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Singapore and HK – two different tales of separation

Both ex-British colonies, but HK still trying to find own identity, unlike Republic: Historian

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Singapore and Hong Kong were once British colonies. But unlike Singapore, Hong Kong continues to struggle to find its own identity, said historian Wang Gungwu.

Part of the reason lies in Hong Kong's deep historical connections and reliance on China as a hinterland, even when it was a British colony, said Professor Wang, adding that the connection is so entrenched that Hong Kongers find it difficult to carve their own course.

Singapore's history of separations, on the other hand, set it on a very different path.

Prof Wang pointed out two such separations. Singapore's first separation took place after the British arrival in 1819, when they worked to separate the island from the Malay hinterland and the Dutch-controlled archipelago.

The second took place in 1965 when Singapore left Malaysia and became independent.

Prof Wang, 88, a renowned historian known, among other things, for his scholarship on the history and civilisation of China and South-east Asia, was speaking at the Separations and Connections session yesterday, on the last day of the two-day Singapore Bicentennial Conference.

He said the 1819 separation had laid the foundations for 1965 and Singapore's eventual transformation into a global city.

The people of 1960s Singapore, he noted, had unconsciously or subconsciously understood the benefits of separation, and built on it.

"The people who managed Singapore somehow managed to grasp the idea that connecting with the distant and separating from the near was quite a good formula," Prof Wang said.

In contrast, Hong Kong had never been truly separated from China, even when it was administered by the British.

"All the people in China were actively involved in Chinese affairs, and China was actively involved in Hong Kong affairs from 1840 right down to the present.

"That connection was so close that it is so difficult for Hong Kongers today to try and seek and find their own identity," he said.

Hong Kong has been roiled in 17 straight weekends of protests over what started out as anger at an extradition Bill, now withdrawn. It would have allowed individuals, including foreigners, to be sent to mainland China to face trial.

When the British left Hong Kong in 1997, the connection became overwhelming, added Prof Wang. "In the past, it was a connection between two worlds – a balance between connecting with China and connecting with Britain."

Meanwhile, in Singapore, the British empire, in an effort to pay for some of its adventures elsewhere, tried to reconnect the island with some of its neighbours in the 1860s, Prof Wang said.

But the development of "British Malaya" was not entirely successful as the British were preoccupied with issues elsewhere.

Ultimately, British attempts to reconnect Singapore with the Malay world failed, said Prof Wang.

There are, however, downsides to this history of separations for Singapore, he added.

"Two centuries of separation have developed a habit of mind which makes it much easier for Singapore to connect with distant places – the farther away, the better – whereas connecting nearby is somewhat less comfortable."

Singapore, therefore, needs to work on establishing stronger ties with the region without losing its distant connections and this, he believes, requires tremendous rethinking about connections and separations.

"Reconnection is not impossible, but it is a challenge being part of South-east Asia, as a new nation in the middle of 10 other nations, right in the middle of something much more complicated as the world shrinks and the superpowers focus on this part of the world.

"This challenge requires Singapore to do both – to connect with places far away to survive economically, politically and security-wise, and unless it reconnects with the neighbourhood, with the nearby states, it will find it extremely difficult to face the next few decades."

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RIGHT STRATEGY

The people who managed Singapore somehow managed to grasp the idea that connecting with the distant and separating from the near was quite a good formula.

HISTORIAN WANG GUNGWU, on Singapore's history of separations and its impact on 1965.

BALANCING ACT

Two centuries of separation have developed a habit of mind which makes it much easier for Singapore to connect with distant places – the farther away, the better – whereas connecting nearby is somewhat less comfortable.

PROF WANG, on the need for Singapore to establish stronger ties with the region without losing its distant connections.



Associate Professor Farish Ahmad-Noor of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies speaking at the Singapore Bicentennial Conference yesterday. With him were National University of Singapore (NUS) head of sociology Vineeta Sinha (centre), who was moderator of the panel discussion on diversity and identity, and fellow panellist Brenda Yeoh of NUS. ST PHOTO: GIN TAY

SENSE OF DETACHMENT

We talk about South-east Asia as though it's out there. Aren't we in South-east Asia, and isn't South-east Asia here, in us, with us?

NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF SINGAPORE PROFESSOR BRENDA YEOH, on how families in the region were becoming more diverse.

REVISING HISTORY RESPONSIBLY

Some people have asked me if I agree with revisionist history. All historians are revisionists. That's what we do with new interpretations and new materials. We revise, but do it responsibly and with intellectual honesty.

HISTORIAN TAN TAI YONG, on history and history writing changing with time.

S-E Asia must remain diverse and multicultural, say academics

Tee Zhuo

A future in which the South-east Asian region is split in two, between rich elites and millions of the poor, is the biggest fear of academic Farish Ahmad-Noor.

The frightening picture he paints is of a small cluster of cosmopolitan "cafe latte-drinking, sushi-eating" elites "swimming on a sea of 600 million poor South-east Asians" who have no access to mobility.

Associate Professor Farish of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies made the point during a panel discussion on diversity and identity on the final day of the Singapore Bicentennial Conference.

Fellow panellist Brenda Yeoh, of the National University of Singapore, said families in the region are now more diverse, with many Singaporeans marrying people from nearby countries.

"We talk about South-east Asia as though it's out there. Aren't we in South-east Asia, and isn't South-east Asia here, in us, with us?"

Agreeing, Prof Farish said he is a Malaysian married to a Singaporean of Indonesian origin. But he warned against seeing cross-border marriages as a panacea and reminded everyone that such marriages are not just between elites.

"We do not celebrate these marriages when they are among the working classes," he said. "That is the kind of slippage, the silencing that we need to be cautious about."

Prof Farish said in his presentation that multiculturalism in the region was far richer before colonialism, and pointed to the need to adopt a regional, Asean identity and embrace its complexity.

Professor Yeoh traced a history of diversity in Singapore, even as she noted possible reflections of colonial attitudes in how Singapore treats migrant workers.

The issues animated the audience, who raised points ranging from "new colonialism" in the treatment of marginalised groups to tensions between a regional identity and a national one.

The founder of the Brahm Centre charity, Ms Angie Chew, pinpointed Singapore's "new colonial" attitude towards foreign maids and LGBTQ, or lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer people.

She said: "If we are going to be inclusive... it is time we accepted these people as they are, without making them feel they are not good enough for our society."

Prof Yeoh, who in her presentation spoke of the "pride and prejudice" mentality of the colonialists that left little room for mixing, asked if Singapore today may be approximating these attitudes.

Professor Kishore Mahbubani, former dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, noted an "underlying optimism" in the points made by the two panellists.

"In a world where multiculturalism is being challenged, how can South-east Asia still remain optimistic that it will be positive and successful in this dimension?"

Replying, Prof Farish said he was a pessimist who is also a realist: "Stop harping on states and expecting states to perform miracles."

States, however powerful, cannot compel their citizens to love one another, he said. "The state has to create avenues for understanding, genuine communication, ethical communication," he added.

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Leftist leaders' arrests key to S'pore's 1963 merger: Historian

Rei Kurohi

Without the arrests of left-wing leaders in 1963 in Singapore, the Republic's merger with Malaya, Sabah and Sarawak to form the Federation of Malaysia would not have happened, said historian Tan Tai Yong yesterday.

The first prime minister of Malaya and later Malaysia, Tunku Abdul Rahman, was worried about Singapore becoming a communist "Cuba in his backyard" and so made the arrests a "non-negotiable" condition of Singapore's entry into the federation, said Professor Tan.

Prof Tan added that the People's Action Party (PAP) might have lost power and not exist today if the merger had not taken place.

He said: "It's very easy now with hindsight to say that this should not have been done, but when people were making decisions in 1963, or 1962, or 1961, they were faced with stark options and had to decide which was the best option to take."

"This was a very fundamental decision on what the future of Singapore should look like: a left-leaning communist or socialist kind of model, or one that is open to connecting with the rest of the world, one that is prepared to be part of a larger federation embracing Malaysian identity."

Prof Tan, who is also the president of Yale-NUS College, was on a panel on the lasting impact of decolonisation on Singapore, on the final day of the two-day Singapore Bicentennial Conference.

He said Singapore's merger with Malaysia and subsequent separation was one major example of contesting visions and ideas in Singapore's history on what decolonisation should entail.

Ultimately, the decision to go ahead with the merger was a coming together of different interests that overlapped.

This included the political interests of the PAP led by Singapore's first prime minister Lee Kuan Yew, which was facing a "formidable foe" in the form of the left-wing Barisan Sosialis, and the interests of the Tunku and the British leaders, who wanted to contain the spread of communism, Prof Tan said.

The panel discussion, on the topic of contestations and choices, was moderated by Mr Ho Kwon Ping, executive chairman of Banyan Tree Holdings, who said the "great contest of ideas" continues today, and that understanding the past can help one to better understand how to discuss the future.

The story that most Singaporeans know of the Republic's separation from Malaysia – that it came as a shock, suddenly and unexpectedly – is probably not historically accurate, said Prof Tan. "The truth, which has surfaced because we now have access to new materials, is that, from early 1964, there were members of the Singapore Cabinet who had already decided that it was not working," he added.

In response to a question on whether Singapore can do more to acknowledge the legacy of left-wing politics, Prof Tan said history and history writing both change with time.

"The national narrative that many of us grew up understanding is not sufficient anymore. History is more complex than that and, as more research happens, we will see a more nuanced approach.

"Some people have asked me if I agree with revisionist history. All historians are revisionists. That's what we do with new interpretations and new materials. We revise, but do it responsibly and with intellectual honesty," he added.

Also on the panel was Princeton University history professor Gyan Prakash, who spoke more broadly about the lasting global effects of decolonisation, which produced a "fundamental restructuring of the world", including the rise of the nation state as the dominant basis for understanding identity and rights.

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