



He Who Is Made Lord: Empire, Class and Race in Postwar Singapore

by Muhammad Suhail bin Mohamed Yazid, Singapore, ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, 2023, 251 pp., ISBN 9789815104301 (S\$35.90, pbk)

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BOOK REVIEW

He Who Is Made Lord: Empire, Class and Race in Postwar Singapore, by Muhammad Suhail bin Mohamed Yazid, Singapore, ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, 2023, 251 pp., ISBN 9789815104301 (S\$35.90, pbk)

As Muhammad Suhail indicates in the title, this book centres around a political figure in Singapore named ‘He Who Is Made Lord’ (or ‘Yang di-Pertuan Negara’ in the original Malay language). In 1959, Singapore was granted self-governance from British colonial rule. Yang di-Pertuan Negara, as the new head of state, replaced the colonial governorship as the representative of the British monarch in the territory. This process constituted a significant part of Singapore’s decolonisation. By focusing on Singapore’s transition from a late colonial state to a postcolonial nation, the book dissects the diversified and sometimes contesting political, social, and cultural meanings of Yang di-Pertuan Negara. The author claims in his epilogue that the book showcased how ‘decolonization was a complicated, unpremeditated and ambivalent process which unfurled across many dimensions’ (p. 214). He succeeds in doing so. With a thematic approach, the book analyses how officials and politicians in Singapore and London attempted to instil multiple meanings to the title of Yang di-Pertuan Negara. Conflicting ideas relating to empire, class, and race became associated with this new head of state of Singapore. By examining the process from internal discussion within the British government to public reactions in Singapore, the book illustrates how the decolonisation process of Singapore was never linear or straightforward. Instead, it involved power struggles between British and Singaporean historical actors, demonstrating how the postcolonial, inclusive, and multi-racial discourses in contemporary Singapore were never natural in historical development.

The book contains five chapters. Chapter one serves as an introduction to the book. The story of the Yang di-Pertuan Negara appears as ‘a tale about ingenuity’ that involved ‘simultaneous struggles for power’ between historical actors in London, Singapore, and Malaya (p. 13). Unlike other studies on viceregal officers in British imperial history, the case of this parliamentary head of state in Singapore highlights the need to look beyond ‘episodes of crisis’ and the strict separation of political and ceremonial functions of the political figures (p. 25), challenging existing generalisation. Chapter two forms the contextual basis of later analysis. It describes the late colonial transition in Singapore, including key historical events such as negotiations between Singapore and London, the drafting of a new constitution, and the rise of the People’s Action Party (PAP), a major political party that has governed the country since 1959. Readers who are less familiar with Singapore’s history might find this chapter particularly useful. Chapters three to five showcase the core of the book’s analysis. Chapter three investigates how Yang di-Pertuan Negara emerged at the intersection of British imperial and late colonial Malayan politics. While being a symbol of Singapore’s departure from British colonial rule, Yang di-Pertuan Negara and the process of creating this position indeed represented how the British persisted in maintaining their control. Declassified colonial records reveal that British officials preserved the imperial hierarchy while nationalist leaders were hoping to add postcolonial meanings to the role of Yang di-Pertuan Negara. On the one hand, Yang di-Pertuan Negara represented ties

to political culture in the Malay world, as the title and its significance resembled royal titles in the Federation of Malaya and those in the Johor Sultanate before the British arrival. On the other hand, to the British, this local-born Yang di-Pertuan Negara would represent the Crown, as he performed ceremonial duties previously held by the governor. The interactions of the two sides demonstrate how this head of state 'operated in the semantic interstices of being both an imperial and Malay(an) symbol' (p. 111).

Chapters four and five focus more on the social significance of Yang di-Pertuan Negara while keeping the political context in mind. Chapter four turns to the idea of class. It illustrates the paradox of how, despite his elite, privileged, and English-educated background, the PAP portrayed Yusof bin Ishak (the Yang di-Pertuan Negara from 1959 to 1965) as a commoner breaking class distinction. The aim was to fit the PAP's socialist vision. Focusing on Yusof's anti-colonial trajectory, including his role as the founder of the pro-Malay newspaper *Utusan Melayu*, the PAP portrayed him as an egalitarian figure who held 'perceived distaste towards the hierarchies of the imperial system' (p. 134). With this official rhetoric in mind, the author skilfully examines how Yusof's privileged class identity indeed persisted due to his background as a colonial elite and everyday activities as the head of state. For instance, the author analyses an oral interview with Syed Esa Almendoar (Secretary-General of the United Malays National Organisation in Singapore, 1961–65) and argues that Yusof's actions displayed 'class exclusivity' and showcased himself 'like a Sultan' (p. 154).

Shifting to the idea of race, chapter five focuses on another paradox: While the appointment of Yusof supposedly signalled a challenge to the racial order established during the colonial era, it also demonstrated how racial hierarchy persisted. A key example, again, came from the PAP's official narrative. Racial tensions had long existed in British Malaya and Singapore. The colonial economy led to unequal development among different racial communities, creating inequality and tensions, especially between the Malays and the Chinese. Appointing Yusof, a Malay with a royal background, thus became a politically calculated move for the PAP. This choice helped legitimise the PAP's rule by 'balanc[ing] off the Chinese-dominated Singaporean government' (p. 187), a strategy described by the author as 'diluting Chineseness' (p. 163). Race continued to be relevant despite political claims rejecting communalism. By examining Yusof's social images, these chapters demonstrate how officials reconstructed the Chineseness and Malayness in the decolonising city-state, reminding readers of how their historical and contemporary existence was not only connected but also traces of late colonial politics.

The book presents a key contribution to decolonising the history of decolonisation. While the book concerns the end of the British Empire in Singapore, it does not present the process as merely a matter of the coloniser. Instead, it showcases how local interests, voices, and society engaged with this retreat of the coloniser. Despite relying primarily on colonial and official archives, the author has departed from metropolitan concerns and instead analysed how stakeholders in Singapore and London interacted. With the aid of local newspapers and second-hand oral history interviews, the author does not depict the process as unilateral forces coming from Whitehall officials. Negotiations, disagreements, and bargaining were the common themes, illuminating the active role of local politicians. Even when describing imperial legacies, the author shifts away from the common narrative that focuses on the British monarch and the continued existence of British institutions, personnel, and culture. Instead, Muhammad Suhail proves the relevance of Malay political culture, including how the royal and privileged background of Yusof became intersected with the British and the PAP's interests. This

intersection also reminds readers of how the British relied on the Malayness of the territory in both creating and ending Singapore's colonial status. Earlier in the early nineteenth century, as Carl Trocki has shown, the British established colonial administration in Singapore by relying on the foundation of the pre-existing Malay polity of the Johor Sultanate and intervening in its succession dispute.¹ Over a century later, as Muhammad Suhail shows in his book, British and Singaporean officials invented traditions surrounding the Yang di-Pertuan Negara, especially his royal family background and Malayness. This continuity reminds historians of the importance of pre-colonial and local polities and how they became re-fashioned, re-created, and re-produced across colonial and postcolonial times.

This book also illuminates directions for future research. While the book covers unofficial perspectives and critically examines the subject, it focuses on newspapers and other sources that describe views from a relatively pro-official standpoint. For instance, the author mentions that the *Straits Times* described the appointment of Yusof as 'no shock', as the people had recognised his name through his public service (p. 133). Was this a unitary view in Singapore (and Malaya) towards the appointment? Did newspapers in other languages or periodicals targeting different communities hold divergent views? As the PAP constructed new social and cultural portrayals of the Yang di-Pertuan Negara and created paradoxes, did the people (from different communities and generations) accept the contradictory images presented to the public? Did any other historical actors, apart from Syed Esa Almenoar, hold critical perspectives on Yusof? Nevertheless, as a monograph centring on the political process of establishing the Yang di-Pertuan Negara, it has done its job well, and the above issues are merely directions for future research. Overall, *He Who Is Made Lord* is a significant contribution to the history of Singapore and would be a valuable read to scholars and students specialising in the history of empires, decolonisation, and race.

Note

1. See Trocki, *Prince of Pirates*.

Reference

Trocki, Carl A. *Prince of Pirates: The Temenggongs and the Development of Johor and Singapore, 1784–1885*. 2nd ed. Singapore: NUS Press, 2007.

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