Source: *TODAY,* p8
Date: 8 August 2016

BREAKING WITH THE PAST TO FORGE AHEAD

S'poreans need to remember to forget

ADRIAN KUAH



National Day is upon us once again. And while this year's celebrations mark our crossing the midway point towards our centenary, we have to admit that SG51 does not have quite the same ring to it as SG50.

The SG50 jubilee was grand and pervasive on an unprecedented scale. Packed full of celebratory activities organised by the Government and from the ground up, it was a year-long show of unbridled patriotism coupled with no small measure of reflection.

SG50 was meant to prepare us to face the future with a can-do spirit, but at times it seemed more like a retrospective.

For all our rhetoric and reputation as a future-oriented society, our SG50 celebrations consisted of a great deal of revelling in nostalgia, revisiting our founding mythos, reliving our heroic odyssey from Third World to First, and reminiscing our national heroes. This was especially so when SG50 was shrouded by the passing and state funeral of founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew.

Even as this year's theme is Building our Singapore of Tomorrow, National Day always seems to evoke in us the usual black-and-white newsreels and sepia images of our past.

Certainly, it is right to take stock of what had gone before us, but it is unusual for a young country to be so deeply fascinated by its own short history. This is not simply because, for a young country such as ours, the national narrative is a short one, and the shared memories, images and iconography are so few that they are all compulsively cherished and safeguarded.



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More importantly, it is also because the national narrative, at the abstract level, enjoins us to always remember where we came from, how we got here, and, by extension, who we are.

It reminds us that the Singapore success story is something we should, can and must build on. Moreover, that it is fragile and we must remember not to take it for granted.

However, have we become fixated on our history — one version of it, at least — to such an extent that we are blind to how we use, and have used, our history?

One might say that Singapore's past successes have led us to turn George Santayana's aphorism on its head: That we who remember the past are condemned to repeat it.

The philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche warned that it is possible for us to be so overburdened by and beholden to history that we lose our independence, our creativity and our sense of adventure. Nietzsche's assessment of his own 19th century culture is that it suffered from such a surfeit of history that it became stunted, decayed and paralysed.

Nietzsche's advice? To actively forget. And this is something worth thinking about as we grapple with challenges — economic, technological, cultural and political — that defy our solutions of yore.

Take the economy, for example. Forgive the irony, but recall Dr Goh Keng Swee's words from a 1972 speech at the University of Singapore:

The question we must answer sooner or later is this: When do we stop growing? Or, to be more precise, at what point do we stop importing foreign workers, and cease to encourage foreign entrepreneurs and capital in Singapore? Because of our limited land area, industrial expansion together with the concomitant population expansion will produce overcrowding to increasingly uncomfortable limits.

The candour and humility of his words are remarkable because he was essentially calling into question the long-term viability of a spectacularly successful economic strategy crafted largely by him.

Dr Goh warned that an economic model that relied on foreign capital, technology and labour will run its course and must give way to something else. The spirit of his words were: The way ahead need not be, and often cannot be, how it was before.

This is a real risk we face, especially when we overly romanticise the past. It will start to manifest itself in our classrooms, among our policy-making elites, and in board rooms when all we ask is: "Is there a template for this? Are there precedents? Who else has done this?"

We need to continually go back to the drawing board, to challenge mindsets that were fixed long ago but now assumed to be unchanging and thus unchangeable.

In a way, this active forgetting is also an acknowledgement that not all of our past is beneficial for our present and future, even if it might have been once. It guards against the danger of looking backwards so yearningly that we believe that our past is greater than our present, of sacrificing the future at the altar of our antiquity.

Most importantly, active forgetting gives a society the strength, the élan, to take risks. This deliberate forgetfulness is the cure for an unexamined uncritical sense of history, which can drive us towards the "tried and tested".

Needless to say, breaking with the past is traumatic because it challenges our sense of identity, values and recipes for success. But sometimes, to forge ahead, we must also remember to forget.

● Adrian W J Kuah is senior research fellow at Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy.