

**Robert Yeo, *Routes: A Singaporean Memoir 1940-75*. Singapore: Ethos Books, 2011. 384 pp. ISBN 978-981-08-7536-7.**

As an undergraduate during the mid-80s, I heard about Robert Yeo: the Singaporean poet who began publishing his poetry in the 60s and 70s, and the playwright who championed the cause of Singaporean contemporary theatre during the 70s and early 80s with his plays, *Are You There, Singapore?* and *One Year Back Home*. I do not recall when I was first actually introduced to him, whether while studying at the National University of Singapore, or later when I seriously began my own journey in theatre. Since that day, although our paths have crossed now and again in the literary and theatre circles, I cannot say that I know or understand Yeo well and my impression of him has always been that of a mild-mannered man whose already large eyes behind his thick-framed glasses would grow further in size and his mop of thick hair would wave about whenever he expressed his strong views about literature, theatre and culture in general.

Until now, that is. In *Routes: A Singaporean Memoir 1940-75*, Yeo sketches out the roadmap of the journey of the first half of his life, giving the reader a sense of how he became the prominent artist and educationist of his later years.

In the first few chapters, Yeo explains his *Peranakan* heritage, traces his paternal lineage to Sarawak and his maternal lineage to Malacca (e.g. the renowned politician Tan Cheng Lock was a grand-uncle), as well as outlines his childhood days of growing up in his paternal grandfather's house located in Upper Serangoon amidst family and neighbours. A proud alumnus of Serangoon English School, Yeo attributes the start of his literary life to a schoolmate who encouraged him to read and buy books: "Buying was, possessing, devouring, owning and losing myself in the imagined worlds of fiction or the sorcery of the English language" (57). Various teachers and lecturers at Serangoon English School, St Andrew's Secondary School and later the University of Singapore inspired him to further his studies in literature, to write, as well as to teach and follow a path down the educational field. Yeo also includes accounts of an active social and sporting life during his school years: from childhood games to youthful sporting achievements (he was a table-tennis champion), from friendships and excursions with classmates to anecdotes about his growing interest in the opposite sex.

As Yeo notes, 1962 was a watershed year when he finally became a man. He graduated from university with a second-class Honours degree in English. His father passed away suddenly. He began teaching at St Andrew's School and becomes the main breadwinner for his mother and siblings. He bought his first car, allowing him to become a man about town. In 1966, he applied and

received a Public Service Commission scholarship to do a Master's in Comparative Education at the University of London. Living and studying abroad for two years broadened his intellectual, cultural, social and artistic horizons and provided him with the basic material for his first published collection of poetry, *Coming Home, Baby* (1971) and his first play, *Are You There, Singapore?* (1974).

After completing his studies in London, Yeo was tasked by the Ministry of Education to edit *Prospect*, a magazine for secondary schools, a position which he used to deepen his understanding and ties to the Singaporean cultural milieu. Desiring to experience life in other parts of Southeast Asia, Yeo moved to Bangkok at the end of 1971 to work as the Information Officer of the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organisation. Two years later, he returned to Singapore to teach at the Teachers' Training College/ Institute of Education as well as to find a wife and start a family. 1974 was yet another pivotal year for Yeo. Not only was *Are You There, Singapore?* produced and staged to much acclaim, he met his wife Esther through the production and he married her in December of that year.

As Yeo focuses on the highlights and occasional low points of his early years, it is easy to see that he has had a generally happy and fortuitous existence, living life earnestly and making the most of opportunities that came his way. If one were a scholar and had to study the life and work of Robert Yeo, then *Routes* could possibly be retitled *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* for his memoir provides deep insights about his background, the events and readings that have influenced his thinking, as well as his experiences and credentials as an educationist and cultural warrior.

Unfortunately at almost 400 pages long, *Routes* is not a slim volume and is nearer to *Ulysses* in proportion. Yeo tries his best to condense his life down into a coherent, concise story. Alas, he does not always succeed in this respect.

He pays homage to numerous family, friends and colleagues who were significant at various points in his life, a feature of his memoirs that is sometimes illuminating and at other times distracting. To illustrate various themes and give texture to the overall chronological order of his self-account, he quotes liberally from passages by various authors and from his own creative writing and non-fiction, intersperses his text with many photographs (sometimes with extensive commentary, particularly on certain family portraits) and reproductions of key documents (e.g. certificates, newspaper clippings), and adds large sections building up the context of the times discussed (e.g. from Singapore politics, cultural milieu and educational history to the Vietnam War).

The result is circuitous, meandering reading where passages and facts are occasionally repeated (e.g. family details, descriptions of the old family home in Upper Serangoon), certain contemplations are inexplicable (e.g. he spends several pages speculating about the life history of an aunt who died young and

who did not have a large impact on his personal life), and the order of material is sometimes quirky (e.g. although he mentions his mother's response to his actions at various points and recounts her family history during the early chapter of his novel while sketching out his heritage, he finally pays a proper tribute to her in the epilogue).

Despite its rambling nature, *Routes* gave me a fresh perspective about Robert Yeo. Hitherto, I had been mainly aware of his image as a serious academic and writer/ staid family man. In *Routes*, Yeo relates his fascination with the opposite sex. There is a sharp contrast between his frank accounts about his dating experiences, lovers, attempts to marry and exposure to swinging bachelor life in Bangkok during the early 70s, as opposed to his awareness of strong women existing in his family and his growing consciousness of the feminist movement of the 70s. Reading about these aspects about Yeo's life allowed me a greater understanding of the background behind *The Adventures of Holden Heng*, as I had always wondered what drove Yeo to write about the exploits of his titular character in his only published novel.

Shortcomings aside, perhaps the most noteworthy achievement of *Routes* is that Yeo has taken pains to document his personal journey as a literary and theatrical pioneer during the period of Singapore's march towards independence and development as a nation-state. In fast-paced present-day Singapore where memories are short, *Routes* vividly recounts his struggle to write his work, publish his poetry and stage his plays amidst an unforgiving environment, thereby reminding (or possibly informing) the reader about the battles that artists of Yeo's generation had fought in order to pave the way and establish that Singaporeans can and should express their artistic creativity. *Routes* is a rare document for no other literary pioneer (at least that I am aware of, apart from Kuo Pao Kun) has openly published his/ her personal history and made it available for easy public access. So if you wish to know more about a Singaporean artist and his time, read *Routes*.

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