

Book Reviews

Rites of Belonging: Memory, Modernity, and Identity in a Malaysian Chinese Community. By Jean DeBernardi. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2004. 318 pp.

Jean DeBernardi is a researcher who has been writing on various aspects of Chinese religious culture in Malaysia for more than two decades. Her latest publication in this field is an engaging and insightful book on Penang Chinese popular religion. As someone who grew up in Penang in the 1970s, I found this work personally meaningful and rewarding to read. In particular, the ethnographic narration of the rituals of the Nine Emperor Gods Festival triggers flashbacks to the annual event as it was staged next door by a neighbour of mine, a Chinese spirit medium.

The proposition that religious rituals and initiations help define ethnic identity and maintain group solidarity is widely accepted by many scholars. However, while ethnic groups employ rituals and initiations to sustain group identity and solidarity, the effectiveness of this strategy depends on the interplay of a variety of factors; social, economic and political circumstances, differences within the ethnic group, and how the rituals and initiations are “re-invented”. In this book, DeBernardi examines the “localization” of Chinese religion in, first, the emerging British colonial city of Penang in the latter half of the 19th century and then in post-colonial Malaysia in the 1970s and 1980s. In both historical periods, she rightly pointed out that ethnic politics played a decisive role in the “re-invention” of Chinese cultures and festivities.

Part 1 of the book discusses the formation of the Penang Chinese community out of the diverse population of emigrants coming from

southeastern China to the island. Amid the port's diverse ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and religious milieu, descendants of Chinese emigrants became localized by assimilating selected elements of mainly the Malay and British forms of life. At the same time, they also preserved their Chinese identity by hanging on to traditional Chinese practices and festivals. However, Penang Chinese society during the latter half of the 19th century was divided between the Straits Chinese and the *sinkeh* or new emigrants, and also fragmented by the fact that many Chinese continued to define themselves "by native place, regional language, and descent". The re-enactment of traditional Chinese practices and festivities thus serves two ends; one, to delineate the Chinese community from other ethnic communities, and the other, to facilitate Chinese solidarity by broadening the "bases for consociality".

Chapter 3 and 4 focus on the sworn brotherhoods to illustrate how Chinese religion was exploited by community leaders for the purpose of fostering a sense of group belonging. While Chapter 3 looks at the institutionalization of the sworn brotherhood, Chapter 4 provides a detail analysis of its initiation rites. Together the two reveal and explain how the sworn brotherhoods were maneuvered by Chinese leaders to propagate identity and enhance solidarity.

DeBernardi importantly contextualizes the Chinese re-invention of traditional performances and rites in relation to the competition for control of the emerging colonial society that went on between the British and Chinese communities. What this meant was that the Chinese were permitted to practice their religion as long as they did not contravene British notions of "public civility", "rationality", and "authority". Although as political master, the British could circumscribe and occasionally proscribe some Chinese religious practices, there were times when they had to negotiate a compromise with the community. Two examples are used to illustrate this; firstly, the 1857 Penang Riots encouraged the British to allow the Chinese their right to publicly hold their festivities albeit under certain guidelines, and, secondly, the secret societies, or sworn brotherhoods, were banned in 1890 in part because they challenged and subverted

British authority. Despite such measures, the British “did not succeed in preventing the symbols and practices of Penang Chinese religious culture from having continued empire over the imagination”.

Since the British colonial state was primarily interested in constructing conditions for economic development, there was hardly any attempt made to integrate the diverse populations into a common community. The Chinese community was largely left to manage its own affairs, including the practice of its cultural tradition and heritage, as long as it posed no threat to British authority and public civility. In contrast, the Malay-dominated post-colonial state, especially after the ethnic riots of May 1969, proceeded aggressively to entrench Malay political dominance, implement ethnic preferential policies to expand Malay participation in education and economy, and promote Malay culture and language, and Islam as the official religion. Consequently, the 1970s marked the beginning of the political, social, and cultural marginalization of the Chinese community.

Penang is unique in that it is the only state in Malaysia where the Chinese constitute the majority population. Indeed, on the island part of the state, the Chinese represent almost 70 per cent of the total population in the 1970s and early 1980s. Chinese culture and symbols used to dominate the public space, especially on the island, and thus when the Malay-dominated Government implemented policies to increase the presence of Malay culture and symbols in public space, it generated and faced significant resistance from the Penang Chinese. When certain Chinese public performances were either banned (for example, the lion dance for a number of years) or when the Chinese were advised to pipe down their celebrations, public display, and performance — public space in general — became politicized. Part II of the book examines how the Chinese preserve and “re-invent” their religious culture in an increasingly Malay-dominated national public space.

The 1970s and 1980s witnessed the revitalization of the Chinese Hungry Ghosts Festival by certain Chinese leaders in Penang as a means to propagate their tradition and reclaim their right to

practice their religion publicly. However, when they tried to use this celebration to politically galvanize the community, they unintentionally “accentuated differences” in the community. For some, the hungry ghosts festival involves “evocative symbols of unity,” while for others, it symbolizes divisions instead; between upper and lower classes, between reformists and traditionalists, between Christians or orthodox Buddhists and “idol worshippers”, and so on. Indeed, for many educated Chinese, feeding the hungry ghosts is nothing more than superstition. Such contentions are growing because of the increasing literacy rate in the community.

In contrast to the Hungry Ghosts Festival, which is political and centrally organized, the Nine Emperor Gods Festival is largely a non-political activity. DeBernardi argues that the celebration of this latter festival was more for the purpose of displaying the “community’s power, organization, and spiritual commitments”. Participating in the ritual supposedly heightens the individual’s awareness of the sacred, and indeed, the gods are called upon to purify the individual. As such, at the collective level, these are “rituals where the deities would expel impurity, chaos and danger from their community and restored inner and outer order”.

DeBernardi has given a first-rate analysis of changing Penang Chinese popular religious rituals and initiations, both during the colonial and post-colonial periods. It has rightly singled out the central role played by ethnic politics in shaping the use and practice of Chinese traditions and festivities. Although the historical and ethnographic details are very well presented, they are, however, not complemented by a more satisfying treatment of the various theories and concepts invoked. Also, for me the analysis ends precisely where new emerging factors — in particular, Islamization, globalization, and the opening of China — are beginning to impact the roles of rituals and initiations among the Chinese in Malaysia.

LEE Hock Guan