

Thinking like a towkay

A best-selling book for young bosses uses Singlish and Hokkien to deliver a message of honest living and hard work

► Bernard Koh

MEET the management gurus: Donald Trump, Jack Welch and, er, Ah Chuan?

That last name is behind the home-grown bestseller, *Towkay Ho Seh Boh? How To Become A Successful Towkay*, which entered *The Straits Times*' non-fiction bestsellers list three weeks ago at No. 8 and stayed in the top 10 until last week. *Towkay Ho Seh Boh* means Boss, how are you.

Ah Chuan is actually the pseudonym for Goh Kheng Chuan, 39, a well-spoken book publisher and National University of Singapore arts graduate.

He declares his intentions in an interview with *LifeStyle* recently: "I'm not here to write any other how-to book you can get from ang-moh authors."

His self-published handbook for young entrepreneurial upstarts is novel in its use of Singlish and Hokkien to deliver 48 digestible morsels of business wisdom headed by familiar dialect idioms.

Gems include *pak lang wu eng, wa boh eng* (other people have time, but I don't) and *lang kuah si sai, wa kuah si kim* (what people see as s***, I see as gold).

In Singapore where the push is in favour of speaking Mandarin over dialects, Goh, who is Teochew, explains his choice of language.

"Do you notice how people perk up when the Prime Minister says something in Hokkien at NDP rallies? People crack up at the phrases.

"Maybe with this book, Singaporeans can start looking at the dialect in a more positive light."

The book has evidently struck a



HE'S THE BOSS: Goh took over his father's publishing business just two years after he graduated from university.

chord with readers. At least 60 per cent of the first print run of 1,500 has been sold and Goh is planning a second print run of another 1,500.

Times bookstore merchandising manager Kenneth Wong, 48, says: "With a catchy title like this, we've sold about 70 per cent of what we've gotten, which is an excellent figure for local books."

Goh's towkay roots came from his father. He admits fondly that some lessons in the handbook are

imparted by the elder Mr Goh. The latter handed over the family business Rank Books to him and retired in 1995, just two years after Goh graduated from university. Before that, the company was operated by the father and his two sons.

"My father said to me, 'What I've given you is a stage. Get a script, get the actors and make it work.'"

"From there, I *bao ga liao* (handled everything)," he says with a laugh.

Now Rank Books operates with a four-man team, but churns out about 10 titles a year, including Member of Parliament Inderjit Singh's *The Art And Science Of Entrepreneurship* and *Business Times* senior correspondent Teh Hooi Ling's *Show Me The Money* volumes.

"Over the years, size still doesn't matter," says Goh with pride.

Of course, like every other towkay, he remembers the hardship.

Under his father's supervision, he took taxis and ran around delivering books to bookstores as a rookie publisher.

He occasionally drives around in his Mazda doing the same thing now and runs into inadvertently direct feedback.

He says: "Some bookstores think I'm just the delivery boy, so they are honest and criticise some of the covers or say this or that title isn't saleable."

"It's not easy to hear it right smack in my face, because books are my thing. It forced me to think about how to improve the books."

Like what he says in his book, *eh chiat kor, mian kang kor*. If one can take the pain, there will be no fear of hardship.

You gingerly ask him about his monthly earnings, and he pauses before revealing that it is a modest but comfortable four-figure sum.

"The word towkay is often misconceived. I'm not writing a book teaching you how to become a millionaire."

"It's about cultivating the right values and mindset – as long as you don't owe people money, and you make a decent, honest living for yourself and the people you hire, I say you're a good towkay."

His father, Mr Goh Tian Wah, 73, is pleased with his son's efforts: "In my time there were no such books in Singapore to teach a young man to start a small business in a practical way."

"Now my son can offer budding businessmen guidance through their struggle."

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Towkay Ho Seh Boh? How To Become A Successful Towkay (\$16.80 without GST) is available at major bookstores.

