their agricultural produce impedes their capacity to get essential goods. In addition, access to land is also changing. Households now enclose plots to protect the marketable crops. The land is no longer accessible to all as a commons, and ‘some highlanders had no access to land at all, a condition unthinkable in 1990’ (p. 115). These mutations have established a form of work almost unknown before: wage labour. Without access to land, selling one’s labour becomes the only legal means of eating.

Despite its interest and great qualities, this reviewer would like to express some reservations about this book. First, the author seems to be sometimes caught up in a ‘Western centric’ vision, as in the following sentence: ‘In 1990, … they had little or no access to education’ (p. 179). Of course, the Lauje especially in the uplands did not have access to education offered by the ‘formal’ school system established by the state or another authority. But it is not satisfying to reduce education to ‘formal education’. Even if local actors associate the deterioration of their living conditions with their difficulties in accessing the dominant modes of socialisation (formal education), from an anthropological point of view, a people without education does not exist. Second, Tania Murray Li uses a vocabulary directly derived from neoclassical economic theory: risk-averse (p. 14), path dependence (p. 16), land scarcity (p. 178), and so on. These terms have taken shape in a singular and ideational theoretical environment in which the ‘natural’ forces of the market explain individual choices. If I have understood the book correctly, these universal forces are not present amongst the Lauje. On the contrary, the transformation processes there are linked to socially and culturally situated representations. Therefore, why refer to concepts derived from a literature valuing theoretical principles, the universal forces, that are absent in the Lauje?

Be that as it may, even if neoclassical concepts do not seem to have been adapted, the work is nevertheless very interesting. It nourishes reflections on the dynamics of transformation of peasant societies and I strongly recommend reading it.

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‘Getting by’: A historical ethnography of class and state formation in Malaysia

BY DONALD M. NONINI

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Getting by is a collection of Donald Nonini’s scholarly articles on ethnic Chinese Malaysians, based on a three-decade-long ethnographic study of the town of Bukit Mertajam, in the state of Penang. It is a commendable and long-awaited study of class, ethnicity and state formation in Malaysia.

Donald Nonini’s work fills several gaps in the literature of Chinese studies in Malaysia and Southeast Asia. The bulk of current scholarship focuses heavily on
Chinese entrepreneurship and their cultural capital, with scant attention is paid to the struggle of the working class Malaysian Chinese. Indeed, research on the working class Chinese seems to have fallen out of vogue since the 1990s, after Judith Strauth (Chinese village politics in the Malaysian state, Harvard University Press, 1981) and Francis Loh (Beyond the tin mines: Coolies, squatters, and new villagers in the Kinta Valley, Malaysia, c. 1880–1980, Oxford University Press, 1988) published their works which focused primarily on the Chinese in the ‘new villages’ and district areas. Nonini’s work, by contrast, analyses the everyday life of the working class Chinese in Bukit Mertajam, a lively commercial town in the 1970s that was dubbed a ‘wholesale centre’ in the northern Peninsula of Malaysia. He cautions that the stereotypical image of Chinese as successful businessmen, crafted in part by scholars and the indigenous ruling elites, has frequently been used as a basis to discriminate against the ethnic Chinese as a whole. The group hurt the most by the policies based on this premise were the Chinese working class, rather than the petty proprietors and capitalists.

Nonini’s work is more than just a depiction of economic struggle, opportunities and aspirations of working class Malaysian Chinese. The strength of this book lies in its new theoretical approach, which is discussed in the introductory chapter. The author gives a persuasive critique of several classical scholars of Southeast Asian Chinese communities such as Maurice Freedman, Wang Gungwu, William Skinner and Judith Nagata, whose work he classifies into three approaches, namely the China-oriented approach, the ideological manipulation approach and the subjective pluralist approach. Instead of these approaches, he proposes a new method of historical ethnography to study the construction of Chinese identity and ethnicity in Southeast Asia. Taking the Malaysian Chinese working class as an example, he contends that the feeling of being ‘second class’ was a dialectical construct arising through long-term relational experiences with other members of society especially the New Malay class, petty government officers, the ultra-wealthy Chinese tycoons and local towkays.

Chapters 2 to 7 discuss the author’s field trips to Bukit Mertajam in the late 1970s, coinciding with the implementation of the New Economic Policy (NEP) by the federal government of Malaysia. His in-depth interviews with the Chinese from the truck industry enables him to vividly capture the agency, feelings, sentiments, relationships and lifestyles of his subjects.

Chapter 2 broadly sketches the active participation of Chinese labourers and petty proprietors from the truck industry during Bukit Mertajam’s economic boom in the 1970s. In chapter 3, the author describes how truck drivers were typically labelled as crude and dishonest by lower-ranking government officials and truck company owners. This stereotype, he later discovers, was a hidden transcript, as the truck drivers revealed when discussing their hardships. The drivers talked about resorting to using tools such as deception in order to survive in the hostile working environment. Chapter 4 highlights the racialised nature of official discourse such as the rhetoric of well-to-do urban Chinese and poor rural Malay folk which has been used as a reason to justify discriminatory policies against the working class Chinese. Moving on to intra-ethnic relations, Chapter 5 illustrates the class conflicts among the Malaysian Chinese themselves. The author outlines the constraints imposed by the Chinese proprietor class and pro-proprietor state on workers’ organisations, and the limits placed on their public expression of identity. Despite being stereotyped as crude, disputatiousness and cheaters
by the local business class and petty government officers, the Chinese working class men in Bukit Mertajam had nonetheless crafted their own ideal of a Chinese male figure as discussed in chapter 6. Nonini concludes that the idealised Chinese male is linked to gendered imaginaries, demonstrated in male mobility, physical strength, and socio-economic success. Chapter 7 criticises the propagandistic slogan of ‘Chinese unity’ championed by Chinese leaders as it serves a discursive device to discipline the Chinese population and failed to facilitate working class access to essential resources.

The following chapters describe new social phenomena during the years of national economic liberalisation, and how globalisation impacted the Chinese men of Bukit Mertajam. The town’s inhabitants witnessed the encroachment of government-linked corporations and the building of state monuments in former Chinese settlements. As explained in chapter 8, some Chinese petty capitalists chose to split their businesses into smaller units to evade the acquisition of company shares under the bumiputera policy. While working class Chinese managed to ‘get by’, decades of government partiality severely deprived them of opportunities for upward mobility. Chapters 9 and 10 note the transnational exit made by young adults from Bukit Mertajam. To escape state predation, Chinese workers went abroad for physically exhausting work to gain material rewards, but most of them eventually returned to Malaysia. Finally, the epilogue contains the author’s reflections on the future of the Chinese Malaysians. He observes the revitalisation of the China connection in the twenty-first century and how this has presented a new exit option for the community.

While it presents many insightful perspectives, the book’s shortcoming is perhaps also obvious. The author’s analysis is confined to fieldwork done in a single town in the Peninsula, leaving doubts as to whether the experiences that he has documented are truly representative of the Chinese working class throughout the country. From a personal perspective, having grown up in a middle-sized commercial town in East Malaysia, several themes described, including the views and feelings of the author’s informants about their hectic work schedule, male superiority, ‘money transactions’ with lower-ranking government officers, and the perception of the national government’s ethnic policy seem to resonate. In conclusion, this is a commendable in-depth and sensitive study of the Chinese working class in Malaysia.

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Tamils and the haunting of justice: History and recognition in Malaysia’s plantations

By ANDREW WILLFORD
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How do ethnic minority communities react to ‘development’ policies introduced by post-colonial governments which suddenly take away their ‘identity’, ‘home’, place of worship, and their place in history? In Tamils and the haunting of justice, the doyen