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Ethnic Relations and Nation-Building in Southeast Asia. The
Case of the Ethnic Chinese (review)

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Ethnic Relations and Nation-Building in Southeast Asia. The Case of the Ethnic Chinese. Edited by Leo SURYADINATA. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2004. x+251 pp.

LEO SURYADINATA HAS EDITED A NEW VOLUME ON ethnic politics in Southeast Asia. This collection of essays is the result of an international conference organized by the Singapore Society of Asian Studies. The conference and the book are unique; they address the issue of ethnicity from a Southeast Asian perspective. Furthermore, each author's contribution stems from his or her personal experience as a member of a particular ethnic group living in Indonesia, Malaysia, or Singapore. It is unusual in academia to acknowledge one's personal experience and view point as an important starting point for intellectual inquiry. I think this unique element adds a valuable perspective to this book.

The book's other broad contribution is in keeping the issue of ethnic politics in Southeast Asia on the table. *Ethnic Relations* has 11 chapters including an introduction by Wang Gungwu, and three chapters on ethnicity in each of three crucial Southeast Asian states: Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore. A conclusion written by Leo Suryadinata summarizes the diverse contributions of the essays and the larger points of the book. While most of the chapters look at the ethnic relations and politics of the Chinese community, Ramasamy contributes an important piece on Indians in Malaysia, and Sharon Siddique provides the Malay perspective to the Chinese (cultural) domination of Singapore.

As the title suggests, the other theme in this volume is nation-building. All of the essays provide some discussion about the difficulties of nation-building in ethnically diverse states. To me, the essays that do the most comprehensive job connecting the politics of nation-building to ethnic issues are Mely Tan's "Unity in Diversity," A. Dahana's "Pri and Non-Pri Relations in the Reform Era," Frans Winarta's "Racial Discrimination in the Indonesian Legal System," Lee Kam Hing's "Differing Perspectives on Integration and Nation-Building in Malaysia," and Eugene Tan's "The Majority's Sacrifices and Yearnings." What these essays do particularly well is in discussing how political policies, institutions, and elites shape and often constrain Chinese — or minority communities more generally — identity and political behavior. Likewise, these chapters then explain how the Chinese have tried to defend their interests under different conditions. For example, Frans Winarta explains how racial discrimination began in Indonesia under Dutch colonialism and continued through the Suharto era with the banning of Chinese-language materials and a variety of restrictive policies on many issues like obtaining citizenship. Not surprisingly, the Chinese community was unable to assert and protect their civil rights under this sort of repression. Since Suharto's

departure in 1998, there has been a massive resurgence of Chinese political activity and civil organization. The chapters on Malaysia do a similar job of highlighting how the Chinese have responded to different government policies, some of which have been ethnically polarizing and some have tried to promote Malaysian nationalism instead of community identification.

Almost all of the essays provide good historical background about the period of nation-building immediately after the end of colonial rule. However, some of them could have contained more thorough discussions of the unique problems of nation-building in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore today. For example, Shamsul's essay on Malay memories and perceptions of the "Chinese" and "Chineseness" does an excellent job detailing how the emergency period and the fear of Communism colored and shaped views of the Chinese. While he explains that this distrust lingers, and it is manifest in tension, not violence, he doesn't do a sufficiently rigorous job in describing the current policies and issues that impact ethnic relations and attitudes. More than just competition in school or memory of the past, ethnicized economic policy-making, and increasing Islamicization are some of the more current variables that impact ethnic relations in Malaysia.

Over all this is an excellent and informative book. However, I would have liked to see more discussions throughout the volume of the current challenges of nation-building in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore. Although each of these states faces different hurdles and each has a very different political system, the problems of nation-building *today* are quite different than in the 1950s or 1960s. Problems fall into two broad and related areas: ethnic politics and democracy. All three states are multi-ethnic and all still face problems and lingering questions about how different ethnic and religious groups will get along, and how power and economic resources will be distributed among them. What is more relevant for today is the question of democracy. Indonesia has made a transition to democracy and we have seen the amazing changes that go with that. The Chinese community has become active in civil society organizations and political parties, and in (re)establishing cultural and linguistic activities that had been previously forbidden. Some of the ethnic tensions that existed prior to, and that contributed to the horrific violence of 1998 were a direct result of Suharto's authoritarian regime and his use of economic policy and the military to scapegoat and pit one group against another (a point that Dahana makes in his essay, though he may be understating the virulent anti-Chinese propaganda instigated by Prabowo and possibly Suharto in his last months in office). With the fall of the New Order regime and the lifting of discriminatory legislation, the Chinese have been able to assert their rights as citizens and the country has begun to grapple with the community's position and contributions within Indonesian society. In many ways, although there are still ethnic and religious tensions in Indonesia, these relations

are in the process of becoming regularized through democratic political processes. This is a positive step forward for both nation-building and ethnic relations.

Neither Malaysia nor Singapore has made a transition to democracy, although each has some elements of democratic processes or institutions. While there are many reasons for the lack of full democratization, one of the obstacles may be unresolved ethnic tension over power sharing. Lee Kam Hing's essay discusses elite cooperation (consociationalism) among ethnic leaders in Malaysia during the transition to independence and until the late 1960s. Consociational arrangements may not have been fully democratic, but they did provide a basis both for ethnic harmony and nation-building. However, elite consensus in Malaysia broke down in 1969 and it has not been clear since then how groups should relate to one another and how power should be apportioned among the Malay, Chinese, and Indian communities. UMNO, the dominant party, is a Malay party which has been searching for a way of legitimating its authoritarian rule. It has used economic development and Islamicization of politics and Malay society as its basis for continued supremacy. Many Malaysians would want to see political reform and an opening up of the political process, but this might entail a reshaping of the national discourse so that Malay identity and Islam are no longer given primacy of power and place. Power-sharing may not be agreeable to many Malays, some of whom feel threatened by Chinese economic power. Thus, questions of democracy are unresolved.

While evidence from public opinion surveys seems to point to positive ethnic relations in Singapore (as described in Tan Ern Ser's essay), nation-building and ethnic cooperation is unfinished business there as well. Democratization in Singapore might reopen questions about Chinese dominance of the political and economic order.

In all three countries examined, nation-building is incomplete, and questions about ethnic relations are unresolved. This book sheds a great deal of light on the past and current problems in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore and I would highly recommend it to both scholars and those with a more general interest in ethnic politics and nation-building. The book would have been strengthened by linking today's questions about nation-building to the issue of democratization; but even without discussing democracy, it should be justly recognized for what it accomplishes.

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