

Is Singapore's History in our Future?

Charissa Yong

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Six years ago, while in secondary school, Ms Toh Yan Ling chose not to study history because she disliked the dry routine of memorising cold hard facts.

"History is in the past and dead," said Ms Toh, now 19 and a final-year polytechnic student, recalling her thoughts back then. It was only while working on a video project on history for the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) last year that she began developing an appreciation for the subject.

For the first time, she learnt about the fire which swept through the Bukit Ho Swee squatter settlement on May 25, 1961, razing 2,200 attap houses and leaving 16,000 people homeless in its wake. In working to rehouse the victims quickly, the Housing Board undertook its first large-scale public housing project - sparking the transformation of Singapore's physical landscape.

But like Ms Toh, many Singaporeans have never heard of this significant moment in national history. A recent IPS survey found that only 70.7 per cent of more than 1,500 citizens polled know of the Bukit Ho Swee fire, compared with 98.9 per cent who recall the glitz opening of the two casinos in 2010.

Some say this is inevitable given that each new generation chooses to retain only the history most relevant to them.

But historians, politicians and history aficionados warn that letting go of the past risks leaving the nation rudderless. Keeping history alive, they say, is important in ensuring Singaporeans stay humble, remembering the nation's vulnerabilities, and in building a strong sense of national identity.

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong stressed on Thursday the importance of learning from history, noting that there was "nothing inevitable" about Singapore's independence and its subsequent success.

"Today we are in a much better position than in 1965, but we are still a vulnerable, small country in South-east Asia," he said in a Facebook post. "The dangers we avoided long ago are not permanently gone, but remain potential possibilities. If we forget our history, they may come back, and we will have to relearn painful lessons."

THE IMPORTANCE OF REMEMBERING

For 66-year-old James Seah, whose kampung home was destroyed in the Bukit Ho Swee fire, the history being forgotten today is literally his story.

He recalls fleeing from the flames alongside his mother, with only their family's birth certificates in hand, when he was 13.

But the knowledge of the destruction wrought by the fire and the desperate need for proper homes in its aftermath is missing in the generations born after 1961, he says.

"There are no more attap-roof settlements now. They only see multi-storey HDB estates," says Mr Seah, a retired public servant who keeps a heritage blog.

Other pioneers like Mr Philip Chew, 79, believe that younger Singaporeans should be aware of their origins so that they do not take today's success for granted.

Mr Chew is the great-grandson of landowner and philanthropist Chew Joo Chiat, after whom the area is named.

He keeps a history blog about his famous ancestor, "to let my children and those after them know about the humble beginnings of their ancestors".

On a larger scale, some worry that the fading of collective memory means that today's youth forget how vulnerable tiny Singapore was - and still is.

"A people who forget their history will perish. I fear we might well become such a people," said IPS director Janadas Devan on Monday in his opening remarks at an IPS conference, where the survey results were discussed. "Raised in clover and accustomed to success, our elite especially have come to regard themselves as self-created, self-sustaining, self-perpetuating entities... So they come to believe, for instance, that we were never vulnerable," he added.

But "this island has always been vulnerable", says Yale-NUS historian Derek Heng, who co-wrote the book *Singapore: A 700-Year History*. "Knowing our history lets us see longer cyclical patterns and appreciate the possibilities of riding out immediate existential crises," he says.

A grasp of history also helps younger Singaporeans appreciate how and why their country evolved to its current state, and shapes national identity and a sense of belonging.

"Our history defines us as a nation, a people, and we need to understand it to know why we made the decisions that we did," says Tampines GRC MP Baey Yam Keng, who chairs the Government Parliamentary Committee for Culture, Community and Youth.

National University of Singapore (NUS) Associate Professor Albert Lau adds that "no country can afford to have historical amnesia". "If you want to build a psychological strength for the nation, you cannot just build it on material things," he says.

Others point to lessons Singapore can learn from its past.

The country's occupation by the Japanese during World War II, for instance, is a lesson that "we need to defend ourselves, and nobody else will defend us if we don't", says Prof Lau.

Chua Chu Kang GRC MP Zaqy Mohamad does not think that younger Singaporeans have forgotten history, per se, but that they are unable to relate to the past. "History doesn't resonate with them as strongly because they didn't live through it," he says.

But at least two historians think the danger of "forgetting" history may be overstated. Mr Kwa Chong Guan from the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies argues that each generation chooses to remember the history it thinks is relevant.

"The anti-colonial riots which marked the end of colonialism and the struggle for independence may be central to an earlier generation. How is that relevant to a post-1965 generation?" he says.

The Singaporeans who grew up under British colonialism and learnt about their country's history as part of the British empire rejected this narrative, he notes.

The post-1965 generation similarly had to learn to reject the history of Singapore as part of a Malayan hinterland upon which they depended, and write their own history of an independent Singapore.

And the post-1990 generation will undergo this process in turn, says Mr Kwa.

Dr Heng points out that communities who lived through the events keep the memory alive. "You may have a majority of Singaporeans not knowing about some events, but that doesn't mean they are entirely forgotten. There will be a segment of the population that will remember them," he says.

Because of this, a country never fully forgets its past.

WHO REMEMBERS?

Older Singaporeans are not the only group who appear to remember history better. Some communities do have stronger memories than others of historical events, the IPS survey showed.

About 81.1 per cent of Malay respondents recalled the uncovering of the Jemaah Islamiah terrorist plot in 2002, compared with 64.9 per cent of Chinese people and 63.9 per cent of Indians and other racial groups.

Many of the events that more Malays know about have a racial undertone, such as the Maria Hertogh riots in 1950 and the race riots of 1964.

"It is not surprising that these events resonate more strongly with the affected community," says IPS senior fellow Leong Chan-Hoong, who led the study.

Other events that Malays remember better have strong cultural tones, such as the creation of the Majulah Singapura anthem in 1958 and the SilkAir crash in 1997 in Indonesia.

Says Dr Leong: "If you are Malay, you will know more about your own culture and the predominantly Malay-Muslim region."

Mr Zaqy says that the Malay media, for instance, may have covered the national anthem - which is in Malay - more extensively than media platforms in other languages.

"Different races may have different levels of exposure to events," he adds.

Similarly, a larger proportion of Chinese recall the merger of Chinese-medium Nanyang University with then University of Singapore in 1980, notes Dr Leong.

The age group which turned out to be the most unaware of events turned out to be middle-aged Singaporeans who were between 35 and 49 years old. These Singaporeans neither

lived through the events their elders did, nor learnt about it in school the way their younger peers did, he says.

The Ministry of Education's (MOE) National Education (NE) programme, which teaches students about Singapore's history and circumstances, began only in 1997. It was launched after some soul-searching about Singaporeans having a poor understanding of the country's history, including of key issues like why Singapore separated from Malaysia.

The IPS survey also showed the distinct trend that a larger share of graduates, private property dwellers and higher income earners have a greater understanding of historical topics than others who are less well-off.

Dr Leong says that this segment tends to be better educated, and have more opportunities to learn about this history. Dr Heng suggests that some may also have parents who took them to visit museums and other historical exhibitions.

But this does not mean that history is the preserve of the ivory tower elite. "History is something everybody can associate with. Everybody has a past," says Dr Heng.

For instance, the simple desire to record their experiences for younger readers drew Mr Seah and Mr Chew to start their respective heritage blogs.

"I'm nearly 80 years old. There are so many things in my past to blog about," says Mr Chew, who has written about his experience of living through the Japanese Occupation, when his family took shelter in a smoke house where natural rubber was dried. He is also working on a book about his ancestor.

The growing number of heritage groups lobbying for places with social, cultural or historical significance to be preserved also shows how history can be popular across generations.

The Singapore Memory Project, which encourages people to share their memories, has received a million entries on everyday themes such as food and neighbourhoods since it started in 2010. Mr Gene Tan, director of the National Library, which oversees the national project, says its success on social media shows that people are interested in the past.

"History is something people can access if you put it on the right media. It pops up in conversations, people start to share it and it goes viral," he says.

As Dr Heng puts it: "History has something for everyone."

MAKING HISTORY COME ALIVE

But perhaps not everyone wants something to do with history.

For younger Singaporeans who may have little interest in a dusty past, more exciting teaching methods may be needed in school, some suggest.

This change is already happening. Last year, MOE tweaked classroom approaches away from heavy content and memory work to closer examination of historical sources.

Schools have also been given resource kits that let students touch and feel artefacts from Singapore's past. These include authentic shards from pre-colonial times, recreated banana

notes and ration cards used in World War II, and a document proclaiming Singapore's independence.

A history teacher, who declined to be named, says: "The students love role-plays and debates and assuming historical characters. They also love learning about war and get really enthusiastic about what life was like on the front line."

History can also benefit from being forward-looking, for instance by making use of new technologies and media.

The National Library's Mr Tan says that younger Singaporeans enjoy a more hands-on approach to history, such as interviewing senior citizens and creating films. Some of these projects were sponsored by the irememberSG fund, under the Singapore Memory Project.

"They take a very future-oriented approach to the past, using technology," he observes. "History has to be like that."

Ms Toh says that working on the IPS project - which involved presenting the survey results in the form of videos - changed her mind about history.

"If my lecturers were to have shown more visually pleasing videos of history, rather than hard facts through PowerPoint presentations, I would have been more interested in history," she says.

Adds Mr Tan: "History needs to have a bit of a future sheen to it, so that people can see it in terms that are relevant today."