



*Chinese, Indian, and Malay boys and girls are all represented in this throng of Singapore grade-school children. The government, in the words of Prime Minister Lee, is committed to "inculcating the virtues of group discipline and the overriding calls of society upon individual rights."*

# Singapore

In 1977, the Washington-based International Monetary Fund decided that Singapore was no longer part of the Third World and set about to strip the island city-state of its "developing country" status. With millions of dollars in multilateral loans, as well as other benefits and concessions, at stake, the Singaporeans sought (and won) a reprieve. They were, they argued, being penalized for success. With no resources except its people, Singapore today is the premier banker, refiner, manufacturer, handler, and harbormaster of Southeast Asia. In two decades, Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew has fashioned an orderly, sometimes idiosyncratic, version of modern welfare capitalism. Corruption is rare. Few go homeless, schooling and health care are available to all, and virtually everyone has enough money to buy a television set. Singaporeans pay a price, low by Third World standards, in political freedom and participation. Is the price too high? Here, historian J. Norman Parmer looks at Singapore's colonial past. Political scientist Thomas Bellows describes the mini-republic that Lee built.

## CITY OF THE LION

*by J. Norman Parmer*

For more than 2,000 years, the narrow Strait of Malacca has been among the busiest shipping routes in the world, a shallow corridor, bedeviled by shifting sandbars, between East and West. At the southern entrance to the Strait, several hundred yards off the tip of the Malay Peninsula and several leagues above the equator, lies a diamond-shaped island, roughly 30 miles across. The island has no natural resources. Its name, Singapore, means "city of the lion" in Malay, but there are no lions, and the origin of the name is obscure.

So is the history of the island before the arrival, in 1819, of Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles, then Lieutenant General of Bencoolen, a man as ambitious for Britain as he was for himself. Singapore was sparsely inhabited when Raffles first stepped ashore from the *Indiana's* longboat—home to not more than a

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few hundred fishermen and traders, ethnic Malays for the most part but even then including some Chinese on inland spice estates. There had once been a small, intermittently occupied urban settlement—known as Temasek at its birth in the 13th century and as Singapura by the time of its death three centuries later—but Raffles saw only the ruins. Chinese sources as far back as the third century A.D., and Arab sources as far back as the ninth, refer to a place that *may* be Singapore, though the association remains uncertain and not much is said about the island in any event. From later chronicles, we know that, politically, Singapore's fate was bound up with the changing fortunes of neighboring Malay, Thai, and Indonesian empires, a reality not lost on the island's leaders today.

### Going Too Far

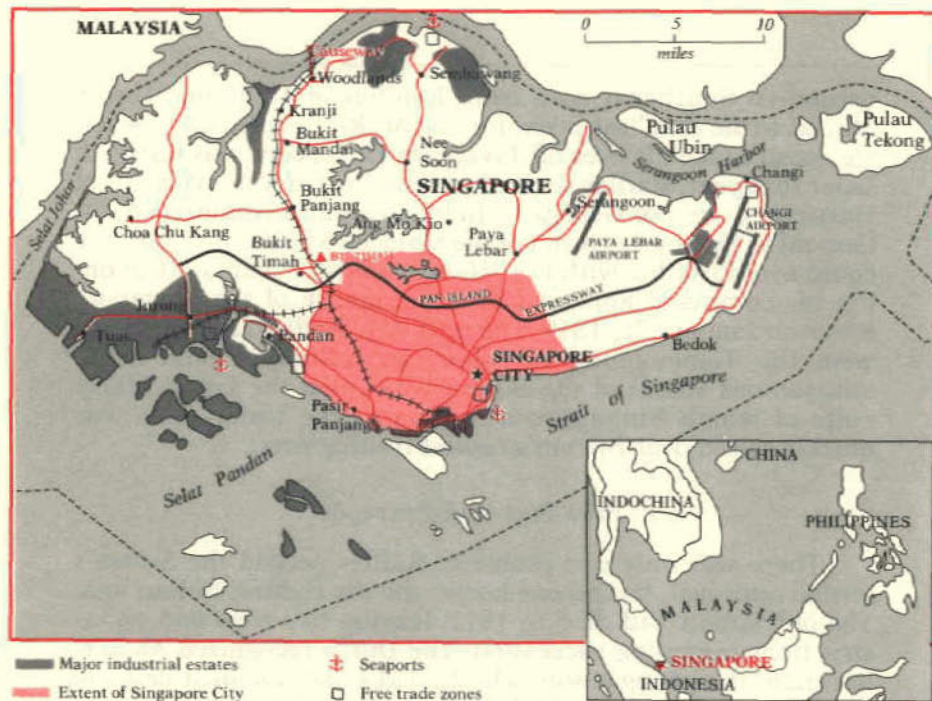
Thomas Stamford Raffles represented yet another empire. Though he could boast little formal education, Raffles was bright, perceptive, bookish, and, as he described himself, "meek as a maid." Malay scholar, botanist, historian, and founder of London's Zoological Society, he spent nearly the whole of his career in the service of the British East India Company in Southeast Asia. He sustained many bitter losses in the course of a short life—a wife and children, who died in the tropics; his plant specimens and ancient Malay manuscripts, which were lost at sea. His own health was poor, yet he drove himself with fierce energy. Raffles virtually single-handedly presented Britain with Singapore; and it became, as he foresaw that it would, one of the most valuable of all Britain's imperial possessions.

The story begins, as does so much of recorded 19th-century Asian history, in Europe. For two decades, Britain had been preoccupied with defeating or containing Napoleon, and after Waterloo, Lord Castlereagh, the British Foreign Minister, was determined to help the Kingdom of the Netherlands remain strong as a bulwark against a possibly resurgent France. For this and other reasons, the British agreed to return to the Dutch most of their former colonial possessions, seized during the Napoleonic Wars. In Asia, this meant Java (which Raffles had helped subdue in 1811 and had administered for several years) and Malacca, among other places.

Raffles was angered and disappointed by the move, for Java

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*Singapore Island is half the area of Los Angeles and, on average, no more than 50 feet above sea level. Reclamation has added six square miles to Singapore and doubled the size of many offshore islands.*

had long seemed to him a perfect base for British operations in the Far East. As it was, "the British have not now an inch of ground to stand upon between the Cape of Good Hope and China, nor a single friendly port at which they can water and obtain refreshment." Sir Stamford argued his case to friends in London and to his superiors at the East India Company in Calcutta, contending that the Dutch were aggressively expanding their claims in Asia in order to exclude British trade altogether. Raffles's motives, it should be noted, were as much idealistic as commercial. He was a passionate free-trader, an opponent of slavery, and a believer in "economic man." He was firmly convinced that "the cause of humanity and the improvement of society" would be well served in Southeast Asia by the establishment of a British presence.

Yet, for a time, Raffles made little headway. He was, to put it frankly, not universally liked. Among other things, he had a penchant for insubordination, forever going "beyond the limit," as Castlereagh once complained. Not surprisingly, the Dutch regarded him with downright mistrust. When Sir Stamford re-

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turned to Southeast Asia from London in 1818, one Dutch official wrote that "the proximity of Mr. Raffles please[s] us not. He doesn't take his eyes off Java." Dutch concern was justified. Later that year, Raffles secured permission from the Marquis of Hastings, Governor General of India, to found a commercial settlement at the southern end of the Malacca Strait—providing he could avoid trouble with the "Netherlandish." A small fleet under his command appeared near the mouth of the Singapore River on January 28, 1819. The next day, Raffles came to terms with the Temenggong of Johor, an influential and semi-autonomous vassal of the Sultan who ruled the larger Malay state of which Singapore was a part. The Union Jack was quickly raised over Britain's newest trading post.

### Free Port and Entrepôt

There was only one problem: Raffles needed the Sultan's formal approval, but no one knew who the rightful Sultan was. The old Sultan had died in 1812, leaving two sons and no instructions regarding succession. The Dutch recognized Abdu'r-Rahman, the younger son, who by 1819 had assumed de facto control of the crumbling Malay state. (Hussein, the elder son, removed himself to Pahang.) There was no chance, Raffles realized, that Abdu'r-Rahman would risk Dutch displeasure by ratifying the British agreement with the Temenggong.

The stage was set for an episode that illustrates the kind of behavior Sir Stamford's colleagues found so infuriatingly impulsive, even as they conceded that it could be quite effective. Raffles learned that Abdu'r-Rahman had never been officially crowned: The late Sultan's widow, who preferred Hussein, had refused to relinquish the royal regalia. Aided by the Temenggong, Raffles secretly brought Hussein to Singapore, where he was coronated amid all the pomp that circumstances would allow. And the treaty was signed.

The Dutch, of course, were furious, but from Calcutta, Lord Hastings supported Raffles, and London supported Hastings. British replies to impassioned protests from the Netherlands were polite, wordy, slow in coming, and devoid of offers to withdraw. Eventually, Britain did admit that some sort of territorial tidying up was necessary in the East, and a suitable Anglo-Dutch treaty was worked out in 1824. Under its terms, Britain agreed to give up all claims and possessions on Sumatra and the islands south of Singapore, while the Dutch did the same with regard to the Malay Peninsula, Malacca, and Singapore; the Netherlands also gave up its few territories in India and agreed

not to seek commercial or political hegemony in Southeast Asia. Thomas Stamford Raffles died two years later, aged 45, with the East India Company not only ignoring his application for a pension but also seeking reimbursement for money he had spent on its behalf.

If nothing else, he had the satisfaction of knowing that his gamble was already paying off. With its excellent harbor, the Singapore settlement was an immediate commercial success. A British-style city with formal squares and parks was soon established on the site of ancient Temasek. Ethnic *kampongs* (a Malay word meaning village) sprang up in and around the European downtown. Raffles laid out much of the city himself. He also laid down the law regarding Singapore's economic function: It was to be an entrepôt and a free port—collecting no import or export duties but providing a variety of lucrative services for commerce and shipping.\* After only one year of British rule, Singapore's population had grown to 10,000, and no fewer than 160 ships had called at its port. As one of the three Straits Settlements—Malacca and Penang were the other two—the island was administered initially by the East India Company from Calcutta. In 1867, Singapore was elevated to the status of a Crown Colony, its governor general answering directly to London.

### Luring the Chinese

By then, Singapore City with its bustling port had become a crowded, polyglot metropolis, attracting a population of 70,000, including Chinese (the largest group); Malays (the second largest); Javanese and Bugis from the Dutch East Indies; Filipinos; Bengalis, Sikhs, Tamils, and Parsees from India; Jews from Calcutta; Jaffna Tamils from Ceylon; Arabs; and Japanese. It was quite a collection. "The Native festivals here are, of course, numerous," a Major James Low wrote in 1840. "If every class was to have its own way, the town would be in a continual clamor by noisy and riotous processions."

Every group did not always get its way, but the Chinese, who made up more than half the island's population, often did. Singapore, as visitors never failed to remark, was essentially a Chinese city. Even Raffles had noted early on the "peculiar attractions of the place for that industrious race." The most im-

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\*The Dutch tried to apply this formula themselves—as Southeast Asian nations still do—but could find no location as strategic as Singapore. The acquisition of Hong Kong by Great Britain in 1842 and the opening of British "treaty ports" in China at first spread panic among Singapore merchants, but in the end, these developments simply augmented Britain's total volume of trade in Asia, to Singapore's benefit.

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portant attraction was its absence of regulation, taxes, or other government interference. Overseas Chinese merchants had great freedom to do what they pleased. No sooner was the settlement established than hundreds of Chinese traders, mostly from the Straits region, set up shop in Singapore. Thanks to long association with, first, the Portuguese, then the Dutch, and then the English, many of them were already familiar with Western ways. Not a few spoke English. This was precisely the type of immigrant Raffles had hoped to lure.

### The Coolie System

The so-called Straits Chinese became the most visible Chinese class in Singapore—to the British. A few, such as Seah Eu Chin, risked their fortunes cultivating pepper and gambier—the island's only export crops. But most, such as the renowned Tan Che Sang, built on their experience as merchants, middlemen, and outfitters. Tan, perhaps the richest man in Singapore during its early years, was a miser with a paradoxical taste for gambling. (Torn between conflicting passions, he once cut off part of a finger in a futile attempt to curb his lust for gaming.) Yet, according to historian Song Ong Siang, he was so respected in the city—10,000 people attended his funeral in 1837—that “any day he said the word he could empty the place of all the Europeans but he never tried.”

The influx of Tans and Seahs did not make the Chinese a majority. Their success did. As Singapore's economy expanded, merchants and retailers required an ever-increasing supply of workers. Because neighboring states in Malaya, Indonesia, and Indochina had for centuries been short of labor, the Chinese turned, as they would have preferred to do anyway, to China, specifically, to south China. There, in Hokkien and neighboring provinces, isolated from the rest of the Middle Kingdom by rugged hills, lived a hardy people whose menfolk had a long tradition of seeking their fortunes abroad. The coolie system was born.

It was wonderfully efficient, its costs merely human. Singapore merchants and businessmen paid recruiters to round up *sinkhehs*, or newcomers, in South China and bring them to the island. They were put up in lodging houses and then contracted out to Chinese and European employers. The *sinkhehs* were mostly young and had never before been away from their farm communities. The overcrowding and enforced intimacy of shipboard life fostered outbreaks of disease. Commonly, as many as a fifth of a vessel's passengers failed to make port alive.

Raffles, high-minded as always, had abolished slavery in his



*Chinatown as seen from Government Hill in 1852 and (inset) a bust of Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles. Settlements hugged the harbor, while the island's interior, where tigers roamed, went unexplored for years.*

island outpost, but the coolie system replaced slavery with a highly profitable regime of indentured servitude. The ambitious south Chinese had to pay his way to Singapore. Along the route, money was demanded by the recruiter (always Chinese), by the ship captain (usually a European), and by the lodging-house owners (again, always Chinese). Few *sinkhehs* had enough money up front. They paid for their passage after the fact, in sweat. "Truck," the practice of supplying immigrants with food and other necessities (including opium) at high prices against future wages, exacerbated the newcomers' plight. For the individual worker to survive and get free of his employer took a minimum of three years, plus a great deal of self-discipline, good health, and luck. But many did so.

For several decades, the character of Singapore was that of a frontier boom town. The colony had been created, more or less, from whole cloth. Most of the streets were unpaved and the buildings made of wood; fires and floods did heavy damage in the early years. There were no local institutions to be co-opted and exploited—a far cry from the British experience in India. A thin veneer of civil authority belied the underlying chaos. Pros-



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titution was legal and thriving, abetted by the fact that 90 percent of the island's population was male. Gangs of Chinese—a hundred or more at a time—occasionally roamed the streets armed with *parangs*, a machete-like knife still used today to slash through jungle underbrush. (Skillfully wielded, it can decapitate a man with a single blow.) No police force was established in Singapore until 1843; until then, unemployed British sailors were deputized as needed.

Public order was undermined in part by public policy—the practice of “tax farming” in particular. Because both the British and local merchants eschewed excise taxes, the cost of administering the settlement was borne by levies on liquor, opium, and gambling. The rights to collect these taxes were auctioned off to Chinese entrepreneurs, the government being anxious to avoid “frequent and odious collision with the natives.” It was thus in the interest of Chinese tax farmers to promote the very activities that helped give Singapore its reputation as the most dangerous town in the Wild East.

### Scrambling for Asia

The form of lawlessness most feared by traders was, to use the British word, piracy; the Malays who engaged in this pursuit might have preferred the term “revenue enhancement.” Exact-ing tribute from passing merchant ships had for centuries been regarded by local rulers as a legitimate activity. A 14th-century Chinese account of Singapore noted that “everything the inhabitants possess is a product of their plundering of Chinese junks.” As Singapore became the major choke-point of Oriental trade, a clearinghouse for manufactured goods heading East and produce heading West, Malay pirate fleets from as far away as the Philippine and Indonesian archipelagos flocked to the Malacca Strait like bees to a honey-pot. And they did so with seeming impunity, putting into Singapore City itself for a respite between engagements. Goods lost to pirate attacks could often be bought in the open-air markets of Singapore a few days later.

The situation was so serious that George Bonham, who became Singapore's Governor in 1833, warned of the “total annihilation” of Britain's Asian trade. The British responded by sending two Royal Navy gunboats for a brief tour in the Strait. Steamships were not then a common sight in Southeast Asia, and the gunboats, not dependent on the wind, struck terror in the hearts of becalmed freebooters. But a new wave of piracy commenced during the 1850s. Piracy was never entirely suppressed in the Strait, where flotillas of *perhau* could easily elude

pursuers in coastal mangrove swamps. Piracy exists even today on a small scale, as attested to by occasional newspaper reports, and its adjunct, smuggling, continues to thrive in parts of Southeast Asia.

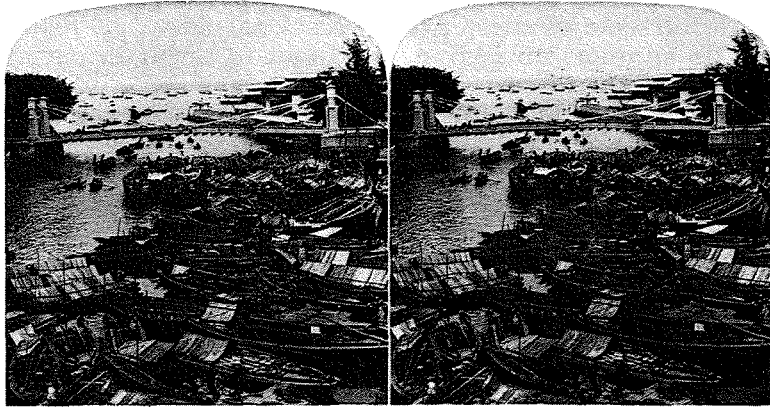
The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 transformed Singapore from a useful outpost into a strategic asset. The canal reduced the distance between Singapore and London by 3,500 miles, and spurred a new scramble by European powers for "unclaimed" parts of Asia and Africa. Commercial activity picked up rapidly, much to Singapore's advantage. During the four years after France's Empress Eugénie aboard the *Aigle* led the first procession of ships from the Mediterranean via the canal to the Red Sea, the value of trade passing through Singapore increased by 50 percent. After the Treaty of Pangkor in 1874, Britain began to extend its control north over the Malay states.\* Vast quantities of tin and, by the early 20th century, rubber, began flowing down the peninsula and out through Singapore's New Harbour. Oil storage tanks were built on the island during the 1890s, and Singapore, by then the seventh busiest port in the world, became the principal oil distribution center for all of Asia, a function it retains.

The most important commodity passing through the island continued to be people. Whetted by the influx of British and European capital, the appetite for cheap labor became insatiable in Southeast Asia. Hundreds of thousands of workers were required to build roads and railroads and to work the British-owned tin mines and rubber estates. Strong backs were needed on the wharves and skilled hands in the factories. The demand now went far beyond Singapore, but Singapore's entrenched coolie system showed the way to a supply. A mechanism was already in place; it needed only to be expanded.

### \* The Good Life

What had been a relative trickle of immigrants—amounting to mere tens of thousands of Chinese coolies a year during the 1830s and '40s—swelled to a quarter of a million annually during the later decades of the 19th century, with most of the newcomers destined for jobs in Malaya. The coolie trade was a Chinese operation from start to finish, and many of Singapore's most prominent Chinese residents, friendly to British rule, were

\*Under the treaty, the Sultan of Perak agreed to accept a British Resident whose advice he would heed in all matters save those relating to Malay religion and custom. Sultans of other states in subsequent years signed similar accords. Four of these entities were grouped together in 1896 to form the Federated Malay States.



*A stereoscope of Singapore, 1901. One British journalist described the Singapore River as such a "packed mass of boats that you hardly know when your foot has left dry land."*

known to be deeply involved in this traffic.

Colonial administrators looked the other way. There was no constituency for interference. When employers complained to the government, it was not about the wretched living conditions of immigrants but about "crimping"—the stealing of one businessman's workers by another. If anything, such petitions indicated that the coolie system would benefit by growth.

The many Chinese secret societies (commonly referred to as *hueys* after the name of the most powerful one, Tean Tay Hueh) were deeply involved in the coolie trade. Secret societies, the principal form of Chinese organization in Singapore during the 19th century, were broadly political in conception, the aim being to overthrow the alien Ch'ing or Manchu dynasty back home in China. But their function in Southeast Asia was, on the one hand, to provide (however imperfectly) physical security, discipline, and social identity for incoming coolies and, on the other, to guarantee the enrichment of society leaders, who comprised employers, labor contractors, recruiting agents, lodging-house owners, and proprietors of brothels. So lucrative was the trade that rival societies often competed for business in the streets, with murder and mayhem as by-products.

The colonial government usually remained aloof from such disputes. Its strategy was to cultivate a few influential, English-speaking Chinese leaders and, in times of violence, to try to cajole and pressure them into persuading the combatants to make peace. Only rarely, as during the Post Office riots in 1876, did

the British intervene directly with troops.\* Not until 1877, when William Pickering was appointed "Protector" of the Chinese community in Singapore, did colonial authorities even attempt to regulate immigration or inhibit forced prostitution.

Yet for the affluent—English and Chinese primarily—life was good in Singapore. The town itself began to take shape, with handsome new buildings in the commercial core and comfortable stucco and tile villas in the suburbs. Theater groups and country clubs amused prosperous residents, who could also indulge in tennis, cricket, and golf. On Tuesday and Friday evenings, there was music. "The band," wrote *Straits Times* editor John Cameron, "which is that of the regiment on the station at the time, or from one of the men-at-war which occasionally visit the port, plays on a raised mound on the center of the esplanade green." At dinner parties, the fare rivaled that of London, and the drink, at least in volume, was often superior. "The good folks of Singapore," Cameron noted, "are by no means inclined to place too narrow restrictions on their libations."

### Looking Homeward

Yet, a certain insecurity always existed—had existed, in fact, since the founding of the settlement in the face of Dutch hostility. Who would defend the place? Great Britain was, of course, Mistress of the Seas, and her warships prowled the Indian Ocean and adjacent waters. But not until the 1870s, when Singapore's strategic significance was plain, did London begin contributing financially to the island's defense. (Until then, local merchants grudgingly chipped in on an *ad hoc* basis when crises arose—a procedure that helps explain the persistence of piracy.) The revival of European imperialism during the last half of the 19th century prompted considerable concern in Parliament over Singapore's safety, but for years nothing was done about it.

And, for a while, nothing need have been done. When World War I erupted in Europe, Singapore was barely affected. The German cruiser *Emden* shelled nearby Penang in October 1914, but that was the closest the Germans ever came, and the *Emden* was sunk in November. Most Singaporeans simply looked for-

\*Chinese residents in Singapore generally remitted part of their earnings to families in south China. Because the mails were slow and untrustworthy, they relied on an alternative mail system created by Teochew merchants in Singapore. The British attempted to replace this with a special remittance service, even though it was widely known that, while the Crown could effectively convey mail to distribution centers like Amoy, it had no access inland. The Crown's effort resulted in a general strike, instigated by secret societies, and punctuated by urban violence.

### THE CHINESE MERCHANTS

*In their First 150 Years of Singapore (1969), Donald and Joanna Moore observe that the difference between British and Chinese merchants in 19th-century Singapore was summed up in an epigram: "Englishman have five dollar, make one dollar business; Chinese have one dollar, make five dollar business." They go on:*

The British possessed one inestimable advantage over their oriental colleagues: Their links with Britain enabled them to secure all the profitable agencies, or nearly all, for themselves.

But if an accident of birth placed an agency in British hands, an accident of race conferred upon each Chinese businessman an acumen so acute, so ingenious, and so resourceful, that he was more than a match for any monopolist. His improvisatorial style often concealed an approach to genius. While he appeared to peck at the crumbs that fell from the rich man's table, he was quietly amassing a fortune.

When the British merchant installed himself in a sumptuous mansion, his Chinese counterpart would tend to remain (but not invariably) in a more humble abode, lest those from whom he bought or borrowed stiffen their terms at the sight of so much opulence. He was accustomed to frugality, and he was never trammelled with the absurdity of bolstering a national ethnic superiority by a recourse to gracious living.

And if the British merchant inherited a racial bond with the manufacturer in the West, the Chinese merchant inherited one just as important with the consumer in the East. And again, if the British merchant was the principal exporter of raw Southeast Asian produce from Singapore, the Chinese was its collector, for he was dealing with his own kind who, even if they did not understand his language, understood his ways and he theirs. Throughout Southeast Asia, and most particularly in Singapore, the Chinese became the binding agent of international commerce.

In Singapore a partnership was forged which was eventually to transcend even political considerations. What the British lack, the Chinese provide; what the Chinese lack, the British provide.



*Wealthy merchant  
Tan Jiak Kim*

ward to the end of hostilities and the resumption of business.

In British Burma, Dutch Indonesia, French Indochina, and the American Philippines, the decades after the war saw the emergence of popular nationalist movements. In China, Chiang Kai-shek strove to modernize his country while fighting off Communist revolutionaries and Japanese invaders. In India, Mahatma Gandhi galvanized his countrymen and moved the subcontinent toward self-rule. In Singapore, politics were different. What exercised most Chinese was not Singapore's own status but rather China's. The Chinese-language press in the city, led by Tan Kah Kee's *Nanyang Siang Pao* and Aw Boon Haw's *Sin Chew Jit Poh*, treated events in the increasingly troubled ancestral homeland almost as a local story.

### Language and Loyalty

The overthrow of the Manchu dynasty and creation of the Republic of China in 1911 was greeted with enthusiasm by Singapore Chinese. Sun Yat-sen, father of the revolution, had visited the island several times and received considerable financial support from wealthy merchants. As early as 1912, a branch of Sun's Kuomintang (KMT) Party was established in Singapore. Later, the Nationalist government sent teachers and textbooks from China to Singapore to provide instruction in Chinese history and politics and, not to be overlooked, inculcate loyalty to the motherland. The language employed in the new private schools was not English or one of the south China dialects but Kuo-yu, or Mandarin, the national language of China.

Most Chinese favored the extension of education, but not all welcomed instruction in Mandarin. Singapore's Chinese community was not monolithic. It was divided by district of origin in China, by dialect spoken, by education, income, and occupation, by family history in the Straits. Millionaire entrepreneurs such as Aw Boon Haw, Tan Kah Kee, and Tan's son-in-law Lee Kong Chian (founder of the Oversea-Chinese Bank), were typical of the Chinese-oriented elite. They were educated in Chinese, supported Kuo-yu schools, dominated the Chinese Chamber of Commerce, and had little contact with colonial officials.

By contrast, the Straits-born (also called Malacca, or Baba) Chinese made up the Western-oriented elite. Their leaders, educated in English at a handful of secondary schools such as Raffles College, were British subjects and proud of the fact. They adopted Western dress and many Western customs, played cricket, read English newspapers, and gratefully accepted honors from the King. Some embraced Christianity, and a few, like

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Goh Hood Keng, a Methodist, entered the ministry.

In general, Straits Chinese took a dim view of a resurgent Chinese nationalism that threatened to dilute their identity and engulf their special, anglicized world. They pleaded with the British to expand public education *in English*. But the colonial government, regarding most of Singapore's population as transients, did nothing. The issue did not go away, however. It emerged during the 1950s as the single most important question of public policy facing Singapore's government.

### The 'Tiger of Malaya'

At the opposite social extreme from the Straits Baba was the mass of Chinese and Malay laborers and seamen, often living in squalor. This was the fertile soil in which, during the 1920s, communism began to flourish. Though cooperating initially with the Kuomintang, the Communists moved out on their own after the fragile truce on the Chinese mainland between Chiang Kai-shek and the Communists was shattered in 1927. The Malayan Communist Party (MCP), formed in 1930, devoted most of its energies to organizing labor unions—a new phenomenon in Singapore, and quite illegal—for rubber estate workers, tin miners, seamen, and some 60 other trades on both the island and the peninsula. Helped by the poor state of the global economy (to which Singapore's well-being was and is exquisitely sensitive), by rising anti-imperial sentiment, and by the tragic course of events in China, the MCP by the late 1930s had become a force to be reckoned with and operated through a score of front organizations.

The British, notably Sir Cecil Clementi, did a great deal to alienate many Singapore Chinese. Clementi, appointed Governor of Singapore in 1929, was fluent in Mandarin and Cantonese and had served as Governor of Hong Kong. He believed he knew a thing or two about the Chinese and how to deal with them. No sooner had the guns at Fort Canning boomed their welcome than the new Governor summoned Singapore's leading Chinese to Government House. There, he announced a ban on all political activity, on fund-raising for Chinese causes, and on displaying the Chinese flag. Later in his administration, Clementi eliminated grants-in-aid to Chinese schools—to save money—and, hoping to reduce unemployment, placed tight restrictions on Chinese immigration.

The Communists also benefited from Japan's invasion of China in July 1937, bringing a new alliance between the Kuomintang and the Communists on the mainland. In Singapore,

The last issue of the Straits Times before the British surrender, 1942. "Singapore Must Stand," said the Governor General. "It SHALL Stand." It did not stand.

**THE STRAITS TIMES**

"Singapore Must Stand; It SHALL Stand"—H.E. the Governor

SINGAPORE, FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 13, 1942.

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**JAPANESE SUFFER HUGE CASUALTIES IN SINGAPORE**

**R. A. GUNNERS STICK TO THEIR POSTS**

THE Japanese have suffered huge casualties in Singapore, according to W. T. Knox, News Chronicle war correspondent. Our gunners are sticking grimly to their guns, and there have been many cases of whole crews dying at their posts.

**CURRENCY NOTES: A WARNING**

PEOPLE in the rural areas refusing to accept currency notes issued by the Board of Commissioners of Currency, Malaya, are warned that action will be taken against them and that they are liable to severe penalties.

**Air Battle Over Java Sea**

**4 JAPS DOWN**

THE R.E.I. communiqué issued yesterday was very short and had little to report.

It read: "Apart from enemy reconnaissance over various parts of the Netherlands Indies area it may be stated that on the morning of Feb. 12 a Japanese bomber approached Sourabaya but it immediately disappeared when our fighters went up."

"No further reports have been received from various parts of the Archipelago where the fighting continues."

"Some days ago an aerial combat took place over the Java Sea between Allied aircraft and enemy fighters."

THE COMMUNIST PARTY

**WHERE TO GET YOUR PAPER**

ARRANGEMENTS are being made for the widest possible distribution of the Free Press in the morning and the Straits Times in the afternoon. For the general distribution.

the MCP wisely exploited popular passions by spearheading a virulent anti-Japanese movement. After war came to the Strait, Chinese Communists from Singapore would win further popularity by leading the resistance to the Japanese occupation of the Malay Peninsula.

But war seemed very far away to Singapore's powerful and prosperous during the late 1930s. Besides, the new naval base was now in place at Sembawang on the Johor Strait: Shore batteries were aimed south and east to fend off attack by sea. To the north, the "impenetrable" Malay jungle seemingly provided as much protection as any army. There had been some unsettling developments in the Crown Colony since the Great War, but the island's small and rather snobbish elite found life neither too demanding nor too fast. There was a sense of *tida' apa*, of all's well with the world. Tennis in the late afternoon followed by a cool shower and a *setengah*—whiskey and water—on the verandah before a good dinner bred a sense of self-satisfaction. God was, after all, an Englishman.

The "Tiger of Malaya," unfortunately, was a brilliant Japanese: General Yamashita Tomoyuki. On December 8 (Pacific time), 1941, the Japanese bombed not only Pearl Harbor but Singapore. They invaded Hong Kong, Thailand, and the Philippines. Two days later, not far from Singapore, they attacked and sank two of His Royal Majesty's battleships, the *Prince of Wales* and the *Repulse*. Yamashita now swept down the Malay Peninsula. Relying on boldness, speed, bluff, and command of the air, he outthought and outfought a larger, better-supplied force of



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Indians, Australians, and Britons.

Much has been made of the fact that Singapore's gun emplacements faced seaward, leaving the northern coast opposite the Malay States vulnerable to land attack. But Singapore fell principally because of a failure of command, a failure shared by Lieutenant General Arthur Percival, General Officer Commanding, and Field Marshall Sir Archibald Wavell, Supreme Commander in the Far East. When Percival met Yamashita at the Ford automobile plant on February 15, 1942, to discuss the terms of Singapore's surrender, the Japanese had no more than three days' supply of ammunition remaining. Yamashita suspected that Percival's willingness to talk was a ploy to buy time. He was, unfortunately, wrong.

### Starting Over

The Japanese renamed Singapore *Syonan*, meaning "light of the south." Intending their occupation to be permanent, they launched a campaign to supplant English with Japanese and purged Western influences from school classrooms. The populace was exhorted to take pride in being Asian and, following Japan's example, to undergo a spiritual revival. (General Yamashita once remarked that, since the Japanese were descended from the gods while the Europeans admitted to descent from monkeys, the choice of allegiance should not really be all that difficult.) Japanese business and banking enterprises were established in Singapore, and Mitsubishi and other *zaibatsu* took over and managed key industries.\*

The occupation was a hard, dangerous time for Singapore. The Japanese did not, in Singapore as elsewhere, behave like philosopher-kings. Already hated by the Chinese, they soothed no feelings when the Kempeitai, or military police, indulged in a murderous *sook ching*, executing thousands of locals suspected of being enemies of Japan. The Kempeitai remained in business throughout the war, its personnel by far outnumbering that of Japan's civil administration on the island. Meanwhile, living conditions in Singapore deteriorated with each passing month. For a city dependent on trade for its livelihood, where almost all

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\*The Japanese had little use for the Chinese during the occupation, except as targets of extortion. But they had special plans for the Indian population—amounting to about 12 percent of the island's 550,000 people. Those plans moved into high gear in 1943 with the arrival in Singapore from Germany of Subhas Chandra Bose, a former president of the Congress Party in India who advocated direct action against the British in India. Bose placed himself at the head of an Indian Independence League and breathed new life into efforts to organize an Indian National Army (INA) for the liberation of the subcontinent. The INA saw action in Burma alongside the Japanese but won no battlefield successes.

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food, clothing, and medicine had to be imported, war was disastrous. With scarcity, the new Japanese-imposed currency became grossly inflated, and a black market sprang up.

It was with relief that Singaporeans greeted the return of their British colonial masters in 1945. Keeping the news of the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki to themselves, Japanese commanders had quietly planned for their own internment and arranged an orderly transfer of power. The end of the war was announced on August 17. British troops landed two weeks later, and the Japanese, in a public ceremony, surrendered formally on September 12 to Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten. The crowd cheered as the Union Jack was raised once more over the Fortress of Singapore and the cheers were real enough. But the colors seemed less cheerful now, the fabric somehow frayed.

One year later, a young man known to his English friends as Harry boarded the troopship *Britannia* for the long passage from Singapore to Liverpool. A graduate of Raffles College, he had earned a Queen's Scholarship and was now, aged 23, on his way to Cambridge. He was an ardent anglophile who had watched the Japanese humiliate the British in 1942 and had understood immediately that, however the war turned out, Britain's days of empire were numbered. And he knew that, in an independent Singapore, there would be a role for him to play, perhaps even one to write and direct. He later recalled—as Prime Minister—that the Japanese “never knew what they did to a whole generation like me. But they did make me, and a generation like me, determined to work for freedom from servitude and foreign domination. I did not enter politics. They brought politics on me.”

His name was Lee Kuan Yew.



## BIG FISH, SMALL POND

*by Thomas J. Bellows*

Lee Kuan Yew's Singapore, after 25 years of his rule, scarcely resembles the city young "Harry" Lee left behind him in 1946, and the transformation has been largely Lee Kuan Yew's own doing. But some things he has been powerless—or unwilling—to change. Some things are part of a city's nature. An elderly veteran of the prewar Malaysian Civil Service (ret.), returning after a long absence, might venture out of the old Strand Hotel on Bencoolen Street and encounter a city and an island in some respects still the same as he had known it.

The Raffles Long Bar is still there, as are many of the old Malay mosques and Chinese temples and Hindu shrines, and most of the fine colonial government buildings. Chinatown, with its red-tiled shop-houses and flapping window shutters and street hawkers, still exists, though, like the average Singapore family, it is continually getting smaller. The Selat Johor is still breached by a thin, umbilical causeway—the one the Japanese marched across in 1942—carrying a railway and a six-lane highway from the mainland, not to mention thousands of pedestrians and a pipeline pumping millions of gallons of cool, fresh water into Singapore from the rivers of West Malaysia. The calm blue surface of the Strait of Singapore is still dotted with freighters, and the murky green of the serpentine Singapore River remains choked with junks and sampans.

But downtown, a stand of striking new skyscrapers now dominates the city Thomas Stamford Raffles laid out. The tallest of them, I. M. Pei's 52-story Oversea-Chinese Banking Corporation building, is higher than Bukit Timah, the highest (at a mere 581 feet) natural feature on the island. As in Houston or Miami, air conditioners aspirate the city. Singapore is clean, honest, efficient, and relentlessly rational, with heavy fines meted out for such offenses as littering or jaywalking or driving into center city during rush hour without a very good reason. There are virtually no slums. While the 238-square-mile republic is heavily urbanized, a policy of planting trees, shrubs, and flowers wherever bare ground is exposed lends a lush garden atmosphere to the whole island.

All of these accomplishments, and many others, can ultimately be credited to Lee Kuan Yew. As Prime Minister, Lee has governed Singapore since 1959—first during the period of receding British rule, then during the island's brief interlude as a component state within the Malaysian Federation, and finally,

after August 9, 1965, when it became a sovereign republic. The prospects for the tiny new island city-state, which is almost devoid of natural resources, were viewed skeptically on independence day. But Lee Kuan Yew insisted from the start that the only resource Singapore needed was its citizens; that "human skills and intellectual discipline can be expanded infinitely provided a people have the will and capacity to do so." And provided, one might add, that they also have Lee Kuan Yew.

It is helpful at times to think of Singapore not as a state but as a system, with Lee the governing intelligence. Brilliant, arrogant, and remote, fluent in Mandarin and Malay, his English as pure as that of a Cambridge don, Lee has shaped Singapore in his own image—but has not plastered that image, Mao-style, all over town. Cults of personality he finds abhorrent; there are no statues of Lee in Singapore, no portraits on billboards, no sycophantic paeans in the newspapers.

Indeed, Lee is not generally beloved. Little warmth flows to or from his people (to whom he refers coolly as "digits"). Even physically, he remains aloof, relishing the isolation of the Istana, the former residence of the British governor general, which is set in the middle of Singapore in an enclave of well-guarded parkland. Lee has no sense of humor and is ascetic in his habits. His public statements have tended to be crisply businesslike, bordering on the pugnacious. He reportedly visited his mother only once a year while she was alive, because each visit

*The corporate towers of Singapore, self-proclaimed "global city," glisten on a summer night. "A socialist in Singapore," First Deputy Prime Minister Goh has said, "has to plan for a just society without upsetting the delicate machinery of trade."*



required security police to sweep the area, a waste, Lee thought, of taxpayers' money. He remains distant from his brothers and sisters (though relations with his wife and three children are close). Some who have met Lee recently say he has "mellowed" in recent years, though it is hard to know what this means.

But Lee Kuan Yew is respected—that is all that matters to him—and Singapore has yielded to his will. "Whoever governs Singapore must have the iron in him or give it up," Lee once told his people. "This is not a game of cards. This is your life and mine. I spent a whole lifetime building this, and as long as I am in charge, nobody is going to knock it down." One measure of the awe in which Lee is held is that he can talk like this without needing the armed forces to back him up.\*

### Don't Litter, Study Hard

Today, three races—Chinese (76 percent of the population), Malays (15 percent), and Indians (seven percent)—live together harmoniously in Singapore, each striving, or at least urged, to live up to those ideals and standards of behavior decreed by the government to be appropriately Singaporean. Weed Out Industries That Use Manpower Poorly; Keeping Our City Clean Is A National Objective; Don't Litter, Study Hard; Learn From The Japanese: The slogans one reads on signs and hears on TV in Singapore reflect Lee Kuan Yew's personal habits: his passion for cleanliness, his austerity and capacity for working long hours, and his faith in an oligarchy of talent.

In business and the civil service, advancement is utterly meritocratic, highlighting Lee's belief that Singapore depends on that five percent of the population "who are more than ordinarily endowed physically and mentally. It is on this group that we must expend our limited and slender resources in order that they will provide that yeast, that ferment, that catalyst . . .

\*The military in Singapore is totally subservient to civilian authorities, there is no rank higher than brigadier general, and there is no surplus of general officers—a pork barrel item in many Third World nations. (Lee Kuan Yew's son, Col. Lee Hsien Loong, is chief of staff.) Singapore's 35,000-man Army and its small, 3,000-man gunboat Navy are maintained by a universal draft: At age 18, every male Singaporean undergoes at least two years of military training. What Singaporean officials call "our young arms industry" has since 1980 manufactured and sold 50,000 lightweight assault rifles to customers in Southeast Asia, Central America, and the Middle East.

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which alone will ensure that Singapore shall maintain its pre-eminent place in the societies that exist in Southeast Asia."

"Pre-eminent" is the right word. Economically, the city-state has (partly) traded its role as the warehouse of Asia for that of factory while retaining, thanks to a cluster of free ports at key harbors and air terminals, its critical function as an entrepôt. Thousands of European and American corporations have set up shop on the island—banks, manufacturers, stockbrokers, service industries—and many others, fleeing the long-term political uncertainties of Hong Kong, are arriving every year. The 1980 directory of U.S. firms with factories or representatives in Singapore totals 117 pages, with seven to eight companies listed per page. These include Westinghouse, Comsat, Digital Equipment, Sunstrand, Abbott Laboratories, General Electric, Union Carbide, and Texas Instruments.

Yet, though industry and trade are the lifeblood of Singapore's economy, and high finance its heart, Lee Kuan Yew's government has not neglected the island's stomach. Only about 28 square miles on the island are devoted to agriculture—barely more than 10 times the land area occupied by its main commercial airport—but it is intensive agriculture. Singapore is self-sufficient in pork (important in the Chinese diet), chicken, and eggs, and grows about half of its vegetables and fruits.

### Life after Lee

The island has also become a sorting house and first stop for tourists in the Orient, three million of them every year, each with a yen (or dollar or Deutsche Mark) for "Instant Asia"—an antiseptic Disneyland of the East. Gleaming new hotels such as the Shangri-La and the Dynasty have appeared downtown, and rising next door to the venerable Raffles Hotel is the 21st century's answer to the 19th-century bazaar: a magnificent steel and glass emporium, part office building, part shopping center, part hotel, part convention center. The government estimates that Singapore will need to almost double its present number of 15,800 hotel rooms by 1986.

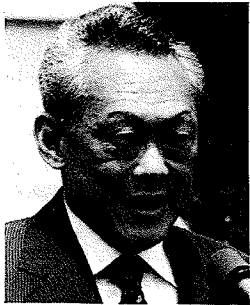
Unlike the situation in neighboring Indonesia, the 2.5 million citizens of Singapore have shared in the island's wealth. While there are many millionaires in the republic, inhabiting villas in the old residential neighborhoods clustered around Singapore City, there is very little poverty. Singapore's people boast the third highest (after Japan and Hong Kong) per capita income in Asia: \$5,240 in 1981. Average life expectancy surpasses 71 years, about that of Scotland or Austria.

**MR. LEE KUAN YEW**

*Journalist T. J. S. George begins his Lee Kuan Yew's Singapore (1973) with a quick character sketch of the man who has been Singapore's Prime Minister since 1959. Some selections:*

As he began to weld a family and a state according to his ideals, Lee Kuan Yew began to mold himself into a highly disciplined individual. Like Jomo Kenyatta with his fly whisk or Sukarno with his general's baton, Lee adopted a personal symbol: a thermos flask. It contained Chinese tea which he sipped throughout the day as he trudged from labor meeting to court appearance to press conference to political council. To this day, Lee is afraid of catching a chill and avoids cold drinks.

That is only part of his health fad. He is sensitive in a hundred different ways. Careful about his weight, he has given up on an early indulgence—beer—and is never seen to drink hard liquor. Once a pipe-smoker, he now detests all tobacco. He rarely eats the Chinese staple diet of rice and avoids bread. His breakfast is spartan and the principal meal, dinner, is light. He is fussy about keeping his nails trimmed and filed, washing his hands several times a day, polishing his shoes to a dazzling shine. . . . Air conditioners are adjusted to keep his bedroom at 66 degrees Fahrenheit, the office temperature at 72. He exercises religiously with a morning round of press-ups, skipping, and weightlifting. . . .



His austerity extends beyond physical matters to his habits of mind. He never listens to music, sees no movies, reads no novels, has no hobbies—golf is his only indulgence. To some people, his uprightness and singleness of mind are positively alarming. He is the only Asian politician about whom no personal scandal has ever been published. . . .

A personal and intellectual alienation completes the picture. Lee is so conscious of his intellectual superiority that others find him arrogant. . . . Most of those who work for him hint that he reduces them to the status of messenger boys. His wife is perhaps the only person with whom he can drop the mantle of super-ruggedness and can communicate on a basis of mutual respect. Professor C. Northcote Parkinson, who spent a career in Singapore teaching history at the University, wrote of Lee: "Utterly without charm, his expression is one of barely concealed contempt; for his opponents, for his followers, perhaps for himself. . . . One cannot imagine that he is even capable of friendship."

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In the context of other Southeast Asian nations, the Republic of Singapore undoubtedly looks good. But it is not devoid of blemishes. The city-state has its problems, some of them serious, some of them perhaps insoluble. Can a young generation, reared in affluence, retain and pass on the more or less puritan ethic that has made Singapore what it is today? Can an island too small to support a large population but so industrialized that it requires a large labor force make a successful transition to capital-intensive, high-technology industries? Can the country survive the passing of its present generation of leaders, who have guided the republic for a quarter of a century? Above all, can it get along without Lee Kuan Yew?

### Promoting 'Groupthink'

Clearly, too, there exists dissatisfaction with Singapore's brand of benevolent authoritarianism, no matter what the regime's achievements. Educated Singaporeans, of whom there are more and more each year, complain that they are made to feel like schoolchildren, incessantly exhorted, scolded, and cajoled. In private, they lament the excessive regimentation and the cultivation of "groupthink." Perhaps partly as a result of the government's *modus operandi*, some of the more intangible qualities necessary to sustain a modern nation over the long haul—civic consciousness, intellectual autonomy, self-sacrifice, social awareness—are still not firmly rooted in Singapore.

The republic's remarkable ruling elite, the handful of so-called "high-flyers" assembled by Lee Kuan Yew, many of them British-educated, demonstrate how quickly a dedicated cadre of astute administrators can create a materially successful country where "trickle-down" economics is a fact of life. Whether these men can nurture a "good society," not to mention a truly democratic society, much less something we might recognize as a "nation," remains to be seen.

But let us not be niggardly. The island has come a long way since 1950, when barrister Lee Kuan Yew returned from England with a Chinese fiancée (like him, a graduate of Raffles College and Cambridge) and every intention of entering politics. He found a Singapore where unemployment was in the double digits and overcrowding a fact of life—in some places as high as 1,000 persons per acre. In tenements, privacy was nonexistent, plumbing not even contemplated. Few schools or parks were available to most Singaporeans. Hundreds of thousands of people lived in squatter shantytowns.

Not surprisingly, Lee Kuan Yew also found not only Singa-



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pore but all of Southeast Asia beset by Communist agitation—leading to riots and strikes if not outright insurgency—as the British prepared their Asian possessions for some measure of self-government. In neighboring Malaya, a bloody guerrilla war had been underway since 1948. (At its height, the conflict engaged as many as 100,000 British troops and Malay police; more than 11,000 combatants on both sides were killed.) Lee was not himself a Communist, but he admired the party's organizing skill and envied its popularity. Opening a law office with his wife, Lee sought and won Communist trust by defending radical trade union leaders and student activists in court.

### Shaking Hands with Tomorrow

In 1954, he founded the People's Action Party (PAP)—symbolized by a lightning bolt—and a year later was one of three PAP candidates, all running as leftists, with broad Communist support, to win assembly seats in Singapore's first popular election. In office, Lee played a shrewd game, publicly defending the pro-Communist wing of the PAP, secretly aiding the British in their periodic sweeps against Party leaders, and then acting as attorney for his unsuspecting allies (usually, and conveniently, to no avail). The rationale was simple: Lee needed to keep Communist votes and lose Communist rivals. The strategy worked. Indeed, the PAP by the late 1950s had attracted a diverse following on both Left and Right. It was, as Lee's biographer, T. J. S. George, observed, "very much an Asian banyan tree under which nothing else would grow." In the 1959 elections, as Singapore was granted full responsibility for its internal affairs, the People's Action Party took 43 of the 51 assembly districts, and Lee Kuan Yew, aged 36, became Prime Minister.

Political bloodletting followed. Lee repudiated the Communists, who formed a new opposition party, the Barisan Sosialis (Socialist Front), in 1961. Two years later, with the Malaysian experience in mind, Lee mounted Operation Cold Store—a roundup of more than 100 Communist leaders, some of whom, like Lim Chin Siong, would be held in prison, without trial, for many years. Calling elections a few months later, Lee resorted to a battery of "legal fixes" to make sure Barisan Sosialis was spurned at the polls.\* It was. Since then, Lee Kuan Yew's lead-

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\*In 1963, Lee resorted to such devices as flooding local printers with orders for government documents, ensuring that opposition candidates would be unable to print and distribute campaign literature. In subsequent years, he occasionally resorted to detention of candidates on technically legal grounds under the Internal Security Act. His favorite method of political intimidation now seems to be suing rivals for slander, usually with some success, for charges made during the campaign.



A Singaporean 10-spot, worth about U.S. \$4.60. The average Singaporean spent only 16 percent of his income on housing but 45 percent on food and drink. American and European brand-name products, from Nescafé to Martell brandy, are making deep inroads according to a 1981 marketing survey.

ership has never been seriously contested, and even minor challenges have met major obstacles.

Lee Kuan Yew has kept himself in power by responding to his island's material needs rather than to its spiritual wants. During the early 1960s, those needs were chiefly two. First, he had to revive the island's sluggish economy—unemployment was regularly running at 15 percent and at times even higher. Second, he had to find places for his people to live.

In 1961, he set up an Economic Development Board (EDB) to promote industrial investment, provide financing, and oversee the creation and management of industrial parks. The first of its many successful ventures was the huge Jurong industrial estate on a tract reclaimed from swampland in the undeveloped southeast corner of the island. Foreign multinationals were wooed unremittingly. "Singapore is where it's happening," read advertisements in Western newspapers. "Yesterday shakes hands with tomorrow and it's yours—today!"

With its inexpensive pool of labor (in 1965, the average Singapore factory worker earned 31 cents an hour, the average American \$2.61), its efficient administrators, and its relative absence of red tape, the island proved attractive. The first industries were labor-intensive—to relieve unemployment—and produced such items as nails, textiles, footwear, and paint. But as industrial employment expanded (from 31,000 people in 1959 to 126,000 in 1970), Singapore shifted away from polo shirts and plastic flowers toward more skill-intensive enterprises: chemi-

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cals, petroleum products, machine components. By the late 1970s, the island was producing everything from batteries to pharmaceuticals to engines to oil rigs; with its four refineries, Singapore was the petroleum processing and distribution capital of Asia. Engrossed in economic pursuits, Singaporeans pretty much forgot about politics.

Singapore's economy is profoundly sensitive to regional politics and local demographics. The country first began to look outward—toward exporting its way to prosperity—after its expulsion from Malaysia dashed any hopes of participating in a Malaysian common market. The export strategy became even more crucial after the 1971 withdrawal of British military forces from “east of Suez” and the consequent shutting down of Britain's large naval base at Singapore. The lowering of the Union Jack over Admiralty House abruptly cost the republic 50,000 jobs and 20 percent of its gross national product.

#### **A Choosy Customer**

Singapore's problem today is a labor shortage. With an economy growing by eight percent annually during the 1970s, the island began to run out of people. To lure workers, companies began offering TV sets to new employees or enrolling them in special lotteries. Last year, some 150,000 foreigners, mostly Malays but also including Thais, Filipinos, Sri Lankans, Indians, and Indonesians, were granted work permits in Singapore, usually taking jobs that Singaporeans now find unacceptably menial or low-paying. Needless to say, the government's successful efforts at population control—required to prevent overcrowding on the small island—have done nothing to relieve the manpower shortfall.

The solution Singapore settled upon in 1979 was called the Second Industrial Revolution. To make room for new capital-intensive “brain industries” and services (mostly foreign-owned) that would yield more profit with fewer workers, the government began to weed out labor-intensive manufacturers (mostly Singaporean-owned companies whose profitability was waning as the island's prosperity drove up wages). It accomplished this simply: The National Wages Council decreed that all wages would increase by 20 percent in 1979, 19 percent in 1980, and 10–14 percent in 1981. The government estimates that by 1991 it will have eliminated the need for foreign workers—Singapore does not want a German- or Swiss-style “guest-worker” problem—while edging the island's economy further into the “postindustrial” world of banking, consulting, insur-

ance, electronics, and computers.\*

With the political future clouded for Hong Kong—whose lease on the New Territories runs out in 1997—Singapore may even supplant the far more free-wheeling Crown Colony as Asia's financial Switzerland. Already, anxious individuals and corporations are quitting Hong Kong and seeking to relocate. Singapore has found it can be choosy. It gives preference to Hong Kong's electronics and computer companies, and the asking price for citizenship is S \$1 million (U.S. \$460,000). Not everyone with the cash is welcome. Singapore reportedly favors Shanghainese and Teochew businessmen because these groups are thought to have more industrial savvy than the Cantonese, who dominate Hong Kong's retail trade.

The bottom line of Singapore's role as the banking, manufacturing, repairing, refining, and service center of Southeast Asia is the foreign exchange surplus it has run in each of the past 19 years. First Deputy Prime Minister Goh Keng Swee, the second most powerful man in the government, recently boasted that Singapore was "accumulating U.S. dollars every year—millions of them." A Government of Singapore Investment Corporation (GSIC), with assets of about \$7 billion, was set up in 1981 to channel those dollars into holdings outside Asia. Among other U.S. properties, the GSIC owns 4 Penn Center, a \$46.5 million, 23-story office building in Philadelphia.

### Building Homes

Soon after Lee Kuan Yew assumed office, with his economic program barely underway, he launched a parallel drive for construction of public housing—at a rate of 9,000 one-, two-, or three-room units a year during the early 1960s. (Back then, a one-room flat rented for \$15 a month.) In recent years, as many as 29,000 new units have been built annually by the Housing and Development Board. Today, more than 70 percent of Singapore's people live in government-built housing (versus nine percent in 1959). Most public housing units can be purchased outright by their occupants—a three-room flat outside the downtown area goes for about \$14,000. For a downpayment or

\*Singapore has a "mixed" economy—so mixed that public and private sectors are sometimes impossible to sort out. The government has several directly owned subsidiaries, such as the Development Bank of Singapore and Intraco (the state trading company, used principally for dealings with communist countries). Through statutory agencies such as the Economic Development Board and holding companies such as the state-owned Temasek Holdings Pte., Ltd., the government has also invested in hundreds of private companies. As a result, civil servants representing the Republic of Singapore sit on the boards of innumerable concerns, often with a controlling interest; they act in concert with the central government when it wishes to massage, stimulate, or redirect the economy.

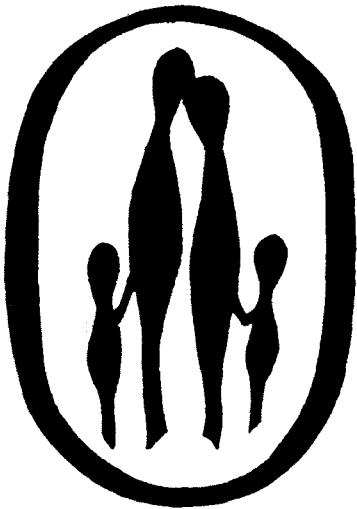
to subsidize the monthly mortgage, citizens can draw on the compulsory contributions—22 percent of wages—that they have already made to the Central Provident Fund, which is Singapore's (solvent) version of Social Security.

Lee had many good reasons for pulling out the stops on public housing. Housing construction helped win over the poor. It provided employment for tens of thousands of workers. (Even today, stepped-up construction of new flats becomes, in effect, a jobs program during times of recession.) But the Prime Minister also had subtler motives. Historically, newcomers to Singapore had settled among their own in one of the many ethnic *kampongs*; Lee hoped instead to create a distinct Singaporean identity. As the slums were cleared, the inhabitants were dispersed—regardless of dialect or heritage—among the new flats. Not infrequently, Lee's aim was purely political: Neighborhoods with a history of opposing the government were often the first to "benefit" from urban renewal, the old tenements torn down and their occupants scattered throughout the island.

Lee Kuan Yew may not yet have brought forth a new race of Singaporeans, but he has certainly established a country of racially mixed apartment-dwellers while at the same time controlling urban growth. Admiring Third World delegations, their members resplendent in guayaberas and dashikis and Nehru jackets, frequently call on Singapore to learn the secret. And admittedly, some of the newer satellite towns, with their relatively

spacious three- and five-room units clustered into small neighborhoods and built around markets and playgrounds, are quite attractive.

But many of the older high-rise buildings—the row upon



*"Singapore Wants Small Families." Family planning efforts in Singapore have succeeded beyond expectations. Contraception, legal abortion, and voluntary sterilization, backed by an array of financial incentives, have helped cut the island's population growth since 1953 from 5.7 to 1.4 percent a year.*

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row of shoe-boxes standing on end that every visitor sees—are inhabited by the less affluent and sometimes located far from jobs and schools. Grousing is contained by the residents' awareness of conditions in neighboring countries, but even so, circumstances may be far from pleasant. Crime, clutter, noise, and poor maintenance must often be stoically endured. One study reported that, in the high-rises, there was little social interaction among neighbors, and fewer than 10 percent of all children were allowed to play outside the flat, it being difficult to supervise the kids in play areas from the 10th or even the third floor.

With the erosion of community spirit—something the *kampongs* always sustained—life in many parts of Singapore is now intensely focused on the nuclear family, where isolation and over-familiarity can be two sides of one problem. The consequences are several. Among other things, as Riaz Hazzan observed in *Families in Flats* (1977), “the fact that the smaller children are continually underfoot and the TV is almost continually on makes it exceptionally difficult for older children to do their homework. As a result, children from the one-room flats are almost always well behind in their work.”

### Skimming the Cream

This is not a welcome state of affairs in a society where education is important. Primary and secondary education has been universally available in Singapore since the early years of Lee's regime. During children's first three years in school, the emphasis is on language—learning to read and write English and one other tongue (usually Mandarin). Only after third grade does instruction turn to science, math, social studies, and so forth. Students are “tracked” into academic or vocational courses as early as age seven or eight.

Schools are good in Singapore, but, like much else about the island, they have flaws where you might not expect them. For one, the regime never made primary, much less secondary, education compulsory. In part, it did not need to, since learning is prized among the Chinese. Yet the government's position also stems from Lee Kuan Yew's entrenched elitism, his belief that the cream will rise regardless. Lee may be right. But the happy few aside, what about the highly skilled work force a “high-tech” Singapore will need?

Adult literacy on the island today is only 75 percent, below that of much poorer countries like Jamaica or the Philippines. This is attributable to some extent, of course, to the fact that many Singaporeans reached maturity well before Lee Kuan

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Yew and his school system appeared on the scene. But it also reflects high attrition. During the mid-1970s, 29 percent of all students dropped out at some point during their first six years in school. The proportion of all Singaporean first-graders who eventually enter the 10,000-student National University of Singapore or one of the island's polytechnics or who matriculate abroad is only nine percent, compared with 20 percent receiving higher education in Taiwan and 40 percent in Japan.

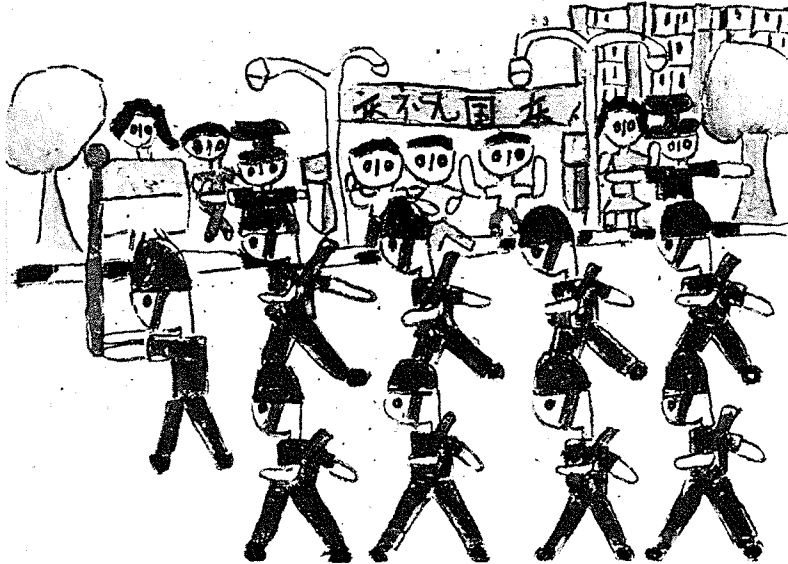
### The New Mandarins

Meanwhile, the school system seems to be in a continual state of flux, as if learning in Singapore could be as finely tuned as the nation's economy. So frequently does the Ministry of Education tinker with local school systems that it is commonly referred to as the Ministry of Changes. The latest kick is an effort to inculcate Confucian values—an attempt, finally, to provide moral education as a firmer basis for national cohesion than self-gratification and “money-theism.”\* With its emphasis on hierarchy, order, reciprocity, loyalty, and rule by the most able and virtuous, Confucianism seems admirably suited to encourage the “team spirit” Lee Kuan Yew wants to see in Singapore. Increasingly, that spirit has given way to a “what’s in it for me” attitude, reflected in widespread job-hopping and demands by workers for overtime pay for playing in company-sponsored athletic competitions. Newspaper editorials lament the rise in juvenile delinquency, drug use, and what the Prime Minister calls “yellow culture”—immorality, hedonism, and other “seamier by-products of prosperity.”

Lee's educational reforms are designed in part to ensure that Singapore's next generation of leaders is as honest and able as the present one, and as devoid of “mediocrities and opportunists.” While the government hopes to enlarge “the number of key digits,” no one doubts that Singapore's 64,000 bureaucrats will continue to be dominated by a “coordinated hard core” of perhaps 300 high-flyers—skilled administrators and technical managers. (Lee Kuan Yew once observed that the country would disintegrate if “all 300 were to crash in one jumbo jet.”) High-flyers make up Singapore's elite Administrative Service—a British legacy—which in turn is overseen by a 15-member cabi-

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\*Confucianism will be introduced in the schools no later than 1984 as part of a broader religious knowledge program. Other courses include Buddhism, Hindu, Islam, Bible studies, and world religions. The humanities have not had high priority in Singapore in recent decades. One ironic result was that the country had to import eight Confucian scholars from Yale, New York University, Stanford, and other U.S. institutions to help determine which variant of Confucianism to teach.



*A Singaporean child's depiction of the National Day (August 9) parade. It marks Chinese-dominated Singapore's final separation from Malay-dominated Malaysia in 1965 on grounds of mutual incompatibility. At the time, Singaporeans held their breath and wondered what was next.*

net. The cohesion of the ruling class, and its ability to march in step, is enhanced by other Singapore institutions, such as the elegant Pyramid Club, whose membership is restricted to about 150 of the island's most senior ministers, members of Parliament, civil servants, businessmen, military officers, lawyers, and academics.

The integrity of those who exercise power in Singapore is ensured by the Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau. (Its name in Chinese is the Foul Greed Investigation Bureau.) The Bureau is empowered to investigate all charges of corruption in both the public and private sectors. No individual is immune. The Bureau's powers of search and seizure are practically unlimited, and the efficiency and sophistication of its 70 staff members are held in awe by Singaporeans of whatever station.

Recruitment of younger men into the ranks of what used to be called the "mandarinate" has been underway for a decade. In the cabinet, for example, seven of the 15 ministers have served for more than 12 years but the other eight have held their portfolios for fewer than six. The average age of the younger ministers is 44. The selection process is designed to winnow out the merely ordinary. "We can find out a man's record in school and



**NO NONSENSE: A LEE KUAN YEW SAMPLER**

*On the importance of following the rules:*

"We have all got to travel either on the left or on the right side of the road. We have all got to agree that when the light is red, we stop. When it is amber, we take heed. When it is green, we go."

*On three hippie tourists whose hair was cut off by Singapore police:*

"Things like this happen in the best of places. If any embarrassment has been caused, we can send them three wigs. We make wigs here."

*On Singapore's leadership:*

"My colleagues and I are by nature and by training calculators, not feelers; we like to make sure."

*On training the young:*

"We will be to blame if youngsters ten years from now become hooligans, ruffians, and sluts. They can be trained to be otherwise. Even dogs can be trained, as proved by the Police Training School where dogs, at a whistle, jump through a hoop, sit down, or attack those who need to be attacked."

*To a group of university students:*

"I often wonder whether you understand, whether you have a grasp of the realities of the society in which you are living. I have the feeling very often that because the administration is so effective, you are living like fishes in aquariums."

*On "social delinquents":*

"Our problem is how to devise a system of disincentives so that the irresponsible . . . do not believe that all they have to do is to produce their children and the government then owes them and their children sufficient food, medicine, housing, education, and jobs."

*On his own intellectual capabilities:*

"At Cambridge I got two firsts and a star for distinction. Harold Macmillan did not."

the university," Lee has explained, "how active he was apart from his profession, and even simulate crises to put him under"—like giving him two or more demanding jobs at once and shuffling him around rapidly among ministries to see if he can handle a rapid succession of diverse responsibilities.

Finding capable young technocrats is one thing, finding capable young *politicians* quite another. Lee and his People's Action Party learned that lesson in 1981 during a by-election in the downtown Anson district, adjacent to the harbor. The PAP had many times before asked older members of Parliament to resign, making room for "new blood." But this time, as a test, PAP officials deliberately left the running of the campaign entirely in the hands of second generation politicians. The PAP candidate for the vacant seat in Parliament, hand-picked by Lee, was 32-year-old Pang Kim Hin, scion of a wealthy family and a mechanical engineer with a B.S. from Canada's McGill University. To everyone's surprise, Pang lost to a personable Sri Lanka-born lawyer, J. B. Jeyaretnam, the candidate of the Workers' Party.

### What Next?

Since 1966, the PAP had never lost an election. In the 1980 general elections, it had captured all 75 seats in Parliament; in the 38 districts where one or more of Singapore's 19 opposition parties—most of them small "mosquito parties"—fielded candidates, the PAP had won with an average of 75.5 percent of the vote. In the aftermath of the Anson vote, the Prime Minister conceded with typical bluntness that the second generation, for all its costly training, had yet to demonstrate "that sensitive political touch which is essential for rapport between government and the people." Meanwhile, though his presence in Parliament hardly threatens the PAP's hold on power, J. B. Jeyaretnam receives considerable public sympathy and attention as the lone opposition MP. He is quoted but hardly lionized by the press, where self-censorship rather than overt government intervention is the rule.\*

The critical question facing Singapore is what the future holds. "If I were in authority in Singapore indefinitely," Lee Kuan Yew once remarked, "without having to ask those who are being governed whether they like what is being done, then I have not the slightest doubt that I could govern much more effectively in their own interests." But he will not be in authority indefinitely, and his successors will probably have to seek popular approval for their policies to a greater extent than Lee has ever done or had to do.

\*Censorship works in many ways in Singapore, and does not work consistently. All printing presses must be relicensed annually by the government—which amounts to a very short leash. The most prestigious newspaper in Singapore, the *Straits Times*, is run by S. R. Nathan, a former chief of Singapore intelligence, who has the full confidence of the government. At the same time, the National University of Singapore publishes academically credible books critical of government policies, and newspapers present the opinions of columnists who often hold the regime up to mild ridicule.

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They will also have to deal with the sensitive issue of the quality of life. "One of the most important purposes of all this planning and effort," Lee has said, "is that at the end of each day's toil, life should be more than just existence and the business of making a living." Singapore is not there yet. Nor has a sense of national identity really begun to jell. On such matters as possible reunification with Malaysia, admiration for Lee Kuan Yew, the importance of bilingualism, or even acceptance of the word "Singaporean," cleavages in public opinion are evident to this day among Chinese, Malays, and Indians. On the two local television channels, there is little domestic programming. Most of it comes from the BBC or from U.S. networks—"Dallas," "Love Boat," and "Diff'rent Strokes" are all popular—or from Hong Kong in the form of soap operas, with the original Cantonese dubbed over in Mandarin.

Beyond this, Singapore may face the task of reconciling its need to function as a unified society with the growing demands for greater individual freedom and political pluralism. Perhaps the two are not reconcilable. Singapore is too small to readily absorb the shock of big mistakes. Prime Minister Lee noted once that, "put bluntly, the role of an opposition is to ensure bad government"—his rationale being that the opposition does not enter Parliament to help a government govern well. Yet, he has also come to believe that, with economic prosperity now a tenuous fact of life, opposition from political "sparring partners" may be the only way to keep the newest generation of PAP politicians fit and agile.

Shadows of one sort or another hang over all of Asia's "little tigers"—Hong Kong, Taiwan, and South Korea are the others—and by comparison, Singapore's lot is in some ways enviable. It faces no military threat; relations with neighbors may often be no more than correct but they are not hostile. There is no denying the republic's internal flaws, and the republic does not deny them. Its leaders, historically, have been alert to dangers and willing to confront them. They do not like washing their dirty linen in public, but they try to wash it somewhere.

There is a saying in Washington that God watches over fools, drunks, and the United States of America. I suspect that, out of one corner of His eye, He's had Singapore in view as well.



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## BACKGROUND BOOKS

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### SINGAPORE

"We in Singapore have to cultivate a very small garden, and the seeds we import for our garden must be selected with care and discrimination, so that no poisonous weeds are allowed to overrun our little plot of earth. But what seeds we do select can be the best that either East or West has to offer."

That is as pithy (and earthy) an expression as any of Singapore's leaders' hopes and plans for the future. It comes from President C. V. Devan Nair, Singapore's titular chief of state since 1981, an Indian by heritage and in younger days an ardent Communist (jailed by the British), a prominent union activist, and, ultimately, a loyal supporter of the People's Action Party who survived Lee Kuan Yew's purge of the PAP's pro-Communist wing in 1961.

Singapore was not built by the overly meek, the studiously consistent, the scrupulously virtuous. In his *One Hundred Years' History of the Chinese in Singapore* (Murray, 1923; Univ. of Malaya, 1967), Song Ong Siang quotes Sir James Brooke, writing only two decades after the settlement was founded in 1819. Brooke at once praised and lamented the character of the Chinese who dominated the island's commerce:

"Their industry exceeds that of any other people on the face of the earth, they are laborious, patient, and cheerful; but on the other hand they are corrupt, supple, and exacting, yielding to their superiors and tyrannical to those who fall into their power."

Nevertheless, such ingredients often added up to a recipe for success in Singapore. In addition, they so fla-

vored the island's history that respectable historians seem to have shied away, perhaps fearing that any general history would seem too "popular" (i.e., interesting) to suit academic tastes. Fortunately, C. Mary Turnbull was not deterred. For the specialist and nonspecialist alike, her illustrated, scholarly, and smartly written *A History of Singapore* (Oxford, 1977, cloth & paper) is the best survey available of Singapore's colorful path from antiquity to modernity.

Turnbull's study may be usefully supplemented by Donald and Joanna Moore's *The First 150 Years of Singapore* (Donald Moore, 1969), a compilation of documents with connecting text by the authors.

The "anything goes" capitalism that brought Singapore fortune, fame, and infamy during colonial days has been not so much diluted since independence as refined, sanitized, and institutionalized. Singapore today has a "directed" economy and centralized planning. But Iain Buchanan argues in *Singapore in Southeast Asia* (Bell, 1972) that the island's dependence on foreign investment and expatriate corporate management may be merely a disguised form of neocolonialism.

That aside, he also warns that the republic's role as wealthy middleman and regional processing center is increasingly aggravating to its two larger Moslem neighbors, Malaysia and Indonesia. Singapore may now be a pearl, he says in effect, but the surrounding oyster feels it as an irritating speck of sand.

While Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew and his associates prefer to

focus world attention on Singapore's high standard of living, clean streets, and incorruptible bureaucracy, they are aware that potentially serious problems—foreign and domestic—do exist. Parents and government alike worry about a younger generation that takes schools, jobs, housing, and health care for granted—and seems to lack ambition. A small intelligentsia decries regimentation and conformity. In **The Economics of Modernization** (Asia Pacific, 1972), even First Deputy Prime Minister Goh Keng Swee complained of his island's "depressing climate of intellectual sterility."

Some observers attribute that climate in part to the paternalistic political system imposed by Lee after 1963. One such critic is T. J. S. George. In **Lee Kuan Yew's Singapore** (Deutsch, 1973, cloth & paper), a political biography of the island's long-time "headman," George strives to give the austere Prime Minister his due. But his overall assessment is negative.

Lee, in George's view, "casts a pall of conformity and caution over the lives of the people he controls. He seems to assume that a sense of national identity can be created from television sets, apartments, and jobs, disregarding the citizen's right to respect and equality."

One manifestation of the lack of truly national feeling lies in what economist Lim Chong Yah calls the "hotel-guest mentality." Lim, whose local newspaper columns are collected in **Commentary on Economics and Current Affairs** (Federal, 1981), discerns the phenomenon mainly among affluent professionals whose skills are in demand around the world—the very people who have gained the most from Singapore.

As long as times are good, these

people are happy to remain in Singapore, writes Lim. But ask them to contribute something to the republic—allowing their sons to be drafted, for example—and they check out of their "suites" and move abroad.

Newspapers are watched closely in Singapore, but despite inevitable self-censorship, columnists still enjoy considerable latitude, and letters to the editor reflect a riot of opinion. Among everyone's favorite targets are the government's frequent attempts at moral or social uplift, its campaigns to curb (for example) spitting in public or to "make courtesy our way of life."

Two of the better newspaper commentators are B. J. Wu and Paik-Choo, each the author of a recent volume of essays: respectively, **Singapore Accent** (C. Nair, 1981) and **The Pick of Paik-Choo** (Singapore: Times, 1982). Both take aim at a variety of local initiatives, including government language policy—the requirement, in particular, that Singapore Chinese, most of whom speak south China dialects and are avid fans of movies in Cantonese imported from Hong Kong, make their children learn Mandarin, the official language of the People's Republic of China and of Taiwan.

Paik-Choo ridicules the proposal that even personal names be changed to their phonetic Mandarin equivalents. (In Chinese, the meaning of written characters is universal, but each dialect pronounces them differently.) She cites the case of two of her cousins, whose names in Hokkien are pronounced Ah Lok and Ah Loh—after their mother's favorite music, rock 'n' roll. In Mandarin, the connotation is lost.

Knowledge of standard English is a different matter. Government and populace are one in recognizing that

English is the language of trade and the government defends its purity. Citizens are reminded continually that local "Singlish" will not do.

Some characteristics of Singlish, as classified in **The English of Singapore and Malaysia** (Eastern Univ., rev. ed., 1979) by R. K. Tongue, include omission of the verb "to be" ("People will glad to buy it"); repetition of adjectives ("Do you speak English? Broken, broken"); omission of prepositions ("We go your home"); and confusion of the personal pronouns "he" and "she."

As an intensely mercantile community, Singapore long paid little attention to literature and the arts. Yet, more than a few outsiders, including Somerset Maugham and Joseph Conrad, found fertile ground for fiction in the ennui—hardly new or unique to Singapore—that is traditionally handmaiden to economic well-being in the tropics.

The portrait of jaded British colonial society before World War II presented by J. G. Farrell in **The Singapore Grip** (Knopf, 1979, cloth; Berkley, 1980, paper) is echoed in Paul Theroux's **Saint Jack** (Houghton, 1973, cloth; Ballantine, 1976, paper), the tale of a dissolute American expatriate who operates a seamy R & R hotel in Singapore for war-weary GIs from Vietnam.

Even the tales by Singapore's

popular Catherine Lim—collected in **Little Ironies** (Heinemann, 1978, paper only) and **Or Else, The Lightning God, and Other Stories** (Heinemann, 1980, paper only)—present families and individuals adrift in materialism and amorality.

In "The Taximan's Story," a cabby decries the immorality of schoolgirls who "friend, friend, the European and American tourists, and this is how they make fun and also extra money" and reveals that he caught his daughter with Europeans and now won't let her out of the house. But he declines a passenger's request to wait because "must go off to the Hotel Elroy—there plenty of young people [with Europeans] to pick up."

Perhaps Singapore's best-known author—though few realize that he lived in Singapore and taught at the university there—is C. Northcote Parkinson, author of **Parkinson's Law** (Houghton, 1957, cloth; 1962, paper). Parkinson derived some of his droll but perceptive laws of bureaucratic behavior (e.g., "work expands so as to fill the time available for its completion") from practices he observed in, among other places, "a certain British colony."

That was colonial Singapore. Today, on Lee Kuan Yew's efficient little island, many of Parkinson's laws seem to have been repealed.

—K. Mulliner



EDITOR'S NOTE: Mulliner, 43, is assistant to the director of the Ohio University Libraries. He is co-editor of *Malaysian Studies II* (with John Lent, 1983).