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By Grace Chen
gracechen@cbt.com.my
www.cbt.com.my

Eric prefers public transport

ERIC Choong's fashion designing career has been an illustrious one.

The 46-year-old was named by the Malaysian Tourism Board as one of Malaysia's Top 10 designers for three years running from 1990 to 1992.

His is a regular face when it comes to representing the country at international fashion shows. In addition, there are the glamorous collaborations with the likes of Chopard, Cartier and Bvlgari, not to mention being named Designer of the Year at the Malaysian International Fashion Week in 2007.

A man of this calibre would be seen zipping around in a BMW at the very least, but to Choong, it is one hassle he does not want.

Though he has a Toyota Estima, which he bought two years ago to be used as a family car and a Toyota Avanza to ferry his clothes to his fashion shows, Choong would rather leave all the driving to his family members.

"I don't like to drive," says Choong simply.

Describing himself as a bit of a daydreamer, the couturier says that the task of operating an automobile simply takes too much out of him.

"When I am on the road, I love to look around and observe things. When you are driving, you can't do that as it will be dangerous. Hence, my decision to fully use public transport. Being in a bus or a taxi also gives me time to look over my notes and do some last minute work while I am travelling from A to Z," says Choong.

The only time when he has no choice but to drive is when he is back on holiday in Ipoh.

"My mother will really get mad if I take the taxi in Ipoh," says this doting son.

Looking back, the Ipoh native surmises that his aversion to driving may have stemmed from early bad experiences.

"Thirty years ago, a driving instructor once remarked that should I hit a chicken, I would most probably die first. Somehow, I am

all nerves when I get behind the wheel," laughs Choong.

Not that Choong hasn't tried his hand at driving. In 1990, after returning from Hong Kong to start his own haute couture label in Bukit Bintang Plaza, the Hong Kong Polytechnic University graduate had full access to a Toyota Corolla. But the affair only lasted one day.

When Choong arrived for work, he took out one side of the head lights while turning into a parking bay. Then, when it was time to go home, he smashed into a pillar in the parking lot, wrecking the other front light and mangling the bumper. That incident was the defining moment that put Choong off driving.

Meanwhile, Choong is thoroughly

enjoying the freedom of being able to use his legs. This, he says, is the good thing about public transport.

On days when the weather is good, he may even forgo the taxi or LRT altogether, preferring to walk. He regularly does so along the Bukit Bintang-Petaling Street route, where his favourite detour is the Petaling Street market, where he never tires of the sights, sounds

and smells.

The exercise, says Choong, has benefited him tremendously. From his teenage years till now, he has maintained a constant weight of 65kg and his spright physique has an agile quality to it.

On the issue of image, Choong admits that during his early years as a struggling designer, there was a time when he felt that the absence of an iron horse did make him feel a tad inferior.

"I can still recall the time when I was walking in the midday sun with my umbrella. A fellow designer drove up to me in his Mercedes and said, 'Hi, you are walking?' I know he didn't mean anything but I felt it," says Choong.

"There he was in his luxury car and here I was sweating under the sun. But over time, it dawned on me that an automobile is only a mode of convenience where the primary function is to get one from A to Z. Some people might feel the need to drive a Porsche to feel good. Nothing wrong with that. For me, I am a practical person."

Having authored his autobiography, *In Full Bloom*, which was published in 2009, Choong also wants to make his stand on the green issue.

"A city with too many cars will not only add to congestion but pollute the air as well. So, if you can, why not make use of public transport?" he suggests.

But like every boy, Choong too has a penchant for machines and his biggest turn on are trains.

"Again, it's all about memories. Growing up in Ipoh, my favourite place was the railway station where I'd sit at the platform with my parents to look at the trains rolling in. Till now, this remains my favourite mode of transport," says Choong.

"I'd travel from Penang to Singapore by train if given a choice. Everywhere I go, may it be China or Hong Kong, the first thing I look for is a train schedule. In Europe, I'd take the bullet train from Rome to Milan."

"Here in Kuala Lumpur, it's the LRT and MRT and I cannot sing enough praises to the government for providing this service. Not only is it fast but I love the air-conditioning system as it is always cold."

□ To get in touch with Choong, hail him at <http://ericchoong.com>

