



# Michael Chia Reflects

## ON BECOMING A RUGGED SOCIETY

Those were the days of the great sailing nations of the world when *real* sailors roamed the earth, taking many years just to complete one return journey. They had gone where no man had ever gone before, guided by little more than a compass and the logs of sailors who had preceded them and survived their journeys to tell their tales. Those were the days when people had a vague idea that the world was round but were not really sure. There were no sextants to calculate latitude and no chronometers to calculate longitude. These innovations came about slowly but not having them did not stop them from going forth and conquering the world. Those were the days when sailors sailed in tiny wooden vessels, seeking fame, fortune and adventure, planting their flags and seeds wherever they went in the name of their God and King. They created great empires where the *sun never sets*; the greatest of them – Great Britain. She ruled the waves and huge tracts of the lands of the earth, populated by great masses of people - just with a handful of adventurers.

Those brave ancient mariners are gone forever but their spirits live on in the many peoples of the world who admired them. When their great empires collapsed, they left behind them tiny enclaves in tiny plots of land by the shoreline of the great oceans of the world – places where sailors could sail just for the fun of the sport; not the kind of sport that make real sailors who make great empires. Today, you can see the vestige of those mighty empires, constantly reminding you of the tales of their great adventurers – they are the sailing clubs dotted across the length and breadth of the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans. In the Pacific, you see them in Papua New Guinea, in Noumea, Vanuatu, Solomon Islands, Fiji, Tahiti, Hawaii, Hong Kong, Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore; and if you had visited Kiribati in the 1980s – a huge tract of the mighty ocean, containing some tiny, sparsely populated islands – you could have found one Englishman, sailing his little beach catamaran, all by himself, in a tiny lagoon. And above all the little sailing clubs in the Pacific Ocean, you are constantly reminded of the early sailing days by Australia and New Zealand – where the great English sailors of those days have taken up permanent residence – they still produce great sailors today; just for the pleasure of sailing.

Forty years ago, one tiny modern nation on the edge of the western Pacific Ocean, Singapore - a former colony of the once great Britain – flushed with pride on gaining independence, but feeling vulnerable and insecure, decided it needed to defend itself against unfriendly neighbours. To do so, it needed to mould its citizens into a rugged society. The model they chose is the *ancient mariner*, its spirit embodied in the person of one Colonel Williams. The retreating British Armed Forces continued to hold large tracts of land in Singapore some years after the island had gained its independence; they included three former British sailing enclaves - the Sembawang Yacht Club, the Changi Sailing Club and the Royal Singapore Yacht Club. And Col. Williams was in RSYC, commissioned by the Singapore Government to teach a small bunch of teachers or trainee teachers how to handle and race little dinghies.

The author of this article had been mulling over the alternate title, “On the Making of a Rugged Society”. But how does one make a rugged society? Can it really be done? How did the ancient mariners get to be they way they were? - Venturing into the great fearsome unknown, armed only with faith, hope and greed in their hearts. Whether we are brave or timid – it’s in our genes so goes the argument; we cannot *make* people become brave and rugged; we are just born that way. But the sailing programme goes on: The National Sailing Centre was established – its sole aim, to produce ‘Gold Medal Sailors’. The schools’ sailing programme was launched. Decades passed and millions of Singapore Dollars had been spent. The government programme had parents dreaming great dreams for their children – chasing after that little pot of gold at the end of the elusive rainbow. Some gold medals were won - and they were all from the Asian Games; none from the Olympics where the really tough competition comes from. And after winning their gold medals, what did the gold medallists do? - They all retired from competitive sailing; there are no exceptions to that observation, *yet*. You cannot teach Singaporeans to love the sport - you have to lure them to it with that pot of gold. Is the infamous caricature of the Singapore character, *kiasu*, to blame?