

Contestations of Memory in Southeast Asia. Edited by Roxana Waterson and Kwok Kian-Woon. Singapore: NUS Press, 2012. Pp. 300. US\$30

A heightened level of interest in social memory studies has been observed in various fields of the social sciences. With analytic lens largely focused on cases from Europe, US, Latin America, Australia and East and South Asia, Southeast Asia, among other areas, has remained underexplored. The volume edited by Roxana Watson and Kwok Kian-Woon, entitled *Contestations of Memory in Southeast Asia*, fills in a void in the still limited but expanding literature on social and cultural memory in the region.

The volume is divided into three parts. In the first part, the editors deserve to be commended for deftly framing the volume, first, with an overview and introduction that summarises the various case studies and, second, with a well-conceived, penetrating and comprehensive review of relevant conceptual, methodological and analytical issues in social memory studies. Aware of the often cited opposition or tensions between history and memory, individual and social, popular and official, and suppressed and dominant narratives, the editors are keen to explore a hopefully more productive line of analysis. They wish to “trace the interpenetration of politics and lived bodily experience, of communal and personal memories, and of dominant and suppressed narrative.” [42]

The second part of the book consists of five essays that look into the interplay of social memory with efforts to construct or reconstruct politically-inspired narratives, for nation-building and other purposes. The cases covered are from Myanmar, Laos, Vietnam, Singapore and Indonesia. Mairii Aung Thwin’s chapter, “Remembering Kings: Archives, Resistance and Memory,” offers an engaging and thoughtful examination of the archive as a site of memory in Myanmar. From being mere repository of historical documents that are prized for their antiquarian value, the archive comes alive in his analysis of how the shifting interpretations and memories of this key historical events influence, and affected by, the political dynamics in Myanmar from the colonial period up to the present.

In “Textual Analysis of a Nation,” Dayang Istiaisyah bte Hussin employs a simple yet potent critical discourse analysis of newspaper articles on a number of historical milestones in Singapore-Malaysia relations, particularly the 1964 riots and the merger/separation of the two countries. The objective is to demonstrate the politically driven efforts by the ruling elites to define Singaporean nation in ways favourable to them. On the same vein, Heddy Shri Ahimsa Putra shows in his contribution, “Remembering, Misremembering and Forgetting,” the power of the government or a particular leader to shape historical discourses in accordance to its interests. This chapter is noteworthy for specifically underscoring the “series of external constraints” [158] that enable a socio-historical memory to be shaped in a particular way rather than another.

The editors’ expressed desire to explore the interaction between the broader politics and the people’s bodily experience, is reflected to an extent in the contributions by Sharon Seah Li-Lian (“Truth and Memory: Narrating Viet Nam”) and Vatthana Pholsena (“Shifting Visions of the Past”). Using oral history materials, both these articles have shown concrete instances of how individuals or small

groups—their lived experience and memories of historical events—negotiate a dialogic relationship with official or national narratives, a theme that runs more clearly in the next set of essays.

Comprising the third and last part of the volume are essays that tackle social memories of traumatic episodes in the history of the Philippines, Singapore and Indonesia. Ricardo Jose's chapter ("War and Violence, History and Memory") takes another look at the pains and ambiguities of remembering in the Philippines of the Japanese occupation, as well as the accompanying challenges to efforts at healing or reconciliation. This chapter highlights the importance of the shifting contexts—both domestic and international—in the reconciliation process, in addition to the shaping and re-shaping of the social memory of the war. In contrast to the more controlled or authoritarian contexts of remembering in Singapore, Myanmar, Vietnam, and Laos that were discussed in other chapters, the Philippines (like Indonesia in the post-Suharto period) offers a more fluid, multi-centred political matrix for social memory formation and contestations.

Reinforcing Dayang Istiaisyah bte Hussin's chapter discussed above, Adeline Low Hwee Cheng examines the memories of the 1964 riots in Singapore in her piece entitled "The Past in the Present: Memories of the 1964 'Racial Riots' in Singapore." Spun around this traumatic event are a number of the nation's founding myths. From the empirical standpoint, the important contribution of this chapter lies in addressing the transmission of memory from individuals to the collective, and from one generation to another. It is clear in her analysis that notwithstanding the restrictive control by the state of the national narratives, such as the 1964 riots, the people's varied lived experience set the stage for individuals or groups to create and maintain counter-memories of such events. Cheng argues that those younger generations without direct or close links to the experience of such event are vulnerable to the influence of the official narrative.

Kwok Kian-Woon and Kelvin Chia's essay offers a nuanced and probing analysis of the marginalization of the Chinese-educated intellectuals in Singapore. Entitled "Memories at the Margin", the essay examines the complex issues that accompany the formation and persistence of social memory of the establishment and the subsequent demise of *Nantah*, or Nanyang University. *Nantah* is regarded by many as an institutional symbol of the against-all-odds efforts of the segment of the Chinese community to preserve or cultivate Chinese language and culture, a significant move in the face of the PAP's overpowering push for a brand of modernity that privileges education in English. Like the two other essays discussed above, it demonstrates the close interplay between the socio-political context, the lived experience of real people and the formation and persistence of social memory.

The last essay, entitled "Living with the Spectre of the Past," complements the themes emphasized by other essays in the volume. Focusing on the traumatic experience of the wives of ex-political prisoners in Indonesia, Budiawan seeks to examine the double layers of their marginalization. The first is the oppressive social memory of the 'shameful' and traumatic event of 1965-66 when the supposedly communist-led movement to wrest the control of the government backfired and led to the

tragic mass killings of at least half a million people. The second is the overriding patriarchy that burdens women regardless of their achievements. Were it not for some methodological and analytic weaknesses, this essay could have shed light on the still underexplored intersection between gender, trauma and social memory. This notwithstanding it offers a welcome respite from the largely gender-blind cases covered in other essays.

As often the case in an edited volume, some imbalances in the quality of contributions are discernible. Those that stand out include the editors' state-of-the-field essay (Chapter 1), "The Work of Memory and the Unfinished Past", Mairii Aung-Thwin's (Chapter 2) "Remembering Kings" and Kwok Kian-Woon's and Kelvin Chia's (Chapter 9) "Memories at the Margin." On the other hand, readers might be struck by the thinness of empirical support coupled with interpretative or analytic superficiality in a number of the essays. While it is not unusual in social memory studies to deal with small-*N* cases as often the target is analytic depth and theoretical or methodological implications, this is unfortunately not the case in a couple of essays. Furthermore, a few factual errors crept into the texts. The editors claim in the summary, for instance, that the one interviewed by Pholsena (for the case of Laos) was a surviving companion of the leader of rebellion [4]. In fact the informant was a son of Ong Keo's companion, as the author herself clearly stated. Also, Mount Pinatubo erupted in 1991, not in 1989 [191] and it was not Brunei but Vietnam that assumed the observer status in the ASEAN along with Cambodia and Laos [96]. These lapses notwithstanding, the various case studies are useful as they provide valuable insights on the complex and varied contexts of social memory formation and contestations in the region. Overall, the volume is a worthy addition to the existing literature.

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