

CONTRIBUTORS

Robert Kuok
Yong Pung How
Othman Wok
Puan Noor Aishah
S.R. Nathan
J.Y. Pillay
Lim Chin Beng
Wee Cho Yaw
Ch'ng Jit Koon
Sidek Saniff
Philip Yeo
Jennie Chua
Liew Mun Leong
Lim Siong Guan
Jagjeet Singh
Ng Kok Song
Lam Chuan Leong
Bilahari Kausikan
Stephen Lee
Li Ka-shing
Tan Guong Ching
Dr S. Vasoo
Moses Lee
Ho Meng Kit
Yatiman Yusof
Yeong Yoon Ying
Alan Chan
Peter Seah
Heng Swee Keat
Leo Yip
Andrew Tan
Peter Tan
Cheng Wai Keung
Lee Seow Hiang
Chee Hong Tat
Anthony Tan
Lim Teck Kiat

*Essays are presented in chronological order,
based on when the contributors first met
Mr Lee Kuan Yew.*

“Come to think of it, finally, it’s only friendship that matters.”
Lee Kuan Yew

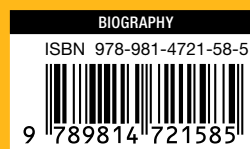
Up Close *with* Lee Kuan Yew

Insights from colleagues and friends

Up Close with Lee Kuan Yew gathers some of the vivid memories of 37 people who have worked or interacted closely with Lee Kuan Yew in some way or other, from when he was at Raffles College in 1941 right up to his demise in 2015. Among these are his 13 Principal Private Secretaries and Special Assistants who lived and breathed Mr Lee for a few years each, and Mdm Yeong Yoon Ying, his Press Secretary of over 20 years. The others include former President S.R. Nathan, Puan Noor Aishah who is the widow of Singapore’s first President Yusof Ishak, former Chief Justice Yong Pung How, and friends such as Robert Kuok from his Raffles College days. This book captures an unvarnished look at what it was like to interact with the serious and no nonsense Mr Lee, both at work and outside of work.

visit our website at:
www.marshallcavendish.com/genref

mc Marshall Cavendish
Editions



Marshall Cavendish
Editions
mc

Up Close with Lee Kuan Yew

Up Close *with* Lee Kuan Yew

*Insights from
colleagues
and friends*



The idea for this book came about in 2014. Liew Mun Leong and Ong Beng Seng were on a flight back to Singapore and chatting about Mr Lee Kuan Yew, whom they had known for many years. As they shared personal stories about their interactions with Mr Lee, they felt it was time for a book that told the personal side about him. They broached the idea with Mr Lee on two separate dinner occasions; and when he gave his consent they formed a book committee comprising Andrew Tan, Jennie Chua and Liew Mun Leong.

The result is this intimate collection of essays by 37 of Mr Lee’s colleagues and friends.

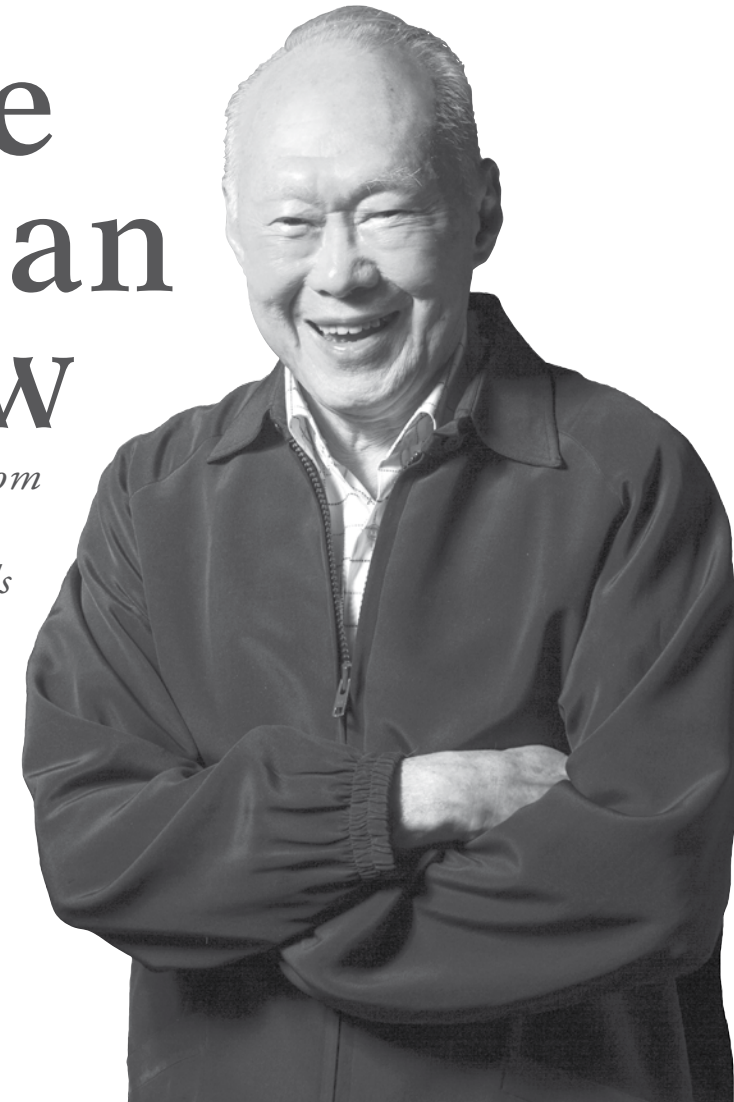
For Review only

Up Close *with* **Lee Kuan Yew**

For Review only

Up Close
with
Lee
Kuan
Yew

*Insights from
colleagues
and friends*



For Review only

© 2016 Marshall Cavendish International (Asia) Pte Ltd
Reprinted 2016 (twice)

Cover image of Lee Kuan Yew by Bob Lee (www.thefatfarmer.com)

Mr Lee's red box: Courtesy of Ministry of Communications and Information, Singapore

Photos on pages 174–186: Courtesy of Ho Meng Kit, Robert Kuok, Kwa Kim Li,
Liew Mun Leong, Ng Kok Song, Andrew Tan, Wee Cho Yaw, Philip Yeo, Yeong Yoon Ying

Minister Heng Swee Keat's essay on pages 257–262 was originally written for this book but first published on his Facebook account and then reported in the media on 24 March 2015 upon the demise of Mr Lee Kuan Yew.

Published by Marshall Cavendish Editions
An imprint of Marshall Cavendish International,
1 New Industrial Road, Singapore 536196

All rights reserved

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner. Requests for permission should be addressed to the Publisher, Marshall Cavendish International (Asia) Private Limited, 1 New Industrial Road, Singapore 536196. Tel: (65) 6213 9300, fax: (65) 6285 4871. E-mail: genrefsales@sg.marshallcavendish.com Website: www.marshallcavendish.com/genref

The publisher makes no representation or warranties with respect to the contents of this book, and specifically disclaims any implied warranties or merchantability or fitness for any particular purpose, and shall in no event be liable for any loss of profit or any other commercial damage, including but not limited to special, incidental, consequential, or other damages.

Other Marshall Cavendish Offices
Marshall Cavendish Corporation, 99 White Plains Road, Tarrytown NY 10591-9001, USA
• Marshall Cavendish International (Thailand) Co Ltd, 253 Asoke, 12th Flr, Sukhumvit 21 Road, Klongtoey Nua, Wattana, Bangkok 10110, Thailand • Marshall Cavendish (Malaysia) Sdn Bhd, Times Subang, Lot 46, Subang Hi-Tech Industrial Park, Batu Tiga, 40000 Shah Alam, Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia

Marshall Cavendish is a trademark of Times Publishing Limited

Library Board Singapore Cataloguing in Publication Data

Up close with Lee Kuan Yew : insights from colleagues and friends. – Singapore : Marshall Cavendish Editions, [2015]
pages cm

ISBN : 978-981-4677-79-0 (paperback)

ISBN : 978-981-4721-58-5 (hardback)

1. Lee, Kuan Yew, 1923-2015 - Anecdotes. 2. Prime Ministers – Singapore – Anecdotes.

DS610.73.L45

959.5705092 -- dc23 OCN918875316

Printed in Singapore by Markono Print Media Pte Ltd

CONTENTS

FOREWORD 7

Robert Kuok	13	Yong Pung How	21
Othman Wok	31	Puan Noor Aishah	37
S.R. Nathan	41	J.Y. Pillay	53
Lim Chin Beng	57	Wee Cho Yaw	65
Ch'ng Jit Koon	71	Sidek Saniff	81
Philip Yeo	93	Jennie Chua	103
Liew Mun Leong	113	Lim Siong Guan	129
Jagjeet Singh	133	Ng Kok Song	141
Lam Chuan Leong	155	Bilahari Kausikan	159
Stephen Lee	169		
<i>Photographs</i>			
Li Ka-shing	187	Tan Guong Ching	189
Dr S. Vasoo	193	Moses Lee	203
Ho Meng Kit	215	Yatiman Yusof	227
Yeong Yoon Ying	235	Alan Chan	241
Peter Seah	251	Heng Swee Keat	257
Leo Yip	263	Andrew Tan	269
Peter Tan	277	Cheng Wai Keung	285
Lee Seow Hiang	291	Chee Hong Tat	303
Anthony Tan	311	Lim Teck Kiat	325

For Review only

FOREWORD

When Mr Lee Kuan Yew passed away in the early hours of 23 March 2015, I had an essay in my computer, titled “Mr Lee’s Red Box”. It was already fully written — referring to Mr Lee in the present tense. After 23 March, I opened the document, changed the present tense to past tense, rewrote the last lines of the essay, and shared it with the public.

The reason I had a complete document in my computer is because Liew Mun Leong approached me in 2014 to contribute an essay for this book. Earlier that year, Mun Leong and Ong Beng Seng found themselves on the same flight one day, and enjoyed a long chat about Mr Lee. Both had known Mr Lee professionally and in different capacities for many years.

As they exchanged stories about their interactions with Mr Lee, it dawned on them that while much had been said and written about Mr Lee’s accomplishments, there was no book that told the personal, more intimate side to him — from the viewpoint of the people who worked very closely with him. They wondered: Wouldn’t some Singaporeans like to see Mr Lee at work and outside of work?

So they asked around amongst Mr Lee’s friends and colleagues if they would be willing to share their stories. Mun Leong also raised the idea of this book with Mr Lee twice, and Mr Lee had no objections.

Mun Leong then formed a small group with Andrew Tan and Jennie Chua to put the book together. I am pleased to know that the proceeds from the sale of this book will go to a charitable cause.

Mun Leong asked me because I had worked for Mr Lee from 1997 to 2000. I spent some months reflecting on it, and managed to put all my thoughts down only in February of last year, the month before Mr Lee passed away.

We had a week of national mourning in the days following Mr Lee's passing. I spent that week talking with residents who came to community tributes, and going to thank the many who stood in line for hours to pay their respects at the lying-in-state in Parliament House. I felt a deep sense of loss, but that sense of loss was overwhelmed by a growing amazement at the strength and graciousness of fellow Singaporeans.

The day after Mr Lee's funeral, I was supposed to go on a school visit and launch the Junior Sports Academy. We had scheduled these quite some time ago. The thoughtful officers at the Ministry of Education asked me if we should postpone things. After some discussion, I decided to go ahead, as Mr Lee would have wanted things to return to normal as soon as possible.

That was a difficult day. Some of the teachers were emotionally drained. The members of the media who came for the launch were exhausted from the week before. But, I think, we were all buoyed by the children's bright laughter as they played games during their Physical Education class. Their laughter reminded us to keep looking and moving forward.

I later discussed with Mun Leong if I should write another reflection. He felt that the red box story should be a part of this book and suggested I write a foreword to set out the background to this book.

While this was taking place, something happened as a result of the essay.

If you are familiar with the red box story, you may recall that, late one night, after he had been at Mrs Lee's wake, Mr Lee went for a walk along the Singapore River, like he and Mrs Lee had done together when she was alive. In fact, during that period, Mr Lee took many long, late-night walks by himself. He was deep in grief. He could not sleep. The night before Mrs Lee's funeral, at the Singapore River, he saw some trash on the river and he asked his security officers to take a photo of it. In my essay, I guessed that there was probably a note about the trash in the red box the next day, for immediate follow-up. But I couldn't be sure as I was not working for Mr Lee at the time.

A few days after the essay came out, a colleague sent me an email with two photos attached. Some officers at the Ministry of the Environment and Water Resources, after reading the red box story, went to check their records to see if they had ever received any instructions about the trash floating on the Singapore River. They had. Mr Lee had sent over two photos. One picture was of the trash. The other photo was of himself. Mr Lee wrote: "I asked for photos to be taken of the flotsam and of my position against the UOB backdrop so you know where it was." He wanted to pinpoint the location to make it easier for the officers.

I was struck by the date of Mr Lee's email — 6 October 2010, the day of Mrs Lee's funeral. Even in his deepest grief, Mr Lee never stopped caring about Singapore.

The photos were taken late at night, and there wasn't much light. The picture of Mr Lee is blurry, not the kind we are used to seeing in news articles or on book covers. But it does the job. And that's what mattered to Mr Lee. He didn't think of himself as the subject of the picture, only as a marker to point out where work needed to be done.



“I asked for photos to be taken of the flotsam and of my position against the UOB backdrop so you know where it was.” These photographs were taken on the eve of the funeral of his wife, Mdm Kwa Geok Choo.

That photo of Mr Lee is bittersweet. He was grief-stricken that he had lost his wife of over 60 years, but he sat upright and friendly, to put his trusted security officers, who remained by his side at his lowest point, at ease.

This is the side of Mr Lee that very few see.

This book shows the sides of Mr Lee that very few have seen. Among the contributors are former President of Singapore S.R. Nathan, Puan Noor Aishah who is the wife of our first President Yusof Ishak, former Chief Justice Yong Pung How, Mr Robert Kuok who was Mr Lee’s classmate in Raffles College, all of Mr Lee’s former principal private secretaries, as well as friends and leaders in various fields whom Mr Lee rallied to the Singapore cause. Through their recollections, we see his lifelong concern for Singapore and Singaporeans.

Underneath his stern and steely exterior, we see curiosity, discipline, dedication, consideration, and — well-known to those of us who sometimes found ourselves caught between his sweet tooth and Mrs Lee’s gentle reminders that he watch his sugar intake — his weakness for ice cream. We see his humility; he sought to learn from everyone, from commanding world and business leaders to fruit sellers in a market in Taiwan to the residents of Tanjong Pagar.

We see the warmth of the man who once told Robert Kuok, “Come to think of it, finally, it’s only friendship that matters.”

We see a portrait too of Mrs Lee, from Mr Lee’s long-serving Press Secretary YY Yeong, and several others. Mrs Lee was an irreplaceable part of Mr Lee’s life — he would not have been the man he was, without her.

I thank the book committee for giving me and the other contributors a chance to share our stories about Mr Lee. I would like to thank all the contributors, not just for their time in putting their thoughts to paper, but more importantly for their friendship with Mr Lee and their service together with him to his lifelong cause: Singapore. Mr Lee valued deeply his friends and friends of Singapore. There are many others with meaningful stories to share, whom Mun Leong and his team did not have the chance to approach. I hope we can all continue to share our memories and lessons, and keep moving forward.

We dedicate this book to the late Mr Lee Kuan Yew and his generation of pioneers. We shall do our best to protect and grow this Singapore you built, and keep your pioneering spirit alive.

Heng Swee Keat

March 2016

S.R. NATHAN

President, Republic of Singapore, 1999–2011

“I must honour what they have given me.

I was in his shadow. I lived and worked for him for many years. He came to me, later in life, as some sort of “revolutionary” bent on making multiracial people “unite” to make Singapore what it is today. Later on, he focused on “development” so that Singapore would continue on its path to prosperity. He was an extraordinary man for the times, indeed, most extraordinary.

My first meeting

I first saw Mr Lee in 1953, in Singapore, at the University of Malaya campus where I was a student. He was with his wife. He was curious, always looking around, paying a lot of attention to his surroundings. This was my first impression of him. He remained a keen observer throughout the years. He observed everything.

The second time I saw him was when I was secretary of the University Socialist Club. The club, which was formed in 1953, was divided into three groups: leftists, moderates and the in-betweens. I belonged to the moderates. I soon learnt that this man was only interested in the leftists. He invited them to his tea parties; he never invited the moderates. When the “Fajar”¹ case was brought up by the government and came up for hearing, the leftists of course approached

him and he went to their defence. He seemed a little uncertain to me and it was only in the later years that I saw the purpose of his closeness with the left.

Development of relations

Later, as I got involved with trade union meetings, Prime Minister Lee became more familiar to me. But I was in the shadow of Devan Nair who had helped establish the National Trades Union Congress (NTUC). He and Nair met regularly and I would be there when they discussed local politics. By then, things had changed. Strikes were frequent. This man who was pro-left was now dealing with the left, and I saw the reason for his meetings with Nair. I was working at NTUC then and left in 1965.

The next year, I joined the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It was new — the minister was new, the permanent secretary was also new, and so were the few senior officers. We were all housed in the same building at City Hall. Mr Lee's office was on the third floor and those of the Foreign Affairs ministers were on the first floor, along with the Public Utilities Board. The government was very small then. Although I had come from NTUC and was a civil servant, I think some of my colleagues in the ministry were wary of me possibly because Mr Lee was always talking to me.

Once, in the early years in the ministry, Mr Lee met with the Thai Foreign Minister. I was told to attend the meeting and take notes. At that time, I had my fears of the man. He was a daunting figure. I felt like I was being thrown into the lion's den. I went to the meeting with a lot of apprehension. But what surprised me was that he came directly to me, adjusted my necktie in a fatherly way, and said, "You're no longer in the labour movement, you must dress properly." This overwhelmed

me. My impression of him changed from then on. He was no longer a dangerous man to me, but someone extremely kind and protective. At that meeting, I decided not to take notes. I just listened. Everything was in my head. I could see Mr Lee was apprehensive but I thought the conversation wouldn't be free if I took notes. So after the meeting, I went back and did the notes and sent them to him. He wrote back: Good report. From then on, he would invite me to sit in frequently to take notes. I sat in on his meetings with foreign ministers from the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, India and the United Arab Emirates.

At another important meeting (it was with either the Australian or New Zealand High Commissioner), I told myself I could not afford to miss out any points and so I wrote lengthy notes. He wasn't too pleased with that. He called me and said, "You think I have nothing else to do except to read your notes?" Before I could explain myself, he told me to take it away and said there should be no notes beyond four pages. In other words, you should only write the essence of the discussion so as to keep it within four pages.

In 1971, he sent me to the Ministry of Home Affairs, where I was acting Permanent Secretary. I was at the ministry for about nine months until Dr Goh Keng Swee had me transferred to the Security and Intelligence Division (SID). I worked closely with Dr Goh at SID. While there, Mr Lee would still call me to ask questions and I had to be ready to give an answer.

One of the things I learnt from working with Dr Goh was to think ahead. You never knew what questions the Prime Minister would ask and if you didn't have an answer, you had to tell him so and ask for some time to get back to him with the answers. When I was with SID, I became even closer to Mr Lee. The relationship I had with both Mr Lee and Dr Goh was one of closeness. They would sit me at the

table, and we would eat and discuss many issues, particularly about trade and politics.

In 1979, Mr Lee sent me back to the Foreign Affairs ministry. He told me he would give me two years to improve it and added that if it didn't improve, the ministry would go to the Prime Minister's Office. In other words, if it failed, my head would be chopped off. So I worked very hard, morning, noon and night. In two years, the ministry changed. He continued to call me and ask me questions. That was when our relationship really began. There was a sense of relief when one day, he acknowledged publicly that the ministry was up to his mark. In fact, I am grateful to Mr Lee for accepting me despite my lack of qualifications. I had only a diploma² whereas many of my colleagues had university degrees. They called me the "Maverick". He never asked for my qualifications.

I next joined Straits Times Press. How that all began was interesting. I still remember it was a Saturday when Peter Lim, the leading journalist in *The Straits Times*, rang me at home and told me he had had a long meeting with Mr Lee. I think this was in 1981. He said he had given my name to Mr Lee as a possible senior official in Straits Times Press. I kept quiet. The next day, I received a call from Mr Lee. He said he wanted me to go to Straits Times Press. I told him that I was already 55 years old and had no journalism experience. That did not matter, he said. He assured me that I could go to him if I had any problems.

The day before I joined the newspaper, I went to see Mr Lee. He told me he had now given me a porcelain jar and if I were to break it into pieces, he could put it back together but it would never be the same. I just kept quiet.

He stared at me and said, "You're keeping quiet."

I replied, "You've already told me what to do and what not to do."

He then smiled. During the six years I was with Straits Times Press, there was only one occasion when he scolded me, and that was in Fiji when somebody leaked information that damaged our security interest.

After Straits Times Press, in 1988, Mr Lee wanted me in Kuala Lumpur.³ So there I went where I made a point of visiting various states to get to know the many personalities and state leadership. Every time he came to KL, I would be there. On one occasion, when things were not going well, I asked him what the mood was like. He replied sombrely that the Malaysian Prime Minister had his daggers set on me. I told him I had not done anything wrong but he said that I was too active. In my defence, I said I was merely doing my job. The next morning, he informed me that I was to go to Washington. I was there for several years during the Bush and Clinton administrations.⁴

On my return to Singapore in 1996, Dr Tony Tan⁵ asked me to start the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies.⁶ This was part of Nanyang Technological University. The university had no political science department so I had a free hand. Of course, there were occasions when I was questioned by senior university staff.

Then one night in 1999, Mr Lee called me and asked all sorts of questions, like the age of my children and what they were doing. It was 11 p.m. and my wife was curious as to who was on the phone at such a late hour. She was somehow anxious as well. He then told me to see him the next morning.

The next day, he said, "I want you to be the presidential candidate but there's no guarantee you would be chosen. I will only throw in your name as a candidate."

I told him I needed to consult my wife. My wife and I discussed the matter and we realised we could not say no to him for all he had done over the years. He had this ability to command personal loyalty!

For Review only

CH'NG JIT KOON

Senior Minister of State for Community Development, 1991–1996

“Mind you, don't hurt the feelings
of the older ones.”

– *Lee Kuan Yew*

Don't ask me how many times I tried to say no to Lee Kuan Yew. And don't ask me how many times he accepted it. The number is zero. Mr Lee is one who, once he sets his mind he wants you, doesn't expect you to decline. He will use his way to convince you. You cannot say no. Because, you know, whatever he asks you to do, it is for the nation.

The first time I tried to say no to Mr Lee, he wasn't even in the room. In September 1967, I received a letter from the Prime Minister's Office (PMO), signed by the Deputy Secretary. It got to me late because it was not sent to the right address. It had been sent to Nanyang University, and they took some time to redirect it to me. The letter said, “This is urgent. When you receive this, contact the undersigned immediately.”

I called up the PMO. The gentleman on the line said, “I have been waiting for your call! Quick, come over!”

So I went to City Hall. The moment the Deputy Secretary saw me, he scolded me. “Why are you still here?”

I said, “If I'm not here, where should I be?”

“Don't you know?” he said. “The United Nations General Assembly has already started. You're supposed to be there. Why are you still here?”

I told him truthfully, “Nobody told me. What am I supposed to do there?”

At this point, he said, “Wait,” and turned to behind his desk to pull out a stack of papers. He found the extracts of some Cabinet meeting notes. “See? Here. PM told Cabinet he himself wants to talk to you. He didn’t tell you?”

He did not. The Deputy Secretary told me the Singapore delegation would be headed by Yong Nguk Lin.¹ But as a Cabinet Minister, he would not be able to stay throughout from the opening until the end of the session. I was supposed to be with the guys who would stay for the whole General Assembly. He would leave everything to the remaining members of the delegation. And who were the other guys? If I recall, I believe they were S.R. Nathan from Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Osman Omar, a senior police officer. And the third guy — that’s me.

PM Lee had already gone off to the United States. President Johnson had invited him. Singapore was just a newborn nation, a tiny little one. Yet we were invited by a superpower. It showed that the US regarded us as important. So of course PM had to go. He was accompanied by the Foreign Minister, S. Rajaratnam, and Rahim Ishak, the Minister of State for Education.

At the time, there were two great powers in the world: the United States and the Soviet Union. Rajaratnam had said before, *we are friends with everyone*. So we had to balance things. At the same time that PM went to the United States, Dr Toh Chin Chye, the DPM, led another delegation to visit the USSR.

So, with both our PM and DPM away, another delegation was needed to represent Singapore at the UN General Assembly. At the time, one of the topics being discussed in the UN was the seat of China. It was then held by the Republic of China government in Taiwan, but the People’s Republic of China government in Beijing was claiming that they should be the rightful owner of the seat in the

UN. I thought maybe S.R. Nathan and Osman Omar would need someone to help read the Chinese reports in the UN papers, so I should go help. That was my ignorant thinking at the time. Later on, I learnt that everything we received was in English.

So I said to the Deputy Secretary, “How many days do I need to be there?”

“It’s three months!”

I jumped. “I cannot go. Three months is too long. I’m not a civil servant, I am helping in my family’s business. It is year-end. I have to help to close the company accounts.”

But the gentleman explained that because both the PM and DPM were out on official trips, he had nobody to give the approval to change the members of the delegation to the UN General Assembly. He said, “Please help me to solve this problem.”

Since he told me his difficulties, I said I would go back and discuss it with my colleagues in the company. Luckily, they understood that this was an important task; it was for the nation. They advised me not to decline and said they could handle the company’s accounts themselves. With their consent, I immediately informed PMO. They arranged for my air ticket and the necessary papers, and I was off to New York within three days. This was the first time I flew that far a distance.

As part of his US visit, PM Lee visited New York. All of us in the UN delegation gathered to greet him. When he saw me he said, “Eh! How come you are here?”

I was stunned and didn’t know what to say. He had already forgotten! Singapore was not even three years old at that time, and he was already so busy running from place to place to make sure people knew us and took us seriously that he even forgot that he wanted me to go to the UN! He expected all the rest of us to do our work too, so much so that

he even forgot to tell some of us to do the work. But actually, he knew very well what you did and when you did your work. He is one who is very grateful and really puts it in his mind that you were with him through the hard times, whatever your status. Whoever helped him during the crucial years, he will always remember you.

I became MP for Tiong Bahru in 1968, and started helping Mr Lee in his Tanjong Pagar ward in 1976. Mr Lee told me that Tanjong Pagar was no longer the same as when he first became Assemblyman. In the 1950s, the people who lived there were construction workers, *sampan*² men, trishaw riders, Harbour Board workers, hawkers. They were very hardworking people and supported Lee Kuan Yew through the hard times. They started the Goodwill Committee after the racial riots in 1964. PM Lee never forgot what they did.

By 1976, the residents living around Duxton Road who were affected by the government's resettlement plans in the area had been given priority to relocate, to places like Kampung Silat and Bukit Purmei. Some young families from other areas were moving in to the newer housing blocks at Tanjong Pagar Plaza. PM Lee knew that the old ones would no longer be relevant to the new residents. He wanted me to find new residents to keep the grassroots organisations alive. He also told me, "Mind you, don't hurt the feelings of the older ones."

By the 1970s, things were stable and the economy was progressing well. I saw that the early residents, even if they moved away, wanted to stay close to PM Lee and support him. They still felt very proud of the old days when they fought the elections with him. I also saw that PM Lee remembered and was grateful to them. So I shared the idea to have an award recognising them as Friends of Tanjong Pagar. It's not like the PBM³ or BBM,⁴ the National Day Awards that the government gives out. This was something exclusively for Tanjong Pagar

grassroots. PM Lee gave his approval and agreed to sign the award certificates personally. It meant a lot to the stalwart supporters of Tanjong Pagar.

The next time I tried to say no to PM Lee, I did it in person. It was in 1981. I had been in Parliament for about 13 years, as a backbencher. Now and then, Mr Lee would ask me something, or tell me something he wanted me to do, or I would tell him something I think he should know about. That was all our interaction. I wasn't involved in any big policies or anything like that.

One Saturday in December 1981, near mid-day, he called me to see him in his office. I went there. He asked me to sit down, then chatted with me, sharing with me his worries. This was after we lost the Anson by-election in October. He felt an urgent need to groom the younger generation of party leaders. He thought the young ones had good brains, but not the skills to reach out to the people and be accepted by them. He said he needed someone to help him. Earlier, he had people like Lim Kim San. Lim Kim San had very rich experience in the Chinese business circles and had a wide network. Now that Mr Lim was already retired, PM needed someone to help him provide a bridge between the young ministers and the people. He wanted me to help him in the PMO as his Senior Parliamentary Secretary.

It was a Saturday. He wanted me to start the next Monday.

I told him I couldn't because I had responsibilities in the family's business. But he wouldn't take my no for an answer. It was in December. I explained to him I would need to settle the company's year-end accounts, so I requested to start the following year.

"Okay. Second January," he pronounced. He was very decisive.

With that settled, he then asked me, "Now, what do you have in mind to do?"