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CHINESE SOCIAL STRUCTURE**Lam Chee Kheung****INTRODUCTION**

Social structure is a system of social relations among differentiated parts of a society or group which describes observable empirical conditions. Age, sex, race and socioeconomic status differences affect peoples' role relations. The social positions that govern the social relations among their people define the social structure. Thus, the age structure of a population, the kinship structure of a race, the authority structure of an organisation, the power structure of a community, and the class structure of a society are relevant analytical elements of its distinguishing social positions.

Chinese who emigrated to Sarawak are almost exclusively from the South eastern provinces of Kwangtung, Fukien and Kwangsi. The reasons for their migration are mainly due to population pressure and poverty. They have settled down in Sarawak for almost two centuries.

The total Chinese population in Sarawak in 1986 was estimated at 443,009 and was the second largest community. It constitutes 29.2 percent of the total population of Sarawak.

The age composition of the Chinese shows that there were 39.4 percent under 15 years old, 53.9 percent in the population of the 15—64 age group, and 6.7 percent in the older age group (65+) in 1980.

The sex-ratio for the Chinese stood at 973 females per 1000 males in 1980.

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THE BASIC FORMS OF SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS AND THEIR FUNCTIONAL STRUCTURE

In Chinese society, the family (Chia) is generally the smallest of the corporate kin group, its form varies according to its size. Three distinctive types of Chinese families are classified. They are: 1) the small-sized conjugal family; 2) the medium-sized stem family; and 3) the large-sized joint family. Outside the family, there are lineage and clan systems for which the consolidating group organised by the numerous component families having their patrilineal descent from a common ancestor.

The Families

The small-sized conjugal family is the most common type of family among Chinese people. It normally consists of the man, his wife, their unmarried children, and sometimes his unmarried brothers and sisters.

The medium-sized stem family consists of only two conjugal units, that is the head of the family and one of his sons, with the son serving as the stem of the family tree, while other sons move away upon marriage.

The large-sized joint family is maintained by only a few wealthy Chinese people. This type of family comprises not only the conjugal unit of the head of the family, but also his brothers, his sons and his grandsons. All these conjugal units live in the same house and share the common property and food.

The Chinese family of any size is a patrilineal, patrilocal and patriarchal kinship group. The family head, the father, has absolute authority in control of common property, income of individual members, consumption and conduct of the members.

The property of a Chinese household is equally divided among paternal descendants upon the death of the head of the household or a family dispute. The inheriting members, together with their conjugal units, will then set up their own separate household.

Chinese place great emphasis on the continuity of the family along the patrilineal line. The Confucian Philosophy expresses that a living individual is the personification of all his forebears and of his descendants yet unborn. A Chinese family would expect to have more than one son, so the strength and prosperity of the family could be better ensured.

The Chinese follow the paternal line of descent. The male is consigned to carry on the surname of a family; male descendants are assigned to perform ancestor worship, and males have right of inheriting family property.

The Lineage

The lineage is the second basic form of institutions outside family. The lineage basically consists of a group of males all descended from one common ancestor, all living in one settlement, owning some property in common, and under the leadership of the man most senior in generation and age. A major function of the lineage is to disburse funds for welfare and education that are collected from members.

In Sarawak, the lineage system has not worked intensely as expected. Because not too many of the same lineage families migrated to Sarawak, and they did not live in the same area, and also they were too poor to effect the lineage relationship.

The Clan

Besides lineage, there is a clan system in the Chinese society. The clan is an artificial kin group. It consists of a deliberate amalgamation into one loose federation of a number of lineages all of which bore the same surname. Typically the clan's membership is drawn from a given wide area. The