

Rojak romance and Ceylonese Tamils

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For a long time, Mr Tinesh Indrarajah was curious about the Ceylonese Tamils in Singapore. He discovered more about this ethnic group when he did his thesis on them during his final year of college at Yale-NUS.

With the knowledge he had gathered in tracing his paternal family's lineage, from their roots in modern-day Sri Lanka to where they reside now, in Taiping, Malaysia, he was inspired to share his findings with a wider audience.

He got the chance when Yale-NUS, in support of the Singapore Bicentennial Office, decided in June 2017 to hold a festival to explore lesser-known narratives in Singapore history through a variety of art mediums.

Mr Indrarajah, 25, submitted his idea of producing a short documentary film on the Ceylonese Tamils in Singapore along with his girlfriend Jane Christine Zhang, 24, also a graduate from Yale-NUS.

Said Mr Indrarajah: "The initial idea was to produce a historical documentary on why they came here, what they did, how they contributed to Singapore and how we can remember them." But the pair quickly realised it wasn't appealing.

"We needed an interesting plot and we thought it could be on passing his culture to a person of another culture, in this case, me," said Ms Zhang. "Maybe we could work something from that."

Their relationship became the lens through which they decided to produce the documentary – to look at the Ceylonese Tamil culture through the perspective of someone who is of a different background.

In the 22-minute documentary titled *Rojak Romance*, Mr Indrarajah and Ms Zhang navigate their different religious and cultural backgrounds, expectations on children and encounters with each other's families.

Through this personal journey, they explore how to exist as a mixed-race couple in Singapore. The film also examines the identity of the Ceylonese Tamils.

Making *Rojak Romance* was not without its challenges. The duo had no previous experience in making a documentary and had to engage the help of a film company to shoot it in Taiping and Singapore.

Said Mr Indrarajah: "We had ideas but we didn't know how to put them together in the script. It was also difficult to convince my family to act, but after a while they realised the value of the film and agreed."

The pair also had to think about their cultures and traditions on a deeper level. "The documentary analyses how one could be in a mixed-race relationship but could still be bearing his or her culture and passing it on. It doesn't mean that such a relationship will cause your culture to die," said Ms Zhang.

Yale-NUS College president Tan Tai Yong feels that *Rojak Romance* "deals with a number of themes that are important to Singapore".

He said: "It's a rich story of cosmopolitanism, multiculturalism, of movements of people, and Singapore is a good place to explore these things as it is a city where different cultures flow, engage with each other and come up with very interesting ideas."

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Rojak Romance will be screened on March 10 from 2pm to 3.30pm at The Projector, Blue Room, Golden Mile Tower, and on March 16 from 6pm to 7.30pm at the Indian Heritage Centre. It is free with registration via <https://rojakromance10mar.peatix.com/> and <https://rojakromance16mar.peatix.com/>



Mr Tinesh Indrarajah and Ms Jane Christine Zhang as seen in the documentary *Rojak Romance*. PHOTO: FUTURE OF OUR PASTS FESTIVAL