

*Chinatowns in a Globalizing Southeast Asia*, edited by Leo Suryadinata and Ang Cher Kiat, Photographs and Captions by Zhuang Wubin. 168 pages, (hardcover ISBN-13:978-981-08-2184-5) Singapore: Chinese Heritage Centre, 2009.

*Chinatowns in a Globalizing Southeast Asia* is meant to be “a sophisticated survey of the different Chinatowns” in Southeast Asia based on the theme of “globalization” and to “inject a renewed interest in the often overlooked corners” of the region (p. 3). It takes the readers on a journey to discover “the origins and transformation” of these Chinatowns and to show their “exotic” and “unique” cultures, traditions and heritage, and the adaptability and tenacity of the Chinese overseas. Despite these intentions, the book is in fact brief in words and lavish in the display of photographs.

The publication is indeed a rare and much-needed study on the Chinatowns of Southeast Asia. Ten Chinatowns are identified, one in each of the capital cities in the region. The immediate question that comes to mind is not so much the presence of, but rather what is, a “Chinatown”.

Some “Chinatowns” have actually originated as “Chinese settlements”. Phnom Penh may have “grown out of a Chinese settlement” that also became the capital of Cambodia in the early fifteenth century (p. 102). The birth of Kuala Lumpur preceded the advent of British “protection”. In Bangkok, a “Chinatown” could have appeared from 1782, and the current one in Yaowarat Road was built only in the 1900s. By then the Chinese had made up half the population of Bangkok (p. 24). This numerical dominance would qualify Bangkok more as a Chinese-Siamese town rather than a Siamese city with a “Chinatown”.

The origins and growth of others were contemporaneous with colonial rule. The Chinatowns of Manila and Jakarta had evolved through repeated colonial persecutions and massacres. Binodo in Manila occupied an area given by the Spanish Governor of Manila in 1594 (p. 86). The Jakarta Chinatown was associated with the Dutch plan to build up the city into a major port in the early seventeenth century. The Dutch saw the need for Chinese labourers, artisans and tradesmen and encouraged them to settle in Batavia (p. 56). After the massacre of the 1730s, the Chinese in Jakarta were resettled outside the city walls which became the Chinatown of today. Cholon appeared in the seventeenth century and has since been the centre of Chinese settlement in South Vietnam (p. 40). Yangon’s Chinatown emerged after the second Anglo-Burmese war in 1852. Before World War Two, half the population of the city were Indians and Chinese (p. 150). Similarly, while Singapore’s origin was the

outcome of colonial rule, it was soon dominated by Chinese settlers and has been so ever since.

It is stated that “some countries do not have clearly identifiable Chinatowns” and Brunei is cited as an example (p. 2). The Chinese population of Brunei (37,600 of whom a quarter are citizens) is miniscule. Yet, despite the absence of “a distinct Chinatown”, businesses in the city centre are mostly in Chinese hands (p. 10). Similarly, the presence of “Chinatowns” in Kuala Lumpur and Singapore does not accord with conceptual reality. Malaysian Chinese do not look upon Petaling Street as a “Chinatown”. Its recent conversion into a pedestrian street at night and, with official blessings, the erection of an archway claiming it to be a “cultural” street, is purely to cater to the tourist industry. As the book acknowledges, the area is now suffocated by foreign hawkers peddling their wares along five-foot ways and the street itself (p. 71).

The publication raises an interesting question on the nature of “Chinatowns”. As an entity, the Chinatown is much more than a physical phenomenon, and it is by no means easily identifiable in the Southeast Asian context. Unlike the Chinatowns in Europe or America, the towns associated with Chinese settlement in Southeast Asia are of older origins or contemporaneous with European colonial rule. In most cases, the initial development of many of these capital cities was intimately associated with the pioneering role of Chinese immigrants.

Kuala Lumpur and Singapore bear the typical characteristics of “Chinese towns” rather than those of “Chinatowns”. Other capital cities in their early phases of development might have been so as well. Singapore and the many towns of Malaysia are the outcome of spontaneous pioneering and a reflection of the dominant presence of the Chinese community. Colonial policies had allowed them a great deal of leeway to pursue their dreams. Fully relying on their own initiatives, capital and labour, the Chinese were among the earliest in opening mines, agricultural holdings and in the building of modern townships. They were the creators of jobs, revenue and wealth from which the colonial authorities derived immense benefits. They were their own masters and charted their own destinies and many enjoyed high social status. Until today, many Chinese still conduct their business and live in rows of two-storey “shop-houses” with their common “five-foot ways”. Such towns are rather unique and hardly found among Chinese communities outside Southeast Asia. The ethnic composition of Singapore and most of the towns along the west coast states of Peninsular Malaysia and those in Sarawak and Sabah is such that they are in appearance and character typical “Chinese towns”. Nowhere is the existence of the “Chinatown” evident, for large areas of the towns are occupied by Chinese shop-houses that symbolize local commerce and trade. In Malaysia, the “Chinese towns” have become an integral part of the Malaysian townscape.

The idea of the “Chinatown” in Southeast Asia is often the creation of the romantic mind with an eye for the tourist trade. What constitutes a “Chinatown” is therefore of little consequence.

In Europe, the first Chinese immigrants arrived in port cities that have been in existence for centuries. In the west coast America and Australia, the Chinese found themselves in newly-established towns in European-settled territories that were being opened up for gold mining. Some eventually moved on to older cities such as New York. The Chinese were effectively “late-comers” who congregated in the “old” quarters of the host cities. Beyond these enclaves, few Chinese were to be found.

The early Chinatowns in the West were more than the physical manifestation of neighbourhoods inhabited by ethnic Chinese and enclosed by host societies. Their “Chineseness” is clearly defined by demographic, social and economic characteristics. The Chinatowns are kept apart from and marginalized by the host societies. The early waves of Chinese who arrived in the West were welcomed as labourers, not as sojourners or neighbours. These Chinatowns were among the earliest ethnic “streets” characterized by a history of racial discrimination and even demonization. Some were no better than “legally enforced ghettos” and were true enclaves settled by unwelcomed settlers.

The “Chinatowns” of Southeast Asia are clearly not the same entities in the historical, economic and socio-cultural contexts as those of the West. They are fully integrated into the local and national economies. A fundamental difference between the early “Chinatowns” of East and West is the social standing of the Chinese inhabitants in the eyes of the host societies.

The colonial rulers had no intention of large-scale settlement in the hot, humid and insalubrious climate of their tropical possessions. They relied on large numbers of hardworking people to fill and develop the vast emptiness of their newly-acquired territories. These they found among the Chinese, Indians and Javanese. Located at the fringe of power, they were left largely alone to pursue their economic interests. Chinese immigrants in particular were able to open up new enterprises in mining, agriculture, trade and commerce and some became landowners.

The “Chinatown” then is more than a place. In its original “version” in the West, it was an enclave in which the residents lived as “outsiders” and differentiated from the host societies. The attributes associated with the Chinatowns in this publication are different from those in the West where the Chinatowns have gone through a dark period in their history and are certainly not the glamorous-sounding places of contemporary tourism. Some of the “Chinatowns” of Southeast Asia, and certainly the many “Chinese towns” in Malaya as well as Singapore, have experienced a more normal path of growth and development.

Credit must be given to the authors for bringing out a much-needed publication on

the important and neglected subject of Chinatowns in Southeast Asia. But if more attention is given to the mechanics and dynamics of the development of the selected Chinatowns in the historical and spatial contexts, the reader will be able to draw deeper insights on the underlying nature of the “Chinatown”.

**VOON Phin Keong**

New Era College

Malaysia