



# LIVING WITH MYTHS IN SINGAPORE

EDITED BY

LOH KAH SENG, THUM PING TJIN

AND JACK MENG-TAT CHIA

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and Jack Meng-Tat Chia**

## Foreword

This is an exciting book, which I took great pleasure in reading, both as an academic social scientist, and as a Singaporean who lived through or remembers much of the empirical terrain it explores.

From the perspective of academic social science, the book is exciting because it, perhaps belatedly, locates scholarship on Singapore society (on which most of the chapters are based) firmly within the disciplinary, multidisciplinary and thematic concerns of global social science literatures, thereby contributing to the ‘mainstreaming’ of Singapore studies within academia, enabling its inclusion in global comparative analyses.

Here one finds rigorous analytical engagement with themes such as colonialism and post-colonialism; the intersection of race, religion, gender, class, and migration with public policy; and the agency of otherwise ignored or forgotten groups in social activism past and present. Each of the essays subtends a mostly local literature documenting and interpreting historical and current events from multiple perspectives, providing the diversity and pluralism of thought that characterises a vibrant and mature scholarly field.

The book’s publication alone will counter prevailing stereotypes of scholarship on Singapore society as being one-dimensional, hewing only to officially sanctioned narratives, and thus reflecting a ‘sterile’ or limited intellectual environment. It is heartening to learn from it that there are so many committed scholars, researchers, artists, intellectuals, and activists working to produce a holistic picture of the Singapore ‘national’ experience from the colonial to contemporary eras – all communicated in relatively brief, but well-argued and substantiated, essays that are generally free of academic jargon and thus accessible to the general reader.

As a Singaporean who grew up in the late-colonial and early-independence years, and has studied the country’s economic development ever since, I particularly appreciate the opportunity to revisit and re-examine faintly-remembered historical incidents and discourses on public policies as they were being made. While the framing of these essays as a challenge to national myths gives them a collective coherence, there is no attempt to impose a uniform “alternative” interpretation on these events, and one does not have to accept every myth-deconstruction presented here to appreciate the depth that diversity brings to our collective history and current struggles with national and subnational identities in a rapidly changing territorial space.

Indeed, the interrogation of national myths in this volume enhances the potentially atomised or homogenised individual's sense of belonging to an otherwise fragmented place, while the challenging of authorised versions of history and policy determinism encourages the different-thinking and risk-taking that are essential for our economic survival going forward. It is reassuring to know that segments of our citizenry have always exhibited such courage and innovation, and still do.

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## Preface

This book started off as a critique that evolved into a conversation. It originated in a series of 10 seminar talks, also called ‘Living with Myths’, held in Singapore between July 2014 and August 2015.<sup>1</sup> Part of the motivation for the talks lay in two of the editors – Loh Kah Seng and Thum Ping Tjin (PJ) – taking issue with the one-sided and factually inaccurate depiction of the 1955 Hock Lee Bus riots in an episode of the *Channel NewsAsia* (CNA) documentary series, *Days of Rage*, which aired in January 2014 as part of the early celebrations for SG50.<sup>2</sup>

The theme of rage – the mindless and dangerous anger of workers and students allegedly manipulated by the communists – is an oft-cited example of the vulnerability of Singapore, and one of the central myths tackled in the seminar series and in this book. Historians Kah Seng, who was interviewed for the CNA documentary, and PJ responded with an op-ed. on the Hock Lee Bus strike, published in *The Online Citizen*. They argued that instead of being a time of political subversion and disorder, the 1950s ought to be seen as a period of hope, which was expressed in organised labour’s struggle for liveable wages and improved working conditions, as well as in Singapore’s optimism about its political future as an independent, multicultural and socially just nation, as part of Malaya.<sup>3</sup> This was an uplifting story of the hopeful activism of People’s Action Party (PAP) and the people of Singapore, a history that has been buried beneath the myth of communist subversion.

Kah Seng and PJ also roped in another historian, Jack Chia, to organise a series of talks to examine myths of Singapore history and society like the Hock Lee riots. Jack saw the project as a way to broaden perspectives of Singapore history beyond political and economic narratives. We then got in touch with Tan Dan Feng, who has been interested in interrogating the ‘conventional wisdoms’ in Singapore, such as it being a ‘fishing village’ before the advent of PAP rule. As the editors were often based overseas in their work and studies, Dan helped to organise the talks.

The volume is thus a culmination of these things – part critique of the myths of history and policy, and part optimism about the future of Singapore. The book, like the talks, would contain relatively short think pieces. They would be free of academic jargon and would be accessible to the general reader. The book was also from the start a collaboration between academics, the arts community, civil society, public intellectuals, and the general public. The academics have had to think about speaking and writing for a wider, non-academic audience,

who would also have to look for relevance and resonance in academic research and scholarship.

The Living with Myths talks were almost always fully attended, warmly appreciated and yet sometimes fiercely contended. A few participants asked, were there really ‘myths’ – or outright fictions – of Singapore, or by talking about them, were the speakers in effect creating their own myths? These questions helped us to define the shape of this book as we worked with the speakers to turn their talks into chapters.

On the note of collaboration, the editors are deeply thankful to venue providers from the arts community which hosted the Living with Myths talks at no charge, namely, S. Prashant and Artistry; Jennifer Teo, Woon Tien Wei and Post-PopUp; Tay Tong and TheatreWorks; Teo Eng Seng and Muse House; and Ute Meta Bauer, Magdalena Magiera and the NTU Centre for Contemporary Arts. We are also proud to have been affiliated with and supported by Project 50/100 which, in the 50th year of Singapore’s independence, also sought to uncover alternative perspectives and stories.

We also wish to express our gratitude to the moderators of the talks, namely, Kwok Kian Woon, Constance Singam, Braema Mathi, Nazry Bahrawi, Yu-mei Balasingamchow, Kevin Y.L. Tan, Kenneth Paul Tan, Ong Chang Woei, and Sangeetha Thanapal. In working on the seminars and book, we are grateful for the assistance of various individuals, such as Stephanie Chok, Lee Min Lin, Isrizal Mohamed Isa, Sudhir Thomas Vadaketh, Jason Soo, and Terry Xu and *The Online Citizen*. We would like to thank speakers for the seminars who unfortunately could not contribute to the book, namely, Hong Lysa, Imran Tajudeen, Jason Lim, Koh Keng We, Chua Beng Huat, C.J. Wee Wan-ling, Sonny Liew, and Huang Jianli.

Finally, we are indebted to Dan, Wong Zi Jia and Martina Yeo for helping to organise the talks, to Bayu Nugroho for preparing the manuscript, and to Fong Hoe Fang and Ethos Books for editing and publishing the volume. May conversations on Singapore continue.

*The editors*  
*October 2016*

# Table of Contents

The Merlion and Me Mya Gosling	vi
Foreword	xi
Preface	xiii
Introduction: Singapore as a Mythic Nation Loh Kah Seng, Thum Ping Tjin & Jack Meng-Tat Chia	1
<b>The Singapore Story</b>	
Justifying Colonial Rule in Post-Colonial Singapore: The Myths of Vulnerability, Development, and Meritocracy Thum Ping Tjin	15
The Myth that a Singular Historical Narrative Moulds Good Citizens Mark Baildon & Suhaimi Afandi	29
The ‘Myth’ of Singaporeanness: Values and Identity in Citizenship Education Christine Han	41
Demythologising Singaporean Literature Gwee Li Sui	53
The Myth of Singapore as a Global Media Hub Terence Lee	61
<b>Third World to First</b>	
Questioning ‘From Third World to First’ Philip Holden	75

Social Welfare in Singapore: Myth and History Ho Chi Tim	85
‘How I wished that it could have worked’: James Puthuchearry’s Political-Economic Thought and the Myth of Singapore’s Developmental Model Seng Guo-Quan	95
Have we always said ‘no’ to the casino? Rethinking the Myth of Progress in Singapore Lee Kah-Wee	105
Myths of Innovation and Technology: From Intelligent Island to Smart Nation Arthur Chia	115
<b>Vulnerability and Faultlines</b>	
Trade Unions, Decolonisation and the Myth of ‘Anti-Nationalism’ Gareth Curless	125
Clampdown of the Law Society of Singapore in the 1980s: Myth & Reality Teo Soh Lung	135
Liberalisation in the Face of Existential Threat: Contemplating Political Change in Singapore from Taiwan and South Korea Ja Ian Chong	147
Rethinking Race: Beyond the CMIO Categorisations Laavanya Kathiravelu	159
Maze and Minefield: Reflections on Multiculturalism in Singapore Lai Ah Eng	169
Myths of Heritage in Multicultural Singapore Wong Chee Meng	181

Cosmopolitanism Disposition: Cultivating Affinity Ties Elaine Lynn-Ee Ho	193
<b>A Deficient People</b>	
Myths of Civil Society and its Culture Wars Liew Kai Khiun	203
Apathy, or How History is Written by Elites Loh Kah Seng	213
Active or Apathetic? The Absence(?) of Student Activism in the University of Malaya in Singapore Edgar Liao	221
Toward a History of Engaged Buddhism in Singapore Jack Meng-Tat Chia	229
Poor people don't like oats either: How Myths about Poverty and Wealth Matter Teo You Yenn	239
Myths About Temporary Migrant Workers and the Depoliticisation of Migrant Worker Struggles Charanpal S. Bal	249
Notes	263
Contributors	305
Appendix: Living with Myths Seminar Series	313
Index	319

Introduction

## Singapore as a Mythic Nation

Loh Kah Seng, Thum Ping Tjin and Jack Meng-Tat Chia

Singapore is a mythic nation. It is mythic in the sense that what Singaporeans take to be ‘reality’ and ‘common sense’ are in fact shaped by a group of myths. The popular idea that good, robust government policies are the main reason for Singapore’s success – and thus should remain mandatory – is an example of such a myth. This myth astutely combines fact (Singapore is successful) and claim (the success is due mostly to government policies) to make a strong case for the country’s future orientation (the policies should continue).

Myths are compelling in underlining the need for ‘hard truths’ in governing Singapore, to use the well-known phrase coined by the late former prime minister Lee Kuan Yew.<sup>1</sup> But myths should also be scrutinised within a spirit of constructive critique and debate, as ambassador-at-large Tommy Koh did in response to the notion of hard truths in 2011. Koh marshalled facts to argue that contrary to two of Lee’s claims, Singapore has made substantial progress in nation-building and that interracial marriages are viable.<sup>2</sup> Koh thus revealed purported hard truths to be myths – truth claims that have a powerful, subtle influence, but when unpacked, broaden Singaporeans’ worldviews to more grounded perspectives and superior possibilities in the future.

As such, while it is tempting to do so, this book is not all about myth-busting. It is more interested in the role that myths play in everyday life. The word ‘myth’ is commonly used to refer to a falsehood that is widely believed. Part of the book does discuss the truth claims that myths make, but more importantly it explores the deeper sense of the term. It is not so much that myths are half-truths – although they often are – but rather that they are widely held. On this point, the volume addresses three questions:

What are myths?

Why talk about myths?

Does Singapore need (new) myths?

This book examines why and how myths in Singapore have the mysterious ability to explain difficult issues and allay anxieties about the future. It considers the social implications of myths, and also different ways of interpreting history and society.

## What are Myths?

To better understand Singapore as a mythic nation, the book turns to literary critic Roland Barthes' classic work, *Mythologies*, as a starting point. The defining quality of myths, Barthes writes, is 'the "naturalness" which common sense, the press, and the arts continually invoke to dress up a reality which, through the one we live in, is nevertheless quite historical'.<sup>3</sup> Barthes distinguishes between history and nature: myths 'dress up' and render what is historical (that is, man-made) into something that appears natural.

The importance of talking about myths and hard truths is to take away their naturalness and reveal them to be man-made. Myths are social artefacts, constructed by institutions such as state agencies and the mass media. Unpacking myths thus tells us why they were created and their social effects. The book aims to destabilise the accepted sense of Singapore's history; instead it looks for histories based on rigorous research, which are often messy, filled with gray areas and open to differing interpretations. Common sense is revealed to be complex and multi-layered, which jolts us out of the comfort zone to which myths have taken us.

The basis of the mythic nation is the version of history Singaporeans are commonly told, called '*The Singapore Story*'. The term, as most people know, is also the title of Lee Kuan Yew's memoirs.<sup>4</sup> A year before the first volume of the memoirs was published in 1998, Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong used the term to highlight the difference between history and myth at the launch of the National Education programme in schools:

The Singapore Story is based on historical facts. We are not talking about an idealised legendary account or a founding myth [but rather] objective history, seen from a Singaporean standpoint.<sup>5</sup>

But although Lee sought to distinguish between history and myth – one is factual, the other is not – The Singapore Story is plainly mythical. It contains a heroic arc which conjoins the past, present and future, while also conflating the nation

with its political leaders. In his chapter in this volume, Philip Holden terms such a story a ‘romance’ – a story of a hero on an epic quest that he can never quite complete. The Singapore Story may be likened to a romance.

As a romantic narrative, The Singapore Story emphasises how difficult and tumultuous the nation’s recent history was. This point is underpinned by the monumental crises the country faced: from the trauma of the Japanese occupation, political struggles with dangerous communists and racial chauvinists in the 1950s and 1960s to Singapore’s ejection from Malaysia to become an imperilled infant nation in 1965.<sup>6</sup> The narrative is also closely written around a few remarkable ‘men in white’,<sup>7</sup> namely, the founding members of the People’s Action Party (PAP) who led the country out of the crises to become the global city-state it is today – the heroes on the epic quest. Yet, the leaders’ success is never complete and their struggles to build the nation continue.

The Singapore Story thus possesses the mythic quality of being able to explain Singaporeans’ history and identity. Echoing the sentiments of numerous Singaporeans who mourned Lee Kuan Yew’s passing in 2015, a Facebook user utilised the narrative template of The Singapore Story:

Indeed we owe much of what we have and enjoy today to this great man for his conviction to build a nation against all odds and for his foresight which has helped Singapore progress from a third world to a first world island nation.<sup>8</sup>

*‘From Third World to First’* is the title of the second volume of Lee’s memoirs.<sup>9</sup> As a self-affirming catchphrase for Singapore’s post-1965 history, it is another of the nation’s mythologies.

Both The Singapore Story and ‘Third World to First’ are myths because they do not merely narrate the nation’s history, but are also signposts to the future. Both myths underline Singapore’s hard truths, the difficult but necessary policies to maintain the success: good governance by far-sighted men and zero tolerance for disruptive forces that can come from anywhere. In this sense, The Singapore Story and ‘Third World to First’ are also ideological in the sense of shaping the values, decisions and actions of Singaporeans.

The Singapore Story is a myth not because it is false – some of the claims are debatable though evidence also exists to support it – but because it is a compelling story that has become common sense. Historians may offer other plausible perspectives or interpretations of the past based on research: that experiences of Japanese rule differed by racial group, that the communist threat is overstated,

and that Singapore's leaders had decided to leave Malaysia.<sup>10</sup> Yet The Singapore Story endures: it is reinforced by the iconic image of Lee Kuan Yew's visible pain shown on television on 9 August 1965, a day relived nation-wide every year. Similarly, the National Education programme has school students commemorate Racial Harmony Day on 21 July, the first day of the Malay-Chinese riots in 1964 when Singapore was part of Malaysia, so that young Singaporeans will be mindful of the spectre of racial strife.

### **Why Talk about Myths?**

The Singapore Story and 'Third World to First' are national myths, and it may be argued that they both provide a vital basis for the nation. The story of war and foreign subjugation warns Singaporeans not to take their security lightly, just as the precedent of racial conflict highlights the need to maintain a multicultural society. Myths strengthen the sense of identity that binds strangers to the nation. It may also be argued that all nations have myths: the United States for example celebrates the Fourth of July – the declaration of independence in 1776, which held that 'all men are created equal'. Singapore's myths are not exceptional.

However, while myths nurture the national identity at a general level, specific myths may be selective and political. As Lee Kah-Wee's chapter notes, there is an important difference between a historical account of the nation and a mythic narrative that fortifies the moral authority of the state. History can provide inconvenient evidence against the myth. Howard Zinn's bestselling work of history from below, *A People's History of the United States*, makes a devastating critique of the American mythology by revealing how the immigrant settlers from Europe had colonised, pillaged and destroyed indigenous communities.<sup>11</sup> In this view, the idea of the United States being a bastion of freedom and liberal democracy is a myth. For Zinn, the myth is harmful: it is not a mere academic issue but one that continues to legitimate American imperialism against other nations in the present day.

Singapore's myths, while not so impactful on a global scale, also have social shortcomings and ramifications. With regard to Racial Harmony Day, the apparent effort to understand other communities does not usually go beyond traditional dress and customs, and students are not encouraged to explore the political, economic and historical aspects of interracial relations. The 1964 riots are in fact used as evidence that issues of race and religion are too sensitive to be publicly discussed.<sup>12</sup> But because it is based on a negative reading of racial

relations, Singapore's multiculturalism is ultimately shallow and weak. At best, state-sanctioned rituals like Racial Harmony Day promote racial tolerance, rather than empathy or understanding. At worst, the official policy is problematic, contradictory and outdated. Classifying people into races is not 'natural' but a continuation of British colonial policy to divide and rule disparate communities. Singapore's rigid system of racial categories (Chinese, Malays, Indians, Others) may weaken the sense of a nation, which as Benedict Anderson aptly surmised, is an 'imagined community' of strangers.<sup>13</sup>

The volume looks critically at Singapore's myths in order to explore missing yet much needed sides of the national community and identity. Singapore is a development-slanted state, led by an authoritarian government fixated with material progress and social consensus. Success is thus narrowly defined. As the myths have contributed to the Singaporean national character, the book attempts to uncover facets of history, politics, society, and culture that have been neglected or excluded from the dominant narrative. It seeks diverse narratives in addition to *The Singapore Story*, which is only one of many. By focusing on myths, the book aims to commence a conversation on how Singapore may become a more open and inclusive nation – the sort of community and identity that Singaporeans should aspire to.

### **Do We Need (New) Myths?**

While Barthes was chiefly interested in how myths are made, this book goes further to discuss what we should do with them. Can myths be useful? Would replacing *The Singapore Story* with *Singapore stories* remove the mythologies, or simply produce new ones? At a general level, myths do play a useful role in providing a basis for the national identity, so it may be a matter of critiquing the existing myths and finding superior ones. But it is also possible that it is in the nature of myths to misinform and mislead. Myths, it may be argued, lull the mind, instead of being curious and self-reflexive, into accepting easy, self-affirming perspectives. As long as myths exist, we put ourselves at risk of being seduced and manipulated by them. The solution, in this reasoning, is total nihilism and iconoclasm.

A related criticism is that the act of talking about myths is potentially self-defeating, as it will inevitably produce new myths. In a recent essay on the Living with Myths seminar talks, political scientist Kenneth Paul Tan warned that 'any effort to rewrite history, even if solidly based on factual evidence and academic

protocols, will find it hard not to be itself part of a myth-(re)making exercise'. Tan concluded that "Living With Myths" succeeded in bringing together a healthy diversity of perspectives' by including arguments for and against mythology.<sup>14</sup> Tan makes a good point about diversity, and this book continues to present various approaches to myths from the seminar series. But he does not delve deeper into whether 'myth remaking' will be inevitable or problematic; he assumes it will be. His view that myths come into existence simply by talking about them differs from Barthes' theory of myths, which are purposefully manufactured and imposed onto society.

The book does not offer a simple answer to this question. The impetus behind the Living with Myths project was to raise questions about myths first and grapple with them as deeply as possible. At the same time, the organisers were not satisfied with merely deconstructing the myths and then vacating the field. They wanted to find, if possible, some common ground for new ideas that can form the basis for a more inclusive and democratic Singapore. Thus, the editors, when reworking the talks into book chapters, have asked the authors to consider alternatives to the myths – if not always 'alternative myths' – and most of them have done so with interesting result.

In a real sense, part of the answer also lies in the methodology of the Living with Myths project: to ask difficult questions and not to accept 'common sense' answers. This method is far removed from the processes of myth making. The Living with Myths seminar series and book, while helmed mostly by academics, had in mind a general audience and readership. The project's aim is to promote a culture of critical thinking and research, where people would debate widely held beliefs and conduct sound historical work. What is as crucial is that the endeavour ought not be left to the 'experts' (academics) alone, but that Singaporeans have the capacity, and social obligation, to comment on the myths. The onus is on people to discuss and reflect on social issues, to find ways to engage productively with views that differ from their own. The manner of these debates will help decide if Singapore needs myths, and if so, what these myths would be.

The chapters in this volume have thus not unearthed another big myth to replace The Singapore Story. Rather, by critiquing various myths, what they do is to open up multiple imaginaries of the nation, some of which may themselves become mythologies. Some chapters in the book demonstrate that the present state of affairs is not the only possible one; viable alternatives existed in the past, which makes it useful to turn to history as a guide. Other chapters reveal the

flaws, oversimplifications and blind spots in prevailing myths, while suggesting other ways of conceiving and interpreting Singapore.

### **The Myths in the Book**

The book is organised around four major myths. The first section, ‘The Singapore Story’, explores various aspects of the idea of Singapore as a mythic nation. The first chapter, by Thum Ping Tjin, traces the historicity of the idea: it uncovers three big myths – of vulnerability, meritocracy and development – in contemporary Singapore, which he argues were inherited from the British colonial government. The myths, Thum’s research highlights, demonstrate a fundamental continuity in Singapore’s governance from the postwar colonial state to the present: that Singapore is still governed in a colonial manner.

Two chapters in the section examine an important place where The Singapore Story is constantly naturalised: schools. Reflecting on history education, Mark Baidon and Suhaimi Afandi emphasise the need for students to look beyond a singular version of history and learn to reconcile with competing narratives. Similarly, Christine Han traces how citizenship education to nurture a Singaporean identity since independence has focussed on substantive values, which simply tell students what to do. She suggests, however, that procedural values can better teach them to grapple rationally with controversial issues and to agree to disagree.

Related to education is literature and media. Gwee Li Sui uncovers five commonly held myths about Singaporean literature. Most crucial of these is the nation-building myth, which structures Singapore’s literary history to mirror the national narrative. Gwee argues that curators and educators must energetically debate these myths in order to bring clarity to Singaporean literature. Terence Lee tackles the myth of Singapore as a global media hub. The myth, as the state narrowly defines it, is based on the economics-driven view of the media as a lucrative industry, rather than as a community of informed creators and users. Lee’s discussion asks us to ponder if Singapore can become a global hub if the media is tightly controlled by the state.

The second section, ‘Third World to First’ – a major narrative arc within The Singapore Story – unpacks big claims about Singapore’s development. Philip Holden reveals that the ‘Third World’ was originally not the stigmatised term used in Lee Kuan Yew’s memoirs, but a hopeful idea key to the global history of

decolonisation after the Second World War, of which Singapore was a part. As Holden points out, the phrase refers to older ideals of socialist redistribution and equality held by many Third World leaders, including the first generation of PAP leaders who were Fabian socialists, like Lee. Thus the original meaning of the ‘Third World’ has resonance with critiques of neoliberal economics today, which express many Singaporeans’ wish to return to some form of the welfare state prior to the 1980s. That the Singapore government is anti-welfare is a myth is tackled by Ho Chi Tim, whose chapter charts the history of social welfare after the war. Ho’s work may usefully free us to relook the government’s role in social policy in more open and innovative ways.

The importance of history for understanding Singapore’s development is highlighted in three other chapters. The first, by Seng Guo-quan, examines a remarkable alternative to the PAP model of authoritarian-capitalist development. Seng excavates the political economic thought of James Puthuchery, a leftist and economist whose arguments for a democratic-socialist form of development in the early 1960s have been forgotten. In the second of the chapters, Lee Kah-Wee analyses the government’s contentious decision to build casinos in 2005 by referring to a similar but unsuccessful proposal in the 1960s. He finds not only much opposition to the earlier proposal, but also familiar arguments: namely, that the casino is useful for Singapore’s development, and that the social problems of gambling can be successfully managed. In the third chapter, concerned with recent economic history from the 1980s, Arthur Chia looks beyond flashy slogans of ambitious state mega-projects of innovation and smart technology. He underlines the need to pay attention to important social and financial issues, particularly governance, transparency and public accountability.

Where ‘Third World to First’ concerns economic prowess, the book’s third section on ‘Vulnerability and Faultlines’ examines the romantic myths that are inextricably tied to The Singapore Story. The section deals with the myths about national frailty which warn Singaporeans that success is impermanent, not to be taken for granted. PAP leaders have frequently highlighted how Singapore is vulnerable as a small nation without natural resources and susceptible to external threats such as subversion and terrorism. In 1984, Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew underlined the importance of an authoritarian government by admonishing ‘a younger generation of Singaporeans who, not having experienced the conflicts in this House in the ‘50s and ‘60s, harbour myths about the role of the opposition’.<sup>15</sup>

In this volume, Gareth Curless and Teo Soh Lung narrate the histories of leftwing trade unions in the 1950s and 1960s and the Law Society in the 1980s

respectively – two elements that have been cast as injurious to national interests. Curless contends that the labour movement, rather than communist-controlled, was part of the anti-colonial struggle to improve workers' well-being, while the Law Society, Teo argues, was similarly an autonomous organisation that was committed to social issues. In another chapter, Ian Chong takes a broader approach to the myth of vulnerability by comparing Singapore with two other Asian states that face existential security threats: South Korea and Taiwan. Chong finds that these countries had successfully undergone democratisation without any discernibly adverse effects on their security or economic performance.

Other than political issues, the most frequently cited instances of vulnerability are alleged racial and religious faultlines. Despite the official policy of multiculturalism, traumatic memories of the 1950 Maria Hertogh riots and the 1964 race riots continue to cast a shadow over the management of race and religion in Singapore. In his 2009 National Day Rally speech, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong recounted in detail a dispute over the use of the void deck between a Chinese and a Malay family. The matter was satisfactorily resolved but although he lauded 'the maturity of Singaporeans who would consider the greater good', Lee repeated the injunction that 'we must appreciate and treasure our racial and religious harmony. We should not take it for granted'.<sup>16</sup> Thus the state acquires the moral mandate, and sole authority, to manage race and religion, and the ethnic groups continue to exist in a state of separation and latent tension.

Four chapters in the section offer critiques of and alternatives to this official policy. Showing the system that classifies Singaporeans into Chinese, Malays, Indians, and 'Others' to be rigid and increasingly dated, Laavanya Kathiravelu suggests a bottom-up approach, where Singaporeans can freely choose how they wish to identify themselves. From her ethnographic observations of everyday life, Lai Ah Eng conceives multiculturalism as both a maze and a minefield – complex and difficult to navigate but at the same time, dynamic and an essential part of being Singaporean. Like Laavanya, Lai shows how multiculturalism on the ground transcends the state's narrow policy.

Similarly, Wong Chee Meng unpacks how seven major myths in Singapore's multicultural heritage are closely linked to The Singapore Story. He reveals instead diverse narratives of heritage, including those of rich interactions between the ethnic groups in the past, while also calling for deeper research to unearth hidden histories. The notion of organic intercultural ties and networks is also germane to Elaine Lynn-Ee Ho's chapter. Ho discusses how the official discourse of Singapore as a cosmopolitan city is inadequate. She proposes that

cosmopolitanism should be grounded in the views and affections of the migrants to Singapore, including both professionals and low-wage workers.

The final section, 'A Deficient People', explores how Singapore's vulnerability is ultimately deemed to rest on Singaporeans. It is because, in the official view, of the innate nature of Singaporeans – a young people who remain immature and irrational – that the dangers exist and why the government must take a paternalistic role to discipline the people. In 1980, Lee Kuan Yew declared that what Malaysian politics in the 1960s taught him was 'the terrifying hate and irrational fears generated by blind prejudices over race, religion, and language', as manifest in the race riots. To him, these experiences privileged his interpretation of the past over academic historians.<sup>17</sup> A generation later, in 2001, Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong also deemed young Singaporeans as bereft of historical knowledge of the struggles Singapore had surmounted in the past. He lamented that they were self-interested, lacking the idealism of the older generation to think of the well-being of the society and nation.<sup>18</sup>

Various contributors to the book scrutinise these limiting and largely inaccurate characterisations of Singapore society by turning to history. Liew Kai Khiun ventures into the British colonial period to uncover a vibrant history of social activism over a wide range of issues – an activism that mirrors the emerging civil society today. Edgar Liao's account of student activism at the University of Malaya in the 1950s and 1960s also highlights how not only were some English-educated undergraduates involved in national and international politics, they were able to bridge the language divide and support Chinese student activists.

Moving downwards from civil and intellectual society, Loh Kah Seng traces the social and political activism of allegedly 'inert' *kampong* dwellers after the Second World War, while Jack Chia charts the efforts of socially engaged Buddhist activists in the 1970s and 1980s. Both Loh and Chia's research provides further empirical evidence that, far from being apathetic, ignorant or irrational, two large groups of Singaporeans in the past were actively aware of, and involved in, national and social issues, albeit in different ways. Their work offers suggestions for how Singaporeans can move away from the prevailing culture of elitism to form communities of mutual interest and self-help.

The book closes with a pair of chapters that scrutinise social deficiency in contemporary Singapore. Teo You Yenn questions the myth that underpins the state's long-standing policy towards poverty: that Singapore has no real poverty and inequality is an inevitable 'externality' of development. Similarly looking at the lower strata of society, Charanpal Bal critiques widely held misconceptions

about low-wage migrant workers, who form the essential but little-protected labour force for the political economy of 'first world' Singapore. Bal demonstrates how state policy and legislation (or lack of) have led to a systemic culture of exploitation of the workers. As both Teo and Bal argue, these myths need to be critiqued so that Singapore can deal more adequately with problems relating to poverty and the abuse of migrant workers.

National myths can both empower and disempower. They have the potential to stir our spirit and imagination. Myths can elevate us towards a higher level of intellectual consciousness based on our lived (rather than manufactured) realities. Myths that empower can inspire us to boldly 'run with the lions'. By contrast, myths that disempower engender fear and division whilst stifling the spirit of progressive imagination required to address social and political injustice. This refreshing book empowers us to question the veracity of deep-seated myths that obfuscate. It offers us the intellectual tools to boldly leap beyond the boundaries of 'manufactured realities' – in the spirit and tradition of the political lions of Singapura, past and present.

— Associate Professor Lily Rahim Zubaidah, The University of Sydney

This is an exciting book which strengthens a trend in Singapore's intellectual life to critique the self-serving mythology of the country's authoritarian state. The authors, almost all Singaporeans, challenge the series of portraits that have been constructed to formulate Singapore's identity, and offer a refreshing analysis that seeks to broaden and diversify our understanding of the city-state within the context of global social science disciplines.

— Carl A. Trocki, Professor of Asian Studies (Ret)

As Singapore moves into the next phase, it will be necessary to clear away the cobwebs in the mind which make 'hard truths' easy. The current narrative produced among Singaporeans the 'common sense' support for the paternalistic governance of the ruling elite. This book is thus much needed for a new 'culture of critical thinking' to emerge, most importantly the citizens' initiative and creativity and the emancipation of their minds. The current simplistic narrative has to be replaced by many new perspectives and interpretations. This is what this book begins to do. It is a must read!

— Tay Kheng Soon, Akitek Tenggara

With contributions from:

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