Baba Chinese, Non-Baba Chinese and Malays: A Note on Ethnic Interaction in Malacca

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Introduction

This paper aims to examine the salient features of social interaction between Baba Chinese and non-Baba Chinese in Malacca as well as between Baba Chinese and Malays. The former is an interaction within an autonomous ethnic group since both Baba Chinese and non-Baba Chinese are in fact sub-ethnic categories of Malaysian Chinese. The interaction between Babas and Malays is, however, one between two autonomous ethnic groups.

In this paper, Babas are those Chinese in Malacca who identify themselves as “Baba” or “Peranakan”. I exclude from this study the “Babas” in Singapore and Penang. The Babas in Malacca are a small minority within the Chinese population, and I have estimated that there are about 5,000 Babas in the state of Malacca. This constitutes about three percent of the total Chinese population of 160,084 in the state (Department of Statistics 1972: 63).

Baba Chinese share a Chinese culture which has, to some extent, been acculturated by the Malays. The most distinct aspect of Baba culture is the Baba dialect which is a kind of Malay and may be called Baba Malay. Babas speak the dialect, at least as a home language. Many English-educated Babas, however, also speak English regularly among themselves. The other well-known features of Baba culture are food and attire. In general, Babas eat more chili and Malay-style food than the other Chinese in Malacca. The older women also wear the Malay-style kebaya blouse and sarong. One should however be careful not to single out any one particular cultural feature as the criterion of Baba identity. In terms of food, for example, there are some Baba individuals who do not eat much chili. Nevertheless, the use of Baba Malay is a reliable indicator of Baba identity since other Malaysians do not speak the dialect.

Baba Chinese and Non-Baba Chinese Interaction

Both Babas and non-Baba Chinese are Malaysian Chinese. Specifically, Babas refer to themselves as “Baba” or “Peranakan”, the latter term meaning “a local-born person”. They refer to the non-Baba Chinese as Orang Cina (“Chinese”),

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Orang Tiongsan ("Chinese") or Cina Tiongsan ("Chinese of China"). The term-Tiongsan (also pronounced as Tongsan) is probably derived from the Hokkien term Teng-Soa * for "China". The non-Baba Chinese are also referred to as Teng-Soa * Cina ("China's Chinese") or Teng-Soa * punya orang, that is, "people of China". These non-Baba Chinese are, however, not citizens of China; they are local-born Chinese and citizens of Malaysia. The Baba label for them is a usage passed down from the earlier times when the Chinese immigrants were people of China. When Babas refer to the non-Baba Chinese as "Chinese", it does not mean that they do not consider themselves as "Chinese". This is only a way of differentiating the Baba type from the non-Baba type of Chinese. Specifically, Babas are Cina Peranakan or "Chinese Peranakans" and the non-Baba Chinese are just Cina or "Chinese". Contrary to what Ho (1976: 20) has written, all Babas are proud of their Chinese identity.4

In general, non-Baba Chinese look down on Babas. This is because most Babas either do not speak any Chinese language or do not speak it very well. When these Babas converse with non-Baba Chinese, they speak either the regional Malay dialect or a mixture of Baba Malay and regional Malay. The English-educated Babas also speak English. In Malaysia, it is still not acceptable by the non-Baba Chinese to speak Malay among themselves. Those Chinese like the Babas who speak Malay among themselves are thus perceived by the other Malaysian Chinese as not quite Chinese. English, however, has been accepted as a language for intra-group communication by the Chinese. This is because, unlike Malay, English is an elite language which is not associated with any particular ethnic group in Malaysia, except the Eurasians.

The non-Baba Chinese perceive the Babas as "like Malay". Among themselves, the non-Baba Chinese often talk unfavourably of the Babas. This is true also of those non-Baba Chinese who live close to Babas. Those non-Baba Chinese who frequently interact with the Babas do not normally express to the latter their contemptuous attitude towards the Babas as a whole. However, interaction between Babas and non-Baba Chinese who do not know each other personally is not always cordial. This is especially true in Malacca Town where Babas do have to interact with non-Baba Chinese businessmen who are most likely to have a negative stereotype of the Babas. Many Baba individuals feel very uneasy interacting with these businessmen. In most cases, these businessmen do not openly tease their Baba customers. There are, however, times when some of them do mischievously tease the Babas. Pork sellers are known to tease Baba customers that Babas are Muslims since they speak Malay and therefore they should not eat pork. Usually such teasing is done in a somewhat joking context so that the interaction does not end in open conflict. Baba informants who cannot speak any Chinese language and who have stayed in towns outside of the state of Malacca (such as in Johor) told me that it is always embarrassing to buy pork for the first time. This is because the Chinese pork sellers think that they are Malays. Outside of Malacca, there is an even greater lack of understanding of Baba culture on the part of the non-Baba Chinese.

There are non-Baba Chinese who call Babas Baba siau. Siau (fifth tone) is a Hokkien word which means "semen", therefore the label is very derogatory.5 A less