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THINK-TANK

Important anniversaries this year

By Tommy Koh



WE WILL commemorate three important anniversaries this year.

First, on March 26, the Armenian Church in Singapore, a national monument, will celebrate the 175th anniversary of its consecration in 1836. Although the Armenian community here has always been small, we should value them.

Armenia today is a small republic in south-eastern Europe, with a population of 3.5 million. But in AD301, the Armenian King Tirdat III was converted to Christianity by Gregory the Illuminator, and Armenia became the first Christian country in the world.

It has had a difficult history since then, having been conquered by the Persians, Arabs, Turks and Russians, regaining its independence only in 1991.

Because of its tumultuous history, there is a large Armenian diaspora. When conditions in Persia became intolerable for them,

many Armenians sought refuge in India. And from India, they ventured to South-east Asia.

When Stamford Raffles established Singapore as a free port in 1819, he invited traders of all nations to come here. Sixteen Armenians answered his call, and by 1836, there were 34 of them living in Singapore. They were deeply religious, built the first Christian church here, and made enduring contributions to Singapore:

- It was an Armenian, Catchik Moses, who founded this newspaper, *The Straits Times*, in 1845;
- Two Armenian brothers, Tigran and Aviet Sarkies, founded the Raffles Hotel in 1887;
- It was an Armenian woman, Agnes Joaquim, who cultivated the world's first vanda orchid hybrid, *Vanda Miss Joaquim*, Singapore's national flower.

Second, on Oct 10 we will commemorate the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Republic of China.

The Manchus conquered China in 1644 and established the Qing dynasty. After ruling China for 267 years, they became corrupt, ossified and incompetent.

Sun Yat Sen was born in 1866 to peasant parents, in a village near Guangzhou. In 1879, he travelled with his mother to join his older brother in Honolulu. He completed his secondary education there and later studied medicine, first in Guangzhou and then in Hong Kong.

He dedicated his life to waging three revolutions: a nationalist revolution to overthrow the Manchu dynasty; a republican revolution to abolish imperial rule; and a social revolution to give the people greater rights. He encapsulated his vision in his *san min zhu yi* or 'three people's principles': nationalism, democracy and the people's livelihood.

Sun's struggle looked hopeless at the beginning. He was an outsider, being Christian and not from an elite family. He was not well known in China and received no support from the West.

He was, however, single-minded. He galvanised support for his cause - including among Chinese students studying in Japan, and other overseas Chinese.

The wealthy Chinese of Singapore were an important source of support for him. Sun visited Singapore eight times between 1900 and 1911. A wealthy businessman, Teo Eng Hock - the grandfather of Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean - offered Sun the use of his villa at Tai Jin Road. It is now preserved as the Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall - Wan Qing Yuan in Chinese - and a national monument of Singapore.

The 1911 revolution was followed by the 1949 and the 1979 revolutions. Although the 1911 revolution was not a complete success, it was an important first step in China's quest for unity, modernity and respect. The journey continues.

Third, in April this year, we commemorate the 500th anniversary of Portugal's conquest of the Sultanate of Malacca. Founded by a prince from Palembang, Parameswara, Malacca became a prosperous and powerful sultanate in the 15th century. It was South-east Asia's leading entrepot. With the protection of Ming China, it was able to defend itself against Aceh and Siam.

In the meantime, Portugal had emerged as Europe's strongest maritime power. In 1498, the Portuguese mariner Vasco da Gama became the first European to sail round the Cape of Good Hope, and reached Calicut in India.

The Portuguese built forts in Goa and various other places, and tried to control the spice trade. Portuguese missionaries converted many Indians to Roman Catholicism. Spice and soul could be said to have been Portugal's twin objectives.

Portugal's King Dom Manuel dispatched Admiral Diego de Sequeira to secure a treaty with Malacca's Sultan Mahmud Shah, and to act as Portugal's commercial representative east of India. At first, the sultan welcomed him. But when de Sequeira began to build a fortified factory, he perceived it as a threat to his sovereignty and evicted the Portuguese. In retaliation, in April 1511, Admiral Alfonso de Albuquerque led a fleet to capture Malacca.

The Portuguese were soon followed by the Dutch, British, French and, much later, the Americans. This opened a new chapter of world history, when Asia came under the domination of the West. The colonial yoke was overthrown only after World War II.

It is remarkable that despite this unhappy past, Asians today bear no grudges against their former colonial masters. On the contrary, Asia and Europe now engage each other as equals.

Asia's time has come. It is growing in prosperity and power. I hope its Western friends will welcome its success and not see it as a threat to them.

The writer is the chairman of the Centre for International Law, National University of Singapore. Think-Tank is a weekly column rotated among eight leading figures in Singapore's research and tertiary institutions