

Singapore 'must stay relevant to China and the world'

The strong relationship that Singapore has with China could not have come about if Chinese patriarch Deng Xiaoping had not told the Chinese to learn from Singapore and if he did not have a good relationship with Lee Kuan Yew, said Professor Zheng Yongnian.

But many things have happened since then to change that relationship.

Both countries have had new generations of leaders and China has grown from a poor country to the world's second largest economy, surpassing Singapore in some areas along the way, including in high-tech, he said.

Singapore, however, has developed the know-how to manage its relations with its giant neighbour and, importantly, remains relevant to the major power.

"The relationship between Deng Xiaoping and Lee Kuan Yew was so important," said Prof Zheng, who stepped down last month as director of the East Asian Institute at the National University of Singapore.

"Deng Xiaoping asked China to

learn from Singapore, that means a lot. Without Deng Xiaoping, I don't think the relationship would be what it is today," he added.

Deng, who died in 1997, had visited Singapore in November 1978 and was impressed by the state of development of the ethnic Chinese-majority city.

The following month, he started China's reform and opening up that wrought an economic miracle in four decades and lifted hundreds of millions out of poverty.

In 1992, on a tour to the country's south to spur further economic reform, Deng told the Chinese to learn from Singapore and even to surpass it. In that year alone, 400 Chinese delegations visited Singapore to learn from its experience.

To this day, China's top leaders are still "trying to learn many good things" from Singapore, including its legal system, noted Prof Zheng.

At the bureaucratic and societal levels, however, the Chinese have become "quite proud" and view Singapore as very small, he added.

While in the past, from the cen-

tral to the local governments, the general perception was that "we have to learn from Singapore", the situation is different now.

"Different sectors of society have different views," he said.

Singapore, for its part, has learnt a lot from its frequent interaction with China and become sophisticated in dealing with a complex relationship that involves working with not just the central but also provincial and local governments.

For example, said Prof Zheng, Singapore has set up eight local business councils with Chinese provinces and municipalities.

"We know how important provincial and local governments are, so sometimes we deal with local governments, we solve issues locally" instead of escalating them up to Beijing, he said.

As for staying relevant as a small country in order to survive, Prof Zheng said Singapore needs to stay relevant not just to China but also to the United States, its neighbours and even Europe. As a small country, "you don't want to be aban-



Then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew meeting China's Deng Xiaoping in the Great Hall of the People in Beijing in 1985. Their relationship was "so important", said Professor Zheng Yongnian. LIANHE ZAOBAO FILE PHOTO

doned or isolated", he said.

He added, however, that staying relevant to China would be more important because of its growing clout in economic terms as well as

in the security arena.

With its per capita income at US\$9,600, way below that of the US at US\$62,600, China has a lot of room for growth and if it were to

grow at 5 to 6 per cent annually, it will become the largest economy in the world in 10 years.

"China will be so big no one can get away from it", particularly with regionalisation and globalisation, said Prof Zheng.

Economically, Singapore is already "very relevant" to China, he said, pointing to Singapore's involvement in projects like the Suzhou Industrial Park, Tianjin Eco-city, the Chongqing connectivity project and Guangzhou Knowledge City.

He expects that Singapore will develop even closer economic ties with China in the years to come.

In terms of security, China will become more important in the region "whether you like it or not", including in the South China Sea.

But it is in geopolitics that Singapore has an advantage, he said.

Located as it is in South-east Asia, it will always know the region better than China. It can stay relevant to China by helping it to understand the region.

And China will need more help in this in the future.

This is because as it grows in power, it will focus its resources on learning about its rivals which are other major powers like the US, neglecting the smaller states in the region, said Prof Zheng.

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