

WEE KIM WEE

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WEE KIM WEE

PRESIDENT, DIPLOMAT, JOURNALIST
AND A TRUE SINGAPOREAN

CHEONG SUK-WAI

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“He was a true Singaporean, who crossed boundaries effortlessly, reaching out to and befriending persons of every creed and colour, the powerful and the ordinary, the rich and the poor, the able and infirm.”

*Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong
in his eulogy for Dr Wee Kim Wee, 6 May 2005*

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Foreword

The first President of Singapore was a Malay. The second President was a Eurasian. The third President was an Indian. When the third President resigned, under a cloud of controversy, the Government set about looking for a suitable person to be the fourth President. It was the then Foreign Minister, S. Rajaratnam, who put forward the name of Wee Kim Wee.

Who was Wee Kim Wee?

Wee Kim Wee was born into a Peranakan family in Singapore in 1915. When Kim Wee was six years old, his father, Wee Choon Lay, went blind after an unsuccessful operation in Bandung, Indonesia. Two years later, when Kim Wee was eight years old, his father died of cancer. This plunged the family into poverty.

Kim Wee's mother, Chua Hay Luan, worked at many jobs and made many sacrifices in order to bring up her five children. Kim Wee was a bright boy and managed to gain admission to the prestigious school, Raffles Institution. However, after completing only one year, his mother told him to leave school and look for a job. He was only fourteen years old.

He started work at the *Straits Times* as a clerk in the circulation department. He worked there for eleven years before he was offered a job by the American news agency, United Press. When Singapore was occupied by the Japanese, he managed to find work with the Sembawang Naval Base. After the war, he returned to work for the United Press International. He became a journalist as a result.

In 1959, he was recruited by the *Straits Times*. He became famous for his reporting on the Malaysian peacekeeping force in the Congo and his

interview with General Suharto. He was promoted to a managerial position and occupied a hot seat. He had to carry out the instructions of his white bosses in Kuala Lumpur against the aspirations of the local employees. He bore the brunt of the fury of the PAP government against the newspaper. In 1973, he suffered a minor stroke and decided to leave the newspaper. He was fifty-seven years old.

When Mr Rajaratnam heard the news, he persuaded him to embark on a new career as a diplomat. He served two terms as Singapore's High Commissioner to Malaysia and one term as Singapore's Ambassador to Japan and South Korea. His enormous success in Kuala Lumpur and Tokyo was due partly to the culinary prowess of his wife, Koh Sok Hiong. Although Chinese-educated, she became a great Peranakan chef. She must have cooked hundreds of meals for their Malaysian and Japanese guests. This was *makan* diplomacy at its best.

He decided to resign and go into retirement. However, the government had other plans for him. On his return from Tokyo, he was appointed the Chairman of the Singapore Broadcasting Corporation. A year later, he was appointed the fourth President of Singapore.

What made Wee Kim Wee so successful in all his undertakings? He was intelligent, hard-working, honest, humble, kind and dependable. He had mastered the art of making friends. He had a huge network of friends all over the world. He kept in touch with them by writing to them. When he was the President, he would, without publicity, invite ordinary Singaporeans to have coffee with him in the morning or tea in the afternoon. The people of Singapore loved him, and he was truly the People's President.

Wee Kim Wee's granddaughter, Lim Hui Min, described her grandfather's teaching as follows: "Live your life to the full, stand by your friends, cherish your families. Listen to everyone with an open mind and welcome those who cross your path with an open heart."

The story of Wee Kim Wee is an inspiration to Singaporeans. You may be born poor but you can break out of the poverty trap. You may have little formal education but it need not prevent you from being "educated".

You may start with a humble job but excel in your job and you will be talent-spotted. Starting as a lowly clerk at the age of fourteen, Wee Kim Wee rose to become Singapore's much-loved fourth President.

*Tommy Koh
Ambassador-at-Large
Ministry of Foreign Affairs
Singapore*

Acknowledgements

I was privileged to meet Dr Wee Kim Wee in person only once, in July 1993. At the time, he was in his eighth and final year as the President of the Republic of Singapore. He and his wife Koh Sok Hiong were guests at Rag 'n' Flag Day on the campus of my university.

There, on a particularly scorching morning, the Wees sat for almost an hour, looking on as my friends and I performed songs I had written for the occasion. Through it all, President Wee gave himself over wholly to the music, tapping his foot and thigh, and inclining his head to and fro to the rhythms. His reception made my day but that brief encounter left me none the wiser as to what he was like, or how he thought about things.

The following people have done much to enlighten me since as to why, almost twenty years after his passing, Dr Wee and all that he stood for matter more than ever. If you enjoy this book, that is largely thanks to them. If you have, however, any qualms about how everything has been written, I alone have to answer for that.

My deep gratitude, then, goes to:

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Cheong Suk-Wai

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