



THRIVING IN THE STRINGS OF CHANGE

5 SG Lifestyle Questions • An Interview With • Lifestyle News • Q&A With • The Story Of | July 12, 2022

T'ang Quartet, Singapore's preeminent string ensemble, first formed in 1992 when its founding members were still with the Singapore Symphony Orchestra (SSO). Upon leaving the SSO, the quartet rose to international acclaim as a cutting-edge musical group and very quickly found themselves as musical ambassadors of Singapore. Founding violinist, Ang Chek Meng, recalls musicians at overseas events expressing surprise that Singapore had such proficient quartets. This strengthened the group's resolve to fly the Singapore flag even higher in the global music scene.

T'ang Quartet turns 30 this year. With this milestone, the quartet will present one of its most important performances at the Esplanade Recital Studio this month, in tandem with the launch of their commemorative biographical coffee table book, *T'ang at 30*, at the two-night show, *Gift of Music*.

The book documents the quartet's trials and tribulations, and how it intends to forge its way into the future with two of its new members; 31 year old cellist Wang Zihao and 47 year old violist Han Oh, alongside founding members 54 year old Ng Yu Ying (1st violin) and 52 year old Ang Chek Meng (2nd violin).

SG Lifestyle's Features Writer, Angela May Tan, a long-time fan of the quartet, was stoked to be able to interview them to find out what drives them, how they managed to stay in the game for so many years as well as their hopes and dreams for the future.

SGLS: Tell us the story behind T'ang Quartet, from the beginning.

Yu-Ying: We met as teenagers whilst playing together in the Singapore Symphony Orchestra. We formed a quartet and decided to remain as a permanent group with an unanimous purpose; to break new ground by extending the fun and enjoyment of classical music to a bigger audience, on top of setting new standards of artistic achievement. While it was fun being part of an orchestra, playing in a quartet meant being very much more exposed because it was just one instrument playing a part, and we had to play our own part well and yet support one another musically. After our fellowship at the Shepherd School of Music, Rice University in 1997-1998, during which we were trained as a professional quartet, we realised that to succeed as a quartet, we needed to focus solely on it and that meant leaving the orchestra. Chek Meng had two-and-a-half years left of his bond to serve while I had a year and a half remaining, and we were grateful that the music director of the SSO then, Lan Shui, recommended to the board to release us from our bond because he knew we would serve the music industry in Singapore even better as a professional quartet.

SGLS: What were some of the challenges you faced along the way?

Chek Meng: Getting grants and sponsorships is definitely the key challenge because the very survival of the ensemble depends on it. Ticket sales alone can't sustain and support the running of a quartet. We are constantly doing outreach, keeping ourselves relevant, in order to get the support we need.

SGLS: With the recent change in members, how does T'ang Quartet ensure the essence of the quartet is retained?

Chek Meng: The new members were chosen for their passion for chamber music and their desire to do so for the long term. They also had to have the proficiency to play in a string quartet. With the musical vision aligned, we now have to assimilate one another – not just the new members to the quartet but also the founding members to the new – to create a new T'ang Quartet. When the new members joined us, they did not play like the musicians they replaced, but instead, brought their own flavour of music. In the process, we adjusted, assimilated and learnt from one another. We believe having a growth mindset helps us stay relevant.

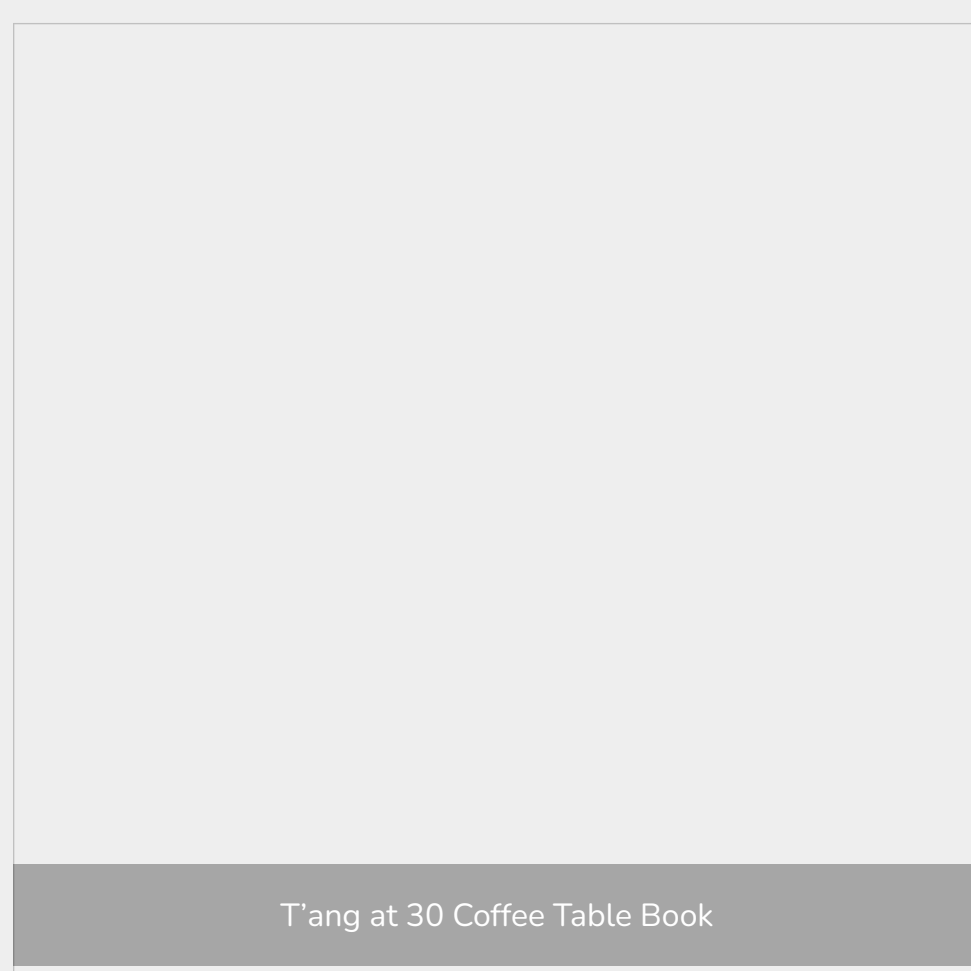


From left: Han, Yu-Ying, Chek Meng and Zihao

SGLS: Han and Zihao, what were your thoughts when you were first invited to join T'ang Quartet?

Han: My thoughts? I didn't even had to think! I'd always been a fan of T'ang Quartet and quartet playing had always been my passion, so when Yu-Ying and Chek first asked me, I said "yes" immediately.

Zihao: At that time, I was with the SSO as a cellist but I knew it was not possible to be in both the SSO and T'ang Quartet if I wanted to give my best to either, so I had to choose between the two. While the SSO provided stability in terms of employment, being with the T'ang Quartet would be a bigger challenge because they were not just the top string ensemble in Singapore but also in Southeast Asia. My worry then was whether I would be good enough. Now, I am glad to be part of the team, learning and growing in the process!



T'ang at 30 Coffee Table Book

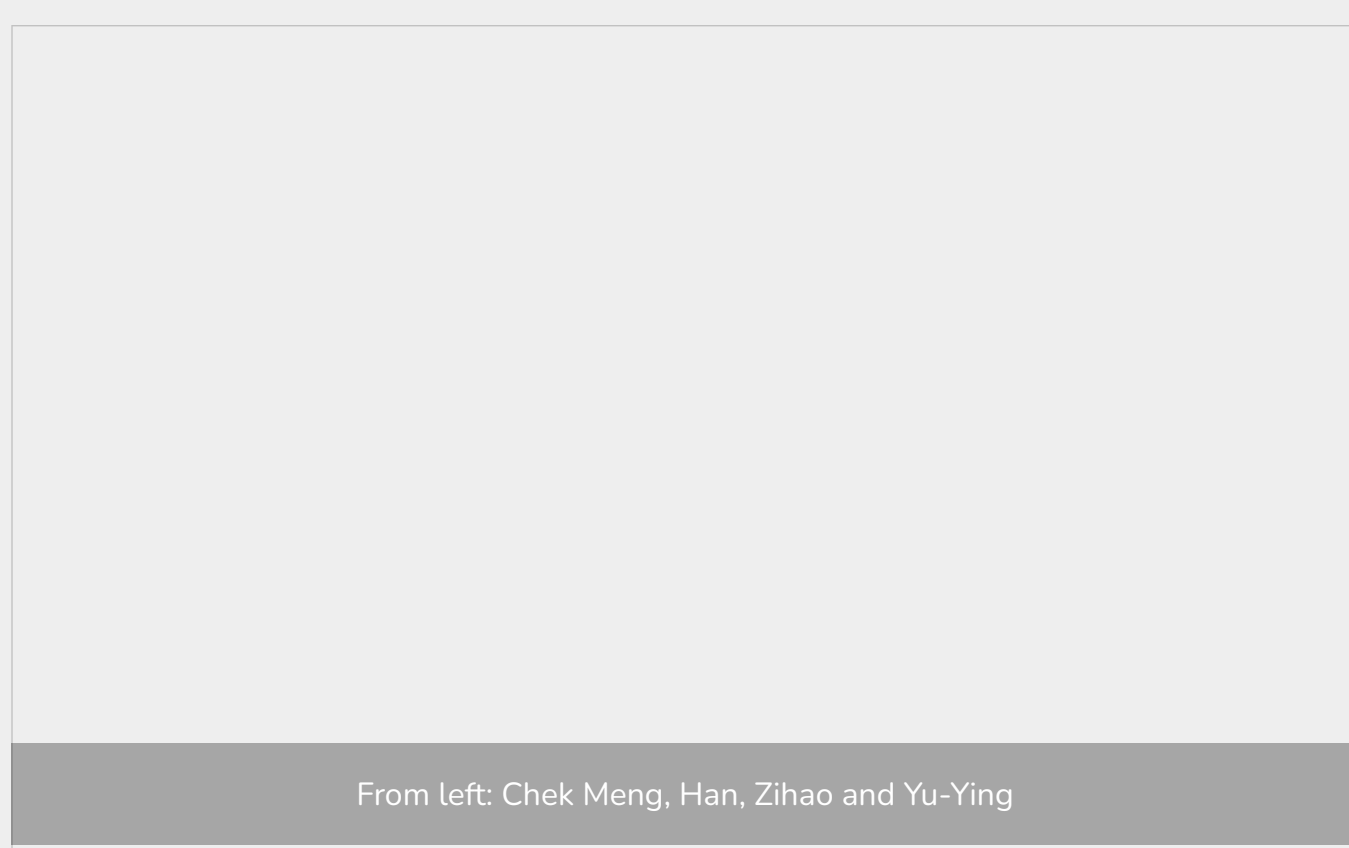
SGLS: Tell us four things we don't know about the T'ang Quartet.

Chek Meng is a rabid football fan and supports Liverpool FC and the England national team. He is quite happy with the way Liverpool is currently run but has great ideas for England coach Gareth Southgate on how he can win the World Cup in November/December this year.

Zihao is a fan of heavy metal music when he is not playing with the quartet or listening to classical music and in fact, Zihao always wishes to be a drummer in a band because he considers rhythm a very important aspect of music.

Han Oh worked with the LA Opera in 2003 – not as an opera singer or musician, but as a telemarketer selling season tickets and packages, bringing in sales to the tune of US\$300,000, much to the delight of his ticketing-agency employers who wanted him to run a campaign in Minnesota. He declined the offer, preferring a music career over sales.

Yu-Ying is a photography enthusiast who has always been fascinated with film cameras, especially rangefinders. Back in 2009, he thought it was a great idea to get a rangefinder camera with no auto features to photograph his son when he was a baby. He has found himself having to improve his technique and speed as his boys started growing up!



From left: Chek Meng, Han, Zihao and Yu-Ying

SGLS: What are your hopes and dreams for the future?

Chek Meng: We hope that the T'ang Quartet will go on for a long time even after we have retired, and continue to push on to attain higher artistic standards. We have now seen it is possible with the retirement of two of our founding members and we hope to continue improving as a string quartet to achieve even higher levels of artistry than we have done in the first 30 years.

Yu-Ying: We hope to travel soon to bring our music to other parts of the world and put Singapore on the classical chamber music map.

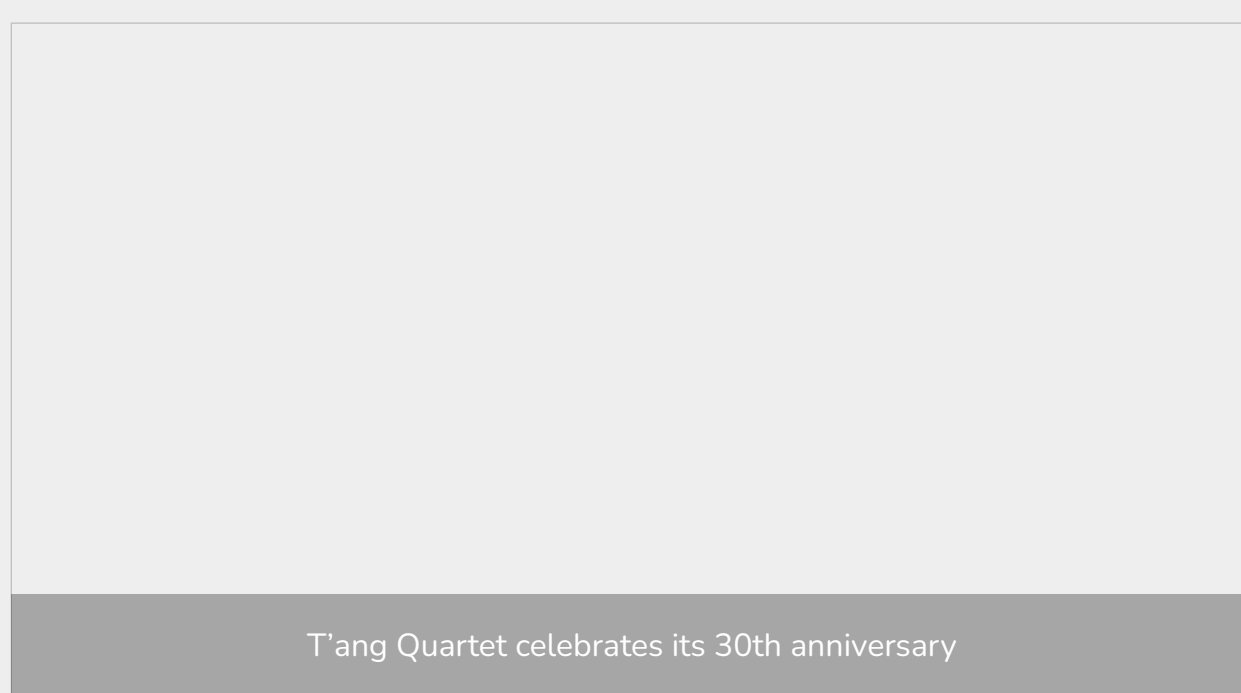
=====

T'ang Quartet Presents *Gift of Music* on Wednesday, July 27 and Thursday, July 28 at the Esplanade Recital Studio. On both evenings, they will be playing classical quartet masterpieces – Mozart's K465 Dissonance and Brahms's Op 51 No 1.

MORE DETAILS:

• **Wednesday, July 27** is a by-invite fundraising concert. Donor seats can be purchased at www.tangquartet.co/donors. Every donor will receive a complimentary copy of *T'ang at 30* coffee-table book.

• **Thursday, July 28** is a public show. Tickets are at S\$40, S\$28 and can be purchased at www.sistic.com.sg/events/gift0722. July 28 concert attendees can also purchase *T'ang At 30* at a special price of S\$40 (usual S\$55) after the concert, and get them autographed on the same night.

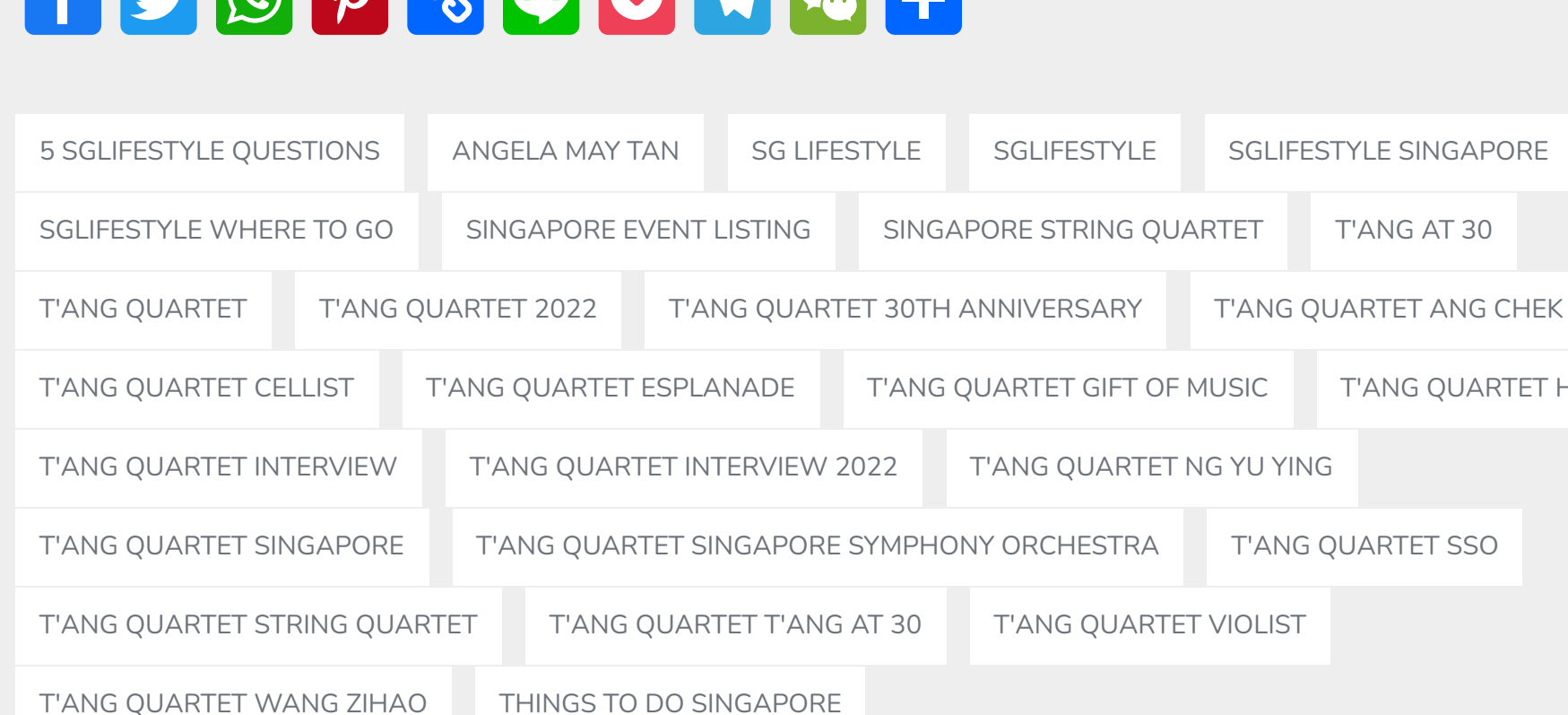
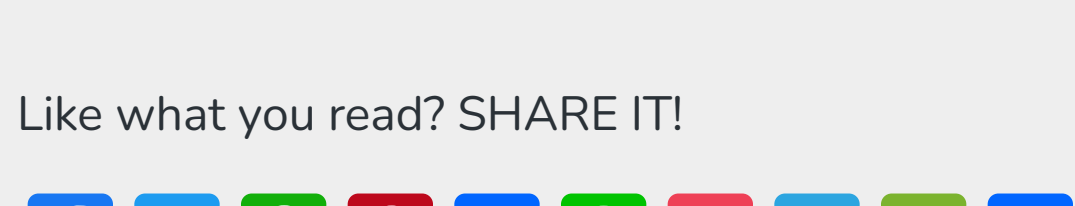


T'ang Quartet celebrates its 30th anniversary

=====

Interview by: **Angela May Tan**, Features Editor & Writer

Like what you read? SHARE IT!



Leave a Comment

Name*

Email*

Website

Yes, add me to your mailing list

Comment

Notify me of follow-up comments by email.

Notify me of new posts by email.