BOOK REVIEW


A number of recent village studies have appeared concentrating on Malay society. This book is the first comprehensive anthropological study of a Chinese village in Malaysia since the early 1960s. As such it fills a large gap in contemporary scholarship on Malaysia.

The author engaged in field research for twenty-two months, eighteen of which were spent in a Chinese village in Perak. The village is given the fictitious name of Sanchun, but it is not difficult for me, and presumably others, to identify it from the description provided. The detailed account of personal and factional politics provided in the book may justify some use of pseudonyms, but their wholesale use in this study appears neither necessary nor appropriate.

The author places Chinese village politics within the context of the wider Malaysian political system. The first chapter is devoted to theoretical and anthropological issues related to ethnicity, class, political encapsulation and centre-periphery relations. For those unfamiliar with contemporary anthropological approaches, this chapter may seem a little pretentious. However, it does provide a very good theoretical foundation for the case study which follows in the remainder of the book.

Following the theoretical review of literature, the author provides an interpretive explanation of the dynamics of the Malaysian political system. Without going into too much detail, she presents an excellent overview, concentrating on the central themes of ethnicity, class and encapsulation. There are some brutally frank comments on the capacity of Malaysian power holders to defeat challengers through manipulation of rules and the judicious exercise of patron-client relationships. For readers unfamiliar with the Malaysian scene, some of the nuances of ethnic coalition politics may be difficult to follow from the rather abbreviated and theoretically-oriented account of this chapter on politics and power. Yet, the analysis is basically sound and sophisticated. Moreover, it is central to an understanding of the politics of Sanchun as an ethnically encapsulated entity within a wider dominating political environment.

The detailed examination of the village of Sanchun begins with chapter
three, which recounts its historical development from its origins as a small spontaneously developing pre-war Chinese settlement, through the traumatic events of the war-time Japanese occupation, to its becoming the nucleus for a large resettled “new village” during the “Emergency” period when communist guerrillas were waging their revolutionary war. As one who engaged in research in “new villages” in the 1950s, I feel that the author captures only part of the complexity of cross-pressures and anxieties faced by new villagers during the height of the Emergency. Perhaps it is because these events were reconstructed by the author from the fading memories of village notables. Even so, the account is more thorough and balanced than previous works on this period.

The author's first-hand research and participant observation begin in 1971, and the book becomes much more vivid and detailed when the political and economic life of the village after 1972 is recounted. The principal actors in village politics assume a three-dimensional texture. The rise and decline of village factions are explained in rich detail and from the empathetic perspective of an insider. The community is viewed as an interacting whole with interlinking village-wide economic, social and political activities. Detailed information is provided on employment, income distribution, and local, religious, educational and native-place associations. Colourful accounts of village events are provided, including that of a temple festival and divination service.

A separate chapter is devoted to the political movement known as the MCA (Malaysian Chinese Association) Task Force. This was a nation-wide effort by some Chinese to revitalize the political role of the Chinese in Malaysia by mobilizing support at the grass-roots level. Given the prevailing Malay dominance at the national and state levels, and the political style in Malaysia of non-public inter-communal bargaining, such a movement was bound to be suppressed when grass-roots mobilization of non-Malays became too intense. This is, in fact, what happened. The author provides a graphic account of the rise and fall of this movement and its effects on village politics in Sanchun. The network of patron-client ties to the centres of power are revealed in great detail, and the overall impact on local politics is analysed with empathy and sophistication. The crushing of the movement was followed by disillusionment and withdrawal from active political involvement by the villagers, not out of apathy, but because of frustration. With weak local powers further curtailed by government action, the prize of politics became smaller, and the risks increased. “... the prize, such as it was, could not easily be won, so the competition itself seemed hardly worth the trouble” (p. 138).

The study reveals how local and national politics are interlinked.
External forces induce cleavages in village leadership and generate shifts of power within the village. The author argues that the national political system and inefficient state bureaucracy stifle local initiative. Different mixes of power and resources are needed to secure compliance with national goals because of differential ethnic responses in locally encapsulated communities. Despite their political alienation and their apparent withdrawal from public political activities, many village Chinese seem to have found a survival strategy which adapts to and deflects overt public policy. Through the centre-periphery patron-client system, encapsulated communities, such as Sanchun, appear capable of providing a limited form of contingent legitimacy to the larger political system. "... though integration may in theory be the aim of national policy, ethnic differences intervene between the ideal and the real, and a form of attenuated encapsulation persists" (p. 164).

Overall, this book establishes a standard of excellence in both theory and data collection against which future studies of Chinese village communities will be measured. It deserves wide circulation among specialists and the informed public, and it should appear on the shelves of all respectable research libraries.

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