

Malaysia

Taming Babel: Language in the making of Malaysia

By RACHEL LEOW

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Taming Babel explores how the British monoglot state's linguistic governance of polyglot Malaya shaped the development of language rationality in postcolonial Malaysia. In Malaya, British monoglots encountered a disconcertingly polyglot society where they faced governing 'over whole populations of people to whom they could not actually speak' (p. 56). In part influenced by the Herderian vision of the monolingual nation, the British viewed the colony's language diversity as 'a terrible confusion and a source of crisis' (p. 3). Significantly, the postcolonial Malaysian state also treated the nation's plurilingualism as 'a crisis' that hindered the production of governable subjects. Both colonial and postcolonial states thus resorted to using language governmentality to regulate and control certain 'disorderly groups' to fit the needs of 'colonial order', 'national security', and, after political independence, 'national unity'.

'Taming' languages to regulate subjects' language use, thought, and action was hence an essential tool of governance in Malay(si)a. Leow focuses on five historical cases, four in colonial Malaya and one in early postcolonial Malaysia, where the state attempted to 'tame' languages to target groups 'perceived to be a proliferation of disorder' (p. 13). All the five cases of 'taming' Chinese and Malay languages, however, for various reasons, failed their objectives. The book is comprised of an introduction, five substantive chapters and a postscript. The substantive chapters cover 'The technocrats: Challenges of governance in a polyglot society'; 'The knowledge producers: Taming sounds, scripts, and selves'; 'The lexicographers: Dictionaries and the making of postwar politics'; 'The propagandists: Public relations, psychological warfare and the making of the influential state'; and 'The language planners: Dewan Bahasa in the invention and constriction of the postcolonial nation-state'.

Chapters 2 and 4 analyse the British deployment of knowledge technocrats and propagandists to 'tame' Chinese languages as a means to govern and control the 'dangerous' Chinese. Both the knowledge technocrats and propagandists were European personnel who were assigned to learn Chinese languages: the former to assist the state to govern the Chinese and the latter to help the 'late colonial state in reining in the Chinese-language public sphere' (p. 14) during the Malayan Emergency (1948–60). Ultimately, the Chinese-speaking colonial officers could not adequately help in the governance of the Chinese in part because they could not master the community's sheer 'linguistic diversity'. The colonial state thus had to continue to rely on Chinese intermediaries whom they did not trust. Similarly, the propagandists failed to help the colonial state in reining in the Chinese-language public sphere because 'they could not replicate or match ... the written and oral Communist propaganda, which was comprised of idiomatic, colloquial, and highly populist documents that tapped into local language communities and sentiments' (p. 14).

Unlike the language governmentality approach used to ‘tame’ the Chinese, the British completely reinvented and standardised the Malay language by ‘the socio-economic shift from manuscript to print, the cultural transition from orality and aurality to writing, and the orthographic transition from Arabic to romanized script’ (p. 92). This taming of the Malay ‘Babel’ entrenched a hegemonic colonial epistemology that influentially shaped Malay language, culture and self. Nevertheless, in the postwar period, anticolonial Malay intellectuals appropriated the Malay language and used it as a ‘source of resistance’, thereby triggering an ‘age of the word wars’. In brief, the radical Malay lexicographers subverted the Malay lexicon and contributed to facilitating ‘profound shifts in the content, form and substance of Malay language and culture ... constituting nothing short of a modern revolution in Malay cultural selfhood’ (p. 60).

After achieving political independence, the postcolonial state proceeded to intervene in shaping the plurilingual landscape of the new nation. It established the national language planning institute, Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (DBP), to conceptualise and implement national language policies. But, rather than supporting the existing diverse linguistic landscape, the DBP pursued policies to forcefully entrench a Malay monolingual nation. Moreover, language became embroiled in Malaysia’s increasingly race-based politics, such that it became a ‘discursive tool to be deployed for the purpose of maintaining racial boundaries in a consociational state whose political claims to power and hegemony would come to depend on their maintenance’ (p. 14). Nevertheless, for a number of reasons, the DBP failed to erase the plural linguistic landscape and establish a Malay monolingual nation in Malaysia.

Leow’s innovative use of Foucault’s concept of governmentality to frame language rationality in colonial and postcolonial Malay(si)a makes an important contribution to understanding the place and role of language in the making of Malaysia.

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Myanmar

Buddhist visual cultures, rhetoric, and narrative in late Burmese wall paintings

By ALEXANDRA GREEN

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The hypothetical reader of Alexandra Green’s *Buddhist visual cultures, rhetoric, and narrative in late Burmese wall paintings* should be knowledgeable about current thinking on the analysis of visual narratives and Buddhism. Green’s book will mainly appeal to those who work on Southeast and South Asian Buddhism, art, and history,