

ULASAN BUKU/BOOK REVIEW

Museums, History and Culture in Malaysia, Abu Talib Ahmad. Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2014, viii + 328 pp. ISBN 9789971698195.

This book makes a valuable contribution to not just the debate about the representation of the past in Malaysia but to the broader area of scholarly research on museology in Asia. Abu Talib Ahmad's work on museums, history, and culture in Malaysia offers many insights into how present-day agendas have shaped the construction of the past in postcolonial societies.

In the last two to three decades, there has been a "museum mania" in Malaysia. So many state and private museums have been set up across the country to represent the past, from a family turning their Pontian home into a Bugis museum to the Sungai Lembing tin mine being re-opened for underground tours as a profit making enterprise. There are at least two private museums to film star P. Ramlee – one in Pulau Pinang and the other in Kuala Lumpur. The state has been busy opening museums for the public to give its version of the past, such as the Port Dickson Army Museum, with its Communist Terrorist Tunnel underground network. One can hardly visit a part of Malaysia without encountering a museum. The visitors' books and records scrutinised by Abu Talib Ahmad reveal that Malaysians are visiting the museums in larger than usual numbers (p. 16).

What has been needed to explain this rush to represent history in Malaysia is a scholar with Abu Talib Ahmad's vast knowledge of Malaysian history as well as his insight into the history and politics of how museums construct the past. In the 1980s, cultural geographer, David Lowenthal sought to explain the rapid increase in the number of museums in the West as an expression of a modern fixation with heritage. Since then, similar studies have been done on Asian museums that have been set up in the region, but until Abu Talib Ahmad's work little has been done on the scholarly study of the museums of a whole nation. No one has attempted in Asia what Lowenthal covered as comprehensively in the West.

Abu Talib Ahmad begins his study with a four part typology of museums in Malaysia – (1) Museums under the Department of Museums and Antiquities (2) Museums under the control of the various Malaysian States (3) Government Departmental museums (4) Private museums. He gives a very comprehensive list of many Malaysian museums with details of when they were set up and assessments of their collections (pp. 26–40).

The book's overall argument is: "In Malaysia museums are closely associated with nation building, seeking to project commonly shared experiences of the past, as well as becoming increasingly attached to the tourism industry"

(p. 3). Thus, the book is strongly focussed on exploring the meaning of the postcolonial museum in Malaysia. The nature of the museum in colonial society is only hinted at in analysis of what were once colonial museums. Abu Talib Ahmad clearly defines his topic as focussing on Malaysia's National Museum, which was established soon after independence, as "the main text" and other museums, including State museums, are "subtexts" for contrast and comparison (p. 4). He documents how "some parties" often "challenge or dispute the National Museum's narrative creating a history war" (p. 4).

The idea of there being "history wars" over the representation of the past in Malaysian museums is a major theme of the book and this has shaped its organisation (p. 257). The majority of the chapters are structured around the different periods of Malaysian history and how they are represented in the National Museum and in other key museums of the country. This structure allows for the contested nature of the Malaysian past to be brought out very effectively by the author. Abu Talib Ahmad skilfully analyses the historical narratives found in Malaysia's museums using his own deep knowledge of Malaysian history. He finds key differences between the National Museum and the State museums over the advent of Islam and the significance of the Japanese Occupation in Malaysian history, which highlight existing "history wars" over Malaysia's past.

In his analysis of Malaysian museums, Abu Talib Ahmad critiques the dominant state endorsed narratives of the Malaysian past. He addresses the contentious notion that Malaysian museums "in the public perception represent only Malays" and uphold "the concept of Malay dominance" (p. 114). He comes to the conclusion that there is substantial evidence to support this idea in many, but not all, museums. He mentions as some of the notable exceptions, the Penang State Museum and the Sultan Alam Shah Museum of Shah Alam in Selangor, which emphasise a multicultural view of Malaysia (p. 252 and p. 256). In contrast, the museums of Melaka, which deal with the Melaka Sultanate, are strongly influenced by the concept (p. 118).

Abu Talib Ahmad's explanation of the "Malay dominance" in the history represented in Malaysia's museums evokes Lowenthal's idea that when museums construct the past they often do so according to a present-day agenda rather than what actually happened. He suggests that the prominence of "Malay dominance" in Malaysian museum exhibitions is perhaps due to the idea gaining political prominence at the height of the New Economic Policy under Prime Minister Mahathir (p. 118). It has remained a feature of many Malaysian museums since the Mahathir period. He observes that most museum boards consist mainly of Malays, most visitors are Malay, and the exhibitions are mainly about Malay history and culture. Thus, he concludes in his final paragraph that Malaysian "museums remain the exclusive preserve of Malays in terms of visitors, administrators and exhibits" (p. 265).

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This book is a significant addition to the study of the way the past is represented in museums and is comparable in quality to the best studies done on museums in other Asian countries and in the West. It is an essential read for students and researchers in the area of both museum studies and Malaysian historiography.

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