

LET
THE
PEOPLE
HAVE
HIM

CHIAM SEE TONG: THE EARLY YEARS

LOKE HOE YEONG



Chiam See Tong burst onto the national consciousness in 1976 when he stood as an independent against a cabinet minister from the mighty People's Action Party in the general election. He lost, but his one-man tilt at the ruling party's political machinery had been audacious. Two general elections later in 1984, he would capture the public imagination when he beat a star PAP candidate tipped to be a minister, to become the second opposition MP in Singapore. Chiam went on to represent Potong Pasir for 27 years—the longest stint of any opposition politician. What prompted this mild-mannered teacher-turned-lawyer to enter opposition politics? What was in his grandfather's revolutionary past that might have spurred him on this daunting quest? How did his Anglo-Chinese School education and sporting experiences colour his world view, when challenging the established order? And what did he think of that infamous quip about his average 'O'-Level results? This first of a two-volume biography traces Chiam's life from his birth until 1984 when he finally won a seat in Parliament. It is based on extensive interviews and access to private family documents given to the author.

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PREFACE

IN 1976 IN SINGAPORE, leftist activists and politicians were detained in jail without trial under the Internal Security Act, while the intelligentsia shunned opposition politics for fear of suffering the same fate. Parliament comprised only of members of the ruling People's Action Party (PAP)—there had not been a single opposition Member of Parliament for 10 years. Out of this landscape emerged a dauntless middle-aged lawyer who contested the Minister for National Development in his home constituency of Cairnhill in the general election that year. It was then that the public started to take notice of Chiam See Tong—the man with the loud-hailer attached to his Volkswagen Beetle, who went around telling Singaporeans that the one-party rule was not their destiny.

Chiam cut a different figure from the opposition stalwarts of the day—different from Lee Siew Choh, the leader of Barisan Sosialis since the time the opposition disappeared from the Parliament of Singapore, remembered for his oratory and his delivery of the longest speech in the chambers of Parliament; and different from J. B. Jeyaretnam, the firebrand leader of the Workers' Party who was to break the PAP's monopoly in the Anson by-election of 1981.

Many of Chiam's family and friends who grew up with him never imagined he would become a politician. Some thought him "too good a Christian" for the rough and tumble of politics. Chiam See Tong was a breath of fresh air for an electorate fraught with fear of opposition politics and increasingly depoliticised, and that was precisely why he and his Singapore Democratic Party (SDP) began to attract such a large following in the 1980s.

The story of Chiam See Tong is very much the story of the political opposition in post-independence Singapore—the story of a man who sought to re-conceive and rebuild the opposition after the era of the PAP's struggles with the leftists, during which many alleged Communist activists were detained without trial. Because of those actions of the PAP, and because of Barisan Sosialis' decision to boycott Parliament as a response, the existence of the post-independence political opposition in Singapore has been necessarily a small one within and without Parliament, compared to that in other countries. But Chiam made sure the opposition was once again electable and relevant, in the new era of a more affluent Singapore that was experiencing a new host of issues and its accompanying problems.

On the struggles between the leftists and the PAP in the 1950s and '60s, books have started to come in and public discourse is growing. Former Barisan Sosialis activists have begun to tell their side of the story.¹ Sharper debates on that era of Singapore's history have also belatedly begun.² But while they were brave people who played a role in shaping Singapore's history, it has to be admitted that the Barisan Sosialis activists and their political platform were borne of a different era that has little relevance to politics today—a situation that is largely by design of the PAP government, through the incarceration of those people under the Internal Security Act, and because of the momentous

ideological shift towards neo-liberalism of a PAP government which had completely monopolised Parliament by 1970.

There have not been many books on the story of the opposition in post-independent Singapore, much less a biography of one of its seminal figures. The academic literature has long been rich on this topic, but its reach certainly cannot be compared to that which the PAP government has had in the popular consciousness of the country. In this era of social media, discussions about the opposition have been able to flourish more freely, but are they are still a motley collection of anecdotes rather than a complete story.

The result of this is a gap in popular consciousness in what went on in opposition politics in Singapore in between—almost like a dark age. This has raised the puzzle that academics and general observers alike have sought to answer—why has the opposition in Singapore been such a small force for so long? When I was at the London School of Economics, my lecturer in constitutional theory once told me he saw the Singapore case as a "curious example of the perfect functioning of the Leviathan," a reference to Thomas Hobbes' conceptualisation of the social contract in which the people institute a "commonwealth" by forfeiting their liberties, to give the sovereign the right to act on their behalf. To detractors of Singapore's political system, that is probably the most benign way to describe authoritarianism. But I think he got quite close to the core of the question without actually studying Singapore in depth.

Singapore in the 1970s was not like the other Asian developmental states of Park Chung-hee's South Korea or Chiang Kai-shek's Republic of China/Taiwan. Those were military dictatorships that were more brutal than the soft authoritarianism practised in Singapore. To lump them all into one basket for easy analysis—as was often the case when

it was fashionable to speak of the “Asian tigers” in one breath—would be to gloss over the real issues facing Singaporeans in the 1970s and ’80s.

There was, as the scholars have expounded on, a very real “social compact” between the PAP government and the citizens of Singapore—the notion that the people sacrificed their political and civil liberties while conferring on the government considerable latitude in how it sought to deliver the economic goods. It was a compact that was rapidly rupturing by the early 1980s. The economic transformation enacted then was sold by the PAP as a painful but necessary step for the economy of Singapore to develop further and, in the PAP’s narrative, survive in the midst of vulnerability. Consensus in the Cabinet also appeared to wear down gradually, once the “Communist threat” of the 1960s was gone and when the PAP government was no longer operating in crisis mode. Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew shut down the Chinese-language Nanyang University, against the advice of almost his whole Cabinet, a move that continues to invoke deep-seated bitterness to this day. In the same vein, he pushed ahead with the controversial Graduate Mothers Scheme, in which students would be accorded discriminatory privileges in school according to the education level of their mothers, in the name of producing more intelligent offspring for the nation. The Howe Yoon Chong Report’s proposal to raise the withdrawal age for retirement savings in the Central Provident Fund (CPF) from 55 to 65 was so deeply unpopular that even the other Cabinet Ministers tried to distance themselves from the report as much as possible, as if in embarrassment. In the rank and file of the PAP, the old guard began to be disillusioned with a party leadership more intent on parachuting technocratic elites into government, and who were pursuing more neo-liberal economic policies. Perhaps it might be said that the old era of the PAP was over when Goh Keng

Swee—widely lauded as the chief architect of Singapore’s economic success—gave notice to the prime minister that he was leaving office, a few months before the 1984 general election. He could not be persuaded to stay.³

All this came to a head at the 1984 general election—the first of many elections that were described as “watershed”—when Chiam See Tong was elected to Parliament, and when J. B. Jeyaretnam was returned in Anson. In most countries, the election of just two opposition members would be written off as a blip in the ruling party’s stranglehold in Parliament. But in Singapore in 1984, it signalled that something truly landmark was happening and the political ground was shifting irreversibly. Take just for instance the issue of CPF retirement savings, which took centre stage during that election campaign, and in particular the contest for Potong Pasir which, until then, was the seat of the Health Minister who proposed raising the CPF withdrawal age. At this time of writing in 2014, the issue of the CPF has once again risen to the top of the political agenda, uncannily reminiscent of the debates of 1984. The state of policy and political debates in Singapore today trace their origins to the run-up to that general election 30 years ago.

Telling the story of Chiam See Tong is also important for more than academic enquiry, or for understanding the genesis of political and policy discourses in Singapore today.

National Education, as implemented most prominently through the history and “social studies” syllabus taught in schools, was launched in 1997. It was apparently conceived in response to the supposed phenomenon of youths being ignorant and apathetic about the history of Singapore’s merger with Malaysia, when Lee Kuan Yew raised such

a possibility again in 1996. National Education taps on the PAP government's official narrative that, for historian Thum Ping Tjin, the "1950s and '60s are characterised as a turbulent and unstable time," and in "portraying this period as being a time that was dangerous, rife with subversion, and when Singapore teetered on the brink of communism, it links the liberal ideas of justice and democracy with chaos and instability."⁴ The Ministry of Education-approved social studies textbooks teach secondary school students that their role as citizens in the governance of Singapore should be to "voice their opinions directly to the ministers, either through the Meet-the-People sessions or through email," and to use "communication channels" like the government-run Feedback Unit (now known as "REACH") and in the letters to the *Straits Times*.⁵ Nowhere is the existence of political parties in Singapore mentioned, nor even the role that civil society could conceivably play.

Such methods of history and "social studies" education are fundamentally at odds with the aims of a country that wants to be a globalised hub for information and communications technology. Singapore also cannot, like what was being envisioned for National Education back in 1997,⁶ build up and glorify a national founding myth like the American story that starts with George Washington, the Declaration of Independence, and drafting of the US Constitution. It is no longer tenable nor realistic to do so in this day and age, whatever the merits may be. Singapore also does so at its own peril, when Singaporeans see a double standard in operation—its people are taught the government-approved version of history in the classroom, while the rest of the world discusses and debates a different version of their country's history. At best, it breeds cynicism and contempt. At worst, it nurses an unhealthy national psyche. In 1997, the PAP government

argued for National Education to "foster in our young a sense of identity, pride and self-respect as Singaporeans" and "strengthen their emotional attachment to the nation."⁷ Fifteen years later, the same government began to chastise Singaporeans for "xenophobia."⁸

With this biography, I do not pretend to have come up with a grand new alternative narrative of the political history of Singapore—a very tempting prospect given the zeal surrounding the lead-up to Singapore's golden jubilee next year. But it is contrived narratives in the name of "nation-building" that we must seek to eschew. Neither does this book set out with a revisionist agenda. I had been careful that the snippets of Singapore's political history—which are peppered throughout the book—were presented as factual and even as colourless as possible, sufficient just to set the context for Chiam's own story to play out. When Chiam comes into the political fray in 1976, presenting those snippets of history as detached facts is of course out of the question, given that Chiam's story merges with Singapore's political story at that point. Instead, I provide discussions of some of the pressing policy issues of the early 1980s facing Singaporeans, on housing and CPF issues for example, to let readers make up their own minds about what Chiam and the SDP were seeking to accomplish.

This book is really the story of the extraordinary life of a man who could truly relate to everyone as an ordinary man. It is a human story—of a man who doggedly pursued what he believed in; who faced the ups and downs, disappointments and discouragement in the face of a David and Goliath battle; who stood to suffer the same fate that befell his political predecessors—that of incarceration without trial. Those who discount his achievements on the landscape of politics in Singapore are the ones, I think, who still fail to grasp the ramifications surrounding Lee Kuan Yew's politicisation of Chiam's

‘O’-Level school results. Chiam See Tong bravely took up opposition politics not because he was the most grandiloquent of politicians, nor that he had all the policy solutions to the woes of the people ready to be implemented—but rather because no one else was brave enough to do it.

The genesis of this biography, however, is humbler. In the aftermath of the 2011 general election, amid talk of the changes in Singapore’s political scene, I bemoaned that there wasn’t even a biography of Chiam See Tong. My percipient friend Andrew Loh picked up on it, and immediately arranged for me to meet Chiam and his wife Lina to broach the idea of writing that missing biography. The purpose was not to pave the way for an “authorised,” “official” biography—everyone involved in the genesis of the biography agreed that there was nothing to be gained from the production of such an authorised tome, precisely since our point was to present a different side to the mainstream narrative of Singapore’s political history. But the involvement of Chiam in the project was critical, beyond just the customary interviews that the biographer is obliged to conduct with his subject. My assessment was that a great deal of material would only be made available to me if I had the confidence of my subject, given how guarded opposition politicians in Singapore have had to be for decades. Chiam and Lina were also shown the manuscript, but they did not make any changes to it, providing only clarifications and additional points.

At that initial meeting with Chiam, I found him to be even more unassuming and approachable than I had imagined. I knew that he was a people person, but I finally understood what people meant whenever they said, “Chiam is one of us.” Over that dinner meeting at a Peranakan heritage restaurant, Chiam glanced up at the old posters

from the 1970s that adorned the walls as paraphernalia—especially the posters of the controversial “Stop at Two” government family planning campaign. Seen in the context of the acrimonious debates of the day over the government’s liberal immigration policy as the solution to Singapore’s declining population, and in how the government almost seemed to be reproaching Singaporeans for not procreating, we all laughed. It didn’t matter that the defence for “Stop at Two” was that it “had nothing to do” with Singapore’s current ageing population woes and low fertility rate⁹—the antediluvian policies of eugenics and sterilisation carried out in the 1970s have not been forgotten. Chiam gave a quiet, bemused look, which almost seemed to say, “I told you so.” The people person is also very much an elder statesman.

LOKE HOE YEONG

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IT WAS ALMOST 8PM. Chiam See Tong got into the car with William Lau at the wheel and Abdul Rahim Valibhoy at the back.¹ They headed for Westlake Secondary School, the counting centre for the constituency of Potong Pasir. Singapore was in the midst of a general election. It was polling day and the polling stations were about to close any minute.

Earlier in the day, Chiam was making his rounds at the polling stations in Potong Pasir, which he was contesting as a candidate. Accompanied by his campaign agents William and Rahim, as well as several other members and volunteers of the SDP, he also made his final rounds of the coffee shops in the constituency, greeting the residents there and canvassing for their support before they were to cast their ballots.

They had a well-prepared strategy for that general election, and all they needed to do was to stick to it. They understood the nature of the discontent among the voters better than the PAP government did. In Potong Pasir, there was widespread unhappiness surrounding the policy of rehousing farmers from villages to the newly-built blocks of Housing Development Board (HDB) flats. Some farmers

also came from surrounding neighbourhoods like Peck San Theng, today's Bishan. It was part of a national plan to improve the state of housing—a well-intentioned piece of policy, but for the farmers, the problems far outweighed the benefits. The compensation for their farming businesses was highly unsatisfactory, and they faced difficulties in adjusting to their new livelihoods away from farming. They were aggrieved at the authorities for being nonchalant about their plight and, above all, for their smug “government-knows-best” attitude.²

Chiam and his team were far from being strangers to the residents of Potong Pasir. They were like friends of the residents who frequently dropped by to visit, if only to hear their personal stories of how they were getting by. It was not the first time Chiam was contesting Potong Pasir. He had previously done so at the 1980 general election and the 1979 by-election for the constituency. Ever since those earlier elections, he had been “walking the ground” with his SDP team, meeting and chatting with the residents of Potong Pasir at coffee shops. They also handed out copies of their party newsletter, which was the pride of the SDP members who relished their time in its sleek production. Increasingly over the years, Chiam was visiting Potong Pasir every week.

Chiam was a candidate of an *opposition* party, and one who was widely touted as the candidate with a very good chance of winning. For 18 years, no constituency in Singapore had elected candidates of any political party aside from the ruling PAP at general elections. So for almost two decades, only members of one political party entered and sat in the chamber of Parliament—until the by-election in Anson constituency in 1981, which saw the victory of Workers' Party leader Joshua Benjamin Jeyaretnam, more popularly known as JBJ. It was a breakthrough for opposition

politics in Singapore. Some sceptics thought it was a freak result, especially since the margin of victory was relatively narrow. Others pointed to widespread discontent in the constituency over a housing resettlement issue. Nevertheless, a win for an opposition candidate in Singapore was a political milestone.

It remained to be seen if that result would be repeated in the 1984 general election. Nationally there was palpable resentment at the recent policies of the PAP government, such as the Graduate Mothers Scheme. Women with university degrees were given incentives to have three or more children, such as receiving preferential treatment in school admission for their children. Ironically, the ones who were most incensed were the women for whom the scheme was supposed to benefit—they were insulted by the idea that the government thought they could be persuaded to bear children just because of some perks. The proposal to delay the age for Singaporeans to withdraw their retirement savings in the CPF from 55 to 60, known as the Howe Yoon Chong Report after the then Minister for Health, drew even more fire.

What Chiam See Tong wanted to do was to break the PAP's monopoly in Parliament, so that policies like this could be given a fairer and more robust debate. It was also imperative that Chiam present his party's election candidates as credible opposition candidates. Credibility was a key issue here, because the ruling party frequently portrayed opposition candidates as “jesters,” and even “bicycle thieves”³—a label owing to one embarrassing but true case. Those considered more credible probably felt there was too much at stake in entering political battles, especially at a time of a prevailing climate of fear of challenging the ruling party. Cognisant of this, one of Chiam's favourite slogans at his 1984 rally speeches was “Don't be

afraid—be brave!” At one such airing, he was answered by a young person in the crowd: “Don’t worry, Mr Chiam, I am brave, but my father is afraid!”⁴ This was met with raucous laughter among the packed crowds of avid listeners standing in the open fields for hours at his rallies.

All eyes of the nation were focused on the constituencies of Anson and Potong Pasir at the 1984 general election. Coffeeshop sentiment was that Chiam stood a very good chance of winning Potong Pasir, as he became gradually better known as a credible opposition politician over the years.⁵ He first made news as the man who had the audacity in 1976 to contest the constituency of Cairnhill which was then held by a sitting Cabinet Minister, Lim Kim San. Chiam lost that first election, but he shaved off the minister’s winning majority by almost 13 percentage points. Chiam gradually organised his group of volunteers and supporters into a political party that was the SDP.

So he was hardly new to some of the very public attacks he would receive during the election campaign that year. A few days before Polling Day, Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, canvassing on behalf of the PAP’s Potong Pasir candidate who was a President’s Scholar, addressed a lunchtime audience at Fullerton Square, in the Central Business District. “Who is this Chiam See Tong? We looked up his record—he has only six credits in his school certificate.”⁶

Chiam was unruffled, though he was slightly bewildered as to how the prime minister managed to get hold of his school results from 30 years back. It was unsettling how that became a matter for public revelation, but then there was a glaring mistake—it was not six ‘O’-Level credits that he had got, but seven. Indeed, the prime minister’s press secretary called the media the following day to correct

the error, and offered an apology to Chiam.⁷ If anything, Chiam was mildly amused at the bungled attempt to discredit him.

As Chiam arrived at Westlake Secondary School with his two companions at 8.20pm, a man reached out to him from the crowd of supporters gathered there. He gave Chiam a pat on his shoulder, saying, “Don’t worry, Mr Chiam, you’re in Parliament already.”⁸

Inside the counting hall, they caught sight of Mah Bow Tan, the PAP candidate, across the tables of counting officers sorting the ballots. There, amid the ruffling of ballot papers, the two candidates exchanged glances and silently acknowledged each other’s presence. The atmosphere in the room was tense, particularly as results for Potong Pasir were being closely watched nationally.⁹

Once the contents of the ballot boxes had been emptied onto the large tables, the counting officers would start separating the ballot papers into two lots, based on the choice of candidate expressed that had been on it with a cross. This would be followed by the bundling together of the ballot papers into stacks of a hundred for the purposes of counting.

Some of the piles of ballot paper in Chiam’s favour were higher than Mah’s. This quietly added to William and Rahim’s sense of hopeful anticipation. But those were from the ballot boxes of just one of the four polling stations for the constituency. William signalled to Chiam and Rahim to head for the next table.

Lina, Chiam’s wife, was in the crowd of SDP supporters in the field outside the Westlake Secondary School counting centre. The PAP supporters were assembled in the adjoining field. The media was

also present in considerable strength to cover the latest of the keenly fought Potong Pasir contest.

At about 9.30pm, an SDP supporter in the crowd started circulating that he had heard from a second-hand source that Chiam See Tong had already won. One by one, his anxious fellow supporters started to probe him as to the veracity of that information. He related that a friend of his had received a call from one of Chiam's campaign assistants, who had made the call from a phone booth at the counting centre. Purportedly, the counting process had already been completed and the result was in Chiam's favour. It was even said that Lee Siew Choh and his colleagues from Barisan Sosialis, another opposition party, had leaked to reporters that Chiam was "comfortably ahead" in the vote count for Potong Pasir.¹⁰ However, this was soon negated by conflicting information from another source in the crowd that Mah Bow Tan had won a narrow victory over Chiam. Some flustered SDP supporters began to speculate that it was an unfounded rumour circulated by someone from the opposite camp. Yet others rationalised that the contradictory pieces of information may both have been true—they were just results fed in from different polling stations in the constituency. The overall tallied result from Potong Pasir's four polling stations was probably yet to be confirmed.¹¹

It had been a few hours since Lina last saw her husband. He seemed to have largely maintained his cheerful and easy-going disposition despite the tremendous pressures, both physical and psychological, that he had been subjected to all week. A few minutes before 8pm, as he headed for the car that would take him to observe the vote counting process at the first counting centre, Lina gave "Dearie" a hug and wished him all the best. Much had transpired

since the afternoon eight years earlier, when he had come home and told her that he had decided to enter politics and had nominated himself as the candidate for the Cairnhill constituency. She had been surprised at the abruptness of his decision, but had nevertheless wholeheartedly thrown her support behind him. Thereafter, she had been involved in every aspect of his campaigns, from sewing the SDP banners and flags with fellow party members, to hanging them up on the streets, and even going on walkabouts to canvass for the support of Potong Pasir residents.

The crowd of SDP supporters grew restless again when Ong Teng Cheong, the PAP chairman and Cabinet Minister, was spotted at the counting centre just after 10pm. Ong's own seat was uncontested, hence he had been campaigning with Mah Bow Tan in Potong Pasir. Reporters tried to speak to him as he was leaving the counting centre, but he walked on briskly, saying, "No comment." He wore a thin smile, and one reporter felt that Ong was masking a pained expression.¹² Ong had cancelled a press conference that was scheduled to be held at the counting centre, and said he was going off to join the prime minister for a combined press conference for the PAP. It looked like something was not going as planned. "That confirms it," one reporter murmured. "They've lost Potong Pasir."¹³

Some time after 1.30am, the figure of the Returning Officer emerged from the balcony of Westlake Secondary School. He held up his folder and announced:

Parliamentary general election 1984. Result for the electoral division of Potong Pasir. Mah Bow Tan, the People's Action Party, 6,674 votes. Chiam See Tong, the Singapore

Democratic Party, 10,128 votes... I declare Chiam See Tong of the Singapore Democratic Party as the candidate elected for the electoral division of Potong Pasir.¹⁴

The crowd erupted into deafening roars and cheers. The voice of the Returning Officer, though amplified, was already drowned by deafening cheers the moment he read out the number of votes cast for Chiam. That was all that the crowd wanted to hear.

The exhilaration of the SDP crowd of supporters grew precipitously as Chiam See Tong, already garlanded, took to the microphone on the balcony. William and Rahim were standing beside him, along with a few other SDP members, all beaming. Below the balcony, the SDP supporters unfurled their party flags and the field turned into a sea of red. As Chiam spoke, he stretched his arms forward, as if to hush his supporters:¹⁵

The victory is not the achievement of one person. It is a result of a good team I have. I am fortunate to have a very capable and hardworking team without whom I would not have succeeded. I thank every member of the team.¹⁶

I will make Potong Pasir a model constituency for Singapore.¹⁷

But all that could be heard from the field below were mostly intermittent “thank yous” from him. The crowd of SDP supporters was so jubilant that their cheering and chanting of Chiam’s name was simply uncontrollable.

Potong Pasir had elected an opposition politician to Parliament with 60.3 per cent of the votes.

The prime minister called a press conference at the Singapore Conference Hall that lasted past 4am.¹⁸ The PAP had lost two constituencies, Potong Pasir and Anson, to the opposition—the first time they had lost *any* constituency at a general election since 1963. And the overall popular vote cast for the PAP that night saw a 12.8 percentage point swing against it from the previous general election. The prime minister said:

There was a bigger and broader shift than in 1980. In percentage terms, the PAP has gone down from 75.5 per cent to 62.9... The drop is reflected in the gains, first of the SDP. Across four constituencies, they scored 45.15 per cent...

The results of the election show a highly sophisticated electorate. They wanted a PAP government, they were sure they had one, they wanted to put pressure on the PAP. They wanted people in Parliament to get us to either go slower—if they don’t like us to go as fast—or to be more generous in our policies, less austere and so on.¹⁹

At the main counting centre in Potong Pasir, the defeated PAP candidate Mah Bow Tan told reporters: “I can’t explain the wide margin except to say that it was a nation-wide phenomenon. A number of issues took their toll.”²⁰

In the field outside the counting centre, four supporters had “chaired” Chiam—hoisting him up on their arms—as the jubilant crowd swooned around him, accompanied by the incessant chants of “Chiam See Tong! Chiam See Tong!” He was taken on an impromptu victory parade through the constituency. Chiam waved at everyone

that caught his eye, but he was also trying to ask William and Rahim below him, “Where is Lina? Has anyone seen Lina?”²¹

Lina was at a different spot in the field. She was surrounded by reporters. One of them asked, “How are you going to celebrate Mr Chiam’s win? Why are you not with your husband?”

Lina smiled. She said, “Let the people have him!”²²

OUT OF THE LAST DYNASTY

CHIAM SEE TONG was born on 12 March 1935, at 462 Orchard Road, the rented shophouse that served temporarily as the home of his parents Chiam Heng Hong and Lily Lim in Singapore. Today, the site of that shophouse is occupied by Delfi Orchard, a mall in the main shopping belt of Singapore. The Chiams had had their first child, Joon Tong, two years earlier. A third son, Tee Tong, was born in 1942.

The name See Tong roughly translates from Teochew Chinese as “timely” or “punctual”. It had been given to him by his paternal grandfather, Chiam Seng Poh, perhaps as a reflection of the methodical instincts of See Tong’s father, Heng Hong, a merchant who worked at Lianqui Trading. Run by his father-in-law, the merchant Lim Liang Quee, the prosperous trading firm was a major exporter of rubber and pineapple products and other commodities to Britain. Heng Hong later started his own trading firm at Rodney House, 10 Battery Road, and named it the Chiam Trading Company. Having made a little fortune through the lucrative trade with Europe, it placed the Chiam family in the upper middle class stratum of society then.

Shortly after Chiam See Tong became a Member of Parliament after the 1984 general election, his father revealed to him that

See Tong's grandfather, Chiam Seng Poh, had been involved as a revolutionary back in China, seeking to overthrow the Qing Dynasty. "I thought he was just speculating where my interest in politics came from," Chiam See Tong said.¹ He has generally been dismissive of the tales of his grandfather's revolutionary exploits, which he thinks have been romanticised.

During his childhood, his grandfather, Chiam Seng Poh, was known to him as an avid tea drinker who relished writing Chinese calligraphy and poetry for leisure. He often gave out his calligraphic works as gifts, or for no payment other than bags of sugar or *ang pows*—the recipients were usually villagers and small-time business owners in the Bukit Timah area where Seng Poh lived, who wanted a couplet to decorate their homes and shops, but could ill afford one. He even took on a few calligraphy students. All this stemmed from Seng Poh's background as a scholar who had sat for the imperial examinations in China. He was also said to have studied medicine at some point of time. Young See Tong could never have imagined his genteel grandfather as a revolutionary activist. Seng Poh's wife, however, found her husband's cultural and intellectual pursuits sometimes frivolous, especially since she had the laborious task of rearing chicken and pigs as the family's source of livelihood.

Chiam Heng Hong was born in 1902 in Swatow, in eastern Canton province,² the homeland of the Teochew people in China. One night in Swatow when Heng Hong was just a child, Seng Poh handed him a revolver, which must have astonished the boy. He told Heng Hong to protect the family while he went out to meet with the other revolutionaries. There had been a number of uprisings in that part of southern China, starting with the Huanggang Uprising of May 1907 that was launched in the neighbouring city

of Chiuchow.³ That night, Seng Poh was most likely heading for one of those uprisings organised by the various societies of the anti-Qing resistance movement. There were many other uprisings across China during the twilight years of the Qing Dynasty, but it was not until the Wuchang Uprising of October 1911 that it spiralled into a full-blown revolution. That eventually brought the Great Qing Empire to its knees. All previous uprisings were brutally suppressed, and many revolutionaries were summarily executed by the Qing forces. Seng Poh managed to escape from that failed putsch, and took his family to Muar, Malaya, where they sought refuge in a thriving Teochew community.

Chiam Seng Poh was not only a fervent Chinese revolutionary; he was also a pious Christian. His family had been converted to the Christian faith through the Presbyterian church established in Swatow in the 19th century by the English Presbyterian Mission from London. Among the Chinese populace, the Christian missionaries were generally not well liked, as they were associated with the Western countries that committed acts of aggression on Chinese soil. The two Opium Wars of the 19th century were just some of the many markers of China's century of humiliation.

Yet many of the Western missionaries were in fact opposed to the imperialistic opium trade perpetuated by their own countries, and actively so. They established hospitals and clinics—some of which offered treatment for opium addiction—as well as schools, universities and many charitable organisations. The spirit of social action of the missionaries must have inspired many of the early Chinese Christians to do their bit to improve the lot of their countrymen. For some, like the well-known Sun Yat-Sen, and Charlie Soong, the father of the famous Soong sisters, that meant that to change China for the better,

a revolution was needed to end thousands of years of imperialistic feudal rule.

During his stay in Muar, Seng Poh became a pastor and started a church that survives to this day. Around 1920, he took his family to the bustling trading city of Singapore to settle for good, to seek better prospects for his children. In so doing, he did what some other enterprising Presbyterian Teochew families from Swatow did, such as the family of Tang Choon Keng, more popularly known as C. K. Tang. At one point, the Tang family lived in the vicinity of the Orchard Road shophouse where Chiam See Tong was born. Later in the 1950s, C. K. Tang would purchase a nearby plot of land by the junction of Orchard Road and Scotts Road, where he built the department store that still bears his name.

After settling in Singapore, Seng Poh began to serve as a pastor and church elder at two Teochew-speaking Presbyterian churches—Glory Presbyterian Church at Bukit Timah, near his residence, and Life Church at Prinsep Street, better known as *Say Mia Tng* (literally “Life Church” in Teochew). Across the street from Life Church was the English-speaking Straits Chinese Presbyterian Church, which acquired a new landmark building designed by the renowned architectural firm Swan and Maclaren in 1930. Later it was renamed Prinsep Street Presbyterian Church, and has been gazetted as a national monument.

Chiam Heng Hong started to work for Lianqui Trading after completing his Junior Cambridge Certificate at the Anglo-Chinese School (ACS). He sacrificed a university education as his family had insufficient money, helping instead to save up to send his younger brother Jer Leng to dental school. While Chiam Seng Poh could lay claim to having been a revolutionary, Heng Hong’s natural instinct

was to have nothing to do with politics, which was more in tune with the sentiments of the majority of the overseas Chinese who had settled in Malaya. They were tired of the political upheavals back in China, which was their primary reason for migrating to Malaya in the first place. Commerce was Heng Hong’s milieu. He was very thrifty, to the extent that some of his relatives thought him miserly. The reason for the high-pitched, wheezing voice which he developed in later years, as the story went, was that he once caught pneumonia from spending the cold night on a train station bench in England—because he wanted to save money on a hotel room while on a business trip.⁴ However, he was generous with his money whenever he felt that people genuinely needed help. “My brothers and I were taught to always help the needy,” See Tong said.⁵

Heng Hong proved to be such a capable hand that he was soon promoted to become of Lim’s four lieutenants in his business. Before long, Lim felt that Chiam was stellar enough to become his son-in-law, and decided for the eldest of his six daughters, Lily, to be betrothed to the young man. Born in 1909, Lily was educated at the Methodist Girls’ School, the sister school of ACS that Heng Hong attended.

In arranging for Lily to be betrothed to Heng Hong, it was said that Lim was partly driven by the premature death of his wife, Tan Swee Eng, in 1928; she was a woman reputed to have had an aristocratic Bugis lineage. Given his traditionalist mindset, he felt that his daughters had to be “married off” for them to receive the best possible care in the absence of their mother. However, Lily might have been betrothed at that young age anyway, as was the custom of the day.

While the Chiams were immigrants from China, the Singapore-born Lim Liang Quee was so anglicised in his ways of life that he gave his daughters only Western names, and no Chinese ones—Lily, Juliet,

Jenny, Eileen, Mabel and Pearl. Only his eldest child, Arthur, was given a Chinese name—Siew Jin—in addition to his Western name. Another son, David, had no Chinese name, like his sisters.

Lim Liang Quee was part of the Straits Chinese elite, and socialised frequently with the community leaders of Singapore. Arthur's wedding in 1930 was a highlight of the social calendar in Singapore, attended by the then Governor of the Straits Settlements, Sir Cecil Clementi. One of Lim's daughters, Mabel, was married to Kwa Soon Siew, a son of the banker Kwa Siew Tee. One of Kwa seniors' daughters was the Cambridge-educated lawyer Geok Choo, who married her classmate Harry Lee Kuan Yew; Lee was to become the first prime minister of Singapore.

Lim counted among his friends the lawyer Sir Song Ong Siang, the first Malayan Chinese to be knighted by the British monarch; Lim Boon Keng, the doctor and social reformist; and Lim Nee Soon, the pineapple and rubber plantation owner, after whom the Singapore district of Yishun was named. While the “King's Chinese” —as these men proudly identified themselves, being British subjects in Singapore—were Peranakans, Lim Liang Quee himself was not known to have any Peranakan lineage. Like them, Lim also contributed towards philanthropic efforts such as in the building of the new premises of Singapore Chinese Girls' School in their Emerald Hill neighbourhood, the school which Song Ong Siang and Lim Boon Keng co-founded.

When Lim passed away in July 1935, just months after See Tong's birth, his funeral at Bidadari Cemetery was attended by luminaries of the day.

Chiam Heng Hong did well in his trading job, such that he managed to move into a new home at 28 Saunders Road, among a row of terrace houses in the more exclusive Emerald Hill neighbourhood in the Orchard Road area. This move took place shortly after See Tong's birth. The Chiam's Saunders Road home lay adjacent to Lim Liang Quee's mansion at 6 Hullet Road, which had by then been bequeathed to his elder son Arthur. Through their association with the Lims and the other elite merchant families, the Chiams gradually became similarly anglicised in their ways of life. English became the main language used at home, while Teochew was still spoken by Heng Hong and his parents.

Although they were brought up as Christians, Chiam Heng Hong's children were not officially given Christian names. Nonetheless, See Tong was somehow associated with the name Alexander at various points of his childhood and youth, after the ancient Macedonian warrior king Alexander the Great. Friends sometimes called him Alex as a nickname. But when they did so, it was in jest, because the humble and kind-hearted See Tong could not have been more different from his valiant Macedonian namesake.

Church life was a major part of the Chiam and Lim families. Presbyterian churches are governed by councils of lay leaders called elders and deacons—it was in this capacity that some of the Lim sisters, Chiam Heng Hong, and later Chiam Joon Tong, served. Chiam Seng Poh's wife, who became blind in later life, was known to be a charismatic, fiery Teochew preacher at Glory Presbyterian Church.

Chiam See Tong's mother, Lily, helped to found the 7th Singapore Company of the Girls' Life Brigade at Prinsep Street Presbyterian Church in the 1950s. It was later renamed the Girls' Brigade. Lily was fully devoted to that role, except that it took a bit of effort to

convince her to occasionally trade in her resplendent cheongsam, her Sunday best, for the drab uniform. She was very generous with her time and money, and hosted many parties for the boys and girls from the church at her home. Her sons Joon Tong and See Tong earned the rank of corporal in the 1st Boys' Brigade Company, which was also established at the church.

Tea with Chiam See Tong's five aunts after church on Sunday afternoons was a family institution, over which conversations would often last until dinner. The tea was generously provided, since the Lianqui Trading Company also traded in tea leaves. Lily was the quietest of the Lim sisters. She was a meek and kind-hearted woman, but also very much the nurturing big sister who would sort out disagreements among family members during those Sunday tea sessions. She inculcated the virtues of humility and kindness in her sons, especially the Christian doctrine of turning the other cheek. Even when they grew up, the Chiam brothers would never bear grudges, always smiling off any insults directed at them.

In a way, Lily was the antithesis of the austere and reserved Heng Hong. Not that he was a strict disciplinarian—he and Lily largely left their sons to their own devices, unless they seriously misbehaved. Her favourite piece of music was George Frideric Handel's well-known "Largo," from the British Baroque composer's opera *Serse*. No other piece of music reflected Lily's temperament and personality better than "Largo" and its reposeful quality. Her son Joon Tong often played it on the piano for her.

At home, young See Tong was always helping his mother in the kitchen doing dishes, going grocery shopping, and running errands. In those days, boys were never expected to help out in domestic chores. His five aunts gushed over their nephew whom they thought

was like a daughter to Lily. See Tong was their favourite boy also because he reminded the aunts very much of their sister Lily's kindness and helpfulness.

Lily was greatly loved by everyone at church. Long after she suffered a stroke and passed away prematurely at the age of 57, church members would still reminisce about the woman they had called their best friend.



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Back cover photo: The campaign poster for the 1984 general election which saw Chiam See Tong enter Parliament.



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CALUN S.D.P. UNTUK POTONG PASIR
S.D.P. CANDIDATE FOR POTONG PASIR



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CHIAM SEE TONG

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