

Race and multiculturalism in Malaysia and Singapore

Multiculturalism and ethnicity have become rather fashionable as research topics in Asian Studies. Several monographs and conference volumes have been published in recent years, especially concerning the situation in Malaysia and Singapore.¹ This well-edited book by Goh et al. is a welcome addition to the existing literature in this field. The various contributions add further information to a topic which is highly sensitive and of great importance for the modern nation-states Malaysia and Singapore.

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Lanterns in Chinatown, Singapore.
Photo by Anna Roberts.

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MALAYSIA AS WELL AS SINGAPORE are multi-ethnic nation-states. In both states ethnicity, commonly referred to as 'race', is of crucial social and political importance. The topics of race were introduced by the British colonial administration which carried out census among its subjects which were categorised into diverse races. In consequence, they began to develop and imagine their own, partly new identities under these labels. This colonial legacy was well-cultivated in the post-colonial nation-states of Malaysia and Singapore and made a deep impact on national politics and the daily life of its peoples. Racial stereotypes are present in both states and are of great relevance for the communities, even when they often form perfect examples for 'invented traditions'. Take for example the term 'Indian race' in both states: while regarded as a uniform group, what lies behind the term is a great heterogeneity of ethnic, religious, linguistic and cultural aspects. In Singapore 'Indians' are regarded as Hindus and 'Malays' as Muslims, so in consequence Indian Muslims face many difficulties in attempting to receive money from state funds for Muslims (Tschacher 2010). What constitutes a 'Malay race' in Malaysia is laid down in the constitution (article 160). This crude definition includes elements from language, genetics, religion – the Malay race is Muslim! – ethnicity and other fields. Furthermore, the 'Malays' in Malaysia are regarded as the original inhabitants of the country and thus are guaranteed special rights which has led to a policy of positive chauvinism towards their group. Thus it is not surprising that the theme 'race and multiculturalism' in Malaysia is not a theme discussed by members of the Malay group, but mostly by authors of 'Chinese', 'Indian' and other backgrounds. This is also the case in this volume.

The book under review here is divided into eleven chapters, plus a lengthy introduction and a short conclusion. As space is limited, not all articles can be referred to here equally. Daniel Goh and Philip Holden mention in their introduction the roots of multiculturalism and ethnonationalism which they rightly find in colonial notions of races and culture. When both Malaysia and Singapore openly make use of the category 'race' in the state apparatus, the post-colonial situations in consequence create rather fixed, often close boundaries. The authors rightly state that these situations open up, which has created 'possibilities in the politics of recognition, but has closed off many others' (p. 3). When official categories of Chinese, Malay, Indian and others become institutionalized, what happens to those who do not belong to either of these identities? Goh and Holden proceed to give a very readable

discussion of recent literature on multiculturalism. The overall good impression would have even been better if the authors had made attempted a definition of 'race' in the Malaysian and Singaporean context, something that is painfully missing.

In the first chapter Philip Holden gives the historical background of the passion for 'race' by analysing English-literature in Singapore. Tracing the roots back to colonial times by analysing the literary works in the *Straits Chinese Magazine*, Holden successfully shows how racial stereotypes were already set by the Chinese themselves as the magazine was edited by Song Ong Siang and Lim Boon Keng, two highly influential members of the Straits Chinese community in Singapore between the 1890s and 1940s. Holden then moves on to Singaporean authors of the 1940s and 1950s who became influenced by anti-colonial nationalism and finally reaches post-independence Singaporean authors. He rightly states that this literature can cause 'readers to reflect on their own racial subjectification' (p. 34), but the reading of texts from the past also has a particular value for deconstructing the state's primordial attitudes towards races and the legitimization of state multiculturalism in Singapore.

The essay of Gaik Cheng Khoo draws attention to the modern Malay movies of the late director Yasmin Ahmad and the constructions of Malay-ness in her films. An independent filmmaker, Yasmin Ahmad was only able to finish six movies during her lifetime. Many of her themes cover inter-racial and inter-religious topics and have been vividly discussed and sometimes also strongly attacked by movie critics close to the Malaysian government, by Islamic authorities as well as by Malaysian intellectuals. Some were even censored, although her movies have received considerable attention at international movie festivals outside Malaysia. Gaik Cheng Khoo meticulously analyses how Yasmin Ahmad's movies challenge Malaysian state-defined Malay subjectivity and gender stereotypes.

Kenneth Paul Tan's essay also deals with movies and discusses racial stereotypes in contemporary Singaporean films. For Tan, most Singaporean commercial films demonstrate how neoliberal multiculturalism in Singapore uses stereotypical notions of race and still is 'paranoid about racial otherness' (p. 139). This is also confirmed by Daniel Goh's excellent essay on Singapore 'Chineseness'. Goh convincingly argues that being Chinese in Singapore is privileged because the discourse is state-defined. He discusses the elements of Singaporean Chineseness and how these become stereotypes and are used by state authorities. But not only governments become active in the construction of racial thinking and multiculturalism, as the article by Kelly Fu Su Yin and Liew Kai Khiun shows. Here the authors show that the Malay hard rock scene in Singapore has hardened stereotypical racial representations of a rebellious and indolent Malay youth (p. 170).

Racial stereotypes of Malays and Chinese are not the only ones discussed in this book. Vijay Devadas shows how HINDRAF, an association of several Malaysian Indian NGOs which was declared illegal on 15 October 2008, plays an important part in constructing Malaysian Indian identity. Charanpal S. Bal analyses 'Punjabi-ness' in a multiracial Singapore and its reconstructions in modern times, while Matilda Gabrielpillai demonstrates the importance of modern novels in the discourse of both Indian and Chinese identity in Singapore. The volume is completed by essays by Helen Ting on the representations of 'Malay-ness' and the legitimization of Malay supremacy in Malaysian schoolbooks, by Michelle Antoinette on Malaysian identity which is inherent in the works of Malaysian artist Wong Hoy Cheong, and by Angelia Poon on Singaporean politics on race, multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism.

In conclusion it can be said that this book is a fine sample of critical scholarship in cultural studies. The approaches of the authors vary and include studies on literature, art, film and also sociology. They give a good overall picture of ongoing discussions and debates in both Malaysia and Singapore and deserve to be read by a wide audience.

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References

1. See e.g. Hefner (2001), Kahn (2006), Kymlicka & He (2005), Lim (2008), Lian (2006), Daniels (2005) and Zawawi (2008), to mention only a few.

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