Singaporean poet, Alvin Pang, teaches at Yale-NUS

Text and image by Clare Isabel Ee

Last semester, 14 Yale-NUS students delved into Introduction to Writing Poetry, a Yale-NUS course led by part-time lecturer, Mr Alvin Pang.

In local literary circles, Alvin Pang is well known and highly respected as a Singaporean poet, alongside other contemporary writers such as Edwin Thumboo, Lee Tzu Pheng, Alfian Sa’at, Felix Cheong and Cyril Wong, among others.

Besides being a prolific writer, Mr Pang has also been a teacher at Raffles Institution and Raffles Junior College, and has been an editor, columnist and longtime advocate for the Singapore literary scene.

This Yale-NUS course was his first teaching stint at a university level – one that he says he has enjoyed immensely.

“Mr Pang has told us about his own journey in becoming a poet, and how it really reflected the political and social changes that were going on in Singapore [over the past few years],” said one of his students and an Arts & Humanities major, Tara Dear, Class of 2017. “He certainly has a particular style, voice and set of ideas that he expressed to us.”

She added: “Because poetry is so subjective, I think it’s great that he takes such ownership over his, to tell us what kinds of things he tries to say through his own poetry, and how he became a Singaporean writer.”

With a mix of Singaporean and international students in the class, Mr Pang took the opportunity to arrange for class trips to the heart of the city, to expose the class to another side of Singapore.

He explained that he would usually try to fit in at least one field trip when he’s conducting a class.

“It’s really about getting out of the classroom and having a different perspective, and engaging with the world around you,” he said. “It’s really not a classroom based thing. It’s about keeping your senses active, paying attention and interacting with other people.”

For example, during a trip to the Singapore River, the class interacted with tourists, looked at texts by Singaporean writers on the Merlion, and wrote their own Merlion-inspired pieces.

“It’s not just Singapore – you can take this skill with you everywhere. There are always stories on the streets,” Mr Pang said with a smile.

Apart from building their craft, Mr Pang introduced them to the world of poetry, established poets and events around town. He encouraged students to take part in the Singapore Poetry Writing Month (SingPoWriMo), during which individuals pen one poem per day for the month of April.

Rohan Naidu, Class of 2017, gamely took up the challenge of participating in SingPoWriMo, armed with the new skills gained during the semester.

“Something that SingPoWriMo and the workshop-style classes taught me is that this is a very social art form,” shared the Physical Sciences major, who says he was an “interested amateur” before the class.

“I’ve always been interested in writing poetry, but I’ve never had any formal tutoring, guidance or anything of that sort,” Rohan said. “Thanks to last semester, I have a better sense of how I can grow in terms of my writing, I know what to look out for, certain themes and forms I can rely on, ways I can think about things, or different ways of presenting my words.”

Along with his classmates, Rohan presented his work at a public poetry reading organised by Mr Pang at the end of the semester.

Held at local bookstore BooksActually, Rohan and his classmates each took the limelight with two or three poems that evening, ending the class they enjoyed so tremendously on a high note.

“It was a good concluding point for the class, because most of us read from our final portfolio. In some sense, it was everyone’s best work,” reflected Rohan. “I would definitely want to continue writing poetry, but I’m not sure if I’ll end up with a book or anything. That’d be really cool, of course.”

Mr Pang shared that he was very pleased with the outcome of the course, and is glad that the students have learnt a little more about the rich world of poetry.

“They’ve come to their own understanding as to what this sort of work is about,” he said.

“And what more do you want from any kind of course, right?”
What would you do if you had one day left to live?

For one week in April 2015, the Yale-NUS community faced this question in their Dining Hall every day.

On chalkboards were the words “If I had one more day to live, I would…”, to which students, staff and faculty wrote their personal responses.

An eye-opening assortment of answers found their way onto the board over the week, ranging from humorous ones – “Play League of Legends (1 game)” – to more heartfelt ones such as “Make sure the people I love know that I love them”.

Organised by Joyan Tan and Carissa Lim (Class of 2017), the chalkboards were a part of the Living Wall project that aimed to raise awareness about paediatric palliative care and to raise funds for patients at Rachel House in Jakarta, Indonesia.

Established in 2006, Rachel House (or Yayasan Rumah Rachel) is the first paediatric palliative care hospice in Indonesia.

The children’s family members can also approach Rachel House to attend informative sessions on the illnesses, and basic caregiving techniques to implement at home.

“Palliative care isn’t something that is discussed often since the topic of death can be sensitive and difficult to broach, but we believe that it is a very important topic that just needs to be approached in the right light,” shared Joyan.

The students were inspired to launch the Living Wall at Yale-NUS after they completed an internship at Rachel House over their mid-year break in 2014, and after they saw examples of another campaign created by Taiwanese-American artist, Ms Candy Chang.

In the original campaign started in 2011, Ms Chang decorated an abandoned house with the words “Before I die I want to...” as an interactive art experiment. The project soon gained global attention, and there have since been over 500 ‘Before I die’ walls in over 70 countries.

“We saw ‘Before I die’ boards that had been put up all over the world and the very positive reactions it had garnered. We decided this was an initiative we wanted to take up as well, to raise awareness about palliative care,” explained Joyan.

“However, we made the crucial change of words because we wanted the campaign to be about living rather than dying.”

The Living Wall proved to be a popular feature, with many students, staff and faculty members penning their bucket list wishes on the wall throughout the week.

Assistant Professor Anju Mary Paul, who participated with her husband, Vice Rector Eduardo Lage-Otero, says she found it “meaningful and sobering at the same time”.

She said: “Putting myself in a situation where I needed to think about my last day was not something I enjoy doing, but it reminded me about what actually matters.”

Joyan, Carissa and a few of their peers who were involved were also on hand to encourage the community to donate money that would help fund transportation costs for the children at Rachel House, as many of the patients live far away from Jakarta and low-income families face the difficulty of bringing the children to medical facilities in the city.

Apart from the Wall, Carissa printed a colouring book she had created during her internship at Rachel House for Yale-NUS students to colour and decorate, eventually turning it into a storybook. The final product was bound and given to Rachel House, along with well wishes received.

The founder of Rachel House, Ms Lynna Chandra, was also invited to the College to give a Rector’s Tea, during which she spoke about the work done at Rachel House.

By the end of the Living Wall project, the team had raised $4,112.30, and they were moved by the generosity and deep reflection that emerged through the project.

“The entire campaign was extremely enriching for me,” said Joyan. “Sharing our stories and experiences at Rachel House also led me to further appreciate the work that the Rachel House nurses and staff do on a daily basis.”

She added: “These volunteering opportunities sometimes feel too touch-and-go, but being able to help even after leaving Jakarta for many months was something that we were both very thankful for.”
In November 2014, the Yale-NUS Men’s Basketball team headed to Shanghai, China, as part of a Yale-NUS student exchange with NYU Shanghai. The students competed in a friendly game against the NYU Shanghai team. Yale-NUS won the match, their first game against another college, bringing home a trophy after a suspenseful game.

Subhas Nair, Class of 2017 and member of the basketball team, said of the visit, “We were very proud to represent the school as ambassadors and as correspondents, to visit NYU Shanghai and later share our experiences with our Yale-NUS community.”

Zachary Mahon, another sophomore on the basketball team, also shared, “We all love having fun on the basketball court, but our main priority is representing Yale-NUS in the best possible light – showing others what our school is all about.”

In February this year, Yale-NUS participated in the Inter-Collegiate Games (ICGs) as a residential college in University Town. The ICGs take place annually as a competition between the five colleges in University Town. Yale-NUS took the victory in the tournament, winning with a tally of 46 points after competing in 15 sports.

Yale-NUS took first place in Captain’s Ball, women’s football, men’s and women’s basketball, and tennis.

The contract bridge team, which placed second in the tournament, even received lessons from College President Pericles Lewis in gaming strategy.

James Shirvell, the Dean’s Fellow who works in Athletics in the Office of the Dean of Students, noted of the victories, “Sports is a great way of being able to show pride in your school and this was a good step forward in developing the athletics programme here.”

He added, “The games were also a great way to reach out and get to know our neighbours better, and we hope to continue building on these relationships.”

To help students take full advantage of the athletic opportunities in College, Associate Director (Athletics & Fitness) Wainright Khoo heads the Athletics Department in the Office of the Dean of Students. He works with James and the Athletics Council, which is made up of students, to provide resources for sports-related activities in Yale-NUS.

In addition, students have organised night cycling rides, overnight camping trips, rock-climbing opportunities, and even a wakeboarding class.

“He all love having fun on the basketball court, but our main priority is representing Yale-NUS in the best possible light – showing others what our school is all about.”

James commented, “One reason why our students want sports to be so big is because they see it as a good way to represent our school and get the Yale-NUS name out there,” James commented.

“I think it’s something powerful in developing the identity of the school.”
70 years ago this year, the United Nations (UN) was born with a charter and a humanitarian dream. In April 2015, Yale-NUS had the honour of hosting the Under-Secretary-General (USG) to the UN, Dr Noeleen Heyzer, for a public talk on her personal journey through the UN over the course of her career. Dr Heyzer’s talk was a part of the Yale-NUS College President’s Speaker Series.

Before her current role, Dr Heyzer also served as the Secretary-General to the UN’s Special Advisor for Timor-Leste. From 2007 to 2014, she was the Executive Secretary of the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), and the Executive Director of the UN Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) from 1994 to 2007.

In her talk titled ‘Through the United Nations: A Personal Journey’, Dr Heyzer covered the themes of empowerment and human rights. She spoke powerfully on the origins of the UN and its charter, reflecting on the founders: “Faced with untold sorrow and the potential of human self-destruction, enlightened world leaders were determined that never again should the world be destroyed by injustice, hatred and violence.”

Dr Heyzer is well-known for her role in drafting and implementing Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security. The resolution, which was adopted unanimously on 31 October 2000, was the first formal and legal document from the UN Security Council that specifically mentioned women and their role in post-conflict reconstruction and development.

She noted, “[The resolution] is regarded as one of the United Nations’ most transformative and legally binding frameworks that we have created together with women living in the conflict-affected countries.”

Dr Heyzer has the tremendous experience of having worked with women all over the globe on issues of development and reconstruction. She spoke on two of her specific experiences in Afghanistan and Myanmar, where she worked with local women to voice their concerns and viewpoints in the state-building process.

Notably, in Afghanistan, Dr Heyzer helped women gain equal recognition under the new constitution.

“Inclusion of women’s equal rights in the constitution was a huge historical victory, but huge challenges remain in its implementation,” she said of the success.

“Gender inequality is deeply rooted in entrenched attitudes in social institutions and in political interests. But a spark towards a new future for women has been lighted.”

This triumph reflects Dr Heyzer’s view of women’s roles in the globe and the future.

“The condition of women in a country is a barometer of peace and security, and is associated with better governance and functioning states,” she declared.

Dr Heyzer also spoke on the future of the UN, which is set to adopt a new development agenda and a set of sustainable development goals in 2015.

To round off the talk, Dr Heyzer noted that the relevance of the 1947 UN Charter has not diminished; humanitarian and human rights spaces are shrinking, and there are still millions of people in poverty.

“As the UN turns 70 in 2015, nothing could do more to bring such an institution of human solidarity into being than a genuine recommitment and partnership to shape a future of dignity for all,” she said.

“It remains our greatest hope.”
Three years ago, Admissions counsellor Jasmine Seah took the plunge and set up her nonprofit organisation Photovoice SG.

Photovoice SG is a community arts organisation that empowers fringe communities by teaching them photography to help them express themselves.

“Photography is a wonderful democratic medium of communication and it just does not make sense to use it only on an ad-hoc basis,” explained Jasmine, 32, who co-founded Photovoice SG with her friend, Jennifer Koh.

“We wanted to use photography as a medium to help different communities communicate. We also believe that there are many communities in Singapore that are not visible enough, and as a result of this, there are misconceptions about how they think or live,” she said.

Managed by a core team of five, Photovoice SG has a pool of around 70 mentor photographers who take turns coaching the participants who then use the skills acquired to tell their own stories.

Some of their participants include children of ex-offenders, individuals with mental illnesses and children with autism, just to name a few. Since its establishment, Photovoice SG has completed six projects, held exhibitions and published a book about their projects.

Needless to say, juggling a day job and managing a nonprofit organisation is no mean feat.

As a Senior Manager at Yale-NUS’ Admissions & Financial Aid office, Jasmine is part of a team responsible for student recruitment drives, which entails frequent travelling to neighbouring countries such as Indonesia, Thailand, Philippines and Vietnam.

At Photovoice SG, Jasmine is responsible for various aspects, ranging from accounts and copywriting for publicity materials to planning outreach activities and events management.

The trick to balancing work and her duties at Photovoice SG, Jasmine revealed, is time management and having a supportive team. The Photovoice SG team takes turns to manage the workload, and finds ways to include it in their busy schedules.

Jasmine is also grateful for the support of her colleagues from the Admissions team, who make the time to attend Photovoice SG events.

Even though Jasmine sometimes has to work on weekends for Photovoice SG events, working to empower fringe communities is a rewarding experience that she finds worth the small sacrifice.

“In one of our projects, we worked with a young woman with advanced glaucoma. We took her out for photo walks and she took really good photos. I think that was mind-blowing,” recounted Jasmine with a smile.

Another project which left a deep impact on her was working with a group of children with autism.

“After we finished the project, we had a sharing session for the participants to present their work. We invited all the parents and it was nice to see the parents connecting with one another. It was really cool when the parents said they have never seen their child speak in front of an audience,” shared Jasmine.

“I think it was an empowering moment for both the parents and the children,” she added.

Aside from that, working with fringe communities also serves as a powerful reminder that there are many different sides to a person, a fact that is often neglected.

“When we worked with a medical social worker for one of our projects, he told us that sometimes you forget that the patient you see for many years has different dimensions because you just see them solely as a patient,” shared Jasmine.

Besides working on their own events, Photovoice SG has collaborated with various partners such as the Tsao Foundation, a nonprofit organisation focused on ageing and eldercare. The collaboration had photography mentors teaching seniors how to tell stories through pictures.

Jasmine and her team are currently preparing for an exhibition. She said, “We are also exploring collaborations to take the project to the next level by working with other organisations with far-reaching impact.”

“Giving communities a voice”

Text by Elena Owyong | Image by John Richards
You may have caught the recent docudrama *The Worlds of Georgette Chen*, with popular local actress Rui En playing the famed Singaporean painter of the 1900s. Aired on both Channel NewsAsia and MediaCorp Channel 5, the docudrama was commissioned by the National Gallery Singapore, as part of their efforts to promote an appreciation for the development of Singapore’s art scene.

A pioneer in Singapore’s early art scene and a key figure in the development of the Nanyang style, the late Ms Georgette Chen was known for her post-impressionistic styled oil paintings, which combined Western techniques with Asian themes. She also started teaching art at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts when she moved to Singapore in 1954.

**The Georgette Chen Study Award**

Despite her passing in 1993, Ms Chen’s legacy in the Singapore art scene continues to burn strongly today. The Estate of Georgette Chen, through its trustees, Dr Lee Seng Gee and Dr Della Lee, has established the Georgette Chen Study Award at Yale-NUS, which is one of our Donors’ Need-Based Study Awards.

In the College’s inaugural year, eight beneficiaries received the award.

“The undying legacy of Georgette Chen

**Text and image by Melissa Wang**

“...being recognised as a lover of the arts, and being bestowed with an award related to the legacy of an artist was huge for me,” shared Keziah Quek, Class of 2017, an inaugural recipient of the Georgette Chen Study Award and an aspiring visual arts curator.

“This Award was completely crucial in enabling me to join Yale-NUS College and has made me more determined to find my way into the curator’s seat. I hope to achieve at least a fraction of what Ms Chen has,” Keziah added.

Sheryl Foo, Class of 2017, echoed Keziah’s sentiments, highlighting how the Georgette Chen Study Award has been a great help to her College career.

“This summer, I was part of the prestigious Young Southeast Asian Leadership Initiative (YSEALI) academic fellowship awarded by the US State department. Through it, I grew in my personal development as a global leader, and was fortunate enough to meet US President Obama. Without the Georgette Chen Study Award, I would not have the financial freedom to be able to focus on my college career and my personal development,” Sheryl shared.

**Research Fellowship Grants**

Aside from study awards, the Estate of Georgette Chen also gives out research fellowship grants. These grants go to faculty members, and Dr Maria Taroutina, Assistant Professor in the Division of Humanities, is the first recipient for the grant.

Specialising in Art History, Dr Taroutina stressed the importance of the grant in helping to build the visual arts department here. The grant will enable her to purchase more art history research materials to supplement the resources available in the library.

“As a very young college, our library, for instance, is not as established as that of other universities with a longer history. There is a need to purchase more art history books, which are expensive,” Dr Taroutina shared. “The sponsorship has really helped to make research materials and resources more readily available to our students.”

The S$20,000 that Dr Taroutina receives over two years has also helped fund her research trips and the publishing of her works. Stressing the importance of physicality in the study of art history, Dr Taroutina shares the work she researches, as a result of her trips, with our students. An active learning component is also a part of her course and she brings all her students to the NUS Museum, because it helps add a different dimension to the learning.

“When studying an artwork, seeing the actual size of the painting, or being in a building when studying architecture, can make such a difference,” she explained.

“I’m really grateful to the NUS Museum for all their help, and they have a great collection of Southeast Asian art,” Dr Taroutina added.

“The museum is on campus and easily accessible for us to conduct classes in the museum environment. This also helps students understand what the art environment is like in terms of future possible careers,” she added, sharing that some of her students have gone on to take up internships with the museum.

“It is very important for students to be able to engage with the artworks, rather than just see reproductions of them,” Dr Taroutina stressed.

Dr Taroutina is immensely thankful for the research fellowship grant, which has been helpful to advancing her research. She added: “Our immediate priority is to build up our library of visual arts resources, so I’m grateful to be able to contribute to these efforts through the Georgette Chen Research Fellowship Grant.”
For the love of language, and more
Text by Amelia Chew | Image by Yap Zhi Wen

With more than 400 million people speaking the language, Spanish is the second most widely spoken language in the world. For three months last year, five Yale-NUS students dedicated their summer break to studying the Spanish language at language schools around the world. With the support of Yale-NUS College’s Centre for International and Professional Experience (CIPE), these five recipients of the Santander International Experience Scholarship all had one goal in mind – to acquaint themselves with the language not by merely learning it through textbooks, but by immersing themselves in an environment with native speakers.

The students had varied experiences as they chose to pursue their love of the language in different parts of the Spanish-speaking world. Prior to embarking on the Spanish language programme, Kinnari Sahita, Class of 2017, had taken Beginning Spanish 1 for one semester. However, studying the language on a Council for International Educational Exchange (CIEE) programme in Argentina, which was funded by the Santander International Experience Scholarship, was an experience on a whole new level. Reflecting on her time in Argentina, Kinnari shared that it was ‘truly immersive’ as she was exposed to Argentinian culture beyond the classroom, and had the opportunity to practise her Spanish in a real-life context.

For many of the students, the summer language school was more than just the study of the language. During their time at the language schools, some students also took the chance to pursue their personal interests to maximise their learning opportunities in their host countries.

Yap Zhi Wen, Class of 2017, went to the University of Alicante in Alicante, Spain. A complete beginner to the language, Zhi Wen committed to speaking only Spanish as soon as she stepped into Spain. While this was initially a challenge, Zhi Wen was soon able to interact with her peers in conversational Spanish as she had to communicate with her local host family on a daily basis.

“I have always wanted to learn a foreign language and there is no better way to do so than to immerse myself completely in a country that only speaks that language,” Zhi Wen shared. “I hoped to throw myself into the unknown, travelling alone into a country where I could barely understand everyone around me at the beginning, hence challenging myself to be independent and adaptable.

For many of the students, where she sketched the scenes that she encountered. As an Arts and Humanities major and the founder of the Visual Arts Society (VAS) at Yale-NUS College, Zhi Wen has had extensive experience holding informal drawing lessons for her peers and organising arts exhibitions showcasing the work of VAS members and the Yale-NUS community. Her time in Spain was an enriching source of inspiration for her artistic endeavours.

Similarly, Shanice Nicole Stanislaus, Class of 2017, pursued her love of dance in Spain and her fascination with the history of flamenco, Shanice worked together with a group of fellow Yale-NUS classmates to produce a short film titled Duende, which explores the spirit of flamenco as it exists in Singapore. The team, comprising Shanice, Reuben Su, Stacey Yuen and Timothy Chua, also from the Class of 2017, filmed and edited the original short film, which won the European Union Centre Short Film Award 2015.

For Shanice, the true value of the experience was how it opened up many more doors for her. Upon returning to Singapore, she continued to practise flamenco and is currently a performing artiste with the Flamenco Dance Theatre Company. Her grasp of the Spanish language, attained over the summer, enabled Shanice to more effectively harness the opportunities back in Singapore. Empowered by the ability to speak a new language, Shanice has opted to study Spanish as an elective so that she can continue learning and improving.

This summer, a new group of 10 Yale-NUS students are currently abroad on Spanish summer language programmes made possible through the Santander International Experience Scholarship, which supports exchanges, overseas internships and professional experience for students.