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Oral History in Southeast Asia: Memories and Fragments

KAH SENG LOH, STEPHEN DOBBS, and ERNEST KOH, eds.

New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, xiv+205p.

Oral History in Southeast Asia brings together a number of committed young scholars who discuss the applicability of oral history in two inseparable arenas: research and social involvement. It consists of nine chapters (four on Singapore, two on Malaysia, and one each on Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines) that are methodologically diverse and split into three parts.

The first part, “Oral History and Official History,” engages with the themes of interaction between official narratives and oral accounts that have played a role in constructing the nation. How official narratives seized, captured, and suppressed “people’s voices” to consolidate national histories is well recorded in volumes of historical discussion on Southeast Asia (see for example Reynolds 1993; Wieringa 1995). The post-independence period of the countries in the region offers fertile ground for academic debates, partly owing to post-colonial scholarship that deconstructs official narratives. The three chapters of this first part (all on Singapore’s case) relate to such debates. Blackburn’s chapter gives an interesting account of the results of a life-history project conducted by senior students who interviewed elderly family members. They found narratives that are not parallel to the “Singapore story” that they learnt from their text books. Koh’s chapter describes the way the uneasy political climate of the newly created nation-state shaped the remembrance of the Second World War. Loh’s chapter, based on candid interviews, presents an appealing description of people’s daily lives after British military withdrawal in the late 1960s. While both Blackburn and Koh’s chapters interrogate the official history by providing accounts that differ from such history, Loh’s chapter provides a “moderate” account that does not necessarily dispute it.

With these converging perspectives, readers are made aware that people's accounts—whether they be alternative or collaborative ones—are diverse and the project of de/constructing an official narratives can find many ways to accommodate them.

The second part, "Memories of Violence," brings out the delicate issue of people's memories of mass violence in the context of the changing political landscapes of the nation-states in the region. All three chapters in this part operate in a similar vein in that they unpack the constitution of mass violence as an "event" to be remembered. Curaming and Aljunied's chapter analyzes the "inter-twining coherent strands" of memories of the 1968 Jabidah massacre in the context of political conflict in Mindanao (p. 86). They show how the personal memories of Jibin Arula, the only key witness of the massacre, are encoded within the tragedy of his personal life and form part of a "cultural myth" of injustice and political conflict. Damrongviteetham's chapter, based on fieldwork, discusses the collective and individual memories of the "Red Barrel" (ถังแดง/*thang daeng*) incident of the early 1970s in Lamsin, Phattalung province. The incident and the annual ceremony that now marks it are a delicate issue, touching on the dynamics of Thai state-society and illuminating a discourse that touches upon human rights and state impunity. The chapter is an important contribution in the English language to the topic, helping scholars who do not read Thai (and are unaware of the debate among Thai scholars on the issue) to make sense of the incident. It also highlights the diverging collective memories of the community. Leong's chapter, based on eclectic sources, takes the troubled episode of the 1948 Batang Kali massacre as a departure point to lay out the political considerations of Malaysia's official narrative of the nation and the threat of communism. But despite the use of strong comparative post modernist vocabulary, it does not offer fresh engagement with an issue that is already well recorded. The three chapters in this part highlight the struggle over social memories of violence (no matter how selective they are) and how the nation-state neutralizes and undermines the political impact of any form of social justice within society. Although this understanding is not novel for historians of Southeast Asia, the chapters have done detailed work in recording this struggle as a reference for future generations.

The third part, "Oral Tradition and Heritage," has three chapters that carefully examine the configurations of oral tradition and heritage development within specific communities on the "fringe." Wellfelt's chapter deals with the narratives surrounding Du Bois, a Swiss-American anthropologist, and her stay in Alor and how she became a heroine in the community's oral traditions; it offers a fresh account of how oral tradition is shaped and transmitted. Chou and Ho's chapter on the heritage conservation of Sungai Buloh leprosy settlement—the world's second largest—narrates the authors' social activism within the community in an effort to "position the present" (p. 170). While the authors insinuate that leprosy sufferers are "subalterns," their work help protect the community's social identity is outstanding. Dobbs' chapter on the selective memories of the Singapore *lightermen* on redevelopment of the river highlights the ongoing transformation of meaning surrounding the project. It shows how their accounts were subjected to a dominant

narrative of modernity (this chapter, in fact, fits well in the first part of the book). Although the three chapters in this part have put forward an interesting discussion centering on oral tradition and heritage transformation, how these narratives have become marginalized remains largely untouched.

The chapters make for interesting reading. But as a collection, they do not pose any original questions on the issue of oral history. Each chapter has its own specific concern, yet they do not relate to each other in terms of aiming for a common objective that can stimulate a more fruitful academic debate on the praxis of oral history. This is not to say that there are no Southeast Asian particularities that can offer insights for inter-regional comparison. But there is a need for a stronger academic rationale that can develop a praxis based upon the region's diversity. The volume lacks conceptual analysis that binds all the chapters together. Although the editors present a well-researched introduction, "Oral History and Fragments in Southeast Asia," where they assert the concept of "fragment" as "a point of departure" (p. 4), this is hardly apparent in the discussion that unfolds in the chapters. In that regard, *Oral History in Southeast Asia* unintentionally underscores how intricate the praxis of oral history is within the boundaries of each country's national histories. This alone has generated different and divergent interpretations for young scholars (as well as public intellectuals) in the region who seek to engage with the current conditions of reproduction of what constitutes history and heritage. The issue of contemporariness has indeed provided a contextual terrain for the popularity of oral history among young scholars who seek to understand their present conditions. Yet we should not forget that diligent scholars on Southeast Asia history have already provided us with a series of excellent works—not exclusively in oral history form—that go beyond official narratives and social memory (see for example Heidhues 2003; Mojares 1985; Kasian 2001 to name a few).

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