

Keeping the Past Alive

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It is revealing that Singaporeans remember the opening of the two casinos here in 2010, the Sars outbreak in 2003, and the MRT breakdowns in 2011 far better than they do the 1963 security crackdown Operation Coldstore, the 1987 Marxist conspiracy and the 1974 Laju ferry hijacking by terrorists. The selective memory of people, evident in a survey conducted by the Institute of Policy Studies, shows what matters more to them.

It is not that the Singaporean is a historically shallow creature of circumstance concerned mostly with what touches his or her immediate material needs. Rather, it suggests that "it may be social memories of how local events... affected us as citizens that will loom large in the emerging rewriting of our history", as noted by historian Kwa Chong Guan. The casinos, Sars and the disruption of MRT services impinged on everyday life for a vast majority of citizens to an extent that the other events did not, important though they were in themselves. Indeed, the casinos have become a part of the Singapore skyline as well, adding visual presence to social memory.

Nevertheless, there are compelling reasons for people to also connect strongly with the national and political past. The struggle for independence, major sacrifices of Singaporeans, transformation of the city-state, and hard-won victories of the past are too precious to be simply forgotten over time by younger generations. It is by engaging all of the past, distant though it might be from present needs and concerns, that a people develop a sense of history. It is history, in turn, that adds the anchoring weight of accumulated social meaning to the ebb and flow of disparate events. History is a form of collective navigation which sustains a people on the journey to nationhood. In a relatively young state such as Singapore, a concern with the past is a necessity and not a luxury. Losing sight of this would diminish the national soul.