

The Process of Assimilation: A Sociolinguistic Approach to the Study of the Peranakan Chinese in Kelantan, Malaysia (A Preliminary Study)*

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1.0 Introduction

This paper is the result of an initial sociolinguistic observation of how the Peranakan Chinese in Kelantan became assimilated to the rural Kelantan Malays by examining the former's speech during their interaction with the latter. Speech in this paper is viewed as a kind of social behaviour.

The observation was carried out in May 1989 in Salor, Pasir Mas for a short period of four weeks.

Before I address the topic, I would like to give you an insight on the Chinese population in Malaysia. The population of Malaysia which is 18 million presently, is approximately 53% Malay, the indigenous group, 37% Chinese and 10% Indian and other South Asian, the immigrant groups, the three main ethnic groups, so to speak.

It is unfortunate that there is a tendency for some students and scholars of Chinese in South-east Asia or Oversea Chinese to consider them as a homogenous group.

2.0 The Malaysian Chinese

I categorize the Malaysian Chinese into four groups based on the intensity of their acculturation and assimilation to the Malay ethnic group, the dominant group. The four groups are as follows:

- a. Pure Chinese
- b. Mixed Chinese
- c. Baba Chinese
- d. Peranakan Chinese

However, these groups are still considered as an ethnic group - Chinese. This is due to the fact that these groups (a word of caution on the Mixed Chinese) show they have the same ancestry, with roots that trace back to China. They also have the same cultural focus on symbolic elements, such as kinship patterns, language with its various varieties, and a common religious belief.

2.1 Pure Chinese

Generally, this group is centred in the urban areas of the country. However, they are also found in considerable numbers in rural areas. Pure Chinese are mostly engaged in business activities. An important criterion in my categorization of the Chinese in Malaysia into this group is not so much the geographical factor, whether they are found in the urban or rural areas, as to the fact that they are part of the later migration from China, or the descendents of these immigrants.

These immigrants were brought to Malaysia by the British to help develop the colonial economy. They came in search of greener pastures since China was going through a difficult period at the later part of the 18th and earlier part of the 19th Centuries. Initially, these immigrants had no intention of settling down in this country. But, in the 20th Century, however, a large number of them together with their descendents decided to consider Malaysia their domicile. They later went on to demand citizenship and their involvement in the administration of the country.

On the whole, these Pure Chinese do not interact with the Malays on levels other than business. Hence their level of acculturation and assimilation to the Malay ethnic group is low, and they remain oriented towards China culturally.

Most of the Chinese in this group do not realize that they need to make adjustments or compromise with the plural society of Malaysia regarding matters on traditions and customs inherited from China.

2.2 Mixed Chinese

This group comprises offsprings of mixed marriages between Chinese men and women of other ethnic groups or nationalities, except Muslims. In other words, they have Chinese fathers and non Chinese mothers. Their number is small, and hence they are not a coherent social force at the moment.

2.3 Baba Chinese

Much have been written on the Baba Chinese tradition. It cannot be denied that their level of acculturation and assimilation to the Malay ethnic group is high. This is evident from their language, Baba Malay which is a dialect of the Malay language. Thus their command of the Malay language is almost as good as the native speakers. They also show an appreciation for Malay pantuns (poetry) in "Dondang Sayang" - a typical Baba cultural performance.

Unlike the Pure Chinese, the Baba Chinese were not part of the emigrants from China to help develop the British economy. The Baba Chinese came to Malaysia long before the British arrived in the region. They were believed to have arrived in Malacca by the 15th Century. Baba Chinese are found in large numbers in Malacca and other former Straits Settlements, especially Penang and Singapore.

2.4 Peranakan Chinese

They are found only in the east coast of Peninsula Malaysia, mainly in the rural areas of Kelantan and Terengganu. Generally, these Peranakan Chinese are engaged in small scale agricultural activities. These Peranakan Chinese and their descendents are part of the earlier Chinese emigrants. There is no available information on their early existence in the area.

Unlike the Pure Chinese who come from the various dialect groups, namely Hokkien, Cantonese, Hakka, Hainanese, Kwongsai, Hokchew, and Henghua, all Peranakan Chinese are from the Hokkien dialect group. The same goes for the Baba Chinese who are also from the Hokkien dialect group.

The Peranakan Chinese have accepted most of the aspects of the social and cultural values of the Kelantan and Terengganu rural Malays in their daily life. The Peranakan Chinese are therefore considered as part of the Malay peasants rather than the mainstream Chinese.

The Peranakan Chinese's level of acculturation and assimilation to the Malay culture and values is the highest in comparison to the other groups.

The Pure Chinese is the dominant group as far as the Chinese population in Malaysia is concerned. They are not only the largest in number but are also more advanced in almost every aspect of life when compared to the other two groups, i.e., Baba Chinese and Peranakan Chinese. Mixed Chinese are excluded in the discussion because they are insignificant in number and have not yet become a distinctive coherent social force amongst the Malaysian Chinese.

3.0 The Chinese in Kelantan

The ethnic composition of Kelantan is largely Malay. Kelantan has a Malay population of about 95%.

Generally, the Chinese in Kelantan form two distinct groups, i.e., the Pure Chinese and the Peranakan Chinese. In Kelantan, these two groups are commonly identified as "Cina Bandar" (Town/Urban Chinese) and "Cina Kampung" (Village/Rural Chinese). But elsewhere in the country, the Chinese are distinguished by their dialect group, unlike that in Kelantan.

My main concern here is the Peranakan Chinese. They are found to have genetic and cultural ties with the Southern Thais.

The result of the cultural mingling of the Peranakan Chinese with the rural Malays is evident from the former's behaviour and practice, speech, body movement, and mode of interaction.

However, the acculturation and assimilation to the Malay pattern of life-style have been selective. Peranakan men and women do not dress in "baju Melayu" and "baju kurung" (Malay traditional garments) respectively. Unlike the Baba Chinese who have lost their mother tongue and have it replaced by a dialect of