

Sharmani Patricia Gabriel (Ed.), *Making Heritage in Malaysia: Sites, Histories, Identities*. Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, 318pp. ISBN 978-981-15-1493-7.

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Making Heritage in Malaysia: Sites, Histories, Identities, edited by Sharmani Patricia Gabriel, is an invaluable collection of scholarly inquiries into the discourses, politics, and tensions of heritage-making in contemporary Malaysia. Organised in five parts, beginning with a comprehensive introduction by the editor, the remaining ten chapters, mainly focusing on intangible cultural heritage, are arranged into Part II: (Re)telling Museum and Community Stories, Part III: (Re)mapping Multicultural and Folklore Heritage, Part IV: The Small Town, Nostalgia, and the Environment, and Part V: Imagined and Cosmopolitan Heritage. Eminent historian Anthony Milner, in contributing the Foreword, describes the collection as an “ambitious” and “subversive” addition to Malaysian Studies scholarship.

To critical readers and scholars researching Malaysia or those in the fields of political and social sciences as well as humanities who are familiar with Southeast Asia, it should not be a surprise that various ethnocentric Malay-Muslim based national policies implemented since the 1970s have greatly impacted the ways in which this young Southeast Asian nation is “imagined” (Anderson 1991). This has resulted in a narrow, state- and authority-defined notion of national culture confined to selected cultural elements associated with Malay ethnicity and Islam. With growing attention paid to issues of cultural heritage in the last few decades, the tensions and contestations explored in this area of study have extended to the politics of heritage-making.

From the Sarawak Museum to the setting up of community galleries in suburban Kuala Lumpur, from personal accounts and memories of places in literature and poetry to contemporary adaptations and interpretations of classical texts and experiences, and from Malaysian diasporic experiences as well as the processes of localisation from food to street theatre, the book offers us an alternative paradigm to approach, interpret, and understand heritage as a concept, discourse, and lived reality.

All of the contributors to this collection are committed to making visible the Malaysian nation’s complex multicultural social realities by “pluralising”, as the editor argues in her Introduction, the sites, histories, and identities obscured by the official ethnocentric discourse and monocultural approach to heritage and national identity construction. As a result, the book offers a veritable toolkit of strategies for

conceptualising “what heritage can do” (278) for both early and experienced researchers. These strategies include the following:

1. **The move away from a peninsular-centric discourse.** Together with Sabah, the East Malaysian state of Sarawak was crucial to the formation of Malaysia in 1963. Yet, decades of Peninsular-centric politicking have side-lined the cultures, histories, and identities as well as heritage of both these Borneo states in Malaysian nation-building. The chapter on the Sarawak Museum by Jennifer Morris is an attempt to disrupt the hegemony of the “West” (Peninsular Malaysia) by inserting East Malaysia’s presence in the nation’s heritage discourse through the story of the Sarawak Museum.
2. **A “bottom-up” approach.** Existing studies focused on heritage tend to adopt top-down as well as state-centric approaches. An approach “from below”, such as that evinced in Sunitha Janamohanan’s chapter on the Serdang Folk Museum, illustrates the more complex ways of exploring and understanding heritage-making at the grassroots level because, as the author argues, “community heritage is viewed as being embedded within local specificity and significance” (88).
3. **The importance of a longitudinal study.** Identity has a history and so has the process of heritage-making. The chapter by Heong-Hong Por’s documents how the Sungai Buloh Leprosy Settlement (SBLs) functions as a site for heritage-making by “fusing two different discourses, on the SBLs as home and the SBLs as heritage” (125) over the course of twelve years. Just as identity evolves, so do heritage sites and movements.
4. **Be involved in heritage-making, be engaged to (re)connect.** Susan Philip’s chapter on cultural mapping with its two case studies of Georgetown and Balik Pulau in Penang posits practical lessons on “how a deep engagement with aspects of tangible heritage has the potential to also connect people with their intangible cultural heritage, so that they see it as part of a continuum of past, present, and future” (141). Arts-based cultural mapping activities can offer individuals and local communities ways to reflect on their intangible experiences of heritage-making through actual involvement of “doing” heritage.
5. **Embrace new interpretations.** Storytelling is indispensable for the reception and transmission of culture, including the conservation of both tangible and intangible cultural heritage. A story changes as the storyteller adapts to new forms, media, and audiences. Sharifah Aishah Osman’s chapter on the

retelling and adaptation of the Nenek Kebayan (an old and hunchbacked woman figure who has an important role in Malay classical texts and traditional narratives) in selected adaptations of Malaysian folktales for children shows how a more diverse representation of the character actually “rescues” the role of the traditional female healer from the patriarchal text. Osman concludes her chapter by arguing that “the authoritative image of the Nenek Kebayan as the frightening, hunchbacked crone in *Sejarah Melayu*, transmitted through centuries of oral storytelling, is not necessarily singular, or even accurate” (180).

6. **Recognise small towns as heritage centres.** Cities were once small towns. While cities can be impersonal, small towns are often intimate with the inhabitants connected to one another differently from city dwellers. This sentiment is evident as small towns in “greater Malaysia” are sources and places of intangible heritage as well as connection in both the writings of Rehman Rashid and Shih-Li Kow, as Carol Leon demonstrates in her contribution. If small towns are places “where identity is formed and a sense of cultural belonging is acquired” (205), no analysis of heritage-making is complete if small towns are ignored as heritage spaces.
7. **Rethink what nostalgia can do.** What is the role of nostalgia in heritage-making? And how is nostalgia related to our environment? Through analysing the weather poems of Shirley Geok-lin Lim, Agnes S.K. Yeow invites readers to engage critically with the notion of nostalgia as intangible cultural heritage. She writes that “it is imperative that newer notions of nostalgia are not merely updated versions of the old nostalgia but that they offer a productive way to reflect on the past in order to navigate the present and the future” (212).
8. **Localising the diaspora.** Siew-Teip Looi’s analysis of selected poems about Melaka by Ee Tiang Hong, the Malaysian poet who emigrated to Australia in 1975, brings to light not just the predicament of the Peranakan (or Straits Chinese) community but also that of other diasporic communities. Ee, who “grew up speaking not a Chinese dialect, or English, but Baba Malay, his mother tongue” (235), clearly drew his sense of cultural belonging from Melaka and Malaysia. The emergence of the Peranakan community is said to be an outcome of early migration, diaspora, and localisation. Shu-Mei Shih observed in 2011 that “*Diaspora has an end date*. When the (im)migrants settle and become localized, many choose to end their state of diaspora by the second or third generation. The so-called nostalgia for the ancestral land is often an indication of displacement, of difficulties of localization,

voluntary or involuntary. [...] To emphasize that diaspora has an end date is therefore to insist that cultural and political practice is always place-based. Everyone should be given a chance to become a local” (emphasis in original, 46). When will Malaysia’s diasporic communities be seen to have had their end date? What are the implications of this end date to Malaysia’s tangible and intangible cultural heritage?

9. **Focus not on origins but on localisation.** In his attempt to trace the authenticity of the “Malaysian” Kari Kapitan (Curry Kapitan), Leonard Jeyam uncovers the multiple processes of localisation that have gone into the making of this popular if not controversial dish. He reminds us that “the point here is that the notion of nation-state borders and identity needs to be forgotten momentarily so as to ascertain the many iterations of the Kari found within a more multicultural and hybrid space before situating the dish back within the contemporary context of identity and place” (260).
10. **Another history of the world.** The collection concludes with Simon Soon’s analysis of Boria, a form of street theatre in Penang with multiple (diasporic) origins. Tracing the evolution of Boria from the late eighteenth century to demonstrate how this art form came to be an important part of the cultural activity of the Malay community, Soon argues that its less-bounded form and performance practice expose the limitations of state-endorsed as well as “UNESCO’s bureaucratic, top-down, expert-led discourse of intangible cultural heritage” (46). For him, Boria’s entangled and cosmopolitan origin story “offer us another history of the world, unique for its own method of reckoning with the challenges posed by identity politics today” (300).

Authored by specialists in literary studies, cultural studies, and history, the eleven chapters in this collection not only “provincialise” critical heritage studies by deploying case studies and perspectives from and of Malaysia, but also direct our attention to the constructed, and contested, nature of race, culture, nation — and heritage. As Gabriel affirms in her Introduction, “If heritage is constructed, then it is also contestable” (4).

Works Cited

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