



Making and Unmaking the Asylum Leprosy and Modernity in Singapore and Malaysia

by Loh Kah Seng



‘An outstanding and timely contribution to the historiography of Malaysia and Singapore: well-written, comprehensive, compelling, and poignantly illustrated. The stories present a striking and moving narrative of life on the margins of society. Highly recommended reading on the social history of Malaysia and Singapore’.

Dr Ernest Koh, Lecturer, School of Historical Studies, Monash University

‘This book awakens us to the final remaining agendum for people affected by leprosy: a challenge to society, and to each of us as members; how we chose to respond is a measure of our conscience and sense of justice’.

Kay Yamaguchi, Sasakawa Memorial Health Foundation

Making and Unmaking the Asylum recounts the entangled histories of leprosy in colonial and postcolonial Malaya/Malaysia and Singapore—decades of heavy-handed biomedical policies and laws enacted in the name of modernity, science and development, interwoven with the personal accounts of those who were sent to the asylums. The leprosarium was a living hell for many. It is also no coincidence, Loh argues, that the majority of patients were poor and working-class.

Yet this book also richly demonstrates how patients resisted being victims—creating new families, forging friendships, working, joining unions, and actively engaging in their communal religious and cultural lives.

Having struggled to remake the asylums into homes, ex-sufferers in both countries have been evicted or moved again, their personal and collective histories erased, and their real homes exchanged for antiseptic hospital wards.

About the Author

Loh Kah Seng is a Visiting Research Fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asia Studies, Singapore. His doctoral thesis at the Asia Research Centre, Murdoch University examined the role of the 1961 Kampong Bukit Ho Swee fire in the making of modern Singapore. He has published on little-studied subjects in the urban social history of Singapore and Malaysia, such as the Great Depression, and labour and student activism. He has also written on the official use of history, heritage, oral history, and social memory in contemporary Singapore. He was a history teacher in a junior college, and still teaches and speaks to students about the challenges of researching the past.

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