

Book Reviews

Understanding Singapore Society. Edited by Ong Jin Hui, Tong Chee Kiong, and Tan Ern Ser. Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1997. 608 pp.

The editors of this substantial reader state that their purpose in compiling it "was to select a handy and compact collection of essays capable of conveying a sense of what sociological studies of Singapore are and have been about" (p. x). The unit of description and analysis is therefore Singapore society and, more problematically, Singapore culture, its constituent parts and underlying processes.

The anthology is also a celebration of the academic achievements of the Department of Sociology at the National University of Singapore, expressed in the re-publication of key articles and chapters of various of the leading members of the Department and several other academics associated with it. In this celebration the book presents the case for the importance of sociology as an academic discipline in both practical and policy terms and "in providing alternative theoretical and organizational and cultural frames of reference" (p. vii). The volume marks, in a sense, a coming of age of the discipline in Singapore, when its main practitioners, past and present, decide that the time is ripe to bring out a consolidated sourcebook that is designed to demonstrate the contribution of sociology to the understanding and indeed the development of Singapore society. One should add at this juncture that an important feature of the Department in Singapore is that it combines both the disciplines of Sociology and Anthropology, and some of the chapters in this anthology have been written by anthropologists.

For outsiders like myself, who are nevertheless familiar with the Department and its work over the past twenty-five years or so, the list of contributors came as no great surprise. Apart from the three editors

there are, for example, chapters by Peter Chen, Aline Wong, Stella Quah, Geoffrey Benjamin, Sharon Siddique, Vivienne Wee, John Clammer, Eddie Kuo, Chua Beng Huat, and Mak Lau Fong. To my mind, the book is not truly “the best of Singapore Sociology” as the editors’ concern is to provide a representative sample of material, and, more especially, give the reader an insight into a range of principles of social organization, institutions, and processes as they have manifested themselves in Singapore since political independence. There are therefore some classic pieces as well as ethnographic space-fillers and illustrations of a particular sociological genre.

What the volume does is to demonstrate the main scholarly preoccupations of Singapore sociology. The majority of the contributions are concerned with the social forms, character, and transformations of modern, post-colonial Singapore. There is very little historical sociology or grand theory, and certain sections illustrate precisely the strengths and weaknesses of the sociological enterprise in the city-state.

The editors have been judicious in ensuring temporal symmetry; the proportion of chapters published in the 1970s, the 1980s, and the 1990s is roughly equivalent. The earliest published paper in the volume is Chan Heng Chee’s on “politics in an administrative state”, originally published in 1975, followed closely by another conceptual chapter by Geoffrey Benjamin on “the cultural logic of Singapore’s multiracialism”, which first appeared in 1976. These two chapters taken together might have been used to inform and structure the rest of the volume. The volume ends in 1993 with Tan Ern Ser’s paper on “theorizing the dynamics of industrial relations and trade unionism”, which looks back and re-evaluates Frederic Deyo’s work on development and industrialization in the early 1980s (some of it is also re-published in this volume), using such concepts as “bureaucratic-authoritarian [and paternal] corporatism”, “social atomism”, and “labour subordination”.

The editors choose a rather conventional and useful categorization of the chapters into “eight of the main subfields in sociology” (p. x), comprising, again in broadly symmetrical distribution, sections on class and stratification, race and ethnic relations, religion and society, marriage and the family, politics and society, industrialization, urbanization

and community, and culture and society. These are rather arbitrary categories, and some of the papers seem to sit uneasily in them. But the editors thoughtfully assist us by providing an informative introduction (or “overview”) to the book and a guide to each section, which summarizes the content of each paper, offers a critical commentary, and presents pointers for future research.

Of course, one could have organized the papers in a rather different way. Given that the book tells us as much about Singapore sociology as it does about Singapore society, the papers might have been presented in more or less chronological fashion to demonstrate the development of the academic discipline in Singapore, its changes in emphases, the fads and fashions of the time, the efforts to re-evaluate earlier data and to test concepts in an Asian context which had previously been formulated in relation to Western societies. In other words, one would move from earlier conceptual discussions about the nature of the state and politics, and organizational principles such as ethnicity, to later engagements with notions of the international division of labour, dependent development and underdevelopment to the more recent concern with Asian values and development. However, alongside these conceptual changes there has been an ongoing concern to fill ethnographic gaps in the study of Singapore society, and however one organized the chapters one would still have had to sprinkle the volume with empirical pieces.

In the present framework adopted by the editors, the sections I found the most interesting were those that combined conceptual discussions with the analysis of ethnography. This was especially so for the sections on “politics and society” and “industrialization”. They seemed to me to fit together in a more stimulating and intellectually satisfying way.

A very clear theme that connects many of the papers in the volume is that Singapore is a highly controlled, administered, and ideologically managed state; it is “a social engineer’s laboratory” (p. x). The editors themselves quote from Leong Wai Teng’s paper to the effect that in Singapore “the presence of the state is everywhere felt. Every institutional sphere of social life is in one form or another under the vigil of the state” (p. 499). In this regard, it is a vitally important research focus to investigate in what ways and to what extent individuals and groups comply

or conform with government policies and actions, and similarly how the state adjusts to local community responses and to an external political, economic, and cultural environment.

Some chapters concentrate on state-level ideological and administrative action, including the Singapore Government's attempt to create a multiracial culture and a "new" Singapore, as well as on the construction of forms of social life that will meet the demands of economic development in an international capitalist context whilst maintaining internal political stability. Other contributions dwell on local-level reactions, particularly those chapters on religious conversion and revivalism, and those that examine informal organizations in public housing estates. Indeed, two subjects that frequently surface in the volume are ethnic identities and inter-relations, and the social and cultural effects of a high-rise residential environment.

The book certainly meets the editors' aims and objectives. I find it a very valuable compendium of materials on Singapore society; one might see the book almost as a patchwork ethnography of the city-state. The editors refer to it as a "montage — a not quite seamless collection of snapshots" (p. xvii). But it is also a guide to Singapore sociology as it has been practised and thought about during the past twenty-five years. For the teacher of Southeast Asian sociology, and more generally modern social sciences, it will be an obvious reference book to recommend to undergraduates. It also provides the advanced student and researcher with a reasonably comprehensive range of the concepts and theories that have been seen to be relevant and debated in relation to Singapore social and cultural life. The editors presumably have confidence in their project. They promise us a companion volume that will "continue where these early explorations in Sociology left off" (p. xxi). We look forward to it.

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