

Book Reviews

Contestations of Memory in Southeast Asia. Edited by Roxana Waterson and Kwok Kian-Woon. Singapore: NUS Press, 2012. 300 pp.

One of the great tensions of historical inquiry is the frequent disconnect between official, institutional versions of the past and histories shaped by popular and collective memory. While the former enjoys the weight of academic authentication, the latter holds an essential meaning beyond circumscribed narratives, and often problematizes any official rendering of the past. This is particularly true for Southeast Asia, a region awash in multiple “histories” and seemingly endless ethnolinguistic perspectives, each sharing a somewhat contrived national space. It is this complexity and tension that Roxana Waterson and Kwok Kian-Woon attempt to address in their edited volume *Contestations of Memory in Southeast Asia*.

The editors frame the subject matter with an extensive review of the theoretical literature, exploring such issues as memory and identity formation, the impact of traumatic memory, the transmission of social memory, and the contingencies of the nation-state as they relate to established and remembered historical narratives. While the editors’ discussion provides an expansive survey of the field, their attempt to demonstrate the breadth of the subject (delving extensively into European cases of trauma and memory, for example) sometimes takes their focus away from the exceptional nature of Southeast Asia. Nevertheless, this broad approach yields to tighter focus in the volume’s subsequent chapters, which provide a firm geographical grounding to the volume.

Broadly, this book examines two overarching themes: first, the nature of social memory, and particularly its transmission through

institutional and governmental entities (p. 19), and, second, the ways in which social memories “work against the grain of hegemonic narratives” (p. 1).

On the first point, this book excels. Mairii Aung-Thwin’s piece, for example, provides an exceptional and fascinating look at colonially constructed and manipulated memories in Burma/Myanmar, memories that continue to hold a great deal of postcolonial currency. The subtlety and nuance of this discourse provide an outstanding case study for the long trajectory of social memory in modern Southeast Asia. Also of note in this regard are the contributions of Dayang Istiaisyah bte Hussin, Adeline Low Hwee Cheng, and Kwok Kian-Woon and Kelvin Chia, which weave together an extraordinary examination of Singapore’s tenuous hold on notions of its status as a multiracial/cultural nation-state. The clever and coordinated uses of social memory by national institutions in Singapore speak to the heart of postcolonial diversity in the region and the difficulties of national homogenization amid racial tensions. Further articles deal with the significance of violent traumas, both selectively remembered and forgotten framing preferred national narratives. Heddy Shri Ahimsa Putra’s and Budiawan’s examinations of events surrounding independence and the “1965 Event” in Indonesia are particularly illustrative of the highly selective recollections that mark official histories.

On the second point, relating to the relationship between social memories and hegemonic narratives, *Contestations of Memory* leaves some room for further work. While contributions by Vathana Pholsena, Sharon Seah Li-Lian, Dayang Shri Ahimsa Purta, and Ricardo T. Jose demonstrate some of the ambivalence inherent in national memories born of traumatic violence, it is difficult to identify in them many significant challenges to hegemonic narratives derived from an organic “social memory”. More often, one encounters competition among the powerful over alternative versions of the past. While this is certainly owing in part to the preponderance of evidence created and made available by those in power, it does beg more fundamental questions

hinted at throughout the book. Is there such a thing as organic social memory, created from the bottom up? Or is all collective memory simply derived from official recollections?

Dayang Istiaisyah bte Hussin documents in her piece an unsettling lack of knowledge and apathy among Singaporeans concerning their national history (a circumstance almost certainly found in most other nation-states). She observes, “history is the prerogative of the state, insofar as the state has the capacity to ‘authorize’ which events are selected as significant, and which version of the past is to prevail as legitimate or correct” (p. 125). While citizens may endorse or oppose such authorized views, history itself still seems to derive from the state, or from other institutions of power. This dynamic is reminiscent of Dipesh Chakrabarty’s bold query: “Why should children all over the world today have to come to terms with a subject called ‘history’ when we know that this compulsion is neither natural nor ancient?” (2000, p. 41). In other words, is there such a thing as a discernible “social memory” in the subaltern sense? Or are all such collective recollections simply prompted or shaped by official versions of the past, and, specifically, by their immediate social or political consequences for the social or political body? In this sense, then, is “social memory” more aptly described as “social reaction” to the contemporary consequences of an ambiguous, contested, and otherwise inherently meaningless past, rather than an actual recollection of events? Such questions go to the heart of “social memory” as a category of scholarly analysis.

Despite such theoretical quibbles, *Contestations of Memory* provides a fine addition to any library. Its contributors’ deft use of theoretical and empirical data comes together in an intriguing look at memory, postcoloniality, and the ongoing process of nation-building in Southeast Asia. It would be an appropriate volume for both undergraduate and graduate courses, as well as a valuable item of reference for those interested in social memory, nationalism, postcoloniality, or identity and trauma in Southeast Asia.

REFERENCE

Dipesh Chakrabarty. *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000.

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