

# San Yu Adventist School

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## RUTH CHENG CHAY CHOO

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San Yu Adventist School is currently the only Adventist school in Singapore that offers primary and secondary education with government examinations.

## San Yu High School

In 1957, a faithful and generous couple who were members of the Seventh-day Adventist Chinese Church in Singapore – Thomson Chinese Church (TCC) – donated a piece of land to build a new church for the Chinese-speaking congregation in Singapore with the intent of also using the site as a school for the Chinese-speaking population. This donation of land at 297 Thomson Road was the largest donation made by an individual in the Far Eastern Division – the land and building's combined value was estimated at \$300,000 SGD. The Lord sees fit to inspire individuals to sacrifice talent, time, and treasure in order to enable Christian Adventist education to take root. This education has stoutly served the Singapore nation and the region beyond by training students to serve their community and preparing them for the kingdom of God through “caring, quality Christian education.”

After TCC began its worship services in the new church in 1957, the church board decided to utilize the basement rooms for a coeducational school. Since the Seventh-day Adventist School already existed as an English language school, it was decided that a Chinese secondary school be established and named San Yu High School (SYHS). *San Yu* translates from Chinese to “three-fold education,” referring to the three focus areas of development for the students – spiritual, mental, and physical. On January 6, 1958, SYHS opened its doors with a total enrollment of 167 students and a teaching staff of ten, including Interim Principal Pastor Joshua Chong, pastor of TCC.<sup>1</sup> Eight months later, the first official principal of SYHS – Yang Chung Pei – arrived from Taiwan with his family. His wife and son taught at the school. Yang served for ten years nurturing the school from its early stages.

In 1961, the Malaysia Mission decided to close the school due to financial difficulties. At a church business meeting, Tan Hian Tsin, board member and businessman, proposed that TCC administer the school from the Malaysia Mission. It did so with the school operating totally on its own funds secured by donations. The first step was to set up an education fund. Tan Hian Tsin pledged \$5,000 SGD and offered to match each additional dollar raised. About \$24,000 SGD was raised. TCC thus became the first local church to run a high school and quickly

began to obtain operating funds. The church's Dorcas Society decided to utilize the church's annual Jumble Sale to begin raising funds. The 1963 Jumble Sale was the first one organized to financially help the school. Of the proceeds, 90% went to the school, and the remaining 10% stayed with the Dorcas Society. The annual Jumble Sale grew with the years and became the financial pillar for the school.

In 1969, James Wang Ho Chun arrived in Singapore to replace Yang as principal. He proved to be the longest-serving principal, and he and his wife, Chu Hui Ju, dedicated their lives to serving the school and the church until their retirement in 1994. The school grew under his leadership. Among his many achievements was the construction of additional classrooms. SYHS bought the land adjacent to it on 299 Thomson Road from the Far Eastern Division for \$60,000 SGD in 1970. The land was bought with donations from Tan Hian Tsin, church members, proceeds from the Jumble Sale, and a special fund for the enhancement of Chinese-medium secondary schools established by the Singapore International Trading Company and the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce. The new classrooms were completed in 1978. In 1985, another four-story high set of classrooms was added at the rear of the church building.<sup>2</sup>

## The Seventh-day Adventist School's History

Elder G. E. Jones and his wife were the first Seventh-day Adventist missionaries in the Malay Archipelago. They were sent by the Australian Union Conference, and R. A. Caldwell, a self-supporting colporteur, accompanied them for their arrival in Singapore in 1904.<sup>3</sup> The first Seventh-day Adventist Church was established at No. 5, Penang Road, District 9, Singapore. It was officially dedicated on a Sabbath, August 21, 1909. Ever since opening, the mission organized series of public meetings every Sabbath afternoon and Sunday night. By the end of the year, 11 believers from five different nationalities were baptized to the glory of God.<sup>4</sup> As the church membership grew, starting a church school became a priority.

The Seventh-day Adventist coeducational school had its humble beginnings in 1908 in a small building on Dhoby Ghaut. When it needed to expand its quarters, it moved to 400 Serangoon Road and started with an enrollment of about 90 students. On February 24, 1915, at the second biennial session of the Malaysian Union Mission, it became the training school for the union and was named the Singapore Training School. Eventually, after another move, the school finally settled at No. 273 Upper Serangoon Road, where it remained until the Singapore government acquired the school's land to build the Mass Rapid Transit system in 1996. In 1923, the school was renamed the Malaysian Union Seminary, which provided uninterrupted education for primary and secondary pupils and for advanced students pursuing mission service until Singapore was occupied by the Japanese in World War II.

In October 1945, after World War II ended, the school reopened with limited facilities and in need of extensive renovation. A new dining hall was built in 1949, and a new wood products shop opened in 1951. In 1952, a well-equipped science laboratory was added. Advanced training classes resumed in January 1950, and, six months

later, the General Conference approved the seminary to offer two years above the secondary level, becoming a junior college.

In 1958, the name of the institution was changed to Southeast Asia Union College (SAUC) to conform with the name of the union it was operating under, the Southeast Asia Union Mission. However, due to government regulations, the primary and secondary divisions of the school were formed into a separate entity in 1961, the Seventh-day Adventist School (SDAS). In March 1972, the Southeast Asia Union Executive Committee gave approval for SDAS to function separately from SAUC. Pastor James Wong, who was the principal of both the primary and secondary schools when they functioned under SAUC, became the first official principal of the newly-recognized SDAS.<sup>5</sup>

The school made plans for expansion with its increased enrollment, and, in 1989, its staff and students moved to a vacant government school at Jalan Kayu while the additional classrooms were being built. When construction was completed in 1992, they moved back to 273 Upper Serangoon Road. Unfortunately, in March 1996, the government announced plans to acquire properties along the new Northeast Mass Rapid Transit line, and the land on which SDAS, SAUC, the union headquarters, and Youngberg Adventist Hospital stood was acquired. Given this unexpected turn of events, SDAS turned to the other school in Singapore that offered Adventist Education – San Yu High School (SYHS) – for help.

## The Merger – San Yu Adventist School

In 1996, since the government had announced it would acquire the land on which SDAS stood, the school had to find a new home. This was difficult in Singapore, where property prices were high. The Seventh-day Adventist Mission (Singapore) approached Thomson Chinese Church (TCC), requesting for the adoption of SDAS by SYHS. TCC held a church business meeting in July 1996, and, after much discussion, the members agreed to the merger on the express condition that TCC retain majority representation on the new board of management for the merged school.<sup>6</sup>

The renamed San Yu Adventist School (SYAS) began operations in 1997. To accommodate the construction of new science classrooms on the SYHS campus, the building which housed the principal, teachers, and chaplain was demolished. While the new science classrooms were being built, SYAS operated temporarily at 273 Upper Serangoon Road. After the science classrooms were completed, SYAS moved back into its Thomson Road campus in 2000.

In accordance with government regulations for private schools in Singapore, SYAS was incorporated as a separate legal entity in May 2011. It is now a corporation limited by guarantee with its own independent board of management. The school is regulated by the Committee for Private Education and complies with the Private Education Act.

In the early years of SYAS merger, student enrollment was around 200. TCC continued to use the annual Jumble Sale to financially support SYAS for many years. In recent years, a shift in government education policy has resulted in an influx of students, and student enrollment has grown to over 500. The school envisions that it will continue to grow and, since 2014, has embarked on extensive school renovations to meet the needs of the increased student population and upgrade its facilities.

## Historical Role of the School

SDAS was a cosmopolitan private school – local Adventist parents and non-SDA parents from other parts of Southeast Asia sent their children to study there. Students from Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, Hong Kong, Japan, Korea, and Cambodia enrolled at the school. Since the school provided English education and operated under the Ministry of Education, diplomats, wealthy businessmen, and other socioeconomic classes sent their children to study there.

SYAS was established as a Chinese secondary school to meet the needs of local Chinese-speaking non-SDA students. There was also a small percentage of students coming from countries like China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Malaysia. With the changes in the education outlook in Singapore over the years, the composition of students at the merged SYAS also changed significantly. The school became more of a cosmopolitan school since the majority of students came from China, Indonesia, Thailand, Korea, Vietnam, etc., and the percentage of local students was minimal. Many students stated that the school's inherent values attracted them to enroll and had left lasting impressions. These values were emulated by the care, support, and dedication of teachers, faculty, and administrative staff, who strove for academic and moral success and spiritual development for the students.

SYAS recognizes high achievers in its ranks of graduates. Several of many ordinary and extraordinary successes should be mentioned. They include regionally-known heart surgeons and other physicians, a Thai ambassador, a Malaysian parliamentarian, and an entrepreneur in the largest Indonesian conglomerate. More importantly, the school vehemently represents a God who cares for His children and serves as a "lamp unto [our] feet and a light unto [our] path."

## Fulfilling the Mission

San Yu Adventist School (SYAS) continues to be guided by its mission and vision in all areas of its development. The vision of the school is "To be a nurturing, premier Christian school developing a holistic person now and for the kingdom of God." The mission of the school is "To provide caring, quality Christian education." The SYAS vision and mission embody the school's enduring beliefs and values of:

Integrity: Be honest and do what is right and kind.

Caring: Show love and concern for others and for the environment.

Cooperation: Work together selflessly for the common goal.

Respect: Honor others by being polite and considerate.

Responsibility: Carry out our duties reliably.

Perseverance: Continue trying despite difficulties.

Trust in God: Above all, rely on God and know that He cares for us.

To reiterate, SYAS located on 299 Thomson Road Singapore 307652 is a merger of two SDA schools – the Seventh-day Adventist School, which was an English language school, and the San Yu High School, which was established to provide Chinese education.

SYAS, a coeducational school, is now the only SDA school in Singapore that offers primary and secondary education with government examinations: the national PSLE for primary school and the GCE O-Level for secondary school. SYAS occupies a unique niche in the Singaporean education system as the only private school offering primary education in accordance with the government's Ministry of Education syllabus and examinations. In fact, the school is so well recognized that the Ministry of Education refers students who are not ready to enroll in government schools to SYAS. As of August 31, 2018, the school's enrollment is 556 (343 elementary, 213 secondary) with 61 staff members.

## List of Presidents/Vice Chancellors/Principals

Seventh-day Adventist School (1972-1997):

James Wong Mun Hua (1972-1973); Daniel Tan (1974-1975); Wu Chook Ying (1975-1977); Yeo Lee Chiang (1978-1984); Samuel Teo (1985-1986); Michael Lim Sze How (1987-1995); Geoffrey Pauner (1996-1997)

San Yu High School (1958-1997):

Yang Chung Pei (1958-1968); James Wang Ho Chun (1969-1994); Toh See Wei (1994-1997)

San Yu Adventist School (1997- ):

Geoffrey Pauner (1997-1999); Leong Weng Kee (2000-2001); Yeo Lee Chiang (2002-2004); Tang Swee Keng (2005-2011); Shee Soon Chiew (2012-2013); Annie Ling Shu Fen, acting principal (2013-2014); Shee Soon Chiew (2015- )

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## NOTES

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