

Reproduced from *Lim Kim San: A Builder of Singapore*, by Asad-ul Iqbal Latif (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2010). This version was obtained electronically direct from the publisher on condition that copyright is not infringed. No part of this publication may be reproduced without the prior permission of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies. Individual articles are available at < <http://bookshop.iseas.edu.sg> >

LIM KIM SAN

The **Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS)** was established as an autonomous organization in 1968. It is a regional centre dedicated to the study of socio-political, security and economic trends and developments in Southeast Asia and its wider geostrategic and economic environment. The Institute's research programmes are the Regional Economic Studies (RES, including ASEAN and APEC), Regional Strategic and Political Studies (RSPS), and Regional Social and Cultural Studies (RSCS).

ISEAS Publishing, an established academic press, has issued almost 2,000 books and journals. It is the largest scholarly publisher of research about Southeast Asia from within the region. ISEAS Publishing works with many other academic and trade publishers and distributors to disseminate important research and analyses from and about Southeast Asia to the rest of the world.

LIM KIM SAN

A BUILDER OF SINGAPORE

Asad-ul Iqbal Latif



INSTITUTE OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES

Singapore

First published in Singapore in 2009 by ISEAS Publishing
Institute of Southeast Asian Studies
30 Heng Mui Keng Terrace
Pasir Panjang
Singapore 119614

E-mail: publish@iseas.edu.sg

Website: <http://bookshop.iseas.edu.sg>

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.

© 2009 Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore

The responsibility for facts and opinions in this publication rests exclusively with the author and his interpretations do not necessarily reflect the views or the policy of the publisher or its supporters.

All net proceeds from the sale of this book will go to the YMCA-Lim Kim San Volunteers Programme as the YMCA was one of Mr Lim's favourite causes.

ISEAS Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Latif, Asad-ul Iqbal.

Lim Kim San : a builder of Singapore.

1. Lim, Kim San, 1916–2006.
2. Cabinet officers—Singapore—Biography.
3. Singapore—Politics and government—1963–1965.
4. Singapore—Politics and government—1965–1990.

DS610.63 L73L35

2009

ISBN 978-981-230-927-3 (soft cover)

ISBN 978-981-230-928-0 (hard cover)

ISBN 978-981-230-929-7 (PDF)

Cover Photo: Singapore Ministry of Culture, obtained from the Lim Family.

Typeset by Superskill Graphics Pte Ltd

Printed in Singapore by Utopia Press Pte Ltd

Contents

<i>Foreword by Lee Kuan Yew</i>	vii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xi
<i>The YMCA-Lim Kim San Volunteers Programme</i>	xii
<i>Family Tree</i>	xiii
1. The Man with the Blanket	1
2. Early Life	12
3. The Japanese Years	22
4. Choosing Sides	34
5. Judging People: The Public Service Commission	44
6. Housing a Nation: The Housing and Development Board	52
7. Housing a Nation: Resettling a People	77
8. Housing a Nation: Owning Homes, Reclaiming Land	90
9. Politics, Elections, and Malaysia	111
10. Minister for Finance	136
11. Minister for the Interior and Defence	162
12. Other Ministries and Roles	194
13. A Life Well Lived	224
<i>Index</i>	235
<i>About the Author</i>	244

Foreword

Lim Kim San was a man of great determination. He lived a full life and also made great contributions to Singapore. Singaporeans now own their HDB homes. They owe this to him for setting a system that made this result possible.

Of all my old guard colleagues, he was the most active after he retired as minister in 1980. He became Senior Adviser to Singapore Press Holdings where he helped until illness overcame him in the last nine months of his life just before his death at the age of nearly ninety.

He suffered during the Japanese Occupation. The dreaded Kempeitai (Japanese Military Police) tortured him, accusing him of being pro-communist and pro-British. He was flogged, beaten, kicked and physically abused. He was confined in a filthy over-crowded room of thirty persons, sitting on his haunches all day and slept on a hard surface without a blanket at night which caused aches and pains. Released after a week, he was re-arrested a second time. Again more blows, kicks and lashes. In the cell with thirty other persons, there was only one squatting toilet, the water from which was used for defecating, washing and drinking.

In 1959 when I first assumed office, I made him a member of the Public Service Commission and later Deputy Chairman. In 1960, I made him Chairman of the HDB (Housing and Development Board).

The HDB was under the Minister for National Development, one Ong Eng Guan who was wildly popular for his theatrical populist gestures, posturing as an anti-colonialist by sacking and humiliating expatriates in his Ministry. To show the other expatriates still in our service that we wanted them to stay, that they were not at the mercy

of the capricious Ministers, I had the expatriate Permanent Secretary, one Val Meadows, transferred to my office as the Permanent Secretary, Special Duties.

As Minister for National Development, Ong Eng Guan told Lim Kim San to hire workers direct and not use contractors in building the flats. Kim San sought me out to ask whether I wanted him to build flats or to become a labour contractor. I overruled his Minister and told Kim San to do things the way he knew best. With his keen business sense, he built the homes we needed speedily and economically with the labour skills and technology of that era.

He built two blocks of flats comprising 324 units along Cantonment Road in my Tanjong Pagar constituency. At the election time in September 1963, it was half completed. Huge crowds of leftist students from the Chinese middle schools and Nanyang University worked the ground, visiting nearly every household in Tanjong Pagar. They wanted to unseat me. These two uncompleted blocks of flats reminded the people that I could complete the building of the few hundred homes, not these leftists. I was re-elected.

I persuaded Kim San to stand for elections in September 1963. I needed men of integrity, courage and ability, who could get things done. He fought in Cairnhill and won. I made him Minister for National Development.

He had told me he could not make speeches, and that he was unsuited for politics. I replied that if he spoke his mind and did not worry whether his speeches had oratorical flourish, he would carry the people with him. He spoke with sincerity and people could sense it. He also carried out what he promised. He won their confidence.

He has an intuitive sense to feel people's characters, motivation and capabilities. Once he described to me how, after he shook hands with a thug, a Chinese Singaporean who had become an important good friend of Tengku Abdul Rahman, the Prime Minister of Malaysia, he felt repulsed and wanted to wash his hands. He was dead right

about that evil man. I had him join me to interview candidates for jobs for high office and even candidates for elections and MPs, to help select the right candidates.

After he retired in September 1988, he became Chairman of Singapore Press Holdings (SPH). He trimmed costs, and cut waste in staff and materials and increased profits in SPH. Convinced that advertising would increasingly come from the electronic media, he took SPH into the digital fields and made SPH one of the most profitable newspaper groups.

Ever the shrewd businessman, he arranged an SPH dinner on 16 September 1998 on my seventy-fifth birthday to launch the first volume of my memoirs that he had urged me to write for SPH/Times.

He remained active until the last few months before he died just before reaching ninety. Whenever I needed someone with integrity and judgement to carry out a mission, I called upon Kim San. He became Chairman of the Council of Presidential Advisers and a Chancellor of Singapore Management University.

He enjoyed life. He was a gourmet. He dressed smartly and with good taste.

He refused to allow physical infirmities to disable him. He had had several operations for his neck and spine over the last forty years of his life. A surgeon fused his neck vertebra but with no great improvement. Then an excruciating back pain led to another operation. Again, the operation was not fully successful. He forced himself to walk daily despite the pain. Finally, he got his muscles to loosen up and the pain bearable for him to golf again. He made his life worth living by his indomitable spirit. He was a valued colleague and a great friend.

*Lee Kuan Yew
Minister Mentor of Singapore
April 2009*

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank Ambassador K. Kesavapany, Director of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, for trusting me with this work. Mr Lim Kim San's family, particularly Mr Lim Kiat Seng, was a wonderful source of help, not least in helping me select the photographs that appear in this book. I am also grateful to Ms Mylene Ng, Personal Assistant to Mr Lim at Singapore Press Holdings, for her help during the initial stages of writing it. I thank Mrs Gretchen Liu for her help in identifying people in the photographs. This book would not have been possible without the excellent Oral History Interview conducted by Mrs Lily Tan of the National Archives. Ms Fatanah Sarmani, production editor in the Publications Unit of ISEAS, was a source of unfailing support.

The YMCA-Lim Kim San Volunteers Programme

The YMCA of Singapore is a community organization, based on Christian values and affiliated worldwide, that engages a critical mass of volunteers to serve others regardless of race, language or religion.

The late Mr Lim Kim San was an Honorary Life Member and an active supporter of the YMCA.

To honour this distinguished son of Singapore, recognize his life in the service of others, and to hold him out as an inspirational challenge to our volunteers, the YMCA Volunteers Service Programme has been named after him.

The Programme aims to:

- a) Promote volunteerism amongst Singaporeans, in particular in YMCA local community and international service programmes,
- b) Attract and retain volunteers to undertake sustained service in specific service programmes, as well as recognise their service,
- c) Enhance the capability of volunteers to better serve and understand the beneficiaries under their care,
- d) Identify and develop leaders amongst our volunteers, and
- e) Encourage and facilitate corporate volunteerism.

Family Tree

LIM KIM SAN

30 November 1916 – 20 July 2006

Parents: Lim Choon Huat and Wee Geok Khuan

Siblings: Lim Yan Siew, Lim Yan Lian, Lim Cheng Siong, Lim Yan Swee, and Lim Yan Leng.

Wife: Pang Gek Kim

Children: Lim Eng Tin (m. Lee Weng Yan), Lim Eng Hong (m. Ee Kean Leong), Lim Kiat Seng (m. Pauline Lim Mee Goh), Lim Siu Tin (m. Jimmy Beng Kian Siew), Lim Kiat Beng (m. Linda Lee), and Lim Siu Horng (m. Tay Puan Siong).

Grandchildren: Lee Yu Chuan (m. Amy Ng Ka Yin), Lee Yu Ching (m. Wee Seng Hong), Ee Kuo-Ren (m. Natalie Ho Chin Yee), Ee Yuen-Ling, Lim Ee Ming, Beng Teck Liang (m. Connie Yang), Beng Li-Siier (m. Shashi Kumar), Beng Li-Hsien, Jonathan Lim (m. Cony Ee), Anthony Ee-Li Lim (m. Jean Chang), and Adrian Tay (m. Leslie Tay).

Great-Grandchildren: Samuel Wee Rui Chang, Matthew Wee Rui Jie, Bradley Beng, Brandon Beng, Annalisa Wei-Ling Lim, Isabella Hui-Ling Lim, Alexander Jie-Hao Lim, and Joshua Zu-Hui Lim.

