

CURRENT AFFAIRS-LOCAL

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People's history becomes popular

The Mei Ling neighbourhood center in Queenstown, recently decided to exhibit the histories of its elderly in an exhibition entitled " Our Folk, Our Past and Our Future."

Initiatives like this one are not a one off.

Historians say that it is becoming much more common for communities and associations in Singapore to want to document their personal histories.

Devika Misra explains the trend to fresh look at history.

History is no longer all about kings and the government.

Today's historians study the past from a far broader perspective.

Rather than just looking at history from above, they say its the perspective of the common man that counts just as much.

Professor Ernest Koh is a historian at Australia's Monash University.

"People's history is just a way of thinking about the past through the perspective of the ordinary person. History is about making sense of how the past is relevant to the present and as a historian when you write history the act itself always privileges someone or some event. because we're saying that this person or this event is important enough to be a subject of history. History from above tends to make sense of the past through the perspective of leaders and famous personalities. People's history privileges the common person and it looks to re create their world through their experiences because the underlying assumption here is that the life and actions of ordinary people are deeply relevant to who we are today as individuals, as communities and even as a nation."

Historians may have worked from this perspective for some time.

But it is only now becoming a non academic exercise.

Neighborhood associations, social organizations, even family units have been trying to document their past.

One such group is the Mei Ling neighbourhood center.

They decided to exhibit some old photographs they received from their senior citizens.

Alwyn Chia is the manager at the Lions' Befreinders Service Association which runs the Mei Ling Neighbourhood Link as part of its out reach program.

"The idea came from an incident where an elderly person gave our center manager Eric an old photograph and Eric felt that it was a bit tattered, it could be preserved by actually saving it, scanning it, giving it new life so that it won't be destroyed in that sense because once torn it's gone forever, it's perhaps a worthwhile project to actually preserve such photographs and actually display such photographs for all to see."

Eric Cheong, the Center Manager, says many did come to see and liked what they saw.

"As far as the community here those people who came to the center, I think they were quite amazed when they look at... I actually put some sample photos on the wall and I think people are quite amazed at what to look at all these old photos and not only do they want to find out about the story that's behind the photo, they also begin to tell their own story and I find that very interesting (*Devika: And are you recording these stories?*), that's my next project, we probably want to do an oral history or something. I think it's worthwhile preserving the stories, why not get the seniors to tell the stories themselves and we record it, we can collect this as an audio archive or something."

Professor Koh sees the project as more than just a one off exhibition.

It is as an example he says, of people's history-or history from below.

" I think many people seem to think of history as a series of facts but really history is how we in the present remember the past and what the community does here with this particular project is that it puts up the past in the sense we can make some sense of it in the present. Because what seems to be a broader trend now is that people seem to be wanting, in Singapore at least, seem to want to recover the past and make sense of who we are as a nation and as individuals and as members of the community and that's where I see this Mei Ling community center's project as a wonderful example."

Eric Cheong says that the project has been about more than just documentation.

Looking back has also served an emotional purpose.

"There's a lot of organisations attempting this so called "reminiscing therapy", I think it's a good way to get seniors to get involved, to get them to draw strength from the past. Sometimes you find it hard to find a topic to talk to a senior person. From a photograph you can actually talk about a lot of things, I think it's good therapy for them, they talk to each other, they discuss the picture or they can talk to the staff. I think by talking they let out their emotions and we can try to channel their thoughts to the more positive events that is where they can draw the strength from there."

Whatever the motivation there seems to have been a democratisation of historiography.

Its documentation and presentation is no longer confined to just academics and museum curators.

"In more recent times it seems to have gained more resonance among a wider range of historians as well as the general public in Singapore and as a trend itself I think it's quite interesting to think about why that's the case. There seems to be a desire to recover the past from the perspective of the common person. Because the work of historians often feed off the sentiments of the public and that translates to a growing body of people's histories in Singapore."

This growing body of people's histories, experts point out, is bound to lead to a far richer and more complex picture of the past.

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