

Book Review/*Ulasan Buku*

The Chinese in Malaysia by Lee Kam Heng & Tan Chee Beng (eds.) 2000. Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 418 pp. Reviewed by Phua Kai Lit.

This book is an edited collection of chapters by various authors dealing with different aspects of the Malaysian community called the 'Chinese'. Apparently, it is the first English-language book-length study of Malaysians of Chinese ancestry since Victor Purcell's classic book entitled *The Chinese in Malaya*. Thus, it is a timely and welcome addition to scholarship on the Malaysian Chinese.

Nowadays, ethnicity (or 'race' as it is popularly known in Malaysia) is widely regarded by social scientists as a socially constructed phenomenon that can come into being, evolve over time and even disappear completely. For example, an 'Indian' identity has emerged in Malaysia and this identity is commonly and even officially ascribed to groups as diverse as the Tamils, Malayalees, Gujaratis, Bengalis, Punjabis, Singhalese and so on. A 'Peranakan Chinese' identity emerged in Penang, Melaka and Singapore in the past and it is slowly disappearing as the Peranakan Chinese become re-sinicized and start merging back into the dominant 'Chinese' mainstream. Among the Malays, ethnic identities such as those of the 'Bugis', 'Mandailing' and so on have practically disappeared and it is uncommon for Malaysian Malays to describe themselves as such today.

It is commonly known (even among Malaysian Malays and Malaysian Indians) that the 'Malaysian Chinese' are actually a heterogeneous group made up largely of descendants of immigrants from various parts of China during the days of the Ching Dynasty and Republican China. Thus, it is well known that the Chinese community is made up of various dialect groups such as the Hokkien, the Hakka, the Cantonese, the Teochew, the Hainanese, the Hokchiu and so on who have intermarried extensively with each other. What is less commonly known is that just a few decades ago, enmity between some of these dialect groups was significant and there were even 'race riots' and other outbreaks of violence between some of the dialect groups. The Hainanese were looked down upon and subjected to 'ethnic slurs' from the other Chinese dialect groups. Also, it was not unknown for Cantonese parents to object strongly when their son or daughter expressed a desire to 'intermarry' with a Hakka. The Peranakan Chinese, who spoke either a Malay *patois* or English as their first language, considered themselves to be socially superior to the other immigrant Chinese during the colonial era and were resented in return. There was also the division between Mandarin-educated and English-educated Chinese. Today, all these have largely disappeared and a pan-Malaysian 'Chinese' identity has emerged.

One major contributing factor to the emergence of an imagined pan-Malaysian 'Chinese' identity is, of course, the Chinese language schools that taught and continue to teach their students through the medium of Mandarin Chinese (a Northern Chinese dialect which is actually foreign to most Southern Chinese such as those who migrated to colonial Malaya). Tan Liok Ee's chapter on Chinese schools in Malaysia underlines their importance in maintaining Chinese 'cultural resilience'.

Francis Loh Kok Wah's chapter on Chinese 'New Villages' (created during the period of Communist insurgency called the 'Emergency' from 1948 to 1960 to separate the insurgents from their rural supporters) also notes how these ethnic enclaves have contributed to a heightened sense of 'Chinese' identity. With the defeat of the radical Chinese Left, ethnic Chinese politics today is played out largely within and between centrist and moderate right Chinese-based political parties such as the Democratic Action Party (DAP), the Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia (Gerakan), the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and the Sarawak United People's Party (SUPP).

Other chapters in the book deal with the Chinese contribution to the Malaysian economy, demographic changes, the rise and demise of Chinese labour activism, cultural issues and the Chinese in East Malaysia.

In contrast to the highly assimilated Chinese in neighbouring countries such as Thailand and the Philippines, it can be safely argued that the Chinese in Malaysia will continue to retain a highly developed sense of distinct ethnic identity for the following reasons:

1. Their large numbers in relation to the total Malaysian population
2. Religious barriers to intermarriage with the Malay Muslim majority (there is significant intermarriage between Chinese and non-Muslim Bumiputera such as the Kadazan in East Malaysia)
3. The continued existence of Chinese language schools
4. Perceptions that affirmative action programmes designed to reduce inter-ethnic disparities in educational and occupational attainment are zero-sum games

Thus, the management of ethnic tensions and maintenance of tranquil ethnic relations (especially between the Malays and the Chinese) will remain a major challenge to all Malaysians of goodwill for the foreseeable future.

One major omission is perhaps the lack of a chapter dealing in-depth with changes in the (traditionally low) socio-economic status of Chinese women in colonial and independent Malaysia over time. Another chapter on Malaysian

Chinese residing overseas would also be very useful. Nevertheless, this book is a high quality addition to scholarly studies of Malaysians of Chinese ancestry.

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