

Schooling Diaspora: Women, Education, and the Overseas Chinese in British Malaya and Singapore

Review Number: 2339

Publish date: Thursday, 3 October, 2019

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ISBN: 9780190495619

Date of Publication: 2018

Price: £53.00

Pages: 210pp.

Publisher: Oxford University Press

Publisher url: <https://global.oup.com/academic/product/schooling-diaspora-9780190495619?cc=gb&lang=en&>

Place of Publication: Oxford

Reviewer: Stan Neal

In 1899 the Straits Chinese physician and community leader Lim Boon Keng made the case that female education was beneficial to the community as a whole: 'Keep your women in a low, ignorant and servile state, and in time you will become a low, ignorant and servile people – male and female!' (p. 69).⁽¹⁾ Thus, female education was essential to the success of the Chinese community and the Chinese community was essential to the success of the colony. Given the supposed 'civilizing mission' of the British Empire, we could assume that the education of colonial subjects, and especially women, would have been a priority for the colonial authorities. At the same time, it would make sense that the hard-working, entrepreneurial and charitable Chinese community would gladly support the education of Chinese girls in order to further cement the community's vital role in colonial society. However, Karen M. Teoh's detailed investigation into female education amongst the Chinese community in British Malaya and Singapore demonstrates that the realities were much more complicated. Teoh shows us that Chinese female education was a battleground for, and contributing factor to, tensions around gender roles, decolonisation, and Chinese and Southeast Asian nationalism over a period of significant change and upheaval. The stories of the educated ethnic Chinese women provide a unique and original snapshot of how individuals interacted with these broader processes of political, social and economic change.

Karen M. Teoh is an Associate Professor of History and Director of the Asian Studies programme at Stonehill College. *Schooling Diaspora* follows Teoh's previous publications and PhD research at Harvard University on issues of gender, education and heritage in the ethnic Chinese community in Singapore and British Malaya. The book starts with the graphic tale of an acid attack on the principal of Nanyang Girls' School in 1951 for being too pro-British, and the divide within the overseas Chinese population between Chinese and colonial identities is a key theme throughout the text (p. 1). It traces these divisions across a range of sources – school archives, textbooks, newspapers and oral history – to tell this story of Chinese girls negotiating these competing forces.⁽²⁾ These sources help Teoh to unpick conventional wisdom. For example, we might assume that English-language education was more important than Chinese-language education in the context of social modernization, but 'Chinese institutions were in fact far more clearly focused on imparting notions of scientific learning, secularism, non-domestic careers, and political awareness' (p. 13). The fact that Chinese-language schools did not enforce gender-specific curricula and

force girls to study domestic science, as in the English system, demonstrates the other central tension of this work: gender roles. By focusing on gender, Teoh is able to further complicate the already complex world of Chinese education in colonial Southeast Asia.⁽³⁾

Chapter one of *Schooling Diaspora* gives an overview of the general contours of the colonial politics of female education over a century. Crucially, the 'outsider' status of the Chinese in Singapore and British Malaya was a key issue as the colonial state did not feel the same duty to provide education for the Chinese population as they did for the indigenous Malay population. Generally, in the early colonial period, missionary groups led efforts to educate, with English-language missionary schools and private 'free' schools open to Chinese students (p. 22).⁽⁴⁾ In contrast, the Chinese community privately funded Chinese-language education, which pleased the colonial authorities as it saved the government money. However, Teoh notes that the British colonial administration began to turn from relative disinterest to interventionism from the 1920s, and in the post-war period, as Chinese education began to be seen as a potential political threat.

Chapter two details the experience of ethnic Chinese girls in English-language schools. Whilst these schools were racially mixed, the fact that the Chinese were the largest ethnic group meant that they were a significant demographic component of English-language schools in Singapore and British Malaya. Moreover, the Chinese community held an English education in high esteem because of the opportunities the English language presented in terms of colonial careers and cultural cachet. The Chinese community also donated heavily to English-language schools, which were more expensive than Chinese-language schools. However, these schools were also divisive in the Chinese community, particularly with the rise of Chinese nationalism and anti-colonial sentiment. Teoh shows how ethnic Chinese who had an English-language education were abused by the staff and disadvantaged by racial hierarchies in these educational establishments, whilst being perceived as too pro-British and not really 'Chinese' by their peers (p. 58). Crucially, the English-language schools were not bastions of modernity and progress towards gender equality. In line with contemporary British social norms, these schools included a version of home economics or domestic science to train the girls as dutiful wives and, depending on social class, managers of a household. Here, Teoh does a good job of tracing the contours of class, gender and race that shaped educational experience. There is also an effective juxtaposition between the specificity of the colonial setting and the universality of the photographs of school inspections, physical education classes, textbooks and teacher training.

Alongside the English-language schools, the Chinese community in Singapore and British Malaya also privately funded Chinese-language schools. Chapter three examines the discussions around female education in the *Straits Chinese Magazine*. Teoh describes a 'Nyonya Problem' that confronted the Straits Chinese community, due to the assumed connection between educated women and modernization.⁽⁵⁾ Education that 'improved' Chinese women – intellectually, morally and as social functionaries – was seen as beneficial for the Chinese community at large (p. 80). Consequently, influential Straits Chinese leaders such as Lim Boon Keng and Song Ong Siang were key founders of the Singapore Chinese Girls' School in 1899. However, they also complained of the reluctance of the more conservative Straits Chinese to provide charitable support. Prevailing anxieties about the Western model of schooling and the perceived social disruption of educating girls persisted within the Chinese community in the 20th century. This conundrum left the educated Chinese girls in an impossible situation. They were expected to shed the perceived negatives of traditional femininity and simultaneously continue to embody the positives (p. 83).

Beyond the mixed messages and expectations around gender roles, schools were also sites of politicisation. Chapter four examines Chinese Girls' Schools in the first half of the 20th century. As private, rather than colonial, institutions they were open to influence by their links to China and East Asia, with the Republicanism of Sun Yat Sen, Chinese Communism and Japanese modernization all shaping the political leanings and activism of staff and students. Teoh gives examples of how Chinese girls' education shaped their involvement in Chinese nationalist and anti-colonial activism, which also blended with anti-Japanese political activity during the second world war. Of course, this political activism was also connected to ideas

about female emancipation. As Chinese schools were not organised along traditional Confucian lines, but academic subjects, and did not have gender specific curricula, they fostered modern ideas about the role of women. However, despite the liberating ideas inculcated by female education, social norms and traditional views of women's roles limited career options. Teoh shows how traditional views lasted longer in the Chinese community in Singapore and British Malaya than in China, particularly after the 1949 revolution.

Chapter five is the most innovative and human of *Schooling Diaspora*. This chapter focuses on the 're-migration' of educated Chinese women to China. Here, Teoh draws on interviews with women who moved to China between the 1940s and 1960s and is able to extract detailed personal insights from her interviewees despite the threat of censorship influencing what interviewees may or may not say. For many of these women, their education formed the basis of their pro-Chinese, anti-Japanese and anti-British inclinations. However, due to their overseas Chinese background, many of these women were viewed suspiciously or treated as outsiders in China. The story of Tang Meijun, who actively fought against the Japanese and British with the Communist Malayan Peoples Anti-Japanese Army, but was later 'sorry' that she had moved to China, is a good example of how many of these women seem to have been isolated between competing forces (p. 136). This chapter is where the book is strongest, using individual life stories to trace the tensions between the ubiquitous contrasts of tradition and modernity, as well as the more complicated divides between political concepts like feminism and socialism.

The conclusion of *Schooling Diaspora* highlights the book's simultaneous strength and weakness. Here Teoh discusses how the tensions between modernity and ethno-national authenticity exposed by the stories of the Chinese re-migrants were tested again in the post-colonial period. Politicians saw education as a crucial tool in this new era of nation building. Teoh notes that there was not as big a push in terms of domestic science in Malaysia as in Singapore, where traditional attitudes continued to deter female education. Ironically, demographic concerns about educated women having lower birth-rates meant that the in the new city-state of Singapore, a symbol of modernity, the education of Chinese women was not a priority (p. 155). Teoh's ability to connect so many geo-political threads and trace the impact of big political changes on Chinese girls in the classroom is a real strength. However, the weakness here is that many readers may want to know more about how these changes developed in the post-colonial period. Even as a colonial historian, I was particularly interested in how the key themes Teoh discusses were contested in the context of decolonisation. For example, I would be keen to hear more about the vicious, politically-motivated acid attack on Liew Yuen Sien that Teoh opens her book with.

That the biggest weakness of the book is that there is not more to read reflects the richness of the subject, the depth of the research on display and the readability of the author's writing. The education of Chinese girls in Singapore and British Malaya provides a fascinating insight to the much broader themes, conflicts and changes. *Schooling Diaspora* is a valuable contribution to our understanding of education as part of the colonial project and competing notions of gender in the Chinese community in Southeast Asia.

Notes

1. 'Straits Chinese' refers to ethnic Chinese born in the British Malaya and Singapore and is synonymous with Peranakan Chinese. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Here Teoh joins a growing trend of focusing explicitly on previously neglected groups to gain a new insight into the colonial experience. For example, see Lynn Hollen Lees, *Planting Empire, Cultivating Subjects: British Malaya, 1786–1941* (Cambridge, 2017), which examines migrant sugar plantation workers. [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. For example, see the tensions and conflict discussed in Zhang Zhixiong, *Chinese Education in Singapore: An Untold Story of Conflict and Change* (Singapore, 2016). [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. These schools were 'free' in that they were open to different races and religions. Entry was contingent on the payment of fees. [Back to \(4\)](#)
5. 'Nyonya' refers to Straits Chinese women, in contrast to 'Baba' for men. [Back to \(5\)](#)

The author is happy to accept this review and wishes to thank the reviewer for their generous comments and thoughtful reflections on the book's main themes.

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