

Singapore and HK - two different tales of separation

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Singapore and Hong Kong were once British colonies. But unlike Singapore, Hong Kong continues to struggle to find its own identity, said historian Wang Gungwu.

Part of the reason lies in Hong Kong's deep historical connections and reliance on China as a hinterland, even when it was a British colony, said Professor Wang, adding that the connection is so entrenched that Hong Kongers find it difficult to carve their own course.

Singapore's history of separations, on the other hand, set it on a very different path.

Prof Wang pointed out two such separations. Singapore's first separation took place after the British arrival in 1819, when they worked to separate the island from the Malay hinterland and the Dutch-controlled archipelago.

The second took place in 1965 when Singapore left Malaysia and became independent.

Prof Wang, 88, a renowned historian known, among other things, for his scholarship on the history and civilisation of China and South-east Asia, was speaking at the Separations and Connections session yesterday, on the last day of the two-day Singapore Bicentennial Conference.

He said the 1819 separation had laid the foundations for 1965 and Singapore's eventual transformation into a global city.

The people of 1960s Singapore, he noted, had unconsciously or subconsciously understood the benefits of separation, and built on it.

"The people who managed Singapore somehow managed to grasp the idea that connecting with the distant and separating from the near was quite a good formula," Prof Wang said.

In contrast, Hong Kong had never been truly separated from China, even when it was administered by the British.

"All the people in China were actively involved in Chinese affairs, and China was actively involved in Hong Kong affairs from 1840 right down to the present.

"That connection was so close that it is so difficult for Hong Kongers today to try and seek and find their own identity," he said.

Hong Kong has been roiled in 17 straight weekends of protests over what started out as anger at an extradition Bill, now withdrawn. It would have allowed individuals, including foreigners, to be sent to mainland China to face trial.

When the British left Hong Kong in 1997, the connection became overwhelming, added Prof Wang. "In the past, it was a connection between two worlds - a balance between connecting with China and connecting with Britain."

Meanwhile, in Singapore, the British empire, in an effort to pay for some of its adventures elsewhere, tried to reconnect the island with some of its neighbours in the 1860s, Prof Wang said.

But the development of "British Malaya" was not entirely successful as the British were preoccupied with issues elsewhere.

Ultimately, British attempts to reconnect Singapore with the Malay world failed, said Prof Wang.

There are, however, downsides to this history of separations for Singapore, he added.

"Two centuries of separation have developed a habit of mind which makes it much easier for Singapore to connect with distant places - the farther away, the better - whereas connecting nearby is somewhat less comfortable."

Singapore, therefore, needs to work on establishing stronger ties with the region without losing its distant connections and this, he believes, requires tremendous rethinking about connections and separations.

"Reconnection is not impossible, but it is a challenge being part of South-east Asia, as a new nation in the middle of 10 other nations, right in the middle of something much more complicated as the world shrinks and the superpowers focus on this part of the world.

"This challenge requires Singapore to do both - to connect with places far away to survive economically, politically and security-wise, and unless it reconnects with the neighbourhood, with the nearby states, it will find it extremely difficult to face the next few decades."