CHINESE WOMEN
THEIR MALAYSIAN JOURNEY

COMPILED & EDITED BY NEIL KHOR
WITH A FOREWORD BY DATO' SRI DR. NG YEN YEN
The Chinese community of Sabah began with the colonial administration's recruitment of labourers and settlers for the state. The North Borneo Company (commonly known as Chartered Company due to the Royal Charter granted in 1881) administration began to recruit Chinese labourers, capital and settlers almost immediately after it acquired the territory from the Brunei and Sulu Sultanates in 1882. They wanted to utilise the Chinese to develop the various sectors of the state's economy and to help to open up the land. Chinese migrants came from the various dialect groups of southern China; the largest group were the Hakkas who eventually made up 60% of the state's Chinese population. Like their counterparts in other parts of Malaysia, most of the early Chinese in Sabah were males. This had a lot to do with the manner these Chinese were recruited; most were brought in to work as indentured workers in the various plantations. As a result, there is little evidence of a sizeable female Chinese population.

In Sandakan, the existence of over 80 very glamorous and exotic female names engraved in a tablet commemorating those who donated money for the renovation of the San Sheng Gung Temple in 1887 is a reflection of the Chinese society in those days when the demand for songstresses or even prostitutes was great for a Chinese male population who were mainly labourers working in the various plantations. Even though other classes of Chinese, especially the traders and the settlers, brought their wives and families to the state, the ratio of females to males was still negligible. Even in the 1920s, the ratio was still three women to five men.

The changing pattern of Chinese migration through the introduction of the various immigration schemes had a lasting impact on the Chinese female: male ratio in the state. Schemes arranged by the North Borneo Company administration and Christian missionary societies such as the Basel mission saw an increase in the number of Chinese women. The Free Passage scheme (1921–1941) also helped bring many Chinese women and families from China and Hong Kong at the expense of the State. Many Chinese settlers took the opportunity to bring their families to Sabah and this contributed significantly to the increase in the number of Chinese women in the state. As most of the settlers were Hakka, the number of this dialect group also increased significantly to the point of being the largest dialect group in Sabah.

As the Chinese community continued to grow, societal and educational institutions were organised. Education