

From Living under Attap to Residing in the Sky: Imagination and Empathy in Source-Based History Education in Singapore

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TO CULTIVATE IMAGINATION AND EMPATHY among school students is a basic challenge for history teachers. This paper examines the relative roles of the teacher and student in nurturing imagination and empathy in the Singapore history classroom, specifically, through source-based studies.¹ We deal with imagination and empathy together because both concepts are based on the premise that historical inquiry is not simply about knowing the chronology of the events, but about appreciating *why* things happened, and *why* both the elite and ordinary makers of history acted the ways they did. In addition, “putting oneself in another’s shoes” requires the history student to carry out a mental act which takes them beyond historical facts and involves them in reenacting the complete social and political milieu of the past, an act that might be called “imagination.” Both imagination and empathy are ways for students to think critically about history and, more generally, to develop a passion for learning.

This paper demonstrates how curriculum can help Secondary Two history students reenact the past in their own minds and achieve historical empathy, using a range of sources on housing in Singapore in the 1950s and 1960s. The paper takes as its basic premise the famous dictum of R. G. Collingwood, the British philosopher of history, that “all history is

the history of thought.”² In this vein, as many educators have convincingly argued, students, like historians, are capable of reenacting historical events in their own minds and getting “inside” the past.³ According to Anthony Pattiz, a Collingwoodian pedagogy exposes students to competing perspectives in history and promotes empathy and critical thinking.⁴ A source-based approach to history education lends itself well to such an endeavour. Primary documents, when presented to students in their full historical context, can encourage them to understand the past on its own terms, not from contemporary hindsight.⁵ Using a wide range of archival and oral history records enables students to grapple with diverse perspectives of the past and challenges them to empathise with both mainstream and marginal historical actors.⁶

A major pedagogical issue in nurturing imagination and empathy is how far the task should simply be left to the student and how far it should be managed by the teacher. Here, some educators make a distinction between imagination and empathy. They point out that to empathise is primarily an adductive act based on one’s acquired knowledge or experience, whereas to imagine implies some sort of intuitive, spontaneous grasp of the subject.⁷ In this view, it is necessary for the teacher to plan the lesson and, as David Stockley maintained, acquaint the student with the historical background before they can get close to the past. Structured simulation games or roleplay which contain “historical paradoxes,” he suggests, are useful for developing empathy; students, in attempting to reconcile the competing statements in the paradoxes, can then get “inside” the past.⁸ Of course, this is not new—active learning strategies like roleplay, mock debates, or interviews have generally been applauded as useful tools in the history classroom.⁹

The argument that cultivating empathy requires pedagogical planning and structure has merit, but we maintain that the imaginative act is also not as mystical or *a priori* as Stockley and others have assumed. In fact, imagination is commonly utilised by both adults and children to understand the past and present, the abstract and concrete, and in situations far removed from the classroom. It is also based, crucially, on what one already knows, or it may be the negation of what one knows; consequently, there are very few completely “wild flights of fancy.” As James Axtell has argued, the history teacher can harness the student’s general imaginative skills towards establishing empathy with the past by “familiarising the alien.”¹⁰ This is to introduce students to the foreign country of history, taking as the departure point their acquired knowledge or experience. This also resolves the tension between empathy—in which one momentarily abandons a familiar present for an alien past—and imagination—which is largely constrained by what one knows. In cultivating historical imagination and empathy,

the teacher's role is consequently vital in either providing background information for the students or drawing from their previous knowledge or experience.

At the same time, the teacher's pedagogical role cannot be divorced from their social function and the relative role of the student in the classroom. Depending on what, how, and to what end the teaching materials are used, imagining and empathising with the past can have the effect of challenging established grand narratives. Students respond well to such history lessons, underlining the emotional as well as cognitive sides of history teaching and understanding. In post-1991 Russia, new history textbooks which present critical perspectives of the Soviet era not only are changing the way Russian students view their past, but are also reshaping their national and cultural identities.¹¹ Imagining the past, present, and future, then, are closely intertwined. Similarly, in the West, feminist and multicultural approaches to history teaching can challenge one-sided perspectives of history. They encourage students to develop an empathy for actors other than the privileged white male and to appreciate "human diversity and historical ambiguity."¹²

As Michael O'Loughlin observes, such a radical conception of history education poses its own challenges. It calls into question the teacher's customary role of socialising students into the established status quo. From being social and cultural gatekeepers, teachers are being asked to become "keyholders with the means to unmask authoritative knowledge and cultural domination." This approach also redefines the student's role in the classroom, from being passive receptacles of delivered knowledge to becoming active learners, in which their own voices, experiences, and emotions play integral roles.¹³ This radical view of education is naturally foreign to both teachers and students, and particularly discomfiting when the subject matter is politicised. But O'Loughlin's point about "daring the imagination" in class— not merely to view the past more closely, but also to imagine possible new futures—is relevant here in encouraging us to reconsider the basic purpose and method of history education.

Since 1997, the Singapore authorities have sought to promote creative and critical thinking among school students in the ambitious "Thinking Schools, Learning Nation" initiative¹⁴—an enterprise for which imagining and empathising with the past is well-suited. In encouraging students to think, the new secondary history textbook, *Singapore: From Settlement to Nation, Pre-1819 to 1971*, launched in 2007, has utilised diverse historical perspectives, including, interestingly, the voices of the leftwing politicians who challenged the People's Action Party (PAP) government in the 1960s.¹⁵ The textbook aims to "develop critical and creative thinking skills such as making comparisons, analysing and drawing conclusions through an

examination of different types of source materials.”¹⁶ Of course, 1997 was also the year when the PAP government launched the National Education programme in schools, which aimed to “develop national cohesion, the instinct for survival and confidence in our future.” Despite official assurances, there is an underlying tension between the “Thinking Schools, Learning Nation” policy and National Education, which is based on a singular master narrative—“a special story, our story . . . the story of Singapore, how we came to be one nation.”¹⁷ This so-termed official “Singapore Story” does not appear to welcome alternative interpretations of the recent past.¹⁸ The attempt to reconcile this linear state-sanctioned narrative with the aims of historical inquiry raises important questions about the relative roles of the teacher and student in grappling with imagination and empathy in the Singapore history classroom.

The paper will first provide a background account of the contested history of housing development in Singapore after the war, and proceed with an examination of a sample of the historical sources which reveal the multi-faceted side of this history.¹⁹ Finally, the paper describes and discusses a trial enrichment lesson conducted in August 2008 in Marsiling Secondary School which attempted to apply the principles laid out in this paper in the classroom towards achieving imagination and empathy.

Housing in Postwar Singapore and the Making of a Modern State

Housing was the first major area of societal change as Singapore developed dynamically into a modern city-state after World War Two; by contrast, its industrialisation programme took off only in the early 1970s. Upon coming to power in 1959, the PAP government soon realized the importance of providing affordable public housing with modern amenities to the growing low-income population. In 1961, Albert Winsemius, a Dutch economist who had headed a United Nations mission to examine the feasibility of industrialisation for Singapore, advised the government to “show something very early” to attract foreign investors, “which at least gave the impression that we were making progress.” The solution, Winsemius suggested, was to build large numbers of flats quickly.²⁰ Within the next five years, the Housing and Development Board (HDB), the fully-empowered public housing agency established in 1960, built 54,430 flats at the margins of the city.²¹ In such accommodation resided 23% of Singapore’s total population, who, for the most part, had formerly lived in wooden kampong (“village”) houses with attap (thatched) or zinc roofs on the urban periphery and in shophouse cubicles in the Central Area.²² The massive public housing programme not only broke the back of the housing shortage, but also radically transformed the urban landscape of

postwar Singapore. Kampong- and slum-dwellers, who hitherto had been semi-autonomous of the state, were progressively forged into becoming model citizens of the emerging nation-state, living in planned, high-rise public housing estates.

A few important caveats should be noted of the HDB's resounding success. The PAP government did not embark on the public housing programme in a historical vacuum, but borrowed heavily from the philosophy, methods, and experiences of the British colonial government and its de facto public housing agency, the Singapore Improvement Trust (SIT).²³ There was, then, both continuity and change in public housing development in the late colonial and postcolonial eras. Moreover, while the British and PAP governments had depicted wooden kampong housing as dilapidated and even "dangerous,"²⁴ most residents viewed it quite differently. As the discussion in the following section will show, the occupants were not overly concerned with the dismal, insanitary living conditions, or with the secret societies which "infested" the kampongs. The dramatic doubling of the urban kampong population from 127,000 in 1947 to 246,000 by the mid-1950s is testament to the acceptance by low-income families to rent wooden housing.²⁵ Not surprisingly, as clearance and resettlement relocated large numbers of families living in the urban kampongs, the public housing project became deeply contested. Kampong clearance was hugely unpopular because many evicted farmers living on the urban periphery were not prepared to relocate to rural resettlement areas.²⁶ Conversely, low-income urban workers did not want to move into more expensive public housing located far away from their workplace.²⁷ There was considerable resistance among urban kampong dwellers to the public housing programme, particularly in the colonial period, but also in the PAP era, particularly in Toa Payoh.²⁸ On many occasions, secret society gangsters threatened and even assaulted SIT demolition teams in the kampongs.²⁹

However, this social history of resettlement is sadly absent in the Ministry of Education's secondary history textbook. What is taught, instead, is a linear story of housing progress and responsible governance. In *Singapore: From Settlement to Nation*, the emphasis is on the "dangerous living conditions" in wooden kampong housing and the HDB's role in replacing "slums and squatter settlements" with modern flats through its Five Year Plans. The 1961 Kampong Bukit Ho Swee fire, where the HDB swiftly rehoused nearly 16,000 fire victims in emergency public housing, is recounted as a singular success story of the Board in rebuilding an entire community from the ashes of the inferno. The textbook depicts kampong dwellers' resistance to rehousing merely as a problem faced, and resolved, by the public housing planners.³⁰ One should note that this triumphal account of

kampong clearance reinforces the unit's focus on Singapore's "constraints and vulnerabilities" and the "key values, attitudes and skills Singaporeans need in order to ensure the survival and success of the nation."³¹ Clearly, housing is not intended to be a topic for in-depth discussion and debate, where diverse historical perspectives could be utilised to promote thinking skills as is done elsewhere in the textbook. Key issues such as the experiences of people who were resettled in the process and the social impact of the rehousing were omitted. These omissions contrast with the attempt to incorporate a diversity of historical voices in the Singapore History Gallery of the newly-renovated National Museum of Singapore. There, the experience of resettlement is acknowledged to be "both exciting and sometimes traumatic," with an unnamed Malay interviewee lamenting that one could not resist the PAP government's acquisition of land for public development.³² In this light, the textbook's representation of resettlement reflects the tension between inculcating thinking skills and promoting a sense of loyalty to the nation in history education in Singapore.³³

This paper argues that a wide range of historical sources enables students to grapple with "the full breadth and depth" of the multi-faceted history of housing development in Singapore.³⁴ Some educators have pointed out that creating a thinking culture in Singapore's schools hinges primarily on the role and pedagogical practice of the teacher.³⁵ A source-based approach adds depth to the syllabus and promotes creative and critical thinking skills and, specifically, historical imagination and empathy. It is in line with the Ministry of Education's aim to introduce students to more diverse historical perspectives in areas of the curriculum beyond the recent political history. To such arguments about thinking cultures and teachers, one should add the idea of an active, independent student learner. An additional advantage in imagining and empathising with housing in Singapore's history is that most local students can usefully draw in part from their personal experiences as a way of "familiarising the alien." In the present-day, four-fifths of Singaporeans reside in HDB flats.³⁶

Documents, Images, and Voices of the Living Past

A genuine problem in source-based studies for local educators and curriculum planners is the lack of research on the recent history of Singapore, particularly on the social history. A sample set of sources on housing development in Singapore in the 1950s and 1960s is included in the Appendices, ranging from unpublished official documents to oral history interviews, newspaper articles, and photographs. The sources are drawn from one author's doctoral research on the role of the Bukit Ho Swee fire in transforming Singapore into a modern nation-state in the 1960s. The

main archival sources are the declassified files of the SIT and HDB, deposited at the National Archives of Singapore, while the interviews were of elderly Chinese Singaporeans, mostly in their 60s to 80s, who had lived in the Bukit Ho Swee locality, conducted in 2006-2007. The sources fall into two categories, the first of which focuses on the contrast between official and residents' views of kampong life, covering sanitation, crime and gangsterism, the fire hazard, the kampong economy, and resistance to eviction. The second category examines the diversity in kampong dwellers' experiences of moving into public housing, such as the effects of rehousing on community bonds and neighbourliness, the economic costs and official regulations of public housing, and life in emergency public housing.

Sources 1 and 2 provide an interesting contrast between the views of the authorities and residents towards living conditions in Singapore's urban kampongs in the 1950s and 1960s. The photograph in Source 1, published in the report of the Singapore Housing Committee, shows various sorts of rubbish such as discarded pots, baskets, and containers strewn over the ground in front of—the student should note—attap houses in Covent Garden, a kampong at the western tip of the Singapore River. Besides the content, the student should be encouraged to consider the *intent* of the source. The photograph ought to be understood not merely as a neutral image, but as a subtle yet powerful attempt to achieve the same goal of kampong clearance. As Susan Sontag contended, “photographing something became a routine part of the procedure for altering it.”³⁷ Students could consider the visual power of the photograph (as opposed to text), and then raise questions about the use of images, such as whether the place was a residential or dumping area, whether the rubbish was in fact cleared within a schedule, or whether all urban kampongs in Singapore were insanitary like Covent Garden. These questions will make explicit the negative associations of kampong life expressed by the image. One could also note that the photograph conveyed a strong sense of physical and social desolation: the attap houses stood in shadow with their interiors unlit, while there was no human occupant in sight. The *message* was clear: the urban kampongs were unfit for human habitation.

Being able to consider the intent and message of a historical source, and not just to describe its content, is important for helping students think about the past imaginatively and empathically. This point is well brought out in Source 2, which contrasts markedly in purpose and content from the preceding source. Here, Tan Ah Kok, an elderly lady in her 80s, is remembering how people lived together with free-ranging pigs and bucket toilets without flush facilities in a Singapore kampong in the 1950s. Tan recalls the experience of pigs waiting to feast upon human feces outside the toilet with much chagrin (she laughs aloud during the interview and com-

ments that it was a “scary” experience). This shows that Tan has adopted a modern view of sanitation and agrees in spirit with the official notion of health expressed in Source 1. Yet, despite the humour, the student should observe that allowing pigs to roam freely among the kampong houses and even to clean up the toilet was a common practice in everyday kampong life. Indeed, one could argue that, to the residents, this arrangement was shrewd and practical. There was an apparent social and economic ecology at work in the kampongs, where livestock were fed at minimal cost and where “waste” was positively utilised. This calls into question the earlier official claims that kampong life was poorly planned and maintained. For students used to the comforts of modern sanitary amenities in public or private housing, Source 2 is a good way of “familiarising the alien” without prejudging it. It requires students to leave behind contemporary norms and to step into the shoes of Tan Ah Kok, whereby they can see her mental and social world from her vantage point.

The difference between official and residents’ views of kampong housing helps students appreciate the initial problems of moving people into public housing flats in the 1960s. To both the British and PAP governments, public housing was undoubtedly superior, cleaner, and safer than wooden housing; to them, the need for people to adapt, socially and economically, to such housing was less important than the real benefits of such a change in accommodation. Testimony from relocated residents demonstrates that the government’s “success” was not so definite. Sources 8 and 9 encourage students to imagine and get “inside” the social transformation which an entire generation of Singaporeans experienced in the 1960s when they left wooden housing for modern high-rise flats. The sources deal with emergency public housing, a semi-permanent type of accommodation built by the SIT and HDB in the 1950s and 1960s, which was later either converted into self-contained standard housing or demolished in the 1980s. As its name implied, emergency housing was cheaper to build and could be constructed more quickly than standard housing, but it was also more difficult and costly to maintain and required the residents to share common toilets or even kitchens with other families.³⁸ However, historically, they were an important stop-gap measure for rehousing low-income families for a brief period before they could be moved into permanent public housing. The sources on emergency housing fill a crucial gap in the Secondary Two history textbook, which makes no mention of the interim facilities, implying in effect that there were only two types of housing in postwar Singapore: “slums” and modern flats. The sources bring history students to an “intermediate” housing type which, for students living in public housing, is both familiar and alien. Consequently, emergency housing is a useful subject for cultivating historical imagination and empathy.

Emergency public housing in Singapore had a brief historical lifespan because the small one-room units were deeply unpopular with the low-income population. This is clearly stated in Source 8, a memorandum circulated among HDB officials in 1962. This was a time when the Board was building large numbers of emergency housing at the margins of the city to rehouse families evicted from kampongs slated for redevelopment. In the source, the HDB's Estates Manager duly stated that "The general opinion of the public is that there is no marked improvement from moving out of a one-room cubicle in the slum area to a one-room Housing Board unit other than cleanliness."³⁹ Source 9, an oral history interview, provides an explanation for the unpopularity of the one-room emergency housing from the perspectives of the residents. Lim You Meng, a male Chinese in his late 50s who also resided for a time in an emergency flat in the same estate, remembered vividly how several families shared a communal toilet, and the great inconvenience suffered by everyone when the modern sanitary facilities broke down. Students can compare the oral recollections with Sources 1 and 2 on wooden housing. The case of the emergency public housing blurs somewhat the conceptual boundary between wooden and public housing, since both the wooden and emergency housing were frequently dark and unlit, and at times insanitary. This is not to encourage students to dismiss the HDB's considerable achievement in providing affordable modern housing for the low-income population, but to highlight the at times difficult initial experiences of Singaporeans moving from kampongs to public housing in the 1960s. It explains why many people initially resisted being rehoused in modern housing. If students can realise that their reluctance to move was in fact quite *rational*, given the conditions of the emergency housing, they have achieved an empathetic understanding of the past. As such, Sources 8 and 9 are invaluable for cultivating historical imagination and empathy for the history of housing. They enable students to draw upon their knowledge of living in modern housing—to an extent. By imagining life in emergency housing, students well-acquainted with contemporary housing are carrying out the rather different mental act of "alienating the familiar" and perceiving diversity in history.⁴⁰ The sources challenge students to recognise that, in terms of living conditions, kampong and public housing were not always diametrically opposed. Thus, students are introduced to complexity, ambiguity, and diversity in history.

Stations, Models, Symbols, and Sources: The Trial Lesson

The source-based trial lesson on housing involved five selected students from the Secondary Two Express course in Marsiling Secondary School.

As history lessons in the school were run on a modular system, the students had finished their classes the previous semester. The source-based lesson consequently became an enrichment activity conducted outside the regular curriculum. It should, however, be noted that the students had not been taught Chapter 10 of *Singapore: From Settlement to Nation* on housing in postwar Singapore. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the chapter was often left out or covered only briefly due to time constraints, with the focus being on the more examinable topics. The five students comprised two Chinese, two Malays and one Indian. There were three girls and two boys; one Malaysian to add to the four Singaporean students. Based on their performance in the mid-year school examinations, the students were of mixed ability. While some were able to understand and analyse the sources and to express their thoughts and opinions with relative ease, others had somewhat greater difficulty with these tasks. All of them, however, possessed above average interest in history.

In planning the trial lesson, the practical challenges were taken into careful consideration. The use of sources has officially been intended to allow students to grapple with multiple perspectives on a historical issue and to enhance critical analytical skills. However, both personal experience and anecdotal evidence suggest that the objective is often not met. Instead of the sources being used as clues to deepen one's understanding of the past, the lesson has frequently transformed into a mechanical exercise in reinforcing the "examination skills" of making inferences, drawing comparisons, and testing reliability. Certainly, these skills are a central part of the source-based philosophy, but when teachers single-mindedly focus on the techniques, it prevents students from developing historical empathy and truly getting "inside" the past. In addition, even at Secondary level, source-based studies assume a demanding competence in English and can be intimidating to students who are weak in the language. This is particularly the case for sources authored by government officials or academics, which were usually not written with school students in mind. In the trial lesson, the problem of language was not fully overcome, but an attempt had been made both to edit the texts for easier reading and to complement them with oral history interviews and photographs.

With these considerations in mind, the lesson was planned in a way to optimally cultivate historical imagination and empathy. There was no "examination type" source-based question to answer or essay to write after the lesson. Rather, the aim was to encourage the students to respond to the sources rather than find a "correct" answer. Students covered the major themes of living in the kampong, the impact of relocation, and the residents' initial experiences of HDB housing. The lesson also had an important spatial dimension, with the classroom divided into five learning

stations, at each of which a specific activity would be carried out. The objective here was to enable the students to move about the classroom and make them feel at ease, further disassociating the lesson with the pragmatically-driven regular classes. Copies of the sources were placed at the various stations.

The first, the “warm-up” station, consisted of a series of short factual questions to set the context for the lesson. The students were asked about the type of housing they had lived in and the living environment. It turned out that all the five students were residing in HDB estates. Crucially, however, two students had lived in kampongs previously; one had stayed briefly with her grandmother in a kampong in either Lim Chu Kang or Choa Chu Kang, while the other, the Malaysian student, had resided in a kampong in Johor. This “discovery” was of great interest to the other students, who now viewed their peers to be live sources from whom they could learn about kampong life. It nicely warmed up the students for the tasks ahead and enabled them to draw from one another’s experiences towards “familiarising the alien,” in this case, the kampong. At this early stage of the lesson, there was already a shared empathy among the students. When asked to describe their present living environment in an HDB estate, almost all students quickly pointed out the negatives—that their flats were not quite big enough and that it could get quite noisy at times. Conversely, the two students who had previously resided in kampongs volunteered that they found living in an HDB estate to be more convenient than in a kampong, although they also missed the open spaces and personal freedom they had enjoyed in the latter. This served as a dynamic point of reference for the students who had only known public housing and established the multiplicity of viewpoints towards housing at an early stage.

The subsequent learning stations sought to further deepen students’ understanding of the multi-faceted history of housing in Singapore. At the second station, the students read a copy of Source 1, the official photograph of discarded rubbish in a kampong, and a can of attap seeds. While their peers expressed their disgust at the way the rubbish was strewn about, the students who had resided in kampongs quickly pointed out that their kampongs did not look like this at all. Indeed, they proudly declared that their houses had zinc roofs, wooden walls, and proper cement floors. One student even added, indignantly, that the rubbish was properly disposed of in her kampong, with herself and her cousin rostered on a weekly basis to bring it to an open field to be burned. This was new information for the other students and challenged the view that living conditions in kampongs were always insanitary. At the same time, the students were asked to sample the attap seeds, an ingredient used in the popular *ice kacang* dessert. They were then told that the attap seed had a historical link to

the kampongs, for it was the leaves of the *nipah* or attap palm which were commonly used for making the thatched roofs of many kampong houses. This prompted some students to raise their concern that thatched roofs would be most inconvenient in rainy weather, an indication that they were using background knowledge to appraise the past. In reply, another student suggested that attap leaves were used as a roofing material probably because they were cheaply and readily available. This was a heartening reply, for the student had arrived at this empathetic understanding of the past on his own; namely, the pragmatic reasons low-income kampong dwellers had for using attap roofing in postwar Singapore.

At the third station, the students' established perception of the kampongs was further challenged upon reading Source 2. This was the Tan Ah Kok interview which related how pigs fed on human waste in the kampong outhouse. Learning about this everyday practice in the kampongs left the students initially appalled. However, they were thrilled when asked to construct a model of the outhouse—pigs and squatting people included—with plastic modeling clay and ice-cream sticks. Although the finished models were lacking in proportion, this was the learning activity that the students enjoyed the most. They also established a strong sense of ownership over the models and consequently an invaluable sense of empathy towards the involuntary relocation of kampong dwellers.

At the fourth station, the students learned why many kampong dwellers were reluctant to move into modern public housing. They read Source 3, which provided an important insight into what the kampong meant to its dwellers. More than merely providing a roof over their heads, wooden housing suited their basic social and economic needs and gave them a genuine sense of ownership and security. After reading the source, the students were asked to draw a symbol on the side of the paper to represent how, in their own minds, kampong dwellers might have felt about being relocated from such homes. The students drew a set of frowning or sad faces. While drawing symbols was not an academically challenging exercise, it was a vital departure from established classroom routine, encouraging students to express their opinions and feelings towards the past without feeling stressed about having to reply to questions in the standard way or being self-conscious of their command of English. The unhappy faces indicated that the students were sensitive to the somber content and tone of the source and were able to imagine and empathise with, to some extent, the possible impact of relocation on kampong dwellers. This theory was further corroborated when the students read Source 4 on kampong dwellers' physical resistance against eviction. Fuming faces with glaring eyes and red exclamation marks now appeared on the margins of the sources. While it is certainly difficult to assess if students had developed

an enduring sense of empathy for the evicted dwellers, there was clearly a more serious and thoughtful atmosphere in class as the students quietly and individually digested the sources. This contrasted markedly with the more boisterous and relaxed earlier warm-up and model-making activities. The change in behaviour indicated that the students were at least attempting to imagine and empathise with the actions of historical actors who lived at the margins of postwar Singapore society and who were being evicted by the colonial state.

In the midst of this segment of the lesson, there was an interesting, albeit brief, digression, with the students asking if they could keep their clay models. They animatedly debated who would get to keep the outhouse, the pigs, and the squatting people. This interlude lit up the otherwise serious tone of the lesson and further demonstrated the developing sense of ownership the students had over their learning. At the fourth station, the students also viewed Source 5, an image of a planned public housing estate in the 1950s and 1960s. The students stated that they were familiar with the image, which was similar to those found in present-day Singapore street directories.

The images set the context for the fifth and final station, at which the students learned about a different aspect of the lesson: life in HDB housing estates. Here, the students read a diverse set of sources on how former kampong dwellers initially encountered Board housing in the 1960s. While the interviewee in Source 6 endorsed the cleanliness and convenience provided by public housing, Sources 7 and 9 highlighted more unpleasant experiences, particularly with the emergency housing built in the aftermath of the Bukit Ho Swee fire. At this point, the students related the sources to their own unpleasant experiences with noise and the lack of civic-mindedness among HDB residents in the present day.

At the end of the lesson, the students were asked to write a simple reflection on what they had learned. Their notes suggested that they had obtained a richer understanding of the subject of housing in Singapore from the “inside.” At the very least, they had become aware of life in alternative types of housing in postwar Singapore from the perspectives of residents who did not view the housing simply as slums or squatter settlements. The students had also obtained an important sense of the history of the HDB itself, of how Board flats had progressively evolved from the gloomy single-room units in the 1960s into the superior flats of the present day. The two students who had resided in kampongs stated that they missed life in the kampong and would like to live there again. Two other students said that they would stay in a kampong if they had the chance, while the fifth student was adamant about living in an HDB apartment. This diversity of views on kampong and public housing demonstrated

that the students were processing their own thoughts and conclusions on a subject which was part of their everyday experience, but which hitherto had not been utilised as a resource in a history lesson.

On reflection, the lesson objectives to cultivate historical imagination and empathy were largely achieved. The spatially-designed source-based activities had been effective in intellectually and emotionally engaging a small group of students who otherwise might have naturally felt inhibited by their relatively weak command of English and by the need to provide the “correct” answer in a class of a larger size. There was a natural flow to their chatter and discussion, with many queries and doubts raised by one student answered and clarified by the others. This was, of course, due partly to the fortuitous presence of students who had previously lived in a kampong, but what was more crucial was that all five students shared the common experience of living in HDB flats which served as a basic point of reference. The teacher’s direct role in the lesson itself had been more as a facilitator, limited to giving out instructions for the various learning stations, occasionally stepping in to plug gaps in the students’ knowledge, and reining them in when a digression appeared likely to refocus on the task at hand. More important was the teacher’s role in designing the lesson and combining the appraisal of the sources with learning activities which enhanced the students’ intellectual curiosity. The wider conclusion which emerges is that imagination and empathy are not as diametrically opposed as is sometimes assumed and that both are based in large part on acquired knowledge or experience.

An obvious challenge in employing this teaching strategy on a wider basis is the classroom size. The small class size was evidently a factor in the lesson’s success, as was also the fact that it was held outside the school curriculum. This paper’s tentative conclusions how on students can get “inside” the living past would have to be tested on a class of average size within the standard learning environment.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that using historical sources encompassing multiple perspectives has enabled Secondary Two students in a Singapore school to imagine and empathise with the recent past. The crucial difference here is not the use of sources but *how* they were used—that the students were given the cognitive and affective space to approach the sources from their own perspectives, knowledge, and experience. Consequently, they learned as much from one another as from the sources. The shared experiences of the students living in HDB housing, with the attendant problems of noise and small flat size, enabled them to “familiarise the alien” by building

mental bridges to the initial problems faced by former kampong dwellers rehoused in emergency public housing in the 1960s. This, it should be noted, also involved a reciprocal act of “alienating the familiar,” with the students attaining a more sophisticated view of the early HDB emergency housing. In the larger context of the lesson, the students had, partially at least, been able to appreciate the desire of many kampong dwellers to live in wooden houses and their initial reluctance to move into public housing. The use of non-textual symbols to express their feelings towards involuntary resettlement and of clay models to represent the kampong outhouse indicates that the students were attempting, as Collingwood had maintained, to reenact the past in their own minds.

The paper also has important implications both for the teacher’s role in redesigning the Singapore school classroom and for the students’ role as active, empowered learners. The teacher had consciously departed from established classroom routine where the standard practice was to reinforce examination techniques for source-based studies by the numbers. There has, instead, been an overarching emphasis on the importance of the students’ personal experiences, opinions, and feelings in the course of the lesson, albeit this being made possible by the small class size. In addition, neither the teacher nor the students had been inhibited from considering multiple new perspectives on the recent history of housing in Singapore, although the subject had been represented in a singular way in the official school textbook. Both the teacher and students had, to use Michael O’Loughlin’s term, dared to imagine—in the case of the students, the new shape of the living past, and for the teacher, the true potential of source-based history education in the near future.

Notes

1. The latter part of the paper discusses a trial enrichment lesson conducted with students of Marsiling Secondary School, Singapore, by Lee Si Wei, then a teacher of the school, in August 2008. The authors wish to record their thanks to the school management for supporting the project.

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37. Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Anchor Books, 1997), 64.

38. Singapore Improvement Trust, SIT 617/54, Memorandum titled "Housing Programmes and Policy" by Chief Architect, SIT, and Planning Adviser, SIT, 5 July 1954.

39. Housing and Development Board, HB 16/59 Volume II, Memorandum from Estates Manager, HDB, to Secretary, HDB, 5 June 1962.

40. Axtell, 434.

Appendix I: Sources on Official and Residents' Views of Kampong Life

Source 1

Source: Official photograph of wooden houses in Covent Garden, in Singapore, *Report of the Housing Committee* (Singapore: Government Printing House, 1947).



Source 2

Source: Loh Kah Seng's interview with Tan Ah Kok, 22 March 2007, former kampong resident in the 1950s.

We built a toilet outside our house. It was like a small house, with two planks for us to stand on and a hole at the bottom. After we did our business, the pigs would come to eat it. Sometimes when you were doing your business, the pigs were already outside waiting. It was scary. [Laughs] But the pork last time still tasted good. Now the pigs don't eat the waste, the pork doesn't taste as good. [Laughs]

Source 3

Source: HB 722/55, Notes for Consideration of the "Squatter Problem" Working Party, 1955, unpublished Singapore Improvement Trust document.

Most of these families are rural type dwellers, i.e., they have always lived in plank and attap houses. They have always experienced a form of freedom which is absent in permanent thickly populated urban districts in that an increase in the family can be accommodated by extending the house, and when they are out of work, they can spend more time on the land and produce food. Their rent to the land owner is small and they have a feeling of independence and ownership.

The threat of eviction to these people is a serious matter. If they move into rooms in a permanent house, they lose the produce of their gardens. If they erect their house elsewhere they must obtain permission of the landowner, the local authority, and the Singapore Improvement Trust or else face a further eviction. Whatever move they make, their former sense of security is destroyed.

Source 4

Source: HB 659/53, Report on the Demolition of Three Timber and Attap Houses on Singapore Improvement Trust Land at Lorong 27, Geylang, on 17 July 1953 by Acting Lands Manager, 22 July 1953, unpublished Singapore Improvement Trust document.

A hostile crowd of about forty people gathered. The two police constables were unable to disperse the crowd. The Indian family moved out in about fifteen minutes, but the Chinese family refused to move. Certain members of the crowd adopted a threatening attitude. I decided to withdraw to Aljunied Road with all personnel as there was an immediate possibility of a breach of the peace.

Appendix II: Sources on Former Kampong Dwellers' Adjustment to Public Housing

Source 5

Source: Singapore Improvement Trust, *Annual Report*, 1954. Layout plan of Princess Estate, the first neighbourhood of Queenstown New Town.



Source 6

Source: Radio Corporation of Singapore, “Then and Now: A Look At Housing,” broadcast on 16 September 1972. Interview with Koh Chuan Seng, an English-educated victim of the 1961 Bukit Ho Swee fire.

After the fire, I see a lot of changes in the area [Bukit Ho Swee], a lot of flats built by the government. I see a lot of people living in a cleaner and healthier environment. Most of the housing estates are self-contained, with facilities like clinics, swimming pools, and sports complex. In every single housing estate, there are markets nearby. Even the shops in the housing estates are built under one roof. Living in housing estates, one can find jobs easily. They don't have to travel five to six miles to go to work. The cottage industries, the small factories, or even the bigger factories are in the housing estates.

Source 7

Source: Radio Corporation of Singapore, “Then and Now: A Look At Housing,” broadcast on 16 September 1972. Interview with Koh Chuan Seng, an English-educated victim of the 1961 Bukit Ho Swee fire.

People like to blast their television or radios or amplifiers. Or even throw rubbish when they are living on the top floor, and they do not consider other people living at the bottom. Instead of using the rubbish chute, they just throw the rubbish indiscriminately and dirtied the place. And even sometimes parents have to instruct the children not to dirty the verandahs, the walls of the flats, or urinate in the lifts.

Source 8

Source: HB 16/59 Volume II, Memorandum from Estates Manager, HDB, to Secretary, HDB, 5 June 1962, unpublished Housing and Development Board document.

The general opinion of the public is that there is no marked improvement from moving out of a one-room cubicle in the slum area to a one-room Housing Board unit other than cleanliness. The accommodation offered should be something better, i.e., larger in size and at a reasonable rental which can be attractive enough as a motivation for uprooting in the City Area and replanting elsewhere.

Source 9

Source: Loh Kah Seng’s interview with Lim You Meng, 13 April 2007, who had lived as a teenager in a one-room emergency housing in Bukit Ho Swee Estate in the 1970s.

The toilet was shared. It was difficult, particularly in that year, when we had a water shortage for nearly a full day. So the toilet became very full and smelly, but you still had to use it. You can’t imagine it. There were only twelve toilets in the entire block. Only when there was water, then the cleaners would come and flush the toilets. The toilet was in the middle of the block, so if boys and girls wanted to go to the toilet at night, they had to ask their parents to accompany them. And the smell for the people living next to the toilet ... you can’t imagine.

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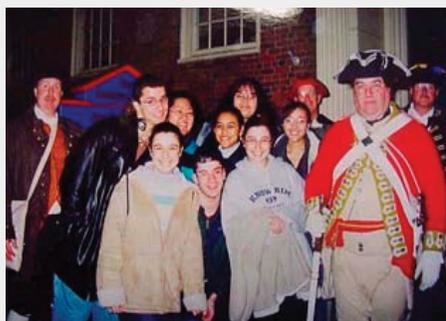
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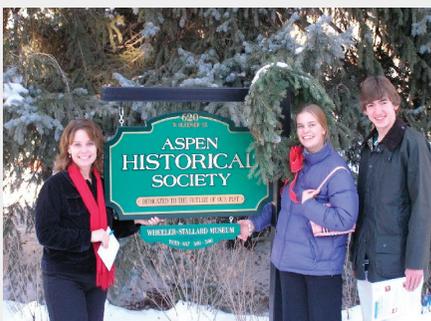
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