

In the field of Overseas Chinese Studies, it is rare to have such a personal but theoretically informed account that sheds light on both the intimate life of family dynamics and the public life of nation-building. This in-depth case study of one shophouse owned by a Malaysian Hakka Chinese family could breathe new life in this sub-field of specialization by legitimizing similar autoethnographic studies.

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*Conceptualizing the Malay World: Colonialism and Pan-Malay Identity in Malaya.* By Naoki Soda. Kyoto: Kyoto University Press, 2020. xix+206 pp.

Soda's *Conceptualizing the Malay World* is the first book-length effort in Malaysian studies to analyse the construction of the modern Malay world through the lens of colonial knowledge (pp. 1–4) as expounded by Cohn and applied by anthropologists and sociologists to the Malaysian context. But it would have been helpful if he had discussed what 'colonial knowledge' is and its difference from 'colonial discourse' to avoid the term colonial knowledge coined by Cohn. The following paragraphs should be helpful in distinguishing between the two.

Discourse on the impact of colonialism in Malaysia's historiography has been extensive both in academic as well as non-academic writing. But 'colonial knowledge' as a concept—introduced and discussed in-depth by anthropologist-historian Bernard Cohn in his thirty-year empirically grounded study of British colonialism in India (1987, 1996)—is almost absent or unknown in Malaysia's historiography or in discourse on Southeast Asian history (Norman 2014). Various scholars, however, have used this term that Cohn coined in its literal sense.

Cohn's pioneering works on 'colonial knowledge' established and consolidated the critique of anthropology as a colonial form of knowledge arguably long before theoretical proposals were put forward by Michel Foucault about knowledge and power and Edward Said about colonial discourses and Orientalist scholarship. Cohn's central thesis is as follows:

In coming to India, they unknowingly and unwittingly invaded and conquered not only a territory but an epistemological space as well. The "facts" of this space did not exactly correspond to those of the invaders. Nevertheless, the British believed they could explore and conquer this space through translation: establishing correspondence could make the unknown and the strange knowable. (1996, p. 4)

Without defining the term 'colonial knowledge', Soda has still managed to demonstrate—through systematically studying an impressive corpus of empirical evidence that strongly supports features of colonial knowledge, such as the textbooks used in the colonial education system in Malaya, especially the Malay vernacular education—how the modern Malay world has been constructed by it, and the subsequent contestation it brought among Malay elites, in Malaysia and Indonesia. He deconstructs and critiques the construction and application of the education system. In other words, he shows how the British defined and ruled Malaya in ways that were not dissimilar to what they did in East Africa (Mamdani 2012).

Methodologically, the British invented 'investigative modalities' to collect the mammoth and complex corpus of 'facts' about India, now housed in archives across the colonized countries and in London. Cohn has described investigative modalities as including "the definition of a body of information that is needed, the procedure by which appropriate knowledge is gathered, its ordering and classification, and then how it is transformed into useable forms such as published reports, statistical returns, histories, gazetteers, legal codes, and encyclopedias" (Cohn 1996, p. 5).

By adopting this investigative approach, Soda was able to deconstruct, elaborate and provide a systematic critique of the knowledge produced by the British in Malaya. He chose to focus

on education as the crucial instrument of the colonial civilizing institution; namely, the modern education system and its schools that produced texts and curricula in service of the formation of moral and productive citizens. It was through such an effort that the process of the indigenization of colonial knowledge took place in Malaya.

His particular focus was on Malay vernacular education (chapter 2) and its origin, bureaucratic organization, pedagogy and standardization as outlined in the influential Winstedt Report of 1917. The content of this education, as found in textbooks and Malay translations of English textbooks, and the practice, including teachers' training, were also outlined in the report (chapters 3 and 4). The implementation of Malay vernacular education began with the establishment of Sultan Idris Training College (SITC) at Tanjung Malim, Perak. SITC produced hundreds of teachers, introducing modern education to Malay pupils in rural areas, thus reproducing colonial notions of ethnicity, especially 'Malayness', along the lines defined by the census that was introduced in 1871 and conducted every decade thereafter. This process is referred to by Soda as "the indigenization of colonial knowledge" (Soda 2021, p. 151).

Soda raised a very important point in his analysis of Ibrahim Hj. Yaacob, an SITC graduate considered a Malay nationalist. Despite using the textbooks provided by the British in his classes—which constructed Malay identity based on the population of Malaya—he openly contested the notion of 'Malayness' that was territorially tied to Malaya. He introduced and developed his notion of pan-Malayan identity that eventually led him to expand conceptually and physically the notion of Malay and 'Malayness' to include Malays in Malaya and Indonesia, or Melayu Raya (The Greater Malay Territory) (chapter 5).

Soda also noted that the establishment of postcolonial modern nation-states in Southeast Asia, which produced clear physical boundaries, made the notion of Melayu Raya irrelevant as a physical entity (chapter 6). But at another level the postcolonial Malay-speaking countries—namely, Indonesia, Malaysia and Brunei—organized a council to plan and monitor the development of the

Malay language in these very countries. Transnational regionalism organizations such as ASEAN may not exactly be ‘Melayu Raya’; nevertheless, the formation of the association has been historically informed by such a regional spirit (Owen 2014, pp. 1–2).

*Conceptualizing the Malay World* is a path-breaking book which demonstrates that the colonial knowledge introduced and applied to Malaya is not uncontested. Nevertheless, colonial knowledge formed the structural backbone of the postcolonial modern state of Malaysia, although the competing notion of “nation-of-intent” (p. 2) remained. Soda has written a book relevant to historians and anthropologists in Malaysia and abroad. Unlike Cohn, he is a historian among anthropologists. This is a must-read book for those interested in Malaysian and Southeast Asian Studies, as well as in the sociology of knowledge.

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*Unwritten Rule: State-Making through Land Reform in Cambodia*. By Alice Beban. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2021. 258 pp.

Cambodia’s integration into regional and global economies has accelerated the demand for land for real estate development and