

Historian Tan Tai Yong's lectures on Singapore launched as book



Minister for Social and Family Development Desmond Lee (left) with Professor Tan Tai Yong, the sixth S R Nathan Fellow for the Study of Singapore, at the National Museum of Singapore on Nov 8, 2019. ST PHOTO: KELVIN CHNG

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SINGAPORE - A collection of historian Tan Tai Yong's lectures on Singapore's evolution over the past 700 years was launched on Friday (Nov 8) at the National Museum.

Titled *The Idea Of Singapore: Smallness Unconstrained*, the book looks at factors that have shaped the nation - such as its geography and ethnic make-up - and continue to influence it today.

Apart from the text of each lecture, the book also contains snippets of Professor Tan's interaction with the audience. The lectures were part of the IPS-Nathan series organised by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS). They took place between September 2018 and May this year.

Minister for Social and Family Development Desmond Lee, who spoke at the event, noted that Prof Tan's approach to history is "accessible and easy to digest".

"He underscores the idea that history is all around us, not just an examinable subject to be learnt in classrooms," Mr Lee added.

He also noted Prof Tan's contributions to the Republic, including to the Singapore Bicentennial Advisory Panel.

"Every meeting, we gained new insights, fresh perspectives," Mr Lee said. "(We were) challenged in our narrative and in the way we present different strands of Singapore history."

In each chapter of the book, Prof Tan examines a different facet of the country's history and how this remains relevant today.

For instance, in the third chapter on Singapore as a port city, Prof Tan suggests that Singapore no longer has a fixed economic hinterland. It should therefore remain open, flexible and on the look out for fresh opportunities, he said.

At the launch, Prof Tan stressed the importance of learning the lessons of Singapore's history as the country moves forward.

"There were ups and downs; there were cycles. And throughout, history presented opportunities and yet imposed limitations," he said. "There were times when Singapore thrived and flourished, and periods where the island faded into oblivion.

"History may not tell us about the future, but knowing history can certainly help us as we think about the future, and make decisions that will shape the future."

His book will be sold at major bookstores and on the World Scientific website for \$29.96.

Prof Tan is IPS' sixth S R Nathan Fellow for the Study of Singapore. The next Fellow will be veteran diplomat, Professor Chan Heng Chee.