



# The Circus Comes to Town

The story of a homegrown circus finds expression in a new book called *Life Beyond the Big Top: Stories of the Tai Thean Kew Circus*, by Adele Wong.

In a time of ever-accelerating change, memory still provides important threads of identity and connection to the past.” The opening lines of the foreword in *Life Beyond the Big Top: Stories of the Tai Thean Kew Circus* by the noted anthropologist, Roxana Waterson, underline the importance of capturing social histories that “risk being obliterated from memory altogether”. Famous people and important events get written about time and again but the stories of seemingly ordinary people, some of whom have remarkable tales to tell, are often glossed over or unspoken, leading to serious gaps in the formation of our identity as Singaporeans.

#### A Singapore Circus Story

It is our good fortune that Adele Wong remembered stories from her childhood about her grandparents, Wong Fu Qi and Sze Ling Fen, who were circus performers in Singapore for nearly five decades from the 1940s to 1980s. Inspired by their amazing tale of guts and gumption, she has painstakingly researched and written their stories and put together a collection of precious old photographs that could have easily been discarded or lost for good.

*Life Beyond the Big Top* is a photobook that captures the history of the Tai Thean Kew Circus, a once-great Chinese circus that was founded in Singapore in 1932. But more than it is a book that celebrates the story of ordinary Singaporeans

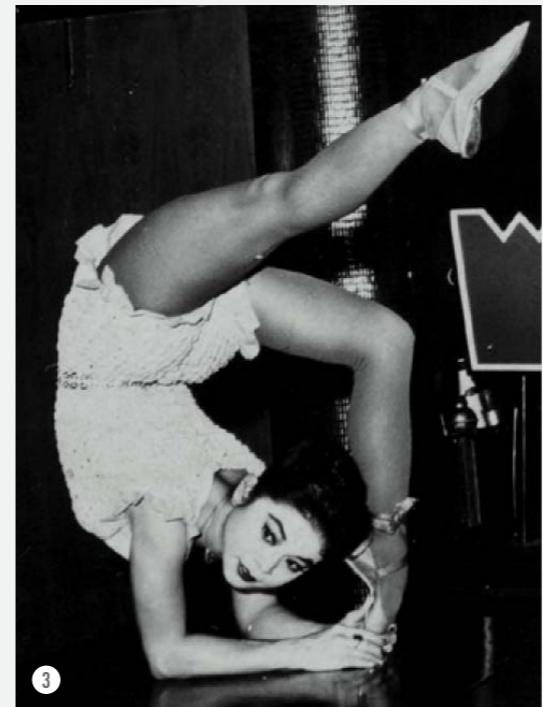
who led extraordinary lives. Adele’s grandmother Sze Ling Fen was born into the Tai Thean Kew Circus family, established by her grandfather and continued by her father. Ling Fen was only 14 years of age when she met her would-be husband Wong Fu Qi, who was two years her senior, in 1948. Both spent their youth and a substantial part of their adulthood touring the region as lead circus acrobats. The young performers, who married in 1954, earned about 50 cents a day when they first started out in the circus.

It was a tough but rewarding life: the circus performers were like one extended family as they spent all their time on the road throughout Malaya (even going as far as Sabah, Sarawak, Thailand, the Philippines and Hong Kong), entertaining the crowds wherever the circus set up tent. Depending on demand, the Tai Thean Kew Circus would stage up to three shows a day – one matinee and two evening shows, often staying put at one fairground for 10 to 15 days before moving on to another destination. At its peak, the Tai Thean Kew Circus had over 100 members, and provided entertainment all day long with its outdoor carnival, animal menagerie and circus acts.

#### About the Book and Author

As a child Adele grew up amidst circus props and stories, and old black-and-white photographs of her grandparents performing heart-stopping acts on the trapeze. These memories eventually led her to document the oral histories of her grandparents and write about their amazing circus careers in her book.

Published in August 2015 by Goff Books, *Life Beyond the Big Top*, which is lavishly illustrated with old photographs, is available for reference



and loan at the National Library as well as at all public libraries. More information on the book can be found at this site: [www.facebook.com/taitheankewcircus](http://www.facebook.com/taitheankewcircus).

The book is supported by the Singapore Memory Project’s (SMP) irememberSG Fund that was set up to encourage organisations and individuals to develop content and initiatives that collect, interpret and showcase memories of Singapore. The fund has currently stopped accepting applications.

Adele Wong is an actress and writer working in television and film. She is a recipient of the Singapore National Arts Council’s Arts Creation Grant and is currently finishing a fictional novel based on her family’s circus histories. ♦



All images courtesy of Adele Wong.

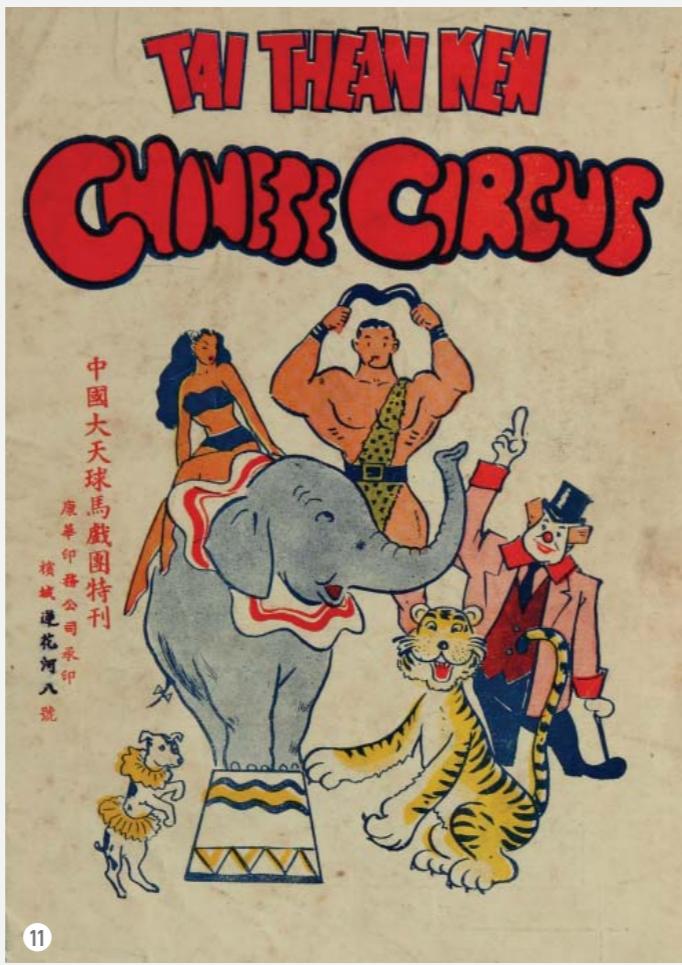
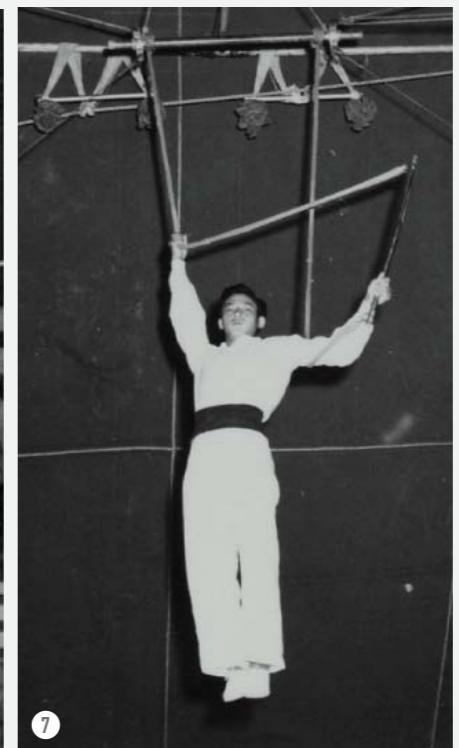
1. Dance performances often showcased diverse cultural influences and provided entertainment for the crowds in between the more serious circus acts. Versatile circus acrobats, like Sze Ling Fen (centre, doing the handstand), added dance to their repertoire of skills.

2. The young and lissome Sze Ling Fen posing for a studio shoot; such images were used as promotional material by the circus.

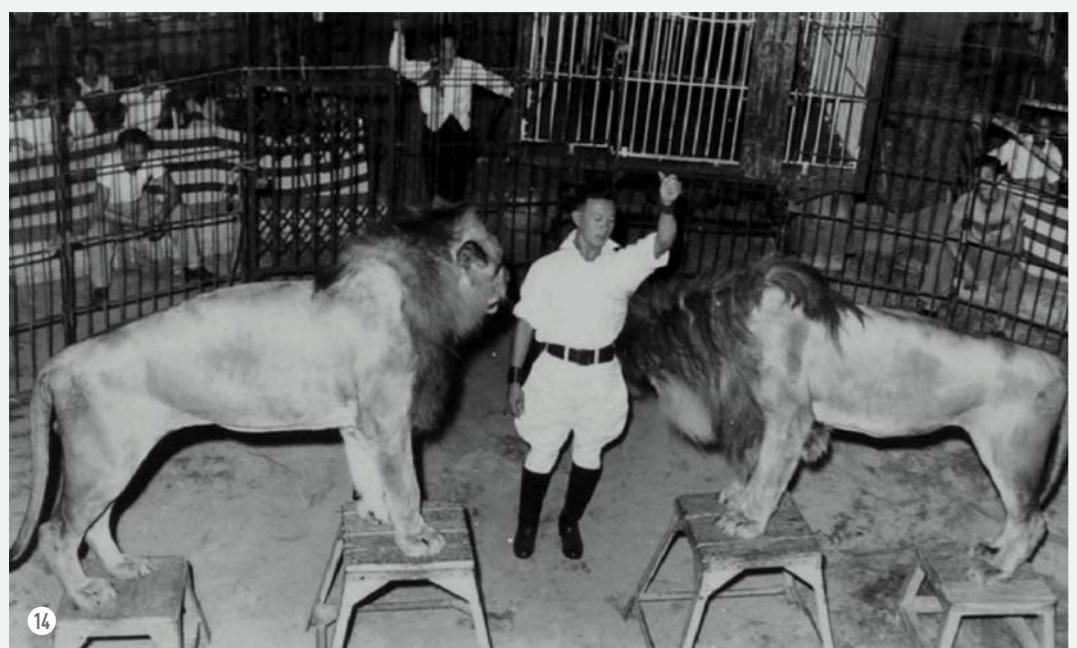
3. Contortionist acts like this one were often performed by younger and newer performers. It would take many years of training before someone could be as limber as this performer.

4. An all-women bicycle balancing act. Many of the early Tai Thean Kew Circus performers were women, and unlike other professions in the 1940s, there was little discrimination against them.





5. The Tai Thean Kew Circus' 8th-year Post-War Resumption Anniversary, which took place in Malacca in 1954, was a much anticipated event. The circus prospered in the post-war years, and "8" is a traditionally auspicious number for the Chinese.
6. Sze Ling Fen, hailed as the Princess of the Circus, is mesmerising during her "Sleeping Beauty" routine – performed under the watchful eye of the clown, who encourages the audience but is also ready to catch her if she slips.
7. The athletic Wong Fu Qi (who in 1948 had begun a budding romance with Sze Ling Fen) on the Aerial Strap Act, hanging mid-air with the aid of a pair of leather straps.
8. Outgrowing their teenage romance, the Princess of the Circus, Sze Ling Fen, and the Top Aerialist, Wong Fu Qi, finally tied the knot in 1954.
9. The circus darlings Sze Ling Fen and Wong Fu Qi performed alongside each other from their early teens till they retired together in 1972. Ling Fen was only 14 years old when she met Fu Qi, who was two years older, in 1948. They managed to raise a family of two boys in the process.
10. It took Sze Ling Fen (in the foreground) over a year to master her balancing skills on tightrope. After that, there was no stopping her dare-devil performances on both the high wire and low wire.
11. The Tai Thean Kew Circus programme booklet specially commissioned for their "Far East Tour" to Hong Kong in 1949.
12. The Tai Thean Kew Circus attracted people of various races. This promotional poster, in Malay, Chinese and English, was used to publicise their shows wherever they visited. Typically there would be a daily evening show at 8pm while on the weekends, an additional matinee at 2pm would be staged.



13. Animals were an integral part of the Tai Thean Kew Circus, and the menagerie comprised horses, elephants, lions, tigers, a chimpanzee, a python and a bear. Though relatively tame and domesticated, the lions and tigers preserved their natural magnificence and instincts.
14. The lions and tiger acts took place within a large cage to ensure the safety of the audiences.
15. After leaving the circus in 1972, Sze Ling Feng and Wong Fu Qi dabbled in various things for the next few years before starting their two-person show called the Wong Family Magic and Acrobatic and Troupe. They designed a whole new repertoire of acts and performed at hotels all over the region. Here, Fu Qi creates the illusion of levitating his wife with only the support of a metal rod when in actual fact, Ling Fen is using her core strength and acrobatic ability to keep her body suspended in mid air.
16. One of the new acts that Sze Ling Fen learnt after she left Tai Thean Kew Circus was to juggle an umbrella with her feet, an act she had once seen in a Russian circus. It took months of painstaking practice before she finally nailed the art. She became the only performer in Southeast Asia who could perform "Umbrella Juggling with Feet", and the act became hugely popular.
- 17,18. These fancy performing costumes were mostly designed and hand-sewn by Sze Ling Fen. She picked up her tailoring skills during childhood and put them to great use by designing these flamboyant and colourful costumes when they started their own act.
19. Wong Fu Qi built most of his own acrobatic and magic performing props, initially out of necessity and eventually as a hobby. This magic contraption has a neck-lock that hides a trap within and a sword made from aluminium. It was used to create the illusion of a person (usually an audience member or Sze Ling Fen) being stabbed through their neck but emerging unharmed.
20. Tai Thean Kew Circus badges, commissioned in 1949 for the circus' "Far East Tour" to Hong Kong. All members of the troupe proudly donned these badges.