

## **The Economic Activities of Foochow in Sibü: Development and Transformation**

Ling Huong Yian and Thock Ker Pong  
Department of Chinese Studies  
University of Malaya.

### **Abstract**

The Foochow community has contributed tremendously to the economic development and achievement of Sarawak. The involvement of Foochow in various economic sectors is spectacular as compared to other Chinese communities in Sarawak. The Foochow community is considered a catalyst in the economic development of Sarawak, they grasped the economic opportunities whenever they found the chances. This research report concentrates in investigating the outstanding and prominent performance of Foochow in the economic development of Sarawak. It traced the development and transformation of the various economic activities of Foochow in Sibü. This essay illustrated how the Rajang area under the cultivation of Foochow settlement had become a model of progress and development for Sarawak.

Keywords : Sarawak, Sibü, Foochow community, economic development, economic transformation

## Introduction

With an area of 12.5 million hectares, Sarawak is the largest among the 13 states of Malaysia covering 37.7% of the country land mass. Sarawak is the “Land of the Hornbills”. This enchanting state of Malaysia is endowed with the world’s richest and most diverse ecosystem. Sarawak is a land of colorful cultures boasting 27 ethnic groups, 45 languages and dialects, be charmed and mesmerized by their cultural festivals and celebrations. (Source: <https://www.statistics.gov.myportal>)

The economy of the Sarawak is remarkably impressive. Sarawak is very fortunate to have been endowed with very rich natural resources ranging from petroleum, natural gas to agricultural and forestry products. The economy is dominated by several primary sectors: mining and quarry and followed by agriculture, forestry and logging. The main industry, particularly in the production of petroleum and LNG remains the largest contributor to the Sarawak’s GDP. The secondary sector of the economy comprises the manufacturing and construction industries. The abundance of natural resources in the State should provide resource-based industries with ample opportunities to grow. Among the resource-based industries being promoted by the State are the petrochemicals, forestry and wood-based, agro-based, biotechnology and mineral-based. (Puah, 2006, pp. 59-60)

## The Foochow Settlement of Sibü

Sibü is a bustling and rapidly growing town located in the heart of Sarawak. Foochows are the largest Chinese dialect group in Sarawak. The immigration of Foochow into Sarawak rested on several structures. Brooke family played an important role to encourage Chinese settlement and agricultural development, a political and economic policy designed to encourage Chinese to enter and invest money and labor in the state.

Foochow people migrated into Sarawak and other parts of Malaysia in the year 1901. They originated in the Foochow prefecture of Fukien Province, in Southeast China. Foochow Prefecture consists of ten counties.<sup>1</sup> People who live in these ten counties are all categorized as “Foochow” as they belong to the same dialect group. But there were slight differences between the several sub-dialects spoken in the Prefecture according to their origins. (Kiu, 1997, p. 38)

Sibü’s early beginning was in the tempestuous period of the mid-nineteenth century, when James Brooke, a British adventurer took advantage of the divisive political situation in Sarawak, which was part of the Brunei Sultanate, then, to gain a foothold in the State. The Rajah James Brooke realized that if Sarawak were to continue to prosper,

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<sup>3</sup>The ten counties including : Minhsien, Haukwong, Changlok, Fuching, Liengchiang, Loyuan, Mintsing, Yungfu, Kutien and Pingnan. Minshen and haukwong merged into one county in a later year and is now known as Minhau. People from Nanping, which is outside the Foochow prefecture, are also regarded as “Foochow” in Sibü.

it needed frugal and enterprising people such as the Chinese (Craig, 2003, pp. 12-16). Impressed by the industrious and hard-working settlers, the Rajah then embarked on a program to recruit more Chinese to Sarawak to help open up the country. The sojourning experience of the Foochow to the Rejang was part of the wider pattern of the Chinese pioneering phenomenon in Sarawak. The introduction of the first colony of Foochow men, women, and children to the Rejang in 1900 by Wong Nai Siong during the reign of Charles Brooke was first wave of future large-scale Foochow migration that was to create a sub-ethnic enclave in the Lower Rejang. An agreement was signed for Wong Nai Siong to introduce one thousand settlers into the Rejang area, and also for farming purposes in the Sibü district, over the following eighteen months.

After the meeting with Brooke, Wong Nai Siong travelled in April 1900, for 13 days up the Rejang River before deciding on Sibü, as the place for the setting up of his new Foochow settlement. He found that Sungai Merah was a good location having the advantage of a river close by suitable for irrigation, drinking and washing purposes. He then headed back to China and began the preparations and persuasion of his clansmen for migration to Sibü.

In China, the anti-Christian movement connected with the Boxer Rebellion had embarrassed the locals. Furthermore, an unusual drought had made food very scarce at that time. In spite of having to leave their homes and parents behind, many young Chinese were very glad to accept Wong Nai Siong's offer of a new life in a new land. Wong Nai Siong's efforts bore fruit with the arrival of the first batch of 72 Foochows on 21<sup>st</sup> January 1901, most of them were Christians who were glad to leave China. On March 16, the same year, the second batch of 535 Foochows arrived, led by Wong himself. This day has since been regarded by the Foochow as the "New Foochow Resettlement Day". In June, the third batch of Foochow arrived and Sibü was soon referred to popularly, as the "New Foochow". Wong Nai Siong was appointed as the "Kang Choo" literally meaning "Port Master" of the Foochow settlement in Sibü.

The secret for Wong Nai Siong's successful recruitment was church networking. He was able to sign up emigrants through church organizations and with the assistance of church pastors. The role of the church was apparent in this endeavour. Wong Nai Siong, a gentry-scholar who possessed several personality traits of Moses, the leader of the Jewish exodus movement from ancient Egypt was able to win the trust of his fellow villagers in Fuzhou (Leung, 2002, p. 348).

Migration is a process of disruption and adaptation that requires both courage and fortitude. The Foochow pioneers came for many reasons, ill prepared and inexperienced but were full of hope to face an unknown challenge. Life was very harsh on the pioneer settlers, it was not a bed of roses for the early Foochow settlers. Unacquainted with the local conditions and unfavorable soil conditions, the Foochows faced a formidable challenge, from lack of experience in clearing the jungle land for agriculture.

Agricultural techniques acquired in China did not work on the tropical lowlands of Sibü. Despite this, the environment was hostile. There were many insects, rats, birds,

deer, and wild boar to ravage the crops, and snakes to cause havoc among domestic animals. Floods were of frequent occurrence. The low-lying swampy ground was infested with malaria and other tropical fevers and diseases (Chin, 1981, p. 64). The early Foochow settlers did indeed face hardship for several years. The jungle was a persistent foe and much labour was needed to clear land for planting. The neighbouring Ibans were uncooperative to those they viewed as unwanted foreigners on their land.

The Foochows' rice crops were not growing as successfully as they had expected as the land was so unlike that which they had been used to in China. The small crops were also further depleted by heavy rains and rats from the jungles. As the land was new, there were many insects, wild boars, snakes and birds to ravage the crops. Many of the settlers also died of malaria. Due to such extreme conditions, it was of little wonder, that of the total 1,118 Foochow settlers in 1901, four years later by 1905, some 100 to 200 had either died or left for Kuching, Singapore, Penang or Sitiawan (Craig, 2003, pp. 52-53).

The original plan had been that they would be self-supporting in six months but with all the drawbacks they suffered, they were forced to continually seek the help of Mr. Wong. His funds were also growing short and in an attempt to get the loan money back from the settlers he decided to start taxing them. To make matters worse, he was also viewed as a thorn in the local opium trade by some of the Colonial officers and traders. Wong Nai Siong's condemnation of the opium trade and gambling put him on collision path with those operating opium and gambling dens (Pang, 2011, p. 332).

The records had it that with so much working against him, the wisest thing to do was for him to return to China. Assured that a Methodist pastor, Reverend James Hoover who was to replace him as the headman of the community was a good and reliable man, Wong bade his community farewell and returned to China in 1904. Nevertheless, Wong Nai Siong left an immense legacy on Sarawak:

Although Wong Nai Siong spent less than six years in Sarawak, he made a great impact on the country. He introduced into Sarawak one of the most forceful communities in the country and had thus shaped the history of Sarawak for a long time to come. It is in this sense that he can be called one of the great Men of Sarawak. (Cooper, 1968, p. 29)

The timely arrival of Reverend James Hoover and under his guidance, the situation started to improve and he finally persuaded the Rajah to waive the repayment of the loan. The timely arrival of Rev. James Hoover not only saved the Sibü Foochow Agricultural Settlement from disintegration but he also engineered its rapid development. In 1904, Rev. Hoover introduced the rubber seeds, taught the settlers how to plant rubber trees and enlarged the rubber plantations at the Rejang Basin. The settlers then found that planting rubber and pepper was far more profitable than paddy and they soon entered into a period of high prosperity.

In the 32 years under the leadership of Rev. James Hoover, the Foochow Agricultural Settlements had not only attained great success but had also developed and

expanded and had attracted an influx of immigrants from the Fuzhou Province of China. The settlement had by now spread along the banks of the Rejang and as less land became available there, new settlements were formed up river at Kanowit (1910) and Kapit (1923), and in the lower reaches of the river at Binatang (1922) and Sarikei (1912). Some of them diffused further to Sri Aman (1959), Mukah (1925), Bintulu (Sebauh) (1926), Miri (Baram) (1920), Melait (1914) and Limbang (1957).

### **The Foochow Economic Activities**

There were many set-backs before SibU was to attain the expanding commercial centre as it is today, among them was the great fire of 1928, Japanese Occupation in the year 1941-1945, the incessant curfews in the year 1970s and others. SibU of today has attained tremendous growth from the time when it was nothing more than a muddy patch. From its agrarian past, SibU has now developed into a modern town with an increasingly diversified economy.

Considered the most adaptable and most economically aggressive, the Foochow have penetrated into almost every occupation in Sarawak. They took up both agriculture and business, and they were the leading group in SibU. Craig mentioned that Foochow community perhaps the most versatile and aggressive overseas Chinese group (Craig, 2003, p. 25). The Foochow had been considered as an asset by Vyner Brooke during the reign of the White Rajahs. They are considered as played “a very important role” towards the contribution of Sarawak economy. In the words of Daniel Chiew, the “land was of spiritual and emotional value to the Ibans, while to the Foochow it was of economic importance” (Chiew, 1990, p. 224).

Between 1898 and 1911, Hakka, Foochow, Henghua and Cantonese were the four groups of Chinese immigrants began to arrive in Sarawak. They were sponsored by the government and formed four Chinese colonies in the First and Third Divisions of Sarawak. The four colonies included: Hakka Christians who settled near Kuching, a large number of Foochow Methodists opening up land in the Rejang River basin, a company of Cantonese who established themselves upriver from the Foochow, and a colony of Henghua who were given land near SibU. In point of numbers and the subsequent success of their land and economic schemes, the Foochow group was the most significant (Chin, 1981, p. 59).

Apart from oil refining, the economy of Sarawak is almost exclusively agricultural. Foochow peoples' pioneering economic activities engaged in farming activities. They started planting paddy, tapioca and vegetables in poor land. However, with the introducing of rubber seedlings to SibU in the year 1904, the pioneers started to plant the rubber trees and obtained a huge profit. The commercial planting of rubber began in Sarawak in 1905, and the first crop was exported in 1910 (Richard C., 2010, p. 71). Altogether M\$700.00 per pikul was obtained. (Kiu, 1997, p. 88). In 1906, Foochow Settlement planted more than 100,000 young rubber trees.

The First World War boosted rubber planting among smallholders, with average fields of 100 to 300 acres. 2000 rubber trees were planted by Wong King Ho at Lower

Sungai Sadit, and another 2,000 were planted by Kuok Yew Dew at Lower Ensurai in 1907 (Kiu, 1997, p. 48). In the 1910's and 20's, the Foochow of Sibü began planting rubber, and from there it spread up and down the banks of the Rajang. Rubber, which started as the major important crop, tended to decline in 1960's. Only in 1973 and 1974, as a result of the increase in petroleum price, did the export of rubber shoot up considerably.

Foochow pioneers provided an economic framework by pioneering in cash crop agriculture and extending their commercial enterprises, thus providing jobs in both fields for prospective immigrants. Eventually they became self-sustaining, particularly after the development of rubber industry. However, the unstable rubber price causing them to change their crops from rubber to pepper. The two major export crops planted by Foochows were rubber and pepper.

Pepper had been grown in Borneo for centuries and that from Sarawak possesses high quality. The black and white peppers from Sarawak are prized condiments in many parts of the world. The innovative use of pepper such as the production of pepper sweets and even a perfume with a light and pleasant fragrance, has elevated pepper as a popular crop.

In Sarawak, most pepper growers were, and still are, Hakka and they returned to China in luxury in the 1890's and early 1900's (Craig, 2003, p. 116). The Foochow involved in pepper plantation much later than Hakka. The Foochow of Sibü experimented with pepper in their early years, but did not produce large amounts of it. They did, however, carry it down river to Sarikei and Bintangor, here it became firmly established (Richard, 2010, p. 75).

Pepper planting is a very risky investment, and production is always speculative. Profits, however, can be high if everything goes well. Pepper was a highly unstable commodity on the world market, however, even until now, the industry always suffered great periods of prosperity and decline. For instance, many fortunes were made in pepper cultivation and in 1951 white pepper reached the price of \$1195 per pikul (Rawlins, 1966, p. 210). In 1960s, due to the fluctuating price of pepper and the limited land to plant, Foochow peoples started to seek their fortune by involving themselves in timber logging. The forestry sector since 1960's, had a more widespread impact on Sarawak's economy because of the high level of local ownership, the labour-intensive methods of timber extraction and the state government's exclusive claim on royalties (Leigh, 1988, p. 342).

The contributions of the Sarawak Foochow to the Sarawak and national economy are immense. They are risk takers, hardworking and enterprising people. Initially, the Foochow made its economic prominence through the timber industry. They were the pioneers in timber harvesting and processing. Local Chinese contractors, particularly from the Foochow dialect group, have dominated the industry. Sibü, which has traditionally relied on the timber industry for its wealth, has been practicing sustainable development of this industry.

Timber firms are now producers of value-added products such as finger-joints, particleboards, chipboards, veneer, furniture moldings, plywood, fancy plywood and others. Some of these firms have attained such a high degree of expertise that foreign government in Papua New Guinea, Brazil, Africa and even Russia have invited them, to help develop the timber resources in these countries. (Puah, 2006, p. 108) Foochow people did well in lumbering activities. Through sheer hard work and grit, the Foochow emerged to be the leaders of the industry. Even though it was a perilous occupation, the Foochow determined to develop the industry, having the foresight to realize that it would change their lives and the future of SibU. They earned a lot and accumulated a huge fund. Then they diversified their economy activities from timber logging to hospitality business, publishing, building and construction, oil palm plantation, educational institutions and others. Some like Tan Sri Ling Beng Siew went into banking.

In forestry and wood-based activities, Foochow have been most active in all stages of production; from logging to related down-stream activities, in a concerted effort to become a globally recognized producer of high quality tropical hardwood products. Though timber logging industries have been hard, the adventurous and hardworking Foochow earned a huge amount of profit. With more Foochow involved in this industry, it helped to ensure the future of Foochow in this sector.

As Sarawak is one of the world's largest exporters of tropical hardwood timber, the State government has imposed strict log-production quotas over the recent years to ensure sustainable forestry management. The adventurous and risk taking Foochow had migrated to other divisions and other countries. They extended their timber logging and plywood industries to Sabah, Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, South Africa, Russia and others. Such firms, which are today household names in many parts of the world, include the Rimbunan Hijau Group, the KTS Group and the WTK Group. On the local front, together with the other timber firms, such as the Sanyan Group, Ta'an Group, they provide employment for huge numbers of people in the state and neighboring countries such as Indonesia (Puah, 2006, p. 108).

As many parts of Sarawak are rich with timber resources, it comes of little surprise that SibU's growth, for a large part of the past four decades has been centred around the development of this natural resource. From the initial logging and export-based industry that it was, the thrust for the past two decades has been on going downstream. The vital role of timber industry which contributed towards the growth of SibU was from the quotation below:

It can be said that the timber industry and those who built it were SibU's saving grace. Because of the industry, the town was able to morph from the rural bazaar that it was, to the bustling town that it is. All of the timber firms which have played a tremendous and beneficiary role in SibU's transformation are now successful firms that continue to be an active part in the town's quest to attain city status, and bring about an even higher quality of life. (Puah, 2006, p. 108)

Due to the overwhelming demand for tugs and barges created by logging operations, the local shipbuilding industry has transformed into a multi-billion ringgit

industry. With an abundance of skilled Foochow labours and land in Sibul, the shipbuilding industry moves towards a new era in Sarawak. Express boats are the other important economic activities of Foochow community. In 1960s, Foochow owned 40 express boats each weighing 15-50 tons which could accommodate more than 100 passengers. More than 60% of the express boats travelled along Rejang river were owned by Foochow (Ting, 2010, p. 85).

According to Eddy Pua (2006, p. 112), made-in-Sibul vessels can easily be found plying the waters of more than 10 countries including Singapore, Brunei, Indonesia, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, Myanmar, Papua New Guinea, China and the Philippines. The local shipbuilders even set their sights on conquering the next frontier, which is the world's mightiest river-The Amazon.

Banking activities fostered the economy activities of Foochows. Hock Hua Bank was the first bank established by a group of 24 Foochows in the year 1952. The bank provided many credit facilities to the Foochow businessmen. If they met with any difficulties, the bank rendered the help. Furthermore, when the businessmen earned the profit, they invested and accumulated their profit in the bank. The mutual related banking activities accelerated the economic development of Foochow in Sarawak.

The oil and gas industry has an important and special position in Sarawak's economy. In the year 1970s, Foochow people diffused further to Bintulu and Miri because of the attraction of oil and gas industries. They started various business activities and encouraged the booming of the region.

In the year 1980s, oil palm plantation became one part of the great earner for Sarawak. Oil Palm considered as "the yellow gold" to the Sarawak economy. Since 1980s, Foochow involved themselves energetically in the plantation of oil palm.

In short, though Foochow's economy is anchored in timber, but it has diversified in various economic sectors in Sarawak and undergone many stages of transformation that has propelled the economic development of Sarawak.

### **Foochow and Sarawak Economy Transformation**

Today, Foochow constituted the most numerous Chinese dialect group in Sarawak. Foochow played an important role and being considered the catalyst in the economic development of Sarawak. Between 1898 and 1911, Charles Brooke sponsored the immigration and establishment of four colonies of Chinese who came as groups. The Foochow no doubt was the most important of these groups. The Foochow also established a reputation as the most aggressive of all the Chinese in Sarawak (Craig, 2009, p. 62).

Michael Leigh, who conducted a detail study on the economic activities of Foochow agreed that Foochow are now universally recognized as the most "dynamic segment of the Chinese community" within Sarawak as well as the most numerous group in the state (Pang, 2011, p. 210). Rajang area under cultivation of Foochow settlement



had become a model of progress for Sarawak. The Foochow proved to be hard working and ambitious settlers even by Chinese standard, and a quiet resentment of these aggressive newcomers persisted among the other Chinese into the present day (Craig, 1971, p. 94). Besides the traditional agricultural cash crops, such as rubber and pepper, the Foochow Chinese also invested heavily on wholesale and retail business and industries, such as timber, banking, hotel, construction, transport, and manufacturing industries.

After the Second World War, the Foochow had diffused to whole Sarawak. As mentioned by Chan Eng Seng (2011:61): “So long as there are economic opportunities, then you can find the Foochow”. Foochow once considered by the Rajah Vyner Brooke as “assets of the State of Sarawak”. They are much appreciated by the Sarawak Governments mainly because of their economic contribution which built upon the solid foundation laid by their forefathers and continued to advance considerably in terms of ecclesiastical expansion, commercial and political involvement and development both at the Rajang Basin region and beyond (Liong, 2003, p. 369).

Fong Hon Kah (1996, p. 407) accurately highlighted some of the reasons behind the success of the Foochow in Sarawak, especially in commercial arena as follows:

...Ever since the Foochow entered into the commercial and industrial world in the 1950s, they have been sensitive to all commercial and industrial opportunities and have been successful in their endeavors as a result of their fore-sight, sincere and committed attitudes to work, their ability to co-operate and united spirit... They were the descendants of the pioneer settlers who emigrated to the Rajang Basin from Fujian in China a century ago. Their successes have been built on the foundation made by their ancestors who had led a frugal life of living from hand to mouth experiencing hardships, sufferings and arduous struggles....

According to the observation of Daniel Chiew, the “land was of spiritual and emotional value to the Ibans, while to the Foochow it was of economic importance.” (Chiew, 1990, p. 224). Foochow always land-hungry, enterprising and profit-oriented as epitomized in the words of Law Yan-Pao: “The natives have plenty of land to waste, and they (Foochow Chinese) have not enough to cultivate.” (Law, 1962, p. 15; Liong, 2003, p. 375)

Foochow not only reached virtually all major towns, villages and places of economic interest and potential but also gone beyond Sarawak to other states in Malaysia and nations around the globe (Liong, 2003, p. 371). John Chin (1981, p. 60) depicted their success as “has outstripped almost all others in its economic potential, development capacity, and professional manpower.”

The characteristics of the Foochow consisted of industry, thrift, enterprise, resourcefulness, and ambition. These type of characteristics brought them economic success and power, higher living standards, higher intellectual or education standards and self-sufficiency in the community. Their economic success not the result of their

hardworking characteristics alone, it was due to other reasons, such as the rubber boom after the Second World War, the timber boom in the 1950s and 1960s, and their wisdom and capability of handling their money and savings for investments (Liong, 2003, p.373). These dynamic characteristics, numerical significance and economic importance to the Sarawak had somehow consolidated the Foochow identity and they were proud of their achievements in Sarawak.

### **Summary**

Sarawak's basic economic foundations are strong. Its economy is well managed. Sarawak is expected to continue to enjoy steady economic growth. Agriculture, mining, manufacturing, construction and the service sectors became the State's mainstay of economic growth.

Sarawak's economy is forecasted to continue to improve unwaveringly. It can be said that Foochow have single handedly carved this wild frontier since the turn of the century, and that they have also been responsible in contributing to the development and progress of the state.

Nowadays, Foochow have extended their economic activities from Sarawak to international arenas and possessed a very outstanding performance. The contribution of Foochow towards the development of Sarawak economy must be cherished among the younger generation. In a nutshell, Foochow played an important role in the development of Sarawak economic activities. Whatever the outcome, the Foochow of the past and present, have contributed tremendously to the development of Sarawak. The good work must be continued to encompass nation building and the good name of the Foochow community on a high pedestal must be maintained.

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