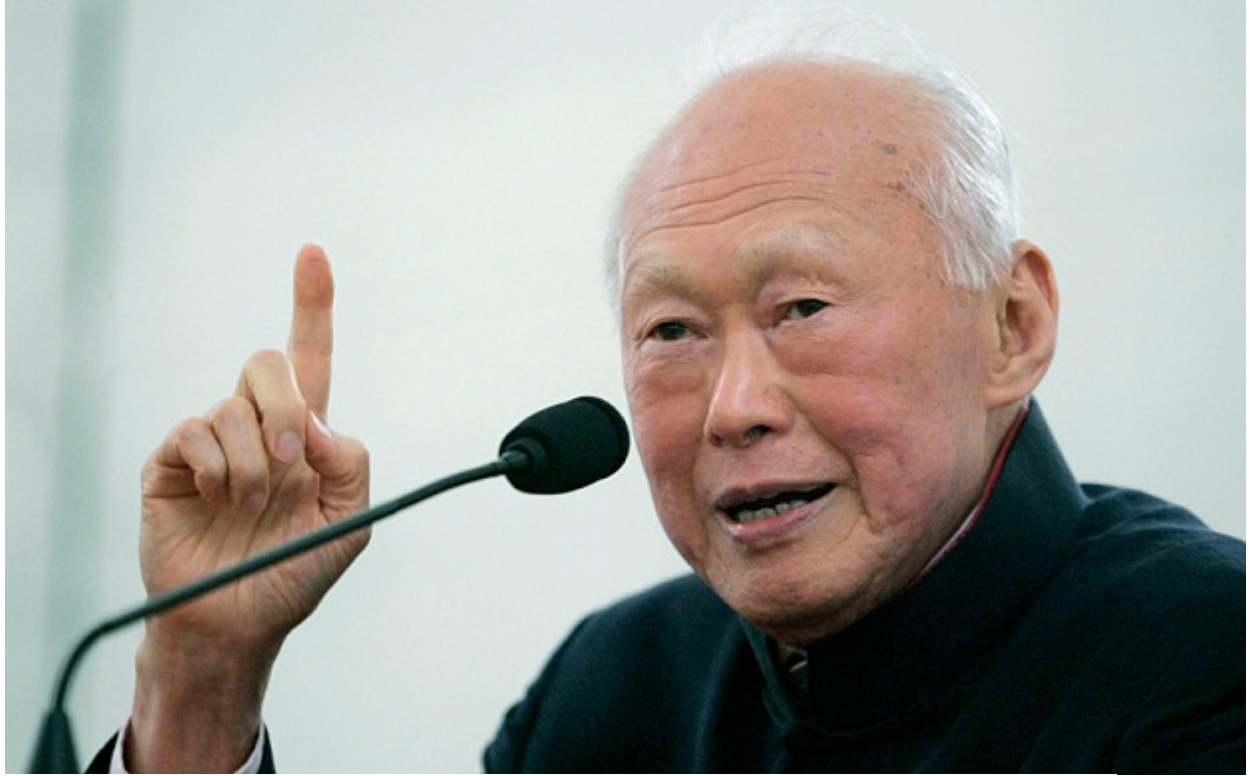


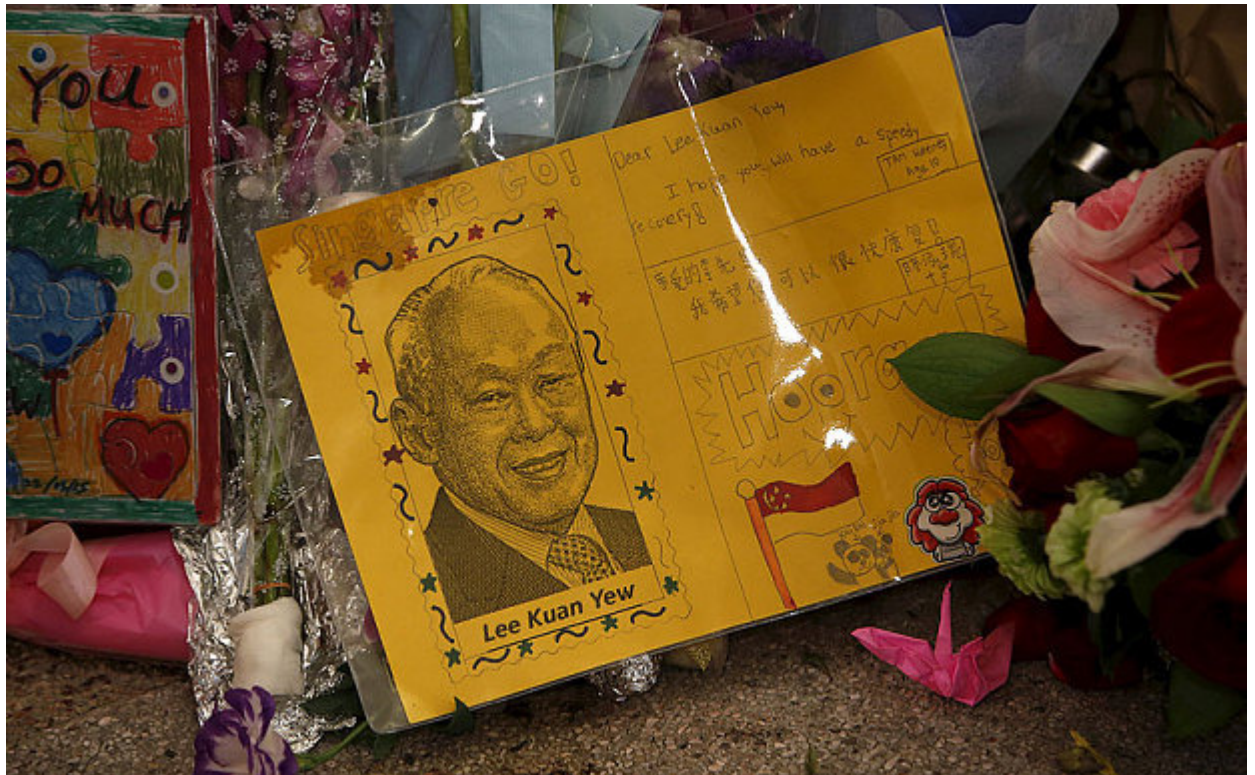
The Telegraph

Lee Kuan Yew's Singapore model was one of a kind
The city state cannot be replicated elsewhere – it's a unique blend
of its founder and its history



Lee Kuan Yew Photo: AP

As the **father figure of modern Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew built a state which many rulers elsewhere in the world came to envy.** Even the Chinese sent delegations south to see how the Lion City had done it. However, the admiration was based on a misconception. There is a “Singapore model” but it is hard to see it being applied in a comprehensive manner elsewhere – even the other great East Asia city success story, Hong Kong, is sharply different in many ways and prides itself on its differences from its rival to the south. The issue now is how Singapore fares in a changing context after the passing of its founder.



A card at a well-wishing corner at the Singapore General Hospital (Reuters)

The “soft authoritarianism” which Lee enforced was of its time and its place. He had a project and was, as he put it in his memoirs, confident that he would “have the last laugh” over his detractors. But that project was one which he was able to build from the ground up, starting with a post-colonial territory with no natural advantages except for its position on a major global trade route, and the aspirations of its population.

He was helped by the very fragility of the place, and the need to struggle in a disciplined manner to survive and succeed. Most of the city’s population were ready to accept the Lee Kuan Yew bargain – improving living standards (including plentiful public housing), stability, security and openness to the world in exchange for acceptance of a government which reserved the right to supervise nearly all areas of life down to the famous ban on chewing gum.

That may have been derided by critics as the creation of a “nanny state” and there is no doubting the degree of self-censorship it bred, but the remarkable thing was that the cocoon of control did not stem Singapore’s drive and ambition. Its businessmen are among the most accomplished in the region. Along with the traditional business of shipping and its big banking sector, it has become a hi-tech centre and shown considerable powers of innovation, down to its pioneering technology to recycle domestic liquid waste for re-use in a state seriously short of water. Hundreds of foreign companies have chosen Singapore as their regional headquarters. And per capita gross domestic product has gone from \$512 to \$56,000 in the past half a century.

Lee was able to steer the country personally, dominating its institutions. His pursuit of “Asian values”, which put the interests of society ahead of the rights of the individual, won people over as the city raced ahead to become more prosperous than many Western countries while enjoying stability, an absence of corruption and what Lee termed an “ideology-free” policy approach.

The ability to balance objectives stemmed from its strengths and skills but also rested on Lee's readiness to accept a ruthlessly realistic and pragmatic approach in which the means mattered little so long as the ends were achieved. This applied not only at home: as East Asia grew into the global growth engine, he carefully balanced the development of strong economic relations between Singapore and China with the cultivation of the US strategic presence in the region which he regarded as providing an essential protective umbrella under which prosperity could be pursued.

While other governments may admire Singapore and what it has achieved, they have not been able to implement its model. It remains a model to be regarded but not one which can be put into practice elsewhere because it is rooted in the specifics of the place that gave it birth and the man who implemented it. For instance, China's size, its history, the political system and the nature of the Communist Party all mean that, while emissaries from Beijing may study how things are done in Singapore, it has proved impossible to graft them on to the Party State to the north. Equally, Western states that may envy the country's growth and sense of order are starting from a very different point with their own past and people to deal with. Switzerland, sometimes compared with Singapore, is hugely different, if only in its federal system. Britain is light years away from offering the kind of incubus with which Lee worked.

At home, the LKY equation may be coming under strain. Prices, particularly of property, have rocketed in recent years, causing grumbles about the standard of living from those ordinary citizens who live outside the high-roller society that congregates in smart restaurants and bars and spectacular casino buildings by the harbour; foreigners, meanwhile, are attracted by banking secrecy and favourable tax treatment. Despite the obstacles of what has been described as a "partly free" political system, the opposition increased its score at the last election – though still only taking six seats. The low birth-rate has led to a demographic problem. The oil trade, for which the port is a major hub, is not what it used to be and China's slowdown is affecting the regional economy.

The Singapore model has been one of a kind based on a combination of historical circumstances and the leadership of a man with a vision for his state who knew how to achieve what he wanted. The question now is whether that model is going to prove fallible after the passing of its founder, whatever the admiration it arouses elsewhere.

Jonathan Fenby is author of 'Will China Dominate the 21st Century?' He edited the 'South China Morning Post' in Hong Kong from 1995-99