

# Book Review

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Ong Jin Hui, Tong Chee Kiong, and Tan Ern Ser, editors, *Understanding Singapore Society*. Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1997, 561 pages.

Whether one knows Southeast Asia well, or is a relative newcomer to the region, *Understanding Singapore Society* is a book which should not be missed. As a scholar with some, but limited, experience in Southeast Asia, I found the volume instructive on many levels. I read the book just prior to going to Singapore for a teaching assignment. Doing so helped me to appreciate many of the more subtle aspects of Singapore, its unique history and society, and to have a deeper appreciation for the changes Singapore has and is currently going through. While especially helpful to those with limited exposure to Singapore or the region, the depth of the volume, its fairly rigorous scholarship, and variety of topics should also interest more seasoned scholars.

Many of the publications on Singapore tends to focus on economics, government policy, the multicultural aspects of Singapore, the leadership of Lee Kwan Yew, or the "uniqueness" of Singapore generally. Such efforts are often narrowly focused or lack depth or rigor. One of the particular strengths of *Understanding Singapore Society* is its balance. It blends different themes with reasonable depth, balancing political, historic, developmental, and cultural themes in a way which allows exploration of individual concerns as well as developing a comprehensive view of Singapore. An added bonus is that it maintains its scholarly approach while still being readable.

Structurally, *Understanding Singapore Society* is a collection of academic articles on various facets of the country. The approach used in the text is sociological, though readers from other disciplines will not find it rigidly so. Specific themes explored in the volume are: class, race/ethnic relationships, religion, marriage and the family, politics, industrialization, urbanization, and culture and society. Typically, those articles or studies included are seen as seminal within particular themes. Each section has an introduction which gives the reader substantive background on the theme highlighted and a critical discussion of the articles included with the particular theme. The chronology of articles included runs from 1975 to 1993. This allows the reader to follow both policy and practical changes along with the development of research themes within different subject areas.

I found the sections on race and ethnic relations and politics and society to be the most informative. The articles from the race and ethnic relations theme explore questions about the tension between being "Singaporean" and yet being a member of a particular ethnic group. The analy-

ses are essentially contemporary, so one does not get a real sense of the development of race and ethnic relationships. However, I found this section to be thought provoking and it certainly examines some of the more important underlying questions related to modern Singapore.

The section on politics in Singapore takes a somewhat wider view. One article ("Politics in an Administrative State: Where has the Politics Gone?") looks at the emergence of the People's Action Party for the perilous times of the 1960s to its ascendancy, including the current "depoliticization" of the Singaporean populace. If one has little background on the political situation in Singapore this is an especially instructive article. Other topics explored include political mobilization, public policy, the relative political pragmatism embraced in Singapore, and some discussion of citizen orientation to the government. There are no specific attempts to generalize to broader political topics often associated with Southeast Asia ("Asian" democracy, prescriptions for developing legitimacy); however, the discussions of politics in Singapore will enable the reader to more fully understand some of the background to these more general political questions.

Some of the themes are better developed and more readable than others. An example of a theme which was not as impressive was the section on religion and society. Analyses of Buddhism and "syncretic Chinese" religions were scattered and difficult to follow. There was almost no discussion of the importance or impact of Islam. While the coverage of Hindu traditions and impacts was better, it was not of a high quality. The saving grace for this section was an article entitled "The Rationalization of Religion in Singapore" which examines the recent growth in Christianity, the revival of Buddhism, and the growth in the number of Singaporeans who claim no religion.

On balance, this is a very worthwhile text. Any work which is a collection of articles is going to have some unevenness and some weaker links; this text is no different. But *Understanding Singapore Society* has breadth and depth, sound scholarship, and is not overly littered with jargon. Its merits far exceed its shortcomings.