

BOOK REVIEWS

Eating Together: Food, Space, and Identity in Malaysia and Singapore. By Jean Duruz and Gaik Cheng Khoo. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2015. 262 pp. \$70.00 (cloth).

This study is highly commendable given the magnitude of its endeavor. It offers insights into the evolution of ethnic identities and the rise of a sense of national belonging in multiethnic and multireligious Malaysia and Singapore. The book undoubtedly provokes thinking about the reality of the rise of a Malaysian and Singaporean identity that transcends race, though not necessarily religion.

The study's other dimension, though one the coauthors inadequately analyze, is its class perspective. Their focus is not yuppies—that urban, urbane, cosmopolitan middle class that reputedly subscribes to a nonracial view of society. Instead, the authors assess “everyday” and “creative” ethnicity lived out in food stalls and coffee shops in Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, and Penang, hardly haunts of yuppies who prefer transnational establishments like Starbucks and Coffee Bean. As the authors' respondents note, at these inexpensive locales they pay a mere five ringgit or less (about US\$1.30) for a tasty meal with friends that can stretch long into the night. These gatherings are crucial contact points to discuss politics, policies, and marginalization as well as modes to foster political change.

The book's primary intent, with original empirical evidence, is to understand newly emerging identities as well as their different forms, and to determine why there is a perceptible hankering by people for a past society where racial and religious differences did not stymie strong friendships. This past sense of community and openness to difference was manifested not just in food shops that people then patronized and the meals they shared. It was also seen in the making of food unique to these countries, an amalgamation of ingredients from the diets of different ethnic groups to create a Malaysian/Singaporean cuisine. After all, only here can one find rojak, nasi lemak, and the exotically named bubur-cha-cha. The book's great strength is its method to capture identity transitions in rapidly modernizing multiethnic countries.

Since this study is of everyday ethnicity, it is unfortunate that the authors do not review related concepts in similar research. Researchers in this area include Malaysia's Shamsul A. B. and S. Mandal, and Singapore's B. H. Chua. By failing to engage with their work, Khoo and Duruz do not indicate their entry point into this literature. Where these coauthors principally differ from other academics is their method.

A core concern among scholars of the evolution of ethnic and national identities has been the need to identify appropriate research methods. These methods have to be of the sort that best capture transitions in societies as people grapple with the implications of modernization. Through its historical review the authors note, albeit briefly, defining processes that shaped particular configurations of ethnic and national identities. These processes include the rise of Islam in the 1970s, the imposition of neoliberal policies from the 1980s, the struggle for democracy and its suppression in the 1990s, and the unexpected turn against long-ruling dominant parties during elections from the late 2000s.

The authors stress the permeation of multiculturalism in spite of the implementation of neoliberal policies. This is problematic because the value of the concept—and policy—of multiculturalism is now heavily critiqued. Charles Hale, for example, has raised the issue of “neoliberal multiculturalism,” arguing that neoliberals support multiculturalism in order to demonstrate the progressiveness of their reactionary economic agenda. In this context then, questions arise that the book alludes to but inadequately analyzes. Are these small food establishments a form of protest against neoliberal multinationals? Are social discourses about national identity a mechanism for society to fend off divisive economic and political ideas foisted on them as elites pursue a development agenda that suits their own interests? And what of new social cleavages created by neoliberal policies and religious-based discourses?

The authors acknowledge new religious and class cleavages in both societies when they note the growing importance of consuming only food that is *halal* and how their respondents take pride in being different from their fellow urbanite yuppies. However, in their analysis of national identities, they do not grasp the predicament of peoples confronted with alienations of different sorts. The changes people want are insufficiently discussed, apart from a return of the type of society they grew up in. Do people really want an economic system that is not neoliberal in orientation, in favor of the current sys-

tem characterized by heavy state intervention? Do all Malaysians, including the cohort they analyze, want to end long-standing race-based affirmative action policies?

Other crucial questions arise. What are the similarities and differences of what is transpiring in Malaysia and Singapore? Both governments are controlled by long-ruling dominant parties, and recent electoral trends in both countries indicate a shift to the opposition, or more precisely, a call for change. Why are forms of national identity in Malaysia and Singapore so similar when Malaysia's dominant parties and discourses are race- and religion-based, while in Singapore such institutions and discourses are frowned upon? Isn't the commodification of religion and of history through small food enterprises empowering and enabling as well as divisive for communities on the ground? Are political activists employing small-scale capital to astutely extend their political platform beyond exclusively urban middle-class concerns to encompass a broad-based subaltern? Evidently, the immense complexities of today's global capitalism are creating new extremely complex forms of businesses and social ties.

These questions draw attention to the book's fundamental problem: it lacks a thoughtful conclusion. This collection of essays by Khoo and Duruz about Malaysia and Singapore, respectively, compiled as a book, is bound by the theme of forms of food catering and consumption and the insights they offer into newly emerging identities. A concluding comparative analysis of the consequences of unjust forms of political and economic development and how this has shaped peoples' understanding of their identities and their relations with each other would have made this an outstanding study.

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The South China Sea: The Struggle for Power in Asia. By Bill Hayton. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014. 320 pp. \$35.00 (cloth).

Opining knowledgeably about any foreign policy dispute requires a certain proficiency in key facts. This is especially true in the case of the sovereignty disputes of the South China Sea. For the uninitiated, Bill Hayton's *South China Sea* provides an accurate and well-