

# A Hakka Civil Servant in Sarawak

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This is a biographical paper on my father, William Chew Hon Fatt 周漢發 (1913-1985), a Sin Onn Hakka (新安客家人), born in Kuching, Sarawak, whose parents hailed from Dongguan (東莞縣). While the Hakka in Sarawak's social history have been associated with rural, smallholding agrarian pursuits and a marginalised past, Chew through exposure to Chinese and English education pursued a different pathway through a civil service career. This biography is on his life and work, especially his working life under the period of British colonial rule in Sarawak (1946-63). This paper draws upon family memories, oral history, library research, personal documents and photographs to reconstruct glimpses of Chew's experiences as a civil servant. After Chew's retirement in 1968, he was one of the founding members and Vice President of the Hakka sub-dialect group association, the Fui Tung Onn, established in 1971.

Key words: Sin Onn Hakka, Sarawak, Civil Servant, Fui Tung Onn  
Association

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## 砂拉越的一位客家公務員

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本文為作者父親威廉周漢發（1913-1985）的傳記研究。周漢發是祖籍中國廣東省新安的客家人，生於砂拉越古晉，其雙親從廣東東莞移民至此。在當時砂拉越的社會歷史中，一般都將客家人聯想為鄉居、以務農為生，因而在昔日多處於邊緣地位。但受過中西教育薰陶的周漢發則選擇了另一條擔任公務員的職業生涯。這篇傳記探討周漢發的生平和事業，尤其是他在 1946 年至 1963 年砂拉越英國殖民統治時期的公務生涯。本文引述了家人記憶、口述歷史、文獻和相片等，來重建略窺周漢發的公務員生涯。周漢發於 1968 年退休後，成為古晉新安客家人的惠東安會館發起人之一，並於該會館 1971 年成立時擔任副主席。

關鍵字：新安客家人、砂拉越、公務員、惠東安會館

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## On Methodologies and Approaches

Autobiographies and biographies that have been written on Hakka<sup>1</sup> in Sarawak have been on politicians and statesmen (Wong 1983 and Yong 1997) although there is a recent biography on a part Hakka and part Cantonese family (Chin-Chan 2013), whose patriarch in Sarawak was a civil servant like my father. This writing on my father's life and work has not been an easy task. He died thirty years ago and when he was still alive, I did not have the interest then to ask him about his life which in retrospect I should. The strict family environment under a stern father which I grew up in was not conducive to inquiries or conversations about one's past which would have been useful to the writing of this paper. Thus I have to dig into family memories as well as those of kin and people who knew my father, to reconstruct the past. With the encouragement of my siblings I started to investigate our family roots and my father's past. My father was a meticulous keeper of documents, and fortunately after his death he left behind piles of personal letters, papers, photos and newspaper clippings which I have not seen before, which reveal parts of his life and work. Additional research was conducted in the Sarawak Museum archives. The writing of this paper has laboured under constraints with inevitable gaps. Despite the limitations,

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<sup>1</sup> Hakka in Sarawak have been associated with rural agrarian pursuits (Tien 1950) and a marginalised past against the backdrop of the Cold War (Kee 2013).

I hope this paper provides insights into what I regard as a window into understanding the interstices of several interesting themes on the life and work of a Hakka in Sarawak.

In the general context of the social history of Hakka in Sarawak, our family history is part of the movement of the Hakka diaspora from China to Borneo at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. My father whose parents came from Guangdong, grew up with the benefit of a foundation in Chinese education followed by an English education. This placed him in a vantage position of straddling between the linguistic and cultural worlds of the Chinese including the Hakka, and those of European Christian missionaries responsible for his English education and later the English civil servants he was to work together with in a long career in Sarawak. The Seventh Day Adventist Mission, founded in America, had a marked influence on my father to the extent that he became a missionary for five years between 1932 and 1937. Chew joined the Sarawak government service in 1937 until his retirement in 1968, in a public career where I believe he left his mark. The final chapter of his public life was after his retirement when he turned to his Sin Onn Hakka community. He helped to form and lead in several capacities, the Fui Tung Onn Association<sup>2</sup> ( 惠東安公會 ) from 1971 until 1981.

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2 Association for Hakka from three districts on the eastern end of the Pearl river delta in China, Fui Chew, Dongguan and Bao On.

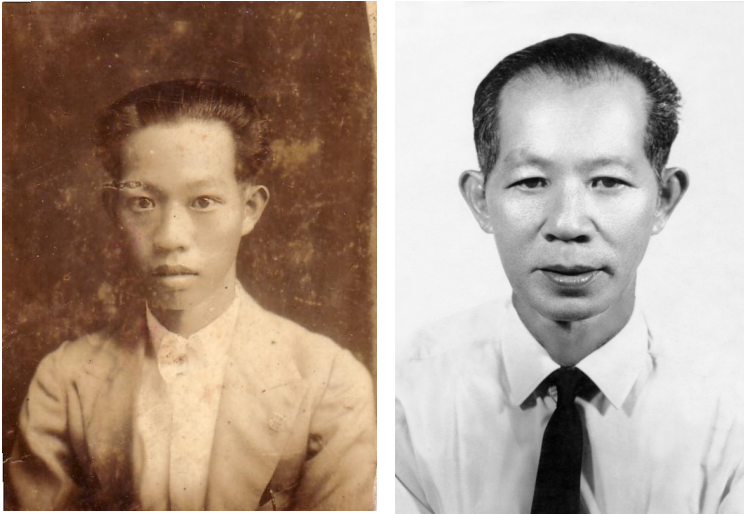


Figure 1: William Chew as a young man, and in his fifties

## **Time Line of William Chew Hon Fatt**

1. Grandfather Chew Hon Thin (Chew Yong) and grandmother Wong Sin Kiaw, both Sin Onn Hakka from Dongguan, China migrated to Sarawak in the early 1900s.
2. William Chew Hon Fatt was born in Kuching, Sarawak on 13 December 1913.
3. Early education in *ZhengGuang* (真光, True Light) School (Hakka school) and Sunny Hill (Seventh Day Adventist) School in Kuching.
4. Further education in *ShenDao* (神道) School, Seventh Day Adventist Malayan Seminary, Singapore.

5. Seventh Day Adventist missionary in Malaya and Singapore, 1932-1937.
6. Returned to Kuching, Sarawak to join the Sarawak civil service as a Court Interpreter.
7. Married Pauline Hon, a Hopoh Hakka, in Kuching in 1937.
8. Promoted from Court Interpreter to Registrar of Trade Unions and Societies in 1951.
9. Retired from the civil service in 1968.
10. Founding member and Vice President of Fui Tung Onn Association (association for Sin Onn Hakka) in Kuching, 1971. Served in several capacities until 1981.
11. Died on 29 January 1985.

## **Bai Hua Dong Village ( 白花洞村 ), Dongguan ( 東莞縣 )**

*Plant paddy, plant sugar cane*

*Wealth is land*

*Mountains of gold*

*Seeds turn to rice*

(Shim Pan Chi)

The family story begins with my paternal grandfather Chew Hon Thin, also known as Chew Yong, and paternal grandmother Wong Sin Kiaw who

both hailed from Bai Hua Dong village (白花洞村) in Dongguan (東莞縣), Guangdong (廣東省) and migrated to Kuching, Sarawak shortly after the beginning of the 20th century. A colleague of my father, Shim Pan Chi<sup>3</sup>, a Sin Onn Hakka too, as a kid recalled, “I passed by your village when I was a very young kid on my way to Sarawak in the 1920s. I remember seeing rolling hills, paddy terraces and brick houses.” Chew Kee<sup>4</sup>, a kinsman of my father remembered, “Oh your grandfather was *thel fong* (長房, first branch) and I am from *san fong* (三房, third branch).” I had approached Chew Kee, who resided at Arang Road, Kuching for stories he may remembered about my ancestors.

My grandfather can be possibly counted among the waves of Hakka migrants who arrived in Kuching in the area referred to as Arang Road from the start of the 20th century<sup>5</sup>:

In September 1898 a small colony of Hakkas was introduced into the country and land was apportioned to them near the third mile along the Penrissen Road. Although they were encouraged to come here for the purpose of paddy planting, this form of industry has not been found suitable but they turned their attention to

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3 Interview with Shim Pan Chi, January 2003, Kuching, Sarawak.

4 Interview with Chew Kee, January 2003, Kuching. I hypothesize that the terms *thel fong* (長房, first branch) and *san fong* (三房, third branch) imply a leadership hierarchy among kinsmen. The “first branch” rank carried a responsibility to assist co-ethnics, the “leader of the pack”, so to speak. See fn. 9 too. I am grateful to cousin Chew Pok Vun who introduced me and my brother Vernon to the Chew elder. Pok Vun’s father, Chew kui Sang, like my father, started work as a court interpreter, and had an illustrious career, retiring as Acting Registrar of the High Court in Borneo, in Kuching.

5 *Sarawak Gazette* 2 June 1902.

vegetables, etc. with good results to themselves and with benefit to the community.

It is gratifying to record that the *S.S. Sandakan* which arrived here on the 19<sup>th</sup> May [1902] brought a further batch of some 160 persons. These people were not State aided in any way but came of their accord and paid \$2,000 passage money to the *Sandakan* to bring them here from Hong Kong. They have joined the other Hakkas and will proceed to plant as soon as possible.

It is my conviction that my grandfather was among these batches of Sin Onn Hakka who arrived in Kuching in the early 1900s. This deduction is supported by the birth record of one of his daughters, Chew Shin Nyuk, born in Kuching in 1907. Chew Sak<sup>6</sup> recalled the pioneering days of the Hakka at Arang Road, “My father Chew Kon Fatt and your grandfather were among the first to settle in Arang Road.”

My grandfather was a woodcutter while grandmother raised the family, and my father was the eldest son born in 1913 and he had two brothers and three sisters. As *thel fong* (first branch) of the original village in Dongguan, grandfather presumably shouldered leadership responsibilities, and according to my uncle Chew Hon Sang<sup>7</sup> “your grandfather sponsored many relatives to migrate to Sarawak. ”

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6 Interview with Chew Sak, February 2003, Kuching.

7 Interview with Chew Hon Sang, February 2003, Kuching.



Our early family history was interwoven with that of the spread of Christianity to Sarawak, which shaped the life of my father. Around the 1920s, an American fundamentalist Christian denomination, the Seventh Day Adventist (SDA) Mission, was given approval to operate in Sarawak in the area settled by my grandfather. According to information provided by Gordon Chong<sup>8</sup>, an ex-principal of Sunny Hill School, a school founded by the mission in Kuching in 1926:

Around the early 1920s, a catechist by the name of Tsuen Thin He from China, together with Seventh Day Adventist missionaries, began evangelical work in Arang Road. What Tsen did, with his knowledge of western and Chinese medicine, was to apply medical first aid to the Hakka like cleaning wounds and treating bad sores, and giving food after church service. In this way he was able to win converts. Chew Yong [my grandfather] was among the first seven converts to the Seventh Day Adventists.

One Sunday morning in August 2003 Gordon Chong invited my younger brother Vernon and myself to attend an SDA chapel service in Kuching near to Arang Road. In the chapel that morning we had a feeling of *déjà vu* that many decades ago our grandparents would have experienced similar church services. Chong introduced us as the grandchildren of Chew Yong to the

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<sup>8</sup> Personal communication from Gordon Chong, March 2003.

gathered crowd of mostly elderly women and men. Chong announced, “this morning there are two grandchildren of Chew Yong who have joined us for Sunday worship.” I was not sure then if the men and women who nodded their heads in acknowledgment to us, knew my grandfather, but some of them might have known my father.

Grandfather died from a tragic tree logging accident sometime in the mid 1920s, followed shortly by grandmother’s death from jaundice. The family of six children who were still of school going age became orphans and the Seventh Day Adventists (SDA) stepped in to help the Chews. Three of the children, including my father were “adopted” by the SDA and assisted to continue with their schooling. Prior to going to Singapore my father had received elementary schooling in Kuching in Chinese, in Zheng Guang or True Light (真光) school, a small school set up by the Hakka, and this school then became Sunny Hill School, established by the Seventh Day Adventists in 1926. After his schooling at Sunny Hill school, Chew continued at the Shen Dao (神道) school or SDA Malayan Seminary in Singapore to be trained as a Christian missionary.

## **The Pastoral Calling**

I did not know about this part of our father’s past until 2004 when I undertook research into the documents and memorabilia which my father had left behind after his death. Father had not said anything about his early life to

the children except to the eldest daughter Irene, but left behind some valuable documents. There is his missionary certificate dated 1932 and some copies of letters he wrote. Becoming a missionary pastor for a period from 1932 to 1937, could be, I surmise, a kind of deal between the Seventh Day Adventists (SDA) and the Chew children, where in return for the SDA supporting the Chews' education, father was trained to be a pastor. The missionary certificate is dated 1932 for the Malay States, with an ominous number, number 2, meaning he was the second such missionary. The missionary work was undertaken in Singapore and towns in the Malay peninsula like Kuala Lumpur, Ipoh and Telok Anson. In a write-up in a Fui Tung Onn Association publication, father was vague and evasive about what he did in Singapore and the Malay States except to say he "worked" there. He gave up being a missionary in 1937.



Figure 2: Missionary license

When he revisited Kuala Lumpur in 1952, he wrote a letter to Thomas Dunbar<sup>9</sup>, a Scottish lawyer practising in Kuching, hinting at his Christian missionary days:

I confess I have great difficulties adapting my humble self to these bustling Malayan city activities although I am no stranger to this part of the world – having spent many, many ‘late nights’ here before I joined the Sarawak government service. Well the world is ever changing and will keep on changing!!! (from bad to worse)

This letter to Dunbar was written after Chew was promoted from his post as court interpreter to Registrar of Trade Unions in 1951. In his work as court interpreter father encountered lawyers and Dunbar was one of them.

In a more revealing letter, father wrote on why he left his calling as a missionary for a secular life. He felt that the calling for him to be a pastor was not for him. The letter dated 7 June 1951 is addressed to Mr. and Mrs Fox,<sup>10</sup> who I believed were from the Seventh Day Adventist Mission:

Dear Mr and Mrs Fox,

For the past 14 years or so (excepting the Japanese Occupation period) I strived hard to achieve something worth accomplishing. I

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9 Copy of letter from William Chew to Thomas Dunbar, 2 February 1952.

10 Copy of letter from William Chew to Mr. & Mrs. Fox, 7 June 1951.

have, to a certain extent, achieved a very limited degree of success. I owe a debt of gratitude to all my teachers and friends who contributed so much towards my success in life. I am particularly grateful to them all and particularly so to both of you. My only regret is that adverse circumstances compelled me to sacrifice all my celestial aspirations at the altar of temporal pursuits.

Father returned to Sarawak in 1937 to embark on a career with the Sarawak government.

## **The Court Interpreter**

“I thought your father was from Malaya as I had not seen him here before,” remarked Shim Pan Chi<sup>11</sup> to me. Father had spent his formative and early working years away from Kuching which would explain why he appeared to be an outsider setting foot in Kuching. When the father returned to Kuching in 1937 to work he was 24 years old. His job was that of a court interpreter in the Sarawak civil service. A discussion of the place of court interpreters in Sarawak’s history is a necessary digression here so as to understand my father’s work background and his subsequent promotion in the ranks of the civil service when he was appointed Registrar of Trade Unions and Societies.

The role of court interpreters in Sarawak’s history is recognised by

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<sup>11</sup> See footnote. 3

historian Robert Pringle (Pringle 1970). During the reign of the white Rajahs in Sarawak from 1841 to 1941 the small pool of European officers lording over the dispersed riverine districts depended on local men to help run the Raj. Among these local Brooke employees were court interpreters many of whom were Chinese who understood local languages like Malay or Iban, in addition to English and Chinese dialects. Brooke rule had a personalised approach wherein much discretionary power rested in the hands of the European officers and this included making decisions on matters of “law” taking into consideration local customs and culture. Due to the small number of European officers, local recruits to the civil administration played multiple important roles and their job function could not be merely understood as interpreters in the modern meaning of the word. The court interpreters and native officers collected taxes and could even manage district affairs in the absence of the European officers. Court interpreters and native officers could be counted on to file administrative reports to Kuching, such reports finding their way into the Sarawak Gazette, a journal which contained news on districts throughout Sarawak. In other words, court interpreters, if they proved their competence, were given bigger roles to play other than merely understood to be just interpreters. In a largely rural population with very limited access to education and literacy, individuals who were formally educated in schools, if appointed as local officials, found themselves thrust into jobs which gave them a lot of responsibilities.

It was in this hallowed tradition of court interpreters that father found himself in when he joined the Sarawak civil service in 1937. By this period of the late 1930s, although the personalised nature of government services was still practised, a more professionally staffed civil service was slowly being implemented. When Sarawak became a British crown colony on 6 July 1946, Sarawak embarked on its way in following British civil service practices. One of the first moves towards professionalism in the judicial courts where my father was employed, was the appointment of K. H. Digby, one of the first British trained lawyers to serve in Sarawak.

Now I turn to an ex-colleague of my father, Shim Pan Chi<sup>12</sup> for his memories and anecdotes on my father. Like court interpreters during Brooke rule, during father's time, they had more responsibilities than the job title might imply. According to Shim, "your father was hardworking, moving around the office like a bee." Shim went on to elaborate:

Your father was working in the Circuit Courts which had European judges. I was in the Lower Courts. We were not only interpreters as what interpreters do nowadays. We prepared the court cases and paper work for the European judges. The work was demanding. Remember there were no local judges then. We as court interpreters were not trained in law and had to quickly learn court procedures and other legal matters to enable us to perform our work. Besides

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<sup>12</sup> Interview with Shim Pan Chi, January 2003, Kuching. Also see footnote 3.

court procedures we had to handle the paperwork from A to Z.

Both Shim and my father had fluency in English and Chinese, Chinese dialects and local languages like Malay. The duo must have been assumed to understand the ways of local Chinese as they were assigned extra judicial duties which were to round up ‘bad hats’ or those who ran afoul of the law at night since they both spoke Chinese and the local dialects. “I remember sleeping over at your house in Rubber road after our night work was done” said Shim.

The “legal” skills of William Chew were acknowledged by Stephen Yong, a Hakka from the rural township of Gedong, and who was Sarawak’s first British-trained lawyer and a leading politician and one of the founders of the state’s first political party, the Sarawak United People’s Party. Yong was the Deputy Chief Minister of Sarawak from 1972 to 1982. Before becoming a lawyer and a politician Yong was a fledging legal clerk acting as a lay counsel in a court case involving his two brothers-in-law in a family dispute, which he won. Yong mentioned getting father’s help in this court case (Yong 1997: 111-112):

Until early 1949, Sarawak had no practising lawyers. A legal action was initiated by giving power of attorney to an English educated person. The person then filed the case in the court with a statement of claim. In court, he would argue the case before the



judge and have the authority to question relevant witnesses... With the help of William Chew, an experienced court interpreter who briefed me on the court procedure and how to present the case, we drafted the declaration and highlighted the relevant facts in support of our case.

It was father's nature to help those who approached him for help and my elder siblings remembered people who came into the family house at night to ask for assistance or advice. Stephen Yong had in fact discussed studying law in university with my father but he could not do so due to the lack of finance and the fact that he had a young family to support. We believed that if father had the opportunity he could have become a lawyer.

For another opinion of father, I turn to K. H. Digby one of the judges he worked with and with whom a longstanding friendship continued after Digby's departure from Sarawak in 1952 (Digby 1980: 98).

The courts which have the benefit of the services of a few trained interpreters are immensely indebted to them. In particular I have to thank Mr. William Chew, the interpreter of the First Circuit Court for his rendering of the best remark which I have heard made by any person during the whole of my career in Sarawak. A Chinese was charged with causing "grevious hurt" with knife to another Chinese. It was pretty clear that each of the combatants had been

armed and the accused had cross-examined the prosecution witnesses with a view to show that he was acting in self defence. The last of such witnesses stepped out of the box five minutes before lunch. I wished to discover how much of the afternoon the case likely to occupy, and so I said to the interpreter: Is the accused going to call for more witnesses? The question was duly translated, and received an eloquent reply: if the court intends to justice, witnesses will be unnecessary, but if the court does not intend to do justice, the accused intend to call a considerable number.

Digby was perhaps mistaken in believing that father received training in interpreting in languages or dialects, or for that matter in procedures of the courts. Learning was on the job and father was largely a self-made man who would tell his children that he had limited years of English schooling and even more so in Chinese before he transferred to an English school.<sup>13</sup> The extensive quote from Digby above hinted at traditionally held notions of justice before the codification of law in Sarawak. As reiterated earlier in this paper, in the Brooke past (1841-1941) it was left to administrators and officers to use their discretion in deciding on court cases. Under the new colonial regime which came into being in 1946, professionalism in the codification of laws and how justice was administered, was introduced. Father held great admiration for Digby who migrated to New Zealand after leaving Sarawak,

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<sup>13</sup> See Epilogue of this paper.

and a friendship between the two developed over the years.



Figure 3: Interpreters in the Sarawak civil service. William Chew is seated second right.



Figure 4: British judicial judges and local interpreters. William Chew is standing fourth from the left, first row. K.H. Digby is seated third right.



Figure5: Digby visited Kuching in the 1970s and caught up with three court interpreters, all of them Hakka. William Chew is on the second right in the photo, Shim Pan Chi is on the extreme right<sup>14</sup> and John Chin is on the extreme left.<sup>15</sup>

After Sarawak became a British crown colony on 1 July 1946, the process of promoting talented and competent local officers in the bureaucracy began in earnest (Naimah 1999). Father was a beneficiary of this localization process and his turn came in 1951 when he was promoted into the administrative service from the judicial courts. He was sent for 3 months' training in Kuala Lumpur in January 1952. An announcement was made in local Sarawak Tribune newspaper<sup>16</sup>:

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14 See footnote 3.

15 See footnote 21.

16 *The Sarawak Tribune*, 12 January 1952.

PAGE 2 THE SARAWAK TRIBUNE January 12, 1952

### For Training

Leaving by the "Rajah Brooke" this afternoon for Singapore is Mr. William Chew who is to undergo a three months' course of training on trade unions under the auspices of the Government in Kuala Lumpur in the office of the Trade Unions adviser to the Federation Government, Mr. Brazier. Mr. Chew is expected to remain in Singapore for a short period before flying to Kuala Lumpur on January 16.



Mr. WILLIAM CHEW

Mr. Chew who joined the Sarawak Government Service in 1937, first served in the Resident's and District Office and after the war was transferred to the Judiciary. He was appointed Registrar of Trade Unions a few months ago and recently was also appointed Deputy Registrar of Societies.

Figure 6: A training announcement

Before Chew left the judicial courts in 1951 he obtained autographs from the European judges. Written in a witty and humorous style the autographs recognized Chew's knowledge of the law and court procedures, and highlighted the dependence of the judges on local interpreters to help them understand local cultures. Two such autographs were published in the *Sarawak Tribune*<sup>17</sup>.

<sup>17</sup> *The Sarawak Tribune*, 14 January 1952.

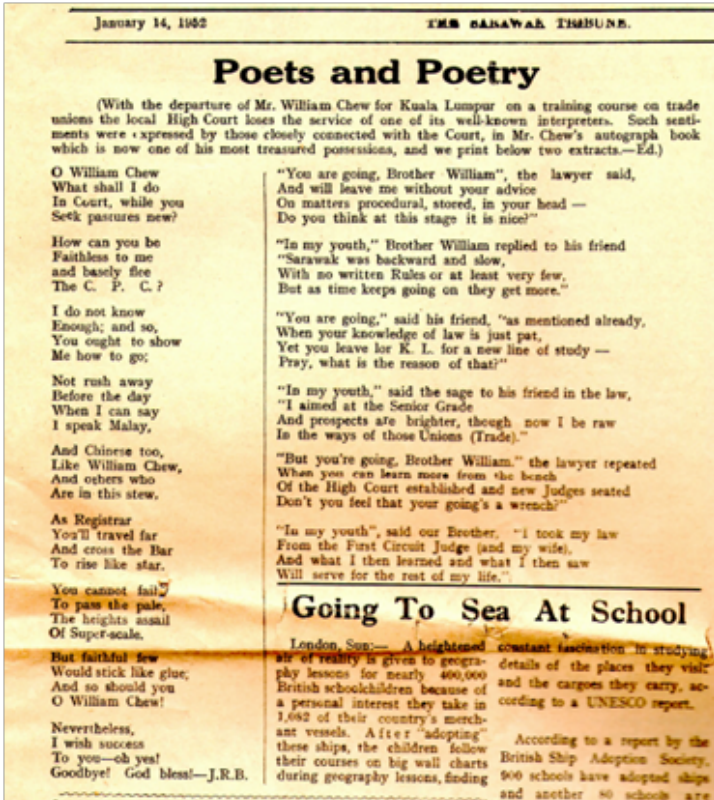


Figure 7: Two autographs published in the *Sarawak Tribune*.

## Registrar of Trade Unions and Societies

Father's appointment in 1951 coincided with the period of political transition for colonies struggling for decolonisation and self independence in post second world war Southeast Asia. Sarawak was no different from other colonies in Southeast Asia in this clamour to be free from

colonialism. The standards of governance which the Sarawak colonial government was introducing included giving local government officers more opportunities for career advancement. The government was also aware that in enforcing better standards of governance through regulations, the rule of law, and in general the service requirements of public administration, it was departing from the arbitrary and personalised nature of prior Brooke rule. Now the government had to deal with the expectations and demands of the population. Chew's appointment can be seen in this context of changing post second world war political and social circumstances. He had gained considerable work experience as an interpreter in the courts. He had fluency in English and Mandarin, Chinese dialects and Malay. Both this work experience and multilingualism were useful in his new appointment in meeting government expectations and that of the public he was serving.

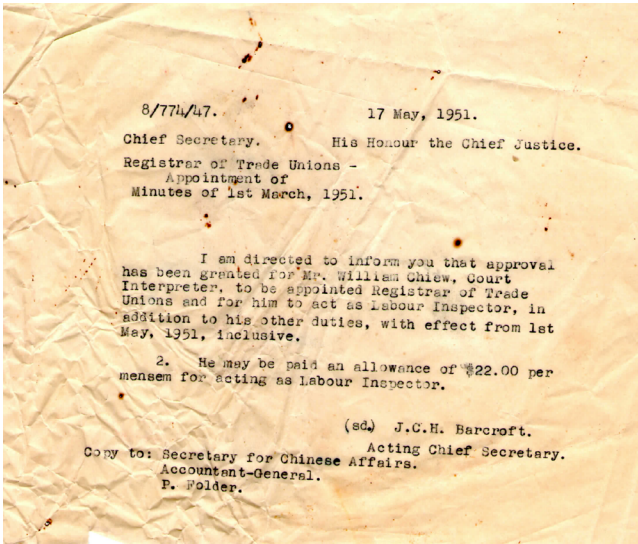


Figure 8: Official approval for William Chew's appointment as Registrar of Trade Unions.

Chew's appointment as Registrar of Trade Unions was gazetted by the Governor on 1 June 1951<sup>18</sup>, and this threw him into the hurly burly of the nascent trade union movement in Sarawak. The work involved advising unions and workers of their rights and obligations, and on the requirements to form trade unions. The idea of forming trade unions was a British government initiative, first introduced in October 1947 under the Trade Unions and Trade Disputes Ordinance, 1947. Trade unions were a new idea and a new way of workers organising themselves even though they had their own prior methods without government encouragement.

<sup>18</sup> *Sarawak Government Gazette*, 1 June 1951.



A report that Chew wrote on the Kuching Wharf Labourers' Union in 1952 is revealing on the insights on how Chinese urban workers organised their work arrangements. The report was meant for internal government consumption but the editor of the Sarawak Gazette, normally a British senior civil servant, decided that the article should enjoy wider reader circulation as it contained information on the issues confronting trade unions and their working conditions. For the same reason of dissemination of information here too, I go into some detail on what my father has written. Formed on 28 May 1948, the Kuching Wharf Labourers' Union was one of the more active and militant unions in Sarawak.

This trade union had its roots in the 1920s when Kuching dock workers organised themselves into small groups or gangs to undertake the job of handling goods at wharves and godowns for traders or shops for a certain remuneration on a piece rate basis. Each group or gang occupied a shop floor or coolie *keng* (premises) which was run by a leader who organized the work, accounts and expenses of the group, and the wages were then divided among workers after all the group expenses have been accounted for. Absentees were fined for work with the fine equally shared by the group including the absent worker. At the end of each month, the workers received their dividends after all the deductions including the leader's wages were made. When the workers formed a union, the group leaders complained about worker insubordination which was blamed on the union. Chew concluded that this had more to do with loss of confidence of the workers in their leaders rather than with the

way the union was organised.

Chew's concluding remarks on the trade union were:<sup>19</sup>

In conclusion I must say that apart from the Chairman and Secretary, the majority of the members of the union know very little about trade unionism. This union is still not well organised. But to re-organise it properly is no easy task for anyone, particularly in view of the fact that it has a most peculiar and complicated set-up founded on what appears to me to be traditional backgrounds.

In this transitional period of the 1950s when Sarawak was expected to follow the standards of governance of the colonial government it can be surmised that Chew had a major role to play in encouraging the social organization of workers.

In an address to this same Kuching Wharf Labourers Union in February 1953 on the occasion of the departure of the Protector of Labour, T.P. Cromwell, Chew urged the union members to set up a welfare section to render mutual assistance to members, and he used the opportunity to urge them to spend their money wisely and to refrain from gambling. The Sarawak Tribune reported<sup>20</sup>:

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19 *Sarawak Gazette* 31 October 1952: 222.

20 *The Sarawak Tribune* 23 February 1953.

The Registrar of Trade Unions, Mr. William Chew said much had been accomplished by the Union in the past year, but there was more to be done and for which they must continue to strive. Mr. Chew said it was a good thing that a savings scheme was started but he thought that they could do more by devising a savings scheme in their Union whereby relief could be sought in the case of old age, sickness and unemployment. He said members should spend their spare time in helping each other in various things which they would need, such as repairing of homes and even the building of houses. Advice was also given on the evil of gambling, which should be discouraged.

This “lecturing” style cited above is similar to what we are children used to receive at home, admonishing us for not studying hard in school for example, something which we loathed to listen to. This lecturing style was also used on those persons who visited him for consultations and advice at home after office hours. While there is some documentation on Chew’s work with the trade unions, there are gaps on other concurrent appointments which he held as Deputy Registrar of Societies when he was appointed on 1 January 1952<sup>21</sup> and as Deputy Protector of Labour on 3 June 1955. These various appointments were inter-related in dealing with trade unions, associations and labour, and although Chew had a wide mandate in serving the whole of

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<sup>21</sup> *The Sarawak Tribune* 9 January 1952.

Sarawak and its diverse communities, he was in a vantage position in handling Chinese affairs. Among the Chinese he was known as “*tua chai hoo*” (big government officer in Hokkien dialect), a term of respect for a well regarded civil servant. According to John Chin (1980: 81), a Hakka colleague of my father who was also for a time a court interpreter, a Chinese civil servant in a senior position “commanded respect even among [Chinese] community leaders and other people of social significance, especially if he worked directly under European officers of senior rank.”



Figure 8: Visit by T. M. Cowan, Labour Adviser to the to the Commissioner General, South East Asia to Kuching in November 1952, meeting representatives of trade unions. William Chew is standing right to T. M. Cowan.

The colonial government recognised Chew's standing within the Chinese community, especially among the Hakka due to the nature of his work. When the British governor, Anthony Abell in November 1955 invited Chinese community leaders living at the bazaars and areas along the 7<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup>, 15<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup>, and 24<sup>th</sup> miles, Kuching-Simanggang road, places where Hakka were the dominant group, for a discussion and luncheon, William Chew was the only Chinese civil servant present.<sup>22</sup> Chew is shown in this group photo on the extreme right.



Father's standing in the eyes of the colonial government was matched by

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<sup>22</sup> *The Sarawak Tribune*, 26 November 1955.

his devotion and loyalty to the government, and as children we were not only subject to his strict and stern discipline but we also knew him to be an upright man, a stickler for the letter of the law, which was what and how British governance was laid down in Sarawak. I would now like to refer to the work of Sarawak scholar Vernon Porritt (2004: 37-41) who while writing about the communist movement in the territory covered in some detail on how Chew dealt with the trade unions. The story of the trade unions and how the communist united front infiltrated the trade unions is outside the scope of this paper, relevant though it may be. The subject of communism even for academic discourses in Sarawak is a sensitive one for local academics to handle. I rely here extensively on Porritt, to show how my father dealt resolutely with the trade unions within the scope of his work, to help throw light on his character as a public servant.

According to Porritt, the Sarawak communist movement, which penetrated the trade unions in 1954 with cells directed to use legal avenues, and indoctrination through night schools, cultural activities and sports events. Father refused to register a Sarawak Trade Union Congress (STUC) in 1955 on the grounds that that it could not be registered under the Trades Union Ordinance then in force. Pressure by the unions was mounted on the office of the Registrar of Trade Unions to the extent that an interim committee for a STUC was set up in May 1960 and again registration was refused on the same grounds. Relentless pressure finally paid off when a First Division STUC was finally approved on 8

January 1961. Government surveillance on communist infiltrations of trade unionists resulted in the arrest of some trade unionists suspected to be communists in December 1962. The government's intention to make sure that trade unions confined their activities to legitimate objectives was conveyed by Chew at a government sponsored seminar in March 1964. Chew explained union rules and the non-use of union funds for political purposes and for political parties. The First Division STUC was banned by the government on 17 March 1966. Although I do not personally know in any detail how my father dealt with the infiltration of trade unions by the communist united front, what can be vouched for is that for my father, his office as Registrar of Trade Unions was a high pressured one, walking a tight rope between the demands of assertive unionists influenced by communism, and upholding the laws and rules laid down by the government. From what Porritt has detailed, it appeared that my father did not waver in the face of union demands.

Another example of my father's steadfastness in serving the government of the day is again taken from Porritt (2004), citing him taking the decision not to register a communist united front organisation, the Sarawak Farmers Association in 1961. " G.A.T. Shaw, the Chief Secretary informed the CouncilNegri [State Legislative Assembly] that the Registrar of Societies had refused registration under the Societies Ordinance on the grounds that the Association was likely to be used for purposes 'prejudicial to peace and good order in Sarawak. ' This has always been what we the children thought our father would be, that he believed

in carrying out the work he was asked to do without fear or favour and being loyal to the government of the day. Work demands I believe, led to my father to take up cigarette smoking which led him to contract throat cancer, a cause of his demise at the age of seventy two years in 1985.

There are gaps in knowing about Chew's work in the period just before the withdrawal of the British colonial masters from Sarawak which culminated in Sarawak becoming a partner of the Malaysian Federation on 16 September 1963. There is however a Malaysian Government Gazette of 11 August 1967, confirming his appointment as Registrar of Newspapers on 11 July 1967. He retired from government service on 13 December 1968 after reaching the compulsory retirement age.

### **Fui Tung Onn Association ( 惠東安公會 )<sup>23</sup>**

An intriguing question is how Chew in his retirement became involved in Hakka community affairs. The Fui Tung Onn association which he helped to establish in 1971, was formed a few years after his retirement. As children growing up in the 1950s and 1960s in Kuching there was little doubt in our minds that father had always taken an interest in his dialect group community of Sin Onn Hakka. This interest in the Hakka community did not just evolve in the late stages of his life. Nor did a sense of being Hakka become just apparent in his post working life. Vivid memories of my older siblings are of

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<sup>23</sup> See footnote 4.



throng of people, a number of whom spoke Hakka, visiting the family house at night to seek father's help and opinions when he was a government servant. People would also visit him in the office too. He had a civic sense of duty to give help to those who approached him for assistance, and in the author's possession are letters from people who acknowledged receiving his assistance, and notices of people who borrowed money from him. It would have been a natural progression for Chew to get involved with the Fui Tung Onn association when community elders mooted the idea of forming an association in 1971. His motivation and intentions to help lead the community, and of helping people would have come from his sense of public duty. He could also be following the tradition of his father in the homeland village in Dongguan. Chew's father was from the *thel fong* (first branch) and he assumed a leadership role when assisting co-ethnics to migrate to Sarawak in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century.<sup>24</sup>

Chew was already well known among the Chinese including the Hakka when he was a court interpreter and later on when he was the Registrar of Trade Unions and Societies. He had expertise in how associations were set up, their rules and benefits especially in newly independent Malaysia where adherence to rules and the letter of the law had become important. He was aware that an association for the Sin Onn Hakka would benefit the members and their children. The spirit of mutual help towards co-ethnics for Chinese migrants and their descendents in adopted and new settings like Sarawak had

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<sup>24</sup> See footnote 4 and 7.

a strong tradition which Chew was knowledgeable on. Chew had written in an undated manuscript, from his days as a Registrar of Trade Unions and Societies:

That the Chinese have a natural flair for organisation work is evident from the number of guilds (known in Chinese as *hong*), associations and societies which came into existence long before the outbreak of war and which still exist today. Many of these are well organised and in a sound financial position.

In an earlier part of this paper, the author maintained that Chew straddled between the cultural and linguistic English and Chinese speaking worlds in Sarawak due to his command of English and Chinese, including the Hakka dialect. In dealing with the vexing question of identity which is multi-layered in a multi-ethnic setting like Sarawak where identity can't be neatly pigeonholed, Chew in his working career might have demonstrated more of himself as a dedicated colonial civil servant displaying a strong sense of loyalty to the colonial masters he was serving. The demands of work and that of raising a big family of thirteen children might have prevented him from asserting a Hakka identity or be actively involved with the Hakka. While he could read and write Chinese fluently, as well as speak Hakka, I suspect that he had a stronger preference for the English language, and he subscribed to English newspapers and listened to English radio broadcasts. In 1971, freed

from the demands of work and with most of the children already grown up and working, Chew might have found that he had the time to devote himself to Hakka interests.

Readers might be curious to know more about the family's Chinese and Hakka identity. Due to his English education and a life long career working with British civil servants, Chew put us, the children, through English schools, and encouraged us to go abroad to English speaking countries like England, Canada, New Zealand and Australia for our tertiary education. We did not speak Hakka fluently like our parents. Father preferred to speak in English to us while our mother, a Hakka herself, spoke to us in both English and Hokkien. None of the children learned and took up Chinese like our father. This fact of the children's non-fluency in Chinese and limited fluency in Hakka did not however diminish Chew's interest and commitment to his fellow co-ethnics as demonstrated by his involvement with the Fui Tung Onn Association.

As one of the founder members of the Fui Tung Onn Association for Hakka Sin Onn, Chew was Vice President and English Secretary for fund raising for various years between 1971 and 1981, and when he fell seriously ill in 1983, he had to relinquish his role and involvement with the association. He had a membership number of two, the number one member being a government minister, James Wong Kim Min (Wong 1983 and Yong 1997). Chew was one of the principal donors of the association and was among a select few persons who each gave \$1000 to the association. It was no small

sum of money in those days as he was just a government pensioner. In rather glowing language, the Fui Tung Onn association penned its tribute to William Chew<sup>25</sup>:

Mr Chew was a righteous person who treated others with friendliness and politeness. Well-versed in Western and Chinese culture, dedicated to societal welfare and charity institutions, Mr Chew was held in high esteem by others during his civic service. In particular, in his capacity as one of the founding members of the Fui Tung Onn Community Association, Mr Chew contributed enormously both in finance and resources in his effort to fund-raise for the establishment of the association. Mr Chew was the Vice President of the association from for a number of years between 1971-1981. He was also an executive member of the Sarawak Civil Servants Association, secretary of the Prisoners Welfare Association and secretary of the Sarawak Badminton Club.

The Fui Tung Onn Association has an interesting past and its late formation in 1971 was explained in the Association 12<sup>th</sup> anniversary publication. The authorities refused to allow its formation previously in the 1930s due to the fact there was already an umbrella organisation for the

<sup>25</sup> Fui Tung Onn Community Association 12<sup>th</sup> Anniversary souvenir magazine (1983: 46) (馬來西亞砂朥越古晉惠東安公會成立十二周年紀念特刊). I would like to thank my brother-in-law, Tee-Siaw Koh for his help in translations from this magazine. I have also benefited from many discussions with him.

Hakka, the Hakka Association, which the Sin Onn Hakka were encouraged to join. The persistence of the Sin Onn Hakka to have their own association finally paid off in 1971. A perusal of the association's activities shows that it has similar social and cultural objectives to that of other Chinese associations in Sarawak. When this particular Fui Tung Onn Association magazine was published in 1983, the Hakka were already Malaysian citizens and an examination of the activities and write-ups in the publication showed a concern with the next generation and with education. Education was seen a path towards social mobility and my father and other Hakka who attained senior posts as government servants were regarded as role models in the write-ups on them. Father did not hold any official position in the association after 1981. In 1983 he was struck with cancer and he died on 29 January 1985.



Figure 10: The Fui Tung Onn Association Committee, 1971. William Chew is seated third from the right.

## Epilogue

*“The past is forgotten often, but the present is important. Tomorrow is even more important.”<sup>26</sup>*

This biography, written thirty years after the death of my father, is not for self serving purposes of writing a personal family history although it does achieve this personal objective, but rather to share the story of my Hakka father who lived at a unique period of Sarawak’s history as a civil servant, a calling which I would dare say he did his best to fulfill in the tradition of service to the public and the government of the day. He wrote to daughter Eleanor Pau on 28 December 1980, “My twenty seven years of service with the Sarawak government has not been in vain. My five years of English education plus some years of self study enabled me to contribute something useful to society.”

When he died on 29 January 1985 from a short illness, there were throngs of kin, people who knew him including those from the Fui Tung Onn Association who came for the funeral wake. Wreaths from kin, associates and friends filled up the family living room where father lay in wake, and with insufficient space, flowed outside the main door of the house and onto the car porch. A few days after the funeral, the family received a telephone call from

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<sup>26</sup> Letter from William Chew to Eleanor Pau (daughter), 28 December 1980.

the office of the Sarawak governor, the late Tun Abdul Yakub (1928-2015), with the governor requesting a visit to the family house to pay his last respects. This visit confirmed to the family that father had indeed made his contributions to society with this form of recognition from a personage holding the office of governor, who was for a time the chief executive or Chief Minister of Sarawak from 1970 to 1981. Father in his working life would have provided assistance or come into contact with many people from all walks of life.

William Chew rose from the ranks of the civil service from being a court interpreter to senior positions as Registrar of Trade Unions and Societies, and Deputy Commissioner of Labour. He worked mostly during the era of the colonial period, with a brief period in independent Malaysia from 1963 until 1968. Although he made his mark as a civil servant and served the colonial government with dedication and loyalty, he did not neglect the Sin Onn Hakka community which he came from, where he played a role in forming and leading the Fui Tung Onn Association. In conclusion, Chew's life and work straddled between the linguistic and cultural worlds of the Chinese, in particular the Sin Onn Hakka, with that of a public career under a British colonial and later Malaysian administration.

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