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NGINGIT

(SPECIAL EDITION)

ISSUE 9, JULY 2017



THE
Tun Jugah
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"Aiih medung dih...
Anak ngingit kampung dibandung ensirau hari
Bedidit di bungkung dan ujung nyatu padi, teras kawi,
Ngerara kebung langit landung udah ayung,
Mata hari ka terunji mati;
Nya alai nangkan anak iban ke agi nyereban ngiga jereki,
Chukup dulu lambu kita bepeletu seharitu,
Tampung baru pagila pagi,
Itung-itung penyampau untung;
Pelematika pemayuh pengerugi,
Nyambika nemu dini alai jenti diri-empu bediri bekenji
Angkat nyingkang ngepung pemansang,
Nyapai penyamai...dih jawang wai..!"

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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

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counterparts. Fieldwork for this research project²⁰ is still ongoing and the discussion provided is far from conclusive. However, it is envisaged that the preliminary finding 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 wellknown 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 seasons²¹ or the selling price of raw sago of the Melanaus to the Chinese traders²². 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 taukehs 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 taukehs 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

²⁰ The project is funded by Institute of Borneo Studies, University Malaysia Sarawak, under grant no. F06/(NRC)/1337/2016(3)

²¹ Sarawak Gazette, 1 May 1919, p.111.

²² Sarawak Gazette, 1 October 1919, p. 259; 1 November 1919, p. 286; 1 February 1928, p.31. Sports, Sarawak.

how boat hawkers along the Rajang River lived a “lonely and dangerous life but profits were high...”

Site of Study

The study focuses on Engkilili, located 215km from Kuching city. The bazaar town is chosen because of the long acquaintance with the Chinese here. The first field visit was made in 2009, when I was supposed to collaborate with a senior researcher on a Chinese-Iban relationship study. Unfortunately I pulled out of the study due to differences in research approach. In 2010, I returned again to document the procession of spirit mediums in conjunction with the Tua Pek Kong temple's celebration²³. I have also witnessed the Hungry Ghost Festival in the town area, and also in Marup area whereby the old gold mine kongsi house still stands. The two ceremonies varies as the one in town was carried out by the Chinese Teochew while the one at the old kongsi was by Chinese Hakka. The paraphernalia did not differ too much, but the sequence of the ceremonies varied. The discussion of such topic is beyond the scope of this paper. However, the social history and relationship of the Teochew and Hakka holds a significant key in understanding the boat trading network of Engkilili and also the entire Batang Lupar river system.

Methodology of Study

The study employs the usual ethnographic approach by conducting interview and participating as much as possible in the community's activities. Mapping of the trading routes along Batang Lupar will also be included.

One of the limitations for this study lies in locating respondents who have participated directly in the boat trade activities. Boat trading activities come to a halt during the Japanese Occupation. Therefore boat traders who have been in their 80s the least. The study tries at best to locate and interview boat traders who are able to recall and retell the memories of their experience. Children of boat traders are also important sources as they might be able to relate their father's or relatives narratives of the situation during the upriver journey.

During visits in 2010, three former boat traders were interviewed. One had since passed away in 2015. Another has suffered a stroke in 2013 and is not able to move or speak since the stroke. Over the course of seven years (2010 to present), casual conversations on boat trade activities and other trades usually occur whenever I visit and stay at the bazaar. The finding of these interviews will be summarised in the following section. The accounts on trading items, how deals are determined, when credit or barter system were applied were the main points to pick up in order to understand the dynamic of the boat trading network system. The experience or reflections during trading are also important leads for this study.

²³ A paper entitled “Tua Pek Kong Procession and the Social Structure of a Bazaar Community in Sarawak” was published in 2013, in 第一届马来西亚华人研究双年会论文集, 林忠强、庄华兴、潘永强、张炳祺、许德发、詹缘端合编, pp.145-178, Center of Malaysian Chinese Studies.

From the information collected, interviews are also to be conducted at longhouses. The longhouses are at best be those which have traded with Engkilili respondents. The respondents from the 'producers' part is equally important in understanding the entire boat trade industry. The same situation occurs wherever the producers might not be around anymore. In many cases, the longhouse community members will be interviewed to gather information about the stories, narratives during earlier days.

This study tries to utilize the knowledge of both researchers who have fair amount of knowledge of the people in Engkilili and its surrounding vicinity. Language barrier is not a question for both researchers. In situation where either researcher does not understand Mandarin, Teochew, Hakka or Ibans of the respondents, the other researcher will translate and explain at the end of the interview or dialogue session. The study aim to amplify

Preliminary Findings of Study

Two terms are used to describe boat trade in the town; "Lampu Shon²⁴" in Hakka and "Ya Chun²⁵" in Teochew. "Lampu Shon" means "Light Boat" when translated. The explanation given by the locals on the name is that the boat is lit up at dawn and dusk and it attracts attention from afar since the river and its surrounding is dark. For the Teochew, they call it "Coconut Boat" ('ya' means coconut while 'chun' means boat) because the boat has a roof made of coconut leaves and its different from the normal boat at that time with no roofing. For the Ibans, they call it "Lampu Cina" which literally Chinese light boats. In Sarawak Gazettes, colonial officers acknowledged such trade as "bandong trade". The usage of this term could have been due to other earlier literature at that time. There were reports by the Dutch Indies Company on the activities of the Chinese in Bandung, Sulawesi, Medan which included the boat trade. Hence probably the use of the term.

Based on interviews and conversations with Engkilili folks, there were only four shops in early 1920s, all owned by the Teochew. All four shops were grocery shops, namely He Sing 和興, Za Ru 再裕, Sheng Fat 生發 and Liat Fat 良發, and owned by the Kua, Tay and Sim families. Only He Sing and Sheng Fat are still into the sundry business while the other two are now a photo shop and a spare parts shop. These four sundry shops were the main collectors, creditors and suppliers for the boat trading activities in this area up to the Lemanak area. The shops supply groceries to the boat hawker for their journey upriver and in return collect the rubber, jungle products. The deals are mostly done based on credit terms. According to Kapitan Bong (deceased in 2015), most of the boat hawkers working for the Teochew shop owners were Hakka, while the apprentices in the shops helping their taukehs²⁶ are Teochew who are mostly their relatives. The town at that time up until 1930s was a 100 percent Teochew dominated. The Hakka lived nearby in Marup, Mawang, Jelukong and Stuga areas. The bazaar was known as *Shong Tui Teu* (上梯頭) by the Hakka or *Tui Tau* (梯頭) in

²⁴ Shon is the Hakka dialect for 船 (pinyin in Mandarin is chuán)

²⁵ Ya Chun written in Chinese is 椰船.

²⁶ Taukeh means boss or employer, by the locals.

Teochew. Shong Tui Teu literally means ‘going up the stairways’ and for boat peddlers, it means the landing area or the jetty.

The shop owners then bring the collected items to Simanggang in boats paddled either by their Teochew apprentice or the Hakka. Kapitan Bong used to work as a ‘transporter’ helping a Teochew taukeh to send his goods to Simanggang. There is a double function played by a boat hawker. They not only conduct trade activities in upriver, they also transport goods to downriver, to bigger ports. They usually work for a single taukeh, where they receive credits for the provisions and help him to transport the products to bigger town area. The findings resonate Tien’s colonial report in 1953²⁷ that, “the rural business are cloesely tied into the system of clanships.there will be found shops owned by members of the clan” (1953, pg.66). The Teochew dominated the bazaar’s main economic activities and

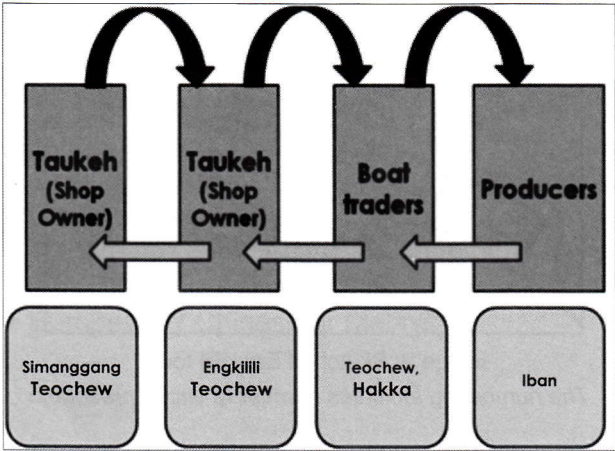


Image 1: Boat Trading Network at Batang Lupar

This study is still ongoing and far from conclusive, therefore suggestion of findings can only be presented. The trading network in Batang Lupar can be exemplified through Image 1. The primary producers of commodity goods are the Ibans, and also some Hakka living in nearby vicinity (Marup, Mawang, Stuga and Jelukong). The boat hawkers are Teochew and majority are Hakka. Sometimes the operators of the boat comprises of a Teochew and a Hakka. The Teochew being related to a shop owner at the bazaar is appointed as the person in charge while the Hakka is more like an employee. Both of them worked for the same taukeh (the Teochew shop owner in the bazaar). The Teochew apprentice may be hired at a minimal wage and he is indebted to the taukeh for taking him in and providing him shelter and food. The Hakka worker could be living in the boat, taking care of the boat when it has reached the bazaar. He is paid a wage and also provided with food and shelter.

²⁷ Tien, J.K (1953) The Chinese of Sarawak: a study of social structure. (reprinted in 1997). Kuching: SUPP

On the river mouth of Batang Lupar at Simanggang some 30km away, there is another taukeh whom the bazaar taukeh is indebted to. He is indebted to him for the credit in supplying the groceries that his workers peddle upriver in exchange for jungle products and rubber. The credit is loaned based on social trust between the two clansmen. They may both be from the same surname clan such as Tay or Sim, or Kua. They may be from the same province that speaks the same dialect, hence making them clansmen of same dialect.

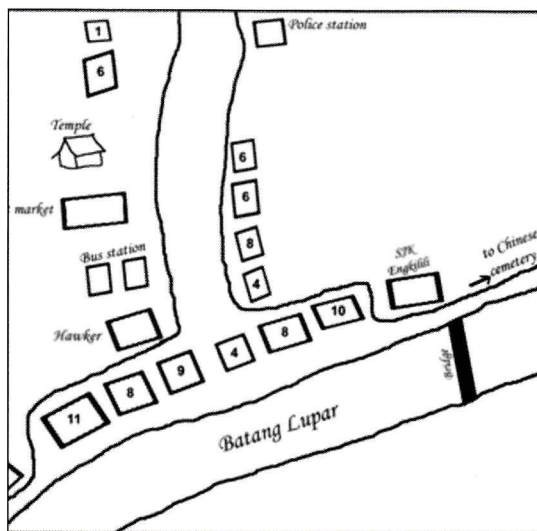


Image 2: Sketch of Engkilili town.

The numbering indicates number of shops presently.

The development of the bazaar can be seen clearly through the setup of shop rows. In early 1920s, there were only 4 shops. By middle of 1920s, 7 more shops were built right next to the four adjoining shops (indicated with number 11 in Image 2). In 1930 the second row of shops were built thus making 19 shops in total, all owned by Teochew. In 1935, 30 more shops were built and this time some of them were own by Hakka. These Hakka owners are pepper cultivators living in the four areas mentioned earlier. They gained profit when pepper price reached a high value in early 1930s, hence the ability to move into the bazaar area and compete with the Teochew.

As Hakka are relatively latecomers into the sundry trade, they might have encountered greater difficulties in obtaining credits. This study will try to find out on the taukeh in Simanggang that has given them the credit and supplies. Also the study will also look into how the boat traders who work in the same river system negotiate their 'locales'. Boat traders have their own longhouse clients. They made visits and sometimes stay for a few days in the boat anchored near the longhouse. From the information gathered, a trader when approaching a longhouse would first make a courtesy visit to the headman. He would then make known his intention to trade with the people. The headman did not make a lone decision, but discussed with his people. Then only the deal is made. The study will inquire into how was the offer made so that the longhouse agree to deal with the boat hawker, and the tactics employed to make the deals more attractive or competitive. If there is a fallout in the discussion, did the boat trader go to another neighbouring longhouse to make another dealing?

Another important finding which has steered the study into another direction is after listening to a respondent about his experience as a boat trader;

“Life at the longhouse was good. There was abundant of food. Empurau, semah, tengalak and udang palak besar were ample in the river. Rambutans, durians, cempedak were everywhere in the forest.”

The remarks by a 88 years old Teochew boat hawker has left a lasting impression. The river fish mentioned are much prized and only available in certain area of Sarawak. These are known as local delicacies. The fruits are irresistible delights. After hearing the ‘life was good’ remark, a question suddenly surfaced. If life was that good with so much food, then there is really no worry. Why then did the inhabitants of the longhouse tap rubber or plant pepper, two very labour burdened tasks? What were the motives behind the exchange of rubber, pepper and jungle products with Chinese traders? It could not be possibly just to acquire grocery items such as sugar, salt, tabacco etc. Was it to acquire bigger imperishable items like pots and jars, silvers, etc? Was it to improve one’s status in the longhouse by having more commercialised goods? The Chinese are known for their frugal, hardworking attributes to succeed in trades and in life. What about the Ibans? If ‘life was already good’, and they are still striving to produce more commodity goods, they too share the same if not even more attributes. This study will approach the motives and motivation that drove the Ibans into the boat trade dealings. If there are commercialised goods that were highly desired, why were it so? Have the locals seen it during one of their bejalai trips? Or during their encounters with the Europeans? Chinese or Malays?

Conclusion

In Charles Brooke’s expedition to the Kajulau area on 10th June 1856²⁸, he wrote;

“While waiting in a small stream, we were obliged to stop at a trading boat of Dyaks bound for Saribas river...” (pg.167)

Dayak have been in trade before the arrival of Chinese immigrants from southeastern China or Chinese miners from Kalimantan. They have traded with the coastal Orang Laut and also the highlanders for various items. They might have fall out of competition when the Chinese came with their networks that went beyond Sarawak. This study envisaged to interrogate further on the motivation, social structure, partnerships of the Iban communities in the trade dealings. The relationship between Teochew and Hakka in the boat trade network is also important towards the understanding of social development in bazaar towns of Sarawak. To sum, the relationship between boat hawkers and local producers is not based on fixed transactions. Emotion, motivation, experience, obligation, network etc all contribute to the total relationship in the boat trade industry.

²⁸ Charles, B. (1866). Ten Years in Sarawak. Elibron Classic.

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