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SPEECH BY MR S RAJARATNAM, SENIOR MINISTER
(PRIME MINISTER'S OFFICE), AT THE OFFICIAL OPENING
OF THE EXHIBITION "A VISION OF THE PAST"
AT THE NATIONAL MUSEUM ART GALLERY
ON THURSDAY, 14 MAY 1987 AT 6.10 PM

Until very recently Singapore's past was a matter of supreme indifference for most Singaporeans simply because they believed this island never really had a history worth remembering. For the immigrant Chinese, Malays, Indians and the British colonisers, Singapore history was merely an extension of the history of the lands from which they emigrated some 170 years ago. Their ancestral lands had proven histories not only stretching back thousands of years but also boasting of a wonderous heritage which each immigrant community was convinced was God's gift to mankind. For a Singapore Chinese, evidence of his superior place in God's scheme of things were such monuments as the Great Wall or the Imperial Palace in Peking, arresting Chinese bronzes and ceramics and of course a Chinese literature and philosophy receding into the mists of time itself.

Similarly, the Indians, Malays, Indonesians and the British could bask in the glories of a history of memorable achievements.

As against these ancestral histories for us to identify ourselves with a Singapore history could be something of a comedown. It begins in 1819 when Raffles landed in swampy Singapore with some 40 to 50 unremarkable kampong houses and no more than four hundred Malays, Orang Laut and a sprinkling of very lost Chinese.

This is not the stuff out of which enthralling history is made. Nothing very much appears to have happened in Singapore - if anything happened at all - before Raffles landed in this unpromising island.

Most of the 170 years history following Raffles purchase of this island for a few thousand Mexican dollars is not something that Singaporeans like to proclaim from the housetops, because all of that history was British colonial history. The only proven history Singapore had was in the eyes of most nationalists a shameful episode of exploitation, oppression and humiliation of a people who nevertheless insisted on remaining in Singapore. Patriotism required that we performed some sort of collective lobotomy to wipe out all traces of 146 years of shame.

Some of you may remember that after Singapore became independent there was agitation that the statue of a brooding Raffles in front of Victoria Memorial Hall should be torn down and flung into the Singapore River to symbolically reject our past.

Fortunately, sanity prevailed in the nick of time. Not only was Raffles' death by drowning commuted but, by way of apology, he now has a twin brother brooding beside a Singapore river now free of industrial and other waste. Unfortunately, the passion to wipe out 146 years of shameful history until quite recently burnt unabated in the iconoclastic hearts of our single-minded city planners, unreal estate developers, businessmen, bankers and others who had decided that Singapore's history should start from 1965 and that everything in our city should not be older than 20 years. Hundreds of bulldozers and other weapons of war against things old were mobilised for what was projected as a mission of creative destruction. Any old thing that stood in the way of the new Celestial City which was to rise out of the rubble of the old was ruthlessly wiped out. The idea was that since there was nothing worthwhile from the

past to preserve then anything that impeded modernisation and the average Singaporean's irresistible urge to make money (a Singaporean manifestation of Freud's libido) burying of the past was a holy thing.

Fortunately, once again sanity prevailed in the nick of time. It occurred to some city planners that creative destruction untempered by creative imagination could in course of time lead to a disoriented society because a people who deliberately wipe out nearly 150 years of their history make an interesting case study in mass amnesia. Though our history began in 1819, this brief past is what made Singapore and its people what they are today and it is this Singapore's past which will shape their future and furnish the ingredients for a national identity. The history of China, India or of Britain will have no direct bearing on Singapore's future.

It is my belief that Singaporeans are beginning to realise that the clue to a Singapore identity has to be sought not in the long and venerable histories of China, India or of Britain but in the 170 years of living and working together of Singapore's multiracial community. The histories of our ancestral lands, their ethos, can offer us no significant guidance as to how the sons and daughters of immigrants born and bred here and who would be strangers and misfits in the land of their fathers can and should shape the future Singapore.

This is the explanation for the new and growing interest in old Singapore. What we are and what we will be must be explained in terms of what the many races of Singapore accomplished together their collective sufferings and joys; their triumphs and failures; their hopes and shattered dreams the past 170 years. The Chinese Singaporeans knows that he is different from his cousins in Hong Kong, Taiwan or China, just as the Indian Singaporean would be a stranger to an Indian from India or from elsewhere.

The demand for the preservation of historic monuments and buildings, even if they are not memorable by world standards, is, I believe, a conscious attempt at identification with a Singapore history, brief though it is. There is now a growing interest in collecting old prints, furniture, household utensils, costumes and even food recipes from old Singapore. The current move to restore not only buildings but even to resurrect some of the old atmosphere of areas associated with the history of the various communities in Singapore is an attempt to develop an awareness of a Singapore history and therefore of a Singapore identity.

This exhibition of photographs of old Singapore in conjunction with a book of photographs of peoples and places over a hundred years ago is a commendable effort to make us aware that there is a Singapore history - the only history which we have and which can explain why we are what we are and why we must be different from our alien and distant cousins whose less adventurous fathers, wisely or unwisely elected to miss the immigrant's boat.

The photographs exhibited here in conjunction with a book of photographs of old Singapore convinces me that the past 170 years or so is not simply a story of unrelieved shame. Looking at these photographs is like travelling in a time machine into a world different from ours. The landscape is different. The atmosphere is different. The people are different. Yet everyone of them left a mark, some small, some big, on the history of Singapore. There is, for example, the two striking photographs of a self-assured young nonya lady whose dress and demeanour suggest a success story.

There is the photograph of an early automobile looking somewhat sheepish and apologetic under a forest of towering and haughty coconut trees, though we now know, that for better or for worse, the automobile won.

There are photographs too of people we know never found the hoped-for pot of gold at the end of the rainbow.

Every photograph is evocative of a real past; real history.

Looking at these photographs with a touch of imagination convinces me that these people made Singapore history and that without them and people like them Singapore would be a different place from what it is today. It is their largely anonymous history and not the grand histories of China, India, or Britain which made the Singapore we inherited.

I would therefore like to congratulate the publishers and, in particular, the editors for the zeal and dedication with which they had salvaged evocative images of old Singapore which otherwise would in a few more years have crumbled to dust and a bit of our past lost with them for ever.

There must still be undetected drawers, trunks, store rooms and attics with bits of old Singapore waiting to be unearthed before they finally and irreversibly pass on to the world of nothing.

I hope the search for a Singapore history will gather fresh momentum as a result of this exhibition and this book.

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