

Indonesian material, the volume's focus on Southeast Asia, primarily Malaysia and Singapore, and the fact that nearly all of the chapters are contributions by Asian sociologists, anthropologists, and historians make it particularly valuable. The volume compensates for its weakness on theory in its insightful and unusual methodological chapters.

In general, the contributors seem to take a more positivist approach to oral history than one might find in contemporaneous anthropological and sociological work. James Morrison's otherwise excellent introductory article only mentions in passing the complex reflexive nature of historical discourse, and in a theoretical chapter, Hong Lysa limits herself to a brief critique of positivist approaches.

The volume shines in its methodological sections, identifying and exploring methodological problems that the authors have found to be particularly acute in a Southeast Asian context, such as problems of social status and hierarchy, gender bias, a lack of a tradition of independent scholarship, and an expectation that scholars will promote national interests (as identified by Hong Lysa).

The volume pays special attention to the collection of "elite" oral histories. Among these are the life histories and biographies of the Asian upper class, the business and political elite of Singapore (e.g., Lim How Seng), former Thai Prime Minister M. R. Seni Pramoj (Yos Santasombat), and Tan Sri Fatimah Hashim, the first woman Cabinet member in Malaysia (Azizah Mokhzani). The volume lays out and addresses difficulties that an oral historian might encounter when engaging "elite" Asians, ranging from issues of gender and social status to practical concerns of scheduling and creating the appropriate interviewing atmosphere. Unfortunately, the "elite" histories examined here often seem to deteriorate into a kind of uncritical praise that borderline on "hagiography," an issue which is mentioned numerous times but never sufficiently addressed. It would have been interesting to read more about how the politicization of history can impact the oral historian's ability to collect accurate information and write about political elites.

While the volume's strength is in its methodological chapters, the substance of the oral histories nicely illustrates the diversity of cultural experience in Southeast Asia. One of the most interesting pieces is Chinese-Malaysian anthropologist Lai Ah Eng's report on doctoral research in a multi-ethnic public housing complex in Singapore. This insightful chapter explores the effects of ethnicity on the fieldwork process. Lai Ah Eng claims that "the single most important factor affecting fieldwork may be ethnicity and the ethnic status of the observer and the observed" (102).

Lastly, the volume includes two very useful appendices: (a) a bibliography of biographies of Malaysian and Singaporean Chinese, and (b) a directory of oral history institutions in Southeast Asia complete with addresses and telephone numbers. Overall, this collection of the work of Southeast Asian scholars constitutes an important milestone in the developing field of oral history in Southeast Asia.

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INDIA

HILTEBEITEL, ALF. *Rethinking the Mahābhārata: A Reader's Guide to the Education of the Dharma King*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2001. x + 365 pages. Bibliography, index. Paper US\$25.00/£16.00; ISBN 0-226-34054-6. Hardcover ISBN 0-226-34053-8.

Although Hiltebeitel originally projected that this second volume in his series on the oral and

classical epics (see *Rethinking India's Oral and Classical Epics*, 1999) would be “retrospective on the Sanskrit epic from the standpoint of the [South Indian] Draupadi cult, that is, a *Mahābhārata* interpreted from the centrality of the goddess,” he ended up instead exploring the meaning of the text and the ways that the text accomplishes this meaning. As he explored the oral roots of the classical epics in the regional oral epics, he found many indicators that led him to conclude that the oral transmission described within the classical epics “is above all a literary trope that should be understood against a background of redaction and above all writing: the activities that went into the making of these two Sanskrit epics” (4). To accomplish this, he focuses less on the text’s prehistory and more on the ways that the text portrays itself through its framing and its metanarrative. By looking at the character who transmits a particular text, the places of transmission, and the occasions of transmission, Hildebeitel demonstrates the ways that the text makes the narrative activities important for the character roles. Hildebeitel is a master at looking at the textual details in the light of other texts, inscriptions, and the historical context of the event described. He discusses the scholarly contributions of a wide range of authors and is always willing to give credit to a particular scholar for a given idea. One could read this text as a means of getting in touch with all the relevant scholarship on the topic even if one were not to agree with Hildebeitel’s conclusions.

When Hildebeitel looks at the question of the dating of the composition of the *Mahābhārata*, he “studies how the text portrays those who compose, transmit, and receive it as audiences,” most notably the figures of Vyāsa, Vaiśampāyana, Ugraśravas, Śaunaka and the other Rsis of the Naimisa Forest, and two additional Rsis not associated with the Naimisa Forest, Nārada and Mārkaṇḍeya (29). He concludes that no scholar has so far come close to proving anything about the date of composition of any of the parts and in particular which sections were composed before or after other sections. Hildebeitel suggests that the way to understand how the text was composed or evolved is to study all of the parts of the text in detail. Toward this end he has an in-depth look at the way the narrative treats particular narratives such as the tale of Nala and Damayantī, Draupadī’s question in the *sabhā*, and the adventures of Vyāsa’s first son, Śuka (12.31020). Hildebeitel suggests that the *Mahābhārata* was composed as a written narrative during the two centuries before the start of the Common Era. He proposes that the *Rāmāyana* was written about the same time as the new epic form emerged out of the oral tradition that must certainly have existed. Hildebeitel does not think that the text was composed by charioteer-bard *sūtas* under the patronage of ksatriya rulers. Hildebeitel’s arguments are very persuasive and I found that I have now reconsidered what I had previously taken for granted about the heroic epic core of the *Mahābhārata* coming out of a ksatriya-controlled oral tradition.

Throughout his exploration of the details of the *Mahābhārata*, Hildebeitel follows the thread of the education of Yudhisthira as the dharmic king. Hildebeitel uses passages that describe *ahimsā* (nonviolence) and *ānṛśamsya* (noncruelty) as the highest dharma to illustrate the ways that Yudhisthira and the reader are educated through the text. Hildebeitel shows how the rise of Yudhisthira’s power and his “education” mark the historical passing of an older order of kingship.

Rethinking the Mahābhārata is a fascinating addition to scholarship about the *Mahābhārata*. This fine text will be utilized by instructors in courses on Indian epics as well as by readers who love to explore the intricate tapestry of Indian thought.

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