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PENTECOSTAL MEGACHURCHES IN SOUTHEAST ASIA



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PENTECOSTAL MEGACHURCHES IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

Negotiating Class, Consumption and the Nation

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First published in Singapore in 2018 by
ISEAS Publishing
30 Heng Mui Keng Terrace
Singapore 119614

E-mail: publish@iseas.edu.sg
Website: bookshop.iseas.edu.sg

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ISEAS Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Pentecostal Megachurches in Southeast Asia : Negotiating Class, Consumption and the Nation / edited by Terence Chong.

1. Big churches—Southeast Asia.
2. Pentecostal churches—Southeast Asia.
3. Pentecostalism—Southeast Asia.
 - I. Chong, Terence, editor.
 - II. Title.

BV637.9 P41

January 2018

ISBN 978-981-4786-88-1 (soft cover)

ISBN 978-981-4786-89-8 (E-book PDF)

Typeset by International Typesetters Pte Ltd
Printed in Singapore by Markono Print Media Pte Ltd

CONTENTS

<i>Preface</i>	vii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	ix
<i>About the Contributors</i>	x
1. Introduction <i>Terence Chong</i>	1
INDONESIA	
2. Pentecostal Megachurches in Jakarta: Class, Local, and Global Dynamics <i>Chang-Yau Hoon</i>	21
3. Counting Souls: Numbers and Mega-worship in the Global Christian Network of Indonesia <i>En-Chieh Chao</i>	47
MALAYSIA	
4. Reaching the City of Kuala Lumpur and Beyond: Being a Pentecostal Megachurch in Malaysia <i>Jeaney Yip</i>	71
5. Pentecostalism in Klang Valley, Malaysia <i>Chong Eu Choong</i>	100

PHILIPPINES

6. Jesus is Lord: The Indigenization of Megachurch
Christianity in the Philippines 127
Jayeel Serrano Cornelio
7. Pentecostal-Charismatic Megachurches in the Philippines 156
Joel A. Tejedo

SINGAPORE

8. Grace, Megachurches, and the Christian Prince in
Singapore 181
Daniel P.S. Goh
9. Speaking the Heart of Zion in the Language of Canaan:
City Harvest and the Cultural Mandate in Singapore 207
Terence Chong
- Index* 235

PREFACE

The idea for this volume on Pentecostal megachurches in Southeast Asia began to form in 2015 after I had completed several papers on megachurches in Singapore. There were several recurring themes in the Singapore cases which I found interesting. The congregations of Singapore megachurches were generally youthful and infused with energy and idealism. They had an optimistic worldview that stood out from the well-worn apathy typical of today's youth. I also found a strong and mutually reinforcing link between the spiritual and material world. This link, often manifested as the Prosperity Gospels, has drawn much criticism from other Christians. However, deeper ethnographic effort will suggest that this link is more than material accumulation for personal satisfaction. Instead material accumulation is, it is believed, a tangible measure of one's obedience to God; less of a reward but a by-product of faithfulness. Meanwhile, their deep engagement with contemporary culture has resulted in an inclusive outlook that is experimental, playful, and always open to the possibility of imputing secular events and actions with theological meaning in order to get God's message across to non-believers. This has also meant that their Christian identity is often writ large in the workplace. Finally, the expansionist visions of their leaders often come through. The drive for souls was always going to be a numbers game but megachurch leaders are less hampered by the modesty or conservatism of their mainline counterparts. Such visions go beyond filling up auditoriums but include aggressive church-planting in neighbouring countries such that local megachurches enjoy a second wing in the region.

All these findings not only distinguish newer Pentecostal churches from older mainline denominations, but also demonstrate an ability to participate in mass consumption, pop culture and modernity like no other church. The fact that Pentecostalism is one of the fastest growing communities in Singapore suggests that these trends would only continue. As I dwelt on these findings, it became apparent that they needed to be set against the broader region.

Much of the scholarship on Christianity in Southeast Asia has been of a historical nature, often framed as the by-products of colonization and foreign missionaries. What was missing in the literature were perspectives of contemporary Pentecostal megachurches growing in the dynamic national economies in Southeast Asia. The growth of consumerism and the middle class have accompanied the expanding Christian community in the region. What we have then is a theological discourse that is responsive to the impulses of mass consumption and entrepreneurship as it negotiates for a place in the national civic space. Furthermore, unlike Singapore in which the majority ethnic Chinese comprise the bulk of Christians, the Christian communities in other Southeast Asian societies are more ethnically diverse. How then does the megachurch engage with ethnic diversity? How does Pentecostalism respond to dominant religions like Islam and, in the case of the Philippines, Catholicism?

The contributors to this volume were invited because of their previous work on the subject matter. They conducted original research which informed the writing of their respective chapters. Given the dynamism and the size of the Pentecostal community in the region, it was necessary to whittle down the scope of enquiry to specific countries and urban centres. Nevertheless, we believe that the eight chapters covering four different countries — Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Singapore — would offer a strong flavour of the Pentecostal character in Southeast Asia.

*Terence Chong
December 2017*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung for its strong support without which this book would not have been possible. I am deeply appreciative of the administrative support from ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute and the encouragement from ISEAS former Director Tan Chin Tiong for this book project. I am also grateful to Ng Kok Kiong, Managing Editor of ISEAS’s Publications Unit and its editor, Sheryl Sin, both of whom were accommodating and professional. Finally, special thanks to Research Officer Kenneth Poon Jian Li for his sharp editorial help and administrative support. I benefitted from his suggestions and feedback.

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