



Lee Kuan Yew

Born Sept. 16, 1923 in Singapore
1947 Begins studying law at Cambridge
1954 Founds People's Action Party
1959 Sworn in as Prime Minister of Singapore
1961 Economic Development Board established to attract foreign companies
1965 Singapore breaks away from Federation of Malaysia
1990 Steps down as Prime Minister and becomes Senior Minister

From sleepy colonial outpost to prosperous high-tech enclave, Singapore owes its rise to the stern, stubborn lawyer who virtually invented the place

By TERRY McCARTHY

Lee Kuan Yew towers over other Asian leaders on the international stage, yet he comes from one of Asia's smallest countries. A champion of Asian values, he is most un-Asian in his frank and confrontational style. Lee loves Singapore but has relatively few close Singaporean friends or confidants. He is a man of great intelligence, with no patience for mediocrity; a man of integrity, with an relentless urge to smite opponents; a man who devours foreign news but has little tolerance for a disrespectful press at home.

What really sets this complex man apart from Asia's other nation-builders is what he didn't do: he did not become corrupt, and he did not stay in power too long. Mao, Suharto, Marcos and Ne Win left their countries on the verge of ruin with no obvious successor. Lee left Singapore with a per capita GDP of \$14,000 (it's now \$22,000), his reputation gilt-edged and an entire tier of second-generation leaders to take over when he stepped down in 1990. Lee now basks in the wisdom of seniority, a latter-day Doge whose views continue to be sought by statesmen and commentators who travel from all over the world to pay court to him in Singapore.

It is difficult to view Lee on his own, distinct from Singapore. James Minchin, who wrote one of the most balanced biographies of Lee, titled the book *No Man Is an Island: A Study of Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew*. But in many ways Lee is the island, embodying in his character all the insecurity, vulnerability, emotional detachment, arrogance and restless energy that also characterize Singapore. His life has shaped and been shaped by the small territory at the tip of the Malaysian peninsula that he made first into a country, and then a rich country. He had

few interests outside his work. He did not even keep a diary--"To do so would have inhibited my work," he comments drily in the preface to his autobiography. His legacy is Singapore, no more and no less. He cried at its inception, in a televised press conference the day the enforced separation from Malaysia was announced in 1965. His emotions were more under control the day in 1990 when he stepped down as Prime Minister, but still he could not pry himself loose entirely, and the job of Senior Minister was created for him.

For Lee lives by the conflict theory of management: you either dominate or are dominated. He knows all about being dominated, both under British colonial rule and, more brutally, during the Japanese occupation. In his memoirs he relates how he was slapped and forced to kneel in front of a Japanese soldier for having failed to bow to the man while crossing a bridge. When it became Lee's turn to dominate, he used the full force of his personality, and the law, to fight his opponents. Some ended up in jail or bankrupt. Contradicting Lee became synonymous with being disloyal to Singapore, so hermetic was the identification between man and principality.

His ancestors were Hakka, the Chinese tribesmen who migrated from northern China to Fujian and have a reputation for pugnacity and clannishness. Lee was a third generation Straits Chinese, however, and grew up speaking Malay, English and the Cantonese dialect of his family's maid. Ever the pragmatist, he was later to teach himself Japanese, Mandarin and Hokkien as the political situation in Singapore required. During the Japanese occupation of Singapore he worked for a Japanese government propaganda department--although it has long been rumored that he was secretly passing intelligence to the British.

His education was English, first at Singapore's Raffles College, where he studied English with mathematics and economics. Then it was on to Cambridge, where he learned English law and English self-assurance, deftly taking a double first in the former and a double helping of the latter. He disliked the English while admiring their way of doing things--he had similar if more extreme feelings about the Japanese--and after Cambridge he ditched the Anglicized "Harry Lee" for his original Chinese name, though many of his English friends continue to use it to this day.

This complicated amalgam of Chinese instincts and English training came back to Singapore in 1950 to start practicing law, but he quickly found his true vocation in the tumultuous politics of the time. Fists flying, he immersed himself in a world of communists, labor organizers, gangsters and intelligence operatives, emerging in 1959 as Prime Minister--with his enemies all knocked out of the ring. That was the way he would keep things throughout his political life.

While flooring any political challenger who dared to climb through the ropes, he set about building one of Asia's economic Tigers with relentless energy. He courted multinational investors to upgrade the economy from mass manufacturing to high-tech industry. He built the region's finest infrastructure of airport, port, roads and communications networks. He established a public housing system and the Central Provident Fund savings pool that gave every citizen a stake in the system. He virtually abolished crime--and jukeboxes--and developed Asia's best health and education systems.

Lee's penchant for control extends to his own physical environment. He admits to being very sensitive to heat and humidity, has hailed the air-conditioner as one of mankind's great inventions, and likes to live his entire waking life at 22 degrees C (reduced to 19 degrees C at night while sleeping). On the rare occasions when his grand plans have failed to come off, the circumstances were usually beyond his control. He was one of the first to recognize China's potential under Deng Xiaoping's reforms. But he also learned how treacherous it is to deal with the mainland--his dream project to combine Singaporean know-how with Chinese labor in an industrial park in Suzhou foundered on the very rocks of corruption, nepotism and avarice that he had warned about all his life in other contexts.

But even as he obsessively pruned, trimmed and weeded the Garden City, Lee would never shed his lifelong sense of insecurity, his feeling that it could all be taken away with one uncontrollable spasm of social upheaval or regional chaos. Because of Singapore's size, its paucity of natural resources and the nature of its neighbors, Lee knew he could never fully be

master of the island's destiny. Perhaps this in the end is what helped to prevent Lee from becoming too autocratic, providing him with a small taste of humility every time he looked at a map and saw that the creation of one of Asia's most brilliant statesmen was, in the words of a much lesser man, just "a small red dot" in Southeast Asia.