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Squatters into Citizens

Loh Kah Seng. 2013. *Squatters into Citizens: The 1961 Bukit Ho Swee Fire and the Making of Modern Singapore*. Singapore: NUS Press, 315 pages + xxvii

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Squatters into Citizens describes in detail the May 1961 Bukit Ho Swee fire and how the event has generated discourse in the shaping of modern Singapore. As a historical study, it provides an interesting account of the social history of the country's development and its transformation from an urban kampong to a modern city-state we know today.

In *Squatters into Citizens* Loh employs diverse historical tools of inquiry to study the subject and accumulate sources. The study is based on comprehensive reading of various archives: unpublished official reports in the holdings of libraries in Singapore, United Kingdom, United States and Australia, and related official reports from different decades (mid-1940s to mid-1990s). To give flesh and blood to the skeleton of official reports, Loh brings the subject alive

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with in-depth interviews with at least 114 individuals that were done in Chinese, English and Hokkien (p. xxiv) over the course of two years (January 2006-January 2008). These individuals are from various walks of life: architects, public officials, firefighters, artists, grassroots leaders, rural activists and social workers (p. xxiv). From these interviews, Loh gleans people's candid expressions (for example, how they remembered the living quarters in the 1940s as "pigeon cages" [p. 36]), their emotional distress (how they saw the 1961 fire had destroyed their homes and "everything was flattened" [p. 145]), and their mixed feelings of anxiety and hope (how after the fire they tried to "find a road" (che lor) [p. 171; p. 227]). Interestingly, Loh also integrates his own family history as part of his personal reflection on being a Singaporean enmeshed in the historical narrative of the nation. The book offers an appealing oral history of the nation that encapsulates the voices from below and their efforts to craft a better life within the state's urban housing project.

In describing the 1961 fire, Loh meticulously notes the situation before and during the event: the physical conditions of the kampong housing (the fire-prone attap house), the path of the fire, the looting and social chaos during the fire, and the damage and life fatalities the fire caused. Loh also notes how the government was relatively quick in responding to the situation through the relief centre and through relief funds that assisted the victims in rebuilding their lives. Temporary housings were soon made available (known as 'Operation Shift') and despite several limitations in the process, were occupied within two weeks by half of the fire victims (p.181). Rehousing was considered successful then. With this success, the government was

able to push its agenda on the development of Housing and Development Board (HDB) flats. The HDB flat became the "vital foothold" (p. 203) that enabled the government to convince the former-squatters of the value of the flats and promoted their smooth integration as citizen. This 'transformation' of Chinese squatters into the nation's citizens disciplined through the housing project is the main argument of the book. In that context, Loh's interview with Sister Sabine Fernandez (p. 223-4) reveals how independent efforts by the community to manage the housing were discouraged and often viewed with suspicion by the authorities.

In its illuminating discussion on "Memory, Myth and Identity" (chapter 10), *Squatters into Citizens* clearly maps three "myths" of the 1961 fire in the context of the state-society relationship. They are: the official myth that locates the state's initiative in the center of the rebuilding project; the nostalgia for kampong life that perpetuates the carefree, simple and "joyous kampong days" (p. 254); and the "wild talk" of the government-inflicted arson that caused the fire. By mapping these three myths that "define the shape of belief about modernity in Singapore" (p. 243), Loh brings the memories of the 1961 fire to the fore of public consciousness. With that, readers are invited to see the diverse interpretations of historical events that not only affected the lives of the people, but also shaped their identities and the nation.

With its strong description and critical perspective on urban development, *Squatters into Citizens* is an important contribution to the growing literature on modern history of Singapore.

