Leo Suryadinata (ed.)

Southeast Asian Personalities of Chinese Descent: A Biographical Dictionary. 2 vols. Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2012. Volume 1: l + 1397 pp.; Volume 2: viii + 154 pp. ISBN 9789814345217 (vol. 1), price: SGPD 198.00; 9789814414135 (vol. 2.), 168.00 (hardback).

Southeast Asian Personalities of Chinese Descent: A Biographical Dictionary is a two-volume compendium, which, as the title suggests, provides an extensive series of biographies of prominent Southeast Asians of Chinese descent. In its broad inclusivity, the work represents a true magnum opus, containing detailed biographical descriptions of prominent individuals of Chinese descent who have made their fortunes in one or more of the 10 nations of Southeast Asia. The entries have been composed by 177 international contributors from a wide variety of professional backgrounds, both within and outside of academia, including journalists, lawyers, physicians, and entrepreneurs. The criteria for inclusion in this volume, among which self-identification holds pride of place, are both sensible and methodologically rigorous. If the self-proclaimed goal of these volumes is to provide ‘a larger picture of men and women whose distinctive lives gave them a place in the history of modern Southeast Asia’ (p. xxiii), the work has clearly succeeded.

Volume 1 of this compilation consists of 605 individual entries arranged alphabetically, each with an extensive biography of its subject ranging in length from 2–5 pages. For academic researchers, the great strength of this volume lies in its detailed delivery of subject names, which, wherever applicable, appear in the indigenous dialect or language, in pinyin, and in Chinese characters. Anyone who has ever painstakingly attempted to reconstruct multiple names for a single individual across the conventions of several Chinese dialects and Southeast Asian languages will find this gift to be remarkably convenient. In general, these volumes are beautifully organized and formatted; however, the biographies themselves vary in quality. Two main issues impact the effectiveness of the profiles in Volume 1. First, while biographies of figures of great historic renown are full of meaningful and valuable details, they also often adopt a reverential—at times, bordering on hagiographical—approach to their subjects, which makes their objectivity suspect. The problem of bias can be further complicated by the inclusion of disparaging language in reference to opponents of the profiled personality. In the specific case of the entry on Lee Kuan Yew (pp. 521–5), for example, glowing recitations of political achievements combine with terms like ‘rabble-rousing pro-communists’ (p. 523) to call into question the objectivity of the entry. On the other hand, biographies of less well-known individuals occasionally contain too much information of ques-

tionable utility; extensive details about subjects' childhoods, school years, and families offer very little insight on the significance of these characters. The profile of the late Singaporean sculptor Ng Eng Teng, for example, while including a lovely précis of this luminary's artistic career, also devotes nearly 10% of its length to a detailed discussion of the assorted ailments that afflicted the artist prior to his death. This type of detail seems better suited to an obituary than to a biographical dictionary, and yet similar details can be found in most of the profiles included in this volume. While these problems do not negate the utility of this volume as a medium for helping 'readers understand modern and contemporary Southeast Asia in which personalities of Chinese descent have played significant roles' (p. xxviii), they run the risk of leaving the impression that the work is more of a 'Who's Who in Southeast Asia of Chinese Descent' than a scholarly reference guide.

Volume 2, including the separate Glossary and Index, is the crowning glory of this compendium. It is skillfully designed and organized to assist the reader in any number of research endeavors and it is this second volume that mitigates many of the problems associated with the biographies themselves. In particular, the five indices included in Volume 2 provide the reader or researcher with multiple vectors for approaching their exploration of the individual profiles in Volume 1. Again, the detailed delivery of subject names is one of the work's greatest strengths, and the Name Index capitalizes upon this strength by allowing profile names to be searched alphabetically using pinyin, indigenous dialects or languages, and Chinese characters. This makes the cross-referencing of subject names incredibly convenient. The other indices are just as useful to readers: the Gender Index divides the personalities into male and female subjects; the Country Index divides subjects by their 10 Southeast Asian national homelands; and the Author Index tells the reader which contributors have written which entries in Volume 1. The Category Index is perhaps the most interesting of them all. It divides subjects into 11 largely occupationally-based categories, including Artists, Businessmen/Businesswomen, Community Leaders, Educators, Mass Media Leaders, Politicians, Professionals (with 8 nested subcategories), Religious Leaders, Sportsmen/Sportswomen, Writers, and Other (also with 8 nested subcategories, which are largely intellectual or activist in nature). The versatility of the category system allows truly complex personalities to appear in more than one category of the index, a great boon to readers or researchers who turn to this volume with specific questions in mind.

Many of the shortcomings remarked upon in this review are mitigated by the vast scope and scale of this Biographical Dictionary. Given the shortage of reference materials addressing the overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia, Professor Suryadinata and the editors should be commended for their persistence in

undertaking such an ambitious project. In the final analysis, these volumes represent an invaluable contribution to our corpus of knowledge about prominent Southeast Asians of Chinese descent and would make an excellent addition to any institution's reference collection.

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