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Entrepreneurial Skills among Chinese Traders and Iban Clients: Boat Trade in Batang Lupar, Sarawak –

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Abstract

Chinese have played an important role in the establishment of bazaars and townships in many rural areas of Sarawak. They are perceived as more successful as entrepreneurs because of their hardworking, risk-taking and frugal characteristics. However, they are not the only one having such characteristics. This paper discusses the entrepreneurial skills owned by the Iban in Batang Lupar, Sarawak during boat trade activities with Chinese boat hawkers. Memory and perception of boat hawkers during the trading and negotiation process offer an important insight into the trading skills of their indigenous communities.

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counterparts. Fieldwork for this research project is still ongoing and the discussion provided is far from conclusive. However, it is envisaged that the preliminary findings could shed some attention onto the motivation, social structures, partnerships of the Iban communities that promote the entrepreneurial drive and skills which is of equivalent with their Chinese neighbours.

Keywords: Sarawak, bazaars, entrepreneurial skills, Chinese boat traders, Iban clients

Background of Study

The Chinese in Sarawak are well-known for their trading skills as witnessed in many of the colonial reports. In Sarawak Gazettes, residents, first officers wrote about the activities of Chinese traders such as, the purchasing price of Engkabang during fruiting seasons or the selling price of raw sago of the Melanaus to the Chinese traders. Many reports were also focusing on sales and purchase of rubber between Chinese and Dayaks in the Second division. Occasionally there were news about contracts of roads, court houses or quarters awarded to Chinese tawaus in town areas. All these reports point towards the success of Chinese as traders and businessmen. The Chinese are believed to own a few distinctive characteristics such as diligence, frugal and persistence which helped them to excel above other groups. They are also known to have high degree of discipline and agile in adapting to harsh working condition. There were of course stories of overworked Chinese who resorted to opium or gambling as a way of leisure, with certain degrees of sadness.

The study on river trading-boat industry started last year with an anthropologist colleague. It is still an ongoing project. My colleague is a Iban-Kelabit from Saratok. His maternal family used to trade salt from the highlands with the Ibans in the upper stream. I am a Chinese (Hakka-Chao An dialect) born in Satok, Kuching. My grandfather and great grandfather were pepper farmers in Serian. It could probably be surmised that both of us share one attribute; our families have histories in trading. His family were salt producers while mine pepper producers. His family traded salt with the Ibans, and also with the Chinese in town area. Mine traded with Teochew and Hokkien tawaus in Kuching town. There was familiarity when we exchange views about books recently read about historical Sarawak.

We were intrigued with life during the boat trading days. There have not been much research done on the nature of the trade and the social relationships between the traders and producers. Apart from Chew (2004), most of the publications on the river trading in Sarawak only mentioned the topic in passing. Mooney (2011), for instance, dedicated one chapter on the trading-boat activities, only because there was a murder case of the Chinese boat hawker. Morrison (1993: 64) also briefly described how boat hawkers were high...

Site of Study

The study focuses on Batang Lupar river system which was chosen because of the classification of the river system. The study was made in 2009, which was based on a Chinese-Iban relationship and differences in research. In addition, the history of spirit mediums in Sarawak also witnessed the Han Chinese involvement of the ceremonies varied in different areas over the years. The study was by Chinese Hakka descendants, a family which was known to be very active in the preparation of the ceremonial activities. However, the study was significant key in understanding the life and work of the traders and producers.

Methodology of Study

The study employed the participant observation method by participating as much as possible in the working routine of the traders and producers. One of the limiting factors was the lack of knowledge of the traders and producers during the Japanese occupation period. The study tried to recall and retell the most important processes of the situation during that period.

During visits in Sarawak, I move or speak since passed away in casual conversations. I visit and stay at the homes of the following sections to understand the details of the transactions and reflections during trade.