

LEE KUAN YEW: THE GRAND MASTER'S INSIGHTS ON CHINA, THE UNITED STATES, AND THE WORLD

(GRAHAM ALLISON)

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For Americans who think that so-called liberal democracy is neither, and in any case is a dead end, successful modern societies with a different political model always intrigue. In the West, notable such are Hungary and Poland, who have effectively executed a mild and tentative turn away from the most extreme vices of liberal democracy, though there is a long way to go. Singapore, which has apparently successfully blended economic success, certain virtues, and limited democracy, offers another possible model, one with a longer track record. Unfortunately, Singapore's example is of very limited use to a future well-run America, and this book of the thoughts of Lee Kuan Yew, who built modern Singapore, helps show why.

There are surprisingly few books, at least in English, on Singapore. (I did read John Curtis Perry's *Singapore: Unlikely Power*, and was disappointed at its flatness and lack of insight.) I'm not sure why that is. Perhaps it's a feeling of pedestrian authors that Singapore, other than economic success, shouldn't be overly praised because it has always rejected liberal democracy, exacerbated by the common stereotype of it being a place where you get flogged for chewing gum. Even its economic success, which largely rejects the globalist ideologies of the neoliberal corporatists who control the West, isn't celebrated as to its methods, merely as to its results. Our ruling class prefers to ignore that Singapore succeeded economically because of its strong industrial policies and direct government involvement in the economy, not because it threw open its borders to parasites or strove to become a libertarian oasis.

Today's Singapore was, it appears everyone agrees, built primarily by Lee. But Lee, who died in 2015, didn't write this 2013 book, nor did he even participate in it. Rather, it is the project of Graham Allison, an American academic expert on China and tireless self-promoter, notable most recently for his 2017 book, *Destined for War*, which analyzed the applicability of the "Thucydides Trap" to Chinese-American relations. Allison simply collected quotes of Lee's made over forty years and cobbled them together into a set of fake interviews. The effect is a little weird.

The “interviews” are posed in a question-and-answer format, grouped by major theme. However, since the narrative responses are stitched-together quotes often made decades apart, even though the stitching is competently done (probably not by Allison, but by the flunky he credits, one Ali Wynne), the responses often seem clunky and inorganic, even sometimes contradictory. If I were Lee, I would be angry that my thought over decades, which no doubt often underwent subtle, or not-so-subtle, corrections and changes, was assembled in this simplistic way and then offered as a complete summary of my beliefs. But nobody asked Lee for permission, and now he’s in no position to complain.

After reading this book, it seems likely that for his own time, place, and culture, Lee was the right man, but that says little about our society. For us, I think, his ideas are either obvious and prefigured by a vast body of earlier thought, or, incomplete, wrong, or irrelevant. Still, let’s get started. We begin with a brief Forward from Henry Kissinger, establishing Allison’s bona fides but telling us little except that Lee raised Singapore from poverty and made his country a player in Asia, which we knew already. Then, in a blatant appeal to authority and a successful exercise in padding the book, we get nearly twenty pages of quotes showing “who listens,” supposedly, when Lee talks. This includes everyone from Margaret Thatcher to the former CEO of Coca-Cola, praising Lee to the skies for his amazing intelligence, strategic vision, and general awesomeness. All this wastes the reader’s time and should be skipped.

Then we swing into the “interviews.” The biggest focus, no surprise given Singapore’s location and that its culture is Chinese (or rather a subset of Chinese, tied to the trade-oriented southern Chinese who originally settled Singapore under British suzerainty), is China. I am unclear why Lee is regarded as a China expert—maybe he successfully made predictions about China that came true, though if he did, it is not shown here. It’s not that anything Lee says is wrong, as far as I can tell (I’m certainly not a China expert myself). It’s that most of it is banal, at least in the world of 2013, or of 2020. China is growing fast and has great aspirations. Surrounding countries are concerned. The Chinese are going about it slowly and methodically. The Chinese are merit-focused. But they have certain problems, including a lack of the rule of law and an unimaginative, uncreative culture that does not permit a free exchange of ideas and, for all those reasons, comes up with no

technological breakthroughs. The United States should adopt a balanced approach toward China, neither too conciliatory nor too aggressive. All true, I imagine, but nothing that is not obvious to someone paying any attention at all.

When he makes predictions about the future that are not obvious, Lee isn't convincing. He says that "Technology is going to make [the Chinese] system of governance obsolete," because everyone is going to be "well-informed," and "because the numbers are so large," you can't just "placate and monitor a few people." So far, though, the Chinese seem very successful in using technology to monitor and control everyone. Just ask the Uighurs, or those now earning a low social credit score. It's not that Lee is afraid to say the unpalatable. For example, he denigrates the tiny minority of Chinese who militate for democracy but are beloved of Western liberals, saying crassly "Where are the students of Tiananmen now?" and apparently agreeing that Deng Xiaoping was correct to say that if 200,000 students had to be shot; it was better than the alternatives. It's that Lee has nothing unpalatable to say that is also original. And he completely ignores what is by far the biggest problem China faces—because it screwed itself with the one-child policy, it will age and shrink dramatically during the twenty-first century, never reaching anywhere near its theoretical potential. I discuss this in my review of Darrell Bricker and John Ibbitson's *Empty Planet*, but Lee ignores this problem, which obviates pretty much every generic prediction he makes about China.

When he turns to talking about the United States, we begin to see that Lee has very one-dimensional, simplistic views. He does not understand the United States, at all, mostly because in this context and others, he thinks economics is everything, and culture only matters to the extent it affects economic thinking. In Lee's pinched reading, therefore, the key to our past and present success is purely entrepreneurialism. Which is to some extent accurate, but that is only a small part of American culture, and one of much less importance than it used to be, as entrepreneurialism is crushed by government overreach and social mobility has slowed to a crawl. It is, however, the aspect of America most evident to a foreigner focused on economic matters.

As far as the bad parts of American society, Lee correctly sees that demands for unfettered, absolute individual freedom in America have

grown to grotesque and immensely destructive proportions. But he has a television-oriented set of takeaways, namely that America is gripped by vagrancy, drugs, and guns, all of which are bad, very bad (Lee is especially petrified by private citizens having guns). His solution is more communitarianism, as led by elites, with a better ruling class than we have now. Only “the top 3 to 5% of a society can handle this free-for-all, this clash of ideas. If you do this with the whole mass, you will have a mess.” Well, the horse is out of that barn, but to that, Lee has no answer. And America needs to quit overspending. Again, much of this is accurate, but obvious. More importantly, it’s grossly incomplete, viewing America through a keyhole. We can do without Lee’s thoughts on America; they’re bush-league.

True, there is a good deal that is refreshingly retrograde about Lee. He is all about merit, and he’s not shy about it. “It is the near-geniuses and the above average who ultimately decide the shape of things to come.” People aren’t equal in talents and merit, they never will be equal, and to pretend otherwise is folly. No surprise, he doesn’t like democracy. To be sure, Singapore has a form of democracy, but Lee is, correctly, afraid the stupid masses will ruin it for everyone. Thus, the government should serve the people, but not be directly responsive to the people. He also thinks, as I do, that people with families should get more votes, and no votes should go to “a capricious young person under 30.” Lee would no doubt blanch at the insane proposals today for American sixteen-year-olds to vote—although, on the plus side, that would probably hasten the collapse of our own pseudo-democracy, and let us move on more quickly to the next thing, so maybe I should endorse it.

Lee is also retrograde about other cultures. His talk of India is interesting mostly for Lee’s thinly-veiled contempt for Indian society and culture, tempered with a recognition that India has a big, therefore relevant, economy. And when talking of Islam, Lee praises Samuel Huntington’s thesis of a civilizational clash and says that Islam will always be a threat unless it changes. He also enthusiastically and repeatedly endorses English as the only language that matters. Again, this is obvious, but our own self-hating elites have lied to us for decades, telling young people that it is critically necessary for success that they learn other languages. This is totally false, and always has been. It’s not necessary for economic success; in the late 1980s and early 1990s,

you may remember, we were told we must learn Japanese to compete in the global future. But competition is not the core reason we're told it's necessary. It's because our ruling classes have the strange belief that Europeans are our betters and we must signal our obeisance to the new globalist order by learning the languages of others. For cultural refinement, or to pick up French girls, it might be useful to read French poetry, but for most utilitarian communication, the reality is that all educated Europeans and Asians learn English, because it is the *lingua franca* for the world, and probably still will be in five hundred years, so there is no practical imperative to learn anything but English.

Most of all, Lee is retrograde about immigration and so-called multicultural societies. Lee's words are often cherry-picked to suggest that he thinks that immigration is a good thing, and a multicultural society an awesome one. But that's not what he thinks at all. Instead, he thinks a rarefied slice of approved foreigners can benefit a society, if they don't cause trouble. He says explicitly that the United States does a great job of mixing in such people in Silicon Valley—but beyond that, "Multiculturalism will destroy America," because "large numbers of Mexicans and others from South and Central America will continue to come to the U.S. and spread their culture across the whole of the country," and they will then "breed faster than the WASPs," destroying the superior American culture. He also says that Americans came to an "empty continent and made the best of it"—because we "killed the Red Indians and took over the land and the buffaloes." I don't think Lee is going to be invited to any American college campuses anytime soon.

There are also worthwhile comments uttered in passing, such as "I think you are a born leader or you are not a leader." This is God's truth, but something universally denied by "educators" in America. For years, especially in business school, I had nothing but contempt for the many offered classes that purported to teach leadership (or negotiation, a closely related talent that also cannot be taught). They even pretended they could teach leadership to lawyers, even though a lawyer's entire training, and the personality of almost all lawyers, is to be risk-averse, to avoid making decisions and let others make those decisions, the very antithesis of leadership. (That's why law firms where lawyers run the business side are always incompetently run.) Teaching leadership is a total waste of time, and Lee saw that, to his credit.

But none of this is earthshattering, and Lee only incompletely addresses the most critical matter of all for Singapore, its looming population collapse. He accurately notes that “Demography, not destiny, will be the most critical factor for security and growth in the 21st century.” Immigration (of the right types of people only) isn’t enough; “much more active government involvement in encouraging or discouraging procreation may be necessary.” Yes, but Lee, however, totally fails to understand why people in modern societies have stopped having children. In fact, almost all of his talk about children is in the Russian context, not the Singaporean. He primly instructs Vladimir Putin that pessimism is the key Russian problem, and that he needs to “give Russians a hopeful outlook” so they will stop drinking and have children, because, by supposed contrast, “In America, people are optimistic and say I will bring a child into the world,” but in Russia, where prosperity fluctuates with oil prices, they are not optimistic. This is very dumb, and shows how limited Lee is as a thinker. The real reason that every advanced society, and most not advanced societies, in the world have a grossly inadequate number of children is not pessimism about the future, but a direct result of what Lee tried to achieve his whole life—increasing wealth, combined with what seems to necessarily come along with that, increasing selfishness and demands for autonomy, in that people will trade children for toys and pleasure, and closely tied pernicious phenomena, most of all that modern Western society denigrates women as mothers and celebrates them as spinster wine aunts, consumers increasing GDP while buying useless trinkets to fill the shelves of their sad, empty houses. In fact, disproving Lee entirely, the Russian birth rate has rebounded in recent years, from 1.16 to 1.75. Singapore’s has not.

Population, though, is merely the most glaring manifestation of Lee’s blinders. He is a technocrat, and technocracy is completely inadequate as the sole basis for societal flourishing, but he cannot see this. Lee’s goal is “a happy and healthy nation, a society in which people find fulfillment.” But by fulfillment, he means GDP per capita, nothing else. Singapore has no high culture, and that is the way Lee likes it. He rejects any role for using brains to study “the great books, classical texts, and poetry.” Rather, a smart person’s brains must be used only for “capturing and discovering new knowledge, applying himself in research and development, management and marketing, banking and finance, and

the myriad of new subjects that need to be mastered.” The only “values” that really matter are “a spirit of innovation and enterprise” that “leads to high productivity.” The limitations of this have now become clear in Singapore—a society that, like many others today, will not exist in a hundred years, having extinguished itself by offering no future, no greatness, to its people.

So I see zero evidence that Singapore’s path is of much use in restructuring our own society. To really answer if this is correct, it would be helpful to have a more in-depth understanding of Singapore. I have a copy of Lee’s memoirs, which might help, but any autobiography is certain to be an incomplete view. But from what I can see, all Singapore’s, and Lee’s, success shows is a man who, lucky in his time and place, took the blessings of Western technology and, combined those with a sub-type of Chinese culture, embodying Lee’s claimed “Asian values,” to create a brief efflorescence, today already past its apogee. A technocracy can only work for a small, fairly homogeneous state where either everyone is intelligent, or where the ruling class is intelligent and the rest of society does not demand unearned rights or interfere in governance. Such is, or was, Singapore. It does not work for a large, heterogeneous state like ours, especially where a long line of insufferable, but well-organized, groups ever more aggressively demands handouts based on their identity without offering any merit in exchange. Asian values may have made Singapore wealthy; they did not make it great, and neither Singapore, nor any other Asian country, has ever been, or likely will be, great, in the sense of remaking and advancing the world, as Europeans did. Sorry, multiculturalists. Venice is a better model for our future. Yes, I’ll take Singapore’s elitism, its industrial policy, and its intolerance of sexual deviancy. But Singapore didn’t invent any of those, and I don’t see what else it has to offer.