

“Chinese in Sarawak, 1946-63: Education, Land and Belonging”, Seminar paper presented at Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Kyoto University, 24 January 2011

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Introduction

The focus of this paper is on the social identities of the Chinese in Sarawak from 1946 to 1963 when the territory was a British crown colony. Extraneous factors such as the historical and cultural identity of the Chinese, how China viewed its role in relation to the Chinese overseas, the attitudes and policies of the colonial government in Sarawak, and the reactions of the indigenous people towards the Chinese, shaped the self-perceptions of the Chinese on their identity. According to Hirschman¹ being Chinese in Southeast Asia rests not only on a historical sense of a shared background but also on contemporary conditions especially the interactions of the Chinese with indigenous populations and national governments.

Chinese identity has several interwoven strands which have influenced Chinese self-perceptions of themselves and how they are being perceived by sovereign governments and the host environment. For many centuries, the Chinese have sojourned to Borneo and Sarawak to trade and in search of economic opportunities. Sojourning to Sarawak was a temporary experience but practical realities and the regime change in China to communism in 1949 forced most Chinese and their descendants to settle down in Sarawak. This adaptation from sojourners to settlers was accompanied by changes and adaptations to identity. In Edgar Wickberg's view² this identity, among the Chinese overseas, is constantly adapting, redefining and reconstructing itself and crosses ethnic boundaries.

Wang Gungwu³ has drawn up a conceptual model to delineate the changes and adaptations in social identities among the Chinese overseas. The historical identity is derived from shared background, values and traditions, nowadays subsumed under cultural identity. And what Wang

¹ Charles Hirschman, “Chinese Identities in Southeast Asia: Alternative Perspectives”, in Jennifer Cushman and Wang Gungwu (ed.), *Changing Identities of the Southeast Asian Chinese since World War II*, (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1988), p.23.

² Edgar Wickberg, “Relations with Non-Chinese, Ethnicity”, p.115 in Lynn Pan (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of the Chinese Overseas*, (Singapore: Editions Didier Millet, 2006), p.115

³ Wang Gungwu, “The Study of Chinese Identities in Southeast Asia”, in Jennifer Cushman and Wang Gungwu (ed.), *Changing Identities of the Southeast Asian Chinese since World War II*, (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1988), pp.1-22.