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Kishore Mahbubani [Singapore, Diplomat, Dean of Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy]

Kishore Mahbubani

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Interviewee: **KISHORE MAHBUBANI**
Interviewer: Tan Siok Sun
Date: 24 November 2015
Location: Singapore

0:00:19
[Tan Siok Sun](#)

Thank you, Kishore, for this interview. Now I think it was Freud that said that one needs to go back to one's childhood to understand a man, or a woman. There...were there any childhood experiences, significant events that you feel perhaps did shape you? I recall you had a difficult childhood.

0:00:48
[Kishore Mahbubani](#)

Well I definitely had a very challenging childhood. I remember looking back, what happened was that my parents separated. My father went to jail, he got gambling debts, and debt collectors would come to our house to try and collect money from us, to sell the furniture in our house. So, it was a very challenging...I guess, almost Dickensian childhood. But the irony of it all now is that, now that I'm sixty-seven years old, I look back at my childhood and I realise that I was given a huge competitive advantage by being given a very challenging childhood because it made me very tough. Because when I watch my mother, when she was under great stress, when she had no money to sometimes buy food, and she didn't break down. So, she taught me a very powerful lesson - never break down. So that's the great advantage of a challenging childhood, because you realise that, no I don't, my life, no matter what challenge I face, nothing can match the challenge that my mother faced when she brought me up. So, she taught me to be tough, and that's a huge competitive advantage.

0:02:17
[Tan Siok Sun](#)

Having such a poor, difficult childhood, and you were poor, what motivated you then, say in school?

0:02:27
[Kishore Mahbubani](#)

I enjoyed learning, I enjoyed studying, and I especially enjoyed reading. The one institution that saved my life, literally, was the Joo Chiat Public Library. I would go there every week and borrow several books without any instruction from my mother. I did it because I loved books and I loved reading, and as a result of reading a lot, I began to do very well in my examinations. So, it was basically not any forces pushing me to do well, it was the love of learning that drew me into books.

0:03:08

[Tan Siok Sun](#)

Books brought you to a whole new world, and you did very well in school. And you in fact was a President Scholar. The year was 1967, was it?

0:03:22

[Kishore Mahbubani](#)

Yes, and I'm glad you mentioned the President's Scholarship because frankly when I finished Grade twelve, or pre-University as it was called then, my destiny as the son of a Sindhi, was to go and sell textiles on High Street. In fact, that's exactly what I did. When I finished my 'A' levels at St. Andrew's School, I went straight to work in High Street, and I was earning \$150 a month as a salesman. Then out of the blue, and I don't know how it happened, I got an offer of the President's Scholarship, which paid me \$250 a month. So, my mother was very pragmatic, said, "Well, the President's Scholarship gives you \$250 a month, Sindhi salesman \$150 a month, go, go to university, you get more money."

I had a wonderful time. The four years at the Bukit Timah Campus were four of the happiest years of my life, because I actually discovered that I had a passion for studying philosophy. That's why I had to repeat a year, I gave up economics, I gave up sociology. I gave up what were considered practical subjects, to study a subject that was completely impractical, which was philosophy. It was one of the wisest decisions that I ever made in my life, because when you are passionately in love with the subject, you excel in it. So, I had the good fortune of having several remarkable teachers in this small Philosophy department.

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[Tan Siok Sun](#)

But what drew you to Philosophy?

0:05:05

[Kishore Mahbubani](#)

The way I explain it is very simple. When I went for the Economics department tutorial, my professor then was not interested in argument; he only wanted to know what the right answer was. So, if you gave the right answer, you were okay. There was no debate, no discussion. Whereas by contrast, the Philosophy department was the exact opposite where there was no right answer, and there's no such thing as a right answer in Philosophy. What you do is you debate the pros and cons of each argument, and then you weigh and decide as a matter of judgement, which position is the correct position. It was so liberating to be forced to think of alternative answers all the time, because there's no such thing as the right answer in the Philosophy department.

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[Tan Siok Sun](#)

So you moved on and your first job was with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Can you describe your early years?

0:06:13

[Kishore Mahbubani](#)

I'm not giving a big secret away if I say that I happened to be a radical on campus. I was editor of the Singapore Undergrad. In fact, I wrote an editorial called 'A Question of Decorum' which has been published in my book 'Can Singapore Survive' now, in which I was very critical of the then Prime Minister, Mr Lee Kuan Yew. So, when I graduated, I assumed that I will only spend a couple of years in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and then frankly resign, and go and do a Masters and PhD and become a full-time philosopher. That was the goal I had when I left university in 1971. But what happened was that after two years of working, including one year in Cambodia, I ended up going to...three years of working, I ended up studying philosophy at Dalhousie University in Canada. That one year of graduate studies taught me a very valuable lesson, which is that politicking in academia is actually worse than politicking in the bureaucracy of the Singapore Government. So surprisingly, I look at... When I could compare the two finally, I realised that actually the Foreign Ministry had a far less politicised environment than academia and I wouldn't...wasn't such a bad job to go back to Foreign Affairs.

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[Tan Siok Sun](#)

Your career as a diplomat, you must have met many personages. Do you care to comment on... they need not be politicians, do you care to comment on one or two personages somehow that...who left a very deep impression on you for one reason or another?

0:08:07

[Kishore Mahbubani](#)

I would say the three people who had the most profound impact on me - intellectually, also I guess in some ways emotionally - were the three great founding leaders of Singapore; Mr Lee Kuan Yew, Dr Goh Keng Swee, and Mr S. Rajaratnam. Looking back now I realise, it was one of the biggest privileges of my life that I worked with all three of them. Because all three were remarkably great men. From each one of them I learnt different things. As it's now clear that the calibre of the founding leaders of Singapore is as high, or as great as the calibre of the founding leaders of America. In retrospect you can see that very clearly. So, when you work closely with remarkable men, you learn so much. You absorb so much.

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[Tan Siok Sun](#)

Can you mention one lesson from Mr Lee Kuan Yew that stayed with you?

0:09:18

[Kishore Mahbubani](#)

Well, I actually came out, since I'm a Dean of a School of Public Policy, which is fortunately named after Mr Lee Kuan Yew. I actually came up with my own theory of leadership and I say a good leader has 5Cs. I think Mr Lee Kuan Yew exemplified this because he had these 5Cs of the theory and the 5Cs are number one, compassion. Which means that whatever Mr Lee Kuan Yew tried to do, he was trying to help other people, moral compassion. Number two, he was very cunning. He could out-negotiate anybody. That was amazing. Number three, he was a collector of talent. He surrounded himself not with fools, but with people who were as brilliant as he was. Certainly, Dr Goh Keng Swee was in every respect, intellectually as brilliant as Mr Lee Kuan Yew. He showed a great deal of courage and great fortitude. The fifth C is complexity, because in today we live in a world, where the world is becoming more and more complex. You have to have a remarkably high IQ (Intelligent quotient) to deal with this complex world. That capacity to handle complexity is another aspect of a great leader. Mr Lee Kuan Yew, by the way, had all these five attributes in a remarkable way.

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[Tan Siok Sun](#)

I guess when it comes to Dr Goh Keng Swee, there's also this, ...the 5Cs in different degrees. I'm curious about Rajaratnam, the Minister for Foreign Affairs, whom I seem to feel, when I was in MFA, was in a world of his own. Can you say it's...I mean you dealt with him far more intimately than I did? Would you like to say something about Raja the man or his character?

0:11:43

[Kishore Mahbubani](#)

Well... Mr Rajaratnam has sometimes been described as the 'lion' of Singapore, and I think it's a description that fits him very well because he is one of the bravest men I ever met in my life. I saw this first-hand when we went to Havana, Cuba in 1979, to attend the Non-Aligned Summit meeting. As you know at that time, there was a Cold War, and the Soviet Union has supported the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia, United States had opposed the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia, and as you know Singapore and the ASEAN states had also opposed the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia. But when we went to Cuba, we went to a country that was a friend of Vietnam, a friend of the Soviet Union. At that point in time Cambodia was still being represented by the previous government, the Khmer Rouge Government of Pol Pot, which Vietnam had removed. So, the Vietnamese wanted the Non-Aligned Movement to recognise the Quisling government that they had installed in Phnom Penh, which is against international law. So, we had to fight the Soviet forces down there. Fidel Castro was very cunning, the leader of Cuba. He convened a small meeting in a room where he stacked the room with leaders, Presidents, Prime Ministers, who were

all friends of the Soviet Union, in that room. And the opposite side there were only two people, the President of Sri Lanka, and the Foreign Minister of Singapore. So, the odds were stacked against Mr Rajaratnam. The atmosphere was very intimidating, and frankly if Mr Rajaratnam had any sense of cowardice, he would have melted. He did the exact opposite. He fought like a lion and even though he was a Foreign Minister, so much more junior to these Presidents and Prime Ministers, he didn't give an inch. He just fought them ferociously, single-handedly, without even the support of Sri Lanka. I saw that with my own eyes, and I said, "This is a man I want to be like when I grow up."

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[Tan Siok Sun](#)

Moving from Singapore, I believe that you had spent some time, several hours with Jokowi, now President of Indonesia. Were you impressed by him? How did you find him?

0:14:31

[Kishore Mahbubani](#)

I was invited one December maybe two years ago, I suspect, to go and spend a few hours with then Governor Jokowi of Jakarta. What happened was that we travelled together in a car where he and I sat at the back, and the driver sat in front, another friend sat in front. I was able to spend five, six hours talking to him, and I was very impressed by him. Because number one, the man is completely honest, amazingly honest. Number two, completely dedicated to improving the lives of other people. Number three, very pragmatic, very shrewd, and very willing to learn. So, in the car he asked me questions about what does Singapore do? How does Singapore solve this problem and so on, and so forth? So, I was extremely hopeful when he became the President. But he's had a very rough time in his first year or so, because he's discovered that even though he's the President of Indonesia, because he doesn't have a political party that controls the Parliament, and he doesn't even control his own political party, he has a big challenge on his hands. It made me aware that to state an.. a remarkable truism - politics is about politics. If you want to be a politician, you got to get your politics right, and you have got to win enough support in Parliament before you can get your programmes through.

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[Tan Siok Sun](#)

That's interesting. So do you think from your years as a diplomat, from your years as a student, and the people you have met, and your travels, is there such a thing as an Asian style of leadership, or an ASEAN style of leadership?

0:16:36

[Kishore Mahbubani](#)

I don't know whether there is an Asian style or Western style of leadership, but when I mentioned my 5Cs theory of leadership, there's actually a sixth C that is equally important. That's not the attributes that I spoke about, the 5Cs, but the sixth C is context. So for...I give you a very obvious, glaring example. Mahatma Gandhi was a great leader of India. He helped to bring out... bring about the independence of India. Now Mahatma Gandhi was very successful in the Indian context, but he would have completely failed in the Chinese context. By contrast, Mao Zedong was very successful as a strong leader in the Chinese context, but he would have failed in the Indian context. So, leadership is not an abstract thing. Success in leadership depends on how you adapt to your context. If you take Singapore for example, Singapore had a very strong set of leaders, Mr Lee Kuan Yew, Dr Goh Keng Swee, Mr Rajaratnam, Mr Lim Kim San, Dr Toh Chin Chye, and so on, and so forth. They were appropriate for that context. But in Singapore today, the political context has changed. When the political context changes, you have to have a different kind of leaders to emerge too. So, leadership is not something that you can take an automatic formula and say, "Hey, Bill Clinton was so successful in America, let's just take him to China." Sorry, Bill Clinton will fail in China. So the context is very important. The great leaders are those who understand their contexts very well, understand the limitations, and are able to rise above those limitations.

0:18:45

[Tan Siok Sun](#)

Apart from the courage that you have mentioned that our early leaders had, have you seen examples of moral courage in other personages?

0:18:58

[Kishore Mahbubani](#)

There's one leader, unfortunately whom I never met in person, whom I regard as the greatest leader of the 20th century and that was Deng Xiaoping. Because Deng Xiaoping was by far the greatest leader of the 20th century, because he lifted more people out of poverty, which by the way is the most degrading human condition, which I experienced myself as a child, and he lifted more people out of poverty than any human being at any point in history had ever done, which is amazing, right? But he had to be a very strong leader to do that. In the West, he's universally condemned for putting down the student demonstrations in Tiananmen, right? Condemned. But what was his choice? If he had allowed the demonstrations to carry on, if the political system of China had crumbled, more people would have suffered. So, the big lesson you learn from people like Deng Xiaoping is that life is never a choice between good and evil. If it was that simple, life would be very easy. It's always a choice between the lesser evil in many, many cases. He chose what he thought was the lesser evil, because at the end of the day, by retaining a firm control of China, the Chinese people continue to flourish and do well. Now what I have just said to you is completely unacceptable to say in an American campus. If what I said to you today was said in an American campus, I would be lynched immediately. But at the same time, this is

the kind of...to use one of Mr Lee Kuan Yew's favourite expressions, this is the kind of political hard truth you cannot deny.

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[Tan Siok Sun](#)

Do you think Xi Jinping is also in a way rather like Deng Xiaoping, having to make very tough decisions?

0:21:22

[Kishore Mahbubani](#)

I have great respect for Xi Jinping. In fact, in my view today, in the world today, the four of the greatest leaders in the world today are, I would say: Pope Francis, Angela Merkel, Narendra Modi, and Xi Jinping. What's interesting, two of the four are Asian, that's quite remarkable. When you consider in the past, all the great leaders used to come from the West, but today you see more and more strong Asian leaders emerging, and the fact that the two most populous countries in the world, China and India, have strong leaders provides room for great hope for the world. Because if two of the most populous countries in the world manage their affairs well, we are actually going to have a happier century. Now, by the way, when I say a happier century, that's completely taboo in the West also. Because in the West, they all think that the world is getting darker and darker, and more dismal and more dangerous. That's completely wrong. So in some ways, paradoxically, you have to...in the past you used to go to the West for optimism, today if you want optimism, come to Asia.

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[Tan Siok Sun](#)

I'm intrigued that you included Modi. So you think he's a strong leader? How so?

0:23:01

[Kishore Mahbubani](#)

He is very driven. He is convinced that India's potential is far greater than what it is today. He is determined to try and achieve that potential, and he's very careful and very pragmatic in the changes that he's making. He's reducing subsidies. He's reduced fuel subsidies. He's told the middle-class population of India, you are getting subsidies to buy gas tanks, you don't need the subsidies. Please voluntarily give up the subsidies. Four million people voluntarily gave up their subsidies, so the same gas tank could be transferred to a poor home in India. Now he's carrying out a very bold move, taking advantage of the new identity cards, a system of India, which is amazing. They have signed up hundreds of millions of people and given them identity cards. With those identity cards, they can set up bank accounts. With those bank accounts, the subsidy can go direct to the person, and nobody can steal it on the way, which used to happen in the past, in India. So that's an example of the enormous changes that he's making. By the way, I'm aware that Modi is criticised a great deal. I have met many of his

detractors, but I would say on balance, what he's trying to do is trying to modernise India successfully.

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[Tan Siok Sun](#)

You could sense his compassion, one of your five, six Cs, in what he does as well as in his communication? Does it mean that a good leader, a strong leader, somehow really needs to communicate to his people what it is that he wants to achieve?

0:25:13

[Kishore Mahbubani](#)

Three things to note about Narendra Modi - he's not doing it for himself, he's absolutely uncorrupted, he has virtually no possessions, he's doing it for the people. Number two, he's probably one of the best communicators in the world. When he gives a speech in Hindi, he's one of the best speakers in the entire world. Thirdly, I think he also has a lot of courage. He's willing to keep fighting on even under, against great odds. By the way, it is conceivable that he may not succeed. It's conceivable, it happens, right? But if I was a betting man, I would bet that he's going to succeed.

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[Tan Siok Sun](#)

Do you think you'll ever go into politics, Kishore? Do you want to be a politician? So that you could influence policies?

0:26:19

[Kishore Mahbubani](#)

Yes, well I think if I was thirty years younger, [Laugh] I could have gone into politics. But now at the age of sixty-seven, I think the great thing about writing a lot is that I found that the footprint of my writings is growing larger and larger. So quite often when I travel around the world, I'll meet people in all kinds of interesting corners who will say, "Yeas, my professor made me read your essays." It happened to me in Serbia, happened to me in Canada, and it's happened to me in Argentina. I mean, that's remarkable.

27:10

[Tan Siok Sun](#)

You tell me that you are happiest when you're writing, and I know you're a very disciplined person. You would lock yourself up in a room and write, and you obviously have tremendous personal satisfaction from writing, but what's your motivation?

0:27:28

[Kishore Mahbubani](#)

My motivation is to create a better world. I actually believe that we can create a better world, but to be completely honest with you, one great mission that I have is that for the last 200 years, the flow of ideas has been a one-way street. It has been from the West to the rest. I want to create, for the first time in 200 years, a two-way street of ideas. We should continue to learn from the West, but I also want the West to learn from the rest. To my absolute surprise, one of the biggest intellectual surprises that I have encountered in my life, is that in theory, the most open-mind is supposed to be that of a Western liberal intellectual, because liberals, by definition are open to all ideas, and will consider every possibility. But in practice, I have discovered that the mental vision of a Western liberal intellectual is very narrow. He cannot conceive of a world where his ideas may be wrong. The narrow-mindedness of this creature called the Western liberal intellectual has been a huge discovery for me, and unfortunately, there are many Singaporeans, including those in our media, when I read what some of our journalists in Singapore say, they polish the boots of these Western liberal intellectuals.

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[Tan Siok Sun](#)

I will wrap up the interview by asking you, Kishore, have you ever thought of an epitaph for yourself? I don't wish to be morbid but what shall we say? Herein lies Kishore, a devoted father? A faithful friend? What would you like your epitaph to be?

0:29:51

[Kishore Mahbubani](#)

It's very...five simple words. 'He made the world a better place.'

0:30:01

[Tan Siok Sun](#)

With that, thank you Kishore, thank you.

0:30:04

[Kishore Mahbubani](#)

Yes, thank you.