

**Angelia Poon, Philip Holden and Shirley Geok-lin Lim, eds.**  
***Writing Singapore: An Historical Anthology of Singapore Literature.*** Singapore: NUS Press and National Arts Council of Singapore, 2009. 677 pp. ISBN 978-9971-69-458-6.

This historical anthology accomplishes what it sets out to do, which is to “take stock of Singapore Literature in English produced within about a century and a half, from the mid-nineteenth to the early twenty-first century” (xxi). The anthology is divided into three sections: literature prior to 1965, literature written between 1965 and 1990 and works written after 1990. The demarcations are significant because 1965 marks the end of the merger between Singapore and Malaysia, 1965 to 1990 charts the economic and social, cultural and political coming of age of Singapore, and 1990 onwards is roughly the period when the political elites of Singapore began to make plans to position Singapore as a global city.

The notion of a historical anthology is not exactly ground-breaking. Given its goals, it sets itself against the more experimental and specialised anthologies of Singapore literature that have appeared recently. One thinks of Alvin Pang’s *No Other City: The Ethos Anthology of Urban Poetry* (2000) which is theme-driven and *Tumasik* (2009) which consists of a selection of contemporary English, Malay, Tamil and Chinese writings (with those written in the other three languages translated into English). Pang’s other poetry anthologies include *Love Gathers All: The Philippines-Singapore Anthology of Love Poetry* (2002), *Over There: Poems from Australia and Singapore* (2008) and *Double Skin: New Poetic Voices from Italy and Singapore* (2009) which are transnational collaborations with Filipino, Australian and Italian editors respectively. Given that the current offering features poems, prose fiction as well as drama, it also defines itself against some of the more conventional anthologies that focus on specific genres, such as *Island Voices: A Collection of Short Stories from Singapore* (2007) edited by Angelia Poon and Sim Wai Chew and *Journeys: Words, Home and Nation* (1995), a poetry anthology edited by Edwin Thumboo et al. Given the number of theme- and genre-specific anthologies that have appeared in recent years, the agenda of the historical anthology becomes its strength, as it renders itself useful to those seeking a broader understanding of Singaporean literature from past to present alongside major social, cultural and political developments in Singapore.

In this respect, the inclusion of the “Timeline of Historical Events and Literary Publications” compiled by Geraldine Song is in keeping with the overall goals of the anthology. The timeline juxtaposes significant historical and socio-political events with the publication of literary works and it is certainly very useful in reminding us of the relationship between the literary and the socio-

political. To give an example, 1979 is the year Singaporeans are able to purchase flats using their Central Provident Fund, and when one sees that Edwin Thumboo's poetry collection *Ulysses by the Merlion* is published in the same year, one cannot help but make the connection between the two events. Thumboo's eponymous "Ulysses by the Merlion," a poem about the search for a national identity and a sense of belonging, is certainly resonant with the notion of home ownership.

To give another example of the usefulness of the timeline: the emergence in recent years of a new generation of writers that includes Pang, Daren Shiau, Yong Shu Hoong, Cyril Wong, Aaron Maniam and Boey Kim Cheng may be linked to *The Renaissance City Report*, a cultural policy vision published by the Ministry of Information and the Arts in 2000. The report outlines an arts policy that seeks to position Singapore as a city-state that possesses an arts and cultural scene on par with those in global cities such as New York and London. The works of Pang and his peers were supported by publishing grants from the National Arts Council (NAC), a government-linked agency set up to develop the arts scene in Singapore. They have showcased their writings in overseas venues such as Edinburgh, Austin, Gothenburg, Hong Kong and Kuala Lumpur. These trips were sometimes organised in the form of a Singaporean contingent and they were often, if not always, supported by travel grants from the NAC. They have set up online literary journals such as *SoftBlow* and *Quarterly Literary Review Singapore* which have strong followings. (It is worth pointing out that the latter has been running for about a decade.) In short, these writers are Singapore's arts and cultural ambassadors of sorts. The irony is that even though some of their works articulate a certain measure of indifference, if not suspicion, towards the state's nation building agenda, their state-sponsored literary activities have found a global audience, and this resonates with the state's attempt at positioning Singapore as a global economic and cultural centre articulated in *The Renaissance City Report*. The timeline allows one to perceive in vivid terms the relationship between the activities of these writers alongside developments in Singapore's cultural policy. Hence, it is crucial as it enables researchers in the field to chart and understand key connections between the emergence of literary works and socio-political events.

The editors are fully conscious of some of the problems involved in putting together a historical anthology, as evidenced by the discussion in the general as well as the three sectional introductions. We are reminded that there was no such thing as a Singaporean as we know it today "before 1958, and in the sense of full citizenship before 1965" (5). The implication is that it is anachronistic to speak of something called Singapore literature prior to 1965. In this respect, the first section is a very necessary and welcome anachronism. It consists of selected passages from *Sejarah Melayu*, *Hikayat Abdullah*, Isabella Bird's travel narrative *The Golden Chersonese* as well as short stories and poems

from *The Straits Chinese Magazine*, not to mention parts of Joseph Conrad's *The End of the Tether*, the poems of Wang Gungwu and Ee Tiang Hong, among others. One finds in this section key texts in Malay literature, colonial writings, stories by the Straits Chinese as well as those who had seen themselves as forging a Malayan culture. As such, this section testifies to the heterogeneity of literary output prior to 1965. A consideration of such a body of writing is indispensable when we wish to consider the historical ramifications of the literature of Singapore.

It is a conscious decision on the part of the editors to focus on works set in Singapore, given the limits of space. However, one may suggest that the inclusion of parts of Simon Tay's *Alien Asian* (1997) and Colin Cheong's *Tangerine* (1997) might have been instructive so as to further suggest avenues whereby one may consider how the Singaporean writer locates himself or herself in relation to other national spaces. Tay's account of his U.S. sojourn and Cheong's fictional travelogue set in Vietnam would have played off well with Hwee Hwee Tan's *Mammon Inc.* featured in the third section as this is a novel set in Oxford, New York and Singapore. One may also wish to further consider novels with multiple settings, such as Lim's *Joss and Gold* (2001), though it might be considered immodest for a co-editor to feature selections of her own creative work in the anthology. Yet a consideration of these novels with multiple geo-political settings might seem timely, since there is potential for research in this area to consider how multiple national spaces are coordinated within literary texts. This would broaden the excellent discussion in the third sectional introduction on the works of diasporic authors based outside of Singapore.

Indeed, the range of issues covered in the introduction to the third section will be of interest to those who wish to plot the present and future trends of Singapore literature. One finds a discussion of how Singapore's state-sponsored hetero-normativity is increasingly being challenged by literary works that feature homosexual themes. There is also a discussion of Singapore's censorship policies alongside developments in its cultural policy under the aegis of the NAC. It has been noted that some of the works are politically charged and again, a hard-to-please reader may lament the exclusion of Lau Siew Mei's *Playing Madame Mao*, a novel that fulfils Linda Hutcheon's definition of "historiographic metafiction" (125). Lau's novel is particularly fascinating because it is a postmodernist rendition of the events surrounding the arrest and detainment of twenty-two people for their alleged involvement in a "Marxist conspiracy" to subvert the Singapore government. It is a daring novel, both in terms of its politics as well as its narrative technique. The novel's antagonist is named Hairy Lee, who one may surmise is the fictional counterpart to Lee Kuan Yew (who was known as Harry Lee in his younger days). Of course, the above suggestions would expand the third section inconsiderably, and it is

worth noting that this section already comprises half of the anthology, with the other half divided roughly equally between the first two sections.

To be fair, decisions pertaining to which texts to include and exclude are the perennial concerns of anthology editors just as it is the perennial source of criticism. It is with regard to this that the genre of the anthology itself plays a crucial role as part of a larger conversation about the renewal as well as reappraisal of what constitutes the literature of Singapore. To this extent, the editors have presented us with an anthology that allows for a Singaporean identity which is pluralistic and open-ended and which interrogates essentialist notions of authenticity brought about by ideological enclosures. As such, given its scope and agenda, part of which is to outline the development of the literature, this historical anthology will prove to be an important, authoritative and dependable resource for researchers, students and teachers of Singaporean literature as well as Southeast Asian literatures for many years to come.

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