

56 culture & lifestyle

OLD-SCHOOL PLEASURES

ARE THE ELDERLY BEING SIDELINED WHEN IT COMES TO ENTERTAINMENT?

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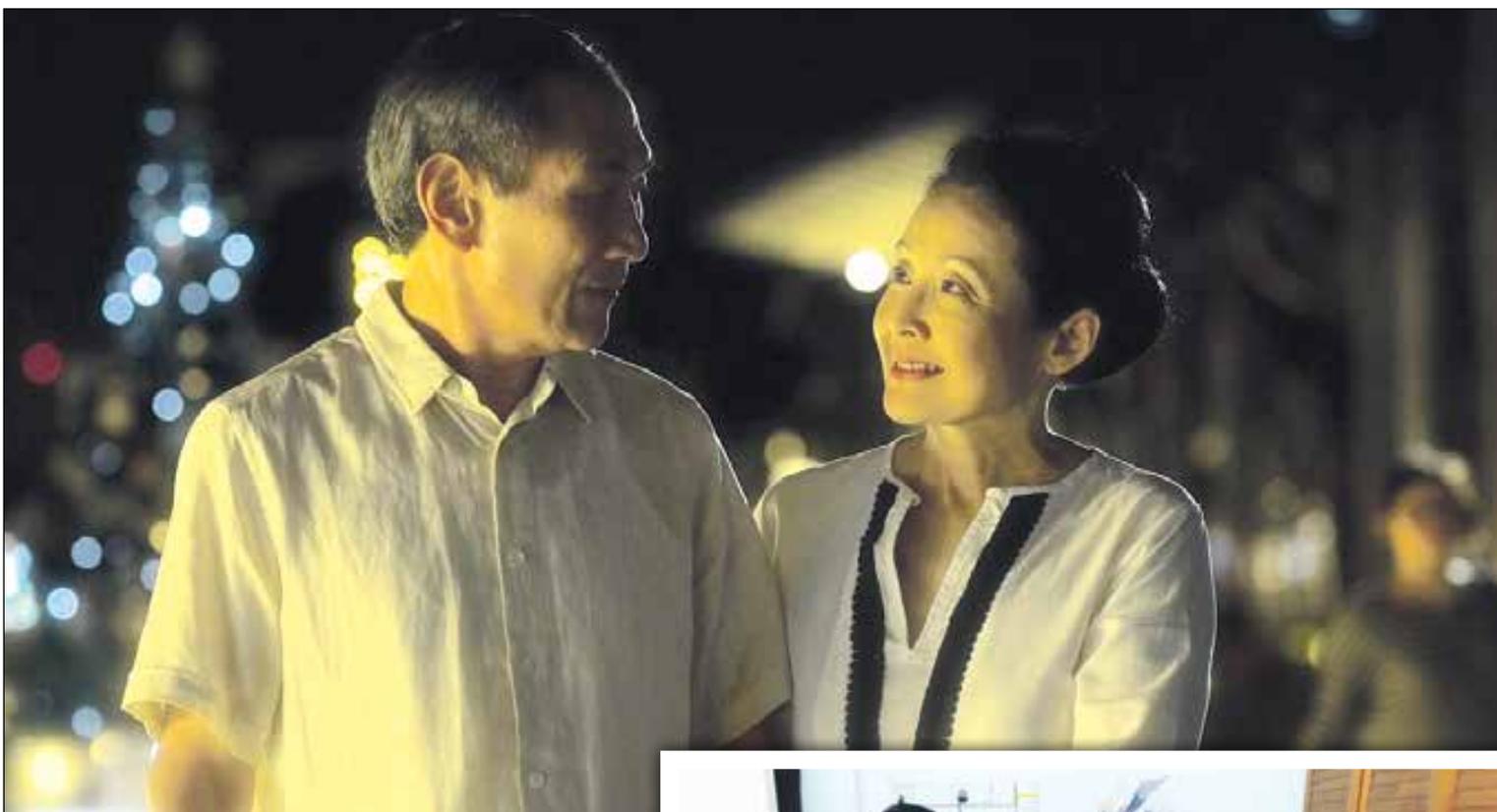


Every day, 68-year-old Tay Teng Long sits in his one-room rental flat in Yishun, or wanders around outdoors to while away his time. His complaint? There is nothing on the television that is suitable for the elderly like him.

He watches the news programmes on MediaCorp's Channel 5 and Channel NewsAsia, and the occasional documentary on the latter, on an old Panasonic television set brought home by his friend, with whom he shares the flat.

"I feel that most of the programmes are specially catered for the young and the rich. The old people have no programmes, especially with Rediffusion cut off. There used to be music and drama there for different dialect groups, which is more appropriate," he said.

Tay's daily routine runs like clock-



Above: A still from *Sunset*, one of the instalments from Channel 5's telemovie series called *Love Is Love*, which deals with relationships in the twilight years. 68-year-old Tay Teng Long says there are not enough appropriate television programmes for seniors like him. He resorts to wandering around malls to pass his time. PHOTOS: JOY FANG, MEDIACORP

work. He wakes up at 6am, rifles through a narrow wooden cabinet for a clean shirt and shuffles downstairs to a nearby coffeeshop for his morning chow of chicken porridge, topped off with a cup of coffee. He would later clean up his flat on the 12th floor and read the newspapers before heading out again to have a simple lunch (which, sometimes, is just two pieces of bread). Then he would stroll around the nearby Northpoint mall or hang out at the coffee shop. Occasionally, when the mood strikes him, he would take a bus to town and walk aimlessly.

"I have no money to buy (anything). I just walk around only, to kill time," he said.

Dinner would comprise a simple meal at the coffeeshop, before he heads back home. He watches the news and by 10pm, he's off to bed. (Well, his flatmate gets the bed, Tay sleeps on the hard floor beside him — no mattress, just a pillow and a blanket.)

His only source of entertainment is a phone call from his siblings twice a week. "Other than that, I don't even have a friend. I'm old already. I have no wife, I have no children and I live by myself," he said.

For the elderly who are lonely like Tay, they don't have much to do or to live for, he said. "Life is meaningless."

HERE WE ARE NOW, ENTERTAIN US

His sentiments about having nothing to do might seem in stark contrast to the number of shows, events and festivals that populate our events and TV calendars. But are these options missing the mark when it comes to our older population?

Programming folks TODAY spoke to say there are ample picks for the elderly to feast their eyes on. Irene Lim,

head of Mediacorp's Family segment (Chinese), said the company recognises the elderly as an important group of audience and it serves "a wide slate of acquired and local content at different times of the day to meet their varied needs".

These include day programmes that cover health, cooking and wellness, such as *Dr Oz* and *Ellen* (on Channel 5) and *Silver Carnival* (Channel 8), which are extremely well-received, Lim said. Other programmes

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with elderly appeal include long-form Taiwanese drama series such as *A Place Called Home* and *Lee's Family Reunion*; music programmes such as *Getai Challenge*, *Golden Age Talentime* and *Classic Golden Melody 2015*, and the upcoming *The Best Music & Songs of Years Gone By*.

The prime-time drama offerings also constantly incorporate relevant issues of interests to seniors, Lim said. These include Channel 5's telemovies such as *Sunset* (part of a three-part series called *Love Is Love*), which deal with relationships in the twilight years, and Channel 8's 9pm drama *Super Senior*, which serves to inspire living life to the fullest.

Elderly viewers of Malay and Indian content are also well-taken care of on Suria and Vasantham.

"Over the years, Suria continues to improve and provide a balanced programming that represents the various target audience," Lim pointed out, citing examples that cater to the elderly, such as reality competition *Anugerah V*, drama *Golden Oaks* and the upcoming social drama *Kembali Bersinar*, which centres around issues faced by the Pioneer Generation.

StarHub's head of media business unit Lee Soo Hui said its content focus has always been on offering customers "the widest variety of quality content, catering to both mass and niche segments, including our more matured audiences".

Last year, the telco launched a mobile application that was specially designed with senior citizens in mind. Called the StarHub Silver App, it offers up to 120 hours of Hokkien drama series and locally produced Hokkien programmes from Ruyi Hokkien Channel On Demand on Android smartphones and tablets. They can also pick Rediffusion Classic on the app, where they can enjoy programmes of yesteryear retold in Mandarin and various dialects, said Lee. Seniors can also tune in to channels such as Celestial Classic Movies, Hits, TVB Classic Channel and Turner Classic Movies, which showcase a collection of the most memorable and evergreen programmes.

Meanwhile, a spokesman said older audiences remain an important segment for Singtel TV. "We will continue to add more channels that provide a rich variety of programming to engage them and all our audiences."

These include drama series with strong family themes, such as *Deiva Magal* on its channel Sun TV, and *If God Loves* and *Unconditional Love* on its Jia Le Channel, as well as music variety shows featuring artistes from the 1960s and 1970s, such as *Super NightClub* and *Songs Of The Years Gone By* (both on the Jia Le Channel), and *Gegar Vaganza* (on Astro Ria).

Dr Brian Lee, head of the Communication Programme at SIM University, said he has seen "great improvement" these days in genres of TV programmes targeting various demographic groups, such as the elderly, young and women. "Whether these programmes are appealing or not is a subjective thing," he said, adding: "It



Top: Channel 8's *Getai Challenge*, which MediaCorp says is one of many shows in its stable that has elderly appeal. Other programmes with elderly appeal also include long-form Taiwanese drama series such as *Lee's Family Reunion*.

PHOTOS: MEDIACORP

is unlikely that a single medium can reach out to 100 per cent of its target audience."

However, he pointed out that MediaCorp's Capital 95.8FM Chinese radio station has a short news bulletin in dialects. "TV should have something similar, if this is allowed. News and information are important to this (age) group. We should try to reach out to them."

Still, Dr Lee noted that the demographic and psychographic profiles of the elderly population will evolve as time passes.

"The contents that appeal to the elderly now may not be appealing to the new elderly ... Those who will be categorised as elderly 10 years from now have relatively higher education and are more tech-savvy. Hence, they tend to have different tastes, compared to the current elderly segment," he said.

"There may be still some in the elderly segment who do not have much options now. It may not be the case in future as most new elderly will know how to use mobile gadgets and (surf the) Internet."

OUT OF THE LOOP?

In this day and age, Tay's life might seem like an unfathomable existence. Cable options and mobile streaming are par for the course these days, and it's common to see anyone aged between 12 and 65 sporting a smartphone or fiddling with an iPad.

But for people such as Tay, such "luxuries" are beyond reach. Tay is surviving on monthly pension hand-outs of S\$800. That is just enough to get by: He doesn't have the money to install cable TV and he uses a basic Samsung mobile phone — with no smartphone functions or camera — which cost him S\$60.

"A lot of the shows now are good quality programmes but many are trying to get people to buy things. Or they show things that are very exciting, very expensive, very clean and tidy," he said.

"For the elderly who are not educated, they are not interested in these. They have no money for such services or products. They feel out of place and

they cannot keep up with the modern programmes."

Language is also a barrier. Being English educated, Tay doesn't enjoy Mandarin programmes. So programmes such as the *Golden Years* is something he is unable to appreciate, he added.

So just what is he looking for? Tay echoed Dr Lee's view that there should be more dialect dramas for the elderly on free-to-air channels, but added that the content should go beyond "slow and monotonous" storylines, pointing at long-drawn Taiwanese dramas as an example.

Tay may be an exception, on the far end of a spectrum of viewers who are difficult to reach or have subjective tastes. But that's not to say that there isn't a group, however small, who have fallen through the cracks.

The number of citizens aged 65 and above is increasing rapidly, as population growth slows. The size of this group of citizens doubled from 220,000 in 2000 to 440,000 today, and is expected to increase to 900,000 by 2030.

Some other seniors TODAY spoke to highlighted issues similar to Tay's, although admittedly, they were not as stark.

Violet Perera, 77, who lives with her daughter, said she watches some programmes, such as *Lion Mums* and *Tanglin* on Channel 5, but added that most of the shows air quite late at night, when they are getting ready for bed. Options in the afternoon are less palatable, she added.

Perera has cable, but watches selected shows, such as American reality television series *The Little Couple* or cooking competition *MasterChef*. "Nowadays, there's too much rubbish on TV. It's very violent and people are killing each other all the time, scheming, or killing animals. It gets me tensed up so I stopped watching a lot of programmes," she said.

"There should be more programmes in the day, like gardening, baking, or shows on home decoration," she said. "In the afternoon, they keep repeating some shows and it's very boring. How many times can I watch *Under One Roof*?"

Retiree GB Peng, 67, agreed, citing a lack of variety for daytime programmes. Many of the shows on free-to-air channels are cooking-related programmes, which can get mundane, he said.

His wife, 66, suggested more arts and crafts programmes, to teach people how to paint, do origami, flower arrangements, or birthday cards. "There are such programmes in community clubs but not many can make their way there on their own," she said.

"What is lacking is in the news aspect. There's no update in the afternoon, it's always old news, which you've seen plenty of times," added Peng. "Oldies are generally not Internet-savvy, so it's hard to get new news until quite late in the night."

He added: "There's some effort made to reach out to the oldies. There are some travel shows, singing competitions and Channel 8 dramas, which are quite good, so it's not completely lacking. There could be some improvements made (but) you can't please everyone."