Beyond the Singapore Girl by Chris Hudson is the latest addition to the “Gendering Asia” series supported by the Nordic Institute of Asian Studies (NIAS), a prestigious and autonomous research group partially funded by the governments of Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden. Honed through over a decade of research on gender identity and urban cosmopolitanism in Singapore, Hudson’s monograph is a timely contribution in response to competing discourses on gendered imagery in the local climate.

Shifting across state-sponsored initiatives, mainstream press coverage, the critical humour of opinion leaders in newspaper columns, contentious citizen-run forums in the local vernacular, and agentic narratives in popular culture, the book offers a running discourse of performative masculinity and femininity played out on the canvas of nationhood. Hudson analytically examines everyday symbolism through the immersive integration of key scholarly work, including Bhabha’s theories of the nation, Althusser’s concepts of “bad subjects”, Foucault’s notion of biopower, Butler on the body and performativity, and Braidotti’s work on specificity from the position of the Othered in feminist theory.

Hudson chiefly argues that it is “contradiction and ambivalence, rather than fixity” that characterises gender imagery in Singapore, thus affording women the space for subversive negotiations and modes of “counter-practice” to reinvent notions of “the modern Singapore woman” (p. 4). She also establishes the confines in which the state’s manufacturing of discursive gendered distinctions supports the production of a modern nation.

The first two chapters discursively unfold the narrative of “Singaporean” nationhood, framed around vocabularies of fear and vulnerability, progress and modernity, and Confucian patriarchy and instrumental morality.
Chapter 1 sets forth critical notions of the “pedagogy of nation”, namely “the primacy of a hyper-rationalised industrial modernity” and “the family, deployed in the ‘nation-as-family’ trope” (p. 17). More explicitly, Hudson investigates the state-engineered folklore of an East Asian “x-factor” supposedly comprising resilience and economic success (p. 18) through the “Chinese” work ethic and hardness—a repertoire of eugenic beliefs she examines through founding Prime Minister of Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew’s public call to (re)productive arms since the nation’s disunion from Malaysia in 1966. Chapter 2 continues to illuminate how the structuration of major institutions, especially state-subsidised public housing and tightly-regulated state education, have come to cattle citizens into adhering to a nuclear family (pp. 43–44) as the building block for producing an ideal rugged and masculine citizen (p. 22).

In-depth case studies of state-sponsored campaigns and public reactions are scrutinised in Chapters 3 to 5, which address the regulation of fertility, the operationalisation of romance, and the pragmatics of coupling. The author traces the state’s rebranding of “the woman problem” as “the female graduate problem” (p. 74), and draws comparisons of women’s procreation abilities to men’s National Service conscription duties (pp. 68–69). She also highlights a cultural distaste for hypogamy in the material and sexual market (pp. 74–75) and demonstrates how “aspects of the female body have played one of the lead roles in the spectacle of crisis, and its ongoing articulation in public discourse” (p. 61). Specifically, Hudson argues that the configuration of nationhood, success and culture is navigated through women’s bodies as productive and reproductive family subjects, and that the “Singaporean” nuclear family is a site for the pragmatic reproduction of citizenry, social integration and material support, as opposed to “Western” notions of passionate love (p. 78). All these are articulated in officious state addresses and local small talk in what she terms a “lexicon of commerce” (p. 93).

In fact, perhaps reflexively, Hudson meticulously archives and peppers throughout her book the candidly pragmatic shorthand for Singaporean women as “stock”, “offspring”, “meat”, “merchandise” and “indemnity against business failure”. She details how written accounts from locals descriptively paint an “inventory of available women” with “commendable qualities”, showcasing the range of “consumer choice” for the Singaporean man. A running narrative is effectively threaded through such serial recounts of plebeian, crass humour as critique, agentic satire and social commentary (pp. 118–121), as a testament in congruence with her claim that conformity “might not only be refused, but also ruptured, forced into rearticulation, and have its legitimacy challenged” (p. 81), albeit through the micropolitics of humour and disobedience as, borrowing from Althusser, “bad subjects” (pp. 139–140). Of slight pity is Hudson’s only pass-