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# THE SINGAPORE LION

“Throughout the turbulent period leading up to Singapore’s independence, Rajaratnam played a crucial role as comrade, fighter, thinker, preacher, propagandist. He worked tirelessly to forge a new Singapore identity which transcended race and religion, during his years as Singapore’s first Culture Minister and also later, as the country’s first Foreign Minister after Separation from Malaysia. Visiting his war-torn ancestral homeland in Jaffna recently, I thought how fortunate we in Singapore are that he came to our shores and made Singapore his home and calling. Irene Ng’s book, *The Singapore Lion*, tells the story of a man who altered the course of Singapore’s destiny.”

**George Yeo**  
*Foreign Minister, Singapore*

“*The Singapore Lion* is an important book for those who want to understand how Rajaratnam’s ideas influenced a generation of Singaporeans and inspired them to believe they could live together in peace despite their troubled past. He was the country’s founding father of multi-racialism without which there would have been no independent Singapore. No other book explains better why and how he believed that was the only way it could work. A very well-written and insightful book.”

**Han Fook Kwang**  
*Editor, The Straits Times*

“Irene Ng has authored a must-read book for all Singaporeans and those interested in Singapore. It offers a rare personal insight of the true renaissance man whose creative imagination helped steer Singapore’s pioneer years.”

**Benson Puah**  
*CEO, National Arts Council*

“What a delightful book! Irene Ng has done all Singaporeans proud by carefully weaving the rich, sometimes bewildering, life of one of the Lion City’s great founding fathers into a tapestry of revelations embracing Mr Rajaratnam’s varied and robust personality. Written in clear, crisp and engaging prose, *The Singapore Lion* is a must-read for all who desire an in-depth understanding of a man whose genius shone through both his political and literary life.”

***Kirpal Singh***

*Director, Wee Kim Wee Centre  
Singapore Management University*

“The story of Raja’s incisive use of media — a must-read for anyone who needs to communicate ideas effectively and win the hearts and minds of others, be they voters, employees, clients or partners. A brilliant piece of writing.”

***Shaun Seow***

*Deputy CEO, Television-Channel NewsAsia,  
Radio/Print/Interactive Media,  
MediaCorp Pte Ltd*

“Irene Ng has fleshed out the Rajaratnam story with lively anecdotes, well-researched materials and well-sourced interviews. They will add to a better understanding of the story of early Singapore, a story that needs to be updated constantly.”

***P.N. Balji***

*Director, Asia Journalism Fellowship*

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# THE SINGAPORE LION

A BIOGRAPHY OF S. RAJARATNAM

IRENE NG



**INSTITUTE OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES**

*Singapore*

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*To the memory of S. Rajaratnam  
and his enduring vision*

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# Foreword

This biography of S. Rajaratnam is a valuable record of the life of an exceptional man who made a great contribution to Singapore.

Raja was always fighting for the underdog. The first time I met him was in 1952. I was representing the Postal and Telecommunications Uniformed Staff Union; negotiations with the Chief Secretary had failed and the postmen decided to strike.

Raja wrote powerful stories and editorials in the *Singapore Standard* to support the postmen's strike. He felt they were unjustly treated. He acidly highlighted the highly paid expatriate officers who had just given themselves a hefty increase in their expatriate allowance, but were miserly towards these hardworking postmen.

The postmen won public support. After two weeks, the government made concessions. This successful strike changed the course of events in Singapore.

Raja's outstanding quality was his fighting spirit when on a righteous cause. After the pro-communist PAP Assemblymen, all of whom were Chinese-educated, split to form Barisan Sosialis, they pummelled us day after day in press statements and at mass rallies, all reported in full by Chinese-owned newspapers. Many Chinese reporters were their sympathisers. Raja tirelessly rebutted them point by point day after day. I felt weary having to issue rebuttals to absurd accusations. Ever the pamphleteer, Raja never allowed them to go unanswered.

He won the support of the English-educated by his wit in his trenchant dismissals. I still remember him at his typewriter with a cigarette in his mouth, tapping away.

We were close friends bonded by fighting difficult battles together. He always gave me a boost of energy to carry on the ceaseless counter barrage against the Communist United Front whose objective was to weary its opponents and reduce their energy and spirits. His vibrant and indignant response was like a cup of *ginseng* tea for me, reinvigorating me by his infectious optimism. In his affectionate way, he would say, “Harry, they cannot win. We must not allow them to win and ruin Singapore.”

He had indomitable courage. When UMNO ultras tried to intimidate us during our two years in Malaysia, he was not cowed. He and Toh Chin Chye, the chairman of the People’s Action Party (PAP), proposed the formation of the Malaysian Solidarity Convention, to which the party’s Central Executive Committee agreed. They gathered their friends from the states in peninsular Malaysia. Raja persuaded the non-*bumiputra* (Malay) parties in Sabah and Sarawak to join it.

At the Solidarity Convention meetings held at our old open-air theatre at the junction of River Valley Road and Clemenceau Avenue, his booming voice gave confidence to the audience not to be intimidated by the threats of UMNO “ultras”. After a few months, the UMNO-led government began to feel the non-Malay ground shifting against them. So Tunku Abdul Rahman, the Prime Minister of Malaysia, wanted Singapore out of Malaysia.

When it came to the crunch, Raja was the most unwilling to sign the Separation Agreement. After hours of contemplation, chain-smoking at the verandah of Sri Temasek, Kuala Lumpur, I decided to tell him that if he did not agree, then he and Toh Chin Chye would have to carry on the fight, and without me. After more agonising, he reluctantly signed it.

His enduring legacy to Singapore is our National Pledge. We had two communal riots in 1964, the first on 21 July, Prophet Mohammad’s birthday, and the second in September when I was away in Brussels for the Socialist International Centenary meeting. These were

engineered by the UMNO “ultras” to intimidate the Chinese population. In both riots, the police and the army, both under Federal control, were biased, against the Chinese and sympathising with the Malays. In total, 36 people were killed and 563 were injured.

After Separation, he drafted the National Pledge. Given the mood of the people in Singapore at that time, only Raja had the conviction and optimism to express those long-term aspirations in that pledge. He had expressed his ideal of our races becoming one people, all melded into a Singaporean people. I tightened his draft to leave out the more idealistic phrases and to smoothen it.

It was an act of faith to declare: “We, the citizens of Singapore, pledge ourselves as one united people, regardless of race, language or religion, to build a democratic society based on justice and equality, so as to achieve happiness, prosperity and progress for our nation.” It was worth aspiring for.

Raja’s warm and open personality made him liked even by foreign leaders who were not politically sympathetic. He represented a small country, was able to engage them by his bearing and open friendliness and his broad background knowledge and experience. These he had developed over his long years in Britain when, instead of studying law at King’s College, London, he immersed himself in the anti-colonial movements of the Indians and Africans.

He was a good judge of people and talent-spotted men from academia and business to be our ambassadors; Tommy Koh for the United Nations, Ho Rih Hwa for Bangkok, Thailand, and many others. All these successfully represented us. Increasingly, I left the selection of people to Raja as Foreign Minister.

Raja’s contribution to Singapore is not in bricks and mortar, or concrete and glass. It was in ideas, sentiments and spirit, captured in words he lovingly typed out. Everyday, when the Pledge is recited in our schools, our children are reminded to live up to our aspirations of a multi-racial society regardless of race, language or religion.

Irene Ng has done thorough and painstaking research over many years to write this biography. She dug into the archival records and the papers that he left behind, and through interviewing relatives, friends and political foes, retraced the path he took.

*Lee Kuan Yew*  
*Minister Mentor*  
*Singapore, November 2009*

# Preface

S. Rajaratnam rarely talked about himself unless probed. He would rather talk about ideas, and the idea he loved most was Singapore. Talk about Singapore and he would be in good form, his eyes alive, his hands gesticulating. Once, over a casual dinner with me in the late 1980s, he became so passionate about his message — the need to stir a love of *meaningful* ideas among the young (as opposed to meaningless) — that he knocked over his glass of red wine on the table. He picked it up, set it upright, and continued talking about the classical tradition of Socrates and Plato.

That is one of the most enduring images of S. Rajaratnam in my memory.

Since that evening, I had become a visitor to his house in Chancery Lane until some months after his death in 2006. When I first met him, I was a senior political correspondent with *The New Paper*, which reached out to younger readers. I believe he saw in me an opportunity to shape young minds, including mine. He was always ready to provide me with quotes for my articles, whatever the topic — from ASEAN, local politics and history to his Saturday nights. Later, in 1998, I rejoined *The Straits Times* — I had started my career as a journalist in *The Straits Times* in 1986 — and continued tapping his brain.

Over the years, as I witnessed how he deteriorated after a series of minor strokes, the visits became more difficult. He began to lose his memory and was visibly alarmed at this. He tried to fight it by writing down all he could remember, such as the name of his wife Pirooska on her portrait photographs on the wall, and copying entire passages from the various books in his vast library, by hand, into notebooks. His scrawls reveal his abiding preoccupation with ideas relating to

race, religion, national identity and Singapore's future as a united nation, just as it was when he became the country's first Culture Minister in 1959. Then the day came when he could no longer read or write. By this time, in November 2001, I had joined the People's Action Party (PAP) and politics.

In May 2004, I approached Ambassador K. Kesavapany, Director of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, with a proposal to write a biography of Raja. His story deserves to be told and remembered. I am grateful that Kesavapany took that leap of faith with me. Without his unflagging support and patient encouragement, it would have been hard for me to undertake and complete this project. I am also thankful to the trustees of Rajaratnam's estate — President S.R. Nathan, Ambassador Tommy Koh and Raja's close relative in Singapore, Dr V. Kanda Pillay — for giving their assistance to this project. Thus began the most ambitious writing project of my life.

I officially started working on the biography in January 2005, while working full-time with the National Trades Union Congress (NTUC). By this time, whenever I popped into Raja's house to sift through his papers, he no longer recognised me. I found that an effective way to elicit a glimmer of life in his eyes was to say anything with the word "Harry" in it. "Can you remember Harry?" "Harry," he would reply, a smile playing on his lips. Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew — Harry to Raja — had been a central figure in Raja's life since they met in 1952.

Hence, I am grateful to MM Lee for agreeing to pen the Foreword to this book. I also thank him for the interviews he granted, once in 2005, and another in 2009, with emails in between to address my queries, and for his encouragement throughout.

There were heart-wrenching moments. Going through Raja's papers in his house, I found a speech he wrote in 1990 about ageing and dying. He wrote it when he was 76 and still lucid. In that speech, he spoke about the "Cyborg" problem. "The Cyborg problem arises because modern medicine, surgery, technology and so-called miracle

drugs can prolong the process of dying not by just a few weeks or months, but spread over many years during which a human being is transformed into a cyborg — a corpse which simulates life...and a brain drained of its humanity...” He wrote that he had told his wife, when he was about to have a heart bypass in 1984, to do everything she possibly could to enforce his right to die, if he became a cyborg. He wrote about meeting death “as dignified human beings and not as mindless cyborgs which have taken possession of our bodies”. Together with that type-written speech, which contained some of his own scribbles, was a sheaf of research materials on dying with dignity.

Sleep eluded me that night. The next day, 10 May 2005, my heart was heavy as I shared this depressing knowledge of his wishes with Professor Tommy Koh. Prof Koh assured me that the next time Raja was rushed to hospital, he would be allowed to pass on without “heroic medical intervention”. So it was that, on 22 February 2006, Raja died of heart failure, three days shy of his 91<sup>st</sup> birthday.

As I stood next to his coffin at his funeral wake in his home, I resolved to do my best to produce a biography which would capture accurately his extraordinary life and all that he stood and fought for. So that people would not forget.

The weight of that vow hung over me for the four years it took me to research and write this book. During this period, I discovered many fresh sides to Raja which provide deeper insights into the man and his role in the history of Singapore and the region. The only way to flesh them out was to do more research, and reflect on what I had found, and then, crucially, to write it up. Raja led a rich, complex and unique life, and it would be an injustice to squeeze it all into one volume. So it will now come in two. The narrative of this book confines itself to Raja’s years from his birth in 1915 to the birth of Malaysia in 1963. The second volume of his biography will cover the remaining years until his death in 2006, including how he came to write Singapore’s national pledge in 1966 and widened the international space for Singapore as its first Foreign Minister.

This work is a biography. It is not history. Neither is it an academic study of a political leader. Biography focuses on one figure, exploring the significance of his life by examining his actions, relationships, frustrations and achievements over his lifetime. In making him the dominant focus and narrating history with him as the protagonist, there is no intention to play down the contributions of the other PAP leaders or the many individuals who struggled in their own ways to build Singapore. There is a growing body of literature which recounts the contributions of the various national leaders, as well as alternative readings from the perspective of their political opponents. This is not intended to be one of them.

This is also not a PAP book. I wrote it with complete independence; it has not been read or influenced by any PAP leader in all the years it took me to write it. It was good of MM Lee to write the Foreword without asking to read the manuscript.

That said, Raja was a PAP founding leader and its most ferocious propagandist; it must be expected that most of his thoughts and actions relate to the PAP. However, his life and achievements go beyond loyal service to a political party. This book seeks to embed him in a larger history of anti-colonial politics and to explore his role in the shaping of Singapore's conception of itself as an independent entity with its own identity. Singapore's development as a nation might well have turned out differently without Raja driving the process as he did.

After his death, many younger Singaporeans expressed dismay that they had not heard of Raja before or known of his role in Singapore's history. One of them, a 23-year-old student at the Institute of Technical Education, in a letter to *The Straits Times* on 6 March 2006, wrote: "The death of Mr S. Rajaratnam made Singapore's history more personal to me, but it also raised the question: Why had I not known about him earlier?...Mr Rajaratnam is a classic example of someone who has not been given enough importance in our history syllabus." I agree. This book hopes to address this.

I write this book with the general reader in mind. My fundamental job, after poring over all the research material gathered, is to be true to the facts as I found them, interpret their significance in relation to Raja, and write a narrative based on them. Towards that end, I have done so many revisions that I have lost count.

In all, I ploughed through thousands of declassified British and Australian records, Culture Ministry files, Cabinet papers, oral history interviews, newspaper clippings and speeches. Also, boxes and boxes of Raja's private papers. At times, I felt like a detective, piecing together clues from personal fragments he left behind — letters, receipts, income tax slips, photographs, notebooks, tattered pieces of paper. I spent hours watching video footage of Raja at work, observing his body language, listening to his voice, imagining the emotion of the moment. His strong voice accompanied me in my car, as I played and re-played CDs of his speeches flowing with his spirited ideas.

I am aware of the need for the biographer to distance herself from her subject and I have attempted to do so. This biography does not ignore his contradictions or shortcomings. After all, they reflect the complexity of the man. I have strived to be objective and fair, although my admiration for him and his work grew as I learnt more about him. As historian C.M. Turnbull put it, it is the accustomed lot of biographers to come to identify with their subjects.

Raja was a man unique to himself and an original thinker in many ways. One of his most precious contributions to Singapore in that period was to put forth his view that a new common national identity can be created, transcending all communal loyalties, and with that, a new people and a new future. As it has been almost 12 years since I studied the subject of nations and nationalism at the London School of Economics and Political Science, it was interesting to revisit the much-contested concepts and discover how Raja had relied on certain thinkers, in particular French philosopher Ernest Renan and British philosopher John Stuart Mill, to form his own views on the making of a Malayan and later, a Singaporean, nation.

But what made him tick? What made him fight so hard for what he believed in? As I moved from his oral history recordings to contemporary sources, I realised that I had underestimated the scale of my task. His oral history was recorded many years after the events related and was therefore susceptible to lapse of memory and to the wisdom of hindsight. Where I have been able to check facts from contemporary records, I have used these.

I have spent much time at the National Archives of Singapore (NAS) and at the Public Records Office in Kew in the United Kingdom. My sincere thanks especially to Pitt Kuan Wah and Ng Yoke Lin from NAS, for their resourcefulness and ready assistance. I have also visited King's College in London to retrieve Raja's university records, and thank the College for tracking down his details. I was also given access to Special Branch files and Cabinet papers. For this, I am grateful to the Internal Security Department and the Cabinet Office.

In this book, I reveal previously unpublished details of letters, declassified records and transcripts of interviews.

A wide range of people, including his one-time political opponents such as Fong Swee Suan, Dominic Puthuchear and Low Por Tuck, have also been interviewed for this book. To provide a rounded picture of Raja, a standard question posed was what they thought were his weaknesses, as well as his strengths. Their replies are weaved into this book. I thank Sonny Yap, Leong Weng Kam and Lau Ping Sum for helping with some contacts and useful information.

Raja's relatives in Singapore, Seremban and Jaffna were invaluable in helping me reconstruct his childhood and family life. They include Dr Pillay, Mrs S. Seevaratnam, Jothiratnam and Anushia Lingam. There are many others — too numerous to name here, but they are listed at the end of the book.

My research was helped by the fact that Raja left a large corpus of his writings as a journalist. I would not have been able to track them all down, had it not been for my research assistant, Teo Kah Beng,

who also met my numerous other requests with ability and equanimity. I thank the excellent librarians from the Parliament Library, especially Mrs Yang Soh Bee and Mrs Cheah-Khoo Sait Poh, the ISEAS Library, the National Library and the Singapore Press Holdings (SPH) library for their generous assistance. A special thanks to SPH and NAS for allowing us to reproduce their photographs.

Some of Raja's notebooks on his passions — ideas on books and photography — and other materials are in my temporary possession. These will be donated to the NAS, ISEAS Library or the National Library for preservation and public reference after this biography is completed. I have also benefited from his private papers in the ISEAS Library, donated by Raja's family.

I would like to thank Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong for his encouragement, and for officiating the launch of this book. I express my great debt to my NTUC bosses, Lim Boon Heng and Lim Swee Say, for their support while I was working with NTUC until February 2009.

I wrote my first five chapters while on a three-month Honorary Professorial Fellowship in the University of Edinburgh in 2006. For providing an environment that enabled me to focus on writing, I thank the Edinburgh University's Vice-Principal, Prof Geoffrey Boulton, and Grierson Professor of English Literature and Director of the Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities, Susan Manning.

The understanding and support of my Tampines GRC MPs and grassroots leaders gave me the peace of mind and courage to persevere with this project. My good friend, Alwyn Lim, was unstinting with his encouragement and practical help. My personal assistant, Emily Ng, helped me to balance the competing demands on my time. I am grateful to them all.

Several people took the time to read the drafts and comment on them. My sincere thanks to Kirpal Singh, Warren Fernandez, Philip Holden, Janadas Devan and P.N. Balji, as well as to the ISEAS peer

review committee. All errors are my own. I would also like to acknowledge the work of Triena Ong, managing editor and head of ISEAS Publishing, in ensuring that this biography finally sees light of day.

Last but not least, my loving gratitude to my family who put up with my long hours at my various jobs with unstinting support, even if that meant their seeing less of me. Even when I was present with them, my thoughts were often on Raja. Hardly a day went by when I was not thinking about Raja, reflecting on his actions and decisions, pondering on what that revealed about him and his role in shaping the country he loved so dearly.

My husband Graham, the first to hear me think aloud on any interpretation or finding about Raja and to read all my rough drafts, was my rock during this period. In more ways than one, writing Raja's book has been a profound learning experience for me. If I convince the reader of the historical importance and enduring significance of this singular personality, this book, and the effort of all those involved in its making, will not be in vain.

# Author's Note

A word about the narrative style. In reading through the many interviews with Raja and his substantial body of writings, I weaved together his thoughts and reactions to events and recreated scenes to animate them while staying true to the facts. To describe expressions, I relied on available video footage and photographs at the National Archives of Singapore (NAS). Where possible, I tried to preserve the authentic voice of Raja. I have also tried not to intrude on the reconstruction with the usual scholarly apparatus, and relied on my journalism training to tell a story as best I could.

Supporting material is provided in the form of selected bibliography. I have tried to avoid overloading these pages with notes and reduced them as far as I could to essential references which would point interested readers to the relevant sources. Most of his speeches can be found in the ISEAS Library and the National Archives of Singapore (NAS). Where footnotes are not provided for Raja's quotes, these come largely from his oral history recordings with the NAS.

On names: Since there are so many people with similar surnames, which can confuse the reader — for example, Lim Hong Bee, Lim Kean Chye, Lim Yew Hock, Lim Chin Siong — I have used their Chinese names, Hong Bee, Kean Chye, Yew Hock, etc. As for Tamil names, an examination of Raja's family tree provided by his family reveals that there can be different spellings to the same name — for example, Pillay/Pillai, Sabapathy/Sabapathi, and Annammah/Annamah — which arose from romanising Sanskrit/Tamil names at different times. Where official records are unavailable, I use the version

confirmed by Raja's family. It is also important to note that the names follow the patronymic tradition, with the father's name prefixed to the personal name. Hence, in Sinnathamby Rajaratnam, the first name — Sinnathamby — is that of the father. Rajaratnam is the given name. It is common for the patronymic name to be reduced to an initial as in S. Rajaratnam. For easier reading, wherever possible, I have also opted for names which would be used more readily in conversation, after a proper introduction; hence it is Raja throughout the book, and not Rajaratnam. No disrespect is intended.

The narrative of this book covers the period 1915 to 1963. For compatibility with quotations, many usages current at that time have been retained, particularly with regard to place-names. Hence, for example, Ceylon is used, and not Sri Lanka, and Peking, not Beijing.