

Thinking Aloud

Make room for outliers

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Those who pursue paths others dismiss as dead ends can help push back realm of possibilities

As I watched Sim Chi Yin read her letter to her grandfather at her photo exhibition two weeks ago, I felt as though I was seeing her and her work afresh. It was a strange sensation as I have known her for well over a decade, since we met and worked together in The Straits Times newsroom.

Some of you will know Chi Yin as this year's Nobel Peace Prize photographer. Her work *Fallout* is a series of photographs showing landscapes in North Korea and the United States, images linked to these two countries' possession, use and testing of nuclear weapons and shot in honour of this year's peace prize winner, the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons.

The Chi Yin I remember best, though, is not the famous documentary photographer who gets interviewed by the BBC and other international media, but a short rookie journalist with a big passion for social justice. She was not, I might add, the easiest person to be around. She was ever so intense and purposeful, and always seemed to be working on projects that shone a light on the plight of migrant workers, or gave them a voice. Between 2005 and 2009, she spent her vacation leave on a book project - *The Long Road Home* - for the International Labour Organisation, for which she trailed 25 Indonesian women domestic workers on parts of their journeys of migration. She accompanied some from their villages in Java to Singapore and followed others back.

Then, at the end of 2010, she gave up the pay and perks she enjoyed as The Straits Times China correspondent for the uncertainties of going freelance as a documentary photographer. I was perturbed. Why did she choose such a hard life for herself? How would she cope in her small, cold flat during the freezing Beijing winters? What if she didn't get enough work to pay her rent?

If I found it difficult to accept her choice, I can only imagine how very much more so it was for her parents.

But perhaps life has a way of reconciling such differences for those brave enough to live their calling.

Here's where I want to return to her grandfather and her photo exhibition now on show at the Esplanade's Jendela Visual Arts Space until April 1. This work, entitled *One Day We'll Understand*, began as a quest to find out more about her paternal grandfather, about whom her family never spoke. She discovered that he had been one of tens of thousands of leftists deported to China by the British in the early years of the Malayan Emergency, which stretched from 1948 to 1960.

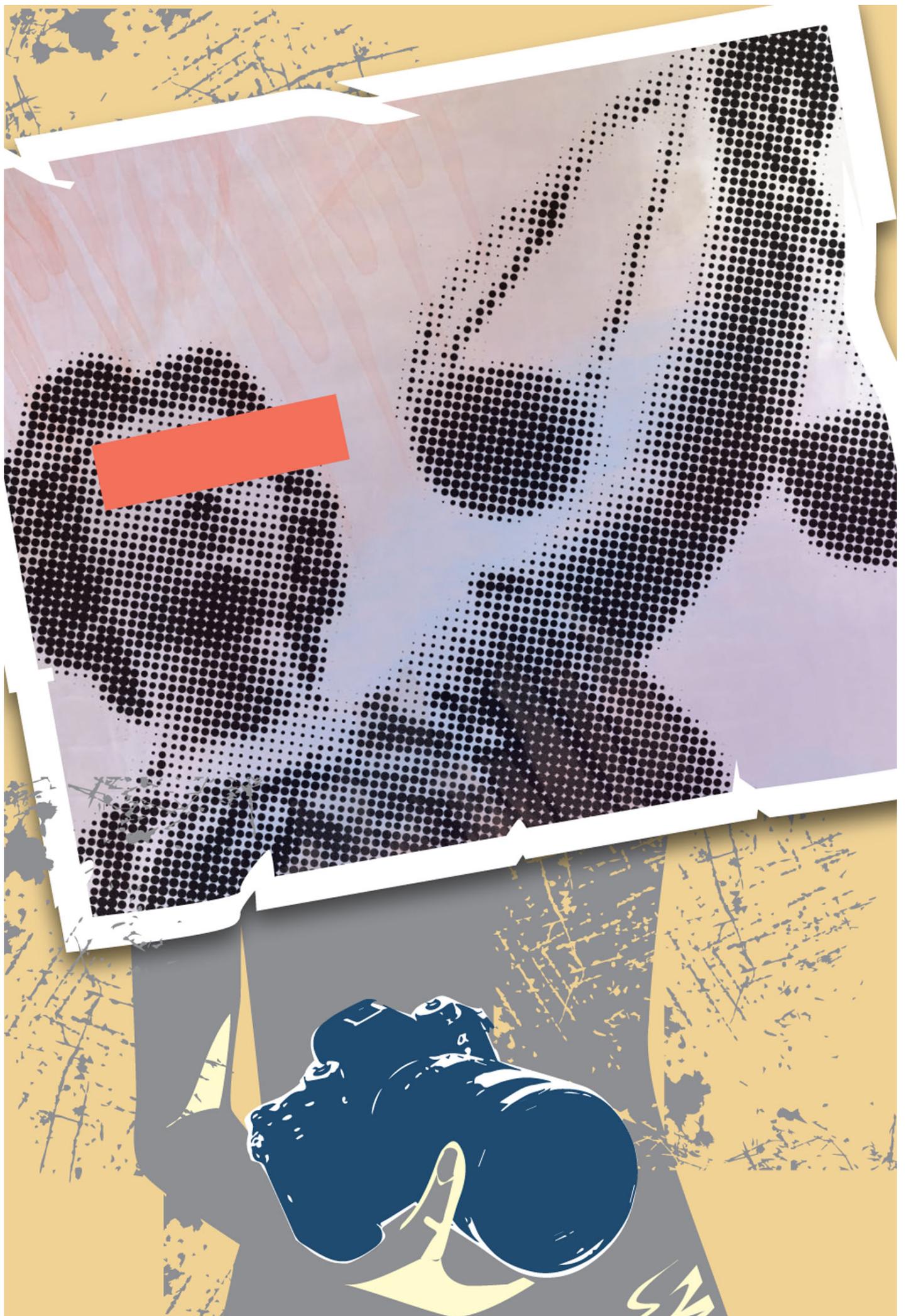


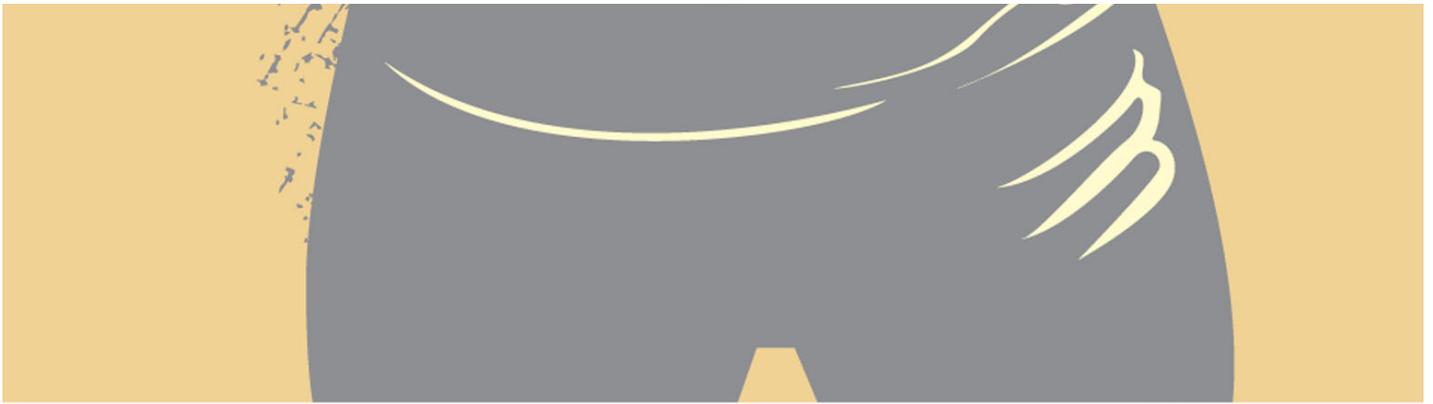
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Singaporean makes history as Peace Prize photographer

He had been a newspaper editor and had shared her passion for social justice and love of photography. Named Shen Huansheng, he had been born in Hong Kong in 1911 and died in 1949 in Guangdong, where he had returned after being deported. There, he had been executed by Kuomintang soldiers shortly before their side surrendered to the communists in the Chinese Civil War.

On show at Jendela are her portraits of former leftists from this period who survived and now live in Malaysia, Thailand, China and Singapore. To these men and women, many of whom had not spoken for decades about what they endured, she has sought to restore a share of dignity. Through her lengthy, meticulous interviews, and her request that they sing songs about Malaya they had not sung for over 60 years, she has given them back their voice; and by doing so, found her own. Her family, too, have started speaking about her grandfather again, recalling their sadness when told he was no more.





ST ILLUSTRATION: CEL GULAPA

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In her letter to her grandfather, she writes: "I am still working to piece together your story, and those of some of your fellow tens of thousands deemed to be leftists and deported or 'voluntarily repatriated' by the British during the first years of the Malayan Emergency. It has been seven years since I started; now that I think about it, I fear I have bitten off more than I can chew. I've been trying to give you time and do your stories justice, but I've come to realise that this sort of project is what scholars spend chunks of their careers researching, studying, writing and presenting. I have not given up; I'm trying to find ways to make it all work, but have been faced with questions of what value society puts on knowledge creation, on the documentation of hidden histories - especially if they are histories from 'the wrong side'?"

"Your 'professional bum' of a granddaughter, not born into wealth or social capital, juggles a lot to stay afloat but she is still trying to make this life work."

In recent weeks, I've had cause to reflect on women who struggled to find their voice in societies not yet ready to hear what they had to say. There is Katharine Graham as played by Meryl Streep in Steven Spielberg's film, *The Post*, who took over at the helm of *The Washington Post* at a time when women did not run newspaper companies. The men in her life had made that clear to her but after the death of her husband, to whom her father had entrusted the paper, she was told by a woman friend, Luvie Pearson, to run the paper herself. "Don't be silly, dear. You can do it," Mrs Pearson said. "You've got all those genes... You've just been pushed down so far you don't recognise what you can do."

The Spielberg film captures an episode in 1971, the Pentagon Papers, when Mrs Graham came into her own as a newspaper publisher, standing up to the president of the US who sought to stop the *Post* from publishing stories based on a leaked top-secret document about the Vietnam War, and doing so against the objections of the company's board of directors, who feared that it would sink the paper's public listing.

Thanks to social media, I've also been able in the past week to read responses from around the world to Ursula Le Guin's death. A writer of both imaginative fiction and essays, Le Guin inspired many other writers, especially women and minorities, who had doubted their own abilities until they read her books which, unlike much other science fiction, did not revolve around white men in space but contained worlds where powerful people of colour dwelt.

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In one tribute, science fiction writer Vandana Singh - who was born in India, has a doctorate in physics, and first read Le Guin at the late age of 32 - recalls how reading *The Dispossessed* and the *Earthsea Trilogy* made her conscious of the need to decolonise the last frontier, her mind. "What Le Guin did was to take down the walls around the imagination, and to set us all free. To shift the paradigms, the conceptual constructs by which we make sense of the world, is no small thing," Singh wrote.

Le Guin herself once observed in her book, *The Wave In The Mind*, that "all of us have to learn how to invent our lives, make them up, imagine them. We need to be taught these skills; we need guides to show us how. If we don't, our lives get made up for us by other people".

It is not an easy road to take, this path of self-invention, for it is often less work to let others decide for us what we should be. Back in 1859, British philosopher John Stuart Mill wrote in his essay *On Liberty* of the need to protect individuals against the social tyranny of the prevailing opinion and feeling, against the tendency of society to impose by other means than civil penalties, its own ideas and practices as rules of conduct on those who dissent from them.

Every society needs to make room for outliers who insist on self-invention, for they are often the ones who can show us new ways of being, and help us push back the realm of possibilities.

My friend Chi Yin is of this ilk. Not for her the easy, well-trodden path. By her choices, she has shown me the difference one person can make when she listens to the voice that speaks from within.

Dear Chi Yin, consider this my letter to you, a letter of thanks and encouragement, for I know you still have far to go.

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