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BY EUGENE K B TAN



Najeer Yusof/TODAYA crowd watching a multimedia show at the Singapore River during the launch of the Singapore Bicentennial on Jan 28.

This week marks the official start of a year-long series of events to mark the 200th anniversary of the arrival of Sir Stamford Raffles on January 29, 1819. Yet, the irony is that the bicentennial commemoration appears to be a deliberate, if not convenient, segue to shed light and focus on a more distant past.

So what exactly are we commemorating?

This is pertinent as there remains ambivalence, if not confusion, on what the bicentennial commemoration is about.

Further, the lead-up had not generated the excitement and imagination of a national commemoration, though it might be early days yet.

There is no doubting that Raffles' acquisition of Singapore for his employer, the East India Company, was a turning point in Singapore's history.

The arrival of the British resulted in the creation of Singapore as a free port and marked the economic, physical, and social transformation of the island, which continues today.

So for a good part of the last 50 years, the dominant narrative that school children learned was that Singapore's early modern history began in 1819.

But Singapore is now seeking to connect with the recently unearthed 500 years before Raffles' arrival that hitherto insufficient attention had been given to.

Recent archaeological evidence, for example, points to the short-lived existence of a thriving entrepôt in 14th century Singapore, which rose and declined abruptly all within 100 years.

Hence, the bicentenary commemoration is appropriate and inappropriate at the same time.

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It is apt because many of the activities will highlight the growth and development of Singapore since her founding as a centre of commerce and a strategic military outpost of the British Empire that Raffles presciently saw as part of Singapore's geopolitical importance.

But it is also inappropriate because the commemoration will conscientiously recalibrate the conventional narrative that, prior to 1819, Singapore was not of significance. The refreshed narrative pivots on Singapore's past as a regional hub at varying times between the 14th and 18th century.

Nation-states often seek to project their history back to a glorious past or to a longer vintage. Singapore is no different.

The bicentennial commemoration highlights that Singapore is not just a socio-political and economic entity with a 53-year independent history but one that goes back 700 years.

For historians like Fernand Braudel, the *longue durée* (or, the long term) is an approach to historiography (the writing of history) that emphasises events that occurred imperceptibly over an extended period of time.

It stresses evolving relationships between people and the world, including geography, climate, and demography. This form of historiography can be contrasted with event-based history writing that stresses short-term distinct events.

This desire for the *longue durée* is a manifestation of Singapore's restless search for a longer past that is potentially inspiring and rich in learning points given her relatively youthfulness and insecurity as a sovereign nation-state.

It is a historical claim that seeks affinity to a lineage of heritage, legitimacy and standing of who we are.

One key lesson from the past that the bicentennial commemoration will probably highlight is that port cities, like countries, wax and wane. Port cities are inevitably a commingling of peoples, cultures, ideas, aspirations and ambitions, trade and commerce.

This potent mix of openness and entrepreneurial verve enables port cities to be the transmission belt for economic activity, ideas, commerce and industry.

Like Temasek, Singapore's predecessor in the 1300s, however, success is never pre-ordained. Singapore's decline at the end of the 14th century meant that Singapore was but a marginal player in what historian Anthony Reid has described as South-east Asia's "Age of Commerce".

South-east Asia was then integrated into a global trade system, with trade-based cities playing a pivotal role between the 15th and mid-17th centuries. Malacca, for example, became an emporium as a key node in the "Maritime Silk Road" trading networks.

Amid the many activities and events to mark Singapore's 700 years of history, there is one poignant truth.

In its 700-year history, Singapore developed as a port and city and declined at least three times (the other two being from the late 16th to early 17th century, and then for much of the 19th century and early 20th century) in tandem with the cycles of globalisation and climate change.

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This year also marks the 60th anniversary of Britain granting Singapore limited self-government, a pivotal way station to nationhood, which was attained six years later via a brief but tumultuous sojourn in the Malaysian Federation.

Self-government provided that initial sensation of independence that the failing merger only reinforced as the foundational premise of the sort of multiracial society we aspire to be. It was only after 1965 that the creation and sustenance of Singaporean identity became an imperative when Singapore became independent.

It is to be expected that the bicentennial commemoration will mean different things to different Singaporeans. Yet this look back to a long-gone era should remind Singaporeans of the vicissitudes of Singapore's fortune in the passage of 700 years.

Singapore's relative success since independence, however, must not lull us into thinking that Singapore's vulnerabilities are consigned to the dustbin of history.

Singapore's first Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew had noted in his memoirs that city-states did not have "good survival records". He asked rhetorically whether Singapore would disappear as an independent city-state.

He added that "the island of Singapore will not, but the sovereign nation it has become, able to make its way and play its role in the world, could vanish".

Commemorations, therefore, cannot be just about sentimentality, novelty or the feel-good factor of how far this little red dot has travelled. That would be merely "thinking of" the commemoration.

Instead, "thinking with" the commemoration will encourage us to not only know and remember, but to learn correctly and well the invaluable lessons of our past in the never-ending quest to sustain our sovereign destiny.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

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