Chinese Diaspora and Faith Formation in Peninsular Malaysia: Ayer Salak, 1850-2019

LEE Kam Hing*

Abstract

Ayer Salak, 17 kilometres from Malacca town, is not only one of the oldest Chinese villages in Malaysia but also one that is predominantly Teochew (Chaozhou) and Christian. It still has about 100 families from the original number of over 200. The village was part of a transnational network of the Teochew people that facilitated the movement of people, trade, the spreading of the Catholic faith, and the maintenance of identity. In this network, a key role was played by the Paris Foreign Missions Society whose mission work spanned across the Teochew people of Shantou in China, Singapore, Siam and the Malay Peninsula. This transnational network was largely underpinned by the rice trade that moved between Siam, China, and Singapore in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Key words: Catholic, Teochew, diaspora, transnational network, identity

Introduction

A much neglected aspect of the history of Christianity in Malaysia is a discussion of the emergence and role of the diaspora or migrant church. A diaspora church is generally distinguished from the mission church which has, by far, received more attention (Wong and Ngu, 2014). Diaspora churches grew out of groups of people who settled in a new land and have formed a community. These churches became distinct communities with their own cultural identities and became part of the diaspora experience. Such communities are very conscious of their history and they take pride in preserving a heritage that has been passed down from generation to generation. Some elements of this heritage are physical artifacts while others are intangible. The latter is manifested often in the way community or individual lives are lived. Often, the history and heritage of the community are mixed with myths. But the myths, together with the history and heritage, are important because they provide meaning to members about

^{*} Dr. LEE Kam Hing (李锦兴) is Professor and Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Corporate Development) of New Era University College, Kajang, Malaysia. E-mail: kamhing.lee@newera.edu.my

¹ The writer interviewed Father John Yoew, the parish priest at the Church of St Mary at Ayer Salak and several villagers on 16 May 2019 and wishes to thank them for their help and co-operation.

how their community came about and in so doing add to a sense of distinctiveness of the place. In this history and myths, the religious faith is central.

The theme of diaspora and faith-formation runs through the course of Malaysian church history. In particular, movements of people such as merchants, pilgrims, missionaries, colonizers and settlers have shaped the religious landscape of this country. This is not surprising as migration and movement of people have always been associated with the spread and development of Christianity. It is also part of the history of the church in Malaysia.

Within this broad theme of diaspora are many examples of how new settlements came to be established and religious lives of these early immigrants formed. This article takes up one strand of the overseas Chinese diaspora in Malaysia and to offer some preliminary observations as to how it came to be closely associated with and shaped by the Catholic faith. This strand is Teochew (Chaozhou), a major dialect group and one of the earliest to settle in Southeast Asia. In Malaysia, Teochews rank in population size after the Hokkiens (Fujian), Hakkas (Kejia), and Cantonese (Guangfu) but are larger than the Hainanese (Hainan), the Foochows (Fuzhou) and other smaller dialect groups (文平强/Voon Phin Keong, 2018).

This Catholic Teochew strand illustrates a diaspora experience and how it contributes to faith-building. The religious and dialect features created an identity that serves to bind the community together. The cohesiveness draws members of the community close to the church and encourages participation in worship and devotion that strengthens their faith. In practicing their faith many of them find meaning and purpose in their lives.

For this paper, three major observations are offered:

- 1. Diaspora and church mission,
- 2. The Teochew diaspora church,
- 3. The St Mary Church in Ayer Salak: a Catholic Teochew diaspora church.

The term diaspora refers to the scattering or spread of a people. It was first used to refer to the establishment of Greek colonies outside of Greece, and later used to describe the dispersal of the Jewish and the Armenian people. This dispersal of people and communities was accompanied by the spread of culture and religion. The term diaspora has since been used to describe the migration of Chinese, although a number of scholars are uncomfortable with the term particularly in the Southeast Asian context. There have always been migrations and movements of people in Malaysia and the Southeast Asia region and one of the most important is that of the Chinese.

The Chinese diaspora in Malaysia dates back to the end of the eighteenth century but the highpoint of immigration out of China into the Straits Settlements and the Malay states was between 1850 and 1940. An estimated 12 million people left China for Southeast Asia to escape from social and political disorder, economic hardships and famine in their homeland. These early immigrants were sojourners who intended to return to their families in China after they have made enough money. And in the early period, many did go back to China (Wang, 2000).

Mostly poor peasants, the early Chinese immigrants brought with them their belief systems, and they set up temples and associations in the host country to provide spiritual support and social solidarity. The different dialect groups have their particular patron deities which they worship in their temples. Nevertheless the arriving immigrants were seen as potential converts to the Christian faith by missionary groups (Chew, 2000).

There were broadly two phases of diaspora Chinese. Those in the first phase were Chinese who, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, came to trade in the Southeast Asian region. Over time many married local women and settled down in places such as Malacca. Referred to as Peranakans, they have over several generations adopted local Malay culture such as language, dress and cuisine. But these Peranakans retained their practice of Chinese religion. The second phase took place from the late eighteenth century. These latter arrivals, mostly labourers and referred to as *Sinkehs*, maintained their cultural and dialect distinctiveness. They mostly observed traditional Chinese religious practices.

Diaspora or migrant churches are those formed by Christians from particular districts in China who migrated to Southeast Asia. On arrival they opened up farms or engaged in fishing or trading activities around which the community grew and developed. In pre-World War Two years, these communities continued to receive new immigrants from their home districts. Sometimes, as the case of the Foochow church in Sibu and Sitiawan, the migration was organized through which groups of Christians were brought into Malaya. Or when migrants arrived, an existing local church gave support and integrates them into a community. Generally members of the supporting church are from the same dialect or district background as those of the new migrants. The term diaspora church is used here to refer to these types of communities.

Mission organizations saw opportunities working with or even creating diaspora churches. Given that resources of the missions were limited and priests conversant in dialects were few, diaspora churches tended to be associated with particular dialect groups. One or two priests would be sent to serve a large village of the same dialect background. Hence where a village was largely Hakka, Foochow, Hokkien or Teochew, the dialect used in the new church for worship and religious activities would be the dialect of the majority of the inhabitants.

A major contribution to the development of the Catholic Teochew diaspora was that of the Societe des Missions Estrangeres de Paris (MEP) or better known as the Paris Foreign Missions Society. Set up in 1658, the society sent missionaries to Siam and China including the Shantou region. It later extended its work to Singapore and Malacca. The places where these MEP missions were active in became important nodes in the network of migrants, missionaries, and merchants within the Teochew diaspora.

The Teochew Diaspora

The Catholic Teochew diaspora church provides a striking example of how a historical experience continues to hold the faith and the imagination of a community. This faith has been supported by two features of identity: the Teochew dialect and the Catholic faith. At the same

time, the Catholic Teochew diaspora had an added dimension in the form of a transnational trade links. Trade, faith, and dialect linked the several Catholic Teochew communities in China, Singapore, Malaya, and Siam.

In China, the region of the Teochews came under early Christian influence since the eighteenth century. One of the first mission groups to work in Shantou were MEP. Through the efforts of this society, many in the Teochew region came to embrace the Catholic faith. Today, there are still significant Catholic communities in the Teochew area particularly in Shantou and the village of Bai Ling.

The Teochews from the Shantou region were among the early Chinese migrants to arrive in Southeast Asia. Over time and as more of them arrived, these migrants created communities of predominantly Teochews. As some of these immigrants from the Shantou region were Catholics, they formed in Siam, Singapore and Malacca large Teochew Catholic communities. These communities were supported by the MEP which provided priests to minister to the new congregations. Through the efforts of MEP conversions were made among non-Catholic arrivals and settlers.

Many of the early Teochew migrants to Southeast Asia were traders, agriculturists, and fishermen. Some among them became successful plantation owners or transnational traders. One of the businesses that the Teochews became prominent during this period was the rice trade. Rice trade had been going on between Bangkok and Shantou and was later extended to Singapore. In time, the Teochews came to be dominant in the rice trade of the region.

The introduction of steamship service in the 1860s greatly boosted the Teochew rice trade as well as migration of the Teochews out of Shantou to Southeast Asia. Travel had been made more affordable and the volume increased particularly in seasons when fares were low. Steamships were faster and more reliable, and consequently contributed to the growth of the large Teochew presence in Bangkok and Singapore as well as to the transnational trading network.

Singapore

Catholics were among the first Chinese to arrive in Singapore following the establishment of British presence on the island in 1819. Many of these early Catholics were from Malacca and they were followed later by Teochews from Shantou. The Hougang area in Singapore was one of the places the Teochews settled in. They became involved in agriculture and soon opened up plantations. In 1833 there were already an estimated 600 Catholic Chinese in Singapore and the number continued to grow (Goh, 2018.).

In 1839 the MEP sent a priest, Father John Tschu, to serve the small Catholic congregation in Singapore. Born in Shantou, Father Tschu was trained in the seminary in Penang, the College General. After his training, he served in Penang and shortly afterwards transferred to Siam. He was there for a few years and then was transferred to Singapore. During his time in Singapore,

the small Catholic community grew rapidly (Song, 1967: 32-33). After Father Tschu passed away in 1848 the MEP continued to send missionaries to serve the Catholic community in Singapore.

As the Teochew Catholics grew in number as well as in economic significance, they came into conflict with other Chinese groups and in particular with the secret societies. In February 1851, violence broke out between the Catholic Teochews and other Chinese believed to be members of secret societies. For five days there was rioting and some 500 Chinese, mostly Catholics, were killed, and dozens of gambier and pepper plantations destroyed. Economic rivalry between the Catholic Teochews and the other Chinese groups was said to be a cause of the conflict. Teochew plantation interests competed against those linked to the secret societies (Blythe, 1969: 70). The Catholics also allegedly smuggled opium for use in their plantations, thus threatening the opium monopoly held by revenue farm syndicates. There was also the religious factor which was said to be a major contributing cause to the conflict. It was claimed that conversions of secret society members to Catholicism had led to the loss of members for the secret societies (Trocki, 1990: 109-110).

Many of the Catholics fled to the city centre while others left Singapore for safer places. Ayer Salak in Malacca was likely to be where some went to. But the attacks also seemed to have created a sense of solidarity and a community identity among those who remained. In 1857 a MEP missionary, Fr Ambroise Maistre, arrived to serve the Catholic community and in the same year he bought a 16ha (40 acres) piece of land from the government where he built a small *atap* (palm leaf) church.

Meanwhile, largely through arrangements of the MEP, a steady influx of Catholics from China came to Singapore. As the Catholic community grew, a larger neo-Gothic building was built for the new church, the Church of the Nativity of the Blessed Mary. While the number of Catholics grew and began to spread to other parts of the island the Hougang Teochew Catholic community continued to serve as a link to the community's history and identity.

Although mostly agriculturalists and fishermen at the beginning, the Teochews were also involved in trade. One of the most successful of the early Catholic Teochew businessman was Jacob Low Kiok Chiang. Born in 1843 in Shantou, Low's family sent him when he was 16 and his brother to Singapore. After working first as a cook, he joined the Singapore MEP headquarter in Oxley Road as a clerical assistant. Later, the parish priest Father Patria arranged a loan for Low to open an import-export business. As his trading and shipping business prospered, Low expanded to Siam where he set up his firm, the Kiam Hoa Heng along the Chao Phrya River (Song, 1967: 431).

Low was just one of several Teochew merchants trading in the Bangkok-Singapore-Shantou route. His partners included Joseph Chan Teck Hee and John Goh Ah Seng in Singapore. These merchants contributed to the building of Catholic churches in Singapore such as the Church of St Peter and St Paul as well as the Church of the Sacred Heart. Among the commodities traded

by these Chinese merchants were rubber and rice. Rice from Bangkok was shipped to Shantou in China and to Singapore. Thus trade was important not only in creating the Teochew Catholic network but also wealthy business groups that could materially contribute to the church.

Siam

As referred to earlier, Thailand was a major destination for Chinese migrants from the Shantou region. The Teochews settled mainly in Bangkok where many were engaged in the rice trade. Over time the Teochews became the largest Chinese dialect group in Bangkok among whom a significant number were Catholics. The French had a major role in the spread of the Catholic faith in Bangkok. Earlier, Portuguese missionaries had in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries attempted to expand Christian influence in Siam but were largely unsuccessful. It was the French missionaries who had better results (Samran and Dumrongkiat, 2019). The MEP first sent missionaries to Ayuthaya, the old capital. Siam then was viewed as the more tolerant of the countries in Southeast Asia to Christianization efforts. When the Siamese capital was shifted from Ayuthaya to Bangkok, the Catholic mission followed and it set itself up along the Chao Phraya River.

The Catholics in the Bangkok area were largely Chinese, of which a significant number were from the Teochew community. The most visible landmark of the Catholic community in Bangkok is the Assumption Church. Situated along the Chao Phraya River the church came to be associated with the Teochews. Among the largest financial contributors to the building of the church was Low Kiok Chiang, a Catholic businessman from Singapore.

Low's business career and the Catholic faith are indicators of a Teochew identity linking Bangkok, Shantou and Singapore. As mentioned earlier, he was born in Shantou but started a trading business in Singapore that expanded to Bangkok. Low was also an important part of the Teochew business network. He had partners in Bangkok and was connected to businessmen in Teochew and in Singapore (Song, 1967: 431). Evidently he spent time in the Siamese capital. The story was that King Chulalongkorn dropped by incognito and unexpectedly to his shop in Bangkok but Low was having his prayers in church. Despite not being present to welcome the king, he was invited to the palace where he received a plaque signifying royal patronage for his business. Low apparently had gained a favourable reputation in Bangkok as to earn royal attention.

The Catholic Church in Siam had links with Malaya other than the Teochew Catholic communities. In 1808, the Catholic seminary that was set up at the old Siamese capital of Ayuthaya and known as the Seminary of St Joseph was transferred to Penang. The Ayuthaya seminary had for almost a hundred years provided training for priests. It was renamed the College General when it was shifted to Penang and it continued with the training of priests from around the region. Among those who attended the seminary was Father John Tschu who went on to serve in Siam and in Singapore. Even here at the College General a key role was played by MEP missionaries who led the training in the seminary.

Ayer Salak Village

Within this Catholic Teochew diaspora network is a remarkable village in the state of Malacca. Ayer Salak is located some 16 km from the town of Malacca. It is one of the oldest Chinese villages in the country, having been founded around 1850. It is likely that following the anti-Catholic riots in Singapore in 1851, a number of Chinese there moved to Ayer Salak. The cemetery in Ayer Salak contained some very old graves, with one that is dated 1909 but it is believed that there were several that had been destroyed and said to be very much older.

It is also possible that some of the early Teochew settlers at Ayer Salak came from Malacca town. There had been a long-established Catholic community there since the arrival of the Portuguese in 1511. Indeed, there is evidence of even earlier Christians in Malacca during the sultanate period. A very large number of the Catholics were Chinese, and many moved to Singapore after the British established a presence there in 1819 (Roxborogh, 1992).

Over the period, the church in Malacca had successively come under the Vicar Apostolic of Burma and Siam. In 1841 the church was separated from Siam and became a Vicar Apostolic on its own. Later that year it was placed under the MEP mission. Between 1826 and 1838, the number of Christians in Malacca fluctuated between 1,799 and 2,239 (Chew, 2000: 69-70).

The existing 120 families at Ayer Salak are Teochew and Catholic. Covering some 162ha (400 acres) of agricultural land, the village once had more than 200 families. In recent years, the young have been leaving the village for further studies or for employment in urban centres or other states.

Some time in 1858 a missionary, Father Pierre Borie of the MEP, arrived at Ayer Salak to evangelize among the Mantra orang asli people. He built a place for prayer and while a few of the Mantras became Christians, most soon moved away (Chew, 2000: 93). They were then replaced by Chinese. Indeed some villagers today claim that the place was started much earlier and that it was in fact developed by Chinese from neighbouring areas of Malacca.

Around 1860 the MEP mission obtained some 162ha of agricultural land from the state government. The church distributed the land to the villagers and subsequent migrants to work on. But the title to the land remains with the church until today. In 1864, a church named the Church of St Mary, a school and a mission house were built.

In the early 1920s and particularly around 1926 there was an influx of immigrants to Ayer Salak from China following reported persecutions against Christians there. These immigrants came mainly from Bai Ling and Huilai, two places in China where the MEP mission had been active in evangelizing. Indeed, in these two places today, the Catholic influence remains strong.

There is now a new and bigger church at Ayer Salak while the old church built in 1860 is being restored. Within the sprawling mission compound is a Chinese kindergarten, a nationaltype primary school and a building used as office and home for the resident priest. The old mission house remains largely unused. At the back of the complex is a sprawling cemetery and a columbarium. The Ayer Salak church serves a congregation of some 3,000 Catholics in Ayer Salak and the surrounding area.

What is remarkable is that Ayer Salak village continues to be a community of devout Catholics and at the same time retaining its Teochew identity. The Teochew dialect is widely used among the villagers although church services are in Mandarin or English. Ownership of land in the village is held by the Catholic Church and this gives the church some control over the continuing character of the place. Secondly, as the MEP was being phased out, its French priests were replaced by Teochew-speaking ones. The last MEP priest, Father Ludovici Julil Calmel, came to Ayer Salak in 1884 and remained there until he died in 1899. The present resident priest is Teochew-speaking Father John Yoew who received his theological training in Taiwan (Decroix, 2005: 229-230).

Many of the resident priests developed close relationship with the villagers. They not only lead the church mass services but also provide counseling and advice. Being Teochew-speaking, the priests became part of the village life yet held in high respect. An example is Father Anthony Tan who served the congregation in the 1960s. Living a very simple and frugal life, he tapped rubber early in the morning to supplement the small stipend he received. The rest of the day was devoted to the church and members of his congregation.

Finally, as the village is relatively isolated, much of the activities of the residents revolve around the church. Villagers attend Sunday service and many also turn up regularly on Tuesday and Thursday evenings for prayer meetings which are conducted in the Teochew dialect.

Diaspora and Faith-building

The Catholic Teochew network discussed in this paper illustrates how immigration relocated a people sharing a faith and dialect from the Shantou and surrounding areas in China to places in Southeast Asia where new settlements and villages were established that retained much of the homeland identity. In this particular migration process, the church was important. For immigrants settling into a place that was alien and unfamiliar, it was the church that provided spiritual and physical support. The new arrivals settled on land provided by the church and sent children to the schools started by the mission. More than that, being Teochew speaking, the church became a regular meeting point for those of the same dialect group.

There was also a sense of being a community that is blessed. The journey from Shantou was arduous and hazardous. Having survived the trip and settling into a relatively peaceful village where they could work on land assigned to them by the church there was a feeling of gratitude to the God they believed in. Here in Ayer Salak was a chance to start a new life free from economic deprivation, political uncertainties, and religious persecution.

The villagers talked among themselves and to outsiders about their religious experiences. They recalled miracles they claimed happened in Ayer Salak. As an example, it is widely believed that the location of the church was originally some distance from the present site. When a framed picture that went missing from the old church was found in the present spot, villagers decided that it was a divine sign indicating where the new church building should be.

There are also stories of miraculous healings among village members. This belief in healings and other miracles served to encourage a regular prayer life among many of the villagers.

In Ayer Salak, the church is central to sustaining faith and culture. The weekly church services sustain the faith of the villagers. While mass today is conducted in Mandarin, the two evenings of prayer are in Teochew. One of these sessions is held in an open space in the village where a small grotto has been built. The community sessions of prayer are well attended. The relatively isolated and rural setting with its particular social cohesion helps to maintain the faith and identity of the villagers as a community.

A remarkable testimony to faith-building at Ayer Salak has been the 30 young men and women from Ayer Salak village who have, over the years, taken the vow to serve as priests and nuns. More than half of them have become nuns. Nowhere in the country is there a village which has sent so many of its youths to join a church vocation.

There is also the example of Heng Mui Seng. Born and brought up in Ayer Salak before World War Two, he later worked in the household of a parish priest in Johor Bharu. Heng married and brought up a large family. One of his sons, Philip Heng, joined the Jesuit Order. Today Monsignor Philip Heng is serving as Vicar-General in the Singapore Catholic Church.

Conclusion

There was an informal network of the Teochews that facilitated the transnational movement of people, trade, the spreading of the Catholic faith, and the maintenance of identity. The French MEP played a key role in the initial creation of the Teochew Catholic diaspora network discussed here. In Shantou and the surrounding districts such as Bai Ling and Huilai, in Siam, Singapore, and Ayer Salak, MEP priests brought the gospel and converted many Teochews. MEP missionaries also served in Siam, Singapore and the Malay Peninsula. In Ayer Salak itself some ten MEP missionaries worked among the villagers. There and elsewhere, MEP priests acquired land for churches and schools to be built as well as for agricultural purposes.

In the years before World War Two, the Catholic Teochew identity in the Southeast Asian communities was sustained through regular contact with the Teochew districts in China. Teochew communities continued to receive new settlers from China and there were also visits to the homeland. Underpinning this contact was the Teochew trade network especially of rice in the Bangkok, Shantou and Singapore link. This trade was important as it helped to create and to consolidate personal and business relationship of the Teochews in the different localities. Within this Teochew diaspora experience there was a Catholic strand that was distinct.

It is suggested here that the diaspora experience helped in faith-building. In places where the Catholic Teochews migrated to, they preserved the group identity, built churches and schools, and engaged with the wider faith community. The church provided support to new arrivals and gave them a sense of belonging in a new and alien environment. In such a community with a distinct identity of being Teochew, its faith has been sustained by the church and the schools.

Even the cemetery, located within the village, is part of the lives of individuals and the community as it linked the living with the dead as well as a reminder of its past. In Ayer Salak there is a further sense of it being a place that is specially blessed and where miracles happen.

Ayer Salak is not only one of the oldest Chinese villages in Malaysia but also still predominantly Teochew and Christian. The church was developed out of a diaspora experience and has maintained both its Chinese as well as Catholic character. More significantly, over the years, some 30 youths from the village have taken up the vocation of priesthood, underlining how real the faith has been for members of the community. A look at the Teochew Catholic experience may contribute to an understanding of the wider Chinese diaspora and faith-formation.

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