

History Vaguely Remembered, Culturally Ingrained Through Social Narratives

By Howard Lee

The Online Citizen, 26 January 2015

Apparently, the Institute of Policy Studies published the results of a survey to chart what Singaporeans remember the most about our history, the results of which are quite odd, to say the least.

It is not sure if IPS listed out key events for respondents to vote against, or simply left it to their freedom to choose what comes to their heads. What The Straits Times reported was that responded were asked about whether they were “aware of the event”.

The top three events were reasonable – the opening of the two casinos (not Integrated Resorts, apparently), the SARS outbreak, and the mass rapid transit breakdown in December 2011 that led to CEO Saw Phiak Hwa stepping down (which some would dispute, regardless).

But going down the list reveals something else altogether. Apparently, Singaporeans today were aware of Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles landing in Singapore (1819), former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew crying on national television on separation from Malaysia (1965) which lead to Singapore independence, and the Japanese Occupation (1942). And, they were more aware of these events than they were aware of Singapore hosting the Youth Olympic Games in 2010.

It doesn't take a math whizz to note that something does not seem to add up. Scarcely anyone alive in 1819 who is capable of registering memories would be living today, and the events of World War II and our independence would likely be vivid only to a particular age group, many who would likely have passed on. What then would give the events of the 1800s and mid-1900s such prominence among a majority of our population that is relatively young compared to our Singapore's age?

And that is not even factoring in the many new citizens who have made Singapore home. Many would have begun to sank roots here possibly only as early as the late 1990s. How would they have formed an impression of Singapore's independence, which happened at least 30 years ago?

The more obvious answer that comes to mind would be through reading. Granted, Raffles and Merger form a great part of our school history textbooks, a rudimentary rite of passage for any Singaporean living today who wish to pass exams and earn a living. That said, reading describes knowledge, which is a far cry from “awareness”, which entails a certain “being in” the thick of the action, so to speak. Does the Singapore population today have such awareness?

Awareness, however, can be created through immersion. The fact that 88.7% of Singaporeans claim that they are aware of former PM Lee crying on television – something that most of them might not have even watched for themselves in person – demonstrates

less the impact of a particular event, but how extensively it has been propagated and repeated, ad infinitum, such that it *becomes* our awareness.

Viewed in that light, we must necessarily see the results of the IPS survey as being endemic of a fairly successful exercise in storytelling. Our history was not just told to us. It is made to be experienced as a personal encounter, and there is no other example that explains this best than the narrative that surrounds the Battle for Merger. Observers, particularly those who have done some study on that particular period of our history, have raised queries about whether the Battle for Merger exhibition might contain factual errors, too focused on the singular narrative presented by the radio broadcast of former PM Lee, and hence failed to adequately reflect a holistic rendition of the events surrounding Singapore's independence. Indeed, the entire exercise can best be described as less about our history, but one man's views and voice on it.

One man does not make history. History must be experienced to be real, and therein lies the danger, when we do not allow our experience to go beyond the accounts of one man or one group.

Tellingly, the IPS survey showed some of the events that registered least on the awareness of Singaporeans. Operation Coldstore, the Marxist Conspiracy, the breakaway of Barisan Socialis, even JB Jeyaretnam being the first opposition Politician since independence to win a seat in Parliament – all these events registered low on awareness among Singaporeans. All these events, incidentally, would also have registered low on our national narrative, the lived experience that surrounds us and increase or decrease our awareness of issues.

Operation Coldstore was simply relegated to one part of the “fight against the communists” in the Battle for Merger narrative, although numerous individuals, some who would have been political leaders, were detained without trial with nary an explanation beyond an unproven accusation that they were communists.

JB Jeyaretnam's hallmark victory was also written off as insignificant, as Loke Hoe Yeong's book about Chaim See Tong attested. Jeyaretnam would, of course, also continue to receive vilification from the ruling People's Action Party, who would definitely be keen to ensure that its own narrative remains a priority.

The Marxist Conspiracy, as then-rookie journalist Bertha Henson had indicated in reflection, was a constant stream of briefs from the Internal Security Department, carried faithfully and with little question from media outlets, to the extent that we are only aware of the scant details presented in the official narrative.

“History is written by the victors”, and at some point we might have to ruefully accept that to be the truth. But at no point should we concede that the narration of our history has to be a singular narrative, experienced only from the one who spoke the loudest.

Today, we have alternative media and avenues for discussion, through which we can explore alternative narratives of our history, so that we can decide for ourselves what is right and wrong. More importantly, we need to increase our awareness beyond the common rhetoric and make sense of our national identity. This is a necessary exercise. We owe it not to the actors of history – the so-called “winners” or “losers” – but to ourselves, because this is who we are.