

# **The Boat-Dwellers**

**'from floating communities to ordinary landlubbers'**



**Shimona Malaihollo**

**Maria Kluijtenaar**

June 2013 • [s.e.i.malaihollo@students.uu.nl](mailto:s.e.i.malaihollo@students.uu.nl) • [m.kluijtenaar@students.uu.nl](mailto:m.kluijtenaar@students.uu.nl)  
Student numbers 3587436 / 3682132 • Supervised by Radhakrishna Menon N.

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# Introduction

The population of Hong Kong used to consist of four rather distinguished ethnic groups. Among them were the boat-dwellers who lived on boats in different floating communities spread out over the waters of Hong Kong.

These floating communities were called floating settlements. In 1988 Bruce Taylor wrote that the most striking characteristic of the Hong Kong floating settlements was that they were continuously shrinking and that they were likely to be completely disappeared by 1996 (Taylor 1988:201).

Furthermore, Eugene Anderson mentioned how the floating communities in 1970 are no longer solely living afloat and are now also part-time situated in communities of houses on poles (Anderson 1970:29). These examples from two different studies of the Hong Kong boat-dwellers show that already 30 years ago there was an ongoing change in the boat-dwellers' living surroundings. With this study we will try to provide in a status update of the ethnic group of Hong Kong boat-dwellers.

The given examples of Taylor (1988) and Anderson (1970) turned out to be good indicators for what would happen to the boat-dwellers. Today hardly any, if none, of the boat-dwellers remained in the floating communities. It is like one of our informants stated: "We are at the end of the lifestyle." (Roger Eastham, S.E.I. Malaihollo/M Kluijtenaar, 11-03-2013). The reasons for the end of this lifestyle will be explained in this thesis.

The Hong Kong boat-dwellers used to be a separate caste in Hong Kong society and most Cantonese perceived this caste as an inferior and different ethnic group of people. The boat-dwellers used to be referred to with the name Tanka, a name quite negatively charged and often associated with loose sexual morality and bad manners (Anderson 1969:443). There was a time that the boat-dwellers hardly came ashore since they had almost everything they needed within their floating settlements but also because they would encounter quite a discriminative environment.

However, times change and so did the Cantonese-speaking boat-dwellers. When we went to Hong Kong to do research on this group of people it was quite hard to define who were actual boat-dwellers and who were not. We got introduced to a number of former boat-dwellers at the different yacht clubs where we conducted our research. Besides that, it was also through random acquaintances that we got in contact with a number of former boat-dwellers who were very open to tell us about their past of living on the boats in the

different typhoon shelters of Hong Kong. We will further elaborate on our specific research population later in the context nevertheless, it is important to mention that through rapid structural changes and personal decisions, a sub-culture almost completely disappeared in a relatively short amount of time (Anderson 1992:235).

In this research we tried to find out as much as we could about the livelihood of the boat-dweller identity among the, now ashore living, former boat-dwellers of Hong Kong.

### **Academic and social relevance**

With our research we hope to add to the already existing literature about the Hong Kong boat-dwellers. Most of the existing literature about the Hong Kong boat-dwellers is about the time that they were still living in their floating settlements. Although in almost all of the articles and books about this subject it is already mentioned that there is a visible decrease of population living in the floating settlements, there is hardly any follow-up literature on how the boat-dwellers are doing now and especially what they are doing now. This sub-culture is no longer easily recognizably present in the Hong Kong society. Apart from the small sampans transporting people that still operate in the typhoon shelters of Hong Kong and a few floating temples, there is hardly anything left of the once completely afloat operating boat-dwellers.

Therefore, the academic and scientific relevance of our research is of complementary nature. Socially, it is interesting that this group of people used to be looked down upon by the people living ashore and now they apparently live side by side. We wanted to find out how vivid the image of the floating settlements still is among the descendants and add to the awareness of the beauty of the boat-dweller culture. Since it changed so rapidly and most of the boat-dwellers were merged into living ashore quite easily, at least so it seems. We hope to revive a bit of the interest in this specific history. Besides this local context we hope to contribute to the wider anthropological context as well. We wish to contribute to the discourse and studies about identities in the context of large-scale social transformations. The nature of this particular large-scale social transformation in Hong Kong will appear in more detail in the context and its relation to the wider anthropological context will be explained in the theoretical framework.

### **Research objective and question**

Identity is nowadays recognized as something fluid and changing instead of stable and fixed (Sökefeld 1999; Hall 1996; Eriksen 2001; Van Meijl 2008). According to Erikson (Van Meijl 2008), individual identity is adjusted to one's environment (2008:169). With our research we wanted to find out more about the difference in identity between the younger and the older generations of boat-dwellers. The older generation went through the actual transition of moving ashore and have lively recollections of living aboard the boats. The younger generation also have these recollections only they were already better integrated in the Hong Kong educational system and therefore more culturally

assimilated in the mainstream of land-dwelling children. This eliminated or lessened any perceived importance these children might attach to living afloat (Taylor 1988:202).

Therefore, our research question is:

*What is the difference between the identity of the older generation of former boat-dwellers compared to the identity of the younger generation of former boat-dwellers in relation to their background in the sub-culture of the boat-dwellers of Hong Kong?*

In order to answer this question we formulated the following sub-questions:

1. Why did the boat-dwellers move from afloat to ashore?
2. How does the older generation of former boat-dwellers position themselves pertaining to their ancestry of the boat-dwelling subculture?
3. How does the younger generation of former boat-dwellers position themselves pertaining to their ancestry of the boat-dwelling subculture?

This research question is based on the assumption that there is an actual difference between the different generations. This difference can be found in the already briefly mentioned literature of Taylor (1988). Taylor explains that by 1988 education had been made compulsory therefore children were no longer allowed to spend their days solely fishing since they had to go to school. This development made most of the children no longer capable of operating a fishing vessel and also they were influenced by the educational system. The children were becoming assimilated in land culture and therefore less involved in their traditional heritage (Taylor 1988:202).

We had originally come to Hong Kong to study a group called boat boys. Boat boy is an occupation within the yachting business. Our gatekeeper Stephen Davies had informed us about this group of former boat-dwellers whom were now working at the yacht clubs doing maintenance on the yachts and organizing the weekend yacht races at the clubs. We intended to conduct research on this occupational group of former boat-dwellers. However, during our research we found that it was not occupation that was most interesting to study but rather, the generational identity difference we encountered. Therefore, we decided to focus on identity in relation to age instead of occupation.

### **Methods and techniques**

The gathered data was collected over two and a half months in the field from the end of January until mid-April 2013. We conducted our research at three different yacht clubs; Aberdeen Boat Club (ABC), Royal Hong Kong Yacht Club (RHKYC) and, Hebe Haven Yacht Club (HHYC), we will give further explanation and details on these locations in the context of research.

Our original plan was to gather information by using the method of participant observation in combination with semi-structured interviews. However, pretty soon it became clear that it would not be possible to carry out actual participant observation since in some cases our research population was working in a setting where we would be in their ways. Or we would meet our interviewees in such a formal setting that participant observation was not an option. Unfortunately, hanging out during our informants' leisure time was not an option either since our research population is no longer living in one place. Besides that, the home environment of a typical Hong Kong family is very private. Our gatekeeper Stephen told us that although he was quite close with one of our interviewees and marine staff manager at ABC Ah Kee, he was closely befriended with him only at the club.

Stephen told us that it would be very uncommon for him to spend time with Ah Kee in either of their houses. Their friendship is confined to the club. Thus instead we depended a lot on the method of interviewing and in particular semi-structured interviewing. Nevertheless, with this method we encountered some obstacles.

First of all the fact that we were not able to speak Cantonese made us miss out on a lot of details we could have gotten if we were able to converse one on one with the interviewees. Besides that, none of our interpreters were professional interpreters and that meant that they were not able to get everything across the way an interpreter by profession would have been able to. Having said this, it is important to note that although the interpreters were not professionals, they did a very good job.

Secondly, the presence of a work related third party must have had some effect on the answers we got. Our interpreter at HHYC, Sarah, is marine staff manager at HHYC and the supervisor of the marine staff members we interviewed. Especially in this last case this must have affected the answers and data we got. However, we did use the method of the focus group thanks to our random encounter with Pong Cheung. Pong will be properly introduced in the empirical chapters but it is in place here to mention that thanks to him we were able to observe and interview during two focus groups with former fishermen. Especially through the second focus group, we gathered very useful information with the help of both Pong and his daughter Joanne. Joanne was kind enough to translate for us.

### **Structure of the thesis**

This thesis will start with the theoretical framework in which we further elaborate on the concepts of identity and ethnic identity with the literature and theories of inter alia, Van Meijl (2008), Hall (1996) and Friedman (1992). After that, we will give more background information on our research population, their current living situation in the setting of Hong Kong and, a brief overview of the transition that the sub-culture of the boat-dwellers went through from the 1960s until now. Following, we will present

our data related to the theories mentioned in the theoretical framework. Finally, in our conclusion the presented data will be related to the theories that were mentioned in the theoretical framework.

# Chapter 1

## Context

By: S.E.I. Malaihollo

**This chapter will provide in background information on our research location and research population. We will explain why we have chosen for this particular group and area.**

### 1.1 Research location

Since 1997 Hong Kong belonged to China who preserved the open, free capitalist and semi-democratic quality of Hong Kong by enabling the “One Country, Two Systems”. The change of Hong Kong from a British colony to a Special Administration Region can be seen as a historical transformation or simply a political experiment. Understanding such postcolonial and re-nationalizing processes brings into focus the construction and reconstruction of Hong Kong identity in terms of negotiation, domination and resistance (Fung 2004: 399). Our research population experienced this change and the changes preceding this event. According to Antonio Lam, one of our interviewees, Hong Kong has a history of fishing with a lot of boat-dwellers who lived in floating communities in different typhoon shelters (Antonio Lam, S.E.I. Malaihollo, 13-03-2013). Our research was partially located in these shelters consisting of the Causeway Bay Typhoon Shelter and the Aberdeen Typhoon Shelter. The typhoon shelters were both positioned next to the yacht clubs through which we met several of our informants. We encountered former boat-dwellers in three yacht clubs: the Aberdeen Boat Club (ABC), Royal Hong Kong Yacht Club (RHKYC) and Hebe Haven Yacht Club (HHYC).

**Aberdeen Boat Club.** The ABC was founded in 1962 and is located on the southern shore of Hong Kong in the area of Aberdeen, one of the oldest inhabited areas on the island. It is well documented that 200 years ago the area was a busy fishing community and a haven for pirates, as well as a location for prostitutes in floating bordellos. Nowadays the shelter is a bustling place of maritime activity with ferries, junks, sampans, water taxis, cruisers and yachts<sup>1</sup>

**Royal Hong Kong Yacht Club.** The RHKYC has a longer history that goes back to 1849. In this harbor fishing was not the main occupation of the boat-dwellers. Unlike most of the boat-dwellers, the people here were in a service kind of occupation. The boats that would come into the harbor would need food, maintenance and entertainment that would be supplied by the boat-dwellers who lived in the Causeway Bay Typhoon Shelter (Roger Eastham, S.E.I. Malaihollo/M. Kluytenaar 11-03-2013). As the harbor developed the demand for support diminished therefore, the community was no longer really necessary. There was an expectation of progression among the boat-dwellers and



most of them actually got good offers by the government.

Like Roger Eastham says:

“We are at the end of the lifestyle.”

(Roger Eastham, S.E.I. Malaihollo/M Kluijtenaar, 11-03-2013).

**Hebe Haven Yacht Club.** The last club where we conducted research is HHYC which was established in 1963. The club has been providing yachting and boating facilities in the bay of Pak Sha Wan in Sai Kung for 50 years<sup>3</sup>. Most of the people we talked to at this club were not only former boat-dwellers, but also former fishermen.

## 1.2 Research population

Before we came to Hong Kong we were aware that the boat-dwellers used to be referred to as Tanka and that this term might be perceived as offensive. We soon found out that the term Tanka is no longer common and that, instead, everyone now refers to them with Yee Man. This paragraph will explain the background of the Tanka in the context of the three ethnicities of Hong Kong. The origins of the term Tanka will be explained along with the fact that we refer to our research population with the name boat-dwellers.

**The four Hong Kong ethnicities.** The boat-dwellers are one of the four ethnic groups in Hong Kong next to the Hoklo, Punti and Hakka. The Punti are the local people of Hong Kong who were farmers and started small scale businesses. The Hakka, also known as “guest people”, migrated later into the infertile hills and were mainly workers for the Punti farmers. The Hoklo arrived after the Hakka group and were settled in Hong Kong as fisher folk but were also involved in the agriculture. The boat-dwellers were a separate group who were all living afloat and overall particularly close at sea. This is the main difference with the Hoklo who were mainly situated on the rivers more inland. The boat-dwellers were seen as a separate community that was not allowed ashore for a long time and even after they were allowed to come ashore, they hardly did so. This was another aspect that separated them from the Hoklo who never encountered these particular hostile circumstances. Because the boat-dwellers were living in quite isolated floating settlements they had to organize everything afloat. They had floating stores, restaurants and hospitals that were categorized under service sector occupations. Furthermore, the people in the floating settlements needed food that was provided by the fishermen. The members of the boat-dwellers had different occupations. These different occupations were also described in our informants’ stories, some were mainly fishing and some were mainly occupied in the service sector.

**Origins of the name Tanka.** Although nowadays these different ethnic groups are not that visibly separated anymore, the image remains vivid like we experienced during our visit to the Hong Kong Museum of History where all four ethnic groups were represented.

What struck us most was that they did not refer to the Tanka as an ethnic group, but to the boat-dwellers. This may indicate that the term Tanka is not officially used anymore. The term Tanka originates from the Tan tribe. This was an aboriginal tribe that survived the massacres in the province of Szechwan during the Five Dynasties from 907 until 959 A.D. Due to force of the Chinese, the Tan tribes took refuge on boats on the rivers and coastal waters of South China and they were officially not permitted ashore until about 1723 when the Yung Cheng period started (Mcfadzean and Todd 1971:61).

Tan literally means “Man” or “Barbarian” and although this original meaning has faded away, the stigma attached to it has remained. For a long time, Tan have been regarded as pariahs and had no social status. Supposedly Chinese were not allowed to marry members of the Tan (Mcfadzean and Todd 1971:61).

Literature describes how the term Tanka is used among the boat-dwellers themselves but that it is not accepted from someone outside of the group of boat-dwellers.

Therefore we decided to refer to our research population as boat-dwellers like in the literature (Ward 1958; Anderson 1969, 1970, 2007; Taylor 1988).

**Decline of boat-dweller communities.** In 1958 Ward reported that out of the total population Hong Kong, estimated at more than 2.5 million, the boat-dwellers of Hong Kong were numbered no more than 100 thousand people. About 50 thousand boat-dwellers gained their livelihood from fishing while the rest of the boat-dwellers were engaged in trading and various kinds of transport. About half of the fishermen were engaged in deep-sea work, trawling and long-lining. The remaining 25 thousand or so were inshore fishermen (Ward 1958:44). Not all the boat-dwellers moved ashore at the same time, instead the boat-dweller community declined slowly. Taylor (1988), who believed that the boat-dwelling community would disappear by 1996, gave a few explanations on how the boat-dwelling community declined. Factors like governmental public housing, education of boat-dweller children and economics played a part in this (Taylor 1988:202). We will further elaborate on this in chapter 3. Taylor (1988) showed that the boat-dwellers, to whom he referred as the marine population, were declining in number increasingly. Table 1 shows the decrease of population and the number of boat-dwellers in relation to the total population of Hong Kong in between 1911 and 1981.

**Table 1:** Change in Hong Kong's Marine Population, 1911-1981.

Year	Marine Population	Percentage of total population
1911	61,798	13.5
1921	71,154	11.3
1931	10,093	8.3
1941	154,000	10.6
1961	136,802	4.4
1966	102,520	2.7
1971	79,894	2.0
1976	59,050	1.3
1981	49,747	1.0

Source: Taylor 1988:201

There are no recent figures on the size of the community of boat-dwellers today. We believe in line with Taylor (1988) they are all gone by now. Our informants mentioned this as well. Ah Kee, who grew up in Po Toi Island, told us that there are only ten people still living on the island as fishermen. During our visit to the Hung Shing festival we were informed that the actual number of people living on the island was only ten to fifteen. The current inhabitants of the Po Toi Island are no longer living on boats and it appears that nowadays this hardly occurs.

**Current occupations.** The majority of the former boat-dwellers we spoke to are working in maritime related occupations. We spoke to several of the marine staff members of the yacht clubs ABC and HHYC. We visited these yacht clubs quite often during our time in Hong Kong both for interviews and casual hang outs to observe. Besides ABC and HHYC, we also visited the RHKYC even though they did not have any former boat-dwellers in their marine staff. Instead this club did have close contact with an independently operating former boat-dweller lady called Ah Fong. Ah Fong can be called a boat boy regardless of her gender. Boat boy is a maritime term for the people who take care of the maintenance of the yachts independently of the yacht club. The marine staff members get a monthly salary and work about six days a week in shifts of eight hours. Whereas the boat boys, who work independently, determine their working hours according to their personal schedule and have a salary based on the agreements made with each yacht owner they work for. Another category of former boat-dwellers we encountered were some of the marine police officers. We spoke to four marine police officers with a background in the boat-dweller culture. Finally, there were the fishermen association representatives, who are also former boat-dweller descendants, who went through the transition ashore. They are now involved in different fishermen organizations

besides their retirement.

During our research we came across different living situations that might need some explanation in order to understand our data. Boat-dwellers who solely lived on water generally used to have three boats. One boat was for fishing or work, one boat was for living and one boat was to get to shore or move from boat to boat. Most of the older generations of former boat-dwellers used to live this way. Another way of living was partially on boats and partially in houses on poles. The houses on poles were located ashore above the water. Therefore some of our informants still refer to living on the water while they were not living on boats. They used to live in the houses on poles, and work on the boats. This way of living was mentioned more often by the younger generation of former boat-dwellers.



*Photo 1: Houses on poles*

**Age categorization.** We have made a distinction between former boat-dwellers above the age of 50 who will be referred to as the relatively older generation, and the former boat dwellers who are below the age of 50 who will be referred to as the relatively younger generation. We have chosen this age limit, because of the differences we found in the field between men that are older than 50 and men that are younger than 50. This has to do with their history as boat-dwellers. The older former boat-dwellers have lived on boats for a longer time than the younger former boat-dwellers. Because of this they have more recollection of their time living afloat. They do not feel the need to get other jobs or compete with others in the labor market, because they are satisfied with their current occupation. Besides that, the older former boat-dwellers were born relatively short after World War II which was a significant time in the Hong Kong fisheries and therefore for the boat-dwellers of Hong Kong. The younger former boat-dwellers have experienced a different time while living afloat which is interesting for our research. We spoke to eleven informants above the age of 50 and eight informant below the age of 50.

The names we used in the next chapters are the real names of our informants. Some informants we spoke to introduced themselves with one name therefore we added the word “Ah” in front of the these informants’ names.

When we asked about the “Ah” in front of their actual names, we were explained that it is a honorific kind of addition. In Cantonese “Ah” means friend, and in front of a name it implies showing a certain amount of respect towards someone. Other informants introduced themselves with their complete names mostly containing three names therefore we did not put “Ah” in front of these names. All the information and data that is presented in the following chapters was gathered through interviews with our informants and interpreters. Therefore the used quotes are not directly from our informants but from our interpreters nevertheless we do present these quotes with our informant’s names. The former boat-dwellers are an interesting ethnic group due to their relatively quick integration in quit a different environment. In the next chapters these changes will be elaborated upon in combination with our informants’ personal experiences and stories attached to these changes and how this shaped their identity now they have moved ashore.

# Chapter 2

## Theoretical Framework

**Identity is a concept that is discussed elaborately in the mass of academic literature. With so many theoretical interpretations it is difficult to find a perfect definition of identity. However, the past developments in the academic debates on the concept of identity have made the concept a bit more manageable. In this chapter we will elaborate on the development of the concept of identity and amplify how the concept of identity was used within our research and data analysis. We will also reflect upon ethnic identity since our research population has been described as one of the four main ethnicities in the literature about Hong Kong (Chan 1998; Anderson 1976,1970, 1992; Taylor 1988; Ward 1959). Although we will not completely emerge in the exact concept of occupational identity, we will briefly explore occupation in relation to identity. We perceive this as necessary because the ethnic group of boat-dwellers has always been related to the maritime occupational area and in the past has not done anything else since the boat-dwellers had limited other options as explained in the context.**

### 2.1 Identity

Within anthropology and the continuous debates about culture, identity, and the relation between these two, there has been a gradual shift from seeing both culture and identity as static and solid, to culture and identity as changing and fluid (Sökefeld 1999; Hall 1996; Eriksen 2001; Van Meijl 2008). In the twentieth century there has been a long-standing assumption that individuals were only primarily members of culture (Van Meijl 2008:169). This view implies that identity was something stable and permanent. On the contrary, in the new notion of identity it is perceived as something fluid and changing over time and circumstances. There has been an equal change in the notion of culture that is also no longer conceived as something fixed and similar for every individual (Van Meijl 2008:173). Instead of something fixed and identical it is now believed that different individuals produce a shared culture and within this culture there is room for different individual creativity with the available economic, symbolic and political resources (Van Meijl 2008:173). This individual creativity is found in the surrounding cultural circumstances and since culture is ever changing and sensitive to different processes, individuals will constantly be in process of changing their identity as well. As Hall (Ojong and Sithole 2007) notes, identity is not something that will be achieved and completed because the production of identity is always in process (2007:96). This means that identities are constantly produced and reproduced repeatedly through transformations and difference (Ojong and Sithole 2007:96).

According to Eriksen (2001), besides the shift in interpretation of identity and culture, there has also been a tendency towards studying identities instead of culture. Within the tilt to identity there has been an intense focus on conscious agency, reflexivity and on the effect of the presence of the researcher on what is being studied (2001:45). This should be seen in line with the fact that earlier anthropology consisted of identifying other cultures and now the representatives of these other cultures are capable of identifying themselves. According to Eriksen (2001), this would either leave scholars out of a job or with the new mission to identify these identifications and study reflexive identity politics (2001:45). Recently, it was a tendency to deconstruct instrumentalist usage of notions of authenticity and traditions and demonstrate the presence of the difference within a group along with how big this difference actually is. These instrumentalist notions of authenticity and traditions consist of the idea that authenticity and tradition arise particularly as a supplement to political strategies (Eriksen 2001:44). Eriksen (2001) points out that this deconstruction is quite an important shift because it provides a method of analyzing the politics, symbols and contemporary processes that come along with identity within a uniform comparative framework (2001:45).

This is related to our research in the sense that our research objective is to supplement to the already existing theory on the boat-dwellers of Hong Kong and give a status update of this group. With our research we want to find out to what extent their common and shared past still effects their present identities and how this is influenced by the transition that they went through. With this specific context and ethnic group we also hope to add to the bigger anthropological context in which the effects of big transitions and transformations are studied. In focusing on identity formation as something based on individual creativity in combination with one's surroundings it becomes more apparent what constitutes the basis for the identities of each of our respondents within the whole of their surroundings, background and history. The big amount of difference that Eriksen (2001) describes refers to the different ways one identifies and uses certain aspects in identification and can partially be explained by the above-described individual creativity based on one's surrounding cultural circumstances. Another factor in this difference is the fact that each individual has multiple identities depending on the context that he or she is in. The next paragraph will further elaborate on this.

## **2.2 Multiple identities**

Besides fluid and ever changing, identity can also be multiple. A person can have an identity with different identifications that are formed with "others". This means that identity is both relational and situational. It is relational, because identity can be constructed through contact with others and it is situational, because different situations can cause different aspects of identity to be emphasized. Identity can be historically, politically and economically influenced and the importance of each of these aspects varies among individuals and communities (Van Gaalen 1998:4). In line with these multiple and multi sided identities, Fong and Chung (2004) make a distinction between

“subjective” and “objective” identity. Both are ascribed forms of identity namely, self-ascribed and ascribed by others.

Subjective identity is constituted out of how one thinks about oneself and how he or she perceives his or her own identity and personality in regard to ethnic, cultural or racial terms (Fong and Chaung 2004:20). Objective identity is based on how others relate a person to a certain ethnic, cultural or racial group in relation to visible physical and behavioral traits (Fong and Chaung 2004:20). On the one hand you have identity that refers to an individual’s own perception of his or her own identity that enables them to direct their own behavior.

This concept corresponds with what Goffman (Wodak et al. 2009) calls “ego identity”. Ego identity is explained as one’s own subjective feeling about one’s own situation and one’s own continuity and uniqueness (Wodak et al. 2009:13). On the other hand there is objective identity that takes place between individuals and the surrounding society therefore, it is something externally posed, outside of the individual (Wodak et al. 2009:15). Wodak et al. (2009) enhance the concept of objective identity to the extent that there are two other distinctions within the concept. Objective identity contains a social and collective identity. Social identity contains the ascription of fixed or relatively fixed characteristics (age, sex, class, etc.) to individuals, whereas collective identity is based on characteristics that are defined and decided upon by others before they were ascribed (Wodak et al. 2009:16).

Although there is a distinction between objective and subjective identity, this distinction is not always that clear and consistent. Individuals possess the characteristics of the collective groups or systems to which they belong therefore these characteristics influence them (Wodak et al. 2009:16). Both the objective is necessary for the subjective identity formation and vice versa. Finally there is the presence of the other that is necessary to construct an objective identity and this shows that identity is defined by relativity and fluidity (Eriksen 2010:37-38). Individuals move between the multiple dimensions of identity since it is relative and to some extent situational (Eriksen 2010:37).

Sometimes individuals choose to over- or under-communicate one or more identities, depending on what situation the individual is located in. This means that some identities are emphasized while other identities are minimized in certain situations (Eriksen 2010:27). According to Wodak et al. (2009) every identity involves inclusion and exclusion and therefore some individuals might choose to over-communicate an identity to show belonging to a group. The distinction between “Us” and “Them” is inevitably made through mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion (Eriksen 2010:23). This difference could be emphasized through stereotyping. When stereotyping occurs it is important to keep in mind that stereotypes are not always true and that there may be a difference between what people say, attitude, and what people do, actions (Eriksen 2010:24-25). When two or more groups who consider themselves as being distinctive are in contact



and interact with each other, they tend to become similar and increasingly concerned with their distinctiveness (Eriksen 2010:23). As the boat-dwellers moved ashore they interacted more with the people on land. Therefore it is interesting to see how they reacted to this and how this influenced both their subjective and objective identity. Also the boat-dwellers abandoned their distinct sub-culture and were no longer culturally recognizable since they no longer lived in certain areas on recognizable boats. With their movement they lost these cultural traits and got absorbed, so to speak, into the land culture. In relation to objective and subjective identity, they were no longer able to ascribe these concrete traits to themselves nor were the people around them able to set them apart from the rest anymore and ascribe traits to them.

### **2.3 Occupation in relation to identity**

When regarding multiple identities and the situational aspect attached to it, in the context of the boat-dwellers occupation plays a vital role in their identity formation. As mentioned above identity is situational because different situations can cause different aspects of identity to be emphasized (Van Gaalen 1998:4). Among the aspects that influence identity there is the economic aspect. In this section the economic aspect of occupation comes forward. As mentioned in the context the floating settlements of the boat-dwellers have long been separated by the concrete boundary between water and land. The boat-dwellers were confined to making their living through maritime means. It is because of this that the occupation of fisherman has played a vital role in the identification of the boat-dwellers. Besides just an occupation this was an aspect that would differentiate them from the people ashore even when the boat-dwellers were not on-duty. Easily recognizable because of different manners and speech, traceable through their working and living circumstances, they were easily differentiated. In this section we will summarize the relation of occupation and identity. This will only be done briefly since it is not our intention to specify on the concept of occupational identity solely. In this research we wish to stick to the idea of occupation being one of the many factors influencing identity.

Christiansen (Pehlan and Kinsella 2009) makes an explicit connection between occupation and individuals' personal and social identity. According to him participation in occupation contributes to one's construction of identity and is the primary means to communicate one's identity. The conclusion is that when identities are built through occupations, a context is provided that is necessary for creating meaningful lives and this adds to one's well-being (Pehlan and Kinsella 2009:85). Kielhofner (Pehlan and Kinsella 2009) even coined the term "occupational identity" and explains this concept as "a composite sense of who one is and wishes to become as an occupational being generated from one's history of occupational participation." (Pehlan and Kinsella 2009:85). In social settings, people are often defined by what they do. Unruh (Pehlan and Kinsella 2009) illustrates this with the common asked question of "so...what do you do?" a question commonly asked in everyday conversation (2009:85).

Although we do not intend to use the actual term of occupational identity we do wish to draw on the literature about the relation between occupation and identity provided by the theory about this term. The next paragraph will be about ethnic identity both because of the common description of boat-dwellers as an ethnic group and, because of the close relation between the ethnicity of boat-dwellers and the maritime occupational area.

#### **2.4 Ethnicity and ethnic identity.**

Like Joane Nagel states: “Identity and culture are two of the basic building blocks of ethnicity.” (1994:152). Since we conduct research on one of the four ethnicities of Hong Kong, ethnicity seems like a logical concept to elaborate on in combination with identity. Ethnicity is a concept that is best understood within the context of both individual identity and group organization. In this part of the theoretical framework we will provide some theoretical views of ethnicity. Besides ethnicity, we will also specify on ethnic identity that means using one’s ethnicity to define one’s identity.

In line with the earlier theory on culture and identity, ethnicity is something fluid and dynamic. According to the constructionist view ethnicity is constructed out of the social aspects of ethnic boundaries, identities and cultures that are defined and produced through social interaction inside and outside ethnic communities (Nagel 1994:152). It reflects the creative choices of both individuals and groups as they define themselves and others in ethnic ways. Ethnic groups are categories of ascription and identification by the actors themselves (Eriksen 2010:44).

The view that ethnicity arises out of the material of language, religion, culture, appearance, ancestry, or regionality does not necessarily imply that there is no historical basis in for instance ethnic conflict. History has an important role but within the constructionist view it is stated that history is used to one’s demands and needs in constructing an ethnicity (Nagel 1994:153).

Ethnic identity is part of ethnicity in the sense that ethnic identity is created out of identification based on ethnicity. Ethnic identity is most closely related to boundaries (Nagel 1994:154). These ethnic boundaries define who is a member and who is not and besides that they indicate which ethnic categories are available for individual identification at a particular time and place (Nagel 1994:153). Ethnicity is created and recreated as various groups and interests put forth competing visions of the ethnic compositions of society and argue over which rewards or sanctions should be attached to which ethnicities (Nagel 1994:153). These boundaries are not stable and continuing, instead this depends on the situation and besides that they are multiple and overlapping (Cohen 1978:387). To relate this to our research population, the boat-dwellers of Hong Kong used to be perceived as an inferior ethnic group for a very long time. Within a few decades quite a big change took place within the ethnic relations between these different ethnic groups. The ethnic boundaries that used to exist between the people

ashore and the boat-dwellers started decreasing in presence. Nowadays the former boat-dwellers are able to move ashore and blend in the life of the land people.

The association of ethnic identity and boundaries derives from the influential essay Frederik Barth (Eriksen 2010) wrote. In this essay Barth conforms with Leach's (Eriksen 2010) general perspective that "culture" needs to be displaced from the front stage of ethnic studies (2010:44). Instead of focusing on culture it is necessary to focus on the boundaries that delimit the group. Focusing on boundaries is stressed because identifying ethnic groups with cultural units is problematic for two reasons. First, a focus on the cultural uniqueness of ethnic groups would imply that these groups are isolated while that is not the case (Eriksen 2010:44). On the contrary, a distinct, shared culture may be seen as an implication or result of long-term social processes, rather than as a primordial feature of groups. Second, these definitions based on the notions of shared culture presuppose that maintaining the ethnic boundaries is unproblematic (Eriksen 2010:44). Groups are in constant contact with each other thus cultural variation must be taken into account. Barth (Eriksen 2010) regards the ethnic group chiefly in terms of social organization relating to what we mentioned earlier about ethnic group definition from within by their members. Ethnic membership needs to be acknowledged by the agents themselves in order to be socially effective (Eriksen 2010:45). An ethnic group is defined through its relationship with others that is emphasized through the boundaries nevertheless these boundaries are social products by themselves and may therefore change through time (Eriksen 2010:45). The next paragraph will elaborate on the changes and shifts of ethnic boundaries.

## **2.5 Ethnic boundary fluidity**

Epstein (Eriksen 2010) states that:

"Since ethnicity arises so often in circumstances of social upheaval and transformation, which are frequently accompanied by severe cultural erosion and the disappearance of many customs that might serve as marks of distinctiveness, a critical issue is how that identity is to be maintained over a number of generations." (Eriksen 2010:81)

Ethnic symbolism, referring to the ancient language, religion, kinship system or way of life, is crucial for the maintenance of ethnic identity through periods of change. Boundary maintenance becomes important when the boundaries are under pressure (Eriksen 2010:81). Different factors can be perceived as threatening and in these circumstances shared origins may be imputed when it seems necessary. This shows that ethnicity is a social creation and not a fact of nature. In order for ethnic identities to function they must seem convincing to their members and besides being acknowledged by

their own members they must also be seen as legitimate by the non-members of the group (Eriksen 2010:83). It is up to the individual or group whether or not certain ethnic symbolisms are to be used or not. If it does not seem necessary it will not be done.

Nagel (1994) poses the interesting question: “How can people behave in ways which disregard ethnic boundaries while at the same time claim an ethnic identity?” (1994:154). The answer can be found in the different ethnic construction processes and in particular the ways in which individuals and groups create and recreate their personal and collective histories, the membership boundaries of their group, and the content and meaning of their ethnicity (Nagel 1994:154). If ethnicity is based on ascription by both oneself and the other, the construction of ethnicity can be seen as a dialectical process involving internal and external opinions and processes combined with the individual’s self-identification and outsiders’ ethnic designation. Ethnicity thus changes per situation and encountered audience and the chosen ethnicity is determined by the individual’s perception of its meaning to different audiences, its salience in different contexts, and its utility in different settings (Nagel 1994:155). Besides that, ethnic identity and the additional aspects have an aura of descent to them. Once they are acquired they are incorporated into the micro culture of families or individuals as part of their own heritage and identity and then passed down the generations. However they are passed down for as long as the grouping has some viable significance to members and non-members (Cohen 1978:387). The combination of ethnic identity and heritage can be found in the usage of the past. We will now further elaborate on the function of the past within identification and ethnic identity since ethnic identity formation depends on a process of exploration that includes the past and present experiences of one’s group and its relations with others (Phinney 1996:143).

A theory on how the past is used can be found in the work of Friedman on how the past is always practiced in the present. This is not because the past imposes itself but rather because subjects in the present might use the past in practice of their social identities (Friedman 1992:853). The past is reproduced and occurs in the present as the discourse of identity. This leaves us with the question of who “owns” the past and who is able to identify him- or herself and the other at any given time and place (Friedman 1992:854). Friedman (1992) states that self-identification must be interpreted in its authenticity and that it is produced in different kinds of social orders. It is a practice that is motivated in different historical, spatial and social circumstances (Friedman 1992:856). As Friedman puts it: “The constitution of identity is an elaborate and deadly serious game of mirrors. It is a complex temporal interaction of multiple practices identification external and internal to a subject or population.” (1992:853). This points out how it is a complex individual related practice that makes history personally interpreted. Within our research we found out how the memories within the history of the boat-dwellers were different for different individuals.

The above theories will come together in the presentation of our gathered data. We wish to demonstrate that the fluidity and changeability of both culture and identity emerges in the identifications of our informants with their boat-dweller past. Within this fluidity of the ethnic identity of the boat-dwellers it becomes clear that the affiliations with one's heritage are used differently in varying situations. Descent and identity are not given things instead they are made out of different aspects of one's daily activities like an occupation, the environment one grew up in, the knowledge about but also the emotional attachments with his or her background and last but not least the outsider's perspective. In the next paragraphs we will present our data. First we will provide in a set of reasons for the movement ashore in chapter 3. In chapter 4 an account of the older generation of former boat-dwellers and their affiliations with their descent and background will be given. Followed by chapter 5, that will give the same account but in the context of the younger generation of former boat-dwellers.

# Chapter 3

## The movement from afloat to ashore

By: M Kluytenaar

**Our informant Ah Wing describes a fundamental economic structural aspect for the movement ashore however this is not the only aspect of why there was such a big flow of boat-dwellers who moved ashore. In this chapter we will elaborate on all the factors and reasons of why the boat-dwellers moved ashore. We will start with the changes that took place in the Hong Kong fishing industry, followed by the economic and educational changes the fishermen went through. This chapter is concluded with personal and emotional reasons attached to the movement.**

“It should be something we call, natural elimination. That means, with the amount of fish they can catch, going outside is less and less profitable than before.”

(Ah Wing, S.E.I. Malaihollo/M Kluijtenaar, 08-02-2013)

### 3.1 Changes in the Hong Kong fishing industry

It was only after World War II that the Hong Kong Government started taking the fishing industry more seriously. It was decided that the fishing sector had to go through some modernization meaning that inter alia, the traditional fishing vessels called junks had to become motorized. Besides that, the junks also had to be changed in shape for efficiency reasons. For decades, even centuries, the junks were built with higher up sterns<sup>1</sup> because of the empress of the sea Tin Hau who had to be situated high up the ship so she could guard the fishermen and look over the ship. Now the boats had to be changed to a new shape and model. A positive effect of this innovation was that fishing got more efficient and more profitable for the fishermen (Stephen Davies, S.E.I. Malaihollo/M Kluytenaar, 07-02-2013). However a major downside was that the pressure on the fishing stocks got very high whereby in the 1970s and 1980s the fishermen had to go further into different territories to be able to catch enough fish to make a profit. In order to go further into different territories fishermen needed steel hulled diesel junks instead of the wooden junks they had been sailing (Taylor 1988:202). This was an investment beyond the means of many boat-dwellers.

On top of this the Hong Kong Government demanded different licenses for steel vessels that the boat-dwellers often did not own or were not able to invest in.

“Nowadays you need a lot of licenses and in general fishermen have a lot more costs. Licenses back in the old days were gained through experience not through school exams. Also they did not cost you a fortune to get.”

(Chung Cho Tai, S.E.I. Malaihollo/M Kluijtenaar, 12-03-2013)

Chung Cho Tai is a retired former boat-dweller in his 60s. Now he is retired he is one of the representatives of a fishermen fraternity association in Tai Po. Chung Cho Tai gives this account after he explained to us how in his head he would still love to be a fisherman. However, in reality he knows that this is no longer possible due to the reasons that are mentioned above. These changes all contributed to the development of fishing becoming more and more competitive and less profitable. It developed into an occupation that people were gradually forced to move out of (Stephen Davies, S.E.I. Malaihollo/M Kluytenaar,07-02-2013).

### **3.2 Economic changes**

During the 1970s and the 1980s the Hong Kong economy was flourishing and it was a good time to find a job in construction and infrastructure ashore. This made both the fishing and farming industry decrease in importance (Taylor 1988:202). Getting a job ashore simply meant making more money and living a more convenient life. Many families with increased means now had higher living demands and the floating settlements would no longer rise up to these demands. The government had already been encouraging the boat-dwellers to move ashore for a while by offering them public housing and giving them priority on the waiting lists for public apartments (Taylor 1988:201). The fact that working ashore would be more convenient and profitable was a very strong argument in our interviewee's stories as well. The following quotation came from our informant Ah Wing. Ah Wing, 50 years old and is one of the marine staff members at ABC.

“The boat-dwellers feel it is tough making a living out of fishing. Like we said earlier, Hong Kong started to develop in the 1970s and a lot of other possible ways to earn money started to come up. So a lot of boat-dwellers who used to earn their money with fishing started earning money with something less hard.”

(Ah Wing, S.E.I. Malaihollo/M Kluijtenaar, 08-02-2013)

Besides the opportunities of making more money ashore, one of our focus groups mentioned another argument related to money. One of the attendants of this focus group was Chung Cho Tai, who was introduced earlier. The other three informants are all in their 60s as well and also represent for the same fishermen fraternity association in Tai Po. We have met them through Pong Cheung who is a Hakka descendant retiree. The next section will tell the story that our informants told us during the focus group.

While interrupting each other enthusiastically, Chung Cho Tai, So Fat, Chung Cho She and Tsui Kit Man, each try to give their reason for moving ashore. While Joanne, our interpreter, looks confused and a bit annoyed her father Pong seems to be telling the four men that they have to agree on a general answer. Although we are not quite sure

whether or not Pong actually told them to do this, it gets more quiet and Tsui Kit Man directs his attention to us and Joanne and starts explaining;

“We moved ashore because of the money but not just to make more money also because by this time our parents had saved up and there was the social welfare program that would help us out. The social welfare program gave us loans and back up when in trouble like when a boat sinks, in exchange for two percent of our profit. So with the social welfare program our parents could build houses and have a better life. More convenient.”

(Focus group, S.E.I. Malaihollo/ M Kluijtenaar, 12-03-2013)

The economic background to the movement ashore comes down to convenience and life improvement. In general the image of the movement was portrayed in quite a sensible and plain way. When there are opportunities to improve one's life one should take this opportunity. This is in line with what Eileen, the marine staff manager assistant at ABC, told us. Eileen explained to us how the people generally working in the yachting industry are working there because of the opportunities in getting job promotion and making more money. In the yachting world there are a lot of possibilities for getting good reference and ending up in different jobs. The marine staff members we spoke to were, to certain extend, pretty down to earth about working in the boat world. It is something that they are good at and comes natural to them (Eileen, S.E.I. Malaihollo/M Kluytenaar, 19-03-2013). Why keep on fishing that is hard work with little reward when you can shift to working ashore and make more money?

### **3.3 Educational changes**

Another important change that contributed to the movement ashore was education. From 1971 and onwards, primary education turned compulsory in Hong Kong. Therefore, the boat-dweller children had to go to school and this had two fundamental consequences for the fishing families. First, a lot of children were no longer able to help on the boats whenever their parents needed them. The boat-dwellers had a system of big families of about eight or more members and this had a lot to do with having enough crew.

“There are no longer enough family members who would be willing to go out and fish. When I was fishing back then, the only costs we had would be the salary of the people aboard but since that was family that was hardly an issue. Now it is different.”

(Chung Cho Tai, S.E.I. Malaihollo/M Kluijtenaar, 12-03-2013)



Chung Cho Tai explains here how having a crew containing family members was more convenient since there were no extra costs. When the children had to go to school they were still crewmembers but not in the same full-time manner as before. While the children had to go to school they could only help out after or before school. A lot of our interviewees told us about how they would go to school one part of the day and help out on the boat the other part of the day. One of the marine staff members of HHYC, Ah Hui gave an account of how he had to combine school and fishing. Ah Hui is in his mid-50s and has been working in the boating industry since he was 34 years old.

“In my family none of the kids were going to school until a neighbor asked my dad why his kids were not in school. My dad did not know why so he send all of us to school. All at the same time I mean, me and my brothers and sisters. So I was 12 something when I started in primary school and I finished when I was 18. Once in school I had to help my dad in the morning and spent the afternoon in school.”

(Ah Hui, S.E.I. Malaihollo/M Kluijtenaar, 14-03-2013)

The second consequence was that, the school going children got in touch with the land-community and got assimilated to a certain extent. This might have eliminated the perceived importance of maintaining the floating life style of their parents (Taylor 1988:202). Part of this assimilation has to do with the confrontation the children had with the life ashore and how this was quite different from living afloat. The next paragraph will provide parts of the recollections our informants have of living afloat. Overall these recollections are not very positive therefore it makes sense that once they came into contact with what life ashore was like, they preferred this over living afloat.

### **3.4 Personal reasons**

Last but definitely not least in this list of different factors and reasons for moving ashore is, the fact that living and working afloat was very dangerous. We got numerous accounts of capsizing boats, ongoing worries about typhoons, cold winters and crowded boats with not a lot of space. Especially the relatively younger former-boat dwellers had a lot of bad recollections of living afloat.

“An exciting memory would be the typhoon and when the rain is coming with big winds and waves. A lot of scary memories so no good memories. It is better moving ashore.”

(Ah Fuk, S.E.I. Malaihollo/M Kluijtenaar, 08-03-2013)

“I did not mind moving ashore and we all agree that we do not mind not living with the fears that come along with living on a boat. Especially the fear of the typhoons every year was exhausting.”

(Focus group, S.E.I. Malaihollo/M Kluijtenaar, 12-03-2013)

All the above reasons and examples show that through time it simply became impossible to maintain the floating communities. The conditions were no longer suitable and besides that if there were better options why would people not try to make a better life for themselves. Anderson (1970) describes how life is integrated around the need to manage one's relationship with the surrounding world. Therefore, the boat-dwellers must cope with situations, people and forces in order to keep operating and if possible improve their position (Anderson 1970:29). In managing the world around them and coping with the different situations their perceived identities would also transform and take different shapes. Identity can be historically, politically and economically influenced and the importance of each of these aspects varies among individuals and communities (Van Gaalen 1998:4). In the case of the former boat-dwellers, within a relatively short amount of time there was quite a radical change in their cultural surroundings. The boat-dwellers moved ashore and were no longer surrounded by their ethnic group of people. Instead they had to blend in between the landlubbers. This was something they were not solely forced to do and a lot of the former boat-dwellers we spoke to were quite happy they could move ashore since, overall, leaving the life afloat behind was perceived as an improvement of their living conditions.

### **3.5 Current occupations**

In line with the changes we will elaborate further on the occupations that our informants ended up in after moving ashore. As mentioned in the economic and overall changes in Hong Kong, during the 1970s and 1980s Hong Kong's economy was flourishing and that brought along a lot of employment in the areas of construction, infrastructure and manufacturing. For instance interviewee Ah Wing, Mikey and Ah Kaiung started working in construction and infrastructure but switched back to the maritime area pretty soon. We encountered three main occupations in which, the former boat-dwellers we spoke to, work. The first is marine staff member at one of yacht clubs of Hong Kong. The second was in the Marine Police of Hong Kong and third there is the occupation of what the gweilos [foreigners in Cantonese] call boat boys. We have already discussed what each of these occupations entail in the context therefore we will not do that in further detail here. The main point is that all of our informant are working, or used to be working, in the maritime occupational area. It is possible to look at this from a very practical perspective namely that, these jobs give them the opportunity to use their natural skills and to a certain extent this is true in the sense that our informants told us that this was what they were good at. At the same time our informants did relate their jobs near the water to

freedom and better environmental circumstances. As our informant Ah So puts it: “..whatever kind of job involving maritime knowledge as long as it is not fisherman.”

Christiansen (Phelan and Kinsella 2009) makes an explicit connection between occupation and individuals’ personal and social identity (2009:85). According to him participation in occupation contributes to one’s construction of identity and is the primary means to communicate one’s identity. The conclusion is that identities are built through occupations, as a context is provided that is necessary for creating meaningful lives and this adds to one’s well-being (Phelan and Kinsella 2009:85). All of our informants emphasize how living ashore is more convenient than living on a boat and how working in their current occupations is so much better than the occupation of fisherman. To recur to Anderson (1970), life is integrated around the need to manage one’s relationships with the world in order that one may keep operating and if possible improve one’s position. This is exactly what our informants did both because they could and because they were forced by what happened around them. This has affected their lives and their identities. We will conclude this chapter with a fragment out of the interview with Ah Wing about the relation between living and working ashore now and the recollections of living afloat.

“Many typical fishermen who moved to land will miss it. We all have good memories of those old things, but we will never choose to live on the boat. One reason is because it is not convenient. In Hong Kong convenience is considered as very important so living on a boat does not fit with that ideal. The other thing is typhoons, Hong Kong has a lot of typhoons during the summer. I was always anxious what would happen to our boats during this period which is not nice and enough reason for me to move to land.”

(Ah Wing, S.E.I. Malaihollo/M Kluijtenaar, 08-02-2013)

The following chapters will be more specifically about the identities of our informants and how we interpreted their stories about their youth in the floating settlements in relation to the stories about their lives today. Chapter 4 will be about the older generation of former boat-dwellers of 50 years and older and chapter 5 will be about the younger generation of former boat-dwellers under 50. After elaborating on these different generations and their affiliations with their descent of and past in the boat-dweller culture we will make a comparison in which we will elaborate on what the differences are between these two generations when it comes to their boat-dweller identity.

# Chapter 4

## The older generation of former boat-dwellers

By: S.E.I. Malaihollo

“You can take a seat on the terrace, I will call Ah Kee to come”. Matthew the front desk operator points to the terrace outside and we follow his directions to the terrace. After a few minutes Ah Kee, the marine staff manager at ABC, comes walking to us and shows us the way to the pontoon. “Stay here, I will get the boat to go to Middle Island”. As we see him jump on the boat and putting his life jacket on he reminds me of a Chinese version of James Bond. Ah Kee has a suit and sun glasses on, he only needs a gun and a Bond girl to make the image complete.

He comes driving our way with a big smile and helps us on the boat. When we are seated we slowly sail out of the harbor onto the sea. As we exit the harbor we immediately speed up and we notice Ah Kee enjoy driving really fast. During our trip to Middle Island we see a man on a wakeboard that pushes itself up into the air by squirting water out of the wakeboard. It looks like the man can fly and we are all amazed by this sight. Ah Kee slows the boat down and approaches the guy. When he comes closer he seems to recognize the guy and they enthusiastically communicate with each other in Cantonese. Then Ah Kee turn to us with bright eyes and explains that he has been teaching him windsurfing a few years ago when he was younger. Ah Kee cannot seem to get enough of looking at this water spectacle, but after a few minutes he starts the engine again to continue our trip to Middle Island. During the whole trip on the boat I saw Ah Kee light up and enjoyed being on the water and driving the boat. He did not say much, but the way he was around the water showed how much he enjoyed it. Everything came very natural as if the water is what land is to us.

As Ah Kee ties up the speedboat that we have driven with to Middle Island and back, we take a seat on the outside terrace of the Aberdeen Boat Club. We look at the big yacht that is berthing next to the small speedboat. Five staff members try to berth the yacht as good as possible while a fancy looking guy jumps on the yacht. He takes a seat and within two second a servant comes to bring him some tea. It is a great contrast when you compare it with the small boats further down the harbor that used to be boats where people would live on with ten people. As we watch this happen Ah Kee joins us and we draw our attention to Ah Kee. “We were asking you a little bit about the term Tanka while we were on the speedboat, can you tell us something more about it?”. Ah Kee starts laughing and explains that the term Tanka is not really used anymore. We ask him why the term is not used anymore. “About 40 years ago the fishermen were poorly educated. The fishermen had an inferior status and were therefore called Tanka. Mostly other poorly educated people would use the term Tanka. People are more educated now, they do not

really use the term, because it is impolite. The current term for it is: “Yee Man”. This literally means fishermen. If people say it to me, I would not really mind, but it is not polite to use it anymore.” We are amazed by the indifferent attitude Ah Kee has being called Tanka. After having a few more interviews with other older former boat-dwellers we understand that they are a bit more down to earth and that they have a certain surviving skill to them.



*Photo 2: Ah Kee*

After having discussed why the former boat-dwellers moved ashore we are now focusing on the older generation of the former boat-dwellers. This chapter is about how the older former boat-dwellers experienced growing up afloat and how they affiliate with this past.

#### **4.1 Growing up in the floating settlement**

As we are looking over the Causeway Bay Typhoon shelter, we see a woman with a reed hat in a small yellow boat coming our way. “Look that is Ah Fong in her boat!” says Joanne. Joanne is our interpreter for the day and staff member at the RHKYC. “Ah Fong is a boat boy, she is using that boat to drive from one yacht to the other if she needs to wash them or something.” Ah Fong moors her boat at one of the pontoons and walks up to us. She comes across friendly though a bit shy. Her constant smile makes us feel free to ask anything. We talk a little at the pontoon about Ah Fong’s past in the shelter. “She is born here in the Causeway Bay Typhoon Shelter, so she has been here over 60 years!!” Joanne says with big enthusiasm. I respond with: “So she was raised on a boat?”. After a Cantonese word exchange between Joanne and Ah Fong, Joanne responds: “No, just helping with cleaning or other stuff, not racing”. Inside I laugh hoping this misinterpretation will not mark the entire interview. We move from the pontoon to one of the tables in the restaurant of the RHKYC where we continue our conversation. “Ah Fong lived with her parents and seven more brothers and sisters on a boat in the shelter. She was born right after World War II”. Ah Fong immediately points out how

living aboard a boat compared to living in an apartment is not that different to her but that the time she was living on the boat in the community was a very happy time. “A full stomach meant happy time, everyone was living day by day because it was after the war and everyone was happy to be alive. There was no pollution in the shelter, we had a good relation with the neighbors and we were able to grab the jellyfish out of the water”. Joanne laughs constantly and explains that Ah Fong has been living aboard the ship with her family until she was about 16 years old. When she was sixteen she got married with her husband who also lived in the Causeway Bay Typhoon shelter. By the time she was 20 years old she was the mother of three children. She lived with her husband and children aboard another boat in the shelter and they were making money by doing the maintenance of several private owned boats in the shelter. Ah Fong grabs her photo album she brought with her and flips through the photos until she reaches one of her husband and children on a boat. She proudly shows it to us pointing at her children saying something in Cantonese, what we interpret as: “Look those are my children”, and we respond with: “Aaaah so cute, you have beautiful children”. She smiles at us not understanding English, but probably understanding our enthusiasm as something positive. The work Ah Fong is doing currently is not unfamiliar to her. She has worked in the shelter for as long as she remembers. While growing up she helped her mother out on the service sampan. They were sailing around the shelter and selling small beverages to the other boat people. Aboard the sampan they had a small box where they burned wood in and cooked some small meals to sell. She tells us that during that time they had to work hard since there was no government support yet. It was also because of this that she could not go to school.

(Ah Fong, S.E.I. Malaihollo/M Kluytenaar, 18-03-2013)

Ah Kee also mentions in his interview that his parents needed all their children to help out and make a living. Without the help of their children they would not be able to support their family. This is in accordance with what Anderson (2007) said about boat-dwellers being a family based operation. The largest boats might hire a few extra hands, but almost all boats were strictly family operations. A big boat might hold an extended family, while a small one was normally a nuclear-family operation. Brothers who owned separate boats typically cooperated, operating what were in effect family fleets of two, three or four boats. (Anderson 2007:3)

“I was born on a boat. I started school when I was 10 years old and finished it when I was 16. After that I helped my parents with fishing. I helped them for about five to six years and then I came working for the ABC. When I moved ashore my whole family had to move, because they did not have enough people to help out with fishing to make enough money.”

(Ah Kee, S.E.I. Malaihollo/M Kluytenaar, 18-02-2013)

So Chi-Keung, So Loi and Chung Ju-She are the three men from our first focus group in Tai Po who are all fishermen representatives. So Chi-Keung, the oldest is 75 years old. So Loi is 60 years old. This age difference is immediately remarked by the men saying that So Loi got more education than So Chi-Keung. So Chi-Keung only had one year of education and this was maritime related. The entire family was living on the boats therefore, they all had to fish when they left the harbor, because they were all aboard. After asking where they were born the three men all respond with the same answer: “on a fishing boat.” They all agree that it was very hard growing up in the fishing environment. It did not matter what kind of weather it was they had to get out on the sea anyway, since they did not have an income if they did not fish. This is one of the reasons they are all representatives of the boat people community of Tai Po. They decided to do this to benefit “their people” and help them out.

As So Loi mentions :

“The boat dwelling community had to be represented after moving ashore.”

(Focus group 2, S.E.I. Malaihollo/M Kluijtenaar, 03-04-2013)

When So Loi says that the boat dwelling community had to be represented after moving ashore he means that the boat-dwelling community is not distinct anymore. The boat-dwellers used to live afloat which made them a distinct group within the Hong Kong society. When they moved ashore they were no longer a distinct group and they had to adapt to land. The men in the focus groups help the former boat-dwellers and fishermen with this. So Loi did not say it in so many words, but out of the focus group it is clear that he means this when he says that the boat-dwelling community needs to be represented.

Our informants have different stories about their past and growing up, both good and bad stories. Most of the stories were more good than bad. We did notice that during their childhood they had to help a lot on the boats and had to do a lot of maritime work. This way they developed maritime skills that they still have and that may have constructed part of their ethnicity. As Nagel states, history has an important role and is used to one’s demand and needs in constructing an ethnicity (Nagel 1994:153).

#### **4.2 Boat-dweller affiliation**

After living ashore for over 30 years now we wonder if our informants still relate to their background since they no longer live on boats anymore.

When we ask Ah Wing, marine staff member at ABC, if he still relates to his history of four generations of fishermen in the work he does right now, he answers a definite yes. Ah Wing lights up and explains that he got used to the sea and the marine side of working. He was brought up in that environment and likes it a lot. He mentions that he does this work for relaxation and to get a feeling of freedom when he drives a boat and

works on the sea. “The air is fresh. In Hong Kong the air pollution is serious, but at sea the air is fresh.”

(Ah Wing, S.E.I. Malaihollo/M Kluijtenaar, 08-02-2013)

Freedom is a recurrent topic in our interviews, as we mentioned above Ah Fong also tells us that she really loves her freedom. This is one of the reasons she is still working in the Causeway Bay Typhoon Shelter. In a study of Holland and Ditton (1992) it appeared that fishing has a certain satisfaction to it. The dimensions of satisfaction they studied were sense of freedom, excitement, catching fish, relaxation, enjoying the natural setting, and thinking about past fishing experiences. Enjoying a quality environment and feeling a sense of freedom were the two most important dimensions of satisfaction for most respondents (Holland and Ditton 1992:28). This is in accordance with the stories of Ah Wing and Ah Fong, who both state they like the freedom that is related to the water. Ah Wing adds that he likes the fresh air at sea, which is a quality environment Holland and Ditton talk about (Holland and Ditton 1992:28). There is a difference between Ah Fong and Ah Wing in their experience of freedom. Ah Fong experiences her freedom in the flexible working hours that give her time to do other things besides working. Ah Wing’s experience of freedom is more in accordance with the kind of freedom that relates to fishing that Holland and Ditton (1992) mention. Not everyone was as lucky as Ah Fong to still experience this freedom. In both our focus groups with the fishermen representatives freedom is also mentioned as something valuable, but not something they still have.

“It was a hard life in a small and poor environment. I think of my life on the water as a life of freedom. Moving ashore was difficult, but it was better for me and my family to improve our lives”. So Loi agrees and adds: “Nowadays I relate to the water as a way of relaxation, I would not want to go back though. I am too attached to living ashore, because it is a lot easier.”

(So Chi-Keung and So Loi, S.E.I. Malaihollo/M Kluytenaar, 27-02-2013)

Chung Cho Tai stresses how he enjoyed being a fisherman and living afloat. Living aboard the boat was based on simplicity, the sea and water accounted for freedom and they did not have to worry about paying the electricity bills, transportations and all the other costs that make life ashore so much more expensive. Back in those days the money did not fly out of his pocket like it does nowadays. On the other hand Chung Cho She points out that he did not enjoy the fears that accompanied their life afloat. There was always the chance that a typhoon would appear out of nowhere and that there would be possible damage to the boats. This remark gets confirmative nods and comments about the exhaustion that these dangers brought with them.

Chung Cho Tai agrees with Chung Cho She and explains that in his mind fishing is still the best occupation there is. He would love to be an active fisherman. However in reality he knows that nowadays this would not be possible. His family would not be able to



help out as crewmembers and the threatening circumstances would soon get him back to reality. Besides that, nowadays licenses and professional crew are very expensive. Back in the old days licenses were gained through experience and the crew did not get any salary since they were all family members and this was sorted out differently. (Focus group 2, S.E.I. Malaihollo/M Kluytenaar, 03-04-2013). It appears that the older generation of former boat dwellers do affiliate with their past as boat-dwellers. What they seem to miss most is their freedom and they all actively experienced having this freedom. Nevertheless, they would not want to go back to life on a boat. The reasons our informants give are mostly related to bad living conditions and fears for typhoons. They are tied to land, because of these reasons. What deprives them from their freedom now is the life ashore they assimilated to. As Chung Cho Tai says, his money is flying out of his wallet now that he lives ashore. The boat-dwellers have to make a living to survive. This includes doing jobs that do not involve having freedom.

### **4.3 Conclusion**

In this chapter we have presented the older generation of boat-dwellers who have consciously experienced living on boats. When they grew up they usually had to help their parents with fishing or working on the service sampan. Some also attended school and combined it with helping their parents and some did not. This led to different levels of education within our research population of older former boat-dwellers. Helping their parents was very important for their whole family to make a living. When some of our informants moved ashore their whole family had to move, because they could not make a living without them. After moving ashore most of the former boat-dwellers changed to different occupations, though always in the maritime sphere because they were good at it. Ah Fong, our only informant who worked in the service sector, did not change her occupation. She kept working in the Causeway Bay Typhoon Shelter while living ashore. This might have something to do with her affiliation with the former boat-dwellers. Most of our older informants mention having good recollections of living afloat and they miss the freedom they experienced during that time.

In all of our interviews with the older generation of former boat-dwellers the feeling of freedom came up. Freedom is considered as something valuable and related to the time that the boat-dwellers lived afloat. Ah Fong is still working in the shelter where she is still experiencing the freedom she talks about, but the other former boat-dwellers do not. They all say they miss it nevertheless they would not want to go back to living afloat because they feel their life is improved since they moved ashore. This is in accordance with our previous chapter in which we mentioned the different reasons for the boat-dwellers to move ashore. It would be contradictory if they now state that they want to go back to the life they had. This is not what the older generation of former boat-dwellers tell us. They do state that they miss the freedom that accompanied living on a boat, but that life ashore is much better. The next chapter will discuss the experiences of the younger former boat-dwellers and how they relate to their past.

# Chapter 5

## The younger generation of former boat-dwellers

By: M Kluytenaar

**Our informants were of relatively different ages. Out of the differentiation we have made, as mentioned in the context, this chapter will be about the informants under the age of 50 and are in the category of the younger generation. The first subject that will be discussed is the way these men grew up. The majority of our younger informants grew up on boats in combination with the houses on poles. In the section about growing up in the communities, our informant's stories will be told in order to delineate their feelings and opinions about their childhood. Thereafter the present affiliations our informants have or do not have with their boat-dweller past will be discussed. The paragraph will provide in their views on the image and lifestyle of the former boat-dwellers and the emotions they attach to this past.**

“I like the sea, I just do not want to live there.”

(Ah So, S.E.I. Malaihollo/M Kluijtenaar, 08-03-2013)

### 5.1 Growing up in the floating settlements

Ah So is our second interviewee and after our first interviewee, Ah Kin, we are quite surprised with his appearance while he walks up to us. He seems about mid-twenty years old but we soon find out that he is in his thirties. Ah So looks rather slick and confident, he is wearing sunglasses, his hair is dyed cupreous and styled with wax. He sits down comfortably and does not take off his sunglasses although he does not come across in a bad way. When we ask about his age, we hear and see Sarah and Ah So laugh a little before Sarah tells us that he was born in 1977 in Sai Kung. He lived on the boat until he was 18 years old and then moved ashore. Unfortunately we are left to guessing the reason for their laughter. Sarah tells us that Ah So grew up fishing with his entire family. We make the mistake to ask whether it was possible to go to school under those circumstances since we get an answer that seems to be obvious. We wonder when he would go to school during the day if he had to fish as well.

Ah So: ‘Morning was for students. In the morning I went to school and in the afternoon I helped out my parents with fishing. My parents taught me how to fish. When I was eighteen the government took away the houses on the sea and we had to move away.’

Maria: ‘But did you not live in the house on the poles before?’

Ah So: 'Both of them, house was for some members and boat was for fishing. Sometimes I lived on the boat for a while and other times in the house.'  
(Ah So, S.E.I. Malaihollo/M Kluijtenaar, 08-03-2013)

Studying in the morning and fishing in the afternoon or evening was something we came across in other interviews as well. It is constantly made clear that it was hard work. Something you cannot imagine when you compare the days you were in primary school and you were allowed to have play-dates with your friends and if you were lucky you could even stay over. It is because of this personal experience that we ignorantly assume that if he grew up fishing with his parents he probably did not go to school. This experience with Ah So made us more careful with the other informants. And like we expected Ah So was not the only one with a busy schedule. The next ethnographic account is about the interview with marine police officer Loi Chi So. Loi Chi So is 46 years old and has been a marine police officer for over 20 years now.

Although I assumed that Loi Chi So's entire family was living on the boat while he was growing up, it turns out that his family already owned an apartment ashore when they were still fishing. The family members who were engaged in fishing activities would live on the boat and the other family members would live in the house. I ask him whether he had to help out with fishing as well.

"Yes I used to be fishing too but in the morning I went to school and after I would fish but I did not like it. I liked moving ashore because the boat was dangerous and small. It was about 15 meters long and it was hard work."

(Loi Chi So, M Kluijtenaar, 13-03-2013)

However, not all of our informants grew up fishing. In the case of Loi Chi So's colleague and fellow marine police officer Jackey, 45 years old, his parents had already quit fishing and switched to the service sector of the Yau Ma Tei Typhoon Shelter. Jackey explains to me how he grew up slightly different.

"I was born in Cheung Chau, in the South of Hong Kong. My parents were fishermen but they stopped fishing when I was 1 year old after we had collided into another fishing vessel so the entire family moved to the Yau Ma Tei Typhoon Shelter. After that we just lived on the boat and my father went working in the service sector. Growing up on the boat was now very different because we did not fish so we did not go out to sea."

(Jackey, M Kluijtenaar, 13-03-2013)

Not all situations were the same and that became clear out of the different living locations and parental occupations plus the different amount of time that our informants had spent aboard the boats. Nevertheless, there was one general conclusion that came out of the interviews and our informant's stories. None of them had really enjoyed growing up in these circumstances. Our informants Ah So and Ah Fuk illustrate this. Ah So has already been introduced and was quoted at the beginning of this chapter. Ah Fuk is 40 years old and Ah So's colleague and fellow marine staff member at HHYC.

Ah Fuk: 'When I lived on the boat I hardly had any time and also it was not convenient to go buy things, have dinner or do things. Normally when I was working on the boat I was checking everything and make sure that we could go out and catch the fish.'

Maria: 'Was there free time?'

Ah Fuk: 'No it was working and no holiday. No karaoke. Karaoke is important for us.'  
(Ah Fuk, S.E.I. Malaihollo/M Kluijtenaar, 08-03-2013)

"There is no day time and no night time, we cannot identify what time it is constant working and many winds, many weeks at sea... it is a very dangerous job. Fishermen are tough."

(Ah So, S.E.I. Malaihollo/M Kluijtenaar, 08-03-2013)

The hard work was one thing that played a vital role in what our informants told us. Besides that there was the danger that might have been a bigger factor in these quite negatively loaded stories.

Maria: 'Did you like growing up on the boat? Like do you have good memories of that time?'

Jackey: 'Well my family had a small boat without a motor, it was 20 something meters long, we had a bad income and we were poor. My seven brothers and sisters had to work as well. My parents stopped fishing because of the collision. And it was actually that they had a lot of damage but also my brother he was asleep for an hour.'

Maria: 'Asleep for an hour? Do you mean that he was sleeping when it happened?'

Jackey: 'No, no! He got injured and was sleeping for an hour, what do you call that?'

Maria: 'Was he in a coma?'

Jackey: 'Yes, yes he was in a coma!'

Maria: 'Oh that is really bad I am so sorry to hear that but did he survive?'

Jackey: 'Yes but my father no longer wanted to fish because it was dangerous. You know the foggy weather and you see nothing. That is how the boats collided with each other. Living on a fishing boat and fishing was dangerous.'

(Jackey, M Kluijtenaar, 13-03-2013)

Jackey's story is a good example of the dangers although not all of the experiences were of similar caliber. Nevertheless, the overall picture of these stories is that living on the boats came with worries.

This was also mentioned in chapter 3. The Hong Kong climate has a fierce typhoon season and this was mentioned numerous times. Therefore it is not surprising that our informants generally did not mind moving ashore permanently. These bad circumstances have added to negative recollections. The fact that these associations with their youth in the floating communities are not very positive has influenced their affiliations with their boat-dweller past and therefore also influenced their identities in relation to this descent. The next paragraph will further elaborate on how the younger former boat-dwellers affiliate with their descent.

## 5.2 Boat-dweller affiliations

The subject changes to the question of pride in being a fisherman. Ah Fuk gives two words and a short grin, Sarah turns to us and says: 'No not proud.'

Maria: 'Why not?'

Ah Fuk: 'Because it is electro, still young, mommy and daddy are fisherman, I am a fisherman, I am not especially proud of this. My family are fishermen, so me being a fisherman is electro, you know automatic. So there is no pride in being a fisherman, it is just the way it is.'

(Ah Fuk, S.E.I. Malaihollo/M Kluijtenaar, 08-03-2013)

What is the best way to ask someone how he or she feels about their past? Since we entered the research field with a view of what the group of former boat-dwellers did in their daily lives and how their community had looked like in the past, it was impossible to start our research objectively, if it is ever possible to do research objectively. The first basic question we decided to use in finding out how our informants felt about their descent of the former boat-dwellers was asking if our informant could give us a description of what it meant to be a fisherman. In the cases where our informants did not necessarily fish themselves or were employed in different occupations within the boat-dweller community we would either ask them the question of what it meant to be

a boat-dweller or still ask them about their view on the fishermen. The answers we got reminded us of a passage in Anderson's book (1970) 'The Floating World of Castle Peak Bay' in which he says:

"The daily flow of life is an integral, unified flow; it involves many kinds of behavior, and the anthropologist must in the interest of convenience class them under separate heads, but to the boat people themselves only the flow has reality."

The examples and stories that will now follow will partially be explained from this point of view as well.

Maria: 'What does being a fisherman mean to you?'

Ah So: 'There is no day time and no night time, they cannot identify what time it is because it is constant working and many winds, many weeks at sea. It is very dangerous job. Fishermen are tough.'

Maria: 'If being a fisherman is being tough would you still call yourself a fisherman?'

Ah So: 'No'

Sarah and Ah So start laughing while we repeat his answers surprised.

Ah So: 'Fisherman is the lower position in the society. I do not want to tell people I am a fisherman. I am not proud.'

Shimona: 'Is being a fisherman a status or an occupation to you?'

Ah So: 'It is a status.'

Maria: 'Is it different for someone else? For your parents for instance?'

Ah So: 'I do not know. For my parents, there is no choice this is their talent they know and they use it to work. They do not have a choice but I do. I can choose whatever job just not fisherman.'

(Ah So, S.E.I. Malaihollo/M Kluijtenaar, 08-03-2013)

After this answer we decided to ask our next interviewee his opinion on the matter. Ah Fuk was of relatively older age than Ah So and therefore it might be completely different. However Ah Fuk was quite clear on why his view would differ from Ah So's.

Ah Fuk: 'I am an old-fashioned former fisherman and that means I have to catch fish, sell fish and that is it. I need to earn money.'

Maria: 'Would you agree with what Ah So said about lower status attached to fishermen?'

Ah Fuk: 'No because this is a different meaning and different culture. We have different backgrounds. I do not think it is a lower status in the society because it is a very hard working job and you need to use your power in exchange for money so that is totally different.'

Shimona: 'Would you still call yourself a fisherman?'

Ah Fuk: 'Yes.'

Shimona: 'So how is your background different to Ah So's background like you mentioned?'

Ah Fuk: 'Because I do not know Ah So's background very well yes, so like it is difficult to compare. But the main thing is because I was working in Tai Po sea area and Ah So was working in Sai Kung sea area and that is total different working culture and background so that is difficult to compare.'

(Ah Fuk, S.E.I. Malaihollo/M Kluijtenaar, 08-03-2012)

According to Ah Fuk, it has to do with the areas they both grew up in and since these differ, their views and perceptions of the status of fishermen differ as well. When we ask Ah Fuk whether this might also have something to do with the fact that Ah So has less years of experience in fishing, Ah Fuk is quite clear on how he does not think that necessarily changes anything. The interesting thing is that although Ah So would not call himself a fisherman, Ah Fuk would. The data show that they do agree on how being a fisherman would be a status. Although Ah Fuk does not literally name it as a status he does separate it from an occupation since he would still call himself a fisherman even though he is no longer occupied as one. In Ah So's case we relate his view of the status of fishermen to the idea of objective identity that is constituted out of something externally posed, outside of the individual (Wodak et al. 2009:15). Within objective identity, Ah So's case is specifically related to the notion of collective identity. This is based on characteristics that are defined and decided upon by other before they were

ascribed (Wodak et al. 2009:16). Ah So seems to experience the status of fisherman as something that is frowned upon by the society therefore his notion of the status is more related to what outsiders think about it. On the other hand Ah Fuk's idea of what status is attached to fishermen seems to be more related to subjective identity.

Ah Fuk does not recognize the status of fisherman as a lower status but instead marks the difference in lifestyle. We concluded that his notion of the status of a fisherman is based on his own perceptions of fishermen and is therefore subjective (Fong and Chaung 2004:20). The next two passages will show Jackey's and Loi Chi So's view of fishermen from both their own perspective and the outsider's perspective.

“Living on a fishing boat and fishing was dangerous. But I am an optimist because I can survive every environment and that is because I am a fisherman. In general fishermen are tough, my father is tough and hardworking because that is tradition. Fishermen are honest people and hard workers.”

(Jackey, M Kluijtenaar, 13-03-2013)

Maria: ‘What do you think it means to be a fisherman?’

Loi Chi So: ‘The meaning of being a fisherman is honest, hard work and good people.’

Maria: ‘Would you tell others that you used to be a fisherman?’

Loi Chi So: ‘No I would not’

(Loi Chi So, M Kluijtenaar, 12-03-2013)

It is important to note that these answers can be compared to a certain extent however there is a difference in the questions that precede these answers. In the case of Loi Chi So, the question asked is “Would you tell others that you used to be a fisherman?” whereas in the case of both Ah Fuk and Ah So the question is: “Would you still call yourself a fisherman?”. In our opinion these answers can still be compared although not with the goal to draw a general conclusion. For both Jackey and Loi Chi So it seems that the image of fishermen to them is very positive, although we have to take into account that Jackey might have influenced Loi Chi So's answers. Nevertheless, this does not mean that they would tell everyone around them about their background. The following information is an example of this.

After Jackey has described his view of fishermen, I take a moment to repeat the description he gave me while I am writing it down as fast as I can.



I conclude my repetition with a question manner so that Jackey will confirm or correct the information.

Jackey: 'Yes but I had to change my name because I got married. This is not my real name because I had another name. But I got married and my wife did not want my name so when I was 24 I changed my name Cheung Tai Man to Chong She Li and Jackey for Western.'

Maria: 'Why did your wife not like your name?'

Jackey: 'Because it is typical fisher community name and if I change it the land people do not discriminate me because they do not know. He did it too!' While he points at Loi Chi So, Loi Chi So starts nodding and begins explaining. 'My name was Kim She Kip but I also changed it because it was a fishing name. If land people would see that name they would discriminate. My elder brothers and sisters changed it so they did it for me as well when I was 10 years old.'

Maria: 'Did your parents not mind that the names were changed?'

Jackey: 'But they did not change their name only the kids did. No, the parents respect their name but they know it is better. It is not about the name it is about the heart. My friends in primary school did it as well.'

(Jackey and Loi Chi So, M Kluijtenaar, 12-03-2013)

The information that Jackey and Loi Chi So provide us with here can be related to the situational characteristic of identity that was mentioned before. Overemphasizing identity in one situation does not mean it cannot be underemphasized in another situation. The fact that Jackey and Loi Chi So changed their name does not necessarily mean they take no emotional attachment or pride in being a fisherman. It does show that there is a difference in the subjective and objective identity when they talk about the status of fishermen. Both Jackey and Loi Chi So are aware of the fact that the status of fishermen is not that positive from the outsider's perspective. Just like Ah So they acknowledge the difference in what they attach to the identity of fisherman, subjective identity, and to what is externally attached to it, objective identity. Although Ah So describes being a fisherman as a lower societal status he does mention that being a fisherman also means being tough. The fact that Ah Fuk would still call himself a fisherman even though occupationally he no longer is one, does not mean he takes a lot of pride in it. All this information shows the fluidity of identity and the usage to a certain extent. It also shows that there is no vast line or category that we can ascribe to all of our informants. There are some similarities nevertheless there are a lot of differences as well.

### 5.3 Conclusion

The informants we have spoken to gave us both similarities and differences. Although not all of them grew up in the same circumstances, the general description of growing up in the floating settlements was that it was not easy. Poverty, crowdedness, dangers and working around the clock made their past in the floating settlements come across as rather hard and out of this a certain tough image arises. This tough image is something that is agreed upon. Besides the actual words coming out of our informants' mouths there are the general descriptions of daily activities that made us conclude that growing up in these environments was the opposite of easy. It becomes clear that these negative experiences play quite an important role in their associations with the boat-dweller past they all share in different ways. Another important factor in our informants' associations with the boat-dweller past is their awareness of the image that was, and might still be, attached to this ethnic group. Based on the answers to the questions about their idea of fishermen we concluded that they communicate a difference in objective and subjective identity. During the conversation with Jackey and Loi Chi So this became especially clear since they both described their backgrounds as tough and honest but at the same time recognized the difficulties they would have if they would emphasize this background ashore. This recognition becomes clear out of the fact that they changed their names. In adapting to their surroundings and creating convenience for themselves they accepted the fact that underemphasizing their background would get them further in life. However, when we are asking about their background it becomes clear that we are interested in this specific aspect about them and therefore we stimulate them to overemphasize it. Identity is situational and different aspects of identity are over- or underemphasized, which ones these are varies among individuals and communities (Van Gaalen 1998:4).

The next chapter will be about the general conclusions we have drawn and our answer to our research question. This answer will be provided after we made an overall comparison between the two different generations of former boat-dwellers as separately described in chapter 4 and 5.

# Conclusions & Discussion

This chapter will be about the general conclusions and comparisons we made. The reasons why the former boat-dwellers are now all living ashore, sub question 1, will be summarized here. This will be related to the different recollections of our informants with the answers to sub questions 2 and 3. We will conclude and answer our main research question namely:

*What is the difference between the identity of the older generation of former boat-dwellers compared to the identity of the younger generation of former boat-dwellers in relation to their background in the sub-culture of the boat-dwellers of Hong Kong?*

After elaborating on our conclusions we will discuss what different aspects could be researched in the future.

Before we start analyzing our data we will first briefly summarize the reasons for moving ashore. One of the most striking explanations came from one of our interviewees, who said that the reason for moving ashore was natural elimination. The boat-dwellers did not have enough means to have a normal live on the boats and therefore had to change their jobs and way of living. This was a consequence of inter alia the changes in the Hong Kong fishing industry. After World War II the Hong Kong Government started taking more interest in the fishing industry that led to modernization. Due to this, fishing became more competitive and less profitable therefore the boat-dwellers were gradually forced to move out of their occupations (Stephen Davies 2013). Secondly, during the 1980s the Hong Kong economy was growing rapidly. A lot of jobs became available in construction and infrastructure. This combined with the governmental encouragement to move ashore by offering the boat-dwellers priority on the waiting lists for public housing, made it quite lucrative to move ashore. Finally, there was the educational change that made primary education compulsory in Hong Kong in 1971. Therefore the boat-dweller children had to go to school. One of the consequences was that the children were no longer able to help their parents on the boats. Another consequence was that the boat-dweller children got in touch with the land-community and supposedly got assimilated to a certain extent. According to Taylor (1988) this has eliminated the perceived importance of maintaining the floating life style of their parents (1988:202).

The reasons here mentioned were all structural reasons for the boat-dwellers to move ashore. Our informants conveyed the bad living conditions as one of the main reasons for moving ashore. Capsizing boats, worries about typhoons, cold winters and crowded boats were things we heard a lot about especially among the younger former boat-dwellers. Based on both literature and personal recollections, the conclusion is that it simply became impossible to maintain the floating communities.

As Eugene Anderson (1970) puts it:

“They must manage the world around them. They must cope with situations, people and forces – economic, natural, supernatural. Life is integrated around the need to manage one’s relationships with the world in order that one may keep operating and if possible improve one’s position.” (1970:29).

In managing the world around them and coping with the different situations the boat-dwellers’ perceived identities would also transform and take different shapes. Identity can be historically, politically and economically influenced and the importance of each of these aspects varies among individual communities (Van Gaalen 1998:4). Since the former boat-dwellers had to deal with different changes and situations their identity has also transformed and taken a different shape. The upcoming paragraphs will be about this transformation. First, the data about the older and younger generation will be related to the theory separately. Followed by the comparison between the two different generations in relation to the theory.

### **Older generation of former boat-dwellers**

When we look at the data of the older generation of former boat-people we see that the people we have talked to in general have relatively good recollections of their past. Living on a boat was not perfect. Nevertheless, in general living near the sea is perceived as enjoyable. The bad memories of typhoons are mostly compensated by the happy times when they caught fish. One of our interviewees mentions that he still would like to be a fisherman if it was not as hard as it is nowadays. According to him life on a boat used to be simple and free.

In analyzing our data we found that freedom is a recurrent topic in our interviews with the older generation of former boat-dwellers. For instance, Ah Fong tells us that she loves her freedom. This is one of the reasons she is still working in the Causeway Bay Typhoon Shelter. Not everyone was as lucky as Ah Fong to still experience this freedom. In both of our focus groups with the fishermen representatives freedom is also mentioned as something valuable, but not something they still have. The stories of Ah Fong, Ah Wing and the fishermen representatives are good examples of Friedman’s (1992) theory we

elaborated upon in chapter 2. Friedman (1992) says that the past is reproduced and occurs in the present as the discourse of identity(1992:853). Ah Wing told us that he is working as a marine staff member because of his past. This demonstrates that having this job is a way for him to relate to the past. Ah Fong and Ah Wing both state that freedom is very important for them and that they relate it to the sea. Since they used to live near the sea that is something they had back then and still treasure now. Again this shows that having the feeling of freedom so they can relate to it because it is something they link to their past. In this particular case, we would not state that our informants are reproducing their past, like Friedman's (1992) theory. However, we would state that there are various modes in which they relate to the past. In this case one of these modes is freedom.

To gain more knowledge about the identity of our informants we started asking them questions about them identifying with being a fisherman, since that was part of their boat-dweller culture. Surprisingly we got a lot of the same answers to this question. Fishing was a big part of their culture and most of the people of the older generation of boat-dwellers we talked to stated that they affiliate with their past. Therefore, we expected that they would also affiliate with being a fisherman. The opposite was true. Ah Huei told us that he would not call himself a fisherman because he is not fishing anymore. He changed his occupation around ten years ago and has not been fishing professionally since. According to Ah Huei being a fisherman means catching fish, nothing more nothing less. So if someone stops fishing, one can no longer be called a fisherman. Fishing is attached to one's identity only when one is fishing hence, the identity of fisherman is strongly situational. As van Gaalen (1998) puts it, identity is situational, because different situations can cause different aspects of identity to be emphasized. In this example, Ah Huei tells us that as long as he works as a fisherman, he is one. Therefore, fishing emphasized his identity. As soon as he stopped fishing his occupational situation changed and therefore his identity as well. This is also in accordance with what Kielhofner (Phelan and Kinsella 2009) calls occupational identity. Occupational identity is a composite sense of who one is and wishes to become as an occupational being, generated from one's history of occupational participation (Phelan and Kinsella 2009:85).

The current situation is that former boat-dwellers live amongst the rest of the Hong Kong population ashore and might be more assimilated. Education is an important part in this assimilation. According to Ah Huei the main difference between people who grew up ashore and people who grew up afloat is education. The boat-dwellers used to have a lower level of education because they did not always go to school whereas the people who grew up ashore generally did. This is something that marked the older generation of boat-dwellers. All of the younger boat-dwellers did go to school. Due to this shift in educational degree more children got in contact with children from other ethnic backgrounds (Taylor 1988). According to the constructionist view, ethnicity

is constructed out of the social aspects of ethnic boundaries, identities and cultures that are defined and produced through social interaction inside and outside ethnic communities (Nagel 1994:152). After our research population went to school they had more social interaction outside their ethnic community. This made it possible for them to define themselves and other in ethnic ways. Ethnic boundaries are an important aspect in this process. These ethnic boundaries define who is a member and who is not and besides that they indicate which ethnic categories are available for individual identification at a particular time and place (Nagel 1994:153). By going to school the former boat-dwellers were not a distinct ethnic group in the sense that they did not do everything on their boats anymore. The boundary that was first placed at the water and doing everything was shifted to a broader boundary that also included going to school on land. Their relations changed and therefore their identity as distinct boat-dwellers as well. The next paragraph will elaborate further on this by presenting the conclusions drawn out of our data of the younger former boat-dwellers.

### **Younger generation of former boat-dwellers**

An overall image that was drawn from our informant's interviews is that none of them had actual good associations with their short or longer lives aboard the boats. Economically this makes sense since the Hong Kong fishing industry was in a rapid decline during that time. Furthermore, the combination of both school and fishing did not seem to give rise to very positive associations either. There is a common conviction that living aboard a boat simply does not work. This is based on both the experiences of living afloat while growing up and on the experience of living ashore now. There is no idealization of these circumstances nor would any of them say that it was a time they would love to go back to. These are the circumstances that are associated with the occupation of fishing or just living on a boat therefore they no longer want be occupied as a fisherman or live under the circumstances of the floating settlements.

Something that was repeated in several interviews was the matter of choice our informants had. Informant Ah So would probably be the best example in saying that he had a choice in actively not becoming a fisherman whereas his parents did not. Ah So would say being a fisherman is a status and he would practice any occupation as long as it is not being a fisherman. This demonstrates the explanation that Kielhofner (Phelan and Kinsella 2009) provides with his concept of occupational identity (2009:85).

In Ah So's story it is illustrated how he uses his own history of occupational participation in building his composite sense of who he is and how he wants to be seen. Ah So does this by saying that fisherman is a status. Since he is not working as a fisherman this status no longer applies to him. He relates the occupation of fisherman to a negative status that he does not want for himself. This reflects that participation in occupation contributes to one's construction of identity and is the primary means to communicate one's identity (Phelan and Kinsella 2009:85).

Actively choosing not to practice the occupation of fisherman because it is related to the inferior status of fisherman, illustrates the personal influence on identification. Furthermore, it shows the awareness our informants have about their objective identity. Objective identity is externally posed and takes place between individuals and their surrounding society (Wodak et al. 2009:15). Ah So composes his own identity based on what he perceives as aspects of his identity, his subjective identity, and based on what other attach to certain aspects of his identity, his objective identity. It is because of the negative view of the fishermen by his surroundings that Ah So decides not to use his fisherman past in his present identity and therefore he under-emphasizes this aspect of his identity.

Another illustration of underemphasizing certain aspects can be found in the case of our two informants who changed their names. Both Jackey and his colleague Loi Chi So changed their names at one point in their lives. For Jackey this was an active decision made by both him and his wife. Since they wanted to avoid being recognized as boat-dwellers they decided to change their name to a less typical boat-dweller name. However quite the contrary of what one would expect when a name is changed, Jackey still very much relates to his boat-dweller roots and describes boat-dwellers and fishermen as the most honest, hard-working and tough people in Hong Kong. At the same time there was no shame in changing his name. Jackey demonstrates his awareness of the negative objective identity and therefore underemphasizes his fisherman identity by changing his name. However, since his view of his subjective identity is quite positive and we showed interest in this identity he chose to over-emphasize it in our presence. This is an example of how ethnicity is created and recreated as various groups and interests put forth competing visions of the ethnic compositions of society and argue over which rewards or sanctions should be attached to which ethnicities (Nagel 1994:153).

Ethnicity and ethnic boundaries are not stable and fixed instead, they depend on the situation and besides that they are multiple and overlapping (Cohen 1978:387). In the sense of ethnic boundaries this can be seen as a shift of the boundary of the former boat-dwellers. Instead of completely getting out of the entire maritime culture Ah So clearly states that he specifically does not want to be a fisherman however working in other maritime occupations is not a problem.

### **The difference**

Our research question is about the existing difference in identity between the older and the younger generation of boat-dwellers, implying an assumption that there is one. Although already discussed in chapter 3 it is important to stress once again that based on the literature there ought to be a difference between younger and older boat-dwellers. The younger generation of boat-dwellers grew up with more contact with the ashore community and its different lifestyle. Out of our informants' stories it became clear that the life afloat was not convenient at all. It was not convenient for either the younger or the older former boat-dwellers. Nevertheless, there is a difference in the emphasis of this inconvenience in their recollections. The difference lies in the fact that the younger generation of former boat-dwellers had a bigger tendency to stress the negative aspects of living afloat whereas the older generation of former boat-dwellers did mention this but did not emphasize the inconvenient lifestyle as their overall view of the floating settlements. The negative recollections that the older former boat-dwellers had were often compensated with laughter and stories about how they either adapted easily or also lived through happy times because of the recent World War II experiences. For them this did not seem to affect their overall affiliations with their identities of boat-dwellers and the affiliations they have today. The younger generation of former boat-dwellers seemed to link the identity of boat-dweller directly to these bad circumstances of growing up and the hard life of being a fisherman.

As Eriksen (2010:27) describes, individuals can choose to under- or over-communicate certain aspects of their identity depending on the situation one is in. This is the case for the younger former boat-dwellers. They got confronted earlier on with the ashore community and realized that the boat-dweller aspect of their identities was not convenient ashore. Therefore, they adapted to the situation and under-communicated this part of their identity. The best example of this is the story of Jackey and Loi Chi So who both changed their names. They explained how this would make their lives more convenient and therefore it needed to be done.

The older former boat-dwellers have, overall, experienced the time that the floating settlements were still distinguished communities with relatively little contact with the ashore community. They experienced a time in which the ethnic boundaries of the different ethnicities were more present than they are now. However, like the theory on ethnic boundaries implies, these boundaries are not stable or permanent (Eriksen 2010:44). When these boundaries started shifting the indication of who was a member and who was not started fading. The older boat-dwellers experienced a stronger presence of these ethnic boundaries that added to their naturalness with their boat-dweller identity. On the other hand, the younger former boat-dwellers grew up during a time in which these ethnic boundaries were changing rapidly. They are more actively aware of the sanctions that are attached to the ethnicity of the boat-dwellers. The self-identification with their ethnicity is different for the younger former boat-dwellers



and this corresponds with the idea that ethnic groups are categories of ascription and identification by the actors themselves (Eriksen 2010:44).

Overall the older former boat-dwellers tend to under-emphasize the boat-dweller aspect of their identity less. Although they are completely aware of the negative objective identity attached to the boat-dwellers they rather emphasized their positive view of their past and therefore a positive subjective identity. Ah Kee gave us a perfect demonstration of this by saying that in general the term Tanka is no longer used and that some people might find the name offensive. However Ah Kee immediately continues that he does not have any problem with being called a Tanka.

The current view of identity as fluid and changing over time and circumstances can be applied to this particular case of former boat-dwellers. The circumstances related to the floating settlements in which our younger informants grew up were quite different from those in which our older informants grew up. The circumstances and situational aspects influence one's creativity in constructing one's own identity (Van Meijl 2008:173). These differences affected the subjective identity of the younger former boat-dwellers in the sense that their thoughts about themselves and their identities come across quite different from the older former boat-dwellers. The older boat-dwellers seem more at ease with their past in the floating settlements. The younger former boat-dwellers were more integrated in the Hong Kong educational system and became more assimilated with the ashore community at a younger age. At the same time they grew up in the floating settlements. (Taylor 1988:202). They got confronted with the friction between these two different worlds.

### **Concluding discussion**

Our main question was about the generational difference in identity between the older and younger boat-dwellers and our conclusion is that the main difference lies in the fact that the younger generation has a bigger tendency to view their past and affiliations with the boat-dwellers from a negative point of view. They seem more actively aware of how this might influence their lives whereas the older generation perceives this as something they cannot erase and will always remain in their past even though they now live ashore.

The ethnic boundaries are more fluid now and that becomes noticeable by the fact that the younger former boat-dwellers affiliate less with their boat-dweller past. It reminded us of Eriksen's (2010) work on ethnic groups.

Eriksen (2010) explains that:

“while one's grandparents may have lived as traditional Inuit (or Sami, or Scots...) without giving it any thought, and one's parents took great pains to escape from their stigmatised

and shameful minority position and to become assimilated and modern, today's generation does everything in its power to revive the customs and traditions that their grandparents followed without knowing it, and which their parents tried so hard to forget." (2010:156)

This passage can also be applied to the generational difference between the former boat-dwellers. For the older boat-dwellers their identifications with their boat-dweller past comes more natural. The younger boat-dwellers are trying their best to escape the stigma attached to this boat-dweller past. It is possible that the next generation might seek to revive certain customs that their parents tried to escape. This would be interesting for further research.

In this research we have not been able to observe more aspects of the mentioned under- and over-emphasis of identity of the former boat-dwellers in different contexts and settings. We have only been able to conduct research in the setting of semi-structured or informal interviews. Further research can be done on these different settings and especially over longer amounts of time. Besides more settings and context, further in-depth research should also be done with knowledge of the local language. We are convinced that being able to speak Cantonese would have gotten us more data and more understanding of our informants. Concluding it would be interesting to see how the next generation of descendants deals with roots in the boat-dweller community.

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# Appendix 1

## List of informants

### Older generation

Name	Age	Place of birth
Ah Huei	51	Sai Kung
Ah Kee	52	Po Toi
Ah Wing	50	Aberdeen
Ah Fong	61	Causeway Bay
So Fat	71	Mainland China
Chung Cho Tai	63	Tai Po
Chung Cho She	63	Tai Po
Tsui Kit Man	63	Tai Po
Chi-Keung	50 something	Tai Po
So Loi	50 something	Tai Po
Chung Ju She	50 something	Tai Po

### Younger generation

Name	Age	Place of birth
Ah Fuk	45	Tai Po
Ah So	36	Sai Kung
Ah Kin	24	Sai Kung
Jackey	45	Cheung Chau
Loi Chi So	46	Aberdeen Typhoon Shelter
Ng Ping Hung	45	Ma Wan
Kaiung	31	Sai Kung
Mikey	About 40	Sai Kung

# Appendix 2

## Summary

The Hong Kong boat-dwellers were one of the four distinguished ethnicities of Hong Kong society. These boat-dwellers lived in floating settlements in the different harbor areas of Hong Kong. The floating settlements were quite separated from the rest of the Hong Kong population. However, in 1988 Bruce Taylor wrote that the most striking characteristic of the Hong Kong floating settlements was that they were continuously shrinking. The settlements were likely to be completely disappeared by 1996 (Taylor 1988:201). Eugene Anderson (1970) commented on this decline as well. Anderson mentions how the floating communities in 1970 are no longer solely living afloat. They are now living both on boats and in houses on poles (Anderson 1970:29). These two examples from different studies of the Hong Kong boat-dwellers show that already 30 years ago, there was an ongoing change in the boat-dwellers' living surroundings. This study will provide in a status update of the ethnic group of the Hong Kong boat-dwellers. The given examples of Taylor (1988) and Anderson (1970) turned out to be good indicators for what would happen to the boat-dwellers since nowadays there is hardly anything left of the floating settlements. These shifts in surroundings and living conditions are part of a transition that the boat-dwellers went through. Due to economic, structural and social changes, living afloat was no longer perceived as convenient. This research is focused on the effects of this transition on the boat-dweller identity.

Identity and culture are nowadays recognized as fluid and changing instead of stable and fixed (Sökefeld 1999; Hall 1996; Erikson 2001; Van Meijl 2008). According to Erikson (Van Meijl 2008), people can change their personal identity and identity can differ per encountered situation (Van Meijl 2008:169). Within the discourse about ethnic identity a similar shift has taken place. The fluid and changing characteristic of identity, culture and ethnic identity can be related to societal transitions. Since society and the world are in constant movement, identity and culture must move along. In the context of the boat-dwellers this has also been the case. Different processes made it impossible for the boat-dwellers to maintain their old lifestyle. On the other hand, the boat-dwellers realized the inconvenience of their lifestyle. Therefore, the movement was not completely out of force. Besides a change in lifestyle their identity was bound to change as well.

Nowadays it is believed that different individuals produce a shared culture and within this culture there is room for different individual creativity with the available economic, symbolic and political resources (Van Meijl 2008:173). This creativity is found in one's surroundings and these surroundings are in constant process of change as well. Therefore, identity will never be finished. Identification is in constant process of production (Ojong and Sithole 2007:96). In this research, this idea of identification is applied to the former boat-dwellers of Hong Kong.

By studying the former boat-dwellers of Hong Kong and delving into already existing literature,



a generational difference evolved. Our informants are of different age categories and therefore affiliate differently with their corresponding boat-dweller past. Our research question is: What is the difference between the identity of the older generation of former boat-dwellers compared to the identity of the younger generation of former boat-dwellers in relation to their background in the sub-culture of the boat-dwellers of Hong Kong?

Our informants' recollections of living afloat and the transition to life ashore are all different. Both the older and the younger former boat-dwellers, experienced life in the floating settlements. However, the younger former boat-dwellers were already better integrated in the Hong Kong educational system and therefore more culturally assimilated in the mainstream of land-dwelling children. This lessened or even eliminated any perceived importance attached to maintaining certain aspects of living afloat (Taylor 1988:202). The younger former boat-dwellers emphasized the negative aspects of living afloat in their stories. They were very clear about the fact that they would never want to go back to life in the floating settlements.

Although the older former boat-dwellers shared the recollections of inconvenience and danger, these recollections were often compensated with laughter and stories about how they either adapted easily or also lived through happy times because of the recent World War II experiences. For them this did not seem to affect their overall affiliations with their identities of boat-dwellers and the affiliations they have today.

Individuals can choose to under- or over-communicate certain aspects of their identity depending on the situation one is in (Eriksen 2010:27). This is the case for the younger former boat-dwellers. They got confronted earlier on with the ashore community and realized that the boat-dweller aspect of their identities was not convenient ashore. Therefore, they adapted to the situation and under-communicated this part of their identity. For example, Jackey and Loi Chi So both changed their names. They explained how this would make their lives more convenient and therefore it needed to be done.

The older former boat-dwellers have better recollections of the time that the floating settlements were still very distinguished. During this time the floating settlements had relatively little contact with the ashore community. They experienced a time that the ethnic boundaries of the different ethnicities were more present than they are now. The theory states that ethnic boundaries are fluid and unstable (Eriksen 2010:44). This is demonstrated by the changes in Hong Kong society. The ethnic boundaries started shifting and the indications of ethnic membership started fading. The overall conclusion is that, the fact that the older boat-dwellers experienced a stronger presence of these ethnic boundaries added to their naturalness in the boat-dweller identity. On the other hand, the younger former boat-dwellers grew up during this transition. They are more actively aware of the sanctions that were attached to the ethnicity of boat-dweller. The self-identification in relation to their ethnicity is different for the younger former boat-dwellers and this corresponds with the idea that ethnic groups are categories of ascription and identification by the actors themselves (Eriksen 2010:44). The generational difference between the older and younger former boat-dwellers is a perfect example of what Eriksen (2010) describes. Eriksen (2010) describes how one's grandparents might have lived traditional lives without even thinking about it. Their children however, might try hard to escape this traditional lifestyle and identity because of the stigma attached to it (Eriksen 2010:156).