HISTORY’S ROLE IN SOCIETY

Moving from apathy to empathy

The National Library Board launched Singapore: The First Ten Years Of Independence last week. Ho Kwon Ping, chairman of the Singapore Management University’s Board of Trustees, spoke at the launch. Below is an excerpt from his address.

ANY of us who has patiently listened to the unpremeditated testimony of our parents will have known that our own lives will know the vicissitudes of emotional living as a vicarious experience. We can try to understand and imagine, but we cannot truly experience life as someone else has lived it.

That is essentially the problem of history, the reason for saying that the mistakes of history always repeat themselves. We only learn from committing our own mistakes, and renovation the mistakes of lessons of our forefathers. Even in the theatre of history well, as our children faithfully ignore the hard-earned lessons of life.

Our parents are, all of the accumulated knowledge and truths carefully or through the millstones of learning in the bookshelves of the world’s oldest and largest libraries, leaves little impression on each new generation. But even if we are deemed to never learn from history, we must try to do so – or else the mistakes which such generation will certainly commit will be that much greater. The knowledge of history, some- one once said, is not a signpost showing you clear directions, but guardrails on the road’s borders to hopefully prevent you from a full-scale disaster as youcareer recklessly down the road.

History is important not only as a disaster-prevention device, but also as protection. We are all, deep inside, afraid of the past. We need to belong to a community and derive our emotional existence and stability from it. The collective memory of tribes consists of oral histories transmitted through legends and myths. Tribes became nations and then nation-states, but communities remained geographically defined.

Today, globalisation and the Internet have created virtual tribes which diffuse, if not endanger, national identities. Facebook has created alternative cyber communities and expressions of tribalism which not only cross borders but also space and time. Against all this, the appeal of questions about the past becomes stronger, the more you grow older and the more you become interested in the subject. Who am I, and where do I belong?

Singapore: The First Ten Years Of Independence is full of memories for those old enough to have known the people behind the grainy black-and-white photographs. But for young people, there is little recognition of much less emotional connection with, the people in the photos or the events portrayed. Perhaps the people of a little and young Mr Lee Kuan Yew in shorts, playing golf, may click some smiles as most people would only recall the Minister Mentor as an avuncular octogenarian.

My own children, from 26 to 14 years old, have little knowledge of, or interest in, Singapore’s history. Perhaps it is a consequence of our own educational and political system. Or perhaps it is an inevitable part of life. Very few young Chinese today can even remotely understand or care about what the Cultural Revolution meant for their parents.

But no matter how much a loving battle, we must continue to fight against the apathy of time and to transmit a knowledge of our history to our young – and not through textbooks and recited dates, but through an emotional understanding and empathy with the past.

The National Library Board has launched an essay contest entitled “10 Years That Shaped A Nation”. No doubt there will be many very well-researched and fact-laden essays with meticulous documentation. But if we were to write it, I would recall memories instead.

I remember how when I was 13 and playing in the garden of our house in Bangkok, my father came home one day and showed me his new bright-red passport. He proudly said that he was no longer a British subject nor a Malay-ian citizen, but a Singaporean from the city whose backwaters he had left in 1956 when his forebears had worked and lived. I remember too how, for the next four years, while my father was Singapore’s ambassador to Thailand, I read and lowered the Singapore flag daily from the flagpole erected in our garden.

It is said that immigrants feel more passionate about their adopted home because they do not take their citizenship for granted. That was certainly the case with me. Neither born nor bred in Singapore – and naturalised as a citizen only by virtue of technically living on Singapore soil since our home in Bangkok was sovereign Singapore’s Embassy residence – I never experienced Singapore till I returned from my studies in the United States to do national service in 1972.

The Singapore Armed Forces was little more than five years old then. NS was the big- gest calling card of a young man’s manhood. I joined.

In those days, every intake was not straitlaced by education. I learnt about the envi- ronment of Singapore: its rough but resilient immigrant roots; the dichotomy between the two separate worlds of the Chinese- and English-educated; the tensions as well as the camaraderie between different cultures and races. The na- tion-building role of NS has certainly contributed to our sense of collective identity.

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