

I told John. He might have been disappointed but he did not show it, at least not on the surface.

“Just as well,” he said.

I never saw Dr. North again. He went on to become the Vice-Chancellor of Oxford University and was knighted by the Queen.

ALIVE IN THE CROCODILE PIT

When God wants to destroy someone, He first makes him crazy

Suntec City was built according to the principles of *feng shui*. It is shaped like a left hand. A huge man-made fountain resembles the palm, and the five buildings – one short and four long – resemble the fingers; hence, the name ‘Five Fingers Mountain’.

A Five Fingers Mountain is also featured in the folklore *Journey to the West*. It is there that the Monkey King is incarcerated by the gods for his sins. He is only set free when he agrees to accompany a Buddhist monk on his pilgrimage to the West to obtain the book of enlightenment. The monk travels with his three protégés and a dragon prince who acts as his horse. They have agreed to protect the monk as he travels. The journey is perilous and fraught with danger.

The Monkey King is born out of a piece of rock. The gods use a brilliant light to trace his every movement. He is clever, brave and, at times, mischievous. On one occasion, he makes trouble in Heaven. The gods send an army to subdue him. He manages to defeat the army single-handedly. He does it by using his many powers, including the power to clone himself many times by pulling hairs from his body and blowing them to become his doubles. He is also able to transform himself in seventy-two different ways. His somersaulting allows him to travel long distances by leaping.

He is controlled by the monk through a headband he wears which he cannot remove. Only the monk can. By chanting a spell, the monk can tighten the band whenever the Monkey King needs to be disciplined.

My journey through Singapore was fraught with danger. It was as perilous as the Monkey King’s journey to the West. The monk took the shape and form of the Chairman.

I was overly optimistic that I could control Suntec City – a bold attempt that was an act of heroism mixed with a dash of madness. Tan Sri considered Suntec City his possession and a vehicle to advance his career. He would fight tooth and nail to keep it. Cheng Yu Tung made no bones about it. It was just another consortium project. He did not wish to be bound together, in his words, “for a hundred years”. On the surface, Cheng had the support of Li Ka Shing and Lee Shau Kee – two of Hong Kong’s richest tycoons – but, behind the façade, the alliance was falling apart and the act-in-concert agreement was rendered less and less relevant.

There was intensive rivalry between Li Ka Shing and Lee Shau Kee. Both of them vied to be Hong Kong’s richest. At times they were at each other’s throats. The difference between Number 1 and Number 2 is huge. The former gets all the attention; when prime ministers and politicians visit, they ask to see him. He also gets to see them when he travels overseas. He gets all the media attention. He is sought after by money men such as the head of Goldman Sachs, Morgan Stanley and other top international bankers and financiers. Deals are often presented to him on silver plates together with all the finance he needs. He gets the first bite of the cherry, so to speak – the right of first refusal – before the same deal is passed down the line to the next person.

Being first therefore means everything. The two fight bitterly for the top spot. Once there, the victor guards the privilege jealously. He will do anything to ward off challenges and attempts to unseat him.

For as long as one could remember, Li Ka Shing was untouchable in that Number 1 slot as Hong Kong’s richest man. He basked in the sun. But at times his pre-eminence was challenged.

“Mr. Li, I need your approval on this matter,” I said. “I have already spoken to Colin Lam and—”

“Don't mention that name to me,” interrupted Li. “He is a...” He muttered something.

“What? Mr. Li, I am talking about Colin Lam, the right-hand man of—”

“Yes, I don't want to hear that name,” retorted Li.

“What happened?”

“Okay, I will tell you. Did you know Yeung Chi Wan?”

“Yes, I did. He was the owner of Miramar Group. He died recently, didn't he?”

I knew Yeung through his long-time mistress who was a successful businesswoman in her own right. She owned chains of restaurants and boutiques. She was a woman about town. Everyone knew her.

She used to describe how romantic her lover was. Every time they met, Yeung would reserve a room at the French restaurant in his hotel – the Miramar Hotel – and order flowers, red roses, to fill the room. There they would dine by candlelight. Yeung was generous to a fault.

“Yes, after he died we had reached an agreement with his family,” Li continued. “Larry Yung and I would each take fifty per cent of the shares to be sold by the family.”

Larry Yung was once the richest man in China. He headed CITIC, a giant state-owned conglomerate that is listed in Hong Kong.

“Then Lee Shau Kee came along and said he too wanted to be included in the deal. Larry Yung and I agreed to carve out ten per cent each from our stakes and gave twenty per cent to him. He agreed. For all intents and purposes it was a done deal – my word is my bond. I then left the execution part to Victor, my son, to handle.

“Unbeknown to us, Lee Shau Kee reneged on the agreement. He went behind our backs and offered fifty cents more per share to the widow. He succeeded in snatching the company from us. When the deal was made, he walked out of the room rubbing his hands gleefully saying, ‘Victor, I am sorry. I am very sorry. I've let you down.’”

I could see that Li was still fuming as he recounted the incident.

After taking over the Miramar Group, Lee Shau Kee was propelled into the Number 1 spot. Li Ka Shing was unseated. Indeed, that year *Forbes* rated Lee Shau Kee the fourth richest in the world, behind only Warren Buffett, Wal-Mart's Waltons and Bill Gates. Being the richest man in Hong Kong raised his profile beyond all expectations. Politicians and international financiers flocked to him in droves. He was sought after by the international media. They overwhelmed him with interview requests. Fame on an international plane gave him even more recognition at home. He went on to hold the coveted Number 1 spot for a while before Li caught up again and displaced him.

The two men became antagonistic to each other. However, in business as in politics, there are no permanent enemies or friends. It all depends on what serves the interest of the party at any given point in time.

It is strange how the human mind works. When one basks in the sun of success, one thinks the sky is the limit. After all, Li Ka Shing had started from scratch and within a short period of time he had been propelled to the top. In a capitalistic society like Hong Kong, nothing is impossible. The important thing is to get on the track. Anyone can then be launched into the orbit of tycoons, me included. I could not forget the incident with Cheng Yu Tung that happened in or around 1995 when I had moved to Singapore.

“Big Brother Tung,” I addressed Cheng Yu Tung by his nickname one day when I called on him at his office.

“Big Brother Robert,” Cheng returned the courtesy.

It took me by surprise. How one addresses a person is determined by the pecking order – one's position in society. In the hierarchy of things in Hong Kong, one must be senior enough before one can address Cheng as ‘Big Brother’, let alone be addressed back by him in the same fashion. He will never call someone below him ‘Big Brother’ unless that person is a close personal friend. This mode of address is reserved for his equals such as ‘Big Brother Li (Ka Shing)’. Most people call him ‘Mr. Cheng’, and those who work for him, ‘Lo Chun’ – Commander-in-Chief.

I was surprised Cheng addressed me in that manner and it was not just him; of late, I had noticed others in Hong Kong had also begun to call me 'Big Brother Robert' – a phenomenon that was as strange as it was welcome.

It went to my head. "Could it be that I have arrived?" I naively asked myself.

"What are you trying to prove?" Elaine asked me. "Can't you be satisfied with what you have? There is already so much on your plate. What more do you want?"

"That's the way I am. This is my way of getting even with my past... all that discrimination I suffered as a child just because I was poor. It wasn't even my fault. I couldn't control how I was born, could I?"

"Yes, once upon a time, life did short-change you but it's all over now. You should be at peace with yourself. You told me yourself: nowadays when you think about the past you can no longer shed tears no matter how hard you try. What does that tell you? It means the past is over... yes, behind you. It is no longer there to haunt you. There is nothing more for you to avenge. What more do you want?"

"Revenge sees no bounds. I want to be repaid for all those lost years when I suffered at the hands of poverty. I couldn't see it as a child but now it's clear. Instead of boosting my confidence, you are always there to dampen my enthusiasm. Don't you like to see me moving ahead? All wives do... except you. I am sick and tired of your attitude. Why are you always so negative?"

"End of conversation," Elaine retorted. "I am not going to argue with you any more. It is not the past that consumes you; it is the raw ambition... this screw-the-world, get-even-with-the-past... avenge this and get even with that... it is all part of your ego trip. I don't think I can talk to you any more. Why can't you be happy and content? There is so much bliss around you... our family, children, friends... yet you choose to ignore them and always strive for more of what you can't get. This will prove to be your undoing. One day all that pillaging and philandering will come crashing down, and take the family with it."

"You may be right. But at the moment I am surfing on a good wave. I don't know where the wave will carry me. But if I don't try I shall never know. Maybe one day I can control Suntec. Who knows?"

"What control? The shares you own are negligible. How can you control Suntec? T.O. has warned you before: 'A snake cannot swallow an elephant.' My advice to you is: if you sleep so close to the elephants you will get squashed."

"The corporate world is full of examples of 'small' controlling 'big'. Take the example of Jardine Matheson. The two brothers, Henry and Simon Keswick, together own less than three per cent of the stock, yet they control a business empire that is worth US\$30 billion. David Li's shareholding is equally minuscule yet he rules the roost at the Bank of East Asia. This is the route all tycoons take to become who they are. You use 'OPM' to grow 'MOM'. I'm not wrong in thinking big, am I?"

"What is 'OPM'? What is 'MOM'?"

"Other People's Money and My Own Money – you use money that belongs to others to grow your own."

"How can you do that?"

"It's easy. When one is in control, opportunity knocks. There are all sorts of ways one can enrich oneself. For instance, if a good deal comes along one can either give it to the company or keep it for himself. If he decides to keep it, he can use a company that he controls to buy and hold the asset. He places it through incubation until the value goes up. He sells it back to the company. He makes a profit in the process."

"Is that legal?"

"Yes, it's done all the time. The astute businessman won't do anything that is illegal. Oh, no, that would be foolish. There is no law, for instance, that says he can't make his own investment even if he heads a listed company. Yes, he may be required to declare an interest but in real life it is not always done. If he does anything illegal, he may get caught and thrown into prison. No, he won't take such a risk. He won't do anything that he can't get away with. Yes, the criterion is always: can I do this

and that and get away with it? It's all worked into the risk and reward formula. I have seen it all."

"But to control big with small you must be good enough—"

"Are you saying that I'm not good enough?"

"No, but don't you think Suntec is too big? Even if you overcome Tan Sri you may just be there to warm the seat for the 'king' who will come later. In the meantime, he uses you as a foot soldier to test the water, until he is ready to step in and claim the crown. Do you want to fight a war that you can't win and, even if you do win, the spoils are not yours?"

"Do you remember the Chinese parable of a seabird and a giant clam? The two are locked in a life-and-death struggle. The bird has its eye set on the clam's meat. As it pecks, the clam closes up and traps the beak of the bird inside. Neither is prepared to give way. While the tug of war continues, a fisherman comes by and harvests both. It is anyone's guess who that 'fisherman' is."

"You haven't answered my question," I reminded her. "So you are telling me that I am not good enough, aren't you?"

"You said it. I didn't."

"I have to try, haven't I? I've already achieved early success."

"What early success?"

"Don't you know? Ever since I made it known that I had arrived on the back of the act-in-concert agreement, I noticed a visible change in the attitude of the management. Suddenly they listen to me. It has not happened before."

"I don't think your hour of glory is going to last. T.O. has warned you before. If you step onto Tan Sri's turf, he can and will make life difficult for you. Who are you? At best you're just a messenger for the big boys. Please know your place, Robert. It makes no sense to act bigger than you actually are. It's your ego at work again."

"But the big boys support me."

"Don't fool yourself. On the surface, maybe. Below the surface, it's self-interest that drives them. Suntec is just too big. It's not for you. Know yourself, please, Robert."

"Please don't be so negative. Even if I am wrong, let me enjoy my moment of glory. Can't you see? I am basking in the sun. I am the 'ambassador'. Everyone who comes through wants to see Suntec – walk the mall, visit the column-free hall so big it could hold three jumbo jets next to each other, the kitchen with its state-of-the-art equipment, the fountain that has entered the Guinness Book of Records as the largest in the world. It is called the 'Fountain of Wealth' because it is said to generate good 'tze' (air) and people are queuing up just to touch the spouting water. They even sell the water by the bottle, like London fog. I've never had it so good. It's the best time of my life. I am at my prime. Can't you see?"

"Let me warn you. It's just vanity, pure and simple. You can try if you want to but it is going to end the same way. Mark my words. You will not succeed."

"I should at least try and see whether or not I can get there. You may not know but my maternal grandfather tried. He succeeded for a while. Then he fell from a dazzling height. He lost everything – a lifetime of greed came crashing down on him. So what? At least he tried. He got his fifteen minutes of fame. It was his life. And this is my life."

"At least you know what you are up to. For the sake of the family, I wish you luck. But I don't think it is wise for you to tell the world at large that you have the support of the Trio to take control of Suntec. This kind of talk can create problems. It's foolish."

"Well, you may be right. But how else can I establish my authority?"

"This is like talking to a brick wall. I've had it up to my neck. I need a rest. Let's change the subject. Almost every day there is someone passing through. I am sick and tired of entertaining."

"Isn't that wonderful? It is a great feeling. But you can't deny it's good for business. I hit the jackpot and it's big. Shouldn't you be happy too? Remember you have a stake in it."

"I am just a simple housewife. I am not ambitious. My family comes first. Fame and fortune mean little in my world. Look at what success has done to us. You're seldom home; I don't know where you are half the

time. At times I don't even know whether you are here in Singapore or still in Hong Kong. What kind of life is it for me? Money isn't everything, you know. I need peace of mind. I yearn for the old days when you were a struggling solicitor, when family values came first and friends were truthful. Nowadays, when I look around, it is nothing but falsehoods – false values, false sense of grandeur... false this and that. Yes, it's phoney... do you understand? Is it worth it? For the sake of the family, answer me. Is it worth it?"

"Of course it's worth it. I just love it. I work hard. I play hard. My life is exciting. By the way, next week we have been invited to dinner with the President and the First Lady – 7 p.m., next Thursday, at the Istana."

"But Dad and Mum are arriving from Hong Kong the same day. I have arranged a dinner at home with the children."

"I have accepted the invitation. You don't say 'no' to the President of Singapore, do you? The family dinner can wait. What about Friday?"

"But Friday night we have been invited to a concert at the Victoria Theatre."

"If that's the case why don't we have lunch instead – either Friday or Saturday? But please clear it with my secretary beforehand."

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At the Istana, I was surprised to find there were no other guests, just the four of us – the First Couple, Elaine and me.

"Nanyang Girls' High School is my old school," explained the First Lady. "The school wants to raise funds to build a new wing for the boarders. Robert, can you help?"

"Mrs. Ong, I'm only too glad to try," I replied, "but I don't carry much weight, I'm afraid. My appeal may fall on deaf ears. I tell you what, I have an idea. I'll draft a letter for you. Please write and sign it on your letterhead and send it back to me. You can then leave the rest to me."

In the letter that arrived I was asked to approach certain named tycoons. No one could refuse the First Lady. Bingo! It was easy. Almost all the tycoons I approached with the First Lady's signed letter made a donation – some so large they made local donors uneasy.

"Robert, you have spoiled the market for Singapore," one of them chided me. "We don't do things the way you guys do in Hong Kong, you know? It sets a bad precedent."

The First Lady was nevertheless happy – the wing for the boarders at Nanyang Girls' was made possible by the donations.

I was in the good books of the President and the First Lady. We saw each other often both in Singapore and Hong Kong.

"We both live so simply and healthily it boggles my mind even to think about how we can both end up with cancer," said the President.

Sadly, both of them died not many years later; in fact, not long after Ong Teng Cheong's term as the President of the Republic ended.

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In the early 1990s, Hong Kong entered a new era. Its industries had moved north, out of the Territory. China's involvement in international trade became more intense. Hong Kong's integration with the mainland accelerated. Service industries filled the vacuum left by the departing factories. Interest rates were low and unemployment was low despite the changes. It was a boom time for Hong Kong. Not even the imminent return to Chinese rule could affect the mood of optimism. It was as if the casino was about to close; the punters wanted to play the last hand.

Singapore was doing well too. It proved the theory that Hong Kong and Singapore always work in tandem: they go up and down together, seldom one without the other, at least in recent history.

The struggle for control of Suntec entered a new phase. It was a well-known fact that I had impinged on Tan Sri's territory. He would have none of it. Soon he started plotting and fighting back. The process of

cleansing began in earnest. The Chairman had his way of dealing with disloyalty and those he considered his enemies. It was never open, always clandestine. Open confrontation had to be avoided. It was just not his style.

Dr. Chua Yong Hai was a government scholar. He spent many years in government before we recruited him as General Manager of Suntec City. There was no denying that Dr. Chua was a good manager. He oversaw the construction of the project. The man was deep and thoughtful, a true professional in every sense. His integrity was beyond reproach. During his watch, we had not had a single claim for compensation despite the numerous construction and other contracts that went out on the project. It was completed on time, within budget and almost entirely trouble-free. One would have expected Dr. Chua to stay on and steer the company into the next stage – market, sales and rent. But it was not to be.

He was seen to 'tilt' towards the Trio. He learned about the act-in-concert agreement. Being a prudent and careful man, he took the trouble to go to Hong Kong to have it verified. The answer he got proved to be his undoing – his kiss of death.

"Robert, I shall from now on follow orders from your side instead of the Chairman," Dr. Chua said upon his return.

Soon Tan Sri knew. It sealed Dr. Chua's fate.

On the pretext that we needed a different man, a marketing and sales person, at the top to take care of the post-construction era of Suntec City, Dr. Chua was given a golden handshake and left the company.

Another man was appointed. He was given the title of CEO. This time Tan Sri made sure we had nothing to do with his appointment. The new man, therefore, owed his loyalty to Tan Sri. He made no attempts to hide the fact he was the Chairman's man. True to his word, he remained loyal to Tan Sri till the end.

Next the knife fell on SICEC (Singapore International Convention & Exhibition Centre). It was managed by a German named Claus Schultz. As the similar Hong Kong convention facility was managed by New

World, Cheng Yu Tung's flagship, it was natural for Claus Schultz to sympathize with our cause and side with us.

He was replaced.

I was a director in the management company, Singapore Convention and Exhibition Centre Limited. To root out my influence, Tan Sri changed its name to East West Exhibitors Limited and left the company dormant. A new company was formed to manage SICEC.

I was removed in one masterly stroke.

After he consolidated his grip, Tan Sri began to play a game of cat-and-mouse, all done with a view to undermine, marginalize, harm and provoke; in short, wear me down until I lost my cool. My career at Suntec took a turn for the worse, and deteriorated progressively until it became pretty much impossible.

"Robert, you are all stressed out," said Elaine. "You have to find a way to put Suntec City behind you or else your health is going to suffer. Do you still remember what Sir Y.K. Pao, the shipping magnate, used to say to you?"

"Yes, I do. He said that a billion is 1,000,000,000. When '1' gets knocked down the zeros that follow don't mean a thing."

"You're like a bird in a cage. The two chairmen take turns to have you removed from the cage every now and then. They take pleasure in each plucking a feather. Then they put you back in the cage. You'd better throw in the towel and leave Suntec once and for all. It's not your game. Admit it."

"That's absolutely true. I am a prisoner of the Five Fingers Mountain in this book, *Journey to the West*. I wear the headband of the two chairmen which they can tighten at will. It is squeezed so hard that the pain is excruciating. I scream and ask for mercy. It doesn't help. I'm doomed."

I was often driven close to losing my temper. An open confrontation was considered an absolute taboo in a struggle set against the background of the imperial palace. In the intrigues of the court struggle, one could manoeuvre and back-stab but one could never lose one's cool – it was the

prerogative of the Emperor and him alone – lest one be driven out of the court and into exile.

I remember what T.O. had told me: “Never lose your cool. Once you do, the game is over. Remember the character that means ‘forbearance’ in Chinese has the sharp edge of a knife pressed against the heart. It reminds you that even under extreme provocation you must forbear. Forbearance is golden. It is the key to survival.”

Tan Sri stopped holding meetings of the board. Instead he held meetings of the Executive Committee of which I was not a member. In doing so he marginalized me.

I countered by getting Cheng Yu Tung to appoint me as his alternate on the board – I was already a director but the main duties of the board were delegated to a committee (the Executive Committee) of which only the Trio, Tan Sri, Sir Run Run and W.H. Chou were members. I became a de facto member of the Executive Committee as well as being on the board and could continue attending the meetings of the committee as Cheng’s deputy.

Tan Sri reacted by holding paper meetings instead on the pretext that the directors were all busy people and could ill afford the time.

I was again marginalized.

I proposed to Tan Sri’s ally on the board, W.H. Chou, that we should ask the government to build a pedestrian subway linking the nearest underground train station, Raffles, to Suntec City. I was asked to go ahead only to be told that we would not tender when the government, pursuant to my overture, approved and put the project up for public tender. It showed me up badly in government circles. In the end, Hongkong Land, a subsidiary of Jardine Matheson, won the tender. Raffles Link was built.

Tan Sri spent more time in Singapore. He was determined to root out his adversaries with all means at his disposal. On the surface he wore a smiling mask but behind the façade he plotted and manoeuvred clandestinely and duplicitously to isolate and marginalize his rivals without being seen to confront them directly. He was particularly careful

that he did not affront any one of the Trio in the process. He knew they were more powerful than he was and acting in concert they were deadly. He could ill afford to run afoul of them.

Thus the game of cloak and dagger was played out in full, each trying to undo and undermine the other from behind. Increasingly, it resembled one of the dramas that unfolded within the compounds of the old Forbidden City in Imperial China – full of intrigue and cunning, all aimed to destroy adversaries and advance self-interest.

I became the scapegoat. It was not unnatural that Tan Sri considered me to be a pain in the neck. He had to remove me. The backstabbing and secret manoeuvres intensified. The struggles soon acquired the proportion of either ‘you live or I die’ – more from my perspective than his – as the sniping and character assassination came almost entirely from him. Being the Chairman, he was powerful and had at his disposal an array of weapons. He also had the Shanghai shareholders on his side. I was mostly defenceless.

But, occasionally, I too found ammunition to fire back. The Trio was with me.

“The Chairman is bad-mouthing you,” Wee Cho Yaw came over and told me at a pre-lunch gathering.

Soon the Trio – Li Ka Shing, Lee Shau Kee and Cheng Yu Tung – left their conversation with Tan Sri and came over to join us.

It showed the Chairman which side these tycoons were taking. It was gratifying and I took comfort in the knowledge that the most powerful businessmen from both cities openly supported me.

Then an opportunity arose for me to fire back at the Chairman. After Kang Hwi Hwa was jailed, his business empire began to crumble. His company, Amcol, went into receivership. The government-appointed liquidators began an earnest search for a white knight to save the company. To allow the company to falter was considered to be politically unacceptable. The fact that pension money from retail investors was involved meant the government had to prevent the company from going under.

I remembered what Kang had told me when we last saw each other in Las Vegas. With the blessing of the Trio, but completely unbeknown to the Chairman, we started to negotiate with the liquidators with a view to reversing Suntec City and gaining control of Amcol through a back-door listing.

If we were successful, the Chairman would certainly be dislodged as he would have to face an enlarged group of shareholders. The true value of the act-in-concert agreement would manifest itself. Secretly I was hoping I could play a bigger role in the listed company – controlling Suntec as a proxy for the Trio was what I had hoped for.

But an Indonesian buyer emerged at the eleventh hour, just as we were about to close the deal.

“You should not squeeze us so hard on the pricing,” said V.J. Rajah, the liquidator. “We represent the government of Singapore. You must take that into consideration and show us the deference we deserve. If you can't give us more then we will take the deal to the next in line. We've told you that there is an Indonesian buyer in waiting. They are prepared to give us more.”

The deal was being negotiated on Suntec's side by a party that was made up of the likes of Henry Cheng (Cheng Yu Tung's son), Colin Lam and Albert Chow (respectively the right-hand men of Lee Shau Kee and Li Ka Shing). They were hard nuts to crack, the toughest in Hong Kong. It was bad enough dealing with them individually but, when they combined, they were formidable and at times downright impossible to deal with. It was no coincidence that the liquidators were exasperated.

We continued to press hard on the pricing. In the end, true to the words of Mr. Rajah, there was indeed another buyer waiting in the wings. The company was snatched away from us.

The Chairman was raging mad.

“How can you convene a meeting of the Board without going through the chair?” he barked at me.

It was the one time when I almost got even with Tan Sri – almost.

But I would have to wait for another time.

THE PERFECT STORMS

The Hong Kong Club was first opened in 1846. It is located in Central, the heart of Hong Kong. During the colonial era ‘*The Club*’ – as it was simply referred to – was where senior officials and heads of Hong Kong's major *hongs* – conglomerates of British origin such as HSBC and Jardine Matheson – rubbed shoulders and made decisions that affected the livelihood of the people. It was an exclusive gentlemen's club. Its membership was open mainly to white British subjects until as recently as the 1970s. There was nothing in the rules to say that it was off-limits to the Chinese. However, no member nominated and seconded the application of a Chinese other than in exceptional circumstances. If one did so in an act of folly, the application would sit idle, gathering dust. It just would not be brought up for consideration by the Membership Committee. Nor did the Club have any lady members until the door was forced open by the Sex Discrimination Ordinance in 1996 – a piece of legislation that Anna Wu had a hand in.

Then, one by one, domains exclusive to men fell in quick succession. There are no more ‘Speak Easies’ for men at the Club any more.

“There are women at the Members' Bar,” I remarked with some curiosity to an old colonial servant well known to me at the Club. Anna Wu was there with us at the lift.

“Oh, you know,” he spoke in a Scottish accent as he sneered and made a gesture of scorn at Anna Wu, “it's all because your partner... you know, this lady...”

Anna Wu smiled as if to acknowledge what she and her colleagues in the Legislative Council had pulled off.

When British rule ended, many of its members returned to the old country. Admission rules at the Club were relaxed. Nowadays, the ratio of British and Chinese members is close to 50:50. Even today, its members are still the most influential people in the city.

To launch a Singapore Hong Kong Club to rival Hong Kong's icon was an idea that I held dear to my heart. The Club would provide a platform for the elite of the two cities to meet, interact, exchange ideas and perhaps invest together. It would play a pivotal role in bringing not only the two cities but also its leading players close to each other 'by a process of harmonization' – a phrase coined in Singapore. The idea of the Singapore Hong Kong Club was warmly received both in Singapore and Hong Kong.

Finally it was possible. The timing was opportune. Everything was ready. Tycoons from both sides were willing.

My next step was to find a guiding light; what better choice than Lee Kuan Yew to be the Club's patron?

I wrote to the Senior Minister. At the same time I asked Wee Cho Yaw to nominate luminaries from Singapore to be elected to its Board of Governors. I was not conversant with the local business scene. I needed Wee's input to find candidates that matched Hong Kong's nominations.

In hindsight, I suppose Wee supplied me with Singapore's list in anticipation that the Senior Minister would accept the invitation to be the patron. Except for one or two, I did not recognize any of the names. I assumed this was entirely normal as I was new to Singapore. Nevertheless, I noticed all of them belonged to powerful corporations such as Singapore Press Holdings which I knew to be publishers of the *Straits Times* and *Business Times*, two of Singapore's leading dailies.

I wrote to all the nominees. Almost everyone replied giving his consent. However, Lim Kim San, Chairman of Singapore Press Holdings, did not reply.

In the meantime, Lee Kuan Yew declined the invitation. Instead, Minister B.G. Yeo, who was then the Minister of State for Finance and Minister for Foreign Affairs, agreed to be the patron.

Chairmanship was to be by rotation between Hong Kong and Singapore. Since the initiative came from us, it was natural that the first chairman would be a person from Hong Kong. As usual, Li Ka Shing was the first to be approached. He declined. Cheng Yu Tung agreed.

Momentum gathered and the Club was all set to go. It was unstoppable. With so many top businessmen on its list of members and the resources that were at their disposal, the Club was destined to succeed.

News of the Singapore Hong Kong Club spread quickly among the elite of the business communities. It was a runaway success. Everyone worth his salt wanted to join even though membership was by invitation only. No one wanted to be left out. It would be a symbol of inferiority if one was not invited. The reaction was overwhelming.

Being new in Singapore, I was not conversant with local customs and conventions and its history. I wish someone had alerted me to the sensitivity of the situation but it was not to be. The intervening events brought me into the centre of a catastrophic storm like none other I had experienced. It created sheer havoc, consuming me from within and in the end destroying me.

While it was acceptable for Lim Kim San to serve under Lee Kuan Yew – this must have been why Wee Cho Yaw nominated Lim to be a governor in the first place – he would not be pleased if he had to serve under another patron, as a matter of protocol. I was oblivious to how sensitive the matter had become once the Senior Minister declined the role of patron of the Club.

It also drove me out of Singapore... all over a lousy, non-profit-making and charitable club that was meant to serve the interests of both cities.

Prior to moving to Singapore and heeding T.O.'s advice, I had worked towards selling my shares in the 'merchant bank' to Suntec of which Tan Sri was then the Chairman. He also wanted to sell his shares – a five per cent stake. The matter was discussed by the board of Suntec and the parties almost reached an agreement – both of us declared our interests. Li Ka Shing did not attend the board meeting but was briefed by his deputy. When Wee found out what we were up to with our joint venture shares he was not pleased. He expressed his displeasure in no uncertain terms on at least two occasions, both times over the telephone, before the launch of the Club.