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A MAN AHEAD OF HIS TIME:

LEE KUAN YEW'S IRON FIRST BENEATH THE VELVET GLOVE

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APS 650: MAPS Capstone Project

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May 5, 2023

Abstract

This study examines the role of Lee Kuan Yew, the founding father of Singapore, in the country's development from a third-world nation to a first-world economic powerhouse. Lee Kuan Yew was the Prime Minister of Singapore for over three decades and was responsible for implementing policies that transformed Singapore's economy, infrastructure, education, and social systems. This paper analyzes the various policies and strategies, as well as personal values and ideologies, adopted and implemented by Lee Kuan Yew that were instrumental in Singapore's growth. Additionally, the paper discusses the challenges faced by Lee Kuan Yew during his leadership in his public and private life. It concludes that Lee Kuan Yew's leadership and vision, marked by his single-minded focus on growth, efficiency and order, were pivotal to Singapore's transformation into a prosperous and modern state, and his legacy continues to shape the identity and character of the nation to this day.

Keywords: *Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore, economy, economic development, politics, nation-building, leadership, modernization*

Introduction

Singapore's rise from a small port city to a bustling metropolis is a remarkable story that not only showcases the incredible vitality and resilience of its system, but also the sharp and far-sighted vision of its enterprising government. From its humble beginnings as a British colony, Singapore has transformed itself into one of the world's most technologically advanced and economically prosperous nations, despite its little land and limited natural resources. This island nation's journey to becoming a global powerhouse within just a few decades has been driven by innovative policies, strong leadership, and a tireless and consistent focus on growth. This paper will journey through time and delve into the many facets of Singapore's development, exploring its political, economic, and social transformation and uncovering the secrets behind its miraculous success.

The reasons for studying Singapore seem self-evident, given its pivotal status and the role it plays as a regional and global business hub. Especially for multinational corporations operating in Singapore as well as those looking to tap into the Singapore market and, more broadly, the Southeast Asia market, it is crucial to gain understanding and insights into the local policies and business dynamics in Singapore. It is even more significant within the Asia Pacific context specifically, as Singapore is considered one of the “Four Asian Tigers,”¹ which refer to the four rapidly industrializing economies of East Asia in the 20th century – Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan. Overall, Singapore’s economic trajectory, as well as culture and society, has mirrored, depended on and interacted with other parts of the Asia Pacific region dynamically and profoundly.

¹ “Four Asian Tigers,” Wikipedia, April 11, 2023, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Four_Asian_Tigers.

From an international affairs standpoint, Singapore also holds significant weight regionally and globally. The city-state holds an important geopolitical location due to its strategic location at the southern tip of the Malay Peninsula, at the crossroads of major sea lanes connecting the Indian and Pacific Oceans. This location has made Singapore a hub for international trade, serving as a major center for shipping, finance, and technology in Southeast Asia. Singapore is also a key player in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), a regional bloc of 10 countries.² As a founding member of ASEAN, Singapore has played a central role in facilitating economic integration and regional cooperation among member states.

Singapore also acts as a critical trading, diplomatic and strategic partner to both superpowers, the US and China. Given the backdrop of deteriorating US-China relations, intensifying geopolitical tensions and the general trend of deglobalization, Singapore's position as a relatively neutral mediator and facilitator for dialogues, diplomacy and cooperation holds more sway than ever. Economically, both China and the US are Singapore's top trading partners. Singapore's economy is highly dependent on trade, and its open and business-friendly environment has made it an attractive destination for American and Chinese companies. Geopolitically, the US maintains a strong military presence in Singapore with access to naval and air bases, while China sees Singapore as a key gateway to Southeast Asia and a vital link in its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) infrastructure plan.³ Singapore has hosted

² "The Founding of ASEAN," Association of Southeast Asian Nations , accessed May 13, 2023, <https://asean.org/the-founding-of-asean/>.

³ "Cdr – the Belt and Road Initiative: Singapore: CDR Magazine," Arbitration,Litigation,Dispute Resolution | CDR Magazine, accessed May 13, 2023, <https://www.cdr-news.com/cdr-essential-intelligence/1100-cdr-the-belt-and-road-initiative-2021/singapore#:~:text=Singapore%20offers%20a%20neutral%20third,commercial%20disputes%20quickly%20and%20effectively.>

several high-level meetings between world leaders that are dedicated to resolving the most pressing challenges in the world, including the historic summit between former US President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un in June 2018.⁴ The city-state also hosts the annual Shangri-La Dialogue, a premier security forum in the Asia-Pacific region that attracts top defense officials from around the world.⁵ Overall, Singapore's unique strategic location and positioning, economic importance, and regional influence make it a key actor in reducing tensions and maintaining stability in Southeast Asia and the wider Asia-Pacific landscape.

Research Questions

While there has been extensive literature that provides valuable insights into Singapore's success story, this paper aims to focus on Lee Kuan Yew, the first Prime Minister of Singapore who served from 1959 to 1990, and his unique perspectives through investigating the following questions: How did Lee Kuan Yew see and understand Singapore's development and the world? How did he narrate and present his experience of building the nation from the ground up in his own words? What was his political and personal philosophy? At the risk of oversimplification, Lee Kuan Yew's political and economic philosophy fundamentally operates on one core tenet: a single-minded pursuit of growth and efficiency, yet in an orderly and well-governed manner. This translates into an economic ideology centered on pragmatism

⁴ "2018 North Korea–United States Singapore Summit," Wikipedia, May 4, 2023, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2018_North_Korea%E2%80%93United_States_Singapore_Summit.

⁵ "IISS Shangri-La Dialogue - Asia's Premier Defence Summit," IISS, accessed May 13, 2023, <https://www.iiss.org/events/shangri-la-dialogue/shangri-la-dialogue-2022>.

and a healthy competitive environment, and a political ideology focused on meritocracy, integrity and good governance within a single party system.

By expounding these ideas, this paper will provide valuable insights into the mind of one of the world's most respected statesmen as not only a political leader but also a philosophical thinker. I hope to use this opportunity as a case study to explore some of the major driving forces behind a booming economy, and extract viable lessons from history that potentially provide some value for those who wish to absorb and adapt these lessons in line with their peculiar needs and circumstances.

Mapping the Territory

As a young Chinese woman in her 20s who has lived in both the US and China during her formative years, I have always viewed Singapore from a place of fascination, wonder and admiration, not just in the overused sense that it has grown into the nexus between the west and the east, but in a more personal sense where this land gives off both a sense of familiarity and strangeness. While the majority of Singapore's population consists of ethnic Chinese, it was colonized by Britain for over a century, which has left behind a legacy of British-style architecture, education, legal system (the common law), traffic laws, and so forth. Nowadays, the society is very culturally and ethnically diverse, and most people speak English as an engineered result of public policy, which to a certain degree has boosted the perceived sense of internationalism and cosmopolitanism commonly associated with Singapore. When I think of Singapore, the following descriptors come to mind: on one end, it is open, adaptive, absorbent; on the other, it is meritocratic, Confucianism-based, regulated, well-behaved, efficient. It has

incredibly liberal markets, but also an all-powerful, centralized state enforcing conservative and strict customs and social mores. Such oxymoronic coexistence truly fascinates me.

My background growing up in Beijing and Hong Kong, then being educated in Connecticut, New York, and California has allowed me to develop a nuanced, multicultural and receptive worldview. I have been able to study and gain firsthand insights into different political and economic systems, development models, cultural practices, social norms, and ways of living, which endows me with a comparative viewpoint while studying Singapore's unique conditions. That said, I recognize that I have been fortunate to lead a privileged life, receiving elite education in ivory-tower-like settings and interacting with those from largely similar backgrounds. I will stay aware of how my socioeconomic identities and educational experiences have shaped my perspectives and the types of limitations or biases it may pose.

The study of Singapore's prosperity has attracted a significant amount of interest among scholars and researchers, most of which have been focused on providing a broad-based, birds' eye-view of Singapore's history and evolution. Fundamentally, Singapore's growth would not have been possible without the constructive and dynamic interplay between the developmental state and market forces, and the fruitful collaboration between the private and public sectors. More particularly, it entails a combination of factors and actors including the government's emphasis on attracting foreign capital and transferring foreign technologies; the state's intentional investment in human capital through quality education, support for entrepreneurship and a well-designed immigration policy, all of which crucial to the attraction and retention of high-skilled talents; its robust and powerful legal and judicial system; and last but not least, the strong and visionary leadership of Singapore's founding father, Lee Kuan Yew. These factors,

independently and interactively, created an environment that fosters enduring economic prosperity and sustainable development.

Linda Lim, Professor of Southeast Asian Studies at University of Michigan, and others, have studied the topic extensively in *Singapore's Economic Development: Retrospection and Reflections*. This provides an informative and retrospective analysis that looks back on the fifty years since Singapore's independence and highlights major themes that characterize its unique, robust and durable developmental model that has, despite twists and turns in specific policies, largely remained unchanged. The book by John Curtis Perry *Singapore: Unlikely Power* also provides a comprehensive and detailed view of Singapore's colonial history from its Malay origins to its present-day success as a wealthy and well-educated country. Despite centuries of colonization, Singapore's strategic location and natural deepwater port allowed it to profit from global commerce and become a major shipping entrepot. Singapore was able to overcome its issues of corruption, inequality, and lack of education in just three decades, becoming a model regime for other developing states. The book also gives due credit to Lee Kuan Yew, highlighting his pragmatic approach to economic development among other things.

The keynote address "An Economic History of Singapore – 1965-2065" given by Ravi Menon, Managing Director of the Monetary Authority of Singapore, at the Singapore Economic Review Conference in 2015 pays tribute to Singapore's meteoric rise to prominence also by painting the highlights of Singapore's growth. It is both a review of Singapore's past and an imaginative peek into the future. It showcases how income has dramatically risen, human productivity and efficiency has qualitatively improved, all while being dedicated to a greener and more sustainable environment. It portrays the country's smooth and successful transition from a manufacturing- and export-oriented economy to one driven by services and high-end skilled

jobs. It also addresses the main challenges lying ahead for the country that include a substantial slowdown in population growth, wealth inequality and the need for more technological innovation to power the economy and secure the country's position at the forefront of the global economy and human progress. Still, it presents a very optimistic and bright outlook for the future, anticipating that the small city-state will eventually surpass many of the major economies in the world and be ranked among the top five cities in terms of GDP per capita.

In a nutshell, there is a rich and diverse range of existing literature on the hot topic of Singapore's flourishing economy. By reviewing and critiquing these sources, I aim to contribute by identifying the potential weaknesses and limitations of their content or methods, and present a fresh answer to the question of what led Singapore to its prominent status today with an incisive focus on Lee Kuan Yew's own perspective and narrative.

Methodology

Since this paper aims to zoom into one individual, Lee Kuan Yew, albeit one special and momentous individual, it is by definition required to present a rather subjective and personal point of view through Lee's lens. Hence, I believe it is more suitable, in this case, to employ a more qualitative approach in collecting and analyzing evidence, and to make use of a mix of primary and secondary textual, audio and video sources that include Lee's own writings and interview.

As I aim to approach Lee Kuan Yew's personal and professional life from both a first-person and third-person point of view, I will first look at Lee's autobiography *From Third World to First: The Singapore Story: 1965-2000*. It covers the period from 1965 to 2000 and provides a first-hand account of the transformation of Singapore from a third-world country to one of the

most prosperous and developed nations in the world. I will also dig into tapings of his public interviews and speeches, including archived footage of his talks with the Central Intelligence Agency and National Security Council in 1967 (just two years after Singapore was founded). The speech he made in 2000 at Harvard Kennedy School, his interview with famed journalist Charlie Rose in 2004, are useful sources to use to continue studying his thinking from 2000 onward (the endpoint of his autobiography). There are also a vastness of secondary sources worth studying that center around Lee. One significant piece would be the biography of Lee written by Graham Allison, American political scientist and Professor at Harvard Kennedy School, titled *Lee Kuan Yew: The Grand Master's Insights on China, the United States, and the World*. It is based on a series of interviews and conversations that Allison had with Lee over a period of several years, as well as on a review of Lee's speeches, writings, and public statements. The book is a testament to Lee's vision, character, exceptional leadership and the everlasting impact and legacy he has left for Singapore and the world.

All these works have allowed me to explore in-depth Lee's thoughts and opinions on Singapore and the world, including Lee's views on the rise of China, the role of the United States, the future of global governance, and the challenges faced by developing countries. They also touch upon the challenges Lee faced himself in building and reforming a modern nation, including issues related to poverty, unemployment, and racial and ethnic tension. Lee is known for his pragmatic and strategic approach to governance and the economy, and these sources give us a clearer understanding of the policies and programs he implemented to bring about change, spur economic growth, improve the standard of living for the people, and establish a stable and secure society. In a nutshell, they provide a fascinating look into the mind of one of the world's

most visionary and influential leaders, his leadership style, his values and his take on some of the most pressing challenges facing humanity today.

Pragmatism

The first word that inevitably comes to mind pertaining to Lee Kuan Yew is pragmatism. It is at the core of everything he does and has become inseparable from his identity and the party he leads, the People's Action Party (PAP). He regards "efficiency first" or utilitarianism, as broadly defined, as the law of policy formulation and implementation. In other words, Lee will consider any idea or policy that can potentially be useful and beneficial to improving Singapore's societal development and people's standards of living, no matter which "theory" or "ideology" the idea fits into or originates from. As Lee says in one of his interviews, "My life is not guided by philosophy or theories. I get things done and leave others to extract the principles from my successful solutions...I do not work on a theory."⁶ Instead, he is solely interested in "what works" particularly for Singapore, and what can bring about real positive impact on ordinary people.

While Lee is not rejecting any theories or frameworks altogether, he looks at them with a skeptical lens in terms of how applicable and viable those theories are when faced with real life situations and problems. He sees them largely as confinements or distractions, and is aware of the limitations they can pose on a leader's vision and decisions. Rather, Lee has committed himself to cutting through the clutter and setting aside the criticism and side-eyes of people who insist on adhering to existing ideologies or established doctrines. As he succinctly proclaimed, "I

⁶ Graham Tillet Allison, Robert D. Blackwill, and Ali Wyne, *Lee Kuan Yew the Grand Master's Insights on China, the United States, and the World* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2013), 135.

always tried to be correct, not politically correct.”⁷ He would always start, on a first-principles basis, from the root problem and asks the only fundamental question that matters: how can we benefit people who are “looking for work, to be paid, to buy their food, their clothes, their homes, and to bring their children up”?⁸

Lee gives the example of Singapore’s receptive response to the arrival of multinationals. At the time, multinationals were seen as evil capitalists, “exploiters of cheap labor and cheap raw materials and would suck a country dry”⁹ and therefore too greedy, immoral and self-interested. However, going against popular belief, Lee received them instead with an open mind and open arms, “So why not, if they want to exploit our labor? They are welcome to it... We were learning how to do a job from them, which we would never have learnt... We were in no position to be fussy about high-minded principles.”¹⁰ In his eyes, those grandiose and lofty morals and values are essentially empty and meaningless if they could not fill people’s stomachs or erect a roof over their heads.

When P. V. Narasimha Rao, then Indian Prime Minister, visited Singapore in 1994, Lee imparted the same idea and advice to him. He said, “The most difficult obstacle was the mindset of Indian civil servants towards foreigners – that they were out to exploit India and should be hindered. If he wanted foreign investments to flow into India freely, as in China, they must change their mindsets and accept that it was their duty to facilitate, not regulate, the activities of investors.”¹¹

⁷ Kuan Yew Lee, *From Third World to First: The Singapore Story, 1965-2000: Memoirs of Lee Kuan Yew* (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Editions, 2015), 671.

⁸ Allison, Blackwill, and Wyne, *Grand Master’s Insights*, 135.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 136.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Lee, *From Third World to First*, 647.

These examples demonstrate that Lee is a result-driven leader deeply committed to problem-solving, with remarkable flexibility, adaptability and open-mindedness. Many have inevitably drawn parallels between him and Deng Xiaoping, another one of the greatest minds and visionaries of the century, who famously said: “No matter if the cat is black or white, as long as it can catch the mouse, it is a good cat.”

Competition

Another essential characteristic of Lee’s economic philosophy was his belief that market competition serves as a key driving force for economic growth. He believed that competition is fundamentally a part of human nature, and therefore acts as a natural incentive mechanism for hard work, aspiration and efficiency. This belief has therefore led Singapore to develop an economic machine around free-market competition that encourages everyone from all walks of life to be their best selves and unleash their fullest potential. No matter if you are a worker, manager, entrepreneur, or professional, you have the opportunity to succeed in Singapore.¹² Lee largely allowed market forces to guide and organize business and commercial activities, with government intervention only as necessary.

Along similar lines of thought, Lee shied away from excessive social welfare and absolute egalitarianism when it came to the distribution of social wealth. He pointed out that going too far in welfarism would in fact deter people's desire to take initiative and dampen their competitive spirit, leading to a lack of ambition and momentum in society. He believed that if a nation were to be solely run on the redistribution of wealth and resources and always prioritize a

¹² *Singapore Lianhe Zaobao*, 李光耀40年政论选 [Lee Kuan Yew’s 40-year Selected Political Commentaries]. Singapore: SPH Media Trust, 1993.

government-engineered state of equality over market-driven organic growth, such a nation would eventually collapse in internal chaos.¹³ Therefore, he advocated that in Singapore, everyone should work hard, strive for the best and receive what they deserve. Only under such conditions could the society be at a healthy equilibrium and achieve durable and sustainable growth. He emphasized that wage differences are thus necessary for stimulating and propelling the society forward as people are penalized for idleness and rewarded for hard work in a relatively fair manner.¹⁴ As he asserted, “Human beings are not born equal. They are highly competitive. Systems like Soviet and Chinese communism have failed, because they tried to equalize benefits. Then nobody works hard enough, but everyone wants to get as much as, if not more than, the other person.”¹⁵ This again echoes his pragmatism, as well as his adherence to a meritocratic system of governance and management, on which this paper will elaborate in the next section.

Meritocracy

Aside from economic factors, Lee also stressed the role of non-economic factors in building a country from the ground up. As early as the founding of Singapore, he pointed out that non-economic factors, namely human factors, also played consequential roles in not only a nation’s economic growth but also its overall strength and power.

The model of governance and management that Lee Kuan Yew vigorously advocated for, be it national, regional or corporate, can best be characterized by one word: meritocracy. What it means is an elite leadership class or management team, where the word “elite” does not refer to the wealthy or the aristocracy; rather, it refers to top-notch talents, the *creme de la creme*. As Lee

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Allison, Blackwill, and Wyne, *Grand Master’s Insights*, 129.

insisted, “If you want Singapore to succeed...you must have a system that enables the best man the most suitable to go into the job that needs them.”¹⁶ In other words, each job should be done by the best person for it. Individuals should be judged purely based on their competence and their ability to get the job done, and nothing else. Those who can bring the best expertise and experience for the position or role, no matter who they are or where they come from, shall be selected and entrusted with appropriate responsibilities and power.

Lee was a firm believer in the fact that the future and fate of Singapore relied on the quality of the people, and that collecting and retaining a concentrated pool of talents was the key to unlocking high growth. He proclaimed: “The quality of a nation’s manpower resources is the single most important factor determining national competitiveness.”¹⁷ Regardless of the ideological framework or values system, the quality and calibre of the people who implement and execute on the system is much more critical to the success of the country. Lee said, “In a developed society, the country will still survive even if mediocre people take minister roles. However, in developing countries, an extraordinary political leader will be directly tied to the life and death of the country.”¹⁸ He argued that the fate of millions of people often hinges on the strength, resilience, intelligence and vision of those governing at the foundational grassroots level of the society. Whether the nation will unite and make steady progress, or crumble in chaos, is heavily dependent on these individuals. As such, he vehemently opposed the idea that ordinary citizens can govern a country just as effectively, or that Singapore could survive no matter who was elected as the national leader. Putting “mediocre” individuals in leadership

¹⁶ Shashi Jayakumar and Rahul Sagar, *The Big Ideas of Lee Kuan Yew* (Singapore: Straits Times Press Pte Ltd, 2015), 115.

¹⁷ Allison, Blackwill, and Wyne, *Grand Master’s Insights*, 83.

¹⁸ *Lianhe Zaobao, 40-year Selected Political Commentaries*.

positions will virtually pose an existential threat to the country, ultimately bringing the entire nation down.¹⁹

Therefore, Lee's policies adamantly centered around acquiring and retaining the best people, ensuring high quality education, and creating a vibrant and dynamic private market environment that fosters innovation and entrepreneurship. His pragmatist tenet of not adhering to one single idea but adopting whatever is useful and beneficial to people's lives is also manifest in his attitude towards the role of individual talents. He said, "Those with good minds to be scholars should also become inventors, innovators, venture capitalists, and entrepreneurs; they must bring new products and services to the market to enrich the lives of people everywhere."²⁰ In other words, it is not sufficient for scholars to purely study and teach theories, or even only do research and discover new knowledge. Rather, they need to take it one step further, by spinning out applications from fundamental science and translating and commercializing products of research from the lab to the market, in order for them to truly create tangible impact on society. In this way, technological innovations and progress also become the biggest driver of rapid economic growth.

Singapore's civil service system, widely recognized as one of the most efficient and effective in the world, epitomizes this commitment to talents. The system is built upon a culture of excellence, meritocracy and impartiality, which were advocated by Lee Kuan Yew himself. Based on his personal experience and education, he was able to conclude that, "We need good men to have good government. However good the system of government, bad leaders will bring harm to their people. On the other hand, I have seen several societies well-governed in spite of

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Allison, Blackwill, and Wyne, *Grand Master's Insights*, 84.

poor systems of government, because good, strong leaders were in charge.”²¹ The civil service is responsible for the implementation of government policies, and plays a crucial role in ensuring the smooth running of the country. The government has put in place a rigorous system of recruitment, training and career development, to ensure that only the best and brightest are recruited into the service. As Peter Ho wrote in a collection of essays written by people who worked closely with Lee, “It meant that we had to be as sharp as he. To present our views and win the case, we had to be thorough in our research and compelling in our arguments...Never take short cuts or the intellectually lazy argument, or short-change other points of view. For Mr Lee would sniff out these weaknesses.”²² This ensures that the civil service is staffed with highly skilled and motivated individuals who are able to provide top-quality services to the public and are highly responsive to the needs of the public. As Lee said, “The single decisive factor that made for Singapore’s development was the ability of its ministers and the high quality of the civil servants who supported them. Whenever [he] had a lesser minister in charge, [he] invariably had to push and prod them, and later to review problems and clear roadblocks for them. The end result was never what could have been achieved.”²³

However, it was not an easy process to lay out the infrastructure and groundwork in the beginning that morphed into the comprehensive and powerful talent scouting system that Singapore takes pride in today. It took many trials and errors and extensive experimentation to get it right. Lee Kuan Yew’s methodology went from finding “activists in universities, trade unions and party branches”, to educated elites including PhDs, professors, lawyers and doctors, to leaders and professionals in various industries, and so forth.²⁴ He even scoured the “top

²¹ Lee, *From Third World to First*, 647.

²² Jayakumar and Sagar, *Big Ideas*, 100.

²³ Lee, *From Third World to First*, 647.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

echelons of all sectors in Singapore – the professions, commerce, manufacturing and trade unions – to look for men and women in their 30s and 40s whom we would persuade to stand as our candidates.”²⁵ Initially, a small group of educated elites would be empowered to collectively decide on national strategy, such as the specific directions or industries that Singapore should focus on and double down its investment in. Yet, none of these independently worked. As Lee reflects, it was not merely enough to be smart and competent or to obtain a PhD, as being a political leader also meant being “able to argue, cajole and demolish the arguments of opponents at mass rallies, on television or in Parliament.”²⁶ Therefore, it was a strenuous process “with high attrition rate” to not only find these people, but also convince them and trade them; he had to “persuade them to enter politics, get themselves elected and learn how to move and win people over to their side.”²⁷

Lee concluded that, compared to a candidate’s competence and intelligence, it was more important, albeit more difficult, to measure their character, disposition and motivation. He needed to come up with a better selection criteria and evaluation framework, and also began to have universities train more behavioral psychologists to help identify and select potential candidates with the “right attributes.”²⁸ Lee also studied history carefully, including how Mao, Deng and Winston Churchill selected their successors (and failed), and consulted experts from various domains including psychologists, professors and CEOs of multinational corporations. Eventually, he landed on the so-called “helicopter quality” as one of the best measurement systems he had encountered, developed by Shell, the Anglo-Dutch oil company. As Lee recalled in his autobiography, “They concentrated on what they termed a man’s ‘currently estimated

²⁵ Ibid, 649.

²⁶ Ibid, 648

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid, 650.

potential’,” as defined by “a person’s power of analysis, his imagination and his sense of reality.”²⁹ This can be distilled down into “The ability to see facts or problems in a larger context and to identify and zoom in on critical details.”³⁰ Other than being ranked on “helicopter quality,” the candidates also “needed to have political sense and the temperament to establish rapport with grass-roots leaders.”³¹

Singapore’s immigration system is another key example that clearly reflects the nation’s focus on absorbing talents. Given its small native population, it has strong demand for both foreign professionals and migrant workers and is one of the top recipient countries for immigrants and migrant workers. Lee had the foresight that attracting immigrants was key to having a sustainable source of human capital and workforce, including high-skilled and low-skilled, professional services and manual labor alike. He stated in an interview, “Throughout history, all empires that succeeded have embraced and included in their midst people of other races, languages, religions, and cultures.”³² As a highly sought-after recipient destination, Singapore has built an immigration policy that is fully open to the world and eager to absorb all the best talents the rest of the world has to offer. Lee prided himself on this, saying: “Because of our relentless and unceasing search for talent both at home and abroad to make up for the small families of the well-educated, Singapore has been able to keep up its performance.”³³

However, at the same time, Singapore’s immigration is also selective, well-differentiated and rigorous, with a low bar for entering but a high bar for staying. This effectively limited those that can be qualified for long-term stay and permanent residence to only those with relatively

²⁹ Ibid, 650.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Allison, Blackwill, and Wyne, *Grand Master’s Insights*, 21.

³³ Lee, *From Third World to First*, 647.

good socioeconomic backgrounds, such as the white-collar class as opposed to blue-collar. Migrant workers, therefore, would experience life in Singapore very differently than professional workers. As Acedera and Yeoh write in their study “Making Time,” “A differentiated system of employment passes and work permits regulates Singapore’s labour migrants according to a fine-grained continuum of (un)desirability.”³⁴ In essence, highly skilled professionals are favored and considered more “desirable”, as they are provided with job mobility, visas for dependents, and routes to permanent residency. In contrast, low-skilled migrant workers are restricted through short-term permits, quotas, levies, and limited options for residency or family reunification.

Good Governance, Order and Stability

While obtaining individual talents no doubt matters, Lee Kuan Yew also emphasized the importance of good governance, effective collaboration, and an unwavering work ethic. In an insightful interview, he remarked, “It is the people’s innovativeness entrepreneurship, teamwork, and their work ethic that give them that sharp keen edge in competitiveness.”³⁵ In addition, he underscored the importance of maintaining harmonious labor-management relations, cultivating a collective spirit, and loyalty to the organization at large. He pushed for this sense of a shared mission and shared destiny, of working towards a common goal and prioritizing the common good over individual interests. In his interview with Charlie Rose, Lee commented, “Before you can have a country, a society, there must be a sense of common destiny, that we share a certain obligation to each other. Otherwise [when] everybody [thinks] for himself, why should I, if I’m a loser, be part of the game. I have learned, watching Europe, Japan and America, that the

³⁴ Kristel Anne Acedera and Brenda SA Yeoh, “‘Making Time’: Long-Distance Marriages and the Temporalities of the Transnational Family,” *Current Sociology* 67, no. 2 (2018): pp. 250-272, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011392118792927>, 252.

³⁵ Allison, Blackwill, and Wyne, *Grand Master’s Insights*, 84.

robustness of the American economy is this ability to meet unexpected challenges, adapt, downsize, change, revamp, revive, start new industries, flourish, move ahead, more than any other economy.”³⁶

Lee therefore believed in creating an environment where individuals were aligned and incentivized to come together and work towards a common goal. Recognizing the undeniable role that human capital plays in the growth and success of any large organization, Lee urged for the establishment of a culture that breeds cooperation, camaraderie, and a sense of shared responsibility. Lee was no doubt inspired by ancient wisdom in traditional Chinese culture, where values such as diligence and hard work, respect for the authority, loyalty to one’s kindred, social harmony, and dedication to the common good (oftentimes at the costs of one’s self-interest) take precedence. He artfully integrated such cultural and ethical underpinnings with a competitive mindset to propel productivity and move society forward, establishing a unique synergy between ancient wisdom and modern ambition that resulted in a powerful formula for success. By reconciling individualism with collectivism, he skillfully balanced the merits of Western and Eastern values. These principles have no doubt left a lasting impact on the way countries, governments, organizations and corporations function in not only Singapore, but all around the world.

Furthermore, order and stability were always Lee’s top priorities, as he considered a stable society to be a precondition for creating any type of sustainable, enduring growth. Here is where Lee’s iron fist truly comes into play, as this was made possible by Lee Kuan Yew’s chosen political model of a single-party centralized system. He believed that a strong and unified government was necessary for Singapore to achieve rapid progress and avoid the pitfalls of

³⁶ Kuan Yew Lee and Charlie Rose, “Lee Kuan Yew – Charlie Rose Interview,” September 24, 2004, 19:40, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ngtDgPmzLbM&t=1s>.

political instability. He was convinced that the western-style liberal democracy and a multi-party system would not work well in Singapore's context, citing Samuel Huntington's words: "Some cultures do not receive democracy well,"³⁷ implying that each country should be entitled to have their own definition and modality of democracy. He went on to claim, "In a liberal (Western-style) democracy, a man, once elected, is free from all party discipline. [Once] you have that in Singapore, you have unstable government,"³⁸ implying that pluralist politics would lead to internal fragmentation and short-termism and hinder the country's development especially when it is still in developing stage. When questioned whether he might have been too autocratic and not respectful of human rights, Lee responded confidently, "I have done this parlor game myself. For the first five to ten years of extreme crisis when the country could just fall apart in racial strife, religious hatreds, and old feuds, without a strong hand, we could have come apart."³⁹ Because of his strongman control, he was able to call the shots, execute, and move things quickly and efficiently in one uniform direction. Because of it, he and his colleagues were able to "establish certain firm ground rules and redevelop the city."⁴⁰

Lee was also uncompromisingly insistent on high integrity and clean governance and showed zero tolerance for corruption, which he believed would fatally undermine the credibility of the government and pose an existential threat to the party and the country. Those serving the civil service system are expected to be free from corruption and other forms of wrongdoing, and are subject to strict codes of disciplinary conduct, in order to ensure that the civil service is seen as a neutral and trustworthy institution, and that the public has full confidence in its ability to

³⁷ Fook Kwang Han, *Lee Kuan Yew: Hard Truths to Keep Singapore Going* (Singapore: Straits Times, SPH Media Limited, 2023), 83.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Lee and Rose, "Interview", 25:16.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 25:45.

serve their needs. Lee wrote in his memoir, “We were sickened by the greed, corruption and decadence of many Asian leaders... We had a deep sense of mission to establish a clean and effective government.”⁴¹ On the day Lee and his colleagues took office in June 1959, everyone “wore white shirts and white slacks to symbolise purity and honesty in [their] personal behavior and public life.”⁴² The government has therefore put in place a range of performance monitoring systems to ensure that civil servants are held accountable for their conduct, and that they are constantly striving to improve the quality of their work. Lee continued to emphasize that from day one, the party leadership took great care to ensure that “every dollar in revenue would be properly accounted for and would reach the beneficiaries at the grass roots as one dollar, without being siphoned off along the way” and “gave special attention to the areas where discretionary powers had been exploited for personal gain and sharpened the instruments that could prevent, detect or deter such practices.”⁴³ Ultimately, social order and stability, clean governance and administrative efficiency have become key factors in Singapore's ability to attract foreign investment as it first and foremost seeks markets with stable, reliable and business-friendly environments to operate in. Furthermore, Singapore is a melting pot of diverse cultures, ethnicities and religions, and Lee Kuan Yew recognized the importance of promoting harmonious coexistence among various demographics. By implementing policies to maintain social harmony and reduce crime, he laid the groundwork for Singapore's long-term success.

⁴¹ Lee, *From Third World to First*, 173.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*

Conclusion

Singapore's story of development is a testament to the power of human determination and perseverance. Through decades of hard work and innovative policies, the country has transformed itself into a model for other nations to follow. The key to its success has been a steadfast focus on growth and improvement, coupled with a willingness to embrace change and tackle challenges head-on. Whether it's through fostering a cutting-edge technology sector, building world-class infrastructure, or creating a vibrant and inclusive society, Singapore has consistently shown that anything is possible with the right approach, serving as a shining example of what can be accomplished when people come together with a common goal.

As we look to the future, there is much to be learned from Singapore's model. By studying the country's path to success, one can gain valuable insights into what it takes to build a thriving, modern nation. It may be hard to replicate its path given every country's unique circumstances, the lessons of Singapore's development will nonetheless continue to inspire and guide future generations as they work to build a better world for all.

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