

Love the Tree, Love the Branch: Beijing's Friendship with Lee Kuan Yew, 1954–1965

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Abstract

Chinese national identity has long been considered to have been an obstacle to Singapore's nation-building efforts. This is mainly because China was suspected of using its ethnic links to encourage Singapore's communist rebellions during the 1950s and 1960s as Lee Kuan Yew was working towards establishing the city state. This study reviews Lee's exchanges with Beijing and argues that he gave China the impression that he was building an anti-colonial, pro-China nation. Beijing therefore responded positively to Lee's requests for support. Reiterating its overseas Chinese policy to Lee, Beijing sided with him against his political rivals and even acquiesced in his suppression of Chinese-speaking "communists." In addition, China boosted Lee's position against Tunku Abdul Rahman, supported Singapore's independence and lobbied Indonesia to recognize the territory as a separate state. China thus actually played a helpful role in Singapore's nation building.

Keywords: Lee Kuan Yew; Lim Chin Siong; Liao Chengzhi; Zhou Enlai; Barisan Sosialis; People's Action Party

The Chinese Committee for Afro-Asian Solidarity on October 29 condemned the GOS for its criminal armed suppression ... Although probably mild by Peking's standard, the October 29 broadcast is the first explicit ChiCom criticism of Singapore.

— US embassy in Singapore, 20 November 1966.¹

Many scholars believe that the Chinese-dominated Communist Party of Malaya (CPM) was controlled by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), "whose consent was required or else nothing could move."² Singapore was a target for Chinese revolutionary activism and the CPM tried to gain power in Singapore through subversion. However, "there is scant evidence regarding CCP ties to the Singapore communist movement."³

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1 NA 20 November 1966.

2 Ramakrishna 2015, 27.

3 Garver 2016, 218.

China is suspected of involvement in Singapore's rebellion owing to the ethnic ties between the countries. Lee Kuan Yew claimed that there were "communists and their sympathizers" among the "Chinese-speaking left-wing unions and the middle school students." They mobilized Singapore's Chinese identity by filling their listeners with "emotion and exhilaration at the prospect of Chinese greatness held out to them."⁴ Therefore, Lee and his People's Action Party (PAP) had to downplay "overseas Chineseness in the 1950s and 1960s,"⁵ persuade Chinese-educated Singaporeans to "switch to Malayan centered nationalism,"⁶ and ensure that Singapore created its own multiracial national identity, rather than succumb to "narrowly Chinese images of what Singapore should look like."⁷

By establishing English as Singapore's common language, Lee created a national identity separate from that of the People's Republic of China (PRC). Lee understood that "the PRC aimed to increase the loyalty of the overseas Chinese to Beijing," so when he visited China for the first time in 1976, all meetings were conducted in English so as "to avoid any suspicion that Singapore was influenced by kinship ties with China."⁸ Using English was also a mark of Lee's efforts to build racial harmony between Singapore and Malaya. In recognition of Malaya's fear of the CPM, the PAP chose to use English, regarding it as a neutral language, because "Singapore could not afford to be known as a third China."⁹

However, Lee was a Straits Chinese, whose identity was usually situational,¹⁰ and thus he was not necessarily always opposed to invoking a Chinese identity. He said of business opportunities in China, "we would be foolish not to use the ethnic Chinese network to increase our reach and our grasp."¹¹ The PAP government also encouraged enterprises "to exploit their dual identity as ethnic Chinese and Singaporean."¹²

If Chinese identity can be situational in order to maximize interests, then so can political identity. Although Lee worked for the pro-British Progressive Party in 1951, in 1954 he became an anticolonialist, believing that "the colonial rule of the British over Malaya is the basic cause of a great number of social and economic evils of this country," and cofounded the PAP with the communist Lim Chin Siong.¹³ In 1957, however, "in effect, Lee had already formed a united front with the British" against the communists.¹⁴ In 1961, Lim formed Barisan Sosialis (BS), which was accused by the PAP of being a communist-front organization. In

4 Lee, Kuan Yew 1999, 184–86.

5 Lim 2014, 349.

6 Lee, Edwin 2008, 168–69.

7 Hack 2015, 125.

8 Lee, Kuan Yew 2000, 574–79.

9 Borthwick 1988, 53.

10 Holden 2009, 8.

11 Tong 2010, 247.

12 Ng 2006, 305.

13 Lee, Kuan Yew 1999, 191.

14 Chong 2008, 63–69.

February 1963, Lee launched Operation Coldstore and arrested Lim and other BS leaders, detaining them for long periods without trial.

Scholars mostly agree that in the 1950s and 1960s the PRC supported overseas communists in their efforts to disrupt Singapore's stability and, in view of Lee's contention with communists, they contend that "Singapore and China were at opposing ends of the political and ideological spectrum."¹⁵ Because of this enmity, the Bank of China in Singapore was believed to have been Singapore's only unofficial diplomatic contact with Beijing.¹⁶ Nevertheless, if Singapore's communists were indeed dominated by the CPM or the CCP, it stands to reason that the PRC should have been hostile towards Lee from the late 1950s onwards. However, the most commonly referenced evidence of PRC hostility is its 1968 accusation that Lee was a "running dog of US and British imperialism."

The inconsistency in these time periods, the scant evidence of PRC involvement in communist activity in Singapore, the significant impacts on Singaporean identity and the detention without trial of opposition leaders all call for a review of the conventional perspectives on Singapore's anti-communist discourse.

Rethinking the PRC's Role in the Making of Singapore

Many scholars have used British archives when researching the PRC's influence in Singapore, but as Tim Harper notes, those studies are "deeply partial ... [A] rhetoric of counter insurgency permeates these kinds of documents and has shaped the contours of the historiography ... even the accounts of seemingly disinterested observers ... were written to edify and to instruct, or as an apologia for the post-1965 order."¹⁷

Publications counter to mainstream perspectives have also relied on British archives. Bilveer Singh summarizes these works: "some former detainees and writers [argue] that most of those detained ... especially under Operation Cold Store in 1963, were not communists ... they were unjustly incarcerated and negatively portrayed as subversive [and it was] their threat to the PAP [that] led to their being detained without trial."¹⁸ Chin Peng, the leader of the CPM, also admitted that he was "unable to exert any reasonable degree of control over the CPM's operations on the island ... Contrary to the countless allegations made over the years by Singapore leaders, academics, and the Western press, we never controlled Barisan Socialists."¹⁹

Thus, the CCP may not have had any control over the Singapore communist movement. As Stephen Uhalley contends, for Beijing the economic and

15 Zheng and Lye 2015, xviii–xiv.

16 Leifer 2000, 111.

17 Harper 2015, 6. Among those Harper criticizes are Josey 1968; Bloodworth 1986; and from British Special Branch sources, Lee, Ting Hui 1976. A recent publication with similar sources and arguments is Ramakrishna 2015.

18 Singh 2015, 188. Singh's list of works includes Poh, Tan and Koh 2010; Tan, Jing Quee, Tan and Hong 2011; Poh, Tan and Hong 2013.

19 Chin, Peng 2003, 409, 438.

nationalistic goals generally would have had priority over ideological ones.²⁰ After the end of the Korean War, China adopted a “peaceful coexistence” policy in order to “concentrate on economic development at home and cultivate newly established Asian governments,” including “bourgeois nationalist or capitalist regimes which were truly independent of the US.”²¹ Moreover, the 1963 Nuclear Test Ban Treaty further suggested to Beijing that its only diplomatic leverage in combatting superpower domination was “to cultivate better relations with the neutral nationalist states.”²²

At the same time, Singapore was struggling for national independence and was not ideologically committed to the US-dominated Cold War policy. Moreover, Singapore was an important source of foreign exchange for China, alleviating its domestic economic difficulties and providing a channel for the import of modern technologies from abroad. In 1959, Singapore was China’s tenth largest trading partner.²³ In the 1960s, Singapore became “the second largest source of foreign exchange earnings for China, after Hong Kong.” China’s relations with Singapore were marked by the same pragmatism that governed Beijing’s treatment of Hong Kong: “trade is a powerful bait with which to overcome ideological antipathies.”²⁴

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, then, Beijing wished to cultivate good relations with Singapore, not antagonize it. And, indeed, David Marshall, Singapore’s first chief minister (a position that later became prime minister), was witness to Chinese offers of amity. Under its peaceful coexistence policy, Beijing pledged that it would not exploit overseas Chinese for political purposes and would instead encourage them to abide by the laws of their host countries. It was during this period that Marshall was invited to visit China following his resignation from his position as chief minister in 1956. Although an anti-communist, Marshall was hosted by China for two months and met Zhou Enlai 周恩来 twice. Marshall was also a known anticolonialist, which was the real basis of Beijing’s friendship with him. As Marshall noted, Zhou “vehemently expressed his abhorrence of imperialism.” It appeared that Beijing cared about Singapore’s politics but was “more concerned with the struggle against colonialism.”²⁵

Marshall had no government position, and his Labour Front government was arresting “communists” at home, but Beijing still expressed good faith and published its agreement with Marshall regarding overseas Chinese in the *People’s Daily*.²⁶ This attitude explains why Marshall was absolutely convinced that the CPM was not receiving any direction from Beijing,²⁷ a position confirmed by

20 Uhalley 1988, 79.

21 Yahuda 2004, 35.

22 Wong 1984, 85–86.

23 Pei 2009, 80.

24 Polsky 1969.

25 Chan 2001, 210, 219.

26 Tan, Kevin 2008, 371–72; Marshall 1996, 26–29.

27 Tan, Kevin 2008, 379.

Chin Peng, who claimed that the CPM never received any aid from the CCP in the 1950s.²⁸

Marshall went to Beijing in order to gain “political capital;” that is, he believed that his friendship with the PRC would help him gain the pro-China vote in Singapore.²⁹ If right-wing Marshall sought political capital from Beijing, his left-wing opponent, Lee Kuan Yew, could do the same. Even better, the PAP was ethnically Chinese, so it should be easy to win PRC friendship.

Although there has been little analysis of such an assumption, Han Suyin’s interview with Zhou indicates that sometime around 1962 or 1963, Lee dispatched envoys to inform Beijing that he would be leading the future Malaysia. Zhou therefore acquiesced to the Greater Malaysia Scheme, which would merge the Federation of Malaya, Singapore, North Borneo, Brunei and Sarawak to form a new Malaysia.³⁰ This scheme was proposed by Lee, London and Kuala Lumpur; however, the “communists” in the PAP considered it to be a colonial conspiracy and so left the party to form the BS in opposition to their old comrades in 1961.

In his analysis of China’s acquiescence of the scheme, Abdullah Dahana finds that Chinese propaganda broadcasts did not start until April 1963, and argues that Beijing’s participation in the Indonesian campaign to crush Malaysia was “reluctant,” “passive” and “half-hearted,” because compared with Vietnam and Korea, Malaysia was less important to China’s security. China worried that conflicts with Malaysia would affect the well-being of the ethnic Chinese there, and intended to maintain good relations with London “because the British attitude toward China was different from [that of] the U.S.”³¹

Geoff Wade also reports that on 1 June 1962, Lee told Philip Moore, the British deputy high commissioner in Singapore, that he had had “secret talks with representatives of the Chinese government,” whose “advice to Chinese overseas was to adapt themselves to the local conditions and not to seek an alignment with Peking.”³² In other words, Beijing had officially informed Lee that it had no alignment with Singapore’s “communists.”

Researchers have mined both British and Singaporean memoirs and archives to argue for and against the existence of a PRC threat to Singapore’s path to independence. Yet, there have been few studies of how the PRC perceived this “threat.” This study draws heavily on the PRC’s Foreign Ministry archives (MOFA hereafter) of declassified files from 1949 to 1965 to review Beijing’s involvement in Singapore. It focuses on documents filed between 1954, the year the PAP was founded, and 1965, the year Singapore separated from Malaysia. Most of the documents record interdepartmental meetings, the State Council’s instructions, overseas embassies’ telegrams, and transcripts from

28 Chin, C.C., and Hack 2005, 162.

29 Chan 2001, 202.

30 Han 1992, 410–11.

31 Dahana 2002, 60, 62, 66.

32 Wade 2013, 36.

external affairs sections of the CCP and provincial governments. Even though some files may have been removed owing to political concerns, existing files still give an indication of how Beijing interpreted Singapore's nation building.

Major dialogues between the leaders of Singapore and the PRC are listed, and bilateral interactions when Lee was still an opposition leader are then reviewed. Lee gave China the impression that he was building an anticolonial, pro-China country, and so continued to enjoy Beijing's support in his struggle against "communists" and Malays after he became prime minister. China's discreet support of Singapore's separation from Malaysia in 1965 epitomized Beijing's under-the-table friendship with Lee before then. This study challenges prevailing narratives that Lee and his party adopted an anti-Communist China policy in order to ensure Singapore's multicultural identity.

The "First" Diplomatic Contact

Although Lee Kuan Yew claimed that "after independence, we had no diplomatic contact with the PRC ... the first contact came through ping-pong diplomacy in 1971," MOFA files indicate that there were at least two major diplomatic exchanges soon after independence.³³ The first took place on 18 August 1965, when Lee sent Ko Tek Kin, Singapore's first high commissioner to Malaysia, to meet Qi Feng 祁烽, the deputy director of Xinhua News Agency, in Hong Kong.³⁴ The second occurred between 29 September and 1 October 1965, when Singapore's deputy prime minister, Toh Chin Chye, foreign minister, S. Rajaratnam, and education minister, Ong Pang Boon, met PRC ambassadors Wang Yutian 王雨田 and He Ying 何英 in Kenya and Tanzania, respectively.³⁵

Many records in the MOFA show that there was contact between Lee and Beijing prior to Singapore's independence. Yet, in terms of the first diplomatic contact, the following communications are the most significant.

The very first recorded contact between Lee and Beijing is dated 8 December 1957. Wilfred Burchett informed Gong Peng 龔澎, MOFA director of information, that Alex Josey (Lee's friend and first biographer) had asked him to notify Beijing of Lee's wish to visit China. In January 1958, the MOFA granted Lee's request. Gong told Josey to contact the Chinese People's Institute of Foreign Affairs (CPIFA), which would arrange Lee's tour.³⁶ On 3 April 1958, Josey informed the CPIFA that Lee would lead a delegation of PAP leaders to China in late September. However, on 17 April, Josey informed the CPIFA that owing to domestic politics, Lee had decided to cancel the trip.³⁷

33 Lee, Kuan Yew 2000, 574–75.

34 MOFAA 25 August 1965.

35 MOFAA, 30 September 1965; 1 October 1965.

36 MOFAA 7 January 1958.

37 MOFAA 3 April 1958; 17 April 1958.

On 26 October 1959, the PAP sent two representatives, Jek Yeun Thong and Chan Choy Siong, to visit Beijing and other cities for over a week. Jek was Lee's personal secretary and a member of the Legislative Assembly in 1959. He later served in different cabinet positions. Chan was also a member of the Legislative Assembly. Her husband was Ong Pang Boon. Liao Chengzhi 廖承志, as chairman of the Overseas Chinese Affairs Committee (OCAC), was responsible for managing this visit. However, when he met Jek and Chan, he used the title of chairman of the Afro-Asia Solidarity Committee.³⁸

Singapore's first official contact with the PRC was on 11 February 1961. The Singaporean Prime Minister's Office informed the PRC embassy in Indonesia that Toh Chin Chye hoped to visit China in May of that year after visiting Moscow. The communication contained Toh's detailed passport information.³⁹ Zhou Enlai granted Toh's request immediately. However, on 12 May, the office informed the embassy that Toh's trip to Moscow had been cancelled, so his visit to China would also be cancelled.⁴⁰

Lee met Beijing's representatives for the first time in Hong Kong in May 1962, and went on to conduct an indirect dialogue with Zhou Enlai. Following his 1959 visit to the PRC, Jek Yeun Thong had become Lee's key go-between, often liaising with his Chinese counterparts in Hong Kong. On 23 May, Jek conveyed to the Chinese Lee's wish to meet "friends from Beijing."⁴¹ Liao Chengzhi took the arrangements for this meeting very seriously. Zhou Enlai and PRC foreign minister Chen Yi 陈毅 drafted a list of topics for discussion, clearly stating the PRC's positions, and the meeting was held over a dinner on the night of 28 May. Representing Singapore was Lee, his wife, and Jek. The Chinese representatives included Xinhua News Agency's Liang Shangyuan 梁上苑, Qi Feng and Tan Gan 谭干, as well as Xue Jingzhang 薛景章, Jek's counterpart from the China Travel Service. The two other units represented, the Hong Kong and Macau Work Committee of the CCP and the Foreign Affairs Office of Guangdong Province, did not actually attend the dinner but helped to organize the meeting and passed messages to Beijing.

The questions raised by Lee during the dinner, including a request to send a Singaporean trade mission to China by September, were cabled to Beijing on 29 May; Beijing replied the same day. On the morning of 30 May, before Lee left for Singapore, the Chinese delegates held a second meeting with Lee at the Peninsula Hotel, where he was staying.⁴²

On 25 September 1962, Lee met PRC ambassador, Chen Shuliang 陈叔亮, for the first time in Cambodia. They had a discussion at the airport, followed by a more in-depth dialogue at a state banquet the following day.⁴³

38 MOFAA 31 October 1959.

39 MOFAA 11 February 1961.

40 MOFAA 12 May 1961.

41 MOFAA 23 May 1962.

42 MOFAA 31 May 1962.

43 MOFAA 26 September 1962.

The PRC's Interactions with Lee Kuan Yew, 1954–1959

Lee first had contact with the PRC as early as 1957. To gain a better understanding of his relationship with Beijing after he became Singapore's prime minister, it is important to review these early interactions.

Lee was first mentioned in a MOFA briefing in December 1954. He was noted for his anticolonial rhetoric after he praised the Chinese middle school protests and voiced his opposition to the English language requirement for Singaporean legislators. Another briefing in August 1956 described Lee as “(Chinese) students’ best friend.”⁴⁴ Lee used pro-PRC language extensively. For example, “[The] Chinese are immensely proud of the achievement of Mao Tse-tung. A government that in five years can change a corrupt and decadent administration into one that can withstand the armed might of the Americans in Korea deserves full praise.”⁴⁵

The US consulate made note of Lee's ethnicity in its report of his praise for Mao, stating that “within the Chinese community, purposeful political activity was most apparent among the middle school students who campaigned aggressively on behalf of the far left-wing PAP ... No students of other races were included ... students roundly cheered PAP candidate Lee Kuan Yew who praised the Mao Tse-tung regime.”⁴⁶ The US consul general at that time, Elbridge Durbrow, commented that “from all I had read about his remarks and actions, I believed he probably was a secret communist.”⁴⁷

Although Lee claimed that he was not a communist, he and his party were treated with suspicion by the US prior to 1959. The US consulate general considered him to be “the champion of [the] communist-led school movement,”⁴⁸ who would “turn the nationalist movement into a strait communist movement.”⁴⁹ Washington distrusted Lee so much that in 1958, secretary of state John Foster Dulles, believing that “the PAP victory would represent [a] danger to [the] Free World,” decided to provide financial support to Lee's opponents.⁵⁰ London was informed of the US interference in Singapore's 1959 general election.⁵¹ Right up until the eve of the election, although Lee “may or may not be a communist himself,”⁵² the US believed that Lee would create a “Socialist Malaya oriented towards mainland China.”⁵³

If Washington tried to deter Lee from establishing a pro-China Malaya, then Beijing would attempt to do the opposite. The International Department of the Central Committee of the CCP regularly published its “Malaya briefing,”

44 MOFAA 25 December 1954; 6 August 1956.

45 Lee, Kuan Yew 1999, 191.

46 NA 12 April 1955.

47 NA 23 December 1955.

48 NA 27 May 1955.

49 NA 6 March 1956.

50 NA 15 May 1958.

51 NA 6 March 1959.

52 NA 2 January 1959.

53 NA 9 April 1959.

which represented the CCP's perspective on the situation. Lee occupied significant space in this publication. For example, the briefing for June 1955 extensively quoted Lee: "The Chinese are very proud of China. If I had to choose between colonialism and communism, I would vote for communism and so would the great majority."⁵⁴

In addition to taking a pro-PRC stance and employing Chinese language to win over pro-China voters, Lee sought Beijing's help to create balance within the left-wing PAP. Since August 1957, Lee had been in contention with the left-wing elements in the party. In January 1958, he told the US consulate that "he must be able to answer attacks of pro-mainland China elements by answering that he, too, has been to the mainland. He therefore hopes to make a trip to mainland China."⁵⁵

Lee's conflicts with the "communists" in his party were public, but Beijing still approved Lee's visit because he was "neither pro-communist nor anti-communist" (*ji bu qin gong ye bu fangong* 既不亲共，也不反共) and was "mobilizing a great nationalist movement" (*fadong yi ge qiangda de minzu yundong* 发动一个强大的民族运动).⁵⁶ For Beijing, Lee's anticolonial stance was more important than his non-communist leanings. Just as Beijing helped Marshall to "obtain political capital" (*qude zhengzhi ziben* 取得政治资本) to bolster his status in Singapore, it did the same for Lee.⁵⁷

Beijing carefully managed Lee's visit to China to ensure that it would provide him with maximum political capital, protect his nationalist image and demonstrate the close ties between them. The arrangements were handled by the CPIFA, rather than the OCAC, indicating that China viewed Lee as a foreigner rather than an overseas Chinese. The timing of the visit was also important: Beijing accepted Lee's schedule and arranged for him to be presented on the PRC's National Day in a bid to boost his election chances.⁵⁸

The cancellation of his trip can be viewed in relation to his dealings with his opponents. In March or April 1958, he met a CPM representative who promised to support him in his election campaign, so his visit to China was no longer deemed necessary.⁵⁹

Despite cancelling the trip, Beijing still looked favourably towards Lee; even Lim Chin Siong was seen as less pro-China than Lee. In May 1959, the investigation department of the Central Committee of the CCP issued an introduction to the PAP's main leaders in which it described Lim as having progressive tendencies (*sixiang you jinbu qingxiang* 思想有进步倾向), and noted that Lee was an "enthusiast of new China" (*dui xin Zhongguo you haogan* 对新中国有好感).⁶⁰

54 MOFAA 30 June 1955. For an English version, see Lee, Kuan Yew 1999, 207.

55 NA 29 January 1958.

56 MOFAA 7 January 1958.

57 MOFAA 1 November 1956.

58 MOFAA 3 April 1958.

59 Lee, Kuan Yew 1999, 280–81.

60 MOFAA 20 May 1959, 5.

In short, Beijing shared Washington's view that Lee intended to establish a pro-China nation. Beijing believed that Lee's anticolonial ideology and ethnic background entitled him to political capital and when Lee's position was challenged, Beijing was willing to help. Therefore, after Lee became prime minister and was confronted with more challenges, he once again resorted to using anti-colonial rhetoric and promoting his Chinese ethnicity to muster Beijing's support.

Anticolonial Rhetoric and Ethnic Ties

Anticolonial and anti-American rhetoric

Immediately following his election success, Lee commended Zhou Enlai and the CCP for not interfering in Singapore's affairs, saying that it was "absolutely correct." He also maintained that the CPM would not incite a violent revolution, and criticized British colonial rule as well as US financial involvement in the election process.⁶¹ Beijing believed relations between Singapore and the PRC would improve. Jek and Chan's visit to Beijing confirmed this optimism. Liao Chengzhi promised to support Lee against the British and Americans.⁶²

Although Lee and the CPM were united in their anti-British stance, China was more focused on battling the US. Liao informed Jek and Chan that "the US was an enemy more hostile than the British." Beijing repeatedly relayed its fears to Lee in the following years. In 1962, Zhou Enlai explained to Lee that American neo-colonialism was the most serious danger to Singapore. In 1964, when Lee was travelling in Africa, Beijing instructed the PRC embassies to remind Lee again that the US was the most serious threat to Singapore.⁶³

Recognizing Beijing's anticolonial determination, Lee and his colleagues not only criticized the British and Americans regularly but also frequently sought Beijing's support based on such positions. For example, when Lee failed to keep his promise to invite Chinese performing arts groups to Singapore or to dispatch a trade mission to China, Jek blamed British and US hindrances, hoping that Beijing would understand Singapore's difficult position.⁶⁴ When Lee needed Chinese support for the Malaysia Scheme, he told Beijing that Tunku Abdul Rahman was "not a puppet of the British and Americans" (*bu shi Ying Mei de kuilei* 不是英美的傀儡); however, when he was in conflict with Kuala Lumpur, he informed Beijing that the Tunku always listened to London and Washington.

Lee also impressed Beijing with his anti-US rhetoric. For example, Lee explained to Zhou Enlai that he would keep the British base in Singapore in order to keep out the US. Zhou, happy with Lee's anti-US position, declared

61 "Lee is premier." *The Straits Times*, 2 June 1959; "Xiangxin zhonggong bu ganshe taguo neizheng" (Believing that the Chinese Communists do not interfere in other countries' internal affairs). *Nanyang siang pau*, 2 June 1959, 5.

62 MOFAA 20 May 1959, 3–4; 29 October 1959.

63 MOFAA 4 January 1964.

64 MOFAA 29 April 1960.

that the PRC had high expectations of Lee (*xin Zhongguo yixiang duiyu Li Guangyao zongli jiyu xiwang* 新中国一向对于李光耀总理寄予希望). He praised Lee for being a progressive anticolonial “statesman” (*zhengzhijia* 政治家) who significantly contributed to “Asian and world peace,” and encouraged Lee to unite the British and Malays against US imperialism (*lianhe Ying Ma kangju Mei diguozhuyi* 联合英马抗拒美帝国主义).⁶⁵

Ethnic ties

Lee carefully selected his first representatives to Beijing: Jek and Chan were both Chinese-educated and Jek was even an ex-communist.⁶⁶ Their fluency in Chinese made it easier for them to forge good relationships. For example, they humbly said that more PAP leaders would visit China because the young and inexperienced PAP needed to learn from the advancements of the PRC. They also promised to invite troupes of performing artists from China to help Singapore “elevate (Chinese) culture” (*tigao wenhua* 提高文化).⁶⁷ Chan was convincing in her show of admiration for the PRC, stating that the PAP was “modelling Singapore’s marriage law on China’s marriage law.”⁶⁸

Jek and Chan’s comments were welcomed by Liao, who responded by expressing his government’s hopes that an ethnic Chinese government would be friendly to China,⁶⁹ and stating Beijing’s preference for Lee as Singapore’s leader, rather than Marshall, owing to his Chinese ethnicity. Beijing’s responses suggest that Lee had managed to impress his “Chineseness” upon Beijing in all their exchanges.

In 1962, unlike in 1976, Lee intentionally used Mandarin, which was not his mother tongue, in all his discussions with Beijing. He expressed his view that Beijing’s position in the Malaysia Scheme appeared to be pro-BS and pro-CPM (an accusation which Beijing refuted immediately). He added that this could be interpreted as Beijing supporting local Chinese in opposition to Malays and lead to further ethnic violence. Lee emphasized to Beijing that the Chinese in Singapore had deep affection for China and hoped that Beijing would side with him for racial reasons.

In September 1962, Lee also spoke to PRC ambassador Chen Shuliang in Mandarin. In this meeting, Lee not only voiced concern about the overseas Chinese in Cambodia but also mentioned that he understood China’s policies because he frequently listened to Beijing’s broadcasts. He further explained that, owing to his Chinese ethnicity, it was natural for him to have affection

65 MOFAA 31 May 1962.

66 Lee Kuan Yew 1998, 437–38.

67 MOFAA 31 October 1959.

68 Ibid. Chan famously campaigned for Singapore’s Women’s Charter in 1961. This statement about the marriage law explains why Lee said that the Charter “shared the views of the communists.” Lee, Kuan Yew 1999, 325–26.

69 MOFAA 29 October 1959.

for China. Lee's wife told Chen that all three of their children were studying at a Chinese school. Chen later reported to Beijing that Lee had affirmed his southern Chinese ethnicity, and praised Lee for publicly revealing his personal affection for China (*bu yinhui ziji dui Zhongguo de ganqing* 不隐晦自己对中国的感情).⁷⁰

Overall, after 1959, Lee continued to give Beijing the impression that he was fighting to establish a country with a similar ethnic background and ideology to China. What could China do to support Lee's plan?

Beijing's Assistance to Lee

National identity

In order to support Singapore's nationalism, Beijing first needed to recognize it as a nation. Michael Leifer argues that the PRC ignored Singapore's international status even though Marshall visited China in 1956.⁷¹ However, the MOFA recorded that Zhou Enlai had told Marshall that Singapore was "a country with a bright future" (*hen youxiwang de guojia* 很有希望的国家).⁷² Chen Yi also told Marshall that China "hopes to see Singapore and Malaya unite and become independent."⁷³

Beijing surely maintained the same attitude with Lee. Liao reiterated to Jek and Chan that Beijing hoped to see Chinese and Malays united to establish a real independent Malaya. For this reason, Liao told the PAP not to get too close to China (*baochi xianzhuang, buyao ji* 保持现状, 不要急), to keep their friendship under the table, and especially not to establish official relations with China. Understanding Malayan sensitivity to Chinese issues, Liao said that diplomatic relations would jeopardize the Singapore–Malaya merger (*Xinjiapo guozao he Zhongguo fasheng waijiao guanxi, jiuhui zu'ai XinMa hebing* 新加坡过早和中国发生外交关系就会阻碍新马合并). Lee must have expressed his desire to ally with Beijing too, because in 1962, as Liao did in 1959, Zhou told Lee not to establish diplomatic relations too early and promised to wait (*Zhong Xin jianjiao kongpa youkunnan ... women shi keyi dengdai de* 中新建交恐怕有困难...我们是是可以等待的).⁷⁴

As Beijing was concerned that racial harmony be maintained between Chinese and Malays and saw Singapore as a separate nation, it considered the ethnic Chinese in Singapore to be foreign nationals. In 1956, accepting Beijing's overseas Chinese policy, Marshall did not consider Beijing to be hostile. In 1959, Liao further explained to Jek and Chan that it would be good if overseas Chinese wanted to keep their Chinese nationality; however, China's most desired outcome was that overseas Chinese obtained the nationalities of the countries in

70 MOFAA 26 September 1962.

71 Leifer 2000, 110.

72 MOFAA 9 October 1956.

73 MOFAA 18 August 1956.

74 MOFAA 31 May 1962.

which they resided, so that they would then become “kinsmen” (*qinqi* 亲戚). As Liao explained to Jek and Chan, “you are our *qinqi*.”⁷⁵

Regarding Jek and Chan as foreigners, Liao therefore met them in his role as Afro-Asia Solidarity Committee chairman, rather than as OCAC chairman. The PRC regarded those who retained their Chinese citizenship as “overseas Chinese” (*huaqiao* 华侨) who should obey the laws of their host countries. Those who took on the nationality of their country of residence would be regarded as “ethnic Chinese” (*huayi* 华裔) – that is, foreigners who had severed their national links with China. China regarded *huayi* as kinsmen because of their cultural and consanguineous links, “just like British relationships with Australia or New Zealand.”⁷⁶

As Singapore’s Chinese population had mostly obtained new citizenship, Zhou refused to discuss “overseas Chinese” issues with Lee, but he would discuss “ethnic Chinese” affairs (*bu tan huaqiao wenti, zhi tan huayi* 不谈华侨问题，只谈华裔). Zhou reiterated to Lee the PRC’s policy on overseas Chinese, emphasizing that China would not engage with insurgencies (*bu hui gao dianfu de* 不会搞颠覆的). This explains why, the day after his Hong Kong talk, Lee told Philip Moore that Beijing was not seeking alignment with overseas Chinese.

On the understanding that Beijing expected him to unite Singapore’s ethnic Chinese population and Malays to establish a country, Lee sought Beijing’s help to overcome Chinese and Malay challenges at home.

Barisan Sosialis

In order to unite the different ethnic groups, Lee first had to establish himself as a Chinese leader. China therefore would side with Lee in his struggles against the left wing of the PAP, and later, the BS. Besides the above-mentioned 1958 planned visit to China, it was also the challenges from the left-wing faction of the PAP to Lee’s leadership in late 1960 that led to Beijing giving immediate permission for Toh to visit China in 1961.

From Beijing’s perspective, the object of Lee’s meetings in Hong Kong was to “obtain political capital” (*laoqu zhengzhi ziben* 捞取政治资本), because sending a trade mission to China could help Lee face down challenges from the BS.⁷⁷ The MOFA recorded that when Lee heard that Beijing had granted his request immediately, he seemed to be very happy (*qingxu sihu hen hao* 情绪似乎很好).

Lee promised to send a trade mission to China by September 1962, but Jek was unable to set it up before then.⁷⁸ The referendum on the Singapore–Malaya merger was scheduled for 1 September, and the trade mission was a back-up strategy to manage internal politics. If the situation did not favour the PAP before the

75 MOFAA 29 October 1959.

76 Lee, Enhua 2003, 823.

77 MOFAA 29 May 1962.

78 MOFAA 31 December 1962.

referendum, the trade mission would help Lee win the pro-China vote. In the end, the PAP defeated the BS, so the trade mission was put on hold.

Beijing had little sympathy for the BS's failure in the referendum. Soon after, Liao suggested that Zhou keep working towards setting up a Singapore trade mission. Liao believed the trade mission would help anticolonial morale in Singapore and Lee's chances in the 1963 general election.⁷⁹

Jek finally went to Hong Kong on 27 December 1962 to speak with Liang Weilin 梁威林, the-then director of Xinhua News Agency. Beijing was under the impression that this meeting was to arrange the details of Singapore's trade mission. To China's surprise, Lee now wanted to visit China to attend the 1963 Labour Day celebrations, and requested a public invitation from Zhou Enlai. Zhou was suspicious of Lee's motives for so publicly extending a hand of friendship to the PRC, and told Liang to be careful with "cunning" Lee (*ciren hen jiaohua, xu renzhen duidai* 此人很狡猾, 需认真对待).⁸⁰ Beijing decided to send a pilot study group to Singapore in an attempt to understand how far Lee would push for a bilateral relationship.⁸¹

In February 1963, Jek informed his PRC counterpart that the British had agreed to issue visas for the Beijing study group. Then in March Jek said that the British had changed their mind. Beijing felt that Lee was no longer interested in pursuing the visit idea, so decided to temporarily put Lee's invitation request on hold.⁸² However, Lee was still trying to publicly demonstrate his attachment to the PRC. On 6 April 1963, Lee was misinformed that Liu Ningyi 刘宁一, deputy director of the Foreign Affairs Office in the State Council, would have an airport transfer in Singapore, so he eagerly requested that Beijing arrange a meeting between them.⁸³

Again, internal politics provide the context to Lee's efforts to associate with the PRC after December 1962.⁸⁴ London, the Tunku and Lee began planning Operation Coldstore in December 1962. If Zhou invited Lee to visit China in May, this would give voters the impression that Beijing approved of Lee's round up of "communists" in the February. China did not seem to care about Operation Coldstore. Although many "communists" were arrested, Beijing did not stop working on Lee's visit until March 1963, when Lee's enthusiasm for the plan seemed to wane.

The US consul general, Sam Gilstrap, provided an explanation for Lee's capriciousness. He thought that the Tunku had heard about Lee's China plan, and believed that Lee's China trip was connected to the BS, because it could be a "domestically useful political gambit to undercut Barisan support." Gilstrap

79 MOFAA 29 September 1962.

80 MOFAA 1 February 1963.

81 MOFAA 5 February 1963.

82 MOFAA 13 March 1963.

83 MOFAA 17 April 1963.

84 Wade 2013, 45–54.

concluded that Lee felt he should not “inflame Tunku by his trip to Peiping when sensitive negotiations over the merger hang in balance.”⁸⁵

Tunku Abdul Rahman

Lee needed to consider Kuala Lumpur whenever he made China plans. For example, the reasons behind the cancellation of Toh’s trip in May 1961 were connected to Lee’s pursuit of Malay support. On 23 April 1961, Lee warned the Tunku that if there was no prospect of a merger on the horizon, Singapore might soon be controlled by the “communists.”⁸⁶ The Tunku announced the Greater Malaysia Scheme on 27 May. A visit to China during this time might have jeopardized the support Lee had just secured from Kuala Lumpur.

Beijing was sympathetic to Lee’s predicament with the Malays and accepted that the cancellations of arranged visits were owing to the situation with the Tunku. In fact, Beijing tried to help Lee. Beijing believed that Lee wanted to serve as the Tunku’s deputy after Malaysia was formed. Thus, by granting Lee’s request to establish a trade mission, China was able to boost Lee’s position and demonstrate to the Tunku that he was capable of managing Chinese affairs.⁸⁷

However, soon after the merger referendum, Lee shifted his position with regard to the Tunku. Previously in Hong Kong, Lee had told Beijing that the Tunku was not a colonialist; however, in Cambodia, he criticized the Tunku for being pro-colonialist. Zhou’s suspicions about Lee’s motives for the planned visit in 1963 were echoed in Beijing’s hesitation in accepting Lee’s change in attitude about the Tunku. In September 1963, after the BS had been defeated in the general election and Malaysia was officially established, Lee no longer cherished his relationship with Kuala Lumpur. In fact, the PAP’s friendship with China became a useful way to irritate the Tunku. In his memoir, Lee complained that the Tunku had overreacted to his letter to China in 1963: “Zhou Enlai wrote to me a letter similar to that addressed to many other heads of government ... I gave him a bland reply. This was while we were a self-governing colony and not a state of Malaysia ... Tunku publicly reprimanded me.”⁸⁸

Although Lee assumed an air of innocence with regard to the matter, MOFA files reveal that Beijing felt that Lee’s letter was a set-up, because it was “sent through public channels” (*tongguo gongkai tujing jilai* 通过公开途径寄来).⁸⁹ “Public channels” refers to post offices in Hong Kong. Liao had told Jek and Chan that Beijing preferred correspondence to go via a personal messenger, and that “if there is an important message, never send it through the post office, as Hong Kong post offices are not reliable.”⁹⁰ In 1962, Beijing rejected Lee’s idea

85 NA 24 April 1963.

86 Jones 2012, 65–66.

87 MOFAA 29 May 1962.

88 Lee, Kuan Yew 2000, 574.

89 MOFAA 16 December 1963.

90 MOFAA 29 October 1959.

of sending messages through the Bank of China in Singapore, and reiterated that they preferred all communication to go via personal messenger.⁹¹

Lee received Zhou's letter in August 1963, and replied on 30 November, two months after Singapore had become a state of Malaysia. After so many messages had been delivered via messenger between 1957 and 1963, Lee's reply using a public channel suggests that he hoped the letter would be made public. As China had joined Indonesia's campaign against Malaysia, Zhou decided to publish the letter in the *People's Daily* to "highlight the contradiction between Lee and the Tunku."⁹² The Tunku's reprimand of Lee appears to have been almost planned.

Lee had been trying to publicly link himself with Zhou since December 1962, and finally realized his plan after a year of effort. By openly siding with the PRC over the Malays, Lee exacerbated the already terrible relationship between Singapore and Kuala Lumpur. Bloody racial riots soon ensued in 1964. The clashes eventually led to Singapore's independence.

Upon Independence

Beijing "reluctantly" joined Indonesia's anti-Malaysia campaign in mid-1963, and once Singapore separated from Malaysia, relations based on an anticolonial comradeship resumed between Beijing and Singapore. Lee's pursuit of PRC support and Beijing's response can be seen as strategic and a demonstration of mutual goodwill in the first decade of their relationship.

Lee heavily promoted Singapore's Chinese ethnic ties to elicit support and recognition from Beijing. He requested that China send "a congratulatory telegram to make over one million Chinese happy" (*yizhang hedian shi Xinjiapo yibaiyuan huaren gaoxing* 一张贺电使新加坡一百余万华人高兴). Lee even referred to himself as an "overseas Chinese," a term mostly applied to Singaporean Chinese who still held Chinese nationality, asking China to "cherish him just as China always cherishes overseas Chinese" (*yiguan aihu huaqiao de xinqing aihu ta* 一贯爱护华侨的心情爱护他).

Similar to the manner in which Jek and Chan asked for Beijing's guidance in 1959, Lee humbly stated that the PAP's young leaders were inexperienced, and asked China not to criticize them too harshly if they made mistakes. Lee articulated his hope that China would support the PAP because "those who love the tree love the branch" (*aiwu-jiwu* 爱屋及乌).

Alongside the promotion of the new state's Chineseness, Lee was careful to emphasize that the US had not played a role in the separation of Singapore – rather it had been the British who granted it independence. Lee claimed to have made a deal with Sabah and Sarawak that would see them unite with Singapore and Brunei to establish a new country. Furthermore, Lee expected

91 MOFAA 31 May 1962.

92 MOFAA 16 December 1963.

to merge Malaysia with this new country, which would be led by Singapore, within 15 years. Lee's message confirms Han Suyin's report, proving that Lee was trying to persuade Beijing that he would lead Malaysia.

Lee also hoped that Beijing would support Singapore's participation in the Second Asian–African Conference and block Kuala Lumpur's entry, because "if Singapore's status can be elevated, Tunku could be destroyed" (*Xinjiapo diwei tigao, keyi gaokua Donggu* 新加坡地位提高, 可以搞垮东姑).⁹³ However, following Singapore's independence, Beijing had no intention of escalating the racial tensions between Malays and Chinese, and so Zhou ordered that no action be taken against Kuala Lumpur.

Beijing wished to formally recognize Singapore and indeed had a recognition telegram ready. Before consulting with Jakarta, Zhou had sung Lee's praises to the Viet Cong.⁹⁴ The chair of the Bank of China, Nan Hanchen 南汉宸, was instructed to issue a public expression of China's goodwill towards Singapore.⁹⁵ Qi Feng also told Ko Tek Kin that it would be possible for Beijing to recognize Singapore. At the same time, the US consulate in Singapore informed Washington that Singapore had received a recognition telegram from Beijing.⁹⁶

In fact, this telegram was not sent, because between 18 and 20 August, Chen Yi was trying to convince Indonesia to recognize Singapore, without success. Chen informed President Sukarno that "China intends to recognize Singapore ... Singaporeans are anticolonial and anti-imperial, so we cannot disappoint them. We should support really progressive forces" (*women shi zhuzhang chengren Xinjiapo de ... Xinjiapo renmin yao fandi fanzhi, bu neng shi Xinjiapo renmin shiwang, yao zhichi xinma renmin he zhenzheng de jinbu liliang* 我们是主张承认新加坡的。。。新加坡人民要反帝反殖, 不能使新加坡人民失望, 要支持新马人民和真正的进步力量). However, Indonesia's leaders viewed Singapore's independence as neither "anticolonial" nor "progressive," but a colonial conspiracy. Thus, to maintain China's friendly ties with Indonesia, Chen promised Sukarno that China would recognize Singapore only after Indonesia did so (*nimen xianchengren, women houchengren, nimen tuo, women yetuo* 你们先承认, 我们后承认, 你们拖, 我们也拖).⁹⁷

The PAP knew of Beijing's efforts in Indonesia and requested Beijing's recognition again, this time via the PRC embassy in Tanzania.⁹⁸ Hoping to allay Indonesia's suspicions, Singapore cabinet members publicly criticized the US for interfering in Singapore's internal affairs, described Malaysia as a colonialist construction and accused the Malays of discriminating against the Chinese.

93 The above dialogues are from MOFAA 25 August 1965.

94 MOFAA 12 August 1965.

95 MOFAA 10 August 1965.

96 NA 18 August 1965.

97 MOFAA 20 August 1965.

98 MOFAA 30 September 1965.

Under Beijing's instruction, Ambassador He Ying did not comment on Indonesia but stated that China had always supported Singapore's anticolonial struggles and praised the PAP's efforts to enhance bilateral relations. He believed that Singapore's independence was a great anticolonial achievement, and as long as Singapore remained on the path towards national independence, the bilateral relationship would eventually go well.⁹⁹ With a relationship based on such a strong anticolonial foundation, neither side expected that "eventually" would mean waiting until the 1970s.

Conclusion

In the first days of Singapore's Independence, Lee ... was acidly critical of the United States to the press ... This public, bitter anti-American phase was short-lived. Before the end of 1965, Lee and his principal cabinet advisers were convinced that, for economic survival, an independent Singapore must expand its exports to the United States and attract American capital to develop new export industries.

– Thomas Hughes, assistant secretary of state for intelligence and research, 9 August 1967.¹⁰⁰

When Singapore cabinet members requested PRC recognition via China's embassy in Tanzania, Indonesia was in the midst of a coup. Jakarta eventually recognized Singapore in June 1966. By then, Chinese foreign policy had taken an ultra-left turn. Lee had also softened his anti-US stance, undertaking visits to the US in 1967, 1968 and 1969. From a Beijing perspective, Lee had sided with China's "most serious danger" and was no longer pro-China or anticolonial. Examining early PRC–Singapore relations through a post-1966 lens, with Singapore deemed to be a "running dog of US and British imperialism," can present a rather distorted picture. In reality, the communist threat was not as serious as mainstream accounts reckoned it to be; the Bank of China in Singapore before 1965 was not important because exchanges went through Hong Kong; and the bilateral meetings that took place after the 1970s were not a new experience but rather a reunion of old friends.

This article shows that it is by no means certain that China used the "loyalty of the overseas Chinese" to attack Lee before 1965; however, it is clear that Lee exploited overseas Chinese loyalties to win Beijing's support. To overcome challenges from their Chinese-speaking and Malayan opponents, Lee and his colleagues neither downplayed their "overseas Chineseness" nor switched "to Malayan-centred nationalism" in front of the PRC. Instead, they maintained "Chinese images of what Singapore should look like" and behaved like Chinese kinsmen who were building a third China. The identities Lee and his colleagues displayed at this time were not multicultural, but situational.

The PRC prioritized anticolonialism over communism, tacitly siding with Lee instead of the "communists." Beijing helped Lee and his colleagues by endowing them with political capital as it arranged their visits to the PRC between 1957 and

⁹⁹ MOFAA 1 October 1965.

¹⁰⁰ NA 9 August 1967.

1963, and even looked the other way as “communists” were suppressed in Singapore. It seems that Beijing pragmatically helped whoever could facilitate peaceful coexistence and anticolonial principles.

These principles were particularly evident in China’s stance with regard to Singapore’s independence. Ang Cheng Guan argues that Lee was glad that Beijing did not comment on Singapore’s independence.¹⁰¹ In fact, this may not have been the case at all: despite its constant quarrels with the Tunku, China ignored Lee’s advice to provoke the Malays. However, based on anticolonial comradeship, China tried its best to recognize Singapore and strongly lobbied Indonesia to do so.

Thus, Beijing’s involvement in Singapore’s struggle for national independence was helpful rather than harmful. By cancelling several planned visits to the PRC, Lee demonstrated that bilateral relations were not the priority. Rather, the trips were organized for political leverage to manage challenges from his political rivals. Lee used the race card when he cooperated with London and Kuala Lumpur to suppress his domestic opponents. After the British left Singapore, the Chinese “threat” continued to scare Malays. Lee elevated his status by exaggerating the risks posed by the PRC. Although Beijing supported Singapore’s nationalist struggle, in order to maintain Lee’s legitimacy and the PAP interpretation of nation building, Communist China was portrayed as an enemy.

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Biographical note

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摘要: 1950与1960年代李光耀建国时,中国被怀疑藉族群联系影响新加坡共产党暴动,因此中国身份认同也被认为有损新加坡的国家建构。本文检讨李光耀与中国的交往。李光耀使北京相信他正建立一个反殖亲中的国家,因此获得北京积极回应其需求。北京对李光耀重申其海外华人政策,并支持他对付反对派,包括默许李光耀镇压说华语的「共产党」。此外,中国也加强李光耀对抗吉隆坡的地位,支持新加坡独立,包括游说印度尼西亚承认新加坡。因此,中国实际上有助新加坡的国家建构。

关键词: 李光耀; 林清祥; 廖承志; 周恩来; 社会主义阵线; 人民行动党

101 Ang 2012, 23.

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