

with Adeline Foo

Author, mother and budding screenwriter

Adeline Foo dons all these hats in her pursuit of stories that bring to life the cultures and creatures of Singapore. Perhaps best known for introducing Puteh, a precocious little Nonya, to audiences in Singapore and abroad, Ms Foo made her debut in the heritage scene in 2008 with a quartet of illustrated children's books about Peranakan life.

The four titles – *The Beaded Slippers*, *The Kitchen God*, *Chilli Padi* and *The Amulet* – offer charming and colourful accounts of Puteh's adventures as she explores her family's home and history, celebrates traditional festivals and enjoys scrumptious Peranakan treats. A sleeper hit with both parents and young readers, the books have travelled all the way to the Frankfurt Book Fair in Germany and Singapore Day in Melbourne.

A mother with three children, aged 4, 6 and 9, Ms Foo has nearly 15 years of experience in advertising and public relations. Her plunge into the world of children's books came in 2006 when she received a First Time Writers & Illustrators Publishing Initiative Award¹ to pen a series on the native wildlife of Singapore. "After that I went on no-pay leave to spend more time with my kids," she told *BeMUSE*, adding that her decision to juggle writing and homemaking has the full support of her employers. "My bosses see that I have a passion for writing," she said.

"There are so many children's books out there," Ms Foo observes. "But a local one, and one peculiar to a certain culture, is not really available. And to encourage a mom to spend her money, your books must appeal to a certain niche and offer a unique selling point in advertising jargon. So I focus on what I know best, like native animals and Peranakan culture."

Not too long ago, few children's books featured local heritage. One notable exception that Ms Foo recalls fondly is *Samsui Girl* by Ho Lee-Ling, which is about a young girl who learns what it is like to be a Samsui girl for a day. "I read her book and found that it was a unique way of presenting the historical aspects

of Samsui women," she said of this illustrated chapter book, which was also published under the First Time Writers & Illustrators Publishing Initiative. "So I decided to write about something that I know, which is my Peranakan heritage, and it has to be a picture book, because the flavours of the culture are so colourful and vibrant."

The seed was sown, but it was a serendipitous encounter that sparked the idea for one of the first two books in Ms Foo's Peranakan series. "It actually started with a snippet about the *Kitchen God* that I came across in the library," she recalls. "I read about the *Kitchen God* that's worshipped a few days before the Lunar New Year. People would pray to the god and try to bribe him by sweetening his mouth with honey and hopefully he will rise to heaven to report on the family he's watching over favourably."

"When I read that I was thinking: it's so funny! What would a kid think? Would a kid think that it's true and really believe it?" Thus emerged Puteh's adventures in *The Kitchen God*, in which the young Nonya tries to cover up her naughty antics by silencing the deity and ends up nearly burning down her grandmother's kitchen.

Later, in *The Beaded Slippers*, a pair of magical slippers transports Puteh to the past, where she learns how her grandmother spent her youth and the rituals and artefacts involved in a Peranakan wedding. For Ms Foo, the account is a case of art mimicking life, as the book is dedicated to her own grandmother, who was nicknamed 'Puteh' for her fair complexion. "In Peranakan culture, we use a lot of nicknames," she remarks with a laugh. "My grandfather is called Itam ('black' in Baba Malay), so Puteh has a friend who is darker and nicknamed Itam."

Armed with these stories, Ms Foo convinced the National Heritage Board that the books would complement the activities and galleries of the then-unfinished Peranakan Museum. Excited by the possibilities, the museum's team

also suggested that she apply for funding from the then-newly established Heritage Industry Incentive Programme (Hi²P).

"I did the proposal, wrote the synopses and planned what we wanted to do with the books and how to market them," recounts Ms Foo, who found the process similar to what she did during her advertising days. "It was not unlike doing a marcoms plan for a client!"

"Nobody had any idea if these books would sell," says Ms Foo of the uncertainties she faced then. "But because it was one of the first ten projects that got the funding, there was a lot of publicity. The media was interested and it was quite refreshing for them to see that children's books can also be funded. Also, the Peranakan community has been very supportive – they have been buying and the books are doing quite well." By March 2010, the four Peranakan books have sold an estimated 8,000 copies in total.

Ms Foo also heaps praise on her illustrator, Lee Kowling, for the books' enduring depictions of Puteh and her home. "The artist is not Peranakan, so she had to do a lot of research," she explains. Using references loaned by the museum and the Peranakan Association, Ms Foo weaved stories around actual artefacts such as shoes, furniture and jewellery that would be on display, while the artist recreated settings based on archival photos. "In fact, one of the scenes was illustrated from a picture of a bedroom featured in Peter Lee's book² on the architecture of a Peranakan house," reveals Ms Foo. "When [Mr Lee] saw the book, he was quite amazed."

The result clearly appealed to both Ms Foo and her readers. "Mothers prefer a style that is more organic, back to basics and less computerised," she remarks. "The artist is a veteran in the field of illustration using water colour and her style sits very well with parents." As a result, the author-artist partnership is continuing with Ms Foo's next line-up of heritage-theme children's books. "It was a no-brainer," quips Ms Foo, who is



Ms Adeline Foo sharing stories from her books with students of United World College of Southeast Asia East Campus, 2010.

now seeking inspiration in the Singapore Art Museum's collection of art by Singapore's pioneering Nanyang artists. Puteh returns, now older and wiser, in the first title of the series, *Georgette's Mooncakes*, which charts the origins of the Mid-Autumn Festival through the works of Georgette Chen (1906 - 1993), one of the founders of the Nanyang style of painting³.

"I was quite attracted to Georgette Chen's life," states Ms Foo. "She is the first woman [in Singapore] who's a successful artist and she had no children, so I was wondering how her life was like. She was a very well-respected teacher, so her whole life was surrounded by children - students and painters - so maybe she has a story to tell."

In the book, readers observe the artist through the eyes of Puteh and a friend, who serve as her apprentices. "At the end of the story, she has a reflection where she yearns for a family and togetherness, and she finds that in her two students," says Ms Foo of the relationship she imagines the artist forges with her young charges.

Betraying a childlike fascination with personal nuggets that escape academic attention, Ms Foo shares how she was

tickled pink by one episode in Chen's life. "She used to travel to many countries, and there would be people writing to her from these countries. She lived in a Siglap house where the postbox was quite accessible, so naughty children would steal her letters, tear off the stamps and throw the letters back. So she was complaining about letters that had all their stamps torn off - I found it so quirky!"

"It's quite amazing when you hear the voices of all these people who have passed on," sighs Ms Foo. "Till today, I enjoy reading historical anecdotes, especially those that capture what life was like in the past. I am quite a kaypoh!" It's a love she is trying to share with her two younger children. "My oldest kid thinks it's boring, but my younger kids are more receptive to going to the museum and having fun, because I started them earlier when they were two to four." But even her oldest child can't resist the interactive exhibits and e-platforms installed in the galleries.

"I think the way forward to packaging history is to use new technology," she opines. "You can't escape that. Books are for very young kids because you want to encourage them to read, but once they are 12 onwards, if anything, I would use films to tell a story." Thus, Ms Foo is seeking to boost her craft with a Masters in Dramatic Writing at the New York University's Tisch School of the Arts Asia. "I am working on a screenplay right now," she reveals. "The idea that started me off was a historical anecdote in the newspapers about a group of cabaret women who set up a school for orphans."

At the same time, Ms Foo is working on her next book in the Singapore's pioneer artist series, which will focus on Cheng Soo Pieng (1917 - 1983), while *Georgette's Mooncakes* is being translated to Chinese. She also hopes that her books will find an audience beyond Singapore. "I would very much like to see that happen, so that whatever we write is not just constrained to Singaporeans learning about our own cultures but about telling the world out there what we have to offer."

Citing the example of Mem Fox, an award-winning Australian children's author, Ms Foo observes that when Fox started writing, "her publishers told her nobody wanted to read about koalas and kangaroos, but 50 years on, her books are well accepted all over the world." It's a change of heart that Ms Foo believes will come in time. "I think people would want to read about what Singapore has and this culture that is unique to this part of the world."

Endnotes:

¹ The First-Time Writers & Illustrators Publishing Initiative is an initiative by the Media Development Authority and the National Book Development Council of Singapore to nurture new talents in the publishing industry. For more information, please visit: www.bookcouncil.sg/_publishing/FTWIP12009.php

² Peter Lee & Jennifer Chen, 1998. *Rumah Baba: Life in a Peranakan House*, Singapore: National Heritage Board, Singapore History Museum.

³ The Nanyang Style refers to the art practised by a group of post-war artists in Singapore who combined techniques from Chinese pictorial traditions and the School of Paris movement. 'Nanyang' means Southern Seas in Chinese, and the artists usually depicted subjects from Southeast Asian cultures and scenes.