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Master's (Two Years) Thesis in Global Studies:

"The Diaspora of Chin Refugees in Malaysia: Challenges and Coping Mechanisms"

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Supervisor: Catarina Kinnvall
Author: Michela Pittalis (mi2865pi-s@student.lu.se; 19950226-8841)

Abstract

This thesis investigates the social dynamics of the Chin refugee group which currently faces great challenges in Malaysia, the host country. Modes of organisation and coping mechanisms are examined in relation to the specific legal and socio-political context. The theoretical concept of "diaspora" is used to make sense of processes of identity (re)construction and collective action. In addition, feelings of belonging together with the concepts of "home" and "homelessness" help make sense of refugees' struggle to adapt to the new country. In particular, the thesis explores the extent to which Malaysia is or could be a "home" for refugee communities. These issues are analysed through the combination of participant observation and an ethnographic approach whose findings will be subjected to thematic analysis. The main argument of the thesis is that the Chins do not feel like they belong to Malaysia, which they consider a temporal stop on their journey projected to a third country resettlement. Furthermore, due to the collective trauma caused by discriminations in their home country, they do not wish to return. Their loss of "home" is, however, alleviated by a strong community they can rely on which provides Chin refugees with support and basic services.

Key words: Chin, refugees, diaspora, belonging, community, home, Malaysia

Word count: 20,031

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I dedicate this thesis to my mum who encourages me to always do better and has never doubted me, even when I did. I hope I can make you proud.

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List of Abbreviations

ACR	Alliance of Chin Refugees
ACTS	A Call To Serve
AIM	Amnesty International Malaysia
CBO	Community-Based Organisation
COBEM	Coalition of Burma Ethics Malaysia
CRSC	Chin Refugees Supporting Committee
IDEAS	IDEAS Academy
MCCM	Myanmar Catholic Community in Malaysia
RFTR	Refuge for the Refugees
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

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1. Introduction

Southeast Asia has been the locus of large migration flows since the 18th Century when labour was most needed in plantations and mines. Transnational movements intensified during the colonial occupation and World War II, resulting in the large-scale dispersal of people (Ullah and Ahmad Kumpoh, 2019). Located in this crossroad of cultures and ethnicities, Malaysia today is an important transit point and destination for migrants and refugees coming from neighbouring countries. Commonly referred to as having a 'tiger economy', the country continues to rely on foreign labour to sustain its economic growth. Many foreigners living in Malaysia are undocumented and work as "irregular migrants" in low-skilled jobs, such as maids or in plantations, constructions, services and agriculture (Jajri and Ismail, 2014). Migrants' 'illegal status' denies them fundamental rights, including access to education and health, making them powerless and vulnerable to all kinds of discriminations. Refugees find themselves in similar conditions since Malaysia is not a signatory of the 1951 UN Convention on the Status of Refugees nor the 1967 Protocol, and does not therefore legally recognise refugees as such. The two treaties require host countries to respect the principle of *non-refoulement*, according to which refugees cannot be deported to their state of origin, and demand basic rights and provisions for refugees (see the Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees). According to several Asian countries, the 1951 Convention and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) are European inventions created to serve Western interests (see Davies, 2008). South-east Asian states also claim that the UN Convention is inadequate, as it was designed to deal with the large number of refugees displaced in Europe in the aftermath of World War II (Brun, 2001). The result of this ensures that Malaysia does not officially support nor recognise the UNHCR's authority and power.

Currently, Malaysia hosts more than 170'000 registered refugees and asylum seekers of which around 87% have moved across from Myanmar (the UNHCR Malaysia). Amongst these numbers, the second largest refugee group is the Chins,

a Christian ethnic minority hailing from the Chin State, a mountainous region on the border with India (see Figure 1). This group comprises of more than 24,000 people registered with the UNHCR, however according to the Alliance of the Chin Refugees (ACR), as many are not on file. Since the army coup in 1962, the Chins started fleeing from the abuses, violence and varied forms of discrimination perpetrated by the Myanmar army against ethnic minorities (Hoffstaedter, 2014). The preferred destinations to seek protection remain as Malaysia and India. As a result of the UNHCR's operations, Chin refugees have been given the opportunity to resettle in third countries, in particular the US and Australia. The massive displacement of this ethnic group has gradually led to the creation of a Chin diaspora with communities living in over nine countries globally (see Figure 2).

1.1 Significance and Research Gap

The phenomenon of migration is the main subject of a growing literature in different fields and disciplines. This thesis contributes to recent studies focused on refugees, especially in regard to their modes of organisation and processes of adjustment to their new country of residence. The humanitarian crisis in Myanmar has received a lot of attention, especially after the violence in 2012, which caused the displacement of hundreds of thousands of Rohingya people. This group has been the main topic under study due to the extensive suffered violence and its members' stateless status. Notwithstanding this, discriminations by the government are perpetrated against several ethnic minorities. Among them, the Chins represent the second largest group fleeing the country. Despite this, the Chin community has been overlooked and is, to this day, under-researched. To the author's knowledge, only three academic studies specifically look at Chins living in Malaysia. In his work, "Place-making: Chin Refugees, Citizenship and The State in Malaysia", Hoffstaedter (2014) has investigated the 'liminal and extra-legal place' the Chins live in, together with their efforts to confront the Malaysian authorities. McConnachie (2018) has instead examined the securitisation and protection provided to refugees by the community in Kuala Lumpur. This topic was also the main focus of a case study about Burmese refugees, including the Chins, who live in the host country without

recognition (Floyd et al., 2015). This research will analyse more in-depth these issues by referring to primary data collected in the field. Thus, this study aims to bridge the research gap on this specific ethnic group and provides an innovative diaspora approach focused on feelings of belonging, identity (re)construction and community building.

1.2 Aim and Research Questions

The primary aim of this thesis is to identify the challenges faced by refugees in Malaysia and to analyse the specific coping mechanisms adopted by the Chin ethnic group. A specific focus will be given to the socio-economic conditions the Chins live in, which are affected by the lack of a proper legal framework for refugees in the host country. Furthermore, gender-related factors will be discussed and their implications on social integration assessed. Reponses to these challenges will be studied in relation to Chins' particular modes of organisation in a hostile society. The main research question was then formulated as follows:

How do Chin refugees cope with socio-economic, legal and gendered challenges in Malaysia?

The theoretical concept of diaspora will prove to be essential to make sense of the social dynamics inherent to this ethnic group. In particular, this thesis will show how the concept of "diaspora" can further contribute to refugee studies, as it enables further exploration of the issue through analysis of community development within host countries. The role of community will be analysed within the context of 'community building' processes, complimented by analysis of identity (re)construction that demonstrates refugees' desire for mutual recognition. Collective identity formation and collective action will be studied through consideration of 'homesteading practices' and 'emotional aspects of belonging', bonding, and identification, which are often disregarded (Deutsch and Kinnvall, 2002). In this regard, the role of religion will be discussed to demonstrate its potential to strengthen the community. The purpose is to investigate whether the

Chins feel like they belong to the host country and how they are adjusting to the new socio-cultural environment. The concepts of "home" and "homelessness" will be employed here to make sense of the issues stemming from displacement and relocation to a foreign place. Thus, the second research question asks:

To what extent do Chin refugees feel part of Malaysia and how are they (re)constructing their identity in the host country?

In addition to showing the issues at the heart of Chins' experiences and perceptions, this research paper aims to provide suggestions and possible alternatives for a way forward for Malaysia to become a safe and secure place for refugees, a so-called "home". These recommendations will be formulated by combining interviews' findings and conclusions drawn from my critical analysis. The steps which will be outlined must not be considered as rigid and finished instructions but as mere guidelines for policymakers and civil society open to improvement and criticism. Hence, the following final research question:

If Malaysia was to become a "home" for refugees, what would this process involve?

1.3 Limitations

Due to its focus, this thesis is limited to a specific refugee ethnicity group with distinct group characteristics, and which finds itself in particular circumstances dictated by geographic location and socio-political structures. For this reason, the findings cannot be generalised to all people with no legal status living in Malaysia, nor to displaced people who live in other countries. Although universal assumptions are not possible nor desirable, it is arguable that some of the Chins' difficulties are related to other refugees' living in other non-signatory countries of the 1951 Convention, such as Indonesia, India and Thailand. Furthermore, this group face similar challenges to other refugees and 'undocumented migrants' working in the Malay Peninsula. Besides, the objective of this research is not to provide a macro-

level analysis but rather to highlight a special case of community development and organisation in diaspora. In this sense, the final aim is to explain the reasons why the Chins have been more successful in coping with unfavourable conditions compared to other minorities.

In regard to data collection, it must be noted that the time spent with the group under study was limited (see chapter 4). For this reason, it was not possible to build long-term relationships with community members and informants. However, due to being aware of the importance of trust-building and transparent information, I visited community-based organisations and contacted the relevant coordinators and NGOs months before starting data collection, during my first stay in Malaysia when I was undertaking an internship at Suara Rakyat Malaysia (SUARAM), a local human rights NGO. This allowed me not only to meet and inform relevant stakeholders about my project well before conducting the interviews but also to become familiar with the socio-political context of the country. Working with cases involving violations of human rights, especially those who were refugees, provided me with solid research foundations and background information necessary to grasp the complexities inherent to Malaysia's specific political, social and cultural composition. Despite my lack of knowledge of the local language and the Chin dialects, communication was facilitated by the use of English widely spoken in Malaysia, not so much by refugees but by NGO representatives and community leaders.

1.4 Disposition

Following the introduction, the second chapter will serve to locate geographically and historically on one hand, the displaced people under study – the Chins – and on the other, their host country and its society, Malaysia. The evolution of the Chin civilisation will be briefly introduced to understand the consequent development of ethnic consciousness in diaspora. Malaysian anti-immigration policies will be described as factors affecting refugees' lives together with the complex multi-racial and multi-ethnic composition of the country and its implications for minorities' (non)integration. The third chapter will be dedicated to the theories

underpinning this research, namely “diaspora”, “home” and “feelings and belongings”. It will be shown how the combination of these concepts contributes to the understanding of important social dynamics, which will be then analysed in the Chin case. This section will be followed by the illustration of methods utilised to conduct and analyse the collected data. This will include ethical and reflexive considerations made by the researcher. The fifth chapter constitutes the central and most substantial part of the paper, as it presents and discusses the findings from the conducted interviews. This is where the afore-mentioned theories will allow the logical construction and analysis of issues at the heart of Chins’ processes of (non)inclusion, community building and identity (re)construction. This section will also review the possible steps forward to improve the hostile circumstances refugees find themselves in. Lastly, the sixth chapter concludes with a summary of the thesis and provides recommendations for future research.

Figure 1: The Chin State in Myanmar

https://www.freeburmarangers.org/2014/01/02/fbr-team-conducts-relief-mission-in-chin-state/

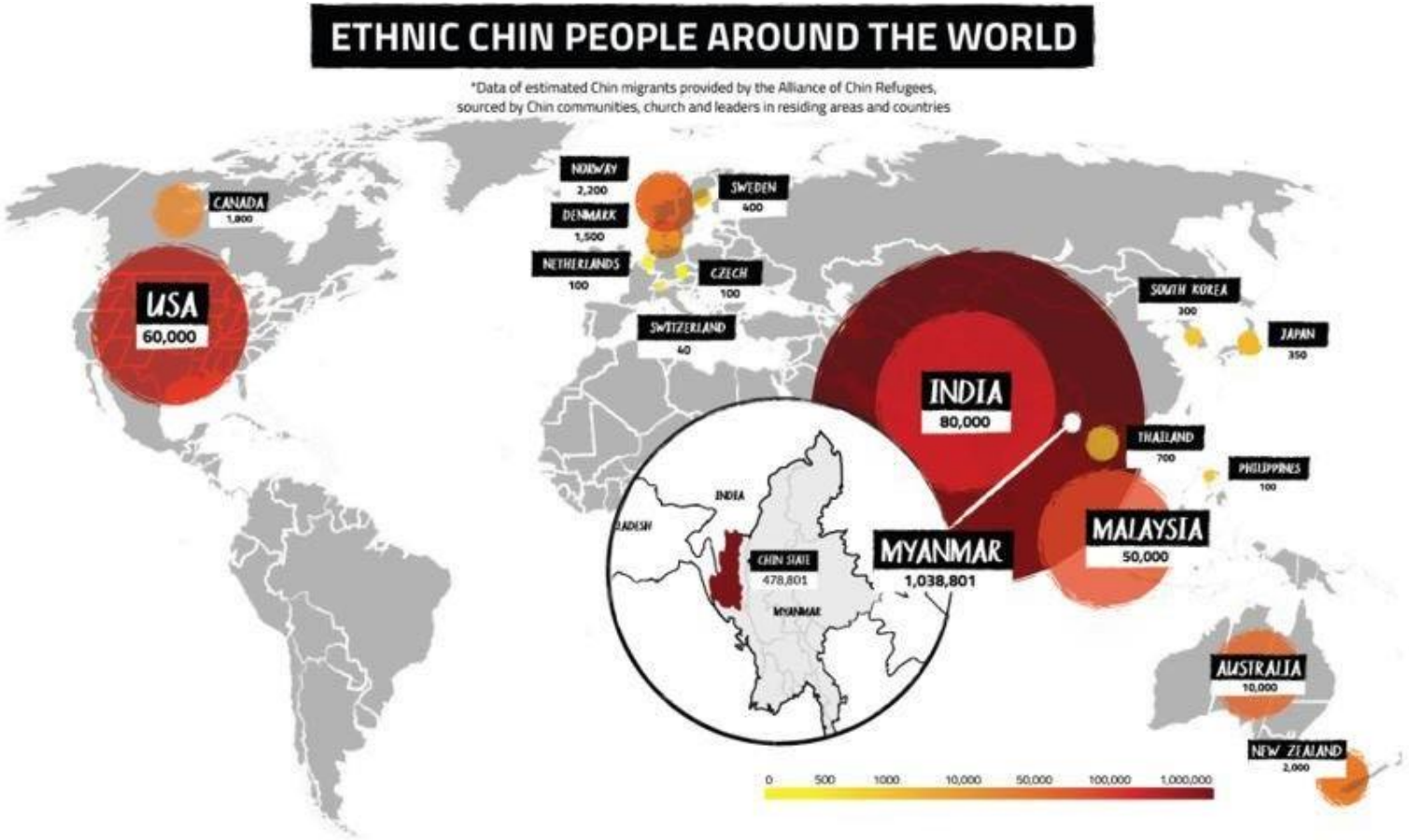

Figure 2

https://www.rage.com.my/refugeesnomore-chin/

2. Background

2.1 The Chin People

Before the arrival of the British, identification of people and identities in Burma (Myanmar) were characterised by syncretism and fluidity (Charney, 2008). In the first half of the 1800s, the colonial power slowly annexed to its territories, first the plains, and later the mountainous area in the Northern Arakan Yomas (which includes today's Chin State). Colonial officers had easier access to people living in the plains and their rule was facilitated by the fact that they tended to have centralised governments. On the contrary, 'highlanders' relied on individual governments organised around clans and kinship (Son-Doerschel, 2013). The latter would often relocate in search for new land, causing conflicts and hostilities with other communities. This presented a challenge for the British, who necessitated people to be settled to pay taxes. As a result, civilisation became a priority and was pursued through several strategies, including the introduction of modern methods of cultivation and literacy. Christian missionaries participated in this project by conducting censuses and gathering information on the highland communities. Despite their semi-nomadic state, the population was classified according to root languages, migration patterns and specific locations determined through linguistic methods (Son-Doerschel, 2013). Nomenclatures such as "Chin", "Kuki," and "Lushai," were constructed by equating people's locations to their dialectal group. As detailed by Piang (2008), these identities are colonial inventions and remained intact after the transition into independence and remain present to date.

During their field missions, the missionaries selected and learned specific dialects which were spoken by the largest groups. In the late 1800s, they consequently translated the Holy Scriptures using the Roman alphabet, resulting in the exclusion and marginalisation of some clans. In this regard, Go (1996) argues that "the Bible itself became a victim of this dialectical chauvinism" (p. 5). Literacy was therefore combined with a process of conversion to Christianity, which involved a long and gradual adjustment to the new faith. The missionaries

preached that it was necessary to move away from *Lai Phung*, the 'old' Chin life, and embrace the 'new' Christian ways of life, *Krifa Phung* (Sakhong, 2003). In order to do so, believers had to renounce pagan gods such as the guardian god, called *Khua-hrum,* and the household god, *Chung-um*. This transformation coincided with the desertion of the tribal system based on chieftainship, in favour of a new collectivity sharing the same values and religious principles. By the time that Buddhism was made the state religion in 1961 by the leader U Nu in the newly independent Burma, Chin self- awareness, a shared identity, beliefs and value system were inextricably linked with Christianity.

2.2 Malaysia: Policies and Socio-Cultural Composition

Before the British colonial rule, the Malay Archipelago – which includes today's Indonesia, the Philippines and Malaysia – was open to movement of people and goods. The concept of borders, understood as the delimitation of two territories with its own flags and state administrations, was invented during the colonial era (Garcés-Mascareñas, 2015). Under the British rule, migration from neighbouring countries, such as India, Indonesia, and China, was highly encouraged due to the need of foreign labour. After gaining independence in 1957, Malaysia introduced the first migration-related regulations with the Immigration Act (1959), and the Employment Restriction Act (1968), which made work permits a legal requirement. Nevertheless, in the 1970s and 1980s border crossing was still easy and simple, as Kuala Lumpur adopted a "policy of tolerance" towards migrant workers, due to a growing capitalism and labour shortages. It was only after the financial crisis in the early 1990s that stricter regulations on recruitment, employment and return were implemented (Ullah, 2013). The presence of immigrants in urban spaces and economic sectors previously dominated by locals started to be perceived as a threat in the increasingly competitive market. In the early 2000s, raids like Ops Nyah I and II ("Operation Get Rid"), and crackdowns targeting illegal migrants became more and more common (Kassim, 2004). Today Malaysia endorses a "zero irregular migrants" approach which involves both external and internal border controls (Choo, 2017). On one hand, visa requirements have been tightened up and

work as a form of "remote control policing" or "systematic interception mechanisms", in that they prevent migrants to set foot in their territories (Crépeau et al., 2007). On the other, punitive procedures (i.e. detention and deportation) are in place for those who enter the country illegally. Despite these deterrent measures and the harsh treatment that awaits them, migrants, including refugees, still cross the border and live avoiding immigration officers and police operations.

Malaysian authorities have been and still are criticised for behaving in a way that compromises refugees' safety and for direct contraventions of international human rights standards. According to Hoffstaedter (2014), the mistreatment of immigrants and refugees is not addressed since it does not create problems for the body politic, which excludes them from the political discourse. These groups have become the scapegoats for the society which feels threatened by the inclusion of another group to the already ethnic diverse 'pool'. This is especially problematic for a multi-racial country where ethnic issues have yet to be solved. According to Nair (1999), the problem dates back from the colonial period, during which policies of ethnic exclusion and segregation were pursued. Despite encouraging large-scale immigration from India and China, the British created ethnic divisions of labour by confining Indians to plantations, Malays to farming and fishing, and the Chinese to tin mines, except for those who had capital and became traders and entrepreneurs. As a result, social interaction between the ethnic groups was heavily hindered by such economic specialisation. The rights of the native Malay community were preserved in the areas of culture, religion and politics, and were represented by the sultans, who functioned as symbolic sovereigns of the Malay masses (Nair, 1999). Policies on education, the economy and administration fuelled cultural antagonism introducing stereotypes based on race.

In the late 1940s, the first ever attempt to bring together all races was made by the united front Putera-AMCJA. Putera was a coalition formed in 1947 comprising the major Malay left-wing parties, whereas the federation AMCJA consisted of labour unions, political parties, youth organisations and women's associations. The

coalition's main objective was to create a democratic and self-governed country (at that time it included Malaya and Singapore), where all races were to be considered as 'Malay'. Its main achievement was the organisation of a nation-wide "hartal" (strike) which represents the first political action involving the united action of all Malayan people (Reza, 2007). The social mobilisation was aimed at boycotting the 'undemocratic' Federal Constitution, the product of consultations behind closed doors between the British and the Malay aristocracy. Instead, Putera-AMCJA drafted and advocated for the adoption of a 'People's Constitution,' defined as "the first political attempt to put Malayan party politics on a plane higher than that of rival racial interests, and also as the first attempt to build a political bridge between the domiciled non-Malay communities and the Malay race" (The Straits Times, 1947 cited in Reza, 2007). This inclusive nationalism, however, was sabotaged by the colonial rule and the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), and ended with its leaders and members arrested or banned.

Following these events, was the production of a class-based nationalist movement coordinated by a new front inheriting cultural and ethnic fragmentation. The Alliance Party, which brought to Independence in 1957, was indeed constituted by three ethnic-based parties – UMNO, Malayan Chinese Association (MCA) and Malayan Indian Congress (MIC). These Malaysian nationalists not only were unable to reconcile contradictions but reinforced them in the Federal Constitution, which gave special rights to Malays and preserved socio-economic and political inequalities (Chakravarty and Roslan, 2005). Malay ethnicity, language and religion then came to constitute the cultural framework for national identity. Processes of 'othering' of non-Malays continued in the post-colonial era causing ethnic tensions which reached their peak with the 1969 riots, which involved racial violence between Malays and Chinese. Although this is the only 'ethnic-based bloodshed' in Malaysia's history, silent tensions continue to be stirred by political parties, especially UMNO, which often politicise and instrumentalise races and ethnicities. Recent attempts have been made to create a more united national consciousness, for example through concepts such as "1Malaysia", promoted by

the former Prime Minister, Najib Tun Razak, which aimed to foster both ethnic harmony and national unity. Despite these efforts, “bangsa” (the nation), still relies on strong connotations of race, which put emphasis on the separation between ethnicity and nationality.

3. Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework employed in this thesis will draw from political psychological and social theories. Several theoretical concepts were selected as relevant explanatory tools to make sense of the issue under analysis. A great deal of attention will be given to the concept of "diaspora," which will guide the discussion of results. This approach will be enriched by the adoption of two important ideas, "home(lessness)" and "feelings of belonging". Their tight relationship will be analysed also by looking at processes of identity construction. In the next section, all theoretical concepts will be explored in relation to the research question(s). In chapter 5, it will be shown how these interwoven into the context of Chin refugees' lives in Malaysia, and how they are able to explain related social dynamics and behaviours.

3.1 Diaspora

Although mostly disregarded before the 1980s, "diaspora" has now become a popular buzz word. Its use has spread not only to the social sciences but also to non-academic spaces, such as the worldwide web and the media. This has resulted in the evolution of its definition which was also influenced by global political and economic changes (Ullah and Ahmad Kumpoh, 2019). Brubaker (2005) has strongly criticised the dispersion of this term in conceptual, semantic and disciplinary fields which, he argues, has led to the universalisation, and consequent disappearance of diaspora.

I argue that the concept of diaspora is a useful concept if its definition is kept within clear boundaries and distinguished from other notions. For this reason, diaspora will be defined through six main criteria, as outlined by Bruneau (2010): 'dispersion under pressure; choice of destination; identity awareness; networked space; duration of transnational ties and relative autonomy from host and origin societies' (p. 36). Following this, the dispersion of people to other locations happens under different forms of pressure, such as natural or man-made disasters. The destination

countries are usually chosen due to 'migratory routes' or links developed by the first ones who moved to the host country. Thirdly, the dispersed population often possesses a strong awareness of identity, that frequently relies on memories about the territory and society of origin. In this sense, collective narratives strengthen community identities linked to Anderson's idea of 'imagined community' (1983). Such identities are ultimately transmitted from one generation to the other. Multiple relations are sustained through social networks, existent both within the diasporic people, and between them and their society of origin. The final outcome is the organisation of a social group autonomous from both the host and the origin countries, which relies on different types of associations, be they religious, cultural or political (see Bruneau, 2010). In addition to these criteria, two more traits were highlighted by Vertovec (2000) as distinctive of diasporas – the solidarity with co-ethnic members living in other countries and the impossibility for diasporic people to be completely accepted by the 'host society' –which, in turn, creates feelings of alienation or exclusion.

Robin Cohen (2008) has theorised five different types of diaspora according to the motives behind them – victimhood, labour, empire, trade and deterritorialisation. The first type is linked to a negative connotation firstly introduced in the bible and later associated with the Jewish diaspora. Victim diasporas are characterised by forcible dispersion and a possible return. Labour diasporas, also referred to as 'proletarian diasporas,' emerge when emigration is caused by a search of work. Italians and Turks are perhaps amongst the best examples. Imperial diasporas instead blossomed during the mercantile period when European powers pursued their imperial ambitions in future colonies, especially Asia and Africa. Trade or business diasporas go back to ancient Greece, Babylon and Thebes. These were characterised by merchants who had to live in an alien town, learn its customs and practices in order to exchange goods. Today's most famous trade diaspora is arguably the Chinese one. Finally, Cohen (2008) defines 'deterritorialised diaspora' as the category that comprises new forms of displacement and mobility. In particular, he refers to those ethnic groups which do not rely on traditional territorial

reference points and have therefore turned into "mobile and multi-located cultures" (2008: 124). The African Caribbean is perhaps the main case study.

This thesis will focus on the first type, the victim diaspora, analysed in its 'social form'. According to Vertovec (2000), such understanding of diaspora entails a "triadic relationship" between dispersed and self-identified ethnic groups; the places where they reside; and the home country they came from (see Figure 3). The specific social dynamics emerging from the three are closely tied to a particular history and geography. In order to make sense of such relationships, Clarke et al. (1990) have suggested several factors to take into consideration, especially in the case of South Asian diasporas: (a) migration processes and factors of settlement; (b) cultural composition; (c) social structure and political power; and (d) community development. In regard to migration processes, the researcher has to look at numerous elements such as the extent of ties or networks with South Asia, the economic activity in the new country, the geographic features of settlement (for example, whether rural or urban), and the infrastructure of 'host society' (i.e. policies, availability of housing or loans). When it comes to cultural composition, factors including religion and language should be examined. Social structure and political power should be investigated considering class composition, the extent of 'institutionalised racism' and the degree of racial and ethnic pluralism should be considered. Lastly, the community development can be evaluated by studying organisations, leadership and whether there is ethnic convergence or conflict (see Figure 3).

This framework was originally made to analyse the Indian Diaspora, and thus included additional criteria useful to evaluate this specific ethnic case (Vertovec, 2000: 21-23). The above-mentioned factors will be taken into consideration in the analysis of the Chin diaspora in Malaysia as relevant elements to make sense of their social dynamics. Specifically, 'migration processes' and 'cultural composition' were emphasised in chapter 2, which also briefly touched upon

'social and political structures'. 'Community development' – which constitutes the main focus of the thesis – will be thoroughly examined in the discussion of results by breaking it down into its components.

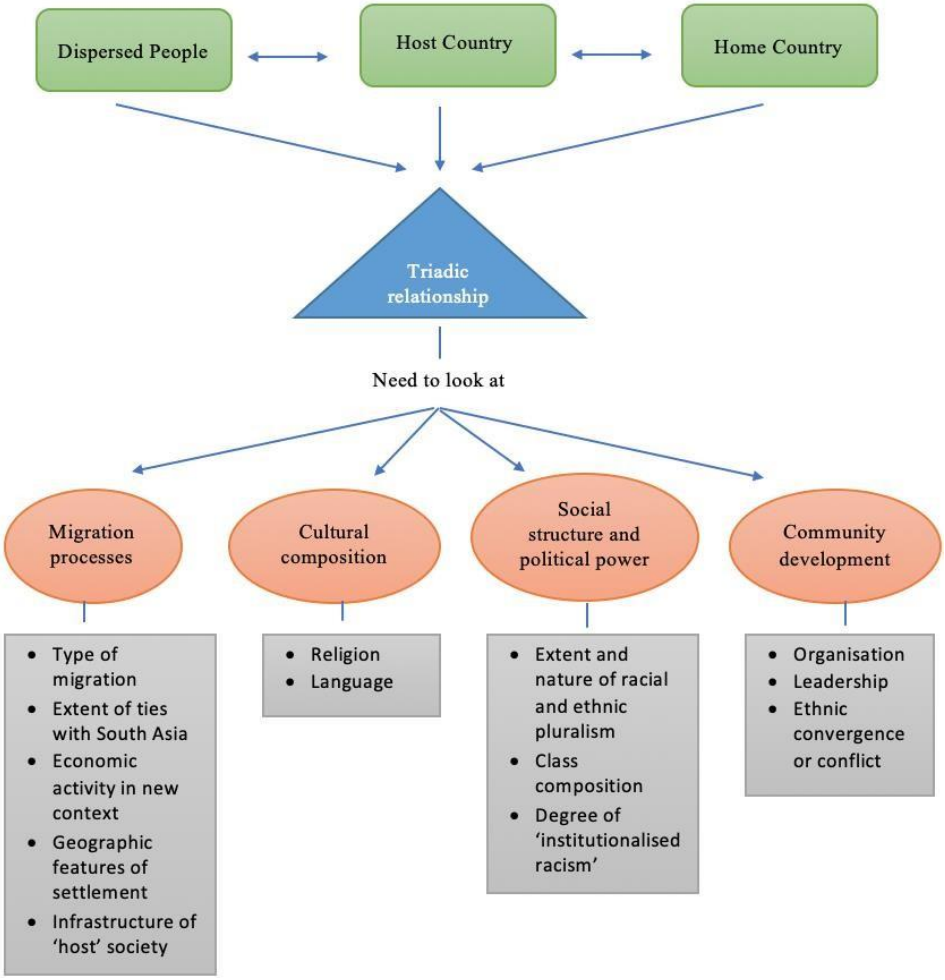

Figure 3: Triadic Relationship (Vertovec, 2000)

The concept of diaspora is "an alternative to the metaphysics of 'race', nation and bonded culture coded into the body [since it puts] emphasis on contingency, indeterminacy and conflict" (Gilroy 1997: 328). This is because diaspora, as a theoretical tool, is able to avoid common reductionisms, especially when it comes to identity, be it ethnic or cultural. This is not to say that ethnicity plays no role in diaspora movements. As pointed out by Ullah and Kumpoh (2019), "diaspora itself relies on a conception of ethnic bonds as central, but dynamic, elements of social organization" (p. 20). According to Hall (1994), diaspora "is defined, not by

the essence or purity but by recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity, by a conception of 'identity,' which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by hybridity" (p. 235). In this sense, identities are understood as contested sites and processes which are constantly changing as a result of history, power and culture. According to him, rather than timeless essence, cultural identities should be treated as "positionings" shaped by two vectors, the first of *continuity* associated with our past heritage, and the second of *discontinuity* closely related to migratory processes. Similarly, diaspora identities constantly (re)produce themselves through difference and transformation. They undergo a continuous process of re-creation, re-modelling and re-production due to the exposure to different cultures and norms.

Diaspora literature gives a great deal of attention to the place of origin, also known as "homeland". The term refers not only to a defined territory that diaspora communities come from but "a mixture of sites and cultures, located in history, memory and the present" (Kasbarian, 2009: 359). Homeland plays a central role for diasporic communities since it gives coherence and meaning, and orientation to often diverse and multi-layered diasporas. The importance of the "homeland" is often associated with the "myth of return," considered by some as a criterion to determine whether a group falls into the 'category' of "diaspora". The assumption is that diasporic communities will eventually go back to their home country from which they were exiled by force. According to Bolognani (2015), return becomes a 'fantasy' that provides "a means to deal with the sense of loss and separation embedded in migration without losing the connection with one's past" (p. 195). She argues that this fantasy belongs to a "transnational place" (Winnicott, 1971) understood as a space where people's daydreaming enables them to construct new identities, horizons and narratives. In a nutshell, it involves processes of identity-building aimed at a search for well-being. This idea of return is complementary to that of "trauma".

As people who have been forcibly dispersed, "refugee-based diasporas" share a trauma which is usually crystallised in their minds (Koinova, 2016). Diaspora

refugees are constantly reminded of the situation 'back home,' both by worrying about the loved ones who were left behind and by the new arrivals who have fled. Trauma shapes their collective identities which are thus anchored in the remembrance of past and present victimisation (Larson, 1999). It is important to stress that the past is neither a figment of the imagination nor 'factual,' since it is a product of "memory, fantasy, narrative and myth" (Hall, 1994). This decisive past not only affects refugees' identities but also their children's through transmission, the unconscious story-telling process. Parents play a fundamental role in shaping the identity of second-generation diaspora by narrating stories of themselves and their previous lives in the country of origin. The result is the creation of an intergenerational or 'trauma by proxy' (Wise, 2004). In his study about African diaspora, Larson (1999) has shown how the social trauma of 'bondage and exploitation' has become "a form of empowerment and identity formation". The latter is made possible by the presence of the older generations who teach children their values and culture, and socialise them accordingly. The transfer of knowledge, past stories and social norms highly affect the diaspora youth in regard to national consciousness, identity and belonging (see Graf, 2018).

3.2 Home(lessness) and Feelings of Belonging

The concepts of 'belonging' and 'identity' are strictly correlated as the latter (re)produces itself "through the combined processes of being and becoming, belonging and longing to belong" (Probyn, 1996 cited in Yuval-Davis, 2006: 202). Belonging is hereby understood as a dynamic process consisting of continuous negotiations between subjects and objects. It is linked with "people, places or modes of being, and the ways in which individuals and groups are caught within wanting to belong, wanting to become, a process that is fuelled by learning rather than the positing of identity as a stable state" (Probyn, 1996 cited in Graf, 2018: 119). According to Yuval-Davis (2006), belonging is constructed on three interrelated analytical levels – social locations, individuals' identifications and emotional attachments, and ethical and political value systems. "Social locations" include categories such as gender, race, class or age and have important

implications for power relations in society. These positionalities shift depending on the historical context. Besides being cognitive stories, constructions of belonging are manifestations of emotional investments and desire for attachments. The latter are constructed and reproduced together with identity narratives through social and cultural practices. Identity narratives, in turn, are central to construction and (re)production of collective identities which provide 'a sense of order and meaning' (Yuval-Davis, 2010).

Despite usually being naturalised, "belonging" undergoes processes of articulation and politicisation when threatened. This is the case for diasporic communities which find themselves in a place laid out by someone else and characterised by contrasting identities (Bruneau, 2010: 49). These circumstances are often associated with feelings of "homelessness," characterised by discontinuity and impermanence. When home is lost, a person's "ontological security" is undermined. The term is understood as a "person's fundamental sense of safety in the world, and includes a basic trust of other people. Obtaining such trust becomes necessary for a person to maintain a sense of psychological well-being and avoid existential anxiety" (Giddens, 1991 cited in Kinnvall, 2004: 746). Indeed, "home" has been referred to as a 'bearer of security' due to its emotional set of meanings existing in relation to permanence and continuity (Depuis and Thorns, 1998). This sense of permanency is constructed over time, for example through repetitive courses of actions or time-space paths. Such daily routines allow for the development of feelings of predictability and familiarity. Indeed, it is 'at home,' that people feel most in control of their lives and comfortable in a site free of surveillance (Depuis and Thorns, 1998).

3.2.1 Home-Building

To address the loss of 'home', displaced people attempt to create and develop in the new country their own place reminiscent of their homeland. This process has been defined as "home-building" or "place-making". According to Castles (2000), this is a collective process which is often visible since ethnic groups tend to be

located in specific neighbourhoods where they open their own shops, restaurants and markets. Places are reshaped through several strategies, for example, by giving names reminiscent of home to locations in the host country or by establishing institutions, such as associations or clubs. These political, social and religious activities can be referred to as "homesteading practices" which are aimed at creating feelings of security, familiarity, community and a sense of possibility. Through homesteading, subject statuses are reconfigured "in ways that open up rather than fencing in terrains of meaning, identity, and place" (Sylvester, 1994: 2). This concept was further developed by Kronsell (2002) who claims that, in order to make a new home, a person has to go beyond and surpass the life of contradictions and initiates of homelessness. Similarly, Hall (2015) has named these participatory practices "migrant urbanisms" and has shown how they reconfigure 'ordinary cities' through diversity and innovation. She argues that migrants alter cities and urban spaces as a result of movement, mixing and exchange. Hall (2015) stresses the importance of streets which function as common public platform and a space where groups are invested and maintain their dialogues. "Everyday street politics evolves through both crisis and common ground, where crisis provides a momentum for collective action, and common ground provides a medium for refining the forms of collective engagement" (p. 864). This is demonstrated by "claims of presence" and "claims to space" made by some foreign workers using slogans such as "We Are Here to Stay" or "On bosse ici, on vit ici, on rest ici!" [We work here, we live here, we are staying here], as seen in France and Italy (see De Denova, 2014: 5).

The extent of re-creation of locations is highly dependent on the circumstances the ethnic groups find themselves in. In contexts of social, cultural or political exclusion, ethnic minorities are largely restricted in their practices. De Genova (2014) has pointed out how migrants living and working in the city are alienated and exploited. In her analysis of Chicago in the US, she has shown how "urban migrants" find themselves in a so-called "migrant metropolis" where they attempt to resist through social relations transcending the nation-state border. Resorting to

illegality is arguably the most common form of resistance of migrants who either overstay their visa or re-enter the country after deportation. "Urban refugees" living in non-signatory countries of the 1951 Convention are involved in similar practices, as their presence in the country is 'illegal'. Denied of their basic rights and lacking state support, they show solidarity by helping each other through sharing food and money. In some cases, it was proven that refugees are better organised than locals and rely on a stronger unity (see Brun, 2001). This can be explained by the fact that, despite their linguistic and cultural diversities, refugee groups share similar stories and challenges which tend to bond them together through shared experience. Big metropolises have indeed prompted different ethnic refugees to collaborate with each other in order to guarantee their survival. In such circumstances, various coping mechanisms are implemented by communities who are involved in 'ongoing process of social engineering' (Sørensen, 1997).

In the absence of other resources for survival and resistance, refugees often consolidate their religion through the seen potential of strengthening a growing community and visible identity rebuilding. As detailed by Vertovec (2000), ethnic diasporas' identities, interests and intents often revolve around religious concepts and traditions. When chaos and uncertainty prevail, religion addresses ontological insecurity by picturing a total and united whole. As claimed by Kinnvall (2004), religion deals with "questions concerning existence itself, the external world and human life, the existence of "the other" and what self-identity actually is" (p. 759). Due to its transcendent nature, religion provides with unquestionable sets of references which function as 'models of and for' the group's social reality (Geertz, 1973 cited in Vertovec, 2000). However, I agree with Castles (2000) that religion should not be considered as a separate entity but rather as a complementary factor to culture around which other practices may be constructed. The functions of religion for displaced ethnic minorities are multi-layered. First, religion plays a central role in 'settlement and community formation'. This is complimented by its potential of being a 'mechanism of social control' by authorities. Thirdly, religion

is a valuable resource for developing resistance in cases of racism and exclusion (Castles, 2000: 135).

Drawing attention to 'homesteading practices' and coping mechanisms allows to criticise the common understanding of displaced people, considered as victims of change and incontrollable forces. Migrants and refugees tend to be regarded as passive agents since they were forced to leave a place where they 'belong'. Forced displacement often implies that they automatically lose not only power and control, but ultimately, themselves. This is because the relationship between people and places is generally perceived in botanical terms. Having 'roots' is considered as a precondition for identity creation and belonging, and therefore to know who we are (Brun, 2001). The 'motherland' or 'fatherland' is frequently associated with arboreal metaphors, since trees entail a "temporal continuity of essence and territorial rootedness" (Malkki, 1992: 28). For example, post-war refugee literature tended to study displacement as a psycho-pathological condition associated with medical and moral problems caused by the broken 'national order of things' (Brun, 2001). In these studies, the loss of 'home' was equated to the loss of moral bearings which made it impossible for displaced people to be honest citizens (Malkki, 1992). Together with Schwartz (1997), I argue that notions of 'roots' and 'home' should not be essentialised nor reduced to fixed symbols. On the contrary, being created over time, the meaning of home is changing and context-dependent as it will be shown empirically in the analysis section.

These theoretical premises allow to deconstruct the idea of refugees understood as a 'problem' and people in need of special therapeutic interventions. Asylum seekers and refugees are often considered as inadequate and a 'deviant problem' which threatens normality. This has important implications for their treatment since it legitimises nation-states to adopt exclusionary and anti-refugee policies (Pickering, 2001). The latter are justified through discourses aimed at the construction of a 'radical other' standing above ordinary politics and locked away from society's consciousness. As pointed out by Hoffstaedter (2014), refugees can be considered

as Agamben's "homo sacer" who live in a 'state of exception' hanging on to a bare life, deprived of all rights. Thus, refugees find themselves in a contradictory situation of 'visible invisibility' in the sense that on one hand, their existence is almost invisible, but on the other, their presence is rendered highly visible through policies and discourses. By adopting binaries of good/bad or legal/illegal, greater attention is given to people's status, rather than on how they can be helped (Goodman and Speer, 2007 cited in Don and Lee, 2014). The term 'illegal' itself is problematic due to its implications for how people are perceived and treated. By employing this definition, people not only are denied their humanity and fundamental rights, but are also considered criminals (Sajjad, 2018). References to criminality are often associated with assumptions of begging, contagious diseases and prostitution (Garcés-Mascareñas, 2015). Furthermore, by associating refugees with strangeness and externality, they are portrayed as "an objectified, undifferentiated mass" (Hannah Arendt, 1973 cited in Malkki, 1992: 33-34). Objectification ultimately results in their dehumanisation. In this thesis, the terms 'legal' and 'illegal' will be used simply in relation to the (non)possession of the necessary documentation required by the host country but not as a definition of people *per se*. Regardless of social status, refugees and asylum seekers will be treated as subjects with agency, self-representation and individual backgrounds.

4. Methodology

This thesis is based on qualitative research due to its exploratory character which allows investigations of the 'why and how' of social action, rather than the 'what, where and when' questions addressed by quantitative research, characterised by a conclusive character (Della Porta, 2008). Among its benefits, the plan for qualitative research is not strictly prescribed and its phases are not fixed but rather changeable. This paper heavily relies on primary data, in the form of interviews and observations. Adopting this approach allows the researcher to explore the chosen issue and obtains information from participants in the study (Creswell, 2014). The investigative process allows the researcher to form logical conclusions of a social phenomenon by contrasting, comparing, replicating and classifying the object study which could be a particular situation, people or group interaction (Miles and Huberman, 1984 cited in Miller, 1992). This specific research will entail an inductive process where patterns and categories are built from the bottom up and the data is later organised into a more abstract and comprehensive set of themes. The objective is to provide a holistic account where multiple perspectives are provided, several factors affecting the problem identified, and the larger picture is presented (Creswell, 2014). The methodological framework guiding this research consists of two methods, ethnography and participant observation. The combination of these approaches will allow me to fully grasp the social dynamics at the heart of the ethnic group under consideration.

4.1 Ethnography

Although ethnography emerged from the field of anthropology, today it is widely recognised as a methodology central to qualitative research in the social sciences, with respect to the descriptive and interpretative approach. From an interpretivist standpoint, ethnography is based on the epistemological notion that subjective and objective meanings are inherently linked. Therefore, emphasis is put on human actors and the meanings that drive their actions, rather than universal and mechanical laws (Della Porta, 2008). The ethnographic method allows the

researcher to learn the meaning that the participants hold about the issue under examination and, more broadly, about the culture-sharing behaviour of individuals or group (Creswell, 2014). Ethnography usually implies that data is collected in the field, in the place where informants experience the issue under analysis. This is because immersion in ethnographic research entails, on one hand, involvement with people to learn how they interpret and respond to events, and on the other, the researcher's experience of the same circumstances. As pointed out by Emerson and others (2011), "the field researcher sees first-hand and up close how people grapple with uncertainty and confusion, how meanings emerge through discussions, discourse and collective action, and how understandings and interpretations change over time" (p. 4).

When conducting research, it is important to remember that researchers find themselves in a very particular situation, which Bourdieu has defined as "the scholastic view". This is "a very peculiar point of view on the social world, on language, on any possible object of thought that is made possible by the situation of skholè, of which the school [..] is a particular form, as an institutionalized situation of studious leisure" (1990: 381). Apart from acknowledging this privileged situation, ethnographers should be reflexive throughout the research process. As pointed out by Sheldon (2016), ethnography requires a high degree of reflexivity which is necessary to think critically about the study and the context, as well as when reading and writing. This is due to the fact that researchers are not *tabula rasa* but rather their culture, upbringing and background (i.e. gender, history, social status) affect their interpretations and interpersonal relations. In regard to this research, I am aware that as a woman, I had easier access to female participants among which two preferred not to use a male interpreter. In that case, translations were made simultaneously by a friend who knew both English and Burmese. Furthermore, on one side, my Catholic upbringing has helped me better understand religious activities organised by the Chins who are mainly Catholic. On the other, it has allowed me to be included and welcomed by the community itself. The similar

background had positive implications on my adjustment to the endeavour that, to some extent, was less 'strange' and 'different' (see O'Reilly, 2009).

As mentioned earlier, in qualitative studies, empirical findings are usually prioritised over theoretical formulations (Bray, 2008). As part of data-gathering in ethnographic work, interviews are among the preferred tools and vary in structure and style. For this thesis, semi-structured interviews were selected so that more freedom was guaranteed for both interviewees and the interviewer. This style indeed enables informants to express their views in their own terms and, at the same time, the researcher is given more room for manoeuvre in asking questions (O' Reilly, 2009: 126-127). Interview questionnaires comprised both closed-ended and open-ended questions according to the different themes under analysis (see Interview Guides in Appendix II). Due to the context and the group under study, the interview guides for refugees were translated into Burmese, the language of communication used by the Chins in Malaysia (see chapter 5). Translations were made by a Chin interpreter with experience in Burmese-English translations, who also simultaneously translated refugees' answers during the interviews. Simultaneous translations allowed for deviation and for the possible exploration of more questions at a deeper level when appropriate and with the interviewees' consent.

4.2 Participant Observation

A fundamental part of qualitative research is to gather up-close information by personally talking to people and seeing them behave and act in their natural setting (Creswell, 2014). One way to achieve this is through participant observation. At a first glance, this method may seem an oxymoron due to combining two almost entirely opposed actions, participate and observe. Indeed, on one hand, participation involves taking part in discussions, activities and share experiences as other members of community under research. This process is usually associated with empathy and sympathy, and it is therefore considered as subjective. On the other, observation is more objective since it requires the ethnographer to watch and listen

as an outsider. The extent to which one participates rather than observes, and vice versa, varies according to different studies and highly depends on theoretical and practical decisions (O' Reilly, 2009). Due to the interpretivist epistemological standpoint of this research, participant observation was conducted by acknowledging how the endeavour affects people and how on their turn, individuals (including myself) construct their world. In this sense, the social world is believed to be co-constructed and in order to understand it, participation in this construction is needed (see Ellen, 1984).

In order not to lose objectivity, it is essential to stand back intellectually and reflect on things writing them down. Thus, the researcher is required to take notes of observations and make sure that they are 'theoretically informed'. As noted by O' Reilly (2009), it is extremely important to "know why you want to become involved before pursuing (or not) a fully participant role, and then reconcile your intentions with practical issues on the ground" (p.162). Through participant observation, the researcher is able to acquire a deeper knowledge of the issue and get closer to the root of the research study (Bray, 2008). This is because this method allows to learn from first-hand experience and better understand the participants' point of view by learning about feelings, rules, and norms in context. During my fieldwork, I partook in activities where at times, I was more an observer, and others a participant.

My role as an observer was evident when I attended the 'Chin National Day', a socio-political and a cultural event to which I was precisely 'invited'. Instead, participation was predominant when I took part in activities organised in religious centres by the refugee community. These events enabled me to make direct observations to compare with informants' accounts and notice dynamics they could not or did not share during the interviews. For example, the role played by religion for the Chins was better comprehended as a result of participant observation. In all cases, my research was 'overt' in the sense that the group was aware of my presence and of the topic of my thesis. Besides, 'covert' research was virtually impossible

due to the ‘permission’ needed to participate and my physical and cultural characteristics. Due to the limited time spent with the community, full immersion did not take place but this prevented me to undertake total mimesis by preserving a degree of detachment necessary for objective analysis.

4.3 Data Collection

Primary data was collected in the span of 5 weeks in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, from February 13 to March 20, 2019. The location was chosen due to easier accessibility to respondents and the high concentration of refugees in the capital and its proximity. A small sample of initial contacts was contacted at an early stage of the research. These were Chin community-based organisations (CBOs) able to grant access to refugees and inform them about the object of the study. In this sense, they worked as a “connecting bridge” between the researcher and the interviewees. This process involved physical visits to centres in November-December 2018 during my first stay in Malaysia where I was taking the elective internship course. More CBOs and other types of organisations were then reached via email and Facebook Messenger since most community-based organisations do not have a website but a Facebook page.

Most informants were interviewed face-to-face (15) and were given the choice of location. All took place in the respective centres of which interviewees are members, work or volunteer, except for one interview made with an NGO representative that was conducted in a coworking space. In addition, one was a telephone interview and another one was made via e-mail. This is because the former was conducted with a refugee who has been resettled in the US, whereas the latter participant was a representative of the Chin Refugees Supporting Committee (CRSC) based in Myanmar, who collaborates with Chin communities in Malaysia. Interviews lasted between 40 minutes and 1 hour 15 minutes and were all tape-recorded and subsequently transcribed. Only with two interviews, hand-written notes were taken instead, as requested by the informants.

In regard to sampling, two main processes were selected: purposive sampling and snowball sampling. The latter is part of non-probability sampling techniques and is usually privileged for a social group that is hard to locate or to access, such as homeless people, irregular migrants or foreign workers (Babbie, 2011). This procedure implies that subjects help contact others and refer them to the ethnographer. For this study, three participants decided to participate in the study after being informed about the study by a common friend. In order to avoid homogeneity and exclusion, I did not completely rely on such networks but also interviewed people who had no contact with one another. For the same reason, I chose to interview only three participants whose contacts were provided by the same community-based organisation and preferred instead interviewing other refugees from different sub-ethnic Chin communities. Snowballing was combined with purposive sampling. This type of sample was chosen "for a purpose, in order to access people, times, and settings that are representative of given criteria" (O' Reilly, 2009: 197). This is so that all criteria of relevance are included and the sample is diverse. Two main categories in relation to informants' social positions were selected: displaced people and civil society.

The first group, which is also the most substantial, includes: refugees, asylum seekers, community leaders and members of community-based organisations. The criterion taken into consideration when recruiting refugees and asylum seekers was gender since the research aimed at representing both men and women fairly. Criteria such as age, marital status, educational level and time spent in the host country were considered at a later stage, during analysis (see chapter 5). Bear in mind that community leaders together with coordinators and volunteers working for community-based organisations were themselves refugees. However, due to their exposure, knowledge and experience in the field, the questions asked to community leaders (ACR and COBEM) slightly differed from other refugees' (see Interview Guides in Appendix II). Specifically, they were able to deepen and expand on certain issues, especially in relation to the topic of community development.

When recruiting interviewees from civil society, the aim was to have an equal representation of different types of organisations – non-governmental, both local and international, education-related and political. For this reason, participants comprised a founder of a local NGO (RFTR), one representative of an international organisation (AIM), a teacher from a learning centre (IDEAS Academy) and the secretary of the Chin Refugee Supporting Committee (CRSC) (see Tables in Appendix I). The choice of including this category into the sample is due to the potential of incorporating civil society's perspective to that of refugees. Consulting these representatives highly contributes to the debate on refugee issues since they work with them but at the same time, they are not personally and emotionally involved like the community-based organisations. Furthermore, it helped counterbalance the possibility of misinformation which is likely in the case of groups who find themselves in very difficult socio-economic situations and wish that a foreigner (myself) may be able to change (see McConnachie, 2018).

4.4 Data Analysis

Contrary to quantitative research which aims at preserving and reconstructing all data, a qualitative approach involves the aggregation of data into a small number of themes (Creswell, 2014). Themes are identified through *data coding* defined as "the process of organizing the data by bracketing chunks (or text or image segments) and writing a word representing a category in the margins" (Creswell, 2014: 252). Among the various types of data coding at disposal in qualitative research, the approach chosen for this thesis is 'thematic analysis'. Although the definition of thematic analysis is contested, it is widely used in qualitative research due to its theoretical independence and flexibility (Braun and Clarke, 2016). This distinguishes it, for example, from 'grounded theory' which is tied to a realist theoretical and epistemological position and is aimed at building theoretical models out of the data (see Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Another benefit of thematic analysis is that it goes beyond counting sentences or specific words and allows to describe and identify both implicit and explicit ideas within the data set (Guest et al., 2012).

The analysis in this thesis follows the guidelines suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006) which include six phases. The first step was the familiarisation with the data which already started with transcribing the interviews and continued with 'repeated reading' thereof. Initial codes were subsequently generated ensuring that all data extracts were given equal attention. Due to the limited number of interviews, coding was done manually without the aid of software programmes. It is important to notice that codes were both 'data-driven' and 'theory-driven'. This means that some – collective trauma and community support – were anticipated by reading past literature and theories related to diaspora and homelessness. Theory, in this sense, gave direction to the analysis and served as a starting point for questioning (see Guest et al., 2012). Other codes – temporal place and dreams of resettlement – became apparent while conducting the interviews and were later classified as relevant themes. The third step involved collating recurring codes and sorting them into overarching themes. This phase is where interpretative analysis of data occurred and broader patterns were identified. Themes were not selected following quantifiable measures (i.e. frequency) but in terms of their relevance in relation to the research questions. Once 'candidate themes' were selected, these were reviewed and refined by breaking them down or incorporating them into similar ones. For example, the initial code "fear" was later merged into the main theme "temporal place"; same as "religion" with "community support". Lastly, themes were organised into 'a coherent and internally consistent account' where each relates to the other and to the research questions. In particular, I made sure that they were "internally consistent and externally divergent" (Marshall and Rossman, 1999: 184). In order to provide a realistic and valid account (Creswell, 2014), discrepancies within the themes will be reported which reflect the different perspectives encountered in the interviews.

4.5 Ethical Considerations

Aware of the researcher's ethicalresponsibilities, this thesis follows the guidelines provided by the EU in the "Guidance Note for Researchers and Evaluators of Social Sciences and Humanities Research" (2010). The sensitive topic was taken into

account throughout the research process and the formulation of interview questionnaires which avoided the use of discriminatory, offensive or unacceptable language. All informants participated voluntarily and were informed about the purpose of the research beforehand and the possibility of withdrawing from the study at any time and for any reason. Most interviewees gave oral consent whereas civil society's representatives were required to sign a consent form (see Appendix III). To protect participants' anonymity, their names were changed except for James from ACR and Heidy from RFTR that explicitly asked for their information to be included in the thesis. The researcher and the interpreter have both signed a confidentiality agreement. No information will be falsified so that the accuracy of data is preserved. Similarly, plagiarism will be prevented and intellectual property respected. Lastly, in order to guarantee honesty and transparency, all interview transcripts will be made available upon request.

4.6 Limitations

This research is essentially limited due to the number of interviews conducted with the community under consideration. Although findings are interpreted in relation to the Chin group as a whole, only 12 refugees were interviewed. Thus, the sample size is not representative of all categories, including all sub-ethnic groups that belong to the Chins. This is mainly due to time and resource limitations. Although efforts were made to include different community-based organisations, some did not participate either because they did not respond to my invitation or because of lack of time. Community leaders were particularly occupied in the period during which interviews were conducted since they were coordinating advocacy work to stop the UNHCR policy on Chins' refugee status. Another limitation is the language barrier between the researcher and refugees. With no knowledge of Burmese nor Chin language, I had to rely completely on the interpreter's translations which may lack accuracy and important details. In addition, interaction with interviewees was affected by the constant mediation which hindered direct dialogues and communication, in general. Lastly, the study is limited due to the lack of voices of the local population which was not involved in the process. Again, this is the result

of a lack of resources and time constrictions, as well as the scope of the project which was mainly focused on the refugee community. Hence, data regarding public perceptions was restricted to second-hand information provided by civil society representatives involved in the field.

5. Discussion of Results

The analysis chapter will be divided into two sub-sections. The first part, which is the most extensive, will be dedicated to the discussion of the four themes selected during the thematic analysis of the transcriptions of the semi-structured interviews. These are the following – *collective trauma, temporal place, dreams of resettlement* and *community support*. It is important to note that although these themes will be analysed separately, they are strictly interrelated and multi-faceted in nature. The last part addresses the third research question and consists of suggestions and possible steps towards the making of Malaysia of a "home" for refugees.

5.1 Collective Trauma

As its name suggests, this theme refers to a trauma shared collectively by Chin refugees. Although the questions directed to the interviewees were focused on their present life in Malaysia, they all made references to their previous time in Myanmar. In particular, they recounted incidents of the "military" and the "soldiers" interfering with their daily life which are the main cause that urged them to leave their home country. Among the major inconveniences, the pro-government militia would make the population carry all kinds of goods and equipment without compensation, preventing them to carry out their daily work. Sometimes this would happen as often as 3 days out of 6 working days[1]. In a place where farming is the main source of livelihood this means that people were struggling not only to work but to survive. No excuses were accepted by the military which would force everyone to work, regardless of their health condition and family needs. This is how one interviewee described the story about her escape:

"There were many soldiers, army in our place. They asked us to work for them, as porters, to carry for them. One day, me and three friends, all of us were asked to carry for them. When we reached a village, we asked 'Is this the place we have to reach?'

[1] Interview with John

they said 'Not yet. This is not the place'. So, we know they still want us to work. So, I try to escape from there. I say, 'I want to go to the bathroom'. After that, they allowed me to go. I pretended I wanted to go to the toilet and I ran away here, away from there, from that place." (Jane)

The impossibility to pursue their occupation was also associated with the interruption of their religious practices. As Christians, Sundays were mainly dedicated to the attendance of the mass at the church. Although officially Myanmar has no state religion, 80% of the population is Buddhist (Wide, 2017). The recent radicalisation of Buddhist identity has resulted in persecutions of ethno-religious minorities, especially of the Muslim Rohingyas. As part of both an ethnic and religious minority, the interviewed Christian Chins were often denied worship. For example, they were prevented from going to church and pastors' home visits were frequently intercepted.

"If the government doesn't allow [worship], we can't do anything. [..] Because I live near the military camp, sometimes they don't allow to visit any pastor, any preacher from another place to my house." (Matthew)

"For me Myanmar is a Buddhist country so they don't want us to worship at all. They ask, 'Why is that?'" (Jane)

In addition to this discrimination, the interviewees showed resentment against the Myanmar government due to the poor living standards, lack of services and development. When asked about their level of education, all respondents stated that they had to leave school and join the labour force in order to sustain their families. Excluding the interviewed Chin refugee resettled to the US, who holds a university degree, only one interviewee went to high school, whereas most of them merely attended middle school. One respondent in particular, only went to school for one year and she is, therefore, illiterate. The frustration regarding their denied right to education is reflected in their willingness to make their children study to give them

a better future. This is also one of the motivations behind their wish to beresettled, as it will be further demonstrated in future chapters.

I argue that the collective trauma shared by the Chin diaspora is one of the main reasons why they do not want to go back to their home country, at least for the moment. Although they all miss "home" and have not forgotten Myanmar, they feel differently in regard to the idea of repatriation. Some interviewees have expressed their wish to eventually move back to Myanmar when stability and peace are restored.

"If Myanmar is safe, I prefer to go back and live with my parents because Myanmar is my country. I love my family so if safe, it's better for me to go back." (Matthew)

Some participants were scared about the idea of repatriation since their identity card had been confiscated by Myanmar authorities. They were particularly concerned about potential retaliation by the state, especially the possibility of being arrested and detained for treason. As pointed out by the Chin Refugee Committee (CSRC), according to Burmese laws, people who fled the country have broken the immigration law referred to as "illegal border cross" and are, therefore, subject to prosecution. To this day, amnesty for those repatriated has not yet been officially granted by the Myanmar government. In addition, it is not clear whether the Chin children born in Malaysia are recognised Myanmar nationality. If this was not the case, they would be *de facto* stateless. Most informants, however, excluded the possibility of going back regardless of concessions and the safety in Myanmar. One respondent when asked about both her dreams and memories about her country of origin, she said:

"I don't have good ones [memories], only bad ones. Even if Malaysia was safe, I would still go somewhere else. Cause I was a teenager there. I don't know Myanmar things." (Mary)

Although it is not possible to create a general and universal pattern due to different people's perceptions and subjectivities, here it is argued that the discrepancy between the two positions can be explained by looking at two main factors: age and family. It was observed that younger refugees are strongly against the idea of repatriation. This is possibly due to the fact that they have spent their youth in Malaysia, and they have better adapted to the host country compared to their parents. It is arguable that the Chins who fled at an earlier age have less 'lived' memories of their country of origin compared to the older generation. Their exposure to the host country happened throughout very important psychological and physical development years. The Chin ethnic identity of the younger generation is constructed through story-telling process typical of diaspora. In this regard, the Coalition of Burma Ethics Malaysia (COBEM) representative conveyed:

"It is a bitter sweet memory becoming a refugee. [..] For the new generation, they will say that Malaysia is their home. They were born and raised here. So, Myanmar it's more like a myth, more like a bed story for them." (COBEM)

Another important aspect affecting people's sentiments over repatriation is whether they still have relatives or friends living in the home country. In some cases, close relatives passed away or are no longer in touch. This is due to the difficulty in relation to keeping in contact experienced by both parties. On one hand, those who stayed in Myanmar have little or no access to phones. On the other, refugees in Malaysia often cannot afford to have mobile phones nor to pay the bills for international calls. Furthermore, the Chins who already live with their family in Malaysia feel less pressure to go back or no pressure at all if their closest relative(s), often the husband, has already been resettled to a third country, usually the US or Australia.

5.2 Temporal Place

The second main theme identified in the interview analysis is 'temporal place' which refers to the idea of Malaysia, the host country, as a temporary step in

refugees' journey. All informants, except for one, did not know about Malaysia when they ran away from Myanmar. They followed other people in the same situation and were guided by other Chins during their travel. In this sense, as a diaspora, they took advantage of 'migratory routes' developed by others before them (see Vertovec, 2000). At their arrival, they were introduced to the UNHCR's asylum-seeking procedures which imply a temporary stay in a second country, in this case Malaysia, and eventually, a resettlement to a third country. Impermanence is, therefore, inherent to asylum seekers' and refugees' lives in the Malay Peninsula. Most respondents made clear that Malaysia is not their final destination and they are not planning to stay.

"Malaysia is not our destination. I want to leave as soon as possible to the US. We don't come here to stay, to live." (Mary)

All interviewed refugees do not see themselves living in Malaysia for a long time since they are only waiting to be resettled somewhere else. This point is extremely important since, as it will be shown later on, it has huge repercussions on refugees' behaviour and perceptions. James, a Chin community leader working for ACR (Alliance of Chin Refugees) has stressed that the locals are wrong to think that refugees "will stay here [in Malaysia] forever" and referred to himself and his group as "guests". This metaphor, however, is rather problematic. As pointed out by Khosravi (2010), a guest remains a stranger and finds himself in an asymmetric power relationship with the host. This is because a guest is expected to always show gratitude to the host who tolerates his presence and decides on its length. The internalisation of being 'guests' is shared by all the interviewed community members who, in some occasions, wished to thank the Malaysian government for allowing them to stay.

This temporality is associated with refugees' feelings of anxiety and depression which derive from the waiting and not knowing what will happen to them. The Chins find themselves in a constant waiting which starts with the process of

obtaining the UNHCR refugee card. While most refugees received their card after 2 years, some are still waiting. For example, one interviewee reported that his application to be registered with the UNHCR has been on hold since 2010. The 'lucky ones' who are already in possession of the UNHCR card are not spared the anguish, as they have to wait for their card's renewal or extension. The respondents were interviewed after the release of the UNHCR decision to stop the Chins' refugee status in June 2018 and before this was withdrawn on March 14, 2019. In regard to this policy, refugees were extremely disappointed with the UN and did not understand the reason behind this decision since there were reports on violence still ongoing in Myanmar. The fear of 'not knowing' was shared by all informants: some had no idea when they would be called for a reassessment interview by the UNHCR, some were not sure whether their card would be renewed or not, and one interviewee was not familiar with the appeal process he had to follow after his case was closed.

All of them were particularly worried about having their UNHCR card withdrawn. Although Malaysia does not officially recognise UNHCR cards, they represent the only protection provided to refugees in the country. UNHCR card holders are entitled to 50% discount in hospitals and, in case of detention, the UN negotiates with authorities on their behalf. This protection is, however, limited and refugees are constantly scared and on alert. When asked about whether Malaysia was "home" for them, all informants strongly disagreed and referred to the challenges they face in the host country. Among them, they identified the lack of safety and security as the most important. In particular, all respondents complained about the police and their raids (*operasi*) which interrupt their daily and work life. One respondent reported that work shifts are irregular and his boss does not allow them to work after 6pm since it is too risky.[2] Another clearly stated:

[2] Interview with Daniel

"The most difficult things are safety and security. We always have to be on alert and check whether there is operasi or any police is coming. It doesn't matter if I am holding UNHCR card or not, they will catch." (Matthew)

Many interviewees recounted several incidents of police's misconduct, especially in relation to money extortion. For example, they mentioned that police officers would stop them and ask them to buy them drinks and in return, they would let them go without arresting them. When this happens, refugees lose precious money that they would spend on food supplies or school fees for their children. As it emerged from the interview with Amnesty International Malaysia (AIM), refugees are relatively easy to locate in the crowd because of their specific facial features and their low level of Malay (Bahasa Malaysia). This is a clear manifestation of borders transferred from territories to people. De Genova has previously stressed that borders can be identified in the bodies of migrants who wear them on their faces, and carry them on their backs (2014: 6). Similarly, Khosravi (2010) a refugee himself has stated: "The invisible border, or in Balibar's words, the 'colour bar', waylays you everywhere and nowhere. It startles, humiliates, hurts you. It pierces your soul" (p. 97). Humiliation and dignity is further undermined in case of detention. Indeed, the biggest fear for refugees is to be arrested and to be detained, either in detention centres or in prison. One interviewee who was recently released from jail has described his confinement as a deeply traumatic experience. If on one side he was scared of police officers who at times would use violence against the detainees; on the other, he confessed to be frightened by the environment he found himself in. Since he had to share his cell with drug dealers and users, he could not understand why his status was equated to those of criminals, albeit unlike them he did not commit a crime.

If home is somewhere free of surveillance (Depuis and Thorns, 1998), it is clear why Malaysia cannot be considered as such by refugees. Many avoid working or leaving the house unless absolutely necessary. This is especially the case for women refugees whose husbands go to work, while they often have to stay in the house to

look after the children. A gendered role was evident since wives tend not to work if they have kids. One respondent pointed out that she had to stop working when she got married and eventually had a baby. As pointed out by the COBEM representative, this is perceived as 'normal' since according to Chin culture, men are the leaders and 'bread winners'.

"So, they [men] have power most of the times. But then you will see, especially for refugee communities, there are many women, they think they deserve in the kitchen and to take care of the children and I think it's also because of the arrest and detention risks they don't want to take. So, they are spending most of their time in the house, lock themselves. And never get a chance to learn new skills while they are in Malaysia." (COBEM)

When asked about their current situation, the interviewed women did not question their role and justified it in various ways. One mother claimed that she had no alternative since she cannot afford to pay a babysitter; another woman stressed that she is happy and proud to be a mother and that she considers her babies as "gifts from God". One more female respondent blamed the types of jobs available to them which are often "painful" as they require considerable physical strength. This results in further social isolation for women who often do not speak any Malay since the only way to learn is at work. The language barrier, which is an issue for all refugees regardless of their country of origin, is therefore exacerbated in the case of women. As a result, they often feel less safe compared to their male counterparty. A refugee, for example, mentioned that since her knowledge of Malay is limited, she finds the police's voice "scary" and "threatening". Similarly, another woman explained:

"I feel here as a temporary place. There is no safety for us, as foreigners, as refugees here. I hold a UNHCR card but I can't speak the language. And now my husband is working so it's only me at home. If somebody comes, I don't know how to talk to them." (Elizabeth)

Refugees are also constantly victims of abuse and injustice. The fear of the police is combined with that of robbers who threat refugees in their homes or in the streets. Unfortunately, they are rarely prosecuted and, therefore, go unpunished. One respondent reported that he often knows the robber and where he lives. However, when the crime is reported, the police do not take action. Some just avoid going to police stations for fear of being arrested. The only option for the victims is "to be more careful outside"[3]. Restricted in their movement and deprived of their rights, the Chins become thus "homo sacer" (Agamben, 2005). When asked about their work experience, some interviewees pointed out that they are regularly given the hardest manual tasks and they never receive the promised salary. Due to policies in Malaysia, refugees are employed illegally, are often only working for physical cash, and have therefore no rights or safeguards for safety at workplaces. One interview pointed out that he feels that he does not have the same job opportunities as others, but he has to "do the basic work" to feed his family[4]. With no contract nor a rest day, they are often forced to work extra time without compensation.

"In a factory, any things that come in for the aluminium factory, we are the ones to carry them and all the things. And also, they promise to give me 45RM per day (equivalent to 10 USD) but when the salary comes, so less… 45 per day should be 1,000 but I only get 800, 900. And we ask why we are discriminated and we can't get what we should get." (Matthew)

Considering these forms of discrimination, it is unsurprising that Chin refugees do not feel welcomed nor that they belong to Malaysia. The common feeling of being unwanted and excluded by the host country highly affects refugees' behaviour and investment, be it social, economic or emotional. For example, when asked whether they would like for them and their children to learn Malay, most interviewees replied negatively. They expressed their preference for English due to its wide use

[3] Interview with Michael
[4] Interview with John

and practicality. Two parents stated that their kids should be taught English being a "global international language".[5] Their illegal status in the country and the total absence of rights for refugees prevent them to feel at ease and part of the host country. A young interviewee claimed that Malaysia neither recognises nor accepts refugees and, as a result, she could never become a citizen. Ironically, however, refugees in Malaysia represent the "impeccable citizen" since surveillance functions as a 'disciplining mechanism,' and requires unconditional submission (see Khosravi, 2010). The internalisation of their condition of 'illegality' is evident in this interview' extract:

"Because the UNHCR from 2019, end of December, will not take [staff] anymore, they say… so the volunteer teachers also don't want to be… 'We are illegal, right?' They don't want to help the illegal." (Catherine)

In terms of refugees' perceptions of the local population, it appears that Chin refugees have either a neutral or at times a positive image of locals. For example, a helper at CWO, a community-based learning centre, has mentioned that the neighbours have never complained about the noise made by the children who study there. She also believes that they make anonymous donations (water, food supply, second-hand clothes) which they live at the entrance of the school. Similarly, another Chin woman who works at MANGTHA, a women's programme, has maintained that some Malaysians are happy to help refugees and thus, they decide to volunteer in the centre. Notwithstanding this, all interviewed refugees admitted having no social contact or interaction with the locals. Only exception is for those working for a Malaysian boss, but even then, most refugee workers pointed out that their colleagues are mainly Indonesians, Indians or Chinese. This can be explained by the fact that these social groups have access only to low-pay jobs in the informal sector. As a result of this, Chin refugees have not created long-term relationships with Malaysians, despite living in the country for almost a decade. One interviewee

[5] Interview with John and Elizabeth

stated that the locals are "nice" but they "do not include with them".[6] In his study about the Chins, Hoffstaedter (2014) drew the same conclusions and argued that refugees live in a "non-place" (Augé 1995) where they traverse but do not engage, and are not able to build dialogical engagement. By being relegated both socially and geographically, refugees are not allowed to be constituted through space, understood as "a fundamental strategic property by which groups, nations, societies, federations, empires and kingdoms are constituted in the real world" (Isin, 2002 cited in Hoffstaedter, 2014: 876). The idea of "non-place" helps explain 'the sense of transit and transition' that pervade the Chins who perceive their life in Malaysia as a temporal place.

5.3 Dreams of Resettlement

The idea of a 'temporal place' is strictly linked to that of resettlement. When talking to Chin refugees, it was very clear that their lives were yet to start and resettlement was their main reason to persevere. Being repatriation and integration not viable solutions, resettlement has become their only option. Since Malaysia is not a safe place for them, they hope that a third country, such as the US or Australia, can become their new "home" where they will not fear arrests or persecutions by the state. From the interviews, it was evident that Chins' attitudes towards the future country and its population are extremely positive and open, for example when it comes to the idea of building relationships with their future neighbours.

"Australia is our home now. We can be friends with everyone, the Chins and Australians." (Mary)

When questioned about why resettlement was so important for them, refugees listed a few reasons, including better education, more job opportunities and actual freedom. In a place where safety and security are preserved, they believe that they can thrive and improve their lives in meaningful ways. In their eyes, it is

[6] Interview with Grace

fundamental to be legally recognised in the country and be treated the same as other citizens. Their status makes a huge difference not only for refugees themselves, in terms of dignity and access to opportunities, but also for others in the country who can appreciate their skills and respect them as equals. As a result of illegality, refugees are considered by some as worthless and as a threat for the country, both for taking locals' jobs and for increasing crime rates (see chapter 3). Displaced people hope to be seen in a better light when resettled and to pursue their dreams. This point was well explained by the COBEM representative, who was also a refugee:

"No matter how brilliant I am, how smart I am, I don't have a legal status. Where am I going to apply all my skills if I don't get a chance to get a job in Malaysia? I am not going to get a chance to teach in the school. Because I am not recognised as a legal person. If you get resettled you are… laws are protecting you as a citizen in the country so you will get a chance to become… if you dream to become an engineer, you can do it. You can pursue whatever you have in mind. You can create, you can dream as big as you want. You can still dream in Malaysia but you cannot implement it." (COBEM)

It was interesting to notice that some informants, although they had no relatives or friends in the US or Australia, and therefore no first-hand information, they still had an extremely positive idea of the third country. Unable to provide concrete facts to justify their opinion, they were describing this place as some sort of 'Promise Land'. The same enthusiasm was shared by refugees who are in touch with Chins in third countries. When asked whether those resettled mentioned anything negative, they tended to minimise it and blamed them for being ungrateful. For example, one informant reported that his friend told him 'not to come' because work is very hard and the job market is extremely competitive. His explanation for his friend's affirmation was that he was simply older and "lazy".

The reality seems rather different. The interview with the Chin resettled in the US helped me shed light on this issue. For example, she mentioned that although she

holds a bachelor's degree from Myanmar, this is not recognised in the US and thus, she would have to start from scratch at the age of 40. Finding a job is extremely hard (she has been looking for 6 months) due to high requirements in terms of experience and qualifications. The only guaranteed job for her would be at a factory, just like the one where her husband is currently working 10-12 hours a day. She lamented that this type of work is turning him into a "robot". Apart from 'predictable' problems, such as the weather and the transport system, she was struggling with a totally different culture where friends are hard to make. In addition, she was terrified about the possibility of getting sick due to the extremely expensive health care in the US. When asked whether she was in contact with anyone back in Malaysia (where she lived for 8 years), she answered that it is less frequent now:

"You know… they are still there. They are so stressed. Sometimes I feel like upset to talk to them, I am afraid to talk to them because they are so desperate. And I am here. They think I am in… that everything is pleasure, I enjoy, you know." (Faith)

Although she herself admitted that it will take some time to adapt to the new country, her description stands in sharp contrast with the picture painted by her compatriots living in Malaysia. My argument here is that the Chin refugees have constructed in their minds their country of destination and idealised it. This is the result not of a cognitive but an emotional phenomenon rooted in the unconscious, just like 'ontological security' (see Giddens, 1990). Resettlement is constructed as a myth and subject of similar processes of idealisation involving the idea of return after exile (see Khosravi, 2010). In this sense, "resettlement" has become a 'fantasy', through which "the individual can re-elaborate experiences in a mode that is safer than the one of reality and [which] may have a positive effect on normalising one's migration experience" (Bolognani, 2015: 193). In the Chins' case, since repatriation is not yet possible due to ongoing violence in Myanmar, their investment, especially economic and emotional is focused on the third country. It is also arguable that such idealisation has repercussions on refugees' attitudes and

perceptions of the host country. Their willingness to move to another country may prevent them in fully participating or at least attempting to feel part of Malaysia, which ends up being some sort of 'limbo zone'. My conclusion was supported by Faith's self-reflection:

"What I mean is that we cannot feel at home… I was really comfortable being in Malaysia but there we cannot feel at home because… it's a human being's mind, I think so. We know that… we are hoping that we have to leave someday. [..] the human being's mind makes it like I cannot really feel at home."

This is not to deny refugees' struggles and sufferings in the host country but to stress the importance of people's mindset and attitudes, and its consequences on feelings of belonging. The paramount role played by the idea of resettlement on refugees is further demonstrated by their desperation and apprehension regarding the UNHCR's decision of stopping their refugee status which would have resulted in the impossibility of being resettled. Resettlement, in this sense, is not simply an option but their only hope, a whole life they have been waiting to live, for some for almost a decade.

5.4 Community Support

A dominant theme identified in the interviews is the important concept of 'community support.' With no appropriate legal system in place, Chin refugees have managed to become, to a certain extent, self-dependent. As stated in the theoretical framework, diasporas rely on social networks between the displaced people and the society of origin. The Chin community is no exception. Indeed, community-based organisations (CBOs) in Malaysia strictly cooperate with Chins based in the home country. Among them, the most important are the Chin Human Rights Organization (CHRO) and the Chin Refugees Supporting Committee (CRSC). From the interview with the CRSC Secretary, it has emerged that the committee collects data and analysis in Myanmar and shares it to overseas Chin communities for third country advocacy support. Despite lacking funding and a

network with the international community, CRSC was able to mobilise and coordinate various meetings to put pressure on the UNHCR to stop its decision on Chins' refugee status. In particular, they engaged in data collection in the Chin state to prove that the region is not yet stable nor secure.

Advocacy practices to the UN were carried out both in Myanmar and in host countries, especially Malaysia and India. In Kuala Lumpur, political action (i.e. press conferences, meeting with representatives) was combined with different types of activities. For example, during my fieldwork, I was introduced to the "Chin Up Project" coordinated by ACR together with several NGOs, including RFTR, and R.AGE – a youth news and lifestyle platform part of The Star, the leading newspaper in Malaysia in English language. The initiative consisted of 30 short interviews, 1-2 minutes long, accessible online where Chin refugees were asked about their dreams and feelings regarding the UN decision. The purpose of the web page was two-fold. On one hand, it would inform the viewer about the issues affecting refugees and on the other, it would encourage the public to take action by sending a pre-made petition. It is arguable that the ethnic mobilisation and advocacy work carried out by the Chins, both in diaspora and in Myanmar, was successful since the UNHCR later withdrew its policy.

In addition, CBOs have managed to create a local network with international and local NGOs focused on refugee issues. Apart from the UNHCR, among international organisations, it was mentioned Asylum Access, APRRN (Asia Pacific Refugee Rights Network), and ACTS (A Call to Serve). The latter, for example, provides the community with doctors and nurses who help in clinics. The Human Rights Commission of Malaysia (SUHAKAM), the NGO TENAGANITA, and the Malaysian Bar Council were referred to as important local partners since they function as mediators between the refugee community and the government. The first two assist refugees with cases of discrimination, whereas the Bar Council often organises leadership trainings. On their part, CBOs, although they work separately, they have monthly meetings with the Myanmar

Coalition (COBEM) where major issues are discussed and addressed. The COBEM representative mentioned that decisions are not made following the principle of majority rule but rather on consensus. This is achieved by merging different ideas and finding compromises that all community leaders agree with. Regardless of the size of the ethnic group represented, the aim is to give the same decisional power to all communities so that everyone has equal status. This decision-making process is not without flaws since, as pointed out by the interviewee, often community representatives are not "on the same page" and have different approaches to the same problem.

CBOs have managed to put in place some sort of 'welfare system' which provides its members with health care, education and different types of support. This coincides with the diaspora's characteristic of being a relatively autonomous group with its own formations and associations. Malaysia hosts a myriad of CBOs, smaller ones focused on one specific sub-ethnic group and large ones offering services on a wider scale. ACR is the biggest Chin community-based organisation in Malaysia and by covering all sub-ethnic groups within the Chin people, it is better able to support their members. The Alliance has more than 18,000 members and offers services free of charge at their clinic twice a week. Their refugee school counts more than 200 students taught by teachers and volunteers. Furthermore, the organisation provides protection to community members who have been arrested and detained together with bureaucratic help for follow-up UNHCR cases. Similarly, COBEM offers the service of 'mobile clinic' which consists of coordinators and volunteer doctors travelling out to rural areas where refugees do not have access to healthcare. Medicines are distributed to the community together with other supplies, especially food and second-hand clothes.

In addition, COBEM has recently founded a group called Myanmar Ethnics Refugee Woman Organisation (MERWO) whose motto is "United in Struggle"[7]. The aim is to have a 'safe place' for women and children from refugee communities

[7] Interview with COBEM

where they can bring up their problems and talk freely without judgement. These panel discussions are extremely important to give voice to the most vulnerable of an already underprivileged group. The founders believe that sharing these issues is important in order to address them so that all members can have the same opportunities and put their skills and talents to use. Another Federation, TANMA ("strong" in Burmese language) was formed in 2010 by three Myanmar ethnic groups and offers leadership development trainings, entrepreneurial skills development programmes, English language and general knowledge classes to women. By participating in sewing courses and handicraft classes, women are empowered and encouraged to be economically independent. These organisations aim at solving the above-mentioned gendered challenges faced by female refugees in several ethnic communities.

Figure 4: Example of Handicraft

Apart from CBOs' assistance, individuals and families support each other by sharing food, money and their place to live. All interviewed refugees have reported to live together with other Chins, not only in the same area but also in the same building and flat. It was interesting to notice that several times interviewees would

refer to other Chins as "friends" and would often use the pronoun "we", although questions were asked about them as individuals. Friends also play an important role when it comes to seeking job opportunities. Most refugees pointed out that they managed to find their current or previous job due to their network. In this regard, during my participant observation, I started noticing that Chins were very keen on sharing, not only material resources but also intellectual. For example, I observed that those who had a chance to study, either in Myanmar or in Malaysia, and were therefore more educated, they would make themselves available to others. James, the community leader, has specified that when he found out about the UN policy, he chose to work for ACR and to put in practice his studies. Similarly, among Chin children, it is very common that older students teach the younger kids what they learn in refugee schools. A teacher working in a learning centre, when she realised the role played by the community, she asked her students about it:

"I asked 'why is it [the community] so important?' They said… the answer was very simple. 'What do we have besides the community? You tell me.' And they are so right. That's the only thing they are holding on to. Besides that, nothing. The government won't support. They are just waiting for the resettlement. The community is the only thing that is holding them together." (IDEAS Academy)

Drawing from my data, solidarity seems to be a cardinal principle in Chin culture. One refugee reported that it is the norm for Chins to share whatever they possess. For example, she mentioned that her family taught her to always share her belongings not only with her siblings but also with her neighbours with whom her mother would exchange vegetables or fruit. Here, I argue that solidarity and cohesion are the Chins' strengths and they are at the basis of their cooperation. As pointed out by Heidy from the NGO "Refuge for the Refugees" (RFTR), these values are not necessarily shared by all refugees since some communities from other countries do no trust each other and suffer from ethnic conflict rather than 'convergence', like in the Chins' case. Unity in the Chin community is further enhanced by the Christian faith. First, Christianity provides security and hope to

believers who are haunted by memories of their country of origin and are now facing innumerable challenges in the host country. This is an example of 'individual forms' of religion (see Vertovec, 2000) which relate to people's inner experiences and personal faith. In this sense, they can be considered as individual modes of worship and they may include devotions to religious symbols (ex. the cross) or images (ex. the Virgin Mary), and recitals of certain prayers. These are often conducted domestically and may be part of daily routines.

"Before I thought about what happened but now I pray. Now I can stay myself. Now I can control myself. Whenever I am free, I do prayer." (Jane)

Secondly, religion functions as a 'glue' for the community which finds unity and support in religious gatherings and ceremonies. Kuala Lumpur hosts a myriad of ethnic religious centres, reference points for each Chin sub-groups. Although communities conduct their own activities, they virtually belong to the same religious organisation called Myanmar Catholic Community in Malaysia (MCCM) which coordinates the main celebrations. On its turn, MCCM cooperates with international religious organisations, such as the American Baptist Church and the International Ministry, which provide financial assistance to their members.

All interviewed refugees have maintained to be strong Christian believers and to participate in activities organised by churches and catholic centres. These represent 'collective forms' of religion (see Vertovec, 2000) since they are organised and attended by one or more groups of people. They comprise, among others, masses, weddings, and funerals. The main issue, in this regard, is that churches are often located far from where observant people live and there are not enough Myanmar priests in the city. For this reason, believers mainly participate in 'dry masses' (with no communion) in religious centres which are found in neighbourhoods with high concentration of Chins. These gatherings consist of reciting prayers and several preachers giving speeches. When I took part in these events, I observed that the young generation was highly involved and often led songs, either by playing a

keyboard or by having a leading singer. Religious centres rely on regular attendants, ranging from adults to young children, and organise activities 3 to 4 times a week. When questioned about the importance of having a religious community, a catechist stated:

"If we are here together, we pray together. All the persons attend here. Even outside, if I meet them outside, we still feel like we have a family. If we don't have this, we go outside, people see only strangers. They don't talk. When we are here, as we are having prayers, we feel like brothers and sisters, even when we meet outside." (Michael)

Figure 5: Religious Chin Centre – photo taken by author

Religion, in this sense, has become a way for refugees to compensate for the social orientation lost through displacement (see Castles, 2000). The support given by the religious community is not only 'moral' but also 'practical'. The catechist has pointed out that donations are collected for various reasons. First, they are used to pay the rent of catholic centres. Second, the money collected is spent for community members in great need or for emergencies. Two main examples illustrate this point. In case of a baby delivery, donations are needed to pay hospital fees (around 1300

USD) which are not affordable by refugees. In addition, if a community member is arrested, money will be dedicated to judicial practices or to hire a lawyer in court.

It is evident that the Chins living in Malaysia have learnt to come together and help each other in a hostile place. This thesis argues that these circumstances have resulted in the Chin community to be better united in Malaysia compared to Myanmar. One reason could be that in Myanmar, interactions between people from different towns or villages are extremely limited. This is due to several factors. One interviewee, for example, reported that poor infrastructure hinders travels to other areas which are often not accessible by means of transport, and when they are, transports are scarce and not reliable. For example, she recounted how to go to the nearest biggest town where she could use a phone, it would take her four hours, of which two had to be completed on foot.[8] Interaction is further hampered by the wide range of languages spoken by different sub-ethnic Chin groups, which comprises more than 40 types. The diasporic Chin community was able to overcome both obstacles. On one hand, Malaysia, and especially Kuala Lumpur, are much more developed in terms of urban infrastructure and offer better opportunities for refugees to keep in contact, particularly since they tend to live in the same areas. On the other hand, they managed to enhance communication by improving their knowledge of the official Myanmar language, Burmese. The latter is only taught in government schools but not practised by most Chins who usually interact with each other in their own dialects. Therefore, Burmese has become the main language of communication in Malaysia not only among all refugees from Myanmar, but also among Chins who come from different townships. The community strengthening taking place in Malaysia is evident in this extract:

"When we came to Malaysia, we become like brothers. We might be diverse, wedidn't know each other in Myanmar but we come to Malaysia, we come from the same country. So, we feel like 'Oh we are brothers!' compared to other foreigners." (James, ACR)

[8] Interview with Jane

It is important to stress that, although the national language is now widely used by the Chins, when refugees were asked about how they would like to be referred to as, they firmly defined themselves as "Chin" or at most "Myanmar Chin", never as "Burmese". By doing so, they showed a strong identity awareness by specifying that they did not want to be identified with the Burmese majority. One participant, in particular, showed explicit irritation when recounting an incident where a local took him for a Burmese and implied he was responsible for the ongoing persecutions against Rohingyas. Thus, Burmese functions for the Chins as a boundary in the process of collective identification. This relates to both 'belonging' and 'identity'. As pointed out by Graf, the two "deal with questions about the self and who we are as a person, about inclusion and exclusion and about processes of constructing boundaries and hierarchies" (2018: 118). Therefore, by excluding the Burmese, the Chins reinforce their identity and group belonging.

It seems that for the Chins, their identity goes beyond ethnicity and stretches to national boundaries. This point is supported by the most important celebration commemorated by the Chins, called 'Chin National Day'. This occasion takes place yearly on February and it is celebrated by all diasporic Chin communities around the world. The first 'Chin National Day' was celebrated in 1948 and represented the "expression of the new social and political determination of the Chin people" (Sakhong, 2003: 225). At the time, the event marked the transition from the traditional way of life to a new modern society. According to Sakhong (2003), today this official holiday serves to recognise the distinctive national identity of the Chins and to strengthen their sense of oneness. When I attended the 'Chin National Day' in Kuala Lumpur, it was interesting to notice that the ceremony opened with a speech on the history of the Chins, especially the democratic movements organised by the Chin party in the late 40s. It was also mentioned that the Chins participated in the pro-democracy movements on August 8, 1988, known as the 8888 Uprisings. These historical references helped depict the Chins as a democratic and progressive society, distinct from other groups in the country.

The ceremony was dense of cultural symbols, such as traditional dresses, songs and dances. The role played by religion was evident throughout the event. Among the guest speakers, two bishops were invited to the stage to preach. Collective prayers were recited in between performances, interposing songs and parades. In this sense, religion clearly stood out as a cultural feature of Chin society (see Castles, 2000). Furthermore, it is worth noting that the audience was rather young, with a high attendance of school students (10-18 years old). The younger generation was likely the main target of the event and the subject of another 'story-telling' process aimed at constructing and reinforcing their Chin identity. In this sense, it can be argued that the 'Chin National Day' functions as a 'homesteading practice' aimed at creating a sense of familiarity and community (Sylvester, 1994).

Figure 6: Chin National Day (15/02/2019) – photo taken by author

The strengthening of identity and home-building process are not exclusive to the Chins but were observed in other refugees coming from Myanmar. From the interviews with community leaders, it emerged that different ethnic groups 'back home' do not trust each other and cooperation is virtually non-existent. The hope in Malaysia is to solve these ethnic divisions and work towards a common interest

and a common goal. In order to create more unity, COBEM, for example, organises youth programmes twice a year:

"We tell them [the children] 'See, in Myanmar we don't get a chance, the ethnic leaders don't really get a chance to meet up and maybe that is one of the reasons why the country is still in conflict against the government.' Because the government is divided. We can work together in Malaysia with ethnic community leaders and we can carry out our generation, together. We are all human beings. We need a society, a community to help each other, to make the community a better place." (COBEM)

During the programme, children are asked to participate in team building games and engage in bonding activities aimed at strengthening the heterogeneous group. In addition, the coalition arranges lectures where the youth is taught about the history of Myanmar. This project can be considered on one side, as a practice of 'community building' and on the other, as an attempt to construct a 'collective memory'. Both are part of processes of identity construction (Wang, 2018) and once again, involve the young generations.

The community plays a fundamental role also for Chin refugees who have been resettled in third countries. For example, Faith has reported that in her city in the US there is a 'Chin centre' that provides guidance and support for labour-related issues. The centre functions as an agency where Chins can leave their curriculum to be distributed. The person will then be notified when a job becomes available. The help given to community members reassures not only the people already resettled but also those who wish to move there. In this sense, Chins living in Malaysia feel close and part of the same community as Chins living in another nation-state. This is an example of 'imagined community' typical of diasporas. They are "imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (Anderson, 1991: 6).

"If I resettled to other countries I'll be hopeless. If I go to the US, there is so many Chins. I can get some help. At least maybe if I don't know how it works, they can show me. They will teach me how to." (Joseph)

The diaspora community is thus source of hope and safety for its members which find a collectivity they identify with and that provides them with essential services and support. Community is where emotional attachment resides in for the Chins, where they feel safe and 'at home'. It is here that feelings of belonging materialise and are naturalised (Yuval-Davis, 2006). Hence, the "home" that was 'broken' with displacement is not to be found in a defined territory but rather in a specific group, the community.

5.5 Steps Forward

The previous sections were concerned with the issues preventing Malaysia from being a "home" for refugees. This last part discusses instead the possibility of a reversal of the situation by looking at potential measures to be taken by various stakeholders. Here, it will be argued that Malaysia could become a safe and secure place for refugees and asylum seekers if a set of multi-layered actions was to be implemented. First and foremost, a legal framework must be put in place in order to guarantee the safety and protection of human rights of displaced people. A major step forward for Malaysia would be to sign the 1951 UN Convention and its 1967 Protocol. This would immediately stop the risk of arrests and detention for refugees whose safety would be therefore guaranteed. Consequently, their feelings of anxiety and oppression would decrease substantially. The ratification would show that the Malaysian government is finally taking on the responsibility to protect refugees, which at moment only the UNHCR is bearing, and to a lesser extent CBOs. Furthermore, signing the UN Convention would result in the official recognition of the UN Refugee Agency which, to this day, operates based on "an unspecified goodwill agreement" made during the crisis of Vietnamese boat people in the late 70s (see Floyd et al., 2015).

In order to be effective, the ratification should be combined with the formulation of new laws aimed to create a solid juridical structure that authorities, lawyers and civil society can refer to. A positive change has been promised by the Pakatan Harapan, the coalition that won the elections in May 2018. Indeed, their election manifesto stated "[..] the Pakatan Harapan Government will legitimise their [the refugees'] status by providing them with UNHCR cards and ensuring their legal right to work. Their labour rights will be at par with locals and this initiative will reduce the country's need for foreign workers and lower risk of refugees from becoming involved in criminal activities and underground economies. Providing them with jobs helps refugees to build new lives without subjecting them to oppression" (Promise 35, p. 78 in the Pakatan Harapan Manifesto). This point was emphasised by the Malaysian MPs invited to give a speech in the 'Chin National Day' last February 2019. The speakers pointed out that the right to work together with that to education should be prioritised. On one hand, the opportunity to work legally would allow refugees to be insured and be subject to fewer discriminations. A better pay and overall treatment at work would result in the improvement not only of living standards but also of feelings of acceptance by refugees who would presumably feel valued and respected by the state. On the other hand, attending government schools will contribute to a better integration of children who will have a chance to study together with Malaysians and learn the local language. The formal recognition of refugees will have implications not only for the group itself but also for the host population who would possibly feel more encouraged to accept and support the displaced. The representative of a refugee school stressed:

"Refugees themselves, nobody can hear them. Local people will only act if the government is helping them. We have seen that the local people are not too much into giving funds because they are not recognised by the government as refugees." (IDEAS Academy)

However, I argue that this should not be a top-down process where the government imposes measures and policies to its citizens. This point is supported by the riots

organised in Malaysia, last December 2018, in opposition to the ratification of the UN racial discrimination treaty, ICERD (International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination). As a result, the Prime Minister, Mahatir Mohmad, had to withdraw his promise to ratify it. This event is undoubtedly another example of politicisation of ethnic issues led by opposition political parties and of open resistance of Malays to the idea of losing their privileges. Although this problem has deep roots (see chapter 2), this incident exemplifies the possible backlash to measures or conventions the population disagrees with. Therefore, in order to achieve a concrete change and for laws to be effective, awareness should be raised first.

When it comes to refugee issues, AIM suggested that in addition to the usual public forums or conferences, the potential of social media platforms to spread information to a huge amount of people should be utilised further. For example, he advanced the idea of creating awareness campaigns on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. Joint efforts between NGOs and the UNHCR itself were presented as a possible solution to reach out to people *en masse*. According to Heidy from RFTR, the main target should be the young generations since they are less affected by social constructions and stereotypes, thus their mindset is more prone to change. She explained how her organisation organises sessions involving both local and refugee children. The aim is to show the youth that refugees are people just like any other and their status does not define them. These activities have the potential to help move away from those binaries of good/bad and legal/illegal (see Don and Lee, 2014).

Another way is to promote products made by refugee groups so that when people buy them, they are aware that they as well are skilful and represent a resource for the country. For example, RFTR arranges so-called 'social projects' where refugees produce goods to be sold to the local community, going from paintings to chilly

pastes. This allows them to "share their voices and their stories".[9] These forms of empowerment are especially important for the refugees who feel like the host country is giving them something in return, not only in terms of money but also of skills. The interviewed community leader has pointed out that Malaysia offers a place for resourceful community members to use their potential and acquire new competences. However, a pro-active approach as well as self-initiative are necessary.

"I always tell them 'Look at me, I changed my life already with education. Learn something. If you are working in a restaurant, learn how to cook Chinese food. So, in future, you can open a shop, open a restaurant on your own. Invest some money. Save some money for your future. Think about which place it's going to be the best for you to open a business. We have to advise them. Or construction, 'Learn how to construct a house. Learn from your boss, from your manager. Ask them. Nobody will refuse to tell you. Just ask them.' That's what I tell them." (James, ACR)

Lastly, this 'home-becoming process' could benefit from international support and pressure toward the Malaysian government. On one hand, the international community should condemn Malaysia's current violations of refugees' human rights and ask for accountability. On the other, financial assistance is needed to address the lack of capacity of many organisations, including the UNHCR, whose efficiency is slowed down by the insufficient number ofstaff, which, as previously mentioned, currently deals with more than 170,000 refugees and asylum seekers only in Malaysia. Besides being a donor and operator organisation, the UNHCR is the only authorised body to register refugees. Suggestions were made regarding the idea of creating a new system of registration involving other partner NGOs which could help with assessment interviews and compiling cases.[10] This would accelerate the lengthy asylum-seeking procedures and process cases of those who have been waiting for years to be registered.

[9] Interview with Heidy, RFTR
[10] Interview with AIM

6. Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to investigate the social dynamics within a particular refugee group, the Chins, living in a hostile country, Malaysia. Due to the nature of the study, an ethnographic approach was combined with participant observation in order to learn about and from the people through engagement with participants in their natural environment. The research study was therefore based predominantly on primary data collected in the field. The afore-mentioned dynamics were analysed by applying the concept of "diaspora" to the Chin people who fled from Myanmar as a result of social and religious discriminations perpetuated by the government and its army. It was shown how the Chins can be considered as a diaspora due to, among others, their strong identity awareness, their local and international networks and their autonomy, albeit relative, in the host country. For example, it was mentioned how diasporic communities are in close contact with each other and with those who have not left the "homeland". Together they work on advocacy for refugee issues and exchange data on the current situation in their respective countries. Particular attention was given to Chins' modes of organisation in Malaysia which include community-based organisations and religious centres. It was demonstrated how to respond to socio-economic and gendered challenges, this group has adopted specific coping mechanisms based on principles of unity and solidarity.

Displacement has resulted in the loss of "home", which for most Chins cannot be found neither in Myanmar nor in Malaysia. In this regard, the idea of "collective trauma" helped me explain why they cannot and do not wish to go back. At the same time, due to the complex socio-cultural context and the aggressive immigration policies, the country they have been living in for years does not provide them with security and safety. Their hope resides instead in the possibility of resettlement to a third country made possible by the UNHCR. This thesis argues that this has implications on refugees' behaviour since they perceive Malaysia as a temporal place which they will eventually leave behind. From the interviews, it

emerged that the country of destination is often idealised and pictured as a 'Promise Land'. Thus, the argument is that unlike other diasporas, the Chins have constructed a myth of resettlement rather than one of 'return'.

The role of the community was analysed in relation to feelings of belonging and the support provided to its members. On one hand, the community – in the form of community-based organisations – has proved to be indispensable in terms of basic services (i.e. education, protection, clinics) offered to refugees and denied by the Malaysian government. On the other, community is the reference point for individuals in need of job, financial help or even food. It was noticed that this spirit of sharing together with their organisational skills distinguish the Chins from other groups and have allowed them to survive. These combined with the specific Malaysian context have resulted in the strengthening of their ethnic consciousness. The latter has developed through the exposure to a new diverse environment which urged them to unite and better communicate. In this regard, it was highlighted how Burmese has become their language of communication and it is now widely used by Chins who speak different dialects and would not otherwise be able to understand each other.

The identification of the factors hindering Malaysia from being a "home" for refugees was integrated with the discussion of the possibility for the country to become one. For this purpose, potential steps in this direction were outlined and supported by considerations made by civil society representatives and personal critical conclusions. This thesis aimed to identify the daily difficulties encountered by the Chin refugees and the so-called 'structural problems' related to the legal and political system of Malaysia. This, however, was combined with the purpose of shedding light on a diaspora group's actions and strategies in response to such matters. In this sense, the study should be placed together with other literature that attempts to move away from the common 'victimisation' and 'blaming' of refugees and pays attention to their agency as social actors without, of course, denying their sufferings. Thus, this paper follows the humanist tradition keen on giving voice "to

the other" (Guest et al., 2012) and adequately portray the struggle of the human condition. The main contribution of this thesis was to provide an in-depth exploration of refugee issues which are part of the wider phenomenon of migration. Studying dynamics related to displacement is essential to truly grasp and, consequently, address its problems. Furthermore, a proper understanding of these social processes will serve as a basis to build engagement and communication between all stakeholders, especially governments, civil society and displaced people.

As a final remark, future research could focus on host populations' responses and perceptions of refugees. As pointed out by Sørensen (1997), the host population should be included in analyses of displacement since they are also part of the process and are as well involved in the re-construction and re-interpretation of places and identities. The concept of "homelessness" may be applied to cases where people have not been relocated but have lost the "home" they knew. This is particularly relevant for situations where locals live in the same neighbourhoods as so-called "urban refugees" and with whom they interact. Thus, topic of analysis could be long-time residents' reactions to newcomers, be they emotional or psychological, and the related root causes.

7. References

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8. Appendices

Appendix I – Tables Interviews

a) Table of interviewed refugees*

Name	Sex	Age (yo)	Marital status	Level of education	Occupation	Time in Malaysia	UNHCR card
Michael	M	31	Married / no kids	Middle school	Catechist	9 years	No
Daniel	M	28	Unmarried	Middle school	Shop Assistant	7 years	Yes
Jane	F	38	Divorced / 4 kids	Illiterate	Jobless	9 years	Yes
Matthew	M	38	Unmarried	Middle school	Plantation	7 years	Yes
Mary	F	22	Unmarried	Primary school	MANGTHA Coordinator	9 years	Yes
Grace	F	27	Married / 2 kids	Middle school	MANGTHA Volunteer	7 years	Yes
Eva	F	26	Married / 1 kid	Middle school	CWO Volunteer	6 months	No
Catherine	F	29	Married	High school	CWO teacher	5 years	Yes
Joseph	M	37	Unmarried	Middle school	Jobless	11 years	Yes (now rejected)
John + Elizabeth	M + F	39 40	Married / 2 kids	Primary school	Shop Worker + Jobless	10 years	Yes
Faith	F	40	Married / no kids	University	Jobless	8 years	Resettled

**Names are fictitious. These were chosen since Chin refugees are often given Christian names after being baptised.*

b) Table of interviewees from Civil Society (CS)

Name organisation	Type of organisation
COBEM (Coalition of Burma Ethnics Malaysia)	CBO (Community-based organisation)
ACR (Alliance of Chin Refugees)	CBO (Community-based organisation)
CRSC (Chin Refugees Supporting Committee)	Refugee Committee
AIM (Amnesty International Malaysia)	International NGO
IDEAS Academy	Learning Centre
RFTR (Refuge for the Refugees)	Local NGO

Appendix II – Interview Guides

a) Interview guide for refugees

Personal data (demographic)

1. What's your name?
2. How old are you?
3. How many members are there in your family?
4. What is your level of education? (primary, secondary school, high school)
5. Do you speak Burmese?

Livelihood

6. How long have you been living in Malaysia? With who?
7. Why did you choose Malaysia?
8. Where do you live and with how many people? Are they all your relatives?
9. What is your job? Working hours?
10. How are you treated at work by your employer and co-workers?
11. Do you have a UNHCR card?

Challenges

12. What are the hardest challenges you encounter every day? Where? How often?
13. How does the situation make you feel?

Community-based organisation

14. What is the role played by Chin organisations for you?

15. How important are they for you?

Integration and acceptance

16. Are there locals in the area you live? How many? (geographical distribution)
17. If yes: what's your relationship with them?
18. When do you have contact with the locals generally?
19. Have you ever been subject of discrimination by them?
20. Do you speak Malay? How well?
21. Would you like for you (and your kids) to learn Malay? (language proficiency)

Homelessness

22. Do you miss home? What in particular? Would you like to go back?
23. Would you rather stay here? Why?
24. Are you in touch with anyone in Myanmar?
25. Have you had a chance to see them since you left?
26. Are you in touch with anyone who managed to be resettled?

Identity (re)construction

27. Did you change any (cultural) habit since you've lived here?
28. Do you think Malaysia is affecting you in any other way?

b) Interview guide for resettled refugee

Personal data (demographic)

1. What's your name?
2. How old are you?
3. How many members are there in your family?

US-resettlement

4. How long did you wait before being resettled?
5. How long have you been living in the US? With who?
6. If she has kids: are they going to school?
7. Are you working? Where? Was it easy to find?
8. Did you adjust easily? Did you make new local friends?
9. Has the US met your expectations? Did you find what you were looking for?
10. Did you encounter new challenges now living in the US?
11. Can you say the that US is your new "home" now?
12. Do you feel part of the US?

Identity (re)construction

13. If you could, would you want the American citizenship? Why?
14. Did you change any (cultural) habit since you've lived there?

15. If you have to describe yourself, would you present yourself as a Burmese or as a Chin?

Malaysia

16. If you compare it to the time in Malaysia, what is different now?
17. What was the main problem about Malaysia?

Chin-liaisons

18. Do you know many Chin living in the same area as you?
19. If yes: do you meet them often? In what circumstances?
20. I have heard there was the Chin National Day: did you have a chance to go?
21. Are you in touch with people in Myanmar?
22. Are you in touch with people in Malaysia?
23. Have you been able to go back to Myanmar? Would you like to?

c) Interview guide for community leaders

Background information

1. What is your position in the organisation?
2. For how long have you been working for …?

Organisation

3. What's the history of this organisation? When and why was it founded?
4. What are its main functions?
5. What are the main services offered to the public? (ex. clinic)
6. How many people rely on this organisation?
7. What is your main source of funding? (membership, donors)
8. What is the relation you have with the Malaysian government?
9. Do you collaborate with any other Chin and/or non-Chin organisation?

Belonging/integration

10. How do you think living in Malaysia has affected Chin people?
11. For example, regarding culture and society?
12. Would you say local integration is needed for the Chins to improve their situation in Malaysia? Why?
13. What should this process involve?
14. Where do you think is home for the Chins? How would you define "home"?
15. What about the kids who are born here: do they have an ID?
16. Do you think the Chins want to go back to Myanmar or would rather stay here?
17. How would you define the attitude of Malaysians towards refugees?
18. How could it change? (i.e. awareness)

Questions/suggestions

19. What (else) do you think it should change in order to solve the current situation?
20. What are the needed steps?
21. What would you ask Myanmar government?
22. What do you think it's the main problem with the UNHCR decision to stop the refugee status of the Chins?
23. Is there anything you wish you could change (regrets)?

d) Interview guide for AIM

Background information

1. What is the organisation you work and your position in it?
2. For how long have you been working in the field?

Organisation

3. How would you describe the work carried out by AI in Malaysia?
4. Does the organisation offer any direct/indirect services to refugees?
5. What are the main challenges the organisation is currently facing?
6. Do you think Malaysia is a special case for AI's work compared to other countries? Why?

Challenges/Acceptance

7. What do you think are the main challenges faced by refugees in Malaysia?
8. Do you think awareness should be raised about refugees in Malaysia? Why? If yes, how?
9. How would you define the attitude of Malaysians' majority towards refugees?
10. Do you think factors such as the 'society system' or 'religion' in Malaysia affect acceptance of "outsiders" like refugees by the host community?
11. What other factors can you think of, if any?
12. Do you think if Malaysia signed the 1951 Convention something would change? Why?

Home/UNHCR

13. Have you heard about the Chin refugees before?
14. What do you think are the main implications for the recent termination of refugee status by the UNHCR of the Chins?
15. Do you think there is the need for 'local integration' for refugees like the Chins? If so, why and in what ways?
16. Could/should Malaysia become a "home" for refugees? Why?
17. If yes, how? What would the result be?

Civil society

18. How important do you think community-based organisations are for supporting/improving refugees' situation?
19. What about civil society? What role does it play?
20. Do you think the two (community-based organisations and NGOs) should cooperate (more or less)? Or should they work independently with similar goals but different approaches?
21. An NGO founder has recently said: "We will start empowering civil society organisation on the ground to be self-sustainable". Is this desirable?
22. If yes, what do you think it's the best way to achieve it?
23. Do you have any final recommendation/suggestion for the society in general, the government or NGOs to address the current situation of refugees in Malaysia?

e) Interview guide for RFTR

Background information

1. What is the organisation you work and your position in it?
2. For how long have you been working in the field?

Organisation

3. What's the history of this organisation? When and why was it founded?
4. What are its main functions and services offered?
5. For how long have you been working with the Chins? In what ways?
6. How many people rely on this organisation?
7. What is your main source of funding? (membership, donors)
8. What is the relation you have with the Malaysian government?

Integration/acceptance

9. How would you define the attitude of Malaysians towards refugees?
10. How do you think awareness could be raised about refugees in Malaysia?
11. Do you think factors such as the 'society system' or 'religion' in Malaysia affect acceptance of "outsiders" like refugees by the host community?
12. Do you think if Malaysia signed the 1951 Convention something would change?

Home

13. In a press conference, you mentioned that "education" will make them feel like this is home. How should we do that? In school? What about the older generation?
14. How can Malaysia become a "home" for refugees?
15. How would you define "home"?

16. Do you think there is the need for 'local integration' for refugees like the Chins? If so, why and in what ways?

UNHCR

17. What do you think are the main implications for the termination of refugee status by the UNHCR for the Chins?

Steps forward

18. In an article, you said: "we need to stop depending on the UNHCR. We will start empowering civil society organisations on the ground to be self-sustainable". What do you think it's the best way to do that?
19. How important do you think civil society is for the improvement of refugee situation?

f) Interview guide for learning centre

Background information

1. For how long have you been working in the field?
2. What is the organisation you work for and your position in it?

Organisation

3. What's the history of this organisation? When and why was it founded?
4. What are its main functions and services offered to refugees?
5. How many people rely on this organisation?
6. What are the main challenges the organisation is currently facing?

Challenges/acceptance

7. What do you think are the main challenges faced by refugees in Malaysia?
8. How would you define the attitude of Malaysians towards refugees?
9. Do you think awareness should be raised about refugees in Malaysia? Why? And if yes, how?
10. Do you think factors such as the 'society system' or 'religion' in Malaysia affect acceptance of refugees by the host community?
11. What other factors can you think of, if any?
12. Do you think if Malaysia signed the 1951 Convention something would change?

Home/UNHCR

13. Have you heard about the Chin refugees before?
14. What do you think are the main implications for the termination of refugee status by the UNHCR of the Chins?
15. Do you think there is the need for 'local integration' for refugees like the Chins? If so, why and in what ways?
16. Could/should Malaysia become a "home" for refugees? Why?
17. If yes, how? What would the result be?

Steps forward

18. How important do you think civil society is for supporting/improving refugees' situation?
19. To what extent do you think community-based organisations and NGOs should cooperate with civil society? Or should they work independently with similar goals but different approaches?
20. An NGO founder has recently said "We should start empowering civil society organisations on the ground to be self-sustainable". Is this desirable?
21. If yes, what do you think it's the best way to achieve it?
22. Do you have any final recommendation/suggestion for the society in general, the government or NGOs to address the current situation of refugees in Malaysia?

g) Interview guide for CRSC

Background information

1. For how long have you been working with CRSC? How did you start and why?

Organisation

2. What does your position as a secretary of Chin Refugees Supporting Committee entail? What is your role?
3. What's the history of this organisation? When and why was it founded?
4. What are its main functions? Do you offer direct services to the community?
5. What is the work you do with CSOs and political parties in Myanmar?

International cooperation

6. Do you collaborate with any other organisation, Chin and non-Chin, in Myanmar or abroad (ex. Malaysia)? If so, in what ways?
7. Did you manage to form an international network and get any support from the international community?

Challenges

8. What are the hardest challenges CRSC is facing at the moment?
9. What is the relation you have with Myanmar government? Is there any dialogue?
10. Do you do any work in terms of advocacy? If so, how?
11. What do you think it's the main problem with the UNHCR decision to stop the refugee status of the Chins?

Steps forward

12. What do you think it's needed to solve the current situation? What are the steps?

Appendix III

Lund University
Department of Political Science
SIMV07: Master's Thesis Course
Michela Pittalis 950226-8841

Consent form

- I agree to participate in a research study about 'Refugees in Malaysia: Challenges and Community-Based Coping Mechanisms' conducted by Michela Pittalis, Master of Science in Global Studies at Lund University, Sweden. The data collected will be used as a part of her master's thesis.
- I have been given sufficient information about this study and I understand my role. The purpose of my participation as an interviewee has been explained to me and is clear.
- My participation as an interviewee is completely voluntary and I am free to withdraw at any time for any reason or no reason and without there being any negative consequences.
- Participation involves being interviewed for approximately 30-45 minutes. I agree for the interview to be tape-recorded. In case I do not wish for the interview to be taped, the researcher will only take notes.
- Should I not wish to answer any particular question(s), I am free to decline.
- My confidentiality as a participant in this study will remain secure. I may request that pseudonyms will be assigned to me and my organisation. Therein, specific identifying details associated with it will be obscured prior to publication.
- I consent to be quoted in the products of the research.
- I understand that I am free to contact the researcher to seek further clarification and information at mi2865pi-s@student.lu.se or mikela.pittalis@gmail.com.

- I have read and understood the points and statements of this form. I have had all my questions answered to my satisfaction.
- I have received a copy of this consent form co-signed by the interviewer.

Interviewee's Name	Interviewee's Signature	Date

Interviewer's Name	Interviewee's Signature	Date