

Squatters into Citizens: The 1961 Bukit Ho Swee Fire and the Making of Modern Singapore. By Loh Kah Seng. Singapore: NUS and NIAS Presses, 2013. 330 pp. \$38.00 (paper).

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Loh Kah Seng's new book, *Squatters into Citizens: The 1961 Bukit Ho Swee Fire and the Making of Modern Singapore* (NUS & NIAS Presses, 2013) provides a highly interesting social history of urban kampongs in Singapore and the modernist public housing scheme that transformed Singapore. Loh, currently an Assistant Professor at the Institute for East Asian Studies at Sogang University in South Korea, is also the author of *Making and Unmaking the Asylum: Leprosy and Modernity in Singapore and Malaysia* (2009).

Loh's book is a well-written and accessible narrative that blends the author's personal history (his early years in a one-room rental flat and interviews of his parents) with oral history methods, ethnography, and disaster studies. He also analyzes different "mythologies" and the ways they operate in Singapore. In his chapter on memory, myth, and identity, for instance, Loh examines the ways the Bukit Ho Swee fire is treated: from the celebratory official narrative promoted by the People's Action Party (PAP) in various public texts to the nostalgic view of the kampong and kampong spirit, as well as the "counter-myth" of rumors and "wild talk" that circulated in Singapore about the fire. Each of these "myths" and how they work in shaping views of the past is highly relevant to history educators and anyone interested in the ways different discourses about the past, public policy, and public space work in Singapore. The book also highlights the challenges historians of Singapore often face when they are unable to gain access to public records (e.g., classified government records held by

the Housing and Development Board (HDB) and the Ministry of Home Affairs).

The book also provides an alternative account and conceptual frame through which Singapore's past and public spaces can be viewed. Noting that linear and mostly celebratory views of Singapore's housing policy obscure the resistance and social contestation that took place, Loh demonstrates the ways policy-makers used a language of crisis (i.e., disease, crime, disorder, social danger, communism, etc.) with scientific-rationalist visions of order and development that didn't recognize the agency, self-reliance, and autonomy of local communities. Loh argues that national developmental goals do not necessarily cripple local communities, even though the transitions required by new policies are often painful. Singapore's kampong culture exhibited high aspirations, social autonomy, a blending of traditional and modern views, and a desire for development that is respectful of traditional values and cultures. Like Pankaj Mishra, in his excellent book, *From the Ruins of Empire: The Intellectuals Who Remade Asia* (2012), Loh points to the way traditional or more communal values and capacities can serve as a buffer against social dislocations caused by government interventions.

Loh's book, then, helps us understand public housing issues and the role of HDB urban redevelopment in the context of Singapore's colonial past (much of the housing policy was rooted in British housing policies), the rise of the PAP (and how grassroots

organization and leaders were co-opted by the government), and their role in the history of Singapore's merger, independence, and national economic development. Most importantly, the book provides an interesting social history of kampong life, the resilient ways people responded to kampong fires, the life of new immigrants to Singapore, and the roles played by secret societies, gangsters, kampong children, and grassroots community organizations in the kampongs and in Singapore's history. The book also offers an empathetic view of the impact that kampong clearance and the transition to emergency housing and HDB flats had on individuals and communities.

Finally, reading Loh's book can help readers see that people who are typically marginalized have tremendous resources and social capital (local knowledge) that can be leveraged for civic good. Interventions with good intentions always have unintended effects. An emphasis on order can sometimes stifle creativity (Vohs, 2013) and diminish community life (Scott, 1998). Narrow, prescriptive approaches designed to produce good, productive citizens may actually foster a less innovative and resourceful population (Scott, 1998). The Singapore government's unrelenting emphasis on order, development, and progress has resulted in Singaporeans calling for more diverse definitions of success, a more fulfilling pace of life, and a society with a greater sense of "kampong spirit." Loh's book helps us understand why many Singaporeans value a greater sense of community spirit with more diverse notions of social well-being. The historian Christopher Lasch makes the case that active citizenship is best exercised when people "do things for themselves, with the help of their friends and neighbors, instead of depending on the state" (1995, pp. 7-8). Loh's book reminds us that history, public policy, and the meanings people give to particular spaces and ways of life (each of great concern to Humanities educators) are absolutely critical areas of study for understanding the ways we think about and live our lives.

References

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