The continuing saga of Singapore’s Story

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Ever since its inception, The Singapore Story has attempted to saturate the content and meanings of Singapore history for Singaporeans. It is the narrative by PAP leaders of their sacrifices, hardships, courage, endurance, and achievements, and of how their successors have continued with their good work.

Ten years down the road, in 2006 however, National Education, the rubric for nation-building messages and activities especially for schools, in which history occupies a key position, is being officially reviewed. It has become commonplace for students to dismiss the prescribed Singapore history as ‘boring, propaganda’. They said as much, indeed, to the government minister chairing the National Education review committee who had invited the youngsters to an informal chat at an ice-cream café. The general elections held a few months earlier had tossed up the ‘post 65 generation’ as category of Singaporeans whom to government wanted to connect with. *(Straits Times* 1 September 2006)

While the frank remark about the national project was given wide coverage in the *Straits Times*, it was really not a startling or unexpected view. After all, the stated aim of education has been to nurture a creative and critically-minded citizenry. At any rate, students who would profess to be satisfied with the Singapore Story would probably earn the scorn of their peers. A contributor to the *Straits Times* current affairs feature written by youths, who was herself about to embark for undergraduate studies in the US has pointed out to Singaporeans that youngsters valued making a show of being non-conformist.

The issue arose when it was reported by the English-language tabloid paper that a group of students had selected Hitler as their role model in a music camp when they had to name their team after a historical personality. The young columnist assured readers that the students probably did not know much about Hitler in the first place, and their thinking that he was cool was most likely only a demonstration of youthful impertinence and political incorrectness to the extreme. It did not mean that they irrationally despised another race, or endorsed Nazi views. *(Straits Times* 11 July 2005) In the same vein, it was probably also cool to be telling a government minister in a
café conversation that the Singapore Story was a turn-off. The student who had so dismissed the national history narrative immediately followed up by clarifying that ‘I truly understand that the Government is doing a good job. We’re prospering, we’re forward looking. But it comes off as propaganda’.

While Singaporean students readily displayed skepticism about their prescribed national history, they were also as easily drawn to its opposite: sentimentality. The death of S Rajaratnam in February 2006 at the age of 90, was the occasion of outpouring of feelings on the part of those too young to have been aware that he was one of Lee Kuan Yew’s most trusted ministers and a long-serving foreign and culture minister. Rajaratnam was one of the most high-profile cabinet members of his day. Yet those who had not come of age in the 1980s were most likely not to have heard of him after his retirement in 1988. Rajaratnam was the last of the old guard ministers aside from Lee himself to leave the political scene. Needless to say then, that the other first-generation cabinet ministers have long faded from public cognizance.

Rajaratnam’s passing in particular aroused sentimental responses, not the least because Lee Kuan Yew was captured on camera wiping away his tears at the state funeral service. A blogger couldn't find words to convey his/her sadness at Rajaratnam’s passing titled his post "The day MM Lee Kuan Yew cried", with only screenshots of television coverage of the memorial service accompanied by the one line of text. (bobafett81.livejournal.com). Singaporeans would be familiar with the other day that Lee cried: when as Prime Minister he broke down on television at the fraught the press conference on 9 August 1965 where he announced the separation of Singapore from Malaysia. This television clip is the pivot of the Singapore Story, marking the closing of a flawed chapter, and the commencement of a bold new world. Lee’s public displays of distress are thus associated with momentous events in Singapore.

What connected younger Singaporeans to Rajaratnam most was the realization from the tributes on television and newspapers that it was he who had penned the national pledge that as students, they recited every day at school. Many expressed consternation that they had not even heard of him till his death. A typical complaint went:
‘The death of Mr S Rajaratnam made Singapore’s history more personal to me, but it also raised the question: why had I not known about him earlier? Until he died and I read about it in the papers, I did not know he had penned the Pledge. Now that I can actually place a human voice to the words, they resonate with a lot more meaning—a man’s vision of multiculturalism and unity….National Education is too limited and selective. Mr Rajaratnam is a classic example of someone who has not been given enough importance in our history syllabus’.

Blogger Babi-Inc (babi-inc.blogspot.com) wrote a note of thanks to Mr Rajaratnam for the National Pledge, and then expressed indignation at the fact that tertiary-level students are not asked to recite the pledge and sing the national anthem, this seen as the reason for Singaporeans being so bo chap (indifferent and uninvolved)

Blogger egg toast was even moved to pen a verse to express his angst:

It's only right to watch it on TV, at least
if one can't be there personally.
it was only recently that I knew the
Pledge was penned by Mr S Rajaratnam.
I'm ashamed to even mention that.
To think I'm a Singaporean.

A related thread of expression can be described as the trivial pursuit. Having learnt that Rajaratnam composed the national pledge, young Singaporeans at that point asked to be told more about Toh Chin Chye who designed the flag, and Zubir Said who composed the national anthem, placing two of the most powerful former Singapore political leaders on the same footing as Zubir, a prolific musician.

In response to the Straits Times discussion topic ‘how our founding fathers ought to be remembered’, a 17 year old wrote:

… I first knew of Singapore’s history through a wonderful book—To tame a tiger by Joe Yeoh. It was told in a comic-book format, and it made history dramatic, humourous, and interesting. It featured members
of the Old Guard. It undeniably humanised these politicians, making their personalities come alive, albeit a little exaggerated. Even the communists, with all their conniving and scheming, had their own charm. It made me want to know more about them. Even though many of them had died by the time I was born, I could still picture them in my head. Imagine my disappointment when I found only a sweeping, clinical mention of them in our history textbooks.

‘Whoever is in the government agencies making national policies’ was reproached for not providing a platform or venue for communicating the history of the founding fathers to all Singaporeans. Suggestions that were immediately proffered included running a nationwide contest to seek the best views on how to honour the ‘founding fathers’; searching for a venue/building to house all the past and current archives/information of the founding fathers in one location. Perhaps even create busts or statues of all of them.

That students who disparaged the Singapore Story’s claims as being history could also be the very ones who felt deprived for not having been taught about S Rajaratnam and the national pledge, or Toh Chin Chye and the Singapore flag is not a perplexing contradiction. Toh was deputy prime minister to Lee Kuan Yew from 1959-1968, and a cabinet minister until 1981, and settling on the design of the flag was certainly not the sum total of his achievements as minister. What the students were hankering for was no more than an embellishment of the Singapore Story. To be ‘critical’ was for them almost a knee-jerk response. The Singapore history that they were taught at age 13-14 was a ready and obvious target, immediately associated with the PAP government’s trademark authoritarian management of information.

Yet the skepticism at the establishment narrative of Singapore history goes beyond adolescent petulance. The National Education blitz has emphasised the trials and tribulations of Singapore’s history during decolonization, culminating in the victories of the People’s Action Party over the enemies of state. Its political rivals have been demonised under the labels of either communism or chauvinism. The two-volume memoirs of Lee Kuan Yew published in 1998 and 2000, set that narrative in his voice, in addition to putting on record which particular triumphs of the developmentalist state were specifically his. This historiography has certainly been taken up as a
challenge by historians, but also was a manifestation of the limitations on possibilities for alternatives to government discourses and activities.

When the Singapore Story is dismissed as propaganda by school students, or critiqued as resorting to diabolical essentialism, the reference is to the first decade of Lee’s PAP. The party had formed a united front with the left comprising anti-colonial student and trade union activists, and then wiped them out from the political scene through detention without trial. The baptism of fire as the PAP presented their early years was their death-defying feat of ‘riding the communist tiger’. Rendered in more measured language, this meant that the moderates under Lee Kuan Yew eliminated its own left-wing leadership which had given it a mass electoral base among the majority of Chinese-language speakers. The detention without trial of the left-wing faction and trade union leaders has been discursively rendered as the fight against violent communist subversives, and their elimination as a force in Singapore’s politics. The question that this issue has been framed within is ‘were they really communists?’ The government’s line has always been ‘in the internal security department we trust’, whose records however have remained closed even to scholarly examination, and even for those arrests made more than forty years ago.

In the last few years, despite the highly restricted access to records for investigation in Singapore, and (indeed because of) the force of National Education, there have been efforts which have brought to light, the other Singapore Story. The foisting of the PAP’s history as national history has generated responses which have dissected its narratives, and more importantly, academically sophisticated, archival-based studies that have raised pertinent questions about it. The publication by INSAN of Comet in our sky: Lim Chin Siong in history edited by Tan Jin Quee and KS Jomo (2001) and Said Zahari’s Dark Clouds at Dawn: A political memoir (2001) recounting his involvement in the politics of decolonization and his detention of 17 years as a political prisoner were vital to the effort. The choice of metaphors from the firmament for the book titles is certainly hackneyed but they aim to express the thwarting of an elemental and expansive sense of beginning and opportunity.

The tour de force that has confronted the Singapore Story has to be Tim Harper’s “Lim Chin Siong and the ‘Singapore Story’”, which used recently declassified records in the British Public Records Office. Placing Lim crucially into the counterinsurgency priority and discourse of the British
which Lee Kuan Yew leveraged, Harper has concluded that Lim spoke for a local radical tradition that pitted the popular will against colonial power. He has answered the vexed question ‘was Lim Chin Siong a communist?’ with the reply that the evidence is certainly inconclusive to say the least. The continuous barrage of accusations against Lim, his detention in 1963, and those of the top leadership of the Barisan Socialis, formed from the split by the left which left the PAP, disqualified them from presenting themselves as candidates just months before the general elections in September of that year. More crucially, Harper has shown that the centrality of the question as to whether the hundreds of political detainees in the 1960s were really communists or not to the Singapore Story is actually more significant than ‘the truth’ of the matter.

Both the Lim Chin Siong and Said Zahari volumes can be purchased in Singapore, and multiple copies are available in public libraries throughout the island. Indeed, history teachers who have to dispense the Singapore Story have been known to state with pride in public forums that they have read Harper, and make it a point to mention the name of Lim Chin Siong to their students to stimulate their interest in the subject, and most likely also for the sake of their own credibility. The Harper essay is of such impressive scholarly quality that it would have been doubtlessly accepted for publication by academic journals if Harper had so wished. Its circulation was ensured in any case, and it would have been counterproductive for the government to attempt to restrict its circulation. Aside from the academic articles, the book comprises appreciations of Lim Chin Siong written by his former comrades in the left movement and fellow detainees. Their accounts fleshed Lim as a person of great dedication, humanism and ideals, whose potential to contribute to a better Singapore was stymied and his own life unfulfilled and vilified. It was a sympathetic, genuine and touching rendition that suggested a moral triumph and the unbroken spirit of the left.

*Comet in the Sky* is a critical breakthrough that has given students’ calling the prescribed Singapore history as propaganda more weight than they may be aware of. That the *Straits Times* did a feature on critiques that have been emerging of the Singapore Story and the public interest on the issue, is perhaps indicative of this situation. (18 February 2006). It noted that an academic roundtable on rethinking Singapore history in February 2006 drew an audience of 160, and various such seminars throughout the year had similarly attracted packed rooms. The feature article highlighted a history doctoral student’s caustic comment that
…a Martian with only the official script would think that there is only one political movement—the PAP; two important personalities in Singapore—Stamford Raffles and Lee Kuan Yew; and three dates—1819, 1942 and 1965—that are worth remembering. Like all national histories, the Singapore Story seems to be concerned with what takes place at the political helm, rendering the rest of society mere passive spectators or victims of grand events.’ (Straits Times 18 February 2006)

More significantly, this captioned quotation was followed by those solicited from two former political detainees. Michael Fernandez made the point that

The Singapore Story has many players. So far, most of us have heard the views of a select group of players. Now that most of the players are entering their sunset years, it is imperative that as many as possible of the views are recorded and told. That’s the least we can do for the growing generation who has been fed a diet of one official view.

Tan Jing Quee was similarly aware of the historicity of the issue:

The increased interest is inevitable as controversies of the past recede and become less contentious. People are prepared to look at things objectively. The Singapore Story is not necessarily a battle between good and evil. It’s just different sides…one side won and another side lost, obviously. But that’s not important in the scheme of things. I hope we’ll have the maturity to see that some time.

Even more remarkably for Singapore, a day after Rajaratnam’s state funeral on 25 February 2006, Fernandez and Tan spoke at an Arts festival event ‘Detention-Writing-Healing’, the first time that former political detainees have addressed the public about their experiences. Both men stressed that they were not communists, but were left wing, union activists. They described the moment of their arrest, and the harsh treatment they received in detention, including forced-feeding when they went on hunger-strike. The Straits Times feature writer commenting on the event voiced support for ‘coming out of the closet’ and for an honest confrontation with ‘alternative, sometimes darker, versions of the past’. (Straits Times 3 March 2006).
The official rebuttal from the minister of home affairs to their narratives reiterated that those who had been detained were not political dissidents or opposition members engaged in the democratic process, but ‘belonged to the Communist United Front which supported the Communist Party of Malaya, an underground organization which used terror and violence to subvert the democratic process and overthrow the government of Singapore and Malaysia’. (Straits Times 8 March 2006) The detainees were released when they signed an undertaking that they had renounced communism. The speakers’ protestations of their innocence and victimization were dismissed as attempts to ‘take advantage of young Singaporeans who had not lived through the period.’ The government had allowed them to put their past behind, and enabled them and their families to enjoy the prosperity of Singapore, but it would not allow them to ‘rewrite history’. The allegations of harsh treatment, both physical and mental, were completely ignored in the official reply. The argument appears to be that if they were communists, then they certainly could expect and deserved such treatment, given their scheme to wreck Singapore. Indeed, it is vital to the Story that the detentions were undertaken to forestall subversion to the political process and the eruption of violence. This claim not only confers legitimacy for the actions, but implicates Singaporeans who have enjoyed the postulated benefits of having a strike-free, economically thriving society. It was almost worth the attention given to the detentions generated by the arts event to give the authorities occasion to make its reply.

If the permit given for the talk by Fernandez and Tan (Said Zahari was also scheduled to speak, but apparently he was not well enough to travel from Kuala Lumpur, where he resides) was to gauge the public’s response to their narrative of the past, then the indication given was very clear indeed. The free tickets for the event were snapped up, even though there might have been routine talk about the possible repercussions of turning up at such an ‘anti-government’ event. The audience comprised mainly young people, and the questions that were asked were sympathetic ones. It must have been heartening for the speakers to see that there was respect for the men and women whose lives and memories questioned the authority of the Singapore Story.

The recently-released ministry of education-prescribed history of Singapore school textbook for 2007 onwards is a milestone in national history. For the first time, Lim Chin Siong is featured in a whole page; the statement that he was detained for allegedly working to turn Singapore into ‘a second Cuba’
Comet in the Sky is included in the list of reference materials for teachers; a suggested activity that teachers could set students to do was to find out the importance of a list of people associated with Singapore’s road to self-government: Lim Chin Siong is on the list, along with David Marshall, Lim Yew Hock and Lee Kuan Yew. For the first time too, the first generation of cabinet ministers whom Lee Kuan Yew had retired in the early 1980s has been acknowledged in the school textbook.

Thus far, the early chapters of the Singapore Story has rested on the narrative of its principled fight against the communists within the ranks of the PAP itself. This motif has become less and less sustainable, and the recognition of this development can be seen as a response to the skepticism it has generated. That contentious past has been diffused with the more balanced account of Lim Chin Siong in Singapore’s history of decolonization. Yet ultimately the strength of the Singapore Story lies not so much in the fight against the alleged communists, but the outcome of this, which is postulated as the great economic success that is Singapore. The Singapore student who thus saw propaganda in what was presented as history but who also understood that ‘we’re prospering’ would no longer have anything to say to minister in that respect.

Nevertheless, the force of exploring alternative histories is not over. As a civil society activist blogger ‘Yawning Bread’ wrote on reading Huang Jianli’s article ‘Positioning the student activism of Singapore: articulation, contestation and omission’, Inter-Asia Cultural Studies (7: 3, 2006), ‘we need to confront our history. Our students today need to know what Singapore students from generations past were capable of and draw inspiration from them. But even more importantly, the government needs to confront history too and get off this business of trying to impose a victor’s version of the linear narrative. They have been wrong in the past…and they have to own up to having been wrong.’ The government however is not likely to oblige unless and until more and more credible Singapore stories which it cannot ignore are being told.