



BOOKS
A conversation with
writer Peter James
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If she ain't broke, don't fix her...

HANDS up, those who think the Singapore Girl needs a major makeover. Or at least a different eye shadow colour.

Whatever it is, advertising agencies must now be working overtime trying to create a new campaign that will wow SIA enough for the airline to put the future of Singapore's lion into their hands. Naturally, a stringent screening process is in store.

But what isn't widely known is that applicants have to go through a rigid pre-screening process in which they are interviewed by a graduate of the One-Eyed Dragon School of Interrogation, before they can go on to the next round. We sat in on one session, and this is how it went:

Interrogator: "OK, who can tell me the

most effective way of stealing \$1 million worth of antiques in less than 60 seconds? If you can, I give you the contract, no questions asked. Oh sorry, I thought this was the interrogation session for new security guards."

Ad Agency #1: "People want change. After 35 years, nothing about the Singapore Girl has changed — it's about time to do something about it."

Interrogator: "For 35 years, I have never had a free upgrade on SIA — are you going to do something about that too?"

Ad Agency #1: "Uh, ah..."

Interrogator: "Obviously, people want to change things because it is no good, right? So what is no good about the Singapore Girl?"

Ad Agency #2 (eagerly): "Well, it's pretty

off the cuff
jaime ee

obvious — she's using 35-year-old eye shadow, the kebaya has remained unchanged throughout numerous fashion seasons. Even other airlines get big name designers to re-design their uniforms, but not SIA."

Interrogator: "So somebody puts an extra ribbon on your shirt and calls it Lacroix, you can remember it forever?"

Ad Agency #2 (unfazed): "No, we were thinking of smart business suits, like some feminists were suggesting."

Interrogator: "The last time I was served by a stewardess in a business suit, she weighed 100kg and smelt like a ham sandwich. She wouldn't help me lift my cabin bag into the overhead luggage hold. And when I asked for water mid-flight, she looked like I was trying to borrow money from her."

Ad Agency #1: "Yes, but we have to deal with people who think the Singapore Girl is a subservient sex symbol, who romps through wheat fields like a sex object."

Interrogator: "What's wrong with doing a commercial where the Singapore Girl romps through the wheat fields, and whisks some Peeping Tom farmer with his own pitchfork? Then you have Singapore Girl-turned-Lara Croft, which is quite a yum-yum compromise, right?"

Ad Agency #3: "Well then, you're just thinking like a hot-blooded male chauvinist in this year of the pig."

Interrogator: "And the people who fly SIA business class are, you mean to say, imp-wricted fashion designers and women's rights activists?"

Ad Agency #2: "So what you're saying is, keep the SIA girl as she is because passengers like her the way she is and paying customers should be the ones to decide? And that change should not be for the sake of change?"

Interrogator: "Well, that, and also, I'm just trying to save the company \$50 million so that it won't be translated into even higher airfares..."

Flying high, still

While debate continues over the future of the 35-year-old Singapore Girl icon, there's no question that life beyond flying can be just as great. Three former SIA girls show that far from being trolley dollies, their flying experience has been a key to building up their own businesses. **CHEAH UI-HOON** reports

Training taught her to manage stress

Terri Tan
Owner, Designworx
Interior Consultant

TERRI TAN, 37, is a rarity — a graduate who applied to be an SIA girl after taking her last paper to qualify for the Bachelor of Arts in architectural studies at the National University of Singapore.

She was inspired by her older sister who joined the airline two years before she did.

In fact, her parents should be proud that they sent three daughters to be the faces of Singapore Airlines.

Ms Tan's elder sister flew for about five years, while her younger sister flew for over five.

"No, my brother didn't become a pilot!" she quickly remarks to pre-empt the question.

But yes, her parents were all for it — and her father would happily drive them to and from the airport, she recalls.

Travel was the reason she went for it, plus Ms Tan had a good impression of the job already, thanks to her sister's positive experience. But she also knew it would be a short stint — as she'd wanted to plan for a career that she could build up and develop with a long-term view.

After spending the years between 1993 to 1995 as a Singapore Girl, Ms Tan quit, and joined a hotel — thinking that the hospitality

industry was in line with her experience.

However, the long hours got to her and she eventually went back to her academic training, before working for a shop selling high-end furniture. She worked in marketing, and later branched out into interior design with that company.

In 1996, when the property market was booming, Ms Tan set up Designworx, her own interior design consultancy.

Since then, her experience as an air stewardess has come into play a lot in her job.

"When the going gets tough, you have to smile and just put on a good front — that was drummed into

us as air stewardesses," she says.

Keeping calm and not letting that composure crack is a skill that has come to her aid many a time in running her own business and juggling the needs and demands from clients. "Stewarding was very tough sometimes — especially on short-haul flights. Till today, I'd have a whiff of the food in the galley and I would have memories of the days I had to man the galley, which was a lot of work," she notes.

But having been trained to handle every situation with a smile puts Ms Tan in good stead. "Our trade is very service-oriented," she adds. Plus, it has prepared her well to handle stress. "And, it's great to be able to put on makeup in five minutes if I have to!" she quips.

Because she knew she was only going to fly for two years, she made the most of it by sightseeing every time she was in a foreign country. "But I know that the longer I stayed in the air, I'd lose the opportunity to build a career for myself on the ground."

Now that she's built up a reputation for herself in interior consultancy, Ms Tan is set to explore a bit further — with plans to set up a home accessories boutique in Kuala Lumpur this year.



Ms Chung: Thanks to SIA, I really got to see many business opportunities, travelling all over the world

Nailing down the right business

Julia Chung
Co-owner of Nail Clinic

THE WAY she draws her hair back in a clip often gives away the fact that Julia Chung, 34, is a former SIA girl. Even if acquaintances don't guess at first glance, they nod knowingly when she reveals that she spent seven years with the airline.

"People often tell me I have 'the look'," she quips. Which isn't surprising, given her ability to look understatedly stylish at all times, even with minimal make-up.

Keeping up this well-groomed image is also key to her nail salon business now, which she started in 2001. There's a Nail Clinic at Nevada Square and also one in Kuala Lumpur — the only one at Starhill Gallery. Ms Chung is currently also exploring opportunities in Beijing and Shanghai. "Flying isn't a lifetime career, so you need to plan what you want to do after a certain age," she says. When she quit after seven-and-a-half years at SIA, Ms Chung had saved up enough — as a completed five-year term also came with a \$15,000 gratuity — to start a nail salon. The nail care business was something that she took note of when she was overseas. "In the US, it's very important to have nice nails."

"Thanks to the job, you really get to see business opportunities because you travel all over the world," she points out. When she started her first US-styled salon, there were hardly any other players in the market. To prepare herself for the business, Ms Chung had enrolled in a nail technician course in Los Angeles, plus she already had a diploma in fashion merchandising from LaSalle SIA College of the Arts.

Had her seven years of flying with SIA been of any help on the ground? "Definitely," she says. "Flying with SIA was an eye-opener." And she should know, as she'd first flown with British Airways, and then Virgin Airlines before switching over to SIA. "SIA really emphasised service — which the other airlines didn't as much — and that has moulded me into someone who is very service-oriented. Everything has to be perfect, whether I'm the one being served or giving service to others," she shares.



'When the going gets tough, you have to smile and just put on a good front — that was drummed into us.'

— Ms Tan (above)

Fulfilling one dream after another

Jessica Lim-Charungchareonvej
Partner, Salut Lifestyle & Communications

IT WAS the allure of travel that drew Jessica Lim-Charungchareonvej to flying, although her first love was food. So after flying with Singapore Airlines (SIA) for two years — from 1989 to 1991 — she quit and dabbled at other jobs for a bit, before opening the French restaurant, Salut, at Tanjong Pagar.

That was in 1996, and Salut was one of the first independently owned restaurants of its time. She was only 29 years old when she opened the restaurant.

Ms Lim-Charungchareonvej, now 39, is best known as the former Salut's owner, and subsequently Au Petit Salut's. She sold Au Petit Salut to another former SIA stewardess however, just after a year of its opening.

After seven years of operation, Salut closed its doors in 2003, after which she set up Salut Lifestyle and Communications, a public relations and events management company.

"I'd always wanted to have my own business and the love for French fare is thanks to the travelling I got to do," she shares.

Like countless other flight stewardesses, she saw flying as an economical way to travel, and she had joined SIA right after her A levels. From the start, she had made a conscious decision not to stay more than three years as an SIA girl.

"Singapore Airlines gave us excellent grooming," she says. Skills like dealing with all kinds of people, the ability to work odd hours, and being disciplined have been engrained in her.

"It made me aware of what real life was all about and trained me to be more enterprising," she declares.

Not one to buy the argument that the SIA girl's image fits the Asian female stereotype, Ms Lim-Charungchareonvej also recalls how well-admired the SIA girl was during her time.

"We all had this uniform look which was very neat and professional, and during my time, we all had black hair as well," she recalls. Nine years after she fulfilled one

of the dreams which was to own a restaurant, she's now fulfilling another one — to go into the events management business.

Besides the events management company, she's tying up with wedding gown maker Irene's Creation to run a wedding planning and gift business.

Irene's Creation will become a one-stop centre for couples who're looking to get married, besides providing just wedding or evening gowns," she says.

The new business will take off in a couple of months, spurred in part by Ms Lim-Charungchareonvej's own wedding just last year.

In a serendipitous move, she'd ordered her gown at Irene's Creations, then they struck up a friendship, and now this business partnership.

"God has always put me in touch with the right people in business," says the grateful Christian, who has no regrets over her stint as an SIA girl.

"Especially as I see it as a life experience and not just a service job. It's a job that exposed us girls to a lot of opportunities."



Ms Lim-Charungchareonvej: SIA made her aware of what real life was all about

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