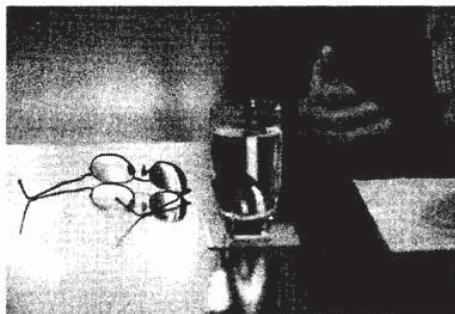


10 NOT YOUR AVERAGE GRANDAD¹



I WAS NOT looking forward to this at all. The atmosphere in the Sheares Room in the Istana was tense, despite my teammates' small talk and encouraging words from my colleague, Robin Chan. Across the wide mahogany table from us, the empty seat was a constant reminder that, in a few minutes, Minister Mentor Lee would stride in and sit down in that chair for the last in a series of heavyweight Q&A sessions held with panel members of this book over the preceding months. I was directly opposite that chair. And I was going to ask Singapore's founding father and global statesman what his favourite movie was.

Lee's press secretary sensed my nervousness. "Talk to him like you would talk to your grandad," she said. "With respect, but no need to be too stiff!" Robin and I exchanged a rueful glance. He said, "Can you imagine going, 'Hi, grandad'? Whoa." I had to agree. My grandfathers would never have written memoirs endorsed by Henry Kissinger.

¹ This chapter was written by Rachel Lin, 25, the youngest member of our team of seven writers.

Before that afternoon, I'd had an easy job. I joined the team behind this book right at the start as an all-round Girl Friday. The writers told me what material they wanted for their chapters. It was my job to hunt down the sources, read up on climate change and Scandinavian welfare and national income statistics and whatnot, ring up experts, organise focus groups and tie it all together in countless briefings and emails. There were even a few arduous weeks spent sifting through 27,000 National Archives photos of Lee.

But this was something completely different. I should have realised at the start that Robin and I – the two youngest members of the team – had been recruited for a reason. The dreadful truth only emerged during a planning discussion a couple of months into the project: the writers wanted to have a chapter on youth and Robin and I were in charge.

"Think of yourselves as the sacrificial la... I mean interlocutors," my boss told us. "Ask him questions that young Singaporeans want to ask."

It was a tall order. There were only two of us journalists and a multitude of young Singaporeans out there with opinions. Looking at ourselves, the prospect seemed even dimmer. How could they possibly expect two overseas-educated *angmoh pai* (Hokkien for "Westernised folks") – including myself, a frequent wearer of black clothes and sporting jewellery studs pierced into the skin near an eye – to represent young Singaporeans?

The first thing to do was to consult the experts.

Surveys that we checked out by National University of Singapore academics and also the National Youth Council gave us a rough picture of the average young Singaporean – well-educated, fundamentally traditional and materialist, but shifting subtly away from the older generation's conservatism.

These surveys did not tell us what they would say in their own words, though. So Robin and I set about collecting questions from as many people as possible. Okay, one of the things we used was Facebook. And no, we didn't just ask our friends. We tried to get questions from young Singaporeans of diverse backgrounds. Essentially, this was what we

posed: “If you could ask MM Lee any question at all, no matter how weird or trivial or irreverent, what would it be?”

After two weeks of begging, we came up with a list of almost 70 questions. They gave us a pretty good insight into the issues that fire up young people: sexuality, gender, culture, the environment, politics, disability.

Other questions, however, gave us pause. Early on in the process, we had decided not to edit the questions at all, apart from correcting spelling and grammar mistakes. We wanted the questions to reach Lee in the same shape as they were in when they were submitted to us. We also promised that all the questions would find their way to him, except for anything that was just too insane or, as in the case of one particularly hilarious one written half in Hokkien, a rhetorical question.

Personally, I was delighted with how people responded to the “no matter how weird or trivial or irreverent” bit. I could almost imagine the wide grins and raised eyebrows behind some of the more light-hearted suggestions:

“Do you believe in fengshui and astrology?”

“Does your food go through a tester before you eat?”

“Who’s your favourite child or grandchild?”

Those are the kinds of question I’d ask my grandad, as a bit of fun. Okay, maybe not the “favourite grandchild” one, in case I opened a massive can of worms.

But putting them to Lee? As I sat waiting for his entrance, I was starting to have doubts. Quite a number of the young Singaporeans that I’d contacted – especially those aged below 20 – said they had questions, but didn’t want to reveal them. They feared retribution of some kind. Some of them mentioned “things” that had happened to their relatives after some anti-government slip of the tongue, or a non-PAP vote.

Their fear was beginning to rub off on me, though not because of those “things”. I had other reasons to hesitate. Lee had given me sleepless nights ever since I started work on this project, and it wasn’t because I’d read about him so much that I’d started dreaming about him, too. As

for most Singaporeans, he'd become a kind of political celebrity to me, someone to put up on a pedestal or shoot down in flames, depending on whether you liked the PAP or not. I was curious about his personal life, but turned off by some of his political views. Even though, having already taken part in several Q&A sessions for this book, I now had a more nuanced understanding of his ideas, and even though I had come to know that a human heart does beat under that white uniform, I was still in deep conflict.

In earlier interviews, Lee had held forth about Singapore's vulnerability, how we had little margin for error. It depressed me. I wanted something to fight for that didn't sound freakishly like a castle under siege defended by dogmatic, extremely irritable knights.

The Singapore I loved, the one I had grown up in and where my childhood memories were formed, was a place of warmth and friendship. The Singapore I doubted, the dysfunctional bits, I hoped we could change. But now, I felt like I was being told that this country was so fragile that relaxing just for a moment meant disaster, that it was his way or the highway.

There was even one point when I felt upset enough to consider feigning some serious imaginary illness, thus achieving both a silent protest and enough medical leave to skip all future interviews. Racial equality, both as an ideal and in practice, is fundamental to my worldview. I have also tried to keep myself informed on developments in science and genetics. So I really could not agree with Lee's Social Darwinist beliefs and his hierarchy of races. I was not persuaded that some ethnic groups were more blessed with certain gifts than others, or had a larger raw intellectual capacity. Neither was I sure that those views were entirely scientific. It was a struggle to have to sit through that. It marked my lowest ebb in the course of the entire project.

But Lee is far, far more than his fears for Singapore or his racial philosophies. His views are more fluid and sensitive to historical context than I have represented them so far. I agreed with many of his views on democracy, such as its cultural preconditions and its chequered past. He

knew that Singapore had changed massively since he was in charge and that his finger was no longer on the pulse.

Listening to him, I was conscious all the time of his formidable mind and his immense grasp of facts. But those two elements – race and vulnerability – really seemed to be fixed points in his ideology. I could not shake off the feeling that I was confronted with a leader who was, at once, very impressive and very obstinate.

The turning point came during the interview on immigrants, when we were discussing the Singaporean identity. For him, he said, being Singaporean had been a conscious choice. The rest of us, who were born here, just had to live with it. “That’s not entirely the point,” I thought. The experience of the past interviews had left me jaded. “We don’t choose to be born here, but it can be a badge that we wear with pride or shame. Right now, I’m edging towards shame.”

Then the penny dropped. I can still remember the exact statement that gave me a change of heart. Did Lee see Singapore as a land of opportunity, one teammate asked.

Lee replied, “No, I think more than that, more than that. This is a near miracle. When you come in, you are joining an exceptionally outstanding organisation. It’s not an ordinary organisation that has created this ... It came about by a stroke of luck, if you like, plus hard work plus an imaginative team, original team. And I think we can carry on. It can only stay as it is, secure, provided it’s outstanding.”

I paused. I had never seen it in that way before: that Singapore was a near miracle, an accident of history. All those national education lessons had drawn some sort of a narrative thread through our past, as if where we are today was the natural result of a chain of dominoes that led back to Raffles. That’s not really true, I thought. There’s nothing natural about how we got here. It took decades of development, choices made over generations, at all levels, to reach this point. There were always options, always paths that we could have taken. For the one set of paths we’ve taken, we’ve got this result. It’s a result that is, in some respects, really miraculous.

Neither is there anything inevitable about the direction Singapore will take. “No system,” Lee said in a later interview on politics, “lasts forever.”

Well, that struck home. It meant that the door to change was open, and to hear it from Lee himself, the man who embodied the principle of taking charge and steering a course through history, was moving. Somehow, seeing him as the man who had the courage and dedication to get his hands dirty in the political arena, who gave up his private life back in 1954 to realise his ideal of equal opportunities for all – that actually filled me with awe. Few of us can say that we were motivated by the same sort of courage and steely singlemindedness. Okay, so it didn’t really remove my earlier misgivings. But it made me feel as if a grappling hook had been thrown across the gulf that separated me from his ideas. It tipped the balance a little away from ambivalence and a little more towards admiration.

Back in the Istana, I composed myself. Robin checked his voice recorder. Through the grand double doors that opened into the Sheares Room came a sudden buzz of activity and the collective footfalls of an entourage of security officers. We exchanged a glance: Let’s Do This.

Lee was all of 86 years old, but his stride – at least, for this interview – was still purposeful, his voice deep and assured. As he took his place across the table I was reminded of my own grandfather, who even in his 80s went for long brisk walks at dawn, sometimes carrying sacks of rice as weights. He seemed to belong to some past, more formidable generation, one that had stared hardship in the face unblinkingly.

But he was not hidebound by that generation’s conservatism – or even the conservatism of society today, for that matter. “I’m not liberal and I’m not conservative,” he said. “I’m a practical, pragmatic person, always have been and I take things as they are.” Of course, the label of pragmatism can often conceal ideological biases. When Lee’s particular brand of pragmatism was applied to the issues raised by young Singaporeans, however, the results were a mix of the traditional and the progressive.

He believed that women, for example, had a different biological makeup that gave them a special role as mothers. “Women become

mothers, women have responsibility to bring up their children. Men will have to share a part of that responsibility but they're not women, they haven't borne the child," he said.

Thus he could see a lesbian couple as effective parents, for example, but not gay men. "Two men looking after a child? Two women looking after a child, maybe, but I'm not so sure, because it's not their own child. Unless you have artificial insemination and it's their own child, then you have a certain maternal instinct immediately aroused by the process of pregnancy. But two men adopting a boy or a girl, what's the point of it?"

This stemmed in part from his own experiences as a father: "I never had to change diapers for my children." It was a far cry from his own son's approach to fatherhood. Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong is a past master at nappy-changing. He had never poked any of his babies with a safety pin and it was a skill he urged other fathers to take up as well, according to a newspaper report in 2010.²

Diaper duties aside though, Lee felt that women could, and had, attained equality in employment opportunities, pay and promotions. The government gave them equal status as citizens, he said. Foreigners who married Singaporean women can now become Singapore citizens.

Facts seem to bear this out: The World Economic Forum's 2009 Global Gender Gap survey found that Singapore was above average in terms of wage equality, ranking ninth out of 134 countries, and in terms of the number of women in senior and managerial positions.³ The gender wage gap has also been narrowing,⁴ and in the 20–29 age group, more women than men are taking up professional and managerial jobs.⁵

The reality, however, is that inequality still has some grip on society here. The World Economic Forum study ranked Singapore 33rd out of 44 high-income nations, with particularly poor performance in the area of women's political participation.⁶

Another study, conducted by the consultants Watson Wyatt in 2008, found that out of the 100 largest companies in Singapore, 72 had no women non-executive directors on their board.⁷ The average gross monthly earnings of men exceeded that of women across all industries.⁸ Women

are still expected to pull their weight in the workforce and perform their duties at home, or, if they can afford it, hire a foreign domestic helper.⁹

The challenges extend to more insidious, psychological realms. The number of teenagers treated for eating disorders at the Singapore General Hospital rose sixfold between 2002 and 2006. More than eight in ten Singapore girls surveyed wanted to change their looks, while six in ten had self-esteem problems over their weight or appearance. The majority of teens with body image issues were women aged 17 to 25.

The trend in both the United States and Europe, of legislating for equality, however, was not Lee's solution of choice. New laws would just collide with society's conservatism and result in unintended negative consequences, a dilemma that was thrown into stark relief by the question of encouraging a more family-friendly social environment.

"We want to be family-friendly," Lee said. "As far as the government is concerned, we are having crèches in the offices, rooms set aside for breastfeeding of children; we're encouraging the private sector to do likewise. We just need to face up to the fact that women are now working and if we don't accommodate their needs as mothers, then they'll have fewer or no children."

What about subsidies, I asked, like in the Scandinavian countries, which have among the highest fertility rates in Europe?¹⁰ Too costly, he answered. We'd break the bank. My reply: How about more modest measures, such as paternity leave?

"How old are you?" came the response.

"I'm 24."

"Well, you haven't thought of the problems that you would face if you were the employer," Lee laughed. "Paternity leave means the man is absent from work. We can legislate, but each company will do its calculations: How much of a chore it is, what it'll cost and what time will be lost. You can legislate and then they won't employ married men with children, then you have repercussions. I think this has got to take its course. We are basically a conservative society."

He believed, then, that policy-making was constrained by society's

values. There was no point in forcing change unless society itself had reached a new consensus, even if Lee believed that new approaches were needed. He raised the example of a single mother in Teheran: “A young woman got pregnant, she thought of abortion, then she saw the movement of the baby on the ultrasound and she decided to keep it. In the eighth month she told her brother and he said, ‘You’re a shame on the family, abort now.’ She fought and refused, her parents refused to recognise her, so she was alone.”

“Do you think she made the right choice?” I asked. Single mothers are left out by many of Singapore’s pro-family policies. They are not eligible for Baby Bonus payouts, tax relief or maternity and childcare leave.¹¹ Some social welfare schemes, such as subsidised Housing Board flats and Home Ownership Plus Education, are targeted exclusively at married parents or divorcees.¹²

“That’s a personal choice,” Lee said. “I mean, from Singapore’s national point of view, I think we ought to keep the baby. But the family may think otherwise and she may think otherwise because it’s more difficult for her to get married if she has a child. There are pros and cons but, from a demographic point of view, I’m in favour of more babies, especially from educated women with educated partners. It may sound rather pragmatic and practical but that’s the way life is.”

It was a reality that Singapore had to face. The question was one of coming to terms with it and working with the trend. But the room for manoeuvre was constrained by social values. “This is a very conservative society. If we move in that direction, I think many of the older generation will be outraged because they say, ‘What will happen to my daughter? You’re encouraging this.’

“I believe in facing trends, and this is a trend. If we don’t face up to it we’re going to have a social problem later. But how we face it is important. The British way, which encourages single women to have more children for more government subsidies, and leads to more irresponsibility, that’s another matter. But our belief is that case in Teheran was an extreme case. It shouldn’t happen to anybody anywhere.”

I asked if he felt frustrated by how society's views were diametrically opposed to his own. Again, Lee took the practical view: Singapore's conservatism was a fact of life. "If I were the prime minister, I would hesitate to push things through against the prevailing sentiment, against the prevailing values of society. You're going against the current of the people, the underlying feeling. What's the point of that, you know? Breaking new ground and taking unnecessary risk?"

Instead, he was confident that Singaporeans would eventually change their minds, that acquiring knowledge and exposure would lead them to new ways of seeing and doing things. "It will evolve over time, as so many things have. My own sort of maturing process will take place with other people. I can't change them overnight; I think their own experiences, their own reading, their own observations will bring about the change despite innate biases."

I suppose it's the same kind of evolution that is taking place to some extent with the issue of disabled people and their integration into society. According to Lee, "We are now at a point where people say, we should do more. I said okay, let's improve. If you can make them useful or make their lives more bearable, why prevent it? Let's help them to enjoy life as much as they can." Now buses and MRT stations are being retrofitted to be more accessible to disabled patrons. Mrs Lee herself had employed a blind telephone operator at her law firm.

His daughter, Lee Wei Ling, has dyslexia, and he suffered from a mild form of dyslexia himself, Lee revealed. He had learnt to overcome it early on and it was only detected in his late 50s, when his daughter brought a dyslexia specialist in to see him. The disorder manifested itself in spelling problems and during a speed-reading course. "I did not succeed, because I usually have to run my eye back to make sure that I've got the right word. So that slows me down. But because I read more slowly I read only once and it sticks. So there are compensations. The important thing is not to be discouraged and feel I'm disabled."

And Lee told us again of his grandson, who had Asperger's and is an albino (see chapter 11). He took a longer time because of his learning

difficulties, but he went on to university at NUS, graduated and now aspires to teach English.

“Supposing we had abandoned him, said ‘Hopeless’, today he’d be, I think, just a discard in the corner,” Lee said. “But we spent time, got him into this special school where he learnt to read and write. Finally he joined a mainstream school.” And when we asked Lee, later in the interview, who his favourite grandchild was, he replied, “All of them are favourites. But I would say the most likeable fellow is my disadvantaged grandson. He’s turned out very polite, well-spoken, well-behaved.”

I was still waiting for that inevitable “young people nowadays” speech that my grandfather would make whenever he talked about how times were a-changin’. And I wasn’t disappointed when Robin posed the next question, about political apathy among young people.

He had seen his fellow students in university get fired up about politics, campaigning for their candidates in the US primaries in 2008. Both Democrats and Republicans had joined battle. Wouldn’t allowing political activism on campus combat apathy back home as well?

Lee’s answer was simple: Young people nowadays aren’t apathetic because there’s no political activism in the institutions. They’re apathetic because they’re too comfortable. Campus activism was just theoretical posturing, immature debates between youth who were high on idealism but low on experience. He said, “I was at the London School of Economics for one term and there was political activism. Pretty British girls were handing out communist pamphlets to me. And in Cambridge, they had a debating society. They got ministers to come down to debate and they tried to pretend that they were aware of all these issues but, looking back, I think they were not really mature. In their early 20s, what experience have they got?

“You have to have a certain amount of experience in life to understand the difficulties large groups of people face in life,” he said. “Then you become an activist. I was not an activist in Raffles College or in Cambridge. I just listened, I watched, I learnt. But when I came back and wanted to go into politics, I worked with the unions and I decided we had

to do something about this. I mean, they were underpaid. Their children had no future. So I formed my ideas, discussed it with my friends."

No amount of university debating, Lee thought, could substitute for the biggest spur to his political career, and one that he felt today's young Singaporeans lacked: the prospect of losing everything. His generation had lived through the panicked evacuation of the British during the Second World War, a brutal Japanese occupation, and communist insurrection. In 1965, they were left with a small country to defend. Political engagement had only emerged against a backdrop of conquest and crisis.

It was exactly the same thing with entrepreneurship, he thought. He attributed the commercial success of Jewish businesses to their persecution and deprivation in the ghettos. They learnt to be enterprising after having been barred from other professions. Singaporeans, by contrast, had it easy. "We have too many people who have comfortable lives and comfortable jobs. Why should they take the chance? You've got small capital, you might lose everything. You've got to start again. You've got to restart your life."

What did today's young Singaporeans have which compared to such experiences? Not much, he said. Life's too comfortable. We've become victims of our own success. The foundations for a thriving Singapore had already been laid: cleanliness, greening, law and order, the economy. The taxi driver or hawker of today, Lee said, has an asset – in the form of an HDB flat – that would get him at least \$150,000 to \$200,000, "if he doesn't spend it going to Batam". And Singapore has been going beyond the basics to liven things up: the integrated resorts, Formula One and so on. The government had beefed up the existing infrastructure well enough to minimise the impact of the new liberalising measures, he said.

"What are you going to change in Singapore? What do you want to change in Singapore, fundamentally? What they want is more growth, better homes, cars, more travel, better schools, better nurseries, better kindergartens. That's it, they are fringe items." Lee was adamant.

"If we had difficult social and educational conditions, we're going to

have political activism all the time, as you have in Thailand. Or now in Malaysia or in Indonesia ... They will get interested in politics the moment it hurts them. The moment the shoe pinches, they will be jumping around. They're unemployed, they'll get interested in politics very quickly. They'll vote for the party that says, 'I'll get you re-employed'."

Then the classic courtroom Lee appeared. "All right," he said, turning to Robin. "You start a party today. What are you going to sell? Where's your platform? How are you going to change people's lives?"

"I'm not talking about starting a party," Robin replied.

"When you say 'interested in politics', you must have something you want to do, right? Economics, social policies, whatever it is. You put up one and see whether you can survive six months." Lee then gave the example of the Workers' Party 2006 election manifesto, "You Have A Choice": "Low Thia Khiang put up his manifesto, which the voters did not buy. We just tore it to pieces. What are the alternative choices for Singapore?"

But surely, I thought, there was something else. I wondered if the students Robin knew on campus had been "too comfortable". Certainly they must have been fairly well-off, intelligent, with good prospects. Did that preclude them from activism? And I remembered the young people who had questions, but were afraid of voicing them. Wasn't this keeping people back, and wasn't part of it the creation of his political style?

Lee certainly didn't think so. It was an ingrained thing, one that could be overcome in times of adversity anyway. "It's part of Singapore's culture and it goes back to a very patriarchal society, especially with the Chinese. Look, why did we form the People's Association? Because during that period (in the 1950s and 1960s) nobody would join a political party. It's too dangerous. If the communists win, they will fix you. But join the People's Association and do social work, yes. In Malaysia they started off that way, the same as us. The Malaysian Chinese Association was a rich men's club. But now they've got real difficult politics because the minorities have been disadvantaged in education, jobs, licences, everything."

But didn't he think that, just maybe, the climate of fear was partly

his doing? I asked. “Come off it! Are you fearful? If you’re fearful why do you ask me this question? Is anything going to happen to you? Utter rubbish!” Lee said, irritation rising in his voice.

“We may not personally be fearful but we did encounter quite a few young people who were,” I persisted.

“I cannot explain that and I’m not interested whether they’re fearful or not fearful. I think it’s better that they’re fearful and they take me seriously, than if they think I’m somebody they can brush off. That’s all. And if you’re the prime minister and you’re brushed off, you’re in trouble,” was his response.

Even the phenomenon of young Singaporeans emigrating was taken in stride. New Zealanders emigrate to Australia; Australians emigrate to the US, the UK, elsewhere, he said. It was a fact of life in a globalised world. “If you believe it’s because of fear and so on that they leave, utter rubbish! It is the attraction of greener pastures in the other paddock. That’s all.”

So what’s left to young people? I was starting to get pretty discouraged. The “no choice” argument had made a reappearance. Feelings of fear had been dismissed.

Finally, Lee turned around. “A hundred years from now, will there be a Singapore? I’m not sure. We don’t have good people with us, with thinking capabilities, talent and organisation abilities, we die.

“Then what will happen to Singaporeans? Those who are well-educated, they can migrate. But what about the majority of people who haven’t got those qualifications? They will just go downhill and start becoming other people’s maids and labourers. You say it’s not possible? I say, think again carefully. Where were we in 1959? Where were we in 1963? What did we face in 1965? Singapore will always be like this, naturally progressing on autopilot? You must be nuts if you believe that.”

Well, I wasn’t nuts. I don’t believe that anything runs on autopilot. And I suppose that was as good a call to action as any. Many things have become better since 1959; I’d be hard-pressed to deny that. Singapore doesn’t have much in the way of natural blessings, after all. We’re an act

of political will as much as we're a near-miracle. Keeping what progress we've made, improving people's lives, ironing out the kinks in the system – that's up to us to figure out.

"Right. Finished?" Lee asked, brusquely. We were running out of time. The serious questions that we'd decided to use as a safe opening gambit would have to make way for the more irreverent ones. After that pep talk, however, I wasn't sure if I was up to asking him about that favourite movie of his.

"We have a section on personal questions," Robin said.

"All right. Proceed."

I tried my best to sound relaxed. "If you could be a statesman at any point in the world history, which one would you be and why?"

"That's a parlour game. I would not be a statesman at all. It was circumstances that created me," he said. "I don't think, 'I want to be a statesman'. That's rubbish. You don't become a statesman."

"I do not classify myself as a statesman. I put myself down as determined, consistent, persistent. I set out to do something, I keep on chasing it until it succeeds. That's all. That's how I perceive myself. Not a statesman. It's utter rubbish. Anybody who thinks he wants to be a statesman needs to see a psychiatrist."

Lee certainly wasn't one of those head cases. He would rather have been a lawyer than a statesman. But if he had not chosen politics, what kind of law would he have practised? With the country in turmoil, he said, where would his law office even stand? It was what drove him into politics.

That question set the tone for the rest of the interview. As the questions grew more personal, more humorous, a curious interplay of public and private perceptions of Lee emerged. On the one hand, people clearly wanted to know about him and his personal life. He'd been an undisputed leader of Singapore for so long that all sorts of rumours had been flying around about him, and young Singaporeans wanted to know the truth directly from him.

It was almost surreal to see the man confronting the myth. It was

pleasant to see him reminisce about past times. He seemed to relax more. He laughed every time some oddball question was posed. When a question fired him up, he sparked with energy. For a moment we got a glimpse into his more personable side, and I actually started enjoying the interview immensely.

Was Lee a closet sentimental? During his last trip back to London, he had gone to visit the Compleat Angler, a beautiful hotel in the town of Marlow, on the banks of the River Thames. It was his 86th birthday celebrations, but he had dined at that hotel for the first time 47 years ago, under very different circumstances: the merger negotiations. Surely, my teammate Zuraidah said, his return marked some kind of emotional connection.

Lee waxed lyrical for a moment. “I remember one of the best meals we had. We were having a very difficult time with the Malayans at that time. So we broke off. Let’s go down this place on the Thames, Marlow, Compleat Angler. Wonderful meal. Beautiful setting. Quite relaxed. So that was 1960-something.

“This is 40-plus years later. The weir is still there. And as befits the British, they kept the surrounding buildings also. And it’s probably a heritage site or whatever, so you can’t alter the place. It’s part of old England, which they’ve modernised inside, but still with the ambience. It’s not sentimental, it’s just harking back to my youth!”

Then he added, ruefully, “My tastebuds were different, so it doesn’t taste the same, although I’m quite sure the quality of the food could not have gone down since the last time. But my tastebuds now are blunted!”

Did his food go through a tester before he ate? This question evoked a long chuckle. “What do I need that for? Who’s going to poison me? I’m not a defector from the KGB.”

Did he believe in fengshui and astrology? “A lot of Singaporeans suspect that you do,” my teammate Ignatius said.

Lee was genuinely shocked. “Utter rubbish! Utter rubbish! I’m a pragmatic, practical fellow. I do not believe in horoscopes. I do not believe in fengshui. And I’m not superstitious about numbers. But if you

have a house which other people think has disadvantaged fengshui and numbers, when you buy it, you must consider that when you resell. So again it's a practical consideration. Not that I'm interested in it. But if I buy that, I must get a low price because when I sell it I will get a low price. You believe I go for fengshui and horoscopes?" he asked, laughing with incredulity.

"You know, there are all these stories about how our one dollar coin has got eight sides to it," Ignatius explained. "Maybe you thought that it was a good idea and it was auspicious."

"People spin these yarns! It doesn't bother me," Lee said.

What did he miss most about pre-independence Singapore? "The wider open spaces," he said. "I used to cycle down from Siglap to Raffles Institution. And it used to be called Grove Road. Now it's Mountbatten Road. It was all empty land. And Kallang River was where the British Overseas Airways Corporation flying boats used to land once every few days.

"But then, at the same time, there were fewer people. There were about less than a million people when I was growing up. So there was a lot of space. I could go down to the sea. The sea was not polluted. There was a good satay man by the sea. So my friends and I would swim and then we'd eat satay. But if I go and eat satay now I'll get a stomachache because I cannot take peppery things in the same quantities. My internal processes will rebel against it!"

Cycling was definitely something close to his heart. Pedalling to school early in the morning and back late in the evenings left a young Lee sweaty and he sometimes caught cold. When it rained, he simply donned a raincoat and shook out his damp hair before starting class. Later, in his early days in England, he had a dim view of London's public transport system, and when a friend, Cecil Wong, told him about the bicycles of Cambridge, he was a convert. "I said, 'Well, that's the place for me. I'm from a small town.' So I got myself transferred and for three years I cycled. Of course it's cooler there, so you don't sweat. Kept me fit. I used to have to cycle about five miles uphill to go to Girton to see my

girlfriend." The "girlfriend" was Kwa Geok Choo, his wife of more than 60 years.

Of course, there was a policy point behind this particular memory. "I think we should really consider special tracks for cyclists. Encourage it, then instead of this LRT (Light Rail Transit) and so on you have bicycle racks at MRT stations. It's better for everybody's health, it's better for the environment and it's certainly better than having the place or having the roads overcrowded with cars, taxis, buses. Doesn't make sense to me."

He approved of the Vélib' system in Paris, where subscribers can rent bikes 24/7 from one of the 1,450 automated kiosks across the city and return them to another kiosk at their destination.¹³ Still, the "softness" of the younger generation made him doubt that the scheme would catch on here. "But, you know, the modern generation: even to go to the bus stop, they want shelter," Lee said. "I think girls may not like it, they'll be sweaty. The boys will say, 'No, I'm doing my national service later, why you make me do national service now?' We are rearing a generation that wants to be in comfort but I think cycling is good for them. It did me good, anyway."

The answers Lee gave to personal questions were poignant, but it was his reflections on his political career that struck me the most. Over all those decades, he'd seized the reins of Singapore, cut down his opponents, earned high praise and bitter criticism. How did he feel he had performed, as a man looking back at the politician? In his quieter moments, did he have his doubts?

Apparently not, was the answer. Questions about what his regrets were, what he felt he needed forgiveness for – those were "parlour game questions", as he called them. It was pointless raking over past failures and triumphs. He had done his best. There were moments when I could almost hear Frank Sinatra's voice singing "My Way" as he spoke.

He had been wrong about some things, he admitted. Malaysia was one of them. He did not believe, back then, that Malaysia would become a Malay and then an Islamic country. He had expected the Tunku to resurrect the sultans and the old court rituals, but did not know it was to assert total Malay supremacy. Separation had been a tremendous blow.

But mistakes did not mean regrets. Lee said, “I did what I thought was right, given the circumstances, given my knowledge at the time, given the pressures on me at the time. That’s finished, done. I move forward. You keep on harking back, it’s just wasting time.

“Do I regret going to Malaysia? No. It was the right thing to do. Did it fail? Yes. Do I regret pressing for a Malaysian Malaysia and making it fail? No. It was all part of a process of growing up.”

This threw me, I’ll admit. Suddenly, after all those happy memories and anecdotes, the political core of the man re-emerged. For a moment I had almost begun to think that I was indeed having a conversation with a grandfather, lured into a false sense of intimacy. I had wanted to believe that the grappling hook across the gulf had widened into a bridge that at least permitted some kind of sympathetic understanding.

But I could never look at Lee as a wise grandfather-figure. The gap between us was more than generational, more than intellectual: it was visceral. I’ve never known anyone with such single-mindedness.

I could grasp people who looked back and said, “I was wrong.” But it takes no small amount of conviction in the essential rightness of one’s own enterprise to regard one’s history with a cold, clear eye and say, “I have no regrets.” About as much conviction, perhaps, as it takes to say, “I do not care what people think of me.”

And to all intents and purposes, Lee really didn’t care. Now that the cut and thrust of electoral politics was no longer a necessity, that conviction shone through. “I’m no longer in active politics. It’s irrelevant to me what young Singaporeans think of me,” Lee said.

“What they think of me after I’m dead and gone in one generation will be determined by researchers who do PhDs on me, right? So there will be lots of revisionism. As people revised Stalin, Brezhnev and one day now Yeltsin, and later on Putin. I mean, I’ve lived long enough to know that you may be idealised in life and reviled after you’re dead.”

With that, the interview ended. His conscience was clear, no matter what the history books would say. He had done what he thought was right and that was good enough for him.

Still, what about regret? This kind of passionate intensity was beyond my comprehension.

A couple of days later, a friend of mine from the United Kingdom came to visit. He wanted to go to the National Museum so I padded along. I hadn't seen the new history exhibits before, so we hooked ourselves up to the audioguides and went on the tour.

Somewhere in the tour there was what I can only describe as a "Lee Kuan Yew Room". On the walls hung old black-and-white photos of Lee on the campaign trail, going on walkabouts, or hard at work. A small TV set had been suspended in front of some benches, playing clips of his speeches on loop.

I pushed buttons on the audioguide until it started playing the soundtrack to those clips. There were speeches in English, in Malay, some at rallies, some at what seemed to be either press conferences or in Parliament. The calm, assured, colonial-accented voice spoke of Malaysia and the future of Singaporeans. There was even a speech in Hokkien, with Lee persuading strikers to back down. For someone who had picked up Hokkien from scratch as an adult, his delivery was deeply impressive. Heck, my parents speak Hokkien at home and I'd be hard-pressed to make a speech in that dialect.

So I found myself looking at a man who had gone from his posh bungalow home and his Cambridge education to the attap huts and shanty towns of old Singapore, who swept the streets and shook hands with labourers and farmers and shopkeepers and maids. He'd jumped into the political fray, an English-educated bourgeois, and somehow picked up Chinese and Hokkien to reach the masses. He'd had the nerve to tell them, in their languages, that he understood their problems and that they and their children could have better lives, if they would trust him. He had put on knuckledusters against enemies who had the real strength to crush him. Conviction.

"Did that room help your project?" My friend asked me later, as we left the museum into a rainy afternoon.

"I suppose. I now know I can admire something I can't understand."