

Jürgen Rudolph, *Reconstructing Identities: A Social History of the Babas in Singapore*. Aldershot, Brookfield USA: Ashgate, 1998. 507 pp. ISBN 1-84014-357-6.

This book presents the social history of the Babas in Singapore. The Babas are described as ethnically 'Chinese' whose 'male ancestors came to Malaya [centuries ago] without female company and intermarried with "local" [Malay and Dutch East Indies] women'. However, after the Chinese had settled down in Melaka—and later in Penang and in Singapore—the newly created Malayan-born Babas married among themselves or married their daughters off to the new arrivals from South China (p. 1; see also p. 22, footnote 1). The book argues that defining a Baba identity is misleading. Instead, it maintains that it would be more meaningful to recognize the multiple identities of the Babas. The argument is based on examining how the

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interplay of social, political and economic factors in Singapore has constructed and reconstructed an array of identities for the Babas. The period under study stretches from 1819 to 1994. Two crucial turning points, namely the Japanese occupation (1942-45) and the self-rule (1959) of Singapore, are highlighted as particular periods of public emphasis and stresses on the culture of the Babas.

This book is commendable in many ways. First, it is a book that is clearly written without the use of jargon. Thus, this immediately avails itself to anyone and everyone interested in knowing more about the Babas in Singapore. The tables and appendices that appear in the midst of as well as at the end of the book are highly welcome. They present a concise overview of what have previously been scattered data and information on the Babas.

Second, this is a comprehensive and carefully documented study which includes an extensive bibliography. In addition, Rudolph's two and a half year fieldstay also afforded him the opportunity of observing the negotiations of identities, traditions and class aspirations in various spatio-temporal contexts. It is noteworthy that such an extended fieldstay contributed immensely towards embedding Rudolph in the Baba community. It also enabled the Babas to accept and acknowledge him as a 'German Baba' (p. 12). The Babas constitute a closely knit community and it is admirable that Rudolph has managed to earn their trust and respect.

Third, in view of the prevailing debates in the fields of sociology, anthropology and history concerning the study of identities as a heuristic concept, Rudolph has been bold enough to adopt the controversial approach of showing how the identities of the Babas are constantly in flux. Whether one agrees with Rudolph on this theoretical standpoint, it cannot be denied that he offers a convincing argument for his stance. He has clearly depicted the many shifts in Baba identities through the different political and social climates of Singapore. The dramatic quotes that he presents in his work clearly underscore the anxieties of the Babas themselves as they negotiate and renegotiate their identities even in contemporary Singapore.

Fourth, Rudolph presents a pointed argument in showing that although the Baba culture is constantly in flux, it is to be understood as a dynamic rather than a static or dying culture. He juxtaposes this with the perceptions of Singapore's policy-makers and Tourist Promotion Board officials that the Baba culture is something that is static, dying and in need of preservation. Rudolph has shown how such misconceptions have led to the failure of the policy-makers' project of constructing what the Babas themselves dismiss as an artificial 'Peranakan Place' right in the centre of the city. Not only has the project been rejected by the Babas, but it has also failed to generate any interest amongst the tourists. Interestingly, as Rudolph has shown, a local Baba's antique shop owned by Peter Wee has instead gained the support of the local community. What is even more interesting is that hordes of tourists are also making their way to this shop to partake in what they consider to be a living tradition.

Finally, the book is a significant ethnography for the Baba community. As endorsed by William Gwee, a well-respected member of the Baba community, '[t]his timely and important contribution will be most enlightening to the Baba community whose members have yet to fathom their multiple identities' (see back jacket of book). Rudolph also retains the classic dissertation structure for his book and within it, explores other issues that would make his study a useful source for researchers in anthropology, sociology and cultural studies in other related issues. These issues include questions of fieldwork methodology, identity, ethnicity, nationalism and minority rights.

Although there is much to applaud Rudolph for in this well-researched book, it is a pity that he neither learnt the Baba language nor lived with Baba families. Although we can sympathize that he chose not to do so because of time constraints, this book would have been greatly enriched had he done so. The inclusion of these two fieldwork methodologies would have enabled Rudolph to pick up the finer details of the community as well as to capture the instantaneous emotions and responses of the Babas. He would also have been able to

observe and participate in the often taken for granted, day-to-day living matters of the Babas.

What is also lacking in this book are the everyday perceptions of non-Babas vis-à-vis the Babas. It must not be overlooked that identities are constructed and reconstructed not just in response to super- and supra-structural social, political and economic shifts, but also in interactions, negotiations and responses to the ordinary man or woman in the street.

Although the book is written in a style that is easy to read, it is a voluminous book that might prove to be intimidating for many potential readers. Each chapter concludes quite satisfactorily even without their respective concluding sections. More often than not, most of these sections do not add anything new; indeed, it would have made little difference were these sections to have been omitted.

Despite the minor shortcomings, this is a good documentation and analysis of the social history of the Babas in Singapore which well repays a reading.

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