

Chinese Studies of the Malay World: A Comparative Approach. Edited by Ding Choo Ming and Ooi Kee Beng. Singapore: Eastern Universities Press, 2003. Pp. 271.

The Chinese have had a long tradition of curiosity about its southern neighbours, often called the *Nanyang* (or South Seas), and some of their accounts constitute an indispensable source for the writing of premodern Southeast Asia. The volume under review represents an important step towards an understanding of the knowledge about the Malay world by the Chinese from the mainland and the region itself. Most of the authors are senior scholars who have done substantial research in the relevant fields, and the book consists of a compilation of papers presented at an international colloquium held at the National University of Malaysia's Institute of the Malay World and Civilization (ATMA) in September 2002. As the editors point out, although ATMA by tradition has been concerned with Malay nationalism, it has recently organized a series of conferences examining Dutch, French, Nordic, and German scholarship on the Malay world. The latest colloquium on the Chinese aims at answering the question “[w]hat are the distinctive features of Chinese scholarship on the Malay world?” (p. 2). Believing that “the Malay world is the Promised Land for the scholar of inter-cultural relations” (p. 11), the editors suggest that while the long history of Chinese studies about the region has created an “apolitical tradition”, scholarship about the Malay world by Southeast Asian Chinese grew slowly but steadily after the nineteenth century (some of the latter are well represented by contributors to this volume, such as Wang Gungwu, Leo Suryadinata, Tan Chee-Beng, and Ho Khai Leong).

The book's title, *Chinese Studies of the Malay World*, should be understood in a broader sense; it is not mainly about (pure) scholarship in its conventional meaning, but about the construction of various types of knowledge that the Chinese have formulated and disseminated through a variety of media such as travelogues, poetry, novels, and political commentaries. The ten essays in this volume can be roughly grouped into three different yet closely related categories. The first group, composed of essays by Wang Gungwu, Claudine Salmon, and Takeshi Hamashita,

is concerned with the Chinese (and its premodern vassal's) views of the Malay world; the second group, consisting of essays by Suryadinata, Tan, and Sidharta, deals with the cultural contributions of the Baba and Peranakan Chinese to the region in which they have increasingly become an integral component; and the third group, composed of essays by Rosey Ma Wang, Leon Comber, Ho Khai Leong, and Ooi Kee Beng, examines political participation and socio-cultural assimilation of the local Chinese in the Malay world.

Wang Gungwu's essay, "Chinese Political Culture and Scholarship about the Malay World", was originally a keynote address delivered at the colloquium. In his usual eloquent style, Wang paints a picture of the changing Chinese knowledge of the Malay world (defined here as "the whole of the Malay Archipelago") and the reasons behind the changes. He suggests that Chinese scholarship about the Malay world was closely related to "changes in political culture, both in China and in the various Malay polities", given that relations between China and the Malay World are built on "at least fifteen hundred years of good erratic trading relations, followed by a century of distrust, and distance" (p. 12). There are at least five reasons explaining the emergence of distrust and distance in the last century: the arrival of the Europeans forced the local Chinese to be more adaptive to the new power structure, thus leading to the distrust of the Malay trading elite; the newly arrived Chinese merchants and labour were seen as displacing the Malays of their opportunities; the emergence of indigenous nationalism and the corresponding discriminatory actions against the local Chinese; the Cold War environment and the internal divisions in China's politics; and the cultural distance resultant from the distrust and political gap. Wang is more optimistic about the future prospect, in part because of the emergence of a maturing local scholarship by those "loyal citizens of Chinese decent" who have developed "a fine sensitivity about the fears and aspirations of their respective countries". While warning of "the greatest danger" of "discrimination against scholars who are at pains to set out the truth as they know it", he concludes, "when enough scholars are allowed to explore the emerging new realities, and do so honestly and thoroughly, that may help to dispel distrust and narrow the cultural distance" (p. 22).

Salmon examines the account of Wang Dahai who travelled to various parts of today's Indonesia. She suggests that Wang's 1791 work, *Haidao Yizhi*, or *Desultory Notes on the Insular Countries*, is "the most informative account of the Archipelago emanating from a Chinese scholar from the 18th century" (p. 55). While his travelogue shares some common features with other similar works of the time, such as the lack of narrative and a predominant concern over generalities ranging from physical geography to customs, Wang's image of the foreign countries was ambiguous, filling with both pleasant and unpleasant aspects in which Chinese values were cohabited with a foreign social order. Hamashita's fine chapter takes us to the border of Chinese civilization by focusing on the perceptions of Malacca and South China as reflected through *Lidai Baoan* (Precious documents of successive generations), a chronicle from Ryukyu covering the period between 1424 and 1867. In addition to detailing the contacts between Japan and China, this work provides three types of accounts formulated by the kings of Ryukyu pertaining to the South Seas countries: general certificates for security purposes, certificates with trade documents, and regular trade documents. Based upon close textual reading and interpretations of some of these documents, Hamashita argues that even though Ryukyu was surrounded by the sea, the Confucianists there ignored maritime trade and focused instead on self-sufficient village life and agriculture.

The second category of the papers in this volume is concerned with the contribution of the local-born Chinese to the knowledge about the Malay world. Suryadinata documents meticulously the "essential and pioneering role" of the Peranakan Chinese in the formation and development of the Indonesian press, language, and modern literature. Tan's informative essay on Baba Malay poetry publications in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century demonstrates their contributions to the literary scene that was characterized by a significant degree of hybridity. He suggests that some of these poems also serve as a useful window to an understanding of the social and cultural life of the Baba and the Malay world. Regarding the Malay Archipelago as their home, these poems show no nostalgia for China as a nation or an ancestral hometown. The work by Tan Pow Tek (which is considered as

“a unique study of Chinese overseas”), for instance, contains the first full list of Chinese surnames with dialect variations as well as “valuable moral advices, strange life adventure, biographical and romantic verses quite practicable among most of our young Babas” (p. 125). In a similar vein, Sidharta describes the poetry and songs by Hoo Eng Djie and Ang Ban Tjong, two Chinese who lived in pre-1942 Makassar and wrote in the Makassarese dialect or a mixture of Malay and the local dialect.

Chinese knowledge of the Malay world has been shaped by the interactions between the local Chinese and the Malay, and this constitutes a central theme in the third category of the essays in this volume. Ooi Kee Beng’s essay considers the transformation of Malaysian Chinese society from migrants to citizens as a result of “the five reactive waves of modernisation” and as a part of the global history as well as nation-building projects. Rosey Ma Wang’s “Chinese Muslims in Malaysia in Different Periods of History” surveys the ethnological presence of the Chinese Muslims in the country from the early fifteenth century through the colonial period until the late twentieth century. She supplements her historical account with a few specific Hui Hui communities in West and East Malaysia. Though only accounting for 3 per cent of total Chinese in the country, they represent a unique segment whose religious belief is the same as the dominant Malay population, and the interplay between ethnicity and religion has been understudied. Leon Comber discusses Tan Cheng Lock’s ties with the Malay community and his understanding of Chinese culture. Advocating local Chinese recognition of Malaya as their homeland, Tan was sympathetic with the Malays. This “Malayan” outlook, Comber contends, was different from many of the other Malayan Chinese Association (MCA) leaders who were recent immigrants and still retained close ties with China (p. 195).

If ties with China remained as an important factor in shaping Malaysian Chinese views of the local society and politics during the 1950s, this would not be the case for the closing decades of the twentieth century. In his well-documented chapter, Ho Khai Leong, himself a public intellectual and keen observer of contemporary Malaysian Chinese politics, examines how Malaysian Chinese view the Malays and their dominance in the political system since the 1980s. He begins by show-

ing the preponderance of *bumiputera* political resources exemplified in the bureaucracy, state-owned enterprises, the *bumiputera* politico-business class, and *bumiputera* cultural dominance. While the Chinese community has to accept the notion of “the Malays’ Malaysia” in politics as an unchallengeable reality, it is very concerned about Chinese cultural identities that have been perceived to be under threat. Ho carefully examines how different political fractions of the Chinese political parties and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) formulate their views of this “incomplete” transaction and the issue of Chinese public intellectuals in the Malaysian discourse. One of the recurring themes in this discourse has been a realization of the marginalization of Malaysian Chinese politics and an intense resentment towards Malay cultural hegemony; Ho also faults the local Chinese public intellectuals for their “shallow” understanding of the Malay world and the lack of dialogue with their Malay counterparts (pp. 249, 255).

The essays in this volume collectively highlight the multi-dimensional constructions of the knowledge about the Malay world by the Chinese from the mainland and the region. The essays are not merely about the perceptions and scholarship per se, but also about the political culture, trading relations, and ethnic interactions that have all played a part in shaping the substance and characteristics of Chinese studies of the Malay world. In so doing, the authors have demonstrated, directly or indirectly and with a varying degree of success, that knowledge and power are closely intertwined, a theme that has become a subject of intense theoretical debates and scholarly inquiries. With respect to documentation, the majority of the essays are based upon original data in the Malay, Chinese, English, and Japanese languages providing convincing evidence for the arguments. This book, in short, is a useful work for those interested in Sino-Southeast Asian interactions and the changing images of the Malay world as reflected through the Chinese mirror.

A main disappointment to this reviewer is the inadequate attention to a comparative perspective in most of the essays. Although this book carries the sub-title *A Comparative Approach*, it is not clear how this comparison is undertaken and what are the parameters of reference. There is little deliberate attempt, for instance, to compare and contrast Chi-

nese knowledge construction about the Malay world with that of non-Chinese examples (such as those by the West, which has been the focus of previous colloquiums organized by ATMA). A concluding chapter highlighting such examples from a comparative angle, in both spatial and temporal terms, would add value to the volume. This could provide a more convincing and illuminating analysis and description of “distinctive features of Chinese scholarship in the Malay World”, a key objective of the volume as outlined in the introductory chapter.

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