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Review

Reviewed Work(s): *Malays in Singapore: Culture, Economy, and Ideology*. by Tania Li

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This book is a concerted and serious research effort by a strong transatlantic team of historians that is of primary interest to the specialist. Nonetheless, the definitive narrative diplomatic history of the Indochina crisis remains to be written, especially if the Soviet Union, China, and Vietnam release their own official documentation. Outside the realm of possibility? Given the changes we have been witnessing in the world, maybe that day is not so far off.

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Malays in Singapore: Culture, Economy, and Ideology. By TANIA LI. East Asian Social Science Monographs. Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1989. xviii, 206 pp. \$19.95.

Tania Li, in this fine monograph, presents us with the first-ever serious and detailed account of the social life of the Malays in post-1965 independent Singapore. This work is arguably more rounded and informative than Judith Djamour's *Malay Kinship and Marriage in Singapore* (1959), which appeared thirty years ago, also as an anthropological monograph. Therefore Li's contribution should be welcomed not only by those interested in Singapore studies but also by scholars and students of the long-established, internationally renowned field of Malay studies. Those specializing in the study of ethnic relations and minority studies would gain much, too, from reading this monograph.

In the narrower context of Singaporean social studies, Li's contribution is significant in two interrelated ways. First, her findings on the Singapore Malays dispels many of the popular negative and static cultural stereotypes, propagated not only by Singapore elites but also by so-called academicians, concerning the factors that led to the decline, since independence, of the socioeconomic position of the Malays relative to the Singapore Chinese. Second, through a creative application of well-known and often used concepts, such as household organization, kinship, "commodification," and gift exchange, together with an excellent grasp of existing ethnographies on the Malays and the theoretical debates within anthropology and political economy, Li is able to present us with a more true-to-life account of the dynamism within the everyday life of the Singapore Malays than those who have examined the same subject matter before her.

Li takes as a central theoretical focus of her study the dialogical relations between culture (part of which is ethnicity) and economic forms, as empirically articulated in "the interaction between macro-level economic and institutional conditions, inherited cultural forms and ideas, and the observable micro-level of day-to-day practices in the household and the community" (p. xv). Thus she organizes her account on the social life of the Singapore Malays around three central themes, each forming a major part of her monograph.

She examines first how cultural ideas and economic conditions shape not only the lives of individual Singapore Malays but also Malay households within the community. She devotes five chapters within Part I of the book to this. She then structurally locates the social life of the Malay community within the wider context of the post-1959 social and economic development in Singapore, highlighting the significance of ethnic and class factors which have contributed to the "socioeconomic

lag” between the Malays and Chinese. This is discussed in the five chapters of Part II. The relatively shorter Part III, consisting of only two chapters, is the penultimate section of the study. Here she takes to task academics and nonacademics, Malays and non-Malays, who have interpreted Malay (poor) economic performance purely in terms of ahistorical, astructural and static cultural stereotypes—a “dominant ideology” conveniently adopted by the Singapore elites regardless of race. According to Li (pp. 168–81), if these stereotypes are removed one would find that, as part of their cultural attributes, the Chinese (and, to this reviewer, even the much-revered Japanese) are as fatalistic, superstitious, and spendthrift as the Malays. Based on the impressive empirical evidence presented in the first two parts of her book, Li concludes that the “differences in the [larger] cultural framework within which Malays and Chinese organize their economic lives, especially with regard to entrepreneurship, have put Malays at an economic disadvantage in Singapore since 1959, and [this has] supported [the] idea that Malays are culturally inferior which, in turn, has been a source of discrimination against them” (p. 182).

Finally, it is common to ask for more from an excellent study such as Li’s. It would have been more helpful to her whole study if Li had avoided using the recent nation-state categories, Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia, as geopolitical units of analysis to explain the migration of the Malays in historical periods, that is, before the existence of the said nation-states. This is because oral and written Malay literary and historical sources inform us that Melaka, Mataram, Srivijaya, Palembang, Riau-Lingga, Sulu, Pattani, Aceh, and Temasik (the original Malay name for Singapore), among many others, were the names, within the familiar *kulturkreisse*, used by the inhabitants of the Malay archipelago as places for one to go to in seeking new life or as places to be totally avoided.

It is quite obvious, and politically meaningful, that Li has decided to use Singapore’s state-endorsed history as the basis of her historical analysis of “The Formation of the Singapore Malay Community” (chapter 6), and not draw upon, for example, the excellent historical studies on the historical Johor-Riau area by Carl Trocki, *Prince of Pirates: The Temenggongs and the Development of Johor 1784–1885* (1979) and Leonard Andaya, *The Kingdom of Johor 1641–1728* (1975), both of which are missing from her impressive bibliography. This is the Achilles’s heel of Li’s otherwise admirable work.

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Dutch Authors on Asian History: A Selection of Dutch Historiography on the Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie. Edited by M. A. P. MEILINK-ROELOFSZ, M. E. VAN OPSTALL, and G. J. SCHUTTE. Dordrecht, Holland: Foris Publications, 1988. viii, 499 pp. Dfl 70.

This volume celebrates two wonderfully helpful women of the Netherlands State Archives, the late Dr. M. A. P. Meilink-Roelofs and the late Dr. M. E. van Opstall. They selected the fifteen articles, by as many authors, that represent early Dutch historiography on the United Dutch East India Company (VOC). The articles were originally published between 1865 and 1976. Professor G. J. Schutte has brought this volume to completion and has written the introduction, which is an informative survey of literature about the VOC. His introduction mentions authors whose work I feel, and I suspect he does too, should have been included in this