

Glenn Chia Jin Wee (1003118)
Perspectives on the Occupation

Appendix

Appendix A: In-person interviews

The approach to conducting in-person was to ask open-ended questions and emphasise that there were no right or wrong answers. Open-ended questions were designed to be neutral such as asking about perspectives on the Japanese occupation. On occasion where multi-choice questions were required, I would list the options and encourage interviewees to elaborate on their answer. Examples would be questions about the general sentiment towards the occupation, whether it was positive, negative, or neutral and how did these sentiments come about.

Interview 1
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Interview 2
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Interview 3
Mr Kieran Pillai, 24. NUS Law undergraduate who last took history from 2009 to 2012,
Secondary 1 to Secondary 4.



0:16

Glenn: Thank you Kieran for taking the time off to join. Perhaps you can share a bit about your educational background, what are you currently studying and when was the last time you studied history?

0:28

Kieran: Thank you so much for having me here Glenn. Currently I'm studying law at the National University of Singapore. I last studied history in Secondary school. So I studied history from secondary 1 to secondary 4.

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Glenn: Within that time span did you cover the Japanese occupation

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Kieran: Yes I did, I believe it was in my secondary 2 syllabus if I remember correctly

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Glenn: Yup excellent. I'll start with a very generic question. It's open ended, there's no right or wrong answer. What is your perspective on the Japanese occupation in Singapore and how did you develop this perspective?

1:05

Kieran: **My perspective on the Japanese occupation would be that it was an extremely difficult time for Singapore both as a country and for the domestic population at that point in time.** My understanding was that there **was a lot of suffering**, there was a lot of **rationing of valuable supplies**. Many Singaporeans had to learn Japanese as their second language instead of English. Overall, it was a very trying time for the whole population and I believe that I **developed this perspective from my history lessons in secondary school and what was covered in history text books.**

1:48

Glenn: Excellent. So what are some of the critical events that happened. You mentioned some like learning the Japanese language that has certainly happened before and the inflated prices. But what other critical events that are quite famous during the occupation?

2:00

Kieran: Well it's been a long time so I might not remember it very accurately. One critical event would be that the **British lost the war to the Japanese** in 6 days if I remember correctly and this was primarily because the guns at the Sentosa were pointed in the wrong way because they had anticipated that the attack on Singapore would come from the South as opposed to from the North via Malaysia. Another critical event would be the **Sook Ching massacre** where many Chinese were shot and executed in a genocide event. I would think that these were some of the critical events that happened during the Japanese occupation.

2:53

Glenn: Yup, another critical event that we haven't covered so far is the issue on Comfort women. Have you heard of this term being used before?

2:58

Kieran: Yes I have but I thought it was dominantly an issue in China

3:06

Glenn: Interestingly it is also an issue in Malaya and in Singapore at that time. When did you actually here of this term being used because I don't recall it being in my history syllabus, I'm not sure if it was covered in yours.

3:17

Kieran: I think I recall this term being used in the newspapers. A lot of times I read that the Chinese government and the Korean government have been asking for an apology from the Japanese government for the atrocities committed during World War 2 and this would include the use of comfort women and that is why this term has appeared quite a few times. I think a similar apology hasn't been demanded on the part of the Singapore government so that's possibly why we are not so aware of it? But I'm just postulating at this point in time

3:52

Glenn: interesting. What is your take on why this issue isn't covered in let's say the history textbooks?

3:58

Kieran: I haven't actually given that much thought. I would say that maybe it's just not part of the narrative that the authorities would want to convey to young impressionable minds, especially at the tender age of 14 or 15 years old

4:23

Glenn: That's similar sentiments to what I have. Moving forward you mentioned quite a few different events and perspective, what is your general sentiment towards the occupation and an extension what is the general sentiment of Singaporeans towards the occupation?

4:43

Kieran: I think the general sentiment of Singaporeans, including myself would generally be one of apathy. It's been almost 80, 90 years since the Japanese occupation. Most of the people who lived during the occupation would have passed on by now and those that were still alive were generally kids at that point in time. So the experience is less real to everyone. Since then Japan has come a long way in mending its relations with its Asian neighbours and many Singaporeans in pre-covid times enjoy going to Japan for holidays and enjoy learning Japanese as a third language and watching Japanese anime, using Japanese products. Over the course of time the impact of the Japanese occupation has lessened in the minds of Singaporeans and the atrocities have been forgiven

5:45

Glenn: What do you think is the general sentiment towards the occupation itself, what the Japanese did during the occupation itself?

6:00

Kieran: I would say the opinion about the occupation itself would be rather negative because it is generally accepted that the Japanese were extremely harsh to the local population. It's important to not forget that the British were also colonizers of Singapore yet there is a much more favourable impression of the British as colonial rulers compared to the new colonial masters in the Japanese.

6:36

Glenn: The next question would be more on the history education. What is your perspective on history education at the secondary school level?

6:43

Kieran: I think there is a lot of emphasis placed on rote memorization of facts with regards to historical events and I feel that more emphasis could actually be placed on skills so from my understanding, history is usually evaluated on the basis of Source-based questions and essays. I think there should be more focus placed on the source-based questions. And sources could also be drawn from a larger variety. **Generally, at least at the secondary school level, most of the sources are generally biased in favor of 1 viewpoint of history.** We would rarely see a source that explains the Japanese perspective on the events of the Japanese occupation. I feel that it would be wise to expose students to a wider range of sources to benefit. I feel that it would be beneficial for the education in Singapore as the world is not just one-dimensional and there are always multiple perspectives to the same issue.

8:00

Glenn: How significant do you think secondary school education is on your impression of the Japanese occupation because you mentioned that you went through history education and read some news articles.

8:17

Kieran: The secondary school education is pretty significant because at least for me I did not study the Japanese occupation after that because I did not do History for A levels or did not choose History as my major in university. This is probably the case for the vast majority of Singaporean students. Hence, **secondary school is the first and last time that they can be exposed to history and therefore the information that is conveyed to them at that age would be long-lasting.** Thus we should ensure that it's a more balanced perspective

9:00

Glenn: That is part of what I'm trying to aim for in this paper because while doing this history module in university I discovered that there were several first-hand accounts where the Japanese were not as bad as they seemed to be. This is widely published. For example there was a book about the Changi POWs where people generally have a negative impression of it but they could play sports with their Japanese captors. Have you heard about any positive stories about the Japanese throughout your life in Singapore or education or the newspapers?

9:39

Kieran: Generally no. I haven't heard of such stories. I look forward to reading your paper and finding out more

9:52

Glenn: Do you feel that these stories should have been included in your history education or do you think that it is just too much information for students

9:57

Kieran: I personally think it should have been included. While the Japanese were clearly the aggressors and had to pay for their war crimes. It is important to not portray all of them as aggressors' cos I'm sure that individual Japanese would have their own mindsets and impressions of the war. It is important to collate all these different perspectives so that we can get a better and more holistic understanding of history.

10:27

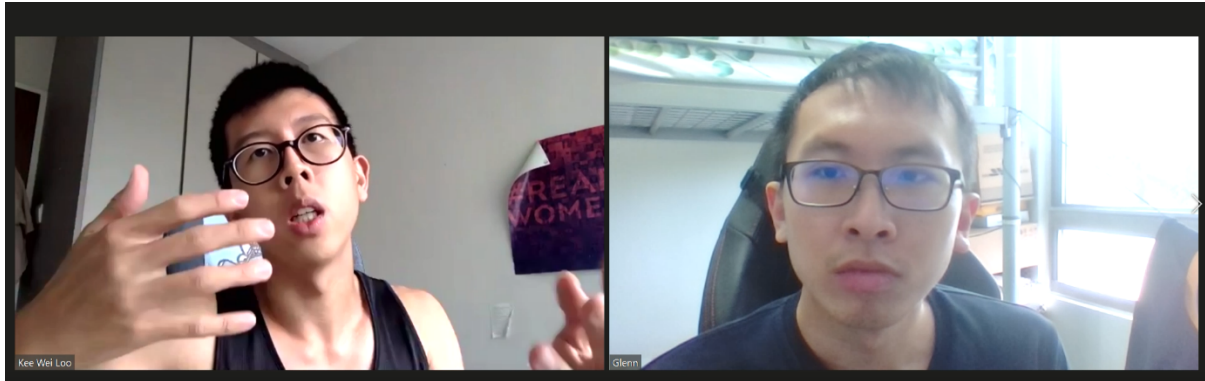
Glenn: Thank you for your time. Kieran, I think that's all I need for this paper and I'll keep in touch with you.

10:25

Kieran: Thank you see you around.

Interview 4

Mr Loo Kee Wei, 27. NUS FASS graduate who last took history from 2006 to 2011, Secondary 1 to Junior College 2.



0:01

Glenn: Yep. Okay, so I can get started. So I'll start by first spend neutral question. What is your perspective on the Japanese occupation in Singapore? And how do you develop this perspective?

0:31

Kee Wei: I think generally it's not a positive one, it's more negative. And I think part of it is the curriculum that we had in school, the sec 2 curriculum. In terms of how they portrayed the Japanese occupation through like a different landmarks in Singapore, like Fort Canning like, remember the hill that we used to run?

1:46

Kee Wei: Yeah. So based on those two, those are the two. Those are my reflections on the Japanese occupation. Now. Those are very significant memories. Yeah.

2:09

Glenn: Yep. So you would say your perception that your perspective is generally negative?

2:15

Kee Wei: Yeah, generally negative, yes.

2:18

Glenn: So the next question would be what are some of the critical events that happened during the occupation? And what's your impression of those events?

2:28

Kee Wei: The first one that comes to mind is the Sook Ching massacre. So I think this is something that we've been kind of drilled, that we have been taught as a very like

traumatic event. So the killing of the Chinese because they were deemed to be possible spies. That's one. So not sure how much of it is factually correct, but this is why I remember. So that's one. Another one is the way that they have portrayed in terms of how the Japanese invaded Singapore, they ride the bicycle across the causeway when we were waiting for them, like in the south? Because we were thinking that they're going to invade us by the water but they came down from the north. Yeah, so some themes are like being unprepared, caught by surprise. **But also that these events were brutal and dehumanizing. Yeah, these are words that would come to mind.**

3:45

Glenn: Yeah, great. So those are relatively your own perspectives. But what do you think are the the general sentiment of Singaporeans and students towards the occupation?

3:57

Kee Wei: Singaporeans depend on your segment. So for example, there are those who live through the war. So I think for people like for them, they are still very much suspicious of Japanese, so I think those people would be in their 80s. Yeah. At least 75 to 80. And those are the people who have lived through the occupation. **I think so for the older generation, the general sentiment will be very negative.** Yes. I think there's this term 'dirty gaps' right. So actually, I found out from my friend that when you say 'Jap food' right, It's actually like, not a good. It's a bit rude because people used to see 'dirty gaps these dirty gaps', 'g-a-p-s'. Yeah. So older people will think that the 'dirty gaps' are more unethical by the **for the younger people I think with anime like Naruto, Pokemon, different cultural imports from Japan. See that Ramen, for example, all these are cultural imports. The younger generation, generally are quite open about Japan,** they don't really see Japan as dirty or see the Japanese as like enemies as opposed to the older ones. Older ones would be 'we don't want to go to Japan, we don't want to associate with Japanese people because they did this to our earlier generations.'

5:56

Glenn: Yep, so that's the perception of Japan in present day in present day terms. But how about the Japanese occupation itself? Was the perception of these younger Singaporeans who didn't really get a chance to be involved in the occupation, which is a good thing. But what do you think their perspective is?

6:12

Kee Wei: I think generally its also negative because of the kind **of curriculum we're exposed to, in terms of how they are going to see the Japanese as invaders and outsiders.** I think. In JC we also studied Southeast Asia and Southeast Asia co prosperity sphere, right, so not sure if you've heard of that?

6:43

Glenn: Yep, is the one that is part of Japan's pan-Asian dreams

6:48

Kee Wei: So is the pan-Asian movement spearheaded by Japan. And even though there's this sense of positive terms, so like we want this Pan-Asian identity to pivot against the Westerners or Russia? Cos it was pre cold-war so I think Soviet Union was on the rise. So the thing is that there is that sense of suspicion, whether this Southeast Asian co prosperity sphere is in the interest of everybody or whether is it just Japan selling this vision but in actual fact, the kind of prosperity is not translated to everybody. So even though like we might have learned things like this, I think there's still a great sense of suspicion and division towards the Japanese occupation, even though it was seen as the Japanese liberating us from our backwardness

8:01

Glenn: Yep, great. Actually, when I interview Kieran, he said it was liberating them from the traditional British colonial rule. But Singaporeans didn't perceive it as liberation, because they were quite content, I guess they're quite indifferent towards British colonial rule.

8:18

Kee Wei: I'm not sure if that's true. But there's definitely this sense that the British were seen as colonial oppressors and Westerners. And then Japanese came here to liberate us. A lot of the narratives of colonialism are built on these kinds of liberation, that they are here to liberate us from the oppressors and then give us a better life. Whether it translates or not, is a different question.

8:48

Glenn: Yeah, so actually, you mentioned quite a lot of education related themes. So I wanted to ask, What is your perspective on history education, regarding the occupation in Singapore, since you mentioned that you did it in secondary school, maybe what was your impression on the secondary school education syllabus?

9:07

Kee Wei: **I think a lot of history education, secondary school is focused on nationalism, trying to build up this Singaporean identity.** Yeah, and I think it's a big challenge for history education, because a lot of times the sense of history, the sense of nationhood, the people that you belong to like Singapore. So what, what are the events that kind of shape us as a people? I think one of few things that come to mind are the Maria Hertogh riots. That one is quite big in Singapore I mean, compared to the Japanese occupation. Maria Hertogh riots maybe 1960s 50s. And then the Japanese occupation in the 30s to 40s. So I was thinking, **a lot of history education at the secondary school level is aimed at helping us cultivate this sense of nationhood, our citizenship, Singaporeans, and a lot of it is talking about warning against race based politics,** that we see now like in Malaysia, where a lot of things are drawn across racial lines. So the iconic Lee Kuan Yew crying at the separation, fighting for merger, this sense of self, this desire for independence. And also a lot of the narratives from first world to third world, this kind of ideas right, so we want to move from third world to first

and we did it under leadership. So a lot of this is recounted in a secondary school syllabus. There's mention of David Marshall ... its the labor front? There's mention of him, but a lot of it I remember as being dominated by this kind of narrative. So Lee Kuan Yew was this during the Japanese occupation. He worked as a translator, I think, if I remember correctly. Then after that what happened was, okay, he went on to do this, and then he teamed up with a few people to win the elections, I think win the second elections. **So a lot of it is nation building. And trying to paint a picture of Singapore that is very much dependent on the political elites.**

12:51

Glenn: So you mentioned that you learned a lot from education. And all these stories about nation building. And you also mentioned that there's a lot of learning from memorials in Singapore. So what weight do you place for both in shaping your opinion about the Japanese occupation?

13:14

Kee Wei: I think I'm quite critical of the things that I'm reading. So I think even though I read all the different things that I mentioned earlier about history, right, **I think history is also written from a particular perspective. And I'm very careful about that.** So this is just whatever we learn in education, educational history, and from the memorials, right. It's all written from a particular perspective, not saying it's wrong, but it is a particular perspective, that doesn't give us the full picture. So I think after reading up and visiting the memorials, I think I was a lot more curious. So the, the memorials in Singapore will only give a certain kind of perspective. Because it is kind of like split section. You cannot anyhow make a monument **you need to get permission**, right. So the government will not anyhow give you permission for that. And that will also signal that the **government has sanctioned your particular portrayal of our nation's history when they allow you to do it.** So I think I'm a lot more influenced by the different readings that I do, rather than the memorials because the memorials do provide only one certain perspective that I don't think is complete.

14:49

Glenn: Since you're quite critical about all this educational material, can you think of any positive events that happened during the Japanese occupation, even if it's a very small incident, can you think of anything?

15:06

Kee Wei: I think the Sook Ching? Sorry is that the question?

15:20

Glenn: The question is more like, you mentioned that a lot of events that you picture about the Japanese occupation was like the Sook Ching massacre as one example, a prominent example. Generally the Sook Ching massacre is perceived quite negatively where you mentioned that they slaughtered many Chinese suspect of being allied with the British. So

can you think of any positive examples that happened during the Japanese occupation that make it not look as bad as it depicted. Were there any slight bright lights during the occupation?

16:11

Kee Wei: I think if you're willing to cooperate with them (the Japanese), then you would actually lead a somewhat comfortable life. This is a slightly better thing, but generally, still quite negative because if you are cooperating with them that that is also kind of portrayed as siding with the enemy, you know?

16:49

Glenn: where did you gain this perspective. How did you find out that if you cooperated with the Japanese, your life will be slightly more comfortable? Where is that mentioned?

17:01

Kee Wei: I think is mentioned in our text. I remember this from secondary school. So if you're willing to cooperate, I mean, it's the idea of you cooperating with the colonial rulers to kind of get the benefits that can offer. Yeah, so I think it's from secondary school. But in the books I think they also portrayed these people as traitors because they sided with the Japanese instead of siding with their own countrymen,

17:46

Glenn: So what kind of cooperation is it does it depict because there are a few different kinds. One is the informants for the Sook Ching where they arrowed their own neighbours to be executed. So that could be one form of cooperation. So in your definition of cooperation, what would it entail?

18:02

Kee Wei: So it could mean working as translators? Because Japanese is obviously a different language from Chinese, Hokkien, Cantonese and English. So you also needed people to kind of transit, to help the civil administration transit from British administration to the Japanese administration, right? Because the language, everything are different. And so if you wanted to communicate with the Malays, you also needed someone to translate for you, to communicate the policy down. So if, if there were no such people helping to translate, whether verbally, or in written word, there would be a big problem for the Japanese. So the Japanese needed to keep these people in their ranks. These locals, not Singaporeans yet. So, that is my impression of it. Not so much informants, I think informants is a lot more. I wouldn't see that as a good as because even though you did gain material things, for example, you did save yourself from being massacred, but that also came at a moral cost, because you would be betraying your fellow Chinese.

19:32

Glenn: Then following up on the question, What's your impression of let's say the Japanese soldiers who were part of this occupation period?

19:49

Kee Wei: I think generally I feel sympathetic because I think a lot of the Japanese also wouldn't know like they would have believe in everything that we are doing, right? So for example, if today the SAF were to tell us that we are doing this, this, Southeast Asian co prosperity sphere for ASEAN's benefit. There might be people who disagree and they might just back out. But I think for Singaporeans, we don't have a choice, we have to be part of it because we are a conscript army. I think there will be people who are unwilling to be there but still went anyway, because maybe out of duty out of love for the country or maybe financial necessity, and so being a soldier was the only way to survive for some of them. So, you know, it may not be so straightforward, because they might be there because they really believed in the vision, but how it played out on the ground was, I mean, those two are very different things. So I do feel sympathetic towards them, not so much hatred, not so much anger, because I think in war it is it is a very brutal and hard reality. So it's not so much that they are trying to harm us. Rather, they're trying to do the best they can to preserve their own lives as well.

21:31

Glenn: Is this perspective, propagated by history textbooks, or how do you form this opinion?

21:39

Kee Wei: I think I think it took a long time to kind of understand this particular opinion. Yeah. I think war is a very complex phenomenon. And say if I'm a Japanese soldier, I would have also been indoctrinated to think that the motherland is like the most important thing and to be loyal to our motherland or we will die and being disloyal is shameful and disgraceful. So I should not be disloyal. So they're also somewhat conditioned by their curriculum or their life in Japan to think that 'Okay, I need to loyal until the end no matter if I'm killing hundred people'. **I think I read a lot more and became a lot more empathetic to the different types of people around us. So I think that's the main thing. Definitely not from the history textbooks.**

22:48

Glenn: So this is mainly your you form your own opinion from your external reading your own experiences in the essay, which I guess not all Singaporeans will go to the extent to really read up on their own, or not all Singaporeans would have the opportunity to enrol in national service to develop this empathy. What was your perspective on history education, then since you mentioned that it did not help to facilitate these balanced views?

23:16

Kee Wei: I think a lot of times, the students are just trying to get a certain grade. I'm not sure but I don't think critical thinking was something that we tried to cultivate in our system. So in the different stages of the education system that I've been in, **I think a lot of emphasis has been put on grades.** So maybe like thinking for ourselves or like, trying to be discerning with regards to what you're reading, the kind of things you're consuming on an everyday basis is not something that is kind of prized by a lot of Singaporeans. Maybe some Singaporeans. So a lot of is pragmatic you know, achievement driven, trying to get to the top, whatever the top looks like. highest score, highest grade, straight As, whatever. So I don't think the culture encourages you to think for yourself. Sad but true.

24:36

Glenn: So what do you think that is that angle that these history textbooks or history education in Singapore takes in the way they depict the occupation and represent Japanese soldiers, because this will definitely play a part in shaping people's impression of the occupation if what you say is true, where they don't really spend time thinking critically about what they read, and they just take it at face value. So what is the image that these textbooks, education, But what did you try to convey from your recollection?

25:05

Kee Wei: it's negative. **The Japanese occupation is something that was atrocious that happened should not let it happen again** and that's driving a lot of things that we are doing today. Like, for example, **the need for national service.** Right? So, to conscript everybody, all the men, you need a good reason. And **the Japanese occupation is a good reason because it kind of shows that if you don't have an army for ourselves, we have been subjected to this kind of colonial occupation.**

25:47

Glenn: Yeah. Interestingly, when I was doing research for this project, I found out some, maybe some accounts in the National Archives and some books, which showed stuff that I didn't read personally in the history textbooks that showed that the occupation wasn't as bad as it seems, yes, it was still bad. But there were some bright spots. For example, in Changi prisons, the prisoners of war would play sports with their captors. So that was never mentioned in history textbooks. Or, for example, in one of the interviews I conducted, my grand uncle, his uncle was actually friends with a Japanese soldier in the latter parts of the occupation. And when the Japanese surrendered, he gave him his sword. So he got an officer sword, which meant something because it is not every day that they will surrender their sword like that. So there are a few, I would say, bright spots in in the war, which I guess the history textbooks didn't ever tell me those. So I was wondering, what's your perspective on this? And do you think that? How do you think that you should be excluded or included?

26:49

Kee Wei: I definitely think that should be included. Because it shows the complexity of history, right? Because it's not that the Japanese were all evil. It's not true of anybody,

even like human beings, like Hitler, for example. He did a lot of evil things but Hitler was not altogether bad. He's not as evil as history books depict him to be even though what he did was evil. And I don't think there's any excuse for that. But I do think that we should include these other sides of this, this side of humanity of, to the kind of evil that we see, because there should always be some sort of balance that we can kind of weigh our views against. So for example, if a particular person is portrayed as perfect, it is so unbelievable, you cannot believe such a character. In movies the hero is always flawed, he is not made perfect, because that makes a huge, very lousy plot. The hero do everything correctly, then there is no conflict, there's no tension. So you don't have anything to resolve. I think in reality, a lot of it is like that also. **Reality is very complex. History is very complex.**

28:16

Glenn: So why do you think that that history textbooks or education leaves this positive events out? What's the agenda?

28:28

Kee Wei: I think a lot of it is trying to justify the things that, as I said earlier, right? **A lot of history education is trying to build up this sense of nationalism in Singaporeans and us.** And how do they kind of **build this sense of solidarity within the population?** One of it is to use these tragic experiences, even though we didn't go through ourselves, that's important. Because you and I, we didn't we didn't live through the Japanese occupation, but they want to have these common events, **common historical narratives to kind of shape our identity as Singaporeans**, because we are a very diverse people. I mean, a lot of countries are very diverse. Singapore, especially. But how do you kind of **get everyone to band together?** And how do you **justify things like national service?** How do you justify things like **spending so much on defense?** Right? So there are a lot of reasons for why the government wants to do something like that. But education is a very, very, very powerful tool.

29:46

Glenn: Yep. Great. That comes to no other questions I have.

29:51

Kee Wei: Okay. Thanks.

29:56

Glenn: Yup Thanks!

Interview 5

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