Malaysian Chinese History and Personalities

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The three books above are an outcome of a research project initiated by Kuala Lumpur-based Centre for Malaysian Chinese Studies and sponsored by Taipei’s Academic Sinica. Focusing on the personal side of history, the papers contained in the three books collectively fill up the gap in the writing of Malaysian Chinese history that has devoted much attention to an overview of the Chinese community and to certain events and institutions. Each paper is soundly researched, detailing one particularly Chinese figure of historical importance in political, cultural, or economic arena of Malaysia. These papers are written by experienced experts and young scholars; some are locally based in Malaysia and Singapore, both historical components of British
Malaya, while some are from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Australia. Together, they read as an account interwoven with different personalities and events and telling what have changed and what have sustained in Malaysian Chinese community over a time span roughly commencing from the mid-nineteenth century and stretching throughout the twentieth century.

In the first book, the editor Ho Khai Leong has successfully brought together different papers, focusing on the political elites attached to British Malaya and subsequently Malaysia, excluding those with consciousness oriented toward China. Ho’s introduction to the book presents a good overview of the changing identity and pattern of Malaysian Chinese politics. The papers in the book address eight figures: Yap Ah Loy (1837-1885), Tan Cheng Lock (1883-1960), Chin Peng (born 1924), Tan Siew Chin (1916-1988), Lim Chong Eu (born 1919), Tan Chee Khoon (1919-1996), Lee San Choon (born 1935), and Lim Kit Siang (born 1941). Yap Ah Loy was a Chinese miner holding an important administrative position in the British colonial system. The remaining seven in one way or another played a special role in the political activities of Malaysia as an independent country, either in the movement pursuing independence or in the subsequent nation-making process. Some of the political parties in which they took part were radical like Malayan Communist Party; some worked within the ruling coalition like Malaysian Chinese Association and Gerakan, while some were in opposition parties like Democratic Action Party. Put together, their biographies demonstrate how Malaysian Chinese contemplated and questioned Malaysia’s politics, thus fitting the Chinese title “Kuanzheng yu liubian” (Correcting Politics and Changes).

With the title “Chengxi yu jueze” (Inheriting and Choosing), the second book, edited by Hou Kok Chung, has different scholars to study how Malaysian Chinese have struggled with the problems of choosing between inheriting traditions originating from China and adapting to Western and indigenous cultures. The people surveyed are Lim Boon Kheng (1869-1957), Lim Lian Geok (1901-1985), Yen Yuan Chang (1909-1996), Sim Mow Yu (born 1913), Hsu Yun-Tsiao (1905-1981), Fang Xiu (born 1922), Fang Bei Fang (born 1919), and Yao Tuo (born 1922). The papers collected in the book have covered evenly the cultural, education, academic, and literature fields where the studied elites emerged and generated influences at different points of time.

(born 1925), Kuek Ho Yao (born 1916). Each paper is well-researched, but the subtitle “Rushang” (Confucian Entrepreneurs) needs further clarification. Loosely defined in the book’s introduction as “entrepreneurs with cultural aspiration and commitment,” the term and the characteristics of “rushang” have not been explored succinctly in the book, except the papers on Tah Kah Kee and Lee Kong Chian, in which this was discussed. In fact “rushang” has been a controversial term over the past ten years in the context of rising Chinese entrepreneurs and business networks. People reading the book may wonder which elements of Confucianist thoughts have been embodied by the people studied while and apart from doing business. Another doubt arises with the inclusion of Kuek Ho Yao in the book, though the paper itself is a well-documented research. It appears problematic to classify Kuek Ho Yao as an entrepreneur or a merchant. As shown by the paper itself, while having kinship ties with tycoon Robert Kuok Hock Nien, Kuek Ho Yao was simply an employee in one of Robert’ Kuok’s companies.

In sum, the three books serve well to make Malaysian Chinese history accessible by inviting readers to explore the times and events that the studied individuals went through. We look forward to seeing more such research projects carried out by the Centre for Malaysian Chinese Studies and Academic Sinica as well as other institutes to cover other Malaysian Chinese biographies that have been left out in the writing of history.