

States Information Service can't show a film on America before submitting it to the censors. Old Beatles favorites such as "Yellow Submarine" are forbidden, and so are some of the albums by the Rolling Stones, Eric Clapton, and Elton John, often because song lyrics contain a reference to drugs. All jukeboxes were banned, as a symbol of moral decay, until July of 1991, when the government relented and licensed one for the Hotel Asia. Censorship can be the result of whim as well as of policy. I was so curious about the banning of *Cosmopolitan* that I put the question to Lee. "I agree with you," he answered, "*Cosmopolitan* is not likely to degrade or beguile young minds. But I have in my midst ministers younger than I who are fervent Christians, who believe that their daughters should not be reading all this. And one of them was in charge of information and the press, and he decided to ban *Cosmopolitan*." In this communications hub of southern Asia, Cable News Network can be seen only when the Singapore Broadcasting Corporation chooses to broadcast CNN news, because satellite-reception dishes are illegal. "You can get CNN in Saigon, you can get it in Beijing, but you can't get it here," one diplomat complains. When the American Embassy applied for a satellite dish, in the mid-nineteen-eighties, it took the Singapore government two years to grant the application, and then only on the proviso that no Singaporeans—not even employees of the Embassy—be allowed to look at programs from it. The Embassy is also forbidden to invite Singaporeans to watch American election returns on television.

The government is most careful to keep out anything that might offend Muslims. Because of the tensions between Malay Muslims and the Chinese during the time of the Malaysian Federation, and because Indonesia, a mostly Muslim country, slaughtered tens of thousands of its Chinese minority in 1965, Singapore bends over backward to avoid inciting either its own Malay population or its Muslim neighbors. (In 1965, Lee Kuan Yew said of Indonesia, "They live in a tenement area and they want to come into my little suburban house with its fruit trees.") Until recently, every Malay Singaporean going to college had his full tuition paid by the government, no matter how wealthy his fam-

ily was; there was no such policy for Chinese or Indians. Several government officials I talked with deplored the fact that Malays don't take as instinctively as Chinese to the pursuit of money, because the result is a Malay underclass in Singapore that, it is feared, could explode at any provocation. "A children's book published in India about the founder of the Sikh religion was banned because he had criticized Islam," a bookseller told me. "We had an art book of Persian miniatures, and one was a picture of Muhammad as a young prince. I had to ink out the face, because Muhammad isn't supposed to be depicted. I got a book on geometric designs in Islamic mosques, and even that had to be submitted to the censors." The government's fear of its Malay minority may be tinged with paranoia. Although Singaporean Malays on average earn less than the Chinese, most still have a substantial stake in the system and have come to be far better off than their counterparts in Malaysia. A young Malay guide from the Singapore Tourist Promotion Board, who showed me the sights of Singapore, told me the story of her family. In the early nineteen-seventies, the family of ten lived in a squatters' zinc-roofed one-room hut, without even a toilet. The roof leaked, she said, and also made the room an oven during the day. Now they reside in a four-bedroom apartment. All her sisters and brothers have good professional jobs, and two of her brothers, who are married, live in five-room apartments.

The workings of censorship can be subtle. The regulations call for all books to be submitted to the censor, but because this procedure can take months for each title the booksellers generally engage in self-censorship, ordering only books that they know are safe, and not bothering to submit them. "A couple of years ago, some young people started an arts magazine," a man active in the arts community told me. "No bookstore would sell it, and it died." In 1986, a critical biography of Lee Kuan Yew was published in Australia. Called "No Man Is an Island," it was written by James Minchin, an Anglican priest who had worked in Singapore. The censors didn't ban the book; they rejected it because the cover carried aerial views of Singapore labelled "Courtesy



of Ministry of Communications and Information." That, the censors said, implied government endorsement of the book. The 1990 edition of the book dropped the photos, but no bookseller has dared sell it anyway, since a bookseller as well as a book's author and publisher can be subject to a libel suit by Lee. The same holds true for a second critical biography of Lee, written by T. S. Selvan and called "Singapore: The Ultimate Island," which was published in Australia in

1990. I bought both books in Johore Bahru, the Malaysian city across the causeway from Singapore, where merchants do a booming business in banned books and uncensored videotapes. In my second interview with Lee, I

took the books from my briefcase and asked him why Singaporeans couldn't be trusted to read them. It was the only time Lee lost his composure. Of "The Ultimate Island" he said, "And this one I don't even know. . . . It's just rubbish. It's not even a well-written or well-researched book. It's just rubbish. I don't even know of the book." He added, "Anybody can write anything they like about me, but they run the risk of defaming me and ending up paying me damages. That's my counterweapon."

The book industry is a paragon of freedom compared with the country's newspapers. All the newspapers are published by a company called Singapore Press Holdings, and anyone who wants to own more than three per cent of its stock must seek approval from the Minister of Communications and the Arts; the minister also has veto power over the directors. Government-owned companies and agencies are among the largest stockholders in Singapore Press Holdings, and its current chairman is in addition the chairman of the Port of Singapore Authority, a government agency. Anyone who reads the *Straits Times* might wonder why all this corporate control is necessary, since direct pressure from government officials is never needed. The *Straits Times* operates with a subservience that irritates even some supporters of the government. Day after day, the paper devotes much of its front page to the latest pronouncements of top officials. One day during my stay, for instance, a five-column headline over the lead story read "PM: LET'S MAKE THIS THE

FINEST NATION," and the article began, "Mr. Goh Chok Tong last night issued an open invitation to all Singaporeans to help build this country into the finest in the world by the end of this century." A Western diplomat who had previously been stationed in Beijing told me, "Reading the *Straits Times* is like reading the *People's Daily*. Basically, the government doesn't like anything it can't control."

Unlike most other countries with a controlled press, Singapore attempts to keep the foreign press in line, too. For several years, beginning in 1985, it fought a running battle with Dow Jones & Co., after taking offense at articles in two of the company's publications; the *Asian Wall Street Journal* and the *Far Eastern Economic Review*. Among other things, Lee twice initiated proceedings against the *Asian Journal* for criminal contempt of court, filed libel actions against each publication, and ordered that the Singapore circulation of each be cut back drastically. When the *Review* responded by ending all circulation in Singapore, the government licensed a local printer to publish pirated copies of the magazine, minus the advertisements, each week, for sale in Singapore. In September of 1989, the *Review* wasn't allowed to send a reporter to cover its own libel trial. The next year, Lee, rejecting a request from Secretary of State James Baker, refused to let either publication cover Baker's visit to Singapore. The controversy neared resolution in 1991, however, with each side taking conciliatory steps toward settling the legal battles.

The government has also used circulation restrictions as a weapon against other foreign publications, and in 1990 it enacted harsh regulations applicable to foreign newspapers and magazines that sell copies in Singapore. "The clear intent of the Government was to warn all foreign periodicals that now circulate in Singapore to be wary of their reporting on Singapore lest they cross the vaguely drawn line of 'interfering' in Singapore's 'do-

mestic affairs,' thereby making themselves subject to the restrictions of the Act," the State Department human-rights report stated.

Never one to hide from his enemies, Lee went to Hong Kong in 1990 and addressed two international press groups; his remarks only strengthened his reputation for combativeness. He blamed television for the deaths in Tiananmen Square, saying that it was television coverage of demonstrations in the Philippines and South Korea, rather than a desire for freedom, which had spurred the Chinese students' protest. And he predicted that the Western press now centered in Hong Kong would gratefully flee to Singapore in 1997 and work under its rules. Derek Davies, the former editor of the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, who is now a columnist for it, wrote that Lee "had the gall to suggest that, come 1997, Singapore would offer the most congenial perch from which Western correspondents could cover Asia. He appeared to be serious. Presumably he believes that, by 1997, the entire 'foreign' press will have been bullied into the pathetic state of the media in Singapore."

Lee clearly takes delight in his battles

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against his critics. When I asked him how many people he had sued for libel, he replied, "I think about thirteen. Thirteen men in thirty years. Not bad. I haven't lost any of them. I fought only four in court; the others decided to settle. In other words, they withdrew and apologized and paid for my costs and paid a sum of money to charity. A political point was made." Still, the confrontations with the media raise a question: Why should a prosperous country with no government corruption to hide—a nation that seeks to be the communications hub of its region—act so forcefully against the press, against what appears to be its own best interests? The most plausible answer is that Lee Kuan Yew doesn't like what he can't control—and that he sees the independent forces in Singapore today as fuelling the potential for destabilization in the future. Censorship in a nation that wants to be a major participant in the world-communications revolution might appear to be a contradiction, but Lee has shown in the past that he can successfully counter a well-known adage: that he can eat his cake and have it, too.

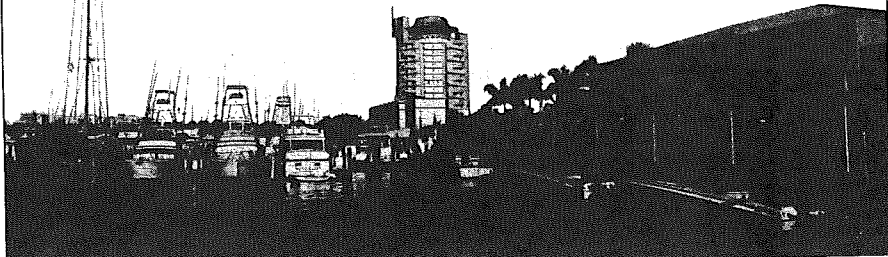
Nothing seems beyond the scope of the government's manipulation. "They recently had a campaign against obesity," a diplomat told me. "Cherubic kids are prized by Chinese society, but the Singapore government likes them lean and mean." Unlike most other offenses, being overweight is not subject to a fine, but the government did rule that obese recruits will have to undergo five months of basic military training, as opposed to three months for fit recruits. (All males have to serve at least two years in the armed forces.) Over all, however, few campaigns have raised as many hackles as a government effort to get college graduates to marry each other and breed. Government ministers don't shy away from the word "eugenics," despite its negative connotations since the Nazi era. Lee, who initiated the campaign, in 1983, once pointed to statistics showing that women with little education have twice as many

babies as college graduates, and told the nation in a speech, "If we continue to reproduce ourselves in this lopsided way, we will be unable to maintain present standards. . . . Our economy will falter; administration will suffer, and our society will decline."

Singapore's educational system is intensive, and pupils are subjected to pressure from an early age. One Singaporean banker I interviewed said, "Everyone has private tutors for his children, and it sometimes starts at two or three years old," and he added, "My daughter at age three and a half came home from nursery school and asked, 'Why am I not studying with a private tutor? Everyone else is doing it.' It's hard here to enjoy childhood." By the time a woman graduates from a university, being a housewife holds little appeal for her. But housewives are what many male Singaporean graduates want. Influenced by a Chinese cultural tradition that relegates wives to the home, they shy away from educated women. If present trends continue, the government estimates, two out of five female graduates will still be unmarried at age forty. Foreign men who work in Singapore find a bonanza: the city is filled with attractive, accomplished unmarried women. For the government, however, this situation is a potential crisis.

That's where the Social Development Unit, which is nothing less than an official government matchmaking service, comes in. Only college graduates are eligible; they fill out personal-data forms, and a computer then provides the names of potential partners. "In our culture, there are no singles bars, and it's hard to meet people socially," Ang Wai Hoong, the S.D.U.'s director, told me. "Girls read these lovely romantic novels, and our guys are practical-minded technocrats. So when the two get together it's a mismatch." The S.D.U. sponsors lectures on how to date women, along with a variety of other activities, including evening cruises to nowhere that are dubbed "love boats." Then, when the matchmaking succeeds (two hundred and fifty-three S.D.U. members were matched into matrimony in 1990), the newlyweds are bombarded with a variety of government incentives to have children. The incentives openly rely on the concepts of eugenics. If a working mother has performed at a certain level in tests given to all students in the

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tenth grade, for instance, she can deduct from her taxes a percentage of her income for each child; the more children she has, the higher the percentage grows. On the other side of the coin, the government instituted a so-called Sterilization Cash Incentive Scheme in 1984 but later abandoned it, along with several other eugenics-inspired schemes. Under this one, low-income families, if neither husband nor wife completed high school, could get five thousand dollars toward the purchase of an apartment if the wife agreed to be sterilized.

Many female graduates in Singapore, being more interested in a career than in having children, express resentment at being looked upon by their government as high-quality breeding stock. The government's social-engineering schemes have also alienated many Malays and Indians. Now that the Chinese language and Chinese culture are no longer identified with leftist politics, Lee Kuan Yew has been pushing for the adoption of Confucian values, and for the speaking of Mandarin along with English, as a counterweight to what he considers the decadence of the West—a decadence he sees spreading in Singapore because of its economic ties. (This isn't entirely paranoia. At one of the more popular McDonald's, for example, large groups of Chinese and Malays in their twenties, financed by indulgent parents, sit at outdoor tables all night long, talking and smoking pack after pack of cigarettes. Cigarettes have become a form of protest for rebellious young people, since smoking is the one activity the government tries to stamp out that nevertheless remains legal.) Lee told me that he was encouraging Confucianism "to insure that certain basic core values which held a society together are not lost." Confucianism is also a philosophy that is ideally suited to Singapore, since it teaches absolute obedience to the state and its rulers. But Malays and Indians look upon Confucianism, and upon the periodic campaigns urging the speaking of Mandarin, as dangerous moves, which could force them out of the mainstream of Singaporean society. Not all Chinese favor these things, either. "Children are taking all their cultural cues from the U.S., but only at a superficial level, like Michael Jackson and Ninja Turtles," a wealthy Chinese industrialist told me. "My children wouldn't

speaking a word of Mandarin unless someone forced them. We don't want to become like A.B.C.s—American-born Chinese—but will Mandarin be increasingly required for the civil service and business? With the population three-quarters Chinese, the minorities feel justifiably threatened."

When the government uses its authoritarian powers for mainstream causes, like environmental improvement, the results would make any planner in the West envious. Singapore, like many cities around the world, has been threatened with slow strangulation by the increased use of cars. But, unlike the other cities, the government of Singapore can dictate stringent restrictions on car ownership and get away with it. Because of government taxes, cars cost two or three times as much as the same models do in the United States. (The cost drops substantially if you agree to use the car only on nights and weekends.) There is a quota on the number of new cars allowed, and the government holds a monthly auction of rights to buy these cars. The annual road tax ranges from a few hundred dollars to well over a thousand, depending on the size of the car. The owner pays extra for the right to drive into the central business district during rush hours, and soon sensors will be embedded in the roads so that the owner can be billed for other rush-hour driving, such as driving on freeways. Combined with excellent public transportation, the result is clean air and few traffic jams.

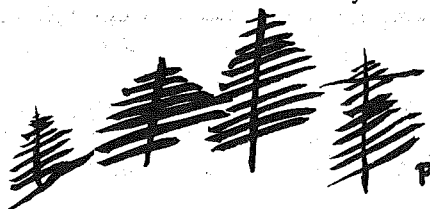
Even in the earliest days of Singapore's development, Lee insisted on environmental controls for industry. When I asked him what he considered the biggest mistakes he had made as Prime Minister, he didn't mention the collapse of the Malaysian Federation first. Instead, he told me about "a beautiful patch of green right in the middle of our harbor called Keppel, which had a golf course," and he went on, "But we were so desperate to get our industrialization going that I was persuaded by my colleague the Minister for Finance to allow a Japanese company to set up an oil refinery there.

It was a fire hazard and a blight on the landscape. And now they've sold out, because they lost money."

**H**IGH government officials in Singapore not only get salaries commensurate with those of corporation executives but also occupy offices luxurious enough to resemble the finest corporate suites. Even by that standard, the office of the Minister of Trade and Industry is something special: it is huge, with tasteful high-tech décor, and is situated on the top floor of the Treasury Building, with a commanding view of the harbor. Its occupant is Lee Hsien Loong, who is often known as B. G. Lee, because he held the rank of brigadier general when he left the Army, at age thirty-one. Besides being the Minister of Trade and Industry, B. G. Lee, at thirty-nine, is Deputy Prime Minister and the heir apparent to Goh Chok Tong. He is also the son of Lee Kuan Yew.

B. G. Lee dismisses the relationship as unimportant. "After a while, they're not interested in who your father is but in what you're doing," he told me. Lee Kuan Yew hasn't got off so easily: his critics frequently question why the son of the Prime Minister rose so rapidly in what is supposed to be a meritocracy. After meeting B. G. Lee, however, it becomes impossible to attribute his status merely to nepotism. A graduate of Cambridge and Harvard, fluent in Mandarin and Bahasa Malaysia—the language of Malaysia—and formidable in his native English, he is a powerful intellect and a master of words; every off-the-cuff remark he makes is phrased as if a speechwriter had taken days to polish it. Unlike his father, he wears a suit and is smooth in manner, betraying none of his emotions in his face. During my interview, he laughed heartily after every answer. Although in Asia laughter is often a sign of being ill at ease, he appeared so supremely confident that I began to wonder whether he was instead laughing with pleasure at the brilliance of his response.

Like his father, Lee Hsien Loong takes a hard line toward the governing of Singapore. He sees no need for a relaxation of censorship. "If we took a poll of the population, there would not be a dramatic change in censorship standards," he said. "Do we want to have Washington, D.C.'s Thirteenth Street in Singapore? Most Singaporeans would say no." (Few Singaporeans are



as worldly as their Deputy Prime Minister, so in reality a reference to Washington's center of sleaze would draw only a blank stare.) Nor does he feel that the foreign press should report on Singapore as it sees fit. "We start with the proposition that Singaporeans have to be masters of their own households, and foreigners are guests," he said. "Does it hurt us? Banks grow at the rate of fifteen per cent a year, multinationals come in. I don't think it hurts our reputation to have taken on Dow Jones and not to have been bested by them." On the question of demonstrations—even relatively innocuous ones, such as those by students protesting tuition increases—Lee was firm.



"It would be a sad thing if we had to solve our problems this way," he said. "I don't think a demonstration in this part of the world would be like a camp-out on the Mall in Washington. Our answer is this: We fully concede we're not like America."

Also like his father, Lee can be tough. When he came to Washington in 1989 to speak to the Asia Society, a business group, he used the occasion to attack America's human-rights policy, saying that the United States should continue to defend Southeast Asia but keep out of its internal affairs. He said that it "puzzles us that U.S. human-rights groups and government officials should so confidently prescribe for us, as a panacea for progress and stability, U.S.-style press freedoms and 'human rights.' Can the Singapore government really be so benighted and wrongheaded as not to see what is so patently in Singapore's interests? . . . Speaking English does not make us an Anglo-Saxon people, much less make us Americans. . . . We are not a Western society, and have never sought to become one." When I remarked to Lee that it must have taken courage to make such a speech in Washington, he replied, "The audience wasn't hostile. Businesspeople don't mind having liberals shot at."

The contrast between B. G. Lee and Goh Chok Tong is dramatic. Goh's father died when he was ten, and the family survived on his mother's earnings as a schoolteacher. He grew up speaking the Fukien dialect at home, and although he got a master's degree in economics at Williams College, his English is no better than adequate, and on occasion it is difficult for a West-

erner to follow, because it has a Singaporean lilt. A friend's father "was amazed that I should choose to make a living as a politician," Goh once said, adding, "Fortunately, this is Singapore, and our people place greater value on substance and results than on the gift of gab." Goh—who, like Lee Kuan Yew, often dresses informally—is tall and thin, sits ramrod straight, and was visibly nervous during my interview. Especially in contrast to the self-assurance of the two Lees, Goh's awkwardness makes him seem refreshingly human, and Singaporeans appear to be fond of him. But Goh, too, can be tough. He played a major role in the arrest of the church workers and in the battle with Dow Jones, and in 1990 he told a public gathering, "If people behave in a manner that will threaten the wider interests of Singapore, they will feel the firm smack of the government."

Few people would envy Goh his position. On one side is Lee Kuan Yew, who heads the P.A.P., takes an active role in running the government, and, in 1988, told Singaporeans, "Even from my sickbed, even if you are going to lower me into the grave, and I feel that something is going wrong, I'll get up." On the other side is Lee Hsien Loong, who openly aspires to Goh's position. "If I can do the job, I want to be Prime Minister someday," he told me. I asked Goh how he survived, sandwiched between two such forceful personalities, one of whom threatens to come back from the grave if necessary. "Well, I think that's because I'm relaxed," he replied. "I'm not wearing Lee Kuan Yew's shoes. I'm wearing my own shoes, which are much smaller than his. I think that B. G. Lee is in many ways like his father. But he knows that to govern Singapore you want a team that can work for Singapore. So he's very supportive as No. 2." Goh calls Lee Hsien Loong "an obvious successor."

Goh became Prime Minister in November of 1990, offering the prospect of a changed Singapore. With the release of Vincent Cheng and Teo Soh Lung a few months before, Singapore was down to its last political prisoner, Chia Thye Poh, and he is now a part-time prisoner at that. Goh has filled his speeches with references to making Singapore a more enjoyable, less restrictive place to live, and has pledged that the government will move toward

"Life is something  
to be spent,  
not to be saved."

—D.H. Lawrence

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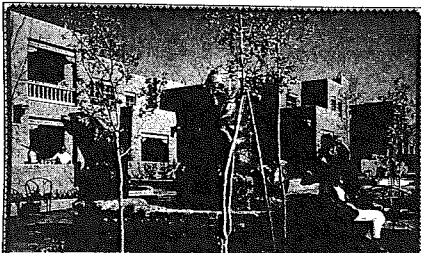
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a less paternalistic role. He has told Parliament that "the society which we want to bring about will be more refined, more compassionate, kinder and gentler, to borrow President Bush's words," and added that "there will be greater freedom for Singaporeans to make their own choices and to express themselves." Then, last August, he called a snap parliamentary election for the final day of the month—two years earlier than was required by law. Goh said that he was making the election a test of his plans for liberalization, and that if he didn't get sufficient support "we can all go back to authoritarian government." For once, Singapore's opposition, so often cowed and ineffective, came up with a brilliant strategy. Its architect was Chiam See Tong, the only full-voting opposition member of Parliament and the leader of the Singapore Democratic Party, which, along with the Workers' Party, forms the bulk of the opposition; the two parties hold similar views, and stand to the left of the P.A.P. Chiam won his first election to Parliament in 1984; he told me that Lee Kuan Yew had campaigned against him then by pointing out that Chiam's opponent had got better test scores in high school. Chiam, a lawyer who is extremely meek and mild in manner, persuaded the Workers' Party to allow P.A.P. candidates to remain unopposed for forty-one of Parliament's seats, and so guarantee that, no matter what the size of the opposition vote, the P.A.P. would remain in power. Chiam sensed the mood of the electorate perfectly. Clearly, there was widespread dissatisfaction with the government's authoritarian, paternalistic policies, but many more voters would be tempted to express that dissatisfaction if they could be absolutely certain that they wouldn't be throwing the P.A.P. out of office, and thereby imperilling the economic prosperity they hold so dear. The result was that the P.A.P. lost ground, its share of the vote dropping to sixty-one per cent from sixty-three per cent in 1988. The drop translated into only four seats, but it was still the opposition's biggest victory since 1963. And it put Lee and Goh in a real bind: Goh had wanted the vote to be a referendum on his plans for liberalization, but Chiam had turned it into the opposite. Many of those who voted against the P.A.P. were asking for more liberalization, not less.

What will happen now is far from clear. Goh said after the election that "life cannot go on as before," but he gave no hint of what he meant. Some students of the Singapore political scene speculated that Lee Kuan Yew would push Goh aside in favor of Lee Hsien Loong, who might quickly turn a kinder, gentler Singapore into a tougher, more brutal Singapore. Singaporean journalists I spoke with noted that the business community was trying to persuade Lee Kuan Yew that it didn't want a crackdown against the opposition—possibly the one move that could bring about the instability that Lee so fears.



If the hard-liners win out, can Singapore continue to survive as an anachronism—

an economic power aligned with the West but resisting the democracy and freedom sweeping through the world? The tendency would be to answer no. The only problem with such an assessment is that when it comes to Singapore the doomsayers have yet to score a point. Lee Kuan Yew has proved them wrong on every possible occasion over the past twenty-five years.

The problem is the same for the other scenario, that of liberalization. Goh has done little more in his first year of office than to ease somewhat the censorship of movies. Jeyaretnam, the Workers' Party head, remarked that "nothing has changed in this administration except that men can now go see films in which women show their bodies." Goh's promises of greater freedom have been expressed only in generalities, and when I interviewed him in April I tried to press him on the particulars. I asked if he could name any issues on which he and Lee Kuan Yew disagreed. "Issues, no," he replied. "But maybe the style, the way of doing things." We discussed the rules and the fines for breaking them that are posted all over Singapore. "My own goal is for us to move into a position one day where we don't need to have all those fines put up," Goh said. "The rules would be there, but they would not be intruding into your consciousness every day. That means a newer generation must be put through schools, to be socially educated that this is the norm of behavior. I think it would require twenty or twenty-five years before we can move to that situation."

—STAN SESSER