
*The Scripting of a National History* comprises twelve chapters, where most of them were previously published between 1998 and 2007 and have been further edited for this book that is divided into three parts. Part One, ‘Scripture’, attempts to illustrate ‘how different layers of Singapore’s past have been presented at various points in time’ (p. 9). The first three chapters centre around the ruling party PAP’s first generation leaders, such as Lee Kuan Yew, S. Rajaratnam and C. V. Devan Nair, while the fourth chapter deliberates on oral history.

Part Two, ‘Singapore’s Chinese Dilemma’, includes three papers focusing on the Chinese community in Singapore. The authors interrogate notions of ‘Chinese-ness’ and Sino-centricity through discussions on the Chinese-educated Communists versus the English-educated non-communists in Singapore’s political history, as well as debates on Nanyang University and student activism in Singapore between the 1950s and the 1980s. The remaining three chapters on Singapore’s national heroes, the Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall and the Tiger Balm Gardens form the third part of the book on ‘Con/Scripting Singapore’s National Heroes.’ These chapters elucidate the relevance of ‘public history’ in relation to the increasing numbers of heritage sites and museums in Singapore over the years. The authors have presented well-researched materials and have perused different genres of *lieux d’histoire*, including architectural outfits, media reports, novels and plays, ministerial speeches, and politicians’ biographies. Overall, the book is anchored on two main trajectories: Communist history and the Chinese community.

The introductory chapter lays the foundation towards our understanding of the use of history in relation to nation-building processes and the formation of a national identity. Hong summarises how different countries have employed history in ‘self-definitions of nation-states’ (p. 2) through examples drawn from British, French and German historiographies. More importantly, she deliberates upon the malleability of history and notes quite rightly that history is employed differently at various times so as to be utilised strategically in narrations of the past. She also identifies two shortcomings of historians working on Singapore. First, there exists an absence of reflexivity in their own positioning *vis-à-vis* officially sanctioned history, with the assumption of objectivity being achieved through scholarly training. Second, those who criticise how the Singaporean government plays a heavy hand in scripting history do so without reflecting further upon how such scripting has been achieved.

Chapters Two and Three raise the issue of analysing political history through the speeches and writings of and on Lee Kuan Yew, Rajaratnam and Devan Nair. Chapter Two serves as a review article on the publications of Lee, where the authors argue that Lee’s political biography has become synonymous with Singapore’s history. In the following chapter, Hong and Huang focus on Rajaratnam and Devan Nair’s political speeches and writings as the basis of Singapore’s political history. It follows that Rajaratnam and Devan Nair are to be regarded as ‘history-makers’ (p. 48) in two senses — as ‘actors in a historical process’ and as ‘narrators who give meaning to knowledge of that process’ (*ibid.*). In Rajaratnam’s case, the authors refer to his *PAP’s First Ten Years* as the ‘template for the history of Singapore’ (p. 49), resulting in what the authors have interpreted as the silencing or negation of political opposition. While the authors then suggest taking a closer look at
'slippages in the dominant discourse itself' (p. 50), this is unfortunately not pursued more concretely. Where Nair is concerned, the authors contend that his use of the past resides within attention placed on it as a 'dark' example of tumultuous times (p. 52). They are also of the perception that Nair regards himself as the 'universal tragic hero who was the victim of historical forces' (p. 62), and who saw himself as the 'repository of the historical memory' which would haunt Lee (ibid.). Notwithstanding some interesting ideas that are raised in Chapter Three, I find that some of the sections are too short and underdeveloped.

Shifting gears in Chapter Four, the spotlight is now placed upon oral history where a few pertinent points have been raised. For instance, the Oral History Centre, as criticised by Kwa Chong Guan, has ended up favouring PAP voices; essentially providing dominant narratives (p. 68). Another critique involves the idea of 'history from below' (p. 70), where Hong and Huang contend that such an approach is not merely about recording ordinary people's voices. Instead, there is a need to pay more attention to the role of the interviewer, as well as the historiographical consciousness of the institution that s/he represents (ibid.). Furthermore, oral history projects tend to revolve around either dialect groups or particular communities of Singapore which conveniently fit in with how Singapore society was put together as a historical process. The authors identify a need to include projects on mixed marriages, the gay community and so forth in order to shift beyond 'mainstream typologies' (p. 72).

Although the points raised in the present chapter are cogently discussed, there appears an infelicity with regard to the authors’ interpretation of anthropologists and their approaches. They wrongly perceive anthropologists as having ‘a thesis or proposition to prove or disprove,’ assuming thereafter that anthropologists would ‘accordingly frame their questions to elicit information and perceptions from their respondents with that end in view’ (p. 72). This misconception of the discipline surfaced as a result of the authors’ discussion on the collection and interpretation of oral testimonies.

Moving on to post-war history, Chapters Five to Seven locate Singapore’s Chinese dilemma through three trajectories. Chapter Five features three historical actors — Old Guards Ong Pang Boon, Lee Khoon Choy and Jek Yeun Thong — straddling between the non-communist English-educated and the Chinese-educated communist comrades. The three of them bridged the English-speaking PAP and the Chinese masses. Through an elaborate discussion on how these three Old Guards tried to engender a ‘Malayan consciousness’ (p. 86), the authors show how the notion of Chinese-ness undergoes change and therefore suggest that one ought to be more reflexive in terms of how Chinese-ness has been appropriated in shifting political climates. Labouring over many details and examples, the authors invite a more critical eye when it comes to analysing accounts of post-war Singaporean history. The succeeding chapter, while providing a discussion on Wang Gungwu’s 1965 report on Nantah — regarded as being an important report as it marks a ‘special chapter on student political activism in Singapore’ (p. 116) — ends up as purely historical recount without a pronounced critique on how historiography has been scripted. Chapter Seven begins with an overview of student activism in different phases between 1954 and 1987. The crux of the issue, as the authors posit, was that student activism cut across different language streams, yet this was not how official discourse articulated it. Instead, a binary framework has been identified where well-organised and cohesive Chinese-educated activists were deemed to have succumbed to communist manipulation in contrast to the English-educated students who were lacking in self-confidence and who