

The logo features the word "Singapore" in a black serif font. The letter "S" is significantly larger and rendered in a white, three-dimensional, glossy style with a subtle drop shadow. Below the word "Singapore" is the phrase "The Unexpected Nation" in a smaller, black serif font. A soft, grey shadow is cast beneath the entire text block, giving it a sense of depth.

Singapore  
The Unexpected Nation

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History of Nation-Building Series

A large, stylized, white letter 'S' with a 3D effect and a shadow, positioned to the left of the word 'Singapore'.

# Singapore

## The Unexpected Nation

A grey, brushstroke-like graphic element located below the subtitle.

EDWIN LEE

**ISEAS**

INSTITUTE OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES  
Singapore

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# Preface

The Second World War sealed the old era of British rule in Malaya, and opened a new final chapter. The new men who ruled Malaya came out with liberal, Fabian ideas of colonial stewardship. They aimed to remake Malaya into a unified multiracial country, a *Malayan* Malaya, to which they would eventually transfer power. But they had not reckoned with how Malaya would receive them. Malay nationalists opposed them, forcing them to put Malay sovereignty and Malay rights first, though agreeing to the unification of all the Malay states in a new Federation of Malaya. Then, the Malayan Communist Party, Britain's Chinese ally behind Japanese lines in the war just ended, edged towards a war of insurgency in the uneasy peace-time. Concurrently, the British officials who started as liberals switched to advocating draconian laws. However, successive British proconsuls worked to keep the *Malayan* Malaya ideal alive until they had to accept defeat not by the guns of communism but by the politics of communalism.

The young Lee Kuan Yew has his political education in this war-torn, troubled period, but from Britain where he was reading law after the war. His thinking was cast in the same liberal mould as the British political and colonial establishment. He arrived at a definition of the Malayan nation that mirrored theirs. Something else very important that Lee grasped very early was that Britain had no intention to leave Malaya in the hands of the Malayan Communist Party. Lee, like a group of young, highly intelligent radicals who came slightly before him, was also to work with the communists, but unlike them, who were drawn like moths to the flame, he reserved some space, playing on the ambiguity in the connection. And the connection enabled him to beat his right wing contemporaries, helped by their own wrong moves. It also helped Lee that the state of play developed such that, ironically, both the British and the Malayan Communist Party

had to take him as the only man who could further their cause. Later still, Tunku Abdul Rahman, the father of independence in Malaya, had also to deal with none other than Lee, as one prime minister (of Malaya) to another (of Singapore).

It had become clear by this time that the initiative to act belonged less and less to the British than to the two leading contenders thrown up by history: Tunku Abdul Rahman and Lee Kuan Yew. They both had to face a third contender, the Malayan Communist Party. The merger of Singapore and Malaya in a Federation of Malaysia, which included the British Bornean colonies for a better ethnic balance, made for the triple entente, Singapore, Malaya, Britain, that decimated the communists. But post-merger, Lee could make no headway in his quest for a *Malaysian* Malaysia, just as British proconsuls had earlier failed in theirs for a *Malayan* Malaya. In the upshot, Singapore was expelled from Malaysia, a profoundly bitter defeat for Lee.

Yet this debacle also made Lee and his colleagues, the first generation PAP ministers, more determined to pull together and attempt to build the Singapore nation that they had once believed an impossibility. They were emboldened by desperation, did audacious things and with a severity that became their trademark style of governance. It was not until the time of Lee's successor, Goh Chok Tong, that a gentler spirit presided over what was by then a different Singapore, affluent and more at ease with itself.

At the time of independence, the English-educated were in charge. This made a big difference to the future of the nation, and therefore, to history. The first generation PAP ministers were English-educated, and likewise, the second generation too. The first generation looked to the civil service and the University of Singapore, which were the preserves of the English-educated, as their natural helpmates. But there was conflict with the university stemming from the scholars' defence of their academic freedom and the government's adamantness that matters of national importance should take precedence. Another problem was that the university did not entirely sympathise with the government's technological plans and take Engineering to itself as a faculty. It was not until Dr Toh Chin Chye, minister and academic, could be spared for the vice-chancellorship that significant progress was made. It took some time for Singapore's "best and brightest" to see that they should be partners with the government in nation-building.

For the Chinese-educated Chinese, who were the majority of the people, independence held an unexpected reason for disillusionment. The economic development which followed, with multinationals playing a dominant role, caused Chinese language and education to decline in importance. The Chinese-medium Nanyang University ceased to exist in the form the Chinese community intended it. This was the inevitable result of the scramble for the rewards of economic development which many believed would come through an education in English as the first language.

The irony was that at a later stage of economic development the government began to worry that the Chinese who chose English as their first language were losing the Chinese cultural values believed to have underpinned East Asian economic success, including of course, Singapore's. Ironically too, the Chinese-medium schools which had inculcated these values had disappeared, save for the few specially supported as premier bilingual institutions. Other ways to reconnect the Chinese to their ancestral culture had to be found, and were, as seen over time in the promotion of Confucian ethics in school and society, in the national values initiative, and in the Speak Mandarin Campaign in which Mandarin was equated with tradition, (an ironic reversal of the May Fourth's identification of Mandarin with modernity).

The Malays, Indians and Eurasians each had their own perspective on independence. For the Malays, it meant losing the numerical edge they had in Malaysia. For the Eurasians, it aroused fears about a future without the British "protector" around. The common worry of all three minority races was that they would be marginalized. Ethnic divisions mattered more than class, despite economic modernization and the burgeoning growth of middle classes. They had another worry when they witnessed the government's later initiatives to revivify Chinese tradition. The building blocks for constructing the Singapore nation were sufficiently complex for the master builder Lee Kuan Yew to wish that he could have had something simpler to work with.

This book contains the political narrative up to Singapore's unexpected independence and the sequel describing nation-building in Singapore which spans the rule of two prime ministers, Lee Kuan Yew and his successor, Goh Chok Tong. The book deals with the making of a national service army;

with the PAP way to economic development, trade unionism, education, housing and home ownership; with the position of two pre-existing universities in the new nation, a story of decolonization, depoliticization, and demise, as the case may be. The book deals with PAP ideology: how that changed from an understated Anglophone Fabian-flavoured socialism to a highly articulated American Ivy League-stamped Neo-Confucian culturalism. It shows how the culture-based thesis of the Neo-Confucian school fed into the PAP leaders' later self-image as modern Asians, and their conviction that economic vibrancy was compatible with a consensual political culture. As well, the book deals with issues of ethnicity and national identity in the context of challenges from within and without, in the latter case from globalization and global Islamism.

This book is one of a series on nation-building in Southeast Asia. Professor Wang Gungwu, who conceived this series, invited five historians from the region each to write a book on their country. I am privileged to have been the one for Singapore. It has been a great stimulus and learning experience for me to share in this enterprise with Professor Wang and four other distinguished historians: Charnvit Kasetsiri, Cheah Boon Kheng, Reynaldo C. Ileto and Taufik Abdullah. Professor Wang chaired many discussions with us on the challenges historians face in writing nation-building history. He then held a conference involving more Southeast Asianist historians which resulted in another book in the series, Wang Gungwu, ed., *Nation-Building: Five Southeast Asian Histories* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2005). In it, Professor Wang defined (again) the problem we faced as that of engaging with both the national and the contemporary. Another contributor, Craig J. Reynolds, commented on our attitude to the idea of the nation, saying we celebrate and embrace the nation, and believe the nation-state capable of giving expression to our political, social and economic aspirations. It has been heartening for me to be in such company. Ours is an attitude, Professor Reynolds observed, that is not universal among societies around the world which had attained independence from colonial rule.

Yet another contributor, Albert Lau, discussed the lack of sources, of perspective, of probably objectivity, and the encumbrance of a dominant official version. But Professor Lau continued: don't let that stop you from trying and being true to yourself, citing the late Raffles Professor Wong Lin Ken's axiom on the historian's integrity. This too is an encouragement to me, and also a reminder, finally, to state my authorial responsibility for the finished product.

Huge thanks go to the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies for supporting this project. I have in mind in particular, Mrs Y.L. Lee, who heads the secretariat; Mr Tee Teow Lee, administrative officer; Mrs May Wong and Mrs Betty Kwan who typed my manuscript so beautifully; Mrs Triena Ong, Managing Editor for her useful advice, Ms Fatanah Sarmani and Mrs Celina Kiong for their kind assistance.

My deep appreciation extends to the Central Library of the National University of Singapore, and to the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library in the National Library Building. I have received excellent help from their librarians and other staff.

Edwin Lee



# Introduction

*Wang Gungwu*

## The Series

This series of histories on nation-building in Southeast Asia had its beginnings in Bangkok at the 14th Conference of the International Association of the Historians of Asia (IAHA). At that meeting, I noted that nation-building in Southeast Asia began fifty years ago and suggested that it was time for historians to write about that phenomenon. Most books on the region's new nations have been written by journalists and social scientists. I asked whether historians would tell the story differently. Decades of anti-colonial nationalism came to a climax with the Japanese invasion of 1941–45. New states like those of the Philippines, Indonesia and Burma were born immediately after the war, followed soon by those of Malaysia and Singapore. The independence of a unified Vietnam was delayed by a bitter war and this held back the liberation of the two other Indochina states, Cambodia and Laos, but the independence of all three was only a matter of time.

Many of the protagonists of the early phases of nation-building have described their roles in this new process. Political commentators and journalists provided up-to-date accounts and analyses. But historians of the region have been concerned not to write prematurely about this subject. Many were, like me, fascinated by the first generation of nationalist leaders, men like Sukarno, Tengku Abdul Rahman and Ho Chi Minh, followed by Lee Kuan Yew, Soeharto, Ferdinand Marcos and Ne Win, but hesitant to take on full-length studies about the nations they had set out to build. Through their leadership, their peoples were offered sharply distinct visions of their countries' future. Would historians wait, as they are wont to do, for

all sources to be available before they began research on their countries? How long would it be before the story of each country in Southeast Asia is told by the historians themselves?

When I returned from the Bangkok conference, I brought the question to the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS) and was gratified when the then director, Professor Chan Heng Chee, encouraged me to try and find out. With that support, I approached five of the leading historians of the original members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN in 1968 consisted of Indonesia, Thailand, Philippines, Malaysia and Singapore). They were Taufik Abdullah, Charnvit Kasetsiri, Reynaldo Ileto, Cheah Boon Kheng and Edwin Lee. We met to discuss the feasibility of a joint project to write the contemporary histories of these five countries. They agreed that this was worth doing and I sought ISEAS and other funding to allow us to proceed. The support we received enabled us to meet and hold a series of meetings to define the scope of the project.

We began our meetings by focusing on the common features of the Southeast Asian "nation-state". We knew that there had been attempts to study the early products of new nationalisms in the region. It was clear that some of the peoples of each country were less prepared than others to be citizens of these nation-states. Furthermore, the unfamiliar models taken from Europe have seemed alien, and each of the leaders who advocated using these models often had great difficulty explaining why anyone of them should be adopted. We also noted that historians in these countries have closely observed the stresses and strains that were generated, and some have felt the urge to study the actual business of nation-building more systematically. The five historians who met with me to discuss this phenomenon felt that they would not wait any longer before they began their task. They agreed that they would use their historical skills to take on this project.

We first decided on the kind of a series we should write. Very early, we agreed that each country had its own story and each author would write a volume about his own country. At the same time, we should try to find out how much the five countries had in common and whether we should adopt a common approach to the subject. From the discussions over several months outlining the main features of the nation-building story in the

region, it became increasingly clear that there were several kinds of stories here. Despite their coming together in a regional organization like ASEAN, each of the five had very different experiences inside their countries. While we were not surprised by this fact, it was astonishing how contrasting their respective stories were. The more we surveyed what each country had to do to define the kind of nationhood it wanted, the more it seemed that the ingredients each started with had forced their leaders to seek very different routes to achieve their goals. We agreed that it would be a mistake for us to try to treat them as if they were different examples of some given model or models. Although the foreign models that each country used may have appeared to share common characteristics, what each country inherited from previous regimes at the point of independence was so different that we had to think afresh what needed to be done to capture the essence of each experience. We agreed that these differences justified our adopting distinct and separate approaches to each story. Ultimately, each volume would follow the dynamics of change that each country encountered and allow that to determine the shape of the history that the country should have. This series of histories is the result. The writing has taken longer than we first anticipated. We are grateful to Professor Chan Heng Chee's successors, Professor Chia Siow Yue and Ambassador Kesavapany, for their sustained support for our project.

In addition, the Lee Foundation, Singapore, and the Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation, Taipei, helped to fund the project and I would like to thank them for their generous support.

Let me place the series in a broader context. The study of modern nationalism was the work of European historians. The historians of the American and French Revolutions were the first to underline the global significance of the nation-state project while others looked further back to study the evolutionary stages of earlier nations like The Netherlands, Britain, Spain and Portugal. During the nineteenth century, historians worked with linguists, philosophers and lawyers to shape narrower kinds of nationalisms in Central and Eastern Europe. Their work stimulated social scientists later to embark on theoretical explanations of what the nation-state system meant to the world. The work of historians, however, continued to be influential, most of all by providing ideas for many of the Asian nationalists of the

twentieth century. Those who studied in Western universities, in particular, were inspired by these histories to use the ideas in them to prepare their platforms for political leadership.

For the post-World War II period, nationalism was largely seen in the region as a positive development, an organized quest for independence, freedom, and modernization. The Cold War determined that leaders of the newly independent countries could look in at least two different political directions. Some chose to build their nations with the help of capitalism and liberal democracy. These would use the Western European models as the basis for nationhood and, for them, the best way to modernity was through an open market economy. Soon, they found the United States more than willing to help them along that route. Others chose to follow the socialist path either against the capitalist democracies or seeking some kind of neutralism in the Cold War. These were encouraged by the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China to contest the global economic and military power represented strongly in Asia by the United States. The more radical among them went further to advocate the overthrow of neo-colonial and feudal structures by mobilizing the working poor who were the majority in each of their countries.

The new leaders soon discovered how difficult nation-building was. It was not enough to proclaim independence. They needed outside help if they wanted to modernize quickly. Large amounts of capital were needed to build a new infrastructure for industrial development. Basic literacy was essential, so were the skills that could only come from secondary and tertiary education for the next few generations. But the nation-state as a new kind of polity was more alien than most people realized at the time. Learning from Western and Eastern Europe, or Japan, China or the United States, may have looked easy for the small group of elites who captured power in the post-colonial states, but building a stable and prosperous nation has been much more elusive.

The responses by historians in the former colonial territories of Southeast Asia have varied from country to country, from those in older countries like the kingdom of Thailand to that of the Philippines, and from those in Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore to those of war-torn states like Burma (Myanmar), Vietnam and Cambodia. Up to now, these different national

experiences have largely been studied professionally by political scientists, and the dominance by political scientists, sociologists and anthropologists has continued to the present day. On the whole, there have been few academic historians of the region who have ventured into the period after 1950. This is understandable. The first generation of historians had enough to do to write the story of national origins, often to meet a teleological need, because they realized that the task of nation-building from scratch was a painful one. Some felt it their duty to delineate the contours of the future by giving a new and greater certainty to their countries' more distant pasts.

However, I believe that historians here, as in Europe and elsewhere, will have an important part in shaping future understanding of the phenomenon of nation-building in this part of the world. It is now more than fifty years since many of the new states began making their respective nations. There is now a rich record for historians to study and some official files are open for the first decades of nationhood. Those who wish to bring history closer to the present can now begin to do so. Theirs is a different kind of training, and their intellectual make-up and methodology have much to offer the subject. Therefore, it is time for more historians to take up the challenge and tell the story of the nation-building that many of them have themselves lived through. More than ever, we should not depend on existing theories of nationalism and what they do to the actual task of building nations. The study of each national history should take into account the specific conditions of the nationalism found within its borders. When more historians write their countries' contemporary nation-building history, other social scientists may look at the subject afresh, examine new facts and interpretations, and re-assess the theoretical work done so far. They might find that a new set of theories would be needed to make sense of what the new nation-states of Southeast Asia have achieved. Or, they might find that the simultaneous development of nations in the context of an exceptional regionalism like ASEAN has rendered previous ideas of nationalism inapplicable, if not irrelevant, and a new paradigm is needed.

Until we have done the work, it is premature to talk about a borderless region, least of all a new world order in which nation-states and nationalisms will begin to fade away. From what is known so far of the modern history of "a world of nation-states", it would seem that

nation-states are here to stay, if only as basic units of regional groupings that will increasingly play a major role as distinct protagonists. Therefore, the sooner we have the more recent developments of aspiring nation-states fully studied by historians in their regional setting, the sooner we will know how to live with them and even how to make them serve the cause of peace in our region.

## **Singapore**

The story of Singapore as a colony that had to change its borders several times but in the end became one of the world's most successful developmental states has attracted much attention. Some of that attention is focused on the speed and direction of the republic's economic growth. Some others choose to regret the policies used to ensure political control. This has led to lively debates about ends and means, and to accusations and refutations. Invariably these have led to growing interest in how decisions are made at each stage, not least in the way battles by leading protagonists are lost and won. The number of social scientists, public policy specialists, management experts, business analysts and journalists who have examined Singapore's progress is growing. Despite Singapore's reputation as a technocratic state that kept its secrets well, there is in fact more information available about how the city-state works than most people realize.

But one part of the country's story has been more difficult to tell. It concerns the complex and sensitive efforts to nurture a harmonious multicultural society in which its several ethnic groups are ready to work for a common goal. There is also the ongoing but crucial task to inspire young Singaporeans to keep focused on a single national future. The political leaders are keenly aware of the problems they face in order to sustain their vision of a Singapore nation and this is obvious in the attention they pay to this theme year after year ever since the colony metamorphosed from a state in federal Malaysia to an independent country. Their success in building a strong and stable state cannot guarantee that there will always be a Singapore nation, but they are keenly aware that the state's determination is a necessary condition if such a nation is to emerge and thrive. However spectacularly its economic goals are achieved and even surpassed, the

social bonding and sharing of cultural values that provide a nation with strong political foundations cannot be engineered. Unlike nuts and bolts and the basic needs for food, clothing and shelter, this sharing needs the willing participation of the people living in Singapore. In order to be deeply felt, the hearts and minds of all levels of society have to be engaged in a sustained discourse about the kind of country they would like to see for them and their children.

This issue was recognized at the start of Singapore's unexpected independence in August 1965. Ever since then, there have been no illusions that preparations to enable the island's people to acquire a common ideal of nationhood would have to begin afresh. No one failed to notice that three quarters of the population were of Chinese descent. And it was known that many of them hoped that, however pluralistic the rhetoric, the aspirations of the majority community should be allowed to shape the nature of that state. How that fact would impact on the minority ethnic groups of Singapore was, therefore, of immediate concern. Among the first steps towards nationhood that were taken by the new government was one that clarified to the whole world that Singapore would not be a "third China" but a Southeast Asian state that knows its place among the nations of the neighbourhood. By declaring that its national language was Malay specifically identified it as a historic part of the Malay Archipelago. All the same, the leaders knew that nation-building would have to be a long process. Their people would have to resolve to live and work together in peace while at the same time trying to formulate a new national identity. In the meantime, the country would need legitimate and effective governance, its sovereignty would have to be protected, and everybody's livelihood assured. It is only when its people can see a long-term future together that nation-building can be deemed to have taken off.

In this series on the history of nation-building, all authors agreed that it should be written as contemporary history and not to go too far back in the past to start their stories. The challenge was to concentrate on the post-colonial policies and decisions that helped to make modern nationhood possible. The assumption was that the leaders of each country gave high priority to creating a new nation. At each point of time, the governments responsible faced pressures both inside and outside the

country. Under those circumstances, key decisions were made that had a direct bearing on the nation to be built. Edwin Lee has held firmly to that focus and has set out to tell the many strands in that story. He shows the many layers of change that must occur before the process can take firm root as he points to the multitude of policies that could shape the nation. He underlines how much more there is to tell before it can safely be said that the task is done. Coming after the country volume for Malaysia by Cheah Boon Kheng, Singapore's unexpected nationhood dictates that the contrasts be made. Malaysia's nationhood seems to have been carefully planned from above, precisely because its communal lumps and socio-economic divisions looked the most precarious. Must these unruly ingredients be urgently channeled into a national oneness? From the results of the national elections of 2008, it would seem that the chosen trajectory of the late 1960s is to be closely re-examined.

Singapore had to face other kinds of futures. Suddenly inheriting a great imperial harbour and a commercial centre located at a major crossroad between empires and oceans, it needed to consolidate its place as one of the nodes of rapid globalization. Under the circumstances, if nation-building turns out to be laborious, the process can perhaps live with the idea that a nation-state is not so vital, at least not so urgent, after all. Edwin Lee's story shows that, even if this proved to be true, Singapore's leaders are leaving nothing to chance as they strive systematically to determine the kind of nation that would best suit their long-term needs.