

Beneath Pornsak's cheery exterior is a man who is always looking out for his elderly father



**Foong Woei Wan**

**A** month-long Christmas holiday in Singapore for a nine-year-old boy from Thailand begins wonderfully, as he basks in the bright lights of the big city. Then things take a weird turn when he is given textbooks and uniforms as Christmas presents.

The vacation ends, he is still in Singapore and a strange new reality starts.

Suddenly, he is a Primary 4 pupil at South View Primary School, although he does not understand, much less speak, a word of English and Mandarin. He speaks Thai and Teochew but he does not recognise his own Thai name when it is read out in a bewildering accent by a teacher who is marking attendance.

He is a fish out of water, not only in school but also at home, as a new arrangement has the boy - whose mother died of leukaemia when he was five and whose father is a travelling spare-parts businessman - living with the father's first wife.

And before long, the lad, who is something of a troublemaker, is shunted from one half-sibling's home to the next, and the next.

Grim as this story sounds, it has a happy ending.

That lad has grown up to be Pornsak, the multilingual television host who, in six years, has ascended to the top of Singapore's viewership charts and won hearts in and out of the HDB heartland.

Although he has never acted in a drama, his appeal is broad enough for him to endorse a dizzying array of products, from Clinique men's skincare range to Mama Lemon dishwashing detergent.

Fluent in Mandarin, English and Thai, he is the sunny, energetic Everyman in Food Source, an itinerant show which has sent him to destinations from Hainan to Tasmania, climbing a coconut tree in sickle-like shoes and diving for abalones on a freezing day.

For three years running, from 2010 to last year, the show was the most popular variety programme on Channel 8. It attracted an average of 831,000 viewers last year, not far behind the top drama, Don't Stop Believin' (918,000), starring Elvin Ng and Felicia Chin, and ahead of shows such as Unriddle 2 (816,000), starring Chen Liping and Rui En.

Currently, Pornsak is hosting The Joy Truck, a feel-good variety show which has been topping the charts for weeks. Food Source will return for a fourth season next year.

At this interview at Porn's, his Thai restaurant at The Star Vista, Pornsak is wearing a shirt with a bowtie and has the air of a perky, well-behaved schoolboy.

Thinking back to those years as a young "nomad" in Singapore, the 31-year-old says: "A lot of people say, 'I don't want to grow up.' But when I first came to Singapore, the only thing I wanted to do was to grow up, quickly."

One part of him wanted to return to Bangkok and rebel against his family's arrangement, he admits. "I refused to go to school. I sort of ran away from my tutor and I fought in class."

But another part of him did not want to let his elderly father down, he explains. "I'm glad the part that wanted to do well won."

His China-born, Thailand-based father, now 90, had married his Chinese-Thai mother late in life, when he was in his 50s. They had a boy named Pornsak Prajakwit and lived in a five-storey house in Sathorn, in central Bangkok.

After the mother died, the father wanted to move the boy to China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Malaysia or Singapore - somewhere where he could learn Chinese.

He decided on Singapore ultimately, where he had settled with his first wife in the 1940s and raised eight children - Pornsak's half-siblings, some of whom housed him when he was between Primary 5 and Secondary 2.

Pornsak likens himself to a high-risk investment for his father. Putting himself in his father's shoes, he says: "If everybody has been telling you, don't invest in this property and these shares, if it does



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# DADDY'S BOY

well, 'Wah, you yan guang.' You yan guang is Mandarin for "you have vision".

"But if it doesn't do well, everyone will say, 'See, or-bi-good.' Or-bi-good is Singlish for "I told you so".

His father had invested too much in him, he says, and he felt he could not fail the Primary School Leaving Examination and not qualify for a secondary school, for example. "When I was in primary school, he was already in his 70s. I don't want him, at the age of 72, to lose face."

In Primary 4, 5 and much of Primary 6, he was "blur", understanding next to nothing in class.

But around the PSLE, he "started to get a bit unblur" and figured out how question papers work.

For English comprehension, he would zoom in on a word in a question, find the sentence in the passage with that word, and copy that sentence as his answer.

For Chinese composition, he memorised descriptions. Every woman he wrote about "wears a pearl necklace", and about every old man, he wrote: "The

years have left marks on his face."

Also, multiple-choice questions were a breeze "because I understand one, two, three, four".

And so he passed the PSLE with four As. "I'm lucky. Because you have to survive. Because if I fail, I will be deported, you know."

But what felt better was when he finally spoke enough English and Mandarin to have good friends in his second year at Clementi Town Secondary School. "They're my very first close friends in Singapore. I was so thankful."

Luck, serendipity, thankfulness - these themes come up a lot when you ask Pornsak how he became a star.

He brightens, for instance, when he speaks of how he moved in with his schoolmates from Secondary 2 onwards - he lived with three families before his father rented him an apartment when he went to Singapore Management University - and discovered he had the potential to be an auntie-killer.

"Their mums all liked me," he says.

For his hosting career, he thanks his "fairy godmothers": Ms Margaret Chan, the former actress and associate professor of theatre studies at Singapore Management University's (SMU) school of social sciences, and Ms Goh Djong Hoa, the vice-president of Chinese entertainment productions at MediaCorp.

He had won a UFM 100.3 deejay contest in his final year at SMU in 2004 and joined the radio station full-time after he graduated in business management.

It was "pure luck", he says, when Ms Chan asked him to host the opening of SMU's Li Ka Shing Library in 2006, a no-pay, high-profile gig at which she introduced him to MediaCorp executives and which led to a job offer from the television station.

(Actually, she had never taught him, he says. They met at SMU's English communication centre for foreign students, where she interviewed him for a job as a student mentor.)

As there was no pay, Pornsak says he might have said no to the gig if it had not been Ms Chan who asked him. But she is a mentor and a mother figure to him, who

has "never asked anything of me, except for me to work harder and live better".

"That's the first time she asked something of me", and so he said yes.

After he joined MediaCorp in 2007, he was, again, "lucky", he says. Newcomers usually wait for a few months to be cast in variety shows but on his second day at work, he had a styling session for Ms Goh's new outdoor programme, Way To Go, and on his third day, he had a shoot.

Afterwards, Ms Goh helped him grow as a host by giving him a variety of shows, such as Stars Beat It II, an interactive programme, and Campus Superstar II, a live show, he says. And she cast him in Food Source and made him a star.

Talk to the two women, however, and a different picture emerges: Pornsak may be a man who makes his own luck.

In a telephone interview, Ms Chan, 63, says she was struck by how he once asked to host a convocation ceremony, despite having no experience at all.

She used to nag him about being a bum but says of him: "He must be a person who actually works very, very hard, but he doesn't come across as driven."

Ms Goh, who is in her 50s, says she remembered him from a MediaCorp hosting class years ago. Taiwanese TV host Hsu Nai-lin was one of the trainers, and Pornsak and would-be actress Paige Chua were two of the top trainees. "He spoke good Mandarin, was lively and had a good memory," she says of Pornsak.

For all the years he has spent in Singapore, Pornsak, a permanent resident, says: "Deep down within me, there's still a Thai boy. The one who's carefree, the one who just wants to roam around."

Consider his schedule, though, and it is hard not to conclude that the Thai boy must be hiding really, really deep down.

Besides TV, there is his food business. He has four Porn's restaurants with his close friend, former TV writer Foo Tuan How, and intends to open more.

Pornsak likes cooking and has whipped up meals since he was six. But at Porn's - which he opened after an early business plan for a Chinese dessert shop backfired - he leaves the cooking to his staff.

Then there is his education business. He has Fun. Learn. Share Chinese Lab, a school in Bukit Timah, with TV host Charlyn Lin Cuifang, and they are opening another one in Sentosa Cove by September or October.

Before that, he got a master's degree in early education from Monash University through distance learning last year, and he is now in the sixth year of a seven-year traditional Chinese medicine course. (His other "fairy godmother", physician Tan Bee Gawh, advised him to take up TCM as a back-up career plan.)

Given how much he has on his plate, it is surprising that he found time to woo a Thai girlfriend, a former CP Food Products public relations manager he met when Food Source went to Thailand. Less surprisingly, they split up early this year, after spending two years "trying to meet", he says.

His smile is rueful when he reveals that she, not he, decided to end the relationship. "I wouldn't have said it."

Home, when he is not jetting about, is an apartment in Bukit Timah, where he rents out two rooms - for, among other reasons, filial piety. His father, who still lives in their house in Sathorn, likes to drop by Singapore unannounced, sometimes when his son is away.

Pornsak, a world-class worrier where his father is concerned, prefers having tenants so someone is around to call an ambulance if something should happen to his dad.

After Food Source producer Chen Wencong died last year of pneumonia, aged 42, it gave Pornsak pause. Typically, though, awareness of his own mortality got him more worried about his father.

"Because you cannot always assume your parents are going to pass on before you, you know," Pornsak says.

He made a will, a living will and other plans for his dad's well-being, to spare his father from having to make a single difficult decision.

"My dad is 90. He cannot fend for himself already. He should just go and play *erhu*, paint and chat with friends. That's all he needs to do. That's what I want to do for him, just for him to enjoy his life."

He sounds more like a dad than a son, and when you tell him that, he laughs.

But tell him his dad has other children to worry about him and Pornsak says: "Trust me, he loves me the most. I know it, he knows it, everybody knows it."

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