

# Club-hopping chief behind Singapore's tourism drive

The recently retired STB chairman believes that having fun is serious business

## Filexclusive

By Catherine Ong  
[SINGAPORE]

**T**raditionally, Singapore and Hong Kong have been seen as rival cities. They compete head-on for a share of the region's trade and commerce, both aspiring to be the favoured destination for businessmen and tourists.

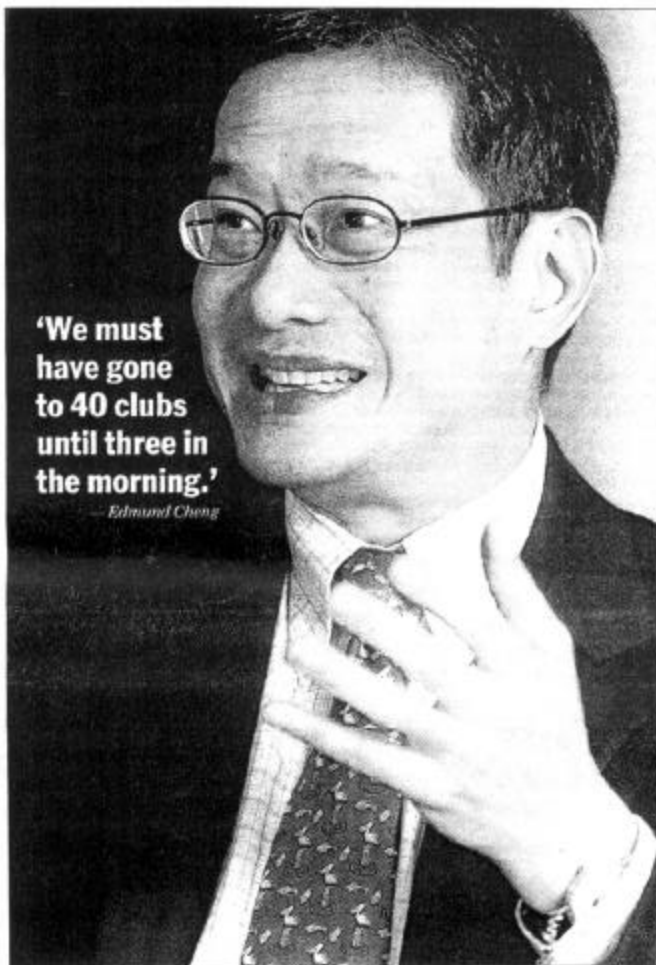
In the past nine years, the Republic has had help in realising its ambition from an unlikely quarter — a Hong Kong-born entrepreneur. Edmund Cheng, recently retired chairman of the Singapore Tourism Board (STB), is unambiguous about where his allegiance lies. When he was chief tourism promoter of the Lion City, he tirelessly spread its charms at home and abroad. From being the most boring place on earth, according to the London-based *Economist* magazine years ago, to the funky town on the front cover of a July 1999 edition of *Time* magazine, Singapore's transformation is due in no small part to the efforts of the STB under Mr Cheng's stewardship.

A smartly-suited man who clearly appreciates the finer things in life, the 50-year-old deputy chairman of Wing Tai Holdings wasn't your average statutory board chief when he steered STB.

It was he who, according to STB's publicity material, reportedly persuaded strait-laced bureaucrats that they should allow Singaporeans to let down their hair and have fun. Foam parties at Sentosa Beach, an extension of nightclub hours, buskers and street parties became the rage.

And Mr Cheng made it part of his job to check out the night spots. "Oh yes, I go club-hopping," he said, breaking out into one of many infectious bouts of laughter during a recent hour-long interview.

In a basement office of Wing Tai Holdings at Winstland House, he recalled with relish the night he took out a group of overseas friends for some serious partying. "We must have gone to 40 clubs until three in the morning," he recalled. "We were at Mohamed Sultan Road. We went from one side of the street, one club to another. We (then) went on to Zouk, Velvet Underground, Ngee Ann City, the



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— Edmund Cheng

FILE PHOTO

basement of Phoenix Hotel."

These clearly aren't favourite haunts for people of Mr Cheng's generation. But work is work — or should that be fun? — for this energetic, engineer-cum-architect-cum-property developer.

Inevitably at such night-spots, he would run into the children of his friends or friends of his children. He didn't mind them greeting him "uncle, uncle". And they didn't mind him picking up their tabs.

It was gratifying for him to see his friends from Hong Kong coming here in recent years "just to enjoy the restaurants and the clubs, proof surely that the night scene here was finally taking off".

"I think we've added more colour and texture to the city," Mr Cheng said.

During the past nine years he was very much preoccupied with turning Singapore into a "vibrant, world-class" city — two adjectives he used liberally when describing STB's new mission.

In November 1997, STB, then known as the Singapore Tourist Promotion Board or STPB, changed its name and logo to reflect its bigger role of developing tourism enterprises here.

The new role stemmed from the realisation that with tourist arrivals having reached a sizeable base — seven million a year — STB's future promotion efforts were likely to yield lower marginal returns.

Tourism is one of the

largest service sectors in Singapore, raking in annual revenue of \$11 billion, or 5 per cent of the country's GDP. The industry employs more than 130,000 people. Conventions, meetings and exhibitions have helped boost the number of visitors. Last year, Singapore was the venue for almost 5,000 such events, making it the world's fifth most popular convention city. "There's so much we can do to attract people," Mr Cheng noted. "After a while, people might not want to come because it's the same old thing again. Singapore is quite limited. In order for us to expand, we have to, in a way, 'borrow' landscape."

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# Club-hopping chief behind S'pore's tourism drive

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Towards this end, he studied such cities as London, Paris and New York, using them as his benchmark of a world-class city. What is it that has made them magnets for as long as tourism has been around? These cities are able to attract millions of visitors every year with relatively little promotion. "France has something like 75 million visitors and most of them go to Paris," Mr Cheng pointed out.

He reckons the attraction is a combination of hardware and software. The world-class cities not only have places and buildings of iconic value, whether they be the Central Park in New York or the Eiffel Tower in Paris, they also offer a rich experience of entertainment, events and education. There are things galore to do, to buy and to learn.

Mr Cheng said the intention was not to remake Singapore in the image of New York or Paris. "We want to preserve our own uniqueness, our own diversity," he stressed. Thus with a view to creating more buzz to keep the tourists and locals interested, STB set about creating thematic zones — the Kallang/National Stadium area, Smith Street in Chinatown and the restaurants by the river at Esplanade — and staging events, such as the highly successful World Gourmet Summit.

But how is a government agency to promote tourism entrepreneurs if it is actively involved in driving many of the developments and events, setting rules and guidelines that could ultimately crimp enterprises?

Mr Cheng said there really isn't any contradiction in the board's developmental and promotional roles. "Of all the agencies, STB is the most relaxed," he said. "We are the number one or two in terms of working with stakeholders."

He cited the example of the World Gourmet Summit, which he said has developed into a brand name that draws tourists to other events taking place in Singapore when it is staged in April. "We started it (the Summit)," he said, "soon after that we passed it on to the private sector (and

told them): 'You have more contacts, you are closer to the ground, you understand what people want'."

"Every year it's stronger and stronger. I'm so proud, even when I go to Vail in Colorado or to Napa Valley, California, people have heard of the World Gourmet Summit and Singapore."

Coming from a family of entrepreneurs, Mr Cheng said he is very pro-business and wants to make sure that a climate is created that will enable tourism businessmen to make money.

His family founded the mid-sized Wing Tai group involved in the textile and property business. Growing up in a 600 sq ft apartment in crowded Hong Kong, he experienced first hand how to rough it out both in life and in business. "We had 14 people living in there. Each bunk bed had four people," he recalled. "It was an environment that bred entrepreneurs, because there's a survival instinct."

He spent the first 17 years of his life in Hong Kong before going to the US for high school and university, where he studied at Chicago's North Western University. Mr Cheng moved to Singapore in 1979 and became a citizen in 1986.

Working with tourism entrepreneurs appeared to be an easier task than working with Singapore's bureaucracy.

"I wish we could have done more," he said. "I think the direction is there. In life, there's no such thing as ideal. You've got to work with people, you've got to work with constraints, with stakeholders."

He said changing the mindset of some government agencies was the most difficult part of the task. STB's interaction with these agencies entailed "a lot of give and take, a lot of compromise" as different government departments have different interests to protect. For example, in its plan to turn Smith Street in Chinatown into a hawker hub attracting the best hawkers, STB had to lobby long and hard for the road to be closed and the traffic flow diverted.

An integral part of the business of creating more buzz is the promotion of the arts — a passion for Mr Cheng, whose office is tastefully decorated with oil paintings and bronze sculptures. He is chairman of Sculpture Square, located at Waterloo Street in a restored building that was the first Baba church in Singapore. The Sculpture Square hosts public exhibitions and workshops and educational programmes for students.

He noted that while the performing arts have enjoyed good patronage in Singapore, the visual arts have lagged somewhat. "Our local art is still not there yet," he said, adding that local artists need to persevere if they want to make it good.

Now that he has more time on his hands, having passed the reins at STB to stockbroker Wee Ee Chao in January, Mr Cheng will, no doubt, be busy out there indulging his passion of promoting the arts.

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