

How has history shaped the present and the future?

by Lee Zheng Yu

The myth of Asian timelessness

As a Singaporean, we're told to be grateful and not take for granted our safety, security, and sovereignty. For good reason. I, like many, believe deeply that my country's birth was fortunate. Much has been done to ensure our continued prosperity.

In my first year at Raffles Institution, our history teacher remarked that, perhaps, two truths can coexist. It became more profound over time, in the course of General Paper (another mandated subject), and eventually law. Approaching issues without a binary lens puts one in good stead to appreciate the broader spectrum on which they belonged. I stopped studying history after secondary two. I had decided that it could not rival geography's practicality; the marks in geography were also more neatly compartmentalised and distributed.

As a direct beneficiary of Singapore's post-independence trajectory, my perspective is necessarily shaped by the very historical narrative this essay examines. That proximity does not eliminate bias; it makes the discipline of analysis more necessary.

Our survival-driven need for a coherent historical narrative has incentivised its curation for present stability. But it may constrain future adaptability, particularly as social cohesion and shared assumptions weaken. For a small, vulnerable state, history is our cornerstone. Singapore's post-1965 survival depended not only on economic policy and external alignment, but on the construction of a coherent narrative that justified discipline, unity, and restraint in the face of existential uncertainty. As founding narratives recede, the same mechanisms that once enabled survival, shaping what is remembered, may constrain future adaptability, the futures that are imaginable.

The embrace of a rules-based global order reinforced this logic. International law, multilateralism, and predictability became extensions of the same impulse: to reduce uncertainty in an anarchic environment through structure, rules, and continuity.

The political function of Singapore's miracle

“(O)n the 9th of August 1965, Singapore came to be “forever a sovereign democratic and independent nation”. You will realise it was hardly foreordained. It was – and still is – a miracle.”¹ Today, Singapore’s survival remains uncertain in a rules based global order. These were SM Lee’s remarks at the Launch of the Albatross File Exhibition.

The declassification of the Files represents a shift from history as justification to constraint on power itself. Founding decisions are portrayed as contingent, anxious, and improvisational even. So why do this 60 years later?

One perspective is that it gives power to the people as they shape their own national historical consciousness. To quote SM Lee, the initial narrative of our nascent state’s vulnerability fed into nation-building objectives. Now that survivalism is less of an imperative, the state accords citizens some interpretive risk, which paradoxically increases its legitimacy. This relinquishing of control stands on retrospective security, allowing residents to internalise their own historical narrative that they shape.

In the context of institutional legitimacy supported by a proven past, change becomes further evaluated against a successful trajectory. Looking around, the streets are clean and green. Basic infrastructure is more than adequate, and the people are happy.² Through this lens, the miracle does not simply explain Singapore’s caution; it normalises it, narrowing the space in which alternative futures can be imagined. Disruption is costly.

Asian societies are uniquely deferential to tradition and hierarchy. Yet this deference is rarely organic when certain episodes are elevated; others contextualised, delayed, or quietly omitted. It is pertinent to note that the result is not falsehood, but historical discipline. The trade-off is structural. When historical success becomes the primary source of legitimacy, adaptability acquires political risk. Innovation or reinterpretation can be read as disrespect. Over time, continuity is not merely preferred, but protected.

By determining not only what is remembered, but how and when it is revealed, the state shapes the boundaries of acceptable interpretation. Preservation limits erasure; controlled disclosure limits reinterpretation. Both narrow the range of futures that feel politically permissible, even as they appear to expand understanding.

¹ Prime Minister’s Office Singapore, “SM Lee Hsien Loong at the Launch of the Albatross File Book and Exhibition,” Newsroom, December 7, 2025, <https://www.pmo.gov.sg/newsroom/sm-lee-hsien-loong-at-the-launch-of-the-albatross-file-book-and-exhibition/>

² Terence Heng, “Commentary: Singapore Ranks High in Happiness. Real Life Is More Complicated,” Channel NewsAsia, December 15, 2025, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/commentary/happiness-singapore-ranking-3rd-mental-physical-wellness-5163651>

As such, it is necessary to appreciate how disciplining historical preservation affects its influence. How does one look to understand forces of history as they shape us?

Polar Opposites: Who built the boat, who rocked it

The future challenge is more complex. As time elapses from our formative struggles, shared historical memory weakens. In Asian societies, where unity has often been prioritised over plural contestation, this creates new pressures. A disciplined historical narrative that once unified may now constrain interpretation. People become less united not because history is forgotten, but because it is no longer lived.

Perhaps, the dispute over honouring the wishes of the late Lee Kuan Yew over 38 Oxley Road reflects this. The crux of this issue was the second half of the demolition clause, which stated what he wanted done if the house could not be knocked down. The first half reflected their wishes with respect to the demolition of the House to be carried out.

“(W)hat did my father think about the house, apart from demolition? Was his view black and white, all or nothing - demolish the house no matter what? Or was he prepared to consider alternatives should demolition not be possible? ”³ This was the ministerial statement in Parliament by then PM Lee Hsien Loong. A useful point of emphasis is that the house can never amount to the legitimacy of the government. This clarification is analytically important. It separates legacy from mandate, two concepts often conflated in public debate.

These are fundamentally distinct in any political architecture.

Singapore’s legitimacy has never rested on relics or reverence alone. It rests on results. Independence was secured through political struggle, survival required difficult and sometimes unpopular decisions, prosperity was built through institutional competence and long-term discipline. These outcomes were produced through policy, governance, and, over time, citizens themselves. In this sense, the present is shaped not by the preservation of a single man’s home, but by the cumulative actions of the many hands across generations.

The issue was not whether Lee Kuan Yew mattered; but whether physical legacy could symbolically anchor political legitimacy. The Government’s position implicitly rejected that notion. A system grounded in the rule of law and performance cannot allow legitimacy to

³ Oxley Road: Full transcript of ministerial statement in Parliament by PM Lee Hsien Loong, The Straits Times, July 3, 2017, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/oxley-road-full-text-of-ministerial-statement-in-parliament-by-pm-lee-hsien-loong?ref=inline-article>

collapse into monument. History, once national, cannot belong solely to its author, even one as consequential as Singapore's founding Prime Minister. The Oxley Road saga illustrates a deliberate refusal to allow historical contribution to crystallise into enduring political entitlement. By emphasising the importance of historical contributions to political authority, the focus became the national interest, allowing the issue to be characterized as one of law.

History is not a political party. History cannot be a political party.

The Oxley Road dispute and the release of the Albatross Files appear to reflect opposite impulses at first glance: one towards preservation, the other towards disclosure and historical reckoning. Yet both episodes reveal the same underlying logic. History is neither left untouched nor freely exposed; it is managed.

Where the former represented containment, the latter represented disclosure. In releasing the Albatross Files, the Government allowed a more complex, less sanitised history to surface within a structured frame. Context was provided. Interpretation was guided. The past was neither buried nor weaponised. This calibrated transparency signaled a confidence that institutional legitimacy does not depend on suppressing inconvenient history.

Future implications

As generational distance from independence grows, shared historical memory weakens. Unity becomes harder to sustain through narrative alone. In Asian societies, where cohesion has traditionally been prioritised over pluralism, this creates new pressures. History that once unified may now delimit imagination; discipline that once enabled survival may narrow the space for reinterpretation.

History has shaped Singapore's present by providing coherence under conditions of uncertainty. The question is whether the same mechanisms, so effective in securing survival, remain equally suited to a future defined by fragmentation, abundance, and change. When history becomes a stabilising force, it is powerful. When it becomes a constraint on imagination, its influence is no less profound. It is, after all, not merely a record. It is a warning system. Wars repeat not because history is forgotten, but because its lessons are misapplied or ritualised. Singapore's challenge going forward is not to extract political authority from its past, but to prevent history from hardening into doctrine, where remembrance substitutes for judgment.

The ultimate strength of Singapore's model has been its insistence on separating statecraft from sentiment. If that separation holds, history can remain a guide without

becoming a constraint. If it collapses, history risks becoming a proxy for power. A system designed to prevent fragmentation may generate quiet disengagement over time. When history feels settled, debate shifts from substance to margins. Across Southeast Asia, post-colonial states that relied on strong historical narratives to consolidate authority now face populations less defined by survival and more by aspiration.

The task ahead is not to abandon historical narratives. It is to recognise their dual function: as foundations and as boundaries. History need not dictate destiny, but neither can it be treated as neutral inheritance. How it is preserved, revealed, or restrained will continue to shape not just authority in the present, but adaptability in the future.

The question, then, is not how Singapore's past should be remembered; but whether the discipline that once ensured survival can evolve to accommodate imagination.

Beyond our little, very little red dot

Today's age is defined by technological disruption and geopolitical uncertainty. Global superpowers are becoming more brazen in breaking away from international norms. We see this in the undermined global system of trade. The relationship between memory and authority is continually being renegotiated.

Singapore's experience offers a distinctive, if imperfect, lens. Its approach has neither romanticised history nor rendered it disposable. Instead, history has been curated as a stabilising reference point to inform choices. This discipline has allowed adaptation within constraint, enabling change without forfeiting trust. In a disrupted age, such restraint may prove as valuable as innovation itself.

Nevertheless, unity can no longer rely on shared memory alone. In increasingly plural societies, legitimacy must be continuously earned rather than inherited, and coherence must coexist with contestation. The challenge for governance is no longer survival, but recalibration.

What, then, does history say about the history of small states? Our line has been to adopt a principled position. This has worked well for us thus far, depending less on the ability to compel outcomes than the trust for mutual cooperation in a volatile international environment. Yet stability is not preserved by permanent stillness. In an otherwise uncertain international system, refusing to rock the boat can be more dangerous than measured instability. Institutions everywhere face a similar dilemma, governments, multilateral bodies, and corporations alike: how to adapt without erasing continuity.

History's role thus becomes forward-looking rather than retrospective. History should not be invoked to silence dissent, nor abandoned in the name of progress. It should function as a framework for judgment, highlighting trade-offs, incentives, and false inevitabilities. Leaders who govern in disrupted times must therefore be fluent in strategy and interpretation: knowing when to preserve, when to disclose, and when to let go. Singapore's model should not be replicated wholesale. Where authority becomes increasingly contested, there is value in separating legacy from legitimacy. Societies that confuse the two may find themselves constrained by the very histories they seek to honour.

As the world is confronted by geopolitical disruptions, the question of coherent governance amidst change remains central. History may not provide all the answers, but it can sharpen the questions. The future will belong not to those who control narratives, but to those who exercise grounded judgment.

In a disrupted age, one need not choose between continuity and change, but hold them in productive tension. History, carefully understood, remains one of the few tools capable of doing both.