Towkays and Men of God: Hakka Leadership in North Borneo before 1963

Danny Wong Tze Ken
Professor of Department of History and Director of Malaysian Chinese Research Centre, University of Malaya

Introduction

In 1976, Edwin Lee published a very important book entitled, The Towkays of North Borneo. The book marked the first attempt to look into the history of the Chinese in North Borneo through studying the post-World War Two Chinese business leaders who were considered as the de facto leaders of the society. It was a credible effort and important contribution to our understanding of the Chinese community in North Borneo, and probably remained to be the only major work available on the subject. The line of thinking that was forwarded by Edwin Lee, hinges on the fact that in the post-war North Borneo, it was the Chinese businessmen, through the Chinese Chamber of Commerce (中華商會) and later, through appointments to the State Legislative Council (州議會) who were put in the leadership role of the Chinese community. Through his analysis, Edwin Lee was able to demonstrate that the underlying strength of the Chinese Towkays (頭家) was the wealth generated through their participation in their business enterprises, especially the fledging tin ore trade that was experiencing a boom in the 1950s and early 1960s. Lee also argues that the Chinese towkays also had a very strong backing from the British colonial administration, with certain quarters working quite closely with the Chinese leaders. Some of the colonial officers probably even envisaged that the Chinese would be the heirs to the leadership of the state after the British left.

The events following the announcement of the proposed formation of the new Federation of Malaysia (馬來西亞聯邦) by Tun Abdul Rahman (東姑亞都拉曼) in May 1961, set the motion going where in response to this was the emergence of indigenous challenges to Chinese positions. In reaction to the Malaysia proposal, Chinese leaders, who were already in the State Legislative Council and the Chinese Chamber of Commerce, also formed the ranks of those who took the initiatives to form political parties and championed for the interests of the Chinese – hence, the image was conjured, and the Towkays as de facto of the Chinese is strongly entrenched. Such notion of equating Chinese leadership with the business leaders gained popularity and acceptance so much so that a departure from such position seems to be unimaginable.

*Paper for International Conference on Southeast Asian Hakka Studies, 7-8 July 2012, Taiwan Hakka Cultural Center, Taoyuan Park, Tongtou, Taiwan, organised by Taiwan Hakka Culture Development Center, Hakka Affairs Council; Center for Southeast Asian Studies, National Chi Nan University, Taiwan.*