CHAPTER NINE

Nation-Building and the Singapore Story: Some Issues in the Study of Contemporary Singapore History

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"History", as Claude Levi-Strauss asserted, "is … never history, but history-for".[1] Perhaps nowhere is the appropriation of this view that history must always be written from some viewpoint and, therefore, *for* some purpose in mind more evident than in its use for the agenda of nation-building. Few would deny that history and nation-building — defined by one commentator as "the creation by government of a cohesive political community characterized by an abiding sense of identity and common consciousness"[2] — are inextricably related, for history, so far as traditional arguments go, not only "offers lessons (be they true or false) to which leaders, nations and peoples respond" but is also "the shaper of national identity".[3] Indeed, as the editors of *Writing National Histories: Western Europe since 1800* point out, "Historical writing has been connected to the process of nation-building across Europe ever since the concept of the modern nation was first formulated in the American and French Revolutions of the late-eighteenth century."[4] In Singapore's experience of nation-building, however, the deliberative use of history in the fashioning of a national narrative — *The Singapore Story* — occurred belatedly, coming only after three decades of nation-building had lapsed. The use of history — and its perceived "politicization" — for the agenda of nation-building raises intrinsic conceptual and methodological concerns, as it did in the contemporary

Singapore experience, that invariably ignited ideological contestation regarding the integrity and purpose of history — and what is the proper way of portraying the past accurately.

History and Nation-Building

"The past" — "as it was" — is how history has been commonly defined. To be more precise, history is really about the "study" of the past, for the past "as it was" is irrecoverable and all we have are what historians, working with available records and archival materials, write about the past. Their retrieval, and representation, of the past has traditionally been validated by the methodology of "scientific" history based on the rigorous investigation of primary sources.[5] By retaining "objectivity", so the argument goes, historians could ascertain the "facts" and so report the "truth".[6] Of course, at the philosophical level, historians today recognize how this idealized "modernist" conception of historical "truth" is basically unrealistic: "facts", which are necessarily pre-selected by their incompleteness, do not exist naturally as facts but need to be so defined — or "interpreted" — by the historian; and any scintilla of "objectivity", which "implies the existence of vantage points absolutely without bias",[7] is simply unattainable in a subject where evaluation and interpretation are also intrinsic skills.

If history, as the critique of historical truth-claims has sought to show, is never neutral, then recalling the past for the highly politicized purpose of nation-building only opens it to further possible contestation. "History manifestly becomes a political battleground," argued Lysa Hong and Jimmy Yap: "Politicians who use history as a political weapon would claim that the version that they support is the most accurate and valid, if not the only acceptable way of understanding the past."[8] In the context of nation-building, the continued legimatory use of the past has, traditionally, been invoked for the purpose of fostering national consciousness and identity — and its corollary, instilling patriotism and citizenship.[9] "Most national history and most group history are of this kind," asserted William McNeill.[10] "Consciousness of a common past", he explained, "is a powerful supplement to other ways of defining who 'we' are. …and formal written history

became useful in defining 'us' versus 'them' ".[11] Indeed, for groups "struggling towards self-consciousness" and those whose "accustomed status seems threatened", the invoking of such "vivid, simplified portraits of their admirable virtues and undeserved sufferings"[12] has always been seen as an indispensable means of developing their continued instinct for national survival.[13] Such, for instance, was the consuming obsession of the Poles, as John Warren recounted from recent history:

> In an attempt to cripple the Poles' will to resist, German forces in the Second World War destroyed much of the historic centre of Warsaw. The destruction of that shared heritage was meant to convey the stark message that a people without a past are a worthless people. After the defeat of Germany, the Poles rebuilt Warsaw — exactly as it had been before the war.[14]

Propagating this so-called "mythistory"[15] as national history, however, presents dangers, as McNeill warns: "[T]he fact that a group of people accept a given version of the past does not make that version any truer for outsiders."[16] Instead, the capacity for inter-group conflict consequently intensifies: "a portrait of the past that denigrates others and praises the ideals and practice of a given group naively and without restraint, can distort a people's image of outsiders so that foreign relations begin to consist of nothing but nasty surprises."[17] Notwithstanding such concerns, it seems apparent that the "use of the national past to legitimize (or delegitimize) particular governments and regimes remains as widespread as ever".[18] No government or nation could afford to reject the past for the sake of insuring its present and future: "A nation or any other human group that knows how to behave in crisis situations because it has inherited a heroic historiographical tradition that tells how ancestors resisted their enemies successfully is more likely to act together effectively than a group lacking such a tradition".[19] That governments and politicians continue to appeal to history or, in some cases, "mythistory" in the fashioning of their national narratives should not be too surprising, for they had recognized instinctively what their detractors had failed to acknowledge fully: as

narrative history has always been written for some purpose, it is in a sense inevitably political,[20] and therefore becomes "a potent ideological mechanism in the work of nation-building".[21]

The Use of History in Singapore's Nation-Building

And yet, in Singapore's experience of nation-building, there was an initial reluctance to reclaim and use the past.[22] Gripped by the preoccupation with the immediate tasks of national political and economic survival after its sudden and tumultuous separation from Malaysia in 1965, its leaders sought to direct Singaporeans to "examine the present, think of the future, and forget the past".[23] As one Singapore minister, S. Dhanabalan, acknowledged, "We were all too preoccupied with surviving the present to worry about recording it for the future."[24] Consequently, history, which "has no immediate practical use", was dropped from the primary school curriculum from 1972 in favour of more "useful studies" geared to Singapore's industrial needs.[25] The past was perceived as a hindrance to the nation-building efforts. "Powerful shadows from the past, and the ghosts of things dead, obscure and bedevil the road to a brighter and more united future," observed Devan Nair, "Rival and jealous gods of the past bar entry at all the gates which open out into the uplands of the Future."[26] The future rather than to their past was where Singaporeans were exhorted to look. Singapore's short history, it was argued, offered no proud Golden Age or a glorious heroic historiographical tradition that could be usefully called upon to galvanize its peoples for national mobilization goals or to transcend the mentalities of their separate ethnic and cultural consciousness. What the island's history revealed instead was not only the record of Singapore's sustained physical and political vulnerability but also the concomitant story of its domination by the successive colonial powers of the day. The search for such a usable past in a plural, immigrant, society, it was further feared, could also lead unwittingly to the strengthening of ethnic and cultural identities with disastrous consequences. As Rajaratnam commented:

> As pasts go, I confess, this is not much of a past in a world when countries can boast of histories dating back thousands of years. …

> Singapore's genealogical table, alas, ends as abruptly as it begins. However we could have contrived a more lengthy and eye-boggling lineage by tracing our ancestry back to the lands from which our forefathers emigrated — China, India, Sri Lanka, the Middle East and Indonesia. The price we would have to pay for this more impressive genealogical table would be to turn Singapore into a bloody battle-ground for endless racial and communal conflicts and interventionist politics by the more powerful and bigger nations from which Singaporeans had emigrated. The present government … [therefore] has been careful about the kind of awareness of the past it should inculcate in a multi-cultural society.[27]

From the early 1980s, however, the dismissal of its past gave way to growing concern about the political wisdom of forgetting Singapore's national history. In an apparent volte-face, Singapore officials started to warn against the "indecent haste to obliterate our historical heritage"[28] and the drive to "create a sparkling new Singapore with no trace of the past".[29] That history was "an essential part of our national development"[30] and had its "proper use"[31] was at last officially — if belatedly — acknowledged. It was not the love of nostalgia or "some obscure research reasons"[32] that brought about this apparent reappraisal but the unleashing of new political and societal forces that, in the official mind, could potentially threaten Singapore's long-term security, viability and ethos of survival. Singapore had survived its early difficult years, and after a decade and a half of steady growth and prosperity, the future had appeared less fearsome. What worried Singapore's leaders was not only how modernization and urban renewal, while necessary in land-scarce Singapore, had transformed its physical landscape beyond recognition, but also how the rapid pace of development was impacting its society to such an extent that "our young and future generations will not know how Singapore was like before".[33] "Because what is worth preserving from the past are not all that plentiful," Rajaratnam warned, "we should try to save what is worthwhile from the past from the vandalism of the speculator and the developer, from a government and a bureaucracy which believes that anything that cannot be translated into cold cash is not worth investing

in."[34] Struck by the Polish authorities' single-minded determination to rebuild Warsaw "exactly as it was before the war", Rajaratnam surmised that they were not only trying to replicate the physical buildings but also to recapture the "intangibles" — "its character, its atmosphere, and its texture" — precisely because they knew that to have built a modern Warsaw would have meant "if not obliterating then at least weakening to a significant degree, the Polish people's awareness of their long and memorable past". Because the Poles had "a different kind of national accounting" when it came to rebuilding Warsaw, they could "today stand up stubbornly and defiantly to assert their identity and desire for freedom in the face of a more powerful, superior and demanding adversary".[35] That the Polish experience underscored an important use of the past for nation-building was not lost on Rajaratnam — nor was its implied relevance to Singapore's own sovereign existence as a strategically placed but vulnerable nation-state:

> The history of Poland, because of its strategic or, more accurately, unlucky location, has been one of repeated invasions by marauding armies which sought the subjugation and elimination of the Poles as an independent people. Had the Poles not had a strong sense of the past, they would have disappeared as a people as have so many in the course of mankind's chequered and violent history.[36]

Even more alarming than the destruction of Singapore's physical heritage were the effects of these rapid changes on the formative experiences of the post-1965 generation, to whom "the turbulence of the colonial and Malaysian era, and the difficulties of the first years of independence, are only sagas of epic proportions, heard at second hand, not vivid personal experiences". Growing up in an orderly and successful present, they were "less used to hardship than to affluence, less aware of the fragility of our prosperity, and have higher expectations of what life ought to offer".[37] Such a change in the population, as Lee Hsien Loong pointed out, "must affect the political process" and the challenge for the government was to "keep alive a sense of

our heritage".[38] An understanding of Singapore's history, officials felt, could offer "lessons" so that "history need not repeat itself":[39] "We must know the story of how Singapore came to be what it is, so that we never forget what an unnatural fact our very existence is, and why the price of this continuing is constant vigilance."[40] In particular, young Singaporeans needed to understand that order, stability and racial harmony should not be taken for granted ("We ignore our tribal faultlines at our peril," observed George Yeo[41]); that "there are no such things as permanent prosperity and permanent success";[42] and that "our future as a nation is not predestined but will depend on our commitment and preparedness to work for our common good."[43] Otherwise, as Rajaratnam warned, "From my study of history, I conclude that decline and collapse appear to be the unavoidable fate of successful nations."[44]

Without such "historical moorings", officials feared that Singaporeans could, at best, evolve into a "rootless and transient society",[45] without a sense of identity, and endangering Singapore's future prospect as a nation, as Lee Hsien Loong warned: "The long-term survival of a country, especially a small one, depends in large measure on a strong sense of identity."[46] Without the latter, Singaporeans would lose the "security of belonging" that could help them "weather difficult times" together.[47] "[A] people with poor memories", observed George Yeo, "can be a fatal weakness in crises".[48]

> When we study the lives of our forefathers and the way they responded to challenges, we abstract lessons for ourselves. In this way, we build upon the accumulated knowledge and wisdom of our ancestors … We must never lose this sense of our past because it is a great source of spiritual strength in a crisis. Societies with shallow cultures are easily destroyed.[49]

Without this awareness among its young, its leaders feared that Singapore could not be expected to master its future. This sense of the past, as S. Jayakumar asserted, was therefore "essential to understanding the present process of nation building".[50]

The soul searching about Singapore's history gave rise, from the mid-1990s, to a more interventionist phase which saw the introduction and integration of National Education (NE) into the school curriculum from 1997. Explaining its background, Education Minister Teo Chee Hean reiterated:

> NE was included in our school curriculum because it was found that many Singaporeans, especially those of school-going age and younger Singaporeans knew little of our recent past and the people closely associated with our recent history. They did not know how Singapore became an independent nation. Many of our young people did not know when Singapore gained independence, and that Singapore was once part of Malaysia. Neither were our young able to explain Singapore's separation from Malaysia in 1965. Another disturbing indicator was reflected in a survey conducted by *Lianhe Zaobao* in 1996 that found a large majority of the 659 respondents from secondary schools expressing little interest in nation building.[51]

At the official launch of the programme on 19 May, Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong outlined its aim to help young Singaporeans "develop national cohesion, the instinct for survival and confidence in our future", or what he called the "DNA to be passed from one generation to the next". It was necessary, he said, to foster a sense of identity to "strengthen their emotional attachment to the nation, and their sense of rootedness", ensure that they understood Singapore's "unique challenges, constraints and vulnerabilities, which make us different from other countries", and instil in them "the core values of our way of life, and the will to prevail, that ensure our continued success and well being". In implementing the programme, history was given a major role: "[O]ur young must know the Singapore Story — how Singapore succeeded against the odds to become a nation," he said, "… Knowing this history is part of the becoming a Singaporean. It is the backdrop which makes sense of our present."[52]

The launch of NE, followed in 1998 by the staging of a grand multi-media exhibition, *The Singapore Story: Overcoming the Odds* in July, which

attracted over half a million people, and the launch in September of the first volume of Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew's memoirs, *The Singapore Story: Memoirs of Lee Kuan Yew*, helped to keep Singapore history very much in the spotlight. In his opening address at the exhibition, Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong reiterated the importance of history to help Singaporeans understand the "vulnerabilities and constraints" that "will always be there" and how the "painful episodes" of the race riots in 1964 and 1969 would always be an "integral part" of the Singapore Story that all Singaporeans should know. "Each succeeding generation of Singaporeans," he said, "must learn about the nation's history, and understand how it is relevant to their future. Then, 100 years from now, we will have more chapters to recount, more stories to tell".[53] In writing his memoirs, Senior Minister Lee too had in mind to impart a sense of the past to future generations. He had not intended to write his memoirs, he said, but was persuaded to do after he was "troubled by the over-confidence of a generation that has only known stability, growth and prosperity",[54] an observation he had made in a speech in 1996:

> …The present generation below 35 has grown up used to high economic growth year after year, and take their security and success for granted. And because they believe all is well, they are less willing to make sacrifices for the benefit of the other in society. They are more concerned about their individual and family's welfare and success, not their community or society's well being.
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> But this is very dangerous, because things can go terribly wrong very quickly. These people are not aware of Singapore's vulnerabilities. All they read and see is No. 1 or No. 2 competitive country, No. 1 seaport, No. 1 airport, No. 1 airline and so on. Sometimes they complain that we are driving people too hard and making life too stressful, so why not settle for No. 2 or 3, or 4! But it does matter, for if we are not near the top in competitiveness, there is no reason why we should have a seaport, or an airport, or an airline — or indeed why there should be a separate independent Singapore. It is as simple as that.[55]

Though not official history, Lee's memoirs provided, as British premier Tony Blair noted, "unique insights into the history of modern Singapore".[56] Written by "a man who, almost single-handedly, built a great nation from a small island",[57] it is personal — but still authoritative — history. "As current history, *The Singapore Story* is without equal," wrote former Australian Prime Minister, Malcolm Fraser.[58] But because Lee had wanted to "give young Singaporeans an objective account of why and how Singapore sought merger with Malaya but in two years was asked to leave Malaysia",[59] his book also stirred controversy from across the Causeway, driving Malaysian leaders and opinion-makers to question his perspective and account of personalities and events that led to the difficult period in both nation's history. All these NE-related developments helped to secure the position of history as a pillar in Singapore's nation-building agenda. "Like the prodigal son, history is returning to Singapore," noted Asad Latif of the *Straits Times*, "National Education has offered it a place to stay. … a revolution has occurred. This is the critical fact of Singapore's recent history."[60]

Engaging the Recent Past: Issues and Controversies

History's return and its "proper" use by the state invariably open it to possible contestation. To the ruling party's political opponents, like former Barisan Sosialis leader, Lee Siew Choh, the latest attempt by the People's Action Party (PAP) government at "[r]ewriting, reversing history" was dismissed as a scheme to "cover up past misdeeds which they do not want posterity to know about."[61] Not unexpectedly, among other observers, the heavy political hand of the government in fashioning the national narrative also contributed in no small measure to the perception that it was official "propaganda", designed with some secret political agenda in mind. NE's "obsession" with "a set of lessons to be learnt from certain historical events", for instance, so worried one letter-writer to the *Straits Times*, who saw this as an attempt to "preclude historical controversy" and "engender a form of selective amnesia" as facts could be interpreted "in such a way that the lessons learnt are those which are conducive to the preservation of the political status quo". He cautioned that NE should not degenerate into

"a mind-numbling, flag-waving form of jingoism which would strain the credulity of the student as he matures intellectually" and warned that there was a real danger in politicizing history: "Political involvement in National Education may lead the cynic to dismiss the whole campaign as little more than political propaganda."[62] Another writer opined that allowing the youth to "find out the facts from as many sources as are available and be given the option for making up their own minds" was preferable to "any process of indoctrination".[63] Others read the politicization of history as an ideologically-inspired rear-guard attempt by the ruling PAP government to create a "crisis mentality" as part of its ongoing attempt to "sustain hegemony over the state" — the possible result of indents made by the opposition to its parliamentary monopoly from 1981.[64] As Loh Kah Seng argued:

> While it [the Singapore Story] does allow a range of possible perspectives, all of these nonetheless focus on the basic concept of 'vulnerability'. The persistent admonition that the nation is racially explosive discourages the public from dismissing dubious ideas as PAP propaganda since to do so would be, in effect, to threaten one's own economic future. The Singapore Story thus pre-determines how Singaporeans perceive and interpret the reality they experience, and to the extent that they regard the regime's ideas uncritically as 'common-sense' truisms, they partake in the government's ongoing hegemony.[65]

While the PAP's overarching political dominance has made the close identification of party and national interests almost impossible to separate, and there is a sense of how this coincidence could be advantageous in insuring through the national narrative its "hegemony", it does not appear that party survival alone, in this case, was, as some have argued, its overriding objective in the construction of national history. Certainly, such an overt, interventionist, scheme carried risks of being misconstrued and rejected as PAP "propaganda", as it obviously had, and could rebound against the party instead. That the weak political opposition was not its match and that the ruling party already had, in its

political arsenal, an impressive track record to boast and other, surer, instruments of power to sustain its political legitimacy and dominance would argue against too ready an acceptance of a reductionist interpretation of its use of national history.

That its use of history could be misconstrued as propaganda, the PAP had already anticipated. While acknowledging that NE, like similar programmes in Japan and the United States, was a "process of indoctrination", Lee Hsien Loong, however defended its necessity on national grounds at his opening address during its launch: "If countries like Japan and US, with long histories and deep roots, have found it essential to pass on national instincts systematically from generation to generation, all the more Singapore, a young country barely one generation old, must make a concerted effort to imbue the right values and instincts in the psyche of our young."[66] As for its version of national history, Lee, while not denying that it was not propaganda, asserted that it was also neither mythistory but a narrative "based on historical facts" and was therefore "objective history, seen from a Singaporean standpoint". "We are not talking about an idealized legendary account or a founding myth, but of an accurate understanding of what happened in the past, and what this history means for us today." Neither was it "definitive" history. Not all the records were available, he said, but as archives yielded their secrets, progressively, "a more complete picture will emerge".[67]

The more vociferous contestation of its version of national history came not from within but from without — its close neighbour, Malaysia. "Singapore's very existence," observed Anthony Reid, "represents something of a challenge to Malaysia's self-image."[68] Sharing a common history, it was perhaps inevitable that the clash of interpretations over key events that defined the *raison d'etre* for their existence as separate, independent, nation-states would occur, especially when, in recounting its national history, Singapore was disinclined to "gloss over them". "Amnesia is not an option," declared Lee Hsien Loong in his NE address, "We cannot pretend that incidents involving race and religion never happened. They are part of our history."[69] What Singapore's leaders were now willing to openly tackle were the "delicate issues" of the two race riots in Singapore in 1964, which

they charged, "had been instigated deliberately to intimidate Singapore's Chinese population" and the "fundamental" nature of the issues which led to its separation from Malaysia.[70] In his memoirs, the Senior Minister elaborated on and provided his perspective on these two defining issues. The race riots, he said, were instigated by the incendiary statements and "flagrant falsehoods" of key United Malays National Organization (UMNO) leaders, of whom the UMNO Secretary-General, Syed Jaafar Albar, was the main protagonist, with the knowledge of, and backed by, the Malaysian Deputy Premier, Tun Abdul Razak for the purpose of re-establishing UMNO's political influence among the Singapore Malays, thus reclaiming the ground it had lost to the PAP in the 1963 election, and to further use the Singapore Malays as pawns to consolidate Malay support for UMNO in Malaya.[71] On separation, the fundamental problem was over whether the new Federation should be a truly multi-racial society, a "Malaysian-Malaysia" which the PAP championed through the Malaysian Solidarity Convention that it led, or one dominated by Malay hegemony. Reflecting on the "real reasons" for separation, Lee wrote: "They must have concluded that if they allowed us to exercise our constitutional rights, they were bound to lose in the long run. The Malaysian Solidarity Convention would have rallied the non-Malays and, most dangerous of all, eventually made inroads into the Malay ground on the peninsula … This was the nub of the matter."[72] In a comment certain to rile Malaysian leaders, Lee opined that the "PAP leaders were not like the politicians in Malaya. Singapore ministers were not pleasure-loving, nor did they seek to enrich themselves."[73] He revealed how Tun Razak, for example, had once offered Dr. Goh Keng Swee, then Singapore's deputy premier, some 5,000 acres of prime rubber land as a bribe, which Goh turned down.[74]

Lee's account drew a rash of angry cries from Malaysian leaders who retorted that the book "merely reflects one man's highly partisan interpretation of history", was selective in its use of sources and deeply biased in its arguments, and was nothing more than a "tool for self-aggrandizement".[75] The Malaysian Premier, Dr. Mahathir Mohamad accused Singapore of being "insensitive" by dredging up "such old issues, it's no use".[76] "[W]e try hard not to raise difficult issues," he said, "while they do

the opposite."[77] Deeply "hurt" by Lee's insinuations about his father, Education Minister Najib Tun Razak said that the Senior Minister should not have written about the dead who could not defend themselves.[78] Then Defence Minister Syed Hamid Albar, the son of the late former UMNO-Secretary, charged Lee with "manipulating the facts to make them appear as if that was what had actually happened … he is trying to recall history based on his own perspective and his own interpretations".[79] Providing the Malaysian perspectives on the defining events, Syed Hamid said that, contrary to Lee's charges that his father had provoked the race riots, there was already "a strong, valid discontent among the Malay population on the way Lee Kuan Yew had treated them".[80] On why Singapore was expelled, he said that it was "because of its communal politics promised under the cover of multi-racialism" and accused Lee of putting PAP candidates in the 1964 Federation elections "to instigate the Chinese population in Malaysia to support the PAP when the understanding was that the PAP should limit its political activities to Singapore".[81] Mahathir observed that "When Singapore was part of Malaysia, Singapore leaders wanted to see the Chinese in Malaysia controlling politics; so when we warned them to stop it, they became angry at us, and it was for that reason that the late Tunku Abdul Rahman opined that it was best they stay out of Malaysia."[82]

Denying that he had written a distorted account in his memoirs "to justify what I have done or to prove I was right", Lee Kuan Yew said, "That would have been a waste of time. I was not always right. It was good fortune that on some critical issues, things turned out well, otherwise I would have come to grief and the Singapore story would have had a different ending."[83] Dismissing the Malaysian charge that he was being "insensitive", Lee said that it was only their way of saying, "why are you saying things which I don't like to hear".[84] But he had an obligation to tell Singaporeans "why I did these things, what took place and why they should take note of my experience. If my experience is irrelevant, throw the book away. I believe it is not irrelevant".[85] As Lee expected his book "to be scrutinized and criticized", he had a team of researchers who "took pains to check and re-check my facts":[86]

> When I started I did know how much work it needed. It was not simply sitting down to say 'Once upon a time' and then spin a story off the top of my head. A whole team of researchers went through 30 years of my correspondence, notes of meetings, Cabinet papers and other documents in the archives, to gather and marshal the data for me to work on. I did not write an official history of Singapore. It is my account of what I did, why I did it, and about the people who worked with me or against me.[87]

While his book remained his version of events, it was an account based on sources that may be verified independently:

> What I have written, I have checked against the records, especially when recounting the race riots of 1964. My account is supported by documents submitted to the commission of inquiry which was held in Singapore by the Malaysian judiciary to investigate the causes of the riots. The documents are still in the archives … My narrative is also substantiated by reports of British, Australian, New Zealand and American diplomats in Kuala Lumpur made at that time.[88]

On Tun Razak's offer of a bribe, Lee revealed that Dr. Goh had "told me of this offer at the time it was made" and had also noted this in his oral history account recorded in 1982. In the same account, Goh had also recorded that Tun Razak had assured him that he was in control of Syed Jaafar Albar. Asked by Lee on 31 October 1997 whether he would stand by what he had said in his oral history account, Goh replied on 4 November 1997 that "he stood by every word in his oral history". Lee said that both of them decided it was better to publish "these facts while we are still alive to substantiate them than to speak from our graves". "To write or dictate oral history to be published after my death, would not be right," he added, "If I am not prepared to speak while I am alive, I do not deserve to be heard from my grave."[89] His statements were not directed at the families of those he had named who had been "hurt" but "I had to write

the truth because it was crucial to an understanding of what happened."[90] Lee reiterated that, as he could write his memoirs "but once", he "set out to be accurate, to make a contribution to the historical records of Singapore … I do not propagate falsehoods, not in a serious document like this. This is not a political tract".[91] The consequences for him would have been grave: "If there are false or untrue statements, I will stand contradicted and my credibility demolished."[92] Indeed, as Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong commented, the Senior Minister's remarks carried force: "As he put it quite poignantly, he is an old man, is there any reason for him to put in untruths because if the untruths are proven, then his whole life's reputation is gone. His integrity is gone." But Lee's account, as Goh emphasized, "is not the official history of Singapore". He hoped that, "as new materials are made available elsewhere, historians will look at the materials and they will then use the materials to either substantiate SM's account of what took place, especially in the years when Singapore joined Malaysia and before that, or as well as to prove SM wrong if they could have new materials to do so."[93]

To professional historians, however, the very notion of engaging the recent past, especially one that has witnessed such vigorous political contestation, underscores some of the more practical issues of writing contemporary history. Comparisons with "current affairs", "enlightened journalism" or "speculative history" are apt to arise, as would doubts about the stunted perspectives, the inadequate documentation, and subjective bias that normally characterize the writing of contemporary history.[94] Good history writing, it is argued, requires an objectivity that is tempered by the vantage point of time and the use and analysis of available archival documentation — all that contemporary history, apparently, is not.

The contemporary historian's lack of historical perspective, therefore, offers a serious objection. "Thinking in time" is what a historian has been normally trained to do, and consequently the greater the distance between the historian and his subject, so it is argued, the better history he is able to write. This ability to view events in the perspective of time, however, is hampered when the historian writes about the recent past. The problem of a limited perspective is of particular relevance to Singapore. As the island attained its own sovereign statehood only in 1965, much of its post-

independence history would therefore be, by definition, contemporary history, and any attempt to document the account of its story of nation-building would be immediately confronted at the onset by this constraint of a stunted perspective. Would such an enterprise therefore be doomed from the start? Perhaps it should be apparent that historical distance from the subject does not in itself always guarantee the writing of good history. Taking Professor Geoffrey Elton's definition of historical perspective as "truly understanding an age from the inside",[95] and not, as commonly understood, as an interpretation of events in the light of hindsight, that objective may be better realized by a contemporary historian working "from within" the period he is studying. He would be better positioned to capture the "atmosphere" of the age to an extent which no future historian, however perceptive, may ever succeed in recapturing. "The 'superstition of historical distance'," as Gordon Wright puts it, "can blind us to the fact that the contemporary historian may produce a more faithful account than his later successor, who will possess a fuller documentary record plus the blessings of long perspective but who will suffer from the astigmatism caused by the distortions of time."[96] Indeed, as Devan Nair recounted from his own personal involvement in the nation-building process in Singapore, a participant's first-hand perspective could afford valuable insights that would otherwise be unavailable to a historian studying an age from the outside: "This would be history at first hand, written by those who lived, fought and won through daunting events and experiences, which are not likely to be repeated for the younger generation of Singaporeans." Regrettably, however, "those who make history seldom find time to write it themselves," he lamented, but "it would be a tragedy if future generations of Singaporeans had to depend on second-hand versions."[97] That a participant in a historical event will have a unique perspective that is often not fully understood by historians writing about the subject was also noted by Lee Kuan Yew:

> History does not happen in clear cut units like courses for credits in an American university. It is after forces let loose in tumultuous events have run their course that the historian comes along to mark out neat periods and narrates them in clear-cut chapters.[98]

The objection that writing contemporary history offers only a limited perspective is further compounded, according to some scholars, by a more pervasive problem when it is applied to recent Singapore history: the apparent dominance of a singular perspective — the PAP's "template" of history, which has a tendency to "crowd out alternative voices in the narration of Singapore's history". Lysa Hong observed, for instance, that Rajaratnam's account of party history — the "PAP's First Ten Years" which appeared in the *PAP Tenth Anniversary Celebration Souvenir 1964* — has become "a classic … for casting the template for the history of Singapore", particularly of the struggle of the non-communists against the communists within the PAP. "More than 30 years after it was written," she wrote, "the understanding of the period has not moved one iota from Rajaratnam's rendition of it". Written by the "victors"[99] — leaders "at centre stage of a government that has been in almost absolute power since 1965", and men who could also "claim privileged knowledge" — the accounts become "an exercise in legitimizing 'us' and not others. The others (political foes) are reduced to negative labels on the extreme fringes".[100] Having "shared the struggle for a time, and yet had departed from its true path"[101] and lost the political game, they "also lost their voice as agents of history because of the institutional and political constraints on them".[102] T.N. Harper noted, for instance, that in the "dominant national narrative", the role of former PAP leader, Lim Chin Siong, who was detained in February 1963 for his pro-communist activities, has become "an adjunct to the master narrative of Lee Kuan Yew and others" in the "authorized version" of the struggle — "He has not vanished from it entirely; but is seen always at a distance and most often through the eyes of his adversaries".[103] Given the dominance of the PAP "template", alternative views "has to come from slippages in the dominant discourse itself".[104]

Notwithstanding the perception that such a dominant "template" exists, it should be obvious that the existence of a version of the past, however compelling, does not in itself constrain any scholar who so wishes from producing other counter versions consistent with the historical evidence. The crux of the matter, it could be argued, is not so much a question of the dominance of a perceived "template", but something more fundamental:

the quality of the evidence. The existence of the PAP "template", for instance, had not stopped former Barisan Sosialis leader, Dr. Lee Siew Choh, from contesting it, as he did in his series of lengthy letters to the *Straits Times* to argue his case that the PAP referendum for the merger with Malaya in 1961 was "a most dishonest referendum"[105] and was "undemocratic, unfair and unjust"[106] because it did not put a simple "yes" or "no" question, and the important questions were framed by the ruling PAP alone, without consultation. But, as Mohamad Maidin, the Parliamentary Secretary for Education, pointed out, "Historical controversy … must be consistent with the facts. Facts will not and cannot be ignored, however inconvenient." Replying to Lee's charges, and referring the former to the "facts", including the parliamentary debates on the subject, Maidin pointed out that Dr. Lee "forgets his history": "The Barisan lost the argument and lost the Referendum. The PAP carried the majority of the people and 35 years later, in defiance of the facts, Dr. Lee is trying [to] rewrite the record and reverse that verdict of history."[107] The PAP had acted openly, responsibly and constitutionally on the referendum, he said, "Its actions are all on the public record." Reiterating the government's view, he asserted:

> The Singapore story is based on facts and documents, and the consensus of historians who have studied them. Since the facts and documents are all on record, any dispute can be resolved impartially and objectively. It is objective history, seen from a Singaporean point of view.
>
> The facts of the Singapore story will always be subject to reinterpretation in the light of new information or fresh analysis, like all other historical facts.[108]

Maidin's reference to the "facts" of history puts into context another objection to the writing of contemporary history: the problem of available archival evidence. What if the "facts" are not accessible or only "selected" facts have been made available? Would this not distort the narrative? How could historians presume to write authoritatively about recent history when they have no access to the classified official documents which would not

yield their secrets for at least another thirty to fifty years — or forever — under official legislation? In writing his memoirs, the Senior Minister, for instance, said that he had started work only in 1995, the year documents in the British archives were made available under the "thirty-years rule" on the declassification of documents. Similarly, archival records were also made available around this time in Australia and the United States.[109] It was the availability of such records that enabled his research team to accumulate "[m]ore than 20 filing bins of documents … over the last three years", disclosed Andrew Tan, who headed Lee's research team.[110] The importance of having archival sources is borne out in my own experience in writing *A Moment of Anguish: Singapore in Malaysia and the Politics of Disengagement*,[111] which was an attempt to understand a defining episode in Singapore's contemporary history — the twenty-three months that Singapore was part of Malaysia and the circumstances that contributed to its eventual separation and independent statehood. It was indeed fortuitous that, at the time when I embarked on my study in 1996, the various archives in the United Kingdom, Australia and the United States, and, more significantly, the Singapore archives, were opened, and I was able to consult, for instance, Special Branch and police reports, kept at the archives of the Internal Security Department, Ministry of Home Affairs, and also certain files from the Prime Minister's Office which were made available at the National Archives of Singapore. A major drawback for the historian writing about contemporary events in Singapore has always been the unavailability of primary sources, particularly of confidential categories of indigenous records, which remained largely classified apparently because of their "sensitive" nature. The alternative use of foreign archives to document indigenous history, however, has not escaped criticism among historians concerned about the writing of more "autonomous" history using indigenous sources. But unless these latter records exist or are made available, it is likely that, for certain categories of historical studies, the reliance on foreign archives will continue to be indispensable for the writing of contemporary Singapore history. In the circumstances of my own study, which coincided with the renewal of interest in history and National Education in Singapore, the opening of the foreign and local archives enabled the circumstances of the controversial

and pivotal race riots in Singapore in July and September 1964 to be documented with greater precision from primary records, including Special Branch accounts, for the first time. Because of the threat of the race riots to law and order, the latter sources were especially useful in providing a perspective as seen from the viewpoint of the security services, whose role it was to investigate the causes and nature of the riots. The archival records also permitted the documentation of what was little-known before: the secret negotiations for the abortive "disengagement" some six months before the actual separation and the behind-the-scenes manoeuvrings, particularly the role of key personalities who contributed to the climatic parting in 1965. In short, it was the availability of archival documentation that permitted a more comprehensive and in-depth study of the subject that was not possible in earlier works.

That a historian requires his sources to write good history is a methodological truism. But, as the contemporary historian is wont to argue, it is perhaps less ingenuous to say that, without access to classified documents, no satisfactory historical analysis can be made of recent events. Not all classified records are likely to be made available to historians even after the lapse of a period of time. A measure of incompleteness is therefore inevitable. Records which are of "current" significance to government departments, or which are of a security or politically sensitive nature, may never be made available to scholars. On his part, the writer of contemporary history has certain other compensating advantages in that he has not only a richer wealth and variety of other sources available — for instance, the larger output of secondary writing, memoirs, diaries, journals, newspapers, film and sound recordings, videos, oral interviews — but also better means of authenticating their reliability, all of which make the contemporary historian's task, to some degree, even more exacting. What seems clear, however, as the *Straits Times* leader argued, is that while disclosure of these facts must be in accordance with accepted norms, there is scope for a great deal more to be divulged, especially from indigenous archives. On the ups and downs of the Singapore-Malaysia equation, it commented that "The definitive history of that period has yet to be written. Such knowledge would be in the public interest; it should

therefore be in the public domain." The editorial added that it was counter-productive for all this information to gather dust while people speculated about important sequences on the basis of scrappy media reports, faulty memory and the possibly biased recollections of some of the players. The wrong conclusions were all too likely.[112]

The contemporary historian's attempt to reconstruct the recent past raises a final objection: the question of subjectivity. Inevitably, the greater involvement of the historian in writing about contemporary issues, it is argued, must necessarily colour his judgement. In a contested field like writing national history, the potential is also correspondingly heightened, as seen in the reaction to the publication of Lee's memoirs. Syed Hamid Albar, for instance, suggested that "Our historians should also write a book on the split, lest the only book be penned by someone so prejudiced against the Malaysian leaders and people."[113] Indeed, Malaysian commentators and academics had not been slow to defend their nation's honour. Rustam Sani, for instance, rejected the Singapore interpretation as "propagandistic", "one-sided", and "dogmatic" and said that the construction of the Singapore narrative was an attempt by the Singapore Government to "play the Malaysia bogey card, like Germany under the rule of Hitler" so as to create "its own holocaust" to "remind Singaporeans of the need for upholding national unity and defending the existence of the Government. The alternative was re-absorption into the Malaysian entity".[114] Another, a Malaysian academic, Farish A. Noor, accused the "older generation of Singapore's leaders" of wishing to "pass on the bad blood of the past to the young, with the hope that this latent animosity would continue to grow and fester in the future" and called on Singapore to "stop playing games with history".[115] But the problem of bias is by no means confined only to the writing of contemporary history. Complete objectivity in the writing of history in general is an ideal to be approximated. As Malaysian historian Cheah Boon Kheng, writing about the "sensitive topic" of Sino-Malay racial clashes in Malaya in the post-surrender interregnum from 1945–1946 noted, "I am mindful of the need to treat the topic objectively and not to pass moral judgements or to take sides … I too am aware that I have my own sympathies and aversions and hope I have been able to control my feelings in an academic study."[116] As a Singaporean writing about the subject of the separation, it is natural to

assume that I will have a Singaporean perspective on the subject. But as a historian my aim must be to offer a perspective of those events based on the available evidence. That the subject of the separation is contested history makes this all the more necessary, as I noted in the preface of *A Moment of Anguish*: "In embarking on this task, as in writing about contemporary history, I am aware that the field is open to controversy, not least, in this instance, because of the possibly still sensitive nature of the subject."[117] In view of the different historical viewpoints presented by Kuala Lumpur and Singapore, the availability of foreign archives on the subject proved particularly valuable in my own study for another reason: they provided "a third-party" perspective on the various issues and controversies that engulfed relations between the two countries. The key British, Australian, New Zealand and American observers who reported on events for their respective home governments were seasoned diplomats and shrewd analysts who had access to top government leaders in Kuala Lumpur and Singapore and often had good insights into their thinking. Their confidential dispatches made keen commentaries about the political tactics and maneuverings of the various local political forces, as well as the perceived motivations which directed them. Depending on whether they reported from the vantage point of either Kuala Lumpur or Singapore, shades of differences in emphasis would invariably surface. But taken together, their views provided a useful foil to the perspectives offered by the local participants.[118] Singapore's charge that the race riots in 1964 were politically inspired, for example, would seem to be borne out by such "third party" assessments. The historian's task therefore must be to weigh the evidence objectively and then ensure that the reportage of his findings is consistent with the 'facts' and not merely the product of his personal bias and unsubstantiated assertions. Indeed, while bias, including nationalist bias, is inevitable, the business of a historian, as Nicholas Tarling put it, "is to be as objective as possible. The fact that you cannot be completely objective does not mean that you should not try": "History is not an arena where narratives contend, no narrative being better than the others. We have been trying to make sure that some 'narratives' are better than others. Documents, peer review, common sense and experience make historians as objective as possible."[119] "The foundation of true scholarship", as my former colleague, Wong Lin Ken, wrote, "rests

on integrity" and the historian "redeems his craft and upholds his reputation if he remains intellectually honest".[120]

In the final analysis, there seems to be little distinction between the contemporary historian's experience and that confronting historians writing about earlier eras. In both contexts, the historian is faced with similar problems of incomplete documentation, perspective and objectivity. Not only would there be the need to constantly and critically examine, analyze and assess the available evidence, the historian would also be required to judiciously synthesize and interpret his findings, and revise them if necessary, in the light of new evidence and perspective. As John Tosh put it, "It can be argued that scholars today [writing on the recent past] are too close to the events of this period to achieve sufficient detachment, and that they are further handicapped by their limited access to confidential records. But although the job cannot be done as well as historians would like, it is important they do it to the best of their ability."[121]

For Singapore, the "proper" use of contemporary history in its nation-building programme reflects an ongoing dilemma in its effort to construct a national identity. Imbued with neither ethnic homogeneity nor cultural distinctiveness, its leaders had sought through economic opportunities and incentives and social programmes to weld its peoples by giving them a stake in the imagined "nation".[122] But as Prime Minister Goh observed in August 2002, the use of the latter instrument created yet another predicament:

> The more we educate Singaporeans and the more economic opportunities we create for them, the more internationally mobile they will become. The more they gain from subsidized HDB [Housing Development Board] housing, the more money they have to buy cheaper houses in Australia. Will Singaporeans be rooted to Singapore? Will enough Singaporeans stay here, to ensure our country's long-term survival?[123]

The issue, as the prime minister put it starkly, was whether the majority of Singaporeans called Singapore "home". The matter of "rootedness" is

apparently of much concern to the country's political leadership. Earlier, in 1999, the prime minister had already warned: "Whether we like it or not, more Singaporeans will take wing, given the pace of globalization and their own personal mobility. As Singaporeans become even more cosmopolitan, the issue of concern to us is whether they will become less rooted to Singapore. We now have to even compete for the hearts of Singaporeans against attractions elsewhere."[124] There was a need for "cultural reserves" in the face of globalization trends that may fragment "our sense of being Singaporeans", as George Yeo explained:[125]

> [A]n increasing number of Singaporeans have now moved out to other lands in search of fame and fortune. They are lost to Singapore if they lose their sense of being Singaporean. But if they organize themselves, retain their Singaporean identity and maintain links with institutions, families and friends in Singapore, such a Singapore diaspora can greatly enhance our national strength and our international competitiveness. … Our nationhood deprives us of easy access to our traditional hinterlands. But it gives us a unique opportunity to internationalize ourselves in a way which preserves us as a self-consciously Singaporean community, locally and overseas. … If we fail, those who come will feel no bond to the nation and those who leave will, over a generation, melt into a worldwide Chinese or Indian diaspora. If we succeed, we will transcend the geographical limitation of our size and remove the claustrophobia that now cramps our spirit.[126]

In the face of uncertain times and unique challenges, the reclamation of the past made political and economic sense. As Teo Chee Hean saw it, "This shared history, especially key defining moments, provides the social glue to bind the people together and enhances the sense of identity, community and comradeship."[127] For a nation, like an individual, needs a good memory. It was David Mcculough who said, "A nation that forgets its past can function no better than an individual with amnesia." For Singapore, amnesia, it seems, is not an option.

NOTES

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