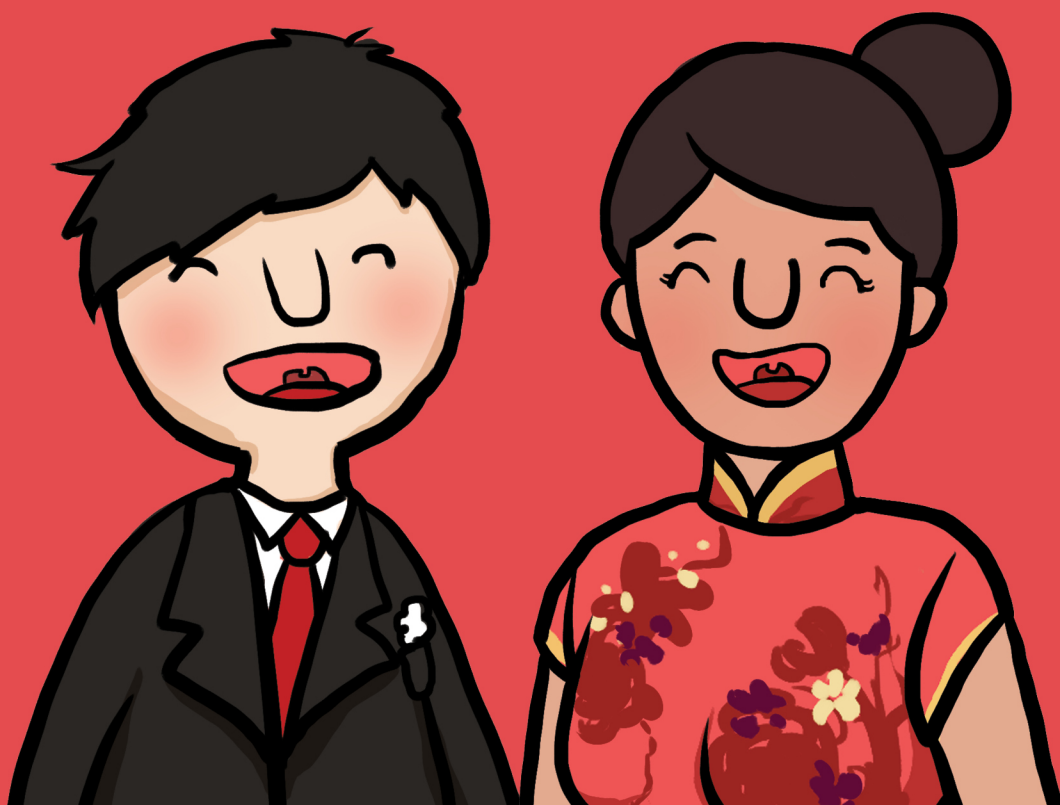


Understanding Singaporeans

# WHY DO THE CHINESE SHOUT YAM SENG?

*and Other Questions*



**Understanding Singaporeans**

**Why Do the Chinese Shout Yam Seng?**

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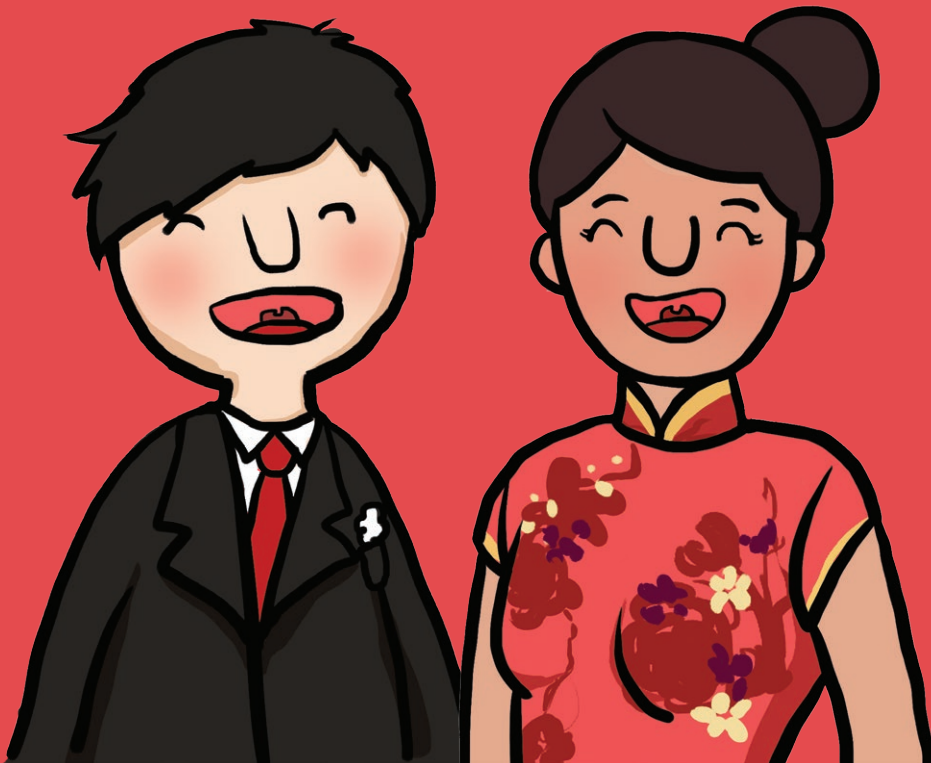
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**EDMUND WEE**

ILLUSTRATED BY CHEE JIA YI



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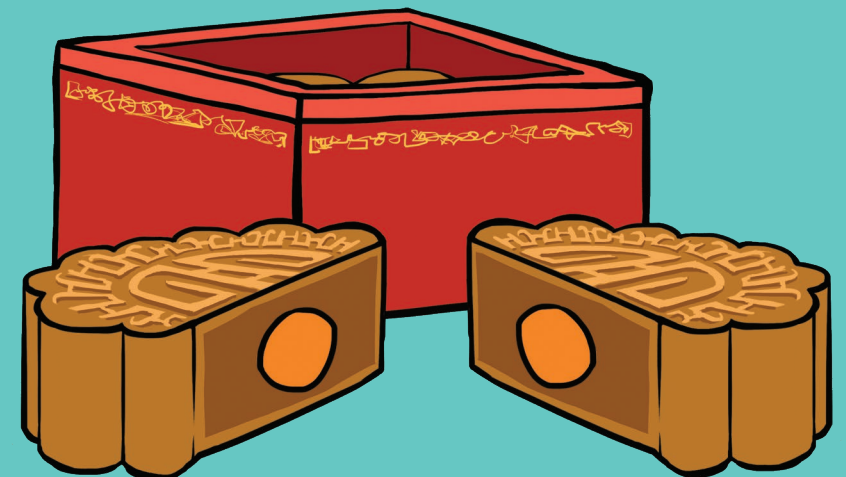


# INTRODUCTION

The Chinese are one of the four main races in Singapore. The others are the Malays, Indians and Eurasians.

Among the Chinese, there are Hokkiens, Teochews, Cantonese, Hainanese, Hakkas and others. They come from different dialect groups but do have some common practices.

This book answers twenty questions a young Singaporean might ask about Chinese traditions, beliefs and festivals.



# THE 20 QUESTIONS



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# WHAT LANGUAGES DO THE CHINESE SPEAK?



Many people who speak Chinese in Singapore now use Mandarin. “Ni hao!” That means “hello!” in Mandarin.

Some of them also speak the dialect of the region in China where their grandparents or great-grandparents first came from. The main dialects are Hokkien, Teochew, Cantonese, Hainanese and Hakka.

## *DID YOU KNOW?*

A Chinese dialect uses the same writing system as Mandarin, but the words can sound very different when spoken. Hokkien is the most common dialect in Singapore.



## WHY DO CHINESE WORDS LOOK LIKE DRAWINGS?

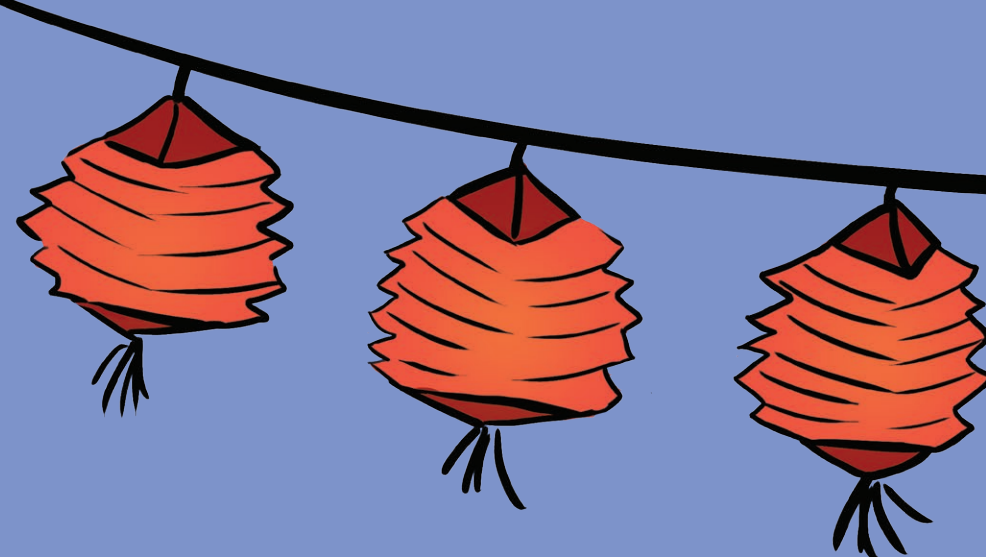
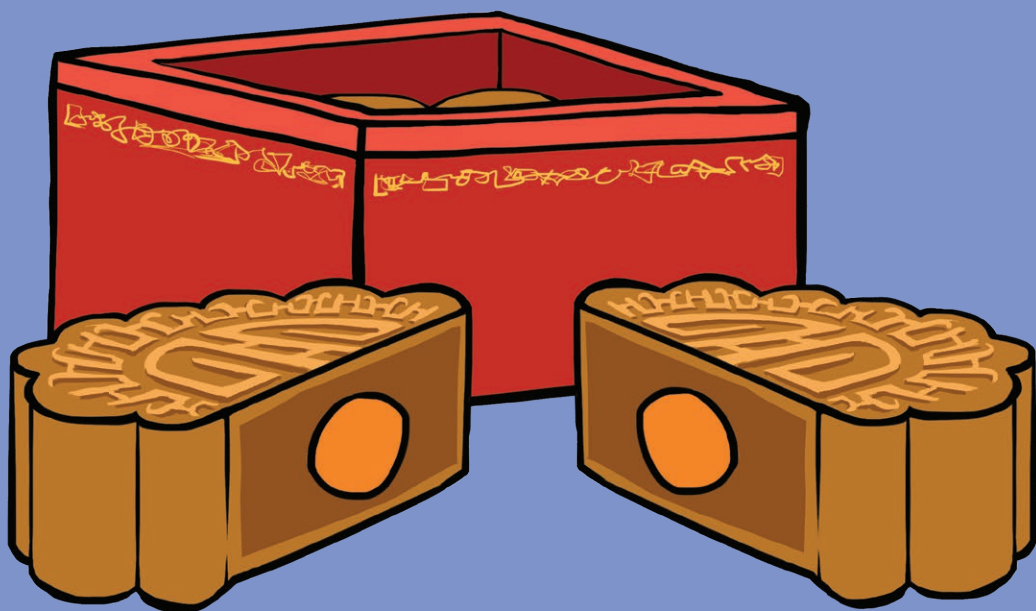
A long time ago, the Chinese drew symbols, or characters, to look like what they mean. For example, the word for “water” looks like flowing water. Over time, some Chinese words have changed.

Look at the characters on the left. Does the first one look like an elephant? That was how the Chinese wrote “elephant” in the old days. Today, the character looks quite different, but the elephant trunk is still there.





## DO MOONCAKES HAVE ANYTHING TO DO WITH THE MOON?



Sort of. Mooncakes are eaten during the Mid-Autumn Festival which falls on a night with a full moon.

Mooncakes are sweet pastries usually filled with lotus seed paste. These days you can also find durian or chocolate inside. Luckily, mooncakes do not contain moon rocks!

### *DID YOU KNOW?*

The Mid-Autumn Festival is also called the Lantern Festival. Today, families buy paper lanterns with electric lights inside and take walks outside at night, under the full moon.



WHY IS THE  
POMELO  
EATEN  
DURING THE  
MID-AUTUMN  
FESTIVAL?



The pomelo is round like a full moon. For the Mid-Autumn Festival, families eat pomelo and mooncakes.

In Mandarin, the pomelo is called “you zi”, which sounds like the words for “to have a son”. So pomelos are bought by couples wishing for a son.



# WHY DO CHINESE FAMILIES EAT TANG YUAN TOGETHER?



Tang yuan are balls of sticky rice flour filled with peanut or sesame paste. The sweet treats are served in soup or syrup.

They are usually eaten during festivals or when families get together. The Chinese say the round shape of the snack represents reunions.

Families might eat tang yuan on Dong Zhi, which marks the start of winter. The Chinese believe that when you eat tang yuan on Dong Zhi, you grow a year older! These days, tang yuan can be eaten at any time and can be found at some hawker centres.



# WHY WON'T THE CHINESE GIVE SHOES AND CLOCKS?



In Mandarin, the word for “shoes” is “xie” and the word for “evil” is also “xie”. Eek!

The phrase “to give a clock” is “song zhong” in Mandarin. “Song zhong” is also how you say “to attend a funeral”.

So for the Chinese, to give shoes and clocks sounds like giving people bad things.

## *DID YOU KNOW?*

A flower vase makes a good gift, because it is called “hua ping”, which sounds like “peace”.

# HOW DO YOU SAY...?

*(In Mandarin)*

<b>Hello!</b>	Ni hao!
<b>How are you?</b>	Ni hao ma?
<b>Friend</b>	Peng you
<b>Good morning</b>	Zao
<b>Good night</b>	Wan an
<b>Thank you</b>	Xie xie
<b>Goodbye</b>	Zai jian

# WHAT DOES ... MEAN?

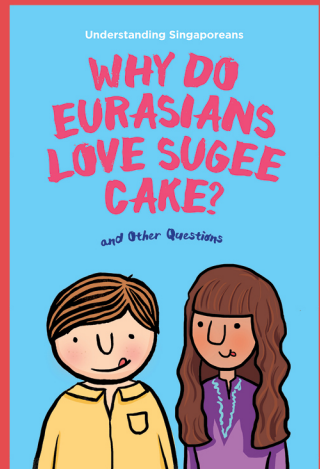
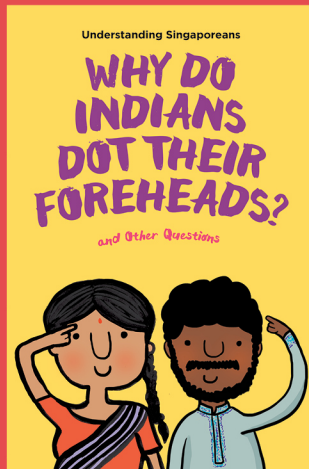
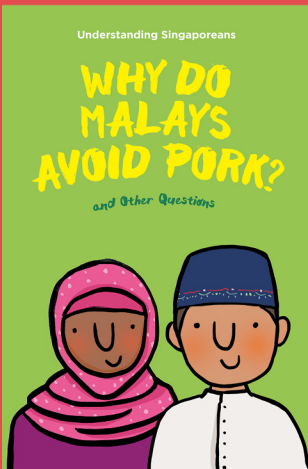
<b>Ang ku kueh</b>	red tortoise cake (Teochew)
<b>Ang pao</b>	red money packet for Chinese New Year (Hokkien)
<b>Changshan</b>	top for a man
<b>Cheongsam</b>	dress for a woman
<b>Dong Zhi</b>	festival marking the start of winter
<b>Getai</b>	song stage for Hungry Ghost Festival
<b>Hong bao</b>	red money packet for Chinese New Year
<b>Hua ping</b>	flower vase
<b>Qing Ming</b>	Tomb Sweeping Festival
<b>Qipao</b>	dress for a woman
<b>Song zhong</b>	to give a clock or to attend a funeral
<b>Tang yuan</b>	sticky rice balls in soup
<b>Xie</b>	shoes or evil
<b>Yam seng</b>	to drink to success (Cantonese)
<b>You zi</b>	pomelo

Why do the Chinese eat noodles at wedding dinners?  
Why do they hang blankets in HDB void decks during  
a funeral wake? Why is Chinatown called “bullock cart water”?

We provide the answers—and useful tips—to some of  
the most-asked questions young Singaporeans might have  
about the Chinese.

This book is part of a fun series about the Chinese, Malays,  
Indians and Eurasians. Each handbook uses twenty questions  
to highlight diversity and promote understanding of the  
different races in Singapore.

### Understanding Singaporeans Series



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