

HomeGround

The videographer, the serial do-gooder, and the Web3 ecosystem builder

Young people working hard to make Singapore better – these are the ones who make me hopeful this National Day



Chua Mui Hoong

Associate Editor

August is one of my favourite months because of the celebratory mood around National Day on the 9th.

This year, I feel even more cheerful than usual. The country is in the midst of a political transition to a fourth generation or 4G group of leaders. So far, it appears their leadership style will be more collegial and collaborative.

This is a style a younger generation of citizens will take to quite naturally, I muse, as I think of young people I know, who are trying to make Singapore a better place.

TEHSIEWDAI AND HIS VIDEOS

About a year ago, a YouTube video started circulating among cycling and active mobility groups.

Titled *Stroads in Singapore – Why They Are Bad And How To Fix Them*, the video explained the difference between streets and roads, and what happens when you mix them.

Problems arise when streets, usually lined with shops on both sides, and centres of interaction and activity, are converted into multi-lane roads for fast-flowing traffic.

Think of roads in the civic district, such as *Jalan Besar*, *Eu Tong Sen Street*, or *Geylang Road*. They are multi-laned arterial roads, but with features of streets – shops on both sides, sometimes with vehicles parked kerbside to load and unload wares, and with many side streets and turning vehicles.

The high volume of car traffic makes it unsafe for pedestrians to cross from one side to another, other than at traffic junctions.

Yet the volume of people and activity also makes it an inefficient road to drive down, as drivers need to constantly slow down and watch out for pedestrians.

“Their terrible walkability suck at being a street, and since people also can’t get from A to B quickly, they suck at being a road,” said the narrator of the video who called himself “tehsiewdai”. The video

now has over 67,000 views, a year after it was uploaded.

When I saw the video last year, I had a mental image of a middle-aged academic or researcher producing it. When I eventually met “tehsiewdai”, I did a double take.

Vareck Ng is a tall, thin, bespectacled 19-year-old with a wide grin, who is waiting to enlist for full-time national service. The son of an art teacher and graphic designer, he just finished his final year at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts and plans to become a music teacher after his NS.

How did a music student become so interested in mobility issues?

He started cycling in secondary school, hopping on a shared bike from *Dakota MRT* to *Chung Cheng High School*. He tried cycling on roads, but found it dangerous. As he learnt more about cycling, he got more interested in the topic.

About two years ago, as Covid-19 hit and school shut down, he began to conceptualise a video channel in which he would share what he had learnt about the history of road usage, and share insights about cycling in Singapore.

“I was drinking *teh siew dai* at a coffee shop I always go to, and I decided to use the name,” he said, referring to the local name for tea with milk that is less sweet. He has produced about 10 videos, and his YouTube channel has over 7,000 subscribers.

On a two-hour bike tour this week, Mr Ng brought me around *Tampines* where he lives. We rode from *Tampines Central* to the new stretch of naturalised waterway next to *Tampines Eco Green park*, and to *Tampines West*, before heading back on cycling paths past *Our Tampines Hub*.

Along the way, he pointed out the first generation of cycling paths, some showing signs of wear and tear with broken concrete slabs; held up a noise metre to measure the decibel level of park connectors away from roads, to show how the noise level went down with less traffic; and pointed out how a recent re-routing of a cycle path along the *Park Connector Network* avoided a potential collision path with pedestrians, making it safer for both.

Later, over breakfast, I asked why he bothered to make these videos.

He replies with some passion: “Did you know that around every three days, one person dies on the roads? In any industry, if that happens, we would shut down that industry. But we live with it! We should not accept that, and we can

do better with better-designed roads and infrastructure.”

As we chat, I find out he has volunteered to work with the town council on barrier-free access, and is working with a historian on a project about streets. When I asked what he hopes Singapore will be like in the future, he replies: “The goal isn’t to build a cycling city. The goal is to make our streets safe for children to play on again.”

At 19, Mr Ng belongs to *Generation Z*, a group of young people said to be high in social consciousness and at ease with collaborative working.

I like the passion of *Gen Z* to want to improve the world. Their restlessness forces us to make things better. The older generation can help channel that enthusiasm along productive paths, while being infected by it.

Influencing for change after all is a two-way street: the status quo and the change advocates have to learn from each other, and then improve. In that iterative process, road designs get improved, a cycling lane winds a different way; and metre by metre, the country moves forward, together, to become better.

THE SERIAL DO-GOODER

I’ve known *Renita Sophia Crasta* for over 10 years and think of her as a serial do-gooder.

During Covid-19, she helped set up the *Covid-19 Migrant Support Coalition* to support migrant workers with food deliveries, befriending and legal assistance during lockdown. She also started a telephone befriending service to reach the isolated elderly. She has also initiated a confidence-building programme for girls, spearheads a diaper initiative, serves on committees on race and gender issues, and assists at legal clinics – all while juggling a career as an in-house legal counsel.

She recently became co-president of the *Singapore Corporate Counsel Association*, a network of about 3,500 in-house lawyers.

Ask her why she is involved in all these and she shares that growing up, she saw her parents serve in different capacities in church. As an adult now, she feels it’s her duty to help when there is a need.

As a 38-year-old “older millennial”, she feels she can empathise with both the older and younger generations, understanding the “traditional seniors who have their reasons for doing things, and the younger



Mr Vareck Ng, 19, at the new stretch of naturalised waterway next to *Tampines Eco Green park*. He started producing engaging videos about active mobility issues a year ago under the moniker “tehsiewdai”, and his YouTube channel now has over 7,000 subscribers. ST PHOTO: CHUA MUI HOONG

generation who want to see change happen”.

She said: “I’m glad to be able to work across organisations and across generations, to bring about change in a tactful and kind manner, while never giving up.”

She adds that she is cheered by the emphasis on collaboration and consultation, as shown by the *Forward Singapore* exercise driven by the 4G leadership, since it echoes deeply what she feels is necessary for Singapore.

“Through much of my past work, I can say that the best outcomes really do come from constant sincerity, kindness and trust-building by all sides, and it’s therefore really critical that apart from the tone from the top, our systems, processes and mindset really must change to allow and reward for such cooperation to manifest towards a stronger and more united Singapore.”

THE WEB3 ECOSYSTEM BUILDER

The first time cryptocurrency made sense to me, was when I had a chat with *Ng Yi Ming* during a chance encounter over a year ago.

A short coffee break turned into an hour-long tutorial on blockchain, how it differs from cryptocurrency, and the potential of blockchain for transforming finance and business.

Mr Ng, 31, is co-founder (with

business partner *Ryan Chew*) of *Tribe*, a global blockchain ecosystem builder. It essentially connects blockchain-based start-ups with corporations, governments and investors. When it started five years ago, most companies viewed blockchain as a risk, despite its potential to improve productivity and transparency in business. Today, more organisations are open to using blockchain and digital assets.

The last two years have been a time of growth, as Covid-19 raised digital awareness among businesses and changed habits: “Suddenly digital currencies were a household conversation, owning digital assets like *NFTs* (non-fungible tokens) was no longer a foreign concept, and businesses were talking about the third generation of the Internet or *Web3*.”

This has led to strong demand for *Web3* talent to build platforms for businesses, and companies are looking at Singapore to deliver advanced *Web3* developers in time to come, said Mr Ng.

Singapore is also playing a leading role on blockchain governance. He said: “In the last few years, I have seen Singapore moving forward in its vision of being a global blockchain hub, while also being cautious in its approach. The country has started to set foundational regulatory

standards which are honestly a learning journey for most countries and are expected to be an iterative process.”

Just what is *Web3*?

The first generation of the *World Wide Web*, *Web1*, was a collection of *Web* pages usually operating in silos. *Web2* allowed for interactivity and social media, but with data stored and owned by platform companies. *Web3*’s vision is for a decentralised, blockchain-powered Internet where users own and store their own data.

Just how that can transform the world, I have yet to find out. Mr Ng had to dash for a flight after sending off replies to my questions, so I couldn’t quiz him for more answers. I look forward to our next meeting for another expanded tutorial – this time on *Web3*, with this clear-eyed young man navigating the digital future.

A country is only as strong as its people. My optimism about Singapore’s future is grounded in the young people I know. There are thousands of them in various fields, doing their thing to make the world a better place.

My wish this National Day is that as a nation, we can give these young activists and doers the space and a friendly climate to fulfil their dreams.

muihoong@sph.com.sg

Ms *Renita Sophia Crasta*, who set up the *Covid-19 Migrant Support Coalition*, with volunteer *Isaac Ong* and a migrant resident at a *Covid-19 Migrant Support Coalition* dormitory event in June last year. As a 38-year-old “older millennial”, she says she can empathise with both the older and younger generations and understand the “traditional seniors who have their reasons for doing things, and the younger generation who want to see change happen”. PHOTO: COURTESY OF RENITA SOPHIA CRASTA



Mr Ng Yi Ming, 31, is a co-founder of *Tribe*, a global blockchain ecosystem builder. The company connects blockchain-based start-ups with corporations, governments and investors. PHOTO: COURTESY OF NG YI MING