Chapter Seven

# Questioning "From Third World to First"

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I didn't grow up in Singapore. I first visited the city-state in my late twenties, and didn't make it my home until several more years later. Migration to another country having left the countries of your birth and adult residence is a curious process. As someone who has only known Singapore from the early 1990s onwards, I'm in a strange way similar to a generation of Singaporeans twenty years younger than myself: living a reality of a very wealthy yet increasingly unequal society, distant from a lived past, but perhaps distant enough to begin to ask questions of stories that we're told. This process of questioning is also driven by my academic interests: I am a scholar of literary studies, and I'm particularly interested in the way in which stories work. In this book we talk about myths, about stories which enables us to make sense of the world, into which we fit everyday personal experiences, information we absorb through listening, reading, and watching various media and our own memories of the past. A myth that completely disregards these experiences wouldn't work. But myths—our way of telling a common sense story about the past—distort the raw material of experience, foregrounding some elements and forgetting others. It is impossible to live without myths, but some myths are more useful than others. A continued reliance on a single myth may be dangerous, particularly at a time of social and political change in which we need to view the challenges we face from a new perspective.

In the discussion below, I want to examine the myth encapsulated in the phrase from 'Third World to First'. This myth is more recent than we might think, and it is not, as it might first appear, simply about economic growth. It is also based on the forgetting of elements of Singapore's pre- and post-independence past that we might now wish to remember. Finally, I want to suggest a possible alternative to the myth, one that may be more useful for us in reflecting on some of the challenges facing contemporary Singapore.

## Knowing the Myth

What is the myth of 'From Third World to First?' Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's 2014 National Day Message pictured him standing in front of a rather anonymous looking water feature, with national day bunting and HDB flats in the background. This is how the speech began:

> I am here at the Alexandra Park Connector near Dawson. This area used to be kampongs and swamps. Now this neighbourhood includes homes, shops, and restaurants, beautifully integrated with nature, running water and green spaces.
>
> Dawson is an example of how we are upgrading Singapore, year by year. We are working together to improve our lives, build a better home, and hand to our children a better Singapore than what we inherited.
>
> This was the spirit of our pioneers. They worked hard to take Singapore from Third World to First. They worked together. Thanks to them, we have today's Singapore.[1]

This speech outlines the myth for us. Singapore, on independence in 1965, was a Third World country with no natural resources. Through the hard work of its citizens, Singapore by the middle of the 1990s had achieved First World status after three decades rapid and almost uninterrupted economic growth. Underlying the myth are other assumptions. The prioritisation of economic growth seen as essential to Singapore's continual survival; debate or conflict that might cause inefficiencies in the economy should be discouraged. Yet there is also a moral dimension to this argument, an unconscious assumption that Singaporeans have not yet matured enough as a people to consider themselves truly First World. Ironically, the very results of rapid economic development —a lack of graciousness, excessive consumption, the erosion of organic community ties—are put forward as symptoms of continued social immaturity. We are told that we are not yet quite ready to be a First World society. This myth of progress from Third World to First enjoys wide acceptance, not only in the government or the civil service. The Worker's Party manifesto in the 2011 general election in which, for the first time, an opposition party won a Group Representative Constituency, was titled *Towards a First World Parliament*.



## The Economic Story

The myth can first be questioned from an economic perspective. Rapid economic development certainly occurred in Singapore from 1965 to 1995, and was accompanied by wholescale changes to many people's lives: the environment they inhabited, the languages they spoke, and even basic ways of relating to other human beings. But in absolute economic terms the rise from 1965 was essentially from the status of what we would now call a middle income country to a high income country. If we look at World Bank statistics for per capita GDP in 1965, we can see this clearly. Rwanda in 1965, with a per capita GDP of US$46 at current prices, was a Third World country in economic terms. South Korea, still recovering from a devastating war, might also plausibly have been called a Third World economy, its per capita GDP still only reaching $106. Singapore, with a per capita GDP of $516, was much poorer than major developed economies such as Canada, the United Kingdom, or France, but essentially in the middle of the pack in global terms, ahead of Portugal and Mexico, but just a little behind Jordan. Economic growth, indeed, picked up in the 1950s and early 1960s, during times that the myth tells us Singapore was racked by strikes and political conflict. A recent monograph by Ichiro Sugimoto published under the auspices of the Economic Growth Centre of the Division of Economics, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Nanyang Technological University, has attempted to reconstruct historical GDP data for Singapore. GDP growth rates increased substantially after 1965, but the economy grew in a fairly healthy manner from 1950 to 1965, almost tripling in size between these dates.[2] Most scholarship from the early 1960s already views Singapore as a relatively wealthy society, although an unequal one, now undergoing the early stages of industrialisation and redistribution of wealth.

## The Moral Story

A second, more profound way of questioning the myth is to think of the way it uses the idea of the Third World in moral terms. The phrase 'From Third World to First' was hardly ever used before the publication of the second volume of Lee Kuan Yew's memoirs, which took the phrase as its title, in 2000: it spread rapidly after this in parliamentary debates, in the press, and in government documents. Yet Lee's two volumes of memoirs, written towards the end of a political career, frame the past in a retrospective manner. Like all autobiographies, they give a

meaning to events of the life in the present that is very different from the significance that a much younger Lee attributed to them at the time they happened, thirty or forty years before the books were written.

This process of reinterpretation is particularly striking with reference to the Third World. In both *From Third World to First* and *The Singapore Story* (1998) Lee sees the Third World as a site of failure. In a passage in *The Singapore Story*, he describes a series of visits to Lusaka, the capital Zambia, over the three decades he served as Prime Minister of Singapore. On the first, when Zambia is still the British colony of Northern Rhodesia, everything is in order; later, on subsequent visits, he notices a growing deterioration: weeds replace roses by the roadside, and are in turn covered over in tarmac. 'I had received', he writes in 1998, 'an unforgettable lesson in decolonisation. [W]hen misguided policies based on half-digested theories of socialism and redistribution of wealth were compounded by less than competent government, societies formerly held together by colonial power splintered, with appalling consequences'.[3] The Third World Singapore has left behind is not just the *kampung* or the swamp, but also a morass of misguided ideals.

This narrative is familiar to us now, but would have seemed strangely out of place in the 1960s and 1970s. Singapore's independence came towards the end of a worldwide movement of decolonisation stretching from the independence of the Philippines in 1946 through to that of Portugal's African colonies in 1975. Most new governments that came to power upon independence were committed to social restructuring to move away from the inequalities of colonialism. The colonisers would depart, and the stratified societies they left behind would be rebuilt. Most of these visions of a new society drew on philosophies of socialism, and the need for governments to actively intervene in markets to help foster social equality: a majority of newly-independent states explicitly identified themselves as socialist. The term 'Third World' was coined in 1953 by the French economist Alfred Sauvy, through analogy with the Third Estate, with those who were excluded by French society in the Eighteenth Century, and thus who launched the French Revolution. 'This Third World', Sauvy wrote, 'ignored, exploited, despised just as the Third Estate was, wants, itself also, to be something' (my translation).[4] Third World solidarity developed quickly, cemented by the Afro-Asian Conference in Bandung, in Indonesia, in 1955, which was attended by Sukarno, Zhou Enlai, Kwame Nkrumah, Gamal Abdel Nasser and others—representatives of over half the world's population. In Shenton Way, hidden by all those glass and steel towers, you can still find a much more modest structure, the Afro-Asia Building, a ghostly survival from that time.



The People's Action Party was very much part of this movement. The 1959 manifesto envisioned a 'socialist society', and this was supported even by figures like Goh Keng Swee, who had a commitment to many elements of free market economics. Just after Malaysia had just come into existence, in early 1964, Lee Kuan Yew toured the Third World, visiting seventeen African countries in thirty-five days, and trying to convince African and Asian leaders that its formation was not, as Sukarno maintained, a neo-colonial plot. Lee maintained a personal investment in the example of some Third World leaders. When Nkrumah was overthrown by a coup in 1966, Lee wrote to him in exile in Guinea, expressing support.

What is perhaps surprising in retrospect is how long an identification with socialism and the Third World continued in Singapore, long after the splintering of the PAP in 1961, and indeed long after independence in 1965. When the People's Action Party was forced out of the Socialist International in 1976, they responded with an essay collection edited by Devan Nair entitled *Socialism that Works: the Singapore Way*. In individual essays writers such as S. Rajaratnam identified with the Third World, criticising European member parties who were unable to 'sit in the International with lesser breeds who in their own way have made a reasonable success of democratic socialism and who steadfastly refuse to acknowledge either their dependence on, or inferiority before, your eminences'.[5] In a speech to a joint meeting of Congress in Washington in 1985, twenty years after independence, Lee Kuan Yew could still note that it was rare that 'someone representing two and a half million people from a small country in the Third World is offered the opportunity to address the representatives of 240 million people who form the World's most wealthy, and most advanced nation,' and praise the anticolonial spirit of the American Founding Fathers.[6] Yet by this time discussions in the Singapore Parliament and elsewhere made less use of the term Third World, and showed increasing identification with Asia and Asian Values. Socialism lingered a little longer, and arguably still lingers in Singapore today. In the early 1990s George Yeo, one of the most intellectually interesting of a new generation of PAP leaders, argued that Singapore's system was a form of 'supply-side socialism'.[7] Even at the end of his life, Lee Kuan Yew continued to hold onto socialism as a principle: in a 2007 dialogue with young PAP members at St James's Power Station, he quoted approvingly an academic

study that described Singapore's system as 'socialist ... in fact, a variant of social democracy'.[8] And in the U.S. embassy cables posted by Wikileaks in 2011, Teo Ser Luck is represented as remarking to his American interlocutors 'with apparent embarrassment [to his anti-communist US hosts] that YP members still follow PAP tradition and call each other 'comrade' in certain formal settings'.[9]

## A Different Myth

In both moral and economic terms, then, the history of Singapore's identification with socialism and the Third World is very different from the myth that we tell ourselves today. In addition, the myth of from Third World to First is a myth that has lost utility in contemporary Singapore, where issues of social inequality and redistribution of wealth seem more pressing than those of absolute economic growth. Is there a more useful myth we might tell ourselves, one that would prompt us to remember the past?

In imagining such a myth we might first look again at the way that we tell stories about nationhood. Most stories of nationhood are told in the form of a quest narrative that scholars in literary studies call a Romance. A young hero sets out from a village – or perhaps a *kampung* – and enters a much wider world, in which he (and the hero is usually male) has a series of adventures. He always has a goal to search for: a magical object, perhaps, that must be discovered, or a historical wrong that must be righted. In the stories that nations tell themselves, the process of development is a quest that never quite ends: the goal of a complete nation is always pursued, but never quite achieved. Thus in 1999, more than three decades after independence, then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong could note that 'Singapore is not yet a nation' but 'only a state, a sovereign entity' and call on Singaporeans to come together to make the 'Singaporean tribe.'[10] This Romance narrative is what we think of as the Singapore story: a rise from Third World to First, with Raffles and then Lee Kuan Yew as protagonists. In this story Singaporeans are on an endless quest for nationhood but can never ever quite reach their goals, never become fully Singaporean.

At times of crisis, however, when self-reflection has been needed, some nations have told part of their narratives as Tragedy. Tragedy begins by looking like Romance: a hero initially succeeds beyond his wildest dreams. Yet his success begins to be undermined: he struggles, but he is eventually brought down. Tragic failure does not, we belatedly realise, occur through an accident: it occurs because of an innate flaw or fault that must be acknowledged, and its consequences worked through. Order is painfully restored: we then begin again. It would be impossible to plot the whole of a national history as tragedy, but tragedy as a narrative mode can be useful at moments of crisis in national history when self-reflection is needed.



How might we might think of elements of Singapore's history in a tragic mode? We might, I think, begin with what for me is the most important year in modern Singapore's history: not 1965, but 1959, when, with the advent of self-rule, the people of Singapore, on a wide and representative franchise, elected a People's Action Party government with a manifesto that promised radical and democratic social change. We often want to celebrate the PAP victory in 1959, before the Big Split, as the triumph of a broad left coalition, with newly-elected Members of the Legislative Assembly elected from all classes and communities. Yet it is worth remembering that Lee Kuan Yew's first cabinet in 1959 was drawn almost exclusively from the English-educated middle class elites: Lee himself, Goh Keng Swee, Kenneth Byrne, S. Rajaratnam, Toh Chin Chye, Ong Pang Boon, Yong Nyuk Lin and Ong Eng Guan all had studied at English-medium universities, while Ahmad Ibrahim was the only cabinet member without an Anglophone university education.

What most of those men shared, however, was the sobering experience of the Japanese occupation, a period in which they were radically disempowered and forced to question the social privilege that they had previously taken for granted. This experience of being forced to unlearn privilege, I think, made them uniquely sensitive to issues of social inequality. We tend to forget that Goh Keng Swee's early intellectual career was almost exclusively focused on understanding and defining poverty in Singapore, with the ultimate goal of eliminating it. The two major surveys of social inequality he was responsible for, the 1947 *Social Survey of Singapore* and the 1956 *Urban Incomes & Housing*, form an important foundation of the history of social welfare outlined by Ho Chi Tim in another chapter in this book. Goh's convictions regarding inequality also extended to personal ethics. In 1957, the Straits Times reported with astonishment that he and other local officers had proposed that their salaries should be cut substantially should any of them be promoted to the position of Permanent Secretary. 'A reduction in top bracket wages is inevitable', Goh was represented as saying. 'It is part of a trend towards an egalitarian society'.[11] Donald Low has recently noted that in the 1960s and 1970s, Goh and Rajaratnam both viewed Singapore's growth strategy of attracting multinational corporations to accelerate development as a means to an end, not an end in itself. Economic growth would be a useful temporary

short cut, but eventually attention would need to be given to its 'political, social and cultural implications'.[12]

The unlearning of privilege and visions of social inequality of the first generation of Singapore's postcolonial political leadership dovetails neatly with the larger intellectual history of identification with socialism and the Third World I outlined earlier. From 1965 onwards, Singapore did achieve remarkable and almost uninterrupted economic growth. From 1959 onwards, walls went up: new estates in Queenstown, then Toh Payoh, and then across the island; the Jurong Industrial Estate, and later the new airport in Changi.

In 1989, half a world away, a wall came down in Berlin. The Cold War was over. Throughout the world, people began to search for a way of combining the economic growth apparently enabled by the free market economics of Reagan and Thatcher with a greater commitment to social justice and the redistribution of wealth. Politicians such as Tony Blair and Bill Clinton talked of a 'Third Way' between Capitalism and Socialism, in which government attempted to leverage the benefits of the free market in the service of a more equal society. The world began to beat a path to Singapore's door. Blair, indeed, looking for a way to combine his Labour Party's legacy of concern for social justice with free market economics, visited Singapore as opposition leader in 1996, and his experience in the city-state fed into his notion of a 'stakeholder society'.[13] And yet in Singapore, such attention coincided with the accession to power of a new generation of leaders who had not had to unlearn privilege in the manner of the previous generation, and who had only a fleeting knowledge of previous identifications with socialism and the Third World. In our tragic narrative, this was the moment of hubris. Europe, North America and other parts of Asia appeared to move left, attempting to reconcile social democracy and neoliberal economics, so Singapore moved right, into a pursuit of economic growth for its own sake without a full consideration of the social cost.

## The Last Word

As a teacher in Singapore, I've found that I've learned much of what I know from my students, and yet I also hope that my teaching has at times opened up intellectual avenues for that others can follow. I thought I might thus give another teacher, from much longer ago, the last word. In 1982, Thomas Silcock, who had served as professor of Economics at Raffles College and the University of Malaya from 1938 to 1960, was interviewed by the National Archives as part



of an oral history project on the history of education in Singapore. Silcock was an interesting man, who had grown up in a Quaker household with 'considerable pacifist and Marxist sympathies', and who tried his best to work for social justice under colonialism, hiring Cambridge-trained Lim Tay Boh as a lecturer in 1939 despite racist opposition from expatriate staff, and refusing to monitor his classes in any different way from the way he monitored the performance of European faculty.[14] Among Silcock's students were Goh Keng Swee and Lim Kim San, and Malayan Democratic Union and later Malayan Communist Party activist Eu Chooi Yip; it is also likely that he taught both Lee Kuan Yew and Kwa Geok Choo.

At the end of his oral history interview Silcock was asked to reflect on the state of Singapore in the early 1980s. Silcock was rightfully modest: he would not claim credit for his students' achievements, for which they alone were responsible. He was also loyal to his former students, and did not want to criticise them. But even then, in 1982, Silcock was uneasy that Singapore's development was moving in the wrong direction. He praised the fact that the 'social engineering, in terms of housing, has shown a good deal of imagination. ... I feel most grateful for this and feel that it's done a great deal for the dignity and for the welfare of people in Singapore'. Yet he worried about the idea that wealth in itself was paramount. 'Originally', he noted, the aims of growth were to add 'to the wealth of people who were desperately poor and giving them a decent life. And that was the main aim and that has been . . . achieved. And in order to go on achieving, they feel they must go on advancing because otherwise they can't remain a nation'. He paused, and then continued. 'That's not what it's for ... I feel very strongly about this. Economics is about getting rid of poverty; it's not about making people richer'.[15]

[42]Ibid., 7-8.
[43]Ibid., 9-10.
[44]Ibid., 11-18.
[45]Media Development Authority (MDA), *Singapore Media Fusion Plan* (Singapore: MDA, 2009), 23.
[46]Elsie Yim, *Sector Report: Creative and Media - Singapore* (Singapore: UK Trade and Investment, 2009), 7.
[47]Elsie Yim, *Sector Report: Creative and Media - Singapore.*
[48]Ibid., 8.
[49]Tisch Asia's announcement was made in November 2012. For further information, read the announcement on their website at: http://www.tischasia.nyu.edu.sg/object/tischasiaupdates.html (accessed: 11 April 2014).
[50]Media Development Authority (MDA), 'International experts commence the progress of Singapore's media sector and suggest new growth areas', 2010, 2.
[51]Elsie Yim, *Sector Report: Creative and Media - Singapore*, 8.
[52]Media Development Authority (MDA), *Singapore Media Fusion Plan* (Singapore: MDA, 2009), 31.
[53]Ibid., 2.
[54]Ibid., 26.
[55]See Leong Yew, *Asianism and the Politics of Regional Consciousness in Singapore* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014).

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[2]Ichiro Sugimoto, *Economic Growth of Singapore in the Twentieth Century: Historical GDP Estimates and Empirical Investigations* (Singapore: World Scientific, 2011), 183.
[3]Lee Kuan Yew, *The Singapore Story: Memoirs of Lee Kuan Yew* (Singapore: Times Editions, 1998), 539.
[4]Alfred Sauvy, "Trois Mondes, une Planète," *L'Observateur* 118 (14 August 1952): 14.
[5]S. Rajaratnam, "An Epistle to the Synod of the Socialist Orthodox Church," in *Socialism that Works: The Singapore Way*, ed. C.V. Devan Nair (Singapore, Federal, 1976), 10.
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[7]George Yeo Yong-Boon, "Speech by George Yeo, Minister for Information & the Arts and Second Minister for Trade & Industry at the Triennial Delegates Conference on 3 April 97 at 9.30am" (Singapore: Ministry of Information, Community and the Arts, 1997), *Archives Online*, National Archives of Singapore, document no. 1997040303, 6.
[8]Lee Kuan Yew, "Dialogue with the Young People's Action Party at the St. James Power Station, Singapore, 22 April 2007," in *The Papers of Lee Kuan Yew (1990-2011) Vol. 7: 2006-2008* (Singapore: Gale Asia, 2013), 273.
[9]"CDA Calls on Young PAP Chairman Teo Ser Luck," 3 April 2009, 11:26 (Friday), Wikileaks, accessed 27 November 2014, https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09SINGAPORE316_a.html.



[10]Goh Chok Tong, "Speech by Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong on Singapore 21 Debate in Parliament on Wednesday, 5 May 1999, at 2.30 PM," (Singapore: Ministry of Information, Community and the Arts, 1999), *Archives Online*, National Archives of Singapore, document gct19990505d.
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[14]Thomas Silcock, *A History of Economics Teaching & Graduates in Singapore* (Singapore: Department of Economics and Statistics, National University of Singapore: 1985), 37-39.
[15]Thomas Silcock, Oral History Interview, 29 April 1982. *Archives Online*, National Archives of Singapore, accession number 000180.

## Social Welfare in Singapore: Myth and History

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[3]Goh Chok Tong, "New Singapore," National Day Rally Address by Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, Speech in English on 19 August 2001, accessed 2 August 2015 , http://archivesonline.nas.sg/speeches/view-html?filename=2001081903.htm; Goh Chok Tong, [no title], Speech at The Swearing-in Ceremony of Mayors of Community Development Council Districts on Saturday, 5 January 2002, accessed 2 August 2015, http://archivesonline.nas.sg/speeches/view-html?filename=2002010503.htm. .
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[5]MSF, "Assistance - Ministry of Social and Family Development", accessed 2 August 2015, http://app.msf.gov.sg/Assistance.
[6]"CPF Overview", *Central Provident Fund (CPF)*, accessed 2 August 2015 https://mycpf.cpf.gov.sg/Members/AboutUs/about-us-info/cpf-overview.
[7]The NUS Department of Social Work began as a diploma programme in 1952 under the Department of Economics in the old University of Malaya. SIM University was originally established as an educational institute for business management to support Singapore's early economic development. In 2005, it became a full-fledged university. The Social Service Institute was officially opened in 2003, and launched a degree in social work in partnership with Monash University.