ONE DATE, Two Destinies

Lee Kuan Yew and the Birth of Malaysia and Singapore

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Foreword

One Date, Two Destinies is the tale of a single date in the calendar: September 16th, and it chronicles two figures that I have held close for a lifetime – the first of which is my home country of Malaysia, and the latter of which is Singapore's Founding Prime Minister, Mr. Lee Kuan Yew… Who was born the exact day that Malaysians call Malaysia Day, commemorating the birth of Malaysia.

To the uninitiated, it may seem a little strange that such a link exists – but those who are aware know of this link and are aware of the intertwined histories of Malaysia and Singapore, brought together by one man. Yet, the late Mr. Lee Kuan Yew's story is unquestionably the story of Malaysia and Singapore - it is this story, told across countless books such as The Singapore Story and From Third World To First as well as numerous biographies from other authors that taught me what one man can achieve in a lifetime, and it is this story that I have chosen to celebrate today with images and illustrations.

Born in Singapore, educated in the West, Mr. Lee lead Singapore's People's Action Party (PAP) and along with a stellar team defined the architecture for a society that would be 'like the durian'; a multiracial society that would not be squeezed, that Lee had planned to last not a hundred, not two hundred, but far beyond a thousand years.

In his generation, Singapore not only survived when its destiny diverged from Malaysia's; it thrived, and the story of how it lifted a postcolonial state to become one of the high-income nations of the world in one generation became a miracle revered by the world in one generation.

In an alternate history, I suppose Lee Kuan Yew would have led Malaysia, but that was not to be. The story of a Malaysian Malaysia remains - something that is whispered about, not brought to life, even as Singaporeans affirm that they are one united people regardless of race, language, or religion.

Looking back to a time when I did not admire Lee Kuan Yew is to look back to a time when I was jealous as a Malaysian and knew nothing of history, when in my mind Singapore was basically "us"

(Malaysians) except their street signs were in English and they were richer than us.

Growing up was meeting Singaporeans in real life – an experience that led me to confront our history and ask how we were different from one another, to look back on the past and to gaze back to where it all began - in the crucible of our traumatic shared beginning, as the heartbeat of empire and history resounded as one.

As you read this book, I hope that you will find it to provide an interesting look into history, even though it may just be a glimpse – but if it makes you dream a little more and to seek to learn more about the past, I consider this work to have been well-done.

Happy Birthday, Malaysia! You turned 62 on the date of this book's release.

Happy Birthday Mr Lee: You have turned 102.

Years will pass as this book ages, and each September 16th, you can do the math to discover how many years have passed since their beginnings. The both of you are intertwined parts of my personal destiny and with the release of this book on Malaysia Day of 2025, the 16th of September, 2025, I celebrate your role in shaping me to who I am, as I aim to have your story shape the world.

Victor Tan,

16 September 2025

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Chapter 1

Early Beginnings

Every great life begins with moments that seem ordinary at the time — a boy in a school uniform, a family gathered for a photograph, a young couple walking by the water's edge. And yet, when history is traced backward, these moments take on the weight of destiny.

In the pages ahead, you will encounter the early chapters of Lee Kuan Yew's life, not as the towering statesman he would one day become, but as a child, a student, a son, and a husband.

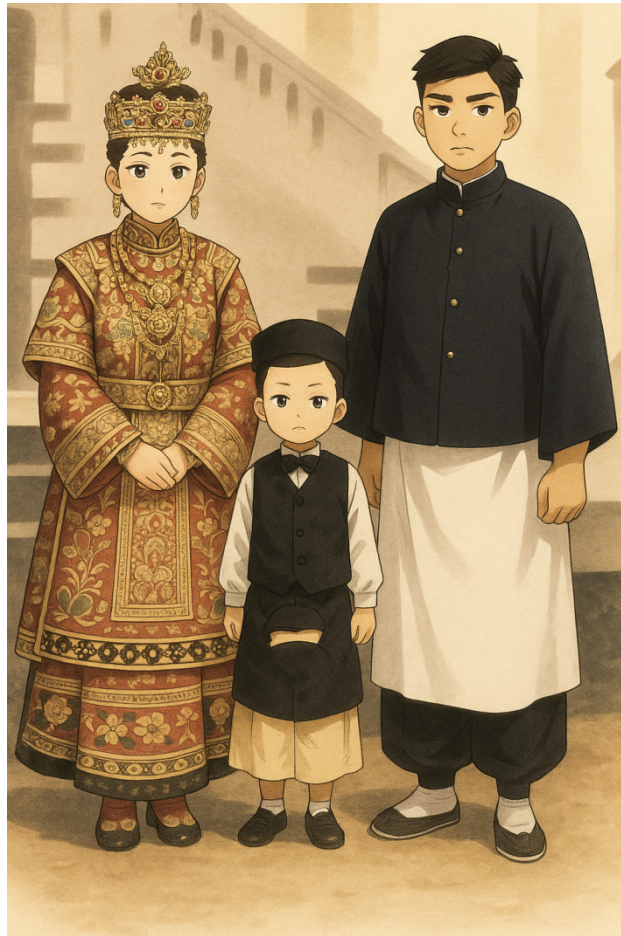
These images invite us to step back into a Singapore that was fragile and uncertain, caught in the thrust of colonialism after colonialism, to see the beginnings of Mr. Lee Kuan Yew.

Here, you will see the young Lee as a boy of sharp eyes and restless energy, glimpse his Peranakan home, where discipline and ambition were instilled by parents who demanded nothing less than excellence. We follow him into classrooms, where he sparred with rivals and encountered Kwa Geok Choo, the woman who would become his lifelong partner in intellect and resolve. We walk with him through the darkness of the Japanese Occupation, when he narrowly escaped death and learned the brutal lesson that survival could never be left to chance or mercy. And we see him again in postwar England, carving out a path in Cambridge, with Geok Choo at his side, the two of them bound not just by love, but by a shared determination to rise above colonial constraint.

It is my hope that these moments will remind us that Lee Kuan Yew's greatness was not conjured in a moment of power, but forged in years of struggle, study, and sacrifice. For those who admire his legacy, these beginnings show us that leadership is not born in office, but in the small, relentless choices of character and conviction that begin long before history takes notice.

Born in Singapore on 16 September 1923, Lee Kuan Yew grew up in a Hakka family. Named "Kuan Yew" after the dialect rendering of the mandarin "Guang Yao", meaning "light and brightness", he was given a role to enlighten others from birth – but his grandfather's admiration for the British made him add "Harry" to Lee's name.

Harry Lee Kuan Yew had a precocious beginning – and I wonder how he would feel if he knew, at that early part of his life, that he would one day lead an entire nation.



The Lee family's history in Singapore began with Lee Bok Boon, a Hakka migrant who had come to Singapore on a Chinese junk. Lee Kuan Yew's father, Lee Chin Koon, worked as a clerk for Shell, while his mother, Chua Jim Neo, came from a well-established Peranakan household and was a woman of formidable intelligence and quiet determination - and here he is, depicted at his aunt's wedding wearing the traditional costume of the time.

Lee Bok Boon could not have known what his great-grandson would do in life – but if life exists after death, what might he be thinking? That is an exercise I leave for the reader.

It was at Raffles Institution in the 1930s when Kwa Geok Choo first encountered Lee Kuan Yew — not as husband and wife nor as the person to whom he would dedicate his memoirs, but as rivals. She was a bright student from Methodist Girls' School, invited to present prizes to the top pupils at Raffles. And there he was — Lee Kuan Yew, the top boy. Confident, intense, and a little too familiar.

Even then, they both knew they were at the top of their class — and would likely keep seeing each other there.

Their academic rivalry would continue at Raffles College, where Kwa Geok Choo actually outshined him in several key areas. While Lee was brilliant in English and History, Kwa beat him in both subjects –

"and probably in history too, her third subject.", he mused in *The Singapore Story*.

Their partnership — academic, political, and personal — would become one of the most consequential in Singapore's modern history.

But it all began here: a girl with glasses, a boy with ambition, and a stack of prizes between them.

It was February 1942, Singapore had fallen., and the Japanese occupation had begun. On this occasion, Lee Kuan Yew, just 18, had been rounded up by the Japanese military—one of thousands of Chinese males forced to report under the *Sook Ching* operation.

Many never came back – and Lee Kuan Yew would not have either, had he followed the chance command of a Japanese soldier who had asked him to join a group of Chinese people – feeling the ominousness in that command, he asked for permission to collect his belongings, which was granted – and narrowly avoided a systematic purge whereby young men who were suspected of being anti-Japanese were screened, stamped, and sent away.

This was colonialism in its rawest form. The Japanese had replaced the British, declaring themselves the rightful rulers of Asia, boasting of liberation while enforcing subjugation. For the people of Singapore, there was no independence — only the cruel exchange of one master for another. The Sook Ching screenings, where thousands of Chinese were massacred, revealed the occupation's true nature: a campaign of racial superiority and fear, in which survival was arbitrary and human lives expendable. It was a stark lesson in power and vulnerability — one that would stay with LKY for life, shaping his conviction that Singapore must never again depend on the mercy of others.

On this occasion, Koh Teong Koo, the Lee family's gardener and the rickshaw puller who had taken him and his brothers to school everyday, had opened his cubicle in the coolie-keng (coolie quarters) to Lee, offering a place to lie low amid the barbed-wire compound at Jalan Besar. They were equals then — two young men caught in the machinery of the Japanese occupation, herded into registration centres where the Kempeitai decided life or death with a stamp or a nod.

But because he had taken shelter with Teong Koo, he was not one of them – the following day, when he had tried the checkpoint that he had tried to escape from, he inexplicably received a red 檢 ("jian" in Chinese, *ken* in Japanese)—a stamp that meant he had been *examined* – and he was allowed to leave.

The Japanese would later admit that they killed 6,000 young Chinese in that Sook Ching of 18-22 February 1942. But Lee Kuan Yew was not one of them. History, as we now know, had greater plans for him.

In 1943, against the backdrop of wartime Singapore, a young Lee Kuan Yew met Kwa Geok Choo by the tranquil waters of MacRitchie Reservoir.

What began as a quiet courtship soon blossomed into a lifelong partnership grounded in intellect, loyalty, and mutual respect.

She was not only his confidante but his most trusted advisor—helping to refine his thinking, offering quiet counsel behind the scenes, and later, meticulously reading every single word he wrote in his

memoirs. Their love endured decades of political storms and personal trials, rooted in a shared vision and quiet strength. Through it all, she remained by his side—not just as a wife, but as an equal force in shaping the man who would become Singapore's founding Prime Minister.

Cambridge, 1948. Lee Kuan Yew did not simply go to Cambridge to study law — he helped create the conditions for someone else to rise with him.

After arriving in postwar Britain in late 1946, Lee initially enrolled at the London School of Economics. He was disoriented and isolated: rationing was harsh, lodgings were grim, and London life was alienating. As he put it, LSE was "a multi-storey building with students dashing up and down in the lifts," utterly unlike the collegial Raffles College back home. He was suffering from what we would now call culture shock.

It was during a constitutional law tutorial that he learned about Fitzwilliam House, Cambridge — a non-collegiate institution where fees were lower and life more humane. By early 1947, he had transferred there, escaping the cold anonymity of London for the quieter rhythms of Cambridge.

But Lee didn't stop with fixing his own trajectory.

By June 1947, his close friend Kwa Geok Choo — back in Singapore — had taken a Class I diploma and was waiting to apply for university. In July, she won the Queen's Scholarship, the highest academic award available in the colonies. But the Colonial Office couldn't secure her a university place in time for the 1947 intake, and she would have had to wait an entire year.

Lee decided to act. He looked up Mr. Barret, the chief clerk at Fitzwilliam, and explained Choo's situation. He asked him to intervene. Barret referred him to Miss Butler, the mistress of Girton College. Lee wrote a passionate letter to her, describing Kwa as "a very bright girl, brighter than I was," who had come top of the list many times at Raffles. Miss Butler, amused and moved by Lee's glowing advocacy, granted Choo a place at Girton College.

He immediately cabled Choo:

> "Girton accepts. Official correspondence following. Get cracking."

It was not just a gesture of romance. It was deliberate — even political. Lee believed she belonged there, and he made it happen – and married her secretly in the Christmas vacation during December of 1947, in London.

Their years at Cambridge overlapped from then on. Both would later graduate with First Class Honours in Law. But the foundation of that moment was laid not by fate — but by Lee Kuan Yew's intervention, audacity, and a letter that changed a life.

30th September 1950, Raffles Hotel.

Though already secretly married in England, Lee Kuan Yew and Kwa Geok Choo now stood before family and friends to celebrate their union openly.

At the cake table, his business partner and her brother-in-law Yong Nyuk Lin had placed a playful 'Stikfas' note — a reminder of Lee's entrepreneurial days during the Japanese Occupation, during which they would make glue out of tapioca flour, water, and carbolic acid.

Their quiet Stratford-upon-Avon vows had bound them together in youth and secrecy; this day in Singapore marked the public recognition of a partnership destined to shape a nation, what began as a secret pact of love became the bedrock of Singapore's history, forged in trust, intellect, and shared sacrifice.

Chapter 2

Enter The PAP

The story of Lee Kuan Yew's rise is not a tale of inevitability, but of choice, conflict, and unrelenting resolve. What you will see in the following pages are fragments of those early years when Singapore's destiny was still unsettled — years of fire and contest, when the island's future hung between competing visions, clashing personalities, and the raw weight of history pressing down on its people.

Here is Lee as the young lawyer who stepped into the courts and union halls, wielding his Cambridge training not as an ornament but as a weapon for the disadvantaged. Here is the Lee who first found allies in thinkers like S. Rajaratnam and operators like Goh Keng Swee, men who together would turn a small party into a movement and a movement into a government.

You will see the fiery confrontations in the Legislative Assembly, where David Marshall pounded the table in passion while Lee answered in measured calculation, embodying two radically different futures for Singapore. You will step into the shadows of his fraught dealings with the communists, where necessity demanded both pragmatism and steel, and where survival depended on balancing principle against political reality.

It was in these days that the PAP began its journey, not as a monolith but as a fragile coalition of ideals, strategies, and personalities. They reveal how much of Lee's early struggle was about narrative and legitimacy: convincing workers that he could be their defender, convincing the British that Singapore was ready for self-government, and convincing a fractured people that unity was possible. It was in these crucibles that his style of politics took shape — sharp, disciplined, unsentimental, yet animated by a conviction that survival could not be left to chance.

These three men — Lee Kuan Yew, Goh Keng Swee, and S. Rajaratnam — formed the intellectual and operational core of the People's Action Party (PAP), and arguably though history may dispute this down the line, the core of modern Singapore beyond the origin stories of Raffles, the Sultanate of Johor, and the myth of Sang Nila Utama.

Each brought a distinct function that, when interlocked, gave the PAP both coherence and durability as a governing movement.

Lee was the strategist who set direction and enforced discipline – the CEO of the organization, if you will. He was ruthless in prioritizing survival over sentiment: jobs before ideology, housing before abstract rights, security before luxury. Within the PAP, he recruited talent, held factions together, and forced ideological clarity — socialism when necessary, capitalism when useful, pragmatism always. His international negotiations (with Britain, Malaysia, Indonesia, the US, and China) secured room for Singapore to maneuver. In the PAP, he was the unifying authority who made sure no one drifted too far from the plan.

On 9 August 1965, tears welled in Lee Kuan Yew's eyes as he uttered the words: *'Would you mind that we stop for a while…'* at the fateful press conference announcing Singapore's separation from Malaysia.

Merger had ended, and in tears.

To many watching then and for years after, it was seen as the grief of a Prime Minister mourning the loss of a dream—that without Malaysia, Singapore was too small to survive.

But later scholarship revealed a more complex weight behind those tears.

Historians have argued that Lee's anguish was not only about Singapore's survival, but also about betrayal and guilt. The Malaysian Solidarity Convention of 1965 had bound him with allies across the Federation, even as he promised them that together they would find strength and equality – allies that included Sabah's Donald Stephens, who trusted his vision of a "Malaysian Malaysia" and found that "the friend, the idol" was "made of cheap clay after all".

But there was another burden Lee carried that morning: secrecy. Separation had been negotiated so hastily, and under such precarious conditions, that even those who believed themselves to be close

partners were kept in the dark. Lord Head, the British High Commissioner, was blindsided, learning of Singapore's exit only when it was fait accompli. The Prime Ministers of Australia and New Zealand—nations deeply invested in Southeast Asia's stability through the Commonwealth and wary of communist expansion—were also left uninformed. For them, Singapore's sudden breakaway was not just unexpected, but a geopolitical shock.

Yet, faced with mounting racial tension, UMNO's push for Malay supremacy, and the very real danger of communal violence, Lee chose separation. In doing so, he secured Singapore's future—but at the cost of leaving Sabah and Sarawak adrift in a Malaysia they would never have entered without his conviction.

This moment, captured forever in his tearful pause, is remembered as one of the rare times the iron-willed leader revealed vulnerability. It symbolizes not only the pain of breaking away but also the profound burden of responsibility he carried—the knowledge that his decision altered the fate not only of Singapore, but of an entire region.

Chapter 6

Building A Nation and a Name

Some countries are born independent, some achieve independence. Singapore had independence thrust upon it. These were the words of Lee Kuan Yew himself in describing the situation that Singapore found itself in after independence. What followed was not the calm dawn of sovereignty, but the sudden shock of being cast adrift—separated from Malaysia in 1965 and left to fend for itself as a small, vulnerable island.

Building a nation, for Singapore, was not about inheriting ready-made institutions or vast natural wealth. It was about constructing legitimacy brick by brick—through industry, through defense, through diplomacy. The nation's leaders innovated by necessity: transforming a swamp into a bustling port, projecting strength in global forums, and cultivating alliances across ideological divides. The Asian Tigers motif captures this spirit—Singapore was no passive beneficiary of history but an active forger of its own path, proving that discipline, pragmatism, and vision could compensate for scale.

The images of this period—Rajaratnam speaking at the United Nations, Goh Keng Swee laying the foundations of Jurong, Lee Kuan Yew navigating diplomacy with figures like Queen Elizabeth II, Harold Wilson, Mao Zedong, and Deng Xiaoping—reflect a nation scrambling not just to survive, but to assert dignity in a world that doubted its very viability. Each encounter, each project, and each speech was more than ceremony; they were symbols of a fragile state hammering itself into being.

Singapore's independence began as an accident of history, but it became a deliberate exercise in creation. To be condemned to be free, echoing Foucault, was to discover resilience in vulnerability, to innovate in the absence of resources, and to build identity through the choices made under duress.

Singapore's story of nation-building here is less about inevitability and more about audacity: that a city with no hinterland, no army, and no guarantee of survival could craft for itself not only a functioning state, but a model admired across the world.

About the author

Victor Tan is a writer and the founder of the education company Ascendant Enterprise. He has a deep interest in history, society and Politics.

You may find him speaking about education, coaching students for admissions to top UK and US universities through Ascendant Academy, and you may also see him playing a musical instrument or calling you "sepupu" on YouTube. Victor is a citizen of Malaysia, and you can find his writings on www.victor-tan.com.

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