Citizenship by law, history by choice: What The Albatross File asks of us
By Lily Kong

The Straits Times, Page 1,2, Section: OPINION
Friday 23 January 2026
1796 words, 1647cm² in size
386,100 circulation

Citizenship by law, history by choice: What The Albatross File asks of us

A journey by four friends to Malaysia is a reminder of how life would have been different had separation not taken place.

Lily Kong

Over the December break, I took a driving holiday with three friends across the Tuas Second Link into Malaysia. It was a wonderful trip – convivial meals, easy conversation and shared memories. All in our 60s now, we joked about how we could still get excited by accidental discoveries of old-style provision stores.

In one such store, rice was sold from sacks and weighed out by the kilogramme – or even half-kilogramme – according to each customer's needs. It reminded us of our childhood in Singapore, when rice was not sold in standardised, pre-packaged bags. Even broken rice grains were still on sale in that small Malaysian town, just as they had been in early post-independence Singapore – good enough for porridge when whole grains were simply too expensive for many families.

Standing there, we reflected on how all four of us had grown up in turbulent times, when Singapore's fate was still unfolding amid the uncertainties of decolonisation. In that modest provision store, we briefly relived our younger days.

Later, over lunch, our conversation turned to the fact that we had been born in 1962, 1963, 1964, and 1965 respectively. We treated it as a mildly amusing factoid, conferring a notional ladder effect within the group. I thought little more of it – until earlier this month, when I visited the recently launched exhibition at the National Library, The Albatross File, which traces the events leading to Singapore's separation from Malaysia in 1965.

It struck me quite viscerally then that the four of us – Singaporeans vacationing in Malaysia – might have led entirely different lives had separation not taken place. Even more striking was the realisation that we had each arrived at Singapore citizenship through different constitutional routes and in rapidly shifting contexts, shaped by the specific circumstances of our birth years, despite being born barely a year apart from one another.

The exhibition The Albatross File: Singapore's Independence Declassified reminds us that Singapore was forged not by destiny, but by decisions made under pressure, with incomplete information and real risks. PHOTO: LIANHE ZAOBAO

FOUR BIRTH YEARS, FOUR ROUTES TO CITIZENSHIP

May, born in 1962, entered the world when Singapore was still a self-governing British colony negotiating the terms of its post-colonial future. That year was marked by the referendum on merger with Malaysia, in which Singaporeans were asked to choose among constrained options: merger with autonomy over education and labour; complete and unconditional merger; or merger on terms no worse than those offered to the Borneo territories. The first option was picked. For those born that year, citizenship passed through three legal identities in quick succession – British subject, Malaysian citizen and finally Singapore citizen. May's early life embodied the uncertainty of a decolonising society searching for viable sovereignty.

Boon, born in 1963, arrived in a year of optimism. September marked the formation of Malaysia itself, buoyed by the belief that merger would secure economic survival and political stability. Yet

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Capacity to make difficult choices without illusion

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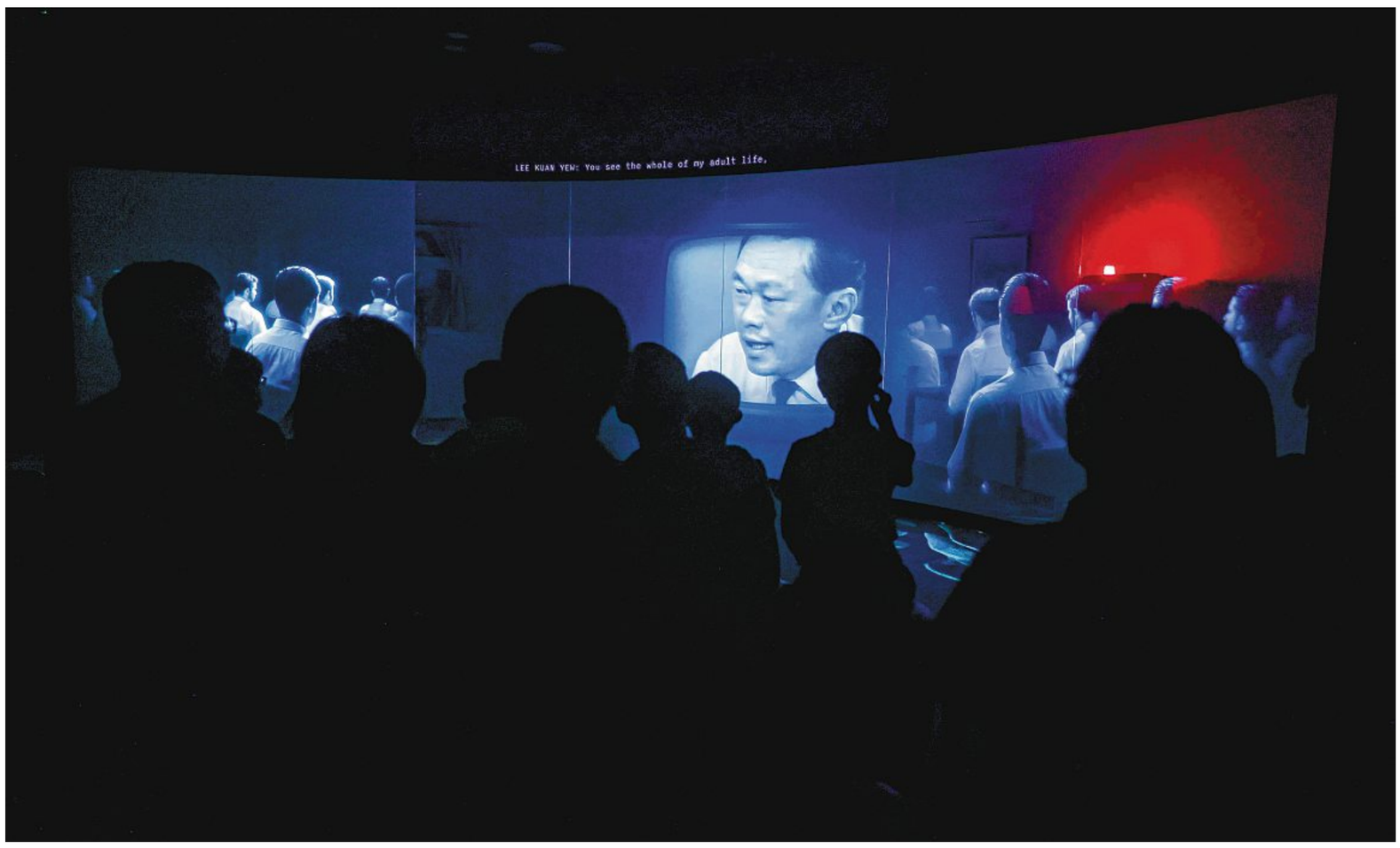
the same year also saw the onset of Konfrontasi and the first signs of strain between Singapore and the federal centre. For those born then, citizenship began with promise, but was soon tested by the realities of incompatible political visions.

Anne, born in 1964, was born into a federation already under severe stress. That year is inseparable from the July and September racial riots – violent ruptures that exposed the fragility of communal coexistence under conditions of heightened ethnic mobilisation. For those born then, the route to Singapore citizenship was shaped not only by constitutional change, but also by the sobering recognition that merger had amplified, rather than resolved, some of society's deepest fault lines.

I was born in early 1965, into a world already edging towards rupture. When I was only several months old, Singapore was separated from Malaysia. My citizenship changed quietly and administratively – from citizen of Malaysia and the State of Singapore to citizen of the Republic of Singapore. No application was filed. No oath was sworn. Constitutions were rewritten, history was made and citizenship followed. That legal conversion was the culmination of failed negotiations, hardened positions and leaders concluding that separation, however perilous, was preferable to remaining bound in an unworkable union.

The exhibition The Albatross File: Singapore's Independence Declassified was launched alongside the book The Albatross File: Inside Separation. Walking through the exhibition sharpened my reflections on the early citizenship journeys of my travel companions and myself. Our brief trip up north became an unintended foil, heightening awareness of what was both lost and gained through separation.

Together, these experiences reinforced a simple truth: citizenship is never merely a piece of paper, nor simply a matter of administrative process. It is shaped by timing, contingency and forces far beyond individual control.



There is an unspoken anxiety that greater transparency about our founding years might unsettle established narratives or invite misreading of difficult decisions, says the writer, who argues the opposite. Trust deepens when citizens see leaders as human actors operating under constraint, not as figures suspended above history. The strength of our institutions lies not in myth-making, but in resilience. PHOTO: LIANHE ZAOBAO

STRUCTURE, AGENCY AND THE BURDEN OF CHOICE

Before the release of The Albatross File, the dominant Singapore narrative framed separation as Singapore being expelled by Malaysia. It portrayed Singapore as a victim of political and racial tensions beyond its control, emphasising that separation was forced upon it rather than chosen.

The Albatross File opens up a different narrative: that it was not only structural constraints at play but also strategic agency on the part of Singapore's leaders of the time that led to separation. Here, two interpretations are possible: the documents provide evidence that Singapore's leaders actively considered, and at least one – Goh Keng Swee – actually preferred separation as the least damaging option, and broached the topic with the Malaysian leaders. In this view, the papers reveal agency: leaders making choices for the benefit of Singapore.

A more cautious reading stresses structure over intent. The documents were written under intense pressure, shrinking options and deep uncertainty. Divergent views were evident within the Singapore leadership team. References to separation, this view argues, reflect contingency planning rather than desire or control. To treat them as proof of deliberate intent risks mistaking crisis management for choice.

Ultimately, the disagreement is less about what the documents contain than about how much freedom political actors truly have when structural forces close in. Both readings deserve consideration.

What the file does not do is overturn the fundamental reality of the early 1960s: Singapore faced profound constraints – communal politics at the federal level, economic precarity and limited room for manoeuvre. What it does do is complicate a familiar narrative by reintroducing agency, calculation and doubt. That complication may unsettle, but it also matures our understanding.

The significance of releasing the file now is sharpened by recent global developments, including tensions involving external interventions in sovereign states elsewhere. For Singapore, these are not distant events to be observed with detachment. They point to a world in which norms of sovereignty, territorial integrity, and non-intervention are increasingly contested, and in which power can override principle with unsettling ease.

WHY RELEASE THE ALBATROSS FILE NOW?

Part of the answer lies in time. Six decades on, immediate political sensitivities have receded. Singapore today is not a fragile polity in search of legitimacy. We are secure enough to examine ambiguity without fear that it will unravel us.

There is also a pedagogical purpose. Around the world, societies are grappling with how to tell their national stories – as tidy moral arcs or as contested histories shaped by imperfect choices. The release of the file signals a willingness to trust Singaporeans with complexity.

There is an unspoken anxiety that greater transparency about our founding years might unsettle established narratives or invite misreading of difficult decisions. I would argue the opposite. Trust deepens when citizens see leaders as human actors operating under constraint, not as figures suspended above history. The strength of our institutions lies not in myth-making, but in resilience.

Most importantly, the file highlights a theme that remains acutely relevant: how a small state navigates asymmetric power relations when all options are costly. In 1965, separation was not an ideal outcome; it was a calculated risk taken in the shadow of larger forces.

LESSONS FOR SMALL STATES IN AN UNSETTLED WORLD

The significance of releasing the file now is sharpened by recent global developments, including tensions involving external interventions in sovereign states elsewhere. For Singapore, these are not distant events to be observed with detachment. They point to a world in which norms of sovereignty, territorial integrity and non-intervention are increasingly contested, and in which power can override principle with unsettling ease.

For small states, the erosion of these norms matters profoundly. Our survival has always depended less on power than on predictability – on the belief that rules, however imperfect, constrain the strong as well as the weak. The lesson of the 1960s is that international order cannot be assumed; it must be actively navigated. Economic interdependence alone does not prevent conflict, and violations of sovereignty carry long-term systemic consequences.

Taken together, these lessons point to what Singapore must continue to do: invest relentlessly in diplomatic credibility; uphold international law consistently, even when inconvenient; diversify partnerships without abandoning principles; and maintain internal cohesion so that external pressures cannot exploit domestic fault lines. Above all, we must preserve strategic autonomy – the capacity to make difficult choices without illusion, but also without resignation.

RETURNING HOME, SEEING THINGS DIFFERENTLY

As we drove back across the Causeway at the end of our short holiday, nothing outward marked the weight of history that had quietly shaped all our lives. Borders opened, passports were checked and we returned home with souvenirs (mainly durians) and stories. Yet beneath that routine crossing lay a deeper truth: that citizenship, identity and national survival are never as settled or inevitable as they can appear in hindsight.

The Albatross File reminds us that Singapore was forged not by destiny, but by decisions made under pressure, with incomplete information and real risks. History made us citizens by law. What sustains us now is choice – our willingness to engage honestly with the past, to accept complexity without cynicism, and to carry forward the hard-earned lessons of vulnerability, restraint and resolve that continue to define what it means to be Singaporean.

• Lily Kong is president of Singapore Management University and Lee Kong Chian chair professor.