

INSTITUTIONAL PANEL ABSTRACT

MALAYSIA OUT OF THE BOX: NATION, ETHNIC AND TRANSETHNIC LAYERS, AND INTERCULTURAL INTERACTION

Abstracts of papers to be prepared by Vincent Houben, Frederik Holst, and Sumit K. Mandal (panel coordinator) of the Institute of Asian and African Studies, Humboldt University in Berlin

As academics, we are pressured to demonstrate novelty: new perspectives, theories, and of course, research. Proposals for funding, conferences, and so forth, almost always claim a novel orientation to an old research trajectory, if not a completely new approach altogether. In this panel, we try to look at the old, not necessarily to go against the current. Rather, we are interested to learn how scholarly perspectives have been formed in the study of Malaysia, and how well they work for us today. We shall not try to accomplish our goal through a theoretical discussion alone, but by taking on specific research areas, namely the nation, ethnic and transethnic layers, and intercultural interaction respectively. Our intention is to promote discussion as much as share some of our research.

An argument could be made that research on Malaysia has been considerably focused on the following topics: party politics, race or ethnicity (especially 'race relations'), multiculturalism, the politics of Islam (especially its bureaucratisation), and authoritarianism. The overall focus has frequently been nation-bound. The premise of the panel is that the research foci listed above do not only constitute particular tendencies, but may have come to constrain our thinking. We ask if these foci, in conjunction with a nation-centred focus, have cultivated insularity in Malaysian studies. The considerable attention paid to the governing interethnic coalition of parties, for instance, favours ethnicised perspectives on the country as the world of formal ethnic politicking is taken to represent Malaysian society as a whole. With the dominance of particular tropes sotospeak in research on Malaysia, other areas tend to be overshadowed, or regarded as forms of 'soft' analysis undeserving of serious attention. These other, and significant areas, include the following: cosmopolitan histories, transregional linkages, transnational comparison, gender, popular culture, and varieties of nongovernmental social and political activism.

We ask if the above premise is valid, namely that thinking on Malaysia has come to be constrained. If so, we are challenged to expand on the causes of this state of affairs, and what may be done to think about the country out of the box. This is particularly important given the political and social challenges faced by many Malaysians at the present time. March 2008 was a watershed in Malaysia's history because an opposition party political alliance practically ended the decades long rule of the longstanding interethnic ruling coalition. More than a year later there is an unprecedented level of political uncertainty and loss of faith in the system on the part of people across the political spectrum. Although many agree that the country is undergoing a crisis, some believe that the political leadership and society can sustain

it, while others feel that the country could descend into damaging conflict along ethnic or religious lines.

The present climate in Malaysia bears on the panel in so much as it challenges participants to consider, within the scope of academic thinking and production, how may the country best be represented. How, if at all, have academic representations contributed to the framing of Malaysian problems in particular ways? Have the traditions of scholarship developed within the country, and in various centres around the world, been adequate to the task of the serious challenges facing Malaysian society today?

(Paper 1)

The Nation as a Product of Representation in Times of Crisis: Malaysia in Comparative Perspective

Vincent Houben

Over the last few years there has been a tendency amongst historians to revisit the birth of the nation-state in Southeast Asia. These histories are either written as part of the history of decolonization and the Cold War, or as an attempt to gain new insights into the establishment of national social orders with singular characteristics. This kind of political history on a specific period in a transnational arena differs from histories that try to capture the long-term condensation of particular Southeast Asian 'peoples' within the framework of a modern nation-state, a process of change that has often been said to be driven mainly by internal dynamics. In his recent work in the history of ideas, Anthony Milner has shown how 'being Malay' has been developed in various stages to fit the format of a modern nation-state, fusing Western notions of ethnicity as well as older and local concepts of community.

In this paper, I am interested in assessing the impact on Malaysian society of the broader thematic historical approach to the nation, versus the internally-driven development of a national polity. To this end, I compare the emergence of Malaysia with three other countries: Indonesia, Burma and Vietnam. The birth of the nation in Southeast Asia in 1945 was certainly a watershed, accompanied by several sorts of crisis. A peaceful transfer of power was supposed to have happened in Burma and Malaya in contrast to the violent, revolutionary events in Vietnam and Indonesia. In reality, however, in all four countries a mixture of violence and negotiation occurred on the road towards political independence. In three cases we can find instances where representatives of interest groups sat together in committees in the midst of crisis in order to deliberate about the format of the nation-state that was deemed necessary as soon as socio-political stability was regained.

In my paper, I pursue a comparison of representations of nation put forward by the committee for the preparation of independence in Indonesia (May-July 1945), the Anglo-Malay Working Committee in Malaya (August-November 1946), and the Anglo-Burmese negotiations over the May 1945 White Paper leading up to the Agreement of January 1947. In contrast, in Vietnam the birth of the state on September 1945 was, as David Marr has shown, the outcome of events that unfolded

after the Japanese ousted the French colonial administration, and beyond the control of the Allied forces as well as the Vietnamese communist party.

In all cases, what emerged and consolidated itself as the national order was a mixture of prewar nationalist thinking, and postwar internal and international bargaining. The power vacuum that existed in the period between the end of the Japanese occupation, and the return of the Allied forces, provoked a deep crisis that paved the way for national independence.

(Paper 2)

Locating Ethnicized and Transethnic Layers in the Social Landscape of Malaysia

Frederik Holst

The analysis of the concepts *ethnie* and ethnicity is often reduced to an engagement with politics that focuses more on the outcome of the complex process referred to as ethnicization, rather than the process itself. In this paper, I argue that two perspectives, layers sotospeak, need to be looked at more closely in order to explore ethnicization in Malaysia in a more holistic way: the manifestations as well as the implementation of ethnicization. The former looks at the various fields in which ethnicity has become a core pillar of a societal sub-system, whereas the latter looks at the way ethnicization is put into practice. Looking at ethnic perspectives often leads to a focus on various ethnic balances of power within the political system or society. However, shifting the focus to ethnicized manifestations provides for an analysis of who benefits – intentionally or unintentionally – from imbalances and inequalities based on ethnic identity.

A further shift in perspective is needed in order to examine the implementations of ethnicized policies and see them not only as a convenient means of divide and rule. The analysis should rather focus on the centrality of these policies as stabilizing factors of the current system, especially in reviving recurrently the *raison-d'être* of the ethnicity-based Barisan Nasional. Instead of focusing on what kinds of policies are actually pursued, and reactions to them, I argue that the implementation and impact of these policies – how they are pursued and in which layers they are manifested – deserve greater attention.

In this paper, I discuss three case-studies, namely the role of migrant workers as the 'outside other,' the impact of ethnicization on university students, and the possibility of transethnic cooperation among social activist groups. Through these cases, I analyze manifestations and implementations of ethnicization in Malaysian society. As language and religion form significant parts of a person's identity, I argue that they constitute central layers in the process of ethnicization. These layers become important when questions of identity form crucial areas of contestations – especially in connection with social position in society. As these kinds of contestations not only occur in the sphere of ethnicized politics, but in the broader society, the whole discourse around de-ethnicizing Malaysia's political and social systems needs a similarly substantial shift in perspective.

(Paper 3)

Malay Students in Chinese schools: New Conditions and Prospects of Intercultural Interaction in a Malaysian Educational Institution

Sumit K. Mandal

The presence of Malay students in Chinese schools has produced fresh areas of intercultural interaction and spawned unprecedented social and cultural outcomes in recent decades. These students are described as pioneers of sorts in this paper because their journey remains a relatively lonely and challenging one in much of the country today. Learning Chinese without a Chinese-literate family and social background is a daunting task. Systems of support have emerged, however, that make the phenomenon of Malays in Chinese schools not only sustainable, but a success.

By acquiring a command of the Chinese language, Malay students have further opened up possibilities in the interplay of at least three languages: Chinese, English and Malay. The notion that an ethnic Malay is not expected to know Chinese is being turned on its head, and with it, the association of a language exclusively with an ethnic group. Besides the struggles of learning Chinese, the new inflections on multilingualism can have humorous and playful consequences. One needs only to imagine the goings-on in a household with different linguistic subcultures. While there may be instances of hybridity, however, on the whole there is little indication of either the hybridisation of language or patterns of thinking.

This paper cautions against a mere celebration of the phenomenon of Malay students in Chinese schools, and turns our attention rather to the complex and contradictory moves it represents. The paper, thus, runs contrary to the rather popular view that intercultural interaction is a process that can only produce a positive outcome in a multi-ethnic context. Malay students are not only pioneers who learn a new language and academic culture. They are also immersed in the desires and fantasies of their parents, besides others with whom they come into contact. The very idealisation of the Chinese schools creates the conditions for an ethnicised view of Chinese people that can reflect as well as perpetuate a complex process of envy and self-denial in Malay students.

The idealisation of Chineseness by Malays is embedded in larger processes in the country. The demands of the ruling regime in Malaysia and the ethnic divisions it has fostered in public life, may not replicate themselves in a simple manner in the Chinese school experience. They do, however, bear on the ethnic identity, aspirations, problems, and fears of the students. For instance, policies geared towards the globalisation of the economy and society have undoubtedly contributed to the way Malays view Chineseness. Cultural prerogatives since the 1990s have shifted from nationalist concerns such as the centrality of the Malay language as well as Malay cultural identity, to the embrace of the English language and commercialisation. The government has called upon ethnic Malays to become more business-minded, indeed to “become more like the Chinese.”

This paper argues that Chinese schools offer an institutional platform for intercultural interaction that is valuable and growing, especially as national schools do not appear

to provide the same even though they are mandated to do so. The arrival of Malays in Chinese schools has provoked the pleasures of the creative interplay between languages and cultures. At the same time, it has provided the potential to confront archetypical fears and resentment, and learn how to negotiate them.