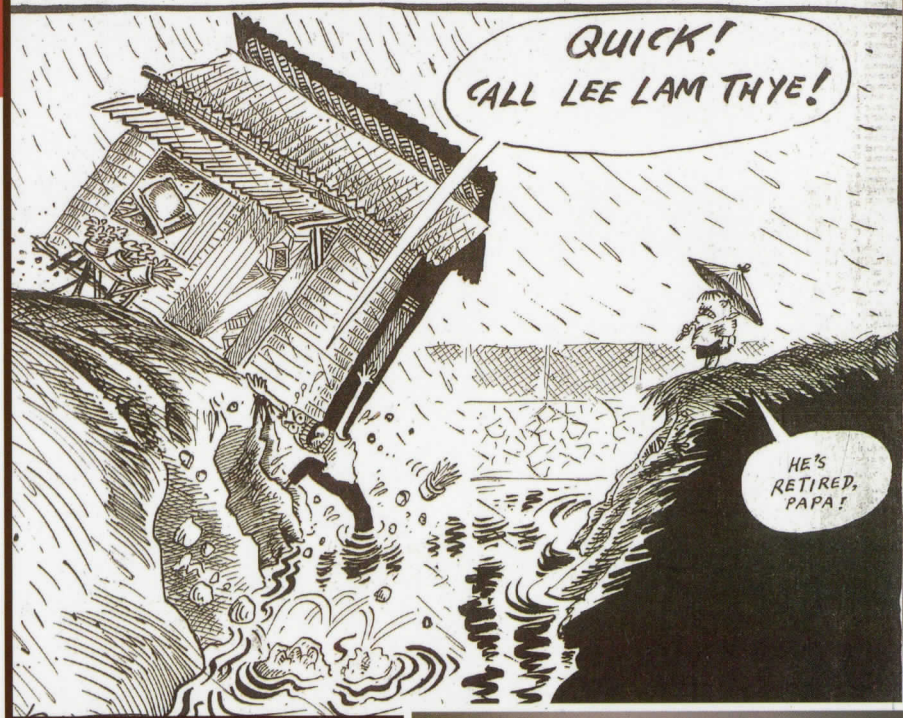


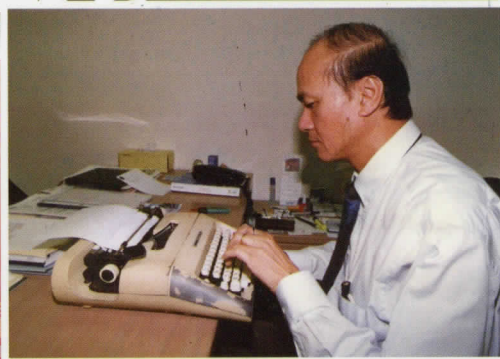
Call LEE LAM THYE!

Scenes of Malaysian Life

By LAT



Recalling a
Lifetime of
Service





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Call **LEE LAM THYE!**

Recalling a
Lifetime of
Service

PUSTAKA PERDANA



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Sofea Chok Suat Ling & P. Selvarani



First published 2022

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Printed by Nightingale Printing Sdn. Bhd. (657391-V)

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Foreword



Tun Zaki Tun Azmi
Former Chief Justice of Malaysia

I was a young legal draftsman in the Attorney General's Chambers when I came to know of YB Lee Lam Thye, a vociferous but very polite opposition member. As a draftsman, I was required to attend Parliamentary hearings, record what was raised by members to be answered by the government, particularly legal issues and issues raised on Bills presented in Parliament. Tan Sri Lee always raised good, interesting and difficult issues. This always kept me on my toes whenever he stood to speak. The next time I met Tan Sri Lee was when he joined me as a board member of SP Setia Bhd and Chairman of SP Setia Foundation. At the Foundation level, we worked closely helping the needy students.

This biography of Tan Sri Lee traces his humble beginnings, early years as a politician and his pursuit in the path of community service and social activism.

Tan Sri Lee, who was born in Menglembu, Perak, came from a poor family and sold fruit from his garden to supplement the family

income. He cycled daily to school at St Michael's Institution in Ipoh, which was quite a distance from his home. Though he came from a poor family, his diligence and hard work made him an above average student and he was well liked by his teachers. He attributed his commitment to serve the people selflessly, to his parents who always encouraged him to work hard, be humble and be kind to everyone. This became part of his DNA. It also made him determined to succeed in every responsibility passed on to him.

Rather than just being an Opposition politician, Tan Sri Lee's objective was to work for the community instead of aggressively opposing the government in power as most Opposition politicians do. He was known as the MP with a typewriter as he carried his trusty portable "Olivetti" typewriter everywhere, ready to write a letter of complaint to the authorities to help solve a problem faced by the public, be they members of his party or not. That was true service.

Tan Sri Lee is known to be a voice of moderation. His fluency in Bahasa Malaysia enabled him to communicate well with government officers. Although he was an Opposition politician, he was well liked by civil servants. Even after leaving politics, he continues to be a popular figure. I remember during one road trip with him from Kuantan to Kuala Lumpur, at every stop we made, he received wishes from so many people... from the traders to policemen; everybody wanted to say hello to him.

Tan Sri Lee is a friend to everyone and a likeable person. Perhaps this was due to his mother's advice to be friends with everyone and show mutual respect to all, irrespective of race and religion. This is what makes him popular as a person and a politician.

This biography will no doubt be an inspiration for all Malaysians, with many lessons to be learnt, especially on how to respect each other as well as earn respect. It will also encourage the younger generation to work hard to succeed in life and be of service to the nation.

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Prologue

The nation was on the cusp of achieving Independence from the British and there was palpable excitement in the air. Those were the idyllic, halcyon days of the 1950s when Malaya was coming of age.

It was an especially fascinating time for the young Lee Lam Thye, an idealistic young man who was beginning to exhibit the first signs of political awareness.

Lee was into his first job after completing his secondary school education at St. Michael's Institution (SMI), one of the most illustrious all-boys schools in Ipoh, the picturesque capital of Perak in northern Malaya.

He was employed at the firm of United Engineers in Ipoh's Lahat Road, as assistant to the British manager, John Reid. His job largely involved mundane secretarial duties but he trudged along as he needed the income to supplement his family's meagre earnings. His father was a self-employed blacksmith. As a young boy, he had wanted to soar the skies as a pilot but had to remain grounded because of his limited circumstances.

But, at Lahat Road, he soon became restless.

He felt there was something else he could do that would take him even higher in life and far away from Menglembu, that small town of wooden homes where he was born.

For Lee, that path should have something to do with aiding the poor and the underprivileged.

“I had always wanted to help the people, especially the poor. I had wanted to be able to serve those who needed to be served. Why? Because I came from a poor family myself. And I knew the only way to do so was for me to be in a position where I could be their spokesman and help them articulate their concerns, their fears and their aspirations. I just wanted to serve.”

So, one day, after many run-ins with the fiery-tempered Reid, Lee decided it was time to quit and pursue his life’s calling. He threw caution to the winds and, on a whim, wrote a letter to a very important figure in Singapore who carried his same surname. The recipient was Lee Kuan Yew, the founding father of Singapore and its first Prime Minister.

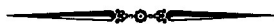
Lee Kuan Yew had campaigned for Britain to relinquish its colonial rule, co-founding the People’s Action Party (PAP) in 1954 as one of the means towards that end.

“Lee Kuan Yew was the person I admired the most.”

Lee followed the Singapore leader’s activities in the newspapers he had so voraciously read but had never had any contact with him or his party colleagues. So he did not expect to even receive an acknowledgement for his letter from the then secretary-general of PAP.

“I wrote to say I was interested in the PAP and supported the party.”

That was to be the beginning of a colourful, eventful and exhilarating journey with many twists and turns that have, over the years, helped shape the persona of Lee Lam Thye.



Chapter One

The Beginning

Lee was born on 30 December 1946 in Menglembu, a small town just over seven kilometres from Ipoh at the foot of Perak's Kledang Hill, then known for its groundnut smallholdings although the predominant occupation of the largely Chinese population there was tin mining.

The Chinese had been settling there since the 1800s, to escape the famine in Southern China. His father, Lee Kan, eked out a living at his small iron foundry, while his mother, Chooi Foong Keng, was responsible for keeping the home intact and providing guidance to the young Lee and his elder sister.

The family also planted fruit trees such as ciku, rambutan, pineapples and guava, for family consumption and sale to the markets. The enterprising young Lee would harvest the fruits when ripe and ferry them by bicycle to the small bustling market in town.

“I did this for several years to help supplement the family income.”

Despite their humble background, his parents, who did not themselves enjoy the privilege of a proper education, were aware of its importance and took great pains to enroll him in a good school.

Although there were other schools closer to home, they decided to send Lee to the better-equipped and missionary-run, St Michael's

Institution (SMI) in Clayton Road (now Jalan S.P. Seenivasagam), Ipoh.

Established in 1912, the school was originally housed in a small mansion with Gothic-style architecture on grounds dotted with coconut trees. As its student population grew, so did the school and over a period of 30 years, new buildings were added.

As part of the La Sallian worldwide community of schools, SMI boasts a long history of academic and sporting excellence.

The school is noted for having produced many illustrious Malaysians, including top-class sportsmen who went on to represent the state and the country, including former badminton aces Tan Yee Khan and Ng Boon Bee.

Lee completed his primary and secondary education at SMI. He remembers with fondness the dedication and service of the school principal, Brother Ultan Paul Rosario. Brother Ultan Paul served the La Sallian school with distinction. In his 60 years with SMI, he touched the hearts of countless numbers of students. He retired in 1985 and died in 2000.

The alma mater still pays tribute to the late Brother Ultan Paul whenever the former students meet in the grand portals of SMI.

“The school was run by the Christian Brothers and they were all very dedicated and committed to education. I am always very proud to be a product of St. Michael’s.”

For Lee, it was a daily 45-minute bicycle ride from his home to school.

His mother would visit on occasion to ensure he had proper meals during recess. It was also a time for mother-son bonding.

The dutiful son listened while the mother imparted valuable advice on discipline and forging friendships. She kept a close watch on him to ensure he did not mix with bad company in school.

But she need not have worried. Lee was a filial son, and he heeded all her well-meaning advice and listened to her pearls of wisdom.

Lee has held fast to his mother’s principles in life, which were

to be humble, to interact with all races and to treat everyone equally regardless of their background, beliefs, status or skin colour.

“Her guidance shaped my attitude in life and in politics.”

Lee was a very disciplined student, active and popular among his teachers and peers.

“I played football in school as well as badminton.” But his favourite was table tennis, and he did well enough to take part in competitions. He was part of the Scouts movement too, attending all the uniformed unit’s requisite outdoor activities and camps.

His academic achievements, however, were not particularly stellar.

Lee’s parents could not afford to send him for extra tuition and so he just leaned on his classmates when he encountered problems.

“I was not a brilliant student, just slightly above average and so I did not qualify for a scholarship.”

Scholarship or no scholarship, he had to work hard for he knew that eventually he would have to take care of his parents.

“So, I put in the extra effort. This was to become my DNA - giving my 100 per cent in all endeavours.”

Nevertheless, he was not a straight As student despite his most valiant efforts.

“I was very poor in Mathematics. I failed the subject a few times.”

His favourite subjects? Geography, History and languages. **“I took an interest in Bahasa Melayu and generally did well in my BM tests.”**

He worked tirelessly to improve his English Language skills too, and, in the process developed a love for writing.

“When I was in Form Three, I used to buy a newspaper called the ‘Eastern Sun’. My teachers had stressed that it was imperative for us to read if we wanted to improve our English. So I decided to read the newspaper daily.

“One day, I decided to write in to the ‘Letters to the Editor’ section of the newspaper and to my surprise, my letter was published! I was so excited, I took the newspaper to school to show my friends.”

This spurred Lee to write more, and his letters eventually became a fortnightly feature on the tabloid-sized newspaper. He wrote on various topics close to his heart, involving social issues, youth, the environment and cleanliness. Lee was then in his teens. Now, more than half a century later, Lee is still at it, writing regularly to the English, Bahasa Malaysia, Chinese and Tamil press, both print and online.

In the early days, he would handwrite the letters and hand-deliver them to the newspaper offices; later he wrote them on his typewriter and mailed them. Now he writes them on his iPad and emails them.

Schoolwork did not completely occupy all of Lee's time during his years at St. Michael's, however. The contemplative young boy had a fun-filled childhood and indulged in the merrymaking and mischief that children his age then often got into.

Occasionally he would skip meals at the tuckshop and save his meagre pocket money for a treat to watch black-and-white cowboy movies at the cinema. During the school holidays, he would visit the serene Japanese garden in Tambun Road near the Perak Turf Club. It was the first public garden in Ipoh and popular with tourists, especially those from Japan.

"It was a good place to relax and unwind. There were fish ponds and lush greenery... and goldfish."

Another place Lee frequented was the iconic octagon-shaped Yau Tet Shin Market in Ipoh. The hustle and bustle, as well as myriad items for sale at the bazaar, from clothes to shoes and household wares, were objects of fascination for this small-town boy.

As most of Lee's classmates were from Ipoh, it was not easy for him to meet up with them after school. But he was to find a kindred spirit in another student at St. Michael's who also lived in Menglembu.

This boy, Abdul Rahman, would eventually become Lee's closest friend and they would meet frequently.

"We were classmates from Standard One to Form Three. His father was a shopkeeper in Menglembu and on some weekends, I would spend time with him."

Lee lost touch with Abdul Rahman when he later moved to Kuala Lumpur to pursue his chosen path in politics. But Lee never forgot his friend.

“We were from different racial and religious backgrounds – Abdul Rahman was Indian-Muslim - but our cultural differences were hardly anything we noticed. We went through thick and thin together and he would sometimes even help me out financially.”

Years later, Lee attempted to look for Abdul Rahman when he last returned to Menglembu, but was unsuccessful.

“I will always remember his name. He has the same name as our first Prime Minister (Tunku Abdul Rahman)... I wonder where he is now.”

Towards the end of his secondary school years, Lee’s father closed his iron foundry due to poor business causing him to lose a major source of income.

“I did not have the means to go on further in my education, so after finishing my Senior Cambridge exam, I looked for work to support my family.”

Lee applied for and secured a job at the Ipoh branch of United Engineers. Founded in 1865, United Engineers was originally named Riley Hargreaves & Company after its two founders – British pioneers Richard Riley and William Hargreaves.

The engineering firm had its main office in Clarke Quay, Singapore and quickly established itself in other parts of Asia, building steamers, and structures including the Cavenagh Bridge in the island republic.

In Ipoh, it specialised in the electrification of mines and supply of mining equipment. Riley Hargreaves & Co. also set up the first garage in Kinta to repair motorcars.

Lee worked under John Reid, largely performing administrative tasks.

He carried out his responsibilities to the best of his ability despite his inexperience but Reid who was feared in the office for his volatile temperament, was dissatisfied with his work. For the slightest mistake, Lee would have files literally thrown back at him.

“I remember how terrible it was to be treated with such utter disregard. This episode taught me an important lesson – no matter who we are or how high our station in life is, we should never treat others with disrespect.”

Hoping for something better to do, Lee wrote and sent a letter in 1965 to someone he admired and whose political career he was ardently following – Lee Kuan Yew – not really expecting anything extraordinary to come out of his initiative.

But it did – it set off a chain of events that would take Lee out of laidback Menglembu to the bright lights of Kuala Lumpur.

In his letter, he extended birthday greetings to Lee Kuan Yew and expressed support for the People’s Action Party (PAP).

Lee Kuan Yew and his colleagues had founded the PAP on 21 November 1954. The other founding members were from the three main ethnic communities of Singapore and included academician Dr Toh Chin Chye, civil servant Goh Keng Swee, teacher C. V. Devan Nair, journalists S. Rajaratnam and A. Samad Ismail and social worker Fong Swee Suan.

PAP’s 1954 manifesto called for independence for Singapore, the setting up of a democratic-socialist government and the creation of a multi-ethnic, fair and just society. PAP has, to this day, continued to dominate politics in Singapore and has been credited with the city-state’s rapid political, social and economic development.

Lee Kuan Yew was Prime Minister for 31 years from 1959, the year that Singapore gained full self-governing status.

For several months after Lee Lam Thye sent his letter to Lee Kuan Yew, he received no response. Then one day, a gentlemen arrived in Ipoh and met up with Lee. That man was C.V. Devan Nair, the PAP Member of Parliament for Bangsar.

As one of the founding members of the PAP, Devan Nair had acquired for himself a solid reputation as a trade union leader. He had transformed the trade union movement into a well-knit and forward-looking force dedicated to the welfare of the workers advocating a joint labour-management-government partnership.

Later, Devan Nair headed the Democratic Action Party (DAP), an offshoot of PAP, following the Malaysia-Singapore split in 1965. He was elected an MP on a DAP ticket.

Lee was shocked to receive a visit from such an important visitor. When they met, Lee was initially at a loss for words.

“This gentleman told me there was no point working for United Engineers and urged me to move to Kuala Lumpur. I agreed to consider.”

Later, Devan Nair contacted Lee again and suggested that he move to Kuala Lumpur to fill up a job opening for executive secretary at the National Union of Commercial Workers (NUCW). The NUCW was then the third largest union in the country.

It was an exciting prospect, and Lee had no hesitation in accepting the offer.

Leaving Ipoh for a new life in a big city was a welcome challenge. The year was 1968 and Lee was 22 years old.



A class picture at St. Michael's Institution (Lee is 2nd from left, top row).



Chapter Two

NUCW and Venturing into Politics

When the eager, young Lee became the executive secretary of the National Union of Commercial Workers (NUCW), he had only a vague notion of what the job entailed and little knowledge of the world of trade unionism. Bent on undertaking the task at hand to the best of his ability, Lee learnt fast, under the tutelage of the veteran trade unionist, Devan Nair himself.

His job was to oversee the office administration of NUCW and to assist union members in their needs. The country was then transitioning from an agro-based economy to an industrialised one, with factories sprouting up in the bigger cities and employing more and more workers. Trade unions grew in tandem with this growing workforce, championing the welfare of their members through better employment benefits. On occasion, when employers resisted the workers' demands for better wages and working conditions, the unions took on an aggressive stance to demand for their rights, often organising pickets or calling on their members to lay down their tools.

This was all new to Lee but he could not have asked for a better mentor than Devan Nair, a trained teacher turned unionist who, in 1949, became the General Secretary of the Singapore Teacher's Union.

In 1951, the British authorities imprisoned Devan Nair, accusing him of anti-colonial activities. After he was released two years later, he became active again in the trade union movement as Secretary of the Singapore Factory and Shopworkers' Union and later founded the Singapore National Trades Union Congress (NTUC). Devan Nair also assumed the presidency of the Asian Regional Organisation of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) and served for five years, until 1981, before he was elected as the third President of Singapore.

Lee's job largely involved dealing with correspondence from members and employers and managing the union office. He was not directly involved in organising union strikes and other industrial actions.

Being a part of the NUCW, however, helped him acquire a good understanding of workers' rights and issues. This knowledge and experience came in useful when, some 50 years later, as Chairman of the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), he started campaigning for the establishment of occupational safety standards for workers and the promotion of occupational safety and health (OSH) at the workplace.

Like most young men seeking greener pastures outside their small hometowns, Lee was pleased to secure a job in the federal capital and did not give much thought to life beyond the NUCW then. He was therefore taken aback when Devan Nair came up to him with a proposition, barely 18 months after he joined the union.

Devan Nair, who was also the Member of Parliament for the then Bungsar (Bangsar) constituency (later renamed Damansara), had developed a soft spot for the young Lee and, recognising his dedication, his hardwork and innate desire to help others, envisaged a role for him on the national stage. He asked Lee if he would consider standing for a seat in the Selangor State Assembly, as a candidate of the newly-formed Democratic Action Party (DAP) which was led by former members of the de-registered People's Action Party (PAP) of Malaysia, following Singapore's separation from Malaysia.

The offer was made in 1968 when Lee was only 22. The general election was due the following year.

It was an irresistible offer for the young man but although excited and honoured to be proposed as a candidate for the party he strongly believed in, Lee told Devan Nair that he could only accept the offer if his parents gave their blessings. And they did. With that, Lee was nominated as the DAP candidate for the Bukit Nanas State Constituency as well as the Klang parliamentary constituency, both in the state of Selangor. The general election was fixed for May 10, 1969.

Election candidates need funds for their campaign. Lee's party did not provide any allocation other than meeting the cost of printing its candidates' banners and posters. The candidates had to source their own funds for campaigning. But Lee was cash-strapped.

Devan Nair stepped up and paid the deposit for his candidacy. But there were also other expenses to bear.

"I raised funds with help from my supporters who were small businessmen and petty traders in the Pudu area. I worked on a shoestring budget as I needed to pay for the meals and transportation for those who helped me, as well as rent a small office space."

Due to his inexperience in politics and his apprehension about speaking in public, Lee did not spend much time giving speeches at public rallies. Instead, he went on a door-to-door campaign to personally meet the voters, accompanied by his then girlfriend, Mary Yap Kooi Foong (now wife), relatives and supporters. Wherever he went, he was warmly welcomed by the electorate, thanks to his good looks, congeniality and his down-to-earth style and sincerity in wanting to help resolve their problems.

"The reception was good. Most of the voters said they would vote the Rocket (DAP) and sink the ship (the symbol of the Alliance party). They poured out their woes and said they wanted to see a change as they were unhappy with the Alliance."

Lee remembers quite vividly the mood at the ballot counting centre at the St John's Institution hall on the night of May 10.

One aspect of Lee Lam Thye that has always remained in my mind even from the very beginning of our first meeting is his very close relationship with the people. He established a name for himself as a member of parliament and he was always there for the people, to attend to their needs.

Dr Chandra Muzaffar,
President, International Movement for a Just World (Just)

.....
To describe him in a sentence is very difficult. He is very passionate about his work. Sometimes I think he's crazy. To him his work is number one. He is truly a workaholic.

Senator Tan Sri Radzi Sheikh Ahmad,
Trustee of EcoWorld Foundation, former Minister

.....
He was one MP who always had questions for my ministry, especially when I was the deputy Finance Minister. His questions were intelligent ones, requiring objective responses.

Tan Sri Rafidah Aziz,
Veteran politician and former Minister of International Trade and Industry

.....
He perceives unity not from the lens of a political organisation but rather, he believes promoting unity is the duty and responsibility of every Malaysian. He is sincere and his approach is objective hence he gets the respect and trust of many.

Tan Sri Leonard Linggi Jugah,
Former Sarawak politician and Member of Parliament for Kapit

.....
He has always something very positive and affirmative to remedy the social ills and problems that crop up from time to time in the nation.

Datin Paduka Mother A Mangalam,
President Pure Life Society

.....
He is gentle and courteous but never gives up the fight for fairness and justice.

Datuk Dr Anwar Fazal,
Consumer advocate and director of the Right Livelihood College

.....
To push for action or for the consideration of those in authority, Lee has probably written more letters to the Press on a broad range of subjects, released more press statements and made more speeches than any other public figure, past or present.

Philip Mathews,
Editorial Consultant



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