

The Singaporean Identity:



Is it a Futile Chase?

By Wan Wee Pin, Assistant Manager, Invent



For a young country like Singapore, we have always been grappling with our own identity and position in the world and until today, we don't seem to be anywhere nearer to finding an answer.

There have been corporate attempts to define who we are to the world for both cultural and economic reasons - through common icons like the orchids, or the Merlion or even the Singapore Girl - but all they have succeeded in doing is to build a stereotype of ourselves that we don't even recognise.

Identity is not about creation; it is about evolution. It has to grow from ground up, a shared vision of belonging and commonality that emerges from within. Since prehistoric times, the binding of tribes together has been dependent on the ability to “communicate” with each other. The word “communication” comes from the Latin root “cum” which means “with” or “together with” and “unio”, the Latin for “union” from which our English word directly comes. Hence, communication refers to “union with” or “union together with”.

This creates an immediate challenge for a multi-racial society like Singapore's. With four main languages and countless other dialects and variations, it has not been easy finding a happy medium. The problem had been compounded by the challenges that the Chinese language has posed to the Chinese community. Their struggles have been well documented and some would even argue had impacted the shaping of the Singaporean identity.

More than just language, many would also point to Genealogy as playing an equally key role. The establishment of family and family roots is what constitutes identity for a lot of people, especially in the Asian context. However we are no closer to the Holy Grail with many of us having

ancestors who migrated from China, India and many other countries. How well do you know your own family history?

Yet the mixture of cultures and histories within a fixed confine has their own benefits. Undeniably the diversity has provided a large palette for the mixing and matching of ideas and influences. This has given rise to the latest phenomenon known commonly as Fusion. Fusion is combining two vastly different things to create something that is refreshing and new. Are we then able to harness our inherent qualities within a melting pot to achieve new breakthroughs?

Since time immemorial, humans have often relied on the collection of items and keepsakes as totems of their own past and identities. In fact, the advent of photographs has almost conditioned the way we choose to remember what happened to us in the past. Just like flakes of our skin reveal a lot about who we are, archaeologists rely on artefacts to piece together our past like a jigsaw puzzle. A Turkish proverb proclaims, “It matters less to a person where they are born than where they can live.”

There are those who believe that History as a subject is Hegelian in nature; it follows a specific path that is predetermined by the purposeful movement of Spirit over time. Spirit is no more than a factual occurrence that the same things will happen again and again. As students, we learn that History travels in circles; throughout our past, humans commit the same mistakes again and again as if the lessons learned were no more than a passing memory. This brings about the saying that, “The more things change, the more they stay the same.”

However there are others who treat History as more than a retrospective study; it is a mystery, it allows for interpretation and different understanding. It does not claim to dismantle the cogs and wheels of humanity so that we can see how it works and master it intellectually.

History can thus be viewed differently and this occurrence can and will shape the evolution of our own historical narratives in the future.

Maybe the question to a collective Singaporean identity is not so elusive and difficult after all; maybe the simple answer may just be that Singapore is our home, it is where we live and where our home is, our hearts belong.

The Chinese Language and the Singaporean Identity (Talk in Chinese)

Personal tutor to Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew, Dr Chua Chee Lay will introduce the influence and impact relationships that the Chinese language has had on Singaporeans and how it has perhaps played a part in shaping the Singaporean identity.

When : Friday 5 August 2005
Time : 7.00pm - 9.00pm
Venue : Level 5, Imagination & Possibility Rooms

新加坡华语的演变和新加坡人的国家认同 (华语讲座)

蔡志礼博士将根据他的长期观察和研究,介绍新加坡特色华语的起源和发展以及在新加坡人的国家认同的过程中所扮演的角色和作用。

蔡志礼博士任职国家教育学院付教授,专授亚洲语言和文化,曾任新加坡内阁资政李光耀的私人华语导师。

日期 : 2005年8月5日
时间 : 傍晚7时正9时正
地点 : 国家图书馆五楼, 想象力和可能性节目区

Who am I? The Joy of Discovering Your Family History

Journey into the past with the Shepherdsons and learn how they uncovered their family's past and subsequent evolution into a fusion of various nationalities and races. You can also pick up tips on how to research and document your family history using traditional research sources as well as scientific methods such as DNA analysis.

Date : Saturday 6 August 2005
Time : 3.00pm - 5.00pm
Venue : Level 5, Imagination & Possibility Rooms

Singapore's Identity - A Healthy Tension of Opposites

Join Brian Richards as he talks about how Singapore can define her identity and participate in the greater world as well as discuss the opportunities for Singapore to become the capital of Asia with unique intellectual property in arts, culture, lifestyle, engineering and sciences.



Date : Saturday 13 August 2005
Time : 3.00pm - 5.00pm
Venue : Level 5, Imagination & Possibility Rooms



New Insights into Singapore History - Perspectives of Emerging Scholars

Join established scholars from the NUS History Department and their younger counterparts as they engage each other in discovering how this history can be viewed differently and how these views, and the academic pursuits that these scholars are currently embarking on, will shape the evolution of Singapore's historical narrative over the next two decades.

Date : Tuesday & Wednesday
 16 - 17 August 2005
Time : 9.00am - 5.00pm daily
Venue : Level 5, Imagination & Possibility Rooms

Lost Cities & Forgotten Past: The Archaeology of Down Town Singapore

Uncover the fertile archaeological past of the civic districts in this talk as Lim Chen Sian explores the ancient settlement of Temasek/Singapura and looks at the colonial period and contemporary Singapore.

Date : Friday 19 August 2005
Time : 7.00pm - 9.00pm
Venue : Level 5, Imagination
& Possibility Rooms



In addition, there are also programmes organised at the public libraries under the Istorica banner. There are three highlighted here. Check them out at a library near you!

Getaran@Bedok: Heritage Trail by Zubir Abdullah and Sri Warisan

Date : Saturday 13 August 2005
Time : 2.30pm - 4.30pm
Venue : Bedok Community Library
Speakers : Zubir Abdullah & Sri Warisan

Zubir Abdullah and Sri Warisan will take you on a heritage trail through songs and stories on places such as Telok Blangah.

Fusion Music

Date : Saturday 20 August 2005
Time : 6.00pm onwards
Venue : Ang Mo Kio Community Library

Join in for a night of audio treats, as various music schools come together to present an enchanting evening of fusion music.

Book Launch of "Anime by Wang Li Yang"

Date : Sunday 28 August 2005
Time : 3.00pm - 4.00pm
Venue : Jurong Regional Library

The publication of this manga book crafted and illustrated by the late Wang Li Yang in his final days showcases a truly laudable effort and proves that creativity is alive in Singapore.

