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In Defence of the Singapore Story

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IN A recent forum on National Education (NE), Education Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam remarked that “[o]ur task in NE is to keep the Singapore Story going. It is a live story, written by each new generation of Singaporeans, not a collection of past facts. To keep it going, our schools must help our young to understand how we got here, but also to want to play their part in writing the Singapore story of the future.” This affirms what Philosopher George Santayana once opined: “A country without a memory is a country of madmen.”

That history plays a critical role in nation-building is a truism recognized by both young nations like Singapore and those with a longer historical lineage like the United States. However, scripting history is not as simple as stringing together a litany of events. The perennial controversy over selected Japanese textbooks bears testament to that. The essence of history in identity construction therefore lies in *what* and *how* nations narrate their past.

As the catalyst for the implementation of NE in 1997 was the lack of awareness among youths of the Singapore Story, it is apt that the current review of NE begins on this note. Based on anecdotal feedback from students so far, youths now *know* the Singapore story but do not necessarily *feel* it. While most accept that it is important to understand the nation’s past in order to make sense of the present and prepare for the future, the way the country’s history has been presented comes across as “boring” or even a form of “propaganda”. A student suggested that to alleviate this (mis)perception, the Singapore Story should include alternative accounts of our historical milestones that “don’t often see daylight in our textbooks”.

Nevertheless, this thoughtful input elicited a response from Minister of State for Education Lui Tuck Yew that reflected a keen grasp of the complexities of historical inquiry. He observed that “[f]or selected students who have the maturity to look at these things with an open mind, we may well be prepared to do so”. However, one should not hastily introduce conflicting versions throughout the entire education system as there is no one-size-fits-all approach bearing in mind differentiated stages of intellectual development.

Understanding Our Past

While history traditionally suffers the reputation of being a ‘boring’ and ‘irrelevant’ subject requiring nothing more than the regurgitation of facts, the approach to the study of history in Singapore secondary schools has been revised since 2000 to focus on the skills of historical

interpretation and inquiry. Except for the Singapore history textbook which is authored by curriculum writers at the Ministry of Education, there are a variety of textbooks authored by various publishers for the other syllabuses. Each not only covers historical events by presenting the multiple perspectives of the various players, but different textbooks even contain different facts depending on how the authors angle the analysis of each event. This is simply because objectivity, albeit the end historians strive towards, is an elusive goal. Historical sources can only provide us with a snippet of the past, not a complete picture of all that happened. Hence students are taught to assess the validity of extracted information and also appreciate that various conclusions are possible. In this sense, history is the study of the past as a work-in-progress that requires constant re-evaluation, and the plurality of perspectives are all crucial pieces to complete the jig-saw of our past.

However, as noted by R. Adm Lui, this approach of *doing* history as opposed to *learning* the facts of history requires a certain level of intellectual dexterity and maturity. This is indeed insightful at two levels. Firstly, this approach of *doing* history is first introduced to 13-year-olds at secondary one. Nonetheless, it will require some practice before the child is able to grasp the notion that the value of history education lies not in teaching *what* one should think but *how* one should think.

Secondly, an open mind and maturity is also needed to appreciate history at another level – being able to critique ourselves. Evaluating the myriad of perspectives in history often requires a critical assessment of the beliefs and value systems that underpin the society in question. However, as the saying goes, it is easier to see the speck in our neighbour's eye than the log in our own. In this respect, to put one's own history under the same microscope used to scrutinize another nation's past requires a lot more. It involves asking difficult questions about *our own* value system, something we may not be comfortable with.

Nonetheless, in order for the current and future generations of Singaporeans to write the Singapore Story meaningfully, their duty should not stop at filling the pages of the succeeding chapters but also to ensure that it is written as accurately to reflect the elusive 'objective' account through the constant re-evaluation of preceding narratives. Addressing the past as a myriad of contested grey areas rather than predetermined "objective truths" need not necessarily be counter-productive to reinforcing national identity. It might even be more effective in this respect by pushing home the message that nation-building is indeed an emotional struggle of patriotism requiring decisive action in difficult times. Such an approach towards our national history could only result in a true understanding of our Singaporean identity. Emphasizing our history as the *incomplete* study of our past also provides a more compelling reason for successive generations to be engaged in the writing of the Singapore story.

Moreover, if understanding our past is critical for an appreciation of our present and where we are heading, how valid then is the Singapore Story to this end if it is scripted to reflect *current* NE objectives and challenges faced by Singapore?

Charting the future of teaching our past

Currently, Singapore history is being taught to secondary two students, most of whom are 14-year-olds. Although students are encouraged to critically evaluate historical sources, there is officially one Singapore narrative that focuses on fulfilling the NE objectives of developing certain instincts in Singaporeans. These are the instincts for survival, instincts for social

cohesion, instincts about the future and the way ahead – rather than “conflicting versions” that are more suitable for mature students. The rationale for pitching of the syllabus at the lower secondary rather than the upper secondary is plausibly due to the fact that history is not a compulsory subject at the upper secondary level and beyond.

However, if a consensus exists that the understanding of history is intrinsically tied to national identity, then perhaps it is worth considering implementing the teaching of Singapore’s history at the upper secondary levels instead. By pitching it to a more mature audience, Singaporeans will be able to explore the Singapore Story through critical lenses that accommodate alternative interpretations to better appreciate where we came from and where we are heading towards as a nation.

German historian, Leopold von Ranke, once observed: “To history has been assigned the office of judging the past, of instructing the present for the benefit of future ages. To such high offices this work does not aspire: it wants only to show what actually happened.” This dictum is useful to mull over in our quest for a Singaporean identity that is borne out of true conviction and choice.

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