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Chinese Minority in a Malay State by Tan Chee-Beng

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Book Reviews

Chinese Minority in a Malay State: The Case of Terengganu in Malaysia.
By Tan Chee-Beng. Singapore: Eastern Universities Press, 2002. 162 pp.

This short ethnographic study focuses on Chinese residents of Terengganu, an east coast Malaysian state where Chinese account for less than 4 per cent of the local population. Two features of Terengganu Chinese society make this case study particularly interesting. First, like certain earlier Chinese communities in Malacca and Kelantan, intermarriages with local Terengganu Malay women several generations ago produced hybrid cultures (known as Baba or *peranakan*) that combined Malay and Chinese elements. Although these patterns of adaptation now survive in only a few small rural communities, they comprise one main focus of this study. Second, Terengganu's political situation, with the Islamic party PAS now controlling the state government, raises issues concerning the treatment of a small Chinese minority under PAS government.

The book is divided into three parts. The first section traces the history of Chinese settlement in Terengganu and describes organizational features of Terengganu Chinese society including temples, schools, and Chinese associations. Section two focuses on two *peranakan*-type rural communities, while the final section examines ethnic relations between Chinese and Malays, both on the individual and governmental levels.

Drawing on a combination of Chinese written sources and interviews with older Chinese residents, Tan Chee-Beng presents a sketch of Terengganu Chinese history dating from at least the eighteenth century. Local informants claim that Chinese first settled in a place identified as Pulau Babi, so named by Malays because Chinese raised pigs (*babi*) there. The earlier Hokkien immigrants, some of whom married local

Malay women, were followed in the nineteenth century by Hainanese and Chinese of other dialect groups, whose adaptations do not seem to have followed the *peranakan* patterns. Contemporary Terengganu Chinese support a variety of Chinese temples, schools, and associations, which are individually described in the remaining chapters of the first section.

The middle portion of this book presents ethnographic data collected in short visits between 1987 and 1994 in two adjacent *peranakan*-type rural communities, Kampung Tirok and Kampung Ganggul Kemang. Here certain Malay-influenced patterns of language usage, dress, food, and housing styles continue to distinguish the twenty-four *peranakan*-type families from most other Terengganu Chinese. Among the details included in this section is information on local family structures, kinship terminology, and genealogies, the latter documenting patterns of past intermarriage between residents of these *peranakan*-type communities and others nearby. Religious activities are described as well, including the village temple festival, domestic worship at ancestral and family altars, Chinese festivals, weddings, and funerals. Local reliance on smallholder rubber supports a comfortable standard of living for these rural residents; however, most of their older children chose to immigrate to towns and cities in search of more challenging employment. Once settled in town, it appears that *peranakan*-type Chinese lose this identity. According to Tan Chee-Beng (p. 3), "a NP (non-*peranakan*) informant may be originally from a P (*peranakan*) family, as many Chinese families in the town migrated from the P (*peranakan*) communities in the rural area". Improved transportation has also made it possible for younger children to attend Chinese primary schools in Kuala Terengganu town, rather than the local Malay school, which will likely also influence their future aspirations and identities.

Ethnic relations between Chinese and Malays form the focus of discussion in the final section of the book. The intermarriages between Chinese and Malays that produced the *peranakan*-type cultures of the past occur only rarely today, and when they do, the Chinese spouse adopts Islam and becomes a member of the Malay community. Thus, contemporary Chinese accommodations take on a different style, which

Tan Chee-Beng describes as primarily avoiding confrontations of any sort. Even when Malay squatters persisted in occupying old Chinese cemetery lands, the leaders of the Chinese community refused to take matters into their own hands, turning repeatedly to Malay officials to find a solution to the problem. Although the return of the Islamic PAS government to Terengganu in 1999 raised potential concerns among some Chinese about fair treatment, Tan Chee-Beng describes a situation where the PAS government is in some respects more sensitive to Chinese rights than the previous UMNO (United Malays National Organisation) regime. He ends this chapter by underscoring the pattern of using the structures and leadership of Chinese voluntary associations to address community problems, and the importance of promoting inter-ethnic cooperation among both Chinese and Malay youths.

In addition to Tan Chee-Beng's narrative descriptions, this book also includes a total of 30 black-and-white photos as well as other figures, such as house plans, genealogical charts, and sketches of ritual offering set-ups that nicely complement the written descriptions. Maps of Terengganu and Kuala Terengganu appear in the first section of the book, but unfortunately they do not show key places that are highlighted in this section, such as Pulau Babi or Kampung Tirok. Later sketch maps clarify their positions somewhat, but geographic relationships remain somewhat unclear in this reader's mind.

The principal shortcoming of this study is the absence of analytical discussion throughout the book. Generally, information is presented as data collected through a series of interviews with various male community leaders and other informants in different Chinese communities throughout the state. Given Tan Chee-Beng's previous publications on Baba society and culture in Malacca, on *peranakan*-type Chinese in Kelantan, and on Malaysian Chinese identities in general, it is surprising to encounter almost no analytical comparisons between the Terengganu Chinese and Chinese elsewhere in Malaysia. Any number of questions are presented by this study that beg further analysis. For example, in the Introduction, Tan Chee-Beng points out that the Terengganu *peranakan*-type Chinese, while recognizing certain features that distinguish themselves from other Chinese, do not assume a

subethnic identity like the Baba of Malacca and Singapore or the *peranakan* of Indonesia (p. 2). Yet he never follows up on this observation to explore why local identities work differently. Similarly, while he endeavours to trace historic Chinese migration patterns within Terengganu (pp. 10–14), there is no attempt to query what led the Chinese to move repeatedly from one place to another. One more analytical comment does appear in the account of *peranakan*-type parents sending their children to Chinese primary schools, where he notes that this should not necessarily be seen as a return to Chinese culture: Chinese parents did not previously send their children to Malay schools in order to assimilate, but because they had no choice (pp. 84–85). Further analysis of the significance of the data presented in this volume would have strengthened it immeasurably. What it offers now is a limited account of an under-reported segment of Chinese Malaysian society. However, given the paucity of materials on this subject, its publication is welcome.

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