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THE CULTURAL ACTIVITIES OF CHINESE IN SARAWAK

Khoo Lip Kee

FOREWARD

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Taking a review on the contribution of Chinese Culture towards a multi-racial society of ours, we have to examine the activities of the Chinese Culture. Culture is an abstract term but it is a reflection of social activities and way of life of the people. It consists of special characteristics of human race. If we do not examine culture from this understanding, we will not be able to ascertain the contribution of culture towards our society.

My talk will try to examine the cultural activities of Chinese in our State in its background, characteristics, development, contribution and its dilemma and then to suggest proposals for its development.

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BACKGROUND AND TRADITION

About one thousand years ago, Chinese had connection with Sarawak. But the migration of Chinese to Sarawak according to historians took place about 200 years ago.

From the time the Chinese landed in Sarawak their cultural activities began.

Culture begins at the time when a human being needs to solve his own problems. Culture, therefore, is a combination of ways and means of human beings to solve their problems. Culture in this respect is a record of livelihood, problems and struggle of human beings.

The cultural history of Chinese in Sarawak in fact is a record of livelihood problems and struggle of the Chinese for the last two centuries.

China has a cultural history of about 5,000 years. Chinese, because of disaster and war in their motherland found it extremely difficult to live and had to move out towards the South. In their new surroundings in the tropical forests, the Chinese migrants faced lots of problems in survival. They had to solve these problems by whatever means they employed. In the early days whenever the Chinese migrants came to a place they would first build an altar for worship of dieties and pray for peace. This was the beginning of the cultural activities of Chinese here.

Although China possessed a very long history of tradition and culture, the Chinese migrants did not, however, from the start, promoted such good tradition and culture. During the early times, the Chinese migrants were mainly farmers, miners and very few merchants and intellectuals. On this point, Mr Liew Pak Kwei, a Sarawak historian in one of his articles on Chinese history in Sarawak stated that the majority of Chinese migrants who came to Sarawak during the later period of the Manchurian Dynasty were illiterates.

During that period what kind of culture did they bring? There were languages, religion, ways of worship, customs, traditions and working skills. On the aspect of languages, as the majority of Chinese migrants came from the provinces of Fukkien and Guantung, they spoke the local dialects of the two provinces. They also practised the local customs of the two provinces.

Some quarters take the view that such culture was crude reflecting only the superficial level of the Chinese culture.

Nevertheless such culture consisted of the characteristics, traditions and values of Chinese culture, was part of the Chinese original culture which was formed after a long passage of time. It was difficult to be changed in any circumstances of conflicts.

What is then the value of the Chinese traditions? I take the view that it is the combination of the thoughts of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism which then formed the basis of religion, moral standards and thinking of the Chinese. This is what we call the traditional Chinese culture with a long history.

The Chinese migrants brought along their Chinese culture and tradition to Sarawak and began such cultural activities in a new surrounding. Are such cultural activities the same as the original Chinese culture?

Cultural experts assert that when a culture is brought to a new place the original culture is subject to change. In other words, the Chinese culture in Sarawak is certainly different from the culture of China. The Chinese culture here has absorbed local characteristics in the course of solving problems of livelihood.

These local characteristics might not be so obvious in the early days but they become clearer and clearer as time advances.