Leong Yew


This book is both a timely and a useful addition to the recent academic debates over Asianism. Yew has skillfully and clearly delineated his topic and made a valuable contribution to Asian cultural studies. The book is of use not only to specialists on Singapore but also to scholars studying the phenomenon of Asianism throughout the region. Notions of Asianism have been formulated as Asian nations have embraced modernity and become aware of their relationships with other Asian countries proceeding along similar trajectories. Yew gives the best account so far of the Singapore brand of Asianism as it has been articulated in popular culture, politics, and academic discourse in the last decade of the twentieth century and first decade of the twenty-first century.

Yew’s work is comparable to the best studies of Asianism, which have been mainly on Japan. Japan’s well-known view of Asianism historically has seen Japan as the guardian and leader of Asia. In Japanese Asianism, Japan is both different from the West and different from the rest of Asia. Yew’s study is similar in quality to the more historically focused work of Sven Saaler and J. Victor Koschmann (2007).

Yew’s book enables comparisons of the different Asianisms to be more easily made by scholars in the area. Yet, Yew does not adopt a comparative approach, but his research work complements the classic comparative two volume collection of essays on Asianism published by Sven Saaler and Christopher W.A. Szpilman (2011).

How has a modern Singapore articulated its own notions of Asianism? Yew gives the most comprehensive answer to this question so far. He tackles the question through a well-organized chapter structure. The first two chapters provide an excellent overview of the scholarship in the area, and Yew cleverly positions his work on Singapore Asianism into the field of study. In chapter 3, Yew searches for the origins of Singapore Asianism in its past, noting the ambiguities in identity that have arisen from its historical beginnings of being built on Western ideas but with a population that was a mixture of Asian immigrants from China, India, and the Malay Archipelago.

Chapter 4, ‘In search of the Asian soul’ illustrates how the powerful Singapore state is central to the idea of Singapore Asianism. He writes of ‘the never-ending attempts by the state to enforce its changing cultural visions and policies in the face of other kinds of identities and norms’, particularly from ‘the place putatively known as “the West”’ (p. 86). He then highlights how the
Singapore education system was ‘Asianized’ by the state in the 1980s to provide ‘Asian cultural ballast’ as a reaction to concerns that Singapore through its modernization had become too ‘Westernized’ (p. 91).

The discussion of the commodification of culture in Singapore Asianism in chapter 5 is done well but could have been expanded upon. There is a fascinating and detailed account of Asian food in Singapore. This section is superb. Singapore has often attempted to define itself through its wide range of ‘Asian’ cuisine that is a legacy from its diverse immigrant population. However, the following section on television could have been enhanced. At least one Singapore television drama series should have been used to flesh out the ideas of Singapore Asianism. Returning to comparisons with studies of the more well-known Japanese Asianism, Yew could have perhaps done what Ryoko Nakano accomplished in a recent article on ‘Nostalgic Asianism in Postwar Japan: The TV Drama Kaiketsu Harimau’ (Nakano 2014). Yew makes his points about television well, but he lost an opportunity to more colourfully illustrate his ideas. However, at most places in his book he does seize upon captivating examples to convey his ideas.

The most interesting area that Yew uses to define Singapore Asianism is his coverage in chapter 6 of how knowledge of Asia is constructed in Singapore. This chapter is highly original and by far the best section in the book. Yew gives a critical and insightful analysis of the National University of Singapore’s Asia Research Institute and its Singapore interpretation of what is Asia in the academic world. Yew sees the Asia Research Institute of Singapore as attempting to ‘reterritorialize Asia’ in a world in which Asia effectively has become ‘detterritorialized’ through globalization (p. 167). Lastly, Yew analyzes the Singapore urban landscape, which comprises the meeting places of a cosmopolitan range of recent immigrants from across Asia, such as Bangladeshis, Burmese, Filipinos, Indonesians, Thais, and Vietnamese.

Yew concludes interestingly with the assertion that there is no one monolithic form of Singapore Asianism. He says that in Singapore there has been ‘varying, contradicting, and opposing notions of Asia that have become dominant and mainstream in Singapore, sometimes at different points in time but often simultaneously’ (p. 218). Yew is reluctant to settle on a single definition of Singapore Asianism, seeing it as having multiple forms. Yet, in his conclusion, he acknowledges the distinctive role of a strong Singapore state in Singapore Asianism throughout his study. He writes that ‘implicit in this book’s discussion is the issue about how substantial the role of the Singapore state was in constructing and designing these varying significations of Asia’ (p. 225).

One thing the book lacks is a bibliography. The references are just listed at the end of each chapter. A bibliography might have improved its value to
scholars studying other forms of Asianism in the region. Undoubtedly, Yew has written an account of Singapore Asianism which is rewarding to read and will be a reference work in the area for both scholars and students.

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References