

07/07/1999

A tale of two countries

Tan Gim Ean

NO historian is objective. The best he can do is bring both sides of an issue to the table and write with that awareness in mind. "That's as objective as one can be," says Jim Baker, author of *Crossroads: A Popular History of Malaysia and Singapore*.

"It is impossible for anyone to say he wrote an unbiased history. There are different ways to approach an issue. The events and people a writer chooses to highlight and what he thinks is important in history is his bias."

Baker says historians do not think of "righting wrongs". The most they do is try to show a historical perspective to what happened. Which is what he himself has done by tracing the currents of history and politics of two "neighbours with a common past hurtling along different paths".

Crossroads follows the spine of Asian values and gauges to what extent these have shaped Malaysia and Singapore's success. Baker examines the recent "bumps and hurdles" faced by both countries and asks what their people can expect after these have been sorted out.

Taking a critical look at their ethnic populations, he questions the possibility of harmony in multi-racial societies. Issues of individual rights versus government restrictions, national identity and a common destiny are also discussed.

Malaysian and Singaporean history is one subject Baker knows at his fingertips - he teaches it at the Singapore American School. The son of American missionaries, he has lived in both countries since the age of two.

There is a story to the writing of *Crossroads*, he says.

"I teach a Malaysia-Singapore course which runs for four-and-a-half months, 45 minutes per period. I asked myself: How hard is it to write a book? So every day I sat down and did that ... and it took me three years!"

As he wrote, what had begun as a secondary school text shifted in perspective and became a bigger picture of two neighbours with unusual ties.

The book opens on 'Early Malaysia and Its Indigenous People', then proceeds to 'Indian Influence and Early Empires', 'Europeans in the Archipelago', the Malay world in the 16th and 17th Centuries, and Singapore in the 19th Century.

Baker surveys the British presence in Borneo and the peninsula, followed by the impact of British rule before and after World War II. The final chapters focus on Singapore's road to self-rule, independence for the island state, and Malaysia since 1965.

"Most people read something of the last 20 years," he says. "They rarely look beyond for the larger context. I see Malaysia and Singapore as exciting countries with a multi-racial core. Their separation is symptomatic of their potential and tragedy."

Three decades after cutting the umbilical cord, both governments are still trying to create a national identity, to find a common purpose. To do that, they turn to history. "That is when the writing of history becomes more sensitive ... and why my book took so long to write," Baker adds.

History alone is not enough to forge national identities, which he views as a revolutionary process. "To expect Singapore and Malaysia to evolve in

two decades is unrealistic. It has taken the Americans half a century to feel they are a part of their national dream."

On the conflict between individual rights and restrictions imposed for the country's greater good, Baker says the driving force of capitalism is for the individual to succeed. Individualism and values will grow as people become more affluent. When the people reach a certain level, they start to ask, "Where do we go from here? We gave up something to get here. Now what do we get in return?"

"Affluence gives people more freedom; eventually, their aspirations will catch up. It is a historical truth that as people prosper, they will want more choices. That is the basis of democracy."

Leaping from past to present, Baker notes that Singapore is becoming a more open society, a transition which takes time.

On this side of the Causeway, the next three or four years should be interesting to watch. "Malaysia is at a flux, a point where a lot of things could happen. It will take some years to sort things out. Anyone who predicts anything is a lunatic."

There are cross-currents in Umno over who will jump in when Dr Mahathir goes. There are many Umno voices trying to catch the ear of the new generation. He is not sure they are succeeding although they have more tools to reach out than 20 years ago.

Who will the young Malays follow and listen to? Baker sees a possibility that they may not listen to anyone. Votes will be fragmented if the young ones opt for change. "A little diversity could create new ideas and concepts."

But Umno politics pales in comparison with a major challenge facing Malaysia today - the need to balance equity with unity.

Discounting any wish to be critical, he says if a government intercedes in the economy to achieve goals of equity, it becomes a political matter. On the other hand, the equity-unity debate is not just a race issue. "Even the Malays are talking about who gets what," Baker says.

He cannot pinpoint when the country will strike a harmonious balance. A good sign is that he knows of certain Malays who now feel confident enough to say they can compete without government aid.

Crossroads stops at the early 1990s. In the interim of its writing, the economic crisis and political changes hit Malaysia with an unexpected force.

Baker feels it's too early to comment on these. "In five years, when the smoke clears, perhaps we can put the current events in perspective."

Finally, the inevitable question: Is there any possibility of a Singapore-Malaysia reunion?

He is upbeat. "Who knows? Who would have believed that Germany and France could come together under the European Union? They are traditional enemies who fought two wars in the 20th Century.

"Singapore and Malaysia have only engaged in a war of words. There's still so much they have in common ... it would be tragic if they cannot build on that. It may take a new generation to do that, to forget the heated words and move on without the baggage."

More immediately, he foresees them sharing a common market. And he is more inclined to speculate on what would have happened if history could be rewritten.

"Where would we be if they had found a way to stay together? Definitely much more successful!"

(END)