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NATION**

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SERVING A NEW NATION

Baey Lian Peck's Singapore Story

Ooi Kee Beng



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FOREWORD

I knew Baey Lian Peck through his work in the Singapore Corporation of Rehabilitative Enterprise (SCORE). I found him public-spirited, willing to give of his time in spite of his business schedule. From SCORE, he went on to other duties for the government. I always found him responsive and diligent in carrying out the duties he voluntarily undertook.

Without people like Baey Lian Peck, Singapore could not have been as well run. We have decentralised many of the functions of government into institutions run primarily by public-spirited men and women. The government supplies the secretarial staff. Baey Lian Peck was one such man.

Lee Kuan Yew
13 June 2011

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

It is not given many to have the opportunity to listen to a major actor of a period just passed telling his or her life story in detail and explaining the recent flow of events that one knows about only in passing as reported news. I had that chance, and when interviewing Dr Baey Lian Peck about his experiences and achievements, the contingency of life became evident and the immediacy of the individual's role in events became shockingly apparent.

This is a blessing not to be taken lightly. Working on this book has meant that I got to know Dr Baey well. I will not say “very well”, because he is a surprising multifaceted man whose work in governmental bodies influenced Singapore's development greatly, and whose business activities spanned the world in an unobtrusive and unknown way. The breadth of this man's activities is simply amazing, even now in his old age.

It has been easy writing this volume because Dr Baey is always inspiring and always willing to share of himself. I thank him and his wife, Daisy, for their warm patience during our interviews.

I am also most grateful to Ambassador K. Kesavapany and Mr Tan Keng Jin for bringing this project my way, and for the confidence they had in me that the book would be done in time for Dr Baey's 80th birthday on 13 July 2011.

Ooi Kee Beng
10 June 2011

INTRODUCTION

When the suggestion to write a book on Dr Baey Lian Peck was put to me by ISEAS Director K. Kesavapany in mid-2010, I must confess that I felt very doubtful. I had just put in three years of work on a book on Dr Goh Keng Swee, and was looking forward to getting back to studying Malaysian personalities from the *Merdeka* years. Not another Singaporean, I thought.

But I had no idea who this Dr Baey was. In fact I had never heard of him, and none of my peers had heard of him. This was not strange, since I began living in Singapore only in 2004. And so, to be fair to the Director, I said I would have to meet the man first before I decided. The head of ISEAS' Public Affairs Unit, Mr Tan Keng Jin, arranged for the three of us to meet for lunch at the Singapore Cricket Club.

It turned out to be a very entertaining meal. Dr Baey was obviously a charismatic individual. Most significantly for me, he was clearly a very frank and honest person, and he had a lot of stories to tell. I was hooked. I had to find out more about him and his improbable tales.

I now think that it was exactly because I had just finished a book on a Singaporean leader that I felt drawn towards the story of Dr Baey Lian Peck. What is always not sufficiently present when authoring a biographical account of great leaders like Dr Goh are the soft voices and untold tales that lurk in the

shadows, without which that main plot would not be plausible. In fact, the main plot is fatally bland unless one assumes the existence of these sub-plots.

And yet, the supporting cast in the big drama of nationhood is seldom studied seriously. This is a failing on the part of historians. These sub-plots are stories in their own right.

In that important sense then, the project I was being offered promised to still a disquiet that had settled upon me following my choice to base my book on Dr Goh largely on his writings. The adjoining and the underlying stories began to seek my attention.

Now, Dr Baey does not have a soft voice, but his stories definitely do need telling. As I was to find out, his contribution to Singapore's success was greatest in the country's early decades. That is why his name is unknown to the young.

A book must develop organically, and one must let the subject seek out its best presentation. This became evident to me when I began putting pen to paper [fingers to keyboard, actually]. My training as an academician got in my way immediately, and whatever formal style I chose to use seemed to empty the text of what I knew had to be its essential emotive content.

Telling Dr Baey's story without conveying his enthusiasm, his commitment and his warmth would be a literary crime. And so, in the end, it became obvious. I had to settle for a First Person Narrative. Dr Baey's story must be told in his own words. I must take on the role of the amateur weaver of a rough tapestry, and the multi-coloured wool must come from him.

This book is thus based on many interviews that I had with him between July 2010 and February 2011 at his apartment at The Caribbean in southern Singapore. Other major sources that I used include his meticulously collected private papers, as well as the transcription of oral history interviews he had given to

Mr Santanu Gupta between September and November of 2008 for the National Archives of Singapore.

Dr Baey is a man fascinated by how he came to play such an important role in the life of so many people who were in dire need. He credits his father for teaching him all the important things he knows, but unlike his father, he became much more than just an enviably successful businessman. He became a public servant, and it is at that nexus between being entrepreneurial and public-spirited that so much of his ingenious innovations came into being.

Just when he was succeeding as a businessman, Singapore became an independent but anxious country. This placed him in a potentially influential position. And once he came to the attention of Singapore's first generation of leaders such as Dr Toh Chin Chye, Mr Lim Kim San, Mr Chua Sian Chin, Dr Goh Keng Swee and Mr Lee Kuan Yew, he became a useful personality they could recruit whenever a social crisis threatened.

Each time, Dr Baey answered the call and each time, he rose to the challenge. Born the son of a born businessman, he developed a sixth sense for solving problems, be these social, economic or — in later years — spiritual.

And he did it all for free.

As he likes to note, all in all, over the years, he spent sixty years being chairman of statutory boards, and a hundred years being a board member. This is not technically correct. Many of the boards he was involved in were not statutory boards, such as NTUC Welcome or Ngee Ann Technical College or the Engineering Industries Development Agency (EIDA). But they do add to the overall impression that his contributions to his country were profound and numerous. What's more, his work on a major statutory board, i.e. the Housing & Development Board, is not even discussed in this book.

His is definitely a Singapore story, and one that Singaporeans should know about and take pride in. While his life reflects the suffering, the uncertainty and the enthusiasm of his people over the last eighty years, it is his role in building the country he loves so dearly that provides both exciting insights into the problems that a new nation must face and much needed reminders of the choices a new citizen of a new nation must make.