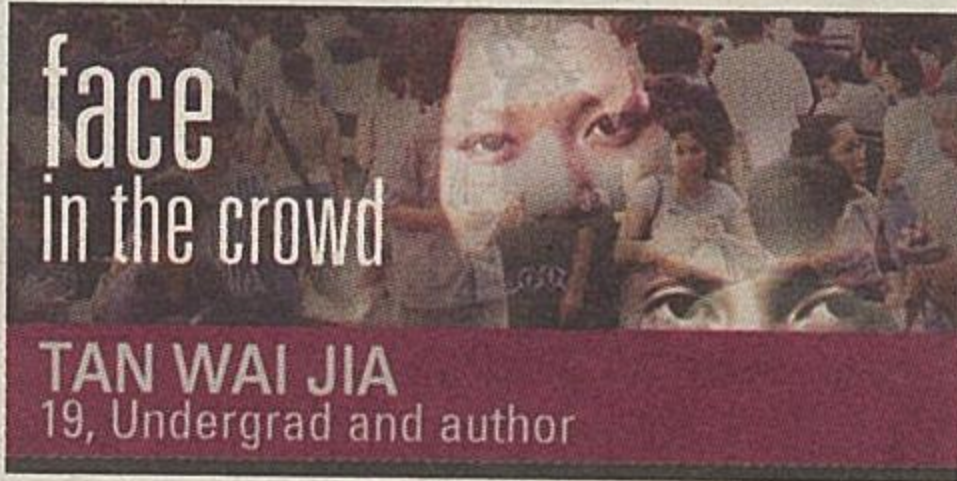


Voices

The wind beneath her wings

A Nepalese orphanage inspired a 19-year-old S'porean to publish her first book, *Kitesong*



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LOOKING AT the stack of illustrated books in front of her, all 19-year-old pre-medical student Tan Wai Jia can think about is how much money the sale of her first publishing effort, *Kitesong*, will bring in.

"Every cent collected will go towards helping Sophia's Home in Nepal, the orphanage I volunteered at earlier this year," she tells you.

Shortly after her A levels last year, the former Victoria Junior College student asked the Methodist Mission Society if it needed help anywhere.

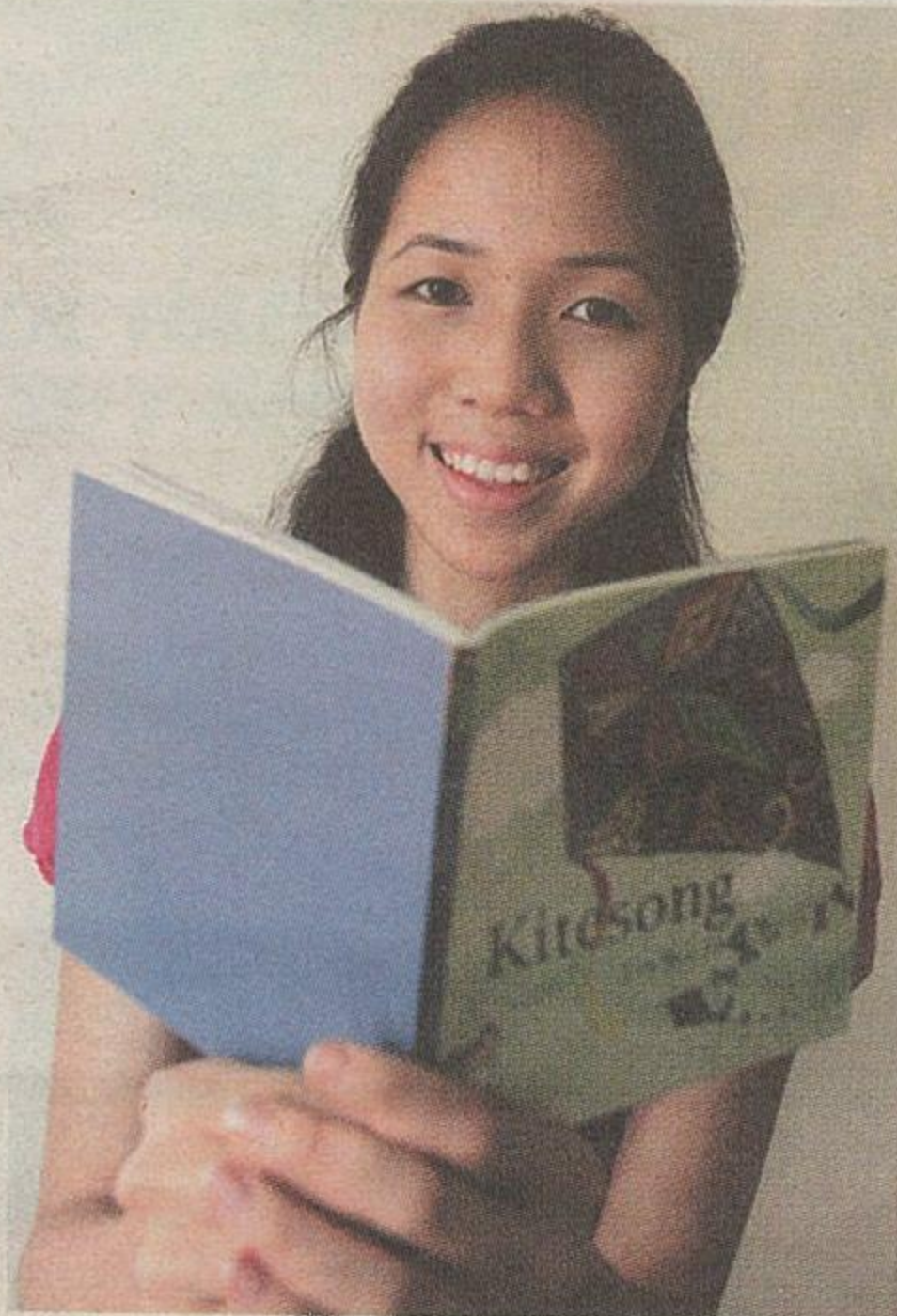
As fate would have it, the society had a dearth of volunteers in Nepal because of the unstable political situation there. Her parents weren't so easily convinced.

"They were quite worried about my safety, but once they were swayed by my convictions, they relented," she said.

Packing the bare minimum for five weeks, she set off by herself to Katmandu where she was warmly welcomed by 23 children and their house parents.

The nights, she admitted, could be hard because it got so cold – with temperatures falling as low as -4 degree Celsius – but the days were filled with love and lessons.

Sometimes, after a day of playing outside, the kids would return to the house and leave mud stains all over the bathroom. One afternoon, walking past the dirtied bathroom, she thought to help clean it and not bother the house parents who already



HER SONG: Every cent collected from the sale of Tan Wai Jia's book, *Kitesong*, will go towards helping Sophia's Home orphanage in Nepal.

had their hands full.

"As I went to look for a pail and rags, I found myself dreading the task. Then I ran into one of the kids who decided she would clean it instead."

Ten-year-old Mamata was so insistent that Wai Jia relented. "She did it with such joy, and when she had finished she exclaimed: 'Sister Wai Jia, I did it and now it's so clean!'"

It left Wai Jia in tears and humbled by Mamata's attitude to the task she had thought so unpleasant herself.

"She took pride in her tasks, no matter how small, and did them so well. Many Singaporean kids including myself would never do that. We are more likely to turn around and ask the maid to help us," said Wai Jia.

Returning from the trip, she started work on her picture book *Kitesong* – painting up to 10 hours a day.

The story is about chasing your dreams no matter how difficult they may be, and for Wai Jia, it represents two dreams coming true: Publishing a book and giving back to the orphanage.

"Previously, I wanted to publish for my own personal glory. Now I'm content to use this as a way to help others," she says.

Copies of the book are now being circulated via a network of churches and she hopes to raise more than \$200,000.

Indeed, she faces life with a mission: To travel and to help all those she can.

"I go on these trips to get to know the people and find out if this is the life that I want". She pauses, nods her head and adds: "I know now, the answer is definitely yes. When I graduate I would like to be a doctor in these countries."

While in Nepal, she had also volunteered at a factory where abused and destitute women worked. Some of them had had acid poured on their faces by their spouses and were now fending for themselves.

"I feel like I should help such people and I think medicine is one of the best ways. At least I can ease their physical suffering and, in a way, emotional suffering as well."

As all her family members have careers in the finance sector, Wai Jia's very different approach to life has perplexed them all.

"We are always joking as to how I ended up being so different," she laughs. "But seriously, I have my parents to thank for instilling in me the importance of giving back to society to me."

She may have had a fortunate start in life, but this, she explains, has only made her more willing to help.

"Having grown up with luxury, I no longer crave it. Having met these people who are content with what little they have, I have come to realise what is more important."

On her first volunteer trip abroad to Cambodia while in college, she recounts: "I came across a beggar, a landmine victim, who had been completely burnt and lost his limbs. All he wanted was some money, but I had to walk past."

Frowning, she admits she is still haunted by that decision.

"We were told by the school not to give, otherwise everyone else will come to us and we could end up getting hurt. But I don't know if I did the right thing."

However, she feels blessed now that she is in a position to help.

She said: "It not a sacrifice, it's a privilege for me to go to these places. I feel happier and freer in spirit."