

Ulasan Buku / *Book Review*

Tra Zehnder – Iban Woman Patriot of Sarawak by Hew Cheng Sim and Rokiah Talib, Kuching: Universiti Malaysia Sarawak Press, 2011.

Tra Zehnder – Iban Woman Patriot of Sarawak represents a worthy effort to document a female public personality in Sarawak. As noted by the authors in their preface, the biography is ‘the first of its kind to be written about an Iban woman leader in Sarawak’ (p.i). Divided broadly into two parts, the easy-reading book presents the private life of Tra Zehnder (1926-2011) in three chapters followed by two more on her public roles in her community, and politics. The short concluding chapter sums up the overall impression of the authors on Tra’s perspective of her own life.

The rewarding thing in reading the book is to get a vivid sense of who Tra was as a person. The authors managed to portray Tra’s feisty personality by describing how Tra felt and experienced some of her significant life events: the love and hope of her father in her when he brought her to enrol in St. Mary’s School; how a teenage, urbanised Tra felt as a misfit taking refuge from Japanese Occupation in her grandmother’s Iban longhouse community; how Tra’s first ‘shock encounter’ with her Eurasian mother-in-law reinforced her determination to work for the uplift of her community. In the chapters on her public engagements, her other aspects of personality come through: her humility, ability to lead in team work, and her dedication to serving her community. The powerlessness and frustration felt by Tra during her active engagement in party politics illustrates perhaps the reality of Dayak politics and the self-serving nature of the top Dayak male leadership, but also the subordinate role of women’s wing in party politics. Hers was also a period during which, following the Federal intervention, Dayak politicians became subordinate to

a Muslim Melanau dynastic family in Sarawak state politics, shaping deeply her Iban ethnic identity. Tra’s political life, while not without errors of judgement or regrets, is a story of how she conscientiously performed her duties in the successive positions accorded her and responsibilities entrusted to her, rather than herself seeking the prestige in these positions. The structural constraints which posed a limit on her agency is evident, but not on her sense of honour and personal integrity.

The authors were upfront with regards to the vantage point from which they told the story of Tra, acknowledging that ‘what we have written is our representation of their (her family and social circle’s) representation and Tra’s own representation of her life.’ (p.ii) This is reflected in their sources of information on Tra, which was through a series of interviews with her and her social circle of former colleagues and friends. Tra’s critiques and detractors (if there are any) may think otherwise of what she did, but the authors explain from the outset that the book is to let the protagonist and those who loved her ‘to tell their version of the story’.

Reading the biography is a quick journey through a reconstructed world traversed by Tra, a *petite* Iban woman who lived through Sarawak’s progression to modernity, straddling the White Rajah’s rule and the ethnic politics of a nation-state. The book is a window to the culturally diverse social life of an urbanised Iban middle class family at the beginning of the 21st century, and enriched our much deficient knowledge of women’s involvement in Sarawak politics.

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