

Milestones Matter, but Recent History Registers More with S'poreans

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Singapore — When it comes to local historical events that have left a lasting impression, recent ones such as the opening of the two integrated resorts and the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) outbreak appear to be more enduring among Singaporeans than that of former Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew crying on television after separation from Malaysia.

A study by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) showed that among events from the last 50 years, Singaporeans are most aware of the MRT train breakdowns of 2011, the escape of Mas Selamat in 2008 and the handing over of the premiership from Mr Lee Kuan Yew to Mr Goh Chok Tong in 1990.

However, Singaporeans ranked other events as most important to them. Apart from the SARS outbreak, events ranked among the 10 most important were nation-building milestones such as the official launch of the MRT network in 1988 and the opening of Changi Airport in 1981.

Periods of conflict such as the Hock Lee bus riots and the Maria Hertogh riots in the '50s did not appear to register, but the racial riots of 1964 scored relatively high in importance.

And among the least-known episodes in history are controversial ones: Under a quarter of respondents knew of the Graduate Mother Scheme debate in 1984 (24.9 per cent), the discovery of a Marxist Conspiracy plot in 1987 (18.5 per cent) and Operation Coldstore in 1963 (16.6 per cent).

The study was conducted last year among 1,516 Singaporeans aged 21 and over from a range of age groups and education and income levels. Researchers culled a list of 50 events from local history, beginning from modern Singapore's founding in 1819 to the previous General Election in 2011. Respondents were asked if they were aware of a certain event and then to rank its importance on a five-point scale.

Commenting on the findings, IPS senior research fellow Leong Chan-Hoong, the study's principal investigator, explained that negative events tend to leave lasting impressions as "it is human nature to remember bad things". However, events considered important usually exemplify progress, he noted.

Low awareness of certain events could be due to the passage of time and the lack of exposure, said Nominated Member of Parliament Tan Tai Yong, executive vice-president (Academic Affairs) at Yale-NUS College.

Referring to Operation Coldstore, Professor Tan, who is also director of the Institute of South Asian Studies, said: "Nobody talks about it, and very few people read about it. It doesn't feature very prominently in people's memories. I don't think it's just the controversial nature

of the subject. But it's whether the subject gets into the public domain ... This may trigger conversation about the cause, effect and motivation of these events.

"In a country's history, there will always be turning points and it's important for people to understand what these things mean. But whether they will resonate with a lot of people is something one can never be sure of."

Historian Goh Geok Yian from Nanyang Technological University's School of Humanities and Social Sciences said: "Being aware of the various episodes in local history adds to a person's appreciation of the place he or she lives and builds an identity in. Awareness can also help mitigate intergenerational divisions."

She suggested holding exhibitions, roadshows, workshops and local history programmes to boost interest.

Using a five-point scale, the study also looked at respondents' emotional responses to events. The happenings that Singaporeans felt most emotional about correlated with those they viewed as important: The SARS outbreak, the official launch of the MRT network and the opening of Changi Airport. Respondents were more indifferent towards political milestones, such as the People's Action Party's split in 1961, the Marxist Conspiracy plot and Operation Coldstore — which ranked last.

Dr Leong said stories of human tenacity, endurance and national resilience appeared to resonate strongly with Singaporeans. "This can be used to ... encourage a sense of solidarity among people and build their confidence for the future," he said.