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Lee Kuan Yew: A Towering Inspiration for China

By Zha Daojiong

Synopsis

Lee Kuan Yew has been a towering inspiration for China's modernisation. His emphasis on stability in governance resonated well in China.

Commentary

A LEGENDARY tale has it that Deng Xiaoping was so astonished by the changes he witnessed on his visit to Singapore in November 1978 that he made up his mind about opening and reforming China by learning from Singapore. In his youth Deng had once made a stopover in Singapore on his sea journey to France. The visual contrast could not have been stronger.

Lee Kuan Yew was the founding father who made possible his country's transformation. Two years earlier, in 1976, Lee had travelled to China, in spite of the absence of formal diplomatic ties between the two countries. In his life time, Lee made 33 trips to China, each personalising his own commitment to make a positive contribution to China's pursuit of modernisation.

Source of inspiration

Lee Kuan Yew built a country – small in geographical size and with virtually no natural resources beyond sustaining basic human survival – into one to be respected not only throughout Southeast Asia but also worldwide. If anything, the country Lee Kuan Yew led, governed and then advised even after retirement from the prime ministership, has proved its resilience throughout the decades of profound challenges in its neighbourhood and beyond.

Singapore's record of rising from the ashes serves as a source of inspiration, partly owing to the fact that ethnic Chinese are the majority in the Singaporean society, many of whom – Lee's own family included – had migrated to that part of the Malay peninsula when China was the 'sick man of Asia': as a people the Chinese can prevail out of adverse circumstances, just like other peoples of the world. It is up to the Chinese in China to prove that they too can match their achievements with those of their Singaporean cousins by kinship and cultural ties.

Today, the catch phrase for that inspiration is 'soft power'. Singapore is beyond dispute one of the tiny

number of countries that truly attracted China, its government and populace. It was only natural for the Chinese government to choose Singapore to be one of the first destinations for Chinese citizens to go on private foreign travel in the early 1990s. Singapore was not just a place with Chinese-speaking communities, but visibly a successful country. The more the average Chinese could learn from Singapore, the better they could contribute to improving China.

Teacher of Governance

Lee Kuan Yew gave priority to maintenance of social and political stability in governing his country. Among other points of wisdom in him as a national leader, the necessity of stability in governance resonated more closely in China.

As a matter of fact, compatibility in governance approaches led China to seek Singapore's assistance in training Chinese civil servants. Such training programmes cover wide-ranging topics, from economic policy to project management, from community management to fighting corruption; virtually every aspect of governance was covered in these programmes. Transfer of ideational/technical expertise from Singapore to China has become systematic.

For China, learning from Singapore comes with a unique cultural environment. Under Lee Kuan Yew's leadership and personal example, civil servants of Singapore dealing with China are required to be fluent in Chinese as one of the four official languages which include English, Malay and Tamil, while Malay is the national language. This facility in Chinese greatly helped the participants from China in their interactions outside the formal classroom, an attribute unavailable in many other advanced economies.

In the wider world, the match in governance between Singapore and China has received mixed commentaries, including some critical ones. But Lee Kuan Yew and his successors stood their ground and, arguably, have prevailed. China is solely responsible for shortcomings still existent in its own society. The appeal of building a clean government, with Mr. Lee as a leader and his country as a model, continues to be strong.

Singapore in China

In April 1994, Lee Kuan Yew, as Senior Minister, inaugurated the China-Suzhou Industrial Park, in China's Jiangsu province. For China, this 'Singapore in China' project was conceived as a tangible demonstration of modernisation. Chinese planners envisioned 2012 to be the year for the collaborative Suzhou project to reach comparable Human Development Index levels of Singapore in 2011.

The initial years of the Suzhou project did not live up to Singaporean expectations. It was the fundamentals in bilateral relationship Lee Kuan Yew had built up that helped it to continue. The emphasis on pragmatism, another hallmark of Lee Kuan Yew's leadership, helped to navigate both sides of the partnership.

Today, 'Singapore in China' projects have spread to other cities including Tianjin, Guangzhou, and Shenyang. In numerous other Chinese industrial zones and beyond, the Singaporean presence is strong. The value of these projects goes beyond statistical records of trade and investment. Throughout the times of uncertainty that the outside world had perceived China as a global economic partner, Lee Kuan Yew and his government cast a vote of confidence.

The one thing Lee Kuan Yew had for sure shown China and the Chinese society is that countries do not have to be large and strong in the conventional sense of the term to be valuable. Mr. Lee is going to be remembered as a towering source of inspiration.

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