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**FROM SUB-ETHNIC MIGRANT TO NATIONAL/DIASPORIC  
CHURCH:  
THE BRIDGE AND THE CHINESE CHURCH IN MALAYSIA**

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **FROM SUB-ETHNIC MIGRANT TO NATIONAL/DIASPORIC CHURCH: THE BRIDGE AND THE CHINESE CHURCH IN MALAYSIA**

*By reviewing the history of the establishment of a national Christian organization, The Bridge and its main publication, a nationally circulated magazine, the paper intends to examine the concerns and struggles of rural Chinese Christians for recognition and visibility in a newly formed nation. It is an attempt to fill a gap in the scholarship on Malaysian Christianity which has been focused on denominational church history and the development of urban churches in the period of post Independence. The paper shows how Chinese Christian intellectuals who operate in the Chinese language have engaged the East Asian and overseas Chinese Christian network while searching for their destiny in the national context of Malaysia. By pointing to the multiplicity of these networks and the complexity of non-western Christian subjectivity, the paper hopes to make a contribution to on-going debates on issues of localization, trans-nationalization and authenticity in global Christianity.*

**KEYWORDS:** Chinese Christianity, localization, trans-nationalization, the Bridge

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

In the famously plural society of Malaysia, where religion is seen to be inextricably intertwined with ethnicity, the social location of Christianity is somewhat less self-evident.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, it would appear to be the only major religion in the country without an 'intrinsic' ethnic constituency, encompassing in its ranks members of diverse ethnic origins, with the sole exception of Malays, who are Muslims by law.<sup>2</sup> Of the circa 2 million Christians recorded in the 2000 census, accounting for almost 10 per cent of the total population, 64 per cent were to be found in the Bumiputra, 27.3 per cent in the Chinese, 6.6 per cent in the Indian and 1.8 per cent in the Others category (Loh 2006).<sup>3</sup>

In place of an *ethnic* constituency however, and in total disregard to the reality conveyed by the above statistics, Malaysian Christianity has been closely associated, if not identified, with the English-educated urban middle class of Chinese and Indian ethnic origin. This is reflected in the existing literature on Christianity in Malaysia, almost all of which has been based on English-medium churches located in Kuala Lumpur and Penang. True to its missionary and colonial origins (Roxborough 1990), the Malaysian Christian community is generally represented as a multi-ethnic English-speaking urban middle class, deeply exposed to western values and culture, and driven in recent years to ecumenical unity across traditional denominational and theological divides by the Islamization policies of the national government (Ackerman & Lee, 1990; DeBernadi 2001; Nagata 1997; Riddle, 2005).

This account of Christianity in Malaysia as the religion of the English-speaking urban middle class does capture a certain reality, insofar as the Christian population in Kuala Lumpur and Penang is concerned. That reality however, is far from representative. Even in these two urban centres, and especially outside of them, much of Christian life finds expression in diverse *vernacular* forms of religious culture and identity. Christians constitute 5.6 per cent and 3.6 per cent of the population in Kuala Lumpur and Penang respectively; they constitute 40 percent of the population in Sarawak, where Iban, Bahasa Malaysia and Chinese are the main church languages, and 27.8 per cent in Sabah, where the vernacular also prevails (Loh 2006).

Representing the Christian community as a coherent religious group sharing similar class and cultural identities, exposed to the same challenges, and reacting in a similar fashion to challenges arising from the national environment fails to take into account the variegated histories of Christian conversion and dissemination in the country, and the various modes and meanings of Christian identity as incorporated into different local communities and cultures. Language is a key variant in this respect, determining to a large extent the relationship formed between the new Christian community and its broader cultural world. The Christian world in Malaysia, we would

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<sup>1</sup> For one of the many statements to this effect, see Ackerman and Lee 1988.

<sup>2</sup> Smaller faiths such as the Bahai are also multi-ethnic in their membership.

<sup>3</sup> This is a significant contrast to the 1980 census data, according to which Chinese constituted 50 per cent of the Christian population. Only 3 per cent of the Chinese population were Christians (Dorall, cited in Nagata 2001, p.154).

argue, is segmented, perhaps to an even greater degree than by traditional denominational divisions, into distinctive linguistic communities.

The point of departure for this paper is the noticeable divide between the English-medium churches, many of which consist almost entirely of an ethnic Chinese congregation, (henceforth English churches) and Chinese-medium ethnic Chinese churches (henceforth Chinese churches). Notwithstanding a shared theological and denominational heritage, they differ substantially in religious culture, history and concerns, due largely to the language which defines and determines their respective life-worlds. Chinese Christians who continue to be embedded in Chinese culture and society cannot be expected to share the same subjective experiences and dilemmas as English-speaking western-oriented Chinese Christians, especially in regard to identification with a religion long considered to be foreign and non-Chinese.

Although occasionally alluding to these differences, studies of “Chinese Christianity” in Malaysia have invariably proceeded to provide an undifferentiated account of a homogenous Chinese Christian community, based almost entirely on observations of the practices, activities and concerns of English-speaking Christians (see DeBernadi 2001; Nagata 1997, 2005). Similarly, notwithstanding the acknowledgement by Roxborough, arguably the leading historian of Christianity in Malaysia, that “in any case much of the core of modern Christianity in the end derives as much from migrant Christian communities as from the work of missionaries in Malaya”, the available historiography, including Roxborough’s own invaluable work, has been almost exclusively devoted to the missions-derived English churches (Roxborough 1990b).

In focusing on a Straits Settlements-centred missions history<sup>4</sup> and the resultant English churches, too little attention has been paid to vernacular Chinese agency and Chinese networks in the process of Christian conversion and the consolidation of a Chinese Christianity.<sup>5</sup> In this paper on Chinese Protestant Christianity in Malaysia,<sup>6</sup> we begin by highlighting the history of the Chinese churches as migrant community churches, as against the mission history of the English churches. The paper then focuses on the establishment and leadership of The Bridge, a highly successful inter-denominational Chinese language para-church lay organization established in the late 1970s and still in operation today, in order to illuminate some distinctive salient features of this Chinese Christianity.

The aim of The Bridge was to form and inform a nation-wide Chinese Christian community at a time of great challenge and insecurity for Chinese society in Malaysia ie with the implementation of the New Economic Policy of 1971. We argue that its emergence at this critical juncture of the country’s history as a voice of Chinese

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<sup>4</sup> As noted by Roxborough, in mission reports, upon which the early history of Christianity in the region was based, “the mission and the expatriate were at the centre of the reporting exercise” (Roxborough 2006).

<sup>5</sup> See the work of Lutz (2001), Lee (2009) and Wiest (2001) in emphasizing the importance of Chinese agency and networks for Chinese Christianity in China. See also Steenbrink’s excellent review of a similar attempt to “rehabilitate the indigenous” in the historiography of Christianity in Indonesia (1993).

<sup>6</sup> It should be noted that the story of Catholicism has not been taken into account at all, although the Catholic Church is the largest denomination in the country, and had a far longer history of mission and indigenization in the region than the Protestant missions (Roxborough 1990b).

Christianity to Christian and non-Christian Chinese society grew out of deeply-rooted national and diasporic networks different to those of the English churches. By pointing to the multiplicity of these networks and the complexity of non-western Christian subjectivity, the paper hopes to make a contribution to on-going debates on issues of localization, trans-nationalization and authenticity in global Christianity today.

## 2. CHRISTIAN CONVERSION AND CHINESE MIGRATION

Western missionaries made Christian converts of Chinese immigrants to the Malay Peninsula then under British colonial rule. With the establishment of mission schools run by Western missionaries, more converts were made among second generation immigrant children. The churches thus established were English-speaking churches, as this was the language of the missionaries. They remained under missionary leadership and control until the 1960s, when the immigrants had become citizens and were ready to take over the leadership and control of what were to become national, rather than mission, churches. This is the standard narrative which links Christian conversion and Chinese migration in the Peninsula (Hunt et al 1992).

Recent literature in the history of Chinese Christianity has provided a far more nuanced picture of the dynamics of Chinese migration and conversion in the region. Between 1724, when Christianity was declared a heterodox religion, and 1846, when the ban on Christianity was rescinded, Western missionaries had no access to the Chinese mainland. There were however, large numbers of Chinese migrants seeking their fortunes in the Nanyang. Lee (2009) and Wiest (2001) have shown how Teochew and Hakka migrants converted to the Baptist and the Catholic faith in Siam by Chinese-speaking Western missionaries played a key role in spreading the Christian religion upon their return to China. As Lutz has pointed out in her work (2001), Chinese evangelists rooted in their own culture were generally far more effective than foreign missionaries in spreading the Word.

In the Malay Peninsula, Liang Fa, the most influential of the earliest Chinese converts and the first Chinese evangelist with the London Missionary Society, was baptized in Malacca in 1816. Before returning to Canton in 1819, he spent seven years in Malacca assisting William Milne and Robert Morrison with the translation of the Chinese bible, as well as the publication of the first Christian magazine in the modern sense of the word, the *Chinese Monthly Magazine* (察世俗每月統記傳).<sup>7</sup> When faced with increasing persecution in the 1830s, he again fled from China to Malacca, while his son moved to Singapore (Spence 1996, p. 31).

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<sup>7</sup> Entry under Liang Fa, Biographical Dictionary of Chinese Christianity, <http://www.bdcconline.net/en/stories/liang-fa.php>. It is noteworthy that in Roxborough's account of this period, no mention is made of Liang Fa's obviously important collaboration with William Milne and Robert Morrison in the translation and publications output (some 140,000 items were printed in Chinese) of this early LMS mission in Malacca (see Roxborough 1990b).

Southeast Asia or the Nanyang would thus appear to feature in early Chinese conversion to Christianity as more than merely the preliminary staging post to the “real” mission field in China that it has been made out to be.<sup>8</sup> From a Chinese perspective of a world then very much in motion, the southeastern Chinese seaboard and the archipelagic world of Southeast Asia was a shared and unified mission site. This maritime highway of Chinese Christian networks (Lee 2009) in which Christian conversion and Chinese migration was moved by Chinese evangelists along pathways of kinship and guilds – the traditional units of Chinese social organization – was conducted entirely in the Chinese language. It remained in operation long after China was opened to overt Western missionary activity in 1846.

Especially in the aftermath of the Taiping Rebellion and the Boxer Uprising, many Chinese Christians continued to seek safety in the “Christian” colonies of the Nanyang. These Christian migrations in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> and first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries were often collectively organized (by a church, or simply by extended family or lineage) and territorially localized. “Colonies” of Teochew Catholics, Baptists or Presbyterians in Singapore and Johore, Hakka Catholics and Lutherans in Sabah<sup>9</sup>, Foochow Methodists in Sitiawan and Sibul, were established, all with strong ties to the “mother” church and community in China.<sup>10</sup> Following on their heels came, in far greater numbers than could Western missionaries, Chinese pastors and church workers, including innumerable Bible women, to cater to the flock and evangelize among non-Christian Chinese migrants. Famous itinerant Chinese evangelists such as John Sung, who made epic mission journeys to Southeast Asia in the 1930s, preaching in the vernacular, did not fail to plough this overseas Chinese field.

By the time World War II and the 1949 Chinese revolution put an end to this maritime highway, the size of the Chinese Christian population in the Peninsula and Sabah and Sarawak far exceeded the numbers found in the English missionary churches. The trend can be gauged from the picture which still obtains today in the Methodist Church, the largest Protestant denomination in the country.<sup>11</sup> Of a total membership of 97,509 in 2006, 46,000 were to be found in Chinese congregations on the Peninsula and in Sarawak, as against 13,494 in English congregations. 251 pastors

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<sup>8</sup> See Brian Harrison *Waiting for China: The Anglo-Chinese College at Malacca, 1818-1843, and Early Nineteenth-Century Missions* (1979).

<sup>9</sup> “The Basel Christian Church of **Malaysia** (BCCM) was established among the Hakka speaking refugees of the failed Taiping Rebellion in China. As the leader of the Rebellion, Hong Xiuquan, was a Hakka speaking Christian, the Hakka speaking Basel Mission was viewed with great suspicion by the Qing Government of China. When the British North Borneo Company sought to recruit Chinese labourers to develop North Borneo, Rudolph Lechler of the Basel Mission enthusiastically supported the scheme. The first Chinese Basel Christians arrived in Lausan, North Borneo in 1882 and the Lausan Church was built in 1886. In 1925, the Borneo Self-Governing Basel Church was established with the Rev Huang Tian-Yu elected as the first president. In 1966, the present name was adopted and the BCCM is now the largest LCC pedigreed Lutheran Church with 45,000 members.”  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lutheran\\_Church\\_of\\_China](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lutheran_Church_of_China)

<sup>10</sup> During the Japanese Occupation, when the expatriate leadership of the church was imprisoned in Changi Prison in Singapore, the Chinese Conference of the Methodist Church in Malaya declared its independence from the American mission (Roxborough 1995).

<sup>11</sup> The American Methodist Mission was the most successful Protestant mission in Malaya, largely through the schools it founded (Roxborough 1995).

served in 110 Chinese Methodist churches compared to 37 pastors in 38 English churches.<sup>12</sup>

### **3. FROM CORRIDOR TO DIASPORA: POST-WAR GROWTH AND THE EMERGENCE OF NEW CHINESE CHRISTIAN NETWORKS**

Chinese churches had been founded in colonial Malaya as sub-ethnic migrant churches, closely connected by a narrow corridor to their respective church and community of origin. Functioning in their respective dialects, they remained separate from and unconnected to each other in the territory of settlement. The perception of Chinese churches in Malaysia as largely parochial dialect churches is still to be found in the literature (Nagata 1997). Chinese churches are also seen to be less socially engaged and networked, as in the following characterization by Roxborough:

“In Malaysia it is the English-speaking churches which are more firmly involved in wider activity, including concern for national and social issues. Chinese speaking congregations have a strong sense of autonomy, weak denominational links and fragile involvement in ecumenical activity— whatever its theological stripe.” (Roxborough 1995)

This is far from the truth and misses the point that, as with other non-Christian Chinese sub-ethnic migrant social organizations, and the English mission churches, the Chinese migrant churches have been profoundly impacted by changes in the post-colonial national and international environment.

The communist takeover of mainland China in 1949 and the consequent expulsion of several thousand Western missionaries coincided with the outbreak of a communist insurgency in Malaya, and the subsequent massive displacement and resettlement of over half a million of the Chinese rural poor into 474 barb-wired “New Villages” (Sandhu 1973). The British administration decided to encourage the re-deployment of the displaced missionaries from China to the newly-displaced Chinese new villages.<sup>13</sup> The Malayan Christian Council, an ecumenical body formed in 1948 by the expatriate leadership of the mission churches, few of whom spoke any of the local

<sup>12</sup> Statistics found on the official website of the Methodist Church in Malaysia, <http://www.methodistchurch.org.my/Statistics.htm>

<sup>13</sup> See Northcott 1992: 58-59: “Templar met with church leaders locally and through the Colonial Office in London corresponded with missionary societies, arguing strongly that the resettlement areas were an important place for Christian mission. In his battle for the “hearts and minds” of the new villagers, including communist sympathisers and supporters, he believed Christianity could play a vital role. He offered government funds for the employment of missionaries with China experience expressing the view that they would be most effective in the ideological battle with communism.”

languages, was the coordinating body for this massive missionary enterprise (Roxborough 1990; Harvey 2009).

Malaya became, for a few brief years, the centre of world Christian missionary activity (Roxborough 1992, p. 95).<sup>14</sup> In the Malayan context, it was perhaps as significant that this foreign missionary activity was directed toward the Chinese-speaking rural poor. In view of the tremendous amount of resources deployed however, the results were somewhat meagre. In 1985, the Lutheran Church of Malaysia and Singapore (LCMS), which developed out of the Chinese New Village work of the 1950s and was its most prominent success, had 2,300 members in Malaysia (Chang 1992, p. 251), drawn largely from children and women converted through the Sunday schools and clinics run by the missionaries.

It was great effort for small success.<sup>15</sup> Notwithstanding the disappointing results, this period of missionary activity did result in Christian converts from new strata of Chinese society, many of whom were bilingual and were to play an important evangelistic and leadership role in the newly-emerging post-colonial Christian society.<sup>16</sup>

The established Chinese migrant churches, which had kept their distance from the MCC, were not incorporated into this missionary effort (Harvey 2009: 260). The yield might have been higher otherwise. Outside of the MCC framework, the missionary outflow from China did feed new urban Chinese ministries in the country. AOG missionaries who were initially sent to Singapore and Malaya started a Cantonese ministry in major urban centres such as Penang, Ipoh and Singapore. Some new local churches were also founded with the aid of China Inland Mission (CIM) missionaries eg the independent church known today as the Xuan En Tang (宣恩堂), which has since set up more than five independent churches in and around Kuala Lumpur. Chinese CIM missionaries from Taiwan, Singapore and Hong Kong played a major supporting role in its establishment.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> There were 220 missionaries from eight different missions (the largest of which was the former China Inland Mission, renamed the Overseas Missionary Fellowship) working in 222 New Villages in 1959 (Roxborough 1990b).

<sup>15</sup> Gideon Chang, Bishop Emeritus of LCMS, was converted as a 13 year-old child in the Sunday school of a new village in Pahang and later served as an assistant pastor to a missionary in another new village in Selangor. He noted the low literacy rate of the New Village populace, their deep attachment to Chinese folk religion and the intense suspicion they harboured vis-à-vis the foreign missionaries and their local assistants, who were regarded as spies (奸细) or "running dogs" (走狗) of the western powers. The charity work resorted to in order to overcome the suspicion often backfired, as when diarrhea occurred upon consumption of the freely distributed milk powder. With the failure of the adult and youth ministries, it was the Sunday schools which were to yield the most converts. Interview with Gideon Chang, 30.09.2008.

<sup>16</sup> An outstanding example is Gideon Chang himself. Gideon Chang was born in Quanzhou, China in 1937 and fled to Singapore in 1947 with his mother and siblings. He moved to Mentakab, Pahang and was compelled to live in a Chinese New Village in 1948. He was converted to Christianity in the Sunday school of the New Village in 1953 and baptized in 1953. He recalled that only three students, he and his two cousins, attended the Sunday School, but all three of them are now pastors. He went to Bible School in 1958. Interview with Gideon Chang, 30.09.2008.

<sup>17</sup> The original name of the church was Christian Fellowship (基督徒聚会处) and the name of Xuan En Tang was adopted in 1966. Each character resembles the name of missionaries and churches which have provided valuable assistance to the Xuan En Tang. Xuan (宣) represents the Xuan dao hui (宣道会) of Hong Kong, En (恩) for the Huai En Tang of Singapore (新加坡怀恩堂) and Tang (堂) for the Taipei Nanjing Dong Lu Li Bai Tang (台北南京东路礼拜堂).

For the local Chinese Christian congregations which had just been so abruptly cut off from their corridor to China by the communist takeover of China, the outflow of Western missionaries and Chinese evangelists from the Chinese mainland to Hong Kong and Taiwan was to be of great import to their existence. Christianity grew rapidly in the two Chinese-speaking centres of Hong Kong and Taiwan in the 1950s and 1960s, both in terms of numbers, as well as infrastructure, such as seminaries and printing presses<sup>18</sup> and the pre-war foreign leadership of the mission churches and para-church organizations soon gave way here to local control (Rubenstein 1991). Hong Kong and Taiwan became the centres of a diasporic Chinese Christianity that was based on the circulation of publications and personnel in the Chinese language.

It was to these new centres that the Chinese churches in Malaysia, both the original migrant churches, as well as the newly planted churches of the 1950s, were networked, and drew their spiritual and intellectual sustenance. Throughout the 1950s and the 1960s, Chinese churches in Malaysia received Christian publications,<sup>19</sup> evangelists and church workers from these two centres (and Singapore), and sent their future leadership to seminaries there for training.<sup>20</sup> In the 1970s, this increasingly networked Chinese Christian world, that now included vigorous new immigrant churches in the United States and Canada, experienced what has been termed an “awakening” (Ling). Closely linked to the temper of the times and the resultant US-inspired world-wide rise of evangelical Christianity, from which the Chinese churches had originated<sup>21</sup> and to which it had remained true, one significant outcome was the formation in 1976 of CCCOWE – the Chinese Coordination Centre of World Evangelism (known in Chinese as 世界华人福音大会 or 华福). Arising out of the 1974 International Congress of World Evangelism in Lausanne, CCCOWE was called into being to evangelize as “Chinese churches in one accord”.<sup>22</sup>

Conceived in the diaspora as a global ethnic church, CCCOWE, with its structure of geographic district (national) committees, regional conferences, global congresses (every 5 years) as well as publications, research and other service activities has played a major role in facilitating collaboration among individuals, para-church organizations,

<sup>18</sup> There were three types of publishers in Hong Kong, those established by western missionary organizations, by denominational publishers and by individual Christians. There were more than ten Christian publishers active in Hong Kong during the 1950s and 1960s.

<sup>19</sup> These included Chinese bibles and hymnals translated into Chinese and distributed through the Chinese diasporic networks. Malaysian Chinese churches were one of the main importers. Some publishers worked with international Christian organizations in translating western theological classics into Chinese. The life and work of prominent Chinese evangelists such as Wang Ming Dao (王明道), John Sung (宋尚節), Ni Tuo Sheng (倪柝聲), Jia Yu Ming (賈玉銘) and their works were also published. Other widely-read literary products exported to Malaysia were Chinese Christian periodicals and magazines including Sheng jing bao 《聖經報》, Shao nian liang you 《少年良友》, Qing nian liang you 《青年良友》, Fu you 《福幼》, Gan lan 《橄欖》, Deng ta 《燈塔》, Ji du jiao zhou bao 《基督教週報》 and Zhong guo xin tu yue kan 《中國信徒月刊》, all of which were founded in those decades.

<sup>20</sup> Besides Trinity Theological Seminary and Singapore Theological Seminary of Singapore, seminaries in Hong Kong and Taiwan also recruited a lot of Malaysian Chinese. For instance, the earliest Chinese Pentecostal bible college, the Ecclesia Bible Institute was found in Hong Kong. Originally it was set up in Guangzhou but moved to Hong Kong in the early 1950s.

<sup>21</sup> The Western missionaries of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century who had brought Protestant Christianity to China were products of the “Great Awakening”. The China Inland Mission, which supplied the bulk of the missionaries to China, and later to Malaysia, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, subscribed to a conservative evangelical theology.

<sup>22</sup> Taken from the CCCOWE website, <http://www.cccowe.org/eng/content.php?id=9>

and churches in the Chinese Christian world. This had an immediate impact on the Malaysian church. It was at the 1976 founding meeting of CCCOWE in Hong Kong that the decision was taken by a group of Malaysian Chinese church leaders to establish a Chinese-language seminary in Malaysia for the training of local pastors.

As recounted by Gideon Chang, a founding director of the Malaysian Bible Seminary:

“We prayed for this for two years. At the same time, the founding member of CCCOWE came to Malaysia to encourage/promote the cooperation of Chinese churches on mission work. Many churches had felt the need to build a local seminary school. In 1976, the first meeting of CCCOWE was held in Hong Kong. Pastors and lay leaders of Chinese churches from all over the world attended the meeting. The Malaysian representatives agreed upon the establishment of a seminary college and Rev. Lukas Tjandra (A Chinese Indonesian who speaks fluent Mandarin and has close relationship with Malaysian Chinese churches) was selected as the head of the project. Rev. Lukas agreed with the proposal...” (Chang 2003).<sup>23</sup>

The establishment of the Malaysian Bible Seminary by the local churches, with the assistance of the ethno-linguistic network in the transnational environment, testifies to an increased sense of community and solidarity among the church leadership in the country, as well as to a further emancipation from the western mission church. Chang noted in a personal interview:

“The western missionaries exercised great control. They were reluctant to recognize us because we were not as well-read as they were. I had worked for seven to eight years as a parish worker before I was ordained. At that time there were not many local pastors because they could not meet the academic qualifications set by the missionary. I felt that the locals were looked down upon. So I felt the need to build a local seminary to respond to the needs of the local church....Those who finished their studies overseas usually could not adapt to the local environment. Hence they usually stayed for a short period and then left the country. The conflicts could be many, for instance, the salary of pastor. The salary of the pastor in western society was between the middle and upper class level, but we couldn't afford that.”<sup>24</sup>

It also contributed to an invigoration of the Chinese church that was now beginning to witness a third wave of Christian conversion. This time it was to be among the increasing numbers of Chinese-educated high school and tertiary institution graduates who were leaving the new villages and small towns of the country to seek

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<sup>23</sup> Message from Gideon Chang MBS 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary. Klang: MBS Publication Sdn. Bhd., 2003.

<sup>24</sup> Interview with Gideon Chang, 30.09.2008.

education and employment in the big cities, a rural-urban migration that began in the mid-1960s, would gain momentum in the 1970s, and continue for the next few decades.

These young men and women were no longer immigrants. They belonged to a new generation of Malaysian Chinese educated within the national school system, speaking dialect at home, but mandarin in school and at work. With their keen experience of geographical, educational and social mobility, they were more open to new forms of organized religiosity, including Christianity (Lim 2007). Unlike the English-educated urban converts, these new Christians remained anchored in a Chinese-speaking society and cultural world. It was a Chinese-speaking world however, in which Mandarin had replaced dialect as the language of education and literary culture for a growing Chinese-educated middle class.

This was to be reflected in the life of the Chinese churches. Based on missionary field reports, dialects were still widely-spoken in these churches during the 1960s and even 1970s. Mandarin started to take over in the early 1980s and would be the language used in most Chinese churches today.<sup>25</sup>

## **4. THE BRIDGE: CHRISTIAN ENGAGEMENT IN THE MALAYSIAN CHINESE PUBLIC**

### **4.1 THE NATIONAL ENVIRONMENT AND THE EMERGENCE OF THE BRIDGE**

The 1970s were deeply troubling times for Chinese society in Malaysia. The New Economic Policy launched in 1971 severely restricted access to state-sponsored education and employment. The National Cultural Policy launched in the same year threatened the preservation of Chinese education and culture, already being undermined by increased exposure to Western culture and modernity (see Carstens 2005). In this climate of extreme socio-economic and cultural challenge, a vibrant literary public sphere emerged in which national issues affecting Chinese society were widely discussed and debated.

The unprecedented growth of Chinese literary production in the 1970s (Li 1984, p. 397) found a ready platform in the weekly literary supplements of the widely-circulated Chinese newspapers,<sup>26</sup> as well as in locally published Chinese literary

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<sup>25</sup> In our field work site, we found that the Kajang Chinese Methodist Church switched from dialect to mandarin in the mid-1980s. The Chinese ministry of the Kajang AOG also started to grow in the 1980s. AOG reopened its Chinese department in its Bible College in 1980. One contributory factor would have been the establishment of local theological seminaries which started producing local chinese speaking workers in the third quarter of the 1970s.

<sup>26</sup> There were 50 Chinese newspapers in Malaysia, with a larger circulation and readership than in any other language medium in the country (Li, 1984: 397). ...Tan doubted the figure was correct..

magazines.<sup>27</sup> It was fueled by the active support of key Chinese community institutions and associations, which organized essay contests, literary prizes and awards and sponsored publications (Ma Lun 2004).<sup>28</sup> In addition to these sponsored activities, the writers themselves, many of them young people in their twenties, were active in organizing literary meetings and camps, setting up literary awards and forming writers associations.<sup>29</sup> In 1978, the Malaysian Writers' (Chinese) Association was formed and held its first national conference with the theme "Develop culture through literature" in the national capital of Kuala Lumpur.

Out of this national literary ferment was born a Chinese Christian literary movement cum para-church lay organization devoted to the development of Christian literary (not devotional) writing and publishing designed for a Christian and non-Christian Chinese reading public. In 1977, a Christian Writers' Fellowship was formed and registered as the Persatuan Penulis-penulis Kristian Malaysia. In 1978, the Christian bi-monthly literary magazine, the Bridge, known in Chinese as *Wen qiao* (文橋) – word and bridge - was first published. The idea of publishing a *wen yi* (literary) orientated magazine instead of a religious magazine was to nurture Christian writers in writing *wen yi* works for the *fu kan* of Chinese newspapers in order to increase the Christian voice in Chinese society.<sup>30</sup> This later took on the more explicit aim of discussing contemporary issues in the nation, church and society from a biblical and theological perspective.<sup>31</sup> From its inception, it has been an inter-denominational Chinese Christian magazine deeply rooted in local Chinese Christian society. It is widely distributed to the Chinese Christian churches in the entire country, and supported financially by donations from them.<sup>32</sup>

In 1985, The Bridge communications Sdn Bhd was established as a company. In 1986, two leading national Chinese newspapers, the *Sin Chew Jit Poh* and *Nanyang Siang Pau*, agreed to devote a weekly section to religion (Christianity and Buddhism) in a deal brokered by the chief editor of The Bridge, which was to provide the Christian

<sup>27</sup> One such magazine was "Jiao Feng", published originally in Singapore in 1955 but moved to Kuala Lumpur in 1959. It was widely circulated among local writers and served as a platform for them to publish their essays, novels and poems and at the same time as a channel for introducing literary ideas and production from Hong Kong and Taiwan to Malaysia. It was an important platform for the growth of Mahua literature. Yao Tuo, the director of the magazine, was a Christian.

<sup>28</sup> The Federation of Hokkien Associations of Malaysia and the Selangor Hokkien Association set up the Academy and Literary Publication Fund (学术文艺出版基金) in 1977 with the purpose of sponsoring local publications, as did the Selangor Teo Chew Association and the Selangor Chinese Assembly Hall. Numerous essay contests were organized by various local societies eg the Tawau Youth Literature and Arts Association (斗湖青年文艺协会作文比赛), The Chinese Language Association of University of Malaya, (马来亚大学华文学会文艺创作比赛), the St John Youth of Bakri, Johor, (柔佛吧口圣约翰青年文艺创作比赛), the Alumni Association of Shing Chung, Sungai Siput (N) Perak (霹雳和丰兴中校友会全国散文比赛) and the Alumni Association of Han Chiang, Seberang Perai (威省韩江校友会诗歌散文比赛).

<sup>29</sup> Informal meetings and associations such as *wen you hui* 文友会 among writers or *wen you* 文友 were very popular in the 1970s and 1980s. Out of these informal meetings, local writers' associations would emerge. One of the well-known poetry associations, Sirius Poetical Society, originally based in Perak and founded in 1974, was actually a combination of ten poetry associations throughout the country.

<sup>30</sup> This was a result of the discussions between Yeoh, Ng and Tan Wei Qiang.

<sup>31</sup> When Lam took over the chief editor's post in 1985.

<sup>32</sup> One of the author's church in Sarawak was a regular subscriber and donor, as was the church she attended while pursuing her university studies in the national capital in the 1990s, and the local church where she then worked in Kajang several years later.

articles.<sup>33</sup> This was the first time for a Christian organization to engage the Chinese public through the non-Christian Chinese mass media. With this “Easter miracle”, the breakthrough to the overwhelmingly non-Christian national reading public was achieved. It sealed the reputation of the Bridge among the Chinese churches. Today, 15 Chinese newspapers, with a total readership of some three million, provide similar sections.<sup>34</sup>

In 1991, it started a new youth magazine. In 1992, it organized its first national conference on the newly minted national “Vision 2020”. The circulation of the Bridge rose from 1,000 for its first issue in 1977 to 16,000 in 1995. Through its publications, conferences and other activities such as low-cost counseling services to the general public, the Bridge emerged as a household name in the Chinese reading public, Christian as well as non-Christian, and the leading intellectual voice for a new generation of young Malaysian Chinese Christians in search of their place in Chinese society, in the nation, and in the world.

A Chinese-educated pastor who converted to charismatic Christianity in his youth described the influence of the Bridge on his 19 year-old self in the following terms:

“The biggest transformation in my religious life was the 2020 Vision conference<sup>35</sup> held by the Bridge. I remember one day I was in the office of Huang Zi helping him to do newspaper cuttings. Philip Chia, Chin Ken Pa, Shi De Qing...were talking about Malaysian current affairs.<sup>36</sup> Shi De Qing was holding a lot of books and said he was going to write an essay. I laughed at him and asked if it was necessary to read so many books for one article. He was ten years older than I. I envied their lives. Though I didn’t understand everything at the conference, I felt passion in my heart. The conference gave me a new sense of direction...I suddenly realized that the world of my belief was much broader”.<sup>37</sup>

The Bridge was then at the height of its influence. Today, the Bridge has lost its younger readers and its circulation has declined to 10,000. It has also lost its intellectual vibrancy. It remains however a visible Christian presence through the provision of low-cost Christian counseling services and the general publishing of Christian literature. It also continues to hold nation-wide conferences, the last two addressing the history of Malaysian Chinese churches in the country.<sup>38</sup> In the following section, we shall examine in greater detail the circumstances of, and the personnel behind, the formation of the Bridge.

<sup>33</sup> The column was generally called *fu yin ban* 福音版 or the Gospel Edition. Sheng Ming Shu 生命树 or The Tree of Life was the specific name given to the column.

<sup>34</sup> [www.bridge.org.my](http://www.bridge.org.my)

<sup>35</sup> Held in 1992.

<sup>36</sup> They were prominent commentators in the national press and activists with the Bridge in the early 1990s.

<sup>37</sup> Interview with Chan Juin Ming, October 22<sup>nd</sup> 2008.

<sup>38</sup> The last conference on Chinese church history, titled From the Emergency Act to the Departure of the Missionaries, was held in September 2008 at the Gospel Hall in Kuala Lumpur.

## 4.2 THE TRANSNATIONAL ENVIRONMENT AND THE FORMATION OF THE BRIDGE

Parallel to the secular Chinese intellectual literary tradition referred to above, there was the Protestant missionary tradition of literary mission, begun in Malacca some two centuries ago with the pioneering work of Robert Morrison, William Milne, Samuel Dyer and Liang Fa, the spirit of which had been inherited by the Hong Kong-based Chinese Christian Literature Council (香港文艺出版社 HK CCLC)<sup>39</sup>. The 1977 writer's workshop which led to the formation of The Bridge was also born out of this tradition. It was conceived in conjunction with the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the CCLC, which applied for funding from the World Council of Churches. Malacca was chosen in view of its history as the site of the publication of the first Chinese newspaper. The Malaysian CCCOWE district committee co-organized the event with the CCLC.

Two Taiwanese speakers, Lin Zhi Ping and Zhang Xiao Feng were invited as guest speakers.<sup>40</sup> Both of them were Christian writers who had written extensively on Christianity in Chinese, and were closely involved with the recently-founded CCCOWE. In 1973, Lin Zhi Ping had set up a Christian para-church organization in Taiwan which published a well-known magazine – Cosmic Light. Zhang Xiao Feng was a famous writer in the Chinese speaking world. During this workshop, Ling Zhi Ping introduced the idea of pre-evangelism and the work of Cosmic Light. The idea caught on. It was at this meeting that the proposal for the publication of a similar Christian magazine in Malaysia was mooted and a Christian Writers Fellowship formed.<sup>41</sup>

Subsequent writers' workshop organized and funded locally by the Bridge continued to call on the services of Lin Zhi Ping and Zhang Xiao Feng, as well as other foreign speakers from Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore and the United States. The strong transnational ties of this Malaysian Christian venture are thus clearly in evidence. Who however, were the local Christians?

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<sup>39</sup> CCLC's predecessor, the Christian Literature Society, was established in Shanghai in 1887, and was the largest publishing house there. With the foundation of the People's Republic of China in 1949, most of the foreign missionaries and the foreign staff of CLS left for Hong Kong. Consequently, the Council on Christian Literature for Overseas Chinese was established in 1951 with the goal of providing religious and reference books to serve Chinese Christians overseas. In 1965, the name was changed to Chinese Christian Literature Council (CCLC).

<sup>40</sup> Other foreign guest speakers included Moses Hsu (bilingual, from US, HK and Tw), Dr. Van Home, Ling Zhi Ping (professor and writer), Zhang Xiao Feng (famous Taiwanese writer), Wayne Siao, Yin Yin (well-known Taiwan publisher director) and Xu Chun Xin (writer and editor).

<sup>41</sup> The structure of CWF consisted of the two bodies, the annual meeting of member as the highest body, and the executive committee members who were elected annually. In the early stage, the committee members mostly consisted of representatives of CCCOWE. The first batch included president (David Hock Tey from Selangor<sup>41</sup>), vice-president (Wayne Siao, principal of Baptist Theological Seminary), secretary (Yap Oon Tham), treasury (Bishop Peter Foong from Selangor), accountant (He Qi Ming) and editorial members (Yeoh, Jin Shou Dao and Su Zong Wen).

### 4.3 WHO'S WHO IN THE BRIDGE – A PROFILE OF LOCAL CHINESE CHRISTIANITY

The establishment of the Bridge exemplifies the collaboration between three groups of Chinese Christians in the diaspora. The foreign input of highly qualified Chinese professionals from Hong Kong, Taiwan and the United States has already been mentioned. They constitute one group. A second consisted of local lay Christians like Yeoh Hong Yee (known as Yang Bai He 杨百合), Ng Kok Kea (known as Huang Zi 黄子) and Lam Sok Fun (known as Lin Wen Cai 林文采), who were actively engaged in the actual work of acquisition, production and distribution at the local level. Their strong ties to the various local communities were their strength in making a reality out of this literary project. As they were deeply rooted in the local society however, they had limited access to international Christian associations. For this, a third group of largely church professionals, both in the churches and para-church organizations, played a critical role. These transnational coordinators and heads of established institution included Ng Yoot Ching, David Hock Tey, Wayne Siao Wei Yuan and Peter Fong Siew Kong. We examine the backgrounds of these last two groups of people in greater detail below.

#### 4.3.1 LOCAL LAY CHRISTIANS

Yeoh Hong Yee, Ng Kok Kea and Lam were born in Malaysia, Yeoh during the pre-war period but Ng and Lam in the post-Independence era. They grew up in small and typical Chinese towns instead of the large cities of the west coast with their multi-racial composition. They went to local Chinese schools and did not receive a formal university education in youth<sup>42</sup>. They were formed by the spirit of the national literary movement of the 1970s.

Yeoh Hong Yee, the founding chief editor of the Bridge, grew up in Kampar<sup>43</sup> and though from a Teochew family, cannot converse in Teochew; he speaks Cantonese, the language of the town, and Mandarin, the medium of instruction. He converted to Christianity in 1963, while studying to be a teacher at the Training College in Teluk Intan.<sup>44</sup> He had been fond of poetry before his conversion to Christianity, and had sent his first poem to “Nanyang Xue Sheng” (南洋学生), a supplement of the Nanyang Siang Pau, but re-oriented his reading and writing career after his conversion. He became an avid reader of the major Christian magazines of the time, even while living in a small

<sup>42</sup> Ng and Lum both obtained postgraduate degrees in their mid-age.

<sup>43</sup> He attended the Pei Yuan primary and secondary school.

<sup>44</sup> As the first Christian in his house, he often shared the gospel with his family members and faced little resistance from his family. According to him this was partly because his parents did not observe the traditions rigidly and also because he paid his filial respect to his parents by sending one third of his month stipend to them when he was attending his teacher's training course in Teluk Intan. His parents converted to Christianity in 1965.

town of Terengganu to which he had been posted, and constantly supplied literary work to them.<sup>45</sup>

Encouraged by debates on the nature of Christian literature in the 1960s in Taiwan,<sup>46</sup> Yeoh Hong Yee resumed sending his work to the secular media in 1971, and, upon his return to Kampar, became a keen participant in the literary movement of the 1970s. As mentioned in an earlier section, an influential modern poetry association, Sirius Poetical Society (天狼星诗社) was active in Perak. One of its founders, Woon Swee Tin (温任平) also lived in Kampar. Yeoh often visited him and he later invited Woonto chair a section in *The Bridge* magazine when the magazine was born. In 1977, Yeoh won a modern poetry award in a national writing contest held by the Sirius Poetical Society. Ng Kok Kea was also a prize winner of this competition. Another founder member, Tan Wei Qiang, was also a prize winner of a national literary contest.

Ng Kok Kea had helped edit *The Bridge* after Yeoh Hong Yee's departure as its chief editor, and later became its first Director General in 1985. Born in 1956 in a Chinese New Village in the southern state of Johore where his family ran a small laundry business, he attended local Chinese schools in Segamat but without a credit in Malay, failed to make it to university. He joined the construction industry in the neighbouring town of Simpang Renggang but had to move to Kuala Lumpur in 1985 when the construction industry was heavily affected by a sharp recession. It was there that he joined the *Bridge* as a fulltime staff member.

Ng Kok Kea had been converted to Christianity in secondary school<sup>47</sup> and had joined the Methodist Church in Segambut. With the encouragement of a former school teacher who was also a member of the church, he sent his essays to the local newspapers, to local and foreign Chinese literary magazines<sup>48</sup> as well as to the three Methodist district magazines active in the 1970s. Through the denominational as well as the Chinese literary networks, he met the older Yeoh Hong Yee, who invited him to the 1977 meeting. When he moved to Simpang Renggang, he joined the Presbyterian church and met Christian student intellectuals such as Chin Ken Pa.

These were the young men who built *The Bridge* as a Chinese literary Christian magazine, and used it to bring Christianity out of the walls of the church into society. Ng Kok Kea's decision to incorporate the *Bridge* as a company in 1985 allowed the group to hold other activities such as seminars and tours which addressed Chinese society

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<sup>45</sup> The magazines available were *Chen guang bao* (晨光报) and *Sheng jing bao* (圣经报) from Hong Kong, *Kan na* (看哪) from Singapore, *The Christian Tribune* (基督教论坛报) from Taiwan and *Bei ma chen guang* (北马晨光), a local publication published by a Christian living in Alor Star.

<sup>46</sup> For instance, the Christian scholar Moses Hsu opened a Christian Literature course in Tunghai University in Taiwan and Yeoh said he was inspired by Zhang Xiao Feng's article on writing Christian literature published in *The Christian Tribune*.

<sup>47</sup> As Ng's mother had been converted by a Christian missionary in the New Village in the 1950s, but continued practicing Chinese religion, Ng's later conversion met with no resistance from the family. His father had died in his childhood.

<sup>48</sup> He wrote for the local literary magazine *Jiao feng* (蕉风), as well as the Hong Kong literary magazine for contemporary arts and literature, *Dang dai wen yi* (当代文艺), which was a well-known magazine circulating around Hong Kong, Taiwan and Southeast Asia. He said it was a great honour if your work was published by the magazine.

through its powerful, non-Christian institutions. One such “breakthrough” event was a seminar tour in mid-1986 on “Christianity and Chinese Culture”, with a leading local Chinese intellectual Huang Yun Yo (黄润岳) as speaker.

“That was an important event. Our seminar tour went to Johor Baru, Kluang, Batu Pahat, Rengit, Segamat, Malacca, Kuala Lumpur, Ipoh and Penang. This was the first time a Christian event was held at the Chinese assembly halls. We went to Penang Chinese Assembly Hall, Pei Feng Independent School of Malacca, and other schools and assembly halls. This was the first time we, the Chinese Church, went out. Before this we only had evangelical events.”<sup>49</sup>

All this started with the literary camp in 1977 which Ng Kok Kea characterized, in retrospect, as “a gift from God who sent his servants from Hong Kong and Taiwan to Malaysia”.<sup>50</sup> Figures such as Yeoh Hong Yee and Ng Kok Kea belong to the younger generation of Chinese Christian youth formed by the nation-state. They had strong ties to the local Chinese society in which they had grown up, but not beyond, to Hong Kong and Taiwan. These ties were made available by the first generation of Chinese Christian leaders in the country, to whom we now turn.

#### 4.3.2 CHRISTIANS WITH TRANS-NATIONAL NETWORKS

There were several key persons who played an important role in networking the local young writers and linking the local Chinese Christians to the overseas Chinese Christian networks. Among these were David Hock Tey (郑国治), Wayne Siao (萧维元), Peter Foong Siew Kong (冯彼得), and Su Zong Wen (苏宗文), all of whom were members of the management committee of The Bridge during its inception.

Wayne Siao and Su Zong Wen were both born in China. Su was a high ranking officer who fled to Malaya after the communist takeover in 1949 and became a Presbyterian elder in a church in Penang. Wayne Siao received his higher education in Hong Kong, and became the first local principal of the Baptist Theological Seminary in Penang. Peter Foong was born into a Christian family in Ipoh and was the first local bishop of LCMS (1977 – 1985), after obtaining theological training at the Lutheran Bible Institute in Petaling Jaya, and an MA. at Trinity College in Singapore. David Hock Tey was born in 1939 in Malaysia but graduated from Zhong Xin University in Taiwan. He then went to the US for his MA and PhD. He was the founder-president of the Malaysian Campus Crusade for Christ from 1968 to 1986 and is actively involved in various international Chinese Christian ministries.

Another key actor was Ng Yoot Ching (黄一琴) who was born in China and had received his theological education there. Like Su, he had left for Malaya after 1949, taking up a position as principal of a Chinese High School in Terengganu. He subsequently served as a pastor in a Presbyterian church of Penang before joining

<sup>49</sup> Interview with Ng, 9 April, 2010.

<sup>50</sup> Interview with Ng

CCCOWE in 1975.<sup>51</sup> When CCLC planned to hold its 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary meeting in Malaysia, it passed the duty of organizing the camp to Ng Kok Kea . He worked together with the West Malaysia CCCOWE to hold the Chinese writing camp.

Another key local leader was Yeoh Hong Yee , a Chinese school teacher and writer who was also a member of the CCLC. During the 1977 meeting, he agreed to help in the publication of a seasonal Christian magazine as a field for Malaysian Christian writers to practice their literary skills. To facilitate the publication of the magazine, the Christian Writer Fellowship (CWF) was formed and the Yeoh became the chief editor.

Other names worth mentioning are C.N. Fang (方中南) from Methodist Church, Li Qian Jun(李前军) and Gideon Chang (张景洲), all of whom were closely associated with CCCOWE and the founding of the Malaysian Bible Seminary in Klang. Chang was the bishop of LCMS; Fang and Li were prominent members of the Methodist Church, with Fang a member of the founding committee of the World Federation of Chinese Methodist Churches set up in 1987 and Li a Methodist pastor who once held the chief editor post of The Southern Bell (南钟报), a magazine published by the (Methodist) Chinese Annual Conference (CAC) in Peninsular Malaysia.

This first generation of Chinese Christians leaders who replaced the foreign missionaries were recruited throughout East Asia and trained in the seminary schools set up by the missionary denominational institutions throughout the region. In Malaysia itself, the big denominations also built their own seminaries and by the late 1950s and early 1960s, there were six such institutions in Malaysia, teaching in Chinese and English.

Groomed within denominational church structures, this generation could also avail itself of the opportunities made available by the global reach of such western denominations and their post-war ecumenical agenda, including that of funding and travel. Establishing close personal relations within the nation and the region, this first generation of Chinese Christian leaders bonded across the denominational divide, united by the shared culture and a passionate evangelical concern not shared by the ecumenical movement. What was urgent to them was not the authenticity of theology or ritual, but the closing of the door in China toward the Christian gospel, and the “souls of the overseas Chinese”.<sup>52</sup> In pursuit of this concern, they constructed the global Chinese Christian network covering diasporic Chinese Christians in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, Malaysia and the United States, and intertwined it with local churches and projects in their own countries.

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<sup>51</sup> The head of Asian branch of China Gospel Working Committee (中國大陸福音工作委員會的亞洲主任)

<sup>52</sup> Interview with Gideon Chang, 8 April, 2010.

## **5. CONCLUSION: FROM SUB-ETHNIC MIGRANT CHURCH TO NATIONAL/DIASPORIC CHINESE CHURCH**

Recent literature on Chinese Christianity has highlighted it as part of local society— spread by Chinese evangelists, through family and lineage networks, and oftentimes with a strong territorial identity (Lutz , Lee 2009, Dunch, Constable). The local Christians associated with the Bridge such as Yeoh Hong Yee and Ng Kok Kea were converted in their youth. They came from Chinese working class families which still practiced Chinese folk religions and worshipped ancestors. Their everyday lives were deeply rooted in Chinese society as they went to Chinese schools, celebrated major Chinese festivals at home, worked and socialized in a Chinese speaking milieu. They speak dialect and are fluent in spoken Mandarin and skillful in writing Chinese. Their conversion has created a tension between their ethnic identity and their new religious identity. As a result, they feel displaced in their society. The same holds for the earlier generation of Chinese Christians, many of whom were born in China.

Engagement with the wider Chinese society has always been the main concern of these Chinese intellectuals. They demonstrate a stronger anxiety over being rejected by Chinese society than the question of losing Christian prestige with the passing of the colonial era and the accelerated Islamization in the postindependence era, as stated in the Ackerman and Lee (62-66). These issues do not seem to have generated the same amount of apprehension as they did among English churches.

Characterizing the Chinese churches as parochial sub-ethnic churches would also be missing the point. In this paper, we have tried to show how the Chinese church has evolved from its early years as migrant churches to the national/diasporic churches that they are today.

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