Some Demographic Aspects of Chinese Population in Malaysia

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Abstract: The Chinese population is an important demographic component in Malaysia. Starting with a mass inmigration of Chinese population from China at the end of the 19 century, Malaysia is now regarded as a multy-ethnic society. The establishment of British rule in Penang, Melaka and Singapore at the turn of the twentieth century marks the beginning of mass Chinese settlement in Malaysia. Using secondary data taken from the Report of Population and Housing Census of Malaysia and various books on Chinese community, it reveals that today this population makes up more than half of the Malay itself. The Chinese population focused on specific states that have a higher level of urbanization. This is in line with business activities that form the backbone of this population since the beginning of their mass inmigration from China. For the states of Perlis, Kedah, Kelantan, Terengganu and Pahang where padi cultivation is dominant, the Chinese is not significant.

Key words: Demography · Chinese Population · Migration · Plural Society · Population

INTRODUCTION

An influx of migrants from a country to another, particularly to capital cities has always been a significant demographic phenomenon in developing countries. Rather, migration is one of the important elements of economic growth in the Third World. When British established her rule in Peninsular Malaysia in 1786, the economy of the Peninsular was soon became more diversified. British started to develop the economy of Malay Peninsular. Various economic activities were then introduced, started with rubber plantation (rubber estates) and tin mines which needs a lot of labor. One of the requirements to develop these two sectors is the availability of labor. Then a lot of good employment opportunities were created. Due to the demand for labor in these sectors, since the establishment of British colonial rule in Penang in 1786, the Malay Peninsular has become one of the most important areas of international migration [1].

The purpose of the present article is to highlight some demographics aspect of Chinese population in Malaysia. Malaysia, situated in a central position in Southeast Asia, is a small country with a population of more or less 30 million. Demographically, Malaysia is a multy-ethnic country, which comprised of several major ethnic groups [2]. In the northern part of Peninsular Malaysia, lies Thailand and in the south is the small island state, Singapore. Before the coming of Europeans in the early sixteenth century, Peninsular Malaysia was under the role of various Malay Sultanates established at different periods in the west coast around Melaka [1].

Census 2000 [3] defined ethnic groups as persons who were bound together by language, religious and customs. It was categorized into four, which are Bumiputra, Chinese, Indian and Others. Within the Bumiputra, it is included the Malays and Orang Asli in Peninsular Malaysia and various indiginous groups in Sabah and Sarawak.

Starting with the influx of Chinese settlers from China at the end of the 19 century, Malaysia is now regarded as a plural society [4]. Although the influx of Chinese settlers was a new phenomenon, the relationship between the Chinese and the Malays can be detected as early as the 12th century. The arrival of the Chinese population to Malaya, particularly to Melaka has already started long

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before this mass inmigration. From the historical records there were a relationship between the Chinese and the Melaka Sultanate in the fields of economy, politic and culture long before the dates of the mass inmigration.

The entry of Chinese population at this time, however, was probably limited to the traders, travelers and preachers of Islam to this area. The state is known by the traders in China since the 12th-century. This is particularly true from the historical records written in China, where in those centuries there were words such as *Nan-Ya-Nu* or *Teng-O-Nung*, considered to refer to the word Terengganu [5].

The immigration of Chinese had developed into a well-organised system by mid-nineteenth century when a return emigrant known as *kheh thau* or headman or by a professional recruiter started to recruit potential immigrants in South China, particularly Kwantung and Fukien provinces [1]. In doing this, the recruits were sent to lodging-houses at the Chinese ports and then were shipped to Malay Peninsular. On arrival at the Malaysian ports the recruits were met by an agent and then dispatched to employers or labor contractors [1]. Through this experience, the yearly statistic of Chinese immigration revealed that in 1890 it was estimated that there were 228 285 net Chinese migrants to Malay Peninsular as compared to only 121 769 in 1880 [1].

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Secondary data in this discussion is taken from the report of Population and Housing Census as well as various books related to Chinese population in Malaysia. In the words of reseach methods, this study employed content analysis design. Content analysis is defined as any technique for making inferences by objectively identifying specific characteristics of messages [6]. For Neuman [4], content analysis is a technique for examining the content or information and symbols contained in written documents. Content analysis can discover and document specific features in the content of a large amount of material [7].

In conducting this, what was firstly done is the identification of relevant archival sources to analyze. There were many relevant sources and the most important sources appropriate are the report of Population and Housing Census of Malaysia 1991 and 2000 [3, 8], the Population of Malaysia [1] and several books concerning Chinese population.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Demographers normally focus their analysis on three components of demography, namely, mortality, fertility and migration. Demographers also focusing their analysis on other aspects of population that lead to the changes in these components, such as marriage, divorce and other socioeconomic factors related to these demographic aspects. Some demographic aspects of Chinese population are analyzed below.

The Growth of Chinese Population: The term ethnic groups, refers to persons who were bound together by common language, religion and customs. In censuses before census 2000 and 1991, the classification of ethnic group was categorized as Malays, Chinese, Indian and Others, while in the last two censuses, the terms Bumiputra (Malays and Other Bumiputra) was used instead of Malays. According to Saw Swee-Hock [1], the first proper census in Malaysia was conducted in 1871 in Straits Settlements in Penang and Melaka. In 1891 the decennial census was expanded to cover the Federated Malay States of Perak, Negeri Sembilan, Selangor and Pahang. The population in the remaining states of Kedah, Perlis, Kelantan, Terengganu and Johor, collectively known as the Unfederated Malay States, was only enumerated in 1911.Time series censuses data from 1911 reveal the percentage of Chinese ethnic in the population has increased dramatically. Out of the total population of 2 339 051 enumerated in Malaysia in 1911, 29.6% was Chinese [1]. This proportion rose from 29.6% in 1911 to 38.8% in 1980. Based on the census [8], the population of Malaysia in 2000 was 23.0 million. Out of this figure a total of 21.8 million were Malaysian citizens where 14.2 million (65.1%) were the Malay population, 5.6 million (26.0%) Chinese and 1.6 million (7.7%) Indians. The percentage of the Malays has increased from 60.0% (1991) to 65.1% (2000). The Chinese was declined by 1.9% from 28.1% (1991) to only 26.0% (2000).

The Composition by State: The composition of ethnic groups in Malaysia has been determined by the historical factor, particularly the influence of British colonial in the past, as well as the level of economics development in the country. The percentage of Chinese tend to be higher in states where influence of British colonial in the past had been the greatest and where economic activities such as commerce, trade and tin-mining are heavily concentrated

[1]. Thus, the Chinese settlement was concentrated in certain states, such as the Klang Valley in Selangor, Kinta Valley in Perak, Johor, Penang and Melaka. This pattern remains the same today. In Penang and Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur, the composition of Chinese population is bigger than the Bumiputra, which is 50.1% and 47.5% against 38.4% and 39.4% Bumiputra.

For other states, the Chinese population is not significant. There are less Chinese in the Malay States of Perlis, Kedah, Kelantan, Terengganu and Pahang where padi cultivation is the dominant economic activity. In these states, the Chinese has been a minority and they have been assimilated with the local Malays. Kelantan and Terengganu are two states with a small Chinese population, less than 5%. Geographical distribution of Chinese population, besides influenced by the historical factor and the level of economic development, it also very much related to the level of urbanization of a state. Concentration of Chinese is generally higher in states with higher levels of urbanization such as Johor, Penang, Selangor, Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur, Perak and Melaka.

Age Structure: Another important aspect of the study of population is age structure. Age structure or age distribution, is the distribution of age of population in a society based on age groups. From this age structure, we can identify which age categories; children, adult or elderly category is bigger. This age structure is changing over time. This age category, which is normally resembles the shape of a pyramid, is called a population pyramid. It composed of all category of population from the youngest to the oldest. Population pyramid is built up in five-year age groups, indicates the percentage of the population in specific age categories by sex, where the base representing the youngest group (0-4 years), the apex representing the oldest (80 and above). Society with high fertility rates will have a bigger number of the youngest age category and will have a bigger base and smaller off upwards with the advance of age. This pyramid tells us this population has a high proportion of young people. With high fertility, more people have entered the base. If society has a lower fertility rate, the base of the pyramid is usually smaller as fewer people have entered the base of the pyramid. Population with high percentage of older persons will have a smaller base pyramid.

The proportion of Chinese in the 0 - 14 age category was increased from 29.1% (1921) to 25.1% (1931), jumped to 39.7% (1947), to 44.2% (1957) and then fell to 42.8% (1970) and 36.9% (1980). This age group rose dramatically

from the early census to the peak level of 44.2% in 1957 [6], while after that decreased to only 26.2% in 2000 [8]. In the working age (15-59), it was found the figure was 75.5% (1921), decreased to 70.0% in 1931 [8].

Median Age: The median age is the age that divides the population into two age groups in which half of the population has age below the median and another half has age above it. In the past the median age of population was lower, which reflects the life expectancy in Malaysia was low. When life expectency of population increases, the median age increases. Thus, it is an indicator of the level of demographic ageing of a population. The median age for the Malaysian as a whole in 1970 was 17.4, increased to 19.6 in 1980 [3], to 21.9 (1991) and to 23.6 in 2000 [8]. In the case of Chinese population, in 1991 the median age was 25.7 compared with 19.8 (Bumiputra), 23.2 (Indians) and 19.7 for Others [3]. In 2000, the median age for the Chinese was 28.9 compared with 20.9 (Bumiputra), 25.1 (Indians) and 18.4 for Others [8]. Thus the median age of Chinese population is much higher.

Marital Status and Age at First Marriage: Marital status is an important component to influence the changing demographics face because all childbearing in Malaysia occurs within legal marriage. Because of that, marriage affects fertility rate and therefore it determines large or small size of the base of population pyramid. Births outside family, although occurs, they are not so significant in number. Census 2000 [8] categorized the status of marriage into four, namely never married, currently married, widow/widower and divorced/permanently separated. The Chinese who is currently married was estimated to be 59.4% off all of the Chinese in 2000 compared with 60.3% (Bumiputra), 58.8% (Indians) and 58.7% (Others). The Chinese who is never married was 35.7%, while widowed and divorced/permanently separated was 4.4% and 0.5%. The Chinese men who never married were higher than Bumiputra and Indians, but slightly lower than others ethnic group. In the context of women, the Chinese and Indians were not much different. The percentage of Chinese who married was found to be higher than other ethnics. For other ethnics there was no significant difference between all groups.

Age at first marriage, another important aspect in demography, also felt crucial to be analyzed. In a society where most births occur in family, age at the first marriage affects population structure. Age at first marriage is a demographic term normally used to refer to the age of men

or women when they first get married. In recent years, age at first marriage has become a significant demographic phenomenon in most of developing countries. Many young men or women have been postponed their age at first marriage. The age at which a woman began to enter marriage is critical as they related to the period a woman span to give birth. Women who marry at a younger age may have a longer period of childbearing.

Chinese populations normally marry at older age compared to other ethnic groups. Today the Chinese population has a higher mean age at first marriage compared with other ethnic groups. In 2991, the mean age at first marriage amongst Malaysian is ranging from as lowerst as 23.8 (Other Bumiputra) to the highest as 28.0 (Chinese). In 2000 [8], the lowest age at first marriage was among Other Bumiputra (25.0) and the highest was Chinese (28.8). In the same period, age at first marriage for the Malays was 26.4, Indians (27.1) and Others (26.3). Age at first marriage for men is higher than females. In 2000 [8], the mean age for the Chinese men was 30.6 years compared to other ethnic groups that only around 28 years. The Chinese female also has a higher mean age at first marriage compared to other ethnic groups (27.0 years). The age at first marriage for Indian female was 25.4 and 24.8 for Malay female population. The higher age at first marriage among the Chinese, reflect the Chinese started their marriage at the later age.

CONCLUSION

The Chinese population is an important demographic component in Malaysia. Starting with a mass inmigration of Chinese population from China at the end of the 19 century, Malaysia is now regarded as a multy-ethnic society. The establishment of British rule in Penang, Melaka and Singapore at the turn of the twentieth century marks the begining of mass Chinese settlement in Malaysia. An influx of Chinese immigrants from South China in the eighteenth century had been planned to fulfil the demand of labor to develop rubber estates and tin mines by British in Malaysia at that time. When the Chinese immigration had developed into a well-organised system by mid-nineteenth century the number of immigrants from South China, particularly Kwantung and Fukien provinces had been increased significantly. Today this population makes up more than half of the Malays itself. Based on information from the Report of Population and Housing Census of Malaysia and various books on Chinese community in Malaysia, it was clear

that most of the Chinese population focused on specific states that have a higher level of urbanization. This is in line with business activities that form the backbone of this population since the beginning of their mass inmigration from China. For the Malay States of Perlis, Kedah, Kelantan, Terengganu and Pahang where padi cultivation is dominant, the Chinese is not significant. The median age of Chinese population is higher. The percentage who married and their mean age at first marriage among the Chinese are also higher.

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