Modern Philosopher Kings: Lee Kuan Yew and the Limits of Confucian 'Idealistic' Leadership

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MODERN PHILOSOPHER KINGS:
LEE KUAN YEW AND THE LIMITS OF CONFUCIAN 'IDEALISTIC' LEADERSHIP

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Abstract

The paper explores the question of whether modern states, especially in Asia, need philosophical or 'ideological' bases for their founding and continuation. It takes as its case study Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew, who appeared to succeed in founding a modern prosperous state that avoided grand philosophical foundations in favour of 'performance' – security, stability and prosperity. The paper argues that a closer look at Lee's conception of leadership reveals a more complex picture. Lee's concern for the future prosperity of Singapore, and therefore his legacy, meant that he needed to secure what he calls 'idealistic leadership' that was essential yet lacking in Singapore. His recourse to 'Asian values', and especially Confucianism, was intended to provide such idealistic leadership. The lack of success of his Confucian initiatives reveals the inherent problems of Confucianism as a moral foundation for modern legitimacy and state-building, and the limits of performance for founding of modern nation-states.

Key words: Leadership, Confucius, honour, ideology, meritocracy, Singapore

Modern leaders who have founded new states have also tended to provide a philosophical or theoretical justification for that founding. Perhaps the best known modern example is *The Federalist Papers* (1787–88) by 'Publius', a subtle and sophisticated account of a radically new form of political founding.[1] Other examples drawn from a diverse range of modern founders and revolutionary leaders seem to confirm this view. Consider, for example, the famous writings or books that accompanied, justified or defended new states: Lenin's *What is to Be Done* (1902; his collected works span 54 volumes); *Mein Kampf* (1926), Hitler's notorious justification for the Third Reich; Mussolini's *The Doctrine of Fascism* (1932); Nasser's *The Philosophy of the Revolution* (1956); Mao's *The Little Red Book* (1964); Mahathir's *Malay Dilemma* (1970); Qaddafi's *The Green Book* (1975); Khomeini's *Islamic Government* (1979); Kim Il-sung's *Jeojakjip* (1979); Kim Dae-jung's *Prison Writings* (1987). Irrespective of their political leanings and whatever their political affiliations, these leaders see themselves as philosophers as much as political strategists and actors who founded states. It is tempting to see them as modern philosopher kings.[2] But do modern states need such a philosophical founding? Is it possible to have a state that eschews a grand philosophical vision in favour of a more mundane agreement that founds its legitimacy on stability, security and prosperity?[3] Is such a limited 'performance' legitimacy enough to found and sustain a modern state?[4] These questions are important not only for the theoretical issues they raise regarding the importance of ideas or 'ideology' in contemporary politics. That modern foundings may not need grand moral foundations will have significant implications for nations previously founded by philosopher kings. It may be possible, for example, for nations such as China to abandon socialism and Maoism and shift to performance legitimacy without great instability.

To explore the possibility of such a modern founding based on performance, this article examines Lee Kuan Yew and the founding of Singapore. Lee Kuan Yew is an instructive case study because, as one of the founders of modern Singapore, he eschewed the demands of the modern philosopher king. There is no seminal book or ideological tract justifying or defending the founding of Singapore.[5] Indeed, Singapore is arguably a modern prosperous Asian state that has at its core a simple bargain between the government and the people – the state and therefore the government is allowed to retain power and authority as long as it fulfils its promise of stability and prosperity. And it seems this bargain has been

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[1] See Alexander Hamilton, James Madison and John Jay, *The Federalist Papers* (New York: Random House, 1982 [1787]). The immediate goal of the series of essays written between October 1787 and August 1788 by Alexander Hamilton and James Madison, with a few contributions from John Jay under the nom-de-plume 'Publius' and subsequently collected as *The Federalist Papers*, was to secure New York's ratification of the new constitution.

[2] In Plato's *Republic*, Socrates states that 'there is no rest for ills for the cities' unless 'the philosophers rule as kings or those called kings and chiefs genuinely and adequately philosophize, and political power and philosophy coincide in the same place'; Plato, *Republic*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1968 [360 BC]), 473d. Unlike celebrated historical leaders and founders such as Alexander, Cyrus or Caesar, modern statesmen claim to be philosophers. Yet these philosopher kings differ profoundly from Plato's philosophers, who like Socrates were *zetetic*: that is, though loving wisdom they did not claim to possess it. In contrast contemporary philosopher kings are proud of their knowledge; they claim to have profound insights that inform their theory and practice of politics. To this extent they seem to approximate more the Machiavellian founder: see his *Discourses on Livy*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield Jr and Nathan Tarcov (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992 [1513–17]), Book I, chapter 10.

[3] In effect, is a 'social contract' founded on Hobbesian or Lockeian principles sufficient for modern states, or do they need larger philosophical or 'ideological' conceptions for their founding and continuation?

[4] The concept of 'performance' ranges from basic security and safety, to economic prosperity, to more comprehensive guarantees of rule of law and constitutionalism. For a general overview see Bruce Gilley, *The Right to Rule: How States Win and Lose Legitimacy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

[5] Lee's memoir and autobiography is perhaps the closest approximation; Lee Kuan Yew, *The Singapore Story: Memoirs of Lee Kuan Yew* (Singapore: Prentice Hall, 1998).

successfully kept. Singapore's continuing prosperity guaranteed Lee's authority: he ruled Singapore as founder, first and longest-serving prime minister, the longest-serving head of government in Asia and the longest-serving prime minister in the Commonwealth. He continued in office as minister mentor until his resignation in 2011. Moreover, Lee's party, the People's Action Party (PAP), has been in power since the founding of Singapore.

Yet towards the end of his rule Lee also became a well-known advocate of 'Asian values' and especially Confucianism, suggesting that Singapore could not be based simply on such a contractual bargain and that performance may not be enough to secure a modern state. If we take the Asian values argument seriously, it suggests that prosperity may need to be augmented by other 'values' to sustain the state. These complex and seemingly contradictory aspects of Lee's founding of Singapore therefore make it an especially useful case for examining whether modern states inevitably need or require philosopher kings.

This article explores the question of whether 'performance' is a sufficient basis for founding and sustaining modern states by looking at Lee's conception of leadership. It does so because his view of good leadership, and what is needed to sustain Singapore in the future, reveals his changing idea of what is needed to secure the future prosperity of Singapore. Lee can be seen to be a leader who is initially disinclined to adopt any larger or more comprehensive 'Asian' principles and forms of leadership, preferring to rely on 'Western' notions of scientific innovation and development. Yet as Singapore prospered, he began to appreciate the need to preserve his reputation as the founder and benefactor of Singapore. To secure and sustain Singapore's prosperity and therefore his legacy, he concluded that what was essential was an 'idealistic' form of leadership that he could not find in contemporary Singapore. Therefore Lee's turn to Asian values, and especially Confucianism, was in part an attempt to secure idealistic leadership, and thereby to ensure the future of Singapore and his glory. Neo-Confucianism for Lee was clearly an 'Asian' form of leadership that was different from Western alternatives that presented a serious challenge to his founding. But his attempt to introduce it to Singapore proved to be unsuccessful, revealing a two-fold problem faced by modern founders. The first concerns the significant inherent limitations of adopting Confucianism as a moral basis for leadership, modern legitimacy and state-building. The second concerns the considerable obstacles faced by founders of modern states to secure their future reputations.[6]

This article relies as much as possible on Lee's own words, typically his speeches but also interviews and public announcements. Of course, many of the things Lee has said or claimed have been challenged by his opponents as well as some scholars. The intention is not to adjudicate these debates, or to decide whether Lee is a good leader, but rather to *assume* Lee's version in order to give the most comprehensive account of *his* idea of leadership, however questionable or contested it may be by others.[7] Having outlined Lee's own conception of leadership, which seems devoid of philosophical dimension and certainly does not appear particularly 'Asian', the article then examines the extent to which his concern with his legacy, specifically his longing to preserve his glory and honour, can be said to have transformed his conception of leadership. Lee's desire to preserve his legacy, it is argued, led to his view that the absence of 'idealistic' leadership presents a threat to the future of Singapore. It also accounts for the solutions he proposes, including institutional reforms, as well as the introduction of Confucian education. The article concludes by reflecting on the

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[6] For an overview of these challenges see H. Wriggins, *The Ruler's Imperative: Strategies for Political Survival in Asia and Africa* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969).

[7] For example, Lee has also been criticised for his political approach, described as unscrupulous, even tyrannical: see, for example, Michael D. Barr, *Lee Kuan Yew: The Beliefs behind the Man* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2007); Stephen McCarthy, *The Political Theory of Tyranny in Singapore and Burma: Aristotle and the Rhetoric of Benevolent Despotism* (London: Routledge, 2006).

efficacy of these solutions, both for Singapore and for the preservation of Lee's legacy. It argues that there is an inherent contradiction in relying on Confucianism to secure one's legacy, and notes the limitations of Confucianism as a moral foundation of modern nation-states.

Lee Kuan Yew's Conception of Leadership

What is Lee's conception of leadership?[8] In this section we examine Lee's public statements in the form of speeches, interviews and publications, to see what he considers is the basis of good leadership.[9] Like all political leaders, much of what Lee will say will be partial or self-serving but will nevertheless reveal *his* view of what is a good leader. As we will see in the discussion that follows, Lee sees society structured as a pyramid, with an exceptionally talented minority of leaders at the apex, a middle strata of talented executives, and a large base of the general populace. This structure, which he describes as a 'meritocracy', has been characterised as 'Asian patrimonialism'. But as the discussion of the modern scholarship on leadership will show, it can equally be defined as a form of 'elitism' that is not specifically Asian. Before we evaluate Lee's conception of leadership, however, it is useful to see who Lee is through a brief account of his background and career.

Lee Kuan Yew was born on 16 September 1923, a fourth-generation Peranakan Chinese Singaporean.[10] Peranakans, who were proficient in English, were well respected in Singapore. Lee, generally known as Harry Lee and the first-born male of the family, was educated to be the 'equal of any Englishmen'.[11] He was a talented student who was accepted into the exclusive Raffles Institution, after which he was awarded top Malayan boy in the Senior Cambridge examinations. His plans to become a lawyer in England immediately after matriculating were disrupted, however, by the fall of Singapore to the Japanese Imperial Army in February 1942.[12] After the Japanese surrender in August 1945 and the return of the British in September 1945 Lee resumed his education in England. He was admitted to the London School of Economics, but soon moved to Cambridge University where he excelled in law. Lee returned to Singapore in 1950 and became a lawyer, gaining public attention with his defence of trade unions. He won his seat as a founding member of the People's Action

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[8] On leadership generally see Peter G. Northouse, *Leadership: Theory and Practice*, third edition (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2004); Joseph Masciulli, Mikhail A. Molchanov and W. Andy Knight (eds), *The Ashgate Research Companion to Political Leadership* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009); and George Goethals, Georgia Sorenson and James McGregor Burns (eds), *Encyclopedia of Leadership* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2004). On leadership as a comparative concept see Lucian W. Pye with Mary W. Pye, *Asian Power and Politics: The Cultural Dimensions of Authority* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1985); W. Theodore De Bary, *Nobility and Civility: Asian Ideals of Leadership and the Common Good* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004); Weixing Chen and Yang Zhong (eds), *Leadership in a Changing China*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

[9] Lee has written an autobiography and authorised collected speeches; see Lee, *The Singapore Story*; Han Fook Kwang, Warren Fernandez and Sumiko Tan, *Lee Kuan Yew: The Man and His Ideas* (Singapore: The Straits Times Press, 1998). There are also a number of biographies of Lee, exploring his ideas, his character and his leadership; see, generally, T.J.S. George, *Lee Kuan Yew's Singapore* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1973); Alex Josey, *Lee Kuan Yew: The Struggle for Singapore*, third edition (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1980); James Minchin, *No Man is an Island: A Portrait of Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew*, second edition (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1990); Michael D. Barr, 'Lee Kuan Yew's Fabian phase', *Australian Journal of Politics & History*, Vol. 46, No. 1 (March 2000), pp. 110–26.

[10] His paternal great-grandfather, Lee Bok Boon, had left Guandong province for Singapore in 1863.

[11] As Barr notes, Lee's paternal grandfather, Lee Hoon Leong, regarded the Englishman as the 'model of perfection' and decided his first-born grandson would grow up to be 'equal of any Englishmen'; Barr, 'Lee Kuan Yew's Fabian phase', p. 100.

[12] During the Japanese occupation Lee ran a successful black-market operation. He also learned to read Chinese and Japanese and worked for the Japanese propaganda department transcribing Allied wire reports.

Party (PAP) in the first Singapore general election in 1955, when the Labour Front's David Marshall became Singapore's chief minister. In the period 1955–9 Lee and his largely English-educated colleagues fought the communists to retain the leadership of the PAP. In the 1959 election the PAP won a landslide victory, capturing 43 of the 51 seats and installing Lee as Singapore's first prime minister. But in 1961 a large majority of the PAP's rank and file left to join a new party, Barisan Sosialis (Socialist Front). Lee marginalised the pro-communist party with his strategic use of a referendum on a merger with Malaya, partisan use of campaign laws and finally 'Operation Cold Store' where in 1963 more than 100 opposition leaders were imprisoned before the election.[13] For a brief period between 1963 and 1965 Singapore merged with Malaya, only to be separated and become an independent nation on 9 August 1965. For the subsequent 25 years Lee would dominate Singapore, transforming it into one of the most prosperous states in the world. Lee stepped down as prime minister in 1990, though serving as senior minister in the administration of Singapore's second prime minister, Goh Chok Tong, and as minister mentor, a post created when his son, Lee Hsien Loong, became the nation's third prime minister on 12 August 2004. On 15 May 2011, the 87-year-old Lee formally announced his retirement from Cabinet.

This brief account of Lee's life and achievements shows him to be a formidable, often ruthless but pragmatic leader. Yet throughout the course of his political life Lee also displays a self-reflective awareness of what it takes to be a good leader. In an early speech to school principals in 1966 Lee outlined how the entire government was based on a 'thin crust' of 150 people:

> This government at the moment – the whole of this administration – is running on I would say the ability and drive and dedication – not on the basis of what they get in salaries – of about 150 people. You remove these 150 people, if you can identify the 150; whoever wants to destroy this society, identifies these 150 people and kills them, the push will be gone. This is a very thin crust of leadership.[14]

Because of the diversity in physical stamina, mental capacity and character, society is inevitably structured into a 'pyramid', according to Lee. The exceptional leaders, a very small number, are the 'spearhead' of society. This apex is supported by the larger middle strata of high-quality executives to help carry out ideas, thinking and planning. Finally there is the 'broad base', the average person who must be nurtured because 'the quality of your privates determines the quality of your army as much as the quality of the general does'.[15] By 1971, in a speech at a seminar on communism and democracy, Lee had doubled the number of exceptional leaders in Singapore to 300:

> If all 300 were to crash in the one Jumbo jet, then Singapore will disintegrate. That shows how small the base is for our leadership in politics economics and security. We have to, and we will, enlarge this base, enlarging the number of key digits.[16]

Though all parts of the society are important for Lee, leaders play a crucial role:

> It is strange, but true, that the fate of millions often turns around the quality, strength and foresight of the key digits in a country. They decide whether a country gains cohesion and strength in orderly progress, or disintegrates and degenerates in chaos.[17]

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[13] See generally Thomas Bellows, *The People's Action Party of Singapore: Emergence of a Dominant Party System* (New Haven, CT: Southeast Asia Studies, Yale University, 1970), pp. 67–100; George, *Lee Kuan Yew's Singapore*, pp. 59–63.

[14] Lee Kuan Yew, speech to school principals, Victoria Theatre, 29 August 1966, in Han et al., *Lee Kuan Yew*, pp. 393–5, p. 394.

[15] Lee, speech to school principals, p. 394.

[16] Lee Kuan Yew, speech at a seminar on communism and democracy, 28 April 1971, in Han et al., *Lee Kuan Yew*, pp. 313–16, p. 315.

[17] Lee, speech at a seminar, p. 315.

As these speeches reveal, a fundamental idea for Lee is the unequal natural distribution of excellence, with few having exceptional ability. Consequently, good government requires authority to be given to these talented few, for the benefit of all. 'Singapore is a meritocracy,' Lee proudly announces in his 1971 speech.[18] He does not think these insights into leadership are specifically Asian – he regards them as universal, to be found in every country. All nations strive to have a meritocracy, where the talented few are elevated to positions of power and authority, but not all succeed. It is this key insight that allows us to understand almost all major political measures Lee introduces into Singapore.[19]

Lee's understanding of the importance of leadership explains his reluctance to adopt liberal democratic constitutionalism. Leadership, not institutions, is necessary for good government, according to Lee. Though institutions are important, he does not think they're sufficient. Contrasting the views of 'American liberals' who think separation of powers and checks and balances will yield good government 'even if weak or not so good men win elections and take charge', Lee responds in a speech in Parliament on a White Paper on ministerial salaries:

> My experience in Asia has led me to a different conclusion. To get good government, you must have good men in charge of government. I have observed in the last 40 years that even with a poor system of government, but with good strong men in charge, people get passable government with decent progress.[20]

Because he values the knowledge and expertise of leaders, Lee is wary of representative democracy: 'So when people say, "Oh, ask the people!" it's childish rubbish. We are leaders. We know the consequences. You mean the ice-water man knows the consequences of his vote? Don't tell me that. That's what the Western journalists write.'[21] To be judged by the people is especially difficult in a developing country where the majority of the population is semi-literate and sacrifice is demanded from the people. In such cases the people

> respond more to the carrot than to the stick, and politicians at election time cannot use the stick. So … he who bids the highest wins … At a time when you want harder work with less return and more capital investment, one-man-one-vote produces just the opposite.[22]

In a speech on leadership in 1962, Lee argues that one-man-one-vote, especially in inexperienced or unsophisticated electorates, would produce a bidding war where the highest bidder wins.[23] It is on this basis that Lee suggests economic development must precede democracy in Singapore and emerging countries. Legitimacy was gained as much by effective meeting of people's aspirations for a better life as by elections. The three essential elements for successful transformation of any society, according to Lee, are: 'First, a determined leadership, an effective determined leadership; two, an administration which is efficient; and three, social discipline. If you don't have those three, nothing will be achieved.'[24]

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[18] Lee, speech at a seminar, p. 315.

[19] See Barr, 'Lee Kuan Yew's Fabian phase', pp. 97–136, for an extensive discussion of Lee's conception of meritocracy. According to Barr and Skrbis, 'Cambridge was the point at which his personal experience and philosophy of elitism articulated into an ideological position'; Michael Barr and Zlatko Skrbis, *Constructing Singapore: Elitism, Ethnicity and the Nation-Building Project* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2008), p. 44. In this context see also Lee, *The Singapore Story*, pp. 115–30.

[20] Lee Kuan Yew, speech in Parliament on a White Paper on ministerial salaries, 1 November 1994, in Han et al., *Lee Kuan Yew*, pp. 331–42, p. 337.

[21] Lee, cited in Han et al., *Lee Kuan Yew*, p. 135.

[22] Lee, cited in Han et al., *Lee Kuan Yew*, p. 135.

[23] Lee Kuan Yew, speech to public servants at the Political Study Centre, 14 June 1962, in Han et al., *Lee Kuan Yew*, pp. 362–4, p. 362.

[24] Lee, cited in Han et al., *Lee Kuan Yew*, p. 136.

Lee's conception of leadership defines the way he deals with the base of the pyramid, the people. It inevitably leads to the need for a Machiavellianism in politics:

> Between being loved and being feared, I have always believed Machiavelli was right. If nobody is afraid of me, I'm meaningless. When I say 'please don't do that', you do it, I have to punish you because I was not joking when I said that. And when I punish, it's to punish publicly. And people will know next time, if you want to do that when he said 'no, don't do it', you must be prepared for a brutal encounter.[25]

And an unflinching ruthlessness. In discussing the critical commentaries by Singapore writer Dr Catherine Lim on Goh Chok Tong, Lee's successor as prime minister, Lee observes:

> Supposing Catherine Lim was writing about me and not the prime minister … She would not dare, right? Because my posture, my response has been such that nobody doubts that if you take me on, I will put on knuckle-dusters and catch you in a cul-de-sac … Anybody who decides to take me on needs to put on knuckle-dusters. If you think you can harm me more than I can hurt you, try. There is no other way to govern a Chinese society.[26]

The 'business of the leader', according to Lee, is 'not to follow the crowd. That's a washout. The country will go down the drain.'[27] Such disregard for popular sentiment includes a willingness not to reveal everything to the people: 'My job is to persuade my flock, my people, that that's the right way. And sometimes it may be necessary not to tell them all the facts because you will scare them.'[28] Indeed, it would seem that the people can be a hindrance to good government. In an interview in 1962, Lee argues:

> if I were in authority in Singapore indefinitely, without having to ask those who are 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. That is a fact which the educated understand, but we are all caught in this system which the British – I do not know what the French do in their colonies in Africa – export all over the place, hoping that somewhere it will take root.[29]

Finally, Lee's merit-based system requires a constant attempt to recruit the best into politics and public service more generally. This is for the obvious reason that the best are essential for good government. But it has another aspect. As Lee notes, if the best are not accepted, they may pose a challenge to the government.

> If we reject people who are natural activists with ideas, with ability, with dedication, then PAP is inviting breakdown of the system. It cannot reject people who are committed with ideas and ability. It must absorb and allow change to take place from within because the party cannot have the foresight to incorporate in its programme and its policies all the changes that are going to happen in the world.[30]

Or as he puts it subsequently, 'the smarter a man is, the more harm he will do society'.[31] For this reason the Singapore model, given the country's population of three million and its small talent pool, may have limited application in countries that are substantially more populous. In a country of 30 or 300 million people where the number eligible to form a Cabinet may multiply by 10 or 100, it may be impossible to include all the best people in government:

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[25] Lee, cited in Han et al., *Lee Kuan Yew*, p. 229.

[26] Lee, cited in Han et al., *Lee Kuan Yew*, p. 126. For an assessment of this episode see Kenneth Paul Tan, 'Who's afraid of Catherine Lim? The state in patriarchal Singapore', *Asian Studies Review*, Vol. 33 (2009), pp. 43–62.

[27] Lee, cited in Han et al., *Lee Kuan Yew*, p. 229.

[28] Lee, cited in Han et al., *Lee Kuan Yew*, p. 229.

[29] Lee Kuan Yew, interview following address to the Royal Society of International Affairs in London, May 1962, in Han et al., *Lee Kuan Yew*, pp. 365–8, p. 367.

[30] Lee, cited in Han et al., *Lee Kuan Yew*, p. 98.

[31] Lee, speech in Parliament, p. 338.

> If you have so many people, although you may run a good system, it is still possible somebody outside there, some maverick, can get together a comparable group and can challenge you. And in a moment of unhappiness, the people will vote the other way.[32]

In addition to recruitment, Lee emphasises the need for good education, at high school and universities, as the first step in meritocratic selection. The academically best are then selected by PAP leaders with a systematic round of 'tea sessions' and interviews, including psychological testing. This form of recruitment resembles corporate recruitment for chief executives rather than traditional political leadership contests found in other countries.[33]

Good leaders, however, are not decided solely by IQ or intelligence but by character. In a 1967 speech at a conference on youth and leadership Lee observes: 'And it is this as yet unmeasurable quality called "character" which, plus your mental capacity or knowledge or discipline, makes for leadership.'[34] Lee frequently refers to 'helicopter qualities' of leadership, a reference to the Shell Corporation system of selection. Shell had switched from 40 attributes of good leaders to four, which they called 'helicopter qualities' and on which they judged their executives worldwide.

> That is why the Shell system impressed me. Its simplicity: reduced to its essentials, its 'helicopter quality'. You must have powers of analysis which are demonstrated by your examination results. You must have imagination and a sense of reality. You must have then the qualities of leadership and a natural ability to enthuse people.[35]

Based on these qualities Lee sought the best leaders:

> Singapore must get some of its best in each year's crop of graduates into government. When I say best, I don't mean just academic results. His 'O' levels, 'A' levels, university degree will only tell you his powers of analysis. That is only one-third of the helicopter quality. You've then got to assess him for his sense of reality, his imagination, his quality of leadership, his dynamism. But most of all, his character and motivations, because the smarter a man is, the more harm he will do society.[36]

Our brief account of Lee's conception of leadership – a pyramid of authority – is regarded as typically 'Asian'. Thus Pye, in his survey of the cultural aspects of power in Asia, argues that paternalistic authority dominates Asian politics.[37] The features of paternalism include strong leadership aided by technocratic advisors, the insistence on 'tidiness and order', an emphasis on loyalty to the collectivity, and weak institutional constraints. 'The establishment of the nation-state as the basic frame-work of politics and government', according to Pye, 'has not weakened, and indeed in many cases has strengthened, the ideals of paternalistic authority.'[38] It is certainly true, for example, that respect for education and knowledge, meritocracy and therefore paternalism was an important

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[32] Lee, cited in Han et al., *Lee Kuan Yew*, p. 98.

[33] Lee, cited in Han et al., *Lee Kuan Yew*, p. 101.

[34] Lee, cited in Han et al., *Lee Kuan Yew*, p. 99.

[35] Lee, cited in Han et al., *Lee Kuan Yew*, p. 101.

[36] Lee, speech in Parliament, cited in Han et al., *Lee Kuan Yew*, p. 89.

[37] Pye, *Asian Power and Politics*, pp. 329–36.

[38] Pye, *Asian Power and Politics*, p. 329. The economic manifestation of this argument is evident in the Asian developmental state model, where states are said to use their extensive power to undertake difficult economic initiatives, which in time lead to economic prosperity and the rise of contending forces and thereby a decline in state power, in some cases resulting in the 'regulatory' state. Pereira argues that such a decline in the developmental state is not evident in Singapore; A.A. Pereira, 'Whither the developmental state? Explaining Singapore's continued developmentalism', *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 29, No. 6 (2008), pp. 1189–203. Contrast this with Dili Liow, who argues that Singapore has become a hybrid 'neoliberal-developmental state'; Eugene Dili Liow, 'The neoliberal-developmental state: Singapore as case study', *Critical Sociology*, Vol. 38, No. 2 (March 2012), pp. 241–64 .

aspect of Confucianism, as is evident from the examinations for civil servants instituted in Imperial China and subsequently adopted by other countries in the region.[39]

Yet even a cursory examination of leadership scholarship shows that there is nothing specifically 'Asian' about this model of leadership. Thus it is not simply correct, as Pye suggests,[40] to see this model of leadership as atavistic, in the Weberian sense of patrimonial authority to be superseded by traditional, charismatic and the rational-legal. A contending modern theory that does not adopt this Asian perspective is founded on the notion of 'elitism'. The origin of modern elitism can be traced to Machiavelli, who repudiates the Aristotelian concept of regimes by reducing all politics to a struggle between 'two diverse humours', that of the few and the many.[41] Machiavelli claims that 'in all republics, ordered in whatever mode, never do even forty or fifty citizens reach the ranks of command'.[42] This Machiavellian simplification of all politics, emphasising the absence of a common good due to the disparate interests of the few and the many, is subsequently taken up by modern elite theorists. William James, for example, argued that humanity does nothing except through the initiative of individual leaders, great and small, and 'imitation by the rest of us'. Individuals of genius point the way and set the patterns that ordinary folk adopt and follow.[43] Other theorists argued that elite formation and rule by elites was unavoidable in the modern world.[44] Robert Michels famously claimed that this form of elite leadership was in effect an 'iron law of oligarchy'.[45] Aware of the challenge such a form of leadership posed to liberal, socialist and democratic principles, Harold Lasswell attempted a reconciliation, claiming that a democracy could rightly express itself through just a few leaders provided those leaders remained accountable.[46] Similarly, Joseph Schumpeter argued a revised version of representative democracy as free competition between elites for the people's vote. This was not government *by* the people, but government *approved* by the people.[47] This brief overview of leadership in Western thought suggests that 'elitism' captures important aspects of Lee's leadership. What is important for our purposes is that however we characterise his leadership,

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[39] On Confucian meritocracy see Joseph Chan, 'Democracy and meritocracy: toward a Confucian perspective', *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (2007), pp. 173–93. On the importance of meritocracy in Singapore and the wider region see Barr and Skrbis, *Constructing Singapore*; Christopher Hood and B. Guy Peters (eds), *Reward for High Public Office: Asian and Pacific Rim States* (New York: Routledge, 2003). On paternalism, Pye (*Asian Power and Politics*, p. 89) notes:

> The Confucian model of paternalistic authority stressed the banding together of ruler and subject, with each clearly needing the other. As father figures the leaders needed to picture themselves as looking after their children. Confucian paternalism, however, had a general stance that precluded the explicit quid-pro-quo concerns which typified the Southeast Asian pattern of paternalism.

[40] Pye, *Asian Power and Politics*, p. 329.

[41] See Machiavelli's *Discourses on Livy*, Book I, chapter 4. On the classical understanding of regimes in terms of the common good or the private advantage see Aristotle's *Politics*, trans. with introduction, notes and glossary by Carnes Lord (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984 [350 AD]), Book 3.

[42] Machiavelli, *Discourses*, Book I, chapter 16, p. 46.

[43] William James, *The Will to Believe* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1897), pp. 27–30.

[44] V. Pareto, *Mind and Society*, trans. A. Livingston (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1935); G. Mosca, *The Ruling Class*, trans. H.D. Kahn (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1939).

[45] Robert Michels, *Political Parties: A Sociological Study of Oligarchic Tendencies of Modern Democracy*, trans. Eden and Cedar Paul (New York: Collier Books, 1962).

[46] H.D. Laswell, *Power and Society: A Framework for Political Inquiry* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1950), p. 7; H.D. Laswell, D. Lerner and C.E. Rothwell, *The Comparative Study of Elites: An Introduction and Bibliography* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1952), p. 201.

[47] Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1961 [1942]), p. 246. For contemporary scholarship see R.D. Putnam, *The Comparative Study of Political Elites* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1976); N. Nevitte and R. Gibbins, *New Elites in Old States: Ideologies in the Anglo-American Democracies* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1990); J. Higley and M. Burton, *Elite Foundations of Liberal Democracy* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006); John Kane and Haig Patapan, *The Democratic Leader: How Democracy Defines, Empowers and Limits its Leaders* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

as elitist, patrimonial or even 'meritocratic' or 'scientific', it is clear that it is not informed by larger philosophical conceptions, be it liberal, democratic or even 'Asian'.

<p style="text-align:center;">*Lee Kuan Yew and 'Idealistic' Leadership*</p>

In addition to this view of leadership, Lee also has a more comprehensive conception that he calls 'idealistic' leadership. Lee claims that extreme situations give rise to 'idealistic' leaders who will put to one side their personal considerations of safety, security and wealth for the sake of their commitment to the people and ideals.[48] But in times of tranquillity such leadership is harder to find. In the discussion that follows, I contend that Lee regards Asian values, and specifically Confucianism, as an important means for ensuring such leadership, an initiative he pursues not only for the future prosperity of Singapore but, importantly, for his own legacy. If true, this suggests that at least for Lee, the continual survival (if not the founding) of modern states requires more than a simple notion of 'performance'. What is needed is some larger conception, whether philosophical, ideological or cultural, that justifies and defends the regime as a whole.

To see what Lee means by 'idealistic leadership', it is necessary to examine the significant problem Lee the founder confronted. As we have seen, Lee thought it essential for Singapore to have the best people in charge, necessitating a systematic selection process. But in time Lee realised he faced a serious problem in getting good leaders. Lee had already anticipated and identified these in the 1960s but took them up in earnest in the 1990s. In an interview in 1966, Lee identified it as the problem of succession: 'how do we, over the next ten years, allow a new generation to emerge to take over from us? This is important. We are not getting younger. We cannot go on forever.'[49] There were two related problems in the selection of future leaders. The first was the many new career options now available to the best, resulting in the second problem, of careerists rather than idealists dominating politics.

> My problem is there are so many career opportunities now that unless we do something to make politics more attractive incentive-wise, your best men are going into executive and managerial careers. This will leave your second-best careerist … Any party faces it. They faced it all along in Eastern Europe. The second generation communist is more of a careerist than an idealist. The first generation [communists] who were captured by Hitler and put in concentration camps all along – I have met them – they are the first generation. They emerged naturally *just as we emerged*, and the process of selection was natural.[50]

Lee describes himself as an 'idealist'. But what is an idealist?

> Either you felt strongly about the colonial system and you wanted a better society enough to take the risk of being locked up or being clobbered by the British and then of being shot and killed or murdered by communists … Unless you feel strongly enough, you don't emerge; you just subside beneath the broad mass.[51]

In a speech in 1994 he put it in these terms:

> The fate of the country, when it's a matter of life and death, you throw up people who put personal considerations of safety and security and wealth aside. But that's when you have a revolutionary situation, when a whole people depend on the actions of a few.
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> …

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[48] Perhaps what he has in mind is the specific context of the 1950s–60s Cold War and later Hot War in East Asia, giving rise to a new generation of leaders in the region. For a general overview see J. Bertrand, *Political Change in Southeast Asia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Clive J. Christie, *Ideology and Revolution in Southeast Asia 1900–80: Political Ideas of the Anti-Colonial Era* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

[49] Lee, cited in Han et al., *Lee Kuan Yew*, p. 93. According to Lee, he had been trying since 1968 to get a successor and by 1976 was getting anxious. He set the target of 1988, when he turned 65, but was asked to stay on until 1990, the 25th anniversary of Singapore's independence; Han et al., *Lee Kuan Yew*, p. 242.

[50] Lee, speech to school principals, p. 93.

[51] Lee, speech to school principals, p. 93, emphasis added.

> So it is crucial when you have a tranquil Singapore that you recognise that politics demands that extra of a person, a commitment to people and ideals. You are not just doing a job. This is a vocation; not unlike the priesthood. You must feel for people, you must want to change society and make lives better. And if I had done that and got no satisfaction out of it, then I would be a fool doing it because I could have gone back to Lee & Lee umpteen years ago and ridden the boom and sat back, probably at least as rich as my brother or my two brothers – one is a doctor, another a lawyer.[52]

Unique circumstances, such as the instability and danger of foundings, *naturally* bring out or reveal idealist leaders. Lee describes himself and all idealist leaders as exceptional individuals who are willing to sacrifice themselves for the common good. This sacrifice included risking his life and, it would seem, substantial wealth in not pursuing a career in the private sector.[53] But why? What is the satisfaction he gained for his idealistic leadership?

Lee sees the Japanese invasion of Singapore as a decisive moment in his political education. As a Peranakan or Straits Chinese he saw himself as a British subject. But the ease with which the Japanese invaded Singapore made Lee question British colonial authority, a view confirmed when completing his studies at LSE and later Cambridge. Lee the talented legal scholar resented colonialism: 'And I saw no reason why they should be governing me; they're not superior. I decided, when I got back, I was going to put an end to this.'[54] In one of his earliest political speeches in January 1950 at the Malayan Forum in London, the 26-year-old Lee explains his strategic assessment: the English-educated Malaysian students, especially those who had studied in England, and not the Chinese who were drawn into the communist movement, were best placed to take over the British administration in a smooth transfer of power.[55] His return to Singapore in 1950 and his crafty manipulation of the fraught politics, first countering the Communists in the PAP, then negotiating a union with Malaysia in 1963 that ultimately ended in Singapore's precarious independence in 1965, saw Lee as prime minister and founder of a new political entity, Singapore. Lee in effect is forced to create and nurture Singapore out of nothing:

> Remember, when we started, we were not even one society, never mind a nation. We were several different separate societies brought together under the British, an accident of history. Our loyalties and roots were in different parts of China, India and the Malay archipelago.[56]

The satisfaction Lee gets from idealistic leadership is therefore the honour and glory of being a founder. Lee can claim pre-eminence as a founder of a unique city-state that is not a product of the decolonisation movements in the region.[57] He can also claim the glory of all founders, who give of themselves to benefit others on the greatest scale possible.[58] Finally, it is the

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[52] Lee, speech in Parliament, p. 336.

[53] To pursue the question of what Lee understands by idealistic leadership we assume that Lee did indeed sacrifice substantial wealth (even though Singaporean politicians are the highest paid in the world).

[54] Lee in Han et al., *Lee Kuan Yew*, p. 31.

[55] Lee in Han et al., *Lee Kuan Yew*, p. 256.

[56] Lee in Han et al., *Lee Kuan Yew*, p. 133.

[57] For an overview of decolonisation in Asia see N. Tarling (ed.), *Cambridge History of Southeast Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). For the development of Singapore as a city-state within a largely Malay environment see Philippe Régnier, *Singapore: City-State in South-East Asia* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1991); Chua Beng-Huat, 'Pragmatism of the People's Action Party government in Singapore: a critical era', *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (1985), pp. 29–46.

[58] For a history of honour see James Bowman, *Honor: A History* (New York: Encounter Books, 2006), who argues we live in a 'post-honour' society; Leo Braudy, *The Frenzy of Renown: Fame and its History* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), who provides an historical account of the modern lack of discrimination regarding fame; and Frank Henderson Stewart, *Honor* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994). For the classical understanding of honour see, for example, Aristotle's discussion of magnanimity in his *Nicomachean Ethics* (trans. Terence Irwin; Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1962, 1123b34–1125a15); Aristide Tessitore, *Reading Aristotle's* Ethics*: Virtue, Rhetoric, and Political Philosophy* (New York: SUNY Press, 1996), pp. 28–35;

glory of an 'Asian' who shows the West that they are not superior.[59] Lee's success with Singapore, evident in the benefits he confers on those who are less able or talented, becomes a living glorious testimony to his own sacrifice, ability, vision. Lee loves Singapore; Singapore's continuing prosperity and grandeur honours Lee.[60]

It is in this context of honour that we gain a better appreciation of the significance of succession for Lee. Holding on to office is no longer sufficient for Lee. It is essential for his continuing, perhaps immortal, glory and honour that Singapore should prosper. Hence the need for new leadership to sustain his founding and pursue his vision. But tranquil times do not produce idealistic leaders. The future Lees who will take over will inevitably follow in his footsteps – in nurturing Singapore and his memory they can never outdo him because there can only be one founder. It seems unavoidable, then, that without idealistic – that is, the best – leaders, Lee's efforts may be short lived. His entire cause and the sacrifices he believes he has endured now rely on the critical question of how to maintain his legacy.

Lee seeks to solve this problem of leadership as his final act of leadership. His solution takes three forms. The first is commonplace in Asia and, indeed, many parts of the world – the appointment of a member of a family to succeed the leader.[61] Many reasons recommend such a solution, ranging from the continuation of the family name to the reliance on the strength and reliability of family ties, strengthening the legitimacy of the regime by transforming it into a monarchy, and finally, the possibility of continuing influence and control, albeit indirectly. The appointment of Lee's son Lee Hsien Loong as prime minister in 2004 seemed to solve Lee's succession problem. Yet it also challenged his views on merit. Was Lee Hsien Loong's appointment simply another case of nepotism and patrimonialism? Lee claimed that his son should succeed on merit and not simply inherit office. His genetics arguments naturally pointed to his family members as suitable candidates. As the oldest of Lee's three sons, Lee Hsien Loong had won both the president's and the Singapore Armed Forces scholarships and had studied at Cambridge, graduating with first class honours in mathematics in 1974. He has a postgraduate degree in computer science, and a master's in public administration from Harvard University and has spent a year at the US Army Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth in Kansas.[62] Though Lee Hsien Loong entered politics in 1984, he did not become prime minister until 2004. In the interim Goh Chok Tong was prime minister from 1990, with Lee Hsien Loong as his deputy. When asked if he was a transitional prime minister, like Taiwan's Yen Chia-kan who ruled for three

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Robert Faulkner, *The Case for Greatness: Honourable Ambition and its Critics* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007). For a general overview of the classical and religious approaches to statesmanship see Larry Arnhart, 'Statesmanship as magnanimity: classical, Christian and modern', *Polity*, Vol. 16 (1983), pp. 263–83. Note, however, the core ambiguity of honour – honour could not be sought for itself, which was love of mere fame; see Thomas L. Pangle, 'The classical and modern liberal understandings of honor', in Peter McNamara (ed.), *The Noblest Minds: Fame, Honor and the American Founding* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield), pp. 207–20. On the obsolescence of honour see Peter Berger, 'On the obsolescence of the concept of honour', in Michael Sandel (ed.), *Liberalism and its Critics* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984), pp. 149–58. On Asian 'face' see David Yau-fai Ho, 'On the concept of face', *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 81, No. 4 (1976), pp. 867–84; Hwang Kwang-kuo, 'Face and favor: the Chinese power game', *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 92, No. 4 (1987), pp. 944–74, p. 968; and Alan M. Wachman, 'Does the diplomacy of shame promote human rights in China?' *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (April 2001), pp. 257–81.

[59] Dealings with the West are therefore fraught. He seeks Western insights, capital and in his way honour and respect (see the testimonials by eminent Western leaders in his autobiography) while rejecting Western liberalism and political impositions.

[60] The National Museum of Singapore has a whole wing dedicated to Lee's struggles.

[61] Consider, for example, the Kim dynasty in North Korea, the Aquinos in the Philippines, the Gandhis in India. On comparable dynastic tendencies in the West see, for example, the Kennedys, Bushes and Clintons in the US.

[62] See generally Sonny Yap, Richard Lim and Leong Weng Kam, *Men in White: The Untold Story of Singapore's Ruling Political Party* (Singapore: Singapore Press Holdings, 2009), pp. 517–19.

years after Chiang Kai-shek and before Chiang Kai-shek's son Chiang Ching-kuo took over, Goh denied being a 'seat warmer'.[63] In this light Lee Hsien Loong's educational background and 14-year term as deputy may support Lee's claim that he was in training and being tested for merit. For others, however, the reason for Lee Hsien Loong's long tenure as deputy prime minister was his ill health – he was diagnosed with cancer in 1993 and had to clear a critical five-year period before he could be considered cured. This suggests that Lee is no different from other Asian leaders. But such a solution still left the problem of succession – who would succeed Lee Hsien Loong?

The second solution Lee proposed is the use of financial incentives to draw the best and brightest into government. This initiative had the added advantage of preventing official corruption, which is rampant in the region.[64] In 1995 Singapore introduced a new pay rate for ministers, based on a formula pegging them to the highest paid in six private sectors (banking, manufacturing, accountancy, engineering, law and multinational corporations).[65] The argument seems clear – the best should not have to sacrifice their personal welfare and the welfare of their families for public office. But there is another, more important aspect to this payment. To the extent that wealth is honourable, Lee was conferring greater honour to future leaders. He was in effect conceding that after his founding, in 'tranquil' times, politics had become less honourable to those with exceptional ambitions, the 'idealistic' leaders.

But Lee must also have known that such a solution would not satisfy the idealists precisely because to them honour cannot be bought. Idealists, like Lee, were less interested in money, they wanted to sacrifice for a great cause, for the common good, to be honoured and remembered for doing great things. The fiscal measure may have solved one problem – making politics financially competitive with commerce – but it did not solve the problem of how to recruit idealists because it seemed to encourage the careerists. It was to address this problem, I suggest, that Lee turned to 'Asian values'.

Asian Values and Asian Leadership

Confucius (551–472 BC) is a Chinese philosopher whose teachings on filial piety, cultivation of virtue and judgement, and good leadership were subsequently developed by his disciples, especially Mencius (372–289 BC) and Xun Zi (312–230 BC). Confucian history and therefore Confucianism is divided by scholars into three periods, Classical Confucianism in the lifetime of Confucius, neo-Confucianism (960–1279 AD) when Confucian ideas and practices were transmitted to Vietnam, Korea and Japan, and twentieth-century New Confucianism.[66] Lee did not distinguish between these forms of Confucianism. His Confucian Ethics campaign was initiated in 1982 when the Singapore government announced that Confucian Ethics would be offered as an optional subject for moral education in secondary schools. The second phase in 1983 focused on higher education, with the new Institute of East Asian Philosophies within the National University of Singapore to define Confucianism for the citizens of Singapore. This was followed by a media campaign encouraging Confucian Ethics as an appropriate social philosophy for modern Singapore. Despite these initiatives the

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[63] Yap et al., *Men in White*, p. 506.

[64] Lee refers to influence-peddling in the British Parliament as well as the money paid to former leaders, e.g. Thatcher, for their books; Lee, speech in Parliament, pp. 331–42. For the legitimacy problems raised by such payments see Ben Wong and Xunming Huang, 'Political legitimacy in Singapore', *Politics and Policy*, Vol. 38, No. 3 (2010), pp. 523–43. For a general discussion of corruption in the region see Jon S.T. Quah, *Curbing Corruption in Asia* (Singapore: Eastern Universities Press, 2003); Lee Seung-Hyun and Kyeungrae Kenny Oh, 'Corruption in Asia: pervasiveness and arbitrariness', *Asia Pacific Journal of Management*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (2007), pp. 97–114.

[65] Lee, speech in Parliament, p. 331.

[66] Tu Weiming, 'Implications of the rise of "Confucian" East Asia', *Daedalus*, Vol. 129, No. 1 (2000), pp. 195–218.

campaign was unsuccessful. Consequently in 1991 the government issued a set of five 'Shared Values' – nation before community and society above self; the family as a basic unity of society; respect and community support for the individual; consensus before conflict; and racial and religious harmony. In 1994 Lee condemned Western liberal tradition, announcing 'Singapore [is] a Confucian society which place[s] the interests of the community above those of the individual.'[67]

Lee's endorsement of Asian values, specifically Confucianism, is unexpected, in part because a number of his closest associates questioned such an approach. Goh Keng Swee (1918–2010), finance minister and deputy prime minister (1973–84), initially dismissed the Asian values project in the 1970s.[68] Sinnathamby Rajarantnam (1915–2006), first foreign minister and deputy prime minister (1980–5) and the 'ideas man' of the PAP, questioned whether 'Asian values' existed, focusing instead on the difference between Westernisation and modernisation.[69] Others such as the diplomat and academic Kishore Mahbubani (1948–present) were critical of the West without simply endorsing Confucianism.[70]

There were, in any case, obstacles to adopting Confucianism. Foremost is the fact that Confucianism was long held in disrepute because it was seen as an obstacle to progress.[71] Moreover, Lee's recourse to ideas, ideology and cultural claims was in tension with his pragmatism. He had always been described as highly intelligent but not philosophical; ideas were important merely for solving pressing practical problems.[72] If so, what was the practical problem Lee wanted to solve with Confucianism? Finally, from the first days of Singapore Lee had avoided Malay and Chinese chauvinism – Singapore was to be a multi-racial society. In 1972 Lee expressed concerns that the majority ethnic Chinese in Singapore would see

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[67] Cited in McCarthy, *The Political Theory of Tyranny*, p. 80. For a general overview see N. Englehart, 'Rights and culture in the Asian values argument: the rise and fall of Confucian Ethics in Singapore', *Human Rights Quarterly*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (2000), pp. 548–68. See also Barr, 'Lee Kuan Yew's Fabian phase', pp. 160–2).

[68] He changed his views and supported the introduction of Confucianism and moral education in schools in the 1980s. Goh, an economist, was one of the founders of the PAP and is credited as one of the architects of Singapore's economy. He was also minister for defence (1970–9) and minister for education (1979–80, 1981–4); Barr, 'Lee Kuan Yew's Fabian phase'; Michael Hill, '"Asian values" as reverse Orientalism: Singapore', *Asia Pacific Viewpoint*, Vol. 41, No. 2 (August 2000), pp. 177–90, pp. 183,186–7.

[69] Rajarantnam, a founder of the PAP, was one of the pioneer leaders of independent Singapore as it achieved self-government in 1959 and later independence in 1965. He thought of a multi-racial Singapore and envisioned her to be a 'global city'; Alan Chong, 'Singapore's foreign policy beliefs as "abridged realism": pragmatic and liberal prefixes in the foreign policy thought of Rajaratnam, Lee, Koh, and Mahbubani', *International Relations of the Asia Pacific*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (August 2006), pp. 269–306, pp. 275–81.

[70] Mahbubani is a former Singaporean diplomat (deputy secretary of the Singapore Ministry of Foreign Affairs (1993) and UN representative) and currently Professor in the Practice of Public Policy and Dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore. He is a modernising intellectual who admires the contributions of Western thinkers like Marx, Machiavelli, John Stuart Mill and Max Weber, though he is also critical of Western individualism and 'democratic fundamentalism'; Melanie Chew, 'Human rights in Singapore: perceptions and problems', *Asian Survey*, Vol. 34, No. 11 (November 1994), pp. 933–48, pp. 935–6; Chong, 'Singapore's foreign policy beliefs', pp. 295–300.

[71] W. Theodore De Bary, *The Trouble with Confucianism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991); McCarthy, *The Political Theory of Tyranny*, p. 88.

[72] Tan argues that pragmatism has provided an important link between economic growth and an authoritarian, meritocratic and technocratic government in Singapore; Kenneth Paul Tan, 'The ideology of pragmatism: neo-liberal globalisation and political authoritarianism in Singapore', *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, Vol. 42, No. 1 (2012), pp. 67–92. Lee was aware of the post-war debates in the UK regarding socialism and liberalism and notes in particular Harold Laski's influence on socialist thought in 1946; Lee, *The Singapore Story*, pp. 104–5. But what seemed to impress him more was the fairness of the system rather than the nature of the specific debates. Thus the early years of the PAP showed a commitment to socialism, but as Barr argues Lee never intended to build a welfare state and his socialism was a means to an end rather than an end in itself, evolving to such an extent that he could claim in the 1990s that he was an economic liberal; Barr, 'Lee Kuan Yew's Fabian phase'.

themselves as Chinese and not Singaporean. The future of Singapore, according to Lee, depended on the majority seeing itself as Singaporean.[73] He had promoted religious toleration by enacting the Religious Harmony Act. Why was he now emphasising one nationality – the Chinese – over others?

Lee's Confucian initiative has been seen as an attempt to stem the sharp decline of PAP electoral support after the election of an opposition MP in 1981. Others have judged it as a form of religious ideology to manipulate the public, a sort of Platonic 'noble lie', even an Aristotelian 'endoxa' to secure the state against the West's moral decay.[74] An important aspect of it has been to counter Western claims that Singapore is not democratic by pointing to the economic and social achievements of developmental states.[75] It has certainly been criticised by other Asian leaders.[76] While these assessments have considerable force, my suggestion is that we should take seriously the possibility that Lee's Confucian initiative was also intended to secure 'idealistic' leaders.

The need to secure idealistic leaders had two aspects for Lee. The increasing prosperity of Singapore had exposed it to new and potentially fatal problems. The energy, thrift and hard work of the founding generation had resulted in greater prosperity. Naturally parents wanted to shield their children from harsh experiences. Consequently the new generation led a much more comfortable but 'soft' life. Related to this general softness, and contributing to it, was a Western 'atomism' or individualism, a product of Singapore's open economy, that was dissolving family ties and thereby all aspects of social life. Though this 'biculturalism' was a particular problem at the top, it would inevitably affect the entire society.[77] Confucianism was therefore Lee's attempt to counter these trends. It would provide a sort of 'cultural ballast' for Singapore.[78]

Chinese core values, according to Lee, are derived from basic human relationships. These were Confucius' five critical relationships. 'Father and son, ruler and subject, husband and wife, old over young, faith between friends. In other words, the family is absolutely the fundamental unit in society. From family, to extended family, to clan, to nation.'[79] As Lee indicates, his intention is to protect and nurture the family unit as the foundation for the entire nation. In doing so he clearly wants to protect society generally from the pernicious influence of wealth and Western liberal individualism. But Lee also hopes to accomplish something much greater. To the extent that it is the people at the top that matter, his Confucianism is intended to invigorate not only society at large, but future leaders. Confucianism will certainly encourage the thrift and hard work of the many. But its moral teaching about good rule and of the *junxi* or 'gentlemen' will have even more important consequences for society. Its teachings that the leader must consider the common good and the welfare of all, and not

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[73] Lee Kuan Yew, speech at Hong Lim PAP Branch 15th anniversary celebration dinner, 14 July 1972 in Han et al., *Lee Kuan Yew*, pp.180-1.

[74] On the debate generally see McCarthy, *The Political Theory of Tyranny*; Englehart, 'Rights and culture'; W. Theodore de Bary, *Asian Values and Human Rights* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000); Michael D. Barr, *Cultural Politics and Asian Values: The Tepid War* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002).

[75] On the nature of these debates see Bruce Cumings, 'Webs with no spiders, and spiders with no webs: the genealogy of the developmental state', in Meredith Woo-Cumings (ed.), *The Developmental State* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), pp. 61–92; Linda Weiss, 'Developmental states in transition: adapting, dismantling, innovating, not "normalizing"', *The Pacific Review*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (2000), pp. 21–55.

[76] See, for example, Kim Dae-jung, 'Is culture destiny? The myth of Asia's anti-democratic values', *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 73 (1994), pp. 189–94; Lee Teng-hui, 'Chinese culture and political renewal', *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 6 (1995), pp. 3–8.

[77] Lee Kuan Yew, 'Changes in Singapore: the obvious and the imperceptible', speech to undergraduates at the National University of Singapore and Nanyang Technological Institute, 22 August 1988, in Han et al., *Lee Kuan Yew*, pp. 406–10.

[78] Barr, 'Lee Kuan Yew's Fabian phase', p. 154.

[79] Lee, 'Changes in Singapore', p. 407.

exploit his position to advantage himself, will replenish and repair what is missing from future leaders – their sense of sacrifice and public good, in short, their idealism.

But why turn to Confucianism? Surely there are other Asian traditions, such as the Indian and Malay, that would have been equally useful? Was it simply the fact that the majority in Singapore are Chinese? As we have seen, Lee was born Straits Chinese and though exposed to Chinese traditions when young he spoke only English and pidgin Malay at home. He began to learn Mandarin during the Japanese occupation and, by 1955, he 'started learning in zest not just the [Chinese] language, but the diction, the slang, the style, the idiom, the proverbs and with it went the mythology of Chinese civilisation and culture and its traditional values' so that he could 'strike a responsive chord' with the Chinese electorate.[80] It is possible that by acquiring this knowledge of Chinese literature and culture, he came to realise the usefulness of what he had discovered in the Chinese classics. Yet it was not just a matter of personal preference. He thought that for cultural and genetic reasons the Chinese were superior. In a 1994 interview with *Foreign Affairs* he noted: 'If you have a culture that doesn't place much value on learning and scholarship and hard work and thrift and deferment of present enjoyment for future gain, the going will be much slower.'[81] Lee demarcated Asian culture into East, South and Southeast Asia. He traced the influence of China in East Asia – Korea, Japan and Vietnam. Chinese culture, and perhaps genetic make-up ('intense types, hard-driving, hard-striving people'[82]), predisposed the Chinese to success.[83] The contrast with India showed, according to Lee, an otherworldly culture: 'The Indians have a more tolerant and forgiving approach to life. More next-worldly. If you do good, then in the next world you'll get rewarded'.[84] This was typical of Malays, too, who did not want to renounce traditions for wealth and economic advancement.[85] As he had said in an early speech, 'I have said openly that if we were 100 per cent Chinese, we would do better. But we are not and never will be, so we live with what we have.'[86]

Singapore's success was due to the Chinese, who formed the majority of the population. But it was the Chinese who were most susceptible to the changes wrought by prosperity and liberal individualism – the Indians and the Malays, relying on their customs, traditions and religion, had not changed as much.[87] Therefore the remedy for idealistic leadership, and for a continuing vigour in society, was to sustain its source, Chinese culture. Chinese culture, in addition to its support of family relations and its moral and ethical virtues, was religiously 'this-worldly' and more tolerant. Lee could introduce this 'Chinese' remedy because Chinese chauvinism and communism was no longer a threat. Indeed, such a Chinese solution would benefit Singapore with the future rise of China, which he anticipated.

The Promise and Limits of Confucian Leadership

In their May 2011 statement announcing their retirement from Cabinet, Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew and Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong note that 'The time has come for a younger

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[80] Cited in Barr, 'Lee Kuan Yew's Fabian phase', p. 155.

[81] Lee in Han et al., *Lee Kuan Yew*, p. 179; Fareed Zakaria, 'Culture is destiny – a conversation with Lee Kuan Yew', *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 73, No. 2 (1994), pp. 109–26.

[82] Lee in Han et al., *Lee Kuan Yew*, p. 174.

[83] In a 1967 speech to the Foreign Correspondents' Association he distinguishes between East Asia and Cambodia, Thailand, Burma and Ceylon, in terms of the type of Buddhism. Unlike the Mahayana Buddhists, he argues, these countries are Hinayana Buddhists, influenced by compassion; Lee in Han et al., *Lee Kuan Yew*, p. 177.

[84] Lee in Han et al., *Lee Kuan Yew*, p. 174.

[85] Lee in Han et al., *Lee Kuan Yew*, p. 183.

[86] Lee in Han et al., *Lee Kuan Yew*, p. 181.

[87] Lee Kuan Yew, speech to Southeast Asia Business Committee meeting, school principals, Hotel Singapura, 12 May 1968, in Han et al., *Lee Kuan Yew*, pp. 398–402.

generation to carry Singapore forward in a more difficult and complex situation.' Tellingly, their statement ends with a reminder: 'But the younger team must always have in mind the interests of the older generation. This generation who contributed to Singapore must be well-looked after.'[88] This article has examined how Lee's desire to be 'well-looked after', to be remembered as a great benefactor, accounts in large measure for his turn to Asian values and thereby a distinctly Asian form of leadership. Asian values were employed by Lee to counter the persistent international attempts to introduce Western conceptions of liberal rights and democratic representative institutions into Singapore.[89] Equally importantly, as argued in this article, Asian values in the form of Confucianism and thereby Confucian leadership were introduced by Lee to ensure 'idealistic' leadership that he contends is absent in tranquil times. What occurs naturally, in times of grave trouble and turmoil, needs to be nurtured and developed by Lee in more peaceful and prosperous times.[90] All modern states, irrespective of their foundings, need idealistic leadership. As a corollary, it would seem that modern states cannot be founded solely on 'performance'.

How feasible and reliable is Lee's 'Confucian leadership' as a remedy to secure idealistic leadership? Lee himself did not need it when he struggled to found Singapore, so we cannot be sure if it is necessary or adequate for times of crisis. But will it fulfil its promise in times of prosperity? Most of the present leaders have not been brought up in this tradition – they are, as Lee admits, bicultural – equally, if not more at home in the West than the East.[91] Not having been educated into this form of leadership, they will have to be persuaded of its merits. In practice it has not proven to be popular and has been dropped from the school curriculum.[92] Finally, whether and how this form of innovative education would have conformed with the economic and technological foundations of modern Singapore remains uncertain.

Lee regarded Confucian leadership as the most appropriate for Singapore because it draws upon and strengthens the culture of its most productive majority, the Chinese. In doing so he risked undermining the carefully managed attempt to accommodate Indian and Malay minorities in Singapore. By his recourse to a Chinese intellectual tradition he risked, in effect, transforming a weak Singaporean nationalism into a form of Chinese nationalism. A limited version of Lee's Confucian proposal was subsequently taken up by China, which revived aspects of the Confucianism it had attacked as 'reactionary'. Such initiatives are a testimony to Lee's influence but, perhaps more tellingly, a confirmation of the power of Chinese nationalism. As such it suggests that Lee's 'Asian' leadership, based on Confucianism, may be limited to Chinese cultures. South and Southeast Asia, culturally and 'genetically', are not 'Chinese' according to Lee and therefore will be unable to employ this form of leadership. But this Chinese solution presents perhaps the more radical challenge to Lee's honour and glory and therefore his legacy. In turning to Confucius to preserve his achievements he implicitly defers to the Chinese sage. He admits that though he was necessary for the founding, Lee Kuan Yew, by himself, is not enough to sustain Singapore. Lee's recourse to Confucian leadership therefore preserves his accomplishments, but at the price of depreciating them. In seeking to secure his honour, Lee in effect honours someone who becomes his superior; Lee makes Confucius the true founder of Singapore.

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[88] *The Straits Times* (15 May 2011).

[89] In doing so he repudiated the examples of Taiwan and Korea, both of which chose the path of parliamentary democracy.

[90] Implicit in this view is the belief that virtue lies in the struggle, and not in the success. Indeed, it would seem that success poses grave perils for virtue, sapping it of its vigour and its vision for the common good.

[91] The background of the present prime minister, Lee Hsien Loong, is indicative, having been educated, as we noted above, in Cambridge, Harvard and the US Army at Fort Leavenworth.

[92] Englehart, *The Case for Greatness.*

This difficulty reveals a deeper problem for all founders of modern states. Security, stability and prosperity may be essential bases for founding a state, but its continuation appears to require more, a larger moral vision that will sustain and satisfy its future idealistic leaders. Lee's recourse to Confucius is an admission that his non-philosophical founding, especially evident in his non-ideological or pragmatic leadership, is insufficient for sustaining modern states. Lee's idealist leadership is therefore a tacit admission that modern states, if not in their founding then in their maintenance and prosperity, may need philosopher kings.

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