



# THE RISING ASIA REVIEW OF BOOKS

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## A NUANCED STUDY OF SINGAPORE'S PAST HISTORY OF MEDICINE

### It Urges Historical Thinking in Navigating Modern Pandemics

Loh Kah Seng and Hsu Li Yang, *Pandemics in Singapore, 1819–2022: Lessons for the Age of COVID-19*. Abingdon, Oxon, UK, and New York: Routledge, 2024, 298 pages, GBP 38.99.

**P***andemics in Singapore, 1819–2022: Lessons for the Age of COVID-19*, co-authored by social historian Loh Kah Seng and medical doctor Hsu Li Yang, comprises eleven chapters bookended by an introduction and a conclusion, and adopts a long-durée perspective to examine the lessons historical pandemics may offer in the wake of COVID-19.

The central question the book explores is: What lessons can we draw from the past [pestilence]? Responses to this question often fall between two opposing views. On one hand, a popular cliché suggests that “those who fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it.” On the other, Rankean historians argue that “history offers no lessons and should be studied for its own sake” (p. 2). Loh and Hsu take a measured position between these two extremes. Drawing on John Tosh’s conception

of “historicism,” which emphasizes difference, context, and process, they assert that “the past is fundamentally different from the present and can be seen as an ‘inventory of alternatives’ to what exists today,” and that while history can inform present-day issues, the integrity of historical inquiry must come first (p. 2).

### **Managing Healthcare and Pandemics in the Colonial Period**

The book delves deep into the historical record, tracing developments in public health as far back as the mid-19th century. It explores the social, economic, and political dynamics that shaped the emergence of quarantine systems and the designation of notifiable diseases in British-controlled Singapore. Rich in empirical detail, the narrative resists simplistic portrayals of colonial power versus passive and undifferentiated native subjects, which is common in some postcolonial accounts. Instead, the authors reveal internal divisions within colonial administrations and tensions between municipal and colonial authorities (pp. 24–28), such as disputes over roles and responsibilities in public health.

The book also highlights how policy was shaped not just by institutional constraints but also by individual discretion. Some colonial officers focused excessively on the so-called “trinity” of plague, smallpox, and cholera, thereby diverting attention from other serious illnesses. Others outright denied the existence of outbreaks. In addition, economic priorities—particularly the need to keep Singapore’s port open—often conflicted with calls for stricter public health governance. Chronic underfunding and the authorities’ reluctance to take broader responsibility were recurring issues.

To avoid privileging official narratives, the authors go beyond colonial archives to incorporate vernacular sources such as *Lat Pao* and *Sin Pao*, aiming to amplify native voices. Yet, they acknowledge the limits

of such sources in fully reconstructing the perspectives of Asian communities, who were frequently depicted in official reports as ignorant, uncooperative, or anti-science. Loh and Hsu argue that *historical empathy* is essential for understanding the actions of marginalized and vulnerable groups—such as colonial-era coolies or present-day migrant workers in post-independence Singapore—who faced harsh living conditions and may have perceived public health measures as coercive or even discriminatory.

Rather than dismissing Asian communities' resistance to health policies as ignorance, the authors suggest interpreting such acts—including evasion of quarantine and withholding of infection information—as forms of “weapons of the weak.” These reactions, they argue, should be understood within their socio-cultural and economic contexts: the costs of compliance for marginalized groups such as coolies, working class migrants, and poor natives were often so severe that individuals chose to live with the disease instead. Public health measures, while designed to protect the population, have never affected all communities equally. This is a crucial lesson that social scientists and historians can offer to medical professionals and policymakers.

### **Cautioning Against Relying Too Much on Past Pandemics**

The authors also highlight the value of *social memory*—personal recollections, memoirs, oral histories, and even advertisements—as sources that help fill the gaps left by official records and institutional amnesia. These narratives reveal how people made sense of their own actions and experiences during pandemics.

Ambitious in scope, the book surveys all major disease outbreaks in Singapore's history. In their conclusion, the authors caution against relying too heavily on familiar precedents. This is illustrated in the

reliance of the Singaporean authorities on the SARS experience in their initial response to COVID-19, when the nature of the two diseases was different. The worldwide tendency to look for lessons from the 1918 influenza pandemic to deal with COVID-19 is as problematic because the context of pandemics has changed drastically. In other words, the context of every outbreak is different, so is the nature of each new disease. Instead, the authors advocate for an approach that embraces complexity and contradiction, offering the flexibility needed for effective pandemic planning (p. 278). Crucially, they argue that learning from the past should be “inquiry- rather than solution-oriented” (p. 272). Historical study should provoke questions—not just provide ready-made answers.

Overall, *Pandemics in Singapore* is a thoughtful and deeply researched work that speaks to general readers, scientists, healthcare professionals, and policymakers alike. It offers not only a rich historical account but also a compelling argument for the value of historical thinking in navigating the uncertainties of modern pandemics.

### ***Note on the Reviewer***

**Por Heong Hong** graduated from the School of Social Sciences, Universiti Sains Malaysia in 2014. Her doctoral dissertation is about the politics of healthcare services in postwar and post-independence Malaysia. Even though she is a political scientist by training, she considers herself an interdisciplinary scholar. She is now affiliated with the School of Social Sciences, Universiti Sains Malaysia. She teaches Methods and Theories of Political Science, Fundamentals of Public Policy, Introduction to Political Science, and Culture and Society of Southeast Asia. Por’s research interests lie at the convergence of postcolonial inquiries and cultural politics of issues pertaining to medicine, health and diseases, bodies,



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