

BOOK REVIEW

Wang Gungwu, ed. 2005. *Nation-Building: Five Southeast Asian Histories*. History of Nation-Building Series. Singapore: ISEAS, ISBN981-230-317-0 (Soft Cover), vii, index 288 pp.

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This book is a compilation of articles written by some of the most prominent historians of Southeast Asia. The collection consists of essays written by Wang Gung Wu, “Contemporary and National History” and “Nation and Heritage; Craig Reynolds “Nation and State in Histories of Nation-Building”; Anthony Reid “Writing the History of Independent Indonesia”; Anthony Milner “Historians Writing Nations”; Cheah Boon Kheng “Ethnicity in the Making of Malaysia”; Lee Kam Hing “Writing Malaysia’s Contemporary History”; Tony Stockwell “Forging Malaysia and Singapore”; and Albert Lau “Nation-Building and Singapore Story”. The only non-historian in the group is Caroline Hau “Rethinking History and Nation-building in the Philippines”. These essays discuss the wide-ranging aspects of ongoing projects to write a history of nation-building in Southeast Asia. Conceived in the mid-1990s, the project aims to tease out the details of how the five original ASEAN members struggled in the past fifty years to ‘build’ their respective ‘nations’ against the backdrop of the Cold War and of efforts at decolonization and regional cooperation. Aware of the seeming incongruity of any project with the agenda of nation-building at the time when talks

on globalization and transnational interactions heightened doubts on the continued relevance of the national framework, the editor justifies the undertaking by stressing that “there is much that we do not know about how this ‘building’ has been going on” (Wang, 2). It was about time, he rightly claims, that the story or stories be told.

The volume consists of ten articles of quite disparate tones and foci as well as theoretical approaches to the question of nation-building. What binds these essays together is the view that these nations are constructed and that the process of construction is contested. What appears to be lacking, it seems, is a consensus on what a nation is; how it is different from the state; and how the process of nation-building can be delineated from that of state-building. The essays are reflections, meditations, clarifications, commentaries, and critiques on the whole framework that underpins the project, and on specific aspects of nation-building in each original ASEAN country.

The book gives a preview of the project’s end products. I hazard a guess, it could be a gentle reminder to the authors to deliver their complete contributions to the project sooner rather than later. To note, by 2005 when this book was published,

only Cheah Boon Kheng, had completed the volume on Malaysia. As of October 2007, Taufik Abdullah's volume on Indonesia is in the press. The volumes on the Philippines (Reynaldo Ileto), Thailand (Charnvit Kasetsiri) and Singapore (Edwin Lee)—are still works in progress.

The essays written by Craig Reynolds and Caroline Hau are notable for a number of things, not the least of which are their theoretical underpinnings. They pose questions, for one, that challenge any simplistic notion of nation-building and thus raise the bar for other contributors to this volume, as well as for the five authors of the country-specific volumes. By emphasizing the “hinge between the nation and the state,” (p. 23) the “complementary yet conflictual relationship” (p. 24) between the two, Craig Reynolds reminds us that nation-building should not be confused with state-building. It is a reminder that seems to be lost in a good number of articles in the volume and, I am afraid, perhaps also in at least some of the five-country studies. Among others, Reynolds's suggestion presupposes the need to explicate not just the nation-building efforts of the established ASEAN countries but also of political advocacies of the groups within those countries toward developing their own autonomous states. Considering the attempts of these minority groups (both political and cultural) in the region to build their own nation-states, it seems incumbent upon the five authors to consider their cases as constitutive elements in the dialectics of official state-approved nation-building projects. Otherwise, the histories that will emerge from the project will be no more than a history of the victors.

Summaries of the country-studies provided by contributors such as Hau, Cheah and Milner seem to be heavily focused on the nation-building efforts of established states and definitions of ‘nation’ seem to privilege the ruling elites and the ruling elite-wannabees. The competing visions of nations, or ‘nations-of-intent’ to use Shamsul's term, of groups such as the minorites in Indonesia and Malaysia or the Muslims in Mindanao do not seem to receive the attention that they deserve. Ileto's assertion,

for instance, as echoed by Hau and Milner, that all competing groups in the Philippines, regardless of ideological orientations, had to anchor their rationale for contesting power within the frame defined by the 1896 revolution misses the fact that for the Muslims in Mindanao and for the Igorots in the mountain areas, among other groups, the narrative of 1896 was almost meaningless. Using the 1896 revolution as the founding myth of the Filipino nation effectively delegitimizes the claims, to the extent of even denying the existence, of other nations-of-intent. It seems imperative for the Series to be transparent about two questions: first, whose nation-building is it that they talk about?; and second, whose nation-building projects are they missing or downplaying in the process. The editor's closing chapter is fairly clear about the first, but the second question is only hinted at, if not ignored by a good number of the contributors.

Caroline Hau, for her part, raises a number of complementary and perhaps even more vexing and fundamental questions. She begins by invoking Joan Scott's observation that history as a discipline paradoxically “creates the object it claims only to discover” (Scott 2001, 85, as cited in Hau 39). From there she goes on to remind us that to “write a history of the Philippines is not... simply a matter of writing *about* the Philippines with particular reference to the past”; it also entails interrogating the parameters within which history as a discipline and the “Philippines” as an idea has been conceived (Ibid.). This also implies, she adds, the complicity of the historians in “structuring—intellectually and materially—the history of that nation” (p. 40). To be added therefore to the already complex mix of factors to consider are the role of the scholars, the historicity of the discipline, and contestations on the idea of the Philippines (or any Southeast Asian country for that matter). In practical terms, Hau suggests that writing the history of nation-building requires more than the acknowledgment of the contested character of nation-formation, as all the contributors and the authors of the volumes recognise, but also the need for the historians to be aware of the roles they play,

and their own interests, in the process. It is a pertinent question that seems to have been largely ignored.

The other articles focus on fairly wide-ranging aspects of nation-building, or better still, state-building efforts in Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore. Anthony Reid's contribution, "Writing the History of Independent Indonesia," notes that Taufik Abdullah's volume in the Series is the first attempt to "tell the story of independent Indonesia as a totality" (p. 69). He identifies and explains the reasons—social, political and academic—for such a long-delayed and obstacle-ridden undertaking. Cheah Boon Kheng's "Ethnicity in the Making of Malaysia," on the other hand, rationalizes in detail the approaches and the tone he adopted in the writing of his volume in the Series, *Malaysia: The Making of A Nation* (2002). It was perhaps written in anticipation of possible critiques of his work.

Anthony Milner's, "Historians Writing Nations: Malaysian Contests" offers a complex and nuanced picture that supplements Cheah Boon Kheng's article. By using plural forms in the title, and by carefully demonstrating this in the essay, Milner underscores the multiplicity of the attendant processes and the envisioned goals of nation(s)-building in Malaysia—a point that Cheah Boon Kheng's article noted or hinted at. By detailing how different history books espousing various ideological and ethnic perspectives try to define their respective conceptions of nation(s), Milner eschews, just as Caroline Hau did in her piece, the unilinear view of nation-formation of each historical narrative.

This tendency toward a largely unilinear view of nation-building in Malaysia is reiterated by Lee Kam Hing in his reflections in "Writing Malaysia's Contemporary History." As Anthony Reid did in the case of Indonesia, Lee Kam Hing spelled out why writing a contemporary history is an undertaking fraught with danger and difficulties in Malaysia. While not unaware of the fluidity and problematics of nation-building, by anchoring the end-goal of nation-formation in Malaysia in "Vision 2020", this article, more than any in the book,

points to the conflation of the otherwise differentiated processes of state- and nation-formation, as rightly emphasized by Reynolds in his contribution.

Tony Stockwell in "Forging Malaysia and Singapore: Colonialism, Decolonization and Nation-Building" offers an alternative view on the role of the British in the formation of the separate states of Malaya/Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei. He argues that rather than driving the process from a position of strength, the British had to contend with competing local interests from which they emerged less rewarded than they had originally expected. As with Lee Kam Hing, among many other contributors in the volume, nation-building here is equated with state-formation.

The case of Singapore offers an interesting contrast. Whereas history has been a deliberate partner in nation-building in other ASEAN countries, an assumption shared by other contributors, Albert Lau in "Nation-Building and the Singapore Story" shows that such a partnership came belatedly in Singapore, only when nation-building efforts had already been underway for three decades. Since the 1960s, history as an academic subject was deemed to have no immediate practical use and from 1972 onwards it was dropped from the school curriculum. The Singaporeans were urged to "examine the present, think of the future and forget the past" (p. 224). It was only sometime in the 1980s, amidst the growing concern for the lack of awareness among the younger generation of the travails Singapore underwent in the past, when the usefulness of history was officially acknowledged. In the mid-1990s history returned to the curriculum, with the launching of "National Education" as part of curricular reforms. The case of Singapore is significant as it suggests that history, as a form of national narrative, is perceived to be an essential ingredient in a successful nation- or state-building project.

In some ways, the book offers a view of the state of the art of writing about nations and nationalism in Southeast Asia. Being a mixed bag of theoretically informed insights and approaches,

on the one hand, and more conventional treatments of the topic; on the other, one gets the sense of the creative tensions between seemingly competing, but ultimately complementary approaches that characterize the field. The book is a welcome addition to the still relatively small but growing

corpus of historiographies on Southeast Asia. As it affords a glimpse of the ongoing effort to write the history of nation-building in five ASEAN countries, this book heightens anticipation of the forthcoming publication of the remaining four volumes in this Nation-Building Series.