



# Chinese Individualism

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“You’re not the center of the story — at least not everywhere.”

That’s the tagline of a [video](#) featuring the late President Lee Kuan Yew, described as the “founding father of Singapore,” elsewhere affectionately referred to as LKY.

The social media account responsible runs under the moniker [Office of the Director of Intelligence & Strategy](#), which sounds like a propaganda bureau. It’s an excerpt from a 25-year-old hour-long [interview](#) with Charlie Rose.

Entitled “Not Every Culture Believes Success Starts with One Person,” the clip goes on to say that LKY “shares his understanding of a key divide between the West and many Asian societies: Where the West centers the individual and leading your own path, many Asian systems prioritize the

group — family, obligation, cohesion, survival together.”

The familial and communal aspects of traditional Chinese society are not in doubt. But LKY makes two crucial errors.

“You believe in the individual as the creator of all things,” he says of Americans.

That is not even close to how American individualism views the world. For starters, most Americans continue to believe in a capitalized Creator “of all things,” and it’s not the individual. Furthermore, even the most rugged individualist understands the role of families in raising children and communities in helping humans flourish.

American liberty, as imperfect and diluted as it is, can accommodate family-values traditions and communitarian folkways as well as free radicals. The point of individualism is not that The Individual creates success [ex nihilo](#), but that government must make no exceptions for some individuals over others based on group membership.

Which is why Chinese-Americans do so well: they are helped by their family orientation as well as freedom. They do much better here than in China, but Chinese do even better in Singapore, which sports a lower tax burden.

The kind of tax burden individualists prefer.

This is Common Sense. I’m Paul Jacob.