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Spectators at this year's National Day Parade held at the Padang on Aug 9. The writer says that while Singapore's history is a constant refrain at every commemoration, the events of Singapore's early years will become more distant with each successive National Day. ST PHOTO: LIM YAOHUI

The way we tell the Singapore Story needs a refresh

The country's journey was woven into the personal lives of older Singaporeans. Younger citizens can't relate to that.



Tan Tai Yong

Addressing the nation in front of the 19th century Sri Temasek building at the Istana, Prime Minister Lawrence Wong opened his National Day message by recounting how, in 1965, founding prime minister Lee Kuan Yew had spent the night of Aug 8 there, just before formal separation from Malaysia, "consumed with worry over how to build a nation from scratch". He added that the then Prime Minister and the founding leaders went on to overcome "enormous odds and laid the foundations" for the modern nation-state of Singapore.

The reference to history is a constant refrain at every National Day commemoration, when Singaporeans are reminded of the country's journey from a small and vulnerable former colony to a thriving, successful nation-state.

Many older Singaporeans relate to the country's journey of nation-building. They remember periods of labour unrest, urban poverty, ethnic conflicts, unstable times in Malaysia, and the domestic and international challenges following Singapore's emergence as a new state. The Singapore Story is interwoven with their personal stories.

But for younger Singaporeans who did not live through these times, what does the Singapore Story mean? With each successive National Day, the events of Singapore's early years will become more distant, and memories of the past will fade. History will be taught through our schools and public institutions, but a storytelling that does not resonate with personal memories and experiences runs the risk of

raising scepticism, leading to a perception that official historical narratives and calls to remember our origin story are merely state-driven propaganda.

Engagements with history get further diluted when physical traces of the past start to vanish. Singapore's rapid physical and social development since 1965 has challenged the different ways people remember and bind themselves to their community and country.

Herein lies the danger. A people that do not relate to their history will not fully appreciate the journey their country undertook, or why it adopted the values it did. Or why, in Singapore's context, multiculturalism is such a key pillar, for example. It's possible that such values will not be internalised and we may risk straying from them. That is why it is imperative that we imbibe our history and it strikes a chord with us, so that the values that the country upholds continue to be deeply and personally meaningful to us. At the same time, we need to understand the context of the decisions we took, so that we can adapt to changed circumstances instead of blindly mimicking past postures.

THE FUTURE OF OUR PAST

How, then, do we get the Singapore Story to resonate with younger Singaporeans and remain relevant for future generations?

At the ground-breaking of the Founders' Memorial in June 2024, Senior Minister Lee Hsien Loong envisioned the Memorial as a space where Singaporeans can reflect on their ongoing nation-building journey, drawing on an understanding of our past and an appreciation of the "fundamental values and ideals" that set the long-term direction of Singapore.

His call to ensure that the Founders' Memorial connects with future Singaporean generations presents an interesting task. It goes beyond recalling the words and deeds of Singapore's founding fathers or knowing the history of those momentous years; it must engage younger Singaporeans who have only witnessed peace, stability and prosperity, and inspire them to understand the fundamental principles that define us as a society and country.

Singaporeans are not unfamiliar

with the country's history. The prevailing national narrative – the Singapore Story – features prominently within the educational curriculum, is recounted in biographies of political figures, showcased at National Day Parades, and exhibited across various national museums. With such frequent exposure, Singaporeans might believe they are fully knowledgeable about their country's historical journey.

But merely knowing history might not be sufficient, as familiarity with events and personalities of the past does not necessarily make history personally relevant and meaningful. Beyond historical literacy – that is, knowing what happened – it is crucial to develop historical consciousness, which is the ability to make the past have meaning for us as individuals and as communities.

What does historical consciousness entail and how do we develop this in younger Singaporeans?

First, we must recognise that historical consciousness cannot be driven solely by the state in the form of national education; instead, bottom-up and community-led efforts at understanding a collective past can make history an organic, shared and inclusive force in the making of national identity. Personal and shared historical experiences are important markers and makers of identity and help make sense of what holds a community and country together.

When people own their history, they derive meanings from it. There are healthy signs that this is already happening in Singapore.

Serving on the judging panel of the NUS Singapore History Prize this year, I have seen an impressive range of meaningful historical studies covering subjects ranging from food to local religious festivals. These stories should be woven into the national narrative for they represent the lived experiences of our society.

Second, we must learn how to draw the right lessons from history. Promoting historical consciousness involves fostering an understanding of context, acknowledging that events and decisions are influenced by the specific circumstances of their

times. Recognising this helps prevent the incorrect assumption that past solutions are perpetually applicable and serves as a good antidote to the inappropriate application of hindsight.

MULTICULTURAL SINGAPORE

Let me use the example of multiculturalism. If we are to better appreciate why multiculturalism is such an integral part of our national value system, we need to understand how it came to be during our founding years and how it has evolved.

The dissolution of the merger with Malaysia, largely due to ethnic tensions, served as a critical lesson for Singapore. The leaders of Singapore were determined to weave the fabric of the new nation with the threads of multiracialism.

In 1966, founding prime minister Lee Kuan Yew acknowledged that Singapore belonged equally to its constituents and not exclusively to one ethnic group over another. He prioritised nation-building in a multi-ethnic society. The Government aimed to create a cohesive national identity while respecting the cultural diversity of a largely immigrant population.

Positioned amid a predominantly Muslim region, making the Chinese-majority island a bastion of racial and religious diversity was deemed the most politically sensible approach. There was no baggage to discard as Singapore had emerged from a plural colonial society.

Moreover, embracing multiracialism was essential in moulding a new society, steering clear of the pitfalls of sectarian divides. Far from being an empty political catchphrase, multiracialism became a practical principle; it was imperative for uniting a diverse and hitherto largely immigrant populace and ensuring Singapore stood distinct as a new state in a troubled region.

Yet, there must be an acknowledgement that the blueprints laid down during the infancy of our nation may not entirely fit the evolving context and altered landscapes we find ourselves in today. Beyond traditional racial lines, today's generations are also concerned with issues of immigration, gender equality, inclusion of people with disabilities, socioeconomic disparities, and intersectionality.

Generational changes in viewpoints are inevitable, and younger Singaporeans will possess diverse beliefs concerning multiculturalism, racial matters and personal identity that differ from the perspectives of the older population.

Our concept of multiculturalism takes on greater complexity due to the country's historical diversity and its role as a hub for international talent and an evolving demographic landscape. Nearly 40 per cent of the population of Singapore today comprises non-citizens. In a

society that includes both longstanding citizens and recent immigrants, economic discontent and xenophobic attitudes add complexity to traditional social and cultural divisions.

Constant adaptation, as circumstances change, is what keeps our history alive and meaningful. The agenda of nurturing a multiracial ethos in the new population of an emerging nation-state is significantly different from the intricacies of managing multiculturalism in a cosmopolitan global city-state.

Thus, as we uphold multiculturalism as a fundamental value, we must accept that it is always a work in progress, and contemplate how its meaning and manifestation will change in our day-to-day lives.

Maintaining multiculturalism is particularly challenging in a global city-state. External cultural influences will sometimes conflict with local values and traditions. Without greater accommodation, acceptance and adaptation, the quality of Singapore's multiculturalism will be strained.

Third, there's the need to appreciate that history does not move in a straight line. We should avoid a narrative of Singapore's history that is too linear or overly triumphalist.

While we acknowledge that steadfast resilience and boldness were qualities that contributed to Singapore's survival and success, it is important to recognise the complexities, compromises and course corrections that happened in our history.

Not all events unfolded as expected, and being a small city-state, Singapore was continually vulnerable to international developments. The feeling of uncertainty and vulnerability adds authenticity and depth to our overarching narrative. It also instils hope, reminding us in challenging moments that we have faced similar situations in the past.

We must remember that the founding leaders did not have a crystal ball or a guiding manual that told the future or showed the way. They stuck to their core values – and it served them and Singapore well, but they also adapted and privileged pragmatism over ideology.

What's the future of the Singapore Story as it faces the challenges of time? As Singapore prepares to celebrate its 60th year, future National Day commemorations will still look to our history for validation and inspiration. But as the struggles of nation-building in our earlier years become less personally resonant with younger Singaporeans who may want to write their own histories, our thinking about history will need a refresh.

• Professor Tan Tai Yong is the president of the Singapore University of Social Sciences. He is also honorary chairman of the National Museum, co-chairman of the Founders' Memorial Committee, and chairman of the National Collection Advisory Panel.