

Singapore to mark 200th anniversary of Raffles' arrival

It will be an occasion to understand island's complex history stretching back 700 years

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The Singapore Story did not begin in 1965, the year of independence. Instead, it stretches back 700 years, telling a tale of ebb and flow.

One major turning point was in 1819 when Stamford Raffles landed

here, setting the island on a different trajectory, noted Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong in his New Year message yesterday.

"Because of Raffles, Singapore became a British colony, a free port and a modern city," he said.

He announced plans for Singapore to mark the 200th anniversary

of 1819, calling on Singaporeans to "understand truly how far back our history reaches, and how complex it is".

Even before Raffles' arrival on St John's Island on Jan 28 that year, Singapore had a rich history, harking back to the 14th century when it was a maritime emporium.

Migrants from China, India and other regions later formed families and communities, "turning an emporium into a home, and eventually a country".

While the SG50 celebrations in 2015 had paid tribute to the pioneer generation, there are groups older than independent Singapore that have contributed to its foundations, added PM Lee.

He cited anniversary celebrations he attended in recent months: the 100th anniversaries of the Singapore Malayalee Association, Masjid Khalid and his alma mater Nanyang Girls' High School, and the 150th anniversary of Thong Chai Medical Institution.

"Each has contributed to the Singapore Story... Without this history, we could not have made the SG50 journey from Third World to First," PM Lee said.

The bicentennial commemoration will debunk the conventional narrative that Singapore had been only a backward fishing village before its transformation into a developed country today, say historians.

Organisers of the commemorative activities also said the commemoration will not take on a "rose-tinted, celebratory" sheen or perpetuate a "great man" narrative of history since the arrival of colonial powers on the island.

Instead, it will be a reflective at-

tempt to understand the "full essence and complexity" of events in Singapore's 700-year history, Yale-NUS College president Tan Tai Yong, who sits on the Singapore bicentennial advisory panel, said at a press briefing last week.

Mr Gene Tan, executive director of the newly created Singapore Bicentennial Office in the Prime Minister's Office (PMO), added that the bicentennial, which wants to be "responsible to history", will not shy away from addressing elements in history that may not always be positive.

This includes acknowledging the "squalor and segregation" that existed under colonial rule, and the 1915 Sepoy Mutiny, which saw over 400 Indian soldiers rise against the British during World War I.

Plans for the bicentennial will be overseen by Minister for Social and Family Development Desmond Lee and Minister in the Prime Minister's Office Josephine Teo, with Finance Minister Heng Swee Keat advising.

The bicentennial will also pay homage to ground-up organisations that reflect the "organic effervescence" of the story of how Singapore came to be.

To that end, the bicentennial office will engage them throughout this year, to plan for how stories of various groups' historical roles can be told. The PMO declined to disclose its budget for the bicentennial activities but said it will be on a smaller scale than that for SG50.

Professor Tan Tai Yong said the commemorative activities will reflect evidence of Singapore's long history that could even pre-date the 14th century. This runs counter to popular belief that "Raffles landed in Singapore, founded modern Singapore and (it was only then that) our history started".

It is important to debunk the notion that Singapore had existed merely as a sleepy fishing village before Raffles arrived, said Mr Yatiman Yusof, Singapore's non-resident High Commissioner to Kenya, who is also on the bicentennial advisory panel.

"Singapore was a well-known trading centre (in the centuries before that), and Raffles' arrival propelled it into a more energetic and attractive place for business," he added.

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