



Bite-sized lessons  
with big impact  
from SLA's Brown  
Bag sessions

Stories of grit, growth and  
resilience—featuring the dreamers,  
disruptors, believers, risk-takers,  
visionaries, movers, fighters and  
challengers from Singapore.

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THE  
IDEA



As Singapore marks its 60th year of independence, we honour the generations who have built this nation through unity, ingenuity, and resilience. SG60 is not just a celebration of how far we've come—it's also a call to action: to continue building a more inclusive, innovative, and sustainable Singapore together.

It is in this spirit that we at the Singapore Land Authority (SLA) embrace the challenge of turning constraints into possibilities. While Singapore may be bounded by limited land, our capacity for innovation and transformation knows no bounds.

As our world becomes increasingly unpredictable and challenges grow ever more complex, it is crucial—now more than ever—that we pause to reconsider how we think, work, act, and engage with our stakeholders.

The Brown Bag sessions were a series of lunchtime conversations initiated to exemplify how curiosity and collaboration can spark meaningful dialogue and inspire new ideas.

In 2021, as the effects of the pandemic continued to reverberate through the lives of individuals and across organisations and governments, we found ourselves asking, "How can we gain a real sense of what is happening on the ground? How do we stay attuned to emerging trends? How can we be inspired to generate new ideas in optimising spaces, beyond purely economic uses?"

One way, we believed, was by bringing together individuals from diverse backgrounds, industries, and areas of expertise to share their stories, thought processes, experiences, and lessons. And this was how SLA's Brown Bag sessions began.

In July 2021, we held our inaugural session with Mr Wee Teng Wen from the Lo & Behold Group. Since then, we have had the privilege of hosting over 20 speakers, primarily from the private sector, who shared their stories of resilience, entrepreneurship, and sustainability.

From sports to finance to logistics to fashion to hospitality and entertainment, these conversations have been a wellspring of learning for all of us at SLA. And this book, *Think Unlimited*, extends that spirit outward—to our fellow Singaporeans today, and for generations to come.

At SLA, we are committed to shaping and stewarding Singapore's land and geospatial resources not just with technical excellence, but with imagination and purpose. We aim to engage, co-create, and evolve alongside the people we serve by tapping into the collective talents of our community and embracing a mindset of possibility—realising a vision of space that is not just physical, but filled with potential.

As we reflect on our shared journey and look toward the future, we hope this compilation of stories will serve as a beacon of hope and inspiration for us all to always *Think Unlimited*.

This publication is a collaborative effort between SLA and our distinguished speakers, all of whom generously contributed their time and effort on a pro bono basis.

All speakers featured in this publication were from the private sector when their respective sessions took place between 2021 and 2024.

The content reflects their Brown Bag session, and each

story features them photographed against a State property that best resonates with their professional domain or personal narrative. The ■ **State properties** managed by SLA in this publication are highlighted in colour and with a square.

We extend our warmest gratitude to all the speakers who have participated in these conversations, embraced this project, and shared their wisdom.









# ABOUT SLA

The Singapore Land Authority (SLA) is a statutory board under the Ministry of Law. Formed on 1 June 2001, our mission is to ensure effective use of land resources and data for the economic and social development of Singapore.

Our vision Limited Land • Unlimited Space is a creative paradox that aptly highlights our nation's constraints and SLA's commitment in addressing them. The word 'Space' is multi-dimensional, encompassing realms from the physical to the digital. 'Unlimited' represents the extent of our commitment in our quest for solutions and innovations that will contribute to the economic and social development of Singapore.

## **State Land and Properties**

SLA manages about 11,000 hectares of State land and about 2,600 State properties, which are used for residential, commercial, social and community purposes. Through the careful planning and execution of interim uses for State properties under our management, SLA is able to maximise the use of vacant State land and properties in creative and innovative ways to support our nation's evolving economic and social needs.

## **Geospatial**

SLA drives the use and development of geospatial information and technology by fostering a national collaborative environment that encourages innovation, knowledge sharing and value creation among public agencies, private enterprises and the community.

## **Regulatory**

SLA is the national land registration and land survey authority and is responsible for maintaining accurate and reliable land ownership and land boundary systems.



The halls of the former Nan Chiau High School have long been filled with those who dared to be different—from brave soldiers in the 1940s to pioneering young women in the 1950s. Today, Teng Wen and his team at The Lo & Behold Group carry on this legacy with the establishment of **New Bahru** at 46 & 58 Kim Yam Road.

# Making Singapore Lovable:

Wee Teng Wen

on placemaking,  
people-building and  
empowering other  
local businesses

Singapore's first rooftop-turned-bar, a 1930s garrison church reincarnated as an award-winning restaurant, an opium warehouse transformed into a boutique hotel, and a defunct high school repurposed as a lifestyle enclave.

These are but just a few examples of the iconic F&B and hospitality destinations under The Lo & Behold Group's portfolio of projects. Since 2005, the Group has transformed and activated spaces of all sorts, enlivening them with the aim of telling uniquely Singapore stories. And in co-founder, Wee Teng Wen's own words, the mission was always to make Singapore more lovable.

"Our mission is to make Singapore more lovable through ideas and intentional hospitality. This has been the lens with which we have said yes and no to new projects. It's the lens that guides us, and it's the lens that, at the end of the day, we hope will make us most proud."

**UNAPOLOGETICALLY LOCAL** In 2005, when the F&B scene was heavily dominated by cut-and-paste concepts from abroad, they seized the opportunity to transform an abandoned rooftop in the heart of the city into the first bar of its kind in Singapore. Playing on how Singaporeans sometimes mispronounce "roof", they cheekily named the bar Loof.

At the time, Teng Wen was 25 and had returned to Singapore after graduating from the University of Pennsylvania with a degree in Finance and Management and a minor in Psychology.

"I spent many years in the States, going to school and working. Back then, the reputation of Singapore, at best, was efficient and clean. At worst, it was strict and soulless. I felt strongly for there to be a fresh perspective on the Singapore story. There are so many creatives here doing amazing work. So I thought about what I could do when I came back, what I could do to change the lifestyle scene."

# loof

The logo of Loof reflects the cheeky play on the Singlish pronunciation of "roof" ("loof").



Singapore's first rooftop bar, located at Odeon Towers (2005-2022).



Menus at Loof are laminated for spills—and sudden downpours. Functional, fun, and very Loof.



Taking over the iconic White Rabbit (RIGHT) space, Claudine (TOP) by Chef Julien Royer brings elegant French cuisine to ■ **Dempsey**. Set in a beautifully restored chapel, it's a place where heritage meets contemporary dining.



Located in the National Gallery Singapore, Odette is a three-Michelin-starred restaurant helmed by Chef Julien Royer. Ranked among Asia's Best Restaurants, it blends French finesse with seasonal ingredients, offering an unforgettable dining experience.



Tucked away in East Coast Park, FICO by Chef Mirko Febbrile is a Michelin-selected trattoria known for its wood-fired pizzas, handmade pasta, and natural wines.

Indeed, Loof was a breath of fresh air. It celebrated and elevated local culture in novel and idiosyncratic ways. The Mandarin idiom “风和日丽”, etched into the memory of every Singaporean student who had written Mandarin essays, was immortalised in bright LED lights, becoming synonymous with the bar. A nostalgia-infused Mama Shop, a small provision shop typically tucked away in residential neighbourhoods, also greeted patrons at the entrance. Branding aside, the menu was meticulously curated to highlight local ingredients and flavours.



#### A TEST OF CONVICTION

Three years later, in 2008, during the early days of ■ **Dempsey**, the Group opened their first restaurant, The White Rabbit. This ambitious and painstaking project transformed a vacant 1930s chapel built by the British into an award-winning modern European restaurant. With no electricity or water on-site, the team was also challenged with the task of conserving as much of the building as possible while ensuring it was safe and fit for use. Apart from the facade, original mosaic tiles were retained, and the stained-glass windows were given a facelift. The result: an awe-inspiring and beautiful restaurant, marking the beginning of a working relationship with SLA. Teng Wen and the Group's co-founder Daniel He were also awarded the Outstanding Tourism Entrepreneur award in 2017, under the Singapore Tourism Awards organised by the Singapore Tourism Board.

“The White Rabbit was a project that got global attention from the likes of *CNN* and *Time* as they felt it was a very interesting adaptive reuse of real estate. I think that was a large part of the magic of it. And we really have SLA to thank for trusting us with that site.”

Since then, the Group has gone on to conceptualise everything from a buzzy beach club celebrating island life, a three-Michelin-starred restaurant, a seaside alfresco restaurant at East Coast Park, and a modern Italian dining destination that redefines luxury, amongst others.

#### START WITH THE WHY AND FOCUS ON PEOPLE

So when it comes to placemaking, what is Teng Wen's approach? He says it's critical to start with the “why”—is it simply to create another F&B establishment, or is there a deeper mission and purpose driving the project? From there, these are some of the questions to ask: How do you tell a compelling story? How do you create a destination from scratch? How do you shape a neighbourhood's identity? How do you breathe life into a space?





#### LEFT

TOP: Teng Wen at one of Loof's parties.

BOTTOM: Teng Wen with the staff who had been with the company for 10 years and earned themselves a month-long sabbatical, at Tanjong Beach Club in 2018.



He also highlights the importance of understanding one's strengths and weaknesses, collaborating with the right partners and brands, and focusing on the people. "We seem to be in the restaurant and lifestyle business. But actually, we are very firmly in the people business."

#### SUPPORTING HOMEGROWN ENTERPRISES

Beyond their own ventures, the Group is also committed to supporting ambitious local consumer brands as well as enablers of the industry they operate in. In the last few years, they started an investment fund with this intention, and some of the companies they have supported include a US-based, Singaporean-owned HR software firm that manages the entire hiring process of non-desk workers, a local milk-alternative brand that's gained popularity regionally, and a homegrown coffee-tech startup that is changing the way we drink coffee at home.

**"We want to support brands that are led by Singaporeans and are making their mark in Singapore or have the ability to make their mark in the world."**

In 2021, the Group also took over the operations of The Coconut Club, a local F&B establishment that Teng Wen says is very close to

Teng Wen's 3 principles in shaping the company's people culture:

#### **1. Be kind, be firm**

"The best kind of leadership is the kind where you can be kind, but firm. So, you are not afraid to give feedback, you are not afraid to give constructive criticism, but at the same time, always with a lens of kindness."

#### **2. Be intentional**

"We want to do things very intentionally, we want to do things with impact, we don't want to do for the sake of doing."

#### **3. Cultivate a culture of accountability**

"We needed to define a culture of accountability. And at the same time, people needed licence and empowerment to make decisions and own the outcomes. We work collaboratively in our teams towards a common goal. And while we may not always agree, we commit to team decisions together. When we achieve something great, we celebrate. And when we make mistakes, we admit it, fix it fast, and move on. We celebrate both as part of our continuous journey of growth."

"We have a programme called *Catch Me Doing Right*, where all our venue leaders are encouraged to find and share the amazing stories they encounter in their day-to-day work that showcases our values. And every month, we hold a group-wide session where these stories are shared. We want to showcase the people who have gone over and beyond in delivering customer service. And this has a flywheel effect because the more you encourage, and the more you recognise, the more people are compelled to do it."





With outlets at Beach Road, Siglap (TOP) and ■ **New Bahru** at River Valley (BOTTOM), Michelin Bib Gourmand-listed The Coconut Club features interiors that incorporate natural materials like rattan and bamboo in its decorative elements, lampshades, and loose furniture—creating a breezy, casual charm.





#### LEFT

Over the years, Teng Wen has partnered with several renowned interior designers to create distinctive spaces that blend functionality with artistic expression. His collaborators include Takenouchi Webb, Asylum, NICE Projects, Foreign Policy Design Group, FARM, Dawn Ng, Open Studios, and John Lim of This Humid House. The latest addition to his portfolio is Somma, a cocktail bar and fine-dining restaurant in ■ New Bahru, helmed by Chef Mirko Febbrile and designed by NICE Projects.

their hearts. Having been schoolmates with the founder, he decided to take over the business shortly after his friend passed away. This was a natural move, as the ethos and aspiration of the brand were very much aligned with the Group's.

**“He always hired the disadvantaged and gave them a second chance. He also had a mission, like us, to elevate local cuisine and show that it can be at the same level as any global cuisine, any Western cuisine.”**

The F&B business is a notoriously tough one to be in, and Teng Wen knows this too well. Operational costs are undoubtedly the biggest challenge for local F&B businesses—especially when sustaining a business inevitably means having to compete with hawkers.

“Singaporean F&B operators have the toughest time because the bar is set so high by our hawkers. You can truly have world-class meals at \$2.50. I do think that they should raise their prices to some degree in order to attract the next generation and continue to be able to do what they do. The sustainability of that industry depends on it. No one will pay \$1 for one *ondeh ondeh*, yet they will pay \$5 for a cupcake. If we all don't want to pay for local food, at some point, no one is going to make it. And then we'll lose our identity.”

In addition to this, manpower, material costs and rents have also been rising due to competition from overseas F&B operators.

“I think what's tough is inherent to the Singapore scene. The real estate tends to be very short-term. If I look at our counterparts in London or New York, their lease terms are 15 or 20 years. They get a lease term. And for ours? Most commercial landlords will give you a 3 plus 3 and then maybe no rental cap, etc., though SLA is 3 plus 3 plus 3, so thank you.”

#### CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Because of the typical short-term lease, Teng Wen says it's been tricky to balance the amount of effort that goes into a project with a mission that requires time to realise over a long horizon. In spite of the ever-rising cost structure, Teng Wen maintains that the one cost they cannot cut or “squeeze” is the cost of hiring people.



This limited-edition collection of shirts for The Coconut Club is a collaboration with local womenswear brand, Ong Shunmugam, and an homage to our sunny, coastal island.



#### TOP AND RIGHT

A 19th-century former spice warehouse by the Singapore River is converted into an iconic boutique hotel that has received local and international acclaim, including the Condé Nast Traveler Readers' Choice Awards (2018), AHEAD Awards Asia 2018 (4 awards including Asia Hotel of The Year), Singapore Tourism Awards 2018 (Best Hotel Experience), President's Design Award 2018 (Design of the Year) and Tablet Hotel's Best Boutique Hotels of the Decade (2019).



Designed by Sydney-based Akin Atelier, Tanjong Beach Club at Sentosa reinvents the mid-century modern beach house, balancing nostalgia with a contemporary edge.



When asked about his “lowest low”, Teng Wen candidly shares this was at the six-year mark of the business. Despite having had a few successes, he said there was no overarching vision, mission, or culture, especially as each venture was distinctly different. In addition, being a relatively inexperienced leader, he had to learn about synergising the operations and organisation.

“From the outside, it seemed like we were a success. But internally, it was a real mess. The internal function was not strong, and yet we were growing the external – the venues, the concepts, and the brands so quickly. That was a big learning for us. At that point, we truly understood the power of really defining who we are, why we do what we do, and everything pulled towards a group culture.”

This moment of truth served as the catalyst for change and transformation. They pulled back and took time to crystallise their vision and mission, and since then, the Group has changed the way they approach their operations. On hindsight, Teng Wen says they were fortunate enough to reach that low early enough in their journey, wise up, and change.

Another milestone year was 2020, with the pandemic at its height. This presented an opportunity for the organisation to give back to the community. Utilising the space and resources they had, they activated their network of chefs to prepare, cook, and deliver over 10,000 meals over the course of a few weeks to migrant communities who were not getting enough or good enough food. They also used this time to redefine their values and transform their HQ's approach to supporting the venues.

“Our people are empowered, right from the start, with the bandwidth to own outcomes for their venues. And these are outcomes that are not just monetary; we place a lot of emphasis on recognition.”

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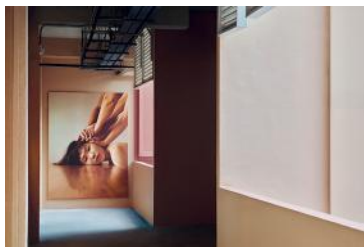
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#### RIGHT

Extra Curious Activities (ECA) is a series of themed, design-led fairs and workshops by **■ New Bahru**, aimed at fostering community engagement and spotlighting emerging local brands. Spanning categories such as fashion, beauty, food, home, and pet care, past editions have featured brands like Brewlander, A Kind Ooof, Whytespace, Postcard, and Romi Beauty.



Photographer Jovian Lim's *Waltzing In* and Lavender Chang's *Eldest Daughter* are part of *Now Now*, a showcase featuring 6 photographic works by Singapore's rising and established creatives at **■ New Bahru**.



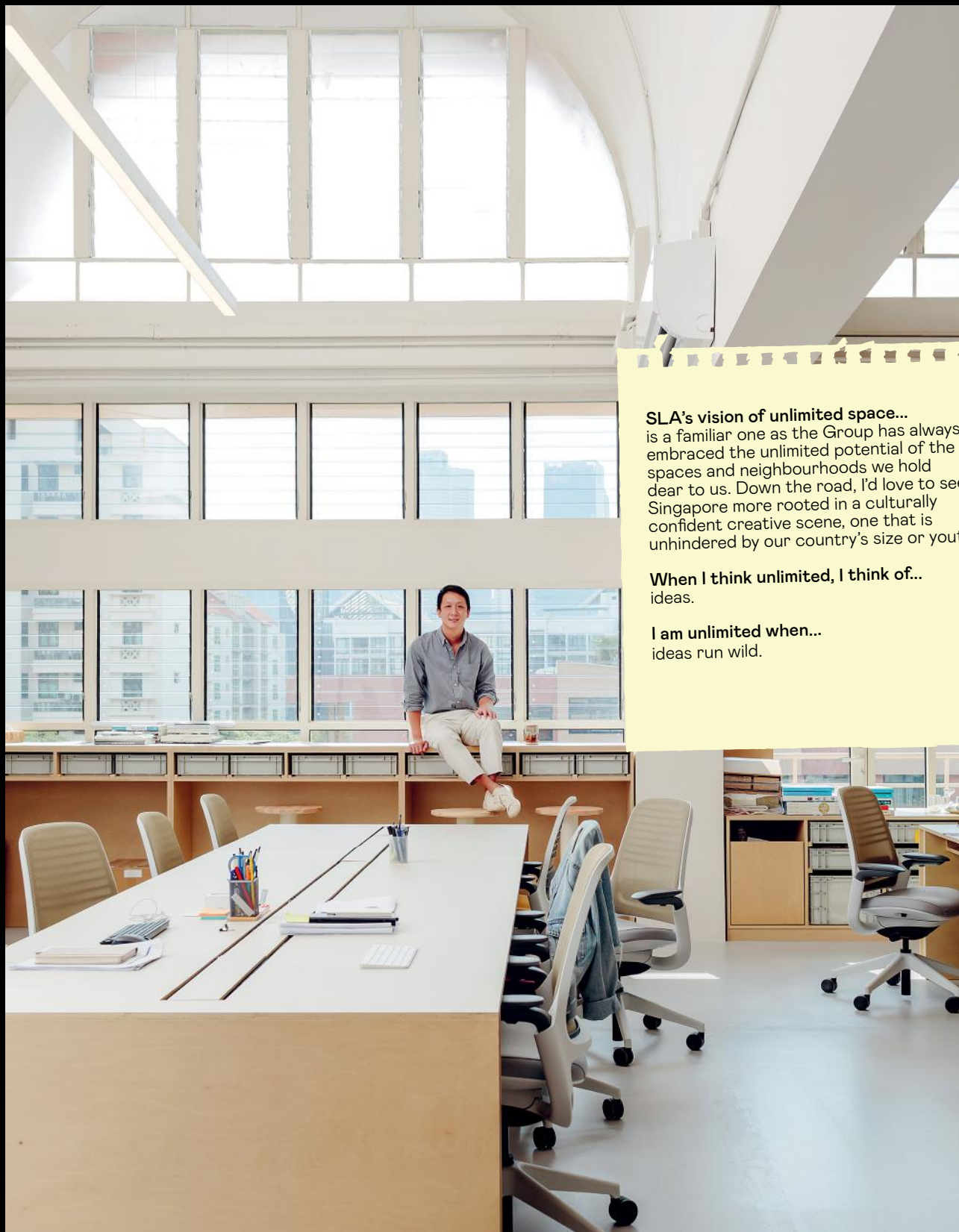
#### THE NEW-NEW

Overarching synergies aside, Teng Wen has also learnt the importance of selecting the right partners and locations. He has experienced his fair share of failed projects like 'A Curious Teepee', which closed after two years. These setbacks did not stop the Group from dreaming bigger and bolder.

Their newest and most ambitious project to date is **■ New Bahru**, the former Nan Chiau High School, which has been repurposed into a vibrant lifestyle enclave featuring over 40 home-grown F&B and retail concepts. The aim? To provide a space for leading local brands to thrive, change the way we think about homegrown brands, and celebrate the incredible amount of talent we have on our shores.

Now 20 years into the business, Teng Wen's passion for what he does still burns bright. Together with his team, he continues to be excited about activating more spaces to enliven the tapestry of Singapore's creative scene.

"My hope is that Singapore can start to impactfully create concepts, projects, and brands that can be held as global benchmarks. And the secondary dream, at least linked to my industry, is to be able to change the perception of food & beverage and hospitality as a truly fulfilling career."



**SLA's vision of unlimited space...**

is a familiar one as the Group has always embraced the unlimited potential of the spaces and neighbourhoods we hold dear to us. Down the road, I'd love to see Singapore more rooted in a culturally confident creative scene, one that is unhindered by our country's size or youth.

**When I think unlimited, I think of...**  
ideas.

**I am unlimited when...**  
ideas run wild.





Once the British army barracks, **Dempsey** is now an iconic international destination and pride of Singapore, celebrated for its vibrant lifestyle and F&B offerings. Chang Wen is shot at Air CCCC, a sprawling 40,000 sq ft site at Dempsey that houses a restaurant, cooking club, edible garden and research facility.



# Way of the Ninja: Lai Chang Wen on driving a multi-million-dollar logistics company with a challenger mindset

Study, graduate, work, retire. That's how it should be, right? Except "should" was not a word that featured very much in Lai Chang Wen's vocabulary, especially during his formative years. For the CEO and co-founder of Ninja Van, a tech-enabled logistics company with operations across Southeast Asia, life has never been a manual to be followed.

Chang Wen's entrepreneurial spirit was apparent since his school days. When he was still studying at Raffles Institution and Raffles Junior College, he would buy used mobile phones at below-market prices and resell them at a higher price. Later on, he moved on to buying bicycle parts, which he later assembled into bicycles and sold for a profit.

He also started interning at different companies when he was just 20, gaining valuable real-world experience that would go on to serve him well. At an age when most would hesitate to stray from a carefully planned path, Chang Wen did the opposite—he gave up his university scholarship to study in London so he could start working.

**"If I look back, dropping my scholarship and making a complete about-turn in the direction of my life was probably the most important decision I made so far."**

## **YOUNG AND DANGEROUS**

However, his parents disapproved of this and persuaded him to pursue his degree, believing that university was a formative experience

best embraced during that specific stage of life. Chang Wen halfheartedly obliged and applied locally instead to SMU (Singapore

Management University), where he got in—but didn't show up much. Apart from turning up for exams, he stopped going to school after the second year. Instead, he spent his time building his first menswear fashion business in China and later secured a job at a prestigious bank—all by the age of 22.

**“When I was in SMU, I started Marcella with a few friends. So I took half a year off school. I borrowed some money from people around me, moved to China, and built a factory in Zhejiang.”**

However, his first taste of entrepreneurship was more bitter than sweet. Describing his life then as miserable, he recalls having to sleep in a small room in the factory, weathering the cold every night.

“Zhejiang is below the line in China where compulsory heating is required. So they got no heater, and it was very cold every night. I have to boil hot water, put it in a hot water bottle, and then roll the hot water bottle on my pillow and on my bed.”

After returning from China, the opportunity to work at Barclays presented itself, and Chang Wen took it up. The job was cushy and an upgrade from his tough time abroad. He says he landed the job not only because he did well in the role but also because he became the go-to person for the team, handling everything from buying meals to securing reservations at clubs and restaurants. But after a while, the routine and stability began to weigh on him. Feeling like he had lost some of his earlier naivety, curiosity, and sense of adventure, he decided it was time to trade comfort for something new.

“So I said, okay, let's open a coffee shop. I foolishly thought that starting a kopitiam was a good idea. I'm sure many of you think that kopitiam guys are very rich, all the 'Kim San Leng' and all that. The reality is, it's one-in-a-hundred who succeed. A lot of them lose money, and it's very, very, very difficult work.”

Though he was no stranger to the rise-and-grind, Chang Wen did not expect the F&B business to be so gruelling. The relentless hours and immense amount of effort required became unsustainable, and after countless late nights, he made the difficult decision to close the business.

“I had to be the dishwasher for days because our dishwasher quit. And it's real. You cannot hire dishwashers. That one is true.”

#### **THE BIRTH OF NINJA VAN**

After two failed businesses and a significant loss of savings, most would consider returning to getting



Ninja Van's co-founders deliver their early orders with a second-hand van.

**RIGHT**  
Chang Wen (CENTRE) with Ninja Van co-founders Shaun Chong (RIGHT), Chief Technology Officer, and Tan Boxian (LEFT), Chief Product Officer.



a stable job the sensible choice. But these setbacks only emboldened Chang Wen. Knowing he could always fall back on getting a job and being free of liabilities and commitment at the time, he decided to take an even bigger leap of faith—to set up Ninja Van.

“While doing e-commerce, we realised that instead of digging for the gold and joining the gold rush in e-commerce, maybe it makes more sense to sell the picks and shovels to the people who are chasing the gold rush. Instead of chasing e-commerce, why not just do a less sexy job and deliver the parcels. Because regardless of who succeeds, we still win. So we decided to just start Ninja Van.”

Together with the same two co-founders he started Marcella with and a team of three, he started the company in 2014. The name, a tribute to the pop-up vans that appeared in the jungles where national servicemen trained, couldn't have been more fitting.

“For anyone who has been in the army, you would know Ninja Van is the van which finds you in the Taiwan forest when you're very hungry, deep in the mountains. You pay him so you can have a hot bowl of cup noodles. So we said, okay, we are going to have a consumer-facing name for a very traditional business focused on e-commerce, but we will bring parcels to you wherever you are in Southeast Asia.”

Despite having no prior experience in logistics, Chang Wen knew he had something to offer—his ability to build strong computational and algorithmic models as well as a keen sense of where the industry was headed.

“I've never had any interest in logistics. Never would I have imagined doing logistics one day. But I thought that the future of logistics would be driven by math, algorithms and strong computational models. And these are my strengths. I may not be able to manage people better than the next guy, or sell better than the next guy, but I was confident of building a strong computational and algorithm model.”

And that was how Ninja Van was born. What began as 22-hour workdays, sleeping in the warehouse, and managing deliveries themselves with a single second-hand van has since evolved into a multi-million-dollar enterprise operating across Southeast Asia. Today, the company has over 1,500 workers and employees in Singapore and over 50,000 in the region, partnering with close to two million shippers to deliver close to two million parcels per day.

“For the first two years, I lived in the warehouse from Sunday night to Saturday night. So I'd go home on Saturday night. And then my mother would make me send pictures of my bed sheets every month to make sure I change them.”

#### EARLY LESSONS

After two years of living in those conditions, Chang Wen finally moved out. As the business gained momentum, he also openly admits how easy it can be to let success inflate your ego, as he reflects on the moments the company first secured their funding. “I think it was in the first three to five years where I lost myself a bit. You thought that you were successful, and you were not, and lost a bit of humility. It was only after the fourth year or fifth year that you start to realise 一山还有一山高 (there's always a higher mountain). There's always something bigger, something better. So it's not about what you have succeeded in, but the respect people accord to you outside of your achievements. If



The fleet in the early days. During periods of surging demand, Ninja Van worked with other logistics providers to increase their delivery capacity. For example, in 2015, they offloaded their deliveries to McDelivery when the latter experienced a lull in operations.

“INACTION

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**ACTION**

MANY TIMES.”

people just list their achievements, everybody looks good.”

Over the years, Chang Wen also realised that a lot of the time, success really lies in managing people.

“We have to build big organisational structures and continually rethink them. How should we move reporting lines around? How can we use reporting structures effectively? How do we run an HQ versus a local office? A lot of problems to solve.”

**USING  
TECHNOLOGY  
TO DRIVE  
SOLUTIONS**

And with Singapore accounting for just 5% of Ninja Van’s operations, it is the larger markets, like Indonesia and the Philippines, where the focus is.

One of the key challenges the company faced with this expansion was tackling the different levels of digitisation and infrastructure across the different markets.

“We quickly realised that in certain countries, drivers delivering parcels may not have an active internet connection. Since our system requires real-time information, we had to build complex caching systems on mobile devices to make sure that we capture all of this data up front.”

In 2022, the company also invested \$50 million to automate parcel processing capabilities across Southeast Asia. For example, it announced the installation of an integrated measurement and sortation system in the Philippines and shared its plans to acquire 200 dimensioning weight scanners in Indonesia. It also opened a new parcel sorting hub in Thailand with a four-kilometre semi-automated parcel sorting conveyor belt.

In addition, every market required a different map system, and this brought about its own set of challenges. In Singapore, Ninja Van signed an MOU (Memorandum of Understanding) with SLA to be their first express logistics partner, paving the way for collaborative efforts on geospatial co-innovations through OneMap to improve hyperlocal and granular data at the street level for last-mile delivery.



Ninja Xpress, Ninja Van’s courier service in Indonesia, launched #Lokalisme—a pop-up festival celebrating and supporting local MSMEs, the backbone of Indonesia’s economy.

**LEFT**

Ninja Van launched its business-to-business (B2B) cold chain offering, Ninja Cold, on its 10th anniversary. The cold chain—where products are shipped at temperatures between 4°C and -25°C—provides the highest value-add that Ninja Van can offer to both B2B and B2C customers.

To support this, Ninja Van utilises specialised refrigerated trucks and retrofits up to 20% of its 1,000-vehicle fleet in Singapore with active or passive cooling boxes.



## RIGHT

A specially designed Ninja Xpress Boeing 737-300 cargo aircraft now makes daily flights across Indonesia, connecting Jakarta with Sulawesi, Kalimantan, and Sumatra.

This initiative is the result of a strategic partnership between Ninja Xpress, PT Adhya Avia Prima, and PT Trigana Air Service. With the capacity to transport up to 15,500 kg of parcels, the aircraft underscores Ninja Van's commitment to delivering every package safely and on time—no matter where in Indonesia it needs to go.



“Our challenge was to build a customised system based on the latitude-longitude system that catered to each different market. The big leaps we made in terms of scaling up systems made us the first in Southeast Asia to adopt a microservices architecture.”

When it comes to consumer behaviour, he also noticed distinct differences across markets. For instance, he says Singaporeans are often quicker to voice complaints and not as inclined to pay for things even if it's within their means, while Indonesians tend to be more content and are willing to spend on items even beyond their immediate affordability.

Moving forward, Chang Wen's hope is that communities and incubators for e-commerce owners can be developed in Singapore. Because if there's one trend that's evident, he says, it's that e-commerce will continue to grow to include an increasing number of smaller brands and players.

“We think the future of e-commerce is to aggregate communities of e-commerce sellers together. Because the biggest challenge for e-commerce sellers in Singapore is that logistics can be quite expensive. I think the opportunity is for us to rejuvenate some properties in Singapore to allow a cheap and efficient way for e-commerce incubators or communities to develop.”

## ENTREPRENEURIAL WISDOM

Ultimately, every entrepreneurial journey is paved with hard-earned lessons and invaluable wisdom. Looking back, Chang Wen shares a few that he has learnt. “Live life for the moment but be mindful of irreversible decisions. People think many things are irreversible. But it really isn't. That said, you should also not be foolhardy and keep trying or keep taking poorly planned gambles. You have to assess, is this irreversible?”

He observes how people often worry about making the wrong choice or taking a misstep. Yet, more often than not, it is these steps that provide the most fertile ground for learning. For Chang Wen, his philosophy is simple: If you're confident nothing truly detrimental will come of it, there's no harm trying. This has always guided him and is something he reinforces in his staff.

## OPPOSITE

TOP: Ninja Van Thailand's largest warehouse to date is located in the Bang Sao Thong area of the Samut Prakan Province.

BOTTOM: With a usable area of more than 20,000 sqm, the warehouse can handle more than 800,000 parcels a day. It also boasts a 4km-long semi-automatic conveyor belt that has more than 400 loading terminals. This increases the parcel sorting efficiency by 200%, leading to an overall increase in delivery speed by up to 4 hours.





**RIGHT**

Ninja Van Vietnam partnered with Coolmate, a Vietnamese men's apparel brand, to deliver 100,000 warm clothing items to children in the northern mountainous region affected by Typhoon Yagi—a destructive tropical cyclone that struck Vietnam in September 2024.




“Inaction is more dangerous than a wrong action many times. If you make a mistake and it’s well thought through, so be it; just move on. When we launch certain tech products and they fail, everyone gets demoralised. But who knew we would fail? Did we fail because we were not doing anything? No. We tried our best, so let’s learn from our mistakes and hope the next one will be better. That’s how we move forward.”

Finally, he reminds us that uncertainty is perhaps the only certainty in life. So, much like how all his ventures began, it doesn’t hurt to roll up your sleeves and just take the leap.

“Don’t plan too hard. Don’t think too hard. The future is always uncertain. Don’t optimise for it. Just take a bet. No regrets.”





**When I think unlimited, I think of...**  
determination.

**I am unlimited when...**  
challenged.



Hiang Whai is photographed at the **Old Kallang Airport**, which ceased operations following the opening of Paya Lebar Airport in 1955. Today the building continues to be used by various groups and has been gazetted for conservation. During Singapore's golden football era, these grounds galvanised an entire nation and provided exciting entertainment. For Hiang Whai, the sport also ignited his passion for storytelling and communications.

# A Lifelong Fascination with Storytelling:

Quak Hiang Whai

on his passion for reading and football and how they catalysed his prolific career in journalism, communications and media relations

From leading the editorial coverage of the Greater China region during the late '90s and commanding the newsroom at *The Business Times* in the early 2000s, to steering communication strategy at conglomerates like UOB and UOL and training some of our public service elite on leadership and public speaking, Quak Hiang Whai's career—for three decades now—has been a masterclass in communications and storytelling.

Moving effortlessly between corporate boardrooms and political corridors, he has navigated state visits with political heads, rubbed shoulders with world leaders and tycoons, and advised both private and public sectors on strategic communications. He is also a published author, with the book—*No Comments & Don't Quote Me!*—under his belt and a new one slated for the second half of 2025—something he says has been 10 years in the making.

Yet, for all his achievements, the man remains disarmingly unpretentious and refreshingly humble—a lifelong student who still picks up books on writing.

"All my media training, communication training, and public speaking—I learnt through books. I read a lot. To this day, I'm still buying basic writing guides, like this one by William Zinsser, *On Writing Well*, and this other one, *Do I Make Myself Clear?*, by the British-American editor Harold Evans. So even though I've written books myself, I'm still trying to improve."

## PASSION FOR READING

Hiang Whai's passion has always been reading. Even though he has had no formal training in writing or communications, he consumes all manner of non-fiction voraciously.

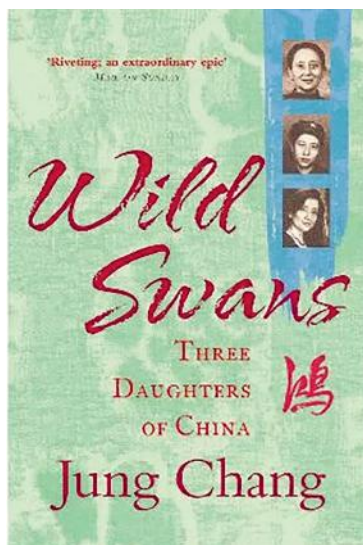


Kallang Airport was Singapore's first civilian aerodrome, operating from 1937 to 1955. The terminal later served as the headquarters of the People's Association from 1960 to 2009.

The building was designed by Frank Dorrington Ward, the Chief Architect of the Public Works Department (PWD), and reflects the modernist style with its streamlined curves, striking horizontal lines and Art Deco accents.

During a 1937 stopover, the famous aviator Amelia Earhart called the airport "an aviation miracle of the East".





#### Book recommendation

*Wild Swans* by Jung Chang

"Anybody who wants to understand the history of China in the last 125 years, read this. It's a good start because it's about 3 generations of women: the author Jung Chang, her mother, and her grandmother, all living through those turbulent years.

She was one of the first from communist China to study in the UK, at University of York when Deng Xiaoping opened up China in 1978. She stayed back and became a linguistic professor and wrote this book, which traced her family history.

So, through the 3 generations of women, you see the Chinese evolution—from the Qing Dynasty, to Kuomintang, to Communism, to Mao Zedong, to the Great Leap Forward to the Cultural Revolution. That was the book that launched my interest in Chinese history. Although it's history, it's written like fiction. So, I like it."

"I read, sometimes two or three books at one go. Right now, it's *Win Every Argument* by Mehdi Hasan, alongside Bill Clinton's *Citizen*."

His home is a testament to this. And more than simply gaining knowledge and wisdom for the sake of it, he believes that reading is the key to living a better life.

"When I moved house recently, I donated hundreds of books. My whole wall? Just shelves of books. When I go to Canada to visit my kids, I'll go with four books and return with, like, 15. Want to do well in life? Read. Knowledge, data, stories—they matter."

#### FIRST LOVE: FOOTBALL AND OLD KALLANG AIRPORT

However, Hiang Whai's love of reading and writing didn't emerge in a vacuum. It was birthed from an unlikely source—football. Living on Circuit Road, he recalls the rough conditions of the area growing up, saying the friends he had then never finished secondary school, some not even primary. But as a young boy, what brought them together and made his heart sing was football.

"I lived on Circuit Road, which was a lower-income neighbourhood within MacPherson. Even today, it hasn't changed much. It's like a time warp. From around Primary 3 or 4 onwards, I became obsessed with football. Kallang Stadium was like some oracle to me. And this is where I always went—the old terminal last seen in action from the '50s."

He recalls with fondness the long walks from MacPherson to Kallang, heart pounding with the anticipation of Malaysia Cup matches. The journey was a rite of passage. After the final whistle, thousands would spill out past the Old Kallang Airport Terminal—and among them, Hiang Whai made his way back to MacPherson, reliving the night's magic. But it wasn't just the matches—it was the stories they carried.

Strangers became one. Even the chorus of "referee *kayu*!" and other unmentionables had their place in the theatre. Here, he first witnessed live English First Division football (now the Premier League) in an exhibition match, an experience that cemented this lifelong love.

#### THE POWER OF GOOD STORYTELLING

Kallang Stadium was more than football. It ignited his interest in storytelling.

"The moment I discovered football, I started developing this interest for sports, for writing, for communication. It all began there. My journey as a communication strategist and storyteller began there in 1974."

Armed with nothing but a pencil, paper, and a fan's devotion, he crafted imaginary interviews, dissected tactics, and even penned fictional transfer sagas.

"I used to make my own football magazines—cutting from newspapers, pasting line-ups, and writing match reports. I pored over British magazines like *Shoot!*—not just for the scores, but for how they made you feel the game. Little did I know then that these moments would shape how I write, inform, educate, entertain, and persuade."

Mornings after matches, he would also devour match reports in *The Straits Times* and *The New Nation* (Singapore's then second major English newspaper, now defunct), which transported him back to the exhilaration of the match—resurrecting the stadium's roar, the gut-punch of a missed penalty, and the collective gasp of a near miss.

“In the pre-Internet era, a well-told print story could transcend time and space, bringing Kallang’s electric atmosphere into homes. It could make people feel, remember, and care.”

But Hiang Whai wasn’t just a spectator—he was a player too.

“I played for Farrer Park Under-14 and Geylang Under-16 under the Milo Soccer scheme. I also went for the Lion City Cup selections.”

For a time, the dream was to be on the pitch, not writing about it. Yet even as he trained, he connected the dots between the sport and larger, more urgent issues and narratives.

“As I grew older, I realised football was never just about the game. It was a microcosm of society, intertwined with politics, culture, and history. Stories like Johan Cruyff’s defiance against Argentina’s dictatorship during the 1978 World Cup fascinated me. The ban of Leeds United from European competition after fan troubles revealed the intricate relationship between sports and governance.”

#### **BREAK IN JOURNALISM**

Yet, like so many of his generation, he followed the expected path.

“Even up to university, I didn’t know what I was going to do. My best friend was a left-brainer who was very good in maths, science, quantitative methods, and finance. I was more of a writer, but he had a stronger personality, so I just followed. I studied science like everyone else and struggled like crazy. My school didn’t even have an arts stream—commerce and arts were deemed as being for girls (at my time).”

So after O-Levels, he applied to mechanical engineering, marine engineering, and even electrical engineering.

“I applied for polytechnic. A-Levels was my fourth choice. Thank God they rejected me and sent me to Victoria School. So I ended up there. That was a stroke of luck. If I had gone to poly, it would have been all engineering. Obviously, not my kind of thing.”

Then came the army, which became an unlikely classroom and self-awakening for Hiang Whai.

“I was always quiet in school all the way. I went to university, where I did a business degree, majoring in finance. Then in the army, I realised that I could command and lead people. I became more confident in speaking up. The moment I became more confident in myself, things started happening for me.”

At that time, like so many in 1980s Singapore, he chased the golden ticket—banking, forex, and trading—and aimed to work in finance. But after 30 rejections and a five-day stint in a commodity firm later, a door opened when a friend said *The Business Times* needed a journalist. He thought, ‘Why not?’. The interview turned out anything but conventional. His grammatical errors in the writing test didn’t matter; what shone through was his insatiable curiosity and interest in culture and current affairs.

“We talked (Eric) Clapton, (Bob) Dylan, flower power protests. Not a word about balance sheets. We just clicked. Suddenly, I was a financial journalist—writing about the very markets that had rejected me.”

To his surprise, the newsroom felt like coming home.

“It was a Type B kind of organisation—no hierarchy, just chaos and



Hiang Whai sharing a joke with the late former Prime Minister of Malaysia, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, who passed away in May 2025.



With Hong Kong's first Chief Executive Tung Chee Hwa just before the return of the British colony to China.

caffeine. We called the editor-in-chief by his first name and argued about politics between deadlines."

For someone who had written letters to the Forum Page about the Soviet Union's expansionism while his peers memorised chemical equations, he relished every moment of his newfound career path. His finance major, once a wrong turn, became an unlikely asset.

"I'd written endless finance essays—now I was doing the same, but for front pages. Within months, I was breaking stories."

The promotions came fast—Hiang Whai was promoted three years in a row when he was posted to Hong Kong as a foreign correspondent, where he covered everything from China's economic reforms to capital flows across borders. And when he returned to Singapore, he rose rapidly to the role of News Editor.

**THE EXHILARATION OF THE NEWSROOM**

For Hiang Whai, the newsroom wasn't just a workplace; it was stepping into that world that felt like finally finding his tribe—colleagues who saw themselves as modern-day Robin Hoods.

"I never really had very strong views, but I was very influenced by my colleagues."

"The atmosphere was progressive, liberal. You go into a newsroom, and suddenly everyone's fantasising about being a Watergate reporter—wanting to bring down a president, expose corruption. We all wanted to be *Washington Post* scoop reporters like Woodward and Bernstein."

At *The Business Times*, the boundaries stretched further, with a more mature and sophisticated target audience. Hiang Whai's team broke stories that sent shockwaves through corporate boardrooms and even rattled government corridors. The thrill of the scoop was addictive.

"We lived for it—that moment when your byline lands first, when you know you've uncovered something nobody else has. I've gone on TV discussions questioning government policies."

As a news editor, he walked a tightrope but maintains that truth should always come first.

**"As long as you're reporting facts, you should be fine. But you learn fast—every word has weight."**

**CAREER HIGHLIGHTS**

Hiang Whai's career as a journalist at *The Business Times* was marked by significant milestones, particularly during a pivotal era in Hong Kong's history, as they transitioned from British rule to Chinese sovereignty.

"I spent three years pre-handover and three years post-handover. I was fortunate to witness this historic event firsthand."

On the night of the handover in 1997, he was inside the hall, covering the poignant moment when the British flag was lowered, giving way to the Chinese flag. His task was to report on the implications of the handover for the people of Singapore and Hong Kong alike, and he wrote a series of columns that traced the complex history of the region.

"I almost felt proud. Even though we were Singaporeans, my colleague and I were witnessing a significant and moving moment which saw China reclaim its place in history, taking back the colony after 156 years."

“WHETHER YOU’RE  
SELLING A MALL  
OR A POLICY, IT’S  
NOT JUST ABOUT  
ANNOUNCING IT.  
YOUR AUDIENCE  
WANTS TO KNOW,  
‘WHAT’S IN IT FOR  
ME?’ MASTER  
THAT, AND YOU’LL  
NEVER NEED TO  
**SHOUT.**”

**RIGHT**

Then Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew—the star among stars—at the Conference 2000: 21st Century Forum, in Beijing in June 2000. He was greeted and surrounded by world leaders, comprising retired presidents, prime ministers and office holders.



Beyond his reporting on the handover, Hiang Whai also covered high-profile events that further solidified his status as a leading correspondent. His freelance work for the World Economic Forum in several global cities showcased his quick writing skills, as he churned out an average of four articles a day. His work also took him to various parts of Greater China, and he had the privilege of accompanying influential leaders like the late Mr Lee Kuan Yew, then Senior Minister of Singapore.

One memorable encounter was during a visit to China, where Hiang Whai witnessed the powerful presence of Mr Lee Kuan Yew among world leaders.

“We were waiting to go in and meet Jiang Zemin. Everyone was there already, but we were waiting for one more guest, and that guest was Lee Kuan Yew. He was having his own session with Jiang Zemin. When he came up and walked towards the group, all the world leaders just had this scrum around him, a circle. This is tiny Singapore, and these are top world leaders, and they were all so excited to see him. I was watching it all unfold in front of me. He just had that kind of aura and reputation on the global stage, and he put Singapore on it. I’ll never forget it. I took a picture of it.”

Not surprisingly, LKY, as Mr Lee Kuan Yew is informally known, has remained a huge influence and inspiration for Hiang Whai.

“I would say he had a very, very big influence on me, which is why I gave him a special tribute in the last chapter of my newest book.”

#### **LKY'S INFLUENCE**

For Hiang Whai—who rose from a modest background through meritocracy to journalism, banking, and beyond—LKY was more than a leader; he was the architect of the opportunities that shaped his life.

“I owe a lot to him. The way he built the nation, created industries, and ensured stability—it allowed people like me to compete and succeed.”

But beyond policy, it was his decision-making and communication genius that left the deepest mark.

“Life is about hard choices. He listened, weighed the options, then acted—no matter the backlash. And for me, the biggest inspiration is his communication skills. I used to sit there just asking him questions. When you listen to him speak, it seems like he’s wandering—but go



## COMMUNICATION 101

### 1. Convince with credibility and confidence

"The guy who is communicating must be convincing. If you don't have the right public speaking skills, the right demeanour, and you come across as insincere, unreliable, or lacking in confidence, you lose trust with your audience. There was a study by a UCLA professor Albert Mehrabian, which says something like: 55% of your communication is about the visual: How do you look? About 38% is audio: How do you sound? The actual message—the spoken words—carries only about 7%. So, if you fail on the first two, the body language and the tone, you lose your audience. Especially during a crisis, if you don't look and sound credible, convincing or confident, you lose the message."

### 2. Distil the most important points

"Civil servants want to be as accurate and as comprehensive as possible. But for journalists, what's most important is that people can understand the layman's language. You cannot use a legal document to communicate with your audience. So, ask yourself: What are the three or four key points or takeaways in the most simple terms?"

### 3. What's in it for them?

"Whatever platform you use, you need to simplify the message and ask: What's in it for the audience? People must know what's in it for them in the long term. Then it's also important to explain the trade-offs—why it is important to give up some things, for the greater good."

### 4. Tailor your strategy

"Who are you speaking to and how will you speak to them? If it's the Pioneer Generation, then you have to employ a different strategy. Maybe you go knock on doors, instead of using social media. It depends."

### 5. Do your homework

"Before you even communicate, you need to do your homework: engagement, feedback, message testing, and focus groups. Gather all the right data and stats, all the info that will help you determine what, and how to communicate."

### 6. Be honest

"Whoever that is communicating the policy, you need to be honest about it. Explain to people why it's a hard decision and why it's needed. If it cannot be communicated, it's likely that the policy doesn't make sense. If you cannot justify it publicly, there's a good chance that it is a poor policy."

back to your notes, and it's flawless—always an opening, a comeback line, anecdotes, statistics, then the punchline. No editing needed."

Yet LKY's most controversial decisions also shaped Hiang Whai's perspective. The push for English as a working language, the merger of Nanyang University with the University of Singapore in 1980, and the suppression of dialects for Mandarin were difficult but necessary sacrifices.

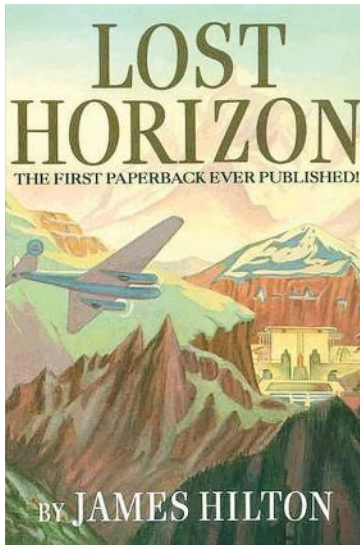
"It was part of social engineering. In the '70s, survival came first. Mobilising the workforce for China's rise meant prioritising Mandarin over dialects. You can't judge the past by today's standards. Back then, we only had 15 years of nationhood and a struggling economy. There was no time for refinement."

Ultimately, Lee Kuan Yew's legacy to Hiang Whai was twofold: the gift of opportunity and a masterclass in leadership. His voracious curiosity and his relentless consumption of global affairs also inspired Hiang Whai's own habit of hoarding knowledge.

"I bored my friends with trivia. Newsroom colleagues called me a walking encyclopaedia."

## HEROES AND MENTORS

Apart from LKY, Hiang Whai's journey was not without many others who had inspired him. He looked up to those, especially in the newsroom, and



#### Book recommendation

*Lost Horizon* by James Hilton

"I first studied this book in Secondary 1 and it left a lasting impression on me. I keep re-reading it and even listen to the audiobook to help me sleep sometimes! A captivating read, it blends adventure with mystery. The mystic monastery Shangri-La makes you question materialism, longevity, peace and happiness. And the idea of a place where wisdom lasts forever feels real, yet mystical. It's a reading journey that stays with you long after the last page."

broadly classified them under one of two categories.

"When I was a journalist, I saw the difference. Some, like Vikram Khanna at *The Straits Times*, wrote with such clarity—even as a former World Bank economist. Others, like Conrad Raj, were scoop kings—relentless in their pursuit of the story. Catherine Ong and Lee Han Shih were legends too. You needed heroes like that—people who made you strive for more."

He also admired American investigative icons—Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein of *The Washington Post*. But as his career shifted towards media relations and communications, new role models emerged: the strategists who could command a room, spin narratives, and handle tough questions.

"Take Alastair Campbell, Tony Blair's communications chief—brilliant. He crafted the strategy that won three elections. That's the skill I aspired to: speaking for politics, government, and the public with that kind of impact."

Many of his heroes shared a similar trajectory—journalists turned speechwriters or press secretaries.

Today, however, he worries the newsroom of today has fewer figures to look up to.

"Young journalists leave or get promoted too soon—before they've earned their stripes. In my time, we had idols. Now? Fewer."

#### FROM PRIVATE SECTOR TO SHAPING PUBLIC DEBATE

In his early forties, Hiang Whai left the newsroom to join UOB, overseeing its global corporate communications, before assuming a few other corporate roles. Then in 2012, after leaving UOL, an opportunity to pivot again presented itself—sparked by a conversation with an unlikely mentor.

**"Nobody will ever imagine I will leave the newsroom for another career, myself included. But I did. And then I was in a few corporate roles before someone convinced me to join the public sector. He said, 'Why work to enrich one family when you can help an entire nation?'"**

And so, Hiang Whai joined the public sector as a communications advisor, where he realised that when one helps the government communicate clearly, it's not just about serving a CEO, as in the private sector—it's about serving millions. What he relishes most is witnessing how a well-crafted message can shape public discourse.

"I used to fantasise about being the one fielding tough questions at a press conference. But over time, I realised I'd rather be the person crafting the strategy, the speech, and the narratives and having someone else deliver it. Seeing a well-crafted message can change public debate."

#### CHALLENGES IN COMMUNICATIONS TODAY

For Hiang Whai, one of the biggest hurdles when he advises on communications strategies is shifting entrenched mindsets in the current age of media and technology.

"There's always this danger of slipping back into old habits—'This is how things have always been done.' But the world has moved on. We can't just rely on the same playbook."

### **On managing civil disagreements**

"In the past, we trusted leaders without question. Now, everyone is more educated and more affluent—we engage and debate everything, from rubbish bins to birds in trees to roaming chickens. That's good: it means better governance and accountability. But we must be honest. Don't just complain because it's fashionable, or waste time on petty fights while the world faces bigger crises. Participation is progress, but maturity is knowing when to stop quarrelling and act for the greater good."

### **On detractors and disruptors**

"Every society has its disruptors—some constructive, some cynical. Some genuinely challenge flaws in the system, keeping leaders sharp and governance honest, while others distract, spreading fake news with ulterior motivation. We must differentiate between the real critics and the detractors. My hope is that we are mature enough as a society to be honest when we have these kinds of discussions. Don't just parrot because it's cool or popular to say something."

### **On success and leadership**

"There are two stages you go through for a successful career: What you know and who you know. Your first act is mastering technical skills—knowing your craft inside out. But to lead? That's Act Two. It's not what you know. It's who you know, who you can persuade—allies, teams, customers, even policy makers. But leadership isn't just talking. It's convincing the best doers to join your mission. I may not be the best banker but I need to hire the best banker. Communication, persuading people to work for you, persuading customers to buy a product, persuading the government to pass a policy—that is leadership."

### **On the media landscape today**

"Trust in mainstream media is declining globally—even here, where we still hold a respectable 61% in the trust index. But why rely on intermediaries when you can go direct? If I can reach 1.6 million people directly through my own channels, why filter truth through a reporter's deadline or angle? Speed and platforms evolve, but principles don't. Accuracy still matters, listening still matters, hitting the right emotional notes still matters. The mainstream media is losing traction. So, it's about cutting the middleman. Post it straight on social media platforms and people can receive and engage it anywhere. But make no mistake: direct access demands even sharper discipline. No editor will clean up your mistakes."

### **On maintaining public trust**

"Singapore's government has delivered results for over 60 years—that's undeniable. Even in the last 15 years, there's been genuine effort to engage, listen, and craft policies for the majority. Honesty remains non-negotiable; when corruption surfaces, it's dealt with swiftly. No system is perfect, but ours works. Remember the 2010 financial crisis? While the world panicked, we grew. Investors fled to Singapore because they trusted what we'd built—a stable, well-managed system. Even America's quantitative easing sent capital flooding our way, proving global confidence in our fundamentals. That trust wasn't accidental. It was earned through consistent delivery and accountability."

### **On good media hygiene**

"In this age of deepfakes and AI scams, media hygiene isn't optional—it's survival. We need a national fact-checking campaign as relentless as our anti-littering drives of the '70s. Many will learn the hard way. Just yesterday I received a 'deer hunting' photo. The first thing I did was to fact-check and I found out it was satire. Most won't bother, and that's the danger: we're all vulnerable to our biases. Confirmation bias. The solution? Pause. Verify. Then share. Today's viral lie could be a deepfake designed to turn communities against each other—with just a cloned voice or doctored image. There are no shortcuts, only vigilance."

### **On his hopes for the future**

"Some things can't be fixed by policy alone—but education can cultivate compassion. Not everything should be about meritocracy or chasing peak performance. Take CCAs: If a child wants to play football, must they already be the best? If they want to excel in music, do they need certificates? The Beatles couldn't read sheet music—yet they wrote history. Growth happens through doing, not proving you have the paper qualifications. Schools must become spaces for exploration, not just excellence. Let kids venture. Let them experiment. The 'whole experience'—that's what shapes risk-taking, wiser, more confident kids."

Gone are the days when a single press conference or a formal announcement sufficed. Today, communication is a dynamic, multi-layered process—one that demands engagement before declaration and listening before speaking.

**“It’s no longer about just delivering facts. In the past, you’d draft a press release and call it a day. Now, you need humour, fear, relatability—whatever makes the message stick. You have to hook your audience—make them care, make them stop scrolling.”**

The rise of TikTok, social media, and micro-content has rewritten the rules. Five-second clips, emotive storytelling, and platform-specific strategies now dominate. But convincing stakeholders to embrace this shift isn’t simple. Some still default to the comfort of mainstream media, wary of the perceived risks of these new formats. Others struggle with the pace—social media evolves faster than policies or organisational strategies can adapt.

“You have to nudge them into trying new things. Show them that a well-placed meme or a viral explainer can do more than a thousand-word statement.”

Yet, for all the challenges, he sees opportunity, saying that the tools and audience are there and that we just have to know when and how to use them—and be smart enough to know when not to. And despite all these changes, he maintains that the fundamentals of communication are the same.

“The speed and platforms may have changed, but the core principles of communication have not. It’s still about having a clear purpose, knowing your desired outcome, listening with empathy, getting real feedback, using simple and clear language, engaging with the right tone and segmenting and targeting your audience. But most importantly, being honest, reliable and respectful.”

As for what’s next for him? Hiang Whai says he’s ready to slow down, but only in the work department that is, as he has plans to write more books down the road.

“I’ll probably take it easier now. More mentoring, maybe a lecture or two. Definitely more writing.”

After decades bridging journalism, banking, and bureaucracy, his final advice distils decades of hard-won insight into one parting maxim:

**“Whether you’re selling a mall or a policy, it’s not just about announcing it. Your audience wants to know about the experience: ‘What’s in it for me?’ Master that, and you’ll never need to shout.”**



When I think unlimited, I think of...  
ideas.

**I am unlimited when...**  
I explore ideas.

"SLA is about building lives—capturing memories, and  
recognising the lives of those who have lived, and the  
lives to be lived."





Eric is photographed in Singapore's oldest electric lift, its original carriage still intact, at **KADA**—a creative lifestyle and wellness hub that occupies the former St. Andrew's Mission Hospital, at 5 Kadayannallur Street.

# The Combo Specialist, with a Signature Dish:

## Eric Sim on redefining what building a career means, one small action at a time

Eric Sim is not your typical working professional. He is, and has been, many things—engineer, banker, educator, coach, author, speaker, and influencer. And at 55 years of age, this is just the beginning. If you think this is because he might have more resources or more privilege than the next guy, you are wrong. Eric is simply hungrier. Through the years, his passion for learning, his belief in working hard, his embrace of failure, and his relentless pursuit of self-improvement never wavered.

“At 40, 50, 60, you can still do a lot! In my younger days, I built my foundation, I explored different fields, accumulated knowledge and developed skills. Now I connect the dots and carve out new niches for myself.”

When he was in primary school, Eric began helping his father sell prawn noodles on weekends and school holidays, and this lasted up until he was in university. Being the eldest and only son in a family of five, he felt it was his duty to help out and did everything from washing the dishes to taking orders and cooking. If all this taught him one thing, it was that he would need to study and work hard to achieve more. He managed to secure a place in Engineering at the National University of Singapore (NUS) and often jokes that no one would have guessed this, given that he failed mathematics in school and spoke a mixture of English and Hokkien. Today, he has over 2.8 million followers on LinkedIn, hailing from all over the world.

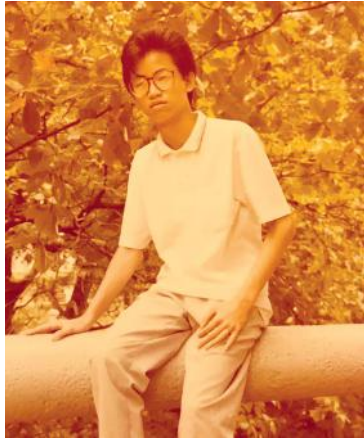
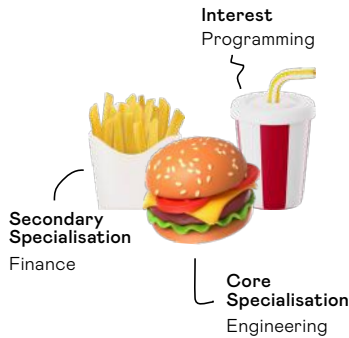
How did Eric get here? He shares some of his ingredients for success.



Eric's father at his prawn noodle stall. For over 30 years, his father woke up at 5am daily, resting only on the first day of Chinese New Year. Eric helped him at the stall up until his second year of university, learning some of the skills that serve him even today.



## Eric's Combo Meal



Underweight and lacking social skills in his teenage years, Eric struggled with an inferiority complex. He admitted that he didn't have the courage to take bold actions. Though he once dreamed of becoming an architect, he never pursued it.

## BE A COMBO SPECIALIST

Although Eric's degree was in engineering, he started his career in finance, spending 20 years in the industry and eventually rising to the position of Managing Director at UBS. In banking, he combined engineering with finance. He knew, even then, that in today's ever-changing world, the specialist-versus-generalist debate is becoming irrelevant and that being able to combine different disciplines to offer something unique is the way forward.

With this, Eric came up with the idea of a "combo specialist" and explained it with the "combo meal" analogy. This "combo meal" includes your core specialisation (the burger), your secondary specialisation (the fries), and your interest (the drink). Back then, for Eric, these were engineering, finance and programming, respectively. Today, he says his "burger" is being an author, his "fries" are his teaching career and life skills, and his "drink" is landscape design.

**"If you're a generalist, you cannot command a premium because you can be easily replaced. If you're a one-dimensional specialist, when your industry gets disrupted, you can get displaced. So what I recommend is to be a combo specialist."**

## CREATE YOUR SIGNATURE DISH

Next, Eric says that being a combo specialist is not enough. It's also important to have a signature dish, and he explains this using the example of a Michelin-starred French restaurant. Its signature dish is a silky-smooth, buttery mashed potato. Customers get it for free with any main course. So how does the restaurant make money? Red wine.

"Every good restaurant has a signature dish. The signature dish attracts you to come. But the restaurant makes money from other more expensive dishes and drinks."

Eric's signature dish was photography, and this was how he managed to clinch the opportunities he wanted. He also emphasises that the signature dish should be a skill that can be acquired relatively easily and will be useful to many people.

"When I was working for Citi, I took up photography. So whenever there were client events, I'd volunteer to take photos. I kept doing that. In 2005, I saw China liberalising its financial sector. So I called the Head of Sales in China and said to them, 'I've conducted training for your staff and clients, and I've taken photos for several of your events. Can I come and work for you?' He said yes. Within two weeks, I was transferred from the Singapore office to the Shanghai office."

## WORK ON YOUR WEAKNESSES

Focusing on one's strengths is easy, but confronting our weaknesses—the uncomfortable, lesser-developed, and not-so-desirable parts of ourselves—requires far more courage and effort. Needless to say, Eric has never been one to shy away from this, taking active steps to face his fears since he was young.

"I have a very long horizon when I want to address my weaknesses. I've got stage fright. So when I was in NUS, I started looking for opportunities to stand on stage. I asked a school dance choreographer to let me stand behind his dancers on stage. He agreed. All I needed to do was to open a red umbrella twice during the dance routine. That small step is the reason I was able to give a TEDx talk 20 years later."

And the key to that, he says, is to find the edge of the discomfort zone—the zone where something is slightly uncomfortable but doable. And then keep doing it.



"I'm patient. So I'll divide big tasks into very, very small steps. And I keep doing them. Every time there's an opportunity, I'll do it."

Apart from facing his weaknesses, Eric believes that there are also ways to capitalise on them, transforming them into strengths.

"I try to take advantage of my weaknesses. I also failed English in school. I remember for Literature, I got 28 out of 100. So on social media, I write in simple, short sentences and use photos to tell stories. It worked! This is why I am able to connect with people whose English is not their native language. Your weakness is your uniqueness."

**BE YOUR OWN CEO** Often, employees may feel they do not have much autonomy. Eric turns this limiting belief on its head, reframing the approach to work: it doesn't matter what you do or where you work; there are always ways to gain a sense of autonomy.

**"When I worked for UBS, I didn't think of UBS as my employer. I think of myself as the CEO of Eric Sim Consulting Company, offering my services to UBS. And UBS is not paying me a salary but a consulting fee."**

Being your own CEO also means fully embodying the role, even if it means paying out of your pocket.

"I buy my own chair. This chair down here is a Herman Miller. It was given to me and cost \$1,000. Looks nice, but I don't use it; it's too big for me. Instead, I use my own chair, only \$200. I'll take it with me whenever I change office location."

Next, Eric says that a big part of the CEO mindset is taking responsibility for one's own learning and trajectory. He recalls how, when he was working in risk management, his insurance agent told him about a company boot camp in Johor Bahru, Malaysia. Even though Eric was not from insurance or the company, he took five days off from work, paid out of his pocket, and joined what would become one of the most life-changing events he has ever experienced. He recalls the intense dawn-to-dusk trainings, repeating mantras like 'For things to change, I must change first' and singing motivational songs like 'I Believe I Can Fly'.

#### LEFT

In the late '90s, Eric attended a job interview at a bank in London wearing an oversized jacket from Oxfam—so large he joked he could "easily hide a chicken" in it—paired with mismatched trousers. Surrounded by impeccably dressed British bankers, he immediately realised he didn't fit in and was rejected within 20 minutes.

That experience taught him a lasting lesson: the power of making a strong first impression.

"I once wrote 2 LinkedIn articles about a Singapore street food vendor who won a Michelin star, differing only in the first sentence. One began with 'Congratulations to Mr Chan Hon Meng, who was awarded one Michelin star for his chicken noodles.' The other began with 'For 30 years, he's worked 100 hours a week; in the last 8 years, he's been selling chicken noodles for less than US\$2 a plate.' The first got 700 likes—decent for LinkedIn. The second? Over 90,000. A strong opening makes all the difference!"



Writing on LinkedIn has opened doors for Eric to speak internationally. His stories have been featured by media such as *Business Insider*, *Fortune* and *South China Morning Post*. He also makes it a point to visit LinkedIn offices when he travels, and has been to the ones in London (pictured), California, Hong Kong, Beijing and Mumbai.

**RIGHT**  
Growing up in a low-income family, Eric knew that the only way to advance was to study. Although he studied hard, he still failed English, Literature and Math in secondary school. His parents comforted him by telling him he could take over the noodle stall if he didn't make it in school.

"I was so glad I went for it. After the training, I learnt how to handle rejections and face the difficulties in life. Everything was possible! If employees are willing to pay for their own training, I hope employers can give them some days off."

#### TELL YOUR OWN STORY

In a world where we are increasingly bombarded by a surfeit of content and distractions, it is more vital now than ever that we remain the authors of our own book and tell our own stories. And for Eric, his story is one about being the most improved player.

"The most important story is the one that you tell yourself. And one story I love to tell is MVP (Most Valuable Player) versus MIP (Most Improved Player). In investment banking, if I want to be a MVP, I can never win. Because I don't have the family connections, the network, or the social skills that others have. But how about becoming the MIP? When I frame it that way, it's a mindset change; I can freely share my failures, my hawker stories. And it resonated with clients, because a lot of them also start from the bottom."

This new narrative instantly bolstered Eric's self-esteem. He owned his story, and this confidence propelled him to achieve more.

Another aspect of telling one's story well, Eric says, is about having a consistent personal brand. And this can start with something as simple as colour. Having always loved the colour orange, he injects it into everything—from how he accessorises his outfit and the colour of his business card to his company's logo and the pen he uses. And not just any orange, but one with the colour code #ff6600.

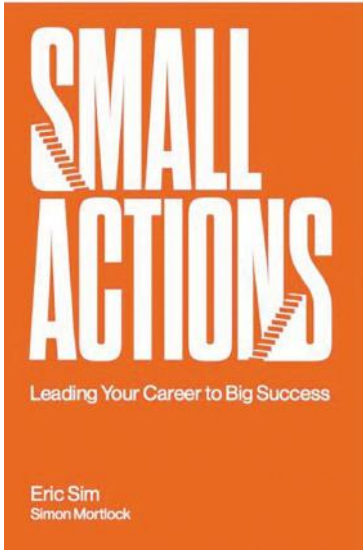
RECORD OF MARKS							
Class: Sec. <u>E31</u>		A.M./P.M.		Year <u>1984</u>			
Age on 1st Jan. <u>14</u> yrs. <u>1</u> mths.							
School Fees Payable/Free Authority No. <u>R51</u>							
Basis of Eligibility for Paying Rate of School Fees <u>SC</u>							
SUBJECTS		MARKS OBTAINED					Grade
		1st. Semester C. A.	2nd. Semester C. A.	Mid-year Exam	Final Term Exam	Year's Average Marks %	
	Max Marks	100	100	30%	50%	100%	
English Language		72	70	15.0	28.0	51	C6
Literature			30		13.5	28.0	F9
Malay/Chinese/Tamil		75	71	20.1	34.5	69.0	B3
Other Lang. as a 2nd Lang. ( )							
Oral English							

"I've always liked the colour orange, and over time it's become a consistent part of my personal brand. I would order dozens of orange-coloured Pilot ballpoint pens with my email address printed on them, which I would give to clients if they forget to bring their pens to meetings."



**“THE  
MOST  
IMPORTANT  
STORY**

**IS THE ONE  
YOU  
TELL  
YOURSELF.”**



Published on 25 November 2021, *Small Actions: Leading Your Career to Big Success* is Eric's first book. It features 66 stories filled with personal anecdotes, aimed at helping individuals improve their lives and careers.

Eric envisioned a book cover that seamlessly integrated the image of a ladder, with an emphasis on the words "Small Actions" to create a strong visual impact. This distinctive design helped the book stand out among competing thumbnails online.

The book took Eric 9 months to write. It has since been translated into Simplified Chinese, Traditional Chinese, and Bahasa Indonesia, and has sold over 20,000 copies.

**RIGHT**  
Rejection letter from Princeton University.

## REVEAL YOUR FAILURES

Eric is no stranger to failure. In fact, he is so used to them that he wears them proudly on his sleeve.

From failing subjects in school and facing rejection from job applications in London to being turned down by Singapore Airlines and Princeton University, Eric has learnt to turn setbacks into powerful sources of motivation.

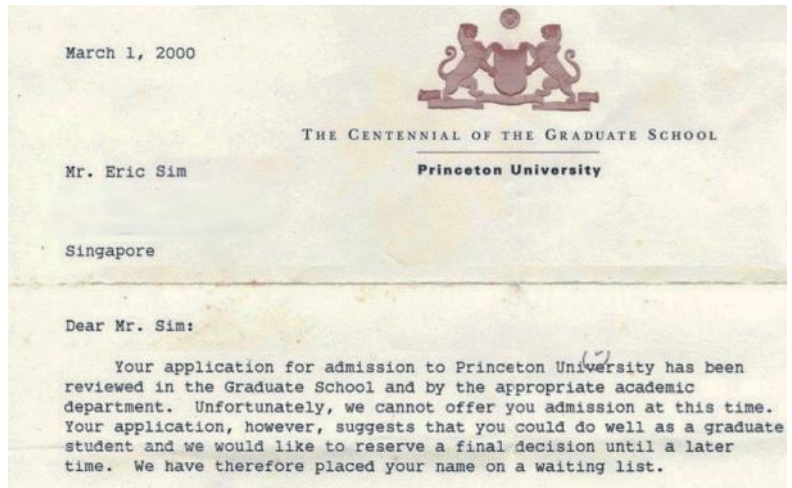
During the 1997 Asian financial crisis, Eric spent six months unemployed after graduating with a master's degree. He eventually secured a job at Standard Chartered Bank—though it was not his ideal job. But there, he met his then-boss, Prasanna Thombre, whose unwavering belief in him gave him the confidence to launch his 20-year international banking career.

"I'm used to failing because I failed so many times. When I do things, I don't expect to be successful, but I still try."

Not only do these failures spur him on to do better, but they also help him build rapport and connect with people on a deeper level.

**"On social media, people show you the best parts of their lives. It makes you believe that everybody's life is great except yours. I reveal my failures to counterbalance that, to show my followers the reality. Life has its ups and downs, twists and turns."**

Eric recalls that in 2000, he applied to a PhD programme at Princeton University. His heart sank when he saw the words "Unfortunately, we cannot offer you admission at this time" on his letter. However, Eric still managed to become an Adjunct Associate Professor at The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology in 2016 by leveraging his banking experience.



"My goals may be fixed. But my plan to achieve my goals is flexible. Find different ways."

One thing to be mindful of, he says, when it comes to revealing failures, is to share your scars and not your wounds. This distinction is





#### RIGHT

Eric's TEDx Talk '10 Years of Selling Noodles' traces his journey from helping at his father's prawn noodle stall to becoming a banker and career coach. He shares lessons in resilience, customer service, and adaptability, emphasising diverse experiences and continuous learning for success.



Eric teaches at several universities and has delivered talks at Cambridge University and Peking University. In this photo, he is conducting a career skills workshop at Keio University in Tokyo.



important, as it protects one from potentially being hurt.

"You can share your scars—the failures you've already recovered from—but don't share your wounds publicly if you're still in pain. Some might use them against you to hurt you further."

Eric's vulnerability in showing himself to the world, along with his insatiable thirst for learning, ability to turn challenges and weaknesses into positives, and courage to blaze his own trail, demonstrate an indefatigable spirit—one that fuels not just his career, but life.

"I have a thick folder full of certificates—I'll learn anything. From graphic design and video editing to gardening and positive psychology, I've taken countless courses. I started with technical skills like C++, photography, and design, which seemed unrelated to my engineering and banking career. But now, they're proving useful—whether it's photo editing for LinkedIn or designing my book."

With no signs of slowing down, who knows what special dish Eric will be whipping up next?



Eric Sim

## Note to my 22-year-old self

To: SLA, Singaporeans CC: Me

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Eric, at 22, you can do a lot more than you think. In the next few years, you may feel a little lost, but you can still lead an interesting life. I hope these tips offer you some direction. Enjoy the journey!

### Think “Crazy”

Eric, your life is a little boring. You need to think a bit “crazier” and do more fun stuff. Why not organise cultural events and parties at your school? On your own, you’re nobody, but by leveraging the university’s network, you could attract sponsors to your events. Don’t worry, students will turn up since you like design. Why not ask your Dean if you can take some elective courses at the Faculty of Architecture? Don’t be afraid to take some risks!

### Don’t Accept “No”

Eric, changing people’s minds isn’t as difficult as you think. Don’t wait until you’re older to realise this. Don’t accept “no” without putting up a fight.

### Believe in the Butterfly Effect

Eric, you’ll find that a small action taken today can have a huge impact later on (a phenomenon known as the butterfly effect). If you don’t write an unsolicited letter to a bank’s HR department, you probably won’t get into banking. If you don’t get into banking, you won’t have enough money to do your master’s in the UK, and that also means you may not develop an international outlook and career. Believe in the butterfly effect: take action today, no matter how small the action is.

### Learn Presentation Skills

Eric, your presentation skills are weak. Whether you set up your own company or work for someone else, you’ll find that you’ll need to make effective presentations. Unfortunately, these skills aren’t taught in school, so engage in activities beyond the classroom to develop them.

### Collect Failure Stories

Eric, you’ll fail and be rejected time and again. An airline will turn down your job application, clients will reject your product recommendations, and your boss will deny your request for a promotion.

Don’t take setbacks too hard—as long as you’ve tried your very best. Failures are painful and can shake your confidence, but they also make you more experienced and resilient. Learn from your failures and move on.

Collect your failure stories, because one day, when you become successful, they’ll make your conversations much more interesting.

—

**When I think unlimited, I think of...** potential.

**I am unlimited when...** I don’t limit myself by my potential.





Fandi's portrait was digitally superimposed against the ■ **State Land @ Margaret Drive**, Queenstown. As he is currently coaching the Sri Pahang team in Malaysia, he was unable to be photographed in person and graciously agreed to this photoshopped version.

Developed in 1952, Queenstown is Singapore's first satellite town. The area has seen much transformation, with the site of the former Hua Yi Government High School at Dawson now home to a restored running track for community use.

# The Boy Who Dared to Dream:

## *Fandi Ahmad* on a life in football and uniting Singaporeans through the beautiful game

For those who have experienced the electrifying matches at the old National Stadium and witnessed the golden era of Singapore football in the '70s, '80s and '90s, you would know that football was more than a game to Singaporeans—it was a force that united a nation. You would also know that at the centre of it all was a kampong boy dreaming of greatness. That boy was Fandi Ahmad, arguably Singapore's most famous football star.

"Since I was young, I knew I wanted to be a footballer. One day I told my late father that. He said, 'Are you sure? You've got to study.' 'Yes. I think I'm good at football because I like challenges.'"

This conviction and single-mindedness were what carried Fandi through his growing-up years and career—and he never once wavered.

"I'm very lucky. But lucky is not the word. I worked very hard for it. I aimed to be the best. I didn't care about others because I knew what I wanted. That was my path."

The young boy grew up to play for clubs in Singapore, Indonesia, Holland and Malaysia before going on to coach teams in Singapore and Indonesia. He was awarded the Public Service Medal in 1995 for captaining Singapore to the Malaysia League and Cup trophies. He earned a total of 101 caps and scored 55 goals with the Singapore National team, a record unsurpassed till today. In the 1983, 1985 and 1989 SEA Games, he also helped Singapore win silver medals. In Holland, Fandi was voted into FC Groningen's Hall of Fame as one of the club's 25 best players in 1999. In 2003, he was named the club's best XI for the 20th century.

More than four decades later, Fandi, who turned 60 in 2022, still radiates the same passion, energy and enthusiasm as the young teenager who captured the hearts of a nation. His dazzling skills on the pitch aside, it is his charisma, humility and approachability that have made him a household name.



**RIGHT**

Singapore fans in the tens of thousands supporting the Lions at the height of the Malaysia Cup fever in 1994.



"I still feel very young. In sports, you always look younger because you're active every day. I like to be on the field. It keeps me going."

In January of 2023, after his seven-year contract with the Football Association of Singapore (FAS) ended, he took on the role of Head Coach of Sri Pahang, a Malaysia Super League team based in Kuantan, Pahang.

"I was lost for two months after leaving the Football Association of Singapore. But when the Crown Prince said, 'Fandi, we need your help.' I knew I had to rise to the challenge."

**SMALL IN STATURE,  
BIG IN DREAMS**

His obsession with football began at the age of seven, when Fandi would kick a ball around in street soccer games.

"When I was young, I played against big boys, got *hantam*, got whacked. But that's how you grow from strength to strength. I'm not big, but I have a big heart to fight. I knew I was going to be a better player someday and get stronger, too."

Growing up in a working-class family, Fandi's father, Ahmad Wartam, who was the goalkeeper for the national team in the 1960s, was his biggest influence and played a pivotal role in shaping his mindset.

**"My father taught me the three Ds: determination, discipline, and dedication. Most importantly, the small 's'—sacrifice. I say it's small, but it's very big. There are many good players, but they don't have this (sacrifice)."**

That lesson came with tough love. Fandi would often sneak out to play after lunch, ignoring his parents' instructions to rest. He laughs now as he remembers the consequences: being caught on the field and getting "whacked" for his defiance.

His big break came unexpectedly, though it was bittersweet. When his parents separated, Fandi, then around 12 years old, moved to Kaki Bukit, a kampong area where many Malay retirees had settled. Life was tough—he had to take two buses to school while juggling his PSLE preparations. But it was here that an opportunity presented itself. A friend told him about a local club, Kaki Bukit, that was looking for players. Despite his young age, Fandi joined the team, and they went on to win a tournament, marking the start of his rise. Soon after, Fandi's talent earned him a spot in the Lion City Cup, one of the first international under-16 tournaments in the world. Despite being just

under 15, he stood out. Two years later, at 16, he was selected for the national team to travel to Russia.

"One of my dreams was to get on a plane. We didn't have money, so I didn't know how. I used to live behind Upper Jalan Eunos, where planes flew by every day. It was a dream for me, really, because at 16, I got the chance to travel the world—Russia!"

In Russia, Fandi made his mark. In the second game, against the Russian under-23 youth team, he played the full match. And despite standing at just 1.73 metres, Fandi made up for what he lacked in height with his agility.

"In the first game, I played in the last 20 minutes and in the second game, I played the whole match and scored two goals and a last-minute equaliser. I'm not the tallest, but I scored. I shocked myself. I out-jumped and hit the goal."

The game ended 4-4, and Fandi's performance left the crowd in awe. After the final whistle, he ran off the field, unaware that the chasing crowd simply wanted his autograph. That trip to Russia was more than just a football tour—it marked the start of his lifelong career in the sport.

#### **FROM GOALKEEPER TO MIDFIELDER TO STRIKER**

Whether starting as a goalkeeper in his youth, anchoring midfield, or leading the attack, Fandi is the embodiment of versatility. Starting first as a goalkeeper when he was seven to nine years old, he

later switched to the midfield position under the advice of his primary school teacher.

"I played midfield most of the time, but I still scored goals because when I play for Singapore, I play on the left side midfield, attacking on the wing side. So you gotta run up and down. And I scored four goals for the first season."

At 17, during the 1979 SEA Games, his breakthrough came. With star players injured, coach Jita Singh offered Fandi his opportunity to change up his position. "He asked me if I can play striker, and I said, 'Coach, you put me anywhere. I just want to play.' Because once I get into the national team, I don't want to be a reserve."

This gamble paid off—his two assists secured Singapore's historic 2-1 win over then-Asian champions, Burma, which he says was an incredibly big achievement for the team. His secret?



#### **LEFT**

Fandi holding up the trophy after Singapore beat Pahang in the Malaysia Cup final at Shah Alam on 17 December 1994.



Fandi pens autographs for his young fans in Groningen, the Netherlands.

"It's all about imagination. Before a game, I always visualise the moves the night before the match. You must be two or three steps ahead of your opponent. You must be creative because playing as a top striker, you are bound to get whacked."

Reflecting on the state of the game now, Fandi feels that it is too structured.

"In our days, we were very creative because the coaches allowed us to be free, to be ourselves. But nowadays, it's very structured. And until today, I choose players who can play at least two positions."

**MOST MEMORABLE GOAL AND FIRST SOUTHEAST ASIAN TO PLAY IN THE EUROPEAN CUP**

Among the many stunning goals Fandi scored throughout his career, he says one stands out as his most memorable: his strike against Inter Milan while playing for Dutch Club FC Groningen in 1983.

"I've scored many beautiful goals, but this is the most memorable because, in those days, not many Asian players got the chance to play at that level. I represented Singapore even though I was playing for Groningen, and I was up against one of the best goalkeepers in the world, Walter Zenga."

That goal was more than just a moment of individual brilliance—it was a proud moment for Singapore. Fandi felt immense pride knowing that the Singapore flag flew high even as he stood alone on the European stage. He became the first Singaporean and Southeast Asian to play in the European Cup, a milestone that cemented his status as a trailblazer for Asian football.

Life in Europe, however, was far from easy. Adapting to the harsh winters in the Northern Netherlands was a challenge. Fandi recalls how tough it was to train in the snow. His initial success on the pitch, including scoring goals during pre-season, was soon interrupted by a quadricep injury that sidelined him for two months. The recovery period was long and lonely, but luckily, Fandi lived with an Indonesian family, who helped him acclimatise to the new environment. His uncle, who acted as his guardian, also encouraged him to immerse himself in Dutch culture.

"He always advised me to read the newspaper and watch Dutch news. When you mingle with friends, you learn faster. I even got a tutor twice a week. That's how I got to know the language."

This language barrier was a significant hurdle for Fandi. During his time in the Netherlands, English was not as widely spoken as it is today. Among his teammates, only about four or five could communicate in English, while the rest spoke Dutch, making it challenging for him to integrate and connect initially.

**RIGHT**  
Fandi scoring a goal in the 89th minute of the match between FC Groningen and Inter Milan in the 1983 Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) Cup. It was the goal that put Singapore on the European football map.



**“I’M**

**NOT BIG**

**BUT I HAVE**

**A BIG**

**HEART TO**

**FIGHT.”**



Despite these challenges, Fandi left an indelible mark on European football. The FC Groningen fans voted Fandi the most popular player and the most skilful player of that season, with a total of 10 goals in 29 games, helping the Dutch club rise from ninth to fifth place in the Eredivisie.

#### **IT'S ALL ABOUT THE PASSION**

For Fandi, football has always been about the passion. He shares that in the past, players did everything from polishing their own boots to waking up at the crack of dawn for training. He also remembers training sessions at Jalan Besar, where they had to arrive by 7am to sing the national anthem. Fearful of being late and losing their spot, he and his teammates would sometimes sneak into the facility the night before.

"We climbed the windows and slept there. We were scared to be late because the coach said, 'Five minutes late, you go home; no need to play.' We were very passionate about the game, and we were scared to lose our positions."

In contrast, Fandi observes that the new generation of players, while talented, often lacks the same level of grit and drive. Unlike his era, where players had to make do with limited resources, today's athletes are provided with sponsorships, equipment, and support systems. While these are beneficial, Fandi believes they may sometimes lead to complacency.

**"The passion we had for playing for the country was real. We'll do it with or without money. While we still love the game and strive for success with the team, people now seem more interested in a lifestyle. And that's how some players lose their way. I wanted a life in football, not a lifestyle."**

However, Fandi also acknowledges the importance of professionalism, knowing one's worth and not short-changing yourself.

"If you're a professional, you should know your value and how to negotiate."

He points out that many talented athletes retire early due to a lack of support, highlighting the need for both passion and a strong support system to nurture talent. He cites the example of Joseph Schooling, whose parents supported him from the age of 13, as a model of how passion and backing can lead to success.

#### **A HISTORIC DOUBLE WIN: 1994 M-LEAGUE AND MALAYSIAN CUP**

In 1993, Fandi returned to Singapore and signed a two-year contract with the FAS after his overseas stints in Holland, Greece and Malaysia. His goals led Singapore to the Malaysia Cup final that year, where they lost to Kedah. But in 1994, they made history by finishing the season as the Malaysia Cup and Malaysian League champions—14 years after Singapore last clinched the cup in 1980. With over 50,000 fans from Singapore who had travelled by the busloads to the Shah Alam Stadium in Selangor, the atmosphere was nothing short of electrifying.

As he wrote in his second biography *Fandi: Honour & Sacrifice*, "It has been 14 years since we won the Cup; this is history in the making. Let's not disappoint the people out there. This is for Singapore! Let tonight's Kallang Roar shake the stadium! Majulah Singapura!"

And he did not disappoint that night and for several games after. Fandi was the top scorer with 26 goals in that double-winning season and was voted Player of the Season. For captaining Singapore, he was also



#### LEFT

The historic double win in 1994—where Singapore reclaimed the Malaysia Cup after 14 years and were also the Malaysian League champions. Pictured with the team are FAS officials and other well-wishers.

awarded the Public Service Medal in August 1995. It was Singapore's as well as Fandi's final year of participation in the Malaysia League and Cup, as Singapore subsequently pulled out of the tournaments—but one that they exited gloriously from.

#### A GO-GETTER: ON THE PITCH, AS IN LOVE

Fandi's life revolved around football, but love found its way into his story unexpectedly.

"I always wanted to focus on football until I stabilised my life. Marriage happened late, when I was 34."

It was May 1994, during the Malaysia Cup season, at the wedding of photographer Wee Khim and singer Jessica (Soo). Arriving late, Fandi noticed a woman in a white dress. When he asked about her, Wee Khim told him not to waste time, as she wasn't Singaporean and was heading back to her home country soon. Fandi let it go—or so he thought.

Weeks later, Fandi and his friend Abbas (Saad) were picking up food from Jalan Kayu to enjoy at home. As they laid the packets out on some newspaper, Fandi noticed a familiar face on the page—the same woman from the wedding. Stunned, and taking it as a sign, he resolved to find her.

He soon learnt her name was Wendy Jacobs. Determined to see her again, he got her home number from a make-up artist who had attended the wedding with her. He called Wendy to invite her to a meal for his birthday. And although she had no idea who he was, she agreed to a lunch date—and immediately took a liking to him. That lunch marked the beginning of their whirlwind romance.

His grasp of Afrikaans—thanks to its similarities with Dutch—worked remarkably in his favour, helping him quickly win over her family. One memory, he fondly recalls, was at the Jacobs' home, where they gathered to watch the historical 1995 Rugby World Cup where South Africa won. During the game, they spoke in Afrikaans, and Fandi would jump into the conversation, shocking the family.

Looking back, Fandi says it was all fated. As Wendy and her family prepared to return home to South Africa, he made the bold move of asking her parents for their blessing to marry her.

"I had already made arrangements with her parents, but she didn't know. Two days before she left, I picked her up from her junior college and, in the car, I asked if she would marry me. And she said, 'If I come back from South Africa, it means yes.'"

Evidently, Fandi approaches love and courtship the same way he



Fandi with his wife Wendy Jacobs and their children—Irfan, Iman, Ilhan, Iryan, and Ikhsan.

Their 4 sons are actively involved in football, while their daughter, Iman, is known for her work in music, as well as her career as a model, actress, and social media personality.



Written over the course of 2 years, Fandi's second biography by WriteHaus Asia was launched on his 60th birthday on 29 May 2022. It sold over 5,000 copies and was ranked No. 1 on *The Straits Times* Bestsellers list for 8 weeks.



Fandi as the Head Coach of Singapore during the AFF Suzuki Cup in 2018.

approaches his sport—with determination, discipline, dedication and sacrifice. And his efforts paid off.

At her 21st birthday celebration at a restaurant in South Africa, Fandi made arrangements to surprise Wendy with an enormous bouquet of roses—along with a phone call. The first thing he said? “What is your answer?” Without hesitation, Wendy replied, “Yes.” He then told her to look inside the bouquet. Tucked within was a ticket for her to fly to Singapore the very next day.

And the rest, as they say, is history. The couple tied the knot in December 1996 and welcomed their firstborn the following year. Today, all five of Fandi's children carry his bold spirit and fierce determination, each pursuing their own passions with heart. His sons are actively involved in football, while his daughter, Iman, has pursued a career as a singer and model.

#### **INSPIRATION AND INSPIRING OTHERS**

Fandi's journey in football was shaped by the guidance and inspiration of key figures who believed in his potential.

One of his earliest influences was Trevor Hartley, a former West Ham United player who arrived in Singapore and joined the national team as advisor and director of coaching in 1976. At 17, after finishing school and waiting for National Service, Fandi began working at Guthrie, where he crossed paths with national players like Samad Allapitchay and David Lee. One day, they relayed a message from Hartley, inviting him to train with the national team. Thinking it was a joke, Fandi didn't show up—until his teammates insisted. When Fandi finally attended training, he was struck by Hartley's inclusive approach. Fandi recalls how he treated everybody the same. On one occasion, when Fandi was asked by senior player Dollah Kassim to make coffee, Hartley intervened. “He's a national player, not your servant,” Hartley told Dollah, leaving a lasting impression on Fandi.

Another significant influence was Jita Singh, known to Singapore's football community as the coach who led the national team to Malaysia Cup victory in 1980. While his methods were sometimes overly strict, Fandi admired his ability to instil focus and determination in his players. Fandi says, “He is full of inspiration.” In 2007, Jita also joined the FAS as the Head of Grassroots Development, helping to enhance youth football development in Singapore.

From being inspired to inspiring others, Fandi himself has made an impact on the younger generation. Even now, he continues to mentor students, including those from ITE, encouraging them to pursue their dreams. He believes that while his generation had to forge their own path, today's youth have more support and resources.

“I used to give about 60 talks a year at different schools, like ITE, where I was a proud graduate. Whether there was money or not, it didn't matter—I enjoyed them very much. What's important is I want to send the message that anything and everything is possible.”

When asked about his happiest and proudest career moment, Fandi takes a macro view, and instead of focusing on his achievements, he acknowledges the power sports has in bringing people together.

“My team and I hope that we have moved the people of Singapore and that we managed to bring people together to support the country through sports.”

In 2022, at 60, Fandi unveiled his second biography *Fandi: Honour & Sacrifice*. Written by Durga Poonambalam, the book is a testament to a lifetime of grit. For a player who thrived in every position, retirement was never about leaving the game—just finding new ways to play.

“My father taught me the three Ds: determination, discipline, and dedication. Most importantly, the small ‘s’—sacrifice. I say it’s small, but it’s very **big**.”





Jaelle is shot at 1925 Quarters, located at ■ [79-95 Hindoo Road](#). This property in Little India was originally built in 1927 as the quarters for junior Asian staff of the Municipality of Singapore. Today, it has been repurposed as a co-living space, as part of SLA's efforts to unlock the value of State properties that are attuned to evolving lifestyle needs.

# The Modern Agora:

*Jaelle Ang*

## on reimagining the co-working space in an experience economy

In ancient Greek cities, the Agora was an open space for citizens to gather over various activities, whether commercial, political or social. It was located centrally and was considered the hub where trades of all kinds took place. Today, Jaelle Ang, CEO and co-founder of The Great Room, a premium hospitality-centric co-working operator headquartered in Singapore, terms the office, or at least her vision of the office, a “modern Agora”.

“We believe that the office is not just a place to be productive. It’s the modern Agora. It’s a space for learning and exchanging because things are moving so fast. It’s also a container for social capital, connections, events, community, water cooler gossip, and casual collisions.”

Since 2015, the company has established 12 co-working spaces across Asia Pacific, including Singapore, Bangkok, Hong Kong and Sydney. And this all started when Jaelle sensed that there was a big gap in the market to fill.

“So there is the backpack brigade—the startups, and they love the co-working spaces. But there are also the grown-ups. However, the grown-ups were stuck with kind of just a service office. There’s the traditional old economy, and there’s the experience economy. So I thought, ‘Is there a space where—I want to get things done, I’m a professional, I’m a high performer, but I also want to play, and I care about the experience economy.’”

### **SOLVING FOR SOMETHING DIFFERENT**

While offices are too stifling, the home too isolating, and cafes too informal and unreliable, Jaelle says that the co-working space occupies a nice in-between. However, even before the pandemic, she observed that co-working spaces were mostly perceived as being “cheap and cheerful”. It was a highly competitive and rather unexciting market. With many players and no premium offering, it was often reduced to a basic, perfunctory experience. Jaelle, however, was determined to solve for something different. She believed that people wanted more than just flexibility.

In the old days, she explains, grand mansions and castles often featured a space informally known as The Great Room. Located at the heart of the property, it was where everyone gathered.



Jaelle launched her very first venture—Art Bug, an art school for children. Noticing a shortage of specialist art teachers for kids aged 5 to 12, she saw an opportunity to fill the gap. She collaborated with educators and principals to develop a tailored art programme for young learners.

This design typology, she says, was something architects sought to recreate in hotels, aiming to capture the same sense of warmth and community.

“We liked the idea that this is where people gather over great food and great conversations, where it’s always buzzing and heartfelt. It was a working name for the longest time until we had to register the business. I was like, let’s just use The Great Room—three simple words, culturally appropriate in any geography, and possibly global.”

After viewing over 60 buildings in Singapore, Jaelle signed her first lease with CapitaLand in 2015. She describes herself as *gungho* at the time. Being the first co-working office at One George Street, in a Grade A office, she notes how other players started entering that space soon after.

“Looking back, I’m not sure why they trusted me to lease 15,000 square feet. After just viewing the deck and meeting me, I signed my biggest cheque ever. That night, I couldn’t sleep. Our goal was to open at 50% capacity. We marketed heavily and did many things, but on the opening day, we were only at 8%. It was terrifying.”

Despite this uncertain start, The Great Room has come a long way. For one, Jaelle shares the importance of thinking like a “small giant”, even from the very beginning. This mindset spurs the team to work towards a bigger vision, one that includes expanding across the region and globe.

Next, a strong brand identity was also vital to the success of the business. The company established a comprehensive playbook of standards, design language, and vocabulary to ensure consistency across all spaces, creating a unified brand and experience. In addition, the emphasis on “performance, play, and purpose” guides their vision, as Jaelle says these are the three key things their audience looks for.

“High performance is table stakes. So when I come into work, I want to be productive. I want great acoustics, good cyber security, and a conducive workspace. These are quite basic, but not all operators have them. Next is play; the workspace must be a great container for that play element. And the third one is, of course, purpose”.

Today, Jaelle says they are committed to securing at least 50% of pre-sales before starting any construction, something they have learnt since the days of starting at 8%. Their global ambitions of being a not-so-small giant also came true in 2022, when they became part of US flexible workplace provider, Industrious, a platform with a network of 150+ locations across 65 cities. This formed part of their push for international expansion and served as the APAC arm of the business. In 2025, Industrious was acquired by the largest global real estate company, CBRE Group, for \$800 million.

#### **FIRST LOVE: ARCHITECTURE**

Reflecting on her journey, Jaelle describes her path as “meandering”. What began as a dream to become an architect took an unexpected turn, leading her into the worlds of entrepreneurship, business, and ultimately, real estate. Having always wanted to be an architect, she studied at the prestigious Bartlett School of Architecture in London after completing her studies at Raffles Girls’ School and a boarding school in England. She explains how architecture represents a confluence of all the things she loves: history, geography, people, and finance. Slated to start work in New York at an architectural firm after graduating, her plan was unfortunately thwarted by the incidents of September 11.

During this period, Jaelle started her own venture, an art school for kids





called Art Bug, and through the experience, she felt the need to equip herself with the business skills she was lacking. So she decided to return to school, pursuing her MBA at Imperial College London.

"I wanted to be an entrepreneur. But there were tools missing in my toolkit. So I wanted to collect certain tools and skill sets and expand my network. Firstly, being away from Singapore for a long time, I didn't have the network. Secondly, I felt there was a big gap in my understanding of economics and financial markets. It was clear that my business would only grow to the extent and scale of my own growth. Business school felt like the right thing to do."

After her MBA, she honed her business skills at Citibank and Credit Suisse in the area of business strategy and mergers and acquisitions. The toolkit she picked up at the global banks set the stage for the subsequent sale of Art Bug when it grew to a size of 40 schools.

Later, after a serendipitous encounter with the CEO of Country Group Development, a Thailand-based property development startup, she made the decision to return to her first love—real estate.

## FROM FISH MARKET TO AWARD-WINNING LUXURY HOTEL AND RESIDENCES

**FROM FISH MARKET TO AWARD-WINNING LUXURY HOTEL AND RESIDENCES** In 2009, Jaelle left her job at the bank, packed her bags, and relocated to Bangkok to pursue an opportunity to develop a prime piece of riverfront real estate. While this new chapter proved to be exciting, she also grappled with the anxiety and stress of this change, which required her to shuttle back and forth between Singapore and Thailand, take a pay cut and, most of all, deal with a big unknown and unfamiliar territory.

"There's this 37-acre site, roughly seven times the size of the Mandarin Oriental down the road. It's one of Bangkok's last golden parcels, owned by the crown. All I could see was its exciting potential. Bear in mind, I was a bit of a closet architect while working at Credit Suisse. I was a banker, but I was always looking for a chance to build something, to create something."

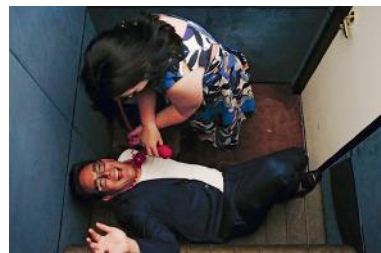
Where others saw an unattractive fish market with hundreds of squatters, Jaelle, with her architectural eye and business instincts, recognised the land's immense potential.

"I love building something from zero to one. I love messiness, because I find

### LEFT AND BOTTOM

"At The Great Room, we like to say, 'It's all work, it's all play.'"

As a premium co-working space, The Great Room reimagines the modern workplace by blending the warmth of world-class hotels and the sophistication of business clubs. From zany photo booths at social events to thoughtful design touches, The Great Room makes coming to work that much more fun.







"We made it our business to make Mondays electric with our *Monday Breakfast Club* and *Turndown Carts*. We are also secretly proud of how people try to sneak into our *Great Thirstdays* because of the great company they find themselves in."

that whenever there's mess and grit, there are interesting opportunities." Her determination led her to pitch the project to over 70 hotel groups, eventually securing the Four Seasons and Capella Hotel. With no 'in' in the industry, she admits that the biggest milestone was getting the head of development to visit the site and convince them. The company acquired the land for less than \$50 million, with the project valued at \$1.1 billion, and it was completed in February 2020, after seven years and during the height of the pandemic. Capella Bangkok went on to top The World's 50 Best Hotels list in 2024, with Four Seasons Hotel Bangkok at Chao Praya River at 14th.

#### **HOSPITALITY AT THE HEART OF THE WORKSPACE**

Four Seasons, has stuck with her since.

Drawing on her experience in the luxury hospitality industry, Jaelle was inspired to infuse the same guiding philosophies into The Great Room. This simple but profound principle, borrowed from the

"How can we serve a hot cup of coffee with a smile? If you want the coffee to be hot, your back-of-house has to be well-designed with the right connections and adjacency. And if you want it served with a smile, your employees have to be happy."

This attention to detail and focus on creating a welcoming atmosphere extend to the space's unique initiatives. Every Monday, *The Breakfast Club* kicks off at 8am, offering a sumptuous breakfast spread. Team leaders often hold their Monday meetings here, creating a vibrant buzz.

"It's not a blue feeling—it's a great feeling. You smell the coffee; you feel the energy. And later, at 5pm, a turn-down cart is placed on each desk, a touch of delight borrowed from the hotel industry to signal the end of the workday."

The space also fosters a sense of community through holiday parties and social events like *A Great Day* and *Great Thirstdays*. Members co-create what they would like to experience, dress up and celebrate together. As such, Jaelle is proud to share that attendance is always high. The Great Room has also hosted a gamut of events ranging from fashion, arts, philanthropy, private equity and wellness. They have also hosted fireside chats spanning the fun, the serious, and the political—*Great Minds Never Think Alike*—a staple of the space's programming.

Ultimately, being small worked to the company's advantage, as it forced them to think creatively. The questions Jaelle and her team often ask themselves are: How do we create excitement? How do we create happiness? How can we bring people in?

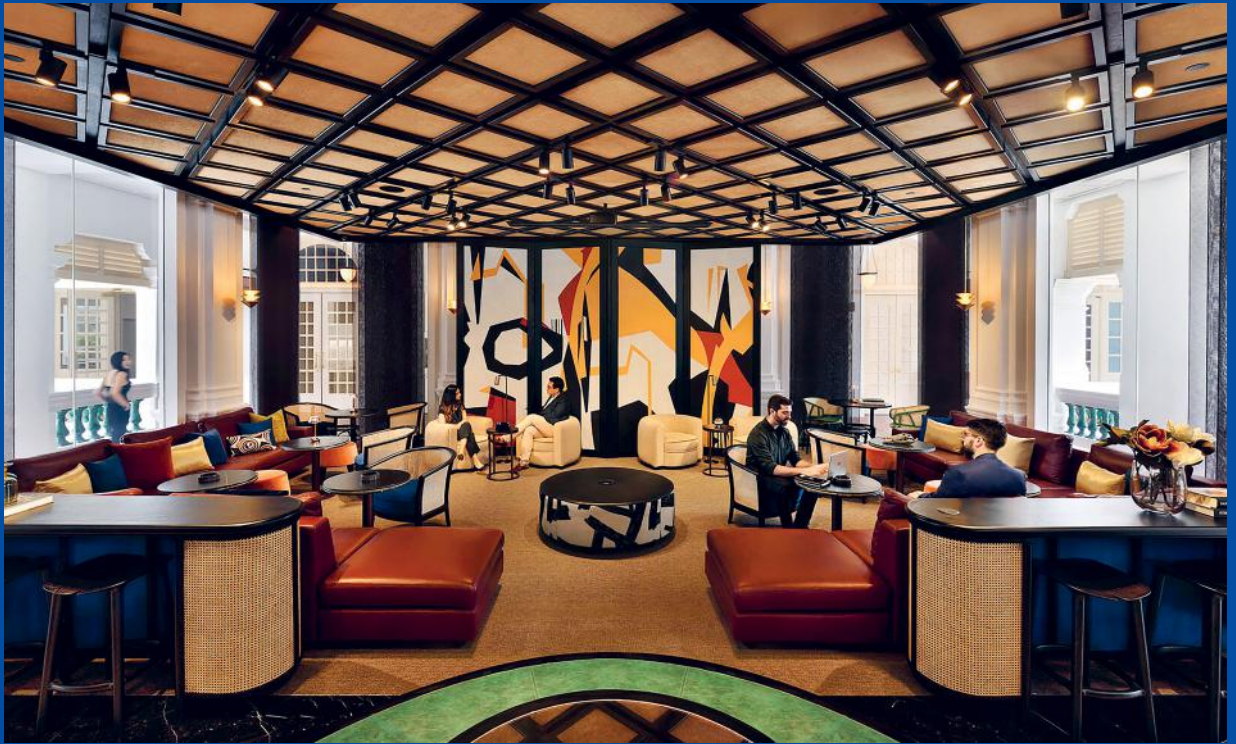
**"The cost of trying was low back then. If something didn't work, we'd fail fast and move on. We took risks, and it paid off."**

#### **THE GREAT ROOM AT RAFFLES HOTEL**

One project that remains close to Jaelle's heart is The Great Room at Raffles Hotel.

"I fought very hard for it. At that time, the board were very divided. We were exactly half-half. Half of us felt that it would be so iconic, so monumental; we've got to do it. But if we don't get it right, Singaporeans are going to scold us. But I think we had a really good relationship with the landlord and the hotel. To their credit, I think they were much more visionary and could see it materialise way before we could."

She recalls the numerous hurdles they faced working within a conservation building with a monument status—from persistent humidity problems and outdated electrical systems to strict regulations limiting structural modifications and renovations.



TOP: Singapore's first co-working space in a luxury hotel, The Great Room, Raffles Arcade is a premier space in a national monument, overlooking a courtyard enclosed with heritage colonnades.

BOTTOM: The Great Room, Gaysorn Tower in Bangkok, occupies 30,000 sq ft over two floors, with breathtaking 360 degree views of the city's skyline.





The inaugural session of the series *Conversation with My Mentor* began at The Great Room in 2020, with the goal of sharing stories and insights from the interactions between mentors and mentees.

The first session featured Jaelle in conversation with Mark Edleson, founding partner of GHM Indonesia, the leading global operator of Mandara Spa Asia, and founder of Alila Hotels & Resorts.



The concierge and entranceway at The Great Room, South Bridge.



The Great Room, One George Street.

“None of our interesting technology, like door technology or sensors, works. So we had to rethink everything. We had to think of everything in a deconstructed way because you can’t move any walls. The space is essentially a glass box in the middle of the shopping arcade, so people can see everything from all angles and come from anywhere. Typically, the view of the office is set, which is your wonderful hero shot, your first impression. Now, because people could come from anywhere, we had to rethink the hero view. There is no back of house; you can’t hide anything messy and dirty. So it was quite challenging.”

They eventually pulled through, and this project galvanised Jaelle’s lifelong love for conservation properties. Jaelle lives in a pre-war conservation townhouse herself, and The Great Room went on to open at the former Eu Yan Sang medical hall on South Bridge Road—another conservation building in Singapore.

“After this project, we received interest and attention from different developers and hoteliers who were impressed that hotels could be reimagined in such a different way. It was not the intention, but we earned the reputation of being the ones who could work with buildings or spaces that were more challenging, weird, or strange.”

#### TRADING ON UNCERTAINTY

In the face of global disruption, when most business leaders would play it safe, Jaelle leaned into the unknown and harnessed it.

“I view the pandemic, or any kind of crisis for that matter, as an interesting time. You know Ayrton Senna, the Formula One race car driver? He said that in sunny weather, you can overtake like three cars. In rainy weather, you can overtake 15 cars.”

This racing metaphor encapsulates Jaelle’s business philosophy: where others see risk, she identifies opportunities. Her company’s model is built around this principle, providing flexibility when markets are most unpredictable.

“We’re selling flexibility and flexible space. And when do people want and need flexibility and would pay a premium? When things are uncertain. So you can almost say that we are trading on uncertainty and volatility, whether that comes from shorter business cycles, inflation, or recession. I don’t have a crystal ball, but what I know is that the world is definitely volatile and will change.”

This insight has proven prescient in recent years. As traditional commercial real estate struggled with rigid long-term leases during pandemic lockdowns and subsequent workplace transformations, Jaelle’s business model demonstrated remarkable resilience.

**“Our business actually doesn’t just thrive when companies are growing. We thrive when companies don’t know what to do—to grow, to cut, to move, or to hold the space before they make bigger decisions.”**

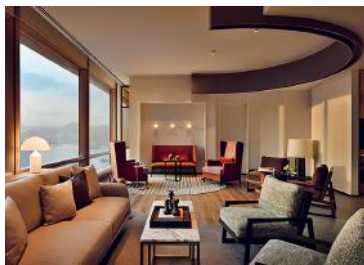
#### OPPORTUNITIES APLENTY

Despite the proliferation of co-working spaces, Jaelle believes the industry is just in its infancy. “Right now, co-working spaces are only around 2 to 3% of total commercial real estate. Very small. So the big prediction is by 2030, it will be around 30%.”

This expansion, she argues, isn’t simply driven by changing workplace preferences but by fundamental shifts in corporate real estate strategies, where companies maintain both conventional and flexible workspace arrangements.

“THE COST OF  
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IF SOMETHING  
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WE TOOK **RISKS**,  
AND IT PAID OFF.”





Launched at one of the most sought-after addresses in the city, The Great Room at One Taikoo Place in Quarry Bay, Hong Kong, occupies 24,000 sq ft in Swire Properties' brand new Triple Grade-A Office Tower.

Jaelle's personal philosophies:

#### **1. You don't need all the answers**

"I don't need to know all the answers. If you have a longer time horizon then you're like 'I have time to get it right, I'm willing to learn and I don't need to know all the answers now, but I will keep going'. And sometimes it's about that endurance."

#### **2. Be long-term greedy**

"Gus Levy from Goldman Sachs said that learning to be long-term greedy is one of the things that can value-add your life most. He may be referring to investments but I think it's applicable to life as well because when you're long-term greedy, you're actually also kinder to yourself and to the people around you."

#### **3. Make mistakes, the earlier the better**

"The earlier you make mistakes, the cheaper the 'tuition fee' you pay for it. In addition, you must have perseverance and persistence. The strategy is do it now and get it done."

#### **4. Be tenacious**

"I think any founder or CEO definitely has that almost-unreasonable tenacity—a dose of foolishness combined with extreme tenacity."

While optimistic about growth, Jaelle acknowledges not every player will succeed.

"We're just starting to build, and it's growing 10 times, but that doesn't mean everyone will succeed. But I think it means that there are different segments, different brands, and different companies who will be attracted by different offerings."

#### **LANDLORDS AS PARTNERS**

Whether it's Gaysorn Tower in Bangkok, One Taikoo Place in Hong Kong, or Raffles Hotel in Singapore, The Great Room has managed to occupy some of the most coveted and enviable addresses across Asia. And the secret to convincing landlords to work with them? Jaelle emphasises the importance of forging strong partnerships and says that if they don't get it right, they simply cannot succeed.

"To set up for success, we share the good and bear the pain together, and we have long partnerships. We don't do three or six years; South Bridge is a 15-year plan. So we take a lot more time with landlords to be collaborative. And when I say partnership, it's the mindset, it's designing the space, and it's owning some of the problems that you want to solve together, whether it's your other tenant experience or increasing ancillary revenue."

#### **BALANCING LIFE AND WORK: GLASS OR RUBBER BALL?**

As if Jaelle doesn't already have enough on her plate, she is also a mother of four and describes her role as a juggler of glass and rubber balls.

"Think of yourself as a juggler, and you're juggling glass balls and rubber balls. You have to be clear about what the glass balls are and what the rubber balls are in your life. We never want any balls to drop, but if they do, you've got to make sure it's a rubber ball. It disrupts your routine, but it's going to bounce back up. In different phases of your life, you've got to know which are the glass and rubber balls, be it relationship, health, family, friends, or spirituality."

She also recalls, as a young analyst at Citibank, she asked this similar question of managing work and life to Sallie Krawcheck, the then CFO of Citibank, and the response she got has since been seared in her memory.

"Sallie said this to me, which sort of burst my bubble. She said that there is no such thing as balance and that it's a fallacy. I clearly remember it and loved it, but I've come to describe it a bit differently, using the juggling analogy."

#### **THE FUTURE IS BRIGHT**

Right now, Jaelle remains optimistic and excited about the opportunities that the future holds for the co-working space. Brimming with ideas, she professes she is foremost a learner, always relentless and always ready to challenge the status quo, while remaining firmly pragmatic.

"I have many ideas every day. So many that my friends don't want to listen anymore. They ask me to put them in a jar and to only tell them the nines, not the sevens, eights or whatever. So I put them in there. I think about many things, but I'm also rather singular. I mentioned co-working is going to expand by 10 times. I'm so excited by that opportunity."

When I think unlimited, I  
think of...  
the growth that comes  
from curiosity.

I am unlimited when...  
I work towards something  
bigger than myself.







Rachel stands before the ■ **Pasir Panjang Power Station**, which comprises two stations that powered Singapore's industrial boom in the 1960s. Its iconic red-brick design reflects Singapore's early urban transformation. In recent years, the venue hosted shows and events like the Louis Vuitton Spring Summer 2023 trunk show and the immersive exhibition on Singapore's founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew's life and legacy.

# Conquering a Multi-Million-Dollar Business—and Herself:

*Rachel Lim*  
on Love, Bonito

being more than a fast fashion brand, her unique leadership style, and imposter syndrome

From a humble blogshop selling pre-loved clothes some 19 years ago to a multi-million-dollar fashion powerhouse that's Southeast Asia's leading womenswear brand today, Love, Bonito has built an empire that transcends fashion. Instead, its success lies in its philosophy of being in the business of women.

With its aim of celebrating and uplifting Asian women with clothes they are “ready-to-live, not just ready-to-wear”, the Singapore-headquartered brand has since expanded its presence internationally in the last decade—into markets like Cambodia, Indonesia, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Philippines and the United States, shipping to over 20 countries currently.

But behind the glowing success and global ambition is a story that cuts much closer to our hearts—a personal narrative that gets to the core of what it really takes to make a business and lead a team. Far from business acumen, lofty spreadsheets, or complex innovations, Rachel Lim, co-founder of the brand, says it boils down to something often not talked about, yet the most challenging of all—conquering the self.

Despite her achievements, having been recognised by *Forbes Asia's* 30 Under 30 list, *Tatler Asia's* Most Influential and *TEDx*, she is candid about her struggles and challenges in her journey thus far.

## IT STARTED WITH BONITOCHICO

Love, Bonito officially celebrates its 15th anniversary in 2025, but for Rachel, the seeds of the brand were sown when she was 19, in her final year at university. Alongside her friends, Viola and Velda, they sought to earn extra pocket money by selling their preloved clothes

BonitoChico

*Love, Bonito*

Love,  
Bonito

LOVE, BONITO

Rachel launched an apparel business with friends Viola and Velda Tan in 2005, starting with a second-hand clothing blogshop called BonitoChico. In 2010, they rebranded it as Love, Bonito, transforming it into a full-fledged fashion label with their own line of clothing designs.

They chose to create apparel tailored for Asian women, who often struggle to find clothing from international brands that fit or flatter them.



on LiveJournal, a blogging platform with its heyday in the early 2000s, adopting the name BonitoChico.

“BonitoChico rhymes better, and while it means ‘beautiful boy’ in Spanish, many think of it as a reference to fish because of its meaning in Japanese.”

Initially a passion project, it became clear that there was a growing demand that could not be ignored. When the group ran out of items to sell, they used their savings from school breaks to import clothes from places like Thailand and Hong Kong. However, balancing university and this emerging business was challenging, and Rachel realised she needed to make a choice.

“I realised that I wasn’t excelling either in school or in my passion project. When I was in school, I was busy replying to emails, thinking about my stocks and forgetting about my assignments. But when I was at work, I was worried about my assignments and my looming exams. So I wasn’t doing well in either. I knew that I had to focus on one.”

At the same time, she discovered a market gap for Asian women.

“International brands like H&M and Zara were designed primarily for Western women, overlooking our specific needs when it came to body proportions, skin tone, and climate.”

With that, she made a bold decision: to break her government bond, drop out of post-graduate studies in her final year, and venture into the world of fashion design and manufacturing. This decision, she admits, was tricky on so many levels. Not only did she have a five-figure debt to pay back, but she also lacked any formal training in fashion or business. Furthermore, her family was struggling financially.

“It was the year of the financial crisis; my dad was going through bankruptcy, and my mum was working two jobs. And I had to pay off a five-figure sum to break my bond to start the business.”

#### **A MOTHER'S LEAP OF FAITH**

However, these hurdles did not deter her, and her mind was set. To complicate things, it was 2009—a time when online shopping seemed risky and unfamiliar.

“I obviously didn’t have that money. The only person I could go to was my mum, and she asked me, ‘Is what you’re doing legal? Will the authorities come after you? Why are people sending you money before they receive or even see and touch their goods?’ It’s something she couldn’t wrap her head around.”

Yet despite her doubts, Rachel’s mother took a leap of faith. And it was only much later that Rachel discovered how extraordinary that leap was.

“She decided to trust me. I later realised that that amount of money was her entire life savings. And that was one of the reasons why I knew I couldn’t fail. It was a real gamble for her. So I had to make it work.”

The costs extended beyond money—Rachel had to sacrifice her social life as well.

“I felt like I was robbed of my youth, haha. While my friends were out at the movies or parties, they’d ask me, but I always had to stay home—working, replying to customer emails. When everyone else was having fun, I was behind a screen and packing at home.”



Rachel with her mum.

## LEADERSHIP: A JOURNEY OF SELF-DISCOVERY

Having never been an employee before, apart from her limited experience as a part-time waitress, and without direct role models, Rachel's leadership journey was anything but smooth. The only reference points and knowledge she had were by piecing together leadership lessons from friends' complaints about bad bosses and media portrayals of entrepreneurs like Steve Jobs. At some point, the self-doubt and imposter syndrome plagued her.

"I tried so hard to emulate what I read about successful leaders. They were glamourised by the media. So I thought, oh, in order to be successful, in order to be a true entrepreneur, I need to run my business like them. When I go home and look at myself in the mirror, I would cringe and wonder, why did I try so hard?"

She recalls how the company used to make their employees do StrengthsFinder tests every year and how the results would always unsettle her.

"I would look at my top five strengths and think—why am I all about the soft skills? Where are my hard skills? I felt embarrassed. And I was joking with one of my colleagues then, saying I felt like a clown. Why do I not have the hard skills that everybody has? And she just said to me, 'You know, Rach, what you have is not what we have.'"

And that simple, yet profound response struck a chord in Rachel. It was the epiphany she needed to grow in confidence. That day on, she stopped belittling herself and comparing herself to others, and instead focused on exploring her unique strengths.

"I read up more about my supposed strengths and discovered what they're about, and how I can use them to my advantage. And slowly I grew in confidence to be the leader I am today. So my leadership style? I am firstly a people's leader."

## HIRING GREEN FLAGS

Having figured out her leadership approach, the hiring process became a lot easier. Rachel knew exactly what she was looking out for, and what she did not want.

"People interview so well nowadays. They walk in, they know exactly what to say. Even before you ask a question, they will say whatever you want to hear."



The Love, Bonito creative team out on shoot for their 2013 summer campaign. Rachel is pictured in the middle, in a cap.



Love, Bonito was voted "Best Blogshop" in the Nuffnang Asia-Pacific Awards in 2009. Pictured from left to right are Viola, Rachel and Velda.

## LEFT

Love, Bonito's Summer 2025 Collection features an elevated neo-nautical aesthetic, blending timeless classics with contemporary design.

This realisation shaped her unconventional hiring process. Rather than relying on traditional interviews, Rachel insists on taking candidates out of the corporate or interview setting.

"We meet their peers; they meet the team. We go for drinks; we go for dinner. If possible, I love to meet them with their partner, their spouse. I want to see how they are like outside, how they are with someone else, and how they treat the wait staff. These are all very telling."

Then, after this preliminary stage, Rachel says two key qualities separate standout candidates. First, a genuine growth mindset and curiosity to learn, and next, those who give credit to others rather than claim singular glory.

"I've met a lot of people who have been in the industry for the last 40 years. They say they know everything about marketing. But when you ask them about TikTok, they're like, 'Oh, I'm not sure how TikTok is going to be in the future.' Then, it's also about how willing they are to give credit to others... that's very telling for me. You don't think, 'Oh, I was the one who built this'... but really rightfully acknowledging the team."

#### **THE POWER OF COACHING AND MENTORSHIP**

When asked about her toughest leadership challenge, Rachel's answer cuts right to the core.

"I think the first thing that comes to my mind is myself. I always think that if a leader can overcome and get over himself or herself, he or she can get over anything. Before we lead and manage others, we need to lead and manage ourselves."

This daily practice of self-awareness manifests in her constant internal checks, and she cites these as some examples: "Am I reacting out of ego and pride or because it's truly against my values?"

Clearly, Rachel has no qualms admitting that leaders need guidance too, and she has never shied away from seeking out mentors and coaches in her life.

"I have a life coach. I grew up playing competitive sports. So I know the power of a coach to guide you, to look for your blind spots. We talk about any issue—my marriage, staying with in-laws, juggling motherhood and work. It's like a mirror that helps reflect back what I need to see."

For Rachel, her breakthroughs came when she stopped trying to have all the answers and instead started asking herself the right questions. She proves that sometimes the strongest move is admitting you can't

#### **RIGHT**

In 2020, Love, Bonito opened its 5,597 sq ft flagship store at ION Orchard, designed to create an immersive experience that reflects the spirit of the Love, Bonito woman—her lifestyle, inspirations, and sense of style. The space features highly Instagrammable photo ops, along with curated touchpoints to explore the brand's signature staples.



**“COURAGE**

**COMES**

**BEFORE**

**CONFIDENCE.”**





Rachel and her husband, Leonard, and her kids.

go at it alone—that's why she sought out women leaders like DBS' Tan Su Shan as mentors.

"For me, mentorship doesn't have to be an official and formal relationship. It can be very fluid and casual. But firstly, to get a mentor, you need to be very thick-skinned. Email, LinkedIn and ask for recommendations from mutual friends. And be absolutely prepared when you get that chance. You only have one chance to make an impression, and make sure that you're worth someone's time."

Now she benefits from reverse mentorship too, learning TikTok trends from Gen Z team members.

"Mentorship goes both ways. It's what you can get from others and what you give in return."

And in particular, one mentor's wisdom has stayed with her: When things go well, don't let it get to your head. When they don't, don't let it get to your heart.

"Life comes in waves. What matters is protecting your mind, spirit, and emotions."

#### **MARRIAGE AND MOTHERHOOD**

Being the strong, determined career woman that she is, what then is Rachel's stance on marriage and family? Having grown up in a boisterous environment surrounded by two brothers and 18 cousins, all boys, Rachel says she always knew she wanted to be a mum.

Yet when her turn arrived, and her husband who's 14 years her senior was eager to start a family, she hesitated. When she finally decided to try, reality proved humbling.

"I felt like I wasn't ready. So I put it off year after year. But one day, I just decided, okay, you know what? We're just gonna try. I feel that I was ready in terms of the help that I needed. So we finally tried, but I didn't know it would be so hard to have a kid. I took it for granted. I thought it was like the movies, you know?"

Finally, after two years of trying, at the beginning of COVID-19, when she was at her most stressed and all the stores were closed, Rachel got pregnant. In December, her son, Oliver, was born.

"For once in my life, I realised there's something more important than work. And when I told my husband, he said, 'Huh, not me?' I think I have learnt so much on this journey of being a mum. It's one of the most beautiful feelings in the world."

Motherhood brought profound joy but also hard lessons about balance. A mentor's advice became her compass, and for Rachel, marriage unexpectedly emerged as the most fragile.

"You need to know which balls are glass and which are rubber. I tend to neglect my husband. There was once, he told me, 'I can't believe I'm finding out about your store opening through LinkedIn.'"

Today, she navigates the constant juggle with clearer priorities. It's an ongoing adjustment, but one that she says has reshaped her understanding of what's truly important.

"My marriage is my glass ball. It takes a village to build a strong home, just like it takes a village to build a strong brand."

## **LIFTING OTHER WOMEN UP**

As a mother, daughter, wife and sister, Rachel knows the importance of supporting other women. And for her, success is as much about lifting other women along the way. This conviction birthed LB Create, the brand's social impact arm dedicated to empowering underprivileged girls across Asia through education.

"I believe Love, Bonito is not in the business of fashion. We're in the business of women. Fashion is just our vehicle. So we commit to supporting girls in lower-income cities annually. Education is the gateway to an empowered woman. When one woman finds her footing, she reaches back to pull up others."

In Singapore, Rachel partners with the Changi Women's Prison to help former inmates rebuild their lives, and collaborates with Daughters of Tomorrow to support single mothers. She views these efforts not as charity but as extensions of Love, Bonito's mission.

"With great influence comes responsibility. We're constantly exploring how to make the world better in our own little ways."

## **NO ONE PATH TO SUCCESS**

When it comes to what it means to be successful, Rachel challenges the notion of entrepreneurship being regarded as the only route to success. Her perspective crystallised during a talk at NUS, where she asked students about their entrepreneurial ambitions. "99% raised their hands," she recalls, amused by one student's generic question: What do you think I should start?

Rachel's response was pointed.

"You become an entrepreneur because you're passionate about filling a market gap, not because it's trendy. People today get it wrong. They think being an entrepreneur equals success. It's not true at all. Not everyone should be an entrepreneur. Just like I don't think everyone should be a teacher or CEO of SLA."

Rachel believes this narrow view overlooks individual strengths. And her advice is refreshingly simple:

**"All of us are gifted and wired very differently. There's a different path to success for each of us. Take time to discover your strengths, weaknesses, and superpower – then go in that direction."**

Success, to Rachel, isn't about job title but alignment. True achievement comes from playing to your unique abilities, whether that's building companies or contributing to someone else's vision.

## **MORE THAN A PHYSICAL STORE**

When Love, Bonito opened their first physical store in 2015 in Malaysia, Rachel faced widespread scepticism from everyone, from investors to the media. At a time when headlines declared "retail is dead" and competitors went online, Love, Bonito decided they were ready to open physical stores. And more than a point of sale, they became community hubs.

"Everyone was trying their best to go online. So they asked us, 'Why do you want to waste money and incur overheads and stress?' But we truly believe that the future of retail is wherever customers are at. And the fact is they are both online and offline. Having a physical presence also builds a sense of community and connections. In a siloed, digital world, people crave real connections."

This philosophy shapes everything from store layouts to staff training—

Rachel's leadership principles:

### **1. People-first philosophy**

"Our first core value is people matter. We will do everything to develop you... to really be there for you."

### **2. Radical self-awareness**

"I need to ask myself, 'Am I the right leader now?' If I'm not wired to run a series C-stage company, then bringing in people smarter than me is key."

### **3. Ego-free growth**

"It would have been the company's downfall if I held on for pride. If I'm standing in the way, I'm gonna get myself out of the way."



Dione Song (LEFT) joined Love, Bonito in 2017 as Chief Commercial Officer and was promoted to Chief Executive Officer in 2021. Rachel credits her as being “instrumental in elevating [the brand] from startup to scale-up, and from a regional business to a global brand.”

service teams don’t just process transactions but offer styling advice and emotional support. Rachel shares one touching story of a breast cancer survivor who frequented their 313 @ Somerset store.

“There was this lady; she shared with me that she was diagnosed with breast cancer at the end of 2018. And every day after her chemotherapy over the last year, she would make a stop at the Love, Bonito 313 store because that was her safe space. And it’s not that she’ll buy something every trip, but just having someone to talk to, who doesn’t judge her, who just lets her sit in the fitting room to cry for a bit if she wants to. That’s what’s missing in retail today.”

The other advantage of a physical store, Rachel says, is also that you get instant and accurate feedback from floor staff. Recalling frustrated boyfriends cornered for feedback in fitting areas, she suggests for customers to approach Love, Bonito’s staff instead.

“At Love, Bonito, we pride ourselves on being very honest with our customers. If you don’t look good, if it doesn’t flatter you, we will tell you. So if we say it’s nice, it’s really nice. And if it doesn’t work out, we’ll give you something else to try until you’re happy. But ladies will always listen to their partners. And the partner will, for some reason, always say it’s okay. My advice for women is to ask any of us on the floor. Please don’t ask your partners. Don’t put them on the spot; it’s unfair to them.”

#### STAYING ATTUNED TO MARKET NEEDS

Rachel attributes Love, Bonito’s enduring success to one non-negotiable principle: In an era where trends change overnight, the brand has mastered the art of rapid adaptation, and the need for humility.

“It’s important to stay close to the ground, close to our customers’ preferences and needs. Something that worked last month doesn’t work today. We can’t dictate trends from some high place—we need to listen.”

This customer-first approach requires market-by-market nuancing. The team constantly studies “how they’re shopping, how they’re browsing”—insights that inform everything from product designs to marketing campaigns. “What works in Singapore may not work in Hong Kong,” Rachel explains.

Physical stores play a crucial role in this learning process. Sales associates become frontline researchers, gathering qualitative insights that algorithms miss. Whether through styling conversations or observing fitting room behaviour, these human interactions provide “an additional layer of insight” that keeps the brand authentically connected to its audience.

#### “Data shows what’s selling, but only face-to-face interactions reveal why.”

By combining data analytics with old-fashioned customer intimacy, Love, Bonito maintains its edge—proving that in fast-fashion, the most sustainable trend is staying genuinely customer-obsessed.

#### LESSONS IN HINDSIGHT

Rachel’s reflections on her entrepreneurial journey reveal hard-won wisdom. The self-confessed former “imposter” struggled with comparison and uncertainty, saying this personal work remains ongoing—“a continuous journey of self-awareness”.

“Looking back, I would have taken the time to get to know myself better. I struggled with comparison, insecurity, uncertainty, not knowing who I am, who I’m not, and being an imposter. I wish that I could have stabilised myself more and centred and rooted myself

quicker. Because then, as a leader, when you're grounded, you're self assured, the level that you can lead at will be different."

Her next lesson came through suppliers and manufacturing battles. When Love, Bonito transitioned from imports to original designs, Chinese factories dismissed the young female founders. But their persistence paid off eventually.

"We were knocking on the different factory doors in China, begging them to take us seriously, you know, take our 单 (order) in. They looked at us, a couple of young girls, and they closed the door on us. Because firstly, the MOQ (minimum order quantity) is too low. And secondly, they don't know any other fashion businesses run by young girls. So they obviously didn't take us seriously at all."

After six months of rejections, one manufacturer finally took pity on us—he gave us his extra production line—and remains a key partner today.

"I really believe in being persistent, and I think that the doors will open for you if it's meant to be."

The prejudice extended to logistics. Rachel recalls how one of the biggest local players demanded to "speak with our boss", then lost interest upon realising they were in charge.

"So we reached out to the company one day and asked for a meeting with their management to see how we could work together to deliver our packages. And they were like, 'Oh, not until you send us your boss.' We were like, 'We're the boss.' Then they weren't interested."

This frustration indirectly led to Ninja Van being their first customer when Rachel recounted her nightmare stories to founder Lai Chang Wen, who was only beginning to start his business then. Till today, they remain good friends.

#### IMPOSTER SYNDROME

Even after building a fashion powerhouse, Rachel still fights that nagging voice whispering "You don't belong here." A conversation with a high-flying friend who works in finance revealed how universal this struggle is.

"I think as women, imposter syndrome hits us a lot more than our male counterparts. Like my friend, even as a top director, when her boss



cheak (formerly known as butter) is an activewear brand established in 2020 by Singaporean co-founders Olivia Yiong and Tiffany Chng. Today, it is the sister brand of Love, Bonito, jointly committed to empowering women with high-quality and affordable activewear with an Asian fit.

#### LEFT

To mark International Women's Month, Love, Bonito held The Trailblazers Summit in March 2025 to celebrate the strength, impact, and resilience of Asian women.

Panel discussions at the one-day conference generated bold conversations on mental health, wellness, career and motherhood with influential icons such as Tan Su Shan, CEO of DBS Bank, Yip Pin Xiu, seven-time Paralympic gold medalist, and Nicol David, former world squash champion and philanthropist.



## RIGHT

In 2019, the brand opened its third—and largest—physical store at Funan Mall.

Spanning over 6,000 sq ft, the space blends physical and digital retail (“phygital”) with features such as an innovative queue system, an AR walkway, and Instagram-worthy corners.

Shoppers also enjoy services like an express counter for online pickups, in-house alterations, and access to personal stylists.



praises her, she thinks, ‘He’s just saying it to make me feel better.’ We downplay our achievements like reflexes.”

The revelation came through an unlikely source—Reese Witherspoon’s Oscar-winning performance in the movie *Walk the Line*. “She said that every day of filming *Walk the Line*, she was crying and fighting to not show up for filming at all because she struggled so much with imposter syndrome. She kept thinking to herself: she can’t do it, she’s not good enough. She even begged her lawyer to cut off the deal because she just couldn’t do it.”

Yet Witherspoon persisted by clinging to this truth: “If someone gave me this role, they must believe in me.”

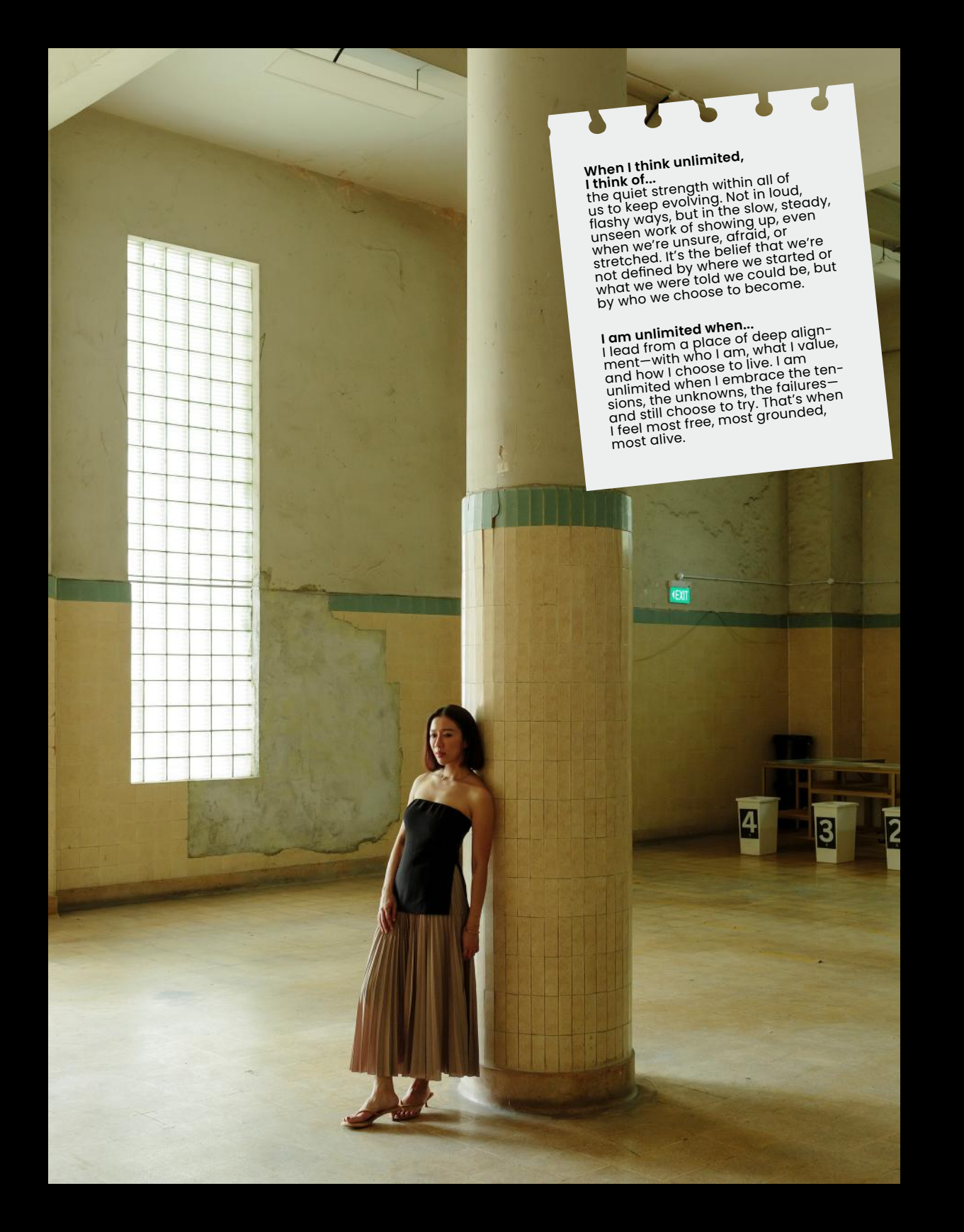
This story was a lightbulb moment for Rachel and sparked this valuable insight.

**“We think and expect to wake up feeling fully confident before we take up that promotion or before we can achieve something. But it’s actually the other way around. We have to show up and prove to ourselves with little wins to build the confidence before we combat imposter syndrome. So you realise, courage comes first before confidence.”**

Today, she views imposter syndrome differently—not as a weakness, but as motivation.

“I think that the best people have a tension between imposter syndrome and confidence because, at the end of the day, it’s important to have that to keep you grounded, hungry, driven, and constantly wanting to learn and grow more. So it’s all about managing that and the voices in your head, which goes back to self-leadership, self-management, and self-awareness. If you can conquer yourself, if you can conquer the voices in your head, you can conquer anything.”

Rachel has proven herself to be much more than a successful fashion entrepreneur—but an influential thought leader and inspiration to many. And her secret ingredients? Not the hard skills she was once ashamed of not having, but the finer, more subtle personal and relational abilities that have contributed to her most meaningful win—conquering the self.



**When I think unlimited,  
I think of...**

the quiet strength within all of  
us to keep evolving. Not in loud,  
flashy ways, but in the slow, steady,  
unseen work of showing up, even  
when we're unsure, afraid, or  
stretched. It's the belief that we're  
not defined by where we started or  
what we were told we could be, but  
by who we choose to become.

**I am unlimited when...**

I lead from a place of deep align-  
ment—with who I am, what I value,  
and how I choose to live. I am  
unlimited when I embrace the ten-  
sions, the unknowns, the failures—  
and still choose to try. That's when  
I feel most free, most grounded,  
most alive.



Professor Koh is shot at the ■ **Former Bukit Timah Fire Station**, built in 1956. The station, set against the lush trees of the Bukit Timah Nature Reserve, is an apt reference to Professor Koh's work in nature-based solutions. Decommissioned in April 2005 following the relocation of firefighting operations to Bukit Batok, the site has since been revitalised into a mixed-used community node.

# Saving Ourselves, and the Planet:

Koh Lian Pin

on his passion  
for conservation,  
the twin pillars of  
economy and ecology,  
and pioneering  
conservation  
technology

"We're not saving the planet—we're saving ourselves."

Echoing the urgency of unprecedented climate changes and ecological challenges, this quote from Professor Koh Lian Pin's favourite sci-fi saga rings truer today than ever. Declared by Vice-Admiral Amilyn Holdo in *Star Wars: The Last Jedi*, these words lay bare a truth—self-preservation is at the heart of the larger fight, and protecting ourselves is the first step towards it.

For Professor Koh Lian Pin, this truth has come to define his entire career—and life's mission.

From revolutionising forest and biodiversity mapping in inaccessible terrains to helping Singapore and ASEAN nations develop science-backed climate policies, his work has earned him the status of being Singapore's most globally recognised environmental scientist, and one of the world's most cited conservation researchers.

His journey—from Princeton to ETH Zurich—has rewritten the rules of ecological problem-solving.

## EARLY YEARS

Growing up in 1980s Singapore, Professor Koh belonged to one of the last generations to experience the island's kampong life. He spent his childhood moving between two worlds—the pockets of nature where he chased butterflies and staged jumping spider battles



**RIGHT**

"This is a photograph of my late grandfather and his many grandchildren at his attap house, taken probably around 1982. I am the pudgy one in green shorts. I benefitted greatly from Singapore's economic success, in having a quality of life and the many opportunities that my parents and grandparents never had, although that came at a cost to our natural environment. This juxtaposition of my life experiences has had a profound influence on my goal as a conservation scientist and my wanting to contribute in Parliament as an NMP, which is to find ways to help reconcile economic development with environmental protection."



A younger Professor Koh (with guitar) performing on stage during one of the songwriting competitions he took part in.



during visits to his grandparents' and the rapidly modernising city where high-rise buildings gradually replaced green spaces.

"Those moments in nature were wonderful. They gave me my first sense of life's intricate systems. As I grew older, I grappled with the duality of having an affinity towards nature while also understanding the need for economic development."

Yet, Professor Koh wasn't always bent on pursuing the sciences. His earliest passion? Music. His teenage years were spent composing songs and competing in music competitions as part of a Mandarin-speaking boy band.

"When I was 12, 13, I wanted to be a musician; I was very interested in music. And like most Singaporean kids, my parents sent me to piano and guitar lessons, but I was more interested in songwriting. I was part of a boy band, and we wrote our own songs and won a few competitions. At one point, I even told my parents I was going to quit school to study audio engineering. That freaked them out. Thankfully, they were very nice and talked me through the reasons why I should at least complete my college education. And I did."

His academic journey began at Hwa Chong Institution, then the National University of Singapore (NUS), which led to a First-Class Honours degree and Masters of Sciences in Biological Sciences. But beyond formal education, his worldview was also shaped by the books he devoured. Richard Dawkins' *The Selfish Gene* left an indelible mark on him, while Robert Pirsig's *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* expanded his imagination.

"I remember being fascinated by the the idea of being on a bike and riding through vast expanses of land and being able to think about those bigger philosophical questions."

### **PATH TO EMINENCE**

In the early 2000s, young Professor Koh went for a scholarship interview, where he found his passion was met with scepticism.

"I told the interviewer I was studying butterflies and birds, and he told me butterflies and birds can't make money."

This rejection proved to be a blessing in disguise. The young man—who once hunted spiders and was determined to bridge humanity's needs with

nature's limits—decided to venture abroad.

"I wanted to prove that that ecology could make a difference. And there weren't jobs here for what I wanted to study."

His destination? Princeton University. There, he pursued a PhD under conservation biologist David Wilcove, investigating the environmental toll of oil palm agriculture in Southeast Asia. During that time, he spent months living on the plantations in Sabah, Malaysia, confronting the uncomfortable truths of the industry: that while it devastated biodiversity, it also lifted communities out of poverty.

"I went in focused on habitat loss. But the reality was more complex—these crops fed families."

This duality between ecology and economy then came to define his career.

After three and a half years at Princeton, Professor Koh joined ETH Zurich as a postdoctoral researcher, diving into the world of palm oil-based biofuels. Being in close proximity to other top institutions in Europe, he thrived on the region's collaborative intensity while honing the skills needed to collaborate across cultures.

"You learn to defend your ideas to your colleagues while remaining open to theirs."

At ETH, he was working with Jaboury Ghazoul, the ecosystem management professor, who became his mentor. Under Ghazoul's guidance, Professor Koh's research expanded beyond theory—informing real-world environmental policies.

Then, at just 40, Professor Koh secured a full professorship at the University of Adelaide. This achievement proved both a blessing and a curse—he was top of his game, but it also made him question academia's limits.

"I started experiencing a midlife crisis. I was 40. I thought to myself, 'You're done. You're finished. What are you going to do for the rest of your life?' So I started engaging with the NGO world and started to be involved in some of Conservation International's efforts in the region. I got to know them and eventually, was offered a position with them in the US."

#### AT THE VANGUARD OF CONSERVATION SCIENCE

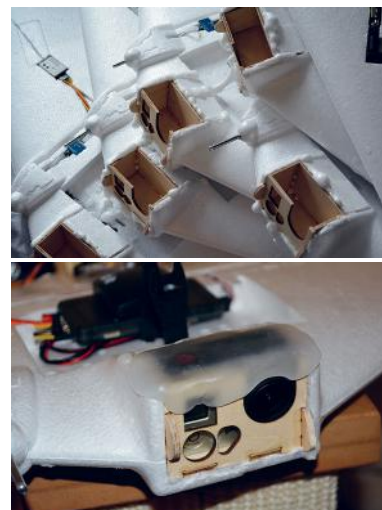
Recognising early that traditional field methods alone cannot address the escalating biodiversity crisis, Professor Koh became a trailblazer in what we now call conservation technology—a revolutionary approach in harnessing cutting-edge tools to safeguard nature.

Among his most transformative innovations was co-founding ConservationDrones.org in 2011, a simple idea that sparked a paradigm shift in ecological monitoring—earning him accolades from *Nature* and *The New York Times*.

"One of my colleagues, Professor Serge Wich, who had been working for many years in Indonesia on orangutans and how their habitats are destroyed by palm oil production, came over to ETH and we chatted. Somewhere along the way, I mentioned Switzerland is great for flying remote-controlled gliders, which are like toy planes. And then we joked about how maybe we can just stick a compact camera underneath one of these glider planes and fly it over the forest in Sumatra and maybe we can use that to detect orangutan nests and count them and study their populations."

That offhand idea birthed an essential conservation tool.

"We built the earliest prototype in 2011. Although it was just a prototype,



A low-cost drone, made from styrofoam and craft wood, has taken Professor Koh to places like Chitwan National Park in Nepal, where he trained forest rangers to use drones for park patrols.

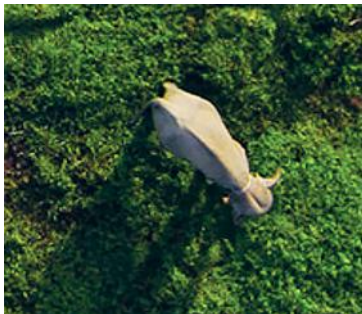


#### TOP AND RIGHT

A conversation with Professor Serge Wich in 2011 led to Professor Koh using drones in conservation research in tropical rainforests.



Professor Koh on a recce field trip to the Ikara-Flinders Ranges National Park in South Australia in 2017.



Footage from a conservation drone captured an endangered Sumatran elephant in Indonesia.



It was already quite sophisticated. It had an autopilot system, a GPS, a compass, and a couple of other sensors. We were surprised at how well it performed, considering it was put together with some glue and tape. For the first time, we were able to get a bird's eye view of the landscape without the high cost of hiring a manned aircraft, and that opened up new possibilities. We were the first ecologists to build and use this technology for conservation."

Their work brought them all over the world: from Sumatra, where they mapped orangutan nests hidden beneath dense canopies, to New Caledonia, where they created 3D forest models to track reforestation.

"We will first program our drone to fly in a zigzag pattern over the forest, capturing images of the forest canopy. The images can then be processed to produce maps of the area and 3D models of the forest. The 3D model enables us to estimate the height, shape, and volume of the trees."

In a landmark 2016 project with a Medan-based NGO, Professor Koh's drones exposed illegal logging camouflaged by untouched riverfront trees— scenes which would otherwise be invisible from the ground.

On Macquarie Island in 2013, his PhD student, Jarrod Hodgson, was involved in the research of royal penguins (*Eudyptes schlegeli*), which are endemic to the sub-Antarctic island and two other smaller islands nearby. There, colonies of the animal, which were traditionally counted manually, were documented by drone imagery so precise that each of the hundreds of thousands of them could be tallied—a scientific first.

"The penguins of Macquarie Island were a eureka moment. The conventional way to survey these colonies is to go up in the air in a helicopter with a pair of binoculars and just eyeball the size of each colony."

Despite these advances, Professor Koh is cognisant of the pitfalls and challenges of technology and is cautious about how to employ it.

"We need to ensure that we are using technology for the appropriate purpose. We must understand and adapt to the environmental conditions where it would be used. If we are transferring the technology to local communities, we need to be aware of the potential barriers and find ways to overcome them. If we are using our drones near wildlife, we need to be aware of any disturbance or distress we might be causing to these animals and take steps to minimise these negative impacts."

"Technology is just a means to an end and not the end itself. Our end goal has always been to produce robust data and information to help guide policies and decisions in society."

“CLIMATE CHANGE  
ISN'T JUST A  
TECHNICAL OR  
MORAL PROBLEM—  
IT'S EXISTENTIAL. IT  
**FORCES** US TO  
CONFRONT OUR  
*FRAGILITY* AS  
A SPECIES.”





Oil palm plantation in Sabah where Professor Koh conducted most of his PhD research as a student.



Map from Professor Koh's research highlighting priority areas for implementing nature-based carbon projects.

1: The Kwan Im Thong Hood Cho Temple Professorship of Conservation was set up in 2012 through the generous gift from the Kwan Im Thong Hood Cho Temple. Established in 1884, the temple is one of Singapore's most respected institutions and has a long history of philanthropy. The Professorship is the first that supports conservation and biodiversity research conducted in Singapore and Southeast Asia.

Beyond drones, Professor Koh also led the global palm oil debate. His research exposed the crop's devastating biodiversity impacts—particularly in Southeast Asia—where orangutan habitats shrank by 80% in some regions due to plantations. Yet he also revealed its economic necessity, with palm oil supporting millions of smallholder farmers.

His groundbreaking 2009 study in *Conservation Letters* quantified the carbon cost of deforestation for palm oil, directly informing the EU's 2018 biofuel regulations. Later work with the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) also helped design certification schemes that protect High Conservation Value forests while ensuring farmer livelihoods.

#### **HOMECOMING WITH A PURPOSE**

After nearly two decades abroad, Professor Koh's return to Singapore in 2020 marked the start of his new chapter, one that was at the convergence of personal reasons—to spend more time with his ageing parents—and a bigger purpose.

"It was a good time to come back to Singapore, given the growing attention Singapore was placing on climate change and environmental sustainability. So having been away for so long and having had experience in this area, I decided to come back to see how I could contribute."

As the Vice President (Sustainability and Resilience) and Chief Sustainability Scientist at NUS, Professor Koh channels his global experience into actionable local strategies. The centre bridges academia, government, and industry, developing scalable solutions grounded in cutting-edge science. His work spans both mitigation—advising on policies like Singapore's carbon tax, one of Southeast Asia's first—and adaptation, such as integrating mangrove restoration with engineered seawalls.

"Adaptation is as important as mitigation. Nature-based solutions aren't an alternative to infrastructure; they're complementary. Our mangroves buffer storms and sequester carbon—that's double value."

Professor Koh also shapes Singapore's green transition, ensuring the nation's sustainability ambitions are rooted in science, scaled by technology, and realised through policy.

#### **ILLUMINATING OUR CARBON LANDSCAPE WITH GEOSPATIAL DATA**

"Imagine if every tree in Singapore could show its ID card with its carbon storage value."

In 2023, SLA and NUS signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to use geospatial data to find a more efficient way of gauging the amount of carbon stored in Singapore's forests, mangroves, parks, and even gardens—capturing the real value of the city's greenery.

In addition, as the Kwan Im Thong Hood Cho Temple<sup>1</sup> Professor of Conservation at NUS, Professor Koh was at the forefront of this pioneering partnership, revolutionising how the nation quantifies and values its natural carbon stores. By harnessing cutting-edge geospatial technology—combining SLA's advanced airborne LiDAR (Light Detection and Ranging) capabilities with NUS' sophisticated carbon modelling—it illuminates the invisible, but complex carbon landscape of our city.

This innovative approach addresses a critical challenge in environmental monitoring: while satellite images from 500 kilometres above deliver only blurry green blobs, LiDAR scans capture individual branches with millimetre precision.

"Suddenly, we can see that a 100-year-old rain tree in MacRitchie stores three times more carbon than a young angšana by the roadside."

This data collected has overturned previous assumptions and revealed surprising discoveries about Singapore's ecosystems. For instance, Singapore's mature forests, which make up just 0.25% of the land area, store an impressive 60% of the country's terrestrial carbon. Additionally, roadside trees collectively remove 50,000 tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> annually, which is equivalent to the emissions from 11,000 cars.

Perhaps most surprisingly, despite their small area, mangroves have emerged as carbon powerhouses, exhibiting unique sequestration patterns that were previously unrecognised.

## "We used to think, 'Green is green.'"

The team's carbon maps have now begun to inform critical aspects of urban management, including Singapore's carbon credit framework, urban planning decisions that protect high-sequestration zones, and mangrove restoration projects at Pulau Ubin.

Looking ahead, Professor Koh is excited about embracing hyperspectral imaging technology, referring to it as a method of "chemical fingerprinting", capable of detecting methane leaks or stressed vegetation.

And as Singapore grapples with the challenges posed by rising sea levels, this pioneering work demonstrates that urban nature is vital infrastructure.

### ADVOCACY AND SHAPING PUBLIC POLICY

Professor Koh's efforts don't just reside in the ivory towers of academia. He is also passionate about bridging scientific research with real-world governance—turning data into public policy, and

innovation into action. His tenure as a Nominated Member of Parliament (NMP) in Singapore from 2021 to 2023 is testament to this.

"As a scientist, this tension underpins my desire to always use science to inform our discussions in society, and our decisions that we make to reconcile our society's priorities."

During parliamentary debates, he emerged as a compelling voice for evidence-based sustainability, framing climate action not as a partisan issue but as an existential imperative.

"Climate change isn't about ideology—it's about decisions. In Singapore, it's about balancing our priorities and understanding the trade-offs. We don't have enough land to protect all the forests we want and also build enough housing for our people."

In the Budget 2023 debate, Professor Koh challenged Singapore to maintain climate ambition despite economic headwinds, arguing that "environmental resilience underpins societal resilience". He championed nature-based solutions—like mangrove restoration and urban greening—as dual tools for carbon sequestration and flood mitigation, while calling for stricter oversight of carbon credit markets to ensure integrity.

"I try to take into account what people's concerns are and raise these issues in Parliament in a sensible way. Climate change and sustainability are not fringe issues, or just green issues. They must be understood as bread-and-butter issues, top-of-mind planning issues, quality-of-life issues, existential issues."

Beyond environmental bills, Professor Koh also addresses systemic challenges, from mental health in academia (advocating for campus support networks) to household recycling reforms (pushing for transparent bins and HDB chutes to reduce contamination). These underscore his belief that sustainability must be interdisciplinary and inclusive.



Professor Koh and his teaching team at NUS delivering a sustainability training course to policy officers.



Professor Koh receives an autographed book from former President Halimah Yacob during a lunch with NMPs at the Istana.

“Singapore must invest in mental health in its academic community to develop more effective and ‘bespoke’ solutions. Academia is not just a moral imperative, but also an economic one. Addressing mental health in academia is critical for Singapore to succeed as a knowledge and innovation hub, and attract and retain top talents, as well as build a resilient workforce and society.”

Beyond Singapore, as an advisor to the U.N., World Bank, and ASEAN, he has shaped frameworks for deforestation monitoring and nature-based climate solutions, ensuring tropical nations’ perspectives inform global accords. His work with Conservation International further cemented his role as a mediator between scientists, policymakers, and industries—a rarity in often-siloed environmental governance.

**RISE TO  
PROMINENCE:  
ACHIEVEMENTS  
AND ACCOLADES**

With over 30,000 academic citations from publications in the world’s most prestigious journals—including *Nature*, *Scientific American*, *Science*, and *PNAS* (*Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*)—Professor Koh ranks among the top most-cited scientists globally, and one of Singapore’s most influential.

After his PhD at Princeton and his Swiss National Science Foundation Professorship (2011) at ETH Zurich, his subsequent roles include Chair of Applied Ecology at the University of Adelaide and Vice President at Conservation International. He was also named a World Economic Forum Young Global Leader (2013) for his climate advocacy and a panellist at the Nobel Prize Dialogue (2022), as well as awarded the Frontiers Planet Prize (2023) for nature-based solutions. His tenure as an NMP also proved pivotal, where he distilled complex science into legislative action.

“Climate change isn’t about ideology. It’s about decisions. And we must decide wisely—with both humility and urgency.”

Yet for all the accolades—what truly defines him is his insistence that science serve society. Whether leading NUS’ CNCS or advising Singapore’s Emerging Stronger Taskforce, his north star remains unchanged.

**“Technology is just a means to an end. Our goal is data that drives wiser choices for people and the planet.”**

**A CALLING BIGGER  
THAN OURSELVES**

When he isn’t working, it comes as little surprise that Professor Koh seeks solace in nature, conquering the most stunning peaks, from Alpine trails in Switzerland to Washington’s Cascade Range. But his biggest motivation right now?

“How do we make humanity care enough to act decisively and at scale?”

As his work focuses on equipping Singapore with AI-powered carbon maps and policy tools, his vision stretches further—across the galaxy of possibilities.

“Climate change goes beyond Singapore. And solving it isn’t just survival—it’s our chance to be part of something greater. And be proud of it.”





"As SLA embraces its vision of 'Limited Land • Unlimited Space', I look forward to seeing the adaptability, creativity, and resilience of Singapore to thrive in spite of our limitations."

**When I think unlimited, I think of...**  
realising our potential.

**I am unlimited when...**  
I can visualise the future.





Yi-Xian stands outside the Group's Global HQ at ■ 6A and 8 Stevens Road, where a historic black-and-white finds new purpose as a beacon for global learning. Surrounded by lush greenery in a central area, the SLA-managed heritage buildings were built during the colonial era and were once the home of philanthropist and businessman Lee Kong Chian.

# Spreading the Gift of Education:

Ng Yi-Xian

## on carrying on the legacy of his family business and shaping the future through education across schools in Singapore and beyond

Since opening its first pre-school on Broadrick Road in 1995, EtonHouse has grown from a single campus to an international education powerhouse with over 100 schools across nine countries, including China, Japan, Vietnam, Malaysia, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. Their unique inquiry-based, child-led approach serves students from infancy through to adolescence, creating a continuous educational journey that honours each child's natural curiosity.

Founded by Dr Ng Gim Choo some 30 years ago, the person at the helm of the company today is her youngest son, Ng Yi-Xian. As the Group CEO, he oversees the operations across all the schools, while Dr Ng focuses on growing EtonHouse Community Fund's impact, helping more children on a larger scale.

Joining the family business in 2015, Yi-Xian's path to leading EtonHouse was never planned, but an unlikely one—sparked by a fishbone.

### **A CALLING HOME**

"I was a hedge fund analyst in the US and was back in Singapore on holiday. My mum swallowed a fishbone, so I rushed her to A&E. And it

dawned on me: what will happen to EtonHouse if something happens to my mum?"

That moment sparked a reckoning, and he decided to hand in his resignation at the bank.



Ng Yi-Xian (BOTTOM LEFT) pictured with his mother, Dr Ng, and his 2 siblings.

Growing up, their mother nurtured each child's unique interests and values. Today, all 3 siblings have forged successful paths in their own distinct ways. While the rest of the family—including their mother—hold doctorates, Yi-Xian chose a different journey, a reflection of the diverse definitions of success their mother instilled.





Before founding EtonHouse, Dr Ng Gim Choo found inspiration while volunteering at her daughter's pre-school in London—a moment that sparked a vision to revolutionise education in Singapore and beyond.

"I told my boss back then, 'Hey, I'm quitting my job. I'm giving you one year's notice.' My boss said, 'Huh? No one gives one year's notice.' I'm lucky that my fund manager treated me well. They gave me a prorated bonus and I left on a good note."

Under his stewardship, the Group has expanded beyond its offerings, launching innovative ventures like Middleton International School—a disruptor in affordable international education—and The Eton Academy, which offers academic enrichment for young learners. Last year, the Group surpassed \$200 million in revenue, a testament to Yi-Xian's vision of scaling excellence without compromising quality.

#### SETTING UP THE SCHOOL OF HER DAUGHTER'S DREAMS

The first woman in her family of six to earn a degree, Yi-Xian's mother, Dr Ng Gim Choo, was a trailblazer from the start. A successful audit partner, her life took an unexpected turn when her husband was posted to London. Reluctant to go initially, she eventually took her mother-in-law's advice to follow her husband. The time there opened her eyes—she witnessed a different approach to education—one where children were respected, not dictated to. Even on the weekends, her daughter would dress in uniform, saying she wanted to go to school.

This was a stark contrast to her daughter's experiences in Singapore. When she coloured a rose purple after being asked to colour it red, she was scolded. And when she had difficulty writing a complex Chinese character, it was met with criticism rather than understanding. So Dr Ng eventually decided to withdraw her from the school—and it sparked this thought: One day, I'll create the school my daughter didn't get to attend.

In 1995, with her brothers' encouragement and support, she leased a property at ■ **51 Broadrick Road** from the SLA—marking EtonHouse's humble beginning. Detractors doubted her, claiming Singaporeans wouldn't embrace the inquiry-based approach to education that did away with worksheets. Yet today, that first school still stands, 30 years later.

Now in her early 70s, Dr Ng epitomises lifelong learning, and is pursuing a doctorate in education.

"She was Her World's Woman of the Year in 2022. So my father joked, 'You must be the old woman of the year' (there was another award called 'Her World Young Woman Achiever'). She just smiled and said, 'Yes, I waited 70 years for this.'"

**RIGHT**  
Yi-Xian with the young learners of EtonHouse.







The Group's mission? To shape the future through education, by developing confident and capable global citizens. "We look at children as confident, capable, communicative, curious, and above all, respected—not empty vessels to be told what to do. For us, when I visit my schools, I expect our children, as young as 18 months old, to ask me, 'Who are you?' If they don't ask me that question, it means they're not really engaged with what's going on around them."

#### **BEYOND THE CLASSROOM**

At EtonHouse, Yi-Xian says the Group operates on a simple yet radical principle: "We see everyone in the organisation as educators. That's why we hold a set of values we call 'Color with Passion'. 'Co' stands for Collaborative, followed by Lifelong Learner, Open-minded, Respectful—all guided by Passion."

Central to this philosophy is the inquiry-based curriculum, which transforms everyday occurrences into teachable moments. Yi-Xian illustrates with this example:

**"If a truck breaks down outside a school, most kids would probably get told off for staring and ushered back inside. But at our school, we encourage the children's curiosity, letting them run up to the gate, take a look, and ask the driver, 'Uncle, can you come over? We want to talk to you.' This really happened—I'm not making it up."**

Teachers at EtonHouse are trained to seize these opportunities. When students noticed the distressed driver, the lesson pivoted to time management, empathy, and problem-solving—all sparked by a chance encounter.

"We use these real situations as learning engagement, as a provocation. This is how we believe education should be."

While EtonHouse respects the rigour of Singapore's academic system, it challenges the existing model, blending structure with spontaneity. The result? A learning environment where curiosity is celebrated, and education extends far beyond textbooks.

"We are all products of the Singapore education system, which is amazing. It delivers very strong learning outcomes. But it can be like a factory. What we have is good. But we want to have a good blend."



#### **TOP AND LEFT**

The Middleton International School, Tampines campus.

**RIGHT**  
Three EtonHouse campuses—at ■ 51 Broadrick Road, ■ 718 Mountbatten Road, and ■ 39 Newton Road. All are State properties managed by SLA.



EtonHouse founder Dr Ng Gim Choo with pre-school and primary school children at the first campus on ■ 51 Broadrick Road.



Students at EtonHouse International School's K-12 campus in Orchard.

Rooted in family ownership—with Yi-Xian's mother as sole shareholder—EtonHouse retains the agility to prioritise values over profit, ensuring that every decision aligns with its mission: to nurture thinkers, not just graduates.

#### **A GAP IN THE MARKET**

Yi-Xian's proudest achievement, he says, is setting up Middleton International School as he noticed a gap in Singapore's education market. While leading EtonHouse, he observed that international school fees, then hovering around \$25,000 to \$30,000 a year, were pricing out expatriate professionals with multiple children.

"I used to go rock climbing before I was a father. And then I found out the head of engineering at Chevron Singapore was sent back home. So I asked my friend, why? He said because the guy has eight kids. He can't afford it."

This revelation struck a chord. Armed with financial acumen and a determination to democratise access to quality education, Yi-Xian set out to engineer a solution.

"So my response was, 'Wait, I'm pretty good at Excel. Let me see if I can find a way to halve the school fees and make this more affordable.'"

Around the same time, a vacant State property in Tampines was available for educational use. Located at Tampines Street 92, the 292,000-square-foot site—about the size of five football fields—was formerly home to one of the Institute of Technical Education's campuses. EtonHouse was awarded the site and set out to transform it into a new campus.

The site, however, was far from ready then with no power, no water yet to be activated, and just 55 days to transform the space. The team worked tirelessly to construct a functional school from the raw parcel of land. Against the odds, they succeeded—and today, that same campus educates up to 1,400 students.

#### **TURNING POINTS**

However, after setting up the school under gruelling conditions, Yi-Xian was burnt out. Seeking respite, he signed himself up for a mindfulness meditation retreat in the US, and there, a chance encounter sparked an idea in him.

"I met a lady who teaches mindfulness in a youth prison. When I came back to Singapore, I told my mum, 'I want to do something like that.' She said, 'We've got a charity that works with young people. Why not try working with at-risk youth, maybe at a boys' home?'"

And so he did. With a vision to impact youths with mindfulness techniques, he brought the idea to Singapore's Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF). Through a series of thoughtful discussions and working closely with a psychologist, the partnership took shape.



“We look at children

as **confident,**

**capable,**

communicative,

**curious** and above

all, respected, not as

empty vessels to be

told what to do.”



The result? A Mindful Movement Programme they launched in a girls' home, blending meditation with dance.

The breakthrough moment came when a Danish-Venezuelan dancer won over sceptical teens with a spontaneous headstand.

"The girls were all like, 'Teach me.' The psychologist's study showed they became more in touch with their emotions. We scaled it to multiple homes—a project I'm truly proud of."

In 2019, another meditation retreat later, Yi-Xian gained newfound resolve on his path, committing himself fully to the business.

"I realised this is my life's work. The journey became a lot easier because I realised I had the opportunity to make an impact on so many children's lives. Another cool thing that happened was that we got to advise Bhutan's education ministry, and did a two-week consulting trip to assess the quality of teaching-learning practices in some selected schools in Bhutan."

#### **INNOVATE OR DIE**

Being family-owned, the underdog mentality keeps them on their toes. Where global giants operate sprawling campuses with thousands of students, EtonHouse intentionally keeps its international schools intimate. He says that in their schools, teachers know every child's name.

"We're going up against multi-billion-dollar companies every day. We don't have their balance sheets, so we have to be nimbler, sharper."

As part of Enterprise Singapore's Scale-Up programme and Infocomm Media Development Authority (IMDA)'s Digital Leaders Programme, EtonHouse blends local identity with international ambition—especially in China, where their presence keeps them alert to worldwide trends.

"Education moves slowly, which can make people lazy. We can't afford that. If we don't innovate, we die."

This hunger for progress is best illustrated by E-Bridge Pre-School, their anchor operator project with the Singapore government. From zero to 28 centres in 10 years with over 6,000 students, the team redefined speed with a swift three-year rollout, all without sacrificing quality. Their Punggol campus, a 5,000-square-metre space, went from bare-bones to being fully operational in just 11 months.

**"Miracles can happen when you have a plan and stick to it."**

Later projects, like the 800-capacity Sengkang centre, took slightly longer "because we kept asking how to push boundaries further." Each classroom was designed with unique indoor-outdoor spaces, proving that efficiency and creativity aren't mutually exclusive.

"Every time we open a new school, we try to think about what this space means to us. How do we make it meaningful to students and to adults? In our school, the corridors are built in a way that everyone meets each other. So if you've been to our schools, it's like a work of art."

And when it came to innovating the school management system, Yi-Xian opted for an in-house build instead of off-the-shelf solutions.



E-Bridge Pre-School, operated by the EtonHouse Group under Singapore's Anchor Operator Scheme, offers accessible, high-quality early education that lays the foundation for lifelong learning.

"I built our own school management system when I could have just bought one for pennies on the dollar. I'm proud to say it worked in the end—but not without failures first."

The initial phase was a lesson in humility. Internal developers, eager to build, often overlooked practicality. It wasn't until Yi-Xian brought in an experienced CTO and outsourced specialists that the system took shape. The result was a tailored platform that streamlined teacher

workflows and gave parents real-time classroom insights.

"It's more expensive, but it makes our education better. That's the fundamental reason—if not, why bother?"

The next frontier? Using AI to streamline administrative tasks. At E-Bridge, AI helps reduce the time needed to plan learning experiences, while maintaining EtonHouse's child-centred approach. Teachers input key parameters, refine

AI-generated drafts, and gain more time for student engagement. The planner taps on EtonHouse's collective organisational knowledge, enhancing learning across all classrooms.

## BREAKING INTO OTHER MARKETS

EtonHouse's expansion into China revealed a mirroring between the two nations' education policies. Just as Singapore launched its Anchor Operator Programme to increase affordable pre-school access, China announced its own push for public-private partnerships in early childhood education around 2016–2017. But for EtonHouse, a premium pre-school operator, this policy shift forced them to rethink their strategy, and think of other ways to offer what they know best.

Today, EtonHouse's China strategy is leaner and wiser. They still leverage their Singapore brand equity but focus on franchising and government-aligned affordable models like their Beijing E-Bridge campus.

In addition, Yi-Xian says each country's quirks demand agility and gives the examples of Jakarta's half-day pre-schools, and Saudi Arabia's appetite for premium fees, or the minefield of local partners.

"We graft Singapore's controls onto global ops—sometimes it sticks, sometimes we learn the hard way."

## CHALLENGES

Yet for all the obstacles of global expansion, Yi-Xian found some of the more revealing challenges closer to home. When he first joined the company, a blowup with his mum in his first month "over something trivial" forced a reckoning. He then joined the Family Business Network, a network that helps guide families in their involvement in the business, as well as facilitate relationships within the family. This helped him to reframe some of his thinking.

"At work, is she my boss or my mum? If she were just my boss, would I react this way?"

He adds that the stats of family businesses succeeding are sobering. "Family businesses have a 50% failure rate. We learnt to disagree respectfully—and never bring work home."

## LEFT

EtonHouse Pre-Schools at 2 unique locations—Sentosa and Gardens by the Bay—offer children the opportunity to explore and connect with nature.



EtonHouse International School's first overseas campus opened in Suzhou in 2003. Today, China is its largest market outside Singapore.

Lastly, Yi-Xian shares candidly about the challenges Singaporean enterprises face—even in their own market. While transparency is a strength, he argues that longer-term commitments from the government could unlock greater investment and growth.

“If we are given longer leases, we will invest more in the property. SLA gets back a better asset—it’s a win-win.”

The disparity becomes even starker overseas, where global competitors benefit from home-country advantages.

“Our international rivals get support in their markets. In Singapore, we operate on pure merit—transparent tenders, no favours. That’s fair, but shouldn’t being a homegrown company count for something? We’re 100% Singaporean. Yet the bar for ‘local’ is 30%. Shouldn’t true local enterprises get more backing?”

For Yi-Xian, the formula is simple: longer leases and strategic support will fuel reinvestment, better infrastructure, and stronger local contenders.

#### **KEEPING THE TEAM HAPPY**

At EtonHouse, profit isn’t the goal—it’s the byproduct of putting people first. The organisation’s longevity is a testament to this: more than half of its principals have stayed for over a decade, some even watching Yi-Xian grow up alongside them.

Speaking from experience, having worked in classrooms himself, Yi-Xian recognises the demands placed on educators and understands what it means to support them.

**“As a pre-school teacher, I’d come home so exhausted I couldn’t even stay awake for dinner—I’d collapse by 5pm and sleep straight through till 10.”**

This firsthand understanding shapes EtonHouse’s approach to staff wellbeing, offering its teachers 35 days of leave—more than double the industry average—while principals enjoy 45 days. And when questioned by his parents about the generous leave policies, his response was this: “Teachers need time to rest. They need to destress.”

But beyond time off, support at EtonHouse also comes in the form of professional growth. Yi-Xian says that every year, they send teams to Reggio Emilia in Italy to study cutting-edge pedagogy and also facilitate exchanges between its Singapore and China staff.

“We don’t just talk about innovation—we immerse our people in it. Now, we’re bringing our Singapore teams to China so they can see how our schools operate there.”

Placing its people at the heart of its business, whether it’s caring for their well-being or investing in their professional development, is the key to retaining their staff.

“People aren’t machines. We’ve had principals navigate difficult chapters, and our message is simple: Take the time you need. We’ll be here when you’re ready to return. Because people are all you have. Education is, and always will be, about people.”

#### **PICKING THE RIGHT SCHOOL FOR YOUR CHILD**

For parents navigating Singapore’s competitive education landscape, Yi-Xian offers simple and practical advice that cuts through the noise of brand names and marketing hype.

His approach begins with a fundamental question: “What is your educational philosophy?” He observes that while some pre-schools





**LEFT**  
The vibrant outdoor space at EtonHouse Nature Pre-School, at ■ 718 Mountbatten Road, invites children to explore, wonder, and learn in harmony with the natural world.

emphasise rigid structure and others champion open-ended inquiry, they all converge at the same place—Primary One. He also encourages parents to resist the pressure to hyper-optimize early learning.

“There’s a healthy middle ground between over-preparing children and letting them explore.”

Apart from these, the real insights, he believes, come from visiting the schools and keeping a lookout for a few things.

**“Trust your instincts the moment you walk in. Notice whether it’s the principal or an administrator who greets you—this often reflects how deeply leadership is invested in daily operations. Watch how teachers interact with students. The best educators won’t even notice you’ve entered the room, they’ll be too engrossed in the children.”**

He urges parents to look beyond glossy brochures and observe whether students appear genuinely engaged or simply compliant: Are they treated as individuals or just statistics in a system? One of his most revealing techniques is changing perspective, literally.

“Squat down to a child’s height so you can see the space through their eyes.”

From this vantage point, parents might notice that displayed artwork hangs too high for children to see—a sign of whether the environment centres children’s experience. He also strongly recommends bringing your child along for visits, saying that their reaction matters more than any school ranking. And if the school is reluctant to welcome prospective students, this raises a red flag. The ideal school, in his view, should make both parent and child feel at ease.

#### **PARENTING PHILOSOPHY**

“Raising a child is a balance. After all, Singapore is a blend of East and West. I believe in respectful parenting, but I think there’s also an element of what our departed Founding Father Mr Lee Kuan Yew would say, ‘Singapore values.’” This means honouring a child’s autonomy while instilling the discipline and social responsibility championed by the nation’s founding generation. Even from infancy, Yi-Xian says this philosophy can be practised through small but meaningful rituals.

“When changing nappies, I’d say, ‘Papa’s going to change your nappy now.’ Though babies can’t understand, the practice serves a



EtonHouse Nature Pre-School at ■ 718 Mountbatten Road.



Yi-Xian's other passion takes him to some of the deepest, darkest places in the world. Ever since he saw a documentary on cave diving, which revealed that "more people have been to the moon than some caves", he became seized by the thrill of the unknown.

Despite trainers warning he'd likely "be a corpse", he persisted. Now, with 500+ dives, including extreme training in Mexico (blindfolded exits, shredded gear) and fossil-hunting dives in WWII wrecks, he's learnt this: "Humans can survive anything with training, teamwork, and trusted buddies." His number one rule? Only dive with people you'd bet your life on.

dual purpose: teaching them that their bodily autonomy mattered, while training oneself to consistently seek consent. "You're showing them, your feelings are valid, and I respect you enough to explain my actions."

This foundation, he believes, fosters trust that pays dividends during the later teenage years—a phase many Singaporean parents dread. The typical view is, he says, that once children grow to be teens, you lose control. But that's also precisely when they need role models most. His approach rejects an all-or-nothing dynamic. Instead, he advocates for steady presence through the highs and lows.

**"There are good days and bad. You'll lose your temper—that's human. What matters is that your child always knows respect goes both ways. We are not raising children to obey blindly. We're raising future adults who understand both their rights and responsibilities."**

#### **THE POWER OF ROLE MODELS**

For Yi-Xian, opportunity isn't just about access—it's about visibility. Growing up attending Outram Secondary School, a no-PSLE-cutoff institution where 30% of students had special needs and another 30% came from low-income families, he learnt early on that potential alone isn't enough. "People may be aware of opportunities, but awareness doesn't mean they believe those opportunities are for them."

This insight drives his commitment to bringing role models into young people's lives. At his alma mater, he organises a speaker series featuring Singaporeans who have succeeded globally—not to lecture, but to demonstrate what's possible.

"When a student meets someone who has achieved extraordinary things despite their background, it shifts something fundamental."


The goal isn't inspiration in the abstract, but about making success feel attainable. This approach also extends beyond formal programmes. He encourages parents to leverage their own networks mindfully.

"Instead of burdening kids with generational guilt—I couldn't do this, so you must—invite them to witness real conversations. For example, a casual lunch with an accomplished friend can be more powerful than a lifetime of lectures. Children may seem disinterested, but they're constantly absorbing everything. Repeat these exposures, and eventually, they may internalise: This could be me."

For Yi-Xian, role models are proof that circumstance doesn't define destiny—"the 'haves' and 'have-nots' aren't fixed categories."

**"When we show children people who've crossed that divide, we don't just expand their dreams—we give them permission to try."**



A man with short dark hair, wearing a blue and white checkered button-down shirt and tan trousers, is sitting on a white stone table. He is smiling at the camera. The table is round with a thick top and a base made of three curved legs. A small white cup sits on the table next to him. To his left, there are two smaller white stone stools with similar curved legs. The setting is outdoors on a paved area with reddish-brown tiles. In the background, there is a white building with a red-tiled roof, a large tree with a thick trunk, and other greenery. A paperclip is visible in the top left corner, holding a piece of paper with text.

**When I think unlimited, I think of...**  
learning—because I believe in  
lifelong learning. In fact, my mother  
recently earned her doctorate from  
New York University at the age  
of 72!

**I am unlimited when...**  
I step outside my comfort zone,  
challenge the status quo, and dare  
to reimagine what's possible.





Zac at **Vidacity's** Fab Lab, home to Repair-Kopitiam—a community initiative tackling throwaway culture through hands-on repair workshops. As part of City Sprout's Project G.R.O.W sustainability programme, the space empowers communities to go green by reducing waste and sharing skills. The restored fans pictured here will be donated to families in need in Pasir Ris as part of the 'Repair for Good' e-waste initiative.

# Man on a Green Mission:

Zac Toh

## on building a sustainable future through nature, tech, and a can-do attitude

Community Builder. Modern Farmer. Tree-grower. Full-time Dreamer & Innovator. These are the descriptions on Zac Toh's LinkedIn profile. And if you know him, you know it couldn't be more spot-on. From building an urban farming community from scratch during the height of the pandemic, to helping manage one of Southeast Asia's top green commodity suppliers, to innovating nature-based solutions for some of today's biggest challenges—nothing seems to faze the 33-year-old.

In the public eye, his name is perhaps most synonymous with City Sprouts, a community-building platform and social enterprise that facilitates connections and creates shared experiences through green spaces and programmes that bridge the gap between people, food, and nature.

The story started with terrariums. At the time, Zac's business and life partner, Simone Lim, who was still in banking, was running terrarium-making workshops on the side and selling her creations at Boutique Fairs. After receiving a positive response, the duo figured, about a year later, that a permanent space would be ideal. They decided to take a chance and, in 2019, successfully won the tender for a 96,000-square-foot space at the **former Henderson Secondary School**. However, their timing coincided with the onset of the pandemic, which meant Zac and his co-founders, Simone and Chee Zhi Kin, had to hit the ground running immediately.

"Typically, if the business makes a lot of sense, then you shouldn't even do it because it's probably going to fail. So you need to start a business where people think it doesn't make sense. When we started City Sprouts, everyone thought we were crazy. We tendered with eyes half open and actually won it. It was during COVID-19. So we really struggled to build the community space. And because everyone was staying at home, we had to try everything—from online camps to one-person tours and two-person tours."

What drew Zac and Simone to participate in the tender was also the fact that the brief was particularly interesting. The first-ever integrated space of its kind in Singapore, SLA was looking to



A terrarium-making workshop for all ages at a City Sprouts farmers market.



## RIGHT

### ■ City Sprouts @ Henderson

was established in a residential neighbourhood in the heart of the Bukit Merah estate. It features a rice paddy field, an aquaponics showcase, high-tech container mushroom farms, greenhouse plots, and a sustainability centre for workshops.



From harvesting farm produce and trialling new agricultural methods to leading tree-planting initiatives, City Sprouts collaborates with both independent and corporate volunteers to engage communities.



transform the site of the ■ former Henderson Secondary School into an intergenerational space that comprised a childcare centre, a nursing home and dialysis centre, and an urban farm. This proposition appealed to them, as they also identified the opportunity to benefit the community in the area.

“Here in Henderson, we see quite a lot of disparity. You have low-income seniors and soup kitchens alongside million-dollar properties. Our vision is to integrate the marginalised into every community we build. Wherever City Sprouts is, it has to benefit the community around it. That’s kind of our internal mandate.”

City Sprouts has also become more than just an urban farming initiative. Over the years, it has served as a test bed for innovation for startups, including Tomato Town, an urban farm that utilises the Vertical Aeroponics System to grow fruits and vegetables. Today, it operates three farms on HDB car park rooftops and owns plots far exceeding the size of City Sprouts itself.

As a social enterprise, City Sprouts is guided by three areas of social impact: Youth, Golden Seniors, and Persons with Disabilities (PWDs). For instance, Zac says they collaborate with active ageing centres to overcome space and manpower constraints, enabling them to run their programmes more effectively. He also shares how they designed a Roblox game, developed in partnership with creative technology studio, MeshMinds, to bridge the generational tech gap through a virtual reality community farm.

“We go to places like Kopitiam (the foodcourt) and hawker centres to teach some of these seniors to play Roblox, to learn the tech. Because Singapore is facing an ageing population, right? With EZ-Link cards, they recently changed to a system where you top up on your phone. But a lot of elderly are still used to topping up at 7-Eleven. So instead of telling them, ‘I teach you how to top up,’ we want to tell them, ‘We’ll play a game with you.’ And when you get volunteers to teach the elderly Roblox, they are also more excited.”

City Sprouts also works closely with organisations like the Institute of Mental Health (IMH) and Thye Hua Kwan Autism Centre to provide rehabilitation programmes and employment opportunities for their patients.



"We now have about five or six volunteers converting to full-timers. A lot of these centres have long waiting lists. So we try to help them transition into the working world and integrate them into society. We do this through training on our premises and then deploying them to other farms. We have a very strong network of different community farms—some are commercial, some are community-based—so we can deploy them accordingly."

Today, City Sprouts has expanded its footprint across the island, with locations in ■ **Henderson**, ■ **Pasir Ris**, West Coast, Punggol, and ■ **Bedok**. But like all things worth doing, the journey hasn't been without its challenges. Zac reflects on having to go through a lot of trial and error, including the hiring process.

"When the business started, a lot of people didn't want to stay because they had to work on Saturdays and Sundays, and it's very *siong* (tiring). So then we started to relook at the way we hire—from what we tell them at the start to all the compensation practices. And then it became more acceptable. Zac reflects on having to go through a lot of trial and error, including the hiring process. Now we have a long queue of people who want to join City Sprouts."

### NO PLAN B

Despite growing up surrounded by plants and the nursery business, Zac never envisioned himself staying in the industry. His family's company, one of Southeast Asia's leading wholesale landscape nursery suppliers, provides many of the trees seen in Singapore and around the region. Yet, for Zac, the early days of working at the nursery felt far from inspiring.

"I was like a labourer then. My dad would pay my brother and me \$1.50 an hour. We'll pluck weeds and add fertiliser. It made me not want to be in the industry. The only reward was if my dad was feeling generous, he'd treat us to char kway teow at the end of the session. And we looked forward to that. My holidays and off days were spent following him and working for him. It was something the family wanted me to do, although I wanted to work for \$6 an hour at McDonald's."

However, despite his initial reluctance, Zac appreciates the lessons of grit and resilience he learnt from those experiences and acknowledges the positive influence his father has had on him. Till today, Zac reveals that his father is still happily working.

"My father's dream was to start an engine workshop, but my grandfather was too fierce, so he had to take over the grass fields instead. I've never



City Sprouts' social impact programmes are centred around engaging Golden Seniors, Youths, and PWDs. The farms are designed with accessibility standards in mind—including quiet zones and wheelchair-friendly pathways.

### LEFT

A wayang stage built around the banyan tree now serves as an open classroom and art space at ■ **City Sprouts @ Henderson**, bringing the community together through stories and creativity—right at the heart of the farm. Banana trees beside the stage pay tribute to Redhill's legendary tale of Hang Nadim and the swordfish, keeping local history alive in a playful way.





The "Song of the Sea" installation by GWS Living Art was awarded Bronze in the Vertical Greenery Competition at the Singapore Garden Festival Horticulture Show 2019, held at Jurong Lake Gardens.



Integrated green wall installations by GWS Living Art at Mandai Wildlife Reserve (TOP) and Mandai Rainforest Resort (RIGHT).



seen my dad give up. Even during COVID-19, when things were tough, he kept going. He's someone who has no fear. The biggest lesson I learnt from him is grit."

So at just 22, and fresh out of National Service, Zac took a leap of faith to start his own company, GWS. With no prior work experience, he dived headfirst into the unknown.

"I don't know if I was naturally inclined to start my own thing, but I've always liked being in charge. If something fails, I'd rather it be because of me than because someone else told me what to do. Since young, I've been a bit stubborn."

At the time, he had almost taken up a part-time job selling Fujitsu computers. He went through sales training for the role, but the company later asked him to sell Compaq computers instead. Uninterested in the alternative, Zac decided to pursue his own venture, marking the start of his entrepreneurial journey.

"Most people think: go to university, then start a business. If the business fails, at least you have a degree. But my take is that if you do that, you always have something to fall back on. There's a Chinese saying: 破釜沉舟 (to cut off all avenues of backing out). If you want to do something, go all in. You don't think about the alternative. You make it work somehow."

So make it work he did. At the time, Zac noticed that his father was purchasing numerous green wall systems, and it dawned on him that he could build a brand around this concept. One thing led to another, and GWS (Green Wall System)—later rebranded as GWS Living Art—was born. However, the journey was far from smooth. In his own words, he spent the first year and a half "just trolling around", followed by several years of "painful progression". Adding to the difficulty was the presence of established industry players, forcing him to "compete with giants".

"I was 21, 22. So some people looked at me a certain way. They see a young boy trying to sell a product for a cladding wall system that's over 20 storeys high, there's no way they are gonna approve it. I went into meetings, got ridiculed, and then they asked me about building codes. But I didn't mind being criticised or ridiculed. I went to BCA Academy<sup>1</sup> to learn more about the industry."

Zac also recalls the arduous first few years, where he had to learn the nuts and bolts of the technology required for green walls and green roofs himself. With no proper guidance, community, maker spaces or relevant programmes, it was easy to just give up at that juncture. In spite of the steep learning curve, his passion, together with a keen sense of how he could fill a gap in the market, kept him going.

**"The turning point came when I realised a lot of landscapers didn't really want to install green walls or roofs or undertake the risk of installing them. To install a green wall, you need to understand many things: structure, mechanical and electrical systems, grow lights, LED chips, and how to make an ST<sup>2</sup> submission. But I'm very interested in all these, so I will read patent papers about them."**

Because of this, Zac decided to specialise in installation, positioning himself as a subcontractor for landscapers and main contractors. But as a greenhorn in the building and construction industry, Zac often found himself having to learn on the job, with contractors and site supervisors becoming his unexpected teachers. He also noted how his youth was a double-edged sword.



The team who worked tirelessly behind the first shipment of trees and grass to Qatar in December 2024.

1: BCA Academy is the education and research arm of the Building and Construction Authority (BCA), Singapore. It provides quality training and education pathways for a diverse group of audience to build the capabilities of the workforce to advance the built environment sector.

2: ST refers to Structural Plans, developed by Professional Engineers to detail the structural elements of a building.





Green walls at Terminal 4 Changi Airport and Jewel Changi Airport.



Singapore's first public buses with plants installed on their roofs—touted as the first in Asia—were launched at Lakeside Garden. 'Garden on the Move' was part of a three-month study to assess whether the plants can lower the temperature inside the buses and potentially reduce fuel consumption.

The project was funded by Temasek Foundation and supported by the National Parks Board, Moove Media, and the Singapore Green Building Council.

"There are two sides to being young in this industry. One is when they see a young boy, they will *tekan* (bully). But there's also the other side, where they're very, very kind and interested to help. And when they know you're the boss, they're even more keen. So I was lucky to have met people who wanted to help me."

Eventually, Zac developed his own system to gain better control over the quality and execution of his projects. To enhance their irrigation systems, they partnered with Netafim, the global leader in sustainable irrigation solutions. These efforts paid off when the company secured its first major project, Terminal 4, at Changi Airport, followed by other high-profile projects, including Jewel Changi Airport in 2017.

Coming a long way from his early days, Zac says that failure is part and parcel of the process and shares the importance of separating your pride and ego from the work.

"At the start of GWS, a lot of the ideas I came up with didn't work. There were a lot of failures, but I don't see failure as a very big deal. I am quite fast to kill my ideas, and I just move on. I'm not a lover of solutions—I'm a lover of problems. I try to fix the problem, not fall in love with the solution. A lot of people get stuck because they're too attached to their solutions."

#### HARNESSING THE LATEST TECHNOLOGY FOR CLIMATE CHANGE

At the heart of Zac's work is the love for tinkering, building, and pushing boundaries. As the founder of GWS Living Art, he has made it his mission to tackle climate change through innovative, nature-based carbon capture solutions. And he does this by staying at the forefront of the latest research and scientific findings and collaborating with universities and research institutions.

"I love tinkering with stuff. I like to build products. I love technology. I love people telling me random stuff, and I love hearing different perspectives. In a way, I'm also a very *kay poh* (nosy) kind of person. I am interested in finding new ways to do things."

The company's two flagship technologies—Gaiaamat and Smart Green—exemplify this spirit of innovation. Gaiaamat, a Green Roof Mat System, was successfully patented in 2023 by the Intellectual Property Office of Singapore (IPOS) and earned Zac the BCA Innovator of the Year Award in 2017. This proprietary soil-less system uses a lightweight mat made of rockwool material, making it easier to install and maintain compared to conventional soil-based systems.

Smart Green, on the other hand, represents the future of integrating data and nature. Leveraging the Internet of Things (IoT), Smart Green's green roof and green wall systems provide health benefits, reduce pollution, and lower temperatures while creating an aesthetically pleasing design. With simple and sturdy mechanisms, they can also be installed anywhere and require low maintenance. Another interesting technology in development uses AI to recognise biodiversity through sound.

"How do we quantify the sounds of birds and nature into hard data? Because in sustainability, what can be measured gets managed. So we're building an automated recognition system that can identify birds and other biodiversity based on their sounds. We converted sound into spectrograms—essentially turning sound into pictures. This made it easier for the AI to recognise patterns and biodiversity."

One of GWS's most innovative and exciting projects was the creation of Asia's first green roof bus—an idea that almost didn't come to fruition. For two years, Zac and his team pitched the concept but were met with scepticism. Many were doubtful about the mat-based system, fearing it might fly off the roof of the bus. Egged on by his team, Zac decided to

test the system on his own car. And just as they were on the verge of giving up, Temasek Foundation stepped in with timely support.

"I thought it was okay if Singapore didn't want to do this first; I'd bring it to Guangzhou. But Temasek (Foundation) thought it was a good idea, so they backed the project. We redid all the paperwork, and everything became faster and easier. In the end, we managed to do it with SBS Transit. The results were pretty cool."

Today, GWS Living Art operates in five countries. While the company was highly active in China before COVID-19, the pandemic posed challenges. However, Zac remains undeterred and remains focused on greening technologies within cities, using different spaces to rejuvenate urban areas.

### TEAMWORK MAKES THE DREAMWORK

Behind Zac's achievements, particularly with City Sprouts, lies the indispensable role of Simone—his partner in both life and business. Simone, who left her banking job in 2023 to join Zac full-time, has been instrumental in shaping the community-building and programming aspects of City Sprouts, areas Zac admits he needed her expertise in.

"When Simone came to help, I knew she could take the company to the next level. There's an X-factor that she brings. I know how to operate, clean things up, and talk about City Sprouts, but developing new programmes, understanding what the community wants, and bringing people together—that's her strength. Without her, City Sprouts wouldn't be what it is today."

Their complementary skill sets, coupled with their contrasting approach to risk-taking, make them a dynamic duo. For instance, when Simone proposed the idea of expanding a part of their business to Shanghai, it was Zac who made the call. Despite thinking it was a great idea, she needed his courage to push things forward. But when it comes to people management, Simone says that is where her strengths lie.

"I always need a backup plan. But Zac doesn't need one. He's like, 'Let's go!' Many times, I have ideas, but I don't have the guts to actually execute them. He's the one who says, 'I think this is good. Let's do it.' I think I come in more on the people side. Having been an employee, I understand how employees feel and where they're coming from. I really enjoy working with people and coming up with new ideas."

Her creativity has led to some of City Sprouts' most memorable initiatives, like the DBS Intergenerational Fashion Show, a project that brought together different age groups of people for a fun and meaningful fashion event in 2023.

### CHALLENGING TIMES

The COVID-19 pandemic was one of the most challenging periods for Zac and Simone, both personally and professionally. Zac described it as a "scary period", as they had just taken over the Henderson space at the time. And to make matters worse, his family business was also struggling, prompting him to return and help. The financial strain was immense, as they were also purchasing a house then.

"At one point, my bank account had less than \$10,000 left. Simone had to step in and fork out the money for the down payment on our house, which we bought in 2019. She was still working in the bank at the time."

When asked how he overcame these challenges, he says, matter-of-factly: "Just believe."

"There's no point in worrying. If you worry, it means you didn't do everything you could. So you try to cover all bases, and whatever happens, you don't take it too much to heart."



"My dad is a very technical person. His dream was to start an engine workshop, but my grandfather was too fierce, so he had to take over the grass fields instead. I've never seen my dad give up. Even during COVID-19, when things were tough, he kept going. He's someone who really has no fear. The biggest lesson I learnt from him is grit."



Models of all ages lit up the stage in pre-loved outfits at the inaugural Intergenerational Fashion Show, held during the launch of the DBS Foundation Outdoor Theatre in May 2023. Hosted by DBS Foundation in partnership with City Sprouts, The Fashion Pulpit and Fashion for a Social Cause, the event championed sustainable style and inclusivity.



■ **Vidacity**, a sustainability innovation hub and living lab, was officially launched in May 2024, with its opening graced by President Tharman Shanmugaratnam.

The former Loyang Primary School has been transformed into a 100,000 sq ft space featuring large-scale ideathons, nature-based solutions labs, startup studios, grow spaces, makerspaces, and fabrication labs.



Reflecting on his struggles in the first few years, where there were no avenues for support or guidance, Zac felt a strong need to create a space where other startups could thrive with the right resources and community.

#### **VIDACITY: A HUB FOR INNOVATION AND COLLABORATION**

With support from SLA, Enterprise Singapore, and the SG Eco Fund, he launched ■ **Vidacity** in May 2024. Located in the former Loyang Primary School, ■ **Vidacity** brings together diverse stakeholders to tackle sustainability challenges through programmes,

spaces, and events designed to foster collaboration, innovation, and positive change.

At its core, it aims to redefine how startups and innovators learn, grow, incubate, and cultivate more startups.

**"If we are going to succeed, we'll need a wave of innovative startups and entrepreneurs. But in Singapore, there's a lack of consolidated resources for early-stage startups across various sustainability sectors that require hardware and space—making it particularly challenging to source funding, secure Proof of Concept partners, or get the Go-To-Market support needed to scale."**

What sets ■ **Vidacity** apart in its work with startups is its ability to transform spaces into living labs—enabling them to test, adapt, and deploy real-world solutions faster.

**"With ■ Vidacity, what we're trying to do is to unscrew and re-screw the learning process. We want people to rethink learning and success in Singapore and bring in fun and curious ways to learn. Vidacity is about pushing boundaries."**

#### **SINGAPOREAN PRIDE**

Zac envisions ■ **Vidacity** as a catalyst for transformative entrepreneurship and is optimistic and excited to see how things unfold.

Zac takes pride in Singapore's global reputation, highlighting how being from Singapore carries weight overseas. Despite its small size, the country has consistently punched above its weight.

**"When you tell people you're from Singapore, they know you're legit. It's like saying apple means apple—no surprises. That trust is invaluable."**

This extends to Singapore's ambitious sustainability efforts, he says. The nation's pledge to achieve net-zero emissions by 2050 is a significant



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## RIGHT

This artist's impression of **City Sprouts @ Bedok**—located on the former grounds of Kampong Chai Chee Community Centre—depicts its transformation into a vibrant, sustainable, and inclusive intergenerational community hub.

Zac & Simone's advice to the young:

### 1. Be contented, yet not contented

"You should be grateful for what you have, but never rest on your laurels. The moment you think you're successful, that's when things start to go downhill. I like to always be on the edge."

### 2. Embrace discomfort

"I don't like people to be too comfortable, and I don't like to be too comfortable myself. When you're too comfortable, you lose the traits that push you to achieve more. That's why I'm a bit chaotic—I want to keep everyone, including myself, on their toes."

### 3. Gain diverse experiences

"Young people should travel and work abroad—go to places like Thailand or China. By working in different societies and economic systems, they can discover their own passions. Only then can they figure out how to contribute to society or the economy."

### 4. Challenge your limits

"When you're comfortable and not challenged, you're not learning. I motivate my team to challenge their limits because I want them to know what they are capable of. If I don't push them to be a better version of themselves, I'm not a good manager."



commitment. He points out that while Singapore has made strides with solar energy, even installing panels on reservoirs, solar power currently meets only about 10% of the country's energy needs. However, he has faith that Singapore can meet its net-zero target, even if the journey is challenging.

## LATEST PLANS

The latest two initiatives that City Sprouts is rolling out include a Social Entrepreneurship Programme and a Cat-Assisted Therapy Centre.

Developed with DBS Bank, the Social Entrepreneurship Programme aims to teach students about social enterprises and financial literacy. After giving talks at schools for the past two years, they noticed the growing interest that schools and students have in entrepreneurship. The programme, now being piloted with secondary school students, includes five sessions where kids learn about social problems, product development, and building an inclusive society.

Meanwhile, at **City Sprouts @ Bedok**, a feline-assisted therapy centre is taking shape. Located within the HDB neighbourhood, it houses a Cat Community Garden in collaboration with Wildflower Studio—a social enterprise that's engaged with partners like the IMH, SHINE, and Stroke Support Station. The idea? To support the emotional well-being and social connection for vulnerable groups, advocate for the adoption of rescue cats and foster intergenerational bonding through volunteer opportunities with active ageing centres and nursing homes.

**"It's about responsible pet ownership and using animals as a medium for therapy. The space also encourages community involvement, with volunteers and friends coming together to care for the cats and support one another."**

Whether it's innovating green solutions, expanding their community-building efforts, supporting up-and-coming startups, or scaling their business overseas, Zac and Simone are a testament to the fact that anything is possible—when you dare to dream.

I am unlimited when... I dream. (Zac)  
I am unlimited when... I am a mum. (Simone)

"When we think unlimited, we often envision a very modern, perhaps even futuristic, sci-fi world. In sci-fi, you have a tiny planet, a mere dot, with drones orbiting around it. The concept of space is also figurative—it doesn't have to be physical. When we started in Henderson, it was just a field, essentially land. But it evolved into a community space. And this space lives in people forever. Land is just land, but space is memory—a shared memory. The same space can hold very different meanings for different people."

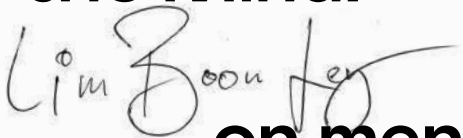






Dr Lim is shot at ■ **Dignity Kitchen** at 69 Boon Keng Road, a foodcourt that employs people with disabilities. Since 2010, it has employed nearly 200 people with disabilities and trained more than 2,000 people. Mr Koh Seng Choon, the founder, was named The Straits Times Singaporean of the Year 2024.

# Matters of the Mind:



## on mental health stigma, stress, self-care and helping those around us

With one in eight people in the world living with a mental health condition, and one in seven in Singapore predicted to develop a mental health condition<sup>1</sup>, mental health has emerged as one of the most pressing global health concerns. While societal awareness and resources have grown considerably, especially following the pandemic's mental health impact, stigma remains. What was once a taboo subject has gradually entered mainstream discourse, yet misconceptions continue to shape public attitudes and create challenges for those affected.

Dr Lim Boon Leng, a psychiatrist in private practice who has special interests in depression, mood and anxiety disorders, adult ADHD, and youth psychiatry, highlights this troubling disconnect.

**"I think if you ask everyone if they are okay to be around people with mental illness, all of us will say yes. But if you look at studies, they will say that there's a high level of stigma. 32.4% actually express unwillingness to move next door to someone with mental illness. 42.8% will not want to work closely with a patient with mental illness."**<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps most concerning is the misconception that mental illness reflects personal weakness, with some suggesting sufferers simply need to "try harder" to recover. The complexity of mental health conditions often contributes to these misunderstandings. Unlike physical illnesses with clear biomarkers, mental health diagnoses often rely on patient histories and symptom patterns.

1: World Health Organization and Singapore Mental Health Study (2016)

2: Tan, G.T.H., Shahwan, S., Goh, C.M.J. et al. Mental illness stigma's reasons and determinants (MiSReaD) among Singapore's lay public – a qualitative inquiry, BMC Psychiatry 20, 422 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12888-020-02823-6>

**RIGHT**  
Dr Lim on *Channel 8's Hello Singapore*, on the topic of remote gambling.



“For mental health issues, there aren’t really biomarkers. So a lot of people still ask me, ‘Hey, can I do some imaging or blood test to prove or disprove that I have a mental illness?’ We cannot do that. We go by history. So history is important. And we need to get the symptoms from the patients, and match them to the diagnostic criteria.”

A multitude of factors—from biological predispositions and life experiences to stress and psychological makeup — interact in complex ways, making mental health conditions a challenging subject to unpack. As Singapore continues advancing its mental health landscape, addressing these knowledge gaps and societal biases remains crucial. With the all-pervasive nature of social media, Dr Lim cites certain platforms for spreading inaccurate mental health perceptions and promoting self-diagnosis, which can be dangerous and lead to the trivialisation of serious conditions.

“Misinformation really downplays serious conditions. It makes fun of it. And a lot of patients would feel really belittled.”

Here, Dr Lim shares key insights on mental health, and offers practical tips for nurturing well-being—whether for the youth, in the workplace, or within our personal relationships.

#### **WELL-BEING AND STRESS**

All living beings are not immune to stress, as it is our body’s natural response to demands or challenges—whether physical, emotional, or psychological. And although stress has gotten a bad reputation, it is not necessarily negative, Dr Lim explains.

**“If there’s no stress, you won’t do anything—it’s just boredom. Stress actually improves your productivity initially. But as it gets higher, and you reach a peak, then productivity drops. Fatigue, exhaustion, and eventually burnout, anxiety, or depression set in.”**

“Good stress” sharpens focus and drives action. But like a curve, stress has a tipping point and Dr Lim says that recognising when stress shifts from motivating to debilitating is crucial for long-term resilience. So why do we experience stress?



“DON'T  
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DO YOUR

**BEST.**  
FORGET  
THE  
REST.”

"In Singapore, 1 in 7 people will develop a mental or behavioural disorder in their lifetime. And only 32% of them will seek any kind of treatment."

"Stress is a caveman's instinct, so unfortunately, it continues with us. It's a way to prepare ourselves for danger, fight or flight. That's why people who are anxious also become very irritable or aggressive, so you either fight the danger or you run away. These days, we no longer see danger, there's no lion running after us. But we have things like work running after us, so that is the mind's and body's perception of danger."

Apart from work stress, which could include dangerous work environments or burnout, stress can also be caused by factors such as life events—including a change in living environment, the dissolution of relationships, certain transitions, death and bereavement, caregiving, and having a child.

Other causes could be chronic illness, traumatic events, and existential crises.

Dr Lim also reveals how even those we perceive as being high functioning or supposedly self-assured are also susceptible to certain stressors.

"You'll be surprised; I see a lot of people, even highly functioning people from important places, who are stressed over presenting and giving speeches. They are always afraid of saying the wrong things."

#### **UNHELPFUL THOUGHT PATTERNS AND THE POWER OF ACCEPTANCE**

Our minds often trap us in rigid thought patterns that amplify stress. Known as "cognitive distortions", Dr Lim explains that it is sometimes these thought patterns that fuel anxiety and burnout. Some of these cognitive distortions include catastrophising ("The worst will happen"), perfectionism ("I must be flawless"), all-or-nothing thinking ("If I'm not perfect, I've failed"), and emotional reasoning ("I feel like a fraud, so I must be one").

"We expect too much of ourselves; we are perfectionists; we work hard. In our society, everything can be solved by working harder, right? That's always the prevailing thought process."

The antidote? Dr Lim says its radical acceptance, paired with accurate thinking.

**"The glass is not half full, and it's not half empty. You don't judge the cup; it is just the way it is. So if we want to catch our negative thoughts, we need to challenge and change them. It's very simple; just ask yourself two questions: 'Is it true?' and 'Is it useful?'"**

For example, believing "I should never make mistakes" crumbles under scrutiny—it's neither true nor helpful.

Dr Lim stresses the importance of acceptance, which means acknowledging your vulnerabilities and strengths without judgment. A person with impostor syndrome might resist accepting that others are more skilled in certain areas—but only by facing this reality can they grow.

"What is really useful here is the curious paradox that when we accept ourselves as what we are, then we change."

He gives us a quick framework from Cognitive Behavioural Therapy with the ABC model, a basic technique that helps us identify and

reevaluate certain irrational beliefs so that we can develop more rational and adaptive thoughts and behaviours.

#### The ABC Exercise:

(A)

##### **Activating**

**event:** Missing a tight deadline despite effort.

(B)

**Belief:** "I'm a failure for not being perfect."

(C)

**Consequence:** Shame, stress.

"We can't change the event or our initial emotions. But we can challenge the belief. Is 'I must never make mistakes' true? No. Is it useful? No. So then you can replace it with: Mistakes are part of growth. This is not difficult to do, but for it to be automatic, you need to keep practising, so practise, practise, practise."



Dr Lim consulting with a patient in his office.

#### Tips for building supportive work environments

##### **1. Reintegrate gradually**

"For someone who has taken leave from work due to a mental health issue, what I find to be the greatest barrier, is going back to work, because often, it is a bit of an all or nothing situation. So gradual reintegration is important. Some organisations implement a graded, protocolised way of working: 10% work, 20% work, 30% work."

##### **2. Approach with sensitivity**

"One of the things people always worry about is: how am I going to explain my absence? So we have to treat it with sensitivity. We don't want to *kay poh* and ask what happened to them. Let them come to you and explain things if they want to, and be gentle with them. There's a time and space for everything. And ultimately, it's about having that right approach, right attitude."

##### **3. Get that access to care**

"Some organisations have a doctor embedded within HR. So staff will go to that person, and they know that confidentiality is maintained. And then the doctor will liaise with us directly. There is also available subsidised care. A lot of people don't know, but all restructured hospitals have psychiatric departments, be it Changi General Hospital, Tan Tock Seng Hospital or the New Woodlands Hospital. You can also approach Family Service Centres, your general practitioner, or polyclinic doctors. They are often the first to help with treatment of anxieties, insomnia, and depression."

#### **WORK SMARTER WITH THE 80/20 RULE**

Dr Lim offers a useful tip using the Pareto Principle, also known as the 80/20 rule. It suggests that roughly 80% of outcomes or results come from about 20% of the causes or inputs—

which means, focusing on the select 20% alone can yield significant results. He illustrates how this phenomenon persists—whether in business (20% of clients cause 80% of problems) or in daily life (20% of words make up 80% of conversations). The key insight? Maximum effort doesn't equal maximum returns.

"People think they need to give 200%, but that's not possible. You can only put in 100%, and even when you reach 100%, you're not going to get 100% returns, because of diminishing returns. Discipline isn't pushing to 100%—it's knowing when to stop at 20%."



Dr Lim on *Channel NewsAsia's First Look Asia* programme, discussing the topic of positive parenting.

Dr Lim was trained at the Institute of Mental Health (IMH), where he served as the Director of the Ministry of Health (MOH)'s GP Partnership Programme for Mental Health. He was also a past visiting consultant at the National University Hospital and a Senior Clinical Lecturer with the National University of Singapore Faculty Scheme.

Additionally, he served as the honorary treasurer of the Singapore Psychiatric Association from 2009 to 2011 and was a member of the editorial board of *SMA News*, the Singapore Medical Association's monthly newsletter. Dr Lim also volunteered as vice chairman of the Ang Mo Kio Family Service Centre.

During his time in public service, Dr Lim received several awards for service excellence, including the IMH Sayang Award, the Excellence in Service Award Gold Award, and the National Healthcare Group Excellence in Action (Individual) Award.

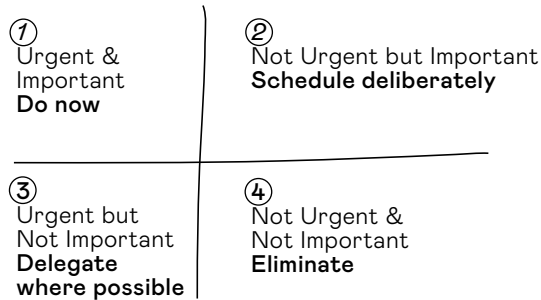


Work isn't about doing more, but doing what matters. Identify your high-impact 20%, then reinvest the saved energy elsewhere.

"I strongly advocate for working smart, not just working hard. We need to rethink an approach that benefits both management and employees. By prioritising efficiency over mere effort, we can achieve better work-life balance, optimise our time, and ultimately enhance our mental well-being."

"If it's not important, why are you doing it?"

Another useful framework to help us prioritise our tasks is the Eisenhower Matrix. Dr Lim explains how it helps cut through clutter by sorting tasks into four clear categories:



The real challenge, he says, lies in defining what's "important". Dr Lim gave the example of asking his medical students when they last met their friends. When they admitted they never made time for friends—deeming it "not in the matrix"—he exposed a flawed value system.

**"Meeting friends can be important, not urgent, and sometimes it becomes important and urgent. Just like sleep, sometimes you think sleep is not**

important, not urgent, but it can escalate very quickly, so do take care of your health!”

Dr Lim co-authored the *National Clinical Practice Guideline for Bipolar Disorder* and was a member of the Professional Advisory Committee Depression and Anxiety subgroup at MOH. Dr Lim is also the co-author of *Handbook of Common Mental Illnesses in Singapore*.

Tips for nurturing youth mental health

### **1. Build strong foundations**

“Mental health begins at home. One of the times you can communicate with your children will be during dinner, and try to make it device-free. If you’re not sure if the child is going through puberty or having real difficulties, and he or she is becoming more and more withdrawn, it’s better to get some opinions.”

### **2. Spot the signs early and get help**

“You don’t have to see a psychiatrist first off. You can see your family doctor as they are well equipped to identify mental illnesses these days. You can bring them to a psychologist, which can be less stigmatising. In school, there are school counsellors you can approach, and sometimes, you can speak to the people around them, like their friends and teachers to know how they are doing. Usually if it’s pervasive, other people in their life will be able to see it as well.”

### **3. Tackle root causes**

“Get to the root of the problem. For example, if it’s OCD, treat the OCD. It’s not a question of whether you’re not going to check your homework again, or not going to retie your shoelaces one more time. You’ve got to talk to them and say, ‘Hey, you know, this is not sustainable. I think we need to sit down and talk about it’. To be honest to yourself and recognise you need some treatment.”

#### **YOUR FUTURE SELF WILL THANK YOU**

Investing in mental health isn’t just wise—it’s economical, explains Dr Lim.

“For every one dollar you invest in treatment for depression and anxiety, you get \$4 returned.”

His prescription for mental wellness combines science and practicality, including regular exercise, deep abdominal breathing, healthy social connections, and engaging in hobbies.

“Exercising is the best prevention—be it for physical or mental illness. Three times a week, 20 minutes each time of cardiovascular exercise is the best prevention, I think. Mindfulness practices or meditation are also useful for the prevention of anxiety and depression. And one of the best relaxation exercises? Abdominal breathing. Once you master it, you can relax and recondition your mind and body.”

Dr Lim leaves us with a provocative question from philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche: If a demon told you that you'd relive this life endlessly, unchanged—would today's choices fill you with pride or regret?

“It's not just a thought experiment. It's a litmus test for how we live now. The good news? Prevention is within reach. Simple practices—exercise, meditation, mindful pauses—can be woven into even the busiest workday. Start today, and your future self will thank you.”

Tips for helping those around us

### **1. Nudge, not push**

“We don't push people—we nudge, we encourage, we are non-judgemental. Instead of demanding change, try: ‘Let's go for a walk together. If you can't today, we'll try tomorrow.’ A lot of times, I see family members sabotaging the treatment. The patient may be doing well on the treatment but they say, ‘Hey, why are you still taking medication? Why are you still going to your therapist? Why can't you step out of it?’”

### **2. Show up**

“A lot of times it's not what we do that matters, but it's what we don't do that can help. So just being there, offering your presence, can be more than enough. Things are unspoken but people can feel it, that you're there for them. We want to go with a very non-punitive approach.”

### **3. Debunk medication myths**

“Antidepressants are never addictive and there's a misconception that they are. I'll give you this illustration—if person A has depression, and takes her antidepressants, and person B has depression, and is not getting treated, who do you think in five years would do better, person A or person B?”

### **4. Seek to understand**

“It is good to understand the whole condition, to accompany them to the doctors if you can, speak to the psychologist if need be, understand their problems, and help them take their medication, because it's very easy to forget. Sometimes we just want to help them with the little things.”



南洋咖啡  
ANYANG KOPI



"Creativity and innovation allow us to break through limitations and reimagine possibilities. With thoughtful planning and design, we can transform limited physical spaces into boundless opportunities for community, growth, and connection. As Singapore moves forward, I hope we can embrace a more holistic approach—one that protects the cultural identity and spirit they embody. Spaces should reflect and celebrate our rich heritage, including the stories of our Orang Laut and Peranakan communities. True progress is not just about development but also about preserving the intangible heritage that makes us who we are."

**When I think unlimited, I think of...**  
the human capacity to adapt, innovate, and create meaning despite constraints.

**I am unlimited when...**  
I empower others to overcome challenges and find purpose beyond their struggles.



Dasmond is photographed in a restored two-storey heritage building at ■ **Smith Street** in Chinatown. A stretch of 13 units of State-managed shophouses and covered pedestrian walkway along Smith Street has been rejuvenated with curated lifestyle concepts including local favourites and international brands, with placemaking and community activities that preserve and celebrate local Chinese culture.

# Lights, Camera, Action:

Dasmond Koh

## on making waves on air, to leading the next wave of Singapore's Mandarin media

If you're familiar with Singapore's Mandarin entertainment scene—as the voice of YES 933 radio (from 1996 to 2002) to the host of variety shows and gala events on Channel 8 and Channel U—you'd undoubtedly recognise him. Whether on-air or on-screen, Dasmond Koh has been a fixture in showbiz for over two decades. From accompanying listeners on late-night radio shows in the '90s and acting in Channel 8 dramas to hosting everything from travelogues and variety shows to major live events like the Chingay Parade, National Day Parade, and Star Awards, it's no exaggeration to say Dasmond lives and breathes entertainment. Most notably, he has co-hosted Singapore's longest running game show *The Sheng Siong Show*, alongside Kym Ng for 17 years and counting. With over 10 wins at the Star Awards' Most Popular Male Artist, Dasmond's star power and enduring popularity among Singaporeans speak for itself.

But behind the voice and the face, Dasmond also helms NoonTalk Media—one of Singapore's leading Mandarin entertainment companies that focuses on Mandarin media productions.

### FROM BEING IN THE LIMELIGHT TO WORKING BEHIND THE SCENES

Having spent his entire career at Mediacorp, the impetus to venture out came to Dasmond when he was at the 20-year mark of his career. Not only was he getting too comfortable and needed a new challenge but he wanted to find a way to make the local media industry more vibrant.

"Ever since I was in Mediacorp and started my career in entertainment, I always felt that our entertainment scene lacked vibrancy. So I've always wanted to be a part of it and do whatever I can do let this industry shine in Singapore."



Dasmond with news host Ng Siew Leng, serving as the 2005 National Day Parade commentators together.



Behind the scenes at *The Sheng Siong Show* with co-host Kym Ng.



**RIGHT**

NoonTalk Media was involved in the successful execution of Chingay from 2021 to 2023. After undertaking multimedia production for the inaugural digital Chingay—Light of Hope—in 2021, NoonTalk was subsequently appointed for Chingay 2022's Ignite Our Dreams at the HSBC Rain Vortex in Jewel Changi Airport, and Chingay 2023's Embrace Tomorrow at the F1 Pit Building.



At an interview with Beyond from Hong Kong at the YES 933 studio.



A momentous day for Dasmond and his team as his company, NoonTalk Media, was listed on the SGX in 2022.



In 2011, he founded NoonTalk Media. NoonTalk Media has since been involved in everything from artiste management and events to studio venue and equipment to film, television and video production.

While the nature of the work was not unfamiliar to him, the responsibilities and pressure to perform were heightened. After all, in the past, he was only taking care of himself, describing life as “easy-going and free”. Now, he has to ensure his employees’ rice bowls are secured.

**“When I crossed over into entrepreneurship, it didn’t feel like an entirely different world. Rather, it felt like my responsibilities were amplified—and subjected to much greater scrutiny.”**

Over the years, NoonTalk Media has been involved in large-scale events and projects with public sector agencies and companies such as the People’s Association, National Arts Council, Marina Bay Sands, and Changi Airport Group. This includes providing production services for marquee shows like ChildAid 2021 and multimedia production services for those organised by the People’s Association like Chingay 2021, 2022 and 2023. These projects contributed to the company’s revenue growth, and in 2022, Dasmond and his team made an impromptu decision to go public with an Initial Public Offering (IPO). At that point, NoonTalk Media had posted revenue that more than doubled, from \$3 million in 2020 to \$6.4 million in 2022. On 22 November 2022, the company was listed on the SGX.

“It felt like a dream come true—for me, my colleagues, and our entire team. In that moment, I remembered how it all began: a simple idea, then the hard work we put in when the opportunity came. When the announcement came, it was like a weight lifted from our hearts. From our humble start as a small media agency, this victory overwhelmed me with gratitude for every person who believed in us. Unforgettable.”

With no shortage of ambition, Dasmond set himself a three-to-five-year roadmap to take the company beyond Singapore, tapping into other markets. He says that because of our fluency in English and Chinese, NoonTalk is able to bridge the language divide between certain countries, and collaborate with the China market and Thai production team with ease, or with Korean artists wanting to break into the Mandarin market. This bilingualism is something Dasmond doesn’t take for granted.

“I am proud to be a Singaporean, especially from my era when bilingualism was very important. When I went on to secondary school,

I took English as my first language, and Chinese as my second. So that was my foundation. But when I got into the Mandarin media industry, the daily engagement was all in Chinese, so you start to forget about English and use it less. Chinese is very important to me—understanding it, and being able to converse in it. We see the international stage as our platform, a playground for us.”

Looking back, Dasmond also reflects on how his background in marketing has been valuable in helping him in his career, no matter what he does.

“I studied business at Temasek Polytechnic and I majored in marketing and retailing. So whatever I do, I always see it as marketing and selling myself, even when I was a DJ. Although it was a DJ job, I was thinking about how to sell myself. So when it comes to entrepreneurship, I also approach it the same way.”

#### **HUMBLE BEGINNINGS AND AN UNEXPECTED START**

Growing up in a modest family, Dasmond was eager to start working as soon as he could. When he was still studying, he dabbled in all kinds of part-time gigs—from working at 7-Eleven and being a salesman at Metro Department Store to teaching tuition. During his National Service (NS), he set his sights on becoming an air steward, as the idea of travelling the world was an attractive prospect. However, just before completing his NS, he received a life-changing call. The caller was responding to his application to be a radio DJ on YES 933.

The catch? He had never applied. Dasmond realised later that an army buddy, recognising his potential, had secretly submitted his name after seeing a Mandarin DJ recruitment drive. With little to lose, he decided to give it a shot. The process went well, and within six months, he became a full-fledged DJ at the radio station. This was 1995.

“I never thought of being in the media or being an artiste. It was by chance and luck, and something I’m very thankful for. My aspiration then was simply to make money. When you come from a not so well-to-do background, your focus is on making a better living, for yourself and your family. That’s something that motivated me quite a bit.”

He also adds how sometimes, the best things are unplanned and left to fate.

“A lot of times, when you plan so hard and want something so badly, it will never happen. But someone else will stuff some chocolates into your box. So, he (my friend) called in and volunteered me. I went down for the interview, and lucky enough after one round, I got in. That’s how I started my career, 有点天意 (it’s fated).”



Dasmond during his army days in Brunei.



Dasmond presenting in class as a marketing student at Temasek Polytechnic.

**LEFT**  
Dasmond with Hong Kong celebrities at a YES 933 outdoor hosting event.



**RIGHT**

NoonTalk Media actively engages schools through learning journeys aimed at building students' confidence in using Chinese, while introducing them to the Mandarin entertainment and media industry. Pictured here are artistes Zong Zijie and Kimberly Chia with students from Evergreen Secondary School.



Behind the scenes of *The Star Bride* with Xu Bin and Chantalle Ng.



Looking back, Dasmond says he was lucky to have had seniors and peers who taught and guided him when he was fresh in the industry, and that these early foundations and lessons played a big part in shaping who he is today.

"Stepping into my first full-time job was a whole different ball game, especially because it was in the entertainment industry. Knowing that whatever I said would be going out to thousands, even millions of listeners, was a huge responsibility. It taught me really early on how important it is to think before you speak, to be mindful of your words, and to take ownership of what you say. A lot of who I am today started from the foundation that was built during that very first job."

One of the job's greatest perks, Dasmond recalls, was meeting artistes—both local and international actors and singers. But beyond the glamour, what truly moved him were those late-night conversations where he heard their personal stories and struggles.

"I was fortunate to meet legends like Jackie Chan, Andy Lau, Jacky Cheung, Faye Wong, and Beyond, as well as rising stars like Nicholas Tse, Wang Leehom, and F4. Each had their unique story and charm. Hosting late-night radio shows gave me precious hours with them—both on and off air. Hearing about their upbringings, their relentless pursuit of their dreams, and how they seized every opportunity (even some personal revelations) truly opened my eyes."

#### **DISCOVERING AND MENTORING YOUNG TALENT**

Since the days of hosting multiple seasons of *Campus SuperStar*, a Singaporean reality television singing competition that began in January 2006, Dasmond has honed the skill of discovering new, young talent, even before they blossom. For instance, Xu Bin, a contestant from the second season, was mentored by Dasmond after the show and eventually found success not in singing but in acting under his company. In fact, Dasmond says that one of the main reasons he started his company was to help some of these talents fulfil their acting dreams. The chemistry and relationship between the two is evidently a light-hearted one, filled with banter and harmless jabs.

"Xu Bin said he thought he was a good singer. Please... when you sing inside the bathroom, it's enclosed, so the echo helps. Then, you know, the water, 哈哈唔听不清楚 (can't hear clearly). So you thought, 'Wow, I'm a damn good singer.' But you have to walk out and sing. You see got people *chup* (bother) you or not..."

Today, Xu Bin has received several acting accolades, consistently



nominated for the Star Awards' Top 10 Most Popular Male Artistes, Favourite Male Character and Best Supporting Actor categories, winning the Top 10 Favourite Male Artistes award five times. He also made his international silver screen debut in 2022 with the Thai horror film *The Antique Shop*, collaborating with talents from Singapore, Thailand, Indonesia and Korea. In 2024, he continued to make waves with high-profile projects like the film *My Star Bride* and the thriller drama *Kill Sera Sera*.

As a boss and mentor to junior artistes, Dasmond takes his role seriously, enacting strict rules like forbidding them to drink alcohol, wearing flip-flops in public and getting into relationships. Like a protective father, he does this to safeguard their personal and professional well-being and image.

**"Artistes who are with me, I never allow them to go out and drink. Reason being, I don't know if they get drunk, what will happen, and if there will be people who will take care of them. But if it's within a controlled environment, like our own homes, I'm fine—you all can drink, you can *peng* (collapse), and you can do whatever. Because I also believe that they need to go through certain experiences."**

NoonTalk Media actively pursues and fosters regional collaborations with production houses as well as artistes and talents. This allows it to expand its market reach. Between November 2023 and March 2024, the company signed six new talents from Thailand. Among them, *Panitsara Yang* (Emma) has garnered attention in Singapore with appearances in prime-time local dramas and events. Collectively, these Thai artistes have also gradually built their presence, participating in the short-form project *霸占我的胃* (Chope The Table), and engaging in brand events across Singapore and Bangkok.

Apart from filling out his artistes' schedules and scoring them endorsement deals, he also takes initiatives that go above and beyond simply managing them, such as releasing songs by the artistes and producing a regular variety web-series that they star in. This is all part of his strategy to ensure continuous exposure for them even during the times they are not in a currently airing television show. This, he says, helps enhance their social media clout.

#### **EVOLVING MEDIA LANDSCAPE**

While traditional television remains significant, Dasmond is well aware of the growing preference for alternative forms of media and fully embraces

it. That's why the company dabbles in everything, producing everything from web-series and social media content, to short videos on streaming platforms and interactive live-streaming events to concert tours. In 2023, it produced and oversaw the creative direction for Kim Se-jeong's first-ever concert tour, *The 門*, which took place in Singapore at The Theatre at Mediacorp.

**"The consumption of content has changed tremendously. It's not exactly a bad thing because when society advances or changes, we just need to identify the trend and embrace it. I think that is more important. Don't trap yourself within a box. Whatever industry you're in and whatever job you do, always think out of the box. But of course, how much you can do that depends on your creativity."**

One particular thing he encourages his artistes to do is TikTok live shows—so they can practise their hosting, engagement, and talking skills.

**"On TikTok Live, they will learn that you cannot have 'dead air';**



Xu Bin and Chantalle Ng won the viewers' Favourite Onscreen Couple award for the second time at the Star Awards 2023.



NoonTalk Media presented the first-ever concert tour of South Korean singer actress, Kim Se-jeong, in Singapore in October 2023.

“NO MATTER  
WHERE YOU LAND  
AT ANY POINT IN  
TIME, JUST MAKE  
FULL USE OF THE  
EXPERIENCE.  
**SEE**, LEARN, AND  
*UNDERSTAND*.  
IF YOU TAKE  
IT POSITIVELY,  
WHETHER IT'S  
**GOOD** OR BAD,  
IT CAN STILL  
NURTURE YOU  
TO BE A BETTER  
PERSON.”



**LEFT**  
Dasmond with the cast of *The Storm Riders* (风云:雄霸天下) at a fan meet-and-greet in 1998.

you cannot have three seconds blank. You need to keep feeding information, things like that. So I thought that was one way to train. And if you are interesting, people will listen to you. And if you really have got things to share, I think people can feel the genuineness.”

Dasmond also makes it a point to go on TikTok Live every night and reveals it’s his way of relaxing.

“I do TikTok Live every night, Monday to Friday, from 11pm to 12am. I tell people it’s an outlet for me. After one whole long day, being able to connect with music again and play some songs from my era brings back fond memories, and sharing them with people who also appreciate it—that’s a great way for me to wind down.”

In addition, NoonTalk Media also recognises the importance of environmental sustainability and has implemented strategies to adopt environmentally friendly practices. For example, the company utilises motion sensor-controlled lighting and energy-efficient lighting in its office and production facility. They also use non-toxic, eco-friendly paint for their office.

“Last time we used to use those big spotlights, carrying a lot of things, which have now become LED. And then a lot of things can be recycled, including the screen. Last time you print, you do whatever. But now, with all the aid of graphics and LED, it’s more sustainable.”

The company also places a strong emphasis on corporate social responsibility and makes a conscientious effort to undertake projects



**LEFT**  
Dasmond at Maris Stella High School to promote Chinese language proficiency. Addressing over 100 secondary school students, he shared his journey of making Chinese his primary language and building a successful career as a media personality and business owner in the Mandarin media industry.



**RIGHT**

In 2023, SLA conducted barrier-free pilot testing on OneMap in various areas to gather feedback and suggestions from wheelchair users. Here, NoonTalk Media artistes Damien Teo and Grace Teo joined volunteers from Engineering Good to assess the routes at Gardens by the Bay.



that have a social impact. Some examples include the company's involvement in ChildAid 2020 and 2021, a charity concert in aid of The Straits Times School Pocket Money Fund, and The Business Times Budding Artists Fund as well as being a media partner for EnableAsia to promote awareness of dementia.

And when SLA extended their barrier-free access pilot testing on OneMap for wheelchair users to public volunteer groups, Dasmond and his team, which included artiste volunteers, readily agreed to lend moral support in the testing sessions at Dhoby Ghaut and Redhill. He also introduced Sheng Siong's bosses to SLA for this project, which led to a contribution of \$3,000 in vouchers as tokens of appreciation in support of the barrier-free pilot testing exercise.

**INDUSTRY REALITIES AND LEARNINGS**

Dasmond's humble beginnings taught him early on to find strength in adversity and accept the realities he cannot change.

"Sometimes, it's your upbringing and your growing-up environment that 给你一些抗压性 (gives you some immunity). You learn to see things in a more positive way. You learn to accept what you can't have and realise that it's no big deal. You know what I mean? 烂鞋我都穿过了, 烂床我都睡过 (I've worn those shabby shoes. I've slept on shabby beds.)"

Another mindset that has served as a guiding force throughout his career is this: to approach every encounter and event—big or small—as a learning opportunity. Whether it's hosting late-night radio shows, acting in Channel 8 dramas, or helming major live events, nothing is insignificant.

"No matter where you land at any point in time, just make full use of the experience. See, learn, and understand. If you take it positively, whether it's good or bad, it can still nurture you to be a better person."

And finally, Dasmond is fully cognisant of the fact that fame comes with its challenges, and one of them, he says matter-of-factly, is the amplified scrutiny that comes with being in the public eye. But ultimately, he asserts that what matters most is staying true to yourself and always striving to do your best. And that, to him, is enough.

"Sometimes, 树大招风 (when the tree is big, it catches the wind), when you are an artiste or someone recognisable, whatever you do or don't do is amplified. If you don't live up to people's expectations, it's amplified. Maybe you are already a very good daughter, a very good son, or a very good mum. So, don't put all this stress on yourself. You just need to know you are doing your best, and that makes you the best already."

"In a land-scarce city like Singapore, every building holds untapped potential. Instead of letting old or unused spaces sit idle, we can breathe new life into them—transforming yesterday's structures into today's solutions. Whether for short-term pop-up hubs or long-term sustainable developments, repurposing existing buildings maximises land use while reducing waste and environmental impact. To me, this approach not only optimises land use but also aligns with Singapore's vision of sustainability, turning constraints into opportunities."

**When I think unlimited, I think of...**  
Doraemon.

**I am unlimited when...**  
I imagine myself as Doraemon, bringing limitless ideas from future to present. By thinking beyond boundaries, I will be able to solve any problem with creativity and innovation!







Darren is shot at the restored and newly renovated **■ Temasek Shophouse** at 28 Orchard Road. During the conservation studies of adjacent units, it was discovered that most of the buildings had an original coat of Shanghai plaster—a mix of crushed stoned chippings held together with plaster. The Shanghai plaster is now being carefully restored as part of the broader conservation of the row of century-old shophouses.



# Eye on Singapore:

on telling

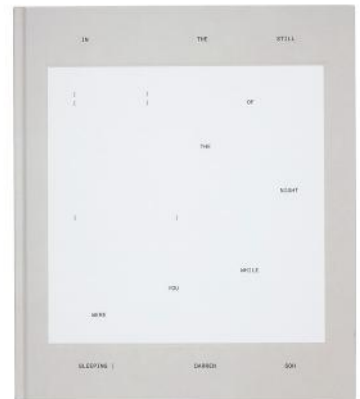
## Singaporean stories from a sociological perspective, one photo at a time

From now-demolished buildings like Pearl Bank Apartments and the National Library at Stamford Road, to national monuments like Jurong Town Hall and the MacDonald House, to familiar everyday spaces such as HDB flats and public recreational facilities—nothing in our built environment escapes the roving, restless eye of Darren Soh.

Documenting the evolution of our city's landscape since the 1990s, Darren may be known as a photographer, but he can also be considered a historian, an archivist, a journalist, and a sociologist. Because what Darren does goes beyond photographing buildings and spaces. His acclaimed body of works freezes time, preserving the important landmarks, architecture, and spaces that are infused with our collective memory, heritage, and culture.

**“Photography is not just a hobby. It’s many things. It can be used to convey ideas about buildings, about our history, about our memories—and not just shared memories, but also personal memories of a space. It’s something that I feel very much for.”**

His images also serve as important commentary on our nation's ever-evolving identity and progress, especially in a city with limited land. After all, with a degree in Sociology, Darren views the world through the lens of social structures, interactions, and change. This informs how he looks at architecture and buildings and what he chooses to point his lens towards.



*While You Were Sleeping* is a collection of photographs of large-scale nocturnal landscapes of Singapore by Darren, first published in 2004. Its sequel, *In the Still of the Night (While You Were Sleeping)* (TOP) was published in 2015.

"I use 5 different weather apps on my phone but only one of them—Sun Seeker—helps me determine where the sun is coming from at the specific time of day. And if you're on site, the augmented reality feature will show you the angle of the sun and tell you if there's a building casting a shadow and all that. But they're not always *zhun* (accurate). So sometimes you just have to guess, and go with the apps that say the same thing."

"My opinions on things like conservation and rapid development are framed from a sociological perspective. While they're not photography-related, I think sociology helps me make sense of the world and informs the work that I do. Sociology tells you why people do things in groups or as a society, and that has shaped my decision to keep taking photographs. It allows me to reason with myself as to why things are the way they are and examine the role my images have played and will play in this ever-surprising world."

Having shot for international magazines such as *Wallpaper* and *Monocle*, Darren has been commissioned by various organisations to photograph spaces—both old and new. His works are also collected by the National Museum of Singapore, as well as corporate and private collectors around the world. In 2017, his photographs of public housing in Singapore were showcased at the Singapore Pavilion of EXPO 2017 Astana (now Nur-Sultan) in Kazakhstan, as well as at the St+art India, an urban art festival in Mumbai. His now-famous picture of the reflection of an HDB block also made him the only photographer from Asia among the 10 global winners of Apple's inaugural #shotoniphone Challenge in 2019.

#### HOW IT STARTED

Darren's foray into photography began when he was 14, egged on by his then-best friend at Catholic High School, who first picked up the hobby. His first experience with the camera coincided with Singapore's 25th anniversary. This was 1990, and that year, his friend's parents secured a room at the Westin Stamford (now Swissôtel The Stamford) to watch the National Day Parade at the Padang.

"I joined him because he was my best friend. I can't imagine I was taking pictures when Singapore was 25. I was very excited I could photograph fireworks, but none of the images turned out well as I didn't know how to set the exposure properly. However, I took some other images of the skyline and 31 years later, those photos suddenly worth something because because they're historical; they documented a significant milestone in our country."

In secondary school, Darren relished roaming around as the school photographer, his father's borrowed film camera in tow. This early passion eventually led him to pursue photography professionally.

"I started to do photography for work when I was still an undergrad in NUS (National University of Singapore), to the extent I almost didn't finish my honours degree. This was in the late '90s. I was working so much that my supervisor had to call me and asked, 'Are you still writing your thesis?' I got to the point where I just wanted to get school over and done with so that I could work."

#### RIGHT Singapore Skyline, 1990

"The tallest building back then was OUB Centre (since renamed). It was completed in 1986 and designed by Kenzo Tange with SAA architects.

This photo, shot on an old Nikon film SLR, actually sums up the message I want to convey. People, human beings, have very bad memories. We don't remember what we had for lunch yesterday, much less things that happened 30, 40 years ago. So it made me realise how important photography is, not just for me."



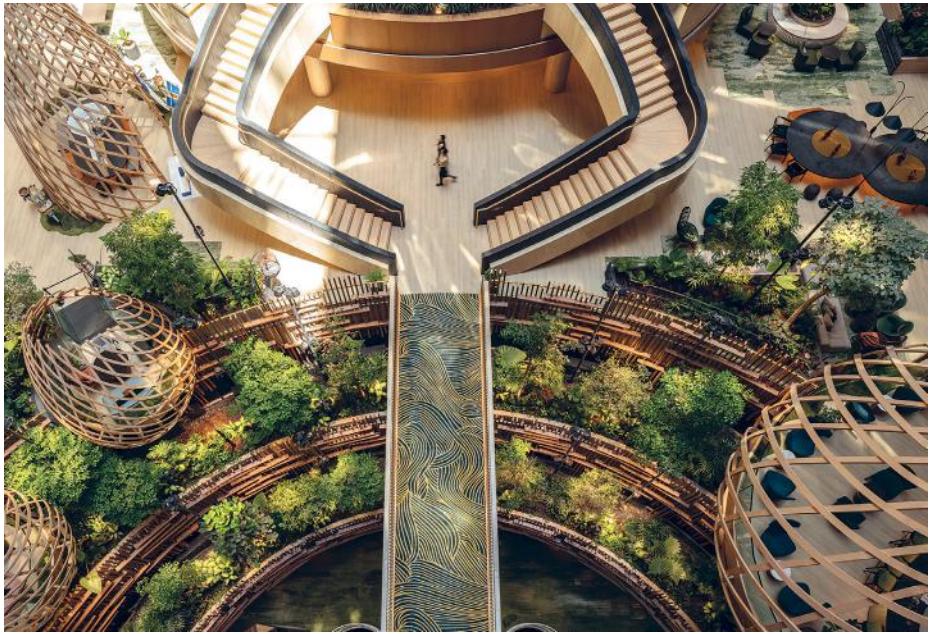


**RIGHT**  
**PARKROYAL COLLECTION**  
Marina Bay, 2021

"Whenever guests stay at PARKROYAL Marina Bay, they'll find this image displayed on their room TV. It makes me happy knowing my clients love the work enough to use it in so many ways – I've heard it's been featured on postcards and even as a backdrop for wedding banquets in their ballroom. What matters most is that I'm able to use my skills to create something meaningful for others who might not be able to do it themselves."

**BOTTOM**  
Jewel Changi Airport, 2019

"This was before COVID-19. I snapped this shot on a flight to Surabaya—one of SilkAir's final flights on that route—where I was heading to judge a photo contest. Knowing that large planes take off into the wind, I studied the flight patterns: evening arrivals typically come from the north, while daytime departures face north. So I chose a window seat on the right side of the plane, hoping we'd take off in the right direction on the correct runway. *Heng heng* (lucky), we did—and Jewel Changi Airport came into view. My camera was ready. I knew exactly what to capture as we ascended."







#### **LEFT**

National Library at Stamford Road, 2004

"In the final days of the National Library 20 years ago, I had full access to photograph it for weeks. I shot everywhere: offices, cubicles, storerooms, and all on film, leaving me with stacks of negatives. I've chosen to show this lesser-known side of the library. Most remember the front staircase, but few know this rear area near the S11 (cafeshop) with its famous lemon tea—which I drank too. I have many more photos, but this reveals the hidden side people rarely saw."

#### **BOTTOM**

Temasek Junior College, 2024

"This was the last JC with its original 1970s architecture, completed in 1976. The lecture theatres (LTs) were iconic—the TJC school logo was actually designed after the LT's design at the bottom here. Interestingly, they created the logo after the JC was built. I got permission to document the JC before they vacated. I don't know, I think demolition has already started. They've moved to the former Tampines JC site as a holding school. The new campus will be rebuilt on the site but will be much smaller and it'll be high-rise, like Eunoia JC. It's a pity because you lose that sprawling campus environment that fostered interaction. That doesn't happen in vertical buildings."



“What I do  
is **archive**  
memories. And  
some of these  
memories are  
other people’s  
memories that  
you don’t even  
know about  
yet.”





**TOP**  
Block 82 Commonwealth Close, 2013

"This was my childhood block. I was born in 1976 and lived here until 1980-81. Only later did I learn its significance—it was among the first HDB blocks ever sold. Since the 1960s, HDB only rented flats until 1964 when then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew pushed for home ownership to give Singaporeans a stake in the nation. Three blocks stood on the hill near Commonwealth MRT (where the former New Town Secondary's track is). Block 81 faced Queenstown and was called the 'VIP block' for hosting foreign dignitaries. Locals nicknamed Blocks 81, 82 and 83 'Chap Lak Lau' (Hokkien for 16 floors) as they were 16 storeys tall. My babysitter lived in Block 81, so I shuttled daily between 81 and 82.

In 2018, I paid tribute to the post-independence modernist buildings of Singapore with a solo exhibition titled *Before It All Goes*, which featured a collage of 48 HDB blocks built between 1960 and 1979—including the one from my childhood."



**BOTTOM**

Queenstown Cinema & Bowl,  
2013

"It's strange because when we were in school, we would go there but it didn't mean very much. It was just a bowling alley, with a KFC. So you just go and eat and bowl. The building was quite stunning before it was painted in these strange colours because there was a KTV there in its later life. Originally it was all brick, red brick. It was an amazing building so I photographed this shortly before it was demolished as well."



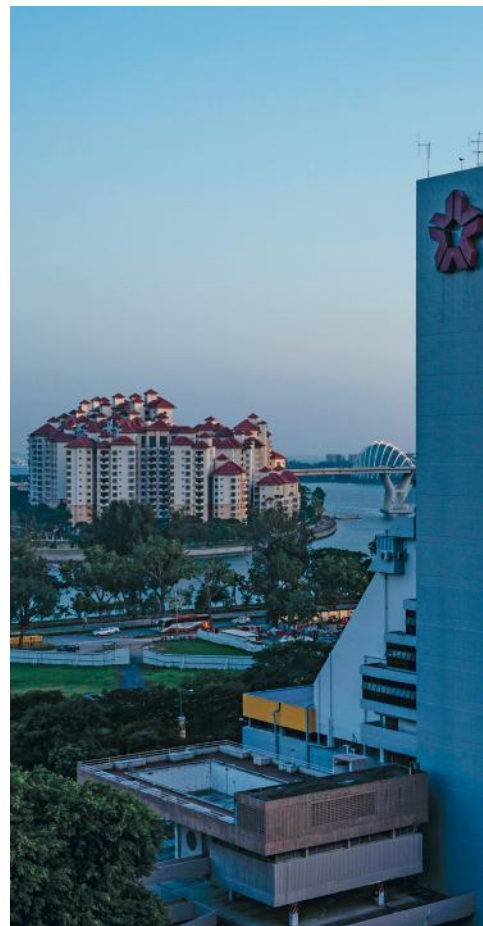


**TOP**  
Pearl Bank Apartments, 2019

"Pearl Bank was one of Singapore's iconic post-independence modernist buildings, constructed in the 1970s. Entirely designed by Singaporean architects, it was once known as the tallest apartment building in all of Southeast Asia."

**OPPOSITE (TOP)**  
Big Splash, 2006

"I only have this one picture of Big Splash because I shot it on a large format camera. For those who don't know, it's the kind of camera where you hide under a cloth, focus manually, lock everything, and then insert the film. People seem to like this print—I've sold several. There's a story: in 2006 I got a large format camera for architecture photography and chose one of the hardest subjects. It was really dark. I had to shine a torch to focus. I also trespassed since they were about to tear it down (which happened months later). Funny thing is they only tore down the slides. That structure behind remains today. When built in the 70s, it was supposedly the world's longest waterslide. Singaporeans often forget or take such things for granted, but photos help."







**LEFT**  
Golden Mile Complex, 2019

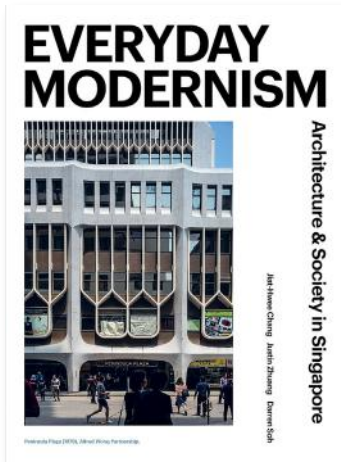
"I'm happy this is saved because it sets a precedent that large commercial buildings can be conserved too. It doesn't just have to be colonial buildings like the Former Supreme Court or Victoria Concert Hall.

Post-independence buildings built in the '60s-'70s have different merit—they were built by Singaporeans for Singaporeans and were the result of our first government land sales exercise where the developers' payments went into nation building. Golden Mile Complex was one of these buildings. That's significant. We've already torn down many such buildings—we should try to save some."





"Julius Shulman was an American architecture photographer and he said this—that he sells architecture better and more directly and more vividly than the architect does. In many ways, it's true because the pictures sell the buildings."



"I co-created this book called *Everyday Modernism* with my friends, Associate Professor Chang Jiat-Hwee from NUS and writer Justin Zhuang. It documents Singapore's modern architecture—from hawker centres and multi-storey car parks to PIE overhead bridges (which I photographed), 1980s PWD (Public Works Department)-built schools, and larger developments like condos, public buildings, Jurong's industrial sites, and lookout towers.

Surprisingly, it won an award from the Society of Architectural Historians of Great Britain. We never expected a book about Singapore's architecture to win a British award!

The book contains 33 short, bus-ride-length essays paired with photos I took of places like Red Star Restaurant, which sits above a car park—things we take for granted until we wonder: Why is there a restaurant sitting on top of a car park?"

So in 1997, Darren began interning at *The Straits Times*, where he sought mentorship from senior photographers. However, due to the Asian Financial Crisis, he was steered toward freelancing earlier than expected. From 2001 to 2005, he took on a variety of photography jobs to sustain himself, shooting everything from weddings, events, celebrities, products, and magazine work. He describes this period of time as incredibly challenging.

"It felt a little bit like taking scraps from the bottom of the table because you're not established and you're young. But back then, if you knocked on enough doors, you would get some work lah. And so that's how I did it. In the beginning I did everything. I also photographed these high society events, and there would be people who would be a bit rude to you. That's why I always say I prefer to photograph buildings rather than people because buildings can't talk back to you."

Darren's first serious body of work, *While You Were Sleeping*, emerged from a simple idea: to visit overlooked, everyday spaces in the far reaches of Singapore and photograph them in the middle of the night. Published in 2004, the book captured quiet nocturnal landscapes and marked his transition from street photography to something more formal.

In 2006, he bought a 4x5 large-format film camera and taught himself how to use it, marking a turning point in his craft, solidifying his niche in architectural photography.

"When I returned to the same spot years later, I realised that each revisit presented a new view of Singapore's evolving landscape."

Another milestone came in 2013 with the release of *For My Son*, a collection of images documenting threatened and demolished vernacular spaces in Singapore.

"When I was putting images together for the book, my son was only a year old. I realised there were all these places getting demolished which he would never see; places of significance to me which I will only be able to show him through photographs. It was then that I started to question why we were not able to save more old buildings, and why 'new' is always perceived as better than 'old.'"

The book marked a shift in his approach, and he proclaims how after that, he couldn't just "sit around and be an observer anymore".

#### **A TIME CAPSULE**

From commercial properties to important social, cultural, and economic landmarks, as well as places of personal and sentimental value, Darren's body of work covers nearly the entire spectrum of Singapore's built environment. Here, we look at some of the places he has captured.

"What I do is archive memories. And some of these memories are other people's memories that you don't even know about yet."



When I think unlimited,  
I think of...  
the richness in the built  
environment that has come  
before us.

**I am unlimited when...**  
I help bring awareness to  
these places and spaces.





Jesher is photographed on the balcony of a walk-up apartment at **Chig Bee Gardens**. Constructed in the mid-1960s as quarters for married British military personnel, the estate later became a district for expatriate teachers teaching in the international schools and tertiary institutions nearby. Today, it is known for its eclectic blend of local lifestyle and F&B brands, including quaint cafés and homegrown brand names.

lepoint



# The Toast That Binds:

## Jesher Loi on the humble beginnings of a family business and sustaining it today, in Singapore and beyond

“The Ya Kun walls have heard a lot.”

These words, spoken by Jesher Loi, the third-generation owner and brand guardian of this local heritage institution, sum up Ya Kun’s enduring legacy. From its humble post-war beginnings to its current international presence in our digital age, Ya Kun has truly seen—and heard—it all.

For more than 80 years now, it has witnessed generations of Singaporeans congregate, savour, and bond over its simple, yet iconic fare of eggs, coffee and toast made with its proprietary kaya recipe—prepared exactly the same way as when it first started in 1944. These time-honoured creations have withstood fleeting trends, hype cycles, and fierce competition, and allowed Ya Kun to remain a formidable player, both locally and abroad.

“Honest to goodness, I like my product. If I’m in an industry where I cannot eat that thing, then it’d be very acrimonious to go to work. I did not choose that menu. I did not even choose the business I was born into. But I’m blessed to be doing this.”

**1926: FROM HAINAN TO SINGAPORE** In 1926, amidst the turbulence of China’s unrest, a young Hainanese migrant arrived in Singapore, seeking opportunity. Like many of his fellow

Hainanese, he was among the last to leave home, and the last to find his place here.

“All the good jobs were already taken. Back then, what was left were jobs as barbers and cooks.”



Loi Ah Koon, founder of Ya Kun, served up piping hot coffee to everyone—from coolies and boat operators to merchants, moneylenders, and police inspectors.

In 1926, at just 15, he scrambled on board an old Chinese junk and set sail from Hainan Island to Singapore.

**RIGHT**

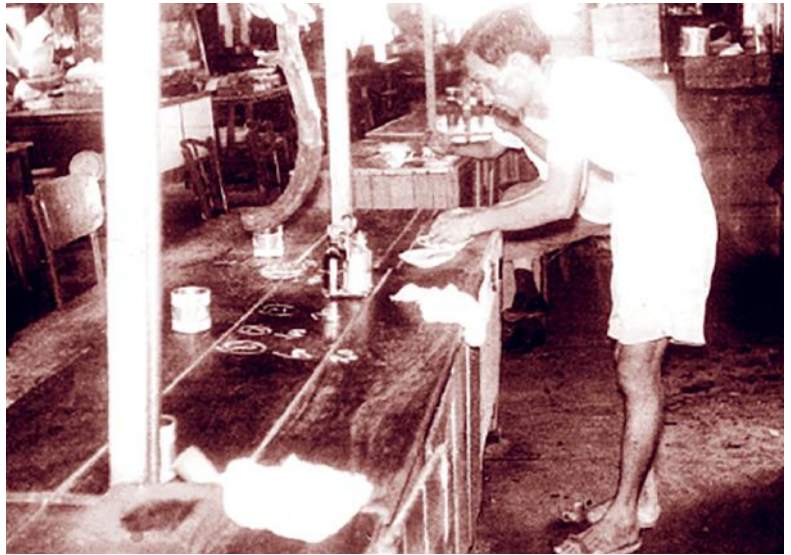
Ah Koon working at the stall. If you look closely, you can see the chalk marks on the counter top.



After operating for more than 15 years at Telok Ayer Basin, Ah Koon relocated his business across the street to Lau Pa Sat. The stall was simply called Ya Kun Coffeestall then, with “Ya Kun” being the Hanyu Pinyin equivalent of “Ah Koon”.

The business remained at Lau Pa Sat for another 15 years, during which it received the “Most Courteous Stall in Lau Pa Sat” award. In 1984, it moved back across the street to the Telok Ayer Transit Food Market to make way for renovations at Lau Pa Sat.

Finally, in 1998, Ya Kun Kaya Toast Coffeestall settled at its current location in Far East Square, where it is now fully managed by Ah Koon’s children.



With no skills to his name, Loi Ah Koon started from nothing. Setting up a coffee stall wasn’t his first venture, but with the help of two assistants, he slowly carved out a livelihood. His humble beginnings began at Telok Ayer Basin, where the smell of the sea mingled with the aroma of freshly brewed coffee.

“Ya Kun was a real person... Ya Kun was my grandfather—a man whose spirit continues to shape everything we do.”

The iconic Ya Kun combo—charcoal-grilled kaya toast, soft-boiled eggs, and coffee—was born out of necessity—both for himself, and the customers he served.

**“My grandfather had one shop, and that one shop was only meant to feed his eight kids. The Telok Ayer Basin was where many coolies worked, and this was the perfect meal to start their day.”**

Long hours shaped his grandfather’s life. Jesher shares that if he served until 11pm, he’d sometimes sleep at the stall. The chalk marks on tabletops tracked orders, while the fire boiled water for the next day’s brew.

“Nobody was talking about sustainability or branding. It was just to feed eight kids. Subsequently, because all his kids were working for him, he had to think about how to solidify the business. My dad took over in 2000, 2001. He’s different, all about branding, growth, being a household brand, things like that.”

Today, Jesher constantly reflects on what his objective is and thankfully, he says, he gets to chart his own path with not much familial pressure.

“My grandfather started with one shop, and when I joined the business, my dad grew it to about 50 plus. So going by the matrix of one to 50, my definition of success would be 85 times 50, which is 4,000. I think I fainted already. So no, but my challenges are different—affordability, sustainability and how we use digitalisation and all that stuff. I don’t have as much pressure, but it’s certainly different from the previous generations.”

Despite these different challenges and different times, the essence of Ya Kun remains unchanged. Jesher’s aunt still toasts bread at their flagship store, just as she has, for 40 years—a testament to endurance, family, and the simple flavours that started it all.

## FROM ONE TO 85, AND BEYOND

Since 2001, Ya Kun's mission has been guided by a few key principles. At its heart lies a commitment to preserving its unique heritage and the belief that good toast and coffee can bring people together—strengthening kinship, friendship, and partnership.

The brand also strives to embrace innovation, whether through the early creativity of transforming bread into French toast or today's advancements in automation. Equally important is its pledge to preserve affordability and accessibility, ensuring its offerings remain within reach for all.

With 85 outlets across Singapore, its stores take on different concepts depending on the location and objective. The classic coffee store—compact and bustling, like the Paragon outlet—still forms the majority. Kiosks, like the one in Takashimaya, prioritise efficiency for those on the move, while the airport outlet serves as a comfort stop for travellers seeking a taste of home before their flights. The family cafe concept, with its expanded menus and seating, caters for bigger gatherings. Some more unconventional locations also include Shell stations near the border checkpoint to Malaysia or in Jewel Changi Airport's curated Singapore section, where Ya Kun stands alongside other local brand names.

Beyond Singapore, the brand has also brought its flavours to Japan, Indonesia, Thailand, Cambodia, the Philippines, and Myanmar. Each location carries its own story, like the Yangon outlet that has become a pitstop for homesick Singaporean students on school trips.

But as with any business, not all endeavours are smooth. Valuable lessons were learnt in Dubai, where the eating culture clashed with Ya Kun's breakfast DNA, and in Korea, where the brand was met with too much competition. Yet every business move, successful or not, has been proof of Ya Kun's willingness to adapt while staying true to its roots.

## A CULTURE OF SERVICE AND CONSISTENCY

Under Jeshier's leadership, Ya Kun's culture thrives on small daily actions and choices rather than rigid rules. Critical to this ecosystem are Ya Kun's operation managers—unsung heroes who embody quiet dedication. Their care runs deep: texting auntsies to ensure they get home safely, escorting staff past when it's dark and late, or simply noticing when a team member needs support.

"When asked why they stay, the staff often say it's because of their colleagues and managers. I'm very happy to hear that. I don't need them to say, 'I stay because of the work I do.'"



"Hugh Jackman visited us quietly during his trip to promote *X-Men: Days of Future Past*. He's a huge kaya toast fan—though he limits the butter for health reasons. Strategically, he came on a Monday afternoon when the shop was empty, bringing an unnamed friend. After eating, he asked the staff for a photo. When I later asked the staff, 'You didn't recognise him?', they admitted they'd thought he was just some random ang moh."



Hong Kong actor Chow Yun-fat with Ya Kun staff on Christmas Eve of 2015.



Danilo D'Ambrosio looks on as Inter Milan goalkeeper, Tommaso Berni slices bread at a Ya Kun outlet. The Italian players were in Singapore for a match with Manchester United in 2019. Jeshier jokes, "I may be smiling, but if he cuts himself, I am in trouble."



“I’m not a foodie.  
But then I realised  
that it’s not the  
industry, but the  
**s p a c e** ,  
that matters to  
me—meeting  
people, talking to  
kids, collecting  
***stories.***”

Consistency, however, demands keen attention and vigilance. Supply chain hiccups—like blended tea dust or uneven coffee beans—require brewers to be alert. For this, a group chat helps, where seasoned staff spot irregularities and share photos of whatever’s amiss.

“If two people return their drinks, you know something’s wrong.”

Yet challenges persist. Rapid expansion sometimes strains training pipelines, leaving new hires without proper guidance.

“Consistency comes through passion, actually. The team must sense your drive.”

### **EVOLVING TASTES**

Ya Kun’s menu strikes a balance between heritage and modernity. The heritage menu, with its charcoal-grilled kaya toast and soft-boiled eggs, remains sacred.

“The heritage menu is untouchable. The modern contemporary menu will always change with time. So one day it could be a mala sandwich or whatever. Sales-wise, the heritage menu is still the main core. We ask ourselves, ‘Do you want to be known as a cafe? Or do you want to be known for kaya toast?’”

Right now, Ya Kun is firmly a kaya toast coffee place—and this has its pros.

“Tourists seek the iconic set; regulars crave the familiar. Before you step in, you already know what you want. Psychologically, you can almost taste it. If you want bubble tea, go ahead. We don’t compete in that space. We anchor our branding rather than stretch ourselves too thin.”

### **A (DIGITAL) LEAP OF FAITH**

Under Jesher’s leadership, Ya Kun embraced digital transformation with surprising foresight, inspired by observing customer behaviour.

“People were saying, ‘I go to Ya Kun two times a day, three times a day. Give me some kind of discount.’ So we conceptualised our app in 2018 and launched it in 2019. This was when McDonald’s hadn’t developed an app and Foodpanda was still finding its footing in Singapore. So we became one of the first F&B chains to take the digital plunge. Of all the coffee chains, only Starbucks had an app then.”

However, the initial adoption proved challenging.

“The uptake was very slow, people were not used to it, saying, ‘Ah... must download app just to buy coffee.’”

Luckily, a strategic partnership with DBS provided credibility, with the bank’s branding helping to build consumer confidence. The eight-points-per-dollar system transformed customer engagement, turning every coffee purchase into a small investment in future rewards.

And during the pandemic, that was when the app’s potential truly shone. Jesher thought, Why don’t we use points to pay a cup forward? This allowed friends and family who were separated to share comfort in cup form—users could purchase coffee remotely, sending a redemption code to the recipient.

Beyond commerce, the app also became a platform for social good. Collaborations with Boys’ Town and World Vision enabled customers to convert their loyalty points into support for charitable causes.

“Something as simple as points can help reading programmes overseas or local charities. We were bringing our customers along with us on this giving journey.”

Till today, the Ya Kun app stands as a testament to the brand’s ability to



The Ibn Battuta Mall in Dubai where Ya Kun opened an outlet in 2013. This is part of Ya Kun’s extensive network of franchise outlets, located across international markets like China, Dubai, Myanmar, and the Philippines.



In 1998, Jesher’s father, Adrin, and his uncle, Algie, took over the business and opened a new outlet at Far East Square with just \$10,000.

Strategically located in the Central Business District, the shop attracted steady crowds from nearby offices and broke even within 2 weeks. It remains there to this day as the chain’s flagship outlet.



Gifts collected at a Ya Kun outlet for The Shoebox Project. Launched in 2020 by Jeshier, this initiative supports children from families affected by pay cuts and retrenchments. The public is invited to donate toys and stationery, wrap them in shoeboxes as Christmas gifts, and drop them off at participating Ya Kun outlets.

Jeshier's advice for scaling a family business:

### **1. Create structure—something many family businesses overlook**

"Structure provides continuity and stability. When there is structure, it is not necessarily reliant on any one person but the team to carry the business forward."

### **2. Protect your legacy**

"Lock in your IP... a lot of them don't value that as much. And then in hindsight, a little too late."

### **3. Don't force expansion**

"Don't rush, get your base settled and strong."

### **4. Wait for the right partner**

"It comes down to the right partner, trust, understanding...don't assume. If there's no good partner, we don't force."

balance tradition with innovation, and has become an integral part of Ya Kun's identity.

### **GOING BEYOND KOPI AND TOAST**

This engagement with the community extends far beyond its app. From school fun fairs and classroom talks to charity drives, the brand weaves itself into Singapore's social fabric. Jeshier's interactions with students range from university lectures to primary school visits. But one initiative he finds particularly meaningful is The Shoebox Project they did in 2020.

"We knew that some lost their jobs and most wouldn't get any bonus that year. We have many outlets, right? What if we transform our stores into collection points for holiday gifts during the economic downturn? People can give toys and presents to those in need through our stores, and then, working with charitable agencies, we distribute these toys. The response overwhelmed our expectations: 20,000 presents came in from all over Singapore. People were really awesome. Singaporeans are very generous—they just need a focal point."

With 350 staff serving countless customers daily, Jeshier recognises the need to keep the human connection alive.

"Making human connections takes time, and it requires collecting stories and relating to people. However, the reward of doing so gives meaning to what we do on a daily basis."

"It's not easy. But it's really encouraging for me to be able to share the stories and to interact with others."

### **WHAT ABOUT COMPETITION?**

When it comes to the question of competition, Jeshier sees not rivalry but collective growth and community. To him, there is always enough of a playing field in Singapore for everyone, and he cites Bugis Junction as an example to illustrate this point.

"Just because a popular mall has over five coffee joints doesn't necessarily mean that competition is present. Even if each cafe could seat 80 people, that's only 400 seats for people looking for coffee. In a mall, we have several thousand people, hungry or thirsty, looking for food or a beverage. So we should not be focusing on competition but rather on providing opportunity."

For Jeshier, coexistence trumps competition, and he appreciates the role of competitors in strengthening the ecosystem.

"I tell my guys not to view others as competitors. If not, you go to work with the mentality of fighting a war, and such an aggressive stance is not sustainable. We have become more mature, both as a nation and as a brand, so taking the win-win works better for us. Quality becomes the true differentiator. And having these other concepts actually boosts the entire system. We can all better negotiate as a nation."

His focus also lies in "outlet sustainability" rather than incessant profit.

"If the outlet is sustainable, it's good enough; no need to be booming. Because the brewer is my limiting factor... I want people to see the quality and the assurance."

Overseas presents different challenges though. While Southeast Asia understands kopitiam culture, northern markets require education.

"We have to sell the Singapore brand, and that will include laksa, chicken rice, and other popular Singaporean dishes."

### **THE INEVITABILITY OF RISING COSTS**

Numbers don't lie: double-digit spikes in electricity, volatile egg and wheat prices, wages and even butter





#### LEFT

Ya Kun collaborated with Adidas to launch a limited-edition collection of apparel for National Day 2024.

costs are dictated by global demand, which, in turn, results in increases in retail price.

**“We are a small country and are thus affected when there are economic shifts elsewhere.”**

As a result, the increase in price was carefully timed, announced and brought into effect. For Jeshier, the hike wasn’t just about survival—it was also about preserving the integrity of his products and the livelihoods behind them. After all, behind the pricing lies Ya Kun’s uncompromising freshness: daily-baked bread, twice-weekly kaya deliveries, and premium coffee beans grown against the backdrop of worsening climate odds.

The true barrier, he discovered, lay in perception.

“It’s an arbitrary price ceiling that we have to be sensitive to. Public perception could be that because we sell eggs, bread and coffee, we cannot go above a certain price point. We have to work with that but also help customers understand that many other factors also affect the price of the food presented to them. Sometimes it’s not about pure economics but about sentiment.”

#### RETAINING PEOPLE

Many factors go into building Ya Kun’s team in order to retain their best people.

“The pay must meet the market standard. Then after that, it’s really about care and camaraderie—people stay for their colleagues. They stay because they know there’s a certain level of predictability and efficiency to what they do.”

In addition, he says it’s also important that organisations help people discover and cultivate their passions, as this is where the magic lies.

“What is their reason for wanting to join us? What do you want to get out of it? I’ve been diving a lot into this concept of work and passion. How do we help others find passion in their work? Or is there a way to find passion within the organisation?”

He distils it into three possibilities—work as passion, work as necessity and work as a way to discover passion.

“Some are privileged to be doing what they’ve always dreamt about doing. Others work hard to support their dreams. I hope to explore a third concept where employers work closely with employees in order to help



In 2019, Ya Kun partnered with Pocky to create the first-ever locally inspired rendition of the popular Japanese snack, featuring flavours like Kaya Toast and Kopi-O. The snack was available at all Ya Kun outlets for a limited time.



Jesher, who grew up playing the violin, has always been passionate about music, and was the music director for the River Valley High School String Ensemble for 4 years.

In his free time, he conducts music-related co-curricular activities for various schools.



Jesher's father, Adrin (LEFT), took over the family business with his brother in 1998 and grew it from a single outlet to more than 50.

them find or blend their passions into their work, thus providing meaning and purpose to what they are doing. When that is nurtured, it flows back into the organisation, enriching both the individual and the company."

#### **ADVICE FOR THE YOUNG**

Jesher believes that every student should get a taste of real work as part of their education.

"On the Singapore Business Federation side, I'm pushing this idea that every student should work on the front line for their project work, whether it's working the night shift at the airport, seeing all the weary travellers come in. Or it could be hospitality, immigration or F&B. Whatever it is, when they are faced with a customer in front of them, under a time crunch, they suddenly learn so much about themselves."

He says that not only do the students benefit from the learning but its effects ripple outward—easing workforce strain, preserving traditions, and bridging generational divides. He also believes that early work exposure reframes service jobs not as last resorts, but as formative life experiences that no textbook can offer.

#### **SUCCESS AND SUCCESSION**

The transition of leadership in Jesher's family business was never a formal discussion. Rather, it was all about 感情 (feeling) and practicality.

"Between my grandfather and my dad, I genuinely don't think they talked much about it. It just seemed like my dad stepped up at the right time with the right ideas."

His father, the youngest son, emerged as the natural successor, as he was the most entrepreneurial. But the path was far from smooth. There were moments of near-collapse, such as when the much cherished Telok Ayer coffee stall was going to be reclaimed, pushing the family to a decision point.

"My dad was the most entrepreneurial one, for some reason. Maybe as the youngest child, he had this drive, and so he took it and did it all. The early days were tough going, but they also took it in their stride to modernise the business, negotiate with landlords and figure out how to operate inside a mall. Those were exciting times."

Yet resilience and unexpected opportunities kept them afloat—like when the visionary Mr Chia Boon Pin from Far East Organization saw potential in gathering Singapore's culinary names under one roof at Far East Square. It was a vision that paid off when they needed it most.

For Jesher, success isn't measured in milestones but in the people who believed in him when he least expected it.

"I don't have a success story yet. However, I would say that I am deeply appreciative to all the people who took a chance on me, whether in my youth or as an adult. It could be that particular teacher, mentor or friend who said, 'Hey, come with me to this internship or come with me to this conference.' Whatever it is, I always remember those who took that chance on me."

And if he can be that for others, then perhaps that is success and legacy enough.



When I think unlimited, I think of...  
something near impossible but  
worth doing.

**I am unlimited when...**  
we attempt something never been  
done before.





Located at Kheam Hock Road, the **Former Command House** features a stately facade highlighted by brick arches, exposed materials, and meticulous craftsmanship. As one of the last defences against the Japanese troops in 1942, it holds a significant place in Singapore's military history. For Sharon, this venue is familiar ground—she attended trainings and workshops here during her tenure at UBS. Today, the SLA-managed State property has transformed into a distinguished location for events and functions.

# First Instincts, Best Instincts:

*Sharon Sim*

## on navigating a male-dominated industry, her evolving relationship with money, empowering women, and always trusting her gut

Women, investment banking, and venture capital may not be terms usually mentioned in the same breath. But for Sharon Sim, money and all that it entails have always been a defining part of her world.

Ever since she was about eight or nine, Sharon was already exposed to the concept of money beyond dollars and cents. It was the '80s when her mum was working as a stockbroker (and still is today at 77), and she would often come home bearing exciting stories of everything from the financial markets to her clients. She would also get her kids to partake in counting what was issued as physical shares then.

"I remember her bringing a lot of the papers home, and she'd always put us in a room and say, 'Okay, can you help me count the share scripts?' For me at least, it was very exciting. I was around the age of nine. So it was actually quite fun to help her with the sorting out, and counting the shared scripts but also understanding that this actually means something important, that this particular piece of paper actually has value; it represents shares."

This early exposure left an indelible mark on Sharon. Not only was she introduced to equity markets at a young age—fuelled by her mother's business, stories, and passion— but she also saw firsthand what being a woman could look like. Today, Sharon wears many hats. With over 20 years of experience in the financial industry, advising everyone from global institutional fund managers to ultra-high-net worth investors and family offices, she is an investor, a venture capitalist, an author, an entrepreneur, a host, and a wife and mother to two teenage children.

"I think my mother is still my go-to role model. Even though we have our arguments and we can disagree over a lot of things in life, she is my anchor. Seeing her as a career woman, seeing her going through

**RIGHT**

Sharon celebrated her 19th birthday with her mum, just before leaving for the US to pursue her studies.



ups and downs, failures and all that, I think it kind of gave me a different perspective of how a woman can be.”

**A RESTLESS MIND,  
AND LOTS OF  
HARD WORK**

It is perhaps this fiercely independent streak, as modelled by her mum, that has rubbed off on Sharon and explains the choices and decisions she has made in life. Despite this, she describes

herself as shy and introverted, while quietly confident and self-motivated.

“I always push myself, like, in my studies. I’m motivated, self-motivated. So I got into the right schools. So in a way, I was quietly confident, but I wasn’t like, outstanding. I try to understand what the rules are and what I need to do, and make sure I kind of fulfil those things, but I will do it my way.”

Somehow, Sharon always seemed to possess an innate clarity about her goals, and was never easily swayed by her environment. In secondary school, at an age where most would be concerned with fitting in or being part of the dominant culture, Sharon said she made the decision not to join any CCA. She took herself out of every activity as she knew she wanted to focus on her studies. She also recalls being called “restless” by her teacher. Back then, she never really understood what it meant. In hindsight, she concurs with it.

**“I have a very restless mind and somehow the teacher picked it up. How I interpret it is that I have a lot of different thoughts, ideas in my head, and I’m actually very excited about new things. Maybe I’m a bit easily bored, and I like challenges. I like to solve problems. So I think that’s where the word restless kind of came from. When I reflected, I could see why the teacher might have said that.”**

And perhaps, it is this perpetual restlessness that has propelled her to where she is today. Sharon’s appetite for the new and challenging was evident in junior college, where she took the risk to pivot from the Sciences to Humanities despite having always been a Science student. She recalls it being a huge struggle as she had to rewire the way she thinks. After college, in the late ‘90s, she went on to pursue a degree in International Relations at Georgetown University, driven by her interest in politics and geopolitics at the time.

However, an exchange programme in London in the final year of her studies drew her into the dizzying world of banking and finance



and it was at that point that she decided she would dive into a career in banking. After all, it was familiar territory, and something she has always had at the back of her mind.

"I wanted to see what else was out there, especially in the financial world. So I spent one year in London at LSE (London School of Economics). Back in those days, London was a very big financial hub, even bigger than it is now. I saw the changes happening and it was very exciting. That was sort of in the middle of dot com, where a lot of deals were being done and a lot of IPOs were happening. So I thought, okay, I want to do investment banking."

#### **RISKING IT ALL TO OWN HER FIRST PROPERTY IN HER 20s**

Hundreds of CVs and applications later, Sharon managed to secure her first job at Goldman Sachs in Singapore, where she spent three years in European Equities Sales. Around this time, having gained a few years of work experience, it

was also when she made her first major investment: property. It was a period when the market was relatively depressed, so she poured all her savings—along with earnings from stocks—into the purchase.

For Sharon, owning her own home was more than just an investment, it was a statement of independence and a testament to her ability to achieve something significant on her own. She was in her mid-20s then.

"It was the early 2000s; in Asia, I think property value was starting to pick up, even in Singapore. Looking at what I knew at that time, I said I have to buy property. I have to leverage. And leveraging is a scary thing when you're young because you're taking on a lot of debt. But for me, the decision was pretty clear. I did my math; I took a massive loan, but because it was progressive, I felt I had the time to pay it back and was comfortable enough with the interest payment. It was important for me to own a property then for the stability, the independence, and to prove to myself I made it. I think most people can afford to own something after a few years of working if they know how...if they know how to strategise the spending."

She managed to sell the property after two years, and bought another one after that with the profit, kickstarting her property investment journey. But even though she's had her fair share of successes, Sharon is also cognisant and cautious about the dual nature of wealth—how it can grow exponentially through smart investments, but also vanish just as quickly when markets turn volatile.

#### **MONEY: A DOUBLE- EDGED SWORD**

She experienced this firsthand during the Asian Financial Crisis of the late 1990s. She recalls how her mother, along with countless others, suffered

significant losses as interest rates spiked and real estate markets crumbled.

"We lost a lot of money during that time. My mum lost a lot; we even had to sell our house. Who could have foreseen COVID-19? Who could have foreseen the Asian financial crisis? Even the smartest fund managers lost money. Money can actually make more money. But I also realised that the downside can be devastating."

This period of financial turmoil taught her that no matter how skilled or knowledgeable one might be, external forces—unpredictable and uncontrollable—can upend even the most carefully laid plans. And more than just a tool or measure of success, money, for Sharon, is also a reminder of humility, resilience, and the delicate balance between risk and reward.

Fast forward to 2008, Sharon experienced what she says is the worst year of her career. It was the Global Financial Crisis and both she and her husband lost their jobs at Lehman Brothers. These experiences taught her an invaluable lesson.



Sharon was the host of a 6-episode finance documentary series *Lunch with Masters of Finance* on Channel NewsAsia. In the series, she dined and conversed with some of Asia's leading investors and fund managers. Among those she interviewed were Suhaimi Zainul-Abidin (CEO of Quantedge), Tom James (CEO of TradeFlow Capital), and Shirley Chua (CEO of Golden Equator), to name a few.

“We can always **reinvent** ourselves at any stage of life, in every season, you can be different, you can play different roles.”

"I learnt to be very cognisant that in this industry, things can be very fluid; big organisations can come and go. So I had to change my mindset once again—about my career, and about who I am. Because when you tie your personality to your job in banking particularly, you are taking a concentrated risk. You've got to be more than who you are at work. You have to build your own identity outside of work, and build your own investments outside of work. So that was another big wake-up call for me."

While these experiences instilled in her a deep sense of caution and respect for the unpredictability of financial markets, she also emphasises and acknowledges the potential for wealth creation through investments.

"You have to be careful with how you invest, but you also have to do it. Saving alone won't get you far. I want to be very conservative with my retirement money. But I also keep a pocket for taking more risks. I saw the upside and the downside of the financial markets, and that affected me emotionally, so I want to have that humility to know I can't be fully prepared for any kind of crisis."

#### **PRESENT PURPOSE**

Today, Sharon is the Director at a US-based global investment firm that provides institutions, entrepreneurs, families, and emerging next-generation leaders with fiduciary capabilities to execute investment strategies and services. She is also the co-founder and one of the driving forces behind the venture capital firm Purpose Ventures, which focuses on investing in early-stage tech companies dedicated to creating meaningful societal impact. With a particular emphasis on education, the environment, climate technology, and women's empowerment, the firm fills a critical gap left by traditional banks and large corporations, which often shy away from investing in nascent ventures.

**"We look at the founders. The founders are important because at a very early stage, there's not much to look at. It's a very high-risk segment, but the returns are also very high, when it turns out right. So it's a very long game. Early-stage investment would take nine years or more to see a decent exit."**

Sharon shares the first investment they made, in an online pet care service company which prides itself on making pet care available and accessible for pet owners. This company was a natural match as their vision and mission were aligned with her company's.

"Zumvet was founded by two Singaporean women, which is very rare in Singapore. They're based here. So it's a good combination of women founders with a tech solution. And they're addressing a pretty sizable and scalable market outside of Singapore as well. So I think that's one example where everything was quite aligned."

Apart from investing for work, Sharon is also a passionate supporter and investor in her sister's F&B projects. She recognises how tough the F&B business is and says that to succeed, it's important to build good relations with all the people you work with.

"There's a very diverse pool of investors in F&B. And we work very closely with landlords, because we rent a space and it's a very long-term relationship with the landlord. There are good stories, but there are also bad ones. F&B is about really building very deep relations with your landlord, your suppliers, and then of course, your customers."



Key takeaways from the book:

### 1. Start investing

"It's never too late or too early to start investing. Even though the journey is never smooth and nothing is guaranteed, the point is to start somewhere. For Cecilia, one of the women in the book, the lesson she learnt is that pain is a very good teacher. It teaches you to understand your risk tolerance and to be more prudent in how you do your research. I think her story of how she started her investment journey is very insightful."

### 2. Invest in yourself

"Investing is not just about dollars and cents. It's about investing in yourself. The story I want to highlight is Ong Bee Yan's. She's 68 and started on this journey only a few years ago, after she experienced the loss of people around her to cancer. She's a fashion model and also started Fashion for Cancer, a charity fashion show that raises funds for cancer research and financial aid. She shows that it's never too late to invest in yourself—whether it's your health, self-care, or things that enrich your life. She's having the best time of her life right now."

### 3. Money vs Wealth

"You may think that people with a lot of money are living great lives. But in fact, they may have more problems than many of us. So what is the purpose of accumulating more money? How do you do good with what you have? We ask all the women featured in the book this question: What is wealth to you? And is wealth the same as money? I think wealth is much deeper, more all-encompassing. It could be experiences that you have accumulated, it could be supporting a charity you believe in, it could be nurturing relationships. You want a certain level of comfort in life and a certain assurance that your family is taken care of. But beyond that, to make life meaningful, it can't just be about accumulating money. It's also about purpose, and investing your energy in something you believe in."

She also cautions anyone from joining the industry unless they are really passionate. Not only is it very susceptible to economic cycles, trends and fads, the margins are lower than you can imagine, she says.

"You have to have a high tolerance for pain. The returns are not very high, even if you're doing a very good job. Even if your store is crowded all the time, it's a misunderstanding. It may not be making money because there are many ways in which the cost is stacking up, as I mentioned, labour, rental. What you see is not what it is."

### WHY WOMEN DON'T TALK MONEY

Considering her lifelong career in a male-dominated industry, coupled with the inspiring example set by her mother, it comes as no surprise Sharon is especially interested in women and their relationship with money. In 2024, she, alongside her friend and fellow finance industry veteran Serene Wong, co-authored *Why Women Don't Talk Money*, a book that brings together the voices of 24 remarkable women to explore their complex relationships with money and wealth.

"The book isn't about how to make money. It's about understanding the emotions and stories behind it. We wanted to dive deep into the often uncomfortable, yet deeply personal, relationship women have with money."

The inspiration for the book stemmed from a shared realisation: while women diligently care for their physical health with regular checkups, they often neglect their financial well-being. And Sharon hopes that this book can be a call to change that. The title itself is intentionally provocative, designed to spark conversations and challenge the silence surrounding women and money. Featuring a diverse spectrum of voices—from a 21-year-old to a 67-year-old—the book captures a wide range of experiences and perspectives, through intimate and unfiltered conversations.

"The goal is to provoke more conversations, to empower women to think deeply about money, and to celebrate the unique journeys that have brought them to where they are today."

### EMPOWERING WOMEN

"It's very natural, I think, because as a woman working in an industry where it's very male-dominated, there was no such thing as women's empowerment, especially back in those days. So I've experienced it firsthand. And I have a daughter, so I never want her to also go through that kind of situation again. I do feel that women do need support. We do need to empower each other."

Sharon's approach to empowerment is both practical and personal. She believes that women, as the heart and soul of families and communities, hold the key to driving meaningful change with its domino effect.

"In many communities, women are the ones who ensure their children are fed, educated, and cared for. Because when you empower women, you create a ripple effect—better education, improved nutrition, and stronger families. It's about addressing the root of the problem in emerging economies, where issues like malnutrition and lack of education persist."

She hopes to work with organisations and charities that promote purposeful giving in Asia, enabling marginalised young people, especially girls, to transform their lives and communities. Beyond just empowering women, Sharon is determined to pave the way for a more equitable future.

"It's not just about raising money; it's about creating sustainable change. The goal is to inspire support—not just financially, but through connections—and bring the right kind of energy."

#### **MOTHERHOOD AND STARTING THEM YOUNG**

"I dealt with guilt all the time. As a daughter as well, you don't spend enough time with your parents. For me, it's with my mum. And I think we have to make conscious decisions and compromises. I knew I'd regret it if I didn't change."

So when her children were younger, she decided to leave investment banking for a while. Later, when faced with the stress of their PSLE exams, she took a two-year hiatus to support them. But having said that, she firmly believes that being a working mother doesn't mean shortchanging her children. At every juncture in life, she believes that one's roles can shift and change.

"In every season, you can be different, you can play different roles, and you don't have to feel as guilty as you think you should. My mum was never a stay-at-home mum, and I don't think we were worse off for it."

She also says that as kids grow older, they begin to see you in a different light. By modelling ambition and resilience, one can impart the values of hard work and the importance of pursuing their own passions.

"They respect you for your career, your impact, and the person you are. It's about showing your kids that you have goals, ambitions, and a life beyond being their mother. You're not just saying, study hard and become a doctor. You're showing them what's possible."

Even now, while her children are more independent, Sharon remains mindful of the quality of time they share. For her, motherhood is not about perfection but about showing up, both as a mother and a person in her own right.

When it comes to teaching her children about money, Sharon's approach, when they were younger, is rooted in everyday experiences and gradual learning. It began with simple lessons during supermarket trips, where she introduced her kids to the concept of value and budgeting.

"When they were younger, money didn't mean much to them. But if you say, 'If you buy this eraser, you can't buy this pen,' it becomes real. They start to think, 'Which one do I want more?'"



In 2024, Sharon co-authored the book *Why Women Don't Talk Money* with her friend, Serene Wong. In it, 24 women share candid stories about their relationships with money—from earning and managing it to celebrating financial independence. Among the contributors are national swimmer Quah Ting Wen, Sasseur REIT CEO Cecilia Tan, and Fashion for Cancer founder and model Ong Bee Yan.



Behind the scenes of *Why Women Don't Talk Money*, a book and podcast series by Sharon and her friend, Serena.

These early lessons laid the foundation for understanding trade-offs and the importance of mindful spending. As they grew older, Sharon introduced them to more complex financial concepts, like stocks and bonds. She used their interests to make the lessons relatable, and introduced her son to Roblox stock as a starting point to explain how investments work. She also set up a dummy trading account when he was 17, allowing him to experiment with building a model portfolio without financial risk.

"It's a great training ground. Start with what they know. He can pick stocks he understands, like Disney or Apple, and see how company performance impacts stock prices. If they see a Disney movie doing well, they can connect it to the company's earnings and stock performance."

Through these hands-on lessons, she's not just teaching her kids about money—she's preparing them for a future of informed decision-making and financial independence.

#### FINAL WORDS

If there was one thing that's been consistent in Sharon's journey over the years, it's her ability to make decisive choices and own the outcomes for herself. And what has served as her compass and guiding light has always been her intuition.

"Intuition—I always felt I had that. And over the years, I trusted the intuition. When I made those decisions, whether it was studying Humanities, going to London, or buying my first property in my mid-20s, it was very much intuition-based, and to be honest, when I was convinced of it, I just went for it. I never consulted my parents. I assessed everything in my mind and clarified what was important to me. If I lose everything, I'll bear the consequences. So there was a lot of stress when things were challenging, when the markets were up and down, but I always said, okay, it's my choice, my decision. I'm gonna go with it. And thankfully, it turned out pretty well."

She also reinforces her belief that reinvention is important and possible at any stage of life and remains hungry for new ways to grow her portfolio.

"We can always reinvent ourselves at any stage of our lives. I don't think we have to be pigeonholed into one particular role. And I think that's how I approach investing, and looking at different companies. It's really to broaden your mind, to have control over the story that you want to write for yourself. I think as we evolve, as my kids are now teenagers, I want to do more. I want to think about how else I want to grow my portfolio of investments and careers."



**When I think unlimited, I think of...**  
infinite possibilities, wide open spaces, and vibrant colours.

**I am unlimited when...**  
I'm creative.

"When I see SLA's tagline, I hear positivity and creativity. It speaks to how we can maximise a space—not just its utility, but its possibilities. Usage is one aspect, but just as important is the community you want to build around it. How do you imbue a spirit into a property? How do you transform a space with creativity and make it magnetic, a place that draws people in?"

I was actually quite inspired when I visited Barcelona two years ago. It's a beautiful city, but what stood out was the architecture—so many different ways of expressing ideas and shaping spaces. In Singapore, we have a lot of human capital, but we're not bold enough to create statement properties. Beyond preservation—which we've done very well—and making things new and shiny—which we also do well—how do we embrace that little bit of madness?"





Petrina is photographed at ■ 52-56  
**Kampong Java Road**, which is set to be  
repurposed into an arts haven for the  
community. Once quarters for municipal  
officers along a street named after  
Javanese gardeners who sold produce  
along Arab Street, this row of heritage  
buildings will be home to a vibrant mix  
of studios, galleries, and performance  
areas. Awarded via a joint tender by SLA  
and the National Arts Council, the space  
will be designed for experimentation  
and expression—much like Petrina's own  
journey in radio, voice coaching and the  
performing arts.

# Liberating the Voice:

Petrina Kow

## on connecting with the self through the voice, helping people find theirs, and the courage to be vulnerable

Novelist and poet Margaret Atwood once said, "A voice is a human gift; it should be cherished and used, to utter fully human speech as possible." And this can't be more apt when it comes to describing what Petrina Kow does.

From being the pioneer batch of broadcasters on NewsRadio 938 in the noughties, to voice acting and directing for animation and commercials, to coaching accents and public speaking at organisations like Google, HSBC, Disney and Netflix, to contributing her expertise on the theatre stage and lecturing at Lasalle and NAFA (Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts), Petrina's voice has travelled far and wide—and has been a gift to many.

Whether you've heard her on popular morning shows on Class 95FM with the Flying Dutchman and ONE FM 91.3 with Joe Augustin, or on pre-school shows such as *Taoshu: The Warrior Boy*, or as the voice-over for countless commercials, her distinctive voice is not one to be forgotten. She looks back, with a laugh, at the time she had to record for StarHub's default voice-recorded message when they first started in Singapore.

"I sold everything; you name it. I've been doing this for 30 years, so I'm in a tonne of commercials—everything from diapers, peanut butter, milk powder, insurance, and every telco. I was the voice on your StarHub 'Press one for...'. I literally had to record 1 to 1,000 in three different tones. This was when StarHub started; I sat there in a booth and went, 'One, one, one, two, two, two...' (in different tones). And then they would computerise the alphanumeric combinations of 'The number you have dialled is engaged at the moment.' The worst thing was when I had to listen to myself tell myself that my husband was unavailable to me. I would hear it and go, 'Shut up!'"

### ACCIDENTAL BEGINNINGS IN RADIO

Growing up, Petrina fondly recalls car rides with her father, where his ritual was to tune in to the BBC, where the crackling voices of presenters would fill her journey. Those mornings steeped in

Petrina is the only Singaporean certified in both Fitzmaurice Voicework® and Knight Thompson Speechwork®—2 of the most respected voice and speech methodologies in the world.

She currently serves as Regional Director (Southeast Asia) for the Fitzmaurice Institute, and previously held a seat on the Board of Directors of VASTA (Voice and Speech Trainers Association), the global hub for voice professionals.



**RIGHT**

Petrina coaching Munah Bagharib (actor) to speak and sing in Ariana Grande's voice and accent, for *G\*d Is A Woman*, a WILD RICE production directed by Ivan Heng and written by Joel Tan in 2023.



British accents, along with a diet of American sitcoms shaped her ear growing up, but she never thought of being the voice behind the mic.

“Have I always wanted to be a radio DJ? Yes and no.”

A twist of fate led her to study sound engineering at university, instead of film. Then came community radio in Sydney, where she lugged a Nagra recorder and spliced quarter-inch tape like an old-school alchemist. Returning to Singapore, she stumbled into auditions for Passion Radio (later Lush 99.5FM) but moved on to One FM—Gold 90's edgier sibling. It was a pivotal era: Radio Corporation of Singapore was morphing into Mediacorp, and stations splintered. Petrina became part of the pioneer batch for NewsRadio 938 (now CNA938).

“I started in news. Reading bulletins and hosting shows—it was baptism by fire. Because even though I had some prior experience with a campus radio back in Sydney, this was the first time we had a dedicated news station. In a way, we were writing the ‘manual’ as we experimented and established the standards for programming and producing a news and features-only radio station.”

But what piqued her interest in community and stories was the radio talk show programme *The Living Room*, a two-hour live show she and co-host Koh Joo Kim spearheaded. They interviewed four guests daily—talking to everyone from doctors to activists. During this pre-internet era, she shares that not only did interviewing these colourful guests help them build an interesting following, intimate bonds with listeners were also forged.

“There were many people who found connections with radio DJs and they would write us letters and stuff like that. So it was very much that sort of one-to-one connection we had with people, which was really lovely. And we had a lot of fans who would write long letters to us, baring their souls and stuff, which was really sweet, which I think is the kind of connection that is lost today in our fast-paced-type-a-few-comments-and-off-you-go kind of world. Nobody dedicates anything to anybody anymore.”

#### **THE EVOLUTION OF RADIO**

Even though Petrina has spent decades in radio, she admits that the medium isn't what it used to be. This shift, she says, is rooted in the democratisation of music and information.

“I think podcasts are what radio wanted to be. Spotify happened. iTunes happened. We're no longer beholden to record companies or

radio stations dictating what we hear. Now, I curate my own music, my own knowledge. I don't need school—I YouTube what I want to learn."

With this freedom to choose what you want to listen to also comes some degree of fragmentation because people now no longer have a common point of reference.

"We've lost common ground. Who here listens to the radio? Back then, everyone knew the new hit song. Now? I have no idea what my kids are listening to. Their music is like, whaaaaat? And they'd say the same about mine! But that's also interesting 'cos it means more variety."

Despite this, she maintains that radio still has its place—not as a tastemaker, but as a companion, saying there is comfort in a schedule, especially for older generations who rely on its rhythm.

### A PERSONAL JOURNEY TO BECOMING A VOICE COACH

Voice was Petrina's tool—one she understood and honed instinctively, but not one she knew how to teach.

"I am not here to tell you to have a 'proper' way of speaking. But everything in my up-and-down career had something to do with the voice and being a professional voice user. We all use our voices, but I got paid for mine. Then I started to get asked to teach workshops on how to speak properly and how to present with confidence etc..."

Having had no clue how to impart what she knew to others, she started to read up more, and eventually created her own curriculum.

"I read a lot of books, I wrote a lot, and then I taught. I started to see some level of success, but half the time, I didn't really know what I was talking about so I felt like a fraud, an imposter. That was when I was, like, There's more to this."

The turning point came while Petrina was in LA as a working wife and mother. One day, she decided to google "Voice Coach LA" and stumbled upon an actual website, "voicecoachla.com". She signed up for a private coaching session, and the next thing she knew, she found herself lying in a studio on a mat breathing deeply—and crying. The session tapped into something more profound; it allowed Petrina to connect with her body in a way she hadn't before. The experience took her by surprise, and in that moment, she learnt that the voice wasn't just a technique—it lived in the body, intricately connected with our emotions and identity.

"There is obviously a lot more to the voice that I didn't know. And that's what led me down the path of learning about the voice and how it is inhabited in the body and why it's so important to all of us."

### OVERLOOKING OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH OUR VOICE

This newfound realisation reframed how she approached the voice—as a relationship to have with oneself, and an amplifier of one's innermost thoughts, feelings, and desires. She grounds this philosophy in a simple truth about the universal gift we so often take for granted.

"So long as you possess a voice, you have the power to speak your thoughts, tell people how you feel, observe, sing and even just joyfully make sounds. Nobody taught us. But the very first thing we did when we entered this world was to make a sound. We made a huge cry. It's primal. We all know how to do this well, but over time, we lose that connection with what it means to have a voice and how to use it. And I think that's what holds us back."

Indeed, most of us have been conditioned from young age to limit the use of our voices—to hold back and to hide it. And over time, it stifles our ability to speak up and speak out. Ultimately, this is what Petrina hopes to help people with.



TOP: Actors from Young & Wild, a year-long acting programme by WILD RICE Singapore, learning the 'tongue dance' during their voice training in February 2025.

BOTTOM: Co-teaching American and British accents through the introduction of the Consonant Chart from the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), alongside Linda Gidley at The Theatre Practice, as part of the 'Mastering Voice and Speech' programme.



Petrina is teaching the concept of phonemes to a group of graduate acting students at the University of California, Irvine, as part of her Knight Thompson Speechwork® certification—a method for teaching accents and speech.



Petrina at Theatre Delicatessen in London, where she presented *Walking in Beauty*—a production she directed that first premiered at the M1 Fringe Festival in Singapore in January 2018, before touring to London in July 2018. Featuring real stories from women in both Singapore and London, the work explores the evolving concept of beauty.

"From the moment we step into the home, we have rules. Mummy's telling us to shush and we shouldn't scream at our brothers and sisters. In school, we should all sit down and shut up and there's a time to speak. And so, we start to learn all these rules. And then we think, 'I shouldn't be saying this. So I guess I won't then.' Then you start to create these artificial boundaries for yourself and that's what holds us back. So I want to help people identify what matters to them and engage in the practice of using their voices more."

#### NO SUCH THING AS A GOOD OR BAD VOICE

When it comes to being a master at oral communication, Petrina cites the late Mr Lee Kuan Yew as a prime example—a leader whose words left no room for ambiguity. Once, while coaching actors to embody the late statesman, she observes the stark contrast between his unwavering clarity and the often hesitant, self-censored speech of today.

"If there was one thing I learnt from Lee Kuan Yew, it's that you're never unsure of what he meant and how he felt about anything. Everything he said was clear as a bell. Today, I feel that most of us have engineered all of that out of our voice, because we're afraid to tell people how we feel and how we think. Because it feels dangerous now." The fear of misspeaking, she observes, has paralysed expression.

"It feels like every time I turn around and say something, I will *kena* cancelled. I'm going to say something wrong. It feels scary these days. My students will be like, '*Cher* (teacher), you cannot say that,' and I'm like, 'Wah, what did I say?'" For younger generations, the stakes feel higher. Petrina observes that many lack the lived experience of unfiltered, face-to-face dialogue as their voices are increasingly shaped by the anonymity of screens. In addition, she says that many people do not think about their voices as something they have a relationship with, or something they would say they love, because it sounds silly. In response, she would pose these questions to them: Why don't you love your voice? What challenges do you face with it?

On this note, she recalls a Chinese term her husband once taught her: 背多分, which loosely translates to "beautiful from behind", and draws the analogy to how the voice can be like that—a dissonance between expectation and reality.

"背多分. Not Beethoven the composer, but when you see someone from behind and think, wah, very sexy, then they turn around and—oh dear. We read someone's writing, hear their title, and then they speak—and suddenly, the image shifts."

Yet Petrina insists that perfection isn't the goal. And that admitting when we don't know, and what we don't know is all part of being human.

"I feel like we need to find the right words. And when we don't know, it's totally okay. It's more important to be human first—to acknowledge our gaps, and to admit mistakes. A lot of times it's hard because it feels like we're admitting to some wrongdoing and that we are weak and that we will get sued."

When it comes to what makes a voice "good", Petrina says that it is deeply subjective, often arbitrary, and too frequently shaped by unconscious bias.

"What we like is very personal. Some people say, 'Oh, this is a great voice—I love this kind of voice,' and then we feature a lot of it. What is a 'good' authoritative voice? What is 'executive presence'? Must it sound this way? I'm here to upend that a little. Does it have to be like that? Or is it just preference? And has that preference become bias—and eventually prejudice?"



“PERFECTION  
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**BEING HUMAN.”**

The consequences, she notes, are tangible. Many of her female clients—accomplished leaders—still feel their voices don't fit in boardrooms.

"Who says that? Do we impose it on ourselves, or is it because the existing examples are all male? We lack diverse models of what authority sounds like. It's partly self-doubt, but also systemic. If we talk about diversity and inclusion, it's about surfacing more voices—not prescribing how they should sound."

Even the Singaporean accent, often dismissed locally, holds unexpected value abroad.

"I've been asked to teach the Singapore accent to Australians and ang mohs. We think, 'Why would anyone want that?' But it is an accent—and everyone has one."

For actors, mastering accents is a technical skill, "like learning kung fu for a role." For the rest of us, she argues, the goal isn't mimicry but returning to the fundamentals and offers some tips on how we can improve in this area.

"Most of us were never taught how to speak—we just picked it up through school oral exams. No one explained the physicality: the muscles, the breath. When I learnt that, I realised speech is just mechanics. We don't have to feel like our pitch is 'wrong' or our pace 'too fast'. So if there is one takeaway I have, it's this: don't shit on yourself—we're very good at that. Instead, ask: How can I get more curious about how I'm speaking? Is it effective? Record yourself. Literally, read something, record it, and ask, 'Hey, did I understand myself?'"

Through her years of experience and training, Petrina concludes that the narratives about "good" and "bad" voices we have are not real, and offers this simple piece of advice: Don't care what people say. Just be you.

#### **HONING THE VOICE THROUGH QUALITY CONVERSATION**

In our everyday lives, Petrina shares that one simple way to practise using our voice is through having quality conversations. We may overlook the importance of this ordinary day-to-day talk, but it can be an inroad into deeper dialogue and connection. The secret? Ask open-ended questions that invite elaboration.

"What I learnt from hosting *The Living Room* is that it's about building a rapport with the person and trying to find out about who they are by asking the right questions. For example, don't ask close-ended questions such as 'Did you like your holiday?'"

This simple guideline is also particularly useful when it comes to talking to children, and Petrina shares how she learnt so much more about her kids and their lives in school with this tip.

"If you went home and asked your kids, 'Tell me three horrible things that happened to you at school today, or one really exciting thing that made your heart jump', then they'd be like, 'Oh, that's very specific', and they'll tell you something potentially surprising or interesting. Because of this, I actually learnt a lot of things that happened in my kids' schools when they were going to school."

With her students, she also makes it a point to forbid the use of certain words that do not express much.

"So for my students, no 'nice', no 'good', no 'not bad'. All these are banned. Use other words. So must try lah. Sometimes we respond too immediately. But we need to cultivate that culture of elaboration. So instead of asking, how was the movie? You could ask, maybe, did it make

you feel like this was propaganda for the American press? Or was he what you expected him to be in this film? Oh, then it might trigger a line of response that you may not have thought about.”

**“BAD PRESENTATIONS ARE AN EPIDEMIC”**

Having endured one too many monotonous corporate presentations, Petrina shares three tips on how to prepare for a good presentation.

“I always ask people to think about these three things when we prepare what to say: How do I want my audience to think? How do I want them to feel? And what do I want them to do?”

These questions, she insists, cut through the noise. Too often, presenters fixate on slides—“pretty pictures and words”—then proceed to “read them out badly”.

What helps, she says, is embodying this mindset: “My voice matters. My expertise matters. That’s why I’m here.” The moment a presenter believes their content is vital, other people will sit up to listen. Nerves, she concedes, are inevitable, but having the right frame of mind is most important.

“If you think you’re boring, there’s no hope. If you think, they need this, suddenly, it’s compelling.”

**THE POWER OF VULNERABILITY**

Even after decades of voice work, Petrina admits that it’s never easy. She still feels it—the quickened pulse, the heat of nerves. And after battling cancer three years ago, radiation also left her salivary glands weakened.

“I look like I’ve got it all under wraps, but my nervous system is having a moment. Because this is a confronting act. So no matter how many times I’ve done this, I will still feel it. I will still feel the heat, the sweat. My mouth will become very dry. I’m upfront about it because I want people to know—this isn’t easy.”

She adds that anyone who says it’s easy is lying. Or perhaps they may not consciously be aware that something is going on in their body. Because for Petrina—discomfort is data. By noticing and naming what she experiences in her body, it helps to manage her nerves.



Petrina at a Fitzmaurice Voicework® workshop in Shanghai, teaching ‘De-structuring’—a technique that releases physical tension by inducing gentle tremors, helping to unlock a vibrant and embodied voice.

**LEFT**  
Petrina (in red kimono) and the crew of *Four Horse Road*, a promenade theatre performance written by Jonathan Lim and directed by Kuo Jian Hong. She acted in multiple roles and was the accent coach for subsequent re-stagings in 2020 and 2023.





#### TOP AND RIGHT

Petrina with speakers Rosemarie Somaiah, Amanda Chong, Dana Lam, Arianna Pozzuoli, Stéphanie Dogfoot, Oniatia Effendi and Ovidia Yu at the Singapore Writers Festival 2019 Festival Debate, which tackled issues such as privilege, sexism, and the progress of feminism.



"They may not register that it's happening to them, but it's happening to them. They may have found ways to pretend it's not happening, but I work in this space, so I know it's happening to me. I'm aware of it. I'm working with it. I'm breathing and I'm managing myself through it."

She recalls a powerful example: A white woman was hosting a conference during the 'Black Lives Matter' movement, and someone shouted, "Black Lives Matter!" from the audience. She looked at the stage and she realised how under-represented it was. "Most would freeze in shame," Petrina says. But the speaker did something radical—she named her discomfort aloud.

"She took a breath, and then she took a moment to just describe what was happening to her and said, 'I'm feeling incredibly nervous, and my heart is beating, and I am looking in the room, and I'm filled with shame about how this could have happened.' She acknowledged the space, and then she very quickly talked about it in the most authentically raw sort of way."

So instead of avoiding the elephant in the room with an awkward comment or closing statement, which most may have done, Petrina says that the host leaned into the discomfort and was vulnerable and honest with what she felt in the moment—which is a sign of strength, not weakness—something she says more leaders can also practise.

**"Sometimes we practise to be distant because that is the safer way—to not acknowledge the pain and to just have a wall. It is not that it's bad, but it was created to protect you. Sometimes when we inhabit leadership positions, some of the work is actually to strip away. It does make it harder to be a leader because you're a lot more vulnerable."**

Finally, she matter-of-factly points out how we step out without a script every day—"No one hands us talking points." But if we can practise staying present—with our bodies, our fears, and our humanity—we learn to weather the unexpected.

For Petrina, the voice isn't just sound but something to be liberated, freed, and reclaimed. It's the courage to be heard—exactly as you are.

"I think the reality of our limited land doesn't have to mean a lack of resources or ideas. My wish for Singapore and SLA is that we will allow artists to envision these spaces as homes for our artistic communities, to grow their creative practices, deepen their curiosities, make learning pleasurable and be a creative HOME for ALL."

**When I think unlimited,**  
I think of...  
abundance.

**I am unlimited when...**  
I feel gratitude in  
multitudes.







Joseph stands against a mural at **3C Japan Kleder**, created by local graffiti artist Ceno2 to honour five Team Singapore athletes who represented the nation at Paris 2024—para-swimmer Yip Pin Xiu, badminton star Loh Kean Yew, kitefoiler Maximilian Maeder, sprint queen Shanti Pereira, and para-archer Nur Syahidah Alim.



# The Singaporean Who Beat Michael Phelps:

## Joseph Schooling on his journey to winning Singapore's first Olympic Gold, an ecosystem of support, and his new chapter ahead

Like Muhammad Ali, known as the greatest heavyweight boxer of all time, who declared, "impossible is nothing", Singapore's very own Joseph Schooling now stands among the pantheon of athletes who have defied their limits.

At just 21 during the 2016 Summer Rio Olympics, he shattered an Olympic record by outpacing his childhood idol, Michael Phelps, in the 100m butterfly. Overnight, his name was etched into history as Singapore's first Olympic champion. Dubbed the "greatest moment in Singapore sport" and the "Olympic Golden Boy", Schooling proved, with a mix of discipline, humility, and fierce ambition, that 'impossible' is simply a word waiting to be rewritten.

### EARLY LOVE AFFAIR WITH WATER

Joseph's destiny with water began when he was just 10 months old, when he dashed toward a pool, sending his parents into a panic as they chased after him.

"That was the shock of their lives. They thought, 'If we're not here one day, what happens?'"

From that point on, water safety became non-negotiable. His father, who nearly drowned twice as a child—rescued only by his own father—was determined to spare his son the same peril. At four years old, what began as survival skills revealed something more: the first glimpses of a future champion.

Since then, his life was dedicated to swimming. After watching Michael Phelps win six gold medals at the 2004 Olympic Games in Athens, Joseph decided he wanted to become an elite swimmer.



Young Joseph with his father, Colin Schooling, who supported and believed in his son's sporting ambitions from day one.



Training sessions in Austin, Texas, where Joseph pitted himself against the best.



Joseph with his mum, dad, and coach, Sergio Lopez, at the SEA Games 2013.

## MAKINGS OF A CHAMPION

At just 14, he made the decision to leave Singapore for the United States, trading family and familiarity for the chance to train at the highest level. He attended the Bolles School, a preparatory and boarding school that has a renowned swimming programme. And his parents bought a house nearby to live close to their only child.

"They would take turns going back and forth between Jacksonville and Singapore every few months, while also running a business. They were on the same continent for three days out of three months."

Joseph's regimen became the stuff of legends: 10 pool sessions weekly, supplemented by two dry-land workouts and three weightlifting sessions, totalling 25 hours of training with only Thanksgiving and New Year's as respite. Even Sunday, which is considered an "off day", would be spent doing skillwork.

This punishing schedule reflected the philosophy he inherited from his coach, something he admits may not seem the most exciting for young and budding athletes, but is, unfortunately, the reality of things.

"My coach in university always said, there are three things in life: You've got the school aspect, the sports aspect, and the social aspect. And you can only pick two out of the three if you want to do this at a high level."

At the University of Texas where he trained, the pool was a gladiator's arena—if their swim team had been a country, they'd have placed third in the 2016 Olympic medal tally. But despite the competitiveness, Joseph maintains that what happens in the pool stays in the pool.

"If you want to be the best, you have to compete amongst the best day in and day out. You want to be great? You've got to be willing to go to places that scare you. You're training among 'monsters' every single day. And we go at each other. The things we'd say to each other, the mindset we had to adopt... other people would think we're crazy. But at the end of the day, I could grab a beer with them after. We chill. We leave that all behind in the pool. That's a sense of maturity."

Like any champion, Joseph's journey was not without its hiccups, as he recalls how it nearly ended before it really began.

"Up until I was 12, I was crushing everyone, breaking records. I was close to Michael Phelps' age group times. Then all my friends hit puberty and I didn't. I got left behind and it was demoralising. I wanted to quit."

Competing on the international stage also served as a reality check, as he became aware of the diverse competition—athletes from war-torn countries and impoverished backgrounds for whom swimming represented their only escape. This inspired him to train even harder.

"People see the gold medal. But they don't see the times you question yourself and everything. The times you're racing guys who grew up in war zones, who are swimming just to eat. So if they're training to survive, how can I possibly do less? If they're going to put in that amount of effort, I'm going to put in as much, or more."

And so he did. By the time he got to Rio, he had become a diligent student of the game.

"I knew every swimmer's tactics. So like Michael, he is almost always dead last at the first wall, but he comes back. He always pulls some sort of magic. So the preparation must be done before your race. And when I step up, I don't think about anything. I don't think about the guy in lane five, lane six, or whatever it is. I think about executing my race plan."

With the rigour, discipline, passion and pursuit of excellence inculcated in him in his early years, it is also no wonder Joseph displays a maturity far beyond his years. His perspective is of someone who has grown up not just in the pool, but in the quiet, contemplative moments between races.

"It's a full-time job. And I think it's more of a mental game. In the Olympic final or even the semifinals, top 16, everyone more or less has the same talent level. But it's also about who wakes up on the right side of the bed that day, who's ready to go, and who's having a good meet. There is a small element of luck."

#### REFLECTIONS ON HIS HISTORIC WIN

Joseph's win may have catapulted him to national and international stardom overnight. But his first response to his victory was surprisingly mellow. It was not indifference, but the understanding of exactly what it cost to get there.

"I didn't feel as ecstatic or as happy as I thought I would. The first feeling was relief. It was a relief because there were a lot of sacrifices that were made. Mum and Dad had to mortgage the house. They had to take turns to look after me when I was in the US. They switched every three months. So there was a lot riding on the line. And in addition to that, I always had this thought: If I don't win or something goes wrong, then my career is over."

He didn't sleep that night. Instead, he found himself wandering the Olympic Village at dawn, headphones on. In those moments, a realisation struck him.

"My life will never be the same again. Standing on that podium... I didn't know what to think. No Singaporean had ever been there before. All I wanted was to find my parents and hug them. You know, you just go back to the basics."

And as far as Singaporeans watching and supporting the race were concerned, Joseph thought no one cared. The homecoming stunned him.

"Honestly, I thought no one in Singapore cared about swimming. Mediacorp wasn't even broadcasting my earlier heats. I was there because I wanted to win. So when I came back to this huge reception, it really hit home. It gave me a greater appreciation of all the sacrifices my family and I went through."

#### INGREDIENTS FOR SUCCESS

Joseph admits that sports aren't purely meritocratic—there are predisposed attributes that contribute to success. However, they are only one part of the equation. He says what matters, ultimately, is your mindset.

"If anyone can take anything from my career, it's that your height, your build—none of that really matters. It's all about a mindset. Of course, sports is an unfair world and part of it does come down to physique. Genetics give me certain advantages as a swimmer—but can I run? Absolutely not."

He believes everyone has a unique gift, and says he was lucky to have found that his was swimming early on. But talent aside, what counts in the long run, is the consistency and discipline.

"Everyone can have that spark, right? But if you don't have the



13-year-old Joseph with his childhood hero, Michael Phelps.



Colin Schooling hugging his son, Joseph, after he returned to Singapore with the nation's first Olympic gold medal on August 15, 2016.



Joseph with a plate of his favourite black chye tow kueh at the hawker centre at Blk 50A Marine Terrace.





The record-breaking moment at the 2016 Olympics when Joseph clinched Singapore's first-ever Olympic gold medal in the 100m butterfly, defeating his childhood hero, Michael Phelps.

discipline to finish, nothing will happen. I think the most important thing is that you give your 110% effort to everything. It's like New Year's resolutions; the gym parking lot is full on January 1st. Then you get to the end of February, it's like, 10% filled. If you want something bad enough, you're going to do everything it takes. It's all or nothing."

And for Joseph, his "why" was never just about shiny medals and winning, but about showing people how there are other pathways to success.

"Why abide by the traditional norms? Why follow the stereotypes of success? My version of success is going to be different from yours. So the definition of 'success' is up to the individual."

He also acknowledges that his success was only made possible by "an entire village", and that the support network and ecosystem have to be there.

"You only see one person standing on the podium. But in the background, you've got my nutritionist, my family, my psychologist, my coaches, doctors, you name it. We have about close to 17 or 18 people—all dedicated to helping athletes like me get to where I am today."

#### **MIND OVER MEDALS**

While physical gifts and relentless discipline formed the foundation of Joseph's success, he discovered an equally critical component: mental resilience. The same mindset that propelled him to Olympic gold—the "all or nothing" focus—demanded careful balancing to avoid burnout. His anchor? Meditation—something he approached with scepticism initially.

"I used to think that it was a complete Hollywood thing, you know, nothing going through your mind, just pure air. I've come to realise that meditation is actually accepting how you feel and accepting the good and the negative. Whatever thoughts arise, be at peace and then move on. It was a process which really helped my swimming career. And I feel like right now I'm seeing the importance of it more and more."

He is also heartened by the recent shifts in mental health within the elite sports culture, and connects this with his own experiences in maintaining balance. Beyond meditation, he finds respite in activities like golf and mahjong.

"What's been particularly encouraging is the growing emphasis on mental health in sports. We're now seeing elite athletes—even world champions—making the conscious choice to prioritise their psychological well-being over major competitions when needed. This shift in mindset marks an important evolution in how we approach peak performance."

#### **BUILDING A WINNING ECOSYSTEM**

Just as meditation helped him sustain peak performance, Joseph believes systemic support is crucial to helping athletes thrive long-term. The valuable insights gleaned from his own Olympic journey now inform his broader vision for Singapore's sports culture.

The first step, he believes, is to build a culture that celebrates and reveres sports—one that goes beyond DSA (Direct School Admission) and does not shy away from fandom. He illustrates this with passion when talking about the Chelsea Football Club tattoo on his forearm.

"Whenever I see Chelsea lose, that really kills me. I'd be furious for days. That's the magic—something intangible that unites us, gives us a shared purpose. So how can we draw that kind of affiliation in Singapore? DSA is important to a certain extent, but what is after that?"



Joseph packing for the 2014 Asian Games.

“YOU WANT TO  
BE **GREAT**?

YOU’VE GOT  
TO BE WILLING  
TO GO TO  
PLACES THAT  
*SCARE* YOU.”



He acknowledges the progress Singapore has made, but stresses the long road ahead.

"I think it's a step-by-step process. Because the truth of the matter is, mindset shifts are generational. We first need to see sports as a viable career path and actually value it. Athletes can make a living. And then we can start talking about winning more medals."

Joseph points to existing frameworks like the spexEducation Undergraduate Scholarship and Singapore Sports School and reflects on how far support systems have come since his early days. But he emphasises the need for broader buy-in.

"The support from the government has gotten better since I first started. But in order for change to happen, you have to have all the stakeholders buy into it, and preferably at the same time."

And while he acknowledges Singapore's constraints and the size of our population, he points to models like New Zealand's that have achieved sporting success despite similar limitations. His vision is clear: a Singapore where sports is valued not just for medals, but for its power to inspire and unite the nation.

Lastly, he highlights the challenges of modern lifestyles, sharing a story from his mother's childhood as a contrast to today's reality.

"So my mum was sharing how she used to climb trees in her childhood. They used to get chased by wild boars so tree-climbing was a skill borne out of survival! The lifestyle back then was completely different. You didn't have phones to play with, no iPads nor Brawl Stars. With so many distractions now, being active is more important than it ever has been. It's a balancing act."

#### LESSONS LEARNT

As Joseph reflects on his journey, he recognises that profound lessons often come wrapped in simple phrases. The man who mortgaged their home for an Olympic dream didn't just create a swimmer—he imparted precious wisdom.

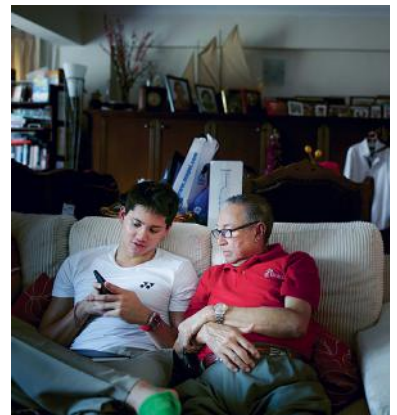
"My dad taught me about life through sayings. And a lot of them were like these corny sayings. He would say, 'You can't soar like an eagle if you're surrounded by turkeys.' That is a very harsh, but true saying. Coming back to competition and sports. You want to be the best in the world? Then you've got to race amongst the best in the world."

From navigating the challenges in the pool to understanding the dynamics of human interactions, Joseph has gleaned insights that extend far beyond sport. He learnt that the relentless mindset needed in the pool doesn't always translate to everyday life.

"It's important to note the difference between how you think in the pool and how you think in your everyday life. It doesn't mean that the beast during competition isn't inside of you, but it's important to treat people with kindness and respect."

He also shares his observation on human interactions and breaks down the approach with the insights he has gleaned over the years, applying his experience in the competitive swimming arena to the area of business.

"There are two types of people in practice, or maybe even in the business world. You've got one type where they appreciate a softer approach. You find out what makes them tick, give them that helping hand, and shoulder to cry on sometimes. Then there's another type of person, who responds well when you challenge them and they rise to the occasion. You've got to read the audience."



Joseph and his father in a private moment at home. These photos were taken by photographer Alvin Toh, who documented the swimmer's training sessions in Austin, Texas, as well as his Olympic homecoming.



Joseph visits his alma mater, Anglo-Chinese School (Junior) with his mum.



Joseph conducting a swim clinic for kids. "It is natural to assume that our sole goal at Swim Schooling is on competitive swimming. However, with Singapore being an island state, learning to swim is an essential and empowering life skill."

Beyond sports, Joseph emphasises the importance of finding purpose and fulfilment, while acknowledging life's practical realities.

"I think sports are important. It's important to be active, but it doesn't just have to be sports. If you wanna go for art class or any other CCA (Co-Curricular Activities) outside to keep yourself engaged, something that gives you purpose, go for it."

His time in National Service taught him adaptability.

"Play the hand you're dealt, accept it, don't fight it, and make the most out of it. This was actually something I learnt a lot in NS as well. My schedule and a lot of the processes weren't up to me to dictate. But I've learnt there's no perfect scenario. You just have to make the most out of the situation."

#### ADJUSTING TO A NEW NORMAL

In April 2024, when he was 28 years old, he announced his retirement from competitive swimming, expressing how he is filled with gratitude for every experience that swimming has brought into his life. Now, his days have settled into a rhythm that balances the familiar with the uncharted. Despite the new and uncertain path ahead, he is not looking back.

"It's a return to normalcy, I suppose. Meetings every day, going out, hanging out with friends. You do get the occasional comment of, 'Why don't you come back and swim?' One more, one more of this, one more of that. But no, I'm ready to retire."

In his new chapter, Joseph is channelling his energy into two passions: finance and nurturing the next generation.

"Finance, I'm in the VC space. Sports, we have a swim school."

His venture, Swim Schooling, reflects his desire to give back to the sport that defined him, helping the Singapore ecosystem and the sports ecosystem on a national level, and training future champions like himself.

As for the gold medal that capped his swimming career?

"It's in a safe somewhere. I don't know. Mum's office, maybe? I gave it to my parents straight away. I don't see any value in holding on to past glory. We need to look forward to the next one. And I hope that one day, sooner rather than later, someone will be able to feel the same sense of joy and pride that I did."

In this new chapter, Joseph is still racing—just toward a different touchpad. And if his track record is any proof, he'll reach them with the same resolve that made history in Rio. The pool may be behind him, but his champion's mindset endures.

When I think unlimited, I think of...  
domination.

I am unlimited when...  
at peace.







Arguably the most beautiful McDonald's outlet in Singapore, McDonald's Queensway is located within Singapore's first Japanese-themed community garden, the **Ridout Tea Garden**. Coming here for breakfast is a weekly affair for Benjamin and his family.

# Happiness, with a Side of Spice:

## Benjamin Boh

### on putting people and operations at the heart of a legacy fast-food brand

If there is one institution that occupies a special place in the hearts (and stomachs) of Singaporeans, it would have to be McDonald's. Whether it's a cherished childhood memory, that familiar taste of comfort, or the collective frenzy over a new launch, this ubiquitous fast-food chain has had an undeniable hold on us, right from the beginning.

The McDonald's franchise was brought into Singapore by Robert Kwan, who first encountered and fell in love with the burgers at an outlet in Las Vegas in 1975. He managed to ink an agreement with the Chicago-based corporation and opened the first restaurant here at Liat Towers in 1979. On its opening day, the outlet set the Guinness World Record for the most number of burgers sold in a single day. Who would have thought Singaporeans would clamour for burgers in 1979? This achievement put McDonald's Singapore on the global stage, and set the precedent for things to come. Today, the brand operates 150 outlets islandwide, serving millions of customers monthly.

#### IT STARTED WITH A HAPPY MEAL

And the person at the helm of driving the brand in Singapore today is Managing Director Benjamin Boh, who has been with the organisation since 2013. Business aside, he proclaims he is, foremost, an ardent McDonald's fan.

"This brand means a lot to me. I'm an employee at McDonald's, but I'm also a big customer of McDonald's. Even before I joined, if I talk about my memories at McDonald's, I can really remember everything from the first Happy Meal to the many, many Filet-O-Fish burgers I had at the Science Centre."



The exterior of McDonald's at Liat Towers on Orchard Road—Singapore's first McDonald's, which opened on October 20, 1979. Note the use of "hamburger restaurant" on the sign, as many Singaporeans were unfamiliar with the McDonald's brand at the time.



The play area at the McDonald's outlet at Redhill.





A McDonald's Guest Experience Leader guiding customers on how to use the self-ordering kiosk when it was first introduced as part of the brand's digitalisation efforts.

Apart from this sentimental attachment, his love for the brand extends to the nature of the business. His leadership philosophy, commitment to operational excellence, and deep understanding of local culture have kept the brand top-of-mind and relevant for Singaporeans over the years. With a background in marketing and IT, Benjamin landed his first job at Procter & Gamble to work in consumer insights and strategy, before joining New York-based consulting firm Analytic Partners. In 2013, he jumped on the opportunity to join McDonald's as Regional Director of Strategy and Insights. Five years into the job, he decided to move into operations as he became more interested in the nuts and bolts of the business.

"It is vital to know who you stand for, what you stand for, and what you really are as a company. The number one thing we stand for as a McDonald's company is operations. We are an operations-led company."

#### **MORE THAN FLIPPING BURGERS**

No operation can run without its people. With over 10,000 employees, Benjamin says it is the 99% working on the ground who run the ship. Not only do they manage the supply chain, hiring practices, and development training, they are also encouraged to come up with their own store's marketing. This means working directly with landlords to negotiate the programmes they wish to roll out.

**"The people on the ground are really the ones who help us run the ship well. Like our restaurant managers, there are about 151 of them—and below them, five to six managers in the management team. Essentially, they are running multi-million-dollar businesses every year. It's crazy; what they do is not just flip burgers."**

To sustain this culture of empowerment and accountability, the organisation also introduced a monthly hospitality newsletter that's sent to the entire company. In it, staff who have received compliments from customers are recognised and featured.

As McDonald's evolves to become more than just a fast-food chain, the biggest change, undoubtedly, has been the digitisation of its many touch points. The biggest challenge, however, is getting its people on board.

"We managed to change the hardware—digital menu boards, better layout and furnishing. But what was the hardest, and therefore what we focused the most on, is the heartware. Because to shift from that to this, you need to first convince the person, the employee."

That's why customer service and hospitality became a key area of transformation for the brand. Table service, once considered an unusual move for a fast-food restaurant, has become a standard. However, change is never easy. Staff had to be trained as guest experience leaders—making customers feel welcome, serving food, and teaching them how to use the digital kiosks.

"Typically, you order through a point of sale, you step aside, you get a tray, you sit down; that's it. No more human interaction. We have changed that completely by focusing on hospitality. But this whole thing about hospitality is very new to McDonald's."

To tackle this, Benjamin recounts how, instead of training the younger employees, they started with the senior employees, inviting them to be the champions of change. This strategic and powerful move worked. Not only did these older employees feel empowered, but it



also demonstrated to everyone else, especially the younger ones, that adapting to a new way of doing things is always possible.

"There was a kid who looked about 14. He refused to order from the kiosk. You would have thought 14-year-olds are very savvy. But no, he refused because they're used to the ordering from the point of sale. So our auntie said, 'Boy, try la.' And the boy said, 'Auntie, don't want la.' Then the auntie said, 'Hey boy, I can do, you cannot, uh?' Immediately, the boy had no choice."

#### **ALL ABOUT THE IMPACT**

Beyond empowering employees and elevating the dining experience for customers, the organisation is also committed to uplifting families and communities. In fact, Benjamin shares that a big part of what he loves about working at McDonald's is the impact it can make on people.

"I love McDonald's not because I love the food only, or because it's a big F&B brand. It's because we work with so many people—10,000 people at any point of time—and this means we are able to impact so many employees and through them, impact customers and communities."

For instance, the staff working in the restaurants go out into the heartlands to do community work, and some welfare organisations they work with include Lion Befrienders, Sinda and Muhammadiyah Welfare Home. These employees, he shares, are not necessarily the managers or higher earners, but those who may be living in rental or one-room flats. But because they see themselves as someone who at least has a job and can do their part to help people, they will. That, Benjamin says, is what he finds is most meaningful.

Another initiative he found memorable was a campaign they created with the Ministry of Social & Family Development (MSF) and Families for Life (FFL) Council during the pandemic.

"At McDonald's, we stand for families; we care about families. Two years ago, we created this whole Family Mental Wellness Campaign because after COVID-19, many children were feeling stressed. Parents also didn't know how to talk to their children. As a happy place, we asked ourselves, what can we do about it? We worked with MSF, FFL Council, to create a whole campaign to help parents and kids talk about their issues more openly, in a less intimidating setting."

#### **FIERCELY LOCAL, GLOBALLY KNOWN**

By leveraging their assets and reach, the brand is able to tackle serious issues, in fun and unserious ways. This is something Benjamin says they will continue doing, and do a lot more of.

As a young boy, Benjamin's fondest recollection of McDonald's, apart from the food, was that feeling of familiarity and belonging whenever he visited a restaurant. Till today, he says that it's hard to experience that sense of local hospitality in other outlets around the world.

"I loved McDonald's growing up because McDonald's felt very local to me. When I go to the restaurant, the auntie calls me Ah Boy—that kind of feeling is just something you can't get in many other places. It feels very local, yet very professional. I think that in-between is the perfect mix for me, at least as a consumer. I feel here, we have found a way to intertwine with the local society. That, to me, is the magic."

Indeed, it is this "perfect mix" of global acclaim and credibility, coupled with a fiercely local sensibility that's perhaps the winning recipe for McDonald's success here. The commitment to continually innovating its offerings and heavy emphasis on marketing has resulted in some of the most iconic and memorable products and campaigns, some going on to gain global recognition.



Proudly made in Singapore: the McSpicy, Curry Sauce, and Teh C Frappe.

Launched in 1999, the McSpicy quickly gained popularity in the early 2000s. This spicy chicken burger features a crispy leg meat patty, paired with lettuce and mayonnaise. Over time, it has become a staple on the menu.



McDonald's popular Nasi Lemak Burger, first launched in 2017. Inspired by the Malay dish of coconut rice, the semolina-bun burger consists of a cornflakes-coated fried chicken thigh patty infused with a spiced coconut marinade, fried egg, caramelised onions, cucumber slices and sweet and spicy sambal sauce. Three other Singapore-themed items also on the menu: the Bandung McFizz, coconut pie and Chendol McFlurry.



In celebration of National Day 2024, McDonald's launched the Satay Burger, featuring a beef or chicken patty, onions, cucumber slices, and a rich roasted satay sauce, all encased in sesame buns.



In 2000, McDonald's launched the Hello Kitty Wedding Series, sparking a nationwide craze and paving the way for future Hello Kitty x McDonald's collaborations—like the 50th Anniversary Exclusive Plush Collection (TOP).

The McSpicy, for example, originated in Singapore in 1999 and remains the spiciest McSpicy variant in the world. Singapore also pioneered the curry sauce, Buttermilk Chicken Burger, and Spicy Chicken McNuggets, which have since been adopted by other markets. The seasonal items, like the Nasi Lemak Burger, Ha Cheong Gai Chicken Drumlets, Pandan Soft Serve, and the Satay Burger, launched in 2014 and subsequently reintroduced in 2024 in celebration of National Day, are a few examples of how the brand has always innovated to cater to local tastes and preferences.

"The pride factor is that Singapore gets brought up in a lot of global meetings – 'Wow, these are the guys who did the spiciest one... and they did it right.' We are always trying to see how Singapore can fly the flag very well, even in a corporate world. So yeah, you must have locally known products with globally known products."

But behind the buzz and fanfare, the making of these products is a labourious journey and Benjamin credits a large part of the success to the suppliers they work with.



"I'll give you the Nasi Lemak Burger example. It takes about a year plus to formalise, which is crazy. But one thing we learnt is when we create food products, we try to create products that are more long-lasting, and not to hook onto fads because fads come and go very quickly. So, the real magicians in all this are the food suppliers. That's why we have very healthy relationships with our suppliers. We told our suppliers to do our sauces, for a local food menu for National Day. We talked to them in 2021 and did it in 2023."

Innovative, locally relevant food offerings aside, McDonald's is also no stranger to leveraging popular culture and trends. For every Singaporean who has lived through the year 2000, they would recall the nationwide frenzy and mass hysteria ignited by two kitten plushies. Hello Kitty and Dear Daniel sets were launched in different wedding costumes and sold as part of a value meal, and over six weeks, what ensued was chaos—overnight queues, unruly spats, and even smashed glass that sent a few to the hospital.

"They smashed the glass, and the Police Commissioner called us up. Jeffrey, then Senior Director of Operations at McDonald's, had to go meet the Police Commissioner. And he just said, sorry, sorry, sorry. It's interesting because at that time when we did it, we just didn't know it would be so crazy." But it is also through these unprecedented times

“KNOW WHEN  
TO MOVE ON.  
**RAISE**  
**Y O U R**  
**H A N D**  
**UP.** HAVE  
A SUPPORT  
SYSTEM.”



**RIGHT**  
Benjamin with the team at  
McDonald's Japan.

that the most valuable lessons are learnt. "24 years have passed. But what we learnt is if you want to do this kind of thing, please call the police first. Let them know. We also started learning that when we start doing these things, customers wait for a long time. So, this is where hospitality comes in; we started giving them water. We also gave them queue numbers to put a cap on the number of people in line. But we learnt all this the hard way. And sometimes you have no choice but to learn the hard way. Because unless you do it the first time, you just never know."



#### **TOUGHEST MOMENTS**

For Benjamin, one of the most challenging times in his career came in 2017 when he moved to Japan to serve as Director of Strategy and Insights. His role involved developing new business channels and enhancing the restaurant experience. However, as a foreigner, he faced significant hurdles. Not only did he have to adjust to a different culture and operational style, he also had to collaborate with local teams to implement systemic changes. This was met with resistance as they questioned his understanding of the market and consumer behaviour, making them hesitant to embrace new initiatives.

"The local teams were not keen to change. But the company's mandate was to change. So, I was basically the patty sandwiched between two buns. But as I learnt the culture and worked with the local teams, I was able to influence them to gradually make changes. Once there were proven results, we could implement the changes rapidly across Japan with great outcomes. From this experience, I learnt the traits to help me become a better leader—patience, influence, humility, communication, and the ability to read the room. These are not only important for the Japanese community, but for any leadership position in any country."

Fast forward to 2020, amid the upheaval caused by the pandemic, organisations faced unprecedented challenges. At McDonald's, a task force was established to implement new measures and ensure business continuity. Benjamin, however, emphasises that the paramount focus was on prioritising the well-being of both employees and customers, ensuring their safety above all else.

"We are a people company, and we can never forget it. Even in the darkest times of the pandemic, we committed to ensuring job security."

The company also had to act swiftly to ensure the wellbeing of its



**LEFT**  
**TOP:** The McDonald's team at Changi Airport Terminal 3 came together to prepare 2,000 BTS Meals—created in partnership with popular South Korean boy band BTS—for the frontline heroes working at the airport during the pandemic.

**BOTTOM:** The company handed out meals to migrant workers during the pandemic lockdown in Singapore.



Malaysian workers who were stuck in Singapore, and Benjamin says the trickiest thing was having to make a snap decision to house 700 of them when the lockdown happened. He recalls having to call up and book hotels that could accommodate all their employees, and what was estimated to be a three-month stay ended up becoming two and a half years.

“COVID-19 was very, very crazy for us. We employ about 1,500 Malaysian workers. And on 18th March 2020, the government said, ‘All right, we’re going to close. You have until 2359 to get into Singapore, or you don’t.’ 300 of them said, ‘I’ll stay at home because of my family’, while 1,200 wanted to stay in Singapore. But obviously, they didn’t have their ‘barang barang’, so they all went back. And only 700 managed to come back in because that’s how jammed the causeway was.”

In addition to prioritising employee well-being, it was crucial to maintain and strengthen relationships with suppliers during this time, as ensuring a stable supply chain was essential for McDonald’s



In February 2019, McDonald's released a limited-edition McGriddles hoodie.

In 2025, with the return of McGriddles on the menu, it collaborated with screen printing company, Konstrukt Laboratories, to offer customisable merchandise, from jackets and canvas shoes to jeans, T-shirts and tote bags.

continued operation.

"We worked very closely with key suppliers like global meat provider Tyson Foods and logistics firm Martin Brower to ensure supplies were not disrupted and to foster a mutual exchange of safety measures, which helped all parties stay protected."

#### THE QUESTION ON LOCATION

When it comes to deciding where to open an outlet, thorough analysis of multiple factors is needed. But ultimately, Benjamin says it boils down to these two factors.

"The key metrics are customer demand and rent. For customer demand, we look at population density, human flow, and types of populations—whether they're residential, corporate or transient. Then, it boils down to rent. Rent tells us whether it's financially viable to open a restaurant with the customer demand we can generate. We cannot afford to open a failed restaurant because then we'll be bleeding money all the time, which would mean a limit on the jobs we can create, and how much we can give to the community. So yeah, we have to be very careful."

In addition, he shares that substantial costs go into building and outfitting each restaurant.

"Our restaurants are costly to build. Apart from the fittings and all that, our equipment is very expensive. We call it 'Gold Standard' equipment, and rightly so because we want equipment that can operate well under our kind of volume."

#### PARTING WORDS

"You know in this game, you can go up, and you can also go all the way down. But sometimes you need to go all the way down to go somewhere else. Then maybe you can go up again. So this is my experience in 14 years, 15 years, and 16 years of working. Really, it's not been a smooth sailing ride. But every ride has lessons, and every ride has helped me learn better and become a better leader."

When asked about what keeps him awake right now, Benjamin says it's about how the business can stay competitive in the long run.

"I can't just think about whether we are going to hit the sales plan next month. I've got to think about the next five to ten years—about how the brand continues to be the leader. Because Singapore is getting so competitive, we can no longer just think, oh we are the big brand. We gotta think like a challenger brand."

Benjamin is clearly not resting on his laurels. Eleven years into the business, his passion for what he does still burns bright. His charisma, humility, and personable character, combined with his strategic vision, emphasis on operational discipline, and passion for people development, make him one of those rare leaders who feels as accessible as the well-loved brand is.

And, finally, his favourite item on the menu?

"McSpicy. In my opinion, it's the BEST spicy burger in the world!"





**When I think unlimited, I...**

envision the removal of boundaries. I envision myself feeling nervous at the beginning as not having boundaries can feel daunting. But this nervousness is replaced by a gush of excitement as I am no longer bound by my own limitations but can think beyond them.

**I am unlimited when...**

I break boundaries and step outside the mould—not seeing space as just land to be built upon for cookie-cutter experiences, but as a blank canvas full of possibility. I want to see us reimagine land in bold, innovative ways that bring communities together.



Vanessa stands before a vibrant mural by Mural Lingo at **The Foundry**—a social impact hub by The Majority Trust in partnership with the Singapore Government Partnerships Office, SLA and Tote Board. Housed in the former Elections Department building, the space brings together diverse groups to support various social causes such as vulnerable individuals and families, youth mental health, isolated seniors and beyond.



# Never Too Young to Build an Empire:

Vanessa Ho

on cutting her teeth in the media at 15, launching NUS Alumni Ventures as a student, and co-founding a venture capital firm by 21

For Vanessa Ho, years are no measure of experience. Her career began when she was just 16, when she competed in *The New Paper New Face*, a local modelling contest where she emerged the finalist. She then went on to win Face of Singapore in 2017. In 2019, at 19, she was talent scouted to join Mediacorp's Star Search, marking her foray into acting. She has since starred in over 20 commercials for the likes of Sony, Huawei, DBS Bank, and Pearlie White and is also a host, emcee, and music DJ for events.

But more than a pretty face, Vanessa, who is now 26, has managed to build up a diverse portfolio career that sits at the intersection of entertainment and media and startups and business. At a stage where most are still trying to figure out their unique strengths, Vanessa has long worked out her strategic formula, carving her own distinct path in life.

## FAILING EARLY

Vanessa's entrepreneurial drive was evident since her teens. Recalling the eight-month gap before university that Junior College (JC)

graduates will recognise, she dabbled in acting while co-founding a fashion subscription startup to provide clothes rental with her JC classmate. They secured inventory, and even attracted interest from two major investors.

"I was trying to solve my own problem. I was doing a bit of acting already under different agencies. And after that I started a fashion subscription company, which is why I joined this incubator programme called The Bridge Fashion Incubator by Singapore Fashion Council."



Vanessa was the 2017 winner of Face of Singapore, the Singapore edition of Face of Asia. Each year, the international finals are held in Seoul, South Korea.





Behind the scenes on a modelling job for UOB.



**TOP AND RIGHT**  
Vanessa and her dad at Mediacorp Star Search 2019. At just 20 and still a student, she dazzled with her charisma and versatility, earning the Samsung Galaxy Breakthrough Award and securing a spot among the 12 finalists.

However, COVID-19 hit, and the business did not take off. Instead of feeling defeated, Vanessa channelled this setback into learning as much as she could in corporate internships during university, treating them as another kind of incubator—one for resilience.

“Who’s going to rent clothes anymore? So we could do two things, right? We either pivot and do a retail model, which is very anti-sustainability and circular economy, and goes against the ethos of the company or just look for other corporate experiences. So I went on to do internships throughout my university stint. But yeah, my startup never really took off.”

What she terms an “early failure” was but a valuable lesson and early head start to her entrepreneurial journey.

#### FORAY INTO MEDIA AND ENTERTAINMENT

In 2019, not knowing what Star Search was, Vanessa was unexpectedly roped into joining the long-running Mandarin talent competition. What followed took her by surprise.

“My Mandarin was the worst—like a dry sponge. But I got the ‘Most Improved Artist’ award through sheer percentage growth—from like level one to six—while others progressed more modestly from six to ten. By the numbers, I improved the most. That’s how I won.”

After this exposure, Vanessa got her first acting break: she was cast in a role alongside Rui En and other artistes for a female bodyguard show. But just as momentum built, COVID-19 struck, and the Malaysia-bound shoots were scrapped during the circuit breaker. These two hurdles marked her uni days—with her startup collapsing and big break disappearing.

But all was not lost. Working alongside industry veterans like Huang Biren and Christopher Lee, Vanessa gained not just acting chops, but also the close proximity of the mentorship. In particular, it was the mentors’ warmth and consideration towards the young actors that touched her the most.

“They spent a lot of time with us. Witnessing their prowess up close, and having them train me was one of the most privileged experiences I have had. They didn’t just train us in acting; they got to know us as people as well. They knew how like sleep-deprived we were, how exhausting training was, so they were really there for us.”

Looking back, she said these experiences helped her reach new audiences on social media, particularly the older folks. She also notes how her late foray into traditional media was the opposite of the usual transition people make. She adds, matter-of-factly, that from a venture



capitalist (VC) investor perspective, it would not be wise to invest in a shrinking market size when it comes to her career trajectory, so she moved on from these early stints.

“I never thought that I would have a chance to do traditional media. Because most people start from traditional media, like TV and movies, then social. Mine was the reverse because, I mean, with Netflix, HBO, and Disney+, I think it’s just a shrinking market size—which goes back to my startup mindset, right?”

**STARTING THE FIRST ALUMNI ANGEL NETWORK AT NUS** While still a third-year student at the National University of Singapore (NUS), Vanessa took a proactive stance to build the first network of its kind in her school. Noticing that other universities like Stanford and Tsinghua had robust alumni angel networks, she identified the opportunity to do something of that equivalent for the students at NUS.

**“Why do we have to wait till we graduate to engage in the private sector investment? Why not do it now?”**

Teaming up with enterprising peers—founders of watch brands, gaming startups, and other ventures—she co-founded NUS Alumni Ventures, Singapore’s first student-led angel network. Their vision was a bold one: to operate not as a campus club, but as a professional investment body.

“We pushed the team to dream like an organisation run by alumni. I was in year three, but we had a team and a lot of advisors who were like C-suites at different companies, VC partners, etc. And we just showed humility and also the eagerness to learn and to contribute.”

Collaborations with corporates like Visa, Salesforce, and StorHub for joint demo days followed, while deals ranged from proptech (MetroResidences, tokenised real estate platform CitaDAO) to cross-border syndication. They even did a specific proptech demo day in 2023.

But Vanessa’s ambitions stretch beyond NUS. The network is also helping universities in Indonesia, Malaysia, and China replicate the model.

“The goal isn’t exclusivity. At this stage, we are thinking bigger. More networks mean more capital and deal flow for everyone.”

**CO-FOUNDING A VC IN HER EARLY 20s** This early experience of building NUS Alumni Ventures—where she rallied student investors—laid the groundwork for her next move. Partnering with Varun Mittal, a seasoned investor, she co-founded Fintech Nation, where she helped secure backing from a large institutional fund to launch their own \$10 million early-stage vehicle.

“We started by syndicating angel deals—getting 10 people to write \$10-20K cheques, pooling funds into a startup through a special purpose vehicle. We wrote cheques for very early-stage Southeast Asia startups.”

Fintech Nation’s strategy hinges on three uncompromising questions: whether the founders are truly the best people to solve the problem, whether the solution fits the market’s real needs, and most crucially, whether there’s exit potential.

“VCs only make money if the company sells or launches an IPO. In Southeast Asia’s markets, we’re usually looking at acquisition by



Vanessa co-founded NUS Alumni Ventures (NAV) in June 2020, alongside fellow alumni from the NUS Entrepreneurship Society. NAV is Southeast Asia’s first student-alumni-led angel investment network, designed to bridge the gap between aspiring entrepreneurs and experienced investors within NUS.

corporates or US players. No exit path? Your money's stuck forever. It's not very glamorous. And if there are returns at all, they usually take a decade."

But capital alone doesn't secure the best deals—Vanessa says that a lot of her time also goes into networking and building a personal brand.

"I organise monthly mixers at my home or a restaurant, creating spaces for what I call 'alpha information sharing'. Because in an industry where relationships dictate deal flow, this is vital. We're not Sequoia or Y Combinator. Without those personal connections, we don't get a seat at the table."

But staying ahead means more than schmoozing. It demands obsessive market awareness ("What's next after AI?") and founder-first support. Vanessa specialises in go-to-market strategy and social media acquisition, while Varun navigates regulatory landscapes with introductions to financial institutions. It also requires them to be clear about what value they can add to the startups.

"Top founders are oversubscribed. They choose whose money to take. Our value-add decides whether it's ours. So how do we support and contribute to founders so that they want our money? Take HeyMax—I invested because my social media expertise complements their mile-tracking platform. Founders should want more than cash; they should want your strategic value."

Beyond capital, the firm also serves as the ecosystem's backbone through partnerships with the Singapore Fintech Association, financial institutions and fintech companies.

#### **BRUTAL REALITIES OF THE SPACE AND LOOKING AT STARTUPS**

To the uninitiated, VC may appear to be little more than high-stakes gambling—a roll of the dice on unproven founders and uncertain markets. But Vanessa is quick to dispel this myth.

"What people might call 'gambling on the person' is often years of intuition at work. When you've been in this space for a decade or more, you develop a sense for founders—a gut feeling that tells you, 'This person is solid.' But that instinct isn't magic. It's honed through experience."

She adds that behind every decision lies rigorous analysis.

"We don't just throw money at ideas. We research, we consult our networks, and we scrutinise every assumption. Sometimes, we spend weeks on due diligence—only for the investment committee to reject the deal. That's not gambling, that's discipline. We answer to partners, to boards, and to funds with specific theses. Every dollar has to justify itself."

In addition, she highlights the brutal realities of the space and how it's far from glamorous.

"In the startup space, 90 to 95% of companies fail or barely scrape by. VC operates on the power law: you back 30, 40 startups knowing most will not make it. But you're betting on that one or two that will become a Grab or Gojek and salvage the entire portfolio."

#### **FINTech OPPORTUNITIES IN THE REGION**

While Singapore's fintech landscape matures, Vanessa has her sights set beyond our borders: on the sprawling, fragmented markets of Indonesia, Thailand, and Vietnam.

"Walk into any 7-Eleven here and you'll see QR codes, PayNow—it's seamless. But most Southeast Asian SMEs still operate in the analogue age. That's where the real transformation will happen."



Her conviction lies in SME-enablement fintech—digital payments as the gateway, followed by microfinance, supply chain solutions, and insurance for businesses traditionally excluded from formal systems.

“These mom-and-pop shops don’t just need transactions; they need capital, protection, and tools to grow. The potential is enormous.”

Yet the path is far from straightforward, as one requires more than just data to succeed. Barriers include regulatory frameworks, cultural friction, and ground truths.

“You can’t rely on spreadsheets here. That’s why I’m at conferences in Jakarta or Ho Chi Minh every other month—building networks so I can call a local friend and ask, ‘Will regulators actually allow this?’ What looks perfect on paper might be impossible in practice.”

For Vanessa, this is Fintech Nation’s next act: not just moving money, but moving the needle for millions of small businesses.

#### CONNECTING THE DOTS

How then does Vanessa’s early exposure to the media industry have to do with her startup ventures? Well, a lot, it seems. Not one to believe in binary career choices, she says professional success isn’t about rigid specialisation or aimless dabbling—it’s about intentional hybridity that comes from knowing yourself and your strengths.

“There are two paths to excellence. You can be in the top 1% in one skill—like a quant, a real estate savant. Or you can be in the top 25% in any interdisciplinary skill set. I am too restless to be the 1%. I am always itching to try new things—one day hosting, another day DJing, then investing. That’s why I mix my media expertise with startup investment. That’s how I book a lot of jobs for hosting or investments and the reason why startups want to work with me. So I think picking one side and knowing which one you are is very important.”

While batchmates at Mediacorp pursued traditional showbiz paths, Vanessa’s early embrace of social media gave her an unexpected edge. During COVID-19, when productions halted, her digital presence meant endorsements kept coming. She wasn’t reliant on any agency’s whims—she built her own platform instead.

The intentional hybridity, as she puts it, also shines through things like her entrepreneurship podcast with The Smart Local’s Bryan Choo and VC partner, Bennett Lee, and her side hustles like hosting and DJing.

“We merged startup insights with media savvy—that intersection is where magic happens. And I only take gigs in finance and tech. Every event is a chance to deepen relationships that might benefit Fintech Nation. When I LinkedIn-ed Indonesian bankers about ad packages, they responded because of my VC hat. That’s killing two birds with one stone.”

But as with wearing multiple hats, Vanessa recognises the difficulty of managing it all, so she recently systemised her approach, and got a former NUS hallmate to manage her social media, freeing her to focus on scaling.



“When I spin, I can play whatever I want. But if the crowd is inclined to a genre I don’t enjoy as much, I’ll still try my best to deliver. My strength is House and Top 40s commercial music. But at venues such as Avenue at Marina Bay Sands, when the crowd slows down, I’ll serve up a string of hip hop tracks or retro music, and if they dance harder or sing along, I’ll play more tracks from that genre. A big part of being a DJ is reading the room. The same can be said in business—give the market what it wants, not what you want.”



In 2024, Vanessa appeared as a guest venture capital investor on Channel NewsAsia's *The Big Spark*, a business reality show where aspiring entrepreneurs pitch their ideas to some of the region's most prominent venture capitalists for a shot at over S\$1 million in seed funding. In the top image, Vanessa is pictured with Mr Murli Ravi from Tin Men Capital, one of the other investors on the show.

"I realised I can't personally reply to every client and still evaluate startups properly. The next phase? Grooming other emcees so I'm not always the face."

#### EARLY SACRIFICES

With so much under her belt, Vanessa says what she has accomplished today came with certain trade-offs.

"I think there were two main sacrifices. While friends were binge-watching shows, I was in modelling competitions, *Star Search*, and other side hustles. I've watched almost zero TV series, just movies, because they're only two hours or so. Some call that 'no life'. I call it prioritisation. I still made time for friends, drinks, and connections. But yes, that part of childhood? Gone."

The second trade-off had bigger repercussions.

"I don't recommend this lifestyle unless you're wired for it. If you're not an extrovert, it'll break you. I also got sick often, especially during conference seasons. I got eczema, acne problems, and some female issues, all when I started working multiple jobs at the same time."

In hindsight, she says the important question to ask is—what you are building worth the cost?

#### OVERCOMING LIMITING BELIEFS

Beyond the polished CV and LinkedIn profile, Vanessa shares how her journey began on a rocky note, when she had to confront the limiting beliefs that held her back. This was during her early years in the media industry, at just 16 or 17, when credibility was hard-won. Over time, however, the support of early believers helped shift her mindset.

"The limiting beliefs came from myself and also some employees who didn't really believe in me and some clients who didn't think I could handle mature conversations with adults. I went to a lot of global fintech festivals and conferences overseas, and age becomes a very important thing—people kind of underestimate you. Thankfully, I built confidence and a track record from early supporters and clients."

One such figure was Varun, her collaborator at Fintech Nation.

"He was the one who really pushed me to speak to CNA to do *The Big Spark*. I was like, everybody in the VC space has been there for at least 10 years before they're a judge on *Shark Tank*'s Singapore version. I'm not going to make it there. They're not going to want me—but surprisingly, they did."

Agencies, too, played a pivotal role, booking her for DJ gigs and high-profile events when she was just starting out. Saying it was these few people helped her build her own confidence eventually; she now focuses on cultivating her personal brand. Till today, her LinkedIn profile omits her university graduation date—a deliberate choice.

#### SUCCESS IS A FLUID CONCEPT

For Vanessa, success has never been a static concept, but something that evolves with the life stage you're in.

"Success, and what a successful career is, the definition changes."

From her university days to now, approaching her late twenties, her focus has been clear: her metric isn't money, but personal development.

“Self

d o u b t

is  
the  
biggest  
**roadblock**  
to anything we  
want to achieve.”





Vanessa at the Singapore FinTech Festival (SFF) 2024, the world's largest financial technology event, held annually in Singapore.

Organised by the Monetary Authority of Singapore, the Global Finance & Technology Network (GFTN), and Constellar in collaboration with The Association of Banks in Singapore, SFF serves as a global platform for the fintech community to connect, collaborate, and co-create.

"I had job offers that would pay me double, but I chose a startup over a management consulting role because, for me, it was about personal development, exposure, and levelling up."

But looking ahead, she envisions a different kind of success.

"I hope the fruits of labour from my first 30 or 40 years will allow me to have a more balanced life—as a family woman, a mother. I don't want to be the absent friend or partner I've been in the past. Success at 50? It's not just career milestones—it's presence, it's relationships."

Her leadership style, too, is fluid, and shaped by the people around her.

"If my team is independent and self-motivated, I lead by building genuine connections. But if someone drops the ball—like during a high-stakes demo day—I become stricter, enforcing timelines and micromanaging only when necessary."

#### **PRIVILEGE OF BEING IN SINGAPORE**

Much of what she has accomplished today, Vanessa attributes, in part, to Singapore's culture of inclusivity, which has also been instrumental in her growth.

"People here give you a chance whether you're female or male. Gender matters less, especially in tech. Some of the smartest investors I know are younger than me, yet respected for their expertise."

However, it was only when she ventured abroad that she realised that discrimination exists elsewhere.

"At fintech festivals in other Asian countries, the contrast was stark. Colleagues pointed out how little airtime I got compared to male or older counterparts. That's when I realised—Singapore isn't the norm. We're just very privileged here. Singapore has been... different."

And for that, Vanessa is grateful. And with many more years ahead of her, there's no stopping how big her empire will grow.



**When I think unlimited, I think of...**  
pursuing our ambitions  
even if the world doubts us.

**I am unlimited when...**  
I become a better version  
of myself every day.





Sybil is pictured at **Vivistop Kampong Eunos**, a vibrant makerspace housed in the former Kampong Eunos Community Centre. Founded by non-profit organisation Vivita Singapore, the space offers interactive programmes, camps, and workshops for youths and children to unleash their creativity. A dream community for budding innovators, Vivistop Kampong Eunos embodies future-focused education that Sybil champions—one that empowers children and youths with the confidence and tools to thrive in the real world.



# Force for Good:

**SYBIL LAU**  
on how  
her diverse life  
experiences, personal  
passions, and  
relentless curiosity  
inform her approach  
to giving and investing

From launching a business consultancy in China at 21 and learning the ropes of finance and investments at 25, to later being the Chief Investment Officer at her family office and assuming board roles at organisations including a public listed healthcare technology company in Canada, Ray Dalio's family office, and various social service agencies, Sybil Lau has carved her own path in the worlds of finance, investments, and philanthropy.

Drawing on her diverse life experiences and driven by a relentless spirit of learning and a mission to create meaningful impact, she shows how capital can be a force for good—and that investing and philanthropy need not be mutually exclusive.

## AN UNCONVENTIONAL START

Fresh out of university in Canada, with a degree in General Studies and a minor in Economics, Sybil headed to Kuala Lumpur while her peers flocked to Hong Kong or the US. There, she joined a Canadian engineering firm, and was hired as a QA/QC associate as she was interested in seeing what she could learn.

Her first day began with a reality check. Tasked with quality control, she was handed technical specs and asked to evaluate them, to which she admitted how dangerous it was for her to QC something she didn't understand. So, they pivoted and asked her to set up the local area network (LAN) for the office. With no prior experience, she was handed two dry manuals. But this did not deter her from completing the task.

"I fell asleep. I don't know for how long, but after about a few days, I finished reading the books. In about two weeks, I set up the LAN for them. I set up something called a factory acceptance test. It was all self-learning."

"I don't really think there's a typical day for me. I get up very early, at 4am. That's because I love to read and I like to read when there are no calls and nobody messaging me. There are no distractions at all. Nowadays I wake up much later, maybe like 6am."



Sybil, with her partner, Ng Kok Song, on a market visit during the Presidential Election in 2023.

Her French fluency even proved useful for translating reports to headquarters. Her takeaway?

"You just need to be driven enough to learn. I truly believe in that."

#### **STARTING FROM SCRATCH**

After about a year at the engineering firm, Sybil decided to venture into entrepreneurship at 21, navigating China's nascent private sector in the early 2000s. Fresh-faced and determined, she launched a consultancy advising foreign enterprises who wanted to make inroads in China. Within three years, she pivoted to early-stage venture capital, drawn to the emerging biotech and medtech sectors. But as her business grew, she found herself more interested in learning about finance.

"I felt like I wanted to learn more about finance before I got too old. When you're young, you know, 27 or 30, in your own mind, is too old. So I wanted to sell my part of the company and focus on learning."

When her then-partner relocated to Singapore for work, she saw the opportunity to start something new. Selling her stake in the company, she landed in Singapore in 2004 with one goal: to learn finance from the ground up. After asking around, she decided to apply to Goldman Sachs, and what others saw as a junior role, she viewed as a paid education.

**"The only way to learn something is to start from the bottom. You can't think about the title or what you were doing before. That really doesn't matter. I wanted to understand the financials of it. Numbers never lie. So I was extremely happy because for the two years I stayed at Goldman as a finance analyst, I felt like I got paid to learn."**

About four months, 23 interviews, and one exam later, she clinched the job, and recalls her ex-boss having to take a chance on her.

"He told me not to fail for the simple reason that he had a huge stack of resumes on his table, and at that time I wasn't a Singapore citizen, and I also didn't have PR. So he said, 'I'd have to apply for an employment pass for you.'"

She fondly recalls her first day, which was anything but ordinary, as she was tasked with something she'd never thought a newbie would do.

"The first task I got was, 'Sybil, can you go upstairs to the interview room? I need you to interview people for a job.'"

Despite being caught off guard, Sybil knew what she had to look for: she believes in hiring people smarter than you are. So rather than standard resume questions, she opted for curveballs designed to reveal how candidates think.

"I said, 'I'm going to ask very non-traditional questions, and I'm actually not interested in the actual answer.' I just want them to tell me how they thought about getting to the answer. So my first question was, 'How many golf balls do you think could fit in this room?'"

Next came, "How many gas stations are in the US?"—a nod to the Fermi problems used by thinkers and organisations that value critical, open-ended and creative thinking. Her unconventional approach to things was evident judging from the early career decisions she had made.

#### **A NEW CHAPTER**

Even after building a successful career at Goldman Sachs and later on, Credit Suisse, Sybil found

herself embracing the unfamiliar once more—this time, at her own family's office.

"Luckily, none of my clients lost any money. So my family said, 'You've been doing this for about four years; how would you like to come and help us? But then you would start from the bottom.'"

The proposition was simple, if humbling, but Sybil did not have to think twice. The opportunity excited her, and being the only one in Asia, she would oversee emerging markets, focusing on convertible bonds and equities—a natural fit for someone who thrived on uncovering value.

"I love looking for things that are mispriced and might do well."

Public equities had always been her passion, honed during her analyst days, and now she had the freedom to apply that rigour to her family's portfolio. But family offices, she quickly learnt, are not for those who crave rigid structure. Unlike the regimented world of investment banking, every day brought new variables. Many families, she notes, don't approach investments with the same discipline as professional firms—which meant she had to build processes from the ground up.

#### **PERSONAL INVESTMENT APPROACH**

And while most investors obsess over spreadsheets and valuations, Sybil's personal investment approach is geared towards something more intangible: the human element.

"It's always investing in the person. A lot of times, it's the founder—it's somebody who has integrity, an amazing work ethic, great energy, and someone who loves what they do. I'm probably one of the few investors who doesn't lead with financial questions. What I want to understand is their vision—where they want to take the company, how they've built their team, and whether they've created an environment where people can thrive together."

She believes that a great founder can fix even mediocre ideas. And apart from the founder, she also stresses the importance of a good team and how, at the end of the day, it is the combination of these factors that will make a great company. She also says the best leaders are those who are willing to listen, who value input regardless of hierarchy, and who can both inspire their team and course-correct when needed.

This people-first philosophy extends to her approach to board memberships. She believes every board member should bring something to the table, and be "deserving" of their seat through active contribution, not just prestige.

"What I mean by 'deserve' is someone who fulfils what we call time, ties, and testimony. Someone who will give their time, someone who is willing to open doors for you and make connections, and someone who will passionately advocate for the organisation."

#### **STARTING SMALL AND BEING CONSISTENT**

And for those who may not be as finance-savvy and want to start investing, Sybil emphasises a few foundational habits.

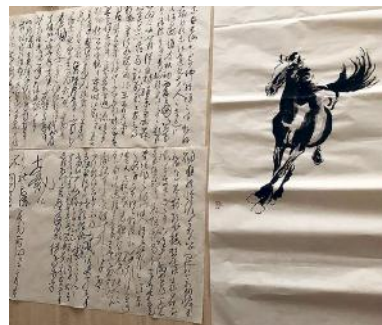
"I think savings are really important. What I would tell myself before is, 'Don't spend as much when you're younger. Save more.'"

Her cornerstone strategy? Index funds. She says that everyone can index, regardless of age, citing low-cost ETFs like S&P 500 trackers with minimal fees. The key, she explains, is consistency.

"You can put a certain amount of money aside, and whether the market goes up or down, just keep buying a little. There's no such thing as being able to time the market perfectly. If you look at it, averaging over



Sybil's cat, Max, sitting on a horse painting that she painted with Chinese ink.



"One thing that never fails to bring people together is art. A shared appreciation of art truly breaks down barriers and boundaries, without bias or the need for language. I enjoy writing a few words of calligraphy or painting horses for good friends who always encourage me to keep going."





Sybil with her grandfather, a well-known property tycoon and philanthropist who supported education, medical research, and the arts.

"I've always been drawn to Chinese history—from the broad sweep of dynastic change to the finer details of culture and philosophy. I started reading Chinese books as a kid, and I feel like I could spend my whole life immersed in them. Each time I revisit a book, I discover something new. I especially enjoy Chinese fables and the four great classical novels. *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* is my favourite, but I also love *Dream of the Red Chamber* and *Journey to the West*. My interest started young—watching my grandfather read them in Chinese. He always said, 'You have to read the four classical Chinese novels.' That stuck with me."

20, 30 or even 50 years, it will outperform anything over time."

For those drawn to specific sectors like AI or tech but wary of stock-picking risks, she suggests a middle path: "Buy a thematic index instead of individual stocks. You get exposure without the volatility." At its core, her philosophy is rooted in patience and discipline.

#### LESSONS FROM HER GRANDFATHER AND DEFINING IMPACT

Growing up in an environment where her grandfather was a maverick of his time—a successful serial entrepreneur who had seven listed companies in Hong Kong, which he eventually injected into Wheelock and Co.—it is evident that Sybil's approach to investment and philanthropy is very much shaped by his early influence.

"I was lucky enough to grow up with my grandfather and with my parents. As a child, I was always very curious, and I'm still very, very curious. So I would always ask him what he's doing, and he would tell me about the importance of building hospitals. And how building infrastructure and schools was important."

As she got older, her grandfather also instilled something important in her—which is the idea that investing in things is very different from giving money away and funding things. Because even if the latter doesn't yield monetary returns, it is the failures that serve as lessons to propel progress.

"He told me research is very important. So being able to fund research is important. At that time I asked him why; what did he mean by that? He would fund Alzheimer's research and cancer research, which means he funded certain scientists, or certain ideas. Because if you don't do it, maybe nobody will do it. And if nobody does it, nobody else will learn from their failures."

She acknowledges that such an approach is not for everyone. Rather, it is those in the 1% who should consider it as a pathway to sustainable philanthropy. These early lessons from her grandfather fundamentally shaped her philosophy on investing and giving. And after his passing, this perspective only deepened when she connected with friends from Hong Kong who had founded Horizon Ventures, the venture capital firm backed by Li Ka-shing, a Hong Kong billionaire business magnate, investor, and philanthropist.

"They told me, 'When you think about philanthropy, it's slightly similar to what we are doing with our investments at Horizon.' So I said, 'Please share what you mean by that.' They said, 'The way that they look at investments is impact first, yield second.'"

What then does impact truly mean to Sybil?

"I think of impact in the sense that, if you believe in someone, the power of that belief means a lot. So imagine getting a cheque from someone like Mr Li Ka-shing. That is so impactful in that it would open a lot of doors, and it is because of that person's belief in you. The next thing to do with impact is to believe in the crazy ideas—the crazier, the better sometimes, because if you don't invest in the crazy ideas, not many people will."

Sybil illustrates this with how Li Ka-shing's office invested in Zoom, X, and Spotify back then, when nobody believed in them. They are also the largest shareholder of WELL Health, the healthcare technology company empowering providers across North America with innovative digital tools and services, and a board that she sits on.

#### SUSTAINABILITY IS MUCH MORE THAN THE ENVIRONMENT

Sustainability may be the buzzword now. But for Sybil, sustainability transcends carbon footprints and recycling programmes. Her vision encompasses systems that empower communities

“THE ONLY WAY TO  
LEARN SOMETHING  
IS TO START FROM  
THE **BOTTOM.**  
YOU CAN'T THINK  
ABOUT THE TITLE  
OR WHAT YOU WERE  
DOING BEFORE.”

**RIGHT**

Sybil with students from ITE College West. She is actively involved in entrepreneurship mentorship, organising internships, and arranging for international speakers from various industries to share their knowledge and insights with students in polytechnics and ITE Colleges.



in the long-term.

“Sustainability is greater than the environment. There’s sustainable philanthropy and sustainable finance. It’s trying to help people build it. Whether it is through internships or volunteerism, I think it’s extremely important as well. Sustainability is also about giving back to society. The private sector can do more; I think it shouldn’t always be government-led.”

Real sustainability, for Sybil, also means creating pathways and enabling social mobility. And one of the things she is passionate about includes giving kids who may be falling behind opportunities to thrive. Currently, one programme she supports is the POL-ITE Entrepreneurs’ Challenge for ITE (Institute of Technical Education) and polytechnic students.

**“Social mobility is sustainability too. It’s giving outsourced advantages to people who need it the most. It shouldn’t always be the top 1% or 10%. I want to give opportunities to those kids who may not be doing the best. It doesn’t matter what you have done in school or what your grades are; they don’t determine where you end up in life.”**

Her all-encompassing approach towards sustainability reflects her belief that real sustainability must address systemic gaps—whether through education access, employee engagement, or redefining what “talent” looks like.

**A THIRST FOR KNOWLEDGE**

Given her history of diving fearlessly into unfamiliar territories, it comes as no surprise that the secret to her success is perhaps the insatiable love of learning. Whether voraciously consuming fiction or meticulously analysing annual reports, she counts reading and learning as a genuine source of joy.

“I love to read everything, but I go through different periods. I like



nonfiction. One time when I was younger, I wanted to read everything I could about true crime; this was like 20 years ago. And when I exhausted that topic, I went on to read about CEOs of companies. So I read about Disney, Subway, and Oracle. And then I wanted to read about how people make cheese. But it was short-lived, because I'm lactose intolerant, but I wanted to read up because a friend of mine was coming from France, so I wanted to have an intelligent conversation, or I was just curious."

More recently, she shares she has been delving into topics like deep tech, AI and quantum computing. Sometimes, she also pores over annual reports in order to gain a deeper understanding of finance. Her most recent read?

"Recently, I've been trying to read about the foundations of Silicon Valley. Hermann Hauser<sup>1</sup> recommended that I read this book on Robert Noyce<sup>2</sup>, and the interesting thing about Noyce is that he mentored Steve Jobs, and Steve Jobs actually mentored Mark Zuckerberg."

As an extension of her love of learning, Sybil also counts education as an area she has a vested interest in. Even though she studied abroad, she says she's had the privilege of learning more about the Singapore education system, in particular the polytechnic system. As part of the advisory committee of the Republic Polytechnic Education Fund, she champions the polytechnic's role in preparing students for future jobs, but says that more can be done.

**"A lot of the polytechnics are training kids for jobs of the future that we really need in some way or another, but what they might need is a little bit more help, in terms of getting more opportunities. That's where I think a lot of us come in, and where I think we can offer assistance in some way, whether it's opening doors for internships or exchange programmes."**

Her advocacy also extends to another passion of hers—the arts. In 2023, she facilitated a groundbreaking visit by Shepard Fairey, the iconic American contemporary artist and founder of OBEY clothing, who painted a mural near Neil Road and, for the first time, addressed hundreds of students in a closed-door dialogue.

"Shepard Fairey is always about inclusion and equality. So when I asked him whether he would come to Singapore and do a wall for us at SG Enable, he agreed. But our only problem with that was SG Enable didn't have an extra wall then. So he ended up painting the wall near Neil Road. The kids loved it, and I think he was so happy. He told me that he had never done this before."

In 2024, Sybil received the Distinguished Patron of the Arts award from the National Arts Council, an award instituted in 1983 to recognise the organisations and individuals that have contributed towards the promotion of cultural and artistic activities in Singapore. An artist and avid supporter of the arts, her advocacy also extends to emerging artists and persons with disabilities in the arts.

Her commitment to inclusivity is also evident in her role as a board member of SG Enable<sup>3</sup>, where she actively advances initiatives that foster a more inclusive society.

At the 2024 Enabling Lives Festival—SG Enable's signature event—she participated in a communal batik painting held in front of the i'mable Gift Market, which showcases original artworks, artisanal gifts, and creative items crafted by talented persons with disabilities. The



ITE and polytechnic students in a closed-door dialogue session with Shepard Fairey at the ION Art Gallery, facilitated by Opera Gallery. The students engaged in an hour-long session with the artist, asking him questions about his journey, inspiration, and work.

1: Hermann Hauser is an Austrian engineer, entrepreneur, and venture capitalist. He has founded or co-founded companies across a wide range of technology sectors, including Acorn Computers (where he helped spin out ARM), Active Book Company, Virata, Net Products and Cambridge Network.

2: Robert Norton Noyce, nicknamed "the Mayor of Silicon Valley", was an American physicist and entrepreneur who co-founded Fairchild Semiconductor in 1957 and Intel Corporation in 1968.

3: Sybil sits on the board of SG Enable, a focal agency set up by the Ministry of Social and Family Development to enable persons with disabilities to aspire and fulfil their potential in an inclusive society. She has also been an active last mile/gap funding partner since the COVID-19 pandemic and volunteers actively in various food distribution and community groups.

**RIGHT**

Sybil at the Enabling Lives Festival 2024—an event organised by SG Enable to strengthen the social fabric across all abilities—with (from left to right) former SG Enable CEO Ku Geok Boon, Senior Parliamentary Secretary for Social and Family Development Eric Chua, and SG Enable Chairman Moses Lee.



festival's theme, 'Celebration Inclusion and Abilities' underscores SG Enable's long-standing commitment to strengthening the social fabric and building a more inclusive Singapore for all.

**THE MEANING OF SUCCESS**

For Sybil, success isn't measured by titles or wealth, but by health, family and waking up excited for work.

**"Success, to me, is that you are happy, healthy, and you get along well with your family. To be successful is also to be fulfilled and content with what you're doing—to wake up every day and be excited to go to work. Even though finance wasn't my thing, every day I was excited."**

In addition, she also counts curiosity as a crucial ingredient for success—to always be open to exploring what you know and what you don't know.

"I think to be successful, you need to be curious about things. You need to want to learn more. I'm okay with not knowing things. Sometimes I tell people I don't know anything about this, and I ask them to share more with me—I think that's extremely important. To have an open mind, to not be judgemental, and to not say that something has to be a certain way—because there are always so many ways."

Increasingly, Sybil is also learning to embrace discomfort and emphasises the importance of stepping out of one's comfort zone in order to learn, evolve and grow.

"Nowadays I try to do things that would traditionally make me uncomfortable. Because sometimes, the best way to learn and evolve is to leave our comfort zone. When you force yourself to do something you wouldn't normally do, you might learn something from it or something new about yourself."

Whether it's rising up to new challenges, learning independently, or advocating for the causes she believes in, Sybil is a testament to the fact that, ultimately, the best investment we can make is in ourselves.

**When I think unlimited, I think of...**  
possibilities, the courage to dream big, and  
potential for every one.

**I am unlimited when...**  
I dream.

"My vision for Singapore and SLA is a  
more integrated, cohesive, and holistic  
approach to things, where everyone has the  
opportunity to communicate, in their own  
ways, what they envision."








Located in Geylang Serai ■ **Tanjong Katong Complex** is a four-storey commercial mall that has a strong cultural heritage and historic connection to the Malay community. Here, Taufik is shot against the iconic slanted columns of the facade, with four cylindrical structures at each corner of the building.

# On Stage, Off Stage:



## on carving out his own unique path, the power of discipline, and embracing life's different seasons

Taufik Batisah may be best known for winning the first season of the reality TV series *Singapore Idol* in 2004, but he is more than a soulful voice. Today, he has transformed from pop idol to multifaceted entrepreneur—embracing acting, real estate, and F&B with the same passion and determination that silenced his early critics, and led to his coveted win.

Where others may have rested on their musical laurels, Taufik consistently pushes himself beyond his comfort zone, whether conquering new stages or building businesses. More than 20 years since winning the contest, it's not hard to see why the man is still adored by his fans today—both on and off the stage.

### AN ACCIDENTAL IDOL

Taufik's rise to fame started not with lofty ambitions, but sheer fun and curiosity. Inspired by the *American Idol* craze in 2004, and egged on by his brother, they decided, on a whim, to audition when news broke of a local version.

Thinking they would be secured a spot upfront, they arrived at Suntec City the night before—only to find that a queue had already formed.

"We thought we were the only ones who were gonna be in front, but there was a super long line already. There was heavy rain at like 3am and everybody had to go into the mall. We were soaking wet. My underwear was still wet, so I was freezing during the audition. That was intense and memorable."

With soggy determination, they reclaimed their spots at dawn, improvising with hand dryers in the men's toilets. Musically, Taufik was an unlikely contender.



**RIGHT**  
Taufik at the 2004 *Singapore Idol* auditions. His confidence was read as arrogance by the judges—but he took their feedback in his stride and ultimately won the competition, with 682,000 of 1.1 million votes.



"I wasn't really a real singer, I tried my best to sing to be honest. During *Singapore Idol*, I think I was known as the R&B guy. That's why a lot of my influences come from Michael Jackson and people like Stevie Wonder."

After this rocky start—with some criticising him for being "arrogant and cocky", which Taufik later explained was an attempt to appear confident and mask his insecurities—he managed to win over the majority of voters in the final round of the competition. He beat Sylvester Sim by garnering 62% of the 1.1 million votes cast and clinched a one-year recording contract with Sony BMG and a three-year artiste management contract with Artiste Networks, an arm of Hype Records.

#### **EARLY STRUGGLES**

His drive and determination to succeed can be attributed, in part, to the hardship and struggles that shaped his growing up years. His childhood was interrupted when his parents split up, and downgrading from a five-room flat to a one-room rental flat in Clementi, then Dover Road, he recalls the days where he had to live in a cramped space with his mother and three brothers. The flat came with bedbugs—and a fair amount of shame. During Hari Raya, when friends celebrated with open houses, he kept his door closed.

"We were at the high point of our life before they got divorced. We moved to a rental flat and there were bedbugs, and there's no way of getting rid of them. You gotta throw everything—but we couldn't. We weren't well-to-do. I never wanted anybody to come over."

However, he turned this struggle into fuel—"a catalyst to work hard, to not be where I was", which also birthed his song, 'Holding On', later adapted to Malay as 'Berserah'.

"In retrospect, it wasn't a big deal. Many had it tougher. No matter how low life gets, don't give up. Hold onto your faith, your effort, your conviction. If you believe—truly believe—it will come to fruition."

#### **IT STARTED WITH MICHAEL JACKSON**

Counting the King of Pop, Michael Jackson, as one of his biggest influences, Taufik says one understated ballad left an indelible mark in the icon's vast catalogue.

"There's this song called 'Gone Too Soon'. When he passed, that song really hit me. It's not one of his main hits, but you should check it out."



The track's melancholic beauty inspired Taufik, and his Malay adaptation became a tribute to his mother. The result is achingly personal, transforming grief into melody.

"It gave me the idea to write my own song—'Khayalan', meaning imagination. I was imagining my mum, talking about when my mum was still around, and then when she was gone, when she was no longer around. Whenever I sing it, I tear up."

From his parents' divorce inspiring the song 'Holding On' to a friend's relationship anxieties becoming 'Awak Kat Mana' (Where Are You?), Taufik says he is inspired by challenges, whether it's his own or other people's.

#### **HARNESSING FEAR, DISCOMFORT AND THE POWER OF PRAYER**

Even with his decades of experience performing, Taufik admits that fear never truly leaves him. But instead of seeing it as a weakness, he sees it as a source of strength—a necessary ingredient that propels him to do better. He also takes it as a sign of how deeply he cares about his craft, whether it's performing, starting a new project, or entering unfamiliar territory.

"Being on stage, I still get stage fright in the first few seconds, but that's fine. That means I still love this. I still care about being on stage. I still care about giving my best. Being scared or worried whenever you're doing something, I think it shows that you care."

Taufik also believes that doubt can be a powerful motivator.

"When you don't assume you can do something well, that means you're going to put in the effort to make sure you will do it well."

While fear can be a healthy sign, Taufik warns against letting comfort become a cage.

"It's okay to feel afraid to do something new. It's okay to have this feeling of 'I'm just comfortable where I am. I don't have to change anything.' But it can also be dangerous."

For Taufik, fear shouldn't be an excuse to avoid taking chances. Instead, it should be a reminder that what we're about to do matters. And in moments of doubt, he turns to prayer and meditation—not just as spiritual practices, but as tools for mental clarity.

"I believe in talking to yourself. I believe in meditation in terms of faith. I believe in prayers. It's a form of self-reflecting and calming yourself down. That really calms me down—talking to myself."

#### **DREAM COLLABORATION**

Taufik's wish list for musical collaborations bridges generations and genres—but one name tops his list.

"Honestly, if I can collaborate with someone right now, the first person I think of is Sezairi. This guy is an amazing musician. Oh my goodness, he's so soulful."

Yet his most unexpected jam sessions have been with Singapore's top leaders. A spontaneous rehearsal with then-Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong left him buzzing.

"Music makes you human—it connects you to artistry. When we jammed the National Day song, he just said, 'Let's go!' No overthinking, just feeling. He's awesome. He knows his music."

The thread continues with President Tharman Shanmugaratnam, whose passion for music sparked a lively interview. Taufik fondly recalls that connecting over their shared love for music made the conversation especially enjoyable.



Taufik with homegrown artist Regina Song and her band at 'Let's Celebrate 2025', a countdown party organised by Mediacorp.



Taufik and then Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong collaborated on an acoustic rendition of the National Day Parade 2022 theme song 'Stronger Together'.

## REINVENTING HIMSELF

For a decade, the *Singapore Idol* winner was comfortable with the rhythms of the entertainment industry, where creativity paid the bills. Yet practicality always won. When he realised singing alone wouldn't sustain him, acting became an unexpected next chapter. For him, this shift wasn't about passion or awards—but survival.

"I needed another job to stay relevant. No artsy-fartsy 'craft' talk—I'm just practical. But acting is completely different, it's someone else's script, someone else's vision. I had to learn to become a character, to emote without seeming like I'm acting, all while remembering lines."

In 2020, he pivoted again, to real estate, after encouragement from his brother. So he used his SkillsFuture credits to study—"I don't do things halfway"—and aced the exam on his first try.

"I was too comfortable in entertainment. My singing career, my acting career were all going well. I was still generating good income. But I was just too comfortable. We all have this fear of trying out something new, so he's been asking me for the longest time."

This new path opened his eyes, and mind to a world rooted in problem solving, which he enjoyed thoroughly.

"After 15 years of creating songs, characters, ideas, I discovered the joy of solving real problems: loans, timelines, tailoring solutions."

Now, whether performing for thousands, negotiating property deals, or wiping tables at his Chix Hot Chicken restaurant, he considers them all equal—all just part and parcel of work.

"My parents taught me: when you work, you work. Give more than 100% to whoever's in front of you—fan, client, or diner."

Five years into real estate, he has this to say.

"It's never too late. I'm 43. I have friends who started businesses at 50. Whatever you want to do, just make the move. Don't hold yourself back."

## THE POWER OF FAILURE AND BEING YOUR OWN BOSS

For Taufik, failure can be harnessed for the worst, or for good. And he firmly chooses the latter, using it to generate strength and growth.

"I really believe in the power of failure, because three things—when you fail, you can allow it to destroy you. You can allow it to defeat you completely. And that's it. But you can also allow it to be a stepping stone for you to learn. Because you already have experienced this failure, and you know, 'I get it. I'm not supposed to do this. Maybe I did too much.'"

Then there's the third, more controversial approach—using failure as fuel.

"I use failure to instil fear in me, which may work for someone, may not work for somebody else if you're not strong enough."

For Taufik, this isn't about self-punishment; it's about harnessing the pressure to stay sharp. And as someone who's been self-employed for over two decades, he knows the stress all too well.

"I've never had a boss. I've never had medical benefits. Never had bonuses. Never had CPF (Central Provident Fund) employer contributions. Every month you're back to zero. Before the month ends, you have to figure out what you're going to do for the next month. How you're going to pay for your house, your insurance... it's a constant thing, and this can eat you. Because I use this as something

that is to my benefit, I use it as something that's positive. It actually drives me to be better every month." His recurring advice?

**"Do not allow failure to defeat you. Use it as a catalyst to just be better."**

**SELF-CARE AND A LITTLE KINDNESS GO A LONG WAY**

Taufik approaches mental health with a mix of discipline and grace. "I try to tell myself, 'You prepared for this; you worked hard for this. You are prepared.'" Yet, even with preparation, anxiety and frustration surface—"a constant battle" as he calls it. His anchor? Faith, self-talk, and the humility to admit he's still learning.

A self-professed introvert, he confesses to bottling up struggles. But growth, for him, lies in unlearning that instinct.

"I like to shoulder all my problems on my own... I feel like talking to anyone does not solve the problem. But I'm trying to be better at it. Speak to people—or if you're not there yet, speak to yourself, to the higher powers. Just be nicer to yourself."

Beyond introspection, Taufik champions a simple, yet profound act: asking strangers, "How's your day?"

"A lot of times, people can just break down by that simple question. They assume they can shoulder it...until someone asks."

He makes it a practice—at petrol stations, markets, cash registers—to pause and connect. It takes just seconds, but its impact endures.

"Just don't think about yourself at all. Just ask. Can you imagine being the only one who does that? You might just put a smile on their face for that day."

**THE IMPORTANCE OF MENTORS AND LIFE'S SEASONS**

When asked if there was anything he wished he had and knew when he was younger, Taufik shares this.

"I wish I had a mentor. I wish I had a mentor in my career. I also wish someone had told me to invest early. Not in get-rich-quick schemes, but through steady dollar-cost averaging—just grow your portfolio."

For someone who has spent over two decades carving his own path in music and entrepreneurship, the absence of guidance in financial foresight weighs on him. But this approach he heard from Denzel Washington illuminated his perspective and clarified his path moving forward.



**Taufik's Spartan Race Journey:**  
September 2022: Debuted with 2nd place in his age group.

May 2023: Won 1st place at Spartan Super 10K (25 obstacles) in Miri, Malaysia.

August 2023: Placed 4th in Sentosa, Singapore.



**LEFT**

Taufik made his theatrical debut and foray into acting in 2010, in *Fried Rice Paradise—The Musical*, a production by Dick Lee. In it, he played the role of Johan, and performed songs such as 'Dream Girl'. The production featured a star-studded cast, including Denise Tan, Darius Tan, Candice De Rozario, Lim Yu Beng, and the legendary Rahimah Rahim.



**“MOTIVATION**  
WILL ONLY  
KICKSTART THINGS.

BUT DISCIPLINE WILL  
HELP YOU REACH  
YOUR **GOAL.”**

“He said there are three phases in life: learning, earning, and returning. There’s a phase where you learn whatever you need to learn. Then, a phase where you earn as much as you can. So I’m in that phase right now. And later, when everything slows down, you return.”

But what does it mean to return? For Taufik, it’s about giving back, whether it’s through charity, mentorship, or simply being present for family.

“You can help guide or mould someone from the experiences you had. But in order to return, you must have money lah. You must be at a comfortable phase where you work because you want to, not because you have to.”

**MOTIVATION FADES, DISCIPLINE STAYS** An early rejection was enough to convince Taufik that sports wasn’t his path.

“I was never really athletic back in school. I tried to play football lah, but I was always placed on reserve. Very sad, very sad.”

Yet decades later, he has found himself pushing his limits in Spartan races and HYROX competitions, not despite the struggle—but because of it. This came to be through an unexpected source and inspiration—a 50-year-old friend who did Spartan races with his daughters. But what hooked him wasn’t just the physical challenge—it was the discipline behind it.

“I enjoy the discipline of doing something you don’t want to do—the discipline of being in the most difficult situation where you can quit, but you choose not to.”

For Taufik, fitness became a metaphor for his entire philosophy. As a self-employed artist and entrepreneur, he knows quitting is always an option. But the ability to endure discomfort, to choose perseverance, is what defines success.

“I don’t have a boss to answer to. I can choose to quit singing, real estate, or my restaurant business any time. So motivation will only kickstart things. It’s not gonna drive you through the journey. Discipline keeps you focused and makes sure you reach your goal.”

Taufik’s message is clear: talent and inspiration may open doors, but discipline is what walks you through them—whether it’s the finish line, or everyday life.

“I love putting myself in the worst conditions, where my body begs me to quit. Because that’s where you prove who you are. To be in the most uncomfortable position and not quit—that’s the discipline I want wired into my everyday life.”

**BIGGEST IDOLS:  
HIS PARENTS**

“I don’t have a mentor, but my greatest inspirations are my parents. We often admire artists, entrepreneurs, the wealthy... but the real heroes? They’re the ones who taught us how to keep going when everything told us to give up.”

In a world that glorifies celebrity success stories, he points to something far more relatable, familiar, and close by.

“Sometimes we don’t realise the things our parents teach us. But these values drive most of what we do without us even knowing.”

For Taufik, his mother embodies this truth. Months after a mild stroke



In October 2023, Taufik competed in the Men’s 40–44 solo division at HYROX Singapore, where he was placed in the top 9% of all athletes and the top 11% within his age group.



Opened in 2025, Hot Chix Chicken at Prinsep Street is the second F&B concept by Taufik and his co-founder, Ismail Rawi Bober. Designed by Tina Fung, the space showcases her signature immersive and sculptural interiors.



Behind the scenes as Irfan in the 180-episode drama *Provocative* on Mediacorp Channel 5.



left half her face paralysed, she was walking again. When she fell during recovery, he recalls—not at her pain, but at her indomitable spirit.

“My mother is the most resilient person I know. That resilience—I believe it’s in me without me realising.”

Her strength was forged in sacrifice. After his parents’ divorce, she worked as a cleaner across multiple condos “just because she wanted to provide for the family”. She’d return home exhausted, never burdening her children with her struggles.

His father’s love, too, revealed itself in hindsight—“My dad bought a house for us... and then he wasn’t even staying there.” That act—providing a home while stepping away—became a lesson in unconditional love.

#### WHAT’S NEW

Taufik is planning to treat his fans to a special concert—a retrospective of his 20-year musical journey—as his way to reflect and thank those who have supported him. The inspiration? After guest-performing at a show headlined by an Indonesian artist and being the only Singaporean act, the crowd’s roaring enthusiasm took him by surprise.

“Eh, I think they still like me leh. So why not do my own concert?”


But music isn’t his only focus. Though real estate remains his “mainstay”, he’s juggling multiple ventures: a return to acting in a Channel 5 drama (“Watch it on MeWatch!”) and the expansion of his fried-chicken brand, Chix Hot Chicken. The second outlet, newly opened at Prinsep Street, has been carefully planned. For that he admits, “Brick-and-mortar businesses are really, really tough.”

Despite this, Taufik has his eye firmly on the prize. His long game is clear: retirement at the age of 50. But don’t mistake this for slowing down.

**“After that, it’s time to give back more. Mentor, do charity, just... good stuff. What else is there?”**

For him, it’s simply the next act—a chance to return to the community.



A man in a black shirt and pants stands on a paved area in front of a modern white building with large windows. Two palm trees and some green bushes are to the left of the man. The building has a curved section and a tall, narrow window. The sky is clear and blue.

When I think unlimited, I think  
of...  
my parents.

**I am unlimited when...**  
I am with my family.



# I N D E X



↑ Once a British military barracks in the 1800s, **■ Dempsey** has evolved into a vibrant lifestyle and dining destination near the Singapore Botanic Gardens. Nestled in lush greenery, it blends colonial heritage with modern charm, featuring a mix of restaurants, cafés, boutiques and sports and wellness establishments. Remnants like tiled-roof structures and old playing fields hint at its military past. Today, Dempsey is celebrated both locally and internationally as one of Singapore's premier spots for dining and leisure.

LEFT: Dempsey was originally the site of a nutmeg plantation that later became Tanglin Barracks for British troops in the 1800s. The site was also once the headquarters of the Far East Land Forces, and later the headquarters of the Ministry of Defence (MINDEF) and the Central Manpower Base (CMPB).

➤ Built in the mid-1960s as married quarters for British military personnel, **■ Chip Bee Gardens** has transformed into a trendy lifestyle enclave. Once home to expatriate teachers after the British withdrawal, it now features a mix of residential and commercial spaces, blending heritage with contemporary charm. Known for its distinctive 1960s-style design, the estate is now popular for its eclectic blend of local lifestyle and F&B brands, including quaint cafés and homegrown brand names.



➔ ■ **Dignity Kitchen at 69 Boon Keng Road** is a social enterprise-run food court staffed by individuals with disabilities and from disadvantaged backgrounds. Operated by Project Dignity and founded by Koh Seng Choon, engineer turned entrepreneur and recipient of the Straits Times Singaporean of the Year 2024 award for his efforts, the outlet offers meaningful employment through skills training and food service roles. Housed in a striking red State property since 2021, it serves affordable local hawker fare and baked goods in an inclusive environment. Beyond being a vibrant dining spot, Dignity Kitchen stands as a powerful symbol of empowerment, mental health advocacy, and social change, aligning with broader efforts to promote dignity and opportunity for all.



↩ The charming row of restored 1930s heritage buildings at ■ **52-56 Kampong Java Road** will soon become a vibrant multi-disciplinary arts sandbox for experimentation, creation, and collaboration. Originally residences for municipal officers, the buildings sit along a road named after Javanese gardeners who once sold produce along Arab Street. Awarded to 19SixtyFive Pte Ltd via a joint tender by SLA and the National Arts Council, the space will feature acoustically treated studios, galleries, and performance venues. It will also host live performances, arts markets, and arts festivals - enriching Singapore's artistic landscape and fostering creative growth.



➔ Built in 1956, the ■ **Former Bukit Timah Fire Station** served as part of the post-war Fire Service expansion and features distinctive elements like a hose drying tower and the Colony of Singapore's coat of arms. Decommissioned in 2005, the 0.86ha site—comprising the main station, firefighters' quarters, and Station Master's residence—has been gazetted for conservation. Strategically located near the Rail Corridor and nature reserves, it is now set to be revitalised by LHN Facilities Management into a mixed-use community node, offering co-living, heritage, and nature experiences with sustainable, zero-energy features while preserving its historic character.







↑ Originally known as Flagstaff House, the **Former Command House** was built between 1937 and 1938 as the residence of Malaya's senior military commander. Designed in a distinctive Arts and Crafts-inspired style with pitched roofs and brick archways, the house later provided lodging for royalty, a president in office, and senior military figures. In 2007, UBS, the Swiss investment bank, made it its business university's Asia-Pacific campus. Now a national monument, the State property continues its legacy as an elegant event venue, blending heritage, architecture, and history with quiet distinction.



↑ The former St Andrew's Mission Hospital at **5 Kadayannallur Street** provided respite and care to impoverished women and children in its early years, with a unique triangular air well in the middle of the building to let in natural light and ventilation. Originally built in the 1920s, it has served various purposes over the years, including as a government medical store, an outpatient dispensary and an office space. It has most recently been transformed into **KADA**, a creative lifestyle and wellness hub with co-working and co-living spaces popular with the youth. The building, one of Singapore's earliest Modernist structures, houses one of the nation's oldest electric lifts, still in operation today.

1. Crowd of onlookers during the opening of the outpatient clinic at Kadayannallur Street (1964).
2. Maxwell Road outpatient dispensary (1989).



↓ Launched in November 2024, **The Foundry** is a collaborative hub for social purpose organisations housed in the former Elections Department building at **11 Prinsep Link**. The Foundry is a result of a partnership with The Majority Trust, SLA, Tote Board, and the Singapore Government Partnerships Office, with its 17,000 sq ft space housing over 20 non-profits and social enterprises. With an aim to foster a vibrant ecosystem, The Foundry supports idea incubation, community-building, and collaborative innovation to address Singapore's evolving social challenges.



➔ ■ **1925 Quarters at 79-95 Hindoo Road** is situated in a beautifully restored row of red-brick, two-storey building in the heritage Little India precinct. Originally built in 1927 to house junior Asian staff of the Municipality of Singapore, this State property has been transformed into a modern co-living space by Eco-Energy Pte Ltd and Cove Living Pte Ltd. The building retains its distinctive colonial architecture, featuring pitched roofs and fair-faced brick columns, and reflects the shared history of other municipal quarters in the area.



↓ Opened in 1937, ■ **Old Kallang Airport** was Singapore's first purpose-built civilian aerodrome and was hailed as the world's most modern at the time. Described as the "finest airport in the British Empire", it gained international recognition, with aviator Amelia Earhart praising it as "an aviation miracle of the East". The Art Deco terminal later housed the People's Association from 1960 to 2009 and is now part of a conserved site with a hangar, service blocks, and an entrance gateway. Since 2011, it has hosted a variety of events, from arts and culture to corporate launches.

4. Immigration check point (1948).

5. Aerial view in 1957. The foreground shows Nicoll Highway, while the circular control tower can be seen beside the highway on the right.

↑ ■ **New Bahru at 46 & 58 Kim Yam Road** occupies the former site of Nan Chiau High School, a historically significant educational institution that was first the Nan Chiau Teachers' Training School established in 1941. Today, the site has been reimagined into a dynamic lifestyle destination that blends residential, retail, and commercial uses. Developed by the Lo and Behold Group, it houses an exciting collection of homegrown brands and offers community-centric spaces and activities, and is well visited by locals and international tourists.



3. Nan Chiau High School in 1993.



➔ Built between 1952 and 1953, **■ Pasir Panjang Power Station** began with Station A, which was named when Station B was added in 1965. Its iconic red-brick design reflects Singapore's early urban transformation. Together, the two stations powered Singapore's industrial boom in the 1960s. In recent years, its arresting architecture was the stunning backdrop for the staging of shows and events, including the Louis Vuitton Spring Summer 2023 trunk show and the immersive exhibition on Singapore's founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew's life and legacy.

BOTTOM: Aerial view of Pasir Panjang Power Station (1957).



↑ The **■ Ridout Tea Gardens** in Queenstown was once home to Singapore's first Japanese-themed community garden, later redeveloped in 1980 into a traditional Japanese Garden (RIGHT) with ponds, pavilions and bridges. In the late 1990s, the site was transformed into the McDonald's Ridout Garden outlet, blending modern dining with the location's tranquil past. Today, it stands as one of the few recognisable flagship McDonald's outlets worldwide, drawing families for its food as much as its unique and scenic setting.







↑ The **State Land @ Margaret Drive**, once the site of Hua Yi Secondary School or previously known as Hua Yi Government Chinese Middle School, is now home to a restored public running track. Established in 1956 as Singapore's first government-aided Chinese secondary school, Hua Yi was renowned for its academic excellence and sports achievements. After relocating in the 1980s, the school left behind its legacy at Margaret Drive. The newly restored running track honours its historical connection to education and sports, providing a community space for residents to enjoy.



↑ The Team Singapore Wall of Fame at **8C Jalan Kledek** features a vibrant mural celebrating Singapore's Olympians and Paralympians. Created by graffiti artist Ceno2, it showcases Team Singapore athletes Nur Syahidah Alim, Shanti Pereira, Maximilian Maeder, Loh Kean Yew, and Yip Pin Xiu for their sporting achievements on the world stage. The location also houses the Vintage Camera Museum, home to over 1,000 cameras that offer a fascinating glimpse into photographic history. It's a unique landmark in Kampong Glam where sport, art, and photography come together.

↓ **Smith Street**—named after Sir Cecil Clementi Smith, Governor of the Straits Settlements—is a heritage-rich enclave in Chinatown where conserved shophouses and pedestrian-friendly spaces bring the area's storied past to life. Once known as Hei Yuen Kai or "Theatre Street" and home to the iconic Lai Chun Yuen Theatre, Smith Street has been rejuvenated with exciting lifestyle concepts including local favourites and international brands while preserving local Chinese culture. With its unique blend of history, culture and architecture, Smith Street is a living showcase of Chinatown's enduring identity and evolving vibrancy.

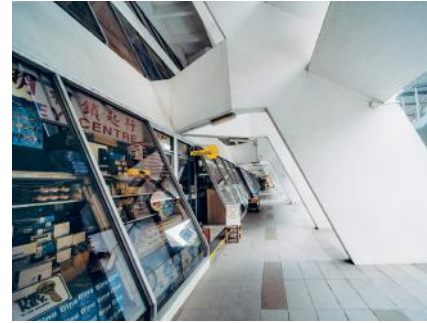


↓ EtonHouse International Education Group's headquarters at **6A and 8 Stevens Road** occupies a pair of conserved colonial-era heritage bungalows managed by SLA. Once a residential property—including the former home of philanthropist and businessman Lee Kong Chian—the heritage site has been thoughtfully repurposed into a serene, greenery-filled office space. Retaining elements like timber floors and arched doorways, the design features biophilic elements and clever adaptive reuse.





➔ The **Tanjong Katong Complex**, a familiar and iconic landmark in the heart of the Geylang Serai area, is set for rejuvenation. These include plans to dedicate a portion of the redeveloped space to tenants representing traditional Malay trades, preserving and celebrating the heritage and culture of the Malay community. With its deep historical roots and strong cultural ties, the revitalised Tanjong Katong Complex will continue to serve as a vibrant hub, honouring its past while evolving to meet the future needs of the community.



⤵ **Temasek Shophouse at 28 Orchard Road** was known for its distinctive architecture. Built in 1928, it was one of the first buildings in Singapore to feature spiral staircases. The social impact hub will expand to include restored units at **14, 22, and 38 Orchard Road** with reinstated historic features such as its Shanghai plaster façade, further highlighting Orchard Road's transformation from nutmeg plantations and motor showrooms to a place of renewed purpose for people, planet, and community.





↑ ■ **Vidacity** is a sustainability innovation hub located at the former Loyang Primary School (RIGHT), now creatively repurposed as a space for green entrepreneurship by City Sprouts. The site features co-working areas, workshops, and living labs focused on urban farming and sustainable technologies. Home to startups in fields such as agriculture, water treatment, reusable materials, and waste innovation, Vidacity brings together a community dedicated to building solutions for a more sustainable future.



↩ The former community centre at **10 Kampong Eunus** is now home to ■ **Vivistop Kampong Eunus**, Singapore's only non-profit makerspace dedicated to children and youth. Operated by Vivita, the space offers hands-on workshops, camps, and competitions that introduce young learners to robotics, AI, and emerging technologies. Supported by public sector and community partners, this SLA-led initiative has transformed the State property into a vibrant hub for creative learning and empowering the next generation of tech-savvy changemakers.





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When I think **unlimited**, I think of...



*Inspired to think  
unlimited? Let  
this space be  
where your own  
story begins.*

I am **unlimited** when...

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