

*Lee Kuan Yew: The Beliefs Behind the Man*. By Michael D. Barr. Nordic Institute of Asian Studies Monograph Series no. 85. Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 2000. 273 pp.

Political scientist Michael Keren has identified a pattern in political biographies in emerging nation-states. Early hagiographic accounts of “mythological leaders [who] played an important role in the struggle for independence” are replaced with introspective biographies which represent “the abandonment of that myth”, and finally with a plurality of biographies advocating different, competing interpretations. Biographical accounts of Singapore’s present Senior Minister have tended to stake out one of the first two of Keren’s positions. Alex Josey’s much-revised *Lee Kuan Yew: The Crucial Years*, Han Fook Kwang, Warren Fernandez, and Sumiko Tan’s *Lee Kuan Yew: The Man and His Ideas* (1998) and, indeed, the two volumes of Lee’s own memoirs, are all concerned to build a national mythology. In contrast, T.J.S. George’s *Lee Kuan Yew’s Singapore* (1973) and James Minchin’s *No Man Is an Island* (1986) cast a sceptical eye on elements of this national narrative. They are now joined by Michael D. Barr’s *Lee Kuan Yew: The Beliefs Behind the Man*, which, despite its author’s eschewing the description “biography”, clearly deploys biographical material centrally to reconstruct an intellectual history of the development of Lee’s thought and its application to the governance of Singapore. In doing so, Barr implicitly raises important questions about the limits of biography in the analysis of history, historiography, and nation formation.

After a brief introduction to both Lee’s career and Singapore’s development as a first chapter, Barr’s study continues with a short outline of Lee’s life. Even here there is some tension in the subject matter: an account of Lee’s political career moves seamlessly into actions taken by the government of the People’s Action Party (PAP) after Lee had stepped down from the “prime ministership” in 1990, and only then returns to Lee’s actions in retirement. The preceding three chapters examine aspects of Lee’s thought — progressivism, élitism, “cultural evolutionism” — while four concluding chapters attempt to synthesize these elements in examining Lee’s attitude to race and political governance, to evalu-

ate their effect upon the growth of a Singaporean polity, and finally to judge “the reasonableness of his world view” (p. 6). The effect of retracing the genealogy of single concepts throughout Lee’s life in successive chapters makes the book rather recursive in structure, although there is a broad movement in emphasis from the early to late Lee as *Lee Kuan Yew: The Beliefs Behind the Man* progresses.

Barr’s introduction shows awareness that his “approach” is “slightly unusual”. The study is not a political biography in that little archival material has been consulted. Its main primary sources are Lee’s own published speeches, interviews, and press statements (which Barr has studied exhaustively) and a series of interviews with both members of the “old guard” such as Goh Keng Swee and Eddie Barker and Lee’s contemporaries at Raffles Institution, Raffles College, and Cambridge. Such material seems inviting in discussing issues such as Lee’s self-construction and self-fashioning, but Barr is less concerned with this than attempting to discover the “essence” of Lee’s thought. In doing so, he adopts a teleological strategy, in which the pragmatic manifestation and evolution of concepts in the speeches is first plotted. These are then related to political and social theories which Lee encountered, primarily in his education at Raffles Institution, Raffles College, and London and Cambridge Universities. Lee’s own interpretation and application of these theories is, in turn, seen as being driven by formative experiences in early childhood.

Barr’s approach does produce genuine insights. The interviews themselves introduce important new perspectives from both central actors, such as Goh Keng Swee, and minor players. An interview with Velauthar Ambiavagar, a school teacher at Raffles Institution in the 1930s, for instance, is extremely useful in exploring the limits of liberalism, and institutional racism at Raffles Institution under the principalship of D.W. McLeod (p. 103). Barr’s careful reading of Lee’s speeches also produces significant results, as in his discussion of the profound influence of British social theorist Arnold Toynbee on Lee’s thought and actions in the early years of government.

However, the act of using biography to do the work of historical, social cultural analysis requires considerable conceptual and theoretical

introspection. Biography, at its best, involves the speculative reconstruction of an inner psychic life, and examination of authorial mediation in biography can make us aware of the constructed nature of all historical texts. However, such interdisciplinary introspection is not present in *Lee Kuan Yew: The Ideas Behind the Man*, and the study thus fails to satisfy a variety of audiences. Historians will be disappointed by the over-reliance on interviews, anecdotes, and speculation regarding Lee's inner life (it seems implausible, for instance, that events such as Lee losing a mock mayoral election at Raffles Institution laid the seeds for his fear of "opportunists"), and by niggling inaccuracies (Barr quotes James Minchin as writing that Tan Chong Chew was Lee's mother's "special friend" during the Japanese occupation (p. 100), but Minchin does not use these words). At the same time, readers anticipating a Strachean biography will be disappointed. While insightful and revealing anecdotes are certainly the most entertaining element of the book, it does not have the stylistic flair of the best popular biography, and Barr's impressive marshalling of references indicates that it is intended for a different audience. Finally, researchers in cultural studies, like myself, will be disappointed by Barr's lack of a theoretical apparatus which would enable him to interrogate the Gramscian common sense of much of the book. Barr concludes his study, for example, by emphasizing Lee's primordial Chineseness, and seeing his project in Singapore as the creation of a Confucian state. To return to *Lunyu* to analyse Singapore without a context, however, is as sensible as viewing the United States as an Athenian democracy (Classical Greek, we should remember, only narrowly missed being made the official language of the American Republic in the late eighteenth century). In making a final judgment on Lee, then, Barr ignores the way that Confucianism has become rephrased and contested in a century of Chinese modernity, and indeed the way in which the Nanyang Chinese identity has been transformed, in Wang Gungwu's words, by the many "mirrors" of the diaspora.

Many of these difficulties, indeed, might have been remedied by engagement with four significant recent Singaporean publications. The first of these is Lee's own memoirs, published in two volumes, *The Singapore Story: Memoirs of Lee Kuan Yew* (1998) and *From Third World*

*to First* (2000). Barr gives the first of these volumes a few desultory references which seem belated appendages to an argument largely based on Lee's published speeches. His concern with both the unconscious and conscious elements of Lee's ideological position would surely have been enriched by giving Lee's own summary and evaluation of his life and the nation the same careful attention he gives speeches which were often written for immediate political expediency. The careful documentation of archival sources offered by Albert Lau's *A Moment of Anguish* (1998) would, in a parallel manner, have supplemented Barr's account of Lee's role in the separation from Malaysia, which is supported in *Lee Kuan Yew: The Beliefs Behind the Man* through a series of interviews conducted with the PAP's "old guard" in the 1990s. Barr is right that many of Lee's interpretations of his actions are retrospective and thus potentially inaccurate, but the same is surely true of the anecdotes recounted by his own and Melanie Chew's interviewees: the interviews provide a useful supplement to other accounts of, but not definitive statements on, events four decades previously.

Lam Peng Er and Kevin Tan's edited collection on the old guard, *Lee's Lieutenants* (1999), would have provided Barr with a much richer account of their relationships with Lee, and a wealth of historical reference. Finally, Nirmala PuruShotam's *Negotiating Language, Constructing Race: Disciplining Difference in Singapore* (1998) provides a complex and nuanced account of the formation of racialized subjectivities in Singapore through such mechanisms as the bilingual education programme. After reading it, Barr would find it difficult to maintain that Lee's whole life has been governed by a Chinese cultural element "which ... led him instinctively to act upon traditional Chinese precepts" (p. 222). In not responding to these key texts, possibly because of the time at which the original doctoral research was done, *Lee Kuan Yew: The Beliefs Behind the Man* seems curiously old-fashioned, more a revisiting of some of the concerns of Minchin with an added element of intellectual history than a contemporary intervention in an increasingly vibrant debate about Singapore's political past and future.

Despite these flaws, however, Barr's study is certainly a useful contribution to analysis of Lee's role in the formation of Singapore polity

and society, and thus a valuable resource in Singapore studies in general. In its tracing of Lee's intellectual growth at Cambridge in particular, it breaks significant new ground, and will thus be of interest and immediate use even to those who remain sceptical of its methodological premises.

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