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## **Singapore Story 2.0: Strengthening the Core**

*By Ong Weichong*

### **Synopsis**

*The Prime Minister has just unveiled a new dialogue series, SGfuture, to forge a vision for the next 50 years, towards SG100. The national narrative will evolve to reflect the aspirations of its future architects. Additional layers and voices are sinews that give the core strength.*

### **Commentary**

2015 HAS been a significant year for Singapore. It marked the 50th year of Singapore's independence and the passing of the country's founding Prime Minister, Mr Lee Kuan Yew. Indeed, the first 50 years of Singapore's history as a sovereign nation-state can be read as "Singapore Story 1.0" - where Mr Lee Kuan Yew and the PAP Old Guard led Singapore "From Third World to First" in a single generation.

Amid the launch of the new dialogue series SGfuture, it is worth bearing in mind that this story of 'national struggle' amidst trying times, however, is far removed from the personal experience of young Singaporeans. The structural geostrategic and physical vulnerabilities faced by Singapore at the outset of independence in 1965 have not gone away, but the narrative of 'national struggle' that underscores much of Singapore Story 1.0 may be losing its resonance with a generation that has known only stability and economic prosperity.

### **Need for a new national narrative**

If the Singapore Story is to endure for the next 50 years, it is imperative to start piecing together a Singapore Story 2.0. The crafting of Singapore Story 2.0 is more than an intellectual exercise. It is an inclusive conversation amongst Singaporeans

that provides the Singapore 'tribe' with a sense of identity, belonging and cohesion. Thus, the importance of having a Singapore Story that resonates with younger Singaporeans cannot be overstated. Going forward, the next edition of the Singapore Story should be built upon the firm foundations of version 1.0, but at the same time broadened to include additional layers and voices.

This can be done in at least three different ways. Firstly, the national narrative should be pluralised and strengthened by adding layers around its core – layers beyond the realm of 'great men' that connect with the lives of the average Singaporean. Secondly, beyond the local, Singapore Story 2.0 should bear cognisance that the fortune of Singapore is inextricably linked to that of its immediate neighbourhood. Finally, Singapore Story 2.0 should reflect the aspirations of a generation that will take the nation-building project beyond SG50.

### **Why the national narrative matters**

Some academic historians of the 'New History' school would argue that there is no place for a master narrative, but as Kumar Ramakrishna points out in his book *Original Sin? Revising the Revisionist Critique of Operation Coldstore*: "For relatively young, globalised nations like multi-cultural, multi-religious Singapore...a master narrative is absolutely essential to provide overall structure and coherence to the ongoing nation-building project."

Indeed, it would be hubristic to believe that the nation-building project in Singapore is complete and immune to the forces of radical ideologies – particularly religious extremism of all forms. Surely, the foundation of Singapore, a nation-state built on the principles of a secular multiracial meritocracy is a story worth remembering. More importantly, the national narrative serves as a more credible aspirational ideal against other ideologies that might threaten the social cohesion of Singapore.

As the Singapore Story evolves, additional strands drawn from a shared social and cultural past are the ones that give voice to the identity of Singaporeans – a shared consciousness of what makes them Singaporean. For example, stories of growing up in HDB estates with celebrations of community functions, void deck weddings and funerals, of Singaporean hawker food culture and other rites of passage unique to Singapore are their shared experiences as Singaporeans. In short, these additional layers give the national narrative added resonance, reality and resilience - for these are stories of their lives that are told.

### **"A Shining Red Dot": Singapore at the Crossroads**

From pre-modern Temasek to modern Singapore, this island has served as the crossroads where various cultures meet and blend, but this has not always been so. Temasek declined to insignificance when it was no longer integral to the wider fortunes of Maritime Southeast Asia. Indeed, the Singapore Story framed through the lens of the Long Duree is very much intertwined with that of Maritime Southeast Asia – and the Indo-Pacific world.

In his recent 8th S Rajaratnam Lecture, PM Lee Hsien Loong emphasised: "In the end both our external influence, and our domestic unity and success, comes down to

our conviction as individual citizens of Singapore. We must be determined that we want to be Singaporean, to stand up in the world, and to be a shining red dot.” The story of Singapore’s place within the larger world - on which the survival and success of this “Shining Red Dot” depends, needs to be reiterated in Singapore Story 2.0.

Lest we fall for the hubris that Singapore’s relevance to the world is a given, Thucydides reminds us of the fate of the ancient city-state of Athens:

*So thoroughly had the present prosperity persuaded the Athenians that nothing could withstand them, and that they could achieve what was possible and what was impracticable alike, with means ample or inadequate it mattered not. The reason for this was their general extraordinary success, which made them confuse their strength with their hopes.*

Globally, the eastward swing in economic and possibly political power is well underway. That said, many bright young Singaporeans would be more familiar with the works of William Shakespeare than the *Sejarah Melayu* or Southeast Asian variants of the Ramayana.

Indeed, despite the massive improvement in global rankings of Chinese universities such as Tsinghua and Beida, most of Singapore’s best and brightest tend to go for the safer route of Oxbridge and Ivy League universities rather than those of the Chinese C-9. If predictions of the 21st Century as the ‘Asian Century’ do come to pass, Singapore’s future leaders would do well to look east to broaden their horizons.

### **Singapore Story 2.0: “That is What Makes us Singaporeans”**

What will the Singapore Story be 50 years from SG50? Will there be a SG100 to tell and celebrate? The ‘national struggle’ of Singapore’s founding generation cannot be replicated in terms of personal experience. It can only exist in the theoretical and conceptual space for succeeding generations. However, the heart and core of Singapore Story 1.0 – a city-nation-state built on the principles of a secular multiracial meritocracy is a vision that future generations can still aspire to.

As envisioned by Mr S Rajaratnam – “Being Singaporean is a matter not of ancestry, but of choice and conviction”. It is indeed a choice that has been taken, lived, experienced and shared by fellow Singaporeans from all walks of life – a vision worth protecting and fighting for. Singapore Story 2.0 will have a software update that reflects the aspirations of its future architects, but its ‘heartware’ will still be one that makes us Singaporeans.

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