Rachel Leow, *Taming Babel: Language in the Making of Malaysia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016, xx + 261 pp. ISBN 9781107148536, price: GBP 83.99 (hardback); 9781316602607, GBP 22.99 (paperback); 9781316668948, USD 24.00 (ebook).

This book rethinks the politics of cultural diversity by examining how the idea of multilingualism became incompatible with the nation-state. It contributes to theoretical debates on both the global and regional scale. The nuanced and fine-grained analysis of the creation of a monolingual state in a multilingual society, colonial Malaya (later Malaysia), makes it worthy of scholars interested in similar questions in other parts of the world. Liora Halperin, whose work challenges the monolingual narrative of Zionist nationalism (2014), is a potential interlocutor.

To the study of 'census, map, and museum' advanced by Benedict Anderson (2006), this book adds the 'dictionary'. To be precise, it focuses on the process by which the printed text came to dominate over languages that had historically been oral and aural in character, and the 'wars of words' that resulted. The author views language as 'at once an unstoppable producer of social and political possibilities as well as a site of extraordinary discipline and governance by both the colonial and postcolonial states' (p. 3). Her argument is built on the premise that 'there may be in the basic nature of the modern state a propensity to [regard diversity] as crisis rather than opportunity' (p. 3). The state's monolingualism, as it turns out, is more vulnerable than it appears and is not a given but something that is sustained through concerted effort in a plurilingual society.

To the study of language, ethnicity, and nationalism in Southeast Asia, the book brings a renewed interest in philology and history to show how the state's advancement of monolingualism profoundly shaped an exclusivist politics in a postcolonial nation-state (and foreclosed inclusive options). This argument is important in Malaysian studies because it acknowledges the 'untamable' linguistic energies that underlie Malaysian society and their potential to produce alternatives to the exclusivist politics. The book departs from analysis based on assumptions of primordial differences to embrace fine-grained work in cultural politics. It is thus a powerful reconsideration of foundational notions about Malaysia.

In terms of its archival research, this is a hybrid book, so to speak, that reflects its hybrid context as it explores archives in Chinese and Malay that have typically been studied separately. By bringing these archives into a single frame

of analysis, the author has at her disposal the necessary lens with which to view a plurilingual society. At the same time, the book highlights bodies of work in Chinese and Malay that have been neglected because they have been regarded to be inconsequential by colonial measures of good language and literature.

The introduction to the book lays out the deep history of the region and develops the idea of language as a neglected site for the analysis of domination and resistance under colonial rule in Malaya. Chapters 1–2 constitute the first part of the book and offer analyses of the efforts of the colonial state to standardize and control language. Chapters 3–4 focus on notable moments of crises when linguistic forces were unleashed. Chapter 5 examines the consequences of state-led language planning after independence. The postscript offers some thoughts on contemporary developments in Malaysia and their broader relevance. Let us now consider the three parts of the book a little more closely.

The first part lays out the linguistic battle field, so to speak, of the colonial state. The contentions are between a state that saw diversity as crisis and a society marked by a dynamic multilingualism. This part examines colonial interventions in Chinese and Malay language spheres and demonstrates that ‘language revealed a deep chaos and incompetence in the heart of the colonial technocracy’ (p. 27). Chinese was particularly subversive in colonial courts because so few could interpret it in comparison to Malay and Tamil and posed a challenge to the colonial state (pp. 36–37). Interestingly, colonial courts had ethnic Chinese interpreters who operated under the stealth of an incomprehensible language to hurl insults and mock the British.

In contrast to the inability to ‘manage’ Chinese, the colonial state approached Malay as a language in whose development it had a role to play. The key to this would lie in the romanization of its modified Arabic script as part of an effort to standardize the language but with the more immediate benefit of making it easier for Europeans to read it (p. 72). The irony is that colonial innovations in the language were taken up by Malay intellectuals. In the name of progress, Malay writers and journalists contributed to the lively postwar journalistic ferment by using the standardized alphabet. Although there were alternatives to this standardization, like the efforts of Raja Ali Haji, this historical path was abandoned and the colonial model was embraced.

The second part of the book quickens its pace to correspond with the rapidly unfolding drama of the Japanese conquest of British-ruled Malaya and Singapore. The philological moment that had been building up was now unleashed. Malay and Chinese were on the rise as the languages of a vigorous journalistic efflorescence that creatively engaged with modernity. Chapter 3 captures

the rise of an innovative, bold, and political press in Malay under the Japanese occupation that truly comes alive and becomes abundant after the end of the war (pp. 108–112). The press was pushed to come up with a new vocabulary in Malay to cope with the need for terms to describe the changing local and global contexts during the war years. This occasioned the rise of *kamus politik* (political dictionaries), a body of material that had been hitherto neglected by scholars. The author provides apt translations of deservedly lengthy excerpts of these texts in order to offer a counterpoint to the politically conservative hold on historical interpretation on Malaysia. As the Japanese governed Sumatra and Malaya together, a transnational space emerged that allowed the Indonesian revolution to influence Malay journalists and intellectuals. The book thus departs from prevailing political and military analyses to focus on the pen (p. 128). At the same time, it offers a rare glimpse into the historical connections of language politics between Indonesia and Malaysia.

Chapter 4 captures a corresponding dynamism in the Chinese language sphere with the rise of vibrant performance and politics in conjunction with the arrival of a new wave of displaced people from China between 1937–1941 (p. 162). The ‘word war’ in this case was shaped by British efforts to control the spread of communism. The chapter turns to the inadequately studied body of communist propaganda to develop a significant thesis about how the communists became successful adversaries of the British for a long time (pp. 169, 174). Communist propaganda was inspired by oral and aural messaging—including powerful songs—that resounded with the population much more effectively than the carefully written and stilted British counter-propaganda.

The final part of the book turns to the deep and long-term effects of post-colonial language planning by examining the push for monolingualism by the *Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka* (Institute of Language and Literature). Rather than promoting Malay as a replacement of the colonial language, English, the purpose was to exalt the former above the linguistic mix of the nation. The effect of the promotion of a monolingual national identity was to render the claims of advocates of other languages—made in the interest of egalitarianism—communal. The author notes the significance of this move when she states that ‘it bound conceptions of ethnicity to language in a configuration which today seems unquestionably natural, but which is in fact one that requires constant maintenance’ (p. 212).

The author began to think about this book in 2008 when Malaysia faced its first opening in decades of its political horizons. As this review is written, a decade later, the country has undergone a historic change of regime and there are hopes of the official recognition of the potential of its plurilingualism. At the same time, a statement issued in June 2018 in Chinese by Lim Guan Eng, the

newly appointed finance minister, led to uproar as it was read as a potential threat to the national language. The war of words continues.

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