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Yearning to Belong: Malaysia's Indian Muslims, Chitties, Portuguese Eurasians, Peranakan Chinese and Baweanese

PATRICK PILLAI

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What are the experiences of ethnic minority communities in present-day Malaysia? How do they negotiate their often multiple and fluid identities with national policies and politics that are based primarily on ethnicity? Patrick Pillai, drawing on years of fieldwork in different locations in Peninsular Malaysia and long-term interactions with ethnic communities, provides valuable observations on not one, but five cases of less-studied minority communities in *Yearning to Belong: Malaysia's Indian Muslims, Chitties, Portuguese Eurasians, Peranakan Chinese and Baweanese*. This book investigates Indian Muslims in Penang, Chitties and Portuguese Eurasians in Malacca, Peranakan-type Chinese in Terengganu, and Indonesians from Bawean Island, all in one volume. This itself is an admirable achievement as such a variety often comes from an edited volume by multiple contributors, yet Pillai manages to pull them all together, assembling historical backgrounds, second literatures, and firsthand data to create a panoramic picture of ethnic relationships in Malaysia today.

We start with the first group, Indian Muslims in Penang, in Chapter 1. After a brief history covering the precolonial and colonial eras, the chapter looks at the religious and cultural impacts of this long-standing Muslim community on Malaysian society, in the form of religious buildings, political leadership, and intellectual influence as well as aspects of everyday life such as food and language. It then focuses on the identity challenge of the community, which finds itself in an awkward position being Muslim yet not ethnic Malay (although the constitutional definition of Malay itself is not strictly an ethnic one). Due to this ethnic ambiguity, Indian Muslims are often

classified into three different types of (non-)citizenship: Malay Muslim citizens, Indian Muslim citizens, and Indian Muslim permanent residents (non-citizens). The strict classification comes with significant differences in access to state resources. The rest of the chapter explores the difficulties and discriminations it brings, and some feasible solutions adopted by individual members.

Chapter 2 brings us to Malacca, a port renowned for its hybrid history and multiethnic heritage. It focuses on one minority group, the Chitties, or descendants of Hindu settlers from South Asia who arrived in Malacca around the time when Islam was introduced to the peninsula. This group, sometimes known as Peranakan Indians, maintained extensive interactions with other communities in Malacca and underwent a sequence of decline, dislocation, and dispersion under Portuguese, Dutch, and British colonial rule over the following five centuries. Like the Indian Muslims in Chapter 1, the Chitty community follows a highly hybrid tradition in its religious rituals, material culture, and performing arts. The interethnic exchange has been so extensive and complicated that in some cases the Peranakan Chinese, instead of other Indians (Chitties' closer ethnic "relatives") or Malays (the major group), functioned as its cultural intermediary (p. 49). Today the Chitty community, despite its shrinking population and diminished influence, has managed to keep a residential, religious, and ethnic space in the "Chitty village" near central Malacca and is actively seeking *bumiputera* (indigenous as recognized by the constitution) status for "land security, social recognition and economic opportunity" (p. 66) to cope with unfavorable ethnic policies and aggressive commercial developers.

Remaining in Malacca, Chapter 3 discusses the Portuguese Eurasians, who have managed to obtain *bumiputera* status, and their own identity search through another ethnic space, the Portuguese settlement on Malacca's seafront where poor Eurasian fishermen live and work. The ancestors of Portuguese Eurasians came slightly later than the first arrivals of the Chitties, as a result of the Portuguese conquest of Malacca in 1511. As in so many other cases in this cosmopolitan port, its unique Portuguese cultural elements merged widely with the Malaysian culture in terms of food, costumes, language, and songs over centuries of intermingling, while Catholicism remained a defining feature. The most interesting part here is the community's unconventional route to claim *bumiputera* status, with partial success (pp. 101–109). The process is not lacking controversy, especially when this was entangled with the changing agenda of the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), the country's ruling political player, in the mid-1980s to solicit wider support from non-Malay voters, and a personal interest taken by Mahathir, the most influential prime minister in postwar Malaysia. So far this is an unfinished story, as the community is now facing a potential intra-ethnic income gap (p. 109) and over-tourism (p. 92) in addition to continued efforts to obtain full recognition as *bumiputera*.

In Chapter 4 we move to Malaysia's east coast and investigate the Peranakan-type Chinese in Terengganu. Terengganu is a Malay-majority state that has Thailand on its northern border (although this further layer of potential ethnic hybridity is only slightly touched upon in the chap-

ter) and whose minority Chinese population accounts for merely 3 percent. Therefore, unlike other Peranakan or non-Peranakan Chinese from the west coast, the Chinese in Terengganu are often isolated from the mainstream Malaysian Chinese. Yet, recent historical discussions suggest that Terengganu, located on the historical China-Southeast Asia maritime corridor, might well be one of the earliest Chinese settlements on the peninsula, perhaps dating back to as early as the visit of Cheng Ho's fleet in the fifteenth century. Today, the Terengganu Chinese experience differs by location (rural vs. urban) and by generation (grandparents and parents vs. youth), some contributing factors being access to Chinese-medium schools and improved transportation and social mobility. Remarkably, this is a community that does not utilize its multiple identities, as eligible as it might be, to seek social recognition in the constitutional framework. Instead, certain segments of the community are disappointed over prevailing policies (p. 143).

Perhaps the most unique story amongst all is of an Indonesian-origin group, the Baweanese, and their migration to and settlement in Peninsular Malaysia. The last chapter is based on Pillai's 2005 doctoral thesis, with detailed fieldwork supplemented by follow-up visits in later years. Unlike other groups discussed so far, the Baweanese began migrating to Malaysia in the British colonial era and continued, almost without interruption, well into the current century. Originating from a tiny island in the Java Sea, the Baweanese have a long tradition of emigration to Singapore and Malaysia as workers as well as religious teachers. The labor shortage in Malaysia during its economic boom in the 1970s and 1980s brought a particularly large number of Baweanese workers. Although relative newcomers, the Baweanese are Muslim with close connections to the Malay majority historically, ethnically, and religiously. Therefore, the Baweanese case sheds new light on the road to *bumiputera* and its fluid nature. Starting from a less marginalized position, the community utilizes its multiple identities to form strategic working and social relationships with its Malay neighbors and colleagues. Still, it takes three generations to become a full-fledged Malay citizen of Malaysia (pp. 173–178), and a significant generational difference is ensured in terms of lifestyle, socioeconomic prospects, and realities.

Such an amalgamation is a result of years of painstaking fieldwork, long-term relationships with the communities, a deep understanding of their challenges, and firsthand experience of the country's ethnic policies. As a journalist-turned-sociologist, Pillai is well positioned to bring these pieces together, often from an insider's vantage point. In addition, his narrative interweaves a wide range of opinions from observers and actors on the ground, including scholars, politicians, community leaders, stakeholders, and members of the community. The rich information and easy-to-read style make the book a good read not only for academics who seek up-to-date case studies, but also the general public within and outside of the region who want to know more about intermingled communities in a multiethnic country and their shared experiences, past and present.

Running through all five cases is one core story: the process of assimilation and acculturation in an ethnicity-conscious country. Some common themes appear repeatedly, such as material

culture, performing arts, religious practice, and communal festivities. Knowing the key position of assimilation and acculturation, Pillai defines them at the opening of the book, claiming that acculturation is “cultural change in the direction of another ethnic group” that can be mutual, while assimilation is “the adoption of the ethnic identity of another group, thus losing one’s original identity” and is one-way (p. xviii). However, readers may wonder why certain themes are categorized as leading to acculturation while others are considered to facilitate assimilation. What is the significance of each theme in our understanding of a community’s experience and identification? And if some themes are about acculturation and others are related to assimilation, what are the decisive factors that set them apart? If all themes appear to be cultural, then why, for instance, is religion more fundamental in defining an ethnic identity than is language or cuisine? Where does culture end and identity begin? Given the book’s numerous and succinct examples, it feels particularly important to further investigate these key concepts.

Despite the large amount of data collected by the author, in more than one case readers may find there could have been better-organized and more critical ways to present these valuable primary sources. For instance, narratives quoted from local historians on the early arrival of Indian Muslims in Penang could be further supported by archeological and textual evidence (p. 10), and the discussion of their contribution to popular Malay food might be supplemented with sources other than from the Internet (pp. 17–18). A large portion of the author’s participatory observations, questionnaires, and interview transcripts remain unprocessed in the appendix of some chapters. It might be worth further analyzing them and weaving the results into the main text.

Reading about all five communities’ challenges and adaptations, and the fascinating life stories of individual members, one wonders what exactly they are “yearning to belong to.” Pillai mentions that his motivation in writing this book is to highlight “shared histories and cultures, common universal spiritual values and . . . interlinked future” (p. xv). In the conclusion he reflects on Malaysia’s ethnicity-based policies and provides helpful recommendations to improve interethnic understanding and increase ethnic harmony. The ethnicity problem might have administratively started under the British colonial system (p. 206), but postwar politics continue to transform the ethnic minority communities’ collective identity. Apart from the Terengganu Chinese, all other communities in the book strategically employ their hybrid histories and fluid identities to maximize their political, economic, and social standing in a uniquely Malaysian way by obtaining constitutionally acknowledged *bumiputera* status, with various degrees of success. Indeed, apart from acculturation and assimilation via cultural channels, a process that has been convincingly elaborated in this book, perhaps we also want to further explore another vital element that determines the experience of postcolonial Malaysian minority communities, that is, the political influence of prevailing ethnicity-based policies. This single element, as the book has more than sufficiently revealed with details, above all defines the ethnic experience for minority communities in Malaysia and differentiates it from any other context. We may even ask whether, if there were no

ethnicity-based policies, these communities would be the same as we see them today. Would they still yearn to belong, and if so, what would they want to belong to?

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The Penguin History of Modern Vietnam

CHRISTOPHER GOSCHA

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The Penguin History of Modern Vietnam by Christopher Goscha traces the story of modern Vietnamese nationbuilding back thousands of years. The titles of its 14 chapters cover in chronological order events that are commonly seen as milestones in the forming of modern Vietnam: Chinese invasion (Chapter 1, “Northern Configurations”), French colonization (Chapter 2, “A Divided House and a French Imperial Meridian Line?”; Chapter 3, “Altered States”; Chapter 4, “Rethinking Vietnam”; Chapter 5, “The Failure of Colonial Republicanism”; and Chapter 6, “Colonial Society and Economy”), the First Indochina War (Chapter 7, “Contesting Empires and Nation-states”; Chapter 8, “States of War”; and Chapter 9, “Internationalized States of War”), the Vietnam War (Chapter 10, “A Tale of Two Republics”; and Chapter 11, “Towards One Vietnam”), and stories of a unified Vietnam (Chapter 12, “Cultural Change in the Long Twentieth Century”; Chapter 13, “The Tragedy and the Rise of Modern Vietnam”; and Chapter 14, “Vietnam from Beyond the Red River”). Nevertheless, amidst a wide range of scholarship about the history of modern Vietnam, Goscha’s *The Penguin History of Modern Vietnam* is unique in constantly stressing on the multiplicity of modern Vietnam’s past. Thus, it implicitly criticizes contemporary scholarship on Vietnamese history that has been produced under postcolonial theory and criticism by foreign scholars and under nationalist historiography by Communist Vietnamese historians.

Throughout the book Goscha uses synonyms for the word “multiplicity,” such as “plurality,” “diversity,” and “heterogeneity,” typical terms of postmodern literature, to highlight his vision of “multiple Vietnams.” Moreover, the author explicitly states in “Introduction: The Many Different Vietnams” that “rather than positing one Vietnam, one homogenous people, one history, one modernity, or even one colonialism, this book investigates modern Vietnam’s past through its multiple forms and impressive diversity” (p. xxx). Accordingly, as presented in the book, the history of Vietnam includes a series of interlocking forces and people; they occurred and acted at specific points in time and space, each generating its own range of possibilities and eliminating others at the same time. As evidence, the author begins his story of Vietnam’s past with “a mosaic of a hundred Vietnams” in the open zone running between present-day central Vietnam and South-