

EXPRESSING IDENTITY IN CROSSING TO
THE NEW YEAR: A CASE STUDY OF THE
MALAYSIAN CHINESE REUNION DINNER

by

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Abstract

This study contributes to the growing cross-cultural body of literature of globalised consumer behaviour with specific to CCT within the discipline of consumer research addressing the consumer identity of consumption. It explores the role of social influences in explaining consumer behaviour of a specific ethnic minority group in Malaysia (i.e. the Chinese Malaysians) during the celebration of the Lunar New Year. Specifically, this study aims to investigate the consumption celebration of the Reunion Dinner through its cultural significance within the multicultural Malaysian context especially of the Chinese Malaysian. Its objectives are to explore the ritual of the consumption, beyond the frame of economics or psychology but from the view of cultural meanings within the contextual, symbolic and experiential of consumption from acquisition to consumption and disposition.

The theoretical guidance for this study which is parallel with CCT incorporates the lenses of social anthropology and consumer behaviour, which is based on interpretive and ethnographic approaches. Data was collected from forty in-depth interviews, participant observation, photographs over three years to provide a schema of analyses. The findings reveal variations of the celebration consumption from the participants, place, time and activities with negotiations made across age, gender and social status.

Four central themes came to light as integral components of the celebration consumption experience in addressing the consumers' identity and its identification through namely solidarity, symbolism, self-concept and play among ethnic subculture members. Firstly identity is negotiated through solidarity likened to the western identity with thanksgiving; bonding in preparation; time for all and reconnection; inclusion of ancestors, deities, friends and relatives; appropriation of food; and pragmatism of time and venue for the gathering. Secondly, identity is associated with symbolism derived from the meanings of: time; food and actions of gifting; and prayers to taboos. Thirdly, the concept of self-identity is reflected in the projection of future self; the role of mother, wife, daughter-in-law, and children; social identity and interdependent of self. Lastly, the phenomenology of play due to the liminal essence of standing between the threshold of old and new, is manifested through food, gifts and gambling as the ritual is being re-experienced through an imagined construction of reality and new identity. The findings of this study generate implications for theorists and practitioners within the context of the identity of the consumers in the construction, maintenance and negotiation of identity is often used to maintain the sense of identity through time as it defines oneself in relationship to other people. This study validates the knowledge of culture that is continuously produced, reproduced and negotiated within the CCT constructs from the ethnic subculture consumption perspective.

Keywords: culture, consumption, ritual, identity, ethnic, subculture, solidarity, symbolism, self-concept, play Chinese, Consumer Culture Theory (CCT).

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

In every culture there is at least one important festival that epitomises its people and belief, or an occasion that brings family and friends together once in a year to feast, that is steeped in traditions and customs. For the Chinese that occasion takes place in the Chinese or Lunar New Year celebration. It is celebrated around the world by all Chinese and usually falls in between late January or February (21 January and 21 February based on the Gregorian calendar). The festival as a whole is a complex cultural event which incorporates myths, beliefs, psychological inclination, and customs.

This chapter is divided into nine sections. Section 1.2 describes the research background and rationale while Section 1.3 describes the significance of the research. The aims and objectives of the research are presented in Section 1.4 and the research questions are detailed in Section 1.5. The research methodology and its approaches are explained in Section 1.6 while the contribution of this study is discussed in Section 1.7. The structure of the dissertation is outlined in Section 1.8 and Section 1.9 summarises this chapter.

1.2 Background and Rationale for the Study

It has been argued that most studies on consumer behaviour are done within the North American or European context in which the models of consumption that have derived mainly from the traditional positivist before the late 1980s. The traditional perspectives on consumer research are based on rational, behavioural, cognitive, consumer decision making models, involvement and habitual decision making, motivational and psychographics, social decision making process through attitude, and the situational influence (Foxall 2001; Pachauri 2002). After the 1980s, the non-positivist paradigm produces the interpretive and post modern perspectives in which consumer behaviour models are attributed to consumers who pro-actively assigned meaning to represent their environments rather than just passively

responding to them (Hirschman 1986). Consumption choices no longer derive from rationality or product utilities but also to their symbolic meaning (Belk 1988; McCracken 1986; Kozinets 2002; Arnould and Thompson 2005; Ahuvia 2005; Dong and Tian 2009; Sandikci and Ger 2010). Consumer behaviour research is looking into the experiential and symbolism perspective that highlights the cultural and social and complexities of consumption (Graeber 2011) which is beyond the assessment of consumption from the usual frames of economics and psychology or the common foundation of rationalism (Foxall 2001).

The last twenty years have also seen an increase in the number of consumer researchers that have explored consumption symbolism attached with popular festivities, for example: Thanksgiving (Wallendorf and Arnould 1986), Christmas (Caplow 1982; Belk 1987, Hirschman and La Barbera 1989; McKechnie and Tynan 2006), and Halloween (Belk 1990; Levinson et al. 1992; McKechnie and Tynan 2008). However, most of the theories and literature of consumer behaviour within the celebration consumption does not include the cultural context from the east perspectives which may differ due to the differences in motivational values and needs within the consumer decision-making process. Since some of these theories are inherently bound to the Western conceptualisation of the world, these theories may have different effect when tested in a different cultural setting.

As such this research is mainly guided through the consumer theory culture or CCT (Arnould and Thompson 2005) which provides a distributed view of the cultural meaning through the consumption patterns found within the particular socio-economic systems that are also impacted by globalization and market capitalism which are explicit in all the CCT studies. CCT will be able illuminate the contextual, symbolic and experiential aspects of consumption as they unfold from the acquisition to consumption and disposition (Arnold and Thompson 2005, McCracken 1986). CCT incorporates four theoretical domains which are consumer identity projects, market place cultures, socio-historical patterning of consumption and mass-mediated marketplace ideologies.

Consumption is not only constructed by goods but it also constructs goods as it constructs self, culture and identity. This study supports CCT theoretical perspectives that address the symbiotic relationships between consumer actions, the marketplace and the cultural meanings. Within the four domains of CCT namely the identity projects, marketplace cultures, sociohistoric patterning of consumption and mass-mediated marketplace ideologies; this study will approach the domain of consumer identity projects as the study is focused on the consumption of the Reunion Dinner on the Eve of the Lunar New Year. Consumption is used by consumers to maintain their sense of identity through time and define themselves in relationship to other people which lies within the consumer culture theory. Besides, festivals have often been seen as a popular site for the expression of culture and identity.

The Chinese Lunar New Year celebration is one of the most significant festivals (or events) from the Chinese cultural tradition originated from China, which is also one of the world's oldest and most complex cultures (Wolf 1978). The global importance of Chinese culture is, in part, due to the geographical size of China and the size of its population, which is the world's largest (US Census Bureau 2011). This population figure does not include the large historical diasporas of the Chinese consumers who have migrated from China and now reside in other parts of the world. The Chinese diasporas have tended to migrate either to locations near China in Asia or they have migrated to Europe and America (Pan 1998).

China's population of 1.3 billion is the world's largest (World Health Organization 2011) and this does not include the population of Chinese ethnic across continents. It is, therefore, appropriate to try to understand and explore the meanings of this Reunion Dinner of the Lunar New Year as it is experienced by the diasporic Chinese who have formed Chinese communities outside China beside the current transnational movements that is taking place (see Chuah 1998; Kong 1999; Tambiah 2000). There are three main regions where the diasporic Chinese have formed communities. Firstly, a large majority (i.e. 80%) are located in the neighbouring regions of China, including: Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan, Korea and Southeast Asian countries (including Malaysia). Secondly, there are those who are scattered in developing countries around the world, including: Africa, Latin America and rest of Asia. The last group are those who migrated to the industrialised West, including:

Europe, the U.S.A., Canada and Australia (Pan, 1998). For this study, the focus is on the Malaysian Chinese who are no longer immigrants but the first or second generation of Chinese.

The Chinese celebrate many festivals throughout the year; some are joyous occasions while others are sombre. The Lunar New Year and Winter Solstice are believed to have been observed and declared national festivals as early as the Han Dynasty in 206BC-AD220 (Asiapac 2004, Wu 2005; Yeung and Yee 2010). There is also a strong belief in the myth of a mountain-dwelling, man-eating beast called the 'nian' which terrorised ancient China every winter and was finally driven away with the loud noises caused by firecrackers and by the colour red. Today this belief and myth has been one of the basis that forms the Chinese New Year celebrations, when the Chinese greet each other saying 'guo nian', which carries two meanings: on the one hand it celebrates the start of a new year, while on the other hand it celebrates the Passover of the 'nian' (beast) (Wu, 2005). Today the Lunar New Year still has its mythical charm and is still being celebrated as an event to overcome the past year's challenges by ushering in a better year ahead.

This research aims to focus on the event of the Reunion Dinner based on the Chinese community living in the multicultural society of Malaysia. Malaysia with its cultural composition and diversity provides a rich set of distinctive cultures which will make this culturally specific research unique (Cui 1997). The Chinese Lunar New Year is a national holiday in Malaysia. It is usually a two days holiday which is held on the first and the second day of the lunar calendar, although the celebration may last till the fifteenth day of the calendar. Most Malaysian Chinese take the day off work prior to the eve of the celebration so that they can travel in order to be present for the evening eve Reunion Dinner (Azizan 2012). Hence, it is essential and a strong belief that the celebration must be done well on the eve, for the first day and also on the last day, which is synonymous with the Chinese belief in having a good beginning and a good ending because all things that start well end well (Tan 1998). A prototypical consumption occurs within the nuclear and extended family units in private households, preferably those households where the older generation resides (Choo 1983). This research defines nuclear family as a family unit mainly consisting of a husband and wife and any of their children while the extended family is a family

that consist of two spouses, children (including grown up children), grandparents and any next of kin leaving together as one family unit (Chao 1983, Popenoe 1993, Brym and Lie 2005). Some families may also travel back to their hometown where they grew up, or travel to their parents' hometown or grandparents home specifically to celebrate this event (Wong 2010).

Due to the liminality of the event, where the time stands at the threshold between the old and the new year, in which the ritual of the Reunion Dinner has been designed to be held on the eve of the Lunar New Year, the homecoming is significant in time and space. Preparations for the Reunion Dinner celebration on the eve of the Lunar New Year have started earlier depending on the roles played by the participants or the venue of the private household. Music and songs of merriment of the festival and televised programmes of the celebrations are played weeks ahead before the celebration (Wong 2010). For businesses and shopkeepers, the merriment and the ushering of this Lunar New Year celebration starts soon after the Christmas and New Year celebrations (e.g. Vinesh and Kang 2012). New decorations are put up immediately after the 1st of January. The extended duration period of more than a month prior to the Chinese New Year, allows the hype and the building up of the celebration, to the delight of many businesses who find another reason for the marketing of festive consumption and purchasing (e.g. Yeung and Yee 2010).

Despite the importance of this event beside being celebrated among the highest populated nation in the world with its richness and traditional rite surrounding this celebrations, very limited research within the consumption cultural perspective has investigated the Reunion Dinner event or even from the multicultural society from the East. Furthermore the traditional rites for the Reunion Dinner held in China today may have become a diluted form due to the Cultural Revolution where religious practices were restricted for a period. In fact, there are still many Chinese festivals celebrated in Malaysian that are no longer celebrated in China today (BBC 2005). This study recognises the potential of diverse cultural meanings behind the Chinese New Year Reunion Dinner (CNY-RD) from the context of a multicultural society in Malaysia among the different generations of Malaysian Chinese. This study will also demonstrate how meanings through semiotic principle are

incorporated into objects as part of the symbolic consumption for both the dead and living (see Mick 1986; Holbrook and Hirschman 1993).

1.3 Significance of this Research

This research explores the scope of consumption due to the rise of ethnic consciousness, multiculturalism, and the global diffusion of consumer cultures. It contributes to the growing cross-cultural body of literature of globalised consumer behaviour with specific to the Consumer Cultural Theory (CCT) as prescribed by Arnould and Thompson (2005). This study aims to investigate the consumption celebration of the Reunion Dinner through its cultural significance within the Malaysian context. The meaning of consumption is explored within the CCT under the domain of consumer identity through the social and cultural influences within the Malaysian multicultural society where the Chinese Malaysian is a minority and is less dominant than the other ethnic group. CCT is relevant in this study given the focus of this study is to explore what consumers do (action), the context of their actions (home and marketplace) and the way they create and assign cultural meanings,

Although there has been some work on consumption rituals pertaining to consumer goods (Rook 1985; McCracken 1986) and Western celebrations (such as Halloween (Belk 1990), Thanksgiving (Wallendorf and Arnould 1991), and Christmas (Belk 1989), little consumer behaviour research has been conducted on any similar Eastern celebrations related to ritual consumption of similar scale and festivity. This study will explore the family relations of the Eastern culture with specific to Chinese culture within the consumption of cultural rituals, the consumption experience and its commercialization. The most significant work conducted on this topic was an examination of Chinese New Year food shopping behaviour which looks into the buyer's interaction, symbolism and bargaining process for that occasion (Bei and Chen 2004). In their study, Bei and Chan (2004) explored the characteristics of the Chinese New Year food market by comparing the night market on the eve of the New Year with the regular night market, and examining the roles that are played by the vendors and the consumers in influencing the purchase decision. This study

addresses the meanings of identity of the consumers within the consumption of the Reunion Dinner instead of the marketplace culture in general.

Another closely related research on the Chinese New Year is to investigate the meaning of luck in the speeches spoken during the Chinese New Year in Hong Kong (Fong 2000). Fong (2000) focuses primarily on cultural speech acts related to beliefs of good luck and bad luck as she explores the meaning of luck from the greetings to the words for foods eaten during the New Year's Eve meal through the linguistic representation that conveys the symbolic meanings within the Chinese culture and identity. This study has supported the study form the linguistic meanings related to good luck within the communication space for the New Year but also on the ritual celebration and its communication to the Gods and spirits through the prayers and ancestor worship as consumers identify themselves with both the living and dead. The closest research done related to the Chinese New Year festival is in the exploring of consumer purchase intention at the flower market in Macau (Yeung and Yee, 2010). However, the study will explore the overall meanings of the Reunion Dinner consumption in expressing the identity of the consumers instead of the purchase intention at one site that comes under the domain of the mass-mediated marketplace ideologies under the CCT theoretical framework.

Therefore, this research will look into the social meanings of the ritual of the Reunion Dinner on the eve of the New Year by looking into the role of the actors, the types of food served, and the overall consumption of that meal within the communities of Malaysian Chinese who live in Malaysia's pluralistic society. It draws on themes from the previous literature of similar events culminating in a ritual from the fields of anthropology, sociology, behaviour and psychology in order to understand the social meanings embedded within this event in helping the consumers to express their identity.

In addition to the limited empirical research which has studied consumption rituals in Eastern cultures, there has also been a recent proliferation of the consumerist lifestyle in large parts of Asia due to the changes in the economic and social environment (Tambiah 2000). With the increase in household wealth over recent

years due to the accessibility of education, opening of new markets and the improvement of life styles and consumer goods have brought much changes to all households, especially for consumers living in both developed and developing countries (Appadurai 1999). In today's globalised environment where technology has changed the way we live and the availability of food, efficient and wider transportation networks have also made resources easily available for consumer goods (Appadurai 1999; Kong 1999). Many consumer goods that were never available before are now found easily all year round. The modern availability of special or seasonal ingredients is such that authentic food from the country of origin is now crucial to represent the collective past. At the same time, the transportation of networks also encourage one to continuously produce, reproduce or negotiate the meaning of this event as in following the prototype of the event that is returning to the ancestor home adhering to the patriarchal social system incorporating nuclear and extended family (Choo 1983) or otherwise. This research aims to investigate if the meanings within the Reunion Dinner have been affected by globalization and transnational movements of cultures (Kong 1999) especially for a multicultural society where the Malaysian Chinese live in.

The Chinese New Year is a highly profitable season within the marketing environment of Malaysia, especially for Malaysian retailers as celebrants usher the New Year with food, gifts and paraphernalia needed for the celebrations (Soon 2012). The expenditure for goods and service for the occasion of the Chinese Lunar New Year is the second largest event in the Malaysian retail calendar even though the Chinese population makes up less than a quarter of Malaysia's population (the majority are Malays and Muslims who celebrate the festival of Hari Raya (also known as Eid celebration in England) (Retailer Expenditure, 2008).

Based on the percentage per urban household of each Malaysian ethnic group for 2009/10 (Malaysia Census 2011), the Malaysian Chinese as a group tends to spend relatively above the average amount of the other ethnic groups (i.e. Malay, Indian and 'others'); even though the size of most Malaysian Chinese families is smaller compared to the size of Malay families (one child compared to the four children of the average Malay family). For food items such as meat, the Malaysian Chinese spend as close as 2.8% as compared to the Malays who spend 2.8% and the

Indians who spend 2.2%. For fruits the Malaysian Chinese spend 1.2% as compared to the Malays who spend 1.1% and the Indians who spend 1.0%. Another significant expense for the Malaysian Chinese is spent on restaurants and hotels, which is at 12.0% compares to the Malays and Indians who spend 11.0% and 10.5%, respectively. Expenses for food and beverages away from home and accommodation service is also the highest for the Malaysian Chinese at 9.8%, which compares to the Malays and Indians who spend 8.9% and 8.5%, respectively. In recreation and culture services, the Chinese again spend the most at 5.8 % as compared to 3.8% and 5.6% for the Malays and Indians. The same goes for the consumption of communication expenses where the Chinese spends 6.2% as compared to 6.2% and 5.6% for the Malays and Indians households.

From this report on household expenses (Department of Statistics Malaysia 2011), the Chinese consumers, which comprises of less than a quarter of the population, consume relatively more of the goods and services than the other ethnic groups per household and even more for a relatively smaller family size. This will be even more prominent for the celebration of festivals. Therefore this study has implication for the international retailers and the multicultural entrepreneurs as the Chinese consumers are willing to spend even more for this event which is embedded in social meanings for them at the present and for the future.

Whereas many consumer research studies focus primarily on consumers and marketing, this study aims to take a cultural approach by following the cultural consumption theory (CCT)) theoretical framework within the four domains of consumer identity projects, marketplace cultures, the sociohistorical patterning of consumption and the mass-mediated marketplace ideologies.

1.4 Aims and Objectives of this Research

The study will explore what the consumers do (their actions), the context of the actions (home and marketplace) and the way they create and implement cultural meanings. This is made possible by focusing the study on a given sub-group of a

society, or a subculture of consumption, which can be treated holistically as an analytic category to understand the cultural dimensions of both the consumer and the behaviour of the market. As advocated by the Cultural Consumption Theory (Arnould and Thompson 2005), this study explores the heterogeneous distribution of meanings and the multiplicity of the overlapping cultural groups that exists within the broader socio-historic frame of globalization and market capitalism of today.

The focus of this research is an ethnographic representation of the range of ideas of a small group of people as well as the study of a particular idea among the heterogeneous Chinese community in Malaysia. It acknowledges the existence not only of internal diversity but also of the group collective representation since the modern media of communication has made and ensures that the circulation of ideas (either individualistic or collectivist) is ever more rapid and widely spread. Attitudes towards the Chinese New Year celebration are also a reflection of our world view and changing habits in ritual consumption, as well as an indication of a changing perception of the world we inhabit. Hence, this research aims to gain a better understanding of meaning creation through consumption by examining the ways in which consumers create social meanings through the consumption ritual of the Reunion Dinner on the eve of the Chinese Lunar New Year. It also aims to explore any significant changes in this ritual over time and space across generations.

The main objective of this study is to explore the consumption meanings of the Chinese New Year Reunion Dinner within the Malaysian context. Drawing upon the consumption theoretical framework from the literature in social anthropology, linguistic and consumer behaviour, the main objectives of this study are:

1. To examine the ritual of the Reunion Dinner;
2. To explore the consumption meanings of the Reunion Dinner;
3. To explore the significant changes of the Reunion Dinner with respect to the venue, time, participants and the food;
4. To examine the significant changes of the Reunion Dinner in relation to social class, age and gender differences; and
5. To examine the effect of generation and acculturation influence.

1.5 Research Questions

For the purpose of this study, the following research questions are developed only as a guideline. There are as follow:

1. What are the consuming patterns for the Chinese Reunion Dinner?
2. What are the meanings and the experiences of that event?
3. What are the significant changes in the celebration of the Chinese Reunion Dinner?
4. Why are these changes considered significant?
5. How have these changes come about?

These question are set as part of the of grand-tour questions prescribed by McCracken (1988) where the questions consist of planned prompting in the form of “contrast”, “category”, ‘special incident” beside incorporating the “auto-driving” questions and elicitation technique (Heisley and Levy 1991). This questionnaire which comes under the discussion guide (Appendix C) as part of semi-structural interview provides a rough travel itinerary to negotiate the interview as part of the deployment of the grand-tour questions

1.6 Research Methodology

This study conducts a qualitative research project based on interpretive design using naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln and Guba 1985, Cova and Elliot 2008) incorporating three perspectives: ethnography, social anthropology, and existential phenomenology. Firstly, ethnography is a description and interpretation of a cultural or a social group which examines the group’s observable and learned patterns of behaviour, customs, or way of life (Harris 1968; Fetterman 2010; Mariampolski 2006) in which this study will observe the consumers in their ‘natural” environment as they consumer their Reunion Dinner. Secondly, social anthropology aims to gain a thick description of the topic (Geertz 1973) following the provision of the great detail on

the data and information collected for better understand and appreciation of the study. By triangulating methods and data, this study aims to provide the understanding and the appreciation of “thick description” to enhance the validity of the data. Lastly, existential phenomenology is a paradigm that blends the philosophy of existentialism with the methods of phenomenology which present an alternative paradigm for conceptualizing and studying consumer experience (Thompson, Locander and Polio 1989). Phenomenology is the study of structure of consciousness as experienced from the first-person point of view while the central structure of an experience is its intentionality which is the consumption of the Reunion Dinner for this study. This experience is directed toward the event and object by virtue of its content or meanings together with the appropriate enabling conditions and of being-in-the-world where this study explores the pattern metaphor and experiences as it emerge from the context as it is lived by the informants (Thompson, Locander and Polio 1990) to provide the thick description of the phenomena. In this study the interpretation are guided by the emergent design that is build around the understandings of the phenomena as it exists in its natural environment through an inductive technique.

The research questions require interpretivism to determine motives, meanings and subjective experience that are time and context bound to provide a thick description on how the event is celebrated. Analysis of in-depth interviews, participant observation and historical documents is used in this study in an attempt to view the entities holistically. In this study data is collected from in-depth interviews, participant observation and photographs/video obtained auto-driven by informants and the researcher. Transcripts, field notes and journals which provide a schema of analyses and textual analysis are also taken from old photographs or artefacts. Due to the nature of the event, which happens once a year, triangulation of data are needed to improve the quality of the research. Photographs of the celebration are taken, and used in the interviews through an auto-driving method. The participant observation of the event (which set standards for collecting ethnographic data under the influence of Malinowski during the three years period of the data collecting) is enriched through the researcher’s native background (which made the understanding of the data feasible through cultural tinkering via bricolage).

1.7 Contribution to Theory and Marketing Practitioners

This study incorporates the Consumer Culture Theory or CCT (Arnould and Thompson 2005; Sherry and Fischer 2009) which explores the heterogeneous distribution of meanings across cultural groups that exist within the broader social-historic framework of globalization within the domains of consumer identity, sociohistoric patterning, marketplace culture and mass mediated market place.

In this study, the ritual aspects of consumer behaviour during the consumption process will be studied and guided through CCT to reflect the school of thought in marketing in studying of consumption choice and behaviours from a social and cultural point of view especially from a multiethnic society such as Malaysia and within the contemporary consumer culture of today. Rituals are social practices; make visible and stabilise relations between human while at the same time making meaning closely related to consumption (Douglas and Isherwood 1979). Consumption then becomes a ritual process because consumption in the consumer society prepares the symbols needed to perform the rituals within the consumption of celebration.

At the same time, commodity may become sacred by ritual designed to transform the object symbolically (Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry 1989) that is from one state to another by a symbolic action, hence changing an object from the profane to sacred. This strategically use of ritual within the celebration context will define and explain the consumption behaviours of consumers. The relationship between lived culture and social resources; and between the social meanings of life and the symbolic and material resources (Arnould and Thompson 2005), are mediated through the metaphors of consumption (Holt 1995) which provides the platform to explore the implication for theorist and practitioners within the contexts of ritualistic consumption of celebration. This study contribute to the ethnic subculture consumption from the developing world towards the multicultural world that we live in.

This study, therefore, has implications for the retailers as consumer rituals such as celebration consumption will encourage consumers not only to consume but also to

perform rituals that may be strategically used to influence the consumption behaviour. From the retailers point of view, the Chinese Lunar New Year follows on through the Christmas and Gregorian New Year holidays (Kam and Ng 2012). As such, the promotional campaign across these three months is highly emphasised to ensure the success of marketing activities (Panneerselvam 2012). This is evident in the amount that Malaysian retailers spend during this period, nearly a quarter of the retailers advertising budget of RM69 million is spent on December and January (12.8% and 11.8%, respectively) (Retailer's Expenditure Malaysia 2008). The demand of goods needed for a Chinese celebration (Loke 2012) where consumption of food is critical is further evident in the enforcement of relevant laws to protect consumers under the Malaysian Ministry of Domestic Trade and Consumers Affairs (www.kpdnkn.gov.my) to ensure the availability of food at a fair price for Chinese consumers celebrating this occasion.

Related studies have shown that the conception of culture trends and meaningful consumption process highlights a strong interrelatedness that exists between brand, brand communications, culture, and consumer (Penaloza and Gilly 1999). Therefore, culture, especially for both marketers and consumers, belongs to the culturally constituted world. This inter-relationship will continue to exist through market places and market stimuli. This research provides a platform to explore the meanings related to this celebration which may help marketers to link the interrelatedness between their products and the occasion. Market research done in Malaysia also found that strong brands influences almost ninety percent of consumers' purchase decision (CNIelsen 2010, PricewaterhouseCooper2006).

This study enables manufacturers and marketers who are constantly employing themes for the construction and signification of brands that aim to commodify the Chinese Lunar New Year experience. By having a clearer understanding of the ritual, myth, and emotions generated from the consumption during the event, and how the consumers identify themselves to the celebration and the experiential learning they gather year after year, Malaysian marketers will be better placed to communicate more successfully with the Malaysian Chinese consumer. Traditionally many mainstream brands of product and services, alcoholic beverages, clothing, carbonated drinks are built on the discourse of 'festivity' and abundance (Vinesh and

Kang 2012). The ownership of use of these objects and brands will also allow the consumers to buy into and signify a self-identity that represents membership of this event. For the international retailers and multicultural entrepreneurs, the understanding of consumption provides a context and a source of meaning to a more dynamic creation of their brandscapes for related products and services.

1.8 Structure of the Thesis

To achieve the objective outlines which are given above in Section 1.4, this thesis is divided into eight chapters.

Chapter One introduces the research background, discusses the motivation behind the research and presents the main objectives that this study aims to achieve. It also reviews the adopted paradigm, methodology, the contribution of the research and the structure of this dissertation.

Chapter Two describes the literature of culture and consumption from the past to the present in particular with the key focus on the Consumer Cultural Theory (CCT). It outlines the approaches to consumption and its constructs as they have been developed over the years. Consumption meanings are also coded and produced from via symbolic and linguistic codes through the product, process, and signs. It also highlights ritualistic consumption of celebrations and the meanings behind the consumption practices which are relevant to this study.

Chapter Three presents the literature on food consumption and the social meanings attached to them, food is *sine qua non* and synonymous with all celebrations and rituals. The Western theoretical framework on food studies is compared in this chapter with the Asian perspective.

Chapter Four discusses the context of Malaysia, which is a multi-ethnic country. This study focuses on the Malaysian Chinese, who are the second largest ethnic group in Malaysia. An overview of the history, the economy, demography and the

cultural environment of the Malaysian Chinese are provided in this chapter. In addition, consumer behaviour and trends of the Malaysian Chinese are also explored in order to provide justification for the need to focus on Malaysian Chinese subculture (most of whom are urban).

Chapter Five discusses the methodology used in the current study and assesses the paradigm underpinning the methodology and the approach adopted in this study. It compares and contrasts various theoretical underpinnings of positivism and interpretivism. The chosen emergent methodology central within the Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) is discussed, linking it to the aims and objectives of this research. Data collection methods and technique are presented to ensure the trustworthiness, reliability, and validity of the data collected.

Chapter Six presents the findings and the analysis of the data collected during the fieldwork. Similarities and differences in the patterns of variables across categories and processes during the event are noted and narrated. By making sense of the plausibility of the findings, an explanation will be provided using thick description to understand and explain the data that is relevant to the core of the event and how it can be used to explain, predict and interpret what is going on.

Chapter Seven presents an intensive discussion of the interpretation of the findings and themes emerged through the phenomenology of the Chinese New Year Reunion Dinner. Themes uncovered and categorised provided a model which looks into the interplay between solidarity, symbolism, self-concept and play in expressing the identity through the consumption of the Reunion Dinner.

Chapter Eight addresses the contribution of the present study and the implication of the research together with some considerable and meaningful guidance for future research. The limitations of this research will also be discussed together with the conclusion of the thesis.

1.9 Summary

This introductory chapter has presented a general overview of this research. It has covered the rationale of the study of the Chinese Lunar New Year in relation to the global impact of the Chinese culture due to its size and its population, and how this event is celebrated across the world. With the rich description and activities pertaining to this event, little or no research has attempted to understand the significance of the Reunion Dinner of the Lunar New Year in which this research aims to fill the gap from the perspective of the Consumer Cultural Theory. The aims and objectives of the research, the research questions, the methodology and the contribution of this research were discussed. This chapter concludes with the presentation of the thesis structure. The next chapter will review and discuss the related literature relevant to this study.

Chapter 2: Culture and Consumption

2.1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to review the literature relevant to this study. In particular, the key focus is on defining and discussing key elements of Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) and the way these specifically relate to this study. In doing so, the chapter reviews literature relevant to a number of related streams of research and discusses ways in which various streams of research integrate together to provide an overall conceptual framework for the study. With this in mind, the chapter is divided in seven sections. Section 2.2 defines Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) and presents various elements of the theory in the context of recent literature. This is followed by a section 2.3 which explores the notion of culture in further depth. Section 2.4 introduces consumption through symbolic and linguistic codes while Section 2.5 reviews literature relevant to ritualistic consumption. Section 2.6 describes relevant celebrations and summarises key themes emerging from the literature review on celebration consumption as applicable to the current study and Section 2.7 provides a summary of this chapter.

2.2 Consumer Culture Theory

Consumer Cultural Theory(CCT) is widely recognised as one of the three pillars of decision making in consumer research behind the information processing and economic modelling (Kahn 2001). Consumer cultural theory addresses the relationship between the consumer actions, market place and the cultural meanings (Arnould and Thompson, 2007) by addressing the heterogeneity and multiplicities of overlapping cultural groups within the globalised and market capitalism environment of today. The consumer cultural theory has pushed the cultural dimension of the consumption equation through themes surrounding the domains of consumer identity,

socio-historic patterning, market place culture and mass mediated market place (Arnould and Thompson 2007).

As this study aims to explore the meanings behind the consumption of the Reunion Dinner for the Malaysian Chinese, this study will be mainly guided through CCT to reflect the school of thought in marketing in the studying of consumption choices and behaviours from a social and cultural point of view. The CCT is relevant to this study given the focus of this study is on exploring what consumers do (their actions), the context of their actions (home and marketplace) and the way they create and implement cultural meanings. In line with Firat and Venkatesh (1995), the CCT prescribe cultural meanings as being numerous and fragmented and therefore considers culture as an amalgamation of different groups and shared meanings, rather than an homogenous construct like Chinese culture per se.

Arnould and Thompson (2005) identify four domain within the CCT where researchers have contributed theoretically and methodologically namely consumer identity projects, socio historic patterning, market place culture and mass-mediated marketplace ideologies. The following section explores each of the domain of CCT paradigm

2.2.1 Consumer Identity Projects

Consumption is not only constructed by goods but it also construct goods as it construct self, culture and identity, This study supports CCT theoretical perspectives that address the symbiotic relationships between consumer actions, the market place and the cultural meanings within the domain of the identity projects. Consumption is use by consumers to maintain their sense of identity through times and define themselves in relationship to other people which lies within the consumer culture theory.

Identity via consumption has been a topic that has been share by anthropologist and sociologist (Featherstone 1991) while the CCT have also their share of studies done in North America and abroad (Ahuvia 2005; Belk 1988; Caru and Cova: Levy 1963;

Sandikci and Ger 2010). Person-object relationships are the focus of this theme which in its complexities and variations have provided definition of self from love objects to the possession display in the work place (Ahuvia 2005; Kelly, Tian and Belk 2005). This has incorporated the extended self to serve identity (Belk 1988) together with Sherry's key article on gift-giving (Sherry 1983) and the extension into gifting behaviour together through dominant role of its symbolic meaning and value of the gift (Joy 2001; Sherry et al 1992; Otnes, Ruth and Brunel 1999).

Consumer identity projects such as Schau and Gilly (2003) provide another exemplar in how consumer creates a coherent self through the market-produced materials which is the presentation of self and possession of self even through their personal webspace. At the same time virtual brand community is also able to exert even power over a brand of a mass-marketed convenience products (Cova and Pace 2006) though traditionally brand communities have been around niche or luxury brand such as Harley Davidson and cars (McAlexander et al 2002) or religiosity brands such as Apple (Muniz and Schau 2005)

From the global consumer identity projects, this domain has been challenged further due to the ideologically constraining cultures. Sandikci and Ger (2010) show how stigmatized identity can become fashionable through the co-optation of the market where the market appropriates and commercialises the subcultural (Schouten and McAlexander 1995) practices as in the case of the study of veiling among the Turkey women. The decision to wear a veil is an act of resistance and empowerment as well as of escape.

The notion of self and identity is widely researched in marketing domain and this is how the theoretical framework CCT was derived. The theory argues that consumers buy and use products to highlight or hide aspects of self (Solomon 2011). Symbolic and self-completion theory work on self and the extended-self (Rosenberg 1979; Sirgy 1982; Belk 1990) are also reasons for purchasing and consuming of products. The self as a construct from psychological and sociological perspectives have been studied through the knower (self as I) and the known (self as ME) where the ME is a

collection of components from materials (our bodies and possession), the inner (our attitudes) and the social (our identities) (see Solomon 1982; Belk 1988; Holbrook 1992; Kleine et al. 1993; Kleine et al. 1994, Crockett and Wallendorf 2004, Lindridge 2004).

This social psychological approach has also been incorporated the symbolic interactionism (Solomon 1983; Belk 1988; McCracken 1989, Ahuvia 2005, Caru and Cova 2006, Berger and Heath 2007, Arroyo and Penaloza 2008) where the self behaves according to the meaning its derives from the continuous encounter with its symbolic environment which consist of objects, people and the environment where it is being process and consume (Lee 1990; Klein et al. 1993, Tian and Belk 2005, Sherry and Fischer 2009). The pursuit of consumption and the bond of possession is intertwined as what Satre (1998) defines as 'being' and 'having'. As we acquire, we create and sustain the present sense of existential self by observing our possession (Wattansuwan 2005), which supports Belk's (1988) extended self phenomena through the having and being through possessions.

From the previous consumer research on social identity which predicts one's sense of self and one's possession through a coherent set around each identity, studies have also linked consumption to the ethnic identity (Hirschman 1981; Cui 1997; Kaufman-Scarborough 2000). Studies have suggested how consumption is use as a tool to inform others of their status as in the conspicuous consumption of the leisure class in America revealed (Veblen 1912) by comparing themselves with the European aristocrats. Consumption is used to differentiate and not to rationalise, to express and warrants their social status and taste through the possessions of art and culture (McCracken 2005). By possessing the physical objects of art and culture, it reflects ones taste and status that comes with it as a class of distinction (Bourdieu 1984).

The act of consumption is sometimes also use to challenge inequality (Fiske 1989), in which subordinate groups use consumption to pursue socio-cultural interest and cultural strategies as compensation for limited resources. The liberalisation of consumption can be seen through activities as diverse as: the decision of choices in the consumption of education services (Allen 2002); the recreational choice of

activities as in water rafting (Arnold and Price 1993), camping (Belk and Costa 1998), and others (Joy and Sherry 2003; Kozinets 2002); and the understanding of consumers in the contemporary changing world of gifting (Mick and Demos 1990) and contemporary life styles (Muniz and O'Guinn 2000; O' Guinn and Belk 1989; Thompson and Tambyah 1999), which have also being grouped together under the CCT framework which we knew of today (Arnould and Thompson 2005)

Besides the construction of self, this ritual of conspicuous consumption is also used to construct person's identity even upon death in the pursuit of newer social identities for the deceased and to those involve in the funerals (Bonzu and Belk 2003). Identity construction involved a reciprocal and continuing relationship between the living and the dead is relevant to this study as the consumers continue with the practice of ancestor worship on the eve of the Lunar New Year before they consume the Reunion Dinner (Choo 1983). The consumption also incorporates the importance of belief and religion in culture especially within the Eastern culture for the identification and at the same time to maintain the individual sense of individuality amidst religiosity (Lindridge 2005; Wattanasuwan 2005). The consumer identity beyond the extended self has also been investigated through activities and possession of loved objects (see Ahuvia 2005) to the empowerment of self through veiling (Sandikci and Ger 2010). The strategies of demarcating, compromising and synthesising a coherent identity have been used to overcome the construction of self in the face of social forces.

Overall this construct of consumer identity is relevant to the current focus of this research and an exploration of consumer identity via consumption rituals associated with the celebration of the Reunion Dinner in Malaysia. It is expected to extend to explore the expression of identity and the boundary of the relationship among personal and collective identities of the Malaysian Chinese within the context of a multicultural society.

2.2.2 Socio-historic Patterning

Arnould and Thompson (2005) describes how institutional social structures from gender, ethnicity, social class, and community help to structure consumption (Bristol and Fischer 1993; Mehta and Belk 1991; Kjeldgaard and Askegaard 2006; Holt 1997; Allen 2002). These consumptions are questioning the meaning of a consumer society and how it is constituted and sustained. To understand this we will need to relook at how culture has influence the socio-historic patterning over time which form the basis of the consumer cultural theory

Similar to culture (which is socially constructed and changes in time through history, by individuals, or as a group within the society) consumption is also influenced by the social, cultural, and also the psychological aspects of an individual (Bocock 1993, Zukin and Maguire 2004) which provide the socio-historic patterning over time. Consumption is undertaken by an individual who will play a creative and conscious role as they approach the interpretation of culture (Geertz 1973) through the symbolic language and social behaviours of the group. As much as consumption is often used as a means for identity, it is sometimes also able to mediate differences. Anthropologists have extensively been studying the meaning of consumption through socio-historic patterning via symbolic codes since the classic work of Malinowski (1922), who wrote on the understanding of the continuum meaning of pure gift at one end and the trade of the pure simple food at the other end through the 'kula' systems. In trying to understand the consumption of myths and the ritual of the society of the pre-literate societies,

Levi-Strauss (1964) has also pointed out that cultural phenomena (including mythology, kinship and food preparation) can be analysed and understood by using pairs of binary descriptions in relationships such as: hot and cold, raw and cooked, and culture and nature. Through this structuralist approach, in which social institutional and relations are means of survival, the study of myths and texts are used to describe the people, groups, objects and their relationships using binary oppositions such as: male and female, solid and liquid, edible and inedible, black and white, and sacred and profane. This structuralist method has also been used in

the categorising of the sacredness and purity of food goods (such as clean and unclean or fit and unfit) for consumption through the laws of symbolic boundary and maintenance found in religious texts such as the Bible (Douglas 1966).

The framework of using cultural consumption for the study of consumer behaviour was later put forward systematically by Douglas and Isherwood (1979). Through their pioneering work from the economic anthropology perspectives, they believed that by looking at the meanings of goods used for consumption one could understand the culture of consumers. The various domains of consumption investigated (such as objects, food and clothing) were found to be heavily invested in meanings derived from cultural and religious frameworks. These cultural frameworks were later extended to the contemporary consumer research of signs and symbols (Levy 1981) and also to the process of how the objects have created meaning through the ritualistic actions perform (McCracken 1988). These socio-historic patterning found within these cultural and religious frameworks are relevant and are used in this study to investigate the social meanings of the Reunion Dinner. This social arrangement will also extend the underlying experience, processes and structures that have been permeated within the cultural framework which produce important insights into how socio-historical forces impact consumption.

2.2.3 Marketplace Cultures

The marketplace culture as the third constructs within the consumer cultural theory (CCT) is caused by the desire-inducing of marketing symbols which is central to consumer culture which is created through the perpetuating and reproducing system derived from the exercise of free personal choice of consumers. Consumers are viewed primarily as culture producers rather than merely culture bearers. The free personal choice within the private space of everyday life is interconnected to the system of commercially produced images, texts and objects used by groups to construct identities and meanings to make a collective sense of their environments and to orient their members' experience and life (Kozinet 2002, Tian and Belk 2005)

Consumers are able to forge collective or community identity through their share common value through the interaction with the market place. The emergence of

consumption as a dominant practice can reconfigure cultural blueprints for actions and interpretations. Some of the exemplar cases are the gift giving relationship suggest important cultural rules for the continuum of social ties (Joy 2001), the subculture consumption analyzing the social structure, dominant values and symbolic behaviours (Schouten and McAlexander 1995) and the a totally different culture of consumption which distance itself from the capitalist ideologies (Kozinets 2002) creating a symbiosis between such subcultures and the marketing institutions as well. In this context of major socio-cultural transformations that may have eroded the traditional bases for sociality, consumers will search for ways to collectively identify and participate in rituals of solidarity which has extend to online communities as well (Cova and Pace 2006, Kozinets 2002). These online communities have define themselves sometimes in opposition to dominant lifestyle where subcultures are creates and display through localised cultural capital through combining and reworking the pool of symbolic resources shared by group members such as the Star Trek communities (Kozinets 2001).

Brand communities and consumer resistance continues to permeate the marketplace culture as consumers identify themselves through a collective value creation within the brand communities through social networking, impression management, community engagement and brand use (Schau, Muniz and Arnould 2009). Marketers and corporations can derive significant benefits by engaging and strengthening the brand communities while new social media platforms can offer branding communications to engage the marketplace culture.

As a social, cultural, and economic process of choosing goods, consumption reflects the opportunities and constraints of modernity within the market place (Appadurai 1986). It is influenced by new technologies, ideologies, and delivery systems, and fostered by media and marketing professionals, and yet it is still subject to different local interpretations (Zukin and Maguire 2004). The transformation of play and reinforcement of beliefs is constantly being challenged and it is in action as we attempt to liberate ourselves towards (Kong 1999; Thompson 2004).

As this study aims to find the social meanings pertaining to the consumption of the Reunion Dinner, this identity approach to consumption is applicable among the consumers, either to identify themselves with the traditional or to break away from the tradition practice of the event through the image congruency theory (Erickson and Sirgy 1992; Kleine et al. 1993). This aspects of consumption of this subculture (Malaysian Chinese) extends the culture created and embodied in the lived world of consumers through the consumption of marketing symbols which is central to the consumer culture depending on the exercise of their free personal choice to the interconnected system of commercially produced images in constructing a collective sense of the environment over time.

2.2.4 Mass mediated Market Place

Besides the consumer identity, socio-historic patterning and the market place culture, consumer cultural theory also highlights the importance of the mass mediated market place. This refers to the systems of meanings that are channel and reproduce in consumers' thoughts and actions thereby creating dominant interest in the society through media. As marketers continue to bombard commercial messages through media, consumers are interpreting agents by making sense either to embrace the dominant representation of consumer identity portrayed in advertising and mass media or consciously deviating from such ideological instructions.

Previous studies have argued that goods have been commodified through the creation of brands and customised production, which has become ubiquitous through the mass mediated marketing (Holt 2004). Commodification refers to the transformation of goods, services, and ideas which may not normally be regarded as goods or services, such as the purchase of memorabilia and gift items. The tourist industry is one that is based and enhanced by the commodification of consumption, in which the commodification of culture has provided the social fact that everything, including culture, is a potential commodity (Simpson 2008). Today, the tourism

industry has seen the growth of tourism sites from historical, religious to theme parks construction with the additional shopping facilities within to encourage consumption which incorporate both worshipping and ritualistic activities (Belk and O'Guinn 1989).

The densely woven network of global connections within the mass mediated market place, continues to extend the consumer culture beyond the local cultures as they are increasingly interpenetrated by the forces of transnational and the global mediascape (Appadurai 1990). The extensive use of technology in grappling the meanings and the ideologies of marketplace is constantly being challenged and renewed rather than the old ideology of market place (Cova and Pace 2006). For example in the case of anti-consumption movements is represented in the work of Varman and Belk (2009) where anti-Coca Cola sentiment expressed by villagers in North India reflects the attempts by the locals to evoke nationalist Swadeshi movement using spatial politics to create feelings of "us' vs. "them". This perception that the products sold in India are deemed inferior provided a renewed nationalism and new ideology of nationhood empowering consumers to reject the products.

As the CCT theory is very much based on the notion of culture, the following section will first attempt to discuss what culture is all about in the context of previous literature and also in the context of CCT and the way it relates to the focus of current study. In doing so, references will be made to literature in sociology and anthropology which appear to be the key underlying disciplines underlying the key logical arguments underpinning the CCT and its frameworks.

2.3 Culture Defined

The word 'culture' is derived from the Roman concept of '*colere*', which is defined as to cultivate, to dwell, to take care, and to tend and preserve (Arendt 1977). '*Colere*' relates primarily to the '*intercourse of man with nature in the sense of cultivating and tending nature*' until it becomes fit for living (Arendt 1977, p. 210). In other words, culture is defined what is fit for consumption. Culture is also described as a catalyst in which historically pattern of meanings embodied in their symbolic forms are transmitted. These are then communicated to people and further perpetuated and developed into their knowledge as the attitude toward life (Geertz 1973).

As this research aims to find the meanings of the consumption of the Lunar New Year Reunion Dinner, the study took further guidance from the anthropological and sociological point of view, where culture is often defined as a multi-dimensional and complex system in which patterns of behaviour are acquired and transmitted by symbols (Kroeber and Kluckhohn 1952). This definition is in a way relevant to the focus of this research. This system includes the “knowledge, beliefs, art, morals, laws, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired” by a member of society (Tylor 1871; cited in Berry, 1992 p.165). In other words, culture is seen as a product since it has its historical values, which include the ideas and patterns that it is made from. These may be symbols that are learned, enacted, and patterned to form habits or rituals. Swindler (1986) also sees culture as a repertoire or a ‘tool kit’ that helps to shape the habits, skills, and styles from which people will construct their actions. This ‘tool kit’ consists of three interrelated components (namely objects, actions, and persistent way of enacting the action) that form a lifestyle that is shared by a group of people. Objects here may refer to symbols, stories, and rituals (McCracken 1987, Levi-Strauss 1969, Rook 1985, Woodside 2010, Schembri et al 2010), while actions consists of the behavioural styles, habits, and ways of expression as stated by Berry in Padilla (1980), and the persistent way of enacting comes from the reference and values derived from one’s culture while symbolising it at the same time.

From that repertoire of skills, culture is then thought to be learned and passed over through social interaction through transitory nature and for identity (Swindler 1986; Hall and du Gay 1996; Briley and Aaker 2001). Over time, culture may be adaptive and capable of changing and evolving since it is influenced by society (Geertz 1973). Hence, although culture may be inherited, learned, and patterned through social contacts with others, it may also change over time since it is a collection of behaviour patterns and beliefs. This collection of patterns and beliefs which constitute the “standards for deciding what it can be, how it can be and what to do with it besides how to go about doing it” (Goodenough 1971, p. 210) may be changed either by an individual or by a group within society. Therefore, both the process and the product simultaneously appear to provide a a better perspective of culture in view of their interchangeable relationship together with the learning process within.

2.3.1 Culture, its Genealogies and the CCT

Culture can be further investigated and learned through its genealogies in view of the interchangeable relationships over time under the influence of the learning experience. For example, Reckwitz (2002) prescribe the four main pillars of cultural knowledge which are culturalist mentalism, culturalist textualism, intersubjectivism, and practice theory. As culture is adaptive and learned, these genealogies may provide a socio-historic understanding of how cultural knowledge influence consumption within the consumer cultural theory.

These cultural genealogies are derived from various schools of thought which differ in cultural theorising, from location to the smallest units and from the minds, discourses, interactions and in practice. Firstly, culturalist mentalism, or pertaining to what is in the mind, has the longest tradition in cultural theory and it locates the meaning of culture through the collective minds or even the mass unconscious (Jung 1959). It is commonly used in anthropology in studying human behaviour which is based on the unconscious mind.

Secondly, culturalist textualism rejects the symbolic structure situated inside the mind. Instead it argues that culture lies outside the mind in systems of signs, symbols and discourses and this involves semiotic, hermeneutic, and constructionist theory. Thirdly, intersubjectivism is guided by linguistics and it locates culture in social interaction, or the use of ordinary language, which acts as agents and constellation of symbolic interactions as in Goffman's impression management (1990). Lastly, the 'in practice' theory for culture definition is traced to the leading social and cultural theorists such as Bourdieu (1986), Foucault (1991), Giddens (2009), Heidegger (2011) and Weber (2002).

The routinised types of behaviour (which consists of interconnected elements from bodily, mental, objects used, to know-how and understanding, skills, emotion and motivation) provide the nexus of doing and saying things, which cultivate the culture within as it is being practice (Reckwitz 2002). Over time, culture can be viewed as an interrelated configuration of archaic, residual, and emergent dimensions (Williams

1977), meaning that culture is not uniform but is instead a continuous synthesis of the old, the new, and the amalgamated. This is in line with the key argument of CCT theory which views culture as being fragmented instead of a whole especially within the context of the ever changing of consumer action, marketplace and cultural meaning. Culture therefore appears to be the central focus of not only CCT but also social anthropology in that it shows the way in which members of the groups see the world and their social realities, beliefs, values and priorities, which has and can provide rich insights for consumption to marketers especially where the aims of this study is concerned.

2.3.2 Phenomenology of Play in CCT

The investigating of culture from its genealogical relationship within the social anthropology has also uncovered the importance element of play within the context of play. In 1938, the cultural historian Huizinga used the Latin word for play '*ludic*' in his work *Homo Ludens* or "Man the Player" as culture. For Huizinga (1938) play is the element of culture itself and not the character of play which is assumed to be found inside culture. In Huizinga's (1938) morphology of play, play is culture because play can pass over into act and rite, be it from the dance or performance into the sacred stage of presentation or festival rites. The study of play is a structure that manifests itself in all spheres of human culture. It helps and serves as an irreducible phenomena in which it shows how high forms of culture (such as religions, language, law, military procedures, philosophy, poetry and arts) are manifested by the character of play from its content to its representation (Salen and Zimmerman 2006).

Salen and Zimmerman's analysis of play (2006, p. 127) defined play as activity that is free, separate, uncertain, unproductive, governed by rules and make believe reflect the dynamism of play . This notion of play has also been found within the domain of the socio-historical patterning of consumption within the CCT where institutional structures such as gender, ethnicity and community can help structure the consumption as seen in the case of gifting (Joy 2001), baseball game (Holt 1995), and lifestyles (Holt 1997). Play is free and separate as it is being circumscribed within the limits of space and time as it separates lived culture from time and space.

Play has a special position in ceremonial acts and symbolic actualisation. For rites, play is the means of something acted to represent a cosmic happening or an event in the natural process (such as the passage of time). This is linked to the CCT through the identity projects which is linked to the role of consumption practices in sustaining symbolic boundaries between social groups (Holt 1997) and even to distinguish the post-mortem consumer identity for the living and the dead (Bonsu and Belk 2003). In this study, the consumers have produced the effect of play in the function of the rite for the desired cosmic events, through prayers and paraphernalia to compel the gods to effect the event in reality. In this instance, play helps to remove the nature of mysterious occurrence in the quest of aspiration of the New Year.

Besides being free and separate, the course of play is uncertain as the results can not be determined nor attained before hand. It may require some latitude for innovation being left to the player's initiative. For example in the play of games and gambling, the winning is the result of fate rather than triumphing over an adversary. The activities and the participation in the games and gambling by the family members during the Reunion Dinner brought them closer together with a common goal in the pursuit of happiness and strengthening of bonds among kin, rather than the focus of winning. For instance children are allowed to gamble with monies only during this time once every year. Within the CCT context, casino gambling has been normalised, rationalised and legitimized under the socio-historic patterning of consumption, while in this study it is only normalised, rationalised and legitimized during the celebration of the New Year. This gaming also reflects the consumer ideology and its role in shaping consumer goals by looking into the salient experiential of tension and anxiousness (Thompson and Tambyah 1999).

On the other hand play also creates no wealth or goods and is considered unproductive. Huizinga (1968) defines play as an action which is bared of all material interest, excluding the bets and games of chances which are found in casinos, lotteries, race tracks which have occupy our economy and daily of various culture. Within the CCT, the celebration of Burning Man (Kozinets 2002) started off as an event that celebrates the frivolity, fun and light heartedness of the event that distance

consumption from the broader rhetoric of efficiency and rationality. The play of the dish 'lo sang' by raising and tossing the food in the air while shouting and exchanging good wishes before one consume exemplify the manifestation of play in the consumption of the Reunion Dinner. While play is free, it is free within the limits but allowing free improvisation of rules. The play of costumes and gifts in cultural rituals (Wallendorf and Arnould 1991; Belk 1990; Belk and Kimura 2005) is also seen in this study. The ritual through the play in costume, solemn overture and the appropriate liturgy are evident throughout the consumption of the Reunion Dinner. The prayers and objects offered to the various groups from ancestors, deities and gods are governed by rules and yet being improvised as deemed fit within the rite of celebration of the New Year. Consequently play can become a make-believe exercise when it is perceived to be able to remove the very nature of the mysterious such as what the future holds in the case of the informants in this study who look eagerly for the coming of the New Year through symbolic actions (prayers) and objects. It is accompanied by a special awareness of a second reality, which is a free unreality against real life. An institution such as the family in this study is involved in seeking the aspiration of success, prosperity and health through symbolic actions or masks which fulfils a sacramental function.

As consumption is a site for the production of meaning (Martin-Barbero 2000), the phenomenology of play, through its ludic core of constituents, or invariant meanings (Wilson 2004) enable the existence and the essence of play in which embedded roles, rules and relationships are produced. Huizinga's (1938) work on play serves as a social function, a manipulation of imagination, and a function of living. Overall the ideas of ritual, magic, liturgy, sacrament and mystery would fall within the play concept (Holt 1995) , which are relevant to this study as the ancestor worship ceremony is held prior to the Reunion Dinner on the eve of the Lunar New Year together with the various activities surrounding the Reunion Dinner.

2.3.3 Culture within the Context of CCT

From the marketing point of view, Sherry (1988) defined culture as having two significant human phenomena, which are: firstly, the meaning of systems; and

secondly, the material flows. Meanings represent the world, the creation of cultural entities, and the direction of how people behave in particular ways. Meanwhile, material flows denote the movement of objects within the system (such as goods and services) in the dimension of space and time (McCracken 1986). Meanings and the materials are mutually influenced and differently distributed across people. Therefore culture is not uniform and continues to be a synthesis of the old and the new as consumers see the world and their social realities, belief, values and priorities change over time (Arnould and Thompson 2005; Sherry and Fischer 2009).

The literature reviews so far suggest that culture is a complex concept depending on the research paradigm and theoretical perspective which is adopted. Culture is a system of representation through which people make sense of their everyday life: how they think, talk, and act. These actions, meanings, and cultural artefacts are produced as people express themselves, interpret and exert power in their social life and in so doing a series of discourses are produced, transformed, negotiated and contested (Hall and Gay 1996).

Culture is not an objectified thing, nor is it self-enclosed, nor is it a coherent and patterned field of meaning and neither is it a socially integrating system of norms and values that produces social order (Geertz 1973). Instead, it is constantly produced, transformed, and contested within social interaction due to its variability through power distance, uncertain avoidance, masculinity and individuals (Bourdieu 1986; Foucault 1991). Lastly, culture is beyond the detached domain of playing games of social distinction and good taste which we have long attached with the consumption that takes place within the domain of culture. This research will explore the meanings of the dilemmas and opportunities of the situation of the consumption during the Reunion Dinner and how the meanings influence the processing and behavioural decision theory. This is done in parallel with the CCT domains which are the discussed in the earlier sections namely consumer identity projects, socio-historic patterning, market place culture and mass mediated marketplace ideologies. In this study the consumption will be illuminated through the paradigm of the consumer identity perspective.

A review literature suggest that there are many variants of the conceptualization and how culture has influence the consumption from its positivist paradigm through the behavioural, cognitive, motivation, attitudinal and situation viewpoints to the non-positivist perspectives of consumers having the capability to assign meaning to their environments rather than responding passively in respond to them (Foxall 2001). The scope of culture and consumption has also expanded due to the rise of ethnic consciousness, multiculturalism and the continuous global diffusion of consumer culture, as also advocated in the Consumer Culture Theory (CCT). Studies within the CCT continue to challenge the research conventions that extend the western constructs to other countries to show cultural differences that will highlight cultural differences through different consumption and market phenomena challenging universal construct (Joy and Li 2012).

In this modern era, the culture of consumption has been studied and considered as a ritual for modern life, in which consumer behaviour can be understood through the time and place of the event, and through the objects used and consumed (Douglas and Isherwood 1979, Crockett and Wallendorf 2004, Lindridge 2004). The CCT construct denotes a social arrangement in which the relation between the lived culture and social resources are being mediated through markets, symbolic materials, and resources for meaningful ways of life (Sherry and Fischer 2009). For this study, though the Malaysian Chinese is only a minority but their purchasing power is dominant among the other ethnic groups. The mass mediated market and the commodification of culture will influence and pattern the consumption of Reunion Dinner especially within the context of the historical place, traditional food types to the popular culture patterning today's consumption (Belk and Bryce 1993, Belk 1986, 1996, Thompson 2004).

2.4 Consumption via Symbolic and Linguistics Codes

For this study which aims to look at the meanings behind the consumption of the Reunion Dinner of the Chinese consumer, which plays a significant and important role in the Chinese culture, this study will lean towards the interpretation of culture

through Geertz's thick description (1973) where interpretation and meanings go beyond the total way of life but are being suspended by webs spun constantly by man and the mass mediate market. From the structural and functional aspects of consumption found within the social anthropology perspectives, the symbols and meanings found within will also indirectly produce the cultural system which they reside in (Geertz 1973). Symbolic codes of consumption are used to explain the fulfilling needs of consumption, besides the embedded meaning it has within the social, culture and symbolic structure of that individual (Barthes 1972). By using models derived from the work of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, and Roland Barthes, a French philosopher, these meanings expose the arbitrary nature of cultural phenomena to uncover the meanings of the Reunion Dinner to the latent meanings of everyday life .

Barthes (1973) did this by establishing a methodological critical distinction between semiology and ideology in order to understand how mythological signs function. Barthes also pointed that there is no such thing as non-significant or innocent objects. Instead, the object has two levels of meanings, which are denoted and connoted, and both will work in tandem to ensure that the myth is fully constituted. Myth is a system of communication, which is a message or speech of signification which can be conveyed through discourse by all of the objects (McCracken 1987). Barthes's *Mythologies* (1957) provides a profound impact on the meaning of things, especially among the media who took advantage of this interpretation to market goods and services such as the marketing of the first French car.

Another example of Barthes (1973) analysis is found in the signs and symbols contained in the French art of eating a meal or drinking wine. A phenomenological analysis of the consumption of wine reveals that wine is the distilled essence of the earth and sun, and, although its physical feature is evidently liquid in form, it is partaken in the form of the mythology of dryness. Barthes's study also contributed to the consumption of modern capitalism; for example, he looked at how one associates the drinking of wine, which is likened to a totem drink (Levi Strauss 1969), as the signifier of an invincible network of belonging and exclusion, or the nationalistic myth that is attached to it. Barthes's application of a method that is rooted in linguistics to other systems of discourse outside language (such as fashion,

film and food) has opened up new possibilities for interpretation in contemporary cultural studies, besides increasing the understanding of fulfilling needs and the understanding of the symbolism behind the actions taken upon products. For this study, this application is relevant to the Chinese in their consumption of the Reunion Dinner.

Symbolic consumption by individuals throughout their life and during the transitions they undergo (Belk 1988) claims that consumers use possession as props to help them cope as they pass through the liminal stages in their life. This liminal transition can be defined as a change in the significant life role marked by a transitional or liminal period during which a personal identity is suspended and the symbolic consumption is used to facilitate the transition. Therefore, due to the liminality of the event as a passage of time, where one moves to mark another new year as in the case of this study, this transition process may even accelerate the transition process (Solomon 1986, Van Gennep 1961). Possession has also been used to express power relationship (Czikzentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981), as in the usage of objects and artefacts, old or new, before and during the event. In some instances, new trends or new symbols maybe used to signify the transitional space and time. Levy (1959) claims that every so often new symbols appear which may indeed be historical yet, because they capture the environment of the present so aptly, they are catapulted into the limelight to become the latest trend.

A review of the literature suggests that the symbolic consumption and its meanings can be studied through the subject-object codes, the process codes and through semiotics which are able to project the consumer identity also found within the domain of the CCT. As this study aims to explore the meanings of the consumption of the Reunion Dinner, these three perspectives are found to be useful in the investigation of themes.

2.4.1 Subject-Object Codes

It can be argued that subjects and objects are laden with meanings within the discourse of the myth (Levi-Strauss 1978, Barthes 1973). The consumption of products is used as a basis to construct social reality through the linkage between

social class/habitus and symbolic power. This concept is introduced by Bourdieu (1984) in his classification of the four types of capital (i.e. economic, cultural, education and symbolic capital) which indirectly shape human consciousness in their role within the social structures or social class. By studying how the various consumers goods were consumed (from the way of presenting the food to eating of the meals, home furnishing and interior decoration), the market will be able to distinguish and identify the various consumer goods that are used by specific groups within the socio-economic classes. These goods are consumed to demarcate the consumers' distinct way of living and to distance the consumers themselves from the others. According to Bourdieu (1984), although education may influence the process of consumption in modern capitalist societies, the taste element is also critical when one is not only required to spend money but is also required to take the time to acquire the taste. This taste factor is, therefore, created, developed, and cultured over time and may then become a form of culture that can be transmitted to the modern societies through peer groups and families. In this study, from the Malaysian Chinese context, the taste element is not as critical as the European context especially within the consumption of the Reunion Dinner as the traditional practices and consumption prevails. However this subjective/objective and freedom/deterministic of the structural position within the cultural practices of the consumption of the Reunion Dinner are independently changeable within the Chinese community and even within the same social groups (Holt and Thompson 2004).

Although the structures may provide position, it may not necessary reflect the correct symbolic meanings codes or meanings reflected within the social class because the lower class may emulate the higher social class by adopting their symbolic codes. This process of emulation through the symbols of consumption becomes more significant than the means of economic capital or rational economic actions in view of the symbolic meanings behind the objects. It does not depend on simple economic criteria but, instead, upon a social construction of taste that is powerful through a set of dispositions, or habitus, in which people are more likely to adopt through a habitus that is learned and acquired consciously or unconsciously through immersion (Holt 1998). This process of emulation in the symbolic consumption is relevant to this study as the celebration of the Reunion Dinner provides a variety of

symbolic consumption among the different social classes of the informants especially in the consumption of Western wine and cheese, French cognac, western dishes and desserts.

Bourdieu's (1984) findings and approach has been considered as being more powerful when compared to Levi-Strauss because it does not abandon the notion that there are still other factors that may have a real effect on consumers, other than social class structure, status group structure, ethnicity structure and gender to taste. In this study of the Malaysian Chinese consumption of the Reunion Dinner reveals the influence of other factors other than the social class and status such as influence of emotions and play in the light of the celebration there after.

2.4.2 Process Code

Besides using the subject or object as consumption codes, Baudrillard (1988) reiterated that consumption in the twentieth century has moved beyond the model of capitalism as assumed in the critical theory of consumption, it moves instead into a social and cultural process involving cultural signs and symbols. These symbols and signs do not express already pre-existing set of meanings, but the meanings are generated within the systems of signs and symbols (Levy 1959) and the mass mediated market which engage the attention of the consumer; such as, serving French wine or hard liqueur instead of the more traditional rice wine, Chinese tea or the carbonated drinks during the Chinese Reunion Dinner. Bocoock (1993) generalised that symbols are considered abstract while signs tend to be tied to the concrete. Peirce's triadic semiosis framework in Mick (1986), defines a sign as being anything that stands for something (i.e. its object) to somebody (i.e. its interpretive). Hence, consumption is now conceptualised as a process in which a purchaser of an item is actually engaged in trying to create and maintain a sense of identity through the display of the purchase of the goods and the symbol meanings behind it (Levy 1959) which are influence by the mass mediated market place.

Indirectly there is a production of symbols through the production of consumption, in which they indirectly produce the image, which is also determined by the object. McCracken (1988) denotes that the object is able to transfer the meanings and this

process is the lens that helps to unify the theories of how cultural meanings are being transferred through the objects and the performance within the marketplace culture. Taking a cue from Saussure's contribution to the signs residing in the nature of things and in relation to the world view of how people construct and perceive signs (Mick 1986), the consumer goods will then be able to translate their meanings through consumption rituals such as possession, grooming, exchange and divestment to the individual consumer as a process of culture (McCracken 1988).

This movement of meaning framework has been taken advantage of by the media to position the products in the market by creating the social meanings which lie behind the products (McCracken 1986, 1990). However, instead of the unilateral direction on the movement of meanings, the individual will also be able to create meanings to the object, which will then provide new meanings in an ever-changing environment. This happens because the process is no longer a synchronic process but is now diachronic in nature due to the changes in time and space; this is true even for ritualistic events and its ritual consumption. Cultural values manifesting through consumption products are well documented due to their ability to carry and communicate cultural meanings (Belk 1984, McCracken 1986). Therefore consumption can create culture as it continues to be practiced and not necessary the culture that decides the consumption enriching the marketplace culture and also enriching and influencing the marketplace culture and the mass-mediated marketplace ideologies within the CCT framework.

2.4.3 Semiotics: A Theoretical Framework for Interpreting Signs

In recent years, as stream of researchers has relied on semiotics to understand the concept of symbolism from fashion, advertising to everyday possession and entertainment (Holbrook and Grayson 1986; Mick 1986; Mick et al 1999). Semiotics is re-emerging as a useful framework to examine issues of symbolism and meaning within this context (Holbrook and Hirschman 1993). Since semiotics is the analysis of system signification, it is a useful method for consumer research especially in the context of the symbolic and ideological of the consumption that forms the underlying experiences, processes and structures to explore the underlying meanings of everyday communication vehicles through fashion, food and advertising (Brown

1995). This is particularly relevant to this study of the consumption of the Reunion Dinner among the Malaysian Chinese who consume based on their experience and the semiotic meanings behind the symbolic objects especially pertaining to the literarily meanings of the food and actions during the Reunion Dinner.

Semiotics can be defined as the science of signs and their meanings (Manning 1987, Mick 1986). Semiotics extends linguistic theory to non-verbal media such as images and myths that abound in popular culture. In this instance, a sign can be anything that can be taken to represent something else (Eco 1976). Manning (1987) explains that the purpose of semiotics as to 'uncover rules that govern the conventions of signification. An alternative term for semiotic is 'semiology'. The two terms today are synonymous; however, they are commonly used as a method to identify the different traditions within the field. 'Semiology' is used to define the linguistic tradition of Saussure, Hjelms, and Barthes, while the term 'semiotics' defines the theory of signs proposed by Peirce. Semiotics or semiology has been used historically and traditionally in religious and theological learning.

The founding of modern day semiotics is usually attributed to Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce (Gottdeiner 1995), who concurrently but separately and individually developed the philosophies of the sign and its interpretation from two different perspectives and continents, Saussure from Europe and Pierce from America. Interpreting semiotics through signs can be viewed from a number of perspectives, including the dyadic perspective or through the difference perspective.

Dyadic perspective follows the Saussurean approach in analysing the signs where the production of meaning is depended on the language while the language is characterised by a system of signs. These signs did not occur in isolation but they occur in groups called paradigms and by linking these signs, a coherent message is created (Mick et al 1999) where the rules that connect them are called codes. The Sausurrean school of thought and its structuralist approach focuses on signs as a form of language. Integral to this philosophy is that culture enables communication through signs, and signs are a language that can be identified and interpreted through the analysis of the codes within cultures (Mick et al 1999, Grayson 2000).

Besides using the dyadic perspectives of understanding the interpretation of sign, other scholars have argue that the meanings can be communicated using the difference which has been developed by the anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss through its interpretation of myths using the binary opposition. The meaning is interpreted by the selection of a sign along a bipolar axis. His work has become highly influential in the development of structuralism interpretation within the studies done under the social anthologists approach to consumption.

Over time, these models of using two perspectives or dimension of interpreting signs are expanded further by scholars who developed them into tetradic models (Greimas 1990). The Greek number prefix tetra means four, and these tetradic models are extension of the bipolar plane to include four defining points on a vertical and horizontal axis. Tetradic models, such as the Grematian Square, provide more detail and depth in understanding the sign using the semiotic square using isotopy (Greimas 1990). Greimas' schema is useful since it illustrates the full complexity of any given semantic term (sème). Greimas points out that any given sème entails its opposite or "contrary." For example "Life" (s_1) is understood in relation to its contrary, "death" (s_2). Rather than rest at this simple binary opposition (S), Greimas points out that the opposition, "life" and "death," suggests what Greimas terms a contradictory pair (-S), i.e., "not-life" ($-s_1$) and "not-death" ($-s_2$) which resulted in the four defining points. This Grematian square is applicable in this study for the interpretation of the status of the ancestor being worship in the understanding of the status of dead and living, as compare to not dead and yet not alive within the context of the consumption around the Reunion Dinner.

2.4.4 Metaphors of Consumption

Besides using semiotics to understand the meaning of consumption, metaphors have also been use to provide the themes and the meanings to the actions of consumption (Holt 1995). Metaphors have been found to be effective to communicate ideas which enhance our perception and understanding (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). Some of the metaphors are literary - devices for making thoughts more vivid or entertaining while some are basic metaphors which we have live. As

this study aims to investigate the consumption of the Reunion Dinner in which interpretivism is used to explore the social meanings, metaphors that is often used together within the perspective of linguistics and philosophy is useful in the interpretation of the themes.

In Holt's (1995) study of the professional baseball game, he defines consuming as consisting of both actions in which consumers directly engage consumption objects (i.e. object action) and interactions with other people in which consumption objects serve as focal resources (i.e. interpersonal actions). Holt's (1995) typology of consumption practices includes four metaphors or dimensions, which are: consuming as experience, consuming as integration, consuming for classification, and consuming for play.

Consuming for experience involves the accounting, evaluation and appreciation of the outcome of the experience as in the understanding of how the game is played, the scores, and expectations of the players. This consumption examines the subjective, emotional reaction to consumption objects with a focus on the emotional state occurring during the consumption. On the other hand, consuming as integration looks into the assimilation, producing and personalising processes. It defines how consumers obtain meaning through a variety of practices such as grooming rituals (Rook 1985) or self-extension (Belk 1988) when the consumer is able to tap into the symbolic properties of the object through the undertakings of these activities.

Consuming as classification looks into the objects or symbols and action (as in memorabilia) or the participation and prediction as part of the ritualistic process (Levy 1959, Rook 1985). Objects are used as cultural labels to group consumers and inscribe meaning through their use (Douglas and Isherwood, 1996) and they are also used to classify consumers through their use and the meanings derived. Lastly, the consuming as play metaphor relates to the bringing out of the communing and the socialising elements which strengthen the bonds among the community. This is also evident in the river-rafting trips where a sense of community was fostered amidst a diverse range of consumers (Arnould and Price 1993).

The study of the baseball game has also found the existence of ritualistic interaction behaviour between spectators, symbolic experience behaviour and behaviour referencing the sacred. According to Holt (1992), if the ritual of the game is not a sacred experience but just a mere ritual, then the consumers will just follow and people will be least involved and less emotional as compared to those who have highly emotional experiences. This experience can be due to a dramatic situation that may be unusual, provoke intense reaction, and produce aesthetic experience which enables the transcendence of experience. However, only a few will achieve the sacred experience and many will simply manipulate the profane to make them sacred (Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry 1989).

Consequently the consuming experience may also be a personal experience and a private affair, as in the example of the vignette of Sarah in the study of the flea market (Belk et al 1989). The object has also been used as a means of sacred consumption experience. Sarah, who handcrafted dolls, sees the baby as coming to life by shifting to baby talk and caressing the baby's forehead as she bids farewell ceremoniously prior to the closing sale of each doll. Today there are still many on-going consumer studies that draw upon meanings from other traditions (such as cultural anthropology, semiotics and literary theory) to specify the consumption categories and needs even from shopping (O'Guinn and Belk 1989, Belk et al 1989) to other leisure activities (Belk and Costa 1989, Belk, Sherry and Wallendorf 1989, Kozinets 2001) .

Holt's (1995) typology of consumption can also be examined through the celebration of the Lunar New Year Reunion Dinner. The consuming experience are found in the facilitating connections across family, feelings of nostalgia in returning home and the gifting experiences with money, while in the consuming as integration through social identification of kin and ancestors, and gods. The consuming for classification looks into affiliation and distinctions from objects, symbols and actions consume as part of the ritual and the consuming for play are through the bonding and activities throughout the Reunion Dinner.

2.5 Celebration Consumption and its sources

A stream of researchers has investigated the consumption of ritual from the western celebration from Christmas (Belk 1989; Caplow 1982), Thanksgiving (Wallendorf and Arnould 1991; McKechnie and Tynan 2006) and Halloween (Belk 1990; McKechnie and Tynan 2008). Very little consumer behaviour research has done on any similar eastern celebrations related to ritual consumption of similar scale and festivity. The closest studies done on the Lunar New Year were based on the celebration as a Lunar New Year in terms of the buying behaviour and impulse buying for the celebration. There is no study with specific focus on the Reunion Dinner celebration.

The activities and actions around the celebration will be explored using the understanding of consumption via symbolic and linguistic codes. The term 'ritual' is increasingly being used to describe some forms of specific types of consumption activities. Historically, the concept of ritual has been used in cultural anthropology in reference to a number of practices, including: the cosmological and magical (Malinowski 1954, Levi Straus 1978), the mystical (Turner 1967), and the superhuman and sacred (Durkheim 1915). Rituals are associated with the performance of rites (such as initiations and rituals) that are archaic and magical. Rituals are also contained within the rites of passage which were coined by Arnold van Gennep (1960). Since this study aims to investigate the meaning of the Reunion Dinner that is celebrated yearly and rich in culture and steep in tradition, a ritualistic approach has been taken as prescribed by van Gennep (1960) through its components and sources.

2.5.1 Ritual Phases and Components

Ritual activities within the ceremonies investigated by van Gennep (1960) points to three major domain or phases in which any life crisis ceremony is established, that is: separation, transition and incorporation. In this model an individual undergoes a three phase process: beginning with separation when the person removes oneself from his/her present role; this is followed by a second phase of transition when the person metamorphoses into the new role; and the final stage of incorporation

happens when the individual re-enters society in the new and changed state. However, it is the middle transition phase which Turner (1969) argues is the most ambivalent because the individual is caught in a state of limbo between the past and the future.

Gennep's (1960) threefold classifications have established their validity over the past fifty years, from the original anthropology to today urban industrial society. Hence, rituals have been historically associated with our common social practices and are usually made visible over time, frequently or annually, to denote our relations among humans as part of our heritage and culture (Rook 1985). Ritual is also conducted, orchestrated, and performed purposively based on the cultural values and social dimension one lives in with the purpose of sustaining social cohesion, either individually or as a group (Rook 1985).

Recent research has even gone beyond responding to the meaning or to the understanding of the changes in the life's phases. Leaping from the myopic definition of ritual, Rook's (1985) definition has gone beyond the primitive mode, or the public domain, it also includes the ritual of personal space and a smaller scale of consumption, which is even extended to daily activities such as the grooming of one's hair. Hence, Rook's (1985) definition below is apt to guide this research which incorporates human cultures from the social structure, language, religion and technology perspectives:

The term ritual refers to a type of expressive, symbolic activity constructed of multiple behaviours that occur in a fixed, episodic sequence, and that tend to be repeated over time. Ritual behaviour is dramatically scripted and acted out and is performed with formality, seriousness and inner intensity.

(Rook 1985, p. 252)

In his exploration of a diagram of everyday grooming, Rook believes that ritual is designed by an experience that is composed of a string of events that are conducted in the exact same sequence each time that the activity is performed. The performance of the ritual is usually accompanied by some implied meanings and knowledge of the past. This implied knowledge plays a critical role in the acquiring,

consuming and disposing of the behaviour needed. Rook (1985) further describes the four main tangible components within the ritualistic experience, namely: the ritual artefacts, the ritual script, the performance/roles, and the ritual audience (Rook 1985). By following the exact same script and order of events the consumer's gain feeling and meaning each time the ritual is acted out. Rook (1985) believes that rituals can be differentiated from behavioural habits in that they are usually group experiences, have dramatic scripts, and have more meaning for the individual performing it. They also usually consist of a beginning, middle and an end. In the example of the Chinese Lunar New Year, the Reunion Dinner is just the beginning of the celebration and rituals are performed to ensure a good beginning for the Chinese New Year celebrations which span across fifteen days, while the ritual of returning home for the Reunion dinner is designed by an experience composed of a string of events.

2.5.2 Source for rituals

Besides knowing the implied meanings that form the basis of ritual, the sources for the symbolic meanings are needed to ensure the repetition and continuity of these activities. Levy (1978) posits that rituals are derived through the five primary sources of behaviour and meaning which forms the ritual behaviour. These five sources are: 'human biology, individual aims and emotion, group learning, cultural values and cosmological beliefs' (Levy 1978 p.20). One of the richest sources of human ritual experience is to satisfy the cosmology's belief system that is found in all religious and customary beliefs, even among the pre-literate society. At times, the ritual performance is even celebrated on an even greater level than the actual beliefs in the theology. An example of this is the Christmas celebration that is being celebrated on a bigger and grander scale amongst the Japanese, even to the idiosyncratic reason for having a white Santa Claus with white beard for authenticity which is deemed as a necessity amongst the majority non-Christians celebrants (Belk 2004).

Sources of ritual are further reconceptualised through their corresponding research tradition (such as socio-biology, psychology, sociology and cultural anthropology), with a feedback loop linked to emphasize the individual's contribution to the ritual

(Tetrault and Kleine 1990). Socio-biology firstly provides the foundation from which the ritual springs, as it concerns the fundamental of human tendencies pertinent to their belief system and the perception to behave (Barash 1979), while psychology provides the analysis of an individual's actions towards the ritual. The psychological analysis which is based on Freud's work includes individual idiosyncratic meanings which are ascribed to the ritual artefacts, ego development, and the belief system of the individual as well as the perception of his/her environment within the content of the ritual and the accompanied scripts (Freud 1962). The sociological inquiry relates to the role designated by the ritual within the social structure in which those roles are derived and emphasis is placed on the role in which ritual serves to reaffirm the social order and solidarity of participants (Freedman 1970). Finally, anthropological analysis looks into the use of the artefact and its symbolic properties in order to indicate social inclusiveness or exclusiveness among the ritual actors within the time and space of the ritual (Levi-Strauss 1966). All these elements continue to reinforce, besides providing feedback to strengthen, the ritual at hand.

In relation to the complicated concept of culture previously discussed, the cultural values are another major source of ritual behaviour, especially in the rites of passage in life (from birth, weddings to funerals). Many of these rituals will also act as a tool for social cohesion by integrating the family and the community. Public rituals celebrated by groups are widely viewed as social cohesion among the members and the community since it is able to regulate any social conflict (Levy and Zaltman 1975) besides invoking community and social inclusion. On the other hand, group learning, especially among family rituals, are able to cement not only the relationship among the family members but also the relationship to the larger culture within the group, such as the holiday and festive celebration of groups and the nation (Wallendorf and Arnold 1991).

Levy and Zaltman (1975) have also drawn upon the work of Levi-Strauss on the study of myths as the sources for the organising of perception of realities to which consumers will indirectly express or suppress their concerns by undertaking the necessary rituals to overcome these myths (Turner 1967). Ritual artefacts, or the objects used for rituals, come with embedded meanings which are rich in culture (such as food, drinks, jewellery or ceremonial garments) (Douglas and Isherwood

1979) are used to communicate symbolic messages pertinent to the rituals. For example, the Christmas tree and gifts for Christmas (Belk 1993; Othnes et al. 2009), or the turkey during American Thanksgiving (Wallendorf and Sherry 1989), or the pumpkin, costumes, and trick-or-treat activity for Halloween are some of the main artefacts that conjure the event as part of the ritualistic activity.

Within the consumer research context, many authors have discussed myth and explored its impact on consumer consumption behaviour (Belk and Costa 1998, Wallendorf and Arnold 1991, Bonzu and Belk 2003). Myth is identified as an important symbolic drive of consumer behaviour; for example, in the behaviour of the Mountain Man (Belk and Costa 1998), the stories handed down from mother to daughter (Levy 1981), and on Thanksgiving rituals (Wallendorf and Arnold 1991). Consumers are motivated to action because of some underlying myth without giving any real thought to rationale behaviour; for example, in the fireworks needed and played during the eve of New Year. The myths of the festival of the Chinese New Year (Selmman 1982) are also reiterated in the Western structural framework; for example, in the structural bipolar meanings of the celebration and through the understanding of the myth from a renewal to a ritual festival that has elements of wanting good luck and avoiding bad luck, which is akin to having prosperity instead of poverty. Other meanings (such as the celebration of the ending and beginning of the year, in thanking God versus fearing god through the beliefs of yin and yan or death and life) were also uncovered as part of the myth of celebrating the Chinese Lunar New Year.

In summary, the meaning of ritual originated from within anthropological studies where it was used to analyse magical or religious behaviour which has many symbolic actions that are followed by individuals, groups, or societies. This original conception of ritual was further developed by Rook (1985), who argued that ritual is commonly observed as trait characteristics in many phenomenon, even daily or normal events. This conception of ritual transcends the sacred in action (Belk, Sherry and Wallendorf 1989) and it enters the conception of symbolic actions and objects (McCracken 1988). Rituals mirror the way that we deem the world is ordered; however, the fact that ritual scripts are repeated over time and taken for granted does not mean that they do not change. An important function of ritual is to guide

and smoothen the dynamic of social change through ritual processes of transformation. Furthermore, rituals themselves undergo transformation in order to adapt to, and to respond to, particular instances of social change. All these research done are significant for my study which aims to explore the social meanings of the celebration and the partaking of the Reunion Dinner which are ritualistic in nature.

2.6 Ritualistic Consumption Associated with Celebration

From the previous section exploring the construct of celebration which is ritualistic in nature based on the ritualistic components and its sources, this section will investigate the consumption of celebrations previously researched. The ritualistic behaviour and ritualistic can be a transient consumption in the community which is predicated on invented traditions. It may be an invocation of a mythic past to create and to consume fantastic time and space (such as in the modern mountain men enacting the fantasy experience of a primitive alternative reality within the modern rendezvous) which offers an opportunity for the transformation of play while reinforcing the romanticised set of beliefs (Belk and Costa 1998). This ritualistic behaviour also helps to examine the symbolic meanings associated with participation in the shared consumption of rituals, which aid the development and maintenance of social relationships (Gainer 1995, McCracken 1988, Rook 1985).

The consumption of celebrations and festivities of the West has been heavily researched by previous research when compared with the relatively limited amount of research that has studied the topic of celebration in the East. In view of our modern understanding of ethnic consciousness and multiculturalism, this research of the Chinese Lunar New Year Eve Reunion Dinner which is celebrated by the Malaysian Chinese will look into the parallels of the consumption of celebration within the existing works on Western celebrations from the marketing perspectives such as Thanksgiving, Christmas and Halloween.

2.6.1 Celebration of Thanksgiving

A stream of researchers has investigated the Thanksgiving celebrations. It was first extensively researched by two well-known senior researchers, Melanie Wallendorf and Eric J. Arnould, together with a hundred student collaborators who contributed to a multi-method ethnographic study which was conducted between the year 1984 and 1986 (Wallendorf and Arnould, 1991). Thanksgiving Day is a national holiday celebrated in the U.S. on the fourth Thursday of November. It is commonly celebrated by eating a traditional feast featuring a whole stuffed turkey as the main meat dish. Thanksgiving Day in the U.S. is a collective ritual that celebrates material abundance which is enacted through feasting. It both symbolises and proves to the participants' their abilities to meet basic needs abundantly. The cultural discourse of Thanksgiving negotiates meanings and issues by producing five themes, which are interpreted through the consuming of food and activities while the consumption of the Reunion Dinner went beyond the food and activities but also to the significant of the venue and time. The five main themes from the Thanksgiving are:

1. Negotiation of abundance;
2. Extension of inclusion;
3. Resolution of universalism and particularism;
4. Negotiation of values; and
5. Negotiation of the role of produces and branded food products.

2.6.1.1 Negotiation of abundance

The Thanksgiving Day ritual provided many details on the negotiation of abundance from the household to the culture. Negotiation of abundance is embodied in the food; for example, in the stuffing of the turkey, the loading of a great amount of food on the table, and the plates that are filled with food. This is further represented semiotically in the fullness of the physical body; for example, in over-eating and going for a walk after the meal. Negotiation of abundance was also seen in the serving of simple food but on the best china, a celebration of the plainness and a surplus of the basics. This negotiation of abundance is found to be similar in this study but the abundance is

reflected not only in the quantity and amount of food served but also the type of food which is expensive, exotic and not the abundance of plainness as found in the Thanksgiving dinner. The abundance of food is not only visible on the table to be served but also in the form of storage to signify continuous abundance throughout the year, as the food are kept before the Lunar New Year approaches.

2.6.1.2 Extension of inclusion

The extension of inclusion looked into who is to be included and how the roles of participants are negotiated and included. The findings in Thanksgiving which were collected by a majority of students, reflected the negotiation in the life-cycle changes which have affected the roles of the care-givers or care-receivers (e.g. who to invite). Inclusion of boyfriends and girlfriends arose as whether they should go to one family or the other and for those from the same town, it was resolved by eating part of the course in the latter part of the meal. Inclusion is also enacted as they come in togetherness to view photographs and shared stories about relatives, while the inclusion of an individual in the adult world is enacted through activities and advice given during the event. Inclusion of pets and those with 'nowhere else to go' was also an activity which was found in the Thanksgiving Dinner study. These similar themes are also relevant in this study as some informants have also invited friends and family of friends who 'were left over' to their Reunion Dinner beside the inclusion of girlfriends who will take their Reunion Dinner earlier at noon in order to eat at their boyfriends' families Reunion Dinner later. However, the extension of inclusion in this study also goes beyond the living, as the ancestors are also invited to join in the celebration of the eve of the Lunar New Year. Food with symbolic meanings to deceased parents' favourite food and drink are prayed to the ancestors before they are eaten on the Reunion Dinner table.

2.6.1.3 Resolution of universalism and particularism

The Thanksgiving celebration was regarded to be similar by all participants in the resolution of universalism. This resolution of universalism also referred to beliefs that all Americans celebrated Thanksgiving and the universalism of the cuisine which is

served is the turkey. On the other hand, particularism was reflected in the little traditions particular to certain families such as how the food should be served.

Particularism also arose because the preparations done which are not only different but were also steeped in tradition. These preparation and types of food served are also influenced by the regional differences. This particularism of food was also found to reflect the social class differences, age and gender segregation in their activities. The particularism of gender segregation is found in the roles played by women. Although the male will take the symbolic role in the carving of the turkey, it is the women who will physically labour to uphold this ritual in the family. Such particularism are also found within the celebration of the Lunar New Year Reunion Dinner in which certain food and practices are critical and meant specifically to signify certain clan.

2.6.1.4 Negotiation of values

The negotiation of values is reflected in the preparation and the activities within the Thanksgiving. Many of the cultural values are traceable to the Puritans' values such as cleanliness, frugality and hard work through the activities of washing and polishing of utensils, the packing of the leftovers and the ritual labour of preparing the meal from home. This study researched also found similar negotiation but not within the Puritan values of frugality. Instead washing, cleaning and taboos are adhered to based on the Chinese beliefs and values. Food served is in abundance with only the best and exotic ingredients to signify the grandeur and importance of the event which deserve only the best to ensure a better tomorrow.

2.6.1.5 Negotiation the role of produces and branded food products

Emic description from the Thanksgiving research frequently refers to the dishes served that are homemade or made from scratch. However, there has been a negotiation of the role of products and the branded foods where the most typical food needed to represent the ritual may be derived from a brand, special ingredients or packaging and not from scratch. There were instances when there was even the need to disguise the brand in order to reclaim the homemade and 'made from

scratch' concepts to denote the cultural values of the Puritans in relation to hard work and frugality. Through multiple perspectives and sources of data, the researchers (Wallendorf and Arnould 1991) were able to elucidate the social meanings of this event vividly and succinctly. Similar actions are also found in the research, as dishes are simplified, or even purchased from the restaurants to be served for the Reunion Dinner.

In light of the findings of Thanksgiving Dinner, a similar study was done based on the Thanksgiving themes in comparison with a Chinese celebration of harvest called the Chinese Moon Cake festival. The study explored the Chinese Moon Cake festival celebrated by the Chinese in Taiwan, Hong Kong and China (Wells and Chen 1999). The similarities of these two celebrations were found in: feasting and fullness as a symbol of abundance with family togetherness with inclusion of unborn, gender role segregation, universalism and particularism and, lastly, the reconstruction of the event. However the differences were found in the importance of family reunification, less negotiation on who or where to attend as it is limited to family and the emphasis on gift exchanges which has profound importance to the face value of self and kinship. The other differences were also found in the activity as it values the spirit of culture by sharing poems and gazing at the moon after dinner, while Thanksgiving celebrates the sporting spirit through the football games watched after the meal. The emotional tone for the Moon Cake festival emphasises family reunification and the roundness of the moon symbolises the family circle, while the flavour and fillings of the moon cakes represent the sweetness of filial ties and the lotus seeds within the moon cakes symbolise the giving of birth to sons to ensure family abundance and continuity, supporting the strong influence of the patriarchal system within the Chinese culture.

This study takes the inspiration from the themes found in Thanksgiving and some from the Moon Cake festival due to the common Chinese values within the latter. The Lunar New Year shares similar emotional tones in the family reunion found in the Moon Cake festival, but with more emphasis to ensure abundance and prosperity for the future. At the same time, whereas the Thanksgiving dinner looks into the present celebration of abundance after a year of hardwork, this study also give

thanks for the year long of hard work but it also looks into assuring of a better and prosperous future.

2.6.2 Celebration of Halloween

Russell Belk has researched many aspects of ritual celebrations, from the odyssey themes to the various cross-cultural aspects of consumption. His study of the American ritual of Halloween included a comparison with the ritual of Christmas (Belk 1990). Firstly, he denoted the opposing ritual themes of Halloween and Christmas, as in the wearing of costumes by children in Halloween to extort rewards (candies and sweets) from adults, while adults wear Santa Claus costumes to extort good behaviour from children before giving them gifts. He also examined the opposing rituals, such as: leaving home to join others for non-religious atmosphere (i.e. Halloween) instead of the extended family meeting for feasting of wholesome food and religious focus at Christmas. The gift giving by strangers to anonymous masked children at Halloween is also compared with the exchange of gifts among family members during Christmas.

Belk's (1990) findings produced four emerging interpretations of the celebration of Halloween, which are: the nature of contemporary celebration, the functions of Halloween for the young children, the functions for the adolescents and lastly for the adults. The nature of contemporary Halloween celebrations according to Belk (1990) is anti-home, anti-family, anti-nourishment and anti-religion. The function of Halloween for young children was the reversal of rites, such as from being weak to being powerful, through the wearing of costumes and the sacred pilgrimage of going out to master the fear. For adolescents this event was meant to aid socialising through acquisition, possession and gluttony through the sweets obtained. The adolescents were also negotiating the boundaries between wakefulness and sleep as they venture past the early hours in the morning, negotiating the boundaries between fantasy and reality, and human and non-human, through their costumes besides exploring their sexuality, chaos and horror as a collectively group of anxious adolescents. Lastly the functions of Halloween for adults is to transcend the normal rules of society to relieve the normal tension of social order through party, carnival,

debauchery, drunkenness, spirit of play, and tricks. The wearing of costume was also a form of response to the political, religious, and sexual repression against conservatism, religion and social issues such as AIDS (Belk 1990; Levinson et al. 1992).

From the anti-home, anti-family, anti-religion perspective of Belk (1990), the celebration of Halloween has also increased the commercial opportunities of retailers who increase materialism among children and adolescents besides pursuing gratification and enforcing the gender role. The consumption of the Halloween festival also provides opportunities to create and extend a new identity through costumes and the socialisation of children using Halloween scripts (Levinson, Mack, Reinhardt, Suarez and Yeh 1992). This festival also proves to be attractive to consumers with complex; time pressured, and socially isolated lifestyles. The market has also offered safe merchandise to enable them to participate creatively which enables them to build and reconnect social ties with neighbours and families in today's modern world (Harries 2006).

From the British perspective, this festival which has deep historical links with its ancient Celtic pagan origins before it went to North America, is now ironically migrating back to Europe as a consumer festival. Halloween is now celebrated by many British consumers who find the experience a positive excuse to have fun with family and friends, and children being the central to the festival (McKechnie and Tynan 2008). However, the negative side of the Halloween festival is to be found in the emphatic language used, the high level of annoyance due to the increased commercialisation and Americanisation of the festival. Nevertheless, Halloween in Britain is a festival that is not a time bounded ritual, free from social obligation, and a treat or some form of creolisation which the contemporary consumers were willing to indulge.

Some of the findings are found to be similar to this study. The roles and function of the children and adolescent are found to be similar as children are being celebrated as they are being waited eagerly by family before the commencement of the Reunion Dinner besides being showered with attention, gifts and the playing of fireworks. Children also extort rewards from family and friends by demanding the packet of

money upon wishing the person a happy new year. This seeking of gratification from receiving the gift of money extends to adolescent and even to those who are still single even. The adolescent negotiation of the boundaries between wakefulness and sleep is also relevant in this study as in this study they continue to stay awake either to pray or to usher the Lunar New Year or to ensure the longevity of their parents by gambling, or visiting temples and friends.

2.6.3 Celebration of Christmas

A stream of researchers has studied Christmas from the social science inquiry to the consumer research strands. It was first researched under the social inquiry in which it looks into the role of Christmas within the American life (Caplow 1982, 1984). The most thorough examination of the role of Christmas within the American culture was undertaken by Barnett (1954) in which he traced the changes in the meaning of Christmas from early colonial days to the twentieth century. The finding concludes that Christmas has acquired a seasonal cult status from religious activities at churches to the family setting in the home from the Christmas Dinner, the Christmas shopping, the Christmas tree and gift giving (Barnet 1954; Otnes et al. 2009). The place for Christmas has also evolved from the intimacy attached to places and the notion of home to the recent twentieth notions of the family, the child and the private home (McGreevy 1990). The strongest association of Christmas with the country occurs among soldiers, hostages and others who are forced to be away from home during the Christmas season while the ideal place or the attractiveness can only be understood based on the ambiguity status quo given to it in relation to the everyday world that circumscribes it (McGreevy 1990).

Further social science studies examined it from the consumption aspects from the iconographic meanings and separating them between the secular iconography and religious iconography of Christmas (Caplow and Williamson 1980). The Santa Claus iconography is further explored as it became an integral part of the Christmas ritual (Belk 1987) and where consumption is religiously performed using this iconic deity as a popular mass media figure with his image appearing annually in department store, shopping malls, street corner charitable solicitation, Christmas plays and

advertising (Belk 1987) . This iconic role continued to be relevant as a Caucasian Santa is a necessity even within the celebrants at the shopping mall in Japan (Mimura and Belk 2005).

In Caplow's second paper based on Christmas festival, he investigated the patterns of giving during the Christmas season and found that women were more than men were likely to give ornaments, crafts objects, food, plants and flowers while men gave appliances and sports equipment (Caplow 1982). Clothing was far the most common type of gifts, followed by toys, money and food/beverages to ornaments, cosmetics, household appliances and sports equipment. A gift of money in the American culture would be an improper gift to one parents or grandparents even from adult children who are much more affluent than (Caplow 1982). Though there were some instances of gift certificate given to elders it was recorded as a form of euphemism for a money gift but there were no report of gift certificate to child or grandchild (Caplow 1982). For this study, the practice of money gifting from the young to the old, and among families to strangers is a requirement for this occasion with some occasional of exchanging gift of food when visiting relatives and friends after the Reunion Dinner.

However, money gifts were found to be common from employers to employees (Caplow 1982). For example small money gifts were given to newsboys, postmen, delivery men and other persons of relatively lower status who perform routine services for the givers throughout the year. But this grateful gifts will not be given to those of relatively high status such as teachers, friends, or family physicians (Caplow 1982: p. 386). However, the gifting of money as grateful gift is also found to be relevant within this study from employer to employee especially for Chinese enterprises.

In the division of Christmas labour, women were found to be doing most of the ritualistic tasks, similar to Thanksgiving. Women dealt with tasks from shopping, decorating, gift wrapping and also as the 'chief performer' (Caplow 1982: p.388) of the ritual, while men bore the larger share of the cost, admired and applauded the women's performance and to lend unskilled assistance when needed. The roles of the young children and adults are sharply differentiated in the Christmas ritual as the

young children will receive the large share of the gifts as the celebrations is understood to be for their benefit. These gender roles and the importance of the children are also reflected in the study conducted for the Reunion Dinner especially the roles and presence of the children signify the procreation of the kin.

The investigation of Christmas also suggested several streams within the consumer research from conspicuous aspects under the gift-giving and exchange process (Belk 1996; Sherry 1983) to the marketing perspective of the event through sensory (Hirschman and Holbrook 1982, Hirschman 1985), symbolism (Mick 1986) and mythology (Levy-Strauss 1978; Hirschman and LaBarbera 1989) can be found in the food, decorations and activities surrounding Christmas. Hirschman and La Barbera (1989) used the bipolar description of Levi-Strauss (1978) to highlight the sacredness/secular and the positive/negative affective dimensions of the event of Christmas. Five consumer themes which emerged from Hirschman and La Barbera (1989) are: gift giving, sociability and family togetherness, commercialism and materialism, the hedonism and sensuality of the event, and, lastly, the religious tradition and spirituality element of the ritual.

In light of the many studies of Christmas done from the North American perspective, a PhD. thesis was done on the intimacy of Christmas as a festive celebration in England from 1750-1947 (Armstrong 2004) also provided similar findings as in the celebration in America. The findings revealed Christmas as a celebration among family and friends, in terms of gathering and sending wishes besides gender roles, servant roles and the experience of children over the years. The late nineteenth century showed how the distinct culture of Christmas is developed as a distinct public culture through charity, entertainment and street culture. The findings also revealed leisure time was an important component of Christmas intimacy in which issues of consumption became important to the intimacy of Christmas with particular emphasis on shopping, advertising and travel, which are parallel also to the Lunar New Year celebration.

Using the metaphors of consumption, McKechnie and Tyanan (2006) studied the British celebrants of Christmas and found that they produced two types of behaviour, which is: special behaviour and the ordinary behaviour. These behaviours denote the

social meanings behind the social meanings of Christmas by incorporating the model of the movement of meanings (McCracken 1986) and the metaphors of consuming (Holt 1995). The special behaviour is derived from rituals (as in the cleaning and redecorating, and purchasing of gifts) that may be hedonic or utilitarian. In addition, they create meanings in their actions of experiencing and integrating, which produces a two-way process of how meanings can be transferred, from the goods or the consumers. The ordinary behaviour is found in the communal experience in which identity is portrayed through playing and classifying. Playing denotes the socialising and the communing of Christmas where activities are similar to previous years (e.g. going to pubs, restaurants and the cinema) while the classifying of actions is found in the classifying of the hostess, who may be a novice or an expert. These themes surrounding the Christmas are found to be relevant within this study which aims to investigate the social meanings of the Lunar New Year Reunion Dinner. Activities from shopping to cleaning, gender roles held by women, the role of children and the behaviour related to the metaphors of consumption from experience, integrating, classification and playing during these celebrations are found to be relevant to this study.

2.6.4 Difference between East and West Celebrations

From the stream of the consumer research studies above on the consumption associated with the Western celebration from Thanksgiving, Christmas to Halloween, the factors surrounding the people, food and activities provides the social meanings and themes uncovered were found to be parallel with celebration of the Reunion Dinner. However, uniquely for the Lunar New Year Reunion Dinner, the element of place and the practice of observing taboos are some important factors and criteria where the consumers are concerned, in which they are less emphasised within the western celebrations.

2.6.4.1 The sense of place

The sense of place and its constructs are found mostly in studies related to environment psychology and tourism while the place factor in marketing is found

within the operational of marketing strategy and tactics. The sense of place constructs look into the psychological dimension of experiencing place have been describe under the community sentiment (Hummon 1992; Urry 1995)), emotional bonds and affiliation with place as aspects of identity (Cuba and Hummon 1993), attachments in terms of commitment, belonging and bonding (Altman and Low 1992; Puddifoot 1995). Self-definitional attitude a place indicates and serve as an important locus of self (Hummon 1992) while the place identity also be integrated into the cognitive structure which contributes to the global self in answering one's self identity (Brakwell 2000; Gustafon 2000; Fried 2000). People's talk about place captures subtle distinction in describing and reflecting on different dimension in their relationship to the place (Pretty, Chipuer and Bramstom 2003).

In the celebration of the Reunion Dinner, the place which is at the home of the parents has been the norm. Traditionally the venue for the Reunion Dinners should be held in the home of the oldest generation, particularly of the immediate parents, followed by the grandparents' homes, depending on the surviving members (Choo 1983; Freedman 1970). This returning home to roots and ancestral home is deeply rooted within the Chinese culture in welcoming the New Year even within the Malaysian Chinese community (Debarnardi 2004; Liu 2006; Hsu 1949).

2.6.4.2 Sacredness of Cleanliness and Taboo

The word 'taboo' is a Polynesian word (Freud 1950:18). The word 'taboo' denotes everything, whether a person or a place or a thing or a transitory condition which is the vehicle or source of this mysterious attribute, It also denote the prohibition arising from the same attribute, Finally, it has a connotation which includes 'sacred' and 'above the ordinary' as well as 'dangerous', 'unclean' and uncanny'(Freud 1950). Taboo restrictions are said to derived from religious or moral prohibitions and yet to have found to have no grounds and are of unknown origin at the same time. Though they are unintelligible to us, those who are dominated by them they are taken as a matter of course.

As the Reunion Dinner is consumed as a precursor to the celebration of the Lunar New Year, the activities involved before, during and after the meal are influenced by the taboos associated with cleanliness in actions and speech. As the consumers drive to seek power, success and wealth through the Lunar New Year celebrations in the consuming of symbolic objects, food and actions, no one would care to put them out in the background as trivialities (Freud 1962). The actions and activities surrounding taboo are known across generations among the participants and are continued by many.

For this study which aims to look at the meanings behind the consumption of the Reunion Dinner of the Chinese consumer, culture is defined through the lens of social anthropology inculminating the marketing point of view by looking at the system of meanings. As this research adopts the interpretation of culture, it incorporated the thick description by Geertz (1973) through learning which goes beyond the total way of life, social legacy, way of thinking and believing from the learned storehouse and behaviour but to the suspended webs spun by man to the mass mediated market. Culture is therefore, constantly being constructed as the webs are continuously being spun, as in the phenomenology of play in which is a culture by itself.

The research conventions of the consumer cultural theory which extends the western constructs in showing cultural differences across different consumption and market phenomena will assist in the developing of theoretical constructs that challenge universal constructs. The two domains which have impending impact on this research is from the context of the consumer identity and the socio-history patterning of the consumption of the Reunion Dinner that will provide underlying experiences, processes and structures for the culture created and embodied in the lived world among the Malaysian Chinese consumers.

2.7 Summary

This chapter provides an overview of the literature pertaining to culture and consumption by reviewing the constructs of culture and consumer cultural theory (CCT). The study of consumption is further explore through symbolic and linguistic codes and metaphors. As the study aims to explore the celebration consumption of Malaysian Chinese Reunion Dinner, the review of consumer research literature pertaining to the ritualistic celebration consumption found in the Thanksgiving dinner, Halloween and Christmas are investigated. The following Chapter will continue with the review of literature pertaining to food consumption which is synonymous with any celebrations and which the study aims to investigate that is the social meanings behind the Lunar New Year Reunion Dinner.

Chapter 3: Food Consumption

3.1 Introduction

This chapter continues with the review of literature related to this study which is on the food consumption. This chapter is divided into seven sections. Section 3.2 overviews the study of food while Section 3.3 provides a description of the theoretical frameworks that have been used by previous socio-anthropological studies on food. Section 3.4 looks at food as part of culture and Section 3.5 discusses food consumption within the Chinese context. Lastly, Section 3.6 discusses the social meanings of food through the themes uncovered in previous research and Section 3.7 provides the summary for this chapter.

3.2 The Study of Food

A review of previous studies has provided themes or social meanings that can be derived from the consumption of food alone. Furthermore food is *sine qua non* and synonymous with all celebrations and events, and the food categories and objects in their variability are able to define social events and social relations (Douglas 1999). In addition, food is one of the most visible and stabilising categories of culture because it has always been assumed to be the last item to be changed or adopted within immigrant communities (Jamal 1998).

Anderson (2005) describes how food plays an essential role in many aspects of human activities and life, and not just a dimension of human culture. Eating is never simply a purely 'biological activity but is instead one that is associated with the past of those who have eaten them as well as the techniques that were used to search, process, prepare, serve and consume that have been earlier embedded in culture and histories of their own' (Jamal 1998). Therefore, the eating and consumption of food is conditioned by meanings which can be symbolic or communicated symbolically over time (Mennell, Murcott and van Otterloo 1992; Counihan and van Esterik 1997).

The consumption of food and its role also reflects people's adaptation to ecology, sociology, the social environment, and the market economy (see Murcott 1983; Warde and Martens 2000). The sociological approach toward food consumption is also concerned with questions of social welfare and the unequal distribution of nutrition (Douglas 1999; Murcott 1983). It further looks into how the religion function affects food and the social inequality of the rich and the poor as they are expressed in the consumption of food (see Douglas 1999; Mintz and Du Bois 2002). Over the years, food processing and the specific taste of food have been defined by its historical heritage and local experiences (Delamont 1995). Currently, the taste of food is even defined with the adverse influence of both global and local processes (Murcott 1983; Mintz 1998; Kiazera and Venkatesh 2007) to denoting of food either as ritual, routine or convention (see Counihan and van Esterik, 1999; Marshall 2005).

This research looks into the theoretical approaches which are available to the study of the consumption of food. Early anthropological research on food has centred mainly on the questions of taboo, totems, sacrifice and communion (Freud 1962, Levi-Strauss 1968). Anthropology has used the cultural symbolism approach to analyse food and its relationship with human self-understanding (Mintz and Bois 2002). It also uses this approach to analyse peoples' relationship with the physical world, as well as the supernatural world (as in rituals and myths) (Freud 1962; Levi-Strauss 1968; Delamont 1995). The anthropological approach argues that our primitive ancestors' believed that eating was a communion with the sacred and, therefore, religion was entwined with the food rituals that were practiced (Steadman 1996; Knechtges 1986)). Since one consumes something good given by, or stolen from, the Gods, ordinary mortals were able to participate in the cosmic mysteries controlled by their Gods (Duara 1988). Therefore, in different cultures, ritualised guidelines specify which vegetables and animals should, or should not, be considered as food (Levi-Strauss 1978; Douglas 1999). In this study, the foods served and consumed during the Reunion Dinner are endowed with special and specific meanings. By following these rules anxiety and guilt are relieved while at the same time group cohesion and solidarity is enhanced (Mennell 1987; Delamont 1995; Mintz and Bois 2002).

3.3 Theoretical Framework for Food Consumption

In general, most studies on food consumption have focused around the quantitative, structural, symbolic and psychological aspects of food (see Murcott 1983; Mennel 1987; Mennel et al 1992; Mintz and Bois 2002). The quantitative aspect looks into the elaboration of how food is prepared and what percentage of income is spent on the food. In this aspect, there is a preoccupation of eating to meet needs versus the wants of the food. The structural aspect looks at how food is studied based on the different kinds of food which are used for different occasions, either in small varieties or in distinct varieties (Levi-Strauss 1966; Douglas 1999). This is also extended to the use of utensils and beliefs, taboos, and etiquette. Societies that use a larger number of terms to designate food are placed higher in the hierarchy system; they are also more likely to be preoccupied with food (Douglas 1999). The symbolic aspect is used as a medium of communication via the incorporation of folklores through which information (communicated and categorised for a particular phenomena within a distinct social context) is established (see Thompson, Locander and Pollio, 1997; Siu 1999).

Mennel, Murcott and van Otterloo (1992) have prescribed a systematic sociological theoretical approach of food consumption, which is based on three main approaches, namely: functionalism, structuralism and developmentalism. Food consumption serves as a means of functionalism, especially from the traditional context (see Murcott 1983; Mennel 1987; Mennel et al 1992). This functionalist approach is used by anthropologists to understand how tribes or social groups go about the production, preparation and consumption of food within their social and psychological context, which may be related to the life cycle, interpersonal relationship and the structure of the social groups (Malinowski 1964; Levi Strauss 1968; Leach 1976). For example, Audrey Richards (1948), a student of Bronislaw Malinowski, studied the southern African tribes in order to uncover activities such as the preparation of food that is used as a form of expressing the sentiments and kinship and to differentiate the relations between relatives and genders. She found that food and its preparation symbolise the social relation indirectly (Richards 1948).

The structural approach was made famous under the influence of Claude Levi-Strauss, Mary Douglas, together with the contribution of semiologist Roland Barthes, uses food to provide a code to understand culture and society (Douglas and Isherwood 1979). Coding and deciphering have been used actively by the structuralists to explain the nature of culinary practices, from the raw food to the cooked dishes (Levi-Strauss 1968). They categorised food to denote hierarchy, inclusion and exclusion, and boundaries for specific social events (Douglas 1999). This was further expanded into the economics and symbolic power in the partaking of certain food (Bourdieu 1979) and into the omnivores eating habits which imply autonomy, freedom, and adaptability as suggested by Fischler (1990) while revealing the cultural aspects within from rules, customs, place and practice (see Mennell et al. 1992; Counihan and van Esterik 1997; Warde et al. 1999; Anderson 2005).

This study takes the inspiration from the developmentalism paradigm which goes beyond the study of culinary rules, novelty of food types, and gastronome cuisine. It is no longer sufficient to use the earlier approach to understand the meanings of food consumption; instead, controversial questions of food preference or avoidance also need to be considered. This has indirectly developed a new system of cuisine, which incorporates the emotions, manners, tastes, and lifestyle of those concerned (see Mennell 1987; Warde 2005; Warde and Marten 2000). Meanings here are not simply deciphered out of context, but they are also found from within the context itself. In addition, these meanings can also arise from the cultural application (Wright et al. 2001). This is shown in Mintz's (1984) work on sugar and its cultural implication, which found power within the consumption of sugar and sweetness.

In the study of consumer behaviour, the meaning of consumption has been linked in the past to the use of products and objects. This has included the experiential perspective (Joy and Sherry 2003) and the consumption rituals of Christmas (Belk 1989), Halloween (Belk 1990), and Thanksgiving (Wallendorf and Arnould 1991). This is also extended to the acts of possession and disposition of the self and extended-self (see Tian and Belk 2005; Wallendorf and Arnould 1988). As for food consumption, research has found it to be divided into three streams. The first stream is based on the usage of quantitative modelling of choices, especially pertaining to grocery shopping for product preferences and acquisition (Manchanda, Ansari and

Gupta 1999). The second stream uses it as the background data for decision making modelling pertaining to the purchasing and consumption of the types of food, and it also uses it to replicate these models for the study of affect and cognition in decision-making (Hirschman 1981; Shiv and Fedorikhin 1999). The last stream, which is more relevant to this research, uses it to explore social meanings, or the social-symbolic framework (Levy 1981; Rook 1985; McCracken 1990).

As this study aims to investigate the Chinese consumers' consumption of the Reunion Dinner which is within the setting of the ritualistic consumption of special occasions, it will explore the cultural aspects under the theoretical framework of CCT. This study takes inspiration from similar celebration events done previously such as the celebration of the Thanksgiving (Wallendorf and Arnould 1991), Christmas (Caplow 1982; Belk 1987; McKenchie and Tynan 2006), and the Halloween (Belk 1990). These studies will provide insights from the social-symbolic perspectives within the food and the processes and preparation (Wallendorf and Arnould 1991). The identities and roles defined through the food will also provide a description of social meanings, through the sacred and secular role of food, characters and participants of the events (Belk 1990; McKenchie and Tynan 2006) as food spans a variety of roles in our lives, from a source of nutrition and sensory pleasure to a social marker, an aesthetic experience, and a source of meaning and metaphor (Rozin 1996).

3.4 Food and Culture

From the review of literature on culture in the previous chapter, culture has been defined as a complex concept in which people make sense of their everyday life, and food plays an important role in their daily life (Douglas 1972). Food then becomes a cultural artefact because it signifies social values, meanings and beliefs (Douglas and Isherwood 1979). It also signifies occasion, social status, ethnicity and wealth (Murcott 1983). Food, therefore, carries multiple cultural, social, psychological, and symbolic meanings (Wright et al. 2000; Kniazeva and Venkatesh 2007).

Food has proven to be multifaceted at those points when it can become a social connector or disconnecter, when it either ties the bond or disrupts it, since eating is a social act which involves more than oneself (Kniazeva and Venkatesh 2007). The sharing of food is another symbolic way of sharing group identity and bonding (Belk 1988); for example, the eating of Chinese food brings one closer to the culture of China (Pleck 2000), as portrayed even by the writing of Chinese cookbooks (Ho 2001). Eating patterns among the newlywed has been found to be a process of adjustment (Heisley and Levy 1991) which can affect domestic harmony and which can be used to please, fix, and maintain relationships. Food can also be an object of desire (Anderson 2005). It helps to improve the psychological effect during the period of desire, and is also able to be regretful after the consumption due to guilt; for example, in the eating of comfort food or snacks (Murcott 1983; Watsink et al 2003).

The interplay of culture, economics, politics and technology also creates a dual nature of food, that is, in its movement from commodity to metaphor. Metaphor in food consumption is likened to a tag, as in the 'Fast-food Nation' (Schlosser 2001), while commodity of food ensures the availability of variety in a globalised market. At times, the description of food through its metaphor or the nation's diet can even reveal its culture. The symbolic, semiotic and metaphorical nature food is encoded in items, such as the McDonalds' menu, or in social events, such as wedding banquet, funerals and the ritual preparation (Delamont 1995).

One of the strongest links of ethnicity, beside the physical features which are written on the body or geographical origin, can be found in the consumption of food (Murcott 1983). Historically food has been used to signal ethnic difference. With changes in time and the availability of various types of food, (from the commodity perspective, as in the growth of the food industry) food has been also been used to signify events of the calendar (such as those festivals and rituals which are time related) (Delamont 1995; Tan 2003; Tan 2007). Food has also become an object to register social activities, for example: in the gathering of friends, either for small or large feasting in weddings, funerals, and parties. Over time, food has become part of a food system that is assumed to be a natural part of ordinary life (Anderson 2005).

Food has also been used to reflect cultural continuities and some local transformation is also necessary due to adaptation (Chang 1997). Moreover, there is a particular notion of the material manifestation where eating is concerned among the Chinese, where consuming food is also an interaction between the meaning of the food and cultural principles (Tan 2007). For some, eating a particular food serves not only as a fulfilling experience but also as a liberating experience, as in making a declaration to connect or disconnect with the world one is living (Chang 1977; Cheung and Tan 2007). Therefore, the type of food, how and why the food is chosen for one to eat or drink may be defined by the social and cultural organisations with which they are associated with (Murcott 1983).

3.5 Chinese Food Consumption

As this study aims to investigate the Chinese consumers' consumption of the Reunion Dinner, the role of food within the Chinese culture context needs further exploration. The role of food within the Chinese consumers where this study aims to investigate needs to make an inference to mainland China literature where available. China has a cultural history which is more than 4000 years old, which is remarkably homogenous, and which is also one of the most resilient on earth (Denton and Xia 1995). Chinese scholar Lin Yutang once said that "if there is anything that the Chinese are serious about is neither religion nor learning but food" (Chen 1990 p. 110). The Chinese passion for a wide variety of food and cuisine is well known. Food has a long tradition in China and it embodies the enjoyment and appreciation of food, it not only emphasises the taste or the nutritional value of food but it also emphasises the aesthetic of eating and preparation of the dishes, the occasion, and the overall atmosphere of the social situation (Cheung and Tan 2007).

The Chinese people are known to be preoccupied with food and the roles of food within Chinese society have permeated through the historical, medical, social and cosmological perspectives of the country (Andersen 2005). This is especially the case amongst the Chinese who tend to celebrate any social event by eating. This Chinese preoccupation with food is even reflected in Chinese daily greetings; for

example, instead of asking 'how are you' when they meet, the Chinese greet each other by asking 'have you eaten?'

Food consumption in Chinese culture is often characterised by rituals with originate from the five primary sources of behaviour and meanings, which are: human biology, individual aims and emotions, group learning, cultural values, and cosmological beliefs (Levy 1978). Food is also known for its infinite variability (Chang 1997). The culture of food can be studied through the understanding and the classification of patterns or styles of behaviour of a group of people who share it, or those who share the same food habits or assemblage of food variables (Chang 1997; Cheung and Tan 2007). Even within the same culture, the food habits are not completely homogenous because there still are different manifestations of food variables; for example, among minority groups due to the different social situations or from those of different social class, occupation, religious sects, and demographics or between genders (Cheung and Tan 2007). Food can be studied through the framework of kinship, government, economics and religion (Cheung and Tan 2007; Tan 2003).

The study of food within Chinese culture also includes the historical culture of food (Chang 1977). There are a number of historical sources which can be used; for example, people who patronise restaurants, cookbooks, and students' genealogies based on regional varieties found in China (Anderson 2005; Allison 1990). These historical resources enable us to understand how food in China has evolved through time, famine, drought, poverty and good times (Chang 1977). Chang's (1977) historical research on food suggests that food culture is derived firstly from natural sources, before the process of preparing the food from the raw ingredients begins. The Chinese way of eating is more often categorised by a notable flexibility and adaptability, as can be found in the preservation of food or eating different sorts of food (Chang 1977). In addition, Chinese ideas and beliefs in food have been found to contribute to Chinese culture, such as the yin and yang, or the hot and cold and even for its medicinal benefits (Murcott 1983). Lastly, to the Chinese, food itself is Chinese culture, as in the importance that was given to the Emperor's kitchen in the palace which is managed by four thousand people (Steele 1917). Food for the Chinese cannot be separated from ritual (Steele 1917; Anderson 1988 2005); for

example, in the right kind of food for a variety of occasions, the right order of food to the correct table manners that accompanies its consumption.

Food also plays an important role not only for the living. The practice of ancestor worship is a key part of the Chinese traditional culture values (Tatje and Hsu 1969; Wolf 1978; Steadman 1996). The connection between the taste and space (Sloan 2004) is evident through the representation of food. Food served on the table represents the ancestors and the place that they came from. The cooking style also represents the city or the place where the Chinese live, as do the ingredients and the culture found within them. In this study, the choices of food serve during the Reunion Dinner shown such similar findings and its association with their ancestors, but not necessarily following the patriarchal lineage as advocated traditionally.

Besides dining in, the dining out experience has been happening in China from as early as the Tang dynasty (618-907 CE) (see Saso 1965; Chang 1997). During then, dining out was a leisure but not a cultural norm because dinner parties are often held at home. However, today the meal occasion has become the criteria for dining out today (Auty 1992). Meanings, such as the symbolic meaning of the economy of the food or the eating out and the eating of fusion which allows food to collide in culture, are also popular trends today as they reflect the changes of lifestyles and social status (Anderson 2005; Warde 2005; Warde and Martens 2000).

Many of the previous studies in Chinese food consumption are based on the Chinese consumers living outside the mainland China (Chung 2000; Wu and Tan 2001; Ching and Fischer 2001, Wang and Cui 2008). Today, with the opening of China, we are able to observe some similarities in food consumption between the mainland Chinese and the emigrant diasporic Chinese consumers. However, some Chinese religious tradition beside the food traditions have disappeared from China, due to the influence of communist ideology which has influenced many of the values pertaining to consumption and, particularly, to the consumption of food (Cheung and Tan 2007). Documentation of the food consumption of the mainland Chinese is now made available through popular media, social media and the internet (Denton and Xia 1995).

3.6 Food Meanings and Themes

Food, just like other material objects, can be used to communicate messages and are taken and treated as they have originated from and between private individuals, which are direct command or instructions or guileful signals about self-identity, intended for by the sender's objectives' (Douglas 1987). Advertisers have used the implicit assumptions and symbolic meanings of food in modern society as messages that convey an individual's role definition and how that role is played and performed; for example, the best mother or best wife in association with the food preparation and habits (Warde 1997).

By using the structuralist approach, the anthropologists Marshall Sahlins and Pierre Bourdieu have provided some analysis of social class pertaining to the domination and subordination of certain food consumption patterns. The contrasting and bipolar descriptions used by Sahlins (1978) and Levi-Strauss (1966) have provided abstractions (such as formality/informality, exotic/homely, raw/cook and traditional/experiential) and they have been able to provide valuable guides to the understanding of the process of social ranking (Leach 1976; Douglas 1987). Sahlins (1978) has also provided the metaphor of the inner/outer social dimension of the food, in which the metaphor is of being closer to nature while the outer refers to being more civilised. For example, using this symbolic structure means that certain internal organs are assumed to be inferior as compared to the rump steak; offal is often described as uncivilised or low class food. However, in other cultures these meanings differ and exotic or traditional food can bring back reminiscences of childhood and nostalgia of family bonding, especially among the older generations (Jamal 1996).

This active human consciousness of consumption has inspired much consumer behaviour research. Within the consumption ritual context of Thanksgiving Dinner (Wallendorf and Arnould 1991), the transfer of objects and meanings are seen in the transmission of intergenerational recipes, the serving and dinner practices, and the stories told about family identity and roles played in the past. These messages reflected the social class and the gender norms of the consumers while partaking in

the feast (Wright et al. 2001). This indirectly provides the collective past images which are used to idealise the family life one envisions (Risto, Arnould and Arnould 2004).

Besides relating to the transmission of the past and its social meanings, food is also seen as the carrier of symbols based on the roles adopted by members. The meanings embedded within the associations of food are found in the roles played from the collective shared meanings. This association of food with collective shared meanings is seen in the example of the hamburger which is symbolically associated with food eaten by teenagers (Levy 1981). Food can also be used to bond the family because it is associated with consumers from childhood to adulthood (e.g. Jelly-O) as in the case of the Thanksgiving dinner (Wallendorf and Arnould 1991). Food can also be used as a symbol of triumph of nature over commerce as seen in the usage of butter over margarine. The preference of using manufacture versus home-made food also provides a symbolic link between the role and the food values (Wallendorf and Arnould 1991). On the other hand, comparing the manufactured food as undomesticated versus home-made food (Moisio et al 2004) has brought meanings from the lack of originality, the lacking experience, and weakening relationships besides causing discontinuity in traditions.

The meanings of food, however, vary across different age groups and generations. For the younger generation, the meaning of home-made means the opposite of mass production while the middle age group link mass production to nature and a romantic vision of cleanliness and purity (Wallendorf and Arnould 1991). Traditionally, the senior generation view food as the involvement of labour process and they see it as made from scratch in order to qualify as home-made (Douglas 1972, 1987). In terms of experience for being home-made, the younger generation takes it as a creative and personal accomplishment while the middle generation who has to work at shopping for food takes it as validating of self through the recognition of who will be consuming the food they cook (Wallendorf and Arnould 1991) . The older generation takes this as to represent 'house-holding', which is central to the reproduction, control and mastery of the household or family (Douglas 1987). Other implied meanings (such as paying moral dues, safeguarding the family from moral decay and ensured communion) are also viewed as reasons for home cooking

(Moisio et al 2004). In terms of replacement of home-made with market-made, the younger generation acknowledged that some market-made food that cannot be copied by home, while the middle generation accepted some of the substitutes which marketing has stimulated (Wallendorf and Arnould 1991; Tan 2003; Cheung and Tan 2007). However, the senior generation noted this market-made food as the distinction of inferiority (Wallendorf and Arnould 1991). These meanings will be anticipated and explored in this research when the family decides to have their Reunion Dinner in the restaurant instead of at home, and when they consume home-cooked dishes versus non-home cooked.

Within this study context, the language and the meanings literary are important to the Chinese consumers especially for one of the most important celebration of the year. During the Chinese New Year celebration, the need to have good luck throughout the year has to be communicated through the choice of food served (Fong 2000). The linguistic representation that conveys symbolic meanings which are related to good luck, or a name that sounds like it, though it may not have the same character, are among the reasons why certain food are essential on the dining table during the Reunion Dinner and throughout the fifteen day celebrations. For example, the fish is “symbolically employed as the emblem of wealth or abundance on the account of the similarity in the pronunciation of the fish in Chinese which is superfluity and also because fish are extremely plentiful in the Chinese waters” (Williams 1976, p.185). The Chinese characters and their International Phonetic Alphabet equivalent have different tones of meaning; for example, they have different tones for surplus, abundance or excess. In addition, the whole fish symbolises the abundance of good luck throughout the year and it is unthinkable to cut the fish into segments because this is normally interpreted as a bad luck sign of severance, interruptions, or difficulties in a person’s life in the coming year.

Overall, the food consumption themes found in the previous literature are derived from two main categories, namely: the traditional structural approach and the developmental approach. The structural approach has produced themes using the binary (or bipolar) of meanings (or codification), such as the connection between the production and preparation of food (be it nature versus culture or sacred versus profane) from both Western and Eastern perspectives. It has also dwelt on the

hierarchy of relationships, such as group identity or the relationship for worship among the Chinese between praying to the Heaven, Earth and ancestors (see Denton and Kaixuan 1995; Anderson 1988). Other themes in the previous literature include inclusion/exclusion, within/across boundaries, and the autonomy/compulsory of food, which reflect either freedom or adaptability (Levy 1978; Leach 1976). However, the weakness in this approach is that the scale may be too small to generate the codification needed, or to sustain it and achieve universal food meanings. In addition, the reliance of binary analysis does not allow one to assess the relative value of the binary when it is paired within the local set of expression, especially within the context (e.g. eating raw fish or sushi as compared to cooked food).

On the other hand, the developmental themes of food are much sought after today because they are strongly influenced by the characteristics of culture which are learnt, shared, and transmitted. Food meanings and practices represent and embody social structures and relationships. For example, eating due to the pressures of convenience, casualness, and speed are indicative of the eating practices of the fast-food industry (or the *McDonaldization* society) (Ritzer 2004) which have significantly changed modern food habits, family life, and consumption ritual (Oswald 2003).

The consumption of food has gone beyond seeing it as an instrumental reason for living or meeting the physical biological needs of the human body, it also includes social needs, how we see the world and how we wish the world to see us in what we eat (Anderson 2005). The relationship between food and culture has been explored anthropologically (Levi Strauss 1966) and sociologically (Douglas 1973). It has been studied through a number of contexts, including: domestic settings (Murcott 1983), historical studies of British and French families (Mennel 1985), and restaurant dining (see Finkelstein 1989; Warde and Martens 2000).

Today's nouvelle cuisine has created a fashion of food as entertainment and the role of dreams and stages to achieve in life (Warde et al. 1996). For example, pizza was even ordered to be served on the Reunion Dinner by one of the informant. As this study aims to investigate the meanings around the Reunion Dinner, themes including:

the development of what is new or novel in food; the development of a cuisine system; the involvement of emotions, tastes, lifestyles and themes that decipher history; and, the cultural applications of food within the celebration context will be explored.

3.7 Summary

The chapter presents the literature review pertaining to food consumption in which themes and social meanings are derived from. It discusses how food can be used to analyse the social meanings attached to it from the western and the Chinese context. The existing western theoretical of food consumption and its relationship with culture is also discussed as this study seeks to identify consumer actions within the CCT. The Chinese food consumption is further discussed due to its relevance since this study aims to investigate the Chinese consumer in the celebration of the Lunar New Year Reunion Dinner. This chapter ends with the discussion of themes found in previous studies such as the Thanksgivings and related food themes and meanings related to other celebration consumption which this research aims to investigate. The following chapter will discuss the research setting of this study which is based on the Chinese consumers residing in Malaysia.

Chapter 4: Research Setting: Malaysia

4.1 Introduction

This chapter is divided into eight sections. Section 4.2 provides an overview of Malaysia as the site of research together with a brief historical background in Section 4.3. Section 4.4 describes the Malaysian economy and Sections 4.5 provides the demography. Section 4.6 discusses the cultural environment by exploring the ethnicity, language and religion factors while Section 4.7 discusses the consumer trends within Malaysia. This chapter is concluded by a brief summary in Section 4.8.

4.2 An Overview of Malaysia

Malaysia has been chosen as the setting for this study aside from the fact that the researcher is from Malaysia but also the richness in culture made available by the multi-ethnic community. The effect of the diasporic Chinese who has formed outside China, the renegotiation of ethnic identity and the transmigration effect may provide insights on the celebration (Kong 1999) within the multi-cultural setting found in Malaysia. Moreover, previous studies on the celebration of the Lunar New Year have been done in China (Sellman 1982), Taiwan (Saso 1965; Bei and Chen 2004) or Hong Kong (Yeung and Yee 2010); which are predominantly Chinese unlike Malaysia where the Chinese is a minority ethnic group. Therefore, Malaysia, with its unique cultural composition and diversity, provides a rich set of distinctive cultures, which also makes culturally specific research a necessity within the country's domestic market (Cui 1997).

Malaysia is a tropical country located in the heart of South-East Asia with a total land area of 331,000 square kilometres (Watson and Andaya 2001). Malaysia has three states: the territory of Peninsular Malaysia accounts for 131,598 square kilometres, while the two states of Sabah (73,631 square kilometres) and Sarawak (124,459 square kilometres) which make up East Malaysia are located on the island of Borneo. Although East Malaysia occupies the larger portion of Malaysia's total area, it is

primarily comprised of undeveloped land and jungle. Approximately eighty percent of the nation's total population of 28.3 million occupy the Malaysian Peninsular, while the remainder reside in Sabah (3.1 million) and Sarawak (2.4 million).

Malaysia has an equatorial climate with high temperatures coupled with abundant rainfall during all seasons. This is mainly due to the maritime influences. The relative humidity averages 80 percent year round and temperatures vary between 22°Celsius and 33°Celsius. Situated in the equatorial doldrums, it is extremely rare for Malaysia to have a full day of clear sky (Watson and Andaya 2001). On the other hand, it is also extremely rare for Malaysia to experience more than a few days without sunshine.

Malaysia is a federation of thirteen states and it includes the Federal Territories of Kuala Lumpur, Putrajaya and Labuan Island. Nine of the states are under the Malay sultanates (namely Selangor, Pahang, Kedah, Kelantan, Perlis, Perak, Johor, Terengganu and Negeri Sembilan) while Penang, Malacca, Sabah and Sarawak each has a governor which is appointed by the government (Watson and Andaya 2001). Kuala Lumpur is the national capital of Malaysia, while Putrajaya is the new administrative centre of the Federal Government (replacing Kuala Lumpur) which was then officially declared the third federal territory after the Labuan Island in the East Malaysia (Watson and Andaya 2001). The Chinese consumers live predominantly in previous states which were under the British Straits Settlement which are the Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur, Penang, Malacca and Perak as these states were booming with activities which attracted the immigrants both the Chinese and Indians (Turnbull 1989).

Malaysia is a multi-racial country with diverse ethnic, cultural and religious communities who live in harmony. The main ethnic groups are Malays, Chinese and Indians, plus a very diverse group of indigenous people living in the Eastern states of Sabah and Sarawak. Malay is the national language but English, Mandarin, Tamil and other ethnic languages are widely spoken. Islam is the official religion of Malaysia but the other religions are still given the freedom of worship under the constitutional acts (Abdullah and Pedersen 2003).

4.3 Brief Historical Background

Because it is sandwiched between the two major civilizations of the Indian subcontinent to the west and China to its east, the Malaysian Peninsular has been the focus of attention from neighbouring areas since the first century BC (Turnbull 1989). Frequent trading contacts with China and the subcontinent of India have been responsible for a series of waves of external influence on the country; for example, both Hinduism and Buddhism have had a great impact on the culture, language and social customs of Malaysia (Watson and Andaya 2001). Following the early Hindu-Buddhist period, Islam was introduced to Malaysia by Indian (specifically, Gujerati) and Arab traders across the Indian Ocean. European colonisation in the region started in the early sixteenth century when the ships of Alfonso de Albuquerque arrived from Goa and conquered the city of Malacca on 24 August 1511. In 1641 the Dutch defeated the Portuguese and took control of Malacca. Malacca was eventually given to the British by the Dutch in 1824 in exchange for Batavia, Java (Turnbull 1989). The British colonies at Penang (1786), Singapore (1819), and Malacca (1824) were brought together in 1826 to form the Straits Settlements. British influence and power spread into the Malay Peninsula and the British political ultimately integrated the present Malay states. In the Federation Agreement of 1948 the British government began to pave the way for the eventually self-rule and independence of the country (Turnbull 1989). When they won landslide results in both the local election in 1951 and the federal election in 1955, the alliance of the UMNO (United Malay National Organization), MCA (Malayan Chinese Association), and MIC (Malayan Indian Association) enabled the achievement of full independence on August 1957 (Watson and Andaya 2001).

4.4 The Malaysian Economy

Since independence in 1969, Malaysia's economy has been state-orientated and relatively opens (Abdullah and Pedersen 2003). With the exception of the Asian financial crisis in 1997 and of the global crisis of 2009, Malaysia's economy has experienced steady growth since independence. In 2009 Malaysia had the third

largest GDP per capita in Southeast Asia after Singapore and Brunei as of 2009 (CIA 2009). Malaysia, a middle-income country, has transformed itself since 1970 from a producer of raw materials into an emerging multi-sector economy (Euromonitor 2009). Malaysia's exports, particularly of electronics (Malaysia Government Statistics, 2009), remain a significant driver of the economy while as an oil and gas exporter Malaysia has profited from higher world energy prices and growth within this sector. Malaysia is also classified as an upper-middle income country and considered as one of the most developed of the developing countries (PricewaterhouseCoopers 2007).

4.5 Demography

Malaysia's population is relatively small compared with that of neighbouring countries, such as Indonesia and Thailand (Watson and Andaya 2001). The total population of Malaysia (according to the Population and Housing Census, 2011) was 28.25 million in 2010, and with the population growth rate was 1.72 percent. Of the total Malaysian population the majority are Malays (50.4%), next are the Chinese (23.7%), the Indigenous (11%), Indians (7.1%), and others (7.8%). The median age of the population is 24.9 and the majority of the population (63.6%) are within the 15-64 age groups (Malaysia Government Statistic). One of the most striking trends is that the household size among the Chinese Malaysians has been shrinking steadily while the average Malay family size is growing. By 2020, as a result of this phenomenon, the Chinese are expected to make up just 18.7% of the population (New Straits Times 2011).

4.6 Cultural Environment

Present day Malaysia is a multicultural, multilingual, and multi-religious nation where different communities and groups live together while maintaining their separate identities (Leete 1996). Its cultural environment is characterised by its population of aborigines and descendants of immigrants, who mainly come from Asia (such as India and China). Malaysia, therefore, can be viewed as a microcosm of Asia (see Skeldon 1995; Leete 1996) with the three largest communities in its heterogeneous

populations which are the Malays, Chinese and Indian, representing samples of the three most populated countries within the region (i.e. Indonesia, China and India). There are also the other small minorities which are considered as rural indigenous which are scattered across the country, some are located in the Peninsular but they are mainly in East Malaysia (within the states of Sabah and Sarawak) (Abdullah and Pedersen 2003).

In Peninsular Malaysia the conventional ethnic division are predominantly divided into four divisions, namely: “Malay”, “Chinese”, “Indian” and “Other”. This classification may also seem to represent the races as categorized by the everyday terms used. According to the Malaysian constitution, a Malay is a person who was born locally, habitually speaks Malay, follows Malay customs and professes Islam (see Haque 2000; Haque and Masuan 2002) while the Chinese and Indian communities consist of descendants of immigrants from China and the Indian subcontinent (see Hirschman 1987; Watson and Andaya 2001). ‘Others’ is a category which is used for those who do not fit the three major categories, such as the small number of Eurasians, Thais, and Europeans (Abdullah and Pedersen 2003).

4.6.1 Ethnicity

Physical and cultural markers that are used to differentiate one population from another can be ambiguous and are subject to change across generations (Chapman and Jamal 1997). For ethnic groups to persist, such markers must be reinforced by social arrangements and practices that solidify group identity and heighten division between groups (Barth 1969). Among the dimensions that may be used to reinforce ethnicity in a plural society are cultural characteristics such as language, dress and cuisine (Hirschman 1987). Other markers that are aligned with other ideological, social and economic division in society (such as religion and language) can also be strong factors in maintaining divisions that reinforce cultural definitions of ethnicity (Chapman and Jamal 1997). For example, although most Malaysian Chinese have retained their mother tongue, there are many examples of Chinese settlements

adopting the Malay language as their own (Winzler 1972); for example, in Kelantan and in Malacca.

Malaysia is a multicultural country. Out of a total population of around 27 million people (Malaysia National Census 2007), there are five different ethnic groups: the Malay (50%), Chinese (24%), Indigenous (11%), Indians (7%), and Others (8%). In terms of religious affiliation, the main groups are Muslims (60%) followed by Buddhists (19%), Christianity (9%) and Hindus (6%) (Abdullah and Pedersen 2003). The cultural diversity of Malaysia is further reflected in the range of languages spoken: Bahasa Malaysia (official), English, Chinese (Mandarin and other dialects of Cantonese, including: Hokkien, Hakka, Hainan, Foochow), Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, Punjabi, Thai, and the indigenous languages spoken in East Malaysia amidst the Iban and Kadazan (Lee and Tan 2000).

Ethnicity diversity is further defined in two broad categories politically namely: Bumiputra (meaning 'sons or princes of the soil') whose cultural affinities are indigenous to the region, and the non-Bumiputra group (Haque and Masuan 2002). These two categories will be explored in more depth in the sub-sections which follow.

4.6.1.1 Bumiputra

Bumiputra groups among themselves are highly differentiated and fall into three categories, which are: the Malays, the Malay-related, and the aborigines (or 'orang Asli'). Malays are the most homogenous ethnic group in terms of culture, language and religion and they form the predominant ethnic group in Peninsular Malaysia (Watson and Andaya 2001). Although there may be some cultural differences from state to state, the overall Malay culture is overshadowed by the strong influence of the Muslim religion (see Haque 2008; Haque and Masuan 2002). The second Bumiputra category consists of those Malay related ethnic groups who are to be found in Sabah and Sarawak. In Sabah, the Kadazan form the largest single ethnic group, they account for 18.4% of the state's population and they are comprised of mainly Christian subsistence farmers. In Sarawak, the largest non-Malay Bumiputra are the Iban (also known as Sea Dayak), at 30.1% of the state's population they form the largest ethnic group (Malaysian Department of Statistics 2001). The other

Bumiputra ethnic groups are the Bidayuh, Melanau, Kenyah, Kayan and Bisayah; some of whom have embraced Islam or Christianity. The aborigines, or 'orang Asli', represents the oldest population, although they are only a very small minority in Peninsular Malaysia and total less than 1% of the national population (Abdullah and Pedersen 2003).

4.6.1.2 Non-Bumiputra Groups

The non-Bumiputra groups consist primarily of the Chinese and Indian ethnic groups (Abdullah and Pedersen 2003). With the exception of the Chinese Baba or Peranakan community in Malacca (which is a different community when compare to the other Chinese communities in Malaysia) who can trace their ancestry in Malaysia back to the sixteenth century, there was no substantial permanent settlement of Chinese and Indians in the area until the nineteenth century (Gungwu 2001). In the nineteenth century the British Empire relied heavily upon imported indentured labour to work in the mines and the plantations of the Straights Settlements and Peninsular Malaysia; hence, substantial Chinese and Indian communities developed based on the British needs for cheap labour (Pedersen and Abdullah 2003)

4.6.1.2.1 Malaysian Chinese

A Malaysian Chinese is defined an overseas Chinese who is either a citizen or a long-term resident of Malaysia (Millet 2004). Within Malaysia, they are simple referred to as Chinese. A sub-group of Malaysian Chinese called the 'Peranakan' or 'Straits Chinese' were early Chinese settlers who arrived in Malacca in the fifteenth century (Tan 2006). The Peranakan adopted many Malay customs, including the Malay language, but they retained their Chinese religious practices. Parameswara (1344-1414) founded the Malacca Sultanate at the start of the fifteenth century; he was also responsible for developing a trading relationship with the Ming Dynasty in China. In 1409 Parameswara is said to have travelled to China and married one of the emperor's daughters. The princess and her consorts were brought to Malacca and they began the first Chinese community in the Peninsular. Their descendants were later known as the Baba and Nyonya, or Peranakan (i.e. Straits-born) Chinese. They intermarried with the locals; spoke Malay (BBC 2005; Tan 2001).

The Chinese in Malaysia came principally from the Southern Chinese provinces of Fujian and Guangdong, which also provided the various dialects of Chinese which are spoken among the Malaysian Chinese today. The major dialect groups are Hokkien and Cantonese, which form the largest dialect group among the Chinese Malaysians (Abdullah and Pedersen 2003), followed by the Hakka, Teochew, Fuchow and Hainanese. The dialect spoken reflects the immigrants' culture for that region. This distinction of dialect among the Chinese is critical to this study because there are many variants in the perception of how this celebration of the Chinese New Year differs across these dialect speaking groups (Tan 2001). Jimmy Lim, the heritage architect referred to Malaysia as 'like a little backwater of Chinese culture as it was in the China eighty year ago' (BBC 2005). There are still many Chinese festivals celebrated in Malaysia that are no longer practiced in China due to the influence of the Chinese Cultural revolution of the 1960s and 1970s.

From the beginning the Chinese in Malaysia (Lee and Tan 2000) were mainly settled in the urban centres where they dominated the area's economy and controlled the tin mining and rubber industries (at that time the country's main export sectors). The Chinese brought with them their distinctive identity and culture with its amalgam of practice and beliefs of Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism (Tan 2006), as well as the various spoken dialects of Chinese. Mandarin was used as the language of the educated Malaysian Chinese (Tan 2006).

A geographically mobile Chinese individual never severed his ties or identification with his native place or ancestors but instead added additional levels of identification (Strauch 1981). This is not limited by kinship but is also extended by a sense of cultural commonality which is instilled across China's vast ideological, economic, and political existence which has lasted for thousands of years (Lee and Tan 2000, Tan 2001). From the time of the earliest Chinese settlements, the use of nested native-place categories has been important in the social life of the immigrant community (Crissman 1967). In each of the Chinese communities the first degree of internal segmentation follows linguistic lines (Cantonese, Hokkien or Hakka) which largely coincide with territorially bounded native place division (Lee and Tan 2000). To this day, the Chinese in Malaysia will sponsor their own cultural and social activities, and maintain their primary ties to the family and associations which are based on their

dialectical or geographical origins in China (Tan and McCullough 1985; Tan 2001; Tan 2006).

4.6.1.2.2 Malaysian Indians

The Malaysian Indians were brought to the Malay Peninsula by the British in the nineteenth century under the indenture system to be recruited as labourers to work in the sugar cane, coffee, and rubber plantations; they also worked on the railways during the British administration (Watson and Andaya 2001). Those Indians who were not recruited as labourers (especially those from Northern India and Ceylon) found professional jobs and opened businesses in the western coastal towns to serve the needs of the indentured Indians. Eighty percent of their descendants are low-caste labourers while the remainder comes from a wide range of castes, language, and occupational groups from various areas of India (Kent 2000); these include: Tamils, Pakistanis, Malayalis, Bangladeshi, Ceylonese, Punjabis, Bengalis and Gujeratis (Abdullah and Pedersen 2003).

4.6.2 Language

Since language is a part of culture, it simultaneously reflects culture and is influenced and shaped by it. Hence, language is part of a culture and culture is part of language, both are interwoven intricately that they cannot be separated. Hence, a country's language is the key to understanding its culture because spoken language is an observable cultural manifestation (Terpstra and Sarathy 2000).

The official language of Malaysia is Malay. Most Malays speak Malay, while the Indians tend to speak mainly Tamil, although there are a number of other Indian languages in use (such as Telegu, Malayalam, Punjabi, Hindi and Bengali). Mandarin is used among the Malaysian Chinese as an integrated language and it is often used instead of the Chinese dialects (Lee and Tan 2000), which are clustered and concentrated among the Chinese in the different areas where they live and through their respective 'clan' network (Abdullah and Pedersen 2003). The Chinese dialects in use in Malaysia include the Hokkien dialect (35% of the Chinese population), Hakka (23%), Cantonese (18%), Teochew (11%), Foochow (5%),

Hainanese (4%), and others (4% (Lee and Tan 2000). English is widely spoken, especially in the urban areas, and it is the language of the business community. There are at least fifteen languages which can be identified among the indigenous people and there is a significant level of language diversity among the Malay related ethnic groups in Sabah and Sarawak (Watson and Andaya 2001).

The significance of the spoken Chinese dialects has been reduced recently and many Malaysian Chinese have started speaking their mother tongue or English instead (Lee and Tan 2000). This is due in part to the use of Mandarin in schools and to the exposure of Malaysia to new influences as the country has developed. The Malaysian Chinese living in Malaysia are predominantly Chinese speaking and they are educated in Mandarin (Lee and Tan 2000).

There are three different languages used in Malaysian schools, namely: Malay, Mandarin (Chinese) and Tamil. Each of these mediums of instruction signifies the three major races that exist in Malaysia. Therefore, it is common for a Malaysian Chinese to be educated in Chinese, English, or Malay (Lee and Tan 2000). In 2004 90% of all Malaysian Chinese attended Chinese primary school, as compared to 70% in 1970 (Malaysia Census 2004). Meanwhile, 90% of Chinese Primary school graduates will continue their secondary education in public secondary school where the medium of instruction is Malay and English. However, there are also a group of Chinese who have never attended any formal Chinese school, they are labelled 'yellow bananas' because their skin is yellow outside (i.e. Chinese) but they are white on the inside (i.e. English speaking) (Tan 2001). A sizable group of Malaysian Chinese speak Chinese as a first language but they speak English at home and make a point of immersing and educating their children in the English language as early as possible (Tan 2001).

4.6.3 Religion

Besides being multicultural and multilingual, Malaysian society is also multi-religious. The population census of 2000 showed that Islam was the most widely professed religion (60.4%), which is also proportion of ethnic Malays in Malaysia. Other

religions which are practiced in Malaysia include Buddhism (19.2%), Christianity (9.1%), Hinduism (6.3%) and Confucianism, Taoism and other related religions (2.6%) (Abdullah and Pedersen 2003).

Buddhism among the Malaysian Chinese is associated with the wave of immigrants who came into the country in the nineteenth century and with those who have arrived subsequently. In Malaysia, Buddhism is the second largest religion professed after Islam. Mahayana Buddhism is widely practised by the Malaysian Chinese community. The majority of Malaysian Buddhists are Chinese-speaking Mahayanists, although many do not make a clear distinction between Buddhist and Chinese folk religious practice (Lee 1997). Buddhism is also the religion of the Thais and a number of Sinhalese and Burmese in the country, who belong to the Theravada School of Buddhism. Malaysian-Thais can be found particularly in the border states of Malaysia (Tan 2006).

Although the religious affiliation may be different among the Chinese, Confucianism dominates their culture. A substantial proportion of Malaysians Chinese practice ancestral worship while a larger number are Buddhists, Christians and Muslims (Lee and Tan 2000; Tatje and Hsu 1969).

Most Christians in Malaysia are to be found in the non-Malay groups of Chinese, Indians and others. However, the majority of the Tamil Indians, mostly found in the western states of Peninsula Malaysia (in particular in Selangor and Perak), are practicing Hindus (80%) (Lee and Tan 2000). According to Lee and Tan (2000), the distinct differences between the northern and southern forms of Hinduism in India are reflected in the way Hinduism is practised in Malaysia, which is predominantly characterised by the Tamil beliefs and style of worship. Besides these regional identifications, Malaysian Hindus still categorise themselves into the caste system where a person's social status is inherited at birth and cannot be altered during their lifetime. However, in contemporary Malaysian society the caste system has little functional value except among the Indians themselves who use it as a cultural marker to distinguish their members. Overall, Hinduism is the dominant religion for the Malaysian Indians, although Christianity, Islam and Sikhism are also commonly practiced by a minority of this group (Abdullah and Pedersen).

4.7 Consumer Behaviour and Consumer Trends of Malaysian

Recent statistics have shown great leaps in the development of urbanisation (PriceWaterhouse Coopers 2005, ACNielsen 2011), including: an increased number of urban households; better job opportunities; the implementation of Integrated Communication Technology (ICT) via cities in the western corridor in the Peninsular Malaysia; an increased rate of industrialisation which has led to higher disposal income, attainment of higher education levels and the increasing importance role of female consumers (Malaysia Department of Statistics, 2010). This section will discuss these new trends emerging within the region.

4.7.1 Urbanisation Shaping Consumption Trends and Preference

The number of urban households in Malaysia has increased from 2.3million in 1995 to 4.1 million in 2007 (Euromonitor 2009), reflecting a growth rate of more than 75%. The major cities that have absorbed the heavy and steady influx of migrants are within the Klang Valley region, mainly: Kelang, Petaling Jaya and Shah Alam (where this research is based). Urbanisation in Malaysia is driven primarily by people seeking better job opportunities, due largely to the rapid rate of industrialisation which is to be found within the Peninsula Malaysia (ACNielsen 2011). At the same time, thanks to its historical development from the early settlements, the cities at the west of the Peninsular are economic centres and industrialised zones which have better infrastructures. A relatively large number of students have moved to Malaysia's cities to attend the higher education institutions which have also increases the urbanization process.

Generally the lifestyle of urban Malaysia is faster-paced and more diverse with wider choices of products and services on offer as compared with the rural areas. The average age of the urban population is younger with far more single-persons per household than in the rural areas. The urban dwellers are also more likely to be influenced by advertising through the various media and popular culture exposure and they have a high awareness of international brands, fashion trends and lifestyles

(PricewaterhouseCoopers 2006). According to ACNielsen (2009), strong brands influenced almost ninety percent of consumer purchases decisions.

4.7.2 Income and Buying Power

Household annual disposable income in Malaysia has increased from 40% 55% from 1995 to 2007. In 1995, only 22.4% of Malaysian had an annual disposable income of more than USD15,000 but by 2007 this has risen by 36.7% (Euromonitor 2009). One of the primary factors behind this improvement has been the recovery from the 1997 Asian financial crisis. In addition, the export oriented economy of Malaysia benefited from robust regional economic performance coupled with high levels of foreign investment and the rise in international commodity prices (e.g. palm oil).

The number of Malaysians who have attained higher education has increased significantly, nearly doubling from just over one million in 1995 to 1.95 million in 2007 (Euromonitor 2009). Generally, having a highly educated population will lead to a bigger pool of skilled workers who can help to drive economic growth and improve the standard of living, they also lead to a higher level of disposable income and financial independence (Clammer 2003). The rise in disposable income and improved technology capabilities, together with higher levels of tertiary education, has continue to fuel the demand for products reflecting the lifestyle aspired to by the various segments of Malaysian society.

4.7.3 The Increasing importance of Female Consumers

Although disposable income among the women is still significantly lower than men's in Malaysia, their importance as consumers has increased significantly (PricewaterhouseCoopers 2006). Retailers and manufacturers now not only target women in obvious product sectors (such as fashion, children's clothing, footwear and food) but they also target women in the marketing of household goods, cars, and other expensive durable products (ACNielsen 2010). In today's Malaysia, women are more likely to contribute in a whole new host of households purchasing decisions and marketers are increasingly aware of this and they are ready to make full use of

this new consumer. The reasons for the new found role of Malaysian women as consumers include the high levels of education attained by many Malaysian women today; for example, in many Malaysian universities the women enrolled typically outnumber the men (Euromonitor 2009). This has boosted the numbers of women entering the workforce and it gives them more opportunities to secure higher paying jobs than before. Hence, the disposable income for women (independent and single as well as joint income earners for a family) has increased the overall disposable income of consumers in Malaysia. This has resulted in many more women having a degree of financial independence and more influence in household purchasing decisions, which goes against Malaysian tradition which tends to favour collectivist values.

4.7.4 Eating Habits

Consumer expenditure on food in Malaysia has increased by 17.3% over 1995-2007, reaching RM37.4 billion in 2007 (Euro monitor 2009). Dining out is an important part of Malaysians' social life and families usually enjoy at least one meal outside the home each week. Young consumers living and working in urban areas will often dine out more frequently. However, preparing meals from scratch at home is still considered by most Malaysians to be part of a healthier life style and many people still continue to cook occasionally, either during weekends or holidays (Clammer 2003). Where cooking habits are concerned the members of the Malaysian Chinese community often use herbal ingredients when cooking while the members of the Malay and Indian communities prefer spicy ingredients (Liu 2006, Tan 2007).

As for the consumption of the Reunion Dinner, the Chinese consumers still cook from scratch with fresh food (see Lo and Comber 1958; Tan 2007; Cheung and Tan 2007) for their traditional dishes. However, for some Malaysians, with years of food acculturation and assimilation has resulted in the preference of spicy food such as the Indian or Malay curries and richly spiced dishes. For some, the curry is also a main dish which is served on important festival such as the Reunion Dinner for the Chinese New Eve. As for eating out, Malaysia is one of the few countries which a family can afford to eat out almost everyday of the week (PricewaterhouseCoopers

2006) with the choice of food depending on budget. Hence, it is not uncommon for the Chinese consumers to dine out for this celebration, either for the Reunion Dinner on the eve or the remainder of the fifteen days of celebration. Lastly, this study of the festival consumption of the Reunion Dinner within a contemporary and pluralistic Malaysian society is appropriate within the jurisdiction of the consumer cultural theory (CCT) advocated Arnould and Thompson (2005).

4.8 Summary

This chapter has given some background information as to provide a context for the area where the fieldwork of this research project is conducted. The researcher has discussed relevant aspects relating to chosen site, Malaysia from its rationale, geographical, historical, demographic structures, and cultural aspects. Emphasis has been placed on the rich multicultural composition and diversity of Malaysia through the ethnicity, language and religion of the country. Particular attention has been given to the marketing setting of the country by looking into the consumption trends of Malaysia, especially within the context of the consumption of the Malaysian Chinese and the sample chosen, which are part of the urban population and living within the capital of Malaysia (i.e. Kuala Lumpur or the Greater Kuala Lumpur). Malaysia's unique cultural composition and diversity provides a rich set of distinctive culture which will enhance this specific research unique (Cui 1997). The following chapter will discuss the methodology use in this study.

Chapter 5: Methodology

5.1 Introduction

This chapter is divided into nine sections. Section 5.2 looks into two distinct research paradigms: the positivistic paradigm and the phenomenological paradigm (Hussey and Hussey, 1997). Meanwhile, Section 5.3 presents the theoretical framework originating from the consumer behaviour context while Section 5.4 outlines the methodology central to Consumer Culture Theory (CCT). An outline of the research strategy employed is provided in Section 5.5 in order to reflect the chosen and emergent methodological format. Section 5.6 discusses the issues of trustworthiness of the data and the techniques used. Section 5.7 explains the data analysis strategy that is employed. The limitations of the study are addressed in Section 5.8 concluding with the summary chapter in Section 5.9.

5.2 Research Paradigm

The term 'paradigm' refers to the progress of scientific practice based on philosophies and assumptions about the world, and on the nature of knowledge. Paradigms are universally recognised as scientific achievements, which for a specific time provide some model solutions to model problems by a community of practitioners (Kuhn 1962). A paradigm may be viewed as a set of basic beliefs representing the world-view of a research community, determining their perspective and their understanding of the world and how things are interlinked (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). A paradigm is rather like a framework within which theories are built as it guides the methodological approach adopted by the researcher (*ibid*). Therefore, depending on the research paradigm which is adopted, the researcher's basic beliefs about the world are reflected in the way that the research is designed, analysed and presented.

Before deciding on the research paradigm it is critical to reflect on the research's aims and objectives. The aim of this study is to investigate the consumption rituals

associated with the celebration of the Chinese New Year Reunion Dinner through its cultural significance within the Malaysian context. In doing so, its four-fold objectives are: to explore the ritual of the consumption of the Reunion Dinner, to investigate the role and significance of cultural changes among the different generations participating, to identify major themes associated with consumption rituals, and, lastly, to discuss the implications for theory development, especially within a cross-cultural market space.

The theoretical guidance for this study came from social anthropology and consumer behaviour, and the study is based on interpretive (Anderson 1986, 1989; Geertz 1973; Hirschman 1989; Spiggle 1994) and ethnographic (Atkinson 1990; Boyle 1994; Clifford and Marcus 1986; Evans-Pritchard 1951; Hill 1993; Malinowski 1922; Jackson 1987) approaches to the study of culture and consumption. The relationship of culture in consumption within the study of the Reunion Dinner suggests an interpretive and hermeneutic approach (Arnould and Fischer 1994; Thompson 1997) which will be appropriate since there is interplay of beliefs and values influencing the consumers and their behaviours. The study of human behaviour and activity needs to be understood in its entirety within a social or situational context and it should not be considered to be independent from the environments in which they function.

5.2.1 Research Philosophy

A review of the literature suggests that social research is dominated by two main research paradigms: the positivist paradigm and the phenomenological paradigm. Both paradigms differ significantly and Table 5.1 presents some of these differences.

Table 5.1 Contrasting Positivist and Phenomenological Research Paradigm

Positivistic Paradigm	Phenomenological Paradigm
Quantitative	Qualitative
Objectivist	Subjective
Experimentalist	Humanistic
Traditionalist	Interpretivist

Source: Hussey and Hussey (1997)

Positivism refers to a set of epistemological perspectives holding that the scientific method is the best approach to uncover the fundamental process by which physical and human events occur in our social world. Positivism assumes that an objective reality exists against which the researcher can compare their claims and ascertain the truth. It also assumes that general patterns of cause and effect exist and, hence, the goal of the researcher is to uncover these patterns. Finally, positivism assumes that objectivity can be achieved and that researcher can be free of subjective bias (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

In contrast, the phenomenological research paradigm stands quite opposite to positivism in the sense that it argues that we should try to understand social phenomena from the viewpoint of those who are being studied; that is, from the perspective of the humans being studied. Phenomenological assumptions include a strong belief that human behaviour and activity needs to be understood in its entirety within a social or situational context, and it should not be considered to be independent from the environments in which they function. Consumer behaviour, in this context, needs to be studied as it occurs.

Having briefly compared and contrasted positivist and phenomenological paradigms, we can now proceed to assess the differences in adopting qualitative versus quantitative methods, each of which is governed by a set of assumptions which depend upon the research paradigm that is followed by a specific researcher.

5.2.2 Qualitative versus Quantitative Methods

The choice of a specific methodology is very much a factor of the research paradigm which is followed. For example, those who use a 'positivistic' paradigm adopt quantitative methods, while those who follow a phenomenological or 'naturalistic' paradigm prefer to use qualitative methods, such as ethnography (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995; Fetterman 2010) and long interviews (McCracken, 1989).

It is of note that positivism has a long history in philosophy and it has a strong influence on social science researchers, who under the influence of positivism have

promoted the use of experimental and survey research methods. However, in other disciplines (such as sociology and social psychology) both qualitative and quantitative methods had been used, as is reflected in various case-study analysis and statistical models (Foxall 1999, Lindridge 2005).

In consumer research, various researchers have debated the case for quantitative and qualitative approaches as alternative ways of gaining knowledge (see, for example: Anderson 1986; Belk 1986; Belk and Wallendorf 1989; Hirschman and Holbrook 1986; Holbrook 1987; Holbrook and O'Shaughnessy 1988; Hudson and Ozanne 1988; Ozanne and Hudson 1989; Spiggle 1994). The positivist paradigm has traditionally dominated consumer research and, hence, much of the published work has been based on several quantitative methods (e.g. experimental designs). However, in recent decades there has been a gradual and noticeable shift towards adopting interpretive and qualitative approaches as valid and reliable ways of understanding consumer behaviour (Ozanne and Hudson 1989; Spiggle 1994, Arnould and Fischer 1994, Holt 1999).

Researchers working within the positivist paradigm normally rely heavily on experimental and manipulative methods, assuming that doing so will ensure a distance between their own subjective biases and the objective reality that they aim to investigate. This approach normally involves generating research hypotheses which are then tested via quantitative methods (such as use of questionnaires). The fundamental assumptions of positivism relate to the logic of the experiment, the universal laws which are assumed, and the neutrality of the observation language used, which presumably forms the basis of the development of scientific theories. This means that they are open to, and subjected to, test so that they can be confirmed, or at least falsified with certainty, through standardised data elicitation procedures that allow replication by others as a reliability measurement.

For this study, a phenomenological research paradigm that employs a qualitative and naturalistic inquiry will be used to understand human and social behaviour inductively and holistically in specific settings, allowing a fuller understanding from the point of view of those under investigation (Lincoln and Guba, 2005; Loftland 1967, Denzin 1971, Guba 1978). This naturalistic approach argues that the social world is

to be studied in its natural state, which means that the researcher has to be sensitive to the natural setting by respecting and appreciating the social world around it. Naturalists regard social phenomena differently and distinctly from physical phenomena. This stems from the philosophical and sociological theories of symbolism, phenomenology, and hermeneutics that naturalism is based upon.

Bryman and Bell (2007) define quantitative research as a research strategy that emphasises quantification in the collection and analysis of data, which entails the use of a deductive approach in the testing of the theory. Epistemologically, quantitative research is aligned to the natural science model, or positivism, while it ontologically views social reality as an external objective reality; hence, it uses an objectivist approach. In contrast, the qualitative research strategy is constructed around the emphasis of words and meanings rather than in the quantification of the collection and analysis of data, which indirectly emphasises an inductive approach to the generation of theories.

Epistemologically, qualitative research is aligned with interpretivism, while it ontologically views a social reality that is shifting; hence, it uses a constructionist approach (Berger and Luckman 1967). Interpretivists emphasize that there are no facts, only interpretations which depend on meanings ascribed by the interpreter. When researchers interact with the subjects undertaking interviews, making observation and requiring responses to questionnaires, they are not just revealing the truth about the social conditions and people's experiences through the data but they are also producing specific representations of something which is being constructed, thus producing a reality that is shifting. The data with the language it uses is a discourse in which a particular view on social reality is constructed (Alveson 2011).

5.2.3 Features of Methodology as Designated by the Chosen Paradigm

In addition to the underlying assumptions of the qualitative and quantitative approaches, the features of the methodology process are also able to distinguish the paradigm chosen. Methodology refers to the research process in which the

theoretical underpinnings will determine the collection and analysis of the data. Methods, on the other hand, refer to the various means in which the data can be collected. The term methodology refers to the overall process, which is defined by the features and characteristics of the process (which is illustrated below in Table 5.2).

Table 5.2: Features of Methodology

<i>Positivistic Paradigm</i>	<i>Interpretivist Paradigm</i>
Tends to produce quantitative data	Tends to produce qualitative data
Uses large sample	Uses small sample
Concerned with hypothesis testing	Concerned with generating theories
Data is highly specific and precise	Data is rich and subjective
Location is artificial	The location is natural
Reliability is high	Reliability is low
Validity is low	Validity is high
Generalises from sample to population	Generalises from one setting to another

5.2.4 Types of Data

Based on the features of the data which is produced and on the paradigm that is chosen, it is advisable to use the terms positivistic rather than quantitative and interpretivist instead of qualitative because it is possible for a positivistic paradigm to produce qualitative data and vice versa (Hussey and Hussey 1997). Nevertheless, it is normal to associate a positivistic paradigm with the measurement used.

5.2.5 Types of Research Methodology

There are a number of specific associated methodologies for each type of data and each research paradigm, which can be mapped along a continuum approach (see Table 5.3).

Table 5.3 Association of Research Methodologies Per Paradigm

Positivistic	Interpretivistic
Cross-sectional studies	Action research
Experimental studies	Case studies
Longitudinal studies	Ethnography
Surveys	Grounded theory

Source: Hussey and Hussey (1997)

5.3 Role of Social Anthropology in Consumer Behaviour

A review of the literature suggests that a substantial amount of consumer research has relied on social anthropology as a source for developing a theoretical framework and adopting a particular methodological approach (Penaloza 1994; Holt 1998; Belk et al. 1989; Wallendorf and Arnould 1991; Thompson 1997; Kozinets 2002). Jamal (1997) highlighted the need to apply ethnographic and interpretive approaches to the study of culture, meaning, and consumption in consumer behaviour. An important feature of anthropological research is ethnographic fieldwork, which provides substantial insights into the experiential world of meaning of the people under study (Jamal 1997). Previous research has investigated consumption rituals and practices, and is multidisciplinary in context and perspective (e.g., Holbrook 1987, Sherry 1983, Wallendorf and Arnould 1988, Belk 1990, Gainer 1995, Jamal 1997). Consequently, this study also derives its methodological inspirations from social anthropology.

Moreover, much prior research suggests that consumers live in societies which contain multiple codes and multiple co-existing sign systems (Douglas 1980; Leigh and Gabel 1992; Levy 1959; McCracken 1986). Therefore, one can argue that consumer behaviour is meaningful and the world of consumers is full of meaningful relations (Jamal, 1997). The products and brands that consumers buy and consume are part of collective systems of meaning which can be culturally specific and shared, learned, and transmitted through generations (Jamal, 1997). This view is in line with that of other studies which have argued that consumer products are capable of communicating cultural meaning (Douglas and Isherwood 1980; Gottdeiner 1985; McCracken 1986; Wright et al 2001). An anthropological approach, as per Jamal

(1997), helps us explore the collective systems of understanding of which consumer behaviour is one part.

Social anthropology has contributed towards our understanding not only of culture and society, but also of the lifestyle of consumers and their consumption within society which produce the consumption culture (Holt 1998). The chronology of consumer research has been likened to the metaphor of a family that is divided into three phases, which are: the 'Early Empiricist Phase', the 'Motivation Research Phase', and the 'Formative Phase' (Ekstrom 2003). The 'Early Empiricist Phase' dates back to the 1930s and 1940s when views of consumers were based on classical economics history while the 'Motivation Research Phase' in the 1950s was inspired by clinical psychology and the theories of Freud. The 'Formative Phase' of the 1960s occurred when consumer behaviour was established as a research orientation in marketing with the creation of the 'Utopian Grand Theories' which explained consumer behaviour (e.g. Engel, Kollat and Blackwell 1968; and Howard and Sheth 1969). This was further extended into the research of: attitudes by Fishbein and Adzen (1975), involvement (Rothschild and Houston 1977), situation (Belk 1975) and to customer satisfaction (1977).

Since 1980 consumer behaviour has experienced its greatest paradigm shift to new topics, such as: consumption symbolism (Belk, Bahn and Mayer 1982), hedonic and experiential (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982), mood (Gardner 1985) and semiotics (Mick 1986). In addition, McCracken (1988) has attempted to understand consumption as an expression of culture based on contextual issues. From this it can be seen that consumer behaviour has gone beyond the micro to the macro context of consumption.

The influence of anthropology is noticeably obvious in a number of other areas, such as in: studies of gift-giving (Sherry 1983; Joy 2001), rituals (Rook 1985), possession and extended self (Belk 1988), flea markets (Belk, Sherry and Wallendorf 1988), and the consumer behaviour odyssey (Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry 1991) which has inspired many to use interpretive methods, such as the naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln and Guba 1985). Recently, the term Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) has been coined to address the social, cultural, experiential, and symbolic ideological aspects

of consumption (Arnould and Thompson 2005; Sherry and Fischer 2009). CCT theory is a family of theoretical perspectives that addresses the dynamic relationships between consumer action, the market place, and cultural meanings of the world today:

Cultural consumption theory explores the heterogeneous distributions of meanings and the multiplicity of overlapping cultural grouping that exist within the broader socio-historic frame of globalisation and market capitalism. Thus consumption culture denotes a social arrangement in which the relations between lived culture and social resources, and between meaningful ways of life and the symbolic and material resources on which they depend, are mediated through the market (Arnould and Thompson 2005, p 869).

Hence, consumer culture theory has helped consumer researchers to examine the hedonic, aesthetic, and ritualistic dimensions of consumption and the possession practices of the world we live in, from the decision of choices we can make and have made in this contemporary world. This is even so where more than one culture exists within the community besides the influence of media and popular culture (Barthes 1972, Thompson 1997).

5.4 Methodology Central to CCT

Much of the empirical work on CCT has been based on the use of naturalistic methods focus on phenomena in their natural setting, aiming to glean the meanings that people produce in an attempt to build knowledge and understand the consumption phenomena as they occur “*in situ*”. Unquestionably, qualitative data and an array of data collection and analysis techniques have been quite central to CCT (Arnould and Price 2005, Arnould and Wallendorf 1994, Belk, Sherry and Wallendorf 1988, Kozinets 2002) as shown below in table 5.4). This follows the aims and drive of CCT that focus on the examination of the hedonic, aesthetic and ritualistic dimensions rather than from a passion for qualitative data as the experiential and sociocultural dimension of consumption is not plainly accessible through experiments, survey or database modelling (Sherry 1991). Issues pertaining to product symbolism, ritual practice, the consumer stories and the symbolic

boundaries that structure personal and communal consumer identities are better capture through qualitative data. From naturalistic ethnographic inquiry, in the premise assumption with the help of empathetic identification or the emic view (Belk et al 1988) where the researcher may function as a human instrument and have access to people's personal view and motives or their nature world view is being approached by this study.

Nevertheless the researcher will continue and embrace methodological pluralism whenever quantitative measures can advance the operative theoretical agenda (Arnould and Price 1993) such as the number of times the celebration were similar, the products used or the types of food consumer. Given to the commitment to multi-method investigations of consumption phenomena in natural settings, this study emphasises the introspection (Gould 1991) element as a mode of representation where the behavioural decision may be revealed through the few exceptional or cognitive precedence. This reflection on the relationships will assist in the investigations of consumption in its full experiential and sociocultural scope.

Table 5.4 Methodologies central to CCT

Context	Methodology	Points of theoretical contributions
Thanksgivings dinners; family dinners (Heisley and Levy 1991; Wallendorf and Arnould 1991)	A multi-method ethnography using depth interview, participants observation and survey of students, non-participant observation at public spaces	Cultural rituals; family relations through consumption
Baseball spectatorship (Holt 1995)	Case study using ethnographic and phenomenological methods, through participant observation	A model of consumption practices
Consumer lifestyle choices in a small town/rural setting (Holt 1997)	Interpretive study using ethnographic interviews	The role of consumption practices in sustaining symbolic boundaries between social groups
Halloween (Belk 1990; Levinson et al 1992)	Combination of secondary data both qualitative and quantitative from participant observation to depth interviews and written questionnaires collected from students.	Consumption experience, commercialised, fantasy

Christmas (Belk 1987; Belk and Kimura 2005; Belk and Bryce 1993; Fischer and Arnold 1990; Caplow 1982,	Content analysis of media (film, tv and print), In-depth interviews, quantitative field study using structure questionnaires, historical analysis through shopping experience	Religious consumption or postmodern miracle to mall
Working class adoption of business and education (Allen 2002)	Ethnographic study of the phenomenon, group discussion	A sociological of tacit consumer choice
Possession in a less-developed country, Niger (Arnould 1989)	Ethnographic or "naturalistic" approach to multiple data sources (both quantitative and qualitative), participant observation	A cultural theorization of preference of formation and diffusion of innovations
White-water river rafting (Arnould and Price 1993)	Multiple methods from narrative/depth interviews to quantitative questionnaire developed form rich qualitative data	Defining extended leisure service encounters
Consumers' intergenerational transfer of possession. (Curasi, Price and Arnould 2004; Price, Arnould and Curasi 2000)	Interpretive methods using depth interviews, naturalistic conducted in informants' homes	Individual and familial identity formation processes; the dynamics of inalienable wealth
Gift giving and gift reception (Belk and Coon 1993; Fischer and Arnould 1990; Joy 2001; Otnes, Lowrey and Kim 1993; Ruth, Otnes and Brunel 1999; Sherry 1983; Wooten 2000)	Qualitative interviews, Qualitative data collection, depth interviews and critical-incident surveys(open ended)	Formation and structuration of a moral economy; age and gender role definition and enactment in consumer society
Re-enactments of Mountain Men (Belk and Costa 1998)	Participant observation, formal and informal interviews with participants.	Consumer fantasy, ritual impulse and the reformulation of social roles
Swap meets and flea markets (Belk, Sherry and Wallendorf 1988; Sherry 1990)	Qualitative interpreting data, naturalistic inquiry, qualitative fieldwork, purposive sampling, ethnographic case study	Consumer relationships to market structures; sociocultural dynamics of exchange relationships
Death rituals in Ghana (Bonsu and Belk 2003)	Qualitative long open ended extended interview	Post-mortem consumer identity
Sky-diving (Celsi, Rose and Leigh 1993)	ethnography, informal interviews, photographs, and videotaped,	A dynamic model of consumer motivations and cultural account of risk taking behaviours

	observation	
Romanian women's use of cosmetics (Coulter, Price and Feick 2003)	Depth interviews and participant observations and a survey	Rethinking the origin and developments of brand knowledge and involvement
Burning Man Festival participation (Kozinets 2002)	Ethnography, participant observation and interviews, videography	Investigating the dialectic between consumer resistance and capitalist ideologies
Indian, Haitian and Mexican immigrants (Mehta and Belk 1991; Oswald 1999; Penalzoza 1994)	Ethnography, participant observation, unstructured long interviews, group interviews	Contributing to a post-assimilationist, post-structural theory of ethnicity
Consumer reports of self-gifting occasions (Mick and DeMoss 1990)	Survey, unstructured questions, data then amenable to a standard content analysis and interpretive analysis (Holbrook 1977)	A theorization of non-rational consumer purchase decisions and the role of their consumption in self-identity maintenance
Consumers of Volvos and Apple, Religiosity in Apple Newton (Muniz and O'Guinn 2000, Muniz and Schau 2005)	Netnographic method, including observation, participant observation and interviews	A cultural theory of community in postmodern society and the role of brands in community formation
Heritage Village theme park (O'Guinn and Belk 1989)	Onsite interviews, video taped, audio-taped of visitors to Heritage Village, still photographs	The impact of consumer culture and consumer ideologies on religious norms and experiences of the sacred
Western stock shows and rodeos (Penaloza 2001)	Ethnographic research-participant observation, interviews and material artefacts over a 7 year period,	Consumers' active process in production of marketplace meanings and the role of commodified cultural myths in mediating marketplace relationships
British high school students talking about advertisements (Ritson and Elliot 1999)	Naturalistic Ethnographic, interview and participant observations	A theory of the social usages of advertising
Personal Web sites (Schau and Gilly 2003)	Content analysis of personal Web, face-to-face, semi-structured	A theorization of consumer's commercialised, nonlinear self-presentation in cyberspace
Harley Davidson riders (Schouten and McAlexander 1995)	Ethnographic fieldwork with non-participant observation, part-time observation and full-time ethnography, photography	The structure and dynamics of consumer subcultures and reworking of identity
Natural food and health alternatives (Sirsi, Reingen and Ward 1996)	Ethnographic, multi-methods, participant observation and quantitative	A microcultural theorization of consumer belief and value systems and their diffusion through social networks

Working mothers as jugglers (Thompson 1996)	Qualitative - phenomenological interviews	The gendering of consumer lifestyles and its impact on preferences
Expatriates living in Singapore (Thompson and Tambyah 1999)	Phenomenological oriented depth interviews	An analysis of cosmopolitanism as a consumer ideology and its role in shaping consumer goals

Source: Adapted from Arnould and Price (2005)

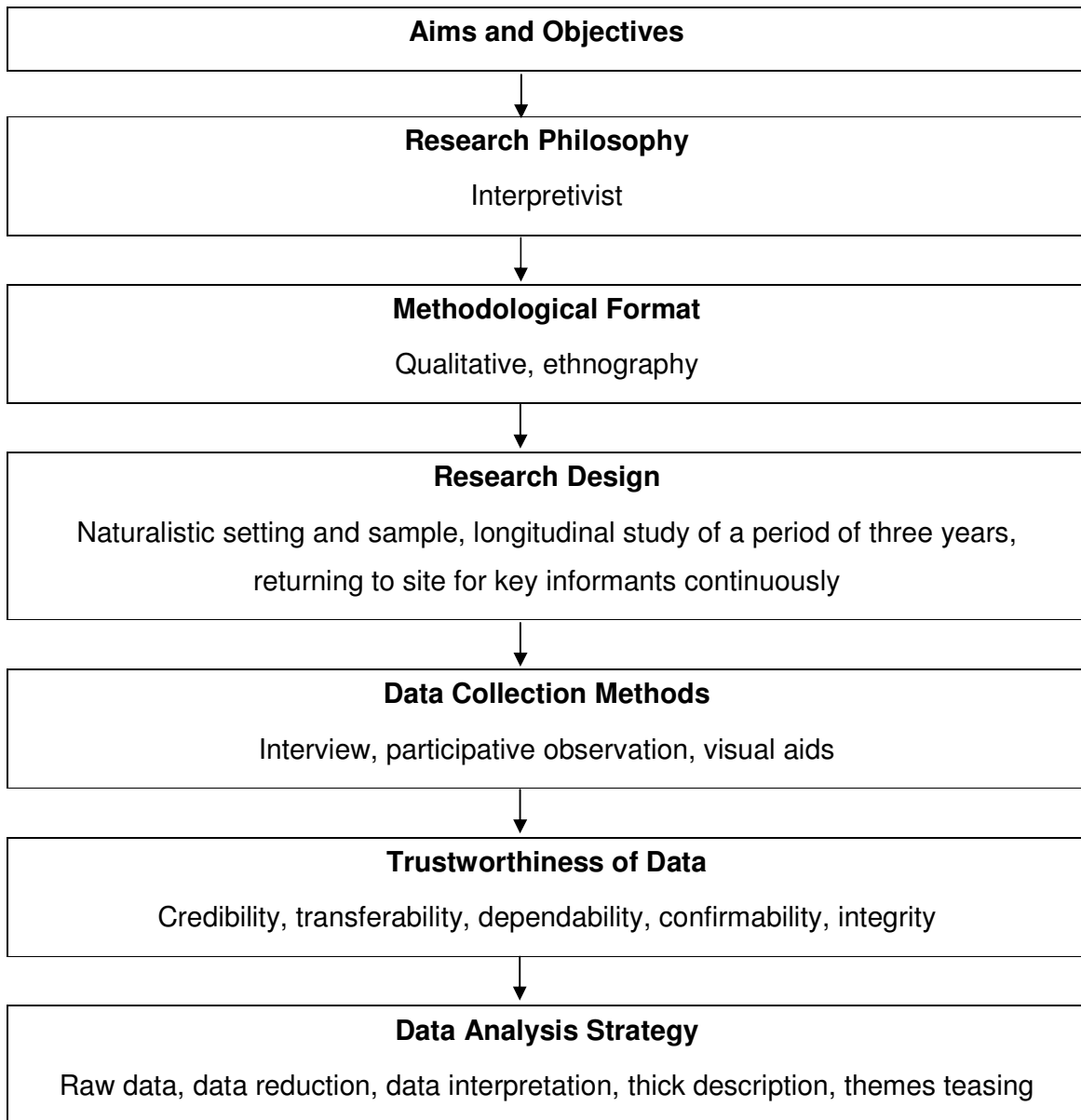
5.5 An Outline of the Research Strategy

This study takes inspiration from the consumption cultural theory (CCT) framework, which in turn derives inspiration from social anthropology, linguistics, and consumer behaviour (Arnould and Thompson 2005). This study utilises the epistemology of interpretivism in an attempt to investigate the social world of the respondents. Interpretivism is a term given to contrast the epistemology of positivism. Its views require a strategy to respect the difference between people and the objects of natural science, which includes the subjective meaning of social actions from Weber's *Verstehan*, the hermeneutic-phenomenological tradition, and the theory of symbolic interaction (Bryman and Bell 2002).

The research approach adopted in this study is in line with a stream of research which has used consumer culture theory (CCT) to examine the hedonic, aesthetic, and ritualistic dimensions of the consumption and possession practices of the world that we live in; examples of this previous research include explorations of educational choices (Allen 2002), possessions (Arnould 1989), recreational activities (Arnould and Price 1993, Belk and Costa 1998, Holt 1995, Joy and Sherry 2003, Kozinets 2002), and the celebration of rituals (Bonsu and Belk 2003, Wallendorf and Arnould 1991) gift giving (Mick and Demos 1990) and consumer lifestyles (Muniz and O'Guinn 2000, O'Guin and Belk 2989, Schau and Gilly, Thompson 1996, Thompson and Tambyah 1999) which uses ethnographic and interpretive. (See Table 5.4).

A step by step outline of the methodology taken for this study is attached below in Table 5.5.

Table 5.5 Methodology: Step by Step



5.5.1 Research Philosophy

Guided by the phenomenological research paradigm, this research uses qualitative research to explore social or human problems. This means that while conducting the study in a natural setting the researcher will build a holistic picture, and will analyse the words of the respondents, in order to construct a detailed view of the information (Creswell 1988). Hence, this qualitative research project is conducted based on an

interpretive design using a naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln and Guba 1985). To study the consumption aspects which are associated with the Chinese New Year Reunion Dinner this research project will incorporate three perspectives, which are: social anthropology, ethnography and existential phenomenology. Firstly, ethnography is a description and interpretation of a cultural or a social group which examines the group's observable and learned patterns of behaviour, customs, or way of life (Harris 1968; Fetterman 2010; Mariampolski 2006) in their 'natural' environment. Secondly, social anthropology aims to gain a thick description of the topic (Geertz 1973) following the provision of the great detail on the data collected for better understand and appreciation of the study which is done through triangulation of methods in this study. Lastly, existential phenomenology is a paradigm that blends the philosophy of existentialism with the methods of phenomenology as an alternative paradigm for conceptualizing and studying consumer experience (Thompson, Locander and Polio 1989) as phenomenology is the study of structure of consciousness as experienced from the first-person point of view while the central structure of an experience is its intentionality. This experience is directed toward the event and object by virtue of its content or meanings together with the appropriate enabling conditions and of being-in-the-world where this study explores the pattern metaphor and experiences as it emerge from the context as it is lived by the informants (Thompson, Locander and Polio 1990) to provide the thick description of the phenomena.

5.4.2 Methodology

Taking guidance from consumption cultural theory and social anthropology, this study aims to provide a thick description of the phenomena under investigation. Ethnography is used a method for providing a description and interpretation of a cultural or social group. It examines the group's observable and learned patterns of behaviour, customs, or way of life (Harris 1968). Phenomenologist's view human behaviour as a product of how people interpret the world and, therefore, it views human behaviour as product of how people see their social world and social reality; as highlighted by Schutz (1962):

The world of nature as explored by the natural scientist does not mean anything to molecules, atoms and electrons. But the observation field of the social scientist – social reality – has a specific meaning and relevance structure for the beings or livings, acting and thinking within. By a series of common-sense constructs, they have pre-selected and pre-interpreted this world, which they experience as the reality of their daily lives. It is these thought objects of their which determine their behaviour by motivating it. The thought objects constructed by the social scientists, in order to grasp this social reality, have to be founded upon the thought objects constructed by the common sense thinking of men, living their daily life within the social world (Schutz 1962, p59).

The interpretive approach has been considered by many to be an alternative method of seeking knowledge (Andersen 1983, Belk, Sherry and Wallendorf 1988, Hirschman 1986, Solomon 1986, Wallendorf 1987 and Ozane and Hudson 1988). The underlying philosophical assumptions for this research project include the respondent's belief about the nature of reality of social beings. The ontological perspective of this research favours interpretive approaches. While positivists tend to take a realist position by assuming that a single, objective reality exists which is independent of the world that the individual perceives, interpretivists deny that any single real world exists. Instead, interpretivists assume that reality is essentially mentally conceived and perceived, and that it is socially constructed, "developed, transmitted and maintained in social situations" (Berger and Luckman 1967, p 3). Hence, within these ontological assumptions, reality is socially constructed and may even be multiple and within a contextual framework that is being continually accomplished and revised by the social actors within it (Kozinets 2002).

As far as the epistemological assumptions are concerned, positivists take a generalising approach to research; that is, they seek out general abstract laws that can be applied to a large number of phenomena through the principle of deductivism. This means that the positivist researcher makes an effort to identify time-and context-free generalisation statements (Keat and Urry 1975). In contrast, interpretivists take a more particularistic and historical approach to research; that is, they study specific phenomena in a particular place and time. Instead of determining

law-like regularities, the interpretivist seeks to determine motives, meanings, reasons and other subjective experiences that are time and context bound. This interpretivist approach was described as a 'thick description' by Geertz (1973). Although the interpretivist approach to research does not facilitate generalisations outside the context of the study, it does facilitate generalisations within the context or case. Geertz (1973) describes this through the metaphor of a: "*clinician making a diagnostic for a conceptualization that is directed toward the task of generating interpretations or matters already in hand, not toward projecting outcomes of experimental manipulation or deducing future states of a determined system*" (Geertz 1973, p26).

In terms of research relationship, the positivist position of the subject is distant and separated strongly from the researcher, who does not influence and is independent from the subject. The interpretivist believe that the scientist is a member of the social reality within the realm of social science and the individual who is being studied become a participant in the experiment, guiding the research besides providing information (Lincoln and Guba 2005). From the interpretivists' point of view, the emerging design and process enables the researcher to provide emerging themes which take into account the subject's knowledge (Blumer 1969, Hudson and Ozanne 1988). For example, in the participant-observation data gathering technique the subject is usually called the informant and the techniques will be unstructured because the research will be led by the informant. Hence, the researcher here is also the main instrument in observation while participating in the study (Fetterman 2010).

5.4.3 Research Design through Ethnography

Many previous studies have used ethnography to study social life and institutions on a scientific basis (Geertz 1973; Fetterman 2010). Traditionally conducting ethnography involved going to the source and becoming immersed in the life worlds of traditional societies in remote regions of the world, such the Pacific Northwest or the South Seas (Hendry 1999). Eminent scholarly work conducted by Frank Boas, Bronislaw Malinoski, Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict has been influential in

promoting this concept of the use of ethnography (Clifford and Marcus 1986; Evans-Pritchard 1951; Hill 1993; Malinowski 1922).

Since the 1980s ethnographic techniques and related cultural perspectives have increasingly been applied to consumer and marketing research contexts, where they are able to gain insights into consumer roles and where they are used to learn about how consciousness and identity are bound into product and brand usage (Belk 1988, Malhotra 1987, Coupland 2005). This particular form of ethnographic approach does not require a long-term resident in a community (Mariampolski 2006). The classical ethnography (which requires analytic induction based on the subjective experience of an individual researcher) is currently being replaced by teams of researchers making focused observations over relatively short periods of time. This applied approach may take no longer than a few hours for each respondent (Mariampolski 2006). This process of analytical induction has transformed the accounts for relatively discrete spheres of experiences, from shopping to playing, making ethnographic studies popular today thanks to the quick turnaround and rapid assessment of consumer environments within a marketing research context (Hirschman 1989, Mariampolski 2006).

Some scholars recommend that ethnography has two complimentary meanings and include both a theory and a method. This is especially the case when ethnography is applied within a marketing context (Mariampolski 2006). From a theoretical perspective, ethnography focuses on the concept of culture and its relation to the observed behaviour, which is the principal analytic tool for classifying and explaining consumer dynamics. In this context, culture is not some reified entity but a foundation for a world view and value systems which provides meaning to people's concept of self and their roles in life (Sirgy 1982, Solomon 1983, McCracken 2005). Culture is a major constituent of the material and intellectual environment that frames personal consciousness, ideals, and aspirations (Bourdieu 1984, Holt 1998, Belk and Costa 1998, Kozinets 2002).

On the other hand, as a methodological orientation, ethnography emphasises direct contact and observation of the consumer in a natural context of product acquisitions and usage. This direct engagement with the "real world" is achieved in contrast to

some laboratory based, or probabilistic and statistical approaches, within the positivist paradigm (Van Maanen 1988, Lincoln and Guba 1985).

Since the objective of this research is to gather information through first hand exploration of the research settings, ethnography has been chosen as a research tool. Ethnography is a form of research that focuses on the sociology of meaning through close observation of socio-cultural phenomena. Ethnography is known as a branch of cultural anthropology which fits into this study in association with the consumer cultural theory (CCT). According to Spradley (1979), ethnography is 'the work of describing a culture' (p. 3), adding that the goal of ethnographic research is 'to understand another way of life from the native point of view' (p. 3). Although this approach is commonly used by anthropologists to study exotic cultures and primitive societies, Spradley (1979) suggests that it is a useful tool for "understanding how other people see their experience" (p.4); he emphasises, however, that 'rather than *studying people*, ethnography means *learning from people*.'

Another definition of ethnography by Hammersley and Atkinson (1995 p1) also supports the leaning process within:

We see the term as referring primarily to a particular method or set of methods. In its most characteristic form, it involves the ethnographer participating, overtly or covertly, in people's daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions – in fact collecting whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the focus of the research (1995, p.1).

Regardless of the methods used, the main criteria of ethnography is rooted in the first hand exploration of the research setting. A more recent of ethnography defines it as a 'descriptive account of social life and culture in particular social system based on detailed observation of what people actually do' where the direct *in situ* observation provides concrete sequences of activities (Baszanger and Dodier 2004). Ethnography gives voice to people in their own local content using their verbatim quotations and a 'thick description' of events in the telling of their credible, rigorous and authentic story (Fetterman 2010)

An ethnographic method usually begins with the selection of a culture and the identification of variable of interest that is perceived as significant by members of the culture. The researcher then sets the stage for cultural immersion. Data from observation transcripts and interview recordings are analysed for theory development through theory articulation by members. In fact, cultural anthropology and socio-anthropology were developed around ethnographic research from canonical texts, which were mainly ethnographies written by anthropologists (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995; Fetterman 2010).

From the marketing perspective, consumer researchers may have typically defined the managerial relevance in terms of rational choice paradigm and its corresponding factors on the purchase behaviour. However with the subsequent developments of customer relation management, lifestyle and multicultural marketing and the proliferation of identity have brought consumer meanings to the centre of managerial decision today. Consequently, ethnographic methods have become a common strategy in applied marketing research (Osborne 2002, Mariampolski 2006) to address this rich cultural meaning in addressing the sociocultural, experiential, symbolic and ideological aspect of consumption within the CCT paradigm. Besides this, the interview conducted as part of the ethnography also provided some advantages as the researcher has been there for some time and being a native, it may de-mystify the interview situation, facilitate communication, and make the interviewee less inclined to engage in impression management.

5.5.4 Data Collection Method and Strategy

The emergent research paradigm adopted in this research means that this research uses three broad categories of information sources: academic material including literature review, some broad sources of data, and the informants. In order to develop a better understanding of the concepts and issues at hand, a comprehensive review of the literature was conducted. This academic material acted as an important source of intellectual inspiration for developing analytical arguments which are taken at face value for their contribution and as representative of a particular cultural view point (Levy 2006). Some broad sources of data (e.g. popular

media) was also reviewed and analysed, including information found in magazines, newspapers, magazines, novels and other publicly communicated materials. The final source of information is the data gathered from informants, either through: formal in-depth interviews, which are recorded and transcribed; participant observation of the event; or, auto-driving using photographs taken by informants for elicitation of data. In total, in this research project data collection was collected within three phases throughout the period of 2008-2010.

Table 5.6: Data Collection Phases

Phases	Data Collection	Insights
Phase 1 (2008)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Returned to Malaysia to conduct in-depth interviews, from June-August 2008. • Conducted four one-to-one interviews and one group interview, consisting of a family of three members (i.e. father, mother, and daughter; mother and daughter). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To explore the consumption meanings of the Reunion Dinner with six key informants. • To get acquainted with the potential themes. • To improve the interview questions and techniques.
Phase 2 (2009)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Returned to Malaysia for the period of one month (i.e. 21 January to 21 February 2009) to conduct participant observation of one family on the Reunion Dinner on the actual day, which was the 25 January. • Revisited the previous key informants and interviewed them again. • Conducted nine one-to one in-depth interviews and seven group interviews. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To transcribe the recorded interviews. • To note patterns and themes. • To contrast and compare themes. • To build a logical chain of evidence.

Phases	Data Collection	Insights
Phase 3 (2010-2011)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Returned to Malaysia for the period of one month (i.e. 8 February to the 8 March 2010). • Conducted participant observation for the Reunion Dinner for a new family during lunch, and revisited the same family from the previous year for dinner. • Interviewed and recorded two new informants for a one-to-one in depth interview. • Revisited nine key informants but only recorded four in-depth interviews. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To re-look into themes. • To confirm findings. • To consolidate themes.

Source: This Study

The initial phase of this research, or Phase One, involved conducting a number of one-to-one interviews in order to solicit further information relevant to the study and to elicit a variety of viewpoints from the point of view of the informants.

In the second phase, or Phase 2, of the data collection, the researcher collected data on the actual time of the event in order to get the actual feel of the data and to improve the accuracy and relevance of the data. Interviews were conducted at a variety of places including the informants' homes, places of work and group gatherings at home. Home settings were chosen due to convenience, familiarity and the ability of the context to provide a relaxed and realistic atmosphere in which consumption typically takes place. All interviews were tape recorded to allow verbatim transcription and the use of exact quotes from informants (Miles and Huberman 1994). This technique was considered useful because the researcher did

not need to take notes during the conversation and discussion, thereby, eliminating the possibility of distraction. These processes were replicated for the Phase 3 data collection in the following year.

The data collections methods which were used in this research project included the use of interviews, participant observation in the Chinese Reunion Dinner, and the use of photographs and videos where appropriate. Transcripts from the interviews, field notes taken during and immediately after the participant observation, and data from journals provided the schema of analyses. Meanwhile, textual analysis of photographs and artefacts used during the event provided additional insights.

The nature of the Chinese New Year Dinner event is that it only happens once a year and the researcher can only participate in one dinner event at a time; therefore, triangulation of data was considered appropriate to further enhance the understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. Additional insights were gained through photographs taken during the celebration period. Moreover, photographs of previous events were shown to the participants during the interview as an auto-driving method (Levy and Heisley 1991) and as part of what is called a 'visual ethnography' (Pink 2001). The researcher conducted participant observation of the Chinese New Year Dinner involving one family unit on the day of the event.

5.5.4.1 Setting within Greater Kuala Lumpur

As the Lunar New Year is celebrated by the Chinese, the majority of Chinese Malaysians are concentrated on the West coast of Peninsular Malaysia. Historically as a result of the British settlement mentioned in Chapter Two, the Chinese consumers are living predominantly within the western states of Penang, Perak, Selangor, Selangor, Kuala Lumpur, and Johor (Hirschman 1987). Urbanisation in Malaysia among these states have increased from 2.3 million in 1995 to 4.1 million in 2007 (Euromonitor 2009) of which 75% are in Malaysia's major cities within the Klang Valley, mainly within the state of Selangor (the vicinity of Kelang, Petaling Jaya and Shah Alam). With around 20% of the country population (Census Malaysia 2010)

geographically located within this area (Greater Kuala Lumpur), the sample for this study has taken from these areas.

Greater Kuala Lumpur has also been chosen by the Malaysian government recent initiative to implement its Economic Transformation Programme to transform the country into a high income nation by 2020 as it aims to grow the population and also to attract foreigners and multinational companies through its economic and cultural activities. This scenario will also provide new multi-cultural perspectives in which there are existing elements of a subculture co-existing within the residents of Greater Kuala Lumpur/Klang Valley (KL/KV), who were originally comprised of Malays, Chinese and Indians but who would now also include an amalgamation of various ethnicities within the region (i.e. Asia and Southeast Asia) and from other parts of the world (i.e. Europe and the USA). Hence, this multicultural composition and diversity provides a rich set of distinctive culture which will make this culturally specific research unique (Chui 1997, Chung 1998, Tan 2001)

5.5.4.2 Selection of Key Informants

In this study a total of forty key informants were interviewed. This sample was selected based on purposeful sampling. Purposive sampling is normally central to a naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln and Guba 1985). Guided by the principles of the phenomenological paradigm, a naturalistic inquiry discourages the use of random or representative sampling because the aim here is not to generalise the findings to a broad population but to maximise the discovery of some heterogeneous patterns in a particular context. This then lays the foundation of transferability (as per the phenomenological paradigm) which builds the trustworthiness of the process of inquiry

The sampling process in this study involved participants who were selected using cohort analysis based on age or birth. A cohort is the aggregate of individuals (within some population definition) who have experienced the same event at the same time (Ryder 1965). Age or birth cohorts are groups of people who were born within the same interval (Rentz, Teynolds, and Stout 1983). These cohorts are used to link the experience among the informants as a means to compare results within the older

and the younger generations. A variety of age groups are needed to assess the perceptions of this event between the older and younger generations. Fact-sheet demographic criteria are used to ensure that the samples are representative of the various age cohorts (Solomon 2011). This enables a relevant emerging analysis for the development of competing theories which are relevant to consumption among intergeneration consumers.

Four Malaysian generation cohorts were identified as relevant to this study, based on age and experience, which links them with the most common memories or important historical events. Instead of using World War 2 definitions to relate to the Baby Boomer generation, the researcher used the period when the country experienced the greatest impact, that is: when Malaysia gained its independence from the British following the suffering that it endured while it was occupied by the Japanese army in World War 2. Several of the respondents commented on these historical events during the interviews. Using the same Western models of age cohort (Solomon 2011), four rough estimations of cohort or generation are derived in this study, they are: firstly, the Before Malaysian Independence Cohort, whose age ranges from 51 and above (i.e. those born before 1957); the Baby Boomer Cohort, or those aged in their 40s (i.e. those born between 1958-1969); Generation X, or those aged in their 30s (i.e. those born between 1970-1980); and, Generation Y, or those aged in their 20s (i.e. those born after 1981). The informants from each category were stratified through age groups, and broad social-economic groups and experiences, and they were interviewed as individuals and in groups, besides being observed where possible.

5.5.4.3 Interviews

Both one to one and group interviews were conducted in this study. Being part of the ethnographic investigation, the rationale of getting close and stay relatively long in proximity with the people to enable one to understand their beliefs and behaviour more accurately, calls for ethnographic interviews of the informants before or after the event of the Reunion Dinner. Interviews are conducted on a one-to-one and in groups in view of the celebration where there is more than one person in the event.

A discussion guide (Appendix C) is used to guide the interviews with the aim to get rich accounts of the celebration of the Reunion Dinner as interview may be relatively time-consuming to carry out and may lead to varied responses from interviewees. These question are set as part of the of grand-tour questions prescribed by McCracken (1988) where the questions consist of planned prompting in the form of “contrast”, “category”, ‘special incident” beside incorporating the “auto-driving” questions and elicitation technique (Heisley and Levy 1991). This questionnaire which comes under the discussion guide (Appendix C) as part of semi-structural interview provides a rough travel itinerary to negotiate the interview as part of the deployment of the grand-tour questions. The advantage of the structure guide is to facilitate the sorting, comparing and analysing of materials instead of going to irrelevant and unproductive directions while the limitation is in its ability to offer new interesting rich results (Alveeson 2011). The discussion guide used is semi-structure as it allows a good deal intuition of the hermeneutic reading as it is fairly open to what the interviewer feels is relevant and important to talk about based on the interest of the event to ensure a rich account of interviewees’ experience, knowledge, ideas and impression that may be considered and documented (Holstein & Gubrium 1997, Alvesson 2011).

Before the interview all of the key informants were briefed on the objectives of the research and they were asked to sign the consent forms provided. A total of nineteen key informants were interviewed on a one-to-one basis. These individual interviews lasted from 30 minutes to an hour. Meanwhile, six group interviews were conducted. The group interviews lasted from 30 minutes to nearly two hours for one group. All of the interviews were conducted in English in order to avoid any potential for bias or complications which could have arisen during the translation of the texts. The interviews were conducted in the informants’ homes and place of work at a time convenient for them. A detailed of the informants profile is further discussed in the following chapter (Table 6.1) in relation to their findings.

5.5.4.3.1 One- to- One Interview

This interview format involves looking into the first person description of a specified domain of experience. The dialogue in these interviews tends to be circular rather than linear (Mason 2005). This one to one interview format is meant to yield a conversation and it should not be a simple question and answer session. The questions employed are descriptive. Consequently, this study uses a relatively informal style of face-to face interviews which was designed so that the conversation had a purpose (Burgess, 1984). It was a discussion rather than a formal question and answer session.

The weakness of this procedure is the strain that it places on the observer's emotional, physical, and ethical perspectives (Bryman 2001). Another important issue is the need to consider the researcher's own introspection and reflection of the social processes being investigated, recorded, perceived and acted towards. One to one interviews were used in this research with the aim of gaining access to the meanings associated with the Chinese New year reunion dinner. In addition, as stated earlier, the researcher's role in a phenomenological inquiry includes being both an interactional participant and an interactional analyst at the same time (Denzin 1971).

In this study the informants' role was considered as a research collaborator since they were informed about how the data was going to be used. This research acknowledges the potential influence of the interviewee on the content as well as on the order of the question and topic covered, even though the interviews were conducted with a written guide at hand. More questions were added into the guide based on the informants' narrations. The informants' role included participation in the interpretation process, the transcripts of which were shared with the informants after the interviews to seek their validation (Hammersley and Atkinson 1983).

5.5.4.3.2 Group Interviews

A group interview is defined as any discussion held between a researcher and more than one individual (Shensul et al 1999). Given the constraints of time and the limitations imposed by the nature of the event itself (i.e. the event is only held once a year), group interviews were considered appropriate to gain additional insights. A total of six groups interview were conducted (see Table 5.5). The group interviews used groups of two, three, four and seven informants gathering together for the occasion as family and friends, at home and in the office.

In comparison to one to one interview, group interview provides a number of benefits, such as: speed, diversity of insights, flexibility in using stimulus material, and cost (Bryman 2007). Group interviews may be formal or informal, pre-organised or occurring in natural settings, guided to a greater or lesser degree by the facilitator, and more or less open-ended (Mason 2005). Group interviews are considered to be interactive and the participants are encouraged to express their opinions and enter into dialogue about them with one another (Shensul et al 1999). Therefore, they are considered useful in generating hypotheses based on the informants' insights and in obtaining the participants' interpretation of the results which had earlier been gathered (Marogan 1988, Stewart and Shamdasani 1990).

Since this research aims to explore the meanings associated with the Chinese New year event, group interviews were considered to be a valid way of collecting data (Bryman 2007). They allowed the researcher to save time and to speak to a diverse range of people at the same time. Many of the participants gathered as a family group, thereby allowing instant access to their world of meanings and associated family rituals. The participants also expressed high levels of willingness and excitement when sharing their experiences of the event in a group context; this was especially true when the celebration was still fresh in their minds. Another advantage of group interview is that it allows leverage of relation between researcher and the informant in encouraging the empowerment to express themselves especially within the collectivist culture embedded within the Chinese culture.

5.4.4.4 Participant Observation

A number of previous studies have used participant observation in order to investigate the consumption patterns and rituals associated with the celebration of festivals (Belk 1990, Wallendorf and Arnould 1991, Penazola 1994). Following this tradition, this research also uses participant observation because it allows the researcher to record the field-worker's experiences in action, in conversation, and in a context. Participant observation in a naturalistic setting, such as the Chinese New Year Reunion dinner, is expected to provide a perspective in action rather than a perspective of action, which would be obtained from the interview itself. Ideally, participant observation includes both perspectives since the fieldworker moves between observing and recording others' actions and asking questions about the action. Despite emic understanding that glosses the event's enactments, participant observation allows the researcher to capture important negotiation processes, including who operates the dinner such as in the seating arrangement or serving food during the celebration dinner (Wallendorf and Arnould 1991). An observation guide has been used in the aim of gathering the rich data to support the themes explored through the data collected by drawing on the methods, pitfalls and perspectives recommended by Delamont (2002) observation works on what to look, how to look, where and when to look and what to record (Appendix D).

The researcher managed to observe two families (i.e. the Lim family and the Sim family) for their reunion dinners consecutively for the two years. Both families have three generations of family members; however, the difference between these two families is that the Sim family practices the Christian faith while the Lim family still practices the traditional Chinese offerings and prayers. The participants for the Lim family involved three generations of family members, which include: Mr Lim and his wife, their two sons and their wives, his daughter and two grandsons and two granddaughters. The Sim family is headed by the grandmother, Madam Sim, whose husband passed away three years ago. Their reunion dinner is organised and held at her eldest daughter's home. This reunion lunch is attended by the family of Madam Sim's eldest's daughter (including her husband and two daughters), the family of her second daughter (including her husband and two daughters), and the family of her third daughter (including her husband), and her son.

The advantage of the participant observation is to get a broader and more varied empirical data to support the phenomena studied besides enhancing the trustworthiness of the data.

5.5.4.5 Personal Experience of the Event as a Native

As indicated earlier, the issue of the researcher being both an instrument of data collection and objective is important while conducting an ethnographic investigation. The issue becomes further complicated if both the researcher and those researched belong to the same cultural group. Jamal (1997) suggests that this raises important questions about reliability and the unbiased nature of ethnography as a method since traditionally anthropologists have investigated phenomena under conditions or contexts that were quite remote (in terms of language and culture, for instance) from those of the ethnographer's own understanding.

Jamal (1997) also argues that while the issues have been debated quite extensively in the literature (see, for some discussion, Jackson 1987; Narayan 1993; Kim 1990; Messerschmidt 1981; Kuper, A. 1994), there are some very important benefits to be gained if both the researcher and those researched belong to the same cultural group. For instance, Clifford and Marcus (1986) find that an insider studying their own cultural group can offer new angles of vision and depth of understanding, which would remain hidden to the outsider, because they do not need to cross some significant cultural and linguistic barriers (Kim 1990). Moreover, Jackson (1987), argues that ethnographic accounts are increasingly considered as subjective (Jackson 1987). Meanwhile, Levy (1996) argues that introspection is an inevitable part of consumer research that is used by all research workers because it simply means looking within one's self to know one's ideas and feelings and, therefore, most of our thoughts are introspective.

In the context of the current study, we can discuss how the Malaysian cultural background of the researcher was a significant factor in selecting the Chinese New

Year Reunion Dinner in Malaysia as a field of inquiry for the present study. The researcher comes from Malaysia (a Chinese Malaysian who was born and raised in Malaysia) and can fluently speak Chinese (including the dialects of Hokkien, Cantonese and Hakka), Malaya, and English. She has extensive experience and enjoys a significant insider view of the Chinese culture in Malaysia.

The researcher was born and raised in a Chinese Malaysian family, and she has celebrated Chinese New Year festival since her childhood in the late 1960s until she recently came to the UK to study her doctoral degree. The researcher, therefore, considers herself to be in a unique position to understand the cultural consumption associated with Chinese New Year dinner in Malaysia. A clear understanding of Chinese Malaysian culture has enabled her to interact quite freely with the Chinese Malaysian informants, in both Chinese and English languages. It also allowed her easy access to informants (in approaching and selecting them) and in understanding their world of everyday experiences.

Taking the role of the first person, the researcher is able to present details, experiences, and also remembers from her own experience and from her own perspective in her own voice. This is an advantage to her and writing one's emotion, self-analysis, and introspective adds additional value to this research because it overcomes the prolonged and persistent engagement in understanding the phenomena. The researcher, however, has been quite conscious of identifying her own bias and prejudices and has tried her best to include some element of detachment, distance, and objectivity. This has been achieved in a number of ways, in particular by seeking informants' views from their own point of view besides ensuring the trustworthiness of the data as prescribed by researchers.

5.6 Trustworthiness of Data

Any research approach (regardless of the philosophy of science from which it emanates) requires the trustworthiness of the research to be assessed. Miles and Huberman (1984) suggest twelve strategies for improving qualitative data quality, this includes: checking for sampling bias, checking for researcher bias, triangulating

across data sources and methods, weighing the evidence according to data trustworthiness, examining contrasts and comparisons, examining outliers, seeking extreme cases, ruling out spurious explanations, replicating findings, checking out rival explanations, looking for negative evidence, and obtaining feedback from informants.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) argued that the trustworthiness of data obtained in a naturalistic inquiry may be assessed by exploring four areas namely the credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. The credibility refers to the confidence of the findings (internal validity) while transferability refers to the degree which the findings may be apply to other contexts (external validity). Dependability (reliability) looks into how the findings will be repeated if the study is replicated and confirmability (objectivity) refers to the findings that should emerge from the context and respondents rather than from the researcher.

Reliability and validity are basic assumption about expression and transformation of knowledge. Wallendorf and Belk (1989) argued that the criteria (such as internal validity, external validity, reliability, and objectivity) for evaluating a positivist inquiry are not appropriate to use when assessing a naturalistic inquiry that uses methods such as ethnography and participant observation. This problem arises because the underlying assumptions of positivist philosophy and phenomenological philosophy are very different to each other. According to Wallendorf and Belk (1989), one should instead consider what was 'done during the data collection, in the formation of final the final interpretation, and in the presentation of the final interpretation to readers' (p.70). With this in mind, the following section aims to describe in detail the various issues that were relevant during data collection and during the interpretation of the ethnographic data.

A number of measures have been taken in this study in order to ensure the trustworthiness of the data through activities (see Table 5.7) throughout the design and planning of the data collection to ensure the credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and integrity of the results. These issues will be discussed in detail in the sub-sections which follow.

5.6.1 Credibility

The criteria of credibility help to answer the question of whether or not we can have confidence in the findings. The validity itself is not monolithic (Maxwell 1992) and from the qualitative study perspective, the types of understanding that may emerge are descriptive, interpretive, theoretical and evaluative and from the natural validity, the events and the settings studied are uncontrived and unmodified by the researcher's presence and actions. Furthermore, the work on validity of narrative emerging from interpretive studies (Miles and Hubberman 1994) suggest the importance of aspects such as "apparency" and verisimilitude (Van Maanen 1988) and authenticity, plausibility and adequacy among others which can be done through a process of checking, questioning and theorising.

To ensure credibility in this study the data collection has been conducted in a prolonged engagement of three phases lasting three years, with persistent observation and triangulation across resources and methods (Miles and Hubberman 1994, Denzin and Lincoln 1994). The researcher is a Malaysian Chinese who is a native of the culture and the phenomenon which is being studied, and has been celebrating this event for the past thirty years. This experience will also contribute to the understanding of the celebration. In addition to observing her own family, the researcher has also had the opportunity to celebrate and observe the celebration with others.

The prolonged engagement and the persistent observation of this festival in this study lends credibility to its understanding of the event since the data allowed her to employ the perspective of action (as the informants explained their actions to the researcher) and the perspective in action (as in the observations of the actual behaviours). By persistent observation the researcher advocated overt observation since the informants have been informed of the purpose of the research and is open to the informants. The researcher was, therefore, able to get access to a wider range of behaviours.

Credibility is also advanced in this study through triangulation of the data of collection across sources and methods. Triangulation across secondary data and

primary data sources was collected from forty informants, which allowed the researcher to develop evidence for an interpretation. The informants selected were also diverse within their celebration of this event (i.e. different places, people and objects). This allowed the researcher to maximise the discovery of heterogeneous patterns and it allowed her to lay the foundations of transferability. Besides triangulating the data, the triangulation of methods was used in line with the ontological perspective of wanting to see the interaction, action, and behaviour as well as the way people interprets these acts on them (Denzin and Lincoln 1994).

Triangulating the data in this study included triangulating the sources, which included: interviews, participant observation and photographs of the real life setting, and observation. This allowed the generation of multidimensional data on social interaction in a specific context rather than relying solely on people's retrospective accounts taken from interviews. Through process of checking, questioning and theorising using the rich context-rich meaning and the triangulation among the complementary methods and sources, credibility can be enhanced.

5.6.2 Transferability

The criteria of transferability help to answer the question of how we would know the degree to which the findings would apply in other contexts. Transferability is parallel to the issue of external validity, which looks into determining the extent of the findings of a particular inquiry in other contexts or with other respondents or on how far it can be generalized. Schofield (2000) distinguishes generalization as to "what is" (other actual contexts), to "what may be" (similar sites or events) and to "what could be" (outstanding and ideal case). The transferability process is firstly activated by translating, refuting or synthesizing other studies of similar phenomena for carefully interpretation.

The triangulation technique which was used in this study has enabled the researcher to lay the foundation to ensure transferability, besides being able to provide the needed thick description (Geertz 1973). Triangulation across the key informants who had celebrated the event at different venues and locations has enabled the

phenomenon to be better represented, as reflected in the findings. The characteristic of the sample, settings and process are fully described for adequate comparison to provide the thick description to assess transferability. Transferability has also been improved through the evidence in the sample taken, the transcripts and observational notes, as well as the photographs taken by both the informants and the researcher (Heisley and Levy 1991). Feedback from readers/informants on the findings which is consistent with their experience is another test for transferability. Similar findings are also found when the methodology is being replicated across other ethnic groups within the cultural celebration setting in Malaysia such as the celebration of the Hari Raya for the Malay and the Deepavali for the Indians where themes of solidarity, symbolism of abundance are similar which this enhance transferability of the data in the making of conceptual coherence.

5.6.3 Dependability

The criteria of dependability helps to answer the question of how we know the findings would be repeated if the study could be replicated in essentially the same way. The issue of dependability is akin to the positivist research which is used in reliability, which determines if the findings of the inquiry would replicate with the same subjects and the same context. This is actually assuming a single objective reality, which is possible only when using positivist philosophy.

Kirk and Miller (1986) distinguish reliability in the qualitative research as being diachronic and synchronic. Diachronic reliability refers to the stability of the observation over time while synchronic reliability refers to the stability in the same time or frame of the research. To overcome and ensure the dependability criteria, the research questions and the features of the study design are incongruent with each other while the researcher's role and status in the site has also been explicitly described to informants. With the usage of interview guide and observation guide, the data collected across a full range of appropriate setting and respondents while coding checks are made will improve and ensure the dependability of the data.

A dependability audit is also performed by using techniques that use raw data which is verbatim, as well as inferences to an external auditor. In this study the researcher has reverted to the advice of her supervisors and of the previous literature of similar phenomena and studies where there has been a replication of the methodology pertaining to celebration such as the celebration of the Thanksgiving (Wallendorf and Arnould 1991), Christmas (Caplow and Williamson 1980) and Halloween (Belk1990). In addition, the prolonged engagements and observation over a period of four years has also enabled the researcher to ensure the dependability of the data.

5.6.4 Confirmability

The criteria of confirmability helps to answer the question of how we know the degree to which the findings emerge from the context and the respondents, and that they do not come instead solely from the researcher. This is likened to the objectivity of positivist philosophy, which differs from the interpretivist approach. This domain sometime is sometimes labelled external reliability with the emphasis on the replicability of a study by others (Compte and Goetz 1982). To overcome this, the study methods and procedures need to be described explicitly and in detail to provide a complete picture and that there are actual sequence in how the data were collected and processed and displayed for the drawing of conclusion. The researcher is also made aware and has been explicit of the possibility of the biases, personal assumption and values which may come into play during the study.

Both an audit trail and an audit process have been advocated (Miles and Huberman 1994) in order to establish confirmability. An audit trail looks through the raw data, data deduction, data reconstruction and material relating to intention. The audit trail will form the foundation for confirmability, which can then be established through the triangulation of data, sources and methods. In this study, transcripts, observation notes and pictures were collected, retained and available for reanalysis by others. The pictures were used to show how the informants celebrated the events (Appendix B). The pictures were also used as stimuli for a projective interview through the eyes of the informants themselves. This enhanced the informant's involvement and

enabled the researcher to elicit enriched qualitative information. To capture the increased voice, authority, and the empowerment given in interpreting these consumption events (Sherry 1988), auto-driving is used to enrich the body of qualitative data and to provide a 'perspective of action' (Snow and Anderson 1987, Wallendorf and Arnould 1987). In addition, secondary data (such as observation at the malls and articles published in popular media) were also taken into consideration for the rich context of the meaning of the celebration within the Malaysian context. The confirmability of the data are established and increased through this audit trail of the evidence and processes.

5.6.5 Integrity

The criteria of integrity was originally included in Lincoln and Guba's (1985) *Naturalistic Inquiry Handbook*, where it was advocated and recommended as an answer to the question of integrity of the data (Wallendorf and Belk 1989). The integrity of the data would be ensured through techniques such as: prolonged engagement for construction of rapport and trust, triangulation (across sources, methods and researchers), good interviewing technique, safe guarding informant identity, and the researcher's own self-analysis and introspection.

The researcher as an instrument and native herself, who has spent a further four years of engagement with informants and the triangulated materials, can help to ensure the integrity of the data from the beginning of the data collection to the analysis of the data. Prior to the collecting the data, the informants were informed explicitly of the objective of the research and the assurance of anonymity by adhering to the research ethics prescribed. This has enabled the researcher to gain the rapport and trust of the informants while ensuring the integrity of both the researcher and informants. Integrity of assessment is further enhance through good interviewing technique and safe guarding informant identity Lastly, the researcher has been explicit and is self aware of her personal assumption, values and biases. The researcher's own self-analysis and introspection will also aid in ensuring the integrity of the data produced and interpretation formed.

Table 5.7: Trustworthiness of Data through Naturalistic Inquiry

Conventional	Naturalistic Assessment	Techniques
Internal Validity	1. Credibility	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Activities prolonged - engagement, persistent observation, and triangulation 2) External check via peer debriefing 3) Refining working hypothesis with negative case analysis and outliers for fit 4) Checking findings with raw data/referential adequacy 5) Direct testing and construction of multiple realities, member checking
External Validity	2. Transferability	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Thick description
Reliability	3. Dependability	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Techniques 2) Overlap methods 3) Inquiry audit – examine process, product for confirmation
Objectivity	4. Confirmability	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Audit trail: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Raw data b. Data reduction c. Data reconstruction & synthesis d. Process notes e. Material relating to intentions 2) Audit Process <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Pre-entry b. Determination of auditability c. Formal agreement d. Determination of trustworthiness e. Closure
	5. Integrity	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Prolonged engagement and the construction of rapport and trust 2) Triangulation (across sources, methods and researchers) 3) Good interviewing technique 4) Safe guarding informant identity 5) Researcher self-analysis and

Conventional	Naturalistic Assessment	Techniques
		introspection

Source: Adapted from Miles and Huberman (1984)

5.7 Data Analysis Strategy

Consumers are meaning finders and they keep the world consistent and predictable by organising it and interpreting it. Analysis of data usually undergoes a data reduction and data display process before conclusions can be drawn and verified. The critical question is whether the meanings you find in qualitative data are valid, repeatable, and right. Miles and Huberman (1994) recommended thirteen tactics for generating meaning (from descriptive to explanatory, and from concrete to the more conceptual and abstract), they are: noting patterns and themes, seeing plausibility, clustering, making metaphors, counting, making contrasts/comparisons, partitioning variables, subsuming particulars into the general, factoring, noting relations between variable, finding intervening variable, building a logical chain of evidence, and making conceptual/theoretical coherence (Thompson 1996, Thompson, Locander and Pollio 1989).

When data is collected and transcribed it goes through a data reduction and data display process before any conclusion and verification can be drawn. Data reduction refers to the process of selecting, focusing, simplifying, abstracting and transforming the data that appears in written notes and transcriptions (Levi-Strauss 1970, Manning 1987). Even before the data is actually collected a process of anticipatory data reduction is occurring when the researcher decides on the conceptual framework of the cases from the research questions and the collection approaches at hand. As the data collection proceeds the process of data reduction continues to occur during writing, coding, teasing out themes, making clusters, and writing memos (Miles and Huberman 1984). This reduction and transformation of the data continues even after the fieldwork, and it continues until the final write-up is completed. Data reduction does not happen by itself but it goes hand in hand with analysis, just as writing is part of the analysis (Wolcott 2001).

According to the Greek, coding is heuristic problem or in other words an exploratory problem solving technique without specific formulas to follow (Saldana 2009). Coding is not just labelling but it is linking towards a rigorous and evocative analysis. In this study, the coding was designed around the meanings of the consumption of the Chinese New Year Reunion Dinner where the first level describes the objective of the gathering of family where food is served at a venue at a special time. The contexts of the data were gathered around the categories of people attending, place/venue, food, and activities to provide description of the meanings. Next the subcategories would refer to the meanings of family (extended, kinship), the place as in dining in or out and in whose home. The activities were described chronologically before, during and after the Reunion Dinner while the types of food served for the meal and prayers (living and dead) were distinguished. Having personal involvement as a participant observer also helps to filter how the document and the coding of the data. The meanings of the phenomena were further bracketed to produce categories of meanings before there are streamlined into the themes of solidarity, symbolism, self concept and play which are integrated to reflect the consumer identity in the consumption of this event.

Data display is another major flow of the analysis activity. In order to display the data, they will have to be organised, compressed, and assembled before they will permit the drawing of conclusions and actions. Data (such as extended text or verbatim phrases) are used as a basis for conclusion drawing and verification (Geertz 1973). This final stage of conclusion drawing provides analysis activity through the noting of regularities, patterns and explanations, possible configurations, causal flows and propositions. All these three processes (that is, data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing) are likened to streams of interwoven threads within the fabric of evidence and verification before, during, and after the data collection. In this view, qualitative data analysis is a continuous and iterative exercise (Miles and Huberman 1984; Wolcott 2001). The evidence and the verification of data and themes were constantly cross checked with literature and transcripts were revisited often to identify and improve the meanings and coding to describe the experiential meanings. By applying a cultural interpretive and soliciting the emic or insider perspective, this iterative exercise will help the researcher to be sensitive to the needs, fears and aspiration of the informants.

Guided by the phenomenological research paradigm, the data in this study was also analysed using the applied existential phenomenology (Thompson, Locander and Polio 1989) in which the objective of describing the experiential patterns emerging from the context is being sought. This foundational interpretive process is used to illuminate the informants views and to better understand their interpretation of the celebration, which represents their experience as it is lived rather than conceptualising an abstract term such as consumption and life style (Thompson 1996), self care and self conception (Thompson and Hirschman 1995), and consumption of a married women (Thompson, Locander and Polio 1989). This interpretive process is summarised by its stages in the Table 5.8:

Table 5.8: Interpretive Data Process

Stages	Interpretive objectives
One	Use participants own terms and category systems within emerging interpretations
Two	Treat the texts as an autonomous body of literature
Three	Bracket preconceived theoretical notions about the phenomena
Four	Use previous passage to improve interpretation within each transcript
Five	Read each transcript many times
Six	Seek an individual understanding of the transcripts
Seven	Identify common patterns across the transcripts

Source: Thompson, Locander and Pollio (1989 page 140-142)

This foundational interpretive process is used to illuminate the informants views and to better understand their interpretation of the celebration, which represents their experience as it is lived rather than conceptualising an abstract term such as consumption and life style (Thompson 1996), self care and self conception (Thompson and Hirschman 1995), and consumption of a married women (Thompson, Locander and Polio 1989).

5.7 Limitations

This study, which is endowed with the specific features of an interpretivist paradigm, has several limitations which may affect the interpretation of the data in terms of what is deemed reliable, valid, or generalisable. However, through interactive rationalism through research techniques and methods that connects the discrete facts with other discrete facts are then grouped into comprehensible patterns and meanings. This research has incorporated the triangulation across methods and data to enhance the thickness of its description and to sharpen the accuracy of researchers' observations for a 'thicker' understanding.

The key limitations faced in this study were associated with time and people constraints. Since the nature of this event is that it happens only once a year, it does not allow the researcher the availability of sufficient participant observations which are needed to compare it with other studies. Instead, the researcher is only allowed to interview the informants after the actual event, hoping to get the most accurate information on how they celebrate the event.

The NVivo is not used due to the nature of interpretation which looks into the phenomena which cut across the language interpretation (at times dialect) of the phenomena which may be lost in translation besides having a high risk of losing the meanings and perspectives. Time and people were also a constraint, especially with the amount of data available and the nature of quantification sought, which would have benefited from a team of researchers who could have shared data collection and who could help to contribute to the cross validation results or even to feed them through NVivo qualitative data analysis techniques. Reliance on technical procedures may draw attention away from and reduce the time and energy for reflexive interpretation

A final limitation to be considered here is the role of the researcher, not only in the collection of the data, but also in the interpretation and analysis. Qualitative data analysis is a learnt skill that requires much rigour and commitment which one is unable to master by learning through texts and manuals. It is a skill which can only

be developed through much practice and application. On reflection, there are not many aspects of the research process which I would seek to change if I were to conduct the interview again except to include a wider range of demographics among my key informants such as education and geographical context.

Overall, the research methodology and data collections and analysis techniques were carefully designed and steps were put in place to overcome any problems which may have occurred along the way. Various techniques (from triangulation be it from data, sites and methods, prolonged activities and engagements, to constant audit trail on inquiry, trail and process) were taken to ensure the trustworthiness of the data and research, which is critical for the qualitative research paradigm, even before any interpretation began.

5.8 Summary

This chapter present the methodology which has been used in the current study. It assesses the paradigm underpinnings the methodological approach which is adopted in this study. An outline of the research strategy has been used to guide the methodology in which the interpretivist paradigm through a naturalistic inquiring framework using ethnography has been chosen for this study. A balance rigour with relevance and reflexive sophistication should be combined with pragmatic consideration in order to obtain reliable and valid knowledge of the social world through the various interacting subjects. Data quality and trustworthiness is done through checking for representative, for researchers' effect and triangulating to ensure the confirmability, dependability, credibility, transferability and integrity of the data. The following chapter will present the findings obtained from the data collected.

Chapter 6: Findings

6.1 Introduction

This chapter reports first part of the findings. Data was analysed using interpretive methods and output consisted of 40 in-depth interviews (1,333 minutes), participant observation of the event (i.e. eve of the New Year) including forty hours of observation spread over three years, one hundred photographs, and 562 pages of typed transcripts of tape-recorded interviews. Patterns of variables involving similarities and differences among the categories and processes involving the informants across time and space within the context of the celebration of the event were noted and narrated. By making sense of the plausibility of the findings, this chapter aims to provide a purposeful explanation using a thick description to understand and explain the data relevant to the event with a view to explain, predict and interpret what went on during the event.

The chapter is divided into seven sections. Section 6.2 provides a general overview of the traditional celebration through using the elements of participants, place, time and activities surrounding the event. Section 6.3 looks into the profile of the key informants who were interviewed about their Reunion Dinner with their families. Section 6.4 explores the role and symbolism associated with the venue (place) where the Reunion Dinner took place. Section 6.5 discusses the role and symbolism of time at which the Reunion Dinner was held, either as a meal in the afternoon or at night while Section 6.6 provides a thick description of some the activities associated with the event. Lastly, Section 6.7 provides a summary of this chapter. Further themes that were revealed as a consequence of an interpretation of ethnographic data will be presented in the next chapter.

6.2 Chinese Reunion Dinner – Participants, Place, Time and Activities

The Chinese New Year festival is an important occasion for the family reunion and for paying homage to ancestors (Saso 1965, Fong 2000). The custom dates back two thousand years. It requires the family members to gather together to usher in the New Year with a view to reaffirm the wholeness of the family through the partaking of the Reunion Dinner. An interpretation of the data, however, shows that the Reunion Dinner can be meaningfully described by examining the symbolic role of participants, place of the event, time and the activities surrounding the event. By doing so, one is able to get a realistic picture of the rich meanings attached to the event by the participants.

Traditionally the Reunion Dinner is held on the eve of the Lunar New Year and at the home of the oldest member of the family, which not only symbolises returning home but also acts as a mechanism for paying respect and homage to the eldest kin (Saso 1965; Friedman 1970; Choo 1983; Debarnardi 2004; Liu 2006). An interpretation of ethnographic data collected in this study reveals that the tradition of returning to home of the ancestors or where the eldest surviving kin resides (e.g. parents or grandparents from the paternal side) was compromised. This appears to have happened largely because some of the younger generations leaving their place of birth and moving away from their home in the rural countryside to the urban centres in search of jobs and a better life.

With this in mind, this following section presents the participants' profile with a view to provide a thick description of the symbolic role of participants, place (location context) and venue (space context) of celebration, the time in which the event was conducted and the activities surrounding the Reunion Dinner.

6.3 The Participants at the Reunion Dinner

The forty participants of this research resided within the Klang Valley or the Greater Kuala Lumpur area (Greater KL). All were born and raised in Malaysia and belonged

to the second generation of migrants from China and thereafter. Since the family structure is relevant to the current study, it was deemed necessary to define various family types formally. This research defines nuclear family as a family unit mainly consisting of a husband and a wife and any of their children. The traditional nuclear family is a family in which the wife works in the home without pay while the husband works outside the home for money making him the primary provider and ultimate authority (Popenoe 1993) The extended family is defined in this research as a family unit consisting of two spouses, children (including grown up children), grandparents and any next of kin, all living together as one family unit (Murdock 1949, Chao 1983, Popenoe 1993, Brym and Lie 2005).

6.3.1 The Profiles of the Informants

Table 6.1 presents the profile of the informants, revealing their occupational background, age, educational status, roles in the family, the venue for the Reunion Dinner and those attending. It can be seen from Table 6.1, that a majority of the participants were highly educated with more than half of them having obtained the minimum of a degree from an institute of higher learning or a degree from postgraduate study. Students studying at a higher institution of learning also participated in this research. All of the participants were fluent in English, even though it was not their first language. This helped in conducting the in-depth interviews that were also conducted in English.

Moreover, it can be seen from Table 6.1 that the age groups of the informants vary from the oldest generation who were in their 70s to the youngest generation who were in their 20s and still studying in university. Most of the participants who were working were engaged in salaried professional jobs or were white-collar workers, while the youngest group of informants were university students. The informants came from a wide-ranging occupational background, with many holding a range of positions from senior to junior management level. Various roles performed by the informants in the Reunion Dinner are listed here with a view to reflect their roles within their family during the event, besides incorporating data on the attendees and the venue of the ritual for the Reunion Dinner. The informants have been sampled through a convenience sampling or snowball sampling where informants have also

referred more informants to the researcher to maximise chances of uncovering insights on the phenomena. This purposively selected informants from a variation in age and cohorts allow attention to socio-cultural factors that may have influence the meanings of the consumption of the Reunion Dinner as they continue to construct their identity within the consumer cultural theory.

Table 6.1: Profile of Informants, Place and Time for Reunion Dinner

No.	Respondent	Gender	Age	Occupation	Education	Marital Status	Social Roles	Venue for Reunion Dinner
1.	Madam L	Female	69	Academic	PhD	Married	Grandmother, mother, wife, daughter-in-law	At her home, attended by her in-laws, sister-in-law and family
2.	Cheong	Male	70	Retired Academic	PhD	Married	Father, son, husband, uncle, granduncle	At his mother's home
3.	Cheam	Male	75	Retired Manager	High School	Married	Father, husband	At his home
4.	Aw	Male	57	Senior Manager	BA	Single	Son, brother, nephew, uncle	At his home
5.	Madam B	Female	51	Director	MA	Single	Daughter, sister, aunt	At her brother's home
6.	Joan	Female	45	Part time worker	High School	Divorced	Single mother, daughter, sister, aunt	At her parents' home
7.	Datin	Female	45	Housewife	High School	Married	Mother, wife, daughter in-law, sister-in-law	At her home attended by her husband's kin
8.	Grace	Female	45	Teacher	BA	Single	Daughter, sister	At her home
9.	Michelle	Female	45	Housewife	Diploma	Married	Expatriate, wife, daughter, sister-in-law	At bro-in-law's house

Table 6.1: Profile of Informants, Place and Time for Reunion Dinner

No.	Respondent	Gender	Age	Occupation	Education	Marital Status	Social Roles	Venue for Reunion Dinner
10.	Mary	Female	45	Manager	Diploma	Married	Mother, wife, daughter-in-law, sister-in-law	At the restaurant
11.	SK	Female	45	Teacher	BA	Single	Daughter, sister, aunt	At parents' house
12.	Terry	Female	44	Tour Operator	Diploma	Single	Daughter, sister, sister-in-law, aunt	At parents' house
13.	Esther	Female	42	Tour Operator	Diploma	Single	Daughter, sister, sister-in-law, aunt	At her friend's house
14.	Eric	Male	42	Engineer	MBA	Married	Husband, son-in-law, brother in-law, son	At his parents-in-law's house
15.	Nicole	Female	41	Consultant	MBA	Married	Daughter, wife, sister, sister-in-law	At her home
16.	Sharon	Female	41	Photographer	High School	Single	Daughter, sister, sister-in-law, aunt	At her eldest brother's home
17.	STeng	Female	40	Nurse	Diploma	Married (Lives in Sweden)	Daughter, wife, sister, sister-in-law, aunt	Returns to her parents' house away from KL

Table 6.1: Profile of Informants, Place and Time for Reunion Dinner

No.	Respondent	Gender	Age	Occupation	Education	Marital Status	Social Roles	Venue for Reunion Dinner
18.	Amy	Female	39	HR Manager	MBA	Single	Daughter, sister, sister-in-law, aunt	At her house
19.	Lorain	Female	37	Sales Manager	Diploma	Single (lives in Australia)	Daughter, sister-in-law, aunt	Returns to her younger sister's home away from KL
20.	Pete	Male	36	Engineer	BSc	Married	Son, husband, brother,	At his in-laws house, joined by his parents
21.	Cindy	Female	35	Consultant	MBA	Single	Daughter, sister, sister-in-law, aunt	At a restaurant
22.	Emile	Female	34	Manager	Diploma	Single	Orphan, sister, sister in-law	At her brother's house
23.	Ken	Male	33	Lecturer	MBA	Single	Son, brother, brother in-law, uncle, nephew	Returns to his parents' home away from KL
24.	Darren	Male	33	Lecturer	MBA	Single	Son, brother, brother in-law, uncle	Returns to his parents' home away from KL

Table 6.1: Profile of Informants, Place and Time for Reunion Dinner

No.	Respondent	Gender	Age	Occupation	Education	Marital Status	Social Roles	Venue for Reunion Dinner
25.	Adeline	Female	32	Manager	MBA	Single	Daughter, sister, sister in-law, aunt, niece	Returns to her father's hometown away from KL
26.	YB	Female	26	Media Planner	BA	Single	Daughter, sister, niece	Returns to her parents' home away from KL
27.	SLeng	Female	26	IT Executive	BA	Single	Daughter, sister, sister in-law	At her home
28.	Jason	Male	25	Sales Executive	BA	Single	Son, brother, brother in-law, uncle, nephew	Returns to his parents' home away from KL
29.	KaMei	Female	25	Marketing Executive	BA	Single	Daughter, sister	Returns to her parents' home away from KL
30.	Kehsin	Female	24	Sales Executive	BA	Single	Daughter, sister	Returns to her parents' home away from KL <i>(lunch at the shop)</i>

Table 6.1: Profile of Informants, Place and Time for Reunion Dinner

No.	Respondent	Gender	Age	Occupation	Education	Marital Status	Social Roles	Venue for Reunion Dinner
31.	HYPing	Female	24	Executive	BA	Single	Daughter, sister	At a restaurant
32.	SWei	Female	24	Credit Officer	BA	Single	Daughter, sister	Returns to her parents' home away from KL
33.	Mist	Female	22	University Student	Pre-U	Single	Daughter, sister, granddaughter, niece	Returns to her paternal grandparents' home away from KL
34.	Samantha	Female	22	University Student	Pre-U	Single	Daughter, sister	Returns to parents' home away from KL
35.	Tracy	Female	22	University Student	Pre-U	Single	Daughter, sister	Returns to parents' home away from KL (lunch at home, dinner at boyfriend's home)
36.	Shaun	Male	21	University Student	Pre-U	Single	Son, brother, nephew	At his paternal uncle's home

Table 6.1: Profile of Informants, Place and Time for Reunion Dinner

No.	Respondent	Gender	Age	Occupation	Education	Marital Status	Social Roles	Venue for Reunion Dinner
37.	Ytat	Male	21	University Student	Pre-U	Single	Son, brother	At his home
38.	Val	Male	21	University Student	Pre-U	Single	Son, brother, nephew, grandson	Returns to his maternal grandmother's home away from KL
39.	CMun	Female	21	University Student	Pre-U	Single	Daughter, sister, niece	At her paternal aunt's house
40.	Cling	Female	21	University Student	Pre-U	Single	Daughter, sister, niece, grand daughter	Returns to her parents' home away from KL

Source: This study

6.4 Place and the Reunion Dinner

While prior research involving celebration of festivals discusses the symbolic role of people, food and activities in uncovering social meanings and themes within the consumption experiences but there is very limited assessment of the role of place (Wallendorf and Arnould 1991; Belk 1990, Levinson et al. 1992; Belk 1987; Caplow 1982; McKechnie and Tyan 2006)). The celebration of the Thanksgiving Dinner (Wallendorf and Arnould 1991) is the closest in parallel with the celebration of the Lunar Reunion Dinner while Christmas (Caplow 1982; Belk 1987; McKechnie and Tyan 2006)) and Halloween (Belk 1990; Levinson et al. 1992) are used to compare and contrast themes for the understanding of the relationship between consumption objects within the cultural and social contexts.

The place where the Chinese Reunion Dinner is held has important cultural and social meanings as it helps to communicate the nature and structure of Chinese values and how those values are upheld and practiced upon by the wider Chinese community. Venue is important as a multitude of aesthetic signs and narrative discourses could be observed by investigating where the dinner is held. To many of the participants, the place for the Reunion Dinner acted as signal of meaningful connectivity and perhaps an important moment of visibility helping to celebrate family and social identities.

This research finds that the place played a significant role in the celebration of the Reunion Dinner specifically when it was held at the parental home or ancestral home. Traditionally the venue for the Reunion Dinners has been the home of the oldest generation, particularly of the immediate parents, followed by the grandparents' homes, depending on the surviving members (Choo 1983; Freedman 1970; Debernardi 2004; Liu 2006).

However, an interpretation of data from this research reveals that the home or place has change as it could be the same place where the participants were residing or it could mean returning to their childhood home where their parents were residing. The trip that was made especially back to another

place away from their residence was termed as 'returning to their 'hometown' by the participants. The word 'hometown' sometimes assumed even though it might not be the informants' place of birth, or even their parents' place of birth, or even a place where they grew up. It could be a place where the elder's were living or the ancestral home of the older generation. The sense of place therefore specified the particular place identity and attachment which overlapped with the emotional bonds, affiliation, behavioural commitment, satisfaction and belonging (see Cuba and Hummon 1993; Altman and Low 1992).

6.4.1 The Symbolic Role of Place from Male Perspectives

Being a traditional rite for the family to gather at the home of the ancestor or within the patriarchal society in where men are the decision-makers and hold positions of power and prestige, and have the power to define reality, in this case the definition of place for the Reunion lies in their prerogative. A prototypical of the consumption of the Reunion Dinner occurs within the nuclear family where the older generation resides (Choo 1983; Debarnardi 2004; Liu 2006) within the patrilineal lines. An interpretation of the ethnographic data collected in this study revealed that there were some variations for the choice of place where the Reunion Dinner was held in comparison to the celebrations of the past. Many informants stated that the Reunion Dinner usually meant rushing and returning to their parent's home, which was not where they were residing, instead returning to their hometown, which they referred to with endearment. Only a quarter of the informants' family had been residing in the Greater KL for the past three generations while the others just migrated to the city, especially among the second and third generation Malaysian Chinese.

Some of those families with an older generation living away from the Greater KL noted this tradition of returning home to one's parent's home in the past. However, they were no longer practising this rite of returning home specifically on the eve of the New Year for the Reunion Dinner. Instead, some would have their Reunion Dinner at their home and only returned to the family home on the other days within the fifteen days of the Chinese New Year. This meant

that the New Year eve Reunion Dinner was also not significant in terms of time (eve of the Lunar New Year) besides the place for the gathering of all family members including the extended family members, because it was celebrated on another day of convenience when the informants would return to their family home later on.

Besides not returning on the eve for the Reunion Dinner, an interpretation of the ethnographic data also revealed that the older generation were moving away from tradition by travelling away from their hometown to the city to celebrate the event with their children. Traditionally, respectfully and as an act of filial piety, the younger generation were expected to return home (Choo 1983; Debernardi 2004; Liu 2006) but the reversed was revealed instead in this research. There were also cases where some parents attended the Reunion Dinner in their sons' spouse's family homes together with the in-law's family instead of within their clan.

These practices were against the norm because the traditional Chinese family is patrilineal society and emphasis is given to the importance of tracing and keeping one's descendants through the male line (Wong 1979; Debernardi 2004; Liu 2006). Hence, at all important and grand occasion, the members of the male line are expected to attend to show solidarity and as a sign of filial piety to their parents, besides being a source of pride to the family and clan. However, the findings of this study show that this symbolic returning home to the ancestral home was no longer imposed on the younger generation as a requirement of the filial act but instead modification and acceptance were displayed due to its pragmatism. It therefore appears that the participants negotiated the meanings attached with place in a different way in comparison what they had done previously. While place was important, but participants showed flexibility in the way place or venue helped in upholding the traditional meanings associated with the dinner and in negotiating their collective identities and reinforcing family values.

To illustrate this further, three cases (Pete, Eric and Val) involving male perspectives are highlighted in the following section to demonstrate the weakening of the expected patrilineal emphasis (Debarnardi 2004: Liu 2006).

6.4.1.1 The Choice of Home for the Reunion Dinner

Case 1: Pete (36, Male, Husband/Son)

Pete, an IT consultant, used to reside in Penang (a northern state in Malaysia) with his parents before starting his work. For the past ten years, after obtaining his tertiary education abroad, he has been living in the city of Kuala Lumpur. Pete is married to Yee Ling (35, Manager) and they live in their own house in Greater KL. Pete has a younger brother who is working in Singapore. For the past five years, his brother has not returned home for the New Year Eve Reunion Dinner because he is employed in the food and beverage industry and is working during the festive season. Instead, Pete's brother would return to their parents' home in Penang either on the third or fourth day for the Chinese New Year celebration.

Pete once tried to perform the traditional rite of returning to his parents' home for the Reunion Dinner together with his wife; however, to his dismay, he found it too quiet and not that meaningful as there was only four of them at the Reunion Dinner. Consequently, he requested changes to the venue as he wished more family members could attend the dinner. He remembered vividly and yearned for those celebrations that he had when he was younger at his maternal grandparents' home in Ipoh (another Malaysian city away from Greater KL).

The best reunion dinner would be the one where we had a lot of cousins and that obviously would have been in Ipoh...big crowd...for the past 10 or 15 years it has always been like that. Usually that would be the uncles and the aunties and several close friends. Once we decided not to go to Ipoh because we just move into a new place and so we decided to do it in the new place and just the three of us because my brother couldn't make it... compare to the thirty people.

The food was good but like I say what is important to me was the company... the crowd... So it was quite boring. It was very quiet unlike the big one in Ipoh which is always something which I desire...hanging out with my cousins...

(Pete, 36, M)

He described the Reunion Dinner which “*obviously would be where his uncles and aunties and cousins are...what is important to me was the company*” as his best Reunion Dinner celebrations he has had and wished he could have more of those today. In fact, he took his wife to experience this celebration that involved his mother’s kin, including his uncles, aunts and cousins. However, there was no collection of memories or any mention of the Chinese New Year celebration involving his father’s side of the family, neither of his kin, throughout the interview.

For the past two years, his parents had travelled south from their home in Penang to join him and his wife for the Chinese New Year celebration, specifically for the Reunion Dinner. Furthermore, the Reunion Dinner was never held at Pete’s home but was instead held at his wife’s Yee Ling’s parents’ home, which is technically Pete’s in-laws house, and which was also attended by his wife’s siblings and families. The venue for this event changed significantly from the ancestors’ home to that of the younger generation, and even beyond. Not only was it no longer held within Pete’s family (be it kin or immediate family) it had moved away from his clan altogether. Hence, the younger generation was no longer returning to the home of their ancestral home or the home of the older generation (i.e. his parents) as prescribed traditionally (McCoy 1970; Saso 1965; Lo and Chamber 1958; Pleck 2000).

Instead, the parents had to travel to their children’s home for the celebration, and in this case even to have the Reunion Dinner with their daughter in-law’s family at their home together with their kin. This again goes against the traditional belief and practice that when the daughter-in-law is married into her husband’s family she is expected to celebrate it with her husband’s family first before her own family. Last year his wife’s parents decided to go for a holiday

during the Lunar New Year and they have their reunion dinner at the restaurant since there were only a few of them and not even going back to his parents' home. The simplicity and lack of hassle of a reunion dinner is preferable until they all can gather later for another meal together.

These variations within the case of Pete alone show the potential threat on the belief and the practice of the traditional patriarchal system that once described the Chinese society (Pleck 2000; Tan 2006). As much as he believes in coming home as a tradition, the definition of home for the Reunion Dinner has been changed from his ancestral home, to his mother's ancestral home and to his spouse's ancestral home and to dining out to reflect his identity and role over time through the consumption of the Reunion Dinner

Of course of course...we must go home because it is a tradition. Furthermore there are just the both of us (Pete and his brother) and my parents...especially mom...she wishes us to be around ...

(Peter, 36, M)

6.4.1.2 Liberty versus Traditional Rules

Case 2: Eric (42, Male, Husband/Son)

Another case reflecting the demystification and growingly lack of importance of the patriarchal system of the Chinese values within Malaysian Chinese society is evident in the case of Eric (an engineer by profession). Eric was the last of the three sons who had married and left his home in the suburb of the Greater KL. His widowed mother and his unmarried sister lived in their family home while his two other brothers had moved into their own homes after they had married. Eric has moved into his wife's home since his marriage ten years ago. His wife, Nic (41, consultant) lives with her parents, a sister, an aunt and a nephew. She has two brothers who have settled down abroad and being the eldest, she has taken the responsibility in taking care of her family members back in Malaysia.

Traditionally, it is normal for the daughter in-law to move in and live with her husband's family (Freedman 1970). Over time, the son may choose to live out of the family home and to set up his own home separately, either as a choice or to avoid incidents such as the horror tales that have been told about the mother and daughter-in-law relationship. Although both Eric and Nic are professionals and could afford their own home, they have chosen to live in Nic's family home. In fact, after their wedding, they have done some extensive renovation to Nic's ancestral home that was built by her grandfather.

This reflects a change in tradition because males are normally expected to live with their own parents even after marriage or by themselves. This is especially surprising from the traditional perspective especially because Eric's mother is a widow and is living with her other daughter. Eric remembered his first few Reunion Dinners when he would visit his mother's house for lunch and then rushed home for another Reunion Dinner with his wife's family. Later, they decided to have only one Reunion Dinner by joining his family with Nic's family and having the festival meal at a restaurant. As the years passed, with the numbers dwindling as many have settled abroad and sometimes do not return for the Reunion Dinner, there would also sometime have the meal at home. For the past two years, however, Eric has been having his Reunion Dinner at home cooked by Nic. His mother and his siblings and their families have also joined them together with Nic's family for the Reunion Dinner. This case shows how the tradition of having the Reunion Dinner has shifted from having it at the home of the husband's family, to a restaurant, to the inclusion of the daughter in-law family, and finally to having the Reunion Dinner at the daughter-in-law ancestral home. This case once again contradicts the values of the traditional patriarchal system.

The following quote reflects Eric's knowledge of the traditional role of women cooking and having the Reunion Dinner in the husband's home whereas Eric is having his Reunion Dinner in the home of his mother-in-law. The ethnographic data reveals that there is freedom on the negotiation of place where the traditional rules are concern.

In old days, when my mother cooks, normally the daughters and the daughters in law will help to clean up...and normally the daughters will go back to the in-laws' house and they won't come back until after the 2nd day. That is where the tradition is...but today we are flexible

(Eric, 42, M)

However, over time the consumption of his Reunion Dinner has been pragmatic where and how the Reunion Dinner should be consume to reflect his identity and role within his family and his wife's family, as a son, and a husband.

6.4.1.3 Inlusivity of the Matriarchal Family

Case 3: Val (Males, 21, Son)

The discussion so far has focused on presenting the views of two male participants who were married. Similarly, Val (a bachelor) has been celebrating Reunion Dinner at his mother's home away from the Greater KL where he lives with his father, mother and sister. For the past few years, on the eve of Chinese Year, his mother would be prepared to get her two children ready to leave for their maternal grandmother's home at Kuala Selangor; a fishing village about three hours drive from the city. His father did not follow them on these occasions. Instead he would remain in their house and celebrated the eve by himself. The family would then have another big feast on the last day of the Chinese New Year with him. The last day of the Chinese New Year is also celebrated with feasting and loud jubilation that includes firecrackers and a lion dance, to denote a good beginning and good ending where the celebration and ushering of the New Year is concerned. However, the ethnographic data revealed Val's vivid memories of his celebration which were centralised around his mother's family.

Same as usual we will go back to our hometown to Kuala Selangor... the ancestor home of my mom...where my mother's side of the family

live...even without my dad...usually my mom is the one that makes the decision because my mother is close to her side and ...my dad will say that, it is ok for us to go and when we come back we will celebrate again with my dad...we pack up and go a few days before the eve.

(Val, 21, M)

He described much enjoyment and merriment of the Reunion Dinner, especially in meeting his maternal uncles, aunts and cousins. They would continue their merriment throughout the following days with family outings and trips. The annual trips during the New Year celebration also coincided with the public holidays that enable Val to follow his mother's clan and the extended family members as part of his annual treat proving the solidarity and social identity toward the matriarchal family rather than the traditional patriarchal system of rites and identity (Debernardi 2004).

Every year we will go to grandmother's home and we will also for a vacation. Yes, every year my uncle will plan where we will go like this year we book early the hotel...last year we went to Cameron Highlands, and it was quite fun, having this picnic...we eat and gamble...

(Val, 21, M)

However, when further inquiry on why his father was not involved in the eve celebrations, Val was silent for a few moments before he expressed his regret for not having the last Reunion Dinner with his dad two years ago. As he related his regrets, there was a quiver in his voice and tears swelled in his eyes. He regretted joining his maternal family for the Reunion Dinner and wished that he could have celebrated his father's last Reunion Dinner with him instead.

Val also described how he still celebrates that occasion in his maternal grandmother's home. Based on the Chinese customs, the family who has experience any death or funeral rites, would not be able to usher the joyous occasion of the New Year in respect of the death. One year when his father passed away, his family could not celebrate it in their home but they were allowed to join in the celebration at his maternal family's home. He reported

that he considered this still to be the same Reunion Dinner because he was allowed to collect the red packets or gifts of money in conjunction with the celebration.

On the other hand, his mother was not allowed to give any gifts of money or the red packets to children, unmarried adults, or her siblings on that year since she has lost her husband, which is considered to be both a misfortune and act of respect or bereavement. In hindsight and for the future, Val performed a traditional ritual, which was to stay awake for the whole night of the Reunion Dinner, to ensure the longevity of one's elders (i.e. his mother). By following this rite, he only slept when the sun rose on the first day of the New Year. Tradition dictates that he will then sleep right through to the late afternoon, forgoing his collection of his gifts of money that were given. The collection of gifts of money is the main highlight of the event and to the single and young family members it is the embodiment of the Chinese New Year event itself, which will be discussed further in the following chapter.

Table 6.2: Binary Identity of the 3 Males Cases: Pete (36), Eric (41), Val (21))

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Returning to parents home as traditional rites (Peter, Eric) • Dining with dishes that reflect ancestor heritage of the patrilineal society identity (Eric) • Prayer to deities and ancestors worship (Peter, Eric) • With extended family members where a big reunion is expected (Peter, Eric) • Believe in taboo of staying awake to enhance parents' longevity (Val) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Celebrating at wife's family home, maternal grandparents home, dining out (Peter, Eric, Val) • Celebrating dishes of his maternal grandparents dishes as identity (Peter) • No longer pray (Peter, Eric) • The simplicity and convenience for all, dining out (Peter, Eric) • Left father home alone for the Reunion Dinner (Val)
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Source: This study

An interpretation of data points to the direction that, place, as being a traditional system of symbolic connectivity was challenged by new social and economic circumstances signalling some sort of crisis in the family life and family values. However, the place appeared to validate the substantial shared interest by participants of the event as consumers continue to play their roles within the celebration. The intergenerational male perspectives of their role and identity within the patriarchal lineage society on the consumption of the Reunion Dinner shows how the consumers continue to change and provide a solution for their assertive roles and identity within their cultural space.

6.4.2 The Sense of Place for the Reunion Dinner from Female Perspectives

The discussion involving the three male informants (regardless of age group and marital status) show changes in the traditional belief in the importance of patriarchal system in which sons are expected to return home to their father's home as a sign of respect and filial piety virtues which are cultivated based on the teachings of Confucius (Tan 2006; Choo 1983; Sasa 1965; Debernardi 2004; Liu 2006). The male participants appeared to be less nostalgic over the sense of places as compared to the female participants (Holbrook 1993) may have resulted in the changes of place and venue for the Reunion Dinner. The data collected in this study also identified various venues beside the home of parents, including the homes of the extended family such as uncle's or aunt's home, regardless of whether they came from the paternal or maternal side of the family.

For instance, CMun (student, 21) attended her Reunion Dinner at her paternal aunt's house. Her parents and her sisters would leave their home and visit her aunt, who is the elder sister of her father, who lives in another city. A participant observation of the Sim family also revealed the Reunion Dinner being held at the home of the eldest sister where the siblings (including an elder brother) will come together for the Reunion Dinner instead of having it at the Sim's ancestor home). According to the Sim, this practice of dining at the

eldest siblings have been in practice for the past fifteen years at her house as they no longer drive back to their hometown which is a two hour drive from the city. These findings show the changes in the choice of the traditional venue which was found to be no longer held at the patriarchal family member's home. However, the visitation of the eldest kin and relatives is still being practiced and this tradition will extend during the following fifteen days of the New Year celebration.

Celebrating the Reunion Dinner and the New Year is also akin to returning to one's home town or sense of place which one associate either through identity of self dimension or as emotional bonding (Jorgesen and Stedman 2001). Although it is a tradition to return home, the data collected in this study also pointed to the existence of a desire and excitement of going back to the hometown and yet the actual returning could also be an agonising feat. To illustrate this further, three cases (Adeline, Datin and Madame L) involving female perspectives are highlighted in the following section to demonstrate the patrilineal emphasis of the Chinese society which is held by the female consumers.

Case 4: Adeline (Female, 32, Daughter)

For example, in the case of Adeline (single, 32, Manager), her annual trip of returning to her ancestor's home for the Reunion Dinner, which is at her father's hometown in another village away from her parents' home was an event filled with mixed emotions. She spoke of annual exodus home with excitement in the first year of the interview. This had turned into an event she dreaded when she related it for the third time.

For the past ten years since she left her hometown in Sabah (a state in the East of Malaysia), Adeline has been living in the capital city of KL, to pursue her higher education. Upon completion, she has been working and living in the city. She returns to her hometown twice a year, and Chinese New Year is one of the main events that she must never miss. To make this trip she has to book the air-ticket months ahead due to the pressures of the festive season.

She celebrated her New Year at her parents' home with her sister, while her Reunion Dinner is held at her father's hometown.

Adeline (single, 32, Manager) further described how she had been returning to her father's hometown for her Reunion Dinner, which includes her father's brothers and sisters and their families. Her father is the eldest among his siblings and, hence, it was expected that he would return to their ancestral home. She used to be excited and happy in meeting up with her extended family because they only met once a year. However, during the third interview, the enthusiasm of returning to her father's hometown decreased. Even his father sounded less enthusiastic of the rite and actually made some adjustments in having the Reunion Dinner earlier so that they could return to their home in KK (the capital city of Sabah), which is an hour from their ancestral home in Papar. Place and attachment and identity can contribute to a sense of well-being, but it can also result in entrapment and drudgery (Brown & Perkins 1992) when one felt one has to stay. This is reflected in the following quote from Adeline (F, single)

I went back to Papar to be with my family, because my father is actually from Papar itself, a small town further, a few miles from KK, the city where we live. Dad was quite reluctant to go back this year because it is actually like an hour drive from KK to Papar. I think all of us are reluctant but just that when my grandmother is no longer around, they all said that this is the only annual gathering that all my father's siblings, they all can actually gather together...but we go because my father is the eldest in the family, and he thinks that he should go back no matter what. So he sort of arranges it earlier for us so that we can leave earlier after the dinner.

(Adeline, 32, F)

Case 5: Datin (45, Housewife, Mother)

Datin has been hosting the Lunar Reunion Dinner at her home for the past five years. Previously her family (husband, son and daughter) would return to her husband family home or his ancestral home where her mother-in-law

resides with her unmarried sister-in-law. Her husband's siblings (especially his brothers' and their families) would also return for this special occasion. This would mean cooking for at least three families or more which was not an easy task. Therefore she decided to take over this cooking task from her aging mother-in-law and host the dinner from her home since she enjoys cooking beside respecting and appreciating this traditional responsibility of taking care of her husband's ancestor worship and being a daughter-in-law in upholding the patrilineal kinship of her husband. At the same time she is also able to invite her parents to join in the dinner as her siblings and families are abroad. By hosting the dinner for her husband's clan she is performing her duty as a filial and obedient daughter-in-law bringing pride and joy to her mother-in-law as they continue to observe the laws of the patrilineal society of the Chinese. On top of that, she will also observe the ancestor worship rites and the worshipping of the clan's deities and gods besides cooking the traditional dishes and food following her mother-in-law recipes while introducing new dishes which her family members were keen to try yearly.

Case 6: Madam L (69, Mother, Grandmother)

Being the oldest informants, she still practices the traditional Reunion Dinner by hosting the reunion dinner at her home inviting her father-in-law and her husband's siblings though she is separated from her husband. As she is still working, she usually cooks only one or two dishes while the other dishes are either bought or prepared by her siblings or her children. She still practices some of the old traditional rites such as buying of special gifts and food to be given out to close family members even though she may cook less. She remembers vividly and still reminiscence the reunion dinners she had when she was younger which were on bigger scale of celebration then as compare to today. She remembers the prayers and worshipping of ancestors and deities which they do at a large scale especially with the presence of the extended family members and servants they have then. For her, the Reunion Dinner held at home is meant especially for her father-in-law as they often dine out for good food and convenience more often than dining in. In future, she does not mind having the reunion dinner at the restaurant as none of her children

appreciate cooking not even her daughter-in-law. As for the dishes, she will usually cook a simple vegetable dish and a soup which she consider healthy for the family while the family members will buy and pack other dishes to supplement the meal.

In general, the data on returning home noted that while there were some who still performed their annual rite in returning to their hometown for the Reunion Dinner, there are also many who opted instead to celebrate it in greater KL rather than returning to their hometown for the Reunion Dinner. There is a reluctance to rush home to avoid the traffic congestion and the hassle. On the other hand, for smaller families there is also a sense of nostalgia of the days when they used to rush home for their Reunion Dinner now that they are celebrating within their immediate family members in the city. Though there is also a preference for some to celebrate just among their family members that are within the nuclear family, there are also some who wished and yearned to have the celebration with their extended families.

The sense of place can be described in many dimensional physical and psychological environment attributes (Hidalgo and Hernandez 2001; Cuba and Hummon 1993) from emotional bonds, affiliation, behavioural commitment and belonging. Place and attachment and identity can contribute to a sense of well-being, it can also result in entrapment and drudgery (Brown and Perkins 1992) when one felt one has to stay. An interpretation of ethnographic data reveals that the location itself is not enough to create a sense of place for the celebration of the event. Instead it appears to emerge from involvement among people and between people and the place (Pretty, Chipuer and Bramston 2003) as the sense of place changes over time for different people which are derived from the social identity processes integrating one's self identity (Cuba and Hummon 1993). Place has historically been conceived as the canters of symbolism and sentiment (Tuan 1974) for the Chinese. The venue which is traditionally to the oldest home of the eldest kin and within the patriarchal system of the Chinese culture is no longer a necessity, while some would even have the meal in restaurants.

Table 6.3 Binary Identity of 3 Female Cases: (Adeline (32), Datin (45), Madame L(69)

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Returning to parents home (Adeline, Datin) • Dining with dishes that reflect her husband's kins reflecting the patrilineal society identity (Datin) • Prayer to deities and ancestors worship (Datin) • With extended family members within the patrilineal kins (Adeline, Datin) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Celebrating at own home (Datin, Madame L) • The simplicity and convenience for all, dining in through appropriation of food (Madame L), Celebrating favourite dishes of attendees (Datin) • No longer pray (Madame L, Adeline) • Immediate family members only (Madame L)
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Source: This study

6.4.3 Dining for the Reunion Dinner

Besides returning to the individual hometown to celebrate the Reunion Dinner, some of the celebrants would also have the choice of dining in or dining out. With the recent growth of restaurants offering such services, even in small towns and villages, this has proved to be an attractive and popular option recently. Restaurants have worked around this important day by arranging and promoting two specific sessions for this Reunion Dinner with an attractive choice of dishes. An interpretation of the ethnographic data (both from analysing print advertisements in mass media and data collected from informants) revealed the overwhelming aggressive promotional campaign and positive responses from consumers dining out. Reservation was required specifying the session one is attended in lieu of limited space and food while some reservations were done months or even a year ahead of the event.

6.4.3.1 Dining In

An interpretation of the ethnographic data reveal that a majority of informants preferred to dine in for their Reunion Dinner (or having the meal at home) rather than dining out. In line with previous research, there were also instances whereby some of the informants having tried both dining in and dining out depending on situations as necessity, pleasure, and enjoyment (Warde and Marens 2000). In the case of Eric (42, M), his Reunion Dinner included not only his family but also his wife's family. Hence, dining out was a necessity due to the large number of guests. Besides they enjoyed feasting and trying new eateries as they enjoyed food, especially when they did not have to prepare or cook such a large meal.

Some of the reasons given for celebrating at home were the mood that is created with a familiarity in place, food and the comfort that the family have prepared together. According to Cheam (75, retiree, M), he has never eaten out before nor would he ever. He insisted that the dinner should always be held at home. Cheam, who has been retired for the last ten years, lives with his wife, a son and a daughter.

According to Cheam, eating out meant losing the actual meaning of the Reunion Dinner because it denotes cooking together besides eating together as a family in the private home of the family. This is echoed in the works of De Vault (1992) who declared that producing means the production of 'home' and 'family' which together acts as a cohesive social unit. Dining out, according to Cheam, also signified the laziness of the younger generation in cooking this important meal or the lack of cohesiveness of the family as one social unit. By dining out it reflects the identity of being lazy and not making an effort to come together as a unit for the Reunion Dinner. The sense of place as in the home is also being interpreted as a phenomenological endeavour declaring the place as the centre of emotions and relationships (Tuan 1977, Low and Altman 1992). According to Cheam, there is no place like home and the mood of celebration will also be different if it is not celebrated at home.

I will stick to the family at home. You see when we have it in the family the mood is there. That is why I say it is the moment to remember. Like those, their children or their daughter-in-law or whoever are not around, and they feel lazy to cook, so they go to hotels for their reunion. And for that kind of reunion it is in a strange place, so the meaning is not there. We have those kinds of moments at home, we feel better but to them it is meeting together, not the place but the reunion. For me...ah for that we used to say there is no place like home.

(Cheam, 75, M)

SK (45, teacher, single), returned to her hometown for the Reunion Dinner where her parents lived. She has two younger sisters, with one settled down in Singapore and another married to a Swede and resident in Sweden. She also acknowledged the norm and notion of eating in for all her Reunion Dinners for as long as she remembered. For the past three years consecutively she has been eating in. In fact she could even predict and name the dishes because they have always remained the same since they were all cooked by her mother. However, she and her sister would often help out in the preparation and the cleaning up. The following quote revealed the upholding of the tradition of having the meal at home.

We never eat out and all my life there have been no changes on the dinner table, I can literary tell you or know or predict what we are going to have, with my mom doing all the cooking as usual, the same food. So, more or less, we know what it is, by cooking. It is the planning that you have plenty and abundance. Preparation is also an enjoyment. If there is no cooking it is not really like New Year for because we don't do the cooking, just my mom.

(SK, 45, F)

Sharon (41, photographer, single) also shared the same views where dining in is concerned. She believed that the role of cooking would continue as per tradition. Sharon is the youngest among her six siblings. Her Reunion Dinner was held at her eldest brother's house. Her mother lived with her brother's

family, together with his wife and his children. Sharon's brothers and their families would all gather at her eldest brother's house for the Reunion Dinner as per the tradition. Her mother cooked all the dishes assisted by her eldest sister-in-law, while the other sisters-in-law who came on the day would help out in the cleaning. Sharon did not need to help in the cooking because there were already too many helpers in the kitchen. She believed that the next generation in her family would take over the role of cooking. At present her mother as the matriarch is still in charge of the cooking even though she is in her 70s. However, she was always assisted by the younger generation, especially her daughters' in-law. Sharon also noticed the enjoyment of cooking by the women who were preparing the meal in the kitchen, even though she was not involved:

No I don't think we will eat out. So even if my mom is not here I guess my oldest sis-in-law who has inherited most of her cooking skills will still cook, and will pass it down to the next generation. But being the youngest I guess for all my life I will be eating dinner at home cooking at my mom's, my sister-in-law. It is like an enjoyment to them, they really enjoy it.

(Sharon, 41, F)

The home has always functioned as a consumption site for important events and gathering of the family. Food consumption also includes the spatial dynamics of cooking and eating (Valine 1999); this was reflected among the informants above in the choice of eating in (or having the Reunion Dinner at home). The home is also a multiple site for the construction of identity, taste, time and lifestyle. For SK (44, F), the taste produced by her mother's cooking style signify it being a new year celebration while the construction of identity through the role played by the women as a mother and a daughter in-law was reflected in Sharon's opinion on why she would continue to have her Reunion Dinner at home. The cooking is also considered as a social activity in which members of family would gather for the preparation of the Reunion Dinner and the cleaning up after meal.

Eating in also allows accommodation to members' preference and lifestyle due to their beliefs and religion. For example, Terry (44, tour operator, F) would have special dishes cooked to accommodate her sister who has embraced the Islamic religion after marrying her brother-in-law who is a Malay and Muslim by birth. By having the Reunion Dinner at home, her mother was able to cook similar Chinese dishes for the Reunion Dinner but with different utensils and pork-free dishes. There were two tables set up for the Reunion Dinner with similar dishes but one table is reserved for her sister, her brother-in-law, her nephew and niece who are of the Muslim faith.

6.4.3.2 Dining Out

While the ethnographic data revealed many informants dining in for the Reunion Dinner, there were examples of some who had eaten their Reunion Dinner in the restaurant. Cindy, a consultant and the eldest in her family (aged 35, single) have been having her Reunion Dinner consecutively at the restaurant for the past few years. She preferred to celebrate at a restaurant because it allowed her to enjoy the dinner without the hassle of cooking and preparation, and toiling in the kitchen. According to her, she has been eating out for many years and it was a good change of environment that also meant that there were many types of food available when they eat out. In addition, it also enabled them to finish their dinner earlier so that they would have sufficient time to prepare for the prayer that takes place after dinner. Although she admitted that the drawback of eating out was the need to rush through their meals because the food served were done quickly due to the strictly two sessions dining procedures of the restaurant specifically for that night.

Most Chinese restaurants targeting this event serve celebration dinners based on a reservation of either two sessions, either from 6:00 pm to 8:00 pm or in a later session from 8:00 pm to 10:00 pm. The stress of eating fast does affect their enjoyment, but it does not deter them from dining out since Cindy's main concern was to enable her family to have sufficient time to prepare for their prayer in the latter part of the night. However, she reported that their reasons

for dining out also included the wide varieties of food and different ambiance provided as compared to home. Moreover, there would be many meals throughout the fifteen days, which she could eat at home with her extended family.

We have been eating out since I was young, until my brothers and sisters came along. So we have been doing it and it is an annual affair. I think it is more preparation at home and all the cooking and all the cleaning up. Quite massive and a lot of work to do. We find it too troublesome, so therefore we went outside and we eat out. There is less preparation because we are not having that dinner at home. As long as everybody is there, enjoying themselves being there. Everybody can go home early because we had an early meal and more time for preparation for prayer. A couple of times we went down to the capital city of Kuala Lumpur, to the Hotel, to have a buffet where you have different types of food and a different environment as well, but it is still having the whole family together. As a matter of fact I like it, sometimes we just want to have different things to eat then just eating Chinese food all the time.

(Cindy, 35, F)

The findings revealed informants having their Reunion Dinner at home and also out of the home or even both modes, alternately. Hence, modernity in this case means that the unity of the modern family lies in the function of consumption rather than the production of the meal (Campbell 1995), as reflected in the case of Cindy. Eating out has been chosen as an option for practical reasons, but that has not deterred them for appreciating and enjoying the consumption as compared to the preparation or production of the food. Eating out is not just for necessity but also for pleasure and leisure in this case (Warde and Martens 2000).

Overall the venue of the Reunion Dinner, in the sense of place for the Reunion Dinner as in the home of the family which is the kin and immediate family has gone beyond to extended families and even to eating out of homes.

An interpretation of the data shows that the venue or place of the Reunion Dinner from the ritual of returning to the ancestral home within the patriarchal system has been negotiated for the ordering of a collective life among the Chinese consumers. The place is no longer beyond the paired opposites of patriarch or matriarch within the cultural system; instead it can be celebrated in the wife's family's home instead. The modern societies of today may be secular because of their social organization but there is still a social glue of interdependence which is found within this modern society in which organic solidarity prevails either by dining in or dining out for the celebration of this Reunion Dinner.

The place which one identifies oneself with within the social identity process has evolved beyond the location as it is the involvement between people and between people and place that defines the place. Places are not only materially carved out but are also interpreted, narrated, felt, understood and imagined in their meanings and flexible within the hands of different people and culture over time (Van Patten and Williams 2008). Place and attachment and identity can contribute to a sense of well-being, it can also result in entrapment and drudgery (Brown & Perkins 1992) as consumers continue to negotiate the place and mode of dining for the Reunion Dinner celebration.

6.5 The Symbolic Role of Time for the Reunion Dinner

An interpretation of data revealed the significance and importance of time where the consumption of this event is concerned. Traditionally, the Reunion Dinner defines by itself as a meal taken in the evening, even more so when there is a need to prepare the food fresh and from scratch to ensure that the best food is served. The results of this study showed that a majority of the informants had their Reunion Dinners in the latter part of the day, as early as late afternoon to late evening, while a few informants have it as a midday meal. Some previous research has found that time orientation and time style influences consumer behaviour and consumption experience (Cotte et al. 2004). The interpretation of data reveals that time can be a phenomena

approach that centres on experience that defines the relationship between the subjects and their environment based on the meaning that they attribute time to it or as an antecedent to behaviour (Chetthamroingchain and Daview 2000).

6.5.1 Dinner Time for Ritualistic Orientation

Being labelled a Reunion Dinner, it is only expected that the meal would be eaten in the evening. The results showed a majority of the informants having their Reunion Dinner in the later part of the day, as early as late afternoon to late evening, depending on the activities performed before the meal. These included the preparation of fresh food for the meal and also food specially prepared for the ancestor worship, besides the ancestor worship ceremony with the burning of big candles, big joss sticks, and the burning of joss papers. Another reason for having it as a dinner would also enable the arrival and availability of the participants who are returning home specifically for this Reunion Dinner that happens once a year. The interpretation of data reveals that consumers approach to time for the Reunion Dinner not as only a time for the consumers to get together for collective identities but also for the social orientation dimension related to culture specific of the Chinese consumers which involves religiosity practices of rituals and symbolic consumption.

In addition to the practical reasons to ensure the preparation of people and food, there is also the notion that this meal will be the closest to the period of the new day of the New Year. The eve of the New Year is also a transition period from the liminal phase (van Gennep 1960) at the threshold between the old and the new. By being closer to the end of the last day, it is going towards the post-luminal, which signifies the ability to incorporate the newness of the New Year into the celebration itself.

6.5.2 Negotiation of Time for Inclusivity

Although a significant majority celebrated their Reunion Dinner in the evenings, there were some exceptions that had their Reunion Dinner meal

taken in the afternoon. For example, Kehsin, (F, 24, marketing executive), together with her other siblings, returned to her hometown in Johor, a southern state which is a four hours drive from the city she is working in. Her father owns a tyre shop business and the Reunion Dinner for lunch was held at the shop itself instead of their house. The staffs from the shop together with their families also joined in her family Reunion Dinner. After the meal, the staff would then return to their respective homes for the latter part of the day to celebrate the coming New Year.

Similarly, another informant also celebrated the Reunion Dinner in the afternoon. Tracy, a second year university student (female, 21) had been eating her Reunion Dinner for lunch for the past two years. Tracy and her sister returned to their hometown where her parents and her brother live. After eating their Reunion Dinner during lunch, both she and her sister would also attend their boyfriend's Reunion Dinner later at night.

Both these cases revealed a growing flexibility which is made available and accommodated by the older generation with regards to the time of the meal as long as it is still celebrated on the same day, which suffices for its meaning as a transition rite that is within the liminal phase between the old year and moving towards the New Year (van Gennep 1960). Partaking in the meal regardless of the time has ensured that the rite of incorporation has occurred even when they have eaten the meal at midday; hence, the symbolic meaning of the rite has been fulfilled. The meal was the rite of incorporation according to the rite of passage (van Gennep 1960), which is the passage in time in this case.

6.6 The Symbolic Role of Activities

The interpretation of the data also revealed activities that were being performed before the Reunion Dinner and after the Reunion Dinner. As the celebration of CNY is a tripartite division, which is the pre New Year's observance and preparation, the actual new year day festivities, and the post

New Year's day activities (Lo and Comber 1958; Choo 1983; Freedman 1970; Debernardi 2004; Liu 2006), this research focused mainly on the pre-New Year observance, especially in light of the Reunion Dinner being the main event. However, it was noted that during the interviews, there were constant spilled over of discussion of the activities across prior to the Reunion Dinner on the eve of the Lunar New Year to the continuity of festivities throughout from the first day to the fifteenth day.

This section focuses on the activities performed on the eve of the New Year, in line with the research objective, which is a study of the Reunion Dinner activities surrounding the dinner. Activities before and after were revealed during the data collection, which focussed around the preparation for the prayer before the Reunion Dinner and after dinner with some family activities done after the meal.

6.6.1 Activities before the Reunion Dinner

Ethnographic data revealed major house cleaning was done a week prior to the eve of the New Year, which is similar to the majority of New Year observance or major celebrations. The houses were decorated with red strips of paper. Red lanterns were hung outside the main entrance or in the house. Red cloth was also draped on some main doors while red strips of paper with good meaning Chinese characters were also pasted on doors, on rice jar/containers, and potted plants. Special potted plants with significant meanings were bought and displayed to signify this occasion. New clothes were bought, together with new household items and personal jewellery or gold trinkets that were specially designed for this occasion. Gifts, such as food for exchange, were also bought and are ready to be given, while in the later part of the day red packets were also prepared for giving away on either on the eve and the New Year's Day to family and friends. These red packets contained a currency note, preferably new and crisp, and are given by parents to children and by married couples to unmarried relative and friends.

The major activity, besides getting the house ready, was the preparation of the Reunion Dinner. Where ancestor worship is practiced by family, there would be preparation of food and cleaning of the altar to offer food to ancestors and other gods being prayed by at the family altar. The family sits down to a grand family reunion, which is akin to Christmas dinner, although it is a non-religious event but of cultural significance as a traditional feast symbolising the solidarity of the Chinese patriarchal family. The father presides over the table and around him are gathered his wife, sons and daughters in-law, unmarried daughters, grandsons and grandchildren, or any other relatives living under the same roof. Should the father no longer be around then it is the duty of the eldest son to hold the fort where the family Reunion Dinner is concerned. The dinner is sumptuous with no expenses spared, regardless of the financial circumstances of the family. Consumption is viewed as a social identity process reinforcing family values.

6.6.2 The Role of Prayer for Inclusivity

The findings revealed that about half of the informants participated in believe in ancestor worship and other Chinese religions/gods. However, in terms of time, the informants differed in the extent to which they offered prayers, with some praying only in the noon, which is before the Reunion Dinner, while others prayed after dinner as they wait to cross over to the New Year.

An interpretation of the data suggests that participants offered a range of prayers which involved and facilitated social relationships among the participants; between the living and the dead, and between mystical beings and subjects whom they worshiped. Food sacrifice is obligatory in most major rituals in celebration relating to beliefs and religion as a key method of communicating with the Gods (Levi-Strauss 1966; Liu 1999; Tan 2006). This consumption which incorporates the collective identities of the consumers while upholding traditional meaning associated in religiosity reveals consumer behaviour and consumption experiences helps to explain the relationship between subject identity and their environment.

6.6.2.1 Prayer before the Reunion Dinner

Given the ubiquity and importance of ancestor veneration among the Chinese culture, especially for those who still observed the Chinese religions (Tan 2006, Wolf 1978), prayers were offered during this important event of the year. The aim of prayers offered before the Reunion Dinner is to invite the ancestors to partake the celebration beside praying and seeking further blessings from them. Datin (homemaker, 45) offered prayers to her husband's ancestors in the morning since she is considered as part of her husband's family before her own. Meanwhile, being single, Amy (manager, female, 39) would pray to her ancestors (who is her grandfather) while Sharon (photographer, 41, female) would pray to her deceased father. Besides praying to their ancestor tablet on the altar, they would also pray to any Gods that are placed there, in the image of the idols and statues of deities.

In the afternoon on the eve of the New Year we will pray to my ancestors, my grandfather and my grandmothers on my father's side. Actually, the prayer is meant for the ancestor but of course we also pray to the god, the kun yam (Goddess of Mercy).

(Amy, 39, F)

Since she has been married for the past eighteen years, Datin (44, F), a mother of two, was assisted by her mother-in-law in an elaborate prayer ceremony which she performs yearly at her house. She not only prayed to her husband's father and his ancestor but she would also prayed to the many Gods she has at the altar in her house. From the ethnographic data (see photographs in Appendix B), it was revealed that she has to set aside two separate tables with different types of food for this praying session due to the difference in purpose, meaning, and connotation of the prayers.

Because we are Buddhist and we are also Taoist, so we pray and we also burn like new clothing, money and all those to our ancestors and to the God. Usually I will cook lunch to be served to the altar also. So

probably I will have the prayer at 12 o'clock to get ready the lunch for the God. We pray firstly to the "Kun Yam", the Goddess because my children are the godchildren of the Goddess. And then we have the "Kuan Tai", which is God of the reverie of, if I am not wrong, he is actually a mastermind of those days, like a general. So he has got a brain. My husband is in business, so "Kuan Tai" is the God that we are praying to. Usually on the alter table, other than our ancestors, usually we have two separate tables. Ancestors have to be lower than Gods. So on the altar of the Gods; we need to have three gods. We can't pray just two gods but it always has to be one or three. So just now I mentioned two deities, and the third one I pray to is the one we call it the "Chai Kong" which is the beggar God but he is supposed to be the God to protect the children and the family, keep us safe, and healthy. And after that, we have the "Tei Chi" which is below the alter table. That is the God that takes care of the house. Then come the ancestors, who are always on the husband's side. It's like his grandfather, his father, because my father-in-law has passed away that means that usually we pray maybe to a few generations.

(Datin, 44, F)

Besides making the effort in returning home to celebrate the Reunion Dinner, there were a number of other activities that one was expected to engage in before the Reunion Dinner. Traditionally, with the exception of the Christian households, a typical Reunion Dinner involves performing some prayers on the occasion. A review of the literature (Comber 1970; Freedman 1972; Tan 2001; Debernardi 2004; Liu 2006) suggests that Chinese households that have ancestor tablet or altars will offer prayers to their ancestors on a daily basis, on special days (e.g., first and fifteenth of every month of the Lunar calendar), and on special occasions (e.g., birthdays, anniversary of a death). This is confirmed in this research because many of the participants were found to pray to their ancestors through the offering and burning of candles, joss sticks and joss papers. Besides the ancestor tablet, there are also other deities and idols on the altar that are for the subject of prayer. Families who do not have a family altar will offer some minimal prayers of worship to the

Gods of the Heaven/Sky and the Earth by placing a table outside the home. These prayers are normally offered either before the Reunion Dinner or after the dinner, and for some they would offer the prayer on the actual break of dawn of the first day. The ethnographic data reveals the importance of prayer as communication between the ancestors and God but flexibility is also shown by some while they continue to uphold the collective identities of family values (Choo 1983; Freedman 1970; Debernardi 2004; Liu 2006).

6.6.2.2 Prayers after the Reunion Dinner

Besides having the prayers done before the Reunion Dinner, especially for families who practice ancestral worship, some key informants would also perform prayers after the Reunions Dinner. Prayers done before the Reunion Dinner is akin to inviting the ancestors to partake in the last meal as they prepare for the coming Lunar New Year, while those who are praying after dinner, they would mainly be praying to the God of Heaven and to the God of Prosperity in order to usher in the New Year. The after dinner prayer is akin to a third watch where homage is paid at the family altar to the dual powers of the Heaven and Earth (Lo and Comber 1958; Debernardi 2004) in welcoming the New Year. However, intense preparation and efforts are required for getting ready for the prayers. This research found strong support for this; for example, Cindy's (consultant, single, 35) main reason for eating out for her Reunion Dinner was to enable her family to have more time to prepare for the prayers.

We have a lot of preparation to do for the prayer time and we need more time. Basically, we will help in the preparation for the prayer, like setting the table, setting the joss stick, because my mom will have these big huge joss sticks that we have to set up, and we also have the firecrackers. While the women are preparing the food my brothers will make sure the floors are clean, take the table out, arrange the table accordingly, and make tea. It all takes a lot of time, we ended up quite late. The main focus of your Reunion Dinner is to come back early to

prepare for the praying at 12 o'clock because my mother has to do so much preparation at home, and to make sure that tomorrow morning's prayers are also done. Because you see, for prayers it is just not limited to 12 o'clock, because after the prayer at home she will go to the temples also. It is actually a whole night affair, so it will be very tiring. She will go to four or five temples and by the time she finishes it will be like 3 or 4 o'clock in the morning. Every year mom will go to the same at least 4 or 5 of these temples to pray.

(Cindy, 35, F)

An interpretation of the data reveals that not all the informants prayed after the reunion dinner due to modernity and simplicity since ancestor worship has already been performed prior to the Reunion Dinner except for a few who continues with the midnight prayer of heralding the New Year. As long as there is collective life, there will be ritual and religion, myths and collective representations of ceremonies and rites (Douglas 1978; Debarnardi 2004). Modernity may change the shape of society but there are still social relations and ritual for renewals as rituals dramatize the moral order of the celebrants.

6.6.3 Activities after the Reunion Dinner

After the dinner, some younger members would go out to various places of public amusement to enjoy themselves further, to meet their friends and to welcome the New Year while the older generation would be more than happy staying at home. At the same time, there were also last minute preparations to ensure that the house is ready and the red packets of money are prepared for distribution the next day.

For those who did not go out, they can often be found playing card games, which is a popular past time in lieu of the New Year. It is belief that it is a time for one to test their luck and for the elders; it was also traditionally a time to give in to the request of the young ones in a game of cards and to give them

some winnings. This is also the only time when gambling is permitted throughout the year. From the participant's observation, one family actually got together around the table, with grandmother, children and grandchildren playing cards with small and low stakes. Many grandchildren as young as seven years old have their first game of cards at these occasions. They were allowed to gamble with small amounts of monies through a game of black jack, while the elders or their parents sat beside them to guide them in the game. This was a time for pleasant sociability and the reinforcement of kinship ties.

Many informants regardless of gender, age or religion, were found to be playing games and cards during this occasion. Most of the time, these games involved the waging of money or gambling. For example, Joan (45, mother, F), whose family members are Christians, would play card games after the Reunion Dinner as shown in the quote below:

We gamble in the evening after eating and chit chat, after that the first thing we do is to open table (hoi toi) or gamble, mah-jong.

(Joan, 45, F)

The following informants, Darren (Male, 33) and Samantha (Female 22) would also pass the time after the Reunion Dinner by playing games. These activities also helped them to pass the time while waiting for the time to pray or to usher the New Year in the midst of merriment, which may last until the early hours in the morning. The person who wins is considered to have been successful in capturing the good fortune of the New Year.

After diner, we will play in the living room. We just want to have fun. We will sit on the floor. Some of them will be asleep early, like some at 10pm while some later. So we play and some will join in later, and this lasts until 4 in the morning.

(Darren, 33, M)

For those who did not gamble, the usual and favourite past time activity, especially after the Reunion Dinner, would just be gathering around the sitting

area or the main hall. For example, they would sit around the sofa and eat some dessert. The television would be turned on at a high volume with special programmes for the occasion. Live-telecast television programmes of the Chinese New Year celebration from other countries and cities populated by Chinese such as Beijing, Hong Kong and Taiwan were shown to provide the sound of merriment to the occasion. While the women were in the kitchen cleaning or preparing food, the men and the children were seated outside the living area watching the television or gambling. Some of these activities helped the informants to stay awake while waiting for the next prayer session while some needed these activities to keep them awake until the following day based on the belief that by doing so they will be able to accumulate additional years to the life of their parents.

Overall, the activities of participation and playing of games brought the family closer together with a common goal in the pursuit of happiness, longevity and prosperity as they gather together to usher in the New Year, even though they may embrace or follow different beliefs or religions. The emphasis was on the culture and the tradition that was to be preserved as the reinforcement of kinship ties and identity prevail. Modernity may change the shape of society but there are still social relation and rituals for renewals. Culture is not autonomous from the social relations within the modern society especially for a celebration that is steep in tradition. Within the CCT theoretical framework, the families operate as site and agent in the reproduction of the social and cultural systems at larger whereby these consumption are being questioned within the consumer action, market place and cultural meaning that will influence the socio-historic patterning over time. The following table below (Table 6.4) provides an overview of the socio-historic patterns of the Chinese Lunar Reunion Dinner among the informants over time as they consume to mediate the differences as means of identity of themselves with the event.

Table 6.4: Socio-historic patterns of the Chinese Lunar Reunion Dinner

	Traditionally	Present
Place/ Sense of Place	The Reunion Dinner is traditionally celebrated at the home of ancestors or where the eldest surviving kin reside with specific focus on the patriarchal lineage or the paternal side of the family	The Reunion Dinner is celebrated in homes and restaurants for pragmatic reasons and convenience.
People/ Participants	A gathering of family members only with emphasis on patrilineal kinship	Friends and family of friends are also invited
Time	Meal to be consumed on the eve of the Lunar New Year as an evening meal	The Reunion Dinner can be consumed at different times either for lunch or other days within the fifteen days of celebration
Activities	Food is prepared by family members for deity and ancestor worship before the Reunion Dinner and after the Reunion Dinner to usher in the New Year, group activities from gambling to playing of firecrackers	Separate food is being served for worship and for those with different religious beliefs, individual activities

Source: This study

6.7 Summary

The findings of event of the Reunion Dinner were discussed through the variation in the participants, the place, the time and the activities taking place before, during and after the meal. The symbolic place of the reunion were discussed in the dimensional physical and psychological environment attributes from the symbolic role of home of the ancestor to the negotiation of choice of home, liberty from traditional ruling, inclusivity for matriarchal system, and the sense of place which reveal the emotional bonds and behavioural commitment and the sense of belonging. The symbolic time for the Reunion Dinner has also been negotiated as a phenomena approach to the ritualistic

consumption which defines the religiosity relationship and identity of the collective identities of the Chinese consumers and for inclusivity and exclusivity of participants. The activities performed before the Reunion Dinner and after the Reunion Dinner involved the symbolic role of prayers, gathering around the living room and playing of games which signify the ordering of a collective life. Overall there is flexibility in the consumption of the Reunion Dinner as consumers continue to uphold the traditional meanings associated with the dinner and in negotiation their collective and self identity and reinforcing traditional and family values. The following chapter will continue with the interpretation of meanings through the consuming of the Reunion Dinner through the symbolic role and meanings of people, objects and artefacts during the event for a richer context of the meanings attached to the celebration of the Lunar New Year Reunion Dinner which goes beyond the time and place for the event.

Chapter 7: Interplay of Solidarity, Symbolism, Self-concept and Play as Meanings of Identity in the Consumption of the Reunion Dinner

7.1 Introduction

Although the previous consumer research has investigated consumption symbolism associated with many Western festivities (e.g., Christmas and Thanksgiving), very little is known about the social meanings of festivals within a non-Western context or even within the consumer cultural theory framework of CCT. An interpretation of the data has led this researcher to identify a number of emerging themes within the theoretical framework of Consumer Cultural Theory. Some of the themes in relation to place and time were presented in the previous chapter. This chapter aims to present the further emerging themes which are associated with the celebration of the Chinese New Year Eve's Reunion Dinner. This chapter compares and contrasts these themes in the context of the previous literature, before synthesising the overall implication of the themes.

The chapter is divided into six sections presenting the four central themes that came to light as integral components of the consumption experiences to reflect the motivation of this consumption as self representation and identity of consumers, which are: solidarity, symbolism, self-concept, and play. Section 7.2 discusses the first of the four factors, which is solidarity and it is supported by seven themes surrounding this factor. Section 7.3 presents the second factor, symbolism and its nine supporting themes within the context of time, food and objects used during the New Year Eve. Section 7.4 discusses the third factor which is the self concept dynamics and five themes supporting this factor. Meanwhile, Section 7.5 discusses the play element within the Reunion Dinner celebration. Lastly, Section 7.6 summarises this chapter.

7.2 Solidarity

An interpretation of the data suggests that the celebration of the Reunion Dinner for the Chinese Lunar New Year was a gathering where the participants appeared to cross over many physical and spiritual boundaries. To many of the participants, the dining signalled a point in time where the gathering of persons, thoughts, and their extended family members sitting down together expressed their togetherness, celebration of social solidarity, and the strengthening of their bonds in maintaining their social identity. Changes and the flexibility of time, venue, and food were taken into consideration, even though there were traditional rules that bound them to the event in order to enable the gathering to include all members of the family.

7.2.1 Chinese Reunion Dinner Gathering similar to Thanksgiving

An interpretation of the data suggests that many participants compared and contrasted their experiences with those of American Thanksgiving, and showed an understanding of what Thanksgiving meant in a Western context. However, they also reflected on the key similarities and differences between these two festivals. The celebration of the Chinese Lunar New Year was widely acknowledged and labelled as the end of the old with the approach of the Lunar New Year; however, many of the participants linked it to the end of a harvest, which was seen as cause for a celebration for the Chinese who come from a traditionally agricultural society. Although none of the informants in this study came from an agricultural background, some were still able to connect and relate to the gathering for the Reunion Dinner as being somewhat similar to the US celebration of Thanksgiving.

An example of this can be seen in the case of Joan, a single mother who lived with her daughter (45, F) in the city. She described the Reunion Dinner as the Chinese version of Thanksgiving in which her family members returned home to participate in the celebrations. Joan is a Christian and her family no longer prays to any of the gods or deities of the Chinese religion, as was previously

practised by her parents. Instead they offered a family prayer before the meal to give thanks as prescribed by Christian beliefs, similar to the acts in the American Thanksgiving dinner. This is reflected in the following quote from Joan where she compared her experiences with those associated with the Thanksgiving in America:

Reunion is important. The Chinese way of thinking that everybody coming back, like Thanksgiving, to come together, be able to come together to give thanks. You know, like the Chinese way of Thanksgiving

(Joan, 45, F)

Another informant, Aw (single, manager, 57, M) also described the Reunion Dinner as similar to the American Thanksgiving festival. However, while the emphasis of American Thanksgiving was to reflect and to link to its historical meanings, the Chinese event, according to Aw, was considered to be more important for the bonding of family ties, especially among kin as a form of solidarity social identity. This is something which is evident in the following quote:

I suppose the closest you can describe the Chinese New Year, the closest would be Thanksgiving. I think in the West, and maybe not necessarily just in the West, in Asia too we have a harvest festival, which is again a celebration, which is even greater than the New Year because it is a time of family reunion. In the West, the Thanksgiving would be a reunion of sorts. It is just that in the Chinese context, the New Year is more specifically for the bonding of the family and that's why the Reunion Dinner is such an event.

(Aw, 57, M)

Based on the informants' interpretations, the gathering of the Reunion Dinner was seen as similar to the Thanksgiving phenomena (Wallendorf and Arnould 1991) because of the gathering of family to give thanks and recollect past meanings, and yet it is seen as different because it not only reflects the

gratitude for the past but it also signify the solidarity identity which points to the re-bonding for the future, to preserve and reinforce kinship ties.

7.2.2 Togetherness in Preparation for Bonding

An interpretation of the data reveals that gathering for the Reunion Dinner was also perceived by many as a very strong bonding experience – something that has united everyone in the physical and emotional sense. For instance, while members of the family gathered together to feast, there were frequent exchanges of news and stories of themselves and about their relatives who were not present. The gathering around the table brought all of the family together physically and emotionally with their stages of the life cycle.

The ethnographic data collected noted that the preparation process, before the meal was served, was often singled out as one of the most enjoyable moments for bonding by many of the key informants, regardless of gender. For example, SLeng (single, 26, F), who was the only girl among her siblings, reflected on the Reunion Dinner and professed that the recent dinner had helped and improved her relationship with her brothers:

I appreciate it more now compared to last time, because I am older, last time it was just to eat, eat, eat, eat and eat. Now this time when we had a Reunion Dinner, the brothers and sisters really talked about, could really communicate since we are getting older and older, so the relationship is getting closer and closer [laughing as she discloses this].

(SLeng, 26, F)

The importance of the preparation process beyond the gathering was also highlighted by another informant STeng (F, 40, nurse). STeng reiterated the enjoyment she had in the preparation of the food, was even greater than the meal itself, because it provided fun and brought the family bonds closer together. This was especially the case now that none of her siblings were

living together; they had all moved into their separate homes and lived in different countries.

STeng was married and resided in Sweden, while her elder sister resided in Singapore, and another sister lived in Kuala Lumpur, while her parents were left behind in their family home in Ipoh, a small town in the northern states of Malaysia. Hence, coming home for the Reunion Dinner with her parents was important to this family and the festival was more memorable, although they had previously tried having the Reunion Dinner in Singapore and in Kuala Lumpur.

During the preparation, all of us participate. That is also to me, very important part of the Reunion Dinner. The fun of doing and preparing the reunion together, the closed knittedness between your family members all working together means more than the meal.

(STeng, 42, F)

The ethnographic data also reveals that the preparation of food as part of the preparation process was not only significant for the female family members but also for some of the male participants. For example, Darren (33, M), was actively involved in the preparation of the food for the Reunion Dinner, from the shopping and preparation of the food to the actual cooking session, even though he has a sister who also helped out in the kitchen when his mother cooked for the family on the eve of the Lunar New Year.

The most memorable time is, well, the preparation for the Chinese New Year. Like, shopping around, preparing the ingredients for the Reunion Dinner, helping out, my mother with the food for the family and usually when she is cooking, I will stand beside her and look, on how and what she is doing the cooking.

(Darren, 33, M)

The ethnographic data reveals moments of food preparation that were highlighted and appreciated by both genders. Traditionally, women are

entrusted with the preparation of food especially for festivals and important meals (Murcott 1983, Delamont 1995). Moreover, within the Chinese traditional family values that emphasis patriarchy system that emphasises the supreme authority of male, cooking is considered as the least important domain of authority for the male (Hsu 1949). An interpretation of data reveals that this form of bonding and renewing ties of affection among family members were appreciated by many participants even before consuming the meal. This was evident across genders and age groups.

7.2.3 Time Waits for All

Besides being assumed to be a time for gathering as a form of Thanksgiving and strengthening of family bonds through the preparation in food, the Chinese Lunar New Year Dinner was also a time when everyone acknowledged the presence of all by waiting and seating together before the meal was consumed. An interpretation of the ethnographic data reveals that the physical presence of all seating together was critical for the partaking of this Reunion Dinner. Some families, especially for those who were residing together or nearby, where they had regularly gathered meals, the time essence for this event was even more significant and crucial. On their usual days, although they did return home for their evening meals, many also did not get to eat together at the same time due to their work schedules and hectic life style in the city. However, for this event, it was critical that all were seated together, even if there were restrictions in space or time. Additional tables and chairs were set up for this Reunion Dinner to ensure the physical presence of all was felt. This was reflected by Madame B's remarks that the main difference of the dinner as compared to her other dinners was that they would not commence the dinner until all her family members were seated together at the same time:

Although the only difference is you see my brothers and sisters are back for dinner every night but of course they don't go back at the same time. Whoever comes, they will sit down and eat and then go

back. Whereas for Reunion Dinner, we will wait for everybody to be present and then only we will start.

(Madam Bee, 50, F)

The ethnographic data also reveals other similar situations among the majority of the informants where there was an emphasis in ensuring all were seated together before the Reunion Dinner was consumed with specific emphasis on the seating arrangement. The observation data also reveals more than one table was prepared by the families. Usually the main table would be reserved for the elders while the younger family members would be seated at another table. An interpretation of the data reveals that this concept of gathering together has taken the literal meaning of being together at the same time and seated together to conjure the meaning of a Reunion Dinner. For example, one family actually locked themselves in the house to ensure that there was no disturbance during the Reunion Dinner, as reflected in following quote:

One thing I always remember is this. My mom will lock the gate outside so that the Reunion Dinner will not be disturbed by any outsider...we have Reunion Dinner we must lock the gate. I remembered one Reunion Dinner, someone came and knocked at the door, and she said...no, no... tell them to come back later. We are having our dinner. She doesn't want any outsider to disturb. In spite of her hospitality, I have never understood why she did that...

(Joan, 45, F)

7.2.4 Time for Reconnection Rather than Reunion

The Lunar New Year celebration has often been labelled as a Reunion Dinner, based on the union of the family members. The ethnographic data suggests that the Reunion Dinner had to be different. This was especially true for those who lived together or close by because they are already in constant reunion;

for example, within the house or even for their daily gathering of dinners for special days and events such as birthdays, anniversaries.

One of the informants, Aw (57, M) believed that the Reunion Dinner was instead more of a 'reconnection' which transcends space. Aw, a manager (single, M) has many family members who had migrated to other parts of the world. He believed that this was a time for reconnection with family members who come from near and far. Therefore, he would call his relatives and he would also receive calls from his relatives abroad. Being single and the only son means that the responsibility of family matters such as the arranging of meal rests upon him based on the value system of the patriarchal system. Throughout the interview, he sometimes came across as being not too keen on the reunion, which he deemed to be focusing only on the immediate family. Instead he stressed the importance of the meeting of the extended family members, especially those from his mother's side of the family, which he had greater memories of. The quote below illustrates his views on the ideal reunion:

It was an occasion to reconnect; the word is really to reconnect. The word reunion is a bit too heavy. The days of old, when people were, the whole entire people were dispersed all over the country and came back once a year to reunite, that's why you called it a Reunion Dinner. Those days are over because people and distance is no longer an issue. People can live in London and live in Melbourne or in Singapore and they can still connect but I suppose the reconnection on New Year's Eve or New Year's days, is important not so much the word of Reunion Dinner, but a symbolic connect, reconnect, connection. After all, you unite everyday what is there to reunite. This dates way back to my mother. Now I don't have contact with father's side but my contact with my greater family is with my mother's side. In those days when there was a big family house and these women have married and moved away, but on the new year itself, not just the reunion itself but the occasion of new year, they will all come back to the family house. They will stay there, they will come back in the afternoon and stay back

for dinner, and they will play mah-jong and card games, until midnight and sometimes 1 or 2 o'clock. Now this was the history of these things. So, until last year, we still had it to some extent. We had preserved that tradition with the people, relations. When they came back, we still arranged... for about 30 or 40 of such greater clan people to come. It is good for these people because life being the way it is now, we are quite dispersed you know, and you know socially once you don't connect, the bond will become thinner and many in this clan, have mentioned this.

(Aw, 57, M)

An interpretation of the data reveals that the Reunion Dinner, which was being designated as a time for reuniting the family had transcended beyond the physicality of the family members gathering together from the preparation to the feasting of the meal. It also appeared to have moved towards the solidarity of family members and kin who were near or far away but never forgotten as it was also a time for reconnection and to rekindle kinship ties. The continuous bridging and bonding of social capital and ties are also observed by the participants as they reconnect with family and friends through social networks and online communication (Schau and Gilly 2003, Ellison et al 2007). Observation and the photographs taken also reflect the importance of reconnection of their social ties and self presentation of their identity.

7.2.5 The Inclusion of Staff, Relatives and Friends

Traditionally, the Reunion Dinner is meant for family members. However, the ethnographic data in this study reveals that there were instances when others were redefined and accepted as family members, especially employees who have been working in family-owned enterprises. This study also found evidence for the negotiation of inclusion of friends and family members, or even a friend's family members.

In his interview Cheam (retiree, 75, M) remembered when he was young in the days when his family had a shop where they would have a great feast among his family and staff. For this special day, they even hired a chef to prepare the Reunion Dinner for his family. The meal was still remembered and cherished by Cheam. He described this time as the best time of his youth (Holbrook and Schindler 2003). The following quote describes the event as inclusive for all:

If you have a shop, and workers, then you have to include them. They should be together because they are part of the family. Without them the business will not be able to go on. So we celebrate together. Whatever things we have for that year, we have worked hard together for it. Last time we had a chef to do the cooking for about twenty people, including the staff, which was at our shop.

(Cheam, 75, M)

The ethnographic data also reveals that, as well as members of staff, any friends of families and relatives who were unable to attend their own Reunion Dinner were also invited. This practice and belief was agreed by the informants across generations. The following quotes came from Aw who lived with his mother, uncle, and his two sisters (single, 57, M). This family had invited his distant relatives whose family members or siblings had migrated or relocated abroad due to work commitments.

If there are friends and family who are left over as well, left over means they are not involved in other reunion family dinners, then we get them to join us as well, simply because they are close enough to join us for dinner and they do it on other occasion as well, so why not on New Year's eve?

(Aw, 57, M)

There were cases when friends and their family were also invited for the Reunion Dinner. For example, Joan's (married, 45, F) younger brother had invited his friend and his family to their Reunion Dinner. Meanwhile, KaMei's

(single, 25, F) Reunion Dinner included her father's friend and his family members. Hence, inclusion went beyond the immediate family and was extended to friends and their family. This means that the family Reunion Dinner for the Lunar New Year has gone beyond the family boundaries of participation.

My younger brother took his friend and his father, whom his wife is travelling to Bandung for holidays, to join us.

(Joan, 45, F)

My father's friend also came because he is working in our area and he is quite old and he can't travel back to his hometown in Ipoh. Somehow, his family members will come to our place to celebrate with him.

(KaMei, 25, F)

Interpretation of the data shows that the tradition Reunion Dinner of the Lunar New Year as a family event was originally performed to welcome the New Year, to renew ties, and strengthen family bonds has now been extended beyond family boundaries. This finding is in accordance with the self extension literature which argues that self extension occurs through control and mastery of objects (Belk 1988). However, in the case of participants, the extension appeared to be in the form of contamination or violation of the rules through proximity and habituation of the event, as participants of the Reunion Dinner extended from family members to staff, friends, and the families of friends as an extension of inclusion found similar in the Thanksgiving celebration (Wallendorf and Arnould 1991). This finding is also in accordance with traditional Chinese culture which practices collectivism and emphasises the interdependence of all.

7.2.6 The Inclusion and Role of Ancestors and Spirits

Whereas the Western celebrations of Thanksgiving and Christmas include family members, our data show that the Reunion Dinner of the Chinese New Year Eve went beyond family members, staff and friends: it also involved consideration and thinking about ancestors, gods, deities and spirits (e.g. Lindridge 2005). The ethnographic data reveals that the families prayed to gods, ancestors and spirit to thank them and to invite them to the celebration. The patrons and saints from the various Chinese religions based on their historical origins and beliefs were worshipped in the New Year celebrations with care and due consideration, which included the suitability and choice of food (see Comber 1954; Chang 1977). According to the older generation, especially from the grandmother of one of the participants, they would only offer vegetarian items (e.g. Chang 1977) to the Gods and patrons while meat dishes were offered to the ancestors. The participants would then use the offerings of vegetarian items to cook the traditional vegetarian dish on the first day of the Lunar New Year. This was apparently done due to the fact that most participants were Buddhists who normally practice vegetarian rites on the first and fifteen day of every month. The finding, therefore, signifies the important role played by religion and religious values, as argued by previous research (e.g. Tan 2006; Lindridge 2005).

An interpretation of the data shows that beside the different types of food to be offered, there were also some participants who would use the same food for both the ancestors and gods, but this had to be done according to the order which was prescribed by tradition as highlighted in the previous literature too (e.g. Wolf 1978). For example, SK, a teacher, explained the order of the prayers that were performed in her house. She would first pray to the God of Heaven at the front of the house. This prayer was done in front of the house because the door signified the point of threshold for the beginning, the outset for the coming New Year. She would then proceed inside, to the house's altar where her family would pray to the deities and to the ancestor tablet which were placed beside the deities:

You pray to the God of Heaven first, then after that you bring in the food in and put in the altar, and pray to the Goddess of Mercy, and after the Goddess of Mercy, then you pray to the ancestor

(SK, 45, F)

The ethnographic data also reveals another informant who prayed to the deities that had significant meanings and of importance to her family members. Being the wife of a successful businessman and mother, she performed those prayers diligently in full tradition. For example, in her quote below, Datin (mother and housewife) revealed the order of prayers she performed in her home from the deities, the ancestors of her husband, to the other minor Gods:

We will pray to [many Gods]. The first one will be 'Kun Yam', the lady Goddess because my children are the godchildren of the Goddess. And then we have the 'Kuan Tai' which is God of the reverie of, if I am not wrong, he is actually a master mind of those days, like a general. So he has got a brain. My husband is in business, so [Kuan Tai] is the God that we are praying to. Usually on the alter table, other than our ancestors, we have two separate tables. The ancestors have to be lower than Gods. The third God that I pray to is what we call the 'Chai Kong', which is the beggar God but he is supposed to be the God to protect the children and the family, keep us safe and healthy. After that, we have the 'Tei Chi', which is below the alter table, who is the God that takes care of the house.

(Datin, 45, F)

A review of the literature suggests that the worship of the Guandi, or 'Kuan Tai', the the Chinese God of War has been followed some Asian communities (Duara 1988). For instance, Durra (1988) argues that the Guandi is also perceived by some Asians as the god of wealth, the god of literature, the protector god of temples, the patron god of actors, secret societies and merchants (Duara 1988). The role and inclusion of the myth through its half-hidden meanings by rediscovering and renegotiating and drawing upon its

power from its resonance (or dissonance) in the culture was also evident (e.g. Malinoski 1964) within the consumption of the Reunion Dinner and the celebration of the Lunar New Year.

Interpretation of the data reveals that the foods offered to the ancestors and the spirits acted as strong symbolic link between the worshippers and their beliefs, which is in line with symbolic interactionism theory. Usually the traditional food items were served on the altar. One key informant was very excited when she mentioned the offerings of a cup of black coffee to her deceased father. Instead of the traditional tea or rice wine, she highlighted the importance of her ancestor's favourite food which she insisted is a cup of black coffee that she can identify as praying to her deceased father.

Oh, I have someone else to pray to. My dad! We will pray to the Heaven God. Since we don't have an altar at home, we usually put a table outside and then pray. And then after that we will bring in the stuff and pray to my dad.

(Sharon, 41, F)

The ethnographic data collected during the participation observation reveals that not only the ancestors were being worshiped, but their presence was also incorporated into the lived experience of the celebration of the Reunion Dinner. The existence of the ancestors was not only acknowledged through the prayers and offerings of food, their presence was also determined through the physical act of casting a pair of small crescent shaped wooden blocks which are flat on one side and rounded on the other (e.g. Saso 1964). These two wooden crescent blocks resembled two halves of an oversized coffee bean. During the participant observation and data collection, the patriarch of the family being observed (Lim) used these crescent shaped wooden blocks to determine if the ancestors were present (Appendix B). The informant's (Amy, F, 39) father cast these two wooden crescent blocks, which resembled two halves of an oversized coffee bean, when the offerings of food were served at the altar. He would cast it in front of the ancestor shrine or tablet when the

food and prayers items had been placed to determine the presence, or arrival, of the ancestors.

A positive sign of their presence was confirmed when the wooden crescent blocks had different sides facing upwards. The actions reflected are in compliance with the Chinese principles of the yin/yang, and positive and negative chi and the paired opposites advocated by popular cultural anthropologist such as Douglas (1978) and Levis-Strauss (1978). However, if both the sides of the tossed wooden crescent blocks were the same then this meant that the spirit was not present and the food must be left there as it was. Until the casting of the crescent wooden blocks produced different sides facing up, only then would the prayers and offerings of the food be deemed successful because those who were being prayed to had participated and were made available for the ceremony.

During the participant observation it was noted that the moon shaped pieces of woods had different sides facing upward when they were cast on the floor for the first time itself, denoting the ancestors' presence at the altar. This appeared to reflect a sign of luck and happiness for the participants as the presence of ancestors was confirmed the first instance. After leaving the food at the table for a short period of time, around half an hour, the wooden crescent blocks were tossed again to determine whether the ancestors had eaten their fill. Again, when both the wooden crescent blocks had different side facing up, it meant that the prayer had been successful and that it would be appropriate for the food to be removed from the altar and taken to the dining table for the Reunion Dinner. The ritual signified the importance of religious thought and traditions in influencing consumer actions (Lindridge 2005).

In line with prior consumer behaviour research, this research found that the notion that consumption involved the symbolic extension of self (e.g. Belk 1988), which was seen through the presence and role of ancestors in the celebration of the Lunar New Year through the consumption of the Reunion Dinner, while at the same time incorporating the influence of the religiosity

factor within the culture as an individual strive to maintain the individual sense of identity (e.g. Lindridge 2005; Wattanasuwan 2005). Moreover, the ancestor worship acts that were observed in this research appeared to present symbolic boundaries in which the demarcation of life and death, or living and non-living, was celebrated personally through the actions of the consumers likened to Greimasian analysis (see, for instance, Greimas 1990, Mick 1991).

7.2.7 Appropriation of Food for Inclusive/Exclusive Beliefs

Besides preparing the food for ancestor worship and for offering to the Gods at the altars, the ethnographic data also suggests that food was appropriated accordingly to enable all the family members to gather together for the celebration of the Reunion Dinner to symbolise unity and solidarity. The multicultural context of Malaysia meant that there were instances where not all of the family members belonged to the same religious faith, which presented some challenges when it came to food consumption within the family context. An interpretation of data reveals the extent to which family members went through the negotiation and adjustment processes to accommodate different dietary needs of family members arising due to differences in faiths. For instance, one informant, Terry, whose brother-in-law was a Muslim by birth, explained how the family would prepare kosher or 'halal' food for his brother-in-law, his sister (i.e. his brother-in-law's wife), and their children by using separate utensils to cook and withholding pork in the dishes. They would even have a separate table set for them, but their dishes would be similar in cooking style except for the exclusion of pork. This enabled all of the family to sit down together and celebrate the event for family solidarity. For instance, consider the following quote from Terry:

My brother in-law is a Muslim. Therefore... they use a separate wok to cook for him. No pork, and nothing and everything that they cook for him is halal. So my sister will sit on a separate table, which is still together [with the family], and we will have the Reunion Dinner together but they will have the Muslim food.

(Terry, 44, F)

An interpretation of the data collected suggest that for those who were Christian, this re-appropriation of food was less complicated and it was easily accommodated by members of the family. The one major issue is that Christians do not eat food which has been offered to gods or deities. From the ethnographic data it was noted that food was set aside for them, which was not difficult because the food was always prepared in abundance. One of the informants, Cheong (70, M), and his brothers and their families are Christians. His mother would set aside food for them when they came for dinner later on in the day after she had performed the yearly prayers in the afternoon. The prayers done were also no longer as elaborate as in the past, as her children and grandchildren would not eat any of the food that has been prayed to.

Because these guys are Taoists they will send the food to the altars first, which creates a lot of problems for my Christian sister-in-laws and some of my brothers also because they are Christians. The food is presented before the altar of the various ancestors and so on and so forth. Then the food is brought out for dinner, because some of my siblings are also actually Christians, so now they only do a small part of it and the rest is not [followed].

(Cheong, 70, M)

Food is something that the Chinese have long been known to be passionate about. For example, the Chinese scholar Lin Yutang once said that, “if there is anything that the Chinese are serious about, it is neither religion nor learning, but food” (Chen 1990, p. 110). In this instance, with the ever-changing life style, beliefs and needs, and the Chinese intensity in flexibility, the re-appropriation of food is accepted as accommodating the need to gather together and expressing the solidarity among kin, especially within a multicultural society such as Malaysia. While, the extension of inclusion in the Thanksgiving celebration incorporates the activities, the food has been used

as a means for the extension of inclusion among the Chinese consumers during the Reunion Dinner.

7.3 Symbolism

Many products possess symbolic features. The notion that the consumption of goods may depend more on their social meanings rather than their functional utility has been found in many consumer research studies (e.g. Levy 1959, 1982; Solomon 1983; Belk 1985; Wallendorf and Arnould 1988). Consumption of a product is used to construct the social reality of what consumers are going through in their life and during the transitions that they undergo (e.g. Belk 1998). These goods provide symbolic meaning and codes which reflect the meanings that they wish to adopt consciously as to identify themselves within the context of consumption of the Reunion Dinner as consumption construct goods, besides self, culture and identity. The goods will then be able to translate their meanings through the consumption rituals because the meanings are transferred within the process of culture in the context of their social reality (e.g. Douglas 1987). In the context of celebrations, the importance of the artefact of the Christmas tree, its tinsels, trimmings and gift giving in the celebration of Christmas (Otnes et al. 2009) or the Turkey with its stuffing and cranberry sauce for the Thanksgiving dinner (Wallendorf and Arnould 1991) or the costumes and candies in the celebration of Halloween (Levinson et al. 1992) are some examples of how consumption is used as a mean to appease the social and psychological construction of self during the occasion through the symbolic interactions of the objects in which symbolism is manifested within.

7.3.1 Symbolism of Time

The ethnographic data reveals that The Chinese New Year Reunion Dinner was an occasion which celebrates the cross over to the Lunar New Year to mark the classification of time. Similar with other rites of passage through life, this event had been regularised and marked within the social framework using

the natural cycle of the movements of the earth and moon in order to herald the arrival of spring after a severe winter, which is especially important among agricultural communities. This event is likened to the crossing over of time and a time to celebrate the end of the year.

Based on the Gregorian calendar, the New Year celebration of the West has assumed the universal role in this ritual of the passage of time through the countdown of the end of one year and the start of another in cities, towns, and homes. Television programmes of the Gregorian New Year event and the countdown celebration are shown from capital cities across countries and continents showing various nations and cultures join and reunite for this annual rite. The elements of van Gennep's (1960) scheme, such as the ending of the old year, can be seen in Britain with the singing of Auld Lang Syne, together with a liminal period passed by waiting and listening to the chiming of Big Ben before toasting the arrival of the New Year. This is then accompanied by kisses, hugs, and handshakes signalling a communal incorporation into the New Year. This Western celebration is reflected in cities throughout the world with the countdown of the clock, gatherings and parties, and in the recent trend for grand displays of fireworks in the major cities of the world (e.g. Sydney, Moscow, Paris, London, and New York). The New Year is also celebrated by minimal prayers and acts of worship among the religious communities in churches, cathedrals, synagogues, mosques, and homes. The ethnographic data of this eastern celebration of the Lunar New Year also revealed similar activities and unique to the Chinese consumers respectively especially in cities and countries which are highly populated by ethnic Chinese such as China, Taiwan and Hong Kong from the counting down, fireworks display to the worshipping in temples.

7.3.1.1 Time as Crossing Over

An interpretation of the ethnographic data collected also reveals a similar scheme of countdown in the ushering of the Lunar New Year among the Chinese consumers. However, there was much more emphasis and focus placed within the private space (such as the home) instead of the gathering in

the public place such as city. Besides the place, the countdown also placed more emphasis on the company of family members rather than strangers. Other activities such as prayers and a Reunion Dinner were also part of the ritual to be performed before one can usher in the Chinese New Year, similar in the waiting for the countdown similar to the West.

Mary, a mother of two (45, Manager), has defined this Reunion Dinner as part of the annual eve celebration for her to meet people and relatives. After having eaten the Reunion Dinner at the restaurant, she proceeded to her brother-in-law's house to wait for the time to cross over to the New Year. They would continue in the merriment of drinking and eating while waiting for her sister-in-law to get ready the food and items for prayers. The prayer was meant to await and to usher in the God of Prosperity for the coming New Year. The time of the prayer signified the arrival of the New Year rather than the physical action of countdown of the event. In addition, the prescribed precise and particular time to pray to usher in the New Year varies from year to year is based on the lunar calendar that varies yearly. Therefore, for Mary (45,F), there was a specific chosen time to gather together as a family to cross over to the New Year, which is based on the Chinese calendar for the receiving of the God of Prosperity.

Eve means that all the family will get together for a Reunion Dinner. Typically, a Reunion Dinner will be those people who stay away from the principal family, like the mother and father and those who work out of town or out of the country who will try to make it back. And it is a get together for people who have not seen their relatives for a year or so. So it is about the only time when all, the whole family gather together to meet up and that is why they called it a Reunion Dinner. Ours is held in a restaurant. After dinner we will go to my brother-in law's house where we wait to cross over to the first day of the New Year, because after we eat we still go back to my sister in-law's house to celebrate. She will wait, she will pray and wait for the God's of Prosperity or 'chip choy sun' as they call it (receive God of Prosperity) and we are still there.

(Mary, 45, F)

An interpretation of the ethnographic data also reveals the main doors at the houses were decorated with red ribbons while lanterns were used to adorn the doors to signify the enduring border of time and space because the door is used to cross the domestic threshold. Just as prayers were offered outside the house on the eve after the Reunion Dinner to welcome the God of Prosperity, the crossing over of time and space are incorporated simultaneously here at this crossing point between domestic space and the external world (see Douglas 1978).

7.3.1.2 Time as the End of Work

Just as one moves ahead to welcome in the New Year, this occasion was also a time to signify the ending of work for the year. In Malaysia two days of public holidays have been set aside for this celebration. The ethnographic data suggests that there were many who would take additional days off to celebrate, either before the actual day or after, making it a major family event that had become a popular holiday for all of Malaysia's ethnic groups. Many small and medium sized Chinese firms would take additional holidays and only commence work on the following fourth day of the festival (e.g. Lo and Comber 1958). An interpretation of the ethnographic data reveals that there was a strong belief among the Chinese that work should commence on the chosen right day to ensure a better year ahead. The right day is determined by the astronomy, and the fengsui or geomancy found within the Chinese calendar, which is found in the yearly Chinese almanac book, which is called Tong Shu. However, there were many who would also chose to start work on the eighth day of the festival because of the belief of the number of eight that has traditionally been associated in Chinese culture with prosperity and luck; for example, the Beijing Olympics of 2008 that was deliberately opened at eight pm, on the eight day, of the eight month, in the year two thousand and eight.

An interpretation of the ethnographic suggest that the passage of time denoting the separation of the old and the end of work was experienced in this

research by some of the participants. The New Year was a time that many look forward to eagerly, where they put down all of the hard work of the year and to return to celebrate with their family. This was echoed by Ken, a lecturer (single, male, 33), who felt strongly about this 'end of work' feeling. In the interview he heaved with great satisfaction and relief in knowing that he had completed the work for the year. The following quote reveals his feelings for the end of work for the year as he leaved for home to celebrate his Reunion Dinner:

We all will rush back for it, because it is the year that you have holiday because people 'sow kong' [end of work for the year], in Cantonese 'sow kong ko nin' [finish work and celebrate new year], and you will feel the new year mood. Something like you have accomplished. For the past year you have been working and now you can rest and go home and spend time with your family. But especially for those of us who are away, not sure for those from KL, I don't know about you all but I have the sow kong feeling. I can go home for New Year, like you finish the work for the year and then you go home to celebrate CNY, I really have that feeling.

(Ken, 33, M)

This same feeling was also shared by Cheam, a retired father (75, Male) who emphasised the significant role of the end of a year's hard work, when the family came together to share all of the things that they had earned among themselves, as reflected in the partaking of the meal.

Well, it is a get together, you know, once in a year we have our dinner together, and just to usher in the New Year the next day. But the most important, the significant part of it, is because, you see after a year's of hard work that we come together, and we have dinner and then we can share all the things among ourselves, family members especially.

(Cheam, 75, M)

An interpretation of the ethnographic data that was collected reveals that the significance and symbolism of time within the rites of passage discussed above during the Reunion Dinner (from looking forward to the beginning to signalling the end of the old year) concur with the rites of passages found within many Western celebrations (from the New Year to other rituals within Western culture) (e.g. van Gennep 1960; Rook 1985; Bonsu and Belk 2003 for a discussion). The data also revealed similar view across all ages and genders.

7.3.2 Casting Out of the Old and Welcoming In the New

An interpretation of ethnographic data collected in this study reveals that the Lunar New Year celebration was a time to recognise the approaching of the New Year and to prepare for the crossing over before the meal was served. It was also a time to cast out the old and to welcome in the new. It was a time for welcoming and acquiring new possessions, from household items, clothing and to luxury items such as cars or houses. For many, the New Year at a minimum meant having new clothes to wear, especially for the younger generation.

An interpretation of ethnographic data reveals the importance of new clothes to wear, especially for the younger generation to the colour of the clothes (Turner 1962). The number of new sets of clothes which are bought for this celebration could be as few as only one set, to a few sets which are used right to the third day where visitation was carried as part of the Lunar New Year celebrations. The ethnographic data also reveals that new clothes would also mean the inclusion of under-garments. The clothes should also be in bright colours while black was still considered a taboo especially for the first day. The following quotes describe the acknowledgement across gender:

One thing has never change is that on the first day we must not wear dark colours or black. My father will never allow us to wear black. So on the first day we all wear red. Bright colours like red, yellow, pink...

(HYPing, 24, F)

Even under wear also must be new...

(YBee, 26, F)

At least I must have one new set of clothes.

(Jason, 25, M)

For some, it would also entail the acquisition of other items, from durable items to status products (such as car or house, or new gadgets, electrical appliances or household items). During the participant observation and data collected over the four years, it was noted that Amy (39, F) had purchased a few big ticket items from furniture to electrical appliances for her family. A few days prior to the Reunion Dinner, she bought a new set of dining chairs and a new television for her family. In the following year, she bought a new freezer and a new mattress for her mother. The ethnographic data also reveals that not only new clothes and new household items were purchased but also household items specifically related to cleaning were also purchased from brooms, mops and pails. Datin, mother of two teenagers (45, housewife, F), had decorated her house with all the new paraphernalia related to the New Year decorations, the inside of her house to the outside of her house. The ethnographic data collected showed her dining room and family room well decorated with paraphernalia of the Lunar New Year to the bathrooms, and into her garage and her garden. She has also purchased new household items for cleaning as well as personal and decorative items to welcome in the New Year before the celebration of the Reunion Dinner.

What I have to do is every time before New Year, I will buy new sets of brooms, mops and everything, and dishes too. I always have a new set; these sets are used for the festive season. Like this year, I completely bought all new sets, all yellow in colour.

(Datin, 45, F)

Another informant also talked about the purchasing of new utensils for the Reunion Dinner. According to HYPing (24, Executive), she had not only used new utensils but she would also use different utensils from the normal utensils that she used daily. For example, while she uses a fork and spoon for her daily meals but for this event she would make an effort to consume her meal with the traditional chopsticks. For the Reunion Dinner, she used a pair of new chopsticks instead of a fork and spoon.

Because for our normal dinner we use plate and spoons, so for the CNY all will use bowl and chopsticks Yes, it must be a new one. My mom will buy new chopsticks every year. Maybe not new bowls but the chopsticks must be new. The old ones can be thrown away

(HYPing, 24, F)

In addition to the new items found among the informants, some heirloom objects that have been used in the past were also deemed significant during this occasion. For example, SWei (25, single, F) discussed the aspect of newness which are deemed important for the celebration of the New Year (such as clothes and other household items), except for the chopsticks that were used which were not brand new. Instead of using new utensils, SWei's family used a special set of chopsticks that were an heirloom that had been passed down from her grandparents. These chopsticks were kept aside and only be used for this occasion. These chopsticks would be passed down to her brother who would be their keeper for the next generation. While newness symbolises the coming of a new year as in the rites of passage, the continuity of the family bond through objects of nostalgic bonding (see also Holbrook and Schinler 2004) are experienced as the possession used are also an extended self formulation of consumers (e.g. Belk 1988).

My grandparents have one set of chopsticks inherited from one generation to another, and we use those for the Reunion Dinner.

(SWei, 24, F)

This symbolic consumption by individuals of either old or new objects is used as a prop to help them cope as they pass through this liminal stage as part of their extended self (Belk 1988). Through external objects and personal possession, the extended self, also includes persons, place and group possessions (e.g. Belk 1988) which are being played as we learn, define and remind ourselves of whom we are by our possessions as in the usage of the new pair of chopsticks to the old pair inherited from the previous generation in this case.

7.3.3 Food Symbolism in the Negotiation of Abundance

In many festivals, food is served in abundance for feasting and merriment. The findings in this study showed that the celebration of the Reunion Dinner on the Chinese New Year Eve shared similar themes of abundance as celebrations such as Thanksgiving Day (Wallendorf and Arnould 1991). However, in this study, an interpretation of the ethnographic data reveals that the symbolism of food from the literal meaning of the names, the quantity and quality of food served, and the storage of cooked and uncooked food were used to negotiate abundance. In the American celebration of Thanksgiving, the negotiation of abundance is found only in the quantity or amount served on the table and of simple food (Wallendorf and Arnould 1991), whereas the Chinese New Year Reunion Dinner celebration focused on the quality from the exotic, special, and expensive food to signify that only the highest quality of food that were being served. This would also include the act of storage of the leftovers from the meal beside the actual storage of uncooked food. The negotiation of abundance in the Chinese New Year was also embodied in the objects consumed on that day, either physically eaten or as offerings at the altar of worship.

7.3.3.1 **Abundance: From the Quantity and Quality of Food to the Leftovers**

While the quantity of the food is the main embodiment of abundance for the celebration of Thanksgiving, the elaboration of food and the highest quality of food were highly emphasised and revered in the Chinese New Year Reunion Dinner celebration. The ethnographic data reveals that the foods served on the Reunion Dinner were expensive, exotic and conspicuous; for example, they could include: shark fins, sea cucumber, and abalone unlike the quantity and simplicity focus of the Thanksgiving Dinner. Due to the scarcity of this seafood historically in China, the presence of these seafood items would denote a meal that was out of the ordinary, which is deemed luxurious and special.

An interpretation of ethnographic data reveals food that were prepared and cooked in large quantities, not only for feasting but to signify abundance and to ensure that there were sufficient to be kept aside as leftovers for the following days. According to Joan (single mother, 45, F), food was cooked in abundance and there could be as many as eight to nine types of dishes. On top of the spread of food on the table, her mother would still personally go around the dining table and scooped additional rice into all the bowls of those seated around the table without asking for their approval or consent, a symbolic gesture that ensured they would have plenty to eat in the future even though they were already physically full at present.

You must always have eight to nine dishes, and so from there I will play around with it and I will dish out eight to nine dishes. As usual, mom wants to cook the rice so that there will be a lot leftover, but I make the decision to cook not a lot but there are still be a lot of leftovers. Another thing is during the Reunion Dinner, she will replenish everybody with extra rice, whether you want it or not, with an additional scoop of rice.

(Joan, 45, F)

These sentiments and beliefs were also shared by another informant, SK (teacher, 45, F), who was aware of this practice. The following quote supports this claim:

There are some families who when you eat that bowl of rice, and when you finish you must add a little bit more, it means you will have [plenty of] food throughout the year.

(SK, 45, F)

An interpretation of the data also reveals that the number of dishes served would also denote the varieties of food available, which again reinforced the notion of abundance. This was reified by the actions and choices which were also embedded in meanings. For example, meat has traditionally been a symbol of abundance among agrarian societies (see Chang 1977). This is evident in the example shown in, SLeng, a marketing executive (single, 26, F) who emphasised the importance of a variety of meat for the Reunion Dinner:

My parents will ensure there are three types of meat. There must be at least three types of living things. Like we choose the prawns, meaning laughter, roast duck, roast pig and steam chicken.

(SLeng, 26, F)

This similarity and the importance of having surplus was also shown in Terry's (single, 44, F) household where the food was cooked in excess, not only for feasting but also with the intention and purpose for storing. For example, Terry's quote below illustrates her family's intention in ensuring abundance of food in the future by keeping some leftovers of the feast:

There will be plenty, plenty of food during the meal. Usually we cannot eat it all, usually we don't finish it because if we don't finish it means that there will be left over and ample food in the next year

(Terry, 44, F)

Besides having access food, the dishes served also must be lavish and exotic as a sign that this was a special meal and as a sign of one's prosperity. For example, Eric (engineer, married, 41), Nicole's husband, illustrates this point:

And family members will also tend to prepare a bit expensive dishes like abalone, sea cucumber. Although these are expensive things, they would like to enjoy this during the dinner to show that everyone is doing well, and are prosperous.

(Eric, 41, M)

The ethnographic data however, also reveals a reduction of quantity or minimisation of food for pragmatic reasons due to the immediate needs of the participants. SK, a teacher (single, 45, F) actually tried to minimize the amount of food prepared for the Reunion Dinner. According to her, although the dishes cooked were similar, they had minimised the portion sizes accordingly. Furthermore, in contrast to the other families, the need to ensure leftovers was not practiced by her family. This could be due to pragmatic, health and for practicality reasons since her family members would leave on the following day to their respective homes after the Reunion Dinner. Therefore to practice the beliefs in having access food to signify a surplus of food for the future would have become a burden to those who were left behind after the Reunion Dinner.

This year we celebrated our Chinese New Year in Ipoh, with my mom doing all the cooking as usual but we minimise the portion of food as everyone is getting old and can't eat much. So, the Reunion Dinner spread is not so lavish this year. The number of dishes? Hmm... less this year, yes we have less number of dishes and the portion is also less because we can't eat much. We do not want so much of leftover food, so small portions, finish it up and that's it but all the usual food that my mother cooks are there, like the chicken, prawn balls, soup, which is a must, vegetables, roast pork. Every year it is more or less the same I suppose. Anyway on the second day of the Chinese New

Year we have to make trip back to Kuala Lumpur already, so we do not want so much of leftover food. So small portions finish it up and that's it.

(SK, 45, F)

In general there is a subconscious and psychological need to ensure there is an excess of food available on any grand occasion for feasting and as to signify abundance and generosity. For the Chinese consumers, food is not only meant for feasting but also to be set aside as leftovers to signify abundance in ensuring there is plentiful for the coming year and in future. However, there were some who had adjusted the meal accordingly, largely due to pragmatic reasons, health consciousness and to avoid wastage, since fresh food and ingredients were preferred.

7.3.3.2 Abundance through the Storage of Uncooked Food

An interpretation of the ethnographic data in this study reveals that the storage food was an important rite among the Chinese consumers. Unlike the usual celebration of festivals and feasting where food was shown and displayed lavishly, the storage of food was an important and common rite as it signified abundance and assurance of the availability of food in the future among the Chinese consumers. The storage of food for this occasion played an important and active role. The ethnographic data collected noted a strong emphasis was given not only for the amount stored but also for the varieties of choices that were stored. The data collected and taken by the informants themselves through auto-driving and in the participant observation, showed the rice container that was filled with grains right to the rim and the refrigerators which were filled with all types of foods.

Esther, a travel agent by profession (single, 42, F), would make an effort to stock up her refrigerator in her home especially for this occasion. She purchased all types of meat, and even parts of the animals. For example, fish and chicken bought were kept intact as a complete whole, meaning they were not cut or separated, including the offal of the chicken and the eggs in the

fish's stomach. Seafood, such as prawns and fish, were kept as they are, with the entire heads and tails intact, as a sign of completeness and abundance as these ingredients are cooked in its wholesome or unbroken form also denote luck and wishes that were not cut or divided. The following quote describes the detailed actions taken by the informant:

Before the Chinese New Year, before 11 o'clock at night, before the eve, I have to make sure that my fridge has everything. I must have the whole fish in there, with the fins all still intact, not cut. I must have pork; every part of the pig has to be in there, except for the organs. I must also have the whole chicken, with the head still intact, with feet still there. Even when they have cleaned up the chicken, the stomach and liver and all those stuff inside, I will put them back in. Place it nicely and put them in the fridge. I must have sea cucumber, I must have prawns, with the head still intact with the feelers, and you don't take them off. The whole thing. So in my fridge, I must have everything even the vegetables, like the Chinese lettuce (sang choy). Everything in the fridge has a meaning such as abundance, prosperity.

(Esther, 42, F)

The data collected also noted that the storing of food could also be done for pragmatic reasons; for example, some shops were closed throughout the period of celebration. Datin, a mother of two (married, 45, F), also believed in the storage of food but said that the reason went beyond merely storing food for the present use, she added that it also symbolised that one would always have extra to ensure that the year ahead would be better since one was provided with abundance at the present time, as shown in the surplus of storage at hand. The following quote describes her beliefs in storing more food than is needed.

You actually have to store a lot like even chicken, you have to store a few chickens. And then I will normally store more than what we eat for the first three days because for Chinese belief, you always have to

'chack nin' meaning you will always have to have extra in your fridge or whatever so that you will always have a better year ahead of you.

(Datin, 45, F)

Regardless of whether if the storage of the food is done for pragmatic reasons, the efforts and the meanings attached into ensuring that food is available in the house is critical. The emotional feelings attached as one makes the considerable effort of ensuring that even the offal of the animal is being cherished and kept further proves the importance of keeping food and its varieties in the Chinese New Year festival. Even in these days where supermarkets and hypermarkets are constantly open (twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week), the availability of food and the notion of being practical and wanting only fresh food may not force one to store the food but yet it is prevalent and practiced here diligently. The disposition of food is likened to having, doing and being (e.g. Belk 1988) as it links to the aspects of continuity valued through security and at the same time provide a psychological explanation as the psychic energy has directed the efforts, time and attention towards the objects (e.g. Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981). Observation data further provided evidence to support this practice of food abundance and storage (see Appendix B)

7.3.4 Symbolism of Food Types: Seafood, Chicken, and Vegetable

Beside the physical and economical aspects, food consumption is conditioned by meanings which are communicated through symbols (Murcott 1983). Food is also an appropriate mediator in exploring the most abstract significance of a social system and its cultural values (e.g. Leach 1976), because what and when we eat establishes a literal sense and a direct identity between our food and ourselves. For example, in the American Thanksgiving festival the food may be closely linked to deeper historical roots (Wallendorf and Arnould 1991). In contrast, the food for Christmas reifies childhood delights (Caplow et al 1982). In this study, an interpretation of the ethnographic data collected

reveals that the food served during the Chinese New Year Reunion Dinner was a material manifestation in which eating the particular food did not only serve as a fulfilling experience but also as a liberating experience in making a declaration and a connection to the world that one had achieved a higher status of prosperity. These symbols were found in objects and food items such as seafood, chicken and certain vegetables, which will be discussed in detail in the sub-sections which follow.

7.3.4.1 The Symbolism of Seafood Consumption

Historically in China, the foods that are expensive are those foods that are scarce (e.g. Chang 1997); such as, the shark fins, sea cucumber, and abalone that are served during the New Year meal to proclaim this as a feast of abundance and a sign of prosperity of the host. According to a book written by Xie Zhaoshi in 1602 (during the late Ming period), sea cucumber (or trepang) is revered as invigorating the body mass, similar to ginseng (e.g. Chang 1977). Sea cucumber is also called 'hai she' in Chinese meaning sea ginseng. Historically, sea cucumber has been harvested in Hokkaido, Japan by the native Ainu, but today, due to its demand, it is also cultured for export to China. Locally it is also found in the east Malaysian sea of Sabah, although some are still being imported from China (e.g. Tan 2004). Sea cucumbers are also known as 'hoy sam' in Cantonese, which denotes a literary meaning as in 'the opening of new horizons in one's life' that is greeted with great joy and happiness.

An interpretation of the ethnographic data reveals that the meanings behind this seafood were also shared by the Chinese consumers during the Reunion Dinner. The consuming of the sea cucumber is viewed as being accompanied with the wish for new sources of income, happiness and prosperity according to SK (45, F, teacher). Another type of expensive seafood consumed for the New Year festival was abalone, or known as 'pau yee' in Chinese, which translation literally meant guarantee surplus which indirectly meant and signify good fortune.

All the dishes have significance. For example, we have abalone, abalone in Chinese we call pau yee, sea cucumber or hoi sam means happy, happiness.

(SK, 45, F)

In this study, the ethnographic data collected reveals that exotic items such as the sea cucumbers and oyster are commonly eaten during the Reunion Dinner. Many families did not mind purchasing these imported items to ensure that they were on their tables because of these meanings and associations. Both sea cucumber and abalone were usually served either in a soup or cooked with vegetables. These same meanings and sentiments of abundance, joy and happiness were shared by the informants across gender and age.

An interpretation of the ethnographic data collected in this study reveals that within the Malaysian Chinese home, the minimal seafood which was served during the New Year meal were prawns and fish. Many families would also include the more expensive ingredients such as abalone and the exotic shark fin and sea cucumber. Prawns are called 'ha' in Cantonese, which literary means laughing as in 'ha ha', signifying happiness as in laughter. Meanwhile, fish in Cantonese are known as 'yu', which means having good luck or good fortune. The word for fish 'yu' also phonetically sounds like the words for both wishes and abundance.

The ethnographic data collected reveals that the Chinese consumers believed that the fish when it is served should not be eaten completely. They did this because the Chinese phrase 'may there be a surplus every year' literally means 'there is fish every day'; hence, eating the whole fish without leaving a surplus during the New Year meal would attract bad luck or reduce their luck and fortune. Another popular seafood served was the oyster or in Cantonese called 'hou see', which literally means good things and fortunate occasions. The oyster welcomes good tidings in whatever we seek and pray for, and eating it ensures that only good things will come one's way.

From the ethnographic data, these meanings associated with food were found to be common and known across genders and all age groups amongst the informants. From the oldest generation who are in their 70s to the youngest generation in their 20s, they were all aware of the meanings and the significance of food (from fish, prawns, oysters to vegetables) regardless of whether the meanings were professed in whichever language or dialect of Chinese (be it known or unknown to them) which supports the importance and passion of food in the Chinese culture. The following examples demonstrate these beliefs in the meanings of the food across gender and the age groups of the informants.

Food like prawns, fish all these with their special meanings like fish in Chinese means tien tien yoa yee, means every year got extra, in Mandarin. Some extra, which we will keep for the next year. Har means ha ha siew or happy. Then we have the sang choy [Chinese lettuce], which means sang sang mang mang lah. And all these things we will carry on to the New Year.

(Mr Cheam, 75, M)

I think it is the Chinese, the name, like you have hou see (oyster) for literary meaning and it sounds good and the fatt choy or the prosperity, and you have lin gau as in the lotus root, gin ko or pak koh. All these I think because of the character and the sound.

(Joan, 45, F)

Just like other, we also have to prepare the prawn, fish and those things. My mother will prepare the pig stomach soup every year. Inside the stomach also has abalone, fish mall, sea cucumber, also my father's compulsory is fish and the raw lettuce.

(Jason, 25, M)

We must have shark fin soup because every Reunion Dinner is a must. They say we have to eat good food then whole year will be very good.

(KaMei, 25, F)

The ethnographic data also reveals another exotic ingredient which was eaten during the Reunion Dinner meal is the sea moss, which is black hair-like seaweed. It was believed to bring prosperity because the sound of its name 'fatt choy' denotes prosperous vegetables. It is usually cooked together with dried oyster, scallop, abalone, and vegetables (where it is known as a mixed vegetable dish), or stewed with other seafood (where it is known as a pot of sea cucumber and meat). Although research has found that this ingredient does not have much nutritional value (e.g. Tan 2012), it is and has proven to be a popular and necessary ingredient for many. For example, Madame L, an academican and grandmother (69, F), was upset that her regular grocer had forgotten to include this in her shopping list this year. Although she did not cook all the dishes for her Reunion Dinner, she was equally disturbed and reiterated the importance of this ingredient.

For example, there will always be vegetarian food with oysters and 'fat choy' you know. This year when I did the vegetarian dish, I realised the lady didn't give me the 'fat choy'. I was a little bit upset.

(Madame L, 69, F)

7.3.4.2 The Symbolism of Chicken Consumption

An interpretation of the ethnographic data collected reveals that chicken was one of the most common and essential ingredient that was found across all dining tables during the Reunion Dinner. It was traditionally used for prayers but today it is an important meat dish for the Reunion Dinner. According to the wife of Cheam (retiree, 73, F), the chicken had traditionally been revered as an animal with five possibilities. She briefly gave the typology of chicken though the five benefits derived from the chicken: firstly, it is a critical and essential item for praying to ancestors; secondly, when it crows it signifies the dawn of a new day; thirdly, it is associated with the sharing of food since the leftovers are often fed to the chickens to avoid wastage; fourthly, the chicken is a source of food because it produces eggs; and finally, the eggs can also be hatched into chicks for future consumption. The following quote describes her definition and symbolic meaning of chicken:

When we pray to our ancestors, we have to use chicken; we have the whole chicken with the head and tail. Chicken in Chinese is Hmm (five) Tak. It literally means five cans. It means it wakes us up. Last time when we live in the village, next whatever we eat. The leftovers we will give it to the [chickens] to eat. The remains, we don't simply waste and this is one of the merits that we gather also from this. Last time everything when we rear them. We don't have to buy, and the chicken also produce eggs. Lastly, hatching the eggs to chicks for the future generation.

(Mrs Cheam, 73, F)

The ethnographic data reveals that the traditional way of preparing the chicken for the New Year festival was to boil the whole chicken, which would then be used for prayers. However, if there were no prayers, then the chicken would be steamed instead. Nevertheless, the boiling of the whole chicken was still a popular cooking method and it was essential for many families who would use the chicken stock in the other dishes. For example, STeng (married, F, 34), a nurse residing abroad who had returned for this event, believed that it was essential to have this chicken, which she had enjoyed regardless of the tradition behind it. The following quote clarifies the symbolic meaning of the chicken consumption and its association with prayers before it was eaten during the meal:

The chicken is an essential thing, a tradition to hold on. Yeah, the boiled chicken or the steamed chicken, we still have it even though we don't use the chicken for prayer. Last time mother used to have the chicken and she will bring the chicken in and out during the whole house for prayer, but now she doesn't. Now she says that we pray vegetarian. But still the chicken is on the table for dinner. In the past because we are forced to do that because we prayed with the chicken but we don't need it now, but we still have it on the table.

(STeng, 34, F)

An interpretation of the ethnographic data reveals that over time, the chicken, which was boiled or steamed, had become synonymous with the Reunion Dinner. Although it is one of the most important and popular meats to be served for this meal, there was one informant, YHPing (24, F), whose family beliefs due to health reasons had prevented her from serving chicken dishes. Her family had stopped serving chicken since her mother was diagnosed with cancer a few years ago. For the Reunion Dinner, they served seafood dishes and vegetables instead. The reason being that they believed the chickens sold commercially were unsafe as they were injected with hormones. Therefore, they avoided eating them when her mother is around, although YHPing still consumes chicken when she is eating out with friends.

7.3.4.3 The Symbolism of Vegetable Consumption

An interpretation of the ethnographic data also reveals an important and popular vegetable which was found in most Reunion Dinner is the Chinese lettuce. It is called 'sang choy'. In Cantonese the word 'sang' means alive, as in wishing all things would be lively and strong throughout the New Year ahead, and 'choy' denotes a vegetable. It was also used and placed into the chicken's mouth for prayers and it was also used as bait for the lion dance that came to perform at homes, hotels, and offices during the Lunar New Year. These leafy greens were also not chopped to signify the wholesomeness of the ingredient. Unbroken ingredients meant undivided good luck and prosperity in the coming year.

The interpretation of the ethnographic data also suggests the importance of lotus root that was used for Reunion Dinner, usually for cooking soup. Lotus root (or rhizome) is regarded as an important dish in weddings (e.g. Anderson 1977). It is sticky within and when it is broken, or when the halves are pulled apart, you can see a thread (or threads) of sticky gum that binds the plant together. In a wedding this symbolises that nothing can pull the couple apart. An interpretation of the ethnographic data collected reveals the same interpretation that consuming the lotus during the Reunion Dinner symbolised that nothing could pull the family apart, as denoted by the sticky threads that

continued to linger when one separates or chews the lotus, reflecting the family ties and bonds that linger on. This is evident in the following quotes. The first quote came from Ken, a lecturer (single, M, 33), who describes this tradition which continues to be of importance. The second came from Joan (45, F), who emphasises the importance of the ingredient and dish on the Reunion Dinner.

Lotus in Mandarin means Lo tuan see lian, it means pull also won't be broken even long, forever connected.

(Ken, 33, M)

There is no change in the way of cooking because there are still some so called important dishes. For soup, always for the Chinese New Year you must have the lotus, as long as I can remember.

(Joan, 45, F)

In general, all of the food served during the occasion of the Reunion Dinner would have multiple layers of meaning, many of which were literal (be it in the translation of the word or through prosperity rhymes and positive connotations) and were likened to the ushering of good wishes and luck (e.g. Fong 2000). This significance and typology of food had been adhered to by the young and the old alike, and they were visible in the mass and popular media. Regardless of the language or dialects that were used to translate their meanings, the meanings were not only found in the presence of the food but also in how they should be consumed. Although there may be differences in taste or the way in which the food was cooked and served, there was little discernible difference in the essence of the food and the meanings behind them. Within the consumer behaviour terms, the consumption of food illustrates how culture influence ritual consumption through the negotiation of future meanings attached to the objects.

7.3.5 Symbolism of Food for Prayers

An interpretation of the ethnographic data collected suggests the final negotiation of abundance was done through the prayers and the objects that were used as their medium. The informants of this study reflected the structure of the Malaysian Chinese society, which was a mixture of Buddhist, Taoist, and Christian. The Chinese religious practices and beliefs which were followed by many of the Malaysian Chinese included both Buddhism and Taoism. They would also pray to other deities together with those of their own beliefs (e.g. Nagata 2001). Hence, most of the Chinese consumers who were not Christians were commonly grouped together and defined as praying to the Chinese religion. This Chinese religion in Malaysia came from the Chinese civilisation which their ancestors brought with them from China (e.g. Tan 2006). It is a complex system of traditional Chinese religions, beliefs, and practices in which multiple Gods or deities that are associated with mythology and rituals are prayed to. The uniqueness and strength of this Chinese religion is its capacity to absorb other religious influences and beliefs (e.g. Nagata 2001).

The participant observations and the data collected noted that the most common prayers which were made on the eve of the New Year was the offering of thanks to the God of Heaven. These prayers were performed outside the house. This would then be followed by the worshipping of the other deities, which was done in the house, such as the prayers to the Goddess of Mercy or the God of Warriors as there were placed on the altar in the house. The God of Warriors is noted for his importance, especially for those who are in business, due to his successful warfare skills which are recorded in historical records (e.g. Duara 1988). After the prayers were performed, the food which had first been served to the ancestors would be consumed by all who had gathered together for the Reunion Dinner. At this point the Christian Malaysian Chinese would be served separate food that had not been used for prayers.

Food sacrifice is obligatory in most major rituals and it serves as a key method to communicate with the Gods (e.g. Levi-Strauss 1966). The equation between human feasting and sacrificing to the Gods is explicit in Chinese folk belief; for example, one informant said that ‘we sacrifice in order that the Gods will be contented with us’ (Datin, 45, F). An interpretation of the ethnographic data collected reveals that the foods that were offered to the Gods or the supernatural beings were less transformed (e.g. Chang 1977). According to the Chinese beliefs, the gods are on a more distant level and they receive different offerings according to their rank. Hence, the highest god, which is the God of Heaven, would receive the most untransformed food (which was normally raw foods such as dried vegetables, fruits, sweets or plain buns), while the ancestors would receive cooked food (which had been the most transformed) right to their favourite food and drinks.

An interpretation of the ethnographic data gathered in this study reveals that the canonical fruits and cakes being offered were brightly coloured, mostly red and orange. These colours and the word rhymes with good meanings were associated with good fortune (especially during the prayers) were considered important for this auspicious event. The cakes that were used were made from rice flour and are called ‘huat kueh’, which literally means prosperity or abundance cakes (‘huat’ literally means to rise) (Saso 1965). Fruits such as mandarin oranges or ‘kum’ (kum means gold in Cantonese) and pineapple were also offered. In the Hokkien dialect which is spoken among some of the Malaysian Chinese, pineapple is ‘ong lai’, which literally means ‘luck coming’. These beliefs were echoed by Datin, a housewife and mother of two, who organised elaborate practices from offerings to the cooking of the Reunion Dinner in her house which was attended by her husband’s family. The following quote illustrates her beliefs in praying with these objects:

We have basics like the ‘Fatt Kuo’, that means for us to prosper. We will never serve pears because pears in Cantonese it means ‘lei’, it means separation. We only serve ‘Kam’ for New Year, ‘kam’ means gold. Not even orange, orange is ‘Chang’, it means sad. Serve

peaches and those are a good meaning. And then pomelo, pomelo is always a must for all the Gods.

(Datin, 45, F)

An interpretation of the data also reveals that a popular fruit among the informants for offering during the New Year prayers is the pomelo fruit, which many thought had magical qualities. It was very common for the participants to leave the leaves soaked in water as a ritual wash to cleanse and to purify them for the New Year.

Overall, an interpretation of the data reveals that the choice of food or objects and their symbolic meaning in either sounds or linguistics associations to the physical characteristics and the prosperity food rhymes (such as wholesomeness, colour, and texture) were taken into consideration during eating, prayers, and storage. The participants did this to negotiate the abundance across the spread of food, which again signifies and embodies abundance for the present and future. The anxiousness of the New Year also involved in the cleansing to avoid bad outcomes and austerity in line with prior research where consumption was used by participants as a mean to appease the social psychological construction of self by incorporating the symbolic, cultural and religious meanings associated with a range of objects while at the same time maintaining the individual sense of individuality (e.g. Belk 1988; Holbrook 1992; Lindridge 2005). In consumer behaviour terms, this research, therefore, confirms the notion that consumers can negotiate self and collective identities via consumption practices.

7.3.6 Universalism and Particularism of Practice

An interpretation of the ethnographic data reveals a resolution of universalism and particularism of practice by the informants. As the previous themes discussed in association with the celebration of the Chinese New Year (including: the passage of time; the negotiation of abundance; and the inclusion of the living, the dead and spirits which the practices were regarded

as being the same for everyone) the universalism and particularism of food was also noted clearly in this event. An interpretation of the data reveals the universal elements of this celebration were found in the majority of the participants (as in having the Reunion Dinner at home, on the eve and with similar dishes of previous years). The informants have regarded the Reunion Dinner celebration as being the same, year after year, held on the eve and as an evening meal. This meal was a grand and large meal that was unlike the daily meal. The universal cuisine or dishes or items that included chicken, prawn, and the Chinese 'sang choy' lettuce while the option of consuming other meats and seafood were also made available. This Reunion Dinner had remained unchanged over the years and it includes a number of familiar signature dishes. However, there might be some augmentation of little traditions that were particular to different families; which could also be based on their ancestral origin, on regional differences, or the dialects spoken groups which were distinctive to specific social groups, or social class of the celebrants.

The majority of the informants had mentioned the importance of chicken, which was meant for prayer, even for those who no longer pray had also described the importance of this meat (e.g. Chinese Christians). The other foods which were served included fish, prawns, Chinese lettuce, sea cucumber, and abalone, which were served, in part, due to the symbolic meanings which were associated with them. Dishes containing these ingredients were found to be universal among the informants, regardless of age, who provided similar meanings regardless of the dialect spoken. The following quotes illustrate the beliefs in these dishes and the importance in having them, which cuts across genders and age groups:

We have all the food, which means with good omen, we say. Fish 'yau tow yau mei' [literally means good beginning and good ending], haha as in prawns. 'Sang choy' [means life] vegetables.

(Mr Cheam, 75, M)

For my family every year is the same. We have the usual chicken, prawn, and all those things. So, mainly more or the less the same every time.

(SK, 45, F)

Fish is a must. There is a Chinese proverb that says 'nin nin yau yue', means every year is good lah. And then of course chicken, because why chicken is so important because those days, olden days you know, for us even to have chicken means big celebration. If not, then you cannot even afford to buy chicken. So it is like a dish that is so important.

(Datin, 45, F)

7.3.7 Sacredness of Cleanliness and the Taboos of Dirt

During the participant observation and data collection, it was noted that the participants, before the Chinese New Year, spent a lot of time and efforts in cleaning and tidying their houses; with many decorating the house with all the paraphernalia which were related to a typical celebration. In particular, the cleaning was even more critical on the eve of the New Year, especially because many participants considered cleaning on the first day of the Chinese New Year as taboo.

The findings showed that the younger generation were more conscientious and busy with the cleaning of their homes and they had adhered to the taboos that were associated with good luck and bad luck religiously (Lindridge 2004). An interpretation of the ethnographic data reveals that the adhering to the taboo of cleaning on the first day of the Chinese New Year was also followed by the Chinese Christians. Adeline (32, single, F), whose family are Christians, believed in the taboo of cleaning on the first day and would never attempt to do any cleaning on the first day of the Chinese New Year. She believed it is a

cultural taboo and is not related to religious belief. Even though she had travelled to another town to celebrate the dinner, she would still clean up the house on the eve. Regardless of whether she was tired or even if they were not having guests the following day, they would still clean the house before the New Year arrives, as in sweeping out of the old and to usher in the new. The following quote describes her belief in the taboo:

And as usual during the Chinese New Year eve, my mom will ask us to clean, clean the house, vacuum the house or sweep the floor first because the next day we cannot sweep the floor. Yes, after I came back from Papar itself immediately my mom will ask us to sweep the floor to make sure it is clean. I think last year we also came back around ten something and by eleven, we are also asked by mom to clean the floor still.

(Adeline, 32, F)

By engaging with the informants on their narratives of their Reunion Dinner, photographs taken by them and through the auto-driving process in eliciting the information, biasness could be overcome. During the participant observation and data collected, it was noted that some of the participants' homes were adorned with new curtains, new tablemats and table clothes. The houses were cleaned a few days prior to the Reunion Dinner. The observation data collected also noted that an informant, Amy (39, F), had changed the bed sheets and blankets, and had also used new towels. The younger informants did not only clean their houses diligently, they also believed the taboos and followed them accordingly. They would bath and cleanse themselves using the water soaked in pomelo leaves or flowers. The following quotes from two female informants, HYPing (executive, single, 24) and SWei (bank officer, single, 24) attest to their beliefs in the ritual of cleaning:

You can't sweep the floor. All the cleaning must be done before the first day. You must clean yourself also, yes shower, and wash your hair with that leaf, the whole body.

(HYPing, 24, F)

Yes, we must clean with pomelo leaves or flowers...

(SWei, 24, F)

Traditionally, this rite of cleansing with the leaves of the pomelo is used to purify one after attending funeral but this practice has extend beyond even to the welcoming of the New Year. This belief has also transcended beliefs and religions across the Malaysian Chinese community as a whole; for example, one informant has noted that even her Muslim relatives also partake in the cleansing of the body by bathing in the water which had been soaked with the pomelo leaves in lieu of the Chinese New Year. Cleansing would override the negativity by bringing in the goodness to one's life especially in good wishes and prosperity revered by the Chinese consumers often. The example below illustrates her observation:

One funny thing I realise is that my Muslim relatives actually have this superstition of bathing in this thing you call what, like the pomelo leaves. They bath using that, they believe in it. I saw them carrying a few litres of water and it was a brown colour and I was curious and asked them what it was. And they say oh to take bath with all these leaves and they did this every year to cleanse themselves.

(Adeline, 32, F)

The interpretation of the ethnographic data also reveals that there were instances where adjustments were made accordingly due to the urgent or emergent need to go against the taboo of sweeping the floor. This was done with some justification to appease one psychologically. For example, KehSin (Marketing executive, 25, F) would still sweep the floor on the first day, but from outside in instead and not inside out. By sweeping from the outside meant sweeping from the front door of the house to the inside of the house and within the house, to signify and ensure that the luck was not swept out of the house. However, she would never wash the floor on the first day:

Cannot wash, but we still sweep, no choice, can't sweep, but if need to can't sweep out but can sweep in.

(KehSin, 24, F)

An interpretation of the ethnographic data collected reveals that the practice of keeping the house clean on the eve of the New Year and not cleaning or sweeping away the luck on the first day were still being closely followed by the younger female informants. Even the male informants also considered and accepted this belief. Aw (59, M) was hesitant at first in acknowledging the belief of the cleaning taboo, nevertheless, he would still follow the ritual by not cleaning the house on the first day of the New Year. The following quote supports his belief of the taboo:

Oh, not really. If you think about it not really. But then again, this year in fact you ask this question, with the maid, and I told the maid, there will be guest coming, so can you please clean the floor or mop, at least once, no need twice a day, as long as the floor is clean, because on the first day we are not supposed to use the broom. Now I am saying that knowing that it is not true, but again, I suppose the notion of not having seen a broom sweeping of the floor in your house or in any other relations' house, for the last 50, 60 years of my life, must have heavily influenced me to say that. In other words even though I think it doesn't make much sense but it is nice to believe.

(Aw, 59, M)

An interpretation of the ethnographic data also reveals that the children were warned by parents to guard their tongues because any harsh word or unlucky word may well bring misfortune on the family through the coming year. Besides words, actions such as breaking of things were also forewarned. However, if unfortunate things should happen, then there were remedies which could help to ward off the misfortune psychologically. For example, one informant, Darren a lecturer (22, M), spoke of his worst reunion which happened when he accidentally dropped a plate during the Reunion Dinner.

This incident proved to be significant even until today, as evident in the following quote:

We are not allowed to use bad words [i.e. swear words]. You cannot curse people, especially moving towards the New Year. And also after the dinner, we are not allowed to eat any more meat, including eggs. Cakes or whatever until the next day. Until today I can still remember. I broke a plate. My father was so angry on that Chinese New Year eve. I was singing, I was so happy and suddenly I broke the plate and the glass flew. And my father was looking at me with the dark face. As you know it was a taboo, like something that is not good. But eventually I heard somebody said that breaking that is good. I ask why and he said that 'lok tei how fah' [literally, drop on the floor and will flower] something like that and I said ok, and that made me feel better. Just got to be careful. I've never tried to repeat that!

(Darren, 33, M)

Freud (1962) in his seminal 'Civilisation and its Discontents' described the human drive to strive for happiness. This is much in evidence here as the participants continue to seek power, success, and wealth, which can be seen through the celebration as they pray and consume the symbolic objects and actions. The activities and taboos are what Freud enumerates as the fundamental tensions between civilisation and the individuals who live within it. However, across all generations, many are aware, accept and will continue these New Year rites. For "beauty, cleanliness and order obviously occupy a special position among the requirements of civilization. No one will maintain that they are as important for life as control over the forces of nature, yet no one would care to put them in the background as trivialities" (Freud, 1962, p.40). This illustrates how consumers use ritual consumption to construct culture as consumers negotiate the meanings to appease the social psychological construction of self.

7.3.8 Symbolic Objects Bring Nostalgia

An interpretation of the ethnographic data collected in this study reveals the presence of nostalgia as the celebration that brought the family together evoked memories of previous celebrations. One informant, SK (teacher, 45,F), even commented on the smell of the burning of joss sticks which she felt brought out the mood of the celebration, even though it may be nauseous for some and burning to one's eyes. In addition, the playing of New Year songs across radio and television, especially the older songs, had also increased the mood for that occasion. The following narratives provide explicit nostalgic experiences through senses such as the smell (Hirsch 1992) and in the hearing of music related and intertwining with the religion and festivity activities (Holak and Havlena 1992; Goulding 2002).

You can even smell the joss sticks and the smell of joss sticks will definitely put you into mood. The fire crackers sound, the smell of joss sticks, the singing of old Chinese new year songs. We listen to the oldies.

(SK, 45, F)

We listen to the New Year songs every day, before the Chinese New Year...we must have these songs...

(YBee, 26, F)

Within consumer behaviour literature, nostalgia is conceptualised as part of the preference within the consumption of goods and services (e.g. Holbrook 1993). Nostalgia is defined as a preference (liking, positive or favourable effect) towards the objects (people, place or things) that were common when one was younger (Holbrook 1993, p.104). Nostalgia also shapes the emotion and behaviour of a broad array of cultural production and consumption (e.g. Holak and Havlena 1992; Goulding 2002 for a discussion). In this case, consumption experiences which extend beyond the extended self provided nostalgic bonding through associated objects, as in the burning of joss sticks

for prayers and the New Year songs rendition over space (see also, Holbrook and Schindler 2004). In view of the technological advancements influencing the relationships between individuals and the communities, the role of nostalgia in the consumption experience discharge psychic energies in the recreation of the idealized past to the present is also present within the consumption of the Reunion Dinner.

7.3.9 Symbolism of Giving

An interpretation of the ethnographic data collected reveals the importance of activity that is the gifting which takes place after the Reunion Dinner. Gifting has been described as a prototypical contract between the giver and receiver (Maus 1924; Giesler 2006). The act of gift giving also has a social dimension, a personal dimension, and an economic dimension (e.g. Sherry 1983; Belk 1996; Ruth et al. 1999; Joy 2001). During the participant observation and data collection, it was noted that the acts of gifting followed after the Reunion Dinner either through food or monies. The gift of food or the gift of money placed in a red envelop were given by married relatives and married friends for the purpose of sharing (Belk 2010) and commemorating the event. The gift of money, which was inserted into red envelopes were given especially for children and those who were still single. An interpretation of the ethnographic data suggests that marital status had been revered as being a status of privilege in which one should be thankful and proud of the ability to procreate and to expand the clan. Hence, the need to share the joy through gifting during this period was most appropriate as it was also a time when the clan were reunited to acknowledge the existence and growth of the clan (e.g. Giesler 2006) in welcoming the New Year together.

An interpretation of the ethnographic data collected in this study reveals the importance of exchanging of gifts or food during the celebration of the Lunar New Year. Gifts as greetings of good wishes to business associates and relatives were also done through gifts specially prepared and wrapped in baskets, which are called hampers, were bought and given out before New

Year approaches. During the participant observation and data collection, these hampers were displayed in the living room as part of the decoration and paraphernalia of the Lunar New Year.

7.3.9.1 Angpow: The Gifting of Money

During the participant observation and data collection, it was noted that the giving of gifts of money were given as early as the eve of the New Year, which was immediately after the Reunion Dinner. The reasons for giving money (either as a token of love or based on mythical beliefs) were still being reinforced and practiced by all the informants. An interpretation of the ethnographic data collected in this study reveals that the giving of money ('angpow') is traditionally given by married donors to recipients who are preferably children, or young and single adults. Over time the data also reveals that this practice of giving of money had been modified according to one's choice and preference instead of tradition. For example, the practice of receiving money from the elders especially one's parents were also reciprocated by the children who would also give gifts of money to their parents, regardless of their marital status. Most of the female informants who were working emphasised the need to give their parents some money as a token of appreciation in lieu of the New Year celebration. At the same time siblings who were working and married would also continue to give each other the gift of money based on seniority and not on the basis of the marital status alone.

An interpretation of the ethnographic data collected during the participant observations reveals parents and siblings exchanging gifts of monies in the red envelope called the 'angpows'. This was observed in the family of Amy (single, 39, F) whose father and mother gave out the 'angpow' individually to all their children and grandchildren immediately after the Reunion Dinner. The siblings would then join in the exchanging of 'angpows' in which nieces and nephew would be receiving their 'angpow' from their married uncles and aunts. However, this family also practiced the giving from the elder to the younger sibling regardless of their marital status. Hence, Amy (single, 39) also gave

'angpow' to her married younger sister. Although she is single and need not give 'angpow', she had chosen to do so also by giving them to her nephews and nieces. This sharing of gift through money is a sharing in within the family that is encouraged and practiced (see Belk 2010).

An interpretation of the ethnographic data reveals that a couple may also decide to give an 'angpow' together or individually. Amy's parents gave individually to all her family members but they would give as a couple to relatives and friends who visited them. Since money can also be a sensitive issue, a couple may agree on the amount to be given collectively. However, in the case of Amy (single, 39), her brother would secretly give a separate 'angpow' to his younger siblings without his wife's knowledge. This secrecy strengthened the family bonds. Another informant, Aw (single, 57, Male) also gave 'angpows' to his nephews and nieces, and even to non-family members on the basis as a token of appreciation and sign of seniority. The giving of 'angpow' is also taken as a sign of respect for the receiver and giver, as implies by the following quote:

You see, I am not married, that's why I don't have to give 'angpows'. But ever since, I have a niece and a nephew, because I am an uncle to them, so therefore they are the only people I give 'angpow' to, but occasionally, if I feel like for example there is a cleaner in the office, and I felt that, because of the occasion, maybe I should take this occasion to give them something like a small token of appreciation. So for some of these cleaners in my office, I do give them 'angpow'. Like my uncle who is unmarried, will give me an 'angpow' as well. More of kind of like a seniority and there must be some liking as well you know, again a respect or something. You can respect the older or the elder can also respect the younger.

(Aw, 57, M)

An interpretation of the ethnographic data suggests that as far as most of the children were concerned the Chinese New Year meant only one thing, which is the collecting of 'angpow'. Everything that they did during this period was

associated with the receiving of 'angpow'. In this study this giving was observed and heard throughout the collection of the data. To the Chinese, the gift of the red packet means the passing of good luck to the recipient. 'Angpow' comes from the word 'hung pau' (red packet), which in Cantonese is called 'lai see' (e.g. Pleck 2000; Yeung and Yee 2010).

An interpretation of the data suggests that this tradition of 'angpow' was seen as wrapping up the good intentions and wishes to be passed to others in order to foster the spirit of giving and receiving luck in return. Therefore, it was considered to be better to give and not be too concerned with the amount of monies inside. However, the younger family members would find that concept difficult to phantom or accept because they would often compare the red packets among themselves. As for the giver, there were many who would still give even though it was against tradition. This was because their belief in giving surpassed the advice of tradition. 'Angpow' is a form of entitlement to the gift of love, appreciation, and it builds a sense of kindred spirit. The generosity of gifting and sharing of money among family members as prescribed in Belk (2010) were prevalent and evident within the consumption of the Lunar New Year Reunion Dinner.

7.3.9.2 Gifting of Food

An interpretation of the ethnographic data collected also reveals the gifting of food that was practiced more commonly among the extended family besides the gifting of money to the children. For example, MadameL (grandmother, 69, F) would prepare some special food items for her family members and these were given away on the eve itself after the Reunion Dinner or during visitation in the following days ahead. Food bought for closer family members were special and more expensive, while simpler gifts were given to others. Sometimes the gifts received were also given to others so as not to waste them. In the following example the informant gave this tradition a modern slant by describing it as recycling the gift:

So every New Year, just about a day or two before the Chinese New Year, my daughter and I will go to the Bukit Bintang market and I visit this provision shop once a year, that's during Chinese New Year, where I get my sausages and other items. I think it has been at least of 10-15 years. It's more by habit than anything and it's also the greediness, once a year. Now we are exchanging gifts on New Year's Eve so that the next day you no need to carry so many packs. I usually buy a bit more expensive items like the sausage whatever they want to eat. We will buy food, usually those more expensive items, as gifts for our close family members, but those friends we will give them those biscuits and gifts which we can recycle.

(Madam L, 69, F)

Besides the content of the food given, the packaging was equally important. One of the respondents, Grace (teacher, 45, F), consciously wrapped and adorned these gifts with bags that had meaningful messages to connote the wishes behind the gifts and to extend her personalized style to the gifts.

So this is another tradition that my mom follows, like to my aunties and those people older, like those grand aunts, so we have to send to them. And usually they will buy this, what you called it, brands of chicken essence? My mom will actually buy all those things that she wants that she wants to give as goodies, Chinese New Year goodies. You see like the olden days we used to use plastic bags and now we have the paper bags with words, and the word is happy or in Chinese words ok and or maybe 'fook', meaning luck.

(Grace, 45, F)

Much research has been done on the meaning of gifts and the understanding of gift exchange (e.g. Sherry 1983; Ruth et al. 1999; Joy 2001; Giesler 2006). Gift exchange in this context is not only a social obligation, but it is also a symbolic exchange of good wishes of luck and prosperity (e.g. Joy 2001) and also as an objective manifestation of self to respond openly to the extended self (e.g. Caplow et al. 1982; Holbrook and Schindler 2004). However, the

findings showed that the younger generation wanting to keep the novelty and the mythical meanings of the gifts more often than the older generation. This study has also found that many old traditions (such as the keeping of the money under the pillow) were still being practiced regardless of age and status, even among educated and city dwellers through the nostalgic bonding experience (e.g. Holbrook and Schindler 2004).

Overall, an interpretation of the ethnographic data collected in this study reveals the interaction of symbolism found within the context of time, food and actions in conjunction with the Chinese New Year celebration. The Chinese New Year is likened to the crossing over to a new year, as within the rites of passages (van Gennep 1960). It is considered as a conventional social change which is made visible through the symbolic renewal of commitment to the new threshold of time through means of symbolic action and objects (see also Douglas and Isherwood 1976). The symbolism in the passage of time addressed in this study is found within the separation and transition into the incorporation from the crossing over to the New Year, ending of work and to the casting out of the old for the new. The interpretation of the ethnographic data also reveals objects of food and paraphernalia used both for the dead and the living which symbolised and negotiated the abundance needed to ensure a better year ahead. Material abundance was enacted through the feasting, storing, and the offering at altars. In addition, the quantity, the quality, and the meaning of food were also taken into consideration to ensure that the meanings were transcended into reality for a better and prosperous year ahead. While the food symbolised the identity warranted by the celebrants, actions such as gifting and consumption of paraphernalia objects during this event also brought back emotion solidarity and nostalgia among celebrants besides the art of sharing the wealth and wishes among family members (e.g. Belk 2010).

7.4 Self-concept

An interpretation of the data suggests that the celebration of the Reunion Dinner was a time when the senses of self was manifested or reinforce. As a time for feasting and gathering among family and friends, the celebration also the constructing of self revealed some anxiousness in the ushering of the New Year, sense of belonging or social identity, the roles played by self and the interdependent selves amidst the collectivism cultural values of self.

7.4.1 Self projection from consumption of Reunion Dinner

Besides being a time of gathering for ushering the New Year, the celebration event also revealed some anxiousness in ushering that New Year. The crossing of time among the informants is based on the Chinese calendar, a calendrical system based on the animal zodiac. This classification of time within Chinese culture is based on the collective ideas of Taoism (e.g. Durkheim and Mauss 1963; Tan 2006), which is independent of social organisation where each year is assigned an animal as the zodiac. Using the alignment of animal, mineral and numerological forces, each year meant different outcomes for different zodiac animal (Goodkind 1991). These shared meanings of symbols in the zodiac animal for luck, success and prosperity had propelled some informants to develop his or her interpretation of what the future holds.

The ethnographic data reveals informants who were anxiously concern on their outlook for the New Year because they believed their year ahead would be affected by the weak alignment of their zodiac with the New Year's zodiac respectively in that particular year especially in their pursuit for success and wealth. For example, Grace, a teacher (single, 45), had mixed emotions as she waited anxiously for this one year when I interviewed her in 2010. She was happy that she was able to meet her cousins once a year and yet she felt sad because the coming of the New Year meant that she was another year older. However, she felt happier and revealed some levels of optimism based

on her beliefs that the New Year in 2010 would be a good year for her based on her zodiac which was well aligned in accordance to the New Year's animal sign as compared to the previous year (i.e. 2009). Her birth year zodiac is rabbit, while that New Year celebration was the year of the tiger, which many soothsayers and astrologists had predicted would be a good year ahead for those who were born in the year of rabbit. She was grateful and pleased about this:

Well, I should say that I feel mix emotion. Happy is because I get to meet my cousins because it is only well, once a year affair. We are all too busy to meet up. Sometime you feel a bit, I won't say sad but ahh... I will say I am getting a year older and frankly because we Chinese, we are very particular about zodiac. This year happens to be the year of the rabbit, I am born in the year of rabbit, so it is good, and so I am happy. Certain years the rabbit is not so good, and then you get like a little bit worry. Sometimes because of all this New Year meaning and all these horoscopes coming in, you get a bit worried, like... oh, will it be good for rabbits or dragons or horses. So it is a mixed thing, a mix of emotions.

(Grace, 45, F)

The crossing over the New Year during the Reunion Dinner has influenced the self-concept of the consumer, as she or he would exploit the meanings of the calendar and the zodiac system to create cultural notions of the self and the stability of the self-concept in the search for happiness and success. While consuming products with symbolic meanings has been used for the self creation, the consumption of the cultural meanings of the cosmic calendar would also assist in the self-definition since we live within a culturally constituted world.

Another informant, Adeline (Manager, 32, single), also agreed and believed with the crossing over of the New Year in association with her zodiac or horoscope. She reported that many people believed and followed their horoscopes in anticipation of the New Year. Adeline had also experienced this;

for example, she had just started a new job and she believed that it would be a good year for her because the readings for those born under her animal zodiac were predicted to have a good year ahead. Both respondents are highly educated and independent and, although one was a Christian, both showed strong beliefs and optimism in their zodiac signs where their career and future were concerned. The following quote from Adeline (Manager, 32, F), who is a Christian by faith, reveals her strong beliefs on the Chinese zodiac:

Some of the people are so much into the reading of the horoscope. They say that the dragon year is ok in the tiger year like career wise is getting better. But some people are otherwise and somehow you are tuned into that and then you will say ok this year I will be going to have a career advancement and if there is opportunity for you, don't reject it, something like this. Somehow or other you do believe. I just started with a new job so I am not so sure in terms of like whether career advancement is there for me but I am thinking more positively since there is a mention that dragon year people in this tiger year is good.

(Adeline, 32, F)

The consuming of the cultural meanings behind the Chinese calendar and the zodiac system in the celebration of the Lunar New Year also had significant meanings to consumers of different faith and beliefs, as exemplified by the informant above. The symbolic meanings of the zodiac they are born with and the celebration of the year accordingly would influence their self-perception of what the year holds for them in the pursuit of happiness, love or success.

An interpretation of the ethnographic data collected suggests that for those whose zodiac signs have not been predicted with good wishes had to take some action in warding off this unpleasant prediction or anxiety by offering prayers at the temple. The participant observation and ethnographic data collected reveals informants who would take precaution for the coming New Year by warding off the negativity by praying and burning of joss papers in the temples. I even followed the informant Amy (39, single, F) to the temple to observe this rite for myself, and found that there were many people also

performing the same rite, even though it was on the first day of the New Year. Many came adorned in new clothes and followed the instructions given by the priests in the temple by purchasing and burning the needed offering materials, sold at the temple in the hope of overcoming the predicted negativity.

While the consuming of cultural meanings of the Chinese calendar and zodiac system were prevalent among the consumers which were able to appropriate symbolic meaning of the self-creation of the individual for the coming year, the assertion of consuming goods to enact, carry and communicate these cultural meanings is manifested further here through the burning of joss papers and prayers which are specially offered in the temple during this period. The actions and consumption within the temple further assist in the self-definition since we live within the culturally constituted world as we continue to sustain the project of the self.

A number of previous studies have also shown that some prospective parents are even using the zodiac as a kind of consumer-choice framework for family planning (see Goodkind 1991) because the animal associated with a particular year is said to have an influence on those people born in that year. Population studies have also shown Chinese mothers planning for birth in the year of the dragon based on folk-belief where famous emperors presiding over the Chinese dynastic rule were born in the Dragon year i.e. the nationalist leader Chiang Kai Shek and the communist leaders Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping (Goodkind 1991, p. 681). Therefore, by consuming the meanings behind the zodiac, the birth or actions taken create notion of the self which assert the potential success of the self.

The beliefs and the perception of what the Lunar New Year brings will encourage actions to be taken during this time of the year to help protect, maintain, or enhance their self-concept of what the future holds (e.g. Solomon 1983; Belk 1988; Holbrook 1992; Kleine et al. 1995). While consuming cultural meanings of the Chinese calendar and zodiac system, consumers are able to appropriate symbolic meaning of the self-creation of the individual for the coming year. The consumption of goods and action will enable the cultural

meanings to be carried and communicated as they assist in the self-definition since we live within a culturally constituted world. The future orientation attitude of the Chinese is also evident as the informants were willing to spend time and money to obtain the future they wished for, while at the same time making an effort to reduce risk associated with their future (e.g. Bergada 1990) in the pursuit of their self-definition for the coming year.

7.4.2 Cuisine as a Social Identity

An interpretation of the ethnographic data also reveals the particularism in food and tradition of cuisine consumed during the Reunion Dinner even though there were universalism elements in the cuisine or ingredients of food overall. Particularism was reflected in traditional food or cuisine that differs among the different Chinese dialect spoken groups which would also denote the origins of their ancestors. Segmentation across linguistic dialects and location were also found among the Chinese Malaysians (see Strauch 1981), which indirectly explains why some of the special and required dishes differ during the Reunion Dinner. The informants that were interviewed in this study spoke various dialects, which could be their ancestor's dialect or their mother's tongue that had been used as means of communicating with their grandparents. Within the Chinese culture which is characterised by patriarchal domination, the food consumed for this special occasion would also be reflective of the patriarch ancestors. The following examples demonstrate these beliefs in the importance of the food in identifying of self with lineage. Both Eric (Male, 41) and Ken (Male, 33) acknowledged their ancestor's dialect grouping, which defined the traditional dishes that they should and would have during their Reunion Dinner to maintain and enhance their identity.

There is always this tradition of the chicken rice because we are Hainanese so we must have, any big occasion we must have chicken rice.

(Eric, 41, M)

We are Hakka, so we have the pig stomach soup.

(Ken, 33, M)

An interpretation of the ethnographic data reveals evidence of specific dishes, which were compulsory to the dialect groups, such as the 'Hainanese' chicken for those whose ancestors, came from the island of Hainan (which is located in the South China Sea), of which the Hainanese clan often identify themselves with this dish. The Hainanese chicken is a chicken dish in which the chicken is boiled and then served with rice that has been cooked with the soup made from the boiled chicken. Today, this is a popular dish that is found in every shop or coffee shop where it is served as chicken rice, similar to Western fast food of the fish and chips. In fact, this chicken has become a popular dish and a franchise on it has even garnered popularity amidst Malaysian multiracial society likened to a fast-food cuisine.

The consuming of the particular food which is embedded with cultural meanings enables one to construct the self or the social identity of the self. By consuming the particular dishes, the informants are identifying themselves with their ancestors but with specific to the dialect groups they belong to. The foods consume enable the acts of self-definition and collective definition of the culture either as a specific dialect food (e.g. Hainanese origin) to the collective definition of a Chinese dish per se.

The ethnographic data also reveals another particular dish that was revered in the Reunion Dinner which came from a prominent dialect-speaking group amongst the Chinese Malaysians, which is the Hakka. The Hakka are considered to be the gypsies of China. They originated in Central China, but they were predominantly found in a few areas in the north or the south of China and they were also very mobile, hence the gypsy label. Their signature dish was the well known 'yong tau foo', which was a dish made up of vegetables that were stuffed with meat. Vegetable such as chillies, fried bean curd, eggplant, ladies fingers, fresh bean curd, and any other vegetables that enable the stuffing to be placed inside would be used and fried to be eaten as the main dish. Another popular Hakka dish was called the 'kau yoke', which

was a dish in which slices of yam were placed alternatively together with marinated slices of pork in a thick sandwich before they were steamed. Although these dishes were also cooked on other occasions, they were still revered for important occasions because they signified the Hakka's origin and identity.

The consuming of the particular dish embedded with history and cultural meanings enable one to identify and express their self concepts. By consuming the particular dishes, the informants were identifying themselves with their ancestors and by consuming them on the special occasion maintained and enhanced their pride in belonging to the dialect group which takes pride in providing unique and popular cuisine.

KaMei (25, F) reported that Hakka dishes were important to her because of her mother, whom she identified and associated herself with through her mother ancestor's dialect group. Meanwhile, Pete (36, M) referred to the meal as a traditional Hakka meal, based on his mother's kin, even though technically he is not a Hakka, as his father is a Teochew (a different dialect group). The dish's association with his mother's clan had been made as his preferred choice of food since he could remember. The following quotes reveal the celebration and attachment to the matriarchy system instead of the patriarchy system which Chinese culture has often characterised with.

Another Hakka dish is important, because my mom is Hakka, is the yong tau foo.

(KaMei, 25, F)

My mother is Hakka, her family is Hakka, and my dad is a Teochew. So she made the Hakka dishes. We are talking about Hakka dishes like mui chow kau yoke, the meat balls and all that. We also did the traditional Hakka hoi sum (sea cucumber) dishes and others. Rather than being a traditional Hakka Reunion Dinner, the more dishes the better.

(Pete, 36, M)

An interpretation of the ethnographic data suggest that the dishes were also cooked based on the preference of the one preparing it, or according to the husband's tradition, which was instilled upon the wives who were taught and expected to prepare them. Besides the specific dishes, the traditional cuisine based on regional difference was also evident in how the meal was organised and prepared. A majority of the informants had their Reunion Dinner following the traditional way of eating that was by having the dishes cooked and served at the same time around the table and where food was always eaten with white rice.

An interpretation of the ethnographic data collected reveals other means of eating the Reunion Dinner, which was called the hot pot or steamboat that is likened to the eastern 'fondue'. The steamboat is a large bowl of soup that is placed in the centre of the table on a hot stove, or the modern approach is to place the bowl of soup on a hot plate which is placed on the middle of the table. Large plates of well-sliced raw ingredients are placed around the steamboat, including: vegetables, chicken, beef, and tofu. Everyone sits around the table and each diner places their own individual servings of meat, fish, and vegetables into the hot boiling soup to cook. In the steamboat the cooking and eating is done together, as a family, at the table. This is a very a popular winter tradition among the Chinese in northern China because the hot stove which they gather around to eat will also keep them warm during the harsh winter weather (e.g. Chang 1997).

The ethnographic data reveals informants whose parents resided or came from the northern state of Malaysia, Penang, have a steamboat for their Reunion Dinners for the past few years. One informant, Madame B, a director of a college, explained the reason for having the steamboat at her Reunion Dinner was due to fact that her family members came from Penang, an island off northern Malaysia. The majority of the Chinese in Penang speak Hokkien and their ancestors came from the southern Fujian province in South-Eastern China. This dialect is commonly spoken among other dialect groups within the Penang Island itself. This group is also found prominent in Taiwan and some

of the rituals found in this research are also found practiced among the Taiwanese (e.g. Saso 1965; Stafford 1995).

So far what I know is because I am quite familiar with Penang because I am from Penang. I think for Penang people, a lot of them, we have steamboat.

(Madame B, 50, F)

At the same time, the informant SLeng, an executive in an IT firm (single, 26, F), also had her Reunion Dinner in the form of steamboat. In her case she said that her family had steamboat because her father's hometown was at Kedah, a northern state next to Penang. Her father is Hokkien while her mother is Cantonese. Her mother's ancestors came from the southern China, nearer to Hong Kong. Her father had since moved to the Malaysian city of Kuala Lumpur. Regardless of how they consume the Reunion Dinner, the amount and abundance of the dishes needed for prayers were still being prepared, even though they were having steamboat. The food used for prayers would be kept for the following day consumption instead.

Yes, my parents ensure there are three types of animals. There must at least three types of living things, like use we choose the prawns, meaning laughter, roast duck, roast pig and the steam chicken for prayer. We don't cut but use the whole chicken for prayer, but keep the soup. Then we will add in the abalone, scallops, dried cuttlefish, mushroom, vegetables, and pork. One bowl of soup consists of half ingredients and half soup. The soup will firstly be used for prayers, and then for the Reunion Dinner. My family Reunion Dinner style is a steam boat. So the soup is actually for the steamboat soup. It is the best base. No traditional dishes, just steamboat. It comes from my father's side. Like a round hot pot together and then the prayer things. My dad will prepare the soup. The soup is very auspicious because my dad will put a lot of things inside. Although we have hometown, we never go back to our hometown to celebrate.

(Sleng, 26, F)

An interpretation of the ethnographic data collected suggests that the word 'steam-boat' is a localised term that is used in Malaysia. Its origin could be traced to the Beijing's 'Fire-pot'. In Southern China, it is called 'ta pin lou', which literally means action on the sides of stove (e.g. Tan 2001). In Malaysia, many of the Hokkien (whose ancestors originated from northern China) reside within the northern state of Malaysia, specifically within the states of Penang and Kedah. The Hokkien in Malaysia celebrate their Reunion Dinner annually with a steamboat. They would also alternate the steamboat with other ready cooked traditional dishes. Although they could have move away from their home states to other parts of the country they would continue to persevere this tradition by having their Reunion Dinner in the form of steamboat.

Hence, having the particular food served on the Reunion Dinner projects the self-creation of the informants. Food is incorporated into self, as sharing is a symbolic way of sharing group identities especially when holiday meals are explicit examples for bonding through food (see Caplow et al 1982). The consumption of food became an external reference in how the consumers identify themselves with their ancestors whether from the patriarch or matriarch system and to their place of origin geographically. The consuming of these goods enable the acts of self-definition and collective definition. Maintaining multiple levels of self from individual, family, community and group membership through shared consumption symbols such as food enable one to identify with the social self.

7.4.3 Role of Women: Mother and Daughter-in-Law

Ethnicity and gender have been regarded as important social identities within the construction of self and identity (Swann and Bosson 2010). Within the Chinese culture, the women are assumed to be the custodians of customs and rites (Freedman 1970; Rosenthal 1985; Leach and Braithwaite 1996). An interpretation of the ethnographic data reveals that the female host or the women have been singled out to play the leading role in the preparations for

the celebration. The women were responsible for purchasing the food and all of the other items that were associated with the Reunion Dinner and the Lunar New festival. They prepared the food for both the prayer and the meal, and they were also responsible for the cleaning up afterwards. Although the men might get involved (but only if they were cooking a special dish), most of the time the overall custodianship of the celebration rested upon the woman (e.g. Murcott 1983; Delamont 1995).

The importance of the role of mother to this event was emphasised vividly by many of the key informants. For example, one key informant, STeng (married, 40, F), was concerned about her mother's role and was certain that nothing would remain the same in the future when her mother is no longer around. The following quote describes her concern of her mother's role in the Reunion Dinner:

My mother decides everything. Frankly speaking, when mommy disappears, the Chinese New Year is going to be very different, very different.

(STeng, 41, F)

This view was also echoed by informant Joan (45, single mother). As the only daughter in the family she had been assisting her mother and helping out in the preparation of the dinner, even though she is married and no longer lives with her parents. According to the patriarchal rules, she must follow her husband's family and celebrate with them before celebrating with her own family. With all her brothers away from home, she had always been the one responsible in all family matters. Getting the family together every year for the Reunion Dinner had always been her responsibility. Now that she is a single mother, the role rests even more heavily on her. However, in the interview she expressed her wish to continue with the family tradition of holding the Reunion Dinner even if her mother may not be around in the future.

Well every year I am the one that will do the preparation for the dinner. I am the one who will buy everything and I am the one who will prepare

the food. One thing that she still say, the moment I reach home, she will say that if Joanne does not come back it will not look like New Year. I think probably because I play a bit part in her New Year celebration, because I am the one who buy all the stuff back, otherwise the whole house is empty. So I will buy a few boxes of oranges, the drinks, the vegetables, and everything. So if I don't go back it is like nothing. I will bring the pots and pans. I think if my mom is not around, I think I will hold the fort. I will call my brothers to come back and I will still continue to uphold the culture.

(Joan, 45, F)

From the participant observation and data collection, it was noted that Amy's (39, single) mother, Madam Gan (65, F) also did all of the preparation and cooking at her daughter's house with no assistance from her daughter or her daughter-in-laws. Amy's eldest brother and second brother would come to her house for the dinner later in the evening since her parents were living with her and not with her brothers' families, as tradition would have it under the patriarchal system. Her mother had been preparing and cooking for the Reunion Dinner since she married into the family some forty years ago. She remembered and lamented how much she had to do during those times as a daughter-in-law, which included the rushing to her husband's home and doing the chores that were expected of a daughter-in-law by her husband's family. During those days, none of the family members helped her in the kitchen as she was the only daughter-in-law but over time, the other daughter-in-laws would also assist in the kitchen.

The ethnographic data collected reveals her getting the ingredients ready a few days ahead before the eve. She was awake as early as six am on the eve of the New Year, to prepare the dishes from scratch for the afternoon prayers which consist of more than eight dishes. Simultaneously, she also prepared the food for Reunion Dinner for thirteen people, including her sons, daughter-in laws, her husband, daughter, and her grandchildren. Although her youngest daughter who is married could not attend the Reunion Dinner, she would still return home with her family for lunch instead. She related and complained

about how fortunate her daughters-in-law are today. Previously, as soon as she was married into her husband's family she had to help and she prepared all the food. However, today this does not apply anymore and her daughters-in-law do not help in the preparation of the family Reunion Dinner. Then again, she consoled herself and believed it was better this way since they would only be obstructing and delaying her work instead of helping. She felt that that their assistance and presence might even make things worse. Hence, all of the family members would just leave her alone to plan, organise and cook whatever she wishes for the Reunion Dinner.

A short, stout, strong, and active person like Madam Gan demonstrated her ability to take charge without wanting anything less. Not even her husband would dare to question or interfere, or even be around the vicinity of the kitchen, when she cooked and prepared the food for prayer and the Reunion Dinner. Instead, her husband was given the task and responsibility of setting the table in front of the altar for prayers, especially when the ancestor tablets were his parents and grandparents. After cooking each dish, she would scoop out a portion to be used for prayers and her husband would take the dishes out to the table placed at the altar. After placing the dishes on the table, her husband would pray using the joss sticks and poured some tea on three special teacups. After she had completely finished cooking in the kitchen, she would then check on the altar table before she prays. She even changed the arrangement of the dishes and added some items that her husband had overlooked. From the observation it was found that only the mother could decide what is correct for ritual performed within the family. This would also include the decision on whether the prayer was deemed complete before she could start the burning of joss papers. She would also be the one burning those items for her husband's ancestors, and she was also the one who would decide when lunch could be serve and eaten.

Another informant, Datin (mother, 45, F), also played an active role as a daughter-in-law in the setting of the Reunion Dinner. Previously, their dinner was held at her mother-in-law's house or her husband's ancestral home. Even though her husband was not the eldest in his family, she had taken the

initiative to organise this event for his family because she did not wish for her elderly mother-in-law to toil in the kitchen preparing the meal. For a socialite and a modern mother, she surprised even her friends who commented on her extreme traditional beliefs on this matter because in other matters she was not that traditional. Her passionate observance of the New Year tradition is observed in the following quote:

Basically, my husband is considered the eldest in the family. It is the tradition for me to cook for the other members of the family. Nowadays I feel that a lot of other families don't actually cook it at home, they go out, but for me, I am still very old fashioned, no doubt I am so modern. Also, I like to cook. Definitely, the tradition has been, I have taken over the cooking. Those days when I got married, a long time ago, it was being done by my mother-in-law and it was always at her house. Because she is getting old, so that's why I said why doesn't the daughter in law do it? That's why after that, we have done it like this for the past seven or eight years already. It's a tradition, these are the culture. We are Chinese, in whichever country we are, we still have to continue doing it. It is not a matter of whether you are a Christian but because this is our culture, it's not a religion, except for praying, if you are Christian, you don't want to pray but it is still our culture to continue the Reunion Dinner. Even my son also, I told them, this is a must for you to continue on you know. Like when they get married, in the New Year the son must be in the mother's house. The daughters yes, I won't even let you come back because it is a tradition, you are already married out, you have to stay with your husband with their family in the first night. Unless, unless they said I don't mind, why don't we join up?

(Datin, 45, F)

Actually for reunion dinner, the married daughter should not be even in the house or with their own mom, and should be in the in-law. It should be the sister-in-law that should be taking over it.

(Joan, 45, F)

An interpretation of the ethnographic data reveals the women's role as the main player that was expected, accepted, and appreciated by informants of all age groups. At times, the mother might share the stage with the daughter-in-laws. There was even excitement in the air when a new-daughter-in-law was expected to cook her maiden dish for her first Reunion Dinner with her husband's family. For example, informant YBee (24, F) commented on her new sister-in-law who took charge of the cooking for the Reunion Dinner by preparing new dishes using new recipes.

Actually I don't help with the food, but I help to clean the floors. But this year is special; my sister in law is in charge of the preparation so my mother is just helping her. She is also very excited because before the Chinese New Year, she has already bought a book that teaches her how to cook those special dishes. So there is one dish which is very special, which is a very big sea cucumber, and she put in some stuffing inside which makes it very special. Before this my mother was doing all the cooking but since my sister-in-law is new, we have her to cook the first time but my mother is there to teach her also.

(YBee, 24, F)

The role of women in the New Year Reunion Dinner is undeniably important, as with any ritual. Within the culture of the East, which places more emphasis on relationship, connectedness and belonging (Swann and Bosson 2010), the negotiation of identity and role of women plays an important custodial role. As the norm of the gender role expected of them, this responsibility continues to rest on their shoulders since kin keeping is primarily a female activity (e.g. Rosenthal 1985). The woman's role as a family kin keeper is related to the greater extended family interaction and greater emphasis on family ritual at both extended family and lineage levels. By performing the relative roles that having, doing and being play in our lives and identities, we learn to define and remind ourselves of who we are (e.g. Gainer 1995; Cheal 1988). Although the younger generation are aware and expected to assist, especially among the womenfolk, this practice has been followed diligently by only a few.

7.4.4 Children's Role and Presence

The celebrations involving family rituals where the children play an active role have been discussed from Thanksgiving (Wallendorf and Arnould 1991), Christmas (Belk 1987) to Halloween (Belk 1990). The family, as a group, is organised and find meanings as a collective unit through the role played during the Reunion Dinner.

An interpretation of the ethnographic data collected for this study also reveals the important role of children and their presence in the celebration of the Reunion Dinner within the ecological context of culture and the family. Besides the mother, the presence of children was also singled out as a criterion for merriment and in creating the right mood for the occasion. Most informants would recall the times when they were young and how joyful the occasion was when the families were larger and had lived together in one house under the same roof as compared to today. The reminiscent on their past reunions to what they had at present provides a strong sense of belonging to the group where traditional family process of gathering in cohesion and organization of family plays a significant role in defining self through 'being' and 'having' (Satre 1998). Such nostalgic experiences also brought one back to when one was younger in time and space and a longing for the past (e.g. Holbrook 1993).

Among the single informants, they would reminiscent their childhood and preferred to have children around to make the event more memorable. One informant, Terry (travel agent, 44, F) who is single talked about the importance of having children around for the occasion because they would stir up nostalgic memories of her past and how she used to celebrate the event (e.g. Holbrook 1993; Holak and Havlena 1998).

I think the Chinese New Year is more significant for the younger generation. I can see my nephews and nieces enjoying themselves very much, especially those who have not reached their teens yet. Of

course, seeing them enjoying themselves brings back a lot of memories. I think the most enjoyable time for me was also when I was younger.

(Terry, 44, F)

An interpretation of the ethnographic data also reveals the importance of children, especially new additions or arrivals to the family kin, who signify the power of procreation and abundance. This good news could sometime offset bad news, such as missing family members who were unable to attend the Reunion Dinner. For example, Ken (M, 33) explained how the arrival of his nephew (i.e. his brother's baby son) compensated for those who could not attend the dinner. In the past, his family celebrated the Reunion Dinner with their extended families, who would occupy at least three tables. However, last year, his uncle and his family did not return for the dinner, but this was overcome and overlooked by the arrival of a new family member. This new arrival is critical because it is seen as a celebration of the continuity and the expansion of the future generation, especially where his grandfather was concerned. The bond of possession as in having his grandchildren, is an internal bonding of being, which Satre (1998) maintains that 'being' and 'having' are intertwined, meaning that we come to who we are through our possessions as the symbol of being be it through people or objects which become a part of our extended self. Belk (1988) further examines this relationship of 'having' and 'being' by approaching possession as the extended self. This is also acknowledged by William James (1950) cited in Swann and Bosson (2010) that states self as a source of continuity which gives the individual a sense of connectedness and unbrokenness (p.589). The following quote highlights the importance presence of the children within the lifecycle:

We have another so called new family member, because my younger brother just got married and they have had a new son. Finally, you have another, like from my family side, a younger generation coming in, which is a bit different. Something you feel like a continuation. So yes, merrier and a little bit different. Even though we have another family

that didn't come back, but my grandfather keeps on asking when is my brother coming back, still stuck in the traffic jam? So they came back on the day of the dinner itself, the traffic was quite bad, so they were stuck in the traffic for over four hours, or five to six hours. So my grandfather keep on asking me to call, when are they coming back, where are they now? Very eager to see la. This year is like we are one family less, rather than all the family members coming back. My mom did make some comments about this, like you are supposed to come back but like now they don't want to come back, it is not very nice. Even though my grandfather, come to think about it, I am sure my grandfather did expect all the sons will come back because all this while it is like a big family and normally we don't get to sit on the same table as we always have two to three tables. Actually it is nicer because everyone can sit on the same table this year.

(Ken, 33, M)

While the roles of women and mothers have proven to be critical in ensuring the continuity of this event, the presence of children provided an additional element of joy to the celebrations. Similar to the symbolic meanings which are attached to objects, the process, and taboos, the roles played by people are equally important, such as the role of women, mothers, and children as they are part of the constellation within the consumption of celebration. Being able to play these roles provided the concept of self and the sense of belonging as one connects and constructs their images and roles (e.g. Rosenthal 1985; Choo 1983). The family Reunion Dinner allows a closer examination to how the culture affects the family through the meaningful rituals that are associated with sense of family cohesion through the roles play in these case as the mother, daughter-in-law and children in general.

7.4.5 Collectivism and Individualism

An interpretation of the data that was collected in this study also reveals that, in some instances within the celebration, the feelings of being together had

changed from collectivist to individualist. In a few cases this had even progressed to the extent of boredom. The influence of technological innovation had changed the meaning of connection and reunion for some of the informants. One of the informants, Esther (Female, 42) complained about her siblings doing their own activities and being in their own world even though they were physically together as a family in the house. Although the family were gathered together, they were not connected since each was in their own space. Hence, she found this experience boring, especially after the meal had been eaten, because all of her family members would disappear from the gathering and individually doing their things separately in their own space.

Collectivism in this context holds that individuals are mutually interdependent and that group take priority over individuals while individualism refers to the assumption that individuals are ascendant over the groups which they belong (Hofstede 1980; Triandis 2001). A ritual embedded within the collectivism culture, consumers are found to display self-concept which differed from the group values. The following quote describes her frustration of her siblings who were in the same place but not the same space where the celebration is concerned:

Now to go back to your question on why I find it boring. It is because this world is advancing so fast with all the computers and internet and everything that even though we get back together, you know after dinner, after drinking, laughing and dinner, everybody is just sat there starring into their laptops surfing the net. You know everybody is having their own agenda. And there is less communication and less interaction. This is why I find it boring like you have your own space. When I was younger, there were no cafes or any places where you hang around with their friends. But now after dinner... poooff! All gone. With all these places existing now, they rather hang around outside with their friends at the cafe, because it is a place to be seen.

(Esther, 42, F)

Another informant, Yentl (21, student, M), also confirmed the norms of doing their own activities, especially surfing the internet, when each of his siblings would returned to their own rooms after their Reunion Dinner. At the same time, Kehsin (executive, 24, F) also acknowledged the lack of activities during the period following the meal, especially when she had travelled back to her hometown for this celebration:

After dinner, watching TV, my mom and dad will watch TV, me myself will be busy online and surfing. So, the same as me, my brother and sister will be staying in the room.

(Yentl, 21, M)

So far, very boring, nothing to do. Just stay at home, eat, sleep, eat, watching television.

(Kehsin, 24, F)

These acts of individualism were seen and found among the youngest generation, who were reported as being busy connecting themselves electronically in space even though they were physically at home. This reclaiming of personal space was reflected as ethnoscapas (see Appadurai 1991) as the younger generation continued to capture the mobile world in which they live in, as reflected in the information and technological space they yearned for during this family gathering. The self-knowledge or self-concept is derived from the culture which one socialised within the collectivism and individualism within the effects of culture. The consumption of the Reunion Dinner signifies the Chinese culture strong association with the collectivism values (Hofstede 1980). At the same also it also gave rise to the interdependent self, where the individual is connected to significant others, relatively undifferentiated but fluid across context and time where the display of self-concept may differ from the group.

The ethnographic data also reveals less merriment in the smaller families as compared to bigger families. This phenomenon could be felt even more strongly when larger families gathered together in smaller towns that have

less inhibition of celebration in terms of noise and group activities. By making the choice to celebrate the Reunion Dinner among immediate family members without the extended family members, the display of interdependent self was not as desirable as their previous gathering of the clan. One informant, HYPing (F, 24), preferred to have a big family to celebrate this event because she was able to reminisce about her youth. Her quote below shows how she missed the family gathering in her hometown when she was younger:

I prefer a big family. Actually I quite envy people who have a hometown to go back to because all the while I have been in KL... it is just that when I was younger, I used to go back to my mom's hometown in Kuantan, but right now no more, because at the time my grandparents is still around, and once after they passed away, my aunties from Kuantan all come to Kuala Lumpur instead. So, normally for the Chinese New Year we will celebrate in Kuala Lumpur, and not go back to our hometown to celebrate. So you know, during the Chinese New Year Kuala Lumpur is very quiet, not as happening as a small town.

(HYPing, 24, F)

The ethnographic data also reveals a yearning for the traditional Reunion Dinner which involved the extended family since self-concept may be relatively undifferentiated and fluid within the group across context and time. While most of the informants described and emphasised the gathering of their Reunion Dinner among their immediate families, there were some who questioned and queried the declined of the traditional gathering of extended families. Some participants might even revert from gathering among immediate family members to the extended families alternately each year to reconnect with their extended family. The collectivist culture of the Chinese is prevalent in the consumption of the Reunion Dinner where the involvement of the extended family is preferred and yet the pragmatism of celebrating among the immediate family is being negotiated and with the interdependent self exhibiting divergent motivations regarding self to rational decision and choices affecting the Reunion Dinner.

7.5 Play

An interpretation of the data suggests that the celebration of the Reunion Dinner incorporated the element of play in culture (see Huizinga 1938) and as part of the metaphors of consumption (e.g. Holt 1995) where the celebrants transform reality through play as they manoeuvre their paths to find an ideal path within its proper boundaries of time and space. The taxonomy of play as classified by Salem and Zimmerman (2006) are found in the play with food, gifts, myth and gambling games where the ritual is being re-experienced through an imagined reconstruction of reality that will influence the destinies of culture and its future especially in respect to the celebration of the Reunion Dinner within the Chinese culture.

7.5.1 Play through Food

An interpretation of the ethnographic data reveals the role of play through the appropriation of food that is consumed during the Reunion Dinner, from a simple home cooked meal to a grand meal. This study has found that the appropriation of food went beyond cooking and ensuring the success of the gathering. Food was cooked or purchased as ready cooked, for the table and sometimes a potluck (a communal meal where guests bring a dish each) might be order of that year's Reunion Dinner. The recipes of food and types of food were also adjusted due to health concerns and in consideration of different beliefs. The decision to dine in or out also differed; for example, some of the informants dined out just for the convenience, fun, and excuse to try something different for the occasion. Play is seen here as a free and voluntary activity which acts as a source of joy and amusement (Salem and Zimmerman 2006) for the pleasure of appreciation of good food or for exuberant, or joyous, behaviour (p. 146).

7.5.1.1 Re-appropriation of Food

The ethnographic data reveals that most of the informants were passionate about their food and the experience they got from eating it. These experiences might derive from the freshness of the ingredients, the authenticity of ingredients, and the taste of the food. With the changing modern lifestyle and the additional time needed to prepare and cook the food traditionally, some informants had chosen to accommodate their needs by re-appropriating the way they prepare and celebrate the Reunion Dinner. For example, instead of remembering how the Reunion Dinner was being celebrated and prepared previously by her parents and at her in-laws, Madame L (grandmother, 69, F) reported that she had simplified her dishes for her Reunion Dinner. Although she had passed the retirement age, she was still working at a private college and for this occasion, she did not even take an extra day off to cook. Instead, she purchased the best dishes available from restaurants to supplement the meal, regardless of the price. For the past two Reunion Dinners, she had actually bought dishes to supplement the spread of food on the table. However, during the first year of the study she did managed to cook at least one dish, which was the vegetarian dish, while her guests contributed the other dishes. The play element is found in the deployment of the food, where foods are bought to disguise the traditional home-cooked food where play presupposes such temporary acceptance.

Cheat on the preparation in the sense that my sister-in-law would be asked to bring the roast duck and the roast pork. Then we buy the “yee sang” from the restaurant. So, practically, this year, the only dish that I cooked was the vegetarian dish. So as years go by with more and more work, we find that we have to cut down on the actual time of preparation and try to make use of restaurant and the good will of family members to bring like pot luck for the family’s reunion.

(Madam L, 69, F)

The play of food was repeated in the following year of the Reunion Dinner where she actually bought all of the meat dishes from a famous restaurant

where she had a meal before during Christmas. She exclaimed that the meat dishes from roast pork and duck cost her more than a thousand Malaysian ringgit, which was equivalent to a meal at the restaurant itself. However, she believed that it was worth it and her family members had enjoyed the meal as much as the previous year. Her daughter even chipped in and bought the special “yee sang” for dinner as part of her contribution to the dinner. The deployment of food through the purchase of food to disguise the traditional home-cooked food also became a source of joy and amusement found within the context of play.

The ethnographic data also reveals families having to cook additional and special dishes that were set aside for family members who were not able to eat the spread of food due to health issues or personal beliefs. For example, one informant, Darren (lecturer, 33, M), whose father is a vegetarian had some dishes cooked specially for him. However, at the same time they would still have the big spread of traditional dishes for the rest of the family. The cooking style and the type of dishes had also been trimmed down and simplified. The dishes that were cooked have less meat, less oil and less salt in them and more vegetables dishes were prepared. This was especially needed for members of the family present who were either very old or who had undergone surgery, stroke, or sickness. For example, Cheong (70, M), who suffered a stroke in the last year, appreciated the dishes cooked by his mother. One of the informant's families also resorted to cooking organic shark fins for this Reunion Dinner since they had been eating organic food for the past few years (KehSin, 24, F). The banning of chicken was noted in one case, even to the extent of not having the chicken for prayers and the reunion meal. This was imposed by HYPing (24, F), whose mother had recently recovered from cancer.

An interpretation of the ethnographic data reveals changes made in food either through simplification, separation, and abstinence of food that were made based on the motives of the host. New recipes and changes in dishes were observed and noted. However, the effect of the day was seen continuously in play through the food consumed with the gathering of family

for a joyful time of consuming the meal. The ritual is played freely and voluntarily, which is within the limits for free improvisation to ensure that it is a source of enjoyment and amusement as the ritual is being re-experienced through the reconstruction of reality that will influence the culture and the celebration consumption of the Reunion Dinner.

7.5.1.2 Dining In or Dining Out

The ethnographic data collected in this study reveals that a majority of the informants have been dining in rather than dining out. However, there were cases in which some of the informants had also tried both dining in and dining out, depending on the situation, as necessary, for pleasure or enjoyment (Warde and Marens 2000). In the case of Eric (42, M), his Reunion Dinner included not only his family but also his wife's family. He reported that dining out was a necessity due to the large numbers of guests. The family however, also enjoyed the food and took pleasure in not having to prepare or cook such a large meal. The play as an action where the play connotes exuberant or joyous behaviour to the pleasure of appreciating and savouring of good food aids in celebration of the Reunion Dinner (Salem and Zimmerman 2006)

The ethnographic data collected also reveals that dining out for the Reunion Dinner had also been a long practice and tradition for some families. As for Cindy (35, F), she had been celebrating the Reunion Dinner at a restaurant for as long as she could remember because it enables her to enjoy the dinner without the hassle of cooking, and the preparation and work in the kitchen. She reported that they also changed restaurants and the types of food served from year to year, from Chinese food to a Western buffet which was held in a hotel. The purpose for dining out was to enable them to finish their Reunion Dinner earlier. By doing this, there would be additional time for her to prepare for the prayer, which took place after dinner. Lastly, dining in or out for the Reunion Dinner had been played by informants, either for pragmatic reasons or as an excuse to try a new experience for the occasion. Play as a free and voluntary activity which is a source of joy and amusement, and free for improvisation for the appreciation of time and space, is enacted here through

the Reunion Dinner. Through this play, consumers use the market to free themselves away from the straight jacket of social expectation of having it according to the traditional rite of dining at home with home cooked dishes by family members.

7.5.1.3 Playing with the Dish: “yee sang”

Although it has no traditional or cultural ties with Chinese culture, ‘yee sang’ is a popular Malaysian dish which has been adopted by the Chinese Malaysians. The ethnographic data reveals that many of the informants in this study have mentioned this dish as a favourite and important dish. Even though “yee sang” literally means raw fish, it is actually a serving of raw fish salad with many types of colourful, shredded, and pickled vegetables (such as lettuces, ginger, pickles, pomelo and the crunchy bits of sesame biscuits likened to croutons for the salad). Instead of the creamy sauce that is served with salad in the West, the dressing that is used for “yee sang” is a sweet and sour plum sauce. ‘Yee sang’ is a special and unique dish found only in Malaysia, ‘Yee’ and ‘sang’ in many Chinese dialects also means abundance and rising, it indirectly symbolises the increase of abundance which is a wish that most aspire for in the New Year.

The participant observations and data collected reveals participants coming together to eat this dish as the opening dish for the Reunion Dinner. Before eating, everyone at the table would trade good wishes while mixing the ‘yee sang’ salad together with their chopsticks. The play of make believe in the scooping of luck by deploying actions such as scooping and accompanied by scripts are evident during the consumption of this dish. Family and friends gathered during this period of fifteen days together to toss the ingredients of the ‘yee sang’ with their chopsticks as high as they possibly could while simultaneously shouting and offering good wishes of luck and fortune before eating a portion of this mixed salad. The belief is that the higher the toss, the greater the fortune. This event is also called ‘lou hei’ or ‘lou sang’ because it is synonymous with the actions of the ‘raising of good luck’ when the celebrants cheer and toss the salad: ‘lou’ means to scoop, ‘hei’ is luck, and ‘sang’ is alive.

This scooping is also found in Japanese tradition. For example, the Japanese have a practice of scooping rice which beckoning good luck (e.g. Daniels 2003). This free and voluntarily act of playing with the food which presupposes the temporary of acceptance through action and submitting one's fate in an imaginary milieu is defined as play (Appendix B).

An interpretation of the ethnographic data of this study reveals many informants who were passionate and continue to play with this dish which is a source of joy and appreciation of the imaginary milieu surrounding the meaning of this dish 'yee sang' when consumed through the acts of scooping of luck. For example, Datin (mother, 45, F) served this dish for many meals throughout the celebration. She served it first for the Reunion Dinner on the eve of the New Year at her own home. She would then serve it on the second day when she returned to her parents' home for their Reunion Dinner. Then she would also serve it on the seventh day of the festival, which was also known as the day of birthday for all, or the 'human day', or the birthday for mankind. Traditionally 'yee sang' is meant to be served on the seventh day of the Chinese New Year, but since it has gained popularity it is served almost at every meal, even before the commencement of the celebration, before the eve of the New Year, and throughout the fifteen days of celebration. The emphasis this dish and the meanings attached to the consumption which is play as a free and voluntarily activity to fulfil a sacramental function in the welcoming of the New Year with a special awareness of a second reality that is beyond the real life in the pursuit of luck, success and prosperity.

We always have "yee sang". So I normally have it for the reunion night, and I have it for the opening, the second day. So I always have it here, the reunion night is a must, it is always a must.

(Datin, 45, F)

From the ethnographic data, it was noted that this dish 'yee sang' was already advertised and served in restaurants even before the eve, especially in Malaysian cities. One informant KaMei (25, F, single) actually commented on this dish when asked about her family Reunion Dinner. Instead of narrating

her family Reunion Dinner, she was telling how she had thoroughly enjoyed having this dish with her colleagues before celebrating for her Reunion Dinner. She sounded happier when commenting on the moments she had in consuming this dish with her colleagues as compared to her own Reunion Dinner. Not even the special organic shark fin soup served in her family Reunion Dinner could be compared to this dish which she had consumed with her colleagues. The play of this dish which is a source of joy and appreciation of the imaginary milieu surrounding the meaning of this dish 'yee sang' when consumed through the acts of scooping of luck exhibits the characteristics of play where liberty and suspension of reality occur.

Actually, my new year is just like normal, but before that my company, among our team mates we will have a 'low sang', pre-eve, really nice. Then after that I will go back to our home town, our family is not big, just four of us, so we will have just a small dinner.

(KaMei, 25, F)

An interpretation of the ethnographic data suggest that this dish 'yee sang' was also a deciding factor for the choice of venue for dining out due to the regulated procedures associated with play.. The 'yee sang' had been a very important dish for the informant Cindy (35, F), so much so that this dish is an essential item in her Reunion Dinner, especially when she had been celebrating it by dining out in restaurants over the past years. Being the oldest sibling in her family, she would recommend the restaurants but her mother would ultimately make the final decision based on the criteria that the 'yee sang' was available at that restaurant. The ritual in having this dish as part of the costumes, solemn overture, appropriate liturgy and procedures of the play as in the consumption Reunion Dinner is seen through the play of dish which is an appreciation of the imaginary milieu surrounding the meaning of this dish 'yee sang' when consumed through the acts of scooping of luck.

They don't mind which restaurants. For her, it is still okay as long as she has the 'yee sang'. Also the time when I called the hotel, I will ask

if they have the 'yee sang' in the hotel, if not we will not go there. It is like a custom, we must have the 'yee sang'. In fact 'yee sang' is one of our favourite dishes and it is only available during the Chinese New Year.

(Cindy, 35, F)

An interpretation of the ethnographic data collected in this study reveals the 'yee sang' as a dish that indirectly summed up the overall belief and wishes for those gathering around the table during the Reunion Dinner and Lunar New Year celebration. It forms the epitome of a great meal ahead because it starts the meal with the direct involvement of everyone sitting around the table who would all toss the dish into the air at the same time to mix it. Their actions, words and behaviour in consuming this dish (as in the raking and scooping in of the new and the gathering of good luck) signify how they beckoned the New Year for abundance and prosperity as the play presupposes the temporary acceptance of these wishes.. The efforts taken and the price one has to pay do not hinder one from enjoying what is deemed priceless. The popularity of 'yee sang' has also attracted marketers to commercialise the dish into pre-packaged food which is now available in many Malaysian supermarkets, and even exported to nearby countries

Originally a dish which used the importance and the presence of fish to signify abundance, the 'yee sang' has also evolved to the point where even the fish could be replaced with other ingredients , such as imported salmon, seaweed, jellyfish, or even fruits. Over the years, there have been many variants of 'yee sang', which have changed it completely from its origin as a dish that was designed for all including vegetarians by using only fruits as the main ingredients. The remove and replacement of items but within the limits of improvisation of the meanings of the food as one continues to deploy the action of tossing and scooping for luck exhibits the characteristics of play where liberty and suspension of reality occur.

7.5.2 Play through Gifting

An interpretation of the ethnographic data collected in this study reveals the gifting of money and food have been playing through the act of free and voluntary activity. It can also be improvised yet within the limits and as a source of joy and amusement while at the same time submitting one's fate in an imaginary milieu in this case of happiness and luck. (Salem and Zimmerman 2006)

An interpretation of the ethnographic data collected in this study reveals that the giving of monies in red packets, called 'angpow', was usually done by hand when greetings and well-wishes were offered to the giver. These red packets were given by the married to those who are single, especially to children and young adolescents. The tradition of giving had also evolved around the literary meanings of using the money to suppress or put down the evil spirit during this period. This voluntarily acts of giving which is a source of joy and amusement to both the giver and recipient denote the notion and taxonomy of play. The following quote describes the traditional meanings of angpow:

This is called 'yah sui chien', this is the northern Chinese tradition. You are supposed to put the money, I mean the 'angpow', under the pillow and then you sleep over it, meaning yah sui. It is for everybody, because long ago, originally there is one monster called 'siu' who likes to frighten the kids only. It is like a story, old story about an old couple who finally had a son and was given this red packet thing, so when the monster tried to scared the kids, and when the monster saw the red packet, and was frightened and ran away, so that was what happened, so later on when we say 'yah sui'.

Ken (33, M)

The participation observation and the data collected in this study noted that many of the younger generation participants were not only able to relate to the

reasons and the novelty for the gift of money in the 'angpow', but they were also continuing and preserving the novelty in keeping this myth alive. By following the ritual as in the solemn overture and the placement of the gift voluntarily and freely, the notion of play is in place. For example, they would follow the traditional practice in keeping the money under their pillow to sleep over it for a night to signify the crossing over to the New Year. For example YBee (26, single, F) and SWei (26, single, F) would take the 'angpow' given by their mothers and placed them under their pillow for that night. This was also evident in the participant observation data collected which reveals the informant Amy (39, single, F), placing the gift of money under her pillow after receiving them from her parents:

Actually my mom will give me and ask me to put it under the pillow for one night. The purpose is that you are one year older like symbolise you are one year older.

(SWei, 26, F)

Besides playing with the placement of the gift of money, the gifts of food were also at play here as there are again a free and voluntarily activity which may be improvised within the limits. An interpretation of the ethnographic data reveals that the gifting of food was revered and given in accordance to the status of the receiver. It was not just a symbolic exchange of good wishes of luck and prosperity, but it could also renew the closeness of their ties. On the other hand, some of the gifts received could also be given to others in order not to waste food as the improvisation provides the play in action as one does it voluntarily.

We will buy food, usually those more expensive gifts for our close family members but those friends we will give them those biscuits and gifts which we can recycle.

(Madam L, 69, F)

The consuming of play within the interpersonal actions through the gifting practices reflects gift giving beyond the purely dyadic, individualistic or

economic reasons (e.g. Giesler 2006, Joy 2001). Instead gift giving construct a meaningful social interaction and a social solidarity that reveals the complex social cultural construction of the Chinese consumers who are giving as more than just as an aggregate dyadic interaction rituals. At the same time gifts are sometimes being recycled as it is a free and voluntarily activity which is free for improvisation within the celebration of the Reunion Dinner.

7.5.3 Playing with Myth and Taboo

During the participant observation and data collection, it was noted that the participants continued to uphold some of the taboos and rites of the celebration of the Lunar New Year, especially in matters associated with luck and prosperity as evident in the choices of food consumed within the context of their symbolic meaning. For example, the cleaning of the house before the celebration was an important chore because one was not allowed to clean the house on the first day of the New Year because the luck which came in for the New Year would be swept away. In contrast, Madame B (director, single, 59) did not believe in any of the taboos pertaining to cleaning. Instead she believed that taboo was a myth created by the maid for the convenience of the servants back in the old days. This story was told by her 85 year old mother, and unlike the convention beliefs which were held by others, her family did not observe the cleaning taboo as she is free to do so as play allows for free improvisation and act as a voluntary activity. The following quote demonstrates her disbelief in the taboo of not cleaning the house on the first day:

For my family, no taboos. It is the mother who says that... the first day of the New Year, you cannot sweep the floor but she said no, it's not true. She said you know why people said that you cannot sweep the floor? Because in the old Chinese traditional houses with rich families, they used to have a lot of maids. So the maid wanted to take leave for the festival, so they will tell the boss to say the first day not good to sweep, don't clean, don't sweep so that they can rest a day. If they

didn't say this then the maids got no time to rest, 365 days they had to work. So they were finding an excuse for the first day of the Chinese New Year, so that they did not need to work.

(Madam Bee, 50, F)

Another informant, Joan acknowledged the cleaning taboo but she had not been practicing it since her family had embraced Christianity. This was particularly true of anything pertaining to luck. Instead, she found it rather amusing that those around her would remind her of the taboo. This voluntary activity which removes the nature of mysterious and sacramental function while at the same time a source of amusement constitute the play element. The following example illustrates her amusement regarding the belief in taboos when a third party reminded her of it:

But I always remember when we were young, yes. Before 12 o'clock midnight, we must shower, we must clean the house, and we must hide the broom and everything. But for the last, I think ten years; we have not practiced this taboo. But I have a neighbour who tells me in advance not to leave my broom nearby in case when they open the door they will see my broom. The old lady next door told me that.

(Joan, 45, F)

The ethnographic data collected also reveals another taboo that is being upheld by the informants, that is the tradition of staying up or keeping awake on the eve of New Year. By staying up to the early hours of the New Year, one is able to collect additional years for their elders, especially their parents, to ensure that they have longevity. This voluntary activity which one deploy in submitting one's fate in the imaginary milieu constitute the play in culture. The participant observation and data collected reveals this observance by the informant Amy (39, single, F) who would stay awake until past midnight even when her guests had left for the night. According to Amy, she needed to stay awake to ensure her parents would live longer since they were past their 70s. Another informant, Val (21, student, M) followed this tradition strictly by staying awake on the eve of the New Year. He kept vigil to the following day

and only went to sleep when the sun rose. His belief in this ritual had grown even stronger due to his father's recent death. For the younger generation the most significant meaning of the New Year was the collection of the 'angpow' or gift money, as well as wearing new clothes and having new gifts. However, for Val (21, M), he was willing to forgo the collection of his 'angpows' because he was still asleep when the guests came the following day. The following quote reflects his belief and strong determination in following the myth for longevity through his action, even at his young age through a voluntary action in submitting one's fate through the deployment of action by keeping vigil constitute the taxonomy of play:

After the meal I remember, yes, I will try my best to be awake, because I heard from my uncle that if a son is awake for the whole night, especially on the new year eve, it will be very good for your parents, they will be healthy, so I will try to be awake and do some things, never sleep. I gambled, rested, ate, played with the computer, and chit chatted. The minute that I saw the sun rise I quickly went to sleep. So, my sister will collect my 'angpow' on my behalf. I think she also will take some of mine without me knowing.

(Val, 21, M)

The activities and taboos adhered and continuously played are evidence of what Freud enumerates as the fundamental tensions between civilisation and the individuals who live within it (Freud 1962). However, across all generations, many are aware, accept and continue practicing these New Year rites. No one will maintain that they are as important for life as "control over the forces of nature, yet no one would care to put them in the background as trivialities" (Freud, 1962, p. 40). The ritual consumption of taboos and the activities around the Reunion Dinner assemble social meanings to negotiate future meanings for the Chinese consumers which construct the consumption culture theory.

7.5.4 Play through Games and Gambling

An interpretation of the ethnographic data reveals that gambling is a popular past time in the New Year celebration, beside other card games that are played by the celebrants without the involvement of monies. The younger members of the family were most excited with the gambling session which they were allowed to partake. It was also a time for one to test their luck especially with the on going celebration for prosperity and good wishes. Besides, this was also another way to share the joy of prosperity and happiness by sharing their winnings or loses among family members instead of giving it to strangers (see Belk 2010). This is also the only time when gambling is permitted throughout the year. From the participant observation notes, it was noted that one family actually got together around the table, with grandmother, children and grandchildren playing the game twenty-one. Grandchildren as young as seven to ten were taught and exposed to gambling through playing a game of twenty-one or black jack using money, while the elders and their parents sat beside them watching and guiding them. Play has been defined as free, voluntarily and a source of joy and amusement and an action that exclude material interest but for the constant relationship between chance and profits (Salem and Zimmerman 2006). It is also play within the limits which allows free improvisation and yet governed by rules of play such as the maximum bets allowed to be waged.

An interpretation of the ethnographic data collected reveals that many informants, regardless of age, gender and religion, gambled after the Reunion Dinner by playing games and cards to pass the time together. The act of gambling is similar to the act of play which is free and a voluntarily activity and a source of joy and amusement where players play within the limits of rules and winning is the result of fate and not of triumphing over an adversary. This allows participants to sit around awaiting the outcome as they play the game in the appreciation and the celebration of the Reunion Dinner. The gambling also reveals how family normalise, rationalise and legitimise the gambling during this period only (Humphrey 2010). For example, Joan (45, mother, F),

whose family members are all Christians, would also play card games after the Reunion Dinner as a continuity of togetherness, which is evident in the quote below:

We gamble in the evening after eating and chatted. After that, the first thing we did is to open the table (hoi toi) or gamble, play mah-jong.

(Joan, 45, F)

An interpretation of the ethnographic data collected in this study suggests that many of the younger generation informants would also be staying awake by playing games in the appreciation and joy of the celebration of the Lunar New Year. The informants, Darren (Male, 33) and Sam (Female 22) would pass the time together with family members after the Reunion Dinner by playing games. The informants would either gamble, played games or just gathered around while waiting for the actual time to pray and to usher in the New Year. This merriment may end after the prayers were conducted or it might last until the early hours in the morning. The person who wins is considered to have been successful in capturing the good fortune of the New Year.

In the living room we just want to have fun. We will sit on the floor. Some of them would be asleep early, like some at 10pm, while some fall asleep later. So then they get up. Only we start to play, and this lasts until 4 in the morning.

(Darren, 33, M)

The ethnographic data also reveals another favourite past-time activity, especially after the Reunion Dinner, was the gathering around the living room, either to watch the television or to play cards. Those who did not play any games or gamble would gather around the living room. They would be chatting and eating while watching the live-telecast Chinese New Year programmes. These activities were also considered to be useful by some of the informants in this study because they kept them awake in fulfilling the belief that by keeping vigil till the early hours of the morning they would be able to increase the longevity of their parents. Overall, the activities of participation and playing of games brought the family closer together with a

common goal in the pursuit of happiness, longevity, and prosperity as they provide the psychological benefits and the self-concept dynamics (see Loroz 2004).

Table 7.1: The Interplay of Solidarity, Symbolism, Self-concept and Play as Meanings of Identity in the Consumption of the Reunion Dinner

Identity Through	Sub-Themes	Meanings of Identity within the Consumption of the Reunion Dinner
Consumption for Solidarity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gathering as Thanksgiving Phenomena • Bonding in preparation • Wait together • Reconnection vs. reunion through space and time • Inclusion of staff, relatives and friends • Inclusion of ancestors • Appropriation of food 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintenance the celebration among patriarchal kin only for the Reunion Dinner and at the ancestor homes for continuing and reciprocal relationship with the living and dead • Negotiate the traditional venue at the ancestor home to restaurants or other homes, or matriarchal homes • Negotiate food for the ancestor worship versus those consuming the food and with their religious beliefs • Negotiate the time from dinner to lunch to include friends and family of friends
Consumption for its Symbolism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Symbolism of time – as crossing over, end of works • Food – negotiations of abundance in quality, quantity, leftovers, storage of uncooked food • Symbolism in names of food and food type, for consumption, storage and prayers • Practices of universalism and particularism • Cleanliness and taboos of dirt • Heirloom objects, nostalgic moments • Gifting – money and food 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Negotiation of identity incorporation the beliefs in the symbolism of time and food for the living and the dead • Construct special food for prayers especially favourite food for the deceased (continue relationship with living and dead) • Maintenance of food types to reflect the heritage of the ethnic groups • Food with special meanings will construct wealth, happiness and a successful year to personify self • Maintenance of the gifting and nostalgia through objects and heirloom artefacts through the extended self
Consumption for Self concept	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personification of self • Cuisine as social identity • Roles of women: mother, daughter-in-law • Patrilineal society of the Chinese • Collectivism/individualism 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Construct a new/future/better self through the ritual of the celebration and prayers • Negotiation of the old self versus the new self after the Reunion Dinner based on the calendar • Gifting of money to reflect status of giver
Consumption through Play	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Re-appropriation of food • Dining in/Dining out • Play with food/gifts • Games and gambling 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Construct better future by playing with food vs. table manners • Negotiate extended self through gifting of money to gifts to the recycle of gifts • Maintain self through collectivism

Source: This study

7.6 Summary

The meanings of identity through the consumption of the Reunion Dinner are manifested through the scheme of things, speech, dress, food and activities that form consumption that not only mirror self but also construct or deconstruct self as it repeatedly seek and identity through things consumed. The themes of solidarity, symbolism, self-concept and play provide the meanings of identity within the consumption of the Lunar Reunion Dinner. The Reunion Dinner is found to be a process and not an event in itself. Hence, the consumption of this event cannot be compartmentalised and restructured to the metaphors of classification, integration, experience or play individually (see Holt 1995) or even identified as being sacred or secular, or positive and negative (e.g. Hirschman and La Barbera 1989; Saso 1965). By assigning the activities around the lives of the consumers that serve its tension, its mirth and its fun, these unique meanings provide an illustration on how ritual consumption continue to construct their identity within and enhance the dimension of the consumer culture theory which addresses consumer action, market place and cultural meanings.

Themes surrounding the celebration showed participants seeking success, wealth and happiness through symbolic action and objects through the interplay of the four elements of solidarity, symbolism, self-concept and play. Rational choices where Chinese ethnicity is concerned will cause them to make the same collective choices through individual actions. Over time, the Chinese New Year celebrates the virtues that bind the celebrants together with the spirit of resilience, determination and adaptability at the same time to reflect their identity. The Malaysian Chinese are seen to be both flexible and particularist at the same time. The symbolic meaning of food in the Chinese New Year festival have not changed over time, neither has the nostalgia for the reunion meal, nor the role of the women and children while play element ensure the ritual is being experienced through an imagined reconstruction of reality.

Lastly, the consumption of the Reunion Dinner has been identified as a ritualistic consumption through the use of goods, service and experience in addressing the social cultural, experiential, symbolic and ideological aspects of consumption under the umbrella of the consumer culture theory (CCT). The themes surrounding the Reunion Dinner also correspond to the heightened sense of communal bonding and spiritual commitment in the celebration of excess of festivals as consumers continue to identify themselves with the Lunar Reunion Dinner.

Chapter 8: Contribution, Implication, and Further Research

8.1 Introduction

The aim of this research was to explicate the festival consumption of the Reunion Dinner of the Chinese New Year by exploring the consumption cultural meanings of the Reunion Dinner event among the celebrants over the years. A discussion of the findings from this study offers parallel and distinctive insights into the Consumer Cultural Theory (CCT). Section 8.2 of this chapter provides a summary of the key findings of the study found within the theoretical framework, incorporating four central themes (i.e. solidarity, symbolism, self-concept and play) being integral elements that projects the consumer identity from a cultural myth that transform their ideological belief to how it is being celebrated today. Section 8.3 considers some of the theoretical implications of this study and it discusses the key contributions and theoretical implications. Section 8.4 considers the implications for practice for marketers, while Section 8.5 discusses the limitations and direction for future research.

8.2 Summary of Key Findings

An interpretation of the ethnographic data suggests that the interplay of identity of found within the emerging themes namely solidarity, symbolism, self concept and play. These four factors appeared to address the self presentation or identity within the CCT though the celebration consumption of the Reunion Dinner as they supported themes which were found to be integral of each other as operating values to reflect the identity of the consumers (see Schau and Gilly 2003; Wiley 1994).

8.2.1 Solidarity

An interpretation of the ethnographic data reveals that Reunion Dinner was a day of family togetherness as the family form a union to bond again for the future. It is also a time to reconnect, to preserve and reinforce kinship ties beyond to extended family members. This family solidarity among the clan especially with the patriarchal norms is still prevalent in the Chinese society which includes the praying to the ancestors of the clan and the various spirits and deities which have been prayed previously. Ancestors and spirits are offered prayer and food before the Reunion Dinner was consumed as the consumption of the Reunion Dinner involved both the living and non-living coming together to cross over the physical and spiritual boundaries (Comber 1954; Choo 1983; Lindridge 2005). This reflects the multilevel identity through the multi-level religious beliefs from the ancestors worship and Chinese religions consisting of Buddhism and Taoism (Lee and Tan 2000). Solidarity continued to be reinforced by the informants through the food preparation and appropriation through the negotiations and adjustment to accommodate the different dietary needs of family members arising due to difference in faith and health reasons (Lindridge 2005). The inclusion of non-family members (staff, friends, family of friends) reflects the transformational identity of family solidarity across to all consuming the Reunion Dinner.

The ideological and traditional rite of the consumption Reunion Dinner, in particular to the venue and time, is negotiated to reinforce and make visible the meaning of solidarity. The symbolic role of venue or place is traditionally at the ancestral home of the patriarchal system, or the home of the oldest member of the family or the home of the grandparents. Consumers have negotiated the meanings attached to place from consuming the Reunion Dinner at other places, such as the home of the younger generation, the home of the wife's family, the home of the matriarchal system and dining out in restaurants. The sense of place which reveals the emotional bonds and behavioural of the patriarchal system which the Chinese culture derives is being negotiated as the place is no longer an attachment of identity and a sense of well-being but instead for the solidarity which emerged from the

involvement among people and between people and the place. By following tradition and returning to the same place can also result entrapment and drudgery (Brown and Perkins 1992). Celebrants have also alternate between dining in and dining out for their Reunion Dinner in the name of solidarity. The meaning of time has also been negotiate, since time has been defined as a social institution (Urry 1995) whereby it is '*an objectively given social category of thought*' (p.3) produced within society. Therefore, the solidarity of the family relations and social hierarchies are maintained and negotiated through the consumption of the Reunion Dinner in the name of solidarity through place, time and food as identity is characterised by how a person defines himself/herself as an individual and how he/she connects to others and social groups in affiliative relationships (Kleine et al 1995). This affiliative identity helps to situate the self within the social world and for communicating the identity to the audience.

8.2.2 Symbolism

The ethnographic data reveals the consumption of the Reunion Dinner celebrate the crossing over time to a New Year which are made visible through the symbolic renewal of commitment to a new threshold of time (e.g. the end of work) for celebration, and for casting out of the old for the introduction of the new or special heirloom objects. Products and signs are consumed to construct the social reality of what they are going through with the assistance of the symbolism behind the objects consumed and actions displayed (Belk 1988). These signs and symbols are used to express both individual and affiliative identity of 'me' vs. 'we' which also describe operating identities as well as ideal identity (Schau and Gilly 2003, Wiley 1994). Operating values are those that practice by social group that are manifest in the behaviours while idea values are those that a given person/group aspire to have. Through the symbolism of event and activities from cooking and preparation of the food and dining provide the operating values as a family unit coming together on the last day of the year to usher in the Lunar New

Year while the symbolism of food and its meanings provided the idea values of the Chinese in aspiring for success, wealth, happiness and longevity.

The symbolism of food served during festivals often denotes abundance and as a special occasion with similar of abundance as the celebrations of Thanksgiving (Wallendorf and Arnould 1991) and Christmas (Caplow 1982). Besides the negotiation of abundance, the universalism and particularism of food were also demonstrated through the symbolic meanings of the objects within the eastern culture. The negotiation of material abundance went beyond the feasting, but to the important role of storage from the storing of excess cooked food to uncooked food. The efforts, time and attention towards the preparation of food for consuming and storing provided psychological explanation on continuity of self through symbolism behind the types of food which range from meats (chicken as a whole and the offal of animals), seafood to vegetables (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981).

The foods served are chosen for their meanings and symbolism to ensure a better future, abundance, and prosperity. The symbolism of food again goes beyond those served for the living to the dead (ancestors). The food offered for prayers acts as a vessel for the requests of the family. Meanings of words for the food served during the ritual consumption of the Reunion Dinner are frequently literally associated to the prayers, request and endowment for abundance, prosperity and health (e.g. mandarin oranges in Cantonese are called 'kum', which translates as gold). The deliberation consumption of food and objects with symbolic meaning in either sounds or linguistic association to the physical characteristics or food rhymes of the Reunion Dinner were employed in the negotiating abundance to the household and more broadly within the culture of the Chinese.

This research has also highlighted the symbolism of giving through food and money. The gift of money is traditionally given by married relatives and friends to unmarried recipients for the purpose of commemorating the event and as a sign of abundance and sharing. The interpretation of data suggests marital status being revered as status of privilege in which one should be thankful

and proud of the ability to procreate and to expand the clan. By giving of the monies in red packet or 'angpow', one is sharing the joy through the wrapping of good wishes found and to be passed to others to foster the giving and receiving of luck. However, the sharing of gift within the family (Belk 2010) is no longer a privilege or limited to the married celebrants. Instead siblings regardless of the marital status were sharing and giving the gift of monies to parents and their loved ones. Gift exchange through the monies and food is not only a social obligation but also a symbolic exchange of good wishes of luck and prosperity (Joy 2001) besides being an objective manifestation of self to respond openly to the extended self (e.g. Caplow et al. 1982; Holbrook and Schindler 2004).

8.2.3 Self -Concept

The Reunion Dinner is not just a celebration to cross over to the Lunar New Year, but also to ensure that the coming year will be a better one. A better year is dependent on the Chinese calendar, a system based on Chinese zodiac system named after the twelve zodiacal animals. The zodiac animal is believed to be the main factor in each person's life that gives him/her the traits of success and happiness. The anticipation and the role of future orientation in time encourage informants to take affirmative actions through the offerings of prayers and burning of joss papers in the temple to reduce the risk associated with their future as predicted by the zodiac for that year (Bergada 1990). These shared meanings of symbols in the zodiac for luck, success and prosperity have propelled consumers to negotiate the interpretation by taking actions to protect, maintain or enhance the self-concept in the pursuit of happiness, success and wealth (Solomon 1983 Belk 1988; Holbrook 1992; Kleine et al. 1995), where mushrooming of retailing to these effect are evident across the world through feng-sui and geomancy shops.

The consumption of the Reunion Dinner represent cultural universalism and practices of particularism through the different groups of Chinese which vary through their dialect speaking group, or region where their ancestors

originated from. By consuming the particular dish and cuisine embedded with historical and cultural meanings, the informants identify themselves with their ancestors and projecting their pride and sense of belonging. Although the traditional practices of the Chinese culture are derived from the patriarchal system, matriarchal system has also been the frame of reference for some. The consuming of these foods enables the acts of self-definition and the collective definition at the same time. The multiple levels of self from an individual to the family, or group and community membership can be maintained through food. For example the specific dish originated from the patriarchal system may be important to identify oneself in the Chinese culture, as a family and as a group while the food derived from the matriarchal family may also identify the self individually when one has to follow the patriarch culture and rules especially for married women.

Ethnicity and gender have been regarded as important social identities within the construction of self and identity (Swann and Bosson 2010). Mothers continue to play the role of custodian (see Freedman 1970; Rosenthal 1985; Leach and Braithwaite 1996) while the role of daughter in-law is equally emphasised, in particular, the new daughter-in-law who celebrates her first Reunion Dinner with her new family. She is expected to help out with the cooking because she would be expected to take a custodian role in the future. The arrival of new family members, which signifies the expansion and the future of the family's besides reaffirming the ability to procreate among kin, is also being celebrated anxiously. The role and bond of the possession through children and grandchildren declare the being and having (Satre 1998) which become a part of our extended self (Belk 1988). By playing these roles, the self becomes a source of continuity which provides the individual self a sense of connectedness as one continues to construct and maintain one's role and image accordingly (Rosenthal 1985; Gainer 1995). The roles played by women, mothers and children are part of the constellations within the consumption of the Reunion Dinner which they identify themselves with.

The consumption of the Reunion Dinner reaffirms the Chinese strong association with the collectivism values (Hofstede 1980). At the same time it

also gave rise to the interdependent self where families were also found to be celebrating only among the immediate family as a separate unit. The independent self is also found where individuals would separate themselves from the family after the meal by pursuing their own activities individually. Though the collectivist culture of the Chinese is prevalent in the consumption of the Reunion Dinner where the involvement of the extended family is preferred but celebrating among the immediately family is prevailed as the interdependent self continue to exhibit divergent motivation regarding self in rational decision and choices.

8.2.4 Play

The celebration consumption of the Reunion Dinner has incorporated the element of play in culture (Huizinga 1938) which forms part of the metaphors of consumption whereby the celebrants transform reality through play as they experienced and reconstruct the imagined reality (Holt 1995). The taxonomy of play classified by Salem and Zimmerman (2006) are found in the play with food, gifts, myths and gambling activities where the ritual is being re-experienced through an imagine reconstruction of reality which will influence the destiny of culture and its future.

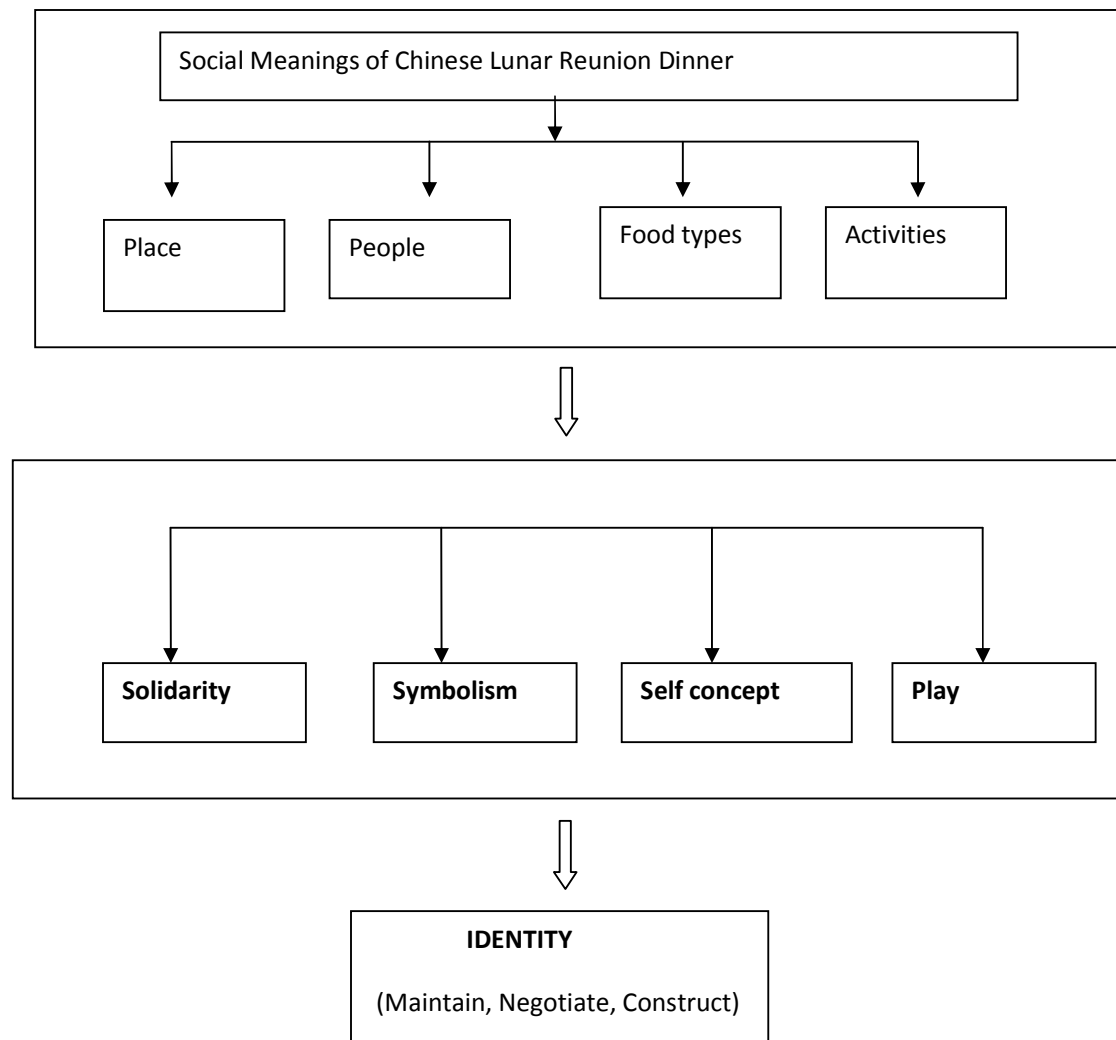
The appropriation of food went beyond cooking special dishes to purchasing the foods from restaurants and disguised as food cooked as informants were passionate about their food and the experience they get from eating. Play is enacted as a free and voluntarily activity which acts as a source of joy and amusement to the appreciation of the savour of good food. The play of food literary in the dish called 'yee sang' further produce a solemn overture and appropriate liturgy in welcoming the New Year. Instead, the trading of good wishes is done by mixing the salad together with their chopsticks signifying the scooping of luck through the deployments of scripts as they play with the dish. The higher the dish is tossed upwards while shouting and cheering for good wishes meant the more luck and success for the New Year to come. This free and voluntary act of playing with the food by tossing them around

presupposes the temporary acceptance though action and submitting of one's fate to an imaginary milieu as one seeks the aspiration of wealth, happiness and longevity.

The element of play is also demonstrated through the hiding of the gift of money under the pillow by preserving the myth of frightening the evil during the crossing over to the New Year. Gifting of food were revered and given according to status and for the symbolic exchange of good wishes and prosperity through the choice of food. At the same time, food received could also be given away as recycling of gifts providing an avenue of play as through free improvisation within the limits and rules of the celebration. Myths were being negotiated from keeping vigil to ensuring the longevity, of the taboos of black colour and not sweeping of the floor on the eve, while gambling remains a popular past time during the New Year celebrations regardless of age and religious beliefs. The family that played together will bring the family closer together with a common goal to share happiness and seek prosperity as they provide the psychological benefits and the self-concept dynamics (Loroz 2004). Lastly, this interplay between the elements of solidarity, symbolism, self-concept and the manifestation of play through the consumption of objects and actions contributes to the consumer identity projects domain under the Consumption Cultural Theory (CCT).

This study provides a cultural approach in discussing the consumption of an extraordinary event filled with delight and showing hedonic consumption and symbolic interactionism where consumers maintain, negotiate and construct their identities are illustrated in the framework in Table 8.1

Table 8.1 A Framework of Identity Interplay in the Consumption of Lunar Reunion Dinner: A Case Study of Malaysian Chinese



Source: This study

8.3 Key Contribution and Theoretical Implications

Consumption is not only constructed by goods but it also construct goods as it construct self, culture and identity, This study supports CCT theoretical perspectives that address the symbiotic relationships between consumer actions, the market place and the cultural meanings within the domain of the identity projects. Consumption is use by consumers to maintain their sense of

identity through times and define themselves in relationship to other people which lies within the consumer culture theory.

In our increasingly multicultural world order, where the circulation of consumer goods go beyond national and cultural borders is no longer an exception to a cultural norm but a model for the construction of consumer identity. Since the marketplace forms a crossroad for multiple voices claiming a place on the stage of culture, the consuming subjects is always and already pulled between personal and public claim on his/her attention and he/she is always and already divided by his/her allegiance to self, culture, country and the world at large (Oswald 1999). Within the multicultural society of Malaysia, this study explores the consumer culture of the Malaysian Chinese that supports the heterogeneity distributions of the consumption practice and the multiplicities of the overlapping cultural groupings within the multicultural society that is globalised and within the market capitalism environment. Previous studies within the CCT were conducted within the western culture, and currently penetrating to Turkey (Sandikci and Ger 2010), China (Dong and Tian 2009), Hong Kong and Singapore (Cayla et al. 2008). This study extends to the second and third world societies. It contributes to the cultural scope of a pluralism society and multi-ethnic society with the developing country in the east where the Malaysian Chinese play a minority role. However, this study does not incorporate the acculturation phenomena as the enduring of Chinese culture and attachment to its origin still permeates within their identity even though there are intermarriages.

This social arrangement in which relations between the lived culture and social resources are mediated by the Malaysian Chinese consumers as they are mediated through the markets through the consumption as found within the context of the Reunion Dinner. It has gone beyond the food, objects and activities as seen in the CCT cases of consumption of similar celebration such as Christmas and gifting to other activities to support self identity. While the sense of place has been traditionally used to reflect the identity of the family unit within the patriarchal norm of the Chinese culture, it has also been used to reflect the nature of self that is beyond individualism and rationalism.

Within the metaphor of play, this Reunion Dinner consumption has expanded the role of play into a higher level within the consumption of rites which is dynamic and different over time, which not only changes in space and time but also use to personify one for the future self in its aspirations for success, longevity and health such as in literally playing of the symbolic dish. Symbolic consumption is critical while activities are assigned around the consumers to serve its tension, its mirth and its fun as they seek new aspirations for the coming year.

The study contributes to the cross-cultural studies by extending the cultural ritual across the age of participants who are consuming the Reunion Dinner celebration across Malaysia either in the urban or rural site. There is also evidence of commercialised and new experience of place where consumers have celebrated the Reunion Dinner at different restaurants over the years and at different venues as the market continues to appropriate and commercialise the subculture consumption practices

This study also highlights the need to consume more to ensure a better future in order to personify the identity to capture the aspirations of longevity, happiness and success. This consuming for aspiration is experienced and identifiable across age and gender. The identity of the consumers of the Reunion Dinner is not merely to reflect the identity of the ethnic Chinese but of the people, who are pragmatic, unify to a certain extent for the benefit and aspiration of success, happiness and longevity of self.

As consumers make their identities tangible or self-present, by association themselves with material objects and places and through symbols and signs, the following are some of the implication that may surface due to the interplay of the solidarity, symbolism, self-concept and play.

8.3.1 Variability and adaptability to Enact Identity

An interpretation of the ethnographic data reveals multi-level self-concept identification phenomena of the informants in the celebration consumption of

the Reunion Dinner. The traditional rites of the Reunion Dinner have been negotiated from the place, time and activities to accommodate the needs of informants within their local lived experiences such as the consuming of traditional and special dishes to the potluck, the changes in venues from the young to the old, dining at hotels, to consuming western dishes and buffet style (Thompson 1989 and 2004). With the increasing levels of movement and interaction across national and culture borders, the issues of being Westernised or Asianised, Orientalist or neo-Orientalist, and culturally distinctive or hybrid remain a discourse here because the Chinese are seen as both flexible and particularist, as they continue to celebrate the Reunion Dinner with its social meanings embedded through the four interplay factors of solitary, symbolism, self-concept and play. The interpretation of the data suggest that the celebration consumption of the Reunion Dinner enabled the Chinese informants continue in their aspirations for a separate and distinctive identity over time because the symbols of food, the sense of nostalgia, and the role of the women and children have not changed, while pragmatism remains the mode of celebration as they continue to play and yet strive for solidarity through the symbolism of consumption and the construction of self.

8.3.2 Interplay Among Individual and Family as Collective Identity

In its traditionally essence, the social meaning of the Reunion Dinner is a gathering at the family of the male side of the family, for the wife, it will be the home of her husband or for the children it will be the home of their father or their father's father. Although in general Chinese culture is characterised by patriarchal domination when the gender determined access to education, legal rights, economic and social roles (Witkowski 1999), the Chinese women in Malaysia have negotiated and made purchasing decision for matters related to the consumption of the Reunion Dinner from the venue, time and activities. The research found that many of the women in this festival are exercising consumption roles that demonstrated their release form patriarchal control such as organising the Reunion Dinner in their own home or returning to the wife's family home instead. The family as a collective identity may be

decide either by the male or female where the celebration of this traditional rite is concerned. However, the desire for normative socialibility represented by kinship and consumption is relevant as the study reveal consumption activities that are still centred on home and family.

8.3.3 Fixed Versus Fluid of Identity Needs

As liminal events such as the Lunar Reunion Dinner is structured by context specific, consumers no longer consume simply for integration or classification, experiential or play (Holt 1995) nor are they classified as being sacred or secular or positive and negatives (see for instance Hirschman and La Barbera 1989; Saso 1965). Instead, these metaphors are influenced and affected more by the play-or ludic-like nature and the liminality effect of the event where these fixed categorisation does not suffice in the understanding of the consumption celebration. For example, the prayers offered signal an imminence of the secular, with the participants' crossing over boundaries, as in a game of immersion in time and space is defined by Huizinga's (1960) work on the notion of play within a range of cultural forms that incorporates the integration of symbolism and play at the same time. The role playing, norms of reciprocity and co-creative collaboration as consumers actively participated in the activities pertaining to the Reunion Dinner from celebrating the crossing over with the consumption of a meal, praying and gambling to usher a better tomorrow together as a family unit, to identify one with the living and the dead, and to the personification of self through the aspirations of wealth, health and longevity with prayers, gifts and gambling.

8.3.4 Dynamism of Play in Meeting Identity Needs

The manifestation of play is caused by liminal period of shifting attitude and activities (such as the merriment of drinking and eating and the fun of doing and preparing) right through the collective to individual activities are found in this event. As a team game, the Reunion Dinner signals a time of gathering, thoughts and extended family, where all were seated together expressing

togetherness and celebrating social solidarity. The Reunion Dinner is a time which many look forward to, when they can put down all of the hard work of the year as a goal directed occasion and to return to celebrate with family for the assurance of the receipt of abundance and good fortune for the future ahead. The occasion was also a time of play in the fun of preparing food and playing games and gambling. The element play, as in the fun in the consumption of the Reunion Dinner, also takes many forms. For example, some of the younger family members are to be found staring into their laptops surfing to wish their friends and families. Play has an ability which will reflect a richer and better understanding of how consumers are actively producing meanings, identity, and power. Play is also a rhythm and a struggle to ensure the ritual is being experienced through an imagined reconstruction of reality. The play element has integrated much of the psychological responses that are meaningful which substantiate the experiences found within the consumption of the Reunion Dinner, which is synonymous to the many activities consumers pursue today from the daily activities to rituals performed.

This research on the consumption of Reunion Dinner also contributes to our comprehension of the meanings consumers attach to the material surplus and satisfaction in association with abundance, good wishes, happiness and prosperity from the Chinese culture context. The centre of the holiday's celebrations of the western celebrations has been on materialism and generosity from Christmas, celebration of adult hedonism in ushering the New Year, to the celebration of basic abundance of Thanksgiving (Wallendorf and Arnould 1991; Belk 1990; Levinson 1992; Caplow 1982; Pleck 2000; Oetnes et al. 2009). The celebration of the Reunion Dinner is associated with the celebration of materialism, generosity and abundance not only for the present time but also with a strong emphasis in negotiating future meanings through the consumption of specific objects and actions where consumers continue to play with event.

8.4 Implication for Marketing Practice

This ethnographic study of the Reunion Dinner informs our understanding of the Malaysian Chinese consumer behaviour in how they use the ritual consumption to construct identity of culture as they recollect past meanings, negotiate future meanings and assemble present meanings through family relations, material abundance, gender roles and self-identity.

Consumption is a productive relationship not only for the producers and marketers but also for players and partners, who tend to seek meaning and substance rather than functional values (Kozinet 2002; Zwick and Dholakia 2002). This research has demonstrated that consumers are not just end-users; instead they also seek to participate, inventing and immersing themselves in the theatre of life, which is play (Kozinets et al. 2004). This research focuses on the cultural and marketing context of the Chinese New Year festival. We can supplement our understanding of consumer behaviour by paying attention to not only why consumers buy certain products, but also by exploring how consumption provides a context and becomes a source of meaning associated with the products.

The conceptual model which incorporates the four integral elements of solidarity, symbolism, self-identity and play will provide insight for retailers and marketing professionals in addressing the identity of the consumers. The dynamism play element especially will provide a new and dynamic twist to the creation of the brandscapes for existing products related to this celebration. Brandscapes are defined as the association with human activity in which narratives of customisation by consumers are provided to bring people together. Stories that cultivate pleasurable audience identification can form groups of successfully aligned enthusiastic consumers who can then form 'brand communities' in association with the celebration (Muniz and Schau 2005). Through these four elements, marketing communication campaigns could incorporate themes related to them rather than focusing on the pricing

element and functionality of products incorporating the multi-level of selves with play as a culture element by itself.

Through the development of brandscape, brand advertising and packaging are also transformed into 'narrative vehicles' (Kniazeva and Belk 2007) which marketers can then utilise effectively; for example, by constructing a mythical status for product achievement through the profundity of association which the consumers need to play along with. Hence, a better understanding of the elements of liminality and the ludic behaviour of the consumer incorporating these four elements will enhance the branding of the associated products and services with the social meanings attached. This is evident in the demand for products and services pertaining to myths from fengsui, geomancy or fortune telling as marketers continue to appropriate and commercialise the ethnic subculture consumption accordingly.

In today's cross-cultural reception of global-media and local-selves, Western cultural imperialism is no longer applicable. Today's theories of globalisation and glocalisation through cultural studies and product morphing within marketing theory have transformed the perception and interpretation of what we used to know. The changes of landscapes within the global cultural economy from ethnoscaples, media-scapes, ideo-scapes, techno-scapes and finance-scapes will continue to influence our social constructs (Appadurai 1990: Kjeldgaard and Askegaard 2006). The four integral elements of solidarity, symbolism, self concept and play will further provide insight on how consumers identity is reflected through the celebration consumption that is evolved over time across space. With the technological advancement, consumption of space and time will be further negotiated as in where they wish to celebrate, from own home to travelling abroad or celebrating on the specific time or a chosen time based on self and social construct which one lived in which can be any time throughout the month celebration. Marketers need to play a key role in the structuring this position in relation to the self identity of consumers.

Returning home to one's home specifically for this event for a nation populated with Chinese celebrants such as China, has provided social

challenges especially in matters related to transportation, crowding effect and traffic congestion. To overcome the maddening rush for the Reunion Dinner, enterprises and government bodies could provide services to encourage the celebrations to be held within places other than their hometown which can assist in the management of influx migration of celebrants from the city to rural areas. The understanding of the social meanings surrounding these four elements could assist in public policies in the planning of services to monitor the traffic congestion and accidents in road for celebrants heading home to their ancestral home. This study is able to assist marketers and entrepreneurs in a multi-cultural marketplace to promote activities to encourage and attract the consumption of the event in the city, which is indirectly smoothing the crowd from leaving the city.

This finding provides some common themes across celebrations within the aspiration of CCT, which explores the multiplicity of overlapping cultural groupings that exist within the broader frame of globalisation and market capitalisation (Arnould and Thompson 2005). The goal of marketing promotion has been to address the psychological aspects of consumption through the laws of functioning. Marketing promotion could be extended beyond functionalism with these two dynamic elements of liminality and play which will enable marketer to play a key role in structuring their position within. In addition, Asian consumers are different in a multicultural society such as Malaysia where there is a heterogeneous distribution of meaning (Arnold and Thompson 2005). Therefore, the multicultural reception will be heightened with an increase in the sensitivity to the cultural framework, which supports its aspirations and the audience of the CCT as consumers continues to draws from their intra-personal psychological construct and processes such as extended self, self-identity and personal values and social meaning in making sense of the consumption behaviour and as the same time incorporating the element of play in culture.

8.5 Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Most of the CCT works continue to view the individual as the primary unit of analysis. However in some instance as within the multicultural society, the collectivism values of the ethnic group may cause the shifting of unit of analysis beyond the individual consumer which is echoing the call for the examination of sociological dimension of consumption as called by Nicosia and Meyer (1976). In this study, there is a need to broader scope of research by situating the individual consumer with relevant network of social and market relation to differentiate the segments and their effects. For example, the desire for normative socialibility represented by kinship and consumption is relevant as the study reveal consumption activities that are still centred on home and family even if there were changes made from time to time.

Much of the work on symbolic consumption by consumer research has emanated from a post-positivistic paradigm and tends to be qualitative and interpretive in nature (Arnould and Thompson 2005). While this approach is useful and quite appropriate for the research questions, it is more difficult to use to address issues, such as the generalisability of results across consumers and external validity, using strictly interpretive methodologies. Therefore, the gap could be filled with further quantitative empirical evidence. However, this methodology is considered to be sufficient for the objectives of this research, which is to explore the significance and social meanings of the symbolic consumption of the Chinese New Year Reunion Dinner that is an act of communication between the consumer and other members of the society, as well as the consumer and that of the consumer's self.

Though the Reunion Dinner is a family celebration, but the family is not a decision making consumption unit but a fragile and symbolically rich human group relating to one another that are increasingly mediated by consumption. The relationship between individual and consumption is similar as a product of the individual relationship with society as defined by his/her role as a consumer. The challenge is also to investigate if transition to consumption related behaviour especially pertaining to life stages will also affect the

decision made in the celebration of the Lunar Reunion Dinner such as those in early motherhood to the empty nest family.

Another area for future research in the interplay of identity include the power relationship between the mainstream marketers and consumers, minority consumers and entrepreneurs in a multi-cultural marketplace in creating boundary which may impact the socio-historical forces of consumption. For example in the marketing of services to extend the boundary of what is sacred and profane of the celebration such as ready made dishes for the Reunion Dinner or even by food providing services such as a Chef to prepare the meal. Consumers are after all culture producers and not merely culture bearers.

Future research could also be extended for scholars to take a stance within the hermeneutic phenomenology, instead of simply looking on the event-character of understanding which Gadamer analyses with his own concepts of 'play' as an active player which is being taken (Grondin 2002). 'Play' here refers to the cognitive events wherein readers concurrently recollect, speculate, absorb the past, and articulate future meanings in their ludic moments, which extends beyond the playing context, as described by Holt in the baseball event (Holt 1995). With the technological advancement, consumption of space and time within the celebration consumption will be negotiated by consumers.

In terms of participants, further research could be also extended to the participants who are residing within the rural areas because the sample of this research is focused on the urban residents within the Greater Kuala Lumpur area. This study can even be carried into China which is the original source of these rituals and this event. Further studies can also be extended to some of the other Chinese diasporas in South Asia, such as Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, Indonesia, Thailand as well as the Chinese diasporas in the West to study how the celebration has evolved from its original source. This would also shed some light into the acculturation process within these respective groups. This study can also be applied to other ethnic groups in their celebration consumption in multicultural society.

The fact that this is a qualitative work means that the findings reported here are time and context bound. Since this thesis is based on purely interpretive work, it acknowledges all the limitations attached to this particular approach. Consequently, no attempt was made to establish a cause-and-effect relationship between any variables. This study has adopted a holistic approach to study the symbolic meanings associated with festival consumption of the Reunion Dinner within the contemporary and pluralistic Malaysian society.

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Appendix A: Profile of Informants, Place, and Time for Reunion Dinner

No	Respondent	Gender	Age	Occupation	Education	Marital Status	Social Roles	Venue for Reunion Dinner	Attendees
1	Madam L	Female	69	Academic	PhD	Married	Grandmother, mother, wife, daughter in-law	At her home, attended by her in-laws, sister-in-law and family	Extended family members
2	Cheong	Male	70	Retired Academic	PhD	Married	Father, son, husband, uncle, granduncle	At his mother's home	Extended family members
3	Cheam	Male	75	Retired Manager	High School	Married	Father, husband	At his home	Nuclear family members only
4	Aw	Male	57	Senior Manager	BA	Single	Son, brother, nephew, uncle	At his home	Extended family members
5	Madam B	Female	51	Director	MA	Single	Daughter, sister, aunt	At her brother's home	Extended family members
6	Joan	Female	45	Part time worker	High School	Divorced	Single mother, daughter, sister, aunt	At her parents' home	Extended family members
7	Datin	Female	45	Housewife	High School	Married	Mother, wife, daughter in-law, sister-in-law,	At her home attended by her husband's kin	Extended family members

8	Grace	Female	45	Teacher	BA	Single	Daughter, sister	At her home	Nuclear family members only
9	Michelle	Female	45	Housewife	Diploma	Married	Expatriate, wife, daughter, sister-in-law	At brother-in-law's house	Extended family members
10	Mary	Female	45	Manager	Diploma	Married	Mother, wife, daughter-in-law, sister-in-law	At the restaurant	Extended family members
11	SK	Female	45	Teacher	BA	Single	Daughter, sister, aunt	Returns to parents' house away from KL	Extended family members
12	Terry	Female	44	Tour Operator	Diploma	Single	Daughter, sister, sister-in-law, aunt	At parents' house	Extended family members and friends
13	Esther	Female	42	Tour Operator	Diploma	Single	Daughter, sister, sister-in-law, aunt	At her friend's house	Friend's family
14	Eric	Male	42	Engineer	MBA	Married	Husband, son-in-law, brother in-law, son	At his parents-in-law's house	Extended family members
15	Nicole	Female	41	Consultant	MBA	Married	Daughter, wife, sister, sister-in-law,	At her home	Nuclear family and her in-laws and families
16	Sharon	Female	41	Photographer	High School	Single	Daughter, sister, sister-in-law, aunt	At her eldest brother's home	Extended family members
17	STeng	Female	40	Nurse	Diploma	Married (lives in	Daughter, wife, sister,	Returns to her parents'	Extended family members

						Sweden)	sister-n-law, aunt	house away from KL	
18	Amy	Female	39	HR Manager	MBA	Single	Daughter, sister, sister-in-law, aunt	At her house	Nuclear family
19	Lorain	Female	37	Sales Manager	Diploma	Single (lives in Australia)	Daughter, sister-in-law, aunt	Returns to her younger sister's home away from KL	Nuclear family
20	Pete	Male	36	Engineer	BSc	Married	Son, husband, brother, son-in-law, brother in-law	At his in-laws house, joined by his parents	Nuclear family including family of in-laws
21	Cindy	Female	35	Consultant	MBA	Single	Daughter, sister, sister-in-law, aunt	At a restaurant	Nuclear family
22	Emile	Female	34	Manager	Diploma	Single	Orphan, sister, sister in-law	At her brother's house	Nuclear family
23	Ken	Male	33	Lecturer	MBA	Single	Son, brother, brother in-law, uncle, nephew	Returns to his parents' home away from KL	Extended family members
24	Darren	Male	33	Lecturer	MBA	Single	Son, brother, brother in-law, uncle	Returns to his parents' home away from KL	Nuclear family
25	Adeline	Female	32	Manager	MBA	Single	Daughter, sister, sister in-law, aunt, niece	Returns to her father's hometown away from KL	Extended family members
26	YB	Female	26	Media	BA	Single	Daughter, sister, niece	Returns to her parents'	Nuclear family

Planner							home away from KL		
27	SLeng	Female	26	IT Executive	BA	Single	Daughter, sister, sister in-law	At her home	Nuclear family
28	Jason	Male	25	Sales Executive	BA	Single	Son, brother, brother in-law, uncle, nephew	Returns to his parents' home away from KL	Extended family members including maternal kin
29	KaMei	Female	25	Marketing Executive	BA	Single	Daughter, sister	Returns to her parents' home away from KL	Nuclear family members
30	Kehsin	Female	24	Sales Executive	BA	Single	Daughter, sister	Returns to her parents' home away from KL <i>(lunch at the shop)</i>	Nuclear family, staff and families
31	HYPing	Female	24	Executive	BA	Single	Daughter, sister	At a restaurant	Nuclear family
32	SWei	Female	24	Credit Officer	BA	Single	Daughter, sister	Returns to her parents' home away from KL	Nuclear family
33	Mist	Female	22	University Student	Pre-U	Single	Daughter, sister, grand daughter, niece	Returns to her paternal grandparents' home away from KL	Extended family members
34	Samantha	Female	22	University Student	Pre-U	Single	Daughter, sister, grand daughter, niece	Returns to parents' home away from KL	Extended family members

35	Tracy	Female	22	University Student	Pre-U	Single	Daughter, sister	Returns to parents' home away from KL <i>(lunch at home, dinner at boyfriend's home)</i>	Nuclear family
36	Shaun	Male	21	University Student	Pre-U	Single	Son, brother, nephew	At his paternal uncle's home	Extended family members
37	Ytat	Male	21	University Student	Pre-U	Single	Son, brother	At his home	Nuclear family
38	Val	Male	21	University Student	Pre-U	Single	Son, brother, nephew, grandson	Returns to his maternal grandmother's home away from KL	Extended family members of mother's kin
39	CMun	Female	21	University Student	Pre-U	Single	Daughter, sister, niece	At her paternal aunt's house	Extended family members
40	CLing	Female	21	University Student	Pre-U	Single	Daughter, sister, niece, grand daughter	Returns to her parents' home away from KL	Extended family members

Appendix B: Photographic Evidence



Photograph 1

Storage of Food: Emphasis of abundance is not only visible in the food serve for the dead and living but it is also to be seen in storage. Rice is the staple food of the Chinese and in this example emphasis is made in having the rice filled to the brim.



Photograph 2

Chicken as a Whole: Chicken is one of the most common, important, and essential ingredients that is found across all dining tables during the reunion dinner. It is also traditionally used for prayers and it is revered as having the 'five' benefits.



Photograph 3

Prayer before the Reunion Dinner: Food for ancestral worship is more elaborate and includes cooked meats and dishes which are eaten later on in the reunion dinner as compared to the uncooked food which is offered to the deities and gods. Abundance is negotiated through the food on the altars (i.e. chicken, vegetables, cakes and fruits such as oranges and pomelo).



Photograph 4

Both the preparation and the ancestral worship come under the purview of the women.



Photograph 5

The two wooden crescent blocks of 'yin' and 'yang' are thrown onto the ground in front of the altar to inquire if the request have been acknowledged. If different sides are obtained after the toss then the response is positive. The questions that are asked require a yes or no answer, for example: Have the ancestors arrived? Have they enjoyed the offering?



Photograph 6

Playing with the Dish, or 'Low Sang' (i.e. scooping of luck and wealth). Before eating, everyone at the table will trade good wishes while mixing the 'yee sang' salad together with their chopsticks. Family and friends will gather during this period and together toss the ingredients of the 'yee sang' with their chopsticks as high as they possibly can while simultaneously shouting and offering good wishes of luck and fortune before eating a portion of this mixed salad. The belief is that the higher the toss, the greater the fortune because it is synonymous with the actions of the 'raising of good luck'.



Photograph 7

Role of Women/Mother: Additional tables are used for the reunion dinner while the mother is still busy in the background ensuring that all is well and that everyone is enjoying the meal while she goes around checking both tables.



Photograph 8

Reunion Dinner at Home:
Nothing like home, home sweet
home as shown by auto-driven
picture taken by informant on
her family reunion dinner.



Photograph 9

Activities after the Reunion Dinner:
Angpows are given while the family
gather around and watch television
awaiting for the arrival of the New
Year



Photograph 10

Merriment while waiting for the Time to Cross Over: While waiting for the new day, children play fireworks and they are watched by all to welcome the new day as they wait for the crossing over



Photograph 11

Grandchildren Take Precedent:
Always a day to capture the
future generation as the oldest
member of the family emphasis
the pro-creation of kin.



Photograph 12

The Gathering of Three Generations: The family observed by the researcher, who is also in the photo.



Photograph 13

Ancestor worship is also observed and practiced within the Christian churches.

APPENDIX C

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR SMALL GROUP SESSION OR ONE-TO-ONE INTERVIEW

Introduction

This discussion guide aims to collect data for a PhD Thesis, that is to study the **“Variations in Inter-generation perspectives of the significance of the Chinese New Year Reunion Dinner within a Malaysian context”**. Your valuable participation in this session will involve the answering of some questions pertaining to the celebration of the Chinese New Year with specific reference to the Reunion Dinner and on how your family celebrates that event. The in-dept discussion/interview will require approximately 35-45 minutes of your time and the findings will assist the academic analysis and study of the event.

Your participation in this session is entirely voluntary and you can withdraw from the session at any time without giving any reason. You are free to ask any question and should you experience any discomfort during the participation, you are free to withdraw or discuss any concerns with my supervisor Dr Ahmad Jamal (jamala@cardiff.ac.uk). The information provided will be held confidential and anonymous and will only be used for academic purposes. You can, if you wish to get a copy of the major findings of this research by emailing me at siabc@cardiff.ac.uk after Jan 2011

SEMI-STRUCTURE QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

What are the consumption patterns and experiences of the reunion dinner?

7 minutes

How did you last celebrate your Chinese reunion dinner? What do you remember most? Which is the best reunion dinner? Why? Which is the worst reunion dinner and why?

What occurs during the reunion? Are there traditional foods, customs, activities that are being preformed? Are stories and photographs exchanged? What innovations has your family made in this celebrations? Has your family creates entirely new meaning to this event?

Participants

7 minutes

Who is invited for this reunion dinner? Who is expected? Who comes? Who are the organizers and hosts? Why are they invited? What other people (friends, household help, etc.) have been incorporated into your family? When? Why? Were these people given family title such as aunt, uncle or cousin? Did they participate fully in family activities?

Food and preparation

7 minutes

What are the usual preparation prior to this reunion dinner? How was the food preparation? Who does the cooking? Who else help? What are the roles of the family in the preparation? What type of foods are serve? Traditional vs. contemporary food? Examples of food and reasons for those food. What are the symbolic meaning of the

types of food being served? Which are those deemed compulsory and non compulsory? Does health factor or different preference such as vegetarian affect the choice of food being served? How do you accommodate accordingly?

Have any recipes been preserved in your family from past generations? What was their origin? How were they passed down –by word of mouth, by observation, or by written recipes? Are they still in use today? When? By whom? Does the food taste as good as it is now that it is made by different person?

Venue and Time for the Reunion Dinner

7 minutes

Where will the dinner be held at? At whose home? Away from home? Locally or abroad?

At restaurants? What kind of restaurants and why was that the choice? Who made the final decision? Who pay for the bill in the restaurant?

Do you ever celebrate it on other time besides the eve of the Chinese New Year? Is there a specific time for that meal? Is there any reason behind the reason for this time and venue? How do you feel about the changes in the venue and the time of this celebration?

Significant changes being experienced and observed today

7 minutes

What do you think is the most significant changes? What changes can be accepted and why? What do you think causes the change? How did these changes come about? What is your expectation of the reunion dinner for the Chinese New Year in the future? What are the changes you would deem as acceptable or not acceptable? Why?

APPENDIX D

SEMI STRUCTURE OBSERVATION GUIDE FOR SMALL GROUP SESSION

Introduction

This observation guide aims to collect data for a PhD Thesis that is to study the **“Variations in Inter-generation perspectives of the significance of the Chinese New Year Reunion Dinner within a Malaysian context”**. This participant observation of the celebration of the Chinese New Year with specific reference to the Reunion Dinner and on how the family celebrates that event is done concurrently in supporting the in-dept discussion/interview which are done either before or after the celebration of the Reunion Dinner.

Your participation in this session is entirely voluntary and you can withdraw from the session at any time without giving any reason. You are free to ask any question and should you experience any discomfort during the participation, you are free to withdraw or discuss any concerns with my supervisor Dr Ahmad Jamal (jamala@cardiff.ac.uk). The information provided will be held confidential and anonymous and will only be used for academic purposes. You can, if you wish to get a copy of the major findings of this research by emailing me at siabc@cardiff.ac.uk after Jan 2011

OBSERVATION GUIDE AND PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

What are the consumption patterns and experiences of the reunion dinner?

How, when and whom participated in this activity? What are the aims, objectives and expected outcomes of the activity? What occurs during the reunion dinner? What types of food, customs and activities that are being performed? What is the relevance of the activities beyond the celebration at present and for the future?

How are the activities implemented before and after the reunion dinner?

Who is taking part? How many number of participants? What is the nature and the timing and location of the activity? How is the activity organized? How time is used during the activity? What are the roles and the responsibilities of the participants? How are the decisions being made by whom and for whom? Are the resources made available for all?

How are the participants behaving?

How are they undertaking the activity? What do the participants do prior to the Reunion Dinner? What do the participants use and how do they interact during the event? What is the extent and nature of the activity before, during and after the Reunion Dinner?

How are the participants interacting?

Is there a dialogue? Who is talking and who is listening? What is their body language? Are the participants responding to the instructions or the dialogue during the Reunion Dinner?