The Chinese in Papua New Guinea: 1880-1980

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For Wei-lan

Foreword

This is, in the first place, a highly informative book on the life of a group of ethnic Chinese who lived and worked in an alien land among people with drastically different cultures and physical characteristics. New Guinea was first under the Germans, then the Australians, then the Japanese after whom again the Australians. The end of World War II saw gradual reduction of white power until 1975, when independence came to the indigenes. The data Dr. Wu so carefully collected offer excellent basis for comparison with other accounts of Chinese in other colonial societies such as T'ien's *The Chinese of Sarawak: A Study of Social Structure* (1953) and Willmott's *The Chinese of Semarang: A Changing Minority in Indonesia* (1960).

In the second place, this book is an analysis of how a minority of Chinese labourers and tradesmen who, in spite of severe discriminatory measures against them, became successful merchants whose "enterprises were dispersed in urban centres over the whole of Papua New Guinea."

But the larger situation of Papua New Guinea underwent a drastic change through its independence from Britain. Having risen from near the bottom of the social ladder to a place only second to the once dominant Whites, the Chinese were threatened with great insecurity, not only by the fear of losing everything they ever worked for, but even for their lives.

Dr. Wu uses the "concept of adaptation" as a general framework of analysis. But adaptation is the very process of living for all creatures including human beings. The Australian aborigines and the American Indians each in their own ways all "adapted" to white invasion, domination, restriction, and prejudice. What distinguished the Chinese in Papua New Guinea was their positive way of dealing with such adverse circumstances by finding and making use of opportunities for survival and advancement. This the author has detailed admirably well.

Central to the Chinese ways of adaptation is their particular system of kinship, whether in China itself under a new revolutionary government or abroad among alien peoples and cultures.

Within China itself that system had enabled the Chinese form of society to endure so continuously for so long, in sharp contrast to most other societies in the world. Being so strongly given to kinship solidarity, the Chinese in China have mainly developed secondary groupings with direct links to kinship and locality ties, but not as a rule those involving causes removed from such ties. Thus an atrocity such as foot-binding went on in China for over a thousand

years. No movement aimed at its abolition appeared until the coming of the West with its missionaries and the return of some Chinese students after studying in Europe and America.

This lack of desire to depart from the kinship and locality bases manifested itself in two other directions not often noted. First, not only did very few Chinese (compared to the total population of China) ever emigrate from China, but those who did have far more than Europeans tended to maintain their social and cultural links with their homeland. This was one of the reasons used in the United States for Chinese Exclusion for a century. Second, the Chinese abroad overwhelmingly came from a few districts in Fukien and Kwangtung provinces; those of other parts of China simply did not see overseas emigration as a solution to their problems. This, even though the Chinese did not lack navigation skills or wherewithal.

The kinship solidarity was the strength that enabled the Chinese society to endure, but it was also the weakness which prevented the Chinese from developing any significant or strong internal and grassroot impetuses for change. This lack was even evident during the recent Cultural Revolution which struck some Western observers (e.g. Arthur Miller in *Chinese Encounters*) as passivity. The Cultural Revolution was instigated from the top, and most Chinese simply acted according to direction, often with excess zeal. Now that the Gang of Four has fallen, most Chinese are in danger of going the other way. For example, there is ample evidence that many Chinese since 1978 have tended to blame all failures on the Gang.

Not unnaturally, an overwhelming majority of the Chinese in Papua New Guinea on whom Dr. Wu has reported in these pages were of Kwangtung (Canton) origin; in fact mostly from See Yap, the area from which came a majority of Chinatown inhabitants in the United States. What they have done to adapt themselves to the alien situation remains understandable in Chinese cultural terms. Like their compatriots in America and elsewhere, they formed kinship and locality associations. These were not, as Wu says, "voluntary" associations (p. 70), for their membership was not open to all. Instead, even their *Kwan Tai Ting*, a society with a religious flavor, for it honours General *Kwan Yu* of the Three Kingdoms (A.D. 220-263), was limited to the Wu Wan people (p. 69). And, of course, their guilds which by definition should have united those of the same occupation in one organization were separated by dialects. Thus Cantonese-speaking cooks formed their own guild, as did Hakka-speaking ones who joined another. Likewise, carpenters were also separated into two guilds according to who were the pioneers and who came later or were native born (p. 70).

All this is not new but mere replication of an age-old pattern found in China everywhere. There, in communities where everyone spoke the same

dialect, as in "West Town" of Yunnan, kinship even divided its butcher's guild into two subdivisions (see Hsu and Hu, "Guild and Kinship Among the Butchers in West Town," *American Sociological Review*, Vol. X, No. 3, June 1945, pp. 357-64.

Where the number of Chinese from the same clan was small in a foreign setting, they formed multiple-clan associations. Thus in Hawaii, mainland U.S.A., and Canada there are *Lau* 劉, *Kwan* 關, *Chang* 張, *Chao* 趙 associations, or *T'an* 譚, *T'an* 談, *Hsu* 許, *Hsieh* 謝 associations. The former are based on the legendary friendship among three sworn brothers and a famous general depicted in the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*; the latter, because all four surnames share the same radical, *yen* 言. (The first two surnames T'an and T'an are homonyms; they are written in two different characters.) The formation of multiple-clan associations is indeed a modification due to externally imposed conditions, but it is a modification in the Chinese cultural mode.

Dr. Wu provides his readers with fascinating new details of the Chinese way in ethnic relations. "Until 1970 the majority of Chinese were indifferent to political trends in the country, having always looked to the Europeans for instructions" (p. 143). Why not? The Chinese in China have for centuries had the philosophy expressed in the following saying:

> Whosoever be the emperor,
> We will pay taxes to him.

In the colonial society of New Guinea, the Europeans (or Germans or Japanese) were the rulers and the Papua New Guineans were the ruled. So the Chinese looked up to the former and looked down or ignored the latter, except as servants and shop hands. They showed no inclination to relate to the indigenes otherwise or to support their cause even in lukewarm fashion until the inevitable date for independence drew near. As late as 1971, Rabaul Chinese leaders still showed little interest in the election, "because they did not want to get involved in the transition to self-government" (p. 151). With their typical Chinese understanding of the world, their leaders even "thought that their people as a whole would be offered fair treatment" after independence (p. 152).

In this the behaviour of the Chinese in New Guinea was in sharp contrast to the Spanish and other Europeans clerics and creoles (native-born Whites) in Mexico who joined hands with Indians and Meztisoes in opposition to the gachupines (Spanish newcomers) and the colonial authority of Spain in the interest of political rights for all and eventual independence of Mexico as a nation.

The case of Madelaine Slade, who joined Gandhi to fight British colonial

rule at the very time when her father was the admiral Commander-in-Chief of all British armed forces in India and Burma, would have been bizarre even for the wildest Chinese fantasy. Coming from the luxury and ease of English high society, Madelaine took on the Indian name Mira Behn. Her first duty after she knelt at Gandhi's feet to become his disciple was to scrub the latrines. She devoted the rest of her life to Gandhi and India, suffering in the process hard labour, illnesses and imprisonment. (Madelaine Slade, *The Spirit's Pilgrimage*, 1960.) In his Foreword to the book, Vincent Sheean said, "In the mode of thought set going by Dr. Carl Jung (collective conscious), one might say that she was the Western World's acknowledgement of guilt and of the will to atone" (Ibid., p. 6).

Throughout their history few Chinese have ever championed the cause of the underdog in their own country. They are even less likely to be the vanguards of any emancipationary movement abroad. Most Chinese individuals are so enmeshed, socially and psychologically, in the duties and obligations of their primary groups that they have little time or energy for distant causes.

The Chinese have never shown any inclination to proselytization, or produced any famous adventurers who explored faraway or unknown regions on their own. No Chinese merchants or entrepreneurs prepared the way for their conquering emperors, as did the English East India Company for King Charles and later Queen Elizabeth, nor did many Chinese common men follow their rulers' victorious armies as settlers in new lands.

However, given the definite structure of a social and political situation where the Chinese find themselves, they will be undaunted in their sustained efforts to better themselves. Their efforts will be aimed at avoiding or skirting the obstacles and searching out the opportunities for themselves and those related to them by kinship or locality ties; but not at eliminating the obstacles or revolutionizing the given situation so that all can (ideally) take advantage of the same opportunities.

Hence, "the New Guinea Chinese managed to educate their children to such an extent that by the end of the 1940s several had entered universities in Australia. Chinese parents in the 1950s each year supported up to 200 Chinese students attending secondary schools in Australia which were not available to them" (p. 47);

Most Chinese, unlike many Europeans, have never had any compunction in utilizing church affiliation as a direct material resource in their efforts for advancement. The Chinese in New Guinea are "quite pragmatic in their religious behaviour: several Methodists shifted to the Catholic group because of economic or other reasons" (p. 72). This reminds me of a Northwestern University coed from Hong Kong who wrote in her application for scholarship: "Willing to be a Methodist," and a Mr. Liu of Peking in 1945 who advised his

readers in a public daily to convert to Catholicism so that their wives and children would become eligible for Catholic welfare as a way of solving the problem of poverty (see F.L.K. Hsu, *Americans and Chinese: Passage to Differences*, 1981, pp. 271-2).

At one point, Dr. Wu seems to suggest the existence of hostility between Chinese adherents of Catholic and Methodist Churches (p. 72), but he then notes that "marked antagonism began to disappear among the Chinese in the 1960s, probably because of the availability of ample business opportunities to everyone" (p. 72). This is the only occasion on which Dr. Wu lapsed into an untenable economic explanation of human behaviour. For ample economic opportunities have had no apparent correlation with the waning of religious tension in America or Northern Ireland.

What the New Guinea Chinese did in this connection was no less characteristically Chinese. This pragmatic approach to religion was why they have never known among them any irreconcilable conflict due to differences in faiths.

White Europeans have exhibited throughout their colourful history a consistant flair for Utopian idealism or for dark nihilism. A sizeable number of them have always been willing to shed blood of others or of their own under either banner. These activists are psychologically so identified with their causes that they are willing to do or die for good or evil. Their way is one of extremes: the good are all good and must eliminate the evil; and the evil are, of course, the same and must do likewise. Westerners generously support child and animal protection societies; but many of them also rape and mutilate young girls and vandalize zoos and decimate defenseless animals.

The Chinese have, on the other hand, throughout their cyclical history, shown no comparable tendency towards such extremes. They bore a heavy burden of their ancestors; their Uptopia was an unspectacular golden age of the past. The founder of their Taoism was even alleged to have been born of a virgin mother who carried him for eighty years. He was very old at birth, hence he was known as Lao Tzu or Old Master. But the Chinese made nothing of the myth, for in their mental scheme of things male and female are complimentary, like light and darkness; but not opposed or antagonistic to each other, in which case the prevalence of the one means by definition the destruction of the other. Hence no Chinese leader ever spoke of a war to end all wars, instituted the Inquisition, or even fantasized anything resembling Hitler's Final Solution.

From one point of view, the Chinese cultural ways can be characterized as tolerant, forbearing, and without bigotry, while their Western counterparts, intolerant, militant, and full of prejudice. But a shift in focus easily reveals that the Western cultural ways are characterized by strong faiths, uncompromising

principles and high degree of creativity while their Chinese counterparts, wishy-washy in faith, fence-sitting in principle, generative of compassion toward few outside their own small circles linked by kinship and locality ties.

Scholars and laymen alike have yet to understand the intrinsic link between the two sides of the same psychocultural coin. Instead, they keep regarding the side they and their society approve of as the normal manifestation of their way of life, of which they are proud, but the other side as deviation, or work of the mentally sick, or even due to unfavourable economic circumstances.

Whatever the merit of the economic determinist views of China, the facts hardly support them. Economic determinism is rooted in Western individualism. Lacking affective relations among humans, Westerners have been preoccupied with the control of things or privatization of the supernatural for personal fulfillment. The Chinese preference for human relations over gods and things sprang from their kinship system. That system is so tenacious that it simply refuses to go away or greatly alter its intrinsic attributes in the face of revolutionary or colonial or post-colonial circumstances.

All this and more await the reader in the following carefully documented pages of Dr. Wu's book. This book will go a long way in demonstrating the power of culture vis-a-vis economic and other factors in human behaviour. It is a must for China scholars, for comparativists, as well as for social scientists in general.

FRANCIS L. K. HSU
University of San Francisco

Preface

My main intention in writing this book was to use anthropological tools to portray a Chinese immigrant minority. I have used both an anthropological and an historical approach to analyze the Papua New Guinea Chinese society, deliberately placing more emphasis on the latter. Being interested in the developmental process and organizational principles of overseas Chinese societies, I realized that I had a rare chance to observe a Chinese society in a colonial and post-colonial context. I was able to trace these processes and the principles of the Papua New Guinea Chinese society due to its small size and relatively short history. A developmental history of this society may serve as a miniature of many other overseas Chinese societies in Southeast Asia and the Pacific, and thus help others to understand better the overseas Chinese.

Although commercial activity is central to the Chinese activities in Papua New Guinea, this book is not about Chinese business operations. Commercialization of the Papua New Guinea Chinese shall be the subject of another book under preparation. It is true that the overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia are typecast as successful merchants, but the image often overshadows their struggle, difficulties, and efforts to adapt to the environment. The insecurity of the Chinese caught my attention as soon as I arrived in Port Moresby. Since I had no contacts in the Chinese community, I initially relied on a few European friends at the University of Papua New Guinea to introduce me to nearby Chinese shopkeepers. I also walked into Chinese shops, bought some things, and then entered into conversation. Most of the people were warm and friendly, treating me as a fellow Chinese visitor from out of town. Later I discovered that I could not convince people that my research was for none other than academic reasons. Based on my previous research experiences in tribal societies, I knew I should visit the community leaders to explain my work in order to gian entry to the society. On many occasions though the community leaders avoided me. Either someone would taken suddenly ill when I called, or he would not keep his appointment as promised. It did not take long for me to realize that I had arrived in Papua New Guinea at a time of crisis for the Chinese—when independence was approaching. It also happened that there were other researchers there at the same time (Cahill 1971, 1972; Inglis 1972), a situation which has given rise to a widely held belief that the Australian government had launched an investigation into the Chinese community on the eve of Papua New Guinea's independence.

I was frustrated to hear the rumor that I was realling a *wong-ga* spy—a

man on Her Majesty's secret service (although some also debated whether I was sent from Canberra, Peking, or Taipei). Their suspicion inspired me to try to understand the meaning behind their anxiety about my research, their cautious responses toward the changing political environment, their complaints about the harsh social environment both past and present, and their aspirations for commerce. I realized that to understand their present social life an examination of the overall history of the Chinese population in this specific environment would be necessary. The adaptation process of the Chinese in Papua New Guinea thus became a focus of my field research.

This book is based on fieldwork and library reserach conducted between 1971 and 1974, in Australia and in Papua New Guinea, when I was a Research Scholar at the School of Pacific Studies, Australian National University. I am grateful to the University for funds which supported my fieldwork in Papua New Guinea, and I also appreciated the generous grant (grant-in-aid No. 2573) given to me by the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research to support this field research. Several people at the Australian National University who helped during the course of my research were Professor A. L. Epstein, Dr. Marie Reay, Professor Derek Freeman, Dr. Steward Firth, Dr. Hank Nelson, and Dr. David Penny.

Although I owe my anthropological training and career to many teachers, I wish to express my special thanks to Professors Yih-yuan Li and Francis L. K. Hsu, for they have initiated my interest in the study of Chinese society and the overseas Chinese. I am indebted to both of them for their continual guidance and for their comments on earlier drafts of the present book. In the past year, Professor Harry Lamley of the University of Hawaii has provided me with valuable advice as a historian and as a specialist in Chinese society. I enjoyed his friendship and sharing ideas with him during the course of writing this book. I also wish to thank Professor Alice G. Dewey, my first teacher in the United States, for her constant support and encouragement.

I became interested in the overseas Chinese for other than purely academic reasons—I had a largely sentimental reason. I myself am a descendant of immigrant Chinese. For generations, my ancestors were among the pioneer immigrants who participated in the development of Taiwan and thus the study of a contemporary Chinese immigrant society at least partially fulfils my own interest in finding out what my ancestors might have experienced.

During my field trips to Papua New Guinea I received kind assistance from many people at the University of Papua New Guinea, from various administration departments in Port Moresby and in West New Britain, and from the Sacred Heart Catholic Mission and the United Church in Rabaul.

This book is the result of the generous cooperation and hospitality of many Chinese of Papua New Guinea. It is impossible to thank each of them in a

separate acknowledgement here, but my thanks for their special help and friendship are especially due to Mr. and Mrs. Francis P. Cheung, Mr. and Mrs. James Cheong, Mr. and Mrs. Vincent Chan, Mr. and Mrs. John Lau, Mr. and Mrs. Andrew Lui and their family, the late Mr. Seeto Soon and his grandson, Mr. Kim Seeto, and the late Mr. Luk Pui-wai, Mr. and Mrs. Cedric Chee, Father Raphael Chow, Mr. and Mrs. Henry Chow, Mr. and Mrs. Tom Chow, Mr. Cheong Wing Hui, Mr. Chin Pak, Mr. Perry Kwan, and Dr. and Mrs. C. S. Li.

My wife, Wei-lan, shared with me both pleasant and depressing days during our fieldwork in Papua New Guinea and during my writing. She helped me in the field in visits and interviews, and she offered stimulating criticism of my analyses. All these years her unfailing support to me as an anthropological co-worker is beyond words. To her I dedicate this book.

One final note about Chinese words appearing in the text. I have followed the Wade-Giles system of spelling for Chinese words, distinguishing Mandarin from Cantonese. Chinese words spelled according to Mandarin pronunciation are capitalized and are not in italics, e.g., Mr. Sutu or Kuo Min Tang. Cantonese terms are not capitalized except for place and personal names, and are in italics, e.g., *t'ong-fan t'san* or *wui-kun.*

D.Y.H.W.
East-West Center, Honolulu
January 1981

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CHAPTER ONE
Introduction

According to the census in 1971, the Chinese in Papua New Guinea numbered about 3,000, making up only 0.14 per cent of the total population of 2.28 million and 8.59 per cent of the total non-indigenous population of 35,000 (predominently white Australians). In spite of being very much a minority population, the Chinese have, for the past 100 years, played a significant role in the socioeconomic history of Papua New Guinea. Sir Julius Chan, who became the new Prime Minister of Papua New Guinea in March 1980, is a Chinese. The Second House of Assembly election in 1972 which sent Mr. Chan and his People's Progressive Party to power, and made him a cabinet minister, also made Mr. Perry Kwan, a Chinese fresh from New Ireland, the Speaker of the House.[1] Mr. Kwan resigned from this most prestigeous position after only two weeks in office and remained a Back Bancher throughout the term of the House, simply because he was ignorant of House procedures and was too embarrassed by his inability to run a House. Despite this superficial importance of the Chinese in national politics, the Chinese community has taken the course of exodus since 1973, during the transition to the country's independence. Chinese population dwindled steadily and Chinatown in many places gradually lost its Chinese. The present study thus provides an ethno-historical account of this overseas Chinese community, the rise and fall of an immigrant minority.

Before I begin my research on the Chinese in Papua New Guinea I knew almost nothing about them. I was surprised that there was a Chinese community in New Guinea, when I first heard about them in 1969. By chance I met a long-term European resident of the Australian Territory of Papua and New Guinea, who told me an interesting story about the Chinese. He said, when he first arrived in Port Moresby, capital city of Territory of Papua and New Guinea in the 1950s, there were no Chinese. By the end of the 1960s the Chinese developed a community of 500 people, many of whom owned shops in the business areas. He told me that he had no idea where these Chinese came from. He only knew that some were brought in originally as coolies to work on the "European" plantations. He further told me a story that one Chinese he met on Bougainville started as a coolie, had himself become the owner of a plantation as well as several stores and a hotel. This Chinese has an unusual name—You. He conjectured that Mr. Wong You must have acquired

[1] Both Mr. Chan and Mr. Kwan are part Chinese. Although the Chinese accept them as Chinese, Mr. Chan has identified himself a Niuginian. Mr. Kwan claimed to be a Niuginian, but the acceptance of his claim is questionable because he is physically Chinese.