

# HISTORIAN: KEEP THE STATUES

They are reminders of nation's colourful past and can be used to educate younger generation

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**H**ISTORIC monuments ranging from statues of slave traders, imperialists, conquerors to explorers around the globe are being vandalised, torn down and some slated for removals, as voices rise against historic and systemic racism and oppression.

This was sparked by the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement in the wake of George Floyd's death during an arrest by police in Minneapolis, United States in May.

In Penang, the statue of Captain Francis Light at Fort Cornwallis in George Town was defaced with red paint on July 2 and initial police investigations did not rule out that it could be related to similar incidents in other countries.

While there are those in favour of the removal of such monuments and statues, there are others, like historians and academicians, who think they should be retained due to their historical significance.

Universiti Malaya's Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences historian and dean Professor Datuk Danny Wong said the keyword

was to learn from the historical experience these monuments represented.

Monuments and statues, he said, were erected to honour or commemorate a momentous event or a personality who might be important to the community or nation at a particular period in history.

Therefore, they would represent values or glorifying certain deeds that could be different from the values and understanding of a later generation, he said.

"In our case, some people from the post-colonial era, the independent era and nation-building era may find monuments honouring imperialists out of place.

"These events (of the past) could have been forgotten, or the personality no longer recognisable to a later generation. Even values represented at that time may not be relevant any more to the later, or present generation.

"When people began to pick on them, they become easy targets, no one or a few would be there to defend them," he told the *New Sunday Times*.

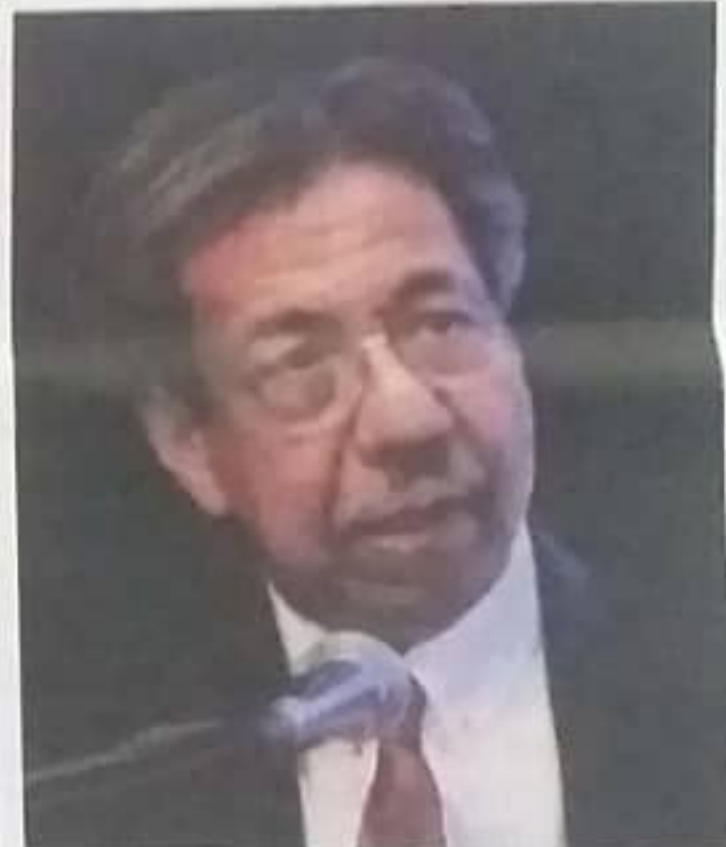
Wong said while there were not many monuments of such a nature in Malaysia, they could be reminders of the nation's colourful past and to educate the younger generation.

In Kuala Lumpur, he said there was the statue of Frank Swettenham and the bust of King Edward VII at the courtyard of the National Museum, and a fountain at Dataran Merdeka to commemorate the Diamond Jubilee of Queen Victoria.

"We also have schools named after some of the colonialists. We



Professor Datuk Danny Wong (left) and Professor Datuk Dr Teo Kok Seong



do have some of their images in our history textbooks to have a better understanding of them and the policies they were advancing at a particular time.

"We need to have a better understanding of the people represented by these statues and monuments (of institutions named after them). The tourism industry could also benefit from them."

He said many were known imperialists, but some of the things they did had long-term positive implications on the development of the country.

"We will do well to preserve them (statues) and for positive purposes like in history education."

Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia's Institute of Ethnic Studies principal research fellow Professor Datuk Dr Teo Kok Seong said the government should step in to preserve historic statues to preserve their his-

torical significance if they became a target.

"This is an unfortunate incident (the defacing of Francis Light) because such statues and monuments have their place in history. They are a part of the social history of this country. There's educational value to such representation.

"We have to focus on the significance of the history subject. It is the study of the past to understand the present and to prepare for the future.

"Understanding this would allow us to appreciate more of those monuments that have been built."

Teo said there were two sides to a coin — one group believed "imperialists monuments" had no significance at all, the other group saw it as a part of history.

"No matter how small the incident is, there is always a lesson to be learnt."