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A Comparative Approach

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Contents

Introduction

DING CHOO MING AND OOI KEE BENG

The initiative taken by Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia's Institute of the Malay World and Civilization (Institut Alam dan Tamadun Melayu, ATMA) to provide a forum for scholars to discuss the Chinese experience of the Malay world is admirable. Much of the significance of the Colloquium on Chinese Studies of the Malay World, held at ATMA on the 16th and 17th of September 2002, comes from the fact that the Chinese form the second-largest ethnic group in Malaysia, a multiracial, multi-religious and mulitilingual country, where non-Malay ethnic groups are allowed to maintain their own cultures, which then fit into a larger dominant Malay national pattern. Thus, they have not tended to question their right of place within the Malay world. By holding the colloquium, ATMA—an institute which, by tradition, has been concerned with Malay nationalism—has given the long tradition of Chinese influence in Southeast Asia due attention. Their presence in the region dates back further than that of practically all other non-indigenous cultures.

By giving voice to Chinese descriptions of conditions in Southeast Asia, Dato' Prof. Shamsul Amri Baharuddin, the ninth director of the institute, makes a major contribution towards pluralizing the construction of knowledge about the Malay world. Prior to this conference, ATMA had already organised a series of other gatherings where Dutch, French, Nordic, and German scholarship about the Malay world were respectively studied. Through a comparative approach, the association between scholarship and cultural points of view is made obvious, as are the cultural prerequisites of social knowledge. No tradition of scholarship has more right than any other to describe the world as they experience it. Taken together, they make up a substantial body of scholarship about the Malay world, ranging

over many disciplines. This cannot but deepen our understanding of the region.

ATMA today is a research institute concerned with a wide range of subjects. It has been holding regular colloquia since November 2000 for scholars of the Malay world from different non-Malay backgrounds, spread across disciplines such as archaeology, anthropology, history, international relations, language, politics, literature, music, sociology and economics. Participants are usually attached to universities, research institutes and libraries throughout the world. These gatherings have been a testimony to the importance of academic cooperation. A scholarly conference may be judged by the content of the papers presented and the quality of ideas exchanged and debated in the ensuing discussions.

The colloquium was officiated by Dato' Chan Kong Choy, the Deputy Finance Minister of Malaysia, while Prof. Wang Gungwu, the director of the East Asian Institute of the National University of Singapore, delivered the keynote address.

Altogether, 18 papers were delivered at this colloquium by experts from nine countries: five were from Malaysia, four from China, three from Singapore and one each from Australia, France, Japan, Indonesia, Sweden and Hong Kong. They were presented in Chinese, Malay or English, expressing the experiences of a traveller, an official or, more commonly, the settled Chinese populations. The topics included historical documents, travelogues, inter-ethnic strife, the Chinese diaspora, cultural hybridity and national ethnocentrism.

It is not possible to attempt a detailed survey, still less a critical analysis, of all the work done by Chinese scholars in various branches of Malay world studies. All we can do is gather a representative sample of scholars and listen to their observations. Nevertheless, the colloquium marks an important milestone both in the study of Chinese writings about the Malay world and in the decolonisation of knowledge.

What are the distinctive features of Chinese scholarship on the Malay world? There is at least one area in which China may be able to make a special contribution in the future—providing access to archival materials in Beijing and other research institutes in China. As things stand, we know a bit about the subject from other available

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sources, since the Chinese have been in the region for quite a while. However, there is much we have yet to learn about early Chinese settlements, their relationship with other ethnicities and polities in the region, and their life as a settled people.

Relationships between ethnicities are never simple and easy, and we know of many massacres of Chinese, in the Philippines, Batavia, and elsewhere. At the same time, we know of numerous cases of cultural hybridity and peaceful coexistence.

Chinese writing about the Nanyang (the Southern Seas) is certainly a well-established tradition. The earliest extant works were in Chinese, and were published in China. Fa Xian, a fifth-century Buddhist priest-scholar, discussed culture and religion in Yavadvipa (Java), while Yi Jing, another Buddhist priest-scholar from the Tang Dynasty in the seventh century, wrote about similar matters in Srivijaya (Palembang). It is believed that Chinese trading and tributary relations with the Malay world had already begun to take shape as early as during the Han Dynasty (206 BC–220 AD). However, Chinese contacts with the region were mainly linked to the settlement and growth of the Chinese population, and were seldom official, unlike later European influence that relied on political control and the stationing of administrators, missionaries, traders and bureaucrats. Although trade was the major concern for both, European relations with the Malay world were essentially colonial and coercive. It is noteworthy that Chinese traders and settlers did not envision any connection between their individual fortunes and an expansive Chinese polity. However, while the arrival of the Europeans did present a challenge to Chinese activities, it also brought new opportunities for individual traders. In that very real sense, the relationship between the two, though unequal, was not often that of coloniser and colonised. Chinese participation in this new structure thus grew enormously. Consequently, much has been written about the Malay world by Chinese in China and later by Chinese living in the region, not to mention writings by Europeans and Malays about Chinese in the Malay world. Historical perspectives on Chinese knowledge about the Nanyang suggest answers to a host of questions:

1. Who are the major Chinese scholars and what are their works?
2. What was of main interest, and how did this change over time?
3. Were their writings merely historical studies or travelogues, or did they have decisive political undertones?
4. Were the writings ever revised?
5. Are the writings, reports and publications over the centuries different in style, content and form?
6. How do Chinese sources compare to other sources?
7. Who were the writings for and what translations have been attempted?
8. How did Chinese attitudes towards the region and local peoples change over time, and how have attitudes towards the Chinese changed among these peoples?
9. How were extra-regional factors reflected in the general process of change in inter-ethnic relations?
10. What have been the experiences of Chinese settlers, then and now?

The early history of relations between China and the Malay world was on all accounts sparsely documented, with few details being handed down about the role played by early Chinese traders and entrepreneurs. In the early days, the number of Chinese in the Malay world was insignificant. Large numbers came during the 18th and 19th centuries, encouraged by European polities. Western writings still provide us with the most reliable statistical information about later Chinese immigration. In any case, prior to the 17th century, writings in Chinese dealing with the Malay world barely mention the activities of Chinese sailors and traders, notwithstanding their prominence and wealth. However, it was obvious that their activities were gaining importance in the late Song period (960–1270). By the time of the Ming (1368–1644), the quality of information on the Malay world written in Chinese had improved, with Ma Huan recording the expedition of Zheng He to Nanyang and Malacca. Notable contributions to contemporary history were *Dong Xi Yang Kao* by Zhang Xie, written in the early 17th century and *Xiguo Wen Jian*, by Jian Longqiong, composed in the 18th century.

Although the early documents were peripheral in comparison with the imperial records as a whole, they are evidence that conscious efforts were made by imperial authors, editors, compilers, historians and many others to preserve details about the Nanyang. In other words, even in the early period, China did have Malay specialists who showed great interest in the languages, cultures and peoples of the region. They exhibited a broad understanding of the Malay world as a region, but their pioneering research had remained largely unstudied, coded in classical Chinese. These scholars were often based in imperial palaces, universities and research institutes in China, and lacked the advantage of local exposure enjoyed by Dutch and English colonial officers of the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries. Like the Europeans, some of the Chinese writers were without any official background or imperial sponsorship. In any case, Chinese studies on the region never provided support for imperialistic ambitions, and peaceful coexistence with other peoples in the region was always necessary for the well-being of the Chinese immigrants.

The article by Claudine Salmon included in this anthology provides us with details about the world of Chinese scholars travelling in the Malay world during the late 18th century, a time when Qing confidence was at its height, and when no cultural threat from the Europeans had yet been experienced. Another perspective on inter-regime relations in Southeast Asia is provided by Takeshi Hamashita's study of official documents from the kingdom of Ryukyu.

While giving us a compact narrative about the long tradition of Chinese contacts with the Malay world, Wang Gungwu's paper reminds us that the modern period of ethnic tension can be seen as an aberration in a history otherwise filled with cooperation and mutual respect. The present period of distrust is analysed by Ho Khai Leong through the responses of the disadvantaged Chinese in Malaysia to the policies of a "mono-ethnic and class-based" state.

Early Chinese writings on the Malay world were rather fragmentary, and provided Chinese courts with mere names of ports and polities in the region. Renowned writings of this kind began with Zhao Rugua's *Zhu Fan Zhi* (early 13th century, translated by F. Firth

and W. W. Rockhill, St Petersburg, 1911). Ma Huan's *Yingya Shenglan* (The Overall Survey of the Ocean Shores, 1433), which relates the travels of Admiral Zheng He, is among the best within this genre. It has been translated and edited by J. V. G. Mills (Cambridge 1970). Other important documents include Wang Dahai's *Haidao Yizhi* from the 18th century, Xie Qinggao's *Hailu* from the early 19th century, and the various short pieces and extracts of longer works collected in the *Xiaofang Huzhai Yudi Cong Zhao* series published between 1891 and 1897. As an indication of the difficulty surrounding our project, it is generally held that J. D. Vaughan's *The Manners and Customs of the Chinese of the Straits Settlements* (1879), for example, actually records more information about the overseas Chinese than any earlier work written in Chinese.

Inconsistencies are, of course, to be expected when one studies such a large collection of documents, and most of these can be easily explained. The authors' personal inclinations, and the involvement of different interest groups and publishers play a major role, of course, especially after 1912. However, besides being mere sources of information, they also stand as documentation of their times, and are therefore invaluable as such.

While the long history of Chinese studies about the region created its own rather apolitical tradition, the more systematic curiosity shown by Europeans in later centuries has been clearly more ideologically and politically informed. However, the Westerners were by no means homogenous in these respects. The English and the Dutch were the most clear-cut colonisers, although in ways different from the Portuguese or Spaniards. Scandinavian designs on the region were of a missionary and entrepreneurial character, while Americans became uneasy colonisers, discursively hampered by their own Constitution. China, in turn, despite its proximity and obvious capability, has never attempted any conquest of Nanyang areas. The Europeans, notwithstanding their inferior numbers, managed to colonise most of South and East Asia, and everything that lay in between.

To some extent, the political distance Chinese scholars had may be considered a merit. In the case of knowledge generated within the

project of colonisation, the sustained exercise of power created stable political configurations and long-lived "scientific discourses." The collection of information was considerably influenced by political goals. The epistemology and ontology conditioned by the exercise of power have, to a large extent, become unquestioned contemporary knowledge about the Malay world. The exposure of an alternative epistemology of Chinese scholarship is therefore a commendable move in sensitising the modern scholar to the political nature of many of the "social facts" about the Malay world now taken for granted.

The imperialistic and commercial impetus that the British had was indeed paralleled by a mammoth task of knowledge construction. Figures like Winstedt and Wilkinson are still popularly read. Their highly pragmatic approach brought to bear the experience of administrators and scholars fully aware of a colonial interaction between "imperial," "migrant" and "indigenous" elements in a highly complex polity. A new awareness emerged in the mid-19th century among British scholars about the size of the Chinese community, their wealth and potential influence, both economically and politically. Many of them were well-versed in the cultures of the Chinese and Malay. Important writings on the Chinese in English were published in *Journal of Asiatic Society*, *JMBRAS* and *Journal of the Indian Archipelago and Eastern Asia*. Similarly important works on the Chinese in Indonesia were published in Dutch in *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde*, *de Indische Gids*, *Verhandelingen*, *Tijdschrift* and *Koloniale Studien*.

Chinese scholarship about the Malay world during the last two centuries is not sufficiently publicised, although there is reason to doubt that any substantial energy was expended during periods of political turmoil on subjects that were too academic and peripheral. Much of the research on the Malay world done at Xiamen University, Jinan University in Guangzhou, Nanyang Research Institute of Jia'an University in Shanghai, Nanyang Xuehui in Singapore or even the Chinese Studies Department at University Malaya still lies buried in libraries.

Scholarship about the Malay world among Southeast Asian Chinese grew slowly but steadily. In recent times, scholars like Wang

Gungwu, Cheah Boon Kheng and Khoo Kay Kim, among many others, have produced significant works about Chinese communities in the Malay world.

Truly large Chinese communities in the Malay world started after the establishment of Penang (1786) and Singapore (1819), with new arrivals quickly achieving social and economic dominance. Before the colonial era, Chinese traders had carried on a steady and robust trade between the various ports in the Malay world and China. We know of colourful characters and significant events from this period and during the early years of colonialism.

It was reported that during the 14th century, a Cantonese named Chen Xuyi fled to Palembang and established himself there as a chief. According to Ma Huan, he was a rich and tyrannical pirate whose activities had angered the Chinese imperial government. Subsequently, he and his followers were captured by Admiral Zheng He in 1407. Also around this time, another Chinese named Cek Ko Po (also named Raden Patah) and his son, Cu Cu (or Arya Sumangsang), played an important role in the Demak Sultanate, and were believed to have been vital in establishing Palembang as an important and prosperous port. A powerful man called Lo Fang-Pai (1736–1795) introduced a *kongsi*-like political organisation in Pontianak, and helped the sultan there to suppress rebellions. His *kongsi* lasted 90-odd years before it was overthrown by the Dutch in 1884. In Indonesia, the Sultan of Banten employed four Chinese as official secretaries and interpreters. Very little else is recorded about them, and it is not known if they were scholar-officials fleeing the Manchu conquest in the 17th century or not. Chinese doctors were also reportedly practising in Batavia and were even employed by the Dutch East India Company on their panel of doctors. Van Hoorn (1678–1681) was reported to have had a Chinese doctor named Chiu Bie Tia (or Chu Mei Die). A Chinese hospital was established in Batavia in 1640. Conclusions about the omnipresence of Chinese commercial activities can be drawn from certain facts: Santubong (Sarawak) was a large port-of-call for Chinese junks during the Tang (618–906) and Song (960–1279) periods; the Chinese were reportedly mining iron ore in the area, tin in Bangka and Biliton

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