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Malaysian Chinese and Nation-building: Before Merdeka and Fifty Years After, edited by Voon Phin Keong, Kuala Lumpur: Centre for Malaysian Chinese Studies, 2007 and 2008, xvi + 460 pp. (vol. 1), vi + 296 pp. (vol. 2) (Hardcover ISBN 978-983-3908-03-5, Softcover ISBN 978-983-3908-02-8)

The theme of nation building is a difficult one as central ideas surrounding the theme are popular subjects of debate. Yet the theme has its appeal and durability that academics from many diverse areas of specializations are tempted to explore. Studies on nation building in Malaysia have generally focused on party and communal politics and Malay nationalism. This current study is focused on the role of the Chinese in Malaysia and undertaken by a team of local academics who are non-specialists in political science.

The study is a major project of the Centre for Malaysian Chinese Studies to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of independence and an attempt to place on record the often forgotten roles and contributions of the Chinese community in the making of Malaysia as a sovereign nation-state. With contributors coming from very different backgrounds, the variety of topics is to be expected. These are grouped into five parts to produce a coherent structure.

In the introductory chapter, Voon Phin Keong attempts to address the basic ideas of “state” and “nation” and examines the formation of the various political units that eventually merged to become the Malaysian nation-state. He then links the ideas embedded in Chinese culture in the promotion of such values as ethnic harmony and tolerance that are basic to nation building in a pluralistic setting.

The four chapters in Part 2 take up topics that follow each other in sequence. Voon (chapter 2) deals with the work of the Chinese in their various capacities to transform large parts of Malaysia over a period of more than 200 years before independence. As pioneers, entrepreneurs, or mere labourers, they contributed significantly to lay the foundation of the future state by opening mines and agricultural areas, building towns, organizing communities, contributing towards government revenue, and playing many other positive roles. Khor Teik Huat (chapter 3) looks at the role of the Chinese in the independence movement. They clearly recognized the need to control their own destiny in an independent country and decided, wisely, that their future was tied to their rights to citizenship of the new nation. Their response was complicated by the rise of Malay nationalism and the chapter provides an account of how the leaders of the Chinese and Malay communities had to negotiate such crucial issues as the official language, Malay privileges and non-Malay rights. Khor affirms that, in order to

meet the terms set by the British prior to independence, the Chinese had agreed to set aside certain crucial issues for the larger interests of gaining national sovereignty. Khoo Kay Kim (chapter 4) continues the theme with a discussion on the background of forging interethnic consensus for the sake of gaining independence. Independence that was eventually granted was consequently the result of interethnic cooperation and understanding. Six years after the formation of the Federation of Malaya in 1957, the idea of a “grand design” to merge the young federation, Singapore and the Borneo states of Brunei, Sabah and Sarawak was mooted by Tunku Abdul Rahman in 1961. The events that led to the formation of Malaysia were examined by Danny Wong (chapter 5). He concludes that nationalism was the driving force behind the continued fight for independence of all the remaining British territories in Southeast Asia. It was a wake-up call to the communities in the Borneo territories as they hastily formed their own political parties. In Brunei, the planned “merger” led to a nasty rebellion and the eventual rejection of “merger”.

The seven chapters in Part 3 examine the nation-building process from the perspectives of selected economic considerations. Three deal with Chinese business, two with the Chinese population, and one each on the special cases of Sarawak and Sabah.

Emile Yeoh (chapter 6) examines the Chinese response, at the community level, to new economic realities after the introduction of the New Economic Policy (NEP). Chinese associations and chambers of commerce took the lead to organize cooperatives and enterprises in attempts to cope with the changing rules of the game. Chin Yee Whah (chapter 8) discusses Chinese participation in various economic sectors and in the development of small and medium-sized industries. With the NEP, they are forced to seek appropriate business strategies to survive or to gain access to new opportunities. One of the strategies is to work with Malay partners. Beh Loo See (chapter 7) examines Chinese capitalism as practised by major corporations. These largely family-based and market-oriented concerns have spread their wings overseas and have developed multi-national links and investments. They are fairly well organized to achieve desired levels of efficiency but remain under the personal control of the founders. Many maintain close relationships with the government and the indigenous business elite and technocrats.

The Chinese population comes under scrutiny by Tey Nai Peng (chapter 9) and Tan Ai Boay (chapter 10). Tey probes the demographic trends and touches on declining birth rates, ageing and emigration. He demonstrates that the community is making important contributions to the development of human resources to meet the demands of national development. Tan’s study is a rare attempt to look at Chinese women and the manner of their involvement in the nation-building process. She focuses on three specific areas in economic participation, education and politics. In all these areas, Chinese women are moving from being a passive

and tradition-bound class into one that is playing many new and increasingly active and important roles in society.

As always in studies on Malaysia, the Borneo components have often been overlooked. Conscious of this oversight, the study contains two separate chapters on Sarawak and Sabah. Wee Chong Hui (chapter 11) highlights the abundance of natural resources of Sarawak while reminding readers of the state's high incidence of poverty and its economy that is lagging behind Peninsular Malaysia. She finds that the Chinese are basically dependent on the primary sector, with some involved in small- and medium-sized timber and wood industries and the service sectors such as retail and wholesale business, light transportation, tourism, catering. Very few are able to gain access to the civil service.

Voon (chapter 12) emphasizes the permanence of the Chinese as a settled and mature community and their role in the development of Sabah during the colonial period. Following independence, the fortune of the community has suffered an irreversible decline as it is fast becoming a minority in the face of mass foreign immigration. Economically, the community is on the verge of being sidelined. It has yet to be seen if this trend is to be a precursor to the future fate of the Chinese in Malaysia as a whole.

Of the ten chapters in volume 2, five are related to the political and four to the cultural perspectives, and a concluding chapter. Wong Wun Bin (chapter 13) attempts to draw lessons from Confucian political ideals in the nation-building process. His efforts are commendable but do not seem to pin down the connection in a more convincing manner. Confucian teachings are seen to be reflected in the running of Chinese associations and business enterprises. In politics, he touches on the rule by virtue and the pursuit of the Grand Communality. To the average Malaysian Chinese, however, Confucian teachings have more relevance in everyday life rather than in political governance. This explains why the Chinese are generally indifferent to politics.

On Chinese politics, Lee Kam Hing (chapter 14) argues that Chinese involvement in the independence movement would require a Chinese political party to safeguard and to fight for their interests. The diverse groups based on dialects, educational backgrounds, political beliefs and ideas were to prove divisive. Several Chinese-based parties such as the MCA, Democratic Action Party and Gerakan all seek to represent the Chinese and therefore compete fiercely among themselves. With the implementation of the NEP in 1971, the *raison d'être* of Chinese politics seems to be the safeguarding of Chinese commercial interests, Chinese-language education, and in power sharing. Danny Wong and Ho Hui Ling (chapter 15) next examine Chinese politics in Sabah and Sarawak. The primary purpose of Chinese political parties is to safeguard Chinese interests. Over the years Chinese political influence in Sabah has waned and the community is losing its clout as "king makers". The Chinese in Sarawak

have fared better as they are able to maintain their share of power in the state coalition.

The next two chapters delve into the issue of identity and civil society. Using the language of diaspora studies, Yow Cheun Hoe (chapter 16) argues that as the Chinese transform themselves from being immigrants to citizens, they are confronted by the Bumiputera and non-Bumiputera divide to play their full role as Malaysians. In the age of globalization, the options for transnational mobility offer alternative choices. Thock Ker Pong (chapter 17) discusses the role of civil society in nation building from the perspective of Chinese community leadership. He argues that Chinese communal associations are “small governments” which existing under the control of the state’s “big government”. In the past they contributed to the maintenance of a stable social order but many now realize the need to fight for the rights and benefits of the Chinese, with mother-tongue education as a major concern.

The chapters in Part 4 deal with education, culture, language and art. Lim Chooi Kwa (chapter 18) gives an account of the history of Chinese education but lacks a serious attempt to link the role of Chinese education and nation building. Voon (chapter 19) views Chinese culture and education as elements of “soft power” that may contribute towards creating a vibrant, mature and more progressive Malaysia. Chinese schools are part of the nation’s social infrastructure that has nurtured a pool of talents. He particularly emphasizes the role of culture as the moral basis of nation building and draws on the core teachings of Confucianism as props in promoting progress and stability, good governance, and working towards the common good.

Chinese efforts in popularizing the use of the national language and the evolution of Malaysian art forms are final themes in the study. Chong Fah Hing (chapter 20) argues that Chinese writers in the national language have worked hard to promote the language. This tradition has led to literary works that affirm the Malaysian identity of the Chinese. Chung Yi (chapter 21) produces a comprehensive piece on Chinese art to demonstrate its transformation to enrich Malaysian art. The objective is to reaffirm, through artistic creations, an identity that is typically Malaysian.

The concluding account by Voon (chapter 22) poses the question of “whither the Malaysian nation-state?” It sees “Vision 2020” as a blueprint for nationhood. Evolution of the Malaysian nation will eventually boil down to the ability to meet the challenges in the areas of ethnic relations, economic competitiveness, the rule of morality, and the people’s “mindset”.

Tackling as complex a subject as nation building is itself a huge challenge, but restricting the discussion to a particular group is even more so. At best, it will present an unbalanced view on the subject as nation building involves all sections of the people. But then one must accept the study’s stated objective to focus only on the Chinese and deepen understanding of their multi-faceted contributions to nation building. The study does not in any way detract

from the contributions made by other ethnic groups especially the Malays.

Clearly the papers vary in quality. Some have clearly failed to link their discussions with the central theme of nation building. In terms of organization, Part 3 on politics should come after the historical background. However, bearing the mind the limitation of the study, the study is commendable in several ways.

The writing style is clear and the approach is objective. It will enable Malaysians, particularly the Chinese, to appreciate the situation they are in and contributions that they have made.

All chapters are written from the Malaysian perspective and by local academics. The result is a piece of work that adds to the scanty literature on nation building.

The study will help other ethnic groups to understand the Chinese community and thus to promote harmony and mutual understanding.

The images of Chinese participation in the construction of Malaysia are very clearly painted. The study demonstrates the ways in which the Malaysian nation-state evolves and how the Chinese community has helped to shape present-day Malaysia into a progressive country where different ethnic groups live in harmony.

WONG Tai Chee

Nanyang Technological University
Singapore