

Berita

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Stand-off during the Bersih 2.0 rally – Walk for Democracy
(Kuala Lumpur, 9 July 2011)



Chair's Address

This is my last column as chair of the Malaysia/Singapore/Brunei Studies Group (MSB). In my three years as chair, I am especially proud of two things: the inauguration of the John A. Lent Prize in 2011, and the resurrection of *Berita* in a new format.

The John A. Lent Prize is awarded for the best paper presented at the previous annual meeting of the Association for Asian Studies. The prize now comes with a \$200 cheque. In 2011, it was awarded to Patricia Sloane-White of the University of Delaware. In 2012, it was given to Cheong Soon Gan of Union College. John A. Lent, professor of communications at Temple University, was the founder of *Berita* and of MSB. He served as editor of *Berita* for twenty-six years and chair of MSB for eight years. It is therefore fitting that we now have a prize in his honor. Developing an academic prize is not an easy task, mainly because it requires people to read many papers without any compensation other than their sense of professional responsibility and their moral goodwill. I am therefore extremely grateful that in these past two years James Jesudason, Craig Lockard, Patricia Sloane-White, Eric Thompson, and Claudia Derichs all accepted – without any hesitation, I should add – to review the papers for the John A. Lent Prize. They have all made an important contribution to MSB.

Second, I want to thank the editor of *Berita*, Derek Heng, for his hard work and superb professionalism. After Ron Provencher retired from many years of editing *Berita*, we were faced with a challenging task in trying to get the newsletter off the ground again. Thanks to Paul Kratoska we were able to recruit Derek to serve as editor. I have heard only wonderful things about *Berita* since it got started in its new incarnation. We are very fortunate to have Derek build on Ron's legacy.

MSB is always looking for new officers and committed scholars to move the studies group forward. The group is in good hands with Timothy Daniels of Hofstra University as the new chair and Eric Thompson of the National University of Singapore as vice-chair. Do get in touch with either of them or with Derek Heng if you have any ideas for developing MSB.

Terima kasih!

*Erik Martinez Kuhonta, McGill University
Chair, Malaysia/Singapore/Brunei Studies Group*



Editor's Foreword

It is my pleasure to present to you this issue of *Berita*, which has a substantial emphasis on the field of history. The common theme running through the articles and reports is the contestation for the collective social memories in Southeast Asia. While the pieces herein pertain, both from the historical and historiographical perspectives, primarily to the immediate post-World War II era up to the point of independence for Singapore and Brunei in 1965, it is clear that these discussions bear significantly on our understanding of the continued use of such memories in the present-day political discourse in the countries covered by our studies group.

The issue begins with a conference report on History as Controversy: Writing and Teaching Contentious Topics in Asian Histories by Ho Chi Tim. Held in Singapore, and bringing together scholars from several countries, the conference explored the uses and pitfalls in the present state of pedagogical approaches to teaching history in Southeast Asia and other parts of the world, pitting observations by practitioners at various career levels.

Nicholas Tarling and Bacha Abdul Hussainmiya's article on the 1958 Hickling report in the run-up to the penning of the Brunei constitution is an important contribution to the ongoing discussion, both in *Berita* as well as in the Malaysia/Singapore/Brunei Studies Group online forum, on the importance in the process of political formation in these three countries from the post-World War II era up to the present time. We are hopeful that this piece will be a precedent of future contributions on Brunei studies to this newsletter.

Ang Cheng Guan's review of Lee Kuan Yew's volume entitled *Hard Truths to Keep Singapore Going* critiques the purposes and relevance of Lee's memoirs, in the face of a generation of Singaporeans who are not only becoming technological savvy and more predisposed towards social media as avenues of information and discourse on Singapore politics, but also increasingly removed from the founding tenets and challenges that had characterized the social compact of Singapore in the first decades since independence in 1965.

Finally, Loh Kah Seng's piece on Queenstown in Singapore reflects the larger contestation, both in the 1960s when the post-war modernization of Singapore was going into full swing, as well as the acquisition and retention of the historical narrative of Singaporean society, in the wake of the establishment of the developmental state's agenda over the course of the last four decades.

Derek Heng, Ohio State University
Editor



Members' Updates

Yeow-Tong Chia (PhD, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto) graduated in June 2011, and was a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Macau between August 2011 and January 2012. He has since been appointed Lecturer in History Curriculum Education in the Faculty of Education and Social Work at the University of Sydney. His article, entitled "The Elusive Goal of Nation Building: Asian/Confucian Values and Citizenship Education in Singapore During the 1980s", was published in the *British Journal of Educational Studies* (vol. 59, no. 4, December 2011, pp. 383-402).

Meredith Weiss (Associate Professor of Political Science, State University of New York at Albany) has recently published a new book entitled *Student Activism in Malaysia: Crucible, Mirror, Sideshow* (Ithaca & Singapore: Cornell SEAP/NUS Press, 2011). The book traces the parallel paths of higher education development and the rise and decline of student political engagement in Malaysia from the early 20th century through the present, as well as in Singapore through the mid-1970s. A related edited volume (co-edited with Ed Aspinall) entitled *Student Activism in Asia: From Protest to Powerlessness* (University of Minnesota Press), will be forthcoming later in the year.

Daromir Rudnyckij (University of Victoria) was awarded a three-year Standard Research Grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Council of Canada to conduct research on state efforts in Malaysia to make Kuala Lumpur a global hub for Islamic finance. His book, entitled *Spiritual Economies: Islam, Globalization,*

and the Afterlife of Development (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010), deploys recent advances in ethnography to analyze moderate Islamic spiritual reform initiatives in Southeast Asia that reinterpret Islam to make it conducive to commercial success and business productivity. It was awarded the Sharon Stephens Prize by the American Ethnological Society (the Stephens Prize is awarded biannually to a "work that speaks to contemporary social issues with relevance beyond the discipline of anthropology and beyond the academy").

Nicholas Tarling is currently a Fellow at the New Zealand Asia Institute. He was Professor of History at the University of Auckland between 1968 and 1996. He has authored and edited over fifty books, mostly on Southeast Asia. Those on Borneo include *Britain, the Brookes and Brunei* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1971) and *The burden, the risk and the glory: a political biography of Sir James Brooke* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1982). He also edited the *Cambridge History of Southeast Asia*. His most recent work includes *Britain and the Neutralisation of Laos* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2011).

Bachamiya Abdul Hussainmiya (B.A., B.Ed, Ph.D [Perad'ya]) is Associate Professor of History at Universiti Brunei Darussalam and Consultant to Brunei History Center. Hussainmiya is author of several books and articles on the Sri Lankan Malays and Brunei's political history in recent times. His works include *Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddin III and Britain; The Making of Brunei Darussalam* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1995) and

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Brunei: Traditions of Monarchic Culture and History (Bandar Seri Begawan: Brunei Press, 2011), which was co-authored with Nicholas Tarling.

Loh Kah Seng (Postdoctoral Fellow, Centre for Southeast Asian Studies, Kyoto University) authored *Making and Unmaking the Asylum: Leprosy and Modernity in Singapore and Malaysia* (SIRD: 2009) and co-edited *The Makers and Keepers of Singapore History* (Singapore: Ethos Books & Singapore Heritage Society 2010). A forthcoming co-authored monograph, entitled *The University Socialist Club and the Contest for Malaya: Tangled Strands of Modernity*, will be published by Amsterdam University Press.

Vincent Chandran (MIS, LLM) is Southeast Asian Analyst at the Emerging Threats ISIS Center, Georgetown University MC. He is presently involved in the **ARGUS III Project**, which involves identifying and analyzing information relating to civil violence, imminent threats-terrorism, bio-disease, political instability covering ASEAN, with a special emphasis on Indonesia, Malaysia and Brunei. He can be contacted at the following address: Suite 603, 2115 Wisconsin Avenue, NW Washington, DC 20007 (Email: chandran@isis.georgetown.edu; Tel: 202-687-7876).

Elliott Parker is Emeritus Professor of Journalism at Central Michigan University and Listserv Listowner of SEASIA-L and MSBFORUM. His research interest is in print media history in ASEAN and internet policies in the region. He is a member of AAS, AMIC, AEJMC and the National Press Club.

Ang Cheng Guan (Associate Professor and Head, Humanities and Social Studies Education Academic Group, National Institute of Education, Singapore) recently authored *Southeast Asia and the Vietnam War* (London: Routledge, 2010). He is currently working on three major research projects: (a) *The International History of the Vietnam War: The Denouement 1967-1975* (forthcoming: Routledge Frank Cass); (b) Singapore/ASEAN and the Third Indochina War (1978-1991); and (c) Lee Kuan Yew's Strategic Thought.



Conference Report

History as Controversy: Writing and Teaching Contentious Topics in Asian Histories (by Ho Chi Tim)

In December 2011, over 150 people attended a two-day conference on 'History as Controversy: Writing and Teaching Contentious Topics in Asian Histories.' Held in Singapore, the conference was co-organised by the Singapore Heritage Society, the Asia Research Institute (ARI) at the National University of Singapore (NUS), and the Humanities and Social Studies Education (HSSE) Academic Group from the National Institute of Education (NIE). Over forty papers, organised into twelve panels, were presented. They shared insightful experiences and posed pertinent questions, and in doing so, shed light on philosophical, methodological and practical questions concerning the teaching and writing of historical controversies in Asia. The conference was opened by Professor Prasenjit Duara, the current Director of ARI and NUS Raffles Professor of Humanities, and Ms Dahlia Shamsuddin, President of the Singapore Heritage Society.

Some of the impetus behind the conference can be traced to the growing interest in how certain historical events and themes, particularly those that may be as 'controversial' or 'sensitive', are researched, written and taught in Singapore, Southeast Asia and other parts of the world. In Singapore for instance, 'The Singapore Story', the national narrative of the country's historical experiences, has for some time held sway. But this 'official' singular narrative has been challenged not just

by professional historians researching Singapore's history, but also by school teachers who are tasked with introducing students to the



Opening address by Professor Prasenjit Duara, chaired by Assistant Professor Syed Muhd Khairudin Aljiunied (Malay Studies Department, National University of Singapore)

country's past. In their attempts to present a more holistic approach and picture of the past, both groups have encountered similar issues and concerns, not least the tensions between history education, student citizenship and nation-building.

The organisers of the conference believe that such issues, which overlap into both realms of academic scholarship and pedagogy, cannot be easily ignored. Instead, they should be directly and confidently addressed in an objective and reasonable fashion. In a rapidly globalised world where information sources are broad and diverse, young people especially will need the skills and knowledge so as to adjudicate competing accounts and deal with the range of controversies they are likely to encounter in public life. With this principle in mind, there was a concerted effort made to bring together professional historians, teachers of history as well as their students, so that their



expertise and experiences can be shared in a conducive setting.

Hence, and despite the primary focus on Asian histories, there was a distinct international flavour to the conference. Presenters hailed not only from Southeast Asian countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam, but also from Australia, France, the Netherlands, Russia, South Asia, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America. As such, the conference was able to boast of a diverse group of papers and presenters, which in turn exposed both audience and presenters alike to the different contexts of similar issues.

The twelve panels were organised into three main themes of 'Teaching', 'Textbooks' and 'Research'. The first group brought together university and school teachers to share insights and ideas in the teaching of history. The papers under this theme focused more on the various pedagogical approaches and methods in teaching controversial historical topics, such as war atrocities, the position of ethnic minorities in nation-states or dealing with singular historical narratives.

The papers under the second theme of 'Textbooks' centred on the specific (and not entirely free of controversy) issue of history textbooks. Here, presenters ranged from history teachers (from both university and

school levels) who have and continue to confront biases inherent in textbooks meant to espouse particular ideals and norms, to scholars searching for new sources of information or teaching methods, so as to redress such biases and to present the past in a more holistic way.

The third theme covered more philosophical but no less practical or significant concerns when conducting research or fieldwork, e.g. how certain topics, such as politics, colonialism, nationalism, religion and gender, are approached, understood and written down.

In addition to the panel presentations, there were also three keynote addresses, which in many ways encapsulated the purpose of the conference. Two were by historians of (and from) Southeast Asia – Reynaldo Ileto and Thongchai Winichakul—and one was by Stuart Foster (Director of the Institute of Education (IOE) at the University of London, and also Director of the IOE's Holocaust Education Development Programme).

To counteract the implications of overtly nationalistic as well as 'official' and 'best story' narratives in history textbooks, Foster argued that it is vital ...'that students are provided with a deeper understanding of the interpretive, contested, and controversial nature of history.' One solution, Foster suggested, is to



develop the 'disciplinary understanding' of students, i.e. 'a respect for evidence, a reflexive approach to knowledge, a willingness to recognise, value and strive for well-grounded judgements and the freedom to offer an account of the past that is sanctioned by available evidence.' One possible outcome of this approach is that history need not be viewed as a 'fixed body of knowledge', but rather a 'discipline open to argument and subject to change.'

Reynaldo Ileto drew from his personal experiences learning, researching and writing Southeast Asian history to expound on the 'academic controversies' that permeated and indeed shaped the field of Southeast Asian history. Southeast Asian history was a contested academic field where certain norms were accepted and others not. Hence, Ileto contended that there remained implications and consequences from that contest that present-day and future historians of Southeast Asia will have to address. Addressing similar issues, i.e. historical controversy, but from a different angle, Thongchai Winichakul observed that there are 'dangerous histories' in the Thai and broader Southeast Asian context. They are not dangerous because of their inherent truth (of lack thereof), as each generation will generate their own questions and perspectives as informed by their immediate contexts, but rather they are dangerous because they pose an intolerable challenge 'not only to the dominant power, but also the normalcy of civil society.'

All three addresses, as disparate as they may be at first glance, do actually reach similar conclusions, or at least share similar observations. First, the present does inform the way we approach our past, i.e. how we interpret past actions, the availability of and access to sources of information, or institutional

obligations and considerations. Each generation, or even different contexts within the same generation, has its questions and perspectives. Second, and leading from the first, history education cannot be (and was never) a simplistic and unimaginative regurgitation of facts and dates. There can and must be a disciplinary approach to the subject, even at the pre-university levels so as to help students learn from an early age to navigate the relentless information flows that underpins the current globalised world.

Founded in 1986, the Singapore Heritage Society is a non-profit, non-government organisation and registered charity. The Society is dedicated to the preservation, transmission and promotion of Singapore's history, heritage and identity. For more information, please visit their website at www.singaporeheritage.org.

Chi Tim is a Ph.D. candidate at the Department of History, University of Hawai'i at Manoa, and is currently undertaking dissertation research into the historical development of social welfare in colonial Singapore. He serves as a member of the executive committee of the Singapore Heritage Society.



Feature Article

The Hickling Report on Brunei (by B. A. Hussainmiya & Nicholas Tarling)

One way of advancing the historiography of Brunei, and of interesting Bruneians in their history, has been the annotated reprinting of some of the major documents. Arguably the most significant document for the independence of the Sultanate is S. H. McArthur's report of 1904, and it has been superbly edited and annotated by A. V. M. Hortons (Athens: Ohio University Center for International Studies, 1987). Now we have collaborated on introducing and annotating R. H. Hickling's report of 1955, and the work has been published in Bandar by the Yayasan Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah, together with notes, illustrations, bibliography and index, as *Brunei Traditions of Monarchic Culture and History*, available from the manager, Brunei Press Sdn Berhad, Gadong, Bandar Sri Begawan, Brunei Darussalam. It is not a work of the same order of significance as McArthur's, but it is still well worth reading. We think others interested in the Sultanate and in the region in general will find it as interesting as we have.

At the time the British, still 'protectors' of Brunei, were considering a constitution for the Sultanate of Brunei. Hickling was then Assistant Attorney-general in neighbouring Sarawak, which had been made a colony after a century of Brook rule in 1946. His report is intrinsically interesting for its account of Brunei constitutional history and practice. It also points to some of the political issues involved.

In preparing his report Hickling drew, as he says, on a relatively limited number of sources. He had access, it seems, to some at least of the earlier British government records, mainly through the 'confidential print'. In the days before carbons, gestetner and Xerox, the Foreign Office printed some sequences of documents for its own use. Copies of those Hickling used may be found in the National Archives, Kew, as FO 572 and FO 881.

One of the aims of the editors, who have had the advantage of working in the archives on the documents themselves, was to supplement and comment on his conclusions. They also hope to put his work itself in an historical context. The text itself has not been modified, except that what were obviously merely typographical errors have been corrected. But, aside from an introduction, additional information is supplied in a further series of footnotes. The challenge to the printer was substantial, but, we think, has been fully and indeed elegantly met.

The McArthur report had led to the installation of a British resident in Brunei, forestalling the aspiration of Raja Charles of Sarawak to complete the acquisition of a territory that his raj now surrounded. That saved the state and the dynasty, but at a price. The power of the Resident in Brunei tended to grow, as it had in other Malay states where Residents had been installed. This formed one of the topics of Hickling's discussion. All legislation seemed now to require the approval of the British High Commissioner based in Singapore, of whom the Resident as agent and representative, and that principle had even been extended to enactments of the State Council affecting the Muslim religion. One conclusion was that in any new constitution it would be



necessary to indicate the kind of legislation that would require his approval.

Hickling also confessed to ‘some difficulty in deducing the true constitutional position of sovereignty in Brunei’, given the wide powers conveyed in the agreement with the Sultan and subsequent constitutional practice. Later in the report he stresses that, to study the government of Brunei and to produce a graft constitution, ‘it is necessary to establish beyond doubt exactly what form of government is constituted by the State of Brunei’. The authorities he quotes distinguish between a protected state and a colonial protectorate. In the former, as Halsbury put it, the administration is conducted in the name of the local sovereign, and in the latter by the British Crown. Brunei, the authorities were generally agreed, was a protected state, but Hickling still thought its exact position ‘far from clear’. That is what it was under the 1888 agreement. But now the Sultan had to act on the Resident’s advice, and ‘in my view the status of Brunei approximates more closely to that of a colonial protectorate than to that of a protected state’.

The ‘colonial protectorate’ was an invention of John Bramston at the Colonial Office in the 1890s when faced with the extension of British control in Africa, and the concurrent need to provide for jurisdiction over non-British Europeans. When one European power assumed a protectorate, it this assumed ‘a portion of what may be called the external sovereignty of those rulers’, and was thus responsible to other powers for the safety of their nationals¹.

¹ Quoted from C. Newbury, “Treaty, grant, usage and sufferance”, in G. A. Wood & P. S. O’Connor, *W. P. Morrell, A Tribute* (Dunedin: University of Otago Press, 1973), p. 82.

“Connected with the distinction between a protected state and a colonial protectorate was the Crown’s ability or inability to legislate under the Foreign Jurisdiction Act of 1890. In a protected state, the Crown was merely exercising its jurisdiction over British subjects, so far as it was conferred by treaty with the sovereign of the territory concerned. In a colonial protectorate, the jurisdiction was much wider. In view of his assessment of Brunei’s status, it was logical for Hickling to conclude that it would be possible to confer a constitution on Brunei ‘by means of an Order in Council under the Foreign Jurisdiction Acts’. But neat as that might be, he did not think it was ‘the correct solution’.

No doubt he was thinking in terms of political correctness. His legal argument may, however, have been faulty. The fact that a sovereign has to take advice does not necessarily mean that the advisor shares or absorbs sovereignty. Indeed the British government did not itself take that view in respect of the peninsular states. The main object of the notorious mission of Sir Harold MacMichael late in 1945 was to secure revised treaties with the Malay rulers conferring on the British government full powers to legislate under the Foreign Jurisdiction Act. Even in Malaya, the British did not conceive of themselves as sovereign. The attempt to increase their powers was indeed to create a political uproar among the Malays that undermined the proposed Malayan Union. That, of course, only underlined the correctness of Hickling’s political judgement.

His report discussed another issue that had been crucial in the plans which the British had developed for Malaya and which Malay protests led them to modify. This was the



question of nationality and citizenship. Again his recommendation took account of the political implications.

Wartime planning revived the idea of federating the 'British Borneo' territories that Sir Cecil Clementi and others had considered in the inter-war period. It certainly seemed that in an insecure post-war world, such small territories could not survive on their own. While the British stopped short of trying to set up the Southeast Asia Union their planners at one time contemplated, they never dropped the view that in some way or other their dependencies in Southeast Asia would have to be strengthened and that that could be done by bringing them into some form of association.

It was in keeping with this view Hickling thus opposed attempts further to define Brunei citizenship or nationality: 'by giving shape and definition at the present time to the urgent demands of what might not incorrectly be described as Brunei nationalism, the development of the three Borneo territories (at least) into a healthy and strong federation capable of taking its place in the international community may well be retarded...To create a separate nationality out of a total population of approximately 55000 people, of whom perhaps no more than twenty per cent might qualify therefore, appears to me like to lead to major difficulties at a later stage.

For federation, however, he knew that there was no sympathy in Brunei, and his recommendation on citizenship was not very consistent with the sentiments that inspired the rest of his report. Its tone was sympathetic to Brunei and to its Sultan, and it may have influenced the Colonial Office in the following years. The Office certainly let the sultan off the hook on many occasions during the

negotiations that led to the final promulgation of the constitution of 1959. It also accepted a Brunei nationality. That stood in the way of federation, as Hickling had seen, and it was, of course, hardly compatible with its inclusion in Malaysia.

Why was Hickling so sympathetic to Sultan and sultanate? Brunei, he insisted, was 'a Malay State with a living constitution based upon a strong sense of history, and with their present wealth the people are politically ambitious, although their ambitions have not yet been overtaken by general education'. Novel ideas, he thought, could be introduced 'after much "conditioning" of the people to be affected'. This was a view he held about much "conditioning" of the people to be affected. This was a view he held about Sarawak, too. In an article he wrote in 1956, he quoted Malinowski, though it might almost have been James or Charles Brooke. Rashly applying our morals, laws and customs to native societies would lead to 'moral atrophy' and extinction of culture and race, the anthropologist had written, words, as Hickling put it, 'terrifying to the colonial servant'. But self-government, the contemporary objective of colonial administration, could not be attained without bearing them in mind. Self-government had to be 'attained, if possible, by the maintenance of a stable society, whilst at the same time that society is being persuaded, and indeed urged, to advance to a point at which it is capable of survival in the modern world'. The law must have its roots in society lest it prove meaningless².

'On the British side', Hickling wrote in his later autobiography, 'we were beset by the

² R. H. H. "The Flight of the Hornbill", *Sarawak Gazette*, 30 March 1956, no. 1185.



belief that a popular government of the people, by the people, is a kind of timeless, moral absolute that is valid at all times, in all places, for all people'. The proposition is 'absurd'. Yet he was himself, he says, among those who 'cherished this kind of delusion, and forced the pace of democracy'. Now, he believes, 'democracy, party politics, one man, one vote, periodic elections: all...seem, in the gloomy light falling over our crowded and confused planet, thoughts of another age, of a time when we mistook the light for dawn'. The Sultan, he thinks, had no such illusions. 'Of course as head of a small state he needed the protection of a powerful friend such as Britain, but he was a thoughtful, careful man, and not one to be hurried into precipitate action, either in the establishment of a Borneo federation, or as a State within Malaysia'³.

If at times Hickling felt socially apart from men like Sir Anthony Abell and members of the Most Conceited Service, his views in some ways echoed those some of them had expressed. His misgivings about modernization unmistakably echo those of Sir Hugh Clifford, for instance, and like his reflected doubts about his own society as well as an appreciation of those among whom he sojourned. Like Clifford, he wrote novels and short stories. In his story 'The Chief Minister's House'—where he appears in the guise of The Gin and Tonic—he quotes an old towkay at a meeting on the proposed constitution: 'would you please go back to His Highness the Sultan and explain that we are very grateful to him for his thoughtfulness, and we have no doubt that this democracy business you mention is a good idea but, if it is all the same to him, tell him we are

quite happy with the present system, and shall be content if he would leave things as they are.' At the time Gin and Tonic reacted with horror. Now he thinks: 'I was being clever...but he was simply wise.'⁴

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Nicholas Tarling is currently a Fellow at the New Zealand Asia Institute. He was Professor of History at the University of Auckland between 1968 and 1996.

³ *Memoirs of a Wayward Lawyer* (Bangi: Penerbit University Kebangsaan Malaysia, 2000), pp. 107 – 108.

⁴ *The Dog Satyricon* (Petaling Jaya: Pelanduk, 1994), p. 4.



Review Article

Hard Truths to Keep Singapore Going (by Ang Cheng Guan)

Fook Kwang Han & Lee Kuan Yew, *Hard Truths to Keep Singapore Going* (Singapore: Straits Times Press, 2011). ISBN 9789814266727; 458 pp.

Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore's first Prime Minister, had originally meant to write a sequel to his two-volume memoir, collectively known as *The Singapore Story*¹. The first (published in 1998) covered his early years to Singapore's independence in August 1965. The second published two years later took the story from Singapore's independence to the year 2000. Volume Two covers substantially Lee's years when he was Prime Minister of independent Singapore - he stepped down in November 1990 - and more briefly the period when he was Senior Minister (1990-2004) and tells of "the long hard climb...from poverty to prosperity". If he had continued with Volume Three, I would assume it would cover the remaining years when he was Senior Minister and the period when he was Minister Mentor (December 2004-May 2011) thus bringing his version/account of the 'Singapore Story' up to the present day or thereabouts.

Hard Truths was published in January 2011. The first two volumes adopted different approaches. The first book was more sequential.

¹ Lee Kuan Yew, *The Singapore Story: Memoirs of Lee Kuan Yew* (Prentice-Hall, 1998); Lee Kuan Yew, *From Third World to First: The Singapore Story, 1965 - 2000* (Harper Collins, 2000).

It was in Lee's words "a chronological narrative" whereas the second volume, out of necessity, adopted a thematic approach in order to "...compress 30 years into 750 pages" otherwise the book would have been too long. I did not have the privilege of seeing his drafts of the intended Volume Three and so cannot tell whether the eventual Question-and-Answer approach adopted in *Hard Truths* is a good "alternative to memoir-writing".

What we do know is his motivation for writing all three books. In the 1998 preface, Lee wrote that he was 'troubled by the apparent over-confidence of a generation that has only known stability, growth and prosperity' and he thought that Singaporeans "should understand how vulnerable Singapore was and is, the dangers that beset us, and how we nearly did not make it". Most importantly, he hoped that Singaporeans "would know that honest and effective government, public order and personal security, economic and social progress did not come about as the natural course of events". He made the same point in the 2000 preface. He felt that the younger generation, unlike "those who have been through the trauma of war in 1942 and the Japanese occupation, and taken part in building a new economy for Singapore", too sanguine about Singapore's vulnerabilities and challenges.

A decade later, his feelings about the younger generation has not changed. In fact, his concern grew. The 2011 Preface in *Hard Truths* revealed that Lee "had become aware that a younger generation of Singaporeans no longer regarded his views with the same weight and relevance as older citizens who had rallied around him unwaveringly in the country's tumultuous journey to nationhood". He felt an urgent need to find a way to "engage" the



younger generation and *Hard Truths* became the medium to reach out.

It is therefore reasonable to surmise that *The Singapore Story* did not achieve Lee's objectives and the message needs to be more effectively iterated. As he told the authors/interviewers, "I want my views born of 50 years of experience read and understood, whether or not they agree with me". He was persuaded by Straits Times editor to adopt a Question and Answer approach for this book. As Han Fook Kwang (Editor, The Straits Times, and the lead author) explained "a cut-and-thrust approach" would throw Lee's ideas "into sharper relief" and he could "focus on issues which the established consensus of the past seemed to be shifting". Most importantly, this approach would (the authors were able to convince Lee) appeal to more readers.

Thus, *Hard Truth* is not your typical memoir. It is a collection of interviews. Lee had given numerous interviews since the 1950s to journalists, local and international, famous and not so famous, which can be accessed from the National Archives of Singapore website and more recently even more easily from his 10-volume collection of speeches, interviews and dialogues. The main difference between these and the eleven interviews contained in *Hard Truths* culled from "16 lengthy sittings between December 2008 and October 2009" is that the latter is conceptualized as a book. The eleven interviews certainly cover the perennial and current of Singaporeans, not necessarily only of the younger generation. I am however not so sure the book is especially successful in throwing Lee's ideas "into sharper relief". A younger generation not familiar with Lee's speeches, interviews and dialogues might think so. For me, I find as much, if not more, "cut and thrust" in many of his previous interviews and

which explain his ideas and policies no less succinctly.

Hard Truths reminds me of another book on Lee Kuan Yew entitled *Lee Kuan Yew: The Man and His Ideas*. There are a number of similarities or near similarities: Published in 1998 also by The Straits Times Press and which Han Fook Kwang (then, the Political Editor, The Straits Times) was also the lead author. The aim of both books is not very different – "to understand the man himself, what he stands for, how he approaches problems, what he believes in". The 1998 book comprised 46 selected speeches on good governance, economic development, politics and democracy, law and order, culture, nature of human society and media – issues which also feature in *Hard Truths*. Most interestingly, the book also involved thirteen interviews of Lee (by Han and Assistant Political Editors Warren Fernandez and Sumiko Tan) over 30 hours in 1994 and 1995. *Hard Truths* involved seven journalists, sixteen interviews, 32 hours over two years. Like his 1998 series of interviews, the *Hard Truths* interviews revealed "how he came round to those key ideas, the circumstances surrounding their genesis, and whether experiences later led him to modify them or strengthened his belief even more". In most cases, it is the latter. Both books also devoted a final section to his personal life.

Space does not allow me to do more than highlight some of the key issues in *Hard Truths*. Readers who are familiar with Lee and what he had said and done over the years will not find much that is new in the book, except for more recent anecdotes and observations such as working in present-day China and the attitude of the younger generation Singaporeans towards China (pp. 330-331), the reason why Singapore sent a medical team to



Afghanistan (p. 327) or the recent developments in Malaysia, Indonesia, the Middle East, and the United States with regards to race and religion. Lee's belief (the authors chose the word 'obsession') in Singapore's innate vulnerability - "the inescapable, permanent condition of Singapore as an independent republic" (p. 17) remain constant. The authors described how Lee became visibly angry at the suggestion that Singapore's vulnerability was exaggerated.

In this series of interviews Lee sets out to convince readers, particularly younger Singaporeans (whom he felt are still skeptical) of this "immutable reality" (p. 20) and the rightness of the policies, both sound and controversial ones, which he had introduced to ensure Singapore's long-term security and survival. For me, the most important 'take-away' from the book is the point he made on page 32 where he explained: "...You cannot have a strong defence unless you have a strong finance. And you cannot have strong defence and finance unless you have a strong, unified, well-educated and increasingly cohesive society. They are all part of one whole..." This theme could have been more strongly emphasized and developed in the book. To Lee, the only way to manage Singapore's vulnerability which apparently can never be overcome is "the quality of government and high standards of governance" (p. 17).

There is a chapter on Environmental issues entitled 'Singapore Greening'. It is perhaps worth comparing it with the chapter entitled 'Greening Singapore' in the second volume of *The Singapore Story*. I found the latter a more satisfying read. Although it was a fairly short chapter, reading it one gets a sense of Lee's decision making and acts over time whereas Lee's answers in the *Hard Truths*

chapter tend to be too brief and I find myself wishing that he could elaborate and develop on many of his answers. Similarly, Singapore's foreign relations get compressed into one chapter 'Standing Among Giants'. That said, the most interesting part of the book are the chapters which reveal not Lee Kuan Yew the prime minister, senior minister and minister mentor but Lee the husband, father, grandfather and friend. There is also a chapter on his personal life in *Lee Kuan Yew: The Man and His Ideas* and also in his memoir. I found it rather heart-warming to read about this aspect of him, his experiences and thoughts about life, of change and continuity in these books written more than a decade apart.

Unless the reader is a Lee Kuan Yew neophyte and/or hardly reads *The Straits Times*, I think *Hard Truths* tells more about the young Singaporean reader who is the target readership for this book than about Lee's ideas that is not already well-known (and have changed little over the years) except perhaps for the chapters on his personal life over the last decade. As one top civil-servant in the Education Service commented, the nature of the internet is such that our very IT-savvy younger generation may be losing their ability to read in depth—which perhaps explains why we need to put old wine in new bottle.

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Feature Article

Queenstown in Singapore and the Interstices of National History' (by Loh Kah Seng)

Man: In future, I think have to get housing, cheap housing. \$15-20 [a month].

Lee: \$25 OK?

Man: \$20 *lah*. We are all poor people *mah*. \$20 is OK.

Lee: We will all try to help – is Queenstown or Redhill OK?

Man: Any in Tiong Bahru?

Lee: No. Queenstown or Redhill?

Man: Queenstown is OK. As long as close to work, it's OK.

Lee: Where do you work?

Man: Cross Street [in the inner city, called the Central Area].

Lee: From Queenstown to Cross Street is not too far, right?

Man: Not far.

Lee: Only four people in your family, right? I think we will definitely be able to give you a flat.

Man: Two flats are OK too.

Lee: Oh, two flats we will give to bigger families.

Man: But then my elder sister can also move in.

Lee: Did your elder sister stay with you last time?

Man: No.

Lee: Now we must take care of the fire victims, then the elder sister and relatives of the fire victims. Do you think this is fair?

Man: Fair.

(Source: Radio Corporation of Singapore 1961)

Evidently, as Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew proposed, Queenstown was reluctantly accepted as the rehousing choice by unnamed fire victim 'Man'. This followed a great fire in May 1961 at Bukit Ho Swee, a kampong (village) located within Singapore city. The combination of the rehousing of victims of the greatest fire in Singapore history and the flats of the first new town at Queenstown helped conjure a turning point in the public housing programme, launched by Lee's People's Action Party (PAP) government. In 1959, Singapore became a self-governing state and the PAP was elected into power.

Nevertheless, Queenstown holds an ambivalent place in Singapore history beyond the role of a pioneer new town. It complicates simple periodisation: it was completed by the PAP government and used to great effect to transform Singapore society in the 1960s. But it was also inspired by British planning ideas after World War Two and was initially a project of the colonial government. Queenstown also possesses a local history located at the interstices of the dominant national narrative (Thongchai 2002). This history links the metropole and the self-governing state to the marginal communities residing in kampongs, officially termed 'squatters'. In fact, the history of the new town provides a telling insight, often neglected in the housing literature, into the rehousing of kampong dwellers and fire victims pursued by international, colonial and postcolonial planners and leaders. Queenstown's flats helped transform the balance of the struggle between planned and

¹ This article is an excerpt from an essay published in *Social History*, Vol. 36 No. 1 February 2011: 1-14. The author thanks Taylor and Francis for granting permission for the reproduction of some parts of the essay in this article.



semi-autonomous forms of modernity in postwar Singapore.

It's all in a name, for there were two. 'Queenstown' betrays the colonial origin and identification, with neighbourhoods like Princess Estate and Duchess Estate and marked Queen Elizabeth's coronation in 1952. The continued use of the name after 1959 also underlined the willingness of Lee's government to accept the colonial past. Stamford Raffles was acknowledged as the island's founder, and public housing flats usefully demonstrated the modernity of the city-state's nation-building project and its openness to foreign capital investment (National Archives of Singapore 1982). Queenstown rose at the intersection of metropolitan influences and postcolonial developmental energies.

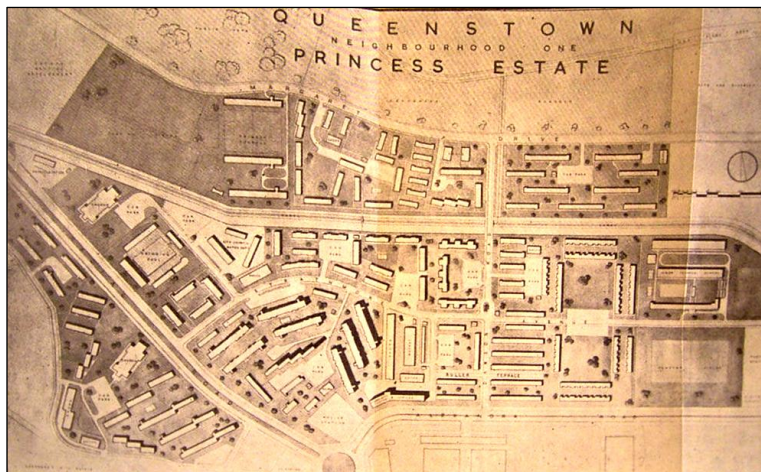
The idea of the new town, as a way of dispersing dense populations from crowded inner cities into self-contained estates, was inscribed in the 1940 Barlow Report in Britain and implemented in postwar London (Foley 1963). Through British town planning experts, it found its way to Singapore's colonial housing authority, the Singapore Improvement Trust (SIT), and received formal endorsement in the 1958 Master Plan of Singapore (Singapore 1955). The Plan's recommendation to decant the Central Area population to outlying new towns was adopted by the PAP government and

put into practice by the postcolonial housing agency, the Housing and Development Board (HDB). The plan for Queenstown comprised high-rise flats, mostly of two and three rooms for the low-income population. The principle of self-sufficiency was expressed in the provision of schools, shops, public spaces, and community buildings, in order to weaken the residents' traditional links to the Central Area (Singapore Improvement Trust 1958). Queenstown, however, had another name, long used by

Chinese families who dwelt in the locality's kampongs: *bo beh kang*, or 'river without a tail'. The name underscored the community's ties with its physical environment (Low 2007). In contrast with the planned modernity of British colonial and PAP public housing,

kampong dwellers in postwar Singapore were semi-autonomous; they were generally wary of the administrative state and structured their social and economic lives largely around their family and the local community.

At the same time, the kampong found itself increasingly entangled with the formal political and economic life of Singapore City. From late 1953, when the first flats in Princess Estate appeared, both spontaneous and organised resistance broke out against the resettlement of the squatters. The urban workers in the kampongs found the rentals of modern flats unaffordable (Singapore Improvement Trust 1954a), while the



The neatly-aligned layout of Princess Estate (Source: Singapore Improvement Trust, *Annual Report*, 1954)

agriculturalists did not wish to resettle in the rural north of Singapore (Singapore Improvement Trust 1954b). The Singapore Attap Dwellers' Association, affiliated to the city's conservative politicians, sought to negotiate fair compensation terms on the premise that 'squatters were morally entitled to certain rights' (Housing and Development Board 1954).

The social contestation slowed the colonial housing project, and the British built only two neighbourhoods before the PAP assumed office. The dual names of Queenstown testified to the social struggle between planned modernity, exemplified by neatly-aligned public housing slab blocks, and the semi-autonomous culture of kampong dwellers. To planners, the kampong's clearance was necessary because it was diametrically opposed to the vision of a planned society. Besides its haphazardly-built wooden housing erected without planning approval, the settlement was deemed to be an 'insanitary, congested and dangerous squatter area' controlled by outlaw secret societies (Housing and Development Board 1967, p. 39). In the Queenstown flats, the SIT aimed to resettle squatters from Covent Garden, while victims of a fire at Kampong Koo Chye in 1958 were also temporarily rehoused there.

The pace of rehousing quickened after 1959. The HDB added 14,000 flats to the SIT's

3,000 in Queenstown, many of them in taller blocks rising up to sixteen storeys. When Bukit Ho Swee went up in flames in 1961, the HDB responded vigorously to achieve Lee's promise that every family among the 16,000 fire victims would be rehoused in a modern flat within nine months (*Straits Times*, 30 May 1961). Many of the homeless were moved into the flats of Queenstown, while Lee's government acquired the fire site for public housing development.

Rehousing became a way to integrate former squatters into the formal structures of the state, as oral history reveals. The language of disempowerment underlined the displacement of the social agency of kampong dwellers, who had hitherto moved freely into and between wooden houses. As Wang Ah Tee said of moving into a HDB flat after the 1961 inferno, 'We had no other road to walk' (Author's interview with Wang Ah Tee, 22 January 2007). Similarly for Lee Ah Gar, whose family of eight accepted a 2-room flat at Margaret Drive in Queenstown, 'We had no choice at the time' (Author's interview with Lee Ah Gar, 4 November 2006). When the fire victims returned permanently to Bukit Ho Swee, it was to a new HDB estate which in turn also enabled the cumulative rehousing of families from other kampongs and the inner city.

In his National Day Rally speech on the 50th anniversary of the Bukit Ho Swee fire in



Kampong clearance targeted wooden settlements such as this one in Covent Garden, c. 1960s (Courtesy of Robert Yong)

2011, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong related the story of one fire victim family's relocation, within a week, from kampong hut to a 2-room flat in Margaret Drive, Queenstown (Lee 2011). This account fleshes out the familiar meta-narrative of Singapore's success under PAP governance. It demonstrates how HDB flats have become the dominant housing form in Singapore, greatly valued as shelter and material asset by Singaporeans. In 1964, Queenstown received the privilege of spearheading what would eventually be the PAP's immensely successful campaign to create an integrated community of home-owners rather than tenants. By the end of the decade, over 9,000 flats in the new town had been sold. But some remnant of the kampong culture has also survived. Former kampong dwellers still refer to the high-rise blocks by their height (*chap si lau*, or 'fourteen storeys'), demonstrating the contrast with previous living on the ground. They less frequently name a block by its given number, which is based on the geometric layout used by housing planners (Low 2007).

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