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Quiet Refusal: Somatic Resistance and the Politics of Belonging in Phuket Baba Foodspaces

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Abstract

How do bodies resist identity labels that do not fit—and what can ethnographic attention to somatic responses reveal about the limits of heritage branding? This paper examines what happens in the pause: the somatic moment when the body registers a misfit between an externally applied identity label and an internally held sense of belonging. Drawing on six months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Phuket Province from March to August 2024, it traces how working-class Phuket Baba food practitioners navigate the increasing application of "Peranakan"—a regional heritage label strongly associated with the Straits Chinese world and now broadly circulated across Southeast Asia—to their local foodways, rituals, and cultural practices. The paper introduces *"quiet refusal"* as a form of somatic infrapolitics: bodily micro-resistances that operate beneath overt confrontation. Building on Scott's concept of infrapolitics (1990), Ahmed's work on affective economies (2014), and Csordas's somatic modes of attention (1993), the analysis demonstrates that identity resistance in Phuket does not rely primarily on argumentation, but on embodied knowledge inscribed through generations of somatic memory, ecological attunement, and cooking practice. Three ethnographic vignettes anchor the analysis: an uneasy pause in a coffee-shop conversation; pepper as a bodily archive of mining-era labour; and a *popiah* maker whose hands slowed before his words corrected. The paper finds that quiet refusal operates through two field-derived somatic mechanisms—*sadung* ("สะดุ้ง", the startle) and *chaa-ngak* ("ชะงัก", the bodily hitch)—which register identity misfit before conscious articulation. These scenes reveal that belonging, for Phuket Baba practitioners, is not only a category to be claimed but a practice to be inhabited, known first in the body and defended there.

Keywords: Quiet refusal, Somatic infrapolitics, Embodied identity, Phuket Baba, Foodspaces, Heritage tourism

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Introduction: The pause before words

The 2024 Phuket Peranakan Festival filled the narrow streets of Old Town with colour. More than 1,500 participants moved through the quarter in kebaya and sarong, garments associated with Thailand's multinational UNESCO nomination of kebaya alongside Brunei Darussalam, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore. Lights lined the shophouse facades. Tourists packed the pavements. The parade was not large by the standards of other cities, but on these streets, it was enough to feel total.

I met one of my key informants, a Phuket-born writer. We stood a little apart from the procession, watching. I remarked that the atmosphere felt festive, that everyone seemed to be enjoying it. He nodded, then looked at me for a moment before speaking:

"But we are Baba. Not Peranakan," he said, his eyes moving across the parade. *"What is there to be proud of here? This is not ours."*

This paper is about what happened in that moment. Not the verbal correction—that is clear enough and has been documented elsewhere—but the somatic event that preceded it: the moment when the body registered a misfit before the mind had words to name it. Before he spoke, something had already shifted. He nodded—not in agreement, but in the way a body buys time when it knows what is coming will not be simple. His eyes travelled across the parade before his words did. The knowledge arrived first as felt wrongness rather than articulated disagreement.

The paper asks: how does identity resistance operate somatically—in the body's pauses, flinches, and continuation of practice—when an externally imposed heritage label does not align with locally held senses of belonging? And what does this somatic register reveal about the limits of top-down heritage branding? I call this quiet refusal: a form of somatic infrapolitics that extends Scott's (1990) concept of everyday resistance into the register of bodily knowledge, resistance conducted below the threshold of open confrontation through the body's ordinary practices rather than through its exceptional gestures.

Several key terms require definition at the outset. Somatic infrapolitics refers to bodily micro-resistances that operate beneath overt confrontation—refusal as it appears before language arrives. Sedimented field memory denotes embodied knowledge inscribed through generations of practice within specific ecological and economic conditions. Somatic archive names a body's accumulated calibrations—what the right amount of pepper feels like, what warmth from inside means—formed through repetition rather than instruction.

The problem, then, is not whether *"Peranakan"* is historically meaningful, but what happens when a historically available label fails to settle in bodies formed through another field. To understand why this label provokes such a response requires a brief account of how *"Baba"* and *"Peranakan"* came to occupy such different positions in Phuket's identity field.

The Baba–Peranakan contestation: A brief history

Chinese migration to Phuket can be read through two analytically important pathways, each producing a different relationship to the label *"Peranakan"* (Skinner, 1957; Wang, 1988). The first passed through the Straits Settlements—Penang, Melaka, and Singapore—where migrants

encountered established Straits Chinese society, Malay-inflected languages, and mercantile cultures (Khoo, 2009; Rudolph, 1998; Skinner, 1996). Some of those who eventually reached Phuket via this route may have carried at least partial familiarity with what would later be named *"Peranakan."*

The second route, which became more systematic under the governorship of Khaw Sim Bee (Phraya Ratsadanupradit, 1856–1913), bypassed the Straits altogether: ships sailed directly from Fujian to Phuket, carrying large numbers of workers into a mining frontier where Hokkien speech, tin economies, and Siamese administrative practices set the coordinates of everyday life from the outset (Tunpaisan, 1991; Kiatiskul, 1991). For many of these direct-route migrants and their descendants, *"Peranakan"* was not an inherited embodied reference point.

The institutional context deepened this divergence. In the British Straits Settlements, *"Peranakan"* and *"Straits-born Chinese"* became socially and administratively legible categories within a plural integration model (Rudolph, 1998; Wang, 1976). In Siam, by contrast, the state tended to sort Chinese immigrants through a sharper binary between *"Chinese"* and *"Thai,"* a framework reinforced by the Siamese Nationality Act of 1913 (Skinner, 1957, 1960). There was little administrative space for an autonomous *"Baba"* or *"Peranakan"* category to crystallise. Instead, *"Baba"* persisted as an intimate, local name—spoken in kitchens, rituals, and everyday life rather than written into registries or policy documents (Skinner, 1960; Tejapira, 1992; Khoo, 2009).

The contemporary tension surfaced most explicitly during the early twenty-first century. When community leaders from Phuket were invited to participate in a Baba-Nyonya symposium through the emerging Thai Peranakan network, they encountered a straits-centred framework that did not match their embodied experience: meals without pork in Muslim-majority settings, standardised kebaya that did not resemble Phuket women's lace blouses, and a Malay-derived terminology that signalled *"not us"* (Fukthongphol, 2024). At the 2002 Baba Convention in Singapore, Phuket delegates reportedly declared that in Phuket, mixed-blood children were called *"Baba only"*—not Peranakan (Fukthongphol, 2024). Upon returning, the initial intention to establish a *"Baba Phuket Association"* (C02, personal communication, 2024) was eventually redirected toward the formation of the Thai Peranakan Association (established 2005–2006), a decision that generated a rift persisting for over two decades between those who insisted on *"Baba"* as the only legitimate self-designation and those who accepted *"Peranakan"* as a useful supplement for regional networking and heritage visibility.

This contestation is the landscape into which that opening moment falls. When a researcher remarks that the parade feels festive—and a Phuket-born Baba writer turns to say, *"But we are Baba. Not Peranakan. What is there to be proud of here?"*—the words do not arrive as neutral correction. They arrive carrying roughly twenty years of institutional friction, a century of divergent state classifications, and, for bodies formed through mining-district ecologies and Hokkien-rooted kitchens, the felt weight of a label that was never fully their own. The quiet refusal this paper traces is inseparable from this history.

Situating the study: Heritage, identity, and the body

This paper draws on three intersecting bodies of scholarship: the infrapolitics of everyday resistance, the anthropology of embodiment and somatic knowledge, and recent empirical work on heritage tourism and Peranakan/Baba identity in Southeast Asia. Rather than treating these as separate domains, I read them through a somatic lens—an approach that treats the body as a primary site of knowing, remembering, and belonging (Csordas, 1993).

Heritage tourism and the limits of labelling

Recent scholarship on heritage tourism has increasingly attended to the gap between institutional branding and community experience. Timothy and Ron (2013) show how heritage cuisines are entangled with questions of identity, image, authenticity, and change, while Cohen's work on commoditisation helps explain how tourism markets transform cultural products in appearance, meaning, and circulation (Cohen, 2000). In the Thai Peranakan context specifically, Koad and Dejpawuttikul (2025) argue that Thai Peranakan identity cannot be understood through a linear narrative of migration, adaptation, and smooth assimilation, but must instead be read as an ongoing process shaped by historical development, transborder interaction, local context, and strategic negotiation. Their analysis of frontstage and backstage identity practices shows how Thai Baba/Peranakan actors navigate between public presentations of Thainess, Peranakan visibility, and more intimate forms of inherited cultural continuity.

Koad and Dejpawuttikul (2025) also show that the commodification of Peranakan culture often privileges visible and marketable elements—fashion, cuisine, festivals, and architecture—while leaving less visible complexities, such as history, political adaptability, religious values, and everyday practice, less fully represented. This insight is particularly important for the Phuket case. What these studies share is an attention to the politics of naming, visibility, and representation; what they have not yet explored in detail is the bodily register through which communities experience and resist imposed labels.

Embodied knowledge and food as identity practice

The anthropology of embodiment provides the conceptual vocabulary for attending to this somatic dimension. Csordas's (1993) somatic modes of attention—culturally elaborated ways in which attending to one's own bodily sensations constitutes a form of knowing—reframe the body from a medium of cultural expression to a site where cultural knowledge is constituted. Connerton's (1989) distinction between inscribing practices (texts, archives) and incorporating practices (bodily habits, gestures) is particularly relevant: the knowledge carried in Baba kitchens belongs primarily to the incorporating register, transmitted through demonstration and correction rather than written instruction. In food studies, Sutton (2001) argues that food memories are encoded and recalled through multi-sensory experience, while Wacquant (2004), through boxing ethnography, demonstrates how embodied knowledge resists verbal extraction. These perspectives converge on a

key insight: some forms of knowledge are irreducibly somatic, and the methods used to study them must be adequate to this register.

From everyday resistance to somatic infrapolitics

Scott's (1985; 1990) concept of infrapolitics—the offstage forms of resistance that subordinate groups practise beneath the threshold of open confrontation—provides the political framing. Scott's framework is powerful because it insists that resistance is often more ordinary, more widely distributed, and less heroic than political theory tends to assume. The dimension this paper extends is the bodily one. In Scott's formulation, the hidden transcript is located in backstage speech, whispered complaint, coded practice, and deliberate acts. In the Phuket Baba case, however, resistance also appears before it becomes fully intentional or discursive: in the pause, the hitch, the slowed hand, and the continued practice of cooking as one was taught.

Ahmed's (2014) affective economies help explain how bodies come to carry histories of attachment and misalignment: affects circulate between bodies, sticking to some words, objects, and identities more than others through social and historical sedimentation. Bourdieu's concept of hysteresis (1977; 1990) names the structural lag that occurs when a habitus formed in one configuration of the field encounters conditions that have shifted. Yet neither framework quite captures the small phenomenological moment this paper follows: the felt quality of a body registering that an identity label does not fit, before that registration becomes argument.

What I call quiet refusal occupies this gap. Unlike Scott's everyday resistance, it is not primarily strategic or intentional; it operates in the body before it has been processed into discourse. Unlike Csordas's somatic modes of attention, which describe how cultural knowledge is constituted through the body, quiet refusal names what happens when that constituted knowledge encounters a mismatch—the somatic event of refusal itself. And unlike Bourdieu's hysteresis, which describes the structural condition, quiet refusal attends to the phenomenological texture of the collision: the felt quality of a body continuing to act from an older logic while the field shifts around it. This paper proposes that identity resistance, in contexts of heritage labelling, has a somatic dimension that existing frameworks have identified structurally but not fully captured experientially.

The ethnographic material reveals two specific somatic registers through which quiet refusal operates. The first is *sadung* ("สะดุ้ง"): a startle, a sudden jolt, the body's alert response to something arriving unexpectedly that does not belong. The second is *chaa-ngak* ("ชะงัก"): the brief halt that follows, the micro-pause in forward motion while the body processes what it has registered. *Sadung* is the startle; *chaa-ngak* is the resulting hitch. These terms emerged from vernacular Thai used by interlocutors in the field, which I mobilise analytically as categories for reading the felt texture of identity friction—field-derived terms that allow the somatic dimension of infrapolitics to be named with greater precision than the available theoretical vocabulary permits.

Quiet refusal, as I develop it here, is the sum of these operations: a somatic registration of identity misfit (*sadung*), a bodily hesitation (*chaa-ngak*), and a continuation of practice that neither

fully accepts the imposed label nor declares refusal of it. It maintains, through the hands and the pot and the calibration of spice, what the mouth may not say.

Methodology: Learning to listen to bodies

Research design and fieldwork

Six months of ethnographic fieldwork in Phuket Province (March–August 2024) anchored this study. The fieldwork was multi-sited, spanning home kitchens in Kathu, morning markets, festival preparation spaces, and conversations over shared meals. It combined semi-structured interviews with sustained participant observation in domestic and festival foodspaces. It was also extended in duration, allowing for the kind of repeated observation that somatic knowledge requires. This duration was not incidental but methodologically necessary: the somatic events this paper describes—the pauses, shifts in tone, and hands that slow before correcting—only become legible against a baseline familiarity with each practitioner's ordinary rhythms. A single interview can rarely distinguish a meaningful hesitation from a conversational pause; six months of repeated encounters can make such distinctions more analytically grounded.

Participant selection and sampling

Approximately 35 individuals were contacted during the fieldwork period. Participants were identified through snowball sampling, beginning with initial contacts through the Thai Peranakan Association and branching outward through community gatekeepers to food practitioners, community leaders, local historians, younger generation members, and critical voices who questioned dominant narratives. Twenty-five key informants completed full recorded interviews, lasting between 45 minutes and three hours. These informants represented diverse positions within Phuket's identity landscape: cultural gatekeepers (5), food practitioners (7), community leaders (4), local historians and writers (4), younger generation members (3), and critical voices (2).

Snowball sampling was not merely convenient; in a community where trust determines access, it was epistemologically appropriate (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). The vignettes presented here draw from the full range of fieldwork encounters, including participant-observation scenes documented in fieldnotes rather than audio-recorded interviews.

Ka pistemology: The body as research instrument

The epistemological approach I call *Ka* ("กะ") shaped both the research design and the analytic sensibility. *Ka* is a term drawn from how practitioners described the transmission of knowledge in Baba kitchens: a mode of knowing that operates through estimation, presence, repetition, and correction rather than through fixed measurement or verbal instruction.

What distinguishes *Ka* epistemology from interview-centred ethnography is its orientation toward the body as a primary instrument of knowing. In practice, this meant learning alongside the practitioners whose practices this paper describes: shaping dough by hand, rolling pastries in coconut,

observing the timing of preparation, and selling food at community fairs. What my own body registered—what felt right or wrong, what arrived as familiar or foreign—became part of the interpretive record. It was not treated as evidence on its own, but as a form of situated sensing that had to be checked against practitioners' explanations, repeated encounters, and observable practice.

Data analysis

Analysis proceeded through what I call *"reading under the line"*: attending not only to what informants said, but to what they did not say, could not say, or said through silence and hesitation. This analytical approach treats the space between words as data: the duration of a pause, the direction of a gaze, the moment hands resume their work after being interrupted by a question. Interview transcripts were read alongside detailed fieldnotes that recorded bodily cues, including pauses, shifts in tone, changes in gesture, and the quality of silence.

The analysis was iterative. I first identified recurring themes across interviews and fieldnotes: responses to the terms *"Baba"* and *"Peranakan,"* generational differences in positioning, classed distinctions shaping who could speak, and persistent gaps between public performance and private practice. I then returned to the material to trace moments where these themes appeared somatically—through startle, hesitation, slowed movement, or continued practice despite verbal ambiguity. The vignettes selected for this paper are those in which the somatic event was supported by verbal follow-up, repeated across encounters, or echoed in multiple practitioners' accounts of similar experiences.

Ethical considerations and mitigation

Reading somatic cues carries obvious risks of over-interpretation. To mitigate this, I relied on several strategies. First, repeated encounters over six months allowed me to calibrate my readings against the baseline rhythms and gestures of individual practitioners. Second, I routinely checked my perceptions against practitioners' own descriptions through informal conversation. Third, I attended to convergence across multiple accounts rather than treating any single bodily response as self-evident. All participants provided informed consent; informant codes (C04, C17, etc.) are used throughout. Thai-language quotations are presented in the original with English translations.

A note on reflexivity is necessary here. The vignette that opens the following section involves my own mistake—a question I asked that, as it left my mouth, I already felt was wrong. I include it because it is methodologically honest, but also because it is analytically generative: the somatic knowledge I had accumulated by that point in the fieldwork was precisely what allowed me to register the wrongness of my own question as it arrived into the room. The researcher's body, too, learns to read the field.

Three vignettes of quiet refusal

"That uneasy pause"

It is the first month of fieldwork, and I am sitting with C04 in a coffee shop in Kathu district. I had been here before—two years earlier, C24 had brought me to this same place for the first time, telling me that this was where Phuket Baba culture had its roots. Now C04—who sits at a very different point on the Baba–Peranakan spectrum—has brought me here too, to eat Hokkien *popiah* in the Phuket style, to drink coffee, and to talk.

C04 is a Baba woman in her mid-fifties, a practitioner of several traditional food crafts and a careful keeper of family memory. We have been talking for over an hour about the way recipes travel between generations—what gets written down, what never does, what gets lost, and what persists in the hands. Then I ask the question. I had been thinking about the relationship between Baba and Peranakan, about how practitioners navigate the two labels, and I asked—carefully, I thought, but apparently not carefully enough—whether, from C04's perspective, "Baba" and "Peranakan" referred to the same community or to something different.

The air in the room changes.

I feel it before I understand it—a shift in register, a quality of attention that has been easy and is now careful. C04 does not look away, and she does not become cold. But something settles into her face that has not been there before, a composure that replaces something more open. When she answers, her voice is measured: "Peranakan came from elsewhere—from Penang, from Malacca, from Singapore. It is not from here." A pause. Then: "We are Baba."

A second encounter deepened this. Working in a kitchen in Kathu with C04 and another practitioner, I heard C04 recount something a former history teacher had once said at a community gathering: that anyone, these days, could choose to call themselves Peranakan if they wanted to. C04's recounting was quiet and precise. Then she added: "But we are Baba. That is not a choice. That is what we are."

Analytically, what is significant is not only the content of C04's answer but the somatic interval between my question and her response: the settling of something in her face, the pause, the weight her voice carried. This is *sadung* in action—the body's alert registration that something has arrived that does not belong. The distinction C04 draws—between identity as available tool and identity as constitutive fact—was carried not only in her words but in the register of her speech: the particular flatness of her tone, the stillness of her hands, which stopped their work while she spoke and resumed immediately after. Quiet refusal here was not silence but felt distinction—a line drawn in the body.

The pepper and the hands

Several months into fieldwork, I began to notice that pepper appeared in Baba food in ways that did not match the heritage-restaurant menus I had been studying—not as an accent, but as a primary ingredient, present in quantities that, when I first encountered them in a Kathu kitchen, I assumed were a mistake.

I was in the kitchen with C04 and C17, two practitioners whose families had maintained continuous residence in Kathu—the district historically closest to Phuket's tin-mining centre—for more than a century. The dish was a slow-braised pork that both families made for funerals and ritual occasions. As we prepared it, the pepper went in in waves. What struck me was not only the quantity but the choice: black pepper here, not white—a distinction that, I would learn, was not arbitrary. White pepper belongs to broths and porridges; black pepper to the slow braises. C17 watched me watching the pepper, then said: "That is how it has always been. If it does not warm you from inside, it is not right."

In interlocutors' accounts, the heavy use of pepper is linked to the cold, damp conditions of tin-mining shafts and to Chinese medical notions of warming ingredients. Workers needed food that warmed the body from within, and pepper, understood as a warming ingredient, served that function. The dish that emerged from those conditions became, over generations, not just a recipe but a physiological memory—the body's calibration of what warmth feels like.

The contrast with the Peranakan heritage food circuit is instructive. In the menus and food displays I encountered in heritage-oriented spaces, dishes were often made legible through regional tourism aesthetics: visually composed, narratively simplified, and easy to present to visitors. The excess of pepper in the Kathu braised pork moves in a different register: warming, functional, sensorially assertive. The class difference encoded in the two flavour registers is not incidental; it is the material trace of two different communities, two different ecologies, and two different economies.

The pepper vignette reveals the somatic archive at work: embodied calibrations formed through generations of ecological immersion that do not restructure easily in response to institutional rebranding. The knowledge of which pepper belongs where—unwritten, circulated through the correction of a hand that has put in too little—constitutes an identity practice that resists the Peranakan heritage aesthetic not through argument, but through the insistence of a body that knows what "right" tastes like.

The hands that keep wrapping

It is the morning after my first conversation with C04 in the coffee shop in Kathu. I find myself sitting with C17, who is already at work—wrapping *popiah*, the Hokkien spring rolls that are among the most recognised preparations in the Phuket Baba repertoire. C17 sells *popiah* in front of his family home, a practice he learned from his mother. The location matters: He is not inside the Old Town heritage circuit, not visible to the tourist flows that animate Phuket's Peranakan festival economy. The heritage economy has made Baba food visible and desirable, but that visibility has not reached him evenly. What reaches him more directly are the costs of being made legible: rising expectations, comparative judgement, and a heritage vocabulary that does not name his own practice as he understands it.

I ask the question that, by then, I should perhaps have known better than to ask: "Would you consider *popiah* a Peranakan dish?"

His hands slowed. Not stopped—slowed. *Chaa-ngak*: the brief halt, the micro-pause while the body processes what has just arrived. Then the wrapping resumed, steady as before. "No," C17 said. "This is Baba food." I pushed, gently: "I've seen it in Singapore—I assumed it was Peranakan." His hands kept moving. He did not look up. "Other places may call it that. But here, it is Baba food."

On another occasion, C17 said plainly: *"เขาอยากจะพูดอะไรก็พูดไป แต่ในครัว ผมรู้ว่าผมทำอะไรอยู่"—"What they want to say, let them say it. But in my kitchen, I know what I am doing."*

Three findings emerge across the vignettes. First, quiet refusal unfolds as a somatic sequence: a label arrives, the body registers misfit (*sadung*), a micro-pause follows (*chaa-ngak*), and then practice continues—carrying its own answer in the steadiness of the gesture. Second, this refusal is not primarily strategic or confrontational; it operates through the body's ordinary continuation of what it knows. Third, the somatic archive—the calibration of pepper, the rhythm of wrapping, the quality of presence—functions as what I call a somatic hidden transcript: resistance practised not in words withheld, but in rhythm maintained.

Discussion: What the body knows

Conceptual contribution: Somatic infrapolitics

The primary contribution of this analysis is to extend Scott's (1990) framework of infrapolitics into the somatic register. In Scott's formulation, the hidden transcript is traced through offstage speech, subversive humour, whispered complaint, and everyday acts conducted beneath the threshold of open confrontation. In the Phuket Baba case, however, the hidden transcript also resides in the body—in the calibration of pepper, the rhythm of the ladle, and the knowledge of what warmth from inside feels like. This is not only a metaphorical extension; it is a claim about where resistance can be materially located. C17's kitchen is not primarily a space where resistance is discussed; it is a space where resistance is practised.

The concepts of *sadung* and *chaa-ngak* allow this extension to be tracked with precision. They name the micro-temporality of quiet refusal: the fraction of a second in which the body registers what has arrived and responds, below the level of articulated intention. This micro-temporality is what Bourdieu's concept of hysteresis describes structurally but does not fully capture phenomenologically. *Sadung* is the felt texture of that collision; *chaa-ngak* is the body's first processing of it.

Empirical contribution: The body as archive

To food studies, the analysis extends the understanding of food as an identity medium rather than merely an identity marker (Sutton, 2001). Food does not only symbolise belonging; it enacts it. When C17 wraps *popiah* at dawn in front of his family home in Kathu, the wrapping is not staged as a performance of Baba identity for a heritage audience. It is a practitioner continuing what his mother taught him. Identity is not declared; it is maintained through the repetition of a gesture that carries within it an entire ecology of belonging: dough stretched to the right thinness, filling measured by hand rather than by recipe, and a rhythm of wrapping that distinguishes his *popiah* from versions sold

in heritage food fairs and tourism-oriented spaces. In this framing, cooking is not a secondary expression of an identity held elsewhere; it is one of the primary sites at which identity is maintained, reproduced, and defended.

This contributes a specific corrective to heritage and tourism studies. Heritage labelling often proceeds on the implicit assumption that naming can reorganise belonging—that if communities adopt the label "Peranakan," the cultural world it describes will gradually follow. The vignettes suggest the limits of this assumption. The body's accumulated knowledge does not simply follow the brand. C17's kitchen becomes resistant to Peranakanisation not because he has necessarily decided to make resistance his political stance, but because his body learned differently, in conditions that the Peranakan heritage aesthetic did not produce and cannot fully absorb. The somatic archive is, in this sense, a form of counter-memory: not preserved through inscription or institutional mandate alone, but through the daily practice of bodies that continue to cook as they were taught, in quantities and rhythms that carry the trace of an economy that has otherwise disappeared.

Broader implications

These findings carry implications beyond the Phuket case. First, for heritage policy: if belonging has a somatic layer that resists reclassification, then heritage programming that attends only to labels, narratives, and visual branding will encounter limits that better marketing alone cannot overcome. Museum exhibitions, festival curation, and culinary tourism initiatives that seek to represent Baba communities might benefit from making greater space for practitioners' somatic knowledge, rather than relying primarily on externally imposed categories.

Second, for identity theory: the concept of quiet refusal suggests that identity politics operates not only through discourse and performance but also through an embodied register that existing frameworks have not adequately theorised. The gap between "Baba" and "Peranakan" is not only a gap in information; it is a gap in embodied experience.

Third, for the broader study of heritage-making across Southeast Asia: wherever institutional or state-led cultural projects seek to consolidate local identities under regional labels, somatic archives may become sites of friction—not simply because people choose to resist, but because embodied knowledge, formed through generations of practice in specific ecological and economic conditions, does not restructure on the timeline of policy.

Limitations

These contributions come with necessary limits. This paper draws from a larger study, and quiet refusal is only one dimension of a more complex field. Not all Baba practitioners resist Peranakanisation; the community's responses are varied, generationally differentiated, and shaped by economic conditions that make accommodation rational for many. Younger community members often express less investment in the distinction between "Baba" and "Peranakan," and some actively embrace the Peranakan label as a vehicle for cultural visibility and economic opportunity.

The vignettes selected here foreground resistance, but the broader fieldwork reveals a spectrum of responses ranging from enthusiastic adoption to strategic accommodation to the quiet refusal described above. The argument is not that bodies always resist, or that somatic knowledge is static. Embodied knowledge, too, changes over generations as ecological and economic conditions shift. The argument is more specific: when resistance occurs in this context, it often begins in the body before it reaches discourse, and this somatic resistance operates through mechanisms that existing frameworks have not fully theorised.

Conclusion: Belonging as embodied practice

I return, at the end, to the pause—to the moment before words, where the body already knows what language has not yet found a way to say.

C17's hands slowed. The rhythm of the *popiah* wrapping changed. Then: "This is Baba food." The question was answered. The conversation moved on. But something had happened in that interval—something the photograph did not capture and the Instagram caption did not contain. The body had responded, in the only register available to it on an ordinary morning in Kathu: briefly, almost invisibly, and with the authority of something that was not performed.

This paper has argued that belonging, for Phuket Baba food practitioners, is not a category to be claimed but a practice to be inhabited—known first in the body, and defended there. The defence is not heroic. It does not announce itself. It consists of the arc of a ladle, the quantity of black pepper, the slow rhythm of wrapping, and the ordinary continuation of hands that know what they are doing.

C04, in the kitchen in Kathu, put this simply. When I asked her what it meant to be Baba in a city that increasingly called itself Peranakan, she was quiet for a moment. Then she said: *"แต่พี่เป็นบาบ๋าแล้วมันก็เปลี่ยนไม่ได้หรอก"—"But I am Baba. And that cannot really be changed."*

The names changed. The policies shifted. The branding evolved. But in small kitchens in Kathu, practitioners continue to cook the way they were taught—not necessarily because they have decided to resist, but because their hands know how, and the knowing is older than the label.

The question this paper opens, rather than resolves, is how ethnographic attention to the body's quiet refusals might reshape our understanding of identity politics more broadly: not as a contest of claims alone, but as a negotiation between different temporal registers of knowing. If identity is something known in the body—formed through ecological conditions, economic necessities, and generations of sensory calibration—then the politics of belonging cannot be fully understood through discourse analysis, policy review, or performance theory alone. It requires, as this paper has attempted, a methodology that learns to listen to what the body says when the mouth is still.

The pepper will still be black. The *popiah* will still be wrapped before dawn. And in Kathu, the hands will continue to know what they know—quietly, without declaration, and with a certainty that does not require a name.

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