Chinese
Village Politics
in the
Malaysian
State

Judith Strauch

CHINESE VILLAGE POLITICS IN THE MALAYSIAN STATE

Judith Strauch

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CHINESE VILLAGE POLITICS IN THE MALAYSIAN STATE

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The Council on East Asian Studies at Harvard University, through the Fairbank Center for East Asian Research, administers research projects designed to further scholarly understanding of China, Japan, Korea, Vietnam, Inner Asia, and adjacent areas.

For my mother

Preface

During the Malayan communist insurgency of the 1950s, euphemistically termed the "Emergency," more than half a million dispersed squatters and small landholders, most of whom were Chinese and were thus suspected of giving aid to the predominantly Chinese guerrillas, were brought together forcibly by British and Malayan security officials into some five hundred fenced and curfewed resettlement camps. Most of these "new villages," as they were called (the name has stuck, though they are of course no longer new), have persisted as viable social units long after the fences were opened in 1958. This book is a study of the social and political life of one of these Chinese villages two decades later, as it is played out today in the context of a Malay-dominated bureaucratic state. In the town I call Sanchun, the preexisting market center and the attached new village together now house some five hundred families, over four-fifths of them Chinese - shopkeepers, wage laborers, and rubber smallholders. The local Malays and Indians are allied socially and politically with the surrounding Malay kampongs (villages), nearby rubber estates, and the district capital with its population of Malay civil servants, rather than with the town of Sanchun, which is essentially a Chinese community.

Most of the generalizations made about overseas Chinese throughout Southeast Asia are based on urban data, in part because in most countries Chinese are primarily urban, and in part because that is the body of data that was collected in the 1950s and 1960s. In Malaysia, however, the rural and semirural Chinese merit closer attention as an important segment of the community, both numerically and politically. Concern over governmental neglect of new villages has been a critical issue since the communal riots of 1969. In 1971 a new federal ministry with full cabinet status was established to deal with issues relating specifically to new villages, though

the focus of this ministry is today less exclusive. In the Second and Third Malaysia Plans (1971-1975 and 1976-1980) the new villages are treated as a separate category in government economic planning and analysis. But until now little scholarly attention has been given the new villages. The few studies that exist have relied chiefly on survey data, and none has treated a single village in depth or placed such a village firmly in the broader context of Malaysian society, as this book does.

My study is based on a total of twenty-two months of fieldwork in Malaysia, beginning with an eighteen-month stay in 1971-1972. I first spent four months familiarizing myself with the new villages, visiting a number of them up and down the country and studying relevant historical and statistical material available in Kuala Lumpur, the capital. No single new village, of course, can represent the full range of diversity that these communities display. Size ranges from a few hundred people up to a highly atypical twenty-seven thousand (Jinjang, just outside Kuala Lumpur), and the location of a village in relation to larger towns, labor markets, and agricultural land resources is crucial in determining the character of each as well. The small market town of about three thousand people in southern Perak where I finally chose to focus my research is reasonably representative of the sort of new village that is numerically most common, however. I lived in Sanchun for the next fourteen months, and I later returned for visits of two months each in 1976 and 1978.

My field methodology included lengthy socioeconomic family surveys, the use of national census data to compare with and corroborate my own, and reference to the limited range of local records and documents that were available. But the most valuable data come from participant observation of community life and activities and from long and frequent discussions and interviews with friends, neighbors, and key informants. I attended scores of committee meetings, banquets, and informal late-evening gatherings in the coffee shops, as well as a number of weddings and funerals and the annual graveyard visitations and temple festivals. Mandarin is widely spoken among Chinese in Malaysia as a school language. Among men, except the elderly, it is almost universal. My own spoken Mandarin is quite adequate for daily interaction, and I worked alone for most of the research period. I was joined by a multilingual assistant for the family interviews, many of which had to be conducted in other Chinese languages, and for a series of in-depth interviews with key informants.

A grassroots political party mobilization, begun in late 1971, proved to be of focal interest for my study. I made contact with state and national leaders who came down to visit the villages, including Sanchun, and it was possible for me then to interview and observe party workings at the state level. These higher-level contacts proved particularly useful in my later visits, when I was able to interview those who have remained in power

throughout some major political upheavals, as well as some who have dropped out of politics in disillusionment. Thus, although my field data are gathered primarily at the village level, the larger perspective into which I place the overall study does not rest on secondary sources alone.

For the reader interested in Chinese or in overseas Chinese (huaqiao) society in general (rather than or in addition to political processes), some comments about the peculiar nature of the Chinese community in Malaysia may be helpful.

The experience of Chinese in West Malaysia differs significantly from that of ethnic Chinese elsewhere in Southeast Asia and the rest of the world in a number of respects. Most notable is the unusual demographic balance. Malaysian Chinese are nationally an extremely large minority; their proportion of the peninsular population (35.4 percent) contrasts sharply with that in Thailand (10.0 percent), Indonesia (2.6 percent), and the Philippines (1.4 percent), for example. Only Singapore, a very special case, has a higher percentage of ethnic Chinese (74.5 percent) (Heidhues 1974: 3). In five of the eleven peninsular states of Malaysia, all along the relatively densely settled west coast, ethnic Chinese are approximately 40 percent of the population, and in one state, Penang, they make up 56 percent. As elsewhere in Southeast Asia, Chinese are overrepresented in the urban areas, but in Malaysia they are found in large numbers in small towns and rural farming areas as well. The 1970 Malaysian census shows that of the roughly 3.1 million Chinese in West Malaysia, 47 percent, not quite one and a half million, live in urban centers with populations over ten thousand, 23 percent in towns with one to ten thousand, and 30 percent in population concentrations of under one thousand people. There is a clear tendency for Chinese in Malaysia, as elsewhere, to specialize in commercial occupations. Again, however, Malaysia differs from the stereotypical case: according to the Third Malaysia Plan's breakdown of the occupational data collected in the 1970 census, only 19.8 percent of the Chinese-Malaysian work force are in the "sales" category, and another 32 percent are classified under "professional and technical workers," "administrative and managerial workers," "clerical workers," and "services and others." Fully 42.8 percent are categorized as "agricultural workers" or "production workers" (mostly in manufacturing and construction) (Malaysia 1976b: 78-82).

All proper names relevant to levels below those of federal and state divisions, both of persons and places, are fictitious. Spellings of proper names are not standardized but follow common Malaysian usage, thus sometimes giving a hint as to the speech-group membership of the bearer (for example, the surname pronounced *Chen* in Mandarin would be spelled Chan, Tan, and Ding by Malaysian Cantonese, Hokkiens, and Hokchius, respectively). Proper nouns aside, Chinese and Malay terms are rendered in Pin-

yin and in the official orthography, respectively. For the reader's convenience I include both a Chinese character list (appendix A) and a list of the Sanchun leaders referred to frequently throughout the text (appendix B).

The present Federation of Malaysia is comprised of the former Federation of Malaya on the Malayan peninsula and two Borneo states, Sabah and Sarawak. In colonial times Singapore was an integral part of British territory in the area as well. The terms Malaya and Malayan will generally be used to indicate the entire sphere of British influence on the peninsula, including Singapore and the two other Straits Colonies, Malacca and Penang, which joined with the Federated Malay States to form the Federation of Malaya. It will be clear from the context when the political unit is referred to specifically. To avoid repetition, Malaysia and Malaysian will generally be used even when the actual unit of reference is West Malaysia rather than the entire federation. The Malay people, or the Malays, are those of the Malay ethnic group; Malayans and Malaysians are members of all ethnic groups who were or are citizens of the Federation of Malaya or the Federation of Malaysia, respectively. Monetary amounts are given throughout in Malaysian dollars (ringgit). In 1972 US\$1.00 was equal to about M\$2.90; by 1978 that figure had fallen to about M\$2.40.

The field research on which this book is based has been generously supported by a number of different institutions over the years. The original fieldwork in 1971-1972 was undertaken under grants from the National Science Foundation and the National Institute of Mental Health; funds for the 1976 research were provided by the Department of Anthropology, the East Asian Research Center, and the Clark Fund, all of Harvard University; research in 1978 was supported by a grant from the Joint Committee on Contemporary China of the American Council of Learned Societies and the Social Science Research Council. I acknowledge this support with gratitude.

I am also grateful to many individuals in a number of government offices in Malaysia who at various times provided assistance—in particular, in the Ministry of National Unity, the Ministry of Technology, Research, and Local Government, the Department of Statistics, and the local district office. Numerous Malaysian political figures have been very generous with their time, providing in their answers to my questions both needed information and valuable perspectives on the issues that interested me. A number of scholars at the University of Malaya have provided both logistical assistance and congenial intellectual exchange. Dr. Chai Hon Chan, Dr. Lee Kam Hing, Mr. Michael Ong, Dr. Lee Poh Ping, and Ms. Loh Wei Leng have all been good critics as well as good friends; they do not necessarily fully agree with my analyses of their country. Without the aid of my field assistants, Mr. Yap Yew Fong and Ms. Ng Kwai Hing, much of this

data might not have been gathered; I would like to thank them both for their very capable work.

The development of the perspectives on politics, ethnicity, and anthropology that are embodied in this book has come about as a process of continuing intellectual interchange with numerous colleagues and friends over the years. Those who have read and commented on parts or all of this manuscript, offering both criticisms and encouragement, include Ezra Vogel, John Pelzel, Arthur Wolf, Harumi Befu, James L. Watson, Rubie Watson, and Heng Pek Koon. Cynthia Enloe has been particularly helpful, both in her attention to detail and in her concern with the more general questions that must be raised. From G. W. Skinner I have learned a great deal about both the art and the craft of exemplary scholarship. To all these people I am extremely grateful.

My greatest debt of gratitude, of course, is to the people of Sanchun. Their warmth and hospitality in accepting me and my inquisitiveness and strange ways into their community, and their cooperation and helpfulness in providing me with needed information and understanding, made the study possible and the experience pleasant and memorable. I write about them in such detail with concern as well as pleasure; it is my sincere hope that I will cause neither embarrassment nor inconvenience to the people who have been such good friends to me. Because of the nature of the analysis I offer of the community and its political life, I must be true to the facts as they appeared to me. Personalities are the stuff of politics, and it has unfortunately not been possible to disguise individuals fully, though all names have been changed. In a very few instances, where I was convinced that an important point could be made clearly and accurately with a careful composite description of characters and events, I have indulged in minor poetic license. I hope that my portrayal of Sanchun will be read as a sympathetic one, for it is meant to be. I am very grateful to the people of Sanchun for making this book possible, and more, for teaching me a great deal about the quality of life.

Abbreviations

ADO assistant district officer ARO assistant resettlement officer BNBarisan Nasional CAO Chinese-affairs officer **Democratic Action Party**

DO district officer

DAP

Malaysian Chinese Association (before 1963, Malayan) MCA

MCP Malayan Communist Party

Malaysian Indian Congress (before 1963, Malayan) MIC

Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army MPAJA

National Operations Council NOC

PAP People's Action Party PAS Parti Islam se-Malaysia

PΙ Parti Islam

PMIP Pan-Malayan Islam Party PPP People's Progressive Party TOL temporary occupation license

UMNO United Malays National Organization

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