

Writer Robert Yeo penned a memoir, which also documents Singapore's coming of age



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The tale of a family curse four generations ago inspired one of Singapore's pioneer playwrights and poets to write his memoirs.

Robert Yeo's paternal grandfather was one of four brothers living in Sarawak in the late 1800s. One of the brothers was supposed to marry a local girl, but did not show up on the wedding day.

"It enraged the girl's people and they got a bomoh (traditional medicine man) to curse all the four brothers, causing them to flee Sarawak," Yeo tells Life! in an interview in his six-room Toa Payoh flat.

As a result, his grandfather, Yeo Teck Hock, and another brother settled in Singapore. This colourful story was told to Yeo by his late grandaunt.

Says the writer: "That was the story that set me off, thinking, 'Wow, I should find out about my roots'."

But he was also thinking of tracing a set of routes or journeys. "I obviously was punning, but 'routes' is just as appropriate when you are the son of migrants, right?"

The result of his curiosity is *Routes: A Singaporean Memoir 1940-1975*. It took him eight years to write and was launched late last month.

The 383-page book is a pungent and incredibly detailed reflection on his - and the nation's - early life and coming-of-age.

That it walks the line between a personal and public memoir is no surprise, since Yeo is the man who gave Singapore English-language theatre its first openly political play.

"He is perhaps the first Singapore playwright writing in English who pushed political boundaries by writing and staging a play about political detention without trial as an instrument of government," says *Routes*' publisher, Ethos Books' Fong Hoe Fang.

The play in question, 1980's *One Year Back Home*, has a central character who runs for elections here as an opposition candidate and is later detained for making inflammatory campaign remarks.

It took 18 months before the play got a licence to be staged. Yeo's appeal, he was told, went all the way up to then Acting Minister for Culture Ong Teng Cheong.

"I had to fight all the way," he says. But he also acknowledges that he was an establishment figure at the time and that the Government probably saw him as a responsible critic.

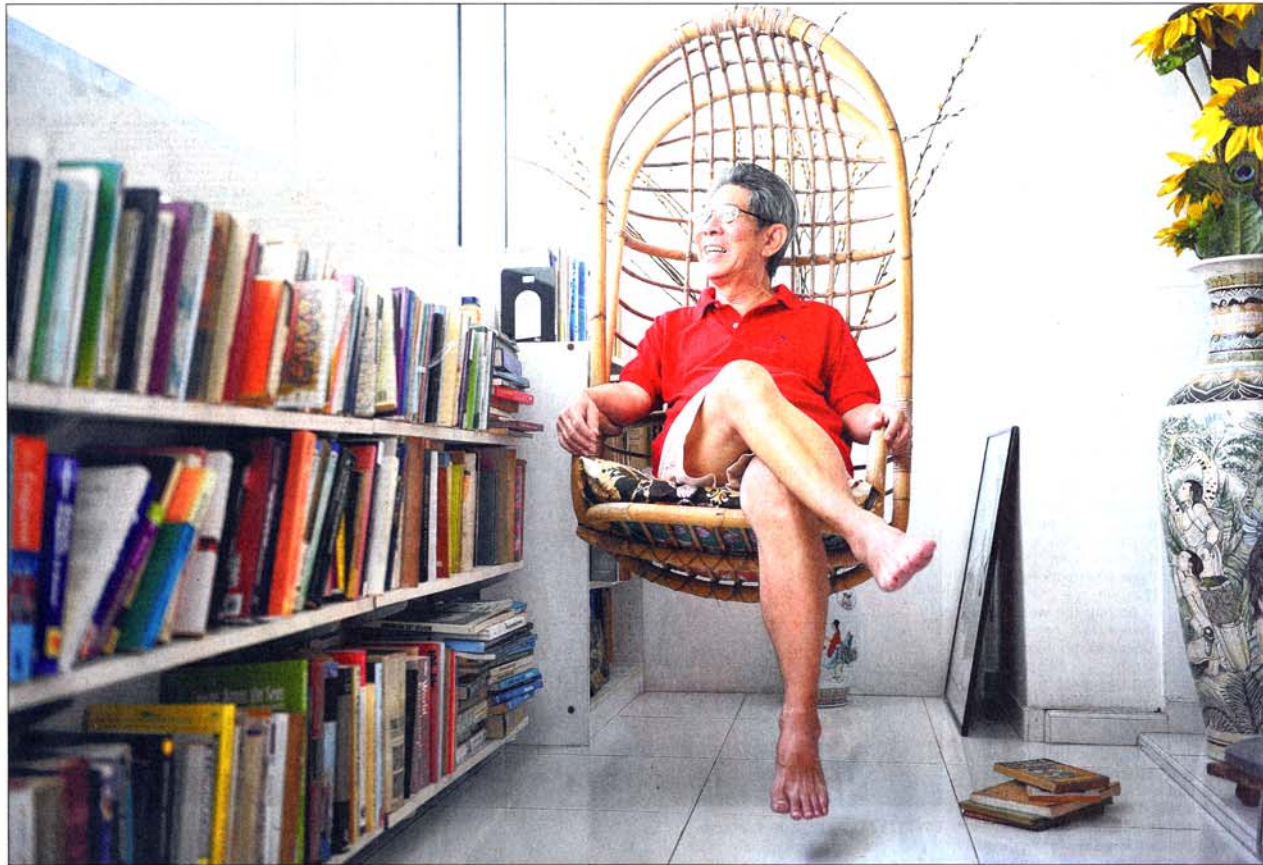
"I must say I was chairman of the Drama Review Committee, so I guess I was a known quantity. I was not a member of any political group, not beholden to any foreign party."

The committee, chaired by him from 1977 to 1991, was a precursor of the National Arts Council (NAC), and gave out funds to support home-grown writing.

Young Singaporeans may have read one of Yeo's poems along with other Singapore poets in literature class but are probably unaware of his plays or his leading role in promoting the arts during the "cultural desert" years of the 1960s and 1970s.

One Year Back Home is the middle play of a political trilogy staged between 1974 and 1997. The plays were ground-breaking for their time because they brought up the sensitive topics of opposition politics and detention without trial, but have not been restaged since.

Ignorance of his literary contributions may change with *Routes* and the



Not just personal stories, Robert Yeo's memoir also gives a rare glimpse into Singapore's literary and political situation up till 1975. ST PHOTO: DESMOND LIM

Charting his Routes

re-publishing of his only novel, 1986's *The Adventures Of Holden Heng*, about the sexual education of its anti-hero.

Another Singapore publisher, Epigram Books, is launching the book in October along with four other out-of-print Singapore novels it believes deserves a new readership.

Yeo does not want to speculate whether *Routes* and Holden Heng will connect with young readers.

Instead, he adopts a philosophical tone, noting that he survived a heart bypass operation two years ago.

"I'm 71. I published my first book in 1971, that's 40 years ago. I guess I must say that I am lucky to have lived long enough to see this day."

The oldest of four siblings, he was born into a middle-class and close-knit Peranakan family.

His father was chief clerk in a British insurance company and the family shared a rambling bungalow in the Hougang area with eight relatives.

This meant that 14 people shared one jamban, an outdoor toilet common in the 1940s. It was detached from the main building, and night soil had to be disposed manually, he records in a light-hearted episode in his memoirs.

The book unpacks his family history, childhood, school days, travel adventures, sexual exploits as a bachelor and twists and turns of his professional life.

He also talks about how he met his

wife of more than 35 years, Esther Leong. It was on the set of his first play, 1974's *Are You There, Singapore?*, and she was the lead actress.

They married after a whirlwind, two-month courtship and have two daughters and a 2½-year-old granddaughter.

For a younger generation, *Routes* is also a rare window into the literary scene and politics of the time. "I wanted to see how much progress we have made as a nation from 1965 to 1975," Yeo says.

His narrative covers not just epochal moments such as former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew announcing on television Singapore's separation from Malaysia in 1965.

That led to Independence, but also forgotten ten episodes that had a ripple effect on the political culture.

One example is Mr Lee's clash in the early 1970s with the liberal-minded independent newspaper, *Singapore Herald*.

An interview Yeo did with the *Herald*'s editor, well before its publishing licence was revoked, shows the newspaper sincerely - and as it turned out, wrongly - believed there would be more tolerance for dissenting views in an independent Singapore, compared to when it was part of Malaysia.

The 1970 interview, published in a Ministry of Education (MOE) magazine edited by Yeo, is one of numerous articles, letters, essays and poems extracted in the book. These were written by him as well

as literary and political figures. The book also contains more than 100 family and archival photographs.

He calls his memoirs a "tremendous act of remembering".

Not only did he do all the research himself, he hand-wrote the entire manuscript - still his preferred mode of writing - rather than using the computer.

An educationist and literary scholar, Yeo began his working life at age 22 as an English literature teacher at St Andrew's Secondary School.

His career choices would take him to swinging 1960s London, where he did his master's in Education, and Bangkok, where he was the information officer for a regional education body in the early 1970s.

From 1974 to 2002, he was a lecturer and, finally, associate professor in the literature division of the National Institute of Education (NIE), which became part of the Nanyang Technological University.

Currently, he teaches creative writing at the Singapore Management University. No ivory tower academic, Yeo is a tireless champion of local writers, say literary insiders.

"Robert is one of the very few Singaporean writers who makes time for other fellow writers, and who cites Singaporean writers when giving papers at conferences and writing critical essays," says literary critic Kirpal Singh.

He believes Yeo's contribution to Singapore's literary heritage is "beyond dispute" and "merits more recognition and notice".

Younger writers such as poet and freelance writer Yong Shu Hoong, 44, also

speak of his generosity.

"I've seen him attending literary readings organised by me or other poets, observing the rise of new talents and interacting with them as peers," he says.

Yeo was tooting the horn for home-grown writers all the way back in the 1970s, when a home-grown arts scene had not really taken root. He campaigned for it in newspaper columns he wrote for the now-defunct *New Nation*.

He quotes the columns in his memoirs. "They were very nationalistic. If you have a Singaporean nation, you must have a Singaporean culture, literature and theatre. I passionately believed it," he says.

He still considers himself a nationalist, the mantle of which was worn readily by many of his pre-1965 generation who lived through traumatic and exciting times. These included Singapore's self-government, merger with Malaysia and independence.

But he sees no contradiction between being a nationalist and criticising society or the government. "One has to be critical when things are not right," he says.

One Year Back Home "made a plea to the ruling government that there is room for dissent. Don't be too harsh on people who are in opposition".

The concluding play in the trilogy, 1997's *Changi*, took a stand against solitary confinement and harsh interrogation of political detainees. It is one of his best-realised works.

His trademark wavy, leonine locks now streaked with grey, Yeo cuts a gentle, sensitive presence. But he also has the doleful air of someone who remembers the doors slammed in his face.

One slight which rankles is the lack of recognition for his verse. Poetry was his first love. His first collection of poems, *Coming Home, Baby*, was published in 1971, before his playwrighting debut.

The collection was panned by literary critic Koh Tai Ann - unfairly, he believes, and recalls this episode in his memoirs.

He tells you, without mincing words: "What I have done as a playwright may have obscured what I did in poetry, because I think I wrote at a time when (Edwin) Thumboo, (Lee) Tzu Pheng and Arthur Yap were writing, and they swept all the prizes.

"I think my poetry has qualities which are neglected."

The three poets he mentioned have received the Cultural Medallion for artistic excellence. It is an award which has eluded Yeo, though he received the Public Service Medal for services to drama in 1991.

What keeps him soldiering on as a writer is the need to put into words his ideas and experiences.

He has started work on a sequel to *The Adventures Of Holden Heng* and is planning another novel on the subject of cultural amnesia in Singapore.

"If I don't write, what else can I do? Life has got to be, for me, a mixture of active and passive.

"You can read books, travel, but you need the act of creating to balance the passive part."

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Routes is selling for \$37.45 at Kinokuniya Bookstores, Select Books and BooksActually.

the monday interview with Robert Yeo

my life so far

"To see Lee Kuan Yew, who has a reputation for being really tough and intimidating, to actually break down and cry in full view of the world's press was unbelievable. I felt like it was the defining moment for my generation. I was quite taken with his argument, that we should be a part of Malaysia. Then this happened, dashing our hopes. Once hopes were dashed, you had to build a new country, and I must say I was absolutely convinced that we had no choice but to build a new nation"

On the impact of watching former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew break down on television while announcing Singapore's separation from Malaysia in 1965



Robert Yeo as a child (left) in the 1940s with his younger brothers, sister and a cousin.

"This is not just a book to me. I quote (the American poet) Walt Whitman: 'Camerado, this is no book./Who touches this, touches a man.'"

On how his memoirs lay bare his life. "Camerado" is Spanish for "comrade"

As an undergraduate (right), in his shared room at Raffles Hall, University of Singapore. He graduated with an honours degree in English in 1962.



PHOTOS: COURTESY OF ROBERT YEO



"She was a lively, good-looking girl. Couldn't stop talking. We became intimate"

On meeting Esther Leong, the woman who would become his wife, on the set of his first play *Are You There, Singapore?*. She was the lead actress. They got married on Dec 28, 1974 (left)

"The Government, I think, has listened to what people were saying: 'Why do you put so much emphasis on bread and butter issues, what about culture, things to do with the mind?'"

On the surge in support for the arts since the late 1970s



In 1966 with some of the students he taught at St Andrew's School, who saw him off when he flew to London.

"In 1966, I was in London. You went to a movie and at the end of the movie, they played *God Save The Queen* and people just walked out, hand in hand. What's all this about standing up for the national anthem? It's an old country and this sort of thing is not meaningful. But for Singapore, it was meaningful, very meaningful"

On how living in London as a graduate student strengthened his feelings for Singapore