

# THE STRAITS TIMES

## Heroes with 'gritty' stories

Singapore-based authors Willie Cheng, Sharifah Mohamed and Cheryl Tang's new book features 13 everyday Asians who make a difference in society



Asian social hero Tony Meloto (left) with former Singapore President S R Nathan, Mrs Nathan, nutritionist Aileen Leong and two Filipino children at a Singapore-built village for needy Filipinos in 2007. PHOTO: LIANHE ZAobao



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## DOING GOOD GREAT

By Willie Cheng, Sharifah Mohamed and Cheryl Tang

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One wintry day in 2000, an 80-year-old woman with severe dementia broke the railings of a window in her nursing home in Japan and clambered out into the cold.

Eight days later, rescuers found her on a snowy mountain. She had frozen to death.

Ms Masue Katayama, the founder of the home, one of the Granny Kamakura chain of commercial live-ins for the elderly, was horrified. She had set out to provide safe and comfortable second homes for old folk, supported by warm-hearted carers and homemade knick-knacks. She even sewed the curtains and bedcovers herself so there would be a more homely feel to her establishments. The 16 homes she shaped, beginning in Kamakura and extending to Tokyo, Yokohama and Kawasaki, had been a hit, even though a stay cost almost US\$2,000 (S\$2,800) a month.

But now, the death of one woman made her examine her conscience: "I had been so focused on the development of facilities for the nursing home that I had momentarily lost sight of my passion and goals, which was to create better places for the elderly to grow old together."

Since then, she has sold off the Granny Kamakura chain and established many community-based eldercare facilities throughout Japan to help the elderly look after themselves better, as well as some public nursing homes.

Ms Katayama, now 75, is one among 13 Asian social heroes featured in this month's Big Read, *Doing Good Great*. The baker's dozen were chosen by the book's three authors, Willie Cheng, Sharifah Mohamed and Cheryl Tang.

The authors felt that *Doing Good Great* would fill what they see as a vacuum in the market for books featuring everyday Asians making a difference in society.

A word on the title: The phrase "doing good" has been adopted by the social services sector to explain its aim, as opposed to "doing well", which is used by entrepreneurs.

Cheng adds that the title is also a doff to his first book, *Doing Good Well*, in which he detailed how you could draw on various management ideas to do business ethically.

The path to fulfilling good intentions, as Ms Katayama's experience shows, is strewn with unintended consequences, death threats, oppression, shortened careers and, perhaps that most banal evil, indifference.

Each among the other 12 heroes also represents an Asian country. Singapore has Ms Braema Mathi, a former Straits Times journalist who champions many causes, including the welfare of migrant workers. Malaysia's Mr Steven Gan and

Mr Premesh Chandran are the founders of news site Malaysiakini, which has questioned authority afresh and exposed many cracks in their country's political and social foundations. Indonesia has

Mr Teten Masduki, who has fought corruption so effectively that Afghanistan wants him to help it do so too. Mr Masduki is now Indonesian president Joko Widodo's chief of staff.

Then there are Mr Tony Meloto of the Philippines, who gave up his cushy post at a multinational corporation to help slum dwellers build houses and self-sufficient communities; anti-human trafficker Sompop Jantraka of Thailand, who learnt that while it takes a village to raise a child, it also takes a village to prostitute a child; and Hong Kong's Mr Ho Hei Wah, who has struggled to improve the living conditions of the many on the city's fringes, who pay rent of at least US\$200 a month to sleep in 1.2m-by-1.2m metal cages because that is the only accommodation they can afford.

Farther afield, Chinese journalist-turned-environmental crusader Ma Jun - whom the authors liken to Rachel Carson of *Silent Spring* fame - has set up a database to raise public awareness of how industrialists are polluting their surroundings. Bangladeshi architect Fazle Hasan Abed founded sustainable programmes that train the poor to set up and run businesses viably.

In India, sociologist Bindeshwar Pathak has undertaken the painfully slow challenge of improving sanitation for rural folk to free them from, among other things, being preyed on by rapists and other criminals.

The best-known names in this book are Dharma Master Cheng Yen of Taiwan, whose Tzu Chi Foundation volunteers are redoubtable for responding rapidly whenever there is a natural or humanitarian disaster; and Cambodia's Mr Aki Ra, a former child soldier in the Khmer Rouge, who has spurred his countrymen on to safely remove the many landmines with which their motherland is riddled.

Some readers may wonder: Where is someone like Aung San Suu Kyi in all this? Cheng says that he and his fellow authors were careful to avoid featuring politicians and philanthropists. As Cheng puts it, they wanted to feature a native working with the grassroots who also had a "gritty" personal story.

The authors spent long hours identifying the most critical social causes which beset Asia - say, slums, child prostitution or the lack of even the most basic toilet. They then tried to match each cause to a country and each country to a single change-maker. They confronted each of their chosen heroes with the sort of controversies and allegations that are par for the course when anyone is sincere about making the world better, in the face of perennial resistance.

The upshot of their approach to the book is that the reader will sometimes find the heroes' stories rather diffused. Their best-structured accounts are those of

Mr Meloto, Mr Masduki and Ms Katayama. Less compelling are those of Mr Ma and Mr Ho, chiefly because it is not immediately apparent from the way their tales are told that they are so exemplary.

## Fact file

### Good things come in threes

Authors Willie Cheng, Sharifah Mohamed and Cheryl Tang are old friends and long-time collaborators in writing research and projects. Cheng and Sharifah, for example, contributed an essay to a book published earlier this year, titled *50 Years Of Social Issues In Singapore*, edited by Singapore Management University don David Chan.

The trio got the idea for their new book, *Doing Good Great*, over coffee and kaya toast at a kopitiam. They chatted about their favourite social heroes, among them Mr Tony Meloto of the Philippines and Ms Aung San Suu Kyi of Myanmar.

Going from that to a book proper, though, proved arduous, particularly in pinpointing the main social ill in any one Asian country and then shortlisting the people who were most effective in tackling that.

All three wrote every chapter for the book and sometimes interviewed the book's featured heroes as a trio.

They also leveraged on one another's strengths in other areas. Prominent social entrepreneur Cheng, who retired in 2003 as country managing director and managing partner of consulting giant Accenture's communications and high-technology practice in Asia, muses: "Much of the outreach and contacts especially outside Singapore were on my shoulders because I had the network. Sharifah did a large part of the research because that was her forte and she had the most access to research sources. Cheryl was the administrator trying to keep everyone on schedule."

The 13 heroes took persuading to be part of *Doing Good Great*.

Some were reluctant to confront the occasional controversies that swirled about their work.

The authors urged them to respond to these so that their stories would be more balanced. "In fact," Cheng recalls, "this insistence on our part led to uncomfortable discussions with one or two of the candidates, but we were able to convince them that the integrity of the writing is good for them." In the end, they signed an agreement giving the authors the right to tell their stories in book form.

The authors had expected to take two years to finish the book, but this stretched to just over three years.

Asked if there might be a sequel to *Doing Good Great*, Cheng says: "Gosh, we are just exhausted and not planning any specific follow-ups, although the National Arts Council has asked us to conduct some talks based on the book."

## **Just a minute**

### **The good**

1. The three authors - Willie Cheng, Sharifah Mohamed and Cheryl Tang - have done their 13 chosen heroes justice with well-written accounts of these heroes' lives and causes.
2. The authors' style is to let the facts speak for themselves, which is effective because, one, the reader does not sense that they are pushing any agenda - important for a book featuring particular causes - and two, it is effective in helping the dire facts sink into one's consciousness.
3. They have had a careful regard for diversity in choosing who and what to feature; although there are four journalists among the 13 heroes. They have been rigorous in narrowing down the main social issues bedeviling each Asian country, by asking trusted people in each country what these were, and who in their country best acted to address them. The authors have been mindful of a balanced representation of men and women.
4. This book is an excellent snapshot of 12 Asian countries and their circumstances and challenges. The authors provide good and succinct background information on each country and also gave context to the social causes championed by each hero. There are diagrams to illustrate some of the more pronounced problems, for example, the nifty graph on ageing Japan on page 98. All of which makes *Doing Good Great* a go-to primer on the state of Asian society today.

### **The bad**