

Excelling in the Shadows: Singapore's Unsung Hero

Reviewed by David Plott



**Goh Keng Swee:
A Portrait**

Tan Siok Sun
Editions Didier Millet,
222 pages, US\$26.00

Goh Keng Swee is the quintessential unsung hero. That is what makes this compelling biography such a welcome addition to the history of modern Singapore.

It puts a vivid face on an individual who quietly played a crucial role in the rise of Singapore, but whose name is hardly known outside the city-state.

AN AWKWARD PUBLIC SPEAKER and an intensely private man, Goh was Singapore's first finance minister and had perhaps the greatest hand in shaping the young nation's economic future. He later served as defense minister—where he led the effort to build an armed force from scratch with Israeli help at a time when Singapore was surrounded by hostile neighbors. He then served as education minister. He also spearheaded numerous initiatives to bring an appreciation of culture, especially music, and a sense of nature, especially birds, to ordinary

Singaporeans struggling to move from the developing to developed world.

Contemporary perceptions of the city-state are understandably dominated by the hagiography—and occasional demonology—devoted to Singapore’s founding father, Lee Kuan Yew. This is understandable because Lee has been such a visible and politically muscular presence in Singapore since independence in 1965—and he continues to cast a long shadow over political discourse there.

But Lee’s Singapore would never have pulled itself up from an ethnically and ideologically riven economic backwater in the 1960s to become one of Asia’s most prosperous states without the kind of quiet, able, pragmatic, and occasionally idealistic, leadership provided by senior lieutenants such as Goh.

He, along with Lee, was one of the founders of the ruling People’s Action Party (PAP) and one of the three founding fathers of Singapore itself. But he wasn’t by nature the kind of political animal Lee was. Nor was he politically autistic. Rather than hog the spotlight or hold the bullhorn, he seemed to understand his role was to make things happen, to translate his personal interest in social justice and efficiency into government policies and actions that pushed the country forward economically, socially and culturally. In this respect, he can be considered the genetic godfather of contemporary Singapore’s civil service—a body of sometimes dry and faceless functionaries who run what is arguably the most efficient and solution-oriented government in the world, content to live in the shadows, letting the politicians be politicians.

Tan Siok Sun’s portrait of Goh is unusual in a number of respects. First, she is Goh’s daughter-in-law from his first wife. This may give readers cause for skepticism. It shouldn’t. Following eight years of research and writing, including inter-

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views with dozens of people who knew Goh professionally and personally, Tan, a former banker born in Indonesia, has produced a work that is remarkably candid, sometimes critical, but always loving. Goh himself only saw a draft of one of the book’s nine chapters in advance, the one on his role in building Singapore’s armed forces. He neither authorized nor rejected this biography (although his second wife denounced its publication in an angry statement to the media).

Moreover, Tan argues that what she has written isn’t a biography at all—despite its seri-

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ous contribution, in my view, to the history of Singapore and a number of critical events in its early years. She calls her work “more a tone poem than a biography” and says she will “leave it to others more qualified to add further strokes and color to the portrait.” In taking such an impressionistic, yet well researched, approach, Tan has delivered to the public, and to future historians, priceless raw material for understanding the origins of modern Singapore.

Tan divides her portrait into a number of different angles on Goh, which will appeal to readers differently depending on their interests in and knowledge of Singapore’s history. One of the most interesting parts of this book, for me, focuses on Goh’s early years. Born into a reasonably well-to-do family in Malacca in 1918, in what is now Malaysia, Goh moved to Singapore when he was two years old to join his father who worked on a rubber plantation. For ethnic Chinese residents of Singapore, it was a close-knit community. The daughter of Goh’s

father’s best friend, for example, became Lee Kuan Yew’s wife. Goh encountered a number of Singapore’s future political players during his school years, forging close bonds at Raffles College even with such figures as Eu Chooi Yip, who was later hounded by the Singaporean government for his pro-Communist views.

Indeed, as Goh and Lee later went separately to the UK for higher education, each had to face the era’s contemporary battle of ideas among the competing claims of communism, independence-oriented nationalism and capitalism. The balance Goh struck in these years wasn’t always divorced from self-interest, as was also the case with Lee. Indeed, there is a self-serving air in the accounts of many of Singapore’s early leaders of their actions and ideas during the tumultuous years ahead of independence, when communism was a potent force aligned with the region’s independence movements. Later, it became necessary to demonize and destroy the communists for the PAP to stay in power.

And destroy them they did, despite an earlier alliance that aided the PAP's ascent.

Tan's account of Goh's early years—and what it says about the intellectual context in which Singapore's founding fathers grew up—seems more candid about Singapore's history than what is available elsewhere in the literature on this period. As a young man, Goh was clearly drawn to the arguments for social justice that the communists espoused, even if he was later to recognize the cynicism behind the ideals.

Two other angles on Goh are particularly noteworthy in this biography. Tan provides an enlightening account of Singapore's negotiations to separate from the Federation of Malaysia, negotiations that were, interestingly, led by Goh himself. Lee Kuan Yew, in his two-volume memoir, speaks in great detail of this traumatic period in Singapore's history, culminating in Lee's tearful radio broadcast on August 9, 1965, announcing Singapore's separation from Malaysia. Lee said at the time, "For me, it is a moment of anguish. All my life, my whole adult life, I have believed in merger and unity of the two territories." Tan's account of this moment, however, suggests that Lee was crying crocodile tears. He and Goh both knew that separation from Malaysia was both inevitable and desirable and they were both working for, not against, dissolution. It was ultimately in their interest, and Singapore's. So why the tears?

Tan provides a final angle on Goh's life—the invaluable role he played in building Singapore's armed forces. Some details of this are sketched out in Lee's memoir—and elsewhere in specialized literature on the topic—but Tan's account of Singapore's engagement with Israel is a much more fleshed out account from the Singaporean side of the relationship between the two countries in building Singapore's modern defense capabilities. This is an important, untold piece of history.

Most of Singapore's early public servants, such as Goh, who played a pivotal role in the creation of today's Singapore, are either dead or well into retirement. The story of Lee Kuan Yew and his family's role in the emergence of Singapore is well known and well documented. But time is running out to hear the tales of those who worked in the shadows to make Singapore a success, or who contributed to the problems it must now overcome. It is important for them, their friends and families to come forward. Singapore's history is also theirs.

One of the inevitable outcomes of nation-building—whether today in East Timor or hundreds of years ago in the United States—is the need to build sustainable myths. For now, many of the myths associated with the success of Singapore's nation-building exercise are built around the Lee family. What Tan's biography of Goh Keng Swee suggests is that we need to look more aggressively in the shadows for the full story.

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