

## Book Review

A multi-perspective study of the Chinese of Malaysia: A review of *Calling Malaysia Home: Studies on the Malaysian Chinese community* (in Chinese) by Phin-Keong Voon. Soka Gakkai Malaysia and New Era University College, 2018, 383 pp.

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Local Chinese who engage in research on the Chinese community of Malaysia are drawn from two education streams based on the Chinese or English language as the medium of instruction. This had served as a social divide especially during the time of independence in 1957. The research works by these groups too showed a bias towards the reliance on different sources of references. The “English-educated” hardly, or are unable to, use Chinese sources, while the “Chinese-educated” tend to avoid English sources or rely only on translated works. The author of this collection is among the few who publish in both languages. This collection entitled *Juzu Yusi* (聚族于斯) was published in Chinese in 2018 as a useful addition to the hitherto limited literature on the subject of Malaysian Chinese studies. It is a collection of a selection of the author’s research in the last 20 years.

The author received his education in the English language and was trained in Human Geography and taught in the University of Malaya for 34 years. Upon retirement, he took up the Directorship of the Centre for Malaysian Chinese Studies in Kuala Lumpur where he began to embark on research on the Chinese community. There he edited the bilingual *Journal of Malaysian Chinese Studies* and came into frequent contact with the Chinese-educated circle, the clan and other community associations, and various organisations that form the cultural backbone of Chinese society. The agenda of the Centre includes the holding of conferences, conducting studies by its fellows as well as managing research projects funded by the community. In his eight-year tenure, he published several edited works including co-ordinating the two-volume study on the Chinese and nation building which were published in English and Chinese versions

(2007-2010). He joined New Era College in mid-2010 (upgraded into a University College in 2016) and established a research institute and launched the English-language *Malaysian Journal of Chinese Studies* in 2012.

The Chinese title of this volume may appropriately be translated as *Calling Malaysia Home*. The study portrays the growth of a community that is now firmly identified with the land of their birth. It records a process of transformation of an immigrant community to becoming permanent citizens and stakeholders in a country that they call home. The book presents a multi-perspective analysis and evaluation of the outcome of settlement and pioneering in a new and developing environment.

His background in geography has allowed him to adapt his methodologies to the study of the Chinese community based on Chinese and English sources of reference. His active engagement with the Chinese community in the past 20 years has increased his interest in Chinese culture and society and to allow him to take advantage of opportunities to delve into a new domain of academic pursuit. The 18 papers are placed under seven parts dealing with Chinese pioneering, economic activities, the settlement process, population, dialect groups, New Villages, ethnic relations and nation building. The diversity of topics pertaining to the historical and contemporary periods may offer insights and viewpoints that may serve as reference for future research. In view of the diversity of topics covered by the papers, this review would focus on selected issues for attention.

The book begins with an overview of source materials in the English and Chinese languages dating back to the works of merchants, writers, travellers and academic and official reports of the 19th century. More systematic studies were later taken up by researchers working on the Chinese in the South Seas or “Nanyang,” and later followed by scholars in the University of Malaya, Nanyang University and other community-run organisations. The catalogue of early source materials shows that the study of the Chinese as an area of academic pursuit began much earlier than generally realised. In truth, this field of specialisation did not begin in recent years but has developed through the collective and cumulative efforts of writers and researchers over a period of more than a century.

Aspects of pioneering are discussed in three papers on the pioneers, entrepreneurs and labourers; the Chinese and development of the rubber industry; and the changing patterns of landownership. As Chinese immigrants gathered in number from the early 20th century, many began to settle down and opened up tracks of virgin land for mining, agriculture, as well as towns and villages to raise their families. The colonial administrators recognised the value of land of which the Malay States had in abundance. Land was “commercialised” as a commodity with guaranteed security of ownership, effectively opening the door for the systematic development of the land. Western capital interests too took advantage of favourable conditions to occupy large swathes of land for rubber and later oil palm cultivation.

The study of landownership at the sub-district (*mukim*) level was an early effort to use land records of a District Land Office and a Registration of Titles Office at a state capital. The

compilation and analysis of data from individual land titles of two sub-districts in Selangor up to the 1980s charted and mapped the evolving patterns of ownership by ethnicity. This case study revealed that, by the 1950s when European-owned plantations liquidated their interests, much of the land was bought up by local Chinese whose principal means of livelihood was dependent on rubber production.

Other studies dealt with Chinese business and culture. One focused on the low esteem of merchants and the subdued business environment in traditional China on the one hand, and the high social status enjoyed by businessmen among the Chinese overseas on the other. The social hierarchy of *shi* (the literati), *nong* (the farmers), *gong* (the artisans), and *shang* (the merchant) was a deep-rooted perception in traditional Chinese society. But away from these cultural constraints among immigrant Chinese communities, the social pecking order was altered by the search for success and wealth. It was the prosperous businessmen who were held in high esteem ahead of the teachers or administrators, the workers, and farmers. This change was due to the interplay of different sets of factors such as the new environment in which the survival of the fittest determined one's standing, the colonial setting in which access to officialdom was no longer an option, new business ties that made available capital through networking, and the making of money guided by positive cultural values and contributing to the public good.

This theme was further developed in another paper that links the pursuit of material well-being to the spirit of hard work and thriftiness. Many were able to lead a better life by living peacefully and making sure of having a job and source of income. Being new arrivals, they fell back on the spirit of unremitting work to put down roots as settlers. They lived by the ancestral beliefs of maintaining stability, fostering harmony, and be law-abiding. Over time, Chinese businesses which were largely family-based, came face to face with issues and problems of succession that determined the eventual fate of their inherited enterprises.

A couple of studies were concerned with the solidarity of the Chinese community. One discussed the role, functions, and characteristics of the thousands of Chinese social associations in Malaysia. Another re-examined Zheng He and his voyages and the heritage of this historical figure to the collective memory of the contemporary Malaysian Chinese community.

The study of the population and distribution of different dialect groups of the Chinese was an attempt that few had undertaken before. According to published and unpublished census data, the community was facing falling birth rates and the relative decline of their number in recent years. Despite frequent reminders by some community leaders of the importance of having larger families, few research papers on demographic issues had been published. One of the papers in this volume reviewed the background of the relative decline of the Chinese and examined the dilemma of the community in what was essentially a contest between community objectives and individual interests. Another paper examined the impact of out-migration from New Villages on school enrolment, family size, family and age structure, and the "sustainability" of village communities, and suggested possible response strategies.

Geographical space and its impact formed the theme of two papers. One highlighted the economic and social changes in the Chinese community from the spatial perspective and the other on the impact of spatial segregation and exclusion policies on ethnic relations. Three other papers touched upon the population of Chinese dialect groups and their distribution, inter-dialect relations of the Chinese with reference to the Hakka community, and aspects of the adaptation of the Hakka community to changing economic conditions.

Not overlooked were issues of the nation state. The role of the Chinese to the nation building process was viewed from the perspective their traditional cultural values such as contributions through unceasing efforts, sacrifices, and advancement of the economic and production capacities of the country. In the process they inculcated a strong sense of belonging and identity to the country. Contributions to nation building were also viewed from the perspectives of culture and education especially in the infusion of moral duties and the nurturing of talents, which includes the Chinese in the development of Sabah state before and after the formation of Malaysia.

The collection portrays the protracted process by which Chinese immigrants have become permanent settlers and stakeholders of the country. Besides offering some new perspectives on different aspects of the Malaysian Chinese narrative, some of the papers make full use of thematic maps and graphs. Many especially among the young tend to under-estimate the power of cartographic and graphic techniques as analytical tools in social research. The statistical tables too have been meticulously compiled from various primary sources.

Unlike Chinese publications on the study of the Chinese, this volume is generously supported by thematic maps, explanatory diagrams and statistical tables. The 45 maps and diagrams were designed by the author based on meticulously gathered data from primary sources including land titles. The statistical tables were similarly compiled from unpublished sources. The lack of experience in the design and use of maps explains why illustrative materials or tables are rarely encountered in publications on the Malaysian Chinese. Additionally, a special feature of the book is the inclusion of a comprehensive index for easy reference. This is a tradition that has yet to be widely adopted by authors and publishers of Chinese books and future publications may consider adopting this feature as a standard practice.

Despite the use of a broad base of reference materials in English and Chinese as well as from unconventional sources such as land titles, there are various records of the grass roots that have yet to be tapped. Absent are issues relating to Chinese education or folk culture. However, the scope of Chinese community studies is broad and expanding. Perhaps this collection would serve as a useful reference to help kindle the interest of a wider circle of young academics to embark on new research projects to further develop this growing field of specialisation.

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