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Ex-CAG chairman, late artist among recipients of National Day Awards

Mr Tan Gee Paw joined the Changi Airport Group board in May 2017, and was the group's chairman from October 2020 to March 2025. He said his role as chairman was to ensure that Singapore emerged from the Covid-19 pandemic with its air hub status intact. PHOTO: LIANHE ZAOBAO

Water engineer Tan Gee Paw accorded highest accolade, the Order of Nila Utama

Samuel Devaraj

The highest accolade at the 2025 National Day Awards has been accorded to veteran public servant Tan Gee Paw, 82, the former chairman of Changi Airport Group (CAG).

Mr Tan, who chaired national water agency PUB for 16 years until he retired in 2017, will receive the Order of Nila Utama.

The next highest award, the Distinguished Service Order, will be conferred on Temasek Defence Professor Lui Pao Chuen of the Temasek Defence Systems Institute, and the late artist and Cultural Medallion winner Lim Tze Peng.

They are among 7,210 individuals receiving National Day Awards for their contributions to Singapore.

Mr Tan was recognised for his extensive and significant contributions in advancing Singapore's critical development on multiple fronts, having played a significant role in augmenting the country's air hub competitiveness, water security and rail reliability, said his citation.

The veteran water engineer was, in 2015, tapped by then Transport Minister Khaw Boon Wan to be his adviser on rail transformation, following that year's general election.

Mr Tan joined the CAG board in May 2017, and was the group's chairman from October 2020 to March 2025.

Speaking to the media, Mr Tan said his role as chairman was to ensure that Singapore emerged from the Covid-19 pandemic with its air hub status intact.

This meant CAG had to hold on to its staff through the uncertain years, which necessitated borrowing over $1 billion to keep paying salaries. This allowed Singapore to be first out of the gates to re-establish air links when countries eased their Covid-19 restrictions, he added.

"During the crisis, all the air links were broken... so he who grabs it first will become the air hub for South-east Asia," he said. "Therefore, we worked together and made sure when the gates were open, we were the first, ready to run out and grab all the air links once more."

Keeping Singapore's air links growing – and by extension its lead position as Asia's air hub – is why the Republic is building Terminal 5, said Mr Tan. "If you have a lot of air links, more people will want to come to Singapore, and you'll grow with it."

As PUB chairman, Mr Tan strengthened Singapore's water security through bold projects like Newater and long-term water infrastructure projects that included the Marina Barrage.

As an adviser to the Land Transport Authority and Ministry of Transport, he provided guidance to resolve complex technical issues on rail projects and advised on critical organisational issues, added his citation.

Asked which portfolio was the toughest, Mr Tan said: "It wouldn't be fair for me to identify one and say that is the issue that challenged us the most, because they are all existential issues."

Mr Tan (Gee Paw) was recognised for his extensive and significant contributions in advancing Singapore's critical development on multiple fronts, having played a significant role in augmenting the country's air hub competitiveness, water security and rail reliability.

Mr Tan, who is currently a non-executive director at CAG, said he now devotes time to taking care of his wife and that his next goal is retirement.

Prof Lui, 83, said he was greatly honoured to receive the Distinguished Service Order, and that his contributions to Singapore were made possible by the trust of his superiors and the integration of his colleagues in project teams.

The chairman of the Singapore Nuclear Research and Safety Institute was awarded the Distinguished Service Order for his significant contributions to Singapore's research capabilities across multiple fields, such as nuclear science, water sustainability and underground cavern development.

He was the Ministry of Defence's first chief defence scientist – a position he held for 22 years – as well as chairman of the Ministry of Finance's development projects advisory panel.

Mr Lim, who was 103 when he died on Feb 3, 2025, was conferred the Distinguished Service Order posthumously for his contributions to Singapore's cultural heritage and visual arts scene.

The painter, renowned for his innovative approach to Chinese ink and calligraphy, was described in his citation as a towering figure in Singapore's artistic landscape.

"His distinctive 'muddled writing' style and groundbreaking integration of colour into classical Chinese calligraphy revolutionised traditional art forms," it said.

The former principal of Xinmin Secondary School was the first Singaporean artist to hold a solo exhibition at the National Art Museum of China.

There are 12 recipients of the Meritorious Service Medal. They include Dr Noeleen Heyzer, 77, a social scientist who was previously an under secretary-general at the United Nations and executive director at the UN Development Fund for Women; Dr Sudha Nair, 68, the chief executive of family violence specialist centre Pave; and Mr Tan Chong Meng, 65, chairman of the National University Health System and former group chief executive of PSA International.

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• A full list of the 2025 National Day Award recipients is available at the Prime Minister's Office website.

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