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## Asian Ethnicity

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### Ethnicization and identity construction in Malaysia

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language must have flowed from these people to the Austronesian-speakers, rather than the other way around.

In a few places, the writing seems a little hasty, or in need of tweaking. For example: 'Buddhist and Taoist principles are such an intrinsic part of Chinese culture that it is common for these to be fundamental behavioural constraints without being recognized as religious' (p. 134). The writer makes a valid point about constructed nature of 'religion' as an organizing category, but it is wrong to position Buddhist and Daoist thought as intrinsic to Chinese culture.

But these minor points do not undermine the value of the book: *The Dragon and the Taniwha* adds a lot to the literature on ethnicity in New Zealand, and should provide useful comparative material to scholars who work on the cultural encounters engendered by Chinese migration in other contexts.

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**Ethnicization and identity construction in Malaysia**, edited by Frederik Holst, London and New York, Routledge, 2012, xiv + 240pp., £85.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-0-4156-9913-6

While I was reading this interesting book, the *Economist* (14 July 2012) featured an article titled 'The racial question: Harassment of pro-democracy activists in Malaysia reveals a worrying undercurrent of racism.' The focus of the article was the racial taunts that Ambiga Sreenevasan, one of the co-leaders of Bersih, a people's movement, faced in the aftermath of a recent Bersih demonstration in Kuala Lumpur and numerous other towns in Malaysia and many cities around the world. The harassment by Malay youth which played on Hindu sensitivities (Ambiga is Hindu) and the demonizing of Ambiga, and not her co-leader, a Malay, by Malay leaders from the governing party and Malay-based NGOs was deemed as racist. Clamoring for clean and fair elections in the country, Bersih has become a thorn on the side of the Malaysian government. What is even more challenging for the government is the fact that Bersih is a multi-ethnic movement and defies the exclusionary trend or process of ethnicization that has deeply divided Malaysian citizenry into ethnic clusters. Is race politics so deep and intractable in Malaysia? Are Malaysians so obsessed with singular identities like ethnicity that they are unable to escape its predominance in the social and political affairs of the nation? Or is ethnicity or race simply a tool or instrument, a technology of power, of the elites and political leaders in their quest to remain in power? To answer these sort of questions in a satisfactory way and to appreciate fully the contemporary politics of Malaysia as presented in the *Economist* article, one would need to examine the several key elements of the 'ethnic question' in Malaysia and it is this context that this book by Frederick Holst, a scholar from Humboldt University in Germany, is useful. This book goes a long way in helping to make sense this seemingly senseless obsession or preoccupation with ethnicity in Malaysia.

As a Malaysianist, my initial question was whether there was a need for yet another book on ethnicity in Malaysia. With such a voluminous amount of literature on this topic in relation to Malaysia, seemingly mirroring the apparent Malaysian obsession with ethnicity, I wondered about the value of such a book to the study of ethnicity in general and Malaysian studies in particular. But I found this study to be of immense value. What I liked most about this book was the attempt to analyze the implications of ethnicization for university students, migrant and refugee politics, and trans-ethnic civil society groups in Malaysia as presented in Chapter 6.

The book is divided into seven chapters. The first chapter subtitled 'configurations of ethnicization in Malaysia' sets out the aims of the book and a short review of the 'current state of research' on the topic of ethnicity in Malaysia (pp. 1, 6). Chapter 2 provides a useful survey of the theoretical literature on ethnicity and ethnic identities and outlines the conceptual framework for the study. Holst has done very well to discuss a range of theoretical expressions on such concepts and processes as race, ethnicity, ethnic construction of identities and ethnicization in a succinct and coherent way. The next chapter outlines the historical background to the process of ethnicization in Malaysia, tracing the roots of 'ethnicized identities' to the infamous colonial policy of 'divide and rule' and the opportunistic continuation of such a policy by the ruling coalition in independent Malaya in the 1960s. What I particularly liked about this chapter is the attempt to remind readers of the forgotten or intentionally erased histories of 'trans-ethnic cooperation' between people of different ethnic groups in Malaysia. Chapter 4 discusses how ethnicization is manifested in the political and electoral systems and economic policies especially the New Economic Policy (1970 to 1990) and its successive policies that favor Malays or Bumiputras ('sons of the soil'). The chapter nicely illustrates how political and economic competition has taken a strong ethnic flavor and in the process has reinforced ethnic polarization in Malaysia. As Holst puts it, the 'policies of ethnicization have become deeply embedded in the various sections in Malaysia' (p. 96). The next chapter discusses the implementations of the range of ethnicized policies such as the language policies related to the relative roles of the national language and vernacular languages in the education system, and the pro-Islamic religious policies. Holst also devotes attention to the role of government media control in fostering ethnicization through an inconsistent implementation of laws such as the Seditious Act that have been applied vigorously in several instances involving non-Malay individuals and groups and not against a number of Malay extremists making seditious remarks in public. The chapter ends with a discussion of the opposing and contradictory discourses of the exclusionist *Ketuanan Melayu* (Malay supremacy) and the inclusionary panegyrics like *Bangsa Malaysia* or *IMalaysia* that are expressed by leaders or members of the dominant Malay-based political party, UMNO (United Malay National Organization).

This book is indeed an important contribution to the scholarly work on ethnicity and Malaysian studies. The main strength, in my opinion, are the fascinating findings of the qualitative research discussed in Chapter 6, even though one might question the validity of a questionnaire-based survey of university students on topics that unquestionably are of a sensitive nature, especially to Malaysians who are unlikely to speak openly on issues related to ethnicity and religion. While this study is based on a reasonably good survey of the existing literature on ethnicity and identity construction in Malaysia, there were several surprising omissions. There is, for example, no reference to the extensive work on ethnicity by some Malaysian

social scientists, such as Raymond Lee and Tan Chee Beng, who have published several books and papers based on solid qualitative research. Tan's research, together with the numerous studies on hybridized cultures in Malaysia such as the Melakan Chittys, Eurasians, and Peranakan Cina, raise several significant questions in relation to the process of ethnicization. The persistence of such mixed cultures in the face of ethnicization, rather than simply the existence of contemporary 'transethnic solidarities' in the artistic fraternity and civil society in Malaysia, suggest that the process of ethnicization and its attendant hardening of ethnic boundaries is not as overpowering as one would assume. On the back cover of the book the blurb states that 'While the focus of this publication lies on Malaysia, the concept of manifestations and implementations of ethnicization provides an analytical framework that can be applied in the study of ethnicization and identity construction elsewhere in the region and beyond' and I fully concur.

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**Reading North Korea: an ethnological inquiry**, by Sonia Ryang, Cambridge, Harvard University Asia Center, 2012, pp. 230., ISBN 978-0-6740-6247-4

The intention of this book is to investigate the 'cultural logic' of North Korean society (p. 11). Ryang's premise is that North Koreans define their own sense of selves in relationship to Kim Il Sung who, despite having died in 1994, remains an object of veneration and love for individual North as the sole 'Great Leader' of North Korea. Ryang explores three cultural matrices: of love, war and the self. Her method is to trace her themes through the contours of detailed explication of North Korean novels, short stories and film.

Ryang makes use of her native language skills in combination with her training as an anthropologist to get below the surface of state-centric analysis to think about what motivates individual North Koreans in their day-to-day lives. Ryang has a number of other advantages which she brings to this project including her personal experiences as a Korean raised in Japan as part of the Korean community living in Japan, which had strong organizational links to the North Korean state. Ryang had access to North Korean literature and culture, and made a couple of visits to Pyongyang where, among other things, she watched the films she critiques and observed the reaction of North Korean audiences

The first great contribution of this book is to show the reader that North Koreans have complicated personal and professional lives, the same as individuals anywhere in the world. This may seem an obvious point but it is surprisingly often forgotten in even very influential literature on North Korea. Some of the most interesting parts of the book are in Ryang's detailed reconstruction of plotlines that demonstrate North Koreans dealing with the perennial problems of all humankind – including bereavement, unrequited love, parent/ child conflict, and separation from loved ones. These storylines represent the universal dilemmas that face us all everywhere.