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## **The Impact of the Interdisciplinary Approach to the Studies of Chinese in Nineteenth-Century Malaya**

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**Abstract:** *In the 1950s, the pioneering studies on the Chinese in nineteenth-century Malaya were generated mainly within the traditional academic disciplines, particularly in history and anthropology. Owing to the advanced technology in diffusion of knowledge and information flow in the 1990s, the interdisciplinary approach has become more and more important in the modern curriculum by encouraging scholars (as well as students) to go beyond their chosen fields of study. However, some scholars argued that the uniqueness among the existing ethnic Chinese communities in Southeast Asian countries would be undermined by this interdisciplinary approach. To illustrate how integrating the different fields of discipline would be beneficial and disadvantageous to the research of Chinese communities in British Malaya, this paper will compare and discuss the research findings of the traditional disciplines with the interdisciplinary studies. The aim is to show that by doing so both fields of unidisciplinary and interdisciplinary studies will further enrich the study of Chinese in nineteenth-century British Malaya.*

**Keywords:** *British Malaya, Chinese, Malaysia, Interdisciplinary Approach, Southeast Asia, Traditional Discipline.*

### **1. Introduction**

The research on the Chinese family, marriage, kinship, voluntary organizations, and the brotherhood societies in the colonial Malayan context have been widely studied by historians and anthropologists within the traditional

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academic disciplines since the 1950s. Because the traditional disciplines' concerns have been with local societies conceptualized at local level rather than with the transnational or global phenomenal level, recent scholars have found it very difficult to make meaningful connections between the Chinese in Mainland China and the ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia, especially on the perpetuation of "Chineseness" among the Southeast Asian Chinese if they concentrate only on one specific discipline.

The topic of "Chineseness" (or "Sinophone-identities") has been of substantial research concern to scholars of Southeast Asia since the 1990s (Salmon, 1996; Tan, 2003; Tan, 2013; Tong 2010; Wang, 1991). This focus has come into being no less because the subject of "Chineseness" has been treated as a part of universal immigration process under the context of theories in *Global History*, *Transnationalism*, and *Diaspora* since the 1980s and 1990s. Along with the emergence of these new theories, the needs to take the interdisciplinary approach to the study of immigrant transnationalism have also been widely recognized by scholars in the 2000s (Cordero-Guzmán, Smith, and Grosfoguel, 2001; Morawska, 2003). Therefore, the subject of "Chineseness" has become part of the mainstream agenda of immigration studies in social science disciplines over the past two decades, particularly on the questions of how did the Chinese in Malaysia and Singapore today perpetuate the traditional Chinese social customs in their societies, and what means did they use to retain their Chineseness in overseas contexts, etc. In order to draw fuller picture of how did the Chinese retain their "Chineseness" since the colonial Malaya period, in the 1990s, some scholars have applied the interdisciplinary approach and new theories in their research on the Chinese in Southeast Asia, i.e. the *Transnationalism*, *Diaspora*, and *Global History*. This was how the interdisciplinary approach incorporated into the studies of migration and transnationalism on the ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia region since the 1990s.

Nonetheless, some scholars have pointed out that the uniqueness of the ethnic Chinese communities in Southeast Asia has been undermined when the interdisciplinary works were focusing more on the triangular relationships between the *Transnationalism*, *Diaspora*, and *Global History*. This is because there has been tendency to assume that the “Chineseness” is similar across history, nation, region, ethnicity, religion and culture under the interdisciplinary research framework (Suryadinata, 2007; Tan, 2013). To illustrate the impact of the interdisciplinary approach to the research of ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia, this paper will review and compare the research findings of traditional disciplines with the interdisciplinary studies of Chinese in nineteenth-century British Malaya. The first section will demonstrate the major findings of the pioneering traditional disciplinary research on the Chinese communities in nineteenth-century British Malaya. The second section will identify the major concerns of the interdisciplinary studies on the same subject. Finally, the last section will discuss and conclude the impact of the interdisciplinary approach to the studies of ethnic Chinese in nineteenth-century British Malaya.

## **2. Traditional Studies on the Chinese in British Malaya, 1948-1980.**

The topic of the Chinese communities in British Malaya has been of substantial research concern to historian and anthropologist of Southeast Asia since the early 1950s. This subject was widely recognized in the 1950s after the publication of Victor Purcell, *The Chinese in Malaya*, in 1948 (Purcell, 1948). Purcell was a former British colonial officer and a historian in British Malaya. Purcell had lived within the Malayan Chinese communities for more than 26 years while he was serving the Malayan Civil Service in British Malaya. Therefore, the idea of studying the history of Chinese communities in British Malaya was believed to have inspired by Purcell’s own life experiences.

However, Purcell's research on the Malayan Chinese communities was conducted after he retired from the civil service position in the late 1940s. Themes like the inherent characteristics and the socio-economic patterns of the Malayan/Malaysian Chinese were considered part of the major issues in his studies. Furthermore, Purcell has also concerned on the subjects of Chinese immigration, Chinese occupations, Chinese brotherhood societies (namely "Chinese secret societies" in British Malayan context), and the Chinese living patterns in British Malaya since the nineteenth century (Purcell, 1948 & 1980). As a result, Purcell pointed out that the Chinese social structures in British Malaya were modified and shaped more by the British influences when the Chinese migrant settlers came under the British colonial rule system, even though the Chinese have brought with them the social customs and religion from South China (Purcell, 1948, pp.119-208). In other words, the social structures of the Malayan Chinese were shaped more in the host country than the Chinese resided, rather than with the traditional culture their ancestors brought from the South China region.

In the following years, besides historian Purcell, two anthropologists have chosen the Chinese communities in British Malaya as their fields of study: T'ien Ju-K'ang and Maurice Freedman (Freedman 1960; Freedman & Skinner, 1979; T'ien, 1953). Maurice Freedman and T'ien Ju-K'ang were both graduated from the London School of Economic and Political Science (LSE). This institution at the time was one of the world's leading experts on the Chinese anthropology during the first half of the twentieth century (Freedman and Skinner, 1979: 1-2). In other words, the studies of the Chinese communities in British Malaya were generated, to some extent, along with the British colonial domination and British academic system in the Southeast Asian region.

In 1953, anthropologist T'ien Ju-K'ang published a result of his fieldwork research in Sarawak, *The Chinese of Sarawak*, after his five-year studies on the social structure of

Chinese communities in Kuching, Sarawak (T'ien, 1953). The formation of social structure of Sarawak Chinese, according to T'ien, was interrelated with the economic strength issued by the British colonial government since the nineteenth century. For instance, the wealthier mercantile communities, the "Hokkien" and the "Teochew", were formed in Sarawak after they won the colonial government's favor in patronage system, as the British government would automatically provide them with higher social positions and with special political privileges. These privileges also provided the Hokkien and Teochew merchants with great advantages in arranging monopolies of commerce and trade in Sarawak. As time went by, such privileges have gradually turned the "Hokkiens" and the "Teochews" as the most leading Chinese communities, as well as the city dwellers in the Sarawak society.

On the contrary, the Chinese communities that did not receive any political patronage from the British colonial government, especially the "Hakka" and the "Henghua" communities, they have remained poor and generally dwelled in the outskirts of the towns with lower socio-economic positions (T'ien, 1953 & 1983). In other words, the social structure and the residential pattern of the Chinese communities in Sarawak were formed more in the courses of economic strength and of social mobility during the colonial Malaya periods, rather than with the transplanted living experiences of their forefathers from the South China region.<sup>1</sup>

In addition, Maurice Freedman, who was one of the most productive anthropologists on the Chinese Studies of British Malaya between the 1950s and the 1970s, has decidedly opposed to the "myth" (as Freedman labels it) of the strength of Chinese culture of China. According to Freedman, the

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<sup>1</sup> T'ien proposition was distinct from a Taiwanese anthropologist, Li Yi-yuan, who had studied the Chinese communities in the Johor district, Malaysia, in the 1960s. Li pointed out that the social structures of the Chinese communities in 1960s-Johor were transplanted from the South China region through immigration process. Refer to Li, 1970.

issue of “Chineseness” should not be overemphasised on the Chinese overseas communities in British Malaya/Malaysia. Rather, he argued that the Chinese customs and manners of British Malaya should be studied and understood within the colonial Malayan context because the peculiar forms of Chinese customs have been formed and transformed in the colonial Malayan context over the past centuries:

Whether the anthropologists were justified in looking upon the Nanyang as a substitute for a China from which the international situation had excluded them may be interestingly debated. But I do not think it could be reasonably argued that they brought to their perception of the Overseas Chinese a model of Chinese society and culture into which the Nanyang data had to be forced. On the contrary, it is chiefly to the anthropologists, although not to them alone, that we owe our realization and understanding of the extent to which Chinese culture has been whittled away in Southeast Asia and how great numbers of people of Chinese descent have been totally absorbed into non-Chinese society (Freedman & Skinner, 1979, p. 45).

From the above quote, Freedman has aptly referred the phenomenon of Chinese descent populations in Southeast Asia region as a unique form of *hybrid* population through the mechanism of social interactions. The Chinese in British Malaya/Malaysia were neither a substitution nor a mere transplantation of traditional Chinese culture from South China. Rather, it was a social transformation that taken place among the local-born Chinese descendants and the China-born Chinese inhabitants since the colonial Malaya periods.

In short, the publications on the Malayan Chinese by Purcell, T'ien, and Freedman were focused more on the local levels that interrelated to the sequence of past events since the colonial Malaya periods in the nineteenth century. Focusing on only one discipline, historian Purcell and anthropologists Freedman and T'ien have demonstrated that

a relatively new Chinese social pattern has been created as a response to the colonial living contexts in British Malaya.

### **3. Interdisciplinary Studies on the Chinese Communities in Nineteenth-Century Malaya, 1980s-2000s.**

The spectacular rise of the digital internet and the “World Wide Web” in the past two three decades have caused massive change to the academia. As the advanced technologies in communication and information flow became an integral part of academic life, the new technologies also challenge and change the traditional views of social scientists to go beyond their chosen fields of study. Along with these social changes, new theories including the *Global History*, *Transnationalism*, and *Diaspora* were emerged in the academia during the 1990s. Meanwhile, the needs of using the interdisciplinary approach to the study of “immigration” and “transnationalism” have also been widely recognized by scholars in the 2000s (Cordero-Guzmán, Smith, and Grosfoguel, 2001; Morawska, 2003; Salmon, 1996; Tan, 2003; Tan, 2013; Tong 2010; Wang, 1991). It was under such condition in which the integration of different fields of discipline has become more and more popular to the research on Chinese overseas communities in Southeast Asia.

However, the interdisciplinary approach was first advocated at the University of Chicago long before the coming of the era of globalization in the 1920s. Initially, the interdisciplinary approach was advocated for synthesizing two or more disciplines over the whole range of the traditional curriculum, so that the social scientists could see things in a wider perspective (Jone, 2010, p.76; Klein, 1990, p. 24). But the concept of interdisciplinary today, as Klein mentions, is centered more on the *problems* of knowledge, especially on the questions of whether connections can be made between two different disciplines, and whether any general concept could be used in all the disciplines. Because

the interdisciplinary approach was created, to some extent, chiefly to cope with the limitations of each traditional academic discipline; for this reason, the modern concept of interdisciplinary was shaped in four major ways, of which include: by attempts to retain historical ideas of unity and synthesis; by the emergence of organized programs in research and education; by broadening of traditional disciplines; by the emergence of identifiable interdisciplinary movements (Klein, 1990, pp.11-39). By this, it is not inappropriate to say that the interdisciplinary approach was generated not necessarily to synthesis two or more disciplines as ultimate goal. Rather, it is a new research approach that created to deal with the limitations of each traditional discipline by synthesising two or more disciplines.

With the advent of globalization process since the late 1980s and the early 1990s, it gave birth to the idea of integration and homogenization of cultures throughout the entire world. More studies came to terms with the the phenomenons of Chinese migration in nineteenth-century Southeast Asia as the result of the *Transnationalism* or *Chinese Diaspora* over the aspects of its movements. Furthermore, scholars also started to take new perspectives to explore the world between the past and the present, such as the global perspective, regional perspective, and transnational perspective. Due to the complexity of concepts in globalization and transnational processes, some recent scholars have found it very difficult to make meaningful connections between the Southeast Asian Chinese and the Mainland Chinese, especially on the subject of Chinese migration if they concentrate only on one specific discipline. Therefore, the interdisciplinary approach gradually becomes part of the mainstream agenda in the studies on transnationalism and the immigration process of ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia (Evans *et al.*, 2000; L. Douw & Godley, 1999; Li, 1995; Liu & Zhang, 2007; McKeown, 1999; Zeng, 2003; Zeng, 2004).

In the 1980s, the researches on the Chinese communities in Southeast Asia were focused on the question of how China



relates to Chinese in Southeast Asia. In 1981, Wang Gungwu was the first to acknowledge the phenomenon of “Chinese migration” under the worldwide approach, particularly of what migration means for nations, communities, and any Chinese individual living outside mainland China (Wang, 1991). The “sojourning” phenomenon, according to Wang Gungwu, should be understood as a “prelude to eventual migration”, which was a form of migration pattern that closely related to the treatment and prospects that the migrants received in the host country, and conditions in their native lands in China. These treatments, according to Wang, were the major issues that leading the Chinese migrants whether to stay in Southeast Asia, or to return to their native lands in China (Wang, 1996, pp. 2-3). By this, the Chinese movements between China and Southeast Asia before 1940 are understood as a “sojourning” process. This “sojourning” process also indicates that the Chinese settlers in Southeast Asia always had the option to return to China even though they have lived abroad in the Southeast Asian countries for more than a half century.

Taking the similar approach, some Chinese scholars have applied the theories of *Transnationalism* and *Diaspora* in their analysis of Southeast Asian Chinese communities. One common interpretation was the “Chineseness” is pervasive among the Chinese overseas communities in present Southeast Asian countries, particularly in Malaysia and Singapore today. These findings generally generated through the studies of different Chinese dialect groups and their voluntary organizations, namely the “Chinese *huiguan*” (華人會館) among the different Chinese dialect groups in present Singapore and Malaysia, include: “Cantonese”, “Hokkien”, “Teochew”, “Hakka”, “Hailam”, and etc. These Chinese voluntary organizations have played a crucial role in perpetuating the cultural sense of “Chineseness” of their ancestors, in which the Chinese have preserving the Chinese identities that transcending the limits of globalization and regionalization in Southeast Asia (Kuah-Pearce, K. E., & Hu-DeHart, 2006; Li, 1995; Liu & Zhang, 2007; Zeng, 2003; Zeng, 2004).

In the meantime, due to the subject of “Chinese migration” has become more popular under the context of theories of *Transnationalism* and *Diaspora*, there has been a trend that aimed for the integration of South China and Southeast Asia as a field of study in recent decades. For instance, since the 1990s, a number of publications were produced to illustrate the integration of two field of study would be mutually beneficial to the study of Chinese both at home and in Southeast Asia, particularly with regard to the subjects of voluntary organizations, dialect groups’ identity, and the Chinese secret societies in Southeast Asia (Evans *et al.*, 2000; Kwee, 2007; L. Douw & Godley, 1999; McKeown, 1999; Ownby & Heidhues, 1993). Integrating both fields of study may help us better understand the traditions and ancestral connections of the Chinese overseas in Southeast Asia to China. Because almost no detailed documents have survived among the Southeast Asian Chinese (whose forefathers were migrated from the Guangdong and Fujian provinces), scholars have found that the interdisciplinary and the transnational approaches are not inappropriate since both regions have shared the common culture and social patterns (Kwee, 2007). As a consequence, the material cultures among the present Southeast Asian Chinese were accommodated often with the cultural linkage to China, rather than with the Southeast Asian countries.

What seems to have happened here with the interdisciplinary approach was that the activities of Southeast Asian Chinese are homogenous to the China’s socio-cultural capital in the past and present. One sees here as a kind “unchanging Chineseness” that enabled the Chinese overseas to preserve their cultural identity over the past centuries (Liu & Zhang, 2007; Zeng, 2003; Zeng, 2004). Others see the China’s relations with Southeast Asia Chinese as a socio-economic connection through maritime trade and commerce (Reid, ed., 1996; Tagliacozzo & Chang, eds., 2011). Other scholars, most notably Kwee Hui Kian, while recognizing the integration of South China and Southeast Asia as a field of study would offer them with new

perspective on the nature and development of Chinese overseas communities, particularly on the Chinese social organizations that have been formed in the Southeast Asian context (Kwee, 2007; Ownby & Heidhues, 1993). In other words, the interdisciplinary approach has stimulated a syncretic understanding to the subject of “Chinese” between China and Southeast Asia, in which the “Chinese” of different nations are culturally integrated (in theory at least) in the modern curriculum.

#### **4. Conclusion: The Impact of the Interdisciplinary Approach to the Studies of Chinese in Nineteenth-Century Malaya.**

Synthesizing the information above, it is observed that the past two three decades the academia saw a remarkable growth by using the new social science theories and the interdisciplinary approach. By looking at the transnational or worldwide level, the interdisciplinary approach may help us better understand the reason why there was massive outflow of Chinese migrants from China to the Southeast Asia region in the past, and how the Southeast Asian Chinese interrelated to China in the present. However, the interdisciplinary approach may not work for every topic due to its limitations. The limitation of the interdisciplinary studies, especially on the research of Chinese in Southeast Asia, was due to its working proposition on the global or transnational perspective. With such proposition, one common interpretation was the common culture that has enabled the Chinese overseas communities to transplant and retain their “Chineseness” in contemporary Southeast Asian countries. The elements that developed into the transplantation of Chinese culture between Southeast Asia and South China have given rise to the phenomenon of what some scholars have called the “unchanging Chineseness” in Southeast Asia. This proposition is an indication of how far the Chinese in both regions- South China and Southeast Asia- have intimately interrelated with each other and remained unchanged over the past centuries at the global or transnational level.

On the contrary, by focusing more on the historical evidence yielded at the local level, the traditional anthropological and historical works on the Chinese communities in the British Malayan context have suggested that the ethnic Chinese in Malaysia and Singapore today were shaped more in the British colonial-ruled context since the nineteenth century, rather than by the traditional Chinese culture they brought from the Fujian and Guangdong provinces. For example, a unique form of Chinese groupings on “Chinese dialect groups” were formed along the lines of spoken languages, occupations, residential patterns, and social positions etc. in the British Malayan context, of which including the “Hokkien”, “Cantonese”, “Teochew”, “Hakka”, “Hailam”, “Kwongsai”, “Hok Chiu”, “Hok Chia”, and “Other”. These Chinese dialect groups also indicated that in actual practices a new form of social identity has been created among the ethnic Chinese in British Malaya since the colonial periods in the nineteenth century, despite the Malaysian Chinese today continued to uphold the customs of their ancestors in various modified forms. In other words, the traditional disciplines that saw the Chinese populations in British Malaya/Malaysia as distinct from the South China region is one of the characteristic elements of Southeast Asian Chinese during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The traditional disciplinary studies, unlike the interdisciplinary studies, have proposed that the Chinese overseas in British Malaya were different from the Mainland Chinese in China at the local level since they have gone through the process of British colonization in the nineteenth century.

In sum, this paper is only a preliminary attempt to sketch the impact of the interdisciplinary approach to the study of Chinese in British Malaya. Certainly, the interdisciplinary approach will help us better understanding the process of how the “Chineseness” has spread across the universe at the global or transnational level. But it is also observed in this paper that the ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia (Malaysia and Singapore, in particular) have been modified and

transformed into a unique form of social groupings within the colonial Malayan context at the local level. Therefore, detailed researches are needed to systematically investigate how far the “Chineseness” was perpetuated at the local level in the Southeast Asian countries during and after the immigration process in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and how far the “Chineseness” can facilitate the Chinese immigration and their livelihood abroad in the Southeast Asia countries.

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