

Owning History? Memory and the Fall of Singapore during World War Two

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National Museum of Singapore, Gallery Theatre
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Introduction

The Topic of Memory with a Capital “M”

Professor Brian Farrell prefaced his lecture, “Owning History? Memory and the Fall of Singapore during World War Two”, with a caveat. While his ongoing research and publications are focused on military history of the British Empire itself, the topic of Memory is a distinct and separate field of academic study in its own right.

This field does not attempt to ascertain exactly what happened at a particular time, but tries to understand how history has come to be understood, received, re-organised, re-worked, re-ordered and consumed as legacies or as influences. It is sometimes singular and sometimes plural.

The topic on the memory of World War Two in Singapore is a very good gateway into the general topic of memory as a field of study in history, because conflict is one of the touchstones that runs throughout the human experience, across the globe and across the long span of time.

Memory and History

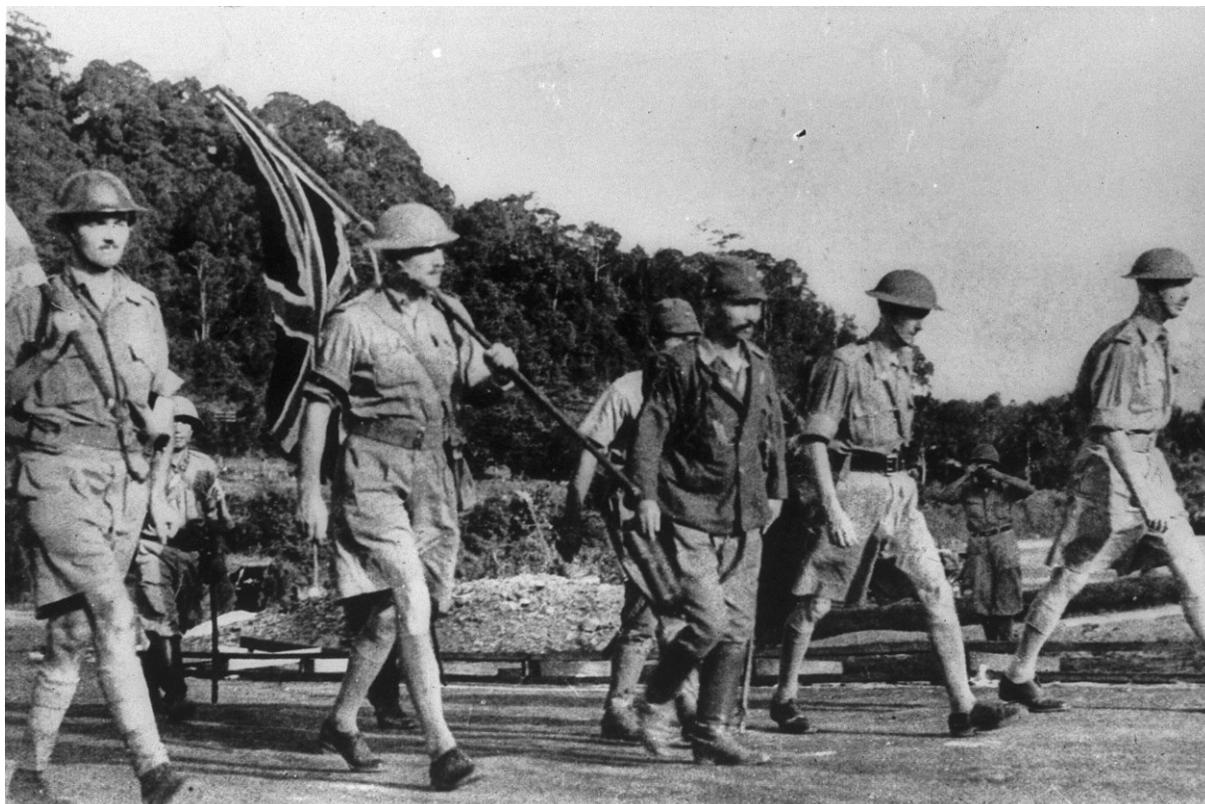
Engaging Memory in History

The academic field of memory is dynamic and thriving because it allows us to draw many connections across different things, themes, times and even other fields of study.

In the iconic picture of the British walking with the Japanese to surrender on 15 February 1942 (see Figure 1), a hidden piece of memory may be found.

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[Figure 1] Lieutenant-General Arthur Percival and his party on their way to the old Ford Factory to discuss their surrender to the Japanese, 15 February 1942.
Imperial War Museum Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

The picture was taken from a Japanese news reel film. The Japanese were filming the British walking to the old Ford Factory to discuss their surrender. Apart from the Japanese, the picture included Major Cyril Wild (an intelligence officer in the staff of the Malayan Command), Brigadier T. K. Newbigging (an Administrative Officer), Brigadier K.S. Torrance, and Lieutenant-General Arthur Percival, who was the General Officer Commanding (Malaya).

The British had been advised by the Japanese to march under the Union Jack, with a white flag next to it, to prevent a mishap. This was because at that time, the communication technology was not as advanced and immediate. There was a possibility that Japanese units did not receive the news of the British surrender and thus, the uninformed Japanese soldiers might have shot at the British surrender party even if it was escorted by Japanese leaders.

Wild, who was carrying the white flag, threw the flag down once he saw the assembled Japanese news media filming the scene. This was because he understood that the British establishment and the world would eventually see this spectacle, and Percival's credibility would be ruined as Percival would be blamed for the loss of Singapore.

Wild did not want this image to go out across the world. Newbigging, however, chastised Wild and commanded him to pick the flag up. They had understood that they were participating in a moment of history which would become a memory on many different levels: national, imperial, generational and individual.

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Another such instance of this was a personal memory of Professor Farrell. He recounted standing in the rain in Redhill, witnessing the funeral procession of the late Mr Lee Kuan Yew travelling from the Parliament House to the NUS Kent Ridge campus. It was raining heavily and he stood in a thick crowd stretched along the road. Each knew they, too, were part of a “memory in history” moment.

Singapore War Memory Reflections

Memories Colour History

In January 1967, the Civilian War Memorial (see Figure 2) was unveiled by then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew.¹ This was amidst controversy and complaints from people who argued that the Japanese should offer sufficient apology and compensation for the suffering inflicted on the people of Singapore, before Japanese support for the Memorial could be accepted.



[Figure 2] Civilian War Memorial.

The state played a very prominent role in the construction of this memorial. The Allied Nations had made a peace treaty with Japan in 1951, to formally and legally conclude the Pacific War. One of the clauses negotiated in that peace treaty was that all further claims for compensation were to be resolved there and then.

¹ The Civilian War Memorial is dedicated to the civilian victims of the Japanese Occupation (1942–1945). It comprises four tapering columns which represent the four main ethnic groups in Singapore who perished during those years.

From the point of view of the law, the government of Singapore was bound to adhere to the peace treaty by the signature of the British colonial government in 1951 and could no longer pursue claims for compensation or reparation against the Japanese. Furthermore, the treaty was signed under the circumstances of the Korean War and the Cold War. These circumstances had rehabilitated Japan from defeated enemy to crucial Cold War ally against the Soviet Union and Communist China.

The late Mr Lee argued that a new Singapore was being formed and it was part of a new Asia, which included Japan. And with ASEAN soon to be launched, Japan was a valued ally. While the memory of the peoples pushed them to dispute Japan's support, the state played a very prominent role in the project by crafting, shaping, and presenting war memories in the context of the time they were in.

Constructing History: People and State Engagement

The public's engagement with war memory and history continues to be present and can also be seen as a healthy and open-ended discussion with the state, under the right circumstances. What Professor Farrell called "grassroots engagement" can be seen in the publishing of *World War II @ Bukit Brown*. The book, published by the Singapore Heritage Society, is a collection of personal and individual memories. This project was a response to the government's decision to expropriate much of the Bukit Brown Cemetery to build roadways. The book highlights the long, open-ended and very rigorous process of discussing and exchanging views about the removal of the Bukit Brown Cemetery, a process which involved multiple stakeholders from all levels, even civil society participation. This signals good robust health in terms of engagement with memory, particularly war memory, in Singapore and shows that not everything is left entirely up to the state.

Communities, Individual and National Memories

The pluralising of communities and of memories as a deliberate part of nation-building co-exists, sometimes uneasily, with the idea of one Singapore. Those who are responsible for using the power and resources of the state to try to assist heritage and memory have decided to work with this co-existence. They also try to help develop and support a unified Singaporean national memory while recognising, working with and supporting community and individual memories as well. It reflects the mosaic that is the people, and not just one group, and is thus, in Professor Farrell's view, a wise and pragmatic move.

Transmitted Memories: Reflected and Refracted

Memory is also transmitted through the generations. During transmission, however, memory is likely to be reflected and refracted. Although memory can be preserved in some form or another, it can also fade as the years move on.

A challenge that troubles historians is encapsulated in Shakespeare's warning: old men forget. Thus, historians are very careful when comparing official documents and memories, and do not take either at face value.

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Professor Farrell also warned that the day will come when the role that Japan played in the 20th century in Asian affairs, whether in the war, in supporting ASEAN or in helping improve Asia's economy, is seen as an unemotional historical curiosity by everyone. It may take 100 or 150 years, but it will come. Time does change the importance of and perception of historical memories.

Memory Connecting with Heritage

There are also *lieux de memoires*, a French phrase for places at which something significant happened and that can often be crowned, cap-stoned or brought out by memorials and monuments. He raised the example of the Changi Beach historic site marker, which the National Heritage Board erected in 1995. This site marker commemorates one of the *Sook Ching* massacres that occurred there in February 1942.²

During the *Sook Ching* Operation, the Japanese rounded up Chinese men between the ages of 18 and 50, brought them to remote places such as Changi Beach and killed them there. These killings were not known to the families; if the Japanese had killed the men in front of the families, the families would be enraged and would seek revenge. But if the families were not sure if the men were dead, the families would still hope that the men may be returned if they behaved well by not troubling the Japanese.

Thus, Changi Beach is a *lieux de memoires* memorialised by a monument, and a case where Professor Farrell thought the state got it right. It is a memory connecting with heritage, which allows those who want to connect with this piece of history to do so.

Owning History?

Professor Farrell concluded the lecture with a series of questions on “owning” history, and the possibilities of how memory can be seen.

The Pacific War or the Japanese Occupation?

Should the war in Singapore be known as the Pacific War or the Japanese Occupation? Professor Farrell urged that it be called the Pacific War because the Japanese came to Singapore only as it was caught up in much bigger events. The Japanese did not have anything against Singapore; they did not go to war against the British Empire in order to take Singapore. They wanted China.

Yet, to call it the Japanese Occupation is tempting and understandable because for the great majority of people who lived through the experience at the time, it was as they had remembered – it was very personal to them.

² The *Sook Ching* Operation targeted the Chinese community during the Japanese Occupation. *Sook Ching* (“great purge” in Chinese) was aimed at identifying and eliminating anti-Japanese elements. For about two weeks, from 18 February 1942, all Chinese men between the ages of 18 and 50 were told to register at screening centres.

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Plural or Integrated?

Should there be an Integrated Memory or independent plural memories? It is understandable for the state to always want to keep alive and nurture the idea of a unifying Integrated Memory. But there must be a place for independent plural memories as well, which better capture the complexity of the society and the events that society went through. Professor Farrell wondered if there is a possibility of a co-existence of the two.

National or Global?

Should there be a national or global memory? Professor Farrell suggested that it depends on the specific purpose at hand.

He remembered being supportive of the idea to develop a home that Sun Yat Sen had lived in in Singapore into a national history site.³ Sun Yat Sen was the first president and founding father of the Republic of China, and he had stayed in the house at Balestier Road for a short span of time while in Singapore, during his career as a revolutionary bringing about the fall of the Qing Dynasty.

Professor Farrell saw only good things coming out of the idea, especially since the generation at the time had been connected to that story. It was a significant moment in history and Sun Yat Sen was a significant man in Asian and diasporic history. Establishing a national history site would be globalising a diasporic story.

Privatised Memory?

Should there be a privatisation of history and memory, making them into commodities? Professor Farrell showed an advertisement photo by a paintball company which had chosen to photograph three young ladies posing at Fort Siloso.

Having the advertisement at Fort Siloso shows the agenda of the company to invoke memory of the war from the historical site. Depending on one's view, it could be engaging or it could be provocative.

Conclusion

Professor Farrell showed how memory is a discipline on its own and how it is a powerful aspect of history. It is malleable as much as it is emotive. It can change perceptions as much as it can be changed. And depending on the circumstances, memory can divide an entire generation as much as it can unify it while preserving the individual and independent parts of it.

³ This house is known today as the Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall, which is managed by the National Heritage Board.

About the Speaker



Brian Farrell is a professor at the National University of Singapore (NUS). He has been teaching at NUS since 1993. His main areas of research interest are the military history of the British Empire, especially in the 20th century; the modern history of empires and imperialism, especially in Asia; the history of Western military power in Asia; and problems related to collective security and coalition warfare. He has taught courses in all aspects of modern military history, the history of empires and imperialism, and European history, at all levels ranging from first year to Masters.

About HistoriaSG

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