



THE LONG INTERVIEW | CHANGE-MAKERS

Habitat For Humanity Singapore's national director Yong Teck Meng is busy cleaning up all the homes of the elderly poor slumming it out behind closed doors in a nation without slums. He tells **Susan Long** why he does it.

'Must do home work'

THE air reeks of urine. The floor is tiled with dried faeces. Bedbug tracks adorn the walls. Cockroaches scurry around.

But Mr Yong Teck Meng doesn't flinch. He's bent on cleaning up the rental flats of the estimated 35,000 vulnerable elderly here, many of whom live in filth and squalor behind closed doors because they are too frail or mentally ill. And he will do it again and again, if it comes to that.

With that new focus, Habitat For Humanity Singapore's national director has reinvented its reason for being in a country where even the poorest have a roof over their heads.

In 2008, the United Nations Habitat, which promotes sustainable cities, declared Singapore the only city in the world without slums, which it defined as areas with overcrowding and a lack of sanitation.

As such, the Singapore branch of the global Christian charity, whose mission is to provide decent housing for all, is the only one worldwide that doesn't do any building locally. Of course, it still sends Singaporeans overseas to build houses for the poor, as far away as Mongolia and Romania. Almost every weekend, it dispatches teams to Batam, where it has so far built over 1,200 homes, or to Thailand, Cambodia, the Philippines, Vietnam and India.

But in Singapore, instead of building, Mr Yong scrubs, mops and fumigates.



Singapore does not have any slums or homeless people, so instead of building homes, Habitat For Humanity Singapore's national director Yong Teck Meng focuses on helping to clean up the homes of the elderly living alone in filth and squalor because they are too frail or mentally ill. He hopes that by 2030, looking out for the old will be entrenched in Singapore society. ST PHOTO: DESMOND LIM

He sees his Project Homeworks to clean up the homes of the destitute elderly as a solution to bring together an increasingly stratified Singapore society today where many Singaporeans have never stepped into a rental flat.

What keeps the 51-year-old up at night is a chilling estimate by the Ministry of Social and Family Development that there are about 35,000 vulnerable elderly who live alone here, a number set to soar to 83,000 by 2030.

Their lives of desolation are led behind shuttered windows. Mr Yong and his team of 11 work with social agencies and voluntary organisations, knocking on doors, making many enquiries to find them. Then he enlists the help of corporations and schools looking for a team-building exercise to clean about six homes each weekend. So far, they have spruced up about 450 homes in the last five years, a pace he wants to double by next year.

But the elderly are tough customers. Some, used to the squalor, require hours of persuasion to let helpers in. Others, mentally ill, rail and curse at volunteers. Hoarders often wrestle back bug-infested items. Others refuse fumigation, which means having to steam clean every crevice.

Of course, old habits die hard and often, within weeks, the mess returns.

Isn't that disheartening? Mr Yong agrees it is, but asserts: "The point is, can we or can we not accept that human beings live like that? The answer is 'No' and therefore, we would still go in and do something about it. It's a fundamental Habitat philosophy that we cannot allow a person made in the image and likeness of God, regardless of race, language or religion, to live like an animal."

He is now expanding Operation Homeworks to take on the homes of disabled people too, and working with polytechnics to build ramps to improve access for the wheelchair-bound.

It's the perfect urban project to make Singaporeans cohere "as one", he feels. It's weatherproof as it's indoors. Volunteers get a "before and after" feeling sense of achievement.

"You bring people together, they see for themselves the way the elderly poor live, they will want to do something about it. They will complain less about life also."

His goal is to naturalise looking out for the old before 2030 arrives - by which he will be 68 and among the aged here. "I'm quite ambitious and gung-ho about this, I hope to create a kind of Singapore where by 2030, it will be part of everyday life to help the elderly, not just a campaign or

project that people do once in a while."

To his great comfort, a bunch of Singapore Management University students, led by his daughter, did its house cleaning here last year. Since then, the students have "adopted" a few elderly poor, returning weekly with meals or to take them to the doctor. "It's a self-starting thing. So I pray that this is something that can happen naturally and regularly," says the man, who speaks rapid-fire, his idioms speckled with Singlish and dialect.

A bicultural man equally proficient in English and Mandarin, he feels there is a critical need to pull Singapore society together today as cultural and class rifts widen, and with the influx of foreigners in recent years.

"You have people who don't speak English, live in their own world, and you have people who just speak English and live in their own world too. Some complex demographic changes are going on and how will it all work out?"

"If you ask yourself, 'What is a Singaporean?', till today, nobody can tell you what exactly that means. It's an obvious question which should have an obvious answer. So that's very worrisome."

Reluctant builder

NOW, he builds for the poor but ironically, one of his first resolutions was never to follow his father and elder brother's footsteps into construction work.

He was the third of four children born to an illiterate stove gas deliveryman who worked his way up to become a building contractor and property developer.

His childhood was "old-style, no talk back", steeped in Chinese culture and church. From age five, he and his siblings were "raised" by Holy Grace Presbyterian Church in Geylang, as his parents tended to their business.

At 10, upon learning their maid was too poor to celebrate her son's birthday, he packed up all his toys and gave them to the boy. "I was privileged to understand early in life that it's more blessed to give than receive," he relates.

He topped Elling North Primary every year effortlessly, attended Raffles Institution, then the University of Texas at Austin, where he did electrical engineering and met his wife, Patricia, who was studying business.

They courted while helping a destitute old Taiwanese woman they met in church with two mentally-ill children. He remembers working as a dishwasher and cashier to buy the woman's groceries and pay her electricity bills.

"Helping the poor always

Yong Teck Meng on...

On charges against volun-tourism

"The theory is that it's very inefficient. You fly all the way there, might as well save the money, which can go to building more houses. One guy told me, 'I can get my Bangladeshi workers to build 300 houses for you by tomorrow' much cheaper and all that. So I said, 'Fine, send.' Then he said, 'Only joking.' So the point is that without our efforts, the house is not going to be built anyway. And there are two groups of beneficiaries, the family who gets the new house as well as the volunteer who goes on the build. It's an occasion for him to really reflect upon his life and hopefully volunteer to do something else upon his return."

On hardware and software

"Singapore is a very blessed country. I once took a couple (of) famous Hong Kong actresses who were here to promote their Chinese New Year movie around Bukit Merah. They wanted to do something for our elderly poor. One of them asked me, 'Why are you bringing me to studio apartments?' The one-room flats here are like studio apartments to Hongkong people because of the beautiful landscaping, butterflies and birds outside. To them, it was like how can you call this a place where the poor live? For sure, the Government has done an excellent job in infrastructure-building here. But behind closed doors, there's a growing rich-poor gap and many who fall through the cracks live in bedbug-infested homes."

On Singaporean volunteer quirks

"Many discover some muscles they didn't know they had. One of the funny things is that at night, when they go back to the hotel (after a build), they always summon masseuses. But that's fine."

seemed logical to me because the impact that we bring is so big. It's not rocket science. You just do a bit and they are so grateful their lives have changed so much. Compared to other work, you try so hard and nothing much changes," he reflects.

He returned home and climbed the ranks at American multinationals Digital Equipment Corporation and Apple for almost a decade, then quit as product manager to catch the dot.com wave. In 1995, the avid doodler struck out to start Doubleclick.com.sg, doing

animated electronic children's books. On the cusp of getting his company listed in Hong Kong in 2001, the Sept 11 terrorist attacks happened, tanking all hopes.

He went on to dabble in running a private school, a corporate training outfit and a listing agency in China - none of which took off. On the side, he was a long-time fund-raiser for the Community Chest, when a fellow volunteer asked him to set up a local chapter of Habitat For Humanity International. He devoured a copy of Habitat founder Millard Fuller's

The Theology of the Hammer, and was sold.

The long-time Presbyterian church elder explains: "I'm a church guy but church doesn't play well with people who are not Christians. Habitat is different. It's like walking into a room full of people and saying, 'Everybody, there's this guy outside who needs help, who wants to go?' Then whoever puts up their hand, I don't care whether you're Muslim, Buddhist, Taoist, Christian, gay, lesbian, whatever, let's all go together. It focuses on commonality and I love it. In my other life in church, I don't get to do that.

"But if you ask me why did I walk into the room in the first place, the answer is: I'm a follower of Jesus Christ. So that's where the Christian identity comes in."

In 2004, the office here got off to a sleepy start with one employee and Mr Yong moonlighting as volunteer chairman. But the Indian Ocean tsunami on Dec 24 that year revved things up, when the group got a US\$8 million (S\$9.8 million) infusion from the Singapore Red Cross.

Mr Yong resigned as chairman and became its full-time national director to oversee the building of 1,700 houses and five wells in the devastated town of Meulaboh in Indonesia's Aceh province. In the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, it got another US\$7 million boost. It spent less than half erecting 875 houses and a nursery in Chengdu and returned the unused money. Both times, it was hailed for its exemplary fund management.

Today, it has 11 underpaid, over-stretched employees here, who work in operations and fund-raising. Mr Yong reckons he is paid one-third his market worth, because, quoting Fuller, "one shouldn't get rich helping the poor because it doesn't make sense".

"I've embraced the idea that I will live a simple lifestyle for the rest of my life," he says with a shrug. "It's all relative. Relative to most people of the world, it's like crazy rich, but relative to my peers, it's simple."

Home is an old condominium along Thomson Grove. His car is a 10-year-old scratched Toyota Wish. His wife runs a Chinese tuition centre. Their elder daughter, 22, is studying business administration and plans to run an orphanage in Cambodia. Their second, aged 15, is enrolled at Singapore Chinese Girls' School.

Busting hypocrisy

WHAT keeps him going is high ideals tempered by low expectations. "They say when you're 18 and you're not idealistic, you have

no heart. But when you're 40 years old and you're still idealistic, you have no brains. The saying illustrates how tough it is to stay idealistic all your life.

"I think the key is to maintain high ideals but have low expectations of people. That's a good formula in life, because people will disappoint you."

He is also propelled by a mile-long bucket list. He runs the full marathon every year and plans to reach the Mount Everest base camp by age 55. Weekly, for the last 15 years, he's been translating world-famous Indonesian-Chinese evangelist Dr Stephen Tong's fire-and-brimstone sermons from Chinese to English. "I try to live 1,001 lives at the same time and seize the day," he says.

For the past three years, he's also pastored the Reformed Evangelical Church (Singapore), an English-speaking congregation of 130 he grew from scratch, which actively helps abused maids here and orphans in Batam.

His favourite pulpit exhortation: "Faith without works is dead." His pet peeve is the "talk, talk, talk" self-righteousness of many church people. What drew him to Habitat for Humanity was its "Shut up and just do it" ethos of working shoulder-to-shoulder with the poor to help them build their homes. "I saw that as a good counterbalance to the excesses of theorising and theology."

He's known to be an all-embracing pastor. "You can smoke in front of me, curse and swear, use the F-word, sport tattoos and all that, I don't care," he shrugs.

He counts among his best friends an alcoholic. "He likes me because I don't judge him. I appreciate his honesty about his weaknesses, more than people who pontificate but at the end of the day you ask them to do something for the poor, they won't do it. Hypocrisy is a big sin in the Bible."

Above all, what invigorates him daily is "the great privilege of being able to give an old woman a good night's sleep and that God will give me the ability to make that happen", he says. "I find that to be more of a high than all the other things my friends are into."

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Yong Téck Meng tells
OLIVIA CHANG what
keeps him going



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