

THE AH BENG SUBCULTURE AS A CASE STUDY OF MALAYSIAN CHINESE IDENTITY FORMATION

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Abstract

Malaysians often use the term 'Ah Beng' to refer pejoratively to a group of people who are Malaysian Chinese in ethnicity, speak mainly in Chinese, and follow East Asian fashions. There is a certain look associated with this term, which is a tendency to have loud and non-elitist tastes such as wearing mismatched clothes and having brightly dyed hair. This study examines the identity of people categorised as Ah Bongs, and how this is not just a stereotype, but an existing subculture which is driven by conspicuous consumption. It is theorised that Ah Bongs derive their identity from their consumption habits, which orientates itself towards the Chinese-speaking world. This study incorporates ethnographic evidence including photographs and interviews. Findings show that the Ah Beng subculture possesses values which are more prone to consumption rather than political ideology. Hence the Ah Beng subculture is driven by conspicuous consumption.

Keywords: conspicuous consumption, identity formation, Malaysian Chinese, Ah Beng subculture, working class.

Introduction: The Ah Beng Subculture

The study of the Ah Beng subculture mentioned here is an explorative inquiry into the existence and the intricacies of the subject. The study focuses on the Ah Beng subculture from a Malaysian standpoint. The objective of this study is to provide an in-depth look into the subculture usually described by the term 'Ah Beng', which is much commonly used in Malaysia. It is a slang term originating among the urban middle-classes and its usage is concentrated in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia's capital city.

The Ah Beng is a Chinese male working-class stereotype which is most often exploited as a national joke. For instance one can find many parodies of this trope in conversations, or even in emailed jokes on the Internet. One example of this joke is 'Ah Beng Gets a New Job'. In this joke, the character Ah Beng usually is clueless on how to react when applying for a job, and blurts out inappropriate statements. However, when he does obtain a job, he is at a loss on how best to behave. Here is an example of one of the often circulated jokes:

Ah Beng is filling up an application form for a job. He supplied the information for the columns on name, age, address etc. Then he comes to column on 'salary expected', but he is not sure of the question. After much thought, he writes 'Yes'.²

Often the Ah Beng is accompanied by a female counterpart, the Ah Lian. The Ah Lian is quite similar to the Ah Beng in their ornate fashion sense. For instance she may be seen wearing leopard print tights paired with a neon pink coloured poncho top, and a Mongolian fur hat. The Ah Beng meanwhile may wear a form-fitting shirt with skinny jeans and accessories with multiple gold chains not unlike a budding rapper. The Ah Beng stereotype is known for being concerned about showing off their goods. If they happen to own a designer tee, they would wear it with aplomb, careful to also match it with designer tight jeans and shoes. These clothing items would usually be colourful, bordering on the gaudy and loud. It is perhaps for these reasons certain people mock the Ah Beng stereotype. For want of a better name, and simplicity's sake, we shall now name the Ah Beng and Ah Lian as simply 'Ah Beng'.

Usually, the Ah Beng derives their personal style from their adulation of rock stars from China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Korea, and Japan. In fact, one can witness the hybridisation of popular culture between the nations. The Ah Beng is not ideological in his or her choice of presentation of self in daily life. Rather, he or she is motivated by the need to show off. In the 1990s, there was an explosion of movies and TV series from Hong Kong, most of which were influenced by the 'art house' look, such as the film *Chungking Express* (Corliss 2010). Then there were others such as *Anna Magdalena* (1998), and action movies like *Gen X Cops* (1999), which promoted Hong Kong fashion as 'cool' and 'sophisticated'. People began wearing 'deconstructed' clothing reminiscent of the characters' clothing in the films in order to look forward with the times.

The 'deconstructed' look so prominent in these art films was propagated by artistes like Faye Wong, Sammi Cheng, Kelly Chen, Richie Ren (after the 1990s), Nicholas Tse, Takeshi Kaneshiro and the Four Heavenly Kings of Cantopop (the Hong Kong pop industry). Malaysian Chinese youth who wanted to be seen as ahead of the pack in terms of fashion followed these looks blatantly. They bought magazines depicting all the latest trends, which comprised of mostly loose shapeless tops, baggy pants, and other forms of sartorial drapery, mix and matched these to create a surreal look. People who did not understand the look described them as fashion disasters. However, those who adopted these styles became known as having a tendency towards becoming 'Ah Beng' in their tastes. Ah Bengs became synonymous with this trend and made it a source of their objectified cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984).

By adopting a Hong Kong 'art house' style, Ah Bengs projected a 'sophisticated' dimension of their identity. Formerly they were identified as being village bumpkins who were easily distracted by glamour and luxury the moment they arrive in the city. The Ah Beng trend gradually became desirable, in tandem with the free spirit found in so many of these Hong Kong 'existential' movies about the youthful search for identity like *Chungking Express*. However, one question is raised in that while Ah Bengs tend to be Chinese educated and prefer to speak in the Hokkien dialect, hence consuming most media from China, they are also indirectly imitating western trends. When the Ah Bengs and Ah Lians attempt to emulate their favourite artistes from East Asian countries, they are indirectly imitating the artistes who are in turn influenced by western styles.

It is interesting that despite being socialised in Chinese education to embrace its values, Ah Bengs are indirectly pursuing western culture. This paper hopes to illustrate how the contradictions manifest themselves through a variety of settings relevant to subculture – namely through clothing, music, and magazines – which are also channels of consumption for the members of the Ah Beng subculture. The Ah Beng subculture has frequently appeared in

Malaysian and Singaporean mass media. Their country-bumpkin-ish candour is a common trope. Singaporean sociologist Chua Beng-Huat, who has largely pioneered the study of youth subculture in Singapore, especially on the Ah Beng, has described the Ah Beng as follows:

In contrast to the English-educated middle-class young, with their skimpy tank tops, spaghetti straps, and basic blacks, the lesser-educated Chinese youth are influenced by different cultural flows. The latter are unlikely to have successfully completed the four years of secondary school. They have been pejoratively termed locally as 'Ah Beng' (for males) and 'Ah Lian' (for females). As the 'other' to the English-educated, the figures of Ah Beng and Ah Lian are not simply lowly educated, they also have supposedly 'pre-modern' or 'sua-ku' (hill tortoise, metaphor for 'backward') modes of behaviour. Until recently, the English-educated used Singlish as a means of belittling this group (Chua 2003: 87)

Chua also describes the fashion of the Ah Beng in detail, taking care to demarcate it from the 'English-educated Chinese' and the latter's way of dress:

In contrast to the black and muted pastel shades of the middle-class youth, the clothes of the Ah Beng and Ah Lian are filled with bright, or to the English-educated, 'gaudy', colours. For example, frilly lime green tops of polyester material may be matched with 'day-glo' yellow jeans or short skirts and white patent leather platform shoes. Generically, against the understatement of the middle-class youth, Ah Beng and Ah Lian go 'over the top' in every item of bodily adornment, including dyed bronze hair. All the colours on the body from hair to nails are big and bright, with every intention of drawing attention to themselves (Chua 2003: 88).

Given that the Ah Beng has become a trope for popular discourse in Singapore as early as in the 1990s, it is likely that Malaysia had adopted this trend around the same time. The term is also widely used in Malaysian mass media. In a news article titled 'A Social Stereotype' published in the Malaysian news paper, *The Star*, we have a description of the Ah Beng:

There are a few traits associated with the Ah Beng. Perhaps the most visible and readily identifiable is the dyed hair. Then there's the abovementioned souped-up car with a loud stereo blasting "feng tau" music.

He also has strange habits, such as squatting by the roadside, at the bus-stop, outside shops; and mixing his brandy, even wine, with soda (Koay 2009)

The significance of studying the Ah Beng subculture as a unique position within the larger grouping of Malaysian Chinese, representing a subset of the Chinese-educated linguistic group in Malaysia, as opposed to the non-Chinese educated group. While many studies have been conducted on the Malaysian Chinese as a social group, none have specifically explained the existence of this subculture within it. The aspect that demarcates the Ah Beng subculture from the rest of society is their exhibition of cultural capital, which according to Pierre Bourdieu (1984) is made up of the embodied, objectified, and institutionalised states of an individual's possession of goods, status, and disposition. This paper identifies and examines cultural capital through the tenets of subculture as outlined by Dick Hebdige (1979) which include musical preferences, fashion, leisurely activity, and aspirations.

Methodology

This study uses a phenomenological approach and is grounded in an interpretivist paradigm. It is not empirical, but seeks to understand the meanings behind the creation of this sub-cultural identity and the reason behind it. The significance of this subculture is also discussed, making this study Weberian in terms of orientation to research design. The research methods used include interviews and photography.

Findings

Photographs of Ah Bengs

These photographs were taken by the researcher in several shopping malls which were identified as usual hangout spots for members of the Ah Beng subculture. Due to the pervasiveness of shopping mall culture in Malaysia, a new phenomenon called 'shoppingtainment' (PriceWaterHouseCoopers 2006/7) has emerged, in which people go to shopping malls not only to shop for goods and services, but also as a form of leisurely activity as it provides them with a place to see and be seen. The shopping malls which have been associated with Ah Beng subculture are Sungei Wang and Berjaya Times Square in the heart of Kuala Lumpur. These malls have been the hotbed for youth subculture due to several factors such as the affordability of consumer goods (mostly fashion and accessories), the youthful and vibrant interior spatial design, and the composition of shops owned mostly by Chinese traders. The photographs are taken in a way that does not highlight the identity of the individual to avoid recognition, in order to maintain their privacy.

Sungei Wang³ is one of the oldest Malaysian shopping malls having been around even before Malaysia's modernisation era in the 1980s. This means it has existed during the waves of change throughout Malaysia's economic growth and the changes in spending patterns brought about by it. Given that it has been around since the 1970s, it has been established as a major Kuala Lumpur landmark. Sungei Wang is not only a Malaysian landmark; it is also popular enough to be a tourist attraction. Hence it is justified in saying that Malaysians would choose Sungei Wang as one of the places to be seen. This is the case with members of the Ah Beng subculture, who render their social axis around this location. Not only can locals see them and their specially chosen outfits or 'full plumage', but so can foreigners. This may explain Sungei Wang's popularity with subculture members.

Berjaya Times Square is another mall adjacent to Sungei Wang. Though it opened much later in 2003, it has quickly acquired popularity due to its similarity in interior spatial design, affordability of goods, and composition of shops to Sungei Wang. It is also attached to Kuala Lumpur Monorail's Imbi station, and this monorail service is one that is widely used by locals and tourists alike in accessing the hotspots in Kuala Lumpur (Berjaya Times Square 2010).



Photo 1



Photo 2



Photo 3



Photo 4

Photo 1: A typical clothing store that Ah Lians would frequent due to the low prices and accessible latest fashions. The female shop assistants and the customers tend to dress in the same colourful manner as the outfits on display.

Photo 2: An Ah Beng walking to work in one of the shops, favouring the 'deconstructed' look.

Photo 3: A few Ah Beng boys who work in boutiques having a break

Photo 4: An Ah Lian and an Ah Beng couple, hanging out

Interviews with Ah Bengs

The researchers were able to speak to a few respondents who shopped at Sungei Wang and identified as belonging to the Ah Beng subculture because of the manner of their attire and spoke mainly in Chinese. They were able to converse at the basic level of English, given that most were college students. Most of the discussion focused on their worldview, including sub-cultural aspects like celebrities they admired, their interests, and opinions on shopping. However, it was clear that the items they purchased and the clothing they wore showcased a strong identification with East Asian fashion. From the conversation they were also enamoured with East Asian values. The two respondents were asked a few questions in an open-ended manner.

Respondent 1 admires singers from Taiwan and Hong Kong such as the likes of Eason Chan, Jacky Cheung, Faye Wong, JJ Lin, Jay Chou, and Elva Hsiao. He admires their singing voice as he calls it 'beautiful', and 'motivates me when I need something to heal my soul'. He listens to their songs most of the time because he claims music is his interest. Although he likes shopping in malls such as e@Curve, Ikea, Ikano, and Empire Shopping Gallery, he does not like overpriced clothing.

Respondent 2 also favours East Asian celebrities especially those from Korea and Taiwan. He likes the Korean boy bands Super Junior, 2PM, and Big Bang; the girl group SNSD; as well as Jang Woo Hyuk, Taiwanese stars include Ding Dang, Zhang Hui Mei (known famously as A-Mei), and Jam Hsiao. He admires the Korean celebrities for their dance choreography and singing, arguing that they are 'cool', despite not understanding the Korean language. As for Taiwanese singers, he admires them because 'their ability to sing, it's just way too awesome'. He considers them his role models, and likes the musical genres performed by Jam Hsiao, who sings rock and jazz with a unique style. This respondent has also been to Taiwan, where he "bought a tremendous amount of clothes" but he did feel the styles were "a bit too much to wear in Malaysia" at the moment. He opines that Korea and Taiwan are "very high in fashion". He has been influenced to learn the 'popping' style of dance due to his interest in Korean dance choreography. Many of his friends idolise these artistes, too. Our respondent shops mostly in One Utama, Sungei Wang, Padini, Brands Outlet, and Giordano.

Respondent 3 admires celebrities from Korea, especially the all-girl group SNSD. This is because of their 'good singing skills'. However she does not dream of becoming like them as she is aware that 'not everyone can be a pop star'. She insists that she would rather 'be herself'. She admires their talent in singing and performing musical instruments and says she has been influenced to love music because of them. Her best friends too love SNSD. She only marginally follows their clothing style, as she only shops in her favourite clothing store G2 (a Malaysian Chinese owned boutique that follows East Asian style) in Sungei Wang.

Respondent 4 mentions liking Hong Kong celebrities, actors Daniel Wu and Louis Koo, because they are 'handsome and talented'. He considers them role models, but does not only limit his choice of music to his idols alone, instead following what is currently the trend. He does wish to be as fashionable as they are, and goes to the gym to build his 'muscular body' to be like them. He is realistic in the sense that he does not aspire to reach their celebrity status career-wise, but does want to achieve a considerable

amount of success nonetheless. His close friends also admire them. They usually go shopping together at places in Sungei Wang such as G2000, Topman, Polo, and Padini.

Respondent 5 admires celebrities in Korea and Japan, such as Shinee, Big bang, IU, BOA, Beast, Boyfriend, Rain, from Korea; and Yui Makino, ON/OFF, Wakaba, from Japan. The reason for this is that she loves their country and language, and the brand of music known as KPOP and JPOP. She mentions that she also considers them her role models. When interviewed, she was shopping in Sungei Wang at one of the Malaysian Chinese owned boutiques.

Respondent 6, the friend of Respondent 5, is also interested in Korean and Japan artistes. She admires the Korean artistes Jung Yong Hwa, Kim Hyun Joong and the Japanese artiste Euno Juri. Jung Yong Hwa has inspired her to pick up the guitar, although she plays the piano. The reason she gave is because of their talent and beauty, and that they 'make me appreciate music better and motivate me to work harder for my music'. She describes admiring their 'layered clothing' style, but sometimes finds it difficult to adopt because 'it is hot in Malaysia'. When interviewed she was shopping at Sungei Wang but claims to also like shopping at Mid Valley.

Respondent 7 enjoys the music of Korean boy bands TVXQ, 2PM, After School, and Korean actors Yoon Eun Hye and Lee Dong Wook. She says that TVXQ is the only group of Korean artists that she really admires because throughout her four years of being a fan, she has felt their passion and love for singing, their sincerity towards their fans and their humbleness shown on TV. The malls she regularly shops in are KLCC, Mid Valley, Sungai Wang, Times Square, and 1 Utama.

Respondent 8 admires mainly Hong Kong actors who were famous in the 1990s. They are Stephen Chow, Jackie Chan, Chow Yun Fat, Andy Lau, Ng Man-tat, Hao Shaowen and Shi Xialong. He has viewed movies starring these actors since childhood, and has never grown bored of viewing them again. Some of the characters played by the actors have inspired him as role models. However they do not influence his choice of music. In his hometown, Chinese movies with these actors were quite the big deal. He mentions that he shops almost anywhere.

Discussion

Ah Beng subculture finds its roots in consumption-based activities. Consumption-oriented activities may involve purchasing clothes, listening to music, hanging out, and choosing lines of occupation – are all part and parcel of what forms the Ah Beng subculture. The analysis is based on Hebdige's view that a subculture can be broken down for analysis into certain elements – that of dress, music, and leisure activity. These constructs were used as indicators of the Ah Beng subculture. When a pre-test survey was conducted before the interviews, we found that Malaysian urban youth based in Kuala Lumpur are aware of these constructs. Ah Bengs have a preference for brightly dyed hair, mismatched and equally bright clothes; enjoy loud techno music; seek non-professional occupations, and are concerned with consumerist acquisition.

These show a desire of the Ah Bengs to distinguish themselves from the rest of society by deliberately ignoring common rules of conduct. While the rest of capitalist society seeks material as well as professional success, the Ah Beng only pursues the former and eschews the latter. He or she is usually concerned with making money, but not building a serious career. A

job is a means to an end. The Ah Beng also dresses differently from other people as a means of drawing attention to his or her identity through deliberately mismatched outfits. Some choose to simply cover up, others for professional reasons, while most to display an elite sense of style. The Ah Beng may go against these common practices by breaking the rules of fashion. At the same time, he or she does not shy away from following trends found in popular magazines in the Chinese medium.

Ah Bengs also like loud techno music as it provides them a form of escapism through sound. It is contradictory to other types of music in that it creates a wall of sound which is mostly non-melodious. Nevertheless, techno music becomes the 'soundtrack' for the Ah Beng but at the same time 'activates' those who pursue an active, fast-paced lifestyle. Such music is commonly used during fighting scenes in Hong Kong movies. It gives the Ah Beng the right kind of mood to while he or she is on the daily grind. It reminds them of their favourite action heroes.

Ah Bengs focus their leisure activities in certain public places highly connected to consumption activity – namely shopping malls. These then, are sites of sub-cultural activity in which we can examine its processes. The shopkeepers that were interviewed in this study confirmed the effect of advertising on consumers' minds and thus their shopping habits. They also confirmed that a large majority of the shoppers in Malaysian Chinese owned fashion and leisure outlets, which tailored their décor and merchandise to suit East Asian trends, were indeed Malaysian Chinese who spoke mainly in Chinese.

The reason why Malaysian Chinese who are Chinese-educated tend to uphold their language is due to a need to retain their cultural identity in a nation-of-intent, according to Thock Ker Pong (2013). As Ah Bengs are a subset of the above, they are prone to adopt Chinese-based values. However, Ah Bengs are comfortable living among their kind and rarely seek to intervene in matters of governance. It is thus apparent that this is a creation of their own world into which they can then retreat. While wanting to uphold their Chinese values, they are not concerned with influencing others beyond their community. As opposed to members of goth or punk, rarely are Ah Beng community thinkers or writers and their publications (as opposed to punk zines) tend to be capitalist ideology-centric. In other words, advertising has played a major role in the creation of Ah Beng subculture, by targeting its essentially Chinese-language readership with images of style subversiveness, thereby influencing Ah Beng purchasing habits.

Bourdieu's notion of taste then, as reflecting the wearer's socio-economic background explains the preference of Ah Bengs towards certain items advertised in the mass market. The Ah Beng's cultural taste also manifests itself through the image of the 'working-class hero', who is proud of his hard work and is not afraid to wear it on his sleeve. And certainly, following Veblen's theory of conspicuous consumption (1902), the motivation behind the Ah Bengs' explicit display of their tastes is to announce their economic and social status and ability to purchase certain goods, and that one does not have to look elitist to look good. Like the British working-class subculture termed 'chavs' (Tyler and Bennett 2010), the Ah Beng has been viewed pejoratively and made the butt of many stereotypical jokes, and yet they choose to remain the way they are. Their belief is that as long as they are able to display their cultural tastes and their knowledge in a particular style, it is alright to do as they please; regardless of what deep-thinking elitist's types might say.

For reasons stated above, a subculture can function both as resistance and as consumption practice. The consumption practice in this case is subversive, and offers resistance to the dominant ways of consumption. The conformist way of dressing, and high-art notions of music are dispelled. However, this is also problematic in that what exactly the Ah Bengs resist is not consistent. Although Ah Bengs were primarily driven by Chinese values, and in most instances prefer to speak mostly in Chinese (and very little of other languages), they derive parts of their

inspiration from Anglo-American based icons. This is because while the Chinese-language press tended to feature stories of artistes from East Asia (with Hong Kong and the rest of China as the centre; Taiwan, Korea, and Japan as the periphery), they did not exclude Chinese-language based artistes who also had a Western upbringing. Hence artistes like Eason Chan and Daniel Wu were easily made into icons, and when Ah Bengs looked at them as cultural references, they too, indirectly imitated the West.

Some noticeable features of the Ah Beng subculture is that they display traditional working class ideals such as strong family ties, filial piety, and even traditional gender roles such as where the man is expected to be the breadwinner while the wife waits for him at home. These are depicted to be the Ah Beng's idealised lifestyle. However, these values are exhibited through the means of conspicuous consumption, by standing out as members of the same value-based community. The motivation to make money manifests itself in the Ah Beng's concern with loud and branded clothes, and their interest in mobile phones and fancy cars. The Ah Lian, meanwhile, in the traditional female role sense, adorns herself in the same ornate way so as to attract male attention. In Ah Lian blogs which the researcher also looked into, we can see them display deep sentimentality for things such as emotions, always on the lookout for tokens of affection from their boyfriends, who are normally their Ah Beng counterparts. They have been said to read too much into small details, hence displaying extreme sensitivity and are easily offended by people who do not agree with their way of life. However most of the time they are also straightforward, and are not afraid to speak their mind. Hence their unpretentious attitude has been idolised increasingly by Singaporeans. However, in an opinion survey with respondents outside the Ah Beng community, we found that most expressed uncertainty about being friends with an Ah Beng. This shows that most of the respondents have not yet had any Ah Beng friends, and while not rejecting them outright, are unsure about them as friends. The male members of the subculture, the Ah Bengs, dress up to signal to the Ah Lian of their status. The best signifier would be their way of speech, which is loud, and their preference for techno music, as well as the places they frequent.

Conclusion

Ah Bengs in Malaysia today are not necessarily bound by social class, as most Malaysians now have greater access to education and hence are able to find middle class jobs. Hence one would observe that while Ah Bengs might have inherited working class traits from their parents' generation, or other family members, they are not necessarily confined to the same class boundaries. One might find an Ah Beng in a white collar job today working as a marketing executive, despite his working-class sub-cultural aesthetic. Perhaps he is working in a Chinese owned family business in the entertainment industry, such as Public Relations. He is thus allowed to sport colourful dyed hair and equally colourful clothes. The role of peer pressure and the Internet today as a tool of socialisation have also broken down the class boundaries of Ah Beng subculture. In Singapore, the subculture has been accepted as an urban trend (Chua 2003). While many locals may mock it for its lack of refined taste, others may appreciate its moralistic working class values that might appeal to those seeking an identity. The image of the Ah Beng as working class hero hence becomes an identity which many aspire to.

The fact they are dressed differently shows that they are trying to distinguish themselves from the rest of the population. There is no clear ideological factor behind this, but there is a sense of distinguishing their identity from the rest of the less fashionable community. By doing so they are perhaps seeking to align themselves with typical notions of modernity in that they are up-to-date with trends from more developed countries. One of these 'more developed

countries' is China (and its neighbours) is perhaps forged by ethnocentric links between them and their perceived origin, as they feel it provides them a sense of history, a creation myth that situates them within a larger worldview.

Politically, the Ah Beng does not offer much resistance to the status quo by expressing any sort of political view. Rather, congruent with their non-intellectual approach to life, Ah Bengs are not prone to concern themselves with formal political or state issues, focusing more on the superficial practices of distinguishing themselves. They are hence often compared pejoratively to village bumpkins, exhibited by their apparent lack of sophistication with current affairs reinforces this identity. So is there a political dimension to Ah Beng subculture? It is clear that most subcultures have a political stand to them, and it is imaginable that some are created on the basis of upholding ethnocentric or linguistic-based values. But as Ah Bengs are both influenced by Chinese values, distinguish themselves through consumption, and yet adopt whatever the media tells them to, it is hard to believe that this is the case for the Ah Beng subculture. It is rather, in a Gramscian sense, an ideological hegemony of the global neoliberal machinery (Gramsci 1971, in Worth 2003). And this is why the Ah Beng subculture is not a political one, but one that is the product of conspicuous consumption.

Notes

- ¹ Rachel Chan Suet Kay is an MA student at the Department of Anthropology and Sociology, University of Malaya
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- ² Seraph 2010. "Funny Ah Beng." *Penangite.net*, (<http://penangite.net/humour/funny-ah-beng>). Accessed 23 August 2010,
- ³ About Us. *SungeiWang.com*. <http://www.sungeiawang.com/inner.htm#> Accessed 20 August 2010.

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