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[History \(/history\)](#)

[Society \(/society\)](#)

[Culture \(/culture\)](#)

[Health \(/health-and-wellness\)](#)

[Cartoon \(/cartoon\)](#)

[Caixin \(/caixin\)](#)

[Home \(/\)](#) - [Society \(/society\)](#) - Chinese roots in Borneo, deep and strong

Chinese roots in Borneo, deep and strong

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Malaysian academic Goh Chun Sheng gives his impressions of the Chinese in Borneo, scattered in different communities and integrated into the locales where they live. Identity politics still rears its head, but perhaps we can look forward to the day when new narratives of diversity and integration will be told.



A dragon dance show during the Chap Goh Meh festival at Singkawang, West Kalimantan, Indonesia. (iStock)

“The river is not *sempit* (“narrow” in Malay/Indonesian) at all. Why do you call it Sampit?” I jokingly asked my guide.

“Sampit is a Chinese name. It means ‘sam’ and ‘it’, three and one. You should know!” My guide laughed, teasing me about my Chinese ethnicity.

That was back in 2014. I was taking a “klotok” (wooden river boat) ride along the Mentaya River in Central Kalimantan, the Indonesian Borneo. The mighty river is also called the Sampit River, sharing the same name as the city sitting next to it.

Scattered traces of the Chinese in Borneo

Curiously, I googled to verify what he said. He did not invent the story — the Kotawaringin Timur Regency Government (<https://kotimkab.go.id/sejarah-kabupaten/>) website claims that the name of Sampit came from the 31 Chinese immigrants who landed at the Mentaya River. Unfortunately, there was no further information such as their origins and the year of arrival, except that they were known to run plantation businesses involving rattan, rubber, and gambir.



A klotok (wooden river boat), December 2014. (Photo: Goh Chun Sheng)

The untold stories of the mysterious 31 explorers could be some excellent materials for a cult movie. I would be excited for such a movie to be realised. Until today, the Chinese population in this city (<https://historia.id/politik/articles/orang-hokian-di-pusat-borneo-vZzxx/page/2>) has always been a very small minority.

... it is intriguing to see the Chinese-Dayak connections from the names of the places.

On another end of Borneo Island, located about 550 km away in a straight line from Sampit, Sarikei in Sarawak also has a subtle Chinese linkage in its name. While the story of Sampit gives an impression of the Chinese's adventurous spirit, the name of Sarikei might come from the commercial side of the Chinese group.



A view of the Central Market in Sarikei. (Internet (<https://www.borneotalk.com/things-to-do-in-sarikei-2021-ultimate-guide/>))

According to the Sarikei Division Administration website (<https://sarikei.sarawak.gov.my/page-0-385-239-Pengenalan-Pejabat-Daerah-Sarikei.html>), the city's name is believed to come from the Chinese dialects, i.e., "central" (Sari) and "street" (Kei). Unlike Sampit, the Chinese remain the largest ethnic group in Sarikei, making up about 40% of the total population. The cityscape was profoundly shaped by Chinese culture.



A man riding a motorcycle in Singkawang, West Kalimantan, Indonesia. (iStock)

Singkawang of West Kalimantan, another city in Borneo with a large Chinese population, seems to have a clearer explanation of its Chinese root. As explained on the website of Singkawang City Administration (<https://portal.singkawangkota.go.id/sejarah/>), the Chinese migrants, mainly of the Hakka clan, named this place according to its geographical features. The name may be interpreted by splitting it into three words in the Hakka dialect: "Sing" to "Sar" for mountain, "Ka" to "Keuw" for mouth, and "Wang" to "Jong" for ocean.



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Spirit of entrepreneurship

However, these stories remain speculative and anecdotal. A further search revealed that the names are somehow linked to the indigenous Dayak namings, i.e., “*Siriki*” for Sarikei and “*Sakawokng*” for Singkawang. While there is no persuasive evidence of which names came first, it is intriguing to see the Chinese-Dayak connections from the names of the places.

In Borneo, the image of Chinese “towkays” or bosses has been deeply implanted among the locals.



A jetty in Central Kalimantan, the Indonesian Borneo, December 2014. (Photo: Goh Chun Sheng)

The arrival of Chinese civilisation brought many new things to Borneo. As Singapore’s Lee Kuan Yew pointed out, most Chinese in Southeast Asia are descendants of poor families in southern China, but they have a strong desire for wealth and a tremendous enterprising spirit. In Borneo, the image of Chinese “towkays” (<https://www.languagecouncils.sg/mandarin/en/learning-resources/singaporean-mandarin-database/terms/boss>) or bosses has been deeply implanted among the locals. There are numerous studies, such as *Ethnic Commerce: Chinese Capitalism in Southeast Asia* edited by Jomo K.S. and Brian C. Folk, describing in depth the history, challenges, and achievements of the Chinese in Southeast Asia.

Integration and inter-marriage

In turn, Borneo has also contributed many unique elements to Chinese culture. In West Kalimantan, the celebration of Chap Goh Meh, the 15th day of the Lunar New Year, in which both the Chinese and Dayaks participate, is full of Borneo flavours. The ritual practiced has a unique Borneo name, “Tatung”. There are plenty of videos about the celebration on YouTube. Dayak costumes and decorations can be seen everywhere, amazingly integrated into the traditional Chinese ritual.

In Sarawak, Borneo's wondrous nature, mystery and primitiveness have influenced a number of native-born Chinese writers, such as Chang Kuei-hsing and Lee Yung-ping, who have published many whimsical novels about Borneo, establishing a unique Borneo Chinese literary faction.

The emergence of the Chinese mixed-race community represents a true integration in the biological and cultural sense.



Dayaks of Kalimantan, a performance and ritual during the Chap Goh Meh celebration in Singkawang, West Kalimantan, Indonesia. (iStock)

Over the years, many Chinese have also married and had children with indigenous people. The emergence of the Chinese mixed-race community represents a true integration in the biological and cultural sense. Mixed-race children born with multiple identities can be considered special in Borneo, as they can “activate” different identities in different situations according to the context.

In West Kalimantan, Yansen Akun Effendy, a Sino-Dayak, ran for office by virtue of his Dayak identity inherited from his mother and was elected as the *bupati* or head of Sanggau regency in 2003. In daily life, he speaks Chinese dialects and celebrates Chinese New Year.

Identity politics still a factor

However, multiple identities are also a double-edged sword. Borneo remains dominated by identity politics, where lineage and religion play a significant role in individual rights.

In Sabah, the identity of the mixed-race indigenous people is regarded as a “loophole” to obtaining indigenous rights. Officials have set up layers of obstacles to strictly limit the recognition of indigenous identities. The impact is most severe among mixed-race groups who choose to inherit Chinese surnames. Many lost their

aboriginal status and are prevented from various indigenous rights and resources given by the constitution. One of the most criticised is the issue of land inheritance. As mixed-race sons and daughters have lost their indigenous status, they cannot inherit the customary land left by their indigenous father or mother, even though blood is thicker than water.

Hopefully, in the near future, we will be able to construct new narratives surrounding new forms of diversity and integration rather than identity crises and racial trauma.



A house along the Mentaya River in Central Kalimantan, the Indonesian Borneo, December 2014. (Photo: Goh Chun Sheng)

As I sit in a restaurant in Tawau, Sabah writing this article, Chinese New Year is just three days away. The restaurant is bombarding its customers with rousing festival songs through multiple loudspeakers. I hear the lyrics "Selamat Hari Raya" in Bahasa mixed subtly with "Gong Xi Fa Cai". When I look around, I realise that I'm the only Chinese in this crowded restaurant. This reminds me of the report by Jiao Zong (<https://www.dongzong.my/kearahbaru/2020-06-23-03-35-08/article/68-2010-2021>) (The United Chinese School Teachers' Association of Malaysia) published in early 2022, which showed that non-Chinese students now make up the majority in more than half of the Chinese primary schools in Sabah with the Chinese language as the medium of instruction.

"You look like someone from West Kalimantan to me." My mind flies back to Sampit, with the voice of my guide ringing in my ears against the backdrop of the "klotok klotok" sounds from the boat engine.

Staring at the untamed river that meandered in the vast land of Kalimantan, its mighty wilderness and

primitiveness did not turn into a galloping beast and charge towards me with its teeth and claws like those in the book *Wild Boars Crossing River* by Chang Kuei-hsing. Instead, I only saw the smiling face of my guide. Hopefully, in the near future, we will be able to construct new narratives surrounding new forms of diversity and integration rather than identity crises and racial trauma.

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