

comparative advantage, they need to be interpreted with caution because they reflect not only underlying economic changes but also the effects of policy interventions. Another issue concerns the use of capital-labour (K/L) ratios as a proxy for “technology”. Admittedly, technology is a notoriously difficult concept to measure, but the K/L ratio may not always be appropriate, especially for (physical) capital-intensive but low-skill industries. Finally, one wonders whether the Malaysia-Japan comparisons are always relevant, because in many cases superficially similar industry categories conceal substantial differences in product mix across countries.

These are all relatively minor quibbles, however, and the book will be of great assistance for those with an interest in the subject.

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13 May 1969: A Historical Survey of Sino-Malay Relations. By Leon Comber. Kuala Lumpur: Heinemann Asia, 1983. Pp. 134 (including plates and appendices).

In this thin and simple book, Comber traces the problematic relationship between the Malays and Chinese in Malaysia (specifically in Peninsular Malaysia) over the last century which culminated in an open, bloody conflict on 13 May 1969, at Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia’s capital city.

The first five chapters of Comber’s book present a brief chronological survey of the historical context within which the problematic Malay-Chinese relations must be understood. The attempt is very descriptive but at times sketchy. In the last three chapters the book presents a stage-by-stage report of what occurred before, during, and after 13 May. Again, the presentation is very descriptive, with little analysis, and, to a certain extent, journalistic.

At the empirical level, what Comber offers is nothing new not only to Malaysianists but also to those who are interested in Malaysian affairs in general. This is owing to the fact that his sources have been solely secondary materials — newspaper reports, published government reports, textbooks on Malaysian politics, and so forth — the very materials used by high school students in Malaysia and the business community, local and abroad. Except for one Malay book, which happens to be a popular historical account of the Chinese in Malaysia, the rest of his sources are in English. Comber’s analysis of the May 13 incident perhaps could have been more interesting and informative, if, for example, he had used Malay and Chinese sources — books, newspapers and journals — as well.

One glaring omission by Comber of an important historical fact is the violent racial clashes between the Malays and the Chinese from 1945 to 1948, which arguably, historically and sociologically, are as significant as the 13 May 1969 incident, if not more. The failure to mention these clashes seems to have exaggerated the historical and sociological importance of the 13 May incident in the history of Malay-Chinese relations. This has rendered Comber’s treatment of the 13 May incident as a sensationalized journalistic piece, overdramatizing the unfortunate, tragic event.

At the theoretical level, Comber’s analysis of Malaysia’s Malay-Chinese relations is based upon the now over-flogged, hence rejected, “integrationist model”. This is clearly

indicated in the last part of the final chapter of the book where Comber argues that “. . . integration would therefore seem to offer the best solution . . .” (p. 88) to the Malay–Chinese problem. Comber’s adoption of an over-simplified version of the ahistorical and astructural “integrationist model” despite his concern for history, is perplexing, to say the least. Probably, we are asking too much from a slightly revised M.A. thesis for a rigorous theoretical analysis of ethnic problems in Malaysia, which many scholars whose works he referred to have even failed to do.

Finally, the contribution of this book can generally be summed up by a statement which appears on the back cover of the book (probably written by Comber himself) that states “. . . a preliminary study of this kind can only be tentative and without great depth, and . . . not . . . definitive . . .” But Comber is certainly over-rating his contribution when he says, in the next paragraph, that it “. . . will provide not only useful background knowledge and information but also some indications and directions for the future study of relations between Malaysia’s two main ethnic groups . . .”. We do not have to go beyond the textbooks which he referred to to get what he claims his book offers.

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