




THE
FISH
BOOK

Ernest Goh

Introduction by Kenny Yap



Ernest Goh's close encounters with these freshwater creatures of the slimy-scaly kind began in the longkangs around the Siglap kampong where he spent much of his early childhood. Armed with nothing but empty milk tins and his bare hands, he scooped up whatever went past—tadpoles, guppies and the occasional frog. Prized possessions they were then. Today, they continue to fascinate millions of hobbyists worldwide, turning Singapore into the world's ornamental fish capital; the island accounts for 24 per cent of world exports and over 40 per cent of the Asian market. For Ernest, this book is his homage to the humble longkang fish for ensuring his childhood world went beyond late-afternoon television cartoons and school textbooks.

Cover: Flowerhorn Cichlid/ *Hybrid cichlids*
Flap: Red Oranda/ *Carassius auratus*

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First Edition
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To Ma, for everything

A Thing of Beauty, a Joy Forever

I can still remember buying my first goldfish for 50 cents with savings from my pocket money. I was seven years old. I happily took it home, broken tail and all. To me it was a thing of beauty.

Since then, the colourful world of freshwater fish has been my pride and joy. I am known amongst my friends and in the business world as Kenny The Fish. Perhaps this is not unexpected having been raised in a family that rears and exports ornamental fish for a living.

Hobbyists often ask me what makes a good fish. My answer is that a good fish is simply one that you like. It does not matter what is the latest trend, or whether your fish has any imperfections. The true hobbyist does not go with the flow. Take those who rear Dragon Fish, for example. They continue to stay true to their faithful Dragon Fish no matter what is popular at the time. The adage “beauty lies in the eyes of the beholder” has never been more apt than in the case of ornamental fish.

For centuries, keeping ornamental fish has brought pleasure to people young and old, all over the globe. Fish keeping in Southeast Asia was greatly influenced by the first wave of Chinese traders and immigrants into the region in the mid 19th century. The keeping of *pla kat* or fighting fish in Siam (Thailand today) started before the 19th century when locals kept them for fighting competitions. It became so popular that the King of Siam started licensing and collecting these amazing fish.

Recent research has shown that the companionship and unconditional love and support that pets provide are truly invaluable. Case studies all over the world have also shown that pets can even help their owners recover and recuperate from serious illnesses.

Apart from these reasons, ornamental fish are simply a sight to behold—the plethora of shapes, colours and personalities provides the lens with an endless source of images to capture. Little wonder then that the beauty of these aquatic creatures has fascinated millions of hobbyists around the world.

In this book Ernest Goh has successfully married his obsession for ornamental fish and his love for photography. The result of this happy union of passions is this beautiful book.

Ernest first contacted me sometime last year for permission to photograph some of the fish at our farm. I readily agreed as I have always admired his unique style of photography, but more importantly, his passion for ornamental fish.

As a stakeholder in the ornamental fish industry, it is my hope that this book will inspire you to be a responsible hobbyist. If you are not yet an enthusiast, may it stir you to run to your nearest aquarium.

May I close by finishing the tale I began in my opening paragraph. When I arrived home with the 50-cent goldfish with the broken tail, my older brothers teased me for spending good money on a flawed creature. But I was not disheartened. I simply shrugged off their comments. To me, the goldfish was beautiful, broken tail and all. As long as I liked the fish, the opinions of others did not bother me. I did not realise it then, but it was this attitude that later helped me become an entrepreneur. Entrepreneurs often take risks, or go against conventional wisdom. If we allow ourselves to be side tracked by other people’s disapproval or opinions, we are doomed to fail.

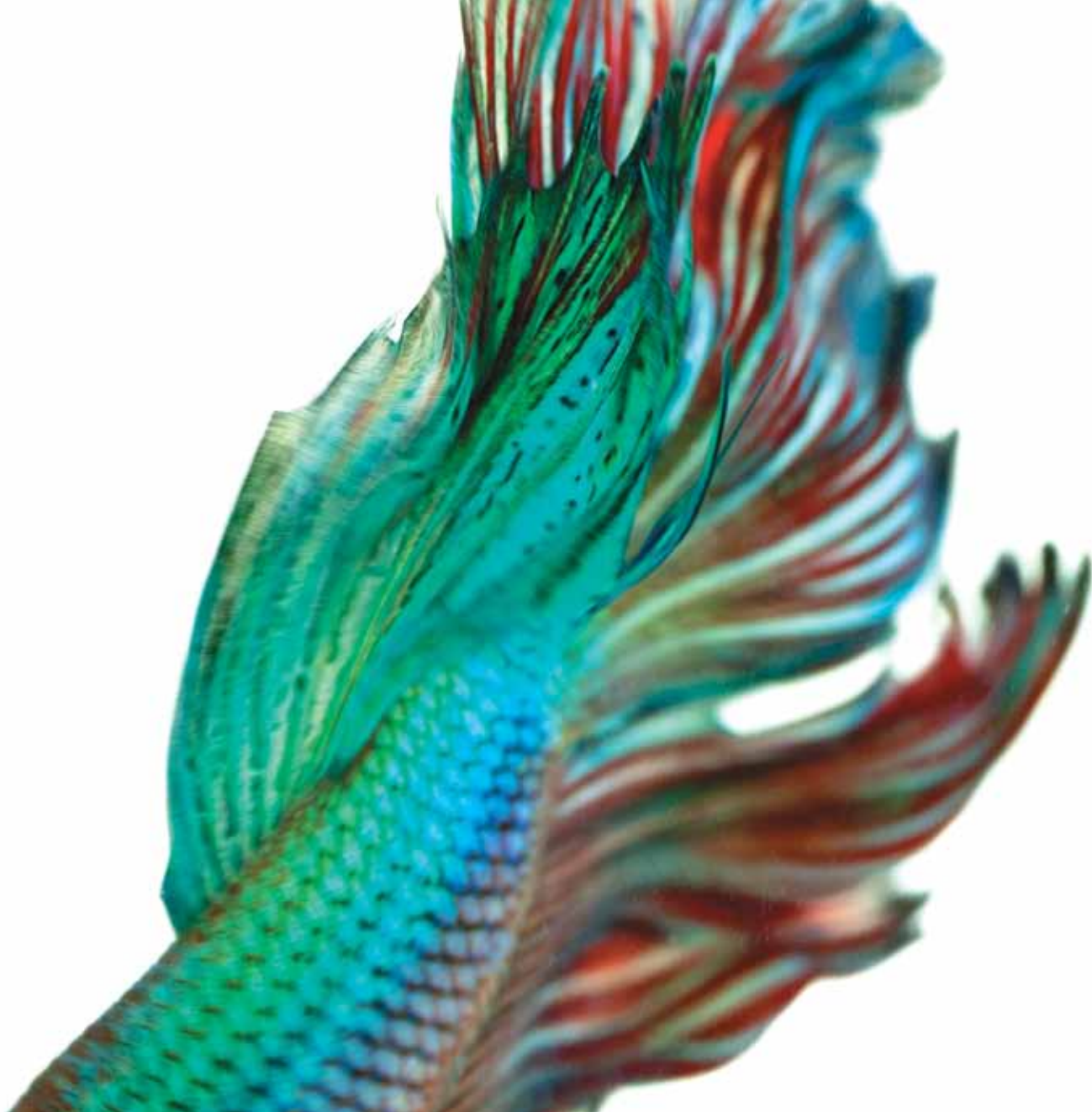


Kenny “The Fish” Yap
Executive Chairman and Managing Director
Qian Hu Corporation



The Fish Book

















Catching Longkang Fish

On the hunt for a subject to photograph for a project, I serendipitously stepped into a local pet store. That instant, I was drawn to a Siamese fighting fish swimming gracefully in its small tank. Inspired, I sought to capture this mini “dance” the same way I would capture a ballerina’s grace.

I got to work immediately. A suitable tank was found, a white backdrop fashioned, and lights were propped. The danseur certainly did not disappoint—on the contrary, I came away with unexpectedly stunning details of the subject’s rainbow-hued scales and fins. This changed my perception of ornamental fish forever—where I had seen them as purely decorative pets, they were now creatures with beauty and personality.

Hooked, I proceeded to raid my father’s fish pond and “kidnapped” first the guppies and then the mollies for portraiture. When that was not enough, I realised I needed to work with a fish farm to continue the series.

And who better to approach than the man whose name has become synonymous with ornamental fish in Singapore—Kenny Yap, executive chairman and managing director of Qian Hu, a world-renowned company in the ornamental fish industry. It is a little known fact that Singapore is the largest exporter of ornamental fish in the world.

Kenny responded with a positive reply within minutes of receiving my strange email request and I proceeded to take fish portraits on his farm in the following months. At one of my many shoots, I chanced upon a series of winding, man-made longkangs (drains). In the longkangs were hundreds of small fish of different shapes, colours and species. And around the longkang were eager children bent over with their nets and buckets. That then jogged memories of my own childhood and I realised where my fascination with fish had come from.

My close encounter with the slimy-scaly-kind happened in the early days of my childhood—catching fish in longkangs. This was in the early Eighties and young families such as ours had moved into high-rise buildings. But I had the opportunity to get a taste of kampong life in Siglap

where my grandmother lived. She looked after me from time to time and Po Po, as I affectionately called my grandmother, would let me roam the kampong freely as long as I was within earshot. Po Po had a voice like a siren so I could roam far and wide. The kampong was my oyster.

Apart from hanging out at the makeshift provision shop below the huge banyan tree, our days were spent squatting next to a smallish stream in front of Po Po’s house. There, armed with empty milk tins, my little friends and I scooped up whatever swam past with our bare hands—tadpoles, guppies and the occasional frog. We cradled the fish one by one in our little grubby palms and ogled them. Some of us sold them to the neighbourhood pet shop while others took them home as prized possessions to be admired.

Now, our little ones have iPads and netbooks in their palms. The days of being close to nature are disappearing and along with them, our ability to appreciate nature up close and personal. One can argue that the award-winning Singapore Zoo and the well-trimmed parks painstakingly maintained by the National Parks make up for that. But great as they are, parks hardly come close to inspiring that sense of exploration and self-discovery one gets while peeling leaves off bushes for spiders and scooping up fish with bare hands.

Over time, this body of work has become a personal endeavour to pay homage to the humble longkang fish for taking my childhood world beyond late afternoon TV cartoons and school textbooks. And it is only now that I realise the absence of fancy toys in my childhood had not been a disadvantage. Instead, I had had the privilege of being able to wander into the pockets of kampong wilderness.

Po Po, stubborn as she was, refused to budge from her zinc-roofed home till the bulldozers arrived quite literally at her doorstep. Perhaps we could learn from her and refuse to let technology bulldoze our relationship with nature.



Ernest Goh

Acknowledgements

Kenny Yap's steadfast support went beyond granting me access to Qian Hu's fish farm. His firm belief in me and the work, even before we met, encouraged me to pursue the idea from the beginning. And my sincere thanks to Jimmy Yap, Tan Boon Kee and the rest of the stupendous staff at Qian Hu who tirelessly assisted me during the photography sessions on the farm.

This body of work would not have gotten its kick start if not for my partnership with Panasonic Singapore and their Lumix G Series line of cameras. My sincere thanks to Daniel Tan for believing in that partnership and to Wilson Ang and Nicholas Chee who were instrumental in bringing us together.

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And lastly, but by no means least, to my Mom, Dad, my brother Emmanuel and my Aunt Annie for their unwavering love and support for what I do.

Ernest Goh has photographed throughout Asia: from the troubled Thai-Burmese border to the clinical hospitals of Singapore where SARS medical workers risked their lives. As a student, he was awarded the Singapore Press Holdings arts scholarship and later the Philips Design Award.

Describing his work as documenting human nature and sometimes both human and nature, Ernest strives to present the extraordinary in the everyday. In *Altered Land*, Ernest's on-going project documenting the aftermath of the 2004 Asian tsunami, he continues to focus on the effects of the disaster long after the international news media have moved on.

This is his first book.

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