

*Political Participation and Ethnic Minorities: Chinese Overseas in Malaysia, Indonesia, and the United States.* By Amy Freedman. New York: Routledge, 2000. 224 pp.

In *Political Participation and Ethnic Minorities: Chinese Overseas in Malaysia, Indonesia, and the United States*, Amy Freedman undertakes the task of determining the roots of political participation by ethnic Chinese outside of China. She examines three countries in detail and extrapolates her theory from these case studies. Her primary goal is to untangle the conditions under which Chinese immigrants become politically active in their host country. In particular, she focuses her examination on the effects of mobilization, communal organizations, the role of ethnic leaders, and socio-economic status. Her basic hypothesis is that Chinese communities participate in politics through the mobilization efforts of community leaders when there are political, economic, and social incentives to do so. Past studies have focused more on the relationship between socio-economic status and political participation within limited geographical settings. Her comparative approach demonstrates the narrowness and limited nature of the socio-economic theories. In her study, the role of socio-economic status appears secondary, becoming significant only in certain political settings and only in conducive atmospheres.

Freedman begins by discussing the various theories that have been posited for ethnic political participation. She then proceeds to a detailed look at each of the countries and highlights the relevant important historical events. Based on patterns that she observes through the variation in conditions between the countries, she then proceeds to put forth a theory about the relationship between the political and economic conditions of the time and the impact of these conditions on Chinese politicization.

In Malaysia, the Chinese comprise about 29 per cent of the Malaysian population. Despite the high percentage, the Chinese are not as politically and economically important as they had been in the past even though their socio-economic status has not changed dramatically. Freedman's explanation is that the electoral incentives behind Chinese

mobilization efforts have greatly declined. Although the support of Chinese business élites has been important in the past, the growth of the Malay middle and upper classes has altered the dynamics between business élites and political leaders. In particular, the political leaders are now less reliant on the Chinese business élite for political funding. Moreover, the electoral safety of the ruling coalition has also contributed to a lack of interest in the Chinese electoral community. These conditions have defined the political role of the Chinese in Malaysia. Socio-economic status has played some role but has not occupied the most prominent role.

Many of these conditions differ in Indonesia but Freedman's basic theory holds. In particular, in Indonesia the Chinese are a scant 3 per cent of the population, though they remain an important economic component of the country. Some report that the Chinese, as the economic élite, control over 70 per cent of the country's economy. Accordingly, Soeharto favoured the Chinese business élite. The result was that a few business leaders were very influential politically while the rest of the community was marginalized and persecuted for its ties with Soeharto. Changes will certainly result from Soeharto's resignation and will likely again be a function of the motivation of the political élite. Again, political, economic, and social conditions have and will figure prominently into the type of political mobilization efforts directed towards the Chinese.

In the United States, Freedman studies two separate communities, the Chinese in Monterey Park, California, and those in New York City. The Chinese in Monterey Park generally tend to have higher levels of socio-economic status and, moreover, comprise a large proportion of their specific geographic region. Indeed, the Chinese are a majority of the Monterey Park population. The New York City Chinese, on the other hand, are not as successful by socio-economic measures and are not as large a proportion of New York City. However, despite the open political system in the United States, the Chinese in America, whether in Monterey Park or New York City, participate at fairly low rates. Here again, Freedman comes back to her mobilization and institutional structure argument. That is, when politicians have few incentives to

court the Chinese vote, the group remains unmobilized and apathetic in political affairs. In New York, the Chinese group is simply not needed to win an election. Even in Monterey Park, the Chinese need to build networks with other ethnic groups in order to develop influential political channels.

One great strength of this study is its novel comparative approach. Studies in the past have focused primarily on one country, or even more narrowly on a specific geographic region of one country. Often, the greater the expanse of the study, the greater the degree of variation that one is able to obtain in the data. Studies that focus exclusively on the United States obviously miss the important interactive effects that enter the fray as a result of different mobilization efforts within different political contexts. Accordingly, through the comparative research design, Freedman is able to note that similarity in socio-economic status does not manifest itself into the same behaviour if the settings differ, and hence, the story behind Chinese political participation is much more complicated than a simple function involving only socio-economic status variables.

If there is a weakness in this study, it would be the lack of a correspondingly strong empirical component to complement the comparative research design. At minimum, empirical data would contribute to the robustness of the findings. A more empirical study might highlight some of the factors that have been given less attention, and perhaps further disentangle the obvious myriad effects that are at play here. For instance, there is little attention paid to the types of candidates who are running in the elections and how these candidates affect the campaign dynamics with respect to the Chinese community. A charismatic Asian American candidate in the United States might have an impact that is unique from the ones that Freedman has identified. Moreover, Freedman gives some constraints more attention in some contexts rather than in others. For instance, the institutional constraints embedded in redistricting and the U.S. political system require that the Chinese community be politicized but also that their residential patterns are geographically compact. Such issues differ in other countries and are clearly consequential. In sum, the findings could be augmented and strengthened with some rigorous

quantitative analysis, but even without these results, the findings are convincing and insightful.

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