

Students' Judgments of Historical Significance in Singapore Schools:

Positionalities and Narratives

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**Abstract**

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Research has established that students' ethnic, community, and national identities can influence their judgments on historical significance. Furthermore, it has demonstrated that students' identities may incline them towards appropriating or resisting particular historical narratives when considering historical significance. In Singapore, little is known about how students think about and make judgments of historical significance as well as which aspects of their identity they draw upon to make these judgments. Using a qualitative case study approach that relies mainly on individual and focus group interviews, this study investigates how 15 secondary school students define their identities in Singapore and examines how these identities influence their judgments of the historical significance of persons and events in Singapore's past. The key findings indicate that students in Singapore tend to position and locate themselves as multiracial

Singaporeans and draw upon a narrative template that complies with the official Singapore narrative to make judgments of significance. The study also reveals that the use of this narrative template has resulted in the development of reductionist views of the past among students. The findings of this research echo those of other research studies that have stressed that unless we attend to students' interpretive frames at the point of their sense-making process, any effort made to promote and deepen their historical thinking might be negated by the misconceptions already engendered. The need to mediate this tension is particularly urgent in Singapore, where the task of educating the young regarding Singapore's past coexists with the emphasis on developing their skills of historical inquiry.

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## **Dedication**

To my family, Yung and Ezra.

# CHAPTER 1

## Introduction

### 1.1 Prelude

On the night of December 8, 2013, Singaporeans were transfixed by news of the outbreak of a riot in the Little India district over a fatal traffic accident involving a private bus and an Indian foreign worker. The scenes of rioters clashing with the police, overturning police cars, and setting the vehicles on fire were almost surreal for many Singaporeans, especially those born after 1970. The last riot Singapore had witnessed was the spill over of the May 13, 1969 race riots from Malaysia. As the Prime Minister of Singapore, Lee Hsien Loong remarked, “Singapore has not seen a riot like that for a very long time, and such incidents are beyond the living memory for most Singaporeans” (Lee, 2014).

A few months later, in February 2014, diplomatic relations between Singapore and Indonesia were put to the test when Indonesia decided to name a naval warship after two dead Indonesian soldiers, Harun Said and Osman Mohamed Ali. While the soldiers are lauded as heroes in Indonesia, their names are a reminder of a darker period in Singapore’s history known as the *Konfrontasi* (“Confrontation”). Accordingly, the decision led to an outcry of dismay in Singapore, which called the move insensitive. The *Konfrontasi* was a campaign launched by the then President of Indonesia Sukarno between 1961 and 1966 to sabotage merger plans between Malaya, Singapore and the Borneo territories of Sabah and Sarawak to form Malaysia. During this period, Indonesian saboteurs carried out many covert military actions resulting in at least 42 bombings in Singapore. The bombing at MacDonald House on March 10, 1965, which left three dead and 33 wounded, was the most devastating of these. Harun and Osman were among the

Indonesian infiltrators responsible; they were caught, convicted and executed for the crime in Singapore.

The Little India riot evoked the public's memory of the race riots of the 1950s and 1960s, namely the Maria Hertogh riots of 1950 and the Race Riots of 1964. In the days that followed, discussions about the event were rife on social media. Some netizens spouted racial slurs and were in turn criticized or defended (Woo, 2013). In comparison, the public's response to the naming of the Indonesian warship was largely nonchalant and at best lukewarm, which prompted Lee Hsien Loong's comment that "many Singaporeans only have the vaguest ideas of what *Konfrontasi* is" (Lee, 2014).

How is it that the naming of the warship did not strike a chord among the larger public while the Little India riot, which had no direct connection to any historical event, was able to evoke strong feelings and the memory of the riots of the 1950s and 1960s? Attempting to address this question involves paying attention to Singaporeans' notions of historical consciousness and historical significance.

## **1.2 Historical Consciousness and Historical Significance**

Historical consciousness refers to the way people look at, think about, and understand the past in relation to themselves. In other words, it is the basis on which the everyday man and woman make sense of the past and use that past in the present. It comprises the "individual and collective understandings of the past, the cognitive and cultural factors which shape those understandings, as well as the relations of historical understandings to those of the present and the future" (Centre for the Study of Historical Consciousness, n.d.). Seixas posited that historical consciousness is often examined through two different lenses. The first is the lens of "collective memory" (Halbwachs, 1992; Nora, 1989). Examining historical consciousness as collective

memory means looking at how beliefs and perhaps knowledge of a common past get passed down from one generation to the next through conscious and unconscious mechanisms and structures such as schools, museums, monuments, archives, commemoration, culture, language, stories, and customs (Gillis, 1994; Seixas, 2006). Also embedded in this approach is the study of the formation and construction of collective identities from these collective memories. The second way of conceptualizing historical consciousness, influenced by Rüsen's (1989) ideas about historical consciousness, emerged out of recent works of those involved in the field of history education such as Lee (2004) and Seixas (2004). In their view, historical consciousness extends beyond collective memory to focus on developing in students forms of historical thinking or meta-historical understandings (Lee, 2004) to handle their encounters with the historical past in their everyday lives (Seixas, 2004). The disciplinary tools and practices of professional historians inform this conceptualization of historical consciousness. This approach focuses on studying any individual's ability to use a set of historical concepts and skills to help them make sense of accounts of the past. These concepts include significance, epistemology and evidence, continuity and change, progress and decline, empathy and moral judgments, and historical agency (Seixas, 1996).

The attribution of historical significance enables us to make sense and meaning out of the corpus of historical knowledge we encounter. Without it, history becomes a meaningless litany of events and facts. Lomas (1990) asserted that no one can "escape from the idea of significance. History, to be meaningful, depends on selection and this, in turn, depends on establishing criteria of significance to select the more relevant and to dismiss the less relevant" (p. 41). Historical significance, as defined by Seixas (1994), is "the valuing criterion through which the historian or, by extension any historical thinker, assesses which pieces of the entire possible corpus of the

past can fit together into a meaningful and coherent story that is worthwhile” (p. 281). Historical significance is a concept that permits us to examine the intersections between the collective memories that influence students’ conceptions of the past and the way students assign significance to historical events (structural factors).

### **1.3 Why Study Historical Significance?**

Among the many historical thinking skills developed in school, the way a student thinks and reasons about historical significance provides a strong indication of how they will play out their role as citizens in a pluralist society. When individuals are called upon to make judgments concerning social, economic and political issues, they very often have to draw upon their knowledge of the past, and what they draw on is in turn dependent on what they consider as historically significant. Hunt (2000) asserted that wrestling with ideas about significance not only expands students’ “understanding of the world, in which they live” but also enables them to contemplate the “ageless, social, moral, and cultural issues” which are of immediate relevance to them (p. 39). As the philosopher George Herbert Mead posited, “all history is the interpretation of the present” (quoted in Campbell, 2013). Thus, the establishing of historical significance is not just a private and public affair; it also involves making sense of connections between the past and the present.

Yet establishing historical significance has become a complicated endeavor in contemporary times. Students are exposed to different types of histories throughout their lives. These include the formal history taught in school as well as the informal histories told and disseminated within their families and communities. With the proliferation of information on the internet, students are also accessing diverse versions of histories from an essentially infinite number of media sources. In the wake of this explosion of new narratives, perspectives and

interpretations, students no longer get their history mainly from one authoritative source, namely, school. Gillis (1994) declared this phenomenon to be the “democratization of the past”, whereby everyone becomes “his or her own historian” (p. 17). He asserted that this represents a deep cultural shift, akin to that of the Reformation:

Most people have long since turned to more heterogeneous representations of the past. And while conservatives decry Americans’ lack of factual knowledge about their national identity, the reality is that the nation is no longer the site or frame of memory for most people and therefore national history is no longer a proper measure of what people really know about their pasts. (p. 17)

This study takes the position that a key goal of historical education is to help prepare students to participate in a pluralist democracy. It privileges the belief that a sound historical education can help students make sense of the diverse perspectives offered by different groups of people. For example, Barton and Levstik (2010) contended:

Neither unquestioning acceptance of other people’s conclusions about the past, nor rejection of every claim as “just an opinion”, serves democracy well. If students are to use history to understand the present, they must understand how historical accounts are created, so that they can evaluate how well supported those accounts are by the available evidence. Historical claims cannot be buttressed by authority, whether that of the teacher, the textbook, or “experts” [*and, I would add, family and community narratives*]; they must be grounded in evidence that has been held up to public inspection.... The inability to distinguish a myth and grounded assertion destroys the foundation for democracy, because students will be susceptible to any outrageous story they may be told. (p. 39-40)

This goal is to be achieved by equipping students with the requisite skills – developed through historical inquiry – so that they can critically evaluate claims and accounts of the past, refute “myths, legends, and outright lies” (Barton & Levstik, 2010, p. 39; see Lee & Shemilt, 2007) and arrive at a balanced and well-substantiated conclusion. However, it is not enough to give students a set of skills, we also need to attend to the intimate accounts students hold dear and that are tied up with their identifications. Building on extant research on the influence of identities on ascriptions of significance, this study continues in the line of argument that posits that researching students’ knowledge of the past and the issues they deem historically significant requires us to take into consideration how these multiple accounts mesh with each other. This approach demands that we attend to the way students’ identities shape the way they construct a usable past. Only by understanding this connection can we make sound suggestions on how we can better shape students’ learning experiences in the classroom, so as to help them become thoughtful and participative citizens.

#### **1.4 Identity and Ideas about Historical Significance**

Researchers investigating students’ ideas about historical significance are primarily interested in understanding the criteria by which students make sense of the past. They are also interested in the underlying factors that influence the way students establish these criteria. However, judgments on historical significance are never objective; they are contested politically and socially. This is because these judgments are highly personal and what is significant to one person might not be to another. How we ascribe significance is dependent on a confluence of interests, factors, knowledge, values, and contexts (Wrenn, 2011). Seixas (1997) emphasized the inevitability of such bias when he argued that “[s]tandards of significance apparently inhere not

only in the past itself, but in the interpretative frames and values of those who study it – ourselves” (p. 22).

To date, research on students’ thinking about historical significance has demonstrated that students’ judgments on historical significance are influenced by their identities. By identity, I am referring to the way individuals define themselves based on membership to particular social collectivities such as race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, communities, and nationalities (Hall, 1989). Many of these studies tend to focus on one or two aspects of identity, such as race (Epstein, 1998, 2000; Seixas, 1993), community (Barton & McCully, 2005, 2010; Lévesque, 2005), and nationality (Barton, 2001a, 2001b; Cercadillo, 2001; Levstik, 2001; Levstik & Groth, 2005; Yeager, Foster & Greer, 2002). Peck’s (2010) research on Canadian students offered insight into how multiple identities can influence individuals’ judgments on significance. Studies conducted by Epstein (1998, 2000) and Almarza (2001) revealed that minority students are inclined to trust the knowledge transmitted through the stories and memories passed on in their communities, and to reject the version that they encounter in the school curriculum.

Scholars, especially those of a feminist or post-colonial persuasion, have long critiqued the singular or essentialist conceptions of identity, arguing instead that each individual holds multiple identities. The concept of multiple identities can serve as a suitable construct for exploring students’ identities in Singapore because it enables us to capture the multifaceted nature of the Singaporean identity. Hill and Lian (1995) claimed that Singaporeans carry a hyphenated form of identity made up of their ethnic and national identities. Devan (2013) added that the multiplicity of the Singaporean identity can be conceived in terms of overlapping circles of identity. In spite of its usefulness, the concept of multiple identities offers a limited lens with which to understand how students engage in historical reasoning, such as when making

judgments on historical significance. In discussing the relationship between students' backgrounds and their views and understanding of history, Barton (2012) argued for the need for conceptual clarity regarding identity. He added that simply stating that identities are "fluid and dynamic" and multifaceted offers little insight into "what identities consist of" (p. 94). In addition, Gottlieb and Wineburg's (2012) study on the difference between how religiously committed historians and non-religious historians read documents revealed that religious historians engaging with a religious text tended to adopt epistemological positions that were aligned with their religious affiliation. They termed these changes in position as "epistemic switching". Their study suggests that some aspects of our identities become more salient than others when we engage in a historical task; our standards of what counts as truth and what developments are acceptable would depend on which identity or identities are activated. In this light, identity can be seen as a form of positioning. Vågan (2011) pointed out that a positional approach to identity sees "how individuals position themselves as particular persons in interaction" (p. 45).

In this study, I seek to provide insights into how students in Singapore schools define their identities, and determine which aspects of their identities are more salient when they make judgments on significant matters in Singapore's past. I employ the concept of positionality, which sees identity as a form of positioning, and draw from social and cultural perspectives so as to attend to Hall's (1996/2010) suggestion to explore the "*positional* and conjectural character" of identities and "their formation in and for specific times and places" (p. 615). While research on students' thinking about historical significance is taking root, yielding useful information and informing classroom practices in other countries, little is known about how students in Singapore think about and make judgments on historical significance; even less is known about how their

identities influence these judgments. One study by Foo (2014) investigated the structural and procedural factors influencing how students assigned historical significance in Singapore history, but it neither accounted for how the ideas and judgments which shaped their thinking had been formed, nor for what these ideas were. I argue that without such information, little can be done to shape classroom practices in the history classroom to help achieve the goal of preparing students for participation in a pluralist society.

### **1.5 The Singapore Context**

As with countries like the United States, Australia, and New Zealand, Singapore's population is descended largely from immigrant stock. These immigrants came primarily from China, India, the Malay Archipelago, Indonesia, and Europe. Many of the early immigrants were sojourners who intended to return to their original homelands, and hence maintained strong ties with their countries of origin. Also among these immigrant groups were offspring from interracial marriages, such as the Peranakans (descendants of early Chinese immigrants and natives from the Malay archipelago) and Eurasians.

Following on from nearly 150 years of British rule, in 1963 Singapore merged with Malaya to form Malaysia. However, the union did not last more than two years as negotiations over the political and social conception of Malaysia, and economic issues such as taxation and the establishment of a common market, were thwarted by distrust and differences of opinion between Singaporean leaders and their Malayan counterparts. This distrust culminated in communal clashes, foremost among which were the Race Riots of 1964. As a result of the mounting tension and irreconcilable differences, Singapore separated from Malaysia on August 7, 1965. The separation caught Singapore's political leaders by surprise. Having built their hopes on being part of a larger Malayan federation, they were forced by the sudden ejection from

Malaysia to reconfigure the identity of the nation and plan its independent future. The key question was how Singapore was to exist as a nation-state. Unlike the rest of the former colonial territories in Southeast Asia, there was neither a common indigenous background among the population nor a pre-existing civilization to recover.

The imaginings of a national identity thus had to take into consideration the multiracial and multicultural makeup of the population. As such, multiracialism was adopted as a principle and remains a key defining feature of Singaporean identity and culture (Chua, 2003; Hill & Lian, 1995; Lai, 1995). The official racial categories of CMIO (Chinese, Malay, Indian and Others) were introduced to accommodate ethnic differences and ensure equal rights for all races. Furthermore, the principle of meritocracy was institutionalized to ensure equality of opportunity for educational and economic advancement (Lai, 2004).

In addition, the need to imagine the nation became manifested in the history curriculum taught in the classroom. As a school subject, history plays an instrumental role in ensuring that the collective memory of the nation's past is handed down to the young. Since the 1980s, the history curriculum has been not only taught to ensure that students learn about the nation's history, but also tweaked in an endeavor to contribute to the building of a national identity and inculcate loyalty, pride and commitment to the nation among the younger generations (Afandi & Baildon, 2010; Baildon & Afandi, 2014; Goh & Gopinathan, 2005). The nation-building element was underscored in 1997 with the launch of National Education (NE).<sup>1</sup> Undergirding this aim is the fear that younger Singaporeans will become an amnesic generation that has no idea of the painful struggles their forebears had to endure to build the nation into what it is today. The

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<sup>1</sup> NE is a citizenship program introduced in 1997, aims to “develop national cohesion, cultivate the instinct for survival as a nation and instil in our students, confidence in our nation's future. It also emphasizes on cultivating a sense of belonging and emotional rootedness to Singapore” (MOE, 2013). NE is delivered both through the formal curriculum – particularly in subjects such as Social Studies, History, Geography, Civics and Moral Education – and informally in class.

lament about the apathy of Singaporean youth and their lack of knowledge of the past is a refrain expressed *ad nauseam* in public discourse (Chua, 2013; Tan, 2007), particularly by political leaders (Goh, 1996, 2000; Lee, 1997; Rajaratnam, 1984) over the last few decades (Tan, 2007).

While nation-building – in particular, the learning of the Singapore Story – forms a key part of the agenda in developing the Singaporean citizen in Singapore’s history education,<sup>2</sup> another development which has influenced the history curriculum since 2001 is the gradual shift towards disciplinary thinking. The thrust of the matter is the view that a good history education inducts students into the experience of historical inquiry, through which they acquire the knowledge and skills fundamental to the study of history as an academic discipline. This shift is further justified on the grounds that these skills are essential to the development of proficiency in critical thinking, a competency sorely needed for students to engage as informed citizens of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Curriculum Planning & Development Division, 2014). One key indicator of this shift is the introduction of source-based questions for the General Cambridge Examinations (at the Ordinary and Advanced levels). However, some scholars (Lee & Shemilt, 2007; Harris, 2010) have pointed out the inherent tension between the goal of educating patriots (for the purposes of fostering national unity) and mature citizens (who are skilled at discernment and critical thinking). The issue here is that a nationalistically orientated approach to education produces unreflective patriots, an outcome that is irreconcilable with the objective of producing educated and reflective citizens. Lee and Shemilt (2007) deemed the aim to achieve both outcomes a “fatal attraction” (p. 14) while Harris (2010) called the two goals “uncomfortable bedfellows” (p. 186).

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<sup>2</sup> This term ‘Singapore Story’ was popularized by the late Lee Kuan Yew, the first Prime Minister of Singapore, in his two-volume set of memoirs on Singapore’s history. It has come to be synonymous with the official history of Singapore.

In an effort to strengthen NE, the Committee on National Education (CONE) was formed in August 2006 to study ways in which NE can better engage young Singaporeans. In the report that ensued, it was observed that a good number of students, especially those in upper secondary Social Studies, found their experience in NE “boring” and “burdensome” (Lui, 2007). Some students also expressed cynicism towards the subject, calling it “propaganda” (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 14; Lui, 2007). In regard to Singaporean history, students shared their wish to be exposed to different perspectives. This finding attests to Seixas’ (1997) point that

students do not swallow whole what this year’s teacher and textbooks tell them is historically significant. Rather, they filter and sift and remember and forget, adding to, modifying and reconstructing their frameworks of understanding, through their own often unarticulated values, ideas and dispositions. (p. 40)

In contrast, a study conducted by Ho (2010) on Singaporean students’ conceptions of citizenship and their perspectives on the official national historical narrative revealed that in spite of their varying racial, socioeconomic, and academic backgrounds, students’ selection and explanation of significant events in Singaporean history were consistent with the official narrative. She also noted a lack of countervailing narratives to the official version, attributing this phenomenon to constraints imposed by a strong climate of censorship and the high-stakes, examination-based nature of Social Studies (the main subject for teaching citizenship at the upper secondary level), which gives students little scope to question the information they are taught. She concluded that these students seemed to have “internalized the dominant historical narrative vis-à-vis race and citizenship” (p. 233). In other words, her study suggested that students’ national identity as Singaporean citizens circumscribed their other identities and their ability to question the existing authoritative narrative.

The findings from the CONE report challenged Ho's conclusion that students acquiesce to and ventriloquize the state's version of Singaporean history. The fact that some of these students deemed what they had learned in Social Studies as "propaganda" in the CONE study raises the possibility that they may have been exposed to some form of alternative vernacular narrative. The students' request for the inclusion of different perspectives on Singaporean history also points to their identification with other collective groups that might offer alternative perspectives to the prevailing national narrative. This apparent conflict suggests that students in Singapore undergo a form of dual positioning in their encounters with the national historical narrative. This fits in with the patterns Wertsch (2000a) described of "knowing but not believing" and "believing but not knowing" (p. 39). According to him, the former could be considered as the "mastery" of a particular, often official, historical narrative. This involves the ability to reproduce the narrative purely in terms of

cognitive functioning and has relatively little to do with emotional commitment to narratives as "identity resources". In the case of national historical narratives mastery is concerned with the ability to "think the nation" but tells us little about the emotional ties and forms of attachment required in the formation of "imagined communities. (p. 41)

This doublethink is associated with resistance,<sup>3</sup> which involves not just the discounting and rejection of a historical narrative but also a distancing from it. Wertsch asserted that just because someone is taught a historical narrative, it need not follow that he or she has to believe or accept it. In his work with Estonians, Wertsch (2000a, 2000b) found that in resisting the official Soviet narrative, interviewees often displayed strong emotions against the official

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<sup>3</sup> The term, taken from George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, denotes belief simultaneously in two contradictory views.

storyline, claiming their opposing views to be misrepresented, or perhaps underrepresented. In rejecting these accounts, the Estonian interviewees invoked their own knowledge of the unofficial or alternative historical accounts, even though these accounts were often “partial and fragmented and were often coupled with an inability to organize coherent interpretations and lines of reasoning about the past” (p. 39).

In contrast to resistance and mastery is the concept of appropriation, which involves the process of making a historical narrative one’s own for the sake of sense-making. Unlike mastery, appropriation connotes an emotional connection with the narrative (Wertsch, 2000a). Whether students choose to appropriate or resist a narrative, this choice entails belief systems which are inevitably tied up with their identities. In light of this, Wertsch’s emphasis on the need for research to “consider belief systems as dynamic and contextually specific” echoes Peck’s (2010) call for “research that investigates the salience of particular aspects of one’s identity over others during particular research tasks” (p. 610). Hence, there is a need to shift the direction of research to examine the impact of intersecting identities and contexts on students’ ascriptions of historical significance.

## **1.6 The Purpose of this Study and Research Questions**

The purpose of this research study is two-fold. First, it aims to address the gaps highlighted above by exploring another way of understanding identity. The impetus for this chosen approach is premised upon Barton’s (2012) argument that current notions of identity as being multidimensional and dynamic provide little insight into what identity is made up of and thus offer little to improve “the precision of research” (p. 94) with regard to identity issues and historical thinking, and little with which to attend to the associated educational issues.

The second aim of the study, which is connected to the first, is to investigate the identification processes that define the identities of Singaporean students. I examine how students narrate their sense of belonging to form a composite picture of their positionalities, and explore how these positionalities shape their sense-making processes when engaging with Singapore's historical narrative. In addition, I ask if students' positionalities shift in differing situations and if so, whether this affects the articulation of their views regarding Singapore's history. The following questions guided this research study:

1. How do students in Singapore define their positionalities?
2. In what ways do students' positionalities influence their judgments on historical significance in Singapore's history?
3. To what extent do contexts affect students' positionalities and consequently, their thinking about historical significance?

### **1.7 Summary of Findings**

The key findings of this dissertation diverge from most of the earlier research which show that students' ethnic and racial identities tended to largely influence their considerations of historical significance. The students in this study tended to position and locate themselves as multiracial Singaporeans and used this positioning when making judgments of historical significance. The narrative template (a concept that will be further explained in Chapter 2), or the general plotline that they utilized to judge historical significance, was aligned with that of the official Singaporean narrative, which is characterized by four central themes: The Origins of Singapore, Death and Suffering, Success Against the Odds, and Vulnerability and Vigilance. In addition, the substance of the community narratives that the students encountered outside of school not only folded into this narrative template but also reinforced it. This study also found

that the students' appropriation of the narrative template led to a reductionist approach in their consideration of past events and developments. This in turn resulted in a conflated and simplified way of making sense of the historical past. The findings thus behoove us to look at pedagogies that could help address these constraints, so as to help advance students' understanding of the present.

## **1.8 Overview of Chapters**

This first chapter provides a broad overview of the dissertation. It also introduces the rationale for the study and the ways in which this study can contribute usefully to the current literature. Positionality is a useful construct for investigating students' identities as well as addressing the lacuna of information in Singapore on students' identities and their impact on students' thinking about historical significance. Chapter 2 will provide a review of the extant research on historical significance and identify the gaps in our understanding that this study seeks to fill. Chapter 3 will outline the research methodology of this study, while Chapters 4 and 5 will present the findings on students' positionalities and the ways in which their positionalities influence their judgment and ideas about historical significance. Chapter 6 will bring this dissertation to a close with a discussion on the implications of the study on history education in Singapore as well as the limitations of this study and suggestions for future research.

## CHAPTER 2

### **Review of Literature and Conceptual Framework**

This chapter reviews the literature on the concept of historical significance as well as the extant research into students' conceptions of historical significance. In particular, it discusses the two main approaches through which the concept of historical significance has been studied in history education. It then explains how the concept of positionality and sociocultural perspectives inform the conceptual framework used for studying students' judgments on historical significance in Singapore's history.

#### **2.1 The Study of Historical Significance in History Education: Two Traditions**

##### **2.1.1 Structural and procedural focus.**

Over the years, the body of research examining the interplay between students and historical significance has diverged into two different traditions (Barton, 2005; Lévesque, 2005). The first tradition examines the structural or procedural factors that students attend to in order to make sense of the historical past. Studies in this tradition are more constructivist in approach, whereby the focus is placed on understanding the cognitive processes used by students in their attributions of significance. Such research is inclined towards delineating typologies or a set of criteria for thinking about historical significance as well as outlining the level of sophistication demonstrated in students' historical thinking. This tradition has its roots in the work of scholars in the field of history education in the United Kingdom (Ashby, Lee & Dickinson, 1997; Lee, 1995, 2004; Lee & Ashby 2000; Lee, Dickinson & Ashby, 1993; Shemilt, 1980, 1987). These scholars conceive of history education as helping students attain historical understanding by drawing from the epistemology of history, engaging them in historical inquiry and guiding them towards the construction of historical knowledge or explanations. The goal is to move students away from learning history as a body of fixed knowledge and instead, to enable students to

“understand history as a discipline or a form of knowledge” (Lee & Ashby, 2000, p. 199).

Geoffrey Partington was one of the first to discuss the concept of significance in his book (1980) *The Idea of an Historical Education*. Partington (1986) argued for the need to establish a framework for guiding the selection of “rational and defensible content” (p. 69) in the school history curriculum. He proposed the following criteria for this framework:

- Importance – the extent in which the events mattered to people of the past
- Profundity – the extent in which peoples’ lives affected by the events
- Quantity – the number of people affected by the events
- Durability – for how long the events affected people’s lives
- Relevance – how far did an understanding of the events enhance people’s understanding of the present day (Partington,1980)

Tim Lomas (1990) extended this thinking about significance by positing eight key ideas students ought to consider when ascribing significance to any historical event, development or actor. These are, namely, that

- History operates on the basis that some things are more important than other things.
- Assigning significance to something involves a subjective judgment.
- Minor causes can produce significant results and vice versa.
- Insignificant factors can act as powerful motivators.
- Some things can be more significant at times than at other times.
- It is important to work out criteria for assigning significance.
- Summarizing and generalizing are part of good history but that should not detract from the need for accuracy. Problems are not usually solved in history simply by going into more detail.

- It is possible for there to be different selections of significant facts about the same event or situations and all of them can be equally valid. There is no one unquestionable set of significant and true facts about a situation or event.
- Something becomes significant largely because it has a relationship to other things.  
(Lomas, 1990, p. 40)

Phillips (2002) and Counsell (2004) built on the work of Partington and Lomas to further delineate different sets of criteria students could use to think about the nature of historical significance. Counsell's (2004) work on historical significance has been considered particularly valuable because of her attempt to overcome three key obstacles stemming from the often naïve approaches used by students. The first obstacle is the notion that significance is a "matter of fixed consensus" (p. 30) and cannot be disputed. The second is the "easy appeal to 'relevance today'" (p. 30) – Counsell cautioned that while she did not discount the value of this approach, this way of thinking about significance opens us to the trap of presentist and anachronistic thinking, or making judgments through present-day lenses. The last obstacle, Counsell argued, is the failure to move beyond seeing significance simply in terms of consequences or results, a view echoed by Hunt (2003): "There is a danger in what may be an apparent overlap with the 'second order' concept of consequence. Greater understanding is more likely to be achieved if there is a clear understanding between the two" (p. 35).

Counsell proposed a set of criteria, the "Five R's", to facilitate students' thinking about significance:

- Remarkable – the event/development was remarked upon by people at the time and/or since.
- Remembered – the event/development was important at some stage in history within

the collective memory of a group or groups.

- Resonant – the event allows people to make analogies with it and connect with the experiences, beliefs or situations across time and space.
- Resulting in change – the event bore consequences for the future.
- Revealing – the event shed light on some other aspects of the past. (2004, p. 31)

As with those put forth by Lomas and Phillips, Counsell's pedagogical framework for historical significance is meant for use in the classroom and does little to reveal whether students really adhere to such criteria when left to their own devices to think about significance.

Nevertheless, the above ideas have influenced research on students' conceptions of historical significance conducted by other scholars.

One of the first of them was Peter Seixas. In his study of Grade 10 Canadian students (1994), he found that the students' responses on the subject fell mainly into two categories: historical significance was evidenced by the imparting of narrative explanations through which they were able to understand that the circumstances of the present are a result of developments of the past, or it was manifested in the form of analogies by which events of the past serve to inform the present by providing valuable lessons. Seixas noted that both approaches, especially the latter, could be problematic for advancing historical understanding, as students then tend to see history as a linear march of progress whereby the present is always deemed to be an improvement over the past.

In a later study in 1997, Seixas found that students' orientations towards the appraisal of historical significance fall along a continuum between two basic positions. On one end is what he called the "subjective orientation" wherein students' personal interests dominate. On the other end is the "objective orientation", from which students' "expressions of personal interests and

particular social locations apparently disappear in their assessment of world historical significance” (p. 23). Seixas observed that many students were able to move beyond these two basic positions to employ a more “intellectually legitimate” and “developed” set of criteria for assessing historical significance, which included considerations of significance based on impacts on large numbers of people or on groups to which the students belonged, and criteria that united students’ personal interests with the larger historical narrative (p. 23). Beyond outlining the broad categories of students’ reasoning about historical significance, Seixas’ study also suggested that some forms of thinking about historical significance are inherently simpler and less sophisticated than others.

In her study of students in Spain and England across three grade levels, Lis Cercadillo (2001) drew from the “conceptual apparatus” established from “the theoretical debate carried out by philosophers and historians” (p. 123) to categorize the students’ responses. Her aim was to construct a typology to categorize the variations of the students’ thinking about historical significance across the two countries. Cercadillo employed the following typology of significance in her analysis:

- Contemporary – the event was deemed significant to people at the time of the event
  - Causal – the significance of the event is tied to its causal power
  - Pattern – the event was seen as part of a larger pattern of change.
  - Symbolic – the significance is tied to how the past is used in the present such as for drawing moral lessons and for forging and reinforcing identities.
  - Present/Future – the event is seen as significant to the present and the future
- (Cercadillo, 2001)

Cercadillo also discerned patterns of progression in the students’ responses. For instance,

she noted that contemporary and causal significance seemed to be most commonly cited among her younger participants while pattern, symbolic, and present/future significance was more prevalent among the older students, with the latter two being the least employed. She deduced that the data suggests a progression with age through the different types of significance identified. For example, she concluded that the students who drew on symbolic and pattern-present significance reflected a higher level of sophistication than those who employed contemporary and causal significances. In addition, she noted that students who were able to perceive “considerations of significance as variable within or between attributions or types of significance” (p. 140) also displayed a higher level of sophistication in their thinking because they were able to move beyond seeing significance as a fixed value, an indicator of skill as pointed out by Counsell. A result of Cercadillo’s study has been the development of a progression model based on these five criteria to guide the development of students’ historical thinking.

Furthermore, Cercadillo’s study also found that the English students in her study who were taught history using “sources and in-depth studies in discussion” and were informed by “a sense of uncertainty in the epistemological study of the discipline” (p. 122) tended to develop higher levels of progression at earlier ages than their Spanish counterparts, whose experience in the history classroom was “more centred on content, coverage and chronology, and didactic methods” (p. 122). She concluded that cultural differences such as different classroom experiences in the two countries had shaped the students’ thinking about significance.

In a similar vein, Conway’s (2006) small study on how students’ preconceptions impact their understanding of historical significance investigated the level of sophistication students displayed in considering significance. Conway reported that his students had rigid ideas about

significance that were largely informed by the “huge range of preconceptions which they used to interpret the data” (p. 13). For example, he noticed that quite a significant number of his students equated “important” with “good” and used ahistorical notions of “good” and “bad” to make their judgments. He wrote, “[a]n unhistorical obsession with pollution that was held by a surprisingly high number of my pupils led to towns, technology and travel being condemned by many as a sort of axis of air-poisoning evil” (p. 12). In addition, the students also equated the notion of “good” with frequency as well as with “quantity.” Based on his findings, Conway came up with teaching strategies to identify the types of preconceptions his students brought to class as well as ways to help them move beyond these preconceptions.

Foo’s (2014) study was one of the first to investigate students’ ascriptions of historical significance in Singapore. Employing a framework based on Cercadillo’s (2001) typology on significance, Foo examined how 50 adolescents in three secondary schools in Singapore assigned significance to events and developments in Singapore’s history. As with Cercadillo, she found that the students were able to employ more than one criterion to evaluate the significance of events. They were also able to move beyond seeing significance as “fixed.” However, she noted that this flexibility only applied to inter-personal variability. In other words, although the students had no trouble understanding that perceived significance can vary because people hold different perspectives, they were still unable to see significance as varying over time. She noted that the students’ reasoning and justifications of their criteria tended to be simplistic, drawing as they did primarily from their “common or ‘everyday’ understandings” (p. 126), a concern also raised by Conway (2006). Foo attributed this to the dominant narrative of Singaporean history that is taught in the local classrooms. She contended that not exposing students to competing narratives can stunt students’ academic growth and keep them from acquiring a more

sophisticated understanding of historical significance, one that is more in tune with disciplinary thinking.

#### *2.1.1.1 Limitations of the structural and procedural focus.*

The research cited above follows in the tradition of looking at the criteria which students employ to assign significance to historical events or developments, and establishes frameworks or strategies that could help students progress from naïve to sophisticated ways of thinking about historical significance. This body of research is valuable in that it offers glimpses into the cognitive processes of historical reasoning as undertaken by students, and suggests ways in which we could help students overcome their preconceptions or develop their ideas more fully, so as better to engage in disciplinary thinking.

However, a drawback of this tradition, as Barton (2008) argues, is that it privileges certain groups of people and certain ways of thinking, and assumes that all other ways of approaching the past are either groundless or underdeveloped. A corollary of this is the creation of hierarchical constructs of attainment, with the highest level being that of the historian. He contends that

hierarchical schemes of thinking portray the perspective of historians as the most mature, most rational way of approaching the past. Whenever we set up hierarchies – in schooling or in society more generally – we naturalize our own way of thinking instead of recognizing it as a social construction...Standards of historical thinking can easily become a mask for our own prejudices, and we can dismiss people with whom we disagree as irrational – or as not having achieved mature historical thought. (p. 154)

Another, related drawback is the limitation of this approach to consider the influence of

the social, cultural, and political environment in which the thinking about historical significance takes place. “All thinking is social”, as Karl Mannheim (1982) claimed, and “thinking and interpreting are always a vital function of the social community” (p. 149). Wertsch (1998) too cautions against the “temptation to treat individuals as if they possess some kind of abstract attribute such as intelligence, independent of any context” (p. 37). A research agenda that focuses primarily on cognitive development misses the opportunity to probe the substantive content and the larger social, cultural and historical factors that inform students’ ideas about progress and decline; such an agenda would also fail to discover the topics and events which they hold to be more significant than others, or even to determine why students hold certain preconceptions about history (Barton, 2005, 2008a; Barton & Levstik, 1998 Levstik, 2008). Seixas’ (1997) discovery of subjective-objective orientations throws up interesting angles for further investigation into the relationships between students’ private and public assessments of matters of world significance, while Cercadillo’s findings on cross-cultural differences between England and Spain leaves one wondering what factors, other than the differences in the school curriculum, were involved. Likewise, had Conway probed further into his students’ preconceptions, he might have gained a clearer understanding of the values, beliefs and (sub)cultures that had shaped their views. Unearthing such information would have provided richer insights and contributed to fleshing out the frameworks and strategies already developed to inform classroom instruction.

### **2.1.2 Substantive focus.**

The second tradition in studying students’ conceptions of historical understanding focuses directly on the substance or topics that undergird students’ judgments of historical significance (Barton, 2005). This research has been largely conducted by scholars from North

America (Almarza, 2001; Barton, 2005; Barton & Levstik, 1998; Epstein, 1998, 2000; Levstik, 1999, 2001; Seixas, 1993; Terzian & Yeager, 2007; Yeager, Foster & Greer, 2002).

Sociocultural perspectives inform this body of research in that they situate students' historical sense-making process in cultural, social, historical and institutional contexts. This approach is premised upon the belief that the way we think and understand the world is always mediated by our social and cultural setting (Barton, 2005; Levstik, 2008). As Hall (1989) pointed out:

There is no way...in which people of the world can act, can speak, can create, can come in from the margins and talk, can begin to reflect on their own experience unless they come from some *place*, they come from some history, they inherit certain cultural traditions. (p. 18)

A key focus of this research tradition is on the relationship between students' identities and their historical thinking. Such research attends to the themes and narratives that shape students' conceptions of historical significance. At the same time, it also probes students' consumption and production of historical narratives, both in public spaces (schools, museums, media) and private ones (home, communities) (Mosborg, 2002; Seixas, 1993; Tulviste & Wertsch, 1994; Wertsch, 2000a).

One of the earliest studies to explore how the intersection between familial sources of history and school sources influences three aspects of students' historical thinking was also conducted by Seixas (1993). Among the six students interviewed, five were either first- or second-generation immigrants. In the study, Seixas observed that the themes and events that the students identified as areas of significance did not match up with those that they had studied in their Social Studies curriculum. The students also tended to draw from a variety of sources such as their families, television and popular culture to inform their choices. Among these sources,

family stories and experiences seemed to play the most instrumental role in influencing “their underlying approaches to history” (p. 320). Seixas also noticed that two students experienced cultural dissonance between their cultural backgrounds and their host society; in particular, they found it hard to bring their family’s historical experience into areas of the public sphere, such as school, or establish any connections between what was learned at school and what is known at home.

Barton and Levstik found in a 1998 study conducted with students from fifth through eighth grades that their students’ selection of significant events in American history tended to conform to the national narrative, which emphasized the themes of the origin and development of the United States, American exceptionalism (especially in the domains of freedoms and opportunities), and technological advancement. The concept of a linear march of progress was also evident in the responses. Despite this, Barton and Levstik found that students from different racial groups, like the African American students, maintained an alternative narrative that highlighted continuing discrimination in the private and public spheres as compared to their European American counterparts, who saw this continuation as a “puzzle.” These alternative narratives, which they described as “vernacular” – a term used by Bodnar (1994) – were hard for these students to reconcile with the prevailing narrative. In line with Seixas’ findings, the study also found that students’ alternative interpretations of events are nurtured and reinforced by their family experiences and narratives.

Levstik conducted a study in 2000 to compare students’ conceptions of historical significance with those of teachers and teacher candidates in the United States. In accordance with her earlier findings, the events selected by the two groups of participants reflected the collective identity and social unity of the United States. The European American students faced

challenges trying to reconcile events with the narrative of progress which they had been exposed to in schools and other contexts. The events in question were considered to have a negative impact on the collective national identity and social cohesion. Conversely, the African American students were able to accept this dissonance, in the process displaying a more nuanced understanding of the narrative of progress. Levstik found that the teachers in her study avoided discussing issues that complicated the narrative of progress. Their reason for not doing so was that they felt that the issues were too complicated for their elementary students and could jeopardize their sense of national identity. Moreover, the teachers viewed these events as aberrations rather than the norm. The study was informative on two counts. First, it revealed a gap between students' interests and teachers' beliefs about the reasons for teaching American history. Second, it confirmed other findings showing that ethnic minority students possess a different understanding of the narrative of progress. Some of these students did voice their views during the interviews while others tended to fall silent. Levstik argued that future research should take this into consideration when forming interview groups.

In the same vein, Epstein's (1998, 2000) studies revealed that the most common themes raised by her Grade 11 students when discussing the American national narrative were nation building, freedom, and equality. Her studies also affirmed that students' racialized identities influence their perceptions of the experiences of different racial groups and the role played by the government in shaping those experiences. Epstein found that as compared to the European American students, the African American students were more disposed to trusting the knowledge they gained from their own communities; they also rejected the version of history that they encountered in the school curriculum. Thus, instead of accepting the mainstream account of American history, which depicts the nation as progressive, exceptional and emancipative, they

tended to characterize American history as filled with oppression, discrimination, and injustice. This was in part due to their view that the principles of democracy and meritocracy have disproportionately benefited European Americans since the nation's formation, and that present-day practices continue to marginalize and oppress minority groups like African Americans, Native Americans and Japanese Americans.

Almarza's (2001) study of 18 Mexican American students in a middle school in a Midwestern town in the United States illustrated the disconnect that minority students feel from a historical narrative presented from a predominantly white perspective. The Mexican American students pointed out the meaninglessness of engaging with a school history curriculum that held no significance to them because it had excluded the voices of their ancestors and their people. Their feelings of alienation, which were also manifested in their lack of voluntary participation in the class, were heightened by their teacher's pattern of calling on students. Many students in the study shared that they refused to participate in the class voluntarily because of their previous experiences with perceived race-based discrimination from their teacher. Almarza's study demonstrated strongly how "overlapping" contexts (school English as a Second Language policies, classroom practices, teachers' beliefs) could result in the exclusion of minority students from their learning of history, leading to their rejection of the history course as a pointless exercise.

Studies have also been carried out in other countries to investigate how students think about historical significance internationally. For example, Levstik (1999) investigated New Zealand students' understanding of historical significance. Her findings revealed that students were inclined to structure their conceptions of historical significance from two locations – the global and the local. She noticed that the students' conceptions of historical significance were

framed by New Zealanders' view of their place in the world, which stresses fairness and peaceful coexistence, and reflects their modest claim on the world stage. Levstik concluded that history education in New Zealand serves the purposes of national identification as well as the development of national pride. However, she observed that students from different ethnic groups held different ideas of significance concerning the same event. For instance, the Pakeha (non-Maori) students saw the Treaty of Waitangi as beneficial because it had led to what they viewed as a fair distribution of land, while the Maoris and Pacific Islanders saw the Treaty as a reminder of their community's struggle to keep their land.

Yeager, Foster and Greer (2002) conducted a cross-cultural study to investigate and compare how eighth graders from the United States and United Kingdom think about historical significance. Their study confirmed earlier findings showing that students in the United States tend to select events that underscore their national identity. Indicators of this identification were the frequent use of plural pronouns such as "we", "our", and "us" in their responses. They also noted that the American students' responses tended to be less culture bound than those of their English counterparts. Even though most of the English students' choices tended to reflect their English background, the study showed that ethnic identities also shaped the choices of some students in the United Kingdom.

Over in Northern Ireland, Barton (2005) investigated Northern Irish students' conceptions of historical significance by comparing them to those of students from the United States. Barton's study probed the substantive content of the Irish students' explanations, revealing dominant themes that shaped their judgments. He noticed that these themes differed greatly from those of their American counterparts. The Irish students' choices reflected a strong emphasis on death and hardship and the need to remember the hardships endured by their

community. Their choices also focused on the events that were considered responsible for the political conflicts between the Catholic and Protestant communities in Northern Ireland, which were still playing out in contemporary times. In addition, the Irish students' choices reflected the formation of the current demographic and political makeup of Northern Ireland. Barton's study showed that despite the similarities in the themes chosen by both the Catholic and Protestant students in Northern Ireland, the justifications for and perspectives on the same events would differ. Perceptions of fairness also varied significantly between these two religious communities. The findings suggest that a more nuanced understanding is needed of the role played by group identities as well as gender on shaping students' ideas about historical significance. Barton noted that despite their different perspectives, the students in Northern Ireland were "not overly committed to their sectarian historical perspectives" and did "apply their criteria of significance to members of both communities" (p. 36).

In Canada, Lévesque (2005) adapted the research instruments used by Barton and Levstik (1998) to investigate Canadian students' conceptions of historical significance in an Ontario high school. Drawing on the criteria established by Phillips (2002) and Partington (1986), Lévesque introduced three alternative criteria which he claimed could offer more complex explanations than contemporary approaches to assigning significance to events in the past. These criteria – "intimate interests", "symbolic significance", and "contemporary lessons" – reflect the subjective and personal interests of individuals. Lévesque's study revealed that linguistic differences between Anglophone and Francophone students played an important role in determining their list of significant events. He also noted that the Anglophone students tended to use disciplinary criteria (Phillips' criteria) to make judgments on historical significance while the Francophone students were more inclined to use personal and subjective criteria in their

considerations. Lévesque argued that the reason for this was due in part to the fact that the Francophone students were of a minority culture. Hence, as the previous studies by Barton, Levstik and Almarza indicated, these students' assigning of significance to events constituted an expression of their Francophone identity.

#### *2.1.2.1 Limitations of the substantive focus.*

This second tradition in studying students' understanding of historical significance has yielded invaluable insights into the "substance" of students' ideas as well as the ways in which different aspects of students' identities are most salient in influencing their judgments or ideas about significance. However, these studies tend to focus on one to two aspects of identity (e.g. race, nationality, or ethnicity). A small number of studies using the substantive approach have nevertheless complicated this view of identity. For instance, Barton and McCully (2005) discovered that the religious backgrounds of the Irish students did not play a significant role in shaping the students' identification with different aspects of Northern Irish history. The researchers observed that their students' responses defied were not confined to their community backgrounds. The majority of their students tend to draw on events that extend beyond the Protestant/Unionist or Catholic/Nationalist history. However, Barton and McCully noted that there were considerable differences among students from different grade levels. They observed that over the course of their three years of secondary schooling, students' historical identifications became increasingly "narrowed" to focus on "community-based historical themes, or with the contemporary troubles" (p.95). They also noticed that gender, school type and geographical locations of the students' community influenced these identifications.

In their investigation of high-achieving Latino students' notions of significance, Terzian and Yeager (2007) found that contrary to the findings of Epstein, Almarza and Levstik, the

Cuban American students adhered closely to the national narrative of progress and American exceptionalism. To explain their findings, Terzian and Yeager drew on studies on Latino political behavior which show that Cuban Americans tend to identify themselves as white, have higher educational attainment, are more economically successful and politically conservative, and constitute a majority in the local community in which the school is located; their findings demonstrated that ethnicity alone is not a key determinant in influencing students' thinking. Instead, their study highlighted the effect of the intersections of multiple identity markers and their interplay on students' conceptions of historical significance.

Similarly, using the lens of ethnicity, Peck (2010) explicitly asked Canadian students in her study to talk about their ethnic identities and to consider how the latter would influence their ascriptions of historical significance. She noted that many of her subjects described their ethnicity in terms of some form of hybrid identity, drawing on their racial and national affiliations, political inclinations, and cultural and religious practices. Peck found that the students in her study employed different narrative templates and criteria that aligned with the way they defined their ethnic identities, to describe the significance of historical events in Canadian history. Peck's study was noteworthy in that she explicitly asked students to reflect on their identities and to consider historical significance from the standpoint of their ethnic identities.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, the notion that students hold multiple identities offers only a limited explanation of the relationship between students' identities and their reasoning about significance. Liggett (2014) argued that "the notion of identity, however, should not be approached simply as the coexistence of a plurality of positions or as an aggregate of factors but as a contextually dependent interchange of material and symbolic positionality" (p. 2).

Furthermore, Levstik's (2008) point that significance is a "slippery concept" (p. 231) that is contingent on contexts suggests that ideas on significance are not static. What this implies is that identities might shift in different contexts. This does not mean that the essence of our beings changes, but that the positions that we adopt may change accordingly. A corollary of this is that the lenses offered by our identities to make judgments on historical significance can change as well.

## **2.2 The Conceptual Framework of this Study**

This dissertation follows in the second tradition of examining the influence of students' identities on their judgments of historical significance. However, it problematizes the conception of identity and seeks to extend current conceptions of identity by offering conceptual clarity on which aspects of students' identities are more prominent when they engage in historical tasks. Drawing from the works of feminist scholars (Maher & Tetreault, 1993) and cultural theorists (Anthias, 2002; Hall, 2000), this study posits that identity should be looked at as a form of positioning. In order to better understand Singaporean students' identities and their judgments on historical significance, I employ notions of positionality and sociocultural perspectives to inform the conceptual framework for the study.

### **2.2.1 Positionality.**

Positionality is a widely used concept in both feminist studies and ethnic studies. It was first used by Linda Alcoff (1988) to reconceptualize women's identity. She rejected the notion that women passively receive their identity from predetermined external forces. To her, the woman is always actively involved in the interpretation and reconstruction of her own identity within a "cultural discursive context to which she has access" (p. 434). Alcoff posited that the concept of positionality ensures that the identity of a woman is fluid and is not threatened by

essentialism. Positionality as such denotes that “the concept of woman is a relational term identifiable only within a (constantly moving) context” and “the position that women find themselves in can be actively utilized (rather than transcended) as a location for the construction of meaning, a place from where meaning can be *discovered*” (1988, p. 434). Maher and Tetreault (1993) advanced Alcoff’s notion of positionality to investigate the relationship between the interplay of contexts and differing identities. They maintained that “[k]nowledge is valid when it includes an acknowledgement of the knower’s specific position in any context, because changing contextual and relational factors are crucial for defining identities and our knowledge in any given situation” (Maher & Tetreault, 1993, p. 118). They argued that positionality assumes that “people are defined not in terms of fixed identities, but by their location within shifting networks of relationships, which can be analyzed and changed” (Maher & Tetreault, 2001, p. 164).

Implicit in positionality is the view that our identities are not determined solely by conventional markers such as race, nationality, ethnicity, gender, and religious affinity, but also by our participation within different collectivities. In our interactions with each of these collectivities, such as family, school, work, neighborhood, religious communities, the state, and other formal and informal groupings, we take up different roles. In the process of our participation and interactions, we not only construct and represent our social space but also engage in and contribute to the practices of that space (Acevedo et al., 2015). Anthias (2002) maintained that positionality is both a reference to our social positions and how we position ourselves using the resources provided by these social positions. It is often manifested in our actions and practices, and the meanings we ascribe to our experiences. Hence positionality can be construed as a form of mediation whereby individuals draw from, appropriate, and are shaped by different identity markers (e.g. race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, nationality, and family)

and tools (e.g. narratives, artifacts, symbols, and language) to create identification as well as to practice and perform that identification.

At the heart of this conception is the way we negotiate our relationships and positionality in relation to others in different social contexts. This positionality is in turn determined by our sense of belonging at a given point in time and location. It demarcates our inclusion within different groups or networks and captures our shared and common ways of life. Our sense of belonging is laden with feelings and emotions (Anthias, 2013). Because this sense of belonging differs in different contexts, the latter might also prompt us to activate different belief systems which in turn emphasize different criteria in our consideration and ascriptions of significance, bearing out Wertsch's point that "what is said and thought in one setting may vary greatly from what is said and thought in another" (2000, p. 45).

In sum, the value of using positionality in place of identity to study students is that it recognizes the way they identify themselves based on social identity markers such as ethnicity, nationality, race, socioeconomic status, age, academic status, and location; at the same time, it recognizes that students are agents who determine the way they position themselves in different contexts. Context, as defined by Kezar and Lester (2010), comprises "the circumstances and conditions in which an individual exists, such as an organization, community, or nation." They added, "[c]ontexts contain cultures that represent a shared system of rituals and significance that give meaning and power to an individual's role" (p. 168). In this manner, positionality enabled me to examine the ways in which students in Singapore partake in the cultures and shared rituals as well as the belief systems which shape the way they define their positionalities. The concept also allowed me to better capture instances where students positioned themselves differently, and assess whether these different positions had affected their judgments on significance.

### **2.2.2 Sociocultural perspectives.**

Sociocultural perspectives are founded on the basis that our social, cultural, political, historical and institutional environments shape the way we make sense of the world. Lewis, Enciso and Moje (2007) argued that sociocultural theory and perspectives enable us “to explore the intersection of social, cultural, historical, mental, physical, and, more recently, political aspects of sense-making, [and] interaction” (p. 2). As such, they consider all activities (internal and external) taking place within a social context and “all participation to embody the identities, relationships, and positioning of the actors within that context” (Nolen, 2007, p. 242). In other words, when students participate in a particular activity, they bring their identities (positionality) into that participation. This positionality is shaped by their experiences in their homes, different classroom contexts, and social interactions, and these experiences collectively contribute to their self-conception and to a repertoire of practices that affect their ability to capitalize on the opportunities and affordances within a particular community to construct and position themselves in relation to others (Nolen & Ward, 2007).

This study is premised on Wertsch’s (1998) view of mediated action, wherein he asserts that all human actions involve mediation. These actions include “speaking, thinking, and remembering” (Wertsch, 2000a, p. 40). He observes that an “irreducible tension” always exists between “active agents” (individuals or groups) and the “cultural tools” used by these agents “to carry out action” (Wertsch, 2000b, p. 512). Cultural tools are artifacts, symbols, systems, and processes that are created and “provided in the sociocultural setting (context) in which we operate” (Wertsch, del Rio & Alvarez, 1995, p. 25). Cultural tools not only provide us an avenue for making sense of the different types of encounters we have with this world, they also enable

us to engage with the world. For example, language, with all its symbols and sounds, provides us with the means to communicate, learn, and even create new knowledge and means of understanding. Yet cultural tools are Janus-faced in nature. On one hand, they provide affordances to help us engage with the world, and on the other, they constrain and limit our ability to engage with the world.

According to Wertsch (1998, 2000b), narratives are a form of cultural tool used to produce historical representations. Wertsch's conception of narratives is rooted in Bakhtin's (1986) notion that utterances are units of speech, and that heteroglossia is the process of appropriating the words of others as one's own (1998, 2000b). In this perspective, the act of speaking or narrating is a form of mediated action which can only establish its effect when it is used to produce an utterance. Each utterance, in Bakhtin's (1986) view, is "individual, unique and unrepeatable" (p. 105). What emerges is "multivoicedness," wherein we discern the voice of the speaker producing the utterance as well as the voice of the cultural tool (historical narrative) in a specific context (Wertsch, 1998). Wertsch (2008) argued that since narratives were created by collective groups in the past, the language and utterances that make up the narrative almost always belonged to other people who had used them to serve particular purposes in specific contexts. Narratives contain general plotlines and "schematic structures" (p. 49). According to Wertsch, each of these plotlines or schema "exists at an abstract level" and involves vague "details about specific actors, times, [and] places" (2008, p. 66). The narrative template functions as a structure for individuals to make sense of the past. Wertsch contended that narrative templates are "especially effective in organizing what we can say and think." He added that because they are an essential part of a collective group's claim to identity, the user is often unconscious of the fact that he or she is using them. As such, these narrative templates have

become “coauthors” to our accounts of the past (Wertsch, 2008, p. 66).

In the context of this research, I examine the narrative templates students draw upon to reason and make judgments on what counts as significant in Singapore’s past. I also examine the affordances and constraints imposed by this tool on their reasoning, and observe if students’ utterances on historical significance are in alignment or discord with one another.

The intent of this chapter was to provide a review of the extant literature on research on historical significance. I have highlighted the existing gaps which I hope my study can help to plug. I have also provided an explanation of the theoretical concepts that inform my conceptual framework for examining how students in Singapore define their identities and how these identities can shape the way they make judgments on historical significance. I present the findings of my study in the next two chapters.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **Methodology**

In this chapter I present the research design and method chosen for this study. I begin with providing a rationale for choosing to use the qualitative case study design. I then address my role and position as a researcher for this study. Next, I describe my research site, explaining my selection choices among my participants whilst accounting for the issues of access and permission. I then discuss my choice of data collection methods and conclude with the process and methods used to analyze the data.

#### **3.1 Qualitative Case Study Design**

The aim of my study was to examine students' sense-making process with regard to their experiences with Singapore's historical narratives. In particular, I was interested in finding out how different aspects of students' identities, articulated through their notions of positionality, would shape their reasoning and judgments about historical significance in different contexts. In this respect, my study adheres to the belief that an understanding of how we construct meaning in the social world can be achieved only when we take into consideration the context and the interpretive framework in which they operate. The qualitative research method was adopted for this study because it allows the researcher to penetrate the "imaginative universe" within which students act, behave and talk (Geertz, 1973, p. 13). Atkinson, Coffey and Delamont (2001) affirm this by claiming that "one of the strengths of the qualitative traditions [is] that we are attentive to the life-worlds and voices of individuals and social groups that reflect the heterogeneity of social life" (p. 8).

The case study approach was also adopted for this study because of its ability to examine the "case" within its real life context, in order to illuminate a particular phenomenon. In other

words, this study was conducted within the very contexts where students interpret their experiences, construct their worlds, and make judgments and decisions on historical issues.

Robert Yin (2009) defines a case study as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (p. 18). Similarly, Stake (2005) emphasized this embeddedness of the “case” in context:

The case to be studied is a complex entity located in a milieu or situation embedded in a number of contexts or backgrounds. Historical context is almost always of interest, but so are cultural and physical contexts. Other contexts often of interest are the social, economic, political, ethical, and aesthetic. (p. 449)

The design of the study also fitted with the instrumental type of casework as outlined by Stake (2005), where the purpose is to offer insights into an issue rather than on the case itself. This case study approach thus allowed me to acquire an in-depth and firsthand understanding of how students conceptualize their positionalities and how these conceptualizations affect the way they make sense of historical events.

Miles and Huberman (1994) defined a case as “a phenomenon of some sort occurring in a bounded context” (p. 25). Similarly, Creswell (1998) argued that a case study constitutes “an exploration of a ‘bounded system’ or a case (or multiple cases) over time through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple contexts” (p. 61). Besides being bounded by the phenomenon I was interested in studying, which is how Singaporean students make sense of historical narratives, this research was also bounded in three other ways. First, the study focused specifically on two classes of Secondary Three students taking a specific course subject

(Combined Humanities) in Singapore. In this sense, the study adhered to Elger's (2009) definition of the commonsense bounding of a case, wherein the objects of study have "clearly defined spatial boundaries as they are experienced and conceptualized in everyday life" (p. 56).

Second, the study was also spatially and temporally bounded (Creswell, 1998; Elger, 2009; Yin, 2009) in that it took place in two secondary schools in Singapore and over a period of about six weeks, from the late of March to the end of April 2014. Third, it was also bounded by prior theoretical perspectives which guided the conceptualization, data collection and analysis of the study (Elger, 2009; Yin, 2006 & 2009). In conceiving this study from a sociocultural perspective, I took up Wertsch's (2000) sociocultural approach to see all human action (internal or external) as involving mediation, whereby humans use "tools" or "mediational means" available in their historical sociocultural settings to carry out action. Hence, the study utilizes a variety of evidence that includes documents, interviews and observations to "explicate the relationship between human action, on the one hand, and the cultural, institutional, and historical situations in which this action occurs" (Wertsch & Alvarez, 1995, p. 11).

### **3.2 Researcher's Role and Position**

Historians or historical thinkers are required to consider their positionalities when conducting any historical inquiry. Our positionalities cannot help but be infused with both political and sociocultural contexts which influence the kinds of questions asked, our attention to evidence, and the way we interpret historical accounts (VanSledright, 1997-98). In a similar vein, in discussing feminist approaches to research as a process, Hesse-Biber, Leavy & Yaiser (2004) have also observed that "all research occurs within a society. The society's beliefs, ideologies, traditions, structure, etc., all impact the research in multiple ways. Feminist objectivity acknowledges the fact that the researcher is going to bring the influences of society

into the project” (p. 13). As such, they echo Schwandt’s (1997) call for researchers to examine their “personal and theoretical commitments to see how they serve as resources for generating particular data, for behaving in particular ways...and for developing particular interpretations” (p. 136).

My approach towards this research was shaped by my position as a “cultural insider” (Ganga & Scott, 2006). Having spent 16 years in the Singaporean education system – ten years in government-subsidized girls’ primary and secondary schools, two years in a junior college, three years in a local university, and five years as a History and English Language teacher in a government school – I was familiar with the educational landscape and the social, economic, and cultural milieu in Singapore at a macro level. At the micro level, I was also acquainted with the department, enunciations, nuances of meaning, idioms, and conceptions of students and teachers. For example, while English is the language of instruction and the main mode of communication in school,<sup>4</sup> Singaporean students tend to slip into “Singlish” when interacting with each other in informal situations. As a creole language, Singlish has its own distinctive grammatical structure, pronunciation, and vocabulary which often incorporates the vocabulary of the various ethnic groups in Singapore (Gupta, 1994). At times, students also fall back on their ethnic languages when interacting with students from their own ethnic group. As a fellow Singaporean, my ability to speak English, Chinese, a variety of conversational Chinese dialects, and some rudimentary Malay proved helpful both in observing students’ interactions during these informal situations (e.g. side conversations in class and during group discussions or along the corridors) as well as in understanding their Singlish utterances natively.

My professional experience as a curriculum officer in the Ministry of Education (MOE)

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<sup>4</sup> Many linguists who study the nature and use of the English language in Singapore commonly term this official form of English as Standard Singapore English.

in Singapore also offered me insights regarding the considerations and processes involved in the design and writing of the history syllabi and the attendant teaching resources, such as textbooks and workbooks. In addition, professional interactions and collaborations with history teachers had also allowed me to appreciate the constraints and affordances that influenced teachers' pedagogical decisions and topic choices in the classroom. This awareness helped me to better appreciate how history is taught and used in schools. On the other hand, I was also cognizant that my insider background could bias the way I collect, analyze, and interpret my data. As Weston (2004) noted a shared identity or cultural proximity can obscure research as "presumptions of a common frame of reference and shared identity can...complicate the anthropologist's task by leaving cultural notions implicit, making her work to get people to state, explain, and situate the obvious" (p. 202). My familiarity with school norms, the local culture, and the history curriculum could lead me to pass over noteworthy nuggets in my data that might otherwise provide further insights into the phenomenon I was investigating. To counteract this familiarity, I adopted the use of exit notes and reflective questions to help me process my data.

I found that my status as a graduate student at the University of Washington helped to mitigate some of these biases. The three years that I spent away from Singapore (2010 -2013), my exposure to different perspectives regarding Social Studies/History education and conceptions of citizenship, and my awareness of post-colonial theories had provided me with knowledge and experience that would help in maintaining an intervening distance from the familiarity of the Singaporean context, hence "making the familiar strange", to use Erickson's (1973) words. Exposure to feminist theories and research also helped me to be more reflective in terms of understanding my positionality vis-à-vis my research project. On top of this, my short involvement in a research project investigating the incorporation of project work in U.S.

Advanced Placement classrooms had exposed me to a community of experienced researchers from different disciplinary backgrounds. Through participating in their discussions and deliberations, I had also learned to appreciate the different lenses and perspectives used to approach the project as well as ask reflective questions in the course of my own research. In addition, my experience in conducting a small-scale research study in a Grade 11 U.S. History class, as part of a course on research methods, also allowed me to put into practice what I had learned and hone my skills as a researcher. In particular, I have come to recognize the need for flexibility, open-mindedness, and the willingness to question and even discard pre-existing constructs and theories in order to allow for new ones to emerge and to be built. I found my postgraduate experience extremely beneficial later on in my data analysis and interpretation.

### **3.3 Research Site Selection**

This study took place in two secondary schools in Singapore, which shall be known by the respective pseudonyms of Cardamom Secondary School and Tamarind Secondary School. In order to study the phenomenon of how students in Singapore schools reason and make judgments about the historical significance of events in Singapore's history, I sought to select my research sites and participants based on three criteria.

The first was the academic track of the students. I selected participants from two schools in the Express academic track, which comprises the largest proportion of students (about 62%) among the three academic tracks – Express, Normal Academic and Normal Technical. These tracks are designed to match students' learning pace, ability and inclinations (Ministry of Education, 2013). The streaming of students to the respective tracks in secondary schools is largely determined by their performance in the national Primary School Leaving Examinations (PSLE), one of the two crucial examinations students in Singapore have to undergo in order to

progress to secondary and post-secondary learning institutions. Students sit for the PSLE when they are in Primary Six (twelve years of age on average). Upon receiving their results, students apply for admission to a secondary school during the annual Secondary One Posting Exercise. Although students have a chance to select the school of their choice, the secondary school and academic track in which they are placed are largely determined by their PSLE performance. In general, students tend to progress through their secondary education in their prescribed track, although a small number transfer track based on their academic performance at Secondary One and Two.

My second criterion for selection was based on the students' knowledge of Singapore history. Bearing in mind Levstik's (2008) point that "establishing significance requires students to have more formal exposure to history, including the recognition of people, ideas and events" (p. 234), limiting my study to Secondary Three students served my purposes because the students would have gone through compulsory in-depth study of Singapore's history in the previous year, at Secondary Two. This is on top of the iterations of different aspects of Singapore's history they would have been exposed to in their primary school Social Studies lessons. This familiarity ensured that discussion and reasoning on events of historical significance would, as much as possible, not be affected by a lack of knowledge or exposure to Singapore's history. Moreover, students at Secondary Three are also required to study the Combined Humanities subject which is made up of a compulsory Social Studies component and a Humanities Elective – History, Geography or Literature – of their choice. The Social Studies component focuses on key issues that "affect the socioeconomic [development], governance and future of Singapore" (Ministry of Education, 2013, p. 2). This means that the students were expected to draw on their knowledge of history to contextualize and engage with these contemporary issues. Given the focus of the

study on students' reasoning about historical significance, only students who took the Social Studies and History Elective combination were considered.

My third criterion for selection was based on the official categorization of schools. There are four main categories of school in Singapore: government (77%), government-aided (18%), independent (2%), and specialized (3%).<sup>5</sup> Government schools are fully funded by the government and generally adopt the mainstream curriculum prescribed by MOE. Government-aided schools are funded partially by MOE and partially by their respective affiliated religious or clan associations. By and large, these schools also adopt the mainstream curriculum. Independent schools are granted the autonomy to design their own curriculum, set their own school fees, and admit their own students. Specialized schools are schools that offer customized learning environments to cater to students with specific inclinations, such as for hands-on vocational instruction, and subject specializations like Arts, Sports, Math and Science (MOE, 2013).

In addition to the four main categories, some government and government-aided schools (19%) are accorded "autonomous" status. Autonomous schools receive additional funding from the government to develop a broader range of programs in order to enhance learning and develop the specific talents of their students. These schools may also charge extra monthly fees to cover the costs of the enhanced programs (MOE, 2012). Autonomous schools are typically known for their niche programmes. As compared to non-autonomous schools, they have more flexibility where it comes to customizing their curricula, though unlike independent schools, most adhere relatively closely to the mainstream curriculum. Autonomous schools tend to draw in the top 33% of the PSLE candidates, the rest going to non-autonomous government or government-aided schools. For students in government schools, aggregate scores in the PSLE as well as the General Cambridge Examinations for Ordinary Level (which are the school leaving

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<sup>5</sup> From *Education Statistics Digest*, 2013, Ministry of Education, 2013.

examinations that determine placement in post-secondary learning institutions) reflect the national average, with those in autonomous schools performing slightly better.

I omitted the independent schools from consideration for my research because they are generally meant for the academically gifted and elite who scored exceptionally well in their PSLE. In addition, these schools often offer their own customized equivalent of the Secondary Three Combined Humanities subject. I decided to focus on an autonomous government school and a non-autonomous government school because they contain the largest proportion of secondary school students in Singapore.

In addressing the different ways in which cases may be bound, Elger (2009) raised the issue that the boundaries of a case could sometimes be set by “practical constraints, including exigencies of access and research deadlines” (p. 58). In conducting my study, I had to shift my boundaries where the demographics of the students were concerned. My intent, as indicated in my proposal, was to select a class from each school that encompassed the most diversity in terms of race and gender. However, it was not possible to fulfill this criterion due to two reasons. First, the enrolment for the Social Studies/History Elective combination course was determined by students’ selection of their desired Elective and also by the school’s decision, based on resource availability, whether or not to take up the combination. As such, it was not within my control to ensure diversity of representation. Second, the selection of the schools was restricted by access issues. Upon obtaining approval from the University of Washington’s Human Subjects Division and Singapore’s Ministry of Education, I approached a number of teachers. A few declined to participate in the study. Some of the reasons cited included their involvement in other research projects, their commitment to piloting new syllabi and textbooks for MOE, and the unlikelihood of their school leaders agreeing to the study. Access to the two participating schools was

eventually facilitated by the researcher’s acquaintance with the teachers as well as key figures such as the Principals, Vice-Principals and Heads of Department. Despite the constraints, the selection of the participants in this study still met the purposeful sampling method with a maximum variation (Patton, 2001) in terms of students’ academic ability and school culture.

### 3.4 Research Participants

The participants in this study comprised mainly 14 to 15 year old students in two Social Studies/History Elective classes. Out of a total of 61 students, 62.3% (n=38) participated in the study. Most were Singaporeans with a few from Indonesia, the Philippines, China, and Malaysia. Out of the 38 participants, 31 (81.6%) were Chinese, 4 (10.5%) Malays, 1 (2.6%) Indian and 1 (2.6%), a Permanent Resident of a Southeast Asian country, in the Others category. Table 1 provides a summary of the study participants by school.

Table 1: Summary of Participants by School

Secondary School	School Type	Total	Gender		Race/Ethnicity			
			Female	Male	Chinese	Malay	Indian	Others <sup>a</sup>
Cardamom	Government Autonomous	20	10	10	18	2	0	0
Tamarind	Government	18	11	7	14	2	1	1
<b>Total</b>		<b>38</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>

*Note:* Data from questionnaire.

<sup>a</sup> In Singapore, the racial/ethnic groups are classified under the official C.M.I.O. (Chinese, Malay, Indian and Others) Model. Any other racial or ethnic groups besides Chinese, Malay and Indian, are classified under the category of Others.

Although not fully representative of the racial composition in Singapore, the students’ racial profiles did not deviate too far from the national ethnic composition of 74.2% Chinese, 13.3% Malay, 9.1% Indian, and 3.3% Others (Table 2).

Table 2: Comparison of Ethnic Composition of Participants with National Proportion

Race/Ethnicity	Participants' Composition	National Composition*
Chinese	84.2%	74.2%
Malay	10.5%	13.3%
Indian	2.6%	9.1%
Others	2.6%	3.3%

*\*Data obtained from Contact Singapore, a resource jointly administered by the Singapore Economic Development Board and the Ministry of Manpower, 2015.*

Based on the responses in the questionnaire, I then invited 24 students for the interviews. As this research was conducted in the second term of the academic year, it coincided with the schools' term tests, along with non-curricular school activities such as Speech Days and the inter-school national sports competitions. Moreover, the students were also preparing to take their mid-year examinations commencing in early May 2014. As such, it was understandable that many were either reluctant or unable to participate in the interviews as their schedules could not accommodate the interview dates. In the end, only 15 students were able to complete all the interviews: the first individual interview, focus group interview, and second individual interview. Table 3 lists these 15 students.

Table 3: Summary of Profiles of Interview Participants

Student	School	Gender	Race/ Ethnicity	Place of Birth	Citizenship
Megan	Cardamom	Female	Chinese	Singapore	Singaporean
Yiling	Cardamom	Female	Chinese	Singapore	Singaporean
Phoebe	Cardamom	Female	Chinese	Singapore	Singaporean
Juyan	Cardamom	Female	Chinese	Singapore	Singaporean
Hazreen#	Cardamom	Male	Malay	Singapore	Singaporean
Bocheng	Cardamom	Male	Chinese	Singapore	Singaporean
Xianzheng	Cardamom	Male	Chinese	Singapore	Singaporean
Jingxuan	Tamarind	Female	Chinese	Singapore	Singaporean
Haslindah	Tamarind	Female	Malay	Singapore	Singaporean
Manasi	Tamarind	Female	Indian	India	Singaporean
Keming	Tamarind	Male	Chinese	Singapore	Singaporean
Zhiqiang	Tamarind	Male	Chinese	Singapore	Singaporean
Joseph	Tamarind	Male	Others	Philippines	Permanent Resident
Aidan	Tamarind	Male	Chinese	Singapore	Singaporean
Ethan	Tamarind	Male	Chinese	Singapore	Singaporean

*Note:* Data from questionnaire.

*# This student chose not to have his individual interviews audio-recorded.*

### 3.5 Access and Permission

As a curriculum officer at MOE, I was involved in the teacher training of history teachers and often dealt with schools in an official capacity. Conscious that this might create a power differential when I entered the field as a researcher, I was careful to ensure that instances of coercion were minimized, if not eliminated, when recruiting and requesting the consent of participants for this study. I approached the teachers first to explain the nature and scope of the study. I emphasized that this research was for my own studies and was not an MOE initiative. I assured them that their participation in the study was entirely voluntary and that they were free to decline. Issues of concern such as the extent and depth of involvement, time-tabling, observation focus, confidentiality, benefits and risks, and clarification on other aspects of the research were also addressed during subsequent meetings or over the phone. The teachers were also assured that their participation would not affect their work performance evaluation. It was only after I

obtained the agreement of the teachers that I sent the formal invitations to the respective principals.

As part of the process of recruiting and consenting the students, I personally presented an outline of my study to them during one of their Combined Humanities lessons. I introduced myself primarily as a graduate student researcher and emphasized that the research was a personal endeavor, being in fulfillment of my graduate studies. I explained that the purpose of the study was not to find out how much they knew about history but to discover how they individually made sense of what is important in history. While I informed the students that they would not benefit directly by participating in the study, I appealed to them to participate so that any insights gleaned from this study could contribute to improving history teaching and education in Singapore. As with the teachers, I highlighted to them that their participation in the study was entirely voluntary and that they could opt to end their participation at any time. It was stressed upon the students that their work and grade in the class would not be affected in any way by their participation or non-participation in this study. To ensure that the students made their decision in private, without external pressure from their teachers, peers, or the researcher, they were asked to bring the assent/consent form home. They dropped their signed forms through the slit of a sealed box provided by me. I then collected the box personally at the end of the school day. This recruitment procedure was important to make sure that I obtained the informed consent of the participants.

### **3.6 Data Collection Methods**

This study employed multiple methods of data collection in order to attain “a rich and holistic account of the phenomenon under study” (Merriam, 2009, p. 51). Yin (2009) observed that among the many legitimate methods of data collection, six commonly used ones are

interviews, documentation, direct observation, archival records and artifacts. This study employed four data collection methods, namely, questionnaires, interviews, observations, and document reviews.

### **3.6.1 Questionnaire.**

All participants from the two schools were asked to complete a questionnaire (see Appendix A). The questionnaire was administered during lesson time and took about twenty minutes to complete. Comprising two sections, it sought to obtain a broad understanding of students' sense of belonging as well as their experiences and views about Singaporean history. In the first section, students were asked to provide basic background information (e.g. gender, age, race/ethnicity and religion) as well as briefly to describe their sense of belonging. Getting this demographic information helped by providing a basis from which I could understand the students' narration of their sense of belonging in the interviews. In crafting this section of the questionnaire, I adapted portions of the questionnaire used by Peck (2009), who in a similar study was investigating Canadian students' ethnic identities and their understanding of historical significance. In the second section, I turned my attention to students' experience with, and views about, Singapore's history. Using the data gathered in the questionnaire, I then invited selected students for the individual and focus group interviews.

The students were selected based on the range of their responses provided in the questionnaire. In particular, I focused on their descriptions of themselves and their sense of belonging (question 13) as well as their reasons and views about Singapore history (questions 17 and 18). Only two students describe themselves in ethnic terms as in "I am Chinese" and "I am Chinese-Hakka, Christian." Others indicated their interests in sports in their self-description using terms like "sporty" and "active" to describe themselves. Two students described

themselves in terms of their interests and preferences like “I love dogs” and “I like Maths and Science.” The range of responses that explicitly discusses students’ sense of belonging comprised expressions of belonging to school clubs such as “Basketball” or “Girl Guides” or to groups of friends with common experience like “I belong with my friends as we have all gone through obstacles together.” Others have gone on to describe their group of friends as multiracial and inclusive as in “I am close with friends who are of different races” and “my community is inclusive as many festivals of different races are celebrated together as a neighbourhood.” Students’ views about Singapore’s history ranged from it being “interesting” to “boring” and “dry.” Those who indicated that it is boring claimed that Singapore’s history is “too short” and not as “complicated” as other countries’ history. Those who found it interesting felt that they could learn about the lives of their “parents”, “grandparents” or “ancestors” in the past and how developments in present Singapore came about. Some responses’ indicated that learning about Singapore’s history is linked to one’s sense of identity and roots while some subscribed to Santayana’s view that learning history helps us to avoid repeating mistakes of the past as seen in comments like Singapore’s history helped them “learn from incidents from the past” and to “be careful to not repeat the same mistakes.” The aim of having a range of responses was to interview students who could provide diverse opinions about their sense of belonging and views about what would constitute as significant in Singapore’s past.

Bearing in mind that the intent of the study was not to make generalizations, but to understand and gain insights into how students’ ascribe significance vis-à-vis their positionalities, selecting a small number of students was considered adequate in providing me a relatively diverse range of ideas and minds.

### **3.6.2 Interviews.**

Interviews, both with individuals and focus groups, constituted a major source of data for my study. They were conducted on three separate occasions. I adopted the semi-structured interview protocol for all the interviews to allow for the standardization of the information collected as well as to provide the flexibility for the researcher to respond to the situation at hand, so as to better incorporate emerging new ideas or worldviews from the respondent (Merriam, 2009). The interviews were conducted in English, the main language of instruction in Singapore schools, and took place in a private room within the schools after formal lesson hours. With the exception of one student, who did not wish to be audio-recorded for the individual interviews, all interviews were audio-recorded so as to preserve an accurate record of what they said. Audio-recording enabled me to note closely the nuances of the verbal cues. I also took notes during the interviews. For the one student whose interview was not recorded, note-taking was the main mode of recording, though my notes on him were not intended to be a verbatim record of what he had said, as attempting to generate one would have prevented me from paying close attention and responding accordingly. Instead, the notes were an attempt to record the pertinent points he made in response to the interview questions. In order to more accurately capture what was said in each interview, in particular the non-audio recorded interview, I regularly paraphrased and repeated the students' responses at specific junctures during the interview as a form of cross-checking with the students. To ensure accuracy, I also checked my recorded notes with the students when I met with them for the second individual interview.

### ***3.6.2.1 First individual interview.***

The first individual interview consisted of two segments (see Appendix B). The advantage of conducting individual interviews is their ability to delve deeply into the lived experiences, values, decisions, ideologies, cultural knowledge and perspective of each respondent (Johnson, 2002, p. 104). An individual interview is particularly useful for this purpose, as sensitive issues and topics such as identity can be brought to the surface and discussed relatively safely in a one-to-one environment. Each pre-focus group interview lasted an average of about 50 minutes.

For the first segment of the interview, I asked a series of questions that probed specifically at the students' sense of belonging and relationship with their family, peers and community at large so as to get them to narrate an account of themselves. Anthias (2002) asserted that narratives are accounts of location and belonging. These stories articulate notions of identification, draw on stories told in our families, and reflect the conventions and discourses around us. They also reveal "how we place ourselves in terms of social categories such as those of gender, ethnicity and class at a specific point in time and space" (p. 498). In short, in getting the students to give these accounts, I paid particular attention to the ways they represented and organized their world and experiences, their values, and their beliefs. They provided a glimpse into their positionality. As pointed out by VanSledright, Kelly and Meuwissen (2006), "studying ideas about historical significance among learners remains only a partially successful endeavor without collecting sufficient data on their biographies" (p. 227). Accordingly, the information collected from my participants provided me a good basis for interpreting their ideas about historical significance. Getting the students to talk about their sense of belonging also primed them for the next exercise.

The picture selection and ranking task is a popular technique used by history education researchers (Barton, 2005; Barton & Levstik, 1998; Barton & McCully, 2005, 2010; Lévesque, 2005; Levstik & Groth, 2005; Peck, 2009, 2010) to study students' historical thinking. For the second part of the interview, I adapted the picture elicitation task from the research studies of Keith Barton and Linda Levstik. Incorporating a task into the interview helped to allay the students' anxiety and stress – an interview situation could be “unnatural” to them since students typically have limited exposure and opportunities to engage in conversation with an unfamiliar adult, especially in a one-to-one situation (Punch, 2002). Moreover, students can also become awkward and self-conscious during a session. Hence, the working task provided an object for the students to construct and base their responses on, shifting the focus away from them to the task at hand (Barton, 2015).

In particular, the interview raised questions and topics that the students would seldom discuss in their natural settings. The likelihood of students being asked a question like “What events do you consider to be most significant in history?” in their daily lives is far less than a question like “Which pop bands do you like most?” They could probably expound on the latter topic in greater detail than on the former. Students might also face difficulty recalling historical events or personalities off-the-cuff. As such, they can become reticent and inhibited in their responses for fear that they were being evaluated on their ability to recall the right facts and avoid giving bad answers (Barton, 2015). Furthermore, unlike their adult counterparts, students are unlikely to provide long and elaborate responses to open-ended questions (Harden, Backett-Milburn & Jackson, 2000). Barton (2015) argued that this lack of elaboration should not be construed as indicative of students' lack of knowledge or interest in the topic at hand, but of their lack of experience in talking about the topic. In addition, as mentioned earlier, considerations of

historical significance require a relatively good grasp of historical knowledge. Therefore, to ask students to recall events and personalities across the span of Singapore's history would have been too demanding. Given that the intent of the task was not to test the students' knowledge but to elicit and understand how their positionalities influenced their judgments on historical significance, the provision of the images and a short caption served to sharpen and prod the students' memory of the events, thus reducing their cognitive load while they were recalling events. The pictures served as a stimulus to prompt students to elaborate and expand on their responses (Barton, 2015).

The students selected around ten pictures out of a set of 32, each one representing a different personality, event, movement, or artifact within Singapore's history, and ranked them by significance. While there were no hard and fast rules on the number of pictures the students were expected to select, my observations from researchers (Barton, 2005; Barton & Levstik, 1998; Levstik & Groth, 2005; Peck, 2010) who had utilized the picture elicitation technique for their interviews tend to indicate that the range was between 8-10 pictures. To choose the 32 images, I examined Singapore's national history syllabus, the current history textbooks and works by historians. The choices were based not only on the content covered in the current history curriculum, but also attempted to reflect recent developments in historiography in Singapore. Since 2000, more attention has been paid to other aspects of Singapore's history that offer different perspectives to and within the "Singapore Story" (Kwa, 2013). For example, the recent publication *Singapore: A 700-Year History* (2009) sought to recast Singapore's history away from the established narrative that marked the arrival of Stamford Raffles in 1819 as the start of Singapore's modern period, whereupon the island grew from a small, sleepy fishing village into a thriving port. Likewise, Loh Kah Seng's *Squatters into Citizens: The 1961 Bukit*

*Ho Swee Fire and the Making of Modern Singapore* (2013) situated the accounts of those who experienced first-hand the effects of the housing resettlement policy during the 1960s. Others, on the other hand, have attempted to offer counter-narratives to the prevailing interpretation of certain momentous events and periods in Singapore's history, such as *Comet in the Sky: Lim Chin Siong in History* (2001) and *The May 13 Generation: The Chinese Middle Schools Student Movement and Singapore Politics in the 1950s* (2011). In selecting the pictures, I sought to include actors and events that are part of Singapore's history but which are not foregrounded in the larger narrative. Other than key events, historical personalities or actors who also played a part in the events were also included as I was interested to see if students' consideration of their significance would be more actor-dominated or event-dominated. The objective was to provide students with a broader list of topics from which they could select. Each interview lasted around 60 minutes.

### ***3.6.2.2 Focus Group Interview.***

To probe whether one's positionality can change depending on the context, I next conducted four separate focus group interviews with the students who had attended the individual interviews. The compositions of the groups varied as attendance for the focus groups had to be negotiated in light of the students' schedules and availability. As a result, two of the groups had three students each while the other two groups had five and four students respectively (See Table 4).

Table 4: Composition of Focus Groups

Group	Student	School	Gender	Race/ Ethnicity	Place of Birth	Citizenship
<b>1</b>	Megan	Cardamom	Female	Chinese	Singapore	Singaporean
	Yiling	Cardamom	Female	Chinese	Singapore	Singaporean
	Bocheng	Cardamom	Male	Chinese	Singapore	Singaporean
	Hazreen	Cardamom	Male	Malay	Singapore	Singaporean
<b>2</b>	Juyan	Cardamom	Female	Chinese	Singapore	Singaporean
	Phoebe	Cardamom	Female	Chinese	Singapore	Singaporean
	Xianzheng	Cardamom	Male	Chinese	Singapore	Singaporean
<b>3</b>	Jingxuan	Tamarind	Female	Chinese	Singapore	Singaporean
	Aidan	Tamarind	Male	Chinese	Singapore	Singaporean
	Joseph	Tamarind	Male	Others	Philippines	Permanent Resident
<b>4</b>	Haslindah	Tamarind	Female	Malay	Singapore	Singaporean
	Manasi	Tamarind	Female	Indian	India	Singaporean
	Ethan	Tamarind	Male	Chinese	Singapore	Singaporean
	Keming	Tamarind	Male	Chinese	Singapore	Singaporean
	Zhiqiang	Tamarind	Male	Chinese	Singapore	Singaporean

Each focus group interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. The format of the interview mirrored that of the photo-elicitation task of the first semi-structured interview. The students were once again asked to select and rank ten events which they considered to be the most significant in Singapore’s history. Only this time, they had to deliberate as a group to complete the task. The purpose of the group discussion was, as pointed out by Patton (2002), “to get high quality data in a social context where people can consider their views in the context of others” (p. 386, cited in Merriam, 2009).

During the discussion and deliberation, I observed closely the students’ interactions with each other to see if their individual positionality shifted within a collective context, and note how the latter might influence their reasoning about historical significance. Specifically, I paid attention to their discussion patterns, responses, and non-verbal cues. Morgan and Krueger (1993) argued that the group format allows the researcher to observe complex behaviors and motivations. In particular, group discussion “offers invaluable data on the extent of consensus

and diversity among participants” (p. 139). Furthermore, researchers can also observe deeper levels of meaning by making connections between the ideas discussed and the non-verbal expressions displayed (Morgan, 1996; Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). An instance of this was observed in one of the focus group discussions, when two students, Jingxuan and Aidan, veered off to talk about foreign talent in Singapore while discussing the significance of the race riots in 1964. Joseph, a permanent resident of Singapore, shifted uncomfortably in his seat. He made a few attempts at interjecting into their discussion, offering sympathetic responses such as,

Despite being... a permanent resident, I sort of kind of agree because if it was my country being overrun by so many people, and then I'll feel quite insecure and a bit, quite upset that they are taking so much jobs.

However, for the rest of the short discussion on the topic, Jingxuan and Aidan carried on, leaving Joseph out.

### ***3.6.2.3 Second individual interview.***

Following the focus group interview, I conducted another round of individual interviews with the students. This time, I deliberately sought their input on their experience with the focus group discussion. Goffman (1974) asserted that one human being presents itself to another in a way that is based on cultural values, norms, and expectations; accordingly, this second round of individual interviews provided me the opportunity to gather the private thoughts and insights of students on their experience, which they might otherwise have been reluctant to voice during the group interviews due to peer pressure and the fear of presenting themselves in a bad light. I was specifically interested in their relationships with the other group members and their personal interest in the subject matter. In this interview, I paid specific attention to statements or justifications relating to positionality. In particular, I asked the students to reflect on whether

they had found it easy or challenging to participate in the group deliberation, and what had made it so. I was also interested to find out how they perceived the similarities and differences between their individual selections and those of the groups.

### **3.6.3 Observations.**

I conducted a total of twelve naturalistic classroom observation sessions during the period of study. Each session lasted about 70 minutes, the equivalent of two subject periods. The students were already aware that I was conducting research in their classroom, owing to the recruitment and consent-gaining process undertaken earlier. For the observations, I confined my role to that of a non-participant observer sitting at the back of the class or at the periphery, so as to be as unobtrusive to the activities of the class as possible. During the observations, I paid attention to the way students spoke, acted and projected themselves within the class. I focused on the curriculum content and pedagogical methods used by the teachers in the classroom and the students' responses to these. I also focused on the nature of the interactions in the class. Specifically, I noted the students' comments on topics or issues related to Singapore's history. Yet, dependent on the activities in the classroom, I sometimes practiced "selective attentiveness" (Wolcott, 1992, p. 22), adjusting my observational lenses on specific interactions or activities within the classroom. The choice was dependent on issues that had emerged from earlier observations or impromptu incidences that happened at the point of observation.

While my primary focus was on the students' interactions in the classroom, I also took note of the school climate as well as how the physical spaces were organized and used. I found observing this larger space informative in illuminating some of the emerging findings I made. To help me stay focused, I used an observational protocol and took field notes to capture incidences

and utterances that would help shape and refine ongoing interpretations about the students' positionality and their historical thinking.

#### **3.6.4 Document analysis.**

Documents such as the subject syllabi, textbooks, and teachers' instructional resources (mainly handouts, worksheets, and students' work) were also analyzed to contextualize the study. Attention was devoted to the way the content and themes were emphasized by the teacher, and to the students' responses to the topics. The syllabi were retrieved from the MOE website, and the textbooks were the researcher's own copies. The handouts were provided by the teachers from both schools while the students' work, which mainly took the form of group-produced charts, were obtained with the permission of the teachers. The data obtained both from the classroom observations as well as the document analysis were used to support or challenge the generated themes or hypotheses that had been gathered from the observations, interviews and the focus group discussions.

### **3.7 Data Analysis**

In offering practical advice to researchers doing qualitative work with a computer, Hahn (2008) wrote that the act of "[t]ranscribing is a form of pre-coding immersion into your data" (p. 78), a view echoed by Patton (2002). As such, I transcribed all the interview data to immerse myself. The subjects' assigned codes and pseudonyms were used to ensure confidentiality. In the process of transcription, I was able to note the tones of voice, voice volume variations, and hesitations in students' responses. Also, transcribing allowed me to recall and confirm or disconfirm some of my thoughts and the notes taken during and immediately after each interview. I was able to generate new insights which helped me in the analysis of my data. The decision to transcribe the data myself had also been necessitated by the students' frequent use of

Singlish and colloquial slang, which might have proved challenging even to hired local transcribers.

An iterative process of coding and memo-writing was employed to help me track, organize, and analyze the data. Using thematic analysis as my main mode, I adopted a combination of inductive and deductive approaches in the analysis. For the initial coding, I divided my data into four bundles, each bundle comprising the students involved in each focus group interview. I then employed an open-coding approach to analyze the first bundle of interviews, whereby key and repeated phrases are marked out to generate possible codes and themes. I followed Coffey & Atkinson's (1996) advice to pay close attention to the categories of expression used by the participants in their responses. This approach required me to pay special attention to the words and phrases that recurred in the students' responses. Examples of these include "close" and "caring". Later on, I sought to establish patterns and connections within the initial sets of codes. I also conducted narrative analysis to look for plot structures and themes (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009) used by the students in their judgments on historical significance. Once a set of themes and concepts surfaced, I applied them to each bundle of data, looking for emerging patterns and contradictions. The data was manually coded and analyzed with the aid of Microsoft Word and Excel, which captured and recorded my emergent findings and analysis. While the software was useful, I was also conscious of the fact that even the most sophisticated data analysis software could not substitute for the researcher as the main analyst and interpreter.

To further facilitate the analysis, I compared the emergent themes and codes with *a priori* codes drawn up from the literature. For instance, I drew on Anthias' (2002) definition of positionality and belonging to analyze the students' narration of their sense of belonging. She asserted that narratives are sources of identification. They communicate our identities through

our descriptions of our sense of belonging, as manifest in “how we place ourselves in social categories, gender, ethnicity, and class at a specific point in time and space” (p. 498). She added that in the process of narrating, we are also performing our identities. In this performance, we draw boundaries (territorial and geographical) and imagine our collectivities, affiliations, and exclusions. I also examined narrative templates and themes surfaced by earlier researchers (Barton, 2005; Barton & Levstik, 1998; Levstik, 1999; Peck, 2009), following which I proceeded to draw up a set of *a priori* codes to help code the substantial topics used by students in their judgments on significance. While these codes were useful in initiating the analysis, I was mindful that space was to be provided to accommodate the emergence of new codes.

Analyzing my data using such codes and concepts sometimes did not produce fruitful insights and left me feeling inadequate in terms of being able to account for, and explain, the range of responses in my data. This I found particularly pronounced in my analysis of how the students projected their identity as Singaporeans. To help me address this gap, I examined local literature that seeks to elucidate the Singaporean identity through an examination of citizens’ sense of belonging. In this respect, I found the notion of rootedness used in Tan Ern Ser’s (2009) study particularly useful. Tan defined rootedness as “the quality or state of having roots, of being firmly established, settled or entrenched in a place” (p. 50). He asserted that rootedness is the bond that links the “past, present, and future of the people and place in which one is rooted”. It is about “identity, a sense of belonging and emotional attachment” (p. 50).

In sum, this chapter presents the research procedures as well as the data analysis structure for this dissertation. In essence, the purpose of the qualitative analysis was to elucidate Singaporean students’ identities through their own description of their sense of belonging as well as to examine their conceptions of what counts as historically significant in Singapore’s history.

In the next two chapters, I present the findings both on students' positionalities as well as their judgments of historical significance.

## CHAPTER 4

### Findings on Students' Positionalities

A central aim of this study was to understand how students' identities influence their judgments on events they considered to be historically significant in Singapore's history. In Chapter 2, I discussed how the notion of multiple identities might not constitute a comprehensive framework from which we could examine students' identity in Singapore. In its place, I employed the concept of positionality to understand how the students in the study identified and positioned themselves in different contexts to make judgments about historical significance. As mentioned earlier, positionality takes into account their narration of their collectivities, their sense of belonging, and their performing of their identities. To get at this positionality, I adopted Anthias' (2013) definition of belonging as an analytical lens to examine not only how these students asserted their identities but also the collectivities and spaces in which they felt they were accepted as members.

Tan's (2009) conception of rootedness also served as an additional lens to elucidate the students' sense of belonging. Rootedness connotes one's sense of belonging as it is founded on one's feelings of being connected to, or being a part of, specific communities. It also implies commitment to the latter and a willingness to be involved in the activities of the communities where one finds membership in. This sense of belonging and rootedness can be expressed in students' "integration into formal and informal social networks and community", "students' familiarity and fondness for a particular space and place", students relatedness with "access to jobs, social entitlements and benefits", students' "repository of memories which provides them a sense of identity and continuation of life's trajectory", and students' "sense of ownership and control over national affairs and the nation's destiny in terms of citizens who get involved,

engaged and contribute to society” (p. 53). In the sections that follow in this chapter, I present how the students in this study defined their identities through their descriptions of their sense of belonging

#### **4.1 Narrating Identity through a Sense of Belonging**

In *Truth and Method* (2004), Gadamer wrote that “[l]ong before we understand ourselves, we understand ourselves in a self-evident way in the family, society, and state in which we live” (p. 279). A noteworthy observation that emerged from the analysis of the students’ responses on their sense of belonging is that, although they did refer to essential ethnic markers like nationality (citizenship) or ethnicity (race, language, religion) to describe their identities, they often drew upon other cultural resources such as social networks and indicators like food, language, and values to position and locate themselves as multiracial Singaporeans. This is in accordance with Anthias’ (2013) point that belonging need not be confined to “formal membership” in ethnic groups or polities like nation-states, but can extend to include “less formal but equally powerful ones, such as families or social networks. Anthias further contends “belonging ‘to’ something is always linked to belonging ‘with’ particular others who also occupy the realm of belonging to that something” (p. 8).

##### **4.1.1 Blunting religious, racial, and language differences.**

In discussing my sampling size in the preceding chapter, I provided a brief sketch of the students’ profiles in terms of their racial categories and citizenship status.<sup>6</sup> To reiterate, with two exceptions, the students who participated in the study were born in Singapore. All held Singaporean citizenship except for one who held Permanent Residency in Singapore. The students were all 14-15 years old when they participated in the study. Other than indicating their

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<sup>6</sup> The term ‘racial’ instead of ‘ethnic’ is deliberately used here to reflect the conflation of ethnicity and race in the officially ascribed categories of CMIO in Singapore.

race and citizenship status, they also indicated their religious affiliations. Eight students, all of them Chinese, listed themselves as Buddhist. The two Malay students listed themselves as Muslim and the Indian student, Hindu. Two out of the remaining three Chinese students listed themselves as Taoist and Christian while the last did not declare his religion. The Filipino indicated his religion as Roman Catholic.

In terms of tracing their ancestry, all students were able to provide details of their parents' place of birth. Eleven were able to ascertain whether one or both of their grandparents were or were not born in Singapore, while the other four reported they were "Not sure". This is reflected in Table 5.

Table 5: Ancestry of Students

	Parents' Place of Birth		Grandparents Born in Singapore		Ancestry
	Father	Mother	Paternal	Maternal	
Megan	Singapore	Malaysia	Yes	No	Chinese
Yiling	Singapore	China	Yes	No	Chinese, Hainanese
Phoebe	Singapore	Singapore	Yes	Yes	Chinese, Hokkien
Juyan	Singapore	Singapore	Yes	Yes	Chinese, Teochew, Peranakan
Hazreen	Singapore	Singapore	Yes	Yes	Malay, pure Boyanese
Bocheng	Malaysia	Singapore	Not sure	Not sure	Chinese, Hokkien
Xianzheng	Singapore	China	No	No	Chinese, Hokkien
Jingxuan	Singapore	Malaysia	Yes	No	Chinese, Hokkien
Haslindah	Singapore	Singapore	Not sure	Not sure	Malay, Indian
Manasi	India	India	No	No	Indian, Telegu
Keming	Singapore	Singapore	No	No	Chinese, Hokkien, Teochew
Zhiqiang	Singapore	Singapore	Yes	Not sure	Chinese, Hokkien, Hakka
Joseph	Philippines	Philippines	No	No	Filipino
Aidan	Singapore	Singapore	Not sure	Not sure	Chinese, Khak
Ethan	Singapore	Singapore	Not sure	Not sure	Chinese, Teochew

*Note:* Data from questionnaire.

All the students could also trace their ancestry beyond Singapore to China, India or the Southeast Asia region. However, an interesting observation that arose from their description of

their ancestry was that, beyond claiming themselves as simply being Chinese, Malay or Indian, eleven of the 14 students who were Singaporean also identified themselves according to their dialects or linguistic sub-groupings within their racial category. According to Purushotam (1997), the last official census conducted prior to the introduction of the CMIO categories and the Bilingual Policy of 1957, indicated that “the linguistic composition of the island was originally made up of at least twenty languages from four different language families” (p. 33). As shown in Table 5, six of the Chinese students identified themselves as Hokkien, the Indian student identified herself as Telegu, and one of the Malay students identified himself as “pure Boyanese”, even though he shared later in the interview that his grandmother was half-Chinese and half-Pakistani.

Among these 11 students, three students further distinguished themselves by reflecting two sub-categories within their respective racial groups, such as Hokkien and Teochew, Hokkien and Hakka, and Teochew and Peranakan. For these students, the notion of “mixed” did not necessarily denote interracial parentage. Instead, the term was also used to indicate inter-linguistic ancestry within the same race. These students’ responses contrasted with the Malay student’s point that he was “pure Boyanese”. This hybrid way of defining identity is not uncommon in Singapore. When asked to clarify their ancestry beyond their larger ethnic or racial groups, many Singaporeans would go on to subdivide their identity according to the linguistic family groups from which they were descended.

Yet despite these distinctions, it was interesting to note that the most common languages spoken at home by the 15 students were their respective Mother Tongue languages, as shown in Table 6. Ten reported their Mother Tongue as the primary spoken language at home, while two other students reported using both their Mother Tongue and their dialect home. Two students

indicated that they spoke both English and their Mother Tongue at home, and two other students indicated that they spoke only in their dialect at home with their family.

Table 6: Languages Spoken at Home, School, and with Friends

Student	Home			School		With Friends	
	English	Mother Tongue*	Dialect*	English	Mother Tongue	English	Mother Tongue
Megan		√		√		√	
Yiling		√	√	√		√	√
Phoebe		√		√		√	
Juyan	√	√		√		√	√
Hazreen		√		√		√	
Bocheng			√	√		√	
Xianzheng		√		√		√	√
Jingxuan	√			√	√	√	√
Haslindah		√		√		√	
Manasi		√	√	√		√	√
Keming		√		√			√
Zhiqiang		√		√		√	√
Joseph			√	√		√	
Aidan	√	√		√		√	
Ethan		√		√		√	

*Note: Data from questionnaire.*

\* Mother Tongue here refers to the three official languages of Chinese (Mandarin), Malay, and Tamil. For Joseph, who was the non-Singaporean, his use of Tagalog is categorized as a dialect to avoid confusion with these three languages.

As Table 6 illustrates, the Mother Tongue languages are spoken predominantly at home, despite the students' articulation of their linguistic roots. This standardization reflects Foucault's notion of discipline where racial differences in Singapore are disciplined (Chua, 2003; Purushotam, 1997). We recall from Chapter 1 that since the island's independence, the policy of multiracialism has been fronted as one of the cornerstones of the Singaporean identity. Using the official categories of CMIO, all intra-racial differences were neatly contained and managed within the larger racial categories (Chua, 2003). The racial categories were reinforced with the introduction of the Bilingual Policy, which designated Mandarin, Malay, and Tamil as the official Mother Tongue languages in Singapore.

Where communication in school is concerned, all the students listed English as their main language. Fourteen out of the 15 students used English in their daily communication with friends; six of these 14 also communicated with their friends using their Mother Tongue language. The predominance of English in schools is hardly surprising given the fact that English is the language of instruction for all school subjects in Singapore. In this sense, the promotion of English as a “neutral” language serves also to “discipline race” as well as facilitate the construction of a common identity. This is attested to in Haslindah’s point that “I talk to my friends in English because all of my friends are, like, my classmates. I’m the only Malay so we speak English actually” (P252-06, 1<sup>st</sup> Interview). The introduction of English as a “neutral” language made it possible to create a “common space” to build and strengthen cohesion among the various immigrant races as well as to facilitate the ongoing construction of a national identity characterized by “multiracialism.” As summarized by Purushotam (1997):

[O]fficial bilingualism rests on the overt principle that bilingualism, in which one language is studied by all school-going children – that is, the English language – will provide a common medium of interaction, and hence a means for a common identity to emerge. Further, the provision of the English language means that all children are given the means to craft social space for themselves, generally and economically. (p. 177)

In addition, school is also conceptualized as a common space where differences of race and religion are both emphasized and blunted. As emphasized by Tharman Shanmugaratnam (2003), then Acting Minister for Education,

Schools remain a key experience in everyone’s lives, and play a central responsibility in building a cohesive society. We have to be alert to small

differences and preferences among children of different races, which may appear inconsequential, but which can be compounded as the children grow older, leading to an unwitting segregation of the races. We have to continue to find interesting and natural ways of strengthening interaction and friendships between students of different backgrounds.

On one hand, the compulsory language policy of having students learn their respective Mother Tongue languages, the celebration of key festivals of the different cultures through the establishment of statutory public holidays, and the incorporation of different ethnic festivals into the formal school curricula promote respect and tolerance of racial and religious differences as well as reinforce the concept of multiracialism among students. On the other hand, these racial and religious differences are also dulled through rituals that promote a common Singaporean identity (Lai, 2004). These include, but are not restricted to, daily pledge-taking and singing of the national anthem, the wearing of school uniforms (Tan, 2008), and the annual commemoration of pivotal events such as Total Defence Day which seeks to remind all Singaporeans, especially the young, about the disastrous fall of Singapore on 15 February 1942 to the Japanese. Other commemorative events also include Racial Harmony Day which memorializes the 1964 race riots, and National Day which celebrates Singapore's independence and its spectacular progress over the years. These rituals were conceived in an attempt to bind citizens together through a sense of shared experience that transcends the differences of race, language, and religion, and sets in its place the value of multiracialism. Ng Eng Hen (2008), then Minister of Education, echoed the importance of maintaining this common space:

First, we must provide space for people to preserve and express their own cultural heritage, traditions and religious beliefs. For these reasons, we celebrate Hari

Raya, Thaipusam, Chinese New Year and Christmas and encourage all groups to celebrate these occasions together. Second, and more importantly, we must continue to emphasise common values that build our common Singapore identity. Our schools provide a common space for students from diverse backgrounds to have a shared formative experience that make us uniquely Singaporean. In this common space, students of different races, religions and cultures interact, and learn to respect, appreciate and get along with each other.

#### **4.1.2 Talking with the family.**

Most of the students in this study described their sense of belonging to their family as close. This sense of closeness is manifested in the social activities that they reported engaging in with their family, such as meals or outings. The most often cited activity was “talking.” To these students, talking constituted an important aspect of belonging and membership, and served as a form of “bonding” for the family. It also encouraged understanding and the tacit passing on of knowledge and culture. Juyan, a Chinese female student from Cardamom, cited her sisters as people whom she would often talk to (P022-05, 1<sup>st</sup> Interview) while Hazreen, a Malay male student from the same school, mentioned his mother as the person he was closest to as she was “concerned about my school work” (P021-09, 1<sup>st</sup> Interview).

Topics of conversation within the family ranged from something as mundane as daily experiences in school to advice on how they should handle their daily problems. This can be seen in the cases of Zhiqiang, a Chinese male student from Tamarind, who spoke of having time to converse with his father after work to “speak about what I had in school” (P251-12, 1<sup>st</sup> Interview), and Yiling, a female student from Cardamom, who commented that her exchanges with her family revolved around “what I encounter in school and any problem that I faced”

(P022-14, 1<sup>st</sup> Interview). Bocheng (a male Chinese student from Cardamom) and Jingxuan (a Chinese female student from Tamarind), mentioned themselves also giving advice and weighing in with their opinions on family matters. For example, Bocheng spoke extensively of how he had participated in a family discussion about how best to take care of an ailing relative (P021-03, 1<sup>st</sup> Interview) while Jingxuan talked about advising her younger sister on “how she should handle her school life” (PP252-03, 1<sup>st</sup> Interview). In the case of Ethan, family discussions involved the sharing of “many interesting facts about the past” which inspired him to “want to study more,” this factored into his decision to opt for History as his elective for his Combined Humanities subject (P251-04, 1<sup>st</sup> Interview).

Family talk also involved reminiscing about the past, either in the form of a personal stock of stories based on the experiences of family members or stories of collective folk memory. Interestingly, these stories reflected two different forms of recall. The first attends to the recall of specific experiences of key historical events such as the Japanese Occupation and the race riots of 1964 and 1969. Haslindah, a Malay girl from Tamarind, shared that she had heard stories of “World War II and how Japan invade[d] Singapore, then about the Lt. Adnan, the hero in Singapore” from her parents and grandparents (P252-06, 1<sup>st</sup> Interview). Haslindah’s grandparents had experienced the war and the Japanese Occupation first-hand and were able to tell her about their actual encounters with the Japanese: “like my grandmother, she said like when the Japan[ese] came into her house, she actually hide under the bed with her sisters.” Haslindah also knew that her grandfather had “helped in the military for some medical [work]” during the war but never spoke in detail about what he did. She concluded that her grandfather’s reluctance to venture into details stemmed from the fact that it “hurt him too much” to talk about it. Similarly, Juyan from Cardamom spoke of her mother’s experiences during the riots: “That time when

there was a newspaper article about a riot, my mom also talked about it. Then she said she was very young and she had to hide and all the adults are outside fighting” (P022-05, 1<sup>st</sup> Interview). Juyan shared that her mother was about 53 years old, which would have meant that she was referring to either of the two key racial disturbances in Singapore during the 1960s, namely, the 1964 race riots or the spill over of the May 1969 race riots from Malaysia, both of which took place when she was a young child.

Keming, a Chinese boy from Tamarind, spoke of his father’s anguish when Chinese schools in Singapore had to adopt English as the official medium of instruction during the 1960s: “I remember my father like, he was very angry when the whole thing you know, when Singapore take English not Chinese because my father was the last batch and he was very angry” (P251-05, 1<sup>st</sup> Interview). It is indeed a fact that in the immediate aftermath of the language policy change, many Chinese-educated individuals encountered difficulties in finding jobs upon their graduation. Despite this, however, Keming had also observed his father’s pride and loyalty to Singapore, remarking that his father “says he likes Singapore and he will never leave Singapore because it’s very safe.”

The second kind of recall encompasses non-specific historical moments characterized by broad, non-specific descriptions of what life was like during a bygone era. Such recollections reflect general characteristics of a particular historical period or event. For example, Phoebe recalled her parents talking to her about the Japanese Occupation, but could only sketch a vague picture of “what was it like during the World War and what did the Japanese soldiers do and how was life bad during that time” (P022-06, 1<sup>st</sup> Interview). Similarly, Yiling from Cardamom recalled her father’s sharing about the turbulent times when “there were many riots that happened” (P022-14, 1<sup>st</sup> Interview). Very often, these accounts depicted life during these periods

or events as being tougher and less peaceful, being lived in a less developed nation with fewer conveniences. For instance, Xianzheng, a Chinese boy from the same school, pointed out that his grandparents had told him about how life was difficult during their childhood, when they “had to fetch water” and start to be “very independent” (P021-05, 1<sup>st</sup> Interview).

Regardless of whether the recollections were of specific or non-specific events, they were often contrasted with life in the present. Xianzheng recalled his parents mentioning that they were “quite poor and they had to save everything unlike us now”, and that “[t]ap water and electricity is more accessible [now] as compared to then”. Yiling pointed out that her parents had told her that they “didn’t have a proper house [in which] to stay” (P022-14, 1<sup>st</sup> Interview). These reminiscences were often accompanied by advice for the students to appreciate their present circumstances and not to take life for granted, as seen in Haslindah’s recounting of her grandparents’ exhortation to “be happy that we are living now because during World War II everybody was suffering.” However, not all accounts would paint the present as better than the past – Aidan, a Chinese boy from Tamarind remarked, “Well, I do hear from my parents from time to time about how things were before. And like how many things were much cheaper back then, and now [there is] inflation and fare hikes and all” (251-03, 1<sup>st</sup> Interview). As will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter, these stories, which were shared intimately at the level of family conversation, came to exert an influence on how the students reasoned and made judgments about the significance of the historical past.

#### **4.1.3 Safety among friends.**

When the students were asked to describe the various groups to which they felt a sense of belonging, most of them cited school friends. These were either classmates or fellow members of their Co-Curricular Activity (CCA) groups. Positive words like “close”, “enjoyable”, and “fun”

were often used to describe their friendships. For many of these students, the friendships were forged by a sense of community which was based on the time they had invested in meeting each other beyond normal school hours. These meetings could be facilitated by formal curricular demands, such as in the case of Phoebe, who shared, “I spend most of my time in school as there are many project work, so we’ll still meet over the weekends some time.” The students also deliberately carved out time to meet for non- curricular reasons. Very often these meetings were motivated by common interests, as Xianzheng explained: “[A]ll our CCA are sports related. We are quite active in our CCAs and we like sports so we do sports together.” Given the fact that he and his friends could not “get to see each other during curriculum time” as they were “from different classes”, they tried to “catch up” and “hang out” with each other “after school”, “during recess”, and “during weekends.”

Students who spent an extensive amount of time together felt a sense of belonging that offered them an intimate space where they could “share our secrets” and talk about “problems we face”. Many pointed out that the level of protection and care afforded to them by their friends also strengthened their sense of rootedness. Haslindah knew she could “turn to my friends if I need some help.” Likewise, Joseph commented that “They provide me with safety”, while Megan observed that her friends were “trustworthy” and that “[t]hey care about me, they will tell me not to do some stuff like [if] it’s dangerous”. These sentiments all attest to Tan’s (2009) point that

Rootedness [and belonging] has to do with the expressive world of friendly community, where we should feel that we are among friends and people who care for us, and amongst people whom we are willing to contribute to and invest in. (p. 53)

#### 4.1.4 *Esprit de corps* through co-curricular activities groups.

The students also expressed a strong sense of belonging to the CCA groups that they participated in at school. In Singapore, all secondary school students have to take part in at least one CCA among four main categories, namely, Clubs and Societies, Physical Sports, Visual and Performing Arts, and Uniformed Groups, as part of their holistic education experience. These activities often take place after school hours. At specific periods of the school year, students from the CCAs take part in national competitions. An important platform that celebrates students' achievements in CCAs is the annual Singapore Youth Festival (SYF) organized by the Ministry of Education, where students from the performing arts, sports and uniformed group CCAs across the various schools compete against each other. Table 7 lists the CCAs in which the students in the study took part.

Table 7: List of Students' Co-curricular Activities

Student	Students' CCAs	CCA Type
Megan	St. John's Ambulance Brigade (SJAB)	Uniform Groups
Yiling	Basketball (Captain)	Physical Sports
Phoebe	Basketball	Physical Sports
Juyan	Basketball	Physical Sports
Hazreen	Malay Dance	Visual and Performing Arts Group
Bocheng	St John's Ambulance Brigade	Uniform Groups
Xianzheng	Volleyball	Physical Sports
Jingxuan	Netball	Physical Sports
Haslindah	Girl Guides	Uniform Groups
Manasi	St John's Ambulance Brigade (SJAB)	Uniform Groups
Keming	Table-tennis	Physical Sports
Zhiqiang	National Police Cadet Corps (NPCC)	Uniform Groups
Joseph	Drama Club	Visual and Performing Arts Group
Aidan	Drama Club	Visual and Performing Arts Group
Ethan	National Cadet Corps (NCC)	Uniform Groups

The majority of the students in this study mentioned that among their close friends were fellow participants in their CCAs. For these students, the CCAs provided a platform that necessitated teamwork and helped to develop camaraderie and friendship. In the case of Yiling, who was the captain of her basketball team, the competitions that her team took part in provided opportunities for her to further cement her relationship with her friends:

I'm close to my basketball teammates because recently there are many matches coming up and we will all meet together and go to the same place. After that, maybe we will have some lunch and study session together. So this will further bond our friendship.

Unlike the warm description that was used to describe the friendship above, the sense of belonging that was ascribed to CCAs, especially for students who had joined the uniformed groups, was one forged out of ruggedness, endurance, and tenacity due to “the high sense of discipline in the CCA,” to quote Megan. Correspondingly, Zhiqiang recalled his initial experience in the NPCC in Secondary One as “quite tough”, to the point that he had “felt like quitting it before.” Ethan described the activities in which he participated in his CCA almost as a rigorous rite of passage: “[a]s you know NCC is more like the army kind of CCA. Then we try to sharpen up our drills so that we can be better than other schools.” As such, it was the common experience of having overcome the tough training in these CCAs that strengthened the students’ sense of membership in these groups. Bocheng’s description of the friendships he had established in the SJAB aptly demonstrates the same point:

The friends who are very close to me will be those from my CCA because throughout my three years in my CCA, we actually gone through a lot together

because we are from uniform group and there will be things like physical activities that we will go through and we keep encouraging each other through.

Moreover, having spent three of their years in secondary school in their CCAs, these students had all assumed leadership positions within their respective CCAs at the time of this study.

These leadership posts further solidified their attachment to and identification with their CCAs.

As leaders, these students were entrusted with the task of passing on the culture and ethos of the CCAs to new members, as seen in Zhiqiang's point that that they were now "leaders and we have to lead the juniors."

As an integral part of students' schooling experience, the CCAs reinforce the concept of "common space" in Singapore, where students from diverse backgrounds are brought together.

The following excerpt from Singapore's Ministry of Education stresses this point:

CCAs are an integral part of our students' holistic education. Through CCA, students discover their interests and talents while developing values and competencies that will prepare them for a rapidly changing world. CCA also promote friendships among students from diverse backgrounds as they learn, play and grow together. Participation in CCA fosters social integration and deepens students' sense of belonging, commitment and sense of responsibility to school, community and nation (n.d.).

In this sense, the CCAs can be seen as another platform for promoting multiracialism, one where differences of race and religion are "disciplined" within the common space of the school.

#### **4.1.5 Belonging to places.**

Place has cultural meanings, especially when it serves as a referent in the definition of identity, such as one's home, one's place of birth. A sense of roots and location is needed in identity construction, which can be defined in terms of the relation between place and culture. (Tam, 2007, p. 143)

##### ***4.1.5.1 School.***

As a place, school plays a role in defining the boundaries and the physical space in which students live out the better part of their day. As a bounded space, it provides a high degree of protection and security for those within. However, the concept of belonging to a place goes beyond the geographical location or physical space – belonging is also tied to the “symbolic figurations” around the place (Anthias, 2013). The students described their sense of belonging to school in four different ways. The first was to describe their school using familial terms and analogies. Both Jingxuan and Yiling referred to their school as their “second home”. However, the utilization of the concept of “home” differed between the two students. In Jingxuan's case, school was home because it was the place, other than home, where she spent most of her time:

I really feel like school is my second home because I'm somebody who doesn't really go out or hang out outside usually after school. So most of what I do will be surrounding in school...So school is actually my second home.

For Yiling, school was a “second home” because it evoked the warmth of home and family. Equally as important to her as her friends were the teachers, whom she described as “very caring” and “motherly.” Similarly, for Haslindah, school was like “one big family” “because they make me comfortable” and “I turn to my friends if I need some help or my teachers any time I need them.” Yet, for students like Phoebe, the actuality of simply being part of the larger

community of students in the school was sufficient to construct her sense of belonging: “I’m also part of this [Cardamom] family so I’m really one of the students here and my friends make up this community. So I feel that we all belong here.”

A second form of school belonging was manifested in the expression of pride and honour students felt at being part of their school. This sentiment is unequivocally founded on institutional pride, which in turn is based on the school’s reputation. The message conveyed in students’ responses implied the existence of a highly competitive and selective process of gaining admission into the school. Tellingly, students who spoke in this vein were all from Cardamom. For example, Juyan spoke of her pride in the context of her relatives’ inquiry into her schooling: “whenever my relatives asked my mom what school I go [to]...every time when they hear [Cardamom Secondary School], then they will feel like, ‘good school, quite good’.” Xianzheng’s pride in gaining admission to Cardamom was equally evident:

[S]ince primary school like my goal was to come into Cardamom and I did. So it’s like I’m thankful to be here and very happy that I got into a school I want to come to; Cardamom is like a good school...I think the education is pretty good and it’s quite well-known according to parents. They all think that Cardamom is a good school where the education is good.

The third form of belonging is related to students’ perceived access to entitlements and benefits from the school. Bocheng’s sense of belonging was shaped by the opportunities given to him by his school to participate in academic competitions or enrichment programmes: “I do feel like I belong to this school after three years because the school has given me many opportunities, Science Membership Programme, Gifted Education Programme, these kind of programmes...[and the] Overseas Service Learning programme.” Megan’s feedback, on the

other hand, highlighted a different kind of benefit she gained from being in Cardamom, that of the opportunities provided to participate in functions organized by the school to celebrate official national events,

I was like impressed by the events they hold 'cause usually in other schools, like National Day will just be like you watch the parade and then you watch some animation, that's all then you go home. But in this school they have like booths that the principal will ask students to set up and then we can roam around freely and do whatever we want to do. Like for National Day, they has [sic] some booths, they will teach you stuff about resilience, it's like they will have games and also prizes to be won. Ya, not only like it's National Day, like other events such as Racial Harmony Day, International Friendship Day, they also have this kind of booths.

The last form the students' sense of belonging to their school took is connected with the ease with which they were able to socialize with each other. To borrow Joseph's words, schools are "conducive not only for learning but also for social interactions." For Joseph, coming to Tamarind was a welcome change from his primary school where "everybody's like busy with studies, and like even though want to socialize with them...they would rather socialize with people of their own level." Extending the metaphor of family, Joseph found it comforting to "see juniors having small talks with their seniors and then seniors, right, like treating their juniors like siblings."

Likewise, the importance of this ease in making friends is evident in Xianzheng's observation that "everyone is very friendly and you can make friends easily here...It's a good thing about this school." For Xianzheng, what contributed to this friendliness was a common

love of sports among the students, which was independent of background factors like race. This point substantiated his response, “I have friends from many races” in the questionnaire. Hazreen, one of his best friends, affirmed this ease in making friends at the school. He described their friendship as “multiracial and we get along well. I get to learn a bit about the Chinese, [and] Indian culture and festivals. All of us are active in sports.” Similarly, Zhiqiang noted that some of his friends in other schools felt they lacked a sense of belonging. He remarked, “I feel like I’m lucky to come to this school as all my friends are very sociable.”

#### ***4.1.5.2 Nation-state.***

In its crudest form, a nation-state refers simply to a geographical, physical place. However, scholars have argued that nation-states are also spaces of imagination. In his seminal work, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Benedict Anderson (1991) posited that a nation-state is “an imagined political community” characterized by the forms in which it is imagined. Similarly, Thongchai Winichakul (1998) coined the term “geobody” to refer to a nation’s territoriality and the way it conceives its collective self as a nation. Both point out that beyond the demarcation of the geographical boundaries of the nation, nation-states also generate concepts, symbols, and practices for communal identification. They argued that it is the identification with these concepts, symbols and practices that helps create a sense of belonging among individuals to the nation-state.

All the students in this study expressed a strong identification with Singapore when asked to describe their sense of belonging to the country. This identification could have stemmed simply from having been born into the polity, as is evident in Aidan’s response: “Of course, I feel like a Singaporean. I know I’m a Singaporean. I was born here. Well, I’m proud to be a Singaporean.” Others identified with the country’s achievements, such as the level of security

they felt. For example, Hazreen's comment, "I feel proud to be in Singapore because it is safe and the security level is high" echoed Yiling's sentiment that "staying in Singapore makes me feel safe as there are not many major events like riots that happen." In a study conducted by the Economist Intelligence Unit in 2015, Singapore was ranked the second safest city in the world, after Tokyo (*Economist*, 2015). The lack of major disturbances and low crime rate had, in a way, contributed to a sense of rootedness and belonging among these students. Students like Bocheng and Manasi also alluded to other types of achievements, such as the quality of Singapore's education and healthcare.

Students also drew on traditional markers like language and food to express their unique multiracial Singaporean identity. In the traditional sense, language refers to the languages of the different racial (ethnic) groups. However, the language that students were referring to was neither their ethnic languages nor the formal English used in commerce, government, and school instruction. Instead, they were all referring to the local creolized form of English known as Singapore Colloquial English or Colloquial Singapore English among academics, but better known as Singlish to the common man and woman. Gupta (2012) argues that as a language, Singlish encapsulates the hybridization of the colonial and immigrant backgrounds of Singaporeans. It can be construed as reflecting the multiracial nature of the country through its incorporation of vocabulary from the languages of the different races (Malay, Chinese, and Indian). In addition, the accent of Singlish speakers is distinctive, sounding almost "machine gun" like. Singlish does not operate with the grammatical logic of Standard English. As Gupta (2012) explains, "A lot of grammatical endings that are required in Standard English are optional in Singapore Colloquial English. Marking plurals and past tenses is a matter of choice, [and] so may be omitted" (Singapore colloquial English: Sounds, para 5).

Although widely used by Singaporeans from all walks of life in casual and informal situations and interactions, Singlish is strongly discouraged by the Singapore government for fear that it would hinder students' progress in "developing competency in the English language" (Liew & Ho, 2008, para. 3). The reason behind this opposition is the fear of Singaporeans losing their competitive edge in the global economy if they were to speak Singlish, which is largely incomprehensible to non-Singlish speakers (Goh, 2000; Liew & Ho, 2008). The government's view is, "Singaporeans' overriding interest is to master a useful language which will maximise our competitive advantage, and that means concentrating on standard English rather than Singlish" (Liew & Ho, 2008, para.5). Yet despite this strong discouragement, Singlish remains widely acknowledged as a badge of Singaporean identity (Gupta, 1994). As aptly summarized by Zhiqiang, "Singaporeans have their own special language as Singlish... And when you hear that they [other people] speak our language that is English and not yet English, you can know that it is Singaporean." Echoing this sentiment was Ethan from Tamarind: "Ya, I think I belong to Singapore, Normally when I talk to people I will speak Singlish." Bocheng from Cardamom made a similar point: "The way the use of Singlish and like we watched Singapore-made movies or films, we would be, like be able to relate to it. Like some of the jokes are in Singlish, and we will be able to understand...maybe people from other country will not be able to understand."

For foreign-born Joseph and Manasi, the ability to speak Singlish enabled them to identify with being Singaporean. When asked about his sense of belonging, Joseph, a Permanent Resident, revealed that he did not fully feel that he belonged in Singapore even though he had been in Singapore since his early primary school years. This feeling was based primarily on his sense that he was not contributing significantly to Singaporean society: "I feel like at some times I don't feel get quite close to Singapore, but at the same time I like Singapore...mostly because I

don't quite get involved in community stuff." However, when it came to Singlish, Joseph readily acknowledged that the ability to speak the language helped greatly in his integration into Singaporean society: "Yes, it does because um, every time when you speak to your friends right? You feel like if you speak in proper English, they would feel left out and then at the same time, I will feel left out. But if I speak Singlish, it feels like we're having the same, it's like two aliens speaking the same language." Even for Manasi, who claimed that she did not "really have a particular identity or something", her sense of belonging in Singapore was brought to the forefront when her trips back to India, her country of origin, highlighted how stark the differences were between Singapore and India. She recounted, "The way I am, it's just I'm more adapted to countries like Singapore and Malaysia. So if you ask me to stay at India, that would be impossible now." One of the key differences she encountered was the language: "Sometimes, I cannot [understand] their way of speaking, even in Tamil. Like there's definitely a difference...their English, they don't even have extra words, even Tamil or Tanglish, whatever. You know only Singapore has it like, makes it so unique and Singaporean."

The majority of the students also mentioned food as a way of assessing their sense of belonging in Singapore. In her book *Eating Her Curries and Kway: A Cultural History of Food in Singapore*, Nicole Tarulevich (2013) argued that food "is the very fabric of the lived experience; it is, if you are a local, what makes you part of the nation...it does the important work of creating a space for personal experience within the national narrative" (p. 5). She also concluded that this relationship between food and nation is particularly evident in Singapore. Although the cuisine that is prevalent in Singapore is often promoted as representing the distinct cultures of the official racial communities that make up the nation, what is more interesting is that even these ethnically representative cuisines have undergone a hybridization process in

which they incorporated the ingredients and cooking styles of the other races (Chua & Rajah, 2001). In other words, Singapore's cuisine is quintessentially multiracial in nature. Manasi, Zhiqiang, and Hazreen mentioned food as an aspect of what makes them identify as (or with) being Singaporean. Xianzheng explained that "it's the uniqueness of the food we have here. We have a variety of food as compared to other countries." Phoebe's response best summed up the point that it is the food, language, and for that matter, the overall culture of Singaporeans that makes Singapore "uniquely Singapore" (Singapore Tourism Board, 2015). Going beyond the term "unique", Phoebe drew the conclusion that ultimately what distinguishes her and her fellow Singaporeans from others is the multiracial and open character of Singapore:

I feel quite connected to Singapore because Singaporeans will have unique characteristics... Like Singlish, like our culture, then our food, and the place we live in. It's very different from other countries... I think because we are quite multiracial so we can easily make friends with people of other races but other countries, they might be not so comfortable with other races. And I think as a community, we will be very open to different races, and even foreigners.

I have attempted in this chapter to illustrate how the students' identities can be explicated and understood from their own accounts of their sense of belonging to formal and informal groups, and places. What was evident was the observation that the students' sense of belonging was often narrated in terms of their daily experiences, participation in the activities, and the attachments they formed within the different collectivities. Interestingly, despite the variety of individuals represented, these accounts of belonging reflect strongly the subjects' "multiracial" and Singaporean traits. As will be presented in the next chapter, this positioning and locating as multiracial Singaporeans was to have a strong influence on the students' judgments of historical

significance and especially on the schematic narrative template that they drew upon to make these judgments.

## CHAPTER 5

### Findings on Students' Judgments of Historical Significance

*The Singapore Story is based on historical facts. We are not talking about an idealised legendary account or a founding myth, but of an accurate understanding of what happened in the past, and what this history means for us today. It is objective history, seen from a Singaporean standpoint.*

- Goh Chok Tong (1997)

In *After Virtue*, Alasdair MacIntyre (1984) wrote that man is essentially a story-telling animal. He claimed, "there is no way to give us an understanding of any society, including our own, except through the stock of stories which constitute its initial dramatic resources" (p. 216). MacIntyre advanced the point that this stock of stories is always present in the communities and social networks to which we belong. Moreover, the stock of stories that are told is also dependent on the cultural, social and political settings from which they emerged.

We grow up listening to these stories of heroes and villains, of how good children get rewarded and bad children get punished, and of how people who persevere succeed while lazy people fail. We absorb the "virtues" and values, and internalize the morality behind these stories to make sense of what is communally acceptable and not acceptable. These stories enable us to locate ourselves in the larger social scheme of things. Through these stories we also learn to configure our social positions and make sense of our relationship with others in the distant past, the present, and the future. It is also this stock of stories that we draw from to inform our thinking and decisions in life. It is important to note, however, that while these "stories inform

our choices, they do not dictate them” (Winston, 1998, p. 20).

The main aim of this study is to understand the reasoning behind students’ judgments on what they considered as historically significant in Singapore’s history, and to determine how these judgments were influenced by their positionalities. Even though the elicitation tasks set for the first individual and focus group interviews did not explicitly ask the students to arrange their chosen events along a timeline (as was the case in Barton & Levstik, 1998), the events selected and the explanations offered for the selection adhered closely to the plot of the official “Surmounting Adversity” national narrative. The plot of this schematic narrative template is characterized by the following sequence:

- The people in Singapore were living in a certain situation.
- Unforeseen circumstances arose and affected them.
- A time of suffering and uncertainty ensued.
- The resilience, audacity, and foresight of the people in dealing with the threats won the day.
- Peace was restored and progress followed.
- But the people remained vulnerable to threats and had to maintain their vigilance.

With the exception of the events concerning the founding of Singapore as a British settlement, the key milestones in Singapore’s history tend to follow this schematic template. An instance of this is the Fall of Singapore (British defeat) and the subsequent occupation by the Japanese:

- The people in Singapore were living in a relatively peaceful time prior to the Japanese attack.
- The population was rudely shocked by the sudden advance of the Japanese and swift capitulation of the British.

- The British surrendered and a period of rule by the Japanese military began, one marked by brutality, hunger, and deprivation.
- The people of Singapore resisted and persevered through this difficult time, with some joining the resistance movement to expel the Japanese.
- Peace was restored.
- But the post-war conditions and communists inspired political and social movements that disrupted the peace, and the people were once again launched into turbulent times.

The students’ explanation of their selections of significant events and personalities also revolved around the four central themes – origins, hardship, vulnerability and vigilance, and success against the odds – that characterized the schematic narrative template.

### 5.1 Theme 1: “The Start of Everything”

As with the findings from Barton and Levstik (1998) and Peck (2009), almost all the students in this study chose pictures of events and personalities that tell of the origins or beginning of Singapore. In justifying their reasons for their choices, the students all used descriptors like “basic”, “start”, “beginning”, “first”, and “stepping stone.” The selected pictures also tend to reflect the three “founding points” in Singapore’s history – the founding of pre-modern Singapore; the founding of modern Singapore; and the founding of independent Singapore (See Table 8).

Table 8: Pictures Chosen According to the Three Founding Points

<b>Founding of Pre-Modern Singapore</b>	<b>Founding of Modern Singapore</b>	<b>Founding of Independent Singapore</b>
Sang Utama	Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles	Merger with and Separation from Malaysia, 1963-1965
	The Treaty of 6 February 1819	

The picture selected by the students that was related to the first “founding point” represents the founding myth involving Sang Utama,<sup>7</sup> a Prince from Palembang, who found and subsequently named the island *Singapura* (“Lion City” in Sanskrit) in the late 13<sup>th</sup> century. It was said that after landing on the island, he spotted a strange beast moving at great speed and asked his advisor what animal it was. When told that the beast was likely a lion, an animal that symbolized nobility and power, he decided to stay on the island and named it *Singapura*. The story of Sang Utama was preserved in the *Sejarah Melayu* or the Malay Annals, written in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The veracity of this founding account is contested among historians, mainly because lions are not native to the island, and also because the Annals were written as a form of historical literature that sought to mythologize the history of the *Melakan* Sultanate. They incorporated myths and narratives that legitimized the rule of the rulers by illustrating their spiritual prowess and divinity. Some students, such as Aidan, cast aspersions on the historicity of the event. He notes:

Well, there are many legends, back then, history of the past could just be legends of today. We can't know if it's definitely true. Facts could be altered, information could be lost, and well. I honestly think that, I'm very skeptical that a lion would have been on this island. I'm very skeptical about that fact...For one, lions are not exactly native in this country... I'm not saying that Sang Utama completely does not exist but I'm just saying that facts may had been altered, information could have been lost and some things may not be true.

Students like Haslindah, Xianzheng, and Manasi saw Utama's arrival as a significant event in Singapore's history because it informs Singaporeans about the country's origins. “Every

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<sup>7</sup> Sang Utama is also commonly known as Sang Nila Utama. In the Malay Annals or *Sejara Melayu*, he is also referred to as *Seri Teri Buana*, Sanskrit for “Lord of the Three Worlds”.

Singaporean have to know how Singapura gets its name,” Haslindah insisted, “I think because he’s the basic and the start of Singapore.” Xianzheng also considered this an essential point: “He founded Singapore... without him discovering this Singapura island, we won’t have this so-called country.”

Most of the students also spoke of the British founding of Singapore in 1819 as a turning point in the nation’s history. Both the pictures depicting the Treaty of 1819 and Sir Stamford Raffles were selected to represent this momentous event. To Juyan, the Treaty of 1819 signified “the start of everything” because “it’s important treaty that allowed the building of settlement on the island and after that many people came to the island. And there were many development of the place and eventually Singapore.” Unlike the students in Barton and Levstik’s (1998) study, the students in Singapore did not see this founding point as marking the formation of a community, but instead as initiating a process of modernization that has transformed the nation into an economic powerhouse. To Manasi, the event led to the development of Singapore from a “normal fishing village” to “a famous trading port.” Similarly, Megan pointed out that “if not for the treaty, Singapore wouldn’t be like the famous trading port it is now or like when it was older.” Keming added that with the signing of the Treaty of 1819, “the whole Singapore will be more advanced.”

The students who chose the pictures that marked Singapore’s beginnings as a British colony also saw British colonialism as a positive phenomenon which brought both social and economic benefits to the people of Singapore. Joseph argued that the treaty was a “significant part of the founding of Singapore because this is...kind of a permission slip for Stamford Raffles and for the British to be part of Singapore.” He added that “this is like the first stepping stone to achieving a great trading port of Singapore.” Ethan also saw the social and economic impact of

the event, in that it encouraged immigrants and traders to come to Singapore, prompting “the Singapore economy” to grow. Manasi extolled Raffles in view of his role in the transformation of Singapore, and claimed that she did not know if “without him”, “we will have a present or not.”

The third founding point is the establishment of Singapore as an independent nation in 1965. The picture chosen to represent this depicts the Merger with Malaysia and the subsequent Separation. All the four focus groups selected this picture unanimously, without much debate. Zhiqiang remarked, “without this, we will still be a part of Malaysia.” Yiling knew these two events are important because being aware of the background helps Singaporeans know “what’s the reason behind that Singapore separated from Malaysia and how it became independent.” What marks this particular “founding point” apart from the other two was the severance of political ties with Malaysia. The students understood that before August 1965 Singapore was still part of the Malayan polity, first as part of the larger Melakan, then the Johore-Riau Sultanate, and later on as part of British-administered Malaya. The significance of the break from Malaysia is captured in Jingxuan’s comment that “once the proclamation come out and the newspaper articles all come out, it’s set. Singapore became one country. We are independent, we are alone.”

In addition to the theme of national origins, students also picked events that represented hallmark changes in Singapore. Zhiqiang’s argument for the inclusion of educational reforms was made on the basis that it “has the most major things that change Singapore. It changed Singapore the most.” Aidan justified the inclusion of the 1959 Elections as one of his key events because it indicated that “Singapore finally gained full governance” and that “people could finally choose who they wanted to rule over them.” Similarly, the 1967 National Service Amendment Bill was considered significant because it laid “the basis of what NS is now.”

## 5.2 Theme 2: The “Deaths and Suffering of Singapore must be Remembered”

Another dominant theme that surfaced in the students’ selection of events is death and suffering. Their explanations on this score often referred to the scale and depth of impact of the events on the people of Singapore. The events that were chosen to represent this theme are noted in Table 9.

Table 9: Pictures Chosen that Show Death and Suffering

War Heroes
British defeat in 1942
The Japanese Occupation of Singapore, 1942-45
<i>Konfrontasi</i> , 1963-1966

The students who chose the British Defeat of 1942 and the Japanese Occupation tended to describe the period as one of great trauma and hardship, particularly in terms of the extent of deaths and the acts of cruelty and atrocities committed by the Japanese soldiers across all sections of the local population. Yiling commented that “the Japanese soldiers are very cruel and they show no empathy on our people.” She followed up her comment by providing further details, noting, “they even killed babies who are very young” and speaking of the “cruel treatment that they had on Singaporeans.” Manasi also spoke about the significance of the Occupation in terms of the death and suffering: “a lot of people died from that Death Railway. They make people go there and people died there. That was really cruel, and the hanging of heads! Oh my goodness!” Despite his Permanent Resident status, Joseph also shared that he was “heartbroken” by the event “because they were being tortured. They were being slaughtered in the streets. It was a big part of Singapore’s history because it was one of the most bad times of Singapore.” Keming added that even though he did not know much about what happened, he too felt that it was a terrible period for Singapore. He noted, “they said it’s very cruel. I don’t really

know much about this. I just know that there's a lot of blood, they [the Japanese] do a lot of bad things.”

Besides deaths and torture, students who selected the two events for their significance also explained their choice by pointing to the hardship the people had to go through during the Japanese Occupation. For instance, Juyan noted that “during the Japanese Occupation and anything that they do or say, it will like cause them to maybe get punished and maybe even death.” Zhiqiang described the hardship by pointing out that “there was also a lot of food shortage” and “people have difficulty getting food.” In their description of the significance of the British defeat and Japanese Occupation, the students often identified themselves with the people of this period, as seen in Juyan's comment,

Like we went through a lot of stuff. Like people in Singapore went through a lot of stuff... we know how cruel the Japanese people were and what they did to the people there. Like we will know how people were treated last time.

Similarly, Hazreen demonstrated this identification: “A lot of lives were lost, and the Japanese, we actually suffered when we are under the rule of the Japanese. It's important because it tells us how our forefathers suffered.” Hazreen's reference to the people who lived during the period as “our forefathers” also denoted his acknowledgement that he was an heir to these people.

As with Barton's (2005) study of Northern Irish students, the students in this study explained that their choices of significant events that emphasized the theme of death and suffering were largely connected with the need for remembrance. For many students, choosing the British defeat and the Japanese Occupation was also a way to remember the courageous and fallen. When asked why he felt that the British defeat was significant, Ethan pointed out that the Singaporean people had valiantly fought “against the Japanese even though they are not

really...British,”and that this event should be remembered because “they are brave and they are worth being remembered for the future generations.” Ethan’s point about remembering the event so that he could honor those who had struggled and died fighting against the Japanese resonated with other students. When asked why war heroes are historically significant, Haslindah pointed out that “we should like remember how last time the army actually fight. They tried their best to fight for Singapore so we should acknowledge this. I mean like the British, some of the Singaporeans actually join the army to fight so we should acknowledge them.” Bocheng explained his inclusion of war heroes along similar lines:

Because they contributed greatly to the war and some of them were even captured and tortured but they still chose not to say anything. They truly wanted to defend Singapore. And it just made me feel like wow these people actually will do so much. They actually will go so far and, I feel like they should be remembered for all the contributions they done to Singapore during the Japanese Occupation.

Other events highlighted by the students as significant and fitting into the theme of death and suffering included the *Konfrontasi* and the Bukit Ho Swee Fire. Zhiqiang explained the significance of the *Konfrontasi* as a period that “injured people” and that “quite a lot of people died in the MacDonald House bombing,” while Bocheng spoke about the great loss of property in the fire: “during this period, during this incident, a lot of valuables and possessions was lost.”

As in the United Kingdom, the remembrance of key events in Singapore is always associated with honoring those who lost their lives and suffered at the time. These events are either commemorated through designated days or by memorial markers. For instance, every year on 15 February, Singapore observes Total Defence Day to commemorate the fall of Singapore to

the Japanese in 1942. As a mark of commemoration, the Public Warning System is sounded island-wide and schools also participate by running their own program. For example, some schools conduct mock water supply and electricity shutdowns whereas other schools serve students war-time food like sweet potato and tapioca soup to give them some idea of what life was like without luxuries. A *Konfrontasi* memorial will also be built opposite MacDonald House to commemorate the bombing. These measures are meant to connect students to defining moments in Singapore's history. More specifically, they serve as reminders of the struggles Singapore had to go through to become what it is today. The students' selections and responses suggest that they fully identified with the significance of these events. As aptly summed up by Joseph in justifying his choice of events, the "deaths and suffering of Singapore must be remembered."

### **5.3 Theme 3: "But Look at Us Now"**

A prevalent theme that the students drew on to explain their selection of events is that of triumph over adversity (see Table 10) or success against the odds. This theme emphasizes Singapore's successes in overcoming challenges and threats to its survival. The students often contrasted the conditions before and after their chosen event transpired or their chosen personality emerged. The pre-existing conditions were often portrayed as bleak and fraught with problems and challenges; in some instances, the nation was described as underestimated. The post facto conditions were a picture of victory and progress. Common among the students' explanations were the use of two comparative adjectives like "better" and "more." The students also pointed to constraints such as the small size of Singapore, its lack of resources, and its strategic weaknesses.

Table 10: Pictures Chosen that Illustrate Success Against the Odds

The Treaty of 1819
Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles
Lee Kuan Yew
The establishment of the Housing and Development Board in 1960 and housing resettlement
Educational reforms
Industrialization and economic development of Singapore since 1960s

Besides marking the start of Singapore as a nation-state, the Merger with and Separation from Malaysia were often described as exemplifying triumph over adversity. To these students, the Separation was a blessing in disguise for Singapore. Megan’s point attests to this view: “it was lucky that Malaysia pushed us out of Malaya” because “if they hadn’t done that, we would not be this like industrialized city we are now today.” Similarly, Juyan applauded the separation as “a very good decision” because the status quo, or worse, would have held if Singapore had remained as part of Malaysia. She deemed the pro-Malay policy in Malaysia as detrimental to Singapore . She remarked, “if we didn’t separate from Malaysia, I believe that there will [still] be like class [racially-based policies determining] that Malays deserve to have more, higher level of quality.... better treatment than Singaporeans.” Joseph perhaps captures the salience of this theme best in his response:

The reason why Malaysia separated from Singapore is because they thought that Singapore was being quite a burden on them and...Malaysia would be better off without them [as] Singapore would be nothing but only a very poor country. But then look at us now! We are like one of the biggest trading port in the world and then like there are many businesses, now it’s even more successful than Malaysia. It’s kind of like a slap to the face.

The students also drew on this theme to illustrate the significance of key historical personalities like Raffles and Lee Kuan Yew in their responses. For example, Haslindah singled out Lee Kuan Yew as “one of the important persons in Singapore” because he “actually show[ed] us that there can be changes for more better life for Singaporeans” and what Lee Kuan Yew did “give us very much hope.” Bocheng’s explanation also supported Haslindah’s. He recounted that Lee “was the one who rapidly developed us from a small trading town or under-developed to what we have today. He was the one who pushed us to such a great distance after all the chaos and unease we had.”

The focus on transformation also dominated the students’ application of the theme of success against the odds to other pictures. For example, Haslindah’s justification of her selection of the establishment of the Housing and Development Board revolved around two transformations. The first was the improvement in the physical quality of life, as recounted by her mother. She explained that since her flat was “made out of cement”, her mother no longer felt that “the house is going to fall.” The second transformation was the improvement in interracial relations – her mother “said like living in HDB flat and she can know people better.” Contrasting living in flats to village life, Haslindah shared that the HDB actually allowed people from different races to “bond together.” With regard to the significance of the picture representing industrialization and economic development, Bocheng spoke about the island’s transformation across a span of almost two hundred years:

Back then, Singapore was just a small fishing settlement...But now after like about a hundred to two hundred plus years, we actually come a long way and managed to build multiple skyscrapers, very tall buildings and our economy has become very, very good compared to other countries even though we have no

natural resources and we have very limited land. And as such a small country, we're able to like develop faster than all the other bigger countries around us like Malaysia, Indonesia.

#### 5.4 Theme 4: “You’re Not Completely Safe Right Now”

The last theme that emerged from the students’ responses was the importance of events that highlight the continued existence of threats to the survival of Singapore (see Table 11). To them, the significance of these events did not merely lie in explaining the origins, the extent of death and suffering experienced, and the progress of Singapore; they also served as cautionary tales to Singaporeans. The students highlighted not only the continued vulnerability of Singapore but also the factors that continue to challenge the country’s survival. In particular, they warned of possible destruction should the nation become complacent and unprepared to meet these challenges. This theme highlights both the vulnerability of Singapore and the need for continued vigilance. Evident in the students’ responses on this theme are phrases such as “if we are not careful”, “not to take things for granted”, “teach us”, and “learn from.”

Table 11: Pictures Chosen that Illustrate Vulnerability and Vigilance

British defeat in 1942
The Japanese Occupation, 1942-1945
The Maria Hertogh riots, 1950
The Race Riots, 1964
<i>Konfrontasi</i> , 1963-1966
The Bukit Ho Swee Fire, May 25, 1961
The National Service Amendment Bill of 1967

Many students selected the British defeat in Singapore and the Japanese Occupation to illustrate the vulnerability of Singapore. To Jingxuan, the speed with which Singapore capitulated to the Japanese taught Singaporeans “a very big lesson” where it came to over-reliance on others and not being self-sufficient. She also identified Singapore’s small size as a

key factor contributing to its “vulnerable state”. To Jingxuan, the significance of the period of 1942-5 was that it made her realize that Singapore is “our own country, we have to protect it ourselves and not just rely on other people.” Bocheng’s explanation underscored the importance of avoiding complacency and the need for vigilance, “because most Singaporeans nowadays are taking things for granted... might just not stay as vigilant.”

The students’ explanations of the Maria Hertogh riots and the Race Riots also pointed out the dangers posed by racial and religious fault lines in Singaporean society and the need to maintain the racial harmony currently present in Singapore. Aidan explained that “there was quite a bit of tension between races... Back then the tension was really, you know, it was quite high actually.” Contrasting the past with the present, he continued by noting that the race riots showed him “how different those times and now is in terms of racial harmony.” Manasi argued that “Singapore has to remember race riots because they need to know what will happen without multiracial harmony... They have to remember that if we have disputes and stuff, how our lives is going to be... These are lessons we just have to learn from.” Xianzheng connected the significance of the riots to the effort made by modern Singapore to maintain racial harmony:

When people from different races, they have different point of view and what they say might actually offend the other party. And misunderstandings and conflicts will also arise.... Because in Singapore we’re trying to have a more harmonious society where all the race[s] can come together and united. And no discriminations should be made against each other.

Similarly, students emphasized the need to maintain vigilance when discussing the significance of the *Konfrontasi*, and even the Bukit Ho Swee Fire. Bocheng warned that a period such as the *Konfrontasi* could come again: “You’re not completely safe right now. We still could

be attacked by terrorist, just like back then.” In summary, the students’ responses on this theme focused not just on the significance of the events themselves, but also on the lessons that one could draw from them. Their pedagogical function, as Joseph pointed out, is to serve as a “kind of like a warning” to teach “us a lesson of what happened.” To Joseph these events are like “flash cards” to remind people not to become complacent. This theme in particular folded in with the main thrust of National Education, which is to develop in the students an instinct for national survival. This is encapsulated in Lee’s (1997) point in

Knowing this history is part of being a Singaporean. It is the back-drop which makes sense of our present. It shows what external dangers to watch out for, and where our domestic fault lines lie. It explains what we stand for and believe in, and why we think and act the way we do. It gives us confidence that even when the odds look daunting, with determination and effort we will prevail.

In the course of this study, it was observed that students tended to draw on their positionalities as Singaporeans to make judgments on the events. For instance, they consistently used first person pronouns like “we”, “us”, and “our”. They also demonstrated strong identification with Singapore and often projected themselves as part of the country when reasoning about historical significance. This can be seen in statements like “we are a small country and we kind of seem vulnerable to other larger countries” and, to repeat an earlier excerpt from Bocheng, “we actually come a long way and managed to build multiple skyscrapers, very tall buildings and our economy has become very, very good compared to other countries even though we have no natural resources and we have very limited land”. Students’ identification as Singaporeans was also manifested in their expressions of pride in the country’s

success. This was especially evident when they discussed how Singapore was able to overcome its challenges and rise to become a first world country. Bocheng remarked, “it actually showed like how much we have developed and to me it will actually instill a sense of pride in me...It just makes me feel proud like I’m living in Singapore.” This form of identification is also observed in other scholarly studies. In particular, Barton and Levstik (2004) emphasized the identification functions served by history, such as in legitimizing current political and social arrangements, providing a sense of identity with communities, and promoting the *exceptionalism* of their community.

### **5.5 Contexts, Positionality and Judgments of Historical Significance**

A key question posed in this study is whether students’ positionality will shift in different contexts (individual and group) and whether these shifts will result in changes in their judgments of historical significance. To get at this, I invited students in the post-group interviews to talk about their experiences in the group discussions as well as to account for the similarities and differences in the choice and ranking of their events in the first and group interview. Students reported that they had positive experiences when asked about their feelings regarding their participation in the group discussions. Majority of the students shared that the group discussion provided them with the opportunity to learn about the opinions of their friends regarding what they considered to be significant. Xianzheng’s comment that the discussion was “quite fun because I know what my friends are actually thinking” was echoed by most of the students. Students like Phoebe and Joseph added that they contributed to the discussion. Joseph, in particular saw his outsider PR status as particularly helpful in providing diverse opinions in the discussion: “I prove to be a valuable participant in the group because...I was the only PR in the

group...I provided the interview with different point of view which the other two participants did not manage to.”

In response to the question on whether it was easy or difficult for them to share their views with the group, most students shared that they found it easy to participate in the group discussion. One reason offered by the students was their familiarity with the group members. For instance Aidan commented that the students in his group were his classmates and friends. Another reason was due to the size of the group. Manasi, Jingxuan and Phoebe felt that the small numbers in the group helped to put them at ease during the discussion. Others like Juyan, Yiling and Hazreen commented that the similarity of ideas contributed to their ease in participating in the discussion. Yiling added that she and her group members were familiar with working in groups for projects and have learned to be open to different opinions and the need for negotiation. However, some students also shared that they experienced discomfort in the group discussion. Haslindah expressed initial discomfort due to her fear of being judged for being “different.” Zhiqiang found it “somewhat difficult” because of his quiet temperament as well as his opinion that his “English is not really that good.” Both Jingxuan and Xianzheng also commented that participation was difficult at times when the views shared by members were too “broad” and different.

Although some of the events in the students’ individual selection and ranking differed from that of the group, the differences were due to the variance in criterion used to evaluate the significance of the events and personalities. For instance, In Group 2, Juyan pointed out that her group members, Phoebe and Xianzheng, tended to focus more on events that contributed to “the process of gaining independence for Singapore and how Singapore develops into like a developed country.” This contrasted with her own emphasis on “individuals” who contributed to

Singapore's development. Jingxuan also commented that her group (Group 3) placed more emphasis on political developments that shaped Singapore and its government than on the people. Bocheng pointed out that his group (Group 1) worked on their selection and ranking based on chronology and what lessons they could derive from the event or personality. While he concurred with the focus on lessons they could learn from the event, Bocheng's individual selection was also based on how the event had impacted Singapore both in the past and the present. In terms of the justifications for the events chosen, students' explanations and justifications continue to revolve around the impact of the event on Singapore or on how much the event revealed about Singapore's past. None of the students offered any alternative explanation that indicated a shift in their positionalities.

However, Joseph's experience in the group discussion had limited his ability to position himself as fully belonging to Singapore. Throughout the discussion, Joseph was made to feel like an outsider by his two other group members. He noted in his post-group interviews that he was uncomfortable when the conversation veered into the issue of foreign talent, noting that Jingxuan and Aidan became a little "passive aggressive" but was glad that they both were able to "cool down quickly." This constant drawing of boundaries between "us" and "them" or "Singaporeans" and "Foreigners" was observed in a few instances during their group interview. For example, when discussing the significance of the British Defeat in Singapore, Jingxuan commented that it was important to defend Singapore "because it's OUR country." This prompted Aidan to remark to Joseph that he just got "burnt" (insulted) by her comment. When they noticed my bewildered look, Joseph pointed at himself and said "PR" (Permanent Resident) and then at Aidan and Jingxuan and said "Singaporeans." In another instance when discussing the significance of the immigrants, Jingxuan exclaimed "It's like this is our forefathers...us."

She then turned towards Joseph and said “not you.” Caught by surprise, Joseph could only mutter, “Wow! Okay, Suan!” Aidan laughed and jumped in to interpret the Hokkien term “Suan” as “Burnt.” Similarly, during the discussion on the Race Riots and racial discrimination, the conversation veered off to the topic of foreign talent which prompted the following exchange among the three of them:

Aidan: (Looks at Joseph) You have to serve NS [National Service] right?

Joseph: Ya

Jingxuan: You better don't run away! (Laughs)

Aidan: You run away, I'll call every contact that know about you (Laughs).

Joseph: (Laughs).

Having spent a significant number of years in the Singapore Education System, Joseph was able to make judgments on the historical significance of events and personalities that adhered to the Singapore narrative. When asked about his use of “us” and “they” interchangeably during the post-group interview, Joseph noted his in-betweenness in “I still don't feel like I should consider myself part of Singapore but at the same time, I feel that I should feel part of Singapore. Sometimes I'm in a dilemma between those things.” He added that labels such as Filipino, PR, or citizen are “just the way we identified ourselves. Just a way to sort us out between Singaporeans, foreigners, and PRs.” To Joseph, identification with Singapore is related to his sense of belonging and rootedness to the country in “But I think I sort myself, whether or not I feel I understand and care about Singapore. And to be honest, I actually do care about Singapore despite its cons.” In this instance, although Joseph's positionality as an outsider was reinforced by his group members' comments in the group discussion, his judgments of historical significance did not indicate this stance of his.

## **5.6 Constraints of the Narrative Template**

As presented in Chapter 2, Wertsch (1998, 2000b) argued that narratives are cultural tools that allow individuals to represent the past. Their function lies in their ability to help one remember the past by making connections between particular events, actors and settings in a meaningful way. This study follows in the footsteps of earlier studies that explore how children and adolescents in schools use the narrative template to make sense of their past (Barton, 2005; Barton & Levstik, 2004; Brophy & VanSledright, 1997; Levstik & Pappas, 1987; Peck, 2009, Wills, 2011). As demonstrated in this study, students drew extensively from the “Surmounting Adversity” narrative template to help them make judgments on historical significance. Yet as Wertsch (1998) pointed out, narrative templates provide both affordances and constraints to those who use them. Researchers such as Barton and Levstik (1996), Lee and Ashby (2000), VanSledright and Brophy (1992), and Wills (2011) concurred with this observation and noted in their studies that students’ preconceptions and naïve conceptions can greatly influence their understanding of the historical past. The next section highlights a few observations on how the schematic narrative template actually became a constraint when the students engaged in reasoning about historical significance.

### **5.6.1 Conflation and simplification.**

Many of the students in this study tend to adopt reductionist moves in their explanations of their chosen events. Very often this tend to lead them to simplify and conflate issues. Nokes (2013) defined reductionism as “any effort to simplify historical content and/or causation in order to avoid historical complexity” (p.150).

One of the most prevalent moves as observed in studies by Barton (1996, 2008a), employed by students was to conflate and simplify the complexities of historical events in their

selection. This was most problematic when students had to deliberate about events that shared some degree of similarity. For example, Ethan thought that the inclusion of the pictures on the immigrants, race riots and Maria Hertogh riots in the focus group discussion would be a “duplicate” as “they are the same” and all “about the races.” Likewise, when asked if she would make any changes to her set of chosen pictures in the post-focus group interview, Jingxuan acknowledged that if it was permitted, she would have included all the riots in her stack because “riots are actually part of a very big past.” However, given the limitations imposed, she decided to adopt the approach of choosing “a riot that kind of symbolizes the other riots.” Jingxuan further explained that all the riots were about “unhappiness from the citizens of Singapore” and hence her decision was to choose the best “riot that symbolizes the rest that we have to remember that this riot that cause us includes of [*sic*] religious issues, and social issues, and how the government is not trying their best or something like that.”

Jingxuan’s and Ethan’s explanations had shown their failure at historicizing and contextualization – the ability to take into consideration the unique historical circumstances and complexity that shaped each riot. As a result of adopting this stance, Jingxuan had reduced the significance of each riot to a single attribute - one that would help others learn about the mistakes of the past. This is evident in her comment that

As long as it’s history, no matter what incident it is, it kind of let people in the present to reflect of the past and let us to pick out the mistakes that our forefathers made.

Ethan’s comment that “race riots is about races while Maria Hertogh is also about race. So it’s the same thing. It’s about racial harmony” also demonstrates this conflation.

Similarly, the practice of segmenting historical time into historical periods like the

Japanese Occupation, post-war years or the 1950s and 1960s while useful in helping students to organize the massive corpus of content in the history curriculum, can also convey the impression that each phase is distinctive on their own and had special characteristics. When students moved on to a different period of study, there is a tendency for them see the new period as a clean break from other historical periods. Students tend to hold the view that there is no continuity from one time period to another, and hence failed to see the changes and continuations of issues across time periods. This was evident in Haslindah's attempt to explain the significance of the MacDonald House bombing during the *Konfrontasi*. She shared that

During the time, 1963-1966...it's like peace because no more riots. But then suddenly there's bomb happening in the bank. I think it's like a shock to everyone because we thought, I mean they thought like they are living in peace, they are safe. But actually it's not...terrorists are all over everywhere so they should like always be careful...It's a shock for everybody like during this time there's no riots for [a] long [time], then there's terrorists in Singapore!

Haslindah's comment that "it's like peace and no more riots" suggests that, in her mind, the 1960s was a period of peace as compared to the 1950s where numerous riots such as the Hock Lee Bus Riots, Students' Riots and the minor labor strikes took place. In this way, Haslindah had failed to realize that the 1960s was also a period of rising tensions between Malaysia, food shortage, a weak economy, and political and social upheavals. Moreover, Haslindah's comment that "terrorists are all over everywhere" gave the impression that Singapore was crawling with terrorists. In fact, this was a historical misconception because the Indonesian saboteurs were operating clandestinely in Singapore during the *Konfrontasi*. Haslindah's explanation, when examined closely, adhered to the schematic narrative template

where a defining feature or plotline was the presence of a period of “peace” before the country was once again confronted by rising and new challenges.

Rather than consider that the explanations produced by students as problematic and deficient, I take the view advanced by researchers (Barton & Levstick, 1996; Wills, 2011) that these accounts were the result of students’ appropriation of the cultural tool – narratives- to represent their knowledge of the historical past. In the case of Jingxuan and Ethan, their consideration of historical significance was constrained by the use of a cognitive filter provided by the themes of the schematic template. Consequently, the two students narrowly defined significance simply as a lesson to be learned which is related to the theme of vulnerability and vigilance. The schematic narrative template also has the effect leading them to discard or ignore the complexities of the events studied.

Many of the students in the study also displayed what Barton (1996, 20008a) called “narrative simplifications.” Narrative simplifications happened when students reduced and simplified history by minimizing the number of actors and events in their accounts, conceptualizing historical change as a linear and progressive process, condensing the duration and extent of historical processes as though it happened all at once, and distorting and misconceiving the roles played by different institutions and groups of people in history (Barton 2008a). For example, Barton noticed that the fourth graders in his studies placed an inordinate amount of attention on the actions and intentions of historical actors in causing historical change.

In examining the significance of the Treaty of 1819 and Raffles in the founding of Singapore, students fell into the trap of condensing the duration and extent of the development of Singapore from 1819 to 1965. For instance, Juyan explained the significance of the 1819 Treaty as the “treaty [that] allowed the British to set up a settlement on the island, and then slowly the

people in Singapore...gain their independence. And they will be merged with Malaysia and then separate again [because] of this treaty... And so we become an independent country.” Juyan’s run-on response demonstrated two problematic views of the causal chain in Singapore’s history. First, she simplified the causes for the key historical developments involved in the process of immigration from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century to early 20<sup>th</sup> century to the Merger and Separation of Singapore leading to Singapore’s independence. Second, by doing so, Juyan had conflated the temporal space between the signing of the 1819 treaty and the other historical events and developments. The 1819 Treaty in her account seemed to gain an omnipotent presence that course through the flow of almost 150 years of Singapore’s history. Likewise Yiling’s view of the significance of Industrialization and Economic Development of Singapore also revealed a linear and simplistic causal relationship between Industrialization and economic growth in Singapore. Pointing at the picture, she exclaimed, “This shows like how Singapore has developed over the years where buildings and technology was advanced.”

Students in this study also displayed an inclination to attribute and equate all developments as the work of one historical agent. For example, Ethan remarked that Raffles’ was historically significant because “he helped to make Singapore a better place, organized Singapore to make it look neater.” Likewise, Haslindah’s point about Raffles being “the one who like from a village in Singapore, he made technologies better in Singapore, making everybody’s life better... Like from a village in Singapore, he actually ma[d]e some houses, arrange[d] them so that it will be [a] better environment for people” also reinforced this preconception. This reductionist view of Raffles as being single-handedly responsible (e.g. organized Singapore, ma[de]e some houses) simplified the processes involved in the development of Singapore by ignoring the roles played by other actors and social, political and economic institutions. Despite

its rather ludicrous sounding logic, there was some element of truth in the two explanations. By establishing Singapore as a trading settlement, Raffles did contribute to Singapore's economic and social development. In commissioning a town plan to be produced in 1822 to organize the fast-growing settlement in Singapore. However, the means and the contributions of other actors that contributed to the development of Singapore in were left out of students' explanations. The result is akin to what McKeown and Beck (1990) termed as the concocting of "factual stews." Wills (2011) argued that narrative simplifications and conflation of historical past are the result of students' "misremembering" which is a constraint brought about by students' use of the narrative template as a cultural tool.

In sum, the findings presented in this chapter suggest that students' judgments of historical significance were influenced by their employment of the "Surmounting Adversity" schematic narrative template which was closely aligned to that of the official historical narrative in Singapore. Students' responses highlighted four broad themes which characterized this schematic template. The study also revealed that students' adopted the positionality of a multiracial Singaporean when making their judgments on what they considered to be historically significant in Singapore's history. In addition, the study found that students' use of the narrative template also constrained their historical reasoning and judgments, leading them to fall into two reductionist traps – conflating and simplifying the historical past. The next chapter will discuss the implications of the findings, the limitations of this study and suggestions for future research.

## CHAPTER 6

### Conclusion

In this study, I employed the concept of positionality to investigate how secondary students in Singapore defined their identities. I also examined how this positionality influenced their historical thinking, in particular, their judgments on historical significance in Singapore's past. The study also probed at the types of historical narratives employed by students to make these judgments. In this final chapter, I will discuss the implications of the findings from Chapters 4 and 5, address the limitations of the study and suggest future research directions.

#### 6.1 Implications

##### 6.1.1 Prevailing perceptions of students' knowledge of history.

The findings of this research study affirm the importance of understanding students' identities when examining their reasoning and conceptions of historical significance. Contrary to the common belief that identity indicators such as race, ethnicity, and religion dominate the definitions of their identities, students in this study drew upon cultural resources such as food, language, formal and informal social networks, and locations to position and locate themselves as multicultural Singaporeans. This suggests that rather than simply defining themselves through the conventional identity markers, students' identities are constructed through their sense of belonging and attachment to the communities in which they are socioculturally embedded.

This study also addresses the prevalent perception among many regarding the lack of historical consciousness among Singaporean youths. The data from this study indicated that Singaporean youths do know their history. It revealed the fact that students drew on the "Surmounting Adversity" narrative template to judge the significance of events and developments in Singapore's history. The plot of this narrative which is set out along the four

central themes of origins, death and suffering, success against the odds, and vulnerability and vigilance, is similar to that of the prevailing authoritative account taught in school. The students in the study were able to sketch the outlines and highlight the key milestones of this narrative. The events most commonly selected include the British defeat in 1942, the Japanese Occupation of 1942-1945, the Maria Hertogh riots of 1950, the Race Riots of 1964, and the Merger and Separation, spanning 1963-1965 (see Table 12 for the top 10 events). These are events and personalities that are considered to be the key events and personalities that shaped Singapore's official history.

Table 12: Top 10 Events Chosen by Students

The Treaty of 6 February 1819
British Defeat in 1942
The Japanese Occupation, 1942-1945
The Maria Hertogh riots, 1950
The Students' Riots of 1954 and 1956
Merger with and Separation from Malaysia, 1963-65
<i>Konfrontasi</i> , 1963-1966
The Race Riots of 1964
Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles
Lee Kuan Yew

This official version of Singapore's history is reinforced through the social studies and history curriculum these students undertook at the Upper Primary (Primary 4 to 6) and the Secondary Two levels. For instance, students in this study would have learned a broad overview of Singapore's history prior to its founding by the British to its development as an independent nation. The topics covered include the pre-1819 Singapore, its founding, the settlers and their contributions, heritage and multiracial society in Singapore, Singapore during World War II and developments of post-war Singapore to independence in their Upper Primary (Primary 4 to 6) Social Studies. At Secondary Two, the students have also undergone a more in-depth study of Singapore's History. Textbooks written by the Ministry of Education in Singapore also support

the study of Singapore's history at these two levels. Comparing the following excerpts from three secondary History textbooks published in the 1994, 1999 and 2007, it is evident that the power of this Singapore narrative has been reinforced across time. In particular, the emphasis placed on the larger theme of "Surmounting Adversity" is prevalent across the three textbooks.

We start off on our survey of Singapore's beginnings, we read about how the town grew, about some of the problems the people faced and about how events that happened outside Singapore affected the people here. The last few chapters tell you how the people on this island struggled to build a nation that would be free from foreign rule. (Curriculum Development Institute of Singapore, 1994, para 4)

The story of Singapore in this book covers the period between 1819 and 1971. It describes the modern beginnings of Singapore and how our pioneering immigrant forefathers came here to help build a town and a port. Then it goes on to trace the growth of Singapore and how events that happened outside the island affected us. More importantly, the story focuses on the determination of the people to struggle against all odds to achieve independence and to build a nation. (Curriculum Planning & Development Division, 1999, p. iii)

The story of Singapore covers the period of pre-1819 to 1971. It discusses the beginnings of Singapore as an ancient settlement in the 1300s. It then goes on to trace the coming of the British and how our pioneering immigrant forefathers came here to build a town and port. It also traces the growth of Singapore and

how events that happened outside the island affected us. More importantly, the story focuses on the determination of the people to struggle against all odds to achieve independence and strive to build a nation. (Curriculum Planning & Development Division, 2007, p. iii)

Students also undertake field trips to local Museums as well as to heritage sites to reinforce their learning.

In addition, students' accounts of their sense of belonging and the substance of the community narratives they encountered outside of school not only folded into this narrative template but also reinforced it. Although the students stated that their main exposure to Singapore's history was from their primary school Social Studies and their lower secondary History lessons, they also mentioned having learned about Singapore's history from sources beyond the formal curriculum such as their families and the media. For instance, in her individual interview Haslindah spoke extensively about the experiences of her grandparents during the Japanese Occupation. Students also mentioned learning about Singapore's history from historical TV dramas like "The Price of Peace" and "Mata Mata". Seen in this light, the results of this study put to rest the concern among many older Singaporeans about our youth's lack of knowledge and connection to the past.

### **6.1.2 History education in Singapore.**

However, I argue that the main value of this study lies in the illumination of a larger concern about students' conflated and simplified understanding of Singapore's history. In conceptualizing narratives as cultural tools for representing the past, Wertsch (1998) alerted us to their Janus-faced character. On one hand, they provide affordances to help us remember and represent the past, on the other hand, they introduce constraints that could impede our

understanding of the past. The findings of this study had shown that even though the students were able to provide defensible and sound justifications for their choices, their appropriation of the “Surmounting Adversity” schematic narrative template had also led them to arrive at reductionist interpretations of the past, resulting in conflations, simplifications and a distorted view of the history.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, there seems to be an inherent tension between the political goal of developing both a strong national identity and social cohesion, and the goal of teaching history in a disciplinary way as ways to foster the development of engaged and informed citizens. One goal is better met by introducing a single narrative that provides students with an “accurate understanding of what happened in the past, and what this history means for us today”, while the other takes the stance that all historical narratives are constructions and that there can be more than one narrative accounting for the same event. In the context of Singapore, both goals are to be met by equipping students with two different sets of toolkits to handle the future as citizens of Singapore. One is a survival toolkit<sup>8</sup> that equips them with the necessary knowledge, values and national instincts for survival, while the other is an “intellectual toolkit” (Lee, 1999, p. 70) containing conceptual tools for evaluating evidence and making judgments about competing accounts.

Rather than perceiving tensions between these two aims as irreconcilable, I advance the view put forth by Barton and Levstik (2004), VanSledright and Brophy (1992) and Wills (2011) that students’ historical narratives could be used as a springboard to develop and apply the disciplinary skills of history. The point here, as argued by Barton and Levstik (2005), is not to seek the replacement of one narrative with another, but to help students see narratives as sets of

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<sup>8</sup> A term used by the then–Minister for Education Goh Keng Swee to describe the purpose of history education in the 1980s.

interpretations and accounts. To this end, Barton and Levstik advocated the introduction of inquiry into the classroom to help students interrogate these differing accounts. They argued that historical inquiry actually lends itself well to the fulfillment of this goal of educating for citizenship. For one, historical inquiry contributes to helping students develop skills of analysis and interpretation. Second, it helps students to work together to reach balanced conclusions based on conflicting and incomplete information. Third, historical inquiry offers opportunities to help students understand diverse and sometimes strange perspectives.

Despite this, Barton and Levstik (2010) argued that many teachers do not engage their students in inquiry because they do not believe in its value in preparing students for participation in a pluralist democracy. Loh and Jaffar (2014) offered slightly different explanations to why Singaporean teachers do not engage their students in historical inquiry. Both argued that the teachers' reluctance stemmed from their own discomfort in teaching competing accounts, especially on topics earmarked in the curriculum to carry particular political and social messages. The teachers they studied expressed personal insecurities over the possibility of transgressing the established out-of-bounds markers when they did engage in such discussion. Many of them were worried about the repercussions of doing so. Moreover, the teachers also shared their lack of knowledge of the alternative accounts available, which left them unable to effectively engage students on the topics. Loh and Jaffar (2014) claimed that in large part the cause of this fear is the fact that teachers are employed as civil servants in Singapore and thus see it as their duty to preserve the political status quo. In regard to the lack of alternative accounts, both authors attributed this to the limited access researchers had to key documents in the archives, which has led to a lack of research on the more controversial topics.

While these are valid and plausible explanations, I offer two other reasons to explain the

low adoption rate for historical inquiry in the history classroom. First, historical inquiry is a new area of pedagogy for Singaporean teachers. While the approach has been introduced to schools in Singapore since the late 2000s, the uptake has not been high. In my years of working with teachers as a curriculum developer and teacher trainer, many of them shared that they found inquiry difficult to implement. The approach requires an epistemic shift in the way they approach history. Teachers could no longer adopt a “sage on stage” stance if they were to undertake inquiry in class. In addition, “doing” history is itself an unnatural act, as Wineburg (2001) claimed. Hence, adopting a practice that is so counter-intuitive would disrupt their current way of “doing” school.

Teachers also shared that even though they had attended inquiry workshops, they found the actual practice of carrying out inquiry in the classroom time-consuming and “messy”. Another reason inquiry was not being taken up had to do with the perception that most students lacked the proficiency in the English language, especially in reading and writing, to carry out the inquiry effectively. Extending this point, I would argue that a further reason why students are perceived as being “incapable” of carrying out inquiry has to do the fact that, as this study has revealed, they bring into the classroom preconceptions and distorted versions of history. Many teachers misconstrue these preconceptions and versions of history as students’ lack of the ‘correct’ knowledge. As such, they resorted to teaching the facts and knowledge. However, Bransford, Brown and Cocking (2000) cautioned against not addressing these preconceptions and distortions in the classroom as they are not easily changed because they serve the students well in their daily lives. So unless, students are asked to interrogate their own mental frameworks of what the past looked like to them, they would remain resistant to discarding their conceptions of the past.

Gadamer (2004) argued that our historical interpretation and understanding can never stand outside of our own historicity, or the particular traditions of knowledge and enquiry in which we are immersed. To interpret and understand, we must always be ready to expose our own presuppositions and prejudgments so that a true understanding can be achieved. It is thus critical that history education in Singapore focus on helping students expose their own presuppositions and prejudgements – the prior conceptions, schematic templates, and frameworks – which they bring to the task of historical interpretation. Engaging students in historical inquiry becomes all the more pertinent in light of the findings of this study. By getting them to engage in inquiry, they would be asked to work with their prior knowledge and schema of the historical topic. In the process of working with sources in collaboration with their friends, students' prior ideas would be further challenged, giving them the opportunity to develop a new understanding of past events. Husbands, Kitson, and Pendry (2003) asserted that “in the hands of skillful teachers all things happen together at the same time” (p. 36). Notwithstanding the challenges mentioned earlier, the teacher remains the lynchpin that ensures that students are given the opportunity to engage in historical inquiry in the history classroom.

## **6.2 Limitations and Future Directions**

Current directions in history education place great emphasis on getting students to think historically. The findings of this research echo those of other research studies in stressing the point that unless we attend to students' interpretive frames at the point of their sense-making process, any efforts to promote and deepen their historical thinking might be negated by these misconceptions. Particularly in Singapore, where the impetus to educate the young regarding Singapore's past coexists with the emphasis on historical inquiry, the need to mediate this tension is all the more urgent.

While this study offers insights into how students in Singapore define their positionalities and how these positionalities influence the way they make judgments about historical significance, it is based on an analysis of only 15 students' responses and a limited amount of time spent in their classrooms observing their interactions. It is not my intention to generalize the findings to other societies or even other groups of students within Singapore. However, in striving to provide a "thick description", this study invites readers to establish for themselves the extent to which they are confident that the findings presented could be transferred to their own or other situations.

This research found that students tend to position themselves as Singaporeans more than any other form of identification. Two possible factors could account for this. First, the research instrument did not explicitly ask students to talk about their racial or ethnic identity, hence the students in this study might have thought that this was not a focus of the researcher. Second, the researcher's identity as an English-speaking Chinese female adult could have made it difficult for students from different ethnic identities, who were more proficient in other languages, to express their ideas or share their views more candidly. Future research in this direction could follow Peck's (2010) approach to invite students to talk about their ethnicity or racial identity more directly. It could also engage interviewers of the same ethnic or racial group as the students as seen in Epstein's (1998, 2000) work.

Continued research on how the explicit teaching of sound concepts of historical significance can influence students' ascriptions of historical significance is also necessary. In particular, research that tracks the transformation of the quality of students' historical thinking (Barton, 2008a), especially their judgments on historical significance, would be most useful. Future studies would do well to heed Lévesque's (2008) observation that incorporating both the

tradition of research that explores the structural and procedural factors, and that which covers the substantive content could further enrich the insights gleaned from such studies. For now, this study presents an alternative way to explore students' identities, touching as it does on the fact that students may employ differing criteria in ascribing significance in different contexts.

Despite the fact that History has been a key subject in the Singaporean curriculum since the nation's independence in 1965, research studies focusing on the teaching and learning of the subject in Singaporean schools remain sparse. The History curriculum in Singapore is reviewed and updated every six years. Thus far, the data collected to inform such reviews are anecdotal and not grounded in empirical research. This lacuna means that any literature the review team in MOE refers to tends to be by scholars outside Singapore. While such information is useful at a theoretical level, it might not be directly relevant to the Singaporean context. This dissertation is a small step toward plugging this gap.

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## STUDENT QUESTIONNAIRE

**Participant Identification Code:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Section A**

1. Age in Years: \_\_\_\_\_

2. Place of Birth: \_\_\_\_\_ (town/city) \_\_\_\_\_ (country)

3. Gender: Male/Female (Circle one)

4. Ethnic Group(s) you belong to: \_\_\_\_\_

5. Languages spoken. (Please  those that apply)

- |                                  |  |  |  |
|----------------------------------|--|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> English | <input type="checkbox"/> Hainanese     | <input type="checkbox"/> Bahasa Indonesian | <input type="checkbox"/> Telugu        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Chinese | <input type="checkbox"/> Hakka/ Khek   | <input type="checkbox"/> Tamil             | <input type="checkbox"/> Hindi         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Hokkien | <input type="checkbox"/> Cantonese     | <input type="checkbox"/> Malayanam         | <input type="checkbox"/> Gujerati      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Teochew | <input type="checkbox"/> Bahasa Melayu | <input type="checkbox"/> Punjabi           | <input type="checkbox"/> Baba Malay    |
|                                  |  |  | <input type="checkbox"/> Others: _____ |

6. Which language(s) you checked above do you use most often in the following settings

a. School: \_\_\_\_\_

b. Classmates/friends: \_\_\_\_\_

c. Home: \_\_\_\_\_

7. Religion (if any): \_\_\_\_\_

8. Citizenship: \_\_\_\_\_ (e.g. Singaporean, Malaysian, Indonesian, Thai)

9. Parents' place of birth

a. Father: \_\_\_\_\_ (country)      b. Mother: \_\_\_\_\_ (country)

10. Are your grandparents born in Singapore?

a. Father's parents: **Yes/No/Not sure** (circle one)      b. Mother's parents: **Yes/No/Not sure** (circle one)

11. In which neighborhood do you live in? \_\_\_\_\_  
(e.g. Yishun, Clementi, Pasir Ris, Sengkang)

12. Please list any co-curricular groups, sports' clubs, community organizations (e.g. clans associations, religious organizations) which you actively participate in:

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13. I would like you to describe a little bit about yourself and your sense of belonging to some of the groups within your community.

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**Section B**

14. I am familiar with Singapore's history. **Yes/No** (circle one)

15. I learnt about Singapore's history from (Please  those that apply)

- |   |   |  |
|---|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Primary Social Studies | <input type="checkbox"/> Internet                     | <input type="checkbox"/> My grandparents                         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Secondary Two History  | <input type="checkbox"/> Documentaries                | <input type="checkbox"/> My relatives                            |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Visits to Museums      | <input type="checkbox"/> TV drama series and programs | <input type="checkbox"/> Talking to other people in my community |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Books                  | <input type="checkbox"/> My parents                   | <input type="checkbox"/> Others:<br>pls specify _____            |

16. I try to find out on my own topics in Singapore's history which I am interested in. **Yes/No** (circle one).

If yes, please tell me what are these topics: \_\_\_\_\_

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Please indicate **three** most frequently used sources where you normally go to for more information. (You can use select from the list provided in **question 15** above)

\_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, and \_\_\_\_\_



## FIRST INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW PROTOCOL (PRE-FOCUS GROUP)

Thank you for agreeing to take part in my study.

**Preamble:** Hi (*name of student*). As you know, I am interested in learning about students' ideas about which events, actors, and movements they consider to be significant and how they relate to them personally. The purpose of this is not to find out about how much they know but about how they think about what's important in history and what it means to them individually.

The interview will take about 60 minutes and will be audio-recorded. There are two parts to this interview. In the first part, I will be asking you to share with me about yourself, where you have learned about history and your views on what is important and why. This will take about 15 minutes. In the second part, I will be asking you to look through and respond to a set of pictures related to Singapore's History.

Please be informed that your participation in this interview is completely voluntary and has nothing to do with your studies or school work. You are also free to choose not to participate, or if you decide to participate, you can change your mind and withdraw at any time.

Please be assured that your names will not be used in the transcript, any reports or publications, and no one other than the researcher will know what you say in the interview. You can also at any time, request that the interview be not audio recorded, if you are uncomfortable. Do you have any questions you would like to ask me about the interview? [Clarify whatever concerns students have with the study]

So before we begin, may I ask if you are willing to participate in this interview?

### **Part I: Short Description about yourself (15 minutes)**

1. Let us start, how would you describe yourself and your family's history?
2. I am interested in how you feel about sense of your belonging to various groups. As I name a group, could you describe your own views about each group and what comes to mind in terms of how you belong:
  - Family
  - Friends
  - School
  - Other community groups
  - Country

How often do you participate in activities within these contexts?

*[Listen and probe particularly for how the student "positions" herself/himself within these different contexts.]*

Now I would like you to think about your experiences with history.

3. How is history taught in your class? How do you feel about the way it is taught? Should it be taught differently and why?
4. Besides school, where else have you learned about Singapore history? (examples of sources: home, community leaders, peers, internet, books etc). [Probe: What aspects /events/personalities of history did

you learn from <name each source>?] What have been the most interesting things you've learned about history that is not covered in school? How is that different or similar?

5. Do you think the history that you've learnt from <name source(s)> can be trusted? Why so?
6. Is there any topic(s) which you have learned either from school or out of school that interests you a lot? Why does it interest you? In what ways do you try to find out more about these topics?

### **Part II: Photo-elicitation Task (45 minutes)**

I have a set of pictures from different times in Singapore's history. Each picture has a caption that explains a little about the content of the picture. What I would like you to do is to select 10 pictures that you think is the most significant or important to you. As you make your selection, I would like you to share with me your thinking and why you selected these pictures. After you're finished, I'll ask why you chose the pictures."

*Give the student about 15 minutes to arrange the pictures. When the student has finished, point to each picture and ask why he or she selected the pictures. Then ask:*

7. Why did you choose these pictures? [points to each of the selected and ranked pictures]. What do these picture have the most to do with you or who you are?
8. Where have you learned about these pictures? Which of these pictures have you learned about outside of school as well?
9. How did what you have learned at school about these pictures differ from what you have learnt outside? Has what you learned in school change your ideas about what you've learnt out of school, or vice-versa? Why?
10. Has what you have learned in school influenced the way you think about your relationship with your family, community, peers, school, neighborhood, and country?

***What I would like you to do now is to rank the 10 pictures you've selected in terms of its relevance to who you are.***

11. Why did you rank the pictures the way they are? Do you think someone else would have ranked them differently? Why so?
12. Do you think other people would pick the same pictures as you? Who do you think is most likely to choose differently from you and why? [Probe: Parents, grandparents, friends, teachers, others; also, point to about 2-3 pictures that are not selected and ask who would have chosen these pictures and why?]
13. Do the images used in this set of pictures adequately represent the chosen events to you? Would you have chosen a different image? Why?
14. Are there any events, actors, artifacts that you think have been left out of this set of pictures? If yes, can you tell me what are they and why do you think they should be included? Which of these pictures would you take out in place of them?

## PROTOCOL FOR FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION

**Preamble:** Hi everyone. Thank you for agreeing to participate in this focus group discussion (FGD). As you know, I am interested in finding out about students' ideas about history, especially what events, personalities and movements do they consider as historically significant and how it relates to them. The purpose of this is not to find out about how much you know but about how you think about what's important in history in relation to yourselves.

The focus group will take about 60 minutes and will be audio-recorded. Please be informed that your participation in this focus group is completely voluntary and has nothing to do with your studies or school work. You are also free to choose not to participate, or if you decide to participate, you can change your mind and withdraw at any time. Please be assured that your names will not be used in any subsequent report. Do you have any questions regarding this FGD? [Clarify whatever concerns students have with the study]

**Each one of you will have a set of pictures** from different times in Singapore's history. Each picture has a caption that explains a little about the content of the picture. **What I would like you to do is to select 10 pictures that you think are most significant.** [For the participants who have been selected for the individual interviews, they will also be asked to revisit the photos to see if their thinking has changed.] As you make your selection for each picture, I would like you to talk to each other and share with each other your thinking. You have about 50 minutes to do this.

**Questions for facilitating the discussion:** [Listen for how students deliberate about what they consider as important, particularly in relation to themselves. Pay attention to students' rationale, positioning in terms of how they assert or do not assert themselves in the discussion.]

### **For selection of pictures (30 minutes)**

1. First of all, could you tell me which are the 10 events/personalities/movements that you would recommend for the selection? Why did you choose these picture(s)? What do this/these picture(s) have the most to do with you or who you are?
2. Does everyone agree that this/these picture(s) should be included? It does not matter whether you agree or not but I would like you to explain to me your own views about why you agree or disagree with the selection. [make sure to get each of them to speak up]

### **For ranking of the selected pictures (30 minutes)**

2. Now, that we have selected these 10 pictures, how would you rank them? Why should this <picture> be ranked \_\_\_\_?
5. How comfortable are you all with the ranking? Why? It does not matter whether you agree or not but I would like you to explain to me your own views about why you agree and disagree. [make sure to get each of them to speak up]
5. Do you think different people have different ideas about history? Why?

**SECOND INTERVIEW PROTOCOL WITH INTERVIEWED STUDENTS  
(POST-FOCUS GROUP)**

**Preamble:** Hi (*name of student*). Thank you once again for agreeing to the second interview. As you know, my main interest is in finding out about students' ideas about history, especially what events, personalities and movements do they consider as historically significant and how it relates to them. The purpose of this is not to find out about how much they know but about how they think about what's important in history in relation to themselves.

The interview will take about 60 minutes and will be audio-recorded. As with the first interview, your participation in this interview is completely voluntary and has nothing to do with your studies or school work. You can also choose not to participate, or if you decide to participate, you can change your mind and withdraw at any time.

Please be assured that your names will not be used in the transcript, any reports or publications, and no one other than the researcher will know what you say in the interview. You can also at any time, request that the interview be not audio recorded, if you are uncomfortable. Do you have any questions you would like to ask me about the interview? [Clarify whatever concerns students have with the study]

So before we begin, may I ask if you are willing to participate in this interview?

1. How do you feel about your own participation in the Focus Group Discussion? Was it easy for you to share your views during the discussion? What made it so? [*Listen and probe for affordances and constraints raised by participants.*]
2. Was there anyone whom you tend to agree or disagree frequently with during the discussion? Why do you think so?

*Show student his/her selection and ranking of the 10 pictures they did in the first interview as well as the selection and ranking of the 10 pictures from the Focus Group Discussion.*

3. So here I have the set of pictures which you selected and ranked during our first interview, and the set that was decided during the focus group discussion. Looking at these two sets of pictures, what do you notice about the selection and ranking?
4. [Points at the FGD's set] Do you agree or disagree with the selection of these 10 pictures? Why so? What made you agree or disagree with this selection (as a whole or with individual pictures) then?
5. Looking at your own set now, would you make changes to it? Why and why not?

**LIST OF EVENTS, PERSONALITIES, AND ARTIFACTS FOR PHOTO ELICITATION TASK FOR INTERVIEWS AND FOCUS GROUPS DISCUSSION**

**Events, Movements, and Artifacts**

1. Fort Canning Hill (Bukit Larangan or Forbidden Hill)
2. The Treaty of 6 February 1819
3. British Defeat in 1942
4. The Japanese Occupation, 1942-1945
5. The Maria Hertogh Riots, 1950
6. The 1955 Elections
7. The Hock Lee Bus Riots, 1955
8. The Students' Riots of 1954 and 1956
9. The 1959 Elections
10. Operation Coldstore, 1963
11. Merger with and Separation from Malaysia, 1963-1965
12. *Konfrontasi*, 1963-1966
13. The race riots of 1964
14. Industrialization and economic development of Singapore since the 1960s
15. The Bukit Ho Swee Fire, May 25, 1961
16. The establishment of the Housing Development Board in 1960 and housing resettlement
17. Education Reforms (e.g. Bilingual Policy and Streaming)
18. The National Service Amendment Bill of 1967

**Personalities and Organizations**

1. Sang Utama (also known as Sri Tri Buana)
2. Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles
3. Colonel William Farquhar
4. Immigrants, Sojourners & Settlers (e.g. Europeans, Middle-Easterns, Indians, Chinese, Malays, Peranakans etc)
5. War heroes: Lim Bo Seng, Lt. Adnan, and Elizabeth Choy
6. Organizations that fought against the Japanese: The Malay Regiment, Force 136, and the Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army (MPAJA)
7. Lee Kuan Yew
8. Goh Keng Swee
9. David Marshall
10. S. Rajaratnam
11. Lim Chin Siong
12. Toh Chin Chye
13. Othman Wok
14. Yusof Bin Ishak

## Appendix F

### STUDENTS' CHOICE OF HISTORICALLY SIGNIFICANT EVENTS

Event	CS*	TS#	Total
1. Fort Canning Hill (Bukit Larangan or Forbidden Hill)	1	2	3
2. The Treaty of 6 February 1819	4	3	7
3. British Defeat in 1942	6	3	9
4. The Japanese Occupation, 1942-1945	8	4	12
5. The Maria Hertogh Riots, 1950	6	3	9
6. The 1955 Elections	0	3	3
7. The Hock Lee Bus Riots, 1955	2	1	3
8. The Students' Riots of 1954 and 1956	4	3	7
9. The 1959 Elections	2	2	4
10. Operation Coldstore, 1963	0	0	0
11. Merger with and Separation from Malaysia, 1963-1965	6	5	11
12. <i>Konfrontasi</i> , 1963-1966	5	2	7
13. The race riots of 1964	5	4	9
14. Industrialization and economic development of Singapore since the 1960s	0	3	3
15. The Bukit Ho Swee Fire, May 25, 1961	0	1	1
16. The establishment of the Housing Development Board in 1960 and housing resettlement	2	2	4
17. Education Reforms (e.g. Bilingual Policy and Streaming)	2	1	3
18. The National Service Amendment Bill of 1967	2	1	3
19. Sang Utama (also known as Sri Tri Buana)	3	1	4
20. Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles	5	3	8
21. Colonel William Farquhar	0	2	2
22. Immigrants, Sojourners & Settlers (e.g. Europeans, Middle-Easterns, Indians, Chinese, Malays, Peranakans etc)	2	2	4
23. War heroes: Lim Bo Seng, Lt. Adnan, and Elizabeth Choy	3	3	6
24. Organizations that fought against the Japanese: The Malay Regiment, Force 136, and the Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army (MPAJA)	2	2	4
25. Lee Kuan Yew	7	5	12
26. Goh Keng Swee	0	1	1
27. David Marshall	0	2	2
28. S. Rajaratnam	0	1	1
29. Lim Chin Siong	0	0	0
30. Toh Chin Chye	0	0	0
31. Othman Wok	0	0	0
32. Yusof Bin Ishak	1	4	5

\* CS – Cardomon Secondary School

# TS- Tamarind Secondary School

## Appendix G

### STUDENTS' CHOICE OF HISTORICALLY SIGNIFICANT EVENTS IN GROUPS

Event	C1	C2	T1	T2
1. Fort Canning Hill (Bukit Larangan or Forbidden Hill)	✓			
2. The Treaty of 6 February 1819	✓	✓	✓	
3. British Defeat in 1942	✓	✓	✓	✓
4. The Japanese Occupation, 1942-1945	✓	✓	✓	✓
5. The Maria Hertogh Riots, 1950	✓	✓		✓
6. The 1955 Elections		✓		
7. The Hock Lee Bus Riots, 1955				
8. The Students' Riots of 1954 and 1956				
9. The 1959 Elections		✓	✓	
10. Operation Coldstore, 1963				
11. Merger with and Separation from Malaysia, 1963-1965	✓	✓	✓	✓
12. <i>Konfrontasi</i> , 1963-1966		✓	✓	✓
13. The race riots of 1964	✓		✓	
14. Industrialization and economic development of Singapore since the 1960s	✓			
15. The Bukit Ho Swee Fire, May 25, 1961				
16. The establishment of the Housing Development Board in 1960 and housing resettlement				
17. Education Reforms (e.g. Bilingual Policy and Streaming)				✓
18. The National Service Amendment Bill of 1967		✓	✓	
19. Sang Utama (also known as Sri Tri Buana)				✓
20. Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles			✓	✓
21. Colonel William Farquhar				
22. Immigrants, Sojourners & Settlers (e.g. Europeans, Middle-Easterns, Indians, Chinese, Malays, Peranakans etc)				
23. War heroes: Lim Bo Seng, Lt. Adnan, and Elizabeth Choy	✓			✓
24. Organizations that fought against the Japanese: The Malay Regiment, Force 136, and the Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army (MPAJA)				
25. Lee Kuan Yew	✓	✓	✓	✓
26. Goh Keng Swee				
27. David Marshall				
28. S. Rajaratnam				
29. Lim Chin Siong				
30. Toh Chin Chye				
31. Othman Wok				
32. Yusof Bin Ishak				

**C1** Yiling, Megan, Bocheng, Hazreen (Group 1)

**C2** Juyan, Phoebe, Xianzheng (Group 2)

**T1** Jingxuan, Joseph, Aidan (Group 3)

**T2** Ethan, Keming, Haslindah, Manasi, Zhiqiang (Group 4)

## VITA

*Angeline Jude Enk Sung Yeo* received her Ph.D. from the University of Washington in Curriculum and Instruction (Social Studies) in 2015. She earned her Master of Arts in Southeast Asian Studies and Bachelor of Arts from the National University of Singapore in 2003 and 1995 respectively. During her doctoral program, she developed her research interests in students' historical thinking and how contexts and students' identities can influence their historical thinking. Her other interests include examining instructional practices that could facilitate students' historical thinking.