The book is regretfully uneven: often the main issues, such as the restructuring after 1997, are left aside, while on the other hand snippets of information suggest tantalizing inroads into understanding Indonesian public administration. For example, a seminar on bureaucratic reform in Banten concluded that 'the province is steered in different degrees by: 1. Kyai ulama from the peninsul and the like; 2. Jagol/juwara or masters of self-defence, whose influence [..] includes black magic to strengthen their authority over the population; 3. Preman or the local criminal/mafia types, the category often overlapping with the former and [...] quite noticeable during the New Order as Pancasila Youth and just plain thugs, [...] now [...] private entrepreneurs who extract up to 30% of project costs in the region; and 4. Kemanakan tururan or descendants from the ruling house of Banten' (p. 219). Perhaps if we want to understand Indonesian political and administrative culture, we should start from observations like these, and not so much from historical analysis.

Joseph M. Fernando
University of Malaya
jmfemando@um.edu.my

This is an engaging book on a very distinctive and almost forgotten community found in Singapore and Melaka in Malaysia, the Peranakan Indians, who are also known as 'Chitty Melaka'. It provides a revealing insight into the history, culture, traditions and norms of a small but vibrant hybrid community that has retained its unique identity for over 500 years.

The Chitty Melaka emerged as a distinctive community during the Melaka Sultanate in the fifteenth century as a result of South Indian merchants marrying local Malay women. This community is distinct from that of the Chettiar, who came to Malaya in the twentieth century and engaged in the money-lending business and owned rubber plantations. The Chitty Melaka community adopted certain aspects of Malay customs and practices but remained staunch practitioners of saivite Hinduism. Even the onslaught of two European powers, the Portuguese and the Dutch, did not erode their religious convictions and identity. While maintaining contact with their ancestral districts in India, the Chitty have evolved their own distinct rituals, norms and traditions in their new homeland. The language of the Peranakan Indians is a kind of patois known as...
Baba Malay, interspersed with Tamil words, that has evolved its own unique identity. This community shares many similarities with the Chinese Peranakan, Malays and Indians in terms of food, dress, jewellery, and footwear.

Most research on Peranakans has focused on the Peranakan Chinese or Baba Nyonya, and this book is a welcome addition to the present literature available on the subject. Interestingly the Peranakan Indians evolved at almost the same time as the Peranakan Chinese, that is during the Melaka Sultanate (1402-1511).

Written in a simple and clear narrative, the book traces the origins of the coming of the Chitty (the term means ‘merchants’ in Tamil) community to Melaka, and examines the ‘survival’ of the community under four different powers – the Portuguese, the Dutch, the British, and the Japanese. The later chapters in the book describe the lifestyle and traditions of the Peranakan Indians in the present, and discuss in some detail the major festivals and ceremonies of the community as well as some of its practices relating to fertility, marriage, and death.

The fertility and marriage rituals are particularly interesting, displaying a blend of traditional Hindu elements with some Malay overlay, including the sarong and baju kurung worn by teenage girls when they undergo the ritual marking puberty. The religious and cultural importance of the rituals and ceremonies is well described, providing the reader with a window into the lives and rituals of the community. The Peranakan Indians in Singapore and Melaka have their own unique festival, called Thiruvizhthu in Tamil or Istiadat Tahunan Mariamman in Malay, held every year over a period of twelve days at the Sri Muthu Mariamman Temple in Jalan Gajah Berang in Melaka.

The book is well illustrated with photographs of the community’s sociocultural gatherings, its temples, and some artifacts from the Chitty Museum in Melaka which give a deeper insight into the history of the community. The reader is transported across time and space as the Chitty community becomes entrenched in both Singapore and Melaka.

On a more academic note, the book raises some interesting historical arguments. It claims, for example, that the Chitty are the ‘real descendants of the earliest Indian merchants’ in the Malay Archipelago; that they were accorded a special position under the Melaka Sultanate, such that the harbormaster or Dato Shahbandar was drawn from their ranks; and that the Chitty community enjoyed close relations with the Portuguese. These claims appear to have some historical basis, but it would have been more useful if they were supported by references to primary historical sources or authoritative secondary sources (that the latter have been consulted by the author is clear from the bibliography). Certain groups – the descendants of Indians in the northern state of Kedah in Malaysia, for example – may have different views on some of the historical claims made by Dhoraisingam. A more detailed documentation of the references used, and the various claims therein, would have elevated the book to a higher level of scholarship and ethnographic research.

Perhaps the community’s identity is a matter of both Melaka and Singapore, and the book is written to scholarly readers. That the book is not written in both languages is a pity, as it limits the community's reader to scholar readers outside Singapore.

Situated at the crossroads of the Indian and Malay cultures, the Peranakan Indians have long been a part of the multi-ethnic landscape of Singapore. Despite its small size, the city-state is home to over a million living in a multicultural community. Despite its size, Singapore is a cultural melting pot, where different ethnicities and cultures coexist harmoniously.

The book raises some interesting historical arguments. It claims, for example, that the Chitty are the ‘real descendants of the earliest Indian merchants’ in the Malay Archipelago; that they were accorded a special position under the Melaka Sultanate, such that the harbormaster or Dato Shahbandar was drawn from their ranks; and that the Chitty community enjoyed close relations with the Portuguese. These claims appear to have some historical basis, but it would have been more useful if they were supported by references to primary historical sources or authoritative secondary sources (that the latter have been consulted by the author is clear from the bibliography). Certain groups – the descendants of Indians in the northern state of Kedah in Malaysia, for example – may have different views on some of the historical claims made by Dhoraisingam. A more detailed documentation of the references used, and the various claims therein, would have elevated the book to a higher level of scholarship and ethnographic research.
have elevated the historical and academic value of this useful study to a much higher level. This weakness, nevertheless, does not diminish the historical and ethnographic value of the work as a whole.

Perhaps the most attractive aspect of the book is the story it tells of how the community has struggled, evolved, adapted, and yet retained its exclusive identity through different historical periods when different powers ruled both Melaka and Singapore. This is testimony to the strength and resilience of the colourful Chitty community, and may be a useful point of reference to scholars of minority communities in the present age of globalization. The book is nevertheless also a valuable reference work on a unique but shrinking community, with a rich heritage, that continues to play a significant role in both Malaysia and Singapore today.


VOLKER GRABOWSKY
Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität Münster
grabowsk@uni-muenster.de

Situated at the crossroads of mainland Southeast Asia, Laos is surrounded by five neighbours: China, Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, and Burma (Myanmar). The only landlocked country of the region, it has a population of less than six million living on a territory almost as large as that of the United Kingdom. Despite its small size and low population density, Laos is one of the ethnically and culturally most heterogeneous nations in Asia. Vatthana Pholsena’s book, a revision of her PhD thesis submitted to the University of Hull in 2002, is an insightful and thoroughly researched study of the politics of nationalism and ethnicity in post-socialist Laos. Vatthana’s multi-disciplinary approach combines ethnographic fieldwork with solid historical research and theoretical reflections on nationalism, ethnicity, and cultural identity. Reviewing the previous contributions to this area of study by scholars like Grant Evans, Martin Stuart-Fox, and Frank Proschan, the author deplores the fact that most recent studies of Lao nationalism and ethnicity have failed to view the non-ethnic Lao peoples, or at least their elites, as political actors with their own perceptions of Lao nationhood. Vatthana tries to overcome this shortcoming in two ways. Firstly, she analyses nationalist ideology as a discourse of power against the background of the majority-minority relationship. Secondly, she integrates educated members of ethnic minorities into an ethnography of Lao nationalism.