

# Malaysian Chinese : An Inclusive Society



Edited by  
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

Malaysia is equivalent to changing one's ethnicity or "masuk Melayu". Her fascinating analysis examines this from both the perspective of the dominant ethnic Malay Muslims as well as the mainstream Chinese community viewpoint.

Rev. Dr. Tan Kim Sai's account of the increasing numbers of Chinese Christians details the changes within this community since the early establishment of the faith by European missionaries in the region and in Malaysia. Initially Chinese Christians served as assistants in the translation of Christian texts and community good works. Traditionally the churches were involved in community welfare, education, dealings with colonial bureaucracy, farming and other social matters of the Chinese community. This has continued to the present time. Chinese Christians as a group are generally well received by the Chinese community who value highly education through the mission and church established schools. The growing number of Chinese speaking churches as well as the increasing bilingual fluency has eased the process of communication and understanding of the faith in the Chinese community.

Associate Prof. Lee Su Kim's paper on the *Peranakan* and *Baba-Nyonya* and people illustrates the complexity of the Malaysian Chinese community. These descendents of early Chinese settlers have evolved their unique language and culture through a blend of indigenous native customs, cuisine, language and attire. Through it all they have maintained the legacy of their original Chinese dialect, values, culture and customs. Certainly they consider themselves Chinese and a part of the Chinese community. As the author describes it, the *Peranakan* is another kind of Chineseness.

It is obvious that the Chinese community in Malaysia comprises a number of minority communities identified, if you will, by their faith, education and historical heritage. It is a product of change, adaptation, diversity compounded with a steadfast adherence to the Chinese culture and values as practiced. As a consequence, there are different *weltanschauung* or world views existing in the community. As a dynamic

organism, it is evolving in the momentum of rapid changes in the geo-political and socio-economic climate of the nation. As was observed by the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus “ You cannot step twice into the same river; for fresh waters are ever flowing in upon you ”.

Huayan and Huazong are to be congratulated for hosting this timely and highly relevant conference to encourage the Chinese community in Malaysia to gain a deeper insight into their history, cultural heritage and legacy.

**Centre for Malaysian Chinese Studies**

## Acknowledgement

To convene a meaningful and successful conference demands a great deal of talent, ideas, support and effort. I am aware that the list mentioned is not exhaustive. So I would like to record my sincere appreciation and heartfelt thanks to the following persons and organizations listed below. They have extended their kind cooperation, contributions and sponsorship and rendering their invaluable assistance to ensure that the conference achieved a hallmark of excellence:

**The Hon. Tan Sri Dr. Koh Tsu Koon**, Minister in the Prime Minister's Department, who officiated the inauguration of the conference

**Tan Sri Pheng Yin Huah**, President of Huazong and Conference Joint Chairman

**Madam Chew Saw Eng**, Chairperson, Centre for Malaysian Chinese Studies

**Prof. Tan Chong Tin**, Joint Conference Chairman

The Keynote Speaker, **Professor Wang Gungwu**, National University of Singapore

**Professor Danny Wong Tze Ken**, History Department, University of Malaya

**Mr. Chua Hiong Kee**, President, Sarawak Chinese Cultural Association

**Dr. Lee Kam Hing**, Senior Fellow at the Institute of China Studies, University of Malaya

**Dr. Rosey Wang Ma**, Research Fellow at the Department of Islamic History and Civilization, University of Malaya

**Rev. Dr. Tan Kim Sai**, Resident Research Scholar, Malaysian Bible Seminary



**Dr. Lee Su Kim**, Associate Professor, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia

**Dr. Voon Phin Keong**, Chairman of Session 1

**Dr. Wong Yee Tuan**, Chairman of Session 2

**Mr. Yong Yew Wei**, Chairman of Discussion Panel

Tan Sri Dr. Koh Tsu Koon for his kind support and financial contributions, the Lee Foundation and Tan Sri Tiong Hiew King for their kind sponsorships

Last but not the least I must mention the hard work rendered by the organizing committee members and the conference secretariat staff who worked ceaselessly to put on an excellent event.

**Madam Tan Tat Chin**

Chairperson Huazong Committee on Innovation and Reform

## Biodata of Contributors

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Mr. Chua was born in Sibu, Sarawak in 1953. He completed his secondary education in the Sibu Methodist Secondary School. A person who dedicates his life to social, cultural and educational services, he is presently the President of Sarawak Chinese Cultural Association, the President of Malaysian Red Crescent Sibu Chapter, Advisor, United Chinese Association, Sibu Division Sarawak and Vice Chairman, Lau King Howe Hospital Memorial Museum Association, Sibu.

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Dr. Lee was lecturer and professor at the History Department, University of Malaya, and later research director at Star Publications. Presently, he is Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of China Studies, University of Malaya. He obtained his B.A. and M.A. from the University of Malaya and Ph.D. from Monash University. Dr. Lee's publications include *The Sultanate of Aceh*, 1993 and (jointly with Tan Chee Beng), *The Chinese in Malaysia*, 2000.

**Rosey WANG Ma**

Dr. Ma is a Research Fellow at the Islamic History and Civilization Department, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur. Her special research field is the Chinese Muslims in China, the diaspora, and the Chinese Muslim converts in Malaysia. Her B.A. of Law is from National Chengchi University, Taiwan; M.Ed in Guidance & Counselling from IIUM; Ph.D. in Socio-anthropology from Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. Published articles in journals and chapters in books include the *Hui Diaspora in Encyclopedia of Diasporas*; *Shifting Identities: Chinese Muslims in Malaysia*.

**TAN Kim Sai**

Rev. Dr. Tan Kim Sai graduated with Bachelor of Theology from Singapore Bible College (1973), Master of Missiology from Canadian Theological College (1980), Master of Arts in Islamic Studies from Birmingham University, UK (1990), and Ph.D. in Intercultural Studies from Fuller Theological Seminary, USA (1993). He used to serve as a church pastor from 1974—1979, as a lecturer/Dean of Malaysia Bible Seminary from 1981-1996, and then as its Principal from 1997-2009. Currently he is serving as Resident Research Scholar of the same Seminary. Dr. Tan was ordained as a Presbyterian minister for Kuala Lumpur Logos Church in 1999. His recent publications include *Gospelogy* (MBS, 2006), and *Facing the New Millennium with Faith, Hope and Love* (The Bridge, 2009).

**LEE Su Kim**

Dr. Lee Su Kim is an author and Associate Professor at the School of Language Studies and Linguistics, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. She holds a B.A., Dip.Ed and M.Ed from University of Malaya and a Doctorate in Education from the University of Houston. Dr. Lee Su Kim is the first President of the Persatuan *Peranakan Baba Nyonya* Kuala Lumpur & Selangor. Her books include the bestsellers *Malaysian Flavours: Insights into Things Malaysian*, *Manglish* and *A Nyonya In Texas: Insights of a Straits Chinese Woman in the Lone Star State*. Her latest book is *Kebaya Tales Of Matriarchs, Maidens, Mistresses and Matchmakers* (2011).

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# 1

## **Malaysian Chinese and Regional Developments**



## 1

**Malaysian Chinese and  
Regional Developments****WANG Gungwu**

Although I have been away since 1968, I have never stopped being interested and concerned for the Chinese community in Malaysia. Today, I have been asked to give an overview of the Southeast Asian Chinese. In order to do that, I need also to look further at Chinese communities elsewhere. The more I read about recent developments, the more I am aware how these developments have ramifications well beyond our region and how developments elsewhere have an important impact on what is happening in Southeast Asia. Not least of which is the rise of China and India and the overall change of balance of relationships between Asia and the West. This is something new for most people in this part of the world. Nobody would have expected this to happen so quickly and dramatically. That background is something we need always to bear in mind. It is not enough to look at developments among various the Chinese in South East Asia without taking into account of what is happening elsewhere.

But let me begin by briefly outlining what has happened in Southeast Asia over the last few decades. I think we are all aware that population variety and diversity is common to many countries. It is not



peculiar to Malaysia. This morning, the Minister quite rightly pointed that out that there are many unique features in Malaysia but, nevertheless, there are also commonalities with other parts of the region. And one of these concerning the Chinese in the country that I would like to emphasize here is that there have been layers of settlement of different Chinese groups over the centuries. The presence of such layers throughout the history of the region is something that we need to bear in mind. The variety derives not only from Chinese coming from different parts of China but also from the fact that they came at different times. We know that those who came very early were single men who came out to do business and to work. Very often, they inter-married and settled down in the port cities and native kingdoms. That first layer of people goes back a long way, certainly more than a thousand years ago. And up to the sixteenth century, that was probably the norm. Although most of the men went back to China, those who remained brought up their descendants as people who were assimilated to the local cultures and societies.

Another layer was formed out of those who came during the period when the Europeans came to dominate many of the port cities of the area, and in some cases, had taken control over chunks of territory. In those areas where the Chinese traded with the Europeans as well as with the native and other foreign merchants, the societies became much more complex. There was less assimilation and there were opportunities for the Chinese to be treated differently, largely because the European merchants, whether Portuguese, Spanish or Dutch, but particularly the Dutch, encouraged the preservation of Chinese communities for their own interests. They got the Chinese to help them trade in the region and, in particular, to try and open up trade with China. This was increasingly the common condition from the eighteenth century onwards down to, I would say, very recent times. The Europeans were very concerned with the China trade and found the help that local Chinese communities