UTAR NEW VILLAGE COMMUNITY PROJECT
REPORT

NAME OF NEW VILLAGE:

Batu Dua 峇都鲁亚

PERAK

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ABSTRACT

Rubber is the main industry in Batu Dua new village as most villagers own rubber small holding plantations which are at least five acres in size. Although there are not many entertainment outlets in Batu Dua, leisure activities are communal and take place in the community hall. The community hall is located behind a Datuk Kong shrine. The hall is a popular place where residents meet for gatherings and social activities such as yum cha (tea time) and a game of mahjong. The worship of the Datuk Kong deity is part of the larger phenomenon of Chinese popular religion in the Southeast Asia. The Datuk Kong shrine was set up in the village soon after the village was established. This was because several villages fell ill and villages feared that there were spiritual/supernatural forces involved. When the Datuk Kong shrine was built, villages claimed that evil spirit was warded of and villages were protected from deadly diseases. At Batu Dua, there is one Chinese primary school and one kindergarten which were established by the government. In the same area, there is also a private Chinese kindergarten near the main road of the village.
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We also wish to thank other UTAR staff and students such as Miss Yap, Chloe, Meng Yap, Jake and many others who have accompanied us on this trip, and we have greatly benefited from their generosity in sharing their knowledge with us, ranging from local politics to the best food in Kampar and Ipoh. Without them, our trip would not be so comfortable and delightful. It is certainly with a tinge of sadness that we have to part company with our new-found friends so soon. We have learnt so much from them, in a country which is so similar yet so different from ours, and there is still so much more to be learnt.

We also wish to express our appreciation to USP faculty and staff: Professor Albert Teo, for making this programme happen, teaching us the concepts of community assets mapping and supporting our efforts; Dr Andrew Conroe, for introducing us to methods of ethnographic study and accompanying us on our trip to the New Villages; Professor Wang Gungwu, for sharing with us the history of Malaysia and being an exemplar of lifelong learning with his curiosity about the New Villages; Mr Daniel Lee and Ms Sim Sor Hui for providing the crucial administrative support without which the programme would not run smoothly.

Last but not least, we would like to convey our tremendous gratefulness to residents of the New Villages we visited, namely, Bata Dua and Kuala Bikam. In both places, we met interesting characters who were extremely hospitable and generous in sharing
their life experiences with us. It is from them we learn the ‘lessons of life’ and 人情味. These people might live far and different from us, but we deeply respect their perseverance, culture and identity. This trip exposed our sheltered lives to their realities, which will never be obtained from a thousand journal articles. We dedicate this report to them. Any errors, inaccuracies or omissions are our sole responsibility.
## Contents

1. Introduction .......................................................... 5  
2. Methodology .......................................................... 8  
   a) Interviews and Conversations ................................. 8  
   b) Statistics, SCHOLARSHIP AND OTHER SOURCES ....... 9  
3. Study of Bata Dua .................................................. 10  
   a) Religion, Popular Worship and Authority ................. 10  
   b) Politics of Wedding ............................................ 18  
   c) Education ...................................................... 21  
   d) Racial Relations ................................................. 28  
   f) “Old Folks’ Village”, Nostalgia and Social Capital .... 31  
4. Community Assets Mapping .................................... 34  
5. Value of Studying New Villages and Future Areas for Study 41  
7. References ........................................................... 43
INTRODUCTION

This report takes a stab at an ethnographic study of Kampung Bata Dua as well as mapping its community assets. The title “Between Black and Blacker: The Forgotten New Villages of Malaysia” represents the group’s experiences in capturing and comprehending Bata Dua’s history, culture and identity. “Between black and blacker” was a metaphor used by Mr Shi, a former resident of Bata Dua whom we interviewed. The group found the metaphor appealing for two important reasons. Firstly, Mr Shi – who is also a Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) branch chairman – had explained that it is often easy to distinguish between “black” and “white”, with each colour having the having the typical connotations of superior and inferior, good and bad. However, given the contemporary politics of Malaysia polarised between the Barisan Nasional (BN) and Pakatan Rakyat (PR), wherein both parties offer nearly equally convincing arguments, he suggested the need for a discerning eye to differentiate both parties (i.e., the “black” and “blacker” arguments). Hence, this metaphor reveals his perspective of politics as a “black” arena of dubious choices in which the electorate ought to be critical.

Similarly, as undergraduates embarking on our first ethnographic study, we needed to have a discerning eye to gain a deeper understanding of the everyday experiences of Bata Dua villagers. The metaphor was thus also appealing and applicable to our own experiences in the village. For example, politics is often theatrical and confrontational on the national level, yet the everyday lives of villagers do not emulate it. Instead, politics is subtle and embedded in daily experiences, and possession of this discerning eye helped us to reveal one aspect of such dynamics in Bata Dua. Otherwise, it would be simplistic and naive to merely generalise the communities of Bata Dua and other New Villages, or subject them into forced dichotomies of “progress vs. backwardness”, for instance. Furthermore, it would be useful to remember we arrive at the New Villages with certain prejudices. We have to account for these prejudices in a fair manner, and strike a balance between completely avoiding our projections of values into the villagers’ lives, and trying to compare our cultures to illuminate fundamental experiences of villagers which they take for
grant. These learning points would be valuable for future USP students venturing into New Villages for the first time.

A brief introduction to New Villages will suffice here. New Villages are a product of the Malayan Emergency during the 1940s – 1950s, created by the British authorities to cut off support and flow of resources between the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) and Chinese rural squatters. Chinese rural squatters were forcibly resettled into these “New Villages” established all over Malaya, where they were subjected to strict regulations of movement, supervision and food rationing. The resulting discontent among the Chinese settlers led to the formation of the MCA to improve the conditions of the New Villages. With the end of the Malayan Emergency in 1960, the strict rules were lifted and New Villages continued their agrarian way of life. In recent decades, however, due to a lack of socio-economic opportunities there has been outward migration of youths from the villages to urban areas, leaving some New Villages in decline. It is within this larger context in which we interacted with villagers, many of them middle-aged.

Thus, the group entered Bata Dua with certain assumptions founded by personal experiences and available scholarship. As our objectives were to conduct an ethnographic study and map the community assets of the New Village, we assumed there was “something” out there yet to be recorded and understood from an academic point of view. As we wanted to map community assets, we assumed New Villages in general wanted economic and social development. This notion of development is supported by the federal government’s New Village Master Plan (2005 - 2015).

However, our early interactions with a few villagers proved our assumptions wrong. When queried on the village’s history, the Batu Dua headman dismissed it as “like any other New Village”, and an elderly resident told us to look at books already written and published. Indeed, recent scholarship on the New Villages has focused their social history in post-war Malaya/Malaysia (see Tan Teng Phee’s PhD dissertation A Social History of New Villages in Post-War Malaya/Malaysia). However, contemporary understanding of New Villages, especially in light of the
2008 general elections and in the context of larger developments in Malaysia, is lacking. Yet nearly a quarter of the Malaysian Chinese population continues to reside in New Villages, and in the state of Perak which we visited, some New Villages have become political hotbeds of contests between the BN and PR. For example, in Kualu Bikam, another New Village that we visited, there was evidence of the MCA gearing up for the general elections, which are expected to be called in March 2013. New Villages are not so “forgotten” after all, at least by the authorities.

As for community assets mapping, we did not find an “asset” waiting to be labelled as such. Theoretical definitions of assets dissolve in the midst of our fieldwork, because assets are inherently situated in the socio-economic interpretations of the New Villages. Without a deeper understanding of Bata Dua through conversations and observations, no “assets” could be identified, interpreted and be utilised.

Such dismantling of our assumptions did not hinder our goals, but helped us to better understand Bata Dua, by forcing us to contextualise our conversations and observations in the dynamics of the New Village and broader developments within Malaysia. Given the extremely limited amount of time we spent in Bata Dua and the limited number of contacts we made, it would be highly inappropriate for us to make an overarching argument on Bata Dua, or even to generalise its experiences to other New Villages. But as the opening line of this report suggests, we are attempting to “take a stab” at ethnographic study and community assets mapping. Thus, we wish to stake a tentative claim on Bata Dua, and perhaps other New Villages, that the metaphor “between black and blacker” is highly germane. Without a discerning eye, one would achieve little understanding beyond the facade of hard facts and statistics. That is this group’s main “takeaway” from the programme, and hopefully future USP students can gain similar experiences.
METHODOLOGY

a) Interviews and Conversations

The group visited Bata Dua for fieldwork between 11 and 13 December 2012. During this time we had contact with at least fifteen people, lasting from about 10 minutes for informal chats to about 2 hours for more proper interviews. These villagers include:

1. Mr Khoo, the appointed headman of Kampung Batu Dua
2. Mr Khoo’s wife
3. Mr Luo, one of Mr Khoo’s friends and a rubber plantation owner
4. Mr Leong, rubber estate co-ordinator and a volunteer at the local temple
5. Madam Chen, an elderly woman selling durians
6. Tang Meixin, a 6-year-old girl who is Madam Chen’s relative; she is of mixed ethnicity, with a Malaysian Chinese father and a Thai mother
7. Mr Tang, a village elder who personally experienced the New Village resettlement
8. Principal Liu, principal of Batu Dua’s sole primary school
9. Mr Khoo’s friend, who joined us during one of our meals and showed us his hand-made birdcages
10. Mr Shi, MCA branch chairman; nicknamed “Malaysia’s Deng Xiaoping” for his short stature and philosophy and experience in politics, which is similar to that of the Chinese leader
11. Mr Zhang, villager who was hosting a wedding dinner for his bride-to-be-daughter on 12 December
12. Mr Zhang’s friend, who was present at the wedding dinner
13. A group of retirees who were practising xiang-gong at the village park/garden when we visited on the evening of 12 December
14. Mr Chen, owner of one of the four sundry shops in Batu Dua
15. A Vietnamese mother who had brought her young son to the village park/garden to play at its playground when we visited on the evening of 12 December

Such conversations and interviews served to provide these individuals’ oral narratives, from which we obtained a large amount of material pertaining to their personal opinions and experiences of the various aspects of life in Batu Dua.

b) Statistics, SCHOLARSHIP AND OTHER SOURCES

The group relied on a year 2000 population census of Bata Dua for some basic statistics of the village, including its demographics, physical resources, community facilities and utilities, etc. We also looked at available scholarship to orientate us towards the New Village, its context and related issues; as well as to support the inferences and claims that we have made from the material gathered during our fieldwork. Some of such literature that is relevant to this report can be found in our references. In addition, some villagers showed us newspaper articles about Batu Dua, which we took note of.

Prior to the trip, the group also attended lectures by distinguished experts of various fields. Dr Andrew Conroe, an anthropologist, was invited to speak to us about his experiences and expertise in ethnographic fieldwork. Professor Albert Teo was invited to lecture on social entrepreneurship and community assets mapping. Professor Wang Gungwu, an academic who is Chairman of the East Asian Institute, National University of Singapore and also Chairman of UTAR International Advisory Council, was invited to share his knowledge of history on Malaysia.
STUDY OF BATA DUA

This section of the report covers the group’s attempts to do an ethnographic study of Batu Dua. We have decided to organise the information gathered in our fieldwork into six broad categories: religion and popular worship; politics as it is manifested in the villagers’ everyday life; the state of education in Batu Dua; race relations among the different ethnic groups present; the village economy; and the village community and social ties. We believe these categories can provide a basic yet comprehensive introduction to Batu Dua, to aid contemporary understanding of the New Village and its present state.

a) Religion, Popular Worship and Authority

Mythic Origins

In this section we will trace the origins of the sole “Datuk Kong” shrine in Bata Dua (Figure 1), its contemporary developments and future progress. The worship of the Datuk Kong deity is part of the larger phenomenon of Chinese popular religion in Southeast Asia, and more specifically, Malaysia (Tan 240). Chinese popular religion in this region is “diffused” and “syncretic” (Tan 242, 219). It is marked by an absence of a strong clergy upholding dogma, and lacks a well-formed ethical structure for its followers to conform to (Tan 242). It also borrows and incorporates deities from other religions, depending on their believed efficacy in responding to worshippers’ material and spiritual desires (Tan 242). Thus, the Datuk
Kong shrine in Bata Dua must be contextualised within this phenomenon of Chinese popular religion.

According to the village headman Mr Khoo and an elderly resident Mr Tang, the Datuk Kong shrine was set up soon after Bata Dua was established. Mr Tang explained that many fell ill and some were terrified by spirits when they first shifted into the New Village from their squatter settlements. The Datuk Kong shrine was thus established to protect the fledgling New Village from such diseases and spirits. On the other hand, Mr Khoo was quick to dismiss the reasons for the beginnings of the shrine as “superstitious”. Yet adopting such a modernist approach to diseases will deprive contemporary audiences of an understanding of the mentalité of the Chinese when they were forcibly resettled into the New Village. Our group speculates that the sudden change in living environment, coupled with strict British controls over movement and persistent suspicions of MCP supporters among the villagers, created a tensed atmosphere of anxiety and fear. This atmosphere and the adjustment to a new living environment might have led to worship of the Datuk Kong for psychological comfort and protection.
Interestingly, the Datuk Kong is said to be the spirit of a MCP member who was killed by the British, apparently near Bata Dua. The metamorphosis of the deceased MCP member into a Datuk Kong provokes some intriguing questions. Given that a Datuk Kong is worshipped for its spiritual protection, what qualities did the MCP member possess which allowed for his spiritual ascendance? The worship of a MCP member-turned-Datuk Kong in a New Village – a product of British attempts to quell the MCP revolt – raises a connection between British colonial domination and local resistance. Can the worship be seen as a form of subtle, spiritual resistance among the forcibly resettled villagers against British supervision over the New Village?

Unfortunately, these questions were not satisfactorily answered due to time and resource limitations. The origins of the Datuk Kong shrine remain shrouded until other evidence can be found.

Communal Space and Popular Worship

While Mr Khoo claimed that there is a lack of choices for leisure in Bata Dua, this did not seem to be the case from our observations. It seems that leisure activities in the New Village tend to be communal and public, instead of domesticated and private. According to Mr Leong (Figure 2), a rubber estate co-ordinator who has volunteered at the Datuk Kong shrine for over 20 years, the hall attached behind the shrine is used as a communal space for leisure activities. As the primary economic activity of Bata Dua is rubber tapping – which typically takes place in the early dawn to avoid the afternoon heat – many of the workers in the village have the afternoon to themselves. During this free time, then, they would gather in the shrine’s hall for social activities ranging from chit-chatting to yumcha (drinking and eating) and mah-jong (a kind of solitaire game). This is probably particularly so for the middle-aged population.
Anecdotes from Mr Khoo and Mr Leong further reiterate the shrine’s position as a site for communal and public entertainment in Batu Dua. In particular, they told us about celebrations of the Datuk Kong’s birthday. This takes place during the sixth month of the lunar calendar, and the festivities are spread out over three days. Operas will be staged in the evening, and interestingly these are sung by popular singers, instead of “traditional street opera” which the group initially assumed. These celebrations also attract non-Bata Dua residents, and unsurprisingly the activities create the largest crowds in Bata Dua than any other event.

The shrine as a space for leisure does not apply to just the adults; children often play on its grounds too. According to Mr Leong, he used to chase away children playing in the shrine during the evenings, but later on desisted because he thought the Datuk Kong might have a special connection with children. Hence, children continue to play in the shrine, marking it as an inclusive communal space for social activities.

Despite the trend of emigration from Bata Dua – wherein the population fell by half between 1991 and 2000 – and Mr Khoo himself labelling his New Village as a “老人村” (“old folks village”), the number of worshippers at the Datuk Kong shrine has in fact increased. Worshippers come from as far as Ipoh, the capital city of Perak; and in the past there were non-Chinese worshippers as well. This rising popularity of
the Datuk Kong is due to its believed spiritual potency (known as “灵” in Chinese). Mr Leong attested to this himself; having swept the shrine grounds daily for twenty years, he admitted feeling a sense of spiritual protection offered by the Datuk Kong in exchange for his devoutness. He emphasised that the Datuk Kong responds to such prayers for peace and stability, rather than for wealth. However, it seems neither can be neatly separated in prayers to the Datuk Kong. For example, an elderly woman, Madam Chen, had kindly prayed to the Datuk Kong for our well-being during our time in Batu Dua, but also got four numbers for us to bet in the lottery.

Popular worship at the Datuk Kong is firmly situated within the beliefs and practices of Chinese religion, in which worshippers are pragmatic in their selection of deities. As for the increasing popularity of the Datuk Kong in Bata Dua, the group is unable to make a claim based on existing materials. One could speculate that the appeal of the Datuk Kong in Bata Dua is more than just its believed “灵” – perhaps worshippers from urban areas like Ipoh are attracted to the shrine’s countryside location. The question of why this New Village in particular, however, remains unanswered.

**Architecture and Authority**

When the group arrived in the New Village, the shrine was undergoing additional construction works (Figure 3), drawing attention to the link between religious architecture and temporal authority. The increasing popularity of the Datuk Kong in Bata Dua has probably led to such physical enhancements of the shrine.
As can be seen from Figure 3, the proposed additions to the shrine include two major enhancements – the building of a wall to surround the shrine, and an arch for the entrance. This construction is illuminating for a few important reasons. First, the enhanced work required mobilisation of resources, and in this instance the shrine’s association (with its name on the arch) was fully capable of this by tapping on donations from businesses and individuals. One could speculate that this is possible due to the increasing popularity of the worship of the Datuk Kong. It is likely to have a degree of influence over worshippers as well.

Secondly, the building of the wall and arch will create spatial segregations in the shrine. Once completed, the wall will be an additional barrier to the shrine (Figure 4), and this can be interpreted as an imposition of spatial hierarchy between the residence of the Datuk Kong and its worshippers, which also symbolically reflects the enhanced status of the Datuk Kong with greater “灵”.
The construction of the arch (Figure 5) will create another spatial distinction between the Datuk Kong shrine and its worshippers, as the arch will become an
entrance in which worshippers will pass through to get to the shrine hall. In this way, the arch symbolically enhances the prestige of the Datuk Kong shrine.

In sum, the increasing popularity of the Datuk Kong has pointed towards a connection between architecture and authority, with the former reflecting and reinforcing the latter’s newly-gained influence over an increasing number of worshippers.
b) Politics of Wedding

As explained in the introduction, the metaphor “between black and blacker” suggests a need for a discerning eye to draw insights into the political dynamics of Bata Dua. On the national and state levels, Malaysian politics is increasingly polarised. Perak was narrowly won by the PR in the 2008 general elections, one of five states wrested by the opposition coalition. However, a few defections in 2009 led to the state returning to BN control. The BN and PR remains almost evenly split in the state.

Figure 6: Ruling and Opposition parties’ offices facing each other

In Batu Dua, interestingly, the branch offices of both the ruling and opposition parties lie along the main road and are directly opposite each other. However, overt expressions of political affiliations seem to be absent in Bata Dua. For example, in our conversation with him, Mr Leong clearly asserted his neutrality in the politics of Bata
Dua, even declaring that there is no division of factions or political cliques in the New Village.

However, even while there is an apparent lack of overt expressions of political affiliations, to claim that there are no political divisions at all is a questionable move. Our observations reveal that there seem to be more subtle, covert political expressions instead, manifested in everyday life as socio-cultural phenomena.

In one instance, the group had a chance encounter with a wedding celebration hosted by Mr Zhang for his bride-to-be daughter. During this time, we discovered Mr Zhang’s political affiliation with the opposition party and his antagonism with the headman Mr Khoo, who is a MCA appointee. For example, in our first encounter with Mr Zhang, we detected a sarcastic tone when he asked us, “Did you meet the older or younger headman?”, because it is obvious that we had met the younger and current one (Mr Khoo) since the older headman is deceased.

Mr Zhang also invited us to the wedding buffet that evening, where relatives from the extended family, friends and neighbours were present (Figure 7).

![Figure 7: Buffet dinner for the night before the actual marriage ceremony](image)

Later on, in a conversation with the headman’s wife, the group told her about the wedding dinner. Puzzled, she asked where it was held. When we informed her that Mr Zhang was the host of the dinner, she replied surreptitiously, “He is pro-
opposition, and [the headman] doesn’t like him; he thinks he is arrogant.” Furthermore, during dinner that evening with Mr Khoo, one of the restaurant staff subtly mentioned to him about the Zhang family’s on-going buffet dinner. The headman brushed it away by shaking his head. Such instances reveal that contrary to what Mr Leong claimed, there are tensions present among the villagers supporting different political parties.

Connecting these conversations and observations together allows us to make a claim that political affiliations in Batu Dua are manifested as socio-cultural expressions. Mr Zhang’s wedding celebration for his daughter is a semi-private/semi-public social gathering, evident from his expansive guest list and the holding of the celebration on a public road outside his house. Thus, his non-invite to Mr Khoo – headman of a supposedly close-knitted Batu Dua community with no divisions as claimed by Mr Leong – is a clear snub to the latter’s political position and authority as a MCA appointee. The wedding celebration became a subtle kind of political tool used by Mr Zhang to articulate his pro-opposition affiliation and discontent against the headman from the ruling party. Thus, it seems that socio-cultural phenomena like the wedding celebration can be politicised to become a display of political allegiances in Batu Dua.

Curiously, however, Mr Zhang had also invited Mr Shi, who is a MCA branch chairman. Perhaps the incident with the headman Mr Khoo might be one of personal animosity intermingled with political divisions. But at the same time, it reveals that Mr Zhang is capable of accommodating those on the other side of the political fence.

To conclude, even if political divisions in Batu Dua or other New Villages appear to be “unseen”, they are likely to manifest in everyday life as socio-cultural expressions, through simple yet important social events such as wedding celebrations.
c) Education

As is typical of most New Villages, Batu Dua is equipped with basic-level education facilities. There is one government-established Chinese primary school and kindergarten situated in the same compound, as well as a private Chinese kindergarten located near the main road of the village. We had the opportunity to speak with the principal of the primary school, Principal Liu (Figure 8); however, we did not have direct contact with persons affiliated with the two kindergartens. Our focus therefore was on the former. Here we realised that there are various problems facing the school; however, what seems to be central are not these problems but the personal relationships within the school instead.

Figure 8: At the gate of the primary school, after the interview with Principal Liu (second from right)

The Problematic State of Education in the Batu Dua Primary School

SJK (C) Kampung Baharu Batu Dua is a national-type primary school (Lim and Fong 102), with Chinese as the main medium of instruction. According to a map shown to us by the headman Mr. Khoo, the school compound takes up a considerably large proportion of Batu Dua’s land area, with a size drawn to be about equal that of 40 houses. At first blush, this might be a possible testament of the school’s significance to the village. Furthermore, a tour of the campus also showed us how
well-endowed with facilities the school was, which was a sentiment reiterated by Principal Liu herself. With a library, a courtyard, adequate classrooms, and a large hall well-equipped with a stage and furniture for events, we could see why Principal Liu named this Batu Dua primary school as the best in terms of physical facilities and resources, throughout her 31 years of teaching experience in several schools (Figures 9 -11).
However, it would be simplistic to paint a merely rosy picture here. During our chat with Principal Liu, it was revealed that there are actually various problems plaguing the school. For one, the school population is being shaped by the changing demographics of the village. Like most New Villages, Batu Dua is facing a continuous outflow of migrating youths to urban areas, due to a lack of suitable economic and social opportunities in the village. As a result, the students in the primary school are numbered at less than a hundred – a statistic consistent with that of many other village primary schools (Wen, par. 26). This small cohort size is accompanied by, ironically, an insufficient number of staff as well. Principal Liu praised her teachers’ dedication and ability repeatedly, but the truth is that they are
not staying long enough in the school. Many wish to return to their hometowns to teach (although the schools in their hometowns often lack teaching vacancies), and as a result there is a high turnover rate: the longest period a teacher has stayed in the Batu Dua primary school is six years. Furthermore, there seemed to be a lack of other school staff as well. Principal Liu herself is a jack of all trades, carrying out not only her duties as a principal, but also teaching, setting and marking exam papers, and doing various minor administrative tasks. Jokingly, she referred to herself not as a principal, but a “senior janitor” instead.

Academic performance is another point of concern for the Batu Dua primary school. Principal Liu informed us, with a tone of worry, that only two pupils achieved straight A’s in the recent year’s UPSR (Ujian Pencapaian Sekolah Rendah, or Primary Schooling Achievement Tests; a national examination that Malaysian students take in their final year of primary school education, before moving on to secondary school) (Figure 12). She also recounted her shock when she was first transferred to this school, for the level of academic standards were much lower than that of the urban schools which she had previously taught at. “By the second year,” she said in Mandarin, “I was numb [to it already].” Such a situation is perhaps not unique to Batu Dua; according to the New Village Master Plan Survey in 2002-2003, 48% of New Villages faced education-related issues including poor educational performance and inadequate educational facilities like classes and teachers (Lin and Fong 107).

![Score Board UPSR 2011 and 2012](image)

*Figure 12: Target-setting for students*
The aforementioned small cohort size is a contributing factor to the poor academic performance in the Batu Dua village school. With only a modest number of pupils, there is a lack of a strong, competitive academic culture. This is further exacerbated by an apparent absence of support from the parent community. Many parents, as Principal Liu explained, are ignorant of the need to encourage academic discipline even at home, and instead push all the responsibilities of education for the school to handle solely.

To say that the villagers do not care about education, however, would be an unfair assumption. During our visit to the campus (which took place during the December school holidays), tuition classes were being held, and the fact that many children were present suggest that parents still care enough about schoolwork to send their children to these extra classes. Another interesting point to note is that the private kindergarten has a long waiting list – despite the availability of vacancies in the public one – apparently because it has better teachers. This implies that there is some level of concern for academic performance and standard among the villagers. Furthermore, when we asked about the primary school’s extra-curricular activities, Principal Liu told us that the school’s parents’ association did fund-raising and supported such activities (Figure 13). In that sense, then, even if they did not emphasise good academic performance, the parents in the village at least encourage some form of holistic education.
The Human Factor

Academic achievement and culture are often indicators of the quality of a school, and indeed, Principal Liu’s worry about her students’ poor academic performance was palpable. The difficulty of amending this situation is understandable, given the various environmental and societal factors that contribute to it (e.g. the dwindling population of the New Village, the villagers’ attitude towards the academics, etc.), and Principal Liu reiterated many times that she had grown used and “numb” to the low level of academic standards in the Batu Dua primary school. When asked about her future plans for the school, she had no grand ideas, only to continue to better her students’ performance.

What stood out to us, however, was that Principal Liu never focused only on the problematic state of her school’s academics. Instead, she also emphasised and spoke fondly of the people. Her pupils are admittedly poor at their schoolwork, but they are innocent, warm and playful children. She cited the example of one time when her leg was injured, and the children asked her about it and helped carry her things
around for her. Urban school children, Principal Liu said pointedly, would never do that for you.

Principal Liu also expressed appreciation for her teachers and their dedication. She believes in allowing them to focus on their work and teach well, even if it meant that the principal had to become the “senior janitor”. Instead of lamenting on the amount of work that she has on her plate, however, Principal Liu holds on to her philosophy of “give and take”, and her belief in the importance of human relationships. It seems that she takes effort to establish good relationships with the teachers and students, and it is things like helping her teachers concentrate that contribute to the building of good ties. From her personal recounts, we gained the sense that the school was somewhat like a family. Principal Liu summed it up best when she said, “这里的人情味很浓。” (The closest English translation of this: “The human ties here are dense.”)

Thus, even though the school’s academic performance is troubling and could possibly have an impact on the future of the primary school, it seems that the people and interpersonal relationships are just as important and emphasised. We think that it is with this attitude that Principal Liu is able to look at the school with sentimentality, as she told us; even with the overwhelming amount of work she has to do and the lack of impressive achievements or accolades, she does not plan on leaving the school anytime soon.
d) Racial Relations

While Bata Dua was set up with a predominantly Chinese population, the population has now expanded to include other ethnic groups. Furthermore, with increasing mobility, there are also more opportunities for interactions between those in Batu Dua as well as those living in nearby villages (and towns), which comprise a variety of ethnic groups. Given the inevitable interactions with other races, the homogeneous Chinese population in the New Village will have to define a status for the relationship between themselves and other ethnic groups. In this section, we will examine the current racial relations between the Chinese and then major races in Malaysia. We will also examine how foreigners such as Vietnamese and Thai migrants live with the natives in Batu Dua.

From the limited accounts we gathered from the villagers, it seems that the Chinese maintain a cordial relationship with the Malays, Indians and Orang Asli. While there are no clear indications of integration between these ethnic groups, it can be said that they can coexist with each other. According to the village headman, as well as the Perak Census, almost all of the residents in Batu Dua are Chinese.

While the residents in the village are predominantly Chinese, we witnessed the presence of other ethnic groups, in particular Malays, in the area. At around 6pm in the evening, we witnessed a group of Malay youths ambling around the village’s garden. Upon further enquiry with the village headman, he explained that while Malays do not live within the village, it is common for Malays to visit the gardens for leisure activities. He added that the Malays will sometimes stay up till 2 or 3 am in the morning. Also, when probed further about the villager’s relationship with the Malays, the village headman recalled an incident where a local Chinese villager got into a fight with a group of Malay from a neighboring village over alleged damage caused by the Chinese to a Malay’s motorcycle. He recalled that the group of thirty or so Malays pursued the Chinese villager all the way until his house as the Chinese sought refuge under him. However, as the Malays approached, the village headman offered to settle the damages done to the motorcycle in return for leaving the Chinese
alone. The Malay group obliged and did not pursue the matter. From this incident, we can deduce that there is perhaps understanding respect between the malays and the chinese. While the Chinese and Malay still congregate along their racial lines, they do not begin to utilize these factions as a means to generate conflict. Instead, we witnessed that conflict is mitigated by the willingness of the Malays to cooperate with the Chinese representative. While

Interactions with Indians remain rare, with a sole Indian restaurant representing the presence of Indians in the village. The Indians in the restaurant seems to get along well with the Chinese as the customers of the restaurant is almost exclusively Chinese during lunch and tea time. The Indian in the restaurant has also picked up bit and pieces of Hokkien for them to be able to communicate to the Chinese.

For the Aborigines or orang asli, interactions remain rare due to the isolated lifestyle that they lead. The Orang Asli do not physically live in the village. According to the villagers, they will occasionally bring their produce to the village to sell. Also, in our interview with one of the owner of the provision shop, we gathered that he married an Orang Asli. Other than that, there remains few opportunities for interaction between the Orang Asli and the Chinese.

Besides interracial interactions, we have also witnessed the presence of marriages between locals and foreigners. In our interactions with Madam Chen, who was selling durian along the main road of the village, we gather that her son married a woman from Thailand. From our conversations with an elderly in the village, we also understand that brides from Vietnam can be ‘purchased’ at a sum of RM 16 000. According the the elder, most of the money paid will go to agents in Malaysia and Vietnam and only a limited proportion of the money reaches the hand of the Vietnamese woman (or her family). We also gathered from other villagers that Mr Luo’s encounter with a woman from China was not particularly well received. While the villagers believe that Mr Luo is a gentleman and will not do anything wrong, the villagers seem to enjoy mocking Mr Luo on his encounter with the Chinese woman.
Perhaps it is just for joking purposes given Mr Luo’s old age, but there is also a possibility that the Chinese from China are viewed differently from Chinese from Malaysia. Will the treatment be the same for a local Chinese. Perhaps there is a need for this issue to be studied further.

With contact with other ethnic groups and members of other nationalities seemingly inevitable, we have witnessed that the villagers have grown to be tolerant if not comfortable with such interactions. While assimilation may not exactly be the case, we begin to witness some form of relationship being built between along racial lines.
f) “Old Folks’ Village”, Nostalgia and Social Capital

This is Home

One recurring theme which the group noted in its conversations with residents of the New Village is the sense of kinship and rootedness they felt for Bata Dua. On the one hand, it seems villagers like to debase their hometown. For example, the headman Mr Khoo dismisses his own New Village, “新村变成老人村了!” or “New Village has become ‘old folks’ village’!” However, on the other hand, when asked whether he had been here all his life, he admitted he used to work outside Batu Dua, but returned because “This is my home”.

This self-debasement and the recognition of Bata Dua as ‘home’ seem incompatible. While claiming his hometown as a place where “there is nothing to do”, it is curious to the group, as outsiders, to see the headman and his friends engaging in banter on a range of issues, from wild-boar hunting to bird-singing competitions. The group did not actually see these activities happening, but it can be observed the headman and his friends had experiences of doing these, yet strangely they deny their hometown as having ‘things’ to do. How should the group explain such a phenomenon?

![Figure 14: The award-winning landscape garden in Bata Dua](image)
The group speculates that this incompatibility can be explained because the villagers have adopted urbanites’ value system. For example, in conversations with the group, upon knowing that the group is from Singapore, some of them would go on to compare rural and urban life. The villagers see cities as having higher crime rates, faster and more stressed pace of life, and even the behaviour of students seem to be different. Principal Liu explains her students in a city school were different from
those in Bata Dua; and she seems to prefer the latter. However, crime rates, stressed or faster pace of life, behaviour of children and leisure activities are not just unique occurrences of cities. But by comparing these few areas of life, a distinction between urban and rural areas is created, with the latter standing out in better light. Thus, even as the villagers living in ‘rural’ areas adopt the ‘urban’ value system in keeping track of macro statistics such as crime rates, pace of life, presence of entertainment, they reveal a sense of belonging by attaching themselves to their home; to the extent of debasing their home, for example, by dismissing it to lack leisure activities.

“The human ties here are dense” or “人情味”

Social capital can be understood as “network of associations, activities, or relations that bind people together as a community via certain norms and psychological capacities, notably trust, which are essential for civil society and productive of future collective action or goods, in the manner of other forms of capital” (Farr 9). This can be interpreted from anecdotes shared by informants in Bata Dua.

For example, even though Principal Liu complained about the poor academic performance of her students, she highlighted the outpouring of support from alumni, parent-teacher association and neighbours whenever the school has major events. They would also raise funds for school activities. Principal Liu also loved the environment in Bata Dua, praising its people for being warm-hearted and receptive of her, despite her being an outsider.

In the group’s conversations with people in Bata Dua, the theme “人情味” kept recurring, and it seems to be somewhat similar to the meaning of ‘social capital’. The villagers trust one another and this trust is mutually reciprocated. Social capital seems to be very strong in Bata Dua, shaping the sense of nostalgia and sentiment which people feel for the New Village.
4. COMMUNITY ASSETS MAPPING

Global Economy and Trends
- Malaysia is connected to the global economy and influenced by global trends affecting all aspects of life
- The prices of rubber and agriculture produce are highly dependent on global market conditions
- Globalization has also resulted in mobility of people, goods and ideas which have penetrated the New Villages

Malaysia Politics, Economy and Society
- Presently, Malaysian politics is polarized between the BN and PR with no predictable outcomes in the coming 2013 general elections
- Despite the rhetoric of 1Malaysia, the bumiputera policy seems likely to continue
- Political and ethnic divisions might deepen after the next general elections
- While New Villages are predominantly Chinese, their political allegiances are not uniform, and any changes at the national level will inevitably spill into New Villages

Perak Politics, Economy and Society
- Perak will be highly contested in the coming 2013 general elections
- If the PR takes over the state government, New Villages will be affected, as evident during the brief tenure of the PR government between 2008 and 2009

Batu Dua Priorities
1. Economic development; 2. Preservation of Culture and Identity

Economic development
1. Physical resources
2. Knowledge & Expertise

Preservation of Lifestyle
1. Interpersonal relationships
2. Shared spaces and activities

As mentioned in the introduction, our ethnographic study of Batu Dua is accompanied by our other objective of mapping the village’s assets. Asset-mapping is
a way of contributing to community development that is potentially meaningful and impactful, serving to promote community solidarity (for example, through shared norms and a common identity) as well as individuals’ agency (i.e. people’s capacity to order their own world and live according to their own meaning systems). It is done by identifying and taking stock of assets and resources that are available to a specific community. As opposed to the more traditional emphasis on deficits and “needs”, the asset-mapping perspective instead focuses on resources that are currently present in the community, and stresses local self-determination and control (Michigan State University 1-2). This section of the report will outline two apparent goals of the Batu Dua villagers, and map the potential assets that could possibly help attain those goals, particularly within the current socio-economic context of the village.

**Economic Development**

From our conversations and interviews with the village folk over the two days of fieldwork, the group has inferred and extrapolated two probable goals of Batu Dua.

The first is some form of economic development in the village. There are already government-initiated proposals in place for this, particularly under the New Village Master Plan. This plan seeks to integrate New Villages within the mainstream of the nation, so as to work towards a developed Malaysia in line with Vision 2020 (Lim and Fong 161). One branch of the plan’s schemes focuses on developing the New Villages’ economies. For instance, the concept of “One Village One Specialty” has been promoted, so as to take advantage of and capitalise on the economic niches of the different New Villages. Another strategy is to give support to the agricultural industry, by recognising villages with exemplary agricultural products and assisting them to increase yield and productivity (Lim and Fong 161).
The reality is not so straightforward, however. Mr. Luo told us that indeed, the authorities had attempted to expand the village’s agricultural capacity, for example by giving them free plant seedlings to experiment with. But he lamented that such a move was risky for many farmers, simply because they never knew if their experimental attempts would be a success. Failure would mean not only wasted time and effort, but also a great loss of income. But Mr. Luo did second the notion of economic development, at least for his own business. Throughout our two days in Batu Dua, he often discussed with our student guide Si Nan on ways to increase yield and profit. A particularly memorable conversation between them involved the possibility of cultivating 鸡肉菇, which is apparently a very profitable type of mushroom.

We have identified some possible assets within Batu Dua which could serve to promote such economic development. For one, the village has a considerable amount of physical resources. With rubber being the main industry in the village, most of the villagers own rubber plantations located nearby, which as mentioned earlier are at least five acres in size. This means that the Batu Dua residents cumulatively possess a large amount of land. There are also two rivers situated within the village itself. Although both have been polluted and drained by the development of industries near Batu Dua, it might be possible to restore them so that they can be better utilised.

Another valuable asset in Batu Dua is the great expertise that many of the villagers have. One area of expertise is, of course, agriculture and rubber tapping, the mainstays of the village economy. Mr. Luo, for instance, could explain with ease the processes of rubber production, and in his many discussions with Si Nan it was revealed that he was well-versed in the domain of agriculture as well. In fact, this should not be surprising; given that they have personal first-hand experience with their work, it is these farmers and rubber plantation workers who would be most knowledgeable of these areas. Any policy or strategy to develop Batu Dua’s economy should thus tap into this wealth of practical knowledge in order to formulate interventions that can actually work on the ground.
Knowledge and skill could also be found in other areas of village life. For example, during one dinner we were introduced to one of Mr. Khoo’s friends, who reared birds as a hobby and also hand-made the cages for the birds. We had the opportunity to take a look at some of these bird cages, and were highly impressed by their quality and exquisiteness. In addition, he shared with us some of the finer details of bird-rearing, including his special way of capturing new birds by using previously captured birds as bait. Such knowledge and skill is indeed uncommon and interesting. It is possible that there are many other such special abilities among the villagers that are still hidden, and Batu Dua could have a great repository of talent and skill that can be utilised.

It is important to note that this is despite the generally low level of educational attainment among the villagers, especially among the older folk. Instead, this impressive amount of knowledge and experience has been gained through going through the motions of life and weathering its challenges. This goes to show that formal education and paper qualifications are not the only way of accumulating knowledge and skill, and proving one’s wisdom.

**Maintenance and Status Quo**

The second priority we identified is rather opposed to the first (of economic development), because instead of progress, it deals with preserving the status quo. The group felt that a common sentiment which was reiterated throughout different interviews with different village residents, was one of “maintenance” - the want of retaining their current lifestyles and relationships in the village, and to continue with the here and now. This was the general theme of the answers given to us by Mr. Khoo and Principal Liu, when we asked them about their plans for the future of the village and the primary school respectively. Principal Liu, for instance, intends to stay on at the school as principal until she retires, even though she could possibly have other opportunities elsewhere outside Batu Dua, as she has had in the past.
In a way, this want of maintenance suggests a sense of contentment with the current state of things. As earlier mentioned, villagers we spoke to often debased the village, saying things like there is nothing much to do around the place, and that Batu Dua is like any other New Village and nothing special. Yet such debasement is also diluted by some of what we have observed and heard. For example, Mr. Khoo himself used to work outside the village, but came back because “it is [his] home”. This was the same case with a sundry shop owner whom we chatted with. She used to work in a city, but came home to Batu Dua with her family about six years ago as she found urban life too fast-paced. In the city, she claimed, there are 3 steps for every 2 steps in the New Village. Other comparisons with urban/city life also revealed the villagers’ appreciation of their home. Principal Liu’s comparison of village children and urban children, and how the former would take care of you while the latter would not, is a good example. Thus, these instances imply that the villagers actually do see value in their home and is tied to it. Certainly, their ‘negative’ perceptions and debasement of Batu Dua may be true to some extent; however, it does not seem that this is particularly problematic to them. Instead, it is possibly the community life, people and spirit in Batu Dua that they treasure and wish to conserve.

In this respect then, Batu Dua is rich in assets. Firstly, there are many strong ties and good interpersonal relationships among the villagers. This is evident from our observations during the two days. During our conversations with Mr. Khoo, for example, many of his friends often came over to sit in and join us, and from the interactions and banter Mr. Khoo had with his friends, one could sense the solidity and closeness of the friendships between them. In fact it was in this way that we were
introduced to Mr. Luo. Mr. Luo often joked that Mr. Khoo was born with a “金钥匙” (literally, a “golden key”, which is a metaphor for well-off family and background), whereas he himself had a 生锈的钥匙 (a “rusty key”, meaning a relatively poorer and tougher life). Despite these very different backgrounds however, their close friendship was palpable. The wedding dinner of Mr. Zhang’s daughter, which we witnessed, was also an explicit demonstration of kinship and friendship ties in the village. It was a big and noisy affair, with members of the extended family and friends invited and sharing the joy together. According to Mr. Zhang’s brother, the extended family and friends are also involved in the wedding preparations, making it a very cohesive event and an opportunity for bonding. The personal relationships extend past racial boundaries as well, and we saw an Indian family friend present at this traditionally Chinese wedding. Such strong ties and good interpersonal relationships are certainly valuable and an asset for several reasons. For one, they serve as a form of social capital (as described in the section Community Life and Spirit) to promote harmony and trust among the villagers. On a more practical level, this can facilitate “future collective action or goods” (Farr 9), such as coordinating village effort for a particular initiative or scheme. On an emotional level, such social capital can help provide support and motivation for individual villagers. This can enhance their problem-solving capacity for times of distress. Once again Principal Liu’s statement, “这里的人情味很浓。” is relevant – the dense human ties here in Batu Dua are a valuable asset that, as has been shown, the people themselves treasure and want to maintain.
Secondly, there are shared spaces and activities among the villagers. Community spaces like the Datuk Gong temple, the award-winning garden and playground, as well as the schools, allow residents to come together and interact. One evening we were there, for example, we witnessed a number of mothers who had brought their young children to the playground. One of the mothers told us that they were neighbours with the other family, and they bring their children there to play almost everyday. We were also told that singing is a favourite past-time in Batu Dua, and some villagers even join local singing competitions and go on to win trophies. These shared spaces and activities form an important part of the villagers’ way of life. Despite them claiming that Batu Dua has nothing much to do, the presence of such common places and activities show that this is not the case. Their experiences and time with these spaces and activities help them to create memories and relationships with others, thus contributing to their contentment with their present lifestyles. As Principal Liu said, for example, she feels an overall sense of sentimentality towards the primary school.
VALUE OF STUDYING NEW VILLAGES AND FUTURE AREAS FOR STUDY

The value of studying New Villages

New Villages are conjunctions between the past and future. They were shaped by the Malayan Emergency and colonial policies; then Malaysian national policies; and contemporary developments will inevitably affect the directions and nature of the New Villages. The nearly homogeneous Chinese population is also changing, and in the New Village we visited, there is a trend of inter-ethnic and –national marriage i.e. Orang Asli, Vietnamese, Thai, PRC Chinese. These mixed marriages and families will bring greater diversity to the New Village and change the experiences of its inhabitants. Even as New Villages might become “old folks’ villages”, these are also places of opportunities – places for retirement or tourism, for instance. While New Villages are artificial creations, the villagers’ later experiences, problems and future are authentic and connected to the rest of the world in multiple levels, from political-administrative levels i.e. state, national, global to changing socio-economic trends.

What about the New Villages’ relevance in the present? Some of them are political hotbeds, while others continue their agrarian way of life. New Villages are unlikely to disappear, but they have become objects of nostalgia for the Chinese population in Malaysia, especially those who shifted from New Villages to urban areas. All these mean that there is a need to document and understand the New Villages, so as to gain greater insights into the present.

Future areas of study

Due to time limitations, there are some areas which the group is unable to study in detail. Future USP participants might consider these themes.

1. Gender: all village headmen are male, and it would be interesting to understand how women participate in village politics. Furthermore, the group
did not have the opportunity to meet female workers. Instead of using a patriarchal lens to examine the New Village, it might be more useful to see it via gender complementary or gender differentiation. The theme of gender remains to be investigated.

2. Children/Youths: how is growing up in a contemporary New Village like? With the penetration of Internet, how has it influenced their lives?

3. Trend of inter-ethnic and inter-national marriages: how is the outcome like? How is their mixed culture?

4. Religion and popular worship: there is increasing popularity of the Datuk Kong in Bata Dua. Why? How has it changed?

This is not an exhaustive list, but research in these areas will lend to deeper analysis of New Villages.
REFERENCES


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