

# Honouring an Important Man

## Looking back on the funeral of Dr Goh Keng Swee

By Tan Shook Fong

On a balmy morning in May six docents from the National Museum of Singapore (NMS) paid their respects to Dr Goh Keng Swee during his wake at Parliament House. We lined up in a row, a mix of Singaporeans and expats (Jane Palmer, Stacey Osachoff, Pauline Ong, Poh Lip Hung, Jean Tsai and me), and together we made our bows. The atmosphere in Parliament House was solemn and dignified. We stepped forward to silently say 'thank you and good-bye' to this great man who contributed so much to the history of Singapore that we studied during our NMS docent training course. Outside the hall, we were interviewed by the Singapore media.

Dr Goh Keng Swee, the stalwart behind Singapore's success story, was 91 years old when he died. During his political career he laid strong foundations for the Government of Singapore. When he retired from politics, he held the rank of Deputy Prime Minister. Dr Goh was accorded a State Funeral by the Government of Singapore, an honour given only to those who have served the country unstintingly, tirelessly and with passion.

Jane said she wished she had met the man. Having learned of his achievements for Singapore, she secretly admired him. To her, he was an enigma and she wondered how Dr Goh

had escaped the 'Sook Ching' cleansing during Japanese times.

To the Singaporeans in our group, Dr Goh was the founding father who shaped our nation's economic growth from infancy to being an economic power in Asia.

Dr Goh graduated in economics from the London School of Economics and naturally became the first Minister for Finance. He then moved on to set up the Ministry of Defence.

After the National Service was formed in 1967, I remember my brother being among the first batch of recruits to be drafted into the army. He was 18 years old and had just finished his Cambridge A Level exams. My poor mother was very anxious and had sleepless

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*Dr Goh Keng Swee arrives at a poetry reading at the Cultural Centre, 1967; photo courtesy of MITA, National Archives, Singapore*



*At the Kreta Ayer hawker centre in Chinatown, Dr Goh listens to citizen concerns; photo courtesy of London School of Economics*

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 nights over the policy. "Why the necessity for National Service, especially when the country is at peace? Will my son get hurt during training? Will he be bullied by his commander?" wondered my mother as she cried.

But there were explanations and more explanations by the government in the English, Chinese, Malay and Tamil press. The parents and the recruits were invited to a Chinese dinner in one of the community centres. Afterwards the recruits were sent off to the campsite in lorry-loads. My brother emerged none the worse for wear after three years of training. In fact he learnt the importance of a sense of nationhood and also established a strong bond with his platoon.

Having finished organising the National Service, Dr Goh moved on again, this time to the Ministry of Education. Although I never had the chance to work directly with Dr Goh while I was in the Ministry of Health, his doctrine filtered through to other ministries in the civil service. Educated in England, Dr Goh abhorred the fact that the administrators in the civil service wrote poor English. He insisted that civil service administrators read the book *Gower's Complete Plain Words*. I immediately purchased a copy and quickly read it. Alas, the book was boring.

Dr Goh encouraged the development of a well-rounded person. He set up the Singapore Symphony Orchestra and the Jurong Bird Park, he supported the Kreta Ayer Chinese Opera Theatre and even attended poetry reading sessions.

With his passing a chapter of Singapore's history has closed.

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**Tan Shook Fong** has been an FOM member since her retirement from pharmacy in 2003. She is a docent at ACM, TPM, NMS and SAM. She was also honorary secretary to the FOM Council in 2003/04.