HISTORY MAKING IN SINGAPORE:
WHO IS PRODUCING THE KNOWLEDGE?

NICOLE TARULEVICZ[1]
Cleveland State University

Introduction

'Before you discuss your future,' Lee Kuan Yew exhorted the citizens of Singapore in 1998, 'remember how we got here.'[2] This statement heralded a dramatic departure from the previous animosity of the Singaporean government towards the study of history. During the 1960s and 1970s, the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) was overtly hostile to history, fearing its potential to divide Singaporean society. In the 1980s, this hostility gave way to ambivalence and, by the 1990s, the PAP had been forced to address a growing interest in and nostalgia for, the past. Singaporeans—in letters to the editor, in poems and newspaper columns—started publicly expressing a sense of nostalgia.[3] For most, it was the 1970s that was being remembered. The significance of this lies precisely in the period of time. Nostalgia was not being expressed for pre-independence Singapore, or even newly-independent Singapore. By the 1970s Singapore had already experienced many of the advantages of economic development.

For a state devoted to economic development, in which 'people are the only resource',[4] and physical resources minimal, nostalgia for the 1970s was an inherent criticism of the fast pace of change and the goals of that state. That is, the nostalgia posed a threat to the nature of the state and given the omnipresent position of the PAP, it posed a direct threat to their rule. Nostalgia for the 1970s posed a threat to the state greater than other periods of time. Rather than move to repress public expressions of nostalgia, the PAP

[1] Nicole Tarulevicz (n.tarulevicz@csuohio.edu) is an Assistant Professor in the Department of History at Cleveland State University.
[2] Lee Kuan Yew, quoted in *Singapore: Journey into Nationhood*, Singapore, Ministry of Information and the Arts, Singapore: Landmark Books, 1998, front cover.
[3] Alfran Sa'at, 'Autobiography', *A History of Amnesia*, Singapore: Ethos Books, 2001, p. 10. Also see Cherian George, *Singapore: The Air-Conditioned Nation: Essays on the Politics of Comfort and Control 1990-2000*, Singapore: Landmark books, 2000, p. 189.
[4] *Singapore: The Next Lap*, Singapore: Singapore Government, 1990.

was quick to capitalize on the opportunity. Its response was to harness history for nationalist aims and to accentuate the link between the past and the future.

Beginning with an examination of history making in Singapore, with reference to both its colonial origins and its contemporary practice, this paper identifies the problems facing Singaporean historiography. It traces the evolution of history writing in Singapore and considers the 'template' of Singaporean history, in particular its emphasis on the actions of great men and important events. The significance of history to the nation, particularly in terms of ethnic origins and race is then considered. Nostalgia, especially for place, has emerged amongst Singaporeans. The PAP, as well as non-governmental organizations, has attempted to address this issue in a variety of ways including the use of technology to draw citizens into the process of producing historical knowledge. The focus of my analysis here is on the management of history or, in other words, the process by which the Singaporean state attempts to construct narratives through which Singaporeans should understand their history.

Drawing on the work of Benedetto Croce (1866-1952), Marc Ferro maintained that the study of history 'pinpoints the problems of its own times more fully even than those of the era about which it is supposed to be concerned'.[5] In drawing attention to the difficulties facing Singaporean historiography, this chapter raises issues concerning the study of Singapore more broadly. The failure of Singaporean society to theorize, or come to terms with, its own past, constitutes opaqueness in the study of Singapore. Thinking about history and history making reveals, as Ferro suggests, much about contemporary concerns. For Anne McClintock, nations, particularly postcolonial nations, 'are historical practices through which social difference is both invented and performed'.[6] History is a trope of knowledge, an established way of thinking about society and as such is critical to understanding a society.

Singaporean Historiography

Early histories of Singapore were, unsurprisingly, produced by the colonizers. Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles (1781-1826) himself wrote what could be seen as Singapore's first history, although it is actually an autobiography.[7] *A Memoir of the Life of and Public Service of Sir Thomas*

---

[5] Marc Ferro, *The Use and Abuse of History or How the Past is Taught*, London: Routledge, 1984, p. viii.

[6] Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*, New York: Routledge, 1995, p. 353.

[7] Thomas Stamford Raffles, *A Memoir of the Life of and Public Service of Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles*, First published in 1824; 1930; Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1978.

Stamford Raffles provides an account of the life of Raffles, in which Singapore features. It is a slim volume written in 1824 which he intended to act as a record of his public life for his family, friends and the directors of the East India Company, in the event of his premature death.[8] The memoir begins with a claim for compensation from the East India Company for possessions lost with the destruction of the ship *Fame*. The remainder of the account is geographically and chronologically divided into three parts—Java, Sumatra and Singapore. Raffles provided a description of economic and political expansion in Asia, in which he plays a pivotal role.

Raffles contrasted his failures in Java with his success in Singapore, describing the occupation and British settlement of Singapore as 'a pleasing part of the duty' he had to perform.[9] The section on Singapore is largely dedicated to a description of how Raffles came to take power. He focuses on his own heroic efforts, framing himself as a 'just colonial,' devoting several pages, for example, to a discussion of how he prevented slavery taking hold in Singapore.[10] For Raffles, the administration of Singapore was a personal success, which allowed the means of wealth and power to be accrued by his own country.[11] In Raffles' view, Singapore is brought into existence by his actions: the story of Singapore is thus the story of Raffles.

Other colonial players also contributed to early histories of Singapore with tales of their own activities or of the deeds of other colonial characters.[12] In these accounts, Singapore provided the backdrop to, rather than the *raison d'être*, of the histories. A national history was slow to emerge. As independence drew closer in the late 1950s and early 1960s a marked expansion in historical work about Singapore occurred, although the focus remained on colonial figures.[13] In Hong Kong, a similar phenomenon occurred, that is, as colonialism was waning, the history of that colonialism was being explored.[14]

---

[8] Ibid., p. 4.

[9] Ibid., p. 48.

[10] Ibid., pp. 60-3.

[11] Ibid., p. 49.

[12] For example, see J. A. Bethune Cook, *Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles, Founder of Singapore, 1819, and Some of His Friends and Contemporaries*, London: Arthur H Stockwell, 1918. Also, see Edwin Arthur Brown, *Indiscreet Memories*, London: Kelly and Walsh, 1935.

[13] For example, see Thavamani Devi Rajah, 'John Crawford, Resident of Singapore, 1823-1826', Academic exercise, Department of History, University of Malaya, 1959; Stephen Samuel Dhoraisingam, 'Robert Fullerton, Governor of the Straits Settlement, 1824-1830', Academic exercise, Department of History, University of Malaya, 1961; Manonmany Doraisingham, 'Colonel Orfeur Cavenagh, Governor of the Straits Settlements, 1859-1867', Academic exercise, Department of History, University of Malaya, 1961.

[14] See, for example, Ackber Abbat, *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997; Rozanna Lilley,

Historical Tradition

The influence of a colonial understanding of history was still apparent in independent Singapore, where the exploits of great men continued to be read as the history of Singapore. Noel Barber's history of Singapore, for example, located Raffles and Lee in a continuum of great men shaping the nation.[15] If for colonial writers Raffles was the great man, for Modern Singapore Lee has become the equivalent. Lee, himself, has written two autobiographies that mirror the approach Raffles took. Although Lee does not explicitly identify himself with Raffles, the imprint of Raffles remains present in Singapore. Phillip Holden has written that the 'continued memorialisation' of an imperial founder in a postcolonial society is unique to Singapore.[16] He suggested that Raffles' place in contemporary Singapore should be understood in the context of 'a genealogy of his historicisation within the narrative of Singapore's history'.[17] By this he means that just as Raffles understood himself as establishing a new order, so too did Lee. In this sense Raffles and Lee can be read as the same kind of great men.

Elite Representations

The history of Singapore has often been told in terms of the life of Lee Kuan Yew, not least by the man himself.[18] A number of detailed accounts of Lee's life published by Alex Josey conflate Singapore's national history with Lee's personal history.[19] *Lee Kuan Yew: The Man and His Ideas*, similarly draws the national and the personal into a single narrative.[20] Holden argued that these texts are attempts to 'build a national mythology' and contrasted them

Staging Hong Kong: Gendered Performances in Transition, Richmond, England: Curzon Press, 1998.

[15] Noel Barber, *The Singapore Story: From Raffles to Lee Kuan Yew*, London: Fontana, 1978.

[16] Phillip Holden, 'The Free Market's Second Coming: Monumentalizing Raffles', in Phyllis G. L. Chew and Anneliese Kramer-Dahl, eds., *Reading Culture; Textual Practices in Singapore*, Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1999, p. 84.

[17] Ibid., p. 87.

[18] Lee Kuan Yew, *The Singapore Story: Memoirs of Lee Kuan Yew*, Singapore: Times Press, 1998; *Lee Kuan Yew, From Third World to First World: The Singapore Story 1965-2000*, Singapore: Times Press, 2002.

[19] Alex Josey, *Lee Kuan Yew in London*, Singapore: Donald Moore, 1968; *Singapore: Its Past, Present and Future*, Singapore: Deutsch, 1979; *Lee Kuan Yew*, Singapore: Times Books international, 1980; *Lee Kuan Yew: The Struggle for Singapore*, London: Angus and Robertson, 1980.

[20] Han Fook Kwang, Warren Feranandez, Sumiko Tan, *Lee Kuan Yew: The Man and His Ideas*, Singapore: Times Editions, 1998.

with T.J.S. George's account and James Minchin's more critical biography.[21] Michael Barr's history of the development of Lee's thinking claims not to be a biography, but as Holden rightly pointed out; biographical material is central to the work.[22] In a critical review of Lee's autobiography, Ian Buruma noted that it was rather 'grandiose to identify one's life story with that of one's country,' but conceded that in Lee's case it was not 'entirely unjustified'.[23]

It is, however, problematic to tell a national story through the life-story of an individual, regardless of how significant that character is. As Lysa Hong argued, 'Singapore's history cannot be simply reduced to an account of his [Lee's] career or a study of his pronouncements, as he himself has done'.[24] Biography and autobiography provide an incomplete picture of a national history. Hong maintains that 'the notion that Singapore is no more than what Lee Kuan Yew wants it to be lies at the heart of endeavours to unmask the man whose name is almost synonymous with the assertive city-state'.[25] It is the practice of biography *as* history that has been central to the polemical approach taken to be the history of Singapore.

Ambiguities over the function of biography, especially political biography, have vexed many.[26] Political memoir is a term commonly used to describe works that are both historical and autobiographical,[27] and it is certainly an appropriate term for describing much historical practice in Singapore. The political memoir has, as George Egerton pointed out, a polemic status not being historical, political, or autobiographical, in genre.[28]

---

[21] Phillip Holden, 'Book Review: Lee Kuan Yew: The Beliefs Behind the Man,' *SOJOURN*, 17, 2002, p. 122; T. J. S. George, *Lee Kuan Yew's Singapore*, Deutsch, 1973; James Minchin, *No Man is an Island: A Portrait of Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew*, Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1986.

[22] Michael Barr, Lee Kuan Yew: *The Beliefs Behind the Man*, Richmond: Curzon Press, 2000, p. 6; Phillip Holden, 'Book Review: Lee Kuan Yew: The Beliefs Behind the Man,' p. 123. Also see Kanishka Jayasuriya, 'Book Review: The Beliefs Behind the Man', *Pacific Affairs*, 75, 3, 2002, pp. 488-9.

[23] Ian Buruma, 'The Man Who Would Be King', *The New York Review of Books*, 46, 10, 10 June 1999, p. 34.

[24] Lysa Hong, 'The Lee Kuan Yew Story as Singapore's History,' *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 33, 3, October 2002, p. 546.

[25] Ibid., p. 547.

[26] For example, see Karl Weintraub, 'Autobiography and Historical Consciousness', *Critical Inquiry*, 1, 4, 1975, pp. 821-848; Patrick O'Brien, 'Political Biography: A Polemical Review of the Genre', *Biography: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly*, 21, 1, 1998, pp. 50-7.

[27] Joshua Mostow, 'Japanese Nikki as Political Memoirs', in George Egerton, ed., *Political Memoir: Essays on the Politics of Memory*, London: Frank Cass, 1994, p. 106.

[28] George Egerton, 'The Politics of Memory: Form and Function in the History of Political Memoir from Antiquity to Modernity', in Egerton, ed., *Political Memoir*, p. 2. Also see

Political memoirs can operate as a shield fashioned to protect the reputation of the political elite.[29] Lee is not unique in identifying his life with his nation's life. Kwame Nkrumah after all, named his autobiography *Ghana*, claiming that the story of his life was the story of the life of the nation.[30]

The political biographies and autobiographies of Lee have a specific social function, that is, to reinforce the national narrative. Lee's autobiographies have been represented as Singapore's national history.[31] Their inclusion in the national education curriculum is evidence of their place as 'a form of hegemonic popular historiography'.[32] The autobiographies have become central to the scripting of Singapore's national history. A national history that is linear 'in which a unified actor—the nation—moves forward in time and conquers uncharted territories'.[33] In drawing a parallel between the making of a nation and the writing of a life, Lee's autobiography writes a 'national narrative' or in Holden's words, 'a national autobiography'.[34] The function of Lee's autobiographies is broader than the writing of a national narrative, because the autobiography actively participates in the construction of a national imaginary.[35]

Lee's autobiographies function not just as autobiographies, framing Lee's and by extension, the nation's past, but also as a tool for constructing the present and contemporary thinking about the nation. In autobiography present understanding is determined by both knowledge of the past and anticipation of the future.[36] It is also the 'thread of the narrative' in autobiography that 'binds the past to the future'.[37] For Singapore the national narrative remains 'unrealized and projected into the future'.[38] At the same time, such national history can offer comfort and Hong suggested that one of

---

Ben Pimlott, 'Is Contemporary Biography History?' *The Political Quarterly*, 70, 1, 1999, p. 37.

[29] B. J. C. McKercher, 'Shield of Memory: The Memoirs of the British Foreign Policy-Making Elite', in Egerton, ed., *Political Memoir*, p. 188.

[30] Kwame Nkrumah, *Ghana: The Autobiography of Kwame Nkrumah*, New York: International Publishers, 1957.

[31] For example, see Michael Barr, 'Review: The Singapore Story', Journal of Contemporary Asia, 30, 2, 2000, pp. 271-4: R. M. Pearce, 'Book Review: From the Third World to the First', *National Observer*, Autumn 2001, pp. 69-73.

[32] Phillip Holden, 'A Man and An Island: Gender and Nation in Lee Kuan Yew's The Singapore Story', *Biography*, 24, 2, 2001, p. 404.

[33] Hong, 'The Lee Kuan Yew Story as Singapore's History', p. 554.

[34] Holden, 'A Man and An Island', p. 402.

[35] Ibid.

[36] Susan Egan, *Mirror Talk: Genres of Crisis in Contemporary Autobiography*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999, p. 5.

[37] Georges Gusdorf, 'Constraints and Limits of Autobiography', in James Olney, ed., *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980, p. 41.

[38] Holden, 'A Man and An Island', p. 409.

the functions of Lee's autobiographies is to 'offer assurance to ever-anxious Singaporeans in a change-driven Singapore that their national history can endure'.[39]

The first instalment of Lee's autobiography, *The Singapore Story: Memoirs of Lee Kuan Yew*, provided an example of a specific history attempting to control understandings of the past. In calling his autobiography 'The Singapore Story' Lee effectively claimed that his experiences and actions are analogous to, or even synonymous with those of Singapore. The experiences of the elite are thus incorrectly presented as the experiences of all Singaporeans. This version of history is highly exclusionary.

Referring to the first part of his autobiography Lee acknowledged that it might be subjective in parts, because he had not kept a diary during the 1950s and 1960s.[40] The implication, of course, is that his diary would have been completely objective, had he but kept one. Lee unquestionably sees himself as not just the 'Father of the Nation' and thus responsible for the state, but as the very essence of the nation. He made the extraordinary statement: 'Even from my sick bed, even if you are going to lower me into the grave and I feel that something is going wrong, I will get up.'[41] Singaporean history under the PAP works to make such a statement unremarkable.

It is said that in 1942 during the Japanese Occupation of Singapore, a Japanese soldier hit the young Lee, who spoke back to him, questioned his authority and then ran away.[42] Sometimes described as the founding moment of independent Singapore, this incident has iconographic significance. No longer, it is claimed, would Lee accept colonialism in any form. The Japanese occupation, Lee asserted, prompted him to become a lawyer and fight for justice and to see Singapore independent. The construction of this event proposes a very particular understanding of history, offering the conclusion that a single action by an individual can form a nation. In this sense, Lee is not only writing national history, he is endorsing an approach to history that began with a colonial project and emphasizes a linear progression, navigated by great men.

Taking Robert Yeo's play, *The Eye of History*, as his example, William Peterson argued that Raffles and Lee are often conflated as great leaders and great men.[43] The play centres on a fictionalized meeting between Lee and Raffles in 1981, whereby Raffles and Lee are simultaneously placed in both

---

[39] Hong, 'The Lee Kuan Yew Story as Singapore's History', p. 557.

[40] Lee Kuan Yew, quoted in Loh Kah Seng. 'Within the Singapore Story: The Use and Narrative of History in Singapore', *Crossroads: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Southeast Asia Studies*, 12, 2, 1998, p. 20.

[41] Lee Kuan Yew, quoted in *Straits Times*, 15 August 1988, p. 1.

[42] Loh, 'Within the Singapore Story', p. 9.

[43] Robert Yeo, *The Eye of History*, Singapore: Select Books, 1992.

the past and the present. The play functions in such a way that 'Raffles, the ur-coloniser at the height of his power and influence' ultimately confers 'legitimacy on his rightful successor'.[44] In the context of the play 'Raffles equates Singapore' is extended to 'Raffles equals Lee Kuan Yew equals Singapore'.[45] In *The Eye of History,* Raffles is characterized as a great man who had a vision for Singapore, albeit a colonial and imperialist one. According to Peterson, 'by demonstrating that Lee has fulfilled a sacred national dream, Yeo upholds one of the great myths that provides a foundation for the nation of Singapore',[46] that of realizing a dream.

When Lee and Raffles meet, Raffles congratulates Lee, not just for a job well done, but for the way Lee remembers the past. 'I am ever grateful,' Raffles claimed, 'to have in you a ruler who takes a long and enlightened view of history and places the contributions of people like myself in perspective'.[47] Yeo had Raffles speculate about a worse future: 'who knows what will happen if someone else should come along, some anti-history, anti-British demagogue and altogether denies my part in the founding of Singapore'.[48] Lee is very much a product of colonialism, educated in a British tradition. He is often described as 'a Chinese mirror of the perfect Anglo leader'.[49] Holden described Lee's autobiographies as works of mourning, in which British Imperial masculinity is simultaneously celebrated and mourned.[50] While Lee is anti-history in the sense that he wishes to control public understandings of history, he is pro-history when it constitutes colonial history. He readily accepted the necessity and benefits of British colonialism that Yeo has Raffles articulate.

Linking Raffles and Lee affects how history is seen; progress becomes central and a linear narrative is established. When historians of Singapore consider modern Singapore they tend to describe a series of events as unquestionably significant, and then show how they were successfully negotiated or overcome by Lee and his colleagues.[51] Moreover, the PAP argued that history is best told by its participants. Lee claimed that it is not possible for academics to write the history of Singapore in the 1950s and

---

[44] William Peterson, *Theatre and the Politics of Culture in Contemporary Singapore*, Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2001, p. 66.

[45] Ibid., 75.

[46] Ibid., p. 69.

[47] Robert Yeo, quoted in Peterson, *Theatre and the Politics of Culture in Contemporary Singapore*, p. 72.

[48] Ibid.

[49] Peterson, *Theatre and the Politics of Culture in Contemporary Singapore*, p. 70.

[50] Holden, 'A Man and An Island', p. 411.

[51] For example, see Ernest Chew and Edwin Lee, eds., *A History of Singapore*, Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1991; Kernial S Sandhu and Paul Wheatley, eds., *Management of Success: The Moulding of Modern Singapore*, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1989.

1960s, as 'history does not happen in clean cut units'. He believes that 'it is after forces let loose in tumultuous events have run their course that the historian comes along … and narrates them in clear-cut chapters'.[52] As it is unclear when it will be acceptable for historians to narrate Singapore's history, 'legitimate' history dictates a 'great men important events' approach, since the 'participants' are such men. Understanding history in these terms excludes historians and defines as illegitimate any recent history not written by participants.

Lee's son and current prime minister, Lee Hsien Loong, also has a very specific understanding of the past, evident in his claim that the National Education programme, introduced in 1997, could not be propaganda because 'if it's truth and facts, then it is objective'.[53] In the same context he maintained that *The Singapore Story*, a Ministry of Information and the Arts (MITA) publication, was based on 'historical fact'. 'We are not talking about an idealised legendary account or a founding myth,' he said but about 'objective history, seen from a Singaporean standpoint'.[54]

These attitudes have left a scar on the practice of history writing in Singapore. Hong described the two most notable Singaporean historians, S Rajaratnam and Devan Nair as the 'midwives of the Singaporean nation-state'.[55] She noted that their greatest contribution to Singaporean history was to set the template for the writing of history in the future. This template had several features. The first is a theme of struggle, which dominates how Singapore is understood—with reference to past and current struggles and those struggles that are yet to emerge. The second is an emphasis on the role played by great men and a focus on great events, inherited as we have seen from a colonial discourse. As a template it provides limited scope for exploring social history, the experience of women and minorities, or examining events with regards to categories such as gender, class and race.

For historians, both Nair and Rajaratnam were remarkably ambivalent about the past. Nair argued that looking to the past for inspiration was both dangerous and backward. In his view, industrialization, together with the associated modernization and progress, divided history into those who look to the past and those who look to the future. He argued that for Singaporeans the past was a poor guide, stating that 'Unlike the pre-modern man who dreamed of the world he had left, modern man must dream of the world he

---

[52] Lee Kuan Yew, quoted in Loh, 'Within the Singapore Story', p. 7.

[53] Lee Hsien Loong, quoted in 'Program Based on Verifiable Facts: Hsien Loong Lee,' *Straits Times*, 19 May 1997, p. 26.

[54] Lee Hsien Loong, quoted in 'Telling the Singapore Story', *Straits Times*, 20 May 1997, p. 29.

[55] S. Rajaratnam, quoted in Lysa Hong, 'Making the History of Singapore: S. Rajaratnam and C. V. Devan Nair', in Lam Peng Er and Kevin Y. L. Tan, eds., *Lee's Lieutenants: Singapore's Old Guard*, Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1999, p. 97.

will make'.[56] History was thus defined as the antithesis of modernity and of future-looking peoples.

Rajaratnam saw history as a linear narrative that could be perverted by 'wrong' choices. The rise of opposition politician J. B. Jeyaretnam, posed a threat, in Rajaratnam's view, to the very course of history and he argued that if Jeyaretnam or other members of the opposition were successful then a 'different history' would begin for Singapore.[57] His anti-opposition stance should come as no surprise from a man who described his role as a historian as being a 'public relations man' for the PAP, 'the chap who projects the PAP's image'.[58] Public relations, in this context, should be understood as providing a positive spin on the past, evidenced by Rajaratnam's comment in 1990 that, 'Being Singaporean means forgetting all that stands in the way of one's Singaporean commitment'.[59]

History that does not validate the PAP and that bypasses the 'important men important events' approach, inherently questions that approach and potentially uncovers a more complex story. It is the notion of an alternative view that is problematic, more than the specific elements of any such view. A parallel is evident in the depiction of sexuality in Singapore. William Peterson convincingly argued that in the context of Singaporean theatre it is acceptable to depict homosexuality as long as it is presented as deviant.[60] In the same fashion it is acceptable to write history as long as it does not challenge societal norms and conforms to the 'great men, great events' pattern.

Histories of Singapore

The government of Singapore, or more accurately, its ministries, has also produced a number of histories of Singapore, which conform to the emphasis on great men and chronologically detailed history.[61] Such an approach tends to veer away from analysis towards description of events and individuals. Institutional histories are common and tend to be commissioned by

---

[56] Devan Nair, *Not By Wages Alone: Selected Speeches and Writings of C V Devan Nair, 1959-1981*, Singapore: Singapore National Trade Union Congress, 1982, p. 275.

[57] Chan Heng Chee and Obaid ul Haq, eds., *The Prophetic and the Political: Selected Speeches and Writings of S Rajaratnam*, Singapore: Graham Brash, 1987, p. 166.

[58] S. Rajaratnam, quoted in Lysa Hong, 'Making the History of Singapore', p. 97.

[59] Ibid.

[60] Peterson, *Theatre and the Politics of Culture in Contemporary Singapore*, p. 138.

[61] For example, see Daljit Singh and V. T. Arasu, eds., *Singapore: An Illustrated History 1941-1984*, Singapore: Information Division, Ministry of Culture, 1984; *Road to Nationhood: Singapore 1819-1980*, Singapore: Archives and Oral History Department, 1984.

commercial companies,[62] although government departments and educational facilities also seek such histories.[63] Private and public institutional histories share an approach to history: the organization is the primary focus, while Singapore provides the backdrop. Individuals, be they company directors or educationalists, are celebrated in institutional histories. Just as a company may be shaped by a charismatic director, so Singapore was shaped by its leader. In this sense, institutional histories complement the Singaporean government approach to history.

Illustrated histories are quite widespread and tend to focus on place and heritage as history.[64] The representation of place as ethnicity is also common. Although the PAP has endeavoured to avoid ethnic ghettos, certain places are read in terms of ethnicity. Serangoon Road, for example, represents Singaporean Indianess. In producing a pictorial history of Serangoon Road, Siddique and Purushotam are typically depicting and reducing history to heritage, ethnic identity, and place.[65]

Histories of communities and community associations, especially clubs, are popular and are represented by both local and expatriate associations. They tend to function in much the same fashion as institutional histories.[66] The energetic club secretary functions in much the same way as the charismatic company director which is to emphasize the importance of individuals in shaping Singapore. Histories of ethnic groups, particularly ethnic minorities, are common and tend to trace the development of the community and stress their contribution to Singapore society.[67] The function

---

[62] For example, see Lim Jim Koon, ed., *Our 70 Years 1923-1993: A History of Leading Chinese Newspapers in Singapore*, Singapore: Singapore Press Holdings, 1988; Emil Helfferich, *Behn, Meyer and Co. Founded in Singapore, November 1, 1840 and Arnold Otto Meyer, Founded in Hamburg, June 1, 1857: A Company History*, Hamburg: Hans Christians Verlag, 1983.

[63] For example, see Francis Brown, *Memories of SJI: Reminiscences of Old Boys and Past Teachers of St Joseph's Institution, Singapore*, Singapore: St Joseph's, 1987; *75 Years (1905-1980) of Medical Education*, Singapore: National University of Singapore, 1980.

[64] For example, see Sharon Siddique and Nirmala Purushotam, *Serangoon Road: A Pictorial History*, Singapore: Singapore Education Publications Bureau, 1983; *A Pictorial History of Nee Soon Community*, Singapore: National Archives and Oral History Department, 1987; Eric Jennings, ed., *Singapore Panorama: 150 Years in Pictures*, Singapore: Straits Times Press, 1970.

[65] Siddique and Purushotam, *Serangoon Road*.

[66] For example, see *Fifty Years at Bukit Timah: 1933-1983, Singapore*, Singapore Turf Club, 1983; Hans Schweizer-Iten, *One Hundred Years of the Swiss Club and the Swiss Community of Singapore 1871-1971*, Singapore: Swiss Club, 1981.

[67] For example, see Sharon Siddique and Nirmala Purushotam, *Singapore's Little India: Past, Present and Future*, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1992; Tania Li, *Malays in Singapore: Culture, Economy and Ideology*, Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1989; Myrna Braga-Blake, ed., *Singapore Eurasians: Memories and Hopes*, Singapore: Times Editions, 1992.

of these accounts is to locate minorities within a broader Singaporean framework and as such pose little threat to Singaporean historical orthodoxy. While past hardships are described, the general tone of minority histories in Singapore is positive, stressing community and economic contribution.

General and popular histories of Singapore have also been written, the best known of which are C. M. Turnbull's *A History of Singapore 1819-1988* and Ernest Chew and Edwin Lee's *A History of Singapore*.[68] Memoirs and biographies constitute a number of histories of Singapore.[69] We have already seen in the case of Lee Kuan Yew, these raise a number of problems when read as national history. Further, many of the more recent histories of Singapore have been written, not by historians but by sociologists and geographers,[70] creating a history of place and space rather than of ideas or social trends. The study of Singaporean literature and performance art has also produced historical analysis, especially in terms of 'reading the colonial'.[71] While these are important contributions and should not be dismissed, they are not an adequate substitute for historiography. The poverty of historiography is well illustrated by the selected bibliography of Singaporean historical sources produced by the library of the National

---

[68] For example, see Nicholas Tarling, *Singapore and the Singaporeans since 1819*, Auckland: University of Auckland, 1992; C. M. Turnbull, *A History of Singapore 1819-1988*, Singapore: Oxford University Press, 2nd ed., 1989; Chew and Lee, eds., *A History of Singapore*.

[69] For example, see Kip Lee Lee, *Amber Sands: A Boyhood Memoir*, Singapore: Federal Publications, 1995; Ying Chow Lien, *From Chinese Villager to Singapore Tycoon: My Life Story*, Singapore: Times Books International, 1992.

[70] For example, see Kwok Kian-Woon, Kwa Chong Guan, Lily Kong and Brenda Yeoh, *Our Place in Time: Exploring Heritage and Memory in Singapore*, Singapore: Singapore Heritage Society, 1999; Chua Beng Huat, *That Imagined Space: Nostalgia for the Kampung in Singapore*, Department of Sociology, National University of Singapore, Working Paper, no. 122, 1994; Brenda Yeoh and Lily Kong, 'The Notion of Place in the Construction of History, Nostalgia and Heritage in Singapore', *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography*, 17, 1, 1996, pp. 52-65; Emma Reisz, 'City as Garden: Shared Space in the Urban Botanic Garden of Singapore and Malaysia, 1786-2000', in Ryan Bishop, John Phillips and Wei-Wei Yeo, eds., *Postcolonial Urbanism: Southeast Asian Cities and Global Processes*, New York: Routledge, 2003, pp. 123-48; Brenda Yeoh and Lily Kong, eds., *Portraits of Places: History Community and Identity in Singapore*, Singapore: Times Editions, 1995; Lily Kong and Brenda Yeoh, *The Politics of Landscape in Singapore: Constructions of 'Nation'*, Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2003; Brenda Yeoh and Kamalini Ramdas, 'Remembering Darkness: Spectacle, Surveillance and the Spaces of Everyday Life in Syonan-to', in P. Lim Pui Huen and Diana Wong, eds., *War and Memory in Malaysia and Singapore*, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2000, pp.160-85.

[71] Phillip Holden, *Modern Subjects/Colonial Texts: Hugh Clifford and the Discipline of English Literature in the Straits Settlements and Malaya 1895-1907*, Greensboro: ELT Press, 2000; Holden, 'The Free Market's Second Coming: Monumentalizing Raffles', pp. 83-97.

University of Singapore; in a volume of over 200 pages, the section entitled 'historiography' included only five items.[72]

Even thinking about Singaporean history seems difficult for many Singaporeans, a fact perhaps due to a lack of clarity over the role and purpose of history. Khoo Kay Kim, a Malaysian historian, for example, described history as being about everything in the past and suggests that to write a general history of Singapore, 'no part of the society ought to be deemed irrelevant; if it existed, it is relevant'.[73] Such an approach leads to histories of small organizations, institutions and groups, a genre already in vogue in Singapore, and not to a critical engagement with history making. The assumptions underlying Khoo's argument are that there is a 'historical truth' that can, through detail, be revealed and then stand unchallenged.

Syed Hussein Alatas, a Malay scholar, has also discussed the difficulties facing history writing in Singapore. For him, sources were the main problem. He pointed to difficulties with dating Malay materials and to the bias of colonial sources. In his conclusion, he called for historians of Singapore to have a strong sense of objectivity and morality, arguing that reading the 'wrong' sorts of sources will corrupt the historian. 'If you consider the works of a writer who does not have that foundation of morality as a source of historical insight,' he cautioned, 'then the history you receive would be a distorted one'.[74] He refers here to Raffles, whom he considers to have written 'biased' accounts of Singapore's early colonial history. Yet it is difficult to write about Singapore without reference to its colonial heritage; exposure to sources with views that reflect their time need to be engaged with rather than ignored because they are polemical.

The problem with sources in Singapore is less Alatas's fear of contamination by immoral historians and more the censorship by the Singapore government of some archival sources, particularly more recent materials. Even when sources are not at issue, those who are working on Singaporean history show a reluctance to consider post-independence sources, as they are deemed too sensitive and a potentially risky area of research. Consequently, recent research has tended to focus more on the colonial era, merger with Malaysia and then separation.[75]

---

[72] Tim Yap Fuan, ed., *A Sense of History: A Select Bibliography on the History of Singapore*, Singapore: National University of Singapore Library, 1998, p. 7.

[73] Khoo Kay Kim, 'Rewriting Singapore's History', *Malays/Muslims and the History of Singapore*, Occasional Paper Series, Centre for Research on Islamic and Malay Affairs Singapore, Paper no. 1-98, 1997, p. 9.

[74] Syed Hussein Alatas, 'Some Problems in the Writing of Singapore's History', *Malays/Muslims and the History of Singapore*, Occasional Paper Series, Centre for Research on Islamic and Malay Affairs Singapore, Paper no. 1-98, 1997, p. 7.

[75] For example, see Lysa Hong and Huang Jianli, "Imagining a Big Singapore: Positioning the Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall," *The Scripting of A National History:*

The low profile of Singaporean history means that it is hard to attract academics to work in that field. Together, these factors contribute to the stagnation of the discipline. Although several accounts of the writing of history in Singapore, notably by Lysa Hong, Albert Lau and Loh Kah Seng have emerged, [76] Singaporean history remains marginal to academic endeavours in Singapore, even in history departments. The most useful analyses of Singaporean historiography often appear as asides by Singaporean scholars, in the course of other research. Hong, a Singaporean historian of Thailand, makes the most significant contribution to Singaporean historiography.[77] Her excellent analysis is overwhelmed by the hegemony of PAP constructions of history. My own research, which seeks to highlight these difficulties, is part of an attempt to redress the balance.

History, Ethnicity, Origins

The way in which a nation constructs its history can be integral to the construction of the nation itself.[78] The relationship between history and the nation in Singapore is polemical because of the state's changing attitude towards the past. Two political comments highlight the shift that has occurred: Rajaratnam's 1970s statement that 'knowing where you are going is more important than knowing where you came from,'[79] and Lee Kuan

---

Singapore and Its Pasts, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2008; Lim and Wong, eds., *War and Memory in Malaysia and Singapore*; James Francis Warren, *Ah Ku and Karayuki-san: Prostitution in Singapore 1870-1940*, Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1993: Brenda Yeoh, 'Sexually Transmitted Diseases in Late Nineteenth and Twentieth-century Singapore', in M. Lewis, S. Bamber and M. Waugh, eds., *Sex, Disease and Society: A Comparative Study of Sexually Transmitted Diseases and HIV/AIDS in Asia and the Pacific*, Westport: Greenwood Press, 1997, pp. 177-202.

[76] Hong, 'Making the History of Singapore: S. Rajaratnam and C. V. Devan Nair,' pp. 96-115; Loh, 'Within the Singapore Story', pp. 1-21; Albert Lau, 'The National Past and the Writing of the History of Singapore', in Ban Kah Choon, Anne Parkin and Tong Chee Kiong, eds., *Imagining Singapore*, Singapore: Time Academic Press, 1992, pp. 46-68; Lysa Hong and Jianli Huang, 'The Scripting of Singapore's National Heroes: Toying with Pandora's Box', in Tan Liok Ee and Abu Talib Ahmad, eds., *New Terrains in Southeast Asian Historiography*, Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2000, pp. 54-68.

[77] Lysa Hong and Jimmy Yap, 'The Past in Singapore's present', *Commentary*, 11, 1, 1993, pp. 31-8; Lysa Hong, 'Making the History of Singapore: S. Rajaratnam and C. V. Devan Nair', pp. 96-115; Lysa Hong and Jianli Huang, 'The Scripting of Singapore's National Heroes: Toying with Pandora's Box', pp. 54-68; Lysa Hong, 'The Lee Kuan Yew Story as Singapore's History', p. 554.

[78] T. N. Harper, *The End of Empire and the Making of Malaya*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

[79] S. Rajaratnam, quoted in Albert Lau, 'The National Past and the Writing of the History of Singapore', p. 50.

Yew's aforementioned proclamation of 1998, 'Before you discuss your future, remember how we got here'.[80] Both of these statements highlight attitudes towards the future as well as to the past. For Lee 'past, present and future' have become a 'single continuum'.[81] Loh explains that, despite the new attitude to history, history making has not changed and the themes of great men and struggle remain. He argued that:

> History reconceptualized thus maintains "survival" as a pertinent concern in a reshuffled ideological framework in which the "crises" is no longer one of older immigrant Singaporeans opposed to modernisation but one of the tainted ego of the collective youth, who in their recourse to parliamentary opposition are taken to exemplify the corruption of the nation within.[82]

History has changed from an antagonist to the state, into a tool of pacification, whilst actually remaining the same. History is of interest to the state precisely because of its usefulness. As a nation building tool, history can, as Benedict Anderson noted, help to construct or validate a myth of origins for the national community.[83] Initial nation building efforts attempted to down play history. Independent Singapore was beset with potential ethnic tensions. A series of race riots in the 1960s made this threat explicit. Many of the early actions of the PAP government were focused on avoiding further racial divisions. The PAP argued that any focus on the past would facilitate greater ethnic tension and was thus threatening and destructive. Nevertheless the project of nation building required a cohesive identity and so the PAP sought to invent that identity. Prasenjit Duara finds it ironic that the 'nation seeks its ultimate moorings in history,'[84] a category that it is so difficult to define. For a new nation such as Singapore, perhaps these ironies are even greater.

In constructing a collective past for the nation the PAP has fostered what Heng Chee Chan and Hans-Dieter Evers see as 'regressive identity' based on the revival of proud traditions.[85] A 'return to the golden past'

---

[80] Lee Kuan Yew, quoted in *Singapore: Journey into Nationhood*, front cover.

[81] Lee Kuan Yew, quoted in C. V. Devan Nair, *Not by Wages Alone*, p. 333.

[82] Loh, 'Within the Singapore Story', p. 5.

[83] Benedict Anderson, *The Spectre of Comparison: Nationalism, Southeast Asia and the World*, London: Verso, 1998.

[84] Prasenjit Duara, *Rescuing History From the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1995, p. 3.

[85] Heng Chee Chan and Hans-Dieter Evers, 'Nation Building and National Identity in Southeast Asia', in S. Eisenstadt and S. Rokkan, eds., *Nation-Building and National Identity in Southeast Asia*, *In Building States and Nations: Analysis by Region*, *Beverly Hills*, California: Sage, 1973, II, p. 303.

approach was inappropriate. The PAP was unable to return to the ethnic heritage of its population. A golden Chinese age, a golden Malay age, a golden Indian age or a golden colonial age, were all unavailable pasts for Singapore. Focusing on one group posed the risk of alienating large segments of the population, and creating long-term ideological problems and implications. So instead the PAP focused on themes of survival and struggle and by doing so submerged history. Lian Kwen Fee sees the official view of pre-1975 as being that of a 'collective amnesia was…most appropriate for Singapore'. [86] The PAP utilized cultural constructions of the past to emphasize the threat of racial tension in this way emphasizing the shared experience of building the nation. The PAP links the past and fear.

The PAP has always accepted a version of events that include colonization. Colonialism is an essential part of the PAP's rhetoric about economic development. What is new is that since the 1990s the PAP has accepted that Singaporeans have more entrenched ethnic identities. Education policies concerned with mother-tongue language learning and the inclusion of Confucian values in the moral education curriculum are part of this desire to cultivate Singapore as an inherently 'Asian' nation. 'Asianess' has become significant for the PAP and this requires the inclusion of cultural heritage in the understanding of history.

The official story told of Singapore's history revolves around race, in particular the threat of racial chaos: the British instituted a policy of divide and rule, which kept ethnic communities apart, but which was good for the economy.[87] When the Japanese occupied Singapore during the Pacific War (1941-5) they treated all Singaporeans badly, which partially unified the populace.[88] At the end of the war there was racial chaos. Merger with Malaysia was needed to stop this. Singapore's expulsion from the Federation of Malaysia was the greatest threat it faced. There was great potential for rioting, forestalled by the PAP.[89] In this version, the threat of racial violence is in both the present and future and the PAP are the only ones who can prevent it erupting.

Constructing and essentializing the past in this fashion does two important things. First it establishes the necessity of the PAP; secondly it

---

[86] Lian Kwen Fee, 'The Nation-State and the Sociology of Singapore', in Phyllis G. L. Chew and Anneliese Kramer-Dahl, eds., *Reading Culture: Textual Practices in Singapore*, Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1999, p. 41.

[87] For example, see R. Arasumani, *History Workbook for 'O' Level*, Singapore: Federal Publications, 1999.

[88] For example, see Yeo Hwee Joo, *Impact: History of Southeast Asia with Emphasis on Malaysia and Singapore*, Singapore: Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 89.

[89] For example, see 'Joining Malaysia', in *Understanding Our Past: Singapore—From Colony to Nation*, Curriculum Planning and Development Division, Ministry of Education, Singapore, Singapore: Federal Publications, 1999, p. 3

establishes that there is no tension currently. The possibility of tensions is never far away and there are constant reminders. Threat and struggle are the two dominant themes the PAP promotes in its understanding of Singapore's history, and events and issues are manipulated to fit with this model. Anxiety about the future can be stressed and linked to specific historical understandings of events.

Although the British occupied Singapore for over a hundred years, colonization has been homogenized in the official history into three essentialized experiences: the British race policy of divide and rule, the race discourse of the 'lazy native' and the provision of necessary infrastructure.[90] Like the British's achievements in providing the essential infrastructure, the PAP's main achievements similarly have been furnishing the necessary infrastructure. Many would argue that the PAP has also kept in place myths about the 'lazy native,' which have been re-deployed in, for example, discussions of criminality.[91] The PAP brands colonialism as primarily being about divide and rule yet their own rule can be typified in these terms, albeit it in slightly more subtle ways.

Nostalgia

Against this background, Singaporeans expressed nostalgia for their past. The nostalgia was both about things that had changed and things that had been missed. In the words of a Singaporean poet:

> When I awoke I was twenty, being asked
> If I had a happy childhood. Yes, the one
> We all have: filled to the brim
> With the love of absent things.[92]

Rather than censoring such responses, the Singaporean state responded to the rise in nostalgia by trying to co-opt it for nationalist purposes. In transforming nostalgia from something that could potentially undermine the policies and rhetoric of development, to a positive part of a broader and multilayered nation building project, the state is acting in a typically adaptive mode. In mainstreaming nostalgia, the state effectively moved nostalgia away

---

[90] For example, see Lim-Seet Ai Ching, *Progress in History*, Singapore: Preston Corporation, 2001.

[91] John Clammer, 'Framing the Other: Criminality, Social Exclusion and Social Engineering in Developing Singapore', in Catherine Jones Finer and Mike Nellis, eds., *Crime and Social Exclusion*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998, pp.136-53.

[92] Alfran Sa'at, 'Autobiography', *A History of Amnesia*, Singapore: Ethos Books, 2001, p. 10.

from the 1970s and broadened its meaning. Citizens have been actively drawn into the process of producing historical knowledge. In so doing, the state makes citizen more aware of Singaporean history, but simultaneously creates the framework for personal narratives, thereby containing personal histories within a state controlled framework of national history.

Singaporeans have been encouraged to 'grab their tape-recorders' and capture the memories of their elderly 'before it is too late'.[93] Such recordings can then be deposited with the Oral History Department. Oral history has been turned into a free for all, rather than a considered historical approach. The logo of the National Archives of Singapore 'Visit us at the NAS to discover the Singapore in you and me,' further implicates Singaporeans in the making of Singapore's history. In recent years the process has become more active and Singaporeans have been given a range of tools through which their personal history can become part of a national narrative. Technology has played a key role in this expansion.

As Singapore experienced rapid economic development, commentators were quick to promote technology as a catalyst for democratization and social liberalization, mirroring similar arguments in the rest of Asia.[94] Websites such as www.talkingcock.com have provided some space for social critique, but the space has been limited by both a perception of censorship and the prosecution of blogs under libel and defamation laws.[95] That is, as Alfred Oehlers argued, in Singapore the Internet 'does not occupy a space independent or beyond the nation state'.[96] For the Singaporean nation state then, the Internet is not only a legitimate space for nation building activities, it is a desirable one.

In 2006 a state sponsored website www.yesterday.sg was launched; signalling a new engagement with the Internet as a site of popular historical knowledge production. The site is multifunctional, allowing blogs and posts, as well as connecting visitors to other heritage related materials, such as 'Explore Singapore'. A 'pioneering info-tainment heritage show on primetime TV' that was 'supported by newspaper columns, radio as well as blogs and SMS to engage all Singaporeans in their heritage and culture.

---

[93] Speech by George Yeo, minister for information and the arts, at the 30th Anniversary Celebration of the National Archives of Singapore, 30 April 1998.

[94] S. Pitroda, 'Development, Democracy and the Village Telephone', *Harvard Business Review*, 71, November/December 1993, p. 66; Andrew Tanzer, 'Wired Island: An Island in More Ways than One, Little Singapore is Eagerly Embracing Change while its Asian Neighbours seem Paralysed by it', *Forbes*, 163, 1, 11 January 1999, p. 66.

[95] Terence Lee and David Birch, 'Internet Regulation in Singapore: A Policy/ing Discourse', *Media International Australia Incorporating Culture and Policy*, 95, May 2000, p. 159.

[96] Alfred Oehlers, 'The Internet and Political Change: Some Thoughts on Singapore', Internet Political Economy Forum: Internet and Development in Asia, 14-15 September 2001, National University of Singapore, Singapore, p. 14.

These channels will be complemented by enriching and edu-training activities at Singapore's close to 80 museums and libraries throughout the island.'[97]

In addition the site provides a link to another site engaged in the production of personal historical knowledge—'Friends and Family: A Singapore Album' (see below).

The banner for the web-page depicts seven historic items—a black and white cut out image of a young Chinese girl, a sepia photograph of a British family, a colour image of glass Fanta bottle, a painted pair of palm trees, a colour photograph of a red VW Beatle, a black and white image of a Chinese Shophouse, and a representation of a film reel and projector. Few of these images are exclusively Singaporean. The shophouse, slightly indistinct at the back of the images, does show washing being hung out on poles, but it is hard to make arguments of specificity for Fanta and VW. There is an obvious absence of historical images of Malays and Indians and a privileging of the colonial image.

The blogs do include colonial voices, Brian Mitchell, a self proclaimed 'Brit Brat' wrote a post about his time growing up in 1960s Singapore. With his 'most vivid memory' being the screening of *Ben Hur* in which the 'audience were all up on their feet cheering wildly! Much better,' he noted 'than seeing the film in the UK' with a seated audience.[98] Discussions of streets now re-routed and buildings no longer in existence form a large portion of the blogs. Beatty Road is the subject of a whole series of blogs, predominantly about family homes replaced by Housing Development Board (HDB) apartments.[99] Other re-developed streets have also been the focus of blogs.[100] Favourite childhood toys and hobbies feature prominently.[101] Many of these posts include photographs and maps. The emphasis on images is more explicit in a dedicated site for photographs 'Friends and Family: A Singapore Album Collection', available through a link from www.yesterday.sg.

'Friends and Family: A Singapore Album collection' is both a virtual interactive web-based exhibition and a traditional museum exhibition. The

---

[97] http://www.yesterday.sg/explore/about.html.

[98] Brian Mitchell, 'Fun and Entertainment in the 1960s', http://yesterday.sg/detail/fun_and_enteriantment_in_the-1960s accessed on 21 February 2007.

[99] Noelbynature, 'Memories of Beatty Road Series', http://yesterday.sg/detail/memories_of_beatty_road_series accessed on 8 March 2007.

[100] HamBearGer, 'Kallang Park', http://yesterday.sg/detail/kallang_park accessed on 8 March 2007.

[101] Vikoo, 'My Favorite Toy as a Kid the Mech Sumo Robot', http://yesterday.sg/detail/my_favourite_toy_as_a_kid_the_mech_sumo_robot accessed 8 March 2007.

National Museum of Singapore project is a clear example of how individual Singaporeans are being encouraged to locate their personal and family memories within a national context. That is, to 'discover the collective story of our lives in 'A Singapore Album'.[102] Individuals and institutions can submit copies of scanned images to the website and some of these were selected for a traditional photographic exhibition. Although at the time of writing the exhibit is open, as is the website, it is not clear how long the Singapore History Museum will continue to collect material. The nationalist goal is much broader than a single exhibition. Emphasizing commonality is an obvious goal for a multiracial society, and visitors to the site are told that:

> Every home has photographs and objects on display or carefully kept away. Each of these … tells a story about our families and communities. By sharing them, we will get to know each other better. We will discover that there are many things common to all families, friendships and communities—in the birthdays and weddings we celebrate, in the things we enjoy, in the familiar places we go to, in the high-rises we call home and in the school and national service experiences we share—and in many more ways. And we will also appreciate the richness of our diversity. Just as your family collections of old and new things show and tell about you as a person, Families and Friends: A Singapore Album will reflect our way of life and bring us closer as Singaporeans.[103]

Engaging with technology is not a departure for the National Heritage Board, the umbrella department which oversees Singapore's museums. For the Singapore History Museum it is familiar territory; as I have noted elsewhere, the virtual exhibitions have traditionally been more sophisticated than the physical exhibitions.[104] The use of museum space for nationalist purposes is well trodden territory for museums the world over, but it is notably so in Singapore.[105]

---

[102] http://www.singaporealbum.sg/singapore_album.html accessed on 4 March 2007.

[103] http://www.singaporealbum.sg/singapore_album.html accessed on 4 March 2007.

[104] Nicole Tarulevicz, 'Between Forgetting and Remembering: Singaporean History and the Singapore History Museum', in Fiona Kerlogue, ed., *Objects in Performance: Material Culture and the Arts in Southeast Asia*, Singapore, Horniman Museum, Critical Museology and Material Culture Series, 2004, pp. 31-45.

[105] For example, see David Lowenthal, 'Identity, Heritage and History', in John R Gillis, ed., *Commemoration: The Politics of National Identity*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994: Paula Hamilton, 'The Knife Edge Age: Debates about Memory and History', in Kate Darian-Smith and Paula Hamilton, eds., *Memory and History in Twentieth-Century Australia*, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1994, p. 24; Carole Duncan, *Civilising Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums*, London: Routledge, 1995; Joan C

On the website for 'A Singapore Album' the call for images has been answered by a diverse range of Singaporeans—a fact reflected in the selected images. Unlike the contributions to the blog space, where screen names are used, these images are carefully identified by both who is in them and by who has posted them, most also include the occupation of the person who has shared the image. Text accompanies the photographs. For the viewer then, the images are narrated not by the state, or museum, but by citizens. The meaning of the photographs is determined by the accompanying text. In this way an image of a house party in the 1960s becomes the story of the exclusion of Maggie Wee, the younger sister who was not allowed to participate in her elder sister's parties.[106] Likewise, an image of six boys perched on a tree becomes the story not of multiracial Singapore, but of hero worship of Primary Two teacher Mr Tang, inspired by the contributor's meeting of the teacher in 2002.[107] Images of childhood activities predominate—from scout troops, to formal sporting activities to an informal game of hockey with sticks and a tennis ball in 1953.[108] Family photographs—birthdays and weddings also dominate the collection.[109]

From sepia images of distant relatives, to colonial images up to a 2005 Chinese New Year reunion dinner, the photographs represent a wide period of Singaporean history.[110] Beyond the immediate nation building agenda, the Singaporean state has also found a powerful tool for depoliticizing memory and nostalgia. If nostalgia can be transformed into a collection of images, of shared experiences, it is no longer about wishing the pace of life was slower or that the contemporary way of life was more like that of the 1970s.

T. C. Chang and Shirlena Huang questioned the linear relationship between memory, identity and nation, when they noted that a linear understanding 'belies the complexity of the memory-identity-nation nexus by flattening the nuances of memory, relegating personal reminiscences to the realm of individual idiosyncrasies, and depicting collective memories as an

---

Henderson, 'Exhibiting Cultures: Singapore's Asian Civilizations Museum', *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 11, 3, July 2005, p. 191.

[106] Maggie Wee, 'Home Parties', http://www.singaporealbum.sg/gallery_story.php accessed on 21 February 2007.

[107] Viswa Sadasivan, 'My Sir', http://www.singaporealbum.sg/gallery_story.php accessed on 21 February 2007.

[108] Ronnie Chen Meng Guan 'Playing Hockey with Sticks and Tennis Ball', http://singaporealbum.sg/gallery_story.php access 21 February 2007.

[109] Lee Geok Boi, 'My 21st birthday', http://www.singaporealbum.sg/gallery_story.php accessed on 21 February 2007.

[110] Bessie Chua, 'My Aunt', http://www.singaporealbum.sg/gallery_story.php accessed on 8 March 2007; Gloria Barker, 'Two Weddings', http://www.singaporealbum.sg/gallery_story.php accessed on 8 March 2007; Tay Choon Song, 'Sparklers at Chinese New Year', http://www.singaporealbum.sg/gallery_story.php accessed on 8 March 2007.

uncontested entity'.[111] That is, while the Singaporean state may well be adapting to new technologies, there is an elasticity in memory. Technology has not provided tools of democratization, and it behoves us to remember that the state can use technology as effectively, if not more effectively, than dissidents. The state has been effective in widening the focus of nostalgia beyond the dangerous period of the 1970s, but as with other actions of adaptive regimes, as more is given to citizens the greater their potential demands become, and the greater the need for adaptation.

Heritage

Hand in hand with nostalgia has been an increased interest in the preservation of buildings. What we could call a replacement of history, or historiography with heritage. Cherian George made the suggestion that the quintessential Singapore T-shirt—'Singapore: A Fine City,' a reference to the copious fines and punishments—should be replaced by 'Singapore: Work in Progress.'[112] This is a comment on the constant construction, up-grading and re-invention that takes place in Singapore. 'The cost of all of this,' George noted, 'is an unsettling impermanence. Singaporeans will build and build, faster and more efficiently than other cities, but Singapore will never be finished.'[113] Physical changes bring about a constantly new environment. In this sense Singapore is always a new city. The language of development and progress is very much a part of the re-building project. The government frames these changes in terms of progress. 'We are upgrading to serve you better,' is one example. In response to this, some Singaporeans have sought to slow the pace of physical change through the preservation of buildings.

The emphasis on physical manifestations of the past in Singapore is, however, problematic. Many scholars have identified the economic benefits of conservation of the built environment as a basis for heritage tourism.[114] Within the field of Singapore Studies the case has been well made.[115] In a postcolonial society, the conservation of colonial buildings might be

---

[111] T. C. Chang and Shirlena Huang, 'Recreating Place, Replacing Memory: Creative Destruction at the Singapore River', *Asia Pacific Viewpoint*, 46, 3, December 2005, p. 268.

[112] George, *Singapore: The Air-Conditioned Nation*, p. 189.

[113] Ibid., p. 190.

[114] For example, see Brian Graham et al, eds., *A Geography of Heritage: Power, Culture and Economy*, London: Arnold, 2002.

[115] For example, see Brenda Yeoh, 'The Global Cultural City? Spatial Imagineering and Politics in the (Multi)Cultural Marketplaces of Southeast Asia', *Urban Studies*, 45, 6, 2005, pp. 945-58; Can-Seng Ooi, 'Identities, Museums, and Tourism in Singapore: Think Regionally, Act Locally', *Indonesia and the Malay World*, 31, 89, March 2003, pp. 80-90.

'complicated by the circumstances of colonization whereby the buildings acquire symbolic meanings for both residents and visitors'.[116] In the case of Singapore, the Raffles Hotel is almost more famous than the island state itself. Moreover the preservation of key colonial buildings has not been contested, although not all have been saved. Many have been re-modelled— The Fullerton Hotel, for example, was once the General Post Office. The conservation of non-colonial buildings and of neighbourhoods has been more contentious and was highlighted by the decision to tear down the National Library and the large, but unsuccessful, public campaign to save the building.[117]

Buildings may serve as the embodiment of national identity, but only certain buildings. On the one hand the Urban Redevelopment Authority called for direct public participation: 'we need you (the public) to play your part. Please share your views, opinions and ideas to help refine the plans'.[118] On the other hand, neighbourhoods were destroyed and buildings with more recent, that is 1970s, significance, like the National Library, were not deemed worth of preservation. Conservation must produce national unity *and* fiscal rewards. The state is keen to channel nostalgia into appropriate public spaces.

Drawing on the work of French historian Pierre Nora, Maurizio Peleggi argued that the progressive destruction of 'places where social memory is embedded in daily practices', has created scope for public buildings 'to serve as a catalyst for collective remembrance'.[119] That is, when neighbourhoods are totally remade as they have been in Singapore, public buildings take on a new significance for the construction of both personal and national memories, a process augmented by government policies. For the Singaporean government the connection between history, memory and building is clear. The Urban Redevelopment Authority used the phrase 'our history captured in brick, plaster, wood and stone', to explain the relationship between conservation and history.[120]

---

[116] Joan C. Henderson, 'Conserving Colonial Heritage: Raffles Hotel in Singapore', *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 7, 1, 2001, p. 7.

[117] Ho Weng Hin, 'Fragments of Memories, Questions on My Mind', in Kwok Kian Woon, ed., *Between Forgetting and Remembering: Memories and the National Library*, Singapore: Singapore Heritage Society, 2000, pp. 43-57.

[118] 'Parks and Waterbodies Plan and Identity Plan Public Exhibit Pamphlets', Urban Redevelopment Authority, Singapore, 2002, quoted in Belinda Yuen, 'Reclaiming Cultural Heritage in Singapore', *Urban Affairs Review*, 14, 5, July 2006, p. 837.

[119] Maurizio Peleggi, 'Consuming Colonial Nostalgia: The Monumentalisation of Historic Hotels in Urban Southeast Asia', *Asia Pacific Viewpoint*, 46, 3, December 2005, p. 263.

[120] *Our Heritage is in our Hands*, Singapore, Urban Redevelopment Authority— Preservation of Monuments Board, 1994, p. 3, quoted in Belinda Yuen, 'Reclaiming Cultural Heritage in Singapore', p. 836.

Conclusion

With numerous strategies the Singaporean state attempts to control the meaning of history in Singapore. The past is presented by methods of display, content and absences, as uncontested and unproblematic. The historiography mirrors this. The history that the state constructs and manipulates ratifies the construction of cultural knowledge in Singapore, even when it is authored by citizens. The more active role Singaporeans are playing as creators of historical knowledge has returned Singapore to a more traditional relationship with history. That is, the state is utilizing history as a form of nation building and as a way of negotiating a multiracial society. Instead of history presenting a threat to the fragile balance of a multiracial society, it is now a tool for bringing people together. In the shared experience of life in Singapore as well as the shared experiences of lives—births, marriages, celebrations, etc.—history has become a part of the national story. The state has been effective in widening the focus of nostalgia beyond the dangerous period of the 1970s, but as with other actions of adaptive regimes, as more is given to citizens the greater their potential demands become, and the greater the need for adaptation.

In attempting to focus attention towards sites of nostalgia that are less problematic, especially the physical manifestation of buildings, the Singaporean state is still seeking to control the meaning of the past. An emphasis on heritage and the built environment freezes a historical moment and strips it of context. That is, the state is making heritage an object of the present and not the past. Likewise, 'A Singapore Album' and blog sites turn nostalgia into something that is contemporary not historical. In so doing the Singaporean state is simultaneously negotiating the production of historical knowledge and seeking to de-politicise history. If, as L. P. Hartley suggested 'the past is a foreign country,'[121] then making the past the present makes it less foreign.

---

[121] L. P. Hartley, *The Go-Between*, London: Hamish Hamilton, 1979, p. 9.