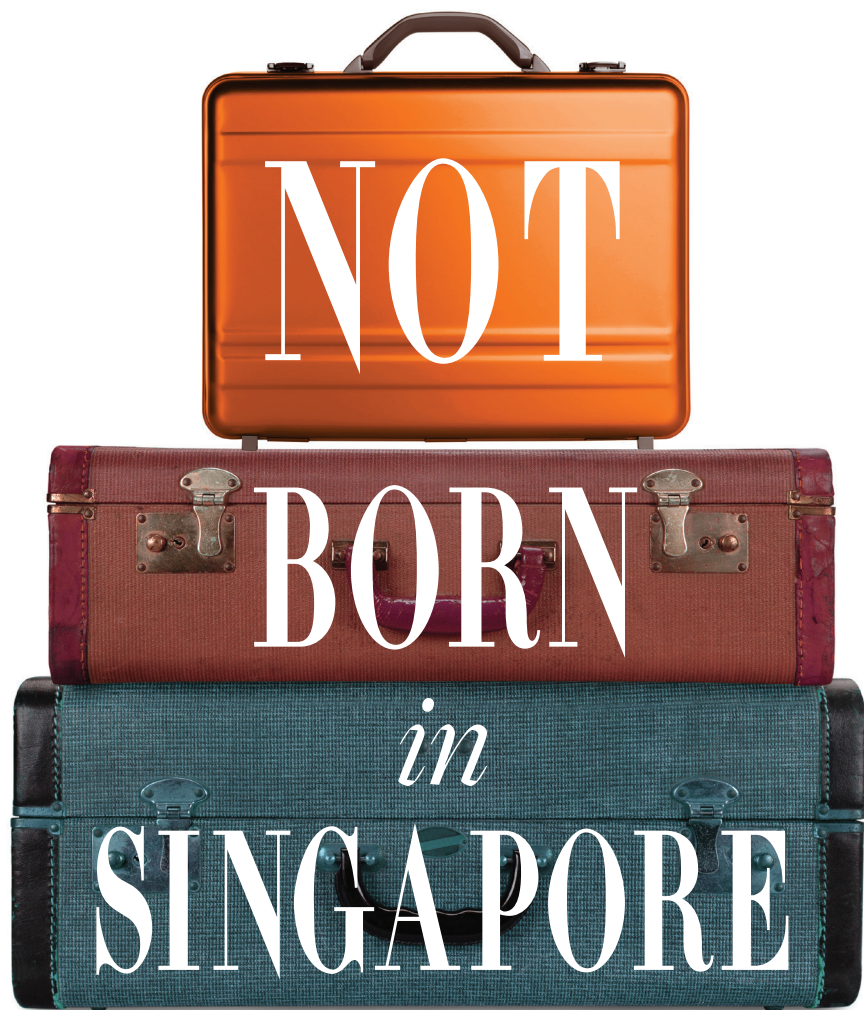


TNG YING HUI



FIFTY PERSONALITIES WHO SHAPED THE NATION

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SPORTS

Aleksandar Duric

YUGOSLAVIA

—
Feng Tianwei

CHINA

—
Jing Junhong

CHINA

—
Ronald Susilo

INDONESIA

—
Tao Li

CHINA

ALEKSANDAR DURIC

Scoring for Singapore

Former Yugoslav Aleksandar Duric won his first cap for Singapore in 2007. That year, he also scored two goals in a football match against Tajikistan to send Singapore into the third round of the 2010 FIFA World Cup qualifiers—for the very first time.

Playing football professionally was never on the cards for Aleksandar Duric. At 15, he was the junior kayaking champion of Yugoslavia. At 17, he had climbed to eighth in the world. So it came as no surprise when he was picked to represent his country, Bosnia and Herzegovina, in canoeing at the 1992 Barcelona Olympics. But his joy was tempered by the civil war in his country, which forced him to seek refuge abroad. After the Olympics, he went to Hungary, dumping canoeing for the better-paying sport of football. But it took time to impress the Hungarians.

In the meantime, Duric suffered a personal tragedy. His mother was killed in an artillery attack in 1993, during the Bosnian War. To get by, he became an illegal moneychanger, dodging both the crime syndicates and the police for three years. “I was hungry. I didn’t have a job and a future. I was ashamed to do it,” he recalled with a furrowed brow. In 1994, a friend in Australia invited him to try out for South Melbourne Hellas, one of Australia’s largest clubs. They were looking for “a tall strong player” who could

“play in different positions.” So the 1.92m tall Bosnian left for Australia. By 1998, he was playing for West Adelaide and when it went bankrupt a year later, he moved to Singapore to play for the Tanjong Pagar United Football Club in the S-League, the Singapore professional football league.

At the end of the season, he returned to Australia and became a citizen there, hoping to play for their national team, the Socceroos. But in June 2000, he took up an offer from another club, Home United Football Club, and moved permanently to Singapore. By then, he had married Natasha, a Russian-Australian architectural engineering student. When his daughter Isabella was born in 2002 in Singapore, “it hit me that a part of my life is here,” said Duric. So in 2006, he applied for citizenship but was rejected. Friends thought he was “mad” to give up his Australian citizenship but he persevered. On his third attempt, he became a Singaporean in 2007. “The only thing that would stop me is if the application fee was as steep as \$1,000,” he quipped. Very soon after in November that year, Duric won his first cap for Singapore. He was then playing for the Warriors, the Singapore Armed Forces Football Club. The club’s general manager Kok Wai Leong asked to speak to him. Duric thought it would be a “casual conversation”. Instead, Duric was handed a letter and told that it was his “call-up for the national team”.

He crowned his national debut with two goals against Tajikistan in the 2010 FIFA World Cup qualifiers, which sent Singapore into the third round—a first for the country. In 2008, he captained Singapore in a friendly against Bahrain, becoming the first foreign-born player to start a game as skipper. During the 2012 ASEAN Football Federation Suzuki Cup, Duric scored the winning goal against Malaysia, drubbing Singapore’s arch-rival on their turf 3-0. Singapore went on to win the Cup and Duric retired from



Aleksandar Duric
Yugoslavia, b.1970

international competition. He was 42 years old and had racked up 24 goals in 53 international appearances for Singapore.

In 2014, Duric played his last club match for the Tampines Rovers. He entered the game at half-time and scored a goal in the 73rd minute against Brunei's Duli Pengiran Muda Mahkota (DPMM) Football Club. That night he left the field victorious, but emotional about leaving the team. By then, he had won eight league titles, three Singapore Cups, three Player of the Year honours, four top scorer awards and was on the way to becoming the league's all-time top scorer. Today, he is the assistant coach at the Tampines Rovers, a job he has described cheekily as "man-managing 25 babies". He still wakes up before dawn to run 15 kilometres each day. In 2011, Duric adopted a seven-day old Muslim boy, whom he and his wife named Massimo, from a children's home in Singapore where he has been volunteering for over a decade. He has two older children, Isabella and Alessandro. Duric said Singapore reminds him of his childhood village of Dobo, which was small, multi-religious and tight-knit. There, he celebrated Eid al-Fitr and Christmas with his neighbours. Singaporeans take time to warm up, he said, pointing out that neighbours have looked "shocked" when he greets them in the morning. "But that is until they open up," he continued, "then they say 'let's go to this festival and this night market.' In the end, it just needs more effort on my side."

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FENG TIANWEI

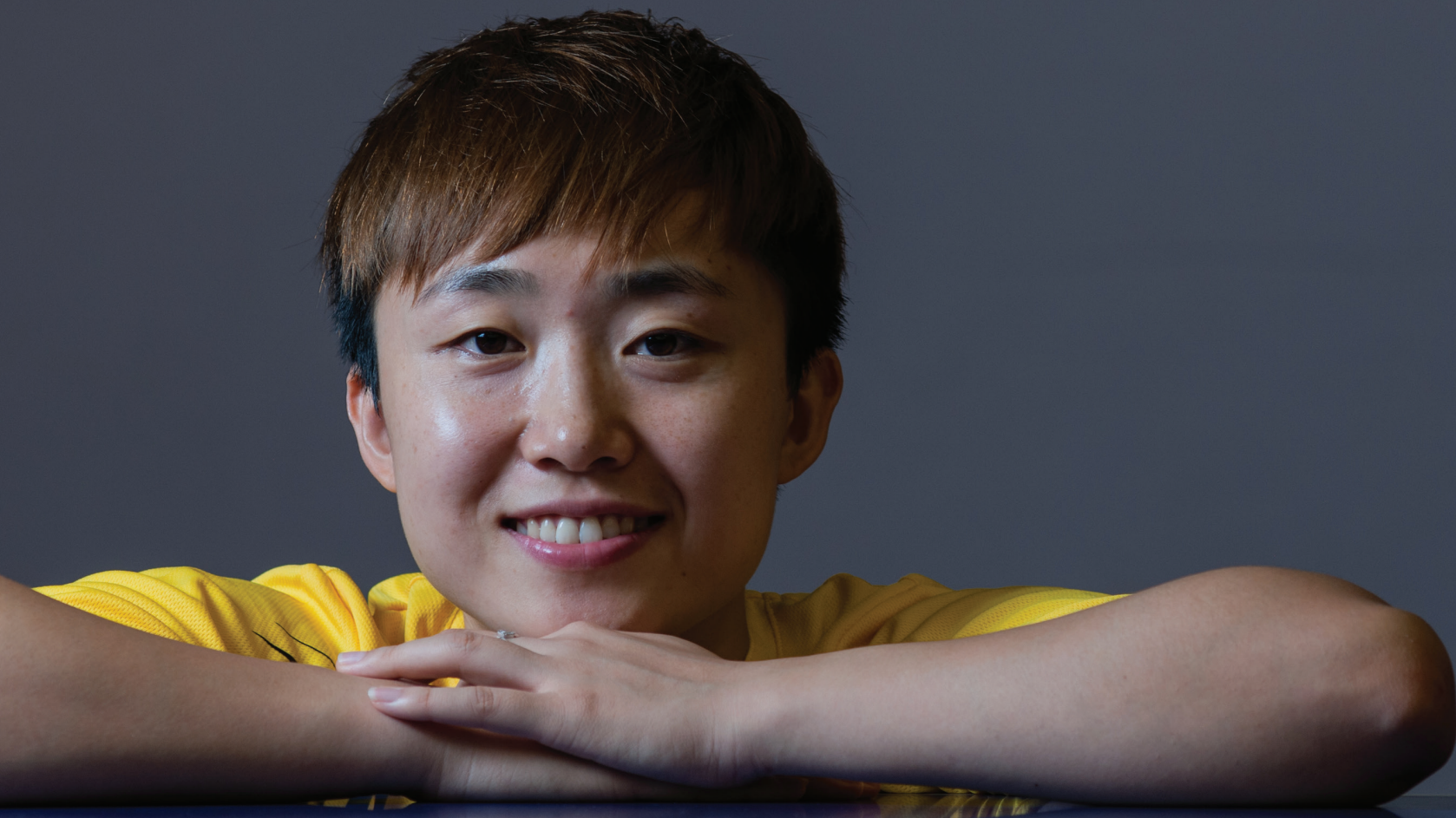
"Cool" Olympic Medallist

The captain of Singapore's women's table tennis team is China-born Feng Tianwei. In 2012, she became the second Singaporean after 52 years to win an individual medal at the Olympics.

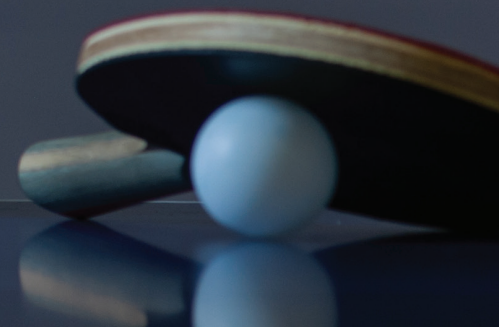
Feng Tianwei has fans who wait for her at the airport to welcome her home, and a fan club on Facebook with more than 9,600 "likes". She is described by fans as "cool", and her quiet confidence and never-say-die attitude are much admired by the young. She succeeds Jing Junhong in continuing Singapore's achievements in table tennis.

Born in 1986, Feng began playing table tennis when she was five. She left home at the age of 10 to train at the Heilongjiang Sports School where all her team-mates were male and four years older. Her experiences in her teenage years were formative—she sparred with the older boys at the sports school, honing her competitive streak and ability to go in for the killer serve. At 16, Feng trained with the national youth team in Beijing and was about to compete in the national youth championships when her father died. She won the singles title nonetheless, demonstrating sheer perseverance and resilience.

While Feng played for the Chinese national team for two years, she never got to represent China in international competitions. Her performance was persistently bogged down by myocarditis,



Feng Tianwei
China, b.1986



an inflammation of the heart muscle. Feng's breakthrough came about when Liu Guodong, who was then the coach of the Singapore table tennis team, talent-spotted her in 2007.

Feng arrived in Singapore later that year. She was 21. Homesickness was not a problem as she was used to living away from home since the age of 10. But she found it hard to get used to the food, which she found spicier than what she had eaten in China. Feng became a Singaporean in 2008 and these days, she spends her time indulging in food the same way other Singaporeans do in their spare time. "I eat and shop on other days. I love chilli crab and will try all kinds of local dishes," she said.

At the Moscow World Team Championships in 2010, Feng played against world number one paddler, Ding Ning, to whom she had lost in all her previous encounters. During the game, Feng lost the first two sets but fought back in the next three sets to win Singapore's first World Championship title.

In 2012, she clinched a bronze medal at the London Olympics, ending Singapore's 52-year dry spell. Ranked eighth in the world then, Feng beat world number six Kasumi Ishikawa in a swift 25 minutes. She was crowned the Sportswoman of the Year for the second time in 2013. In an interview with Chinese broadcaster CCTV after the Olympics, Feng said she was satisfied with her performance but would continue to achieve more, especially in the singles game. She said she expected to do better at the 2016 Olympics in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

Coach Jing Junhong said Feng's strength as a player is her ability to handle stress, which was evident at the 2015 Asian Cup. Feng trumped her arch-rival, Liu Shiwen, to whom she had lost six out of their previous nine meetings. Though she was not confident of winning, Feng held her ground during the game and

pressured the world number three into losing two sets to four.

Despite her toughness on the court, Feng has been suffering from chronic knee problems and admits that she does get anxious before an international game. In the 2015 Southeast Asian Games held in Singapore in June, Feng was eliminated from the table tennis singles after she suffered a shock 3-1 loss to a Thai player. She cut a downcast figure afterwards but fought her way back to help claim the gold medal during the women's team event against Thailand.

Feng's fans continue to support her. She boasts over one million followers on the Chinese microblogging site Weibo. Her Weibo user profile has just one line: "Love life, but live without vanity." In Feng's words, that means living life to the fullest, and doing so peacefully.

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JING JUNHONG

Three-time Sportswoman of the Year

China-born Jing Junhong has won many table tennis accolades for Singapore, becoming a three-time Sportswoman of the Year. Today, she is a coach at the Singapore Table Tennis Association (STTA), grooming the next generation of champions.

China's number three table tennis player never thought of emigrating to Singapore—until she met the love of her life. In 1988, Jing Junhong fell in love with Singapore paddler, Loy Soo Han, when he went to Shanghai for training. After marrying Loy, she came to Singapore in 1992. Today, Jing is the head coach of the national women's team.

Jing wanted to be a stay-at-home mother. That was not to be the case. After moving here, the first game she played for Singapore was the Vietnam Golden Racket Championships in 1992. "At that time I thought to just try since Vietnam is so close," Jing said. Despite not having competed for the past year, Jing nailed a gold medal by trumping the best players from Korea and Hong Kong. Taking up her team-mates' advice, she did not hang up her bat and led two young players to the 1993 World Table Tennis Championships in Sweden.

In Gothenburg, Jing scored a stunning win against the world number one, Deng Yaping, who had until then an unbeatable track record. Her triumph made waves and rekindled Jing's passion for the sport. She said, "People started asking 'Where is Singapore?' and 'Does Singapore have a table tennis team?'" Curious to find out about the player who beat Deng, Juan Antonio Samaranch, the 7th president of the International Olympics Committee, stopped by the STTA to meet Jing when passing through Singapore. The STTA was in bare bones then. Most of the players played part-time and the staff were made up of volunteers. Jing was the only full-time player. But the camaraderie and enthusiasm of the players were infectious. "I thought I could lead the team to do better," said Jing, who obtained Singapore citizenship in 1994. And that was how she set her heart on playing table tennis for Singapore. The Singapore team recorded one of its finest results at the Commonwealth Table Tennis Championships in Glasgow in 1997. Jing won gold at the individual and doubles games at a time when "no Singapore team had won the team event at an international competition", she said.

Jing was entirely devoted to playing the game. Almost immediately after she gave birth to her son, Darren, in 1998, she rejoined the team to train for the Southeast Asian Games, which was to be held a year later. Instead of boarding with her team-mates, which competitive players do when preparing for major competitions, Jing shuttled between Changi, where they trained, and Hougang, where she lived. She insisted on going home to be with Darren even though training sessions started at 9am and ended at 7pm. "I really regretted coming back to play at that time. I'd rather have stayed home to look after my child," the veteran paddler said. Once, overwrought by the stress of the upcoming Games and with Darren taking ill, Jing



Jing Junhong
China, b.1968

sharply rebutted her coach, who had insisted on extra training hours. She said, “I need to go home now, but I will win that gold medal!” True enough, she won gold in the women’s team and doubles events at the 1999 Southeast Asian Games. Given the achievements she had attained thus far, many were hoping for the long-awaited medal at the 2000 Sydney Olympics. But Jing missed out on the bronze medal and came in fourth.

In 2009, Jing decided to stay on with the team as a coach. She said, “Without someone to lead them, they don’t know what they can achieve. When they are under a lot of stress, I tell them my experiences and they become more confident.” Jing’s players recognise her commitment and sacrifices. National paddler Feng Tianwei said, “She has a family to look after, but she still travels with us for competitions.” Jing’s son, Darren, a student at Republic Polytechnic, is in the national Intermediate Squad. When he was younger, he did not want Jing to coach him, but “now he has realised that his mother is in fact quite a good coach,” Jing joked. To honour her achievements, Jing was given the Sportswoman of the Year thrice—in 1997, 1998 and 2000. Jing’s moniker is “queen of table tennis”, but she says categorically that the title is “out-of-date” as she is no longer competing. Her focus is on grooming the next generation of table tennis stars. During the 2015 Southeast Asian Games, Jing was able to lead paddlers Feng Tianwei and Isabelle Li to win the team event even though they were beaten in the singles earlier. Under Jing’s guidance, the women’s table tennis team is currently ranked third in the world.

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Interview with Jing Junhong in May 2015.

“Foreigners who come to Singapore can enhance or diminish those of us who are local-born. Naturally, we welcome those who enhance us. And there have been many—many more than the 50 included in this interesting book. I must include my mother whom my father married in China. We can be a great city only if our doors remain open to them.”

— Former Foreign Affairs Minister George Yeo

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