

The Old School Tie

Does the old school tie determine the ways of the business world? Alexandra Kohut-Cole considers the ties that bind Singapore's leading lights

This photo: Anglo-Chinese School
Below: Chandra Mohan



The ties that bind are alive and well in Singapore, with alumni boasting pride in their institutions

When *Singapore Tatler* interviewed four local school alumni, the results were surprising. The ties that bind are alive and well in Singapore, with alumni boasting pride in their institutions and their members. But what are the benefits of these boys' clubs? Golf, power lunches, business contacts: When the old boys get together, does the earth move in Singapore?

Chandra Mohan, lawyer with law firm Rajah & Tan, is a member of the board of governors of Anglo-Chinese School and on the committee of its alumni. "ACS is different," he claims. "Most of us spent our entire education there from primary to secondary and through junior college. At that time, boys would spend 12 years from the day they started at primary school within ACS. Consequently, there's a strong feeling of family. You grow up together and that's what most people remember; the boys and teachers consider themselves family."

Hence, joining the alumni and celebrating Founder's Day every year on March 1 is almost automatic. "This year we had 105 people," he says. "We sing the school song and reminisce with friends." Indeed, many classes meet every year for a get-together. According to Mohan, from his experience at the alumni magazine, the class of '54 meets once a month and between 22 to 30 people turn up.

Such is the affection in which the teachers are held that a retired teachers fund has been set up. "Old boys give generously. We go through the schools and our own networks to find retired teachers in need and they receive a monthly token."

Mohan's pride in his school and teachers is palpable. "During my time playing the trumpet in the school band we won awards left, right and centre – we were top in Singapore," he says. "This was mainly due to one teacher, our A-level biology teacher and headmaster Lim Peng Ann, a talented bandmaster who reviewed SSO concerts. One day he suddenly passed away in

his 40s. His death had a huge impact on me. He was a popular teacher who never married so contributed a lot to the school." Mohan played *The Last Post* on the trumpet at his funeral, something which must have been a difficult undertaking. "Yes, because his death was a shock. We had no warning and he wasn't ill. It was unbelievable," he says.

Once every three or four years the alumni organises a celebration for the entire six schools, bringing together 8,000 people in one place at one time. Mohan organises it, remarking, "I do enjoy it. It's fun because it's my school."

Gordon Tan, also from ACS, emphasises how he has been able to use what he learnt at school in respect of his career. With fond memories of playing rugby at school, he con-

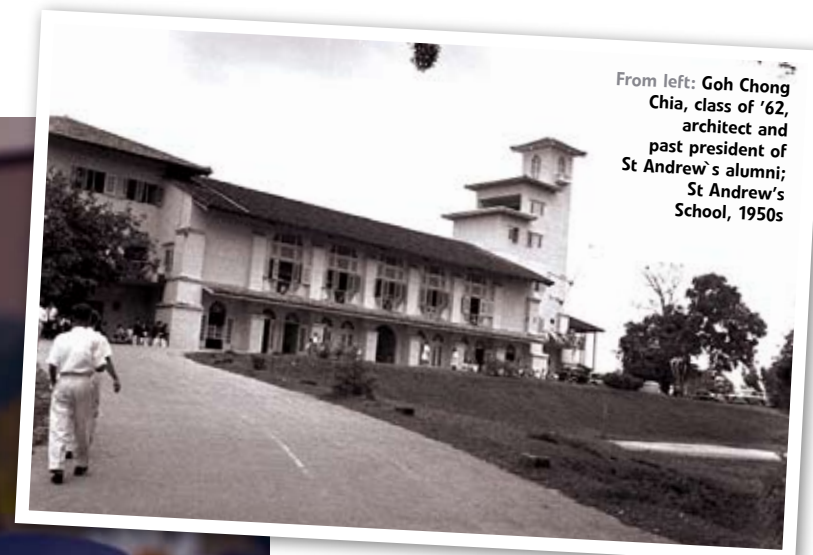
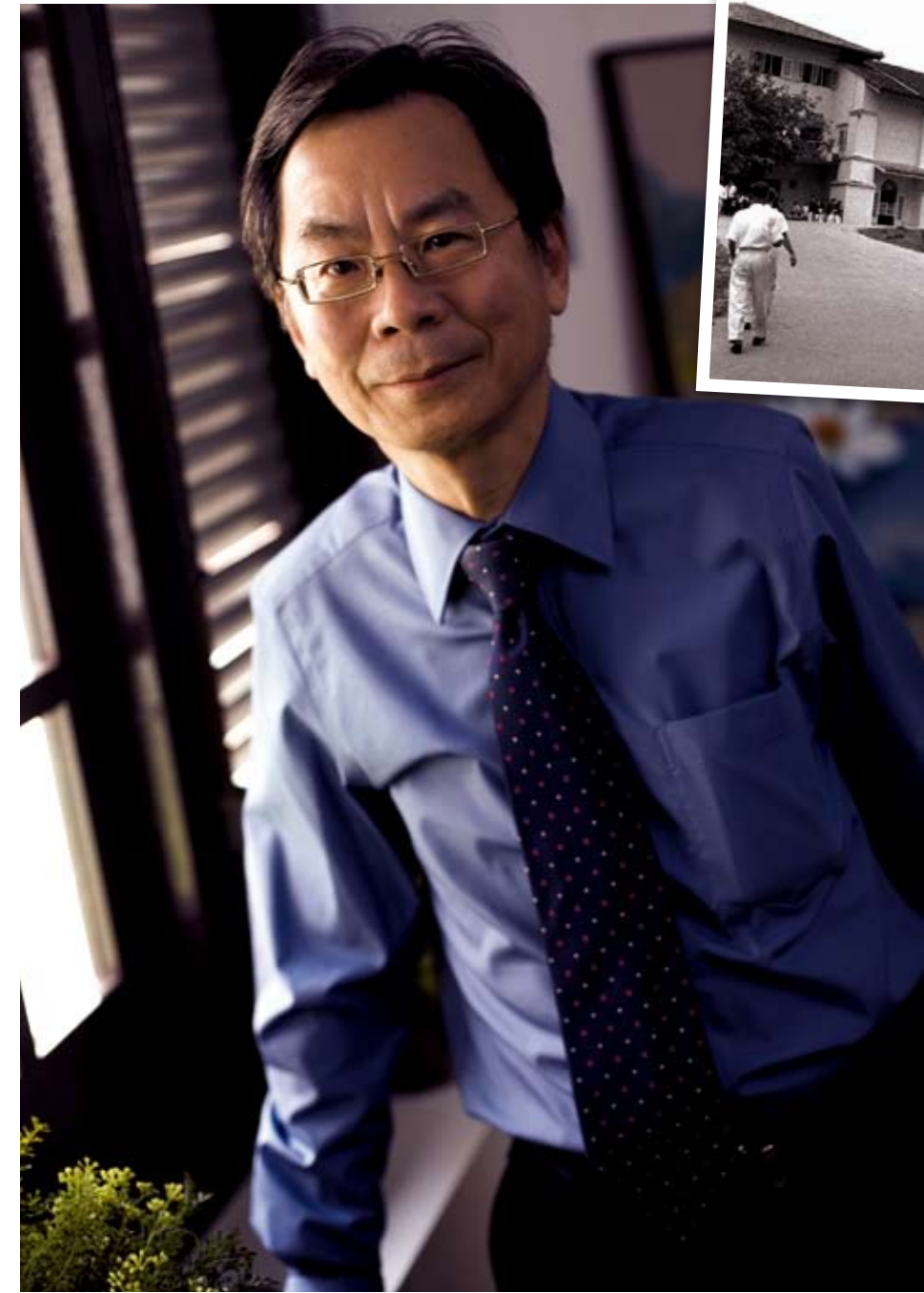
firms the school had no rugby field, so they played at the Police Academy rugby ground in Thompson Road.

Such is Tan's admiration for his school and the time he spent there that he can clearly explain how his early school life impacted on his present occupation. He explains thus: "Rugby is a game for gentlemen. It's a safe sport if rules are adhered to and an extremely dangerous one if rules are ignored. Playing rugby for ACS at national level as the wing three-quarter taught me the importance of playing by the rules. In life, I have used the same dictum that in society there are rules to be followed. As a member of the medical profession and as a member of society, it's important that we live by and adhere to the laws of society." He remembers an incident where the rules

were not adhered to. "It was an important game against St Andrew's and we were trying desperately to prevent a vital try from being scored in the closing half-hour of the game. The wrong interpretation of the rules resulted in a collision between myself and a co-ACS defender which resulted in us both being carried half-conscious off the pitch."

Recipient of the President's Scout Award in 1974, the highest award in scouting, Tan relates what he learned then to his career as a surgeon. "I spent many happy hours camping, cooking, biking and hiking as a scout. I remember as a somewhat plump 13 year old having to sling and cross the Bukit Timah canal on a harness. I made a poor knot that caused my harness to unravel and dump me in the middle of the smelly canal that, in those days, was full of rubbish and debris. I learnt the hard way the importance of proper knots. Today I use the same knots I used to tie rope bridges across swamps to secure major arteries and blood vessels when performing surgery."

Gordon Tan, class of '72 and '74 at Anglo-Chinese School, gynaecologist and pelvic surgeon at Gleneagles Hospital



From left: Goh Chong Chia, class of '62, architect and past president of St Andrew's alumni; St Andrew's School, 1950s

find out more about him. "It was a self discovery for me, too. I had only three lines to follow; he came here, founded the school ... and died!" His ordination papers were found in London's Guild House library. It was established that the school started up in a small shophouse teaching 100 students in the early days. Goh has records of all those years: "It was called Chinese Boys' Day school. One year they had a Malay student who increased the total number of students to 111, so they renamed the school, Chinese Malay Boys' Day school."

Perhaps one reason the old students are such close friends is that St Andrew's, at that point in time, was the only school with primary, secondary and junior college on one campus. It's what helps forge continuing friendships. Says Goh: "Every senior student is a mentor for the next one. The spirit of the school and the old boys with memories of the school is strong."

Goh explains that at St Andrew's they were provided with the basis for decision-making. And an enduring memory of his school days was of lasting friendships. "After six years together friendships were strong. Before I left to do A levels in Britain we realised that this was the last time that 40 of us would be together

As head prefect, Tan was in close contact with problems such as truancy, fighting and smoking among students. "I learnt as head prefect that the only way to communicate with wayward students was to show a genuine respect for them." This allowed them to open up to him and, in many cases, problems were overcome. "Today, many of these so-called naughty boys are successful people in the finance industry and good friends of mine," he confirms.

Past-president of St Andrew's alumni, Goh Chong Chia has such admiration for his school that he's writing a book about its history. "The first book was the basis for the first history of the school." However, Goh questioned its contents and started to explore the school's founder, Edward Sherman Venn. "He was a priest with

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the society for the provocation of the gospel missionary wing of the Anglican Church," he explains. "In the 1860s the church here were looking for a missionary and approached various people. After a year or two Venn came with his wife and son." Goh found 44 archived letters in Oxford, UK, which he ultimately copied and gave back to the school.

Goh takes immense pride in recounting the tale of the founder who only attended the school for three years. With a schoolmate from his A level days in Birmingham, UK, Goh followed the line of Venn's preaching in order to

at one time in one place. They were important days and those friendships were pure, not business-related. Sometimes if you were laughing you would be punished even if you didn't do it and you would take your punishment standing in the corner or outside. Today, they complain to their parents who come to the school. Things have changed ... When someone was very naughty they would get six of the best from the cane as a lesson to the rest."

The St Andrew's alumni started in 1915. Goh is the immediate past president but, when president, he instigated the revival of the Kiwi

rugby cup competition against ACS. "Ten or 15 years ago the Kiwi rugby cup remained with us and I suggested getting the competition going again. I saw it in terms of the Oxford and Cambridge boat race in the UK. We lost it that year but enjoyed the game and all had dinner together," he says. The reason Goh reinstated the cup was to keep building friendships and relationships. There's clearly a lasting friendly camaraderie between the schools. "We were dubbed the Saints. In truth, we were all saints schools, St Joseph's was across the road and we played rugby and would chant 'saints, saints, saints' but as we used it more the label stuck to us."

Last year the St Andrew's class of '62 decided to meet every month. "Some we hadn't seen for years, but after a while the spirit came back as though we had never missed a day." There is a shared attitude running through former students. They want to give something back. They are grateful, they gained, and they excelled.

Heah Siew Min is involved in the alumni of his old school as the representative for the Raffles golf challenge against other school alumni. "We organise tournaments against

St Joseph's, ACS and St Andrew's," he says. "There's a big alumni golf contingent and we all network. It's a great way to reconnect."

A keen squash player throughout levels one and two at school, Heah was among the first A level batch to graduate from Raffles Junior College where he took physics, chemistry, maths and biology. However, he chose to experience life for the first time overseas by studying medicine at the Royal College of Surgeons in Dublin, Ireland. "We are sheltered in Singapore," he explains. "I wanted to experience overseas life and look after myself. It was an eye-opener." Heah lived in Dublin for six years, including an internship period, before returning to Singapore. He then did two-and-a-half years' national service in the army.

Heah's fondness for his old school is palpable. "We are proud of our school and we still follow the progress of our rugby team. Raffles is well

known for rugby. We follow it in the paper and read the A level results. Like us, ACS is cliquy and networks well. There's always the thought that ACS own Singapore and Raffles rule it."

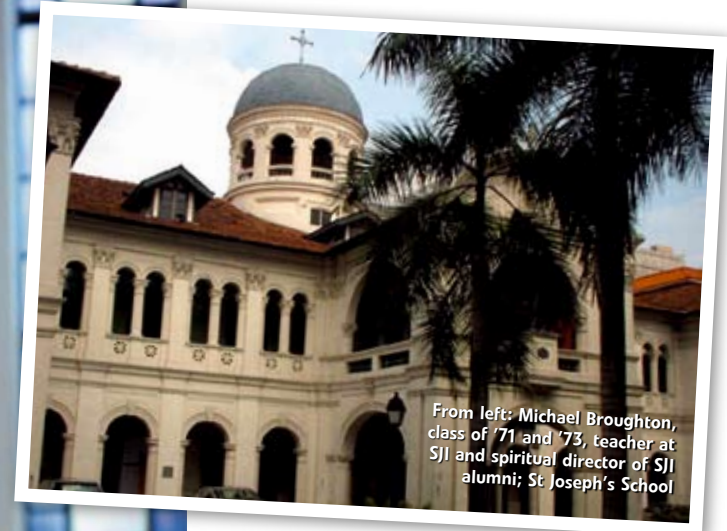
As spiritual director of the St Joseph's alumni, Michael Broughton organises a day of prayer once a year to remember departed teachers and boys. "Reconnecting and bringing us together is the role of the alumni. Once you hit 40 you wonder, 'What made me the crazy person I am today?' and you have this wonderful rosy look at the past which lessens the pain. You look back, remember all the joy and laugh about things." When I was in the army, because of my height I was the bridge for the shorter boys to cross over the barbed wire while they jumped over. It was painful. Now I regale the stories about how we counted the piercings. It's hilarious."

Broughton explains that St Joseph's profess to holding a value system which does not value

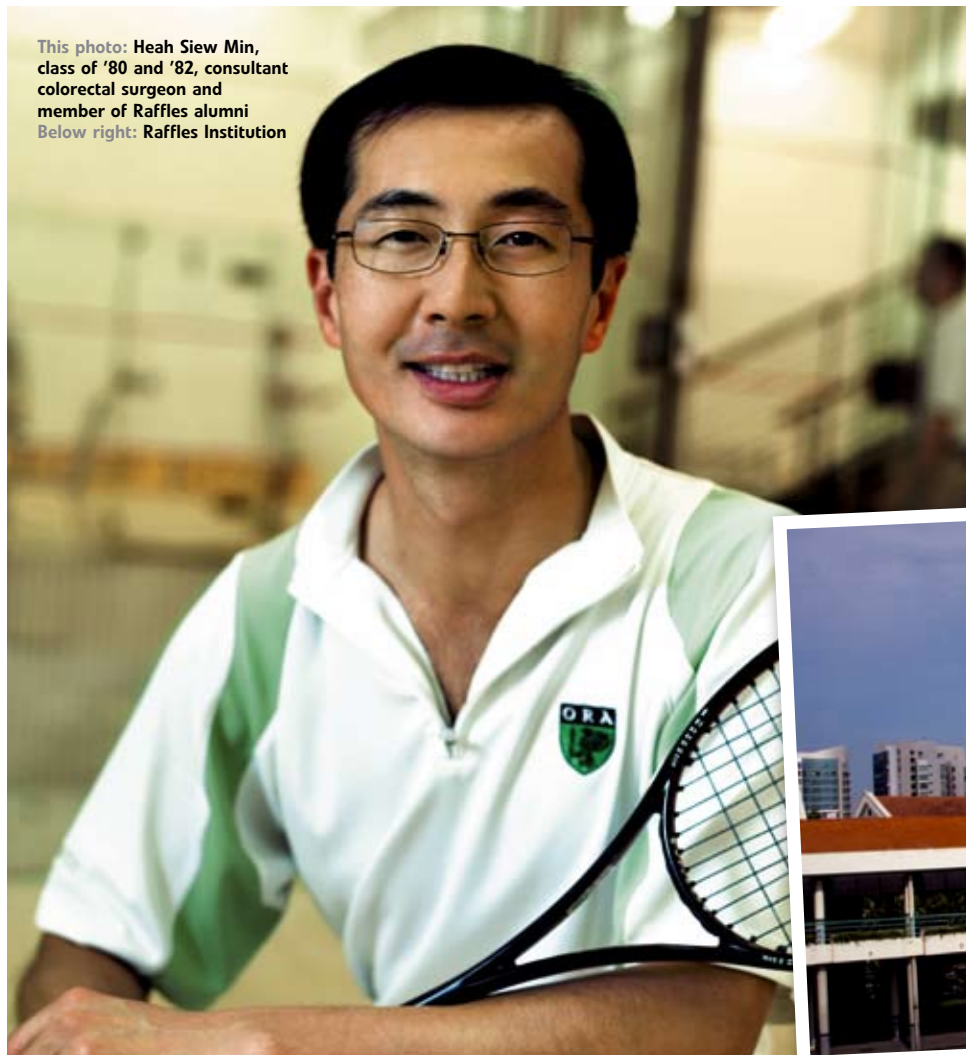
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ostentatious displays, especially as some boys are on financial assistance. "There are many loose ends we will never be able to complete in life, but nostalgia has a wonderful way of finding beautiful meaning in everything that happened in the past."

Broughton's career path took a special route. While he was in the army he was sent to a Hokkien dialect-speaking regiment. "One day an officer came to me and said, 'If you can teach a Hokkien recruit the way you have done, you can teach anybody,' so I thought surely God was telling me something and maybe I should teach." He had previously



From left: Michael Broughton, class of '71 and '73, teacher at SJI and spiritual director of SJI alumni; St Joseph's School



This photo: Heah Siew Min, class of '80 and '82, consultant colorectal surgeon and member of Raffles alumni
Below right: Raffles Institution



Photography Frank Pinckers, Mousefilms

taught music at SJI during his time in the school band for which he played the clarinet. Following university (where he studied English literature and teacher training) he entered the brotherhood. "It was never the culture in our school to put down another religion," he explains. "That prepared me for dialogue with people of other faiths." He studied in the Philippines for three-and-a-half years during the time when Marcos fell. "After that I was ready to teach and was happy to come back to this school as a brother."

Broughton was a student at St Joseph's for six years and loved it. "I was never so depressed as the day before my O levels. We were so traumatised. When we got our results, we were so happy to be staying on. I like to think that any SJI boy, no matter how high he rises in life, still

has a heart for the small person in society, the underdog. And when the old boys meet in the private sector they come back with the old school nicknames but the old rivalries are all in good spirit."

Despite different school-time experiences, former pupils share a common attitude towards their old schools. Each is immensely proud, not just of the school itself but of the legacy bestowed on them by it. They maintain a tradition of respect for each other's schools that clearly transcends their school days. Their careers and networking lives are enhanced. But far from putting their school days behind them, they perpetuate school traditions and meet regularly to reminisce and work out how best to serve their old institutions and how to give back, both support morally and financially. □

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