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Silent Invasion

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SEMIOTIC INVASION: The Chinese in Southeast Asia. By Garth Alexander. London: Macdonald and Co., 1973. xiii and 274 pages. £3.50.

Garth Alexander, a young British journalist based in Southeast Asia during the past six years, believes there is a notable similarity between the fortunes of the Overseas Chinese and the fortunes of Southeast Asia as a whole. He contends that the racial fears of these "Jews of the East" are integrally linked in many Asian lands with a common fear of communism which he says has been pathological.

The Yellow Peril hysteria which swept America and Australia 75 years ago has been compounded with a Red Peril since 1950, Alexander says, and he attributes both the powerful impact of the Domino Theory and the long waging of the Vietnam and other brushfire wars in this region rather to irrational racism than to sober fear of Communism. In the light of these views the author ventures to re-write recent Southeast Asian history.

The book moves along in readable journalese. It is marked by the weaknesses as well as by the strengths of journalism in contrast to scholarship, even though it was four years in the making. It brings together accounts of the role of the Chinese community in the Malayan 1948-1960 "Emergency," and in the Kuala Lumpur riots of May 1969. In lesser depth Alexander describes the build-up and course of the September 30, 1965 attempted coup in Indonesia. His portrayal of the current Sarawak (and West Kalimantan) scene is helpful for a fair appraisal of the Chinese part in guerilla terrorism there.

Students who want an overall glance at these episodes to learn lessons of social, political and security significance will find the book stimulating and worthwhile reading.

Throughout the 274 page work, the author clears the Overseas Chinese of any charge that they are an imminent or aggressive threat to the sovereignty and independence of their host countries. On the contrary, he holds that the indigenous leaders who yield to anti-Chinese prejudices, in Malaysia and Indonesia for instance, are over the long range their own worst enemies. Unfortunately Alexander oversimplifies certain issues about which he writes, and he phrases his censures in a style insensitive to the self-esteem of the host-country people. The result may only be to antagonize the very readers who are in a position to remedy the injustices which he deplures.

He represents the Nationalist Republic of China as a much more active meddler in the internal affairs and foreign-policy making of Nanyang countries than the Communist authorities in Peking. Quite possibly history will vindicate his verdict, but an anti-Taiwan bias (or a newsmen's haste) betrayed the author into error when he wrote that the American beginning of normalization of relations with Peking

was followed by a sharp decline of Overseas Chinese investments in Taiwan. Japanese 'satellite' companies, which had contributed so much to Taiwan's prosperity, began closing local factories at an accelerating rate in expectation of China opening her doors to foreign companies

which did not trade with Taiwan. Suddenly, the Nationalists were faced with the prospect of losing their nuclear umbrella, as well as a substantial slice of the massive forty-five per cent of their G.N.P. which came from international trade. The strategic and economic consequences of America's changed policy were enormous. Although there was no immediate threat of invasion from the mainland, economic stagnation loomed as a frightening possibility for Taiwan. And without a thriving economy, it was unlikely that Taiwan, already short of her U.S. military aid, would be able to keep up her defense requirements" (p. 193). Alexander correctly chronicles the collapse of Chinese secret societies in the Nanyang countries, especially in Singapore and Malaya, where they had been so mischief-making, during the Japanese occupation years, 1942 to 1945. (The Cold War)

After the riots the Tunku spoke of 'the growing menace of Chinese secret societies'. To research an article, I went to see the heads of the secret society divisions of the Singapore and the Malayan police. I was surprised to discover that, according to the police of both countries, the secret societies were on their last legs. While the Malaysian government officially claimed that 226 secret societies were keeping up the bloody old Triad tradition, Malaysian police confidentially assured me that less than half a dozen actually did so. The Tunku's so-called secret societies were no more than street-corner gangs, I was told. In Singapore, traditionally Southeast Asia's center of secret society activity, I was informed that barely 1,000 members were active and only one, vaguely Triad group, the 21 Gang, existed. Yet the Malaysian Minister of Home Affairs went on television in October 1969 to warn the nation that secret societies were merging into large fighting forces and ganging up with sinister intentions. He used this argument to justify renewal of the all-powerful anti-secret societies act of 1958 for a further five years. But he even admitted that of the 13,241 people arrested under this sweeping ordinance between October 1958 and April 1969 only 1,404 had been found guilty of any offense and either punished or, much less, reprimanded (p. 27). A glance at the index of the book will show some 34 reference to events or policies in the Philippines. Alexander relates the case of the Xuy Ding brothers, editors and publishers of the Chinese Commercial News, at considerable length. He devotes much attention and cogent reasoning to the regarding effect which existing naturalization laws have on a whole some integration of the Chinese community into Philippine society. At the outset of his book the author quotes a 1981 prediction of Toynbee, in *A Journey to China on Things which Are Seen*, that through peaceful penetration "in the end the current of Chinese expansion in the Tropics will meet the current of Hindu expansion over the submerged heads of the smaller and weaker and less efficient people in between who are fast going under." (p. viii) He concludes, suggesting an alternative possibility: "The Chinese and Southeast Asians may finally come to accept one another and to assimilate. They may produce a new stock, neither

entirely Chinese nor entirely Asian, but 'strong' enough to withstand a pure Chinese racial and cultural onslaught. The bourgeois Overseas Chinese cannot be expected to be anything but fair-weather allies while they are deprived of basic human rights and surrounded by fear and hatred. China herself cannot be expected to feel sympathetic to the world while the world is patently not sympathetic towards her. Nor can we in the West make the world around us a safer and better place unless we make a supreme effort to involve ourselves in the welfare of the world, and not just the welfare of our own countries. (p. 249).

A thoughtful reader will sift from these lines certain food for reflection with regard to constructive policies towards the Chinese in Southeast Asia.

Charles J. McCarthy, S.J.

MUSLIMS IN THE PHILIPPINES. By Cesar Adib Majul. Quezon City: Published for the Asian Center by the University of the Philippines Press, 1973. ix, 392 pp.

Those familiar with Dr. Majul's writings on Philippine Islam over the last decade have long awaited this history of the Muslim Filipinos to the end of the nineteenth century by a Filipino Muslim scholar at home in the European-language, Arabic, and Filipino source materials. They will not be disappointed, for this is an important book, and if not definitive, will be the necessary starting point for any future study of Muslim Filipino history. Placing the history of Philippine Islam in the larger context of Southeast Asian Islam, Majul has moved away from the Hispanocentric perspective and made considerable use of Dutch printed and manuscript sources hitherto unused by historians of the Philippines. This is especially important for the periods when the Spanish presence was absent from Mindanao and Sulu, periods till now largely unknown because absent from Spanish writings.

The periodization of the book is essentially that earlier set out by Majul in his article, "The Role of Islam in the History of the Filipino People," (*Asian Studies* 4 [1966], 303-315), though as a history the book effectively comes to an end with the Revolution of 1896. A preliminary chapter attempts the reconstruction of the chronology of the Maguindanao and Sulu sultanates, based largely on the *tarsilas*, but complemented by certain later European sources. The second chapter is concerned with the spread of Islam in the Malay-populated lands of Southeast Asia, and specifically in the Philippines to the coming of the Spaniards. After a third chapter which sets general perspectives on the relations between Spaniards, Christian Filipinos and Muslim Filipinos, the heart of the book is to be found in the chapters dealing with the so-called "Moro Wars", punctuated by two intermediary chapters dealing chiefly with Maguindanao-Sulu relations with other European and Asian powers. The ninth chapter on the political