

SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES

<http://englishkyoto-seas.org/>

<Book Review>

Chin Hsuen Wei

E. K. Tan. *Rethinking Chineseness: Translational Sinophone Identities in the Nanyang Literary World*. Amherst, NY: Cambria Press, 2013, xii+260p.

Southeast Asian Studies, Vol. 4, No. 1, April 2015, pp. 213-216.

How to Cite: Chin, Hsuen Wei. Review of *Rethinking Chineseness: Translational Sinophone Identities in the Nanyang Literary World* by E. K. Tan. *Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 1, April 2015, pp. 213-216.

Link to this article:

<http://englishkyoto-seas.org/2015/04/vol-4-no-1-book-reviews-chin-hsuen-wei/>

View the table of contents for this issue:

<http://englishkyoto-seas.org/2015/04/vol-4-1-of-southeast-asian-studies>

Subscriptions: <http://englishkyoto-seas.org/mailling-list/>

For permissions, please send an e-mail to: english-editorial@cseas.kyoto-u.ac.jp



been effective since 1999 and brings it back to the representative vote system by Local Parliaments (Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat Daerah, DPRD) like in the New Order. Whether the re-centralized, albeit local, election system will influence the dynamics and political commitment of the middle class in provincial towns is yet to be seen. It is not the task of this book to answer this. Yet, by emphasizing the role of politics in the construction of the middle class in provincial towns, this book sounds to me a bit too optimistic about the future of decentralization and democracy in Indonesia. It is very likely that the new bill, unless it is revoked before the local election rounds starting in 2015, will soon lead to a return of oligarchy in which elite-dominated political parties will put to an end the dynamic and energetic courses of life the middle class has lived in provincial towns over the past 10 years.

Agus Suwignyo

Department of History, Gadjah Mada University

References

- Bambang Setiawan. Siapa Kelas Menengah Indonesia? [Who is the Indonesian middle class?]. <http://nasional.kompas.com/read/2012/06/08/13003111/Siapa.Kelas.Menengah.Indonesia>, accessed on October 5, 2014.
- . Kelas Menengah Indonesia Konsumtif dan Intoleran [The middle class: Consumptive and intolerant]. <http://nasional.kompas.com/read/2012/06/08/11204529/Kelas.Menengah.Konsumtif.dan.Intoleran>, accessed on October 5, 2014.
- Niel, Robert van. 1960. *The Emergence of the Modern Indonesian Elite*. The Hague: W. van Hoeve. Re-published: 1984, Dordrecht and Cinnaminson: Foris Publications.

Rethinking Chineseness: Translational Sinophone Identities in the Nanyang Literary World

E. K. TAN

Amherst, NY: Cambria Press, 2013, xii+260p.

In Southeast Asian studies, a gap often exists between social science and humanities scholarship. This divide has arisen due to differing research methodologies, methods, approaches, materials, issues, and perspectives. In this sense, E. K. Tan's *Rethinking Chineseness: Translational Sinophone Identities in the Nanyang Literary World* deftly bridges the divide as it copes with an issue, Chineseness, which is a common interest of scholars in both spheres. The underlying critical concept of "Sinophone" has widened the research horizons of literature and Chinese studies, and also been increasingly accepted in fields like comparative literary studies, Southeast Asian studies, cultural studies, diaspora studies, anthropology, and sociology. By focusing on two writers from

Malaysia and one from Singapore (all who write in different languages), the text juxtaposes influential theories of Chineseness with Sinophone theories to persuasively negotiate the current value of Chineseness as an identification marker of Sinophone communities. Using both the Sinophone and Anglophone literary works and associated cultural practices of these three writers as evidence, *Rethinking Chineseness* uncovers a Sinophone identity that is always transitional and open for (re) construction.

Sinophone studies place key focus on identities of Chinese-descent communities across the world and related representations of everyday local life experiences. While existing works in the field do respond to such crucial issues to a certain extent, *Rethinking Chineseness* is comparably outstanding for its substantial combing and correlation of interdisciplinary theories, such as those of Ien Ang, Rey Chow, Allen Chun, Shih Shu-mei, Tu Wei-ming, Wang Gungwu, Wang Ling-chi, Chow Kai-Wing, Tan Chee-Beng, Jing Tsu, Stuart Hall, Aihwa Ong, Donald M. Nonini, Chen Kuan-hsing, Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, and Felix Guattari. This meticulous study potently justifies its research rationale and repeatedly enhances the conversing space of the studied topic with insights from other fields. Indeed, *Rethinking Chineseness* astutely weaves a thought-provoking dialogue with the above-mentioned scholars into literary textual and historical contextual analysis to deploy convincing argumentation throughout the book.

To Tan, who is basically a literary scholar, literary imaginaries are products of social realities and manifestations of Sinophone community dialogues with nation-state narratives. In this view, Sinophone subjects frequently mobilize imaginaries to navigate certain demarcating discourses like the universal hegemony of Chinese culture and Chineseness; these imaginaries hence move beyond nationality and ethnicity to differentiate what is Chinese and what is not in the historical and social-political milieus of the Sinophone community. In other words, the writing and deployment of imaginaries is a conscious practice in the cultural politics of identification. It provides a way for Sinophone subjects and communities to express agency and escape from imposed forms of identification. This dynamic legitimizes the investigation into the Sinophone subjects' perception of desires and memories as "Chinese" or local through analyzing and evaluating their literary imaginaries. With this basic foundation, *Rethinking Chineseness* extensively examines expressive works like novels, war narratives, and plays to find out how Sinophone subjects and the following generation of these sojourners reconstruct and articulate their memories, desires, dreams, hopes, and longings when they reinvent their ethnic culture in different stages of migration (p. 38).

In chapter 1, "Filling in the Blanks: War and the Inscription of a Sinophone Malayan Identity," Tan scrutinizes Malaysian-born writer Vyvyane Loh's English-language novel, *Breaking the Tongue* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004), a coming-of-age story of an anglicized Peranakan boy, Claude Lim, whose life in British Malaya is disrupted by the Japanese occupation during World War II. Tan analyzes how the protagonist searches and reconstructs his local identity through personal and collective memories after spiritually struggling due to war trauma, restricted acquaintance with

cultural heritage and identity uncertainties—i.e. the “blanks” suggested in the chapter title—as well as the experience of tongue mutilation, a symbolic detachment and break from the familiarity that is meaning-corrupted and repressive to the formation of an autonomous self. Tan employs this novel to suggest that nothing can impede the negotiation of a Sinophone subjectivity within the local circumstance (p. 43).

By exploring Malaysian writer Chang Kuei-hsing’s Sinophone novel *Elephant Herd* (Qun xiang, Taipei: Shibao wenhua chuban, 1998) in chapter 2, “Prosthesizing an Origin: Metanarratives and the Making of Sinophone Malaysian Myths,” Tan explicates how the protagonist, whose ethnic longing and local identity are obscured by his limited knowledge of China and immigrant history, reconstructs his identity by transforming Borneo into a realistic space of cultural and national identification (p. 162). Tan emphasizes that the artificial myths fabricated in such a fiction reflect the narrative strategies of Chang’s Sinophone writing as minor literature. Chang frequently engages metanarratives (metahistory and metafiction) and ultimately alters the structural representation of the genre by using the Sinophone Malaysian experience and the poetic language of the Chinese tradition to delineate a unique literary form of local content and aesthetics. Such a language of inventiveness suggests that Chineseness as a designator of Chinese identity has evolved into a floating signifier. Indeed, Tan contends that Sinophone writing is far more than a mere documentation of homelessness and exile, as Sinophone Malaysian writers’ creolized environment and distinct historical experience enable them to convert the geographical homeland into a linguistic sign. To them, the choice of Sinophone writing is intended to create linguistic fluidity for constructing a sense of belonging (p. 164).

In chapter 3, “Transcending Multiracialism: Open Culture and the Making of a Sinophone Singaporean Identity,” Tan features Singaporean playwright Kuo Pao Kun’s notion of open culture. By examining two multilingual plays of Kuo, Tan expounds on Sinophone attempts to promote a common cultural identity that celebrates the intermingling of past and present as well as the local and global in an effort to transcend the cultural, linguistic, and racial compartmentalization formed by Singapore’s bilingual policy. Tan details the quest of a common culture embracing diversity, difference, and openness through discussion of *Mama Looking for Her Cat* (1998) and *Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral* (1995). Utilizing examples like Zheng He’s journey and a carnivalesque market scene, Tan proposes that the open culture allows culturally orphaned Singaporeans to re-root and re-route their cultural parentage by actively mingling their lived experience, history, and memory. Such an invention of culture and identification exposes Singaporeans to a new option for a localized cultural heritage of their own (p. 210).

By demonstrating different dimensions of cultural translation, the introductory chapter and the three long core chapters collectively elucidate how the experience and mentality of Chinese emigrants and their descendants transition from a hope to “return,” to a desire for a sense of belonging, to an eventual ability to creatively articulate difference and connection. This progression

is usually represented in discourse as “overseas Chinese,” “Chinese diaspora,” and “Sinophone,” respectively. Tan thus cogently argues that Sinophone identities are translational, i.e. both relational and translatable, as they are formed by the coexistence of national, regional, ethnic, and local identities (p. 18). Sinophone communities, Tan underscores, assume and integrate traits from other cultures to build and rebuild their distinguishing Sinophone characteristics and thus recreate their ancestral culture (p. 41). Although resonant with previous concepts like Aihwa Ong’s “flexible identities” and Tan Chee Beng’s claim that there is no global Chinese identity, Tan goes further by critically rethinking the instrumentality of Chineseness as an effective theoretical category, especially in terms of its availability in the local context. He hence alters Chineseness to a linguistic symbol that continuously produces new meaning. In contrast to the theory of the diaspora first defined in the context of the Jewish community that focuses mainly on the notion of “returning to the original homeland,” *Rethinking Chineseness* reveals the mental experience of “not returning to the imaginary homeland” of diaspora Chinese.

The book is significantly contributive in its scrupulous theoretical mapping of Sinophone genealogy and its detailed close-readings of the selected literary texts and practices. It skillfully investigates three writers of different generations and backgrounds, a cross-boundaries research perspective that uses impressive conceptualization and sufficient contextualization to essentially strike at the core of Sinophone notions and concerns. Although its approach is primarily rooted in literature and cultural studies, it is definitely worth reading for anyone interested in Southeast Asian studies, area studies, or Chinese studies.

Chin Hsuen Wei 陳雪薇

Department of Chinese Studies, National University of Singapore

The Ruling Elite of Singapore: Networks of Power and Influence

MICHAEL D. BARR

London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2014, 200p.

Michael Barr’s research on the recent political history of Singapore has not generally been well-received by Singaporean academics, to say the least. This is not surprising: Barr roundly dispatches meritocracy and multiculturalism, two basic building blocks of the Singaporean psyche, and finds instead elitism and Chinese dominance, which he traces to the work of one man, former long-serving prime minister Lee Kuan Yew. Independent-minded Singaporean scholars tend to avoid attributing all things on the tiny island to one individual and to find nuances in their study of post-colonial Singapore (Hong 2002).

In his latest book, Barr sets out to map the networks of power in Singapore from the 1960s