

THE STRAITS TIMES

When LKY drove a tractor in MacPherson



Mr Poon King Wang (left) suggested staggering work hours to ease MRT congestion. With him are (second from left) Mr Koh Buck Song, Ms Joanna Tan and Ms Cheong Suk-Wai. ST PHOTO: LIM SIN THAI

🕒 PUBLISHED OCT 1, 2016, 5:00 AM SGT

Singapore's late founding prime minister's hands-on approach to reshaping Singapore is highlighted by the creators of a new book on him

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Recently, some students here told engineer Poon King Wang, 42, that they were working on ways to make travelling on the MRT "more comfortable".

Mr Poon, who is director of the think-tank Lee Kuan Yew Centre for Innovative Cities in the Singapore University of Technology and Design (SUTD), wondered why they would want to do that.

Would it not be better, he asked them, to look into how people could get into and out of the train faster?

As he told 64 readers of The Straits Times at The Big Read Meet on Wednesday evening: "Increasingly, the work day is no longer 9am to 5pm. So might we think of displacing the start of it by 10 minutes here, and another 10 minutes down the line, or find other new ways of distributing commuters throughout the day? With telecommuting, there may not even be a need to go into the office."

He was at the monthly meet moderated by this writer for the non-fiction book club to talk about the book *A Chance Of A Lifetime: Lee Kuan Yew And The Physical Transformation Of Singapore*.

Joining him were the book's writer, ex-Straits Times journalist Koh Buck Song, and its editor and visuals curator Joanna Tan, 42, a senior assistant director at the Ministry of National Development's think-tank the Centre for Liveable Cities.

The book captures lessons from eight pioneering civil servants, among them former Chief Planner Liu Thai Ker, former PUB chief Khoo Teng Chye and Gardens by the Bay chief executive Tan Wee Kiat, from a day-long conference in 2013 to celebrate founding premier Lee Kuan Yew's 90th birthday.

He also drew water from a well to see how difficult it was for people to get water then.

A CHANCE OF A LIFETIME'S EDITOR AND VISUALS CURATOR JOANNA TAN, a senior assistant director at the Ministry of National Development's think-tank the Centre for Liveable Cities, on the late Mr Lee Kuan Yew

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Mr Koh, 53, said his aim was to take the conference's technical subjects such as how to clean up rivers, how to cool a concrete jungle and how to camouflage monsoon drains, and turn them into a read that was engaging for those well-versed in the subjects, as well as those who knew squat about this part of the Singapore Story.

He likened the eight speakers' candid recollections to "magicians sharing tricks".

Mr Alex Tan, 45, a pre-school teacher and a regular at the Big Read Meet, said later that the book was not only readable but had also inspired him and fellow Meet regular Jean-Michel Bardin, 63, to seek out the spot where the late Mr Lee was pictured on the book's cover - between Blocks 85 and 86 in Commonwealth Crescent.

Mr Tan, a self-confessed "heritage buff", also found Singapore's last surviving popiah skin maker there.

In poring over photographs for the book, Ms Tan saw how hands-on Mr Lee had been in shaping Singapore. "He once tried his hand at driving a tractor in MacPherson Estate," she says, "and also drew water from a well to see how difficult it was for people to get water then."

Five readers asked how the landscape here could be transformed in future without ripping up the carpet, as it were.

Citing public remonstrations against the impending partial demolition of the 92-year-old Ellison Building, which houses the Colonial Bistro Bar, to make way for the North-South Corridor, Ms Tan mused: "People are speaking up more and more, like about Colonial (Bistro Bar) or that an MRT line might run through the Central Catchment area. What's encouraging is that we can have a public discussion about such concerns now."

Another Meet regular, Mr Vincent Loo, 57, a commodities sales and relationship manager at financial news and data provider Bloomberg, said the Government's attempts to ease downtown congestion by "decentralising" jobs and amenities to the city's outskirts, were patchy at best.

Agreeing, Mr Poon, who is also SUTD's director of strategic planning, said: "Decentralisation has not quite worked because opportunities in regional centres such as Tampines have not been too diverse. In Tampines, for example, there were only one to two industries with banking, middle offices and back offices."

However, he added, the Government's renewed push to decentralise by developing the Jurong Lake District and Paya Lebar Central might work because there were now more pockets beyond the city centre with diverse job opportunities. These include Geylang, which he said was drawing many start-ups with its lower rents.

After the meet, Mr Koh said: "It was especially good to see such a strong interest in books from our engaging conversation with a diverse and intellectually curious audience."

- **A Chance Of A Lifetime** is available from leading bookstores at \$29.85 with GST.
- **The next Big Read Meet is on Oct 26, when Professor Helga Nowotny, the past president of the European Research Council, will talk about her book *The Cunning Of Uncertainty* from 6.30pm at NLB headquarters, The Pod, Level 16, 100 Victoria Street. Sign up for it at any NLB e-Kiosk.**