

# **(Re)constructing the Nation? Representations of Public Housing in School Geography Textbooks**

**Tricia Seow** *National Institute of Education (Singapore)*

**Diganta Das** *National Institute of Education (Singapore)*

**Julian Chang** *Dunman High School (Singapore)*

Within education literature, scholars have argued that schools play an important role in social reproduction. However the literature on the role of specific subjects in this process is less examined. Within geography education, there is a growing interest and critical examination of the purposes of geography teaching. These accounts suggest that the content of school geography fulfils particular social purposes and national ideologies. In fact, political geographers like Radcliffe (1999) have argued that geographical professionalism and skills have provided the knowledge/power with which to promote certain “imagined” geographies upon which a social or national sense of identity can rest. In Singapore, geography scholars like Kong and Yeoh (2003, p. 2) have examined the specific strategies that the Singapore state uses to construct the Singapore “nation” using both ideological and material practices. They suggest that the public housing landscape has been an important means to this end. The role of public housing in the construction of the Singapore’s national identity has been documented by academics - from scaling up to a first world nation through public housing, to Singapore’s public housing being emulated as a successful model. However there is little analysis of the ways in which public housing has been represented within school geography in order to promote certain imagined

geographies in the population.

This paper, therefore, considers the representations of public housing in school geography textbooks from the 1970s to present day. It analyses the role that these textbook chapters on public housing play in augmenting the state’s modernist projects and goals, as well as the symbolic meanings attached to the content on public housing in reproducing particular types of Singaporean identities. It further compares the textbook content to the larger developmental goals of the state throughout these periods, and surfaces the realities that are obscured in the process.

## **Introduction**

When Singapore became fully independent in 1965, it faced the twin challenges of achieving economic development and creating a cohesive and strong sense of nationhood among its heterogeneous, largely migrant population. Education was seen as vital to these projects, although as noted by Gopinathan (1997), research to quantify the contribution of formal schooling to these purposes remains underdeveloped and inconclusive. Formal schooling, as noted by educational theorists like Green (1990), and Apple (2004), is a key institution through which the state communicates ideals of identity and conduct to future

citizens that will both contribute to its economy and in its formation of a nation. Singapore's development planning experience was one in which education served these ends (Green, 1997; Koh, 2002), under the guidance of a "strong state" which controlled education through its hold over basic educational infrastructure and curriculum (Gopinathan, 1994). At the same time, Singapore's public housing landscape was co-opted by the state to achieve both its modernist development projects and to reinforce its versions of nationhood. Kong and Yeoh (2003) suggest that public housing served the following functions in Singapore: it sought to develop a sense of place and belonging among Singaporeans through home ownership programmes and the creation of distinctive town identities. The housing landscape was a major part of the urbanscape, and a tangible symbol of Singapore's developmentalist ideology and modernity, as infrastructure and standards of living were constantly upgraded. Finally, it supported nation building as the state could exercise multi-racial ideologies through its housing policies.

In the next section we discuss the role of education, and particularly geography education, in reproducing social identity as discussed in the literature on both Singapore and beyond. We then provide a broad overview of the literature on housing provision, focusing on the Singapore state's nation building endeavours in and through public housing. Finally we analyse the representations of public housing in the Singapore geography textbooks as an example of how geography education has been co-opted in nation building since independence.

### **Imagined Nation: Geography Textbooks and Nation Building**

Within educational literature, it is

largely accepted that formal schooling is integral to social reproduction (Apple, 1979; Bernstein, 1990, 2003). Bernstein (1990, 2003), for example, was conscious that the enterprise of education is neither neutral nor objective, and that types of curriculum and forms of pedagogy directly reproduce middle class groups' social identities, cultural aspirations and values. More recently, interest regarding the role of specific subjects in the production of desired social and national identities has grown. For example, history textbooks have been an important site of contention between competing historical narratives in the construction of a Japanese national identity (Bukh, 2007). An edited volume of essays by Schissler and Soysal (2005) deconstructs the ways in which school textbooks in different European nations depict national identities in relation to European and global citizenship.

In her review of the spatial content in education by geography researchers, Thiem (2009) observes that nation building projects are an important part of formal geographic education. One of the ways in which this occurs is through the production of geographical imaginaries of the nation. For instance, commentators in the United Kingdom (UK) like Ball (1994) and Hall (1990) were highly critical of the 1991 National Curriculum for Geography, arguing that school geography harkened back to outmoded notions of British empire. Radcliffe (1999) observed that geographical skills like cartography have also been used by states to reinforce national territory, with citizens forced into limited identities through the discursive power of these boundaries. These suggest that the content of school geography, rather than being neutral and objective, is in fact complicit in the processes of social reproduction. In fact Ross (2000) suggested that rather than describing the world, geography lessons construct the

world for students.

Hopkin (2001) suggests that school geography textbooks in the UK reflect prevailing policy and curricular stances, and provide students with very limited views of the world. For instance the textbooks produced for the 1991 national curriculum limited students' knowledge of less developed countries (especially African countries), while the 1995 series focused mainly on the UK. These representations are important, as noted by Hopkin (2001), because of the centrality of textbooks to teaching and learning in schools, and also because of their status as a "repository of legitimated, or 'authorised' knowledge" (p.50). Morgan (2003) similarly examined the influence of school geography textbooks on students' geographical imaginations of the UK. He suggested that textbooks reinforced notions of national space, and notions of a homogenous unit called "Britain", even in the face of changing political, economic and cultural geographies on the ground.

In the Singapore context, the role of education in Singapore's economic development has been paramount, with researchers noting how education "features in many national strategies" and is "always adjusting to align with national directions" (Ng, 2008, p. 2). Yip et al., (1997) and Gopinathan (1997) discuss these major reforms and alignments in Singapore's education system in the first 25 years of independence from a focus on rapid quantitative expansion of education facilities, which included a technical bias in the school curriculum, to meet the needs of a rapidly industrializing economy in the 1960s, to the current emphasis on critical thinking, creativity and national commitment which acknowledges the contemporary knowledge-driven and globalised economic environment. The power of the Singapore state in setting

education policies and determining what is valuable knowledge is clear. Scott (2000) suggested that policy documents do not necessarily translate into implementation without a high level of prescription, central control of policy implementation and funding, and the use of regulatory bodies. In the Singapore education context these factors do indeed exist and representations of the nation through school textbooks are firmly within the purview of the state through writers from the then Institute of Education in the 1970s, the Curriculum Development Institute of Singapore (CDIS) in the 1980s, and the Curriculum Planning and Development Department (CPDD) from the 1990s to today.

Our analysis of representations of public housing in school geography textbooks in Singapore seeks to understand the ways in which geography education supports the developmental state's nation building agenda. In this deconstruction, it would also be important to ask what gaps there are in these representations of Singapore's nationhood, and how these exclusions could potentially weaken Singapore's future development by ignoring important counter-narratives.

### **Nation Building through Housing the Nation**

According to Blake and Nicol (2004, p. 17) development of housing is largely a product of both history and geography – where a historical perspective brings descriptions and analyses of decisions made by individuals, families and by governments. Geography, on the other hand, focuses on physical landscape features, and the socio-economic conditions of the society that influences landuse patterns. This section will consider role of government in the provision of public housing and the ways (public) housing was planned and developed to

create modern Singapore.

While public housing as a concept originated in the developed world, it remained largely a marginalized sector due to the larger role of private developers that argue for stronger market roles in the housing market (see Chua, 1997). In the United States, housing is viewed as a consumer good with the market deciding the rules of the game. In European countries, the state ideologically sought to provide affordable public housing, but financial constraints hindered it from achieving the goals, thus eroding its role in housing provision. To many in Europe, public housing was a “returnless expenditure” (c.f. Chua, 1997, p. 3, also see Seelenyi, 1983). In the British case, the provision of public housing through subsidized rental facilities was negatively compared with privately developed housing units which were owner occupied. With increasing neoliberal tendencies, the British government under Margaret Thatcher later encouraged families to own their houses rather than rent by paying a discounted price. Positively, more than a million families responded and changed their housing status from tenants to homeowners (see Saunders, 1990). Contrary to this, in Singapore, the government played a very active role in the provision of affordable public housing, influencing the larger market logic right from its inception.

Singapore, during the 1950s faced housing issues which were typical of the developing world, which ranged from inadequate housing, poor sanitation and hygiene, to a lack of other basic amenities (see Kaye, 1960; Kong and Yeoh, 2003). To address the housing situation, the Housing Development Board (HDB) was established during 1960 to prioritize provision of adequate shelter. Within five years, HDB successfully managed to ease the housing shortage. Since then, HDB

under Ministry of National Development (MND), concentrated on providing quality housing and became the sole authority to plan estates and build (public) housing for all (Chua, 2000; also see Wang, 2011, p. 370). Since 1968, the government allowed residents to use their Central Provident Fund (CPF) contributions to offset down payments and mortgages for their homes. Furthermore, incentives were added to encourage home ownership. Subsequently, the share of residents living in HDB increased from a mere 20% in 1965 to more than 80% today (see Wang, 2011). While successful public housing during Singapore’s early years facilitated shelter provision and home ownership for Singaporeans, in the longer run it also helped in deepening a sense of belonging to the neighbourhood, and to the larger nation. Belonging to the neighbourhood was further enhanced by providing distinct architectural identities to different HDB estates. Through public housing, the state emphasised the development of a modern nation and with further economic growth, Singaporeans demanded better modern public housing conditions and amenities. HDB responded to the demand and attention was given to not only better housing units, but also to upgrading the surrounding living environments (see Kong and Yeoh, 2003). To meet further aspirations, “Executive Condominiums” were introduced by HDB in order to cater to aspirational middle class families. Later, the Design, Build and Sell Scheme (DBSS) was launched in order to provide more flexibility and choice. HDB also introduced signature design competitions which resulted in development of the Pinnacle@ Duxton – a 50 storey modern public housing estate in the middle of the city centre. Housing estates such as the Pinnacle provided young Singaporeans with the opportunity to own a home in the city centre and helped HDB to scale up on its innovation to create high-rise and yet

liveable housing facilities. HDB's success has increasingly led many countries

around the world emulate the HDB model.

Figure 1: Singapore's public housing: Celebrating 50 years of building modern Singapore (Photo source: Diganta Das)



The preceding discussion outlines the importance of Singapore's public housing landscape to its goals of constructing a modern nation, and building a sense of identity and belonging to the nation. How has this narrative of successful housing provision been represented to Singapore students through geography as a subject? In the next section we examine how public housing is depicted in Singapore geography textbooks from 1969 to the present. Foskett (1996) points out that meaning is constructed from practice by policy texts, and then interpreted and recreated through other means. Through this analysis of geography textbooks, we aim to understand how geography education has played a role in constructing particular versions of nationhood and national identity for students.

### Public Housing Representations in Geography Textbooks

We have analysed 8 school geography

textbooks that were used in Singapore schools over the period 1969 to 2015. Numerous pictures and textual descriptions of public housing in Singapore were found in these textbooks. These school geography textbooks are read as cultural texts to interpret how dominant versions of reality and practice can be constructed through the material and represented landscapes of public housing to institutionalise and naturalise actively the ideologies of 'nation' and 'nationhood'. The following section deploys an interpretative textual analysis method to examine the "imagined geographies" of high-rise and high-density public housing estates. We argue that the state harnessed the techniques of power in and through education to represent public housing as a successful urban form and planning solution to population problems in the earlier years to an emblem of high standards of living as the nation progressed along the development trajectory. In recent years, public housing

is also (re)presented as an “aspirational urban form” (Leary & McCarthy, 2013: 9) of “inclusive housing” (Goh et al., 2015:96) where people of all walks of life willingly choose to live and work, contributing to a strong sense of place and belonging.

### Housing a Nation

Societies occupy space and this occupancy provides a rich resource to create a national identity (Short, 1991). The local school geography textbooks in Singapore emerged during a time of important social, economic, cultural and environmental changes, and have mobilised the national environmental ideologies of Singapore’s small island size and challenge of rapid population growth in the course of nation-building. The revised series of primary school geography textbooks published during this period emphasise the role of the HDB in transforming the national space of Singapore and to house a nation by providing affordable housing for the diverse “Chinese, Malay, Indian, Ceylonese and probably Eurasian and European . . . Peoples of Singapore” (cited

from Nair et al.’s (1969, p. 18) *Junior Singapore Geographies Book 4*).

The optimistic picture of progressively housing the nation is depicted through images of public housing and citing the rapid rates of completing these flats. Cheng’s (1973, p. 29) Chinese geography textbook titled *New Geography* (‘新地理’) describes how low-cost flats built by the HDB is “a remarkable success” and has served to resettle people previously living in the densely populated parts of the city (see Figure 2). These low-cost flats “built by the Government” were sold to low-wage “Singapore citizens” (Nair et al., 1969, p. 20) through the long-term instalment plans in the “Home Ownership Scheme” (Cheng, 1973, p. 30). The public housing theme is represented as a landscape of nationhood where citizen’s home ownership is bounded up with wages from employment and the CPF to pay for home instalment loans. As the public housing became ubiquitous and synonymous with the HDB landscape, the imagined community of a “nation” is maintained and reproduced through the material landscape as well as the representations in school geography textbooks.

Figure 2: Low-cost flats represented in Cheng’s (1973, p. 30) primary school geography textbook



School geography textbooks are also replete with ways of representing national space to help the young readers to imagine a rational spatial order of places. Where people live is a focus in these early textbook accounts. Jurong, Toa Payoh and Queenstown were cited as “good examples . . . of satellite towns” (Nair et al., 1969, p. 20). These satellite towns are “away from the city” (Nair et al., 1969, p. 20) where people choose to live despite having to work in the city. The texts stress the modernity of these “satellites towns”, which are “modern housing estates with water, electricity and gas” (Cheng, 1973, p. 29) and well equipped with services. Following Ross (2000), geography lessons are constitutive of the real world. These framings of modernity through the representations of public housing have tangible and material consequences in terms of how the young reader understands particular aspects of their rapidly changing lives in the face of modernity and growing urbanism. For instance, the young reader is encouraged to rationalise how “land for building is expensive . . . [hence] building upwards, more people can live on a small piece of land” (Nair et al., 1969, p. 20). In these early accounts of public housing in school geography textbooks, the representation of public housing is interwoven with land scarcity rationality discourse as part of a socialisation process to generate consensus among the young readers into accepting high-rise living as a necessary way of living.

### **Planning of National Space**

The organisation of national space for housing is an important construction of Singapore as a modern nation-state. It is therefore not surprising the series of secondary school geography textbooks in the 1970s to the 1990s often depict pictures of picturesque HDB housing estates that are orderly and clean. These

images are not neutral. We argue that these images are used to legitimise the means of urban planning as an instrument of power to inscribe new meanings in the material landscape (c.f. Winchester et al., 2003), and if there were consequences, it was necessary in the exercise of dominant power to establish spatial order in the landscape. In Chow et al.’s (1972) *Temasek Geography for Secondary Schools 4*, the effects of public housing and associated urban change are legitimised through the discourse of high population growth. As these “middle-class residential estates” were “built in the ‘rural’ areas, including former rubber plantations”, the distribution of Singapore’s rapidly increasing population was dispersed from the city centre (Chow et al., 1972, p. 35). Population distribution maps were presented to show the “uneven” spatial change. To counter the side effects of urban sprawl, urban planning was represented in these school geography textbooks as a necessary process to establish spatial order:

“The residential landscape of a HDB housing estate is a planned one. The flats are neatly organized into ‘new towns’ such as Bishan New Town and Tampines New Town. They are planned in such a way that many facilities . . . are located within easy reach of the residents . . . If houses are not properly planned and built, the residential landscape will not appear as orderly as an HDB estate, the residents may not even have a proper supply of water and electricity.” (CDIS *Secondary School Geography 1*, 1982, pp. 172-173).

“[P]anners of urban settlements make deliberate decisions to place certain land uses in certain areas . . . An example of the importance of accessibility [in urban planning] is the way in which housing may have easy access to industrial jobs near them,

since they do not have to travel far nor pay a lot in travelling costs. In Singapore, flatted factories in Bukit Merah are located beside-rise public housing” (CPDD Understanding Geography 3, 1998, pp. 50-51).

Figure 3: Clementi New Town from a urban planning perspective (Source: CDIS, 1982, pp. 183-184).



As Chua (1997) noted, the material landscape of public housing testifies to the efficacy of the state and contributes significantly to the People’s Action Party (PAP) government’s legitimacy to govern. We extend this argument by pointing out that the planned public housing landscape

is an ideological construct of which its representations rely upon urban planning as an instrument of power to be encoded, naturalised and legitimised in geography school textbooks. Geography students were tasked to take the lens of an urban planner in ‘decision-making exercises’.



For instance, students are tasked to examine why Queenstown was “not as well-planned as Toa Payoh” (CDIS Understanding Geography 1 Workbook, 1982, p. 98). This practice of urban planning promotes the need to perceive space as a tabula rasa in order to make difficult decisions and to establish a new spatial (and social) order. Accepting urban planning as the way to manage national space is deeply rooted in the national consciousness and is arguably achieved partly through education.

What is omitted through these representations of public housing, however, are the forgotten landscapes of informal housing, including the rural villages and city slums, as well as the obliteration of the politics of resettlement. These exclusions could potentially create a post-independence nation with a historical amnesia of its vulnerabilities, and a weakening of its national identity.

### **Changing Aspirations and Changing Representations**

In the 2000s, representations of public housing landscapes were depicted in school geography textbooks under the theme of ‘Development’. Two textbooks published during this era were analysed – Interactive Geography Elective (SNP Panpac, 2004) and Our World A Closer Look (Haines, 2003). Rostow’s 5-stage trajectory of development is used in the text to exemplify how a high level of development can be indicated by high standards of living. Subsequently, images of HDB estates in Simei (see SNP Panpac, 2004, p. 244) and Toa Payoh (see Haines et al., 2003, p. 279) are used to illustrate how Singaporean urbanites enjoy a higher standard of living as compared to rural dwellers. It is also claimed that HDB “now aims to further enhance the standard of living in Singapore by upgrading older

estates and building better quality apartments” so as to meet the “expectations of its people” (Haines et al., 2003, p. 284). In these accounts, public housing representations are mobilised to trace the evolving role of the HDB and to generate dominant consensus among geography students that high-rise public housing is the continued and preferred way of living in contemporary Singapore.

Geography school textbooks capture the changing focus of the nation’s housing challenges and the renewed mission of HDB. In recent years, discourses of “inclusive housing” and the “inclusive city” have found its way into the representations of public housing in school geography textbooks. All About Geography Secondary Two: Urban Living written by Goh et al. (2015) reiterates HDB’s renewed aims to meet rising aspirations of a newly affluent society. In their account, “inclusive housing” has the characteristics of affordability and “ensuring a quality living environment” (ibid., 2015, p. 96). It should have “3-Generation (3G) facilities” for all ages and the use of “[d]istinctive physical features and landmarks” to build a sense of place and belonging of a place. What emerges from these public housing representations is a projection of an aspirational suburban form that is highly liveable and imbued with coded practices of “community” lived in and through these spaces. These are evident attempts by the state to influence Singaporeans’ expectations of public housing estates and how they remain desirable despite the rise of private condominium estates.

The overall picture one gets from a reading of the school textbooks of the contemporary period is one of the continued successes of HDB’s social mission in meeting the changing aspirations of the nation. The effect of this is to provide a textual unity to the

fragmented geographical diversity of public housing landscapes. This narrative of national public housing success is maintained in the face of competing narratives of growing dissatisfaction among the increasing middle class who do not qualify for public housing as well as diverse liveability issues across the different generations of new towns. The meta-narrative of 'affordability' also obscures the conundrum created over the use of CPF funds for public housing and the resulting reduction of funds for retirement adequacy (Singapore Policy Journal, 21 September 2015). Other omissions include the representation of the deterioration of the material landscape over time, and the lived experiences of the occupants. These exclusions fail to bring to light the role of residents in shaping the everyday spaces of public housing, and how the real challenges of public housing may potentially widen the divide between HDB and the people.

### **Counter-Narratives and Geography Education for the Future**

Our analysis of the ways in which public housing is represented in school geography textbooks suggests that geography education supports particular dominant narratives about Singapore as a nation. From the provision of high quality and modern housing for the nation, to the rational and efficient use of space through urban planning, and representations of community and inclusivity in these texts, geography education has been part of a larger educational policy to actively institutionalise and naturalise the ideologies of 'nation' and 'nationhood'. In addition, these textbooks underscore the state's ability to provide a high standard of living for its population, and legitimise its past and ongoing policy decisions with regard to urban planning and public housing.

We suggest that the textbooks also ignore aspects of Singapore's housing development, including its resettlement policies and reliance on housing as a means to fund retirement. We argue that omitting these counter-narratives from the success story of public housing provision and nation building may undermine the quality geography education in our schools, and ironically weaken nation building. The Ministry of Education has embraced national programmes such as Thinking Schools, Learning Nation since 1997, and understanding that Singapore requires a citizenry that can engage a globalised knowledge economy and participate actively to find solutions to Singapore's ongoing and future challenges. Geography teachers have been tasked with helping students to "reach a decision through critical thinking, analysis and evaluation of geographical issues" and to "question and think reflectively through the inquiry approach" (Singapore Ministry of Education, 2013, p. 8). Providing students with access to these counter-narratives within a more challenging geography curriculum is important to engage their critical faculties and enhance understandings of the contradictions and tensions within society. Such an education better prepares our students as stakeholders in the nation's future.

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