



# A Singapore Braveheart

How would you measure success? Is it in terms of how many accomplishments you have or how much money you earn in your career? **SoWhat?** catches up with Joshua Chiang for a time of reflection on the richness of the human heart as he shares about his experiences in championing social justice and equality, besides writing and illustrating for a living.

## When and how did your interest in drawing cartoons start?

I don't remember exactly when I started drawing. But I actually drew my first comic book at the age of nine, after being inspired by the Asterix comics. I was reading a lot on Greek mythology and history then, and so my story was a comical adventure of Hercules and his best friend Odysseus. It was drawn in a jotter book and passed around among my classmates who loved it so much, I drew a sequel. But it never made it to the publishers because my Mum, who was never the greatest connoisseur of comics, threw it away.

My next comic book, was for an English literature project when I was in Secondary 3. I turned George Orwell's novel *Animal Farm* into a graphic novel, which I've kept to this day. It was hard work! For the entire June holidays, I woke up at eight every morning to draw, only stopping at 8 pm, and that included weekends. My teacher offered to help get it published but I was too much of a perfectionist back then to think it was good enough. Nonetheless it was an important lesson in self-discipline and focus.

## What inspired you to publish your first illustrated book *Javier's Day* for children?

Actually my first illustrated book was *Monsters On the Wall* which was authored by Adeline Foo (who is most known as the creator of the *Diary of Amos Lee*). *Javier's Day* really is a labour of love. My parents had been babysitting my nephew Javier since he was six months old. When he was around two-and-a-half-years old, it suddenly struck me how fast he was growing, and very soon, these moments we are enjoying now would be gone. So it was more of an attempt to capture this period of his life and how our daily routines were affected as a result.

I only self-published 100 copies of it, and most of them were given away to relatives and loved ones. But the book did manage to open some doors for me.

## How is the experience working as the director in your own company Cerealbox Studios like?

Every day is like trying to keep a house of cards from falling!

## Why did you decide to volunteer for the socio-political website The Online Citizen (TOC) in Singapore in 2009?

I have been volunteering since 2009 and was the chief editor from January to April 2011 when the previous chief editor left for a sabbatical.

It wasn't a conscious decision to join; rather, it started when I came across a story about 400 migrant workers being abandoned by their employers with no food or water for several days published on TOC. I went down to the workers' quarters with boxes of bottled water, and then reported the situation to the (then) chief editor of TOC. Gradually I got more involved in writing and reporting on stories that the local media tend to avoid, such as the homeless in Singapore.

## Do you think Singaporeans are more informed about socio-political issues in Singapore now, compared to, say, ten years ago? Why?

Yes. The Internet has really helped a lot in putting out stories and views that the mainstream media is reluctant, for whatever reasons, to publish. The result, as you can see from the fervour during last year's General Elections, is a more well-informed public. But it's still a long way to go.

## So what about Joshua Chiang?

Joshua Chiang is a Singaporean illustrator, scriptwriter and former Chief Editor, (now volunteer) with *The Online Citizen* (TOC). He published his first illustrated book for children, *Javier's Day*, in 2011.

Born in 1975, Joshua developed an interest in drawing at an early age,

and later on in filmmaking. He co-wrote and co-directed a local indie film *S11*, in 2004. He has also developed a passion for social justice. In 2009, he joined TOC, which provides an online platform for Singaporeans to champion causes and values that promote justice, openness and inclusiveness. He is also the director

and founder of Cerealbox Studios which he describes as an "outlet for his thirst for visual storytelling".

For a better glimpse at the creative works of Joshua Chiang, visit <http://www.cerealboxstudios.com>.



## What changes would you like to see in the socio-political scene in Singapore in the near future?

Right now, there are lots of people commenting and writing on such issues. However, many people are still only "trigger-happy" with their keyboards. For example, even though many people expressed unhappiness over the MRT breakdowns in December last year, less than a hundred people turned up when TOC organised a protest at Speakers' Corner in relation to the issue. You can read more about this at <http://theonlinecitizen.com/2011/12/transport-woes-re-amplified/>.

I think people still don't quite understand that they have the power to change things simply by making their presence known at socio-political events.

## What are some of the accomplishments or milestones of TOC that are close to your heart and why?

I was involved with TOC's campaign against the mandatory death penalty, as well as our feature on the homeless (two years ago), which gave us quite a bit of grief from the authorities. More recently, I did a story about the exploitation of migrant workers onboard fishing vessels. There have been positive developments in all these issues since then, and I'd like to believe TOC had a part to play.

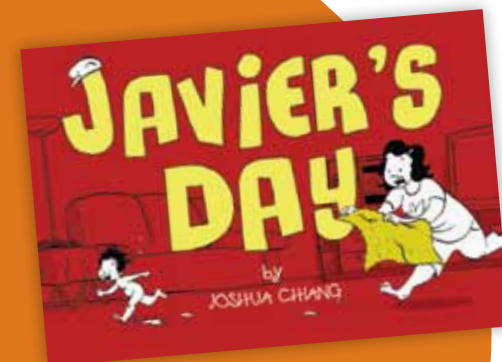
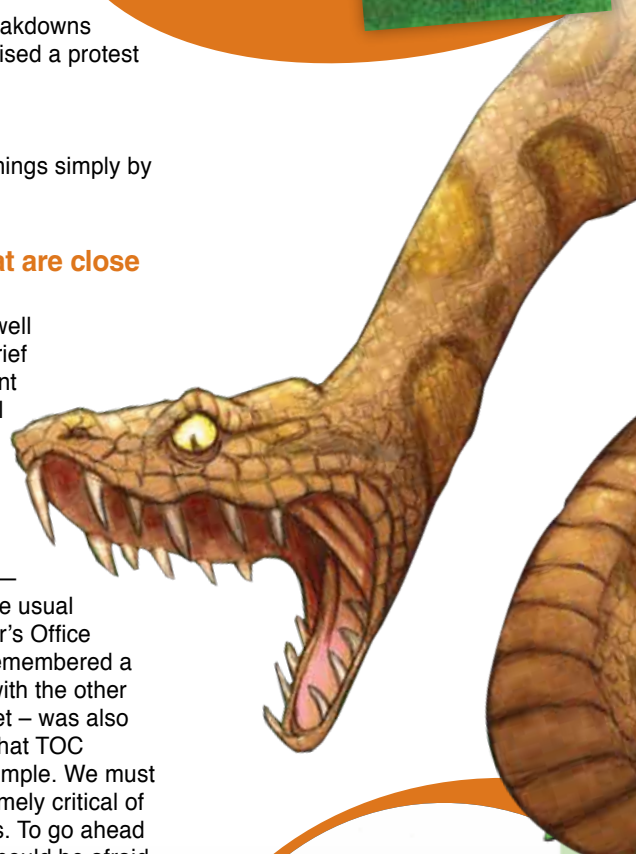
Closer to my heart, of course, is the decision to carry on with TOC when the government decided to gazette us as a political organisation last February. I was the acting Chief Editor then. To be honest, despite the brave front we put up, there was a certain degree of fear to be under the government's radar — even though we knew it all along, but now it was made official to us. I guess the usual response from any community being ordered to register with the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) would be to shut down, go underground, and operate anonymously. I remembered a few days after we received the letter of gazetting from the PMO, sitting down with the other volunteers deciding what to do. Siew Kum Hong — who wasn't a part of TOC yet — was also present. And I remembered asking him for his then-outsider's perspective of what TOC means to him. And he said that more than the stories, we must also set an example. We must use our real names whenever we post our articles — many of which were extremely critical of the government. And I guess that was when I knew what the right decision was. To go ahead with being gazetted because we want to send a strong message that no one should be afraid to speak freely (and responsibly) in Singapore, on issues that matter.

## How would you inspire young people to be more involved in socio-political issues in Singapore?

I don't think young people nowadays need much inspiration. Many of them are already very involved, which is a far cry from when I was a teenager. And I don't think it should just be restricted to socio-political issues. There's nothing wrong if you aren't concerned with political issues if it's not your cup of tea. But if you have a passion for something, just pursue it, even if it is just a hobby. Finding out what makes you feel alive, finding your unique purpose, that's your most important job.

## What advice would you give to young people who want to be cartoonists?

Keep your drawings safe from Mum.



Chiang's first book *Javier's Day* is a book of pictorial representation of child rearing relatable to readers of all ages and literacy level.

