Loh Kah Seng


Being published close to the eve of the 50th anniversary of Singapore’s attainment of independence, and at a point in time when the writing of history is being hotly debated in this island city-state, this volume is timely and significant. The Bukit Ho Swee Fire on 25 May 1961 was unprecedented in scale: four deaths, devastation of 2,200 dwellings spread over 100 acres of land, and the displacement of 16,000 people. It occupies an iconic position in the official discourse on Singapore history. Although it serves well as an appropriate anchor for the monograph, the narrative on this exceptional inferno does not actually begin until the mid-point of this book (p. 127, Ch. 6). The rest of the volume provides a larger mapping of public housing development from late British colonialism to the production of electoral legitimacy and political hegemony for the subsequent ruling People’s Action Party (PAP). Given the broader scope, it would have been more precise if the word “housing” had been inserted within the publication title or sub-title.

Despite facing great difficulty in accessing post-1959 PAP government files (pp. xxv–xxvi), the author produces a study that is underpinned by a good range of empirical sources: colonial records, diplomatic dispatches, official publications, newspapers, audio-visual media materials, and most importantly, a large pool of oral history interviews from archives and as well as those conducted by the author himself. The author grew up in his parents’ small one-room flat near to the locality of fire and his father is one of the interviewees (pp. xxi–xxiii). Autobiographical and biographical elements thus have a strong presence in this study.

Adopting the defensive stand that “the question of arson is a logical, if politically incorrect, subject of inquiry” in academic studies of the fire, the book examines the widespread rumour that the fire may have been started by the PAP government to clear the slums and to hasten housing redevelopment. With sensitive files from the Ministry of Home Affairs and the Internal Security Department remaining firmly locked up (p. xxvi), and presented with inadequate evidence, the smoking gun on this intriguing issue is admittedly not found. Nevertheless, this has not prevented Loh from discussing the arson topic through a variety of interesting angles. This included legislative assembly exchanges suggesting that Lee Kuan Yew’s PAP had unjustly accused the Lim Yew Hock government of igniting an earlier February 1959 fire, conflicting eyewitness accounts and circumstantial evidences in the Bukit Ho Swee fire, the
unpredictable path of the inferno, as well as popular social imaginings with the conspiratorial logic of arson pointing towards the government, landlords, secret societies, communist agitators, and even spiteful neighbours.

The book is avowedly a revisionist historical work. It aims at etching out the “subaltern” resistance to the state, qualifying the official “Singapore Story”, and “finding an alternate past to the one dominated by the PAP government” (pp. Xxiii). Its objective is to move “at the interface between political and social history” and be part of “a growing corpus of new political history” that challenges the “linear grand narrative” of the PAP story “by critiquing the frame of communist manipulation and its use to suppress the left in the 1960s” (pp. 20–21). A central trope being deployed is mythologisation. The first few pages of the book begin with an interrogation of the state-promoted myth that kampong squatters on the urban fringe of the city centre were inherently an “inert community who would not think of moving from their unpleasant and dangerous surroundings until a disaster makes the decision for them.” It argues that the squatters on the contrary were “progressive and urbanised,” with a fair degree of semi-autonomy and yearning for its alternative modernity (pp. 1–2, 10–12). The official depiction of the new Bukit Ho Swee housing estate as resurrecting triumphantly under the PAP government, like a proverbial phoenix rising from the ashes of fire, is thus rendered problematic and termed as “the official mythology” (pp. 243–249). Indeed, the success story of the new Bukit Ho Swee is also modified by a substantive chapter on how it actually had remained stagnant over the next four decades as a “black area” of the “socially detached” and “economically marginalised community” despite repeated upgrading efforts (Ch. 9). In addition, the persistent rumours of a “government-inflicted arson” are also framed as a “counter-myth” in which political ambivalence and “individual acts of agency that break silences and sustain underground discourses” have been inadvertently contesting the official narrative (pp. 243–244, 256–261).

In recognition of the high politics enmeshed in squatter clearance and housing resettlement of this fire and subsequent redevelopments, brief attention is aptly given to the political tension generated by the successive major rural associations, the intra-PAP dispute over its maverick mayor Ong Eng Guan, contestation between the PAP’s right wing and its left wing splinter group, Barisan Sosialis, as well the PAP-United Malays National Organisation struggle. One oddity is that the Malayan Chinese Association, with its shophouse in the locality of the fire, appears fleetingly in numerous pages, yet its political activities and significance are scarcely discussed (pp. 33, 53, 69, 142–143, 198).

Making a conscious effort to place the Bukit Ho Swee fire and Singapore housing within a larger frame of discussion, there are many references to extant