

**Lee Kuan Yew and China:
Leader Who Struck a Chord with China**
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Big or Small, Only Leadership Matters

China has published many books about former Singapore Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew. One written by Chang Zheng in 1996 bears this interesting title, *Lee Kuan Yew: A Great Man in a Small Country (xiao-guo wei-ren)*. In politics and international power relations, does “size” matter at all?

Deng Xiaoping, a “five-footer”, had struck Lee Kuan Yew as “a giant among men” when they first met in 1978. Lee had since openly stated that Deng was the most impressive leader he had ever met.

Viewed from a different angle, Singapore is a tiny city-state while China is a huge continental-sized country. The two also have inherent political, economic and social differences. Yet, they have developed strong bilateral relations, thanks to the efforts of both Lee Kuan Yew and Deng Xiaoping.

Singapore must have also struck Deng as the most impressive country he had ever visited. He passed through Singapore in the 1920s on his way to France, when Singapore was then only a small trading port. Before his official visit to Singapore in November 1978, Deng had not been to any developed society other than the US and Japan. Deng must have marveled at how the Singapore leadership had managed to overcome the constraint of size and successfully transform this small island into a throbbing industrial state. This is something China under Mao had miserably failed.

Thus, Deng, in his famous *Nanxun* (tour of South China) speech in 1992, specifically singled out Singapore as a good model of economic and social development for China. This set off an instant “Singapore fever” in China that had lasted to this day. Deng’s endorsement of the “Singapore model” had laid down a strong institutional base for a robust Singapore-China relationship ever since.

For Lee, he had quickly changed his original Cold-War perception of China. Lee was once attacked by Radio Beijing as the “running dog” of Western imperialism. As Deng started his pragmatic policy of economic reform and opening up, Lee was quick to see rising economic opportunity for Singapore, particularly after Deng’s *Nanxun*. True enough, the *Nanxun* had sparked off China’s dynamic double-digit rates of economic growth for over two decades.

Specifically, Lee was instrumental in setting up the Singapore-Suzhou

Industrial Park, which, after overcoming initial start-up problems, has developed to become a symbol of successful Singapore-China cooperation based on mutual benefits. Success in Suzhou led to another government-to-government flagship project, the Tianjin Eco-City; and then many others in different forms.

Under the auspices of these two great leaders, Singapore and China saw their economic ties grow by leaps and bounds, with their two-way trade reaching US\$64 billion in 2011. Furthermore, their bilateral cooperation has broadened beyond trade and investment into political, social, cultural, education, and even security areas.

As Harvard's China expert Ezra Vogel has pointed out in his recent book on Deng Xiaoping, Singapore and China would not have cemented their relationship in such a unique way, had Lee and Deng not been able to establish close rapport and a kind of "special bond" with each other from the start.

Lee Kuan Yew to the Chinese

In China, Lee is probably the best-known foreign political figure, partly because he has been in public office for over 50 years. More importantly, ordinary Chinese see Lee primarily as a prominent *Chinese* (not foreign) leader that has brought development success to a foreign country called Singapore. To some of them, Singapore is still a very Chinese city-state.

This ethnic-centric approach is very much in evidence in virtually all popular writings and books about Lee Kuan Yew. Invariably, they all start by tracing Lee's ancestral origins (*ji-guan*), e.g., Lee as an ethnic *ke-jia* and Guangdong's Dapu as his ancestral home. To many Chinese, Lee is an overseas Chinese, and he will remain an overseas Chinese. Actually because of this, his success outside China is all the more remarkable to the Chinese people.

Views on Lee from the scholarly community are understandably more sophisticated. Thanks to Deng's promotion of the "Singapore model" and the many thousands of Chinese officials who have subsequently been sent to take training courses at NTU and NUS, Singapore studies as an academic subject is getting popular in many universities in China, with the number of "Singapore watchers" growing rapidly.

Domestic Chinese scholars on Singapore tend to interpret Lee's role in Singapore's development through Chinese cultural lenses. Singapore's episodes of promoting Confucian values in schools and the Speak Mandarin Campaign have particularly made a deep impression on China's scholars with an interest in Singapore. To them, those Confucian values such as emphasis on education, frugality and hard-work must have contributed to Singapore's successful economic and social development. So Lee is broadly viewed as a Confucian kind of ruler.

Since Lee is a lawyer and Singapore is well known for upholding the rule of law, so Lee should also belong to the Legal School (*fa-jia*), as indeed most

successful Chinese rulers and mandarins in the past were both a Confucianist and a Legalist, and they governed China with an optimal mix of *de* (virtues) and *fa* (law). One scholar even labels Lee as a Legalist in substance but a Confucianist in spirit.

However, to the numerous young netizens and bloggers – 700 million Internet users in China today--- Lee presents a different image, often superficial and inconsistent. In November 2009, Lee made one remark by calling the US to continue its presence in the region as a balance to the rising China. This had immediately touched off a big hue and cry in China's cyber world.

Many Chinese, including those who are well-disposed towards Singapore, are upset by this remark. This is not about Chinese nationalism. To them, it is just inconceivable that Lee as a Chinese who used to have many good words on China, should have now turned around to ask the Americans to prevent China from developing into a strong and prosperous country!

After Lee, Then Who and What

A leader from a small country needs to constantly shout in order to get attention. When Lee speaks, Western leaders listen. In particular, they want his views on China. Not just in the West, Lee also commands attentive audience in China. In Beijing, Chinese leaders are similarly very eager to seek wise counsels from him, especially his views about the US and the outside world. Lee's official title of "Senior Minister", in Chinese as *zi zheng* (policy adviser), is particularly appropriate for his role in China.

After Lee, it would be difficult to find comparable successors to fill his big shoes. That is rather unfortunate for Singapore when it comes to deal with the rising China in future. In 1990 when Singapore normalized relations with China, China's GDP was only 10 times larger than Singapore's. Today, it is 30 times. Lee can be frank and blunt in his views, but Chinese leaders still respect him as their senior. After Lee, Singapore's political discourse with China will have to take a different form.

Without Lee's astute guiding hand and his stature, can Singapore continue to manoeuvre effectively in the dynamic power relationship of the US and China without running into the risk of displeasing one or the other? This is a big question yet to be answered.