CULTURE, LANGUAGE & LITERATURE IN MALAYSIAN SOCIETY
Chew Fong Peng
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PLURAL CULTURE & SOCIETY IN MALAYSIA
Volume I

Plural Culture and Society in Malaysia

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The reader community in Malaysia is fortunate to be able to enjoy a book series entitled *Culture, Language and Literature in Malaysian Society* by Chew Fong Peng. The books present the views of a Malaysian scholar of Chinese descent on the national culture, language and literature as seen from her perspective, distinctly different from that of Malay writers in their own realm.

In a country with a plural society such as Malaysia, it is the blend of beliefs, religions, cultures, languages, literatures and public opinions that has contributed to its cosmopolitan fabric. Malaysia’s neighbours, Indonesia and Thailand, confronted with the reality of a plural society, had, from the start, opted to assimilate its varied characteristics into one national culture. Their political stance, education system and cultural process have mixed together the plural differences into one national character, one national outlook and one national spirit resulting in a mono-cultural society.

Malaysia, instead, chose the democratic option. While the Malay and indigenous cultures form the core basis, yet each community is free to deal with pertinent matters including religion.
In addition, each community continues to live by its culture, language and literature.

In the context of pluralism, the Government of Malaysia made a wise move in making Malay the national and official language even before the country’s independence. Post-independence, the English language would have been an inappropriate choice, especially when the different races were segregated – education-wise, economically and linguistically. Making Malay the official language was a practical move for it was already a language of communication in this region for hundreds of years. The Malay-medium schools became national schools to promote the expansion of knowledge using the Malay language and unity, from Peninsular Malaysia across the South China Sea to Sabah, where the majority of the population are the Kadazan-Dusun and to Sarawak, where the people are mostly Ibans.

The wisdom of this decision became obvious in the early 1970s. The Malay language continued to grow (as did the national education) and to bring to the fore non-Malay writers and scholars, whose excellence in the language had nothing to do with fate – in being born in this country unlike their parents – but from the capability of the Malay language itself as a language of knowledge and unity. It is true too that the nation’s democratic milieu further nurtured its culture, language and literature.

Chew Fong Peng stands among writers and scholars who have emerged from such an environment. She holds a PhD and belongs to the Chinese writer community – a community that has, for a long time, contributed to the growth of the national culture, language and literature in this country. Readers, therefore, may be interested to learn about this community and its valuable contributions to our national culture, language and literature.
Although writers of Indian, Kadazan-Dusun and Iban descent have contributed significantly to the development of the national culture, language and literature, this field is open especially to Chinese writers. Historically, Chinese writers in this region have been associated with Malay writing far longer than any of the other communities. Some have dabbled in Malay literature, especially poetry such as the syair and pantun. Their involvement, incidentally, coincided with the emergent printing technology introduced to the Straits Settlements by English colonials and traders in the early 19th century.

A Dewan Bahasa & Pustaka (DBP) study on the contributions of writers of various communities discussed the following topics: (1) The non-Malay writer community, (2) A brief background of Chinese presence in the Malay archipelago, (3) Peranakan Chinese writers of 1889-1950s, (4) The transition period of independence, (5) Chinese writers’ involvement in the writing of post-independence fiction, and (6) The post-independence era.

The involvement of Peranakan Chinese writers in Malay writing coincided with the printing technology. From 1889 to the 1950s, for example, were found about 23 creative texts, besides the published translations of Chinese classics. Among the earlier (1889) ones were poems written by a Peranakan Chinese Muslim convert, Muhammad bin Moor Ta Kub. The paper, Bintang Timur, printed in 1894, projected Chinese writers such as Chan Kim Boon, Wan Boon Seng, Lim Hock Chee, Siow Hay Yam and ‘Kalam Langit’ who produced serials, syair and pantun.

In 1910, Tan Hin Liang or Tan Bulat produced Sha-el-Singapura: Meniaga Gutta dengan Panton Menyanyi (Syair Singapura: Meniaga Getah dengan Pantun Menyanyi). Chinese
works in the Malay language continued through the independence and post-independence eras, owing to a natural assimilation process with conversions into Islam. Thus emerged such writers as Akhbar Goh, Chong Chee Seong, Li Chuan Siu, Cheng Poh Hock, Peter Agustine Goh, Mary Wong, Teo Huat, On Ah Guan, Lee Yak Ing, Lim Swee Tin, Lim Kim Hui, Siow Siew Sing, Atma Goh, Jong Chian Lai, Awang Abdullah, Amir Tan, Lai Choy, Mohd. Azli Abdullah, Lee Keok Chin, Selina SF Lee, Chan Khun Neng and Siow Yee Woo.

Chew Fong Peng prefers scholarly works to creative writing. This inclination has been established by earlier Chinese scholars involved in research, literary criticism and academic studies. This community, including the writer, comprises mostly lecturers of private or public universities. Among the well known are Wong Seng Tong, Teo Kok Seong, Wong Khek Seng, Wong Soak Koon, Khoo Kay Kim, Ding Choo Ming and Ong Hak Ching – in the fields of history, language, literature, culture and humanities.

It is timely, therefore, that we should now look closely again at the work of Chew Fong Peng titled *Culture, Language and Literature in Malaysian Society*.

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The work is divided into three sections in three volumes: (1) Plural Culture and Society in Malaysia, (2) The Malay Language: A Bridge to Knowledge, and (3) National Literature, Literary Education and National Development. Volume I comprises 17 articles, Volume II has 16 while Volume III features 23 – which reflect the writer’s deep interest in literature, education and nation-building.
Volume I focuses on plural culture and society in Malaysia. The writer reviews two creative outcomes, *A Different Chinese* and the film, *Sepet*. The first focuses on the Chinese society in several countries based on the life experiences of Fu Che Qin, who was born in Melaka in 1960. The second looks at a fiction film that promotes national integration.

In this volume too are found interesting articles such as 'The Mission to Build a Malaysian Nation’. Chew, an educationist, views education as systematic, directed and a platform to establishing a nation:

Smart schools can be excellent, teachers exceptional and the teaching methods something to be proud of if the recommendation made two decades ago to limit 25 students to a class had become a reality. On the contrary, in such a crowded classroom environment, teaching and learning have become ineffective. Forty students in a class are taught in 40-minute lesson periods which works out to each student having, on the average, only one minute of teaching by a teacher.

The writer also champions co-curricular activities which can generate determination and diligence as well as a collective sense of responsibility and honesty.

Co-curricular activities can help shape the personalities of students. For example, a student has to work hard in an activity or programme, resulting in the development of a sense of responsibility and trustworthiness. These values cannot be taught through textbooks or from subjects like Moral Education and Islamic Education. They can be developed only through co-curricular activities in school.
In his article, 'The Chinese Work Hard to Find Food', non-Chinese readers will understand the Chinese concept of colour and taste in cuisines:

The Chinese dietary philosophy is closely tied to colour and taste. The Chinese believe that a balanced diet is made of five colours and five tastes. Green, red, yellow, white and black make up the five colours; and the tastes are sour, sweet, bitter, spicy and salty. Each colour is associated with a certain taste and nutrient required for a particular organ of our body.

Another topic, no less interesting, relates to the diminishing Chinese opera. Its fate in this country seems to have shared that of traditional Malay theatre such as the bangsawan, makyung and wayang kulit. The sophisticated emergent electronic entertainment, which offers its audience a variety of choices, has slowly pushed traditional theatre to the periphery of modern society. The author relates her personal experience:

The night was bitingly cold, light rain stung the body, as if weeping over the fate of the Chinese opera. There were only 20 in the audience, absorbed, faithfully following the story in the Hokkien dialect. Most were the elderly, middle-aged and some were children. Not even the shadows of the youth could be seen except for two or three of them in their MPVs, busy with their handphones – sms-ing or playing games. They happened to be there only to accompany their grandmothers or parents to the Chinese opera, themselves not in the least interested. Instead, it was the cyber and electronic worlds that excited them.

This is a sad universal phenomenon. Globalisation and cyber-electronic technology, like the tsunami, have hit peripheral