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THE CHINESE IN SARAWAK, 1946-63; EDUCATION, LAND AND BELONGING

Daniel Chew

INTRODUCTION

Conceptual Framework

This article is a study on Chinese identity formation in Sarawak during the period of British colonial rule from 1946 to 1963, examining how the Chinese perceived their identity in response to political circumstances and to socio-cultural forces.

Chinese identity in Sarawak has historical and cultural dimensions. The focus of this research is on the social identities of the Chinese from 1946 to 1963 when Sarawak was a British crown colony. Extraneous factors such as the historical and cultural identity of the Chinese, and how China viewed its role in relation to the Chinese overseas, the attitudes and policies of the colonial government in Sarawak, and the reactions of the indigenous people towards the Chinese, shaped the self perceptions of the Chinese. According to Hirschman¹, being Chinese in Southeast Asia rests not only on a historical sense of a shared background but also on contemporary condition especially the interactions of the Chinese with indigenous populations and national governments.

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I. Introduction

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Chinese identity has several interwoven strands, which have influenced Chinese self-perceptions and how they are being perceived by the host environment. For many centuries, the Chinese have sojourned to Borneo and Sarawak to trade and in search of economic opportunities. Sojourning to Sarawak was a temporary experience but

practical realities and the regime change in China to communism in 1949 forced most Chinese and their descendants to settle down in Sarawak. This adaptation from sojourners to settlers was accompanied by changes and adaptations to identity. In Edgar Wickberg's view², this identity, among the Chinese overseas, is constantly adapting, redefining and reconstructing itself and crosses ethnic boundaries.

Wang Gungwu³ has drawn up a conceptual model to delineate the changes and adaptations in social identities. The historical identity is derived from shared background, values and traditions, nowadays subsumed under cultural identity. And what Wang says is peculiar to Malaya/Malaysia is communal identity, for the reason that the Chinese form a considerable minority group in the country that is able to localise and draw up markers and boundaries for its identity. Tan Chee Beng⁴ argues that this is the "localization" of identity where it is articulated and if necessary, defended. Ethnic identity, in Wang's words, is more specific in conveying the idea of political purpose in the fight for legitimate minority rights. This is similar to what Kwok Kian Woon⁵ called the "politics of difference"; the expression of "Chineseness" especially when feeling threatened.

While identities may appear to be easily delineated, in reality identities may cross back and forth, are redefined and reconstructed, and are adapted to circumstances. This is certainly so in Sarawak's case. The redefining and reconstructing of identities was a response to changing political circumstances, firstly to China as a republic and then as a communist regime, and to British colonial policies in Sarawak, initially sympathetic to a republican China and then abhorring communism when the country turned communist in 1949.

Ethnic Chinese identity formation

As scholars have pointed out⁶, ethnic groups invoke culture, history and language to inculcate collective and shared experiences of a common past and shared destiny to build up ethnic consciousness. In

Sarawak a variety of actors, community leaders, social organisations, students and activists in the Chinese community sought to construct an ethnic Chinese identity in the face of major changes in the state. This self identity was fluid and contested. Firstly, there were those who linked connectivity with Chinese culture, history and language in the homeland of origin, China with the expression of a local Chinese identity with Sarawak. This would be true of Chinese keen to retain a Chinese educational system in Sarawak. Secondly, there were those outside the Chinese educational system, educated primarily in English, who benefited from getting jobs in the civil service and who were not sympathetic towards the plight of the Chinese schools. In short, a distinction existed between the Chinese-educated Chinese and those educated in English. Thirdly, there were those who believed that the identity of the Sarawak Chinese had to be defined in relation to other ethnic groups and to their sense of loyalty to Sarawak.

Sarawak was an anomaly in July 1946, becoming a British crown colony when the rest of imperial Southeast Asia was being decolonised. Whereas under the Brookes there was minimal governance, the British sought to introduce governance reforms based on the inculcation of loyalty to the colonial state, state building and multi-cultural policies that emphasised mono languages, that is, English. As will be argued in this article, colonialism provoked a reaction of anti-colonialism from the Chinese, with the emergence of social forces and an outpouring of nationalistic feelings in challenging colonialism. Out of the disparate speech groups in the colony which in the past felt separate from each other and even at times were antagonistic and resentful of each other, under colonial rule, a common feeling of being Chinese, not necessarily acting in unison, arose.⁷

In the colonial period, the identity of the Chinese had to be articulated, negotiated and defended against the changed circumstances of living under a foreign colonial power. The concept of origin, “where you’re from” as against “where you’re at”, in explaining

Chinese migration and its diaspora, as cited by Ang⁸, is used here in examining the notion of identity building. The Chinese in Sarawak at this juncture of time just after the end of the Second World War, defined themselves and were defined by others as coming from an original homeland of China although many were born in Sarawak, and by intention or circumstances chose to stay on in Sarawak and claimed a local identity.

Which had a stronger pull on the Chinese, “where you’re from” or “where you’re at” was determined to a large extent by events outside Sarawak. It was not an “either or” situation, defining people according to their origin, “where you’re from” – as opposed to their present circumstances of “where you’re at”, but it was more of a fluid and dynamic situation. Distinctions of “where you’re from” and “where you’re at” were blurred and appeared to converge when the Chinese articulated and defended their identity vis-à-vis the British colonial powers.

Two types of crises emerged during the colonial period between 1946 and 1963, focused on education and land. The first crisis was the model of secular education for the Chinese, which aroused intense debates and feelings within the community and thrust the Chinese on a collision course against the colonial government. Education was linked to cultural heritage emanating from China, the memory of where one’s roots were from, taking pride in a heritage drawing upon an ancient civilisation. This pride became more pronounced in 1949 when China became a communist regime, ending a civil war and a prolonged period of humiliation and submission at the hands of foreign western and Japanese powers. As the Sarawak Chinese were living in Sarawak and calling it home, this identity of cultural roots and transmission through Chinese language education was transposed to the local Sarawak environment, and in the process became a local cultural identity. The Chinese saw no contradiction in emphasising Chinese language education and a local Sarawak identity although

the colonial government perceived it otherwise and linked Chinese language education to the dangers of ideological association and empathy with communist China.

The second crisis was ecological in nature, the demand for land and land hunger felt by the community, a big proportion of which was engaged in farming. The colonial government's handling of these crises and its attempts to forge a multi-cultural state with the eventuality of independence within a wider Malaysian federation inadvertently encouraged new forms of social urban-based Chinese leadership, and the consolidation of Chinese communalism. Communalism was expressed in the fight to preserve the community's identity in culture and language.

There are limitations in this research monograph in narrowing the parameters of this study to education and agriculture. As pointed out by Craig Lockard⁹, social organisations such as the clan associations and pan organisations such as the Kuching Chinese Chambers of Commerce were pivotal in mobilising the Chinese and even in crucial issues such as Chinese education; they helped to galvanise Chinese opinions and spoke out vociferously in defence of Chinese cultural rights. The study is also mainly confined to Chinese living in the urban centres and Kuching and Sibü and their surrounding areas with only passing reference made to Chinese living elsewhere in Sarawak. In the more rural areas of Sarawak where the Chinese are more integrated with local indigenous communities, a different situation might have emerged, and this needs further research. Useful comparisons might be made too with Chinese in other places such as on the Malayan peninsula or British North Borneo, and this too will have to await further research as there may be differences or similarities in colonial experiences which affect the emergence of Chinese identities in different locales. This report is a starting point for examining Chinese identities in Sarawak in the hope of stimulating further discussions and research.