

S'poreans' passion sparks rise of online lit journals



BY SARAH CHANG

TEN years ago, one brave soul decided that Singapore needed to have a presence in the sea of international online literary journals.

Toh Hsien Min, a bright-eyed graduate from Oxford University, then 26, took the path less travelled and plunged head-first into creating Singapore's first online literary journal, Quarterly Literary Review Singapore (QLRS).

There were earlier outlets for creative folk: The Poetry Billboard; The 2nd Rule; and The Flying Inkpot. But QLRS is the first full-fledged regular journal.

Aside from Toh, the founding editor, it is helmed by a non-profit volunteer collective comprising Cyril Wong, Yeow Kai Chai, Yong Shu Hoong and Alvin Pang, who also started The Poetry Billboard.

Looking back, Toh, who is a poet and a risk analyst, said that if he had known it would be so tough to keep the journal going, he would not have started it.

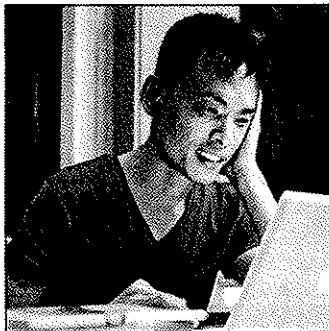
"I was young and foolish. Now, I am slightly older, but still slightly foolish. That's why I'm still on it," he said wryly.

The journal will celebrate its 10th birthday on Tuesday at the Glass Hall at the Singapore Art Museum, as part of the Singapore Writers Festival.

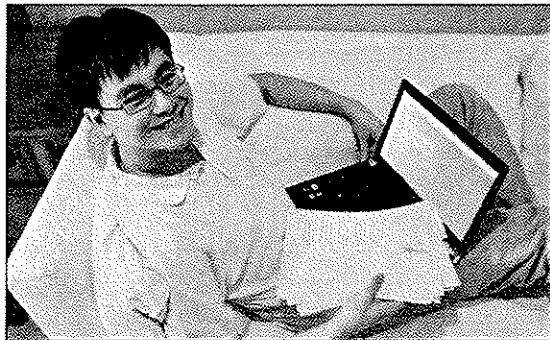
Toh is modest when it comes to the success and longevity of QLRS, saying that it was the Internet's wide reach that propelled the journal forward.

"The moment you put a review or short story on the site, you've essentially reached an unrestrained, massive audience. Your cultural production is no longer restrained by physical distribution," he said.

Modesty aside, QLRS has paved the way for a slew of online literary journals. One of them is Softblow, which is devoted



FOUNDERS: Toh Hsien Min (left) and Cyril Wong started QLRS and Softblow respectively. (PHOTOS: THE STRAITS TIMES, ONG WEE JIN)



NEW DIRECTIONS: Nicholas Liu's (left) Unswept will highlight critiques of literary works. Lee Yew Leong's Asymptote focuses on translations of works from all over the world. (PHOTOS: JAMIE KOH, THE NEW PAPER)

to poetry. It was founded in 2004 by QLRS co-editor Wong.

The 34-year-old operations manager at The Substation recalled the years running the site alone - he now has a co-editor - as stressful and nerve-racking.

But he feels that it's his duty to keep the journal going. "There are so many voices in this part of the world that need to be heard," he said.

Fast forward to 2011, and two more writers have hopped on the online-journal bandwagon.

In January, Lee Yew Leong, a poet and video-artist, founded Asymptote. The 34-year-old pitches it as an international journal, as he wants to move away from the idea that a home-grown journal must promote Singapore works exclusively.

Asymptote has featured writers of international acclaim, such as Haruki Murakami, and local politician Chen Show Mao.

It focuses on translations of works from all over the world, and has recently moved its base from Singapore to Taiwan.

"Singapore is still not a country (which) values its writers, let alone sees the value of literary journals," he said, citing the lack of institutional support as a reason for the move.

When asked if Asymptote can help carry works of Singaporeans forward, he said the journal has a simple aim: to gather the best in contemporary literature in one place.

Another new journal to look out for is Unswept, started by Nicholas Liu, a rising poet and a postgraduate student at Singapore Management University.

Liu has made his name in the literary circle for his incisive reviews of Singapore works for QLRS. Unswept, which aims to critique other literary works, is currently in production.

The 26-year-old, whose poet-

ry collection Versions From The English is coming out early next year, views it as an avenue for writers like him who are just starting out.

He said: "It can be very disheartening that it's the same big names getting published."

But he doesn't think that his journal should and must be a vessel to carry Singapore literature into the international scene.

"This idea that we want to promote ourselves to the world is immature. It's based on ideas that our works are not good enough, that we need foreigners to validate it. That's not healthy," he said.

In the meantime, QLRS is all set for its 10th-anniversary bash.

Toh said: "I cannot imagine that it has been 10 years, and that I am still doing this. But I guess we will keep going, as long as we are still relevant."

schang@sph.com.sg

一个好居处
不需讲究
环境卫生
只需加加手洗玻璃窗大小的根本，伊级就级利地安眠
替值，所以，别给以粗心，请每天采取天致五步，杜绝
伊级，保您住的家人免受细菌侵袭的威胁

AT WRITERS FEST

TAKE part in these Singapore Writers Festival events featuring writers mentioned in the main story.

◇ TOH HSIEEN MIN

The Quarterly Literary Review Singapore celebrates its 10th anniversary with words, wine and food at the Glass Hall, Singapore Art Museum, on Tuesday at 8pm. Admission is free. Poets like Gwee Li Sui, Grace Chua, Nicholas Liu and Daren Shiao will also be featured. Toh will also appear at the panel discussion, Masculinity And Poetry, at Singapore Management University on Sunday at 11.30am. Festival pass required.

◇ CYRIL WONG

Wong will read from his chapbook, You Cannot Count Smoke, at a free event at Singapore Management University on Saturday at 11.30am.

For more information and to buy festival passes, visit www.singaporewritersfestival.com

HELPLESK 我的字典

Online literary journal:
网上文学记录本
wǎng shàng wén xué jì lù běn

Longevity: 长寿 cháng shòu

Translations: 翻译 fān yì

Postgraduate: 研究生 yán jiū shēng

MORE THAN WORDS

BUDDING writers: Aren't sure where to submit your works? The following are online journals started by Singaporeans:

◇ QUARTERLY LITERARY REVIEW SINGAPORE (QLRS)

www.qlrs.com

Started by: Cultural Medallion Young Artist Award recipient Toh Hsien Min, in 2001

Reputation: A national platform for the works of home-grown

writers, it has unearthed new talents such as O Thiam Chin and Grace Chua. It has featured more than 350 Singapore and international authors such as Leonard Schwartz and John Tranter, in areas such as poetry, prose and critical essays.

◇ SOFTBLOW

www.softblow.org

Started by: Cultural Medallion Young Artist Award recipient

Cyril Wong, in 2004

Reputation: Published at the start of every month, this journal concentrates on poetry from Singapore and abroad.

Wong says he looks for poems that are more personal and honest, rather than those that are "Hallmark worthy".

Authors that have been published by the journal include established poets like Arthur Yap and Rich Ives.

◇ ASYMPOTTE

www.asymptotejournal.com

Started by: Writer and translator Lee Yew Leong, in January this year

Reputation: This new journal has already made waves in the international arena, with coverage by Publishers Weekly.

It was selected recently as the Featured International Journal by The Center for Fiction in New York, and cited as a staff pick on The Paris Review Blog.

In its latest issue, Asymptote ran an excerpt from Haruki Murakami's yet-to-be-released 1Q84, along with an exclusive note by translator Jay Rubin.

◇ UNSWEPT

www.unswept.org

Started by: Student Nicholas Liu

Reputation: This online literary journal, which will be published twice a year, will release its first issue by the end of this month.