



NO MERE INTERLUDE THE UNIVERSITY OF MALAYA IN SINGAPORE

The University of Malaya in Singapore was a crucible for a new nation.

By Alvin Tan

The Li Ka Shing Building with the Tower Block at the National University of Singapore campus in Bukit Timah, 2026. The building was the old Block A of the University of Malaya. The Tower Block, formerly the Science Tower of the University of Singapore, was opened by Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew on 1 July 1966. Photo by Jimmy Yap.

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The National University of Singapore traces its history back to 1905 when the Straits and Federated Malay States Government Medical School was formed. In the ensuing 120 years or so, the university has gone through various incarnations.

Although it is easy to view the 13-year existence of the University of Malaya from 1949 to 1962 as merely a transitional phase, it was more than a mere interlude. Set up during decolonisation, the Cold War and the struggle for independence for both Malaya and Singapore, it was a fascinating experiment in tertiary education.

The Start of Tertiary Education

Tertiary education in Malaya began with the official opening of the Straits and Federated Malay States Government Medical School on 28 September 1905 to train qualified locals as assistant surgeons or general practitioners. In 1913, the school was renamed King Edward VII Medical School and again in 1921 to King Edward VII College of Medicine.¹ (The building is known as the College of Medicine Building today and located within the grounds of the Singapore General Hospital.)

To mark the centennial of Singapore's founding, the Centenary Committee proposed the establishment of Raffles College, which provided higher education in the arts and sciences. Its campus on Bukit Timah Road admitted its inaugural batch of students on 21 June 1928 and officially opened on 22 July 1929.²

More developments took place in the following decade. In August 1938, Malcolm MacDonald, Secretary of State for the Colonies, appointed a commission comprising William H. McLean from the Colonial Office, Harold J. Channon of the University of Liverpool and Kenneth W.M. Pickthorn of the University of Cambridge to “survey existing arrangements for higher education, general and professional, in Malaya”.³

In their report published in December 1939, the McLean Commission concluded that Malaya was not ready for a full-fledged autonomous university. Instead, they proposed the formation of a university college by merging King Edward VII College of Medicine and Raffles College under a joint principal. At that point, only four universities existed in the British Empire – Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), Jerusalem, Hong Kong and Malta. There was little interest or impetus to further develop and expand tertiary education in Malaya at the time.⁴

A New University

Attitudes changed greatly by the mid-1940s. In May 1945, the Asquith Commission – which had been appointed in England in 1943 – recommended that a “colonial university should be a small, completely residential university, with very high standards and an enrolment carefully adjusted to the employment capacity of its own territory”. In 1946, Vice-Chancellor of Birmingham University Raymond Priestley, a member of the commission, proposed establishing a university college in Malaya.⁵

Within months, in March 1947, the Carr-Saunders Commission was appointed to further study the proposal. Chaired by Alexander Carr-Saunders, director of the London School of Economics, the commission toured Malaya to gather views, and released their findings and proposals on 30 April 1948. Its proposal was radical: Malaya was to bypass the preparatory stage of a university college. Instead, a new university – the University of Malaya with full degree-granting powers and with internal or external examiners to maintain academic standards – was to be created immediately through the merger of the two colleges proposed earlier by the McLean Commission in 1939.⁶

On 8 October 1949, the University of Malaya held its foundation day ceremony at the Oei Tiong Ham Hall of the former Raffles College. Speaking at the inauguration, MacDonald, by then Britain's commissioner-general for Southeast Asia and the first chancellor of the university, described it as “a cradle where a truly non-communal nation is nurtured” – a safe place where the idea of a university was cultivated and lived out.⁷

He noted that “the national population will contain a mixture of races. It will include, besides the Malays, Malayan Chinese, Malayan Indians and others whose homes and undivided loyalties lie here. It is essential that communal barriers between them shall



Hedwig Aroozoo (extreme left; later Mrs Hedwig Anuar and the first local director of the National Library) with the first women graduates of the University of Malaya, 1950. Raffles College Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image no. 19980005802 - 0090).

be broken down, that they shall think progressively less of their distinctions of race and more of their common heritage and culture as people of Malaya”.⁸

This lofty vision, driven by the conception of a multiracial Malaya, and which rejected communalism, would be the source of political tension for years to come.

The pomp and pageantry over, the university began its life in earnest. The campuses of the former King Edward VII College of Medicine and Raffles College took on new identities as the home of the University of Malaya. Undergraduates were housed in Raffles College’s existing hostels.⁹ This was intended to be a temporary arrangement until the university moved into its new \$145-million campus in Johor, which was never built due to financial constraints.¹⁰ It was decided eventually in 1953 that the university would be situated in two separate campuses on Bukit Timah Road in Singapore and a yet-to-be identified site in Kuala Lumpur.¹¹

Opportunities for Higher Education

Access to tertiary education expanded when the university opened, and this was especially true for women and minorities. For young women, the new university provided them with opportunities to further their education.¹² Housed in Mount Rosie Hostel on Paterson Road, these young women were, for the most part, new to Singapore’s cosmopolitan urban environment. And it was, for a number of them from Malaya, their first time seeing Singapore.¹³

“While they enter into the life of the university with all its opportunities for social and cultural activities, the girls I talked to all stressed that,

Chancellor Malcolm MacDonald delivering his speech at the first convocation ceremony of the University of Malaya on 8 July 1950. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image no. 19980000813 - 0024).

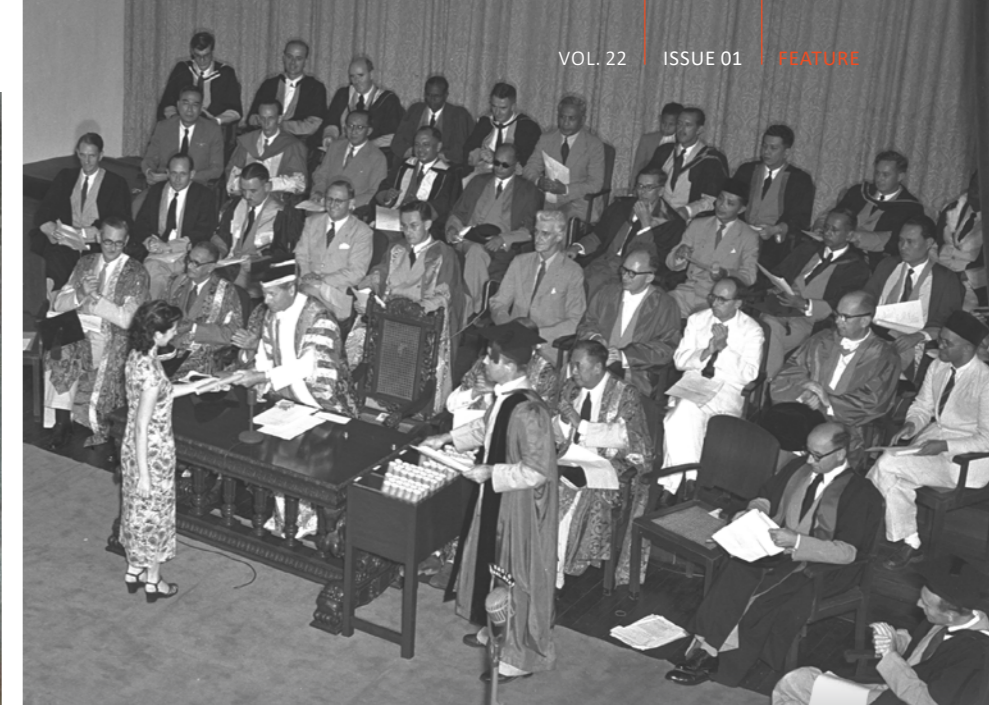
for them, studies take first place,” a *Straits Times* journalist wrote in October 1949. “Nevertheless, they do not look upon their stay at the University merely as a preparation for earning their living. They consider that educated Asian women must play an ever bigger part in the life of their country whether in a profession or in the home as wives and mothers.”¹⁴

At the university’s first convocation in July 1950, 15 women graduates received their degrees. Two were doctors, one a dentist and more than a handful hoped to further their studies in education. Among the graduates was Hedwig Aroozoo (later Mrs Hedwig Anuar), who went on to graduate with first-class honours in English in 1951 and become the first local director of the National Library in 1965 as well as a founding member of the Association of Women for Action and Research in 1985.¹⁵

However, this increase in opportunity and access was limited to the English-educated. As the university was an English-medium institution, the Chinese-educated – those from Chinese-medium schools – were excluded from admission, despite pleas from Chinese educators.¹⁶

In 1959, undergraduates from Chinese-medium schools were admitted to the Faculty of Science after a special committee was convened to interview Chinese middle school students. Described as a “marked departure from normal university practice”, selection was based on their results from the Government Senior Middle (Chinese) School Examination and an interview. Eventually, 40 were selected out of 112: there were 28 from Singapore, 10 from the Federation and two from Sarawak.¹⁷

Malays, too, faced similar obstacles in gaining admission to the university. This was a consequence of limited access to secondary education, particularly



(Top left) The plaque of the opening of the Science Tower of the University of Singapore by Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew on 1 July 1966. Photo by Jimmy Yap.

(Above) Chancellor Malcolm MacDonald conferring a degree at the first convocation ceremony of the University of Malaya on 8 July 1950. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image no. 19980000813 - 0025).

(Left) Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad graduated with a Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery from the University of Malaya in 1953. He is seen here with his future wife, Siti Hasmah Mohamad Ali, who also graduated with the same degree from the University of Malaya two years later. Mahathir later became prime minister of Malaysia. Photo by Kini X, from flickr.



students aiming to end British colonial rule – at the university was eliminated.²⁰ The University of Malaya Students’ Union (UMSU) was, for the most part, moderate and conservative in its outlook and dominated the university’s Student Council.²¹

But the left-wing University Socialist Club (USC), founded in 1953, was a different entity. It had “a broadly socialist identity” and its terms of reference were initially limited: it sought to “stimulate political discussion and activity and propagate Socialist thought within the University; support the University of Malaya Students’ Union in demands for students’ rights; and study the means for unity in Malaya.”²²

Student publications became platforms for activism and advocacy, addressing causes from positions that spanned the political spectrum. *Fajar*, published by the USC, acquired fame and prominence when its editorial board of eight was arrested in a dawn raid and charged with sedition in May 1954 for an article titled “Aggression in Asia”, published in its seventh issue on 10 May that year.²³

The case ended with the eight being acquitted after the case was dismissed by Justice F.A. Chua – who did not deem the article in question seditious – on 25 August 1954. As a result, the USC and *Fajar* gained a certain cachet. They had, after all, fought for and won a case about a fundamental freedom they cherished – the freedom of speech.²⁴

The university’s brush with politics continued into the next decade. On 18 November 1960,

in the rural areas, which in turn precluded access to higher education conducted in English as the medium of instruction.¹⁸ Writing under the moniker C.H.E. Det in October 1949, one Mahathir Mohamad argued forcefully after outlining issues pertaining to Malay academic achievements and challenges that “The University at this stage is not fully beneficial to the Malays and it won’t be unless there are special facilities to enable them to utilise the University to the fullest extent”.¹⁹

Entanglement with Politics

Inevitably, given the zeitgeist of the era, university life was tinged with political overtones. In January 1951, as part of a larger police sweep, the entire apparatus of the left-leaning Anti-British League – a communist-linked organisation comprising





(Above) The upper quadrangle at the National University of Singapore campus in Bukit Timah, 2026. The Federal Building is on the left and the Eu Tong Sen Building on the right. The latter houses the Faculty of Law today. Both buildings are gazetted national monuments. Photo by Jimmy Yap.

(Right) In the second volume of his memoirs published in 2020, Professor Wang Gungwu gives an account of his university education in Singapore and the United Kingdom. Image reproduced from Wang Gungwu and Margaret Wang, *Home Is Where We Are* (Singapore: Ridge Books, 2020), 22. (From National Library Singapore, call no. RSING 950.049510092 WAN).



Singapore's Acting Minister for Labour and Law Ahmad Ibrahim handed a letter to Dennis J. Enright, Professor of English at the university, and warned him to "stay clear of local politics" or have his professional visit pass cancelled. He had on two earlier occasions commented on the government's cultural policy, including the ban on jukeboxes.

The letter reminded Enright that he had overstepped his boundaries. "Whether the Government is right or wrong in banning jukeboxes or whether it should or should not foster a Malayan culture is a matter for the citizens of this country to decide. We have no time for asinine sneers by passing aliens about the futility of 'sarong culture complete with pantun competitions,' particularly when it comes from beatnik professors."²⁵

What was at stake here was not just the banning of jukeboxes in Singapore, but who could and should have free comment on the politics and policies of the newly self-governing state, in the name of academic freedom.²⁶

Literary Arts

The university also proved to be a cauldron for the literary arts, as its eager students embraced poetry as a means of expression. One of Hedwig Aroozoo's early works, "A Rhyme in Time," was described by Malaysian poet Ee Tiang Hong as "a work that merits a place in any anthology of Malaysian poetry that has a historical import."²⁷

Another budding poet was a young Wang Gungwu, who graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in history in 1953, and is a renowned scholar of the Chinese diaspora today. He was the vice-chancellor of the University of Hong Kong from 1986 to 1995.²⁸

For the future historian, writing poetry as an undergraduate was a means to explore and grapple with what it meant to be Malayan. Wang recalled in his memoirs: "We wrote about what the future Malayan literature could be like and imagined the role it could play in educating future generations. Some had envisaged the possibility of Chinese, Malays and Indians communicating with one another in an evolving common language. We all knew that the nature of the country was still unclear. But the idea that we could contribute towards defining it by our efforts to promote its literary identity was tantalizing."²⁹

A New Era

As the 1950s wore on, the University of Malaya found itself in a curious position. On 31 August 1957, the Federation of Malaya became independent. The university was at the crossroads of two political realities: its branch in Kuala Lumpur was in an independent Malaya, while Singapore still remained a colony.

In March 1958, both the Federation and Singapore governments decided to retain the university as a single institution but with two autonomous divisions – separate but equal – in Kuala Lumpur and Singapore. This meant that each division would be controlled by its own divisional council and academic committee and recruit its own staff. There would, however, be a common university council, senate and vice-chancellor.

Slightly over a year later, the political realities changed once more as Singapore attained full internal self-government in 1959. Events unfolded quickly and by late May 1960, both governments had come to an agreement.³⁰ On 1 January 1962, the University of Singapore was born at a midnight ceremony at its



Tommy Koh when he was president of the University of Malaya Law Society, 1961. Source: *The Straits Times* © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.

Bukit Timah campus.³¹ The University of Singapore Ordinance, passed on 16 December 1961, repealed the University of Malaya Ordinance (1959).

The philanthropist Lee Kong Chian was appointed chancellor and B.R. Sreenivasan, principal of the Singapore division of the University of Malaya, took on the role of vice-chancellor. It was no longer a colonial university, as Sreenivasan said in his speech, but a "university which exists to satisfy the educational aspirations of the people of this country."³²

The university's early years have been described by historian Yeo Kim Wah as "a time of high idealism, romantic commitment and near euphoric sentiment."³³ To Wang Gungwu, the era was, in retrospect, a time when "the voices of hope, the idealism, the enthusiasm, the fierce emotions, the thousands of impractical ideas offered, and the immense confidence that only young people can project, coloured everything the students did for some two decades."³⁴

Many of its graduates went on to hold important positions in independent Malaysia and Singapore. Mahathir Mohamad graduated with a Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery degree in 1953, and was the prime minister of Malaysia not once but twice, serving from 1981 to 2003, and again from 2018 to 2020.³⁵ Edwin Thumboo, one of the "Fajar Eight", graduated in 1956 with a Bachelor of Arts with honours and obtained a doctorate from the University of Singapore in 1970, eventually becoming the longest-serving dean of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the National University of Singapore.³⁶ S.R. Nathan, Singapore's sixth president, graduated in 1954 with a Diploma in Social Studies (Distinction), while Ambassador-at-Large Tommy Koh graduated in 1961 with a Bachelor of Laws with first-class honours.³⁷

The University of Malaya in Singapore was a product of its times and its contradictions. Short as its 13-year existence was, it made a lasting contribution to nation-building. ♦

NOTES

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