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OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES**  
A Graduate School of Nanyang Technological University

# RSIS COMMENTARIES

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No. 117/2010 dated 17 September 2010

## **Rejoinder on 'Alternative Narratives: The Danger of Romanticising the Other'**

By Hong Lysa

### **Commentary**

WOULD like to respond to the RSIS Commentary (113/2010) on Alternatives Narratives: The Danger of Romanticising the Other by Ong Wei Chong published on 14 September 2010. This is to clarify what it is that academic historians do. There are certain misconceptions about this on the part of the public. This arises from the blurring of lines between the writing of history as an academic practice, and the general usage of the word to mean writing about the past, which anyone who has something he or she wants to say can do, and to good effect.

It is not that the one is superior to the other. It is just that the article confuses the nature of the two, and hence clouds the issues about the 'alternative histories' that are being produced in Singapore. While I would like to clarify what professional historians do, I am above all concerned about the implications of the author's argument, which I hope is the result only of obfuscation.

### **Two Kinds of History Books**

Firstly, for an academic historian, that is, one who has gone through the rigours of writing a doctoral thesis, there are only two kinds of history books: those that are well researched and written, and those that are poorly researched and written (if they happen to get through the refereeing process, which is less likely to happen if the publisher is a reputed academic press), and the range in between.

Who delivers the judgment as to whether a historian's work is good or poor? Academic books go through a peer review process before they are accepted for publication. When it is published, it is subjected to book reviews, and subsequent scholars cite the work either positively, and build on the insights provided by the book, or critically, to take issue with its arguments. In both instances, this is done in the spirit of furthering enquiry, to enhance one's understanding of a subject. David Irving has been roundly condemned in academic studies way before the matter went to court (at his instigation) for his denial of the Holocaust because the source materials on which he based his arguments did not stand up to scholarly scrutiny at all. His thesis could not stand interrogation by historians who were experts on the field.

Serious academic grants institutions like the research councils in the United Kingdom and the United States, not to mention in Singapore universities, similarly have very rigorous selection processes when awarding grants. If they may currently seem to favour topics say on religion, this is not to say that those on the administrative history of colonial Singapore, for instance, which indeed have more difficulty in receiving a grant,

is bad history. It is because what our society is now concerned about is religion and its place in the lives of individuals, the nation, and transnational linkages, all of which have hitherto not been well studied by historians.

### **Writings on Singapore's Past**

There has been a genre of writings on Singapore's past that has emerged recently. These make no attempts to pass off as academic work, nor do their writers claim to be historians. These are written in the main by former political detainees, and they clearly write to tell readers about who they are and how they understand what their political detention was all about. They are autobiographical; the more prominent pieces have consulted archival documents to support their contentions. They do not even pretend to present more than one point of view. They are plainly polemical, in the same way that memoirs and biographies of Singapore's first generation leaders are.

What is in contention, particularly in *The Fajar Generation: The University Socialist Club and the politics of postwar Malaya and Singapore* [2009] (whose editors Poh Soo Kai, Tan Jing Quee and Koh Kay Yew are former presidents of the Club and ex-political detainees) is whether they were members of the Communist Party of Malaya. There has not been proof that they were. They were never put on trial.

This is the ongoing debate in which academic historians, who have no privileged insights or personal agenda, watch with interest and comment on the discourses of Singapore history that is currently unfolding. This debate is about whether there was continuity or break between newly independent Singapore and the colonial regime, and the nature of the state in Singapore. All this is to further the enquiry into the nature of Singapore history and its ramifications.

### **'Trendy' essay?**

The suggestion that 'even renowned academic historians are not immune to character assassination of political figures and romanticising the deeds of their opponents' is a very serious charge that opens the offending 'renowned academic historian' to lose the respect of their peers and opens them to charges of libel. In the case of Singapore, one has to be even more careful and certain of one's charge before making such a statement.

I would like the author to name one work by an academic historian which aims to 'romanticise the actions of violent revolutionaries that claimed the lives of Singapore and Malaysian security personnel and civilians alike'. If such a work exists, or if a David Irving exists amongst us, I can assure the author that I will be the first to denounce and condemn such a historian, and gather fellow Singapore historians and indeed those worldwide to do the same, for that would be demeaning the good name of the profession.

If the author is simply relying on suggestion and innuendo so as to write a 'counter-trendy' essay, which I might add, is also a trendy thing to do, I would like to point out respectfully to the editorial board of *RSIS Commentaries* that the implications of such unfounded innuendo are dangerous and irresponsible. I understand that the author is a young scholar. I hope his mentors at RSIS will give him good counsel on what is sound and fair academic commentary.

*Hong Lysa is founding member of the group which puts out s/pores: new directions in Singapore Studies, [www.s-pores.com](http://www.s-pores.com). She is also a former associate professor of history.*