LIM KIM SAN

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LIM KIM SAN

A BUILDER OF SINGAPORE

Asad-ul Iqbal Latif

ISEAS
INSTITUTE OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES
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Foreword

Lim Kim San was a man of great determination. He lived a full life and also made great contributions to Singapore. Singaporeans now own their HDB homes. They owe this to him for setting a system that made this result possible.

Of all my old guard colleagues, he was the most active after he retired as minister in 1980. He became Senior Adviser to Singapore Press Holdings where he helped until illness overcame him in the last nine months of his life just before his death at the age of nearly ninety.

He suffered during the Japanese Occupation. The dreaded Kempeitai (Japanese Military Police) tortured him, accusing him of being pro-communist and pro-British. He was flogged, beaten, kicked and physically abused. He was confined in a filthy over-crowded room of thirty persons, sitting on his haunches all day and slept on a hard surface without a blanket at night which caused aches and pains. Released after a week, he was re-arrested a second time. Again more blows, kicks and lashes. In the cell with thirty other persons, there was only one squatting toilet, the water from which was used for defecating, washing and drinking.

In 1959 when I first assumed office, I made him a member of the Public Service Commission and later Deputy Chairman. In 1960, I made him Chairman of the HDB (Housing and Development Board).

The HDB was under the Minister for National Development, one Ong Eng Guan who was wildly popular for his theatrical populist gestures, posturing as an anti-colonialist by sacking and humiliating expatriates in his Ministry. To show the other expatriates still in our service that we wanted them to stay, that they were not at the mercy

of the capricious Ministers, I had the expatriate Permanent Secretary, one Val Meadows, transferred to my office as the Permanent Secretary, Special Duties.

As Minister for National Development, Ong Eng Guan told Lim Kim San to hire workers direct and not use contractors in building the flats. Kim San sought me out to ask whether I wanted him to build flats or to become a labour contractor. I overruled his Minister and told Kim San to do things the way he knew best. With his keen business sense, he built the homes we needed speedily and economically with the labour skills and technology of that era.

He built two blocks of flats comprising 324 units along Cantonment Road in my Tanjong Pagar constituency. At the election time in September 1963, it was half completed. Huge crowds of leftist students from the Chinese middle schools and Nanyang University worked the ground, visiting nearly every household in Tanjong Pagar. They wanted to unseat me. These two uncompleted blocks of flats reminded the people that I could complete the building of the few hundred homes, not these leftists. I was re-elected.

I persuaded Kim San to stand for elections in September 1963. I needed men of integrity, courage and ability, who could get things done. He fought in Cairnhill and won. I made him Minister for National Development.

He had told me he could not make speeches, and that he was unsuited for politics. I replied that if he spoke his mind and did not worry whether his speeches had oratorical flourish, he would carry the people with him. He spoke with sincerity and people could sense it. He also carried out what he promised. He won their confidence.

He has an intuitive sense to feel people's characters, motivation and capabilities. Once he described to me how, after he shook hands with a thug, a Chinese Singaporean who had become an important good friend of Tengku Abdul Rahman, the Prime Minister of Malaysia, he felt repulsed and wanted to wash his hands. He was dead right

about that evil man. I had him join me to interview candidates for jobs for high office and even candidates for elections and MPs, to help select the right candidates.

After he retired in September 1988, he became Chairman of Singapore Press Holdings (SPH). He trimmed costs, and cut waste in staff and materials and increased profits in SPH. Convinced that advertising would increasingly come from the electronic media, he took SPH into the digital fields and made SPH one of the most profitable newspaper groups.

Ever the shrewd businessman, he arranged an SPH dinner on 16 September 1998 on my seventy-fifth birthday to launch the first volume of my memoirs that he had urged me to write for SPH/Times.

He remained active until the last few months before he died just before reaching ninety. Whenever I needed someone with integrity and judgement to carry out a mission, I called upon Kim San. He became Chairman of the Council of Presidential Advisers and a Chancellor of Singapore Management University.

He enjoyed life. He was a gourmet. He dressed smartly and with good taste.

He refused to allow physical infirmities to disable him. He had had several operations for his neck and spine over the last forty years of his life. A surgeon fused his neck vertebra but with no great improvement. Then an excruciating back pain led to another operation. Again, the operation was not fully successful. He forced himself to walk daily despite the pain. Finally, he got his muscles to loosen up and the pain bearable for him to golf again. He made his life worth living by his indomitable spirit. He was a valued colleague and a great friend.

Lee Kuan Yew
Minister Mentor of Singapore
April 2009

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The YMCA-Lim Kim San Volunteers Programme

The YMCA of Singapore is a community organization, based on Christian values and affiliated worldwide, that engages a critical mass of volunteers to serve others regardless of race, language or religion.

The late Mr Lim Kim San was an Honorary Life Member and an active supporter of the YMCA.

To honour this distinguished son of Singapore, recognize his life in the service of others, and to hold him out as an inspirational challenge to our volunteers, the YMCA Volunteers Service Programme has been named after him.

The Programme aims to:

a) Promote volunteerism amongst Singaporeans, in particular in YMCA local community and international service programmes,
b) Attract and retain volunteers to undertake sustained service in specific service programmes, as well as recognise their service,
c) Enhance the capability of volunteers to better serve and understand the beneficiaries under their care,
d) Identify and develop leaders amongst our volunteers, and
e) Encourage and facilitate corporate volunteerism.

Family Tree

LIM KIM SAN
30 November 1916 – 20 July 2006

Parents: Lim Choon Huat and Wee Geok Khuan

Siblings: Lim Yan Siew, Lim Yan Lian, Lim Cheng Siong, Lim Yan Swee, and Lim Yan Leng.

Wife: Pang Gek Kim

Children: Lim Eng Tin (m. Lee Weng Yan), Lim Eng Hong (m. Ee Kean Leong), Lim Kiat Seng (m. Pauline Lim Mee Goh), Lim Siu Tin (m. Jimmy Beng Kian Siew), Lim Kiat Beng (m. Linda Lee), and Lim Siu Horng (m. Tay Puan Siong).

Grandchildren: Lee Yu Chuan (m. Amy Ng Ka Yin), Lee Yu Ching (m. Wee Seng Hong), Ee Kuo-Ren (m. Natalie Ho Chin Yee), Ee Yuen-Ling, Lim Ee Ming, Beng Teck Liang (m. Connie Yang), Beng Li-Siier (m. Shashi Kumar), Beng Li-Hsien, Jonathan Lim (m. Cony Ee), Anthony Ee-Li Lim (m. Jean Chang), and Adrian Tay (m. Leslie Tay).

Great-Grandchildren: Samuel Wee Rui Chang, Matthew Wee Rui Jie, Bradley Beng, Brandon Beng, Annalisa Wei-Ling Lim, Isabella Hui-Ling Lim, Alexander Jie-Hao Lim, and Joshua Zu-Hui Lim.

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The Man with the Blanket

Soon after being appointed Chairman of Singapore's Housing and Development Board (HDB) in 1960, Lim Kim San went around the slum area in Chinatown. He came across a labourer in a bunk who had a blanket pulled right up to his neck. Lim asked the man whether he was sick. The labourer replied: "No. I've got no pants on." Lim asked him why. He replied: "My other brother has just taken my pants out. I'm wearing briefs." Lim's thoughts on the man's reply: "No, I don't think he was in briefs. There was no such thing as briefs at that time. You see how poor they were! They had to share [clothes]."[1] The dead were not exempt from sharing, either. "In those days, there were shops which pulled clothing and shoes off the dead to sell them. 'My God,' I thought to myself, 'I really must help these people.' "[2]

It was a moment of transformation for Lim, then in his forties. Scion of a well-to-do business family, a product of the prestigious Anglo Chinese School and the elite Raffles College, he was a talented and successful businessman. The gourmet and racecourse enthusiast had access to what the good life could offer in Singapore. He had often driven past Upper Nanking Street, but had never been inside the shophouses where Singapore's poor huddled — lured from China and elsewhere, ironically by the island's prosperity.

Prosperity during colonial times had been a mixed blessing. Singapore had prospered since Stamford Raffles had established an

entrepôt on the island in 1819 to service the East India Company's China trade. As East-West trade grew during the nineteenth century, the British colony became the clearing-house for the region's produce and the distribution centre for the European goods traded in return. Indeed, the city became the trading, banking and insurance headquarters for the whole of Southeast Asia. However, the population grew as well. From a mere 52,900 in 1850, it rose to 229,900 by 1901, shot up to 940,700 by 1947, and almost doubled in the following decade. People crowded into the shop houses at the centre of the city area.

> Originally built to accommodate a shop on the ground floor and house the people who worked there, these buildings themselves began to grow. Extra stories were tacked on, bringing them usually up to four, and extensions were added at the back. As more and more immigrants came, first the houses and then individual rooms were divided and subdivided into a dark warren of tiny cubicles — airless holes with room in them for little more than a bed. Thus buildings originally designed for one family were made to house 10 families or more, without privacy or sunlight, with a single tap, a single latrine, a single cooking space. For lack of any other place the street became dining room, meeting place and children's playground.[3]

Yet the population continued to expand, driving some families from the city and forcing them to build shelters illegally wherever they could. Up came squatter settlements that "developed in a girdle of squalor and misery around the central city".[4] Unemployment, crime, gangsterism, extortion and prostitution flourished, and racial tensions simmered, in the vast underbelly of the city even as the island, and its ablest inhabitants, prospered in the seas of global commerce.

The gulf between the two kinds of life in Singapore hurt Lim, although he lived in a far better part of the city. Under his leadership, as many housing units were built during the three years from 1960 as had been built during the preceding three decades. He would go on to become a minister holding crucial portfolios such as National

Development, Education, Finance, and Interior and Defence. He would chair the Council of Presidential Advisers. He would come to play a gatekeeper's role in the screening process through which Singapore's ruling People's Action Party (PAP) put prospective members of parliament and ministers. He would helm the Economic Development Board, critical to Singapore's success; chair the Port of Singapore Authority, also crucial to a port-city; would serve in the Monetary Authority of Singapore and the Public Utilities Board; and he would head the profitable Singapore Press Holdings. While these contributions were substantial, it is as "Mr HDB" — the architect of Singapore's early, ambitious and phenomenally successful public housing programme — that he is best remembered.

Lim Kim San died on 20 July 2006.

The following chapters will trace "Mr HDB's" development from being a successful businessman keen on building a fortune for himself, to being a successful nation-builder literally. But first, it is necessary to sketch the context in which that transformation occurred. A process that began with self-government for Singapore and the PAP's rise to power in 1959, and continued through Singapore's difficult years in Malaysia from 1963 to 1965, culminated when the island was ejected from its geographical hinterland and set about becoming a global city.

A PLAN FOR SINGAPORE

Raffles had a vision of Singapore becoming "the emporium of the East, on the route between India and China" "on the basis of free competition". Given its origins, the independent city-state did not mind importing capital, managers, engineers and others. It did not share the fears of many newly-independent countries, which regarded multinational corporations (MNCs) as exploiters of cheap Third World labour and raw materials that would "suck a country dry". Singapore had no raw materials for anyone to exploit, and nobody

else "wanted to exploit the labour". So it welcomed MNCs that, instead of exploiting Singapore, taught its people to do jobs that they otherwise would not have learned to do.[5] By tuning into the global economy, Singapore was able to overcome its drawbacks, such as the fact that it had little by way of natural resources except for its harbour. What the country brought to the table were values such as hard work, discipline, thrift, ruggedness and openness to change.

The test came soon after independence. When the British decided in 1968 to withdraw from their bases, they caused what could have turned into a major economic crisis for Singapore. However, the threat was converted into an opportunity. The military facilities and the technicians working for them were released for productive civilian industries, Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore's founding prime minister, recalled. "We developed an economy in which the enterprise of American, European, and Japanese MNCs transformed British military bases into industrial facilities for manufacturing, and for servicing of ships, oil rigs, aircraft, telecommunications, banking and insurance."[6]

The economy grew by leaps and bounds, providing the resources necessary for the country's defence. The introduction of National Service in 1967 created a citizens' army and obviated the need for Singapore to invest in a large and costly standing army.

On the political front, the need for stability loomed large. Political stability, the PAP Government believed, was necessary to make Singapore a worthwhile and safe investment destination for foreign and local capital.

Stability required good leadership. Leaders would have to be honest, capable, clear in their thinking, and committed to Singapore's long-term good. Bureaucrats, too, would have to share these qualities and goals and emerge from a process of stringent selection. Together, political leaders and competent bureaucrats formed the governing elite.

Under Lee Kuan Yew's dynamic and charismatic leadership, the PAP functioned as a broad church open to a variety of thinkers and doers. It attracted a range of minds, from the philosophical Sinnathamby Rajaratnam and the cerebral Goh Keng Swee to the intellectual C.V. Devan Nair and the earthy Lim Kim San. Each member of the Old Guard complemented the others in ensuring the survival and success of Singapore.

Singapore was a racially diverse society descended largely from immigrants. If the new Singapore were to succeed, this society would have to be given a stake in the land. This is where public housing, and Lim Kim San, came in.

LIM KIM SAN: TECHNOCRAT OR POLITICIAN?

Lim was initially reluctant to join politics. He made few political speeches as a member of parliament and as a minister. He had a reputation as a nuts-and-bolts person who got things done. These aspects of his life have created the notion that he was a technocrat and not really a politician.

That myth was present in the headline of an article that appeared on him after his death: "The most unpolitical of men".[7] In the same article, however, appeared a paragraph that was much closer to the truth. Lim, Chua Mui Hoong wrote, "was among the legendary core of Old Guard ministers known for their 'political entrepreneurship', bold to experiment with new ways of doing things".

In short, he was a politician.

The headline was not wrong: Lim was indeed the most apolitical of men. However, that was before he joined politics. What he became once he had entered public life was far more than a technocrat: He evolved into a politician who acted in the full knowledge that he was taking decisions that would affect the lives of thousands down the decades.

It is true that the breezily apolitical Lim, the businessman, is evident in his Oral History Interview. That phase of his life covered two epochal events: The Great Depression of the 1930s in the long aftermath of World War I, and the Japanese invasion and occupation of Singapore — which the British had touted as their impregnable fortress — in the 1940s during World War II.

Although his family suffered financially during the Depression and he suffered physically at Japanese hands, the first catastrophe did not lead him to ponder deeply the connections between economics and war. Even during and after the second calamity, he remained apolitical in the sense that he did not set about driving the British — who had lost their colony to Japan in a war that had cost innocent Singaporeans dearly — out of Singapore when they returned to it victorious after the war.

All this is true. However, what transformed Lim into one of Singapore's founding fathers was the social impact of the PAP's arrival on the political stage. He saw a party that matched its anti-colonial rhetoric with a pragmatic blueprint for action. Lim understood that it was natural that, when political life resumed in Singapore after the war, there would be a "sort of flux", "with things going this way, that way". But what was required was that, out of the flux, a party would emerge with "a cohesive plan for Singapore". He was looking for something concrete. "And that I think was what the PAP did. And not only that. I was attracted to the PAP not only because I believe in their platform, but also because I trust… I know the people who run it and I have great faith in them."[8] He joined the PAP in 1959.

Appointed HDB chairman, he realized quickly what his job entailed. At the physical level, it meant having to deal with a terrible housing shortage. At the political level, however, this meant providing houses not merely for the sake of housing, but to give the people of an independent Singapore a tangible stake in their new society.

Lim is commended rightly as "Mr HDB" for his hands-on approach to providing public housing. His businessman's instinct for

keeping costs down, his unerring eye for detail, his frenzied pace of work, and his integrity all came together to create the masterpiece that is Singapore's public housing.

However, that is not all there is to the story. The HDB was nothing if it was not political; it was proof that good and effective governance could change mental as well as physical landscapes among a largely immigrant people. The HDB was an act of faith to make immigrants believe that a place of sojourn could become a home, that a place to buy and sell could become a nation to inhabit and to defend.

It was that sense of political possibility that galvanized the hitherto apolitical Lim. Asked why low-cost housing had failed in so many other countries, he answered: "Well it is a question of political will, isn't it? The political will to do whatever is required to achieve the goal."[9]

Indeed, by his own account, it might actually be misleading to think of him as a technocrat. A technocrat is someone who brings specialized skills to a job. In his own assessment, he was anything but a specialist. He spoke of his philosophy, whether as a minister or in managing a statutory board or in running a company:

> My policy is roughly this: I am not a specialist at anything. Neither am I a professional. But I listen to the specialist and the professional… I use my common sense to ask questions like 'How about this or that?' If they cannot agree, then I must myself decide…. But the whole thing is this: *listen to people*.[10]

The ability to listen to experts, use one's common sense, take decisions oneself and then take responsibility for those decisions is a political trait by any standard.

But is there a case for making a distinction between politicians and technocrats at all? If so, what role did a "technocrat" like Lim play in strengthening the government in what was, after all, a very politicized era? Or was it precisely "technocrats" like him who made an important difference to Singapore?

Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew argued in an extensive interview, given not long before Lim died, that such distinctions are artificial.

> Categorizing people as technocrats and politicians is an oversimplification. Nobody is completely a technocrat or completely a politician. It is a continuum of where your interests and special skills lie. He may not have been politicized in the sense that he was not thinking of self-government, getting rid of the British and taking over the running of the system and changing the social order. Yes, he was basically a businessman. But he had a social conscience and had gone through personal privation during the Japanese Occupation.[11]

It was that background of having known privation that made Lim empathize with Singapore's poor.

> Working in HDB, you begin to see how poor people are living, how miserable their conditions were, and you begin to feel this is something worth doing. You are giving them a home; the CPF [Central Provident Fund] will enable them to buy their homes; and will create a better society. So, in the end, he became a politician nearly as much as anyone else in Cabinet. He may not be well-versed in the idiom of politics — he never went to the LSE [London School of Economics] and listened to Harold Laski or whoever, but in real-life situations, whether you want to create a fairer society, you feel and respond as a human being. In today's terms, the media and the general public like to say that "O, he's a technocrat, he's not a real politician". That's utter rubbish. You may start off as a technocrat.[12]

In that context, Lee recalled the career of former Finance Minister Hon Sui Sen.

> Hon Sui Sen was a civil servant but he faced enormous problems, first with Malayanization and then he had to find jobs when the British withdrew. I fielded him as an MP, and he wasn't very happy because it was new to him and he wasn't a man who could make speeches. I said: "Never mind. You do it, you get in, you'll solve, the jobs have to be done." So, finally, he got the EDB [Economic Development Board] going, he became the Finance Minister, he

> got the Development Bank going. He's as good a politician as anybody.[13]

Lee talked about his own career as well.

> To say that of Lim Kim San [that he was a technocrat] is an oversimplification in categorizing people. People see me as a politician, but I am not a politician alone. Yes, I concentrated on the overthrow of the system and on getting a new system in place and creating a different social order. I started life wanting to make a good living as a lawyer. Later I decided that the law would lead me nowhere. I made money fighting other people's battles with each other or with the state, but to what purpose? To my purpose, for money. I am not to be concerned whether the man is right or wrong; my job is get him off or to win his case. That was not the life that I wanted.[14]

Asked how he would characterize himself, Lee replied: "As someone who was thrown into politics; it started with the Japanese beating me up during Japanese Occupation."[15] The same thing happened to Lim, but he did not take to politics as Lee did. Was that not the difference?

> No, he reacted in a different way. He didn't go to England. I had not only that experience with the Japanese here but I saw the British come back, new military officers in uniform trying to run this country with no experience whatsoever. Then I saw how they were running their own country. Yes, it was a different system from ours, but I concluded that there's nothing they can do for Singapore which I cannot do as well if not better, because I would represent the people. They were representing the British people, and their job was to extract out of Singapore as much economic benefits as they could from Singapore and Malaya to get the dollars which they required to support the British pound and pay for their imports. So it was a combination of these two that made me what I am. I decided that their system was flawed, that they were not capable of governing me better than my friends and I who had grown up under the system, and suffered, knew what it was all about and could be as competent. We went through that process; Lim Kim San did not.[16]

Lee returned to the theme of the educational experiences of the first-generation leaders, particularly their exposure to education in Britain.

> He did not go to England, he did not go through that same sequence of experiences. Goh Keng Swee did and so did Toh Chin Chye. A few of us who went to England decided that, no, they were not more capable than us. Definitely they did not send their best people here. The best people they kept for their home civil service, the next best the Indian Civil Service and then next the colonial civil service. We knew their ranking. We knew what the graduates in Oxbridge chose to do, would join the Foreign Service, the Home Service, the professions, the Indian Civil Service (that came to an end after India's independence in 1947), and only then the colonial service But that came to an end in the 1960s. So we knew the quality of the people who came to rule over us. I saw my contemporaries come out here to earn a living. How could they run the place better than I? It's a different experience that we went through.[17]

Yet, at the end of the day, Lim had a social conscience that made his transition to a political career natural.

The man with the blanket would have understood that sentiment fully.

Lim's role in the unfolding of the Singapore story provides a fascinating glimpse into how, faced with the task of making an improbability work, a businessman came together on a platform with people of very dissimilar backgrounds and outlooks to produce a nation where the dead would not have to share their clothes with the living.

Notes

1. Lim Kim San, Oral History Interview, by Lily Tan, Oral History Centre, Accession Number 000526/21, Project: Economic Growth of Singapore, 1955–79, Date transcribed: 25 February 1985, pp. 134–35. Hereafter OHI.
2. Lim Kim San, Interview, in *Leaders of Singapore*, by Melanie Chew (Singapore: Resource Press, 1996), p. 163.
3. "Biography of Lim Kim San", in *The 1965 Ramon Magsaysay Award for Community Leadership*, <www.rmaf.org.ph/Awardees/Biography/BiographyLimKimSan.htm>.

4. Ibid.
5. Lee Kuan Yew, Speech at the 26th World Congress of the International Chamber of Commerce, 5 October 1978, cited in *Lee Kuan Yew: The Man and His Ideas*, by Han Fook Kwang, Warren Fernandez, and Sumiko Tan (Singapore: Times Editions and The Straits Times Press, 1998), pp. 109–11.
6. Ibid., p. 111.
7. *Straits Times*, Singapore, 21 July 2006.
8. OHI, p. 103.
9. Chew, *Leaders of Singapore*, op. cit., p. 165.
10. Ibid., p. 168.
11. Interview with Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew, the Istana, 16 June 2006.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid.

2

Early Life

Lim Kim San was born into a conservative Peranakan Chinese family in Singapore on 30 November 1916, the eldest son among six children of Lim Choon Huat and Wee Geok Khuan. His ancestry was interesting. When the British colonized Malaya and Singapore, the Peranakan Chinese — local-born and permanently-settled Chinese who spoke Malay or a local language at home and who were culturally more assimilated into Southeast Asian society than the fresh arrivals from China — came to be known as the Straits Chinese. This name reflected the fact of their residence in the Straits Settlements that were formed when Penang, Singapore and Malacca were placed under a single administration in 1826.[1] Not all Straits-born Chinese were Peranakan, but the Peranakan Chinese were born locally.[2] Defined, and defining themselves, as Straits Chinese, the elite of Chinese society possessed certain characteristics: Their families had been living in the region in general, and in the Straits Settlements in particular, for generations; they had become British subjects within the empire; they had generally retained their clan and dialect-group links, but tended to speak English and send their children for an English education to one of the prestigious local private schools; and they ran a network of business organizations that were influential in the settlements.[3]

Lim's family had been out of China for three to four generations. His mother's family came from Bengkalis; her father, uncles and one

of her brothers were *Kapitan China* in Bengkalis.[4] The title of *Kapitan China* (or *Cina*) is believed to have originated in the Portuguese who ruled Malacca after the defeat of the Malacca Sultanate. They continued the sultanate's system of administering foreign traders in Malacca — Indian, Arab, Javanese or Chinese — through a headman that the community chose and who was then confirmed by the ruler. *Kapitan Cina*, who enjoyed the powers of a typical Malay chief, had to keep the peace, administer civil and criminal law, and collect tax occasionally.[5]

Lim, whose parents came from Sumatra, grew up in an extended family living in a Straits Chinese-style bungalow[6] in River Valley Road. Surrounded by durian trees and rubber estates, it had servants' quarters and a stable. His father, who had been educated at Raffles Institution, spoke perfect Malay, wrote Jawi and wrote English very well. His mother, probably schooled in Singapore, read English and Malay in the Roman script. "And I remember very early she used to read all these Chinese stories, you know, these ancient stories like See Jin Quee and the Monkey God, all that, in Romanized Malay."[7]

His father wore a coat and tie, his mother, a *sarong kebaya* (Malay-influenced fusion attire) "all the time", although she would don a Western gown for a photograph at a function. The family spoke Malay, a bit of Hokkien, and English, and ate *Baba* (Peranakan) food. It practised Confucianism, with his mother visiting the temple regularly. There was also a Malay woman who looked after him. "And then when I am sick, she says all sorts of mumbo jumbo, chews betel nut and spits into your face, that kind of thing. Quite superstitious. The family was quite superstitious. My father doesn't subscribe to it."[8]

The Lim family business was in shipping and commodities. As early as at four, his father would bring him to the store and offices in Market Street. "And I can still remember the very strong smell of rubber, sago. And also, the first and last time I ever saw [a] great amount of salt, looks like [a] snowy mountain, was in a storehouse in Tanjong Rhu."[9] His parents "never resented" British rule because they

enjoyed a good standard of living.[10] Indeed, the family owned one of the first cars in Singapore, "a Rover, with hand-brakes outside the car", and a Studebaker.

However, even when he was seven or eight, the child was struck by the arrogance of Dutch officials who confiscated a bottle of mouthwash (because it was supposed to contain alcohol) during a family visit to Sumatra. The Dutch attitude was one of "complete contempt" of the natives and the Chinese. By contrast, he noticed "the politeness of the Indonesians".[11]

Later, he experienced British racism when, during his school days, a bishop denounced some of the boys who had put rouge on their faces and powdered themselves up. The bishop noted acidly that boys in England had natural rosy cheeks, which the Asians were trying to imitate. "That annoyed me a lot. Because you may have rosy cheeks, but if we are in China, in the cold climate, we also have rosy cheeks."[12] He encountered imperious behaviour again when working at Straits Steamship, where "I know that chap who was supervising me has got less brains than I have." "So all this adds up to your resentment against 'orang puteh'."[13]

At home, the young Lim cried a lot, was not very strong and was a difficult boy to look after, but he was a "spoilt brat",[14] being the only boy in a large household with lots of women. He caught malaria and did not go to school till he was seven or eight. The family had moved to Somerset Road by then, and he attended a private school run by a Eurasian woman. This proved to a doubly daunting experience, for while discipline meant getting hit on the knuckles, reality meant getting bullied by the older girls in his mixed class. Overaged for other schools, he then went to Oldham Hall, a school located where Plaza Singapura would be built. "It was a very rickety building, three or four storeys high. And when you climb up the steps, you can feel the whole place shaking, or when the schoolchildren come rushing out."[15] Discipline there, too, was

strict, but a Chinese teacher helped him in mathematics, of which he knew nothing, and he made the grade.

He joined the Anglo Chinese Continuation School and, after his results improved, Anglo Chinese School (ACS). His account of his primary school years unearthed the memory of Mrs Yap Pheng Geck and her son, Eugene. "I don't know what they were teaching. But the moment you are out of order, my God, they really pinch you. You know, they come behind you and pinch here. They pinch you — blue black! Scared of them. I was scared of them."[16] Spelling mistakes meant holding out a hand and getting whacked.

But there were also games to be played, seasonal joys like kite flying and tops, catching fish in the drain behind in Somerset Road, rearing fish, geese, ducks, chickens and fighting cocks. He also had six or seven pelicans that he thought he had tamed and took out, but the lot flew away. "I was quite close to nature, doing all these things."[17] At secondary school in ACS, Latin was a "waste of time".[18] His favourite subject was by now mathematics, and he left school at sixteen with Honours. He wanted to go to Britain to study law.

THE GREAT DEPRESSION

The year that Lim wanted to travel to Britain to study was 1933. It was not a propitious time to seek educational advancement. The Great Depression of 1929–33 had shaken the world. On Black Tuesday, 29 October 1929, the American stock market crashed, triggering the longest and most severe economic collapse in the history of the modern industrial world. The slump spread from the United States to the rest of the world, and the protectionist imposition or raising of tariffs in response curtailed trade further, exacerbating the gloom.

The Depression caused havoc in a Singapore dependent on international trade, particularly the export of Malayan tin and rubber to the American market. Quotas imposed on Chinese immigrants