

PALGRAVE *Studies in Oral History*

# ORAL HISTORY IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

## MEMORIES AND FRAGMENTS

EDITED BY KAH SENG LOH,  
ERNEST KOH,  
AND STEPHEN DOBBS

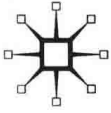


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## Series Editors' Foreword

Post–Second World War, globalization brought with it the emergence of Southeast Asia from its colonial status to an array of nations at varying levels of development. In terms of infrastructure and economic growth, few have modernized more completely than the small city-state of Singapore, perpetuating a state-encouraged “Singapore Story” of triumphalism. However, countering this saga are the many individual narratives that chip away at the official version of progress and demonstrate a more complex and multidimensional version of society, culture, politics, and economics. It is such fragments of memory that the contributors to this volume emphasize in three sections: “Oral History and Official Memory,” “Memories of Violence,” and “Oral Tradition and Heritage.”

The book has its origins in a conference, *Historical Fragments in Southeast Asia: At the Interfaces of Oral History, Memory and Heritage* held in Singapore in 2010, which explains the attention given to that nation by four chapters of the ten herein. Two others concern Malaysia, and one each is devoted to the Philippines, Thailand, and Indonesia. The authors recognize that a number of nations such as Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos are omitted from consideration. Still, the composite story told provides useful insights into the emerging region and the value of oral history to counter official history supportive of elite institutions and government propaganda.

With this volume, the Palgrave Studies in Oral History series continues to extend its geographic reach beyond the United States. *Oral History in Southeast Asia: Memories and Fragments* joins works on India, China, South Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America to add a truly international dimension to the study of oral history. Moreover, it reflects our purpose to bring the best in oral history methodology and narrative to scholars, students, and the general reading public.

BRUCE M. STAVE  
University of Connecticut

LINDA SHOPES  
Carlisle, Pennsylvania



## Preface

This book began as a collection of papers presented at the conference, *Historical Fragments in Southeast Asia: At the Interfaces of Oral History, Memory and Heritage*, in Singapore in 2010. The conference was jointly organized by the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS), a think tank, and the Singapore Heritage Society (SHS), an NGO. The convener was Kah Seng Loh, then a visiting research fellow at ISEAS and an ex-co member of SHS. As the program took shape, official concerns were expressed over some of the papers before, during, and after the conference. These papers had considered how the present influenced memories of the past and how oral histories of political and social change departed from established narratives that reinforced the role of the state and the frame of the nation. The offending papers were on Singapore and Malaysia, while the others—on the Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam, Myanmar—appeared to raise no similar objections. One of the Malaysian papers was withdrawn from the publication process as a result.

The experience helped shape the thinking of the editors in translating the conference papers into a book. The conference had intended to investigate interdisciplinary approaches to the study of oral history in a diverse region (it still does), but the official concerns over its ideas and perceived implications highlighted a larger question about the role and meaning of academic endeavor in this part of the world. It was clear to participants who study Singapore or who work there that such concerns were the norm, even if they were puzzled at why concerns had arisen over this or that particular paper. It is never easy even for those familiar with Singapore to understand why some types of critical research are given the nod (or quietly ignored), while others receive unwelcome official attention. Such is the complexity in the making and silencing of historical narratives in Singapore. For participants unfamiliar with the country, it was not easy to understand an apparent conflict. On the one hand, there is a city-state aspiring to be a world city, eagerly appropriating and purchasing global ideas, talents, and brands. On the other hand, there is a state, in power since 1959, that presides over this ambitious venture



and is sensitive to criticism of its place in contemporary Singapore and in Singapore history.

The central theme of this book explores the impact of authoritarian rule on oral history. Particularly in the Singapore essays, it underlines how people often have to reconcile between their personal memories and officially sanctioned histories. Many of the chapters on other countries in Southeast Asia present more divergent memories that oppose the accepted historical account. But there are also signs that people in these countries constantly worry about telling their stories, or that they feel a need to narrate their experiences in tune with established accounts endorsed by authoritarian regimes, as many Singaporeans do. The chapter on the “Red Barrel” massacre in Thailand, written by a Thai researcher, suggests that Thais may be able to hold on to their own memories. This book offers a different approach to oral history, in not merely distinguishing it from official history, but also showing the relationship between the two to be far more ambivalent and nuanced.

The book would not have been possible without the support of ISEAS, particularly K. Kesavapany, Chin Kin Wah, Terence Chong, Michael Montesano, and the commendable team that provided administrative and logistical support. The same appreciation goes to the Singapore Heritage Society, which works within the constraints highlighted above to research and advocate Singapore history and heritage, and particularly to its immediate past president, Kevin Tan. We are grateful that through SHS, the conference received a donation of SGD10,000 from Lee Foundation, a local charity. We would also like to thank Alistair Thomson, who gave the keynote address at the conference and helped write part of the first chapter. We also benefitted from ideas and assistance from Isrizal Mohamed Isa and Pattaraphon Phoothong.

It is also with great pleasure that we record our collaboration with the editors at Palgrave Macmillan in preparing and revising the manuscript, particularly Bruce Stave who gave a seminar on oral history in Singapore in 2011.

KAH SENG LOH,  
ERNEST KOH, and  
STEPHEN DOBBS

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## Oral History and Fragments in Southeast Asia

*Kah Seng Loh, Ernest Koh, and  
Alistair Thomson*

This book offers a view from Southeast Asia, where oral history is embryonic and state led but is also being socially contested and redefined. The book began as a conference in Singapore in 2010, organized by the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS) and the Singapore Heritage Society. ISEAS had hosted a similar event 20 years ago, which resulted in the publication *Oral History in Southeast Asia: Theory and Method* (1998).<sup>1</sup> The interim years have witnessed significant changes in Southeast Asia that are transforming the practice of oral history.

The book will investigate oral history in Southeast Asia along two intersecting lines of inquiry. First, it explores how, as elsewhere in the world, interdisciplinary approaches are connecting oral history to studies of memory, oral tradition, and heritage. Second, the book pays attention to context and explores the relationship between oral history and the political, economic, and social circumstances in which the narrator speaks.

In bringing together these two approaches, this volume considers oral history as “fragments”—those individual or group accounts of the past that do not fit in with the mainstream or dominant narrative. The term, originating from subaltern/postcolonial studies, refers to perspectives of marginal groups that conflict with the dominant view. Here, it is used more broadly to include different sorts of relationships between oral history and dominant narratives

in Southeast Asia. The fragments discussed in the book are diverse and multifaceted: some oppose the accounts of the past produced by Southeast Asian states. Others are more ambivalent and reveal a closer connection between people's testimonies and official histories.

This complexity partly explains the concentration of papers on Singapore, which account for nearly half the book. Admittedly this was also due to the editors' personal networks (we work on Singapore)) and the conference being held there. The Singapore papers are useful in highlighting the "reasonable fragments" in oral history—to use a term from one of the editors. In Singapore, memory and speech are shaped by the influence of the authoritarian state, which nevertheless governs through a social consensus derived from robust economic development.<sup>2</sup> In contrast, most other essays examine how oral history challenges elite perspectives. While we have not been able to cover all the other states in Southeast Asia, we discuss participants' oral accounts of the violence and suffering that characterize much of the recent history elsewhere in the region. The diversity of fragments points to the various ways that people relate their pasts to the present.

## **Interdisciplinary Approaches to Oral History**

In many English-speaking countries in western Europe and North America, oral history expanded in the 1960s and 1970s as an attempt to uncover the hidden histories of social groups that had been written out of the historical record. The portable tape recorder enabled oral historians to create an acceptable archive record, while the new field of social history legitimized the study of everyday life. When criticisms of the fallibility of memory first emerged, oral history handbooks developed guidelines to assess and enhance its reliability. From social psychology and anthropology, these guides suggested ways to determine bias and retrospection in memory. Early oral historians also adopted methods of representative sampling from sociology, and from documentary history—they borrowed rules for checking the validity and internal consistency of oral texts. These early responses were quintessentially interdisciplinary, although the method remained empiricist.<sup>3</sup>

That interdisciplinarity expanded from the late 1970s when imaginative oral historians turned the criticisms on their head. They argued that the unreliability of memory made it a useful historical source, in providing clues to the relationships between past and present, between memory and identity, and between individual and collective memory. Italian historian Alessandro Portelli argued that orality, narrative form, subjectivity, and the

relationship between interviewer and interviewee were strengths rather than weaknesses of oral history.<sup>4</sup> Memory became the subject as well as source of oral history, and oral historians and other scholars began to use an exhilarating array of approaches—linguistic, narrative, cultural, psychoanalytic, and ethnographic—in their analysis and use of interviews.<sup>5</sup>

Yet, such theoretically sophisticated work is still largely confined within distinctive academic “tribes” that have separate literatures and networks. This book brings together historians and social scientists in an effort to peer across disciplinary boundaries and find convergences, as well as dissonances, between oral history and neighboring fields. We agree with a wider concern articulated by Paula Hamilton and Linda Shopes that oral historians and social scientists who study historical memory have seldom engaged one another.<sup>6</sup> Scholars of memory studies approach the subject not usually to reconstruct the past, but to understand the influences on social and cultural memory. Disciplines such as cultural studies, film studies, and literary studies focus chiefly on representations of the past; they often neglect individual experience and memory, or indeed the relationship between memory and public narratives. The focus on representation may overlook the importance of history itself, of using memory to make sense of the past, not least to critique official myths and construct more inclusive accounts. Oral history enables us to challenge distortion and half-truth and to write better histories.

As Lysa Hong noted at the 1990 conference in Singapore, Southeast Asian oral history was theoretically naïve, and many of the papers were still informed by empiricist approaches. Since then, the practice of Southeast Asian oral history has gained from the intervention of social scientists. Anthropologists have drawn attention to cultural specificities in studies of memory, narrative form, and interview relationships. Roxana Waterson observes that oral history, situated at the intersection between personal life and historical process, is “always representative of experience of living in that historical juncture.”<sup>7</sup> This responds to the frequent critique that oral history only surveys a small fraction of the population in the past. Ann Stoler has also considered the challenges faced by “outsider” interviews in Java, and the importance of listening to the aural and gestural clues within culturally distinctive forms of expression.<sup>8</sup> This awareness of embodied and sensory memory connects to one of the most exciting recent growth areas across several disciplines, “the sensory turn” in the humanities and social sciences.<sup>9</sup>

The concept of the fragment has usefully guided postcolonial investigations into the histories and memories of marginal communities. Gyanendra Pandey conceptualizes the fragment as a trace of a lost history and a fracture within the dominant narrative. Such fragments are important, he surmises,



in challenging the dominant account and uncovering new perspectives. As examples, Pandey refers to people's diaries and poems about riots in India, and more generally creation myths, folk stories, and songs.<sup>10</sup> However, other scholars have been skeptical about what fragments can accomplish. Gayatri Spivak has suggested that fragments, being partial and even contradictory, will not enable the writing of counternarratives, at least those that conform to the norms of the historical discipline.<sup>11</sup> In discussing fragments, scholars have also tended to emphasize silence, as opposed to speech. Shail Mayaram's interviewees were unwilling to speak on massacres that occurred during the partition of India, because the state had discouraged public discourse on the violence in the name of maintaining ethnic harmony.<sup>12</sup>

While the idea of fragments is open to debate, we take it as a point of departure for understanding oral history in relation to the grand historical narratives that exist in Southeast Asia. Like local songs or individual writings, oral history has an incomplete quality to it—it is personal and subjective, and the narrator's memory may be distorted or unreliable. In its social role, however, oral history is important in contesting the accounts of elites or national histories that reduce the past to a homogenous set of experiences. In some cases, oral history is a public means to seek justice for past wrongs. In other cases, it is a way for people to reconcile their memories to the dominant account.

In this book, we aim to shed some light on the nature of the relationship between fragments and the whole of which they are necessarily a part. In examining oral history in Southeast Asia, the book problematizes the binaries between fragments and the dominant narrative; silence and speech; compliance and resistance, and state and subaltern. The complexity of Southeast Asian oral history is a result of the region's history, to which we now turn.

## **Fragments and Official History**

Southeast Asia's political, economic, social, and cultural diversity has shaped its oral histories. The diversity has provoked scholarly debate over whether the term "Southeast Asia" has any positive attribution other than defining a region between China and India. Others have pondered whether the term, which the Allies used to refer to a theater of war during the Second World War, is meaningful for Southeast Asians.<sup>13</sup> There is much variation in the histories, politics, and societies both among Southeast Asian states, and within them.<sup>14</sup> Southeast Asian societies have been heterogeneous in ethnic, cultural, and religious terms, partly because there was never a single power that

governed the whole region. There have also been considerable differences between island and mainland Southeast Asia with regard to polity, culture, and trade,<sup>15</sup> while James Scott's recent work on Zomia illustrates the divides between lowland and upland groups.<sup>16</sup>

Western colonial rule further fragmented Southeast Asia. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Western powers colonized Southeast Asia, except for Thailand, which remained independent, while in the Philippines the United States replaced Spain, which had ruled the island archipelago since the sixteenth century.<sup>17</sup> Each colony was subordinate to the economic imperatives of the metropole, serving as a source of raw materials and agricultural exports and as a market for Western manufactured goods. The colonial governments also drew fixed borders around their territories, physically separating social groups that had shared a common history and culture and rendering them into minorities of the new states. The policy of encouraging immigration into and within the colonies also created Chinese, Indian, Javanese, and Vietnamese enclaves, particularly in the cities. The diversity of Southeast Asia complicates generalization and comparison, but is also useful for interrogating concepts and considering more nuanced perspectives.

Within this overall diversity, however, Southeast Asia has had a long-standing submission to political authority. Precolonial Vietnam had a more centralized administration based on the Chinese neo-Confucian model, but other states in Southeast Asia did not possess centralized bases of power. Instead, there were *mandala* polities of variable power, which drew upon the charisma and authority of an exceptional personality.<sup>18</sup> In the colonial era, the imperial powers established centralized bureaucracies to extend their control over outlying provinces and remote villages. The political system in Southeast Asia remained nonrepresentative; even in the Philippines, an American-style democracy was dominated by the power of the landed elite.<sup>19</sup> The Thai kings also ruled like European colonial governors to modernize the country in the image of the Western powers. Colonial rule came to an end after the Second World War, but the nationalist elites who inherited the colonial territories utilized the power of the centralized bureaucracies to build new, yet familiarly authoritarian, nation-states.

In the six decades since the end of the war, far-reaching political, economic, social, and cultural transformation has occurred in Southeast Asia, largely initiated by or mediated through the nation-states. The postcolonial elites launched nation-building programs that attempted to simplify complex societies into coherent "imagined communities."<sup>20</sup> State-authored "creation narratives," which sanction these programs, typically superimpose the "nation" over community and ethnic minority histories. In addition, these accounts