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As Singapore prepares for state funeral, world leaders pay their tributes

Zuraidah Ibrahim in Singapore

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Henry Kissinger, the former US secretary of state, and Ho Ching, wife of Singaporean PM Lee Hsien Loong, at Parliament House yesterday. Photo: AFP

After an emotionally charged week of mourning, hundreds of thousands in Singapore are expected to line the streets today to send off Lee Kuan Yew, their first prime minister.

His cortege will make a final journey of 15.4km en route to his state funeral, the procession passing by monuments he helped to build.

Yesterday, on the last day of his lying-in-state, several world and business leaders paid their respects, including Bhutan's King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuk, former US president Bill Clinton and former US secretary of state Henry Kissinger, who cried at the sight of the coffin.

Jack Ma Yun, the founder of Chinese online retail giant Alibaba, which has offices in Singapore, was also among those who went to Parliament House to bow before Lee's cortege.

In Hainan , at the opening session of the Boao Forum, President Xi Jinping paid tribute to Lee, noting that he was a respected strategist and politician who made significant contributions to foster communication and cooperation between Asia and the world.

Lee was a close friend of China, having visited the country at least 33 times in 37 years since 1976, and played an instrumental part in steering bilateral relations.

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"I take this chance to pay my tribute to Mr Lee Kuan Yew and other predecessors who contributed to the peaceful development of Asia," Xi said.

Hong Kong's first chief executive, Tung Chee-hwa, who will represent the city at the funeral, also penned a message yesterday, calling him "a giant of our times".

He credited Lee for his vision, strong leadership and love for his people in transforming Singapore and playing a unique role in the international arena. Lee knew Hong Kong and Singapore's many similarities and had hoped to enhance cooperation between the two, said Tung, who added: "I have learned much from his wisdom and unique insights."

As world leaders attend the funeral here, India and New Zealand are also marking it by lowering flags at half-mast.

More than a million pay respect to Singapore's founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew

Outpouring of emotion as crowds wait hours to enter Parliament House



Mourners queue to enter Parliament House, where Singapore's founding prime minister Lee Kuan Yew has been lying in state. Photo: AFP

Past midnight yesterday, Madam Linda Neo hugged her four-year-old son tightly in her arms while her other boy, nine-year-old Isaac, sat bleary-eyed in his brother's pram. They had stood still in a queue for more than two hours.

"We will wait for as long as it takes," said the mother, 38, a purchasing manager. "If we don't do this, I won't be able to sleep well. We need to show our respect."

Similar sentiments have been uttered many times over the past four days as Singaporeans surprise even themselves at the massive outpouring of emotion over the passing of their founding prime minister, Lee Kuan Yew.

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Lee died on Monday, aged 91. In the four days that his body lay in state at Parliament House, more than 415,000 people filed past the flag-draped coffin to pay their respects. Close to 900,000 people visited 18 sites all over the island to pen tributes.

Singapore is famed as a fast-paced and efficient city. Shortened waiting times - whether exiting Changi Airport, transshipping 20-foot boxes through the container port, or getting a licence at a government office - have long been a national goal. As a result, Singaporeans are not known for their patience.

Yet, on Friday evening, mourners queueing at Parliament House were prepared to wait up to 11 hours to enter. It was the police, not the people, who decided to call a temporary halt to the steady inflow. Safety concerns prompted them to stop the line for eight hours until yesterday morning.

Even as Lee Hsien Loong, Lee's eldest son and the current prime minister, announced on Friday afternoon that Singaporeans could experience the scene inside Parliament live on Youtube, the crowds kept coming.

In almost every other conversation, on national television, in the newspapers and on social media, Singaporeans could not get or hear enough about Lee.

"When you think about it, he is everywhere," said Madam B.L. Lim, an IT worker in her early 50s who had tried but failed to join the queue on Friday at 11 pm with her friend.

She said Lee had played a part in every aspect of everything Singaporeans enjoyed today - from their housing to their jobs to their national airline. "Water, land, sea, air," she said.

"And even the air we breathe," her friend, Madam Chung Miao Ling, in her 50s, chimed in. The reason: he started a national tree planting campaign in 1963 to ensure that the concrete jungle had enough greenery to provide shade and soak up carbon dioxide.

Neither Lim nor Chung had had it easy. Both had been laid off a few times and one was in between jobs. Singapore provides no unemployment benefits. But they bore him no resentment.

"We listened to him, we saved up. The young have no idea. They complain but they do so in a comfortable country, in an air-conditioned home," said Lim, who joined the queue eight hours later when it re-opened.

The past week of national mourning has brought out so many emotions in Singaporeans, a mélange of sentiments that ranged from a deep sense of loss to intense reflection about the past and speculation about the road ahead.

"I think this week I changed," said Cherylin Lee, 18. "I am more grateful to be in this country."

Some rued the fact that they had not always appreciated the man. Alan Teo said he was one of those, because he despaired at the way Lee crushed his opponents. But after watching so many world leaders pay tribute to him, Teo felt no other Singaporean would be able to match his standing.

"We must thank him," said the sales manager, tears welling in his eyes. "We have to continue this. We have to."

Lee was prime minister from 1959 to 1990 and remained in the cabinet until his retirement in 2011. While he is credited with transforming the city into one of the wealthiest in Asia, his contributions

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have been to instil values of meritocracy, multiracialism, self-reliance and zero tolerance for corruption, said numerous commentators.

Lee Kuan Yew Fellow and Professor of Psychology at Singapore Management University Professor David Chan said the unprecedented display of grief and gratitude might puzzle outsiders.

"But to the Singaporeans who grew up with him as their leader, or hearing stories from their parents or from those who have worked with him, this is not surprising. It is simply a natural expression of their personal experiences ... regardless of demographics or political views."