

BOOK REVIEW

The Politics of Chinese Unity in Malaysia: Reform and Conflict in the Malaysian Chinese Association, 1971-73 by Loh Kok Wah, ISEAS Occasional Paper No. 70, Singapore, Maruzen Asia, 1982, vii + 86 pp.

This book analyzes the responses of the Malaysian Chinese to the Malaysian government's New Economic Policy (NEP) during the early 1970s. It examines the reconstruction of the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) between 1971 and 1973, when the NEP, which favored improvement in the status of Malays and was seen as threatening by some Chinese, began to be effective.

In the 1969 General Elections, the MCA lost one-half of its parliamentary seats, down from twenty-seven to thirteen seats, and remained in a state of being "neither dead nor alive" in the period between the May 13 Tragedy of 1969 and the launching of the NEP. Dr. Loh feels that the key to the restoration of political power among the Chinese¹ in the early seventies lay in the reform of the MCA (p. 3), and he discusses in detail the reorganization of the MCA. In this examination, he critically adopts the method used by Prof. Wang Gungwu,² which classifies the Chinese into three political groups and identifies the supporters of each group. The classification of Prof. Wang is as follows:

- Group A: Maintains links with the politics of China, either directly or indirectly, and is concerned always with the destiny of China.
- Group B: Consists of the hard-headed and realistic majority who are more concerned with the low-posture and indirect politics of trade and community associations.
- Group C: A small group often uncertain of itself because it is uncertain of its identity, but generally committed to some sort of Malayan loyalty.

Dr. Loh criticizes this model on the grounds that it neglects elite-mass differences. He insists that since "their [the masses] involvement in these groupings occurs only after specific elites have succeeded in persuading the masses to accept the elite-derived concerns of the different groups as their own as well," it is wrong to equate the masses with Group B as Prof. Wang did (p. 3). Consequently, Dr. Loh's viewpoint consists of a "dual structure" of analyzing the relationship between the reform of the MCA and the rise and fall of these three groups on the one hand, and of finding out which group gained the support of the masses on the other. In the following, the present reviewer shall outline the analysis of Dr. Loh.

In February 1971, the Chinese Unity Movement which called for the equal treatment of all Malaysians was launched, with the blessing of Tun Tan Siew Sin, then party president, as complementing MCA activities. The main actors of this movement were urban Group B, such as businessmen-community leaders and the Chinese education movement activists, and younger Group C, such as young English-educated professionals. It disappeared, however, only three or four months after its inception, when it was renounced by Tun Tan for its attempt to become a political organization independent of the MCA, and was also criticized as an example of Chinese chau-

¹ "Chinese" in this review refers to "Malaysian Chinese."

² See Wang Gungwu, "Chinese Politics in Malaya," *China Quarterly*, No. 43 (July-September 1970).

vinism by the largest ruling party, the United Malay National Organization (UMNO).

Prior to this, in March 1971 Tun Tan nominated Alex Lee, leader of the Chinese Unity Movement, as a member of the National Central Committee of the MCA. He also appointed, after the collapse of the movement, the younger Group C Chinese including the movement's activists (Dr. Lim Keng Yaik, Lee San Choon, etc.) to the heads of the party's State Liaison Committees. This group, called the Young Turks, had a sense of crisis about the violation of Chinese rights by the NEP and tried to unite the Chinese in the guilds and in villages by renovating the MCA.

The Young Turks failed to change the party structure, but they wrestled with the problems of the New Villages (NVs) by forming a Task Force centered around Dr. Lim Keng Yaik. Their main activities took place in Perak. The Task Force initially engaged itself only in political awareness activities and was looked upon with suspicion by the villagers. They then made an all-out effort to solve the problems of the villagers such as the land problem (many villagers had been given only Temporary Occupation Licences [TOL] by the government), in order to win the support of the villagers. Thus the villagers (or the lower-class Chinese) were integrated with the Group C elite Chinese.

In the course of 1972, however, the confrontation between the reformists (Young Turks) and the Old Guards became very serious. The MCA Youth Section headed by Lee San Choon (who was conferred Datuk-ship in early 1974) endeavored, together with the Old Guards and Tun Tan, to expell the Young Turks and their organization, the Task Force, from the party. The Task Force's opposition to the National Front (NF) idea, which surfaced at that time, led UMNO in 1973 to condemn the reformists for chauvinism and communism. In July of the same year, several thousand reformists were expelled from the MCA, and most soon joined the Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia (GRM). Thus ended the MCA Reform Movement.

It is understandable that it was impossible to achieve Chinese unity, since it was impossible to realize a convergence of interests of younger and older Group C, Group B, and the lower classes, as well as recognition by the UMNO. In any case, it is a fact that the Chinese were definitely awakened in this process. The younger Group C, which played a leading role in the Reform Movement and in the Task Force, consisted of the young English-educated professionals (p. 12), well-educated people from the middle class with well-to-do backgrounds (p. 28), and young urban elites such as doctors, lawyers, teachers, and businessmen (p. 29). Similar to the younger Group C of the sixties in Prof. Wang's terms, their demands for Chinese rights were great because they were loyal to Malaysia (Wang, p. 26). They gained the support of lower-class Chinese by upholding the protection of the rights of the NVs people during this period. They retreated, however, when confronted with the alliance of the Old Guards (which consisted of older Group C in the center, and local Group B, leaders of the community associations) and the UMNO which held the supreme power in Malaysian politics.

The above is a summary of the analysis by Dr. Loh of the Chinese Unity Movement—MCA Reform Movement during this period. Thanks to his analysis, we are able to understand the social and political backgrounds to the inner party conflicts of the MCA which have remained unclear so far. The similarity of the personal and social backgrounds of the Young Turks shown by the author appears to justify his method of categorizing them.

The three-way classification was considered by Prof. Wang when he wrote in 1970 as a method that was more effective than simple class distinctions in order to analyze the social backgrounds of the Chinese political movements, including even the class-

oriented movements of the Malayan Communist Party (MCP). It should be even more relevant today when a proletarian party is not allowed to exist. Furthermore, the NVs-analysis presented by Dr. Loh to overcome the shortcomings of Prof. Wang's method is elaborate and quite suggestive. Dr. Loh points out that, while the State government granted the conversion of TOL to thirty-year leases in response to the Task Force's and villagers' demands, it also raised considerably the premium and the quit-rents to be paid by the peasants. As a result, the conversion became in fact more difficult than before. This episode (pp. 36-40) reminds us of the incomplete agrarian reforms in many countries.

In contrast to Prof. Wang's fixed notion that the Chinese masses are in Group B and cannot transcend the limits of the Chinese community, Dr. Loh finds that the lower-class Chinese in NVs, i.e., the masses, are less concerned with inter-communal national politics and their primary interest is in local socioeconomic issues that impinge upon their daily lives. This is Dr. Loh's justification for making a distinction between the elite-analysis and the mass-analysis (p. 43).

This is a persuasive argument but it has its own shortcomings. Firstly, it considers the lower-class Chinese to be only the inhabitants of NVs and ignores the urban working-class population. The book would have been more comprehensive if the author had analyzed (1) what the Reform Movement meant to the urban lower-class Chinese, (2) why the MCA reformists could not deploy such a movement in order to gain widespread support from them, (3) what the relations were between the urban lower-class Chinese (as well as the lower-class Chinese in the NVs) and the MCA, and (4) whether and how the MCA's general policy and character changed after the setback of the movement. Secondly, Dr. Loh asserts that one of the reasons for the victory of the Democratic Action Party (DAP) in the 1978 General Election is to be found in the fact that the party got support from Group B elites who succeeded in amassing popular support for the Chinese educational movement. Here the language problem is regarded as the key by which the elites influenced the people. But why then was the language problem not a key factor in the NVs in 1971-73? In other words, the present reviewer cannot judge whether the language education problem should be dealt with as a case of "inter-communal national politics" which "the lower-class Chinese are . . . less concerned with" today (p. 43), or as an issue having "implications for the socioeconomic advancement of the Chinese masses" (p. 86).

There is also a shortcoming due to Dr. Loh's persistent use of Prof. Wang's three-way classification. Prof. Wang states that Group A will grow smaller and remain nostalgic about China's glories (Wang, p. 29). Dr. Loh also puts aside Group A from his consideration probably because he considers that it has already lost its substance. Accordingly, there remain only two categories, Groups B and C. As a result, his analysis has become slightly simplistic, making unclear for instance the difference in the social backgrounds of Tun Tan and Lee San Choon.

Dr. Loh included Lee in the young Group C in one instance (p. 17) and later mentions him simply in the Old Guards, without clarifying to which group he belonged. Datuk Lee San Choon, since his appointment to the party presidency in 1974, has tried to break away from the old customs and practices of the party³ by having the party energetically participate in economic activities through the Multi-purpose Holdings Bhd, an MCA-sponsored holding company. It is obvious that his line was quite different from that of Tun Tan or Tan Sri Lee Siok Yew, who resigned in 1977 from the post of deputy president of the party after having criticized the

³ Although Datuk Lee resigned as party president in April 1983 and at the same time withdrew from the political world, it is generally believed that his position in the party remained solid until then, and his resignation was not due to factors within the party.

“commercialization of the party.” In Dr. Loh’s analysis this point is overlooked. Consequently, the background that led to Tun Tan’s resignation as president and to Lee San Choon’s assumption of control over the party is not clear.

The study would be more encompassing if it had analyzed whether the Reform Movement and its setback had had something to do with this reshuffle of top party leaders. Similarly, because the characterization of the GRM, which began to cooperate with the MCA upon joining in the NF in 1972, is not clear, it is difficult to understand why there was room in the GRM to accommodate so many reformists who had just been expelled from the MCA. Guo Yan points out in his book⁴ that Prof. Wang’s analysis presupposed the prewar society. Guo proposes instead the following classification for the present-day analysis (pp. 178–82):

1. Those who attempt to assimilate themselves with *bumiputras*. The MCA in the fifties and the sixties.
2. Those who attempt to be integrated with *bumiputras*. They demand equality of educational opportunities but not equality of the languages. For example, Lee San Choon and others.
3. Chinese nationalists who oppose assimilation and integration. The Chinese-language-educated from the lower class.
4. Those who seek a multi-language policy. The DAP.
5. Realists who place priority on the interests of individuals and groups. The GRM.
6. Socialists.

Numbers 1 and 2 are of special interest in the classification. Dr. Loh, who also quoted from Guo’s book (pp. 15, 69), should have given some thought to these points.

It is regrettable that Dr. Loh did not refer to Group A. The radicalization of the Labor Party of Malaya (LP) during 1967–69 and the reopening of the armed struggle of the MCP, were possible only because of the support and the enthusiasm of one segment of the Chinese youth. These young people probably belonged to younger Group A who felt a sense of unity with the Cultural Revolution in China. They suffered physically from the suppression after the May 13 Tragedy and then suffered mentally from China’s policy of reconciliation towards the Malaysian government.

On the contrary, the suppression of the Chinese by the NEP and the change in China’s policy towards the realist line, reoriented the sentiments of some of the formerly apolitical or pro-ruling party Chinese towards China. There exist also groups which are always sympathetic to the internal and external policies of China; their voices are in particular reflected in local Chinese newspapers. These three groups, contrary to the attitude of former Group A which remained loyal to China, presumed loyalty to Malaysia and at the same time expressed their sympathy towards China. We might call them neo-Group A.

The present reviewer considers that the existence of this group cannot be ignored as an element in the analysis of Chinese politics. Granted that nostalgia for and sympathy with China may not be related to domestic politics, it would still be wrong to confine those who have nostalgia for China to the diminishing Group A only, as Prof. Wang did.

Lastly, we could understand better the NVs problems if Dr. Loh had explained why those problems ceased by putting the focus on the land tenure system—who were the landlords and with which political power were they associated? This may be expecting too much of Dr. Loh, given the complex conditions which existed.

(Fujiro Hara)

⁴ Guo Yan, *Mahua yu Huaren shehui* [The MCA and Chinese community] (Kuala Lumpur: Reader Service, 1980).