

STUDENT
EDITION

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This Student Edition of *The Singapore Story* is a shortened version of the original edition of *The Singapore Story*, the first volume of Lee Kuan Yew's memoirs published in 1998. It covers all the significant moments in the life of Singapore's first prime minister, *in his own words*, and dispenses with passages that do not directly concern Singapore.

The book:

- traces Lee Kuan Yew's boyhood, his Japanese Occupation experience, his four years in England as a student when his political views took shape, and his work preparing for the launch of the People's Action Party
- describes how Lee and his colleagues worked in a united front with the communists, won the elections, became the government and finally broke with the communists and fought against them
- details the troubles Lee and his colleagues faced from communal intimidation and domination by the Malay extremists in Malaysia until Singapore was asked to leave Malaysia and become independent on 9 August 1965

This specially tailored edition for young Singaporeans complements the study of the history of Singapore. It provides valuable background information and includes a timeline of important historical events in Singapore (and Malaysia) and a list of key personalities with short biographical data.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR


Lee Kuan Yew was born in Singapore on 16 September 1923, a third generation descendant of immigrants from China's Guangdong province. He read law at Cambridge University, England. In 1954, he formed the People's Action Party. Five years later, the PAP won the Singapore general election and he became Prime Minister at age 35. He stepped down in November 1990 and assumed the post of Senior Minister until 2004. He was Minister Mentor till his retirement in May 2011. Lee Kuan Yew passed away on 23 March 2015.

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THE SINGAPORE STORY
Memoirs of Lee Kuan Yew



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For Review only

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Memoirs of Lee Kuan Yew

Straits Times Press

 **Marshall Cavendish
Editions**

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*To my wife and partner,
Choo*

For Review only

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***Preface to
Abridged Edition***

I had written the first volume of my memoirs in the hope that it would remind our young that they cannot take security, stability and progress for granted, that these are conditions that have to be nurtured and preserved by the people, working together with the government they elect. I was therefore happy when my publishers, Singapore Press Holdings and Times Publishing Group, proposed an abridged edition to reach out to our students. They assembled a team of five, consultants Ms Teo Hee Lian, formerly English lecturer at the Civil Service Institute, Mrs Lee Sow Ling, formerly English Language consultant with Straits Times Press, and Warren Fernandez, Straits Times News editor; writer Ms Lee Geok Boi, editorial consultant; and Anthony E C Thomas, senior editor, Times Publishing Group. They reduced 680 pages to 400 pages without paraphrasing my original text, skilfully deleting those parts less important to the Singapore story.

This abridged edition tells of my years growing up in Singapore, my experiences during the Japanese occupation of Singapore, my four years in England as a student when my political views took shape, and my work preparing for the launch of the People's Action Party. It tells how my colleagues and I worked in a united front with the communists, won the elections, became the government and finally broke with the communists and fought against them. It also describes the troubles we faced from communal intimidation and domination by the Malay extremists in Malaysia until we were asked to leave Malaysia and become independent on 9 August 1965.

It is a story that concerns Singaporeans who have to know their past to understand the present and to be better prepared for the future.

Lee Kuan Yew
Singapore, March 2000

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Abridged Edition***

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ANTHONY E C THOMAS

Preface to the ***First Edition***

I had not intended to write my memoirs and did not keep a diary. To do so would have inhibited my work.

Five years after I stepped down as prime minister, my old friend and colleague, Lim Kim San, chairman of Singapore Press Holdings (SPH), convinced me that the young would read my memoirs since they were interested in a book of my old speeches that SPH had published in Chinese. I was also troubled by the apparent over-confidence of a generation that has only known stability, growth and prosperity. I thought our people should understand how vulnerable Singapore was and is, the dangers that beset us, and how we nearly did not make it. Most of all, I hope that they will know that honest and effective government, public order and personal security, economic and social progress did not come about as the natural course of events.

This is not an official history. It is the story of the Singapore I grew up in, the placid years of British colonial rule, the shock of war, the cruel years of Japanese occupation, communist insurrection and terrorism against the returning British, communal riots and intimidation during Malaysia, and the perils of independence. This book deals with the early years which ended with our sudden independence in 1965. My next book will describe the long, hard climb over the next 25 years from poverty to prosperity.

Many, not born or too young when I took office in 1959, do not know how a small country with no natural resources was cut off from its natural hinterland and had to survive in a tough world of nationalistic new states in Southeast Asia. They take it as quite normal that in less than 40 years the World Bank has reclassified Singapore from a less developed to a developed country.

To write this book I had to revive memories of events long forgotten, reading through minutes of meetings, letters written and received, and oral history transcripts of colleagues. It was psychological stocktaking, and I was surprised how disturbing it was occasionally although these events were past and over with.

I had one powerful critic and helper, my wife, Choo. She went over every word that I wrote, many times. We had endless arguments. She is a conveyancing lawyer by profession. I was not drafting a will or a conveyance to be scrutinised by a judge. Nevertheless she demanded precise, clear and unambiguous language. Choo was a tower of strength, giving me constant emotional and intellectual support.

I have not written, except incidentally, about what was an important part of my life, our three children. They have been a source of joy and satisfaction as Choo and I watched them grow up and, like their peers, build successful careers in the Singapore my policies had transformed.

For my cabinet colleagues and me, our families were at the heart of our team efforts to build a nation from scratch. We wanted a Singapore that our children and those of our fellow citizens would be proud of, a Singapore that would offer all citizens equal and ample opportunities for a fulfilling future. It was this drive in an immigrant Asian society that spurred us on to fight and win against all odds.

Lee Kuan Yew
Singapore, July 1998

Acknowledgements

I was fortunate in 1995 to gather a team of young researchers. Andrew Tan Kok Kiong, seconded to SPH from the Singapore Administrative Service, was helped by Pang Gek Choo, who worked for the *Straits Times*, and Alan Chong. They made a thorough search of government archives and ferreted out my correspondence, minutes of important meetings and other relevant documents. Andrew Tan was my most valuable aide; able and resourceful, he coordinated the work of the researchers, organised the material, and made my task easier. Pang Gek Choo was quick and efficient in tracing reports of events and speeches in *Straits Times'* archives of the last 40 years. After two years, as the work expanded, Walter Fernandez and Yvonne Lim from SPH and Dr Goh Ai Ting from the National University of Singapore (NUS) joined my researchers.

They had help from officers like Panneer Selvan of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The registry officer in the Prime Minister's Office, Florence Ler Chay Keng, and her assistants, Wendy Teo Kwee Geok and Vaijayanthimala, were amazingly successful in locating my letters and notes as far back as the 1960s.

Lily Tan, director of the National Archives, helped my researchers in their requests for documents and oral history transcripts of those persons who had given me permission to read them. The staff at the NUS library, the National Library and the *Straits Times* editorial library were equally helpful.

The prime minister, Goh Chok Tong, allowed me access to all records and documents in the government ministries and in the archives.

The British Public Record Office in Kew, Richmond yielded Colonial Office and Commonwealth Office documents which gave

interesting insights from a British perspective on events from 1955 to 1965.

Dennis Bloodworth, an old friend, once foreign correspondent for the *London Observer* newspaper, went through my drafts. He was thorough in deleting repetitions and suggesting alternatives to my overworked favourite expressions. However, Bloodworth left me to decide what went into my book.

A younger generation of editorial writers and journalists – from the *Straits Times*, Cheong Yip Seng (editor-in-chief), Han Fook Kwang (political editor), Warren Fernandez, Sumiko Tan and Zuraidah Ibrahim; from the *New Paper*, Irene Ng; from the *Zaobao*, Lim Jim Koon (editor) and Seng Han Thong – read my drafts. They suggested many improvements so that those not yet born when the events I described happened could understand the background against which they took place. Han Fook Kwang and Warren Fernandez improved the flow of my narrative. Shova Loh, line editor in Times Editions, meticulously tightened my sentences and removed errors.

To avoid being unwittingly insensitive on Malay issues, I had all my draft chapters relating to Malays read by Guntor Sadali (editor of *Berita Harian*), People's Action Party MPs Yaacob Ibrahim, Mohamad Maidin and Zainul Abidin Rasheed, and minister for community development, Abdullah Tarmugi. I did not want to hurt Malay feelings and have tried not to do so.

Old colleagues, including Goh Keng Swee, Lim Kim San, Ong Pang Boon, Othman Wok, Lee Khoon Choy, Rahim Ishak, Maurice Baker, Sim Kee Boon, S.R. Nathan and Ngiam Tong Dow, read the relevant parts of my drafts and helped to confirm or correct my recollection of events.

Tommy Koh, ambassador-at-large, Chan Heng Chee, ambassador to Washington, Kishore Mahbubani, permanent secretary (policy), ministry of foreign affairs, and Bilahari Kausikan, deputy secretary, ministry of foreign affairs, read the page proofs and made many useful suggestions.

I am grateful to them and to the many others who gave freely of their time and advice from which I have benefited. But the responsibility for the final result with all its shortcomings is mine alone.

I had visitors and other duties to attend to during the day. I did most of my uninterrupted work on the PC at night after the day's work was done. Several of the young men and women to whom I sent my drafts asked if the time-stamp on my PC was wrong, because they were frequently stamped as 3 or 4 am. I assured them that it was correct.

My long-time personal assistants, Cheong Cheng Hoon and Wong Lin Hoe, had the hard work of typing and retyping my drafts. They helped me out when I ran into problems with my PC. Cheong retired when the book was three-quarters done, and two others, Loh Hock Teck and Koh Kiang Chay, took over. All had to adjust to my difficult hours requiring them to work well past dinner-time.

I am indebted and grateful to all of them.

CHAPTER 1

Growing Up

My earliest and most vivid recollection is of being held by my ears over a well in the compound of a house where my family was then living, at what is now Tembeling Road in Singapore. I was about four years old. I had been mischievous and had messed up an expensive jar of my father's 4711 pale green scented brilliantine. My father had a violent temper, but that evening his rage went through the roof. He took me by the scruff of the neck from the house to this well and held me over it. Fifty years later, in the 1970s, I read in the *Scientific American* an article explaining how pain and shock released chemicals in the brain, ensuring that the experience would be remembered for a long time afterwards.

I was born in Singapore on 16 September 1923, in a large two-storey bungalow at 92 Kampong Java Road. My mother, Chua Jim Neo, was then 16 years old. My father, Lee Chin Koon, was 20. Their parents had arranged the marriage a year previously. My father had been brought up a rich man's son. As a young man, he had been allowed to charge whatever he wanted into a limitless account at Robinsons and John Little, the two top department stores in Raffles Place. He was educated in English at St Joseph's Institution where he completed his Junior School Certificate, after which he ended his formal education – to his and my mother's eternal regret. Being without a profession, he could only get a job as a storekeeper with the Shell Oil Company when the fortunes of both families were destroyed in the Great Depression between 1927 and 1930, when a global economic recession plunged many businesses and families into hard times.

My family

My family history in Singapore began with my paternal great-grandfather, Lee Bok Boon, a Hakka. According to the inscription on his tombstone in China, Lee Bok Boon was born in 1846 in the village of Tangxi in Dabu prefecture in Guangdong, southern China. He had migrated to Singapore where, in 1870, he married Seow Huan Neo, born in Singapore to a Hakka shopkeeper.



After his return to Dapu, Guangdong province, in 1882: great-grandfather Lee Bok Boon, in the robes of a Qing official Grade 7.

In 1882 he decided that he had made enough money to return to China, build himself a large house, and set himself up as local gentry. His wife, however, did not want to leave her family in Singapore. According to my grandfather, who was then about 10, the children and their mother went into hiding. Lee Bok Boon went back to China alone. There he married again, built his large house, and duly bought a minor mandarin title, a small title that gave him more standing in society.

My grandfather, Lee Hoon Leong – whom I addressed as Kung or “grandfather” in Chinese – was born in Singapore in 1871, and, according to my father, was educated at Raffles Institution up to standard V, which would be today’s lower secondary school. He himself told me he worked as a dispenser (an unqualified pharmacist) when he left school, but after

a few years became a purser on board a steamer plying between Singapore and the Dutch East Indies (as Indonesia was known then). In between his travels he married my grandmother, Ko Liem Nio, in Semarang, a city in central Java on 26 March 1899. My father was born in Semarang in 1903. Kung brought his wife and baby son back to Singapore for good soon after the birth.

His fortunes rose as he gained the confidence of Oei Tiong Ham, the owner of the ship on which Kung had sailed. Oei appointed

Kung his attorney to manage his affairs in Singapore. Kung told me how he was so trusted that in 1926, on his own authority, he donated \$150,000, then a princely sum, from Oei’s funds towards the foundation of Raffles College. Between my father and my grandfather, there was no question as to whom I admired more. My grandfather loved and pampered me. My father, the disciplinarian in the family, was tough with me.

The family fortunes declined during the Great Depression and Kung was badly hit. My mother’s father, Chua Kim Teng, also suffered because he had invested in rubber estates and had speculated on the rubber market. But he had gone into property as well and he was not wiped out. So it was that by 1929, my parents had moved from Kung’s home to Chua’s large rambling house in Telok Kurau.

When I was born, the family consulted a friend knowledgeable in these matters for an auspicious name for me. He suggested “Kuan Yew”, the dialect rendering of the Mandarin Guang Yao, meaning “light and brightness”. But my grandfather’s admiration for the British made him add “Harry” to my name, so I was Harry Lee Kuan Yew. My two younger brothers, Kim Yew and Thiam Yew, were also given Christian names – Dennis and Freddy respectively. At that time few non-Christian Chinese did this, and at school later I was to find myself the odd boy out with a personal name like “Harry”. When my youngest brother, Suan Yew, was born in 1933, I persuaded my parents not to give him a Christian name since we were not Christians.

Kung was in marked contrast to my maternal grandfather, Chua Kim Teng. Chua had neither formal English schooling nor had he



Grandfather or “Kung”, Lee Hoon Leong, the Anglophile, complete with waistcoat in the hoi tropics.

associated with British sea captains and Chinese sugar millionaires. He was born in Singapore in 1865, into a Hokkien Chinese family from Malacca. He had grown wealthy through hard work and frugal living. He had married three times. His first two wives had died and the third was my grandmother, Neo Ah Soon, a large, broad-shouldered Hakka from Pontianak in Dutch Borneo, who spoke the Hakka dialect and Indonesian Malay.

When she married Chua, she was a young widow with two children. She bore Chua seven children and my mother was the eldest child of this union. When she was married in 1922 at the age of 15, the fortunes of both families were still healthy. She even brought with her, as part of her dowry, a little slave girl whose duty, among other things, was to help bath her, wash her feet and put on and take off her shoes. All such symbols of wealth had disappeared by the time I became conscious of my surroundings at the age of four or five. But memories of better times survive in old photographs of me – an infant over-dressed in clothes imported from England, or in an expensive pram.

Chua and all the children by his third wife lived in a large wood and brick bungalow. My mother, my father and five of us children occupied one big bedroom. Ours was a large and reasonably happy household but for occasional friction, mostly over mischievous and quarrelling grandchildren. But because my three brothers, one sister and seven cousins were all younger than I was, I often played with the children of the Chinese and Malay fishermen living in a nearby kampong, a cluster of some 20 or 30 wooden huts in a lane opposite my grandfather's house. The fishermen worked along Siglap beach, then about 200 yards away.

It was a simpler world altogether. We played with fighting kites, tops, marbles and even fighting fish. These games nurtured a fighting spirit and the will to win. I do not know whether they prepared me for the fights I was to have later in politics. We were not soft, nor were we spoiled. As a young boy, I had no fancy clothes or shoes like those my grandchildren wear today.

We were not poor, but we had no great abundance of toys, and there was no television. So we had to be resourceful, to use

our imagination. We read, and this was good for our literacy, but there were few cheap illustrated books for young children then. I bought the usual penny dreadfuls (cheap novels), and followed the adventures of the boys at Greyfriars – Harry Wharton and Billy Bunter and company. When I was a little older, I used the Raffles Library, where books could be borrowed for two weeks at a time.

For holidays, the family would spend up to a week at a wooden house in my grandfather Chua's rubber estate in Chai Chee. To get there from Changi Road, we rode down a track in a bullock cart, its two bullocks driven by my grandmother's gardener. The cart had wooden wheels with metal rims and no shock absorbers, so that half mile ride on the rutted clay track was hilariously bumpy.

Life was not all simple pleasures, however. Every now and again my father would come home in a foul mood after losing at blackjack and other card games, and demand some of my mother's jewellery to pawn so that he could go back to try his luck again. There would be fearful quarrels, and he was sometimes violent. But my mother was a courageous woman who was determined to hang on to the



Myself, age four, as a page boy at my aunt's wedding, dressed in the traditional costume of the time.

jewellery, wedding gifts from her parents. A strong character with great energy and resourcefulness, she had been married off too early. Had she been born one generation later and continued her education beyond secondary school, she could easily have become an effective business executive.

She devoted her life to raising her children to be well-educated and independent professionals, and she stood up to my father to safeguard their future. My brothers, my sister and I were very conscious of her sacrifices; we felt we could not let her down and did our best to be worthy of her and to live up to her expectations. As I grew older, she began consulting me as the eldest son on all important family matters, so that while still in my teens, I became *de facto* head of the family. This taught me how to make decisions.

Going to school

My maternal grandmother had strong views on my education. In 1929, before I was six, she insisted that I join the fishermen's children in a school nearby. The hut had only one classroom with hard benches and plank desk-tops, and one other room which was the home of our scrawny middle-aged Chinese teacher. He made us recite words after him without any comprehension of their meaning.

I complained bitterly to my mother, and she made representations to my grandmother. But a young woman of 22 could not overrule an experienced matriarch of 48 who had brought up nine children from two marriages, and was determined that I should receive some education in Chinese. My grandmother allowed a change of school, however, and I was sent to Choon Guan School in Joo Chiat Terrace. It was a mile away from home, and I walked there and back every day. This school was more impressive, a two-storey wooden structure with cement floors, and about 10 proper classrooms with desks for 35 to 40 pupils in each class.

The lessons in Chinese were still tough going. At home I spoke English to my parents, "Baba Malay" – a pidgin Malay adulterated with Chinese words – to my grandparents, and Malay with a smattering of Hokkien to my friends, the fishermen's children. Mandarin was totally alien to me. I did not understand much of what the teachers were saying.

After two to three months of this, I again pleaded with my mother to be transferred to an English-language school. She won my grandmother's consent this time and in January 1930 I joined Telok Kurau English School. Now I understood what the teachers were saying and made progress with little effort.

Despite my lack of diligence, I was given a double promotion from primary 1 to standard I, leap-frogging primary 2. At the end of standard V, after seven years of primary education – six in my case – we all sat an island-wide examination to vie for places in government secondary schools. In my final year, 1935, I made the extra effort. I came first in school and won a place in Raffles Institution which took in only the top students.

In 1936, I entered Raffles Institution, the premier English-language secondary school, together with about 150 top students from 15 government primary schools. Students were of all races, all classes and all religions, and included many from Malaya. The early headmasters were Englishmen who modelled the institution on the English public school. The syllabus prepared students for the empire-wide examinations for Junior Cambridge and Senior Cambridge School Certificates. The textbooks, especially those for English language, English literature, history of the British Empire, mathematics and geography, were standard for all the colonies, adapted I suppose from those used in British schools. The teaching was entirely in English. Many years later, whenever I met Commonwealth leaders from far-flung islands in the Caribbean or the Pacific, I discovered that they also had gone through the same drill with the same textbooks and could quote the same passages from Shakespeare.

There were four grades in secondary school: standards VI and VII, Junior Cambridge and Senior Cambridge. I was not very hardworking, but I was good at mathematics and the sciences and had a solid grounding in the English language. At the end of standard VI, therefore, I was among the better students and promoted to standard VIIA, where I usually came in among the top three without much effort. I went on to Junior A, the best class of the standard. The form master, an Englishman called A.T. Grieve, was a young Oxford graduate with a head of thick, sandy hair and a friendly and approachable manner. He improved my English language

enormously and I did well, coming in first in school in the Junior Cambridge examinations, my first major examination with papers set and marked in Cambridge.

I also won two awards that year, the Raffles Institution and the Tan Jiak Kim scholarships. Together, they yielded the huge sum of 350 Straits dollars. It was enough to buy me a beautiful Raleigh bicycle for \$70, with a three-speed gear and an encased chain box. I rode to school in style and still had money to spare. But even better was to come. I had set my heart on distinguishing myself in the Senior Cambridge examinations, and I was happy when the results in early 1940 showed I had come first in school, and first among all the students in Singapore and Malaya.

I enjoyed my years in Raffles Institution. I coped with the work comfortably, was active in the Scout movement, played cricket and some tennis, swam and took part in many debates. But I never became a prefect, let alone head prefect. There was a mischievous, playful streak in me. Too often, I was caught not paying attention in class, scribbling notes to fellow students, or mimicking some teacher's strange mannerisms. Once I was caned by the principal. D.W. McLeod was a fair but strict disciplinarian who enforced rules impartially, and one rule was that a boy who was late for school three times during one term would get three strokes of the cane. I was always a late riser, an owl more than a lark, and when I was late for school the third time in a term in 1938, the form master sent me to see McLeod. The principal knew me from the number of prizes I had been collecting on prize-giving days and the scholarships I had won. But I was not let off with an admonition. I bent over a chair and was given three of the best with my trousers on. I did not think he lightened his strokes. I have never understood why Western educationists are so much against corporal punishment. It did my fellow students and me no harm.

Nevertheless, I was learning to take life seriously. My parents had pointed out to me how some of their friends were doing well because they had become lawyers and doctors. They were self-employed, and therefore had not been hit by the Depression. My father regretted his misspent youth, and they urged me to become a professional. So from my early years I geared myself towards

becoming a lawyer, a professional and not an employee. My plan was to read law in London.

But in 1940 the war in Europe was going badly. Going to London to study law was best postponed. Having come first in Singapore and Malaya in the Senior Cambridge examinations, I was offered the Anderson Scholarship, the most valuable then available, to study at Raffles College. I decided to take it. It was worth \$200 more than the other government awards and was enough to pay for fees, books and boarding, and leave something to spare.

At Raffles College

Raffles College was founded in 1928 by the Straits Settlements government. It taught the arts (English, history, geography, economics) and the sciences (physics, chemistry, pure and applied mathematics). The government had designed handsome buildings for it, with quadrangles and cloisters that resembled those at Oxford and Cambridge but with concessions to the tropical climate.

As a scholarship student, I had to stay in one of the halls of residence, a difficult adjustment for me. To suit Singapore's hot, humid climate, the architects had designed big dormitories with high ceilings. Each was divided into 20 rooms with french windows leading to open verandas. Partitions between rooms were only seven feet high, slightly above head level, to allow air to circulate freely. This meant that noise also circulated freely above the 20 rooms occupied by 20 youthful undergraduates.

Each student had to take three subjects. I read English, which was compulsory for all arts students, and concentrated on it to improve my command of the language, and to help me when I studied law later; mathematics, because I liked it and was good at it; and economics, because I believed it could teach me how to make money in business and on the stock market – I was naive! After the first year, a student had to choose one subject as his major field of study. I chose mathematics.

At the end of each of the three terms in the academic year there were examinations, and for the first of these I was the best

student in mathematics, scoring over 90 marks. But to my horror, I discovered I was not the best in either English or economics. I was in second place, way behind a certain Miss Kwa Geok Choo. I had already met Miss Kwa at Raffles Institution. In 1939, as the only girl in a boys' school, she had been asked by the principal to present prizes on the annual prize-giving day, and I had collected three books from her. She had been in the special class preparing to try for the Queen's Scholarship two years running. I was disturbed and upset. There were only two Queen's Scholarships a year for the whole of the Straits Settlements (Singapore, Penang and Malacca), and they would not necessarily go to the two top-scoring students.

I did not enjoy my first year in Raffles College as much as my first year in Raffles Institution. Ragging or hazing was then part of the initiation of freshmen and went on for a whole term. Being the top student, my reputation had preceded me, and I suppose as I was also one of the taller and more conspicuous freshmen, some seniors picked on me. I had to sing. I had to crawl around the quadrangle pushing a marble forward on the ground with my nose. I had to walk at the head of all the freshmen wearing a ragged green tie and carrying a silly green flag. I thought it all stupid, but went through with it as part of the price to be paid for joining an institution that lacked maturity and was developing the wrong traditions.

We had to attend lectures wearing coat and tie. The lecture rooms were not air-conditioned – indeed, one in the science block was an oven in the afternoons because it faced the setting sun. There was also the disorientation from having to live in strange surroundings, in close proximity with 19 other students in one block, and to eat unappetising institutional food. In the examinations at the end of the academic year (March 1941), I did creditably, and came in first in pure mathematics. But Miss Kwa Geok Choo was the top student in English and economics, and probably in history too, her third subject. I knew I would face stiff competition for the Queen's Scholarship.

Initiation into the politics of race and religion

There were other problems. Raffles College was my initiation into the politics of race and religion. In a British colony that made no

distinction between the races, Singapore Malays were accustomed to being treated the same as others. But in June 1940, for the first time, I met significant numbers of Malays who had been born and brought up under a different system. In the Federated Malay States (FMS) of Perak, Selangor, Pahang and Negeri Sembilan, and even more so in the Unfederated Malay States (Johor, Kedah, Perlis, Kelantan and Terengganu), indigenous Malays were given special political and economic rights. In the FMS, there were only five scholarships to Raffles College open to non-Malays, whereas the Malays had a choice of more, as they did in the Unfederated Malay States. Of the 100 students admitted each year, 20 were Malays from upcountry on scholarships paid for by their state governments.

There was a strong sense of solidarity among the Malays, which I was to learn grew from a feeling of being threatened, a fear of being overwhelmed by the more energetic and hardworking Chinese and Indian immigrants. One Malay in my year was to become prime minister of Malaysia. A member of the Malay aristocracy of Pahang, Abdul Razak bin Hussain attended the same classes in English and economics as I did, but we were not close friends. Those I got on with more easily were commoners. Because I had many Malay friends from childhood, my spoken Malay was fluent. But I soon discovered that their attitude towards non-Malays, especially Chinese, was totally different from that of Singapore Malays.

One student from Kedah told me in my second year, after we had become friends, "You Chinese are too energetic and too clever for us. In Kedah, we have too many of you. We cannot stand the pressure." He meant the pressure of competition for jobs, for business, for places in schools and universities. The Malays were the owners of the land, yet seemed to be in danger of being displaced from top positions by recent arrivals, who were smarter, more competitive and more determined. Probably because they did better and were self-confident, the Chinese and the Indians lacked this sense of solidarity. There was no unity among them because they did not feel threatened.

One incident stands out in my memory. In my second year, there was much unhappiness over the arrangements for the annual Raffles College Students' Union dinner at the old Seaview Hotel.

The non-Malays were incensed at the sharp and cavalier responses of the honorary secretary, Ungku Aziz bin Abdul Hamid, to their complaints. A few students started a move for an extraordinary general meeting to censure him and deprive him of office. The Malay students rallied round him, and made it clear that if he were removed, they would resign en masse from the union.

This presented the non-Malays with a challenge. I was approached and asked to make the opening speech setting out their complaints against Ungku Aziz. The meeting took place on a Saturday afternoon, and all the day students had left, probably because they wished to avoid the unpleasantness. The Malays turned up in force. The tension was high, and racial feelings strong.

It was my first experience of Malayism, a deep and intense pro-Malay, anti-immigrant sentiment. I made out the case in measured tones, firmly but, I hoped, not aggressively. Ungku Aziz spoke up to refute all the allegations of rude behaviour. I could sense that the crowd of some 80 students felt most uncomfortable about the confrontation. When the votes were cast, the Malays carried the day for Ungku Aziz, and the break-up never came. But the non-Malays felt they had registered their point. I was to recall this incident between 1963 and 1965, when we were in Malaysia and ran into similar problems with Malayism.

But if it was a time of rivalry, it was also a time for forming lasting friendships. Many of those I first met in Raffles College were to become close political colleagues, among them Toh Chin Chye, a science student one year my senior, hardworking, systematic, quiet and consistent, and Goh Keng Swee, a tutor in economics with a first-class mind, a poor speaker but a crisp writer.

When I started my career as a lawyer in the 1950s, therefore, I already had a network of friends and acquaintances in important positions in government and the professions in Singapore and Malaya. Just sharing the same background made for easy acceptance, and the old school tie worked well in Singapore and Malaya, even between Chinese, Indians and Malays. It was the easy old-boy network of an elite at the very top of the English-educated group nurtured by the British colonial education system.