

## Cover Story

STAYING ALIVE ... AND DOING IT WELL

## In love with life as the years roll by

AT an age when most people would be content to sit back and savour the years, Mr V. Ambivagar, 91, parks himself in front of his Taxan 2000 home computer each day to write his memoirs.

"The book, entitled 90-Year School Of Experience, is about what I've learnt from life, including my experience as a teacher," he says.

The sprightly, retired English language teacher, former principal of Raffles Institution and former deputy director of education started working on his book three years ago.

Mr Cyril Oliveira, 90, makes it his hobby to record the family tree of his large clan here.

He has been writing down all the births and deaths in the family since the mid-'50s.

"All the Oliveiros come to me if they want to check their family history," says the retired draughtsman.

He knows the names and birthdays of the 433 descendants of his 19 siblings.

Madam Aminah binte Katarogga says she was born 105 years ago in Java, although her identity card puts 1898 as her year of birth.

Yet even that age does not deter her from dancing.

Though this former maid is slightly bent with age, she does the *joget* and aerobics twice a week.

Notwithstanding her lack of teeth, she can belt out English songs such as Yes, We Have No Bananas and Malay songs *Burong Kakak* and *Bengawan Solo*.

The three nonagenarians are proof you can reach a ripe old age and enjoy it.

With better medical care, Singaporeans have a longer life expectancy.

Today, they can expect to live up to 77 years on average, compared with an average life expectancy of up to 60 in 1950.

Life! spoke to some of them to uncover the secrets of their longevity.

Except for a few who are hard of hearing, they retain their faculties.

They still have vivid memories of life in early 20th-century Singapore, when bullock carts, rickshaws and mosquito buses — cars converted into buses — were the usual modes of transport.

**HOBBIES:** One factor that has apparently helped them reach 90 years or more is their determination to stay mentally alert and keep physically occupied with hobbies.

Mr Ambivagar, for example, who edited a teachers' magazine, says of his book project: "I'm doing it as an amusement and pastime just to keep myself alert. But I've no target date to finish the book and am not sure whether I will publish it."

Typing with only one finger, he has written 300 pages and expects to write about 150 more.

He lives in Telok Kurau and has five children and six grandchildren.

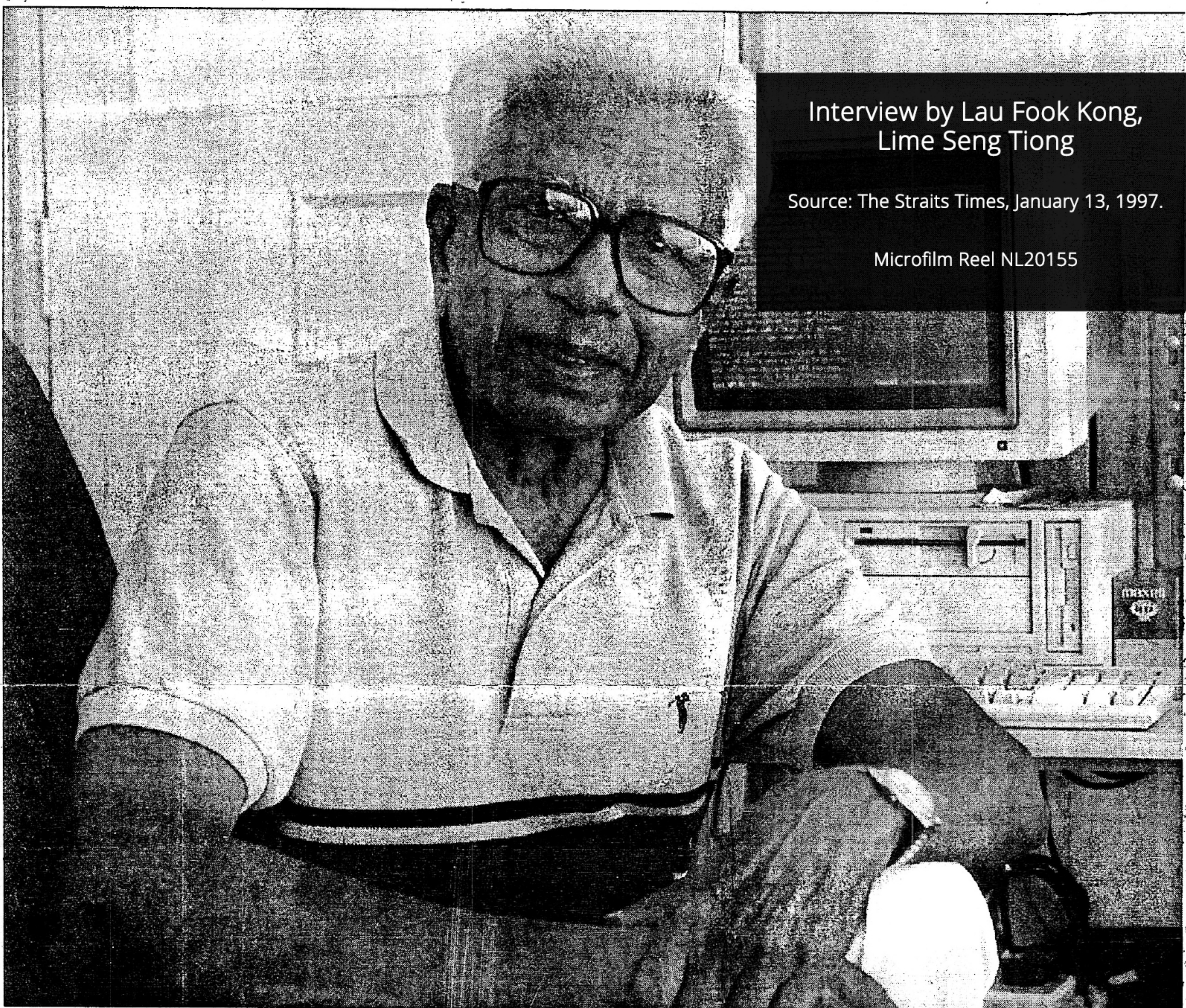
He reads a lot of novels, especially those by his favourite, Jeffrey Archer.

Mr Oliveira, who lives in the Upper Thomson area, has three children and four grandchildren.

He updates his family tree record on festive occasions such as Christmas, when his family visits, or when they call to inform him of new births and deaths in the clan.

His two record books — one was typed and the other done by hand — have several categories.

For instance, there is a League of Nations section that details the nationalities into which his relatives have married, including Chinese,



Interview by Lau Fook Kong, Lime Seng Tiong

Source: The Straits Times, January 13, 1997.

Microfilm Reel NL20155

■ LAU FOOK KONG

Memories are made of these ... retired English language teacher V. Ambivagar, 91, is writing his memoirs with the aid of a home computer.



■ LIM SENG TIONG

Weathering stormy days ... former seaman Chong Leong, 104, had to fend for himself at 11 after his father died.

Thai, Indian, Scottish, Australian and Italian.

There are sections on birth stones and flowers for the months of the year.

After retiring from his City Council job in 1959, he started collecting stamps and coins. He has coins of 84 countries, some dating to Queen Victoria's time.

Mr Oliveira keeps up with current affairs and has newspaper cuttings of events such as the Miss Universe contest here in 1987 and the World Cup in 1994.

Reclusive millionaire and retired lawyer C. J. Koh, 96, who donated \$3.78 million to educational institutions and charitable bodies here recently, has spent a good part of his retirement painting portraits, still lifes and landscapes.

He had 400 oil paintings by the time he was 80.

He has been unable to

speak after his stroke in 1988 but his mind remains very alert, according to his trustee, Mr Ong Tiong Tat.

"When I mention the stockmarket, his eyes sparkle immediately," says Mr Ong at Mr Koh's 96th birthday celebrations recently.

**GENES:** Heredity may have something to do with longevity, some say.

A number of Mr Oliveira's siblings lived well into their 80s.

Mr Ambivagar "has longevity in his genes", says his wife Mangalesvary, 82, a retired teacher.

"His grandmother and uncles lived until they were in their 90s," she says.

**HEALTH:** People who live long lives tend to be healthy and free from major diseases, such as heart disease and cancer.

Madam Aminah says she has not been sick for even one day.

Mr Oliveira has been very healthy and it was only last year that he had to have a pacemaker installed.

**DIET:** Madam Aminah, who lives at the Pertapis Senior Citizens Fellowship Home in Toa Payoh, attributes her good health, among other things, to eating a lot of *jamu* — Indonesian herbs that women take for health and beauty — in her younger days.

She ate a lot of vegetables and fish, and meat only occasionally, and avoided coffee and tea, drinking only milk every morning.

Ms Tan Chee Chee, 93, a retired inspector of schools who lives at the Ling Kwang Home for Senior Citizens, says she is very health-conscious and used to eat a lot

of vegetables while avoiding caffeine.

"I used to enjoy durians when I was younger but gave them up as I became older," she says.

Mr Ambivagar believes in eating in moderation.

**EXERCISE:** Regular exercise contributes to general health and longevity.

Mr Ambivagar played cricket, hockey, soccer, badminton and tennis when he was young.

Today, he keeps fit by working out in a gym for short periods, four to five times a week. He plays golf once a week.

Mr Oliveira played football and tennis. Since he retired, he has been walking and doing chores at home, such as painting the house and watering his plants.

Until he had his pacemaker installed, he worked

out on his stationary exercise bicycle for at least 10 minutes a day.

**HARDSHIP:** Hardship and hard work are said to be factors for longevity.

Millionaire Koh's life seems to support this belief.

Trustee Ong says: "He had to fend for himself ... as he was sent to Wales to study at the tender age of six."

Mr Ong considers this training in the school of hard knocks was a factor in sharpening Mr Koh's survival instinct and helping him to live so long.

Mr Chong Leong, 104, the oldest resident of the Ling Kwang Home for Senior Citizens, had a tough childhood. He had to fend for himself at 11 after his father died.

The former seaman, who is a widower without children, was living alone in a one-room flat in the Aljunied area before moving to the home about three years ago.

Though he is hard of hearing and blind today, he can walk around and feed himself.

Madam Aminah is another example of a survivor in the tough school of life.

Widowed only four months after her marriage, she left Java to work as a maid for a British family here in the '30s. She never remarried.

After her employers left for home after World War II, she struggled to make ends meet by becoming a hawker of *gado-gado* and *lontong*.

Before she was referred to the Pertapis Home, she lived for several years in a shack in a Chinese cemetery near MacRitchie.

Says Haji Ahmad bin Khalid, 52, the administrator of the old folks' home: "She used to clean the graves and cut the *lallang*, though she did not get paid at all."

"Perhaps, God is blessing her with long life because of all her hard work."

## If your parents lived longer, you stand a better chance

IF YOUR parents or grandparents lived to ripe old ages, you have a better chance of doing so too. If they died at earlier ages, then you probably may not live to see 100 either.

Longevity has a lot to do with your genetic make-up and, indeed, there is nothing you can do to change the genes you were born with, according to Dr Chan Kin Ming, Head of the Department of Geriatrics at Alexandra hospital.

However, he says people with a happy disposition who are optimistic and do not worry, tend to live longer.

Dr Chan cites a 1990

study of women who lived to be 100 in France. It describes a typical centenarian as someone who has worked hard all her life, without indulging in excesses.

The study was presented at the first Asian Symposium on Longevity held in Kuala Lumpur two months ago. It also found that the typical centenarian has never been really ill in her life.

According to Dr Chan, regular exercise at least three times a week for 20 minutes to half an hour each session can help one be healthy and live longer.

At the symposium, Dr Sylvester Yong, president of the

Holistic Health Society and a specialist in geriatric medicine here, spoke on the holistic approach to longevity.

He stressed that longevity "is not about living a long life, but being able to function physically, mentally and socially".

He said: "The challenge is to retain your functional abilities as long as possible without compromising too much on lifestyle and enjoyment of life."

Here are some useful tips from Dr Yong on how to retain all your physical and mental faculties and live to a ripe old age:

■ Eat and drink in mod-

eration. Eat more vegetables and eat less fatty food filled with cholesterol. Scientific studies have also proven that eating fewer calories and less food may help you live longer.

■ Cultivate a moderate lifestyle and learn techniques to cope with stress, such as yoga, taiji and meditation.

■ Use anti-oxidants, such as Vitamin C and E. These can mop up certain molecules, which can cause cellular damage and premature ageing. Various studies have shown a need for such anti-oxidants, though nothing has been proven yet.

Supplements, like melatonin, which people use for jet lag, and DHEA, natural hormones with anti-ageing properties, may also have an influence on prolonging life.

They help enhance well-being and improve one's immunity to disease. They have been accepted as a way to stay healthy, although their efficacy has not been proven completely.

■ Maintain a balance of mind, body and spirit. For a holistic approach to health and longevity, try increasing your awareness of other health options or alternative health practices, like traditional Chinese herbal medi-

cine, massage therapy and aromatherapy.

■ Be spiritually at peace with yourself. Recognise that there is a greater meaning to life, either in your relationship to life, family, people or the environment because all people are part of the universe.

But do people really want to live to be 100 years old or more?

Cheryl Ong does.

"I want to live for a long time, perhaps up to the age of 119, though I'm not sure whether I am able to do so," she says.

Cheryl is nine and in Primary 4.