Fear and loathing of Malaysia

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of Singapore’s expulsion from Malaysia. Here, he reveals his own personal anguish and guilt at having “let down several million people in Malaysia, immigrant Chinese and Indians, Eurasians, and even some Malays. I had aroused their hopes, and they had joined people in Singapore in resisting Malay hegemony, the root cause of our dispute.”

In fact, more than half the book is not about the Malaysia-Singapore divorce. As a university student in Singapore from 1956 to 1960, this reviewer found most fascinating Lee’s recollection of his own political evolution. Students like myself saw the young Lee emerge as a political giant. He was certainly unorthodox, though greatly admired even by the English-educated whom he deemed to be not a significant factor in Singapore politics.

Singapore indeed was his first battlefield. He meticulously strategized about capturing power from the English-educated political elite, and found that to be easy. He out-manoeuvred the likes of John Laycock, David Marshall and Lim Yew Hock and, in 1959, applied the coup de grace.

The Chinese-educated, either hard-core communists or palpable pro-communist elements, were a different proposition. He had to flirt with them, trying at each stage to outfox them even though the odds were heavily stacked against him because of Singapore’s demographic structure. For all his consummate skill and careful preparation, he found himself in danger of losing the battle in his endeavour to create an independent, socialist-democratic Singapore. He turned to the Federation of Malaya for support despite knowing that it would be a monumental task, based on historical experience, to ride the tide of Malay nationalism.

He tried every strategy he could devise to assuage the intensity of that nationalism. He learned Malay, appointed a Malay as the first president of Singapore, made Malay the national language of Singapore, and had a Malay compose Singapore’s national anthem—"Majilah Singapura." On occasions, after the formation of Malaysia, he even accompanied Tunku Abdul Rahman, Malaysia’s prime minister and a soccer fanatic, to watch football matches. But there was one point he could not concede: Malay dominance in the enlarged Federation of Malaysia.

The Singapore Story is Lee Kuan Yew’s personal story. It is not merely his perception of events and developments in which he was involved. It also reveals his thoughts, feelings, aspirations and indefatigable struggle. He had a lofty mission in life and set out to seek its fulfilment. The present memoirs stop at 1965. The next volume, which he has promised his readers, will likely be very different. Unlike the first, it will be a success story—the final defeat of the Communists and the creation of modern Singapore.

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Fear and Loathing Of Malaysia

Little wonder Singapore’s Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew’s memoirs have already aroused criticism from Malaysia’s Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad. Lee’s less-than-flattering reflections on the failed political merger between Singapore and Malaysia—and about some of his neighbours’ leaders and the political system over which they preside—are clear. The city-state’s founding father also lays the blame for separation squarely on the federal government.

Yet, if the memoirs magnify diplomatic tension between the two countries, they also help explain it. Lee’s account of the problems during the merger remind us there are important differences between Southeast Asia’s various political systems and cultures. Ironically, as the leading proponent of the Asian-values mythology, Lee usually downplays such regional variations. The memoirs also remind us that some of the central protagonists at the time are still on the scene.

Lee believes the merger was doomed before it started—even if he wasn’t able to read the signs at the time. Put simply, communalism was so institutionalized in Malaya that it rendered a “Malaysian Malaysia” unachievable. Lee’s aspirations threatened a political division of labour based on ethnicity that not only suited Malay rulers, but an ethnic-Chinese elite. Political appeals to Malays outside Singapore were always going to be out of bounds. According to Lee, his speech in federal parliament in May 1965 was decisive in convincing Tunku Abdul Rahman, Malaysia’s first prime minister, of the urgent need for separation.

Reacting to Mahathir’s charges that the People’s Action Party was “positively anti-Malay,” Lee questioned the “obscenarian doctrine” of special Malay rights on class grounds, contrasting the lot of privileged and underprivileged Malays. According to Lee, the United Malays National Organization’s “ultras” were desperate to thwart the PAP, linking them to communal riots in Singapore in 1964.

Despite advocacy of a multiracial approach to politics and occasional recourse to class rhetoric in that period, Lee makes some interesting but seemingly contradictory generalizations about the ethnic Chinese as a political category. In recounting the PAP’s domestic struggle with the communists, Lee depicts them as fence-sitters, “like the Chinese-speaking everywhere in Southeast Asia,” trying to as certain which way the political winds are blowing before deciding their allegiance. Later he contrasts the ethnic Chinese of Singapore, who “would not be brow-beaten,” with their more compliant Malaysian counterparts.

Given contemporary events, Lee’s observations take on a special significance: “The PAP leaders were not like the politicians in Malaya. Singapore ministers were not pleasure-loving, nor did they seek to enrich themselves. Umno had developed to a fine art the practice of accommodating Indian ministers in Malaya who proved troublesome... we always acted constitutionally and were difficult to fix.” Not that the Malaysians didn’t try, Lee says, citing an alleged overture by Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak to Singapore counterpart Goh Keng Swee. The Asian crisis has provided the catalyst to call for an end to crony capitalism and corruption—new catch-phrases of ousted deputy Anwar Ibrahim and his supporters. Malaysia’s leaders will find this contrast all the more uncomfortable.

Conspicuously absent from Lee’s memoirs is any acknowledgement of influences by previous political theorists or philosophers. By his own account, Lee’s guiding beliefs and understandings are grounded firmly in concrete experience—one more important than the three-and-a-half years of Japanese occupation of Singapore. It

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was this experience which he contends gave him "vivid insights into the behaviour of human beings and human societies, their motivations and impulses."

An apparently bleak view of human nature emerged, and one not far removed from classical conservatism. Among other things, it drew Lee to an appreciation of the utility of fear and punishment to contain crime. Not surprisingly, Lee's subsequent endeavours to achieve a more egalitarian society departed significantly from orthodox social-democratic models—something the next volume of his memoirs can be expected to detail.

Lee took instruction from demonstrably effective practice, not abstract ideals. From the Malayan Communist Party he borrowed techniques in political mobilization and, despite his stated aversion to Leninist methods, he crafted one of the most successful Leninist parties of this century. From the Catholic church he borrowed the system for replacing the elite: Just as the Pope was elected by cardinals who had themselves been appointed by earlier popes, so, too, the PAP executive would appoint cadres to decide on the executive.

Despite Lee's emphasis on the experimental, a doctoral thesis by Michael Barr argues that the senior minister's world view and political philosophy have been decisively influenced by Arnold Toynbee's 1935 book, A Study of History. Having been exposed as an adolescent to the Raffles Institution's "near blind faith in scientific development and its role in mankind's progress," Toynbee's notions of social change had resonant tones for Lee, according to Barr. Toynbee was thus quoted in cabinet meetings from the earliest days of PAP government. Barr links Lee's progressivism to defining elements of his political views, including notions of elitism and cultural superiority.

Lee's memoirs not only offer an insider's account of controversial events and struggles; they reveal much about Lee's political education and method. However invaluable and important these memoirs are, like the memoirs of any significant political figure, they will have to be read in conjunction with interpretations of other political players and analysts. The work would have been even more compelling had there been critical reflection on the ideas and influences that shaped his politics beyond his own political experience.

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God's Thousand Faces

The exhibition's goal is to illustrate how Buddhist ideas and aesthetics travelled—and were transformed through those travels. "There is nothing new about cosmopolitanism or globalization," Ghose, an associate professor in the University of Hong Kong's fine arts department, argues. And the works—from India, Sri Lanka, Burma, Cambodia, Indonesia, Thailand, Nepal, Tibet, the caves of the northwest province of Xinjiang and other parts of China—vividly illustrate this: In them, elements of Persian, Greek, Roman, Central Asian, Southeast Asian and Indian cultures are apparent.

Take, for example, Vajrapani, protector of Buddha. A greenish-grey schist sculpture from 1st-century A.D. Gandhara, the area where modern-day Afghanistan, Pakistan and northwest India meet, depicts a warrior who clearly resembles the mythological hero Hercules. From his massive beard, mane-like head of hair and rippling toga with lion-fur trimmings to his stocky, muscular legs and trademark club, he's definitely more Greco than Ganges.

Why a Greek hero in the heart of South Asia? The answer, according to art historians, is simple: This incarnation of

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