

## Lee Kuan Yew: Race, Culture and Genes

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*"Three women were brought to the Singapore General Hospital, each in the same condition and needing a blood transfusion. The first, a Southeast Asian was given the transfusion but died a few hours later. The second, a South Asian was also given a transfusion but died a few days later. The third, an East Asian, was given a transfusion and survived. That is the X factor in development."*

Racism is rarely far from the surface of Asian societies, and this is especially true of those multiracial societies that feel the need to promote racial tolerance as part of official ideology. Yet even in these cases, promoting racial tolerance does not necessarily imply the promotion of racial indifference. Singapore's multiracialism, for instance, encourages a high consciousness of one's race even as it insists on tolerance. Further, it has been considered by many as a covert form of discrimination in favour of the majority Chinese and against the minorities, especially the Malays. This article is an attempt to advance our understanding of Singapore's idiosyncratic version of multiracialism by casting new light on the thinking of its primary architect, Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew.

Despite official denials there can be little doubt that there is an unofficial pro-Chinese bias in Singapore, and that in spite of the structures of "meritocracy" and sometimes because of them, the Malay minority in particular has suffered structural discrimination. Even a cursory survey of recent history confirms this impression. For two decades after separation from Malaysia in 1965, for instance, the Singapore government had an unofficial policy of excluding Malays from the Singapore Armed Forces and the police force because of concerns about their loyalty. Not only did this practice deny Malays a traditional source of employment, but it made other employers reluctant to hire them because they were, technically, still eligible to be called up. (1) At the same time, the government exaggerated, possibly unintentionally, the structural impediments to Malays' educational advancement. At the time of separation from Malaysia, Malay students in Singapore had already been disadvantaged inadvertently because they were streamed through Malay-language schools which were staffed by under-qualified teachers, and which used substandard Malay-language text books. (2) These schools had very high attrition and failure rates from the beginning, but after separation even the successful students faced unique linguistic and academic hurdles in their pursuit of higher education. After separation, not only did the Malays find that their language had little economic value, but they discovered that their schools had not prepared them for tertiary education in the new Singapore. The first problem was that unlike Chinese-educated Chinese attending Nanyang University, and English-speaking Chinese, Indians and Eurasians attending the University of Singapore, the Malays had no tertiary institutions in which they did not face a language barrier. In fact Malay students' command of English was so poor that they

alone were required to take an oral examination as part of their entry requirements to university. Further, as part of the push for national and economic survival in newly-independent Singapore, university scholarships were restricted to those students pursuing technical and science disciplines, and the inadequately staffed and poorly resourced Malay-stream schools had left their students singularly ill-equipped to qualify or compete for these scholarships. (3) The Malay's problem was compounded by their continuing socio-economic marginalisation, (4) and by the near-universal perception that their underachievement reflected their racial and cultural defects: that they had grown up in the "soft," lethargic Malay Culture which did not encourage studiousness, enterprise or hard work. Between their educational and employment disadvantages, and the psychological impact of being told that their problems were the result of their ethnic culture, it is not surprising that Malays are still at an economic disadvantage today.

Perhaps the most revealing aspect of the saga of Singapore's Malays, however, is not the actual discrimination, but the fact that Singapore's multiracial meritocracy has provided the rationale for its justification, and that this rationale has been effective to the point that even Malay teachers have come to accept this "cultural deficit" explanation of Malay underachievement. (5) The perception of the cultural deficiency of the Malays is, to some extent, a continuation of the prejudices fostered by the British colonial authorities who regarded the Malays as slow and lazy because they preferred their agrarian *kampong* lifestyle to working in tin mines for money. (6) This interpretation, however, ignores the role of former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew in moulding the ideological and social perceptions of Singaporeans. Although no nation's history can ever be reduced to the story of one man, Lee Kuan Yew had such a paramount role in making modern Singapore that an understanding of that society cannot be complete without an attempt at understanding Lee himself. The remainder of this article is devoted to contributing to our understanding of Lee's views on race.

### **Lee Kuan Yew**

Understanding any aspect of Lee Kuan Yew's career requires a syncretic approach. but fully understanding his racial views stretches holistic analysis to new limits. Lee's views on race have been a matter of much private, but little published comment. This now changes with the publication of his authorised biography, *Lee Kuan Yew: The Man and His Ideas*, (7) in which Lee speaks about race with unprecedented candour. Upon close inspection, Lee's racial beliefs prove not to be an aberration or idiosyncrasy in his thinking, but the consummation of his world view and his political thought.

Until the late 1990s, Lee rarely allowed his public record to be sullied by any explicit statement that could be construed as racist, though on occasions he has come close to doing so. He has, for instance, argued that there are links between economic performance and race. In 1993, Lee wrote an article for *The Economist* in which he speculated on the state of the world in the twenty-first century, with special emphasis on Asia. (8) Lee put his own views into the mouth of a fictional Chinese Singaporean, Wang Chang, who then discussed his views with his friend, Ali Alkaff. Lee painted a

picture of a prosperous twenty-first century East Asian industrial belt consisting of Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and coastal China, while South and South East Asia (except for Singapore) languished by comparison. Singapore, although geographically part Of South East Asia, was economically on a par with the more prosperous East Asian region. (9) In the subsequent "discussion" of these predictions, "Wang Chang" made it clear that race was a factor in his assessment, since he based his forecasting "on a people's culture, heredity and organisational strengths." (10) A few years earlier, Lee used his 1989 National Day Rally address to defend the Government's programme of encouraging Chinese immigration from Hong Kong on the basis that the birth rate of Singapore's Chinese is lower than that of the Indians and Malays. The numerical preponderance of the Chinese must be maintained, said Lee, "or there will be a shift in the economy, both the economic performance and the political backdrop which makes that economic performance possible." (11) Lee enumerated several reasons why maintaining the Chinese proportion of the population at current levels was necessary for economic prosperity - including the "culture" and "nature" of the Chinese. Without a hint of irony, Lee also took the opportunity to assure Malays that they need not fear Hong Kong immigrants taking their jobs because the immigrants will all be high income earners. In 1977 Lee treated Parliament to a four hour post-election victory speech which could best be described as "uninhibited." In this speech, Lee told the multi-racial chamber, "I understand the Englishman. He knows deep in his heart that he is superior to the Welshman and the Scotsman.... Deep here, I am a Chinaman." (12) In recent times, Lee has not only been more forthright about his racial views but he has also confirmed that he held them at least as early as the beginning of the 1970s. In October 1989, in an interview with Malaysia's *New Straits Times* Lee revealed that after he read Mahathir Mohamad's *The Malay, Dilemma* (13) in 1971 or 1972, he found himself "in agreement with three-quarters of his analysis of the problem" of the economic and educational under-performance of the Malays. (14) According to Lee and Mahathir, the problem was both cultural and genetic. (15) Lee noted with approval that Mahathir's views were the "result of his medical training, and... he was not likely to change them." (16)

### **Indiscretion**

While Lee has been moderately circumspect in most of his public statements on race, there have been rare occasions on which he has shown less discretion than usual. The earliest such documented occasion was on 27 December 1967, when Lee addressed a meeting at the University of Singapore. (17) After his speech there was a question and answer session, in which a question was asked about "the most important factor, the X-factor, in development." (18) Two members of the audience have given the author independent and almost identical accounts of Lee's answer. According to Chandra Muzaffar, Lee responded in these terms:

"Three women were brought to the Singapore General Hospital, each in the same condition and each needing a blood transfusion. The first, a Southeast Asian was given the transfusion but died a few hours later. The second, a South Asian was also

given a transfusion but died a few days later. The third, an East Asian, was given a transfusion and survived. That is the X factor in development." (19)

Herman Paul independently gave the following account of Lee's answer: "There were 3 women, one of them from East Asia, another from South Asia and the 3rd from S-E Asia. They were admitted to the Singapore General Hospital. Their condition was precarious, and they all received blood transfusions. The woman from S-E Asia passed away. The woman from East Asia survived. The woman from South-East Asia (20) passed away. " (21)

Each listener took the Southeast Asian to be a Malay or perhaps a member of one of the aboriginal races of the region. Each of them took the South Asian woman to be an Indian, and the East Asian who survived was Chinese, or perhaps Japanese or Korean. Lee revealed in this speech, as reported by Chandra Muzaffar a perception of a racial hierarchy of Asians, in which the Chinese and other East Asians are at the top, Malays and other Southeast Asians are at the bottom, and Indians and other South Asians are in between. On this occasion Lee made no attempt to disguise his views on race with discussion of related factors, such as culture. He was talking about the inherent, genetic, strength and weakness of the different races. The emphasis that Lee has placed on culture and race in economic development has varied over the years. Only 27 months after Lee argued that race is the "X-factor" in development, Lee credited "ethnic factors" with being one of the variables in economic development, though on this occasion he contradicted his December 1967 statement by arguing that these "ethnic factors" were a minor consideration compared to "cultural factors." (22) Regardless of the balance between the two factors in Lee's thinking, there is no room to doubt that both race and culture play related if different roles in Lee's political thought.

### **Hierarchy**

The hierarchy of races revealed in Lee's December 1967 parable helps to explain a similar hierarchy of humiliation to which Lee referred four years earlier, when he said, "Humiliation and degradation by foreign European powers is bad enough. It was worse at the hands of a conquering Asian nation like Japan - and it will be even worse if it should be by a neighbouring power in South-East Asia." (23) In fact, Lee's racial hierarchy is much more complex than he indicated on either of these occasions. In 1982 he revealed his belief that Jews share with East Asians a place at the top of the racial pyramid. and that both occupy a higher place than Americans:

"Let us not deceive ourselves: our talent profile is nowhere near that of, say, the Jews or the Japanese in America. The exceptional number of Nobel Prize winners who are Jews is no accident. It is also no accident that a high percentage, sometimes 50%, of faculty members in the top American universities on both the east and west coasts are Jews. And the number of high calibre Japanese academics, professionals, and business executives is out of all proportion to the percentage of Japanese in the total American population." (24)

More recently, commenting upon Charles Murray and Richard Herrnstein's *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life*, (25) Lee told his

authorised biographers:

"The Bell curve is a fact of life. The blacks on average score 85 per cent on IQ and it is accurate, nothing to do with culture. The whites score on average 100. Asians score more... the Bell curve authors put it at least 10 points higher. These are realities that, if you do not accept, will lead to frustration because you will be spending money on wrong assumptions and the results cannot follow." (26)

A reading of the evidence cited above suggests that Lee has always had an agenda based on the racial and cultural superiority of Singapore's Chinese population. If this analysis is accurate, however, it requires a complementary argument which accounts adequately for the fact that Lee did not begin acting on these beliefs until the late 1970s. On the surface, such a line of argument appears plausible, since there are no shortage of external factors which could have restrained Lee's sinocentric bias until the early 1980s. His early hostility to Chinese education, culture and language, for instance, can be explained by the fact that Lee regarded Chinese culture as a threat to Singapore's stability because it was so closely associated with Chinese chauvinism, Chinese communism and loyalty to the People's Republic of China. (27) As well as these internal communal factors, it is known that Lee considered that allowing even the appearance of creating a sinocentric culture in the 1960s or 1970s would have heightened tensions between Singapore and its Malay neighbours. (28) These were sufficient reasons for Lee to continue his campaign of gutting Chinese education and building a communally neutral multiracialism. By 1979, however, Singapore's political and regional landscape had been totally transformed. Chinese culture was succumbing to the constant incursion of English language education and Western influence through the media. Nanyang University, almost the last institutional bastion of Chinese culture and Chinese communism. was demoralised, (29) and the Chinese-educated were on the verge of becoming a minority in the electorate. (30) This meant that Chinese culture was no longer seen as a major threat to Singapore's internal stability. Furthermore, Singapore's relations with both Malaysia and Indonesia had reached a new high thanks to the spirit of regional solidarity within ASEAN, prompted by the fall of Vietnam in 1975. (31) The post-separation siege mentality towards the Malay world was now redundant, if it had ever been valid. This development coincided roughly with the retirement, enforced or otherwise, of most of the "old-guard" of PAP leaders. By the mid-1980s Lee had surrounded himself with younger second generation leaders Substantially dependent upon his patronage, thus relieving Lee of another constraint. The sinicization of Singapore was now a political possibility for Lee, and according to the logic of this argument, he then took the opportunity to act on his racial beliefs.

While this thesis goes some way towards explaining Lee's actions, it faces serious problems. It is important, for instance, to acknowledge that not only did Lee show no signs of acting on Chinese racial or cultural supremacist beliefs until the very end of the 1970s, but for many of those years he was widely demonised as an enemy of Chinese culture. Alex Josey wrote in 1974 that "within ten or fifteen years, Lee Kuan Yew expects the Chinese language to be unimportant, " (32) and this seemed a fair assessment. The majority of Chinese parents were choosing English as the first

language for their children's education since English was the language which led to good jobs and upward social mobility. (33) Nanyang University was struggling to survive and was under a continuing cloud of suspicion that it was fostering Chinese chauvinism and communism. This suspicion had led the Government to "disperse" former communist Chinese-educated students to universities in Australia, Canada and New Zealand, rather than allow them to study at Nanyang. (34) In 1971 two Chinese language newspapers, *Sin Chew Jit Poh* and *Nanyang Siang Pau* were brought to heel for allegedly promoting Chinese chauvinism and accusing the government of killing Chinese education and the Chinese language.(35)

These factors by themselves undermine the thesis that Lee was always a closet Chinese Supremacist. Consideration must be given also to the testimony of Lee's close associates from those early decades, who flatly contradict the picture of Lee Kuan Yew as a Chinese cultural or racial supremacist. Goh Keng Swee was Lee's right hand man for twenty years in government, at one stage rising to the position of First Deputy Prime Minister. When Goh was shown Chandra Muzaffar's account of Lee's December 1967 parable, he was genuinely shocked and lost for words. Finally he stammered. "I can't imagine he spoke in such crude terms." (36)

E.W. Barker, a Minister in Lee's Cabinet for more than twenty years and his friend for more than two decades before that, was equally adamant in interview that "there was nothing of this race business in Cabinet. I wouldn't have served if it was a pro-Chinese government, but it was not." (37) While Lee believed in his heart that the Chinese were genetically and culturally superior, he separated this belief from his public policy. Only in the late 1970s did his racial beliefs begin to exert a noticeable influence upon public policy. The discrepancy between the picture of the Chinese, racial and cultural supremacist which we are able to paint from a collage of Lee's words is barely reconcilable with Lee's public record up to the late 1970s and with the accounts given by his close associates of forty and fifty years. It is obvious that the thesis that Lee was restrained from acting on his beliefs by external forces is insufficient. As is the case with most aspects of Lee's career, the story is much more complicated, and requires a detailed study of the gradual development of his political thought.

## **Origins**

At this stage it is important to consider the origins of Lee's racial views. It is natural to assume that Lee's beliefs stem directly from prejudices he learnt as a child. While there is a certain likelihood in this line of approach, Lee's own accounts suggest that he arrived at his racial views as a result of observation, empirical enquiry and study as an adult: "I started off believing all men were equal. I now know that's the most unlikely thing ever to have been, because millions of years have passed over evolution, people have scattered across the face of this earth, been isolated from each other, developed independently had different intermixtures between races, peoples, climates, soils. ...I didn't start off with that knowledge. But by observation, reading, watching, arguing, asking, that is the conclusion I've come to." (38)

Lee maintains that at some stage before the late 1960s he had acted under the

assumption that all races were equal, but bitter disappointment convinced him that the reality was otherwise: "When we were faced with the reality that, in fact, equal opportunities did not bring about more equal results, we were faced with [an] ideological dilemma. ... In other words, this Bell curve, which Murray and Herrnstein wrote about, became obvious to us by the late '60s." (39)

The evolution of Lee's racism was a long process. According to Lee himself he began to form his views on race while he was a student in London. (40) He has described how his ideas firmed in 1956 on a visit to Europe and London, (41) and then reached their full force in the Malaysia period. (42) The details and implications of Lee's account of the development of his racial views are considered later in this article, but one must be sceptical that his adult mind was ever a tabula rasa on the question of race. Lee likes to consider himself a pure empiricist who can rise above preconceptions and prejudices, but it seems reasonable to assume that the very questions he asked as an adult, and his early fascination with questions of race sprang from an existing, possibly unconscious world view in which race was an all-pervasive feature.

In racially conscious Singapore it would have been difficult to have grown up without exposure to racial stereotyping. Further, the Chinese of Lee's parents' and grandparents' generations grew up in a culture which emphasised familial piety and ancestor worship and who were naturally proud of both their ancestry and their tenuous association with the glories of Chinese civilisation. Ethnic pride can slip easily into racial prejudice in the most racially unconscious society, and Singapore was and is anything but racially unconscious. We might believe Lee when he maintains that he had, at some stage in his early adult life, come to the intellectual conviction that all races are equal. His childhood, however, was steeped in racial stereotyping that meant that questions of race were never far from the surface of his dynamically inquisitive mind, and deep seated stereotypes were always ready to challenge race-blind explanations of the world. Hence, when he visited other countries, even as a student, he took his racial consciousness with him. He has told his biographers, "I visited Europe during my vacation (as a student) and then saw India, Pakistan, Ceylon, Indonesia, Japan, Germany ... You look for societies which had been more successful and you ask yourself why." (43) Note Lee's assumption that a society's "success" can be judged by a universal standard of progress and development.

For Lee it was natural to judge peoples according to the how high up the ladder of progress they had climbed, and his background made him prone to place people in racial and cultural categories when making such judgements.

## **Rationale**

Lee may have brought the kernel of his racial prejudices intact from childhood, but as an adult he has woven an intricate argument to rationalise and develop his view. His argument rests on four pillars: an environmental determinism based upon a distortion of Arnold Toynbee's "Challenge and Response" thesis; a medieval scientism which gives an important role to ductless glands in determining a person's and a

people's drive to achieve; a Lamarckian view of evolution; and a belief in culturally-based eugenics and dysgenics. The influence of Arnold Toynbee on Lee since the mid-1960s is well documented in speeches and inter-views. From 1967 onwards Lee acknowledged Toynbee as a source of his ideas. (44) It is less well-known that Lee began quoting Toynbee's "Challenge and Response" thesis in Cabinet meetings as soon as the PAP came to power in 1959, (45) and that Toynbee was widely read and vigorously discussed in Lee's circle of friends at Cambridge University. (46) The connection between Toynbee's thesis and Lee Kuan Yew's racial beliefs is convoluted, but it is the lynch pin of Lee's rationalisation of his Chinese racial suprematism.

### **Toynbee**

Central to the thesis propounded by Toynbee in *A Study of History*, was the notion that societies and civilisations develop in response to certain challenges. Toynbee argued that "civilizations come to birth in environments that are unusually difficult and not unusually easy." (47) The Sinic Civilisation, wrote Toynbee, was nurtured in the north of China, where the climate was severe, and swamps and regular floods made agriculture difficult, and so it became a "hard" society. (48) Conversely, societies that were nurtured in easy environments, without challenges from people or nature are inherently weak. In Volume I of *Study*, Toynbee repeated a parable originally told by Ellsworth Huntington in his *Civilisation and Climate*. It was the story of a group of savages from the tropics who travelled north into the colder climate. Upon the onset of the first winter, some returned to the tropics, "resumed the old life and their descendants are untutored Savages to this day." (49)

All of the others perished except for one group which invented clothes, constructed shelter, learned to dry meat and store it, and discovered how to make fire. "And in the process of adjusting themselves to a hard environment they advanced by enormous strides, leaving the tropical part of Mankind in the rear." (50) No one should suggest that Lee, Toynbee or Huntington believed that this parable was literally true. The story does demonstrate, however, Toynbee's lesson of the importance of the challenge of climate and more generally, of the environment, whereby those people whose civilisations grew in the "soft" life of the tropics were left behind by their hardier cousins in harsher climates. Lee has taken Toynbee's arguments and used them to justify a dismissive attitude towards the Malayan and Indian Cultures. This logic explains the hierarchy of hardiness of the three women in Lee's parable. The Southeast Asian died first because she came from an easy tropical climate. The South Asian lived a little longer because the climate of the Subcontinent is less amenable than that of tropical Southeast Asia. The East Asian lived because she - or at least her ancestors - came from a very harsh climate which brought out tougher qualities in her people. With a harsh climate go many challenges which develop a plethora of cultural and racial characteristics in a people.

In 1965, in an interview on Australian television, Lee discussed the differences between the Malays and the Chinese in Malaysia: "One is the product of a civilisation which has gone through all its ups and downs, of floods and famine and pestilence,

breeding a people with very intense culture, with a belief in high performance in sustained effort, in thrift and industry. And the other people, more fortunately endowed by nature, with warm sunshine and bananas and coconuts, and therefore not with the same need to strive so hard. Now, these two societies really move at two different speeds. It's like the difference between a high-revolution engine and a low-revolution engine. I'm not saying that one is better or less good than the other. But I'm just stating a fact that one was the product of another environment another history, another civilisation, and the other is a product of another different climate, different history." (51)

Lee found an unwitting ally for his views on cultural suprematism in the Scandinavian social scientist, Gunnar Myrdal. The connection was made by Lee himself in his 1971 commemorative lecture at his old college at Cambridge University, in which he argued this case at length: "It is in part the difference between the more intense and exacting Sinic cultures of East Asia and the less demanding values of Hindu culture of South and South-east Asia, that accounts for the difference in industrial progress between Eastern and Southern Asia. The softer and more benign Hindu civilisation spread through Burma, Thailand, Laos and Cambodia, meeting the Sinic civilisation on the borders of Vietnam...."

Gunnar Myrdal, in his "Asian Drama" (52) voluminously sets out the reasons for lower achievements amongst these peoples [of South and South-east Asia]. He terms them "soft societies." Their expectations and desire for achievement are lower. Had he studied the Sinic civilisations of East Asia - Korea, Japan, China and Vietnam - he would have come to the opposite conclusions, that these were hard societies. (53)

While references to Gunnar Myrdal began only after the publication of Myrdal's Asian Drama in 1968, Lee had expressed similar views long before this. In 1965, at the height of both Indonesia's Confrontation with Malaysia, and Singapore's difficulties with Kuala Lumpur, Lee made a revealing speech in which he dismissed the threat from Indonesia because of the soft and indulgent nature of its culture, though at this stage the term "soft culture" was not part of Lee's vocabulary: "...these were not cultures which created societies capable of intense discipline, concentrated effort over sustained periods. Climate, the effects of relatively abundant society and the tropical conditions produced a people largely extrovert, easy-going and leisurely. They've got their wars, they have their periods of greatness when the Hindus came in the 7th and again in the 12th centuries in the Majapahit and the Srivijaya empires. But in between the ruins of Borobudur and what you have of Indonesia today, you see a people primarily self-indulgent." (54) These are merely two examples of Lee's many Myrdalian statements which express a condescending attitude towards the indigenous cultures of South and Southeast Asia.

Early in 1967, Lee expounded his views on the stultifying effects of living in the tropics, and explained why Singapore is the exception to the rule: "There is only one other civilization near the Equator that ever produced anything worthy of its name. That was the Yucatan peninsula of South America - the Mayan Civilization. There is no other place where human beings were able to surmount the problems of a soporific equatorial climate. You can go along the Equator or 2 degrees north of it, and they all

sleep after half past two if they have had a good meal. They do! Otherwise they must die earlier. It is only in Singapore that they don't. And there were good reasons for this. First, good glands, and second, good purpose." (55)

There are three noteworthy points in this excerpt, apart from the confirmation of Lee's environmental determinism. First, the reference to the Mayan Civilisation is almost certainly derived directly from Arnold Toynbee's Study. (56) Second, Lee has either overlooked or dismissed the former greatness of the Javanese Culture, since acknowledging it would have qualified his theory of environmental determinism. Third, this quotation introduces Lee's idiosyncratic ideas about the role of glands, and allows Lee to take a deft step from justification by culture to justification by physiology and thus genetics.

### **Ductless Glands**

According to Lee, ductless glands, especially the adrenal gland, play a crucial role in determining the drive of people, both as individuals and as races. In 1966, Lee told the Socialist International: "There are believed to be two influences on the efficacy of human resources. First, biological, and second cultural factors.

Anthropologists all emphasize the cultural influence as the factor which causes variations in capacity between men, tribes and nations but they do not discount altogether the possibility of biological differences between man and man because of differences in their ductless glands. I would have certain reservations about attributing all differences completely to cultural factors for I remember the Australian aborigines, who, in spite of considerable exposure to a new, society they were suddenly confronted with, have yet been unable to adjust and to emerge as an equal in his new environment. As against that. we have the negroes in Africa transported into slavery in America who have emerged as scientists, doctors, lawyers, boxers, high jumpers, runners and so on." (57)

Leaving aside the question of Lee's ignorance of Australian Aborigines and Afro-Americans, this speech demonstrated that Lee perceived that there was a direct link between ductless glands, the drive to achieve, and race. In 1971, Lee explicitly linked his views on ductless glands to Toynbee's "Challenge and Response" thesis, and erroneously attributed his own ideas to Toynbee.

Describing the challenge of planning a reserve army after Singapore's separation from Malaysia, Lee said, "Toynbee's "Challenge and Response" summed up our position. If we did not have it in us, enough output from the adrenal and other ductless glands, we would have fallen flat on our faces." (58) The author's research has failed to uncover any reference in Study which could justify Lee's attribution of his views on glands to Toynbee, which is not surprising since, despite the impression created by Lee, Toynbee devoted sixty four pages of Study to arguing that race is not a factor in determining a civilisation's rate of development. (59) Lee, however, has taken Toynbee's views on the role of the environment. and developed a view of race based on a much stricter theory of environmental determinism than was ever advocated by Toynbee.

## **Lamarck**

The connection in Lee's mind between race and the development of the ductless glands is based upon his adherence to his personal Lamarckian theory of evolution, according to which acquired characteristics can be inherited. Hence, "hard" and "soft" countries not only produce "hard" and "soft" cultures, but their people acquire "hard" and "soft" physiological characteristics. This explains why in Lee's parable of December 1967, the woman from the "hard" East Asian society lived after her operation, while the women from the "soft" South Asian and Southeast Asian societies died. The evidence for believing that Lee holds a Lamarckian view of evolution is found most overtly in a series of speeches in the 1960s. These speeches express his admiration for the energy and drive displayed by those of "migrant stock," who have inherited their "good glands" from their parents, and his peculiar notion of acclimatisation as genetically passed down through generations. The speeches also reveal a fear that he and the ethnic Chinese of Singapore will lose the drive which has made them successful, not only because they have left the "hard environment" of their forebears and are now living in the tropics, but because they are also living in a more prosperous, but "softer" and thus inferior culture. (60)

## **Migrant Stock**

Lee developed, or at least rationalised, his Lamarckian theories during his two month tour of Australia and New Zealand in 1965, though his thoughts had been turned in this direction for some time. Soon after his return from the tour, Lee gave a lecture to public servants at the Political Study Centre. There he told his audience that he began his tour grappling with the problems of large scale migration. He was fascinated by the similarities between Australia, New Zealand and Singapore, in so far as they are all new communities built by migrants from nothing. (61) Throughout the tour, Lee's preconceived but unclear ideas were confirmed and he became increasingly convinced that the similarities between Australia, New Zealand and Singapore were of major significance in that each of them were migrant communities which were evolving further away from their original stock." (62) Lee opined that the tough migrant cultures of Australia, New Zealand and Singapore had produced societies with "a tremendous amount of enterprise" which he characterised as a "frontier spirit." (63) The problem in Lee's mind, however, was that as prosperity comes to a migrant people, life becomes easier, the culture becomes softer, and the genes "go down":

"We are not unlike the other migrant groups in the South Pacific. We share a lot of their characteristics. We share a lot of their problems. And one of these problems is to secure what we have created for prosperity. Which means, you and me, the genes going down. ...You have come with certain equipment. Your cultural values, your habit patterns, your techniques, the drive, the push, the thrust, to conquer nature and make a life. But in the process you become a different people." (64)

Migrants and their descendants, it appears, have tremendous reserves of stamina and determination, but they are constantly faced with the challenge of maintaining their genetic inheritance because they are now living in a culture and an environment

different from the one in which their ancestors developed their good genes. Less than a week later, Lee resumed his theme with a slightly different twist at an Institute of Engineers' dinner after his hostess unwisely told him that she was thinking of migrating to Australia or New Zealand: I was spending the whole evening advising my hostess what a ghastly error it is for people to migrate... I told her of my experience. Three generations here, and I haven't got a climate I am used to yet." (65) Lee believes that he is acclimatised to northern China because that was the ancestral home of the paternal line of his ancestors. For some reason, possibly related to the patrilineal nature of Chinese culture, Lee chooses to ignore the ancestors of his mother, who is generally thought to have been part-Malay. (66) He seems also to have forgotten the difficulty he had in coping with the cold of England while he was a student at Cambridge University. (67) It is tempting to discount Lee's words as an aberration, especially when taken in the context of the rest of this undisciplined speech, some of which is quoted later in this article. It is now known that earlier in the day, Lee sent a secret letter to the Australian Prime Minister, Robert Menzies, in which he expressed deep pessimism for the future of Malaysia, and pleaded with Menzies to speak to Tunku Abdul Rahman on Singapore's behalf. (68) There can be little doubt that the mood of despair expressed in the letter continued into the evening, and was deepened when his hostess rather insensitively sought his advice about emigrating. It may have been Lee's black mood that prompted him to speak wildly on this occasion, but there can be little doubt that he was nevertheless conveying his true thoughts, since he presented the same argument in an interview with Gerald Stone seven years later: Lee: I'm extremely sensitive to changes in temperature, humidity, mainly because I think after four generations here I'm still not acclimatised.

Stone: You came from Northern China?

Lee: Mid-China, but the climate doesn't suit me. (69)

While Lee regularly complains about Singapore's stifling humidity, he wears his discomfort like a badge of honour. He believes that he does not belong in the tropics, but was "stranded" there by his great-grandfather one hundred years before he was born. (70) "My great grandfather came here with nothing," Lee told an audience in 1967. "He made something and decided to get out while the going was good! My tragedy started when he left his son behind ... and here I am." (71) In Lee's mind, finding the humidity uncomfortable is a sign that he still has the "good genes" and the "good glands" of his ancestors. The Chinese of Southeast Asia have yet another reason to be proud of their genes, because not only are they mostly Chinese, but they are of "migrant stock" which by its nature is more hardy and enterprising than the genes of those who accepted the world as it was and stayed at home:

"We came here into the mud flat, and built this out of the marshes. And I felt what they felt that if anybody feels they can come over in a canoe and take it over, then I say, over my dead body... That, I think, is at least one of the qualities of the migrant. He carries with him some of the qualities of the desperate circumstances which impelled his forefathers to leave their more comfortable societies and pit their luck and kill against unknown odds." (72) Two years later, Lee proudly proclaimed that "very few such cities on the equator the climate and the stupor, the heat and the

humidity notwithstanding - have the cultural verve and dynamism of a migrant community which have made this place throb with life and vitality." (73) It is just as well that migrants' genes are hardier than average, because in other ways they are of a lower standard than those of their racial confreres, since they are descended from "peasant stock." (74) If he and other Chinese Singaporeans can maintain their genetic and glandular standards, it is good news for Singapore, but it is a constant battle against the climate and the environment. As Lee explained to a group of trade unionists in Adelaide: "The Chinaman who came out to Southeast Asia was a very hard working, thrifty person. I mean he faced a tremendous stride [sic] because he faced floods, pestilence, famine..., [but] we are getting soft. You know, all sunshine and bananas growing on trees and coconuts falling down by themselves - this affects people. To a certain extent, you can try and counter it.... Up to a point we can strive to lessen the burden.... This is a problem all migrants face. You are part of one culture, one civilization and culture. But it is a different climate." (75)

In fact climate is only one of the factors against which the Chinese had to battle in coming to Southeast Asia. They were also coping with the debilitating effect of moving from a superior to an inferior civilisation. At the Institute of Engineers' dinner in April 1965, Lee continued his dissertation on the problems of migrating to Australia or New Zealand: "I told my hostess that where I think it is a ghastly error all this large movements of human beings seeking a better life is that one has got to be quite sure that in the end [one] is going to offer a higher civilization. Otherwise, you end up just eating more beef steak and pork chops and mutton chops and what happens when people cease to want to buy your dairy produce and leave you stranded in the South Pacific as I am stranded in Southeast Asia. ...I advised her against settling in Australia and New Zealand because I am quite sure that her progeny will regret all this because they were unlikely to create a civilization vaster and greater than the one they left behind. I say, before you leave behind all these things just make sure you are going to create something better. And if you are not going to, then perhaps it shouldn't be done because this is the way I thought about my great grandfather leaving me here." (76) Lee argued that the debilitating effects of climate and moving to an inferior civilisation were too great to resist in the long term, (77) although measures could be taken to slow down their effects.

### **Cultural Eugenics**

The last plank of Lee's racial logic is his view of cultural eugenics and dysgenics. Lee believes that some cultures have social customs which are naturally eugenic while others are burdened with dysgenic sexual mores. He believes, for instance, that the Catholic Church suffers from a dysgenic culture: "All the bright young men became Catholic priests and did not marry. Bright priests, celibate, produce no children. And the result of several generations of bright Fathers producing no children? Less bright children in the Catholic world." (78)

Of more practical relevance to the development of Lee's politic I thought is his view that the genetic quality of the Malays is low because of their dysgenic Culture. In 1989 Lee confirmed his general agreement with Mahathir Mohamad's The Malay

Dilemma, which argued in part: "Malays abhor the state of celibacy. To remain unmarried was and is considered shameful. Everyone must be married at some time or other. The result is that whether a person is fit or unfit for marriage, he or she still marries and reproduces. An idiot or a simpleton is often married off to an old widower, ostensibly to take care of him in his old age. If this is not possible, backward relatives are paired off in marriage. These people survive, reproduce and propagate their species. The cumulative effect of this can be left to the imagination." (79)

Of these and other arguments which purportedly account for the supposed backwardness of Malays, Lee said: "From that book I realised that [Dr Mahathir] believed in it as a medical man - that these were problems of the development of the Malay race, Anthropological problems, and these were strongly-held views. Indeed, I found myself in agreement with three-quarters of his analysis of the problem - that the Malays had always withdrawn from competition and never really entered into the mainstream of economic activity; that the Malays would always get their children or relatives married off regardless of whether it was good or bad." (80)

The Ashkenazi Jews, on the other hand, are among an elite of races which have a thoroughly eugenic culture: "From the 10th to 11th century in Europe, in Ashkenazim, the practice developed of the rabbi becoming the most desirable son-in-law because he is usually the brightest of the flock. ... So he becomes the richest and wealthiest. He marries young, is successful, probably bright. He has large numbers of children and the brightest of the children will become the rabbi and so it goes on." (81)

The Chinese also have benefited from centuries of practising cultural eugenics, though his logic works only if you assume that a person's economic status directly reflects his or her intelligence and energy: "In the older generations, economics and culture settled it. The pattern of procreation was settled by economics and culture. The richer you are, the more successful you are, the more wives you have, the more children you have. That's the way it was settled. I am the son of a successful chap. I myself am successful, so I marry young and I marry more wives and I have more children. You read Hong Lou Meng, A Dream of the Red Chamber, or you read Jin Ping Mei, and you'll find Chinese society in the 16th, 17th century described. So the successful merchant or the mandarin, he gets the pick of all the rich men's daughters and the prettiest village girls and has probably five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten different wives and concubines and many children. And the poor labourer who's dumb and slow, he's neutered. It's like the lion or the stag that's outside the flock. He has no harems, so he does not pass his genes down. So, in that way, a smarter population emerges." (82)

If Lee believes that this is the natural order of affairs for Chinese, it is no wonder that he raised the possibility of reintroducing polygamy as part of his eugenics programme. (83) Lee's propensity to identify intelligence with economic status seems to have been a deep-seated trait which had been with Lee since childhood. In his old age he told his authorised biographers, "In primary school, I had no trouble doing well. Probably because my fellow students were poor and they were not very bright and advantaged ... I had no trouble staying ahead of the class." (84) It must be acknowledged that Lee was speaking retrospectively, and that his words stop just

short of explicitly drawing a direct, let alone a causal link between the economic status of parents and the intelligence of children. His words are not, therefore, unequivocal proof that Lee formed these ideas in childhood. They do, however, suggest that many of his ideas of the elite are built upon the prejudices associated with economic class. For all of Lee's supposed empirical reasoning and his theorising, his elitism and geneticism looks suspiciously like the conceit born of a pampered and privileged childhood.

### **The Anthropologist**

Lee's racial hierarchy appears to have been based initially on his interpretation of Toynbee, but Lee needed to confirm his theories by observation. Speaking of his racial views in the 1990s, he told his biographers: "This is something which I have read and I tested against my observations. We read many things. The fact that it's in print and repeated by three, four authors does not make it true. They may all be wrong. But through my own experience, meeting people, talking to them, watching them, I conclude yes, there is this difference. Then it becomes part of the accepted facts of life, for me." (85)

We will probably never know all of the experiential factors which fostered Lee's perception of racial differences, but he has intimated that his travels in Europe during the 1940s and 1950s contributed to a perception of a European racial hierarchy similar to that which he revealed for Asia in the 1960s. His reminiscence also indicates how little it took to convince Lee that he was correct once he had already made up his mind:

"On my first visit to Germany in 1956, we had to stop in Frankfurt on our way to London. We had [earlier] stopped in Rome. This languid Italian voice over the loudspeaker said something ... And there were Italian workers trundling trolleys at the airport. It was so relaxed, the atmosphere and the pace of work. Then the next stop was Frankfurt. And immediately, the climate was a bit cooler and chillier. And a voice came across the loudspeaker: "Achtung! Achtung! " The chaps were the same, porters, but bigger-sized and trundling away. These were people who were defeated and completely destroyed and they were rebuilding. I could sense the goal, the dynamism. ... I also visited Switzerland when I was a student in '47, '48, on holiday. I came down by train from Paris to Geneva. Paris was black bread, dirty, after the war. I arrived at Geneva that morning, sleeping overnight. It was marvellous. Clean, beautiful, swept streets, nice buildings, marvellous white pillowcases and sheets, white bread after dark dirty bread and abundant food and so on. But hardworking, punctilious, the way they did your bed and cleaned up your rooms. It told me something about why some people succeed and some people don't. Switzerland has a small population. If they didn't have those qualities, they would have been overrun ...(86)

Lee did not spell out explicitly the logic of environmental determinism, but this passage reveals an emerging pattern in Lee's thinking. First, he is apparently blessed with the ability to determine a culture's character from an airport stopover or from a short holiday. Second, cultures which evolved in cooler, harsher climates were more

worthy of his admiration than those which developed in warmer and more sultry climes. Although he did not highlight the climatic difference between Geneva and Paris, as he did between Frankfurt and Rome, it is unlikely to be a coincidence that in both instances Lee perceived the harsher, cooler climate as having produced the "people who succeed."

### **Climate**

The logic by which Lee synthesised his first principles is now evident. We know that Lee took Toynbee's "Challenge and Response" thesis and turned it into a theory of environmental determinism whereby the characteristics of a people, both cultural and physiological, are largely the result of environmental influences. In his own mind, Lee has obscured the division between culture and genetics. As he told his authorised biographers, the "drive to protect your own offspring is ... in the genes. And built into that is a certain cultural pattern, which varies from society to society." (87) He considers those peoples who evolved in a harsh climate, such as the Chinese, to be tougher, more resolute and more innovative than those who evolved in tropical climes. The effect of the environment on people was thus comprehensive. It affected both the character of the civilisation which they created, and their physiology, because inherited characteristics can, in Lee's Lamarckian view of evolution, be inherited. This means that people who lived in an environment which required more stamina to survive and flourish passed on to their offspring some of the improvements that they inadvertently made in themselves: better genes and better ductless glands. Those of "migrant stock" have particularly good genes because their forefathers must have had exceptionally good glands, otherwise they could not have braved the unknown and made a new life for themselves. Lee's great fear, however, is that the good genes which developed through living in a harsh environment can be lost through living an easier life in a softer climate.

Lee's perception of the migrant's good glands is actually critical to his racial hierarchy as it applies in Singapore, since most Singaporean Chinese are descended from illiterate peasants who, in China's culturally eugenic society, would normally be "neutered." Lee's emphasis on the migrant's good glands flatly contradicts his elitism, the logic of cultural eugenicism, and his usual practice of blindly equaling economic status with talent and intelligence. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that it is a rationalisation developed specifically for the "benefit" of Southeast Asia's Chinese population who, on the basis of his usual logic, should be dumb and slow. The fact that Lee resorts to such a deft piece of sophistry supports the argument that his racial world view, as explained and defended in adulthood, is an attempt to justify his preconceived notions of the racial hierarchy, rather than the result of dispassionate logic applied to empirical evidence. While his adult experiences probably did influence the development of his world view and his political thought, the essence of his conclusions regarding the hierarchy of Asian races owes more to the prejudices he learnt as a child than it does to his observations of the porters at Rome and Frankfurt airports, or to his reading of Arnold Toynbee and Gunnar Myrdal. (88)

### **Not a Social Darwinist**

This article has described in detail the character of Lee Kuan Yew's racial views substantially using his own words as evidence. After a lifetime of being circumspect on the question of race, Lee has finally spoken openly, revealing himself as doctrinaire racist. Yet it would be a mistake to condemn Lee as a hard line racist in every sense of the word. Such a characterisation of his views would be a distortion of both his logic and his natural disposition. There can be no doubt that Lee is a racist in the sense that he believes that some races and some ethnically-based cultures are inherently superior to others. His own words leave no doubt about this assertion, though it should be recognised that this in itself hardly makes him remarkable in Asia. He is also a racist in the sense that he has integrated his racial views into his political agenda and he has created a regime which accentuates racial categorisation. This assertion, too, is beyond dispute, yet it should be acknowledged that affirmative action programmes in the United States and Australia are based upon racial classifications and are widely accepted as part of modern liberal orthodoxy. Of equal significance to our study of his political thought are the aspects of political and personal racism that Lee has avoided by his eclectic approach. Lee's idiosyncratic rationalisation of his racial views, for instance, has undermined the tendency to dismiss any race as being irredeemably inferior, or unchangeably superior. He has not conceived of any race as being supreme, even though some are more intelligent and hardier than others. Unlike Social Darwinian racists, he does not base his views on the assumption that any race is a lower or higher evolutionary form of humanity. He sees no unbridgeable divide between races. Although his environmental determinism, Lamarckian view of evolution and cultural eugenicism may explain the higher intelligence and better glands of those who hail from a "hard" society, they also create a firm line of continuity between the different races, and give each race the capacity to change for the better or the worse: hence Lee's efforts to "improve" racial communities by "tinkering" with their cultures. (89) The result has been that despite instances of overt racial discrimination by Lee's government, and more common occasions of discrimination in Singaporean society, Lee has created a society which has a relatively low level of racial tension, despite having a high level of racial consciousness. Considering his own racial views and the nature of the society he inherited, this is a remarkable achievement which, despite its shortcomings, should be acknowledged.

Our understanding of the nature of Lee's views on cultural and racial evolution now enables us to perceive a new depth in Lee's public policies and in the development of his political thought. More significantly, it gives us a fresh insight into the deep fears which have driven Lee throughout his public life, and especially since his sinicisation in the late 1970s Lee has married pessimism, progressivism and geneticism to produce a vision of a horrible world where every step on the road to progress creates new problems which will drag civilisation down to the depths again - unless the elite takes charge and applies itself creatively and scientifically to overcoming these challenges. (90) Such an attitude is, of course, the height of hubris, but this does not concern Lee. By the late 1970s Lee was very comfortable with

hubris. He had been almost single-handedly transforming and re-transforming the physical, political, linguistic and cultural landscape of Singapore for nearly two decades. He had been making and breaking careers and industries, politicians and ideologies, and setting patterns of work, procreation and education for about two million people. He had assumed more control of his countrymen's lives than the Pope claims over the lives of Catholics. Furthermore, by the early 1980s ill health and old age amongst his colleagues meant that he could now foresee the day when he would be the last of the "old guard" left in Cabinet a paramount leader without rivals, rather than a primus inter pares. Lee himself spoke of the difference this set of retirements has made to Cabinet. The old guard leaders were never compliant and were forthright in their opposition to many of Lee's policies. (91)

After their retirement, however, he did not "waste time taking opinions all around" the Cabinet, but simply told his colleagues what he wanted and it was up to them to disagree. (92) One does not have to be a Western liberal to see that this near-omnipotence and unrivalled pre-eminence is not healthy for either the nation or the leader. Lee's new freedom, combined with his perception that cultural and dysgenic disaster were imminent seem to have been at the heart of Lee's quixotic approach to politics in the 1980s. His eugenics policies and the sinicization programme converged as the complementary answers to the challenge of the West, degenerating genes and the search for talent.

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