

# Conjuring mountains to keep spirits up amid Covid-19

NUS mountaineering club keeps busy with a new book and training despite closed borders

Ng Wei Kai

Trekking Bukit Timah Hill may fall far short of their aspirations, but National University of Singapore's (NUS) mountaineering club members will have to make do with the 163.63m peak – Singapore's tallest – until travel restrictions are lifted.

The club, which started in 2001, has seen over 300 members pass through its ranks over the years. It is celebrating its 20th anniversary this year with the publication of a book titled *Conjuring Mountains*.

The book, which will be launched on April 17, details the history of the club – from the struggles of its early years when the sport was not well established in Singapore to some of the achievements and sacrifices made by a community which has since scaled some of the world's highest and hardest peaks. It was written by a team of the club's former and current presidents.

One of the book's authors, 26-year-old Joel Lim, made headlines in 2017 for scaling the Ong Teng Cheong (4,743m) and Ong Siew May (4,451m) peaks in the Tien Shan mountain range that extends along the Kazakhstan-Kyrgyzstan-China border.

The peaks are named after Singapore's fifth president and his wife.

The current club president, 24-year-old Nathaniel Soon, a third-year environmental science undergraduate at Yale-NUS College, said: "The book, to me, is not about individual feats, but about bringing together the stories of the community in one place."

Despite not being able to travel, training, such as going on the Bukit Timah Hill treks, is ongoing for the club.

Having to resort to pretending that the grass on campus grounds is mountain ice to simulate training conditions is no obstacle for a mountaineering club located in flat tropical Singapore.

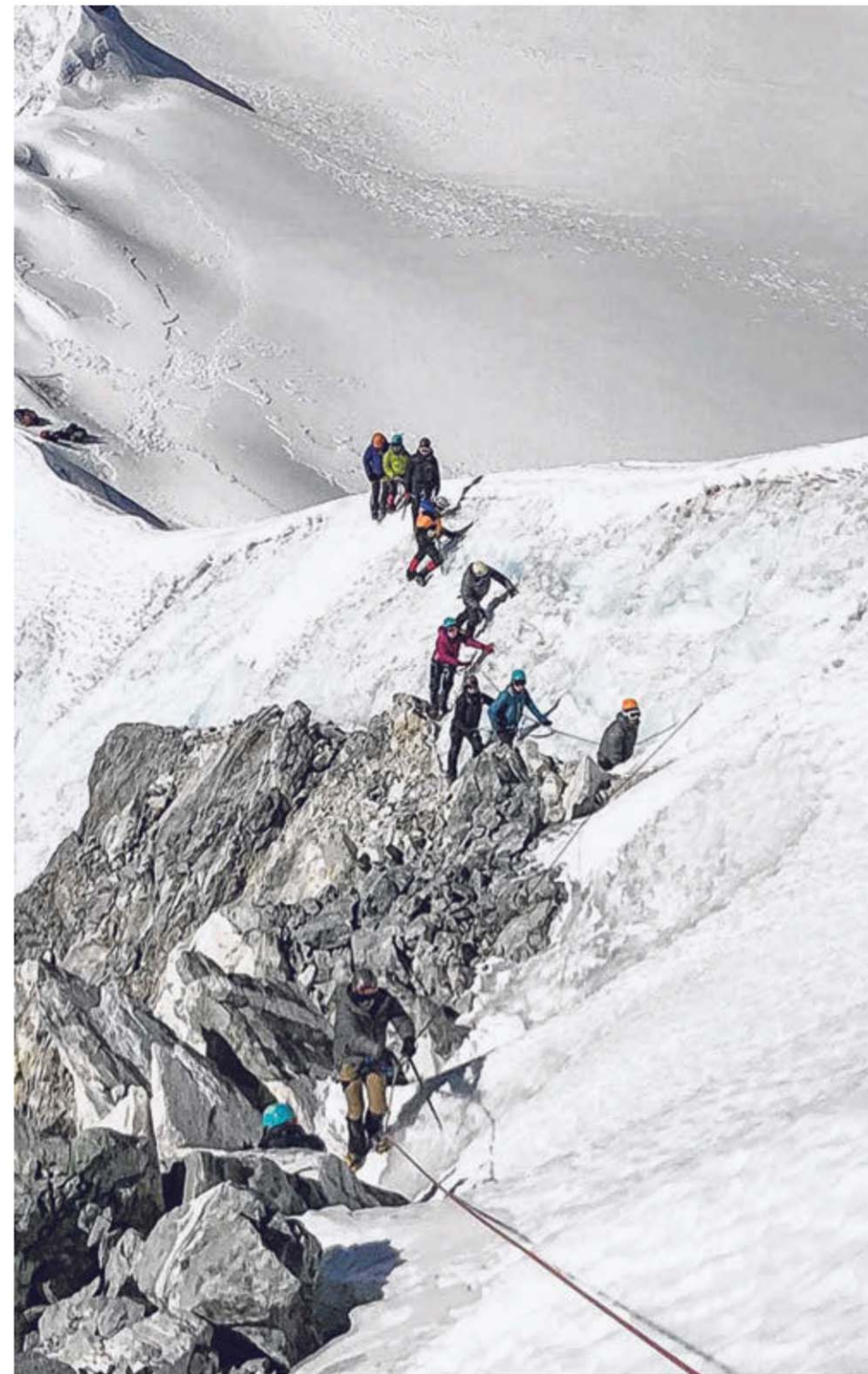
Ironically, members of the club – which is also known as Make It Real (MIR) – may have to keep tapping their imaginations for some time yet.

Due to the ongoing coronavirus pandemic, the club's roughly 70 active members – including recent alumni and current students – have had plans and trips cancelled.

If not for the pandemic, the newest recruits would have gone on their first organised mountaineering trip – a technical mountaineering course – in March last year.

Fourth-year life sciences undergraduate Chong Yong was one of the students who had his trip cancelled.

"It was very disappointing but also expected, as during that time



there were a lot of cases both here and overseas," said the 26-year-old, who would have gone to India for his first mountaineering trip.

He has continued to train with the club as he says there is still a lot to learn, even without being able to go overseas.

"For me, it's about the sense of

community and staying with people who are passionate about mountaineering, who inspire me."

Despite the references to imagination which characterise the club's name and that of the new book, the passion which drives MIR's members seems to be borne out of a search for self-reliance

and authenticity.

Said Mr Soon: "While we support any sort of mountaineering new members might want to do, like scaling high, well-known peaks like Everest, we are also trying to cultivate a culture of self-reliance."

"When you are up in the mountains there are direct conse-

quences to all your actions – something that is hard to find in Singapore where a lot of things are done for you all the time and your safety is rarely in question," he added.

"Your decisions up there become very real."

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Above: Mr Joel Lim (back row, far right), a former president of the National University of Singapore's mountaineering club, with his team near the Ong Siew May peak in the Tien Shan mountain range in 2017.

Left: Current club president Nathaniel Soon (bottom right) on his final ascent to Tserko Ri peak in Nepal in 2018. The club's active members have had plans and trips cancelled due to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic.

PHOTOS: COURTESY OF JOEL LIM AND NATHANIEL SOON

## REAL CONSEQUENCES

**When you are up in the mountains there are direct consequences to all your actions – something that is hard to find in Singapore where a lot of things are done for you all the time and your safety is rarely in question. Your decisions up there become very real.**



MR NATHANIEL SOON, NUS mountaineering club president