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ROBERT CHUA

**REVISITS  
TELEVISION  
GLORY DAYS**

# MEMORY LANE

BY EDMUND WEE

The Singaporean media mogul reminisces about his favourite moments from Hong Kong's television heyday.

It was by chance that one of the pioneers of broadcasting in Asia, Robert Chua, got started in the industry.

"I went to Australia in 1963 as a 16-year-old kid. My stepfather had mentioned to me about a Singapore television station that would start in one or two years' time. I thought to myself: television sounded interesting. I watched TV and enjoyed it and I liked it. It was then that I decided to go into the television industry," said the media mogul.

Chua went to college for a year in Adelaide before entering the television trade in 1964. "I started my television career at an Adelaide TV station at the age of 17. I started from the bottom: sweeping the studio floors, setting up sets, learning to be a cameraman, floor manager, and directing," he revealed.





### TELEVISION AMBITION

It was during a bygone era that Chua cut his teeth in the television broadcasting business. After spending over a year in Australia, he returned to Singapore. "I spent the next year or so without a TV job. Then I did stage shows; I started producing at the age of 19. Then I went to Malaysia to produce pop stage shows."

Chua moved on to Radio Television Singapore, where he spent seven months producing TV entertainment programmes in Singapore. But he wanted to do more.

"I was not happy to stay in Singapore; there was a glass ceiling. I couldn't grow much and was frustrated. I applied for a job at Television Broadcasts Limited (TVB) and got it immediately. Because I had a letter of recommendation from my previous boss in Australia, who later told me he wrote an excellent reference."

The rest is history, it seemed. "When I was at TVB, I was the youngest producer. They had recruited people from Australia, the UK, US, Taiwan, and Malaysia. I joined them nearly six months before TVB opened. I helped them to recruit and train staff. I was one of the pioneering staff at TVB," he shared.

Chua later launched TVB's live variety show *Enjoy Yourself Tonight*, a local cultural institution that was first aired on 20 November 1967. The television show continued to screen every weekday evening for the next 28 years.

He attributed the success of the show to its live studio format. "Live shows and taped shows are two different animals. Only live shows were packed with adrenaline. Taped shows just did not have that kind of energy. My boss asked me if I could do a live show; I told him I could do it."

He recounted: "Back in the day, live shows involved so many things; dancing, singing, and so on. In hindsight, I don't know why I did it without fear. I looked back on my first show and wonder how I had felt absolutely no fear."

Chua acknowledged that the television industry is now in dire straits and that live shows may be the remedy to the ailing business. He reasoned: "For example, football, if it's live, you love it; but after it's taped, you lose viewership. So going live is always better."

### FOND MEMORIES

Looking back, Chua has fond memories of his broadcasting days, one of which includes legendary actor and martial artist, Bruce Lee. "He jumped out of a birthday cake; we brought a cake into the studio and out jumped Bruce Lee. I told him: let's have fun with it. It was an anniversary show, circa 1972," he shared.

"In fact, I was in Tokyo recently and met up with some Bruce Lee fans, who came all the way from Osaka to see me. All of us knew Bruce Lee back in the day. One of his fans told me, I could not sleep the whole night because I knew that I was going to meet you the next day to discuss our memories of Bruce Lee."



Reminiscing about the late Bruce Lee also took him down memory lane in Singapore, especially on his kinship ties, despite having lived in Hong Kong for 55 years.

“One of my biggest regrets to this day is that I didn’t spend enough time with my family in my early days at TVB as I had devoted so much time to work,” he lamented.

“My biggest regret was with my mother; I thought I was being kind to send her on a holiday on business class, but without me. I should have spent at least a few days with her; your parents love you to spend time with them, and not to go on a trip without you. When she came to Hong Kong, I didn’t even have time to see her. If she were alive, I would spend quality time with her,” he shared. “Everyone works too hard and forgets these things.”

These days, Chua who splits his time between Hong Kong and Singapore, is busy expanding his food business, something he got into by accident.

“I tried to help a young man who was selling pots and pans, including those made from white nano ceramics. I tried to help him create a brand. While I was doing that, I managed to befriend the Tim Ho Wan founder in Hong Kong,” he said.

Chua first made his foray into the food and beverage industry in Singapore in 2013 by setting up dim sum chain, Tim Ho Wan, which turned out to be a resounding success in the city state. Within six to seven years, he expanded Tim Ho Wan to more than 40 outlets across Asia Pacific. Following the success of building Tim Ho Wan into a Pan-Asia franchise, Chua is repeating his achievement with Kam’s Roast and Joy Luck Teahouse.

For his next project, SINSTANT, he considers it a befitting tribute to Singapore. “It’s like my National Service; these foods are really what represent Singapore. Even the music that we’re using to promote our brand is composed by a Singaporean: Alvin Oon, featuring a mix of Indian, Malay and Chinese music showcasing a multicultural Singapore.”

Prepared by Michelin-starred chefs in Hong Kong, SINSTANT is a new brand of ready-to-eat gourmet meals that are a blend of Hong Kong and Singapore heritage foods.

“I also want to create more product brands: SINSTANT is the latest one that I want to see it grow to become internationally famous, to promote Singapore as an F&B hub,” he said.

Besides SINSTANT, Chua, who is also busy working on an online show, is keeping himself occupied with his hobby of collecting antiques. “I love admiring these art pieces that are done by artisans hundreds and thousands of years ago,” he said.

“I started collecting Chinese antiques over the years. Guests come to my home and are shocked to see it filled with artefacts. I love antiques and ‘share’ them with friends who like it; I even gave a few of them to my friends,” he added. “I do things very obsessively; I put my heart into it.”