MAKERS OF MODERN ASIA

EDITED BY

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story is not as simple as these labels suggest. How, for instance, to account for Lee’s purported enthusiasm for socialism from the 1940s to the first half of the 1960s, and his attachment to “Asian,” “Confucian,” and “Chinese” values, which has persisted since the mid-1980s?4

The truth is that Lee was never a coldly logical thinking machine. He was beset with prejudices about race, gender, elitism, the nature of progress, and—not least—the quality of his personal gene pool.5 The difference between him and most political leaders is that at his peak he possessed a rare gift for political judgment and capacity. On the one hand, he had no time for hopeless dreams. He declared in 1966 that he was interested in only one test of an idea: “the sheer test of its applicability.”6 Democracy itself was one of the ideas that he regarded as being an experiment under consideration—an experiment that he judged was failing before his eyes in the mid-1950s, in contrast to his perception of the wonderful utility of Chinese-style communitarianism.7 On the other hand, if there was a way to build a scenario for success based upon his own prejudices, he was clever enough and energetic enough to create the edifice of ideas by which it could be rationalized and justified in terms of pragmatism.8

The Life and Political Thought of Lee Kuan Yew

Lee’s political thought developed in tandem with the late-colonial and early postcolonial history of his generation.9 He was born in 1923, the eldest son of a well-to-do baba family in colonial Singapore. The babas were a community of English- and Malay-speaking Chinese that had been at home in Singapore, Penang, and Malacca (together constituting the British colony of the Straits Settlements) for generations. In colonial Singapore babas were respected and did well because they were useful to British colonial and business interests, but they held themselves aloof from the Chinese-speaking community with whom they had little in common. Between his social advantages, the relentless encouragement of his strong-willed mother, and his natural intelligence and energy, young Harry Lee flourished in the colonial education system. In this cozy little society Lee learned about the blessings that the British brought to the world and the wonders of social and scientific progress, and he acquired the self-confidence that comes with knowing that he was one of the best of the brightest in a meritocratic, elitist system. He knew from the age of twelve that he was special, and he and his mother looked forward to a prosperous future for him.
Two events disturbed Lee’s world and were fundamentally important in determining the sort of man he was to become. The first was the Great Depression, which shattered any complaisance he may have had about his destiny. He did not begin to doubt himself, but he no longer took for granted the world around him. His family lost its fortune, reducing them to relatively humble means as they moved in with relatives, and Lee became a typical “Depression child,” acquiring the pessimistic conservatism and insecurity about the future that is typical of so many who lived through that period. The second pivotal event was the Japanese Occupation of Singapore. Lee did not have a good war, though it must be said that it could have been much worse. His mother accepted the patronage of a wealthy Chinese harbor-front contractor to protect and support her family, and Lee himself accepted a job with the Japanese Propaganda Department. In the early days of the Occupation he suffered the humiliations of a couple of beatings at the hands of Japanese occupiers and a daily dice with arbitrary execution, all of which built a determination in him to avoid being so dependent and subservient ever again. In this period his faith in the wonderful British was shattered, though not his faith in progress. Upon the return of the British after the war, he became conscious, seemingly for the first time, of the racism that was inherent in colonial society, and came to despise it whenever he recognized it. It was unfortunate for the later development of Singapore that he allowed this element of his social cognition to atrophy as he came to see the world and his own society through a racial prism that was substantially of his own creation, but was in critical ways drenched in the colonial racial stereotypes that he had earlier found so repulsive.

His mother had saved to send him to England to study, but the intervention of the war meant that he had to rebuild his fortune through sharp business dealings and a willingness to seize any opportunity that presented itself. With a substantial nest egg in hand, he set sail for England, where he not only received an excellent Cambridge law degree but managed to woo and marry Kwa Geok Choo, a Chinese-Singaporean heiress who was also a Cambridge law graduate. She was soon to become his unfailling rock of emotional stability and, during the crucial early years of his political career, his main source of financial stability.

From his arrival in England, Lee’s biography becomes increasingly indistinguishable from the development of his political thought. He began a course of study at Cambridge that was to provide him with a lifelong belief in the power of the state to transform, drive, and manage society from above. It was a period in which the drive at Cambridge put great faith in the radical power of the law to improve society and push aside burdens of tradition, and the entire curriculum was directed to developing this insight into a practical, working reality. “Historical Introduction to the English Legal System” was taught by R. M. Jackson and was substantially devoted to reconstruction and reform. Lee’s friend and fellow student, David Allan, had trouble conveying to me in an interview the excitement that this course caused among the students, but some of it was captured in the preface to the 1953 edition of Jackson’s book. It explained that this edition was very different from the 1939 edition because most of the reforms advocated in the earlier edition had been implemented in the late 1940s. That is to say, Lee was able to read about the implementation of reforms in the newspapers as they were studying the proposal of those reforms in their textbooks and in the classroom.

The power of these experiential lessons proved to be enduring for the rest of his very long life. These lessons in the law were reinforced by his newfound faith in socialism, which he acquired both from his personal exposure to the generosity of the newborn British welfare state, and from the socialist and Labour Party associations that he developed while he was a student. His faith in socialism was, however, founded more in romanticism than in ideology, and it did not last long. In fact before he had even left Britain, it had been replaced by an extreme aversion to anything that smacked of the welfare state. This antipathy developed into an ideological obsession and came to form the basis of a major overhaul of the health and welfare system of Singapore in the 1970s. Yet the romanticism behind his socialist idealism proved deeper than his affiliation with socialism itself. Even while his faith in socialism was still alive, his romanticism had already found another, parallel channel that was to serve him well in government: Arnold Toynbee’s A Study of History. Toynbee was the most fashionable post-intellectual among the undergraduates in Cambridge immediately after the war, and he wrote of civilizations rising and falling with the fortunes of elites, whom he termed “creative minorities.”

Toynbee’s idea of the creative minority fed and provided an intellectual framework for a natural disposition in Lee toward elitism. Decades later Goh Keng Swee told me that Lee quoted Toynbee in cabinet meetings from their earliest days in government. Lee was
particularly taken with Toynbee’s “Challenge and Response” thesis, whereby ruling elites retain their creative edge (or not) according to how effectively they responded to crises. This vision of constant struggle and achievement fed his natural temperment, which, as he noted in a speech delivered in 1965, made him doubt that he could ever be comfortable in “a placid society.” It also provided the framework for what became his standard use of brinkmanship and the use of crises to force desired political outcomes, as well as to shape and train his colleagues, subordinates, and successors. Between graduation and his return to Singapore he found another focus for his romanticism in the image of strong, forceful Germans working together under strong leadership to reconstruct their nation after the war. This image was formed during his and Geok Choo’s honeymoon in Europe, and it is significant mainly because it proved to be a foretaste of his propensity for thinking of nations, races, genes, and cultures in collective and visionary terms, and of analyzing problems through such conceptual prisms.

Lee returned to Singapore in 1950 with a conviction that he and his fellow “returned students”—Asian graduates of English universities—had a duty to take leading roles in the anticolonial movement so as both to guide Singapore to independence and to save it from communism. He entered legal practice in 1950 and used his position to build a loose network of left-wing social, industrial, student, and political organizations that would subsequently become his political base. He joined up with fellow “returned students,” and in 1954 they set up the People’s Action Party (PAP). Lee and most of his colleagues were lapsed socialists by this stage, but they judged that it was necessary to identify with socialism to appeal to their anticolonialist, working-class constituents. They went a step further and formed a united front with local Communists and militant leftists in order to tap their much larger and better-organized political base. The PAP contested Singapore’s first popular elections in a very limited fashion—nominating just enough candidates to establish an opposition presence in the new Legislative Assembly. It then swept the race in the subsequent elections in 1959, the first to be held with a full universal franchise and which introduced complete self-government on domestic matters.

The next few years were mayhem as Lee led Singapore into Malaysia as a constituent state in September 1963, and then led it out again in August 1965, by which mechanism it became an independent republic. In the meantime he and his colleagues had broken their alli-
power, even though Goh was still, at that time, prime minister. When
Lee Hsien Loong officially became prime minister in 2004, Lee Kuan Yew
remained in the cabinet as “minister mentor.” He tried to con-
tinue as the “power behind the throne,” but time and tide were against
him, and he suffered a slow decline in his power. Yet his ultimate po-
titical demise came only in 2011 when he was implicated in the PAP’s
exceptionally poor showing in the general elections of that year, after
which he finally stepped down from the cabinet. At the age of ninety,
he remains a member of Parliament and commands more respect and
influence than direct power.27

For Lee, the distribution of talent and energy and intelligence
among peoples, both as individuals and as collectives, explained the
world. Race had always formed an important element of his under-
standing of the hierarchies of the talented. When he looked out over
civilizational history and contemporary global politics, he saw strong
societies being led by natural elites.28 The critical point here is that his
social cognition saw the world in hierarchies, where elites ruled and
others served to the best of their abilities. He was circumspect about
such thoughts in the 1950s, but once Singapore separated from Mal-
yasia, he was suddenly liberated to speak his mind on elitism, if not
yet on race. The social “pyramid,” said Lee late in 1966, consisted
of “top leaders” at the apex, “good executives” in the middle, and a
“highly civic-conscious broad mass” at the base. The role of each
of these social strata was distinct, requiring “qualities of leadership
at the top, and qualities of cohesion on the ground.” Lee supplemen-
ted his imagery of the pyramid with that of a military organization, and
argued that after the leaders come the “middle strata of good execut-
ives,” because “the best general or the best prime minister in the
world will be stymied if he does not have high-quality executives to
help him carry out his ideas, thinking and planning.” Finally comes
the “broad base” or the “privates.” They must be “imbued not only
with self but also social discipline, so that they can respect the com-
unity and do not spit all over the place.”29

Democracy and constitutionality demanded routine genuflec-
tions, but neither was important to Lee.30 It so happened that in the first
decade and a half of Singapore’s independence, the country’s very sur-
vival was a matter of serious doubt,31 and for someone who had only
ever considered democracy to be an “experiment” bequeathed by the
British on their former colonies32 and who sought to highlight crises
and challenges as a matter of political technique, this was a golden
opportunity. The 1970s was the dark decade for Singapore’s democ-
acy, as Parliament, political parties, the news media, the trade unions,
and the ethnic and language associations succumbed to the hegemony
of the PAP, and dissidents were detained, bankrupted, or marginal-
ized.33 Lee was clearly comfortable rationalizing the use of repressive
practices—including the detention without trial or charge of political
opponents for years at a time, along with beatings, sleep deprivation,
induced coldness, and intimate humiliations—to the point where it
became standard government practice in the 1960s and 1970s, and
was still an option at the end of the 1980s when he stepped down as
prime minister.34

Today a government attack on political opponents is more likely to
take the form of litigation and civil action than actual detention with-
out trial—even if it needs to be noted that the threat of detention re-
mains, and the courts have not been of any help in upholding even the
most basic natural rights of defendants or the most elemental of judi-
cial procedures when it is a political case.35 The political process Lee
created under himself and bequeathed to his successors was therefore
supine and compliant. The fact that it has also been stable and eco-
nomically successful brings us to perhaps Lee’s most significant leg-
acy: the legitimation of a new and repressive form of political entity.
It was described at the time by Thomas Bellows as the “dominant
party system”36 and by Chan Heng Chee as an “administrative state”
and “one-party dominance.”37 Years later Chua Beng Huat would call
it “illiberal, communitarian democracy.”38 Today Andreas Scheller
describes it as “Electoral Authoritarianism,” which it identifies as part
of an emerging new form of governance that is challenging democ-
acy across the globe.39 Regardless of the labels and the analytical
prism used, in Singapore’s case we are talking about a marriage of
repression and capitalism that promises to be a model for the more
clever dictators of the twenty-first century.

Economic Growth and Development

Lee is most positively regarded on both the local and the global stage
for his ideas about economic growth and development. Indeed, when
finding a title for the second volume of his memoirs, Lee chose this
achievement as his primary boast—having taken Singapore “from
third world to first.”40 Yet the truth is that he was not the primary
mover in this field of endeavor. His early finance ministers, Goh Keng
Swee, Hon Sui Sen, and Lim Kim San, led the way, all the time under the guidance of a Dutch economist called Albert Winsemius, who really should be called the father of Singapore's economic development. There is an implicit consensus in the scholarly literature that Lee's substantive contribution in this field was to provide the political conditions to enable these other leaders to devise plans and implement them, but the final result is such a clear reflection of his ideological convictions and personal traits that it seems to me that this assessment grossly understates his real importance in this field.

Let us consider just three salient points. First we can consider the nimbleness of the Singapore economy as it jumps at opportunities and defies conventional wisdoms. It did not start off this way. In the 1950s and 1960s Singapore was pursuing a conventional program of economic development through Import Substitution Industrialization (ISI). This program followed the economic orthodoxy of the day, and indeed was the mandatory course of action for receiving World Bank loans. Upon Singapore's separation from Malaysia in August 1965, Singapore suddenly had a domestic market of less than two million people, making ISI unsustainable. Winsemius advised a switch to Export Oriented Industrialization (EOI), having ensured years earlier that the economy already had the tools needed to run an EOI-based economy. It was not Lee's idea to make this switch, and he was not the primary manager of such economic matters, but he embraced the logic and became its most effective public champion—in the process establishing Singapore as a pace-setter for Japan, the other Asian "tiger economies," and eventually China. Then in 1968, when Singapore's continued existence was in doubt and the EIO program was still in its infancy, he put his weight behind a plan to establish Singapore as the financial center of Southeast Asia (by taking advantage of the gap between the closure of the San Francisco and the opening of the Zurich stock exchanges half a day later) and in the process completed the world's first twenty-four-hour-a-day money and banking market. Again, this was not Lee's idea. It was Winsemius's proposal, and even he had to have the mechanics of the plan explained to him by a friend who was vice president of the Bank of America, but it was Lee who embraced it, ran with it, and drove it. Later, in the 1980s, when Ezra Vogel was busy declaring that Japan was "number one," but Singapore's collective memory was still traumatized by the Japanese Occupation, Lee opened the country not only to Japanese investment, but to every fad associated with Toyota-ism in an effort to improve standards and increase production levels.

Second, consider that the vehicle for this nimbleness was persistently the state, an investment and management vehicle not usually associated with this virtue. It was fortunate that Lee found himself in charge of a microstate that lends itself to sudden changes of direction. If he had been in charge of China, Japan, or Indonesia, it is extremely doubtful that he could have exercised such versatility through the levers of state power—a point that severely limits the "Singapore model" of development as a template for emulation. After initially operating through companies and statutory boards fully owned and directly managed by government ministries, the government settled on its preferred model, which was the government-linked company (GLC): wholly or partially government-owned; given preferential treatment in domestic markets; given enough independence to act like a business in day-to-day affairs, but with more than enough government control to make it a reliable political tool. Eventually the government consolidated its GLCs into two major sovereign wealth funds: Temasek Holdings, designed to house Singapore-based companies, and the Government of Singapore Investment Corporation (GIC) for direct offshore investments, which between them have become the country's most important tools of patronage and power. The size and ubiquity of the government in business and society means that it has dealt itself a powerful hand when it comes to handling domestic politics. Once we include the set of Statutory Boards, one of which owns and manages the housing of more than 80 percent of Singaporeans, we reach a situation where it is near-impossible to live or work in Singapore without bumping into government. Reliable estimates put government equity in the Singapore economy at 60 to 70 percent. One direct outcome of this state-driven enterprise has been the marginalization of local small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Today this outcome is regretted, but originally it was an intended effect. SME ownership was drawn mainly from Chinese families who operated independently of government patronage, and one of Lee Kuan Yew's most basic political instincts when confronted with capacity for independent action is to take control, to co-opt, or to marginalize. (In the case of the Chinese SMEs he did all three.) This propensity to utilize the state as his preferred instrument of economic development—including Singaporean investment overseas—complements this political methodology.
A third feature of Singapore’s economic development model that is distinctively Lee is the attention to managerial professionalism. It was both a strength and weakness. It enabled him and a select group of civil servants to manage the GLCs with cutting-edge efficacy (though not necessarily high levels of efficiency or productivity) while facilitating the levels of control that Lee demanded of any institution of power. The personal attention that Lee and his inner circle have paid to professionalism and managerialism over several decades of stable rule has enabled “Singapore Inc.,” as it is now known, to avoid the typical problems of corruption, ineptitude, and inefficiency that are routinely associated with government enterprise, especially in developing countries. These positive legacies are real but should not be overstated. It is intrinsic to the system Lee created that there is very little accountability at the upper levels of government, administration, and government-linked business, in contrast to high levels of accountability at the lower levels, so mistakes by members of the elite are routinely papered over and those responsible protected from public scrutiny. There has also been a remarkable prevalence of family networks in Singapore Inc. and the public sphere more generally (especially Lee’s family), but there is no active concept of conflict of interest operating anywhere in the Singapore public sphere. Yet even with such question marks hovering, the achievements are remarkable, and the presence of serious blemishes should not obscure their significance.

One of the blemishes in the system was famously identified by Paul Krugman in 1994, when he compared Lee Kuan Yew’s Singapore with Stalin’s Soviet Union:

All of Singapore’s growth can be explained by increases in measured inputs. There is no sign at all of increased efficiency. In this sense, the growth of Lee Kuan Yew’s Singapore is an economic twin of Stalin’s Soviet Union growth achieved purely through mobilization of resources. Of course, Singapore today is far more prosperous than the USSR ever was—even at its peak in the Brezhnev years—because Singapore is closer to, though still below, the efficiency of Western economies.

Since then this theme has been developed further. In 2002 Peter Robertson contrasted the record of Singapore with the other “tiger” economies:

Much of the capital accumulation in South Korea, Taiwan and Hong Kong was due to productivity growth. The direct and indirect effects of productivity growth account for half the growth in Korea and two-thirds of Taiwan’s growth over a 30-year period. Only in Singapore is the [measure of productivity growth] too small to have much impact on capital accumulation.

The essence of this criticism is that Singapore’s increased outputs and wealth are almost entirely due to increased inputs of capital and labor. The inputs of capital were drastically increased mainly by two distinct sets of measures. The first set was domestic in nature: appropriating most domestic savings through a compulsory Central Provident Fund that in the mid-1980s took 50 percent of wage earners’ salaries, a Post Office Savings Bank through which most remaining domestic household savings were enlisted in the service of the government, and by asiduously building and husbanding government surpluses. The second set looked outward, providing tax and myriad other incentives to attract Multinational Corporations (MNCs) to set up factories and eventually regional bases in Singapore.

The increase in labor inputs was achieved by pushing almost the entire adult population, male and female, into a new waged, industrial workforce, then increasing workers’ hours of work per week, and finally by importing labor from less developed parts of Asia. The creation of a waged workforce was driven substantially by the government’s housing program. It bulldozed kampong, squatter villages, and shop houses—all of which supported life to varying degrees of comfort and hygiene at very low cost—and replaced them with high-rise rented flats with conservancy fees, running water, and electricity, all of which needed to be sustained by a steady income. Parallel to the simple expedient of increasing the volume of labor, the government also set out to improve the workforce’s skill set by spreading and improving the quality of education and by attracting “foreign talent.”

In this enterprise of economy-building, Lee was crystal clear that the needs of capital were paramount, and labor played a subordinate role. This privileging of capital gave Lee an affinity with neoliberalism, but he was no liberal. He was a free trader because Singapore relied upon free trade. He upheld the nearly unfettered right of capital to be mobile simply because Singapore needed foreign capital. But he was a state capitalist operating in a neoliberal international
environment. His government not only intervened in the economy but micromanaged it and dominated it as no self-respecting neoliberal ever would. He also used an extraordinary level of state intervention to pass many benefits of the national prosperity to the ordinary worker so that they felt a commitment to and a sense of solidarity with their country. A liberal may be able to find common ground with the objectives and some of the final outcomes, but Lee’s methods were more akin to those of an authoritarian socialist than those of a democratic liberal.67

In 1970 Lee argued that the major preconditions for economic development were: capital accumulation; a disciplined, skilled workforce; management; engineering; and administrative “digits.”68 His insight was undoubtedly correct for the Singapore of 1970, but that model is much less useful today.69 He and his successors have tried to find alternative models—they have exercised their minds to develop creativity in the population, and to rent the best minds in the world in fields such as biotechnology, all in an effort to break out of the Krugman dilemma. They have found real difficulties in breaking out of old ways because with the old model of tightly controlled, state-led economic development came the justification for the privileged position of the ruling elite and its political and social control. It seems that whenever they are able to point to significant achievements in this regard—such as the successful creation of a well-endowed “knowledge hub” of universities, research institutes and professional schools—it is due more to the depth of the government’s pockets than the creativity of Singaporeans. These limitations should not be laid exclusively at the feet of Lee Kuan Yew, but the symbiotic linkage between the political system and the economic system is his personal creation: this was part of his political genius and has become the burden of his legacy.

The Cultural Politics of Nation-Building

If there was one element of Singaporean life in which Lee Kuan Yew was the prime driver, it was building the country’s national identity. Interestingly, however, he was not the first prime mover. That honor goes to Singapore’s first minister for culture and master wordsmith, S. Rajaratnam. Singapore’s third president, C. V. Devan Nair, has also been credited as a national myth-maker,70 but both men and the visions they represented were subsequently overwhelmed by Lee.

In the heyday of Rajaratnam and Devan Nair as mythmakers—a period that stretched from the 1950s to the early 1970s—the national culture and identity swirled around images of a Singaporean melting pot of races and cultures, all pulling together and defying the odds to build a better future. This was hardly surprising since both men were Indians and therefore members of one of Singapore’s smaller ethnic communities. During this period Chineseness was marginalized in the national narrative, as was Sir Stamford Raffles because using him as a starting point made the Singapore story a British-cum-Chinese story. In 1969 Lee was busy playing down the importance of Raffles in Singapore’s history, and a contemporary editorial in the Chinese newspaper Sin Chew Ji Poh dismissed the “discovery [sic]” of Singapore by Raffles as “a historical accident” that merely “accelerated the growth of Singapore.” Education Minister Ong Pang Boon warned against giving “too much” emphasis to the personal contribution of Raffles, preferring to “play up the meritorious services rendered by our pioneering forefathers” and the “industry of the various races” of Singapore.71

By the 1980s, something had changed. Both Chineseness and Raffles were becoming prominent in the Singapore story, and Lee was being presented increasingly as a new Raffles.72 Some of the drivers of this change were circumstantial: Singapore had left Malaysia; it was no longer facing existential threats; it was thriving. Yet part of the change was due to shifts in the thinking and emotional resonances of Prime Minister Lee, which took on disproportionate significance because of the dramatic increase in his personal power in the same period. In the early 1980s Lee was almost the last active member of the original “old guard” that came to power in 1959, and so he was able to dominate a younger and less secure cabinet as he never could in the 1960s and 1970s.73 Paradoxically, he took this chance to start stepping back from day-to-day management of the country, but this was merely an indication of the supreme confidence with which he was wielding power by that time.74

Lee treated his newfound power as an opportunity to indulge those of his private prejudices that he thought were useful and politically viable. The most notable of these was his belief in the superiority of “Chinese culture,” “Chinese values” and Chinese people. Hence, at the beginning of the 1980s, the state began sponsoring a Sino-centric concept of nation in which the Chinese were expected to share, and the minority races expected to mimic. The country had been built on
the twin myths of multiracialism and meritocracy, but by the early 1980s government leaders were just as comfortable upholding the supreme place of Chinese culture and virtues as they were in insisting on the importance of multiracialism. In this vision multiracialism equaled peace, whereas Chinese values equaled prosperity.

This bifurcated thinking became a fundamental dynamic in the new multiracialism, and it was created almost single-handedly by Lee in the 1980s and 1990s. It came to dominate public space through the education system and the media, as well as in the use of Chinese ethnicity (race), and not just “Chinese culture,” as a basis for career promotion and elite selection. The effect of these moves was to shift Singaporean society from one that provided a reasonably equitable balance among the various ethnic and religious communities, to one in which being Chinese and speaking Mandarin and English provided the keys to worldly success. Nowhere was this more visible than in the tertiary student population and in the various Public Service Commission (PSC) scholarships, which were and are the key to entering the elite. Despite the non-Chinese making up around 23 percent of the population at all relevant times, we find that:

- ethnic Chinese make up 92.4 percent of local university students and 84.0 percent of polytechnic students;
- after 1980, the proportion of non-Chinese among the President’s Scholars (the high-water mark of elite production) more than halved from an already-low figure of 8.8 percent (1966–1980) to 3.8 percent (1981–2010);
- for the twenty-four years from 1990 to 2013, there were only four non-Chinese President’s Scholars out of ninety-one (4.4 percent)—and one of these non-Chinese studied Higher Mandarin at Chinese schools;
- for the entire forty-three years in which the prestigious Singapore Armed Forces Overseas Scholarship (SAFOS) has been awarded (1971–2013), only 6 (2.8 percent) out of the 213 that I have been able to identify by race are non-Chinese. Over the twenty-four years from 1990 to 2013, I can positively identify only 5 (3.4 percent) of 148 SAFOS winners as non-Chinese.

If we focus on all types of PSC overseas merit scholarships from 2002–2012, we find that 21 (4.2 percent) out of 500 were non-Chinese. These skewed outcomes are not accidental. They are the result of systemic discrimination in favor of Chinese throughout the education system from kindergarten onward, which culminates in an opaque selection process at PSC scholarship level. How do we reconcile this ethnonationalism with Lee’s early and notionally ongoing advocacy of multiracialism and meritocracy? Some may suggest that they were never anything more than political conveniences, but Lee deserves more credit than that. We know that he grew up and was educated in a genuinely multiracial environment, and there is every reason to think that this experience profoundly influenced his social cognition. The contradiction between these positions exposes an obvious tension in his thinking, but the tension becomes less pronounced if we refine our account of his childhood experiences of multiracialism and meritocracy thus: Harry Lee—a Chinese—excelled in a multiracial and meritocratic environment, matriculating ahead of all other members of his cohort throughout Malaysia. He was, in fact, a Chinese who had emerged supreme in a multiracial environment. With the benefit of hindsight, we can recognize in this experience the model for Lee’s vision of multiracialism and meritocracy. This need not have resulted in systemic discrimination against non-Chinese, but put this way it is not difficult to see how Chinese supremacism could be imperfectly reconciled with notions of multiracialism and meritocracy. There is an expectation that when “meritocracy” operates in a multiracial environment in the social milieu of Singapore, it will, in the normal course of events, produce a Chinese hegemony, and Lee built a system that was designed to facilitate this outcome.

Yet Lee went further than merely presuming Chinese hegemony. He also wanted to share his personal virtues—what he saw as his “Chinese” virtues and values—with Singaporeans, so that they could be uplifted. He was convinced—and has said so on many occasions—that what he regards as “Chinese culture,” “Chinese virtues,” and “Chinese values” are the key to the material success of Singapore. Alongside his faith in the importance of genes, he was also a passionate believer in the pivotal role of culture, nurturing, and social engineering in determining life outcomes. Thus he sought to impose his sense of Chineseness onto the population, making Chinese culture, art, language, and mores central elements of the state and society. He had indeed come far from the idealism of the 1950s.
It must be conceded, however, that even though this racial favoritism suited his personal prejudices, there was also a ruthlessly practical dimension operating: Lee was plugging Singapore into the rise of China. The most important dynamic in his thinking—and the purest sense in which he lived up to his ideal of being a pragmatist—was that if there was not a credible likelihood of being on the winning side, then he could not see the point. No matter how strong was his prejudice, if it was not likely to prove useful he would park it out of sight, waiting until he found a way to use it. For instance, regardless of the strength of his prejudices about the supremacy of the ethnic Chinese gene pool and Chinese culture, if China had been just entering its century of humiliation during the first decades of his rule, rather than just getting ready to emerge from it, he would never have turned his gaze to China. But with the rise of Deng Xiaoping at the end of the 1970s, China was indeed readying itself to rise, and Lee's vision and his prejudices helped him to recognize this earlier than most—and his position in the government of a country that was nearly 80 percent ethnic Chinese and situated on the meeting point of the Indian and Pacific Oceans enabled him to do something about it. He was convinced that China's chances had been squandered, not just by the "century of humiliation," but by the incompetence of the Great Leap Forward and the mindless excesses of the Cultural Revolution. Yet even before the Cultural Revolution came to an end and Deng had defeated the Gang of Four, his antennae were already sensitive to the opportunities that could be available in a new China. It is notable that Lee himself identifies 1982 or so as the period in which he became convinced (correctly as it turned out) that China was on the cusp of emerging as a major economic force, but his visits to China began in the mid-1970s, and his fascination with what he thought of as "Chinese values" and Chineseness had been growing since the 1950s and emerged as a direct force in his domestic politics by the late 1970s. So central did China become in his global thought—and his vision of Singapore's future—that in the early 1990s he took Singapore out on a diplomatic limb with his "Asian Values" diplomacy that was intended to blur the politics of human rights and democracy by using arguments of cultural relativism. The story was told to me in an interview with Bilahari Kausikan, a permanent secretary with the Singapore Ministry of Foreign Affairs, who was adamant that the entire international "debate" on "Asian Values" had nothing to do with Singapore and "everything to do with China":

The Asian values debate began when there was a new Democratic administration [in Washington] who... seemed to be trying to be define their approach to China on the basis of democracy and human rights and trying to set up to change China... They couldn't change China but they could sure as hell cause a hell of a lot of confusion... in an effort to do so. Now that lasted I would say for about three years of the first Clinton Administration and then I guess reality set in and they started restructuring their relationship with China in a different way. Once that happens, I mean for people like us, in Singapore who went into this debate in a purely instrumental way... there's no reason to participate anymore so we all stopped writing about it and stopped talking about it.

This episode was not a direct and personal intervention by Lee, but it was a logical—perhaps even a necessary—outcome of the logic of the China card that he had begun playing back in 1982. By the 1990s, China was too central to Lee's vision for the region and for Singapore to allow amateurs in important positions to muddy the waters. These days Singapore is trying desperately to build two-way human exchanges with China in an effort to capitalize properly on what was started thirty years ago: for instance, by bringing cohorts of school and university students from China to Singapore on scholarships, and building cohorts of bilingual, bicultural Singaporean-Chinese entrepreneurs who can work and live in China.

The Idea of Singapore

Lee Kuan Yew's vision for Singapore is derived partly from the economic imperatives in which Singapore finds itself: a city-state utterly dependent upon its capacity to survive and profit from the whimsical currents of the global economy. The politics of the region have also helped to form his vision: a small, developed microstate flourishing in a region dominated by large, developing states. Yet in perhaps its most decisive way, the idea of Singapore emerges from Lee's imagination as a manifestation of his own personality and drives.

The "idea" of Singapore is powerful and omnipresent in his mind and now in Singaporean society. "Singapore" the idea is, very simply, the best: a tiny Chinese beacon of talent-driven achievement in a Southeast Asian sea of mediocrity and a global ocean of giants. It
navigates its way through the shoals and reefs of global politics and economics with the nimbleness of a speed boat, changing tack to confront new challenges and meet new opportunities. It has become a small but integral node in a network of “global cities” that are home to and generators of innovation, progress, and new global elites.31 It is “a renaissance city” of culture, refinement, vitality, and ideas—a welcoming environment that makes foreign elites feel welcome.32 If I may adapt a metaphor that is in constant use in Singapore, it is a country that “punches above its weight.”33 This is a catchphrase born of complacent confidence, and the worrying thing is that it is usually used without any hint of an acknowledgment that Singapore’s “weight” is so slight and its size so tiny that any admiration and any lessons need to be severely tempered by a reality check. An alternative and slightly more modest variant of this expression is that Singapore is a “success”—an eternally vulnerable success, always at risk of falling off its perch, and only ever saved by the cleverness of its leadership (the elite), but always a success.34

The “success” theme is linked inextricably to Lee’s perception of elitism and “talent” and dates right back to 1964, when Singapore’s claims to success in any meaningful sense were, to say the least, audacious, yet he attributed success to the fact that in the late colonial era Singapore had acted as a magnet for talent from Malaya and that contemporary Singapore was benefiting from that legacy:

The success story of Singapore, of the last few years, was one achieved to a large extent by men from Malaya. Seven out of nine Singapore Ministers came from Malaya, seven out of nine Permanent Secretaries came from Malaya, four out of six judges are from Malaya. So also most of Singapore’s trade union leaders and business executives have come from Malaya. For many years there was a drift of talent to Singapore.35

Lee has anthropomorphized the country and imposed his own personality onto it. In the idea of Singapore, the romantic and the pragmatist in Lee have found common ground. The two biggest powers in the world have both looked to Singapore as a model. Singapore is an example to China of how to marry economic development and authoritarianism.36 The Americans have had a much more problematic relationship with Singapore, but there is ample evidence of admiration, beginning with Richard Nixon and continuing, surprisingly, into

the Clinton administration, which in its early years was seriously considering the Singapore health system as a potential model for its own health reform program.37

The litany of role-model seekers who look to Singapore38 is both a testament to the undoubted achievements of Singapore and to its capacity for self-promotion. And lest anyone doubts that Lee deliberately sets out to present Singapore and his personal legacy—much the same thing—as models to be admired, one only needs to take a glance at the opening credits of his memoirs, in which thirty-three international political and business leaders take turns in heaping praise on Lee and his achievements. It must have taken a significant amount of determination and manpower to solicit these testimonials to “the Singapore story.” These witness statements were not just invited to feed an ego—though this motive cannot be discounted. They are evidence of Lee’s success in showing the way to others: effectively, his success in teaching by example, even if it as an example acted out in a microstate so small that all lessons learned there need to be taken at a huge discount. There is a deep-seated drive in Lee toward didacticism that emerges persistently in his speeches, interviews, and the pattern of his public life, and he has bequeathed this impulse onto his idea of Singapore. He once described school and the schoolteachers of his childhood as being “the beginning and an end of life,”39 so it should not be entirely surprising that didacticism has always been present in his model of politics.40 In 1966 he gave an address to an assembly of school principals:

In my experience—both as a pupil in school and in universities, and subsequently in trying to teach people at large simple political ideas—the most important person is the man who is in charge of the boy. . . . For effective teaching—such as explaining to an ignorant audience the simple A.B.C. of currency or reserves backing, and why our currency could be sound if we do this or that—one really has to give of oneself. The process demands effort and nervous energy.40

Didacticism was thus a vital element of his approach to domestic politics and his idea of Singapore. At a personal level he takes particular delight in being idolized in China and Britain, these being the two great recipients of his affection and admiration at different stages of his life and the two centers of his global political thought. He is
particularly proud of having played a role in the thawing of hostilities between the PRC and Taiwan in the early 1990s and maintains a posture as an active commentator on cross-strait affairs. These achievements are reflected onto Singapore, and he in turn enjoys the reflected glory from public recognition of his country's many achievements and successes.

Lee Kuan Yew in the Twenty-First Century

Lee is now at the end of his long and successful life, and after more than half a century in office, he has only recently relinquished the last of his executive roles. By the end he was clearly out of touch with the changing attitudes of his own constituency in Singapore, which is why his son forced him to retire in May 2011. History will no doubt confirm how much he has contributed to public discourse and ideas—particularly to the politics of economic development and to recognition of the importance of professional management. Some of his pre-science has today become common wisdom: welcoming international capital; the idea and best practice of state capitalism at a time when regional economic unions and liberal capitalism are lurching from crisis to crisis; seeking export markets wherever they can be found; and the importance of a rising China. Even his persistence in thinking in terms of ethnic communities and structuring society through this prism may turn out to be an enduring legacy. And who knows? His very effective utilization of communalism to feed national success, even at the relative expense of minority groups, could yet prove to be visionary, as distasteful as this idea sounds. In among all these legacies it seems likely that one of the more significant and powerful of them might be the legitimacy he has lent to authoritarianism as a political system, and the example he has created for the world's more intelligent and sophisticated dictators—those willing to seek a long-term marriage between a strong state at least bordering on dictatorship and capitalism.

Within his tiny former fiefdom of Singapore, his legacy will be enduring, well beyond his own lifetime. Lee himself, however, has now become stuck in deep grooves of thought laid by half a century of active leadership, and he is not traveling as light as he used to do. How could he, in his nineties? But the ideas that he sowed in his relative youth (from his thirties to his fifties), when his mind was more nimble, will be with Singaporeans for a long time. He has implanted the ideal of a meritocracy deeply into the national psyche even if the reality is a highly flawed distortion of the ideal. He built an education system that is elitist and in many ways unfair to significant sections of the population, but which produces high-caliber outputs that make excellent professionals, and then set up a system of importing more expertise. As a direct consequence, the society he leaves behind has an extraordinarily high regard for education and professionalism. This is the core of his positive legacy.

As his legacy becomes part of history rather than part of contemporary politics, we can expect the critical interrogation of it to intensify, producing increasingly candid assessments that acknowledge the flaws within the achievements and the foibles within the brilliance. Some of these negatives are relatively incidental to his achievements, but others seem to be intrinsic either to his vision or to the reality of his achievement. Many of these failings reflect deep-seated impulses on his part. On the one hand, his disrespect for democracy, human rights, rule of law, and for any idea with which he disagrees is intrinsic to his political vision and praxis, as is his systemic privileging of Chinese people and “Chinese values.” On the other hand, it remains to be seen whether his willful persistence in creating a cozy network of personal contacts and family members to run and profit from the instruments of state capitalism are central to his method of operation. These practices were and continue to be so endemic that his claims to have been running the country through a system of meritocracy are easily challenged.

One of the other fundamental challenges that his system faces, and that it has been trying to overcome for nearly two decades with indifferent success, is the production of educational, social, and political systems that conspire to stultify the imagination and engender a culture of bland and sterile conformity. The government has been trying to introduce a significant degree of diversity into the education system in an effort to stimulate entrepreneurial individualism and creativity, but it faces a problem: the same features that make Singapore an outstanding success by its own terms also serve to cramp independence of imagination. This conundrum leads to an even more fundamental impasse: the ruling elite wants independent thought and creativity in business and enterprise, but not in politics. There is a basic contradiction between the demands of capitalism in a knowledge-based economy and the demands of authoritarian rule, and they may prove to be irreconcilable in the long term.
Lee Kuan Yew is a colossal figure in modern Asian history. Whether he is regarded as a hero or a villain will ultimately depend on the values of future generations casting judgment. For my part, I think that Singaporeans have paid a high price for Lee’s vision. He has produced prosperity, but at the cost of leaving behind him a sterile, soulless, racist society that has little respect for ordinary human values, let alone human rights. It is run by an exclusive professional class that at the higher levels endures almost no accountability and suffers no interrogation about conflicts of interest, while reaping financial rewards of such magnitude that one can perhaps consider it a form of legal corruption. I realize that Singaporeans could have done much worse, but personally, I think they deserved better.
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