Imagine All the People

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Why studying History is good for something other than your GCE O'Levels.

For a few years now, I have been conducting a private experiment of sorts. I make it a point to observe (carefully) the facial and tonal reactions of people I interact with when I tell them I am a History major and it has been somewhat revealing. Naturally, in the interests of scientific empiricism I have excluded from this experiment people in related fields (that is to say, fellow bearers of the Cross of History).

The reactions themselves seem to fall on both extremes of the spectrum. Some express their pleasant surprise and thereafter engage me in intellectual discourse of my specific field of research and interest (that would be the Cold War, by the way), or at the very least make some conversation about a seemingly related topic (some notable examples are “The Da Vinci Code”, “300” and, surprise surprise, “The Pacific”).

The other extreme is an eclectic mix of judgement, condescension and stereotype - “There’s no money in history!” - “So you want to be a teacher?” - or the classic (and my all-time favourite) - “But history is so boring!” I usually laugh this off with some self-deprecating joke about how I like to live in the past, but sometimes I wonder why this is so.

Naturally, I don’t expect that everyone would want to study history, just like you would be insane to expect that everyone could understand first order differentiation, let alone love quantum physics - but why should it be that History is so (unfairly) marginalised?

History is important - and not just for passing your GCE O’ Levels - I rather fancy that history is fundamentally intrinsic to the make-up of an identity. Personal, national, cultural, regional - whatever, it is absolutely vital.

How do you define who you are without understanding your past experiences in the context of where you are now? Is that even possible? Benedict Anderson considered the nation to be “an imagined political community” - but can we take that further? Are our national identities then intrinsically formed from the amalgamation of our collective communal responses to our past, our contextual present, and where we hope our future leads? If so - then I think history deserves a little bit more respect.

But how do we imagine? How do we understand? Where do we look? What do we manifest this with? Academia and outright nationalist propaganda and acculturation aside, maybe the answer is in culture.
Traffic jam during riots in Singapore in 1956: Pro-communist students gathered and camped at Chung Cheng High School and Chinese High School. Over the next 5 days, 13 people were killed and more than 100 were injured.

*Photo credit: Ray Gipson*

I had the pleasure of speaking with Boo Junfeng and Joshua Tan, the director and male lead, respectively, of “Sandcastle” recently (read the interview) about their film, which among other things, is the story of a young Singaporean boy on the cusp of adulthood, who discovers that his late father was a political activist during the troubled times of the 1950s and 1960s.

Junfeng shared that he was inspired by his findings from his research on the period - particularly from the passion, fervour and enthusiasm the Chinese students displayed, even at young ages, which he sought to juxtapose with what he perceives as “the apathy of people of our generation”.

I asked if he hoped to encourage more questioning and discourse with this film, and he was at pains to emphasise that he fundamentally just wanted to tell a story - driven by his love of period films and “of recreating a world that used to exist”. He confessed that while he never did well in history while he was in school, his work in film has opened up an entirely different paradigm on history - that of its stories.

‘If you based it on a timeline alone, it becomes pointless. But I feel that if you base it on a story, from there I know the dates, and with that I know what happened, and with that, things fall into place, with that, there is a map to history, and that is interesting to me.’

The man has a point - history is just as much about the stories as it is about the dates, the geopolitical significance of events, the trends, the lessons, the examination and term papers.

Stories involve, stories engage, and perhaps most importantly, stories help us imagine. And when we imagine, we identify, and when we identify, then perhaps, we will ask questions, we will look deeper, and somewhere along the way, perhaps we will take ownership of our past. Hopefully the pointed questions about my intended career - “but you don’t look like the teaching sort” - will then die their natural deaths.

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