

success in unravelling a difficult topic by focusing on the local experiences and micro-strategies of the people of the borderlands. Notwithstanding some of its shortcomings, the book will lend itself well to undergraduate or graduate courses in Asian studies, anthropology, border studies, and social and cultural studies.

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Squatters into Citizens: The 1961 Bukit Ho Swee Fire and the Making of Modern Singapore. By Loh Kah Seng. Singapore: NUS Press, 2013. xxvii+315 pp.

The book's unequivocal title hides a complex study of a significant moment in Singapore's past. *Squatters into Citizens* argues that the 1961 Bukit Ho Swee fire was a catalyst for Singapore's emergence as a modern state, as squatters rendered homeless by the fire were rehoused in clean, orderly — modern — apartment flats. But the book offers more than an argument for the historical significance of the fire; it also attempts to connect a local event to broader histories of fire, housing, and responses to post-war crises. As such, the book contains several underlying sub-narratives. The story of the fire is complemented by a historical-cum-sociological study of the locale known as Kampong Bukit Ho Swee. It also includes an extensive social history of former kampong-dwellers, an analysis of their post-fire lives and their memories of the event. The book is further layered with an informative account of government and societal responses to threats — real and perceived — posed by disorganized housing, rehousing efforts and fire.

A common factor tying these narratives together is the author's desire to counter the Singapore Story. Despite its generic name, the Singapore Story is generally perceived as the state's version of Singapore history, one which is in turn unavoidably centred on

the People's Action Party (PAP), the political party that has formed all of Singapore's governments since 1959. *Squatters into Citizens* begins with a quotation from a 1967 Housing and Development Board publication that depicts the Bukit Ho Swee fire as a "blessing in disguise" as it allowed an "inert community" to be moved from an "unpleasant and dangerous" environment (p. 1). This perception, the author suggests, has been incorporated into the Singapore Story, resulting in a false dichotomy between the apparent modernity of state housing policy and the backwardness of a squatter community. Hence, a primary aim of *Squatters into Citizens* is to demonstrate the existence of a socially autonomous and progressive way of life — an "alternative modernity" (p. 10) — in the Kampong Bukit Ho Swee community. It was not an easy task, as the author himself admits, to find this alternative modernity. Just as kampong dwellers resisted government efforts to rehouse and thereafter acclimatize them to a "modern" lifestyle, they retained similar autonomy as informant-subjects, inadvertently forcing the interviewer-historian to reassess his initial presumptions as they reconciled their own memories with other narratives of the fire.

Nonetheless, the very process of engaging a pervasive historical narrative makes *Squatters into Citizens* an invaluable contribution to the research and writing of Singapore history. The stark memories of former kampong dwellers demonstrate the effectiveness of oral histories in a scholarly field that still suffers from limited accessibility to public and private archives. English- and Chinese-language newspapers are also used to good effect, giving a vivid sense of contemporary perceptions of and circumstances surrounding the event. Memories and contemporary perceptions are moreover balanced with official records and relevant publications by government agencies. The author's comprehensive efforts are an excellent example of the necessary spadework that underpins historical research.

Such efforts are a timely reminder of the value of historical scholarship, as Singapore approaches fifty years of nationhood.

As interest in the country's past and how it is presented continues to grow, there has also been a corresponding increase in the reluctance to accept as gospel state-sanctioned histories. To counter dominant meta-narratives and to uncover the voices that they have marginalized, historians of Singapore have utilized a wide range of historiographical methods and approaches. There are, however, risks involved in marrying concepts to historical situations, both of which possess their own particularities. The social-history approach employed in *Squatters into Citizens* has convincingly demonstrated a considerable level of social autonomy and progressiveness among the kampong dwellers under study. In turn, it also demonstrates their active role in engaging the Singapore Story and shaping the country's history. Hence, the suggestion of an inherent "alternative modernity" (p. 10) in the experiences of kampong dwellers seems extraneous and rather forced, as it is unclear as to how that "alternative modernity" differed from the "high modernism" (p. 264) of the PAP government.

Perhaps the book's discussion of modernity could have been expanded and considered in tandem with post-war colonialism. After the Second World War, the British had assumed greater responsibility for the social and economic development of their empire. This was a fundamental shift in colonial policy, and the new approach to governance was hailed as "modern" in contrast to pre-war laissez-faire principles. It also has long-lasting, and still relatively unexplored, implications for both colonial and postcolonial governments, as well as state-society relations. A more incisive discussion of modernity would have been possible if the social history of the Bukit Ho Swee fire had engaged more directly the shift to a supposedly "modern" form of colonial governance and the implications of such a policy for both state and society.

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