

Remembering our Founding Fathers

Can we do more so that we will continue to benefit from their values, ideals and ethos?



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Polymath, visionary, pioneer – these are the epitaphs that still inadequately capture the contributions of the late Dr Goh Keng Swee to Singapore.

Even as we prepare to send off one of Singapore's most illustrious sons, the question of how to remember his life and contributions takes on greater poignancy.

But before we can consider how best to remember and commemorate the life of our pioneers, we need to be very frank about why we should remember them in the first place.

As a young nation-state, we need our heroes. Their lives, their contributions and their legacies remind and reinforce in us our identity, and the values we hold dear.

Our heroes also inspire us. In the midst of relative abundance, we fall all too easily into the blind spot of thinking that the past does not matter that much.

Memories are not just sentimental stuff. They are also things with which we think with.

Winston Churchill said: "The longer you look back, the farther you can look forward".

It wasn't so long ago that the lineage of Singapore's nationalism was traced to the Chinese 1911 Republican revolution. Singapore and the ethnic Chinese living here then were portrayed as having shaped and contributed to the diasporic and local nationalisms.

The villa (now, the Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall), which Sun had used as his temporary headquarters in South-east Asia for his revolutionary cause between 1900 and 1911 and at which he stayed whenever he visited Singapore, was gazetted as a national monument in 1994.

Yet, Major-General Lim Bo Seng and Lieutenant Adnan Saidi, two courageous Singapore sons who lost their lives valiantly during the Japanese Occupation, have been deemed unsuitable for elevation as national heroes.

Then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong rationalised (in 1999) that they were "defending Singapore for the British, not independent Singapore" although they will remain as "military heroes".

Yet, both these heroes have closer affinity to Singapore nationalism rather than Sun's transient and inchoate connection with Singapore.

PREVENTING COLLECTIVE AMNESIA

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For example, we have the Hon Sui Sen Memorial Library at NUS, the Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information, and the S Rajaratnam School of International Studies at NTU.

These are worthy efforts. But more can be done.

Our lack of recognition of our own illustrious sons and daughters misleadingly give the impression that, as a nation, we are tabula rasa.

But Singapore was not a blank slate notwithstanding our short post-independence history. Our story is about our pioneers and forefathers who went against the odds to build this little red dot.

The late Mr Lim Kim San is described as the "father of public housing" for the Herculean effort and leadership to house our booming population in the 1960s.

He was also the first person to be awarded Singapore's highest honour, the Order of Temasek.

HDB Hub could, for example, be renamed after him.

The late E W Baker, a long-time Law Minister and who helped draft the separation agreement, was also noted for his contributions to the development of sports in Singapore.

What about naming the yet to be built Sports Hub after him?

Our roads and buildings should intrigue and tell Singaporeans about our past. It's not a perfect past but certainly a past that can inspire and challenge us to do better, to self-correct, and to know.

Our history textbooks and national education programme will have greater resonance with Singaporeans if they present contrasting perspectives and vivid understanding of Singapore.

Besides tangible commemorations, we need intangible ones that capture the ideas, values, spirit and ethos of our founding generation – not just the leaders but the ordinary men and women who also contributed to this nation.

Tributes are aplenty when an illustrious Singaporean passes on. But let's ensure that their legacy lives on, not only to inspire us but to provide us with new pathways to critically understand and interpret our nation.

This self-knowledge is our collective intelligence and can provide valuable guidance in uncharted waters. ■

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