

LIVING

IN A TIME OF

DECEPTION

POH SOO KAI

LIVING IN A TIME OF DECEPTION POH SOO KAI

EDITORS

HONG LYSA & WONG SOUK YEE



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Dr Poh Soo Kai shatters the history of Singapore espoused by Lee Kuan Yew and the People's Action Party. Nine years younger than Lee, Dr Poh exposes the tactics of Lee as a master politician—how he made use of his friends and foes to achieve his goals and how they were discarded or punished when they switched allegiance or were no longer useful to him. Dr Poh's refusal to let Lee have his way cost him his family and an illustrious career in medicine. He spent a total of 17 years in prison without trial. Singapore today is the result of what Lee Kuan Yew did to his political opponents in the 1960s and 70s. The publication of this memoir more than 50 years after Operation Coldstore is late but exceedingly important to Singaporeans who wish to understand why they are deprived of basic human rights which are taken for granted by people in other first-world countries. I admire and respect Dr Poh for his determination and courage in recalling a painful past.

– Teo Soh Lung, Director, Function 8

About the editors

Photo by Mandy Gam Chiu Hor



HONG LYSA (left), formerly with the History Department, National University of Singapore, continues with her research interests independently. She is co-author of *The Scripting of National History: Singapore and its Pasts* (2008). She is a founding member of the e-journal *s/pores: new directions in Singapore studies* (www.s-pores.com), now into its eighth year, and comments on minimyna.wordpress.com when matters relating to history are raised in the Singapore press. She co-edited *The May 13 Generation: The Chinese Middle Schools Student Movement and Singapore Politics in the 1950s* (2011), and *The 1963 Operation Coldstore in Singapore: Commemorating 50 Years* (2013).

Photo by Allan Siew



WONG SOUK YEE holds a PhD in literature and creative writing from the University of New South Wales in Sydney. She taught at the Hong Kong Baptist University from 2005 to 2008. Since 2009, she has been a part-time lecturer at the National University of Singapore. Choosing to hold a part-time day job in order to participate more actively in civil society, she strives to be a productive member of the social enterprise, Function 8.

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Abbreviations and Acronyms

ABL	Anti-British League
AMCJA	All Malaya Council of Joint Action
API	Angkatan Pemuda Insaf
CEC	central executive committee
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CID	Criminal Investigations Department
CO	Colonial and Commonwealth Office
CPA	Commonwealth Parliamentary Association
CPC	Communist Party of China
CPM	Communist Party of Malaya
CWC	central working committee
DAP	Democratic Action Party
HBLU	Harbour Board Labour Union
HMG	Her Majesty's Government
ILO	International Labour Organisation
ISA	Internal Security Act
ISD	Internal Security Department
LF	Labour Front
MCA	Malayan Chinese Association
MDU	Malayan Democratic Union
MI5	Military Intelligence, Section 5
MI6	Military Intelligence, Section 6

Nantah	Nanyang University
NTUC	National Trades Union Congress
PAP	People's Action Party
PKI	Partai Komunis Indonesia
PMSF	Pan-Malayan Students' Federation
PPSO	Preservation of Public Security Ordinance
QC	Queen's Counsel
RAF	Royal Air Force
SATU	Singapore Association of Trade Unions
SBWU	Singapore Bus Workers' Union
SCCC	Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce
SCMSSU	Singapore Chinese Middle Schools Students' Union
SEATO	Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation
SFSWU	Singapore Factory and Shop Workers' Union
SGEU	Singapore General Employees' Union
SHBSA	Singapore Harbour Board Staff Association
UK	United Kingdom
US	United States of America
UMNO	United Malays National Organisation
UN	United Nations
USC	University Socialist Club

Preface

When I was released from detention under the Internal Security Act (ISA) the second time in 1982, Lee Kuan Yew said that I was defiant, but that he would give me a second chance. He was referring to the press statement I had made upon my first release at the end of 1973 where I had called him, 'a political pimp'. Therefore, it would seem that being defiant was one of the reasons for my arrest under the Preservation of Public Security Ordinance (PPSO) and its successor, the Internal Security Act (ISA). I am still defiant. I draw a strict line between what is just and what isn't.

In 1994, when the 30-year limit came up for the records of the British archives to be partially declassified for the period up to 1963, I went to spend some time in London at the Public Record Office. I wanted to have the facts to back up the stand that my friends and I took, that we were arrested under the PPSO, and later the ISA, for political reasons and not on any account of security or subversion. This stand is diametrically opposed to Singapore's mainstream account which the younger generation has been fed with. As late as 2006, when Tan Jing Quee and Michael Fernandez spoke at a forum about the use of the ISA and their prolonged imprisonment, the Singapore government issued a statement that ex-political prisoners would not be permitted to rewrite history. It was both a threat and a challenge.

In 2009, I accepted the challenge. Tan Jing Quee, Koh Kay Yew and I edited *The Fajar Generation: The University Socialist Club and the politics of postwar Malaya*. The thrust of this book, however, was against British imperialism and not directed at the PAP. With the opening of a bigger

space for discussion of Singapore history as a result of this publication, the PAP could not give a reasoned response. And so, the ruling party fell back on a reproduction of *Battle for Merger*, which was no more than an anti-communist diatribe.

With encouragement from friends, especially those in Function 8, I decided that a more comprehensive book on the tumultuous events of the 1950s and 1960s in which I was personally involved should be written. I would like to thank Hong Lysa and Wong Souk Yee for their expertise in research and crafting the book. Without their enthusiastic help, this book would not have seen the light of day. However, all opinions expressed in this book are solely mine.

I am also most fortunate to have Ngoh Teck Nam as translator of the Chinese version of this book. Teck Nam is a comrade and a fellow ex-political detainee.

Historian Thum Ping Tjin has most generously shared with me recently-released documents which he has consulted at The National Archives in Britain. These include documents which he obtained under the Freedom of Information Act.

Finally, I owe it not only to comrades and friends, but also the younger generation, to explain and debunk the official Singapore historical narrative.

Poh Soo Kai

November 2015

Chronology of Events

- 21 December 1945 Inauguration of the Malayan Democratic Union, the first political party to emerge in Singapore after the Second World War. Its founders included John Eber, Lim Hong Bee, Lim Kean Chye and Philip Hoalim.
- 1 April 1946 Singapore was excluded from the Malayan Union scheme and became a separate crown colony.
- 21 September 1947 The All-Malaya Council of Joint Action (AMCJA), a coalition of political and civic organisations in Malaya, presented to the public the People's Constitutional Proposals. It called for a common Melayu citizenship for the people of Malaya (including Singapore) and Malay as the national language. It was ignored by the British and the sultans.
- June 1948 Declaration of a state of Emergency.
- January 1951 15 students from the *Malayan Orchid* publication in University of Malaya and ABL members, including John Eber, PV Sarma, A Samad Ismail and CV Devan Nair, were arrested and detained under the Emergency Regulations.