Introduction

The impetus for writing this paper comes from two closely related sources. One is from a critical analysis of the sociological content of the large but erratic literature on the Chinese in historical and contemporary Southeast Asia. The other is from a specific investigation into the processes of social and cultural change amongst a localized group of Malaysian Chinese whose relationship to the processes of assimilation to the wider society and the alternative policy of resinification to a "Chinese model" of behaviour and organisation stands at a critical juncture, notably the melaka "Babas" and those who are culturally closely connected with them.

It is not my intention here to examine all aspects of Baba culture and society, but to concentrate entirely on one particular problem of major importance not only to the understanding of social change within that community, but also to the whole question of Baba self-identify — indeed to the very social boundaries of that community as a whole. This problem is that of Baba relationships to the pressures which are perceived as forcing them to either consolidate their position as a culturally unique group in Malaysian society, or to move into much closer links with (and perhaps ultimately submerge themselves in) the wider Malaysian Chinese society. This problem is of significance at two levels: at one level it is a problem facing all Malaysian Chinese today - whether to assimilate, or to assert a specifically Chinese social and cultural identity; at another level it is a problem which has not only perennially confronted the Babas, but one the resolution of which is crucial to the understanding of what a Baba is.

For indeed who are the Babas, and are there any criteria specific to them that might allow members of this community to be identified vis a vis other communities in Malaysia? One of the central contentions of this paper is that the boundary maintaining mechanisms of the Baba community have never been clearly defined, and the ambiguities arising from this not only illustrate this identity uncertainty, but must also, on the one hand be resolved by the Babas if they are to continue as a corporate group, and on the other hand, must be linked to the situation of Chinese from the non-Baba sector. There are two reasons for this last condition, notably (i) that there are a large number of non-Baba (in the strict sense) Chinese, who in fact, in their attitudes towards assimilation to

1. For "Baba" (used here for both male and female "Nuyonya") members of this community the words "Peranakan" or "Straits" Chinese may be used interchangeably. A further definition follows below.
2. For more details see Clammer 1975 and 1977 (forthcoming).
a wider national culture share many of the features of the Baba community, and (ii) the socio-political pressures of the present time, and especially those of Malay nationalism, are obliging many members of the wider Chinese population to seriously consider (or to reconsider) their own attitudes towards the “national culture”, the creation of which is an official objective, and towards their own Chinese heritage. So while it is true that the Babas form the core of that group upon whom the pressure to come to an unequivocal definition of their cultural identity is strongest (because, as we have indicated, of the internal as well as external necessity of doing this), they by no means the only Chinese who are in this position.

The Historical and Sociological Characteristics of the Sample

Clearly this problem cannot be adequately understood without some reference to the historical context in which it came about. This is especially true in the present case, where the "sample" is a product of history in a very direct way. It should also be noted at this stage that the term "sample" is used here in a loose way: it refers not to a statistically defined group (the empirical investigation being conducted on an ethnographic rather than a survey basis), but to a population, or community, the boundaries of which (and the perception of which) were precisely one of the major objects of investigation. This community which, for the sake of brevity, I will refer to as "assimilated Chinese", was defined by the existence within it of two classes of individuals. Firstly, Baba Chinese, or Chinese of long residence and depth of lineage in Melaka or one of the other ex-Straits Settlements (i.e. Penang and Singapore, and for certain comparative purposes, Labaun), who tend generally to speak Malay as the language of the home, who have adopted (and adapted) a considerable body of Malay custom in respect of dress and food, and who define themselves as Babas. Secondly, there exists a group of Chinese who have assimilated themselves to some extent to Malay sartorial and culinary custom, who can speak (often very fluently) Malay, but who do not generally use it as a medium of communication amongst themselves, and above all, who have taken the step of identifying themselves not only with Malaysia as their permanent homeland, but with assimilation to a "Malayanized" form of culture as a cultural goal. The precise nature of this "National culture" is as yet of course very ill-defined, but this does not prevent it from being ardently pursued, at least as an idea, to any less extent. There is also a question here of what is meant by "assimilation" in this context. A fuller definition of this will be attempted below, but for the time being it may be described as an identification with the (at least idea of) national culture conceived of as a non-communal (in an ethnic/cultural sense) and therefore "Malaysian" product.

In many respects the 'assimilationist' Chinese were ahead of their times, since they actively pursued the goal of making Malaysia their homeland long before Malaysia as such was ever conceived of, and during a period when Chinese nationalism was at its height.

3. For instance see the rural Chinese described as "Babas" by Gosling (1964) and Wang (1970) whose "Group C" Chinese fall into this category.
4. This definition can in detail be much expanded and tightened up. See Clammer 1975.