

CHIA JOO MING

CHIA JOO MING (b. 1959) is an accomplished novelist who has been cited as ‘one of the ten keywords of Singapore’s Chinese cultural perspectives’ by Prof David Der-wei Wang, Department of East Asian Languages and Civilizations, Harvard University (‘The Cultural Perspectives of Sinophone Articulations and Singaporean Experience: Ten Key Words’, 2012).

Joo Ming has published 12 books since 1976. His works explore the historical development of Singapore, including the post-independence era, and highlight social issues such as immigration. In 2016, his novel ‘m40’ (2009) was one of the Top 20 Novels (2001–2015) featured in ‘Wen Hsun’ (文讯), Taiwan’s Literary Magazine. His 2018 novel ‘Kian Kok’ (建国) has also been listed as the 2018 Top 10 Novels by Yazhou Zhoukan (Asiaweek).

His works are regularly studied in Chinese literature modules in the National University of Singapore (NUS) and Nanyang Technological University (NTU), becoming subjects of numerous undergraduate and postgraduate theses. His 2015 novel ‘Exile or Pursuit’ (放逐与追逐) was selected as the Chinese Literature textbook for secondary schools by the Ministry of Education (MOE) in 2018. An English-language translation of the novel was published in 2019, and adapted into a stage performance in 2021 by MOE and the Committee to Promote Chinese Language Learning, in collaboration with InARTS Collective.

He was the Writer-in-Residence at NTU in 2014 and has served on the panel of judges for numerous Chinese literary awards, including the Sin Chew Daily Literature Awards (2019) and Singapore Tertiary Chinese Literature Awards (2013, 2015).

Joo Ming was the founding editor for the literary section ‘Urban Literature’ (城市文学) for ‘Shin Min Daily News’ (新明日报) in 1984, which brought about a new style to the evening newspapers. In 1988, as the ‘Lianhe Zaobao’ sub-editor for the Literary Section, he organised a series of projects to nurture potential young writers in the creative writing field.

Spearheading the literary section twice in his career, Joo Ming had undoubtedly made an impact in the local literary arts scene by undertaking the lead planner, organiser and editor roles for activities such as ‘Zaobao Book Choice’ (早报书选) and ‘Literary Phenomena: A Collection of Lianhe Zaobao Literary Writings’ (文字现象), and was a committee member of Zaobao Literary Festival (早报文学节) since 2018.

A recipient of the Young Artist Award in 1993, Joo Ming has also received many major awards including the Golden Lion Literary Awards (1987, 1989 & 1991), the National Book Development Council of Singapore’s Book Awards (1996) and Singapore Literature Prize (2006, 2010, 2016 (commendation) & 2020). In 2017, he received the S.E.A. Write Award for his outstanding literary achievements.



NTU Writer-in-Residence in 2014
From left: NTU Deputy University Librarian, Dianne Cmor, Chia Joo Ming and Dean of Social Science and Humanities, Professor Liu Hong
Photo courtesy of Chia Joo Ming

CHIA JOO MING: THE KEYWORD NOVELIST

BY ASSOC PROF TAN CHEE LAY



In 2012, when Harvard University's Professor David Der-wei Wang, one of the most revered gurus of modern Chinese literature,¹ extolled Chia Joo Ming as one of the 10 keywords of Singaporean Chinese literature, Joo Ming was astounded. He was, after all, armed with only an air-conditioner repairman certification from the former Singapore Technical Institute. Not only did he not possess the academic qualifications, he was an introvert who avoided most literary functions and did not have the literary connections then.

However, Joo Ming possessed a unique trait very few could claim to own in abundance in our multi-hyphenated, "the-more-the-merrier" society: a single-mindedness.

In a recent interview I conducted with him,² he declared he was a "Jack of no trade" who did not have any noteworthy qualifications and, hence, "could not afford to be choosy in life." As part of the last batch of Chinese-educated students who grew up in a difficult and impoverished period during Singapore's early nation-building years in the 1960s, he assumed that he could only accept what life had chosen for him.



1993 Young Artist Award Recipients,
with Chia Joo Ming on the right
Photo courtesy of Chia Joo Ming

After reading classics by great literary masters such as Ernest Hemingway and Eileen Chang, Joo Ming was convinced that he was not blessed with literary talent and told himself to be grateful for his accidental career as a journalist. In hindsight, we must thank what life has chosen for him—journalism, and with it, a pen with seemingly endless ink. As it turns out, Joo Ming's claim of being a "Jack of no trade" is a blessing in disguise, for he has, unwittingly, become a "master of one"—a writer, and a genuinely excellent one.

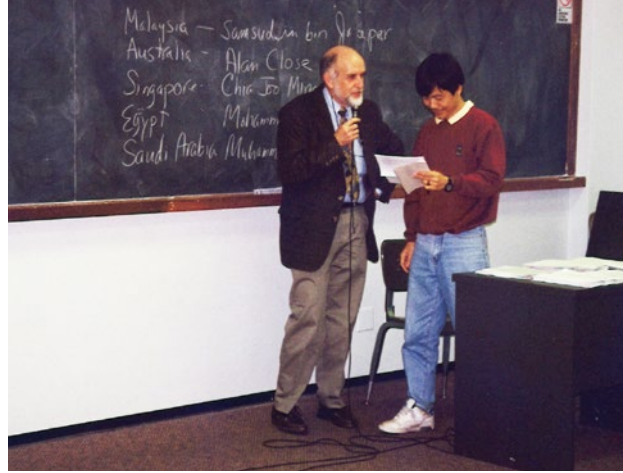
Slowly and steadily, Joo Ming, a self-described "barefoot kampung child at heart," began to gain recognition due to his unwavering devotion to writing and publishing. He started writing at 17, weaned on years of reading his elder brothers' fiction books at home.

His gift was spotted soon by Yao Zi, the writer-editor of 'New Wind,' (新风) the literary supplement of 'Shin Min Daily News' who published his creative writings frequently in the paper. By the time he turned 20, Joo Ming had enough essays to publish a collection, 'The Song of Guitar' (六弦琴之歌, 1978), together with his older brother, Cultural Medallion recipient Chia Hwee Pheng (Xi Ni Er).

Joo Ming has not looked back since then. He has produced 12 books, of which a notable three were full-length novels; and received four Golden Lion Literary Awards, four Singapore Literature Prizes (SLP), of which one was a commendation prize, and a National Book Development Council of Singapore (NBDCS) Book Award, the Young Artist Award (1993) and the S.E.A Write Award (2017).

His penchant for avant-garde works emerged very early in his literary career. Mr Toh Lam Huat, the Chief Editor of 'Shin Min Daily News,' was among the first people to notice his unique literary sensitivity. In his preface for Joo Ming's first short story collection, 'The Most Boring Nationality' (最闷族, 1989), saying: "While Singapore urban literature is a new plant, Joo Ming's fiction is the first leaf that is closest to the flowering bud."³ In the book 'A Preliminary Study of the History of Singapore Chinese Literature', Joo Ming was affirmed as a true-blue Singaporean writer who focuses on Singapore's city-state urbanity, which truly constitutes a new tradition in Singapore Chinese literature.⁴ Critics have also pointed out that his depiction of the fast-changing "Chineseness" in urban Singapore is very different from that by other local Chinese writers: calm and even cold, he observes and reflects from afar, producing masterpieces with levity, satire and black humour.⁵

His formal experiments speak volumes about his unconventional creativity. The 51 micro-fiction pieces in 'New Words of Worldly Tales' (世说新语, 1994) represented Joo Ming's search for a new form of fiction: a stylistic structure which corresponds to a cultural resurgence in post-independent Singapore. His revelry with unusual forms and semantics—such as listicle narratives, brief and powerful quotations, highly condensed stylistics, and a mix



International Writing Programme (IWP) at Iowa University, with the Director of IWP, Clark Balise, 1995
Photo courtesy of Chia Joo Ming

of Singlish and Singnese (colloquial Singaporean English and Singaporean Chinese)—is evident throughout the book. Joo Ming self-deprecatingly called his micro-fiction “textual chit-chat,” but his cynical yet serious approach and innovation in fiction are certainly exceptional in the Singapore literary scene.

Even though he has written much on Singaporean modernity, Joo Ming still finds it challenging to create fiction in a relatively stable and conservative society like Singapore. After all, writing critically about social absurdities requires much courage and imagination. “In Bangkok, you may witness a mother-and-daughter pairing begging in front of a most luxurious bungalow where life can be scored anything from 0 to 10,” he explained. “Life in Singapore is not so extreme. You can score it from 4.5 to 8.5.”

Nevertheless, he has found a way to overcome the lack of obvious narrative inspiration in Singapore’s routine and mundane society: historical research. He spoke enthusiastically about the amount of interesting resources one can uncover from databases and newspaper archives (especially convenient for him as a news editor): “More often than not, history is more fictional than fiction.”

Via his access to a wealth of historical information—uncovering secret stories of Chinese dynasties and palaces, the central Catholic administrative body of the *Curia Romana*, Taiwanese political parties, as well as “left-over, unresolved scars” of World War II in Southeast Asia—Joo Ming ventured into local and world historical fiction.

In the SLP-winning short-story collection, ‘Reconstructing Nanyang Images’ (重构南洋图像, 2005), he focused on the geo-societal contexts of Singapore, including before it was founded by Sir Stamford Raffles. Besides depicting Chinese travellers who passed by this island in the Han, Tang and Yuan dynasties, he provided the creative fictional background for historical Nanyang iconography and nomenclature such as *selat* (or “strait” or “channel” in English), Tumasik, Dragon’s Teeth Gate, Straits dollar (currency used as part of the Straits Settlements), and “Holland Water” (*Ho Lan Shui* or carbonated water). In ‘1644: The Year a Dynasty Was Hanged’ (甲申说明书: 崇祯皇帝和他身边的人, 2012), Joo Ming went as far as to create a full-length historical novel about Emperor Chongzhen (1611-1644) and shed new light on how the latter lost the Ming Dynasty.

Joo Ming returned to the Singaporean backdrop in ‘Kian Kok’ (建国, 2018), interrogating the subjectivity and objectivity of the country’s historical narratives from the perspective of the protagonist Kian Kok (whose name means “nation-building” in Chinese). Utilising choice newspaper reports in ‘Shin Min Daily News’ and ‘Lianhe Wanbao’ over one full year in 2015 when Singapore celebrated its 50th anniversary, this novel is unique in its “newspaper-cutting” form of narrativity as well as its novel angle in highlighting the



Chia Joo Ming as guest speaker at National Dong Hwa University, Taiwan in 2019
Photo courtesy of Chia Joo Ming

germination of, and reception towards, the accidental nationhood. Demonstrating the complex relationship between fictionalised newspaper reports and the rise of a critical socio-consciousness, the novel was awarded the SLP in 2020 and selected by Asiaweek as one of the top 10 novels of the year in 2018.

While the so-called macro-environment may not be amenable for Chinese creative writing, Joo Ming believes one can always create his own micro-environment.

As an important member of the organising committees of the International Chinese Literature Conference (1987-1991) and the annual Zaobao Literary Festival (since 2018), Joo Ming indeed walks his talk by creating various conducive micro-environments for literature lovers and practitioners.

Currently the Senior Executive Sub-editor for ‘Lianhe Zaobao’s Literary Supplement, ‘Literary City’ (文艺城), he has advocated for, and organised impactful literary programmes over the years, both within and beyond his capacity as a journalist.

In 1984, he started and edited the literary section ‘Urban Literature’ for ‘Shin Min Daily News,’ bringing a fresh, new look to the evening newspaper. He initiated special editions of ‘Lianhe Zaobao’s literary supplement, such as ‘100 years of Modern Chinese Literature’ and ‘The Return of Veteran Writers’, and introduced columns featuring young, emerging voices, just like what Yao Zi had done for him. Other initiatives by him which have also won accolades include the annual ‘Collection of Lianhe Zaobao Literary Writings’ (2015-2021) and ‘Lianhe Zaobao Annual Book List’ (since 2016).

Today, Joo Ming is not just a keyword but also the *tour de force* of Singapore literature, locally and abroad. His works are regularly studied in Chinese literature modules in the National University of Singapore (NUS) and Nanyang Technological University (NTU), becoming subjects of numerous undergraduate and postgraduate theses. In 2014, he was appointed Writer-in-Residence at NTU. His novel ‘Exile or Pursuit’ (放逐与追逐) was selected as the first full-length local Chinese Literature textbook for secondary schools by the Ministry of Education in 2018, and subsequently produced as a stage performance for all literature students in 2021.

Internationally, Joo Ming’s works have gained popularity, especially in Malaysia and Taiwan. His 2016 novel, ‘m40’, was selected as one of the top 20 novels between 2001 and 2015 by Taiwanese literary journal ‘Wen Hsun’ (文讯). He has been invited by National Taiwan University, National Dong Hwa University from Taiwan, and Malaysia’s Huazong Literary Award to present keynote speeches on his creative writing.



S.E.A Write Award, 2019
From left: Goh Mey Teck, Ovidia Yu and Chia Joo Ming
Photo courtesy of Chia Joo Ming

Restless as ever, this ‘keyword novelist’ feels a much stronger sense of urgency to write his next novel. “Time is running out,” he quipped. Perhaps the keywords for Joo Ming now are what he kept repeating in our interview: “Focus, and just write.”

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Assoc Prof Tan Chee Lay is a bilingual scholar, creative writer and artist. He is the co-founder of Poetry Festival Singapore, and has served on the Cultural Medallion and Young Artist Award Specialist Panels, and the S.E.A Write Award Panel.

- 1 Wang, D, ‘The Cultural Perspectives of Sinophone Articulations and Singaporean Experience: Ten Key Words,’ Speech at Public Lecture In Memory of Tan Lark Sye: 40th Anniversary (Singapore: 2012).
- 2 Tan, C L, Interview with Chia Joo Ming, Singapore, 8 Oct 2021.
- 3 Toh, NH, ‘A romantic rain,’ in Chia, J. M., ‘The Most Boring Nationality,’ Full House Communications (Singapore: 1989), p. 5.
- 4 Wong, M V, Xu N X, ‘A Preliminary Study of the History of Singapore Chinese Literature,’ National University of Singapore Chinese Department & World Scientific Publishing (Singapore: 2002), p. 310.
- 5 See for instance, Zhang S J, ‘Post-adherent of the Lion City: The Exile Writing of Novelist Chia Joo Ming’ http://www.360doc.com/content/21/0514/11/75273272_977112795.shtml (accessed 10 Oct 21), and Goh, C K, ‘A study of the works of Chia Joo Ming,’ <https://dr.ntu.edu.sg/bitstream/10356/48284/1/FYP%20A%20Study%20of%20the%20Works%20of%20Chia%20Joo%20Ming.pdf> (accessed 11 Oct 2021)/.



WORDS OF APPRECIATION

I have been writing for 45 years. From the time when I was just a 17-year-old callow youth to being a 62-year-old veteran who has seen it all, I am heartened to have received the Young Artist Award and now the Cultural Medallion. These milestones mark the important stages of my life.

Today’s affirmation is especially significant considering these extraordinary times we inhabit, as we continue to keep faith in the arts and culture. For that, I would like to extend my gratitude to the National Arts Council.

As witnesses to history unfolding, we converse with the beleaguered Mother Nature, protect fragile lives, and reassess what is truly important.

Through the arts and culture, every artist can process and glean insights from his or her own responses to the pandemic, and what hand fate has dealt each and every one of us.

Years later, those lucky among us may look back and be grateful for having gone through such uncertain times.

So, let us appreciate the times we live in, and our arts and culture.

This pandemic has clarified and simplified our priorities and lifestyles. At the most basic level, we realise home is where the heart is.

It is the first stop and the final destination for all of us, and so it is for us writers, too. For that, I would like to thank my family.

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从“少年不识愁滋味”的17岁开始，至“白发渔樵江渚上”的62岁，45年书写之路，分别获得青年艺术家奖和文化奖，都是人生不同阶段重要的肯定；尤其是在这特殊时刻，我们依然相信、拥抱文化与艺术。感谢艺术理事会。

这个特殊时刻，我们都在历史现场，与大自然深切对话，守护微弱的生命，重申所有的必要；文化与艺术则展现个体对疫情、命运的揭示。多年后，幸存的我们许或会庆幸生活在这个不测的时代。感谢时代，感谢文化与艺术。

疫下所有繁复都归简，触感初始，再幸以家为单位。家一直为人类最初与最后的栖息地，书写之路亦如此。感谢家人。