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Alternative Narratives: Why I Wrote It

By Ong Wei Chong

Commentary

IN RESPONSE to Hong Lysa's remarks on my RSIS Commentary on *Alternative Narratives: The Danger of Romanticising the Other* published on 14 September, I would like to clarify three issues of contention: history as a practice; the writing of alternative narratives; and the crux of her argument. At no point did my article suggest that any Singapore-based academics were engaged in the romanticisation of violent revolutionaries. My commentary was premised not on any unfounded innuendos but on the perils of romanticising the exploits of violent revolutionaries that threatened the security of Malaysia and Singapore from 1968 to 1989.

Strands of the Past

There are different strands of writings on the past that range from the academic to the popular. Nonetheless, the lines between academic history (written by professional historians for a professional audience) and popular histories (written for a general audience) have somewhat been obfuscated by academic historians engaged in the penning of popular history. This blurring of boundaries is apparent in all genres of history including narratives on continuities and departures between pre and post independence Singapore.

Peer review by fellow academic historians does ensure a certain level of credibility but conflict of interests does arise even in a double-blind peer review process. Approaches, writing styles and methodology may point toward a particular individual that the reviewer might severely disagree with. In short, the peer review process is not always bias-free. Moreover, certain prestigious university presses tend to reject history books that are deemed to be too policy-prescriptive. Even in spirit of encouraging enquiring, what is good or bad history can be a very subjective matter in the academic peer-review process.

Policy Relevant Past

I do not disclaim the fact that I am approaching the subject of alternative narratives from a 'history for staff college' rather than a pure academic perspective. Hence, the securitisation bias. The advancement of historical scholarship that allows further generations to come to grasp with its nation's roots is an integral process of any civil society. The main drivers of the process however must be Singaporeans and it must be done in a responsible and gradual manner that does not undermine the social cohesion or stability of contemporary Singapore.

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