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CULTURAL INTERACTION**Chang Pat Foh****INTRODUCTION**

The year 1988 is not only a historical and important year which marks the 25th Anniversary of Sarawak's Independence in Malaysia but it is also of extraordinary significance as far as Sarawak and its people are concerned.

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- 2) It is the first time in the history of Sarawak that a seminar on Sarawak Chinese Culture is being organised; and
- 3) It is the first time that Sarawak is celebrating her independence on such a grand scale that the programmes of the celebration will hst almost four months.

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by

Chang Pat Foh

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CULTURAL BACKGROUND OF SARAWAK

What is a culture? Culture may be defined as the outward appearance of a civilisation, the means by which one knows that a particular civilisation does exist. The common examples are art, literature, architecture and language in concrete form; religions, customs, beliefs and social organisation in the more abstract form. All these may be said to constitute a culture.

It is very obvious that there is no Malaysian or Sarawakian culture in Sarawak and that the colourful culture which exists in the State is merely made up of separate cultures of the various races living in Sarawak namely the Ibans, the Malays, the Bidayuh, the Melanaus, the Lun Bawang, the Chinese, etc. Sarawak is therefore comparatively rich in culture and it has a better opportunity to develop a Sarawakian culture. However, such a Sarawakian culture must have the result of compromise, fusion and synthesis.

The development of Sarawakian culture is desirable and should be supported by the people at all levels, but it cannot be achieved at once. The racial groups differ greatly belonging to the different religions and customary traditions using different languages and scripts. Moreover, inter-marriages between the various races is to a very limited degree only. They do not have much in common, except they live together and work together in the State of Sarawak.

The existing culture diversely reflects the great differences. Each has developed its own culture. The Malays as a branch of the Malaysian civilisation in South East Asia, the Dayak as a branch of Bornean culture in the Island of Borneo and the Chinese as an extension and variation of the culture from China.

It may be difficult to develop a Sarawakian culture, but cultural interaction is possible with the mutual understanding and respect from all the races in Sarawak. It is a fact that cultural heritage identifies a race. Without a culture means without a race. However, there are some common similarities in customs, observances, languages and religions especially in the long established mixed areas and sometimes one race has been directly influence by another. This is what I call "Cultural Interaction" and it has taken place among the various communities in Sarawak unknowingly.

EARLY CHINESE SETTLEMENT IN SARAWAK

Sarawak belongs to all the 1.59 million people living on her land. As far as the Chinese community is concerned, it forms a significant proportion of the population of Sarawak. In the estimated 1988 Population Chinese makes up 29.3% of the population i.e. 460,600.

Although Chinese contacts with Borneo (of which Sarawak is part of) occurred at least 1500 years ago, actual significant Chinese settlement had been concentrated within the last two hundred years. At the time when Sir James Brooke, the first white man became the Rajah of Sarawak in 1841, the Chinese population, although still negligible, was found in Sarawak Proper (Kuching) and Upper Sarawak (Bau). From 1850 onwards, more and more Chinese immigrants came to Sarawak because they were attracted by the trading in Kuching and gold and antimony in Bau.²

We are here to-day and we have our own nation but we must not forget our pioneers who brought our great grand parents and the Chinese Culture to Sarawak from China in the olden days. I wish to quote a few outstanding pioneers. They were Liew Shan Pang (Hakka) to Bau³, Ong Ewe Hai (Hockien) to Kuching⁴, Wong Nai Siong (Foochow) to Sin Choo San (Sibu)⁵ and Law Kian Huat (Teochew) to Kuching/Sri Aman⁶. These pioneers and many other laid down our social and cultural status for us. To-day we are still being identified as a community – Chinese and still practising a culture – Chinese culture in our new nation which was born 25 years ago. However, not all the culture is perfect. If a culture is good, we can preserve it and if it is bad, we can either improve it or discard it altogether.

We are staying in a nation-Malaysia with a multi-racial and multi-cultural background for the past few centuries. We must not isolate ourselves from other Malaysians just because we have a rich culture for the past 5000 years! We must, on the other hand, try to transfer some of our good culture to them and at the same time try to adopt or to absorb some of the good culture from other communities.

LANGUAGE EXCHANGE

Before I go into the subject, I wish to relate a story on the use of language.