

SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES

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<Book Review>

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Janet Steele. *Malaysiakini and the Power of Independent Media in Malaysia*. Singapore: NUS Press, 2023.

Southeast Asian Studies, Vol. 13, No. 3, December 2024, pp. 585-589.

How to Cite: Boon Kia Meng. Review of *Malaysiakini and the Power of Independent Media in Malaysia* by Janet Steele. *Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 3, December 2024, pp. 585-589. DOI: 10.20495/seas.13.3_585.

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Malaysiakini and the Power of Independent Media in Malaysia

JANET STEELE

Singapore: NUS Press, 2023.

Janet Steele's *Malaysiakini and the Power of Independent Media in Malaysia* provides a timely chronicle of modern Malaysian history, seen through the eyes of *Malaysiakini*—"arguably Malaysia's most important independent news organization" (p. 2)—beginning roughly with the political milieu of its founding in the late 1990s and ending with Malaysia's election of a government led by the once political prisoner and former deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim in November 2022. In her introduction, the author astutely observes that "much of the academic work on Malaysia focuses on politics and elections" (p. 4), with scholars and analysts feverishly churning out studies that seek to diagnose the meaning and implications of electoral results as well as prognosticating future trends for the country. Steele's work looks instead to the past:

This study takes a different approach. It looks at the history of modern Malaysia through the lens of *Malaysiakini*. By focusing on significant moments in *Malaysiakini*'s history, it illustrates how seemingly intractable problems get worked out within Malaysia's only truly independent newsroom. (p. 4)

These "intractable problems" become the substantive topics for her ethnography and history in subsequent chapters, namely, citizenship (Chapter 6), race (Chapter 7), religion (Chapter 8), and politics (Chapter 9).

The first five chapters of the book focus on the founding origins and inner workings of *Malaysiakini* as a news organization operating in a national media landscape dominated by pro-establishment print media. The latter are owned mainly by political parties and individuals belonging to or supporting the decades-old, long-standing ruling coalition, Barisan Nasional (National Front), which is dominated by United Malays National Organisation. A major deterrent and source of frustration for individuals or groups wanting to enter the country's news journalism sector is the existence of highly coercive laws regulating news publishing, most dating back to the British colonial era. These include the 1948 Sedition Act, the 1984 Printing Presses and

Publications Act, and the 1972 Official Secrets Act (p. 35). The 1990s, a time of rapid capitalist economic development and technological change, culminating with the eruption of the Reformasi protests in Malaysia precipitated by Mahathir Mohamad's sacking of his deputy, Anwar Ibrahim, provided two non-Malay Malaysians—Steven Gan and Premesh Chandran—an opportune moment for founding an online news portal. *Malaysiakini* was set up in 1999. Mahathir, in his quest to attract foreign investment into Malaysia for high-tech and digital industries (the Multimedia Super Corridor project), pledged a “no internet censorship” policy (p. 5). These conjunctural factors enabled the birth of *Malaysiakini*.

Steele's accounts of Gan's and Chandran's personal and familial backgrounds—Gan an ethnic Chinese from Ketari, Pahang, and Chandran of Indian descent from Petaling Jaya, Selangor—and their involvement in student activism at university in Australia give the reader some sense of the formative experiences that shaped the political outlook and values that the two sought to embody and articulate through *Malaysiakini*. Steele's highly readable writing provides colorful and memorable accounts of the founders' origins and significant events in their early years (Chapter 1); their journalist and activist careers in the 1990s (Chapter 2); and the political events and protests that inspired and birthed the Reformasi Generation (Chapter 3).

At the heart of the book is the story of *Malaysiakini*'s unshakeable commitment and embodiment in the Malaysian context of what Steele has termed the norms and values of “independent journalism and the ideology of professionalism” (pp. 6, 68). How *Malaysiakini* operationalizes the putatively universal principles of “good journalism,” such as independence and objectivity, in the day-to-day workings of its newsroom in Kuala Lumpur is further developed in Chapters 4 and 5. For example, “Although *Malaysiakini* journalists seldom use the word ‘objective,’ they frequently use the word ‘independent,’ by which they mean factual, non-partisan and outside of government control” (p. 69). Elaborating on journalistic norms, the author makes the further claim that “*Malaysiakini*'s equation of independence with non-partisanship and ‘covering both sides’ is rooted in the specifics of Malaysian political culture” (p. 70), what Gaye Tuchman (whose work the author references) would call “objectivity” in the United States. The historiographical assumptions behind the author's deployment of these norms in her stated purpose of writing “a cultural history” of *Malaysiakini* (p. 2) will be subjected to critical assessment below.

Chapter 5, titled “Independence,” provides an intriguing account of how *Malaysiakini* began with some initial start-up capital before an infusion of funding from MDLF (now MDIF, or Media Development Investment Fund), an organization that funds “independent media in developing democracies” (p. 84). MDLF/MDIF funding, crucial to *Malaysiakini*'s survival in its early years, led to virulent attacks from the ruling Barisan Nasional regime, culminating with the infamous police raid on *Malaysiakini*'s premises on January 20, 2003, a landmark in its history. *Malaysiakini*'s political persecution by the government burnished its reputation of independence and gained it much support from readers, particularly among an increasingly politicized and largely urbanized,

multiethnic middle class in West Malaysia. Gan estimates that soon after the 2011 Bersih protest in Kuala Lumpur, the number of subscribers hovered around ten thousand and “many of the subscribers were ‘hard core supporters’” (p. 156). Implicit in this chapter’s account is the author’s glowing evaluation of *Malaysiakini*’s practice of economic and financial independence, a fundamental capitalist virtue, only now performing the silent function of a normative yardstick for how media businesses should be independent in Southeast Asia.

Given that Steele’s work is intended to be read as a cultural history of *Malaysiakini*, a history that intersects with the broader historical trajectory of modern Malaysian politics, this review critically evaluates the work’s historiographical assumptions and what they mean for history writing on Malaysia more generally. The present critique seeks to pose the following two questions: the question of the nation and the subject of history, and the question of the politics of chronology or temporalization (Hirano 2018).

To gain an understanding of these historiographical matters, there are a couple of particularly revealing lines in the author’s admission that

the history of *Malaysiakini* is difficult to write, because in many ways the news organization has not changed at all since its founding—it is Malaysia that has changed . . . In 2018, it was Malaysians who . . . changed the government for the first time since independence. One could even argue that these changes are in large part due to the dogged efforts of *Malaysiakini* journalists. (p. 10)

The author’s ruminations on the idea of change and continuity provide two keys to understanding the implicit assumptions on the nature of history and historical knowledge in her book. First, who is the historical subject in Steele’s narrative? *Malaysiakini*, the news organization (its corps of journalists and editors, especially its founding protagonists, Gan and Chandran), is the putative historical subject, or the agent of history, “unstoppable as a force for change” (p. 175) in shaping modern Malaysia, practicing “its ideology of independent journalism” in an electoral authoritarian or semi-democratic country. *Malaysiakini*’s role as historical agent also serves as the avatar and microcosm of the larger historical narrative of the Malaysian nation. However, given the binary nature of the competing notions of the imagined national community that still prevail in Malaysia today, one that Donna Amoroso (2004, 215) has insightfully diagnosed as Malaysia’s seemingly interminable entrapment “in the logic of Malay vs. Malaysian nationalism,” it is worth ascertaining which side of the national story *Malaysiakini* and its founders identify with.

Chandran, with the utmost clarity, observes: “the birth of Reformasi crystalized this idea of a nation, and *Malaysiakini* played a critical role . . . to channel this rethink of the nation . . . without that movement we wouldn’t have succeeded, and without us they wouldn’t have succeeded” (p. 168).

Malaysiakini’s role as historical subject is intimately tied with the social and political ascendancy of the urbanized, multiethnic middle classes in West Malaysia, which drove the Pakatan

Harapan (Alliance of Hope) coalition to electoral victory in 2018. Steele goes so far as to say, “there was a ‘path’ connecting Reformasi with the landmark electoral victory of the opposition in May 2018, and we can trace this same path at *Malaysiakini*” (p. 145). In other words, *Malaysiakini*’s story is the story of the recent ascendancy and political victory of “Malaysian nationalism” over “Malay nationalism,” as the country continues to be locked into this unending bipolar national, ideological tug-of-war.

Second, what kind of temporality is employed by Steele’s history, and what are its political consequences for readers of Malaysian history more generally? The kind of chronology employed by Steele is a historicist one, “an understanding of time in which all human societies, despite their historical differences and diversities, follow the exact same linear path of progress” (Hirano 2009). The historical avatar for the realization of the author’s “universal” values of liberal, democratic, free market capitalism of the American variety can be likened to the image of Russian nesting dolls: *Malaysiakini*’s narrative as the outer figure for the narrative of a pluralist, multiethnic story of the Malaysian nation underneath, with the universal history of American values as its innermost figure. What this chronology conceals is precisely what Walter Benjamin (2003, 392) forewarned of: “there is no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.” It is possible to read the events recounted in Steele’s book from the perspective of the oppressed classes of people in Malaysia’s past, the silenced historical subject. This critical historical account is woven out of countless memories of police violence against protesters in numerous demonstrations between 1998 and 2012 (Chapters 3 and 9), the destruction and eviction that accompanied urban capitalist development (Chapter 6), the deaths of migrant workers in immigration detention camps (p. 37), and the undocumented “bodies . . . piled up three-deep in the morgue” (p. 123) on May 13, 1969, among others. What Steele sees as “intractable problems” connected by “a chain of events,” the oppressed classes see instead as “a single catastrophe” (Benjamin 2003, 392), that of people living and dying under the systemic violence of the modern Malaysian capitalist nation-state. The epistemic violence committed by historians sustains this catastrophic course of history indefinitely.

Boon Kia Meng
CSEAS, Kyoto University

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The Khmer Rouge Tribunal: Power, Politics, and Resistance in Transitional Justice

JULIE BERNATH

Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2023.

The Khmer Rouge genocide, a historical tragedy that continues to resonate in Cambodia’s politics, underscores the importance of understanding the country’s social and political dynamics. Julie Bernath’s *The Khmer Rouge Tribunal: Power, Politics, and Resistance in Transitional Justice* offers a comprehensive examination of transitional justice in post-conflict Cambodia, providing a rich empirical foundation. The book delves into the establishment and impact of the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC), also known as the Khmer Rouge Tribunal Court, in facilitating transitional justice in Cambodia. Employing the concept of “resistance” as a guiding framework, Bernath has structured the book into four chapters, with the first one examining the background of the Khmer Rouge regime and the three subsequent chapters discussing the three forms of resistance to transitional justice. The three forms of resistance encompass senior members of the ruling party, victims of the Khmer Rouge regime, and marginalized groups who have suffered under both the Khmer Rouge and contemporary regimes.

The first chapter provides an overview of Cambodia’s long-term conflicts and multiple regime changes from its independence from France in 1953 to 1998. Through these decades, Cambodia experienced a range of transformations—from a brief period of prosperity in the 1960s to successive political upheavals and violent conflicts in the 1970s and 1980s, followed by an era of experimentation with liberal values in the 1990s. These shifts were driven by power struggles among ruling elites influenced by both Eastern and Western powers. The prolonged process of reconciliation and peace negotiation in the 1990s, prioritizing negative peace over accountability, delayed the establishment of an ad hoc tribunal to address the Khmer Rouge crimes until October 2004. This delay, with the tribunal being set up twenty years after the Khmer Rouge regime’s collapse and Hun Sen’s successful consolidation of power with many former Khmer Rouge defectors, led to criticisms that the ad hoc ECCC tribunal resembled a “show trial”—akin to the People’s Republic of Kampuchea’s People’s Revolutionary Tribunal, which was set up shortly after the fall of Democratic Kampuchea in July 1979. The ECCC’s limited impact in delivering justice for the victims stemmed from two major factors: first, the operational delays caused by many disagreements within the hybrid trial chamber between the United Nations and the Cambodian government judges; and second, a race against time to try aging Democratic Kampuchea leaders