

RAFFLES PRESS

2026 SPECIAL EDITION



PROJECT OOPSIE DAISY: MORE THAN JUST AN "OOPSIE"
 By Tan Yan Qi (26S06M)

Ask anyone about mental health, and the first thing that comes to mind might be "depression" or "anxiety". Talk about IMH, and the first thing that comes to mind might be "insane people".

As much as we as a society laud our progress in destigmatising mental health issues, the truth is that we are far from it. While recent progress has opened doors for conversation on mental health, few know what happens behind the closed doors of what IMH and similar institutes do. For many, our understanding of mental health is heavily limited by personal experiences, the experiences of the people around us, and media depictions of mental health.

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CEO1 Spotlight: With Love, RI



WADING THROUGH THE WETLANDS WITH PROJECT NATURALIA
 By Cherie Khoo (26S03B) and Tara Sim (26A01C)

\$3.50 might only be able to get you one meat + two veg at the Caifan stall in the RI canteen, but for 50 cents less, you could spend your Saturday morning on an insightful guided tour to Sungei Buloh led by our very own Rafflesians from Project Naturalia.

After discovering his newfound love for nature walks and cataloguing wildlife from attending an international course on ecological research in Malaysia during GAP Semester in Year 4, this VIA project was founded last year by Koshik Basak (26S03J) and heartily supported by many of his friends from Y14.

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PROJECT HORIZON: HELPING CHILDREN WIDEN THEIR HORIZONS
 By Irene Eva Thomas (26A01B) and Gladys Koh (26A01B)

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When the term 'disadvantaged children' is mentioned, we would often focus on the tangible resources they are unable to access.

Yet, barriers to social mobility extend far beyond food or shelter. Family struggles and limited foundational support frequently result in a lack of cultural capital – the non-financial assets such as skills and knowledge that help individuals succeed in society.

Recognising this, Project Horizon seeks to strengthen disadvantaged children's confidence in public speaking in Singapore. By equipping these children with the skills to communicate and think effectively, they are empowered to express themselves more confidently.



PROJECT ENJO, WHERE LEARNING MEETS ENJO-YMENT
 By Ariann Khoo (26S06B), Jaden Lum (26S05A) and Nithilan Balachander (26A01C)

Project Enjo (Japanese for "aid") is not your average tutoring VIA. From building terrariums, to music video production using GarageBand, to web design and product innovation using Canva, it is focused on fostering holistic growth in their hard-to-please stakeholders: cheeky 11 to 12-year-olds.

Founded by its five main members, they transform mundane tutoring sessions into Enjo-yable activities aimed at broadening the students' worldviews, going far beyond worksheets and classroom-style teaching. By exploring usually unventured VIA territories like career guidance, STEAM (with the often-neglected "A" for arts) appreciation, character building, and social awareness, Project Enjo redefines what community service can look like.

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TO SPEAK THE LANGUAGE OF HOME: RAFFLES DIALECTS
 By Koh Shin Robbie (26A01A) and Tok Kai Xue Traven (26A01B)

To lack the linguistic capabilities to understand—let alone speak—one's dialect is a common issue many Chinese-speaking youths face. With the shift towards English as the primary medium for everyday speech, this has led to a frustrating intergenerational language barrier between the youth and the elderly, where communication is tragically reduced to vague gestures and simple phrases. How then can familial intimacy survive, when cultural estrangement renders these simple conversations a daily struggle?

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PROJECT HONGZHONG: RED AT ITS CENTRE
 By Michelle Lee (26S07A) and Tara Teo (26A01D)

If you asked any of the members in a formal setting why their project's called Hongzhong, they would've told you it means red centre—the beating heart of a community, symbolising the importance of having people come together. But if you asked them anywhere else, they would've told you it's because the "Hongzhong" tile is the only Mahjong tile that has an emoji for it. And that's exactly how a project centred around Mahjong got approved by the CE committee.

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By Sonia Chang (26A01A)

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 @rafflespress

Foreword



By Raffles Press '26 Chairperson Ariann Khoo (26S06B)

The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others. If you find yourself pondering over which CE01 to join, or wondering how, as students, we can impact the larger community beyond RI, I was once in your shoes. At a glance, service learning seems vague– something abstractly good but difficult to picture in practice.

But these CE01 student-initiated projects prove otherwise– not that service learning is easy, but that it is actionable. With a heart for the community and genuine effort, it is possible to leave an imprint.

This is precisely what this year's special edition theme, With Love, RI, seeks to capture: an appreciation of the ripple effect one can have beyond the biodiversity pond here in Raffles, a collection of letters (or stories) that show how it is possible to touch the lives of others tangibly, one life at a time. Be it through simple moments of connection with children – such as *Project Enjo*, which fosters appreciation of STEAM – to efforts aimed at reviving the youth dialect community through *Raffles Dialects*, or bonding with the elderly through activities like mahjong under *Project HongZhong*. Beyond the borders of age, some initiatives seek to bridge communities in meaningful ways: reducing “nature illiteracy” through *Naturalia*, or *Oopsie Daisy* which promotes mental well-being through horticulture activities at IMH.

This edition explores the many ways Rafflesians engage with communities beyond our own, challenging the tendency towards NIMBYism and the often overlooked assumption that impact must always be large-scale for it to be deemed meaningful. It is an attempt to spotlight the often unseen and quiet forms of service by our students, especially those grounded in care. These are not only a magnifying glass into the behind-the-scenes of our seemingly mundane school life, but also a reminder of the many hands that make these ripples of love possible.

Lastly, I would like to say a huge thank you to everyone who has contributed to these articles– these articles would not have been possible without every single student, mentor, organisation, and even you, our readers. Hopefully, while reading these stories, you will discover something new about the student-initiated projects here in RI, and come to see service learning in a different light.

With Love,
Raffles Press '26



PROJECT HORIZON: HELPING CHILDREN WIDEN THEIR HORIZONS

By Irene Eva Thomas (26A01B) and Gladys Koh (26A01B)

When the term ‘disadvantaged children’ is mentioned, we would often focus on the tangible resources they are unable to access.

Yet, barriers to social mobility extend far beyond food or shelter. Family struggles and limited foundational support frequently result in a lack of cultural capital—the non-financial assets such as skills and knowledge that help individuals succeed in society.

One important type of cultural capital is embodied cultural capital, which refers to the internalised habits and dispositions that shape how individuals behave. For example, confidence in public speaking is a form of such cultural capital, as it influences how individuals express themselves in social settings.

Recognising this, Project Horizon—a CE01 initiative in RI led by Cecilia Wong (26S03K) Rosaline See (26S06A), Bryan Sim (26S03D), Syabil Muhammad (26S03D), Rino Hossain (26S03L) and Angelina Chang (26A01D))—seeks to strengthen disadvantaged children’s confidence in public speaking in Singapore. By equipping these children with the skills to communicate and think effectively, they are empowered to express themselves more confidently.

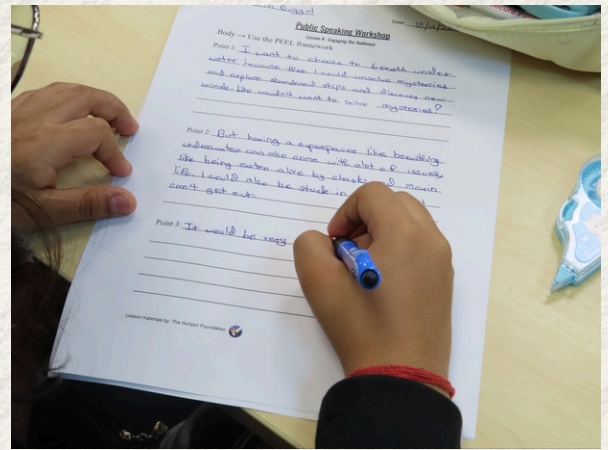
“Project Horizon (tackles) the broader issue of bridging the gap. Holistic workshops teaching public speaking and confidence building are (uncommon), tuition workshops are more prevalent.”

~ Cecilia Wong (26S03K), a core member of Project Horizon

A glimpse into Project Horizon

On Saturday, 18 April, Project Horizon conducted another of their weekly Saturday sessions at Toa Payoh West CC. Children were eagerly milling in before the official start of the lesson at 10am, while volunteers clad in blue handed them worksheets.

The theme of the day's lesson was on utilising different techniques to engage your audience. Firstly, the volunteers presented on 'Rhetorical Questions', then encouraged the children to come up with their own examples for such questions and note them down on their worksheets. Next to them, a volunteer guided them through the process.



The worksheet for today's session

The second method to engage an audience was through 'Humour'. And when the volunteers shared examples of some jokes, they added playfully, "No 6-7 jokes allowed!"

Immediately, many of the children burst into laughter, sputtering "6 7", gesturing wildly with their hands between fits of giggles. As the volunteers gently hushed them and redirected their attention back to the screen, the classroom gradually settled. Yet, small smiles still lingered on the faces of both parties alike.

Certainly, teaching these children was not always easy. A girl asked what PEEL (Point, Explanation, Example, Link—a paragraph writing approach) was a mere 30 minutes after it had just been recapped. One boy got up halfway during the lesson to fiddle with the chairs at the back of the classroom. But in the midst of this, more children had begun raising their hands to share their answers. Scribbling responses on their worksheets no longer needed as much guidance as before.

Throughout all this, it was clear that the children seemed more carefree and more relaxed, as compared to the first session. They were expressing themselves more confidently, participating more actively. Growth, though slow, was nonetheless present.



The children were more confident in volunteering their answers

The third method to engage an audience was through 'Personal Stories'. To demonstrate this skill, the volunteers displayed a speech by Jack Ma, in which he detailed his failures and efforts before finally attaining success. "Success does not come immediately; you will fail many times", he shared.

Perhaps particularly resonant with the children, that regardless of one's starting point, growth and perseverance can eventually lead to triumph, many jotted down his words.

All too soon, it was time for a break. Brian (26S06D), a Year 6 volunteer, began engaging some of the children in a simple game of tossing a ping pong ball back and forth—a light-hearted outlet for expression that allowed them to relax and interact more freely. Excited shouts of joy soon filled the classroom. Meanwhile, Rosaline (26S06A) spent time speaking with the quieter children, gently drawing them into conversation, creating space for confident expression in a more comfortable setting.

The sense of familiarity between the volunteers and the children was evident. It was reflected in the ease with which they interacted and laughed together, without much hesitation. The children had begun sharing about their experiences in school and how they had applied their learnings. On the other hand, the volunteers were active listeners, interjecting with proud praise and follow-up questions.

Of course, as Brian reminds us, incentivising the children to pay attention to the task at hand is not easy. The kids, all within the age range of 9-12, are full of childish energy and joy, probing the volunteers to innovate ways to get their focus back.



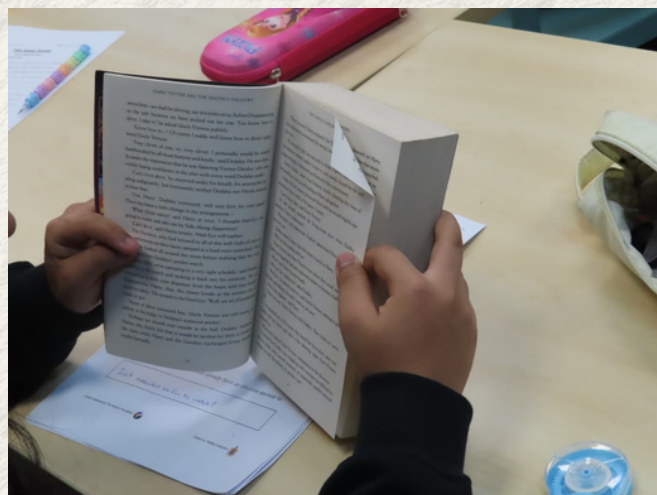
“When dealing with kids at this age, you have to understand what they prioritise most; simple logic or reasoning may not always work.”

~ Brian Sim (26S06D), a core member of Project Horizon

A few moments later, we saw this very principle play out. As they attempted to get some of the students to write their paragraphs, the volunteers (to some avail) began to devise tactics like the classic “Let’s play a game called ‘Who can write the fastest?’”. When this failed with some of the more rebellious kids, Brian pivoted to us, suggesting that the student’s photograph was needed because of his “handsome face”, on the condition that it was a picture of him writing. The ruse, transparent as it may have been, drew laughter from him and somehow ended up working.

However, on occasion, the volunteers do come across some students who are incredibly receptive to the workshops. Walking around, we noticed a few kids who had completed the exercises given before the stipulated time, some even taking out their copies of Harry Potter to read while they waited for the rest of their classmates to finish work.

Speaking with students, we learned that these workshops were so much more than English lessons. They’ve enabled the kids to step out of their comfort zone and become more confident in their public speaking ability.



A student reading Harry Potter.

One of the children we talked to recounted that she used to be “extremely shy”. And yet, she noticed that she always gets allocated the role of presenter during group projects because of her confidence in public speaking, which she attributes to sessions like these.

The sessions also help the children inch closer to their own aspirations, offering them skills that are immediately relevant to the futures they are beginning to imagine for themselves. As we asked one of the students what her ‘dream job’ is, she replied without hesitation, “I want to be an author or a CEO!” When asked whether the sessions were of any help to her, she noted that the practices they’d been doing were already helping her correct her grammar and construct better paragraphs—skills, of course, pertinent to being an author.

The gap Project Horizon seeks to address

As the exco mentioned, while we attend the occasional public speaking workshop, very few of this kind of holistic workshops are offered to those of lower socio-economic status, disadvantaging them more than we'd think.

Although Singapore's meritocratic culture seems overly focused on intellectual capabilities and test-taking abilities, holistic skills we may take for granted are being increasingly valued as 'human' in an era of rapid digitalisation. Apart from providing the students with the means to express themselves more persuasively, skills such as public speaking abilities do result in tangible outcomes for those who are provided the opportunity to hone them.

“I mostly get awards for being the presenter. Our group always wins.”

- Student X, attending sessions at Project Horizon

What underlies much of this, though it often goes unnamed, is the question of cultural capital. This encompasses the behaviours and sensibilities beyond grades and qualifications that allow individuals to navigate social and professional environments—for example, the ability to articulate oneself clearly in an interview, or to present their ideas with confidence.

For children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, this form of capital is usually out of reach due to a lack of exposure. It is, by nature, inherited and passed down through environments where such skills are modelled, practised, and reinforced from an early age.



A student reading Harry Potter.

Singapore's meritocracy promises equal opportunity, but opportunity is rarely as evenly distributed as the ideal suggests. Project Horizon does not seek to dismantle this system; it instead seeks to ensure that more children are equipped to participate in it. And in doing so, it reminds us that the most meaningful investments in a child's future are often not the most visible ones.

This is the gap that sessions like those run by Project Horizon seek to address. In teaching children these skills, the project offers something that extends beyond the classroom—equipping these students with the unspoken fluencies that their more privileged peers may have long taken for granted.

We already see this in both the student who leads her group presentations and the aspiring author, learning how best to refine her writing.



PROJECT ENJO, WHERE LEARNING MEETS *ENJO*-YMENT

By Ariann Khoo (26S06B), Jaden Lum (26S05A) and Nithilan Balachander (26A01C)

Project Enjo (Japanese for “aid”) is not your average tutoring VIA. From building terrariums, to music video production using GarageBand, to web design and product innovation using Canva, it is focused on fostering holistic growth in their hard-to-please stakeholders: cheeky 11 to 12-year-olds.

Founded by its five main members, they transform mundane tutoring sessions into Enjo-yable activities aimed at broadening the students’ worldviews, going far beyond worksheets and classroom-style teaching. By exploring usually unventured VIA territories like career guidance, STEAM (with the often-neglected “A” for arts) appreciation, character building, and social awareness, Project Enjo redefines what community service can look like.

One of their members recalled teaching students financial literacy, turning mundane talks about economics and finance into the “Game of Life”, a role-play game where children learn about financial literacy and social inequality in a more approachable and digestible manner. To Project Enjo, it’s all about making things meaningful, easily understandable and memorable.



The team (clockwise from left): Chloe Heng Ya Xuan (26S03H), Yeap Jia Yun (26S06L), Namrutha Senthil Kumar (26S03O), Hasini Senthilnathan (26S06T), Karen Benita A (26S06B)

Theory will only take you so far

On paper, running programmes for primary school kids in a student care centre doesn't seem that complicated. But as Enjo's members repeatedly discovered, no amount of planning can really prepare you for the reality of each hour-to-hour-and-a-half-long session.

"Every session was unpredictable," the team recalls. For one, energy levels fluctuated wildly depending on the day. One week's group of eager and enthusiastic kids could easily arrive dull and disinterested the next.

When the project—that was once limited to only holidays—transitioned to weekly sessions, the team had to reckon with an entirely new rhythm: even we know all too well that dealing with younger kids after a long school day is a completely different ball-game from dealing with them on a free afternoon.

The sheer volume of sessions was no joke either. Having done this project with different groups of kids, keeping the programme fresh—and keeping themselves motivated—became its own challenge for the members.

Community advocacy, one of the project's earlier focuses, proved particularly hard to sustain. "It got dry and repetitive," the team admits. They had to respond deliberately: constantly rotate activities, find new things to do, and resist the temptation to recycle what might have worked before.

Beyond that, they had to deal with pushback from their stakeholders, too. When centre managers occasionally rejected the sessions they had painstakingly planned, they had to pivot last-minute.

The most important stakeholders are, of course, the kids themselves. And sometimes, they had their own agenda of just wanting to chill around and unwind, rather than to do something "productive", as both the team and centre managers had hoped.

Rather than treating this as insurmountable, the team learnt to negotiate, compromise, and work around this challenge. Once the students completed the various learning objectives that the team had set out, they got games or playtime as a reward, like building cardboard houses during a particular session. The kids were even taught how to build terrariums.

But, if anything, it was perhaps the challenges themselves that built this project into what it is today.



Process over perfection

The children's screaming. Their mischief. Their incessant "6-7"s. They never stopped, and neither did the team. Project Enjo has been in the making for more than 4 years, and as the kids grew up, so did they. When asked what about the odyssey that took them from libraries to childcare centres they were proudest of, they remarked that it was the learning along the way, the creativity and adaptability they displayed as a team in brainstorming activities before executing plans.



However, four years on, the team is now armed with more hindsight than ever. The beginnings of Project Enjo, they admitted, lacked a defined sense of direction, and along the way, more volunteers for the project were also needed. This gave way to their most profound lessons: to lay out clear objectives, but to always be open to changes.

Last call

Through getting “bullied” by the kids, the long commutes to Simei and back (which were often longer than the sessions themselves), and the exhaustion of it all, persistence has always been the thread running through Project Enjo.

Nevertheless, all things must come to an end. Now, as everyone inevitably sets off onto diverging paths, the laughter and joy of Project Enjo remain imbued in group photographs, silly music videos and gifted drawings—footsteps, some larger, many smaller but ultimately together, imprinted forever into the relentless sands of time.

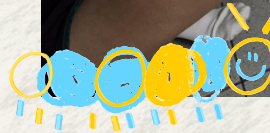
We ended our interview enquiring if the team had any parting messages to the kids (so if you aren’t one of the kids you should scroll away).

To them: Project Enjo hopes that you had fun, enjoyed their sessions and did not dread them, and of course that you left learning something new—those career exploration sessions might come in handy! Last but not least, they hope to see you again soon.

1 step back, 3 steps forward

And now, Project Enjo has a piece of advice to anyone thinking of starting something like them: don’t do it alone. Find people who share your vision, define what you want to do and where you want to go early on, and be prepared to throw your plans out and start again (in case a 10-year-old would rather build a cardboard house).

As Project Enjo knows, the real joy is in showing up anyway.





WADING THROUGH THE WETLANDS WITH PROJECT NATURALIA

By Cherie Khoo (26S03B) and Tara Sim (26A01C)

\$3.50 might only be able to get you one meat + two veg at the Caifan stall in the RI canteen, but for 50 cents less, you could spend your Saturday morning on an insightful guided tour to Sungei Buloh led by our very own Rafflesians from Project Naturalia.

After discovering his newfound love for nature walks and cataloguing wildlife from attending an international course on ecological research in Malaysia during GAP Semester in Year 4, this VIA project was founded last year by Koshik Basak (26S03J) and heartily supported by many of his friends from Y14.

Since then, their love for animal discovery and nature has shone through the development of Project Naturalia and its team's dedication to providing guided tours to the community. This project sets itself apart from typical nature walks by teaching participants how to truly appreciate the world around them—going beyond a jog through your neighbourhood park or the obligatory school learning journey to the Botanic Gardens to learn about sustainability that most of us would rather sleep through.

With the key intention of bridging the 'illiteracy' the ordinary RI student (and wider community) has when it comes to nature, Project Naturalia's tours provide opportunities for people to learn about local wildlife and flora species to look out for while outdoors to truly appreciate Singapore's biodiversity.



Some of the Project Naturalia members with their tour's attendees

After chatting with Koshik, one phrase surfaced during our conversation: “touch grass.” How many of us would actually willingly get up at 8am on a Saturday for purposes outside of studying or school-related activities—let alone to pull up at Sungei Buloh? (P.S. they provide free transport to and from Bishan CC!) More importantly, when was the last time any of us spent our precious, and seemingly increasingly rare spare time in nature?

This reluctance itself presents a solid case for the “nature illiteracy” that Project Naturalia seeks to solve—the disconnect between us and the natural world that surrounds us.

Labelled as a “Garden City”, it's almost painfully ironic that many Singaporean youths avoid going to green spaces—or go outside at all—as though stepping outdoors were a fate worse than dying a slow and painful death. Perhaps the biggest factor to this sentiment is the unbearable humidity Singapore seems to have all year round, which makes standing outside in an unair-conditioned space for more than two minutes enough to have us whipping out our electric hand-held fans that whir loud enough to rival that of industrial-grade machinery.

Somewhere along the way, nature became something we acknowledged from afar rather than actively experienced—a distant, abstract idea of sustainability endlessly drilled into our heads instead of a place we intentionally stepped into.

We're no longer the same kids who spent weekends flying kites at Marina Barrage or picnicking at the beach with our families, but teenagers who now hermit ourselves away into the comfort of air-conditioned rooms, doomscrolling in bed or buying stuff we really don't need in malls because “there's nothing to do in Singapore”.

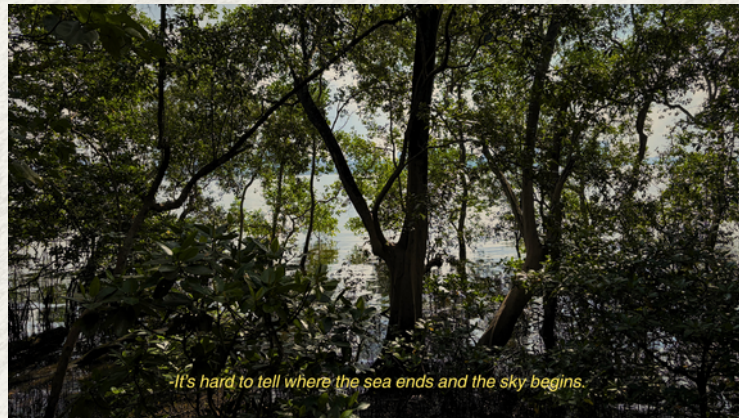
Yet, despite all our complaints about the heat and inconvenience, we start to wonder whether the issue lies less with nature itself, and instead more with our unwillingness to engage with it.

So, as two Pressies who love nothing more than sleeping in on weekends and have never been to Sungei Buloh, we decided to give up our creature comforts (and beds) and attend one of Project Naturalia's tours.

Flora, fauna, fungi, and fangs: our trip to the Wetlands

When we arrived at Bishan CC, we didn't have to wait long before we boarded the provided excursion bus and were on our way to Sungei Buloh Wetland Reserve. With roughly 30 minutes travel time there and back, we struck up a conversation with some of the student tour guides and asked them about their motivations for joining this CE01.

Whether it was a Year 5 tour guide who had just joined the project, or an experienced Year 6 guide on their last guided tour, one thing became apparent—everyone there (a majority of which were ODAC members, unsurprisingly) had a shared passion for the outdoors. Much more than simply grinding out community hours and buffing up portfolios, the project members spend their own free time preparing informative booklets for attendees, liaising with the community centre, and learning about local wildlife just so they can share this enthusiasm with others.



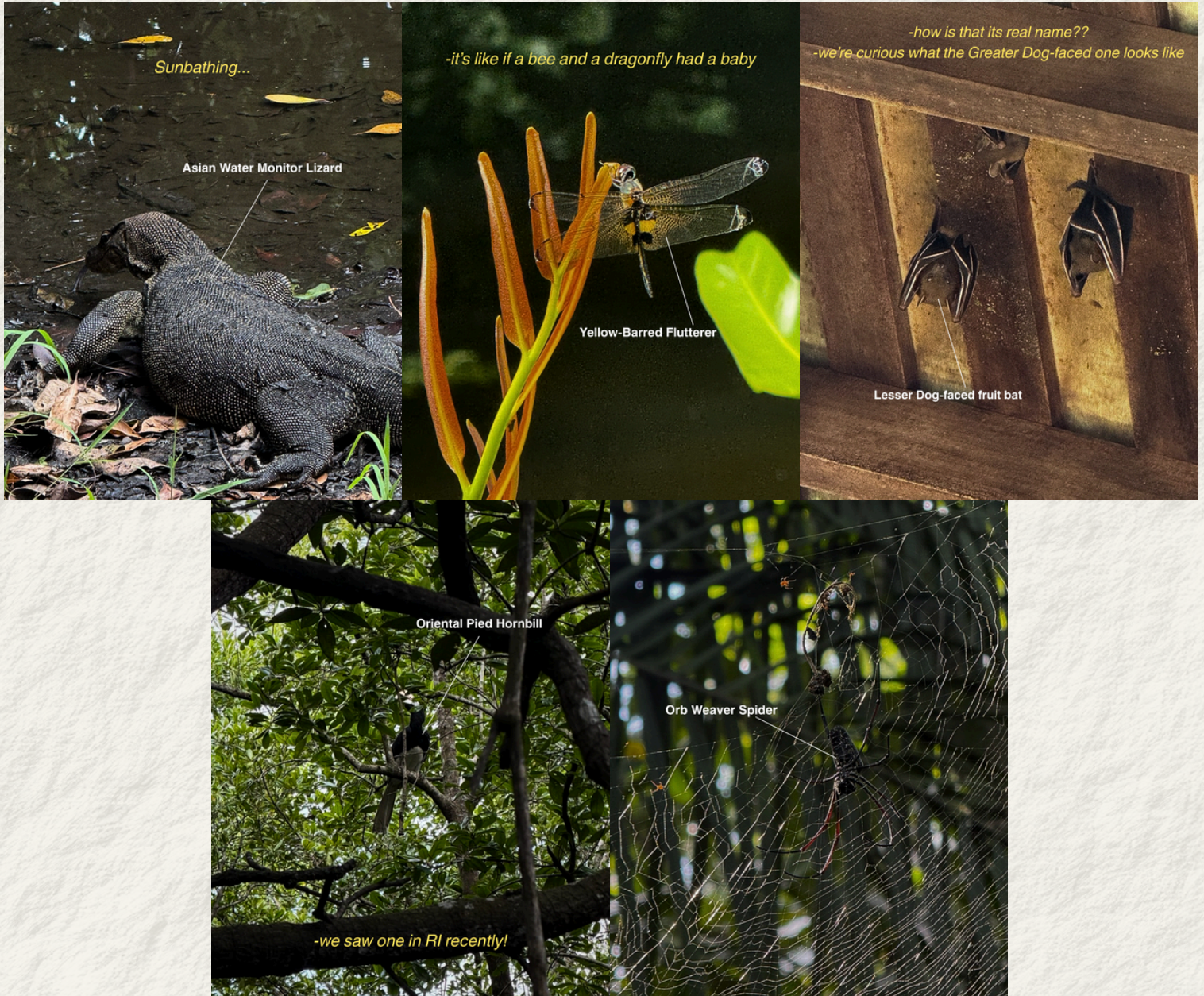
Unlike other nature walks that simply host nature enthusiasts and bring them around green spaces rather mindlessly, Project Naturalia's tours are accompanied by educational commentary, attendees leaving with new knowledge on Singapore's flora and fauna. The genuinity of the guides' love for nature is clear in how each of them seems to have their own incredibly niche and random stash of fun facts related to the different wildlife species we spotted. (Did you know historically, crab meat—along with lobster—was considered a food for poor people?)



Beyond their proficiency in nature-related knowledge, many dedicated members also take the time to build meaningful connections with attendees. When asked about his favourite memory with this project so far, Koshik recounted an exchange with a mother who attended Project Naturalia's very first guided tour with her child. She shared that she had hoped to invite more of her friends and their children along as well, but was unsuccessful after learning that most of the children already had tuition or external classes scheduled instead. Our constant fixation on academics often causes us to forget to slow down, step outside, and reconnect with the world beyond our classrooms once in a while.

After speaking to a mother-daughter duo who frequently go on nature walks, we realised that many nature enthusiasts would prefer joining guided tours over self-led tours to enrich their knowledge and for easy transport to nature areas, where parking and public transport may be less conveniently accessed.

The project also aims to engage further with the youth community by creating a gamified app—think Goosechase, but for animals! Along the way, we loved seeing the fish, migratory birds, spiders, and even bats in their natural habitat, and had a great time playing hide-and-see with mudcrabs.



It seems like recent discussions on local ecosystems and biodiversity constantly revolve around conservation. While that seems like an insurmountable task to most of us, simply visiting our natural areas on guided tours like the one we attended can deepen our understanding and appreciation for flora and fauna.

In our busy schedules and hours filled with schoolwork, “touching grass” is a natural remedy that we should all sample. And maybe in the future, we might all finally be able to tell the difference between a chicken and a Red junglefowl—before confidently calling them “basically the same thing” and moving on.



RAFFLES X DIALECTS

萊講
方言!

gòng tshù lāi uē
講·厝內話

To Speak the Language of Home:
featuring **Raffles Dialects**

TO SPEAK THE LANGUAGE OF HOME: RAFFLES DIALECTS

By Koh Shin Robbie (26A01A) and Tok Kai Xue Traven (26A01B)

In 1959, Singapore saw the first of many key developments to its education system: a bilingualism policy. Its premise was simple—English, as the language of international business, would be mandated to be taught in all schools. Alongside this, the study of one’s mother tongue (namely Mandarin, Malay, and Tamil) would also be made compulsory to ensure students did not lose touch with their cultural roots. In an instant, dialect languages were taken out of official usage. Radio stations switched to purely official languages, and an entire Speak Mandarin Campaign was launched with vigorous dissuasion of dialect use.



*Photo from a speech by former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew. Source: Zaobao SG
Text in the background translates to “Speak Less Dialect”.*

For Mandarin, however, this line of reasoning proved rather ironic. In the face of institutional pressures to adopt Mandarin as their home language, what would happen to the dialect-speaking households which relied heavily on Hokkien, Teochew or Hakka to communicate on a daily basis? How would the precious, dialectal tongues which served generations upon generations of ancestors manage to maintain their relevance?

Indeed, it is today where we see the cultural consequences of Singapore's bilingualism policy. To lack the linguistic capabilities to understand—let alone speak—one's dialect is a common issue many Chinese-speaking youths face. With the shift towards English as the primary medium for everyday speech, this has led to a frustrating intergenerational language barrier between the youth and the elderly, where communication is tragically reduced to vague gestures and simple phrases. How then can familial intimacy survive, when cultural estrangement renders these simple conversations a daily struggle?

Reclaiming the Mother Tongue

It is thus these challenges that Raffles Dialects aims to address. Founded in 2021, Raffles Dialects is a CE01 which helps to equip participants with the basic foundations of various Chinese dialects, hence providing them with the adequate tools to converse in these languages. Lessons are taught by a core team who are fluent in their own dialects, consisting of Cantonese, Hokkien, Teochew, and Hakka speakers.



An introductory Cantonese lesson with Raffles Interact. Students practice their pronunciation by repeating statements shown on the board.

Lesson structures vary greatly on a case-to-case basis, highly dependent on the differing needs of their collaborators. When collaborating with Raffles Interact, for instance, lessons had to be more informative and dense given the limited timeframe (one hour!) for teaching. Thus, key concepts such as pronunciation, syntactical structures, and elementary vocabulary were condensed into these sessions while also ensuring they were engaging.

Students were also given an opportunity to practise what they had learnt through skits. With the help of some given phrases and pointers, students had to come up with a 2-minute skit which showcased the use of their dialect in everyday life.



Students perform their skit in front of the classroom.

Beyond these conversational skills, the pedagogy also includes lessons on the historical context of these dialects. In an interview with Preston Ang (26S06B), one of the key leading members of the interest group, he echoed the importance of learning the history behind these dialects as a way to strengthen one’s appreciation and understanding of them:

“It enables them to connect with the language easier. Rather than learning the language in a vacuum, its applications are instead contextualised. [...] They are not learning words for the sake of it, but instead so they can channel the cultural relevance and history through these languages.”

Thus, on a broader scale, Raffles Dialects also occasionally structure their lessons around Chinese historical culture. They have been invited to secondary schools to host workshops to promote the appreciation of Chinese culture—lessons consisted of topics such as the immigration of mainland Chinese to Singapore, and the varying occupations which different dialect groups took up in the early 1900s.



Preston conducts Kahoots to educate participants on the cultural and historical context of Hokkien, his dialect.



Participants at a Raffles Dialects workshop at Maris Stella High School

Beyond independent and in-school sessions, Raffles Dialects has also extended their reach to nearby community clubs. Lesson structures here are a lot more relaxed, given the longer timeframe they are provided with. Their audience, surprisingly, consists mostly of the elderly.

“They want to find places to speak dialects, and seeing youths speak—and even teach—dialects is actually very heartening for them. [...] A lot of them feel that dialects are dying out, [...] so when they see these children being interested in something that is so close to them, it makes them feel very happy,” Preston laughed, “They join [these lessons] to troll us, to laugh at us, and have fun.”

It is this wholesome irony that flips the script in these sessions. The ‘students’, in this case, are actually more proficient in their dialect compared to their instructors.

“The Chinese-educated elderly who are already fluent in their language [...] they sit there and correct any mistakes the teachers might make. [...] It’s like having a proofreader in the audience.”

Perhaps, then, these sessions still manage to bridge the aforementioned generational gap between the youths and elderly—though through a more unorthodox medium. These dialects, ironically, are passed down from student to instructor, and lessons give elderly the linguistic authority and space to share languages they hold dear to their hearts.

The bigger wins

When asked why he decided to join Raffles Dialects, Preston shared an experience common among his peers: the persistent struggle to navigate the language barriers that divide them from their grandparents.

“At home, my grandma and grandpa were extremely unproficient at English and Mandarin, so it was not easy to communicate with them,” he shared. For Preston, joining Raffles Dialects thus seemed like a solution to bridge that disconnect, allowing him to “expose [himself] to more use of Chinese dialects while brushing up on [his] own skills.”

“I think one of the key principles that has allowed me to be better at Chinese dialects is learning by teaching,” Preston continued, “since I am in charge of the academic section of Raffles Dialects, [...] it has put dialects actively in my conscience.” Indeed, being a member of this interest group has allowed Preston to become more proficient in his own dialect, and by extension, share it with others who have similar aspirations.

Jade Yeo (26A01D), a member of Raffles Interact, similarly echoed the importance of these efforts to spread awareness of Chinese dialects:

“It is important to be aware of these dialects,” she shared, “if not, we risk losing these languages. [...] I feel that knowing just a little bit of these dialects will help you to connect with any elderly out there in Singapore.” Indeed, she pointed out how knowing a simple greeting would facilitate cultural connection between communities, bridging the social gaps between youth and elderly.

Issac Lee (26A01D), the chairperson of Raffles Interact, further highlighted how this social disconnect is an issue that Raffles Dialects has effectively addressed— “I think what they are doing is really good—they are bringing the culture of many Singaporeans back to them, after many decades of detachment [from their own dialects].”

Regardless of background, it is apparent that Raffles Dialects has awakened youths’ consciousness of their dialect heritage. Proficient or brand-new, it provides a platform not just to hone such skills, but learn through experience by joining the team. More so, it anchors its pedagogy less on technical knowledge, but more on real-life application, preserving bonds through shared language.

Moving forward: Navigating CE01, growth, and more

Several years in, Raffles Dialects is met with yet another critical turning point. Having had years of operation in Raffles Institution, Raffles Dialects has garnered a steady presence among our many student groups. Beyond this, consistent efforts by generations of members have led to tangible recognition on a national level.



Raffles Dialects, a student-led interest group founded by five Raffles Institution students in 2021 to teach and learn Chinese dialects, has grown to 12 members today.
ST PHOTO: LIM YAOHUI

A screengrab from a Straits Times feature by Shawn Hoo

This newfound recognition has lent considerable strength to the organisation, propelling it to partner with new stakeholders. On a youth outreach level, Raffles Dialects has partnered with student groups in CHIJ St. Nicholas Girls’ School and Anglo-Chinese Junior College, expanding its network of dialect-speaking youths.



Raffles Dialects at Ling Kwang Home

On a community service end, they have also curated opportunities for youths to put their dialect skills to the test, partnering with Ling Kwang Home to hold interaction sessions.

Behind the organisation's successful push at branching out, though, lies the unseen process of making such collaborations possible. Speaking with the core team, they shared that external collaborations were more challenging to establish as CE01s due to the need for official approval.

As the current generation of Raffles Dialects begins to hand over to yet another batch of leaders, the team remains uncertain on how readily the organisation would be able to expand its external network under the given CE01 system.

Premised on the principle of empowering and connecting youths to awaken community awareness, a system that presents difficulty in bringing together youths beyond Raffles would prove limited in truly equipping participants with the connections and opportunities to exercise their dialect heritage.

Speaking with Cantonese team member Brendon Mak Tsun Ming (26S06H), the team is presented with yet another challenge. As an organisation that covers Hokkien, Teochew and Cantonese services, the team is spread across the three wings based on their existing proficiency. The thing is, simple statistics would quickly leave the Cantonese team struggling to achieve sufficient manpower, as Cantonese stands as the smallest dialect group among the three and by a considerable margin. As a result, Raffles Dialects' Cantonese team has co-opted Hong Kongers, equally proficient in the Cantonese dialect, to join them in teaching the language.

Taking us through minor linguistic differences between Singaporean Cantonese and Hong Kong Cantonese in day-to-day interactions, Brendon shares that despite such differences, the experience of learning Cantonese from Hong Kong speakers like himself can prove equally enriching. The heart of this lies in the richness of Hong Kong's media scene, where Cantopop and Cantonese film plays a critical role in pop culture, even spreading to Singapore. Strategic employment of Hong Kong culture as part of his Cantonese teaching content has thus been pivotal to better engaging Cantonese learners, by helping them connect the dots between what has been learnt and what they heard on their grandparents' Hong Kong television channels.

As the session came to a close, members in various classrooms would conduct after-action reviews between members. Watching the seniors provide feedback for their junior counterparts in each classroom, it was truly heartwarming observing their patient guidance, the juniors' eagerness to improve their skills, as well as the overarching shared drive to offer the best experience for the programme's participants.



Raffles Dialect team members at Ling Kwang Home

To this regard, Raffles Dialects' process of handing over to the next generation of leadership premises heavily on how its seniors pass down this intense passion and connection to the Y5 members, before training them to infect fellow youths with similar affections.

Closing thoughts: Dialect in a Gen Z Singapore?

After our insightful session at Raffles Dialects' workshop, we walked away with an itching fascination towards rediscovering and embracing our dialect heritage. Thinking back, we realised how little phrases like “jiak ba buay” or “have you eaten” were pivotal in characterising the warmth Singaporeans showed each other, engendered by our unique cultural contexts.

Today, dialects continue to exist indirectly in our jargon through insertions into Singlish (think phrases like “buay tahan” and “walao”). Once considered crude, Singlish was often feared to impede young Singaporeans' mastery of the English language.

Yet today, as English has by far become our primary language, the fear of Singlish obscuring our clear and proper language use has been put to the question, as we are more cognisant of when and how we choose to make the deliberate codeswitch to Singlish. In fact, the use of Singlish has proven to be an artful one today, as Singaporean poetry has seen a reintroduction of Singlish lexicon, for instance in Cheng Him's poetry anthology “Bo Beh Zhao”, where the dialect title translates to “Can't Run”, a reflection of the speakers' struggles in navigating his life as a Singaporean youth.

As youths in our generation rediscover our heritage through embracing dialects, such a change's sociocultural impact goes beyond mere conversation, serving also as the basis for a vivid future of expression and belonging.



Project Oopsie Daisy
**MORE THAN JUST AN
"OOPSIE"**

PROJECT OOPSIE DAISY: MORE THAN JUST AN "OOPSIE"

By Tan Yan Qi (26S06M)

If you asked me two years ago about where my CE01 project would go, I never would have been able to guess that we'd be doing what we are now.

Project Oopsie Daisy started out as a simple VIA which aimed to promote horticulture as a method of improving mental health. Fast forward to Year 5, downsizes in the core team left only 5 members: Alice Chen Anhan (26S03L), Cecilia Wong (26S03K), Jyoti Adithi Narayanan (26S06M), Looi Ee Xin (26S06M) and me.

I vividly remember how the search for a partner organisation went back then. We sent emails to community organisations (the usual targets), hoping to expand our range of beneficiaries beyond children, and somehow landed up on the Institute of Mental Health (IMH) volunteering website.

"Why not?" was the general consensus when we reached out to IMH. To be honest, it seemed rather laughable that we were even trying, but it was a last-ditch attempt after failing to hear back from our other prospective partner organisations, and there was no harm in trying, right?

Less than a week later, we received a reply. And thus, we started our volunteering journey at IMH.

It's not what you think it is.

Mental health is all the talk in the 21st century. And as young 17-18 year olds navigating the complexities of teenage life, it can be a tricky subject to discuss. For most of us, we have only scraped by the surface of what mental health truly is about.

Ask anyone about mental health, and the first thing that comes to mind might be “depression” or “anxiety”. Talk about IMH, and the first thing that comes to mind might be “insane people”.

As much as we as a society laud our progress in de-stigmatising mental health issues, the truth is that we are far from it. While recent progress has opened doors for conversation on mental health, few know what happens behind the closed doors of what IMH and similar institutes do. For many, our understanding of mental health is heavily limited by personal experiences, the experiences of the people around us, and media depictions of mental health.

Even as we informed our CE01 mentor that we planned to volunteer at IMH, there was an evident worry etched between her brows, and understandably so. Filling up the Risk Assessment and Method Statements (RAMS) form for the project was quite the terrifying task, and it was quite a wonder how it was approved given the stakes.

Sink or swim

Project Oopsie Daisy ran sessions in-ward, conducting small horticulture activities such as simple garden maintenance tasks and leaf art. Our sessions were run under the guidance of Phillip Lee Pak Phi, who manages IMH's therapeutic horticulture programmes.

I still remember the first session we had at the Early Psychosis Intervention Programme (EPIP) ward. We were warned beforehand, by Phillip, that he preferred to “throw his interns into the deep end” and let them sink or swim.

And that was exactly the experience we got.

There truly was no saying what to expect. In all honesty, we had little knowledge of what we were getting into. And, while in hindsight, this was one of the few times where being clueless was for the better, at that moment where we were rushing all over the place, trying to get the session going, I had never truly seen a more chaotic scene in my life.

Yet, in a painfully ironic juxtaposition to our panic and chaos, our session participants watched us with seemingly disinterested faces, quietly following the instructions of facilitators who didn't seem to know what they were doing.



The Mindful Meadows Community Garden at IMH

A big part of learning to work with the patients was being able to manage expectations: of the kind of feedback (or lack thereof) that we would receive, and of the number of participants we got in a session. Sometimes we'd start out with six participants, only for them to slowly drop off mid-session, until we were only left with two at the end. Other times, we'd have participants who were extremely engaged in the session, holding friendly conversations with us while gardening.



Simple activities such as propagation of plants are carried out in sessions.

Every session was a new experience. One session could leave us feeling high in spirits and proud, and the next could end with a somber silence that was uncomfortable to sit with.

We often hear of people describing “a sense of fulfillment” as what motivates them to volunteer, whether it be seeing how their work contributes to actionable change, or just seeing the smiles on the faces of the people they’re helping.

This “sense of fulfillment” was difficult to find in IMH. The truth is, the “success” of a session was difficult to determine solely based on the atmosphere, which left us with little to work with.

After one particular session where the mood was visibly down, our mentor told the team something that would completely change how I viewed future sessions.

Sometimes, when patients look disinterested, he said, it’s not necessarily because they find the session boring. It was then he gave us an important reminder: the people we interacted with were often dealing with their own inner battles, and that meant that they were not always able to concentrate fully on what was in front of them.

Looking back, my expectations going into this volunteering project with IMH were defied and met at the same time. I cannot deny that some of my worries did come true, but there were also so many new experiences that I could never have expected, and so many new connections that I never thought I’d form.

Mental health does not discriminate

Over the course of the year, we went from general acute wards, to the Early Psychosis Intervention Programme (EPIP) wards, to the Mood Disorder Unit (MDU), to the National Addictions Management Service (NAMS) wards. Even within each ward, there were people of varying ages and backgrounds, from adults with careers to teenagers who were still in school.

As we rotated through different wards, there were almost always fresh faces at every session. For us, as students, the EPIP ward was always the ward we were most excited to visit, and also the most frequent one. They were the most similar to us—in terms of age, interests and communication styles. And, for all the worries about not being able to connect with them, it was surprisingly easy to do so.

But even though we went back to the ward biweekly, there were few familiar faces. It was always a bittersweet experience to hear of patients who'd been discharged, hoping that we wouldn't see them again as we knew it meant that they'd gotten better, and were ready to return to the lives they had before being admitted.

There's still a long way to go

***"I believe in a universe that doesn't care, and
people who do."***

~Angus, Night In the Woods

The universe may be indifferent to the ups and downs in our insignificant lives, but it is the people who show kindness and empathy who make even the toughest struggles survivable.



While this project may be coming to a close, we are all aware that it is far from the end of our journey with mental health. And for anyone who may be struggling, know that there are always people around you that you can reach out to.

IMH has an array of volunteering programmes besides therapeutic horticulture for those 17 and above. Click on [this link](#) for more information.

Mental health hotlines:

- *National mindline: 1771*
- *IMH Emergency Helpline (24h): 6389 2222*
- *Samaritans of Singapore (24h): 1-767 (1-SOS)*



PROJECT HONGZHONG

RED AT ITS CENTRE



A CEO- FEATURE



PROJECT HONGZHONG: RED AT ITS CENTRE

By Michelle Lee (26S07A) and Tara Teo (26A01D)

If you asked any of the members in a formal setting why their project's called Hongzhong, they would've told you it means red centre – the beating heart of a community, symbolising the importance of having people come together. But if you asked them anywhere else, they would've told you it's because the “Hongzhong” tile is the only Mahjong tile that has an emoji for it. And that's exactly how a project centred around Mahjong got approved by the CE committee.

The start of Hongzhong

It is only through witnessing the depth of struggle that underpins every single step of a CE01's journey that we can understand the heart of service they carry. No team knows that better than Hongzhong's Exco, who fought tirelessly for official approval.

Their journey to become a CE01 started in March 2025, when then Year 5 Committee members Looi Ee Xin (26S03M), Kaylee Nga Xin Teng (26S03E), Sarah Ashley Tan (26S03L), Jade Lim (26S03P), and Kaelyn Yeo (26S03P) submitted their application form. The idea raised concerns at the first project approval meeting due to perceived association to gambling, but they didn't falter. After all, they've been rejected once before as a SVIA project in RGS. Back in RGS, they had successfully managed to receive approval as a project after citing research and newspaper articles about SG Mahjong Together, another Mahjong-only project, to back up their cause. The rejection was thus no surprise, and they had the very same articles ready to present to the CE Committee.

Focusing on the many strengths that Hongzhong had (like the accessibility of their chosen venue of active ageing centres), they finally received approval a whopping 8 months after the initial application. Even so, the road was far from smooth.

Now that they had passed the RGS chapter of Hongzhong down to their juniors, the EXCO switched partner organisations from Xinyuan Community Care to Care Corner. Sandwiched between the struggle of having insufficient elderly participants and volunteers, the five of them were often dealt difficult hands that they had to respond to on the spot.

Recounting one of the weeks when the elderly were away on a learning journey, the members sighed in frustration as they described the bleak scene when just 4 elderly beneficiaries were left in the whole centre. Still, the volunteers did not let the inconsistent participant turnout limit the depth of interaction they had with the elderly, doing their best no matter the circumstances to connect and have fun.



The team introducing their project when they were in RGS.

For the EXCO, they were also dealing with their own issues having transitioned from RGS to RI. Previously, they were all in the same class, making scheduling and meeting incredibly easy. Now, the RI campus was not only further away from Care Corner, but they also had to carve out pockets of time when their schedules aligned with each other.

Four years, hopefully five.

Although the journey to make Hongzhong an official CE01 was hard enough, like every other project, they're facing their fair share of problems in their 4th year together.

For instance, having sufficient volunteers. As dramatic as it sounds, the biggest issue the project is currently facing is survival.

Hongzhong focuses on teaching seniors how to play Mahjong. But, there's only so many seniors in Care Corner and Hongzhong is still in the process of figuring out what they're going to do once all of them know how to play. As Jade puts it, they need to "change their methods to cope with the changing needs of the elderly". Otherwise, it may be the case of Hongzhong on the RGS side, where beneficiaries could conduct activities amongst themselves, without the project's members. Although the team has made a temporary shift to teaching seniors how to play rummikub, the root issue still remains unaddressed.

Even with lists of unconventional ideas (think teaching seniors dialects and stretching sessions in the midst of Mahjong games), all the members shared the same question: is the project still Hongzhong if there's no Mahjong?

A new name?

Initially putting the question aside because it sounded too *chim*, we decided to ask the members why they feel so strongly about Project Hongzhong nearing the end of the interview.

“I don’t really know, it just feels like a child.”

- Jade Lim

This statement sums up the drive behind all those emails, research papers and Tuesday afternoons. There wasn’t a clear, structured response like “Because I really believe in the vision and impact of the project. Seeing how it can positively affect people makes me want to give my best to it” (thanks ChatGPT). Instead, it was an unrestrained flinging of words into the air which shared the same excited agreement. Through the chaos, I picked up a few terms that evoked the most excitement, measured by the number of “Ya”s exclaimed in response: “favourite aunty at Care Corner”, “..were so excited about bringing it to RI”, “..raised it for so long, cannot abandon” and “aunty invited me to their table!”.



The team with their volunteers during a session.

At this point, we couldn’t help but ask the members, “Imagine you handover to a new team that does something completely unrelated to Mahjong. Would you stop them?”

Instead of an exaggerated response or opposition, the team was pragmatic. They simply said the succeeding team could do what they wanted since it would be their project. It just wouldn’t be Hongzhong anymore, but they could always just change the name.

红中: Red Centre

If you ask us, Project Hongzhong really captured the idea of “red centre”, even if it was just a name to help them get their CE01 application approved. From the seniors willingly splitting up from their friends to play Mahjong with the Hongzhong members, to them bringing their own Mahjong sets to train their volunteers in RGS classrooms, they’ve somehow always managed to gather people around a table, *the centre*, even during that one session where the centre *literally* meant the only one table available.



The team and their volunteers.

We discussed issues of handing over and the survival of the project, but the reality is, Hongzhong will inevitably end (just hopefully when they're thirty). But, at least in the time Hongzhong has been around, the Mahjong table has been and will continue to be a space for warmth and connection.

If you're interested in being part of Project Hongzhong or just a "Mahjong kaki" for their sessions at TP5 Carecorner on Tuesdays, from 1400h to 1600h, feel free to drop Looi Ee Xin a message on Teams.