Marshall Clark and Juliet Pietsch

Indonesia-Malaysia Relations: Cultural Heritage, Politics and Labour Migration.


In 2015 extensive forest fires in Indonesia blanketed Southeast Asia in a thick haze that lasted for months. The haze problem is a recurring transnational issue that this book discusses as well as other disputes, such as those over cultural icons in Southeast Asia. The book aims to contribute to scholarship on cultural heritage, labour migration, and the international politics of Southeast Asia with a focus on the intricate relationship between Indonesia and Malaysia. As regional neighbours, the nations share historical roots and cultural heritage; the concepts of serumpum (originating from one stock) and saudara (sibling) enforce notions of cultural and linguistic familiarity. Most literature tends to focus on official inter-state relationships which emphasises cultural commonalities of kinship and common economic and political interests.

Clark and Pietsch apply an anthropological approach to explore how tensions between the two states play out in reality. They discuss a wide array of topics such as the Manodrama, the true story of an Indonesian model fleeing an unhappy marriage with a Malaysian prince, and the tense atmosphere of the soccer final in the 2011 Southeast Asia Games. They visited one-sided, often coarse, Facebook pages and internet blogs, analysed movies and soap operas, visited museums and cultural sites and, most importantly, talked to many ‘ordinary’ people, that is: people, not involved in politics or policy making. The result is a discussion of fascinating incidents that illustrate the intricate love-hate relationship between the two countries. Ambitious in its scope, the variety of topics is extensive and ambitious, covering culture, language, religion, migration, ethnicity, citizenship, and democracy through the lens of transnational issues like air pollution, territorial disputes, and the treatment of Indonesian migrant workers.

The captivating account of the mid-2009 Manodrama serves as an introduction to the love-hate relationship between the two states. The first chapter provides a historical overview of the political relationship since independence, discussing events before, during, and shortly after Sukarno’s ‘Ganyang Malaysia’ (Crush Malaysia) campaign. In Chapter 2, on language and mythology, the authors turn to the story-cycle Ramayana in a search of cultural commonalities. Politicians in both countries have long used shared culture and heritage to ease bilateral tensions, which paradoxically also often turn out to become points of dispute. This point is discussed in the third chapter that concentrates on cultural contestations, one of the root causes of Indonesia’s
anti-Malaysian sentiment. It discusses tourism campaigns and contains a fascinating description of Indonesia’s hosting of the Southeast Asia games in 2011 and Indonesia’s poor sportsmanship at the time, losing the soccer final to their neighbours.

Chapter 4 examines the tension between ‘museumised’ heritage protection in Malaysia and ‘living culture’ in Indonesia. It shows how much of Indonesia’s heritage, including wooden fishing boats in Makassar, is still in use, while Malaysia’s maritime life appears in Terangganu’s museum. In the next chapter, Islam is discussed through an analysis of the representations of women and men in a sample of Indonesian and Malaysian films showing that Islam is used to explore ideas about gender, class, and nation. The authors argue that Islam in both countries is a question of ethnicity. The sixth chapter deals with the racial divides in both countries, and how these divides play out differently due to the different colonial experiences of Indonesia under the Dutch and Malaysia under the British.

The last three chapters provide less in-depth material and reprises much of what has been discussed in previous chapters. Chapters 7 and 8 deal with economic development and citizenship rights for ethnic minority groups in Malaysia, labor migration from a regional perspective with a focus on Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia, and Indonesia’s determination to deal with the human rights of Indonesian migrant workers. The last chapter asks if democracy is able to support different ethnic and religious groups in Indonesia.

The ambitious scope of the project makes it difficult to see a cohesive structure of the book, with its nine chapters, extensive introduction, and short conclusion. At times laboriously long paragraphs that go on for one whole page (pp. 148–9) also make for difficult reading. But the elaborate and lively descriptions of the Manodrama and the soccer final in the 2011 Southeast Asia Games in Jakarta are page turners, and make the book both lively and deeply informative. All the discussed cases clearly demonstrate how the complex interrelatedness of culture, politics, and human relations make for intimate tensions between the two countries. They also explain how these tensions time and again play out differently according to topic, time, and place.

A question remains, however: what do these incidents actually mean? Clark and Pietsch conclude that ‘despite the deep links between the people and the cultures of the two countries, and the heavy human and cultural traffic between them, the one thing uniting them […] is their deep and abiding sense of difference’ (p. 210). They observe that ‘the greater the sense of cultural affinity, the greater the sense that the two nations seem destined to remain apart’ (p. 212). Although this conclusion seems appropriate for the discussed case studies, one cannot help but wonder why this sense of difference is so endur-
ing, and how regional and national politics affect these experienced tensions. Unfortunately, the authors neither pose nor provide a compelling answer to these issues. Instead, Clark and Pietsch in a number of instances resort to light-hearted or journalistic coverage, and even report to recommendations, as in Chapter 3, when the authors ask, ‘if there is such a thing as Macassan heritage, what form would we like it to take? We can look to Malaysia for some answers’ (p. 106). Such suggestions do not necessarily contribute to the analysis of the tensions between Indonesia and Malaysia. However, the great number of interesting examples, as well as the intricate mapping and intimate connections the authors identify make the book valuable. It is a significant contribution to our understanding of the complex love-hate relationship between Indonesia and Malaysia.

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