

# *Cocks*

*Ernest Gob*

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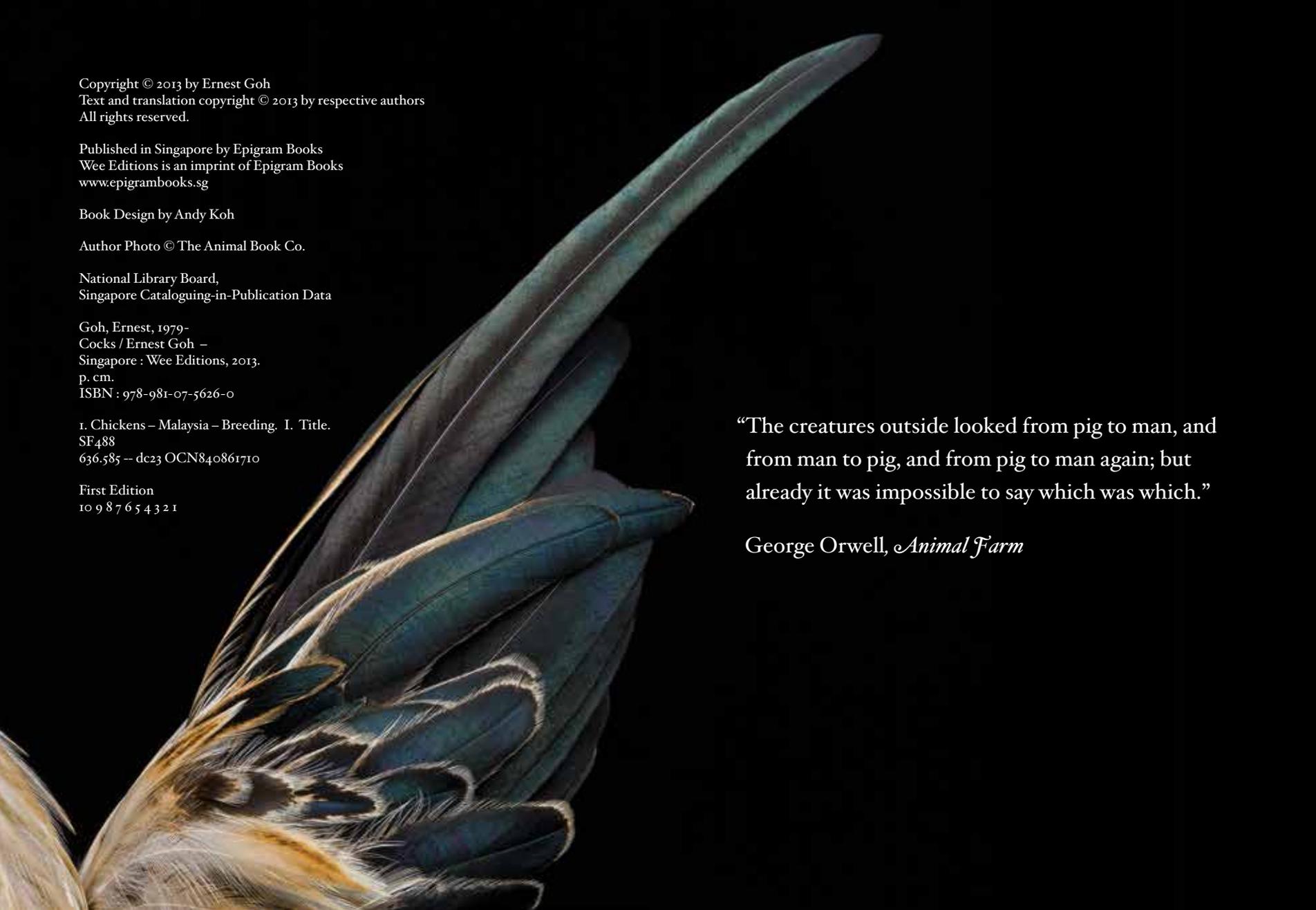


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“The creatures outside looked from pig to man, and  
from man to pig, and from pig to man again; but  
already it was impossible to say which was which.”

George Orwell, *Animal Farm*

# The Erudite Parade of the Serama Cocks

by Agnès de Gouvion Saint-Cyr

The cocks have left behind their villages, their homes and their families and tremble nervously before the competition's start, enclosed within their masters' knowing hands, on whose fingers, rings, set with precious stones, hide yet rival the beauty of their bodies. And while the photographer discreetly places in the background, in the manner of the studio artists of the 19th century placing their painted canvases, a black drape representing the night's scarcely dispersed shadows, there appears in all his splendour, like the incontestable leading actor of a grandiose and eagerly awaited show, the star of the day: the cock with the black plumage and the off-white beak, the feathers on his head tufted up, or, for that matter, the cock with his white feathers carefully smoothed to contrast with his bright red crest, or even, indeed, the rust-coloured cock showing off the blue tones of his feathers, and, to close, the cock with his feathers adroitly ruffled.

And so begin the performances. Are these traits inborn or acquired? For the whole question is to know whether these gestures that mimic human beings—the proud bearing, the clawed advance, the chest puffed out, the feathers subtly deployed, fan-like, the martial step, the body curved into a seductive pose—the usual anthropomorphic postures performed in the course of a beauty contest—are the fruit of patient

training, of that extraordinary capacity for imitation shared by man and animal, or whether they result from genetic factors and aptitudes strengthened over time?

Undeniably, Ernest Goh proves himself to be an excellent portraitist, despite the difficult conditions he works under. He plays with light in a way that moulds the body in the same way that light moulds a work of sculpture, adopting a strict protocol that inscribes the animal within the camera's black rectangle. He makes the poses vary whilst seeming to carefully avoid the eye of his models as if he wished one to question the state—natural or naturalised—of their soul, the vision of their reality or fiction. Like La Fontaine, who in his *Fables* describes animals in order to more clearly evoke human beings, here, Goh shows us portraits of the proud, the vain, the timid and the gentle, the temperamental, the peaceful and the lazy. In short, he portrays the community of cocks in a way that provides us with the opportunity of reflecting on ourselves. At no time does he reveal them in any dangerously aggressive mood, for all their would-be valour, for he considers these small creatures as his friends, indeed as his brothers, brothers with whom he shares the affection that they deserve.

*Translated from the French by Kevin J. M. Keane*

*Agnès de Gouvion Saint-Cyr is a curator of photography and art critic in Paris. She was inspector general for photography at the Ministry of Culture and Communication, and artistic director of the Rencontres d'Arles in 1990.*



## Neither Fish nor Fowl

by Ernest Goh

My interest in animals was nurtured while growing up in my grandmother's kampung in 1980's Singapore—a very different time and place from today's concrete jungle. As my boyhood ended, I left that life behind, but rediscovered my passion for animals when I worked on *The Fish Book*. Photographing fish was a real eye-opener. I found each of them to be different, and not just in terms of shape, size and species. My encounter with each was different, and I came to know them as individuals. Some were livelier than others, some were more camera-shy, but all had facial expressions of some form—elated, grumpy, excited or confused. From behind the camera, they seemed to be showing a gamut of emotions.

Since the publication of *The Fish Book*, I've photographed orang-utans in the forests of Sumatra and come face-to-face with snakes in the home of a reptile researcher. The experience made me realise how our perception of animals could be changed simply by getting to know them as individuals.

For this book on cocks and other fowls, I again chose portraiture to capture their liveliness by setting up a photo studio on location. The main motivation was to discover *who* they were and not *what* they were.

Among the chickens pictured in *Cocks* are a special breed known as Ayam Serama. "Ayam" is the Malay word for "chicken"

while Serama is the name given to this breed, considered to be the smallest in the world. The Serama originated from Malaysia through the crossbreeding of Japanese and Malaysian bantams but stories tell of a Thai king who gave some small chickens to a Malay sultan. The modern breed was thus named Serama, after Rama, the title of kings in Thailand.

The breeding of Serama as pets has become more popular in the last decade. Serama breeding clubs have emerged in Indonesia, Thailand, the US and even European countries such as Britain and France. Malaysia is the hub of this cultural phenomenon. The Serama have often been mistaken for fighting cocks—a common misconception because most people tend to associate any rooster competition with the cruel sport of cockfighting. Serama competitions are in fact a beauty contest. Held almost every week in different villages in Malaysia, the competition sees judges sitting around a square table to inspect each chicken for a few minutes, trying to determine a champion specimen in its own weight class based on its stance, showmanship and physical assets like wings, tails and comb.

At first, it was strange to see chickens showily display themselves like peafowls. But only after observing the Serama did I start to understand the uniqueness of this animal, as well as why Serama owners often regard their chickens as warriors ready for battle. In certain stances, the Serama stood with its head lifted skyward, chest puffed up and wings pointed downward in a vertical manner, resembling a proud soldier standing at attention. The Serama can also effortlessly prance, strut and parade, in full pomp and pageantry. From the perspective of a photographer, the Serama seems more like a runway model!

Pet owners tend to anthropomorphise their pets and even treat them as members of the family. This is true of many cat and dog owners. In fact, this experience of closeness is prevalent across all human-animal relationships, whether the animals are domesticated or not.

British broadcaster and naturalist Sir David Attenborough once said: “People are not going to care about animal conservation unless they think that animals are worthwhile.” I have met farmers who name and pat their pigs, and conservationists who hug and talk to their research subjects. They form long-term relationships with the animals that see both human and animal benefit from an exchange of affection. Perhaps to the human, these benefits are emotional, academic or economic. Whatever the reason, they all think their animals are worthy of care and protection and that they are not just merely animals or in my case, not just a fish or a fowl.











# Pukku, the Chicken Man

by Mohamad Tahar Jumaat

You may call him the Chicken Man.

Fifty-two-year-old Tuan Hassan has devoted his life to breeding chickens, though not the ones that appear on dinner tables. Tuan Hassan, or Pukku to his family and friends, is a master breeder of a beloved Malaysian icon—the Ayam Serama, a type of bantam chicken prized for their upright posture, full breast and flowing tail feathers.

So admired are these qualities that breeding the perfect specimen has become a hobby for many in Malaysia. The Ayam Serama compete in beauty contests held around the country, attracting aficionados in the hundreds. A potential champion is highly sought after. In 2005, an Ayam Serama named Kijang Mas changed hands for a tidy sum of RM35,000, a record that still stands today.

As a result, successful breeders may make a good living, and Pukku is one of the best. At eight, Pukku fell in love with the Ayam Serama when his Muay Thai teacher gave him a Serama bird as a birthday gift. Since then, he has turned his hobby into a lucrative business, thanks in part to the spike in interest in the Ayam Serama as an investment after the 1997 Asian financial crisis.

Financial security aside, breeding Serama has given Pukku many hours of joy. A beautiful bird needs a clean living environment and clean drinking water, he says. But because it is

smaller than the so-called kampung chicken that is bred for food, the Ayam Serama may be kept in a smaller enclosure. It also doesn't require as much food as a kampung chicken. One danger to guard against, however, is the rainy season—because of its shape, the Ayam Serama does not have a good sense of balance, and may easily drown in a deluge.

When a competition nears, the bird must be properly prepped. Just as some women—and men—go to salons to get their hair straightened through 'rebonding', the bird's feathers must also go through a beautifying process.

So, what is considered beautiful in an Ayam Serama? People's tastes change over time, Pukku says. An active chicken with an S-shaped body is prized today, but in the 1980s, a bird was valued for the beauty of its breast and its ability to stand still.

Once a community pastime, Ayam Serama competitions are now recognised as part of Malaysia's national heritage, with even the tourism ministry getting involved in promoting such events. Today, Pukku sells his birds to buyers from as far away as Australia, the US and Europe.

Pukku is grateful for the financial independence he has enjoyed, and hopes the government will continue to support the sport. The money he has made over the years has helped him buy land, build a house and put his children through university.

Perhaps one day, he says, his eldest son Tengku Muhammad Ikram will follow in his footsteps. But for now, he will focus on breeding the most beautiful Ayam Serama anyone has seen. "As long as the demand for them is there, I will continue to do this," he says.

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Reared and groomed by dedicated owners for participation in pageants, ornamental chickens, including the impressive Malaysian breed of Ayam Serama, project a natural and seemingly effortless charisma rivalling that of human models. Ernest Goh's award-winning portraits capture the full range of these beautiful birds' personalities: puffed chests, ruffled plumage, bowed heads and all. By turns provocative, humorous and surprising, *Cocks* will move you to view our humble feathered friends in an entirely different light.

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