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IN LIEU OF IDEOLOGY

I should like to end as I began, by exhorting Singaporeans to take more interest in the history of their country — its founding, development and progress. They will then realize the magnitude of the problems that have had to be faced, and the great achievements that have been accomplished.

— Goh Keng Swee
("150 Years of Singapore", 1 August 1969)

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IN LIEU OF IDEOLOGY

AN INTELLECTUAL BIOGRAPHY OF
GOH KENG SWEE

OOI KEE BENG



Institute of Southeast Asian Studies

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FOREWORD

Dr Goh was the foremost among the architects of the transformation of Singapore

— Press Statement from Prime Minister's Office,
14 May 2010.

One month before Dr Ooi Kee Beng delivered his manuscript to the publisher, Dr Goh Keng Swee breathed his last.

Dr Goh's death triggered an interesting phenomenon in Singapore. On the one hand, a profusion of tributes to the great man, from high and low, arose from many who had worked with him or, as contemporaries, were familiar with his achievements. Yet, at the other end of the age-spectrum, say, among the under-40s, there was bemused surprise at that outpouring of acclaim.

A sign of collective amnesia among the younger half of the citizenry? Not really. They just may not have learned of Dr Goh, for reasons that are suggested below; or their ears did not prick up when his name or accomplishments earlier came up.

One reason is that Dr Goh was out of the public eye for some 15 years or more before his death. He did his job, retired, and had a clean break with politics. During his years of active service, Dr Goh's mission, as the book demonstrates in unmistakable terms, was to throw himself wholeheartedly into the tasks at

hand. Not for him the development of a personality cult. He did not obsess over what the history books might want to say about him. He knew that his actions and their results spoke for themselves. And he understood the ancient Roman maxim: *Sic transit gloria mundi*.

The second reason that the younger generation may not have come up to speed on Dr Goh is the palpable state of the teaching of history in schools. Maybe, steps are now being taken to improve the situation. Time will tell. Perhaps the timeliness of publication of this book, so soon after Dr Goh left this earthly world, will stimulate interest among Singaporeans not only in its subject matter, but our nation's history.

What did Dr Goh do to justify the description by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong in the tribute quoted above? Dr Goh's work is normally divided into three compartments — finance and economic growth, defence, and education — corresponding to the three ministries he headed over a span of 25 years. Yet, his record in those three vital areas is not the sum and substance of what he did for Singapore. His reach penetrated virtually every area of public life. He was the ultimate policy wonk. But not just that. Because of his intellectual prowess, innovative turn of mind, and common sense combined with a degree of *chutzpah*, he enjoyed a moral authority that enabled him, as the saying goes, to punch above his weight. Far above his weight.

What he did, as Dr Ooi patiently and penetratingly exposes, shaped Singapore's destiny. And what he did not, or more accurately what he prevented, was equally significant. Seductive ideas and proposals always emerge from ministries and elsewhere. Particularly in those early days of straitened resources, someone with the clarity of thinking, cogency of exposition, and moral integrity of a Dr Goh was needed to sift the wheat from the chaff. The need for judgement of that calibre is still valid. Always.

Leadership in government is essentially the practice of the art of making choices. Choices not just of policies, programmes and projects, important as they may be. There are also choices of governance: the type of governance system adopted taking into account the circumstances of time and place; the values the leadership wishes to espouse; and the pertinence of concepts such as justice, egalitarianism, civil rights, the rights of the individual, the environment, as well as other more mundane policies. Those were the fundamental issues which Dr Goh, who thought deeply about moral philosophy, wrestled with in his public life.

Those issues were pertinent in his early years in public life, in the 1960s, as the foundation of the new nation was being set; and they continue to be valid, as existential issues. So, it is interesting to speculate on how Dr Goh may have addressed some of the more intriguing questions of the day: the distribution of the national pie, population, immigration, the falling fertility rate, and so forth. While he kept out of the public eye for some two decades before his death, there is enough known about him and his thought process, which the author has explored so assiduously in his scholarly work, to project that Dr Goh would have conceived radical ideas. He is sorely missed.

Dr Goh's interests were wide ranging, and his mind rapier sharp. That combination enabled him to take a kaleidoscopic perspective of the issues before him. He was truly a renaissance man, a humanist, and would wholeheartedly have subscribed to the sentiments of Tagore in these lines from the Gitanjali:

“Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high;

Where knowledge is free;

...

...

Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way into the dreary, desert sand of dead habit;
Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake.”

No one is perfect. With all his many virtues and attributes, Dr Goh was subject to human foibles and failings. Out of timber so crooked as that from which man is made, nothing entirely straight can be built, said Immanuel Kant. So Dr Goh had his irascible moments, the faltering of judgement, and the occasional rash, lamented act. They can be forgiven, and most of his victims probably did forgive. Because of his generosity of spirit and sterling character, those who worked closely with him, and earned his confidence, were prepared to go the last mile for him. They recognized him for what he was: a selfless leader who always put the public interest before his own. Truly, “He was the noblest of them all”.

A word about the author and his opus. When the manuscript arrived and the sub-title, “*An Intellectual Biography of Dr Goh Keng Swee*”, popped up, so did my eyebrows. I wondered who that intrepid author was, whom I had then not met, that ventured to probe that lofty mind. As I scanned the text, I realized that Dr Ooi was not exaggerating. I later learned from him that, astonishingly, he had never met Dr Goh, a fact that enhanced my esteem for him. He clarified that he had attempted to gain second-hand insights through interviews with several personalities that were contemporaries of Dr Goh, but gave up the idea in favour of a scholarly search of primary sources.

That task he has accomplished in spades. Even to someone like me who had worked with Dr Goh on-and-off for some thirty years, the result of Dr Ooi’s labour is a revealing tome. Befitting his scholarly background, Dr Ooi has painstakingly researched dozens of references, indeed well over a hundred. And he has

strung his material and his thoughts together cogently and convincingly. The product is worthy of patient perusal, but even Dr Ooi may concede it is not for the faint-hearted.

All who knew Dr Goh well owe the author a debt of gratitude for so diligently and successfully undertaking the project. We should thank as well ISEAS and its perspicacious director, Mr K. Kesavapany, for promoting this project and selecting a very able scholar to write it.

It is ISEAS' declared intention to produce biographies of other leading Singaporeans, particularly the founding fathers. It is an aspiration that will be applauded by Singaporeans of a reflective disposition.

J.Y. Pillay
Chairman
Singapore Exchange Limited

PREFACE

Dr Goh Keng Swee passed away on 14 May 2010, just as I was finishing Chapter Seven. It was very sad news, of course. I had hoped to present him with a copy of this book, more for the symbolism than anything else, you understand. He had after all been bedridden for many years, following a series of strokes.

I decided then that the next best thing for me to do was to shift to top gear and finish the book within a month of his death. I have a weakness for symbolisms.

And so, I hand in my manuscript to ISEAS Publishing now, on the morning of 14 June 2010. With that, a project that took three years to do is brought to completion.

It has been a great and undeserved honour for me to study and to write about this unique man. Being of foreign origins, I had to discover this Singaporean for the first time. I knew nothing about the great deeds he performed in his life, and so was able to be properly awed by them.

I went to his wake at his home in Dunbar Walk. His son, Goh Kian Chee, was there to receive me, as was his widow, Dr Phua Swee Liang. Seeing Dr Goh in his casket that day, I wished that my children were there with me so that I could point to him and talk to them about who he was. I had after all been filling my mind with his thoughts for months on end.

Dr Goh's body was laid in state at Singapore's Parliament House for three days, beginning on 19 May. So that morning, my wife and I took the opportunity to bring along a group of home-educating families, including our own children, to pay our final respects. We sat on the granite steps outside Victoria Theatre for a couple of hours while I talked to the group about this man, whose passing was prompting young and old Singaporeans to revisit their national history.

Most of the children present, aged between 4 and 15, had not heard about Dr Goh, and if they had, knew of him only as a name they were supposed to recognize for some unclear reason. The people who were most interested in what I had to say were not the kids; it was their mothers.

And so, it is to them, and to all Singaporeans, that I dedicate this book; my humble contribution to the complex saga of The Little Island that Roared.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A half century has passed since the two decades that followed the Second World War saw colonies throughout the world transform themselves into sovereign states. A new generation is now grown who benefits — and suffers — from the actions of post-colonial nation builders, but who has no detailed knowledge about the complexities of their national history. What has also appeared is a sense of urgency among members of the older generation who lived through those times, to capture whatever can be captured of the past. They fear that the young will not understand their own situation and jeopardize the nation-building process through that ignorance.

And so, there has been an explosion of books about Southeast Asia's past leaders, many of them coming out of ISEAS Publishing. The latter is largely due to ISEAS Director Ambassador K. Kesavapany, whom I wish to thank before anyone else for giving this project to me, and for all the help he rendered along the way.

I thank him also for graciously allowing me to structure this book in a unique fashion. This volume is unlike other recent ones written about past leaders which are based on interviews with friends, relatives and colleagues, but is instead a narrative built around the subject's original writings.

I wish also to express my gratitude to Dr Goh Keng Swee's family members for assistance given to me over the last three years.

This project is also the first to make full use of the digitized version of *The Straits Times*, made available to me a year before the official launching of the NewspaperSG initiative that now provides scholars with easy access to Singaporean and Malaysian media printed before 1989. I heartily thank Singapore Press Holdings for that privilege.

That access to key material would not have been possible without the trust and generosity of Singapore's National Library. I would especially like to thank Ms Lim Soo Hoon, Chairman of the National Library Board (NLB) and Permanent Secretary of Singapore's Public Service Division; NLB Director Ms Ngian Lek Choh; Ms Judy Ng, Head of the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library; Ms Noryati A. Samad, Senior Manager of the Singapore and Southeast Asia Collections at the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library; Ms Ang Seow Leng, Senior Reference Librarian at the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library; and Ms Kartini Binti Saparudin, Associate Librarian at NLB.

Ms Kartini offered valuable help in my quest for articles written by Dr Goh Keng Swee before 1960, saving me a lot of time and headache through her kind and warm assistance.

The National University of Singapore's Singapore/Malaysia Collection put useful and rare material at my finger tips, and I am grateful to the librarians there for their competence and warmth.

My hunt for details about Goh Keng Swee the schoolboy was made easy through the kind assistance of the Archivist at the Anglo-Chinese School, Mr Earnest Lau, formerly Principal of Anglo-Chinese Secondary School, and his assistant, Ms Jenny Ng.

My debt of gratitude to colleagues at ISEAS goes without saying. ISEAS Library is one of the best stocked in the world, and this book would have taken a much longer time to write if I had not had such easy access to the books and journals found there,

as well as special collections such as the Gerald De Cruz Papers and the Tun Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman Collection. I thank Library Head Ms Ch'ng Kim See, Ms D. Gandhimathy, the head of Systems Development, Reference and Circulation Services, Ms Susan Low, head of Special Projects, and all other ISEAS librarians for their kind and ready assistance.

A great debt of gratitude is owed to Mrs Triena Ong and all the staff at ISEAS Publishing for their warm and dedicated professionalism. Without them, this volume would not be as error-free and elegant as it is. As with all my earlier books handled by ISEAS Publishing, the final product always comes out looking more stylish than I could have imagined when handing in the manuscript.

I am also indebted to Dr Audrey Kahin and the Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections at Cornell University Library for permission to access the George McTurnan Kahin Papers, and to my friend and colleague Dr Hui Yew-Foong for help rendered on that front and for many valuable comments made on our daily trips to work.

Thanks must also be given to the National Archives, Kew Gardens, where invaluable documents concerning Malaya's and Singapore's history are easily kept available by a competent staff.

A special word of thanks must also go to colleagues at ISEAS who provided me with advice and relevant material, especially Dr Terence Chong, Dr Francis Hutchinson, Dr Lee Hock Guan, Dr Loh Kah Seng, Mr Daljit Singh and Mr Tan Keng Jin.

When I started on this project, I also interviewed several people who knew Dr Goh Keng Swee well. Although the approach I finally chose did not make direct use of those interviews, I wish them to know that my conversations with them provided me with solid knowledge about the man whose thoughts I was about to analyse. Many thanks to Mr Ngiam Tong Dow, Mr Lim Ho

Hup, Prof Lui Pao Chuen, Mr Phua Bah Li, Dr Soon Teck Wong and Dr Moses Yu.

Inspiration comes from unexpected directions and in all shapes, sizes and subjects. This makes it difficult to give credit where credit is definitely due, and I am bound to leave many unmentioned to whom I am in truth indebted. So, even if their names are not included in this short note, I wish them to know that I am grateful for their help, kindness and friendship. They contributed in more ways than they will ever know.

Last and certainly not least, I wish to thank my wife, Laotse Sacker, for her patience and assistance throughout the years. She scrutinized the chapters before they were finished, and gave precious pointers that are all now incorporated into the final product.

INTRODUCTION

This project suffered a few false starts. I began by looking for books about Dr Goh. These are surprisingly few, the most prominent of them being his daughter-in-law Tan Siok Sun's recent *Goh Keng Swee: A Portrait*. It took some time for me to realize that a book on Dr Goh could not possibly build on secondary sources and on what interviewees remember about him, regardless of the state of their memory and how well they knew him. Although people were most willing to help, useful documented sources about him were a scarcity.

Besides, Singapore's historiography suffers a narrative bind caused not only by the minute size of the island, its small population and its short history, but also by widespread concerns about national security and legal consequences. Such conditions persuade political biographers and historians to rely on interviews with an ever diminishing group of aging insiders and on limited access to official documents.

After some ingestion of information about Dr Goh, I saw that what was lacking once Siok Sun's book had come out in 2007 was a volume that dealt at length with the man's thoughts. After all, he was a thinker above all else, with the qualifier of course that thought and action were intertwined in his personality. What better way is there to understand Dr Goh than through his own words?

And so, the concept for this book became clear. What was also gratifying was to learn that he wrote a lot throughout his life, and already as a young teenager. Furthermore, he was an old-world politician who had a wonderful command over his language of choice and who personally wrote practically everything he allowed to be publicized. He was also highly respected by his colleagues for his scope of knowledge, and his need to do research on anything he was to give a talk on.

From that point onwards, the book developed with a dynamic of its own. All I had to do was find the material, sieve through them, pick out texts that I found representative of his major trends of thought, and analyse them within a historical context.

A natural demarcation in Dr Goh's life was when he became an elected politician. This occurred exactly when Singapore's political situation changed dramatically. I therefore divide this book into Section One and Section Two — the first dealing with writings done before he was openly a politician, and the second with the rest of his life when his thoughts were fully concerned with the building of the nation. To be sure, the last chapter is somewhat different and deals largely with his understanding of the modern world and China's economic reforms.

Section One is written in a chronological fashion, and covers, as far as I am able to ascertain, everything that Dr Goh wrote before winning the Kreta Ayer seat for the first time in 1959. The same procedure could not be used for Section Two. His thinking and his achievements were too interlocked throughout the coming years for them to be represented chronologically. I therefore chose a thematic approach for the period after Singapore's gaining of self-government. What I finally ended up with was a chapter each on economics, finance, defence, education, the human element and China. Admittedly, these extended beyond the concerns of the three portfolios that he

was officially in charge of at different times in his life; and acts poignantly as testament to the holistic and practical frame of mind that he possessed.

The result is what is best called an intellectual biography. The narrative weaves selected works by Dr Goh with historical and biographical details in an attempt to do justice to the richness of his thinking and in acknowledgement of the fact that his achievements can only be fully appreciated alongside the imperatives he experienced.

For the period before 1959, the biographical element is stronger than the intellectual, and provides the reader with an account of his early thinking. In Section Two, the latter element is definitely more prominent.

No doubt, as in all of us, his thinking evolved over time. However, what is surprising is how consistent his basic ideas seemed. The primacy of economics in politics was already clear to him as a boy, as was the importance of hard work and determination. He threw himself into his times, as it were. Only after he retired did he have time for himself; but even then his academic interests were about what we may call “economic engineering”.

I wish I could mention in a word what the essence of his thinking was. What “-ism” would suffice? Socialism? Elitism? Statism? Modern Neo-Confucianism? Asian Nationalism? Utilitarianism? Economism? Pragmatism?

To all, I have to answer both “Yes” and “No”. He did show affinity to all these approaches, some more than others, but his basic tendency was always “achievement-orientated”. Economism does connote a practical approach, but only if understood in a sense broader than mere concern with money matters. Pragmatism describes his thinking as well. Sun Zi, the militarist he admired most, was definitely a pragmatist. But I fear the term is useful by

virtue of its vague and accommodative nature. Pragmatism is about means, not ends.

Perhaps it is because we are dealing with someone who lived in a time when ideologies reigned that we try to summarize his thoughts and actions. That is really not a fruitful undertaking. In lieu of a label — in lieu of ideology — he thought in informed and practical terms. He succeeded in what he set out to do, and he made Singapore succeed.

Dr Goh wished for results, the foremost of which was economic growth. For that to occur, national stability and security was imperative, and that required shrewd institutional manipulation of global capitalism and judicious control over macro-economic factors. Since time was a luxury new states do not have, state participation in economic growth was vital, and in conjunction with market capitalism if policies were to be effective. Competition forces people to excel, which meant that welfare measures had to be eyed with suspicion, and traditional economic mindsets had to be transformed. After Singapore had gained stability and security, and the national economic and state finances had found solidity, the government shifted its attention to education and moral upbringing. In the case of Dr Goh and in Singapore policies in general, we witness a strong appreciation of Confucianism by the late 1970s which went beyond the interest in ancient generals like Sun Zi and Wu Qi. The search for an integrated way of thought that would encourage economic competitiveness, enhance patriotism and develop high-minded and cultivated citizens pointed towards an old solution. Confucianism — or at least Legalist Confucianism — became an attraction, not only for its capacity to strengthen the country, but also for its ability to provide moral guidance as well.

In a profound sense, therefore, the chapters in Section Two chart major aspects of nation building in Singapore considered as

a former English colony in Asia with a Chinese-majority. The apparent holism that we end up with is thus the sum of the stages telescoped in time, through which the country — and Dr Goh — travelled over a half century.

Ooi Kee Beng
ISEAS, Singapore
14 June 2010

