

### On Baba Literature, Kinship, Religion and the Weather in Malacca: A Rejoinder to Dr. Clammer

In his reply to my review of his book, *Straits Chinese Society* (in *J.S.E.A.S.* Vol. 12, no. 1, 1981), Dr. Clammer has avoided answering most of my specific criticisms and queries. As the book contains many errors and unfounded statements, and since I have the advantage of having done one year's anthropological fieldwork among the Baba, I chose to review the book in a comprehensive manner in order to cover all the topics discussed by the author. The usual length of a book review does not permit me to give detailed, counter-evidence to the many unfounded assertions of the author. I therefore confined my review to pointing out the problems in Dr. Clammer's approach and analysis. In taking this approach, I could not discuss in detail all the issues raised. However, Dr. Clammer's reply calls for more elaboration on Baba kinship and religion. Furthermore, Dr. Clammer has managed to evade addressing the major issues which I raised by charging (to mislead readers) that I have not been fair in my comments.

Firstly, Dr. Clammer describes my comments as "wild", and says that I have accused him of not mentioning publications which he has discussed by name. In this way, he cleverly avoids the basic issue which I raised — that he does not *analyse* Baba publications in Romanized Malay and has relied almost entirely on *The Straits Chinese Magazine*, an English publication, for his conclusion that the Baba published very few original works and that their publications are of low quality. Two of my examples of Baba publications in Romanized Malay have been mentioned by Dr. Clammer on p. 67 of his book as examples of Straits Chinese publications. However, my point is not that Dr. Clammer has not mentioned any of the titles of Straits Chinese publications, but that he has ignored Romanized Malay publications in his analysis of Straits Chinese literature in which he arrived at a conclusion as to the nature and quality of this literature. In defence, Dr. Clammer mentions that he does not wish to reproduce Dr. Claudine Lombard-Salmon's<sup>1</sup> arguments with which he largely agrees. This is, however, no reason for not analysing the Romanized Malay publications before judging them. Furthermore, Dr. Lombard-Salmon will no doubt agree that her important study is only the beginning of the investigation into Straits Chinese literature.

On my comment that he has not accurately cited the titles of Romanized Malay publi-

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<sup>1</sup>Dr. Claudine Lombard-Salmon is the first person to do a *systematic* library research on Straits Chinese literature. Her original work in French, "La Littérature en Malais Romanisée des Chinois de Malaisie. Première Enquête", *Archipel* 14 (1977): 79-109, has been translated into English and Malay. See "Writings in Romanised Malay by the Chinese of Malaya: A Preliminary Inquiry", *Papers on Chinese Studies*, vol. 1 (1977): 69-95, translated by Anne Destenay. See also "Kesusasteraan Melayu Rumi Orang-Orang Cina di Malaysia: Satu Kajian Awal", *Dewan Bahasa* 22(72) (1978): 899-921, translated by Drs. Abdul Rahman Al-Ahmadi. During my research among the Baba in Malacca, I came across many copies of Straits Chinese books. Some of my findings are presented in "Baba Chinese Publication in Romanized Malay", *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, no. 22, 1981 (forthcoming).

cations, Dr. Clammer says that his citation is based on the form cited when the publications were extant. In actual fact all the titles cited by Dr. Clammer were taken from an article written by Tan Teck Soon and published in *The Straits Chinese Magazine* in 1897. Tan Teck Soon was a regular contributor to the magazine and one of his articles entitled "Some Genuine Chinese Authors" was published in three papers in *The Straits Chinese Magazine*, Vol. 1, nos. 2, 3, and 4, all published in 1897. In his first paper, Tan Teck Soon mentioned that the Romanized Malay translations of Chinese romances were not good enough as examples of Chinese literary achievements, and so in the three papers he introduced some English translations (with characters provided) of selected Chinese literary works. The titles of Romanized Malay translations mentioned by Tan are "the historical *Sam Kok Chi*, *Suat Tong*, *Tseng Tang*, *Tseng Sai*, *Huan Tong*, as well as such lighter novels as the *Lui Hong Thah*, *Ji To Moi* and others".<sup>2</sup> Dr. Clammer not only cites the same titles in the same sequence but also adopts Tan Teck Soon's description of the last two titles as "lighter" novels. Dr. Clammer, however, cites *Ji To Moi* as *Ji To Noi*. There is quite a substantial collection of such Romanized Malay translations at the National Library of Singapore and the University of Malaya Library. Unfortunately, Dr. Clammer has not tried to look at these copies but has, instead, relied on a secondary source in *The Straits Chinese Magazine* for examples of such publications. Furthermore, Tan Teck Soon who did not write specifically about the Romanized Malay publications might not have cited the titles as they appeared in the translated volumes. In fact, all the works, mentioned by him are still available in local libraries with the exception of *Suat Tong*. However, the titles of the copies available today are transcribed slightly differently from the titles mentioned by Tan Teck Soon. It is also proper for this reviewer to point out that Dr. Clammer should cite the full titles (at least the shortest possible full title) of the works rather than the abbreviated form used by Tan Teck Soon or by those Baba who knew the works well. I was being polite when I mentioned in the review that Dr. Clammer relies almost entirely on an English publication to analyze Baba Malay literature. I should have said that he relies entirely on *The Straits Chinese Magazine* in his judgement on the quality of the literature. Are my criticisms "wild" after all?

Dr. Clammer blames his rather uncertain discussion of Baba kinship on the inconsistencies of the Baba "system". It is certainly an easy way out for an anthropologist to resort to this argument rather than to confess that his theories and models are inadequate for understanding and analysing social phenomena. It seems to me that it is the inadequacy of Dr. Clammer's study which accounts for his confusing analysis of Baba kinship. We are not given a sufficient ethnographic account of Baba kinship and he often backs up his assertions with the phrase "in some cases". In fact, in his reply Dr. Clammer writes, "would Tan for example care for me to introduce him to some female-headed Baba families where the only vestige of patrilineal descent is in the transmission of the surname, and *in some cases* (my emphasis) not even that?" My comment in the review was that it is nothing new to find widows becoming household heads in both Baba and non-Baba Chinese families in Malaysia. What I question is Dr. Clammer's argument, without showing us the facts, that this leads to a kinship system which is bilocal and bilateral (p. 110). So much of Dr. Clammer's argument rests on those "some cases" and yet he does not analyse them. Given that these cases exist, they may, if analysed, turn out to be exceptions, and as I have explained in the review, one possible exception is when a man has no son and may arrange for one or more of his daughter's sons to adopt his surname and

<sup>2</sup>Tan Teck Soon, "Some Genuine Chinese Authors", *The Straits Chinese Magazine* 1(2) (1897):63-68.

follow his line of descent. Dr. Clammer fails to understand the relationship between Chinese surnames and Baba patrilineal descent. The patrilineal transmission of surnames is not the only *vestige* of patrilineal descent. It manifests the patrilineal nature of Baba descent system since people of the same descent bear the same surname. In fact, patrilineal relatives are a special category of people whom the Baba in Malacca called *culai* or what the non-Baba Hokkien called *chhin-lang* (Mandarin: *qijen* 亲人). *Culai* can be divided into different categories according to the degree of closeness from the point of view of descent. The term *culai* is most probably derived from the Hokkien term *chok-lai* (Mandarin: *zunei* 族内) which means “within a lineage or a clan”. Like the non-Baba Chinese, the Baba recognize not only patrilineal relatives but also affinal relatives as well as relatives of one’s sisters’ and daughters’ spouses. What makes the Baba different from the other Chinese is that the former have a much wider network of relatives through the female side. This is due to the small size of their population and, therefore, a greater need of marrying “intensively” among themselves even though they also marry other Chinese and even non-Chinese. It is therefore common, especially in the past, to find Baba marrying the affines of their own siblings or affines of their own close agnatic relatives. The actual relationship with non-patrilineal relatives may be very intimate but they are never considered as people of the same descent. The Baba use the term *orang lain* (other people) to describe these relatives. When a Baba wants to refer to his affinal relatives he can say that they are *dia punya orang*, that is, “her (his wife’s) people”. The importance of patrilineal descent is further stressed in the rituals on such occasions as funerals. To understand the Baba descent system, one has to undertake a holistic study of the Baba culture. Where the Baba are concerned, one should also distinguish patrilineal descent from patrilocality and patrilineal inheritance. The Baba observe patrilineal descent but their residence rule, especially in the past, need not be patrilocal and their property inheritance rule is also not strictly patrilineal.

In my description of Baba kinship, I compare it with the system of the non-Baba Hokkien. This is because the Baba system is largely derived from the traditional Hokkien system and, therefore, the two systems are comparable. While I have mentioned that most Straits Chinese (more specifically Baba) are Hokkien Chinese, Dr. Clammer unfortunately distorts my statement and accuses me of saying that Baba are Hokkien Chinese only. He then goes on to describe the speech-group identification of the Baba. He compares the Baba identification to the Englishman of German origin and points out that the gulf between any typical Baba and a Singapore Hokkien is obvious. If by this he means that the Baba identification with Chinese speech-group is not strong or not very significant in their social life, then he is wrong. The Baba identification with speech-group and even sub-speech group is as strong and as important as that of the non-Baba Chinese. Here, one has to distinguish between culture and ethnicity, a point which Dr. Clammer is aware of (p. 140) but does not demonstrate in his book. The Hokkien Baba’s identification with the Hokkien speech group does not depend on the ability to speak Hokkien. They speak Malay but identify themselves as Hokkien and are proud of this identity. The ethnic identification of the Baba is therefore segmentary: he is not only a Baba, but also a Chinese, a Hokkien (for example), and even, for instance, an Eng Choon (Mandarin: *Yongchun* 永春).

Dr. Clammer obviously does not understand Chinese religion. As mentioned in the review, the fallacy of dividing Chinese beliefs and practices into three religions, namely Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism has been discussed by such scholars as Wing-tsit Chan<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup>Wing-tsit Chan, *Religious Trends in Modern China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1953).

and C.K. Yang.<sup>4</sup> In the context of Malaysia and Singapore, a follower of Chinese religion cannot be described as a Taoist or a Buddhist and certainly not a Confucianist. He is the follower of a religion which includes worshipping ancestors, a wide range of deities and spirits of Taoist, Buddhist and local origins, as well as heroes and sages in Chinese history. This religion can appropriately be called Chinese religion. Confucianism is a system of philosophy rather than a religion even though this philosophy touches on religious beliefs and practices of the Chinese. Wing-tsit Chan has rightly pointed out that the Chinese character *jiao* 教 does not mean religion alone, but also education and culture; and that when it is used for Confucianism, "it means culture and moral education and almost never has the sense of religion".<sup>5</sup> Thus a Chinese Malaysian or Singaporean may be a Confucianist in the sense of a follower of the philosophy of Confucianism but not a Confucianist in the sense of a believer of a religion. Dr. Clammer, who depicts me as lacking ethnographic knowledge of Chinese religion, fails to understand this point.

The Confucian Association or Confucian Society which Dr. Clammer refers to began in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The first such society was not formed in China, and it was after a Confucian Society was formed by Chinese students in New York in 1907 that similar societies were formed in China.<sup>6</sup> In Southeast Asia, it was the Western-educated Peranakan Chinese in the Straits Settlements and Indonesia who initiated the formation of Confucian Societies and similar institutions.<sup>7</sup> Since Confucianism was the basic system of ethics of the Chinese and regulated so much of Chinese social life, the leaders of the Confucian Societies in China did try to make Confucianism the state religion but without success. It is a fact to historians that Confucianism was closely linked to Chinese political systems. In an attempt to save its dynasty, the Manchu government even tried, in 1906, to promote a cult which centred on worshipping Confucius. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when Chinese nationalism was high, various Chinese scholars tried to revive and promote Confucianism. In fact, both of the prominent Straits Chinese reformers, Lim Boon Keng and Song Ong Siang, who were Christians, also promoted Confucianism in Southeast Asia. Dr. Lim Boon Keng was more active and delivered many lectures on Confucianism in the Straits Settlements between 1894 and 1910. What Dr. Lim Boon Keng promoted was Confucianism as a system of philosophy, not as a system of religious beliefs and practices. That the Confucian Society in Singapore promoted Confucianism as a system of ethics is seen in the promotion of essay competitions as mentioned by Dr. Clammer.<sup>8</sup> Confucian Societies were not distinct Chinese religious sects like the Dejjiao Hui<sup>9</sup> 德教会,

<sup>4</sup>C.K. Yang, *Religion in Chinese Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961).

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 140.

<sup>6</sup>Cf. Wing-tsit Chan, *op. cit.*, p. 7

<sup>7</sup>Cf. Kwee Tek Hoay, *The Origins of the Modern Chinese Movement in Indonesia*, trans. by Lea E. Williams (N.Y.: Cornell University, Southeast Asia Program, 1969), p. 5; Lea E. Williams, *Overseas Chinese Nationalism: The Genesis of the Pan-Chinese Movement in Indonesia, 1900-1916* (Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1960), p. 55; Leo Suryadinata, *The Chinese Minority in Indonesia: 7 Papers* (Singapore: Chopmen Enterprises, 1978), pp. 33-62; and Yen Ching Hwang, *The Overseas Chinese and the 1911 Revolution* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1976), pp. 43 and 70.

<sup>8</sup>The topic for the essay competition this year is about the contribution of Confucian philosophy to Chinese culture. See *Sin Chew Jit Poh Malaysia (Xingzhou Ribao)*, 17 July 1981, p. 5.

<sup>9</sup>Dejjiao Hui is a Chinese religious sect which worships Laozi, Buddha, Confucius, all kinds of Chinese deities as well as Prophet Mohammad and Jesus Christ. It started as a nativistic movement in China. I am currently doing research on Chinese religion and am at present focusing my attention on Dejjiao Hui. However, I have not yet carried out any in-depth study of Confucian societies in Malaysia and Singapore. From the little bit of published material available, we know that in the first part of the twentieth century, there were people who tried to turn Confucian teachings into a religion. This is especially so in Indonesia, see fn. 7.

Sanyi Jiao 三一教 (“Three-in-One Doctrine”), Zhenkong Jiao 真空教 (“Religion of the Void”) and others. While Confucius is worshipped as a deity, this does not make Confucianism a religion. In Malaysia and Singapore, Confucius is worshipped in certain temples and is one of the deities in the religious sect known as Dejjiao Hui. Yet Confucius is not an important deity for Chinese Malaysians and Singaporeans as compared to such deities as Guangong 关公, Dabogong 大伯公, Guanyin 观音 and many others. If a Chinese who worships Confucius is to be described as a Confucianist, then he may, logically, also be described as a Guangongist, a Dabogongist, and so on. Yet such logic is employed only by a person who does not understand Chinese religion and fails to see its polytheistic nature.

Dr. Clammer says that I misunderstand his central thesis. He goes to the extent of denying having said that Baba culture was a product of British colonialism. Yet on p. 126 of his book, he writes, “what then does account for the emergence of Baba culture, and why did it spring into being when it did? The answer that I would propose, in two words, is British colonialism”. This same theme, phrased in the same words, is also to be found in an earlier work of his,<sup>10</sup> and it is shocking that Dr. Clammer denies saying what actually forms an important theme in his analysis. The book under review touches on such issues as ethnic identity and ethnic group formation, and this point is evident in my review, yet there is no coherent theme on ethnicity. Can this reviewer be blamed for not mentioning what Dr. Clammer considers to be the central purpose of the book?

At times Dr. Clammer is too sensitive in his reply. In the review, I questioned the usefulness of the term “resinification” since the Baba have never lost their Chinese identity. Instead of viewing this as a useful academic exchange, he says that my “attack” on this conception is aimed at scoring an easy point over him. It should be noted that Dr. Clammer is not the first nor the only one who has used the term. Maurice Freedman, for example, has used this term to refer to the Baba ceasing to be Baba and identifying merely as Chinese.<sup>11</sup> I should also point out that it is my job as a reviewer to inform the readers that much of the material in the book has been published elsewhere by Dr. Clammer as he himself has said in his Acknowledgements. This is a statement without any negative connotation. Yet Dr. Clammer criticizes me for pointing this out. However, partly owing to the fact that the book is a collection of papers previously published, there is much repetition of certain discussions in different chapters. Other than mentioning that chapter seven repeats most of the points already presented elsewhere in the book, I also single out his *argument* about intermarriage and the formation of Baba culture as an example of repetition, for the same discussion is presented in different chapters, such as on p. 21, p. 46, p. 83, p. 100, and p. 123. While Purcell thinks that Baba culture originally sprang essentially from the early unions of Chinese and local women, he is not altogether wrong for intermarriage is a more intimate form of *interethnic contact* and is an important factor which promoted the acculturation of the offspring of such unions.<sup>12</sup> What is wrong is Purcell’s description of the Baba in terms of a mixed-blood type. In view of the lack of information on the Baba during his time, Dr. Purcell, who was a historian, should be excused for presenting the stereotyped view of the Baba.

<sup>10</sup>John R. Clammer, *The Ambiguity of Identity: Ethnicity Maintenance and Change among the Straits Chinese Community of Malaysia and Singapore* (Occasional paper, no. 54, Singapore, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1974), p. 4.

<sup>11</sup>Maurice Freedman, “An Epicycle of Cathay; or, the Southward Expansion of the Sinologists”, *Social Organization and the Applications of Anthropology: Essays in Honor of Lauriston Sharp*, ed. Robert J. Smith, pp. 303-322 (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1974).

<sup>12</sup>Victor Purcell, *The Chinese in Malaya* (London, Oxford University Press, 1948), p. 38.

In defending his many unfounded statements, Dr. Clammer compares his assertions to the observation that the weather in Malacca is generally hot. The point is, people who have been to Malacca know that the weather there is generally hot, but they cannot see that there are more Baba/Indian than Baba/Malay friendships, or that the younger Straits Chinese are abandoning their traditional religion for Christianity. It is the job of Dr. Clammer to back up his points with either statistics or ethnographic evidence or both. Ethnography, like history, is itself invaluable as a branch of knowledge. For anthropologists, it is also important as a way of presenting evidence. Golomb, for example, has done this well in his analysis of the interethnic relationship between the Thai and the other ethnic groups in Kelantan.<sup>13</sup> Without presenting any evidence, one can only suspect that Dr. Clammer's assertions are based on certain stereotyped views. This seems to be so for Dr. Clammer thinks that there are more Chinese-Indian friendships because there is a lack of religious barriers to their interaction (p. 91). I have shown elsewhere that despite the presence of incompatible cultural institutions and structural conflict (i.e. conflict at the group level), interpersonal interaction between ethnic groups can be very cordial.<sup>14</sup>

In this book, which has many ethnographic errors, assumptions and unfounded statements are presented as facts, and readers should not take the contents at face value. It should not be regarded as a typical anthropological work despite the author's claim that it is anthropological and ethnographic. The kind of research and study represented by this work should not be encouraged. While Dr. Clammer has criticized most people's works on the Chinese in Malaysia and Singapore as either of little literary merit (pp. 66, 67) or of a highly general character (such as the work of Victor Purcell, p. 17), it is unfortunate that I have to conclude that *Straits Chinese Society* is not only highly general but also misleading. I am, however, not qualified to judge its literary merit, nor should I make such a judgement.

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<sup>13</sup>Louis Golomb, *Brokers of Morality: Thai Ethnic Adaptation in a Rural Malaysian Setting* (Honolulu: The University Press of Hawaii, 1978).

<sup>14</sup>See my articles, "Baba Chinese, Non-Baba Chinese and Malays: A Note on Ethnic Interaction in Malacca", *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science* 7(1-2): 20-29, 1979; and "Ethnic Relations in Malaysia", *Ethnicity and Interpersonal Interaction: A Cross-Cultural Study*, ed. David Wu (Singapore: Maruzen Asia, 1981, forthcoming).