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Review Article

Student movements: Malaya as outlier in Southeast Asia

Wang Gungwu

Student activism in Asia: Between protest and powerlessness
Edited by MEREDITH L. WEISS and EDWARD ASPINALL
Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012. Pp. 318. Index.

Student activism in Malaysia: Crucible, mirror, sideshow
By MEREDITH L. WEISS
Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Southeast Asia Program and Singapore: NUS Press, 2011. Pp. 302. Index.

The University Socialist Club and the contest for Malaya: Tangled strands of modernity
By KAH SENG LOH, EDGAR LIAO, CHENG TJU LIM and GUO-QUAN SENG
Amsterdam: IIAS/Amsterdam University Press, 2012. Pp. 347. Index.

For the past three decades, student movements in most countries in the world have been beaten back, but there are signs that some may be returning. In response to the Arab Spring, students participated fully in Tahrir Square and beyond. The student elections in Egypt that followed, however, seem to have been divided according to the various links that each student group had with the political groups contending for state power, like the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamists on the one side, against secular and revolutionary groups on the other. It is not certain if the student elections really reflected the overall mood of the country or whether they were simply shaped by political protagonists outside the campuses.

The first of the three books reviewed here, *Student activism in Asia*, recognises the way politics shapes what students do. It explains how earlier groups of students often started their activities independently of established national players outside their campuses, but were nevertheless drawn into party politics. The essays in the volume provide a thorough analysis and are particularly welcome because student movements, although prevalent in the politics of modern Asia for at least a century, have not been comparatively studied before in such a systematic way. In contrast, we know more about the anti-Vietnam War student movements in the United States and Europe (especially in France and Germany) in the 1960s because there have been numerous studies that closely examined them across continents. Scholars like

Wang Gungwu is University Professor at the National University of Singapore. Correspondence in connection with this paper should be addressed to: eaiwgw@nus.edu.sg.

Seymour Martin Lipset and Philip Altbach laid the foundations for the comparisons made, and their studies included some of the movements in developing countries in Africa, Latin America and major countries in Asia. For those in Asia, however, we have only had country studies illuminating the different origins and motivations for student action. For example, in East Asia, several studies have been published on the movements in China, Korea and Japan, while in Southeast Asia, specific periods of student political activism in Myanmar, Indonesia and Thailand have attracted wide attention.

Student activism in Asia provides us with comparisons of five student movements in East Asia with five others in Southeast Asia and offers fresh perspectives of the phenomenon. Among the five chapters on Southeast Asia, the one on Malaysia is by Meredith Weiss, who is also the author of the monograph on Malaysian student movements that will be reviewed in this essay. I do not know what movements there were in countries like Cambodia and Laos, and Brunei is too small for any movement to have been politically significant. But it is notable that the student activism of countries like Vietnam and Singapore have not been included, although Weiss shows in her essay, and in more detail in her book on Malaysia, that some of Singapore's activism was indistinguishable from that in Malaya/Malaysia. In the case of Vietnam, it should not perhaps surprise us that we know so much more about student protests against the Vietnam War in countries far away than about the role of Vietnamese students who were caught in that war within their own country. This suggests also that when serious conflicts are matters of life and death for all citizens, there is little need for separate struggles such as student activism.

The neglected story of Singapore's students fortunately is told in the third book that covers the two decades from 1945 to the late 1960s after which the country's students were systematically depoliticised together with the rest of the populace. It was forty years later before a group of the main student protagonists could come together to recall their movement's history, and published their stories in several essays in *The Fajar generation* (2009), edited by Poh Soo Kai, Tan Jing Quee and Koh Kay Yew. Their deeply felt personal accounts were what inspired a group of four young Singapore historians to follow up with the full study reviewed here, *The University Socialist Club and the contest for Malaya*.

Student activism in Asia opens with a survey of earlier studies on the subject and what they found that was common to, or different from, student politics in different parts of the world. The editors bring together a team of authors to provide an excellent summary of the major findings and suggest how they could explain similar developments in the two regions of Asia that the book covers. They use four themes for their purposes; comparing the education systems in which the students organised themselves, the evolution of collective identities among students, the nature of the regimes the students had to face, and the diffusion of features of international student activism in Asia.

The essays on East Asia consist of well-rounded analyses made possible by the fact that each of the five territories have been well served by earlier research in their respective languages, in Japanese, Korean and Chinese. Teresa Wright discusses both Mainland China and Taiwan and examines the several generations of activism that began with the May Fourth Movement of 1919. Both her essays deal with

students in modern higher institutions who saw themselves as privileged to help the nation develop and prosper and acted in the name of salvation causes, but encountered conflicts of great local, national and international complexity. Stephen Ortmann's essay on small groups in Hong Kong who were more focused on specific issues has an easier chronology to follow. Certainly the students there did not suffer the deadly consequences that many on the Mainland and Taiwan had to face. In contrast, those in Korea were uniquely anticolonial against fellow Asian imperialists while those in Japan were discontinuous. Unlike movements elsewhere, those in Japan that were crushed before the Pacific War were totally different in character from the postwar student activism. Nevertheless, when taken together, the five sets of movements that are carefully examined through the four approaches used by editors Weiss and Aspinall support the picture of students responding in similar ways to the major political changes taking place in their emerging nations.

The remaining five in Southeast Asia are more difficult to compare. There are simply far more variables in each of the countries and the political, demographic and cultural differences influenced student behaviour in distinct ways. Nevertheless, the essays here enrich the narratives of student activism and include fresh information that enables us to make comparisons across the region. At the same time, each essay also demonstrates how different were the reasons that led students to go beyond campus politics and engage in larger community and national issues.

Edward Aspinall traces the anticolonial roots of the movement in Indonesia that can be compared with what spurred the students in Burma described by Win Min. There were significant differences between the education the British offered in the University of Rangoon and what was taught in the engineering college in Bandung, however. Thus, in each country, what happened to students after independence became two totally different stories. Ultimately, the course of national politics determined the stances taken by the students. By the 1960s in Indonesia, with the Communist Left powerful and threatening the state, it was eventually the right-wing students who made history and helped install an essentially military regime under President Suharto. The contrast with Burma is stark. With the military regime under Ne Win wielding absolute power and the local Communist parties in disarray, the students represented a force for liberalism and democracy that was treated with considerable brutality by the military regime for decades. In both instances, the nature of the regime shaped the respective student movements and also dictated their very different fates.

Thailand may appear an exception because there was no colonial master to fight against. But, as Prajak Kongkirati shows, the military that dominated the country aroused a response from the students similar to that in Burma in the early 1970s. In Thailand, however, they were driven to the Left, with some joining the Communists in the jungle. But, to a greater degree than in Burma, the students were closely integrated with strong civic movements in their country and the monarchy provided a large shelter for the state and legal institutions and also for the universities. Furthermore, the expansion of higher education in Thailand played its part in transforming student activism into a social force, and the restoration of democratic practices also allowed students to support political protagonists more openly. There was no call for assuming the kind of distinctive student identity that

characterised the organisation that Soe Hock-Gie and his brother Arief Budiman came to lead in Indonesia in the 1960s.

The institutionalised forms of democracy in the Philippines provided a different framework for student activism that is harder to explain. Patricio Abinales traces its multiple roots in the anti-Spanish and anti-American pasts, but the main postwar inspiration was communism, whether from the West or from the Maoists of China. This points to the influence of external developments on student activism rather than indigenous factors. As the essay shows, higher education policies, more developed after 1945 in the Philippines than elsewhere in the region, neither helped nor impeded the politicised students. The elected government was relatively liberal and had not promulgated laws that would force the idealistic to reject the political system. Democratic parties and a free press allowed a lot of room for dissent. And except for the Muslim students from Mindanao and Sulu, no other collective identities could challenge that of patriotism and the new Filipino national identity. Thus the essay is nuanced and illuminating in exploring the reasons why eloquent left-wing idealism was not enough to hold activist students together for long.

Meredith Weiss's essay on Malaysia brings together a sharper outline of the book she has recently published. As I shall be reviewing the book here, I shall only make one brief comment in the context of the comparative essays. Her summary highlights an issue that is less pertinent in the other countries, the ethnic dimension of the Chinese and Indian minorities that made the student movements vulnerable to communal politics outside the campus. As the nation building process advanced, the original pluralist thrust of student activism in Malaya (including Singapore) and then Malaysia, was undermined. The different ethnic ambitions constructed collective identities that most student movements have been fortunate to avoid. Thus, it would have been useful if the editors of the volume had highlighted this aspect in their regional analysis and explained why ethnic issues elsewhere seemed to have been more successfully subordinated to broader socioeconomic and national concerns.

Let me now turn to Weiss's comprehensive monograph on student activism in Malaysia. This is by far the fullest study of the various kinds of student activism in this complex multi-communal state that was expected to build a nation out of a classic example of a 'plural society'. Her study takes the story from the early beginnings of student consciousness in the 1920s in the various Malay States protected by the British colonial government and in the colony of the Straits Settlements (Singapore, Penang and Malacca), that is, British Malaya, all the way to the post-Mahathir Malaysia of the twenty-first century. That coverage led her to distinguish three periods of activism. There was an age of relative innocence prior to the Second World War when there were mere stirrings in a few politicised Chinese schools and some social and cultural consciousness among the Malays. After the end of the War in 1945, there followed degrees of radicalisation in the face of decolonisation on the one hand and a communist rebellion on the other. How far did students respond to the first? Did they choose sides in the second? After the separation of Singapore from Malaysia in August 1965 and, in particular, after the tragic events following the riots on 13 May 1969, the new challenge of separate collective identities along communal lines in national politics began to fragment activist student organisations. This happened

to an extent the students had not anticipated and in ways that they had never experienced before.

Chapters two and three in the book take the story to the separation of Singapore from Malaysia. For this period, the role of students in Malaya has been touched on in books on decolonisation written by historians like Cheah Boon Kheng, Tim Harper and Anthony Stockwell, and included in official reports on communist activity in both Singapore and peninsular Malaya. For much of the period, there were two main groups of activists. There was the small number of students at the Raffles College, the King Edward VII College of Medicine and, when the two were merged in 1949, the University of Malaya. Distinct from them were the younger students who began in the Chinese middle (secondary) schools of Singapore, who were joined by their counterparts in the Federation of Malaya. The best and brightest from these schools then entered the privately funded Nanyang University after it opened its doors in 1955.

There are reasons why this part of the story happened mainly in Singapore and Weiss is aware of the exceptional conditions that made this so. She has, however, added some less known facts about the Malay students in various parts of the country who were increasingly involved in the new nationalist movements arising from the Anglo–Malay negotiations over sovereignty and eventual independence. These are valuable contributions to a fuller understanding of the political awakening experienced by that generation of students. The fact that theirs was a low-key movement was obviously related to the fact that major military operations of the Malayan Emergency on the mainland made student activity far less relevant, when it was not actually dangerous.

Since the more dramatic activism for this earlier period was predominantly in Singapore and the third book reviewed is about that earlier period, I shall take that up later. Let me now add a few comments on the later chapters four, five and six, the most original chapters in Weiss's book. They not only place on record what the numerous student groups were allowed to do, especially after the May 13 riots and the introduction of the Universities and University Colleges Act, but also provide a fresh analysis of student movements that tried to participate in off-campus political battles as well as those who wanted to fight for ideals that had been neglected by officialdom.

At the heart of the new developments was the gradual dismantling of the English-medium schools together with the growing resistance of Chinese-medium schools against being turned into Malay-medium ones. This was a complicated struggle among partners within the ruling party, the Barisan Nasional and, much of the time, it is obvious that the student movements were often refractions of that struggle rather than autonomous initiatives aimed at attaining student ideals. The connection with political power was often direct. Inevitably, idealism gave way to party-shaped campus activism with specific political ends. Weiss has a difficult task keeping the many strands together and matching student actions to changes in policies concerning higher education. There were many changes in methods and goals pursued by the government from 1975 onwards, but the overall expansion of tertiary student numbers in the country as a whole probably played a decisive role in taming the students. After that, as Weiss clearly demonstrates, the student movements that

remained were dominated by ethnic organisations totally different from the multicultural groups that the University of Malaya's students had started with after the Second World War.

This takes me to the third book reviewed here, *The University Socialist Club and the contest for Malaya*. The Malaya in the title was the name used as in 'British Malaya' that included Singapore and, from 1948–63, in the Federation of Malaya. But, as the name of a country in people's hopes and dreams, it has fallen out of our vocabulary with the formation of Malaysia. The book suggests, however, that Malaya remained in the consciousness of many activists for decades afterwards. The four historians, all of the post-Malaya generation, are understandably intrigued by the way the concept-name has inspired so many, especially during the period 1945–65. This is where the Singapore story is connected to the first half of Meredith Weiss's book that takes us to the end of the Malaya dream. Nowhere else in the region have students been linked to a country's name-that-might-have-been. There were other name changes in the region, for example, from Siam to Thailand, the debate on the future of 'Indochina', the change from Cambodia to Kampuchea and back and, more recently, when Burma became Myanmar. In other examples, like the revolutionary states of Indonesia for the East Indies, and Vietnam for the colonial entities of Cochin-China, Annam and Tongking, the names finally adopted were inspirational.

The book is a close study of just one of the many student organisations of the 1950s and 1960s. Why is this one of interest? The British planners who agreed to establish the University of Malaya in 1949 at the final stage of colonial power provided the opportunity for higher education so that there would be people trained to lead and serve the plural society of Malaya. The students had the aura of an elite that the Weiss and Aspinall volume identified as likely to be activist. The idea of Malaya thus projected continuity, an orderly transfer of power from the British to the English-educated who were prepared to inherit that multicultural country. The ideal was challenging and attractive and was why most of the students expected to participate in the development of a new postcolonial state. Among them, however, were nationalists who were also drawn to the underlying structure of identity politics rooted in their different ethnic origins, as Chinese in Singapore and as Malays in the Malay states. And for those who were moved by the call for social justice without reference to race and class, they envisaged an agenda for radical transformations that included being sympathetic to those willing to fight against the existing order in the streets or in the jungle.

Not surprising, the active students in various parts of Malaya were divided largely between those who were engrossed by the pull of identity politics and those who were drawn to work for social change. For Malays, Melayu Raya was at first an inchoate but meaningful ideal and many came to admire their youthful counterparts engaged in the victorious war in Indonesia. For Chinese educated in the middle schools, however, the image of idealistic and patriotic Chinese students in 1919 led by students of Peking University was a powerful one. Growing up in Malaya in the 1930s, I recall how the story of Chinese students was repeatedly told in Chinese schools and inspired many of the students who dreamt of going to China to further their studies. The context was one of national humiliation and the need to unite the country against the imperialist forces that kept China divided and weak.

When the Japanese occupied *Ma-ra-ee* (Malaya) in 1942–45, there was a foretaste of changes to come. Organised student movements were not possible, but individual students were prepared to join the anti-Japanese movement to fight in the jungle with either the British, or the Malayan Peoples' Anti-Japanese Army. Several college students (there was no university in Malaya, only Raffles and Medical Colleges) and many from the Chinese schools were known to have taken this path. And there were young Indian students who joined the Indian National Army so that they could fight for Indian independence from Britain. And many Malay schoolboys were awakened to nationalism by the Melayu Raya idea that the Japanese were willing to encourage. In other words, a questioning and rebellious mood came out of the war years, especially among Chinese students who had lost family and friends. On the whole, the students followed the leadership of the politically active and were not yet able to initiate any movement in the name of students.

But for those who became college and university students in the two decades after 1945, the seeds of activism had been sowed in ways described in the Weiss and Aspinall volume for many countries in both East and Southeast Asia. In Malaya, what politicised students in China were doing, encouraging demonstrations and opposing authorities, was an inspiration. After the war, student leaders in China displayed even more remarkable organisational skills. Even peaceful student protests against bad food and poor hostel conditions could be channelled to include left-wing slogans attacking the government's conduct of the civil war against the Chinese Communist Party, popular anger against runaway inflation, and nationalist calls against American interventions in the country's affairs.

The University Socialist Club (USC) was formed when anticolonial slogans could lead to calls for social revolution. When some of its members were arrested for sedition, that gave the Club a sense of mission that led some members to help found the People's Action Party (PAP). The book reviewed here captures the tensions of the shift from a student organisation to one that believed that it could be part of a national government that stood for change. It also discovered that the causes it supported also appealed to Chinese students at the Nanyang University and in the middle schools. But, as the book shows, once Singapore was self-governing, most other students rejected the Club's radical mission. And when Malaya was abandoned to give way to a larger federation of Malaysia, and the PAP that the club supported was split into two, its members were once again drawn into the politics of opposition. For them, the Malaya that represented continuity had become an unrecognisable Malaysia, something of a 'neo-colonial plot'. The ejection of Singapore from that federation was not seen as an opportunity, but as another twist in the plot.

Here the story ends with the official depoliticisation of student activity, in a way not dissimilar from the policy towards all kinds of student activism in Malaysia described in Weiss's book. There most students turned away from left-wing ideals towards identity politics that was expressed in terms of *bangsa* (race) and *ugama* (religion). That process reminds us of the student movements in Indonesia in the mid-1960s that helped to lead to the military crackdown on the Communist Party of Indonesia (PKI). When the movements went further to push for regime change and supported President Suharto's displacement of President Sukarno, many of its leaders were drawn into mainstream politics. At the University of Malaya in Kuala

Lumpur, students supported their counterparts in Indonesia, not so much because they were fellow students, but more because of their opposition to President Sukarno's Konfrontasi policy against Malaysia and the PKI's role in that policy. What distinguished the Indonesian movements is that there were student leaders who insisted that they acted as students who stood above the contending political parties and factions in the country.

Weiss's study of Malaysia describes the communal identities that undermined the traditions of student activism in the University of Malaya. It does not highlight the significance of keeping the university's name even after Malaysia was formed. The name serves as a memorial for the diminishing groups who still believed in non-communal national politics while student groups even on that campus have been forced to turn to the rhetoric of ethnicity. The study of the USC in Singapore's original University of Malaya recognises that the Malaya name has lost its meaning in Kuala Lumpur because of identity politics. In Singapore, however, separation after 1965 cut it off from the possibility of the Malaya dream. Therefore, despite the efforts of the PAP leaders to retain the substance of an English-language 'plural society' in a nation-building city-state, the continuity that was an essential part of the dream was lost. It is in that context that the USC has subsided into an episode in student movement history. As the book points out, often in the words of the club's strong supporters, it was sidelined because the nation that its leaders imagined was no more. No other student movement has had to endure what a country's name-change has bestowed.

The three books reviewed here each make a valuable contribution to our understanding of the variety and complexity of student movements in Asia. The specialists who studied the more dramatic movements of East and Southeast Asia have drawn a lucid picture in the Weiss and Aspinall volume. For the first time, we have a comparative view of the interplay of education and student politics in modern Asian history. What is significant about the other two books is that the detailed study of the activism in Malaysia by Weiss has come late, long after the others have been closely examined. A careful reading reveals why that story has been more difficult to follow and explain in the framework provided by student movements elsewhere. Having her book come out just before the publication of an intimate study of one such student organisation in Singapore further emphasises the role played by the Malaya roots of student activism.

Both the Malaysia and Singapore books suggest that the lack of high drama for student movements there had to do with the expectations of a Malayan heritage that could not be fulfilled. That abandoned ideal left the 'Malayan' student movements in both countries on the margins of two contrasting kinds of national politics. Malaysia has framed its politics in terms of Malay sovereignty and Singapore aspires to make the nation simultaneously a global city. Neither goal has helped student activism in the two countries to make its mark in East and Southeast Asia.