

Singapore's history of separation sets it apart from Hong Kong: Historian Wang Gungwu

Melody Zaccheus

The Straits Times, 1 October 2019

Both 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 on Tuesday (Oct 1).

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 Prof Wang, adding that the connection is so entrenched that Hong Kongers find it difficult to carve out its own course.

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

Prof Wang pointed out that Singapore's first separation took place after the British arrival in 1819 where they worked to separate it 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, an internationally renowned historian known, among other things, for his scholarship on the history of civilisation of China and South-east Asia, was speaking at a session titled Separations and Connections on the final 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 managed to take this heritage and build on it. "The people who managed Singapore somehow managed to grasp the idea that connecting with the distant and separating from the near was actually quite a good formula."

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

"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. It never really stopped."

"That connection is 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 against what started out as anger over a controversial extradition Bill, which would have allowed individuals, including foreigners, to be sent to mainland China to face trial.

When the British left Hong Kong, 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 by 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 said. "Two centuries of separation has 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 in order 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 two decades."