



Trading Hub Beyond Ideologies: *The Singapore-North Korean Economic Connection and Mission for Industrialization during the Cold War*

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Abstract

During the period from the 19th to the mid-20th centuries, colonial Singapore played a central role as an Asian trading hub. From 1965, the Republic of Singapore, as a sovereign nation, attempted to uphold its former colonial position of dominance. The efforts undertaken by the Singaporean elites proved to be highly effective, surpassing even the ideological conflict of the 1960s. This resulted in communist nations like the Soviet Union, China, North Vietnam, and North Korea expressing a desire to establish commercial trade relations with Singapore. In the 1950s and 1960s, North Korea stood out as an Asian nation that had achieved notable industrial advancements. North Korean leaders sought to utilize Singapore as a platform for disseminating its industrial products and economic achievements. The efforts made by North Korean communist leaders can be analyzed through various activities carried out between Singapore and North Korea. In the case of Singapore, its leaders aspired to broaden its trading horizons by establishing connections with socialist nations and adopting the insights gained from North Korean industrialization. Through primary sources of Singapore news articles, North Korean news articles, South Korean diplomatic archives, and CIA archives, this paper focuses on the mutual interactions of Singapore, the trading hub, and North Korea, the industrial estate.

Keywords: North Korea, Singapore, industrialization, socialist trade, Cold War

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Introduction

During the period from the 19th to the mid-20th centuries, colonial Singapore played a central role in facilitating the trade of commodities in Asia. From 1965, Singapore, as a newly independent country, aimed to preserve its formerly colonial position as a central economic hub in Asia and for other regions (Bruton 1996; Chua 1977; Heng 2011; Huff 1994, 1999; Sugimoto 2011; L. Lim 2015; Soon and Tan 1993). This paper contends that Singapore's elites effectively preserved their status, extending their success beyond the ideological conflict of the Cold War. Consequently, even communist countries such as the Soviet Union, China, North Vietnam, and North Korea sought access to Singapore for the purposes of promoting the socialist bloc's commercial trade. In the 1950s and 1960s, North Korea stood out among Asian countries for its exceptional industrial achievements in various sectors, such as synthetic fabrics, machinery, underground resources, and heavy machinery, a fact that has been supported by multiple studies (T. H. Kim 2001; Hwang 2005; B. Kim et al. 2007; C. Lee 2013; G. B. Kim 2015; Yang 2015; Miller 2016; Y. Lee 2019; Jo 2021; Duol Kim 2021; J. Lee 2022a; Woo 2022). Less widely recognized is the fact that the leaders of North Korea aimed to utilize Singapore as a means to export industrial goods and propagate economic achievements diplomatically, over not only South Korea but also other countries.

In November 1975, Singapore established official diplomatic relations with North Korea.¹ The relationship with North Korea has garnered attention through means other than economic connections, for which precise statistics are unavailable. Prior to 2016, residents of North Korea had the privilege of entering Singapore without a visa. The relationship between the two countries seemed to be as strong as that between South Korea and Singapore. However, in November 2017, the Singapore government halted

1. Singapore had previously established diplomatic relations with South Korea in August of the same year. Since then, Singapore and South Korea have enjoyed a close friendship, with frequent exchanges of heads of state and government. The relationship has also become economically important, with trade between the two countries surging after the FTA came into effect in 2006.

trade with North Korea. The termination of diplomatic relations in 2016 and 2017 was probably a reaction to the imposition of economic penalties by the United States on North Korea. Additionally, there have been suggestions that North Korea views Singapore's political system and economic growth process as an exemplary model to follow.² Furthermore, the inaugural North Korea-US summit, which took place in Singapore in June 2018, was indication of their solid familiarity. The discovery and location of the North Korean embassy in Singapore became widely known, attracting numerous South Korean journalists who considered it an essential destination to visit.

Although there has been significant attention on Singapore's diplomatic and security concerns regarding its relationship with North Korea, there has been a lack of historical studies examining North Korea's relationship with Singapore, and even more so Southeast Asia. There was limited research done on the relationship between North Korea and Singapore before 1975, the year when they formally exchanged ambassadors. Some studies on North Korean diplomacy briefly mention the rivalry between North and South Korea or the socialist connections with Vietnam and Cambodia (K. Hong 1995; Park 2003; Bridges 2017; S. B. Kim 2020). In addition, there has been no research conducted on the historical relationship between Singapore and North Korea. It is important to note that there have been few investigations on the relationship between Southeast Asia and other Northeast Asian communities, including South Korea, China, Japan, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. The challenge in studying North Korea's relationship with Southeast Asia primarily stems from the scarcity of information and data released by North Korea. Furthermore, the volume and significance of North Korea's trade with Southeast Asia is comparatively smaller relative to its trade with other regions.

This study aims to focus on North Korea's economic ties with Southeast Asia, which have been largely overlooked in Northeast Asian and Southeast Asian studies. It attempts to reconstruct the history of the relationship between North Korea and Singapore during the Cold War by focusing on

2. "N. Korea Taking Lessons from Singapore," *Taipei Times*, May 14, 2012, accessed May 16, 2024, <https://www.taipetimes.com/News/world/archives/2012/05/14/2003532798>.

newly discovered primary sources, such as Singaporean and North Korean newspaper articles, diplomatic records of the South Korean government concerning the close relationship between two countries, and other related sources. As previously stated, the majority of studies on North Korea's foreign relations during the Cold War have concentrated on socialist connections. This study examines the relationship between North Korea and Singapore with a particular emphasis on its significance in understanding the Third World international cooperation in the Cold War context. It challenges the prevailing stereotyped notion of North Korean foreign relation by demonstrating that it was in fact multifaceted. Moreover, it offers a perspective on economic cooperation and exchanges among Third World states that transcended ideological considerations during the Cold War period.

All of this cannot be fully understood without placing it in the context of Singapore's transition from a colonial city-state to a nation-state with the onset of the Cold War following World War II, as well as the peculiarities and dilemmas Singapore faced in its early economic development. Ultimately, this paper seeks to investigate the geo-economic power of Singapore even beyond the ideological conflicts of the Cold War and uncover the hidden characteristics of Singapore's economic connection with North Korea in terms of its mission for expanding trade and promoting industrialization.

Ideological Support and Cooperation: The North Korean-Singapore Relationship before 1965

Little is known about the relationship between North Korea and Singapore after the establishment of the DPRK (Democratic People's Republic of Korea) in the post-war period (1948) and before Singapore's independence in 1965. Although Singapore had been self-governing since 1959, it was still a colony with a strong British influence, so it was difficult to have any formal ties with communist states. It even served as the main rear base for the British campaign on the Korean Peninsula during the Korean War.

According to the visual archives of National Archives of Singapore, the British stationed fighter planes in Singapore during the Korean War, stored large amounts of timber for the war effort, and recruited Indians to serve in its military.³

Britain, along with the United States, was extremely wary of the widespread impact of communism in Southeast and East Asia, also known as the “domino effect,” and, in the wake of the Korean War, was the leading First World *liberal* camp state to pursue a strategy of containment of the Communist Bloc, which included China, the Soviet Union, North Korea, and North Vietnam. It was also the first country to impose martial law to counter communist military forces, doing so in Malaya where it deemed the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) as potentially disruptive following Britain’s return to the Malayan region to reassert colonial control shortly after the end of World War II (Kheng 1983, 2012). Recently, the prominent British newspaper, *The Guardian*, discovered secret documents that appear to show that agents sent by Britain during the 1965 anti-communist mass killings in Indonesia carried out propaganda work that fueled that tragic incident (Lashmar et al. 2021).

However, there are some sources, albeit limited, in the private sector that provide a picture of Singapore’s Chinese community’s various engagements with North Korea and, more broadly, with communist states. A case in point is a secret report on Singapore sent to the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) on August 30, 1950, shortly after the outbreak of the Korean War on June 25, 1950. It describes how the editors of the *Nanyang Siang Pau* 南洋商報 (Nanyang Business Daily), a leading Chinese private newspaper in Singapore, had expressed support for North Korea’s military actions on the distant Korean Peninsula.⁴ *Nanyang Siang Pau* was founded by Tan Kah Kee 陳嘉庚, a rubber tycoon, and had a wide following throughout the Malay Peninsula, the Straits Settlements, and Indonesia, as one of the most influential overseas Chinese morning newspapers in all of

3. National Archives of Singapore (NAS), 20060000343-0037, 1952; NAS, 19980000862-0031; 19980000862-0033; 19980000862-0032, 1953; NAS, 19980000874-0015, 1953.

4. CIA Archives, RDP82-00457R0056005, August 30, 1950.

Southeast Asia. Its board of directors included Tan's son-in-law Lee Kong Chian 李光前 and Tan Lark Sye 陳六使, and the paper's support for North Korea's military action was clearly related to Tan Kah Kee's pro-communist stance (Yong 2014; J. L. Lim 2017).

There were also Singaporeans who fought in the Korean War. Chen Bang Xing 陳邦興, a Singapore Chinese mechanic (also known as *nanqiao jigong* 南僑技工), fought in the Second Sino-Japanese War in Kunming in Yunnan province in 1941 and went on to fight in the Korean War in 1950 as a member of the People's Liberation Army of the People's Republic of China.⁵ The term *nanqiao jigong* refers to overseas Chinese engineers from Southeast Asia, who were recruited in large numbers by Tan Kah Kee in response to Chiang Kai-shek's call for engineers during the Sino-Japanese War, and contributed to the war effort by driving, maintaining, and repairing supply trucks on the infamous Burma-Yunnan front.

However, these examples do not indicate that the Chinese community in Singapore had an intensive relationship with North Korea, but rather that they displayed some ideological support for the communist People's Republic of China, established in 1949. In fact, there were occasions when Singapore's Chinese community had shown a neutral or pro-Chinese stance, contrary to British intentions, such as the SCCC (Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce)'s attempt to reopen Sino-Singapore trade in 1956 (J. Lim 2012). The Chinese mercantile community in Singapore attempted to trade with China even though the British government, along with the United States, was maintaining a strategy of blockade towards China. However, the attempt was unsuccessful, largely due to the authoritarian attitude of the Chinese communist government in dealing with capitalists and the failure of negotiations over the status of overseas Chinese in Singapore. In addition, Tan Kah Kee and other Singaporeans were monitored by the CIA for smuggling resources and machinery parts to the Soviet Union, China, and elsewhere in Southeast Asia.⁶ Furthermore, as

5. NAS, 20100000006-0075, 1950; 20100000006-0075, 1951; 20100000006-0119, 1940s.

6. CIA Archives, CIA-RDP80-00809A000700210213-7, December 5, 1952; CIA-RDP82-00457R001900840008-5, October 19, 1948.

communist movements grew in Southeast Asia, Singapore's labor unions and students began to oppose any external influence in Singapore, such as British control and American intervention. These events demonstrate that following the establishment of the People's Republic of China and the Korean War, the political and social dynamics in Singapore began to explode within the context of the Cold War, something the North Korean government observed closely, as seen below (Table 1).

Table 1. North Korean News Articles on the Situation in Singapore, 1951–1965

Newspaper	Headline	Date
<i>Minju Choson</i> (Democratic Joseon)	New Law of Press Suppression Implemented in Singapore	August 12, 1951
<i>Rodong sinmun</i> (Workers Daily)	Strike by Asian Dock Workers in Singapore	January 9, 1953
<i>Rodong sinmun</i>	Strike by Bus Company Workers in Singapore	May 17, 1955
<i>Rodong sinmun</i>	Singapore Students Alliance Takes Leave of Absence Action	May 23, 1955
<i>Rodong sinmun</i>	70,000 Singapore Transport and Factory Workers Strike	June 16, 1955
<i>Rodong sinmun</i>	At the end of December, the General Secretary of the Malay Communist Party Held a Meeting with the Malay and Singaporean Prime Ministers	December 18, 1955
<i>Rodong sinmun</i>	Independence Movement Week in Singapore	March 16, 1956
<i>Rodong sinmun</i>	Call for Immediate Independence from Singapore's Legislative Assembly	April 13, 1956
<i>Minju Choson</i>	Singapore-British Talks End in Failure due to British Machinations	May 19, 1956
<i>Minju Choson</i>	Support the Independence Movement of the Singapore People from Asian Countries	May 29, 1956
<i>Rodong sinmun</i>	People's Action Party of Singapore Condemns British Authorities' Repressive Measures	June 29, 1956
<i>Rodong sinmun</i>	Crowds Rally Demanding Independence of Singapore	July 29, 1956
<i>Rodong sinmun</i>	Singapore Government's Provocative Actions	September 29, 1956
<i>Rodong sinmun</i>	Dismiss British Advisers and Officials in Singapore	December 27, 1956

<i>Minju Choson</i>	Public Opinion in Each Country Strongly Condemns the Landing of US troops in Singapore	August 26, 1958
<i>Rodong sinmun</i>	US Fleet Moves out of Singapore under Pressure from World Opinion	August 28, 1958
<i>Rodong sinmun</i>	Stop the Repression of Singapore's Patriots	February 12, 1963
<i>Rodong sinmun</i>	Strike by 60,000 workers in Singapore	October 12, 1963
<i>Rodong sinmun</i>	Singapore Newspaper Welcomes Cambodia's Rejection of the US "Aid"	December 18, 1963
<i>Rodong sinmun</i>	31 Trade Union Organizations in Singapore Announce an Appeal for Anti-"Malaysia"	May 11, 1964
<i>Rodong sinmun</i>	Our People's Unity Organization and Singapore's Political and Social Groups Issue a Statement Condemning "Malaysia"	September 24, 1964
<i>Rodong sinmun</i>	Singapore Withdraws from Malaysia	August 11, 1965
<i>Rodong sinmun</i>	Singapore's Secession from Malaysia Demonstrates the Failure of US and British Imperialist Policies towards Southeast Asia: Broadcasting Speech of the Indonesian Communist Party Chairman	August 13, 1965
<i>Rodong sinmun</i>	Instrument of Colonialism, Malaysia will Eventually Collapse: Joint Statement of the Socialist Front People's Party of Singapore	August 13, 1965
<i>Rodong sinmun</i>	The People of Asia should Unite against US Imperialism, which is Reviving Japanese Militarism: Pointed out by Singapore Newspaper	December 11, 1965

Table 1 shows that North Korea's major interest regarding Singapore from 1950 to 1965 concerned ideological support for leftist movements, such as worker strikes, student movements, and other communist-related activism. At the same time, these North Korean newspapers condemned the United States, the United Kingdom, and Malaysia in the context of the Cold War and in the name of anti-imperialism/colonialism. This time, North Korea saw Singapore as a place where a local socialist movement was clashing with external forces, as well as a symbol of the Cold War and Asian decolonization, thus ideologically North Korean leaders observed and monitored the situation in Singapore. Moreover, North Korea used Singapore's independence in 1965 to attack the *liberal* side, particularly the UK and Malaysia, interpreting this event as a sort of people's liberation from imperialism and liberalism.

The different attitudes of North Korea and Singapore towards each other prior to Singapore's independence in 1965 can be explained by the nature of the regimes established in each country and their policy orientation under the logic of the Cold War. In the case of Singapore elites, who were gradually moving towards self-reliance and independence, they had to adapt to the British and American-led international order in terms of economic aid and security, while at the private level there was socialist activism and sympathy with China's communization among Singapore's Chinese population, particularly the working class and students. On the other hand, North Korea, a socialist state born of the division of the Korean Peninsula, under the dictatorship of the Kim family and the Communist Party arbitrarily interpreted Singapore's move towards independence as a challenge to the US- and UK-led liberal international order. These divergent perspectives converged sharply as Singapore gained independence. At the time, the economic cooperation between two countries was a critical link.

Economic Cooperation between Singapore and North Korea after 1965

With Singapore's independence in 1965, the nature of the relationship between Singapore and North Korea shifted from ideological alignment to economic cooperation. Through an examination of diverse primary sources from Singapore, the US, North Korea, and South Korea, this study found there were four main events in the two countries' economic cooperation prior to the signing of official diplomatic relations between the two states in 1975: trade missions, trade agreements, goodwill delegations, and trade exhibitions.

The First Trade Mission from North Korea to Singapore in October 1966

From the October 15 to November 11, 1966, a three-member North Korean trade mission visited Singapore to investigate the possibilities of expanding bilateral trade between Singapore and North Korea. This was the first trade

mission from North Korea and the first case of a communist country sending an official delegation to newly independent Singapore. It was not an official trade mission, but a semi-governmental one. According to the *Straits Times*, the mission members were:⁷

- a. Mr. Li Eung Gu, leader of the mission and vice president of the Korea Metal and Chemical Export and Import Corporation
- b. Mr. Li Sung Hoon, executive in the Export and Import Corporation
- c. Mr. Pai Yong Duck, representative of a food company

The main goal of this one-month mission was to find ways and means to promote bilateral trade between the two countries. Li Eung Gu, the mission leader, told Chinese merchants at a dinner hosted by the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce (SCCC) that North Korea was “prepared to have normal trade relations” with Singapore and to conclude short-term and long-term agreements.⁸ C. H. Tong, the vice president of the SCCC, responded that North Korea’s rapid development of industrial output since its pre-industrial days should be noted. The North Korean trade mission announced at the farewell party that they “concluded several business contracts based on mutual benefits” and would recommend that the government establish official trade representatives in the region.⁹ It was the beginning of the two countries’ economic cooperation, which would lead to their ongoing relationship.

Trade Agreement between Singapore and North Korea in May 1967

Just after the trade mission in late 1966, Singapore and North Korea signed a trade agreement on May 13, 1967.¹⁰ The official government trade delegation led by Kim Suk Jin, director-general of the External Ministry of Commerce, visited Singapore from April 26 to May 15 of that year to sign the trade

7. “First Trade Mission from North Korea in Singapore,” *Straits Times*, October 18, 1966.

8. “N. Korea Ready to Sign Trade Pact with S’pore,” *Straits Times*, October 20, 1966.

9. “N. Korea Plans Trade Base in S’pore,” *Straits Times*, November 10, 1966.

10. “S’pore Signs Trade Pact with N. Korea,” *Straits Times*, May 14, 1967.

agreement between the two countries.¹¹ According to the news article, North Korea had already exported mechanical equipment, various metals, chemical goods, minerals, and ginseng products to Singapore while Singapore exported rubber, shellac, tin, fat and oil.¹² This first trade agreement between the two countries, which was signed by Kok Ah Loy, director of the Trade and Division of Singapore's Finance Ministry, on behalf of the Singapore government and Kim Suk Jin on behalf of North Korea, included the following provisions: 1. trade representations would be established in both countries; 2. the volume of trade in the first year would amount to 200 million pounds of goods; 3. North Korea would be obliged to import Singapore-produced goods equal to the entire amount of North Korean goods exported to Singapore.¹³ Following the agreement, on January 12, 1968, a North Korean trade office was set up in Singapore led by Bak Su Kwon, the first ever trade representative in Singapore.¹⁴

Interestingly, the third condition of the agreement was a key demand of the Singapore government to the two Koreas (South and North) in negotiating trade agreements that would promote their own industrial infrastructure. While North Korea accepted this condition easily because its economic structure was totally controlled by the state as a one-party totalitarian politico-economic system, South Korea could not accept this kind of condition because the produced goods of South Korea and Singapore, notably light industrial products, were almost the same. This difference is a key reason North Korea was able to lead in the Korean competition for the Singapore market. According to a report of the South Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs, there were three primary reasons the

11. "Uri nara-wa Singaporeugan-e muyeok hyeopjeong chegyul" (Signing of a Trade Agreement between Our Country [N. Korea] and Singapore), *Rodong sinmun* (Workers Daily), May 16, 1967.

12. "Spore Signs Trade Pact with N. Korea," *Straits Times*, May 14, 1967.

13. "Singaporeu-wa-ui gwangye surip" (Set up a Relationship with Singapore), Ministry of Foreign Affairs 67-145, National Archives of Korea, June 3, 1967.

14. The office and residence address was 18 Chatsworth Road, Singapore 10 ('Registered List in Singapore Diplomatic and Consular List,' Ministry of Foreign Affairs, National Archives of Singapore, August 23, 1969).

two Koreas each sought to establish a bilateral trade relationship with Singapore: a. geopolitical location: located between Malaysia and Indonesia, it was an optimal port from which to secure the natural resources of those two states; b. trading hub Singapore was ideal for use as a trading hub to export manufactured goods; c. ideological competition: Singapore was neutral in its foreign relations and the arena of ideological competition. The report proposed the South Korean government to strengthen its position in Singapore, economically, diplomatically, and ideologically.¹⁵

After the trade agreement was signed, North Korean products made a huge impact on the local market in Singapore. A New Zealand trade mission in October 1967 reported, “We have discovered that since the visit of our trade mission 18 months ago, China and North Korea have cornered several lines of consumer goods in Singapore which were formerly held by our manufacturers. In certain cases, we have completely lost the business because of dumping prices of Chinese and North Korean products. It appears to us that the two countries are selling their products at unrealistic prices in an all-out effort to earn foreign exchange.”¹⁶ A South Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs agent report on the North Korea-Singapore trade agreement had in fact already raised the alarm regarding the possibility of North Korea dumping products.¹⁷

North Korea’s Goodwill Delegation to Singapore in June 1968

The official North Korean goodwill delegation that stayed in Singapore for nine days, from June 29, 1968, symbolized the closer relationship between Singapore and North Korea. Kang Ryang Wook (1904–1983), leader of the delegation, was the highest-ranking official and the first ever VIP to visit Singapore from an Asian communist country.¹⁸ Kang was an important

15. “Singaporeu-wa-ui gwangye surip” (Set up a Relationship with Singapore), Ministry of Foreign Affairs 67-145, National Archives of Korea, June 3, 1967.

16. “NZ Trade is Hit by N. Korea, China Dumping,” *Straits Times*, October 27, 1967.

17. “Singaporeu-wa-ui gwangye surip” (Set Up a Relationship with Singapore), Ministry of Foreign Affairs 67-145, National Archives of Korea, June 3, 1967.

18. “History by Red VIP,” *Straits Times*, June 30, 1968.

figure in North Korean history in terms of the Christian movement and education policies. As a relative of the Kim lineage, Kang had been a teacher of the teenaged Kim Il-sung, the founding father and president of North Korea at the time. After the establishment of DPRK, Kang forced all the various Christian denominations in North Korea to be regulated by the North Korean state and had been placed in charge of their control and regulation. Kang was an appropriate choice to lead such a state visit, a high-ranking official familiar with the international order and a prominent figure in the North Korean Communist Party. In fact, Kang was vice-chairman of the Standing Committee of the Supreme People's Assembly at the time of his visit, but the Singapore government and news agencies acknowledged him as the vice-president of North Korea, ranking just below Kim Il-sung. The fact is that Kang was only nominated as vice-president after returning home. But for the diplomatic consideration, it seems North Korea informed Singapore that Kang's position was vice-president.

According to a South Korean report, this delegation had a nine-day schedule that involved visiting highly modernized destinations, such as the HDB (Housing Development Board), Jurong Industrial Complex, a television broadcasting station, the National Theatre, a hospital, and harbor facilities.¹⁹ Another report identified the nine members of the delegation: Kang Ryang Wook, vice-chairman of the Standing Committee of the Supreme People's Assembly; Jin Mun-Dek, minister of urban development; Bang Tai-Il, vice-minister of foreign affairs; Jin Choong-Kuk, a bureau chief in the Ministry Foreign Affairs; Han Eung-Cho, the vice-director of the Supreme People's Assembly; Shin Byung-Chul, senior officer in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs; Kim Hee-Dal, a doctor; Kim Choong-Il, a senior officer in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs; and Kim Duk-Hyun, a journalist.²⁰

Lee Kwan Yew, the prime minister of Singapore, and government ministers welcomed the delegation at the airport. Upon arrival, Kang released a public statement, which clearly reveals the perspective of North

19. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, National Archives of Korea, MAW-0653-281030, June 28, 1968.

20. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, National Archives of Korea, MAW-0701-010930, July 1, 1968.

Korean elites on this trade connection. “The friendship and solidarity between Korea and Singapore are an integral part of the friendship and solidarity of the Asian peoples who oppose imperialism and colonialism... The industrious people of Singapore have achieved many successes in their work against foreign aggression and the interference in their internal affairs, and for consolidating national independence and developing the national economy of the country.”²¹ In its coverage of the event, a North Korean newspaper pointed out how Kang highlighted North Korea’s achievement of developing a socialist industrial-agriculture state with a self-supporting national economy through the leadership of the greatest leader, Kim Il-sung, and 40 million North Koreans.²²

Just after arriving in Singapore, Kang and some other members of the delegation were invited to Istana Palace for a banquet and meeting with Wee Chong Jin, the acting president of Singapore. The notable discussion between Wee and Kang clearly revealed their different perspectives on economic cooperation between the two countries.²³ Kang condemned the US intention to colonize South Korea as a military base for the occupation of North Korea, declaring, “As long as US imperialism occupies South Korea, the Korean people cannot live in peace and the unification of Korea cannot be realized.” Wee responded that, “In these times of momentous changes when universal concepts of human society are in conflict, the sad fact is that the world continues to be divided not only on political lines but also on ethnic and racial lines... We have, therefore, despite many difficulties ordered our foreign relations on the basis of being friends with all those who wish to be friends with us and who acknowledge the fact of our independence and our right to build a way of life according to what our people

21. “History by Red VIP” *Straits Times*, June 30, 1968.

22. “Singgaporeu gonghwaguk-eul bangmunhaneun uri nara jeongbu chinseon daepyodan-i Singgaporeu-e dochak” (Our Country’s Goodwill Delegation Visiting the Republic of Singapore Arrives in Singapore), *Minju Choson* (Democratic Joseon), July 3, 1968.

23. “N. Korean Leader’s Call to Singapore,” *Straits Times*, July 1, 1968; “Singgaporeu gonghwaguk-eul bangmunhaneun uri nara jeongbu chinseon daepyodan-i Singgaporeu-e dochak” (Our Country’s Goodwill Delegation Visiting the Republic of Singapore Arrives in Singapore), *Minju Choson* (Democratic Joseon), July 3, 1968.

want.”²⁴ Wee revealed that Singapore would focus on more practical areas beyond ideology, like trade and the economy, for fruitful cooperation.

Singapore government and society were also cautious about this trade relationship in the Cold War context, seeking to balance trade and international politics.²⁵ “In a world where there is an excess of ideology Singapore has striven to cultivate friendly ties with all countries which are willing to reciprocate. The attitude is pragmatic and consequently is concerned more with results than with theories.”²⁶ From this perspective, Singapore considered North Korea had met the conditions for trade that it had set forth. Singapore’s leadership also clearly knew it was impossible “to draw a line between trade and politics” but, from a realistic perspective, Singapore should do business with all comers as a center of trade because Singapore’s prosperity was “tied up with the steady expansion of trade.”²⁷ Singapore’s trade connection with North Korea presented a dilemma, and Singapore’s answer was to balance trade and politics. According to a South Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs report, Kang and the North Korean trade delegation had demanded a press conference to be broadcast on both radio and television, but Singapore had rejected it. This also reveals Singapore’s efforts to balance trade and politics.²⁸

Kang and the delegation undertook an in-depth inspections of Singapore’s industrial infrastructure, to include the Jurong Industrial Complex, wharfs, the Jurong shipyard, and iron and steel mills. After two-hour tours of these industrial sites, Kang stated that “from the experience we have had in our country, I am confident that Jurong will make a contribution to the development of your country’s commerce and industry.”²⁹ This statement reveals North Korean self-confidence concerning its own industrial performance, one of the reasons Singapore had sought economic

24. “N. Korean Leader’s Call to Singapore,” *Straits Times*, July 1, 1968.

25. “Singapore and Korea,” *Straits Times*, July 4, 1968.

26. “Singapore and Korea,” *Straits Times*, July 4, 1968.

27. “Singapore and Korea,” *Straits Times*, July 4, 1968.

28. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, National Archives of Korea, MAW-0711-051800, July 11, 1968.

29. “Kang: I’m Confident of Your Success,” *Straits Times*, July 3, 1968.

cooperation with North Korea. Following the North Korean delegation to Singapore, that September Singapore also dispatched a delegation to participate in celebrating the twentieth anniversary of the founding of North Korea, while also looking around the Chun Li Ma (Chollima) Factory and Chun Li Ma Steel Wire and Mill Complex.

North Korean Trade Exhibition in Singapore, 1969

In late January 1969, the North Korean government dispatched an eight-man team to prepare for a trade exhibition in Singapore.³⁰ Kim Tai Ruin, the deputy leader of the team, pointed out that “trade between two countries in 1968 was worth about US\$30 million, which was 20 times greater than in 1967.”³¹ He stated that North Korea hoped to import more rubber, tin, and locally made leather shoes and shirts from Singapore. This clearly shows that North Korea and Singapore dealt with exchangeable commodities, like North Korean heavy and chemical industry products and Singapore’s rubber and tin, brought in from Malaysia and Indonesia, and light industrial products. In short, they were able to pursue mutually beneficial trade. On the other hand, South Korea dealt with almost the same commodities as Singapore. South Korea only regarded Singapore as a trading hub while Singapore needed to promote their own industrial output, so it was challenging for the two countries to find a way of signing any trade agreement that included the special stipulation of the Singapore government that was noted earlier.

In this context, the first North Korean trade exhibition opened at the Shenton Way exhibition site of the Light Industries Services and for two weeks showcased over three thousand items, ranging from machinery and foodstuffs to porcelain. The main purpose of the exhibition, according to its director Choi Taik Jun, was to “develop friendship and trade ties between two countries.”³² The displayed products included heavy machinery, metal,

30. “N. Korea is to Buy More from S’pore,” *Straits Times*, January 23, 1969.

31. “N. Korea is to Buy More from S’pore,” *Straits Times*, January 23, 1969.

32. “North Korean Exhibition,” *Straits Times*, February 25, 1969.

chemical products, mineral ores, building materials, the chemically processed North Korean textile known as Vinalon, ceramics, handicrafts, glassware, and tobacco. Within the first three days, beginning on February 25, 1969, US\$10 million worth of commodities were ordered by local businesses.³³

Even by the time exhibition opened North Korea had already received orders worth US\$100,000 from local businessmen, which revealed the interest of local businesses in North Korean heavy industry.³⁴ On March 5, Dr. Goh Keng Swee, Singapore's finance minister and an architect of the Singaporean economy, made a 30-minute visit to the exhibition guided by Bang Tai Ryul, North Korea's minister of foreign affairs, and Bak Su Kwon, a trade representative in Singapore. Goh was given a presentation on drilling and shaping machines, leading him to remark, "One can see that the technology achieved by Korea is advanced."³⁵ According to a spokesman for the exhibition, machinery, including center and bench lathes, and medicines had attracted the most attention. The exhibition closed on March 10, 1969. All told, order placed by more than twenty companies at the exhibition amounted to over US\$15 million.³⁶

A North Korean news article also reported on this trade exhibition in Singapore, but only focused on the leadership of Kim Il-sung in the area of industrial development, stating that people all over the world were surprised by and praised his great leadership.³⁷ This revealed that the major purpose behind North Korea's connection to Singapore was not to display its industrial products per se, but rather to display its ideological superiority. On November 28, 1968, the Singapore and North Korean governments agreed to establish consular relations, and the North Korean Consul General in Singapore began operations from the first day of the following month. The official letter from Bak Sung Cheol, North Korean minister of foreign

33. "N. Koreans Get \$10m Orders at S'pore Show," *Straits Budget*, March 5, 1969.

34. "North Korea Gets \$100,000 Orders," *Straits Times*, February 26, 1969.

35. "N. Korean Technology Impresses Dr. Goh," *Straits Times*, March 5, 1969.

36. "\$15 mil Orders for N. Korea," *Straits Times*, March 11, 1969.

37. "Singaporeu-eseo uri nara sangpum jeollamhoe gaemak" (Our Commercial Product Exhibition Opens in Singapore), *Rodong sinmun* (Workers Daily), March 2, 1969.

affairs, to S. Rajaratnam, Singapore's minister of foreign affairs, reveals clearly the ultimate perspective of North Korea on this relationship: "The establishment of consular relations between our two countries will contribute to further strengthening and developing the friendly and cooperative ties between our two peoples, ties which were forged in the joint struggle to oppose imperialism and colonialism, to consolidate national independence, and to preserve peace in Asia."³⁸ North Korean communist leaders regarded Singapore, the Asian and global trading hub of people, capital, commodities, and even ideologies, as a gateway or market to convey or display socialist-based industrial performance during the Cold War.

Singapore's Industrial Development as Survival vs. North Korean Industrial Development as Propaganda

The thrust of Singapore's foreign policy was clear: no trade agreement, no diplomatic relations, including consular relations. Just after a series of economic exchanges with North Korea between 1966 and 1969, Singapore established consular relations with that country, while South Korea still struggled to establish diplomatic relations with Singapore, even for so much as official trade representatives, because South Korea could not accept the demand of Singapore regarding a trade agreement, in particular the condition that South Korea should purchase Singapore-manufactured goods equal in value to its exports to Singapore. This was a strategy of Singapore to boost industrial development using diplomacy.³⁹ In this context, in the late 1960s, North Korea, rather than South Korea, was a rising counterpart to Singapore's foreign and economic relations. This is evidenced by the fact that North Korea was listed in the Diplomatic and Consular List published by

38. "Joseon minjujuui gonghwaguk-gwa Singgaporeu gonghwaguk-gan-e chongnyeongsa gwangye-reul seoljeong" (Report on Establishment of Consular Relations between the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and the Republic of Singapore), *Rodong sinmun* (Workers Daily), December 2, 1969.

39. "Singapore: Jakarta Report," Ministry of Foreign Affairs, National Archives of Korea, May 10, 1970.

Singapore's Ministry of Foreign Affairs under the name of "Korea," clearly showing that the Singapore government regarded North Korea as the representative among the two Koreas.⁴⁰ Another factor explaining Singapore's preference for connecting to North Korea was the latter's industrial development, which Singapore aimed to duplicate.

North Korea's Motivation for Propagating its Heavy Chemical Industry in Singapore

Socialist foreign trade experienced significant growth during the 1950s, particularly in the Soviet Union and East Europe. The socialist intellectuals and politicians in the Soviet Union and East Europe aimed to enhance trade by achieving a harmonious distribution of industrial growth among socialist nations. The theory referred to here is known as the socialist international division of labor theory. According to this theory, the socialist camp was perceived as a vast cooperative entity that was intricately interconnected (J. Lee 2022b). Consequently, the countries that achieved success in industrialization were permitted to persist in their current state, while other countries with lower levels of industrialization were to concentrate on agriculture and the mining of natural resources. The Soviet Union and Eastern European states, known for their significant industrialization, sought to engage in trade by offering their industrial goods in exchange for agricultural products from less-developed countries. Essentially, it was a trade system that prioritized Europe and revolved around the Soviet Union. Unsurprisingly, this hindered the efforts of less-developed socialist states, particularly in Asia, to achieve industrialization, and was met with opposition from those countries.

This was a point over which North Korea and the Soviet Union clashed. Kim Il-sung's attitude throughout the 1950s was that the immediate increase in agricultural production was only for the self-sufficiency of manufacturing, and that the ultimate goal of North Korea was economic growth centered on

40. "Registered List in 'Singapore Diplomatic and Consular List,'" Ministry of Foreign Affairs, National Archives of Singapore, August 23, 1969.

heavy and chemical industries, including the metal, chemical, and fishery processing industries. North Korea's position was to engage in the global allocation of work within the socialist bloc, while exporting goods based on its own economic blueprint, rather than adhering to the role previously imposed by the Soviet Union (J. Lee 2022b). North Korea experienced rapid growth in this sector in the 1950s as a result of a policy that prioritized heavy industry (C. Lee 2013).

North Korea has not officially released economic statistics since the mid-1960s. For this reason, most of the economic statistics related to North Korea released by South Korea's Ministry of Unification (Tongilbu) and its

Table 2. North Korean Gross Production of Society (*sahoe chongsaengsan*) by Sector, 1946–1964

Year	Gross production of society	Industry	Agriculture	Transportation & Postal	Basic construction	Commodity distribution	Others
1946	812	188	480	13	-	97	33
	100%	23.2%	59.1%	1.6%	-	12%	4.1%
1949	1,779	633	722	51	128	167	76
	100%	35.6%	40.6%	2.9%	7.2%	9.4%	4.3%
1953	1,357	416	564	50	202	81	42
	100%	30.7%	41.6%	3.7%	14.9%	6%	3.1%
1956	2,856	1,145	759	114	351	308	177
	100%	40.1%	26.6%	4%	12.3%	10.8%	6.2%
1960	6,682	3,815	1,577	147	581	400	160
	100%	57.1%	23.6%	2.2%	8.7%	6%	2.4%
1962	8,398	5,122	1,788	235	644	302	201
	100%	61%	21.3%	2.8%	9.1%	3.6%	2.2%
1963	9,191	5,569	1,976	257	845	349	193
	100%	60.6%	21.5%	2.8%	9.2%	3.8%	2.1%
1964	10,110	6,298	1,951	283	990	384	202
	100%	62.3%	19.3%	2.8%	9.8%	3.8%	2%

Sources: Tongilbu (1996, 123–124).

Note: Unit is million North Korean won. This table only includes major fields, while the total amount includes all data.

Bank of Korea can be characterized as estimations made by domestic experts and various ministries. However, as shown in Table 2 above, economic statistics were published until the early 1960s. In this respect, looking at the process of North Korea's economic growth, the share of agriculture was 59 percent in 1946, while the share of industry increased to 57 percent in 1960 and then 62 percent in 1964, indicating that the country was promoting an economic development model centered on industrialization. In addition, the development of the heavy and chemical industries, to include chemicals, machinery, and steel, was emphasized by North Korea using various mineral resources such as coal and iron ore (Tongilbu 1996; Jo 2021; Duol Kim 2021). North Korea's Kim Il-sung had already declared to the Workers' Party Central Committee in 1955 that he would go "to the foundation of socialist construction, that is, the road to heavy industrialization" (Cha 2013, 16). On the other hand, in South Korea, the share of agriculture in the national economy was around 40 percent until 1963, while the share of the manufacturing and construction industries was around 15 percent, and heavy and chemical industries showed a lower development (EPB 1970). In other words, North Korea was producing results in economic development based on its heavy and chemical industrial foundations, which were ahead of its South Korean counterpart, and this proved a noteworthy moment for Singapore's officials and politicians who were pursuing economic development as an independent nation-state and looking for a model in heavy and chemical industry-led development.

However, North Korean industrial growth slowed gradually in the 1960s because, while the economic growth was made possible through consumption control and mass mobilization, it was hampered by deteriorating relations with the Soviet Union in the 1960s and the negative effects of internal mobilization. North Korea began to open up to the outside world in the 1970s, borrowing from the liberal camp and attempting to achieve balanced development by expanding agriculture and light industry (Kwon 2012). In the 1960s, the North Korean state monopolized the growth of its heavy chemical industry and used it for trade, but this changed in the 1970s.

During the late 1960s, North Korea had aimed to redefine its position

within the socialist camp by promoting its industrialization strategy and selling its heavy chemical industry achievements and products to other countries through an economic connection with Singapore. This move was a deliberate attempt to break free from the role assigned to North Korea by the Soviet Union. Indeed, in 1971, North Korea published two advertisements in Singapore's prominent Chinese-language newspaper, *Sin Chew Jit Poh* 星洲日報 (on September 5 and 9) to promote its system and coinciding with the country's 23rd anniversary. The September 5 English-language advertisement featured in the Chinese newspaper clearly demonstrated an explicitly propagandistic intent. The advertisement promoted Kim Il-sung's leadership, emphasized the superiority of North Korea's socialist system, highlighted the propagation of the Juche ideology, and showcased the country's achievements in industrialization.

On the September 9, a double-page spread featuring a range of photographs was utilized to showcase Kim Il-sung's leadership. The photographs included images of the "Chun Li Ma" (Chollima) movement, as well as various energy, machinery, and chemical plants associated with it.⁴¹ The series of advertisements presented here illustrate that North Korea utilized the Singaporean press to highlight its industrial accomplishments. These advertisements, published in both Chinese and English, indicate that the propaganda campaign targeted not only South Korea but the entire socialist camp. The format of trade exhibition of North Korean industrial products held in 1969 was also organized with the primary objective of promoting and disseminating the country's industrial accomplishments in Singapore.

Motivation of Singapore as a Socialist Trading Hub and as Industrial Developmental State

In the economic cooperation between North Korea and Singapore in the late

41. "North Korean Advertisement Marking the 23rd Anniversary of the Establishment of North Korea (朝鮮民主主義人民共和國成立23週年紀念)," *Sin Chew Jit Poh* 星洲日報, September 9, 1971.

1960s, as outlined previously, North Korea aimed to promote the products of its heavy chemical industry to socialist countries for propaganda purposes. Conversely, the Singaporean government had two primary motivations for actively seeking economic collaboration with North Korea: 1. the potential to establish itself as a prominent center for global trade among socialist nations, and 2. the opportunity to leverage North Korea's extensive expertise in the chemical industry, science, and technology.

During this period, the South Korean government was particularly focused on the North Korea-Singapore relationship. Its diplomatic records from that time cited a press conference held by then-prime minister, Lee Kuan Yew, which was reported in Singapore's local newspaper, *Nanyang Siang Pau* 南洋商報 on August 4, 1966. In that interview, Lee Kuan Yew said, "We want to expand economic relations with other countries... We aim to enhance our trade relations with other nations as we fully recognize the significance of economic trade. Similarly, this applies to trade relations with communist nations, trade relations with Eastern European countries, and trade relations with the Soviet Union. South Korea would like to send a delegation as well, and North Korea would be able to come as well."⁴²

Since 1949, the CIA had documented the presence of a Soviet trade commissioner in Singapore who acquired rubber, electronics, and other goods in the region.⁴³ The National Archives of Singapore also possesses documentation pertaining to the trade and diplomatic interactions between the Singapore and the Soviet Union since the establishment of Singapore in 1965. In 1965, Singapore dispatched its deputy prime minister and other officials to the Soviet Union for a visit focusing on science and technology. Additionally, in August 1967, a three-member trade delegation from the Soviet Union visited Singapore for ten days with the aim of boosting bilateral trade.⁴⁴ A trade agreement had previously been ratified in April 1966,

42. *Nanyang Siang Pau* article quoted in, "Singaporeu susang-ui gija hoegyeyon naeyong songbu" (Transcript of Singapore Prime Minister's Press Conference), Ministry of Foreign Affairs WMA-0908, National Archives of Korea, September 20, 1968.

43. CIA Archives, CIA-RDP82-00457R002600460007-0, April 29, 1949.

44. NAS, 20060000663-0030, November 5, 1965; National Archives of Singapore, PCD0485-0027, August 1, 1967.

and subsequently, trade representative offices were established in both nations (M. Hong 2006). In 1969, the Soviet Union appointed its inaugural ambassador to Singapore, and in 1971, Singapore responded by appointing an ambassador to the Soviet Union. This can be perceived as a distinctive pattern of Singapore alliance-making, whereby it brokered a trade agreement before officially establishing diplomatic relations. Singapore, at that time, held the belief that establishing economic ties with the Soviet Union would have a significant impact on the equilibrium of Southeast Asian regional order in the Cold War era, not just in terms of trade but also in terms of security (M. Hong 2006).

At that time, Singapore was seeking to expand its trade opportunities by establishing trade and diplomatic relations with socialist countries. Additionally, it adopted a pragmatic approach to maintaining a balanced diplomacy in Southeast Asia amidst the Cold War. In fact, in 1968, the CIA documented how a Singaporean-flagged vessel delivered North Korean goods to Hai Phong, a major industrial port city in North Vietnam, to support the Vietnam War. Also, on February 5, 1968, a group of economic officials from the warring North Vietnamese arrived in Singapore to investigate potential trade opportunity in Singapore. The five-member North Vietnamese trade mission was headed by Ngo Thanh Giang, secretary-general of the North Vietnam Chamber of Commerce, and the meeting was attended by officials from the Singapore Chamber of Commerce and the Manufacturers Association, as well as Bak Su Kwon, North Korea's deputy trade representative to Singapore, who was mentioned above.⁴⁵ Dozens of local Singaporean journalists were in attendance, demonstrating how important trade with the socialist bloc was to Singapore.

Singapore was also inclined to increase trade with socialist countries because only those with centrally planned economies could facilitate the specific conditions of trade that Singapore desired. Upon discovering that North Korea had been granted permission to establish a consulate in Singapore in 1969, the South Korean government expressed its concern and raised the issue with the Singaporean government. In response, the

45. NAS, 19980001704-0094, February 5, 1968; NAS, 19980001704-0095, February 5, 1968.

Singaporean government explained that trade agreements needed to be signed before any action could be taken.⁴⁶ In other words, as described above, Singapore would only authorize consulates in countries that had signed agreements that met its trade requirements. This perception of Singaporean politicians and bureaucrats is best illustrated by the transcript of a conversation between Singapore's finance minister, Goh Keng Swee, and South Korea's deputy foreign minister at the Chosun Hotel on April 10, 1970.

Deputy Foreign Minister: In '67 and '68, we negotiated twice for trade agreements, but were unsuccessful because we could not agree. The Singaporeans were trying to follow the pattern of the trade agreements they had with the communist countries, and we, as you know, have a free economy and a free trade policy, so we cannot follow the pattern of the agreements like the communist countries, which have government-controlled economic systems.

Goh: That's true. The countries that Singapore has trade agreements with are all communist countries, and we do not have any agreements with countries in the liberal camp, even though we do a lot more trade with them.⁴⁷

Goh acknowledged that Singapore had been strengthening its trade agreements with countries in the socialist camp. This was to promote economic ties with socialist countries, which had plenty of room to improve, rather than with countries of the liberal camp, which already occupied higher positions in terms of trade volume (see Appendix). Another thing this meeting demonstrated was Singapore's strong interest in science and technology.

Goh: What is it like to promote science and technology in South Korea?

46. "Dae Singaporeu hyeonan tagyeol bangan geomto yogang" (Outline of the Review of Proposals for Settling the Singapore Issue), Ministry of Foreign Affairs, National Archives of Korea, July 30, 1969.

47. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, National Archives of Korea, MOFA 297-70, April 10, 1970.

Deputy Foreign Minister: There are many engineering universities, especially the Korea Institute of Science and Technology (KIST), which was established with special assistance from then US President Johnson and is the only such institution in the East. It is equipped with all modern facilities, and top Korean scholars who used to teach in American universities are engaged in research there. We have a great weakness in the acquisition and development of science and technology, for it is only through this that we can keep up with the rapidly developing countries.

Goh: I wish I could get a copy of KIST's brochure. Singapore is also sending science and technology delegations to foreign countries, but so far, they have only been to the US, Germany, Japan, and France, which hasn't been of any practical use. When I return home, I plan to send the director of science and technology to [South] Korea to inspect Korean science and technology, including KIST. Also, when a Korean consulate is established in Singapore, a delegation of industrialists from Korea will come to Singapore, and Singapore will send the same delegation to Korea to learn and cooperate with each other.⁴⁸

These discussions evoke Goh Keng Swee's concern with science and technology during the period he managed Singapore's manufacturing sector and overall economic strategy. In light of this situation, Goh, who maintained a neutral stance in foreign relations, promptly suggested the implementation of science and technology exchanges and manufacturer exchanges upon learning about South Korea's science and technology policy. This demonstrates the extent of the Singapore ruling elite's interest in science and technology-driven manufacturing during that period.⁴⁹ This matches their previous inclination to enhance relations with North Korea.

The conversation between Goh and the South Korean deputy foreign minister reveals that Singapore sought countries that could not only accommodate its desired trade structure, but also engage in the exchange and acquisition of the fundamental scientific and technological knowledge

48. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, National Archives of Korea, MOFA 297-70, April 10, 1970.

49. The industrial development of Singapore has usually been classified into five stages—1960s: labor-intensive; 1970s: skills-intensive; 1980s: capital-intensive; 1990s: technology-intensive; 2000s: innovation-based economy (Yeo 2016).

necessary for heavy and chemical manufacturing. Not only Goh Keng Swee, the architect of Singapore's economic framework, have this perception, but the entire bureaucratic elite in Singapore shared the same view. North Korea was an ideal match for Singapore's needs during the late 1960s. North Korea would have been a more suitable subject for a case study on pursuing a developmentalist state economy, as compared to the Soviet Union, which was already a developed nation. Singapore's emphasis on heavy and chemical manufacturing, as well as the associated science and technology, stemmed from the young country's commitment to achieving economic growth through manufacturing.

Singapore's Path to Industrial Development and North Korea as a Reference for a Developmental State

At the time of its independence in 1965, the three pillars supporting Singapore's economy can be summarized as: 1. intermediary trade that had continued since the colonial period; 2. a manufacturing base that had become increasingly important; and 3. the large-scale British naval base in Singapore.⁵⁰ Based on its geographical location and infrastructure as an intermediary trade port, Singapore maintained a stable position as a place where major resources in Southeast Asia and processed goods from around the world were gathered. There was no case in which Singapore's status as a trading hub was questioned. However, after acquiring autonomy in 1959 and the assumption of power by the People's Action Party led by Lee Kuan Yew, the most fundamental problem facing Singapore's economy was that intermediary trade and finance were not labor-intensive industries and so did little to decrease the unemployment rate. In other words, many economic entities were proposing to increase the proportion of manufacturing-based industries to improve the quality of life by employing the country's growing population. Furthermore, in 1967, the British government decided to withdraw the its naval base, which had produced huge amounts of expenses and employed tens of thousands of local residents. All these

50. CIA Archives, CIA-RDP79T01003A002400060001-8, October, 1965.

circumstances compelled the Singapore government to focus on the labor-intensive manufacturing industry (Huff 1994, 1999; L. Lim 2015).

In this context, the United Nations' industrial survey mission led by the Dutch economist Albert Winsemius had been closely observing Singapore's economy and submitted its findings in a special report in 1961, proposing an increase in Singapore's manufacturing share. A draft of the report had already been delivered to the Singapore government in December 1960, and was discussed in the National Assembly in 1961, leading to the First Economic Development Plan from 1961 to 1965 under the leadership of Goh Keng Swee, the country's finance minister.⁵¹ Upon this five-year plan, the development of the manufacturing industry began in earnest through the creation of a large-scale machinery and chemical industrial complex, also known as the Jurong Industrial Complex (the same complex later toured by Kang Ryang Wook, deputy prime minister of North Korea). As shown in Table 3, the share of Singapore's manufacturing industry steadily increased from 1960, surpassing trade and finance in 1973, reaching its highest share in 1980. Due to this characteristic of state-led industrial development in Singapore, Singapore's economic development has been classified as state capitalism with high government interventionism (Völgyi 2019).

Due to the implementation of the First Economic Development Plan, with a specific emphasis on manufacturing, Singapore experienced a remarkable annual GDP growth rate of 13 percent between 1966 and 1969, the highest since the country's establishment. From the 1970s, exports of manufactured goods produced through its direct manufacturing surpassed its export of resources from elsewhere in Southeast Asia, which were the main focus of the existing brokerage trade (Huff 1994). During the 1970s, the sectors that received the most significant investments in Singapore's manufacturing industry were machinery, electronics, and chemistry. These sectors gained considerable interest from both Singaporean government

51. "Annual Budget Statement," Singapore Parliament, December 13, 1965, https://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/#/topic?reportid=026_19651213_S0003_T0023.

Table 3. Singapore GDP by Industry, 1960–1982

Year	Agriculture & Fisheries	Quarrying	Manufacturing	Public	Construction	Trade	Transportation & Communication	Finance	Overall
1960	75	6	249	49	72	719	292	247	2,149
1961	77	6	264	50	102	778	310	274	2,392
1962	84	8	297	56	114	818	321	311	2,513
1963	84	8	356	56	137	940	328	340	2,789
1964	82	10	384	66	159	777	312	369	2,714
1965	84	9	446	64	186	814	337	407	2,956
1966	101	11	521	78	187	961	359	445	3,330
1967	106	11	631	100	213	1,134	402	492	3,745
1968	121	14	769	117	256	1,286	475	578	4,315
1969	128	17	956	127	293	1,511	544	688	5,019
1970	134	19	1,186	149	397	1,639	629	815	5,804
1971	158	24	1,460	163	508	1,850	750	998	6,823
1972	160	28	1,853	185	692	2,067	924	1,232	8,155
1973	214	28	2,429	218	725	2,771	1,127	1,553	10,205
1974	229	33	3,084	231	929	3,588	1,338	1,882	12,543
1975	254	47	3,226	250	1,084	3,608	1,517	2,123	13,373
1976	256	56	3,611	273	1,205	3,815	1,795	2,233	14,575
1977	283	49	4,020	291	1,200	4,232	2,123	2,349	15,968
1978	273	38	4,620	351	1,122	4,631	2,616	2,581	17,750
1979	295	42	5,766	424	1,242	5,135	2,920	3,144	20,452
1980	320	81	6,919	557	1,560	5,730	3,436	4,128	24,200
1981	355	104	8,354	484	2,053	6,212	3,585	5,520	28,369
1981	348	138	8,204	520	2,879	6,621	4,116	6,770	31,348

Source: Department of Statistics (1983).

Note: Unit is million dollars. This table only includes major industries, while the total amount includes all data.

officials and local businessmen, as evidenced by their high level of attention at the North Korean trade exhibition in 1969 (Department of Statistics 1983).

A remarkable fact is that when looking at the trade volume by country

during this period, the statistics on trade volume with North Korea are not even high enough to merit recording in Singapore's statistics (Department of Statistics 1983). Looking at Singapore's trade volume by region from 1964 to 1973, Northeast Asia, Southeast Asia, North America, and Europe had the highest share, and among these regions, Malaysia, Japan, the United States, and the United Kingdom accounted for an overwhelming portion.⁵² In the case of North Korea, statistics do not even appear. In fact, the target amount of 34 million dollars revealed in the news article on the agreement between Singapore and North Korea in 1967 was much lower than Singapore's trade with Sri Lanka at the same time (Department of Statistics 1983).⁵³ For 1968, it is also lower than trade volume with South Korea (US\$42 million), which even did not even establish an official trade agreement with Singapore. In the case of Japan, which had the highest trade volume with Singapore among countries in Northeast Asia, the volume had already reached 960 million dollars by 1948 (Department of Statistics 1983).⁵⁴

These statistics indicate that the trade volume between North Korea and Singapore was not a significant factor in their relationship. In the context of Singapore, it appears that there was a greater inclination to draw inspiration from North Korea's remarkable industrial progress in East Asia, particularly in the machinery and chemical sectors that formed the basis of heavy industry in Northeast Asia. This preference was more pronounced than a direct focus on trade with North Korea. The relationship was not beneficial in terms of quantity, but it was beneficial in terms of quality.

The essence of this relationship was highlighted by Dr. Koh Keng Swee's statements on North Korean industrial achievements and his focus on science and technology, and Kang Ryang Wook's commentary on Singapore's Jurong Industrial Complex. The closeness of Singapore-North Korean relations from 1965 was a strategic decision by the Singapore government to drive economic growth through socialist trade and technology exchange,

52. See Appendix.

53. "S'pore Signs Trade Pact with N. Korea," *Straits Times*, May 14, 1967.

54. The trade with North Korea does not even appear in Singapore trade statistics, which means it occupied the lowest percentage. As seen in Appendix, the largest proportion of Singapore trade was with Japan, Malaysia, the US, and UK.

while North Korea sought to go beyond ideology and to leverage Singapore, a global trading hub, for disseminating its industrial performance. Undoubtedly, Singapore's emphasis on its ties with North Korea during its early years can be understood within this framework, despite the concerns expressed by the UK, the US, South Korean, and Malaysian governments at that time. Singapore pursued a pragmatic approach that transcended the ideological divide of the Cold War.⁵⁵

Based upon his experiences with Singapore's industrialization during the 1960s and 1970s, Goh Keng Swee, architect of Singapore's industrial development, was invited by Deng Xiaoping, then president of PRC, to serve as an economic advisor between 1985 and 1990 (Zheng and Wong 2012, 1). Furthermore, it clearly demonstrates Singapore's unique position among Asian developmental states, transcending conventional ideology. In the context of industrialization, within the theory of the developmental state Singapore is considered a multifaceted entity with a variety of ideologies (Cheang 2024; Som 2022; Cheang and Lim 2023). Singapore has consistently operated as a market-driven economy, but it adopted a state-planned industrial strategy under an authoritarian political regime following the implementation of the development plan—led by Goh—in the 1960s, which might partially parallel North Korea's state-led heavy and chemical industrial development despite the different meaning attached to industrialization in the two countries—survival to Singapore and propaganda to North Korea.⁵⁶

55. Some of the British papers held at the National Archives of Singapore document the South Korean government's concerns about these close Singapore-North Korean ties, including a 1968 trade-related conversation between the South Korean ambassador to the United Kingdom and the Secretary of State for Commonwealth Relations. According to the transcript, South Korea at the time was deeply concerned about such developments as North Korean Vice-President Kang Ryang Wook's visit to Singapore. In fact, the Singapore-North Korean relationship was viewed negatively not only by South Korea, but also by the British and Malaysian governments (NAS, FCO 24/299, 1968; NAS, FCO 21/329, 1968).

56. Due to this characteristic of Singapore's economic planning, the country's system was often regarded as market socialism in the development theory of the 1980s (Gayle 1988).

Conclusion

Interestingly, economic co-operation between Singapore and North Korea peaked in 1969 with the establishment of a consulate, only to decline sharply after the mid-1970s. Newspaper articles in North Korea and Singapore were also more likely to focus on political and diplomatic relations between the two countries rather than economic co-operation, perhaps as a result of the Nixon Doctrine, which the Nixon administration announced in February 1970. The doctrine, which declared that regime competition in the Asia-Pacific region should be settled through economic aid to countries on the liberal side rather than through direct intervention, such as war or diplomatic pressure, led to the dominance of liberal states, such as the US, Japan, Hong Kong, the UK, and South Korea, over socialist states among Singapore's trading partners (Department of Statistics 1983).⁵⁷ Furthermore, the North Korean socialist economic system controlling production and distribution and aimed at self-sufficient development failed to maximize its economic scale from the 1970s, which led to the *great divergence* between the two Koreas from the late 1970s (Duol Kim 2021). Even in the 1960s, the North Korean economy was on the decline, which necessitated the use of propaganda to shore up regime legitimacy.

The economic transformation and restructuring that occurred in the decade surrounding Singapore's establishment in 1965 is the fundamental basis for its current status as one of the most prosperous countries in Asia and globally. There is a substantial amount of research available on the various accomplishments of Singapore, such as export-led industrialization, the transformation of industrial structure towards manufacturing, and the enlargement of living space through local construction and the establishment of wide-area roads. Although these studies share a common theme that emphasizes the crucial role of state-led planning in this transformation, as well as the significance of United Nations' recommendations, they have largely overlooked Singapore's interaction with

57. See Appendix, which clearly shows the drastic increase in Singaporean trade volume led by the rise of liberal states.

socialist countries, including North Korea, and Singapore's strong interest in establishing a heavy industrial base akin to that of North Korea. Nevertheless, newspaper archives and other sources from the National Archives of Singapore provide evidence that North Korea's development trajectory was used as a point of reference for the Singapore government in shaping the country's future, determining its developmental direction, and establishing its economic and industrial framework around 1965, when Singapore gained independence.

During the 1950s and 1960s, North Korea distinguished itself as one of the few Asian nations to independently cultivate its own dynamic industrial sector. Throughout that period, the primary objective of the Asian countries recently liberated from colonial and semi-colonial rule was modernization, and the crucial factor for achieving modernization was the realization of national prosperity through industrialization. Following the attainment of independence, the majority of nations prioritized industrialization as a crucial aspect of their nation-building endeavors, while simultaneously striving to cultivate their own sense of nationalism. In numerous Asian countries, the concepts of nation-building, nationalism, modernization, and industrialization became closely intertwined. The geopolitical and geographical configuration of Asia during the Cold War differed from that of the West, which was primarily focused on competition with the Soviet Union. Within this framework, the connection between North Korea and Singapore can be interpreted as an instance where Singapore made a deliberate decision to move beyond ideology in order to ensure its survival and achieve industrialization. The fundamental basis for the mutual advantage between the two nations was that North Korea utilized Singapore as a locus for disseminating its industrial accomplishments, while Singapore leveraged North Korea as a partner to enhance socialist trade and advance its industrial progress.

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Appendix: Statistics on Singapore Trade by Selected Country, 1964–1982

Year	Total	Malaysia	Japan	US	Hong Kong	Australia	UK	Taiwan	South Korea	China	Eastern Europe	USSR
1964	6,250	2,136	459	309	270	238	532	50	14	197	148	84
1965	6,811	2,329	533	318	241	259	606	45	12	246	194	138
1966	7,439	2,361	587	372	233	259	592	48	18	408	170	120
1967	7,897	2,167	704	491	242	270	566	67	25	481	167	110
1968	8,974	2,072	966	677	286	305	641	102	42	541	213	139
1969	10,984	2,484	1,355	1,002	502	364	695	112	71	593	289	164
1970	12,289	2,443	1,819	1,342	550	500	893	164	74	454	301	174
1971	14,053	2,672	2,079	1,737	489	624	967	192	80	453	241	147
1972	15,687	2,785	2,266	2,288	616	680	975	296	75	456	221	125
1973	21,419	3,652	3,008	3,400	840	771	1,245	440	156	701	358	197
1974	34,559	5,033	5,264	4,958	1,372	1,258	1,570	519	288	769	466	262
1975	32,028	4,426	4,367	4,799	1,364	1,298	1,495	514	251	780	288	144
1976	38,670	5,685	5,259	5,354	1,803	1,409	1,447	703	389	754	431	208
1977	45,612	6,340	6,392	6,348	2,125	1,635	1,603	876	573	815	451	259
1978	52,586	6,987	7,894	7,456	2,361	1,526	1,841	1,081	734	906	563	311
1979	69,274	9,820	9,498	9,755	2,924	1,992	2,311	1,434	924	1,263	743	447
1980	92,797	13,333	12,500	12,509	4,251	2,833	2,840	1,918	1,206	1,990	904	558
1981	102,053	14,116	15,445	13,205	4,974	2,978	2,793	1,881	1,282	2,007	727	440
1982	104,717	15,924	15,634	13,368	5,002	3,172	2,613	1,885	1,422	2,397	853	640

Source: Department of Statistics (1983).

Note: Unit is million dollars. This table only includes major trading partners of Singapore, while the total amount includes all trading data.