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Married for 54 years

Fifty-four years might seem like a lifetime to be married, but for Mr Tan Koh Kwang and Madam Yeo Char Whay, the secret is simple.

"Aiyah, we just take it one day at a time. Nothing to it," shouts retired hawker Tan in Mandarin who, at 80, is hard of hearing.

Asked what they think of their other half after all these years, both husband and wife look at each other and echo in Mandarin: "Can do, can do."

Their seasoned nonchalance belies a fond attachment to each other.

When LifeStyle first arrives at their terrace home off West Coast Road, Mr Tan is wearing just a vest and boxer shorts.

His 75-year-old wife immediately dresses him up, doing up the buttons on his shirt with care.

Occasional holidays to China and karaoke sessions with friends aside, life for the couple has slowed down, now that their five children, aged 40 to 54, are grown up and have their own families. "All he does every day is weed the plants," his wife complains good-naturedly.

They married on Jan 16, 1956, after being introduced by neighbours in the Jurong kampung where they lived.

Asked why he married his wife, Mr Tan merely says: "In those times, things were different. My family and I wanted someone who could do the chores and look after us. Whether she was educated or very pretty... we didn't bother."

She chips in jokingly: "I was the maid."

They lived with Mr Tan's family,

where it was her responsibility to look after his seven siblings. "I woke up every day at 6am to cook porridge for them," she recalls.

They set up a fruit-selling business at Jurong Fishery Port and retired only in August last year. Working together, they often squabbled over "small things", she says. "But we never bore grudges. We would be angry only for a while."

On Jan 1, encouraged by a representative from the Yuhua constituency, they renewed their marriage vows at an event organised by the People's Association of Singapore.

"When we got married in our Jurong kampung, we had only 10 tables at the ceremony. It was a very simple affair and we never really exchanged vows," says Madam Yeo, who wore a traditional "kua" (Chinese wedding robe) for last

month's ceremony.

Asked how he felt about the vow renewal, a shy Mr Tan could only muster in Hokkien: "Hua hee, hua hee." (Hokkien for "happy").

But living together into their twilight years will be less about fancy ceremonies and more about mutual tolerance, they say. Mr Tan says: "I don't nitpick. When she wants to go out to play mahjong or for karaoke sessions, I don't question her... unless she starts mixing with bad company."

Madam Yeo adds with a laugh: "He doesn't 'luan lai' and I won't 'luan lai' also." "Luan lai" is Mandarin for fooling around.

CUPID'S TIP

Staying abreast of news and current affairs helps keep the mind alert, and helps ensure elderly couples don't run out of things to talk about. "I make sure I read the newspapers every day," says Mr Tan.

