

**Loh Kah Seng and Liew Kai Khiun, eds. *The Makers & Keepers of Singapore History*. Singapore: Ethos Books & Singapore Heritage Society, 2010. 347 pp. ISBN 978-981-08-6357-9.**

*The Makers & Keepers of Singapore History* is an immensely interesting read on notions of history making, recording and keeping. The book is an exciting collection of essays which challenges the official Singapore story which, for a long time, had been entrenched in the hearts and minds of Singaporeans. *The Singapore Story*, the title of the second volume of Lee Kuan Yew's memoir, has been a text set in stone, so to speak – an immutable narrative about Singapore's past and its growth as a nation. The authors in this collection tell us that Singapore's history is multilayered and cannot be told in a linear fashion. They explore the ways in which the history of the island nation should be researched and presented which, they assert, must highlight diversity, multiplicity and a vision of the past which is necessarily generous in its embrace. Indeed, *The Makers & Keepers of Singapore History* compels the reader to be aware of the various narratives and threads which shape the past of Singapore. Importantly too, the book underlines the fact that the past of any nation is a palimpsest, constituting different layers, and to close the door to this awareness would provide for a stunted understanding of self and society which could only be detrimental to the meaningful growth of any nation. The essays in the collection demonstrate that Singapore's past is profoundly pluralistic.

The Foreword, written by Professor Garry Rodan, quite succinctly puts down the intention of the book: "*The Makers & Keepers of Singapore History* represents a major intervention in the study of how Singapore history is created and reproduced. It highlights systemic and deep-seated impediments to independent research" (iii). The book adopts an innovative approach, i.e. it assembles the views and ideas of a multidisciplinary group of researchers looking at Singapore's pasts from varying angles and using different genres. Some of the essays explore what resides in archival resources and state-sanctioned discourse, while others move beyond the realm of the carefully documented to include oral history and personal memories. Underlying all the essays however is the sense that history-writing is highly problematic and that there are many obstacles "hindering academic research on the political and social history of post-war Singapore" (vii). Even when it comes to personal accounts and oral histories, there are many dimensions that the researcher must be alert to. For example, to what extent is individual memory shaped by public imagination and discourse? Despite best efforts, how authentic is personal recounting? What challenges face the historian using oral history as a research field? Indeed, *The Makers & Keepers of Singapore History* puts forward numerous

questions about history making, keeping and writing, and tries to answer these questions – some of which, however, remain unanswered because, as the authors discover, there can be no simple clarifications or explanations in history. History, the essays assert again and again, is dynamic (contrary to common, misguided views) and one must carefully think out the process involved when undertaking its research.

The individual figures prominently in this book. The book was inspired by attempts by the authors to research Singaporean history and the obstacles and challenges they individually faced in their endeavours. Some of the essays like “Perils and Prospects of Researching the Maria Hertogh Controversy,” “An Insider’s Research into Buddhist History” and “Digging up the Past in Singapore, Mainland China and Taiwan: Research into the Overseas Chinese Merchants in the China-Singapore Trade” detail the processes involved when the individual writers of these essays undertook their research. Actually, almost all the essays in the book, at varying degrees, highlight the personal experience of researching history. As Loh Kah Seng writes in his engaging Preface: “The contributors to this volume have, in their own creative ways, made concerted attempts to unlock the gates to Singapore’s multiple, multi-faceted histories and obtain access to vital historical sources” (8). Apart from that, the focus on the individual experience is also apparent in the way the essays demonstrate that the private narrative is a valuable part of the Singapore story, underlining the idea that the personal always imbricates on the public.

Motifs of gates and gatekeeping provide the conceptual framework and shape the structure of the book. These are really interesting motifs and all the essays are involved in teasing out the various notions inherent in them, i.e. securing information, custodianship, the dangers, both exciting and worrying, about what enters through and leaves the gate, what possibilities lie beyond the gate, etc. The book is divided into four parts. Part 1 – *History and the Gates* lays out the foundation and inspiration for the book. Part 2 – *Front Gates* discusses the “front gates” of history making and keeping in Singapore, i.e. archives and institutions. Part 3 – *Side Gates* refers to foreign archives, and Part 4 – *Memory Gates* revolves around personal memories and oral histories. The ideas come together very well and the purpose is to learn about history making and keeping and possibly dismantling some of the gates.

*The Makers & Keepers of Singapore History* is an informative tome and would be especially beneficial to the historian or student of history, particularly Singapore history. But, because of its wide range of references it would appeal, really, to any person interested in the way any historical narrative is remembered, written and kept.

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