

# Study delves into defining moments for S'poreans

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**In first wave of research, IPS Social Lab looks at how 35 events shaped social perceptions**

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It occurred more than 20 years ago and generated an avalanche of media coverage – often hostile – yet it is seen now as a historically defining moment for Singaporeans.

In 1994, American Michael Fay, then 18 years old, was given a sentence for vandalism which included caning.

Singapore faced intense pressure but despite then US President Bill Clinton's clemency appeal, Fay was still given four strokes.

A team from the Institute of Policy Studies' (IPS) Social Lab found that the incident was one of several historical events which shaped Singaporeans' shared memories of how

crises were overcome as a nation.

These findings are detailed in the report "Narratives of our past: Taking a journey through history for collective well-being", which was published in the *Asian Journal of Social Psychology* in July.

Speaking to *The Straits Times* about the Michael Fay incident and the study, Dr Leong Chan-Hoong head of the Social Lab, said: "It was a case where a small country stood up to say, I don't care what you think. Vandalism is a crime here and you have to comply with our laws.

"The incident shaped our attitudes – that we would not bend backwards to compromise our social values and norms, even for a superpower like America."

The study is the first wave of re-

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**STUDYING IDENTITY** continued on B2

# Spurring conversation on identity, heritage

## FROM B1

search by the IPS Social Lab as it attempts to unpack the various elements that constitute the Singaporean identity and the heritage of a nation.

Using a sample of 1,516 Singapore citizens, the study examined the impact of 35 historical events and how they shaped social perceptions.

Researchers found that other historical events, such as the collapse of Hotel New World in 1986 and the Sentosa cable car accident in 1983, were critical in the discourse of national resilience and identity.

The team behind the study,

which includes researchers Elaine Ho Qiaoying and Varian Lim, said these incidents encapsulate the collective sentiments experienced at the national level.

They also capture the moments where Singaporeans “closed ranks and mourned”, or stood firm and established a moral compass and attitudes as a nation.

Ms Ho said she believes the study is important – “to increase awareness of past events and add dimensions to the existing narrative”.

Respondents indicated that they were also proud of nation-building events, such as when the National Anthem was composed in 1958, the

formation of the Housing and Development Board in 1960 and the opening of Changi Airport in 1981.

But they felt less optimistic about the future. This, the researchers said, may be because Singaporeans feel the country has “peaked”.

Dr Leong said: “The narrative has always been about Singapore’s exceptionalism as the way forward – propelling the country from Third World to First World because of exceptional leadership and exceptional circumstances.

“But that form of exceptionalism is not sustainable for the next 20 years. The results suggest that hinging on the nation-building narra-

tive alone will not uplift confidence for the future.

“We have to think beyond that and understand what matters to people to engender greater hope and optimism for the next stage of development.”

He said the findings, among other things, can help better inform the National Education curriculum by broadening the Singapore story to go beyond the country’s nation-building efforts, rosy milestones and formative policies of yesteryear.

Dr Leong said that through its work, the Social Lab hopes to spur a deeper conversation on the subject of identity and heritage as the country stands at the crossroads of globalisation, while facing a slew of geopolitical pressures.

Apart from the study of historical events, the Social Lab is also looking

into three other aspects of identity – built heritage, historical figures and National Day Rally speeches.

It is in the midst of studying the role of landmark buildings to understand ordinary citizens’ views towards Singapore’s built landscape.

The full results, featuring the responses of 1,500 Singaporeans, will be published by the first half of next year.

In addition, Dr Leong said he plans to conduct a study on Singaporeans’ perception of local historical figures by the second half of next year. He said that apart from Mr Lee Kuan Yew, the Social Lab hopes to glean insight into who else people are aware of. He said: “Are they familiar with Tan Lark Sye, who contributed to the education scene, war hero Elizabeth Choy or the first president Yusof Ishak?”

“These personalities can help us understand who we are as a nation as their contributions and values personify our attitudes and beliefs.”

Meanwhile, the team is in the midst of studying 52 years worth of National Day Rally speeches, from 1965 to 2016.

This project aims to uncover, among other things, various issues the city-state has grappled with. The study, to be completed by the year end, can potentially identify blind spots in local policies, said Dr Leong.

He said: “Like America’s State of the Union address, the National Day Rally speeches capture the national focus for the year. We want to trace the various topics discussed and how they have shaped Singaporeans’ sense of identity.”

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