Ex-Political Detainee Forum at Singapore in 2006

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On a Saturday afternoon, 26 February 2006, over 200, mostly young people, crowded into the Recital Studio of Singapore’s Esplanade Arts Centre to listen to ex-political detainees from the 1960s and 1970s give their side of Singapore’s history. This was the first time that ex-political detainees in Singapore have held a public forum to give critical accounts of their experiences of being detained without trial for long periods by the Singapore government. Previous meetings of ex-political detainees had been organized by the Singapore government and had a different purpose. During the time of the Cold War, political opponents of the government were branded as Communists and thrown into prison for being associated with the armed insurrection that the Malayan Communist Party carried out against the government from 1948 to 1989. Many of the ex-political detainees believed they had been unfairly tarred with the Communist label so the government could silence them and other members of the political opposition in Singapore. When released, the ex-political detainees could only meet and talk under the watchful eye of the government organization set up in 1966 to monitor them, Sepda (the Singapore Ex-Political Detainees’ Association). Its initial membership of 49 grew to 380 by 1977. Sepda helped many ex-political detainees get jobs and assimilate back into ordinary daily life after being detained for many years, but it also controlled what the detainees could say and do. Sepda meetings of ex-political detainees were about ‘rehabilitating’ them and renouncing their former beliefs so they could ‘become useful citizens again’. As late as 1997, Singapore ex-political detainees could not associate with each other unless they were members of Sepda. The 2006 ex-political detainee forum in Singapore thus appeared a striking break from the past. It promised to bring oral history from the politically marginalized to the attention of the public.

Public Reminiscence as ‘Healing’

The forum was billed with the title, ‘Detention-Writing-Healing’. Tan Chong Kee, the facilitator of the forum, who was a social activist involved in many activities critical of Singapore society, explained that the organizers hoped that the process of the ex-political detainees talking about their experiences to a receptive audience would be more than just a matter of recording the other side of political history. The organizers wanted the forum to create ‘healing’. He explained that this ‘healing’ would arise through a sense of empowerment felt by the ex-political detainees telling their stories. By speaking to the public they would begin to feel a sense of ‘healing’ of their bitter memories of suffering anonymously at the hands of the government in prison for long years. Recording their oral histories and creating a written record out of it was seen as how writing would be part of the public forum, ‘Detention-Writing-Healing’.

The event was modeled on the 2005 ‘An Open Public Forum with Veterans and Members of the Wartime Generation’, held on the sixtieth anniversary of the end of World War II, which encouraged marginalized voices in the major historical narratives of the war to speak directly to the public. Part of the idea of the public forum was to in turn stir media interest and give attention to these otherwise ‘forgotten’ voices. Both forums were oral history sessions that had a very strong dimension of reminiscence therapy to them. Members of the older generation narrated parts of their life stories before an appreciative audience of the younger generation, and this process helped affirm their own self-worth and the value of their memories. In both forums it was also hoped that the younger generation also would come away with a greater appreciation of the older people’s experiences.
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The ex-political detainee forum promised to provide a platform for the voices of the political opponents of the Singapore government, run by the Peoples Action Party (PAP), from the 1950s to the 1970s. The PAP had through its long term in office (since 1959) constructed its own official narrative of the past. The PAP’s version of the political history of Singapore was disseminated in history textbooks, exhibitions and documentaries on state-run television, and it told of how the PAP had defeated the pro-Communist opposition by detaining many of them without trial.

The story continued along the lines that because it had won its fight against the opposition, the PAP was able to take the ‘tough decisions’ that created progress for the nation by providing a rising standard of living. This story had become known by the late 1990s as *The Singapore Story*.5 Comments by young Singaporeans in the days before the ex-political detainee forum indicated that many of the young people who had only known the PAP-inspired *Singapore Story* hoped to hear the other side of their political history, which they had not encountered in their school textbooks. Some members of the younger generation of Singaporeans expected the government to cancel the forum, which was put on by the experimental theatre company, the Necessary Stage, at the Fringe events of the Singapore Arts Festival.6

There was little danger of the forum being cancelled because of government intervention. The state-controlled newspaper, the *Straits Times*, had actually run a story publicizing the forum a few weeks before it was scheduled.7 The PAP, wanting to build Singapore into an ‘arts hub’, had tolerated for almost a decade many dissenting voices in the theatre scene. This was the price it was prepared to pay to achieve a reputation as a vibrant arts hub that would attract tourists and investors. It knew there was little danger that the vast majority of Singaporeans would be touched by theatre criticizing and satirizing Singapore society that played in small, inner-city venues for the intellectual elites whose opinions were far ahead of most conservative Singaporeans on many social issues. The PAP’s conservative political heartlands of support in Singapore’s vast suburban government housing estates were safe from the avant-garde and small theatre scene.8

The ex-political detainees themselves emphasized that the event was not something they were holding to challenge the PAP government. Said Zahari, aged 77, one of the ex-political detainees who was due to speak at the ex-political detainee forum but ultimately unable to attend because of illness, told the *Straits Times* a month before the forum was scheduled:

*Such an event would not have taken place in the country even five years ago … Perhaps there is a slightly more open political climate now.*

Michael Fernandez, aged 72, a labour leader who was detained from 1964 to 1973, mentioned the therapeutic value of the idea of reminiscing at a public forum:

*It is simply an occasion for healing, for sharing one’s experience with a younger generation of Singaporeans who weren’t around during those tumultuous years.*9

The ex-political detainee forum as ‘history from below’

The forum was very much in line with argument often made that oral history allows the marginalized voices of history or the ‘underside of history’ to give their accounts so there is a ‘history from below’ rather than history from the perspective of elites, or the ‘winners’ of history.10 This was on the mind of one of the ex-political detainees who spoke at the forum, Tan Jing Quee, aged 66. In the September 1963 General Election in Singapore, he had stood for the leftist Barisan Sosialis Party against one of the senior PAP cabinet ministers, S. Rajaratnam, the Minister for Culture. Tan lost by only about 200 votes. In October 1963, he was among 30 left-wing activists and trade-union leaders who were detained by the PAP government. This was the second wave of arrests that had begun with the detention of about 120 political activists in February 1963 in what was called Operation Cold Store. After these mass ar-
rests, the whole parliamentary opposition to the PAP collapsed; and effective one-party rule in Singapore has prevailed until today. Tan was detained without trial and later released in 1966. He then studied law in England, becoming a lawyer after returning to Singapore. He admitted that he had ‘benefited from the new order’ as a lawyer working in a society that had a rising standard of living, but reminded the audience that many other detainees had their lives ruined through many years of being detained without trial. Tan told the audience:

A convicted criminal can be charged in court … and from day one will know the precise date of his release. A political detainee is arrested without trial, often dragged out in the night.

Tan expressed his perspective of the forum in response to a question by Robert Yeo, a playwright who has written about ex-political detainees in his plays. Yeo asked Tan if it would ‘satisfy’ and ‘bring closure and add to healing’ if the PAP adopted a ‘Truth and Reconciliation’ policy and apologized to the detainees for imprisoning them for no reason except that they were on wrong side of the politics. Tan replied:

What needs to be done is the demarginalization, if I could use that sort of word, of the entire generation who got caught on the wrong side of the divide. There were equally brave men who could have contributed immeasurably to development of a more open society here, whose continued marginalization, as a generation, not individually, is a problem we have to face. For the last two, four, five decades we have been gradually sucked into a huge historical amnesia, reading and listening to one ‘unversion’ of our historical transition from colonial rule to nationhood. That transition, I think, it must be admitted, is more complex; and due weight and consideration must be given to a wide range of social forces and groups who have fought and sacrificed for that transition from colonial rule to nationhood.

Tan articulated the anger that the ex-political detainees felt in not having their side of the political history of Singapore told.

When the ex-political detainee Michael Fernandez spoke, he recounted his view expressed in the month before the forum, that it was a time for healing rather than politically challenging the PAP. He, like Tan, also expressed his strong belief in using the forum to present his side of history. Fernandez disavowed any idea of the forum being an occasion of healing or being reconciled with the PAP with the words: ‘We are not going to discuss healing at all because the wounds are still fresh.’ Fernandez described with a sense of bitterness the details of his detention. He informed the audience that what he was telling them had been recorded by the Oral History Centre in the National Archives in Singapore during an interview done as far back as 1981.

Before the audience, Fernandez was able to act out some of his experiences which he had been unable to do on audiotape. His account at the forum bordered on performance at times.

The most graphic was when Fernandez recollected how in December 1970 he was one of the detainees at the Changi Moon Crescent Complex who went on a hunger strike over being forced to work in prison. Before the audience, Fernandez contorted his body on a chair to show how he had been held down and forced fed by the prison guards. This was the first time that anyone in Singapore had heard the other side of the hunger strike, which had been reported in the press, but with few details being given, as the released detainees were reluctant to talk about what happened during their detention because they could be easily detained again for doing so.11 With the playwright Robert Yeo, Fernandez also re-enacted his interrogation, which Yeo had dramatized in 1996 for his play about being a political detainee, called Changi.12

Perhaps the most startling revelation that Fernandez had at the ex-political detainee forum was the existence of a diary that he had kept as a political detainees. He was, of course, forbidden to keep a diary, but he managed to write one on toilet paper. In 1981 he asked the National Archives of Singapore to copy it on microfilm. He had just recently been able to find this copy and printed out the 600 pages of his diary. The historian helping him write his memoirs, Loh Kah Seng, whose written work has been contemptuous of the PAP version of the past, walked around showing individual members of the audience the toilet paper diary. While he was doing this Fernandez talked about how he kept his handwriting very small, and when he was moved from cell to cell he hid the toilet sheets in his underwear. The existence of diaries in prison among the political detainees was quite a revelation because they were completely unknown, as most of the searches of the detainees were thorough enough to pick up such items. It was well-known that the political detainee Said Zahari wrote poetry in prison and passed the poems to his wife, but the existence of a toilet paper diary required a rewriting of the political history of Singapore.13

The forum for these voices that had been marginalized contributed significantly to the Singapore public knowing the other side of the political history of Singapore, as the ex-political detainees had hoped in their addresses. The event was well covered in the Singapore press in the weeks following, with journalists seeing value in airing these marginalized voices of the political past.

The Aftermath of the ex-Political Detainee Forum

Many of the young students who attended the forum were very sympathetic to the points of view that the two ex-political detainees espoused and enraptured by their oral history accounts of what it was like to be detained. They wrote about their enthusiasm not only on internet blogs, but also to the press.14 Newspaper columnists, such as the usually pro-government Chua Mui Hoong, agreed that ‘it is time for these other stories to come out
of the closet’ and so that Singapore could be truly an ‘open and inclusive society’. However, for the PAP government, having a small forum of 200 at the arts centre for the theatre was one thing, but having these views in the national press that penetrated into the suburban heartland of its support was something entirely different. Government ministers had expressed their view a number of times that the press was a ‘partner in nation building’ and there ‘to explain government policies’, not to challenge them. On 8 March 2006, Mrs Ong-Chew Peck Wan, Director of Corporate Communications Division, of the Ministry of Home Affairs (the government department that had put many of the political detainees away in prison), wrote to the national English language daily, the Straits Times, on behalf of the Permanent Secretary to put an end to the debate by presenting the view of the PAP government:

Mr Tan and Mr Fernandez were not political dissidents or opposition members engaged in the democratic process. They belonged to the Communist United Front (CUF) which supported the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM). The CPM was an underground organization which used terror and violence to subvert the democratic process and overthrow the elected governments of Singapore and Malaysia. Many innocent lives were lost, victims of the CPM’s struggle.

The CUF was a key part of the CPM’s strategy to infiltrate, subvert and exploit legally-established organizations, such as trade unions and student associations, to create civil disorder and destabilise the country.

Together with the CPM, it was responsible for violent demonstrations, sit-ins, boycotts, illegal strikes, sabotage and riots that resulted in deaths and injuries, destruction of property, political instability and economic losses. Mr Tan and Mr Fernandez took part in communist subversion. They were detained for threatening the security, stability and economic well-being of Singapore, and not for holding different political views or pursuing lawful, democratic political activities.

The letter from the Ministry of Home Affairs effectively closed this brief episode of presenting oral history at forums in order to bring marginalized voices to the public, and then having the forum spur media debate in Singapore. This process had begun in September 2005 with ‘An Open Public Forum with Veterans and Members of the Wartime Generation’. For the postwar political history, as Fernandez had said, ‘the wounds are still fresh’. For the PAP government, it was acceptable to have Fernandez’s and Tan’s views buried away on audiotape in the National Archives of Singapore as oral history, and even aired at art house venues to small audiences, but not debated in the national press.

NOTES

1 Straits Times, 5 September 1977.
2 Straits Times, 10 July 1997.
7 Straits Times, 7 January 2006.
8 See for example, William Peterson, Theater and the Politics of Culture in Contemporary Singapore, Middletown Connecticut, Wesleyan University Press, 2001; and Straits Times, 10 August 2006.
9 Straits Times, 7 January 2006.
16 See for example Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong’s comments, Straits Times, 12 November 1995; President S. R. Nathan’s remarks, Straits Times, 22 November 2006; and Dr Vivian Balakrishnan, Second Minister for Information, Communications and the Arts, Straits Times, 23 March 2007.
17 Straits Times, 8 March 2006.