

Malaysian Chinese : An Inclusive Society



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Centre for Malaysian Chinese Studies

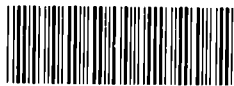
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Preface

The saga of Chinese communities in Southeast Asia, including the Malaysian Chinese community, remain a work in progress. It was reported recently by the Xinhua News Agency of the People's Republic of China that there are now some forty five million Overseas Chinese globally. Of these, a substantial number are domiciled in Southeast Asia. Professor Wang Gungwu's keynote address examines the Malaysian Chinese community in relation to the perspective of historical and contemporary developments in the region. He noted that Chinese communities had developed with successive "layers" of migration through the centuries. Migrants from China were initially traders and in some instances farmers. With the industrial revolution, the Dutch, British and French colonial policies deliberately exploited the availability of Chinese migrants to work in their territories in small businesses and as labourers in the extractive and plantation industries.

In the ensuing years as Chinese communities settled in, they faced tumultuous changes and upheavals throughout the twentieth century. There were the years of the Great Depression, the Pacific or Second World War followed by the Cold War and rising indigenous nationalism culminating in independence and nationhood. These events created new tensions and imposed new challenges for the Chinese communities in the region. In the case of Malaya and Singapore, later Malaysia and Singapore, the Chinese community had to contend with the communist insurrection, known as the Emergency (1948-1960) as well as the political separation of Singapore and Malaysia after barely two years in

a political federation (1963-65). Through it all, Professor Wang reminds his readers of the constant China factor as an influence in the history of the region.

Meanwhile the Chinese community in Sarawak and Sabah developed differently as pointed out by Mr. Chua Hiong Kee and Professor Danny Wong Tze Ken in their respective papers. Their studies serve to emphasize that the Malaysian Chinese community is diverse in dialect groups and experience as dictated by their interaction with the indigenous populations, thus facing different challenges. Sabah, the former North Borneo, has a growing number of Sino-Native non-Muslim population through inter-marriages. This is food for thought for students of national unity and integration in Malaysia. It was also clear that interactions between the Chinese communities in East Malaysia and the Peninsula were sporadic until political unification with the Federation of Malaysia in 1963.

Within the Chinese community in the Peninsula, the tapestry of diversity included the English-educated Chinese who played prominent roles and made significant contributions in the history of Malaya and thereafter Malaysia. This group of English-educated Chinese dominated the political, business and social scene well into the years after independence. Dr. Lee Kam Hing's well-researched paper documents the contributions of this important component of the community with profiles such as Dr. Lim Boon Kheng, Dr. Wu Lien Teh, Tun Tan Cheng Lock, Lim Cheng Ean and Tun H.S. Lee, to name but a few. In fact until 2005 the MCA was led by the English-educated Tun Ling Liong Sik, while the other major Chinese-based party, the Gerakan was helmed by Tun Lim Kheng Aik until 2007. Dr. Lee's paper prompts the query of the need for similar studies in Sabah and Sarawak.

The theme of diversity is further evidenced by the practice of different faiths within the community. Dr. Rosey Wang Ma's paper on the Malaysian Chinese Muslim community explains the marginalization of Chinese Muslims by the mainstream Chinese community. It would seem that the Chinese community perceives that to be a Muslim in