

Book Review: Squatters into Citizens: The 1961 Bukit Ho Swee Fire and the Making of Modern Singapore by Loh Kah Seng

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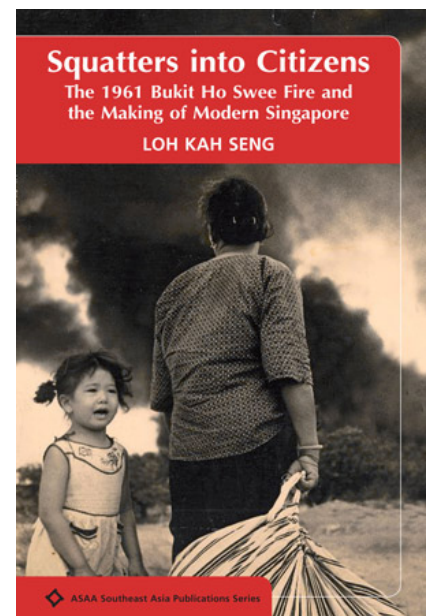
Fifty years have passed since the great fire at Bukit Ho Swee in Singapore left 16,000 people homeless, gave rise to a national emergency and led to the first big public housing project in the country: a seminal event in the making of modern Singapore. Loh Kah Seng grew up in one-room rental flats in the estate built after the fire, and in this book he draws on oral history interviews, official records and media reports to describe daily life in squatter communities and how people coped with the hazard posed by fires. Reviewed by Nathan Bullock.



Squatters into Citizens: The 1961 Bukit Ho Swee Fire and the Making of Modern Singapore. Loh Kah Seng. NIAS Press. June 2013.

Find this book: 

Loh Kah Seng is an interdisciplinary researcher of Southeast Asian history and teaches in the Institute for Southeast Asian Studies at Sogang University in Seoul, South Korea. In his book, *Squatters into Citizens: The 1961 Bukit Ho Swee Fire and the Making of Modern Singapore*, Loh's interdisciplinary perspective and methodology provide a richly rewarding view of a missing piece of social history. Loh makes use of oral history, interviews, archives, photography, and official records to piece together the galvanizing experience of the 1961 Bukit Ho Swee fire in Singapore and explore its ramifications for the political economy, society, and changing built environment of the city and its margins. Loh successfully argues that this fire was a catalyst for change in all of those areas and a turning point in Singapore's urban development and national identity. Today, the Housing Development Board (HDB) provides the majority of Singaporeans their residences. Its multiple policies based on race, marriage status, family proximity, and age continue to shape the city-state and define its demographic challenges.



Bukit Ho Swee was a *kampong* (village in Malay) not far from the city centre of Singapore in the district of Tiong Bahru. Residents were often migrants and worked in a number of low-skill and labour-intensive industries. At the time of the fire, approximately 26% of the city's population lived in kampongs across the island (250,000 people). Kampong residents were considered to be squatters or illegally dwelling on the land, and multiple attempts were made to evict them. This fire impacted 16,000 people over an area of 100 acres with only four fatalities. The fire began in one of the thatched roof houses spreading easily to the other wooden houses. The unclear cause led many to suggest arson – either by gang members or by the government. One victim echoed those numerous rumours, stating, “the government had great difficulty trying to evict the kampong residents, so if there was a fire, you had to move even if you were unwilling” (p.176).

Chapter 1 “Fire: A Catalyst for Modern Singapore” begins with an exploration into the intellectual history of urban planning in Singapore, noting the relative levels of influence over time from various UK political parties and the US more generally. Here Loh also makes the notable distinction that as kampong dwellers “these squatters were not ‘marginal’ but were distinctly modern in their outlook and socio-economic relations” (p.13). The agency of the residents of Bukit Ho Swee is evidenced through subsequent quotes from interviews and analysis of newspapers which display that modernity. For example, Loh's informants recall a system of credit called *hwei* for those unable to

access banks. To ensure against risk, one former organiser explained that “when people organised a *hwei*, they only let those they knew enter” (p.63). There was even a form of voluntary firefighting already in place. One former resident describes “One thing you were always vigilant about was fire ... As soon as there was a fire, the first thing most able-bodied young people would do was try to put out the fire” (p.104).

In pointing out that the term ‘squatter’ was discursive in nature, Loh pulls in much literature from multiple directions to inform his research beginning with disaster studies, and continuing throughout with theory and references to nostalgia, high modernist planning, multiple modernities, and mythology. His comparative approach draws analogies from London, Paris, Hong Kong, Brazil, and Africa showing that the role fire as a catalyst is widely applicable beyond his own study. (Similar connections to disaster and public housing can be found in [Philadelphia](#).)



A mix of housing, offices and other buildings across today's Singapore skyline. Credit: [Peter Gronemann](#) CC BY 2.0

Chapter 3 “A ‘Black Area’” paints a picture of the kampong as a transgressive space where hawking, unregistered housing and other unlicensed businesses such as ‘pirate taxis’ proliferated. This understanding of the village is useful in problematizing the binaries of urban-rural or city-kampong as used by both the British government and later Peoples’ Action Party (PAP). As this area was redeveloped following the fire, a salient aspect that is drawn out by the testimony of former residents is the loss of autonomy associated with new flats built by the HDB. Here and in Chapter 4 again are excellent demonstrations of a mastery of qualitative research methods. The footnotes are treasure troves of archival research and the interviews and discourse analysis are highly insightful into the “agency of ordinary people”. While reading about the crisis of housing after the fire one can only long for the government to take such a level of interest in creating and implementing housing policy.

Chapter 6 “The Inferno” serves as an engaging model for telling recent history. Mixing sources and relaying the order of events in a highly readable manner from the eyes of participants without unnecessary commentary or tangential discussions feels novel. Equally impactful here are the inclusion of photographs obtained from the National Archives of Singapore and various informants. Mixing media does well to serve Loh’s thesis and goal of the

book to exist “at the interface between political and social history to trace how planned housing transformed power relations between state and society and mobilized squatters into model citizens” (p.21). Continuing in Chapter 8 “Nine Months” Loh switches to deftly showing how the previous housing debate was intricately linked to Singaporean politics even at the highest levels and its impact on larger political events such as the crackdown on Leftists by the PAP.

In the Preface, Loh states that he is addressing “an amnesia in the history of Singapore that was both personal and academic” (xxiii). Through recovering this oral history and offering an alternative picture of modernity that was lost to PAP rule, Loh’s book may allow Singaporeans – whether academics, planners, or former squatters – to move toward a postcolonial citizenship.

Nathan Bullock is a researcher of space, place, and identity with a focus on the topic of citizenship in urban geographies. He spent a year in Singapore on a Fulbright Fellowship and is now continuing his research in the MSc Human Geography and Urban Studies program at the LSE. [Read more reviews by Nathan.](#)

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