

Schedneck's analysis would have benefitted from a more robust unpacking of some of the scholarly concepts that she employs — “commodification”, “imaginary”, “field”, “embodiment”, “habitus” — as well as from a sustained, critical engagement with the specific arguments and claims advanced by other scholars, such as Preston, Campbell and Pagis, who have analysed similar phenomenon.

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“Getting By”: *Class and State Formation among Chinese in Malaysia*. By Donald M. Nonini. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015. x+348 pp.

This is a remarkable ethnographic study of Bukit Mertajam, a small Malaysian town known as a transport hub linking the state of Penang to the rest of the country. As such it shares many characteristics with other small towns on the west coast of Malaysia. What makes the study remarkable is not necessarily the study site, but the time span covered through intensive participant observation and the focus on Bukit Mertajam's male Chinese — mainly Hokkien — population of *towkays* and labourers. As Donald M. Nonini quite rightly points out, the rich literature on the Chinese of Malaysia and, indeed, on Chinese throughout Southeast Asia has focused on the richer segment of that population, on business leaders and the middle class, whereas the lower classes have been largely ignored. It seems obvious, but it is often overlooked, that most Chinese are wage labourers or belong to the low-income self-employed, whereas only a small proportion are rich businessmen or professionals. The author has made this clear and focused on the Chinese majority.

After conducting a survey of the Chinese mercantile elite of Bukit Mertajam in 1978–80 while working on his doctoral dissertation,

during several additional field visits the author turned his attention to truck drivers: the largest segment of the Chinese working class in the town. As these drivers are overworked and exploited by their Chinese employers and allegedly squeezed by Malay government officials, one could expect a rising class consciousness and incipient class struggle. As class consciousness is, however, mediated by ethnic Chineseness, class conflict has only rarely emerged. Common cultural values do not, however, extinguish differences in culture, lifestyles and behaviour patterns. These clearly set the lower and upper classes apart: high-level Mandarin phrases versus coarse Hokkien slang, karaoke drinking parties versus shared hawker food, leadership roles in religious festivities instead of mere participation in such events all indicate *de facto* class membership.

Linking ethnographic details with phases of Malaysian economic development allows Nonini to add historical depth to the analysis. The New Economic Policy, launched in the early 1970s, apparently put pressure on the Chinese business elite, by reducing their profits and increasing competition between small companies, mainly in the trucking business. This, Nonini shows, hindered the creation of larger firms and stymied economic development. Bukit Mertajam businessmen often owned a fair number of small companies, which they did not combine into large publicly listed companies, mainly in order to circumvent government regulations, taxes and pressure to take in Malay counterparts. An ethnography of Chinese religious festivals enlivens the text. The hungry ghost festival (pp. 78–81) and clan association events are interpreted as representations of Chinese society.

As is common with anthropologists, the author has integrated himself fully into the community under study. He conducted many interviews in Mandarin, sympathized with the political views of his interview partners and, at times, repeated stereotypes about the country and the Malays that are common in Chinese Malaysian society. Other ethnic groups, of which there are several in the town, accounting for about a quarter of the population, turn up only in short snippets of interview texts. There is a large Indian business

community in Bukit Mertajam, and the town is surrounded by mostly Malay villages, in one of which James Scott discovered the “weapons of the weak”. But these are largely peripheral to Nonini’s discussion. As a result, the perspective on Malaysian society from within only one of its constituent ethnic groups has some limitations. In particular, the analysis overshoots its boundaries by asserting that “tributary relations between Chinese business families and the petty government officials, police, and employees of state-owned enterprises simultaneously ethnicised and personified the state” (pp. 119–20), with *towkays* pitched against “an aggressive predatory state” (p. 121) and subjugated to a “state-initialized class war” (p. 123). There may be some truth in these allegations, but interviews result in value-laden images of conditions, rather than exact data on these putative social relations.

The analysis of Chinese society in Bukit Mertajam could not ignore the segmentary structure and ethnic differences among Hokkien, Hakka, Teochew and Hainanese dialect groups, treated in Chapter 7. The attempts by clan and hawker associations to achieve unity are vividly portrayed. Though the instances described refer only to a limited time span, they nevertheless provide an inside view of the dynamics of clan politics at the micro-level of a small town.

The last part of the book turns to the final years of the twentieth century. By this time Bukit Mertajam had been integrated into the wider industrial hinterland of Penang state. Government offices, industrial estates and housing complexes had extended far beyond the earlier town boundaries. The author’s remarks on local politics turn out to be somewhat vague, tinted by anti-government sentiments and allegations. Bukit Mertajam and its Chinese working class benefited from government-initiated projects after all. The role of the Penang state government in comparison to the federal government dominated by Barisan Nasional is generally neglected. In short, the attempt to bring the historical ethnography up to 2007 is not fully convincing.

Leaving aside the somewhat disappointing epilogue and appendix — the latter on the distribution of wealth among Chinese in Bukit Mertajam during 1978–80 — the book as a whole is an excellent

and innovative ethnographic study of the male Chinese population of Bukit Mertajam. Its strength lies in the integration of detailed ethnographic field data into the wider framework of Chinese society. Another strong point is the analysis of the neglected role of the Chinese working class and its relationship to both the Chinese upper class and the Malay-dominated bureaucracy. The significance of the study goes far beyond the ethnography of a booming but not otherwise extraordinary middle-sized Malaysian town, and Nonini certainly rectifies the cliché image of a rich Chinese business society by drawing attention to its numerically far bigger class of Chinese workers, hawkers and the self-employed. This is a book worth reading for students of Malaysian society, modern history and economic development.

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Contemporary Malaysian Indians: History, Issues, Challenges and Prospects. Edited by Denison Jayasooria and K.S. Nathan. Selangor: Institute of Ethnic Studies (KITA), National University of Malaysia (UKM), 2016. xxii+640 pp.

The scholarship on the study of Indians in Malaysia has seen a number of momentous publications. Beginning with the well-documented studies of Sandhu (1969), Arasaratnam (1970), Jain (1970) and Stenson (1980), the field moved later to multidisciplinary approaches in the edited volumes of Sandhu and Mani (1993) and Kesavapany,