Wang Gung-wu, *Nanyang: Essays on Heritage*. Singapore: ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute, 2018, viii + 220 pp. ISBN: 9789814786515, price: USD 14.90 (hardcover).

This collection contains nine main essays (plus a short introduction) by Wang Gung-wu, most of which are revised from lectures he gave in recent years. Several of the essays have been revised and published elsewhere. They are gathered in this volume to affirm his “ISEAS [Institute of Southeast Asian Studies] connection” (p. 1). Only Chapter Four, which contains Wang’s reminiscences of his multiple encounters and relationships with the late Goh Keng Swee, a key first-generation leader of Singapore’s ruling People’s Action Party, is freshly written for this volume. Wang recalls that Goh had consulted him in 1967 about establishing an institute in Singapore to study Southeast Asia. Using his characteristic flair for blending the autobiographical with analytical perspectives on history painted in broad strokes, the book offers readers glimpses of Wang’s “personal reflections and encounters about the region that the Chinese knew as Nanyang, often projected through images of Malaysia and Singapore” (p. 1). What these essays affirm is Wang’s life-long engagement with Southeast Asia.

Wang has arranged the essays thematically by categorizing them into three main sections: “Malaya in Malaysia,” “Locality in Flux,” and “Reframing Contexts,” which appear in this order. This thematic structure serves Wang’s “Nanyang heritage” perspective perfectly. The book begins with his roots as an intellectual from a Chinese immigrant family who came of age in “Malaya.” It is also, surprisingly, a “Singapore-heavy” book. Apart from Wang’s desire to recall his ISEAS connection, he mentions that he has lived in Singapore since 1996, which is the longest that he and his wife, Margaret, had ever spent in any one place in their lives. Singapore, and the multiple contexts through which Singapore may be understood, are central to the book.

As someone who grew up, was educated, and who began his scholarly career in Singapore and its neighboring region, Wang has an intimate understanding of the country. The first two chapters address the history of Singapore as part of Malaya/Malaysia. Chapter Two contains Wang’s reflections on the “failures” and “successes” of Singapore’s inclusion within Malaysia’s nation-building. In Chapter Three, he reminds readers that the old idea of “Malaya” should not be jettisoned completely, and shows how “Malaya” can be re-cast as a common or shared “platform” for understanding nation-building which developed in different ways in Singapore and Malaysia.

This book marks Wang’s return to Singapore and the region in his old age. The rest of the chapters in Sections Two and Three are in the style of Section One and represent his attempt in re-working issues pertaining to post-colonial Singapore and Malaysia. Some of the more prominent issues discussed in these

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sections include Chinese-ness—specifically the historic development of Peranakan Chinese-ness in Singapore, decolonization, and the fractious nature of simultaneous projects of nation-building unfolding in the region after 1945 as well as Singapore's relationship with Malaysia, Indonesia, and mainland China.

Section One captured my attention because it contains his reflections on colonialism, decolonization, and nation-building in Singapore and Malaysia. Wang focuses mainly on mainstream nationalist accounts in Singapore and Malaysia, as his analyses are confined to the historical perspectives of the nationalist elites that had come into power in the two countries during the 1950s and 1960s. This focus would have been valid if Wang had not taken these mainstream narratives for granted and instead, had complicated them by illuminating the roles of the other key players as well. The book leaves me with the uncanny impression of the British as a “non-player” in the nation-building processes in Singapore and Malaysia, while the author also downplays the existence of the robust popular anti-colonial movements during this period. In Chapter Three's treatment of “Malaya,” for example, Wang recognizes the different if contentious meanings of “Malaya” as well as the tensions between “Malaya” and “Tanah Melayu” (Malay Land). Wang is surely in a position to elucidate these diverse yet inter-related propositions for building a new nation centered on these contentious concepts. However, Chapter Three focuses on the “British idea of Malaya,” (p. 39) more specifically, the “multiple-state colonial entity called British Malaya” (p. 38). It is this “Malaya” which constitutes a “common platform,” that Wang suggests had been reworked by the ruling elites in Singapore and Malaysia in divergent ways.

In Section Two, Wang returns to his area of expertise. Chapter Five stood out for me, offering a fascinating treatment of what Wang calls the “Peranakan phenomenon.” In this chapter, he describes the Peranakan Chinese as a “proto-national” community:

... they were the first Chinese community to be given a distinct identity in jurisdictions administered in the name of two of the world's earliest nation-states, the Dutch and the English. Thus the Peranakan felt the impact of those national interests before the Chinese in China became aware of the idea of nationhood. Their status as Chinese in the colonial context provided them with something akin to a “national” identity in the eyes of the Dutch and British who knew what that meant. It defined for them a space that was proto-national.

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I find Wang's treatment of "the Peranakan phenomenon" to be problematic because it can result in several historiographical erasures. First, there is hardly any reference to the historic creole Malay world that gave rise to the "peranakan" cultures that characterized this world. Without anchoring his discussion in an account of the creole Malay world, Wang's use of the "Peranakan phenomenon" to refer only to the Peranakan Chinese risks privileging the experiences and histories of Chinese migration and settlement, leaving readers with the impression that the Peranakan Chinese in the region were exemplary and representative of the creole Malay world.

Second, what Wang projects theoretically as "proto-national space" was historically the space occupied by the Peranakan Chinese as subjects of the British and Dutch empires. Wang calls these empires "national empires." By consciously adopting the "nation" as his primary analytical category, Wang elides the impact of European imperial formation on the status and identity of the Peranakan Chinese. The portrait of the Peranakan Chinese as "stuck" between two well-defined nations and nationalities—"Chinese" and "local" or "indigenous"—is a hackneyed one. Wang's discussion can be deepened by exploring notions of imperial subjecthood and subjectivity of the Peranakan Chinese. A focus on "empire" and not just "nation" would, moreover, provide a more productive point of entry into discussing the contested official status of Southeast Asian Chinese as subjects of the Manchu empire as well.

Finally, Wang's use of "the Peranakan phenomenon" risks reifying "hybridity" as an inherent quality of the Peranakan Chinese. As critics of the "hybridity" concept point out, we do not get very far if we take it to mean inter-racial or inter-cultural mixing, which presumes the existence of clearly-bounded and discrete cultures to begin with. It is, therefore, necessary to contextualize the "hybridity" of the Peranakan Chinese with reference to the creole Malay world. Sumit Mandal's explanation of this world and the Malay word, "peranakan," as a type of "groupness that is constituted by porous and changing rather than hermetic boundaries" is useful in this regard. This understanding of the Malay world veers away from Malay-ness as a fixed category. Rather, the Malay world is viewed as a "site of interaction between wide-ranging polities and peoples" where creole individuals and communities can be situated as "its culturally fluid and mobile embodiment." (Mandal 2018: 17).

What happened to the peranakan cultures of the Malay world as it was subjugated by European empires bent on managing their colonies with idealized race hierarchies? While these racialized hierarchies had been imperfectly administered in reality, they had deeply influenced Peranakan Chinese identity. Even as the Peranakan Chinese acquired and mixed new linguistic and cultural elements as European imperial formation took hold, they increasingly

articulated their identity with reference to these hierarchies which infused the element of class in racial identification. Instead of understanding “hybridity” as simply an “in-between” quality, a grounded treatment of the concept of “peranakan” in the Malay world would enable a finer interrogation of the racial categories and culturalist perspectives that Wang discusses in this book and that still operate in Singapore and Malaysia today.

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Reference

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