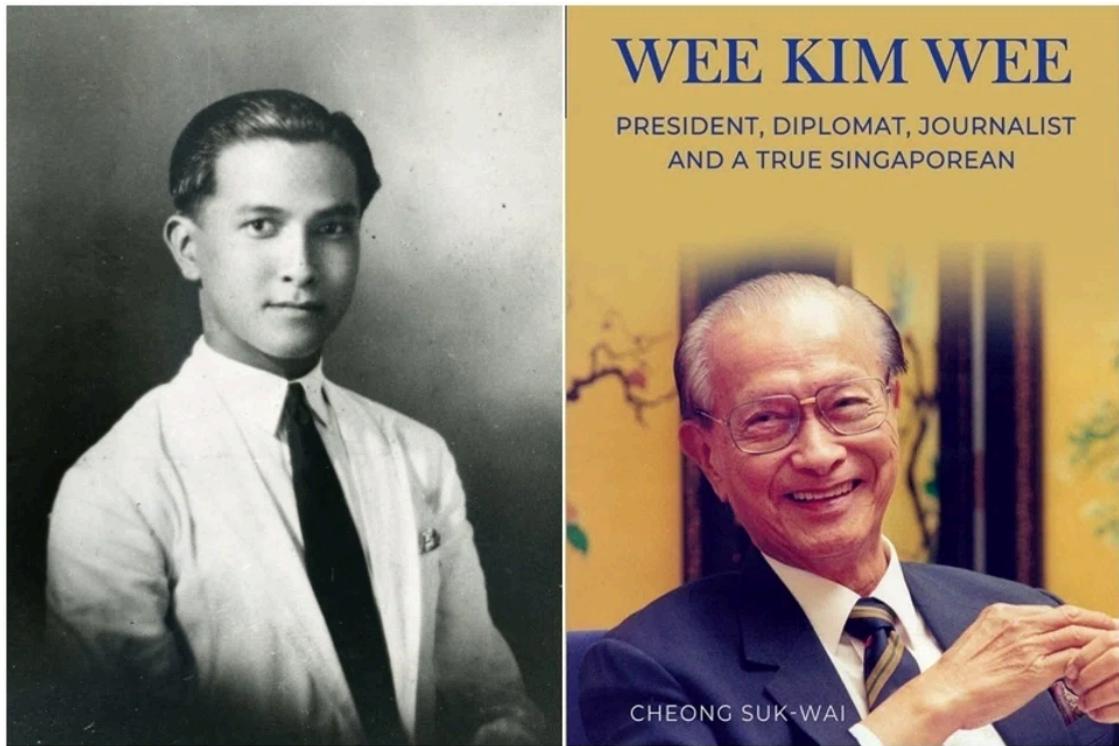


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From penury to the presidency: New biography retells the journey of former president Wee Kim Wee

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The earliest known portrait of Dr Wee Kim Wee (left). A recently published biography by Cheong Suk-Wai seeks to make the man more accessible to younger generations.

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Zakir Hussain 



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Wee Kim Wee: President, Diplomat, Journalist And A True Singaporean

By Cheong Suk-Wai

Politics/Iseas Publishing/Paperback/213 pages/\$39.13 (with GST)

The life journey of Singapore's fourth president Wee Kim Wee might seem improbable today, but it is no less remarkable and a reminder of what can be accomplished by quiet courage, conviction and strength of character.

A recently published biography by Cheong Suk-Wai now seeks to make the man many fondly remember as a people's president more accessible to younger generations, and its coverage of his early years is not short of colour.

Wee's story is one of not only having to grapple with choices foisted by circumstances, but also of seizing opportunities amid setbacks.

He started primary school at the age of eight, but had to drop out of Raffles Institution shortly after turning 14 to work, as his widowed mother could not afford the fees.

He landed his first job as a clerk at The Straits Times in 1930, pored over the pages of newspapers from around the world, honed his passion for badminton and got noticed by the sports editor who got him to write part time.

A year after he married in 1936, he was sent to Ipoh to reorganise the newly acquired Times of Malaya. But he faced resistance, as the staff thought he would sack some of them.

This chipped away at his health: He could not eat, he could not sleep. The company doctor told him to go home lest he "go mad or die".

He took the next train back to Singapore, and the next three months to recover from the ordeal. But the episode made him resolve never again to let stress get the better of him.

This served him well from then on.

Snubbed for the post of chief circulation clerk in 1941, Wee left to join American wire outfit United Press Associations (UPA), which was setting up an office in Singapore.

Seven months on, while juggling keeping his family safe from aerial bombardments with reporting on the Japanese advance through Malaya, he closed shop two days before the British surrendered.

After the war, he rose to be UPA's chief regional correspondent, got tapped to be ST deputy editor in 1959 – a time when the paper's editors were at odds with the newly elected PAP government, and retired at the age of 57 in 1973 after suffering a stroke.

While at ST, he scored several scoops, including reporting on the Malayan Special Force peacekeeping mission in the Congo in 1960 and a 1966 interview with Indonesian lieutenant-general Suharto, who would later be president, on ending Konfrontasi.



Wee Kim Wee, seen here running UPA's South-east Asian bureau in Singapore in the 1950s, was a pioneering Asian journalist who helped the world understand his region better in relatable ways.

PHOTO: COURTESY OF WEE ENG HWA/WEE FAMILY ALBUM

He went on to three new careers – high commissioner to Malaysia from 1973 to 1980 and subsequently ambassador to Japan and South Korea concurrently from 1980 to 1984; chairman of the Singapore Broadcasting Corporation from 1984 to 1985; and from 1985 to 1993, President of Singapore.

He assumed the presidency following the controversial resignation of predecessor Devan Nair, and in 1991 became the first president to exercise the powers of the elected president, following amendments to the Constitution.

While the book gives insights into Wee's sentiments and challenges in these roles, it does not reveal much on what he felt about some of the controversial changes to the political system – such as the introduction of group representation constituencies and the Elected Presidency – made during the period he was president.

There are also some surprises, as Cheong writes: "In person, Kim Wee appeared placid but he actually had a very bad temper; 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. He was all about finding solutions, not carping about concerns, especially not publicly."

Cheong's is not the first book, but the first dispassionate biography of Wee, who died at the age of 89 in 2005.

In 2004, Wee himself put out *Wee Kim Wee: Glimpses And Reflections*, a compilation of personal recollections and stories from his impoverished

childhood and his career. This was followed two years later by *On The Record: The Journalistic Legacy Of President Wee Kim Wee* by Ng Boon Yian.

In 2010, Wee's daughter Wee Eng Hwa authored *Cooking For The President: Reflections & Recipes Of Mrs Wee Kim Wee*. Both cookbook and memoir, it offers an intimate glimpse of the late Mrs Wee, whom veteran diplomat Tommy Koh credits with helping Wee make inroads during his Tokyo posting. She died in 2018.

Cheong's biography weaves in material from these books, and the narrative draws on interviews with more than 30 people, including family members and former colleagues who worked closely with Wee in journalism, the foreign service and the presidency, and who stayed in touch with him well into his retirement.

Nuggets include his tenderness for all sentient beings – he would often take along money, oil, sugar and rice to those he knew who were in dire straits, and buy papaya and leftover chicken rice to lay out for the birds that flitted about his neighbourhood.

Once, Mrs Wee found a toad whose back was lacerated, took it indoors, dabbed antiseptic on the cut and nursed it back to health in her kitchen sink – while Wee fed it fresh prawns and kangkung.

Wee also guarded his thoughts well, writes Cheong, a former senior writer at ST. But one thought he revealed in a letter to an old friend Jamshed Fozdar in 1998 stands out.

“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,” he wrote.

“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.”

Rating: ★★★☆☆

If you like this, read: *On The Record: The Journalistic Legacy Of President Wee Kim Wee* by Ng Boon Yian (2006, available at the National Library under 070.92 NG). It chronicles Wee's journey from reporter to editor and his journalistic achievements and principles.

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