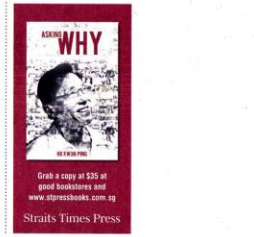


A journey of ironies

He was a political detainee but was later invited by the PAP to run as a candidate, a radical student activist who became the founder-chairman of Singapore's third national university. Ho Kwon Ping's book *Asking Why* is a collection of speeches and articles from a public intellectual and businessman whose career has sometimes taken improbable turns. Here are excerpts on key chapters of his life.



What it was like under ISA detention

With a perspective developed from my Stanford days and unfamiliar with the political constraints in Singapore, I wrote freely in FEER about Singapore issues as I saw them.

I should probably have realised, when I was charged under the Official Secrets Act for an article about the SAF (I was found guilty and fined a few thousand dollars, which FEER paid on my behalf), that this was a warning from the Government. But perhaps this was too subtle or I was too headstrong; I did not moderate my writings, which became increasingly critical of the PAP.

Finally, as part of a general crackdown against what was billed as a conspiracy to discredit the PAP internationally, I was detained under the ISA. Returning to Barbary Walk one day in early 1977, I was surprised by plainclothes officers who put a hood over my head, and drove me to an undisclosed location. I was informed that a detention order had been served against me, and I could be held without trial for two years, after which it could be renewed indefinitely.

I was then put into a small windowless room of about 1.5 square metres with just a concrete bench. Except for toilet breaks monitored by Gurkha guards and sessions with the interrogators, I led a solitary existence with no sense of day or night, or of time passing. I recall vividly breaking into a cold sweat and panicking simply because I could not discipline my mind to think of nothing. I also watched with great concern as a single ant crossing the small cell, simply to focus my mind on something. My restless and ill-disciplined mind was my greatest weakness.

Solitary confinement was very effective in making detainees crave human contact, in the form of one's interrogator. The disorientation over time - it was bright lights every moment of my stay and food was brought in sometimes when one was full, or when one was very hungry - was also effective in breaking down the sense of self. There are other memories which are as alive as when the events happened some 40 years ago.

My detention lasted for about two months, and I was released when I made a confession both on television and in writing. I have sometimes been asked if I felt that my detention was wrongful, and if so, whether I bear any grudge against Lee Kuan Yew. This is an interesting question because I do believe that I was wronged - obviously, I believe I was innocent of the charges of being a pro-communist sympathiser who wanted to bring down the Government and I was coerced to confess. But I do not bear any grudge against neither Mr Lee nor the PAP.

The key difference between those who detained me - principally Lee Kuan Yew - and others after Gandhi - the most abominable leader of modern times, Lee acted for what he truly believed to be in the best interests of Singapore. Those to whom I will never speak to, however, did me wrong for their own benefit.



SMU founding chairman Ho Kwon Ping (second from left) looking at a model of the Singapore Management University's latest five-storey development at the ground-breaking ceremony earlier this year, with (from left) Minister for Social and Family Development Desmond Lee, donor Dr Tahir and SMU president Arnaud de Meyer. ST PHOTO: KHALID BABA

Surprising roles and varied interests

Without planning, forethought or intention, I had slowly segued from being a student activist and radical journalist to a family-business custodian and then an entrepreneur.

I enjoyed business tremendously, partly because it gave me the financial independence to have to report to no one, but also because of the freedom to pursue any, and even all, of my interests.

My interests were varied and not compartmentalised. My interest in tourism and environmental sustainability converged with family time - Claire and I would discuss work with great passion during our own holidays, and trips to our resorts with our children were inadvertent education lessons and slow induction into the family business.

I maintained an interest in political issues, and had a short encounter with the People's Action Party (PAP) which I have never spoken or written about. Three years after returning to Singapore from Hong Kong, I was approached by the PAP to consider running as a PAP candidate in the 1984 general election. I was 32 years old. I've forgotten who approached me but I agreed to meet Goh Chok Tong, who was then the PAP's organising secretary for the election. Neither he nor I talked about my detention seven years earlier, and I agreed to go for the selection process.

I duly went through a wide range of eclectic psychometric exercises from the typical Rorschach tests as well as strange questions (I remember one with a picture of a table with only three legs showing and the question was how many legs did the table have; another asked what book you would like to have if you were on a deserted island).

After the tests, I appeared in front of a panel of Old Guard ministers including Lee Kuan Yew, and I entered into a somewhat tense debate about race and religion. He finally concluded the session by saying that the tests and interview showed that I might not be content to be a Member of Parliament (MP), but that he could easily (and I recall the precise words) "take you on". But he'd leave it to the younger ministers to decide. He also said that the best thing I'd done was to marry a "grounded" Singaporean girl. I had Claire about this episode, which naturally cemented her opinion of Lee Kuan Yew as a wise man.

I consulted my parents, who were against the idea of my entering politics as I had just joined the family business with no siblings to replace me. My mother also warned me against my headstrong outspokenness, a trait which she knew only too well as I probably inherited it from her.

Several days later, Goh Chok Tong asked if I was willing to shadow the then MP for Jalan Kayu, Hwang Soo Jin. I did so, and was mentioned in the press as the likely candidate for the PAP there.

A few days before the elections, Goh Chok Tong called me back and said that a few members of the PAP had evinced doubt about my political ambitions and about me as a team player. However, he said that it was my decision whether to run or not, and if I still decided to run, the PAP would field me. I didn't consider this to be a very solid endorsement and suggested that I drop out, to which he did not object. We've never spoken about this episode since.

After my wife, Claire, completed her term as a Nominated Member of Parliament in 2001, I was asked by a minister to serve as an NMP from the business sector. I declined partly because I was travelling a lot for my business, but also because I had doubts about my headstrong tendencies, which had only brought problems in my earlier years.

My political career had ended before it ever began. But my engagement with Singapore in other ways had only just begun.

In 1992, I turned 40, and had the first of many private lunches with Lee Kuan Yew in his Istana office. I was not particularly special; he was actively planning for not only politi-

cal succession, but generational succession in all areas of public service. Others have told of the lunches with one normal-sized piece of steak (for his guest) and one tiny piece of steak (for himself), of his ability to devour an entire pomelo, tacking it with gloved hands, and of course, of his inordinate curiosity about things and willingness to engage in a good debate, so long as it was intellectually rigorous.

From these lunches, a number of Singapore Inc appointments flowed. I was first asked to chair small entities, such as the Speak Mandarin Campaign, the National Council on the Environment, and various ad hoc committees. My first appointment as the chairman of a more sizeable entity was at Singapore Power, when it was first split off from PUB. I also served on the boards of Singapore Airlines, Singapore Tourism Board and GIC, and as the chairman of Mediacorp. This last appointment brought me occasional tinges of *deja vu* when I walked through the Caldecott Hill studios - some 30 years earlier, I had been a young news producer in the same buildings.

But in an ironic twist of fate, the one institution I have been most associated with involves a sector towards which I previously had the greatest disdain: university education.

In 1998, then Deputy Prime Minister Tony Tan asked to see me, via Professor Cham Tao Soon, president of Nanyang Technological University. I had a chequered university education - it took me nine years and three universities to simply get a bachelor's degree - and had given speeches critical of the Singapore system. And so, it was with more than mild surprise that I met Dr Tan, and with even greater apprehension that I accepted the invitation to be the founding chairman of a new university.

Over almost 20 years, Singapore Management University (SMU) has achieved a credibility which its founders only dared to hope for at its creation. Along the way, I've been given accolades, including the Meritorious Service Medal and the Distinguished Service Order, for which I am truly simply the representative of so many others who made SMU what it is today.



It didn't take Mr Ho long to ask his wife out after their first introduction in 1975, and romance blossomed. He wrote in his book: 'Claire and I were married on July 7, 1977, but had our formal wedding dinner only in May 1978. Our wedding date is easy to remember and also a once-in-a-decade - 7-7-77!' PHOTO: LIANHE ZHAOBAO

Journalism, friendships and Claire

Having to repeat a syllabus in Singapore that was almost identical to what I had in Stanford, and choosing to live on my own and support myself, I started to do freelance journalism out of boredom and to earn some money.

I got into journalism by accident. As a teenager in the late 1960s, spending my first summer in Singapore, I worked as an intern at The Straits Times, Singapore's main English-language newspaper, where I befriended Dr Wee Kim Wee, who later served as the President of Singapore from 1985 to 1993, and formed a lifelong friendship.

My first byline - unpaid - was for a short news piece on a student demonstration led by Loo Choon Yong, then a medical student who later became the founder and executive chairman of Raffles Medical Group. We had a heated argument which led to our eventually becoming housemates and then loyal friends.

My very first paid article was probably also the most enjoyable assignment I ever had. A photographer friend and I came up with the idea of chronicling the routines of Singapore's pre-dawn workers, from fish market workers to news vendors, and it was fun going around on my motorbike to see a slice of Singapore life which most people never see. Being paid for writing about things I enjoyed doing anyway seemed a dream job. I made something around \$200 for a single article.

There was no looking back - what easier way to earn a living? Journalism paid my share of the rent in a shared house; for a second-hand motorcycle and excursions to the east coast of Malaysia with my then girlfriend (and now wife).

Eventually, I became a "stringer" (a piece-rated rather than salaried correspondent) for the Far Eastern Economic Review, an English-language Asian news magazine based in Hong Kong, and then a full member of the Singapore bureau. My political inclinations from Stanford days began to resurface as I started to discover Singapore society.

Not only was I virtually a repeat student, I was also classified a "mature student" at the University of Singapore - a freshman at around 23 years old. Everyone else in my cohort in NS were university graduates, so while I returned to university, they were starting to work.

My army mate who received the Sword of Honour, Teo Soon Hoo, joined Keppel Corporation in his first and last job. Sadly, he died in 2014 from pancreatic cancer. Back in 1975, he invited me to a lunch at the then Salat Bowl, a cafe in the Cold Storage supermarket building in Orchard Road, which was then redeveloped into The Centrepoint.

Joining him was a pretty girl he introduced as a good friend. I knew very few people in Singapore, much less girls. I was struck by not only her long-haired beauty, but

her forthright confidence. She was doing her honours year in sociology at the University of Singapore and also working as secretary to the cultural attaché of the French Embassy. She had also studied at the Sorbonne and was fluent in French (mainly by having had a French boyfriend). She had chosen the name, Claire, while in France, as *See Ngoh* was too difficult to pronounce.

After the first introduction, I didn't take long to ask her out. She rode pillion on my motorbike - without a helmet, which was quite illegal - and I drove jerkily so that she would have to hug me tightly. We drove to normally inaccessible places in Singapore, and I even pretended to cook a meal in my shared house at Barbary Walk, which in retrospect, she pretended to enjoy.

We became a couple, and took weekend rides up the east coast of Malaysia, enjoying the rustic desolation of its beaches and plantations.

Since I had no regular office hours, I often visited the French Embassy, and was naturally snubbed by all the sophisticated diplomats who treated me as a somewhat coarse and uncultured Singaporean - even though the Ambassador knew me, as my father had been awarded the Chevalier de la Legion d'Honneur for his services to Franco-Singapore relations while he had been Singapore's ambassador to the EU.

In those days the only way of instantaneous written communication was by telex. As a journalist, I used it as a daily tool. So, on one particularly extended overseas trip, when I missed Claire dreadfully, I wrote a long, passionate poem to her at the embassy telex address. I assumed it would simply be passed to her by the telex operator, as was done in news agencies.

Little did I know that all telexes went to the Ambassador's office first, and then several copies were sent onwards - to Paris' Quai d'Orsay, to the local embassy archives, and to the intended recipient.

My telex-poem to Claire was personally handed to her by a smiling Ambassador, and after that, whenever I visited the embassy and bumped into him, he always gave me a smile and a wink, as if to say, you're OK, you're French at heart.