

Shedding light on community issues

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"My mother was like, 'You do something you do not like now, so that hopefully, when you get good results, you can possibly get a good scholarship,'" he recalls with a chuckle.

As it turned out, his new class was a melting pot of Malays, Chinese and Indians, bringing Yap into a social circle far more diverse than the one he had known before.

Until then, most of his friends had been Chinese. But as he began spending more time with his Indian classmates, his curiosity got the better of him.

He began wondering how he could grow up in a country as multicultural as Malaysia and yet not understand a word of Tamil.

The question stayed with him long enough for him to act on it. He began learning the language through Tamil films, music and other forms of entertainment, gradually discovering a culture that would eventually become a defining part of his creative journey.

BEST OF THREE WORLDS

The process began with just a few words a day.

Noticing my surprise, Yap explains that learning Tamil through Kollywood felt almost natural to him, bringing together three things he loved most: dance, acting and singing.

"That was the perfect way for me to pick up a language," he says cheerfully.

But not everyone took kindly to his newfound passion. Some of his old friends began to distance themselves, feeling that he had "changed" too much.

The scepticism did not end there. Some of his classmates of Indian descent were also doubtful of his intentions, questioning why a Chinese student was suddenly so interested in their language and culture.

Yet Yap refused to let the reactions dampen his enthusiasm.

"I wanted to get to know my friends. Get to know them on a deeper level, which is what I usually do when mak-

ing friends," he says simply.

PROFESSIONAL STAMP OF APPROVAL

What started as a personal quest to learn Tamil soon became a significant part of who Yap was. Before long, he found his growing passion for the language naturally intertwining with his love for content creation.

Together with a friend, he decided to make his first music video cover of *Ethir Neechal*, with little thought of where it might lead.

Unexpectedly, the video began gaining traction on YouTube and even caught the attention of composer and singer Anirudh Ravichander, a moment Yap admits he never saw coming.

"It felt very validating to know people, especially the original artist himself, responded to the video. It was like a stamp of approval to continue what I do," says Yap.

What began as a way to connect with a language and culture he had grown curious about has since evolved into a full-time career.

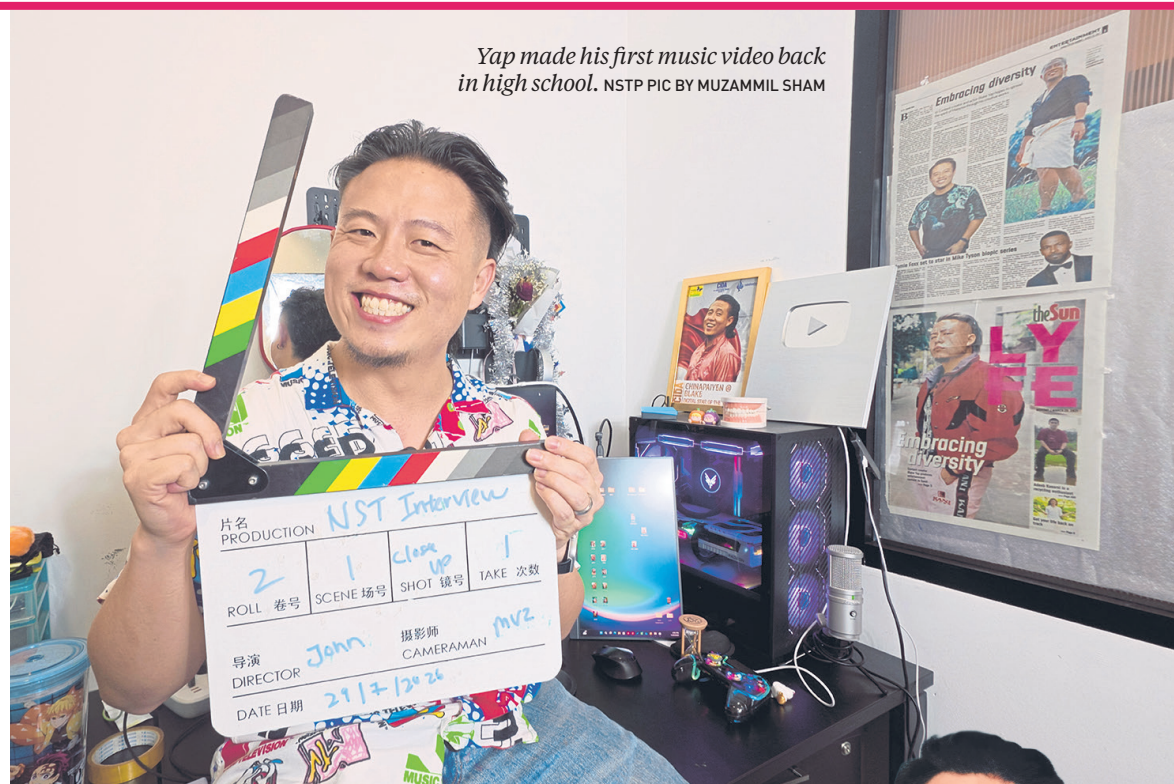
SYSTEMIC STRUGGLES

Yap's achievements speak for themselves. With two million followers on TikTok and a role alongside South Indian superstar Nayanthara, the 33-year-old has plenty to be proud of. Yet, despite the size of his online following, commercial opportunities have not always come as readily.

Yap says Malaysian Indian creators can often find themselves overlooked in the local content market. The irony, he believes, lies partly in the makeup of his audience. A large proportion of his followers are Malaysian Indians and audiences from India — demographics that do not necessarily fall within the primary target markets of local brands.

So, while the numbers on his social media platforms may look impressive, they do not always translate into the kind of commercial value brands are looking for.

"You would assume that a person with two million followers on TikTok and



Yap made his first music video back in high school. NSTP PIC BY MUZAMMIL SHAM



Yap sharing the screen with superstar Nayanthara (left).

PHOTO COURTESY OF BLAKE YAP

400,000 followers on Instagram would be earning well. But they see my audience as of lesser value," he says.

The financial uncertainty worries him, but Yap is conscious that his struggles are part of something bigger. If anything, they offer a glimpse into a much broader challenge facing Malaysian Indian creators, many of whom are navigating an industry where reach does not always translate into recognition or opportunity.

Conversations with friends and followers have also given Yap a closer look at the challenges the community

faces in their daily lives.

CHAMPIONING CHANGE

It is a topic that clearly strikes a nerve with Yap.

Perhaps that is why he has come to see his platform as more than a means of building his own career. He also uses it to shine a light on issues affecting the community that, in turn, has helped build his following.

A quick scroll through his social media pages reveals a history of advocacy — from calling out shopping malls over their lack of Deepavali decorations to speaking up when members of the community are publicly mocked.

His frustration is palpable when he talks about these issues, so much so that he catches himself mid-sentence when a "fish" slips out in place of an expletive.

For Yap, these may seem like individual incidents, but together they point to a larger question of visibility — and who gets to feel seen in Malaysia.

As the Tamil cinephile continues to celebrate the entertainment and culture he once discovered as a teenager, he also wants to keep speaking up for the community that welcomed him. "I have a responsibility as a creator. I will

Yap aims to continue his advocacy for the local Indian community.

PHOTO COURTESY OF BLAKE YAP



Yap's alter ego 'Chinepaiyen' means small Chinese boy in Tamil. NSTP PIC BY MUZAMMIL SHAM

always continue to support, speak up and entertain my audience as such," exclaims Yap.

Perhaps that is what it means to truly embrace another culture — not simply to celebrate what makes it beautiful, but to understand its people, stand alongside them and speak up when they are not being seen.

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