

Ernest Koh, *Singapore Stories: Language, Class and the Chinese of Singapore* (Cambria Press, 2010)

Singapore is usually regarded, by historians as well as by official spokesmen and outside observers, as a successful multicultural and technocratic state firmly embedded in the global economy. Its official foundation myth makes two claims about the origins of its success. The first is that after independence the governing elite led it from third world destitution to become a meritocracy marked by collective, although not egalitarian, prosperity. The second is that this has been achieved by removing the barriers to upward social mobility, so that anyone with the right abilities and motivation can now achieve prosperity. This book successfully challenges both of these contentions.

The book is based on an examination of the available statistics relating to literacy, language, education and income, and on listening to the voices of both those who have prospered in Singapore society and of eighty from what he calls its underside. The result is a collective biography that tells of 'fading hopes for a better world, of a community increasingly divided, and of a system that finds merit in entrenching these divides.' Yet the people who tell these stories do not see themselves as victims, but want to share the achievements that they have celebrated in their own ways and their own lives. As a historian, Koh has not made a statistically representative sample but a collection of voices that reflect the plurality of their experience of history. His transcriptions bring the tellers to life, and their voices keep the colloquial vitality of Singapore English: 'Got no money ... and so ugly, ghost also run away.'

Koh shows that in immediate postwar Singapore, destitution or extreme poverty was general among the working classes, and the English language gave no particular advantage, although in English-speaking households it was regarded as the key to the future. The Chinese speakers were further divided between different vernaculars.

The factory workers who built the wealth of Singapore were both English and Chinese speaking, but English came to have the advantage as it was favoured by government policies. Government schools that taught in English were cheaper, and English became the language of the new University of Malaya. Although the Chinese community tried to maintain Mandarin, the graduates from the Nanyang University were not favoured for employment, and even after independence the government feared the chauvinism and radicalism of Chinese language schools. At the same time, the consequence of the Communist Revolution in China meant that its universities were closed to Singapore students.

The decisive change in favour of English was the shift of the economy in the 1980s from a basis of manufacturing to one of finance and technology, which both depended on the global language of English. At the same time, however, access to English literacy became restricted to those with the time and money to complete secondary and university education. So English, once a means of upward mobility, became an instrument for dividing society and corralling people in particular classes. Grandparents whose work had enabled their children to succeed found themselves

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isolated by language from their own, now mono-lingual, grandchildren, and prevented them from carrying out their obligation to pass on the stories and culture of their own past. Meanwhile, the incessant pursuit of the 'five Cs' – car, cash, condominium, credit card and career – consumed their children, who were left with no time for leisure or, even, family. Many of these children, growing tired of the constant demand for success that kept them from any family life, began to look to opportunities to migrate to other, less driven, societies, like England and Australia. With the children absent, through either work or migration, the grandparents are left in aged care accommodation, often woefully inadequate.

The book offers more than this bare outline suggests. Apart from the sociological data and the individual portraits, it fills in the details of Singapore's social and political history since the war, and shows the many facets of Chinese culture that have developed or atrophied in the island state. It finishes with Koh's speculations on what the future may hold. One possibility is that the rigid class divide will lead to increasing discontent and disorder. The other is that as China becomes increasingly active in the region, new possibilities and advantages will open for those literate in Chinese. The only certainty is that the present equilibrium will not last.

John McLaren