



*Tra  
Lehnder*

*Iban Woman Patriot of Sarawak*

HEW Cheng Sim



Rokiah Talib





THAILAND

Bangkok

CAMBODIA

VIETNAM

South China Sea

Sulu Sea

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Kuala Lumpur

SINGAPORE

Sumatra

Kota Kinabalu

SABAH

BRUNEI

Miri

Bintulu

Sibu

MALAYSIA

SARAWAK

Kuching

BORNEO

SULAWESI

INDONESIA

Java Sea

Jakarta

Java

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By

HEW Cheng Sim & Rokiah Talib

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# Preface

There has been a resurgence of interest in the use of the life history method in social science research. This particular qualitative research method has grown in significance with the realization that an understanding of history and broader societal changes through people's 'lived experiences' is important and often much neglected. An individual is not an isolated entity but is enmeshed in a network of social relations and institutions. Thus, by placing the life of an individual centre-stage, the intimate and the personal reveal the public and the political at a specific point in history. The feminist notion of "the personal is political" takes on a new meaning in the use of the life history method. In choosing to write the life history of Philomena Tra Zehnder we are informed by our feminist stance of highlighting women's lives and giving space to the life stories of minority groups which are often sidelined and ignored.

This book is the first of its kind to be written about an Iban woman leader in Sarawak. This is not merely to valorize Dato Seri Philomena Tra Zehnder but it is hoped that in reading her life story, one would also have a glimpse of the historical developments connected with her life and

times. Her story is therefore told against the backdrop of Kuching, Brooke rule and its policy on European and native relations, life in an Iban longhouse during the 1940s and later, the fractious nature of Iban politics. In other words, Tra's life is a piece of mosaic amidst a larger picture of life in Sarawak from the 1920s to the turn of the twenty first century. As in all life histories, we have endeavored to tell her story as fully as possible with all its conflicts, ambivalence and ambiguities. Life is messy and glossing over the unpleasant, the difficult and the unpalatable would not do justice to her rich and embracing life. In writing this book, we interviewed Tra herself, all her children, some of her grandchildren, her colleagues, associates and friends but ultimately, the interpretation is ours. We will be the first to admit that what we have written is our representation of their representation and Tra's own representation of her life. A life history is not about facts, figures and objective truths. After all, our interviews with people are not police interrogations but people's recollections and remembrances, and memory is a delicate thing. We forget because of poor memory but we also forget because we choose to forget. The people we interviewed have a right to tell their version of the story. A life history is therefore people's interpretation of reality.

Writing life histories is emotionally fraught and communicatively complex. Although feminist research begins from the standpoint of women's experiences, as researchers interested in the lives of others, we are



cognizant to the importance of reflexivity in our practice. Our social location as writers is very relevant as our age, gender, ethnicity, and our own experiences colour our perceptions and perspectives. The interviewer is not a distant objective researcher, an investigative reporter or a prosecuting lawyer. It is a collaborative project between writers and the participants. As we march through life, we sort, categorize and file away our experiences and interpretations of life. The participant will also respond differently to our prompting. Alcoff put it very well when she said,

The rituals of speaking that involve the location of speaker and listeners affect whether a claim is taken as true, well-reasoned, compelling argument, or a significant idea. Thus how what is said gets heard depends on who says it, and who says it will affect the style and language in which it is stated, which will in turn affect its perceived significance (for specific hearers) (Alcoff, 1991: 13).

To remain true to the call for reflexivity, we will discuss our own position and experiences of this project.

## Cheng Sim speaks

I first met Dato Seri Tra in the 1980s. We met in numerous seminars/meetings/conferences concerning women and I was very impressed by her passion and sincerity in advancing the cause of women and the Ibans. She took great pains to clarify and correct misconceptions about the Iban *adat* of *ngayap* (courtship). She asked insightful questions and had a wealth of knowledge and experience on women's real life issues. As a young feminist newly returned from university at that time, I was very impressed by her. Everyone who knew her had enormous respect for Dato Seri Tra and my own encounters with her told me that their respect was not misplaced. Her petite and traditional appearance was beguiling because when she spoke, she was a fiery orator. Through the years, I learnt the rough sketch of her public life but it was her private life that intrigued me. What were the origins of such a Germanic surname? Who shaped her into such an Iban warrior, a fighter for the rights and dignity of her people?

One day, I casually mentioned to my Iban friend, Magaret Bedus that if I were to write a life history, it would be Tra's. The maternal grandmother of Magaret's husband was none other than Barbara Bay, Tra's mentor and good friend. As the years rolled by and other projects took precedence, Magaret would give me a nudge whenever Tra's name came up in conversation. An exasperated Magaret would say, "What are you waiting for? She is already 84!"

Serendipity was to dictate that this life history be written. Rokiah entered the scene. Professor Rokiah was an old friend and mentor in University Malaya (UM) where I did my Masters degree. We met again after many years in a seminar in Kuala Lumpur organized by the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development. Rokiah had retired from UM and was actively writing biographies. I do not know if she actually meant it when she said, "We should do a project together." The dice was cast. I roped her into this project. At this point, I have two confessions to make. I am a sociologist by training, not a historian. Secondly, I have never written a life history while Rokiah had several under her belt. Colleagues asked, "How are two people going to write one life?" Rokiah had an easy answer. "You write her private life and I will write her public life," she said. I was delighted as it was precisely her private life which interested me. And so it was, and that is how the book is organized. I wrote the first three chapters on Tra's private life and Rokiah wrote the other three chapters on her public life.

As the project draws to a close, I am glad to say that this has been a happy experience. Dato Seri Tra was happy to share with us, stories about her life and in seeking out her old associates, we were able to help her reconnect with her long lost friends. There were happy reunions as we surprised her with visitors who she thought she would not meet again. Others made visits of their own because of our interviews. After each chapter, I would read to Dato

Seri Tra what I had written. One day her eldest daughter, Cynthia who was present in all the readings remarked, “You have given me a different perspective of my mother. I have never thought of her in this way. I now understand her better.” Very often, when we look at a picture up close, we only see the brush strokes and not the beauty of the entire canvas and so it is with the people who are closest to us. In writing Dato Seri Tra’s life history, I have come to the conclusion that for the majority of us and Tra notwithstanding, it is ultimately the relationships with spouse, family and friends which matter in the end. When the spotlight dims and the accolades are over, it is our relationships with significant others which help us to reach resolution and peace in our sunset years. It has been a privilege to enter into Dato Seri Tra’s life in such an intimate way and I sincerely hope we have done justice to her life story.

### **Rokiah speaks**

I started writing biographies on women just before my retirement with a motto, “Women writing about women.” While teaching at the Gender Studies Programme at the University of Malaya and being constantly bombarded by my feminists colleagues that, “women’s contribution are not acknowledged” I decided that the solution would be for women to write about women! The first woman that came to my mind was Tun Dr Siti Hasmah, wife of the

then Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Muhamad. That was how I came up with the proposal and as they say the rest is history. She is to my mind a role model for a First Lady, forever gracious and circumspect.

Writing biographies is quite unlike writing a normal research project paper where most of the people you interview are usually just ‘informants or respondents’. My own experience is that in writing biographies, you tend to get very close to the person, knowing her or him at the personal level. More than that you get to know her or his family members and they also get to know their parents deeper. The usual remark has always been, “I never knew that part of her or him.” This stripping naked a person is not necessarily a pleasant one for the writer, sometimes. I have always taken the position that I do not write to smear a person’s reputation or to unnecessarily glamorizes her or him. I would try to be as objective as possible. I have a qualifier though, I must be comfortable with the subject, likewise I assume, so must the subject with the writer.

This brings to mind, my first meeting with Dato Seri Tra Zehnder. This is my first experience writing about a non-Malay, a Sarawakian patriot. I have had some experience with Sarawakians who were not too happy with people from Peninsula, post the Kalong Ningkan episode. Being a Malay is worse, as there was the perception that the Malays from Peninsula would dominate Sarawak after the formation of Malaysia. Furthermore, Tra is a Christian and there were some undercurrents between us,

both at the racial and religious fronts. I could sense that Tra was a bit hesitant and was not too comfortable at the first meeting. Later when she knew of my NGO work with National Council of Women's Organisation (NCWO) and the fact that I have written about the women she holds in high esteem - Tun Hatimah Hashim and Tan Sri Zaleha Ismail - she softened and became more relaxed during subsequent interviews.

As the famous line says, the journey is the reward. It is so true of writing biographies. Having written close to ten biographies now, I find it to be a very enriching yet humbling experience. These famous men and women that I interviewed gave me a totally different perspective of life. Truly it is in giving that you receive. This is one of the many lessons I learnt from these iconic leaders. They unselfishly gave their time, energy, ideas for the well being of others. It is not fame or wealth that they seek. They just want to make a difference so others can have a better future. That is the common thread running through these paragon men and women that I have written. I take the cue from them, I do not write for fame, I just want to document their great deeds so other leaders could emulate them. Some of the biographies that I have written should make great resource books for motivation courses as they are played by our own actors within our own socio-cultural milieu.

As to co-writing with Hew Cheng Sim, it is first impression that counts. I had the feeling that she would

make a good lecturer-academician when she was doing her Masters at the Department of Anthropology and Sociology, University of Malaya. Having written about women and men from Peninsula, I thought it would be a welcoming change to embark on a Sarawakian woman. She came up with an excellent choice in Tra Zehnder. I have no regrets. Hopefully many more luminaries from Sarawak will be written in the near future.

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In the Zehnder family, Dato Seri Tra has been the ever gracious subject of our life history project. We cannot thank her enough for her kindness and generosity in sharing her life story with us. As she tactfully remarked, “You’re very good at digging stories from me.” Her children Lawrence, Cynthia, Charles, Philip, Rosa and Zoe readily talked to us, but Cynthia deserves a special mention as she took great pains to sort out her mother’s personal documents for our perusal. Lawrence also deserves special thanks because as family historian, he provided the information on the Zehnders which were invaluable. Rosa supplied her parents’ wedding photograph and grandchildren Marianne and Eva contributed to their grandma’s story.

In Majlis Adat Istiadat, we would like to thank Nancy Anyau, personal assistant to the Director for helping us to make contact with the long lost friends of Dato Seri Tra Zehnder. Ms. Mary Dau and Mr. Philip Langgi also assisted us. In Sarakup, we would also like to thank Dato Sri Empiang Jabu, Datin Vera Nichol and Tra’s good friend and confidant, Puan Vida Bayang for talking to us and Puan Magaret Bedus who pushed this project. We are also grateful to Dato Sri Tra Zehnder’s former colleagues and friends, Dato Sri Edmund Langgu, Mr. Nicholas Bawin, Mr. Robert Sulis Ridu, Mr. Dunstan Melling, Mr. Ng Kai Ho, Dr. Peter Kedit and Puan Heidi Munan for giving us interviews. Mr. Nicholas Bawin and Ms. Imor Langgu also helped with the Iban sayings at the start of each chapter. In the midst of writing this book, Cheng Sim’s office was



burnt down and she lost everything including research notes on this project. If anyone had been inadvertently left out, it is with our deepest apologies. Finally, we would like to give the last word to Brian Roberts who said,

...in releasing the voices of the unheard into the public sphere, they enter into the vagaries of political processes whose consequences cannot be judged. Finally, biographical work is 'imaginative' – it is creative, image-laden, open, exploratory, reflexive, humanistic and political (2002: 172).

# 1

## ***When A Child Is Born***

*Sampi ke anak indu ke baru ada.  
(Blessing of a new born baby girl.)*



Boom! A gun was fired from the Fort. “Wake up, wake up.” Tra was shaken awake by her father. She rubbed her sleepy eyes, tumbled out of bed and put on her slippers. It was still dark outside, the air was crisp. She pulled her night clothes closer around her and made her way to the chicken coop. It was her chore to collect eggs every morning before school. Tra yawned as she stretched her short spindly arms into the coop. “That’s strange,” she thought as her hands felt something cold and leathery. A moment later, realization struck. Her eyes widened, all sleepiness gone, she let out a shout, “*ULAR! ULAR!*” the eggs splattered on the ground as she scampered barefoot back to the house. After that close encounter with the snake coiled around the eggs, Tra never had to collect eggs in the dark again.

Thus begin the story of Philomena Tra, born in Miri on the 25<sup>th</sup> October 1926 to Jemat and Sara, who were Ibans from the Sri Aman Division of Sarawak. Inting Jemat anak Ugek was from Tanjung and Sara anak Unang from Pedalai at Batang Ai. Jemat's mother was Jalica ak Buak who was a direct descendent of Langi, daughter of Iban warrior, Bau and his wife, Selangka from Seremat, Batang Ai. Bau was leader of the warring fraction that fought against the Saribas Iban. In a peace-making accord, Chandu, the eldest daughter of Bau and Selangka, was given to a Saribas warrior called Gallau in marriage. Thus, Tra comes from an illustrious head-hunting family. This was to become very useful to Tra later in life. Sergeant Jemat was a Sarawak Ranger stationed in Miri when Tra was born. She was born prematurely at seven months and was delivered by a midwife with her maternal grandmother in attendance. Her father was so delighted that he etched her date of birth onto a jar. Thus, her age is never in dispute. 1926 was the Year of the Tiger in the Chinese zodiac and this child was destined to roar for the Ibans.

If not for a serendipitous event, Tra would have remained in Miri and this story would have been very different. The details of the event are now murky, but a fire broke out and an officer would have died a fiery death if not for the swift action of brave Sergeant Jemat who threw himself onto the officer and rolled together with him in the sand. In this way, he distinguished himself to Commander Clark who promoted and transferred him

to Kuching. So Jemat and his family moved to Kuching when Tra was a few months old. A decade later, Jemat was to distinguished himself once again but more of this later. For now, a discussion of the historical development of Kuching where Tra lived and the Kuching Ibans is in order as it gives a context to Tra's early childhood and growing up years.

### **Kuching – Tra's hometown**

Kuching was established as a Malay village by a Bruneian prince some time between 1824 and 1830 (Lockard, 1987). Thus, before 1857, Kuching was a predominantly Malay bazaar with Malay Muslims constituting 80-90% of the population while the Chinese and Indians were small minorities. In 1856 there were only around 800 Chinese in and around Kuching (ibid). They were made up of various dialect groups like the Hokkiens, Teochius and Cantonese who were mainly traders and the Hakkas who were mostly artisans, labourers and market gardeners at that time. The Indians who arrived were Malabari Shia Muslims unlike the local Sunni Malay Muslims and were estimated to be several hundred in number in 1848 (ibid). However, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the migrant population swelled as Charles Brooke had a liberal immigration policy and land and agricultural incentives to boost economic development. Pepper and gambier cultivation, sago production and processing, mining and trade were some of

the economic opportunities which attracted Muslims from Java and Sumatra, Christian Hakka, Hindu Tamils, Sikhs and Japanese. Apart from the three main ethnic groups of Malays, Chinese and Indians, there was a small contingent of European officers in the service of the Rajah. Apart from these migrants, in the 1840s, a 60 door Sebuyau Iban longhouse was already in existence on Padungan Creek about a mile from the main bazaar (ibid). However, in 1858, a further eight families of Balau Ibans from Banting in Batang Lupar established a longhouse near the bazaar. They were allies of James Brooke who helped him to quell the rebellion by Bau Chinese goldminers the year before. When the conflict ended, James Brooke decided that as a deterrent and for protection, this community of Ibans should relocate to his capital. However, with population expansion, they were later resettled to Kampung Tabuan, a suburban area located 6.4 kilometers southeast of the bazaar (ibid).

Kuching was physically divided along ethnic lines with the Chinese and the Indian shops along the south bank of the Sarawak River, the Malay villages upriver from the Indian quarter with the Javanese, Boyanese and Minangkabaus moving across to the north bank downriver from the Astana. Kampung Surabaya, Gersik and Boyan still exist in the same location until today. The Ibans lived in Padungan and the European officers on the north bank around the Astana while European missionaries lived on the south bank inland from the shops which fronted the

river. Commerce concentrated on the south bank along the Sarawak River while the north bank remained rural in orientation – rubber tapping, fishing, wood-cutting. The only link between the north and the south bank was by small sampans known as *tambang*s, operated by the Malays. They are in use to this day. Tra lived on the north bank and that was how she travelled to school every day. The major landmarks on the north bank were the white washed brick Astana built in 1869 and the Fort Margherita built in 1879 and named after the Ranee Margaret (Charles Brooke's wife). Fort Margherita is strategically positioned to guard against approaching enemy boats. On the south bank was the one storey brick Court House built in 1874, the Square Tower (1879) facing the Sarawak River, the Round Tower (1886) and the Pavilion behind the Court House. Further south, the Sarawak Museum was completed by Charles Brooke in 1891 (Ho, 1998).

The ethnic and cultural diversity of Kuching was captured by visitors who gave colourful descriptions of Kuching street scenes. One account of Kuching in the 1850s included Ibans in their loin cloth 'bristling with swords and spears, with tigers' teeth inserted in the upper part of their ears, and huge black and white hornbill feathers rising from their heads' strolling in the bazaar (Payne, 1960 in Ho, 1998: 51). Another description of Kuching in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century gave a cosmopolitan picture of "pigtailed Chinese traders in blue silk jackets and wide black trousers; Malays in patterned jackets,

white trousers, gaily decorated sarongs and handkerchiefs around their heads, Europeans in white uniforms and helmets,... Moplan merchants in long white Indian tunics and sarong” (Lockard, 1987: 39).

By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Kuching was a thriving bazaar with a population of 20,000 (Lockard, 1987). The demographic profile of Kuching also changed dramatically. Rubber seeds had been introduced in the 1880s and a decade later, it replaced gambier as the golden crop. The rubber boom created by the First World War attracted thousands of Chinese into Sarawak to take up rubber planting. Government census taken in 1876 and 1939 showed that the Malay population fell from 69 per cent to 40 per cent while the Chinese population increased from 29 per cent to 55 per cent. In the course of six decades, Kuching went from being a Malay bazaar to a Chinese bazaar (ibid).

1906 saw the arrival of the telephone and street lighting. The following year, the first automobile made its appearance, a 10–12 hp Coventry Humber owned by the manager of Borneo Company. Not to be outdone, in the same year, the then Rajah Muda Charles Vyner Brooke rode the first motorcycle into town (Ho, 1998). A 16 kilometer railway line was also in service by 1915 but had to close in 1933 and was replaced by a more economical and convenient bus service. By the 1910s, there were two cinemas in town playing silent movies. In the 1920s, there was also a dance hall in the form of the Square Tower on

the bank of the Sarawak River which was formerly used as a fort and dungeon for prisoners. In the same year, the Charles Brooke Memorial was added in front of the Court House. The unveiling of the monument was momentous as Kuching saw its first seaplanes as three did a fly-past (ibid). By the time Tra was born in 1926, Kuching was booming. Kuching's treasury coffers had 3.44 million dollars in 1923 and the Satok Suspension Bridge, connecting the north and south bank, located west of the town centre opened the year she was born. By the 1930s, Kuching had three Chinese owned banks and the Chartered Bank. The General Post Office with its Grecian columns was built by the Third Rajah, Charles Vyner Brooke in 1931 and an airfield opened in 1937 (ibid).

### **Kuching Ibans**

As mentioned earlier, the Sebuyau Iban and the Balau Iban were the first to settle in Kuching. By the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Kuching Ibans had basically lost their rural cultural roots of shifting paddy cultivation and were no longer staying in their traditional longhouses but individual dwellings like the Malays. The significance of this on Tra's life will become apparent in the next chapter. According to Lockard (1987: 77) there were considerable intermarriages between the Ibans of Kampung Tabuan with the rural Sebuyau Ibans. Iban migrants from the Sri Aman and Sibiu Divisions also added to their numbers