

# Lepak Lah!

*An initiative by 3 concerned students to bridge Migrant Workers with NTU students,  
led by Lin Min Htoo, recipient of the OG Department Stores - Mr Tay Tee Peng  
Distinguished Undergraduate Student Award*

## **Background:**

Min Htoo founded Lepak Lah! after reflecting on the state of affairs in Singapore and his own experience of coming to Singapore to study in Primary 5. He saw how even in this day and age, many migrant workers still do not enjoy a proper “life” in Singapore. Materially they may be provided for, by their employers and the government, but **communally**, they are greatly underprivileged. They rarely, if ever, get opportunities to interact wholeheartedly with Singaporeans, as fellow residents of a nation should, in order to be integrated into the Singapore society. Naysayers may say they are only here transiently, but Min Htoo felt a strong sense of discomfort with just partitioning migrant workers in an unseen corner of Singapore – their dorms and their workplaces – while the rest of us go about with our lives.

In his heart, the story of Omelas resonated strongly with the situation in Singapore.

As the story of Singapore continues to be written, the chapters must mention and credit these heroes, who build our nation with their own hands under the scorching Sun.

Min Htoo was dismayed that there were no active CCAs or groups in NTU championing migrant workers’ causes. He thought long and hard about what he could do, as a mere student, about this. Policy-making and legislation were out of the question, and common charitable activities like fundraising seemed too mundane for him.

When he was having a meal, he realised that the idea was right in front of him – food. Food is the common thread that ties all of us, regardless of race, language, religion, nationality or skin color. It was even more apt as Singapore is known as a food hub. Furthermore, meals can be shared regularly, instead of a one-off activity with an unclear impact on the beneficiaries.

## **The Organising Committee:**

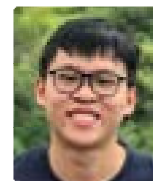
With this idea, Min Htoo won over the selection panel of the DUSA award and gained their approval and funding to execute this project. Determined to bring Lepak Lah! to fruition, Min Htoo recruited two friends, Eiden and Joseph, to join him as the organising committee of Lepak Lah!



**Lin Min Htoo**



**Eiden Cheng Wei Quan**



**Joseph Sebastian**

### Timeline of events:

Date	Event
9 Oct 18	Lepak Lah! was conceived by our founder
8 Nov 18	Lepak Lah! approved by DUSA Selection Panel; Eiden & Joseph join Min Htoo
19 Jan 19	The team met Migrant Workers' Centre (MWC) & Humanitarian Organisation for Migration Economics (HOME) to gather expert opinion on executing Lepak Lah! The team also began liaising with the construction firm in charge of renovating Yunnan Gardens
19 Feb 19	The team visited Westlite Dorm @ Jalan Papan, organised by Sama Sama, a Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) redefining the narrative of migrant workers as heroes
18 Mar 19	Lepak Lah! held our first meal with migrant workers @ Yunnan Gardens construction site
8 April 19	Lepak Lah! was featured on Nanyang Chronicles, the NTU student-run newspaper
12 April 19	Second meal with workers @ CresPion Hall renovation site
26 June 19	Third meal with workers @ CresPion Hall renovation site
9 Sep 19	Preparation for collaboration with SDI Academy, a local NGO that organises free English lessons for migrant workers Meeting between Lepak Lah! volunteers and SDI founder, Sazzad Hossain
22 Sep 19	Intro session by SDI Academy for migrant workers Lepak Lah! provided food and volunteers for this session
8 Oct 19	Collaboration with NTU CN Yang Scholars Club We held a sharing session with 11 CN Yang Scholars on what we do in Lepak Lah! and why we do it
25 Oct 19	Fourth meal with workers @ Hive renovation site
Present	Moving forward, we wish to continue Lepak Lah! in 2020 and are discussing ways to sustain it We are in talks with MigrantXMe, another local NGO that organises dormitory visits and interaction sessions with migrant workers

**Media & Publicity:**

Below is the poster that we disseminated through WhatsApp groups and our Instagram page to recruit volunteers.



As Instagram is used by almost everyone in our age group, and to document our meal sessions through photos, we created an Instagram handle @lepaklah2019. As of December 2019, it has 141 followers.



We were also very privileged and honoured to be approached by Mr Chia Kun Liang, one of the writers at Nanyang Chronicles, an NTU student-run newspaper. Below is the Chinese article.

南苑

《我们》最大的敌人，最终是自己  
—刊12页



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新闻

## 伸向客工的友谊之手

谢坤良/卓思恬 ● 报道

**越**来越多南大学生开始关注客工在新加坡生活的状况。他们有的积极参与客工权益组织的义工活动；有的主动发起公益活动，促进本地青年与客工群体之间的了解；有的则通过摄影作品展示客工群体，让公众一窥他们的日常生活。

《南苑》访问了数位各自以不同方式对客工福利发声与做出贡献的南大学生，了解他们开展的各自活动，及他们为何心系客工群体。

**用一餐饭的时间 聆听客工的故事**

回想起自己在2009年与父母搬迁到新加坡时，曾挣扎于适应本地环境的历程。来自南大的数理学院二年级生林明建（20岁）深觉的意识得到帮助，带领体融入本地社会的体会。

今年三月，在黄奕百货公司即于教育基金会的赞助下，他发起名为 Layuk Lahi 的学生义工活动。每周三到为南大学生和在云南花园一带建筑工地工作的客工举办午餐聚会，让参与者透过面对面交流，分享彼此的生活点滴。

林明建坦言，客工的福利一直是自己非常关注的课题，也一直想帮助他们，但苦于没有行动。

直到他发现南大社会福利与志愿服务社并没有针对客工的计划，他才因此决定率先发起此活动。

“身为一名外籍学生，在陌生国度上我都能体会客工在异国他乡生活所遇到的困难。基于生活背景、语言与饮食习惯上的不同，他们往往遭受偏见及不同等待遇。我们必须改变这些现象。”

Layuk Lahi 于3月18日在云南花园建筑工地举行了午餐聚会，参与的义工及客工共七



名。印度与孟加拉籍客工占多数。

当天学生义工为客工们购买不同的本地美食，包括了海南鸡饭、煎豆腐、炒粉等。

有趣的是，他们在交谈中发现，虽然印度与孟加拉籍客工会偏爱辛辣的食物，但他们却不怎么喜欢炒粉，对它可是无动于衷。

他们后来发现，印度与孟加拉人对辛辣食物非常讲究，本地炒粉酱汁对他们而言不够浓稠，稠度也不足。

请问为何选择以午餐聚会的方式促进学生与客工之间的了解，林明建说：“我们常谈民以食为天，美食的确可以把来自不同文化背景的人凝聚在一起。通过分享美食打破彼此之间的生疏与误解。”

下一阶段的活动计划将持续至今年11月，目前的计划是让学生义工、

林明建说，有许多学生义工在参与第一次的午餐聚会后都表示，他们愿意在愿意与客工们攀谈，也学会如何以同理心去了解他们。

“我们所做的是提高意识，通过与学生近距离的接触，透过交谈直入心事，让更多人看到客工群体不一样的一面，也渐渐学会关注彼此之间的许多相似之处。”

**拍下瞬间美好 一窥客工日常**

2013年震惊全国的小印度骚乱事件，激发了郑泽恒（23岁）重新关注本地客工的生活状况和困境。

这名黄奕到理与信息学院一年级学生在过去的3年里，空闲的时间会带着相机探访各建筑工地以及客工宿舍夜班的地点，拍下客工们自然、直接和真实的面貌，希望通过作品能



来自南大的数理学院二年级生林明建（左二）说，身为一名外籍学生，也能体会客工在异国生活的困难。

— 谢坤良

**Meal sessions:**

Here are the photos of our meal sessions.





This was our collaboration with SDI Academy where we provided food and volunteers for one of their first sessions of the year.







This was the sharing session organised jointly with NTU CN Yang Scholars' Club.



### **Concluding thoughts:**

The main challenge we encountered during the meal sessions is the language barrier. However, both the NTU students and the workers were not hindered by this, and managed to have interesting conversations about family, our hobbies, work and food. The migrant workers had never tried many of the Singaporean dishes we ordered from NTU canteens – laksa, chicken rice, banmian, fishball noodles, pulut hitam etc. They were understandably hesitant to try the food initially, as they had never seen them before – which is a shame as food constitutes a large part of Singaporean culture. It warmed our hearts to see the workers relishing these dishes. Indeed, food was a natural ice-breaker in our sessions.

After the meal sessions, we asked the NTU student volunteers their perception of migrant workers before and after the meals. Many expressed that they were hesitant, or even slightly scared, prior to meeting the workers, as they had never talked face to face with them before, let alone share the same dining table. A running concern was the awkwardness resulting from the language barrier and lack of common interests. While they were valid concerns, they proved to be exaggerated fears, as conversation flowed from one topic to another during the sessions and the volunteers took away important lessons from them.

Here are a few excerpts from our volunteers:

#### **Rebecca Goh, 2<sup>nd</sup> Year in Mathematics**

*Prior to the meal, I did not know a single name of the many workers I have come across. I saw them all as the same: Indian migrant workers, Bangladeshi migrant workers, Chinese migrant workers etc., ignoring the fact that they had names and were people just like you and I... Before the meal, I hesitated going, because I anticipated the awkward silences in our conversations. Eventually, I managed to bring myself there, and learnt their names: Tangarasu, Saiful, Khatik, Rajah, Lakshman, Shojib; their families, and their lives back home... Through the meal, I was challenged about how to welcome a stranger into my country and what it means to share a space to eat with a stranger... It is so easy to remain comfortable in the status quo while not thinking about how to engage others in society whom we often easily look past... I am now motivated to slow down, and learn new ways to show appreciation to the migrant workers in our midst!*

#### **Shirleen Kok, 2<sup>nd</sup> Year in Chemical Engineering**

*Lepak Lah! is a truly eye-opening experience, as we don't usually sit down for a meal and chat with migrant workers in our daily lives... I feel that Singaporeans should reach out to them more, which can even be just having small talk with them... Little actions like this will make them feel more welcomed and at home in Singapore!*

To conclude, we discovered for ourselves that race, language, religion, nationality or skin colour are just superficial differences that we might tend to be limited by. Deep within, we are all humans one and the same, and if one reaches out to another, through such a simple gesture as sharing a meal, our shared humanity is easily discovered. We learnt that our migrant friends have hobbies, families, dreams, worries, likes and dislikes, just as any of us do, and will definitely appreciate them more for the hard work that they put in every day to earn an honest living for their families.