

# Casinos, Sars top list of best remembered S'pore events

New survey identifies historic events  
that S'poreans are most aware of

By **CHARISSA YONG**

THE three events most Singaporeans remember in the nation's history have been revealed in a new survey to be the opening of the two casinos in 2010, the 2003 outbreak of the deadly Sars virus and the spate of major MRT breakdowns about three years ago.

Conversely, among the least remembered events were the 1963 security crackdown Operation Coldstore, the 1987 Marxist conspiracy and the 1974 Laju ferry hijacking by terrorists.

These were the findings of a recent Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) survey of 1,500 Singaporeans, conducted through face-to-face interviews between last August and October. Survey participants were shown a list of 50 historical events selected by researchers – from the founding of modern Singapore in 1819 to the 2011 General Election – and asked if they were aware of each.

The survey showed Singaporeans were highly aware of key political events like former prime minister Lee Kuan Yew crying on TV on Aug 9, 1965, as he recounted the train of events that led to Singapore becoming independent after separation from Malaysia.

Events detailed in textbooks, like the landing of Sir Stamford Raffles here in 1819 and the Japanese Occupation in World War II, were also among the 10 most remembered events. About nine in 10 said they were aware of them. In comparison, fewer than one in five remembered Operation Coldstore and the Marxist conspiracy.

The IPS survey, highlights of which will be discussed at a seminar today, aims to identify the historical events that Singaporeans remember best as they mark 50 years of independence this year. It is the first study of its kind here.

Lead researcher Leong Chan-Hoong of IPS said the findings “give an idea of what could resonate as historical narratives for fu-

ture generations of Singaporeans”. He said the results show Singaporeans are more likely to recall recent events, adding: “The human tendency is that you tend to remember the bad things.”

National University of Singapore historian Tan Tai Yong, who was not involved in the study, said: “Events in the 1960s or earlier are not likely to feature in people's consciousness unless they had a very direct impact on their lives, or whose stories are repeated in school curriculum, mass media or in public platforms.”

He added: “We have always been focused on economic development and more concerned about what the future holds.”

The researchers also sought to explore how far citizens believe these events are important to them and to future generations of Singaporeans. Here, events like the official launch of the MRT in 1988 and Changi Airport's opening in 1981 topped the list.

The survey also found citizens of certain races had deeper memories of events with an impact on their community. About 81.1 per cent of Malay respondents recalled the uncovering of the Jemaah Islamiah terrorist plot in 2002, compared with 64.9 per cent of Chinese and 63.9 per cent of Indians and other races.

Conversely, a larger proportion of Chinese were aware of the merger of Chinese-medium Nanyang University with then University of Singapore in 1980.

The launch of the bilingualism policy in 1966, once controversial, was now regarded positively.

Dr Leong said the results show Singaporeans do not have just one view of their past. “They perceive the Singapore Story in different ways, shaped by ethnicity, age and background. Different strands of historical narratives make up the collective Singaporean identity,” he added.

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# Most Singaporeans unaware of Coldstore: Poll

By CHARISSA YONG

THE debate over a contentious episode in Singapore's history may have hogged the headlines in recent months, but the average Singaporean does not know about the large-scale security crackdown in 1963 that saw 113 leftist politicians and others rounded up.

A recent survey by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) showed that just 16.6 per cent of the 1,500 citizens polled were aware of Operation Coldstore in 1963, and 18.5 per cent were aware of Operation Spectrum in 1987 when 16 alleged Marxists were detained for subversion.

"Operation Coldstore does not affect our routines and we are not reminded of it like we are of Raffles when we drive past Raffles Hotel," said Mr Kwa Chong Guan, a senior fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies.

The legitimacy of Operation Coldstore has been the subject of an ongoing debate of late, with several former detainees and historians arguing that the crackdown was politically motivated and the Communist threat was hyped up.

But the Government has criticised these activists' attempts as distorting Singapore's history to serve their political agendas.

Mr Kwa said that the revisionist attempts "have not stirred a majority of Singaporeans who are more concerned about the continuity of the story of Singapore's economic development into the 21st century as a global city".

Other historians say these episodes are also fairly distant for most people to recall, and are not discussed as extensively as others.

The survey found that a larger share of graduates, those who are

older, and those who are better-off were aware of these crackdowns.

"Private property dwellers are generally better educated and more aware of historical events," said IPS senior research fellow Leong Chan-Hoong, who led the study. Singaporeans tend to have less interest in historical events of a political nature, he added.

Other events that less than half of those polled knew about include the People's Action Party split in 1961, and opposition politician J.B. Jeyaretnam's victory in the Anson by-election in 1981.

"Political events aren't bread-and-butter issues which affect people's everyday lives... political events tend to have effects that are further away in the future, so people may think they are less important," said Dr Leong.

Other events given low billing were policies that were heavily debated when they were introduced.

They included the merger of Chinese language university Nantah and the University of Singapore in 1980, and the controversial scheme in 1984 to give graduate mothers incentives to have children, which was later shelved.

But 75 per cent of those polled were aware of the launch of the "Stop at Two" family planning campaign in 1970, which was reversed in the 1980s.

Historian Tan Tai Yong is concerned that the survey findings suggest many Singaporeans lack a good grasp of the nation's history.

"Having more knowledge of our past and understanding the meaning of historical events to our development as a society and country will become important as we mature as a nation," he said.

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## 10 events Singaporeans are most aware of

Rank	Event	% of respondents who said they were aware of event
1	Opening of two casinos (2010)	98.9
2	Sars outbreak (2003)	98.5
3	Major MRT breakdown (2011)	96.4
4	Mas Selamat escapes (2008)	95.2
5	Mr Goh Chok Tong takes over as Prime Minister from Mr Lee Kuan Yew (1990)	93.1
6	World War II Japanese Occupation (1942)	92.5
7	PAP loses Aljunied GRC (2011)	91.8
8	Raffles' landing (1819)	89.8
9	Lee Kuan Yew sobs on national television over Separation (1965)	88.7
10	Singapore hosts Youth Olympics (2010)	87.5

Source: INSTITUTE OF POLICY STUDIES  
ST GRAPHICS

## 10 events Singaporeans are least aware of

Rank	Event	% of respondents who said they were aware of event
1	Operation Coldstore (1963)	16.6
2	"Marxist Conspiracy" plot uncovered, 16 people detained (1987)	18.5
3	Laju hostage incident (1974)	22.1
4	Debate on Graduate Mother Scheme (1984)	24.9
5	PAP splits (1961)	32.1
6	Merger of Nantah and University of Singapore (1980)	34.4
7	Formation of MAS (1970)	35.1
8	Maria Hertogh riots (1950)	37.0
9	Mr J. B. Jeyaretnam wins Anson by-election (1981)	44.1
10	Introduction of Singapore currency (1967)	47.0

Source: INSTITUTE OF POLICY STUDIES  
ST GRAPHICS

## Respondents' awareness of events by ethnicity

Event	% of total respondents aware of event	% of Chinese respondents aware of event (i)	% of Malay respondents aware of event (ii)	% of Indian/others respondents aware of event (iii)
Maria Hertogh riots (1950)	37.0	32.9	55.7	43.7
Hock Lee bus riots (1955)	57.5	57.1	64.3	52.5
Majulah Singapura is composed (1958)	67.2	62.5	84.9	78.1
Racial riots (1964)	79.9	78.6	85.9	82.5
Bombing of MacDonald House (1965)	52.6	51.0	61.1	54.6
Merger of Nantah and University of Singapore (1980)	34.4	36.7	23.2	31.1
SilkAir flight crash in Palembang, Indonesia (1997)	56.9	55.5	67.0	55.7
Jemaah Islamiah terrorist plot (2002)	66.8	64.9	81.1	63.9

NOTE: (i) Out of total Chinese respondents  
(ii) Out of total Malay respondents  
(iii) Out of total Indian/others respondents  
Source: INSTITUTE OF POLICY STUDIES  
ST GRAPHICS