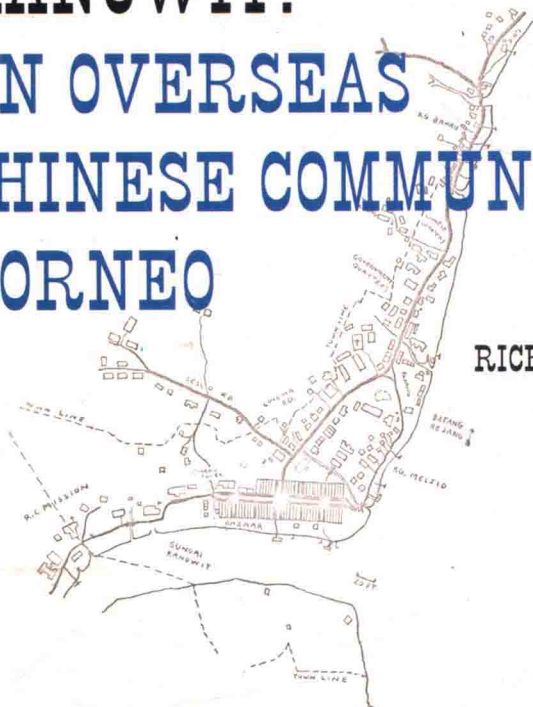


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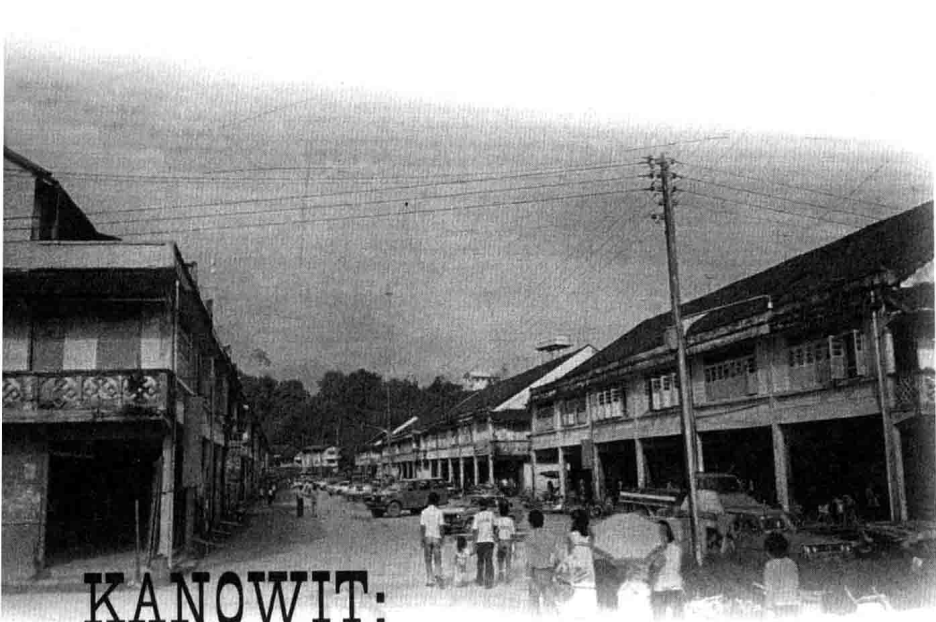
KANOWIT: AN OVERSEAS CHINESE COMMUNITY IN BORNEO

RICHARD C. FIDLER



砂拉越华族文化协会

SARAWAK CHINESE CULTURAL ASSOCIATION



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Richard C. Fidler

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I wish to express my appreciation to my Academic Advisor, Dr. Ward H. Goodenough, for his many years as my teacher, advisor, mentor, and friend, and to the Faculty of the Department of Anthropology of the University of Pennsylvania.

Indispensible to the success of my field research was the friendship and cooperation of the people of Kanowit Bazaar. There are too many to whom I am indebted for the kindness and hospitality, understanding and assistance, to mention them all here; I single out only a few who made my fifteen months in Kanowit so memorable:

Mr. and Mrs. Lau Ngai Yii and family
 Helen Lau Pek Kim, for her secretarial assistance
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 Father Gerardus Bruggeman
 The District Officer and his staff
 The Peace Corps and Commonwealth Volunteers
 The Members of the D*O*G Club
 Lee Chai Tee, for sharing a part of his world with me

FOREWORD

Richard Fidler--Rick--first came to Kanowit in 1970-71 to begin writing about “An Overseas Chinese Community in Borneo”. But that year or so was just the beginning of his long-term connection with the Kanowit community. Six years later he brought his new wife Carol to introduce her to Kanowit, and, beginning in the 1990’s, he brought his daughter, Kathy, and then his son, Ben.

A two-way path was eventually established. Friends from Kanowit came to visit in Providence, Rhode Island, where Rick and Carol both taught anthropology. These friends brought news of people and of changes, such as the building of the temple and the arrival of the road. In years when he didn’t visit, Rick kept up with Kanowit friends by mail. He took his last trip the summer before his death in June 2009. Among his last requests was the wish for his ashes to be scattered in the Rejang.

How did a boy growing up in several small towns in Pennsylvania, U.S.A., develop such a keen interest and lasting affection for Sarawak? He himself credited his early reading of adventure writer Richard Halliburton’s books, especially *The Flying Carpet*. Later, as a student at the University of Pennsylvania, he acquired an interest in Mayan culture, but after graduation, during the time he served in the newly established Peace Corps, he turned his sights toward Southeast Asia.

Rick’s preparation for the Peace Corps included “boot camp” in Hawaii, culminating in a rigorous swimming test in the bay at the City of Refuge. His permanent assignment, however, was to the town of Tenom in Sabah, where his primary responsibility was teaching English in a Chinese language school. In addition, as a volunteer, he helped prepare students at St. Anthony’s private school for advanced exams in English and world history. This two-year Peace Corps stint was the basis of his interest in Chinese

bazaar towns, an interest he pursued personally and professionally for the rest of his life.

After teaching in Tenom Rick returned to the University of Pennsylvania for graduate work. He knew he wanted his doctoral project to be the study of a Chinese community in Borneo, but at that time Sabah wasn't granting research visas. Sarawak proved more accessible. Working through the Sarawak Museum, he received a visa and chose to study the bazaar town of Kanowit on the Rejang River.

Kanowit, at that time, was a center from which locally grown pepper and forest products were sent downriver, while manufactured goods were imported to local Ibans and Malays, with Chinese merchants serving as middlemen. There were no roads. People and goods alike traveled up and down the Rejang River. Even though there were no roads, there were schools, a library, a cinema, a post office, a Catholic mission, Protestants churches, a main bazaar, and the Malay kampung. People of three main cultures and ethnicities—as well as numerous subcultures—mingled in the bazaar. Rick was fascinated with how they all fitted together into a functioning community.

Trained as an archaeologist and informed by the theories of Julian Steward, Rick approached community study differently from the methods of traditional ethnographers. Instead of formally interviewing informants and restricting his records to transcriptions of those interviews, he began mapping the bazaar, shophouse by shophouse. He determined which goods and services flowed into and out of each. He determined which families were associated with each shophouse, and he listed all their members and relationships. He copied every written record he could find—census, marriage, school, library, cinema—and then he sat in a coffee shop and strolled through Main Bazaar listening to everything and taking pictures.

Rick took more than 200 black and white photographs and

more than 100 color slides, each labeled with names, event, and other information. The photos were of men talking in the coffee shop, children playing in the street, crowds waiting for the express boat, festivals, funerals, pepper drying, incense burning. These photos, along with voluminous written records and “listening records,” were the raw material he used for his dissertation.

“Life in an Overseas Chinese Community “was produced at the beginning of Rick’s career, but his interest in learning about his subject never lessened. Of all the courses he taught through the years at a number of universities, his favorite was “The Kanowit Course,” in which he tried to show American college students what it was like to live in a town like Kanowit. He took pride in collecting up-to-date statistics, media material, and photographs, so that an American student in 2009 was delighted to find in Rick’s course magazines which were a Malaysian counterpart to his own favorite graphic novels.

In addition to his teaching, Rick, a founding member of the Borneo Research Council, gave papers at most of their biennial meetings. He was a strong advocate for the inclusion of local scholars and lay people in the meetings, an advocate who never ceased emphasizing the important contribution of Chinese culture to the Malaysian community.

Robin Brancato

NOTE ON ROMANIZATION

All non-English words in the text have been italicized, with the exception of Proper Nouns. The language or dialect of each word is indicated in parenthesis, with its English translation, if the latter is not clear from the context of the sentence.

Proper Nouns have been Romanized in their conventional Sarawak spellings.

Chinese words are all given in the Mandarin dialect, unless otherwise indicated. They are Romanized by the Wade-Giles system, which indicates tone by superscript number (e.g. hsien⁴). References for Romanization and translation are:

Shau Wing Chan

1955 A Concise English-Chinese Dictionary.

2nd edition. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

MacGillivray, D.

nd Mandarin-Romanized Dictionary of Chinese.
Tainan, Taiwan: Universal Book Company.

Malay words are Romanized in the standard National Language (Bahasa Kebangsa'an). Reference for Romanization and translation:

Wilkinson, R. J.

1959 A Malay-English Dictionary (Romanized).

2 vols. London: Macmillan.

Iban Words are Romanized and translated as in Scott, N. C.

1956 A Dictionary of Sea Dayak. London: London University, School of Oriental and African Studies.

PREFACE

Kanowit Bazaar is a multiracial, multicultural bazaar town on the Rejang River in central Sarawak. While its population has more Chinese than any other race, the latter are divided among a variety of different dialect groups, so that no one groups dominates the town. At the same time, Chinese culture does not dominate either, as the history of the Chinese experience in Sarawak has led them to adopt many non-Chinese customs, while the non-Chinese members of the community continue to practice many of their traditional patterns of behavior as well. Over both of these segments of the community, and affecting both equally, was laid the government of the Brooke Raj, and, later, Colonial Civil Service, bringing Western culture and Western education to the diverse peoples of Sarawak.

The town is a bazaar, a market, and the Rejang River is the highway that connects it with its suppliers and ultimate customers in the interior, and with its markets and source of manufactured goods in the city of Sibuan and the ports of the world. Kanowit Bazaar lives on its middleman trade. The necessities of this trade for the survival of the community have led to the development of business practices, specifically the towkay-Iban symbiosis, that have, in turn, led to new forms of behavior and attitudes of racial tolerance needed to sustain the economic system. The primacy of the middleman trade in local subsistence has also affected the town through its declining prosperity; the population is failing to grow, and is losing young people to the cities downriver. As changes in the technological and economic environment endanger the continuation of the bazaar's existence, and the prospects of a good life for its children in years to come, the residents, especially the Chinese, have, by necessity, come to accept that changes in traditional ways of social, educational, and cultural behavior must

be made to face the challenges of the future.

While some of the old institutions continue to function - the dialect associations and the Kapitan China, for example - they no longer meet the needs of providing a secure and rewarding life for the citizens of the community. The path to future success is seen by many to lie in using the new institutions provided by the Sarawak society, solving Sarawak problems with Sarawak solutions. Education is often believed to be one of these solutions. It provides an excellent agent for social change, as the concept of an education is well established and highly valued in Chinese culture, and the idea of success through education requires no traumatic cultural or philosophical changes for the Chinese of Kanowit. The education their children receive, however, is nothing like the traditional Chinese system. It instills them with values, concepts, and ideals as foreign to their natal cultures as English, the medium in which they learn these new patterns, is from Chinese. Education also brings the young of all races together, and gives them shared experiences and shared goals that promote inter-racial understanding and cooperation.

As old economic practises fail to meet the challenges of a new environment, changes are made in them to respond to the situation; as old institutions no longer satisfy social needs, new ones are development that will meet these demands. The same is true of religion and the family. The old gods were left at home in China, in the ancestral halls and the earth-god shrines; their truncated survivals in Kanowit are remnants of cultural heritage, not of religious philosophy. The family organizations that worked so well in south-eastern China do not satisfy the needs of living in a multiracial community; their remnants are also of tradition and nostalgia, not of deep-seated conviction.

Murdock has been severely criticized for his statement that changes in economy, property, and religion lead to changes in, first, residence patterns, and later, the structure of kin groups and

terminologies. Some feel it is too strongly deterministic, that it does not take into account the multitude of additional factors that influence social life. Others feel it is an artificial concept, created in the libraries at Yale and then applied in toto to the real world, without regard for the diversities in concept formation that differentiate the two. Both of these criticisms are well founded. It is folly to believe that all changes in social structure, wherever they occur and whoever is conceptualizing them, can be traced to Murdock's neat thesis of economy / residence / descent / kin terms.

It happens, however, that the thesis of Murdock describes the situation in Kanowit exactly. Economic motives do lie behind all of these changes among the Chinese of the town, and many more in addition. A desire to change their economic position led the founders of Kanowit to leave their lineage lands and ancestor shrines and come to Sarawak and a new environment, a new residence, a new way of life. To survive in this new world, new patterns had to be developed - new ways of earning a living, based on trade rather than on property, and that trade required close relationships with a very different race of people. New types of family ties had to be forged, drawing on kinsmen previously neglected in favor of the dominant and powerful lineage organizations. By economic necessity, the agnatic lineage village has given way to the bilateral nuclear household. Murdock's thesis of economic determinism does fit when applied to a group determined to survive economically.

Many others have written about culture change among the Overseas Chinese. Some have been anthropologists, some political scientists, some government bureaucrats, some business analysts. All seem concerned with The Problem of Assimilating the Chinese; all dwell upon the Chinese acculturating to the culture of their host country. All have been written about small percentages of Chinese surrounded by a massive and dominant native culture. This does not exist in Kanowit Bazaar, and neither does Chinese

acculturation, as there is nothing well enough established for them to acculturate to. What they are doing instead, slowly, painfully, and not without some hesitation, is participating in the development of a new culture, blending their ideas, their beliefs, their ways of approaching and handling problems, with those of their cultural neighbors. All put into the common culture, all derive benefits from it. The medium of this new culture is largely English, as it is a neutral language, weighed in favor of no one ethnic group. It is also a language that is suitable for the communication of these new ideas, as it has helped to form and conceptualize them. But it is not English culture; the culture is the direct product of its multiethnic input.

The new multi-culture of Sarawak is only in its infant stages. Not all of the problems have yet been defined, let alone solved. But by necessity the people of Kanowit are drawn to it, and it is this necessity that gives it a chance to survive its difficult period of incubation.

Not all of the races of Kanowit "love" each other. Racial bias still exists; racial fears still threaten; racial chauvinism still blinds the eyes of its adherents to the realities of modern survival and success. But survival and success have led to tolerance, and even if bred of necessity, even if only a manifestation of outward behavior rather than of true desire for social justice, the tolerance of the people of Kanowit Bazaar is a lesson for the whole world to learn.

Richard C. Fidler
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
Hari Kebangsaan - National Day
August 31, 1972.

FRONTESPIECE
MAP OF
KANOWIT BAZAAR

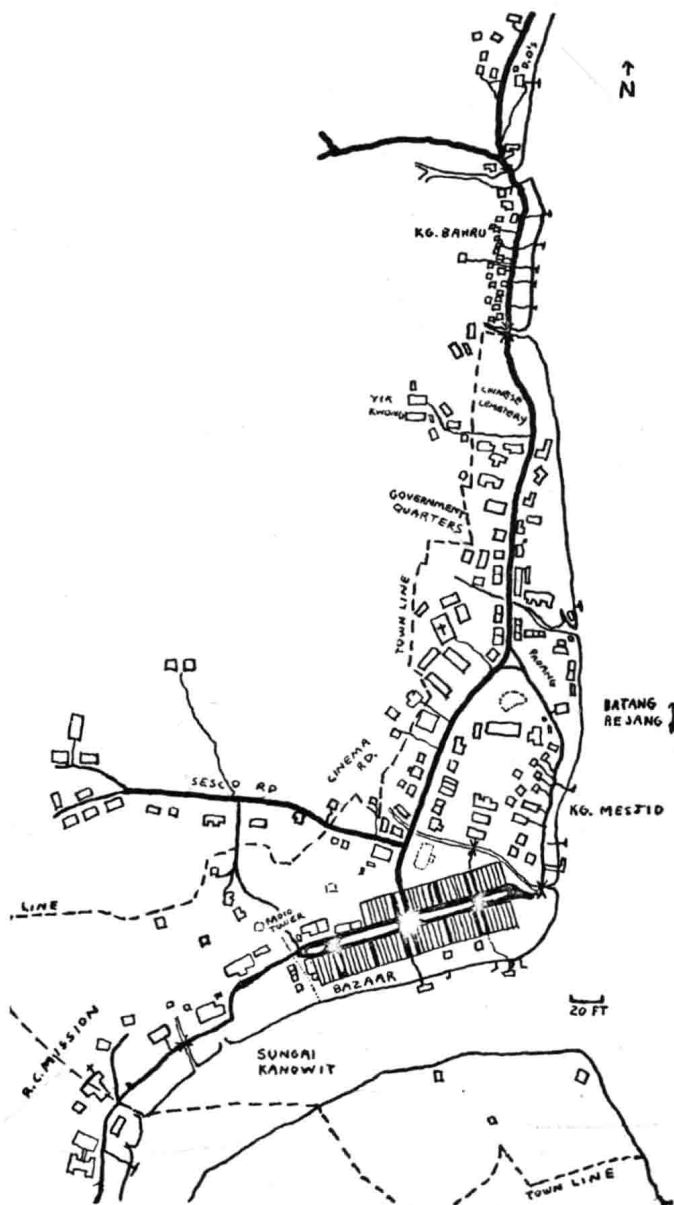


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