

## Chapter 1

# INTRODUCTION

When I began to put this volume together, I recalled my links with the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS). That reminded me of the time fifty years ago when Goh Keng Swee talked to me about establishing the institute. I was most intrigued by his foresight (see Chapter 4 on Remembering Goh Keng Swee in this volume). Other memories flooded in as I collected some of my recent writings to affirm my ISEAS connection. As a result, the book is now also a book of personal reflections and encounters about the region that the Chinese knew as Nanyang, often projected through images of Malaysia and Singapore. Behind the events after the end of World War II that shaped the new nations and settled the fates of their Chinese populations, a number of issues touching on a mixed heritage also came to mind.

In January 2016, my wife Margaret reminded me that we have lived in Singapore for twenty years. We were surprised how quickly the years had passed and noted that the period is the longest both of us have ever spent in any one place in our lives. I had spent some seventeen years growing up in Ipoh. Margaret spent the first twenty-four years of her life in Shanghai, Penang, Singapore, Cambridge, London, and back to Singapore. We then

had in succession nine years in Kuala Lumpur, eighteen years in Canberra and ten years in Hong Kong. As a student, I had spent a year and a half in Nanjing, five years in Singapore and three years in London. This volume is thus also one that marks some of my changing perspectives on Singapore, Malaya and Malaysia.

I grew up as a Chinese in Malaya among millions of other Chinese in the Nanyang. Like many others, I was taught to think of China as home and my parents prepared me to return there. That day came in 1947, when the three of us moved to Nanjing, my father to teach at the school attached to his alma mater, by then renamed National Central University, and I to take the entrance examinations to seek a place at his university. I was successful and settled down to start my new life. After a very cold winter during which my father fell very ill, my mother decided that they had to return to tropical Malaya. It was a fateful decision because they would never return to China again.

I stayed on in Nanjing to learn how to be Chinese in a conflicted country that was fighting to determine what kind of modernity its people should have. By the end of 1948, the civil war came closer to us as the People's Liberation Army arrived on the northern banks of the Yangzi River. My parents were convinced that Nanjing would become a battlefield and insisted that I return to join them in Malaya. I was persuaded to do that because I was their only child.<sup>1</sup> Thereafter, my life changed direction. China gradually became part of my heritage, and Malaya (and places beyond) was reframed as my future.

When I first met Goh Keng Swee in London a few years later, I felt that we shared an image of that future. He could trace a different heritage from mine, but deep down it also connected at several points with China. For a couple of years, we actually belonged to the same country of Malaysia. After Singapore's separation from Malaysia in 1965, my hopes for the future were

also distanced away from the Malaysian state. I returned to my studies of China and now tried to understand the China that was undergoing the fresh set of violent changes that Mao Zedong termed a Cultural Revolution. Going to the Australian National University where contemporary sources about the People's Republic were plentiful enabled me to make yet another start.<sup>2</sup>

This volume consists of recent writings, some looking back at the years of uncertainty after the end of World War II. Among the key changes that took place following British expansion into the Malay States at the end of the nineteenth century was the emergence of the idea of Malaya. Later, more changes followed when this Malaya was re-regrouped as Malaysia, eventually becoming Malaysia with the city-state of Singapore left out. That was a tale of twists and turns in which many Chinese played significant parts both on the peninsula and on the island. I lived through several of those turns that occurred, and vividly remember some of what followed the final stages of the story.

It so happened that two occasions provided me with opportunities to place my thoughts before an audience. The first was in Sydney at the annual meeting of the Malaysia and Singapore Society of Australia and was dedicated to a former colleague, James C. Jackson. The second was when the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, together with Asia Research Institute of the NUS in Singapore, invited me to give one of its public lectures. My host was Cheah Boon Kheng and I had hoped to seek his advice to revise my text but he passed on before I could do so.

In those lectures, I did not focus on the parts played by the Chinese population or on the interests of Communist China, but both were strongly present in the Malaya-Malaysia story. Each lecture contained a touch of nostalgia for the kind of multicultural society that might have been. I must admit that

the sense of regret persisted while I wrote and I realized that, despite the years since the events took place, it was still a feeling that I could not avoid.

Changes are still occurring. The part played by the Chinese Peranakan or Baba in the story may be instructive for the future, so I introduced an aspect of their story and other questions of loyalty and identity before there were modern ideas of nationhood, and also what various Chinese have done in response to the nation-building efforts around them. The locally settled were once in the frontline of Chinese adaptation to alien conditions and had developed successful strategies to deal with their predicament. Their historical experiences could serve to illustrate how Chinese communities who have settled abroad might have to handle future challenges. Thus the essay describing Baba Peranakan encounters with early ideas of nation also touches on aspects of the Chinese heritage in the Nanyang, the kind of perspective that I imagined Goh Keng Swee to have had.

That drew me to another feature of Chinese adaptability, their changing identities and the impact of that phenomenon on ideas of loyalty. What did Chinese understand about those shifts in British Singapore? How did they relate them to the cultural values and other artefacts that they or their ancestors brought from China? And what changed in Singapore when the independent city-state institutionalized the plural society it decided to uphold? Here, of course, I go back to the story of what the decision to create Greater Malaysia meant for the Chinese. In doing that, I am drawn back to contemplate the Malaya that the Chinese had got used to. That way, we can see the layers of cultural and political heritage behind the rapid developments of the past half-century.

The Chinese heritage in Singapore is now getting the attention it deserves. The fresh interest is in part because China is regaining

its place in the world but the developments also come from the historical information now readily and swiftly available in numerous books and on the Internet. I suggest that this attention could deepen if there is further awareness of what their origins were like. Although what one takes from heritage does not have to adhere to the original purpose that created it, it is surprising what could continue to have relevance under conditions that have radically changed.

This led me to a different perspective, to another kind of heritage, that of divisiveness following the years of decolonization in Southeast Asia. I spoke about this in a lecture that I had delivered a few years earlier in honour of Herb Feith. Herb Feith was one of the founders of the Monash University Centre of Southeast Asian Studies and an excellent scholar of Indonesian politics. I first met him in Melbourne in July 1965. Because of the circumstances of our first meeting when we spoke about the region's ongoing conflicts, my lecture recalled that meeting and I entitled it "Divisive Modernity". Our first meeting was on the eve of the Malaysia-Singapore separation when Malaysia was not yet two years old. It was thus a meeting I keenly remember.

Herb Feith was a scholar I admired for his understanding of Sukarno's Indonesia. Talking about the divisiveness there and how it was related to the efforts to become modern led us also to wonder about the impact of China's hard communism on Indonesia's soft response. We went on to talk about the way Indonesia's leader Sukarno was determined to destroy the fledgling Malaysia and that led us to the consequences of imperial rule and the nature of empires. We even went on to talk about the religious divisions that modernity has spawned.

Two years after I gave that lecture in 2004, I found myself speaking on a happier occasion, one in honour of Nicholas Tarling's seventy-fifth birthday. At the conference organized for

him, I talked about the empires we have either studied or lived through, with emphasis on their final days. The lecture was published as “Imperial Themes”. Sadly, as I was revising parts of it for this volume, on 13 May 2017, Nick Tarling unexpectedly died. We had shared some experiences with empires, but how the end of the Chinese and British empires impacted on the Nanyang was a subject that we developed an ongoing interest in. China’s was premodern at its core and Britain’s was national and capitalism-inspired. I talked about how they cast different shadows on today’s relations between a revived China and the new nations of Southeast Asia.

The last chapter, written in 2008, takes me to another recurring theme in Nanyang-China relations. I refer to the asymmetry in relationships whenever China turned its attention to the neighbours to its south. I set out to find the words and ideas in historical texts that tell us how China chose to regard these foreign rulers in smaller states. There were terms that were used consistently over the centuries and showed why the conditions for the development of what we call diplomacy and foreign affairs had not been present during all that time. The words and ideas commonly used are deeply embedded in Confucian attitudes towards those beyond their ken. They are examples of China’s intangible heritage that still influence China’s relations with its neighbours today.

China has now risen to economic power and global prominence and it is changing its attitudes towards smaller neighbours and those people of Chinese origins who are living overseas. In particular it appears to have different expectations of those who are recent emigrants from the Chinese mainland. How this will affect those ethnic Chinese who have fully localized will be of keen interest to all concerned. Insofar as China still appeals to the ideas and practices in past relationships, it would

be necessary for countries engaged with China today to constantly and carefully update their understanding of that heritage.

## Notes

1. I have completed a book of memories about my first nineteen years in Ipoh and Nanjing, entitled *Home Is Not Here*, to be published by the NUS Press in 2018.
2. My early research life (1954–61) had taken me back to ancient China's trading relations with the Nanhai (South China Sea), the politics of North China in the tenth century and the tributary relations of the early Ming dynasty. At the University of Malaya (1957–68), I taught Ming and Qing imperial history for over ten years and also aspects of comparative historical thought in Asia and Europe. During the transition from Malaya to Malaysia, my research interests turned to Malayan history and I worked with my colleagues and students to seek a local perspective. I also began to focus on the tribulations of overseas Chinese communities.

The beginnings of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution in Mao Zedong's China in 1965–66 reawakened my interest in contemporary China. Thus the offer of a research professorship at the Australian National University was irresistible. Not being able to gain access to any documents concerning China in an anti-communist region, I was hungry to read the excellent collections of such materials in Canberra. They absorbed my attention for several years and enabled me to write *China and the World since 1949: The impact of independence, modernity and revolution* (1977).

