



Cynthia Joseph

Growing up Female in Multi-Ethnic Malaysia

New York and London: Routledge, 2014
ISBN: 978-0-415-62922-5 (hbk); x + 212 pp

reviewed by [JoAnn LoSavio](#)

1. Cynthia Joseph's *Growing up Female in Multi-Ethnic Malaysia* is a significant contribution academically and politically. Unlike the majority of scholarship on Malaysia, which fractures the national label into ethnic groups, and typically focuses on one of those groups, Joseph's study proposes the existence of a transcultural Malaysian subject. She does not suggest a homogenous 'Malaysian,' but offers the possibility of a multicultural way of being 'Malaysian' as one identity strategy (among many) used by young Malaysians (p. 191).
2. Joseph's findings aside, her research design to address Malays, Chinese and Indians simultaneously is refreshing because it literally erases the Colonial legacy of ethnic divisions. Her inclusion of scholarship by Southeast Asian researchers such as A.R. Embong, L.H. Wong, N.P. Tey, M. Maznah, P.K. Heng, and scholarship published in homegrown journals such as the *Jurnal Sains Sosial dan Kemanusiaan* alongside Michel Foucault and Aihwa Ong is more than a scholar's natural reference to the necessary literature. It is also a political act, a statement that Southeast Asian institutions produce scholars and publish scholarship equal to that produced in the 'West.'
3. But Joseph's political statement is not merely historical and academic. She boldly critiques the Malaysian state for its ethnic biases and its failure to address ethnic prejudices in the public education system (p. 193). For a Malaysian to do so is a risky endeavour. Malaysian nationals have been arrested and detained for criticising the Malaysian government; as such, Joseph's choice of public education as a research topic and the honest content and clarity of her analyses warrant applause. Joseph's position as an Indian-Malaysian woman is an important factor, one which she addresses head on in the book. While the book is grounded in Joseph's research, its intent and audience must be gauged by her hopes for it; it does possess a strong—and desirable—activist flavour.
4. The book documents Joseph's seven-year-long sociological study of the identity strategies of young Malay-, Chinese- and Indian- Malaysian women. She locates the development and practice of these strategies in secondary school, and follows her subjects' trajectories post-secondary school to examine the long-term success or failure of these strategies. Joseph's primary assertion is that young Malaysian women are developing identities and using various ethnicised identity strategies to subvert the ethnic identities prescribed to them by their state and by their ethnic collectives; in doing so, they are creating new ways of being both Malaysian and feminine (pp. 119, 139–40).

5. The strategies they subscribe to do not follow the legal ethnic boundaries, making them 'transcultural' subjects. For example, a common Chinese strategy to subvert the affirmative action policies unfavourable to them is to be *kiasu*, that is, to strive to be better than everyone else (pp. 97–103). In the academic setting this means to aim for and achieve the highest marks and thereby obtain access to public universities and scholarships. Joseph finds that some young Malay and Indian Malaysian women also use this strategy; however, other young Malay and Indian women of poor academic ability choose to adopt other strategies.
6. While some ethnic policies and traditions serve to privilege individuals in some domains, they act as constraints for others. Less academically driven young women use traditional gender prescriptions to resist demands on them to become worldly workers. Young women from all three major ethnic groups subscribe to various aspects of being 'western'. However, identity strategies also do not always produce the same results: for instance, the exhibition of 'western' dress and language by girls of good academic standing positions these young women as successful globally savvy go-getters, but when girls of poor academic performance behave in a 'western' manner they are denigrated by school officials and their peers as rebellious and morally lacking (p. 127).
7. Joseph finds these young women are constantly code-switching between several and often conflicting strategies. They subscribe to various identity markers, sometimes using them in predictable ways and at other times perverting them in order to resist, subvert or comply with expectations and identities prescribed for them by the Malaysian state, by their ethnic traditions, and by their families. These young women's identities are constantly fluctuating, constructed by subjective internal means and external, consensual understandings of ethnic collective identity, stereotypes regarding academic ability and their families' financial resources. Strategies which are successful in localised settings change once implemented on a national and global level as these young women leave secondary school and begin their adult journeys in Malaysia or overseas, as tertiary or post-graduate students or professional working women.
8. Joseph begins with the premise that life for all Malaysians is constrained by historical colonial legacies, contemporary ethnic politics, and ethnic gender roles. Affirmative action policies which favour *Bumiputera* Malay citizens above Chinese, Indian and 'Other' citizens affect almost all aspects of life, but are particularly influential through the ethnicised public and private education system. Chapters one and two explicate these historical and political contexts. These chapters are well written, delivering excellent introductions to Malaysian history and political culture for the less initiated, while being nuanced enough to fulfill other readers' needs for specificity. They outline the myriad of factors—for example, a near global use of English as *lingua franca*, a Colonial legacy of labour categorisation of ethnic groups, reactions to the 1997 Asian financial crisis—which intersect to form the identity strategies available to Joseph's subjects.
9. While Joseph acknowledges and addresses this variety of intersecting factors, she focuses primarily on gender and ethnicity. Joseph makes it clear these are not the only factors influencing identity or the strategies these young women use, but the legalisation of ethnicity, and the specific cultural gendered mores of these ethnic groups make them the two most influential. Chapter three addresses ways which the Malaysian state, through subscribing to global capitalist notions of labour, position women in opposition to certain traditional ways of being a 'good' woman. Malaysian women manipulate traditional *and* non-traditional roles to resist identities imposed on them by the state, and by their ethnic traditions. These young women are developing new femininities, new ways of being female in contemporary Malaysia (pp. 78–79).
10. The ways young women of these three ethnic groups navigate the constraints or privileges discussed in these first chapters, how they see themselves and how they project their desired

identities upon others are the focus of Joseph's study. Chapters four, five and six describe the study itself, its methodologies, parameters and findings. Chapters seven, eight and nine focus on the young women after they left secondary school, during their time as tertiary students, then as workers and wives.

11. Joseph finishes with a short conclusion. This reader was slightly disappointed, left with a desire for a longer discussion regarding the 'transculturalism' practiced by Malaysians, specifically how 'mixed race' Malaysians would feature in her argument, and how they would function within the public school system. Although Malaysians are legally bound to select (or have selected for them) one ethnic category, how individuals are culturally raised, or how they socially identify may not mirror their identity cards, particularly those from interracial families. However, this is a minor complaint; overall Joseph's book amply satisfies.
12. Joseph's delivery is straightforward, her style and language accessible. The concise but detailed descriptions of her methods, research design, and the historical and contextual explanations of the Malaysian public education system, ethnic politics and Colonial legacies make this book useful to advanced undergraduate and graduate students, and individuals in the early stages of exploring scholarship on Malaysia. However, Joseph's Foucauldian discussion of discourse, her use of Southeast Asian sources, her political assertions, and her overarching argument for a 'transcultural' Malaysian aim for other more academically advanced audiences: her professional peers from the 'West' and those from Southeast Asia. Amongst the latter, it seems she aims for those who occupy positions of power and possess the ability to evoke changes toward ethnic equality in the Malaysian educational system.
13. The book is aimed at and written for a wide readership. It should be a required reading for anyone interested in Malaysian studies, ethnic politics, women's education, or gender and modernity.

MAIN

Published with the support of Gender and Cultural Studies, School of Culture, History and Language, College of Asia and the Pacific, The Australian National University.

URL: http://intersections.anu.edu.au/issue41/losavio_review.html

© [Copyright](#)

Page constructed by [Carolyn Brewer](#).

Last modified: 14 November 2017 0826