Lee Kuan Yew: 
Hard Truths to Keep Singapore Going

By Han Fook Kwang, et. al. Straits Times Press, 2011.

Reviewed by Nathaniel Yong-Ern Khng

Formerly a British commercial emporium, Singapore became a self-governing state within the British Empire in 1959 before becoming part of Malaysia in 1963. In 1965, Singapore separated from Malaysia to become an independent nation. In the years that followed, the country rose to the upper echelons of the world economic order. The person who has taken most of the plaudits for what has been described as Singapore’s “economic miracle” is Lee Kuan Yew, the former Prime Minister of Singapore, and the subject of Hard Truths to Keep Singapore Going. This unique book is comprised nearly entirely of questions posed to Lee by journalists from The Straits Times—the newspaper with the largest circulation in Singapore—and the answers Lee provided, in sixteen interviews conducted between December 2008 and October 2009. Included with every book is a DVD, which covers approximately two hours of the interviews.

Born in 1923 and called to the Bar of the Middle Temple after completing his law studies at the University of Cambridge, Lee returned to Singapore to practice law in 1950. The political party that he led, the People’s Action Party (PAP), won the Legislative Assembly General Elections in 1959, whereupon Lee became Prime Minister, a position he was to hold for the next 31 years. The PAP became the dominant political party in Singapore’s parliamentary system, winning huge majorities in elections since 1966. Much praise has been accorded to Lee for his leadership, which was crucial to Singapore’s success. Lee and the PAP have, however, also faced significant criticism, including allegations of subjecting Singapore to authoritarian rule. It cannot be denied, however, that without Lee’s leadership, Singapore might not be the prosperous nation that it is today.

Hard Truths was first released just months prior to Lee’s resignation as a member of the Cabinet, where he had held the appointments of Senior Minister and then Minister Mentor following his tenure as Prime Minister. (He presently serves as a Member of Parliament.) Lee intended Hard Truths to be a means by which he could lay out
certain critical realities for the continuing survival and success of Singapore, which younger generations of Singaporeans need to appreciate. Most important to him is the maintenance of a strong economy and military vigilance to protect against the inherent vulnerabilities of the country, which stem largely from the fact that it is a small city-state located in a region not free from social and political instability.

This message, however, is easily lost due to the sheer breadth of issues that are dealt with in the book. It covers topics as diverse as international relations, politics, leadership, race, language and religion, the environment, and even life and love. Indeed, the final chapters of the book, although interesting in so far as they reveal the other side of Lee as a husband and family man, delve into questions such as Lee’s belief in love at first sight, distracting the reader from the main message that he wanted to convey.

Although Lee’s overarching objective in *Hard Truths* does not appear to be that of addressing criticisms levied against him and the governing PAP regime, some limited responses to those criticisms can be found in the book. In answering questions concerning doubts about the existence of democracy in Singapore due to the PAP’s political dominance, for instance, Lee declared that Singaporeans can vote the PAP out of power if they feel it is unfit to govern. He also clarified that the major difficulties faced by opposition parties in Singapore are not the result of the PAP’s activities, but rather finding competent candidates to run for election and a truly credible alternative platform. Nevertheless, the scope of the questions put to Lee did not require him to expound on his views regarding the rule of law, which he and the PAP have been accused of disregarding on more than one occasion.

These observations notwithstanding, *Hard Truths* should be read as a comprehensive repository of the inimitable, but sometimes unconventional, wisdom of a man who has been proclaimed as an outstanding statesman by no less than Presidents and Secretaries of State of the United States, as well as Prime Ministers and political leaders from major countries around the world. The views Lee expresses in *Hard Truths* include some that cannot be found in other sources, and in this sense, the book is second to none.

NOTES

2. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
8. Tan, “Citation by the Attorney-General,” 152.
BOOK REVIEW: LEE KUAN YEW: HARD TRUTHS TO KEEP SINGAPORE GOING

9 Han et al., Hard Truths, 42.
11 See Han et al., Hard Truths, 9–11.
12 Ibid, 10–12.
13 See the tributes to Lee in Lee, The Singapore Story. George Bush (President from 1989 and 1993) is quoted as describing Lee as “one of this century’s truly visionary statesmen” and “one of the brightest, ablest men” that he has ever met. Gerald Ford (President from 1974 to 1977) is quoted as describing Lee as “one of the Pacific Basin’s great statesmen.” Henry Kissinger (Secretary of State from 1973 to 1977) is quoted as describing Lee as “one of the seminal figures of Asia.” George Shultz (Secretary of State from 1982 to 1989) added: “Candid, informed, forceful, brilliant: these attributes explain why leaders throughout the world have sought out Lee Kuan Yew . . . .”
14 Ibid. Tony Blair (British Prime Minister from 1997 to 2007) described Lee as “one of the great Asian leaders of the 20th century.” Malcom Fraser (Australian Prime Minister from 1975 to 1983) described Lee as “one of the most distinguished leaders of the last half century.” David Lange (New Zealand Prime Minister from 1984 to 1989) described himself as being “lost in awe of [Lee] and his works.”