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Accidental losers

Our future completeness requires reconciliation with our past.

In 2015, in case you were one of the three people who weren't paying attention, Singapore celebrated its golden jubilee, dubbed SG50. It was the biggest birthday bash since the country marked 25 years of nation building. Now, if you trust your PISA-accredited maths skills, you'd probably calculate that the earlier round of festivities must have occurred in 2015 minus 25 years, or the year 1990. But if you are old enough to recall, you'd know that Singapore's 25th anniversary was actually observed six years earlier, in 1984. To solve the riddle, an understanding of history and politics is more helpful than basic arithmetic.

History tells us that Singapore's national journey contained more than one major milestone. In 2015, we celebrated the 50th anniversary of 9 August 1965, when we became an independent republic. In 1984, however, we counted 25 years from 3 June 1959, the date we achieved full internal self-government. This was when we could finally call ourselves a nation. It was a big enough deal that, from 1960–63, Lee Kuan Yew led our "National Day" celebrations on 3 June. This was followed by another momentous event, 31 August

1963, when Singapore declared full independence. We don't like to commemorate this first independence day because we sought this sovereignty for the sole purpose of voluntarily giving it up a fortnight later—to join our fellow Malaysians in the Federation of Malaysia. Still, when locals shed 144 years of imperialist rule and became masters of their own destiny, it was hardly a minor moment.

As for why the Singapore government picked, first, 1959-plus-25 and then 1965-plus-50 as jamboree years, that decision wasn't ordained by history but by political calculation. What 1984 and 2015 had in common was that they were both—you guessed it—election years. But the larger point that strikes me about those two decades from the end of the Japanese Occupation to our separation from Malaysia is just how complex and confused the journey was, with fits and starts, detours and dead ends. Only when we grasp this can we do justice to the memory of the pioneering generation of nationalists. If, instead, we oversimplify their history, we risk caricaturing them as either heroes or villains, engaged in a clear-cut battle between good and evil.

Sadly, this is exactly the effect of what's now become the official history of the period. It's a rule of historiography that victors get to dictate mainstream accounts of the past. So it is not surprising that the authorised narrative anoints Lee Kuan Yew and his comrades as the noble heroes of Singapore nationalism, contending with beastly colonialists, communists and communalists, to shepherd the nation to a bright future. Even if we acknowledge the PAP's right to hog the limelight, it's a pity their script has been so reluctant to acknowledge that there were actors of deep principle and patriotism on various corners of the stage.

I wish the PAP were magnanimous enough to embrace its old enemies, those on the losing side of history. I feel this strongly not because I come from that stock, but precisely the opposite. I was born in 1965 to parents who benefitted from what the PAP stood for and the forces that made it victorious. In the run-up to SG50, the national broadcaster released a five-part documentary series

dedicated to those topsy-turvy decades. It was titled *Days of Rage*. My parents had really no reason to be consumed by any such rage. As post-war English-speaking immigrants from British-controlled India, they plugged into colonial Singapore relatively easily, my father getting white-collar jobs in European companies and my mother becoming a teacher in Christian mission schools. They were relatively immune to the ideological pulls that the authorities would deem dangerous or destructive. They had been raised on the nationalism of Nehru and Gandhi, but coming from Travancore—a princely state in the southern tip of India that never suffered the worst indignities of white imperialism—they nursed no intense hatred for the British. Nor had their lives in India been turned upside down by a savage Japanese Occupation, opening their minds to radical and revolutionary solutions.

Some other Malayalee immigrants were communists and militant union leaders, but my father was never at risk of falling into that crowd. His mentor in Singapore was his eldest brother, who happened to be a high-ranking, British-trained police officer at the forefront of counter-insurgency efforts. Later, being middle-class and Christian, my parents were not part of the natural constituency of the Barisan Sosialis: as English-educated Christians, they didn't get caught up with the linguistic or religious causes that placed many other Singaporeans at loggerheads with the authorities. Not belonging to either of Malaya's main ethnic groups, they were not swayed by Chinese or Malay leaders who were pushing hard for the cultural rights of their communities. On the contrary, they supported and benefitted from Lee Kuan Yew's promotion of English as a unifying language.

Ultimately, what was it that put my family on the right side of history along with the PAP? Humility requires I admit it had a lot to do with demographic and socio-economic factors—and luck. Conversely, I have to wonder about all those Singaporean families who include parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles whom official history classifies as, at best, losers; and, at worst, enemies of the state. Individuals who were beaten, arrested, detained without trial,

expelled. Sure, some may have been unscrupulous and self-serving opportunists. But can we really say that of the majority? All they were really guilty of was underestimating the PAP's ability to pull off its political gamble and sweep aside all its opponents. They didn't bet early enough on what would turn out to be the winning side. Surely, that does not amount to a moral failing. Even the PAP did not know if it would succeed.



This is why I found it difficult to get into the spirit of the SG50 jubilee. Not because it was obviously doubling up as an election ploy—any ruling party would have done the same—but because of the missed opportunity to heal wounds that have remained open for too long. PAP dominance is overwhelming and unquestioned. It could have afforded a big-hearted gesture toward all those who played any part in Singapore's multistranded nationalist struggle. It's not uncommon for governments to use the occasion of an independence day to grant pardons and amnesties to former enemies in the name of national unity. Granted, such moves are usually self-serving. A government may release political prisoners to buy the cooperation of groups that are a thorn in its side, for example. The all-powerful PAP has no equivalent need to curry favour with anyone. So it would have been unrealistic to expect the government to clear their opponents' names or express remorse for their detentions.

But it could have at least acknowledged that those tempestuous decades were understandably divisive, and that its former opponents were in many cases only doing what they thought was best for their Singapore. In paying homage to the Pioneer Generation, it could have conceded that the nation's most self-sacrificial forebears didn't just stoically accept kampung clearance and military conscription, but also endured arrests and ostracisation. And if the government really could not bring itself to say anything nice, it could have at the very minimum looked the

other way when these individuals were given a voice through non-official vehicles such as Tan Pin Pin's documentary, *To Singapore, with Love*, instead of trying to stifle them—again.

Singapore's 25th anniversary celebration in 1984 was partly an (ineffective) election stunt, but it at least accepted the historical truth that our nation building pre-dated Separation. SG50 didn't. It drew a thick red line at 9 August 1965. "From that break, we began building a nation," Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong declared in his 2015 National Day message, contradicting the party line in 1984. He described Singapore's pioneers as "the lion-hearted", but apparently only because they allowed themselves to be led by "the lions"—the PAP leadership. As for the strong-willed individuals who weren't persuaded and paid the price, the SG50 narrative relegated them to the role of fiendish foils, to accentuate the heroic qualities of the PAP's founding fathers. Thus, in the course of the jubilee year, the government banned public screening of Tan Pin Pin's film because her interviews with exiles could be viewed as condoning violent subversion, it said. Around the same period, the government responded vigorously to a critique of Operation Coldstore by former Barisan Sosialis politician and detainee Poh Soo Kai. One charge it repeated against Poh, a medical doctor, was that he had treated and supplied medicines to Communist Party of Malaya insurgents. Doctors are ethically obliged under the Hippocratic Oath and Geneva Conventions to provide medical help regardless of a patient's identity, but such humanitarian niceties are not permitted to complicate the national agenda of vilifying our old communist foes.

If you are fan of the PAP, you should stop to consider that the caricature approach to history isn't even good propaganda. Even comic book creators know that the black-and-white depictions of good and evil no longer cut it. The 21st-century DC and Marvel franchises contain superheroes with dark sides and supervillains with humanising backstories. Superman, Batman and the rest are allowed to be guilty of momentary lapses of judgement and full-blown civil wars. Even an adolescent audience is able to cope

with—indeed, demands—such authenticity and ambiguity. The PAP's ideological policemen are not doing their team any favours when they insist on two-dimensional tales that don't even do justice to good storytelling convention, let alone historical fact.

That story is shallow and brittle when imagined as a multiple-choice test with only one right answer. It is majestic and rich when animated by men and women of passion, who responded to confusing times in many different ways—but never with indifference. One of the most inspiring events of that early nation-building period must surely be the community effort to create Nanyang University or Nantah, at last allowing Chinese-medium students to pursue a tertiary education locally. The colonial government refused permission, but the community went ahead anyway, with land donated by the Hokkien clan association and donations pouring in from businessmen and humble workers alike. It started classes in 1956. Nantah would become a leftist hotbed and was closed down in 1980. Even if you accept the PAP's stated rationale completely, that the closure was due only to declining standards, that's no reason to forget its inspiring origins.

Today, Nantah land is occupied by Nanyang Technological University, which proudly claims to be the world's number one “young” university—meaning under 50 years old. When I was an NTU faculty member, I benefitted from such branding, but never felt it was worth the price. Do the maths. To qualify for the “Top 50 Under 50” league, NTU has to count its history from the post-Nantah period, a calculation of stunning insensitivity to Singapore history and the people who built Nantah, some of whom are still alive (and to whom NTU reaches out for donations, since, in Singapore, irony and ideology never get in the way of business).

The steamrolling of history has contemporary implications. There is a straight line connecting the PAP's flattened nation-building story with its overbearing approach to politics. Its dogmatic view of the past justifies and reinforces its with-us-or-against-us intolerance of dissenting opinion. The fiction of PAP founding fathers as the only heroes of Singapore nationalism is

what allows today's leaders to believe that Singaporeans who don't row in rhythm are threats to the sampan of state.



If Lee Kuan Yew's opponents had emerged victorious, it's very likely that my own life would not have been as comfortable. But that doesn't justify dehumanising them as somehow undeserving of dignity. I know I'm not alone in feeling that our national narrative includes this major piece of unfinished business, a piece that makes us less whole as a nation. I'm glad that some of Singapore's most profound artistic works produced over the past decade respond to this collective malaise. All are by individuals born after 1965, having no direct experience of the "days of rage" either, but feeling compelled to make peace with those who have been cast aside in our names. Besides *To Singapore, with Love*, there was Boo Junfeng's 2010 feature film, *Sandcastle*, the story of a listless teenager who gradually discovers that his late father had been a radical Chinese middle-school student leader far more tragic and noble than he'd realised. Sonny Liew's 2016 graphic novel, *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye*, is a heartwrenching meditation on pragmatism versus idealism, and how well-meaning choices taken in those confusing nation-building years condemned innocent men to the wrong side of history. I'm looking forward to documentary photographer Sim Chi Yin's passion project about her grandfather, a newspaper editor in Ipoh who was among tens of thousands of leftists and communists who fought against the British in Malaya and was deported to China at the start of the Emergency, making him a non-person to even his family.

Singapore at 50-something should be able to handle the moral complexity of the country's early nationalist period. We are not small children whose worlds would turn upside down if we suddenly realised a parent isn't perfect but only human. If we honour Lee Kuan Yew and his team as founding fathers of the republic, it can be the way an adult child honours his aged

parents—thoroughly cognisant of their flaws, but deeply appreciative of their efforts, and forever bound by a shared history.

As Singapore's 50th jubilee year approached, I had fantasies of an alternative universe where PAP leaders would reveal their wisdom and magnanimity through a grand gesture toward its enemies of decades past. As the celebrations took shape, I felt silly for even entertaining such dreams. Singapore at 50 was evidently still too immature for any such reconciliation with its past; SG50 was never going to be anything other than a PAP victory parade. Perhaps one day, the accidental losers of Singapore history will receive what too many of them have been denied—respect. In the meantime all I can do, as a private citizen and accidental beneficiary of Singapore's success, is to express mine.