

## ULASAN BUKU/ BOOK REVIEW

### *The Chinese Overseas in Malaysia in an Era of Change*

By Danny Wong Tze-Ken, Cheong Kee Cheok &

Lee Kam Hing. Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press. 2018, pp. 225

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The book *The Chinese Overseas in Malaysia in an Era of Change*, edited by Danny Wong Tze- Ken, Cheong Kee Cheok and Lee Kam Hing, is a compilation of nine articles that commemorate the late Professor Lee Poh Ping, who died on 21<sup>st</sup> November 2016. The publication of this edited book demonstrates the noble intentions of its editors to fulfil the wishes of the late Professor Lee. As indicated in the preface by the editors, who were his close colleagues for many years, the completion of his proposed project is the best way to honour his memory. Late Professor Lee was a scholar who devoted his entire life to researching Chinese overseas. Thus, the theme of this book revolves around Chinese overseas by offering perspectives on this group's relation to the economy and international affairs.

The study of Chinese overseas reveals a tapestry of many subjects that encompasses a variety of knowledge disciplines in addition to addressing the problems and challenges faced by the Chinese overseas. Diversity and complexity arise due to the changes that are experienced. Chinese overseas had to accommodate the current changes. They changed from a diaspora of groups who had to migrate from Mainland China and then change their status to citizens who were rooted and residing in the country where they lived. Therefore, the results of the chapter study in this book not only revolve around the contribution of Chinese overseas to the internal economy but also the political aspects of the country in which they live. However, its editors managed to compile chapters in this book that relate to issues between Chinese overseas and those in Mainland China. In addition, the book also focuses on the housing aspect involving Chinese overseas, especially during the period when Malaysia and Singapore were hit by the Asian financial crisis and the issue of Chinese overseas internationalization arose. Current issues are important, especially in light of China's rise as an economic power in recent decades and the launch of the One Belt One Road initiative by Chinese leaders in 2013.

Past studies on Chinese overseas are specific as they are limited to each dimension of migration and the Chinese overseas diaspora itself. For example, Chinese overseas migration is shaped by the circumstances in which it occurs, the way it occurs, and the situation and perceptions of countries inhabited. However, issues related to the diaspora, such as the extent of acceptance by the local community and the policies of the country in which they live, affect them, especially in the formation of their identity. Therefore, the strength of this book is that its articles discuss the questions that have been

raised. Additionally, the chapters in this book also examine the relationship, known as *qiaoxing* between Chinese overseas and their native communities in terms of family support and the context of Chinese economic modernization. Recently, the need for Chinese foreign enterprises to address globalization and the way they internationalize has received increasing attention. Therefore, the strength of this volume is also evident, as some of these questions have been successfully addressed, specifically from the geographical context of Malaysia and Singapore.

This book has been categorized into several themes. The main theme of this book is to discuss the Chinese overseas response to the world recession and the Asian financial crisis. For instance, Chapter 2 describes rarely discussed topics: the impact of the recession on Chinese migration to Malaya and immigrants' ability to send money back to China. The findings show that the arrival of migrants is declining, but the flow of remittances to the country of origin is still running as usual. The experience of migrants in the face of the Asia economic recession is of considerable relevance for migrants during the Asian financial crisis. The Asian financial crisis was a period of financial crisis that gripped much of East Asia and Southeast Asia beginning in July 1997 and raised fears of a worldwide economic meltdown due to financial contagion. The authors try to focus on core competencies, such as export orientation, debt management and production activities, especially in sectors less affected by the Asian financial crisis, which helped many Malaysian Chinese businesses continue to survive the financial crisis.

In exploring the chapters of this book, the reader can draw some conclusions. First, the focus of this book is on Chinese overseas in Malaysia and Singapore, which is characterized more by complexity than equality. Their diversity is formed by differences in their place of origin, which is reflected in the dialectical groups, the situation in their destination, and the effects of external events. Second, the strength and tenacity of overseas Chinese groups were born from their adaptation and response to the environment in the country to which they migrated.

The uniqueness of this book is that it succeeds in tracing the success of the Chinese overseas. That is if success is measured by the ability of Chinese overseas to earn a living while sending money back home. The issue of suffering and pain behind this success, including those related to having to part with loved ones, let alone failure in the region, is addressed in chapter 5 of this book. The author successfully included not only the ebb and flow of remittances from Malaya and Singapore to China, but also a sketch, with a level of detail allowed by the material resources available, of the quantum, traits and mechanisms of remittances to their home countries. The suffering in their native country, China, towards the end of the Qing dynasty (1644–1911) has driven Chinese immigrants to try their luck abroad. Hostility towards Chinese migrants increased due to propaganda in the early years of

the establishment of the People's Republic of China, making life difficult for them. This is because China, which was taken over by the Chinese Communist Party after successfully eliminating the Kuomintang party, caused the loyalty of these Chinese immigrants to continue to be questioned by the country in which they live. Meanwhile, China's rise in the global power arena has also restored positive perceptions of Chinese overseas and the governments of their residing countries.

Although the situation has changed radically, contextually as well as structurally, thus ensuring that history cannot be repeated, important lessons can be learned from the historical experience of Chinese overseas when this study is completed. Specifically, this review has drawn attention to the plight of the migrant community in times of economic crisis. An extensive survey and analysis of Chinese overseas as a group has contributed significantly to the existing research. The studies, especially in discussing small and medium-sized enterprise and overseas Chinese families, as detailed in this book, are an important complement to the extensive Chinese overseas study. Most importantly, this book demonstrates the differences and nuances within the broad range of perceptions and assumptions in Chinese overseas discussions. Indeed, this book presents new research and findings that provide perspectives on aspects of Malaysia's past, which is still lacking in the attention of scholars.

Other themes discussed in this book focus on the private business of Chinese in Malaysia. Chapter 7, for example, illustrates the success of Robert Kuok, one of the richest Chinese individuals in Southeast Asia who organized his business as his company underwent an inter-generational change. The authors tried to show readers how Robert Kuok managed to overcome two major obstacles that sank many businesses in China. The first is the professional management of the organization, and the second is the successful and organized transitions between generations. Robert Kuok was not only attentive to unexpected opportunities, such as the sugar business through imports, he was also able to leverage three sources of identity—family values, dialects and his country of origin—to achieve success for his sugar empire. In the process, he travelled first from Malaysia to Singapore and then to Hong Kong. Robert Kuok's actions and success are a prime example of Chinese internationalization overseas. However, Robert Kuok is not the only example of internationalization by Chinese abroad. In chapter 8, for example, the authors compare Kuok's internationalization with the well-known Malaysian Chinese business, Selangor Pewter, which started as a small company and was later renamed Royal Selangor. Kuok's companies and Royal Selangor have shared experiences, including good relations with the rulers. However, their path to internationalization was quite different. Kuok is a proactive supporter of internationalization. He has taken deliberate steps when opportunities arose and made quick decisions, while the internationalization of Royal Selangor was more cautious.

In chapter 9, which is also the summarizing chapter, the author concludes this volume with a brief overview of the role and perception of Chinese overseas in the context of China's rapidly growing international arena. This chapter, known as "Postscript: China and the Chinese Overseas Today", not only examines the changes that have taken place because of Chinese overseas migration but also suggests that the study of Chinese overseas should redefine their role and perceptions in a broader framework so that Chinese overseas contributions in the country they are loyal to can be understood more precisely by all.

This book has indeed explored widely, collecting several thoughts and studies on the Chinese overseas that were successfully worked on by the late Professor Lee. This book is not only suitable for scholars who are involved in the study of Chinese overseas, but it should also be read and owned by all communities so that they may know more details about the role and contribution of Chinese overseas in the country they now inhabit. It would be great if the editors had provided some background on Professor Lee Poh Ping, as the purpose of publishing the book was to commemorate him. Perhaps these biographical sketches are not about his biography, as that has been written in *Rising China, Resilient Japan, Resourceful ASEAN: Selected Writings of Lee Poh Ping on East Asian International Relations* published by the Strategic Information and Research Development Center, and in a tribute to him in the *International Journal of China Studies*. The editors should provide a reference note on the thoughts of the late Professor Lee on the theme of Chinese abroad.

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