

BOOK REVIEWS

Southeast Asian Chinese and China: The Social-Cultural Dimension and Southeast Asian Chinese and China: The Political-Economic Dimension. Edited by Leo Suryadinata. Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1995.

In July 1914, King Vajiravudh of what was then known as Siam published a four-part article in the *Siam Observer* entitled “The Jews of the Orient”. He was referring to the Chinese, and the comparison was made by no facile mind. Vajiravudh was sent to England for education in 1893 when he was twelve years old. He went to Oxford in 1900, where he read history and law, and later attended Sandhurst. While in Europe he visited France, Belgium, Italy, Hungary and Spain and, while on his way back to Siam, the United States and Japan.

Like the Jews in Europe, King Vajiravudh wrote, “The Chinese also preserved their allegiance to their race, taking advantage of all the benefits of foreign citizenship but giving no loyalty in return. The Chinese also possessed the concept of racial superiority, regarding only Chinese as civilized and classifying all other peoples as barbarian. And, lastly, the Chinese shared the Jewish money-making instinct; they had ‘discovered the Art of living on nothing’. In their devotion to money, the Chinese were without morals or conscience or pity”. Comparing the Chinese to the Jews was not new in King Vajiravudh’s time. As early as 1898 H. Warington Smyth, a Briton working in Siam, wrote in the book *Five Years in Siam* that the Chinese were “the Jews of Siam”. What is remarkable about the discourse on “Chinese as Jews” is the ingenious stringing together of two peoples from different cultural histories into a single register of mutual reflection. But this is beside the point. For such a comparison became

widely accepted because it mirrored the prevalent fear for the two “races” as posing a threat to the social and economic security of the nineteenth century world in both the East and West. The idea of the “yellow peril”, a term which first appeared in the *London Daily News* of 21 July 1990, found an insidious echo in the voice of Luang Wijit Wathakan, Director of the Fine Arts Department of Thailand, who in July 1938 called for the application of the German solution to the Jewish problem in Nazi Germany to the Chinese problem in Thailand.

The heritage of racial discourse tends to confront any attempt to understand and write about the Chinese diaspora. In Southeast Asian countries today where the Chinese are a minority, they are always “one of us, but not quite”. The very ethnic label tends to reinforce the notion of an immigrant community still longing for their homeland, and whose local national loyalty is always in question. With the granting of citizenship rights by post-colonial nations, some Southeast Asian states still find it politically befitting to maintain key “differences” among the ethnic Chinese in order to set them apart from the other citizens within the same polity. While the earlier racial discourse produced crude but effective reactions against the Chinese, such “differences” based on the re-imagining of highly selective social “facts” also result in significant ambivalence in the understanding of the Chinese. The Chinese may be resented for their wealth and economic success, but the fact is that they are also much admired, if not desired. They are admired for their frugality and forbearance, and especially the seemingly miraculous ease with which they create spectacular riches from nothing. But the Chinese themselves are not immune from this irony. While they reject the racist view about themselves, few would resist the seductive call of the other stereotype: the hardworking Chinese whose commercial talent enables them to smell out business opportunities like a hound.

All this is an appropriately tortuous path to map out the complex desire implicated in the two volumes of essays under review. These were papers first presented at the International Conference on Southeast Asian Chinese: Culture, Economy and Society, held in Singapore in January 1994. The volume dealing with *The Social-Cultural Dimension* (sic) classifies the papers under three parts: Ethnic Chinese Society and Leadership, Ethnic Chinese Religion, and Ethnic Chinese Literature. There is much of the “sameness” to those familiar with the literature on Overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia. C.F. Yong produces another of his impeccably researched historiographies, this time dealing with an early communist organization in Malaya. Cheng Lim Keak’s paper on “Chinese Clan Association in Singapore: Social Change and Continuity” repeats much of the theme put forward in his 1985 book, *Social Change and the Chinese in Singapore*,

regarding the “bang”-based clan associations and their response to changes in Singapore since 1959. (“Continuity and Change” is part of the title of another paper on the Chinese in the Philippines by Teresita Ang See. Can the reader expect academics to come up with more imaginative titles?). These and other papers in the volume could do with some self-reflection, some teasing of what all the elaborate details actually mean. For example, writers of Overseas Chinese leadership have always conceptualized it in terms of prominent men’s structural positions in what are regarded as key Chinese cultural institutions: clan associations. If that had been true in the past — even then we might question the idea of power as necessarily lodged in formal institutions — the concepts of leadership and the effect of their influences have to be rethought in the contemporary situation. Changing national politics, we might suggest, would have produced new and more fluid loci of power which dwarf the highly mythologized significance of clan associations and other “traditional cultural institutions”. At the same time, urban consumption and global connections through (Western) education and travelling must bring forth new symbolic capital outside the customary arenas of voluntary associations and temple sponsorship. Other than Tan Liok Ee’s essays on Chinese leadership in Malaysia, which correctly focuses on the complex engagement of the Chinese leaders in independence politics, these essays talk of continuity and not much about the dramatic changes in a world of volatile national politics and regional and global cultural flows.

The more interesting chapters for this reviewer are those in the section on Ethnic Chinese Literature. This, however, consists of only four short chapters. Perhaps it is the freedom of literary imagination which enables some of the writers to open at least a slit in the complex desire of a people at the cusp of tradition and change. Koh Tai Ann’s chapter goes beyond the easy assumption of the liberating potential of using English by Chinese women in their autobiographical writings. The self-inscribed androcentric values are invariably reproduced by these women, without irony, as the stable and harmonious social and domestic order of patriarchal practicalities. The remarkable career of the pre-war Indonesia *peranakan* writer Njoo Cheong Seng (1902–62) is described by Myra Sidharta with the same bitter-sweet aura that marks Njoo’s life. Njoo wrote novels, plays and poems in Indonesian. In spite of his own modern ways in love and taste, he was still concerned with the corrosive force of Westernization on the moral values of men and women among the Indonesians and *peranakan* Chinese.

If there was an underlying motif informing most of the papers in this volume, it would be the conscious and unconscious affirmation of the understanding of the Overseas Chinese as tradition-bound, inward-looking and ambivalent about their role in local national politics. And the

affirmation goes far back to the ambivalence in the stereotype of the Chinese as Jews. It is as if by repeating the idea of the cultural authenticity of the Chinese, the writers can begin to carve out something unique about their community (all except three of the fourteen writers are ethnic Chinese) outside the ruling of racial prejudice and ethnic politics. This evokes precisely the contradiction in the position of the ethnic Chinese. The question facing them has always been: when is a longing for China — the ancestral country — and Chinese tradition simply a matter of cultural nostalgia afflicting all diasporic communities, and when does this come to clearly indicate a lack of national loyalty? The circulation of this desire touches the political nerves wherever Chinese find themselves in Southeast Asia. The current opening of China, and the economic opportunities available there, reopen the proverbial can of worms which spill out in the second volume entitled *The Politico-Economic Dimension* (sic).

The chapters in this second volume deal more directly with the issue of Southeast Asian Chinese and China by focusing on economic relationships. Yashirara Kunio summarizes his argument which he first outlined in his 1988 book, *The Rise of Ersatz Capitalism in Southeast Asia*. It takes Jamie Mackie's thoughtful essay to question the thesis about the peripheral role of Chinese participation in the Southeast Asian economic systems. The power of Mackie's chapter lies in his thoughtful critique of the prevailing fiction about overseas Chinese business practices, and especially regarding the existence of a single "powerful regional network (extending from Hong Kong throughout Southeast Asia) — informal though pervasive, . . . essentially stateless, stitched together by capital flows, joint ventures, marriage, political expediency, and a common culture and business ethic". The representation sounds faintly of a conspiracy of ethnic self-interest beyond national boundaries. Truth is not better served when the editor casually remarks: "The Chinese in Southeast Asia are indeed a heterogeneous group. However, it is a well-known fact that no matter where they reside, they are quite successful in their economic pursuits". Most of the other essays take up the issue of ethnic Chinese involvement with China's economy. Huang Jianli, historian at the National University of Singapore, reminds the reader of the significance of China as a communist state, a fact which coloured any trading and economic dealings with the country in the Cold War era. But the ideological memory lingers. Even as trade with, and foreign investment in, China from all sources rapidly expands, "China connections" still have to be underplayed in the ethnic politics of Southeast Asia. The awkward hesitancy of the following in the introduction can be read under such light: "To an extent, Beijing has been quite successful in attracting (overseas) Chinese capital. However, the largest amount has come from Taiwan and Hong Kong rather than

Southeast Asia. Nevertheless, since some Southeast Asian Chinese capital has also been invested in Hong Kong, it is quite difficult to know for sure the proportion of Southeast Asian Chinese investment in China. However, from available information, most scholars are of the view that the bulk of ethnic Chinese capital is still in the region rather than in the mainland". Wang Gungwu lends his authority as a renown scholar on the Overseas Chinese and as the then Vice-Chancellor of the University of Hong Kong, by assuring the reader that the investments by ethnic Chinese in China have been mainly motivated by profit rather than by cultural sentiment and ethnic ties.

The chapters in the two volumes are of uneven quality and analytical depth. This is to be expected of any book that is a compilation of conference papers. A project such as this dealing with the social, political and economic entanglements of the ethnic Chinese with China is an important one. With the "rise of Asia" and the "romance of Chinese capitalism" made popular by Gordon Redding, the position of the some 20 million ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia deserves critical re-examination in the context of regionalization and globalization. Yet such a project can only begin to help our understanding of the complex processes of "continuity and change" — not always in contiguous duality — if it confronts the fissure brought about by the new reconfiguration of the post-Cold War era. Above all, to heed the warning of Edward Said, it needs a sophisticated "hermeneutic suspicion" of the concepts and discourses which have previously shaped our understanding of a community now inevitably and rapidly changing. The two volumes tease our wish to catch a glimpse of a remarkable people at the "end of history", but never quite delivers.

YAO SOUCHOU
Institute of Southeast Asian Studies
Singapore

Eastern Asia: An Introductory History. Edited by Colin Mackerras. Melbourne: Longman Cheshire, 1992. 639 pp.

This book is an ambitious attempt to provide a one-volume history of eastern Asia. It would be difficult for any such work to be comprehensive, especially when the term "eastern" is used to encompass Southeast Asia as well as the more usual Japan, China and Korea. The main emphasis in