

Engaging Modern Brunei. Research on language, literature, and culture

Hannah Ming Yit Ho & David Deterding (Eds.) Singapore: Springer, 2021¹

Ho & Deterding's edited volume delivers a timely and substantial addition to the growing body of literature on Brunei Darussalam. Until recently neglected, under-researched and under-represented in academia, research on Brunei has made considerable progress, filling the intellectual lacuna. Within the past few years, there has been a steady stream of publications pertinent to the country in the fields of humanities and social sciences, many of which emerged from collaborative efforts of scholars affiliated with Universiti Brunei Darussalam and its partner universities.

The edited volume presents 15 chapters by 17 contributors, ranging across three interrelated domains of language, literature, and culture. In curating this edited collection, the editors ground it in two main points: an overarching aim and a definition of modern Brunei. Ho and Deterding intend "to explore significant developments within the nation-state" "in terms of history and the ongoing developments of the nation" (p.v). The editors focus on language, literature, and culture, the three domains which they perceive as interrelated and upon which "modern Bruneian identity is shaped, defined and negotiated" (p.v). In addition, the demonstration of historical and contemporary cultures, as depicted and discussed by the published works in the volume, will "reflect the process of modernisation" (p.v).

As an edited collection, one may expect considerable diversity in the foci of the chapters. All chapters demonstrate the scholarly depth and rigour required in academic publications. More importantly, alternative interpretations and contrasting viewpoints from the contributors further elucidate what makes up modern Brunei while capturing the real nuances of Bruneian society.

The editors also detail that "the researchers are interested in investigating the extent to which globalisation has impacted upon a local sense of identity" (p.13). One such chapter is Debbie Ho's, where she notes the increasing dialect loss among young Chinese due to the impacts of modernity and globalization. Such a finding may not be entirely novel as it resonates with the results of previous works. More interestingly, Ho's research participants assert that "not knowing how to speak their dialect does not make them less Chinese" (p.76). An extended analysis should be taken upon this fascinating finding, and the outcome should be brought to the fore to further one's understanding of the current characterisation of ethnic Chinese in modern Brunei.

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Rinni Haji Amran's chapter that "investigate[s] the construction and literary narration of Bruneian ecosensibility which [the author] define[s] as one's awareness, perceptions of, and attitudes towards one's environment" (p.147) presents a unique and an innovative approach to understanding the relationship and interactions between individual and place in the context of modern Brunei. In particular, her analysis of Muslim Burmat's *Makna Sebenar Sebuah Ladang* (The True Meaning of a Plantation) concentrates on the ways nationalism and nationalistic sentiment shape the Bruneian ecosensibility and "the construction of one's place within the nation" (Amran, 2021:151). This finding deserves greater consideration and further exploration. A growing literature has identified the distinct ways contextual conditions define nationalism and its characters.ⁱ Scholars also argue that the characters of Eastern nationalism would and should not replicate those of Western nationalism, subsequently calling for future studies to pay more attention to specific conditions that led to the rise of nationalism in the East.ⁱⁱ Amran's chapter proves that the specification of the Bruneian environment "is effective for the purposes of boosting nationalistic sentiment" (p.151).

Shifting the focus to the cultural domain in Part III, Haji Ramlee Haji Tinkong and Nur Raihan Mohamad's chapter on the symbolisms in the Brunei Malay wedding customs is one of the most pertinent chapters to the main theme of the edited volume. There are a few reasons for this. Firstly, the chapter provides a wealth of information about Brunei's cultural lives, particularly for international audiences who may be unfamiliar with the history and setting of Brunei. Secondly, the chapter includes a tradition practised by the Tutong, the *buri pu'oh* ceremony, which is an act of cleaning one's feet at the end of the reception. Although the discussion focuses on the symbolism of the items used in the ceremony, what can also be identified from the discussion is the persistent practice of *buri pu'oh*, which is only conducted and practised by certain ethnic groups including the Tutong and the Dusun. This seemingly simple fact confronts the conventional understanding that present-day Bruneian society has become culturally homogeneous with a strong practice of common language, culture, and religion. And thirdly, Haji Tinkong and Mohamad also trace the impacts of modernisation on the ensuing process of change experienced by ethnic cultures. Other contributors in this edited volume also allude to the implications of modernisation and globalisation on their research subjects. There are also some comparable arguments and findings across different chapters. I then pondered whether it would also be possible to treat the arguments and findings collectively so that a potentially novel synthesis of the findings can be explored and presented further.

I believe a concluding chapter would round out the edited volume nicely and act as a binding force between the different chapters. The conclusion would also bring readers to the critical context of traditional and contemporary cultures and re-emphasise the ways modern Bruneian identity is shaped, defined, and negotiated, as indicated at the beginning of the volume. The chapter could also take the underexamined or unaddressed issues raised by the chapters and put forward relevant discussion with some indications for further research agenda.

Overall, this publication is a thoughtful and noteworthy volume. Considering the wealth and quality of the 15 chapters, this edited volume should be one of the significant references for scholars from various disciplinary backgrounds. In particular, since research on Brunei history and historiography is no longer restricted to traditional historical frontiers and most chapters engage with specific historical periods or events, this edited volume can direct researchers to new thrusts of historical inquiry.

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Notes

ⁱ For a discussion on nationalism in the East, see Derichs, C., & Heberer, T. (2006). Introduction: Diversity of Nation-building in East and Southeast Asia. *European Journal of East Asian Studies*, 5(1): 1-13. See also Jung, K.S. & Morris-Suzuki, T. (2011). Tunneling Through Nationalism: The Phenomenology of a Certain Nationalist. *Asia-Pacific Journal – Japan Focus*, 36(2): 1-18.

ⁱⁱ See Norbu, D. (1992). *Culture and the Politics of Third World Nationalism*. London & New York: Routledge.