EVERY AUTHORITARIAN government worth its salt understands the importance of commanding the national historical narrative. It is a concept that was perhaps best encapsulated by George Orwell in his classic dystopian novel *1984*: “Who controls the past controls the future, who controls the present controls the past.”

Countless one-party states and banana republics have banned books, banished professors and pumped propaganda into the education system. But few have managed so successfully to stamp their imprint on their nation’s history as Singapore’s first prime minister, Lee Kuan yew, and his ruling People’s Action Party (PaP).

Just as Lee dubbed his two-part memoirs *The Singapore Story*, so many Singaporeans perceive their own history to be little more than the Lee Kuan yew story, with a bit of Sir Stamford Raffles thrown in for good measure.

The well-rehearsed official narrative tells of a Singapore that was little more than a sleepy fishing village until Raffles, a representative of the East India Company, arrived in 1819 and planted the British flag there. Raffles built Singapore into a successful trading outpost, but the vast majority of its people remained disenfranchised and mired in poverty until Lee took control amid the social and political turbulence that buffeted the city after the Second World War. Lee then dragged the people of Singapore, initially kicking and screaming, “from third world to first,” as he himself puts it in the sub-title of the second volume of his memoirs.

Given the government’s hegemonic control over the school curriculum, universities and the mass media — and its belief that these institutions must perform a “nation-building” function — this narrative has become deeply entrenched and gone largely unchallenged.

But a new book, *Singapore: A Biography*, makes a concerted if subtle attempt to wrest Singapore’s historical memory from Lee Kuan Yew’s unyielding grip. Turning the state-sanctioned timeline on its head, the authors begin their study of the island in the 14th century and draw it to a close in 1965, shortly after Lee’s accession to power.

There are not many books about Singapore where the first mention of Lee comes on page 327. The authors, Hong Kong-based academic Mark Ravinder Frost and Singaporean writer Yu-Mei Balasingamchow, delve into Singapore’s distant and little-known past in an attempt to challenge the orthodoxy that the Southeast Asian island was a stagnant backwater before it was pulled up by the PAP.

Self-consciously following in the footsteps of historian Simon Schama — who believes history should “bring a world to life, rather than entomb it in erudite discourse” — the authors draw vivid portraits of a Singapore shaped by pirates, prostitutes and prima donnas as well as the usual cast of colonial officials and Chinese businessmen.

Much history is invariably written by the victors, but Frost and Balasingamchow try to draw attention to the underdogs and their vital contribution to Singapore’s cultural, economic and political development: the Indian convict laborers who built some of the city’s better-known colonial edifices such as the former Government House (the present-day Istana or president’s residence) and St Andrew’s Cathedral, the opium-sustained Chinese coolies who kept Singapore’s people and goods moving and the Japanese prostitutes who serviced a population dominated by single men away from their families, whether they were colonial officials or rickshaw-pullers.

Aimed at the general reader, the volume is nicely designed, with paintings, photographs and reproduced documents giving an added richness to the many fascinating tales that the authors recount.

There’s Daing Ibrahim, who was effectively deprived of his hereditary right to rule Singapore when his father ceded control to Raffles and the
British in 1819. He fell into piracy before being “turned” by the British in the late 1830s and leading the charge that eventually made the waters off Singapore safe for the shipping that was vital for trade.

Then there’s William Pickering, the first European official in Singapore who could speak Chinese, who discovered in the 1870s that local translators were mocking the colonial regime in their translations of official documents, calling officials “red-haired barbarians” (“ang moh” in the Hokkien dialect, a term still used to describe Westerners in Singapore), judges “devils” and police “big dogs.”

Pickering suspected that the system had been infiltrated by Chinese secret societies and, in his later role as the so-called Protector of Chinese, would attempt to stamp out the simmering inter-society violence that was undermining the colony’s development. Despite his best efforts, he ultimately failed, and his career was ended in 1887 by an axe-blows from a disgruntled Chinese carpenter and apparent secret society member.

One of the strangest stories is the mutiny by the men of a predominantly-Muslim Indian regiment in 1915, partly fueled by German propaganda that Kaiser Wilhelm II had converted to Islam and would lead a global jihad against non-believers. The British eventually put down the rebellion, with the help of some Russian, French and Japanese troops, but not before 40 Europeans, both civilians and soldiers, had been killed in the fighting. Of the 201 Indian soldiers found guilty of participating in the mutiny, 47 were executed by firing squad.

Although the book grew out of research for an interactive history gallery at the government-controlled National Museum of Singapore, it is something of a Trojan horse volume. It masquerades as little more than an interesting collection of stories, while shedding light on the deeper historical roots of modern Singapore.

On the economic front, the book argues that Singapore’s status as an international trading center stems from a combination of the rigid British promotion of free trade and the deepening of long-standing trade routes operated by Chinese junk-owners and traders from across the Malay archipelago. Fourteenth century Javanese jewelry and Chinese coins and pottery found in Singapore point to the existence of a successful entrepot long before early Singapore succumbed to a mysterious fire around 1611.

The city’s reliance on cheap, imported labor, which has become a testy political issue in contemporary Singapore, had its origins in the 19th century. The stories of migrant laborers worked to the bone to pay off the debts incurred in paying labor agents, entrenched racism toward domestic workers and tensions between recent and more-established arrivals may be historical but they would ring true in present-day Singapore.

The authors also try to remind depoliticized Singaporeans of an interwar past when “political debate was everywhere, not just in classrooms, in newspapers or reading rooms, but everywhere.”

A walk through interwar Singapore, Frost and Balasingamchow argue, would be “an alien and confusing experience” for the city-state’s modern-day residents, with impromptu political gatherings, radical newspapers and would-be revolutionaries taking to the streets.

In a cosmopolitan colonial city that was increasingly dominated by ethnic Chinese, debates about race and nationality, largely considered taboo in today’s Singapore, abounded.

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In 1914, a group of Asian and Eurasian businessmen launched the *Malaya Tribune*, one of several vibrant newspapers, which openly debated what it was to be a “Malayan” and whether the Malays, the region’s original inhabitants, ought to be given special status — issues that continue to wrack Malaysia and Singapore today.

But colonial officials were hardly more enthusiastic about promoting the liberal values of free speech and political engagement than the PAP, and the interwar period saw the beginning of what became Singapore’s ultra-efficient machinery of repression.

Like contemporary Singapore’s Internal Security Department, which recently hauled a Christian evangelist preacher over the coals for making disparaging remarks about Buddhism and Taoism, the colonial Special Branch kept up surveillance on “all racial, religious and social activities.”

The authors argue that the Japanese occupation, following Britain’s humiliating capitulation in 1942, had a profound impact on Singaporean society, hinting that Japanese militarism and autocracy laid the foundations for the domineering rule of the PAP. The period of Japanese rule was, according to Frost and Balasingamchow, “the first encounter with intense state propaganda” for many Singaporeans. “Japan’s efforts to establish tight administrative control over its conquered territories brought the government closer to an average Singaporean resident than at any point in the island’s previous history,” they write, presaging “the birth of the territory’s first bureaucratically obsessed state.”

Unfortunately, and as a likely result of the self-censorship that continues to pervade Singapore, the authors never draw out any of these themes explicitly. And once Lee’s domineering presence pops up in their account, they seem to abandon the critical lens through which they so adeptly examined the pre-independence history of Singapore. Whereas other first-person accounts are analyzed and deconstructed, extracts from Lee’s memoirs and speeches are taken at face value.

Some of the commentary on Lee and the PAP is fawning, to say the least. The authors describe his 1963 election campaign as “an unscripted, unrehearsed drama of national proportions,” led by the man who was an “on-screen idol” to his adoring people. Never mind the admission in the next paragraph that Lee had gone for media training with BBC interviewer Hugh Burnett.

There’s also the bizarre statement that, despite the many challenges facing newly independent Singapore in 1965, there was “grounds for optimism” in the fact that the PAP had managed to crush the parliamentary opposition, having rounded up many of its leaders and jailed them indefinitely without trial.

It is almost as if Frost and Balasingamchow are paying the necessary dues to ensure their book is published and marketed in Singapore, their biggest potential market. Closing the book, they rue the PAP’s determination to set the historical clock “back to zero,” warning that “if we fail to comprehend what happened in the ‘old’ Singapore — fail to understand its passions, dream, failures and accomplishments — then we can never fully appreciate the extraordinary change that followed.”

What they don’t say is that Singaporeans need to develop a better understanding of their own history not so much to “fully appreciate” what the PAP has done for them but to understand the limitations of their rigid political system and how they can improve it.

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