

The nation which I am referring to is relatively unknown, which isn't helped by the fact that the dot to mark it on a world map is bigger than the actual country itself. But this is of course, Singapore, which, in case any of you may have thought it, is nowhere near China and is a country in it's own right. The Economist has called it the world's only fully-functioning city state, and it comes towards the top of the list of countries when ranked by Human Development Index and GDP per capita. Yet this has only happened within the space of a generation, and is largely accredited to the prime ministerial leadership of Lee Kwan Yew. While the prosperity brought to the country by Lee is recognised internationally, his iron-fist style politics is slightly more controversial, and this is what I wish to explore.

When Lee was born under the name Harry in 1923, Singapore had not progressed much from when it was founded as a trading port by Sir Stamford Raffles over a century earlier, being essentially a settlement on a swampy island. Studying Law at Fitzwilliam College, Cambridge, it was in 1954 when Lee entered politics and founded his own political party, with a desire for Singapore to independently govern itself instead of continuing to be a British Colony. It was useful that the people of Singapore also thought the same way, and Lee subsequently became the Prime Minister.

His first decision however was a short-lived one, pressing for a merge with Malaysia. This resulted in racial tensions and riots, and so only two years later, on the 9th August 1965..

Lee oversaw the expulsion of Singapore from Malaysia, meaning this small island was now an independent country. You could say Brexit happened, but the rest of the EU had pushed us out, instead of us shooting ourselves in the foot. Rather than resign because of this though, Lee carried on, albeit after half a year of politics being in suspended animation, and now had an island needing to fend for itself on his hands. This left some very important issues to tackle, which he did one by one.

Being a small, vulnerable island, the quick establishment of national security was imperative to prevent the country being attacked, or people running riot again. To tackle defence issues Lee introduced compulsory national service for all male Singaporeans. This normally occurs at the end of secondary education, so instead of immediately going off to university, males have to spend two years undergoing first basic military training and then serving in one of 33 different roles. This sounds like quite a harsh, communist-style enforcement to implement, an effective waste of two years for those who had their mind set on going to university, although it is generally regarded as beneficial to one's own personal development, being another life experience that everyone goes through.

However, what is more controversial are the "nanny-state" laws and penalties that have earned Singapore a reputation as being a "fine city". One such rule that existed between the 60s and the 90s banned men having long hair, to prevent any "corrupting, polluting influence" from hippies. This rule also applied to foreigners, meaning the Bee Gees, Led Zeppelin and Cliff Richard had to cancel gigs. Today, more reasonable, but maybe just as strange laws are in place, including the ban of chewing gum, the death penalty for drug trafficking, and fines for being caught not flushing a public toilet. Corporal punishment also still exists in the form of caning, including in schools. Numbers 10 to 6 of what else not to do in Singapore are shown in this video; divide by 2 to get pounds from Singapore dollars:

Like in most countries, population was another issue that Lee had to tackle, although the success of the policies implemented is questionable. Whilst China had its one child policy, a two child policy was implemented in Singapore, although this was mainly aimed at uneducated women. Graduate women on the other hand, were given numerous benefits like housing priorities and tax rebates, with additional benefits to have three or more children. There were even match-making schemes in place to encourage graduates to get married and have children. Whatever your opinion on these selective-breeding style policies, and whether you think intelligence really can be inherited, the obvious inequity in them meant they no longer exist today, instead there being benefits for all, similar to how it is here.

Nevertheless today, many of Lee's policies still exist, including the emphasis of investing in the people due to the lack of natural resources. In education, English was made the language of teaching in schools, with a compulsory mother tongue language also being studied, while the Speak Good English movement aimed at encouraging the population to do just that, as opposed to speaking a local colloquialism known as Singlish, examples of which are on the screen. The education system itself revolves around meritocracy, where social hierarchy is based upon ability and academic achievement. Now this obviously will not be suited for all, and could potentially breed an elitist attitude, which is not helped by the widespread phenomena that I'm sure many of you will have experienced first-hand, that is, Asian parenting. Despite this, the Singaporean education system is regarded as one of the best in the world, and you may have heard of the logic problem on the top left, which seemed to go viral a couple of years ago. This was initially believed to be something set to primary school pupils, but is actually intended for year 10. If you were wondering, the answer is July the 16th.

While Lee, with his hand-picked government, did a lot more than what I've mentioned to turn a swamp into a metropolis, including housing and public transport programs, it is clear that without Lee, Singapore would be a very different country to what it is today. When Lee died in March last year, 1.5 million people paid tribute, in spite of 11 hour queues and torrential rain on the day of his funeral procession. People genuinely appreciated what he had done for Singapore, and his formidability was recognised across the world. While not everything that Lee and his government introduced would necessarily be considered correct, one thing the government emphasised on that applies just as much in this school is the emphasis on multiculturalism and racial tolerance, something that is imperative to the running of any sort of community.

I hope I've managed to give an insight into a country and culture that forms an integral part of myself. Singapore is a very unique country, with a mix of Western and Eastern influences that has grown out from the original British settlement, and if you ever get the chance to visit, you'll see a nation that was basically hand-shaped by Lee Kwan Yew.

Thank you for listening