

IPS-Nathan Lectures  
Lecture VI — What to Do with History?  
Professor Tan Tai Yong  
8 May 2019

# **IPS-Nathan Lecture Series**

**Lecture VI —  
What to Do with History?**

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Singapore**

**8 May 2019  
Shaw Foundation Alumni House  
National University of Singapore**

## **Introduction**

This is my 6<sup>th</sup> and final lecture of the series. In previous lectures, I have spoken of Singapore's long history, explained how Singapore was shaped by forces of early globalisation, and of the continuities that underlie Singapore's position as an open port city, constantly searching for hinterlands.

In this long narrative, stretching over 700 years, Singapore's current status as a nation state appears but as a short blip. Will Singapore endure as a nation state, even as it reverts to its traditional instincts as a global or port city that needs to stay open and connected to thrive? Where are we in the latest cycle of history, and what sort of future can we anticipate?

Since 1965, Singapore has always been a forward-looking nation state. It has tried to anticipate problems and stay ahead of the curve. This is of critical importance to a young city-state that does not have a civilisational core and a natural hinterland, and whose destiny has always been tied to larger forces beyond its shores.

Even as we look forward, it is important to understand that our current situation is always the result of preceding events, and that we are shaped by the circumstances, choices and actions of the past. Therefore, we cannot

understand our present situation without knowing history, much as we have been reminded that progress cannot be made by constantly looking at the rear mirror.

As I had explained in an earlier lecture, there was the sense, by the 1980s, that young Singaporeans had lost touch with their history, and there was a need to introduce national education to provide an appreciation of the challenges we have faced in the past — where we have come from and how we got here — to give us a better sense of how we should be managing the present and can perhaps plan for the future.

In this lecture, I intend to discuss how we can better understand and appreciate our history. Is merely knowing what had happened in the past sufficient? I will argue that having historical knowledge provides a necessary foundation. But, to truly understand what history means, and how it affects our personal and public lives, I will argue that we need to develop a deep sense of historical consciousness and cultivate our capacity for historical imagination.

### **How well do we know our history?**

Singaporeans are generally aware of the official “Singapore Story”. This is taught in our schools, featured in the biographies of our political leaders, performed in our National Day Parades, and exhibited in the national

museums. Because of this exposure, Singaporeans may think that they already know all there is to know about Singapore's history, from colonialism, war and occupation, to political change and independence.

Singaporeans are also aware of the broad history of the region, and key pivotal world events like the Second World War. Their historical knowledge can be seen from the results of a pop quiz on Singapore history, conducted by Channel NewsAsia (CNA) last year. Among its interviewees, CNA found that younger Singaporeans between 20 and 40 years old did better on the quiz. These Singaporeans were exposed to key dates and events as part of national education, and therefore more well-versed with these facts.<sup>1</sup> This is not surprising as Singaporeans, especially those who went to school in the 1990s onwards, have been exposed to national education and compulsory social studies, which included history, in the school curriculum.

But, history is more than the official Singapore narrative. This is not to say historical knowledge imparted through state institutions (like schools and museums) is not important. The overarching narrative — the way in which the official history is written — provides a frame and a chronology with which to

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<sup>1</sup> Fann Sim, 'Going beyond 1819: How Well Do Singaporeans Know the History of Singapore?', Channel NewsAsia, 17 February 2018, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/going-beyond-1819-how-well-do-singaporeans-know-the-history-of-9945420>.

make sense of the series of events that resulted in Singapore becoming what it is today.

Without this narrative structure, we would not have a coherent history of the nation state. But, how do we make our history relatable to us as individuals or members of a community? And is the national narrative the final word? Or is there more to our history than what we have learnt in schools and through state institutions?

### **The Importance of Historical Consciousness**

Knowing and linking key facts of the past do not necessarily make history personally relevant or meaningful. We often hear the lament that history is dry and boring, a school subject that students have to study to pass examinations, and worse, nothing more than propaganda. Beyond historical literacy — that is knowing what happened — it is crucial to develop what I call historical consciousness, which is the ability to make the past have meaning to us as individuals and as communities.

It is also the ability to understand why things happen. In other words, historical consciousness allows us to develop individual and collective

understandings of the past, and to be aware of the cognitive and cultural factors that shape those understandings.

Historical consciousness rests on collective memories. Collective memories are shared memories and knowledge of a social group. These memories are used by the group to interpret a past that would resonate with the way they identify themselves. For example, the Chinese people remember the period between 1839 to 1949 as the “century of humiliation”, during which China was bullied and humiliated by foreign powers. This powerful collective memory influences the way China conducts itself in world affairs today. Sometimes, these collective memories are framed as part of present developments, rather than the past.

Many younger Singaporeans may find historical consciousness difficult to achieve because they lack the lived memories that earlier generations had, some painful and frightening, others, bittersweet or exciting. Historical consciousness had been eroded by collective forgetfulness, when direct links to an immediate past have been replaced by an orientation towards change and progress.

Singapore's rapid development in the last 50 years has challenged the different ways people bind themselves to their community and country. Experiencing constant change in our physical and social environments can leave precious few things that yield sufficient attachment and endearing familiarity to people. Memories fade when traces of the past start to vanish.

We cannot take for granted that the physical embodiments of our history, elements of our collective memories, will always be here to stay. To return to an earlier lecture, someone in the audience raised the question of how to anchor national identity in the face of continual loss of physical spaces, such as places of worship and schools, and the resulting erasures of our past.

My response was that anchoring national identity to physical embodiments of memories and heritage remains a perennial challenge. There is a tension between pursuing progress and efficient land use on the one hand, and preserving physical spaces that people deem to be of historical and cultural value on the other.

National monuments in Singapore of historic, cultural, symbolic significance etc. and national importance have been protected by the Preservation of

Monuments Board, later renamed the Preservation of Sites and Monuments (PSM), a division under the National Heritage Board.<sup>2</sup>

Separately, the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) has done its part in preserving old buildings as part of land use planning. While these attempts, sometimes promoted by civic activism, have been laudable, it is not always possible to keep things unchanged due to Singapore's limited land area. Still, there is no disputing that heritage sites "add value to the landscape and provide a sense of familiarity, place and time, rooting the people of Singapore to their homeland."<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps, we have to seek alternative ways of developing and preserving memories of spaces. Let me give the example of *Merged*, a documentary on the merger of two junior colleges (JCs), Tampines JC and Meridian JC, that was produced as part of *The Future of Our Pasts*. This documentary tries to capture the sentiments and memories of students and staff in the schools' final days before merger through digital means. Digital preservation of memories as opposed to physical conservation of places may not be ideal, but it is still a way of preserving memories.

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<sup>2</sup> Melody Zaccheus, Straits Times, "The balance between national progress and preservation of heritage", 6 May 2019.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.



Historical consciousness happens when there is personal resonance with the past. This often has deep influence on perceptions and reactions to the way history is remembered through public events.

A good example was an exhibition gallery on the Japanese Occupation at the Former Ford Factory. Originally, the gallery and exhibition was named “Syonan Gallery”, to reflect the name that the Japanese gave Singapore under the Japanese occupation. It had negative connotations, but the curators argued that referencing “Syonan” was a way of remembering a painful chapter in Singapore’s past and Singapore’s vulnerability.

However, following public outcry from others who saw the name “Syonan Gallery” as inappropriately glorifying the occupation, the exhibition and gallery was renamed “Surviving the Japanese Occupation: War and its Legacies”.

The latter group may have been a loud minority, but this incident revealed the importance of taking into account the different feelings and significance that different groups in society attach to a single historical event. In this instance, the majority of society may have had no opinion or were emotionally and intellectually prepared to move on. But, there were people who still had painful

memories of that period and it was necessary to respectfully validate those sentiments and connections to the past.

Historical consciousness can be enhanced when we take ownership of our histories, and not allow historical inheritance and collective memories to erode with time. But people have also said that Singapore is historically sterile, all we have is ultra-modernity; history is being lost in the name of progress.

I am not sure if I agree with this sentiment. Thanks to the effort of the National Heritage Board, you will find that history is actually all around us. As such, making time to pause and read commemorative plaques and signs that display historical information is one step we can all take to understand the history around us.

Few people know that the hawker centre at Tiong Bahru was probably the first such centre to be paid for by the hawkers themselves. In a grand collective action, these men, who were illegal or itinerant hawkers previously, got together, negotiated with the Government and raised an infrastructure that was later redeveloped into the two-storey building seen along Seng Poh Road today. This is not a piece of history we find readily in our history books, or even on the signs in front of Tiong Bahru market, but it is a true Singaporean story.

For the more internet savvy among us, the website [Roots.sg](http://Roots.sg), a website run by the National Heritage Board, maps out heritage trails, monuments, historical site markers, buildings and sites, among other material. It also documents Singapore's national collection, allowing users to view images and other information relating to artefacts. This resource, which was launched in 2016 and is publicly accessible, is one way we can explore Singapore's history in our own time.

There is also an abundance of materials in the National Library and National Archives. Among these materials are stories of the past from individual perspectives, that can make history come to life, with the potential to evoke sympathy and emotional resonance.

One example is the story of a man who miraculously escaped being killed at Changi Beach during Operation Sook Ching. His oral history audio recording can be found on Archives Online. Here is an excerpt of his recount.

There were three groups – 18 of us. Three soldiers. It was then that we began to worry as to what would happen. So, one of the captives in the group asked the Japanese soldiers, “Master, ini mana pergi?” He spoke

in Malay. Then the soldier replied, “Sana itu go, san tien kok, kok, kok, okay.” In other words he meant that he would be retained for three days chipping rocks and we would be released.

So, we thought that our destination would be Changi Prison because the lorries were heading towards Changi Road. Then after when we passed Changi Prison, and the lorries didn't stop, we began to have more worries. We were imagining all sorts of things. And our hands were tied behind our back, our knees were tied and they were so tight that blood circulation began to affect us. And we were telling ourselves that they were really going to shoot us, they were really going to kill us. Because the man said we would stop somewhere near the Changi Prison, chip stones for three days and then we would be released.

So, I swam and swam until I was so tired. I said, “Well, this is the time I drown.” I told myself that. So, I just allowed myself to go down, both my feet touched bottom and then believe me or not my nose was just above water. When I looked back it was around about 600 yards from the shore. I say 600 yards because I know the distance. During our manoeuvring days we used to go for shooting practice and 600 yards is about that distance.

So, when I looked back at the shore it was about 600 yards. It was then that I heard a whistle, an ordinary whistle. And somehow or other it clicked on my mind, this is when the firing would start and actually after the whistle the machine gun opened up, you see. I took a deep breath and went under water and I could hear the bullets ricocheting above me. I never knew what a ricocheting bullet sounded like and that was the first occasion I heard it. It went zioong, zioong, zioong above water.<sup>4</sup>

Here, Mr Yap was describing his thought process when he and other men were brought onto a lorry by a Japanese soldier, and then how he managed to stay undetected as the shooting started.

There is a treasure trove of material, be it compelling anecdotes or intriguing artefacts, which already exists in the public domain, essentially at our fingertips. If we are serious about historical consciousness, these are materials we can use, to build our knowledge and aid our exploration and imagination of the past.

The next point I would like to make about historical consciousness is that it is not just an intuitive feeling or a memory. Historical consciousness requires a

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<sup>4</sup> The extracts I refer to are accessible here: [http://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/oral\\_history\\_interviews/record-details/99c30aa3-115f-11e3-83d5-0050568939ad?keywords=yap%20yan%20hong&keywords-type=all](http://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/oral_history_interviews/record-details/99c30aa3-115f-11e3-83d5-0050568939ad?keywords=yap%20yan%20hong&keywords-type=all). You can listen to the specific sections at 19:23-21:22 and 26:57-27:30 respectively.

degree of intellectual rigour, and open-mindedness — seeking to understand why decisions were made, and searching for nuance. It goes beyond simply asking “what happened”, to questioning “why it happened”.

To understand why things happened, it is important to appreciate contexts – to understand events in their proper environments, and also accept that history does not always progress in a straight line; that our present and future can be shaped by unexpected contingencies and twists.

### **The centrality of context**

Historical actions and events do not happen in isolation; the environment in which things happen and the circumstances of the time often shape and determine why and how decisions and actions are taken.

Understanding contexts is a good antidote to the inappropriateness of hindsight. Understanding the culture, collective mentality or physical or technological and geographical environment in which things happen allows us to interpret and understand events and actions in the time and place in which the situation occurred, rather than merely judge them by contemporary standards, or worse, in accordance with our own beliefs and prejudices.

We appreciate things better when we do not impose our own lenses and perspectives to understand past decisions. We cannot assume that historical actors have the privilege of knowing what the future holds when they make the choices of their times. Their choices and options are necessarily limited by the realities of their immediate contexts.

Let me offer an example.

On 13 May, 1940, Winston Churchill made his first speech in the House of Commons, announcing that he had “nothing to offer but blood, tears, toil and sweat”. He pledged himself to a policy of waging war “by sea, land and air”, with the single aim of “victory at all cost, victory in spite of all terror, victory, however hard and long the road may be”. This short speech is now regarded as a turning point, an iconic moment in the history of the War. It would be easy to believe, hearing that speech now, that Britain had turned the corner and was on its way to defeating the Nazis.

But, this view is coloured by hindsight and by our knowledge that Britain and the allies would emerge victorious from the War. Was this true of what confronted Churchill and his audience at the time? Obviously not. In the short term, Britain was about to enter into its darkest hour. And Singapore would fall less than two years after that speech.

Understanding contexts allows the historical individual to predict the likely consequences of his proposed action; it also enables the historian to explain the actual consequences. The historical player can never be certain of the future — at best he/she can only deal with probabilities.

### **Capriciousness of Contingencies or Chances**

Many of you may have heard of the assertion that if Cleopatra's nose had been shorter, the course of western history would have been different. Human affairs are unpredictable and events do not proceed on predetermined trajectories. Sheer chance and contingencies can be powerful forces determining outcomes in history.

Histories that are used to project progress and advancement tend to underplay or ignore the role of chance. This is true of Marxist, religious historians, or those who are influenced by theories and are seeking hidden patterns or forces in history. They tend to believe that events follow a set and pre-determined course which allows them to determine the future.



But, we all know that the unexpected happens, and at each critical point in our past, the historical trajectory could have taken an unexpected turn, caused by force of personality or unanticipated circumstances, leading us down a particular path which might not have been planned.

Let me give an example:

In the 1950s, Singapore could not envisage a future without the Malayan hinterland. The PAP government made merger with Malaya its election manifesto in 1959, and after a bout of acrimonious negotiations with its Malayan counterparts, Singapore became part of Malaysia in 1963. In the process, the PAP split and the left-wing leadership was decimated. Everyone at that point in time thought that the deed was done, and Singapore had returned to its rightful place within the Malaysian nation.

But, troubles soon followed and the relations between Singapore and Kuala Lumpur started to worsen. The strained relationship became untenable when the ideological differences between “Malay primacy” and a “Malaysian Malaysia” came to a head. So, despite the efforts and desires that led to merger, the marriage broke up within two years. On 9 August 1965, Singapore proclaimed its independence, officially leaving Malaysia. Did Lee Kuan Yew and his colleagues expect this to happen in September 1963? Probably not.

While history may be necessary for nation-building purposes, it is also a powerful device that can give meanings to our personal identities. Personal and shared historical experience is an important marker and maker of identity, and having a strong sense of historical consciousness will not only give us a better appreciation of our identities; it would help us to understand what makes and holds us together as a community and a country.

### **Expanding our historical imagination**

I will go further to say that it is not enough to have historical consciousness. We also need historical imagination in our writing and understanding of history. What do I mean by historical imagination?

The imaginary does not have to be unreal. Historical imagination has to do with the ability to offer new ways of thinking about past events, to not only examine the observable, but also find clues and traces of the unobservable (for example thoughts and motivations behind certain actions). How does one, for example, write the history of an event or group of people for which there are limited primary sources and written documentation? This was something the Subaltern School historians had to contend with when writing about peasant uprisings in British India from the perspective of the peasants.

Moving to a historical event closer to home, I would like mention a talk given recently by Dr Nurfadzilah Yahaya on the Sepoy Mutiny in Singapore in 1915. The colonial archive on the event is focused on the government and army command. How does one write the history of the Sepoy Mutiny from the perspective of the soldiers?

Dr Yahaya's research looked at sepoy testimonies recorded verbatim by British officers in the aftermath of the Mutiny as well as nine letters that were intercepted and translated, which offered rare insight into the motivations of the soldiers and their views on their military postings. Through these transcripts and testimonies, one gets a palpable, poignant sense of the soldiers' sense of isolation as they are subjected to what Dr Yahaya describes as a life of circulation without mobility.

An interesting point she picked up in the Commission of Enquiry report issued after the 1915 mutiny was the frequent mention of 'going towards Singapore' by the sepoys even though they were in fact stationed on the island. Local civilians were reportedly puzzled by the soldiers' requests for directions to Singapore. The term 'Singapore', Dr Yahaya suggests, seemed to have referred to the urban core of the island even though its geographical contours were never defined by any sepoy. This serves to reinforce the argument that

the soldiers were kept apart from the rest of Singapore, displaced and disconnected from the environments they were supposed to guard and protect.<sup>5</sup>

Historians are constantly pushing the boundaries of historical knowledge. The discipline expects this of them, and efforts at revising history and adding to existing historical knowledge should be welcomed.

This is where historical imagination comes in. It involves employing creativity in interpreting sources (archival documents, legal documents, oral history interviews etc.) and coming up with new analytical frameworks, all within the perimeters of evidence-based historical context.

But let us not forget that historians are also storytellers. They craft narratives in an attempt to make sense of what happened. One of the marks of good historical scholarship is the combination of careful documentation with artful construction.

Good history is rigorous, critical and compelling. People should ideally want to read it, find out more about it, and be excited by it. How else can history be educational, relatable and relevant?

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<sup>5</sup> Talk by Dr Nurfadzilah Yahaya on “Alternate Pasts: Politics of Commemoration of 1915”, presented at *The Future of Our Pasts* festival, 27 Feb 2019.

Just recently – from February to March – Yale-NUS College organised a month-long history-and-art festival in conjunction with the Singapore Bicentennial. Named *The Future of Our Pasts: History Reimagined*, the festival was focused on engaging with history outside of academia. The intention was to get more people interested in history through stories. When the call for project proposals was launched in 2017, applicants were encouraged to examine less-explored aspects of Singapore history and present their research findings using artistic, creative mediums. We wanted young Singaporeans to write their own history and in so doing develop a sense of belonging and identity.

Eleven projects by students and recent graduates from different tertiary institutions in Singapore were selected for the festival. Over a year and a half after the open call, the teams got to refine their ideas and projects through a series of workshops and critique sessions attended by artists, writers, curators and academics.

For some project creators who were undertaking a creative project for the first time, it was a journey of learning and discovery. Through the process of project-making, one also becomes aware of the complexities of history writing, and the act of constructing a narrative.

Through the works, we encounter personal histories, community histories, histories of places gone and places still in existence. We encounter stories told by young people in Singapore of love, loss, self-discovery and identity. Stories we can all relate to in some way.

Each project provided different entry points for audiences to ‘reimagine’ Singapore’s history, through performances, exhibitions, public installations, books, films, and a web-based interactive documentary.

In addition, fringe programmes including film screenings, walking tours, talks and panel discussions were also organised to encourage conversations about history.

Among the festival projects was ‘First Storeys’, which was part installation, part interactive theatre focused on charting the historical trajectory of public housing in Singapore. The project creator drew on his grandparents’ experiences of housing relocation under the Selective En-bloc Redevelopment Scheme in 2015, and previously in the 1970s. The student curator of the installation pointed out that “history is not just a big narrative, but something that is personal, immediate and relevant. Personal histories matter as much as broad historical narratives.

There is also 'Boka di Stori', a graphic novel bringing to life the history and culture of the Eurasian community in Singapore. 'Boka di Stori', the title of the graphic novel, is a Kristang phrase that translates into English as 'Mouth of Stories'; it also means 'Storyteller'. A large part of the project involved the creators speaking to members of the Eurasian community to collect stories and materials for the novel.

Another history-based graphic novel I would like to mention is *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye* by Sonny Liew. I'm sure many of you here are familiar with Liew's work, which has been described by a reviewer as "an ambitious, innovative work". What makes this work distinctive, especially from a historical perspective?

*The Art of Charlie Chan* manages to move seamlessly, unhampered, between fact and fiction. Liew spent a lot of time on research in his retelling of historical events in Singapore. We see this in the extensive footnotes and sources.

But he also turns evidence on its head, subverts methods used traditionally by historians working within conventional academic settings to establish veracity: photographs, newspaper clippings etc.

We can reasonably conclude that the author is challenging us not to take any text and narrative for granted. The success and popularity of *The Art of Charlie Chan* in Singapore and Malaysia demonstrates the following:

- 1) the medium of the comic book, like other artistic approaches to historical narratives, allows us to expand our historical imagination;
- 2) makes history accessible outside of academic settings;
- 3) it could generate an openness and growing appetite among Singaporeans for new interpretations of history.

## **Conclusion**

As Singapore develops as a country, it is critical for us to have a deeper, more inclusive and more nuanced appreciation of our history and heritage. This should not be driven solely by the state, in the form of national education; we should also encourage bottom up, community-led efforts so that history becomes an organic, shared and inclusive force in the making of national identity.

Why is history important? Because it "... allows us to fulfil our need for self-examination and awareness .... so that what is needed is a study of how



we came to be the sorts of people that we are, of why we have the perceptions, the outlooks and the attitudes that we have.”<sup>6</sup>

Personal and shared historical experience is an important marker and maker of identity, and having a strong sense of historical consciousness will not only give us a better appreciation of our identities; it would help make sense of what makes and holds us together as a community and a country.

But history is not just about bringing us to speed with what we were, and what we are now. Historical imagination comes into play here. We weave past events, interactions and individuals into a comprehensible narrative.

Historical consciousness and imagination also means being open to nuance and accepting complexity. “We ... tend to simplify history: but the pattern within which events are ordered is not always identifiable in a single unequivocal fashion, and it may happen that different historians understand and construe history in ways that are different ...”<sup>7</sup> This is not to say that all frameworks are equally plausible, but historical imagination should mean the possibility of different ways of seeing.

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<sup>6</sup> Beverley Southgate, *History: What and Why? Ancient, Modern and Postmodern Perspectives* (London, 1996)

<sup>7</sup> Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, London, Abacus, 1989, pp. 22-23

Edward Luce, a British journalist, recently wrote an article in the *Financial Times*, making a case for the relevance of history. History is decreasing in popularity, while fields like science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) are seen as paths to economic success. We may rely more on algorithms and automation today, but it is still up to us as individuals to discern, judge and be well-informed so that we do not fall prey to civic ignorance, fake news and other phenomena that may divide us. As Luce puts it, “a well-informed citizenry in turn creates a stronger society. We may no longer be interested in history, but history is still interested in us.”<sup>8</sup>

Let me end with a quote by Henry Kissinger, who in his book, *World Order* made the following observation: “Long ago, in youth, I was brash enough to think myself able to pronounce on “The Meaning of History.” I now know that history’s meaning is a matter to be discovered, not declared. It is a question we must attempt to answer as best we can in recognition that it will remain open to debate”.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Edward Luce, “US declining interest in history presents risk to democracy”, <https://www.ft.com/content/e19d957c-6ca3-11e9-80c7-60ee53e6681d>

<sup>9</sup> Henry Kissinger, *World Order*, New York: Penguin Press, 2014, p. 374.