



Sharing our piece of the Singapore Story

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by **Ow Yeong Wai Kit**

I remember what it was like taking the bus when I was in primary school. At that time, there were no air-conditioned SBS buses, which meant that buses were sweltering hot. It also didn't help that the buses were cranky, but the best part was the loud beep that sounded whenever the bell was pressed - enough to wake any sleeping passenger. Often, I would slide the windows open, and feel the wind rustle in my hair.

Perhaps this doesn't count as a part of national history, but I thought it would make an interesting contribution to the Singapore Memory Project, an initiative managed by the Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts (MICA), and which aims to collect 5 million memories of the nation by 2015.

During the National Day Rally speech, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong raised the example of the project and made the case for personal histories, noting the value of remembering the past. He even quoted a contributor to this newspaper, who wrote about the importance of stories from our people.

"All these stories will weave the tapestry of our nation," PM Lee remarked, sharing the stories of two Singaporeans: One a first-hand account of the Bukit Ho Swee Fire, the other recounting when Singapore won the 1994 Malaysia Cup.

PM Lee's choice of the word "tapestry" is telling. Singapore is not a blank slate; instead we are a fine embroidery of shared narratives, layered with the threads of ages past. Each individual's story spins another thread into this multi-hued tapestry, lending texture to our complex and colourful history.

Indeed, during every National Day Rally, PM Lee talks about the lives of particular individual Singaporeans, highlighting and commending them for their achievements. As a lover of stories myself, I am heartened by the PM's use of personal narratives to illustrate his points.

Life in Singapore should not be remembered as a collection of statistics but as a series of interwoven stories. People often relate better to heart-warming stories than cold facts, as each narrative has its own richness of detail and further possibilities of meaning.

Yet the Singapore story is frequently imparted to the young with a sense of epic grandeur: We have bravely survived events like the Japanese occupation, separation from Malaysia, economic crises and even SARS. Such an account has its place in the history textbooks. But for our youths to really feel for the country, maybe we need a more intimate and subtle approach.

Let us not forget that our younger generation is one that has grown up in a land of construction cranes and burgeoning skyscrapers - we see the world in ordered grids, where even trees are planted at regular intervals. Without the organic spontaneity offered by personalised renderings of our past, we risk the growth of youth apathy and cynicism towards Singapore's history.

So credit is due to MICA for the Singapore Memory Project. But must we always wait for the state to encourage enthusiasm and ignite passion for our past? While it is perfectly acceptable to leverage on the state's resources for the preservation of national memories, individuals can and should take the initiative to capture precious memories and contribute their own Singapore story.

Some contributions have been made in this regard. The arts community has often worked at such efforts: I'm reminded of the documentary *Invisible City*, by local film-maker Tan Pin Pin, about the need to recover lost histories.

I know of youths, too, who have taken the trouble to tap the memories of grandparents by asking them for anecdotes of their younger days, and recording them for posterity. In a sense, such efforts also constitute active citizenship, inculcating a spirit of humility and a willingness to learn from elders - traits which bode well for future generations.

If this spirit lives on in years to come, it may just be possible that Singapore remains what PM Lee described as "an exceptional country", fostering a deeper sense of identity in an increasingly transient environment.

By collecting our narratives, we safeguard our stories and preserve our memories, nurturing a sense of affection for the nation. Every tale, then, adds a pearl in the beautiful necklace that is Singapore's history.

Perhaps even a trivial story like mine, griping about old SBS buses.

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