

BOOK REVIEW

ISMAIL, Rahil, SHAW, Brian and OOI, Giok Ling. Eds. 2009. *Southeast Asian Culture and Heritage in a Globalising World*. Surrey, UK: Ashgate, pp. 1–173. ISBN: 978-0-7546-7261-6.

This collection of nine conference papers deals with the problems of the "pluralistic nation-state" in Southeast Asia, its cities, environmental crises, human rights issues and problems relating to cultural heritage and identity in the face of globalisation. The societies under study—Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Laos and Burma—all have a diverse mix of ethnic peoples and hybrid cultures, in which the cultures of minority groups are confronted by accelerating social change and experience institutionalised oppression, fragmentation and political threats from the dominant ethnic groups. Interdisciplinary in their approach, and falling well into the field of multi-cultural studies, the paper writers represent a range of disciplines, from geography, sociology, history to cultural studies. The geographers who are in the majority, attempt to deal with the issues of community, environment, tourism, conservation and urban-rural development, while the social scientists focus on education, the economy, health and public housing.

It is in the area of ethnic contestation over cultural space that several papers make their mark. Brian Shaw's literature survey shows that the creation of a uniform national culture in Southeast Asia has been rather problematical. Although the colonial concept of "race" and "ethnicity" was a socially-constructed one, and used interchangeably, some post-independence nation-states like Singapore continue to adopt its use. Creation of a national identity has been a top-down process, in which ruling elites attempt to impose their policies, and "subaltern" minority ethnic voices resist and assert their own respective cultures and approaches. In Indonesia's Aceh and West Papua provinces, minority groups project separate identities and have attempted to secede to create their own states. Similarly, Muslims in southern Philippines and in southern Thailand challenge and are in conflict with their respective majority Filipino and Thai cultures. Shaw rightly argues that globalisation has widened the post-colonial restructuring processes and exacerbated long-established rivalries among the groups. Nation-building, state-led development projects and the rapid transition to a market economy, he asserts, have "brought about an acceleration of social change, and are creating new and imagined communities that are potentially disruptive and which may well threaten the longer-term sustainability" of the region. Overall, the global trend is towards greater rather than lesser cultural diversity within the region.

The other essays, in their varied approaches of this theme, assess how change is introduced by the state and confronted by the ethnic minorities, especially in the area of cultural landscapes. Rahil Ismail's essay, for instance, assesses the predominantly-Chinese nation-state of Singapore's reconstruction of a Malay-Muslim "ethnic quarter", Geylang Serai, into a heritage site for tourism. Although the project is in line with the state's urban renewal and resettlement programme, she finds that "to touristify and commodify the place means to subject the community to definitions of themselves as different and hence not 'normal' in the very area where their numerical and physical visibility seemingly makes their cultural and social practices 'normal'." In a similar vein, Ooi Giok Ling and Brian Shaw in their essay criticise the state-led development projects for global tourism of the island resorts of Sentosa Island (Singapore), Pulau Langkawi (Malaysia) and Penang Island (Malaysia) for marginalising the local cultures and identities of the islands.

Historian Kevin Blackburn's well-researched essay on civilian war memorials in Singapore and Malaysia offer insights into how commemorative spaces are shaped by diverging identities. In Singapore, state-constructed national monuments commemorate the dead of the four main communities; Malays, Chinese, Indians and Eurasians killed by the Japanese Army during the Second World War, while in Malaysia, with Malay dominance in social and cultural life, each ethnic group is left to mark their own commemorative space. The essays on Burma, Laos and Java present local case studies of rural and urban under-development, with ethnic minorities facing severe poverty, human rights abuses, and suppression of their cultures. Overall, the papers are of uneven quality. Those on ethnoscapes and commemorative spaces contribute new perspectives and research materials, while those on Burma and Laos attempt to deal with too many issues and their content appears rather over-stretched and disorganised.

CHEAH BOON KHENG
Kota Kemuning, Shah Alam
cheah.bk@gmail.com