From Ah Beng to scholar

IDA scholar Shawn Han's obsession with computer games sets the foundation for his career.

MR SHAWN Han recalls his teenage years with a chuckle and says candidly that he was a juvenile delinquent.

"I was your typical Ah Beng. I was playful, never studied much, played computer games a lot at home and spoke in Hokkien with my friends. Yes, I also carried a comb in the back pocket of my pants. "But all that is behind me now," says the 26-year-old who will be graduating with a Bachelor of Computing (Honours) degree from the National University of Singapore (NUS) in May.

Mr Han says his fascination with computer games has turned out to be a blessing in disguise although his parents, who run a retail business, had fretted that he was neglecting his studies.

His preoccupation with computers games led him to a diploma course in multimedia software engineering at the Singapore Polytechnic in 2000 after he completed his O levels at Dunearn Secondary School.

He adds that his years in secondary school would have ended in a fiasco if not for a life-changing holiday trip he took with his mother to Tokyo in 1999.

He recalls: "I was deeply impressed with the life and culture there. The city oozed discipline, efficiency and modernity. The public behaviour of the Japanese was fantastic. They were so polite to one another."

"Before I started on the holiday, I did some reading about the country's history and culture."

"That visit was a turning point in my life. I saw the beautiful side of life in Japan. It made me feel that I must bring some discipline and quality into my life as well."

Soon after he returned home from the trip, he threw himself into preparing for his O-level examinations.
"I was so inspired that I studied very hard for six months. As a result, I was the top student of the Daerah Normal Academic stream in 1996."

He spent four years working as a cybercafe manager until 2004, when he decided to enrol at NUS for a computing degree course, specialising in e-commerce.

In March last year, the university informed its students via e-mail about the InfoCom Development Authority of Singapore’s (IDA) scholarship offer.

Mr Han applied for the scholarship, which was jointly sponsored by IDA and ST Electronics, an organisation that deals in simulation and training instrumentation, digital media, e-learning solutions and training solutions and services.

At that time, he was in Manchester, England, on a six-month student exchange programme. He recalls that a member of the National InfoCom Scholarship selection board held an hour-long phone interview with him.

He landed a scholarship for his final-year studies.

Mr Han says that after graduation, he will spend a year with ST Electronics to serve his bond. He might continue working there to broaden and deepen his knowledge in his chosen field.

"After that, I will pursue a master’s degree. But eventually, I will start my own business, as this is in my blood. Must be my parents’ genes," he adds.

Computer studies, he says, hold the promise of great careers for young Singaporeans in many fields, such as mobile technology, digital media, games development and so on.

"Computisation already pervades every aspect of life in Singapore, and in the years to come, this reach would be even more widespread with new applications and inventions. So, students who pursue IT courses should have bright careers ahead.

"The market for computer applications is huge and is growing in fields such as education, medicine, defence, transport — every conceivable sector, even food and beverage," he says.

When asked who inspires him the most, Mr Han replies: "My parents."
He adds: "They started with nothing but they persevered. And today, although they are in their 50s, they still work long hours managing a shop that sells handbags and luggage. Their toil has given my brother and I comfortable lives and good education.

"My father once told me, ‘Learn to be independent. Be honest. Believe in your decisions and stick by them. Do not let naysayers discourage you."

"My philosophy in my chosen field is to dare to try and to explore. I will strive to be a true IT professional."