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# RSIS COMMENTARIES

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## **The Singapore Story: More Than a State-imposed Narrative**

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*The scripting of the Singapore Story goes beyond the state-dictated narrative as described by certain observers. Rather, the real challenge in such a process is getting young Singaporeans interested and involved.*

IN HIS SPRING 2010 Global Asia book review *Life Before Lee: When Singapore Had a History*, Ben Bland, a Jakarta-based freelance journalist suggested that the state of historiography in Singapore is dominated by a hegemonic “well-rehearsed official narrative” that is “deeply entrenched and gone largely unchallenged”. Bland asserts that “many Singaporeans perceive their own history to be little more than the Lee Kuan Yew story, with a bit of Sir Stamford Raffles thrown in for good measure”

While there is a certain quality of truth to Bland’s assertions on the state of historical awareness in Singapore, the main cause is not the “government’s hegemonic control over the school curriculum, universities and the mass media” as suggested by Bland, but the lack of historical empathy of many a young Singaporean.

### **Presence of an Alternative Narrative**

Copies of the latest Sony PlayStation Portable (PSP) game titles fly off the shelves faster than the book reviewed by Bland, *Singapore: A Biography*. A trip on the Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) in Singapore would reveal more youngsters immersed in their PSP game consoles rather than a history book of any sort. The issue here is historical ambivalence by choice rather than a lack of alternative narratives.

Contrary to Bland’s monochromatic painting of Singapore’s historical landscape, alternative narratives are readily available online in various forms of new media such as the e-journal *S/pores* which can be accessed free of charge. Titles in the more traditional print form such as Francis Seow’s *The Media*

*Entralled: Singapore Revisited* and *Comet in our Sky: Lim Chin Siong in History* can be found in local Singaporean bookstores and university libraries. The latter edited volume includes a piece *Lim Chin Siong and the Singapore Story* that sets the Singapore Story in the relief of Lim Chin Siong's central role in Singapore's politics.

On 26 February 2006, a public forum 'Detention-Writing-Healing' was held where ex-political detainees from the 1960s and 1970s in Singapore were able to give critical accounts of their detention without trial experiences. The forum allowed ex-political detainees such as Tan Jing Quee and Michael Fernandez to present their side of history openly to a public audience. A critique of the forum by Kevin Blackburn, a Singapore-based historian is accessible on S/pores, an e-journal on Singapore history.

More recently, *The Scripting of A National History: Singapore and its Past* published by the National University of Singapore (NUS) Press sought to remedy the 'Singapore Story' 'as conventionally scripted in the Bloodworth-Drysdale 'Tiger versus the Trojan Horse' narrative. Young Singaporean historians are increasingly shifting their angles of research to *include* displaced or suppressed histories – including those of marginal groups mentioned in the book review.

Academic and public historical discourse is alive in Singapore, but it is never conducted in a polemical fashion. Singaporean historians know better than to engage in polemics or indulge in inflammatory prose. Historiography in Singapore is more than just "the Lee Kuan Yew story, with a bit of Sir Stamford Raffles thrown in for good measure". If that is perceived by Singaporeans to be so, the lack of historical consciousness is largely self-imposed rather than state-sanctioned as suggested by Bland.

### **History and Nation-building**

Bland takes a very dim view of historiography as a nation-building tool – particularly the manner in which it is done in Singapore. Bland should be aware that nation states including Western liberal democracies engage in the use of history as an instrument of 'national education'. In France, the distinctly Germanic Clovis I, King of the Franks is francofied even though the notion of France as a nation or even a kingdom did not exist until the founding of the Capetian dynasty in 987.

In the United Kingdom, where Year Eight students are encouraged to decide for themselves if Oliver Cromwell was a hero or villain, thus 'warts and all', the syllabus is nevertheless a reflection of what the state hopes to instil in the minds of its young minds. In short, each nation state tailors history as a nation-building tool to its individual needs. The use of history in nation-building is not the unique purview of so-called authoritarian governments.

History teaching in Singapore's state schools for national education purposes is more than a propaganda-pumping exercise. The nation-building narrative of Singapore as taught in state schools goes beyond the omnipresence of just one man. It includes a host of other actors, both winners and losers in Singapore's recent history. Nonetheless, national education entails more than shaping opinions. It is a matter of national survival for a young city state barely 45 years of age.

Considering its small size, young age and inherent strategic vulnerabilities, Singapore has little room for failure in nation-building. If young Singaporeans undergoing basic education are not imbued with a sense of historical consciousness rooted in Singapore's recent past, the prospects of Singapore's continued existence as an independent nation state would be in jeopardy.

### **Know Singapore, Know Yourself**

A state of historical amnesia does exist in Singapore, but the cause goes beyond Bland's simplistic assertions of Gramscian hegemonic dominance by the Singapore state. Alternative narratives or other

'objective truths' on the Singapore Story are readily available if anyone chooses to look. Judging by the hits on various sites that provide alternative views (in the low thousands even for well-known ones), the political/historical apathy of young Singaporeans is very real. Thus, the real challenge is to stir young Singaporeans from their apathy rather than to produce edifices of erudite scholarship read only by a few.

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