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Singapore's dangerous trade-off: When progress erases the past

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Abstract: I stroll peacefully along Punggol Promenade, admiring the beautiful sunset and the sound of waves crashing rhythmically against the rocks. The sound drowns out the city's noise and distracts me from the creaking of the boardwalk beneath my feet. Occasionally, gusts of wind sweep by and carry children's laughter from a distant playground. Just up ahead lay soft, natural-coloured sands filled with clusters of weathered boulders. These rough, jagged boulders stick out like ancient ruins, which contrast with the modern skyline behind them.

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I crouch down beside a boulder and run my fingers over its eroded surface. Its exterior felt rough and slightly slippery due to patches of seaweed. The air smells like salt and moss, but for a moment, it smells somewhat metallic and rancid, leaving me feeling unsettled. Beyond the rocks, the sea glitters under the sun, but my attention is still on their quiet and steady forms. They feel like a portal to some forgotten time that I cannot seem to grasp.

Later, I learn that these boulders belong to the Pengerang Volcanics, an ancient volcano that is older than Singapore itself. They witnessed the Sook Ching Massacre taking place during World War II. Hundreds of innocent lives were stolen here, their blood seeping into the sand now trampled upon by visitors. It is hard to wrap my head around the huge contrast between this tragic history brought by the war and the laughter that echoes all around me. The place holds such a heartbreaking and meaningful past, yet there is no memorial here and only a couple of subtle markers and plaques to honour the innocent people who were tortured and killed. It is as though their suffering has been forgotten.

Although the rocks are ancient, they are not eternal. The tides are slowly wearing away at the rocks, creating grooves on them, similar to how memory fades with time and neglect. The laughter of children in the distance only amplifies the tension: their world thrives unaware of the ghosts here. How many generations until tragedy becomes a myth?

A young couple caught my eye as they took selfies against the boulders, smiling. The stones stand silent in the background of their photos, their edges softened by relentless waves. Singapore's development mirrors this erosion. Graves and sufferings are hidden under the weight of progress, but at what cost?

I came looking for tranquility, yet I found a paradox – a sanctuary and a graveyard. The boulders, which were once a scenic prop to me, now feel like tombstones. At first, I assumed that nature and history coexist here. How naive and wrong I was; they actually collide.

As the sun begins to set, the horizon blends into shades of amber and violet. The boulders fade to silhouettes, and their forms dissolve like the names of the Sook Ching victims. Both are erased – one by neglect, and the other by nature’s indifference.

Memory, like these worn-down rocks, is fragile and requires tending. Without it, freedom loses its meaning and people become disconnected from the struggles that shaped it. The waves are slow but inevitable, and they will never stop slamming into the boulders. Will we let the sea wash the past away, or will we press our palms to the stones and listen?

This leads me to wonder, how does the erosion of collective memory mirror the gradual decay of natural landmarks like the Pengerang Volcanics – and why does time seem to dull society’s urgency to preserve the stories of suffering that forged the liberty they now inherit?

Singapore’s fast-paced society has reshaped its landscape, often at the expense of its history and tradition. The tension through Punggol’s transformation is illustrated in Michelle Chan Yun Yee’s *Punggol: Waves of Recreation* (2018). Chan (2018) asserts that Punggol was once a “waterfront recreational retreat” with European bungalows and bustling seafood villages, but it then turned into a site of wartime violence during the Japanese Occupation. After the war, redevelopment took place and rebranded the area as a “waterfront town of the 21st century”. Chan observes that the younger generations are more drawn to Punggol’s scenic beauty and are increasingly becoming disconnected from its traumatic past. Her saddening remark on how “younger Singaporeans see only [Punggol’s] beautiful view of the sea” emphasises that societal liberty, built on unacknowledged suffering, risks becoming hollow.

This phenomenon is not just limited to Punggol. Other natural landmarks shaped by centuries of wind and waves, like the Pengerang Volcanics, are eroding, like how memories of their histories are being forgotten as the nation rapidly moves forward. For instance, Kranji Reservoir was once a place where many soldiers fought and died defending Singapore due to fierce battles that took place during World War II. Yet, its wartime significance is seldom brought up, concealed by its role in water management. As the tides wear down stone, societal indifference reduces the importance of acknowledging history and remembering the past. Can a nation truly thrive if it forgets the sacrifices that forged its identity and liberty?

Chan (2018) also provides a localised case study that shows how urban development prioritises economic utility over historical reckoning. However, her focus on Punggol’s Sook

Ching Massacre brings attention to the ethical cost of progress, but her framework disregarded the basic efforts to preserve memory, like oral history projects at Punggol Settlement. Although these initiatives are minor, they still resist the seemingly state-driven erasure by reviving and preserving marginalised stories. These projects slow memory's erosion as they turn fragile stories into lasting records and encourage society to recall the suffering behind its freedom. Without them, apathy and neglect will silence history.

Gaik Cheng Khoo's *of Diminishing Memories and Old Places* (2013) expands this critique by framing memory erosion as a systemic issue tied to neoliberal governance. Khoo elaborated on state-led digitisation projects such as the Singapore Memory Project (SMP), which gathers the public to share their personal stories to construct a depoliticised "national memory". She then contrasts these with simple efforts like the Bukit Brown Cemetery documentation, where activists photograph graves and record oral histories to combat state-led historical erasure. Khoo warns that "memory cannot be stored forever... time lives on outside the archives in the Singapore landscape" (2013, p. 50). While these sites decay as memories fade, their tangible presence demands that we pay attention. Unlike digital files that are stored away, real-world landmarks compel us to confront the past. They not only hold memories but also make remembering an active responsibility.

Both Chan (2018) and Khoo (2013) hint at the paradox of liberty in Singapore. Chan's focus on Punggol's cyclical reinvention, where trauma is buried under modern infrastructure, complements Khoo's analysis of digitisation as a "premature archive" that mourns loss while allowing complacency. Both authors emphasise time's dual role to serve as a force of decay and a catalyst for urgency.

However, both differ when it comes to their solutions. Khoo (2013) implies that an increase in physical markers would educate more people about the histories behind certain places, while Chan (2018) encourages the government to balance efficiency and historical preservation as much as possible, and not to always take shortcuts to save costs, as it will fail to educate society on the country's history in a more meaningful way. Together, they challenge Singapore, a nation admired for its efficiency yet haunted by its historical past, to confront this existential dilemma.

The erosion of memory and landscape in Singapore reflects a global dilemma to balance progress with conservation. Chan (2018) and Khoo (2013) remind us that memory, like the rocks from Pengerang Volcanics, demands active care or they will deteriorate faster.

Though eroded, they can endure as geological testaments to time's passage and earth's history. Likewise, Singapore's history, no matter how unpleasant, must be made more vivid in its streets and shores. Without more plaques and gravestones to acknowledge the sacrifices made by its ancestors, the nation's achievements will become morally and ethically shallow. Hence, Singapore must gain the courage to remember and not to easily forget. Not only will preserving the nation's darkest past and stories ensure that Singapore honours the sacrifices made to shape its liberty, but it will also ensure that its future is rooted in more than concrete and pixels.

Declaration of Conflict of Interest

There are no conflicts of interest to declare.

Bionote

Celeste Ruth Chia Yu Xuan is an undergraduate student of Nanyang Technological University Singapore, undertaking Mechanical Engineering.

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