Book Review/*Ulasan Buku*

Southeast Asian Identities: Culture and the Politics of Representation in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand, by Joel Kahn (ed.). 1998. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, viii, pages 273.

Politically conservative critiques of postcolonial theoretical approaches dismiss the contemporary scholarly focus on identity as a mere passing fad, implying even that it is little more than navel gazing. The edited volume reviewed here is a fine example of why this view is flawed. The book's scholarship is critical given that identity has come to occupy an increasingly important place in the political cultures of the region. This development is tied to the social, cultural and political changes set in motion by both the kind and magnitude of the rapid economic growth of all the four countries covered: Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Thailand. Each one of the eight chapters as well as the editorial introduction by Joel Kahn articulate identity constructions in the interplay between political elites, social actors, and public spaces, all within the context of the region's rapid economic transformation. To the extensive work that has been done on the political economy of the region, the book offers an important balance as well as corrective. To the scholarship on cultural politics as a whole, the volume offers insights into the character of industrialisation at the close of the century. In so doing, it lays the foundations for complementing if not rejecting assumptions about industrialisation and the attendant social change that have been heavily informed by the European experience.

Each author develops analytical themes that are grounded in the experience of particular countries but may be easily extended across boundaries. Chua Beng Huat opens the book with a sharp analysis of the tensions between the "Asianisation" of culture in Singapore versus the rise of individualism as an outgrowth of the state's unswerving faith in capitalist economic development. Nothing so systematic as the Singapore experience is replicated among its neighbours. Nevertheless, the tensions between the state's constructions and social developments as a consequence of economic liberalisation is a recurring theme in the other countries of the region. This tension though most finely tuned in the Singaporean context underlies the late industrialisation of several Asian countries, and is an important contribution to understanding with more scholarly depth the place of culture in the region's economic growth. It is also a recurring theme in the chapters as a whole.

Most of the chapters provide fine and sometimes unexpected insights into the consequences of the tensions that have emerged between state as well as social constructions and capitalist growth. Nirmala PuruShotam offers the sharp contrast between her own hybrid cultural identity against the formulaic ethnic

divisions of colonial vintage that have been firmly grounded in Singapore state policy. Ariel Heryanto notes how even though the figure of the Chinese Indonesian has been banned from public life, its representations have increased visibly in the 1990s in a manner unprecedented under Suharto's New Order regime. Goh Beng Lan observes that the Malaysian state is faced with a conflict in its longstanding commitment to the redistribution of wealth along ethnic lines because this policy runs in opposition to the "move towards greater foreign investments to promote growth" (p. 175). Even as the government firmly advances globalisation (to be stalled only by the regional economic crisis of 1997-98), Wendy Mee's study of the Internet nevertheless finds that the nation-state is alive and well. She points out that Malaysians continue to construct national imaginaries, and that only today these are in relation to a global space. Although national imaginaries are integral to the Indonesian state's ordering of the nation's cultural diversity, Albert Schrauwer shows how competing discourses are nevertheless at work in shaping ethnic identity.

Tensions between constructions of culture and identity are not restricted to actors within particular localities but are increasingly played out in a global space. Two chapters thus focus primarily on globalising discourses. Craig Reynolds' study of the debates of Thai intellectuals shows that globalisation may have contradictory effects, both empowering and assailing local cultural formations. In her chapter concerning debates on Islam and women in Malaysia, Rachel Bloul observes that the identities of Muslim women intellectuals and activists have grown out of an engagement with a global Islamic discourse on gender.

The book as a whole takes a new look at the old topic of culture in Southeast Asia by incorporating the tools of sociological, historical and literary analyses. Censuses, public policy, historical institutions, and other common research sources and foci are studied with a different perspective and result. Popular solidarities, the media, the Internet, images, public spaces and other novel areas of analysis are included in a much more expanded definition of the scope of scholarship. These developments are not necessarily new in themselves. Nevertheless, they are underdeveloped in scholarly work on Southeast Asia even though the countries lumped under this regional rubric do offer rich resources for theoretical work in cultural politics.

The chapters by Goh and Mee stand out in terms of new scholarly foci and perspectives as they engage two aspects of contemporary Southeast Asian identities of great material and symbolic significance: the modern urban built environment and the Internet respectively. They show how negotiations and claims over urban spaces as well as Internet cultural imaginaries – both important outgrowths of the region's economic growth – have played a critical role in shaping identity.

All the chapters engage the radical transformations in the region in some form or other, and thereby generate important scholarly work for consideration

by scholars beyond the area specialist. Each chapter introduces themes that have a broader theoretical relevance as well as provide insights into the dominant character of the economic and political transformation of the region as a whole. For instance, the chapters in different ways engage racism (colonial and postcolonial), they render more complex the notions of plural society that have been handed down from colonial era scholars, and they provide depth and difference to global understandings of multiculturalism – so often dominated by American models.

The authors in this volume are not only expanding the boundaries of scholarship but their analyses also provide a necessary and vital intellectual response to the massive social, cultural and economic changes that have been undertaken by the region's political elites. As Kahn puts it in the introduction, several of the scholars in the book are casting new light on scholarship by being "prepared to speak out against and combat the kinds of essentialized readings of culture and identity that are increasingly being mobilized by economic and political elites in the region". For instance, Chua's article is a fine critique of Asian values, noting importantly that its underlying economistic discourse has its beginnings in the formation of Singapore and is not merely an outgrowth of the last decade's economic boom. Heryanto's critique of political economy as a primary method of analysing the position of Chinese Indonesian may be extended to the tendency to reify as 'overseas Chinese' the diverse members of this ethnic group in the region.

Cultural identity was significant in the politics of the countries in question during the period of rapid economic expansion covered by the book. It has remained so in the period of decline following the regional 1997-98 economic crisis. Cultural arguments have been used to justify reversals in economic policy, the particularism of the methods used in managing economic affairs, or the unusual political manoeuvres that have surfaced. The insights into culture in this book remain relevant and show that the region is a rich area for theoretical work on cultural change with implications across the globe.

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