

Corruption remains low in Singapore – in fact, it is one of the least corrupt countries in the world – and the agency tasked with weeding out such deceit works quietly behind the scenes to ensure it stays that way. For the first time, officers from the Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau open up to **The Straits Times** about some of their major cases, over a cup of kopi.

# A cup of kopi with the CPIB

**Tan Tam Mei**

An invitation to have coffee with the Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau (CPIB) often strikes fear in the heart of “guests” – and for good reason.

While the bureau remains under the radar in its investigation work, nothing escapes the long arm of the law, said long-time CPIB officers.

“People joke about coming to *lim kopi* (Hokkien for “drink coffee”) with us. But, at the same time, they know we mean business,” senior deputy director Chin Wee Liam of CPIB’s investigations operations told **The Straits Times** in an exclusive interview with him and other senior officers last month.

Neither is anyone given a free pass when it comes to corruption, he said, noting that the bureau has looked into people of all backgrounds, including ministers, businessmen and even forklift drivers.

Mr Chin, who has been with the CPIB for 30 years, said corruption is often associated with big amounts of money, but corruption involving petty cash is tackled just as severely.

He recounted a case last year where a forklift operator collected bribes of between 10 cents and \$1 from truck drivers to let them jump the queue and speed up the picking up or dropping off of their containers.

“The implications are wider when bribery becomes a norm for people to do their job,” said Mr Chin, adding that the objective is to maintain Singapore’s anti-corruption culture so that even petty corruption cannot become a way of life.

CULTURE SHIFT

**Giving ‘kopi money’ (slang for bribe) is no longer in our culture, and we’re proud of it but we cannot let our guard down.**



**MR CHIN WEE LIAM**, senior deputy director of CPIB’s investigations operations.



## She traded secret documents for cash, luxury hotel stays

She traded confidential US Navy documents in exchange for cash and luxurious hotel stays but remained tight-lipped about her crimes.

But Gursharan Kaur Sharon Rachael, a former lead contract specialist with the US Navy, owned up after extended hours of intense interrogation by the Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau (CPIB).

She admitted giving sensitive information to Malaysian businessman Leonard Glenn Francis, the ring leader of a massive bribery scandal dubbed the “Fat Leonard” case after his girth.

Corruption thrived in Singapore during the colonial days and nothing concrete was done to fight it until anti-corruption legislation was introduced in 1937. The CPIB came on the scene in 1952 to effectively clamp down on corruption, and in 1960, the Prevention of Corruption Act was enacted.

Last year, the CPIB received 358 corruption-related reports, said the bureau in its latest statistics unveiled in April. Of these, 107 were registered for investigation, which means there was sufficient evidence to investigate them.

In the Political and Economic Risk Consultancy’s 2018 Report on Corruption in Asia, Singapore was rated the least corrupt country in the region – a rating it has maintained since 1995.

The number of reports has been declining, but most cases registered continue to come from the private sector, where there were 94 cases last year. In comparison, there were 13 public-sector cases registered.

Mr Chin highlighted a case in which senior executives of listed-company AEM-Evertch Holdings gave bribes to advance business interests.

In 2004, the firm’s former executive chairman Tok Kian You and former chief executive Ang Seng Thor paid more than \$100,000 to a manager of a China-based firm in exchange for business.

That same year, they gave \$50,000 to an operations director at a Melaka-based company so it would buy machines from AEM-Evertch for \$1 million.

Ang was initially fined \$200,000 for corruption, but after the prosecution appealed, he was given a 12-week jail term and a \$50,000 fine in 2011. In 2012, Tok was jailed for 12 weeks and fined \$60,000 for corruption.

Mr Chin said the case set a precedent as it was clear from the court ruling that corruption in the public and private sectors is treated with equal seriousness. It also signalled that corruption in the private sector can result in jail time, dispelling the popular misconception that such crimes in the private sector warranted only a fine.

He added: “Giving ‘kopi money’ (slang for bribe) is no longer in our culture, and we’re proud of it but we cannot let our guard down.”

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## Following the money trail

A case involving a senior employee of a facilities management firm highlighted gaps in procurement processes that were abused to cheat the company of nearly \$10 million. Five people were taken to task for their involvement in the scheme.



**1** Then asset management vice-president Linda Lee abused her powers to cheat her employer of nearly \$10 million. She committed the crimes over the course of five years and siphoned monies from United Engineers Limited.

**2** She and renovation firm manager Tan Aik Gee hatched a plan where the latter would give Lee letterheads of various companies to prepare false quotations that would be submitted for fictitious job requests.

**3** Lee would approve and check off on the job requests that were never carried out. The duo would then split the money paid out for the jobs. Over time, she roped in three more accomplices.



**4** Lee pocketed almost \$5 million and spent it on four apartments and more than 500 luxury items, including branded bags and expensive watches, which she hoarded in two storerooms in her office.

**5** A tip-off led the Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau to look into the case. The scheme was busted in 2015. Lee and her accomplices were hauled up for questioning and were dealt with in court.



**6** In an attempt to recover the assets, officers were led to Lee’s loot of luxury goods and found that many were brand new, with their price tags still attached. The items were confiscated and officers had to use two moving trucks to transport them. They were auctioned off and the money returned to Lee’s former employer.



ST INFOGRAPHICS: TAN TAM MEI, CEL GULAPA

## Officers find rooms full of branded goods

When officers of the Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau (CPIB) confiscated the luxury goods Linda Lee bought with her ill-gotten gains, they had to transport them in two trucks.

The stunning discovery was made after the former vice-president of a facilities management company came clean to the CPIB.

“She had amassed so many valuables that she kept hidden on the company premises,” said Mr Phua Meng Geh, deputy director of the CPIB’s private-sector special investigations branch.

The illicit scheme involved Lee getting the help of four others to cheat her employer United Engi-

neers Developments, a unit of United Engineers Limited (UEL), of more than \$10 million.

The offences, which took place between 2010 and 2015, involved Lee creating fictitious job requests and awarding them to several companies controlled by her accomplices.

The money paid for the non-existent “jobs” was split among them. In all, Lee pocketed almost \$5 million and amassed more than 500 luxury items, such as branded bags, watches and clothes.

A tip-off triggered the probe, with CPIB officers launching a two-week intensive search as they combed through the financial records of all who were involved.

“We started by calling the banks and it became clear that, based on Linda’s salary, she could not afford four condominium units,” said Mr Phua.

When they questioned Lee, she was “quite cooperative,” he said.

“She probably realised she had sunk very deep into her crimes, and they had caught up with her,” he added, noting that sometimes, suspects come clean as they are tired of concealing their crimes.

Lee was sentenced to 14 years’ jail for cheating and money laundering offences in 2017. Her accomplices were also dealt with in court.

Besides confiscating and selling the luxury goods in an auction,

CPIB also seized bank accounts and properties Lee owned.

Half of what she pocketed – about \$2.5 million – was recovered and returned to UEL.

Mr Phua said the case involved one of the largest amounts of money in recent years and showed gaps where abuse could occur in a company.

The building management sector is an area of concern, he added.

CPIB’s 2018 statistics released in April this year highlighted the construction and building maintenance sectors as worrisome areas in the private sector.

Of the 107 private-sector offenders taken to court last year, 18 were for corruption linked to construction activities and 17 involved building maintenance work.

**Tan Tam Mei**

the arrest and conviction of several senior navy officers, including a retired rear-admiral.

Mr Tin said the US Naval Criminal Investigative Service approached CPIB in 2013 to launch a parallel investigation. “It was a challenge as we had to begin investigations the very day to coincide with the US side,” he said.

“If anyone of us moved first, it would have alerted the suspects prematurely.”

A team of 10 CPIB officers set out to search and recover documents from Francis’ and Kaur’s homes and offices. Through forensic accounting, the CPIB traced the extent of Kaur’s crimes and found that she had received more than \$130,000 in bribes from Francis.

She also stayed at luxury hotels in places like Bali on GDMA’s dime.

The information she leaked was linked to 16 US Navy contracts. GDMA submitted bids for 14 of them and was awarded 11 contracts worth US\$48 million in total.

Said Mr Tin: “Some of this information was passed to Fat Leonard through covert means. She used compact discs and her personal e-mail to pass on the information.”

Mr Tin said that Kaur would also hand hard copies of the documents to Francis’ driver at an agreed meeting place. “Very spy-like, very covert,” he added.

While Francis and other conspirators were tried in the US, Kaur was convicted in Singapore as she is Singaporean and the crimes were committed here. “It happened within our jurisdiction and it’s natural for us to prosecute her here,” said Mr Tin.

She was sentenced last year to 33



months in jail. Her case is an example of how corruption cases have become more transnational, said Mr Tin. “There is an increasing need for us to cooperate with foreign

agencies, and people need to know that corruption can happen on international platforms, too.”

**Tan Tam Mei**