

# LEE KUAN YEW

## BLAZING THE FREEDOM TRAIL

It was the 1950s, a tumultuous time for post-war Singapore. Disgruntled with the British ruling power, anti-colonial forces were calling for independence. The main contenders were the People's Action Party led by nationalist Lee Kuan Yew and the Communist Party of Malaya headed by Chin Peng.

Displaying their political acumen, Lee and his team overcame all adversities to win the people's mandate. Lee, who became Singapore's first Prime Minister in 1959, orchestrated the movement to build a prosperous Singapore. When he stepped down in 1990, he left behind an efficient government, world-class infrastructure and a thriving economy. When he died in 2015, he left behind a shining Singapore as his legacy.

This book is an updated and revised edition of *Days of Thunder: How Lee Kuan Yew Blazed the Freedom Trail* (2005). It explores Lee's leadership during Singapore's early years and the question: Could Singapore have achieved as much without Lee Kuan Yew, the founding father of modern Singapore?

Anthony Oei

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FREEDOM TRAIL

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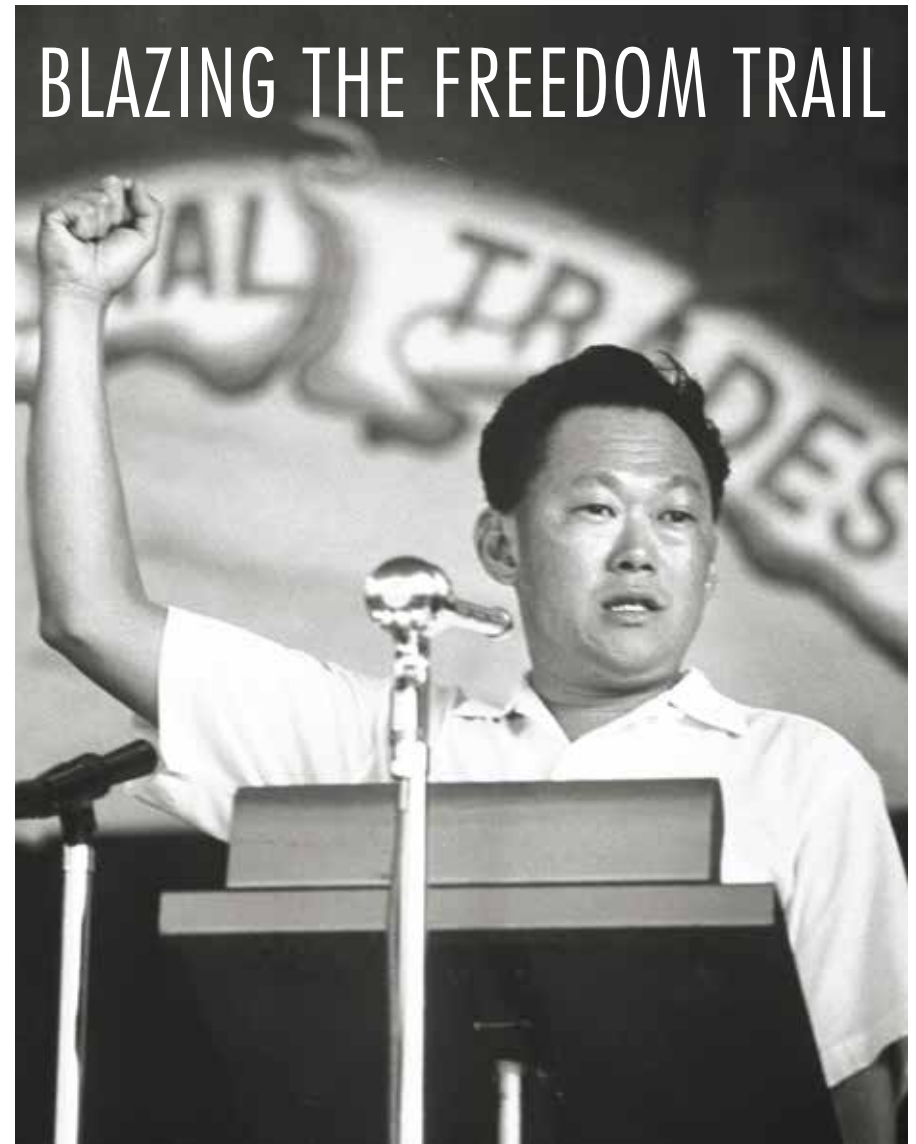
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## BLAZING THE FREEDOM TRAIL



*Exploring the leadership of Singapore's  
first Prime Minister from 1959 to 1990*

*Anthony Oei*

For Review only

**LEE KUAN YEW**  
**BLAZING THE FREEDOM TRAIL**

*The verdict of the people is a terrifying thing.*

*Life should be more than just existence, the business of making a living. This is the new way of life.*

*To have a better life, all must play good music.*

*I know in 10, 15 years, I can breed a generation that can man missiles.*

*Your child has a brain bigger than the biggest computer man has ever built.*

*They would never know what they did to a whole generation like me. But they made me and a whole generation like me determined to fight for freedom—freedom from servitude and foreign domination. I did not enter politics. They brought politics upon me.*

*How long will it take before we become all Singaporeans? I have no idea. It will improve with another generation.*

*I am on parade all the time. Why need I be a dictator?  
They come to violent ends.*

*No, no. I have a pretty scarred hide.  
I am accustomed to arrows and bolts of lightning.*

*To build a country, you need passion. You will trample over us, over our dead bodies. We dug our toes in, we built a nation.*

*And even from my sick bed, even if you are going to lower me into the grave and I feel that something is going wrong, I'll get up.*

*Your future really depends on how you make of it.  
The government can give you the framework, and give expression to the will of the people, but the people must have the will. If you do not have it, there is nothing a government can do.*

*I shall now play goalkeeper...But the goalkeeper should not wait till the ball gets into the penalty area.  
That's dangerous. Keep it outside the penalty area.*

*Eat less than you want to. Work more than you need to. Sleep well.*

*I used to believe that you can learn two languages at the same time, whatever your IQ. I was wrong.*

*I think we made a mistake in not building a Formula One course... I think I was dim-witted then.*

*All I can say is, I did my best.*

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*To my daughters,  
Charmaine Tsu Min, Michelle Yu Min and  
Dawn Li Min, members of the younger generation  
in whose hands lies the future of Singapore.*

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## PROLOGUE

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Among the former colonies, Singapore is one of the most successful in nation-building after gaining full self-government from the British in 1959 and independence in 1965. The recipe is, to put it simply, a government that delivered and continues to deliver.

In the first 31 years of nationhood, the government was led by an indomitable Cambridge-educated lawyer, Lee Kuan Yew. Lee was the nation's first Prime Minister. When he stepped down in 1990, he left behind a system of a clean and efficient government, world-class infrastructure and a business-friendly economy, which he termed "gold standards".

His successor, Goh Chok Tong, a former senior civil servant and managing director of a shipping company, continued to build Singapore up in the next 14 years, with Lee serving as

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his Senior Minister. Singapore's future now lies in the hands of Goh's former deputy, Lee Hsien Loong, who assumed office on 12 August 2004. He is a top Cambridge graduate in mathematics. Goh was Number 2 as Senior Minister, while Lee Kuan Yew was adviser with the title of Minister Mentor.

Lee Hsien Loong's appointment in this second leadership change is historic for Singapore for he is Lee Kuan Yew's son. What had been widely expected has come true. He had been Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister, discharging his responsibilities creditably. How has he been performing as Prime Minister? Naturally, one would compare him with his father. But comparisons are misguided because the missions and the circumstances are totally different.

His father lived in the days of thunder, the most turbulent and dangerous period in Singapore's history. His mission was to demolish British colonial rule, communism and communalism, and deliver Singapore from want, servitude and danger. He was the founding father and the master craftsman of modern Singapore. The social revolution he led successfully and his prodigious achievements in nation-building remain an open book for it is an unforgettable story.

In stark contrast, today's Singapore is relatively peaceful and prosperous. Lee Hsien Loong inherited the "gold standards" set by his father and fine-tuned by Goh Chok Tong. Thus, his task is to propel the nation to higher levels of growth and ensure its security. He should be judged by what he can achieve to satisfy present needs under present conditions. So far, he has shown he has steel in him.

Following the death of Lee Kuan Yew, it is timely to recount the

full story of the social revolution—the basis of modern Singapore—and the resulting socio-economic development that has taken place.

The anti-colonial battle began after World War II. Lee Kuan Yew and his team vied with other freedom fighters who included the communists directed by Chin Peng of the Malayan Communist Party, later renamed Communist Party of Malaya (CPM). The campaign convulsed the nation and exploded into the blackest days in Singapore history, with frequent industrial strikes, violent street demonstrations, riots and racial conflicts which left many dead and injured, and properties damaged.

As the dust settled, it was Lee Kuan Yew who emerged triumphant. Lee was Secretary-General of the People's Action Party (PAP). The party won the historic general election for a fully elected self-government in 1959 and formed the government that ended 140 years of British rule.

As Prime Minister, Lee orchestrated the movement to build a prosperous and peaceful Singapore. In one generation, he and his team elevated the nation from the Third World to the First World league. They also moulded a new Singaporean as an essential part of the nation-building process, an identity that Singaporeans are proud to own.

The road to independence was long, arduous, traumatic and dangerous. The most traumatic was the issue of merger with Malaya. Reunion was the PAP's greatest political ambition as it sought a democratic, socialist and non-communist Singapore. The most dangerous enemy was the CPM because its goal was a communist Malaya that would include Singapore, and it opposed reunification. At one stage, the CPM even tried to control the PAP to use it as a



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front. The clash of ideologies turned into a cloak-and-dagger battle. Displaying their calibre and political acumen, Lee and his men overcame these adversities.

Lee had confessed that fighting the communists was the most perilous task in his life and that of his fellow freedom-fighters. They faced personal risks for the communists were not “to be trifled with”. They did not fully realise the frightening extent of the hazards until they were in the heat of battle. He recalled that “we were young and naïve” and that he would not want to run through the fire again as “it is too dangerous”. If his team had lost, “they would have pulled our fingernails out”.

What made them go into battle then? It was the unquenchable desire to live as a free people. They felt duty-bound to realise that dream and they pursued it with passion and a tenacity of purpose. Like Lee, his comrades were dedicated, committed, trustworthy, gallant and fearless. They were stalwarts like Dr Toh Chin Chye, Dr Goh Keng Swee, S Rajaratnam, Ong Pang Boon and Othman Wok. They comprised the Old Guard who laid the foundation that built a nation of international repute.

Lee was a formidable and combative politician, and “the stainless steel of frightening competence”, as he was once described. However, not everyone in Singapore or elsewhere likes him. There are bouquets and brickbats. His detractors, while acknowledging his leadership qualities and accomplishments, regard him as arrogant, domineering, autocratic and dictatorial when he was captain of the ship. Cynics even say he built a Lee Kuan Yew cult, that Lee Kuan Yew is Singapore and Singapore is Lee Kuan Yew, that he created a climate of fear and a nanny state, and that he should have retired

after stepping down instead of remaining in the government.

In some ways his critics are not off-beam. The late Minister Mentor is still very much in the picture and is as controversial as ever. During his premiership, he governed with a firm hand and formulated many unpopular policies, causing much unhappiness among Singaporeans. There are also some Western journalists who have a penchant for aiming pot shots at him, even to this day. They would poke and probe, trying to find the skeletons in the cupboard that would embarrass him and put him in a bad light. Certain books that have been written about him can only be described as a demolition exercise.

But Lee made no apologies for the tough stand he adopted during his long stewardship. His political philosophy was epitomised in the following statements he made during the Global Brand Forum in Singapore in December 2003:

I belong to the old school. I believe that it is better to be feared than to be loved. My younger colleagues sometimes want to be both. I decided a long time ago that popularity is something volatile. They feel good, they get their bonuses, you're popular. They're squeezed, there's a recession, you're blamed for it; your stocks go down. And the key is not to hold an election when people are not feeling good.

I do not believe that popular government means you have to be popular when you govern. I think the best thing to do is to do all the unpopular things when you are governing so that at the end of your term, you have the choice of a date when you feel that they will

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be most grateful that you've done all these unpopular things and they vote for you.

I don't know about branding. I do know that you need a good reputation, not just outside Singapore but within Singapore, with your own people. This is a place that works, that must work and continue to work, because it is based on principles. And the first principle is nobody owes us a living.

Whatever one's opinion of him, Lee Kuan Yew stood alone in Singapore's political theatre. He was a legend in his time and a symbol of Singapore's success. Of course, he had his successes and failures. Arguably, Lee could be compared with other giants of men, like Dr Sun Yat Sen and Mao Zedong of China, Tunku Abdul Rahman of Malaysia, Mahatma Gandhi of India, Sukarno of Indonesia and Nelson Mandela of South Africa, whose names still ring a bell across the globe for their great deeds. They are a special breed of leaders who appear but once in a blue moon.

An interesting fact is that Lee and many in the PAP leadership, such as Dr Toh Chin Chye, Dr Goh Keng Swee and S Rajaratnam, were English-educated and Straits-born, "Straits-born" being a common definition given to those born either in Singapore or Malaya. They were descendants of the early immigrants and were considered sons of the soil, deserving the term "nationalists". As events have shown, they proved their strength and capability against the British.

Turning back the pages of history, it is also interesting to find that the anti-colonial movement was not of post-World War II origin.

The script was first written in the early 20th century by Chinese business and community leaders. Coincidentally, they were likewise English-educated Straits-born.

In his book *Chinese Political Leadership and Power in Colonial Singapore*, Dr C F Yong says these Straits-born Chinese were the dominant socio-economic force in those days. They initiated the demands for better living conditions, better education, more employment opportunities and improvements in other domestic matters for their community.

These pioneers included physician Dr Lim Boon Keng, lawyers Sir Song Ong Siang, Wee Swee Teow, S Q Wong and T W Ong, and merchants Tan Jiak Kim, Seah Liang Seah and Lee Choon Guan. In 1900, they formed the Straits Chinese British Association (SCBA), the forerunner of today's Peranakan Association, to strengthen their position. Dr Yong notes that the British often nominated them as unofficial members of the Straits Settlements Legislative Council, Municipal Commission and other government bodies to allow them to participate in local affairs.

One of their greatest breakthroughs, after years of agitation in the Legislative Council, was opening the door for Singaporeans to work in the Straits Settlements Civil Service, hitherto shut to non-Europeans. In the 1920s and 1930s, some of the SCBA leaders were even bold enough as to talk about a self-governing Malaya. They wanted the people to play a greater role in running their country.

Dr Yong adds that in the 1930s also, other SCBA leaders such as merchant Tay Lian Teck and physician Dr Lim Han Hoe, fought to adopt English as the *lingua franca*, establish a university, build a technical and agricultural institute, start the teaching of science

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in grants-in-aid schools, and open an engineering faculty at Raffles College. As one can see, many of these proposals have materialised into reality.

The Chinese immigrants of yesteryear played little or no part because they were only sojourners, treating Singapore as their second home. They were more preoccupied with the revolutionary movement in their fatherland led by Dr Sun Yat Sen, the Father of the Chinese Republic. Therefore, as Dr Yong says in his book, they kept their Chinese nationalist fervour alive in Singapore. In any case, “the British paternal rule offered little opportunity for the creation and emergence of a Singaporean nationalism with a Singapore loyalty as its objective”. That gave these sojourners little or no prospect for their socio-economic advancement in the country.

However, while both the SCBA and the PAP had the same objective, that is, improving the people’s lives, there were two distinct differences between them. First, the former held the British in high esteem and pledged its loyalty to the Crown. Secondly, the association worked for its own people, since it was an exclusive ethnic body and not a multi-racial organisation, although the results of its programmes indirectly benefitted the other communities.

On the other hand, the PAP pledges its loyalty to Singapore and is multi-racial. It seeks to create a just, fair and equal society for all. Its members comprise Chinese, Malays, Indians, Eurasians and others. During the social revolution, they pulled together to demolish British rule, the communists and the communalists.

Dr Yong does not mention whether the pre-war Straits-born “revolutionaries” pursued their aspiration for a self-governing Malaya. Presumably they made no further headway, even if they

had wanted to, because of the war erupting in Asia in 1937 when Japan attacked China, followed by the war in Europe in 1939 that culminated in World War II.

Nonetheless, it can be said that the post-war freedom fighters picked up the thread left behind by their pre-war predecessors, whether or not they were aware of the political consciousness brewing in those days. Certainly, the pioneering Straits-born Chinese leaders of the 19th century and the early half of the 20th century merit a prominent place in the history books for planting the political seeds.

Travelling farther back in time, one makes yet another interesting discovery. Singapore civilisation began at least 700 years ago, and not after Stamford Raffles’ arrival in 1819, as people had been led to believe. Archaeological excavations underway for some time have unearthed ancient artefacts that provide concrete evidence of that. These include Chinese coins from the Tang and Sung dynasties, shards of exquisite porcelain from the Yuan and Ming dynasties, even beads from India.

Their existence suggests that Singapore was a vibrant ancient city, teeming with life and trade as early as the 14th century, transacting business with these regional countries. Little is yet known about what happened in the ensuing centuries. The Singapore History Museum, which is spearheading the archaeological research, is continuing to support the diggings to get to the bottom of it.

There is some indication, though, that life and trade had continued after the 14th century. For when Raffles set foot on 29 January 1819, he was reported to have been impressed with what he saw and with the potential. This would seem to suggest

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that the island was more than a fishing village or mud flats then. Furthermore, it has been reported that Singapore was earning revenue by 1820. Can anyone transform an island of mud flats into a trading settlement and make it revenue-generating all in one year?

The assumption that a settlement existed when Raffles landed is reinforced by the fact that the Lieutenant-Governor of Bencoolen and an agent of the East India Company, concluded a preliminary treaty the day after his arrival with Temenggong Abdu'r Rahman, the *de facto* ruler of Singapore, to set up a trading post for the British and open a new trade route to China. About a month later, a formal treaty was concluded with the Temenggong and Sultan Hussein of Johor, the *de jure* ruler of Singapore.

Subsequent treaties made Singapore a British possession and eventually a Crown colony under the jurisdiction of the Colonial Office in London, along with Malacca and Penang, the two British settlements in Malaya.

Raffles is held up as the icon of Singapore, perhaps overly done. His name is all over the place—on land, sea and air. A local real estate company has even named one of its projects in Shanghai after him. The gospel is that without him, there would have been no Singapore. Those who subscribe to this belief ignore or minimise the solid contributions of the pioneering Chinese, Indian and other immigrants. They deserve more recognition than they are getting.

Singapore, indeed, is a nation rich in history with enormous potential. The battle for independence had been worth the pains and sacrifices. Singaporeans of all races are now in sole possession of it, a nation with the prospects of more accomplishments as it entrenches itself deeper in the global grid under its own power.

The story of Singapore's social revolution is a typical story of oppressed people whose innate desire for their inalienable right to self-determination cannot be extinguished once the fire is lit, and of outstanding leaders appearing at the most critical moments to guide them to victory. It is a story of what a free people can achieve with good governance. Indisputably, Lee Kuan Yew and the Old Guard accomplished immeasurably more for Singapore in one generation than the British did in 140 years. Singapore civilisation, which began at least 700 years ago, is all the richer for it.

It is a saga worth telling and preserving for posterity. The point at issue is whether Singapore could have achieved as much without Lee Kuan Yew, the founding father and master craftsman of modern Singapore. He was the right man at the right place and time. So totally dedicated was he that he served Singapore to his last breath. When he died from severe pneumonia in the early hours of Monday, 23 March 2015, at the age of 91, he left behind a shining Singapore as his legacy.

August 9, 2015 marks a momentous milestone in Singapore's modern history as the day it celebrates its 50th National Day. It was a cruel twist of fate that the founding father who proclaimed the nation's birth at City Hall 50 years ago died before the celebrations of this golden day.

Anthony Oei

June 2015

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Power is of two kinds. One is obtained by the fear of punishment and the other by acts of love. Power based on love is a thousand times more effective and permanent than the one derived from fear of punishment.

– *Mahatma Gandhi*

## 01

### WHEN A HAKKA CAME TO TOWN

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Singapore owes much of its early economic development to Chinese and other immigrants who came here centuries ago for greener pastures. Those with capital and enterprise set up businesses and many of them succeeded and became wealthy. Those without money sought work in firms, some of whom later charted their own destiny. Others were indentured to toil in menial tasks. Many of these immigrants married local women, producing descendants who are now part of the local community. Whether it was talent, entrepreneurship, capital or sweat, their contributions were welcome.

But one 19th century Chinese immigrant by the name of Lee Bok Boon contributed more than that. He was to become the progenitor of two prime ministers—Lee Kuan Yew and his son,

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Lee Hsien Loong. Of Hakka stock, a tough tribe originating in northern and central China, he arrived in Singapore in 1863 and married Seow Huan Neo, a local-born with Hakka ancestry. From there, the family tree goes down to Lee Hoon Leong, Lee Chin Koon and Lee Kuan Yew. Lee Bok Boon later returned to China and became a mandarin.

Born in 1871 and educated at Raffles Institution, Lee Kuan Yew's paternal grandfather, Lee Hoon Leong, started work as a pharmacist. Then he joined Heap Eng Moh SS Co Ltd, a leading shipping line operating between Singapore and Indonesia. The reputable and successful company was majority-owned by Indonesian Sugar King Oei Tiong Ham, one-time Chinese Mayor of the central Java city of Semarang. Lee was a shrewd businessman and earned Oei's trust, so much so that he was given power of attorney over his boss' affairs. In Semarang, he met and married local-born Ko Liem Nio. Their son—Lee Kuan Yew's father—Lee Chin Koon, was born in 1903 in that city. His parents brought him back to Singapore when he was a baby. An old boy of St Joseph's Institution and a former Shell Company depot superintendent, Lee Chin Koon married Chua Jim Neo, eldest child of Singaporean Chua Kim Teng and Indonesian-born Hakka Neo Ah Soon.

Like Lee Hoon Leong, Chua Kim Teng was a successful businessman, making his fortune from rubber and property. He was vice president of Cheng Kee Bean Association, a Chinese society founded in 1893. Both Lee and Chua shot to prominence in business and community circles, to the extent that they merited a place in the pages of Sir Song Ong Siang's monumental *One Hundred Years' History of the Chinese in Singapore*. They shared the honour with

other eminent personalities of the day such as physician Dr Lim Boon Keng and businessmen Tan Jiak Kim, Tan Tock Seng, Tan Kah Kee, Eu Tong Sen, Choo Kim Kiat and Lim Nee Soon.

The marriage of Lee Kuan Yew's parents was match-made following the common custom in those days. As it happened, the arranged union was a propitious one and their son's birth on 16 September 1923 was, in retrospect, a historic moment for Singapore. The Lee and Chua families were not to know this, of course. They only knew the birth was heaven-sent as he was the first-born and he was a boy, a most precious gift in the eyes of traditional Chinese families. Swelling with pride and joy, paternal grandfather Lee Boon Leong decided the child should be educated to become the equal of any Englishman, that is, the model of perfection.

Grandfather Lee was very much Westernised, with a great admiration for English conduct and dress code, like most of the English-educated in Singapore. Nevertheless, he upheld his ethnic roots and values. So he asked a good friend who was a specialist in auspicious Chinese names to select the most felicitous one for his grandson. The friend, an intellectual, chose "Kuan Yew", meaning "the light that shines far and wide". Being pro-English, grandfather Lee added the English name of Harry. Then a soothsayer friend predicted that the boy would one day cross a big ocean and become famous on his return.

Whether or not any human being has powers to foretell and determine the future by gazing into the crystal ball, or whether some things are pre-ordained, the light did shine far and wide. Unfortunately, grandfather Lee did not live to see his grandson become Prime Minister of Singapore, as he died during the Japanese

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military occupation. He would have been the proudest patriarch in the land.

Certainly, Mr and Mrs Lee Chin Koon were proud to have earned the rare distinction of being the parents of a prime minister. But relatives say Mr Lee, who had four siblings in Siok Neo, Chin Tong, Wee Neo and Kim Neo, was not one to strut around with his nose in the air. Outwardly, he remained humble and unobtrusive, and lived his normal life. He was reticent about himself and his renowned offspring, once telling a nephew: “I don’t like publicity.”

Lee Chin Koon, despite his seemingly reserved nature, was friendly, jovial and got on well with relatives and friends, although his son revealed that he was a tough disciplinarian in the family. He loved music—one of his favourite songs was *Hello, Dolly*. Younger sister Wee Neo to whom he was particularly close, offered her own favourite, *Ramona*. Whenever they met at family gatherings, for example, the two would link arms and burst into this haunting ballad. He also relished his sister’s *poh piah*, a Chinese-style spring roll common in Singapore.

In contrast, wife Chua Jim Neo was the loquacious, outspoken, aggressive, determined and resourceful type. She was a model mother. She devoted her life to her children’s education and welfare, and was the driving force behind them. An intelligent woman, she always strove for excellence and perfection. One incident epitomised this quality. Once when a relative fell seriously ill, she advised her: “Get the best medical attention. Never settle for anything less. If the best fails, you get satisfaction.” As Lee Kuan Yew later told a writer, his mother had a great influence on him and that “she was a tower of strength, she encouraged me”.

Lee Kuan Yew was born at 92 Kampong Java Road, a rambling, imposing bungalow belonging to maternal grandfather Chua Kim Teng situated near Newton Circus. The premises later became the Singapore headquarters of the Convent of the Good Shepherd. The building disappeared long ago under the hammer of urban redevelopment. When he was very young, Lee and his family lived with paternal grandfather Lee Hoon Leong at 147 Neil Road. The pre-war two-storey terrace house still stands today. Then they moved to Chua’s house again which by then was located at 11 Still Lane. The Great Depression, which shrank the fortunes of the Chua and Lee families, had a bearing on the changes of residence.

Lee had four siblings—Dennis Kim Yew (lawyer), Freddy Thiam Yew (stockbroker), Monica Kim Mon, and Suan Yew (medical doctor). They were closely knit, a bonding cemented while growing up, and would help one another in a crisis. Relatives say that like all good big brothers, Lee took on the responsibility of protecting his younger siblings. It would pain him when any of them faced difficulties and he would do everything possible to help and console them. It was therefore a tragic loss to him when Dennis and Freddy died on 14 December 2003 and 28 June 2012 respectively.

There are other descriptions of Lee Kuan Yew’s character as a boy circulating among relatives. One remembers him as a bright boy and strong in English, and lively and rather mischievous, given to practical pranks. Another says his leadership qualities were already apparent even at an early age. He was always at the head of his group of friends. Yet another relative paints him as a chubby, quiet and well-behaved boy, always keeping to himself. A late aunt who used to look after him loved to tell the tale that whenever paternal

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grandfather Lee Hoon Leong gave him pocket money, usually five cents, he would promise to save it so that when his grandfather grew old, he would have the money to care for him.

In the book, *Lee Kuan Yew: The Man And His Ideas*, Lee gave another side of his boyhood personality. He said:

I didn't do any work. I was too keen on running around, catching fighting fish in the drains along Changi Road, Joo Chiat Road. There was great fun also flying kites and putting thread on two poles, pounding the glue and the glass, fixing the line so you can cut the other fellow's line.

Nevertheless, Lee was an outstanding student. At the age of six, he attended a Chinese-language school, Choon Guan School at Joo Chiat, which he did not like. He then entered Telok Kurau English School where he distinguished himself and won a coveted place at Raffles Institution, the top school in the country, for his secondary education leading at that time to the Senior Cambridge certificate. He continued to excel at Raffles Institution, winning many prizes for his excellent academic results. In the Senior Cambridge final examinations in 1939, he not only topped his class but also all the students in Singapore and Malaya. Scholastic achievements aside, Lee was an excellent orator, taking part in many debates. He was also the sporting type, indulging in swimming and games such as cricket and tennis.

His ambition was to be a lawyer and he had planned to pursue this field of study in London. But the war erupting in Europe in 1939 caused him to postpone that aspiration. As the next best

thing, he accepted a scholarship to study at Raffles College, which offered the arts and the sciences. He read English, mathematics and economics. He thought he had a monopoly on these subjects, until he met his match in the form of fellow student Kwa Geok Choo. She topped the class in several term examinations, especially in English and economics, much to Lee's chagrin.

Kwa, daughter of a prominent banker with Oversea-Chinese Banking Corporation, Kwa Siew Tee, had been a top student at her *alma mater*, Methodist Girls' School. In the Senior Cambridge final examinations in 1936, she had come first in the whole of Singapore and Malaya. At Raffles College, she was contending for a Queen's scholarship for further studies in Britain. Lee, who was also vying for it, saw her as a threat to his ambition. But their college rivalry was interrupted in 1942 when Japan invaded and occupied Singapore, Malaya and several other Southeast Asian countries. Later on, this rivalry was to turn into a love match as their friendship blossomed. They were suited to each other from the beginning, although she was three years his senior.

When Japan's surrender in August 1945 ended World War II, Lee opted to start on his postponed law studies in Britain immediately, instead of wasting time by returning to Raffles College to finish his interrupted education. He applied to Middle Temple and got a place at the London School of Economics. But unhappy with student life in London, he looked around and decided on Cambridge where he got a place at Fitzwilliam College. He started his term in January 1947. He had already missed a term. Still, although he did eight terms instead of nine, he got a double first in law and a star for distinction.



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But the best news he received while in Cambridge was that girlfriend Kwa Geok Choo had won the Queen's scholarship she had competed for. She entered Girton College in Cambridge in October 1947 and also got a first in law. She was the first woman from Singapore and Malaya to achieve the scholastic feat, and in six terms instead of nine. In his memoirs, Lee Kuan Yew said that they were so much in love that they got married secretly during their student days. The wedding took place at Stratford-on-Avon, Shakespeare's birthplace. They were called to the Bar in the Middle Temple in June 1950 and returned to Singapore on 1 August. They held an official nuptial ceremony on 30 September. Working life for them began with a pupillage at Laycock & Ong, before they formed their own law firm of Lee & Lee, and before Lee Kuan Yew entered politics full-time.

Lee was a formidable politician—bold, firm, fearless and combative. He got things done. He was a hard taskmaster, expecting only the best from everyone. He was endowed with a sharp intellect, relishing intellectual discussions and debates but disliking insincerity. His grasp of events, foresight and analytical ability were legendary. A great visionary and a long-term planner, he had a satellite view of things and long-range vision, like a chess player who thinks steps ahead of his opponent. As he had said, he played chess, not draughts.

World leaders from Asia to Africa to Europe to the United States sat up and took notice of his ideas and commentaries on international events, whether or not they agreed with him. If need be, they were not abashed to seek the benefit of his advice and political experience.

One useful lesson he learnt about leadership was the necessity to surround himself with “good, strong men”. He explained in an interview with *Newsweek* in September 1989:

The stronger the men around me, the abler they are and the more expertise they bring along with them, the more likely I am to resolve the problems that confront me. To be able to use other people's strength—that's the heart of the leadership.

Although English-educated, he was fluent in Mandarin, Hokkien and Malay, tongues he had taken great pains to master to reach out in Singapore's multi-racial society. He vigorously upheld Asian values, imparting these values to his three children when they were young: Hsien Loong, now the Prime Minister; Wei Ling, Director of the National Neuroscience Institute; and Hsien Yang, Chairman of the Civil Aviation Authority of Singapore.

During his stewardship as Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew highlighted the importance of Asian values to Singaporeans constantly, stressing that these were a vital shield against the insidious onslaught of undesirable Western fads and fancies. As he had once said during a BBC interview in 1971, if he had allowed hippie and drug cults in Singapore, “we would be crawling on all fours”.

Lee had no religion. He said that he did not know whether there is God or no God. All the same, his moral values were the equal of those of God-fearing religious people, and Singaporeans are free to practice their respective religious faiths in the nation's secular society. He is on record as having said that he greatly admired the Roman Catholic Church because of its organisation

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and administration efficiency, and consistency in policies, some of the qualities that have held the religious establishment strong and cohesive for over 2,000 years. The PAP learnt something from the administrative efficiency, he said.

Another sterling quality of Lee was that he was absolutely incorruptible, a key factor which has made Singapore such a success. He inculcated this virtue in everyone in his government after becoming Prime Minister in 1959 and made it perfectly clear that he meant business. He had no hesitation in exposing and punishing corrupt officials. He even drove home the point to his own family, telling them they should not expect favours from him.

But while he was a lion in the political theatre, he was a typical family man at home who loved his family and lived a simple life with simple tastes. He once boasted: "I can live on soya beans." His home at 38 Oxley Road, which is a stone's throw away from the Istana and the famous Orchard Road shopping belt, was his haven from the rough-and-tumble of politics. He found solace in his family. He valued family life dearly, deeming it the pillar of society. His wife whom he addressed as Choo, children and grandchildren meant the world to him. In fact, Choo was his "tower of strength, giving me constant emotional and intellectual support", as he once said.

S Rajaratnam, a former Deputy Prime Minister who had held several key ministerial portfolios, once revealed: "He is completely disoriented without his wife. In his position, she is the only one he can lean on."

Here is another insight into Lee's private life given by Rajaratnam, who had known and worked with him since 1951:

He doesn't go to parties, even get-togethers with MPs. He is not that kind. If he has a dinner, it's with two or three close friends, so he doesn't mix a lot, unless it is something very official. My guess is that his close friends may not be more than a dozen. He reads a lot, but really more practical stuff because it helps him to make decisions, to understand change. He doesn't read novels. He doesn't like to read things which are not of practical value. He likes statistics. I think he enjoys them. He's a man who reads a lot about health matters. I think he even instructs doctors how to diagnose him. That's true. He carries lots of medicines for colds, coughs and so on. And I'm quite sure he's got big encyclopaedias around the place to do with health. He's not the kind of man who goes in for music. He is completely tone deaf, I think.

Lee did an excellent job in demolishing British colonial rule and delivering the people from want, servitude and danger. It had been his abiding obsession. What had lit the fire of his nationalist spirit?

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Anthony Oei was a journalist with *The Straits Times* and *Radio & Television Singapura*, public relations manager of the Economic Development Board and a writer with several advertising agencies.

This is his fourth book, a revised edition of his previous work, *Days of Thunder: How Lee Kuan Yew Blazed the Freedom Trail* (2005). That was itself a revised edition of *What If There Had Been No Lee Kuan Yew?* (1992). Another of his earlier works is *Building A New Niche: The Story of Dr David B H Chew* (1991). The latter two books were published by Heinemann Asia.

A Catholic, Oei was born in the Indonesian capital of Jakarta but spent most of his childhood days in Bogor and Sukabumi. His mother tongue is Sundanese, an Indonesian dialect. He also knows Bahasa Indonesia besides English, but no Chinese. His family

migrated to Singapore after World War II. So he lived under three different colonial rulers—the Dutch and the Japanese in Indonesia, and the British in Singapore. He was educated at St Anthony's Institute and St Joseph's Institution and became a Singapore citizen in 1957 with the passing of the Citizenship Bill that year.

His wife, Teresa, is a Singapore Peranakan whose maternal grandmother hailed from Semarang. A former convent school education officer, she knows Malay, Teochew and Hokkien, besides English. They have three daughters, all bilingual in English and Chinese and now living in their own homes, and four grand-daughters.