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Culture Is Destiny

A Conversation with Lee Kuan Yew

Fareed Zakaria

MEETING THE MINISTER

"ONE OF THE ASYMMETRIES of history," wrote Henry Kissinger of Singapore's patriarch Lee Kuan Yew, "is the lack of correspondence between the abilities of some leaders and the power of their countries." Kissinger's one time boss, Richard Nixon, was even more flattering. He speculated that, had Lee lived in another time and another place, he might have "attained the world stature of a Churchill, a Disraeli, or a Gladstone." This tag line of a big man on a small stage has been attached to Lee since the 1970s. Today, however, his stage does not look quite so small. Singapore's per capita GNP is now higher than that of its erstwhile colonizer, Great Britain. It has the world's busiest port, is the third-largest oil refiner and a major center of global manufacturing and service industries. And this move from poverty to plenty has taken place within one generation. In 1965 Singapore ranked economically with Chile, Argentina and Mexico; today its per capita GNP is four or five times theirs.

Lee managed this miraculous transformation in Singapore's economy while maintaining tight political control over the country; Singapore's government can best be described as a "soft" authoritarian regime, and at times it has not been so soft. He was prime minister of Singapore from its independence in 1959 (it became part of a federation with Malaysia in 1963 but was expelled in 1965) until 1990,

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when he allowed his deputy to succeed him. He is now "Senior Minister" and still commands enormous influence and power in the country. Since his retirement, Lee has embarked on another career of sorts as a world-class pundit, speaking his mind with impolitic frankness. And what is often on his mind is American-style democracy and its perils. He travels often to East Asian capitals from Beijing to Hanoi to Manila dispensing advice on how to achieve economic growth while retaining political stability and control. It is a formula that the governing elites of these countries are anxious to learn.

The rulers of former British colonies have been spared the embarrassment of building grandiose monuments to house their offices; they simply occupy the ones that the British built. So it is with Singapore. The president, prime minister and senior minister work out of *Istana* (palace), the old colonial governor's house, a gleaming white bungalow surrounded by luxuriant lawns. The interior is modern—light wood paneling and leather sofas. The atmosphere is hushed. I waited in a large anteroom for the "SM," which is how everybody refers to Lee. I did not wait long. The SM was standing in the middle of a large, sparsely furnished office. He is of medium build. His once-compact physique is now slightly shrunken. Still, he does not look 70.

Lee Kuan Yew is unlike any politician I have met. There were no smiles, no jokes, no bonhomie. He looked straight at me—he has an inexpressive face but an intense gaze—shook hands and motioned toward one of the room's pale blue leather sofas (I had already been told by his press secretary on which one to sit). After 30 awkward seconds, I realized that there would be no small talk. I pressed the record button on my machine.

FZ: With the end of the Cold War, many Americans were surprised to hear growing criticism of their political and economic and social system from elites in East Asia, who were considered staunchly pro-American. What, in your view, is wrong with the American system?

LKY: It is not my business to tell people what's wrong with their system. It is my business to tell people not to foist their system indiscriminately on societies in which it will not work.

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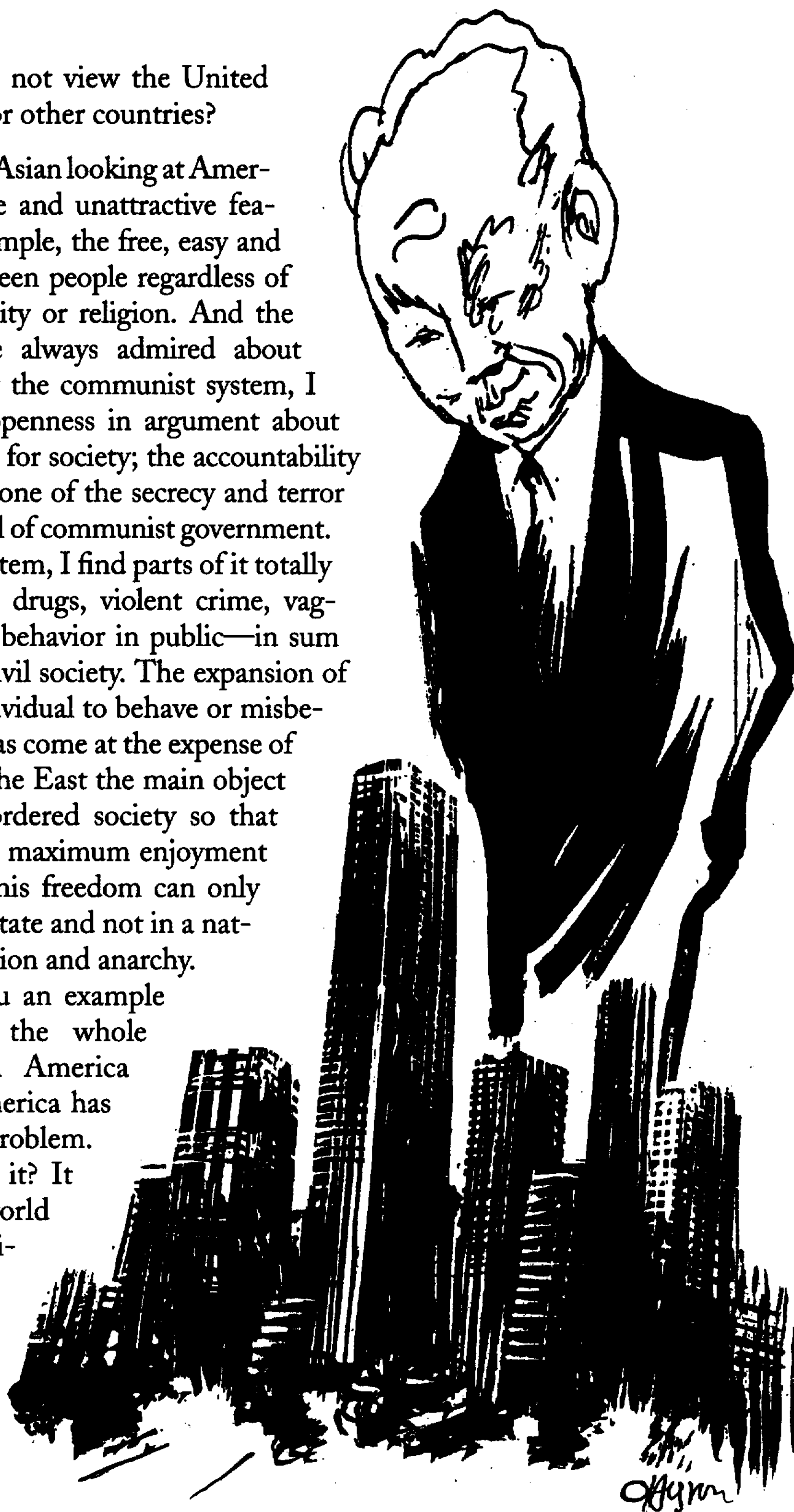
FZ: But you do not view the United States as a model for other countries?

LKY: As an East Asian looking at America, I find attractive and unattractive features. I like, for example, the free, easy and open relations between people regardless of social status, ethnicity or religion. And the things that I have always admired about America, as against the communist system, I still do: a certain openness in argument about what is good or bad for society; the accountability of public officials; none of the secrecy and terror that's part and parcel of communist government.

But as a total system, I find parts of it totally unacceptable: guns, drugs, violent crime, vagrancy, unbecoming behavior in public—in sum the breakdown of civil society. The expansion of the right of the individual to behave or misbehave as he pleases has come at the expense of orderly society. In the East the main object is to have a well-ordered society so that everybody can have maximum enjoyment of his freedoms. This freedom can only exist in an ordered state and not in a natural state of contention and anarchy.

Let me give you an example that encapsulates the whole difference between America and Singapore. America has a vicious drug problem. How does it solve it? It goes around the world helping other anti-narcotic agencies to try and stop the suppliers. It pays for helicopters, defoliating agents and so



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on. And when it is provoked, it captures the president of Panama and brings him to trial in Florida. Singapore does not have that option. We can't go to Burma and capture warlords there. What we can do is to pass a law which says that any customs officer or policeman who sees anybody in Singapore behaving suspiciously, leading him to suspect the person is under the influence of drugs, can require that man to have his urine tested. If the sample is found to contain drugs, the man immediately goes for treatment. In America if you did that it would be an invasion of the individual's rights and you would be sued.

Westerners have abandoned an ethical basis for society, believing that all problems are solvable by a good government.

I was interested to read Colin Powell, when he was chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, saying that the military followed our approach because when a recruit signs up he agrees that he can be tested. Now, I would have thought this kind of approach would be quite an effective way to deal with the terrible drug problem you have. But the idea of the inviolability of the individual has been turned into dogma. And yet nobody minds when the army goes and captures the president of another state and brings him to Florida and puts him in jail. I find that incomprehensible. And in any case this approach will not solve America's drug problem. Whereas Singapore's way, we may not solve it, but we will lessen it considerably, as we have done.

FZ: Would it be fair to say that you admired America more 25 years ago? What, in your view, went wrong?

LKY: Yes, things have changed. I would hazard a guess that it has a lot to do with the erosion of the moral underpinnings of a society and the diminution of personal responsibility. The liberal, intellectual tradition that developed after World War II claimed that human beings had arrived at this perfect state where everybody would be better off if they were allowed to do their own thing and flourish. It has not worked out, and I doubt if it will. Certain basics about human nature do not change. Man needs a certain moral sense of right and wrong. There is such a thing called evil, and it is not the result of being a victim of society. You are just an evil man, prone to do evil things, and you have to be stopped from doing them. Westerners have abandoned an ethical basis for society, believing that all problems are solvable by a good government, which we in the East never believed possible.

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FZ: Is such a fundamental shift in culture irreversible?

LKY: No, it is a swing of the pendulum. I think it will swing back. I don't know how long it will take, but there's already a backlash in America against failed social policies that have resulted in people urinating in public, in aggressive begging in the streets, in social breakdown.

THE ASIAN MODEL

FZ: You say that your real concern is that this system not be foisted on other societies because it will not work there. Is there another viable model for political and economic development? Is there an "Asian model"?

LKY: I don't think there is an Asian model as such. But Asian societies are unlike Western ones. The fundamental difference between Western concepts of society and government and East Asian concepts—when I say East Asians, I mean Korea, Japan, China, Vietnam, as distinct from Southeast Asia, which is a mix between the Sinic and the Indian, though Indian culture also emphasizes similar values—is that Eastern societies believe that the individual exists in the context of his family. He is not pristine and separate. The family is part of the extended family, and then friends and the wider society. The ruler or the government does not try to provide for a person what the family best provides.

In the West, especially after World War II, the government came to be seen as so successful that it could fulfill all the obligations that in less modern societies are fulfilled by the family. This approach encouraged alternative families, single mothers for instance, believing that government could provide the support to make up for the absent father. This is a bold, Huxleyan view of life, but one from which I as an East Asian shy away. I would be afraid to experiment with it. I'm not sure what the consequences are, and I don't like the consequences that I see in the West. You will find this view widely shared in East Asia. It's not that we don't have single mothers here. We are also caught in the same social problems of change when we educate our women and they become independent financially and no longer need to put up with unhappy marriages. But there is grave disquiet when we break away from tested norms, and the tested norm is the family unit. It is the building brick of society.

There is a little Chinese aphorism which encapsulates this idea: *Xiushen qijia zhiguo pingtianxia. Xiushen* means look after yourself, cultivate yourself, do everything to make yourself useful; *Qijia,* look after the family; *Zhiguo,* look after your country; *Pingtianxia,* all is peaceful under

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heaven. We have a whole people immersed in these beliefs. My granddaughter has the name *Xiu-qi.* My son picked out the first two words, instructing his daughter to cultivate herself and look after her family. It is the basic concept of our civilization. Governments will come, governments will go, but this endures. We start with self-reliance. In the West today it is the opposite. The government says give me a popular mandate and I will solve all society's problems.

FZ: What would you do instead to address America's problems?

LKY: What would I do if I were an American? First, you must have order in society. Guns, drugs and violent crime all go together, threatening social order. Then the schools; when you have violence in schools, you are not going to have education, so you've got to put that right. Then you have to educate rigorously and train a whole generation of skilled, intelligent, knowledgeable people who can be productive. I would start off with basics, working on the individual, looking at him within the context of his family, his friends, his society. But the Westerner says I'll fix things at the top. One magic formula, one grand plan. I will wave a wand and everything will work out. It's an interesting theory but not a proven method.

BACK TO BASICS

FZ: You are very skeptical of government's ability to solve deeper social issues. But you're more confident, certainly than many Americans are, in the government's ability to promote economic growth and technological advancement. Isn't this a contradiction?

LKY: No. We have focused on basics in Singapore. We used the family to push economic growth, factoring the ambitions of a person and his family into our planning. We have tried, for example, to improve the lot of children through education. The government can create a setting in which people can live happily and succeed and express themselves, but finally it is what people do with their lives that determines economic success or failure. Again, we were fortunate we had this cultural backdrop, the belief in thrift, hard work, filial piety and loyalty in the extended family, and, most of all, the respect for scholarship and learning.

There is, of course, another reason for our success. We have been able to create economic growth because we facilitated certain changes while we moved from an agricultural society to an industrial society. We had

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the advantage of knowing what the end result should be by looking at the West and later Japan. We knew where we were, and we knew where we had to go. We said to ourselves, "Let's hasten, let's see if we can get there faster." But soon we will face a different situation. In the near future, all of us will get to the stage of Japan. Where do we go next? How do we hasten getting there when we don't know where we're going? That will be a new situation.

FZ: Some people say that the Asian model is too rigid to adapt well to change. The sociologist Mancur Olson argues that national decline is caused most fundamentally by sclerosis—the rigidity of interest groups, firms, labor, capital and the state. An American-type system that is very flexible, laissez-faire and constantly adapting is better suited to the emerging era of rapid change than a government-directed economic policy and a Confucian value system.

LKY: That is an optimistic and attractive philosophy of life, and I hope it will come true. But if you look at societies over the millennia you find certain basic patterns. American civilization from the Pilgrim fathers on is one of optimism and the growth of orderly government. History in China is of dynasties which have risen and fallen, of the waxing and waning of societies. And through all that turbulence, the family, the extended family, the clan, has provided a kind of survival raft for the individual. Civilizations have collapsed, dynasties have been swept away by conquering hordes, but this life raft enables the civilization to carry on and get to its next phase.

Nobody here really believes that the government can provide in all circumstances. The government itself does not believe it. In the ultimate crisis, even in earthquakes and typhoons, it is your human relationships that will see you through. So the thesis you quote, that the government is always capable of reinventing itself in new shapes and forms, has not been proven in history. But the family and the way human relationships are structured, do increase the survival chances of its members. That has been tested over thousands of years in many different situations.

THE CULTURE OF SUCCESS

FZ: A key ingredient of national economic success in the past has been a culture of innovation and experimentation. During their rise to great wealth and power the centers of growth—Venice, Holland, Britain, the

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United States—all had an atmosphere of intellectual freedom in which new ideas, technologies, methods and products could emerge. In East Asian countries, however, the government frowns upon an open and free wheeling intellectual climate. Leaving aside any kind of human rights questions this raises, does it create a productivity problem?

LKY: Intellectually that sounds like a reasonable conclusion, but I'm not sure things will work out this way. The Japanese, for instance, have not been all that disadvantaged in creating new products. I think that if governments are aware of your thesis and of the need to test out new areas, to break out of existing formats, they can counter the trend. East Asians, who all share a tradition of strict discipline, respect for the teacher, no talking back to the teacher and rote learning, must make sure that there is this random intellectual search for new technologies and products. In any case, in a world where electronic communications are instantaneous, I do not see anyone lagging behind. Anything new that happens spreads quickly, whether it's superconductivity or some new life-style.

FZ: Would you agree with the World Bank report on East Asian economic success, which I interpret to have concluded that all the governments that succeeded got fundamentals right—encouraging savings and investment, keeping inflation low, providing high-quality education. The tinkering of industrial policies here and targeting sectors there was not as crucial an element in explaining these countries' extraordinary economic growth as were these basic factors.

LKY: I think the World Bank had a very difficult job. It had to write up these very, very complex series of situations. But there are cultural factors which have been lightly touched over, which deserved more weightage. This would have made it a more complex study and of less universal application, but it would have been more accurate, explaining the differences, for example, between the Philippines and Taiwan.

FZ: If culture is so important, then countries with very different cultures may not, in fact, succeed in the way that East Asia did by getting economic fundamentals right. Are you not hopeful for the countries around the world that are liberalizing their economies?

LKY: Getting the fundamentals right would help, but these societies will not succeed in the same way as East Asia did because certain driving forces will be absent. If you have a culture that doesn't place much value

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in learning and scholarship and hard work and thrift and deferment of present enjoyment for future gain, the going will be much slower.

But, you know, the World Bank report's conclusions are part of the culture of America and, by extension, of international institutions. It had to present its findings in a bland and universalizable way, which I find unsatisfying because it doesn't grapple with the real problems. It makes the hopeful assumption that all men are equal, that people all over the world are the same. They are not. Groups of people develop different characteristics when they have evolved for thousands of years separately. Genetics and history interact. The Native American Indian is genetically of the same stock as the Mongoloids of East Asia—the Chinese, the Koreans and the Japanese. But one group got cut off after the Bering Straits melted away. Without that land bridge they were totally isolated in America for thousands of years. The other, in East Asia, met successive invading forces from Central Asia and interacted with waves of people moving back and forth. The two groups may share certain characteristics, for instance if you measure the shape of their skulls and so on, but if you start testing them you find that they are different, most particularly in their neurological development, and their cultural values.

The World Bank report makes the hopeful assumption that all men are equal. They are not.

Now if you gloss over these kinds of issues because it is politically incorrect to study them, then you have laid a land mine for yourself. This is what leads to the disappointments with social policies, embarked upon in America with great enthusiasm and expectations, but which yield such meager results. There isn't a willingness to see things in their stark reality. But then I am not being politically correct.

FZ: Culture may be important, but it does change. The Asian "model" may prove to be a transitional phenomenon. After all, Western countries also went through a period in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when they were capitalist and had limited participatory democracy. Elites then worried—as you do today—that "too much" democracy and "too many" individual rights would destabilize social order. But as these societies modernized and as economic growth spread to all sections of society, things changed. Isn't East Asia changing because of a growing middle class that demands a say in its own future?

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LKY: There is acute change in East Asia. We are agricultural societies that have industrialized within one or two generations. What happened in the West over 200 years or more is happening here in about 50 years or less. It is all crammed and crushed into a very tight time frame, so there are bound to be dislocations and malfunctions. If you look at the fast-growing countries—Korea, Thailand, Hong Kong, and Singapore—there's been one remarkable phenomenon: the rise of religion. Koreans have taken to Christianity in large numbers, I think some 25 percent. This is a country that was never colonized by a Christian nation. The old customs and religions—ancestor worship, shamanism—no longer completely satisfy. There is a quest for some higher explanations about man's purpose, about why we are here. This is associated with periods of great stress in society. You will find in Japan that every time it goes through a period of stress new sects crop up and new religions proliferate. In Taiwan—and also in Hong Kong and Singapore—you see a rise in the number of new temples; Confucianist temples, Taoist temples and many Christian sects.

We are all in the midst of very rapid change and at the same time we are all groping towards a destination which we hope will be identifiable with our past. We have left the past behind and there is an underlying unease that there will be nothing left of us which is part of the old. The Japanese have solved this problem to some extent. Japan has become an industrial society, while remaining essentially Japanese in its human relations. They have industrialized and shed some of their feudal values. The Taiwanese and the Koreans are trying to do the same. But whether these societies can preserve their core values and make this transition is a problem which they alone can solve. It is not something Americans can solve for them. Therefore, you will find people unreceptive to the idea that they be Westernized. Modernized, yes, in the sense that they have accepted the inevitability of science and technology and the change in the life-styles they bring.

FZ: But won't these economic and technological changes produce changes in the mind-sets of people?

LKY: It is not just mind-sets that would have to change but value systems. Let me give anecdotal evidence of this. Many Chinese families in Malaysia migrated in periods of stress, when there were race riots in Malaysia in the 1960s, and they settled in Australia and Canada. They did this for the sake of their children so that they would get a better education in the English language because then Malaysia was switching to

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Malay as its primary language. The children grew up, reached their late teens and left home. And suddenly the parents discovered the emptiness of the whole exercise. They had given their children a modern education in the English language and in the process lost their children altogether. That was a very sobering experience. Something less dramatic is happening in Singapore now because we are not bringing up our children in the same circumstances in which we grew up.

FZ: But these children are absorbing influences different from your generation. You say that knowledge, life-styles, culture all spread rapidly in this world. Will not the idea of democracy and individual rights also spread?

LKY: Let's not get into a debate on semantics. The system of government in China will change. It will change in Korea, Taiwan, Vietnam. It is changing in Singapore. But it will not end up like the American or British or French or German systems. What are we all seeking? A form of government that will be comfortable, because it meets our needs, is not oppressive, and maximizes our opportunities. And whether you have one-man, one-vote or some-men, one vote or other men, two votes, those are forms which should be worked out. I'm not intellectually convinced that one-man, one-vote is the best. We practice it because that's what the British bequeathed us and we haven't really found a need to challenge that. But I'm convinced, personally, that we would have a better system if we gave every man over the age of 40 who has a family two votes because he's likely to be more careful, voting also for his children. He is more likely to vote in a serious way than a capricious young man under 30. But we haven't found it necessary yet. If it became necessary we should do it. At the same time, once a person gets beyond 65, then it is a problem. Between the ages of 40 and 60 is ideal, and at 60 they should go back to one vote, but that will be difficult to arrange.

MULTICULTURAL SCHISMS

FZ: Change is often most threatening when it occurs in multiethnic societies. You have been part of both a multiethnic state that failed and one that has succeeded. Malaysia was unwilling to allow what it saw as a Chinese city-state to be part of it and expelled Singapore from its federation in 1965. Singapore itself, however, exists peacefully as a multiethnic state. Is there a solution for those states that have ethnic and religious groups mixed within them?

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LKY: Each state faces a different set of problems and I would be most reluctant to dish out general solutions. From my own experience, I would say, *make haste slowly.* Nobody likes to lose his ethnic, cultural, religious, even linguistic identity. To exist as one state you need to share certain attributes, have things in common. If you pressure-cook you are in for problems. If you go gently, but steadily, the logic of events will bring about not assimilation, but integration. If I had tried to foist the English language on the people of Singapore I would have faced rebellion all around. If I had tried to foist the Chinese language, I'd have had immediate revolt and disaster. But I offered every parent a choice of English and their mother tongue, in whatever order they chose. By their free choice, plus the rewards of the marketplace over a period of 30 years, we have ended up with English first and the mother tongue second. We have switched one university already established in the Chinese language from Chinese into English. Had this change been forced in five or ten years instead of being done over 30 years—and by free choice—it would have been a disaster.

The peoples of East Asia have learned powerful lessons about the destructiveness of wars.

FZ: This sounds like a live-and-let-live kind of approach. Many Western countries, particularly the United States and France, respectively, have traditionally attempted to assimilate people toward a national mainstream—with English and French as the national language, respectively. Today this approach is being questioned, as you know, with some minority groups in the United States and France arguing for "multiculturalism," which would allow distinct and unassimilated minority groups to coexist within the nation. How does this debate strike you as you read about it in Singapore?

LKY: You cannot have too many distinct components and be one nation. It makes interchangeability difficult. If you want complete separateness then you should not come to live in the host country. But there are circumstances where it is wise to leave things be. For instance, all races in Singapore are eligible for jobs and for many other things. But we put the Muslims in a slightly different category because they are extremely sensitive about their customs, especially diet. In such matters one has to find a middle path between uniformity and a certain freedom to be somewhat different. I think it is wise to leave alone questions of fundamental beliefs and give time to sort matters out.

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FZ: So you would look at the French handling of their Muslim minorities and say "Go slow, don't push these people so hard."

LKY: I would not want to say that because the French having ruled Algeria for many years know the kind of problems that they are faced with. My approach would be, if some Muslim girl insists on coming to school with her headdress on and is prepared to put up with that discomfort, we should be prepared to put up with the strangeness. But if she joined the customs or immigration department where it would be confusing to the millions of people who stream through to have some customs officer looking different, she must wear the uniform. That approach has worked in Singapore so far.

IS EUROPE'S PAST ASIA'S FUTURE?

FZ: Let me shift gears somewhat and ask you some questions about the international climate in East Asia. The part of the world you live in is experiencing the kind of growth that the West has experienced for the last 400 years. The West has not only been the world's great producer of wealth for four centuries, it has also been the world's great producer of war. Today East Asia is the locus of great and unsettling growth, with several newly rising powers close to each other, many with different political systems, historical animosities, border disputes, and all with ever-increasing quantities of arms. Should one look at this and ask whether Europe's past will be East Asia's future?

LKY: No, it's too simplistic. One reason why growth is likely to last for many years in East Asia—and this is just a guess—is that the peoples and the governments of East Asia have learned some powerful lessons about the viciousness and destructiveness of wars. Not only full-scale wars like in Korea, but guerrilla wars as in Vietnam, in Cambodia and in the jungles of Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines. We all know that the more you engage in conflict, the poorer and the more desperate you become. Visit Cambodia and Vietnam; *the world just passed them by.* That lesson will live for a very long time, at least as long as this generation is alive.

FZ: The most unsettling change in an international system is the rise of a new great power. Can the rise of China be accommodated into the East Asian order? Isn't that kind of growth inevitably destabilizing?

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LKY: I don't think we can speak in terms of just the East Asian order. The question is: Can the world develop a system in which a country the size of China becomes part of the management of international peace and stability? Sometime in the next 20 or 30 years the world, by which I mean the major powers, will have to agree among themselves how to manage peace and stability, how to create a system that is both viable and fair. Wars between small countries won't destroy the whole world, but will only destroy themselves. But big conflicts between big powers will destroy the world many times over. That's just too disastrous to contemplate.

At the end of the last war what they could foresee was the United Nations. The hope was that the permanent five would maintain the rule of law or gradually spread the rule of law in international relations. It did not come off because of Stalin and the Cold War. This is now a new phase. The great powers—by which I mean America, Western Europe as a group if they become a union, Japan, China and, in 20 to 30 years time, the Russian republic—have got to find a balance between themselves. I think the best way forward is through the United Nations. It already has 48 years of experience. It is imperfect, but what is the alternative? You can not have a consortium of five big powers lording it over the rest of mankind. They will not have the moral authority or legitimacy to do it. Are they going to divide the world into five spheres of influence? So they have to fall back on some multilateral framework and work out a set of rules that makes it viable. There may be conflicts of a minor nature, for instance between two Latin American countries or two small Southeast Asian countries; that doesn't really matter. Now if you have two big countries in South Asia like India and Pakistan and both with nuclear capabilities, then something has to be done. It is in that context that we have to find a place for China when it becomes a major economic and military power.

FZ: Is the Chinese regime stable? Is the growth that's going on there sustainable? Is the balancing act between economic reform and political control that Deng Xiaoping is trying to keep going sustainable after his death?

LKY: The regime in Beijing is more stable than any alternative government that can be formed in China. Let us assume that the students had carried the day at Tiananmen and they had formed a government. The same students who were at Tiananmen went to France and America. They've been quarreling with each other ever since. What kind of China

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would they have today? Something worse than the Soviet Union. China is a vast, disparate country; there is no alternative to strong central power.

FZ: Do you worry that the kind of rapid and unequal growth taking place in China might cause the country to break up?

LKY: First, the economy is growing everywhere, even in Sichuan, in the heart of the interior. Disparate growth rates are inevitable. It is the difference between, say, California before the recession and the Rust Belt. There will be enormous stresses because of the size of the country and the intractable nature of the problems—the poor infrastructure, the weak institutions, the wrong systems that they have installed, modeling themselves upon the Soviet system in Stalin's time. Given all those handicaps, I am amazed that they have got so far.

The Japanese have a cultural trait, whatever they do they carry it to the nth degree.

FZ: What about the other great East Asian power? If Japan continues on the current trajectory, should the world encourage the expansion of its political and military responsibilities and power?

LKY: No. I know that the present generation of Japanese leaders do not want to project power. I'm not sure what follows when leaders born after the war take charge. I doubt if there will be a sudden change. If Japan can carry on with its current policy, leaving security to the Americans and concentrating on the economic and the political, the world will be better off. And the Japanese are quite happy to do this. It is when America feels that it's too burdensome and not worth the candle to be present in East Asia to protect Japan that it will have to look after its own security. When Japan becomes a separate player, it is an extra joker in the pack of cards.

FZ: You've said recently that allowing Japan to send its forces abroad is like giving liquor to an alcoholic.

LKY: The Japanese have always had this cultural trait, that whatever they do they carry it to the nth degree. I think they know this. I have Japanese friends who have told me this. They admit that this is a problem with them.

FZ: What if Japan did follow the trajectory that most great powers

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have; that it was not content simply to be an economic superpower, "a bank with a flag" in a writer's phrase? What if they decided they wanted to have the ultimate mark of a great power—nuclear weapons? What should the world do?

LKY: If they decided on that the world will not be able to stop them. You are unable to stop North Korea. Nobody believes that an American government that could not sustain its mission in Somalia because of an ambush and one television snippet of a dead American pulled through the streets in Mogadishu could contemplate a strike on North Korean nuclear facilities like the Israeli strike on Iraq. Therefore it can only be sanctions in the U.N. Security Council. That requires that there be no vetoes. Similarly, if the Japanese decide to go nuclear, I don't believe you will be able to stop them. But they know that they face a nuclear power in China and in Russia, and so they would have to posture themselves in such a way as not to invite a preemptive strike. If they can avoid a preemptive strike then a balance will be established. Each will deter the others.

FZ: So it's the transition period that you are worried about.

LKY: I would prefer that the matter never arises and I believe so does the world. Whether the Japanese go down the military path will depend largely on America's strength and its willingness to be engaged.

VIVE LA DIFFERENCE

FZ: Is there some contradiction here between your role as a politician and your new role as an intellectual, speaking out on all matters? As a politician you want America as a strong balancer in the region, a country that is feared and respected all over the world. As an intellectual, however, you choose to speak out forcefully against the American model in a way that has to undermine America's credibility abroad.

LKY: That's preposterous. The last thing I would want to do is to undermine her credibility. America has been unusual in the history of the world, being the sole possessor of power—the nuclear weapon—and the one and only government in the world unaffected by war damage whilst the others were in ruins. Any old and established nation would have ensured its supremacy for as long as it could. But America set out to put her defeated enemies on their feet, to ward off an evil force, the Soviet Union, brought about technological change by transferring technology generously and

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freely to Europeans and to Japanese, and enabled them to become her challengers within 30 years. By 1975 they were at her heels. That's unprecedented in history. There was a certain greatness of spirit born out of the fear of communism plus American idealism that brought that about. But that does not mean that we all admire everything about America.

Let me be frank; if we did not have the good points of the West to guide us, we wouldn't have got out of our backwardness. We would have been a backward economy with a backward society. But we do not want all of the West.

A CODA ON CULTURE

THE DOMINANT THEME throughout our conversation was culture. Lee returned again and again to his views on the importance of culture and the differences between Confucianism and Western values. In this respect, Lee is very much part of a trend. Culture is in. From business consultants to military strategists, people talk about culture as the deepest and most determinative aspect of human life.

I remain skeptical. If culture is destiny, what explains a culture's failure in one era and success in another? If Confucianism explains the economic boom in East Asia today, does it not also explain that region's stagnation for four centuries? In fact, when East Asia seemed immutably poor, many scholars—most famously Max Weber—made precisely that case, arguing that Confucian-based cultures discouraged all the attributes necessary for success in capitalism. Today scholars explain how Confucianism emphasizes the essential traits for economic dynamism. Were Latin American countries to succeed in the next few decades, we shall surely read encomiums to Latin culture. I suspect that since we cannot find one simple answer to why certain societies succeed at certain times, we examine successful societies and search within their cultures for the seeds of success. Cultures being complex, one finds in them what one wants.

What explains Lee Kuan Yew's fascination with culture? It is not something he was born with. Until his thirties he was called "Harry" Lee (and still is by family and friends). In the 1960s the British foreign secretary could say to him, "Harry, you're the best bloody Englishman east of the Suez." This is not a man untouched by the West. Part of his

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interest in cultural differences is surely that they provide a coherent defense against what he sees as Western democratic imperialism. But a deeper reason is revealed in something he said in our conversation: "We have left the past behind, and there is an underlying unease that there will be nothing left of us which is part of the old."

Cultures change. Under the impact of economic growth, technological change and social transformation, no culture has remained the same. Most of the attributes that Lee sees in Eastern cultures were once part of the West. Four hundred years of economic growth changed things. From the very beginning of England's economic boom, many Englishmen worried that as their country became rich it was losing its moral and ethical base. "Wealth accumulates and men decay," wrote Oliver Goldsmith in 1770. It is this "decay" that Lee is trying to stave off. He speaks of the anxious search for religion in East Asia today, and while he never says this, his own quest for a Confucian alternative to the West is part of this search.

But to be modern without becoming more Western is difficult; the two are not wholly separable. The West has left a mark on "the rest," and it is not simply a legacy of technology and material products. It is, perhaps most profoundly, in the realm of ideas. At the close of the interview Lee handed me three pages. This was, he explained, to emphasize how alien Confucian culture is to the West. The pages were from the book *East Asia: Tradition and Transformation,* by John Fairbank, an American scholar.

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