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The Relevance Of History To Our Lives Today

GOH CHOR BOON

I will divide my talk* into two sections. I will first discuss briefly but concisely the question "Why should we teach and learn history in schools?" Then I will proceed to show how the past provides useful lessons which help us to understand contemporary problems and issues. Specific examples of historical events will be used to illustrate this link between the past and the present.

Our young generation today – we can call them the "Pepsi Generation" or the "Computer Generation" – is living in an environment very different from the era of the 1950s and 1960s. In the United States there is a great concern about the rise of the "Me" generation; and in Japan a new term has been coined to describe the young, swinging Japanese – "Shinjinrui." Yes, Singapore is progressing so rapidly that what is fashionable today may be obsolete tomorrow. There is a real danger that our young citizens are losing touch with our heritage. Let me ask you four simple questions and you decide for yourself:

- (a) Do you appreciate the preservation of our old buildings?
- (b) Would you stand in front of a Peranakan house and observe its details?
- (c) Do you have the intention of visiting the remnants of kampong life in Singapore?
- (d) Have you ever been to the National Museum?

Give me your honest answers and if you ended with four "nos" I am very tempted to describe you as "rootless".

* This is the text of a talk given at the Chinese High School during National History Week, 1 – 5 August 1988.

In fact there are signs that we are losing contact with traditions and customs, once so cherished and practised by our forefathers. Take for example the Chinese New Year festival. When I was young Chinese New Year was real fun and ceremonious too. Today, it is common to see families packing up and heading for Club Med.

History lessons in school, therefore, allow our pupils to appreciate various aspects of our heritage. History can inculcate in them a reverence for our past and thereby developing a sense of belonging to the nation. The many community research projects, for example, those of Nee Soon and Whampoa, are good indications that history and heritage are inseparable.

Learning history also helps to develop in our pupils good social and moral values which are so vital in a multi-racial society like Singapore. Understanding the contributions of historical personalities and significant historical events will help to inculcate values such as loyalty, perseverance, propriety, people's welfare, religious toleration and racial harmony. Our young will also learn to appreciate the nature of other societies, their cultures and politics. History makes them recognise the fact that the way people see and judge things is conditioned by the society within which they live.

After a brief discussion on the rationale for teaching and learning history in schools, we now proceed to explore a much broader question, "How can history teach anything to a society that is engrossed with technological and scientific transformations and poised to enter the 21st century?"

I will begin by transporting all of us here through the time-tunnel to the ancient world of Classical Greece. My purpose is to show that even the Greeks saw the importance of history. The Greeks were generally recognised as the "first historians" who dealt with the events of the past through historical inquiry and investigation. In his historical writings, Herodotus, popularly regarded as the "Father of History", had a serious purpose in view. He published his researches

" . . . in the hope of thereby preserving from decay the remembrance of what men have done, and of preventing

the great and wonderful actions of the Greeks and the Barbarians (the Persians) from losing their due meed of glory; and withal to put on record what were their grounds of feud."

Herodotus did not write history for its own sake. Instead, he addressed the historical importance of decisions, events and developments to the Greeks of his own day.

The writings of another famous Greek historian, Thucydides, whose book "History of the Peloponnesian War" is still a masterpiece among histories, also reflected the relevancy of history to the ancient world – and to the present time. He commented:

"It will perhaps be found that the absence of story-telling in my work makes it less attractive to listen to, but I shall be satisfied if it is considered useful by all who wish to know the plain truth of the events which happened and will, according to human nature, happen again in the same way. It was written not for the moment but for all time."

In Imperial Rome, politicians and historians, such as Julius Caesar, Sallust and Tacitus, had to look to the past for reassurance and justification. All believed that the understanding of the past was a task for the politicians to master. The Roman historian Polybius succinctly stated that "knowledge of the past is the readiest means men can have of correcting their conduct" and that "the study of history is the truest sense an education, and a training for political life."

Therefore, a glimpse of the historiography of ancient Greece and Rome reminds us that even in ancient times historians sought in past events practical illustrations of the hand of providence, practical examples of human qualities that seemed to them excellent and worth propagating – above all, relevant to current needs.

Over 2000 years have gone by. The rapid transformation of the world since antiquity should not hide the basic reality that all we do, all that we think, indeed all that we are, is the cumulative result of past experiences. As one writer puts it, the future is an abstraction, the

present is but a fleeting moment; all else is history. The past and judgement of the past are inevitable and inescapable. Every moment of our lives we make statements or act according to perception of past events.

Another compelling reason for studying history is that a society's identity is the product of the many individuals, forces, and events that constitute that society's past. History is society's collective memory. In the words of the American philosopher and novelist George Santayana "A country without a memory is a country of madmen." Individually and collectively, what we are is the product of what we have been. Our sense of personal and social identity is a direct outgrowth of our history, and to study that history is to discover a "means of access to ourselves." Many of us would still remember the immense success of Alex Haley's family history, "Roots". It reflects the deep human need to know where one comes from and where one fits into the grand scheme of human revolution. In the same vein, our Lower Secondary history syllabus has the objective of developing in our young a sense of Singapore identity and of instilling pride in Singapore's past and their ancestors' achievements.

Closely related to the notion that history is a road to self-knowledge is the belief that to comprehend the present, one must study the past. History is vital for understanding the issues and problems that presently confront the world. Of course, this is not to say that history can have the answer or solution to present day problems. To some extent, all historical events are unique because history never exactly "repeats itself". Even the study of close historical parallels will not provide specific solutions to current problems. But to attempt to handle contemporary problems without seeking to know the relevant historical background is highly undesirable and, perhaps, dangerous.

For example, a more thorough knowledge of the history of Southeast Asia might have helped American policy-makers avoid the worst agonies of Vietnam. The U.S. intervention in Vietnam was designed to "contain" Communism within the boundaries of China and to prevent the enactment of the so-called domino theory. The triumph of Communism in Vietnam, so the reasoning went, would also

represent a victory for Chinese imperialism. A study of East Asian history, however, would have revealed that the Vietnamese had for centuries resisted Chinese encroachments, and that a Communist Vietnam would probably not be a puppet of the Chinese. We can see today that Vietnam is not a close friend of China. Therefore, a lack of historical understanding was one of the factors that lay behind the American policy in Vietnam. Examples could be multiplied endlessly, but all of them would simply underscore the sentiments of Oscar Wilde: "He to whom the present is the only thing that is present knows nothing of the age in which he lives."

Perhaps at this juncture, it is wise for us to remember that though knowledge of the past is essential for understanding the present nothing is easier to abuse than the historical analogy or historical parallel. Time and again politicians, journalists, and the man on the street often declare that "history proves" this or "history shows" that. They will assert that history somehow supports their position on some contemporary issue. Unfortunately, "history" in the abstract, "proves" or "shows" nothing in the absolute sense. Parallels between past and present circumstances are never exact. In fact, history makes one of the most useful contributions when it exposes the inapplicability of many inaccurate or misleading analogies.

History also provides us the opportunity to study the forces that are responsible for the rise and decline of powers. Why is that throughout history some nations gain power while others lose it? This question is not only of historical interest, but also significant for understanding today's world as we approach the 21st century. We become aware that just as the great empires of the past flourished and fell, will today's – and tomorrow's – powers rise and fall as well? In his well documented book, "The Rise and Fall of Great Powers," Yale historian Paul Kennedy stresses the crucial relationship of economic and military forces that affect the rise and fall of empires. His wide-ranging analysis of global politics over the past five centuries shows that nations project their military power according to their economic resources and in defence of their broad economic interests. But the point to note here is that the cost of projecting that military power is more than even the largest economies can afford indefinitely. This is especially so when new technologies and new centres of production shift economic power away from the

established powers. We can see the powerful implications of such an historical understanding on present-day superpowers and the Asian giants, China and Japan. For example, the United States now run the risk of an "imperial overstretch", that is, her global interests and obligations are far larger than the country's powers to defend them all simultaneously.

The case of pre-war Japan is another excellent illustration. In her quest to establish the "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere" she built up her military resources and fought the Pacific War. Today, though under severe pressures of the United States government to increase its defence expenditure, the Tokyo government still keep increases in spending on her self-defence forces to a modest level. Moral, ideological, economic forces and the possible repercussions on Russia, China and Southeast Asia of a Japanese military build-up have encouraged Japan to work towards the enhancement of peace and security in Southeast Asia.

Finally, the relevance of history is not confined to a specific set of preoccupations. In a much broader sense, the study of the past enables us to share the thoughts and passions of fellow human beings and to develop a tolerance and appreciation of cultures, customs, and ideas other than our own. Sadly, perhaps because human nature seems to remain unchanged for centuries, we still have civil and international wars. Conflicts in Northern Ireland, South Africa, the Middle East, Afghanistan, India, Sri Lanka and Kampuchea all serve to remind us that man is, either consciously or unconsciously, oblivious of the lessons in history. Leaders of the world are guilty of making disparaging remarks which, ironically, bring to light the relevancy of history to our lives today. Recently, a top Japanese politician publicly maintained that the Japanese were not the aggressors in the Second World War. But we know from history that blatant atrocities were committed by the Japanese in China, Korea and Southeast Asia. In July this year, another senior Japanese politician passed sarcastic remarks about the black people in the United States. In fact, two years ago, the then Prime Minister of Japan caused a furore when he said that the average level of knowledge in the United States was lower than that of the Japanese because of its black, Puerto Rican and Mexican residents.

The relevancy of these unpleasant comments can be traced to the war years. It is embodied in the racism exercised by the Japanese and the Americans in the Pacific War. Japan then asserted herself as the "leading world-historical race". This sense of racial superiority was manifested in Japan's assigning "proper place" for other nations. The Americans, on the other hand, considered the Japanese as simians and used such terms as "toilet training" and "rectal fixation" to explain Japanese primitiveness and childlike aggressiveness. Japan lost the war but today she is gaining the upper hand in the war of another nature – the economic war of Japan versus the West. One question remains. Will we see the revival of the form of militant nationalism of the 1930s which propelled Japan to fight a fanatical and suicidal war and which was extolled by the late novelist Yukio Mishima? Will Japan re-assert the concept of the "leading world historical-race"?

In conclusion, we are fully aware that the burdens and legacies of the past and the long-term continuities are still with us. But we cannot live without history because without historical perspective we are in danger of falling into the prideful, naive notion that the problems we face and the solutions we propose are unprecedented and bear no relationship to human problems of the past. I would like to end by quoting to you the prophetic words of Niccolo Machiavelli:

"Whoever wishes to foresee the future must consult the past; for human events ever resemble those of preceding times. This arises from the fact that they are produced by men who ever have been, and ever shall be, animated by the same passions, and thus necessarily have the same results."

Machiavelli believed that man is essentially egoistic and self-centred. His ideas on the nature of the relationship between political power and the role of the military in state affairs are still very relevant to contemporary societies.

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