
In this short and easy to read book, Kennie Ting provides a lucid overview of Singapore’s heritage over the course of 50 years. The main focus of the book is on how and why certain aspects of Singapore’s heritage have been deemed worthy of preservation, while others have not.

Ting has divided his book into three main sections. The first largely deals with theoretical concepts, as well as the various definitions and discourses of heritage. Notably, he elaborates on the internationally-recognised discourse of heritage espoused by UNESCO. He points out that built heritage has taken precedence in both policy-making and academic circles. He also draws attention to the increasing importance that is now being placed on intangible heritage in recent years and its unique significance in the Asian context. This includes the performing art forms and craftsman’s skills passed down from one generation to another that form the cultural backbone of many Asian communities. Ting attempts to conceptualise how Singapore’s heritage can be categorised, while taking into consideration its “unique” socio-cultural fabric. He comes up with five main categories: “Built”, “Movable”, “Intangible”, “Precinct” and “Everyday” heritage of Singapore. These categories attempt to cover all aspects of Singapore’s heritage, ranging from national monuments to traditional performing arts of various ethnic communities and even memories held on and shared within familial relationships.

The second section describes at length various government initiatives and policies that have shaped the heritage landscape over the last 50 years. This forms the bulk of the book and yields the most interesting insights. Ting shows how the government’s pragmatic focus on developing Singapore into a global and cosmopolitan city with a vibrant economy has influenced many decisions involving the preservation of heritage. He provides two significant examples in support. Firstly, he highlights specifically how S. Rajaratnam, the first Minister of Culture, consciously emphasised Singapore’s colonial heritage as a foundation for nation-building. This led to the establishment of 1819 as the year that marked the founding of Singapore by Sir Stamford Raffles and the beginning of Singapore’s historical journey as a modern entrepôt. Not only did this help with advancing the government’s agenda of portraying Singapore as a modern city to potential foreign investors, it also provided a common historical experience to unite the multifarious ethnic groups in a singular narrative of the nation.
Providing a more recent example of this pragmatic approach towards Singapore's heritage, Ting shows how ethnic enclaves, which present the heritage of the different ethnic communities, were created in the 1980s with the intent of promoting tourism under the direction of the Economic Development Board (EDB) and the Singapore Tourist Promotion Board (STPB). He elaborates on how the ethnic enclaves of “Chinatown”, “Kampung Glam” and “Little India” serve the purpose of preserving ethnic heritage and continue to contribute to the growth of Singapore’s tourism. However, he acknowledges that it is this pragmatic focus of ensuring Singapore’s survival and economic exuberance that has at times caused the government to be at loggerheads with civil society, as well as the public. In the case of the ethnic enclaves, he explains how they have been criticised and associated with the “Disneyfication” of Singapore’s heritage in which its authenticity has somewhat been compromised.

Nevertheless, Ting offers an alternative view to such criticism by highlighting how the government has been responsive towards opposing views even as it falters at times in its heritage policies. For example, when the Singapore Heritage Society (SHS) was formed as an advocacy group, the government convened a high-level Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts (ACCA) to rethink its heritage policies and strategies. However, he acknowledges that the government’s attempt at being responsive to the concerns relating to its policies has not always been perceived in a positive light, sometimes being labelled as “insincere attempts” that only seek to placate public discontent. Instead of taking sides, Ting suggests an approach based on collaboration, as he concedes that the concerns of the government, civil society and public are all valid, as they stem from a common desire to see Singapore advance as a vibrant nation.

Perhaps, an area worthy of further consideration would be the importance of the performing arts and the Malay film industry during the early decades of Singapore’s independence. The contributions made by institutions such as the Bhaskar’s Dance Academy and the Cathay-Keris Studio were prominent manifestations of Singapore’s intangible heritage that made an indelible impact on the everyday experiences of Singaporeans.

Overall, Ting’s book will likely appeal to the average reader, as well as academics who want to quickly update themselves with the key socio-political developments that have shaped the trajectory of Singapore’s heritage. He makes a commendable contribution to the discourse of Singapore’s heritage by clearly highlighting that the government has not remained resolute in adopting a “top-down” approach towards its management of heritage. Rather, it has gradually shifted over time towards a more consultative and nuanced approach that takes