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## AUNG SAN SUU KYI

**'THE LADY' IS FREE  
BUT TENSIONS  
REMAIN IN BURMA**

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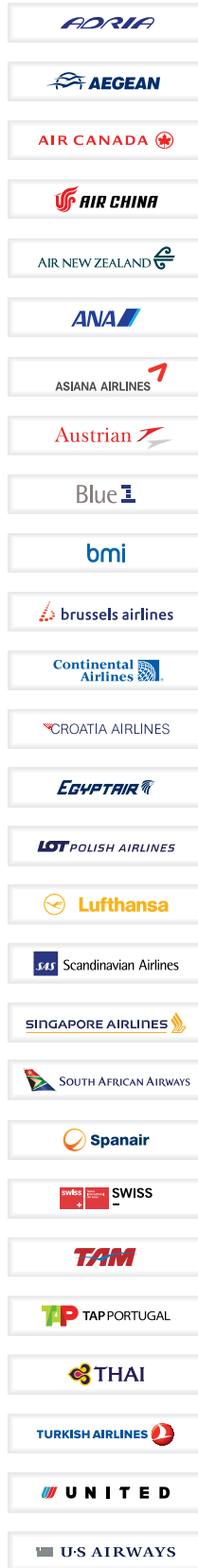
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# An Icon Free At Last

**T**he joy with which Aung San Suu Kyi's supporters everywhere greeted her release from house arrest on November 13 was as spontaneous and enthusiastic as the junta-staged elections on November 7 were not. In riposte to the regime's obvious public relations move to blunt domestic and international demands, Suu Kyi's reception spoke in the authentic voice of freedom, not in the flawed lingo of pretend polls that belied the ruling generals' appetite for power. The people made abundantly clear again whom they wanted as their leader, as if there was ever any doubt on that score since Suu Kyi's landslide electoral victory two decades ago. She has been released twice before, in 1995 and 2002, only to be re-arrested. If the regime were to repeat that trajectory, there is no predicting the reaction.

Even amid currently unpromising political realities for the opposition, her public reappearance holds promise for real change though the outcome is far from certain. The first words Suu Kyi uttered above the cheers of the crowd were Mandela-esque: "People must work in unison. Only then can we achieve our goal." If indeed there are no restrictive conditions to her release, she needs to work quickly to heal the divisions that have emerged within her own movement. However, she should also not miss the opportunity of the moment to extend a conciliatory hand to the government once again,

despite its harsh treatment of her and her National League for Democracy.

Corruption, economic mismanagement and human rights abuse have brought misery to the land. Far from dealing with the opposition from a position of strength, the regime should know that it risks facing a greater uprising than the one three years ago, when red-robed monks led street protests. The threat from restive ethnic minorities would even be more difficult to manage. Most of these groups, having engaged for decades in armed struggle for autonomy from central rule, saw through the electoral farce and refused to take part. The military is growing increasingly less confident that it can defeat so many ethnic guerillas on their home turf.

If conditions worsen, Suu Kyi could emerge as the only figure who can command enough trust and respect to hold the nation together. It is not in the interest of its giant neighbours, China and India, nor of its fellow Asean members, to see Burma break up, with instability sure to affect everyone. So Suu Kyi's message of unity should resonate more widely, even as regional pressure has to be kept up to move the junta towards compromise and reconciliation.

— The Straits Times

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PHOTO BY AFP

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COVER IMAGE | AFP PHOTO



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# No Need To Rush

Time is on South Korea's side. There's no reason to rush to North Korea's rescue

◆ Seoul

As expected, North Korea was an important, if not dominant, issue when South Korean President Lee Myung-bak met his US and Chinese counterparts separately on the fringe of the G20 Summit in Seoul last week. What was confirmed at the talks was that South Korea will keep its hard-line policy on the North.

China apparently wishes to see South Korea let bygones be bygones, bury the hatchet and improve relations with the North. But as Lee indicated, the South finds it unnecessary to change course. The reason is that Pyongyang has yet to acknowledge and apologise for its March 26 torpedo attack on the South Korean warship *Cheonan*.

On November 11, Chinese President Hu Jintao proposed to Lee that the South take action to repair inter-Korean relations that broke down over the sinking of the *Cheonan*. But Lee avoided making any promise to consider changing his policy on the North.

Instead, he called on China to remain neutral in its relations with the two Koreas. He reminded Hu that future Seoul-Beijing relations on a "strategic partnership" will be no less important for China than the current Pyongyang-Beijing relations based on the past treaty on military alliance.

Lee may understand China's "special relations" with North Korea, as he said he did. But he may not forget the damage he sustained when China successfully shielded its unbridled military ally from Seoul-initiated sanctions at the UN Security Council.

Lee had already confirmed that South Korea will stay the course in its relations with the North when he met US President Barack Obama earlier in the day. At their post-summit joint news conference, Lee said he agreed

with Obama that an improvement to inter-Korean relations would have to wait until Pyongyang holds itself responsible for the attack. Lee also demanded the North demonstrate its sincerity in its approach to the South.

Since a multinational investigation confirmed the North as the culprit for sinking the warship, the South has been keeping an acknowledgement and an apology as the condition for the resumption of massive aid. It has repeatedly



**RESTRAINT NEEDED:** South Korean President Lee Myung-bak should tighten screws on the North until it complies with the South's demands.

said aid will be confined to disaster relief until this condition is met.

Undeterred, however, the North comes knocking at the door for aid at every opportunity. When Red Cross talks on family reunions were held last month, the North asked for 500,000 tons of rice and 300,000 tons of fertiliser. But the South turned a cold shoulder to the North's brazen offer to arrange regular family reunions in return for the aid.

Now Pyongyang is proposing to hold talks on restarting the tour programme to the Mount Geumgang resort in the North, which was suspended when a South Korean woman was shot to death when she

strayed into the off-limits security area in 2008. But there is little likelihood that the tour programme, which used to be an important source of hard currency for the North, will resume anytime soon because Pyongyang refuses to conduct an investigation into the case with the South.

Pyongyang is desperate in its pursuit of aid and hard currency, apparently because its coffers are being

depleted at a time when it needs to feed, shelter and clothe its starving residents better for a smooth transition in leadership from an ailing Kim Jong-il to his youngest son Jong-un. According to a news report, exports of conventional weapons, a main source of income for North Korea, have more than halved since the United Nations imposed sanctions on the communist state since a nuclear test in 2009.

If so, Seoul has no reason to rush to North Korea's rescue. Instead, it will do well to tighten the screws on the North until it complies with the South Korean demands. Time is on South Korea's side.

PHOTO BY AP

BY THE YOMIURI SHIMBUN

# The Japan-US Alliance

The East Asian country cannot simply continue to rely solely on the United States for its diplomacy

◆ Tokyo

It is unfortunate that Japan and the United States missed a golden opportunity to issue a joint declaration on the bilateral alliance to mark this year's 50th anniversary of the signing of the revised Japan-US Security Treaty.

Japanese Prime Minister Naoto Kan and US President Barack Obama held talks on the sidelines of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit meeting in Yokohama. They agreed to issue a joint declaration on the alliance next spring when Kan visits Washington. Now that the statement has been postponed until next year, its content should be enhanced all the more.

When then prime minister Yukio Hatoyama and Obama agreed to deepen the alliance in November last year, it was assumed that a joint declaration would be issued while Obama was attending the Apec Summit in Yokohama.

But preparatory work on the document was held up due to the Japanese government's muddled handling of the issue of relocating the US Marine Corps' Futenma Air Station in Okinawa, which slowed the momentum for issuing such a document. The blame for this lies squarely with the immature and clumsy diplomacy of the Democratic Party of Japan-led government—in particular under the Hatoyama administration.

The two countries eventually reached an agreement on the Futenma relocation issue in May, but there has been no progress since then because the Kan administration has not taken any effective measures.

The Japanese government must step up its efforts to win over the affected local governments and people in Okinawa on the accord to move the Futenma base functions to the Henoko district of Nago. The government's line of action will be based

on the result of the Okinawa gubernatorial election on November 28.

During his talks with Obama, Kan explained the government is considering sending Self-Defence Forces medical officers to Afghanistan to train their counterparts in the Afghan government forces.

To bolster the Japan-US alliance and enrich the content of the joint security declaration to be issued next year, we think Japan must not only

recent visit to Kunashiri, one of the four northern islands off Hokkaido.

Dealing with these issues has exposed the fragile nature of the Kan administration's makeshift diplomacy. It is urgent to overhaul Japan's diplomacy—the cornerstone of which remains the Japan-US alliance. However, Japan cannot simply continue to rely solely on the United States for its diplomacy.

China is a neighbouring nation that



**BE MY GUEST:** US President Barack Obama (L) gestures towards Japanese Prime Minister Naoto Kan to take the lectern at the APEC Summit in Yokohama recently.

resolve issues pending with Washington, but also play a wider international role in security matters.

When their conversation turned to China, Obama was quoted as saying that China needs to speak and act appropriately in accordance with international rules. Kan shared this view.

Kan thanked Obama for US support of Japan's position on territorial issues with China and Russia. Tokyo's ties with Beijing have been strained by the collisions of a Chinese trawler with two Japan Coast Guard boats near the Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea, and ties with Moscow chilled following Russian President Dmitry Medvedev's

has become a major power. Dealing with China will be a perpetual challenge for Japan's diplomacy.

How can China be effectively guided into complying with international rules in the political, economic and military fields so that it acts responsibly commensurate with its power over the medium-to-long term? We think it is essential that Japan holds repeated strategic dialogues with the United States on this matter.

Japan also must propose concrete measures to strengthen ties with nations other than the United States. Steadily and actively building these ties could lead to a reshaping of Japan's diplomacy.

PHOTO BY INDRANIL MUKHERJEE/AP



**WALKING FREE:** Aung San Suu Kyi walks towards the gate of her house to meet with supporters after her release on November 13.

PHOTO BY AFP

# FREE, FOR NOW

SUU KYI HAS RE-EMERGED INTO A NEW POLITICAL LANDSCAPE BUT FUNDAMENTAL TENSIONS PERSIST

## ❖ Manila

It was a stirring sight, made more poignant by the near-certainty that it was only temporary. After seven years under house arrest, the Burmese pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi greeted a crowd estimated at some 5,000 outside her house after the military junta that rules Burma released her without conditions on November 13.

"I haven't seen you for a long time," the opposition icon known to many in Burma as 'The Lady', quipped while holding onto the gate. The crowd laughed, and someone offered her a bouquet of flowers. Others asked her to place a flower in her hair; she obliged.

It is just such ordinary, even dainty, acts, that threaten the peace of mind of the country's military rulers. Official government spokesmen can argue that the unconditional release is proof that the leadership is not in fact threatened by Suu Kyi and the democratic movement she embodies. But Burma has been down this sorry path before. In the last 21 years, Suu Kyi has spent a total of 15 under detention.

In fact, her latest house arrest order was extended as part of an elaborate plan to render her ineligible for the parliamentary election conducted earlier this month. The obviously manipulated election process was used in part to legitimise the Burmese military's so-called plan of transition to civilian rule, and in part to divide the still-strong opposition. The junta got exactly what it wanted with the second; a faction in the National League for Democracy, the opposition party Suu Kyi heads, opted to contest the elections. But the junta may not get what it wants from the first: international condemnation of the sham elections has

been consistent and unequivocal. (The Burmese junta's clever strategy included retiring generals from the armed forces so that these new retirees can serve as 'civilian' officials.)

To be sure, the Burmese junta is primarily interested only in what its sponsors in Beijing think, but the fact that they went through an elaborate charade to conduct an election tells us they also want to leave their pariah status (even in the normally accommodationist Asean) behind. The generals must believe that releasing Suu Kyi, the daughter of the assassinated independence hero Aung San, at this particular time would serve their own interests: The elections are done, so Suu Kyi cannot be a direct political threat; and the media attention that is already being poured on Suu Kyi will help obscure the fact of the fundamentally fraudulent vote.

There is talk that Suu Kyi will re-enter the political scene by helping probe allegations of voting fraud. There is also the certainty that she will try to reconsolidate the opposition movement, and the likelihood that she will travel around the benighted country. None of this can be a surprise to the ruling junta, and it is a foregone conclusion that none of it can be allowed for long by the junta. As a former Australian ambassador to Burma phrased it, "The regime may wait for her to make a tactical error and crack down on her again."

This is the stark reality that made that scene outside her house on the night of her release all the more moving. While democracies around the world celebrate her freedom, even if only as a step in the right direction, there is real cause to worry that the freedom she will enjoy now is not only temporary, but designed in fact to be a trap.

— PHILIPPINE DAILY INQUIRER

By Yan Paing  
Inter-Press Service

**LOYAL FOLLOWERS:**  
Aung San Suu Kyi (C)  
arrives at the National  
League for Democracy  
headquarters in Rangoon  
on November 14 where she  
addressed thousands of  
exuberant supporters.



## An Emotional Reception

### ♦ Rangoon

Some were smiling, many were crying and others were shouting, but emotions overflowed among the hundreds of Burmese who had been keeping vigil for the latest release from house arrest of the country's pro-democracy leader, Aung San Suu Kyi.

Suu Kyi appeared beaming on an elevated platform behind the steel gate of her compound minutes after her 5:20pm release on November 13.

Waiting for the crowd to settle down, Suu Kyi, often called 'The Lady', finally spoke in public for the first time in years.

"We haven't seen each other for long time. I feel very happy to see you all here," said the 65-year-old Nobel laureate, who was freed by

Burma's military leaders six days after the November 7 general election, the first held in this Southeast Asian country in 20 years.

"As I don't have a loudspeaker, I can't speak to reach you all," she told the crowd, many of them wearing shirts adorned with her portrait or carrying photos of her. "If you can listen quietly, you can hear my voice. Otherwise, it's very hard to speak. You all have to help each other. If people from the back can't hear what I say, then people from the front row are able to share what you hear."

"See! As soon as I come out, I need to start political training," quipped Suu Kyi. "To get democracy, we all have to be disciplined," she told her restless, eager supporters.

There was little that the riot police could do earlier when, after they

removed the barbed wire that for years fenced off Suu Kyi's compound near Inya Lake, the crowds rushed toward her home.

"Today we can see the real desire of the people," Yarzar, who belongs to the youth wing of Suu Kyi's now disbanded National League for Democracy (NLD) party, said as he took part in this historic moment in this country of more than 53 million people.

"I feel like my feet are up in the air, like I'm flying!" quipped Maung Aye.

Than Than Aye, a 35-year-old who fails from north Okkalapa, remarked: "I feel so happy to see her. Today is very worth (it) for me to wait for her for two days."

Since Friday, November 12, many had gathered around Suu Kyi's compound to see if Burma's military bosses would free her at the end of her

latest detention period, scheduled to end at 7pm on November 13. Others had come to Rangoon, the former capital, from outside the city.

The NLD won a clear majority in the last general election in 1990, but the junta nullified its result.

Suu Kyi's struggles go back to 1988, when the daughter of independence hero Aung San returned to Burma and became involved in the opposition to then dictator Ne Win.

She was first put under house arrest in 1989, released with restrictions on her movement in 1995, and put back in house arrest in 2000. She was released again in May 2002, but in May 2003 was back in prison after a clash between her supporters and a government-backed mob. Her house arrest was extended in 2007 and 2008, and in August 2009 she

was sentenced to another 18 months' house arrest after a US national swam to her compound.

Her last brief public appearance was in September 2007—and that was the first since 2003.

Her supporters are aware that Suu Kyi's personal freedom does not signify real change by the military on giving more political openness in this country.

"The most important thing is to start the dialogue, the only way to solve all the problems in Burma," NLD vice chairman Tin Oo told IPS. "First, all political prisoners must be released. We have to discuss about ethnic issues too," he said, referring to decades of unrest and armed struggle by Burma's ethnic groups.

There are different expectations of Suu Kyi's role after her release.

"I strongly believe her to be the one who can do (change) for the country; I can even give my life for her," said Maung Maung Tin Lay, an 80-year-old veteran soldier.

Twenty-five-year-old Tun Tun from Hlaing Tharyar added, "I expect that Aunty Suu will tell something about election fraud when she is released."

He was referring to results and conduct of the November poll, which the junta says is part of a roadmap to democracy but which critics have called a sham to cloak the military regime in civilian clothes.

Tension remains after the vote, after many opposition candidates alleged fraud and filed complaints before the Election Commission.

As expected, the military's proxy party, the Union Solidarity

and Development Party (USDP), won majority of seats in the two chambers of Parliament and regional assemblies.

More than 800,000 'advance votes' cast by government employees and the military, days before November 7 itself, have been criticised as leading to forced votes to ensure the USDP's victory.

"The 2010 election is just a kind of robbery. It's not (even) voting fraud; USDP robbed all votes," remarked Tin Oo.

Given the uncertain political road ahead, the sentiments of Rangoon resident Soe Naing, 30, may well capture those of many in this country. "I don't expect much after her release, but we have to think how we can support her," sighed Soe Naing.

By Nirmal Ghosh  
The Straits Times



**BARBED FREEDOM:** Policemen guard a checkpoint set up across the road leading to Aung San Suu Kyi's house.

# 20-Year Paradox Remains

✦ Bangkok

The emotion that swept through Rangoon on November 13 as the 65-year-old Aung San Suu Kyi was released highlighted a paradox central to Burma's political scene since at least 1990.

That was when the army refused to recognise her party's landslide victory, but to many, she remains the only figure acceptable across the pro-democracy spectrum.

Yet Senior General Than Shwe, the regime supremo whose power comes not from popular or moral authority but from force, is by definition also a national figure.

He now also has an overwhelming election victory by the regime-sponsored Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) to display—even though the November 7 poll was clearly engineered to help the party win.

The military establishment sees issues through a national security lens, and believes liberal democracy is a threat to the unity of the nation.

Conversely, pro-democracy parties see democracy as the solution to conflict, and the military as perpetuating conflict.

Essentially, this dichotomy has shaped Burma politics for the past two decades.

The excitement on November 13 also belied the occasional pundits who believe Suu Kyi's influence diminished as the years ticked by with her under house arrest in her dilapidated bungalow by the lake on University Avenue.

The spontaneous crowd outside her house showed that the years of detention—15 of the last 20—have not diluted her popularity.

This should not come as a surprise; in August and September 2007, weeks of protests against price in-

creases turned political and escalated only when monks marched to her house. Very soon, the protests swelled, and the army cracked down.

But she has re-emerged into a very different political landscape.

Her former party, the National League for Democracy, legally no longer exists, and several NLD figures in effect split from Suu Kyi and ignored a boycott call to run in the election.

Burmese politics has always been fractious, and though she is without a doubt an iconic figure with immense charisma, not everybody sees Suu Kyi in the rosy light that Western democracy activists in particular often do.

The two houses of Parliament and regional assemblies to be convened within three months will open up some room for ethnic minority and pro-democracy parties, several of whose candidates managed to win despite the 80 per cent vote share of the USDP, and



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By Mr. Arin Jira, Co-Chairman ASEAN Business Advisory Council
- **Introduction to the Main Theme : Co-existence of Collaboration and Competition**  
By Mr. Tevin Vongvanich, Chairman of Thailand Management Association
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- **Panel Discussion III : Infrastructure to Facilitate Trading and Service**
- **Special Speech : Leadership in ASEAN**  
By Ms. Low Peck Kem, Director, People Matters Department & Divisional Director, National Human Resource Division, Ministry of Manpower, Singapore
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without the help of the defunct NLD.

The election introduced not a seismic shift, but a degree of structural change. However, it has not affected fundamental internal tensions.

The perceived polarity of what Suu Kyi and Senior General Than Shwe represent, remains. The conflicts with armed ethnic minorities, which have decades of complex history and aspirations for autonomy or independence, also remain.

And more than 2,000 political prisoners remain behind bars.

Suu Kyi could well be in danger too; in May 2003, during a provincial trip as part of a tour of the country which attracted thousands wherever she went, she barely escaped alive from an attack by pro-regime thugs. Up to 70 NLD members were killed in the ambush.

Her challenges now include unifying pro-democracy opposition parties and factions, and possibly mustering a mass movement as a moral force for democracy, outside the political party system.

But to deny the regime an excuse to detain her again, she will have to play her role very carefully, within the bounds of the Constitution.

"She has always tested the limits of how far she can go; and freedom of speech in the Constitution comes with limitations," said professor David Steinberg, a specialist on Burma at Georgetown University in Washington, DC.

"It will be impossible for her to work with the government simply because she has been so adamantly against it."

And he said that Senior General Than Shwe "will retain enormous influence even after retiring" as power in Burma is "very highly personalised".

For now, Suu Kyi's release comes without conditions.

Another aspect at stake is foreign opinion. Suu Kyi has had what Burma author and historian Thant Myint U describes as a "choke hold" on the international community's Burma policy—though notably not that of India, China and most Asean countries.

Suu Kyi has advocated international sanctions in the past, although she recently asked diplomats for their assessment of the sanctions.

Conversely, however, the regime has enough investment and revenue from Asian neighbours to make it less vulnerable to sanctions than a decade ago.



## The Making Of A Democracy Icon

**A**ung San Suu Kyi was born in Rangoon on June 19, 1945 to General Aung San, an independence hero assassinated in 1947, and Khin Kyi.

Her mother was also a prominent figure in Burma and the daughter would rise from housewife to opposition leader and world-famous political prisoner. More importantly, Suu Kyi has become a symbol for the struggle against the military junta in Burma.

She studied politics in New Delhi and philosophy, politics and economics at the University of Oxford in the United Kingdom. She married Michael Aris in 1972 with whom she had two sons—Alexander and Kim.

Known simply as 'The Lady' by millions of her countrymen, Suu Kyi spent most of the time overseas before returning to Rangoon in April 1988 to take care of her ailing mother. That time, resentment against the military rule was boiling over into pro-democracy protests across the country.

Keen to continue her father's legacy, Suu Kyi entered politics and helped set up the National League for Democ-

racy (NLD), becoming its secretary-general and calling for an end to military rule.

She first spoke to crowds of protesters from the steps of Rangoon's historic Shwedagon Pagoda on Aug 26, 1988.

The following month, the military crushed the democracy uprising, where thousands were killed and imprisoned.

In 1989, Suu Kyi publicly attacked Ne Win as the source of Burma's ills. This sealed her popular appeal, but also her fate—she was first placed under house arrest on July 19, 1989, and remained there for six years.

The NLD won the national elections in 1990 but the military refused to hand over control.

Suu Kyi was later released, only to be put on house arrest on subsequent occasions.

In 1991, she won the Nobel Peace Prize.

Her husband died in Britain in 1999. Suu Kyi declined an offer from the junta to attend his funeral out of fear that she would not be allowed back if she left.

She has not seen her sons for about a decade and youngest son, Kim, is expected to arrive in Rangoon this week.

PHOTO BY MANREET ROMANA/AFP

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By Martin Khor  
The Star

# Inconclusive End To G20 Summit

The world economy remains in a web of serious problems with the potential to break out in new crises

◆ Kuala Lumpur

The G20 summit last week was overshadowed by a new financial near-crisis in Europe, highlighting the dangerous state of the world economy.

The world economy remains in a web of serious problems with the potential to break out in new crises. The G20 summit last week discussed them but could not agree on the causes or how to resolve them. Even as the G20 leaders were meeting in Seoul, the real drama was taking place half a world away, as Europe stood on the brink of a new financial crisis.

Ireland faced a big jump in the interest cost of its debt, arising from (and giving rise to) fears that it would have to be bailed out, like Greece some months ago, or even face a debt default.

It seems like the crisis of investors losing confidence could also spread to Portugal, Spain and Italy.

It took a hurried joint statement by five European finance ministers issued in Seoul that holders of present European governments' bonds would not be asked to share the burden of bailouts to calm the markets last week.

But it remains to be seen if there will be new turmoil in Europe in the near future, as many analysts are of the view that the sovereign debts of several European countries are unsustainable and that they would need a bailout by the EU and the IMF, or undertake debt restructuring, or both.

In the 1990s, it was Asia that faced

a debt crisis, and in the decades before that Africa and Latin America. In recent years, East European countries were affected.

But until just months ago, it was inconceivable that a sovereign debt crisis would ever hit Western Europe. Then, Greece faced a debt default and had to be rescued via a huge EU-IMF bailout in May. The EU and IMF then established a 750-billion-euro (US\$1 trillion) fund to support future bailouts of European countries.

Last month, an EU summit agreed to set up a new system by 2013 in which private investors in government bonds would also have to bear part of the cost of bailouts.

There are no details yet of this system, though it is known that the Germans are contemplating a European debt work-out system, in which the creditors or bond holders would take a 'haircut' (or partial loss) if a country is unable to repay its debt in full.

The fear of this system triggered the sharp rise in the yield of Irish bonds, to 9 per cent at one stage, before the finance ministers' statement (clarifying that the new system would not affect holders of existing bonds) calmed the markets somewhat.

The latest market turmoil showed the vulnerable situation of the three or four European countries and how fragile is the future of the euro single-currency itself.

The European crisis reminds one of the Asian crisis more than a decade ago, when one country after an-

other was affected by the contagion effect until it became region-wide.

This crisis overshadowed the G20 Summit, which has disappointed most analysts for not having any concrete results.

The considerable differences that major countries had before the summit remained at and after the summit, and thus the underlying problems are unresolved and will make a global economic recovery difficult.

At the summit, the leaders agreed to disagree, and their different concerns were reflected in the obscure language of the G20 communique.

Most of the key issues are in the paragraph on monetary and exchange rate policies. It said, "We will move toward more market-determined exchange rate systems and enhance exchange rate flexibility to reflect underlying economic fundamentals and refrain from competitive devaluation of currencies."

This reflects the major US concern that China's currency is undervalued and should be allowed to appreciate significantly. China, however, succeeded in avoiding any explicit mention of its currency situation. Each country will be able to interpret this sentence in its own way.

The statement also said: "Advanced economies, including those with reserve currencies, will be vigilant against excess volatility and disorderly movements in exchange rates. Together, these actions will help mitigate the risk of excessive volatility in capital flows facing some



**POWERFUL 20:** Flags of the G20 member countries at the venue of the G20 Summit in Seoul last week. Leaders of the Group of 20 merely papered over their differences without agreeing on the problems and solutions.

emerging market economies."

This reflects the strong concerns that developing countries like China, Brazil and South Africa, as well as Germany, have voiced about the "quantitative easing" (printing of money) policy of the US.

While the US creation and injection of \$600 billion into its banks is aimed at economic recovery, its critics say it will weaken the dollar (and is thus a competitive devaluation).

It will also cause more 'hot money' to move to developing countries in search of higher returns with adverse effects, such as adding to pressures towards inflation, asset bubbles and currency appreciation.

The G20 communique added: "In circumstances where countries are facing undue burden of adjustment, policy responses in emerging market economies with adequate reserves and increasingly overvalued flexible exchange rates may also include carefully designed macroprudential measures."

This reflects the view of developing countries like Brazil, Thailand and South Korea, that they have the right to make use of capital control measures to stem the inflow of short-term foreign capital.

To avoid the destabilising effects, developing countries are already using or are planning measures such as placing a tax on various types of foreign short-term capital.

In the past, such measures were frowned upon by the IMF and the developed countries. Now, even the IMF and World Bank have recognised that they are legitimate and useful.

The G20 communique thus contains the different concerns of the countries while giving them sufficient space to continue with their policies.

This has opened the G20 to criticism that they merely papered over their differences without being able to agree on the problems and solutions. But at least the leaders met and opened channels of dialogue. It's better than not talking at all.

PHOTO BY ROMEO GACAD/AFP

By Peh Shing Hwei  
The Straits Times

# Is Wen A Liberal?

**MANY SAY WITH TWO YEARS LEFT OF HIS TERM, THE CHINESE PREMIER HAS STARTED REVEALING HIS TRUE LIBERAL COLOURS. IS THAT THE TRUTH?**

◆ Beijing

Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao is a man under siege from within his own political party—or so it seems.

For two months now, the leader with the paternalist image has been tagged by foreign media and analysts as a solo crusader for political reform; a lonely fighter for freedom and democracy in China.

It has been pointed out that he spoke about reform eight times from August 20 to September 30. He also used colourful language, which the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) elite usually eschew.

When speaking to CNN in September about political restructuring, Wen said: “I will not fall in spite of the strong wind and harsh rain, and I will not yield until the last day of my life.”

Observers argued that with two years left of his term, the Premier was revealing his true colours as a liberal. It is also in keeping with his political background as a top aide in the 1980s to the late deposed reformist leader Zhao Ziyang.

And when his comments were adjudged to have been censored in the state media, speculation of a split among the ruling elite—and even talk

of one between him and President Hu Jintao—mounted.

But closer study of Wen’s words suggests that such talk is likely to have been overstated.

“It is plainly wrong,” said University of Nottingham analyst Wang Zhengxu. “Wen’s version of reform is to change within the system.”

It is appropriate to first look at the speech that kick-started this whole brouhaha. On August 20, while on an inspection tour of Shenzhen, Wen said: “The basic system of socialism in our country has tremendous advantages, but various mechanisms and structures are not yet sound enough.

“It is necessary to push forward the reform of the economic structure and it is also necessary to push forward the reform of the political structure. Without the guarantee of the reform of the political structure, the achievements made in the reform of the economic structure will be lost and it will be impossible to realise the goal of modernisation.”

The last sentence has been quoted extensively to show Wen’s liberal tendencies. But the preceding words are critical too, showing that he never meant for a Western-style democracy

and was extolling the virtues of Chinese socialism.

More importantly, those words mirror what he said during the opening of the annual session of the Chinese legislature in March.

“Without political restructuring, it would not be possible for economic restructuring and the modernisation drive to succeed,” he had said in a speech which was delivered in front of the Politburo and drafted with its approval.

“We will develop socialist democracy, and effectively safeguard the democratic rights of the people as masters of the country, particularly their rights to vote, and to stay informed about, participate in, express views on, and oversee government affairs,” he continued.

It is unlikely that words approved in March could turn provocative by August.

But critics further claimed that the Shenzhen speech was snuffed out and downplayed in the state media, a sign of conservative factions censoring Wen.

It was not. It was prominently carried the next day by the *People’s Daily*, the mouthpiece of the CCP, on its front-page top-right-hand corner. Other national and provincial papers also ran it on their covers.

His subsequent comments, made overseas with commentator Fareed Zakaria on *TIME* magazine and CNN, were indeed censored, but it is not out of step with Chinese protocol.

“This has happened before,” said Hong Kong-based analyst Willy Lam. “Interviews with the Western media are not necessarily reported, even when they talk about non-controversial and completely benign matters.”

*China Leadership Monitor* editor Alice Miller agreed and added: “All evidence indicates, therefore, that Wen’s Shenzhen remarks, and similar ones at the Tianjin Summer Davos conference and to Fareed Zakaria, follow the prevailing party line.

“This is also evidenced by the fact that no other Politburo Standing Committee member has been reported contradicting them... I find it very difficult to believe that a Politburo Standing Committee member



PHOTO BY AFP

**GRANDPA WEN:** China’s Premier Wen Jiabao toasts other Asian leaders at a gala dinner during the 17th Asean Summit in Ha Noi last month.

with perhaps more leeway for non-governmental organisations and other harmless snail-pace tweaks by the edges.

Such is the political reform that Wen was referring to, and he raised it repeatedly because the issue of ‘socialist democracy’, which pertains to government institutions, is his area of responsibility as the Premier, said Miller.

She added that Wen had to press this issue because of the 12th five-year economic plan next year, which is supposed to renew the Hu-Wen campaign to moderate high-speed growth at all costs.

“As before, this renewed push will engender political resistance from cadres... and from constituencies in society, which will affect social stability. And so political reform is necessary for the success of economic policy. This is not a new departure.”

Wen did not stray from the official line and it would be more accurate to label him a ‘centrist’ than a liberal. He preaches reform within the party and, even then, at a glacial pace. China will change, but it will be to entrench, not weaken, the CCP’s rule. It will be socialism with Chinese characteristics, as Wen stressed in Shenzhen. Nothing else.

On a more personal note, he could also have made those comments with an eye on buttressing his political legacy. After all, just days before his speech in Shenzhen, a controversial book titled *China’s Best Actor: Wen Jiabao* was released in Hong Kong.

The author Yu Jie criticised Wen—one of the most popular political figures in China, nicknamed Grandpa Wen—for being a fake reformer and playing the ‘good cop’ role among the CCP leaders.

Best actor one moment, liberal hero the next? As former British prime minister Harold Wilson said, a week is a long time in politics. The truth is somewhere in the middle—a lot more mundane, a lot less sexy.

The words of Charles Dickens in *Great Expectations* are instructive: “Take nothing on its looks; take everything on evidence. There’s no better rule.”

would vent views on the record that contradict the party consensus to any leader or reporter.”

But Wen’s comments did encourage liberals both inside and outside of the CCP, with retired reformists led by one of Mao Zedong’s private secretaries, Li Rui, issuing their own call for reform.

They issue similar petitions every year, attracting the attention of the foreign press but remaining almost completely ignored in China.

Their cause was further emboldened when jailed dissident Liu Xiaobo was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize last month.

Putting the sequence of events together, it is tempting to conclude there is a reformist coalition of sorts, from Wen at the highest echelon to retired officials and then influential liberal intellectuals, driving a deter-

mined agenda for quicker political change. But it is probably more accurate that the officials and thinkers were merely piggybacking on what they perceived to be the Premier’s supposed leanings.

“They used Wen to say what they themselves wanted to say,” said Wang.

And it is these liberal riders, more than Wen, whom a series of *People’s Daily* commentaries last week were assaulting.

The articles slammed Western democracy and affirmed China’s socialism, pointing out that political reform has been ongoing.

Indeed it has, with the end of life tenure for leaders, informal term limits, strengthened collective decision-making and more stable successions.

And it will continue to be so,

By Deepika Shetty  
The Straits Times

# Passage To India

## An increasing number of Singaporean firms are looking to cash in on India's booming economy

❖ Chennai/Mumbai/Bangalore

**G**o back a decade and most Singaporeans would have rather tried setting up a business anywhere in the world than take on chaotic and cluttered India, but the country's compelling magic seems to have worked miracles.

Now local go-getters are beating a path to India's door—some keen to pursue big business plans, others with less ambitious dreams but all happy to trade life in super-safe, super-efficient Singapore for the uncertainties and high-octane excitement of India.

They are spurred in part by remarks made back in 1993 by then prime minister Goh Chok Tong, who said he wanted to infect Singapore with "India fever".

Well, things are at fever pitch now. Bilateral trade between Singapore and India has passed S\$20 billion (US\$15.5 million), up from S\$2.5 billion in 1994.

There are almost 4,000 Indian companies operating in Singapore and local giants such as Ascendas, CapitaLand, Singapore Airlines, DBS and Hyflux, plus smaller operators like Charles & Keith, Kenko and Breadtalk, have set up shop in India.

No matter what end of the business spectrum they are from, most point to the huge opportunities on offer, while acknowledging the frustrations, delays and red tape that have to be grappled with on a daily basis.

For many, it is a give-and-take exercise and an ongoing process of adapting.

Just ask businessman Kenny Koh, who has managed to create a slice of Singapore in his vegetable patch at his apartment in Chennai's Mylapore area. "Adapting to the food was the hard-

est part. I never realised I would miss Singapore food so much. Some of the vegetables are impossible to find so I decided to grow my own," says Koh.

The 40-year-old bachelor moved to Chennai three years ago after he invested in India's MGM group, which has several restaurants, resorts and a distillery in southern India.

The initial months were tough. Koh found it hard to understand and adapt to the business culture, the bureaucratic processes and the delays to get basic things done.

"Even simple things like fixing a water filter or a washing machine take time," he says.

"The delivery guy would tell you it will be done on Monday. I have waited all Monday, only to be told it was to be the week after. When you move from Singapore, things like these are very frustrating."

Patience, he points out, is the key to doing business and living in India.

Spa owner Jatin Walia, 57, needed it in spades.

He arrived from Singapore in 2004 and his first days in New Delhi were spent grappling with power cuts, sporadic water supply, flexible meeting arrangements and endless traffic jams. Getting a straightforward clearance certificate to offer massages entailed several trips to a single government department.

Adapting to the Indian business environment took both men quite a while, but they are glad they persevered.

Koh's time these days is taken up travelling to MGM's expanding resorts and distillery operations across southern India.

Walia has seen his business, which specialises in Indonesian massage, grow from one to six spas in six years.

Body Spa International, set up with a capital of US\$250,000, now employs about 70 people and is worth US\$2.5 million.

It was the interest shown in India by Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew and Goh in the 1990s that gave Walia and many others the confidence to look at the then relatively undiscovered Indian market.

Goh, who first visited India as prime minister in 1994, had talked about 'infecting' Singapore with 'India fever' in 1993. Back then, he was convinced that the country would emerge as an economic power, even though the prevailing sentiment was none too positive.

"If the Singapore government was asking Singaporeans to go there, they had seen something ordinary people like me had missed," says Walia. "I did my maths. The cost of setting up a business was comparatively low and the opportunity was immense."

Then he believed the numbers spoke for themselves—as they still do today.

India's US\$1.2 trillion economy contributes some US\$100 billion to global output a year. It is the world's second-fastest growing economy, behind China. Its population of 1.2 billion people—around 60 per cent are under 25—presents investors and entrepreneurs with a huge marketplace for their goods and services.

Satpal Khattar, 68, chairman of private investment firm Khattar Holdings, sees India's consumer sector as a sleeping giant that is only just beginning to stir.

"If there are, at last count, 800 Indian restaurants in Singapore with a population of five million, can you imagine the potential of places such as New Delhi with a population of 12 million and Mumbai with a population of 18 million?"

"What has changed in India now there is money to be spent and people have a different mindset. They are willing to spend the money."

Such potential is luring many Singaporean businessmen.

Since the India-Singapore Comprehensive Economic Cooperation



**BOOMING:** An Indian sales executive looks at a model of a luxury apartment complex in Mumbai. Singapore real estate companies are coming to India as the country's property and capital markets boom, and developers build dream homes for a rapidly-growing list of Indian millionaires.

Agreement (CECA) was signed in 2005, bilateral trade has grown steadily between the two nations.

Singapore investment in India topped S\$5.6 billion in 2008, according to IE Singapore and the Singapore department of statistics, well up on the S\$2 billion in 1994. And bilateral trade touched S\$22.69 billion between January and September this year, compared to S\$21.59 billion in all of last year.

In a comparatively short time, India has emerged as Singapore's 11th-largest trading partner.

Although no official figures are available on the precise number of Singapore firms operating in India, there are more than 50.

Heading the list is Temasek Holdings, which has invested mostly in listed Indian corporations, such as telco Bharti Airtel and ICICI Bank.

Changi Airports International (CAI), PSA Corporation, DBS Group Holdings, Ascendas, Ascott and CapitaLand also have large Indian operations.

CAI, which manages and invests in overseas airports, has a 26 per cent stake in the Duragpur Aerotropolis project in West Bengal. Dubbed India's first airport city, this will serve as a feeder route for airlines operating from eastern regions to other parts of India.

PSA's Indian footprint was established in 1999, starting with the Tuticorin Container Terminal

in southern India.

It expanded to Chennai in 2007 and Kolkata in West Bengal and Kandla in Gujarat in 2008.

In banking, DBS secured a significant presence in the country after the Indian central bank's 2008 decision to allow it to open eight branches.

The move, in line with the provisions of the CECA, was unprecedented in that no other foreign bank had been allowed to expand its operations so quickly in one go.

It now has 12 branches and about 450 staff in the country—more than seven times the staff it had there in 2005. Chief executive Piyush Gupta expects its business in India to soar by between 20 and 25 per cent each year.

Real estate is another fertile field. The International Tech Park at Whitefield, managed by Ascendas, has pulled in a wide range of IT companies. The site, which opened in 1997 and would not be out of place on Singapore's skyline, hosts more than 145 companies and their 26,000 employees.

Ascott, CapitaLand's wholly owned serviced residence business, has pumped more than US\$100 million into India.

It acquired its first property, Chennai's Somerset Greenways, in 2006 and has five other properties slated to open: Ahmedabad in western India and Hyderabad, Bangalore and two more in Chennai in southern India.

Ronald Tay, chief investment of-

ficer of The Ascott, points out that more multinational corporations means rising demand for accommodation from business travellers and expatriates and "significant potential for Ascott to grow in India".

Singapore real estate giant CapitaLand Group now boasts a wide range of residential, shopping mall and commercial projects, as well as real estate fund management services, in cities in northern, southern and western India.

As well as the corporate giants, there is an increasing number of smaller Singapore companies to be found up and down the country.

They include homegrown shoe retailer Charles & Keith—which has nine stores in major Indian cities—reflexology and fish spa Kenko, Indian vegetarian restaurant Komalas and bakery chain Breadtalk.

SIA and SilkAir are in the game as well, with more frequent scheduled flights. SIA, which operated its first flight to Chennai in June 1970, now flies to six Indian destinations: Ahmedabad, Bangalore, Chennai, Kolkata, Mumbai and New Delhi.

SilkAir's links began here in 1999 and now its network takes in Trivandrum, Kochi, Coimbatore Hyderabad, Bangalore and, most recently, Chennai.

The quickening pace of Singaporean investment in India and the growing number of local companies looking for business there show no sign of slacking.

The two nations are conducting a second review of CECA which, when completed next year, is likely to see a further opening up of India's markets.

Khattar certainly believes there is a lot more room for growth. "There are opportunities in manufacturing, real estate and several emerging second-tier cities in India."

But he cautions those looking to take their first tentative steps there.

"My advice to those looking to do business in India is quite simple: If you are looking for a comfort zone, do not go to India. If you are prepared to be patient and persistent, only then you should go to India."

PHOTO BY PUNIT PARANJPE/AP

By Gan Tian  
China Daily

# Where Are You Now



LOCATION-BASED SOCIAL NETWORKING IS FAST CATCHING UP IN CHINA, HELPING BUSY PEOPLE STAY CONNECTED, WHILE ALSO EARNING THEM FREEBIES FROM BUSINESSES

ILLUSTRATION BY LI MIN/CHINA DAILY

## ◆ Beijing

Location-based social networking services have emerged as the latest fad among tech-savvy Chinese. The service, which pinpoints the location of smartphones, allows users to 'check in' at restaurants, gyms and stores, to share their whereabouts with friends.

Beijing freelancer Luo Xuehan uploads her location via her iPhone on **Jiebang.com** (the mainland's biggest such service) everywhere she goes, whether jogging in Chaoyang Park, or writing a food review at Starbucks in Sanlitun.

It was only recently at a party that she discovered just how popular the service was.

"I found all the guests were checking in at Jiebang even before they looked at the menu. It seemed everyone had a burning desire to share where they were," Luo says.

For white-collar worker Li Zixi, it is an online service offering offline convenience. On a recent Friday, when Li was caught in a traffic jam in Beijing, a friend saw his location at **Sifang.com**—that ranks second only to Jiebang—and invited him to his nearby apartment.

"That is why we like this service so much. It brings friends closer, especially in this fast-paced society where nobody seems to have time for others," Li says.

It was Facebook Places that introduced these location-based services, before it was taken by the US-based Foursquare to a higher level. Since both sites are blocked on the Chinese mainland, the Beijing-based **Jiebang.com** stepped in to take the first bite of the cake.

With applications for iPhone and Android-based phones, Jiebang is China's answer to Foursquare, its founder David Liu says.

Liu is a Chinese-American who grew up in California. He used to run a social networking site to organise offline events while in college. His search for business opportunities brought him to Beijing at the end of last year.

Calling location-based networking services an "unavoidable trend", Liu launched **Jiebang.com**, together with its applications in May, but it was not until July that the country's youth became familiar with it.

Like Foursquare, Jiebang allows users to upload their whereabouts at any time. If that happens to be a business venue, like a store, a café, a gym, or a restaurant, they earn points at Jiebang, which then entitles them to free gifts or discounts from these businesses.

When Apple opened its second retail store in Pudong, Shanghai, hardcore fan Zhen Ziheng used the Jiebang application on his iPhone to upload his location there and won himself a free Apple T-shirt.

In Beijing, freelancer Luo found, after she uploaded her location at the Sculpting in Time Café several times, that she could use her Jiebang scores to get a cup of coffee for free.

In September, when Nike held a basketball match at Beijing's Dongdan court, some 500 people uploaded their location there, and won themselves free T-shirts.

Jiebang already has some 60,000 users and the numbers continue to grow. At least one check-in happens every four seconds, according to the company.

At present, there are 10 to 20 such location-based networking sites in China, most of which have started cooperating with businesses.

PR giant Weber Shandwick (China) even has a dedicated digital communications department, to connect their clients with such services.

They also provide businesses with important client information. For example, **Sifang.com**, that has more than 40,000 users, was able to show Traveler's House Pub in Beijing that Thursday nights saw the fewest check-ins and that there weren't many women among its customers.

Armed with this profile, pub owner Zhang Hengzhi launched a 'buy-one-get-one-free' campaign every Thursday evening. He also started offering more snacks and soft drinks, to cater to women's tastes.

"The service helps me know who our loyal customers are. Are they boys or girls and how old they are," Zhang says.

But there are also challenges.

Compared with Westerners, Chinese users are more conservative, which means they do not share their locations as often, according to Jiebang's Liu. "There are cultural differences, to cater to which we have developed features, like a 'private check-in' so that no one else can see it," he says.

Besides, many users lose interest after using the service for a while and this is largely owing to the lack of additional functionalities on such sites.

Apple fan Zhen Ziheng says he will never check in at a supermarket via this service, as it is "meaningless". But admits he would consider it if it allowed users to upload a 'to-buy' list when the users check in at supermarkets, or a 'recommended dishes' column when they check in at a restaurant. Doing so acts not only as a reminder to the uploader, but also signals to others if a particular item is on offer or what meals offer the best value for money.

What such services mean for businesses is that while they help maintain old customers, they have to come up with winning offers to lure new ones.

By Rupak D. Sharma  
Asia News Network



**BIG WIN:** India's Geeta Kumari celebrates with her gold medal after defeating Australia's Emily Bensted in the women's 55kg wrestling finals at the Commonwealth Games 2010 in New Delhi.

# Wrestling For A Change

The success of two girls in the Commonwealth Games is changing perception about female children in India's conservative state of Haryana

PHOTOS BY AFP

◆ Bangkok

**A**t the recently held Commonwealth Games, the entire stadium went up on its feet when Indian female wrestler Geeta Kumari pinned her Australian opponent to the mat to win the gold medal in women's 55kg freestyle wrestling competition.

The exuberance expressed by the crowd—which included chants of "India, India" and Oscar-winning *Shumdog Millionaire* song *Jai Ho!*—was obvious as the 21-year-old had just become the first woman wrestler to win the gold medal for India in the history of the Commonwealth Games.

The next day, Geeta's younger sister, Babita, was also expected to draw similar reaction from the home crowd in the finals of 51kg

freestyle wrestling.

The words were out that Babita was even tougher than her sister and many people like India's chief wrestling coach, Pyara Ram Sondhi, had declared that a gold medal from her was assured.

At the finals the next day, the 20-year-old did show her prowess like her coach and the crowd had expected. But unfortunately, it fell short against her Nigerian opponent.

Still, people were not disappointed and they showered Babita with thunderous rounds of applause when she stepped on the podium to receive her silver medal.

Clearly, Babita and her sister Geeta—both high school graduates—had become the favourites during the Commonwealth Games held in India's capital, New Delhi, in October. The two

came, fought and, in a way, conquered, showing that Indian women are a force to reckon with.

But behind this glitzy picture of becoming darlings of the nation lies the story of two simple girls who were born in a state which is notorious for its prejudiced behaviour against female children.

Haryana, the state where the two sisters were born, reported 18 cases of female foeticide last year, which was the fifth-highest in the country. It is said hundreds of such cases go unreported every year. That's why the state has a skewed sex ratio of 834 girls for 1,000 boys among children under the age of six, compared to the national average of 933.

Here, girls also get very few opportunities to get formal education and pursue their dreams. Many women here simply spend their entire life working in the farm, and preparing food and doing the laundry for their husbands and their families. The girls here also cannot marry men of their choice.

If they go against their family's wishes and marry someone from outside the community, they can get killed—an act which is known to many as 'honour killing'. And once they get married they are not expected to give birth to a baby girl; otherwise they can be taunted for life.

India's emerging sports stars, Geeta and Babita, probably would have to live a life under similar torturous conditions had their father, Mahabir Singh Paughat, not watched the performance of weightlifter Karnam Malleswari at the 2000 Sydney Olympics.

After watching Karnam bag first bronze medal for India in weightlifting, Mahabir, a former wrestler himself, immediately took the decision on behalf of his daughters to turn them into athletes. But in a place where people despised sportswomen, it was not so easy for him to pursue his dream.

These days, one of the questions that many villagers often asked



**TOUGH FIGHT:** Nwoye Ifeona (L) of Nigeria and Babita Kumari of India compete in the 51kg women's wrestling finals at the Commonwealth Games in New Delhi.

Mahabir, a father of five, including four daughters, was: "Who would marry your daughters?" They'd also say: "It would be difficult to find grooms for Geeta and Babita since nobody would like wives with well-built muscles." It was not only outsiders; even people from his family chided him.

"My grandfather said that if we even thought of going into wrestling, we were bound to lose our dignity," Geeta recently told Indian media. Her grandfather even called it a "shameful act". "But our father would dismiss it by saying that we were more like his sons, the ones who would earn for the family," she said. And Mahabir raised his daughters like sons.

The two girls had to fight on hard mud floors like the boys in their village in Billali, as comfortable synthetic mats were not affordable. And they had to do as many push-ups as the boys. The practice hours were also the same for everyone and the two sisters had to take on boys during these practice sessions.

After years of rigorous training, Geeta achieved her first major victory when she won gold in her first national tournament at Chennai. Later in 2004, she was declared the best wrestler in the Asian Cadet Championship in Kazakhstan. Her younger sister

Babita was also in the same league and she won the silver medal at the Junior World Wrestling Championship in 2007.

Today, nobody rebukes or chastises Geeta and Babita. In fact, many of the villagers who used to make fun of them came to New Delhi during the Games to support and cheer for the girls. Today, many parents from different villages in the state also approach Mahabir and request him to train their daughters, as the two sisters are now seen as the pride of the state.

It may be a coincidence but right after the two sisters won medals in the Games, a village in Haryana held a ritual called *kuan puja* for the long life of newborn daughters. Although this religious ceremony is performed in many places in the state for the well-being of both male and female child, Indian media said it was the first time 161 families had gathered to pray for their newborn daughters. What more, the family members, who participated in the ritual, also took the oath to oppose the practice of female foeticide.

A mother of a new-born female child who participated in the ritual was quoted by the Indian media as saying: "I hope my daughter would win gold medals (like the girls) and make the country proud."



By Jamie James  
The Jakarta Post

# A Fungus To Die For

Fortunes are made and lives lost in the search for a rare medicine in Nepal

♦ Manang, Nepal

As twilight falls across the snowy peaks of western Nepal, just over a steep ridge from the iconic Annapurna trekking trail, a herder scans the shadows with binoculars, searching for a lost yak. From a perch high above the tiny, cliff-clinging village of Nar, he spots a stealthy movement in a desolate meadow just below the snowline.

He sharpens the image. It's a young man, a stranger. Just behind him is another. Eventually five more creep into view, most still boys in their late teens, led by a man in his mid-30s. The herder knows immediately who they are and why they are there.

This ragged band of men is from the Gorkha tribe, the historical adversaries of the Manang people of Nar, and they've come 100 rugged kilometres to plunder the village's treasury—its fields of yarsagumba, a tiny, wrinkled fungus that is, by weight, the most valuable tonic in traditional Chinese medicine.

It's been prized for centuries as a potent aphrodisiac and elixir of youth, which tradition holds will prolong youthful virility through long winter nights and throughout a long life. On a good day, a yarsagumba picker can bag 400 pieces, which he can sell for as much as US\$1,000—double the average annual income in Nepal.

His lost yak forgotten, the herder

**FIELD OF ELIXIR:** Terrains like this in Nepal have cultivated the prized aphrodisiac called Yarsagumba.



PHOTO BY AFP

quickly clammers down the scrubby hillside to spread the alarm. The village elders convene a hasty meeting to organise a posse to repel the interlopers. Mukhya, the communal law of the Himalayas, requires that one adult male from each of Nar's 63 households join the posse. During the night, the men prepare an ambush, surrounding the poachers' high, isolated position. As the mild June night wanes, the group's fury at the violation builds: they will do whatever it takes to protect their communal wealth.

At dawn, a force of the fittest Manang youths storms the Gorkha camp, attacking with sticks and iron farming tools. The enraged Manangi beat two of the Gorkha to death on the spot and throw the bodies into a deep, icy crevasse. They round up the other five and herd them down the mountain, where the main force from Nar is waiting.

There, the beatings quickly escalate. The angry mob rips the life from the poachers, hacking at their limbs and bashing their heads with rocks. Every member of the group, including boys as young as 12, is required to strike a blow, so the guilt will be collective.

Then they cut the five corpses into small pieces, wrap them in

plastic and throw them into a glacial torrent that carries them far away. Their bloody work done, hands spattered with gore and splinters of bone, the 65 men and boys of the village sit in a mountaintop conclave and swear a solemn oath never to tell anyone what happened, not even their wives.

A month after the massacre, life in the village continued at its slow, pastoral pace, but the inner turmoil of the 65 murderers, all devout Buddhists, was as violent as their crime. The conspiracy began to fall apart when a delegation from Gorkha arrived in Nar, seeking news of their missing kinsmen. They were brusquely turned away: nobody knew what they were talking about. Then a traitorous cowherd took the group aside and told them where they could find the bodies of the first two victims.

The Gorkha visitors went to Chame, the capital of Manang district 16km to the south, and told their story to the authorities, who dispatched a force of more than 60 police officers to Nar. They soon discovered the two bodies in the crevasse. The police rounded up all the men in the village who were physically capable of having participated in the crime and herded them

down the mountainside like sheep. It was the first time any Manang people had ever been arrested.

A curse had fallen on Nar: women grieved, their children were fatherless. The economy spiralled into entropy. Untended, herds mingled together randomly until no one could tell which yaks belonged to whom; new houses were abandoned in the middle of construction. There was no one to pay the hired hands, who stole away by night. A village that had survived for centuries in one of the most extreme environments on Earth tottered on the brink of extinction.

"This wasn't the first time yarsagumba poachers were murdered in Nar," said Karma Gurung, the 26-year-old manager of a hotel in Braga, on the Annapurna trekking circuit, who had been recommended to me as a reliable guide to the shadowy network of the yarsagumba trade in Manang. "But before they kept it a secret. The people in Nar are very dangerous."

Traditionally, the wealth of a village like Nar was its livestock, measured primarily by the number of yaks. But after the discovery of this 'Himalayan gold'—a combination of insect and plant that remains inactive in winter and comes out in summer—in the early 1990s, the



**HIMALAYAN GOLD:** Yarsagumba, a combination of insect and plant that remains inactive in winter and comes out in summer, has been known as a potent aphrodisiac and elixir of youth.

economy of the Manang was revolutionised by yarsagumba. Then simple farmers suddenly started earning more money during the picking season—from late March through June—than their fathers did in a lifetime.

Karma explained that the yarsagumba trade became widespread in Manang seven years ago, when yak herders noticed that animals grazing up near the snowline were healthier, more active—and randier. "The people in Nar knew about it long before that. Everyone wondered why they were up there with the yaks all the time. It was a secret then."

As I travelled through the land of the Manang, virtually everyone I met was involved in the yarsagumba trade in one way or another. One village told me children make the best pickers because they're closer to the ground and better able to see the spindly stem of the dead caterpillar poking up from the ground. But some people here also have a moral objection to collecting yarsagumba.

"We believe it's bad karma to pick yarsagumba from the ground. It's like killing a living thing," Karma told me later one night over a dinner of dried yak meat.

Later at Braga, I called the lead detective in the Nar arrests, Inspector Bharat Bahadur Biswakarma.

"The Gorkha men came to Nar to steal yarsagumba, and it wasn't the first time," he said. "The Nar men only wanted to teach them a lesson, but as they beat them, it got to be more and more brutal." The maximum punishment for murder in Nepal is 20 years in jail. Bharat quietly added, "It was the worst crime that anyone here can remember."

On my last day in another village, Chame, word came by fax that 17 of the prisoners were to be released without bail, on parole to return for trial a month later. Among those released was a 21-year-old college student named Krishna Lama. He joined me for breakfast at the Marshandi Mandala Hotel the morning after his

release, but he wasn't celebrating. "Yarsagumba brings a curse," he said. "Our entire village has had to suffer. Even my father had to face that fate."

Krishna's father was murdered two years ago when he tried to drive away another gang of interloping yarsagumba poachers from Gorkha. He, too, was beaten to death with sticks. Krishna was attending college in Kathmandu, studying computer science with the money his father had saved from selling yarsagumba, until last June. He had just come home on a holiday to see his widowed mother, when fate knocked at his door.

"I had to go," he said. "A man from every house had to be a part of the group, and my father was gone."

Krishna's story, that he was one of the last to arrive on the scene of the crime and didn't even witness the killings, is corroborated by the police, who obviously have sympathy for him. Yet under Nepali law, as in most countries, his role in the conspiracy makes him culpable.

He shrugged with a grim smile and said, "I am cursed. It happens to me time and again. I have no hope."

When Krishna Lama talked about the curse of yarsagumba, he didn't mean it as a metaphor. He was describing the fungus's inner power, which is more real to the people of the Himalayas than any of the scientific reports attesting to its efficacy. On the Annapurna trail, I met an old man who ran a little shop on the side of the road selling yak skulls and farm tools, who explained why devout Buddhists believe it's an evil power.

"A famous lama chose to be reborn as yarsagumba as a boon to mankind," he told me. "If you traffic in yarsagumba, you will be reincarnated very low. You won't be reborn as a man."

Like every gold rush in history, the yarsagumba boom in the Himalayas has blighted many more lives than it has enriched. The gloomy predictions of Krishna Lama are almost certainly correct: regardless of how their case is decided, their lives are ruined.

By Kee Hua Chee  
The Star

# THE BUNNIES HAVE LANDED

THE ONLY PLAYBOY CLUB IN ASIA  
IS THE NEWEST ADDITION TO  
THE GLITZ OF MACAU

## ❖ Macau

Some men may well have fantasised about being buddies with Hugh Hefner, founder of the Playboy empire, and getting the gilded key to the Playboy Club, once the world's most prestigious and exciting bar, supper club, nightclub and entertainment centre rolled into one. To have been served by a Playboy Bunny, perennially smiling, good-natured, accommodating and generally blonde must have been a dream of all worthy, red-blooded men.

How times have changed. *Playboy* magazine's success and the industry it spawned as well as competition from other sources have resulted in a precipitous plunge in the club's prestige, pride and profit.

Today, 20-somethings have a vague inkling of *Playboy* magazine or most likely are clueless as the Internet has taken care of all earthly desires. As founder Hefner is all of 84 and on his last legs, he is also not the best walking advertisement for his products—not that walking is an activity associated with the brand.

There was a time when (in the foggy mists of the 1970s and '80s) a man could die happy the next morning should he be invited to one of Hefner's legendary parties at the Playboy Mansion in Chicago. This was home to at least half a dozen long-staying Playboy Bunnies who could guarantee a good time 24/7, at least to the house owner and select guests. A copy of *Playboy* "accidentally" dropped from your Samsonite briefcase was proof that you were not only a raging hetero but also possessed good taste as the magazine featured—apart from the Playmate of the Month—remarkably well-researched articles and literature by notable writers.

After being denied a US\$5 raise at *Esquire* magazine, Hefner mortgaged everything he owned, including his furniture, to produce *Playboy* in December 1953. The first issue featured Marilyn Monroe from her 1949 nude calendar. It was a sensational success and sold 53,991 copies at 50 cents each.

Hefner wanted to name his bachelor magazine 'Stag Party' but an unrelated, outdoor magazine



**COME AND PLAY:** Playboy Club Bunnies are all set to welcome guests to the Playboy Club Macau.

called Stag threatened a lawsuit. Few know it was not Hefner but co-founder Eldon Sellers who suggested 'Playboy' as his mother had worked for Playboy Automobile Company. The world-famous logo of a stylised rabbit with a tuxedo bow was originally intended as an endnote but ended up as the logo since Hefner liked the "humorous sexual connotation" of breeding like rabbits and the creature's "frisky and playful" image.

He was not just synonymous with glorifying the joys of a hetero bachelorhood. In 1955, Hefner shook the establishment by publishing *The Crooked Man in Playboy*. This science fiction short story by Charles Beaumont was about straight men being persecuted in a homosexual-dominated world.

The 1970s were *Playboy's* heyday. Its best-selling edition was the November 1972 edition which sold 7,161,561 copies—and one in four college undergrads bought *Playboy*. At its peak, Playboy Enterprise covered almost every category from casino to publishing to cuff links. It was worth \$1 billion in 2000, a figure that collapsed to \$85 million by 2009 though its publishing arm was on sale for \$300 million.

Hefner's daughter Christie became CEO in 1988 and stepped down this year. *Playboy* now has 10 issues per year as it battles to stay *au courant* and relevant to the 18-to-35 age group, wary of being seen reading their dad's magazine.

## ❖ Playboy clubs

The first Playboy Club opened in 1960 in Hefner's hometown of Chicago and the last on American soil in Lansing, Michigan, which closed in 1988. Playboy Club Manila teetered until 1991 at Silahis Hotel.

At its peak, the Chicago club received 132,000 visitors in the last three months of 1961, making it the world's busiest nightclub. In 1981, the Playboy Club's London casino was the world's most profitable but shuttered to a halt soon after when its licence was not renewed.

Apart from Bunnies, Playboy Clubs actually boasted a roll-call of famous entertainers, among them Ray Charles, Bing Crosby, Dizzy Gillespie, Bob Hope, Jay Leno, Peggy Lee, Ann Margret, Steve Martin, Bette Midler and Ginger Rogers.

The recently opened Playboy Club at The Palms Casino Resort Las Vegas is the only Playboy Club in the world ... but not for long. On

November 20, Playboy Club Macau would have opened at the Sands Macau Hotel (the first Las Vegas-style casino hotel in Macau when it started business in 2004).

Its 12,000sqft Playboy Club is designed to be the last word in luxury (some say it is also Playboy's last chance at renewing its fortune) and will command spectacular views from its penthouse location, both indoors, outdoors and from its Bunnies. The club will flaunt private gaming areas, opulent lounges, high-tech media rooms, live entertainment, luxurious Playboy-type decor, costly artwork and "unique VIP arrival experience tailored for Asian customers"—whatever that means.

Investors are so convinced Playboy Club will be such a glorious success that it is now building the 30,000sqft Playboy Mansion which will open in 2012. This year, after all, is the 50th anniversary of Playboy Club since the first one opened at 116E Walton in downtown Chicago and corks should be flying.

## ❖ Bunny hunt

On October 15, 15 shortlisted Playboy Club Bunnies from various countries, including Macau and Hong Kong, joined seasoned Las Vegas Playboy Club Bunny Denise Pernula at the first Bunny Hunt at Sands Macau. The event marked the start of the recruitment drive for the entertainment industry's most coveted, glamorous and best-paid jobs. Winners will get to welcome VIP guests on opening night and thereafter pander to the whims of Playboy Club members and high-rollers.

The 15 finalists walked the walk and talked the talk, preening, posing and pirouetting prettily as they chatted with select guests, premium players, members of the media and judges. The judging panel included Playboy officials, Macau celebrities and experienced Playboy Club Bunnies from Palms Las Vegas.

At the rate they are going after the Chinese market, perhaps Playboy should be Playman(darin)!

PHOTO PROVIDED TO THE STAR

By Kelly Chung Dawson  
China Daily

# East In Vogue

Asian designers are now under spotlight in the West

## ◆ New York

If the shows at New York Fashion Week highlighted one trend this year, it was the rise of Asian designers in the United States.

Up-and-comers like Phillip Lim, Thakoon Panichgul and Derek Lam proved hits this summer, which came hot on the heels of Richard Chai, Alexander Wang and Jason Wu being named the best of the new breed by the Council of Fashion Designers of America (CFDA).

"Asian designers who are getting more recognition are doing so because they have genuine talent," said Steven Kolb, executive director of the council. "The decision to honour designers with (our awards) is based on talent, and talent alone."

Although ethnicity did not factor in the CFDA awards, fashion experts suggest that rising stars of Asian heritage could have a distinct advantage when it comes to tapping into the growing markets for high-end fashion in the Far East, particularly China.

Sales of luxury goods in China alone reached roughly US\$9.4 billion in 2009, according to a report from Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, while PricewaterhouseCoopers, the global professional services firm, predicts China will become the biggest consumer of luxury goods by 2015.

Major foreign labels are attempting to capitalise on this growth, as well as similar trends across the region, with lines specifically

tailored to Asian shoppers.

This year, Levi Strauss & Co. released Denizen, a style of jeans targeted at 18 to 28-year-olds in China, South Korea and Singapore, while Hermes launched Shang Xia, clothes specifically designed for Chinese buyers, at its newly opened store in Shanghai.

The region plays an integral part in the plans of most Asian designers, too.

"It is a goal for every designer to be part of China's growing economy," said Prabal Gurung, a Nepali fashion designer who has enjoyed critical acclaim in the US.

"The Chinese luxury market is becoming more and more important, if not as important as the European market," he said. "You would have to be a fool not to consider China. You would lose out on a lot of business."

Luckily for fashionistas with Chinese lineage, they stand to profit from what Simon Collins—dean of New York's Parsons The New School for Design, or Parsons for short—believes is a growing sense of national pride in Chinese fashion design.

"It's starting to emerge that Chinese people seem to want to have things be of China," he said.

## Going east

As global financial markets have faltered in recent years, Western brands have increasingly been turning to developing markets, such as China and India.

"This change of cultural emphasis

has created more opportunities not just for Chinese Americans but Chinese fashion designers as a whole," said Kin Yeung, founder of Blanc de Chine, a Chinese fashion house.

Asian designers who spotted the opportunities are already attempting to expand their markets in the Far East.

Award-winner Wu, who was raised in Taiwan and designed the dress Michelle Obama wore at her husband Barack's inauguration as the 44th US president, teamed up with luxury retail store Lane Crawford in 2009 and is now focusing on international expansion in South Korea, Japan and Singapore.

He also recently announced a partnership with Shiseido, the hugely popular Japanese hair care and cosmetics brand.

"I am proud of and grateful for my Chinese heritage," Wu told

the next generation of brands."

Some fashion observers have questioned whether Asian-American designers targeting China will face problems marketing in a country that has long valued the prestige of European luxury brands manufactured overseas.

However, Collins at Parsons argues that things are changing. "There is a consideration that certain foreign elements have always been more desirable but there is beginning to be a ready openness to embrace Chinese design," he said.

It will be a long time before Chinese brands achieve the same level of prestige as the likes of Louis Vuitton, he said, "but previously those who could afford luxury only desired the credibility of overseas brands, whereas now people are more open".

To attain international prominence, however, Collins suggests Chinese de-

they were made by Asian designers.

"It's all about good design," said Angel Ho, a Hong Kong-born student at Pratt Institute, another famous New York design school. "If it happens to be an Asian designer, that's cool, (people) will find pride in it. But it's not the main selling point."

Still, the majority of the clothing designed by Lam and Wu are actually manufactured outside of China, partly as a calculated move to avoid the stigma occasionally associated with Chinese manufacturing.

Gurung said having a 'made in New York' line has helped him break into the Asian market.

"There has definitely been more openness to my brand because we're made in the US," he said. "It creates a different story; it gives me a global point of view. It's not that I'm closed to the idea of things being made in China—but for now New York is my base and forms the core of my branding."

These factors may change as Chinese companies race to improve quality, said Schlottman. "A renewed sense of pride can be seen in their work as they become competitive in the international market," he said of the Chinese manufacturers who produce roughly 20 per cent of Lam's inventory.

## Next generation

Most of the Asian designers now coming under the spotlight are all former students of Parsons, generally regarded as one of the best fashion schools in the US.

According to school statistics, about 70 per cent of the programme's international students are from Asia. Meanwhile, the Fashion Institute of Technology, also in New York, reports that 23 per cent of its 1,200 design students are of Asian descent.

"We can't deny the fact that a great many of the most successful designers in the last 10 years have been Asian," said Parsons' Collins, who with Lam has been asked to judge Creative Sky, US.

"We don't assess people with any relation to their ethnicity," he continued, "but when someone from (China) becomes internationally famous, it might open the eyes of other people to something they've previously not looked at as an option."

Models present creations by Taiwanese born designer Jason Wu during the Swiss Textiles Award at the Charles Voegele Fashion Days Zurich recently.



US First Lady Michelle Obama (R) checks her 2009 inaugural gown as designer Jason Wu looks on.



Nepali fashion designer Prabal Gurun poses with US 'Vogue' editor Anna Wintour backstage at his Spring 2010 Collection in New York.

China Daily. "It seemed like a natural step to expand in the Asian market in a big way."

Derek Lam's clothing is sold in the luxurious Joyce Boutique in Hong Kong, while he also serves as a creative director for Tod's, the Italian shoemaker. Jan Schlottman, chief executive of Derek Lam International, credited both factors with helping the American-born Chinese designer to raise his profile in Asia, especially China.

"With international fashion trends becoming more accessible to Chinese audiences, they've learned to express their personal style through what they wear," said Schlottman. "Within this search we see an opportunity to enter

signers avoid branding their companies as strictly Chinese, citing the example of Ports 1961. Although not designed by Chinese, it is a Chinese-owned brand that has remained ethnically ambiguous on the international stage, he said.

Regardless, Schlottman said he believes Lam's Chinese background is a marketing asset.

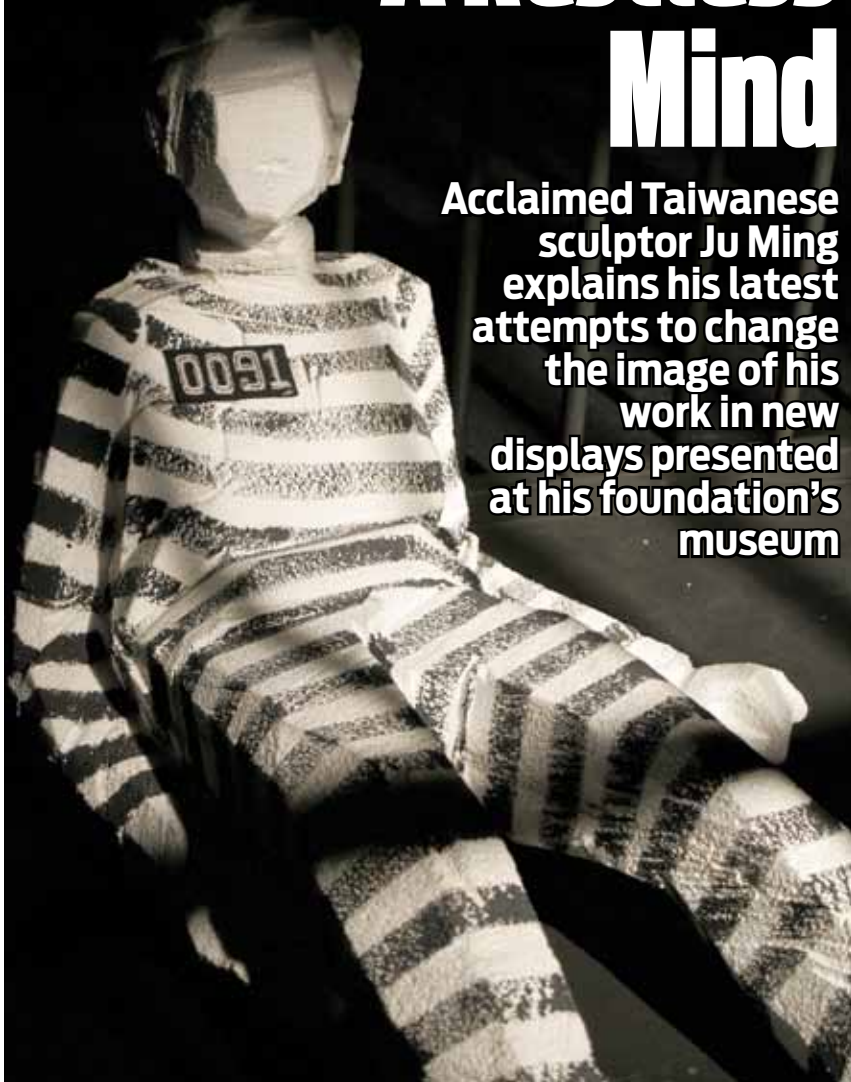
"As a successful Asian-American fashion designer of Chinese descent, Derek elicits a sense of pride in the Chinese people," he said. "It helps make the brand more approachable in the Chinese market."

Yet, others argue that shoppers are unlikely to buy clothes simply because



## A Restless Mind

Acclaimed Taiwanese sculptor Ju Ming explains his latest attempts to change the image of his work in new displays presented at his foundation's museum



By Deborah Lu and Dimitri Bruyas  
The China Post

### ◆ Taipei

In a single cage, divided into a black-and-white space, two people face each other: the person on the black side of the cage was incarcerated by others, whereas his counterpart has been imprisoned by his own thoughts.

Although there aren't physical separations between them, the artist suggests that the bad man could simply cross over and walk out of the cage, while the allegedly good man seems to have drawn his own boundaries in a case of self-imprisonment. Yet, there is no key on the inside of the black side, but there is one on the other side.

This new artwork is part of a new

three sculpture opus, 'Imprisonment' created in 2009 by Taiwanese sculptor Ju Ming, now on display at the JUMING Museum in Taipei County.

Like previous artworks in his famous 'Living World Series', the black-and-white sculptures carry the artist's signature bold knife strokes that are distinctive of works that he has produced over the past 30 years.

Unlike most of Ju's other sculptures in the series, coloration has gradually ceased to be vital in the Styrofoam sculptures. The artist has also turned away from focusing on external aesthetics to explore the abstract spiritual dimension in his latest work.

"The 'Living World' collection would be more complete with issues dealing with the spiritual, so I decided to do ('Imprisonment')," Ju told *The China Post* in an exclusive interview.

The set explores three issues: the imprisonment of others, being imprisoned by others and self-imprisonment.

"It is more difficult to present the spiritual, it takes a long time. In the end, I used prisoners to represent the issue of choices," he said.

"The two people are not separated by anything. That means the guy (on the black side) can move to the other



Ju Ming



PHOTO BY ARIE ANG/THE CHINA POST

side anytime, but he doesn't want to and remains there," Ju explained.

"Think about it, there are many evil people among us. They can move to the good side, but they don't want to. Everyone has a choice and no one can force anyone to do anything."

According to the artist, a lack of a barrier between good and evil in the cage represents the thin line between them in the real world. "There is hell on earth, and heaven on earth. It is only a matter of the mindset. It is a problem in life, not in death. (Good and evil) are just choices and people's mindsets."

Ju further pointed out that the person on the white side is inside the cage because he feels a lot of restrictions. As for which side he belongs to, the artist said neither: "I am not good and I am not evil, like most people."

A married couple stands inside a cage of another set, symbolising marriage as a kind of prison. The artist noted that married people can be imprisoned by their other half and career. "Family and career can be cages. You worry about what might happen to them once you leave to enjoy yourself."

A key can be seen inside the cage, symbolising the availability of a choice for the couple to leave their marriage. "Chinese people feel very negative towards divorce, so (some) are locked up (in marriage) until they die," he said.

Comparing the two prisons, Ju added that it was worse being in the marriage prison. "Even with a life sentence, there is parole after 20 years, but the (marriage) one is forever."

Yet, the artist feels that 'Imprisonment' is more lively compared to his signature work, the 'Taichi Series'.

"The aesthetics for the 'Taichi

Series' are more ancient, like the beauty of space. The 'Living World Series' is created with newer materials, a lot of which are not found prior to the 20th century, such as stainless steel, Styrofoam and plastic," the artist said. "I tried to create new perceptions (from other people) with new materials to describe the issues of modern societies."

Stressing that sculpture is all about the process, Ju noted that coloration was not a vital element in these Styrofoam sculptures. "I would like to present diverse ideas with different materials."

The 72-year-old-artist gives his mentor Yang Yuyu credit for teaching him how to draw and apply different materials to his artworks, starting in the 1960s.

Based on his years of training in traditional temple wood-carving that began when he was 15 years old, the artist believes that experience has also helped him to cross over to the world of modern art from the folk art approach.

Still, Ju stressed that Yang reminded him not to forget about Chinese spirits, where he is from, and his background. Even if there are thousands of Chinese studying art, Ju emphasised that only a few of them are known worldwide because their works contain Western styles but lack of their own spirits.

In other words, Ju argues that the world cannot acknowledge someone who works with Western spirits but forgets about his own culture.

Ju worked with Yang for eight years; he had a Western influence but he told his student not to forget his background. However, Ju acknowledged that he didn't know much about the Chinese spirit; it was such an abstract idea.

He then realised that he had to learn

step by step, to acquire little by little. He started learning calligraphy, composing couplets, enjoying Peking opera and studying the terracotta warriors. That might be why, when we see his work, the 'Taichi Series', most people know it was created by a Chinese artist, because the spirit is underlying in the work.

Contrary to all expectations, Ju explained that he couldn't keep on the 'Taichi Series' ad infinitum, even if the sculptures sold briskly throughout the 1990s. To him, the series was just a minor subject. "There were some limitations," he said with a smile.

When working on the 'Taichi Series', he noted that he had three burdens: Taichi was Chang San-feng's invention centuries ago and he was restricted within the spirits as well as the (Taichi) moves. That was also why he started working on the 'Living World Series' as there are no boundaries in this subject.

While preparing his latest sculptures, for instance, Ju would first draw some sketches, select the material and swiftly start to work. In fact, the artist said he looks at his artworks as a whole instead of individual items. "Each work is an extension from the major theme."

"There is only a theme within the Living World Series; there are no subordinate subjects. There can be many interpretations of my works, but I don't want to name each of them."

Asked about the media's bold interpretations of his massive work of 300 soldiers 'San Jun' completed in 2005, Ju stressed that it was just different from his "original idea".

Terracotta warriors were meant to be soldiers that died with the emperor. His 'Armed Forces' in the 'Living World Series' are soldiers today. He used the troop to convey the ideas of installation art and action. The troop gives a sense of assembly and military reviews as well.

Further, the soft-spoken artist says his 'Imprisonment' installment is part of this attempt to change the image of his work and museum, founded on Sept 19, 1999.

By Gillian Terzis  
The Jakarta Post



# A Nascent Cultural Juggernaut

INDONESIAN YOUTHS ARE MOST SUSCEPTIBLE TO AN INFATUATION WITH KOREAN CULTURE

♦ Jakarta

The dusty back streets of Jakarta's Kemangisan may seem an unlikely indicator of Indonesia's cultural zeitgeist. But it was there—while subjected to a cacophony of insouciant beeping from vehicular traffic—I became mesmerised by the strains of an alluring, catchy melody.

Like the apocryphal call of the Sirens, the sounds were impossible to resist. It was as if perfection had

heralded itself with meticulous five-part harmonies. And in line with Greek mythology, I capitulated to their enchanting calls.

Fortunately, those killer hooks and lyrics were not those of actual Sirens, but of nine-woman Korean super-group Girls' Generation. Their gossamer-thin melodies were pumping through the speakers of a cramped news agency populated by students of nearby Binus University. There, magazine racks were flooded with K-pop paraphernalia—with

magazines dedicated 13-piece B-boy outfit Super Junior and girl group After School.

While failing to appear inconspicuous while leafing through a feature on Kara—another chart-topping K-pop girl group—a group of girls in their early 20s approach me, somewhat nervously. One of them, Andra—an interior design student at Binus—taps me on the shoulder and tactfully informs me that I've skipped the interview with Big Bang.

"Korean hip-hop is very popular over here," she says, before chiding me for my obsession with Super Junior. She points excitedly at G-Dragon, the lead rapper of Big Bang, before exclaiming: "Don't you love the bright colours he wears? Don't you think he's cute?"

It sounds like more of a statement than a question. Her friend Juanita chimes in with her fervent love for Korean soap operas.

"Obviously (they) can be over the top," she says, "but I feel I can relate to the characters more. I like American dramas like *Gossip Girl* too, but (as Indonesians) we face different pressures from our parents, different expectations." She quickly adds: "And the guys are very cute!"

Perhaps they are on to something. While the West has been in thrall to the cultural hegemony of the United States, much of Asia has been blissfully riding the Korean wave, revelling in its unbridled

cuteness and playful rebelliousness. South Korea has become a nascent cultural juggernaut, and is responsible for a phalanx of K-pop artists and soap stars whose celebrity seemingly knows no cultural or geographical bounds.

It seems that it is Indonesian youth who are most susceptible to an infatuation with Korean culture.

Those with such predilections would have enjoyed the impeccably timed Indonesia-Korea week recently. The event comprised of myriad cultural and economic forums aimed at solidifying bilateral ties between the two countries.

Crucial to Indonesia-Korea week was the concept of cultural exchange, which was kicked off by a fashion festival that showcased a melange of traditional Indonesian and Korean styles. It featured batik clothing, *hanbok* (traditional Korean dress) made from batik and an array of ethereal costumes that evoked the

(known in Korean as *hallyu*) gathered momentum in the late 1990s after the Korean government abolished austere censorship laws, thus enabling Korean television programmes to be exported to countries in the Asian region.

According to *The Economist*, exports of Korean video games, soap operas and K-pop have doubled since 1999, while the total number of cultural products exported since then has increased almost three-fold to US\$1.8 billion. Not only do these exports highlight South Korea's significant cultural capital, but also its financial capital. They also have a dual function: such cultural exports allow the nation to exercise a considerable amount of clout or 'soft power' in the region.

Perhaps it is the synthesis of Confucian-style catechisms and Cinderella storylines that have resonated most with Indonesian audiences, particularly those who

government. The Indonesia-Korea initiative could be seen as one such example of the South Korean government's mercantilist knack, effectively using the festivities as an opportunity to promote Korean products to an Indonesian market.

Furthermore, organisations that disseminate Korean culture to foreign markets are handsomely rewarded by millions of dollars in government grants.

Even the Korean film industry is not exempt from this quasi-nationalist imperative. *Le Grand Chef 2: Kimchi Battle*—which screened as part of Indonesia-Korea week—managed to combine family-friendly storylines with a hint of nationalism. The *kimchi* is an integral part of Korean cooking; an instantly recognisable symbol of national identity. The film allowed audiences a taste of authentic Korean culture while explicitly bolstering the Korean brand.

But for me, I find the distinguish-



candied melodrama of popular Korean serials like *Winter Sonata*.

Other cultural events included badminton and taekwondo battles, a Korean film festival, and a smorgasbord of Korean and Indonesian culinary delights.

But what was most remarkable about the event was that the audience—particularly at the cultural forums—comprised mainly of younger Indonesians. One is compelled to wonder what draws them to Korean culture and how on earth did it become so popular?

Once a relatively esoteric phenomenon, South Korean culture

have enjoyed much prosperity as a result of the Asian economic boom of the past 20 years.

A common trope in Korean soap-dramas involves a dissatisfied protagonist who wants to abandon his middle-management job for the pursuit of fame. One wonders if it is this mythologising of the banalities of one's day-to-day existence (such as the constant struggle between working to live or living to work) that makes these dramas so palatable to Asian audiences.

But *hallyu* increasingly appears to be part of a nation-building strategy engineered by an enterprising Korean

ing feature of *hallyu* is its ingenuity, which applies equally to the restorative (and delicious) qualities of *bulgogi* to the establishment of Starcraft as a national sport.

In June this year, the *New York Times* reported South Korea had orchestrated a propaganda campaign against North Korea. They were backed up with heavy artillery: purpose-built speakers and the saucy provocateurs of Girls' Generation. Naturally, there can only be one response to a country that deploys titillation as the best defense against threats of nuclear annihilation: *hallyu* yeah!

By Devraj Singh Kalsi  
The Statesman

# Bollywood's Retro 70s



**The '70s is best remembered for racy romantic comedies that are still charming to watch. 'Action Replayy' captures the essence of this glorious decade**

◆ **Kolkata**

**B**ollywood touched the nadir of crassness and mediocrity during the '80s. Some of the worst films were made during this period. Contemporary directors pass this unanimous verdict. Many directors, who survived this lean phase, differ on this. Whether one likes it or not, the fact remains that Bollywood came to be despised as a factory churning out *masala* (mixed genre) potboilers during this decade.

The industry had to wage a tough fight to come out of this quagmire. Redemption became possible in the fag-end of the '90s. Dirty patchwork had to be left behind and forgotten as a nightmarish experience. Sensible cinema that has emerged in the last decade gave the much-needed push. Just as economic reforms hit the nation and shook it out of its slumber, along similar lines some directors made every effort to bring dignity and sanity back to commercial cinema. The effect of this turnaround came to be noticed in the last few years, making the nation proud of the output.

The present crop of directors hark back to the '70s—the only decade they seem to be fond of. It is not for nothing that they are nostalgic about this phase. They pay tribute to this period when Bollywood had a successful stint. So impressed they are with this particular phase that they have in their own creative ways tried to revive this era in their films. This gimmick clicked so well that some directors wanted to structure their films with a retro '70s look loaded with dance, action and music. Romantic comedies are popular today. This is not a new genre. The '70s showcased this trend of making racy romantic comedies that are charming to watch.

*Action Replayy*, which topbills superstars Aishwarya Rai and Akshay Kumar, catches the essence of this glorious decade. And probably pays homage to it.

One need not try hard to understand the reasons behind this attraction. Directors who have scaled popularity today are the ones swinging in their '30s and '40s. They have grown up on the Bollywood diet from the '70s. As a result, they have a soft corner for the kind of movies they

grew up watching and had perhaps nurtured the dream of making similar films for the big screen. This wish would have remained chimerical because commercial films are dictated by trends, meant primarily for the youth who are fond of change and variety.

The potential of the '70s first came to be noticed when songs belonging to this period, particularly RD Burman hits, became a rage on the dance floor. Finding the youth tap their feet to these groovy numbers made the album directors realise that the music from this period still had a lot of spunk and verve to charm youngsters. RD has become a greater hit now than he was back in his heydays: a cool favourite with the new generation who prefer his peppy tracks.

This successful experiment inspired others to pick up other aspects from this golden era. There was hopefully much to be explored and tweaked to suit young taste buds. They found many items worth selecting. Item songs remixed and lyrically altered became a huge hit. Choreography during the decade inspired directors to pick up a few steps. They liked the flashy art direction found in the films made in the '70s. They also liked the way the lead pair dressed. Bright floral stuff and designer outfits with sequins and ostentatious cuts from the '70s found favour in the industry. Designer eyewear and footwear, hairdo of the lead pair were worth emulating. Though some changes were made, these were largely cosmetic. The '70s look had caught the fancy of the youth. Right packaging did wonders.

In the '60s, colour films arrived on the scene. In the '70s, colour gained richness and technical expertise improved in shooting films in colour. Ace cameramen of this period got the chance to do things differently. Art directors also stepped in to create

resplendent, iridescent sets where gloss and sparkle was the clear winner. To match the colours in the frame, costumes were also made bright and colourful. The collective output was meant to bedazzle the audience. Movies in the '70s did so quite effectively. Movies in the present times also have to be visually grand and opulent so that the audience is left spellbound. There cannot be a compromise on this basic premise related to the magic of cinema.

Directors who share this vision of filmmakers from the '70s end up following the trend to some extent. Till now, there has been total acceptance of the retro elements on the silver screen. Emboldened directors want to see more classics and come up with more elements they can adapt without being labelled as copycats. Here, the difference is that they need not follow a particular film. Study and contrast and follow the collective efforts of this era so that they can take it to the next level by interspersing fresh elements, applying their own creativity to create a dapper look that surpasses the original stuff.

The new generation has not consumed such fare as it belonged to the period before their birth. It is an advantage for commercial filmmakers because though it is old, yet it is new, for the young ones have not seen it. And what is not seen by them remains new. This clever trick has been played quite successfully. Old wine has been served in a new bottle without the young generation being aware of it.

It is possible that the gimmick will fall flat within a short span of time. That should not be a matter of concern as directors know full well that everything is cyclical in this film world and nothing lasts forever. The fact that it is good till it lasts is good enough.

Just one big flop would dissuade the rest, making them realise they have ventured too far in capitalising on the stunning visual power of the '70s.



# Rich Men, Famous Women

The second-generation members of the Chinese elite seem to have a penchant for fast cars, swift courtships or both



Barbie Hsu

Wang Xiaofei



Vicki Zhao

Wang Yu



Liu Tao

Wang Ke

◆ Singapore

Taiwanese actress Barbie Hsu has met her Mr. Right.

As it happens, her Chinese fiancé, businessman Wang Xiaofei, is also a Mr. Big—and there are

more of them where he came from.

Collectively known as 'Beijing's four young masters', Wang Xiaofei, Wang Yu, Wang Ke and Wang Shuo are second-generation members of the Chinese elite.

When news of the couple's engagement broke, Hsu's fellow Taiwanese entertainers were quick to wish her well.

"Congratulations, he's very rich," singer Jay Chou said.

Weeks ago, Taiwanese actress Jessey Meng also got engaged to Chinese businessman Ji Zenghe.

According to Chinese tabloids, Beijing's Fab Four have a penchant for fast cars, swift courtships or both.

Between them—if even half the stories are to be believed—they may have gone through, at high speed, a who's who of famous girlfriends.

*The Straits Times* tries to keep up with them.

◆ **Who:** Wang Xiaofei, 29, is the son of Chinese celebrity restaurateur Zhang Lan. Educated in France and Canada, he is the executive director of her dining chain, South Beauty.

◆ **Women:** He had a girlfriend of three years, Chinese model Feng Jing, before his one-year relationship with *CJ7* starlet Kitty Zhang and now he is engaged to *Meteor Garden* star Barbie Hsu after a 20-day courtship, reports said.

He was at Taiwanese actress Ady An's birthday bash in Beijing on September 29 when he met Hsu. An, who was in love with him, had not asked Hsu to her party, said *Next Magazine*.

Hsu had attended it with An's pal, actor Shone An. At the party, she was introduced to Wang by her buddy, Pace Wu.

He was so smitten by Hsu that eight days later, he flew to Taipei for her birthday with two bottles of wine, a 1983 Chateau Petrus and a 1962 Chateau Lafite Rothschild, Southern Metropolis Entertainment Weekly said.

Within weeks—before they met each other's parents—they were engaged.

◆ **Who:** Wang Yu, in his 30s, is the son of the late Wang Daohan, China's top Taiwan negotiator.

Educated in the United States, he is reportedly a real estate multi-millionaire.

◆ **Women:** He has been linked to actresses from Huang Yi (*Six Strong Guys*, 2004) to Sharla Cheung (*All For The Winner*, 1990).

In 2003, his relationship with actress Vicki Zhao came to light. He was serious about her and she met his parents, reports said.

But they had an ugly row once, when she was exhausted from filming but he insisted on taking her to a party.

She said no in front of his friends and he slapped her, reported *Xinhuanet.com*.

Eventually, they broke up.

◆ **Who:** Wang Ke, 29, is a bit of a mystery man.

Reportedly, he is a businessman's son with a 20-billion-yuan company.

◆ **Women:** In August 2007, he took the lift with Chinese actress Liu Tao in The Peninsula Beijing hotel and fell for her, reports said.

He met her properly at a party the next month, after he saw a report that she was going to it. Twenty days later, they married.

Their wedding banquet, held in 2008 in The Peninsula, was the talk of the town because they and their guests arrived in an astonishing fleet of fancy cars.

At least one Porsche Cayenne, eight Ferraris, three Lamborghinis, two Bentleys and two Rolls-Royces were counted, *Xinhuanet.com* said.

The couple have a child. Amid talk of a marital break-up, Wang has been linked to Kitty Zhang. She has refuted the rumour.

◆ **Who:** Wang Shuo, 28, is the son of Chinese-Australian property tycoon Wang Zhicai. He is reported to be worth 400 million yuan.

◆ **Women:** Beautiful girls and gorgeous cars go together for Wang Shuo, who has been linked to the likes of actress Fan Bingbing.

He dated actress Zhou Xun last year and in their six months together, he drove a Rolls-Royce, a Ferrari, a Mercedes-Benz, a Lamborghini, a Lamborghini convertible, a Maybach, a Bentley and an Aston Martin, *Xinhuanet.com* said.

At a charity gala last year, he offered 3.88 million yuan for a miniature house donated by his friend Jaycee Chan's father, actor Jackie Chan, and gave it to Zhou.

She admitted then that she was dating Wang. But she left him as soon as he was linked to someone else, said the report.



Fan Bingbing

Zhou Xun

PHOTOS OF BARBIE HSU, FAN BINGBING, ZHOU XUN AND VICKI ZHAO BY AFP

PHOTO OF LIU TAO BY CHINA DAILY

# Cool Culture

FILMS COMING OUT OF TAIWAN THE LAST TWO YEARS COMBINE ARTISTIC AND COMMERCIAL ELEMENTS, BUT CAN THIS BE CALLED A 'NEW WAVE'?

✦ Bangkok

There is a new wave going on in Taiwan cinema but it does not have to do with a specific filming technique. Instead, it has to do with the attitude of directors towards making movies that straddle both the artistic and critical aspects, but are not too commercial to be considered a sell-out.

American-Chinese filmmaker Arvin Chen, 32, however, refuses to call this the 'new wave' as compared to the First and Second Waves characterised by arthouse and critically acclaimed films, and led by the likes of Hou Hsiao-hsien and Tsai Ming-liang.

"I wouldn't call it a 'new wave'... but there is an ongoing movement where young directors want to make movies that will earn money. They want to make movies that are watchable and will reach a bigger audience," Chen tells *AsiaNews* during his recent visit to Bangkok where his film, *Au Revoir Taipei*, screened at the recently concluded World Film Festival.

Chen admires Hou and the late director Edward Yang who he worked with, but he also looks up to Ang Lee who has been able to reach a wider audience and has successfully expanded to Hollywood.

He notes that recent films coming out of Taiwan, and which many have referred to as the new wave, take a portion from Taiwanese culture but do not tell the story in new ways.

Yet, it cannot be denied that these recent movies have connected better with

the international audience.

It started with *Cape No. 7* in 2008, a small budget, charming movie that became a surprise hit in Taiwan. It is the only Taiwanese movie that has been screened in China in the last five years, notes Chen.

Then there is *Au Revoir Taipei* and *Monga*, both released this year. The two cannot be considered arthouse films, but nevertheless pleased critics and audiences alike. Both also used good-looking stars, like in the case of *Monga* headlined by Ethan Ruan Xiao Tian and Mark Chao You Ting, two of the currently famous actors in Taiwan.

Despite the success of these movies though, Taiwan cinema—like the rest of the world—is struggling. Of about 40 films that the industry produces a year, only four or 10 per cent of these actually make money.

Even an all-star cast does not guarantee good box-office returns like in the case of the 2009 *Treasure Hunter* that starred superstar Jay Chou Jie Lun and supermodel Lin Chi Ling. The action-adventure film set in the Gobi desert suffered from poor ticket sales and negative reviews despite Chou's popularity across Chinese-speaking countries.

In the meantime, it has become common for co-productions like in the case of the China-Taiwan film *Buddha Mountain* that features Chinese star Fan Bingbing and Taiwanese actress-director



Arvin Chen, director of 'Au Revoir Taipei'

PHOTO BY THE NATION (THAILAND)



MONGA

Sylvia Chang Ai Chia.

Not only is the production cost split but it is easier too to tap talents from various countries when there are different equities involved.

Still, looking for financiers, says Chen, is the most difficult part in making a movie.

"Writing and financing are the toughest parts. Financing... always takes a long, long time," he says.

He did *Au Revoir Taipei* on a US\$1-million-budget with equity coming from the Taipei city government and private partners from the US, Hong Kong and Singapore.

He also attributes the film's appeal to an international crew: "The ones who made it are Taiwanese, American, Malaysian, Singaporean. Also, one reason is that I wrote the script in English then I asked somebody to translate it to Chinese. When the actors got it, they improvised again. I guess that's one of the reasons why the film is universal because it starts with English then goes to Chinese then goes to Taiwanese then goes back to English."

Chen notes that Taiwan movies will "become increasingly commercial" in the future without losing their artistic values. "I don't think Taiwanese directors will ever make those purely commercial films. Even like *Monga*, which is commercial, there is still a lot of artfulness to it. Or *Cape No. 7*, which is also very commercial, but it is still very personal," Chen says.

Last year's big winner at the Golden Horse (Taiwan's Oscars) was *No Puedo*



TAIPEI EXCHANGES

*Vivir Sin Ti*, a heavy drama based on a true story. It was shot in monochrome and well received by local audiences. It was also Taiwan's entry to the Oscars and has earned recognition from various international festivals.

This new renaissance in Taiwan cinema was acknowledged when this year's Tokyo International Film Festival (TIFF) dedicated a section to the country. Among the films that were featured were *Monga*, *Juliets*, *Taipei Exchanges* and *Zoom Hunting*. Interestingly, these films also feature some of Taiwan's young stars whose names have been attached to more commercial projects, including idol dramas.

An interesting sidelight at the TIFF was the row between China and Taiwan with the former insisting that the latter's films should be represented as part of the mainland. The stars and directors who flew to Tokyo from Taipei ended up missing the red carpet, but their films nevertheless got shown at the festival.

For Chen, whose parents were from China but grew up in Taiwan, politics and pop culture can never be separated even if some people insist they are two different things.

"That's a really big problem and I don't think there's a solution," he says. "They should be separate but I think the problem is that movies are really a unique way of exporting culture and because of that, there's no way people will leave it alone."

"Movies are a powerful medium. When Taiwan movies go to Cannes or Berlin, of course China wouldn't



AU REVOIR TAIPEI

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE TAIPEI ECONOMIC AND CULTURAL OFFICE

want them to be represented as Taiwan because that's a way to represent countries and cultures so how can you leave it alone?" he asks.

Meanwhile, Taiwan's soft power has become increasingly wide-spread including in China, where Taiwanese pop stars are ubiquitous, whether in movies, dramas, concerts, albums and even advertisements.

Perhaps that is where the new wave lies: on how Taiwan's pop culture has become accepted as 'cool' even in China.

✉ [asianpopdom@gmail.com](mailto:asianpopdom@gmail.com)

**New Wave Cinema: 1982-1990**

Characterised by films done in realistic, down-to-earth and sympathetic portrayals of Taiwanese life. Notable filmmakers during this period include Hou Hsiao-hsien (*A City of Sadness*) and Edward Yang (*Taipei Story*).

**Second New Wave: 1990-2009**

Characterised by less somber films but still grounded on the Taiwanese perspective and placed Asian films on the global stage. Notable filmmakers for this period include Tsai Ming-liang (*Vive L'Amour*) and Stan Lai (*The Peach Blossom Land*). But it is Ang Lee who may be the most popular from this era directing such films that have become modern classics like *The Wedding Banquet*, *Eat Drink Man Woman* and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*.



By Kitchana Lersakvanitchakul  
The Nation (Thailand)

# The Guitar Boy

Teenage prodigy Sungha Jung is not just another YouTube sensation

## ◆ Bangkok

**H**e may only be 14 years old, but South Korean finger-style guitar player Sungha Jung has already won 13 awards on YouTube over the past four years for his video clips that show him playing songs, both old and new, with a fluency that belies his age.

The prodigy, who says he was influenced by his father's preference for 'Western old school' music, has been uploading his video clips since September 2006, with 240 clips posted on YouTube over the course of 42 months. Surprisingly, he's scored more than 100 million views.

His most viewed Top Five songs are *Pirates of the Caribbean* with 10,720,520 views; *Mission Impossible* with 9,373,786; *Billie Jean* with 8,960,743; *More Than Words* with 7,894,392; and *With or Without You* with 7,751,602.

Fans include Austrian guitar maestro Thomas Leeb, who contacted the youngster by e-mail; British jazz gui-

tarist Martin Taylor, who complimented him on being a "wonderful guitarist", and Yoko Ono, widow of John Lennon, who left a comment on the clip of Sungha playing The Beatles' hit *All You Need Is Love*, "I just witnessed your performance of *All You Need is Love*. Thank you for a beautiful performance. John Lennon would have been happy that you performed his song so well," wrote the avant-garde artist.

Sungha, who was nicknamed 'Guitar Prodigy' and 'August Rush in Korea' after making his TV appearance on *Star King*, took his career into the real world with a solo concert in Seoul in February 2009 and has since performed at some of the world's most prestigious venues, including Musikmesse Frankfurt in April.

He was recently in Thailand and played at the Bangkok Acoustic Guitar Celebration.

He recently toured the US with Trace Bundy and has also performed alongside famous guitarists: Tommy Emmanuel, Ulli Boegershausen,

Andy McKee, Leeb, Michel Haumont, Akihiro Tanaka and Kotaro Oshio. Earlier this year, he opened for American hard rock band Mr. Big.

Sungha was recently selected as one of the top 100 celebrities in Korea 100 Sparkles, an online event organised by the ministry of culture and tourism to promote Korean culture and heritage to the world with a special focus on Asian communities.

Now, he has his debut album, *Perfect Blue* on his indie label Sungha Jung Music Records. The 14 tracks feature 11 covers and three originals.

"I composed two new songs, *Hazy Sunshine* and *Perfect Blue*, which reflect my love and passion for the acoustic guitar, and arranged Sting's *Fields of Gold*. Ulli Boegershausen is the producer," says Sungha. "Finger-style is fun and really attractive because it offers lots of chances to explore."

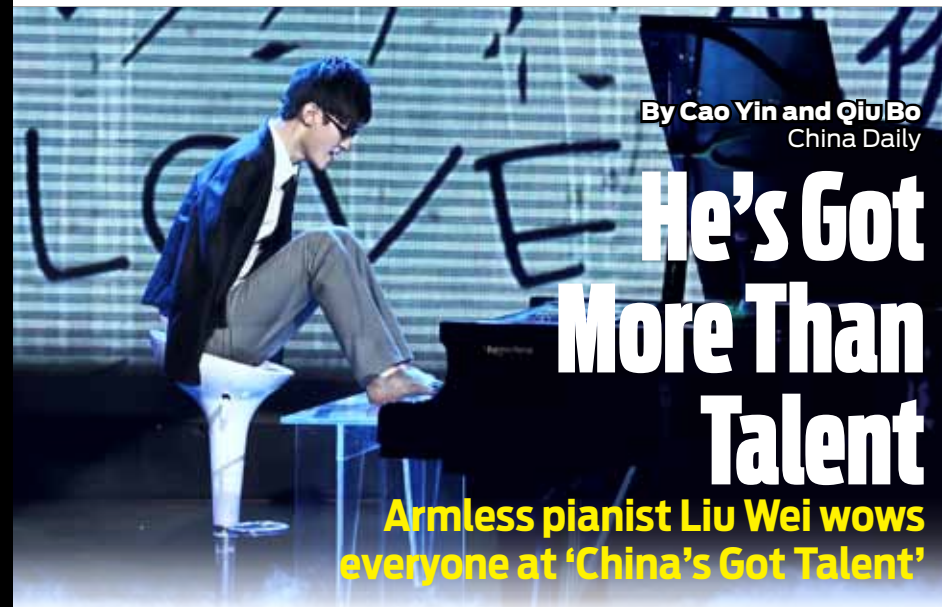
He lives with his parents, grandmother and his younger sister and is studying at Cheongshim International Academy, a school in Kyunggi province.

"My father has a large CD collection and is also a big guitar lover who plays at home a lot. I've been listening to his CDs since I was 10. It is mostly my father who recommends the songs I play. He's a big fan of oldies so I've played quite a few of them, as you will have seen on my YouTube channel. Sometimes I also choose songs to make my own arrangements," he says. "My father knows this is what I love to do. I think I'm very lucky to have such a father."

"Listening to other great musicians is my major inspiration. But often I find things from everyday life, like reading and travelling, inspiring too," he adds.

Sungha admits he doesn't get to spend as much time playing guitar as he would like.

"It's not easy to strike a balance between the classroom and playing guitar. I'm at the boarding school and the daily schedule is rather tight but they allow me some time to practice and I've also got my own practice room in school. I basically have about two hours to practice after classes."



By Cao Yin and Qiu Bo  
China Daily

# He's Got More Than Talent

Armless pianist Liu Wei wows everyone at 'China's Got Talent'

## ◆ Beijing

**W**hen God closes a door, somewhere he opens a window.

For Liu Wei, 23, these words are more than mere encouragement—he proves them every day.

The Beijing native, who lost both his arms at the age of 10, trained himself to be a champion swimmer and is now a pianist who plays with his toes.

He is one of the most talked-about finalists on *China's Got Talent*, a reality show hosted by Shanghai-based Dragon TV similar to the United Kingdom's *Britain's Got Talent*.

At the finals on October 10, Liu won the entire competition with James Blunt's *You're Beautiful* while singing the song in front of a jam-packed Shanghai Stadium. He will join a worldwide tour with former *Got Talent* winners including Scottish singer Susan Boyle.

But Liu was aiming even higher—an album contract with Sony Records.

"A soldier will fight long and hard for a bit of coloured ribbon," Liu told *China Daily*, quoting Napoleon. "Since I've come so far in this competition, I have no reason to give up," he said before the final competition.

Liu started to attract nationwide attention in June when he first appeared on the reality show.

In his first filmed appearance he

played the piece *Mariage D'amour*, made popular by French pianist Richard Clayderman. When the thunderous applause from the audience finally quieted down, he was asked how he managed to do that.

"For me, there are only two options in life," he said on stage. "Die quickly or go for an exciting life."

He has chosen the latter. "Those words may cause a controversy in public, but it's not a ploy, just a principle in my life," he said.

Liu lost both arms when he accidentally touched an electrified high-voltage wire while playing hide-and-seek.

Undeterred, he took to swimming and won several national championships for the disabled.

He had aimed for a gold medal during the Beijing Paralympic Games in 2008 when his body failed, stopping him from further training. The accident not only took away his arms, but weakened his immune system.

Then the teenager turned to music to brighten his life. Like others his age, Liu's early interest in music came from songs by Hong Kong pop stars like Andy Lau and Jacky Cheung.

It was not until he was 19 that he tried putting his toes on the piano for the first time. He had developed a strong interest in composing and songwriting by then when a tutor suggested he try playing the piano if he intended to be a composer.

"I put my feet on the keyboard

and tried to play a little bit. It sang," he said. "Then I realised this was one more thing I can do just as well as others, and it's not as difficult as it seems."

He has since practiced the piano seven hours a day, proving that toes can function as nimbly as fingers.

One year later, he even accompanied Andy Lau, the pop star he has long admired.

Liu had joined a contest similar to *China's Got Talent* but failed in the first round because the organiser told him: "You are not suitable for the show".

The unpleasant experience didn't frustrate Liu's ambition to explore his musical adventure.

"It's really hard to meet a master who can give you a tip, especially when you are a nobody," Liu said, explaining the reason that motivated him to be part of the show.

"I'm here for professional advice from the judges who I can learn from, rather than just hunting for a springboard," Liu continued. "It is great that the programme doesn't decree that you must use your hands to play the piano."

In fact, the armless young man has been financially independent for some time. He runs bars with friends in Beijing and the businesses could definitely provide him with a decent living.

Thanks to the popularity of the reality show, Liu has become an overnight celebrity.

He was once invited to share his experience with more than 220 million primary and middle school students across China in an inspiring TV show along with Yuan Longping, China's father of hybrid rice, and Internet business tycoon Jack Ma, who founded the country's first e-commerce website—**china.alibaba.com**—in 1998.

"Public attention means encouragement and trust to me, but that won't change my life," Liu said. "All I care about is how to improve my musical skills and become a successful composer and songwriter."

"For me, life is impossible without air, water or music."



By Jofelle P. Tesorio  
Asia News Network

# (Weird) Museum Tripping

## Thailand and Japan top with most strange museums in Asia

### ❖ Bangkok

Last week, I came across photos of a condom museum that recently opened in Nonthaburi, in the outskirts of Bangkok.

The Thai health ministry decided to open the museum to showcase various types of condoms and to encourage Thais to practice safe sex. It's a timely initiative because there have been reports that the incidence of HIV/AIDS in the country is climbing up again.

This Buddhist country is one of the most liberal in Asia when it comes to the use of contraceptives. Hail to the condom! The AIDS epidemic in Thailand was reduced to manageable level in the '80s after the former health minister Mechai Viravaidya promoted condom use. The 'Mr. Condom' moniker is still very much his as he continues to encourage protected sex. His foundation is also running a restaurant chain named Cabbages and Condoms (which gives out free condoms instead of candies upon settling the bill). The proceeds go to the development programmes for the communities and to people with HIV/AIDS.

Going back to the condom museum, this new one in Thailand (there is also a condom museum in Basel) adds to the growing list of strange museums in Asia. In Europe, especially in touristy areas, almost every space is turned into a museum. There is one in Amsterdam called Our Lord in the Attic Mu-

seum. If there's a museum of God, there's also a sex museum and a cannabis museum. In Prague, the museum of medieval torture instruments is very popular and in Paris, what else but the erotic museum!

Thailand's condom museum has inspired me to make a little research on otherwise strange/extraordinary/weird museums in Asia and I've got some interesting list.

### Insect Museum (Chiang Mai)

Go to Thailand's city of flowers and visit the insect museum. Officially called the Museum of World Insects & Elemental Wonders, this insect kingdom can creep you out of your wits as these little things crawl in front of you. There are also butterflies and camouflaged stick insects, bugs and beetles. Aside from the astonishing collection of insects, there's a section about mosquitoes. According to the museum, there are 422 species of mosquito in Thailand.

### Museum Of Death (Bangkok)

Travel books warn that this museum is not for the faint-hearted. In fact, visitors are welcomed by the

founder's skeleton at the entrance door. The forensic department's museum displays strange hemorrhaged brains, severed legs and arms with tattoos, lungs full of deep knife wounds and skulls punctured by many bullet holes, shot at from different angles by forensic experts in an experiment to study how gun bullets ricochet inside a human's head. You will also see the mummified body of the Thai-Chinese Si-Ouey, a notorious cannibal and serial killer of young boys and girls in the 1950s.

### Ramen Museum (Yokohama)

The Japanese love their ramen so they dedicated a museum just for this delectable noodle soup. This museum is recreated from the Showa period, when ramen was invented. Visitors can make their own ramen in this museum and take it home to cook.

### Museum Of Parasitology (Tokyo)

Visitors of this museum probably are the ones so interested in parasites. Devoted for research and education on parasites, this museum

has a vast collection of intestinal tapeworms, scabies and crabs.

### Teapot Museum (Guizhou)

If Japan has a ramen museum, China has a teapot museum. At the entrance, visitors are welcomed with the world's largest teapot-shaped structure. Meitan, the county in Guizhou province, is famous for its premium tea.

### Inflatable Museum (Beijing)

The 20-storey, inflatable museum claims to be the biggest in the world, weighing 12,000kg and 70m-long. Visitors can start their journey at the left foot and eventually end at the right ear. Inside, they get a life-like look into the intricacies of the human body. The museum, assembled in Taiwan, is currently on tour. So check out the places where it's stopping next!

### Teddy Bear Museum (Jeju-do)

There is indeed an increasing 'culture of cute' in South Korea. The Teddy Bear, a well-loved stuffed toy, has caught the fancy of the world including the Koreans. Opened in 2001, the Jeju-do Teddy Bear Museum

has millions of collections around the world. Everything you have to know about the Teddy Bear is found here.

### Museum Of Toilets (New Delhi)

From the very first sewers to toilets disguised as stacks of books, the Sulabh Toilet Museum has the detailed historical evolution of toilets, from 3000BC to present day. It offers information relating to the technology used in every period, toilet etiquette and sanitary conditions and some funny anecdotes such as when Louis XIV purportedly used to relieve himself while holding court.

### Museum Of Enduring Beauty (Melaka)

This museum in Malaysia usually attracts visitors interested in beauty and anything beautiful. Why not? The museum displays interesting examples of foot binding, tattooing, piercing and other ways of beautification starting from the Medieval Ages to present.

### Narcotics Museum (Mong La)

The startling reddish pink building resembles a pagoda than a museum. Opened in 1997, the Narcotics Eradication Museum is

dedicated to expose the drug menace and to showcase the drug eradication activities of the Burmese government. This is evident in a large collection of black-and-white pictures display of small planes spraying poppy fields and Burmese officers staring at piles of burning heroin. The museum, located up in the mountains near the Golden Triangle, details the growth of poppy culture over the decades.

### Footwear Museum (Marikina)

There is nothing strange about a shoe museum but this one in Marikina, Philippines, is interesting because of Imelda Marcos' shoes. About 800 pairs (of the 3,000 pairs from Marcos' collection) are on display here. Who doesn't know Imelda Marcos, the better-half of the conjugal dictatorship in the Philippines until the people power revolution threw them out in 1986? Imelda's vast shoe collection is baffling but she has argued that many of these were just gifts during the 20-year-reign of her husband, Ferdinand.

✉ [travelbites.asia@gmail.com](mailto:travelbites.asia@gmail.com)



**BEYOND ORDINARY:** (clockwise) Inflatable Museum; Teddy Bear Museum; Toilet Museum.



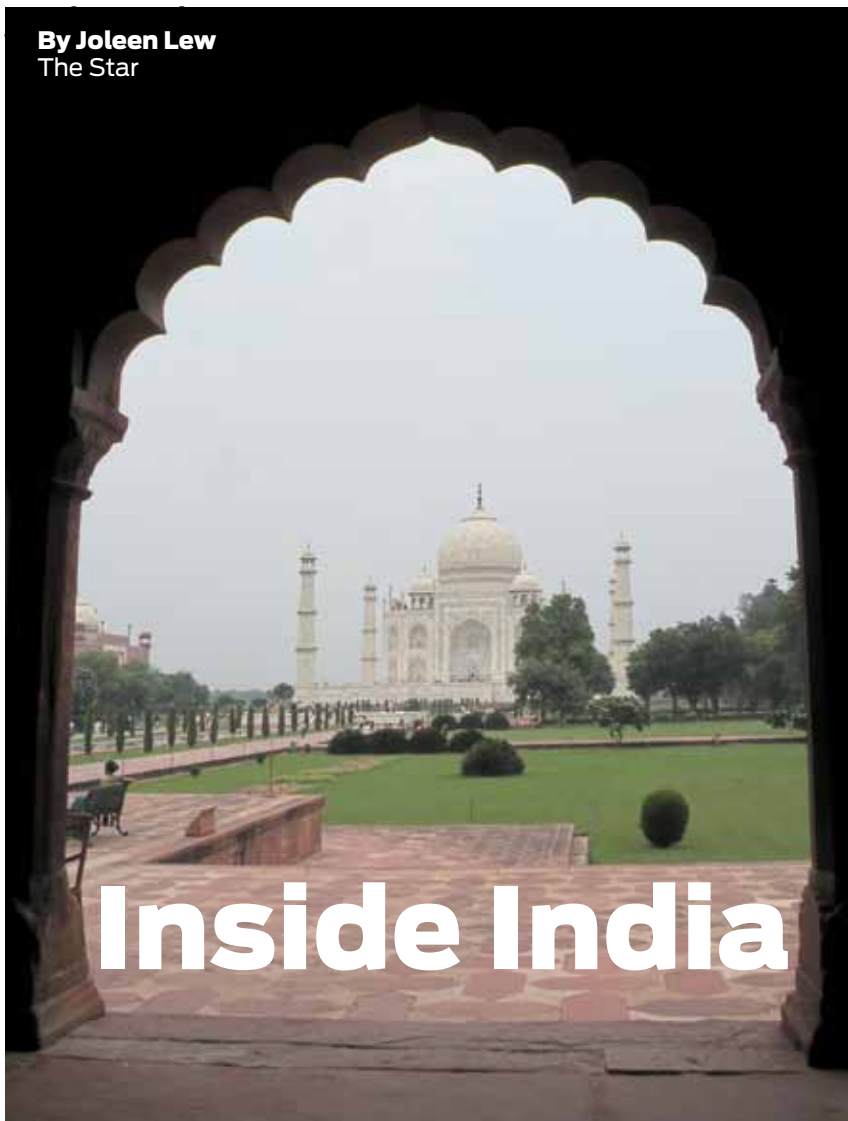
**STRANGE:** (clockwise) Footwear Museum; Teapot Museum; Parasitology Museum; Insects Museum; Narcotics Museum.



PHOTO BY THE NATION (THAILAND)



By Joleen Lew  
The Star



## To the visitor, India is many things, but it's often the people and the vibrant colours that leave the deepest impression

### ◆ New Delhi

It's not easy to sum up India—the crowds and the sweltering, bustling cities; the pesky touts and the magnificent and tranquil temples; the pestering hawkers and beggars and the warm Indian hospitality.

Love it or loathe it, India is a country that must be experienced, at least once in a lifetime.

I wanted to visit India for a long time, but costly air travel always got in the way. AirAsia X's inaugural flight from Kuala Lumpur to New Delhi recently, however, provided the opportunity at long last.

We touched down at Indira

Gandhi International Airport's spanking new Terminal 3 to an elaborate welcome—we were the first Malaysian carrier to land there. And so, for the first time ever, I received a congratulatory certificate for landing in an airport!

India's summer is quite similar to Malaysia's climate, but when we left the airport the reality of the country hit us. The frenzied mess of Delhi's traffic, the constant blaring of horns, the workers who danced to loud upbeat music in trucks and—amidst the chaos of it all—the bizarre scene of cows calmly munching away. It was exciting and fascinating all at once.

Old Delhi was the capital of Islamic

India before the British built New Delhi as their imperial capital. Although modern developments are mushrooming all over Delhi, the allure of Delhi's rich past is still very much alive, if you care enough to look.

The tranquil ruins of Humayun's Tomb is one place where you can go to get away from Delhi's madness. Built by the widow of the second Mughal emperor in the 16th century, the structure is a fusion of Persian and local architecture. The style it introduced would eventually culminate in the magnificent Taj Mahal.

Another quiet refuge is the Raj Ghat, whose vast and immaculate grounds house a simple, black marble platform that marks the spot where Mahatma Gandhi was cremated following his assassination in 1948. You can't visit the country without paying respects to this Indian legend. Other notable leaders were also cremated here.

I was told that the Red Fort was the best place to go if you wanted an idea of a Mughal city's splendour. Unfortunately, we were in town on a Monday, which is the one day of the week when the attraction closes. Oh well, there were other things to do.

Delhi will also not disappoint shoppers. There are plenty of street bazaars and government emporiums (with fixed prices) that offer an astounding array of goods for shopaholics—colourful sari, textiles, accessories, jewellery, handicrafts, knick knacks and more.

My market of choice would be Janpath as the traders there don't hassle you much, but if you're looking for wholesale prices, then busy Chandni Chowk opposite the Red Fort is where the bargains are at.

### Rajasthan

Most people who visit northern India do the classic Golden Triangle circuit of Delhi-Jaipur-Agra. We were no different, since this is the route that highlights the best of the region for those with limited time.

The desert state of Rajasthan is where you can catch a glimpse of the rich and romantic past of the



maharajas and their lavish lifestyle. The Pink City of Jaipur, painted such to welcome the Prince of Wales in 1876, is a must-visit. It's a bright and cheerful city where camels and painted elephants have as much right to the road as the motorised vehicles.

There is beauty to be found in its arts, so abundantly evident in its blue pottery, semi-precious stone jewellery and block printing, and wonder to be found in its culture, from snake charmers to Rajasthani puppet shows.

Shopping is a major sport for all who visit Jaipur, what with the rows upon rows of enticing shops beckoning the eager shoppers and their less enthusiastic partners. Bargaining is the name of the game here but it can get exhausting, not to mention infuriating, to have to fend off the never-ending advances of persistent traders. Just be careful not to wander too far in, or you may not come out in one piece!

Although the tourist attractions such as Amber Fort, Hawa Palace, City Palace and Jantar Mantar have their individual charms, the memory I cherish the most is of our unplanned visit to a small village enroute to Agra since it opened our eyes to the way the locals live.

As we disembarked from our bus, word got around that 'foreigners' had arrived in their midst so a horde of schoolchildren in blue uniforms came rushing out to gather around us. They were as fascinated by us as we were by them. The children followed us into the village, eager and curious.

We saw the humble homes they lived in and the animals that shared the same compound. Women in colourful saris went about their business, tending to their kids and carrying out household chores. It was apparent that their lives were hard but they stopped to share a smile.

Further on, we came to a private school where young children in red uniforms sat cross-legged on the enclosed roofless compound. My heart went out to these kids who, despite their very basic learning conditions, seemed determined to better themselves. Well-behaved, the kids continued to pay attention to their teacher and the green chalkboard in front of them even though it was evident that they were puzzled by our presence.

Their discipline was in stark contrast to the public school children in blue uniforms.

### Uttar Pradesh

The state of Uttar Pradesh is better known for hosting one of the Seven Wonders of the World. And what a wonder it is, for who hasn't heard of the Taj Mahal?

This iconic building in Agra is every bit as mesmerising as people make it out to be. Words can't do this magnificent white marble structure justice—its beauty is simply breathtaking. Looking at this monument to love gleaming in the morning sun is an experience I will cherish forever.

I looked on in quiet amazement, as did the other visitors, as though an unspoken rule required us to appreciate

its beauty in silence. The Taj, up-close, is even more amazing as it reveals intricate carvings inlaid with 43 different types of semi-precious stones. You can't help but marvel at the elaborate complexity and artistry.

Later on, I took the liberty to do some yoga at the Taj's grounds.

It would be a pity to visit Agra and not travel a further 40km west to the fascinating abandoned Mughal city of Fatehpur Sikri. This magnificent red sandstone city was the capital of Emperor Akbar between 1571 and 1585. Its grounds are airy and peaceful, and there are fascinating structures to explore, such as the palaces the emperor built for his three wives who were of Islamic, Christian and Hindu faiths.

There was something different about this place. What was it, I wondered, until it hit me: the freedom to soak in the sights without being hassled by traders!

Alas, my peace was short-lived as the darn touts returned in droves at the nearby Jama Masjid. It is hard to appreciate the beautiful mosque and the spectacular 54m-high Victory Gate when there are kids following you closely everywhere you go, imploring you to buy something. If only they understood the concept of personal space.

Despite the annoying peddlers and the summer heat, India is a fascinating country whose rich history and vibrant people will surely have you coming back for more.

(THE WRITER'S TOUR WAS ORGANISED BY INDIA TOURISM, DELHI.)





By Minh Thu  
Viet Nam News



# Tranquil Beauty

JUST 50KM OUTSIDE HA NOI, QUAN SON LAKE RETAINS ITS WILD AND TRANQUIL CHARISMA AS AN IDYLIC OUT-OF-THE-WAY PICNIC SPOT

PHOTOS BY MINH THU/VIET NAM NEWS

## Ha Noi

**Q**uan Son Lake, with its many small islands surrounded by forests and hundreds of limestone peaks, retains its wild and tranquil beauty as an idyllic out-of-the-way picnic spot in My Duc District, 50km from central Ha Noi.

The lake is considered a small Ha Long Bay on land.

Passing the East Bridge, visitors reach a wharf where, for only 60,000 dong (US\$3), they can be taken around the 85oha lake area by an enthusiastic boatwomen.

The interesting tour gives tourists a chance to behold the captivating scenery and enjoy the fresh air. The site is also the home of many varieties of birds, including the white egret.

During the trip, tourists will also see unique white flowers floating on the surface of the lake. It's a strange plant native to the lake, with leaves as round as the moon and blossoms shaped like starfish.

Our boatwoman, Ngo Thi Huyen, told us a story about this flower. It was once called *hoa tien si* (scholar's flower) because, in the old days, poor students in the region couldn't afford to buy paper to study. They often sat at the lakeside, wrote on the plant's leaves, and studied under the moonlight in the hope of passing examinations. When they were successful and became scholars, the plant was renamed in tribute.

In Quan Son, there are many wonderful destinations, including Trau Trang (White Buffalo) Mountain, Su Tu (Lion) Island, Doc Lap Island, Voi Phuc (Kneeling Elephant) Hill and Hoa Qua Son (Flowers and Fruits Hill), each with its own natural attractions.

The area is also famous for Linh Son and Ngoc Long caves, which are not large but are dramatic, with stalactites and stalagmites in various shapes of eagles, dragons, phoenix, unicorns and tortoises. Tourists who arrive in the rainy season in June and July may not have a chance to visit the caves, because the water level rises.

But in this season, waterfalls run down into the lake from the high mountains, creating white spumes that add to the splendid scenery.

After the boat tour, a rest on the

(Elephant) Valley—the bird watching point in Quan Son—is especially appealing, with a great number of species flocking to build nests and shelters.

Next to the valley, Huyen, our boatwoman, led us to an area filled with lotus. She said we are so lucky to visit this place while the lotus were in bloom. The boat runs slowly through the kingdom of lotus, hindered by roots and sprigs of flowers and leaves. We were charmed by the perfume of the blossoms. Huyen suggested that



Travelling by boat is the best way to tour the islands and passages in Quan Son Lake.

islands is suggested, where stilt-houses serve as places to stop for a picnic. Visitors can bring meals from home or ask the ferrywomen to buy food for a delectable midday feast. Local specialities include chicken and goat raised on the island, as well as fish, crab and snails from the lake.

Standing on the shore of Quan Son Lake, visitors marvel at the magnificent and peaceful environment, with imposing cliffs overlooking the green water and flocks of white egrets leisurely stretching their wings.

From October to March, Voi

we pick a leaf and use it as an umbrella to shade us from the sun. Because there were plenty of flowers, we were allowed to pluck a small bunch to bring home.

There are also some pagodas in Quan Son, such as Cao and Ham Yen. However, Linh Son Pagoda, built during the Mac dynasty in the 16th century, is located at the foot of the mountain near Linh Son Cave and reflects on the surface of the lake.

About 20 rowboats and several motor boats are available at the lake to serve tourists, Huyen said.



**SEOUL**  
**SEOUL DESIGN FESTIVAL**

Both up-and-coming and established designers descend on the COEX Centre to swap ideas and explore new trends at Seoul Design Festival. Compare Korea's cutting-edge designs with those from across the world and see the special exhibition by top designers.

**When:** December 8-12

**Where:** COEX Convention & Exhibition Centre, 10am-6pm

**Info:** [www.designfestival.co.kr](http://www.designfestival.co.kr)



**TOKYO**  
**FESTIVAL/TOKYO**

The event showcases theatre and dance from across the world at the Tokyo Metropolitan Art Space, Owlspot Theatre and Nishi-Sugamo Art Factory, all in Ikebukuro. Expect experimental productions like promenade theatre (where the audience travels around) and unusual interpretations on Shakespeare.

**When:** Ongoing until November 28

**Info:** <http://festival-tokyo.jp/en>



**SINGAPORE**  
**MARATHON**

The Singapore Marathon attracts some of the world's most seasoned athletes. Spectators come along to soak up the carnival atmosphere and fun runners join in the half marathon, 10K



PHOTO BY THAWEGHAI JAOWATTANA / THE NATION (THAILAND)

**THAILAND**  
**LOY KRATHONG**

Millions of Thais welcome this festivity by thronging the banks of waterways to launch their floats of leaves and flowers, known as the *krathong*. They kneel down by the rivers to ask Ganga—the goddess of river—to forgive their transgressions in the past

**JAKARTA**  
**JAK JAZZ**

Jakarta's vibrant and eclectic jazz scene is celebrated at the annual Jak Jazz, a multi-cultural and international event held over three days. From smooth jazz to big band-like ensembles, the festival represents a range of genres at venues across Jakarta.

**When:** December 10-12

year. Then they ask that she sweeps all their bad luck and worries away with the current as she scoops up their humble *krathong* offerings. Bigger celebrations are found in Bangkok, Ayyuthaya, Sukhothai, Chiang Mai, Tak and Samut Songkhram.

**When:** November 21



PHOTO COURTESY OF TIFFANY'S SHOW PATTAYA CO., LTD.

**PATTAYA**  
**MISS INTERNATIONAL QUEEN**

The 6th annual Miss International Queen pageant is not just a beauty contest but also a colourful showcase of talents.

Dubbed as the Miss Universe for transsexuals and transgenders, it seeks to provide opportunity for them to be more accepted in society and to create an exchange of ideas among international lesbian, gay, bisexual and transsexual/transgender communities.

**When:** November 19, 9pm

**Where:** Tiffany's Show Pattaya  
**Info:** [www.missinternationalqueen.com](http://www.missinternationalqueen.com)

**Tickets:** 1,000 baht (US\$33) and 2,000 baht (\$66)



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