

Culture Vulture: Awaken the Spoilt Singaporean Brat

A wider knowledge of the violent aspects of Singapore's birth as a nation might show young people why social harmony is crucial

Ong Sor Fern

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The hype over SG50 seems neverending. The murmurs began last year, but just five short weeks into 2015 and it already seems as if a deafening babel of activities and campaigns, both official and unofficial, is underway.

Everyone wants to get on the bandwagon. Everything from advertising campaigns to venue openings seems to bear the little red logo.

The cynic in me snorts and dismisses the whole slew of events as just advertising malarkey riding on the coattails of a national event.

But as I was on the verge of tuning out the noise, a couple of quiet whispers amid the clamour stopped me short: film-maker Tan Pin Pin's documentary *To Singapore, With Love*, and a Web special *The Straits Times Digital* put up about the history of the Singapore Volunteer Corps.

Tan's banned film, which I saw at a private screening recently, struck me at a visceral level. The documentary features lengthy interviews with political exiles hailing from various decades of Singapore's history, ranging from the elderly septuagenarians and octogenarians who once took up arms for the Malayan Communist Party, to younger activists such as Tan Wah Piow and Dr Ang Swee Chai who fled Singapore in the 1970s.

The Singapore that they had fought for, through either violent or ideological means, no longer exists. And it could be argued that Singapore's success today might not have happened if these exiles had succeeded in their battles.

The history of the Singapore Volunteer Corps (SVC) fascinated me too. I had no idea the militia was a 161-year-old institution that began with a group of 61 European expatriates, who had to supply their own firearms, in 1854.

Before Singapore even became a nation, the Corps was her de facto army and defence: among the locals who joined, war heroine Elizabeth Choy was a second lieutenant in the women's auxiliary arm and was nicknamed Gunner Choy.

I was awed to learn that these volunteers and amateurs, literally, gave up their lives for their country when, in World War II, they defended installations on Singapore's south coast. Those who survived the bloody battles were imprisoned and many died in internment camps or were sent to the notorious Death Railway in Thailand. These people defended Singapore before there was even the notion of it as an independent entity.

As a child of post-independence Singapore, I grew up coddled in political stability and seemingly endless economic booms.

Watching Tan's film and learning about the Singapore Volunteer Corps made me question my patriotism. It provoked me to ask, not what my country can do for me, but what I would do for my country.

I admit to being a spoilt Singaporean brat and I am grateful for having grown up in the shelter of this little red dot.

But, at the risk of sounding very #firstworldproblems, this social and environmental comfort means I have never really been tested in my belief in this country. Not that I would want to be tested for real, I hasten to add. But that, I guess, is the worrisome kernel of the matter.

I have never questioned the existence of Singapore, only been grateful that it did exist. I have never been pressed to define its identity in the face of crisis, only been facetiously jokey with friends about the usual Singaporean tropes of foodies and kiasuism in casual conversations.

The sight of the exiles in Tan's films, who have spent their lives away from this country because of their beliefs about what form it should take, and reading about how ordinary folks in the Singapore Volunteer Corps took up arms for this country, made me ask if I would be willing to make any sacrifice for this place I call home.

Whether they were right or wrong, those political exiles believed in Singapore with a fervour that humbles me. So too the SVC volunteers during World War II, who were fighting for a country which did not even exist and laid down their lives for their homeland.

I do not think I have ever felt such flaming passion for this place I call home, only accepted my lucky lot with the unthinking presumption of the privileged.

With the Republic turning 50 - a human lifespan but the mere blink of an eye in a nation's history - Tan's documentary and the little nuggets of pre- nation history that I'm learning are a timely reminder for me to excavate my privilege and reconsider my assumptions about my home.

One way to do that is to learn more about this country's history, which predates its formation as a nation, and embrace it, warts and all, in the clear-eyed awareness of how Singapore arrived at this point in time.

There are many gaps in my knowledge of Singapore history and I am not the only one with such gaps.

A recent Institute of Policy survey found that some events in Singapore's history are remembered by less than a fifth of the 1,500 respondents.

History may seem irrelevant to contemporary life. But there are many historical touchpoints that have defined Singapore as a nation and not just the commonly remembered moments such as then-Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew breaking down in tears during the televised press conference announcing Singapore's separation from Malaysia.

Among the 50 events selected by the institute, the 10 least-remembered events included Operation Coldstore (1963) in which at least 100 people, including leftist opposition leaders,

were arrested; the Maria Hertogh riots (1950); and the then-heated debate over the Graduate Mother Scheme (1984).

I cannot help but think that a wider knowledge of the more brutal and violent aspects of Singapore's birth as a nation might lead the younger generation to a better understanding of why leaders are constantly harping on social harmony.

This conversation of course is an ideological one about national identity. It deals with an existential crisis which older nations with deeper histories do not have to worry about.

In one of the videos released by the institute to accompany its survey findings, its director Janadas Devan quotes S. Rajaratnam's reply to the thorny question of whether Singapore can create a national identity: "We must first accept the premise that it is an act of faith that a national consciousness is desirable, possible and inevitable."

I would like to add that it is not just an act of faith today, where many have grown up taking Singapore's existence for granted, but an act of love that also needs to be nurtured by an act of will.