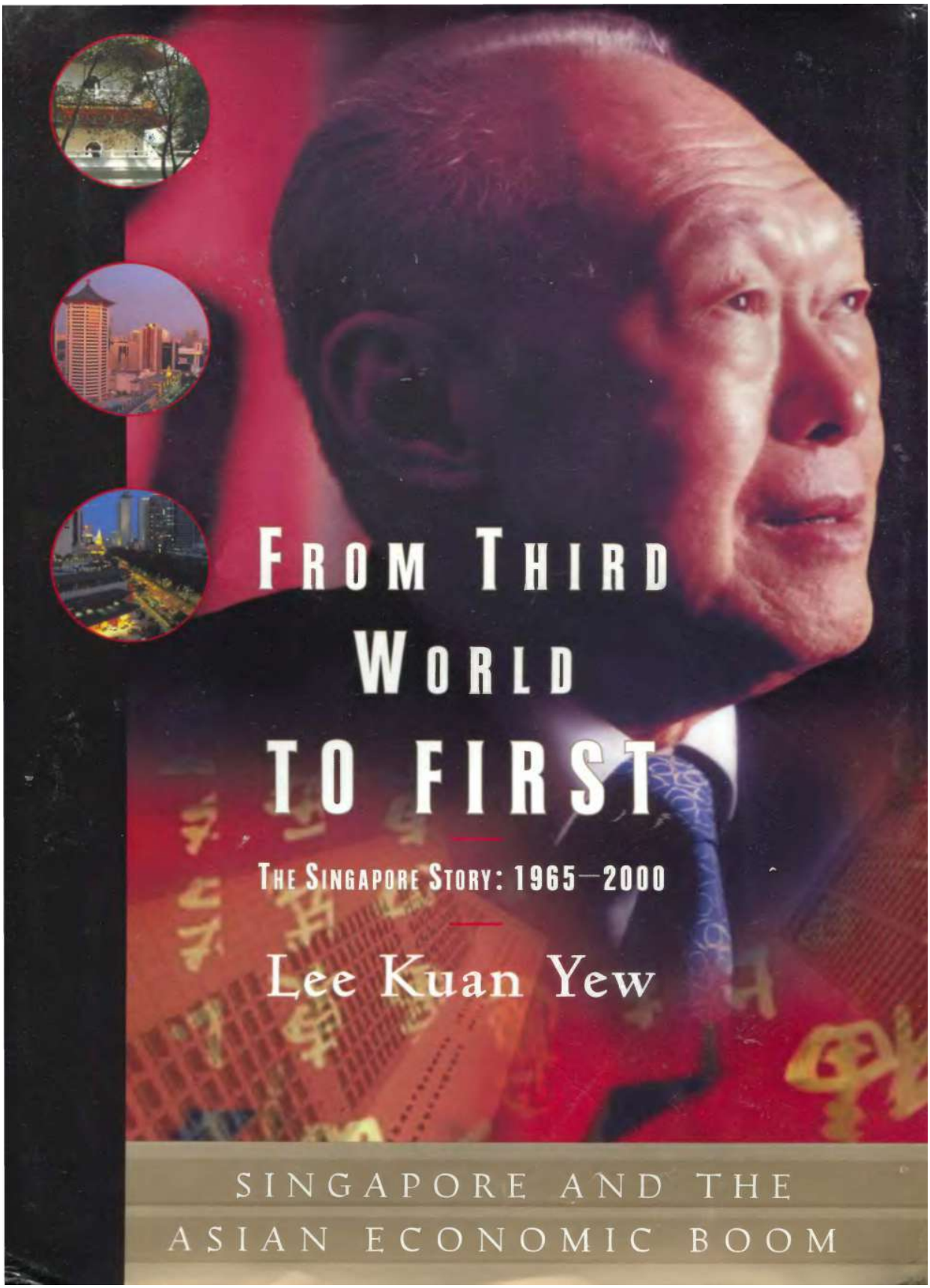
FROM THIRD WORLD TO FIRST

THE SINGAPORE STORY: 1965-2000

Memoirs of Lee Kuan Yew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To Goh Keng Swee, S. Rajaratnam, Hon Sui Sen, Lim Kim San, Eddie Barker, Toh Chin Chye, Ong Pang Boon, and Othman Wok, my old-guard colleagues who together made possible The Singapore Story.

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Foreword

Dr. Henry A. Kissinger

In the second half of the twentieth century, the emergence of scores of new states has made international politics and economics truly global for the first time in histo ry. At the same time, technology has made it possible for nearly every country to participate in events in every part of the world as they occur.

Unfortunately, the explosion in information has not been accompanied by a similar increase in knowledge. The continents interact, but they do not necessarily understand each other. The uniformity of technology is accompanied by an implicit assumption that politics, and even cultures, will become homogenized. Especially, the long-established nations of the West have fallen prey to the temptation of ignoring history and judging every new state by the criteria of their own civilizations. It is often overlooked that the institutions of the West did not spring full-blown from the brow of contemporaries but evolved over centuries which shaped frontiers and defined legitimacy, constitutional provisions, and basic values.

But history does matter. The institutions of the West developed gradually while those of most new states were put into place in elaborated form immediately. In the West, a civil society evolved side-by-side with the maturation of the modern state. This made possible the growth of representative institutions which confined the state's power to those matters which society could not deal with by its own arrangements. Political conflicts were moderated by overriding purposes.

Many postcolonial states have no comparable history. Tasks, which, in

the West, were accomplished over centuries, must be completed in a decade or two and under much more complex circumstances. Where the common national experience is colonial rule, especially when the state comprises diverse ethnic groups, political opposition is often considered an assault on the political validity of the state rather than of a particular government.

Singapore is a case in point. As the main British naval base in the Far East, it had neither prospect nor aspiration for nationhood until the collapse of European power in the aftermath of the Second World War redrew the political map of Southeast Asia. In the first wave of decolonization, Singapore was made part of Malaya until its largely Chinese population proved too daunting for a state attempting to define its national identity by a Malay majority. Malaya extruded Singapore because it was not yet ready to cope with so large a Chinese population or, less charitably, to teach Singapore the habits of dependence if it was forced back into what later became the Malaysian Federation.

But history shows that normally prudent, ordinary calculations can be overturned by extraordinary personalities. In the case of Lee Kuan Yew, the father of Singapore's emergence as a national state, the ancient argument whether circumstance or personality shapes events is settled in favor of the latter. Circumstances could not have been less favorable. Located on a sandbar with nary a natural resource, Singapore had in the 1950s a polyglot population of slightly over a million (today over 3 million), of which 75.4 percent was Chinese, 13.6 percent Malay, and 8. 6 percent Indian. It adjoined in the south with Indonesia, with a population of over 100 million (now nearly double that), and in the north with Malaya (later Malaysia), with a then-population of 6. 28 million. By far the smallest country in Southeast Asia, Singapore seemed destined to become a client state of more powerful neighbors, if indeed it could preserve its independence at all.

Lee Kuan Yew thought otherwise. Every great achievement is a dream before it becomes reality, and his vision was of a state that would not simply survive but prevail by excelling. Superior intelligence, discipline, and ingenuity would substitute for resources. Lee Kuan Yew summoned his compatriots to a duty they had never previously perceived: first to clean up their city, then to dedicate it to overcome the initial hostility of their Foreword

neighbors and their own ethnic divisions by superior performance. The Singapore of coday is his testament. Annual per capita income has grown from less than $1,000 at the time of independence to nearly $30,000 today. It is the high-tech leader of Southeast Asia, the commercial entrepot, the scientific center. Singapore plays a major role in the politics and economics of Southeast Asia and beyond.

This volume is Lee Kuan Yew's account of his extraordinary achievement. He navigated this passage by understanding not only the requirements of his own society but the needs and motives of his neighbors. A thoughtful discussion of Indonesia and the fall of its President Suharto is matched by Lee Kuan Yew's account of his encounters with China and its leaders. His narrative of Singapore's abortive venture into creating a satellite city in Suzhou is particularly instructive on the challenge of melding the market economics of even so friendly an interlocucor as Singapore with the political and social realities of a China midway between Mao and reform.

Lee Kuan Yew would not be true to himself were he less than frank about his analysis of the difference between the individualism of the West and the priority for social cohesion in countries such as his and in much of the rest of Asia. He does not ask us co change our patterns, only co refrain from imposing them on societies with different histories and necessities.

These views have subjected Lee Kuan Yew to considerable criticism in the West. Those of us who prize our values while understanding the complexities of a new country in a different culture are prepared co leave it co hiscory co pass judgment as to whether there were other options available co him. But, for a generation, every American leader who has dealt with Lee Kuan Yew has benefited from the fact that, on international issues, he has identified the future of his country with the fate of the democracies. And he has done so not passively but by making a seminal political contribution to the struggles of our time.

Preface

I wrote this book for a younger generation of Singaporeans who took stability, growth, and prosperity for granted. I wanted them to know how

difficult it was for a small country of 640 sq. km with no natural resources to survive in the midst of larger, newly independent nations all pursuing nationalistic policies.

Those who have been through the trauma of war in 1942 and the Japanese occupation, and have taken part in building a new economy for Singapore, are not so sanguine. We cannot afford to forget that public order, personal security, economic and social progress, and prosperity are not the natural order of things, that they depend on ceaseless effort and attention from an honest and effective government that the people must elect.

In my earlier book, I described my formative years in prewar Singapore, the Japanese occupation, and the communist upheavals followed by racial problems during our two years in Malaysia.

The Japanese occupation (1942-1945) filled me with hatred for the cruelties they inflicted on their fellow Asians, aroused my nationalism and self-respect, and my resentment at being lorded over. My four years as a student in Britain after the war strengthened my determination to get rid of British colonial rule.

I returned to Singapore in 1950, confident of my cause, but ignorant of the pitfalls and dangers that lay ahead. An anticolonial wave swept me and many others of my generation. I involved myself with trade unions

and politics, formed a political party, and at the age of 35 assumed office in 1959 as the first prime minister of an elected government of selfgoverning Singapore. My friends and I formed a united front with the communists. From the start we knew that there would have to be a parting of the ways and a time for reckoning. When it came, the fight was bitter, and we were fortunate not to have been defeated.

We believed the long-term future for Singapore was to rejoin Malaya, so we merged with it to form Malaysia in September 1963. Within a year, in July 1964, we suffered Malay-Chinese race riots in Singapore. We were trapped