



Interview with Professor Tan Tai Yong, 6th S R Nathan Fellow

Rachel Hau



Professor Tan Tai Yong is the Institute of Policy Studies' 6th S R Nathan Fellow for the Study of Singapore. He is President and Professor of Humanities (History) at Yale-NUS College. A graduate of NUS, Professor Tan completed his doctorate at Cambridge University. He has been a faculty member of the NUS Department of History since 1992, and has served in various leadership positions within NUS, including Vice Provost (Student Life) at NUS (2010–2014), Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (2004–2009), and Founding Director of the Institute of South Asian Studies (2004–2015).

We spoke to Professor Tan about his upcoming lecture series, his thoughts on Singaporeans' relationship with history and our colonial past, Mahatma Gandhi and "soul-force", and much more.

Q: What do you hope to achieve with your IPS-Nathan lecture series?

Prof. Tan Tai Yong: As a historian, naturally, my interest is to get audiences interested in and to have a better appreciation of Singapore history.

People sometimes think Singapore history is too top-down or boring. But if we can think carefully about our long, complex history, it can tell us a lot about what we are.

History doesn't move in a straight line. We don't have a pre-ordained trajectory. Nations have their ups and downs, and sometimes things don't go according to plan. It is very important to understand historical context and contingencies. Only then will history come to life and help us understand our current situation.

I hope people will appreciate that history is not just about national education, that historical consciousness will give personal meaning to our history.

So, I'm hoping to address all these themes in my lectures, and that I would be able to give a more nuanced and complex picture of Singapore's history to the audiences.

Q: What is Singaporeans' relationship with our national history?

Prof. Tan Tai Yong: The relationship is one that is imposed by our education system. We are taught and grow up believing that Singapore's history started in 1819, our founder was Sir Stamford Raffles, there was this journey to nationhood, we overcame adversities of war, occupation, merger and separation, then moved from a third- to a first-world country.

There was a certain narrative and trajectory that was told to us. It was intended to give Singaporeans a sense of their past to give them hope for the future and hopefully a better understanding of their roles as citizens.

But after a while, young Singaporeans particularly feel that this is propaganda. They want to hear about the exciting, controversial, tense parts of our past. I think we are going to see more people asking questions about our national narrative. Not that the narrative is wrong, but they want to see the edges and nuances, as well as hear stories not previously told in the school textbooks.

For that to happen, more research has to be done and more histories written. The more versions we add to the narrative, the more complete the picture we'll have of our past.

Q: Singaporeans seem not to be as antagonistic about our colonial masters as many other previously colonised nations. Why is this so?

Prof. Tan Tai Yong: This has something to do with our national policies. In 1965 when Singapore became a sovereign state, the political leaders thought, as they projected forward,

what sort of historical past should we try to remember, and how would that help in the enterprise of nation-building?

There was a concern that, given Singapore's multi-racial population, people would go back to their "primeval roots", leading possibly to racial tensions and polarisation. To avoid this, the political leaders decided that the most neutral party would be the British. That was why the narrative has it that the founding in 1819 led to Singapore's move towards modern statehood. Subsequently, the British remained in Singaporean public consciousness as benign and enlightened colonialists, with the modern state of Singapore built on the foundations of the colony.

The other thing is Singapore did not go through a period of mass-based nationalist movement or revolution, unlike India, which went through half a century of nationalist movement. To build a new nation, you needed to have the negative other. And in most post-colonial states, that negative other was the erstwhile imperialist power. In Singapore, we didn't go through a prolonged, mass-based nationalist movement. We had a transfer of power. In other words, when the British decided it was time for them to go they handed power over to a group of chosen successors.

There wasn't that rupture between the nationalists and the colonialists. Therefore, the kind of antagonism you see in other countries of their colonial masters did not happen in Singapore.

Q: One of your research interests is the Sikh diaspora. What do you think is something most people don't know about the Sikh community in Singapore?

Prof. Tan Tai Yong: I was looking for a topic to write for my honour's thesis, when someone suggested that I study the Sikh community. I approached leaders of their community, and eventually wrote about the Singapore Khalsa Association, to try to understand the evolution of the community in Singapore.

The Sikh community is a very interesting community because colony and empire created opportunities for them to move out of Punjab. They were able, on settling in Singapore, to keep very focused on the things that were important to them as a community, such as religious worship, building cultural institutions, and maintaining social mores.

The Sikhs, when they came to a city, Singapore, moved out of a social milieu—the agrarian or rural Punjab. There were new challenges—modernity, having to mix with other races, and so on. This had some impact on the way they developed their practices subsequently.



Prof. Tan being interviewed by IPS at Yale-NUS College.

Q: Which non-Singaporean personality in history do you most admire or find infinitely fascinating? Why?

Prof. Tan Tai Yong: I find Mahatma Gandhi, the leader of the Indian nationalist movement from the 1920s onwards, to be a really fascinating figure.

He was once described by Winston Churchill as a half-naked *fakir* (an Indian holy man). British politicians have found him very difficult to deal with. They said that he was either a saint trying to be a politician, or a politician pretending to be a saint, because of his ability to adopt a certain personal lifestyle, and develop very interesting methods of contesting the imperial power.

These included non-violent campaigns, civil disobedience and “soul-force” (*satya graha*). You don’t use violence against the colonialists; you use moral force. I think he succeeded in doing that.

Remarkably, he was able to bring an end to the British empire in India through non-violence, and personified what he thought was morally and politically important for the Indian people. A belief in themselves, that they had a great civilisation, that they had what it took to regain their rightful place. *Swadeshi*, *Swaraj* (self-reliance, self-rule) were concepts he developed.

There are also aspects of his life that people have criticised. He kept a certain lifestyle that was quite complicated. He refused to negotiate with the British when he had the upper hand because he disagreed with how some activities were degenerating into violence.

A very complex man, but one that had tremendous impact, and still largely venerated as the founding father of India.

Q: Why is studying history important?

Prof. Tan Tai Yong: I've always thought of history of a country as a form of social collective memory. A person without memory would not have personality, character, or presence. Similarly, for countries without a sense of your own history, you're not able to understand your current situation and future challenges.

If you look at many of the world's conflicts and intractable issues today—Kashmir, Middle East, the Korean peninsula—you can't understand why they are happening without an appreciation of history.

Of course, a lot of people think that history is just an academic subject, but it's more than that, history is all around us.

History is very fundamental to our existence as individuals, as a people. It's about developing historical consciousness—asking “what does this history mean to you personally?” I think that's something that all of us should try to aspire to.

Q: Do your children share your love of history? Why, or why not?

Prof. Tan Tai Yong: (Laughs) Unfortunately, no. Maybe because I talk too much about history at home. They think, when I talk of history, that I want them to read history books and specialise in history, but that is not my intention. I just want them to appreciate historical depth in anything they encounter.

I've spoken to educationists about what's the best way to teach history. Is teaching history as an examinable subject the best way to inspire interest? Schools are trying to do more now—engage museums, take students on field trips, understand history from an experiential point of view. I think that is the right step forward.

Coming back to my own children, I think they did not enjoy the history they learnt in the classroom. And that developed in them an aversion towards history.

But I'm sure, when they get to their 30s, they will better appreciate history. I meet people all the time, who hated history in school, but now they're older, history is one of their favourite topics. They find it enriching and important. You look at popular culture, like Netflix—it has very popular historical dramas. I think there is an interest in history, it's just that people see history as a burden in school. Later in life, they see history differently and will not dispute that history is indeed very important.

Q: You've served in many leadership roles over the years, ranging from statutory boards to think tanks and university administration. What is one key lesson you have drawn on leadership?

Prof. Tan Tai Yong: I'm fortunate to have been given opportunities to lead in various capacities. I led an academic department as head of history, I was Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at National University of Singapore (NUS), and then I was Vice Provost (Student Life) at NUS, and now, the president of Yale-NUS College. I've also played roles outside of college, I was Chairman of the National Museum, and so on.

In all these, the important lesson I learnt is how to work with people. A leader is nothing without people. I have always believed that the job becomes easier when you find the right people to work with and support you.

So this has been a lesson I always take with me. I go around looking for the best people. The first thing I acknowledge is, there are many things I don't know and cannot do. So the strategy is to find people who know, and can do those things, and then you have a nice complement.

Of course, a good leader must also try to think further, deeper, and maybe here is where the historian in me has helped. I can reflect on things from a longer perspective, and not get hassled by the immediacy of issues, because you take a step back all the time and ask how this developed, what are the longer-term implications, how do we find longer term solutions with better outcomes.

So maybe the historian in me has helped me in leading. Stepping back, not reacting, thinking carefully about things, understand contexts and having good people around you—those are the key ingredients of my leadership style.

Prof. Tan's first lecture, "[The long and short of Singapore history: Cycles, pivots and continuities](#)", will take place on 5 Sept, 6.30 pm. Register [here](#).

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