Donald M. Nonini

'Getting By'. Class and State Formation among Chinese in Malaysia. Ithaca:

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'Getting By' offers a historical ethnographic account of ethnic Chinese living in the city of Bukit Mertajam, in the state of Penang in West Malaysia. The book provides a concise and lucid account on the complex intersections of class, gender, and racial politics among Malaysian Chinese. Although the fieldwork was performed primarily within the larger state region, the racial discourse on discrimination and subjugation suffered by ethnic Chinese is commonly regarded as a microcosm of the wider racial dynamics between the Bumiputra and the minority Chinese.

Nonini's ethnographic observations span three decades and cover the various cultural behaviours of petty capitalists and working class Chinese men. Among other insights, his work has revealed intriguing comparative findings on class identity and cultural reproduction of Malaysian Chinese of different socioeconomic strata. While the literature on the entrepreneurial spirit and success stories of overseas Chinese abounds, little, if any, focuses on working class people, such as truck drivers, and how they face systematic oppression by state officials from the majority race and marginalization by their fellow ethnic bosses, or *towkays*.

Chapter 1 and its preceding introduction offer an overview on the theoretical development of state formation and class struggles among ethnic Chinese in Malaysia in the immediate post war era. It draws attention to the historical injustice and racial inequality suffered by the Bumiputras under the British colonial government, and attempts to restore social justice through income redistribution measures such as the New Economic Policy (1971) and education programs that promote Malay cultural supremacy.

Chapters 2, 3, and 4 examine the multiplicity and complexity of Malaysian-Chinese cultural identity, class, and racial politics. On the one hand, the Chinese in Malaysia face discrimination from state policies and institutions. On the other hand, the system, however corrupt and discriminatory, nevertheless enables petty enterprise owners to 'get by'. In response to Malay dominance and hegemony, the communities' cultural response is dynamic. The relationship between Chinese capitalist and Malay state officials is at times mutually beneficial (or even symbiotic) rather than predatory. As a result, cultural styles are sometimes meticulously curated to appear modest or 'small' in order to evade predatory business cannibalism perpetrated by the Bumiputra policies.

Chapters 5, 6, and 7 delve into the typology of working class Malaysian-Chinese and their elite counterparts. Working class Malaysian-Chinese are characterized as innately incapable, impoverished, and dangerous. They serve as the convenient targets for harassments and petty extortions by state officials who view them as disloyal citizens undeserving of rights. For the Chinese elites and petty business owners, their place within the broader ethnic Chinese society is defined by their modes of representation, manifested through linguistic (eloquence in mandarin) and behavioural (good manners) competences that are considered social markers of a 'proper', upper-middle class 'Chinese'. But Malaysian-Chinese constitutes neither a homogenous community nor is the label a static marker of identity and class status. The working class is not entirely disempowered as they do have some means to respond, as when the truck drivers transporting goods over long distances discovered that they had some power and leverage over policy.

Chapters 8, 9, and 10, introduce how the 'politics of developmentalism' triumphs over the politics of protest, and it describes how the forces of globalization reshape the reproduction of culture and class in both the business owners and the less privileged working class. The influence of traditional Malaysian-Chinese institutions on the daily lives of ordinary people waned considerably by the late 1990's and 2000's, as the centre of gravity steadily shifted away from collective identities (trade, labor, and ethnic associations) to individual and family identity. For both elites and the working class, their imaginary spaces have been broadened through cross border migration, albeit in different forms. The book offers refreshing and intimate perspectives to the seismic changes in Malaysian identity politics and the forces that have shaped these transformations.

As a Singapore-based scholar on intercultural relations and transnational migration, Nonini's thesis is thought provoking and poignant. The Malaysian ethnic demography is diametrically opposite to that of Singapore where the ethnic Chinese community is the numerical majority, and enjoys both cultural and political supremacy. In contrast to the former, Singapore takes a pragmatic stand in public policy formulation and administration, and ethnic diversity is managed with a light touch (Noor & Leong, 2013). But similar to Malaysia, the city-state had a tumultuous period in its founding years managing racial politics. Racial conflicts were rife in the 1960s, and the Malay and Chinese ethnic communities have coexisted uneasily in the post-colonial era.

Singapore's membership in the Malaysian Federation was short lived (1963–1965). The Republic was expelled from the political conglomerate for posing a serious economic threat to Kuala Lumpur, and in promulgating a 'Malaysian Malaysia' agenda, that is, non-ethnically based politics (Lee, 2014). Ironi-

cally, these are the same driving forces for UNMO's antagonism against the Malaysian-Chinese today. The racial discourse has remained seemingly unchanged over the past decades, although there are nascent signs that both ethnic Chinese and Malay electorates have become increasingly disenchanted with the ruling Barisan Nasional and its corrupted state regime. Will the cultural supremacy of the Bumiputra prevail? Will Malaysian politics lean towards Singapore's multicultural model? Only time will tell.

Overall, the volume offers a critical but excellent and impartial analysis on class and ethnic struggles in Malaysia. As the regional economies become more intertwined and complex, domestic ethnic conflict and other forms of socio-economic injustice will increasingly be a subject of international scrutiny. The Malaysian people, both ethnic Chinese and Malay alike, will have to recognize, negotiate, and co-create the future of Malaysia's multicultural society.

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