

Tracing Chinese Migration to Sampadi, Sarawak: A Historical Ethnography of Cultural Integration and Settlement

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the historical migration and settlement of Chinese communities in Sampadi, Sarawak, focusing on how distinct dialect groups—Hakka, Teochew, and Lei Chou—integrated with local Dayak populations. Drawing upon oral histories, archival sources such as the Sarawak Gazette, genealogical records, and ethnographic observations, the study reconstructs the processes through which migrants adapted economically and culturally within a colonial frontier zone. Methodologically, it combines field interviews (n=20) with documentary analysis and site-based ethnography. Findings reveal that Sampadi served as both an economic settlement and a cultural crossroads, where intermarriage, linguistic blending, and hybrid rituals created a localized model of cultural integration. By situating these dynamics within broader frameworks of diaspora, transnationalism, and hybridity, the study contributes to understanding how peripheral settlements like Sampadi illuminate the micro-histories of Chinese migration in Southeast Asia and the negotiation of identity in plural societies.

Keywords: Chinese migration; Sampadi; Sarawak; Hakka, Teochew, Lei Chou; Dayak; cultural integration.

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INTRODUCTION

Chinese migration into Southeast Asia has profoundly shaped the region's demographic, economic, and cultural landscape since the seventeenth century [Reid, 1993; Heidhues, 1974]. While much scholarship centers on major port cities such as Singapore or Penang, smaller settlements like Sampadi in western Sarawak remain underexplored. Situated between Kuching and Lundu along the South China Sea, Sampadi evolved from a colonial agricultural node into a multiethnic community characterized by Chinese–Dayak coexistence.

This study addresses that gap by examining how Hakka, Teochew, and Lei Chou migrants—arriving in successive waves between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—settled, intermarried, and integrated with local Dayak groups. The Dayaks, indigenous to Borneo, were historically animist agrarian communities whose social systems provided both labor alliances and kinship opportunities for Chinese settlers [Ho, 2012]. Sampadi thus offers a lens through which to study frontier adaptation, local hybridity, and the maintenance of cultural continuity within migrant diasporas.

The significance of this research lies in uncovering how localized migration histories, often excluded from mainstream colonial and national narratives, contribute to broader understandings of identity formation and intercultural negotiation in multiethnic Malaysia.

METHOD AND APPROACHES

Fieldwork and Oral Histories

Fieldwork took place between October 2017 and March 2018 in Sampadi and surrounding areas. Twenty informants—descendants of early settlers, local elders, and temple custodians—were selected via snowball sampling based on community reputation and lineage accessibility. Interviews were semi-structured, focusing on migration origins, routes, intermarriage, occupational patterns, and ritual continuity. Data were cross-validated by triangulating oral accounts with tombstone inscriptions, genealogical archives, and colonial records (See supplementary data).

Archival and Documentary Analysis

Primary sources consulted include the Sarawak Gazette (1885–1950s), clan genealogies, and local land registries. Secondary sources (Chew, 1990; Ji, 2018; Ho, 2012; Lie, 2004) provided comparative context for interpreting oral narratives. Ethnographic observations, including religious ceremonies, linguistic usage, and funerary customs, were documented through participant observation at festivals and visits to grave sites such as Sungai Nguan, Sungai Limo, and Bukit Kualu.

Data Interpretation

The study employs a historical ethnography approach, integrating micro-historical reconstruction with interpretive anthropology. Oral histories were coded thematically (migration motives, settlement, integration, memory), while material sites (graves, factory ruins) served as mnemonic landscapes indexing cultural continuity.

SCOPE AND LIMITATION

Historical Background

Early Maritime Networks

Chinese maritime connections to Southeast Asia date back to the Tang and Song dynasties, but intensified during the Ming and Qing periods, when traders ventured to Melaka, Java, and Borneo.

In West Borneo, Hakka migrants established Kongsis mining federations such as Lan Fang, which combined governance and cooperative labor [Ji, 2018; Yuan, 2000]. Following the Dutch suppression of the Kongsis (1850–1854), displaced Chinese miners crossed into northern regions, laying foundations for settlements in Sarawak, including Sampadi.

Colonial Context and Land Development

Under the Brooke Raj (1841–1941), Sarawak’s economy was restructured around plantations, with emphasis on gambier, pepper, coconut, and charcoal industries. Colonial administrators such as James Brooke and later his nephew Charles encouraged Chinese settlement through labor recruitment and land concessions. Sampadi was identified as a promising agricultural frontier, with figures like James Scott (“Tuan Scott”) and Towkay Yeo Ban Hok serving as intermediaries between colonial authorities and Chinese laborers.

Migration Routes to Sampadi

Migration occurred via two primary channels:

Overland Routes

Post-Kongsis War refugees followed mountainous paths from Montrado and Sadas (present-day Indonesia) into Sarawak. Route A—via Serikin to Bau—was associated with Liu Shan Bang and the remnant miners of the Shi-Wu Fen Kongsis. Route B connected Sadas–Tebedu–Semanggang–Engkilili–Murup, facilitating gradual movement toward Sampadi. Oral accounts describe hazardous jungle crossings, which allowed small family groups to evade colonial surveillance while maintaining kin-based settlement clusters.

Maritime Routes

Steamships from Singapore and Pontianak carried laborers to Kuching, where flat-bottomed river craft continued inland via Muara Tebas and Rambungan to Sampadi. For many Teochew and Lei Chou families, including the Phangs and Khos, maritime arrivals in the late nineteenth century preceded agrarian ventures in pepper and gambier. Sampadi’s tidal and riverine geography shaped both its accessibility and isolation, influencing settlement duration and cultural retention.

Socioeconomic and Cultural Dynamics

Agricultural and Industrial Development

Chinese settlers transformed Sampadi’s ecology through plantation agriculture. Teochews specialized in gambier processing, leveraging proximity to river systems for boiling and transport, while Lei Chou migrants established charcoal factories that remain partially operational. Hakka settlers diversified into coconut and pepper cultivation. Oral records cite intergenerational transfer of agricultural knowledge and family enterprises such as the Goh and Lim households, whose descendants maintain farms today.

Cultural Integration and Hybridization

Ethnic integration was facilitated through marital alliances between Chinese men and Dayak women. Unlike more segregated multiethnic zones elsewhere, Sampadi's intermarriages produced hybrid households characterized by blended rituals, foodways, and linguistic codes. Hakka, Teochew, and Dayak languages coexisted within family settings, fostering a creolized environment without institutionalized barriers. Ritual syncretism is evident in funerary practices incorporating both Chinese ancestral rites and Dayak animist offerings.

This fusion aligns with broader anthropological frameworks of hybridity and localized diaspora, wherein migrants retain cultural identity while negotiating belonging through everyday exchange [Skinner, 1996; Reid, 1993].

Key Personalities and Local Agency

Three figures illustrate Sampadi's entangled colonial economy:

James Scott ("Tuan Scott"): Engineer and landowner who developed plantations and later transferred ownership to local Chinese families such as that of Wu Ji An, signifying localized redistribution of colonial property.

Towkay Yeo Ban Hok: Prominent merchant and Ban Hock port owner whose economic ventures facilitated labor migration and trade between Kuching and Sampadi. His enterprises linked colonial agricultural needs with Chinese entrepreneurship.

The Kho Family (Teochew lineage): Mixed farming and shipping family connected through economic and marital, as well as local administration. Their integration into local society, exemplified by Kho Tai Moi's adoption of Dayak kin, embodies Sampadi's pattern of cultural synthesis.

Material Heritage and Memory Landscapes

Sampadi's spatial history persists in its landscape: riverside cemeteries, charcoal kilns, gambier factory remnants, and ancestral tombs record overlapping ethnic and temporal identities. Inscriptions at sites such as Sungai Nguan reveal lineage origins (Lei Chou, Hakka, Teochew) and attest to continued local stewardship by families like the Gohs and Wongs. These places function as mnemonic sites reaffirming transgenerational belonging—what Nora (1989) would term *lieux de mémoire*—anchoring diasporic memory within rural Sarawak.

Discussion: Reframing Migration and Hybridity

This ethnographic reconstruction situates Sampadi as a microcosm of diasporic adaptation and localized modernity. The study challenges urban-centric narratives of Chinese migration by foregrounding peripheral rural experiences. Sampadi's community exemplifies what Clifford (1997) describes as routes rather than roots—mobility embedded in local reterritorialization.

Intermarriage and cultural fusion enabled social cohesion, suggesting that identity in Sampadi operated through negotiated hybridity rather than assimilation. Gendered dynamics—Chinese male entrepreneurs and Dayak female mediators—played crucial roles in sustaining both economic productivity and kinship legitimacy. The coexistence of ancestral Chinese rituals and indigenous practices illustrates not assimilation but mutual incorporation, rooted in shared settlement histories and economic pragmatism.

CONCLUSION

Sampadi's history exemplifies how migration, adaptation, and memory intertwine within a frontier community. Through oral histories and archival synthesis, this study reveals that Chinese settlers in Sampadi did not merely transplant their culture but reconstituted it through interaction with Dayak society and colonial structures.

The study contributes to Southeast Asian migration studies by (1) documenting a localized model of Chinese–Dayak integration; (2) demonstrating how micro-ethnographic methods illuminate subaltern migration histories; and (3) proposing a framework for analyzing cultural hybridity beyond assimilation paradigms. Future research could extend comparative analysis to neighboring Lundu and Bau or examine intergenerational identity transmission among mixed-descent descendants in contemporary Sarawak.

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