

06/12/1997

Hail to the Chief!

iewed by Chong Seck Chim

THERE will be, I suppose, different types of readers interested in this book. First will be those keen to know more about Singapore's economic success which, according to the authors, "is a story of how Lee's ideas have been put into practice on an island of 600 square kilometres, on which three million people today enjoy a standard of living higher than their former colonial masters".

Later in the book, Lee is quoted as putting it more succinctly:

You would not have today's Singapore if we had allowed Chinese chauvinism to grow unchecked ... I am absolutely convinced that without the experience, the two years in Malaysia - first fighting the communists '61, '63 and then fighting the communalists '63, '65 - Singapore would not have made it.

Next we have the readers of Lee's generation, who will be interested in the behind-the-scenes stories of the momentous events which they themselves had lived through.

Lastly, there is the captive market of Singapore readers, all avidly interested in the doings of the great man. Love him or hate him, he is quite simply LKY to them. This sobriquet is avoided in the book; nicknames for American presidents are also only traded in news magazines. Lee himself has said: "Between being loved and being feared, I have always believed Machiavelli was right. If nobody is afraid of me, I'm meaningless."

The authors sifted through more than 2,000 of Lee's speeches over the years, then "narrowed the field to seven key areas: the secret of good government, economic development, politics and democracy, law and order, the importance of culture, the nature of human society, and media". The Seven Pillars of Wisdom, you might say, distilled from the Thoughts of Chairman Lee, pungently expressed in the hustings, in parliament, and in vigorous encounters with the foreign Press.

Lee met all these challenges head on, often sparking off more controversy in consequence, as a lightning rod might atmospheric electricity in a thunderstorm. A selection of his speeches and interviews therefore forms an integral part of the book. Each of the seven 'Ideas that made a Nation' is treated in this setting, the text often juxtaposed with full-paged entr'actes on kindred topics, besides being signposted by pithy remarks on the margin to press the point home.

Taking as starting point the locus of interest for each group of readers as I have defined them, let me indicate some pointers for would-be readers in this review.

How did Singapore make it from Third to First World status in the space of 30 years? Quite a few books have dilated on the question, mostly by foreigners who may or may not have been biased on that account. The present version is perhaps more definitive, since the authors - from The Straits Times - had unrivalled access to official sources as well as 13 exclusive interviews with Lee. But it is also less controversial.

It is a heavyweight as well - quite literally, at 4lbs avoirdupois - its fulsome documentation and Lee's expatiations tending to the loquacious, so patience and stamina are needed to do the book justice.

Still, the testimony is incontestable. Without Lee's drive and authoritarian style, the chances of Singapore being viable after separation from the Federation of Malaysia would have been slim indeed. He

just didn't have the time to go about things the roundabout way, so he was ruthlessly efficient - and ceaselessly hectored his staff to perform likewise.

He made no apologies for elitism, applying Shell's system to look for "helicopter quality" to create a meritocracy in government. It was a form of crisis management for him from the start: "We had no raw materials for them to exploit. All we had was the labour ... So why not, if they want to exploit our labour?"

But he had his lucky breaks as well which, though mentioned in the book, have not been presented as such. The wars in Korea and Vietnam, for instance, were timely windfalls for Singapore's trade. Earlier, he had been able to ride and get off the Communist tiger safely, because Lim Yew Hock detained many of the leftists, leaving the field open for Lee to consolidate his position in the PAP.

Anyway, what comes through it all is the permeating influence of the former premier in the island-state. No minutia of administration was too trifling for his interest, no knotty affair of state too remote for his intervention. Whether it be the greening of Singapore or improving writing style in government, or yet the proper working of buttons in government bungalows - all claimed their share of the Man's attention.

On unpopular issues, Lee was just as unbending. Some he put through with customary elan: "If we took a poll, we would never have had National Service. I simply decided, 'Introduce it'."

Other matters were more sticky, and he could only fret in public: "If you don't include your women graduates in your breeding pool and leave them on the shelf, you would end up a more stupid society." He also mooted a "some-men-two-votes system" - "we should consider giving those between the ages of 35 and 60, married and with families, one extra vote".

All in all, a thoroughly eventful record for his 31 years as Prime Minister in the republic. In a kind of summing-up, Lee identified "three basic essentials for successful transformation of any society": a determined leadership, an efficient administration, and social discipline.

Readers looking to inside stories of the oral history variety will find them mostly in the section on 'The Making of a Politician'. Lee's interest in world affairs was probably kindled during the war years in Singapore, when he worked as a cable editor for the Hodobu, filling in missing words in intercepted radio transmissions for Japanese propaganda. Later, studying law in England in 1950, he campaigned for the Labour Party, and also made his first political speech at the Malayan Forum started by Goh Keng Swee, Tun Razak and Maurice Baker.

After that, there was no stopping him, learning on the job as he picked his way through successive roadblocks: the British Special Branch, who played him against the Communists who were eager to use him in their turn; the ruling Labour Front under David Marshall, later Lim Yew Hock; the "Battle for Merger", anathema to the leftists but a godsend for Lee, who made sure that they signed an undertaking beforehand that "we are working for a non-communist Malaya and merger as the way to independence".

Not explained in the book is how he outmanoeuvred them again in the wording of the 1962 referendum for merger "under the terms proposed by the government".

But there was still the PM in Malaya to win over: "The one critical event which was the turning point for the Tunku and made him agree, reluctantly, to an idea he had long tried to avoid was the PAP's defeat at the Hong Lim by-election." Ong Eng Guan had won that round, appealing directly to Chinese chauvinism and demanding immediate and unconditional independence from Britain. But Merger, when it came, was short-lived:

The MSC held only two meetings before Singapore was expelled from

Malaysia ... Rajaratnam and Dr Toh Chin Chye felt so strongly about it that they almost did not sign that separation agreement because they had organised this Malaysian Solidarity Convention more than I did. They were Malaysians, you see. One came from Taiping, Perak, the other came from Seremban.

For an understanding of Lee as 'The Man Behind the Ideas', we have the shortest section in the book, which perhaps says it all. There is not much that one can discover about a chief who was not so much primus inter pares as a loner at the top, especially after the old guard had, one by one, withdrawn from the fray.

There are brief glimpses of his family life, and reflections on personal philosophy:

... if I give my children a good education, the rest is up to them; You must read ... But you've got to read what's relevant, not only what you're interested in; Life has an unfair, unpredictable quality about it and you must take it as it comes ... How many of my generation are alive, never mind being fit and mobile and still compos mentis?

A mellowed Senior Minister now "sees himself as a guardian to the younger team running Singapore". A far cry from the days when he did not mince words:

Anyone who decides to take me on needs to put on knuckle-dusters. If you think you can hurt me more than I can hurt you, try. There is no other way you can govern a Chinese society.

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