

Lee Kuan Yew in historical context

By WANG GUNGWU

THE eulogies have poured in for Lee Kuan Yew: Brilliant strategist, respected statesman, political phenomenon.

The respect and sense of loss among the Singaporeans who went to mourn him was moving and surprisingly deep. The reservations about his ruthless use of power were expected, but they were subdued. One can expect fuller analyses to follow to try to place him in a larger historical perspective.

He was a complex man whose success rested on many factors.

Two have not been given much attention in the discussions so far. I refer to the core values that shaped him and the power systems that he carefully studied and selectively brought together.

The first relates to his origins as someone descended from many generations of Chinese in South-east Asia who had all lived among a variety of people and under several different kinds of regimes.

The second draws on his personal capacity to learn from history and respond to shifting realities.

Overseas Chinese heritage

THE Chinese state and 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 did so settled down with local wives and their descendants were by and large assimilated.

However, there was one area that was exceptional.

I refer to the territories around Batavia (Jakarta) and Malacca, where the Dutch East Asia Company encouraged the enterprising Chinese to be organised to help them trade with China.

This zone expanded along the Strait of Malacca when the British arrived at the end of the 18th and

Two aspects have not been much examined: His heritage as an overseas Chinese in South-east Asia; and his capacity to learn from history in shaping his ideas on nationhood.

the beginning of the 19th century with settlements in Penang and Singapore.

Within the zone, the local-born Chinese began to form a distinct Chinese community. Its members adapted to both the Anglo-Dutch and Malay worlds and understood many of the neighbouring lands and peoples. They were well prepared to become key players in the growing trade with China.

In order to remain relevant, the successful among these Chinese adopted as their core ideals those of respectable merchants in China. This was connected with a rigorous extended family structure and the Confucian cultural pride that allowed them, when necessary, to stand up to European officialdom and Malayo-Javanese aristocrats.

By the end of the 19th century, their descendants were modernising and learnt to appreciate the virtues of a different kind of imperial political order and the advantages of industrial capitalism.

This was also when new coastal elites in China were adjusting to new structures of power and awakening to national consciousness. They were also acquiring modern knowledge and sought the support of the Chinese overseas.

This was a challenge to the distinctive settled Chinese communities. Did they have to choose between affirming their special relations with the Western forces that dominated the region, and joining their compatriots in calling for a new Chinese nation?

Many of the Chinese who had long settled in the region were undecided until the Japanese occupation of the region.

After 1945, it was clear that the era of Western empires was ending. For most Chinese thereafter, the choice was to identify with new native nations or turn to China. Only in British Malaya was



Mr Lee Kuan Yew at an election rally in 1961. He sought to educate his people to appreciate how enriching a plural society could be, and to get them to understand the necessity to establish a multiracial and multilingual state. ST FILE PHOTO

there another option: The chance to enable a plural society to become a kind of 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 rose to fight for the multicultural ideal and, when forced to, they gambled on doing so on the island of Singapore.

There were others who were willing to take the same risks, but Mr Lee was exceptionally equipped to assess the forces of

history and harness all that he could in order to fight for the new state. He therefore led those who shared his faith, especially those who were committed locals like him, and chose to defend their heritage, ready to use every weapon they could find or forge.

Learning from history

THIS leads me to his capacity to learn from history.

Like many of his generation, he studied the imperial system led by an expanded British nation. He knew that empires claimed universal omniscience while nations defended their central core values.

The British had sought to transmit their values to the peoples they ruled over, much as the Romans did to the feudal states they spawned in Western Europe. They

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cally 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 to establish a multiracial and multilingual state. The unique conditions called for decisive and innovative leadership and that he was determined to provide at all costs.

Mr Lee 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, one that consisted of generations of the local-born who call Singapore home but open to in-migration of peoples who provide the skills it needs.

The composite state that this patriarch has left to his successors would have to be one that is nation in form, but not narrowly bound the way European nations have been and still are.

It would be one that is better adapted to a resurgent Asia in which new notions of nation, region and transnational enterprise are possible.

This is an exceptional time when options are still open. He 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.

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