

CHAPTER ONE

Of the People, By the People, For the People

He was a true Singaporean, who crossed boundaries effortlessly, reaching out and befriending persons of every creed and colour.

*Lee Hsien Loong, Singapore's third prime minister,
on the Republic's fourth president, Wee Kim Wee¹*

On the first day of Hari Raya Aidil Fitri in early March 1995, two gentlemen could be seen darting about Kranji State Cemetery, the burial ground for Singaporean heads of state.² The elder of the two was Wee Kim Wee, the fourth President of the Republic of Singapore, who was there in search of the final resting place of his dear friend Yusof Ishak, who had been Singapore's first head of state.³ With him was Vincent Wong, Kim Wee's right-hand man, clutching a bouquet of Kim Wee's favourite red carnations for the latter to lay at Yusof's grave—if they could locate it.

While that visit was not their first to this cemetery, a sprawling green carpet about half the size of a football field, Yusof's tomb was now hidden from view by a tall hedge that encircled it. The two gentlemen eventually found it, at the most north-easterly end of the graveyard. There was, in fact, only one other head of state resting there, namely Singapore's second president Dr Benjamin Sheares, who lay at its most south-easterly end. Shaking his head at what he saw, Kim Wee sighed and told Vincent, “When I die, I don't want to be buried here. It's very lonely.”

That afternoon, Kim Wee had another ten years before he was to meet his Maker.

Circulating Like A Dodgem

Kim Wee could not bear being left alone as he had long been bereft of his immediate family. Most of his immediate kin had died young; he lost both his parents before the age of twenty and by the time he was seventy, had outlived his four siblings.⁴ They had all doted on him, as had his teachers, and so he grew up wanting always to be surrounded by such affection. As it was, he and his wife Koh Sok Hiong chose to have a large family, seven children in all. When their offspring had grown up and flown the coop, Kim Wee took to amassing a veritable menagerie of assorted pets, from dogs and fish to chickens and terrapins. He also took great care to keep in touch with the thousands of friends that he had made for life. In his retirement, not a day went by when Kim Wee did not shoot off fifty or so letters to his pals⁵ in every corner of the Earth. He was in his element every Chinese New Year when he threw open his house to more than 500 well-wishers, tycoons and taxi drivers alike. He would, as he put it, be “circulating like a dodgem”⁶ to catch up with them as they relished Sok Hiong’s superb cooking.

Kim Wee lived a decade short of 100 years. In that time, he went from cadging rides on bullock carts to school, to riding Singapore’s first Mass Rapid Transit train on 7 November 1987. As a teenager, he licked stamps at the *Straits Times* (ST) to bulk-mail the daily to subscribers. By 1993, when he retired from the presidency, he had taken to emailing friends and writing his memoirs on his own desktop computer.

Between the 1950s and the 1960s, he sang *God Save The Queen*, only to have that same queen pin one of her country’s highest civilian honours⁷ on his chest on 9 October 1989, aboard her yacht, the *Britannia*, no less. His improbable rise and rise through life, studded as it was with historic encounters and travels to every continent except South America and Antarctica,⁸ approximated the resolve and struggles for social parity by Nelson Mandela, the first indigenous president of South Africa, to whom Kim Wee has been likened.⁹

Kim Wee always had his wits about him. He honed that from enduring a hardscrabble boyhood that obliged him to drop out of school at the age

of fourteen.¹⁰ He then languished as a clerk at ST for eleven years¹¹ till he landed in mid-1941 the rare opportunity of setting up the Singapore office of the American news agency United Press Associations (later known as United Press International).¹² Even the intervening Japanese Occupation could not stop his personal ascent from then on. Having yearned to be a lawyer, he wound up an accidental journalist, and then an accidental diplomat. His unsullied track records in these fields led to him being appointed the fourth President of the Republic of Singapore on 1 September 1985. He was not a household name then,¹³ but Singaporeans grew to love and admire him so deeply¹⁴ that the Government of Singapore extended his term for a further four years, just after he had major surgery for two forms of cancer.

The golden thread running through Kim Wee's many accomplishments is that he was Mr Fixit. He was the genial, can-do man whose name sprang to mind whenever one needed a delicate touch to resolve or redeem seemingly intractable situations. In Kim Wee's case, that included quelling ructions with Malaysia; burnishing the tarnished image of the presidency and restoring trust in that high office; forging balanced ties with China; investigating injustice at the highest levels for friends and colleagues—or simply preventing ST, Singapore's leading daily, from shutting down for good. As an official of the Singapore Press Club put it in January 1996, "The ST might not have survived Singapore's transition from colony to republic if not for Wee Kim Wee."¹⁵

Kim Wee was a born organiser and a natural at rallying others to do their bit for the greater good. Without him, Singapore and what was then Malaya would have struggled for decades to produce world champions in badminton. Thanks to Kim Wee's concerted drives to develop and promote the sport, by 1949, Malaya had its first world champion in Wong Peng Soon, the first Asian to win the All-England Open title.¹⁶

Whether he was on the badminton circuit or in newsrooms, Kim Wee went all in to guide others to glory. He himself was content to stay behind the scenes, doing his best work when he was unobtrusive. He did all this at great personal cost, being a largely absent husband and father, albeit one with a great sense of fun. So, he became more of a

dear friend to his children than a patriarch.¹⁷ He was, however, a stern father figure¹⁸ in ST’s newsroom in Singapore, spending so much of his waking moments there that he came to coach and mentor his colleagues as if they were family.

At United Press Associations as well as at ST, Kim Wee’s efforts to manage his oft-unruly colleagues and complex publishing operations on a shoestring for thirty-four years wore his heart out such that his doctor warned him that he would die if he did not change course soon enough.¹⁹

He was, in the words of founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, so “committed to Singapore”²⁰ that, despite his weakened heart, he agreed to help the nation calm choppy waters with Malaysia. He did such sterling work in restoring trust with the Malaysians that the government then sent him to Tokyo to befriend the then standoffish Japanese.

A Man of Contradictions

For all his accomplishments, Kim Wee had more than his fair share of failings, largely because he was a man of contradictions.

He was often too hard on himself, sometimes unreasonably so, because he was the archetypal tender heart, a diehard romantic and sentimentalist who took great pains to achieve desired ideals. He burned through all his days off in the field,²¹ gathering useful information in Singapore’s best interests. He brought in big business for his employers, even though they very rarely reciprocated by promoting him.²² As President, he insisted on writing his own speeches and answering the letters he received.²³ In his dotage, he and Vincent would often recce event venues in advance, to ensure they would be there on time eventually.²⁴ And, at the age of eighty-eight and after universally beloved as “the People’s President”, he mused: “Making friends is an art. I am a novice in this.”²⁵

Yet, despite struggling to sustain the highest moral standards, he shied away from taking risks, especially when it came to his finances. He had no head for business or, as he put it, “the Chinaman’s courage to go for broke”.²⁶ And he took years to recover from a rotten Australian investment, which he said had him “falling to earth like a ripe jackfruit”.²⁷

He was a great listener, open to all views and ever-present to soothe anyone's grievances. But he was stubborn, exceedingly so, and so once he was persuaded of something, it was nigh impossible to change his opinion, however mistaken he might actually be. "He had an inner core of toughness," said Ambassador-at-Large Tommy Koh who, try as he might, could never convince Kim Wee to see the virtues of the United Nations or the failings of Mikhail Gorbachev, whom Kim Wee admired greatly because, to his mind, Mr Gorbachev had freed an oppressed peoples by disbanding the communist bloc known as the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.²⁸ Kim Wee's grandson Colin Wee said the key to understanding why his grandfather had such a mind of his own was that he actually "did not like bothering anyone". Kim Wee once averred that he did not even want to bother God with his problems.²⁹

There were other curious contradictions about him.

Kim Wee and his wife were so frugal, they would scrimp by freezing mushroom stalks to make soup and Sok Hiong sewed all her children's clothes, including their underwear.³⁰ Kim Wee even resisted making a will for years because he thought it would cost a lot of money to draw up.³¹ Yet he was always on the lookout for anyone who might need help, even if it meant he would have to spend money to render assistance. Once, on hearing that a neighbour was scrubbing her hands raw to launder bed linen, he bought her a washing machine.³² He bought at least one of his old friends, who lived alone, his daily meals.³³ He would also buy papaya and leftover chicken rice, to lay out for the birds that flitted about his neighbourhood.³⁴ His daughter Eng Hwa said: "Often, he would quietly visit and bring along money, oil, sugar and rice to people known to him, who were in dire straits—to keep their bodies and souls together and simply to let them know that he cared."³⁵

And as much as he liked surrounding himself with friends and family, he guarded his thoughts so well that they never quite knew what his real feelings were on any matter. "I am one who normally keeps my private inner thoughts to myself,"³⁶ he once said, explaining why he rarely put in a good word for his wife in public. He had, perhaps, sound reasons for that because when he let rip his views occasionally, they could jar with

the benign image most had of him. For instance, welcoming the Chinese Year of the Tiger in 1998, he mused to his old friend Jamshed Fozdar: “Of late, I have come to the conclusion that tigers and other animals are much less cruel than *homo sapiens*. Simply put, a tiger does not plot or scheme or murder. It only goes into action in self-defence when it felt its very life was threatened.”

“A tiger is not capable of indulging in cruel things like backstabbing. But human beings are not only capable but in fact commit these heinous crimes wantonly and brutally.”³⁷

In person, Kim Wee appeared placid but he actually had a very bad temper,³⁸ that was par for the course as he was also a very impatient man, one with thoughts dancing about in his mind all the time.³⁹ He was all about finding solutions, not carping about concerns, especially not publicly.

He Was Like Water

In keeping with his guarded approach to sharing his private thoughts, Kim Wee tended to express his philosophy of life in what were decidedly humdrum platitudes. When asked how people could best get along, he would say: “Be a sport, and be good at sports.”⁴⁰ As for taking risks, he was fond of saying, “You win some, you lose some.”⁴¹ Getting on with others was all a matter of “give and take”.⁴² And what of his secret to a good life? “Do not fight for power. Do not be greedy. Serve the community.”⁴³ Also: “Work hard”, a principle which the incorrigible workaholic held so dear that he devoted an entire chapter to it in his 2004 memoir, *Glimpses and Reflections*.⁴⁴ Then again, even his closest friends took pains to say that while Kim Wee was an intelligent man, he was not everyone’s idea of an intellectual.⁴⁵ His brilliance had been honed in the streets, among the rough-and-tough in hardscrabble potholes of Singapore. He was, as his fifth child Wee Eng Hwa put it, a “kampung kid at heart”,⁴⁶ retaining a sweet, child-like innocence in his outlook on, and approach to, much of life.

Kim Wee was so humble, agreeable and consequently a threat to no one, he was sometimes regarded as a figure of mirth by even his good

friends. One regarded as “disgraceful”⁴⁷ his 2004 memoir *Glimpses and Reflections*—which dwelt on pedestrian topics such as service standards, dress codes and punctuality. Another reduced his responsibilities at ST to “buying cartoons” for the newspaper—only half in jest.⁴⁸ A third disparaged Kim Wee as a mouse, for not daring to defy his Caucasian bosses on behalf of his ill-treated colleagues.⁴⁹ A fourth was sure that while he was friendly to all and sundry, he might perhaps not always be relied on to go to bat for others.⁵⁰ The last critic must have been put in his place when, in 1988, Kim Wee requested that the government investigate whether or not Kim Wee’s friend, hotshot banker Allan Ng Poh Meng, was being unfairly prosecuted for insider trading.⁵¹ At the time, Kim Wee was serving his first term as Singapore’s fourth head of state. Then, in a statement in Parliament the following year, Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew announced that the investigation had concluded with nothing to substantiate Allan’s allegation.⁵² But as Kim Wee’s close friend Tommy Koh pointed out, Kim Wee was willing to put his own name on the line to help a friend if he believed the latter’s grievance was valid.⁵³

Anyone is entitled to his or her opinion, but these friends cannot have known Kim Wee that well, given how dim their views were of him and his efforts. But Kim Wee must have known only too well what people such as them were saying behind his back. As he once intoned: “There is nothing wrong and cheap about behaving modestly and humbly.”⁵⁴

But however others treated him, he was consistent in his approach to everyone. “If you sat down with him in the Istana and he was wearing a suit, you would enjoy his presence,” said Colin. “Similarly, when he was at home in his singlet and shorts, he was the same guy. And that was something really lovely about him.”⁵⁵ Kim Wee’s fellow journalist Said Zahari certainly thought so. Once, while visiting imprisoned political detainees as a Justice of the Peace, Kim Wee came upon Said in his cell. “Kim Wee not only asked for my cell door to be opened, but came in and shook my hand,” recalled Said in his 2007 memoir, *The Long Nightmare*. “I asked him to sit beside me on the prison bed. For about 10 minutes, we talked about old times.”⁵⁶ So it was that Kim Wee was, first and foremost, a friend and a humanitarian.

For all his constancy, Kim Wee was sometimes known to be incautious, striking out even in the riskiest of situations, such as by risking torture to take in an illicit radio broadcast,⁵⁷ or putting his money in ventures for which he was ill-suited to make.⁵⁸ Then again, as he liked to say, one should not succumb to stress but cut loose as the purpose of life was not merely to “slave, sacrifice and suffer”⁵⁹—although that phrase just about sums up his lot for much of his eighty-nine years.

Being resigned to a lifetime of hard graft, he developed a way of coping by convincing himself that being content with one’s lot was the true secret to success.⁶⁰ This view jarred, of course, with exhortations by the government of the day for Singaporeans to aspire and strive to be No. 1 in all endeavours. In fact, Kim Wee saw only too clearly that his prize of contentment would not sit well in Singapore society, notorious as it is for being *kiasu* (Hokkien for “fear of losing out to others”), and so was careful about waxing publicly about being content.⁶¹

How, then, did a man so outwardly meek and mild-mannered surmount it all, from indigence to war and from inordinate work stresses to grave illnesses? His good friend Christina Cheang said he approached life’s most forbidding obstacles as if he were water. As she put it: “His kind of intelligence was like water—quiet, enduring, eternal. He did not have to be on a soapbox, loudly protesting or proclaiming.”

“And his was not smartness; it was quietly spoken wisdom.”⁶²

That being said, Christina added that the flip side to Kim Wee’s flow was that he could be quite a “dreamer”.⁶³ He could be decisive when the occasion called for it, but as he brimmed with the milk of human kindness, he would usually refrain from dealing anybody a killer blow, as it were.⁶⁴

It must be said that if one’s image of a true Singaporean is the old saw of a materialistic, hard-nosed and business-minded person, Kim Wee would not pass muster.

But if one considers a true Singaporean to be one who always gives his best to others; never gives up; does everything in Singapore’s best interests; and, above all, embraces all and sundry with regard and kindness, no matter if they are wearing a crown and atop a throne, or are clad in a T-shirt, shorts and slippers.⁶⁵

Always loving and never covetous, his nobility may seem quaint in this age, when the urge is more pressing than ever to grab, to hurtle and to judge others. But Kim Wee still stands out today for being the quintessential self-made man, one who was elevated to Singapore's highest political office by remaining resolutely himself, never compromising his principles, embracing everyone on their own terms and doing his utmost to right moral wrongs in his quiet, gentle and unflinching way.

This, then, is his story.

NOTES

1. Lee Hsien Loong, eulogy for Dr Wee Kim Wee, delivered at Mandai Crematorium and Columbarium on 6 May 2005 (<https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/speeches/view-html?filename=2005050601.htm>).
2. From the author's interview with Kim Wee's right-hand man Vincent Wong on 7 June 2018.
3. *Ibid.*
4. Kim Wee's last surviving brother, Joseph Wee Kim Choon, died on 18 May 1983. Kim Wee, who was then Singapore's ambassador to Japan and South Korea, took leave to spend time with his only surviving brother in his final weeks. Following Kim Choon's death, Kim Wee was so distraught that he cut short his tour of duty in Tokyo by half a year.
5. Philip Lee, "I Want to Get Down to the People", *Straits Times*, 28 August 1985, p. 9.
6. From an email by Kim Wee to his good friend Jamshed Khodadar Fozdar dated 9 March 2002. Jamshed and his wife Parvati later donated their collection of letters and emails between them and Kim Wee from 1992 till 2005 to the National Library Board of Singapore. The full collection is available for downloading from the website BookSG (<http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg>) under the heading "Letters from President Wee Kim Wee to the Fozdars".
7. Wee Eng Hwa, *Cooking for the President: Reflections and Recipes of Mrs Wee Kim Wee*, 3rd ed. (Wee Eng Hwa, 2022), p. 46. Queen Elizabeth II bestowed on Kim Wee the Knight Grand Cross of the Most Honourable Order of the Bath, as she had on his predecessor Dr Benjamin Sheares and on his successor Dr Tony Tan. Past recipients of this honorary knighthood, which does not carry the title "Sir", include United States presidents Dwight D. Eisenhower and George H.W. Bush, French presidents Francois Mitterrand, Jacques Chirac and Francois Hollande, and Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah of Brunei.

See <http://en.m.wikipedia.org> under the entry “Honorary Knights Grand Cross of the Order of the Bath”.

8. Wee Kim Wee, *Glimpses and Reflections* (Landmark Books, 2004), pp. 149–50.
9. From the author’s interview with Ambassador-at-Large Tommy Koh in June 2019.
10. Wee Eng Hwa, *Cooking for the President*, p. 5.
11. Ibid., p. 18.
12. Ibid.
13. See the lead-in “Wee Kim Wee? Who’s He?” to the article by Anonymous, “A Self-made Man”, *Business Times*, 28 August 1985, p. 2.
14. Madam Tay Choon Keng, letter to the *Straits Times* Forum with the headline “President Wee has my fullest support”, *Straits Times*, 11 September 1989, p. 24.
15. Anonymous, “Former President Wee Receives Prestigious Journalism Award”, *Sunday Times*, 28 January 1996, p. 1.
16. Wee Eng Hwa, *Cooking for the President*, p. 82. In 1949, Malaya was chosen to host the Thomas Cup, then the world’s most prestigious badminton tournament. The badminton associations of Malaya and Singapore knew Kim Wee as being a great organiser, and appointed him to the organising committee for the Cup, as well as Director of Training for Malaya and Singapore’s eventually victorious squad. The squad’s triumph put Malaya and Singapore on the world’s badminton map and from then on, Kim Wee was a household name among badminton fans on both sides of the Causeway.
17. Clarence Chang, “His Kids Never Spoke to Him in Fear”, *Straits Times*, 3 May 2005, p. H5.
18. Wee Eng Hwa, *Cooking for the President* p. 84 as well as from the author’s interviews with Kim Wee’s friends and ex-colleagues at the *Straits Times*, namely Leslie Fong Yin Leong on 5 August 2019 and Christina Cheang on 13 May 2021.
19. Cheong Yip Seng, *OB Markers: My Straits Times Story* (Straits Times Press, 2013), p. 144.
20. Lee Kuan Yew, speech by the Prime Minister in moving the motion on the election of Mr Wee Kim Wee as President of the Republic of Singapore on 30 August 1985 in Parliament (Singapore Government Press Release lky/1985/lky0830.doc via Archives Online at <https://www.nas.gov.sg>).
21. Wee Kim Wee, *Glimpses and Reflections*, p. 59.
22. From the oral history of Ambrose Anthony Khaw Tai Wah, National Archives of Singapore (NAS) Accession Number 003830 Reel 47, p. 892.

23. Joyce Koh, “Former President Wee Dies, 89”, *Straits Times*, 3 May 2005, p. 1.
24. From the author’s interview with Vincent Wong, 7 June 2018.
25. Wee Kim Wee, *Glimpses and Reflections*, pp. 119–20.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 51.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 107.
28. From the author’s interview with Tommy Koh, June 2019.
29. Wee Kim Wee, *Glimpses and Reflections*, p. 164.
30. Wee Eng Hwa, *Cooking for the President*, p. 24.
31. Wee Kim Wee, *Glimpses and Reflections*, p. 59.
32. From the author’s interview with Kim Wee’s fifth child, Wee Eng Hwa, on 28 October 2019.
33. Peh Shing Huei, “A Soulmate to His Wife—And a Smashing Friend to All”, *Straits Times*, 3 May 2005, p. H4.
34. Irene Ng, “I Believe in Comfort … Not Luxury”, *New Paper*, 16 August 1993, pp. 26–27.
35. From the author’s interview with Wee Eng Hwa, 28 October 2019. See also the speech by Wee Eng Hwa at the launch of the Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information, 5 December 2006, p. 6, <https://www3.ntu.edu.sg>
36. Irene Ng, “Rare, Heartfelt Praise for Wife”, *New Paper*, 13 April 1996, p. 6.
37. From a letter by Kim Wee to Jamshed Fozdar dated 3 February 1998. See note 6 above.
38. Per interviews with Kim Wee’s former personal assistant Edith Tay on 26 January 2019 and with Kim Wee’s grandson Colin Wee on 12 July 2019.
39. His granddaughter Lim Hui Min, whose mother Hong Neo had a “meeting of minds” with Kim Wee, once said that Kim Wee told her that he “had two million things on his mind”, being one who “has filled the unforgiving minute with 60 seconds of distance run”. From Lim Hui Min’s eulogy for Kim Wee, delivered on 6 May 2005 at Mandai Crematorium and Columbarium.
40. Wee Kim Wee, *Glimpses and Reflections*, p. 39.
41. *Ibid.*, p. 60.
42. *Ibid.*
43. Wee Eng Hwa, *Cooking for the President*, p. 93.
44. Wee Kim Wee, *Glimpses and Reflections*, pp. 25–27. Wee Kim Wee scripted a collection of his reminiscences and anecdotes of his life, including his childhood, family life and career, into this book.
45. From the author’s interviews with Peter H.L. Lim in April 2019 and with Christina Cheang on 13 May 2021.

46. From the author's interview with Wee Eng Hwa on 13 April 2019.
47. From the author's interviews with Peter H.L. Lim in April 2019.
48. From the oral history of Ambrose Anthony Khaw Tai Wah, National Archives of Singapore (NAS) Accession Number 003830, Reel 39, p. 747 and then again at Reel 40, p. 773.
49. Clement Mesenas, *The Last Great Strike* (Marshall Cavendish Editions, 2013), p. 66.
50. From the oral history of Professor Arthur Lim Siew Ming, NAS Accession Number E000004 Reel 2, p. 7.
51. From the author's interview with Tommy Koh in June 2019.
52. After a seventy-seven-day trial in the Magistrates' Court in 1989, Allan Ng Poh Meng pleaded guilty to charges of insider trading and on 16 September 1989, was convicted and sentenced to twelve months in prison. This sentence was later suspended pending his appeal. Allan was successful on appeal in 1991, with the appeal judge setting aside his jail sentence and imposing a fine of S\$50,000 on him instead. It should be said, however, that Kim Wee would have weighed carefully the merits of Allan's allegations before requesting that the government investigate the likelihood of an unjust prosecution of Allan. As it was, Allan's ensuing seventy-seven-day trial was the longest in Singapore history at the time. See Lee Kuan Yew, Statement by the Prime Minister in Parliament on 27 January 1988 concerning the investigations leading to the prosecution of Mr Allan Ng and his allegations against Mr Tan Boon Teik, the Attorney-General of Singapore (Singapore Government Press Release 34/JAN/02-1/88/01/27).
53. From the author's interview with Tommy Koh in June 2019.
54. From the author's interview with Vincent Wong, 7 June 2018.
55. Per interviews with Colin Wee, 12 July 2019.
56. Said Zahari, *The Long Nightmare: My 17 Years as a Political Prisoner* (Utusan Publications & Distributors, 2007), pp. 151–52.
57. Wee Kim Wee, *Glimpses and Reflections*, p. 35.
58. Ibid., p. 104.
59. Ibid., p. 108.
60. Ibid., p. 53.
61. Ibid., p. 52.
62. From the author's interviews with Christina Cheang, 13 May 2021.
63. Ibid.
64. Ibid.
65. From the author's interview with Vincent Wong, 7 June 2018. Vincent recalled that when Kim Wee was President of Singapore, a taxi driver who had been

invited to take tea with Kim Wee there arrived at the Istana gates in slippers. Kim Wee stopped the Istana guards from sending the cabby away, saying that nobody needed to dress just to meet him even if he, Kim Wee, was the President of the Republic of Singapore.