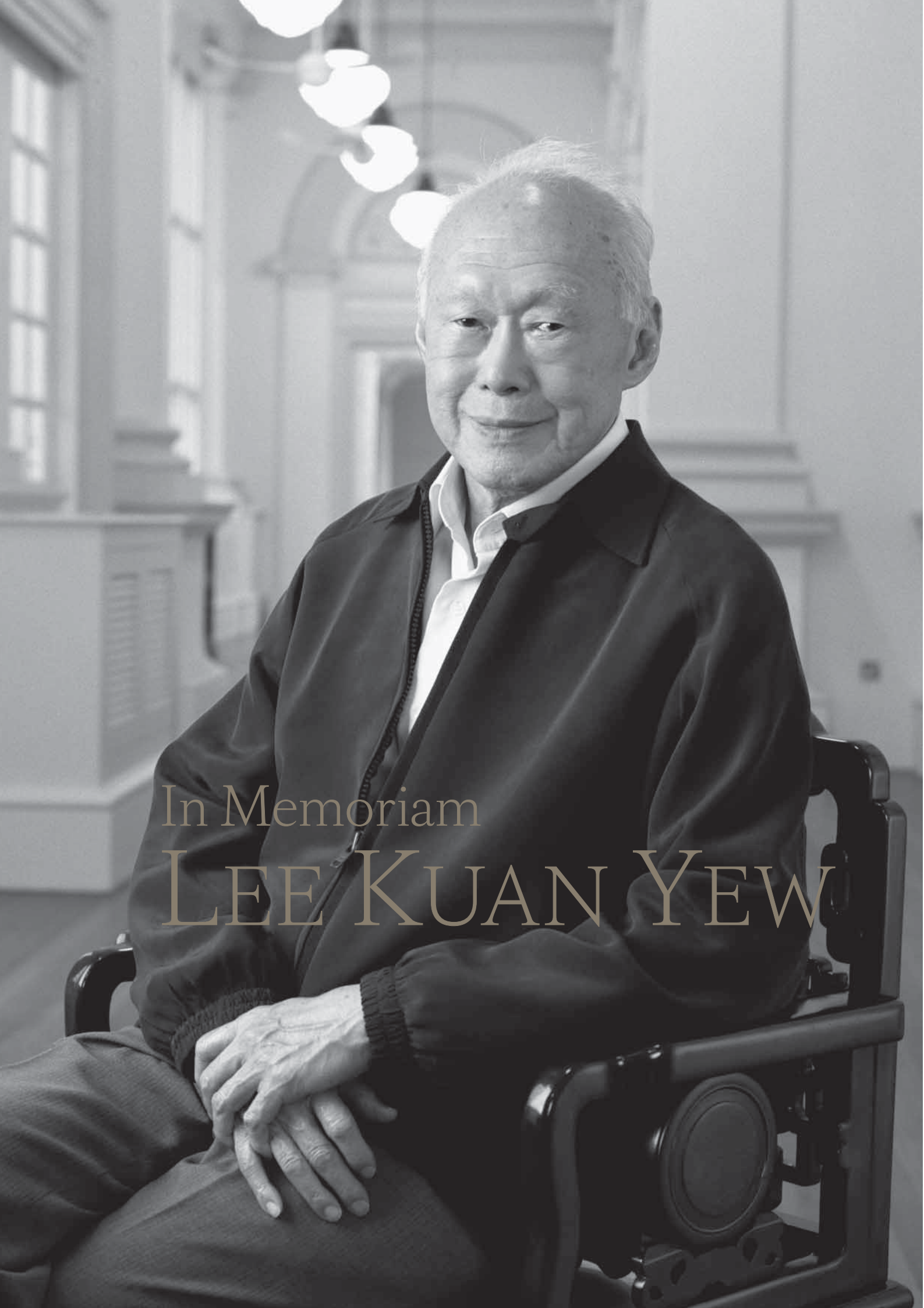

In Memoriam
LEE KUAN YEW

In Memoriam
Lee Kuan Yew
1923–2015

Lee Kuan Yew was the founding father of modern Singapore. The Japanese Occupation had shaped his political thinking and led to his involvement in the anti-colonial struggle. Soon after returning to Singapore in 1950 with a law degree from the University of Cambridge, he began working with the unions. He later founded the People's Action Party together with a group of like-minded men in 1954.

Mr Lee was elected to the Legislative Assembly of pre-independent Singapore in 1955, and became Prime Minister of self-governing Singapore in 1959. He led the country through the merger with Malaysia in 1963, and separation from it in 1965. He was the driving force behind Singapore's transformation from a Third World country to First. After stepping down as Prime Minister in 1990, Mr Lee continued to serve in the Cabinet until 2011 when he was 87 years old. He has been recognised as Asia's pre-eminent statesman – one among the giants who spurred Asia's rise in the 20th century.

This exhibition is a memorial to Lee Kuan Yew's contributions to Singapore, his international stature, and the ideals and convictions that shaped him and his generation of leaders.

The Formative Years 1923-1950

"We, in Malaya, are now seeing British domination after over a hundred years enter its last phase. Colonial imperialism in Southeast Asia is dead except in Malaya, and our generation will see it out."

- Lee Kuan Yew, at the Malayan Forum at Malaya Hall, London, 28 January 1950

Lee Kuan Yew was born on 16 September 1923 in Singapore. He was the top student from Raffles Institution in the Senior Cambridge examinations of 1940. He then entered Raffles College with the hopes of going on to study law in London, but his plans were interrupted by World War II.

After the British surrendered to the Japanese on 15 February 1942, Mr Lee narrowly escaped being killed in *sook ching* ("purge by cleansing") – the Japanese army's anti-Chinese operation which took the lives of many Chinese. He had gone to the Jalan Besar *sook ching* screening, but sensing something was wrong, he excused himself from the line-up. He hid with his gardener's help and fortuitously cleared the screening the next day. He later recalled that he did not choose to enter politics; it was the Japanese Occupation that brought politics to him. The brutal occupation forced him to realise that unless Singaporeans took their fate into their own hands, they would forever be at the mercy of major powers.

University of Cambridge and the Malayan Forum

Lee Kuan Yew resumed his studies after World War II. He first enrolled at the London School of Economics, and then moved to the University of Cambridge in 1947. He graduated from Cambridge with "Double First" honours in Law and received the only star for distinction in his year. While in England, Mr Lee joined the Malayan Forum together with Goh Keng Swee and Toh Chin Chye, who would later form the PAP with him. The Forum was a group of politically conscious Malayan students in Britain who were working towards an independent Malaya, which would include Singapore. Mr Lee returned home after being called to the Bar in June 1950.

Reading by the River Cam
at Cambridge University, 1947

Courtesy of Mrs Lee Kuan Yew Collection,
National Archives of Singapore

In Cambridge, 1947-1949

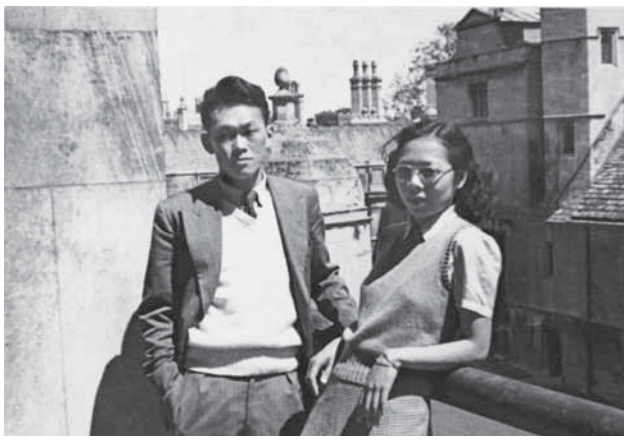
Courtesy of Mrs Lee Kuan Yew Collection,
National Archives of Singapore

Lee Kuan Yew and Kwa Geok Choo with
W S Thatcher, the Censor of Fitzwilliam
House who had offered Mr Lee a place
at Cambridge University, 21 June 1949

Courtesy of Mrs Lee Kuan Yew Collection,
National Archives of Singapore

Lee Kuan Yew with Kwa Geok Choo,
before he left for England to study,
5 September 1946

Courtesy of Mrs Lee Kuan Yew Collection,
National Archives of Singapore



With Kwa Geok Choo at Cambridge University, where both studied, 1947-1949

Courtesy of Mrs Lee Kuan Yew Collection, National Archives of Singapore

In the Cambridge University Law School Library, 1947-1949

Courtesy of Mrs Lee Kuan Yew Collection, National Archives of Singapore

Lee Kuan Yew and Kwa Geok Choo at dinner with fellow students from Singapore and Malaya at Cambridge University, 1949

Among those present were E W Barker (top row, fourth from left) and Yong Pung How (seated, second from right). Barker served as a Cabinet Minister from 1964 to 1988, while Yong was Singapore's Chief Justice from 1990 to 2006.

Courtesy of Mrs Lee Kuan Yew Collection, National Archives of Singapore

Graduation photograph
with Kwa Geok Choo, 1949

Courtesy of Mrs Lee Kuan Yew Collection,
National Archives of Singapore

Graduation photograph, 1949

Courtesy of Mrs Lee Kuan Yew Collection,
National Archives of Singapore

Lee Kuan Yew, 1960s

Ministry of Communications & Information Collection,
Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

Barrister wig and container, 1949

On admission to the Bar, Lee Kuan Yew and Kwa Geok Choo bought barrister wigs. They were made by Ravenscroft, an established wig and robe maker in London.

Gift of Lee Kuan Yew,
National Museum of Singapore Collection

Rolex Oyster Perpetual watch, 1953

This watch was presented to Lee Kuan Yew by the Singapore Union of Postal and Telecommunications Workers on 11 April 1953. He had successfully represented the union in an arbitration over a wage dispute. Eventually, nearly 1,000 clerks received 28 months' back pay.

Gift of Lee Kuan Yew,
National Museum of Singapore Collection

Glass master plate, 1955

This glass master plate was used for printing leaflets for Lee Kuan Yew's campaign as a People's Action Party (PAP) candidate in the 1955 General Elections. The leaflet notes the polling date of 2 April 1955, and declares Mr Lee's support for independence and workers' rights.

National Museum of Singapore Collection

Red ministerial box, mid-20th century

This red box was used by Lee Kuan Yew while he was in political office. It contained his work – papers, speech drafts, letters, readings, notes and cassette tapes with his recorded instructions. According to Minister for Education Heng Swee Keat, who was Mr Lee's Principal Private Secretary from 1997 to 2000, the locked red box would arrive at Mr Lee's office at 9 every morning. His secretaries would transcribe the dictated notes and Mr Heng would follow up on his instructions before he arrived at office. Mr Lee used this red box for the last time on 4 February 2015, the day before he was hospitalised. Today, it has become a symbol of Mr Lee's unwavering commitment to Singapore.

Poster of Singapore's First Legislative Assembly, 1955

This poster shows Singapore's first Legislative Assembly, including 25 members elected in Singapore's first General Election under the Rendel Constitution. The poster is dated 22 April 1955, when the first session of the Legislative Assembly was convened. Lee Kuan Yew, the Member for Tanjong Pagar, won his seat by the widest margin among all the candidates.

Gift of Mrs Anita Benson
National Museum of Singapore Collection

Leaflet for Legislative Assembly By-election at Tanjong Pagar, 1957

After negotiations over Singapore's independence broke down in London, David Marshall resigned as Chief Minister. On 26 April 1957, he challenged Lee Kuan Yew to resign and re-contest in a by-election. Mr Lee accepted immediately, but two days later Marshall announced his "permanent retirement" from politics. Lee Kuan Yew went on to contest and win the Tanjong Pagar by-election.

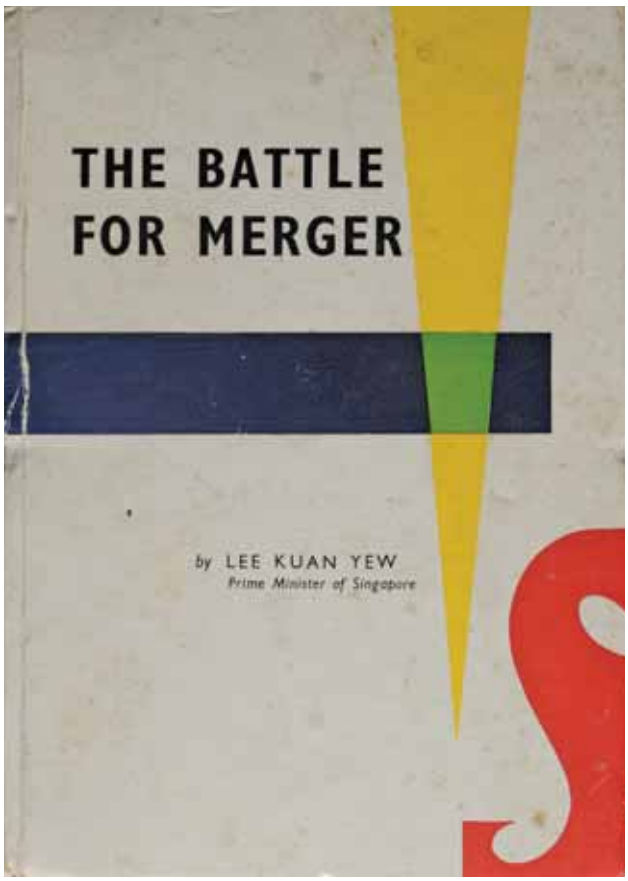
This leaflet contains an open letter to the voters of Tanjong Pagar, explaining the PAP's aim to end colonialism and establish an independent, non-communist Malaya. It also lists Mr Lee's credentials, particularly the numerous trade unions he served as legal adviser.

National Museum of Singapore Collection

Leaflet for Legislative Assembly General Election, 1959

This is a PAP leaflet for the 1959 General Elections. It features a write-up of Lee Kuan Yew as the party's secretary-general and candidate for Tanjong Pagar. Besides highlighting his credentials, the leaflet mentions Mr Lee's fluency in English, Mandarin and Malay. After the PAP swept the elections, winning 43 out of 51 seats, Lee Kuan Yew became self-governing Singapore's first Prime Minister.

National Museum of Singapore Collection



The Battle for Merger
– Malay, English and Chinese editions, 1961

Between 13 September and 9 October 1961, Lee Kuan Yew delivered 12 radio talks in English, Mandarin and Malay – a total of 36 broadcasts inall. The talks aimed to expose the communists – their goals, methods and organisation. With the PAP hanging on by just one seat in the Legislative Assembly, the talks helped turn the tide against the communists. The talks were later compiled and published in all four official languages under the title *The Battle for Merger*.

National Museum of Singapore Collection

Rosewood rostrum, 1970s

In the 1970s, Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew delivered his annual National Day Rally speech at the National Theatre from this rostrum.

National Museum of Singapore Collection

Road to Merdeka
1950–1965

"The time has come for Malayans to unite, for we can't stop this exploitation unless we are masters in our own country. So that is the first thing that has to be put right. We've got to have independence."

- Lee Kuan Yew, at an election rally, 21 March 1955

Legal adviser to trade unions

In 1952, Lee Kuan Yew represented the Postal and Telecommunications Uniformed Staff Union in its salary negotiations with the colonial government. He exposed the high-handedness with which the postal workers had been treated, but advised them to adopt a peaceful, moderate approach in the negotiations. Mr Lee gained wide publicity after he succeeded in negotiating a better deal for the postal workers. Soon, more trade unions and clan associations began approaching him to be their advocate.

Formation of the People's Action Party (PAP)

Together with a small group of students who had recently returned from England, Lee Kuan Yew developed the idea of forming a political party to fight for independence through constitutional means. This group – Toh Chin Chye, Goh Keng Swee, S Rajaratnam and Kenneth Byrne, joined later by Samad Ismail and Devan Nair – met regularly in the basement dining room of Mr Lee's home in Oxley Road.

The *Fajar* trial

In 1954, Lee Kuan Yew was approached to defend eight University of Malaya students who had been charged with sedition for publishing an article in *Fajar*, an undergraduate magazine. Together with Queen's Counsel D N Pritt, Mr Lee defended the students successfully. Soon after, he represented Chinese middle-school students who were appealing their conviction for rioting over National Service registration. This was Mr Lee's introduction to the Chinese educated world. As he described it, it was "a world teeming with vitality, dynamism and revolution".

Inauguration of the PAP

Through these students, Lee Kuan Yew became acquainted with Lim Chin Siong and Fong Swee Suan, two influential figures in the Communist United Front. Mr Lee told them of his plans to form a political party, and they soon joined the Oxley Road group. On 21 November 1954 the PAP was inaugurated at the Victoria Memorial Hall.

The 1955 Legislative Assembly Election

The PAP put up four candidates, including Lee Kuan Yew. The PAP won three seats, with Mr Lee himself winning the largest number of votes cast for any candidate. He had emerged as the natural leader of the anti-colonial movement.

Shaking hands with W A Cooper, Director of Posts, Singapore, after successfully negotiating the award of 28 months' back pay for clerical workers from the Singapore Union of Postal and Telecommunications Workers (SUPTW), 11 April 1953

The Straits Times,
Courtesy of Singapore Press Holdings Limited

An SUPTW member presenting a garland to Mr Lee at the Victoria Memorial Hall, 11 April 1953

The Straits Times,
Courtesy of Singapore Press Holdings Limited

Greeting Queen's Counsel D N Pritt at the airport, 1954

Pritt had flown in to represent eight University of Malaya students charged with sedition for an article published in *Fajar*, an undergraduate publication. All eight were acquitted.

Ministry of Communications & Information Collection,
Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

Speaking at the People's Action Party's inaugural meeting at the Victoria Memorial Hall, 21 November 1954

Ministry of Communications & Information Collection,
Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

At the SUPTW premises for the PAP's Special Party Conference, 13 February 1955

It was decided at the meeting that the PAP would contest the upcoming Legislative Assembly Election. Four candidates, including Lee Kuan Yew, were fielded.

Ministry of Communications & Information Collection, Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

Speaking at the Merdeka Rally at Farrer Park, 17 August 1955

The Straits Times, Courtesy of Singapore Press Holdings Limited

Lee Kuan Yew with his supporters on the eve of his first electoral triumph, 1 April 1955

Ministry of Communications & Information Collection, Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

Shouting "Merdeka!" (Independence) at a rally at the Padang, 15 April 1957

Lee Kuan Yew had just returned from London. He had been a member of the all-party delegation attending constitutional talks on self-government for Singapore.

Ministry of Communications & Information Collection, Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

Road to Merdeka
1950–1965

"Once in a long while in the history of a people, there comes a moment of great change. Tonight is such a moment in our lives ... We begin a new chapter in the history of Singapore. The powers of the people through their elected government is limited to our internal affairs. It is not what we really want. It is but a step forward towards merger and Merdeka."

- Lee Kuan Yew, at a mass rally following the PAP's victory in the 1959 Singapore General Election, 3 June 1959

Open front alliance

Lee Kuan Yew and his non-communist colleagues in the PAP felt they had to forge an alliance with the communists to fight colonialism. But this meant a constant tussle for control within the PAP. Mr Lee secretly met Fong Chong Pik, a representative of the Malayan Communist Party whom he named " the Plen", short for Plenipotentiary, in his Battle for Merger talks.

The 1959 General Election

The PAP took 43 out of 51 seats in Singapore's first general election for a fully-elected legislature. It was a landslide win. Lee Kuan Yew became the first Prime Minister of self-governing Singapore. He began immediately implementing the far-reaching social and economic policies that transformed the island over the next few decades.

Independence through merger

In May 1961, the Prime Minister of the Federation of Malaya, Tunku Abdul Rahman, announced the possibility of a merger with Singapore. Disagreement over this issue prompted a split in the PAP in July 1961. The pro-communists led by Lim Chin Siong first tried to bring down the government in the Legislative Assembly. When they failed, they broke away to form the Barisan Sosialis. The trade unions also split – those loyal to the PAP formed the National Trades Union Congress (NTUC), while the pro-communist unions set up the Singapore Association of Trade Unions (SATU).

This resulted in a fierce battle for the hearts and minds of Singaporeans. Lee Kuan Yew made a series of radio broadcasts to expose the communists – their aims, methods and organisation – and visited all 51 constituencies. A referendum was held in September 1962 in which the PAP's proposal for merger with the Federation won 71 percent of the votes. A year later, on 16 September 1963, Singapore became part of Malaysia. Five days after Merger, the PAP won 37 seats in the 1963 General Elections, compared to the Barisan Socialis' 13. The PAP – with Mr Lee's "superb political generalship," as Dr Goh Keng Swee later described it – had survived the communist onslaught.

Separation

Merger, however, turned out to be an unhappy experience. The PAP contested the 1964 Malaysian General Election, but won only one seat in the peninsula. Racial riots broke out in Singapore on 21 July 1964. Relations between Singapore and Kuala Lumpur deteriorated as Lee Kuan Yew campaigned for a non-communal "Malaysian Malaysia". On 9 August 1965, Singapore separated from Malaysia. The image of Mr Lee on television crying over this "moment of anguish" was something no Singaporean would forget.

At a press conference in the Cabinet Room at City Hall, 1960s

Ministry of Communications & Information Collection,
Courtesy of National Archive of Singapore

Speaking on the steps of City Hall at the installation of Yusof bin Ishak as Yang di-Pertuan Negara (Head of State), 3 December 1959

Ministry of Communications & Information Collection,
Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

With Tunku Abdul Rahman at Paya Lebar International Airport before Tunku's departure for the Singapore-Malaysia merger talks in London, 16 November 1961

The Straits Times,
Courtesy of Singapore Press Holdings Limited

Urging residents of Tanjong Pagar to help make Singapore "one of the cleanest and healthiest cities in Asia" during a mass drive to spring clean the city, 23 November 1959

Ministry of Communications & Information Collection, Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

Handing out pamphlets in the campaign for merger with Malaysia, 26 August 1962

Ministry of Communications & Information Collection, Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

Broadcasting over Radio Malaya to mark the beginning of National Loyalty Week, 2 December 1959

Ministry of Communications & Information Collection, Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

Leading ministers and assemblymen from City Hall to the Assembly House for the first sitting of the first fully-elected Singapore Legislative Assembly, 1 July 1959

Ministry of Communications & Information Collection, Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

Addressing the crowd at Fullerton Square during a lunchtime election rally, 25 September 1963

Ministry of Communications & Information Collection, Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

Listening to residents of Geylang Serai in the wake of racial riots, 24 July 1964

On television the same day, Mr Lee pledged to help victims of the riots and said his government will dispel fear and restore confidence.

Ministry of Communications & Information Collection, Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

Delivering the closing speech at the first Malaysian Solidarity Conference at the National Theatre, 6 June 1965

Mr Lee was determined to fight communalism and insisted on a “Malaysian Malaysia”.

The Straits Times,
Courtesy of Singapore Press Holdings Limited

Arriving at Singapore’s Broadcasting House for a televised press conference on Singapore’s separation from Malaysia, 9 August 1965

Ministry of Communications & Information Collection, Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

Survival and Nationhood 1965-1990

"I have a responsibility for the survival of the two million people in Singapore ... my overriding, my paramount duty is the survival of my own people ... I am determined that they will survive and I think they've got enough grit in them."

- Lee Kuan Yew, interview with foreign correspondents, 14 August 1965

This period has been closely identified with Lee Kuan Yew's leadership and strength of character. Assisted by a group of exceptionally able colleagues, he transformed Singapore into a progressive, open and economically successful nation.

Obtaining international recognition for Singapore

Lee Kuan Yew believed that it was most important to position Singapore in the international system. Before Singapore's independence, he had already been meeting key figures of that time (including Nehru, Nasser and Tito) and leading missions to Africa and Australia on behalf of Malaysia. He put this experience to good use as soon as Singapore became independent.

Rule of law and non-corruptibility

Lee Kuan Yew initiated constitutional changes and adapted the rule of law to the local context. He insisted on high standards of probity in government and was relentless in fighting corruption. He believed the success of the country depended on the strength and integrity of its institutions, particularly the civil service and the judiciary.

A Singaporean Singapore

Lee Kuan Yew envisioned a meritocratic, multiracial, multi-religious and multi-lingual society, where no one would be favoured or discriminated against because of their race, language or religion. He shunned race-based political parties and stressed the importance of racial and religious harmony. In education, he instituted bilingualism with English as the medium of instruction and with Mandarin, Malay and Tamil as the mother tongues. There shall be no majorities or minorities in Singapore, he declared soon after Separation. He combated chauvinism in all its forms.

Building a defence force

To ensure Singapore's security, Lee Kuan Yew worked closely with Defence Minister Goh Keng Swee to build up the Singapore Armed Forces. In 1967, he introduced compulsory National Service for all 18-year-old male citizens. 900 full-time National Servicemen were enlisted in the first batch that year.

Surviving without the British military

In the 1960s, the British military bases contributed about 20 percent to Singapore's Gross Domestic Product. After the British announced in 1968 they were withdrawing their forces "East of Suez", Lee Kuan Yew negotiated with British leaders a generous aid package and a postponement of the date British forces would leave Singapore, from March to December 1971. He also set up the Bases Economic Conversion Department, led by Hon Sui Sen, to oversee the conversion of British military bases and facilities into commercial use. In this way, by boldly turning crisis into opportunity, Singapore survived the British withdrawal. That was to become a hallmark of Mr Lee's leadership as Singapore tackled the crises of the 1970s and 1980s.

Speaking at the Victoria Memorial Hall after his victory in the 1963 General Elections, 22 September 1963

Ministry of Communications & Information Collection, Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

Speaking with newly-commissioned Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) officers after the SAF Training Institute Commissioning Parade at the Padang, 16 September 1973

Ministry of Communications & Information Collection, Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

Meeting President Suharto of Indonesia at the Merdeka Palace, Jakarta, 8 September 1982

Over the years, the two leaders held many such private meetings, which Suharto called *empat mata* ("four eyes").

Ministry of Communications & Information Collection, Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

Proposing a toast to Senior Vice Premier Deng Xiaoping of China when he visited Singapore, 12 November 1978

Ministry of Communications & Information Collection,
Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

Braving the rain with Housing Development Board Chairman Lim Kim San to host Cambodian Prince Norodom Sihanouk at Queenstown, 18 December 1962

Cambodia under Prince Sihanouk would become one of the first countries to recognise Singapore when it became independent in 1965.

The Straits Times,
Courtesy of Singapore Press Holdings Limited

Surveying the site which would become Jurong Industrial Estate with Economic Development Board Chairman Hon Sui Sen, 27 October 1962

Ministry of Communications & Information Collection,
Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

Reviewing the progress of the Jurong Industrial Estate, with Yang di-Pertuan Negara Yusof bin Ishak, 10 May 1964

Ministry of Communications & Information Collection, Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

Speaking to a worker during a visit to the Jurong Industrial Estate, 2 May 1965

Ministry of Communications & Information Collection, Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

Survival and Nationhood 1965-1990

"We cannot go backwards in time, to the old trading port of Singapore. We have to move forward and upwards, diversify our economy, upgrade technology in factories and offices, and increase our knowledge and skills."

- Lee Kuan Yew, National Day Message, 8 August 1982

Establishing Singapore's economic base

Unique among leaders of developing nations of his time, Lee Kuan Yew welcomed multi-national companies. He saw them as a means of industrialisation and to link up Singapore to the world. Central to his economic vision was the establishment of industrial harmony. Mr Lee worked closely with Devan Nair and the National Trades Union Congress (NTUC) to promote tripartism. The National Wages Council was set up in 1972 with representatives from unions, management and government to achieve a consensus on wage issues.

Creating a financial centre

Together with Dr Goh Keng Swee, Lee Kuan Yew helped make Singapore a global financial centre. In 1967, the Board of Commissioners of Currency was established to issue the Singapore currency. In 1971, the Monetary Authority of Singapore, the country's de facto central bank, was established. And in 1981, the Government of Singapore Investment Corporation (GIC) was formed to invest government reserves. Mr Lee served as GIC chairman from its founding till 2011.

A stake for each citizen

Giving every citizen a stake in the country was of primary importance to Lee Kuan Yew. His vision was a nation where every citizen owned a home. So he set up the Housing and Development Board to build and sell flats to Singaporeans. As wages rose, Mr Lee also raised the Central Provident Fund contribution rates to help Singaporeans buy homes and ensure they have adequate retirement savings. In 1984, he initiated Medisave, a national medical savings scheme. These schemes and institutions – HDB, CPF, Medisave – remain the bedrock of Singapore's social policy today.

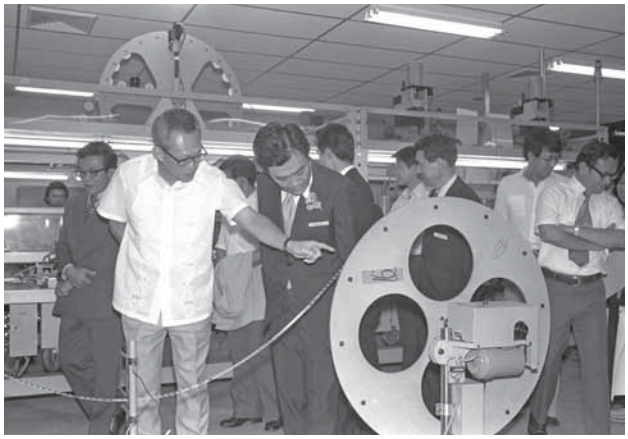
Organising the grassroots

To nurture confidence and trust between the people and the government, Lee Kuan Yew set up the People's Association and became its first chairman. Community Centres were built all over the island to bring people together. In addition, Mr Lee launched many campaigns – from "Keep Singapore Clean and Green" to "Speak More Mandarin, Less Dialect". He and his Old Guard colleagues considered themselves to be public educators as much as political leaders.

Visiting the Rollei camera factory in Braunschweig, West Germany, 30 September 1970

Mr Lee later met the first batch of Singaporean technicians undergoing training there.

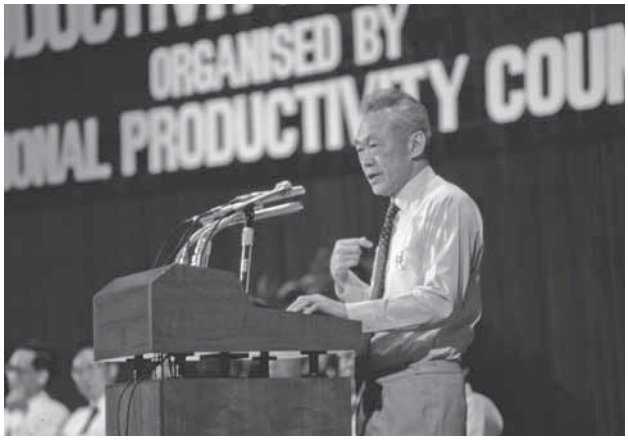
Ministry of Communications & Information Collection, Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore



Touring the newly opened Singapore Time factory set up by Seiko, 19 March 1976

With an investment of $30 million and employing 1,500 workers, the Japanese company became the first to make watches in Singapore for export.

Ministry of Communications & Information Collection, Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore



Speaking at the inauguration of Productivity Month at the Singapore Conference Hall, 11 November 1982

Ministry of Communications & Information Collection, Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

Stopping to chat with a student, as guest-of-honour at St. Joseph's Institution's Founder's Day celebrations, 15 May 1967

Ministry of Communications & Information Collection, Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

Mingling with young residents during his tour of the Queenstown housing estate, 2 May 1965

Built first by the Singapore Improvement Trust (SIT) and later by HDB, Queenstown became Singapore's first satellite town.

Ministry of Communications & Information Collection, Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

Visiting a home at Cantonment Road in Tanjong Pagar soon after it was built, 10 April 1964

Mr Lee chose Tanjong Pagar as his constituency in 1955 because he wanted to represent the working class population then living there.

Ministry of Communications & Information Collection, Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

Speaking at the 1982 National Courtesy Campaign at the Singapore Conference Hall, 29 June 1982

Mr Lee said that genuine consideration for one another was the "social glue" that will bind Singaporeans together.

The Straits Times,
Courtesy of Singapore Press Holdings Limited

Chatting with a young boy during a walkabout in Nee Soon, 24 July 1966

Ministry of Communications & Information Collection, Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

Survival and Nationhood 1965-1990

"People must feel that Singapore is worth being part of and worth defending. Otherwise, we cease to exist ... We can make Singapore a vibrant and thriving society, with opportunities for a rewarding and fulfilling life."

- Lee Kuan Yew, National Day Message, 8 August 1989

Establishing international relations

Lee Kuan Yew helped Singapore establish strong relations with major powers like the United States, China, India, Japan and the United Kingdom. He welcomed the United States as a stabilising force in the Asia-Pacific region. His rapport with Deng Xiaoping led to the strengthening of ties with China from the 1980s. Mr Lee was well received by the top world leaders of his time.

The Commonwealth and ASEAN

Lee Kuan Yew ensured Singapore's voice was heard on the world stage. Singapore hosted the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in 1971, with Mr Lee as the chairman. Together with his Foreign Minister S Rajaratnam, Mr Lee was a strong supporter of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), which he viewed as important to regional stability.

Placing Singapore on the world map

Mr Lee took a personal interest in Singapore Airlines (SIA), and urged it to focus on international rather than regional routes. His decision to build Changi International Airport, which opened in 1981, helped Singapore become the air hub of the region.

A clean and green Singapore

Mr Lee believed in a clean and green environment. He was the inspiration and chief architect of Singapore's transformation into a "garden city", and later into a "city in a garden". The clean-up of the Singapore River and the Kallang River basin – a massive project that took 10 years to complete – together with the waterways, parks and trees that dot Singapore's landscape are among the most enduring of Mr Lee's achievements.

The water story

Singapore's dependence on Malaysia for its water was a matter of profound importance. Lee Kuan Yew was the key figure in all bilateral talks with Malaysia over water. Thanks to his leadership, Singapore focused on developing its own water resources. This included converting more than three-quarters of the island into water catchment areas, developing desalination plants and introducing NEWater or reclaimed water.

Leadership succession

Lee Kuan Yew believed that the continued success of Singapore depended on having capable people in government, especially its political leadership. After the 1988 General Elections, he paved the way for Goh Chok Tong to succeed him as Prime Minister. He saw this as his final duty as Prime Minister before stepping down in 1990.

Speaking at the Hokkaido Forum on the importance of free trade to Singapore in the 21st century, 11 July 1988

Ministry of Communications & Information Collection,
Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

Meeting United States President Ronald Reagan at the White House, 19 June 1981

Mr Lee met every US President since Lyndon Johnson.

Ministry of Communications & Information Collection,
Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

Welcoming British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher at the Istana during her visit to Singapore, 1 August 1988

The Straits Times,
Courtesy of Singapore Press Holdings Limited

Leaving on a Singapore Airlines plane at Paya Lebar Airport, 19 January 1976

Mr Lee recognised the importance of having a successful national airline to fly the Singapore flag and project its image to the world.

The Straits Times,
Courtesy of Singapore Press Holdings Limited

Planting a yellow flame tree sapling at the Tanjong Pagar Community Centre, 12 December 1971

The first tree Mr Lee planted to start Singapore's tree-planting campaign was a Mempat tree at Farrer Circus on 16 June 1963.

Ministry of Communications & Information Collection,
Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

Inspecting the Singapore River, 2 September 1987

Mr Lee considered the decade long project to clean up the river one of his most ambitious.

Ministry of Communications & Information Collection,
Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

Taking the salute at the National Day Parade at the Padang, 9 August 1987

Ministry of Communications & Information Collection,
Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

Thanking supporters after his victory in Tanjong Pagar in the 1988 General Elections, 11 September 1988

This was the last general election Mr Lee contested as Prime Minister.

The Straits Times,
Courtesy of Singapore Press Holdings Limited

Addressing the press after the 1988 General Elections, 3 September 1988

Leadership succession was important to Mr Lee. He groomed Goh Chok Tong (seated on his right) to be his successor as Prime Minister of Singapore.

The Straits Times,
Courtesy of Singapore Press Holdings Limited

His Legacy

"... my values are for a government which is honest, effective and efficient in protecting its people and allowing opportunities for all to advance themselves in a stable and orderly society, where they can live a good life and raise their children to do better than themselves ..."

- Lee Kuan Yew, keynote speech at the Create 21 Asahi Forum in Tokyo, 20 November 1992

Senior statesman

Lee Kuan Yew stepped down as Prime Minister in 1990, but remained in the Cabinet as Senior Minister. He was appointed Minister Mentor in August 2004, when Lee Hsien Loong succeeded Goh Chok Tong as Prime Minister. He served in this position till 2011, when he retired from the Cabinet. Mr Lee had an active post-Prime Ministerial career, and his presence was felt both at home and abroad. One of the highlights of these years was the publication of his two-volume memoirs. It was translated into many languages, including Spanish, Portuguese and French, reflecting the worldwide interest in the views of Asia's pre-eminent elder statesman.

Legacy

Lee Kuan Yew's legacy is Singapore. He devoted every fibre of his being, the full measure of his considerable talents and energy, to the betterment of his fellow citizens. He believed in a fair and just society, one in which every citizen had a stake. He believed we could be "one united people, regardless of race, language or religion". He believed government had to be honest and strong if it was to be a force for good. He thus insisted on the rule of law, meritocracy and zero tolerance of corruption. It is upon these solid foundations laid by Lee Kuan Yew and his generation of leaders that Singapore will continue to thrive in the decades to come.

Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong and President Wee Kim Wee witnessing the swearing in of Lee Kuan Yew as Senior Minister at City Hall Chamber, 28 November 1990

Ministry of Communications & Information Collection, Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong witnesses President S R Nathan presenting Lee Kuan Yew with his instrument of appointment as Minister Mentor, Istana, 12 August 2004

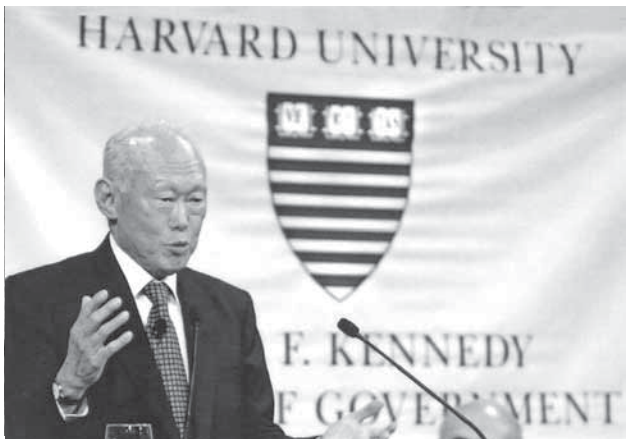
Ministry of Communications & Information Collection, Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

Visiting residents at Ghim Moh housing estate, 8 September 1991

Ministry of Communications & Information Collection, Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

Thanking a supporter on Nomination Day in the 1997 General Elections, 23 December 1996

Ministry of Communications & Information Collection, Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore



Delivering the first Collins Family International Fellowship Lecture at Harvard University's John F Kennedy School of Government, 18 Oct 2000

Mr Lee spoke on the importance of stability and good government for a country's growth and progress.

Ministry of Communications & Information Collection, Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

Speaking at the launch of the second volume of his memoirs, *From Third World to First*, 16 September 2000

Ministry of Communications & Information Collection, Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

Prominent Americans paying tribute to Lee Kuan Yew at the US-ASEAN Business Council's 25th anniversary gala dinner, 27 October 2009

From left:
Dr Lee Wei Ling, US Senator Jim Webb, Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew, former US-ASEAN Business Council Chairman George David, Singapore's Ambassador to the US Chan Heng Chee, former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, and Mrs Linda Bond, wife of Senator Christopher Bond

The Straits Times,
Courtesy of Singapore Press Holdings Limited

Lee Kuan Yew, 23 November 2004

Photograph by Tara Sosrowardoyo,
National Museum of Singapore Collection

A National Museum of Singapore exhibition, 25 March to 26 April 2015.