

honour mum's sacrifices

The Straits Times, Singapore, Page 13, Section: SPORT |
Wednesday 16 September 2026
784 words, 1802cm² in size
386,100 circulation

Team Singapore's 304-strong contingent for the Asian Games is set for battle in the samurai city of Nagoya and Aichi prefecture from Sept 19 to Oct 4. In a nod to Bushido, the way of the warrior, **The Straits Times** explores how Singapore's athletes embody its seven principles of integrity, respect, courage, honour, compassion, honesty and loyalty. Today, the spotlight is on cyclist **Valencia Tan**.

To honour mum's sacrifices



For eight years, Super Star Original Famous Penang Laksa was a popular fixture at the People's Park Food Centre.

Loyal diners flocked to the stall run by Phua Yoke Phek, locals and tourists sharing table space as they tucked into steaming bowls of her Penang assam laksa.

One local food blog called it "slurp-worthy", while another included it on its list of Singapore's best assam laksa.

But the shutters came down for good in May 2025, when Phua traded her ladies and bowls for the driver's seat of a taxi.

The single mother made the career change so that she would have time and the flexibility to ferry her daughter, national cyclist Valencia Tan, to and from training.

Ahead of Tan's Asian Games debut in the women's omnium and Madison road race events, Phua, 59, said: "Of course I miss the shop but I do not regret it because I want to support my daughter's dream to go to the Olympics."

"It's her hobby, her dream. I want to do whatever I can to support it."

Her love for her 21-year-old daughter is apparent in their Bidadari HDB flat. Photos of Tan's SEA Games debut in 2025 in Bangkok, where she won a silver medal, and her competing at the recent Commonwealth Games line the fridge door and walls.

Inspired by her twin brother Sachin, who was born just two minutes after her, Tan took up cycling as a hobby in 2021 after seeing how much he enjoyed the sport. She started off cycling at East Coast Park and soon transitioned into riding on the roads. Not long after, she was selected for the national team.

As her interest grew, she swapped her Decathlon bike – which was passed down from her aunt – for a \$2,000 second-hand road bike. In 2023, Tan asked her mum if she could buy a better "race-level" bike. Though initially shocked by the \$16,000 price tag, Phua borrowed the funds from friends for the professional-grade S-Works bike, a debt she has since fully repaid.

Knowing how much her mother has given up to support her sporting

ambitions, Tan is determined to honour that faith by giving everything she has on the bike.

"Of course, I know how lucky I am to be able to have my mother support me in my ambitions, and it motivates me every day, in every training and race," said Tan, a first-year business student at the Singapore Management University.

"Hopefully I can make it to the Olympics one day so that I can repay all that she has done for me to have a chance at this."

MUM'S SACRIFICE

FOR EIGHT YEARS, VALENCIA TAN'S MOTHER, PHUA YOKE PHEK, RAN SUPER STAR ORIGINAL FAMOUS PENANG LAKSA, A POPULAR STALL AT PEOPLE'S PARK FOOD CENTRE. IN 2025, AS TAN'S CYCLING CAREER GAINED MOMENTUM, SHE CLOSED THE SHOP TO TAKE ON A JOB THAT WOULD ALLOW HER TO SUPPORT TAN IN HER SPORTING AMBITIONS.

FROM LAKSA TO ROAD LANES

PHUA BECAME A TAXI DRIVER FULL TIME AFTER CLOSING THE SHOP. SO THAT SHE COULD FERRY HER DAUGHTER TO TRAINING, GYM SESSIONS, AND SCHOOL, SHE PLANNED HER TRIPS AROUND HER DAUGHTER'S SCHEDULE.

\$16,000 LEAP OF FAITH

AFTER TAN BROKE INTO THE NATIONAL TEAM AND BEGAN COMPETING MORE REGULARLY, SHE WANTED TO UPGRADE HER BIKE. PHUA DID NOT HAVE ENOUGH MONEY TO PAY FOR THE S-WORKS BIKE COSTING ABOUT \$16,000 – SHE BORROWED SOME FROM A FRIEND, WHILE ANOTHER CLOSE FRIEND, UNCLE RONNIE, CHIPPED IN TO SUPPORT TAN'S AMBITIONS.

SWEET SUCCESS

IN DECEMBER 2025, PHUA FLEW TO BANGKOK TO WATCH TAN COMPETE AT THE SEA GAMES, HER FIRST MAJOR GAMES IN NATIONAL COLOURS. SEEING HER DAUGHTER RACE WAS ONE OF HER PROUDEST MOMENTS, MADE SWEETER WHEN TAN WON A SILVER MEDAL.

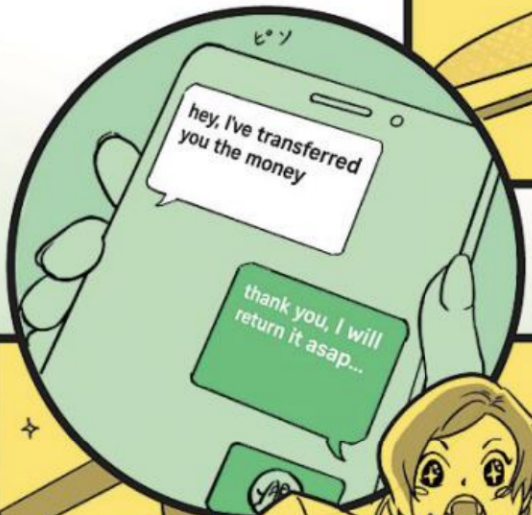
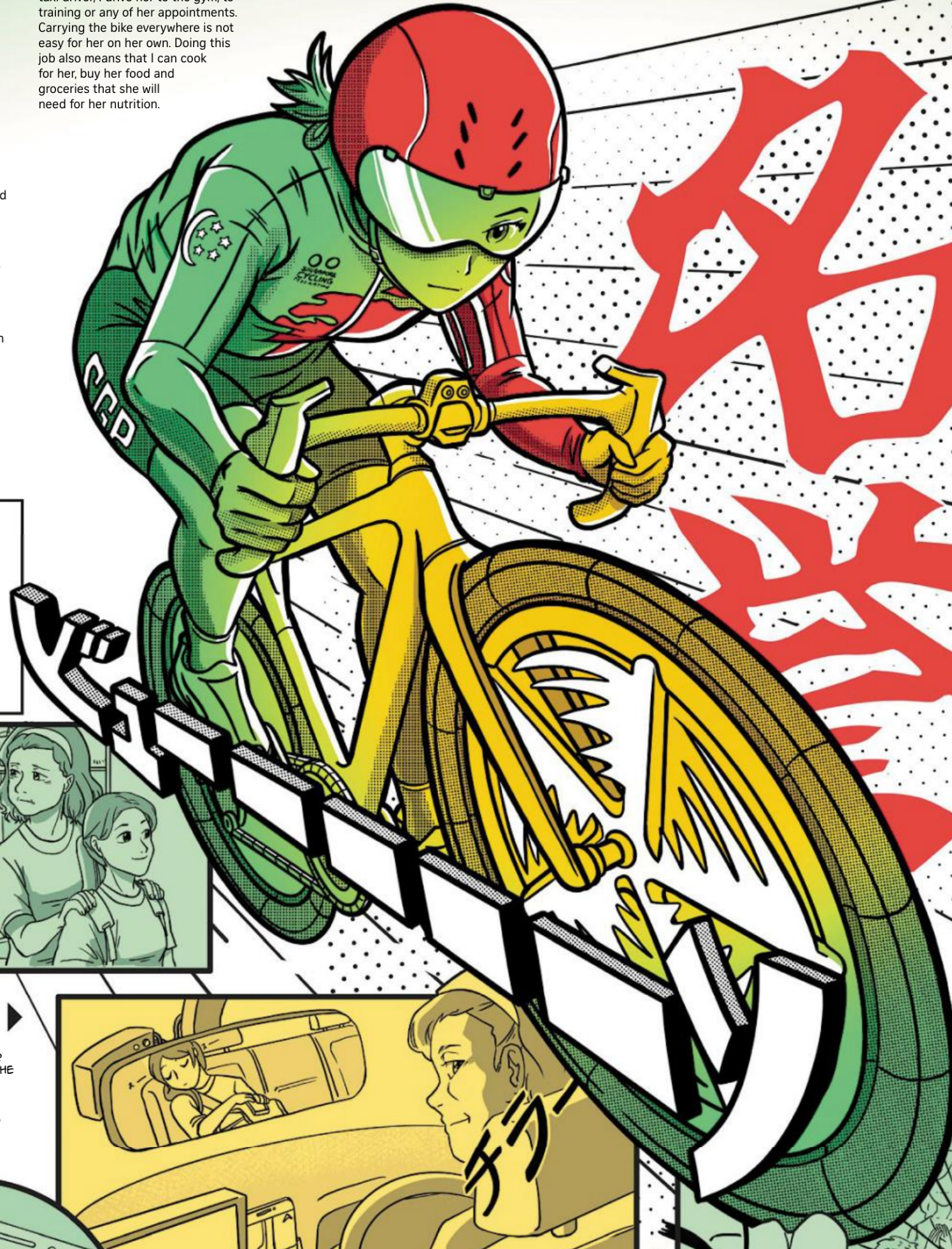


PHOTO: SPEXSG ANDY CHUA
TEXT: DEEPANRAJ GANESAN
ST GRAPHICS: BILLY KER, NG WENG CHI