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Lee Kuan Yew: History, Heritage and the Idea of Singapore

By Wang Gungwu

Synopsis

Lee Kuan Yew's success in transforming Singapore from a plural immigrant society into a multicultural nation rested on the core values that shaped him and the power systems that he chose to serve his political cause.

Commentary

IT IS not too early to think about Lee Kuan Yew's place in history. The sense of loss that Singaporeans demonstrated when he lay in state was genuine and deep. The eulogies from all over the world testify to the impact of his achievements in the city-state that he led.

To many leaders in Asia, what he did was to provide remarkable answers to the problems of decolonisation and nation-building that the region experienced after the end of World War II. Some might focus on his doing this with so small a country; others wonder what more he could have done if he had more land and people under his care.

Heritage and shifting realities

His success rested on his ability to understand his environment and the transformations it was encountering. It rested on the core values that shaped him and the power systems that he studied and eventually chose to serve his political cause. The former relates to his origins as someone descended from many generations of Chinese in Southeast Asia who had lived among a variety of people and under several different kinds of regimes. The latter draws on his personal capacity to learn from history and respond to shifting realities.

Chinese society frowned on the idea of leaving home and not returning. But, for centuries, many in southern China did so when conditions were favourable, although the majority of males who settled down with their local wives and descendants were by and large assimilated. However, there was one area that was exceptional - the territories around Batavia (Jakarta) and Malacca where the Netherlands East Asia Company encouraged enterprising Chinese to organise themselves to help the Company trade with China.

Their communities expanded on both sides of the Straits of Malacca when the British arrived at the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th century. The locally-evolved organisations extended their activities to the settlements in Penang and Singapore. Their members adapted to the Anglo-Dutch as well as to the Malay worlds. They understood well the characteristics of the neighbouring lands and peoples and were well prepared to become key players in the growing trade with China.

By the end of the 19th century, their descendants were responding to the modernising changes in the region and learning to appreciate the virtues of different kinds of political systems and the advantages of industrial capitalism.

This was also when new generations of elites in China were adjusting to the demands of Western imperial power and awakening to the need for national consciousness. They were also acquiring modern knowledge and sought the support of the Chinese overseas. This was a challenge to the distinctive Chinese communities in Southeast Asia. Did they have to choose between affirming their special relations with the Western colonial states that had been established or join their compatriots in supporting a new Chinese nation?

Making plural society a multicultural nation

Many Chinese who had long settled in the region were divided in their loyalties and remained undecided until the Japanese invasions. After 1945, it became clear that the era of Western empires was coming to an end. For most Chinese, the choice from now on was to identify with the new native nations or return to China. Only in British Malaya was there another option: the chance to make a plural society develop into a multicultural nation.

Coming from this settled Straits Chinese background, Lee Kuan Yew chose to build on that possibility. He had to do so in the midst of local nationalist hopes, a primarily Chinese communist revolution and an Anglo-American offensive against the spread of communism. All three forces held great dangers for the immigrant minorities in the region. A handful of men and women were keen to fight for the multicultural ideal and gambled on doing so on the island of Singapore.

There were also others who were prepared to take the same risks, but Lee Kuan Yew was exceptionally equipped to assess the forces of history and harness all that he could in order to establish this new state. He therefore led those who shared his faith, especially those who were committed locals like him. Together, they set out to defend their heritage and use every weapon they could find or forge to do so.

Singapore his only home

Lee Kuan Yew also had an unusual capacity to learn from history. Like many of his generation, he studied the imperial system that the British nation had created out of their commercial and industrial successes in Asia. He understood how their empires claimed universal omniscience while their national interests led them to export their core values. The British sought to transmit those values to the colonials they ruled over much as the Romans did to the feudal states they left behind when their empire collapsed.

With decolonisation after 1945, they sought to extend their ideals to the new members of the Commonwealth of Nations. Lee Kuan Yew was encouraged by some features in that model to try to adapt them to shape the country that would eventually replace British Malaya.

He failed in Malaysia because his Malay counterparts in the Federation of Malaya wanted their own nation and were willing to accommodate their country's Chinese and other minorities only to a limited degree. Thus he was left with a Singapore that had a population that was 75 per cent Chinese. He and his colleagues realised that they had to recalculate afresh the kind of political structure that such a country could have. For Lee Kuan Yew, his deep sense of Singapore as his only home helped him to contemplate the social and cultural mix that he must bring together in order for this state to survive in an intrinsically hostile neighbourhood.

He was local and his ancestors were embedded in the region. He was educated to adapt to a global maritime empire that had now become Anglo-American. His people were largely Chinese whom he

could count on to draw on Chinese traditions if and when forced to stand together in the face of common dangers. He was confident that they were rational. He believed he could educate them to appreciate how enriching a plural society can be.

He thus sought to recapture their aspirations while inducing them to understand the necessity for the republic to be a multiracial and multilingual state. The unique conditions that the country faced called for decisive and innovative leadership and that he was determined to provide at all costs.

A new global city-state

Lee Kuan Yew insisted that he was a pragmatist without an ideology. But his understanding of history gave him hope for a new kind of global city-state. Such a city has to be one that consists not only of generations of the local-born who call Singapore home but is also open to the in-migration of peoples who, no matter what their origins, could provide the skills it needs.

The composite state that he has left to his successors would have to be one that is nation in form but not narrowly bound the way the original European model was designed to be. It would have to be one that is better adapted to a resurgent Asia in which new notions of nation, region and transnational enterprise are now possible.

This is an exceptional time when options are still open. Lee Kuan Yew has left behind a vision of the future that is rooted in his past. This is a vision that he would expect his followers to go forward to realise.

*Wang Gungwu is Professor of the National University of Singapore and chairman of the East Asian Institute and former member of the Board of Governors of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. An earlier version of this article appeared in *The Round Table*, London (2015). This is part of an RSIS series on the Legacy of Lee Kuan Yew.*

Nanyang Technological University
Block S4, Level B4, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | www.rsis.edu.sg