

Negotiating Chinese Identity through Chinese-Language Newspapers in Pre-Independence Sabah

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Abstract

From *Huaqiao* (overseas Chinese) to *Huaren* (local Chinese) is one of the popular means to describe the Chinese in Southeast Asia. It indicates that the object of political loyalty of the Chinese shifts from China to the country of residence. In British North Borneo (later the state of Sabah in Malaysia), such shifts were observed in around 1959 till 1960 when schools and associations replaced the word *Huaqiao* with *Huaren* in their official names. Yeh Pao Tzu, local journalist and newspaper publisher, continued to produce the *Overseas Chinese Daily News* (《华侨日报》). He insisted on his *Huaqiao*-ness by advocating the usage of Chinese as a common language of North Borneo, or by urging efforts in recapturing China from the communists. At the same time, he eagerly appealed for the necessity of uplifting the education and living standard of the people of North Borneo including the natives. Through the case of Yeh, this study attempts to examine the implications of the phrase of “from *Huaqiao* to *Huaren*” in pre-independence Sabah, Malaysia.

Key words: Chinese of North Borneo, Chinese newspapers and politics, *Huaqiao*, *Huaren*, Mainland China

Introduction

The change of government of China in 1949 raised concerns among Western countries over the possible spread of communism from China to Southeast Asia through the local Chinese communities. In this context, it was emphasized that the Chinese in Southeast Asia maintained their inherited cultures rather than being assimilated into the local cultures. This view was reflected in the saying that “Once a Chinese, always a Chinese” (Wang, 1981: 10) and further elaborated by Purcell (1951).

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From the standpoint of stressing the fact that the Chinese of Southeast Asia would not sympathize with Communist China, studies were carried out on Chinese who had been culturally assimilated by the local people. In the study of Chinese in Java, Indonesia, Willmott (1960) discussed Peranakan who had a high degree of cultural assimilation into local society against Totok who maintained more Chinese culture. Skinner's studies on Chinese in Thailand and Java (Skinner, 1957 and 1960) and Wickberg's study on the Philippine Chinese Mestizo (Wickberg, 1964) also dealt with Chinese who have been well assimilated into the local society.

The situation was seen to be different in Malaya. Where the Chinese were present in substantial numbers, it was unlikely that the Chinese would be culturally assimilated (Skinner, 1960: 100). In response to changing political conditions in Southeast Asia in the late 1960s, Chinese began to be recognized as belonging to two separate groups which identified with China or with the local society. In fact, Wang Gungwu categorized the Chinese of Malaya into three groups, and argued that those seeking to retain Chinese culture, including Chinese language education, were not seeking political empathy with China and it would not be appropriate to call them *Huaqiao* any more after independence (Wang, 1970 and 1981).

A similar argument can be applied to the Chinese of Borneo, though little attention has been devoted to the study of the community. Following the 1948 pioneer study on Malaysian Chinese by Victor Purcell, it was 40 years later that an edited volume of study on the history of the Chinese in Malaysia appeared (林水椽、骆静山/Lim Chooi Kwa and Loh Cheng Sun, 1984). This publication in the Chinese language was undertaken by local Chinese researchers, but without touching upon the states of Sabah and Sarawak. This shortcoming was rectified in a subsequent publication (林水椽等/Lim Chooi Kwa *et al.*, 1998). The first study by local Chinese on the Chinese community of Malaysia and published in English appeared in 2000 (Lee and Tan, 2000). This volume features a study on the history of the Chinese of Sabah (Wong, 2000).

Studies on the Chinese of Sabah by local scholars are few and far between. Published works in English include those by Lee Yong Leng (1965), Han Sin Fong (1975), Edwin Lee (1976), Wong Tze Ken (1998, 2004, 2005 and 2007), and Voon Phin Keong (2007). Studies on Chinese political leaders or politics are almost absent except for the study by Edwin Lee (1976). Edwin produced a pioneer study that attempts to explain the link between the timber-producing industry and the Chinese party politics of North Borneo during the transition to decolonisation. Chinese party politics took the form of parties such as the United Party established by wealthy Chinese timber producers who were educated in English, and the Democratic Party that was helmed by the Chinese-educated proprietors of small- and medium-sized businesses. Both eventually merged to form the North Borneo National Party (Borneo Utara National Party).

Most of the studies published in English do not make use of Chinese-language sources that were active in voicing the views and opinions of the Chinese and their leaders on political issues, especially in the few years prior to 1963 when Sabah was inching towards merging into the Federation of Malaysia in 1965. It is therefore essential to examine the role played by

Chinese-language newspapers to gain a better understanding of Chinese political thinking and tendencies during the crucial years leading to the formation of Malaysia.

Chinese newspapers first appeared in the bigger towns of North Borneo from the mid-1940s. These papers were then published or edited by influential figures of the Chinese and their views would reflect to some extent the political position of the community of the period. This study will examine, by focusing on three Chinese newspapers, namely, the *Overseas Chinese Daily News (OCDN)* (《华侨日报》) and *Api Siang Pau (ASP)* (《亚庇商报》) in Kota Kinabalu, then known as Jesselton (or *Api* to the local Chinese community), and the *Borneo Times (BT)* (《婆罗洲时报》) in Sandakan, how Mandarin-speaking intellectuals viewed the political developments that were unfolding prior to the formation of Malaysia and how their views were to influence Chinese identity.

The political thinking on relations with Mainland China and Taiwan is reflected by the positions of Chinese leaders in their role as Mandarin-speaking intellectuals. Influential Chinese tended to identify themselves as “patriotic overseas Chinese” who were conscious of the mission to free Mainland China from the domination of communism. This position was firmly held by Yeh Pao Tzu, the editor of *OCDN*. Although North Borneo Chinese saw the need for assimilation in the late 1950s, partly swayed by the Chinese exclusion policy that was emerging in Indonesia, Yeh Pao Tzu consistently stressed the importance of maintaining “traditional Chinese culture while building the North Borneo nation in order to establish an anti-communist base.” He thus recognized that North Borneo and the local Chinese should maintain and enhance their external relations. The first part of the study will deal briefly with the history of the Chinese and their relations with the Republic of China, followed by an account of the debate between the Chinese leaders and Donald Stephens, a native with Eurasian background who emerged as a leader of natives in North Borneo. The last section will deliberate the issue of the identity of the Chinese from the perspective of “Huaqiao” and “Huaren”. A primary source of reference materials that is generally overlooked are the views and public pronouncements expressed in local Chinese newspapers.

The Development of Chinese Newspapers in North Borneo

The origin of Chinese newspapers in North Borneo may be traced back to the distribution of leaflets on the state of the anti-Japanese war in China. Lee Nyuk Lin was subsequently inspired in March 1936 to launch the *OCDN* in Jesselton to report on the anti-Japanese war in China based on information derived from radio broadcasts. At about the same time, Chong Wai Cho, who was the principal of the Basel Mission Society School in Sandakan, also distributed the *OCDN* to report on the situation of the anti-Japanese war in China.

With the end of the Japanese Occupation in 1945, Lee Nyuk Lin invited Philip Lee, an influential Chinese figure in Jesselton, to join him to revive the *OCDN* (叶观仕/Yap Koon See, 1996: 216 and 1999: 11). But it was Yeh Pao Tzu from Sarawak who inherited and further developed the paper.

Yeh was born in October 1923 in the Sibu Division, Sarawak. His father was a member of the Revolutionary Alliance (Tongmenghui) of the Republic of China. After studying at Kwong Hua School in Sibu and the Confucian Secondary School in Kuala Lumpur, Yeh went on to Shanghai to study at Fudan University's School of Journalism. During this time, he also trained at Chiang Kai-shek's Central Training Corps. After graduating from the university in the midst of the anti-Japanese war, he returned home and made a visit to North Borneo in 1946 with the intention to launch a Chinese newspaper there. He acquired the *OCDN* in 1947 and became its editor and publisher. This decision was in part attributed to the advice from the Chinese consul in Jesselton. Initially, he outsourced the printing of the paper to the Chung Nam Printing Company, but after founding Sabah Publishing in 1953, he began printing the paper in-house (叶观仕/Yap Koon See, 1996: 216).

Lo Kwock Chuan, president of the Chung Nam Printing Company, founded the second Mandarin newspaper, the *ASP*, in Jesselton in 1954, after parting company with Yeh, and served as its president and chief editor. Lo took an anti-communist position as did Yeh. He recruited Zhong Yongluo from the newspaper industry in China in 1959, and the *ASP* subsequently underwent a complete layout redesign to take on even stronger pro-China, anti-communist sentiments.

“From Huaqiao to Huaren”

“Huaqiao” is a general term to refer to Chinese who live overseas and carry a political connotation as being Chinese nationals or expatriates. As they possess attributes of Chinese identities culturally and politically, it is argued that as they regard the overseas territory of residence as their homeland, they may be more appropriately referred to as “Huaren” or simply Chinese people. In North Borneo, it was around 1959 when the Chinese became conscious of the implications of being Huaqiao or Huaren.

The Jesselton Chinese Chamber of Commerce revised its bylaws at the general assembly on 21 November 1959 to amend its membership qualification from “our fellow Huaqiao” to “local Huaren”. This was because the growing number of members with British nationality had rendered the retention of the phrase Huaqiao untenable rather than its implied negative connotation (*OCDN*, 10-13 May 1960). The Chamber also renamed the school under its control from “Huaqiao School” to “Chung Hwa School” (Chinese School). A few months earlier, the women's division of the Chamber known as the Overseas Chinese Women's Association was renamed the “Chinese Women's Association” (*North Borneo Official Gazette*, 1959: 347). In addition, the Teochew people's Teo Khiaw Association was renamed Teo Chew Association by dropping “*Khiaw*” (or expatriate Chinese in the Teochew dialect) (*North Borneo Official Gazette*, 1960: 235). By the early 1960s, the phrase “Huaqiao” was rarely encountered in North Borneo, but with its continued use in the *OCDN* as a distinct exception.

The changes in the attitude of the Chinese of North Borneo were taken place at a time when the Chinese exclusion movement was growing in Indonesia. In May 1959, the Indonesian

government had banned foreigners from opening retail businesses in rural areas and issued an ordinance ordering foreign owners to hand their businesses over to the Indonesian people by the end of the year. Essentially, this was a political move targeting Chinese business owners who, barred by local government to move into the cities, had no alternatives except to leave Indonesia altogether. In December 1959, China dispatched ships to Indonesia to enable these Huaqiao to return home. It is estimated that more than 100,000 Chinese left Indonesia for China in 1960 (Pan, 1990).

The Chinese in North Borneo could not dismiss events in Indonesia. While many Chinese in Indonesian Borneo (Kalimantan) returned to China, some 100 Indonesian Chinese sought refuge in North Borneo towns such as Tawau (*NBNST*, 28 February 1961; *ASP*, 1 March 1961). In May 1960, North Borneo United Chinese Chambers of Commerce broke its tradition of gathering alternately in Sandakan and Jesselton by holding its annual meeting in Tawau. Holding the meeting in Tawau was partly to resolve serious differences over the list of nominees for the Legislative Council at the previous general assembly as well as to deal with the issue of Chinese refugees from Indonesia. However despite the efforts of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce in Tawau, only 39 were permitted to stay in North Borneo and the rest were forced to seek refuge in Taiwan (*ASP*, 14 May 1960).

General concern over the direction of the decolonisation process of North Borneo, in particular the likelihood of native-led nationalism in the form of Chinese exclusion similar to that in Indonesia, was a serious issue confronting the Chinese of North Borneo. This concern was probably a deciding factor in their desire to be known as Huaren rather than Huaqiao.

Meanwhile, there was also increasing calls among non-Chinese urging the Chinese in North Borneo to change their mindset from considering themselves as outsiders to considering themselves as locals. In consequence, a series of exchanges between Chinese and non-Chinese leaders on this issue arose in connection with the National Day of the Republic of China (Taiwan) on 10 October, also popularly known among overseas Chinese as the Double Tenth celebrations.

Chinese newspapers in Jesselton marked the Double Tenth in 1960 with the usual celebratory spirit. The *ASP* not only printed the entire first and last pages in red but also included an insert entitled “The 49th Double Tenth of the Republic of China Special Commemorative Edition” on 10 October. The insert depicted side-by-side illustrations of “fellow Chinese suffering from hunger and from the oppression of the Communist Party in Mainland China” and “fellow Chinese benefiting from scientific technology and liberal democracy in Taiwan” and urged the Chinese people in North Borneo and abroad to tear down the “iron curtain” of Mainland China by working together. It was indeed a sharp contrast to the Chinese-language *Borneo Times* in Sandakan, which only printed “The Xinhai Revolution and China’s Transition” in its editorial known as the “Mid-week Commentary” on the same day.

In addition to those newspaper articles, commemoration ceremonies for the Double Tenth were held up and down the west coast of North Borneo. In particular, the ceremony held by

the Chinese Chamber of Commerce in Beaufort was highly publicized, with each newspaper printing a speech by Foo Pat Yin, an organizer known for supporting Kuomintang (the Chinese Nationalist Party). It is said that Foo considered the purpose of the ceremony an opportunity to raise awareness of communism in China. He said, “I want all of you to be united in thought and share the responsibility of stopping the disturbance and penetration of the Communist Party in total co-ordination. That’s what a respectable community member who is truly loyal to this country would do,” and he concluded his speech by saying, “Hail the Republic of China! Long live President Chiang!” (*OCDN*, 12 October 1960; *BT*, 13 October 1960).

Responding to this, Stephens posed a question in the *Sabah Times* regarding the North Bornean Chinese celebration of the Double Tenth (*NBNST*, 13 October 1960). He contended that while it was not an issue to celebrate traditional Chinese culture with festivals such as the Mid-Autumn Festival and the Lunar New Year, if they did not wish to be seen as foreign nationals, then people should immediately stop celebrating the national day of a foreign country. The Mandarin translation of this editorial was published in the *ASP* the next day (*ASP*, 14 October 1960). In this way, Stephens and Mandarin-speaking intellectuals had crossed the language barrier and were able to debate via the English *Sabah Times* and the Mandarin *ASP*.

In his discussion entitled “The Significance of Double Tenth”, Chong Khiam attempted to argue against Stephens by highlighting examples of Indians and Indonesians living in Jesselton who celebrated the independence day of their home countries every year and stating that commemorating one’s home country is part of humanity (*ASP*, 18 October 1960; *OCDN*, 18-19 October 1960). However, Stephens, who had asked the Chinese to abandon their loyalty to China in order to become part of the Sabah nation, did not find the opposing argument persuasive. The debate ended with the rebuttal of Stephens (*NBNST*, 21 October 1960) and since then, Chinese newspapers have stopped certain practices such as printing the paper in red or holding large celebrations on Double Tenth Day.

The Overseas Chinese Daily News as a Chinese Newspaper

While the transition “from Huaqiao to Huaren” continued to take place through pressure from both inside and outside of Chinese society, the retention of the word “Huaqiao” by the *OCDN*, edited and published by Yeh Pao Tzu, was deliberate. This was the only Chinese newspaper in North Borneo that included the Republic of China calendar in addition to the Western calendar and kept the 12 November, Sun Yat-sen’s birthday, as a press holiday in a gesture of respect for the father of the Chinese republic. The literary section of the *OCDN* was entitled “The Voice of Overseas Chinese”. In addition, the Weekly Education section, which was published every Tuesday, routinely discussed issues relating to the education of overseas Chinese as members of the Republic of China, including topics such as “the importance of studying Chinese and Chinese literature”, “boosting Chinese culture”, “historical understandings that Huaqiao students should have”, and “educational initiatives for Huaqiao”.

Clearly setting forth its anti-communist position, the *OCDN* printed fierce attacks against communists, particularly the Chinese Communist Party. The paper held a contest asking readers to write a short essay on “popularisation tactics used by the Communist Party” prior to the Double Tenth and published the winning entries on 10 October 1960, albeit not in a flashy format. This was just a few days before the *ASP* was criticised by Stephens for devoting a large space in the paper to the celebration of the Double Tenth (*OCDN*, 10 October 1960). The paper had such an all-out, anti-communist, pro-Republic of China attitude that one reader asked if the paper was an official publication of the Kuomintang (*OCDN*, 8 November 1960).

Yeh did not even try to hide the fact that he considered China his homeland. When he was asked what people should think of the above-referenced Double Tenth incident involving the Beaufort Chinese Chamber of Commerce and the fact that there was a Chinese who said, “Hail the Republic of China! Long live President Chiang!” on Double Tenth Day, Yeh stated, “Since they are living in North Borneo, Chinese people need to develop their identity” to become an important component of the multi-ethnic communities of North Borneo. But he also added, “You cannot blame the Chinese who do not forget their homeland, because that’s just human nature” (*OCDN*, 8 November 1960).

In addition, Yeh regarded himself as Huaqiao and not just as a Chinese living overseas with Chinese citizenship but as someone who supported the liberation and reconstruction of homeland China from overseas. On 1 September 1960, a comment was submitted to the *OCDN* as follows:

“It is just a matter of time until the Communist Party will be completely stamped out. This situation will be a successful outcome of the measures taken by us, the overseas journalists who tried to prevent disasters from occurring. I cannot even imagine what circumstances we would be in today if we, the overseas journalists, didn’t endure the suffering and hold out.” (*OCDN*, 1 September 1960)

Although this statement was not written by Yeh, it is clear that the writer shared his thoughts. In response to the question by one reader, “Why do you often print anti-communist discussions in your paper?”, Yeh wrote, “The purpose of publishing this newspaper in North Borneo is to raise the awareness of each ethnic group here to prevent the spread of communism and to work together to develop a North Borneo that is prosperous and advanced” (*OCDN*, 19 January 1961). Having studied journalism in China during the anti-Japanese war and arriving in North Borneo just prior to the establishment of the Chinese Communist regime in order to launch a Chinese newspaper, Yeh actively positioned himself as a Huaqiao journalist involved in the development of homeland China from overseas. The fact that he was looking for a town where there was no Chinese newspaper should also be regarded as evidence that he wanted to accomplish the particular mission he imposed on himself rather than just pursue business opportunities.

An Attempt to Reclaim the Mainland and the Development of North Borneo

Despite his insistence on being a Huaqiao, Yeh preached the need to establish a North Borneo nation more passionately and more specifically than other local Chinese leaders. The *OCDN* was the only Chinese newspaper that discussed and celebrated the 1960 Harvest Festival of the natives in its editorial section. Yeh described the event as a period of preparation in which farmers, after a year's hard work and after harvesting their crops, rested and enjoyed themselves before resuming work on the farms. He noted that North Borneo lacked self-sufficiency in rice and had to rely heavily on import; and hence used the Harvest Festival to stress the need for rectifying this shortcoming (*OCDN*, 30 June 1960). He urged the Chinese to take a proactive role in improving the state of education and health among natives which would in turn help to improve the quality of life of the Chinese (*OCDN*, 25 January 1961). In contrast to the general exhortation for the improvement of childhood education among the Chinese, Yeh addressed the need to raise the level of education among the children of all ethnic communities.

Yeh's primary argument for advocating improvements in the economy and education of North Borneo was his fear of the likelihood of a war breaking out locally. This would undermine his imagined efforts to liberate his homeland and its citizens from the communists. He held to the belief of striking back aggressively at Mainland China to free the people and to "reclaim the Mainland". He linked North Borneo's food self-sufficiency ratio to possible difficulties in case a war broke out and disrupted external support (*OCDN*, 30 June 1960). The rationale for his line of reasoning was that food self-sufficiency had to be raised in anticipation of a state of war arising from attempts to reclaim Mainland China.

The anti-communist journalist in Yeh had strengthened his anticipation of war breaking out following the occurrence of famine in China in the early 1960s. Domestic sufferings had prompted mass exodus of refugees to Hong Kong. It was his conviction that, based on his observation, that:

"the revolution of the Mainland people is about to commence, and now is our chance to free China. It is time to stand up and liberate the Mainland people by abandoning the idea of waiting for the right time." (*OCDN*, 24 February 1961)

There was also a possibility of civil war with the communists in North Borneo as a result of attempts to "reclaim the Mainland". A white paper had been released by the colonial government of Sarawak on 22 July 1960 pointing to evidence of activities by communist forces attempting to overthrow the government (*OCDN*, 23 July 1960). Yeh lost in time to implicate these anti-government forces to extend the battlefield to North Borneo.

It was also Yeh's wish to make North Borneo a base for anti-communism to prevent the spread of the ideology to the local society. He believed that education and economic development to reduce ignorance and poverty would resist the infiltration of communism into the state.

Hence his emphasis on the need for education and economic development among the native communities was not merely to counter communism but also to enable North Borneo to serve as a base to “reclaim the Mainland” (*OCDN*, 29 August 1960; *OCDN*, 4 February 1961).

Yeh was motivated by his patriotism towards China to work for its development. He stressed the importance of co-operation among the Huaqiao to help China to advance but then they have to improve their lives in their country of residence so as to prepare themselves to assist in the reconstruction of their homeland. Raising the level of education and living standards for the native residents in the state was necessary not only to avoid their suspicion but also to resist communist subversion. Even though he identified himself as a Huaqiao, Yeh presented more realistic and specific proposals for building a North Borneo nation than other local Chinese leaders.

Donald Stephens and the Chinese Community

Making English the National Language

The mid-1950s was a period in which the Chinese of North Borneo reflected on what it meant to be Chinese. Influenced by Indonesia, they became increasingly conscious of the need to be seen as Huaren rather than Huaqiao, especially during the 1959-1960 period. This was also the period when Donald Stephens emerged as a leading political leader in North Borneo and was regarded as the leader of the natives. In December 1959, he had advocated the creation of a Sabah nation and to change the name of the state to “Sabah”. His proposal was opposed by the Chinese members of the Legislative Council. In February 1960, the colonial government announced that it would make Natives Day a national holiday. Subsequently, Harvest Festival was held on this day in June and Stephens was conferred the title of *Huguan Siou* or Leader of the Natives.

Stephens’ commitment to the cause of the natives did not prevent him from proposing in the *Sabah Times*, on 26 September 1960, that English be made the national language of North Borneo and called for the co-operation from Chinese schools. He sought the support of schools to work for the “realisation of a national system of education, which would knit all the races together into one unified whole.” He insisted that English be used in the national education system and that languages such as Kadazan, Malay, and Mandarin served as second languages (*NBNST*, 26 September 1960). Approval for teaching vernacular languages should begin after the Sabah nation was formed with English as a common language and when everyone had become part of the culturally homogenous nation.

Chinese leaders were in general support for Stephens’s proposal, including the presidents of the Jesselton Chinese Chamber of Commerce and the North Borneo Cultural Association (*BT*, 3 October 1960; *NBNST*, 5 October 1960). One argument was that English was already the *de facto* official language in Sandakan for certain official matters and it would promote the integration of the diverse population. The increasing acceptance of education in English

was looked upon as a “natural development”, and it was suggested that education in English be further enhanced and the language be taught at the elementary school level. The suggestion that Malay and Mandarin be recognized as the nation’s second languages was generally well supported (*BT*, 4 October 1960). An editorial in the *Borneo Times* expressed support for making English the national language and applauded the fact that the opinion was made known in a newspaper published by the leader of the natives (*BT*, 6 October 1960). The editorial also stressed that modern civilisation was built upon industrial development and that English was essential in promoting industrialisation. To allay the fear that people might forget their own languages if English became the national language, the native language could be treated as a second language. Chinese leaders too made no mention of Chinese culture, most probably because they were confident that the Chinese could maintain their customs through efforts at home and in the society.

On 1 October 1960, the *Borneo Bulletin*, a newspaper published in Kuala Belait in neighbouring territory of Brunei, criticised the Chinese in the three Bornean territories on their insistence on maintaining their traditional culture to the extent that this had become an impediment to efforts in nation building. It is possible that because of the criticism that Chinese leaders came out in support of Stephens’ exhortation that all ethnic groups in North Borneo be more involved in building the nation by supporting English as the national language.

Under these circumstances, the only opposition to making English the national language was expressed in the *OCDN*. The article dismissed the criticism of the *Borneo Bulletin* and claimed that “they don’t understand the traditional thought, morality, and spiritual culture of the Chinese” and insisted on the importance of education in Chinese. It stressed that the Chinese were the bearers of an advanced civilisation and they were assimilated into the North Borneo society (*OCDN*, 5 October 1960). It also put forth three arguments on why education in Chinese was necessary.

First, the traditional thought, morality, and spiritual culture of the Chinese have not hindered the establishment of the North Borneo nation but have rather helped it to succeed. The virtues of justice and humanity were emphasized and the idea of the rule of righteousness is practised by the Chinese; territorial expansion during the Sui and Tang Dynasties was achieved by means of developing friendly relationships with other ethnic groups rather than overpowering them by force. The Chinese overseas, such as those living in North Borneo, have also contributed to the development of their territories of residence by co-operating openly with the local communities.

Second, the Chinese have been migrating to North Borneo for over a century and many were born and raised locally and have assets tied to the land. While the Chinese remember and maintain the special traditions of China, they identify themselves as North Borneans and aspire to building an independent nation by working together with all ethnic communities. It would be senseless and ignorant to allege that the Chinese were becoming an impediment to the creation of the North Borneo nation.

Third, Chinese education grew because Chinese community invested in making available opportunities for the education of their children. An education in the mother tongue did not conflict with the idea of identifying one as a North Bornean. In addition, Chinese schools in North Borneo devoted many classes to science in order to keep abreast of current trends, while Mandarin and history classes comprised about a third of the curriculum. All textbooks were also approved by the North Borneo government and were not biased towards China in any way.

“If I Were North Bornean Chinese”

Subsequently, Stephens published an article entitled “If I Were North Bornean Chinese” in an attempt to encourage the Chinese to give up their Chinese culture in order to be accepted as part of the Sabah nation (*OCDN*, 14 December 1960). Responding to this, a contributor whose pen name is “a local without a name” submitted an article entitled “If I Were Councillor Donald (Stephens)” to the *ASP*, in response to Stephens with the following comments:

“I would encourage (the natives) to stop establishing organisations of any kind that bear the earmarks of ethnicity, including the Kazadan Association. In addition, I would change my attitudes and apologize for demanding changes be made only by the Chinese. Furthermore, I would work to change the situation in which preferential treatment is given to the natives in the area of education. I would not force the Chinese people to accept the language of natives; rather, I would encourage natives to incorporate Chinese culture.” (*ASP*, 1 January 1961; *NBNST*, 10 January 1961)

However, Stephens did not act on the call put forth by the comments above. Instead, he published an article about seeking a national system for education in the *Borneo Times* on 1 January 1961 and repeated the same argument. He asserted that in order to promote ties between the groups, it was necessary to eliminate the wall between them by having a common language, and it was most appropriate to use English, a language that allows people to not only communicate internationally but also explore advanced and profound knowledge and experiences. He urged Chinese members of the board of education to fully support the introduction of a national education policy that would unite all ethnic groups (*BT*, 1 January 1961).

Shortly after, the Sarawak government announced a plan to teach all subjects except the “national language” (Mandarin) in English at Chinese schools in Sarawak and to turn Chinese schools into English schools in ten years. *ASP* published a series of feature articles on Chinese culture for three days beginning on 6 March 1961. The opinions of influential individuals in Chinese society in North Borneo such as the Legislative Council members, leaders of the local Chinese Chambers of Commerce, and management officials of Chinese schools were published daily based on the theme of the day. These themes included “Chinese culture will never die unless the Chinese themselves abandon (their) own culture”, “North Borneo’s multi-ethnic

society needs a common language”, and “Changing the medium of education cannot be rushed; we should proceed one step at a time by considering difficulties actually found in the process”. These articles generally sought to enhance English education by declaring that increasing English education would not lead to the disappearance of Chinese culture and that English was an appropriate common language for the multi-ethnic community in North Borneo (*ASP*, 6-8 March 1961).

The only strong opposition to this trend was discussed in the *OCDN*. To counter the campaign of *ASP*, the *OCDN* declared that ethnic education should follow natural evolution; diversity in education would not impede the unification of the nation (*OCDN*, 7 March 1961). Its position was based on a slightly different reason from that of the Chinese schools that insisted on continuing education in the mother tongue. Admitting the fact that English had become the international language as well as the language of science and technology, the *OCDN* claimed that the Chinese language, which had been in existence throughout the 5,000 years of Chinese civilisation, was as “civilized” as English and questioned whether it was reasonable to make a Western language the common language in North Borneo where different Asian ethnic communities have congregated (*OCDN*, 25 February 1961).

What became clear through these developments was the different positions held by Mandarin-speaking intellectuals on certain issues. Many of them agreed with the idea that the Chinese in North Borneo should form a Sabah nation and to that end, should actively learn English, which was a common and international language. However, they were not confident that the Chinese would no longer be treated as immigrants by the native community even if they bore the increased burden of studying English. On this point, Yeh positioned himself as a Huaqiao as well as a member of the North Borneo community and argued for the maintenance of Chinese culture. Although some supported him, voices of dissent such as those publicized by *ASP*, which accepted making English the national language for the purpose of assimilation, began to emerge as well.

The opposing ideas between Stephens and Yeh on the position of the Chinese in North Borneo and their culture developed further into commercial conflicts. The *Sabah Times* was originally a newspaper that Yeh, as a partner, launched in order to create an English version of the *OCDN*. Stephens was hired by Yeh as the editor who later acquired the publishing rights and had control of the paper as a medium to publicize his political beliefs. In early 1962, Yeh suddenly terminated the contract to print the *Sabah Times* at his publishing company, forcing the *Sabah Times* to print the paper in-house. Soon after, a vision for the merger of the Federation of Malaya, Singapore and the Borneo territories was put forward by Tunku Abdul Rahman, Prime Minister of the Federation of Malaya, in May 1961 and North Borneo began to take steps to facilitate the process of decolonization.

Conclusion: “From Huaqiao to Huaren” Reconsidered

Compared with neighbouring countries, the decolonization of the British Borneo territories was relatively slow and took place in the late 1950s. It was a time when the Federation of Malaya, which recognizes the privilege of Malays, became independent in 1957, and the mass exile of the Chinese took place in Indonesia in 1959. The special edition to commemorate the independence day of the Republic of China disappeared from the local Chinese newspapers in North Borneo after 1960.

However, the shift in identity from being Huaqiao to Huaren was a gradual process. Yeh retained the term Huaqiao in the name of his newspaper. Born in Sarawak and studied in Shanghai but settled in North Borneo in 1946, Yeh did not hide the fact that he regarded China as his mother country. He regarded himself as a patriotic Huaqiao, and insisted that China should be recovered from the control of the Communist and that the Chinese of Southeast Asia should work together towards this end. At the same time, he was committed to the state building of North Borneo, in part to make North Borneo a base for his anti-communist campaign as well as to thwart the spread of communism to North Borneo. One way to achieve this objective was his counsel on the need for education and raising the standard of living in North Borneo.

When Stephens suggested that English be made the official language of North Borneo in 1960, many Chinese leaders in North Borneo agreed with the proposal. However, Yeh acknowledged that English was an international language and a language of science and technology, but asserted that Chinese was a language originating from a 5,000-year-old civilisation. He suggested that, as a multi-ethnic territory, North Borneo should adopt the use of the languages of different communities.

The position adopted by Yeh would suggest a need to reconsider the phrase “from Huaqiao to Huaren”. The transition from “Huaqiao” to “Huaren” assumed that the switch of identity was a clear-cut and unidirectional change from identification with China to the country of residence. It might imply that it was entirely dependent on individual decisions. This was clearly not the case as the Chinese of North Borneo, while they were not resistant to becoming part of an integrated Sabah nation, would object to the idea of having to abandon their culture and henceforth cut of ties with their ancestral roots. One’s identity was therefore not simply a matter of individual decision but more crucially that of the larger community.

Living in North Borneo at a time of political flux and debates on the future of the territory during the post-war years just prior to independence, Yeh used the power of the press to wage a campaign that was inseparably linked to the question of the identity and role of the Chinese community. The late 1950s and early 1960s saw active debates on the likely scenario of a future independent nation in its own right. Yeh was effectively searching for a role both as a Huaqiao and a resident of North Borneo. His insistence on being a Huaqiao was in keeping with his vision that arose from his staunch anti-communist stance, in the hope that fellow Chinese would

contribute to the overthrow of the communist government in his motherland. As a resident of North Borneo, he was active in advocating an official role for the Chinese language in an independent state and insisting on the relevance of the Chinese culture.

The political scenario took a drastic change with the announcement of the formation of the enlarged Federation of Malaysia by way of providing independence to the former British-ruled territories of Southeast Asia. The change in the identity of the Chinese from being perceived as Huaqiao to Huaren was gradual but inevitable. The formation of Malaysia in 1965 also signalled the weakening of the Huaqiao identity. However, his support for the proper role of the Chinese language and culture still resonates with the current aspirations of the Chinese community of Malaysia.

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