

# I AM TIGER, HEAR ME ROAR

Fearless, forthright, formidable and fiercely independent. These female celebrities born during the Year of the Tiger are at the top of their game and ready to attack the year ahead



**Jeanmarie Tan**

**Born:** Sept 26, 1986

Rebecca Lim's Chinese zodiac animal sign may be the tiger, but she is far from aggressive when it comes to her big day. Last November, the local MediCorp actress posted on Instagram about her engagement to Mr Matthew Webster (above, with Lim), a 35-year-old Singaporean, after dating for less than a year. But Lim, 35, calls herself a "too-chill bride" who has not planned anything. She tells *The Sunday Times*: "We are hoping for the wedding to be this year, but the challenge now is to find a venue that can hold as many guests as possible, and in these times, that's difficult. "One step at a time. Matthew is a much better planner than I am." Neither is she feeling any pressure to start a family soon. "It's not something that comes when you want it. A life is a miracle and I hope we will be blessed with one. "I won't be surprised if I do become a Tiger Mum in the future. After I get married, I'll be able to share more about that more accurately," she says with a laugh. Chinese New Year celebrations will also be "special" this Tiger year because of her new home. Lim has a huge extended family – her father has nine siblings and her mother has four. Due to the pandemic, only her grandmother and maternal side of the family has met her fiancé. So this year, the couple will probably be visiting all of the relatives. "Also, it's our last year to be receiving hongbao," says Lim, who will appear in a collaborative performance by the Singapore Chinese Orchestra and Singapore National Youth Chinese Orchestra as part of the live Lunar New Year's Eve Special 2022, showing tomorrow at 10.30pm on meWatch and Channel 8. Not much is known about Mr Webster, except that his dad is British, his mum is Chinese Singaporean, he studied at UWC South East Asia, earned a journalism degree at Monash University in Melbourne and is now assistant vice-president of corporate branding at PSA Singapore. "It was the guitar, bass guitar and drums and drives a Porsche 911. But Lim assures the couple "look forward to sharing more of our lives with everyone". She says: "I've always been quiet about my personal life, especially my love life. But my stand has been that if one day I should get married, I'll definitely share the



news with everyone. "I was very nervous yet excited to share the news of my engagement because I hardly share anything private and this is such a huge part of my life. She adds: "Unveiling Matthew will be a slowly-but-surely kind of situation. I'm easing him into my world and he's been amazing at dealing with everything that comes along with it." But Lim did not just get lucky in love. Like many women born in the Year of the Tiger, she is at the top of the food chain, the new-generation Ah Jie of the local entertainment scene, flush with meaty roles, awards and endorsements. The latest Gucci and Valentino tiger-themed fashion campaigns, for instance, have her decked out in tiger prints. But Lim would like to believe this is not her peak. "There's so much more for me to discover, to grow, to improve on and reach greater heights. "I've been blessed with many different kinds of opportunities – English and Mandarin productions, hosting, overseas assignments, winning awards locally and overseas. I've been given more than I ever imagined. "I'm really not the most talented or most gorgeous, but I'm thankful that there are people in this industry who noticed me and people in and out of the industry who appreciate and love me for who I am and allow me to be me." And for Lim to become the biggest Singapore female star since Zoe Tay and Fann Wong is something her nine siblings and her mother has four. Due to the pandemic, only her grandmother and maternal side of the family has met her fiancé. So this year, the couple will probably be visiting all of the relatives. "Also, it's our last year to be receiving hongbao," says Lim, who will appear in a collaborative performance by the Singapore Chinese Orchestra and Singapore National Youth Chinese Orchestra as part of the live Lunar New Year's Eve Special 2022, showing tomorrow at 10.30pm on meWatch and Channel 8. Not much is known about Mr Webster, except that his dad is British, his mum is Chinese Singaporean, he studied at UWC South East Asia, earned a journalism degree at Monash University in Melbourne and is now assistant vice-president of corporate branding at PSA Singapore. "It was the guitar, bass guitar and drums and drives a Porsche 911. But Lim assures the couple "look forward to sharing more of our lives with everyone". She says: "I've always been quiet about my personal life, especially my love life. But my stand has been that if one day I should get married, I'll definitely share the



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Rebecca Lim in Gucci's tiger-themed fashion campaign. PHOTOS: GUCCI. REBECCA LIM/INSTAGRAM



**LINA NG**

**Born:** May 6, 1974

She is one of the main stars of the Channel 5 drama series *Lion Mums*, which revolves around a group of mothers who share the same goal of giving their children the best. Off-screen, Lina Ng embraces being a Tiger Mum to her three sons aged 18, 16 and 11. At least, she was one when her two older boys were in primary school. The home-grown freelance actress says: "Someone has to be the 'fierece' figure. When children are still young and immature, you have to be firm and stern. "Instilling discipline is necessary, especially in boys, to build routine and build them up to be responsible." Ng, 47, does not believe in sparing the rod. Even though she loves her cubs fiercely, she punishes them harshly when they are "out of control". She once caned her "mischievous" second son, who was in lower primary then, 30 times in a row. "Some of my friends were shocked – they already feel so sad caning their kids three times," she recounts. "But one of our family values is no lies, not even white lies. "He didn't tell the truth over something and covered it up, and caused someone else to be blamed, so it's a double offence." She adds: "Of course, my heart

and I teared when applying medication for him. But after that, he never did it again." When he was older, Ng asked him if he remembered the incident and he replied he did because "it hurt so much". She then apologised. She says: "As a parent, it's also important to acknowledge that you didn't find a better method back then and apologise for it. I was touched when he said he didn't hate me and he understood where I was coming from. "That's why your relationship with your child is so important – that no matter how harsh the punishment, he or she will take it the right way and know you are doing it out of love." Even though Ng is the queen of the household and makes decisions on home matters and the children's education, she cedes the final say to her husband – former national bowler Mike Lam, a deputy director at Hwa Chong International School – when it comes to co-curricular activities and sports. When her older boys transitioned to secondary school, she learned to "let go" and relinquish control. "They now know when it's time to study and play, but I still insist on seven to eight hours of sleep." Her tough-mum love was also the reason she could identify with the strict, upright and perfectionist character Chae Lian, when she was asked to join the cast of the second season of *Lion Mums* (2017). There were many parallels to her own life. "My eldest was doing his



**TAN KHENG HUA**

**Born:** Jan 17, 1963

Intelligent, independent, strong, courageous, bold, decisive and charming. While scanning the line-up of Tiger traits, Tan Kheng Hua thinks she is pretty much "the quintessential tiger". More specifically, a Water Tiger, which refers to those born in 1962 and this year, who are said to be more careful and calm, with a strong sense of self-esteem and learning ability. The 59-year-old home-grown actress jests: "I think I am exactly what I was born to be – a watered-down tiger." Tan is now living her best life in North America and enjoying a second wind, sinking her teeth into a new Hollywood career and devouring the roles thrown her way – never mind the issue of ageism. She says: "I think I am given these wonderful work opportunities because I am my age. I feel seen and heard for all the right reasons, both at home and abroad. "Growing older doesn't make me much happier. I know better where I am, who I am, what I am and what else needs to be done, or not. "I know when to leave things well alone and go for a walk. When to go home. When to stop thinking, close my eyes and go to sleep." The veteran thespian is in Vancouver, Canada, filming the second season of martial arts action-adventure television series *Kung Fu*, a reimagining of the 1970s show of the same name starring David Carradine. Featuring a predominantly Asian cast, its first season premiered on Warner TV StarHub TV Channel 5 and Singtel TV Channel 306 on Feb 14 at 10.40pm. Tan plays the strict mother of vigilante protagonist Nicky (Olivia Liang), who uses her martial arts skills to protect her family and community when her home town of San Francisco is overrun with crime and corruption. She is also a voice talent on Paramount Animation's much-anticipated *The Tiger's Apprentice*, slated for a 2023 release, which features her co-stars from the 2018 romantic comedy *Crazy Rich Asians*, Henry Golding and Michelle Yeoh. She says: "I love voicing. I find it very freeing to be in a sound studio with just the directors and a microphone, and breathing life into an animated character. I get to play, sing, stream and try out all sorts of things and be so imaginative."



Home-grown actress Tan Kheng Hua (above) is in Vancouver filming martial arts action-adventure television series *Kung Fu* (right). PHOTO: SHAVONNE WONG. HBO

"It is wonderful to be reunited with Henry and Michelle on another project because they are beautiful people inside and out, with talent oozing out of every pore." Tan's other job is long-distance parenting her 23-year-old daughter Shi-An, whom she shares with her ex-husband, local actor Lim Yu-Beng. She declares: "I am the opposite of a Tiger Mum. I often call myself a delinquent dad." She remembers how a full zodiac cycle ago, when Shi-An was 12, she did not want the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) to rule her only child's year. Tan says: "I've seen too many parents stress their children out because of PSLE and I saw that as a waste of a good year. "I mean, how tragic it is for any child to look back on his or her 12th

**Born:** May 21, 1998

Last July, a 23-year-old Singaporean magazine intern made headlines for scoring a six-figure two-book deal with Berkley Publishing, an imprint of Penguin Random House. Kyla Zhao's debut novel, *The Fraud Squad*, has been pitched as *Crazy Rich Asians* meets *The Devil Wears Prada*. It is scheduled for release in January next year. Zhao has a master's degree in communications and a bachelor's degree in psychology from Stanford University, and wrote the book while alone and homesick in California at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic. And she is not done earning her stripes. The young author's Year of the Tiger is off to a roaring start, as she recently sold her third novel to Penguin Random House to be published by its imprint, G.P. Putnam's Sons Books for Young Readers, in 2024. A tween fiction titled *May The Best Player Win*, it revolves around a young Chinese chess prodigy as she prepares for the biggest tournament of her life, while navigating her team's boys' club culture, middle-school friendships drama, her first crush and her immigrant parents' weighty expectations. Zhao is now working as a marketing analyst in Silicon Valley, California. She wrote *May The Best Player Win* in a month in late 2020 as part of National Novel Writing Month, organised by a United States-



**KYLA ZHAO**

born non-profit group that promotes creative writing around the world. She says: "I think it's important to explore more serious themes of mental health, racism and sexism even – or maybe especially – in children's books. Pre-teens are at the age when they are growing an awareness of the grittier side of humanity and literature is a way for them to develop a perspective on those issues." Zhao found herself reflecting on those subjects subconsciously because it was also during the US presidential elections, contested by Mr Joe Biden and Mr Donald Trump. The anti-Asian racism she read about in the news and witnessed inspired her to make Asian representation a core tenet too. She says: "I've always joked that writing is like free therapy for me, since I use crafting fictional characters and worlds to try to figure out my own emotions and concerns. The entire story just felt very personal. That could be because Zhao, who is a big fan of the 2020 Netflix series *The Queen's Gambit*, has been playing chess since she was six. She was in the chess club at both Nanyang Primary School and Nanyang Girls' High School, representing the former at individual and team competitions. She was a member of the National Junior Squad and interned with the Singapore Chess Federation in Secondary 4. In 2017, the Hwa Chong Institution alumna even organised the Singapore Youth Girls' Chess Championship, the country's first national all-girls tournament. Studying and working in the US since she was 19 has made her more independent, a Tiger trait she happily claims. She is the type who is determined to see a task through to the very end. "However, I sometimes worry that I might be so focused on completing a task that I risk burning out, but it's also one of my goals this year to do more non-work activities," she says. Some of the predictions for the Year of the Tiger for those born under the zodiac sign sound like music to her ears. She says: "I love the idea that 2022 will be the time for me to step out of my comfort zone. So, yes, I hope I pick up new skills at my day job as well as experiment more with my writing. "I would also love to expand my social circle. I find it tougher to meet people now that I'm out of school and everyone's working remotely, with the ongoing pandemic."

Kyla Zhao received a six-figure, two-book deal for her debut novel, *The Fraud Squad*. PHOTO: KYLA ZHAO

## Other Tigers in the news



**K.F. SEETOH (1962)**

When it comes to local hawker food, it is really a jungle out there. Guiding people through it over the decades is veteran food reviewer and Makansutra founder K.F. Seetoh, who goes on the prowl for cheap and good street grub. And whatever he hunts down, you can bet it is a "die die must try". Seetoh is also partnering Urbanspace, which operates multiple food halls in the United States, to open a Singaporean hawker centre in New York this year. The unnamed food market will be located within walking distance of Times Square.

**AMOS YEE (1998)**

Tiger terror alert. Who would have known that when Yee appeared in Jack Neo's movie *Not Naughty* (2012) 10 years ago as a 14-year-old, the title would be so ironic?



**DAVID GAN (1962)**

The flamboyant hairstylist is "Ah Bo" (Hokkien for mother) to the stars, so come for any of his "cubs", such as actresses Zoe Tay, Fann Wong, Joanne Peh and Jeanette Aw, and his claws will show. On Instagram, Gan has unleashed his savagery at everything from MediCorp's talent management arm to a local aesthetic doctor who commented on Wong's alleged cheek fillers.

**DESMOND TAN (1986)**

The popular actor and MediCorp heart-throb is one tiger who is burning bright. Early last month, he married his university sweetheart of 12 years in a romantic, intimate ceremony at a chateau in southern France. The usually well-groomed Tan is now sporting an unflattering "mushroom" haircut in the Channel 8 drama *Home Again*. He plays a man who is reunited with his vegetable-farming family 25 years after being abducted as an eight-year-old and forced to work as a child labourer in Thailand.



pornography. He pleaded guilty to two charges of child grooming and child pornography in exchange for a sentence of six years in prison, which he began serving last month.