

The Chinese in Malaysia

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Foreword

THIS volume of 14 essays is the first book on the Chinese in Malaysia to be written in English by local scholars of Chinese descent. Only 3 of the 14 contributors no longer reside in Malaysia, but all have been educated and have worked in the country for varying periods of their lives. To say that this is a first may seem strange since there have been many studies on the Chinese in modern and contemporary Malaysia and many are written by Chinese scholars. But there has not been any work *in English* that is wholly about the Chinese since the study published by Victor Purcell in 1948. This fact deserves a brief comment.

The various groups of Chinese in the different parts of British Malaya had, for the past century and a half, attracted attention from traders, travellers, and colonial officials of many nationalities, and most of all from Chinese writers themselves. The outside world, however, is more familiar with the writings of the former group of writers because most of them had published in English, while most Chinese had written largely in Chinese for their own audiences. In any case, no systematic book on the Chinese in Malaya as a whole appeared in either English or Chinese until Purcell's *The Chinese in Malaya*. That was soon after the end of the Second World War, when serious research began to be done on Chinese sojourners or emigrants, first in South-East Asia, and then in North America and elsewhere.

There are many reasons for this growth in interest in the Chinese in South-East Asia. New indigenous nationalisms were emerging, communism was victorious in China, and there was fear that decolonization by Western powers would leave a vacuum for China and international communism to fill. All these posed serious problems of nation-building to local political leaders, bureaucrats, and military experts. The government in China had for decades been speaking of Nanyang Chinese as a common body of their compatriots. The new leaders on the Chinese mainland were expected to continue to do so. This idea of Nanyang was focused on the archipelago region centred on the Malay Peninsula and the greatest concentration of Chinese sojourners in the Nanyang by the turn of the century was in British Malaya. It was no accident that these 'Malayan' Chinese became the centre of considerable attention.

When the concept of the oneness of the Nanyang was replaced by that of South-East Asia soon after 1945, it was not merely a name

change. It was the prelude to a major geopolitical shift that now placed the emphasis on the special nature of newly independent countries setting out to become modern nation-states in the region between the two large polities of China and India. The importance of this configuration was confirmed for the next 30 years by strong contending forces, those of communism centred on China and supported by the Soviet Union, those of political neutralism (in Asia, largely centred on India), and those of capitalism, projected by the Anglo-American alliance in the archipelagic states, and hinged on the Malay Peninsula. It is in that context that one can observe the significance of having, in the early 1950s, some 15 million Chinese living within that area of modernizing states. It is also in that context that we can understand the pressures on these Chinese to make a stark choice, to identify with their homes in mainland China while remaining in countries which would fear and distrust them as potential communists, or to accept their positions as minorities and try to prove their loyalties to their adopted countries.

What they did or did not do for the next four decades aroused much interest, and hundreds of articles and several dozen books were published. The bulk of those written in English and Chinese were about the immigrants turned settlers in what had been British Malaya, now Malaysia and Singapore. But unlike Singapore, on which it is possible to write mainly about the Chinese by simply writing about developments within the city-state, Malaysia has been more difficult to write about where its citizens of Chinese descent are concerned. There is a Malay/bumiputra majority committed to economic policies that were designed to uplift themselves from positions of relative inferiority. There were great sensitivities on subjects that might touch on communal politics during a period of transition. Also, there was no one Chinese community once the umbrella of 'Nanyang Chinese' was removed. That had been an umbrella held up by Chinese nationalism to encourage sojourners to look always to China. When these sojourners decided to settle and not return, other factors came to the fore, including both those which united and those which divided them. This is particularly acute in Malaysia precisely because the Chinese there are neither a small minority as they are in all other countries, nor the majority as are their counterparts in Singapore, the one part of Malaysia that was forced to leave the federation in 1965. There are clearly special problems for those who want to write about the Chinese in Malaysia which scholars in other countries do not have to face.

Nevertheless, efforts both inside and outside the country to build a picture of the new Chinese communities in the complex fabric of the Malaysian states have continued. By 1984, a volume of essays, in Chinese, entitled *The History of Chinese in Malaysia* and edited by Lim Chooi Kwa and Loh Cheng Sun, was published in Kuala Lumpur. All 12 authors were local and at least eight of them were working in Malaysia at the time. It covered a wide number of topics that included specific chapters on politics, economics, society, education, literature, and religion, but it was mainly about the peninsular states. It was weak

in materials on East Malaysia. Also, it included Singapore in at least three chapters and was often uncertain about what to include or leave out about Singapore. What was remarkable about the work was that it was the first attempt by local Chinese to put such a volume together about what was still a rather elusive identity, that of the Malaysian Chinese.

About the time this book appeared, another group of local Chinese scholars, centred on members of two universities, the University of Malaya in Kuala Lumpur and the Universiti Sains Malaysia in Penang, began to plan for a volume on the Chinese in Malaysia to be written in English. Three of them had already contributed chapters to the volume published in Chinese. But they and their colleagues believed that the time had come for a general work in English which would update that of Purcell. Like Purcell, they sought a broader canvas and did not limit themselves to history. The present volume of multidisciplinary essays is the product of that effort. For various reasons, this work has taken much longer and the editors have offered a brief explanation as to why that has been so.

In the meantime, the editors who published the 1984 *History* have enlarged the earlier work and published in 1998 a new three-volume work, *A New History of Malaysian Chinese*, this time with four editors but still led by Lim Chooi Kwa. In this much larger work, the authors compare pre-independence and post-independence history more systematically down to the time of publication. Among the contributors also is one who wrote for the present English work. He is Yen Ching-Hwang and he provides a historical chapter common to both. For the present volume, his is the only chapter that describes itself as historical. The other 13 authors here concentrate on recent developments and seek to help the reader understand some of the major trends of contemporary events which affect the future of the Chinese communities in Malaysia. The authors range widely and there is nothing of significance to these communities which has not been covered fully. It can be described as a worthy successor to Purcell's work.

I have drawn attention to the 26 chapters of the work in Chinese for a particular reason. They are more directly historical than the 14 chapters of this volume but the subjects covered are similar and there are many opportunities for comparisons to be made. What is truly significant is that there is, in the two collections of studies, a degree of convergence of views which would simply not have been possible 50 years ago. At the time Victor Purcell wrote his book, writings in English would have been inspired by colonial or anti-colonial, anti-imperialist concerns, either of which was likely to be openly and more subtly ideological. Among the Chinese in Malaysia themselves, there would have also been voices that spoke in terms of Chinese nationalism, if not international socialism as well. Furthermore, the division between the majority who were Chinese-educated and the more favoured minority who were English-educated was very great, and it was rare for any Chinese to understand or reconcile their divergent points of view.