

FOR THE RECORD

From ribbon cutting to rice dumplings, some 45 world records are currently being held by Singaporeans in the Guinness World Records. LifeStyle takes a look at the nation's many wacky record-setting feats

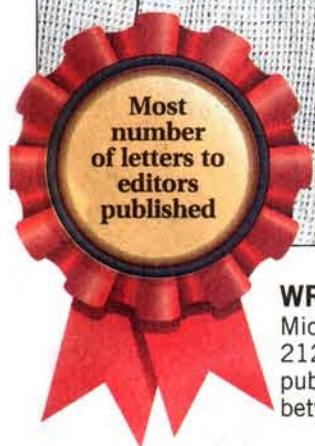


PHOTO: EDWIN KOO
WRITE ON: Lawyer Michael Loh, 42, had 212 of his letters published in one year, between 2002 and 2003.



PHOTO: STEPHANIE YEOW
WATER WORKS: Adventurer Khoo Swee Chiow, 42, stayed underwater for 220 hours.

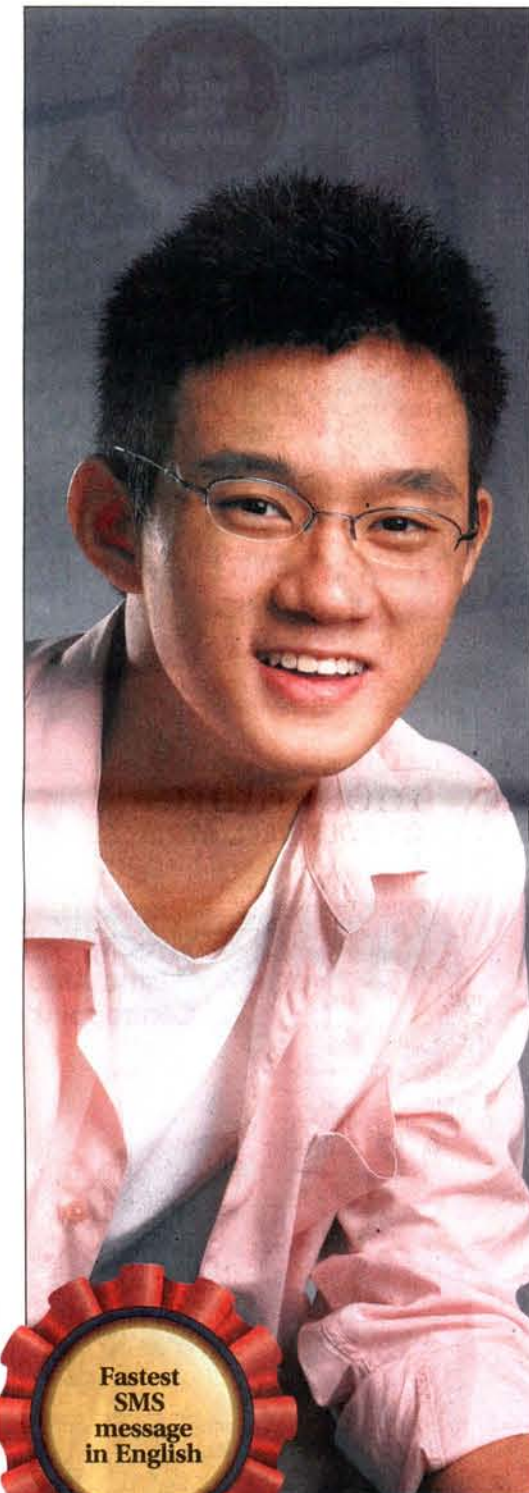


PHOTO: ALAN LIM
SHOOTOUT: Student Ang Chuang Yang, 16, sent a message in 41.52 seconds. His record is awaiting confirmation.



► **Mak Mun San**

FORGET about Olympic gold medals for sports prowess. But when it comes to breaking records for the oddest, wackiest or most obscure achievements of human endeavour, Singapore is on a roll.

From forming the world's longest inline skating chain to popping the record for the biggest mass gathering of folks wearing hats made of balloons, Singaporeans are busy claiming their place with the ultimate compiler of fabulous feats, Guinness World Records.

The nation boasts an estimated 45 world records noted by Guinness, with the latest coming from schoolboy Ang Chuang Yang, 16.

He text-typed his way to a new world record in writing the fastest SMS message in English (see other story) last Sunday, smashing the previous one set by an American in July.

Chuang Yang trained for his record-breaking success for all of two weeks, so it does not rank up there with human achievement involving gruelling physical and mental extremes.

Still, the teenager's success is the latest in a string of world records produced by Singaporeans in recent years, from obscure stunts to fun mass events to the odd one that was literally breathtaking.

Adventurer Khoo Swee Chiow, who broke the Guinness record for the longest scuba dive – 220 hours – done in a controlled environment last year, agrees that some records are “strange and funny”.

“People have called me stupid, ridiculous, wasting time and other names. But I generally ignore people who talk a lot. I prefer to do rather than talk,” says the 42-year-old.

According to Mr Ong Eng Huat, president of the Singapore Book Of Records Club, Singapore currently holds about 50 recognised world records, of which 45 are Guinness records.

How to be a record breaker

ANYONE can set – or break – a Guinness world record.

There is a correct procedure to follow, though, before you dash off to eat 50 bowls of mee siam in one minute, or whatever feat it is that you have in mind.

First, get in touch with Guinness. You need to get the green light from the august body that your record-breaking idea is worthy of attempt.

The easiest way to make contact is by an online application at www.guinnessworldrecords.com.

Give as many details as possible about what record you want to try to break or set. It takes six weeks or more for Guinness to reply with a decision.

If it likes your idea, it will send you its rules and guidelines.

After the feat, you need to send all the required information to Guinness for verification. Once it accepts your world record, it sends you a certificate – proof that you have earned a place in history.

The exact number is anyone's guess as the Guinness World Records book carries just a selection of the over 40,000 records in its archive.

Called the Guinness Book Of Records until its name was changed in 2000 to the Internet-encompassing Guinness World Records, the first edition was published in 1955 and is now the world's best-selling copyrighted book.

The latest 2007 edition lists just four records from Singapore, and all came from mass participation events, such as the most number of people wearing balloon hats in Sentosa in June last year.

Forty-five among 40,000 records worldwide hardly counts as an obsession, but on a per capita basis, it would seem Singapore is up there with the most prolific countries such as Britain, Germany and the United States.

So why are Singaporeans making their mark in this fetish for firsts? Are they obsessed with making a name for themselves in the more odd-ball categories?

Dr Chang Weining, head of the psychology division at Nanyang

Technological University, says that many Singaporeans are very competitive and tend to “construe success as outdoing other people and groups”.

But sociologist Tan Ern Ser from the National University of Singapore reckons: “They are just having fun, but with specific goals.”

One Singaporean who had fun creating a world record is safety supervisor Yap Yee Tharm, 57. Along with his IT engineer son Victor, 26, Mr Yap was part of the 280-strong team who formed the longest inline skating chain in the world during the Samsung Inline Skating Festival in August this year.

“It is probably my one and only chance at setting a world record, and it's great I got to do it through my favourite activity,” says Mr Yap, who has been skating for 15 years.

Singaporeans are no more and no less obsessed with etching their names in the annals of fame than citizens of any other country, says lawyer Michael Loh, 42. He boasts a 2004 Guinness record himself: the most number of letters to editors published in one year.

“If you look at TV shows like Ripley's Believe It Or Not, you have people doing the oddest things. So we're no different from everybody else,” he says.

Indeed, some of the most bizarre Guinness records include the fastest sandwich made by feet (the US), most number of rubber bands stretched over the face in one minute (Britain) and the largest gathering of people dressed as mobile phones (the Netherlands).

Mr Ang Mong Seng, president of the Singapore National Wushu Federation, says that such feats help to create milestones for organisations. His federation organised two record-setting events last year – the largest lion dance display and biggest gathering of dancing dragons – which went into the Guinness World Records 2007.

Lion and dragon dance instructor Peter Chai, 36, took part in both feats. “What I found most valuable was the team spirit we fostered. The records were a nice bonus.”

But not all record-breakers are basking in the glory of their world-class stunts.

An undergraduate from the National University of Singapore requests anonymity despite creating a new world record by folding six paper cranes within five minutes.

And not all record-holders are fixated on defending their titles. Mr Loh, for one, adopts an almost indifferent attitude towards his Guinness record. Although 212 of his letters were published in that record-breaking year between August 2002 and 2003, he says he wrote only a couple of letters this year.

“I couldn't possibly make myself write things just to break that record. I'll just end up looking stupid,” he says with a laugh.

Associate Professor Kirpal Singh, who teaches creative thinking at the Singapore Management University, says the tendency for Singaporeans to break records on a mass platform is something of a worry. “It does not truly reveal a sustainable capacity for genuine firsts,” he says.

It is easy enough to continue to think of newer ways of breaking and creating new records, like getting half a million Singaporeans to tie a turban, he quips. “But for the longer term, we must endeavour to break records which truly matter,” he says.

But Mr Khoo feels it does not matter if world records come from individual or mass events. “People should be encouraged to pursue their passion. Everyone should take the courage to do something they feel is beyond them,” he says.

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