



MY NANTAH STORY

**The Rise and Demise of
the People's University**

TAN KOK CHIANG

My Nantah Story: The Rise and Demise of the People's University
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ISBN 978-981-11-4307-6

Published under the imprint Ethos Books
by Pagesetters Services Pte Ltd
#06-131 Midview City
28 Sin Ming Lane
Singapore 573972
www.ethosbooks.com.sg
www.facebook.com/ethosbooks

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Cover design by Bayu Prasetyo Nugroho
Back cover photo of original Nantah Arch Gate, 2017 by Fong Hoe Fang
Page design by Maliah Zubir
Layout and book design by Word Image Pte Ltd
Printed by Markono Print Media Pte Ltd, Singapore

1 2 3 4 5 6 21 20 19 18 17

First published under this imprint in 2017

Typefaces: Din; Minion Pro; Cairo
Material: 70gsm Prima Antique Cream Bulk 2.0

National Library Board, Singapore Cataloguing in Publication Data

Name(s): Tan, Kok-Chiang.
Title: My Nantah story : the rise and demise of the people's university / Tan Kok Chiang.
Description: Singapore : Ethos Books, 2017.
Identifier(s): OCN 995068448 | ISBN 978-981-11-4307-6 (paperback)
Subject(s): LCSH: Nanyang University--History. | Nanyang University--Alumni and alumnae. | Chinese language--Study and teaching (Higher)--Singapore--History. | Education, Higher--Political aspects--Singapore. | Universities and colleges--Singapore--History.
Classification: DDC 378.5951--dc23

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TAN KOK CHIANG



Dedicated to my father
Tan Chiang Sai
who sent me to Nantah
thus opening for this Old Rafflesian
a Brave New World

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FOREWORD BY SYED HUSIN ALI

I REMEMBER WHEN I was in second year at the University of Malaya, whose Faculty of Arts was then located at Bukit Timah, Singapore, I witnessed from my hostel huge traffic congestion along Bukit Timah Road and Dunearn Road. All vehicles were almost at standstill; they were inching their way to Jurong, where the Inauguration Ceremony of Nanyang University (or Nantah) was scheduled to begin at 4 pm, on March 30, 1958.

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Tan Kok Chiang in his book *My Nantah Story: The Rise and Demise of the People's University*, describes this memorable event by quoting quite extensively from Pan Kuo Chu, who was directly responsible for organising the occasion, and academic Yao Souchou. According to Yao, the Governor of Singapore, Sir William Goode, who was to officiate the ceremony, arrived two hours late and only “unveiled the commemorative plaque at seven in the evening”.

With the Governor gracing the occasion, it would appear that Nanyang University was fully supported by the British colonial government. This was not so, especially at the beginning. As Kok Chiang so amply and clearly describes in his book, the university faced many obstacles, right from the day it was conceived. It is the detailed description of these obstacles and persecution that forms almost his entire book. Kok Chiang may not consider himself to have completed a full and comprehensive story of Nanyang University, but what he has written covers an important and also a major aspect of Nantah's history.

After World War II, some Chinese community leaders in Singapore had already begun discussing the need to establish a private university using Chinese as the medium of instruction. In 1950, the Hokkien Association bought a piece of land in Jurong on which to build a university that many dreamed of. About a year later,

a well-known multi-millionaire businessman, Tan Lark Sye, publicly proposed that a university be built. He started the ball rolling by giving a large donation and called upon the Chinese community to donate. Rich and poor, from business tycoons to rickshaw pullers, not only from Singapore but also Malaya and other parts of Southeast Asia, responded generously.

By quoting very extensively from statements and speeches made by Tan Lark Sye, who became the founding chairman of Nanyang University, Kok Chiang explains elaborately the rationale for forming the university. Firstly, it was to be an apex of the Chinese education system, which has long been sustained with private funds from the Chinese community, and to enable those mainly from the Chinese secondary schools who qualified to continue their education at university level. Secondly, it was to help preserve the Chinese language and culture that the Chinese have always been proud of but which was facing a serious challenge from the dominant colonial English language and culture.

Nanyang University was formed under the Company Act and enrolled its first batch of students in 1956. It was popularly upheld as a true people's university. Therefore, it was no surprise that thousands wanted to attend its inauguration, thus causing the massive traffic congestion mentioned above. But, unfortunately, even before its formation, Nantah was opposed by the likes of Sir Sydney Caine, Vice-Chancellor of University of Malaya, Sir John Nicoll, the Governor of Singapore, and Malcom MacDonald, the British High Commissioner for South East Asia, among others. They all echoed the position taken by the Colonial Office.

But there were also well-known people supporting it, although not so many. Among them were Tan Cheng Lock, a respected Chinese leader in Malaya, Han Suyin, an internationally renowned novelist, and David Marshall, one time Chief Minister of the Labour Front government in Singapore. But after Marshall resigned, his successor, Lim Yew Hock, with the government he led, did not share Marshall's enthusiasm. Even the self-proclaimed socialist PAP government led by Lee Kuan Yew also expressed disfavour towards the existence of the People's University.

The main argument of those who opposed Nanyang University was that it would cater exclusively to Chinese students with a Chinese language education background, and thus would not help in the government effort to create the so-called inter-ethnic unity. It was strongly implied that any new university should be open to students from all ethnic groups and should preferably be modelled on the University of Malaya, which was formed in 1949, and teaching in the English language. They opined that already having one university was enough and feared the danger that the proposed Nanyang University could become a breeding ground for communists or pro-communist activists.

But the United States government had a different idea from the British colonial office. It argued and managed to convince the latter that the new university should and could be turned into an effective anti-communist institution. Thus, almost immediately after, the Colonial Office changed its mind and all those who opposed the conception of Nanyang University made a volte-face. Malcom MacDonald and a few others made symbolic financial contributions to the university. That also explains why Governor Goode was willing to officiate its inauguration.

Perhaps it was in line with the American idea that Lin Yutang, a Chinese-American best known for his book *My Country and My People*, became the first Chancellor of Nanyang University, although it appeared that a number of people associated with the university and also a section of the public were not so happy with the choice. But fortunately for them, Lin Yutang made a mess of things right from the beginning. He was seen as having made use of his position for his and some of his close family members' pecuniary gains.

He also had different ideas from the founders about the role and structure of Nantah. He apparently wanted a building that had been erected to be demolished, to make way for one suitable to his concept. Of course, a major mistake he made was to emphasise publicly the anti-communist role he felt the university should play, despite the well-known view of Tan Lark Sye and others that the institution should be above politics. Finally, Lin Yutang agreed to leave, but only after being paid substantial compensation.

Despite all opposition and many trials and tribulations, Nanyang University was soon firmly established and began to thrive. But government efforts to discredit and close it did not cease. The Minister for Education in Lim Yew Hock's cabinet pronounced that the university could not award a degree. Eventually, Ong Pang Boon, who was Education Minister in the Lee Kuan Yew cabinet, announced that Nanyang University degrees would be officially recognised.

Then, at different times, four commissions or committees were formed by the Labour Front and then the PAP government to study various aspects of the university. The first three were named after their respective chairs, namely, Prescott, Gwee Ah Leng, and Wang Gungwu. From the perspective of various supporters of Nantah, whose views have been presented in this book, it appeared that there was a hidden agenda behind these efforts, which was to discredit Nantah and justify the government's desire for its closure.

The commission headed by Professor Prescott alleged that the university's standards were below par and recommended that its degrees not be recognised. Its central recommendation was to allow government intervention in the university. The Gwee Ah Leng Committee was appointed to review the recommendations of the Prescott Commission. This committee dwelt upon the question of ethnic unity and the academic standards of Nanyang University, and advocated that it should carry out reforms using the University of Malaya as a model. As for the committee chaired by Professor Wang Gungwu, although it was set up to study the university curriculum and provide recommendations, it ended by suggesting the closure of some departments and that Nanyang University should follow the British rather than the American system and adopt the University of Malaya model.

The last study was carried out alone by Professor Frederick Dainton, who was invited by then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew. The foreign university administrator completed his study within a scant few days. The main thrust of his report was that there should be only one university in Singapore, and Nanyang University should be integrated with the University of Malaya. The Dainton Report was immediately made public by the PAP government. Not long afterwards, Nantah was closed, although there appeared to be stiff

opposition within the Lee Kuan Yew cabinet and also from staff, alumni, and students of the Nantah, as well as a large section of those who were closely associated with its founding.

Every one of these commission or committee reports was criticised and opposed, mainly by the alumni and students of the university. They submitted memoranda, held meetings, and even public protests. Some of the students were accused of being trouble makers inspired by the communists, and so a few were arrested and many expelled from their studies at different times. The student union and several student publications were suspended.

On many occasions, the police, sometimes together with the army, raided the university to make arrests. Perhaps the most significant time was when they entered the university, as usual without informing the university first, to arrest students under Operation Coldstore. This had nothing to do with their opposition to any of the reports. Tan Lark Sye himself was deprived of his citizenship after he called upon voters to vote for all Nantah alumni who stood as candidates for both parties, Barisan Sosialis and PAP, which were pitted against each other in the general election following the formation of Malaysia. He passed away without his citizenship being restored.

In 1980, Nanyang University was closed and the National University of Singapore was formed, after an act was passed in the Singapore legislature on July 29th. Following this, University of Singapore and Nanyang University were integrated to form the new National University situated at Keng Ridge. The old Nantah site was later turned into Nanyang Technological University. Lee Kuan Yew finally realised his long desire to control Nanyang University and her students.

In 1992, at the Global Reunion of Nantah alumni in Toronto, Han Suyin called for the revival of Nanyang University and was met with thunderous applause. This issue cropped up at every of the subsequent biennial reunions. In 2006, at the reunion held in Melbourne, Kok Chiang volunteered to carry out a feasibility study at his own cost on reviving the university. He and his group of investigators met about 500 Nantah alumni across the world and submitted his report at the Beijing reunion two years later. In his report, Kok Chiang stated that

the establishment of a new Nanyang University was the dream of almost every alumnus he met, but because the situation had changed, there were differences regarding the manner in which it should be established and the scale on which it should operate. Nevertheless, it was generally agreed that it should be built in Singapore.

By this time, although there were more Chinese billionaires than at the time of Tan Lark Sye, there was no one with his courage and determination to initiate the move for a new Nanyang University. Furthermore, it was foreseen that there would be serious difficulty in getting a steady enrolment of students because the PAP government had already converted all Chinese secondary schools into English schools. Kok Chiang's dream is to maintain Nantah's characteristic as a Chinese language university, even though his own education prior to entering Nantah was in English and, after graduating, he had gone for further studies in Canada and England (at LSE), subsequently becoming a professor in Canada, teaching Geography in English.

Over the years, a large number of Nantah graduates have been admitted to foreign universities that teach in the English medium and they have all found great success. Kok Chiang argues that this was a clear testimony that Nanyang University was not lacking in academic standards. He is confident that a new university teaching in Chinese can certainly maintain a high standard. He also envisages that the university will have a well-equipped library with all types of books, journals, and newspapers. In addition, the university should have a strong translation unit to translate books between multiple languages, to provide a strong basis for creating inter-ethnic and inter-cultural understanding.

In his book, Kok Chiang repeatedly emphasises the point that Nantah was not exclusively Chinese in orientation and certainly not against inter-ethnic unity. He noted that it was open to non-Chinese, provided, of course, they were proficient in Chinese. Nantah also had a strong Malay language department which produced many graduates who were very fluent in the language. In fact, a few of them found success compiling high quality Chinese-Malay dictionaries and composing short stories as well as articles in Malay. Kok Chiang expressed confidence that the new university will do even better than Nantah. But realising all the practical difficulties to be faced in

establishing a new university, Kok Chiang has said that he would be satisfied even if it could only take the form of an academy.

Tan Kok Chiang may not be able to realise his dream for a new Nanyang University, but he has succeeded in writing a remarkable book which can certainly be regarded as a comprehensive history of the old Nanyang University. More than this, his monumental work can also be upheld as a significant addition to the growing corpus of books considered to be alternative (or people's) history, different from and breaking the monopoly of such official elite versions of history as exemplified by Lee Kuan Yew's *The Singapore Story*.

Looking at the bibliography, we see there have been a number of books written about Nanyang University, almost all of them in Chinese. This volume is perhaps the first full and comprehensive one written in English dealing with an important historical aspect of Nantah. As mentioned earlier, it contains hundreds of quotations from individuals and organisations, which add great strength to the book. Kok Chiang convincingly puts across an important, if not the most important, aspect of the history of Nanyang University, namely, the successive persecutions that finally led to its closure.

This book will certainly be welcomed, not only by Nantah alumni, but also by all who are interested in the history of Singapore and its education system. Congratulations, Professor Tan Kok Chiang!

Dr Syed Husin Ali
Petaling Jaya, Malaysia
June 1, 2017

Syed Husin Ali is a Malaysian Senator, university professor, and political activist. Among his many important works are *Ethnic Relations in Malaysia: Harmony and Conflict* (2008), *The Malays: Their Problems and Future* (2008), *Memoirs of a Political Struggle* (2012) and *The Malay Rulers: Regression or Reform?* (2013).

INTRODUCTION

NANYANG UNIVERSITY (NANTAH) was the first Chinese-medium university to be established outside mainland China, Taiwan and Hong Kong. Built with funds raised from the Chinese community across Southeast Asia, the institution was patterned upon the private university model of pre-1949 China of providing education and training to the largest number of students.

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20 Tan Lark Sye, a successful local businessman and an ardent supporter of education, made the call for her establishment in 1953. Within three years, Nanyang University was declared open. On March 15, 1956, her flag was raised over Yunnanyuan, the poetic name used by many to refer to the university's campus.

She held her 21st and final convocation on August 16, 1980, after turning out approximately 12,000 graduates and winning recognition around the world. She was then merged with the University of Singapore (SU) to form the National University of Singapore (NUS) under an Act of Parliament on July 29, 1980. Lee Kuan Yew, the Prime Minister at the time, took full personal responsibility for the move and expressed regret that he did not take this step earlier.

The closing of a young functioning university in a time of peace and rising economic affluence was unprecedented in the history of education. At the time, it did appear that Nantah had willingly entered the merger with the other university on the island to form a national institution. However, it soon became clear that the consequence of the merger was the complete swallowing up of Nantah.

Nantah stood at the apex of the Chinese-medium education system in Singapore. Its closing contributed to the extinction of a system that had been built up over more than a century; one that even powerful colonial forces had failed to undermine and destroy. In the years that followed, it became common to hear complaints about the

decline of the language of the island's largest ethnic group to a "bazaar language" and the emergence of a "chop suey culture". It is no stretch of imagination to say that the disappearance of the Chinese-medium schools was a major contributing factor to these developments. One could also argue that the closing of Nantah curtailed the Chinese community's role in nation-building.

In the official narrative of Singapore, those parts played by the left-wing political parties, the progressive trade unions, rural organisations, the Chinese-medium school students, and the educational and cultural groups in the anti-colonial and rights movements have all been neglected in favour of the version of history propagated by the People's Action Party (PAP), which has held continuous rule over the island since 1959. Only since the 1990s have former members of these groups been able to voice their side of history, in a bid for a more balanced telling of the "Singapore Story", a term Lee Kuan Yew used in his memoirs to refer to the developments that happened after his party ruled Singapore. These emerging efforts to correct perceived distortions can be viewed as attempts to tell the People's Story.

The telling of the history of Nantah has been one-sided so far. In the various state-endorsed narratives, Nantah has been painted as second-rate, communal and communist-inspired, and as such, was an entity whose life had to be ended. Those who wanted Nantah to survive and thrive were helpless against the powerful forces that sought at every turn to prevent the university from achieving her objectives.

One can never deny that Nantah was truly a People's University. She was built with resources donated by members of the Chinese community in Southeast Asia, especially Malaya, including Singapore. She was given the mission to stand as the highest educational institution protecting and developing Chinese language and culture while acting as an agent of inter-cultural understanding and exchange, at the same time nurturing nation-builders as Malaya moved towards independence. She was thus a symbol of the determination of the local Chinese community to make Malaya their home and play their part in the progress of the new nation.

Nanyang University was an inspiration to the younger generation, many of whom grew up in conditions of deprivation and limited

rights under colonial rule. Encouraged by the success of the anti-colonial struggles and revolutions against the old order in other parts of the world, they were ready to work towards the independence of their place of birth, creating a society that was just and harmonious. For many graduates, their time at Nantah was the most inspiring and unforgettable period of their lives. Many felt a strong sense of commitment to repay her and the community which gave birth to her by living up to the expectations held of them.

The closing of Nantah brought great pain to many members of the alumni. The trauma that was experienced by the community and among the alumni in particular has not healed despite an interval of more than three and a half decades. Indeed, revulsion has grown among some as current political leaders in Singapore continue to exaggerate the inferior quality of education delivered by the university while they pontificate the value of the PAP's brand of "bilingualism", all to justify the actions of their political predecessors.

Even in the darkest days of the "White Terror", there were those who expressed their anger and grief in various Chinese publications and media. Yet, to date, the "Nantah Story" has not been communicated in any meaningful way to the English-speaking world. This is something that needs to be done. With the disappearance of the Chinese schools, the English-speaking have become the mainstream of Singapore society and they have the right to know this other side of the "Singapore Story".

This volume, then, is my small contribution to the telling of the People's Story, an attempt to present the truth about one aspect of the modern history of Singapore.

It is a story that reflects the experiences and viewpoints of those who love Nantah, especially the alumni. It is a story that challenges the current narrative and exposes the biases and prejudices against Nantah that have been constructed ever since the idea of a People's University was first mooted.

I graduated from Nantah in 1959. Apart from my own recollections, my story is taken from the writings of many alumni, as my direct association with my alma mater lasted only four years (1956-1959) as a student and another year (1973) as Visiting Associate Professor. One can choose to see this volume as an articulation of

the collective memory of those who have directly benefited from the university's 24 years of existence. The atmosphere has not faded with time. Indeed, as some recent commentaries on Nantah show, time has allowed the participants of history to gain more insights; emotions about Nantah's fate have, if anything, grown stronger.

Of course, I cannot claim to be speaking on behalf of all Nantah alumni. I take full personal responsibility in including some of the materials contained in their writings in this volume.

This is not a history of Nantah but one person's view of her rise and demise. I hope something good can come of it. Perhaps it could lead to a re-evaluation of the language and culture policies that affect the Chinese community, which remains the largest ethnic group on the island. To this end, I am encouraged by this statement made by Lee Hsien Loong, the current Prime Minister, when he spoke at the NUS Society's 60th anniversary on October 3, 2014:

I think there is no hindrance to discussing the past in a normal way. People express, recount their memories, they write their memoirs. Historians research the archives, they write their thesis, they propound revisionist views of history, others rebut them. Academic fratricide is normal.¹²

Since my main sources are in Chinese and are taken from various publications and websites that are not easily accessible to the English language reader, I have decided to reproduce as much of them as possible, in order to present them in their full contexts. The government has had the chance to present an uncontested view of the matter for decades. Thus, my aim in writing this volume is to convey as much as I can of what supporters of Nantah, such as Tan Lark Sye, have said.

In the course of writing this book, I have collected and translated voluminous materials relating to Nanyang University. As including them in this volume would make the book too long, I will be sharing them on the website: www.mynantahstory.com.

Acknowledgements

I WISH TO express my sincere thanks to Dr. Syed Husin Ali for taking time from his busy schedule to write the first Foreword as he continues to work towards bringing desirable political change to his country. I am also grateful to Dr. Thum Ping Tjin for contributing the second Foreword amid his laudable efforts to provide the younger generation with a more balanced understanding of the history of Singapore.

I owe Dr. Hong Lysa a thumbs up for critically reading and commenting on an earlier draft. Her insights into the young intellectuals in the country helped correct many of my out-of-date ideas borne from a long absence from home. But I am sure my old thinking has not all disappeared, and I hope that my good friend would not cease educating me.

Knowing that I meant to dedicate the book to my father, my family, both in Canada and in Singapore, provided me with all the moral and logistical support I needed to complete this effort. Because she feels as dearly as I do about our alma mater, Ching, my twice fellow student and life-long partner not only supported me with ideas from her personal experience, but also provided me with the most comfortable conditions for my writing. Thank you, all.

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In 1958, more than a hundred thousand people attended the inauguration ceremony of Nanyang University (Nantah), a true “people’s university” that was founded with the support of all strata of society, from tycoons to trishaw-men. After producing 12,000 graduates and winning global recognition, the institution, the first Chinese-medium university outside China, held her final convocation in 1980. Drawing from the author’s own research and diverse sources that have never before been available in English, this book tells the fascinating story of Nantah’s short and eventful life and deconstructs the many myths and misconceptions that continue to surround her.



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