

## Malaysia

*Mapping Chinese Rangoon: Place and nation among the Sino-Burmese*

By JAYDE LIN ROBERTS

Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2016. Pp. 200. Maps, Notes, Bibliography, Index.

doi:10.1017/S0022463418000115

Compared to their counterparts in maritime Southeast Asian countries, the Chinese in Myanmar have been a low profile and marginal community, and have seldom received much scholarly attention. As Jayde Lin Roberts argues, 'much remains hidden in the history of the Sino-Burmese' and 'the field of Sino-Burmese studies is in its infancy' (p. 15). Indeed, Myanmar's Chinese have been neglected by scholars of Southeast Asia or the overseas Chinese.

In *Mapping Chinese Rangoon* Roberts applies participant-observation, interviews, and theories of space and place to illuminate a Sino-Burmese ethos and the vicissitudes of the community, focusing on descendants of immigrants from Fujian. This is an ambitious work, which will go a long way to filling the general lack of knowledge about the lives of the Sino-Burmese. The emphasis on spatial relations and consumption provides new insights into the history of the Myanmar Chinese. For instance, through the prism of architecture, the volume provides a stimulating overview of how Rangoon Chinese along the Andaman Sea and Straits of Malacca attempted to 'maintain their Hokkien traditions while pursuing modernity as practiced and represented by the British Empire' (p. 42). Roberts was invited to join various regular activities and events in the lives of local Chinese communities, and the book presents intimate accounts of everyday life in these Hokkien communities in Myanmar. For instance, the author is told of a significant change in the composition of traditional lion dance troupes in Yangon, which since the 1990s have included young Burmese and Indians. This transformation indicates that the Yangon Chinese have begun to consciously adapt to the local culture, seeking aspects they can incorporate to create a sustainable home for themselves (pp. 126–30).

Despite my agreement with Roberts' general thesis that the 'Sino-Burmese continue to occupy an in-between zone (p. 139)' and that their lives have 'required continual negotiation with multiple forces at multiple scales (p. 135)', the author does not succeed in convincing me completely.

The lack of different perspectives leads to some inaccuracies. The author maintains that there was increased Chinese migration into Myanmar after the 1850s because Rangoon and Lower Burma were colonised and developed by the British 'but the sparsely populated country was unable to meet the increasing demand for labor' (p. 29). Roberts neglects another critical contributing factor in China: the Qing dynasty which had previously strictly prohibited emigration was forced to conclude the Convention of Peking in 1860 with Britain. The Convention forced Beijing to allow Chinese emigration, thus providing a source of labour for British colonies. The author also argues that the Chinese population in the capital remained small and male-dominated 'because the Qin [*sic*] dynasty government severely restricted

the emigration of women' (p. 34). But this is only one side of the coin. Chinese women practised footbinding under the Qing and hence lacked the mobility to travel, emigrate and work abroad. More importantly, women under traditional Chinese patriarchy and ethical codes were confined to the domestic sphere.

The narrative description of Yangon Yunnanese is based on quotations from contemporary Hokkien respondents and informants (pp. 104, 108), which may misrepresent Chinese immigration. In recent years, increasing numbers of wealthy and middle-class Yunnanese living in upper Myanmar have moved into Yangon. At the very least, the author could have tapped into multiple Burmese, Cantonese and Yunnanese points of view to cross-validate and triangulate them. The Myanmar Yunnanese itself are a complex group. Some newly urbanised Burmese from the ceasefire areas have often been conflated with Chinese immigrants, especially Yunnanese, by the Burmese and even Yangon Chinese communities 'due to their complexion, their inability to speak proper Myanmar language and the proximity of their homelands to Yunnan' (Hélène Le Bail and Abel Tournier, 'From Kunming to Mandalay: The new "Myanmar Road"', *IFRI Asia Visions* 25, Mar. 2010, p. 36).

There are three main dialect groups of Myanmar Chinese, the Hokkiens, the Yunnanese, and the Cantonese. Most urban Chinese live in the two largest cities — Yangon and Mandalay. But this book devotes little space to cities other than the capital, nor does it discuss the non-Hokkien-speaking dialect groups in any depth.

Historically, Chinese associations based on birthplace or blood ties in Rangoon did play a crucial role in ensuring mutual help among the early migrants and as a medium of maintaining contact with hometowns. Today, 'Sino-Burmese still maintain a sense of connection to these association halls and, through them, a connection to their native places' (p. 39). The book pays little attention, however, to the shrinking space of traditional Chinese associations in Yangon, particularly the clan and hometown associations. Parts of some association buildings have been sold or rented out to provide a regular income, which is used for the worship of shared ancestors; and only the ancestral hall remains functioning. The association buildings have lost their original and primary functions. With an ageing membership, the associations themselves are failing to attract the younger generation, who have lost interest in traditional Chinese rituals and activities. As a result, the associations may in the future exist in name only or eventually close down unless they adapt and reinvent themselves. This phenomenon is also occurring in other Southeast Asian countries to varying degrees.

Significantly, this volume does not include the experiences of the Myanmar Chinese during the '8888' Uprising, the Saffron Revolution, Cyclone Nargis or the 2010 General Election. Roberts discusses the 1967 anti-Chinese riots in Rangoon at length using secondary sources, but new and relevant documents declassified by the United Kingdom and the United States and in the Japan National Archives are not employed.

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