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For Immediate Release

IPS Study on Perceptions of Singapore's History

The **Institute of Policy Studies (IPS)** recently conducted a survey on public perceptions of Singapore's history. The aim of the study was to delve into the collective memory of Singaporeans through personal interviews and focus group discussions as Singapore marks its 50th year of independence.

In conducting the study, researchers sought to explore these questions: Which events in our history do Singaporeans remember best? Do they believe these events are important to them and to future generations of Singaporeans? How do they recall, retell and perceive these Singapore stories?

Methodology

Between August and October 2014, a total of 1,516 Singapore citizens aged 21 years and above were interviewed. Respondents were shown a list of 50 historical events – from the founding of modern Singapore in 1819 to the last general election in 2011 – and asked if they were aware of each event. If they were aware, they were then asked if they thought the event was important to them and to future generations of Singaporeans, and how they felt about the event. The 50 historical events were drawn from various sources, including academic and media. The list was pilot-tested three times prior to the fieldwork.

Data was collected using a quota-based sampling method, controlling for age, gender and ethnicity. The sample is representative of the Singapore citizen population. The average duration of the interview was 30 minutes, and the interviews were conducted face-to-face at respondents' homes. Questionnaires were available in four languages: English, Chinese, Malay and Tamil.

Following the survey, three focus group discussions were conducted with different groups of Singaporeans to gain deeper insights into which historical narratives resonate most strongly and why.

Findings

The study found that recent events were more likely to be recalled. From the sample list of 50 events in Singapore’s history, the top four events cited by respondents had occurred within the past decade. These were the opening of the casinos, the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) outbreak¹, the major Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) system breakdown of 2011 and the escape of terrorist suspect Mas Selamat from security detention.

Table 1: Top 10 events Singaporeans are aware of
Are you aware of this event?
(Yes/No)

EVENTS	N	%
Opening of two Casinos (2010)	1500	98.9
SARS outbreak (2003)	1493	98.5
Major MRT breakdown (2011)	1461	96.4
Mas Selamat escapes (2008)	1443	95.2
Goh Chok Tong takes over as PM from Lee Kuan Yew (1990)	1411	93.1
WWII Japanese Occupation (1942)	1403	92.5
PAP loses Aljunied GRC (2011)	1392	91.8
Raffles’ landing (1819)	1361	89.8
Lee Kuan Yew sobs on national TV over Separation (1965)	1344	88.7
Singapore hosts Youth Olympics (2010)	1327	87.5

Turning to the lower end of the rankings, events which did not feature highly in the individual consciousness of Singaporeans included Operation Cold Store, the “Marxist conspiracy plot”, the Laju hostage incident and the Graduate Mother Scheme. Less than a quarter of the Singaporeans polled were aware of these historical events.

Events with a racial undertone were more likely to be recalled by the affected ethnic community. The Maria Hertogh riots in the 1950s and Jemaah Islamiyah terrorist plot, for example, figured more strongly in the consciousness of Malays than other racial groups. Conversely, the Chinese reported a higher degree of awareness of the merger of Nanyang University (Nantah) with the University of Singapore, which happened in 1980.

Individual consciousness of events did not necessarily translate into empathy or emotional awareness. For example, while an overwhelming majority of Singaporeans (98.8%) were aware of the controversial introduction of the casinos in 2010, they did not feel that it was an important historical event to themselves or to future generations. The casino openings ranked at the bottom of the scale of importance to Singaporeans.

Similarly, the loss of the People’s Action Party’s (PAP) Aljunied Group Representation Constituency (GRC) during the last elections, the hosting of the inaugural Youth Olympic Games and the landing of Sir Stamford Raffles, were

¹ The SARS outbreak reached its peak in 2003, and was only brought under control in 2004.

given less weightage, even though the majority of Singaporeans were aware of these events. Respondents did not think these events were important to them or to future generations.

Most respondents felt that events they consider important were also important for future generations of Singaporeans. This was especially so for events related to the development of physical infrastructure in Singapore, including the launch of the MRT system, the establishment of the Housing and Development Board (HDB) and the opening of Changi Airport. The SARS outbreak and the creation of the national pledge were also perceived to be significant historical events in the Singapore Story.

Table 2: Top 10 events Singaporeans think are important to them
Ranked on a scale of 1 (not important to me at all) to 5 (very important to me)

EVENTS	Mean
SARS outbreak (2003)	4.37
Official launch of MRT (1988)	4.36
Formation of HDB (1960)	4.23
Opening of Changi Airport (1981)	4.21
Creation of Singapore national pledge (1966)	4.20
Lee Kuan Yew sobs on national TV over Separation (1965)	4.14
Introduction of Singapore currency (1967)	4.14
Majulah Singapura is composed (1958)	4.11
Completion of NEWater (2000)	4.09
First batch of NS men enlist (1967)	4.07

Table 3: Top 10 events Singaporeans think are important to future generations
Ranked on a scale of 1 (not important to future generations at all) to 5 (very important to future generations)

EVENTS	Mean
Official launch of MRT (1988)	4.45
SARS outbreak (2003)	4.42
Introduction of bilingualism policy in schools (1966)	4.34
Creation of Singapore national pledge (1966)	4.32
Opening of Changi Airport (1981)	4.32
Formation of HDB (1960)	4.31
First batch of NS men enlist (1967)	4.28
Completion of NEWater (2000)	4.28
Racial riots (1964)	4.26
Majulah Singapura is composed (1958)	4.25

Researchers analysed the top 35 events that respondents were most aware of, and concluded that these could be grouped under three broad themes: Nation Building, Differences and National Resilience.

Nation-building events were milestones for Singapore and achievements which charted its progress to developed nation status. These included physical infrastructure developments, like the launch of the MRT system in 1988, the opening of Changi Airport in 1981, and symbols of nationhood, such as the creation of the national pledge in 1966 and the formation of the HDB in 1960. Nation-building events, and the collective pride in our achievements and infrastructure, resonate strongly with Singaporeans.

Historical events that embodied differences were either socially divisive events that left an impact on Singapore society or those where Singaporeans felt divided over how the country should be governed. These included the 1964 racial riots, the “Stop at Two” birth control policy in 1970 and the bilingualism policy in 1966. Interestingly, while the bilingualism policy, which made English the first language in schools, was controversial at the time of implementation, Singaporeans associated positive connotations with the bilingualism policy.

Finally, events related to national resilience were challenges and crises that Singaporeans overcame together. Examples included the Cable Car accident in 1983 and the Bukit Ho Swee fire in 1961.

The three themes were positively correlated with current life satisfaction. This implied that respondents who rated highly the importance of historical events associated with the three themes were more likely to be satisfied with their present life situation.

National resilience was marginally associated with perceived future well-being. In other words, respondents who rated highly the significance of historical events associated with national resilience (such as the Hotel New World collapse, the Cable Car accident and the Bukit Ho Swee fire) were more likely to feel optimistic about their future well-being.

**Table 4: Top 10 events Singaporeans feel positive about
Ranked on a scale of 1 (negative) to 5
(positive)**

EVENTS	Mean
Official launch of MRT (1988)	4.52
Opening of Changi Airport (1981)	4.43
Singapore River clean-up campaign (1977)	4.33
Creation of Singapore national pledge (1966)	4.33
Introduction of Singapore currency (1967)	4.31
Majulah Singapura is composed (1958)	4.28
Formation of HDB (1960)	4.27
Completion of NEWater (2000)	4.22
Formation of SQ (1972)	4.19
Introduction of bilingualism policy in schools (1966)	4.18

**Table 5: Top 10 events Singaporeans feel empathy for
Ranked on a scale of 1 (indifferent) to 5 (strong emotion)**

EVENTS	Mean
SARS outbreak (2003)	4.17
Official launch of MRT (1988)	4.14
Opening of Changi Airport (1981)	4.00
Creation of Singapore national pledge (1966)	3.95
First batch of NS men enlist (1967)	3.89
Majulah Singapura is composed (1958)	3.89
Introduction of bilingualism policy in schools (1966)	3.88
Major MRT breakdown (2011)	3.87
Formation of HDB (1960)	3.86
Lee Kuan Yew sobs on national TV over Separation (1965)	3.85

Conclusion

The study offers a glimpse into the collective memory of Singaporeans and highlights the historical events that come to their minds most easily.

The findings give insight into how the past may bear on the present. For instance, certain events in Singapore's history, more than others, have a greater bearing on how Singaporeans feel about being Singaporean. There is also a correlation between how Singaporeans view the past and their perception of their current and future well-being.

IPS Senior Research Fellow Dr Leong Chan-Hoong, the principal investigator of the study said: "Findings from the study contain rich insights into the different strands of historical narratives entrenched in the Singaporean identity, and chronicle the Singapore journey over the past 50 years. They also give an idea of what could resonate as historical narratives for future generations of Singaporeans."

Dr Leong added: "Our history is a beacon. The Singapore Story is a multi-layered one, interspersed with stories of collective achievements, national pride, crises and challenges, human tenacity and endurance. As we look towards the next 50 years, let us not forget our past."

Further information

For queries on the IPS Survey on Perceptions of Singapore's History, please contact the Principal Investigator of this study, Dr Leong Chan-Hoong at leong.chanhoong@nus.edu.sg, tel: +65 6516 5601.

Fieldwork was conducted by EA Research and Consulting Pte Ltd, an independent market research company.

Data analysis and focus group discussions were conducted by researchers at IPS Social Lab, an independent centre for social indicators research.

About the Institute of Policy Studies

The Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) was established in 1988 as an independent think-tank to study and generate public policy ideas in Singapore. IPS became an autonomous research centre of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore in 2008. Today, IPS continues to analyse public policy, build bridges between thought leaders, and communicate its findings to a wide audience. The Institute examines issues of critical national interest across a variety of fields, and studies the attitudes and aspirations of Singaporeans through surveys of public perception. It adopts a multi-disciplinary approach in its analyses and takes the long-term view in its strategic deliberation and research. For more information about IPS, visit www.lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/ips

About IPS Social Lab

IPS Social Lab is an independent centre for social indicators research. It seeks to understand Singapore society through survey-based research on social perceptions, attitudes and behaviours in Singapore, using the most robust standards in survey methodology and statistical analyses. IPS Social Lab is committed to serve the public interest as a national resource centre for longitudinal data. Policymakers can also tap Social Lab to broaden their research capability.

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