REMINISCENCE AND WAR TRAUMA: RECALLING THE JAPANESE OCCUPATION OF SINGAPORE, 1942-1945

by Kevin Blackburn

The process of reminiscence, the act of recalling one’s life story, entails a self-discovery of who one is. Understanding one’s past and making sense of it is important for an individual’s identity. However, remembering traumatic events or periods of many years ago can interrupt and challenge this process of having reminiscence affirm identity. The Japanese Occupation of Singapore was a traumatic period in the lives of people now over seventy years old. This study traces how individuals interviewed on the Japanese Occupation in Singapore integrated what they experienced and witnessed during the Japanese Occupation into their overall life story. The study derived from an oral history course for trainee teachers who would be using oral history in schools. It seeks to integrate lessons from oral history and reminiscence work.

Studies on veterans remembering their war experiences have indicated that the act of reminiscence—older people recalling their life stories to construct a narrative affirming their identity—can be interrupted and challenged by remembering traumatic events or periods of many years ago. Early research suggested that memories of war trauma were a major impediment to older people wanting to engage in reminiscence activities. However, recent work indicates that after a period of time there develop what Peter Coleman and other scholars have called ‘consummate memories’, whereby the individual gains control over their traumatic war memories and those recollections become less emotionally overwhelming. Their work suggests that what is noteworthy ‘about these reminiscences was the determination of the veterans both to bear witness to the truth of what happened, and to convey some meaningful message, whether about the nature of warfare, about behaviour under extreme stress, or about society and values, that emerged from their experiences’.

Most studies of reminiscence and war trauma have focused on the experiences of Western war veterans, European civilians, and the Holocaust survivors. There has been less focus on
reminiscence and war trauma of Asian civilians who endured a brutal Japanese Occupation during wartime. Does the use of reminiscence techniques with Asian people of the countries occupied by Japan bear out the results of the new research by Coleman and other scholars on recalling war trauma. Does it show that "commemorative memories" develop in which the individual's recollections become less emotionladen and are narrated into a life story by the older person to convey a meaningful personal message to the much younger interviewer?

The Japanese Occupation of Singapore was a traumatic period in the lives of many people born over seventy years old. From 1942 to 1945, Singapore was occupied by the Japanese Imperial Army which implemented a brutal regime over the local population. During the Japanese Occupation tens of thousands of Chinese people, suspected of anti-Japanese activities by aiding China's struggle against Japan, were killed by the Japanese in massacres. Ordinary people feared being turned over to the Japanese military police, the tempehpol, by neighbours and acquaintances desiring rewards from the Japanese occupiers for finding "traitors". Young women hid in their families' houses and disguised their beauty for fear of being raped and sexually enslaved as "comfort women" for the Japanese military. Many civilians suffered malnutrition as food supplies became scarce.

This study proposes to examine several individual testimonies dealing with war trauma during the Japanese Occupation, gathered from the 1980s onwards at the National Institute of Education in Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. Interviews were conducted by sociology graduates training to be Social Studies teachers who, as teachers, are expected to supervise their own pupils in interviewing older people for the oral history exercises in the syllabus. The interviews on the Japanese Occupation were conducted using a reminiscence and life review style of interviewing in order to explore the question of how have the individuals interviewed about the Japanese Occupation in Singapore integrated what they experienced and witnessed during the Japanese Occupation into their overall life story.

Analysis of these interviews covering war trauma examines Joana Bornat's ideas that reminiscence and life review approaches to interviewing, and the methods of oral history, can benefit from borrowing from each other's techniques. Bornat has noted that while oral history tends to focus on the context of the matters of what is perhaps more characteristic of reminiscence and life review is attention given to process and outcomes for participants. The desired outcomes include therapeutic benefits that focus on the older person finding meaning and self-worth through constructing a narrative of their life recollections that enables them to understand who they are and affirm their personal identity. She contrasts the two interviewing styles. Bornat writes that an oral historian is an "interviewer who focuses on a life history with a view to finding out about the past and an individual's life in the past". In contrast, an interviewer "who encourages life review, reflecting on those same experiences but with a view to encouraging greater self-awareness and personal reflection by that older person, is engaging in reminiscence". She has argued that a
more lucid approach to remembering in the life of older people is one which might benefit oral history, introducing more interpretable layers onto "the person who is" comes to be valued as much as "the person who was". What remembrance can gain from oral history is 'recognition of the significance of the told story and its place in the history of a particular life, community and society'.

**APPLYING REMINISCENCE IN EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS**

The exercise of gathering testimonies from the wartime generation of Singapore at the National Institute of Education in Singapore was an activity that borrowed from both reminiscence techniques and the methods of oral history practice. In the project, the therapeutic outcomes of the interviews that the trainee teachers were required to do as part of their teacher training in Social Studies were as important as the content they were gathering. Oral history activities in the Singapore syllabus are often set by teachers not primarily as fact gathering exercises for the school pupils to learn about the past. There are values and attitudes that are meant to be encouraged in schoolchildren interviewing older relatives for oral history projects. In a conservative Asian society, such as Singapore, it is common for the grandparents to live in the same household as the grandchildren, whom they might look after when the parents are working during the day. Oral history projects in these settings are often aimed at binding the grand- parents and the grandchildren, and making both realize that the life story of the older person is a story of value that should be passed onto the school pupil. Oral history interviews on a regular basis feature in the Singapore Ministry of Education's syllabus, particularly in the subject of Social Studies. In Primary 4 pupils are asked to interview one of their grandparents about their school days, while in Primary 5 they must again do an interview with an older member of their family about their own cultural heritage. Primary 4 pupils in Social Studies continue the process by interviewing a member of their family or family friends who lived through the Japanese Occupation.

The purpose of doing oral history in Singapore schools is closer to the reminiscence therapy sessions of gerontology. In 2001, at Hwa Chong Junior College, Edmund Too, an English Literature teacher, asked his students to go to a local old folk's home to interview older people in order to record their life stories as a writing exercise. Too commenced on the objectives of the project. "Even if they learn nothing, hopefully they learn something about empathy." Older people tell their life stories to the young students, who are not just collecting facts about the past but are engaged in an exercise in understanding their older family members and bonding with them. Collecting oral history in such a context is inextricably linked to a social function of the old and the young booting together and developing mutual respect. The younger generation learns to empathise with older people, either their grandparents, or older relatives and family friends, whom they would not otherwise speak to very often.

In order to understand the process of doing oral history, young undergraduates training to be teachers have to complete an oral history interview themselves. The trainee teachers, who would later ask their own pupils to do oral history in Social Studies, are asked to facilitate discussions with older people not just about an historical period, but also to engage them in conversations that would review the whole lives of the wartime generation albeit with a focus on that one period of time - the Japanese Occupation - which is recognised as a historical watershed. In addition to the eyewitness description of the historical events that the oral historian focuses on, the consequences and impact of that maximum period of the life story are explored as length. The undergraduates must not only produce a transcript, like interviewers collecting oral history testimony for archival purposes, but in addition they must complete a self-reflexive written analysis of the process of reminiscence that they have facilitated. They regularly comment that the interview in which their older family member engages in reminiscence for several hours, was the first time that they have actually sat down and spoken for more than a few minutes with their grandparents or grandparents. The younger interviewers invariably come away from the interview with a greater respect for older people and for the value of their memories. Thus the memory of the older generation is passed to the younger generation. The identity and sense of self-worth of the older person are enhanced by the interest shown by the young interviewer.

Collecting oral history in the context of the Singapore social systems is shaped by concerns that differ from those of a national archival repository of oral history interviews. The largest collections of oral history testimony in Singapore is held at the Oral History Centre, a government agency located in the National Archives of Singapore. The process of encouraging the older person to narrate their whole life story has generally not been the impetus behind the gathering of the state-run Oral History Centre. The testimony collected is shaped by the objectives of the interviewers of the national repositories, the Singapore National Archives and Oral History Centre.
which has as its mission the goal of collecting material that contributes to the story of the nation. According to Daniel Chew, of the Oral History Centre in Singapore, the approach of the interviewers at the Centre was to provide oral history that was "not just a revelation of the private self but also a collective reflection on social and historical processes at work." The oral history interviews of individuals were not valued for themselves, but for what they could contribute to the story of the nation. Chew argued that oral history was to be used so that "it no longer the individual lives that become apparent but rather the collective memories of people, their tradition and their past."  

LIFE STORIES OF WAR TRAUMA AND THE JAPANESE OCCUPATION

Oral history transcripts taken from older people talking about the Japanese Occupation in Singa- pore, and the written self-reflection essays on this testimony by the trainee teachers at the National Institute of Education, illustrate the points made by Boram on the benefits of doing interview work borrowing techniques from both remembrance and oral history methodology. These projects also provide support for Coleman's idea of 'consummate memories' developing when older people recalling war trauma gain control over their emotional memori- nes to narrate their stories and convey a message to the young. For many young trainee teachers studying at the National Institute of Education in Singapore, interviewing their grandparents or other relatives and family friends about the Japanese Occupation was a process of self- discovery for not only the older person being interviewed but for also the younger interviewee. Priscilla Gwyneth Koh Lianpeng spoke to her own grandmother, Madam Teo Jia Chee, aged 74, in October 2004. Priscilla's reflections and observations on her grandmother's testi- mony indicate that the interview was more than an oral history interview producing an eyewitness account of events. It was an affirmation of her grandmother's self-esteem at being able to construct a narrative of her life that had value to her granddaughter. Priscilla observed that her grandmother deliberately chose English as the language of the interview to show that she was as educated as her brothers. Priscilla mentioned that Chinese Peninsular families of her grand- mother's generation doted on the boys and sent them to school to be educated, while education for girls was perceived to be a 'waste of money' as they only needed to know how to cook and sew so they could take care of their future husband and children. Priscilla noted the reason for her grandmother's proficiency in English: "She is proud of her ability to do so as she did not go school unlike her brothers, as back during her time, only boys went to school and the girls stayed home and learnt how to run the house."

During the interview, Priscilla was shocked to hear her grandmother describe how her father, Priscilla's own great-grandfather, had been tortured to death by the Japanese Kempiatsu. They had subjected him to their commonly used water torture method. The Kempiatsu would forcefully pump the victim's body full with water and then jump on them and beat them so that the water would be forced out of the body. The Japanese killed my father. He went to report to the Japanese thinking they had worked. He did not return until after a week. He had a big stomach and was bruised. He died in my mum's arm, She was so sad and cried a lot. They probably thought he was a threat since he worked for the British. They hated the British.

Priscilla's reflections on her grandmother's reminiscences and her own feelings about discovering this incident demonstrate that there are benefits from remembrance approaches in oral history activities. From her description, it is clear that her grandmother was trying to convey her own message that she had forgiven the Japanese, and that she encouraged Priscilla, so untroubled from learning something that had remained unknown to her before, to do the same:

My grandmother became tearful when she told me about my great-grandfather's death. She hated the Japanese for taking so many of her family members away. Her two sisters and two brothers were also killed by the Kempiatsu and when the British came back after the war she hoped that they would kill every Japa- nese soldier. I was enraged when I found out about my great-grandfather. I felt such hatred towards them after the interview. It took me quite some time to rationalise my thoughts and feelings. My grandmother has had sixty years to forgive the Japanese, and she says she has. However, she is puzzled at how both Japan and America can be in business and so civil with each other now after what has happened. I guess time heals all pain, hurt and sorrow. It would be easier if Japan apolo- gated for their acts in World War II, although words, are cheap, but those words could bring peace to many. The only thing that keeps me from hatred is me reminding myself to 'Forgive and forget' but not the recurring memory being burdensome like how my grand- mother had.
Madam Low Gook Huay, aged 72, was also able to organise her recollections to retell her life story, focusing on the Japanese Occupation, to convey a strong message to her granddaugh-
ter, Koh Ai Yong Kimberly, in an interview conducted in October 2003. Madam Low assessed the significance of the Japanese Occu-
pation for her own life in a manner that was closely meant to instruct her granddaughter.
Kimberly, on the laws and that she drew from the
narrative of her interview recollections:

It was the most unforgettable time of my life. They were the most frightening days of my life. Even now when I recall them, there are still little fears in me. When I see Japanese people on television, I am reminded of the
terror that took place. Though life was tough, but my family and I survived. None of us perished in the Occupation, and we were still able to carry on our usual life during the Occupation. I learnt that was possible to go through the most difficult
moments, and that I learnt that I must treasure our security and the things and food. And if we want to survive, we must depend on ourselves, not on those foreign people. As long as we have money and food, we won’t
die. So don’t waste food.12

Members of the wartime generation interviewed showed considerable awareness of how
their experiences fitted into the historical record of the anti-colonialist struggle that grew out of
the Japanese Occupation when they argued that the period had shown that it was better that the
local people decided their own fate in an inde-
pendent country rather than being ruled by colo-
rial powers. This is often summed up by a quote
from Lim Chuan Yew, Singapore’s first prime
minister (1959-1990), a member of the wartime
generation (he was born in 1923), and an anti-
colonialist political leader. He commented in a
radio address in 1961 that he was of “that gener-
atation of young men who went through the
Second World War and emerged determined
that no one – neither the Japanese nor the British
– had the right to push and kick us around.”13

Many of the wartime generation who have never
heard this quote will express in similar words the
same sentiments. Madam Wong Wai Kwan, 87 years
old during her interview with Soo Ali
Jasmin during October 2004, told the story of her
suffering during the war, and then went into the nationalist perspective of the Japanese
Occupation. She thus transmitted the message
that she wanted to her younger interviewer:
The three years and eight months which we
went through was the darkest moment in my
life. It was a long period of suffering. I lost
almost everything. I lost my husband, my
newborn son and even lost the family’s
wealth. The ‘Japanese Ghosts’ were shrewd
and scheming people who loved to launch
attacks on the people when they (the British
and civilians) were still asleep. They were
also a bunch of inhumane people who enjoyed
killing people and raping women.
The British, on the other hand, were incomp-
petent and not trustworthy. We trusted them
so much but yet they did not try their best to
protect us. I had learnt a lot from this
darkest period. I learnt that we must protect
our own country instead of waiting for other
people to protect it for us. In times of crisis,
these people would just abandon you and
flee. In addition, I had also learnt to become
more creative in order to survive and that
money was not everything. There are some
things which money cannot buy – peace.”14

Jasmin, the young interviewer, imbibed the
message that was being transmitted and
concluded. “Not only will the accounts of Mdm
Wong and many other survivors during the
Japanese Occupation remain in the hearts of
those who went through it, it will also remain in
the hearts of the more fortunate younger gen-
eration.”

Kausuri Krishan’s March 2001 National
Institute of Education interview with 73-year-old
Shanmugasivanandan (‘Sivanathan’), who

A Singapore
residents tied
down and about
to undergo water
(‘National
Archives of
Singapore’)
described himself as working as a "laborer" during the Japanese Occupation, illustrating the strong sense of identity that older people who lived through the Japanese Occupation derive from remembering having endured it. In his interview, Shammugaiasanandan recalled how his father had enough food to eat and had to stop his education at age fourteen in order to go to work to earn more money for his family. At the end of the interview, Shammugaiasanandan, upon being prompted by the Kasturi, comments on what he "learnt" from the Japanese Occupation:

I learnt that will power was very important... that you need that to carry on to survive the hard times. And I learnt that as a very young age. So, I think that was one very good thing about the Japanese Occupation. I learnt how to be strong, and that has made me who I am now. I think basically what I learnt was... we should not let will power be conquered by our desires. I mean at that time, I wished for a lot of things but I couldn't get it at all... but I had to tell myself to be strong and go on. I didn't just then I wouldn't be here... you know talking to you about all this... I learnt not to be wasteful... even now I'm very careful about throwing away food... and I just learnt that you don't need a lavish lifestyle to be happy... just be simple because you never know what is going to happen... so you must be prepared. That was what I learnt... never to let my will power be conquered by my desires. So, the Japanese Occupation taught me something good... something valuable that I will... cherish a lot. And I appreciate life a lot much more after that. And at a young age I think these are good values and lessons that one can learn. Our teenagers these days... don't know what a hard life is so they take everything for granted. And that is not a good way at all to live one's life... taking things for granted."}

It is clear that Shammugaiasanandan is recounting memories of an experience that, in the context of the interview done with Kasturi, has become central to his own identity. He asserts that this sense of identity is of considerable worth in a modern society that does not value the experiences of older people.

During their reminiscences, some members of the wartime generation sought to stake their claim to the title that Tom Browne has given to the American wartime generation—"the greatest generation." However, when they started to make overt comparisons between themselves and the young generation today, there were young interviewees who resented the heightened sense of self-worth of the elder person. In an interview with an anonymous Tamil speaker done by Kumaranasan son of Subramaniam during October 2004, this was noticeable when Kumaranasan presented his transcript:

There were tough times but nothing we could not handle, lah [of course], with or without the invasion, we were struggling to survive; that's why when we were invaded most of us tried our best to continue with life. That's why I tell you, nowadays the present young generation is not as tough as before. Now if you get invaded, you will be all sure to suffer and would not be able to take it. I tell you. Everything will be torture... He's gone on to compare his generation with his and we want to sing a song about it that is not relevant to the essay. My interview ends here."

Not all of the wartime generation produce clear cut tales of triumphalism when seeking; their memories into a narrative for the younger interviewer. Others interviewed by young trainee teachers had dark secrets that they felt were crucial parts of their own identity. They now finally ceased that after sixty years they could tell these memories to someone of a much younger generation as cautionary tales about the mistakes they had made in their youth. These memories are still very much part of their identity. In a sense, the passage of sixtieth years could they be more frank about what they had done during the traumatic period of their life marked by the Japanese Occupation. Leong Chui Pik's interview with Wee Ming Xiong, conducted in March 2001, is an example of an individual drawing together his own memories of the Japanese Occupation into a narrative of who he is, but transmitting these memories as a cautionary tale to the much younger Leong. Wee Ming Xiong had gone from Vietnam and worked in Hong Kong as a tailor, where he learned Japanese from his many expatriate
Japanese customers. He arrived in Singapore before it fell to the Japanese. He until his knowledge of both Japanese and Chinese to become an interpreter. In a remarkably self-reflexive interview, Woe tells his story as a puzzle of the fearlessness of his youth in helping the Japanese send Chinese people that they thought to anti-Japanese to their deaths. Woe declared, “I was a depraved young man who had no integrity whatsoever.” There, he had no qualms about helping the Japanese lure innocent people with the promise of food and work. The Japanese’ entrepreneurial spirit would take away the Chinese, interrogate them with Woe’s help, then perhaps kill them. In his interview Woe, added in mitigation, “The overt prejudice against the Chinese made me feel that I was driven into a corner, there was no choice but to work for the Japanese if I wanted to survive alive.” In his rigorous self-examination of himself, that was no doubt intended as a warning to his young interviewer, Woe added: “I was young and impetuous with solely the aim of survival in mind. The monetary rewards from the Japanese were an added incentive besides the guarantee of being able to live. The rewards made me a proponent man for a while but conscience-stricken infi¬nitely. Being wealthy no doubt had its many advantages but the fact that I had blood on my hands is an indelible one and which no amount of money is capable of eradicating. This bloodstained money made during my espionage days was later all lost in a common job.”

The reaction of Leong to such self-incriminatory testimony was one of empathy. Reflecting on the testimony, she wrote that “to a certain extent, it is not fair to simply dismiss the reasons put forward to mitigate his crime.” She notes that the “somewhat psychologically disturbing events that took place,” such as the terroristic tactics of the Japanese towards the Chinese, lead to an understanding of his actions. Leong notes that in the Japanese Occupation very few individuals were “preoccupied with morals and ethics,” and that Woe like many others appears to have been governed by situation rather than ethics. She expresses her empathy when she notes that Woe “is able to acknowledge his mistakes and recognize that his past actions were of the highest degree of betrayal, which makes it easier to overlook his past and forgive him.”

The author of the young trainee interviewers when conducting the interviews has meant that older people have been able to openly tell their life story to someone who expresses a strong belief in the value of that life story. The young interviewers regularly remark about the social and personal value of facilitating reminiscences from older people. The reflections of Dimple Dalip Chugani are an indication of the approach taken by the trainee interviewers in inter¬viewing older people. Dimple interviewed Mr. Lakha, who was born in Hyderabad, India, in December 1925 and came to Singapore before the Japanese Occupation as a textile trader. During the war, he was kept in inhuman conditions when the Japanese forcefully stole his goods, and then had to survive by his wits. In the interview. Lakha affirms how the Japanese Occupation shaped his view and identity:

“...I was not to take life for granted and to be prepared at all times for unforeseen circumstances. It was living through the war period that I realized that life is not a bed of roses. However, I feel that I have become a stronger person after having lived through so much hardship.”

Dimple, illustrating the understanding between interviewer and interviewee, mentions that during the interview ‘at certain instances, he answered my questions with such an emotion that I myself being only 20 years old could almost relate to what he had not only seen but gone through’. She concluded:

“I would like to say that I feel that the single most important part of this interview was when Mr. Lakha told me what he had learned from his experience living through the Japanese Occupation. He said that as an human being I should not be caught ill-prepared and part things off and later date as we do not know what the next day will bring for or the fact that we will even make it till the next day. I...I have learnt a few important lessons myself from this session. I should be very grateful and thankful for the fact that I can move about freely without having to worry whether I will be assassinated while I am out and that I have enough food to eat for the most important part I live in a country that is safe with a sound and stable currency.”

Many narrators interviewed by the young trainee interviewers demonstrate a remarkable degree of openness that perhaps is due to the passage of time, but also results from the contextualisation of the experience of the Japanese Occupation within the interview, and thus through the empathy of the interviewer. In one interview, Madam Lim Ah Hua, born in 1926, frankly discusses her feelings about rape and family during the Japanese Occupation. Lim places her...
experience in the context of her own life story and her family relationships, and her testimony is richer because of this. She elaborates on this when talking about how she dressed as a boy when Japanese soldiers came looking for women.

They turned towards my sister and took her away. My sister was screaming for me but I was too afraid to go to her aid for I feared that I also would be caught and my identity exposed to them. My sister was raped and only a week later, she returned home looking dazed. [The Japanese soldiers] also asked my brother-in-law to get them for 4 or 5 women. They told him that if he didn’t bring them, they would chop off his head. My brother-in-law left but didn’t return.

**Q:** How did you and your sister feel about the incident?

**M:** My sister was always crying at night but I was not really affected. I was already on bad terms with her as she ‘tormented’ me.

The testimonies dealing with war trauma during the Japanese Occupation of Singapore, recorded by trainee teachers at the National Institute of Education of Singapore, are good examples of how reminiscence approaches can be adapted to oral history interviews. In the interviews, the older people construct a narrative of their memories that strongly affirms a sense of identity. Insights are gained that would not be available through a methodical oral history interview technique designed to gather as much factual information as possible. By placing their memories of the Japanese Occupation into the context of their real life story, the elderly interviewees believe they are passing on to the younger generations experiences that are of value because these are the very influences that shaped their own identities. The subjectivity of this process produces an oral history of memories that reveals deep insights into the characters and personalities of particular individuals. The empathy that the young interviewee shows, not just by listening to, but by actually facilitating reminiscences of the whole life story of the individual, captures a rich tapestry of memories that constitutes who that person is rather than just what a period of history was like.

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