

Lee Kuan Yew

The Grand Master's Insights on China, the United States, and the World

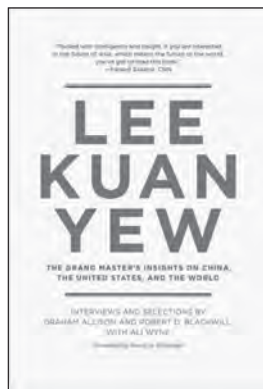
BY GRAHAM ALLISON, ROBERT D. BLACKWILL, AND ALI WYNE

FOREWORD BY HENRY A. KISSINGER

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Reviewed by David Kenley



Lee Kuan Yew: *The Grand Master's Insights on China, the United States, and the World*, by Graham Allison, Robert D. Blackwill, and Ali Wyne, provides a fascinating introduction to the thoughts and attitudes of one of the twentieth century's most complex political leaders. Lee was the first prime minister of independent Singapore, continuing in that position from 1959 to 1990. After stepping down as prime minister at the age of sixty-seven, Lee continued to serve first as senior minister and then eventually minister mentor. Consequently, Lee's political influence and leadership cover a period

of over fifty years.

Lee is often credited with transforming Singapore from an underdeveloped backwater city-state to a global leader in innovation, clean government, social stability, and per capita income. For these reasons, politicians from around the world have tried to study Lee's methods and policies. And yet, despite his many accomplishments, Lee has a sizable group of critics. While they readily acknowledge Singapore's impressive gains under Lee's guidance, they point out that these were achieved through authoritarianism and at the cost of individual liberty, leading to cultural sterility.

This book is clearly written from the perspective of an admirer. According to the authors/editors, the so-called "grand master" is "a man of unmatched intelligence and judgment," "among the most intellectually alert of the world's leaders," and "an artist painting on the largest canvas that society can provide" (vii, xxi, xv). In short, he is "a strategist's strategist, a leader's leader, a mentor's mentor" (xi). The authors make no attempt to disguise their obsequiousness. Regardless if you are an admirer or critic, Allison, Blackwill, and Wyne have produced a provocative text that should be read by anyone interested in global affairs. Their contention that Lee deserves to be heard remains powerful and convincing.

The book is organized into ten chapters, each offering Lee's predictions for the future (the future of China, the future of the United States, the future of Islamic extremism, the future of democracy, etc.). Within each chapter, the authors pose a series of questions to Lee. His answers—gleaned from past interviews, speeches, and writings—are each roughly 2,000 words. In this way, it reads much like the Confucian *Analects*, with Lee playing the role of the sage Confucius answering the questions of his disciples. It is a concise book of roughly 150 pages (not including peripheral materials) and can easily be read in a short period. Alternatively, the reader can pick and choose chapters or even specific questions according to his or her interests. Within the classroom, teachers can select those passages most directly related to their daily lesson topic.

In many ways, Lee's words have proven to be prophetic. For instance, the editors ask, "How likely is a major confrontation between the United States and China?" Lee replies, "Competition between them is inevitable, but conflict is not." He then addresses the specific situation in the South China Sea, saying, "China will not let an international court arbitrate territorial disputes in the South China Sea, so the presence of US firepower in the Asia-Pacific will be necessary if the United Nations Law of the Sea is to prevail" (38–39). Since making this statement, the world has watched as China has ignored the Hague tribunal ruling on this matter while simultaneously creating artificial islands with aircraft landing strips, radar detection stations, and military communications equipment. The US has responded, as Lee predicted, by sending in US firepower in the form of battleships and aircraft carriers, asserting the right to do so according to the Law of the Sea. In this and numerous other examples, Lee's words have been borne out with amazing accuracy.

In other sections of the book, Lee's words feel somewhat dated and anachronistic. Though published in 2013, many of Lee's answers are gleaned from quotes he uttered in the 1990s. His ruminations regarding China's Xi Jinping and North Korea's Kim Jung-un sound far removed from the quickly changing realities of our day. He also fails to predict the rise of Donald Trump and global populism. At other points in the text, Lee's answers seem folksy, as if your own grandfather were providing homespun advice. For instance, when addressing the challenges of contemporary Russia, Lee explains, "Vladimir Putin's challenge is to give Russians a hopeful outlook for the future: stop drinking, work hard, build good families, and have more children" (97). At other points, his words are intended to provoke and offend. "Multiculturalism will destroy America," Lee warns. "There is a danger that large numbers of Mexicans and others from South and Central America will continue to come to the US and spread their culture across the whole of the country. If they breed faster than the WASPs [white Anglo-Saxon Protestants] and are living with them, whose culture will prevail? . . . It would be sad for American culture to be changed even partially" (30–31).

Perhaps the greatest strength of the text is that it forces American readers to confront many of their widely accepted "truths." Liberal democracy, he points out, is one of many American theories, "theories not proven, not proven in East Asia, not even in the Philippines after [the US] had governed the Philippines for fifty years" (30). "Those who want a wholesome society where young girls and old ladies can walk in the streets at night, where the young are not preyed upon by drug peddlers, will not follow the American model . . . The top 3 to 5 percent of a society can handle this free-for-all, this clash of ideas. If you do this with the whole mass, you will have a mess . . . To have, day to day, images of violence and raw sex on the picture tube, the whole society exposed to it, it will ruin a whole community" (29).

Two years after this book was published, Lee passed away at the age of ninety-one. In many ways, this text is a fitting tribute to an influential, controversial, and widely respected statesman. Lee's Singapore continues to be held up by many as a model society, with a high per capita income, social stability, and a clean and efficient government. Whether or not you agree with his methods, you must admire Lee's accomplishments. For this reason, *The Grand Master's Insights* is a worthwhile and thought-provoking read. ■

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