

Survey on Public Perceptions of Singapore's History

A survey on public perceptions of Singapore's history finds that the three events which rank the highest on awareness are the opening of the two casinos in 2010, the 2003 SARS outbreak and the major MRT breakdown in 2011.

Olivia Siong

***Channel NewsAsia*, 25 January 2015**

Singapore: More than 1,500 Singaporeans aged 21 and above were asked about events in Singapore's history which they remember best or consider important in a recent survey on public perceptions of Singapore's history by the Institute of Policy Studies.

Fifty historical events were presented to Singaporeans - from the founding of modern Singapore in 1819 to the last general election in 2011. When asked if they were aware of the occurrence of the events, little surprise that more recent events were remembered better.

The three events that ranked highest on awareness were the opening of the two casinos in 2010, the 2003 SARS outbreak and the major MRT breakdown in 2011.

At the lower end of the rankings were Operation Cold Store, the "Marxist conspiracy plot", the Laju hostage incident and the Graduate Mothers Scheme. Less than a quarter of the Singaporeans polled were aware of these events.

Researchers concluded that the top 35 events that respondents were most aware of could be grouped into three broad groups - namely, nation building events, events that demonstrated societal differences, as well as events when national resilience was demonstrated.

However, they also noted that awareness did not necessarily mean respondents felt these were important historical events.

Among the top 10 events deemed most important were the formation of the Housing and Development Board, the creation of the national pledge, the opening of Changi Airport, the official launch of the MRT and the SARS outbreak.

Not forgotten was that emotional moment when then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew announced the separation of Singapore from Malaysia on national television.

"The SARS outbreak in 2003 - I think that was a very important event in our history because it showed the collective effort of Singaporeans in the face of adversity," said 21-year-old Ng Woon Aik, who was waiting for the university term to start.

Administrator Ravinder K Sandhu, 50, said: "Formation of HDB is very important because you see how we've progressed along the way and with time how we've actually improved. And also how the environment has changed tremendously to suit the kind of living standard we have today."

Researchers said the findings give insight into how the past may impact the present. Dr Leong Chan-Hoong, senior research fellow at the National University of Singapore's Institute

of Policy Studies, said: "From the survey, it's not too surprising Singaporeans view physical infrastructure as important. But what's surprising to me is if they also assign equal emphasis on symbolic events, like the creation of the national pledge for instance.

"I think what that data shows is that we're not just looking at physical achievements, the kind of things that you can build over time, but also the kind of tribulations and challenges that we overcome, and I think that's really heartening."

Dr Leong added the survey helps identify the narratives and events that resonate with Singaporeans, and that will enable Singapore to build a unique national identity.