

QUESTIONING MUSEUMS

Art Institutions in Singapore

Conversations with

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Angelita Teo
Kwa Chong Guan

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Kennie Ting, Peter Lee, Angelita Teo,
and Kwa Chong Guan

Edited by
Jennifer Burris and Adrian Tan

Museum Studies and Curatorial Practices

Nanyang Technological University
School of Art, Design and Media

About the MA in Museum Studies and Curatorial Practices

Radical changes in museums and curatorial practice over the last 30 years call for critical reflection of traditional education in these disciplines. NTU's new MA in Museum Studies and Curatorial Practices (MSCP), the first of its kind in both Singapore and Southeast Asia, offers an innovative approach by responding to this field of study and thought.

This one-year taught MA programme has three streams—Museum Studies, Curatorial Practices, and a blended curriculum. It is designed to prepare graduates for professional positions in the multi-layered work environments of museums and art-related spaces in the region, addressing the ever-expanding field of Contemporary Curating. Its international faculty, which holds many years of experience in different curatorial formats and contexts, covers a wide range of fields: spanning from the core focus on museum studies and curatorial practices to more specific aspects such as curating the city, curating time-based media, and curating in both post-colonial and global geopolitical constellations. Furthermore, this MA addresses specific skills that define the spaces of the curatorial, which span from exhibition design to outreach and education.

These rapidly developing sectors require specific knowledge, the ability of creative and critical thinking, as well as day-to-day experience. This programme consequently places great emphasis on addressing theoretical and practical challenges in collaboration with art historians, curators, artists, and experts with local, regional, and international knowledge working with historical and contemporary art and culture.

Singapore's unique collections, museum infrastructure, and geographical location within Southeast Asia allow direct

contact with artworks and artists, archives and artifacts. Situated at the School of Art, Design and Media, this MA creates an exciting and dynamic environment provided by a dedicated and highly respected faculty. The MA MSCP is a joint venture with NTU Centre for Contemporary Art Singapore, a national research centre housed under NTU's College of Humanities, Art and Social Sciences that is located at Gillman Barracks, Singapore's International Art Precinct, and whose overarching focus is on spaces of the curatorial.

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Preface

Questioning Museums: Art Institutions in Singapore examines the ways in which shifting social, political, and cultural histories are both produced and made visible through the island-state's institutional structures, collecting strategies, and modes of exhibition making. Working together in teams, the inaugural class of graduates from Nanyang Technological University's Masters of Arts in Museum Studies and Curatorial Practices (MSCP) anchor their collective exploration through four in-depth interviews with leading figures of Singapore's ever-evolving museum field: Kwa Chong Guan, Peter Lee, Angelita Teo, and Kennie Ting. The year 2019 also marks the Bicentennial of Sir Stamford Raffles's 1819 landing in Singapore: a complicated anniversary marked by cultural institutions across the state, and which draws forward contested narratives of meaning and memorialisation, state and citizenship, global power dynamics and intricate regional histories. Taking this coincidence of chronology as starting point, this series of interviews delve into the complexity of national narratives of belonging, representation, and identity while moving fluidly from personal reflection to policy insight.

Through these conversations, fetish photographs, international movie posters, turn-of-the-century circus flyers, and amateur snapshots from 1960s Bugis Street (a tangible repository of street culture and popular entertainment gathered from eBay and junk shops) share space with technological innovations that re-animate for a contemporary audience the natural history drawings commissioned by William Farquhar in colonial-era Melaka. International trade histories are materialised in the intricate patterns of 18th and 19th century Malay textiles, which incorporate imported materials like printed European cotton and Indian brocade, as well as in an ivory Virgin Mary figurine from the Philippines that tells the story of

the Manila Galleons via its Mexican gilding. These interviews trace the lingering influence of Raffles, who in 1847 founded the Raffles Library and Museum, which later became the Singapore History Museum, while simultaneously dismantling this national origin story by showing how archival records from Arabic and Chinese, in addition to European, traders in the region stretch back over 700 years. Questions of language, both the difficulties and the need for translation, intersect with those of identity: How do museums navigate the profound diversity present in Singapore's communities—a complexity of beliefs, cultures, and histories of migration that extend far beyond the CMIO (Chinese, Malay, Indian, Others) framework—while at the same time act as spaces in which this diverse citizenship can coalesce through a shared sense of belonging?

The strength of such conversations was only possible because of the profound generosity of the four interviewees, all of whom gave significant time and attention to the students and displayed a remarkable willingness to engage their heavily researched and precisely formulated questions with both frankness and insight. We were welcomed into museums and homes; gifted pineapple tarts alongside intimate memories. Observing first hand this commitment to an emerging generation of cultural workers on the part of Singapore's museum directors, policy makers, and leading collectors, I am left both humbled and moved. This book not only indexes a cooperative inquiry into the nation's art institutions, it also speaks to a dynamic ecosystem of dialogue and mentorship that is sure to grow.

In addition to the distinctive voices of these four singular interviewees, what emerges most strongly in this publication are the thoughtful, informed, and inquisitive perceptions of the students themselves. As members of the core class "Introduction to Museum Studies," which anchors one strand of the interdisciplinary Masters, they were challenged to engage the concept of the museum through histories of exchange, movement, and debate; looking at museums as sites for the construction of knowledge and power, as well

as places in which such epistemologies can be both contested and changed. Core readings spanned such topics as secular spaces and sacred objects, colonial collecting, indigenous heritage, cultural property, historiographical aesthetics, institutional critique, structures of public versus private, and the poetics and politics of museum display. These texts were complemented by a series of guest lectures by curators, scholars, and artists with deep knowledge of the region.

Dr Alexandra Green, Henry Ginsburg Curator for Southeast Asia at the British Museum, kicked off this series with an introduction to the historical idea of the museum as a "repository for world culture" while also giving students an in-depth understanding of the complex diplomatic process and research trajectory underpinning the exhibition *Raffles in Southeast Asia*, which opened at Singapore's Asian Civilisations Museum in February 2019 as part of Singapore's bicentennial activities. This intersection of museum studies and curatorial practice was further examined by Peter Lee, who led an intimate tour of the exhibition *Amek Gambar* at The Peranakan Museum, which was drawn from a private collection of over 2,500 photographs donated to the institution in honour of his parents Mr and Mrs Lee Kip Lee. Extending this focus on photography, Dr Khamvone Boulyaphonh, the chief archivist at the Buddhist Archive of Photography in Luang Prabang, Laos, led a workshop moderated by Dr Roger Nelson that focused on methodologies employed for the management and digitisation of this unique collection. How to store rare and fragile materials in ways that balance climatic concerns, cultural norms, and religious beliefs? Dr Andrea Nanetti, Associate Chair of Research at NTU's School of Art, Design and Media, further advanced these questions of preservation and history through his introduction to current debates around digitisation and world heritage; while Kwa Chong Guan, Senior Fellow at NTU's S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, detailed the history of museums in Singapore via a meticulous chronicling of the ideological and political intentions behind the formation of Singapore's four national museums. Concluding this diverse sequence of

guest speakers, former artist-in-residence at NTU Centre for Contemporary Art (CCA) Singapore Residencies programme Jacqueline Hoàng Nguyễn introduced the possibilities of institutional critique via her ongoing research collaboration with the Museum of Ethnography in Stockholm. Titled *Black Atlas*, this project reflects on the administration of racialised labour for transporting material cultures from countries around the world to European collections and storage.

This publication would not have been possible without the instrumental support and encouragement of Professor Dorrit Vibeke Sorensen, Chair of NTU's School of Art, Design and Media and Co-Chair of the MSCP; the seamless coordination, technical assistance, and editorial insights of Adrian Tan, artist and researcher; the elegant book design of Gideon Kong Wen Da; and the faultless administration of Chia Hsiao Ching, Manager of Graduate Programmes. Adeline Tan at the National Museum of Singapore and Jessie Woon at the Asian Civilisations Museum provided additional help in coordinating interviews while Er Bee Eng, Ng Chay Tuan, and Vincent Wong at the NTU Library offered critical advice regarding publication process and distribution. As Co-Directors of the MSCP, Associate Professor Laura Miotto and Dr Marc Gloede supported the book's launch in dialogue with Magdalena Magiera, Curator of Outreach & Education at NTU CCA Singapore. As Co-Chair of the MSCP, Professor Ute Meta Bauer, Founding Director of NTU CCA Singapore and Professor at the School of Art, Design and Media, shaped the educational drive for a graduate degree in museum studies and curatorial practices in Southeast Asia, within which this publication is situated.

Questioning Museums: Art Institutions in Singapore was a collective effort at every step: between students and spaces, interviewers and interviewees. This diversity of thought and perspective gives the project its strength.

Jennifer Burris

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Introduction

Every museum exhibition, whatever its overt subject, inevitably draws on the cultural assumptions and resources of the people who make it.

— Ivan Karp, *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, 1991

This book is a collection of conversations intended to shift our cultural assumptions about well-known figures in the nation-state by focusing on the more lateral connections between their roles, ideals, and resources as museum leaders. At the core of each interview are attempts to deconstruct assumptions about these figures of authority by recomposing such assumptions into insights about our cultural formations. Each conversation evolves, in different ways, around a central theme: the critical perspective of museum practices in Singapore and its relationship to the state and its publics.

For the past 132 years, since the inception of the National Museum, museums have occupied a privileged position in the space and memory of Singapore. Understanding how these institutions were shaped via their ongoing intersection with politics and economics is explored as we look at the book's final interview with Kwa Chong Guan. An important figure in shaping museum practice in Singapore through both his involvement in policy initiation and academic inquiry into institutional historicity, Kwa is decidedly assertive in positioning archiving as an important record of the state's history; "When the museum curator or archivist collects, there exists a collection policy, a strategy of collection that invariably responds to the needs of the state." The students' dialogue with Kwa introduced perspectives on why museums functioned differently at varying moments in our history,

as well as how Singapore's cultural formation has been "intimately linked to our economic aspiration."

A question that curators and museum workers in Singapore frequently confront is how to tell history using both archives and objects in the museum's collection? How does one balance these two forms of memory and artifact? The conversation with Angelita Teo maps the restructuring of the National Museum as a case study in maneuverability by exploring how it reshapes a historical collection to appeal to a changing public. Teo details this via anecdotes on the shifting roles of museums in Singapore: what social and cultural dimensions are implied when we say that the museum should be both "relatable" and "responsible" to the public? Surfacing from this conversation, we gather insights into how the National Museum maintains its place in Singapore's national narratives by continually foregrounding, through museum practice, what "being Singaporean" means. Here, as in other conversations, are underlying messages on how the museum should reach out to Singapore's various ethnicities, social classes, and age demographics through programming, festivals, and curatorial efforts.

Every ambitious exercise in positioning museums as cultural nodes through both policy and programming must be met with a community of museum-goers set within an eco-system of collectors, academics, and curators. Peter Lee is a necessary exemplar of a figure that straddles both the private and public cultural spheres of Singapore. His candid commentary extends beyond theoretical approaches to museum making by drawing on his vital role in an uneven development of collectors in Singapore's museum landscape. Breaking through the double bind between collecting and curating, Lee shares his struggle to engage collecting as a meaningful contribution to the public and cultural spheres via the intersection of research, writing, curating, and philanthropy. Through this conversation, we glean understanding into how collecting interests and strategies run parallel to an institution's various formats of exhibition making.

The construction of a space as heterogeneous as a museum can, and ought to, change over time: as Kwa Chong Guan asks, once museums use more "interactive means, are they still a traditional museum? A keeper [of] objects to tell history?" In his conversation with the students, Kennie Ting similarly acknowledges that, specifically in reference to the Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM), museum workers are increasingly duty-bound to adopt complex roles as place-makers, researchers, custodians of heritage, and diplomats. Ting grounds this shift, in the case of Singapore, in a history of the cosmopolitan, cross-cultural Asian port city. The global and the Asian, which stretch back further than colonial history, are in his view undeniably part of the national narrative. This narrative is one that is both multilingual and multicultural, and which continues to be manifest through programming, festivals, and spaces.

The origins and meaning of the museum are and have always been under constant debate; these interviews extend this debate through open-ended conversations that question how museums impact a place and its people. In this book, students from the inaugural year of NTU's Master of Arts in Museum Studies and Curatorial Practices have compiled an oral and archival resource into the historiography of museums in Singapore: forming a much-needed inquiry into its shifting cultural formations.

Adrian Tan

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Kennie Ting

with Ray Hong, Lee Ju-Lyn, Suki Lim, Shireen Marican,
Isaac Ng, and Rachel Wong

19 February 2019

Kennie Ting was appointed Group Director of Museums and Development at the National Heritage Board Singapore and Director of the Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM) in 2016, after serving in the Civil Service for more than ten years. He attained a Bachelors degree in Economics and English from the University of California, Berkeley and a Masters degree in Urban Life and World Cities from Goldsmiths, University of London in 2011. This conversation discusses the development of museums, specifically ACM, in relation to questions of authenticity, multiple heritage narratives, and "spectacularisation." We explore the complexities of exhibition making with respect to recent debates on alternative historical narratives and curatorial approaches to such histories. By leveraging Ting's experience, as seen both in his professional work and personal writing, this conversation hopes to give insight into the relationships between museums, histories, festivals, and the multiple stakeholders across Singapore's creative industries.

Shireen Marican (SM)

Museums have evolved from “curiosity cabinets” to complex learning environments; there is simultaneously a shift of focus for the museum from cultural and heritage awareness to cultural and heritage education. This has sparked debates on the types of learning environments that museum should create, and the pedagogical processes that should take place in the museum. Some have voiced concerns on misinterpretation or under-representation of knowledge gleaned from heritage narratives,¹ while others have also said that we should construct exhibitions so that visitors can question their own knowledge structures when they enter the museum.² How does the Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM) navigate between these two poles?

Kennie Ting (KT)

ACM is an art museum. Our focus is to remind people that there is a very strong, enviable, and excellent tradition of art, craftsmanship, and design in Asian cultures. It is art historical—not so much historical. I think the primary focus here is to make the works of art the centre of the experience or the centre of understanding and knowledge building.

We tell history through the object, which is very different from the historical approach where the object is used to support a historical narrative. An example is one of our key pieces, the

1 Jeffery-Clay asserts that constructivist methods of learning in museums allow visitors to create their own hypothesis and encourage them to investigate so that they can make their own comparisons of what they have learnt to their own lives. Museums “may not always get to teach what they want” and must “carefully [craft] and [test]” programmes and exhibitions “to assure that they enhance visitor knowledge/feelings without encouraging misconceptions.” See: Jeffery-Clay,

Kodi R. “Constructivism in Museums: How Museums Create Meaningful Learning Environment.” *The Journal of Museum Education*, Vol. 23, No. 1, 1998, pp. 3–7.

2 See: MacLeod, Roy. “Postcolonialism and Museum Knowledge: Revisiting the Museums of the Pacific.” *Pacific Science*, Vol. 52, No. 4, 1998, pp. 308–318; and Wexler, Alice. “Museum Culture and the Inequities of Display and Representation.” *Visual Arts Research*, Vol. 33, No. 1, 2007, pp. 25–33

"Canton Hong Bowl."³ The historical approach would be to use the bowl to tell the history of Canton and the Opium War. The art historical approach would be to look at the provenance of the bowl, the material, and design. This would mean examining what scenes are depicted along the side of this bowl and looking at the genre of Chinese Export Porcelain—which is the larger material and art historical context within which the bowl is situated.

We try to straddle both sides. If you look at the *Raffles in Southeast Asia* exhibition,⁴ it is a type of show we rarely stray into because we are not about the history of Singapore at all. One of the reasons why there's so much discussion about the show is because we take the art historical approach. We allow the objects to tell the story.

And I think that when you do that, you recognise that the history of that object has multiple facades to it. History doesn't exist in shades of black and white; it exists in shades of grey or in colour. I don't like the idea that museums are didactic places. We are not here to tell you how to think, we are here to provide an environment where you can make up your own mind.

SM On the global development of museums, another shift we see is in the increase of technological penetration into creative industries. This refers to digital technologies used in creative industries where all digital and cultural presence links to a specific product of heritage and culture.⁵ We also see cultural technologies developing in the museum field like the Cooper-Hewitt pen.⁶ What are some cultural technologies that the ACM uses today?

KT None. (Laughter) We believe in the principles of digital. I think what is important when looking at digital media is not to be bogged down too much by infrastructure and technologies. It is important to understand what principles drive digital consumption. Digital content needs to be visual

first and foremost, and "bite-sized." On Instagram, for example, you need to be able to communicate things visually and in "bite-sized" packets of information without rambling on too much. I demand that in whatever we curate, the visual must come before the textual because we simply don't have enough space to communicate everything on the walls.

The visual in the museum also needs to be beautiful and stunning—people react well to strong and striking visuals on digital media. The visual has the power to communicate messages that might not be obvious in text. The visual is emotional—it's arresting. You feel something more immediately when you see something, as opposed to when you read something. So in curating, if you want to provoke an emotion, you have to focus on the visual.

Digital media consumption also involves personal choice. For example, on Spotify, the listener is able to build his or her own personal playlist. Here we've tried to apply this principle of building personal playlists on Spotify to curating the museum's permanent galleries. This approach is not the most obvious way of curating Asian art museums. Most Asian art museums organise their galleries by geography—East Asia, West Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia. Here, we curate the galleries thematically in a way that allows for complex, multiple narratives rather than a single curatorial narrative. This then allows the visitors to come in and make their own "playlists" of the objects that they like—for example, they can create an "Indian Art Playlist" or a "South East Asia Playlist"

3 The Canton Hong Bowls are ceramic vessels made in 18th century Canton that depict intricate paintings of the history of Canton as a trading hub and port city.

4 The *Raffles in Southeast Asia* exhibition, on view from 1 February to 28 April 2019, was organised by the Asian Civilisations Museum in partnership with the British Museum. It was launched as a highlight of Singapore Bicentennial.

5 See: Ching, Eugene, Cai Shengdan, Leow Fui Theng, and Evelyn Zhang. "Adoption and use of emerging cultural technologies in China's museums." *Journal of Cultural Heritage*, Vol. 35, Nos. 1-3, 2018.

6 The Cooper-Hewitt pen is a device that helps museum visitors collect and save objects of their interest and view it again online after their visit.

of objects across the galleries in the museum. Or they can create a “Blue Playlist” of all the blue objects in the museum, and so on and so forth. This allowing for personal choice encourages people to come back again. If you have a singular narrative in the museum, once you go through this narrative, that’s it. Why would you want to come back?

Aside from curating with principles of digital consumption in mind, we are also very strong in using social media to promote our exhibitions. I, myself, do online videos of key artifacts in the museum with the understanding that how museums can contribute to the space of digital is in producing layers of content and context—additional content that hopefully drives people to come and see the objects here. For example, last year I did a video of an ivory Virgin Mary figurine from Manila that shows gilding from Mexico and tells the story of the Manila galleons. And we have visitors coming to ask us where the piece is, and we say, “Well, it’s not in the gallery yet. Sorry! The gallery is not installed until November.”

This shows what ultimately the role of digital content is—to pique people’s interest enough so they step into the physical museum. We have been very careful with installing technological infrastructure because it goes obsolete very quickly. There was this series of “talking heads” in the museum with videos featuring personalities, including Janice Koh, talking about the galleries in the old ACM and they quickly became very creepy.⁷ (Laughter) I think that is one of the things we want to avoid—indiscriminately looking at and adopting new technologies.

We need to understand that everyone has a brilliant computer in their hands, which is the smartphone. As far as possible, we believe that the only infrastructure that the museum digital experience requires is the smartphone that all our visitors already have—and so then our focus is to produce rich or additional content in the galleries, which our visitors can access

with their smartphones. I am also very wary of apps because there are so many these days, and it is very hard to get people to download and use them. I find it such a pain to download apps that supposedly give you a richer experience. Why bother developing new apps when there are already existing platforms such as WeChat or Instagram?

I would say that, in the space of museums, we haven’t yet explored what is the best approach to bring in digital content into the museum beyond succumbing to “spectacularisation,” by which I mean large-scale digital art installations creating a “wow moment” in the museum. I don’t think we’ve figured out yet the most “value-for-money” way to bring the digital to the museum. Of course, we are now exploring different aspects of augmented reality and virtual reality but these are extremely expensive to do well. I would rather direct the money towards doing actual exhibitions and acquiring actual objects.

Suki Lim (SL)

In the *Renaissance City Plan III*, one of the key measures to determine the success of museum and festival is quantitative by measuring and comparing the number of activities and visitors.⁸ For policy-making and grants or awards, there is similarly an overwhelming emphasis on visitor numbers, something that connotes a specific type of community measure of success. Yet online visitation is another mechanism of engagement that we tend to

7 Ting is referring to a series of multiple interactive panels playing video recordings that featured personalities introducing a particular gallery or artifact installed in the galleries in ACM, prior to the museum’s restructuring in 2015.

8 The focus on quantitative performance indicators such as attendance or the number of visitors engaged in an exhibit can indicate a specific programme’s “direct” or “immediate” impact. See: How, Tarn Tarn and Shawn Goh Ze Song.

“The Art of Measuring the Arts: Full Report on the Roundtable on Bang on the Funding Buck: KPIs and Capturing the Impact of the Arts.” Institute of Policy Studies National University Singapore, 2019, p. 6. See also: *Renaissance City Plan III*. Ministry of Information, Communication and The Arts, Singapore, 2008, pp. 37–39. <https://www.nac.gov.sg/dam/jcr:18cf2883-7907-4938-9931-384333e210ce>. Accessed 9 March 2019.

overlook.⁹ What does ACM think of online communities? Do you think online visitation could be considered as one of the quantitative aspects of success? Why or why not?

KT We already track online visitorship. It is not necessarily a KPI (Key Performance Indicator) per se, but we do report that data. As a museum professional, I would say that physical presence is the most important because it relates to the authenticity of the experience of the “real” thing that cannot be substituted. Of course, the online space, as I alluded to before, is very important and the role of that is to provide additional knowledge and information that cannot be provided in the physical space.

I feel that the role of the digital is in support of “strengthening humanity”, by which I mean human-to-human, human-to-artifact, and human-to-experience kinds of interaction. Otherwise the experience becomes singular and lonely—i.e. our entire human experience becomes one between our technology and ourselves. I believe firmly that museums and the arts exist to bring people together. The only way people are brought together is through physically coming together and having face-to-face experiences and person-to-person conversations, which do not exist in the digital space because this is mediated through technology. I strongly believe that the digital must be subservient to the human or actual physical space.

Isaac Ng (IN)

Pivoting from the digital, I will be asking what heritage means specifically to ACM. Singapore embraces a heterogeneous heritage because there is a heritage that comes from our local region of Southeast Asia versus one that is, you could say, inherited from colonialism, which ties us to the rest of the world. How strongly does the ACM adhere to this notion of continuing the “Emporium City” legacy?¹⁰

KT I would say that this idea of the “Emporium City” is specific to the ACM and me. The other museums are only just exploring this notion. (Laughter)

The Romance of the Grand Tour is just one volume of a few books to come out.¹¹ It was the outcome of travelling and photographing “port” and “imperial” cities in Asia, with my intent being to question from where exactly does Singapore draw its direct heritage? I don’t think there is necessarily one official heritage or narrative. We exist in this space where there are plenty of ways to look at what Singapore is at its essence.

In the books that I write, I consider Singapore from an art historical perspective—looking at its form, primarily. And in form, Singapore belongs to the “genre” of the cosmopolitan, cross-cultural Asian port city. There are historical antecedents in Asia. For example, Batavia (Jakarta), Manila, Saigon, Canton (which is Guangzhou today), Bombay, Yangon, Nagasaki, so on and so forth... Which all have a very similar kind of form, and in a way history, to Singapore.

We are not alone. There were other cities like us, but today, the rest of these cities have been absorbed back into their respective national mainland and they no longer retain the essence of that cosmopolitan, cross-cultural port city heritage as much as we do today. I personally feel, and so does ACM,

9 There is potential for online communities to create new pools of visitors. For further reference, see: Pivovarov, Kirill. *The Future of Museums: The Ultimate Visitor Experience*, <https://www.callisonrtkl.com/you-are-here/the-future-of-museums-the-ultimate-visitor-experience/>. Accessed 17 February 2019.

10 The term “Emporium City”—which refers to a city that contains, deals, and exhibits a variety of trades, services, goods, and cultural resources—is frequently used by Ting in his research and writing.

See: Ting, Kennie, *The Romance of the Grand Tour: 100 Years of Travel in South East Asia*, Singapore: Talisman Publishing Pte Ltd, 2015, pp. 73–75. For a more detailed description of the term, see also Ting, Kennie, “Foreword” in *Port Cities: Multicultural Emporiums of Asia, 1500–1900*. Singapore: Asian Civilisations Museum, 2017, pp. 6–8.

11 *The Romance of the Grand Tour* retraces the history of twelve port cities in Southeast Asia including Singapore and Melaka from the 20th century to the present day.

that it is very important to remember that if you want to look at where Singapore's heritage really comes from, it is in this phenomenon of the cosmopolitan cultural East-West port cities—and the history of these port cities goes very, very far back. We can argue that this history goes back to even that of Venice, which was a cosmopolitan East-West port city sitting at the Western terminus of the spice trade.

My role is to remind people about these histories of port cities and how Singapore is intimately linked therein—this is the goal of my latest book, *Singapore 1819: A Living Legacy*, which came out in October.¹² There, I explored Singapore's heritage entirely through this frame of the global cosmopolitan "Emporium City." By nature, the "Emporium City" is global yet local, incorporating within it narratives of the colonial and the Southeast Asian. For example, all these cosmopolitan port cities I mention above have had a colonial past, so naturally, the colonial narrative figures in the "Emporium City" narrative; but they all also have their own specific local narratives tied to their geography—Southeast Asia, India, or China. What is unique about all of these port cities, including Singapore, is that you get a blend of the global and the local. And certainly in historic Singapore, sometimes the line between local and global is not so clear. I feel that we need not draw the line so clearly.

Rachel Wong (RW)

Singapore's identity as a port city has contributed to its importance in not only Asia's history but in global trade history.¹³ At ACM, we see how objects in the Maritime Trade Collection reveal these linkages between Singapore, Asia, and the rest of the world, thereby stressing the global, cross-cultural, and cosmopolitan nature of our heritage.¹⁴ Does the museum's apparent focus on this specific narrative impact the types of objects collected, and how do you understand the distinction between history and heritage?

KT I think ACM has the luxury of being, perhaps, the only museum in Asia that is not nationalistic. In China, the museum would be primarily focusing on Chinese history and heritage; and in Korea, Korean history and heritage. Whereas for us, our focus is on the entirety of Asia—partly because of who we are as a cross-cultural, cosmopolitan port city—the global and the Asian is also part of our national narrative in some way. This is a great privilege because what this means is that we can really pick and choose what we acquire, and we only want the best. We only acquire and display masterpieces because our role is primarily to show that there is much to admire about Asian heritage. I often jokingly say that with all of Asia's treasures and wealth being here, the museum itself symbolises one of Singapore's values—that of "prosperity" through trade, which is enshrined in our National Pledge. So as long as ACM remains here, on the Singapore River, which is the origin of modern Singapore; as long as all of Asia's treasures remain here on the River, Singapore will continue to remain prosperous. I don't know if that necessarily links back to what you are asking, so all I can say is that from the point of view of collecting objects and representation, our focus is on representing Asia's best.

As to the distinction between history and heritage, of course, everything in our collection is a piece of cultural heritage from everywhere else in Asia or the world, and it's our responsibility to protect it.

We are more of an art museum; our focus is still primarily to show these pieces of cultural heritage as works of art and

12 This book recounts the story of modern Singapore by charting the city's journey from 1819 to today via aspects of its sociological, environmental, and man-made heritage. See: Ting, Kennie. *Singapore 1819: A Living Legacy*. Singapore: Talisman Publishing Pte Ltd, 2019.

13 See: Ting, Kennie. "Foreword" in *Port Cities: Multicultural Emporiums of Asia, 1500–1900*.

14 See: Ting, Kennie. "Asian Civilisations Museum: Singapore's Museum of Asia" in *ACM Treasures: Collection Highlights*, edited by Richard Lingner and Clement Onn. Singapore: Asian Civilisations Museum, 2017, pp. 6–9.

to describe how creativity in art and craft and design has shifted and evolved throughout the centuries. By telling that art history, we are also telling the history of Asia, Singapore's links with Asia, Asia's links with each other, and Asia's links with the rest of the world by way of the objects.

RW Following this line of questioning on heritage and collection policies, you outline how built heritage has taken a precedence on both policy-making and academic circles in your 2015 book, *Heritage*.¹⁵ However, monuments and buildings may not be enough to represent Singapore's cosmopolitan nature and globalism as a port city. How has this expanded view of heritage, beyond the built environment, impacted ACM's collection strategy or policy? Is there also a personal drive for the collection perhaps, drawing from your own travels and experiences abroad?

KT I think it's important to distinguish me as the writer from me as the museum... (Laughter) Obviously, collections are a separate category of heritage, they are in the category of moveable heritage and so they exist on their own category beyond that of tangible, built heritage. I think for me I am very clear that where the museum is concerned, it's still focused on presenting our own collection. And I still feel that people don't fully understand the significance and the value of collections in museums, in the sense of what they can be used to do. My primary responsibility or drive in the museum is to focus very much on the collection that we have. Because collections are multifaceted, the intangible side of the heritage can also come through, as can built heritage. This is because many of the pieces that we have in our collection, for example, could have adorned buildings; they can be used to speak about architecture. Many of the pieces in our collections also belong to very specific traditions or rituals, if you go to our Ancestors and Rituals gallery,¹⁶ everything there has an intangible heritage tied to it because everything there was used for a variety of rituals and traditions of ancestor veneration and worship.

There is definitely a potential to speak of the other aspects of heritage, but with collections at the core.

Lee Ju-Lyn (JL)

Related to that, *Our SG Heritage Plan*, which launched in April 2018, is the first master plan for Singapore's heritage and museum sector.¹⁷ It proposes four main pillars, one of which—"Our Treasures"—is related to Singapore's national collection and museums.¹⁸ This plan includes the proposal for museums to be transformed into more accessible and inclusive spaces, both physically and in intangible ways, and asks how well exhibitions and programmes cater to the diverse needs of visitors. How do these considerations affect the ways museum exhibitions and programmes are being planned at ACM?

KT We are currently going out in a big way to speak about access but that doesn't mean that we haven't already been addressing these issues previously. At ACM, every single special exhibition has an interactive family section. If you look at the *Raffles in Southeast Asia* exhibition now, before you go

15 Ting notes how Singapore's foray into conservation and preservation of heritage was primarily focused on the physical, which led to the dominance of built heritage as a reference for policy-making because this would also be a strategic move to bring investors and talent to the country during the 1980s. See: Ting, Kennie. *Heritage*. Straits Times Press Pte. Ltd., 2015, pp. 44–45.

16 The Ancestors and Rituals gallery in ACM showcases works that examine the ancestral and ritualistic beliefs of traditional societies, including some of the most remote communities in Southeast Asia.

17 See: "Media Release: Launch of Our SG Heritage plan—Singapore's First Master Plan for the Heritage and Museum Sector." Singapore: National

Heritage Board, 2018, <https://www.nhb.gov.sg/-/media/nhb/files/media/releases/new-releases/launch-of-our-sg-heritage-plan-at-singapore-heritage-festival-2018---7-april.pdf>. Accessed 9 March 2019.

18 Other elements include: "Our Places," referring to buildings and architecture, "Our Culture," referring to intangible heritage, and "Our Communities," referring to key stakeholders, including non-government heritage, organisations, interest groups, precinct partners, museum docents, heritage volunteers and enthusiasts. See: *Our SG Heritage*. Singapore: National Heritage Board, 2019, www.oursgheritage.sg. Accessed 9 March 2019.

into the exhibition, you have to first step into a library we have created at the Shaw Foyer, a welcoming space with poufs and cushions to sit around on and books related to Raffles to read. If you came to the Angkor exhibition, you would know that you end in the section where you can sort of play with aspects of temple architecture or build “temples” with folded cut-outs.¹⁹ Access, with regards to families and children, has always been something that we do. It’s just we haven’t come out very big about it but we are doing it now because we feel that is very important.

We’ve also done lots of pilots. We worked very closely with various Volunteer Welfare Organisations to bring in groups of special needs communities: children with autism and the elderly with dementia.²⁰ We are very quiet on this, because these have been pilots for us to see how and what we can do for these groups. Therefore, now is the time that we are ready to announce, “Oh you know, there is this plan.” Across the museums, we have agreed that there are ways to do this that are meaningful.

I think that access is key. It does not run counter to everything else that I’ve just said. I think that heritage and museums are for everybody and the kinds of stories that we tell must be open to all. This even applies to language. Everything on the walls has to be translated into the three other national languages at minimum. It is very hard to find folks who are able to translate, especially technical terms. It is very hard for us, but we do it as a commitment to the fact that we say we are multilingual, multicultural, and as an Asian museum, we want to promote the building of the capacity to be able to do this. I would even go further to have the exhibition catalogues in different languages if not for the fact that we just don’t have the time, the skillsets, and no one to buy the books in different languages.

One of the most immediate things we could be doing is to have big text booklets because everyone complains that the text is too small—but that is also because we can’t squeeze

enough content in otherwise. The text would then become too large for museum captions. We can only have so much text as captions. To me, we are a bit behind on this. Ideally, we should also have dialect tours because that is how you get the elderly in. It is very hard to find people who can do tours in dialect.

I, myself, am trying to build up other language capacities. I can give tours in Mandarin as well. I’m giving my first Mandarin talk at the National Library, in partnership with *Zaobao*,²¹ because we feel that, again from the access point of view, we need to reach out to the Mandarin speaking community in Singapore who are really left out in terms of the kinds of cultural options that they have.

JL With various government initiatives, like *Our SG Heritage*, there’s also a focus on place-management and placemaking; for example: Museum Round Table (MR),²² the various annual festivals,²³ and this year, the Singapore Bicentennial.²⁴ It seems like museums today are playing multiple key roles simultaneously. How do museums in Singapore manage these multi-layered considerations alongside more traditional roles like research?

KT Museums are becoming more complex everywhere; we are place-maker, researcher, and custodian of heritage. Increasingly, we have to put on these various personas to stay

19 *Angkor: Exploring Cambodia's Sacred City* was exhibited at the Asian Civilisations Museum from 8 April 2018 to 29 July 2018.

20 Voluntary Welfare Organisation (VWO) is a non-profit organisation that provides welfare services and/or services that benefit the community at large.

21 *Lianhe Zaobao* is a Chinese newspaper published daily by Singapore Press Holdings.

22 The Museum Roundtable is a network formed and chaired by the National Heritage Board to support

the development of Singapore's museum-going culture.

23 For example, in the Bras Basah Bugis (BBB) precinct, the Singapore Night Festival is held every August since 2008.

24 The Singapore Bicentennial is the commemoration of the 200th anniversary of Raffles's landing in Singapore. It was launched on 28 January 2019 by PM Lee Hsien Loong and comprised commemorative and reflective events by over 200 groups and organisations.

relevant. There's another role we play as well, which is the diplomat, particularly at ACM.

My day-to-day work, just an example of what it could be like, is meeting the neighbours to talk about the Light to Night Festival—that is placemaking;²⁵ meeting the Ambassador of Ukraine—that's diplomacy; meeting with the curators to talk about how are we going to structure the catalogue—that's the research role; and meeting with the conservators to argue about how far you should go in conserving an object—that's heritage conservation. It's very, very challenging but you learn that it's just what we must do.

There is another consideration to this—which none of you guys have perhaps realised—which is funding. We are no longer fully funded by the state. We are required to raise funds however we can. So often that's also a consideration; we need to be able to reach out and participate in other kinds of initiatives to secure funding for what we do. My primary role is as a fund-raiser.

For example, this Bicentennial "Raffles Show" is something we wanted to do a long time ago. But we knew that, because of the Bicentennial, there would be special funding for it. So we angle what we need to do for the exhibition to ensure we secure funding for it.

Note that none of our special exhibitions have assured funding. I must raise funds for every single special exhibition that we do; therefore I must be strategic and opportunistic. We marry the ambitions and goals that we have as a museum, as an academic and knowledge institution, with larger imperatives such as financial or diplomatic. This is so that the museum can be relevant and survive financially. That's the reality of it, anywhere in the world, not just here.

JL Going back to the idea of place management and placemaking,²⁶ referring to the "2016 Roundtable on Place Management in Singapore,"²⁷ issues like

the sustainability of state-driven efforts and the adequacy of "one-off" or annual events, like festivals, were raised. What are your views on how museums should help address these place management and placemaking issues of sustainability?

KT ACM sits in between two precincts. We see ourselves as being more linked to the river, but we are told that we must throw in our lot with the Civic District.

Sustainability is a real issue because, ultimately, for the precinct association to work, it needs to be the players coming together to naturally want to do certain things. There is a different nature to the various precincts; so, if you look at Singapore River, it's entirely commercial; the precinct association, Singapore River One, drives it.²⁸ The bulk of the players of Singapore River are CapitaLand and various tenants, the restaurants (F&B and all that) and we are the odd one out, being one of the few cultural agencies that are part of that association. Our role previously has always been to support, to promote, and to add cultural elements to the festivals and other activities that they organise. Of course, we are not able to do that on our own from a financial point of view, this is

25 Light to Night Festival has been organised by the National Gallery Singapore annually since 2016.

26 The Singapore government has adopted a "place-management" strategy defined as a "multi-stakeholder approach to improving precincts and making them more attractive for the benefit of its users." Ting, Director for Policy and Development, presented a report on Bras Basah Bugis (BBB) at the March 2016 "Roundtable on Place management and Placemaking in Singapore." See: Hoe, Su Fern, and Jacqueline Liu. "Full Report on Roundtable on Place Management and Placemaking in Singapore," in *Research Collection School of Social Sciences*. Singapore Management University, 2016, pp. 9–10.

27 These issues were raised by National University Singapore Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) Senior Research Fellow Tarn Tarn How, who chaired the roundtable. Respondent Kok Heng Leun, Artistic Director of Drama Box Ltd., also raised a similar issue regarding how the efforts to revitalise districts through "one-off festivals" could be sustained. See: Hoe, Su Fern, and Jacqueline Liu. "Full Report on Roundtable on Place Management and Placemaking in Singapore," pp. 13–14.

28 Singapore River One is a not-for-profit organisation that was designated as the Place Manager of the Singapore River precinct in 2012, which includes Boat Quay, Clark Quay, and Roberson Quay.

not what we're funded to do. Every time we participate in the river-related festivals, it has always been some special injection of funding from the government to do so. But over these past few years with the National Gallery up and running, that government funding has been directed towards supporting the Gallery. It's our sister museum. So, we have turned inland.

The question of sustainability is applicable, but very different if you talk about a commercial precinct such as the Singapore River versus the Civic District, which is not commercial at all. And there's no way it could possibly be commercial because big museums essentially need state funding. If we want to do something, we need to have state funding to be able to pull it off.

Even the Night Festival is still primarily state-funded;²⁹ although increasingly it gets more private sector gifts and sponsorships to keep it sustainable, that degree of partnership between the state and players in the precinct is very important for this to happen. I would say that the most important criteria for sustainability is the willingness of the parties to participate. Because everyone must agree in order for these festivals to work. Let's say for the Singapore Night Festival, it has been around for ten years, and what has been built up is the good will between the National Museum and the various players—including the Singapore Art Museum (SAM), the National Design Centre, and the precinct. Now the obvious sense is that there's a benefit to participating; that there's a real tangible benefit to business, to more people frequenting your restaurants. You can demonstrate through surveys that the per capita visitor spending during the festival has risen: it's grown.

It's part of our commitment as a place manager to the community. But it takes time, so we are only now able to demonstrate our value in terms of footfall, spending, so on and so forth, after ten years of doing this, and ten years of building a brand

of the Singapore Night Festival. It's not something that happens overnight.

RW Festivals are celebrations that offer a sense of belonging for different ethnic, religious, and social groups. Most of the festivals in Singapore, for instance, celebrate the nation's diverse ethnic groups and seem to be becoming increasingly educational—a space where people can learn about their own culture or tradition. While it is expected that learning about traditions usually takes place within the household or the classroom, the festival as a learning environment has contributed to the decentralisation of cultural studies and education. These large-scale events now play a pivotal role in nation building: bringing people from every religious, economic, and social background in order to create a sense of community.³⁰ Do you think that annual events like the Singapore Night Festival can lead to the birth of new traditions or understandings of cultural education or studies in Singapore?

KT I think, for a start, that the Night Festival itself has become a tradition. I believe the recent statistics show that close to 90 per cent of the footfall is local, so people have begun to expect that this will take place every year and they come out in droves to attend.

I believe that education is multifaceted, it doesn't just take place in the schools. The museum believes that our role is also in education, but how we educate is very different from how schools or families educate. I think everyone has a role to play. How we educate has to be non-didactic, non-propa-

29 The Singapore Night Festival is an annual street festival organised by the National Museum of Singapore that celebrates the arts and Singapore's rich cultural heritage.

30 See: Crespi-Valbona, Montse and Greg Richards. "The meaning of cultural festivals." *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, Vol. 13, No.1, 2008, pp. 103–122.

gandistic, more enjoyable, and that's what we aim to do as a complement to other aspects of education.

I don't think that the festivals or museums can replace what families do, but the festivals and the museums ensure that they are spaces where families can come to enact that process of education. The Night Festival, for example, is very family-friendly. If you come between 7pm to 10pm, you see that there are mostly families with children; and then the more "risqué" stuff takes place after that, till midnight or 2am... you have the beer parties on Armenian Street. (Laughter)

So I might say that's the simple answer. I think we complement the broader landscape of education by ensuring that we provide spaces for families to come and have a non-threatening, non-pressuring civic space to educate, to self-educate, to explore, and to discover. We also have objects that are featured in textbooks, so the schools have no choice but to come through with that... there are hordes of school children every day at the museum.

This is important, don't get me wrong, we also want a space in the formal curriculum because it shows that museums are important, but I think that we must complement it with interactive spaces that allow for a more playful way of education.

Ray Hong (RH)

When the Singapore Bicentennial was launched on the 28th of January, it introduced a series of events and activities for the year, including, of course, the exhibition *Raffles in Southeast Asia* at ACM. The Bicentennial also includes a list of festivals, such as the iLight Marina Bay festival and Light to Night Festival.³¹ As the Group Director of Museums at the National Heritage Board (NHB) with experience in running major festivals, how would you articulate the differences in agendas and mandates between museums and festivals? What is the public opinion

regarding the constant partnership between museums and festivals and how are both significant to Singapore's culture?

KT I first must clarify that my role as the Group Director of Museums is a policy and advocacy role wherein I speak on behalf of museums in Singapore both locally and internationally, where I represent Singapore on the International Council of Museums (ICOM) and other international committees. I don't intervene in the running of the National Museum and festivals.

I think that festivals are important because, again, this relates back to the role of the museum and the relevance of the museum. All the museums participate in this festival role from a placemaking perspective because we are all charged in some ways to enliven the precinct around us. We do this in different ways. Obviously, the big national festivals are helmed by the National Museum; the latest, newest one is the Light to Night Festival helmed by National Gallery Singapore; the iLight, which also focuses on placemaking, is run by Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA). We at ACM do smaller festivals as well. For example, every quarter we have the Asian Culture and Music Series, which sees us placing traditional arts on our waterfront.³² We have gone through the various ASEAN and South-east Asian traditional artforms with this festival.

I will speak about festivals on the whole and then specifically relating to ACM. For festivals as a whole, beyond the placemaking imperatives, which is about us showing our larger relevance, festivals are a way to drive visitorship. We are still funded based on visitorship as a Key Performance Indicator (KPI), and the festivals are the most efficient way to do it. In one night or one weekend, you get tens of thousands of

31 The iLight Festival was organised by Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) in 2019 for the Singapore Bicentennial 2019.

32 Asian Culture and Music Series is a monthly series organised by the ACM focusing on the intangible cultural heritage of the Association of Southeast Asia Nations (ASEAN).

people entering the museum. We do festivals so that we then can do other kinds of shows that may or may not hit that visitorship level.

The third reason why we do festivals is to show that museums are plugged into contemporary life. If you talk about the Night Festival and Heritage Festival in general, it's about showing how the Bras Basah Bugis Precinct, which is essentially a heritage precinct, comes alive.³³ There is a relevance to the entire precinct. That even though it's about heritage, it's "sexy". Ultimately, that's the role museums play and that's what I firmly believe in at ACM. Even though we are in the space of antiquities, we believe that antiquities have relevance for today.

For ACM specifically, we do our own smaller festivals, like the Asian Culture and Music Series. So it has to be relevant to us as well. Of course, beyond the fact that we are trying to enliven the immediate Empress Place precinct and the riverfront, we are placing traditional arts from Asia at the riverfront because again it's a statement that the traditional arts have a place in the daily life of a contemporary city. It's also for our engagement with ASEAN, because we are "the" diplomatic museum and therefore the Asian Culture and Music Series is a form of diplomacy with ASEAN neighbours. We basically place these age-old traditions against the backdrop of the contemporary Singapore skyline. So as you can see, we tick multiple boxes in terms of what our festivals achieve for us.

RH In his Bicentennial opening speech, PM Lee said that cultural groups keep "Asian civilisations" alive. He also emphasised the connection between festivals and national history, culture, and heritage.³⁴ What do you think authenticity means in this context when we talk about heritage in "civilisation", and how does the National Heritage Board (NHB) co-operate with other institutional sectors in terms of this question of "authenticity"?

KT This is a very, very hard question. Obviously, heritage at its core is about the "real" thing, and how you allow for people to access and experience that "real" thing, whatever it is. I think when it comes to the museum at least, it's very easy, because it's all about the collections, which is why I emphasised very strongly that whatever is digital is about enhancing the experience of the real object itself. When it comes to the intangible, it might be slightly more challenging because intangible heritage is ephemeral, and part of the ways you capture, preserve, or present intangible heritage is through a performance or recording of the actual thing happening. That is the core of intangible heritage work.

I can only speak tangentially about NHB because my role these days is all about ACM and the Peranakan Museum.³⁵ I don't really get involved in the intangible heritage of the "Our Heritage Plan," which is helmed by the folks that deal with heritage policy—the sites and monuments, archaeology, etc. So I can only tell you what I feel from my perspective here.

The role of the museum and the heritage board is to protect and present the "real" thing. From a promotion point of view, festivals play a key role. Because the preservation work is at the back end, you can't see it; it involves legal statutes, it involves the very technical work of conservators in terms of protecting the buildings, protecting the objects at the museums, and so on and so forth. So festivals are the outward channels for promoting heritage. If you look at the Heritage Festival for example, it's all about uncovering interesting, hidden, forgotten aspects of heritage—the "real" thing that people might not remember.³⁶

33 Bras Basah Bugis precinct is the art and heritage district popularly quoted to be in "the heart" of Singapore's civic centre.

34 See: Lee, Hsien Loong, "Speech by PM Lee Hsien Loong at the launch of the Singapore Bicentennial on 28 January 2019." *Launch of SG Bicentennial 2019*, 28 January 2019, Asian Civilisations Museum, Prime

Minister's Office Singapore, 2019, <https://www.pmo.gov.sg/Newsroom/PM-Lee-Hsien-Loong-at-the-launch-of-the-Singapore-Bicentennial-Jan-2019>. Accessed 9 March 2019.

35 Ting is also the director of the Peranakan Museum, an institution that explores the art and culture of the Peranakan community.

Fundamentally, the role of each festival is slightly different. The role of festivals such as the Heritage Festival is to provide access to the authentic, “real” thing: whether it is the kind of intangible heritage that are in the clans or food heritage, built heritage, or hidden spots in Singapore. The role of the Night Festival is slightly different—it’s more about showing visitors how heritage can be used and enjoyed. Because it’s not enough to just promote heritage: we have to make a point that we preserve it and to not stultify it so it remains relevant.

I would say that is increasingly important today. If you cannot preserve a heritage building without thinking of its economic sustainability, if you cannot make the building or that piece of intangible heritage economically viable, it will die whether you like it or not.

IN In *Renaissance City Plan III*, Dr Lee Boon Yang identifies culture as an element for attracting talent, investment, and attention.³⁷ Considering this, in your book *The Grand Tour*, you speak of Singapore having this unique ability to create capital by “marrying the colonial with the contemporary” so that our colonial heritage is relevant and desirable.³⁸ Is this a good framework to use when thinking about our heritage?³⁹

KT Our success lies in our ability to marry two narratives. I also mention this, perhaps not so explicitly, in the chapter on Singapore and its section on “Colonial Contemporary,” which, incidentally, is actually angled as a kind of critique.⁴⁰ There are two narratives that we use all the time; one of which is less explicitly mentioned. The one that is more mentioned is our multiculturalism. That is used more frequently and successfully than the second narrative of colonial capital and our success because there is perhaps some discomfort about our success and our identity as a trading hub since this relates to our colonial history. We exist here as a successful port city today because of trade and our colonial history. The multicultural part of our identity pertains to our success as a society;

how politically, and socially, we are able to cohere as one even though we come from different backgrounds, faiths, and cultures.

To me, how well we are able to marry these two narratives (trade and our colonial past, as well as our multi-cultural fabric) is a more important and a more useful measure of success these days, particularly since everywhere else is imploding in a xenophobic “us and them” kind of situation. Singapore needs to continue to emphasise how we alone in the region are able to deal with that sort of cultural complexity. We call this cultural complexity, at ACM, our cross-cultural or hybrid nature. We go one step further from multiculturalism to cross-culturalism, which means that within that one form there are multiple East-West and East-East elements. Obviously, I feel that my personal focus and the museum’s focus is on furthering this aspect of cross-culturalism as our unique defining feature, because within that cross-culturalism, you absorb these two strands; you acknowledge that we simultaneously incorporate and are beyond Chinese-Malay-Indian-Others (C-M-I-O) and our colonial past. In espousing a cross-cultural approach to seeing Singapore, we are saying that “let’s acknowledge the fact that we are both East-East and East-West and get on with it.”⁴¹

Our cross-cultural nature and our ability to navigate the cross-cultural is essentially our defining factor and unique compe-

36 On this point, Ting gives an example of this “real” thing as tours to the historic lighthouses in Singapore, which were part of the built heritage in Singapore.

37 Dr Lee Boon Yang, “Foreword by Minister of Information, Communications, and the Arts” in *Renaissance City Plan III*, Ministry of Information, Communication and The Arts, 2008, p. 3, <https://www.nac.gov.sg/dam/jcr:18cf2883-7907-4938-9931-384333e210ce>. Accessed 9 March 2019.

38 Ting, *The Romance of the Grand Tour*:

100 Years of Travel in South East Asia, p. 80.

39 Ibid.

40 Ting refers here to the “Singapore” chapter in his book *The Romance of the Grand Tour*.

41 The C-M-I-O (Chinese-Malay-Indian-Others) scheme is a model of multiracialism that maintains the identification of a Singaporean or Permanent Resident with a particular major race in Singapore. See: Oon, Clarissa. “Let’s Talk About Race.” *The Straits Times*, 19 May 2013. Accessed 9 March 2019.

titive advantage in the world, not just in Asia. I do work with regional counterparts a lot and they all think we're very strange: we speak English; we are the one Asian nation whose national language is not one of the ethnic languages.⁴² It's just very odd, if you think about it from the outside perspective or anywhere in the world—this cross-cultural strangeness is what makes us exceptional. As long as we continue to focus on and communicate this, we ultimately show an aspect of understanding of East and West and of connections between civilisations that could only be an advantage in a globalised world. Of course, there's also been conflict between civilisations historically and the potential of that happening today, but we are firmly on the side of looking at civilisations connecting and coming together both historically and today.

SL From the cultural and heritage perspective, it is Singapore's goal to be a world-class cultural hub.⁴³ Whereas in your book *Heritage*,⁴⁴ you mention that certain ethnic enclaves have been associated with the "Disneyfication" of Singapore's heritage, in which authenticity is somehow compromised.⁴⁵ In the context of intangible cultural heritage, how do we determine which contexts accurately represent or evoke an authentic sense of identity, home, and belonging, and which contexts spectacularise or "Disneyfy"? What considerations and strategies can prevent these festivals, places, and museums from the "Disneyfication" of heritage and culture?

KT The "Disneyfication" point was made in relation to Chinatown in the 1980s, which was redone by the Singapore Tourism Board (STB) at the time. I think we've come a long way since then. I think there is a much stronger view now as to what is viewed as "authenticity" in cultural heritage. I think there's a very strong focus with all kinds of work that we do, whether it's the museums or the festivals, on original, site-specific kinds of works: respecting and understanding the site in the case of the festivals and the commissioning of works, and also bringing works that would resonate with the site. If

we're bringing in something from abroad, it must be customised to the local audience, as well as to the local and micro-local contexts. By focusing on original content and content that is relevant to the specific location, in a way that gets around the "Disneyfication".

We are not trying to copy. I think we are mature enough now to be able to produce our own points of view and our own ways of doing things. I think that even extends, slowly but surely, to the other agencies in the cultural sphere that are not directly to the cultural sphere—I refer to the Singapore Tourism Board... There's also more and more understanding of the value in not "Disneyfy-ing" things. The whole Passion Made Possible global campaign initiative, which was launched by the Singapore Tourism Board in conjunction with the Economic Development Board in 2017, is a step in the right direction in terms of focusing on unique cultural qualities of Singapore, rather than trying to ape whatever is going on elsewhere.

There's a difference between heritage, history, and art, but they are all linked. I feel that we need to be clear about what each of them is, but we shouldn't draw the lines too clearly.

42 While Singapore's official national language is Malay for historical reasons, Ting, in his statement, refers to the national "working" language of English.

43 Singapore's aim to be a global cultural hub is seen in the *Renaissance City Plan III* where the vision is to transform Singapore into a Distinctive Global City for the Arts. This is amplified with the inscription of the Singapore Botanic Gardens in 2015 as the first UNESCO World Heritage Site in Singapore, placing the country on the global cultural map. See *Renaissance City Plan*, p. 6.

44 See: Ting, *Heritage*, pp. 58–71.

45 "Disneyfication" in a society refers to a blending of capital and culture, where the process of creating a holistic and integrated spatial environment with tourist attractions feeds into the idea of being like a theme park: a make-believe space where local culture is being replaced with standardised forms of cultural consumption and these forms are being commodified and marketed as the principal images of urban life. See: Zukin, Sharon. *The Cultures of Cities*. New Jersey: Wiley Publishing, 1996, pp. 49–79.

with Tracy Lai, Kelvin Leong, Yan Ni, Ng Sor Luan,
Celeste Tan, and Hui Ting

26 February 2019

A leading scholar of Peranakan art and culture, Peter Lee has organised exhibitions such as *Amek Gambar: Peranakans and Photography* (2018), *Sarong Kebaya Peranakan Fashion in an Interconnected World 1500–1950* (2014), and *Junk to Jewels: The Things that Peranakans Value* (2008). This interview explores Lee's unique role as a multi-hyphenate Baba, curator, collector, and donor. Our conversation focuses on his journey as a collector, his views on the use of oral history as a research method, the finer points of curatorial research and storytelling, and his perspective on the potential contributions of collectors to the Singapore museum scene. We had the honour of being shown some of the objects in his personal collection during the course of this interview.

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Celeste Tan (CT)

In an interview in 2014 with *TODAYonline*,¹ you said that “collecting only to amass has no sort of deeper motivation” and “to be a good collector, you need to have a bigger mission.” Do you see collecting as a conceptual system where the world you experience and inhabit can be reflected through your objects? What is your mission and how does your mission affect the way you collect?

Peter Lee (PL)

I suppose with any life experience, we walk on a tightrope. With collecting, you are really dealing with the devil: with feelings of desire, of greed, of competitiveness. Competitiveness is a good thing, but it can also be a bad thing. How do you try and rise above it and make it a more sublime or spiritual experience?

I was trying to connect my spiritual life with what I was doing, because sometimes it's ego. Let's say I work with a dealer I know well, and I find out I'm the second person he offers an object to. The initial reaction might be, “Well, I am not going to buy it then.” All these thoughts bubble up. You have to tame them and control it. The mission balances this primal hoarding instinct.

CT Do you think a mission charts a clearer path to what you collect and how you select objects?

PL Yes, it provides a purpose. In my case, there were several missions. I am one of four brothers and we do not have children. One of our missions was to commemorate our parents because they were wonderful. The idea was to create some kind of family legacy beyond our lifetimes and to do it while my parents were alive so they could see where these

1 Martin, Mayo. “Patron Of Heritage Awards 2014: Snapshots of the Past.” *TODAYonline*, 28 April 2015, [www.todayonline.com/entertainment/](http://www.todayonline.com/entertainment/arts/patron-heritage-awards-2014-snapshots-past)

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things were heading. They took great joy from friends saying, "Oh we saw your things in the museum." That, to me, was one pleasure. Secondly, as somebody interested in art history, I realised there was little material I could find as reference about our part of the world and Singapore. I felt there was a gap to fill.

Another motivation is the so-called spiritual or personal element. A friend of mine studied astrology as a hobby and he looked at the chart and said, "Oh my God, you are a super competitive person." (Laughter) I said, "No, I am not." I hate playing games: chess, mah-jong, etc. It dawned on me: I don't like any of it because I am so competitive. That competitive streak needs to be channelled into something better. With collecting, I started out wanting to form this excellent world-class collection; to collect not just what everyone else has or what has been studied. If a field has been well studied and the best books on it are already out, all you can do is mimic that collection. There isn't any added value. I became very interested in filling gaps: things that we don't know about, things that museums don't have, and things that are poorly studied. They did not have to be very valuable things, just very interesting things that nobody was looking at. That was the other motivation that also inspired my academic side. There was potential to write new essays and tools for new kinds of thinking.

Over the past weekend there was a Southeast Asian Ceramic Society Symposium.² They had four or five people on the panel and everybody was given three minutes to make a statement; the smaller the limit, the more interesting the challenge. The topic was on heritage buildings in Singapore. I decided to read a statement and I really spent quite a lot of time working on it. Again, it is that slight competitive streak: "I am going to prepare mine, so I can say everything I want to say in three minutes." You always want to do something different, you always want to showcase something of a certain quality. Collecting also has that.

Sor Luan (SL)

Your experience is very diverse: you focused on Chinese studies and archaeology at university and later worked with Christie's Auction House in London as well as an editor with *Orientalist*³ in Hong Kong. How do you harness all this knowledge and experience as a scholar, as an editor, and as someone who understands the art market when you are collecting and curating?

PL Being an editor taught me how to focus on my own writing, as I had to deal with so many essays. You also deal with a lot of egos because people really don't like their work cut. I have trained myself to be compliant and adaptable. I work very well with editors and I take their suggestions. Their job is to make it readable and if they don't understand it, you have to fix it. A lot of writers think, "If you don't understand you're an idiot." There is a lot of tension that way. Having been an editor, I understand the initial feeling and that goes with observing one's own feelings. Everything helped.

At Christie's you actually learn how to handle objects. I also learned to respect dealers. One of the big issues in the museum world is the sense that curators don't respect dealers. Curators don't credit dealers. Dealers are always saying that they do all the groundwork. It might not necessarily be presented in the most academic fashion, but they often do very original work or discover very interesting objects. But little credit is given. I collaborate very closely with dealers and

2 This symposium, hosted by Southeast Asian Ceramic Society at Singapore Management University School of Law on 23 February 2019, aimed to make one re-think what they knew about ceramics through three topical panel discussions led by experts in fields of art, history, archaeology, and more. Lee participated in the second panel discussing "Conserving and Activating Cultural Heritage." How can we increase local appreciation of the region's rich

cultural heritage? Is enough being done to reveal, preserve, and display it? Who needs to be empowered and can a balance be struck between the many conflicting needs of a growing society?

3 *Orientalist* is a magazine for collectors and connoisseurs of Asian art published in Hong Kong. It covers scholarly research, market analysis, and current news of arts of East and Southeast Asia, the Himalayas, and the Indian Subcontinent.

there are many advantages. Firstly, if you are very nice to them—not as an ulterior motive, but the better the relationship you have with them—the more exciting the work you are shown.

Sometimes one of the problems with museums is a sense of privilege and entitlement among the older curators. Sometimes dealers have to swallow their pride when they need to sell. As a result, museums nowadays often miss out. Firstly, dealers have to deal with attitude. They also have to deal with very slow payment because museum purchases go through the acquisition board. The institutions miss out on the best things quite often. However, there are times dealers will patiently wait. They want some of their objects to be in the museums. It's a status thing. Having contact with all these different worlds gave me a lot of experience and an understanding of how to manoeuvre.

Kelvin Leong (KL)

Does your network help Singapore institutions with acquisitions as well?

PL Yes. In Singapore, museums might have their own procurement and acquisition systems, but it's really hard for them to buy on eBay or junk shops. All the junk shop dealers are my best friends. They get really good stuff and they don't have a huge reserve of cash, so they need to turn over very quickly. They don't want to wait for a couple of months for museums. I've developed quite a good relationship with some of them. With WhatsApp it's quite easy. I can confirm at once. Sometimes I buy stuff I don't collect but feel should go to an institution. Recently I bought this amazing collection of movie flyers. They are all Chinese movies filmed in Singapore and Hong Kong.

KL Cathay?⁴

PL Yes, a whole assortment, Shaw,⁵ and a collection of international movie posters filmed in Singapore: the posters are hilarious. I don't collect in this area but it says Singapore

everywhere, so I bought them all and gave them to National Library.

I am collecting things that institutions might have a tough time collecting. I am now slowly trying to amass a collection on the underbelly of life in Singapore and the Straits such as early pre-war porn. In *Amek Gambar: Peranakans and Photography*,⁶ I also included some fetish photos. It's a group of pictures with people in horse riding gear and it was all photographed in a house in Penang: one of the very well known families.



Pre-war photographic pornography circulated in Singapore. Collection of Peter Lee, Singapore. Photo by Ng Sor Luan. 26 February 2019.

- 4 Cathay-Keris Studio was established in 1953. The local studio specialised in making Malay-language films. See: "Former Cathay Building (Now The Cathay)." *Roots*, roots.sg/Content/Places/landmarks/balestier-heritage-trail-faith-film-and-food/Former-Malay-Film-Productions-Studio. Accessed 14 April 2019.
- 5 Another early Malay film studio was Shaw Organisation's Malay Film Production, established in 1940. The studio produced 150 movies between 1941 and 1967 during a period known as the "Golden Age" of Malay cinema.

- 6 See: "Former Malay Film Productions Studio." *Roots*, roots.sg/Content/Places/landmarks/balestier-heritage-trail-faith-film-and-food/Former-Malay-Film-Productions-Studio. Accessed 14 April 2019.
- 6 *Amek Gambar: Peranakans and Photography*, 5 May 2018–24 March 2019, was an exhibition co-curated by Lee and Dominic Low at the Peranakan Museum that traced the emergence, adoption, and evolution of photography in Southeast Asia through a century of photographs.

KL Millionaire Street?

PL Somewhere, I will not say. (Laughter) They are all shadowy faces, but there is one picture of somebody being spanked and they are all in riding gear and stirrups. Very kinky. Also, some enterprising person took all these pictures of the transgender girls in Bugis Street,⁷ and they are just on these Kodak prints.



Kodak photographs of Bugis Street. Collection of Peter Lee, Singapore. Photo by Ng Sor Luan. 26 February 2019.

KL Polaroids?

PL Not Polaroids, just those photos that you printed in the 1980s and sold as postcards. (Laughter) Objects like that are really part of Singapore's history. There are lots of avenues to find very interesting material about local history; places where nobody is looking.

KL Each object contains stories, narratives, and oral histories. How do you actually document or collect this contextual information?

PL I haven't. The minute it becomes a more serious project, I'll try and do something, but for now it is still a work-in-progress. I am interested in all these aspects of

entertainment and the bizarre. I found a 1900s circus flyer with all the acts. Those are really amazing because they were very hybrid: a Chinese opera performance, an American boxer, and a Hindustani something.



1900s circus flyer. Collection of Peter Lee, Singapore. Photo by Ng Sor Luan. 26 February 2019.

KL So that we can understand your process of documentation and archiving information: how do you retain the stories or memories around each object?

PL With *Junk to Jewels*,⁸ for example, a lot of this information was stories, so I had to sit down with the people and families depicted in the photos and ask them, "Is this alright? Does this reflect what you say?"

⁷ Bugis was renowned as a nightly gathering place of transvestites and transsexuals during the 1950s to the 1980s. It attracted locals and tourists, especially American servicemen and sailors during the Vietnam/Second Indochina War (1955–1975).

⁸ *Junk to Jewels: The Things That Peranakans Value* was held at the Peranakan Museum from 26 April to 23 November 2008. The exhibi-

tion's narrative revolved around objects and images kept by Peranakan families, as well as the stories attached to such objects and images. As research for this exhibition, Lee conducted oral histories with members of 30 families in both Singapore and Malaysia. He describes this experience of visiting 30 families as akin to watching 30 movies.

That goes back to when I was tasked to do that show. It was the inaugural temporary exhibition at the Peranakan Museum. The main gallery was opening at the same time. The concept was to do a not-the-Peranakan Museum exhibition. I didn't see any point in echoing the narrative of the main gallery. The show tried to complicate the idea of precious objects. I showed a lot of things that had no value and things that were obviously not Peranakan but were precious to Peranakan families: objects that raised questions about the museum's acquisition and exhibition decisions. (Laughter) It had to be a counterpoint. I looked for the narratives that went beyond the glorification of the wealth and privilege of Peranakans by including stories from the time when the person or the family was very poor. That element is often left out. I don't know if you all have visited the *Chetti Melaka* exhibition?⁹ Nalina Gopal, the curator for the exhibition, was challenged by the fact that the community did not have, so-to-speak, "precious artifacts." I think it's more satisfying when your visitor is emotionally affected by the show, rather than by the dazzle.

KL In terms of oral history, do you actively document it for your own research purposes or for the National Archives of Singapore?

PL I do it in my own haphazard fashion and sometimes it is just little notes and scribbles and sometimes it is for fun.

KL Could we say that oral history is central to understanding Peranakan material?

PL You have to be careful with oral history. It's mostly unreliable. (Laughter) For example, I have this long-term project that will probably be an exhibition in a few years, which focuses on batik from three generations of female batik entrepreneurs. We had to work a bit harder to get the family to trust the museum. Because I have been collecting the same pieces from that family I said, "Look, if you donate your pieces, I will donate mine, and we will have this amazing collection." They are three sisters. Their mother, grandmother, and great-

grandmother were batik-makers. They had a less varied collection of pieces made by their grandmother, but I was the most enthusiastic for those in particular. Together it's such a beautiful fit. We sat down in Jakarta one day. They took out all their old pictures and were recounting one incident, and the three of them could not agree about what happened that day. (Laughter) The stories were totally different, which is very interesting.

SL It is interesting how the same photograph could "tell" different stories. With regards to storytelling, in your 2014 interview with *TODAYonline*, you said, "to see the evidence in photographs helps us in understanding the past" and that "they provide the most objective evidence."¹⁰ What role do textiles, oral histories, and photos play in your collecting or curatorial process?

PL You have to take everything with a pinch of salt. Of course, they are very valuable. We have to handle the idea of memory with a lot of care and vigilance. It is important, but we can't just accept it wholesale. We have to analyse what's being said.¹¹

9 *Chetti Melaka of the Straits-Rediscovering Peranakan Indian Communities* was an exhibition at the Indian Heritage Centre that took place from 7 September 2018 to 5 May 2019. The Chetti Melaka (or Chitty Melaka) are descendants of Tamil traders who settled in Melaka during the reign of the Melaka Sultanate (15th–16th century) and married local women of Malay and Chinese descent. The exhibition featured 175 artifacts and photographs from the community.

10 Martin. "Patron Of Heritage Awards 2014: Snapshots of the Past."

11 Towards the end of this interview, Lee elaborated on his distinct approach to history and memory by sharing his three-minute statement written for the Southeast Asian Ceramic Society Symposium. This

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For me, history and heritage need to pivot on two concepts: memory and interconnectedness. The writer Nobel Laureate Elie Wiesel (1928–2016) famously said that, "Without memory, there is no culture. Without memory, there would be no civilization, no society, no future." This perfectly expresses the importance of history to humanity, to community, to a sense of place. However, Primo Levi (1919–1987), writer and fellow Holocaust survivor, warns us that, "Human memory is a marvelous but fallacious instrument." He also said, "The memories which lie within us are not carved in stone; not only do they tend to become erased as the years go by, but often they change, or even increase by

SL As you previously mentioned, we should handle the idea of memory with both care and vigilance. Following this mandate, could you explain a bit more about how you conduct research for curatorial projects, whether at the Peranakan Museum or at NUS Baba House?¹²

PL Let me give you an example. When you conduct an interview, do you accept everything that is said at face value? What other kinds of questions could you pose to double check what the person is saying? They might say, "I remember there was this scene on a whatever street," which I will follow by asking, "Do you have a photo of it?" There are ways to verify as you have the conversation.

SL But, because photos themselves are subjective in nature, how could they effectively back up oral histories?

PL I see what you are saying but here is one example. I met some established scholars who said that in the "old days" everybody dressed "properly." The sarong was always folded left over right. But the more I looked at a photo from the era they were talking about, which is included in the *Amek Gambar* exhibition, the more I realised people were not "proper." You would see women with their sarong folded in either direction. The photo showed something completely different and proved the scholars wrong. If we look at enough photos, we start observing differences from "official" histories. I think it gives us an opportunity to re-examine these assumptions. I find that, especially for photography in Southeast Asia, there are all these assumptions that the photos show to be incorrect.

Hui Ting (HT)

Through our research, we understand that being Peranakan is not just about a Chinese-Malay blend or one confined to the Straits Settlements. These were cultures that were shared across the Indian

incorporating extraneous features." The fascinating reliance we have on this wonderfully unreliable form of evidence therefore emphasises the vigilance we need to have with something so unstable. Whether writing, researching or collecting the past, one needs to be as rigorous as possible... I am Peranakan, and Peranakans in particular subscribed to the validation that if my grandmother told me so it's 100% fact. So yes, we need to remember the past, we need to record the past, but we need to be very vigilant.

The other concept that I find key to any approach to history and heritage is interconnectedness. I am inspired by what the poet Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) said about learning. He said, "The highest education is that which does not merely give us information but makes our life in harmony with all existence." This aspiration is echoed in the line of the poem expressing Tagore's longing for a world that has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls. There is certainly merit in pure subjects, but Tagore tells us to break the domestic walls and explore the ramifications, the transnational, and cross-cultural links and connections to celebrate shared heritage... interconnectedness also means a testability, how often have we chanced upon an Asian subject that immediately alienates by launching into quantifications about obscure scriptures, some ancient esoteric treatises, the reign of empress, the tyranny of taste makers, the rarefied and obtuse aesthetics of ancient scholars, or by using generally unintelligible specialist jargons. Asian history today still seems to be encountered by these caricaturing of the past, where everything is established on an unchanging monolithic cult civilisation, where even every cough and sneeze is founded on a deep, esoteric thousand-years old text.

Accessibility nowadays also means the Internet. Digitisation is vital, as well as digital audiences and free access to high-res resource material. The Rijksmuseum is an inspiring role model for this, making heritage resources available online

and framing history in terms of networks and interconnections, which provides a more viable foundation to make the past relevant, accessible, and resonant for diverse audiences. The Internet should be leading all of us to believe in one world, one global history. Although Tagore bemoaned the idea of narrow domestic walls, it is also within domestic walls that the potential of interconnections can be realised. For me, curating the NUS Baba House has been about walking that tightrope of memory between restoring and restaging. It has been about creating a theatre of memory, a subliminal multi-sensory experience for visitors, about placing objects and furnishing in context, which together with the physical structure of the house become one complex, composite artifact. There are pitfalls to restaging a theatre of memory. I hear that in Melaka and Penang, and now in the Netherlands, syndicates are renting the houses of impoverished ladies and getting them to convince gullible and voracious collectors that the newly fired porcelain filling the cabinets have been in the family for generations. We have all been guilty in art history of privileging the wealthy and powerful, as though only such people had good taste and discerning artistic sensibilities. So, the house can slide dangerously into just being a shrine of wealth. However, with rigor and vigilance, I believe that historical houses like NUS Baba House can become a multidisciplinary resource. Its mission is not to impose a viewpoint, but rather to become a laboratory for research and a playroom for ideas and dreams.

12 Located in Singapore's historic district in Tanjong Pagar, the NUS Baba House is a townhouse built in 1875. It was renamed the NUS Baba House on 4 September 2019 following extensive restoration, and currently showcases the domestic life and culture of the Peranakan Chinese as part of the National University of Singapore Museum. It also acts as a platform for cultural, socio-historical, and architectural research.

Ocean and Southeast Asia; Peranakan history and culture are non-linear. Do you think the narrative or the storytelling approach of public institutions is linear or non-linear? How do you think this approach impacts the way Peranakan history and culture are being perceived and understood more broadly?

PL We have inherited a linear, separated, and categorised approach. Everything is in little neat sub-sections. For a lot of disciplines, the approach has always been taken from natural history's taxonomy and types, where you try to define something by excluding everything that doesn't fit those definitions, but which also coexists. The government, in general, funded museums, so you had to promote the preferred state narrative of history and a Chinese-Malay-Indian-Others (CMIO) racial categorisation policy. But now I think the storytelling narrative at state-run museums is more varied, with the Peranakan Museum and the Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM) in particular taking on a less segmented or divided viewpoint in terms of presenting different cultures. There is a lot of cross-cultural programming now. It's getting better.

Tracy Lai (TL)

In an article by Paula Findlen, "The Museum: Its Classical Etymology and Renaissance Genealogy," she writes that the museum is a mirror of the present because it presents the objects from the past.¹³ This reminds me of your article "Dressing Badly in the Ports" in the *Port Cities: Multicultural Emporium of Asia, 1500-1900* exhibition catalogue,¹⁴ when you wrote that hybrid fashion was frowned upon at that time. In other words, fashion reflects stories from the past. How might this confluence apply to your collection or research?

PL I'm trying to overcome the problems created by a lot of 19th and 20th century scholarship. The essay, "Dressing

Badly in the Port," describes a very 19th century European obsession for people to dress "appropriately" for their class so that they couldn't rise above their station. But the fascinating thing is that, although there were no legal dress codes in Singapore, we also see this attempt to standardise breaking down completely in the photographs. This continues to happen now: the breaking down of dress codes.

TL Would you say that you tried to move away from the historical lens or applied other lens in this work?

PL I'm trying to undo the 19th century lens, which makes an assumption that when we look at the picture we grade everything. I am trying to say that we should undo a lot of our thinking and relook at pictures. We shouldn't assume that what we are thinking is what they were thinking. The point of my essay was to see if we can recover some sense of life via this 19th century colonial lens. The trouble is that, when we apply the 19th century lens, we fix the past as something very static and unreal. It feels more modern when you undo that static view, which is how we should feel about the past.

TL It's not that distant from our own lives.

PL This is the biggest problem with Asian studies now. I have been reading essays on Asian photography and, whether written by Asians or non-Asians, everybody starts their

13 "As a repository of past activities, created in the mirror of the present, the museum was above all a dialectical structure which served as a meeting point in which the historical claim of the present were invoked in memory of the past." See: Findlen, Paula. "The Museum: Its Classical Etymology and Renaissance Genealogy." *Journal of the History of Collections*, Vol. 1, No. 1, January 1989, pp. 59-78.

14 Lee, Peter H., et al. *Port Cities: Multicultural Emporiums of Asia, 1500-1900*. Singapore: Asian Civilisations Museum, 2016. Held from 4 November 2016 to 19 February 2017, this exhibition deployed items and stories from traders and migrants to show how port cities represented a mix of languages, people, merchandise, and ideas. This exhibition includes jewellery and multi-coloured cottons, languages and commerce in port cities, with mixed people, merchandise and ideas.

essay about the arrival of photography in Asia in the context of scientific marvel versus superstitious, traditional people. Whereas photography was a marvel wherever it appeared, even in Europe. You have the same narratives. In terms of Asian photographic history, this caricature is always played out. We don't notice it because it's Asia and we think it's appropriate but if you transpose it to European photography, everybody would think it is totally bizarre. Why isn't the modern world seen as one world?

My favourite picture from *Amek Gambar* is a very early snapshot of Peranakans eating, from about 1900. What is so amazing is that it's a picture of Asians not being particularly Asian, which seems such a difficult concept because, for Asians, it's all about identity. You choose pictures where people are showcasing that identity. What about pictures of people who are not? Why are we still framing our thinking about what we can show that is quintessentially Peranakan? We are all complicit in playing out these divisions.

TL In a previous interview with *The Straits Times*,¹⁵ you mentioned that, as a collector and independent curator, you wear many hats. In other countries, multi-hyphenate collectors seem to be more common. Why do you think this is not the case in Singapore?

PL The school system in the 1970s was geared towards the sciences. There weren't many opportunities for Singaporeans to embrace and be engaged in art. There was a prevailing stigma that you were a loser if you got into an arts class or took art as a subject. That it is because you were not able to qualify for the science class.

TL In Hong Kong, where I am from, art collecting is usually associated with the wealthy. Is that the case in Singapore?

PL No. You see, from the Peranakan perspective, it's

all just household knick-knacks. It's interesting if you meet anybody from an old Peranakan family. They are not interested in any of these objects. Porcelain was thrown away. It was just crockery. So people who didn't grow up with it created the whole market. My mother was a very early collector. Mainly because she had to go to Melaka for funerals, where you would sit around for days. Where my father's family home was located there were a lot of little antique shops that started popping out. She used to just wander around and buy. She was one of the first people who collected in that sense. She was an exception. In the 1970s and 1980s, there were also a lot of wealthy businessmen who collected Chinese art. I can tell you that when most of them had their collections evaluated, almost all of it turned out to be fake. Without proper guidance...

TL Is this because they weren't working with dealers?

PL No. The problem was that very few collectors then did enough homework and many of them were business people. So they were always interested in bargains. If you think you are going to buy an imperial yellow "something" for a fraction of the price, then... There were a lot of scammers around. Even now, I am sceptical when I see an auction catalogue. You can't assume. Currently there is so much extremely rare material coming out, you think, "Is that really possible?"

Yan Ni (YN)

Your family has also built an amazing collection. How do you bring together these intimate objects, either your own or other families, through an exhibition? How do you construct the narrative? Is your approach story-based, concept-based, or object-based? Do you choose the objects from your

15 Seah, Lionel. "The Life Interview with Peranakan scholar Peter Lee: Finder, Keeper and Giver." *The Straits Times*, 16 May 2016, [www.straitstimes.com/](http://www.straitstimes.com/lifestyle/arts/the-life-interview-with-peranakan-scholar-peter-lee-finder-keeper-and-giver)

[lifestyle/arts/the-life-interview-with-peranakan-scholar-peter-lee-finder-keeper-and-giver](http://www.straitstimes.com/lifestyle/arts/the-life-interview-with-peranakan-scholar-peter-lee-finder-keeper-and-giver). Accessed 25 January 2019.

collections to fit a narrative on a selected theme, or is it the opposite, where themes are first identified and only then are the objects sourced?

PL It is always easier to start with what you have. If you begin with an idea you will always end up with some disaster. Unless you come out with an idea after you've seen enough objects, and you have the confidence that you can find enough pieces to tell that story: a sense of what's out there.

YN How do you then come up with a curatorial objective or narrative that is broader than your own collection?

PL Our family's approach has been to package the collections into little themes. Sometimes, with exhibitions like *Port Cities*, the themes are much bigger, so we borrowed some objects and we also had the budget for overseas loans. It was miraculous because everything I wanted was lent: including objects from a Zen Buddhist temple in Japan and Gereja Sion in Jakarta.

YN What is your plan for your collection in the future? Do you have any new experimental projects in mind?

PL I have a few things in the pipeline. I have been invited to do a show in Kuala Lumpur at the end of 2020 and I am thinking of an exhibition of 18th and 19th century imported textiles and costumes sourced in the Malay world but that are not explicitly or solely "Malay"; imported and foreign materials like early printed European cotton and Indian brocade. This is to show how globally connected the Malay world was. Whenever a textile exhibition is mounted, the artifacts usually belong to a type made by the community such as *songket*,¹⁶ so this curatorial angle is different and unexpected.



Indonesian textile. Collection of Peter Lee, Singapore.
Photo by Ng Sor Luan. 26 February 2019.

KL You are a "galvaniser" within Singapore's art community, where you also help shift certain art historical narratives about the region by soliciting certain loans or acquisitions for museums.

PL I am so glad that the museums have budgets now. In the old days, I felt compelled only to buy certain objects that were very important in my opinion. Whereas now, if I see something nice, I will ask the museum to buy it. I link up the museum and seller.

KL Do you have to convince the board or chairperson?

PL No, you can only suggest it. It's up to the museum if they do buy it in the end, and sometimes there are certain reasons why they don't. I'm just trying to find a good home for it.

KL Collectors play a critical role in the ecosystem. How can we develop more "Peter Lees" in Singapore?

¹⁶ *Songket* is a traditional Indonesian Malaysian and Bruneian fabric intricately patterned with gold or silver thread. It is considered to be

both luxurious and prestigious, often worn to important events such as weddings.

PL Everyone must find his or her own way. There are different kinds of collectors and everybody has their own strengths. I had the good fortune of meeting and getting to know some very important collectors in Europe and they have this wonderful gentlemanly system. They share a lot of their info and don't bid against each other. Quite often, collectors are very engaged with the museums as well as with one another. The biggest problem locally is that the collectors are in their own world. We have people with the money to build a really good collection, but they are not approaching it with that right system or network. So the relationship with collectors is often underplayed in Singapore. At museums in Japan, Europe, America, and Australia, curators make an effort to become best friends with collectors. It's part of their job. Here, state museums are still very much either under the civil service or state-associated. Museum professionals are fearful of compliance regulations. I think the Peranakan Museum and ACM curators make it a point to have good relationships with collectors.

KL Could you share a little bit about the first item you collected? What or who inspired you to begin collecting?

PL The mentors and people who came before me were key in influencing how I collect. My uncle, Lee Kip Lin,¹⁷ was an influence. He was an architect-historian. He had a photography collection and was interested in street scenes and buildings. That was my first contact with prints. His whole attitude towards documents, old books, and archival materials inspired me.

When I was in university in London, I lived in a little apartment my parents bought, just off Portobello Road where there is an antique market. Every weekend in London, we just spent time browsing there. We were just students, so everything seemed very expensive, Singapore photos were then 200 to 300 pounds. So I just admired them. But my friend gave me a photograph of Burma; Burma photos were cheap. From there

the idea came to form a collection slowly, I started buying Southeast Asian pictures. I started collecting pictures of people and remembered thinking, as a student, "Wouldn't it be nice if you could find a book with pictures of Southeast Asia?" Then I thought of the idea of building resources on early photography in Southeast Asia. As you know, most collections in the West are based on colonial history. If you want to see photographs of Indonesia, you go to the Netherlands. If you want to see Singapore photographs, you go to the British Library. For Indochina photographs, you go to France. So, I formed the collection as a "one-stop shop" for researchers looking at Southeast Asian photographs. Hopefully they will at some point join an institution here in Singapore.

17 Lee Kip Lin (1925–2011) was an architect, professor, and author. He practised architecture while teaching at Singapore Polytechnic and the

University of Singapore (now the National University of Singapore) and was a mentor to prominent local architects such as Tay Kheng Soon.

with Alessia Levonique Candra, Ratnawati Erlimus,
Zhou Fan, Damiët Schneeweisz, Leon Tan, and Lydia Wong

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Angelita Teo is Senior Director of the Museums and Festivals division at the National Heritage Board Singapore (NHB), where she is also Director of the National Museum of Singapore (NMS). She is additionally Director of the NHB's Museum Roundtable and Festival Director of the Singapore Heritage Festival and Singapore Night Festival. Our conversation draws on these rich experiences to reflect on the positionalities of the NMS as it constantly negotiates between different histories, objects, disciplinary mechanisms, cultural identities, and political and economic incentives. With that framework in mind, we asked questions on the role of museums, her perspective on the cultural and social dimensions of the institution, and the relationship between the NMS and the public in Singapore. In discussing Teo's directions for the NMS and the roles she has taken on throughout this professional and personal path, we gained insight into the various ways the NMS has contributed to the museology of Singapore.

Further Reading

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Zhou Fan (ZF)

The NMS has an interesting history, which you elaborated on in your article “Singapore, a Multi-racial Nation—The Role of the National Museum.”¹ In this essay, you discuss the evolution of the institution from its early stage as the Raffles Library and Museum. At that time, the collection was comprised primarily of natural history material supported by archaeological and ethnological elements. How do you understand the evolution from “natural histories” to the telling of political and social histories as part of the legacy of the NMS?

Angelita Teo (AT)

(Laughter) There are so many ways to answer that question! In terms of a colony, when Stamford Raffles conceptualised having an educational institution and museum, I think as early as 1823, they were all seen as one. But I believe the birth of the museum was very similar to a lot of European museums that were founded in those days. If you go back to the British Museum, it was also founded on the same values and beliefs about knowledge, sharing that knowledge, and so on.

The ultimate change came post-independence. As you know, the name was changed to the National Museum; then, in the 1990s, we also became the Singapore History Museum; and in 2006, when we reopened after the building of the extension block, it became the National Museum once again. Throughout the museum’s history, what it’s called does play a significant role.² I guess that’s why we kept changing the name as

1 Teo, Angelita. “Singapore a Multi-racial Nation—The Role of the National Museum” in *Appropriate Museology—Appropriate Language, Essays on Translation and Communication in the Museum*, edited by Gundula Avenarius, Aisha Deemas, and Susan Kamel. Berlin: Hochschule für Technik und Wirtschaft, 2018, pp. 99–113.

2 Teo refers here to the National Museum of Singapore’s shift from an ethnological to a socio-historical institution. For more context, see: Hoe, Su Fern, and Terence Chong. “Nurturing the Cultural Desert: The Role of Museums in Singapore” in *The State and the Arts In Singapore: Policies And Institutions*. Singapore: World Scientific, 2018, pp. 241–265.

we went along. Although, in the 1990s, when you said that the Singapore History Museum is in the National Museum building, it was rather odd! (Laughter) Back then, the government was going through a phase where they were really thinking about cultural development. The National Heritage Board was established in 1993 and that's when the National Museum was renamed the Singapore History Museum. In fact, we can call ourselves the mother of all museums in Singapore. All collections came from the National Museum. The Lee Kong Chian Natural History Museum's collection came from us; the National Gallery's modern art collection came from us; the ethnographic collection that is in the Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM) now is also from us. In a way, it was extremely exciting for Singapore that the government believed in having museums.

Which then goes back to your question on the role of the museums: how do we see them? I constantly wonder if I am a civil servant first, or a museum professional. One thing I do hold close to my heart, and of which I remind all National Museum staff, is that this is one of the oldest institutions in Singapore. This year, Singapore is celebrating 54 years and we turn 132 as an institution.³ I think that in itself says something. If we bear this in mind, a lot of the things we do here and the decisions that we make are affected by that fact. As an institution fully funded by the government, we also have to understand our role in national narratives. Currently, we are going through that phase where the constant question is who we are as Singaporeans? What does it mean, "being Singaporean?" We try to address that in many different ways, as much as we can.

The role of this museum really comes down to the people we serve. Unlike some of the bigger museums around the world, we are not an encyclopaedic museum. Our collection is extremely small in comparison to institutions like the British Museum or the Louvre—the Australian Museum has 12,000,000 objects! I think the British Museum has 14,000,000... Everything is in the millions!

In contrast, the National Museum only has 160,000 objects in our collection. It's drastically smaller. Museums are about their collections—that our collection is small, I see more as an advantage than a disadvantage. We are not laboured by a lot of the things that trouble museums today internationally. Therefore, we have to carefully decide what we do in terms of presentations—exhibitions, programmes, and things like that. But we also have to ask what do we do in terms of acquisition and how we want to grow the collection for the future. All of these things need to be considered hand-in-hand.

ZF Throughout the evolution of the NMS, we see a shift from the colonial collection to one that uses its collection to focus on local history. Would you argue that your role is more of a facilitator, a navigator, a teacher, or a critic in relation to this legacy? How do you intend for the NMS to carry this legacy into the future?

AT I think the word facilitator, as unsexy as it is, is very important. Curators today are also facilitators. The world has evolved, and the amount of technology out there means that each exhibition curators are involved with is no longer a solo effort. Our starting point is always that a particular subject matter has to have a certain resonance to social issues today.⁴ Because of the museum's collection, some of these things do drive us towards a certain type of programming or exhibition. Sometimes when we start and we think that it's going in one direction, it may not end up that way because of the people we meet.

3 This chronology refers to the origin date of 1887, when the construction of the National Museum of Singapore building, then known as the Raffles Library and Museum, was completed and opened to the public in the year of Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee.

4 For further insight on these social relationships in curatorial practices, see: Kreps, Christina. "Curatorship as Social Practice." *Curator: The Museum Journal*, Vol. 46, No. 3, 2003, pp. 311–323.

A good example of this is how we started off with the Polaroid exhibition for many good “museum” reasons.⁵ Why would this exhibition matter today? We knew it wasn’t going to be a commercial success. It’s not one of those shows that is going to receive thousands of visitors, but it’s one of those shows that we felt was important to do. We also wanted to examine the concept of instantaneity in today’s world. Which kind of answers the other question that, yes, perspective for us is important. We are not here solely to critique. We are here to inform people that there are many ways of looking at something. There is no clear right or wrong to anything. I think that if the museum is able to present as many perspectives as possible, and people are able to come here and realise that “I have never thought of it that way,” we have done our work.

The other thing I’m very mindful of is that we don’t work towards an audience leaving the museum thinking: “today I’ve learnt that Singapore was founded in 1819.” That is not the kind of knowledge we want. Rather, what we are after is: “wow! I didn’t know that, I would like to find out more about it!” I’m talking about a sense of curiosity. As we all know, the world today is a “noisy” environment where many things can be distracting. We are lucky if we have anything trending on the news for more than two or three days. In the same way, if you come to an exhibition here and go: “okay, I will head back this evening just to Google and find out a little bit more about that,” that is when I think we have done our job.

There are different types of audiences. There are people who go through every single text panel, go through every single digital content that you have. I have met people who said “I’ve spent eight hours in there!” For them, it’s a sense of accomplishment that “I went through everything.” But they are the minority. The majority of people who come to an exhibition are impressionistic. Design thus becomes very important as well.

Alessia Levonique Candra (ALC)

The narratives and processes resulting from
Singapore’s independence fundamentally shaped

the museum: a time period in the 1960s that explicitly called for the creation of a national identity. This could equally be seen as an important moment or change of direction in the evolution of what began as the Raffles Institution. How do you see the evolution of the display and its narratives from the Raffles Museum to the NMS today, as well as the influences of nationalist incentives in the museum’s collections and display?

AT This museum is about presenting Singapore and also about bringing the world to Singapore. At the end of the day, it was people coming together and saying: “I want to put together a group of objects in a building and claim something.” I don’t think that has changed. But I do think the whole question about nationalism and how Singapore relates to it is a bit more complex. We feel very strongly—and personally I do too—that one of the most important things about Singapore is how we hold on to our multicultural, multiracial identity.

We aren’t selling propaganda, but we are definitely highlighting to visitors what brought us to where we are today as a nation. Embracing some of these ideals and beliefs in multiculturalism and racial harmony is very important. Those are still things we try to address.

For some of these questions, although they are difficult, they are questions that need to be addressed. We have to pick the right occasion, environment, and situation to talk about these things. Exhibitions are not always the most suitable platform, but museums are suitable to discuss some of these issues. So we do it through lectures and conferences. It’s about not being afraid to talk about certain things, but also being responsible about it.

5 Here, Teo refers to the exhibition *In an Instant: Polaroid at the Intersection of Art and Technology*, which ran from 10 November 2018 to 31 March 2019 at the NMS. This

collection of Polaroids and artworks reflect on issues of instantaneity and the impact of the photographic medium.

The museum is a very attractive venue for a lot of people to make statements, and because we engage contemporary artists, I'm always very mindful of that. I'll give you an example: for an artist who uses history as a starting point in their work, having this work displayed at the National Museum or having the work displayed at the Singapore Art Museum (SAM) are completely different contexts. Whatever they are challenging through the work has very different weightage when it is seen in a contemporary art museum versus being seen at a history museum. Those are things I'm mindful of. But does that mean that we don't want to talk about these issues? No. We just have to find the right ways and means to have those conversations.

Ratnawati Erlimus (RE)

Presenting and negotiating Singaporean identity is a complex issue not only because of its relationship to colonial and nationalist sentiments, but also due to the vast variety of aims it can encompass. In your own words, the NMS is "not just the place to learn about Singapore's cultural and historical heritage, but also the place to celebrate our shared stories."⁶ What strategies does the museum use to enable Singaporeans from diverse backgrounds to relate to this shared heritage? Is it possible to represent a collective of ethnic, religious, and/or ideological entities within a single Singaporean national identity via the museum?

AT I think some things are very levelling. There are parts of life that, no matter what social status you have, will still affect you. One, for example, is ageing. If you are rich, so what? You are still going to grow old! That's why we organise a lot of senior programmes. We realised that, regardless of social background, it's important to be able to have meaningful leisure activities. We also noticed that, through engagement, people from completely different backgrounds become friends. Some of the activities we have done here have proven that. At first, when they come in, they say: "I've nothing

similar with you besides the fact that we are all above 65 years old." But after a while, when they start speaking to one other, they realise that some of the life challenges people face, regardless of background, are similar. I think the museum is the perfect space for this.

We are very mindful that we don't come across as elitist. We do have a problem, purely because of the word "museum," the word "national," and the facade that we have: the colonial building itself. We are trying to break down those things, and I think we are achieving it.

Kids are extremely levelling as well! We are working a lot with parent groups, including those from special needs schools, to find ways of asking: "how can the museum play a bigger role in making it meaningful for your kids to visit?" Engagement sessions are something we do a lot of now—although we are not here to ask people what they want. The reality is, when you ask people what they want, they don't know. I read the other day that Henry Ford said that if you ask people what they wanted, they would tell you they want a faster horse. And then he would have never invented a car! It's the same way with the museum. Often people just want more of something that they like, a strategy that doesn't work. However, their feelings and what they think *does* matter. By listening to our visitors and our communities, we learn a lot.

Regarding people with special needs, about two and a half years ago, we started seriously improving on this aspect as a museum. Some of these engagement sessions included parents with kids both with and without autism. At the end of the day, the conversation wasn't between the museum and parents, it was between parents themselves. I found that extremely enlightening. This started us off on programmes that try to be reverse-inclusive. Rather than catering pro-

6 See: Teo. "Singapore a Multiracial Nation—The Role of the National Museum," pp. 101–107.

grammes especially for kids with autism, we came up with programmes that are suitable for all kids, including those with autism. Those are things that we think through a lot and try to do a lot of.

Late last year we organised an exhibition on playgrounds, which came about when we wanted to work with the Housing Development Board.⁷ One of the programmes that I was extremely proud of was getting domestic helpers to come on weekends to talk about playgrounds. Because, actually, domestic helpers spend a lot of time at playgrounds! In the old days, it was grandparents and grandchildren—today it's really domestic helpers with their charges in playgrounds. So we had this programme where the domestic helpers talked about their experiences, which I thought was extremely interesting!

RE Throughout the NMS, issues of identity, nationality, and coloniality are addressed in relation to heritage. I refer to what Kwa Chong Guan writes in his essay "Redefining the National Museum: New Reflections on Heritage"⁸ when he explains that the long term plan was for the NMS to be a living museum that links Singapore's past with its present and future. He also mentions that the main function of the museum was to enable Singaporeans to relate to their heritage. We've talked about key moments in national history as presented in the Singapore History Gallery and other permanent galleries. How do the permanent galleries tie our history to the present and future?

AT A new exhibition that's coming up in May—*Packaging Matters*—looks at food packaging over the years. As you know, historical packaging was a lot more sustainable and used different kinds of organic materials. In the National Museum collection, we have quite a lot of ephemeral things like *Kick-a-poo* bottles.⁹ There's a lot to learn from history in terms of going back to the past to see how things were done. A lot of developments with packaging over the last twenty

years are the cause of some of the climate issues that we have today. So that's one way of addressing present issues and future concerns through an exhibition showcasing the past. We do a lot of this now, because, at the end of the day, the museum has to be relevant.

ALC During its independence process in the 1960s, Singapore adopted Malay as the national language in order to avoid friction with neighbouring countries like Malaysia and Indonesia. But at the same time, Singapore embraced English as its most prominently used language, which also highlights its colonial past.¹⁰ In your essay, "Singapore a Multiracial Nation—The Role of the National Museum,"¹¹ you mention that language is one of the policies of inclusion that the National Museum is trying to refine. For example, via the inclusion of Tamil content in its gallery following feedback from the Indian community. As the museum opens up to different audiences, inclusion of these different languages reflects some of the complexity of Singapore's identity through the museum. Can you please elaborate more on this linguistic policy of inclusion? Furthermore, how might the museum be made accessible to people who are illiterate?

7 Specifically, Teo is referring to the exhibition *The More We Get Together: Singapore's Playgrounds 1930–2030* that ran from 20 April to 30 September 2018 at the NMS. This exhibition not only explored the development of playgrounds as physical sites in Singapore, but also looked at them as places for collective experiences that influenced society throughout the years.

8 Kwa, Chong Guan. "Redefining the National Museum: New Reflections on Heritage" in *Impressions of the Goh Chok Tong Years in Singapore*, edited by Bridget Welsh, James Chin, and Arun Mahizhnan. Singapore: NUS Press, 2009, pp. 479–490.

9 *Kick-a-poo* was a carbonated drink from the United States that was popular in the 1950s in Singapore and originally distributed in glass bottles.

10 For a discussion of the use of language and its relationship to the British colonisation of Singapore, see: Purushotam, Nirmala Srirekam. *Negotiating Language, Constructing Race: Disciplining Difference in Singapore*. Berlin: Mouton De Gruyter, 1998.

11 Teo. "Singapore a Multiracial Nation—The Role of the National Museum," p. 109.

AT I think language is very important for culture. Translation goes beyond just translation. But when a text is translated, someone still has to vet it. Internally we don't have that expertise. It takes a lot of the museum's resources to do, but we still do it. I think it goes back to the acknowledgement that we are a multiracial society. We mindfully put aside budget for translation of our resources into all four languages because we realised that, as a national museum, we are first a national institution and then a tourist attraction. That dictates a lot of the things that we do. The nuances with language are very hard to explain. If there are important terms in the original vernacular, we will place them in brackets. We are also trying to use technology more so that translation will become more expedient and less cumbersome.

To answer your question relating to people who are not comfortable with reading, we're also working on audio guides. It's not just about whether people are literate or not, but also about people's preferences. We have big fonts in the gallery and handouts that are meant for older people. I'm more sympathetic now because I need it myself! (Laughter) Sometimes people capture information better through listening, while others are more visual. We are trying to cater to different learning needs.

Lydia Wong (LW)

One aspect that's very particular to Singaporean identity, which has been highlighted recently, is the museum's use of intangible heritage. In 2015, the Living Galleries were revamped after almost a decade to allow for new narratives to be shared.¹² One gallery, titled Food, which replicated the vibrancy of Singapore's street life from the 1950s to 70s, was especially memorable to many visitors including myself, who found themselves immersed in a multi-sensory display of food artifacts, scents, and sounds reflecting Singapore's melting pot of cultures and flavours. Also in 2015, the museum hosted a talk titled "Preserving Singapore's Food Heritage in the

21st Century," which detailed our engagement with local fare and its histories. There has recently been a huge emphasis on intangible cultural heritage in Singapore. Our hawker culture has been nominated for inscription into UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) of Humanity.¹³ What strategies does the National Museum adopt in the promotion and preservation of Singapore's intangible heritage, and do you see a shift in collections towards the intangible in the future?

AT The fact that it's intangible means that it's hard to be in the collections. (Laughter) Although there are ways of documenting some of these things. Intangible cultural heritage is one of those things that is now becoming quite popular, right? Suddenly ICH is everywhere! The reason we decided not to have the Food gallery in the recent revamp has to do with two things. First, one of the main criticisms of the Food gallery previously was the fact that people lamented: "yeah, everything is there, but you can't eat it, so annoying!" You need to taste food. Is the museum the right venue for it? I don't disagree that it is important, I don't disagree that it's fun, but should we be the one to do it? Maybe not. As much as the museum has evolved over the last century, collections are still an important aspect. If you can't tell a story with objects, then maybe it's someone else's job. Secondly, there are other ways of addressing intangible heritage through programmes—that's why we have talks. I always emphasise: if something

12 In a separate interview, Teo talks about the aims to revitalise the galleries by addressing feedback that was given based on the previous iterations of the exhibition. Wei, Cheng. "Crowds Throng National Museum after Gallery Revamp." *The Straits Times*, 19 January 2016, www.straitstimes.com/singapore/crowds-throng-national-museum-after-gallery-revamp. Accessed 14 February 2019.

13 Hawker culture in Singapore can be traced to street hawkers in the 1940s. The hawker centres were built in 1970 as an attempt to resettle these street hawkers in Singapore and provide a place to sell food in a hygienic setting with proper sanitation. Hawker centres are naturally ventilated complexes with stalls selling a wide variety of affordable food representative of the diverse culinary traditions of communities in Singapore.

is meant to be in a book, it is meant to be in a book, and not meant to be an exhibition. (Laughter)

To answer your question very succinctly: festivals are amazingly powerful for such things. We have the good fortune in this museum to be the platform for the Singapore Heritage Festival¹⁴ and the Singapore Night Festival¹⁵—both of which can address ICH. I guess the public sees the National Museum as the main organiser of the Night Festival, which we also take advantage of, because it's an opportunity to present some of these experiences. The Heritage Festival is just about to happen this year and a lot of ICH things will be covered in that. A few years back, the National Museum was one of the key locations for the Heritage Festival. One of the programmers found a very nice old photo of the front of the museum that showed where hawkers would come in the evening to set up. It was a beautiful photo. She recreated the scene and the turnout was amazing! What was important was that we were not just creating it for nostalgia's sake, because nostalgia, to me, is a double-edged sword—you have to be quite careful with nostalgia. Although we included all these traditional hawkers, it was curated in such a way that they were presented as second or third-generation hawkers. We were trying to show that there is a future in this; these are not dying trades or things that you'll never taste again! That was not what we wanted to present. The vibrancy was amazing.

Leon Tan (LT)

This is a nice lead-up to the next question, following on from what we talked about regarding the tension and complexity that's created through narratives that are told using collections as well as heritage. How could education and outreach programs or festivals, as you mentioned, serve not as an alternative story, but instead as one that creates a space that allows for a dialogue between museum, viewer, and objects?¹⁶

AT I believe that, as museums, we do not need to generate everything ourselves. We are also facilitators and acknowledge the fact that we have assets and that these assets are platforms. We have assets in terms of venue; you cannot imagine the number of people that come to us and say: "we want to do something at the museum." It's a constant struggle to say no. Not because we are arrogant, but because sometimes the museum is just not suited: to have them send an invitation card that says that the venue is the National Museum of Singapore makes it appear as if we are endorsing it, even though it's just a rental or we're just a venue sponsor. So we're always very careful with the events that are held here.

Although we are cautious, we're also extremely open to working with communities and having exhibitions put up within our space. We want that sense of ownership from our communities. For example, people that we have worked with include non-profit organisations like the Singapore Council of Women (SCWO), who came up with the Women's Hall of Fame.¹⁷ These are the people that we support. We don't simply provide them with a venue—our exhibition team also advises and helps make changes to the design and all that. It really is a partnership. We also get a lot of public agencies that want to celebrate their anniversaries here... You'd be surprised! (Laughter)

14 The Singapore Heritage Festival is an annual festival held in Singapore and organised by the National Heritage Board. It aims to celebrate all aspects of the cultural heritage of Singapore and its programmes are built through partnerships with communities.

15 The Singapore Night Festival is centred on art-related activities, all of which have been programmed in the evening as a means of creating a space for appreciating the arts after hours.

16 For insight regarding how this tension is not detrimental, but rather is integral to and an alternative means of being an educational tool, see: Rancière, Jacques. *The Emancipated Spectator*.

17 Teo is referring to the Singapore Council of Women's Organisations (SCWO) which was founded in 1978 and officially recognised in 1979. Their focus on the advancement of the status of women is manifested through their role of being the national coordinating body that oversees all women's organisations in Singapore. SCWO is not to be confused with the Singapore Council of Women, which was formed in 1952 but dissolved in 1971 due to decreasing membership. They were responsible for many of the lobbying and campaigns that resulted in the 1961 passing of the Women's Charter in Singapore.

Next year is quite fun as we're working with the Singapore Police Force which will be celebrating 200 years. That is a big date for them! The museum can also help in terms of capability building—we have very specific knowledge that others don't have, like curation and understanding technical requirements for exhibitions. My team is extremely good at observing visitor behaviour, adjusting lighting, or other aspects that make it easier for visitors to enjoy the exhibition experience. Although, whenever people come to us and say that they want to do a particular exhibition, we're quite open to them getting their own designers as well because we also want variety. Then, when the design comes in, we'll give them our assessment and explain why this or that won't work. I think even that is capability building.

RE I'd like to reflect more on the impact of histories, identities, and multiple publics on curatorial strategies. We are curious as to how collections could engage forms of progression and narration using both time and space. I'm thinking of the Farquhar collection displayed in *Magic and Menace*¹⁸ as well as in *Story of the Forest*.¹⁹ Heritage is fundamentally related to time, subject to both preservation and restoration, and yet it is equally rooted in the contemporary condition. The museum presents the collection simultaneously in object and digital displays—how are they distinguished from each other in terms of telling a narrative? What is the aim, or what are the possibilities, of such curatorial strategies for the visitor experience?

AT I think embracing technology is not solely to “wow” people or to say that “the museum is not as old fashioned as we think.” I think the key here is to see technology as a tool: a tool has to make something useful or better, and in this case, easier to deliver information. I have to say that this is not something I can say for all museums. Different museums have different strategies for technology; different ways of seeing what is important for visitors in terms of experience. I'd like to

think that because we are the National Museum of Singapore—and for Singapore there are certain things that are important to us—we employ technology to facilitate access.

I am extremely mindful that people's ways of receiving information and their interests in exhibitions has changed quite drastically. Recently, we went to Facebook for a presentation and they were talking about attention span: these days, something is very popular if someone can look at it for eight seconds! Those shifts are also things that we need to be aware of.

Damiët Schneeweisz (DS)

Technologies have also proved to be an interesting tool in complicating traditional or established narratives in the museum. Through interactive displays, virtual reality, and other ways of intervening in the gallery space, technologies have transformed how we tell stories. There have been a number of movements in recent years in museum studies that have addressed these processes of narration. For example, one that has often been subject to critique is the idea of a master narrative: a narrative that structures the dominant way of thinking about the development of certain subjects, often presented linearly in museums. By doing so, such narratives are also actively excluding subject matters that might complicate these types of stories. Eileen Hooper-Greenhill talks about this in *Museums and*

18 *Magic and Menace* is a permanent exhibition that discusses supernatural and spiritual beliefs as seen through selected objects from the William Farquhar Collection of Natural History Drawings. In the previous iteration exhibited in the same gallery, which was called *Desire and Danger*, a different selection of objects from the collection were used to narrate the relationship

between man and certain plants or animals that have both curing and poisonous, medicinal or spiritual properties.
19 Held in the NMS's Glass Rotunda, *Story of the Forest* transforms 69 drawings from the William Farquhar Collection of Natural History Drawings into three-dimensional animations designed by Japanese digital art collective teamLab.

the *Interpretation of Visual Culture*, stating that while master narratives are created by presenting a large-scale picture, they also eliminate complicating and contradictory details—objects that might illuminate different interpretations of events are excluded.²⁰ In terms of your approach to the museum's display, do you distinguish between the grand narrative of Singapore history and these complicating alternative details?

AT That was the intent when we had the opportunity to revamp our galleries in 2014 for 2015, *SG50*.²¹ It was a mad rush—no one does six or seven galleries in eighteen months! I would say that, from a framework point of view, the answer to your question is that the Singapore History gallery is the broad stroke of Singapore history. We present 700 years because the collection is able to present 700 years, starting from the archaeological collection to what we have in more modern times. The Singapore History Gallery was meant to be that.²²

The Life in Singapore galleries on the second floor were meant to then do a deep dive into specific aspects of history that we wanted to touch on.²³ That was the framework. I cannot say that we have completely achieved that, but they are what we consider as ongoing projects. For example, on the second floor in Surviving Syonan gallery, you find a very personal experience about how people were trying to survive those three years of occupation. That was an attempt although we also felt we could do more. When we did the temporary exhibition called *Witness to War: Remembering 1942* in 2017 in commemoration of 75 years after the fall of Singapore, we did it with two objectives: one was to, of course, commemorate the occasion, but also to acknowledge that there are fewer and fewer war survivors. We took the opportunity to collect a lot of oral histories and even acquire more objects for the collection in relation to World War II. Once that exhibition was done, we transported some of the more important elements of that exhibition to Surviving Syonan. I am personally extremely happy that it was very well received.

We are extremely mindful of it. As we go along, things will get updated, things will change—and some things you can't do in exhibitions, regardless of the efforts you put in. Again, that's why we need to have conferences. We need a lecture series to address those issues. We are also here to bring people's attention to understanding certain complexities—and life is complex—it can't be neatly put in a physical space.

LW Talking about national narratives in relation to our earlier discussion of identity and nationhood, the Singapore History Gallery takes its visitors on a successive and progressive journey through the grand narrative of Singapore, beginning in the 13th Century with the Singapore Stone, an island shrouded in mystery, and then concluding with a present day representation of the values that make Singapore so successful today. This historical continuity of the Singapore story and our collective social memory of this progress to nationhood is familiar to many.²⁴ Understanding that state-funded museums and institutions in Singapore serve an important function in the nation's political structures, how do you,

20 Hooper-Greenhill, Eileen. *Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture*. London: Routledge, 2008, pp. 151–152.

21 Teo is referring to the NMS's involvement in the campaign celebrating Singapore's 50th year of independence in 2015.

22 Teo is referring to a permanent exhibition that, in broad strokes, presents the transformation of the island *Singapura* to the nation of Singapore today.

23 Teo refers to the overarching exhibition *Life in Singapore: The Past 100 Years*, which spreads across several galleries on the second floor of the NMS; specifically *Modern Colony*, *Surviving Syonan*, *Growing Up*, and *Voices of Singapore*. Each of the four galleries look into specific topics: Singapore's status

as a British Crown Colony in the 1920s to 30s; the Singaporean people's ways of coping with the Japanese Occupation in the 1940s; development of societal and local identity in the 1950s and 60s amidst Singapore's separation from Malaya and its subsequent independence; and the means of self-expression through cultural performances in the 1970s and 80s, respectively. For further discussion of concerns of appropriated historical continuity and ontological unity of national narratives in reference to the negotiation and attempted dismantling of colonial ramifications, see: Diouf, Mamadou. "Sortir De La Parenthèse Coloniale." *L'Afrique Des Africanistes, Le Débat*, Vol. 118, No. 1, 2002, pp. 59–65.

as the director of National Museum of Singapore, exercise your autonomy or manoeuvre away from this very entrenched national narrative?

AT To be honest, I think the majority of Singaporeans wouldn't even know what the national narrative is. It's really a handful of people, like yourselves, who have a personal interest, that actually think about it. But firstly, I want to say something: just because we are a publicly funded museum doesn't mean that we have to avoid certain conversations—we don't. We have a certain level of professionalism that we also need to maintain.

That also doesn't mean that privately funded museums are fully autonomous: if we look at American museums, they have all these board members who have their own agendas. If you go to the Natural History Museum in New York and visit the gallery of dioramas it is as if time stood still. I thought this was by choice! I thought that, because it has now become a part of the museum's history with movies like the *Night in the Museum* series,²⁵ they're trying to preserve it as is. However, the reality is that the person who gave money to fund that particular gallery stated very clearly to the museum director: "when I came as a young child with my grandfather, the gallery looked like this; when I come with my grandson, it has to be exactly as I remember it!" That is the only reason they're preserving it exactly!

I don't know how that information affects the thinking of what we do here, but it does. You always have a paymaster. Basically, if you're taking someone's money, you have to solve their problems. (Laughter) So you have to do it in a smart way. I also don't want people to come here and say things that are irresponsible. You shouldn't create controversy for controversy's sake. At the same time, there will be occasions—there are conferences, there are lectures—where we have very heated debates.

DS Going more in-depth with subspaces of the grand narrative, what I noticed going through the museum was that there seems to be a certain focus on the role of women. Recently, we saw the Museum of Modern Art in New York (MoMA) close its doors for four months to undergo renovations in order to include more works by women and people of colour, which was both an effort to "rethink the way that the story of modern and contemporary art is presented to the public," as well as to acknowledge that there is no single or complete history of modern and contemporary art.²⁶ How do you see this kind of inclusion, or privileging, of alternative histories in relation to gendered experience for the National Museum?

AT I think that, as there are more and more female professionals in the museum, things will change. The funny thing is that if you visit most museums, whether local or foreign, the staff are mainly women but the directors are all men in their sixties. Most of them are either political appointees or academics. And as much as I would like to say that a museum shouldn't be personality driven, it is. The director sets the direction, and in that sense, they will affect it. Nonetheless, I think the good news is that, internationally, there are a lot of dynamic people in the cultural scene and in museums. I have met so many wonderful colleagues who are leading institutions that traditionally would not have been headed by a woman.

25 Teo is referring to the American fantasy-comedy film trilogy directed by Shawn Levy and starring Ben Stiller as Larry Daley, a night watchman at New York's American Museum of Natural History. In this series, characters from various historical dioramas "come to life" during the museum's off-hours.

26 Pogrebin, Robin. "MoMA to Close, Then Open Doors to More Expansive View of Art." *The New York Times*, 5 February 2019, www.nytimes.com/2019/02/05/arts/design/moma-museum-renovation.html. Accessed 10 February 2019.

It is about having more diversity, having more voices, and I think that is happening. We attend a lot of international museum conferences and you do start to see a lot more diversity. I'm not talking just about directors; there are museums that believe their roles are now a lot more diverse. Previously, museums were educational institutions, so it was quite straightforward—but in recent times, different museums have had different visions and agendas. I have seen a rather interesting surge of city museums that are becoming very vocal. For example, if you find out a bit more about the Museum of London with their move to Smithfield, you'll see that their museum is extremely ambitious and completely community driven.²⁷ It is about the people they serve. I think that's something that is very different from what we would traditionally think or say about museums. It will be harder to define museums in the future. It will no longer be as single minded. I think that is amazing, because embracing diversity, whether it is in presentation or across the sector as a whole, is important.

DS In recent years, we have also seen narratives of "decolonizing the museum" especially in relation to Western institutions.²⁸ For example, the activist, research, and art criticism group MTL Collective in New York, whose members are involved with US-based action group Decolonize This Place, wrote about their efforts and its theoretical underpinnings in a poignant article for the journal *October* last year. They pointed out that "the mental, spiritual, and emotional toll that colonisation still exacts is neither fictive nor less important than the material, but without grounding land, water, and air as central, decolonisation is a shell game."²⁹ This statement reflects the responsibility that has recently been attributed to institutions to acknowledge the indigenous experience in decolonisation processes: conversations that are contextualised within an American experience, but their content may hold value for Singapore as well. One local example could be the *Orang Laut* community.³⁰ How do you approach

the inclusion of indigenous thought or history within a museum that presents a historical narrative of Singapore and how does that impact your programming decisions?

AT That is a hard question. Fundamentally, the problem is that as a museum we go back to the collection—and there isn't anything from these indigenous groups. There's hardly anything in the collection because such objects don't preserve well. Especially if you are talking about *Orang Laut*: things go back to the land. Unless we have anthropologists who came by and collected them in bulk, which didn't happen here, it's really difficult to tell that story. It's also an oral story and history. In that sense, it is something we are struggling with.

We acknowledge that it is important, especially in response to the Bicentennial. Our exhibition, which opens in September, reflects on 200 years before the arrival of Raffles. We picked 200 years largely because we wanted to set the context as to why Singapore was important for European powers, and why Singapore as part of the East Indies was important as well. Our starting point was the establishment of both the Dutch and British East India Company, but in telling that, the story becomes a very white-man story. (Laughter)

27 The Museum of London made plans in 2018 to move from its current site at the Barbican to the Smithfield market, citing a lack of space and also a desire to activate West Smithfield and its heritage through both the new building and institutional programmes.

28 Lepecki, André. "Decolonizing the Curatorial." *Theater*, Vol. 47, No. 1, 2017, pp. 101–115.

29 MTL Collective. "From Institutional Critique to Institutional Liberation? A Decolonial Perspective on the Crises of Contemporary Art." *October*, No. 165, 2018, pp. 192–227.

30 The *Orang Laut* are seafaring groups or tribes living in coastal areas and offshore islands around Singapore, the Malaysia peninsula, and parts of the Riau islands. Historically they contributed significantly not only to the commercial growth of these areas as major ports but also as deterrents to external threats such as pirates.

It is something that we need to address. The curators are working very hard to try to show the vibrancy of this island before the 17th century. Yet, in terms of objects, we have nothing. So we have to create immersive experiences based on historical accounts—that's where technology comes in to aid us in telling this story. Whether or not that will be sufficient I can't say, but at the very least, we are not ignoring it.

DS For an exhibition like the one you were just describing, where you create more immersive experiences, one of the dangers that you might run into is that the inclusion of the indigenous in these historical narratives becomes synonymous with alterity: a backwards, barbarous society set in false opposition to a modern and civilised "present." How do you negotiate between presenting the indigenous as perhaps evoking an alternative temporality within a narrative that has often privileged linear ideas of progress and modernity, and within an institution, the museum, that could be seen as a direct result of those ways of thinking?

AT That's someone's PhD, you know. (Laughter) For this particular exhibition, we were very mindful of all the things that you just mentioned. We chose a very appropriate scene that actually shows how advanced the indigenous population was at the time: we are going to depict a scene in Aceh, which was already a vibrant port.³¹ People were trading in this area for a long time. However, there isn't always a convenient answer to everything. We are not claiming that we can present everything. We are upfront about it, and we deal with it at the beginning by saying that we are only able to present a particular aspect.

This is why I've said it's very important—which I emphasise a lot in our curation here—that the message for the exhibition has to be extremely clear from the beginning to the end and that the curators do not self-indulge to a point where they say: "because we have so many objects here, we included as many

things as possible with captions written as long as possible!" By putting more into an exhibition, you just confuse people and then they leave with more questions than answers. Not that we are trying to answer everything, but if there are questions, at least the questions are specific to a particular aspect.

ZF As an archaeologist, you have previously worked with pre-colonial artifacts. For example, the exhibition *SINGAPURA: 700 Years*, held at the NMS in 2014, traced Singapore's roots from a fishing village in the 14th century to an independent nation-state. One of the exhibition's sections focused on archaeology in Singapore, showcasing the artifacts discovered from various archaeological digs around the island. I imagine this focus relates both to your previous research in archaeology and your previous work as a curator. What role do you believe archaeology plays in the museum narrative and how is this either reflected in your current position as a museum director or through the collection strategy?

AT (Laughter) I am laughing because—I am always quite honest—I studied archaeology, and it made me realise that I could never be an archaeologist. (Laughter) The reality of it was that the museum had to close our permanent galleries in order to facilitate the major revamp. It was also the same year (this was in 2014) that we finally got the galleries and the museum objects to be presented in the history curriculum of Ministry of Education (MOE). The first year we were mentioned in the curriculum, and we close our galleries! So we had to have a temporary gallery exhibition that was fully catered to students. In fact, it was one of the exhibitions that was not meant for a general audience—it was meant for *students*. It was really designed and produced based on the

31 Aceh is a province on the north-west tip of the Sumatran Islands in Indonesia. Teo refers to the trading activity, which is largely supported

by the abundant natural resources of oil and natural gas that were likely highly sought after by traders in and coming to the region.

curriculum. I love archaeology, but I love it from a distance.³² I applaud the MOE for seeing the value in archaeological information.

LT Something that seems to be of strong interest to you, as we have seen throughout this conversation, is the role of festivals and events. How do these platforms extend beyond the institution, and how might they serve as an addition to the National Museum of Singapore? What are the major possibilities that you see going forward?

AT I think the festivals are an amazing platform because they create opportunities for people to bond. Some of the issues we deal with in today's world are purely out of ignorance, out of fear of the unknown. Whatever we do, we are trying to break down those barriers: in an environment where you are relaxed and enjoying yourself, you are more receptive to things that you see and experience.

One of the most amazing things about the festivals is that we have been doing very thorough surveys from the beginning. Because of that, there is a lot of information regarding how the festival has grown and how people's feelings for the festival have evolved over the last ten, eleven years. It has become a social event for people to come together. Our survey showed that the majority of our night festival goers have been to three or four editions, so there is a high repeat attendance; and the overall age group has dropped from thirties to mid-twenties, which means we have new audiences, so that is also extremely promising.

Memories can be extremely evocative. If we can use these platforms to create positive memories, then I think that is extremely meaningful as a job.

32 As part of the conversation, which was edited for brevity, Teo explains why she decided not to pursue archaeology: "I'm not sure if you have tried your hands in archaeology, it's backbreaking! For me, it is

repetitive and it doesn't capture my imagination. The results from archaeological excavations are amazing. The work in itself is not."

with Juraimy Abu Bakar, Chen Qiuyuan, Heng Zhi Wen,
Tian Lim, Bernice Seow, and Metta Yang

6 March 2019

Kwa Chong Guan lay the foundations of our current museological institutions by reshaping both the Oral History Department under the National Archives in 1983 and also the National Museum as part of the 1986 Task Force. He currently holds advisory positions in heritage institutions including the National Archives and the National Library Advisory Committees and is honorary adjunct associate professor in National University of Singapore's History Department. His 2018 book *Studying Singapore Before 1800*, co-edited with Peter Borschberg, forms the basis of this interview. This publication raises the complex conditions that govern Singapore's social-political landscape and re-introduces a lesser-known narrative about Singapore's pre-1819 history through its geographical and maritime importance as a port city. Our conversation is framed along three broad strands: "Looking Backward;" "Looking Forward;" and "Looking Inward." "Looking Backward" raises the question of how historical inquiry shapes public discourse about past identities and intersects with arts policies: what does this imply for Singaporeans as we continue to participate actively in global economies? "Looking Forward" examines the role of museums and archives in our society and how they should respond to scholarship and policy. Finally, "Looking Inward" is concerned with the role of curators and the evolving public. How should we establish our vision and widen the scope of Singaporean identity within the context of Southeast Asia at this point in time?

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Juraimy Abu Bakar (JB)

The timely publication of *Studying Singapore Before 1800* prior to the Singapore Bicentennial helps us think deeply about how the person on the street is affected by the version of history that the museum most commonly presents.¹ We would like to begin our conversation with two quotes. The first is from the introduction to this book, which states, “the consequence of this archivalisation of institutional memories of EIC [East India Company] and Colonial Office is that it fundamentally shaped the writing of Singapore’s past by Tregonning and Wong, and subsequently their students, as an appendage to the histories of the EIC and British Empire.”² The second is a response by Mr Yaacob Ibrahim³ to a parliamentary question raised by Mr Low Thia Khiang of the Workers’ Party: “archives across the world, including the United States, are governed by national security and defence concerns. Even if there was a freedom of information act, let us not pretend that... everything can be released, because there are concerns which every nation has to preserve.”⁴

What can we do to make our archives readily accessible to a wider audience so that this turning point in studying and embracing the multi-narratives of Singapore history can be continued by future generations?

1 This “common presentation of history” refers to the permanent exhibition of the Singapore History gallery in the National Museum of Singapore.
2 Kwa, Chong Guan. “Introduction” in *Studying Singapore Before 1800*. Singapore: NUS Press, 2018, p. 17.

3 Then Minister of Communications and Information, in a parliamentary session on 10 March 2015.
4 Lim, Yan Liang. “National Archives Releases Documents as Much as Possible.” *AsiaOne*, 11 March 2015, www.asiaone.com/singapore/national-archives-releases-documents-much-possible. Accessed 11 March 2019.

Kwa Chong Guan (KCG)

There are two separate issues here. One is about the nature of record keeping—to what extent do these records shape our perceptions of the future? Records fundamentally shape how these governments see their role in history and, more importantly, knowledge is the power to govern. You must have archival records to write any history and the archivist is there to support that effort.

The other is the opening up or release of these records: institutional issues that are more easily dealt with. Traditionally, these records were never opened. In pre-19th century, a lot of records were not written. They were passed down through word-of-mouth. The idea that archives can and should be opened at some point for public scrutiny is very recent, with the advent of 19th century democratic ideals. Prior to that, archives were the preserve of the government.

That issue of when or what to release is an issue that consumes all archives today. Most archives today have a roughly 25 year-old rule. After 25 years, the records should be opened. This is the practice in the British archives and other Commonwealth archives. In 1968, when we started our archives, that was the intent and there's no law stating that it should be so. The problem here is, who determines what records become archives, and who determines when they are to be opened? It is really up to the ministry or government agency to determine. In most countries you will find that records relating to defence, the security of the state, and foreign affairs are not opened. Even in the British archives.

In Singapore, what records do we have that are more than 25 years old? There are the British records, the Straits Settlement records that have been opened. The Straits Settlement records of Singapore from 1819 to 1867⁵ became the colonial office records after they were taken over by the colonial office. The issue becomes our own post-1945 records. It only became an issue in the 1990s, when there was this move to write the Singapore story more coherently—the turning point being Lee

Kuan Yew's memoirs.⁶ The issue then became, where are the sources for our history?

Two books, Albert Lau's *A Moment of Anguish* and Tan Tai Yong's *Greater Malaysia*, are not based on our own records.⁷ Tan Tai Yong's book on the events leading up to merger and Albert Lau's documentation of these circumstances leading to separation were all based on British and Australian archival sources. We have seen no need to open up our records even to them.

Prof Huang Jianli at the National University of Singapore (NUS), in the book *The Makers & Keepers of Singapore History*,⁸ has been extremely critical of the Archives in Singapore. The National Archives in Singapore (NAS) locked up the records so he could not write his "Von Rankean" history of the 1950s student activism in this university.⁹ The question then becomes more complex. Do we need to open the records?

Certainly: but how? Who decides? Home Affairs is not about to open any of its records; it deems that a matter of internal security. Foreign Affairs is not about to, or they do so very selectively. Like they did for my colleague, Ang Cheng Guan,

5 The Straits Settlements records are a collection of documents relating to the British administration of the Straits Settlements from 1826 to 1946, which initially comprised Singapore, Penang, and Melaka. Also coming under the Straits Settlements were Cocos Island in 1886, Christmas Island in 1900, Dindings in 1874, and Labuan in 1906. See: "Private Records @ Archives Online." *National Archives of Singapore*, www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/private_records/. Accessed 11 March 2019.

6 Lee, Kuan Yew. *The Singapore Story: Memoirs of Lee Kuan Yew*. Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Editions, 2015.

7 See: Lau, Albert. *A Moment of Anguish: Singapore in Malaysia and the Politics of Disengagement*. Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1998. See also: Tan, Tai Yong. *Creating "Greater Malaysia": Decolonization*

and the Politics of Merger. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008. Both books were written by consulting primarily foreign archival records from Great Britain, the United States, Australia, and New Zealand.

8 Huang, Jianli. "Walls, Gates and Locks: Reflections on Sources for Research on Student Political Activism" in *The Makers & Keepers of Singapore History*, edited by Loh Kah Seng and Liew Kai Khiun. Singapore: Ethos Books and the Singapore Heritage Society, 2010, pp. 28–47. Rankean historiography refers to the scholarly method pioneered by German historian Leopold von Ranke (1795–1886). For more about the 1950s student activism, see: Huang, Jianli. "In Search of Student Politics of the Past." *Tangent*, 2007, Vol. 6, Iss. 2, 2007, pp. 18–29.

to write about our involvement in the Cambodian crisis of 1979 to 1989.¹⁰ So this is an issue.

There are committees looking at how to get the ministries to open up their files. Those who are looking to the archives for this wealth of information will be disappointed. Archivists keep less than five percent of all records generated by the government. And even at five percent, we are already leading many other archives who keep three or less percent.

For the archivist, the issue then becomes what key file series do agencies or ministries keep? That process of what to keep is a major political and institutional issue. How do you identify the critical file series that defines the work, the policies, and the achievements of that ministry? Second, in the U.S. or other countries, the cabinet minutes would reveal the deepest, highest workings of the government. **We follow the British tradition where we only record the decisions taken by the cabinet. So that's the challenge of using archives for historical research. What is kept is that idealised version of the one in power, of how it sees its role in history. It only keeps records that document their achievements. That was the intent of the first quote—that archives reflect, essentially, the point of view of the government.**

JB You pointed out two key ideas that we have to be mindful of: that the issue is not just in terms of what we open up, but the selection itself. In a response given during the parliamentary session I mentioned earlier,¹¹ we get a sense that historians could instrumentalise historical research to endanger our national security. From your perspective, how could the veracity sought for historical research be in conflict with efforts to uphold and preserve our social stability?

KCG **This question looks at issues of accuracy and authenticity; basically, the truthfulness of historical accounts. The standard answer that all historians would give to you is**

that it depends on the amount of archival and other records you bring to support your conclusions: no records, no history. You have to relook at that axiom or assumption. Even if you have the records, there is a selection made. The historian has to select what is relevant. How does the historian decide what is relevant to his case? Does he then also only look for records that support his case?

This is similar to any scientific research: you look for evidence to support your hypothesis, your argument. Or, in philosophy, we say you **look for the evidence that disputes and falsifies your argument**. But most of us don't. We ignore. Or we do not see contrary evidence that does not support our case. It is really our critics who would point out, "you forgot this," or "in that file, there is that document," or "there's this development:" all of which challenges your argument. How do you respond to those critiques? **That's the call of historical research.**

In addition, that evidence is already biased as it gives you the point of view of the writer. The records of the East India Company and the Colonial Office will of course record the achievements of the British colonial administration. Their underlying assumption is that Britain had taken on a responsibility to administer this territory as a colony and it was trying to do the best it could to solve problems it had. You would not find in the archives anywhere that British colonialism equalled 200 years of the exploitation of Singapore.

Similarly, you are not going to find any government record in the Ministry of Home Affairs that categorically says Lee Kuan Yew argued that communism was a threat or that Lim Chin Siong was a threat and should be jailed.¹² It is for the historian

10 Ang, Cheng Guan. *Singapore, ASEAN and the Cambodian Conflict 1978–1991*. Singapore: NUS Press, 2013.

11 This refers to the parliamentary session held on 10 March 2005 and referenced in Footnote 4.

12 Lim Chin Siong (1933–1996) was a prominent left-wing trade union leader

who became a founding member of the People's Action Party (PAP) and elected assemblyman for the Bukit Timah constituency at the age of 22. When he was expelled from PAP in 1961 for his leftist stance, he joined Barisan Socialis in the same year and was jailed for political dissent from 1963 to 1969.

to interpret the records, which is what Thum Ping Tjin¹³ argues when he read the records of Operation Coldstore.¹⁴ A lot depends on how that same record can be read very differently by historians. This is the point that I often refer to, about reading along-the-grain verses reading against-the-grain.¹⁵

Heng Zhi Wen (ZW)

Beyond suggesting a critical analysis of primary sources from the governing body, we also believe that you **champion a bottom-up approach to historical research**, which has encouraged many to study European, Arabic, and Chinese traders' records more closely in order to better comprehend the rich complexities of Singapore's pasts.¹⁶ Furthermore, the re-organisation of the Oral History Department has not only demonstrated your professional convictions toward oral history but also elevated these records' importance in the writing of Singapore's historical narrative. When you curated the process of gathering these materials for archiving, what were the dilemmas you faced? As a scholar as well as a public servant?¹⁷

KCG The records that the museum curator or archivist acquires must be within some collection policy or strategy that responds to the needs of the state. What does the state need to keep on functioning? School records, health records, land records: these are the more basic instruments. Treaties you signed, agreements you made. What are the key records that the state needs to understand what is happening today? How did we come to this policy and move forward?

When we are looking at the pre-Raffles past, the focus is the British records. Were there any files in the East India Company operating from the 1600s until 1857? We have to wait and see what the National Museum has unearthed in their forthcoming exhibition on the East India Company on Singapore.¹⁸ My own guess is not much, simply because the East India Company at the time of its establishment and for several years after

operated on "gentleman's agreement." It was only sometime in the 17th century when they set up a department of records.

What other records do we have? There are Dutch records, Portuguese records, Chinese records. How systematic or good are they? That is for the historians to decide. In fact, these are not archival records. The university library and, more recently, the National Library have collected records of an earlier Singapore. The archivist can only collect records of the existing government that they are established to serve.

In the case of the Oral History Department, it was initially set up quite clearly, top-down, to record the political history of the first years of government; the political struggles with the communist party and other issues. Dr Goh Keng Swee¹⁹ proposed that this Oral History Department should be set up to interview politicians for memoirs that would not be written

13 See: Yahya, Yasmine. "Minister K. Shanmugam Grills Research Fellow Thum Ping Tjin and Says He Is Not an Objective Historian." *The Straits Times*, 29 March 2018. See also: Yuen-C, Tham. "Oxford Academics Say Thum Ping Tjin 'Is and Remains an Academically Trained Historian.'" *The Straits Times*, 2 May 2018.

14 The Special Branch was formed in 1948 (as part of the Singapore Police Force till 1966) as a response to the threat of internal subversion. It mounted Operation Coldstore on 2 February 1963 to "crack down" on leftists and communists suspected of mounting unrest prior to the formation of the Federation of Malaysia. 107 people suspected of threatening Singapore's internal security were arrested on the first day of the Operation and detained without trial under the Preservation of Public Service Security Ordinance. See: "Special Branch Mounts Operations Coldstore." *HistorySG*, National Library Board Singapore, 2011, <http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/history/events/79b177e2-4d1f-4692-9a95-d2be1510495b>. Accessed 14 March 2019.

15 Kwa. "Introduction" in *Studying Singapore Before 1800*, p. 5.

16 Ibid., pp. 5-10.

17 Kwa participated in the setting up of the Oral History Department in 1979. For further discussion of the challenges in curating oral interviews, see: Kwa, Chong Guan. "Oral History in the Making of Our Memories and Heritage." *Asian Journal of Social Science*, Vol. 36, Is. 3-4, January 2008, pp. 612-628. The Oral History Department is now called the Oral History Centre.

18 *An Old New World: From the East Indies to the Founding of Singapore, 1600-1819* is an exhibition launched in the second half of 2019 by the National Museum of Singapore in conjunction with the commemoration of the Singapore Bicentennial. See: Zaccheus, Melody. "Singapore's Rich Pre-colonial History to be Showcased." *The Straits Times*, 22 November 2018.

19 Goh Keng Swee helmed several ministries during his tenure as a Minister in the Singapore government.

otherwise. The Oral History Department then decided that we also have to do that bottom-up: how did these policies, made by Dr Goh and company, affect different communities? So you ended up with a series of interviews about the different ethnic communities and about the Japanese Occupation. That political history sets the overall framework for the bottom-up history to be developed because the initial top-down approach shaped what was happening on the ground. The policies for racial harmony integration basically shaped the development of these different communities.

JB In Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's speech at the launch of the Singapore Bicentennial on 28 January 2019, he stated, "1819 marked the beginning of a modern, outward-looking and multicultural Singapore. Without 1819, we may never have launched on the path to nationhood, as we know it today. Without 1819, we would not have had 1965, and we would certainly not have celebrated the success of SG50. 1819 made these possible."²⁰

Even though Raffles is a fundamental, widely accepted turning point in Singapore's history, objections to the insistence on this narrative are everywhere.²¹ In your analysis, why do we continue to privilege the 1819 narrative as the most important historical strand when defining a global-city Singapore in present-day conversations?

KCG The Bicentennial is taking apart the 1819 narrative, not privileging it. It's to put it in a longer context. The intent of the Bicentennial is to ask Singaporeans, what's so important about 1819? Once a message is put out, you cannot control how the audience will see it. Some will like it, some won't. Likewise, when we decided to commemorate 1819, it was to ask, "so is it still the beginning of Singapore?" If not, where does it begin? And where does 1819 stand? You then get very distinct, diverse, contradictory responses. Lee Hsien Loong tries to put in a very linear development of history but if you

take a different perspective of history, that it moves in cycles of time, you get a very different interpretation of how we arrived here. If you take a moralising point of view, you make the moral judgment regarding why are we celebrating 200 years of colonial exploitation. It all depends on the perceptions we have of the past; whether that past is perceived in very moralistic tones of good/bad (British are good/British are bad). It's quite clear from Lee Kuan Yew down to Lee Hsien Loong today that the government sees the British in very positive terms.

Look at the book of essays edited by Professor Tommy Koh on 200 years of UK-Singapore relationships, which includes contributions that detail how we have benefitted from the British legacy in law, government, port development, and everything else.²² That is the positive aspect. But there are others who say no. Here is one approach to history in terms of morality of rightness or wrongness. The other is to put Singapore in an appropriate time frame of how we view the developments of history.

You have to make clear these two sets of issues: the morality and the proportion of that.²³ How do you compare 200 or 150 years of British history with Temasek from the 14th century? How do you weigh the proportionality of these events? Is it

20 Lee, Hsien Loong. "PM Lee Hsien Loong at the Launch of the Singapore Bicentennial." Prime Minister's Office, Singapore, 31 January 2019, www.pmo.gov.sg/Newsroom/PM-Lee-Hsien-Loong-at-the-launch-of-the-Singapore-Bicentennial-Jan-2019. Accessed 16 February 2019.

21 The Singapore government has been criticised for over-glorifying the British administration in Singapore and glossing over the atrocities committed by their officials during the colonial period. See: Huang, Jianli. "Stamford Raffles and the 'Founding' of Singapore: The Politics of Commemoration and Dilemmas

of History." *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*. Vol. 91, No. 2, 2018, pp. 103-122.

22 Koh, Tommy T. B. and Scott Wightman. *200 Years of Singapore and the United Kingdom*. Singapore: Straits Times Press, 2018.

23 Kwa mentions these two issues again in response to a subsequent question on the Singapore Bicentennial, where he explains that Singapore's history can be viewed in terms of "a simplistic binary of good and bad" (morality) of the British, or from a "multi-historical narrative" (contextualising Singapore in an appropriate time frame in the developments of history).

ultimately our social memories of who we are and where we want to start our history? Do we start our history with 1945 or 1942: when we realised that we could not depend on the British? Or do we start it in 1965? This is a political decision and an identity issue of who we think we are as Singaporeans.

ZW You mentioned earlier that the government endorses Raffles's landing as a turning point and we benefited a lot from the British colonial administration. Professor Tan Tai Yong mentioned in his lecture at the Institute of Policy Studies, "This is best illustrated by the decision to retain, rather than cast Raffles's statue into the Singapore River. Lee Kuan Yew revealed in his memoirs that Albert Winsemius, Singapore's economic advisor, had suggested that letting the statue of Raffles remain would be a public acceptance of Britain's colonial legacy. This would send a positive signal to investors."²⁴ Recent scholarship has animated our public discourse regarding how our cultural genomes and ancestries are intimately linked to our global economic aspirations. However, the old Eurocentric trajectory mentioned in the quote is no longer relevant. The new trajectory establishes Singapore's position as a global-state with a significant role within the Asiatic sphere. What are your thoughts on this?

KCG You have to think historically in the context of that time. In 1919, on the centenary of Singapore's founding by Raffles, how did we see Raffles? What did we say about him? Fast-forward to 1969, the 150th anniversary, how did we see Raffles and the British? At that point in time, Singapore had just left Malaysia and we were in a very uncertain state. What did Lee Kuan Yew do? He clung on to the British—that we still look to them to defend Singapore. He convinced the British government to send Princess Anne here as a representative of Her Majesty.²⁵

Every generation will have to rethink what it makes of Raffles. Different people have different views of Raffles. Raffles will be used for various political ends. Winsemius was telling Lee Kuan Yew the statue of Raffles is a symbol of what his new government stands for. At that point of time when Winsemius made this recommendation, Sukarno was nationalising Dutch Shell and Ne Win in Burma was nationalising British investments.²⁶ Winsemius's message was that Singapore cannot afford to have that image: that Singapore was going to nationalise Hong Kong Shanghai Bank. Leave the statue of Raffles as a symbol of a free port status—all of which uses the idea of Raffles for very different political ends.

So your generation needs to decide. Fifty years from now, how would you want to see Raffles on the 250th anniversary of his landing?

Bernice Seow (BS)

The Bicentennial presents milestones from Singapore's 700-year history to explain the nation's long and complex history as well as its relationships with countries in the region. One concern of the public with the Bicentennial is that it continues to romanticise the British colonial rule and neglects the voices of the marginalised. For example, although the four statues unveiled alongside Raffles at the

24 Tan, Tai Yong. "The Long and Short of Singapore History: Cycles, Pivots and Continuities." Institute of Policy Studies at Yale-NUS College Singapore, 5 September 2018, <http://president.yale-nus.edu.sg/speeches-essays/speech/lecture-i-the-long-and-short-of-singapore-history-cycles-pivots-and-continuities/>. Accessed 16 February 2019.

25 "Tour Starts with Call at Istana." *New Nation*, 18 February 1972: 2. Microfilm. National Library Board Singapore: Reel NL6999.

26 In 1961, Dutch economic consultant to Singapore's Industrialisation

Project, Dr Albert Winsemius, advised then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew to "let Raffles stand where he stands today." See: "Singapore Is Indebted to Winsemius: SM." *New Nation*, 10 December 1996: 32. Microfilm. National Library Board Singapore: Reel NL20148. See also: White, Nicholas J. "Surviving Sukarno: British Business in Post-Colonial Indonesia, 1950–1967." *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 46, Is. 5, September 2012, pp. 1277–1315; and Pilger, John. *Hidden Agendas*. London: Random House, 2010, p. 170.

Singapore River were of local pioneers, they were also a part of a colonial regime that profited from a subjugated populace. How would the state's current endorsement of historical plurality influence the role of the museum? How can museums present these multi-historical narratives without falling into nostalgia for colonialism?

KCG The museums are trying to present that multi-historical narrative. That exhibition on *Raffles in Southeast Asia* at ACM: is it really a binary exhibition that highlights Raffles and downplays the atrocities that he committed? If you look at the exhibition carefully, you will see that the museum is trying to show that Raffles is a complicated person. Things he did were neither good nor bad. What is certain was that they had an influence on how the futures of Indonesia, Java, and Singapore were shaped. We come back to the point of moralising our history. If we want to get beyond that simplistic binary of good or bad and look at this multi-historical narrative, then you have to look at Raffles's legacies.

Raffles as a collector—as a scholar—was trying to make sense of the Southeast Asian world he was in. This was the first time that Europeans had seen this “strange” animal of a tapir or all these “strange” plants. He was trying to make sense of all these customs of how societies are ruled. In the case of slaves, Raffles said no, slavery is bad; we do away with it. Raffles also had standards that he was trying to impose, like education. The emphasis on education that Raffles made was played up by British colonialism: in 1919, on the centenary and in commemoration of Raffles's interest in education, we should further the improvement of the so-called natives by setting up a college. And they did: Raffles College.²⁷

From the 1920s to 1942, a generation of post-war Singapore leaders—Hon Sui Sen, Goh Keng Swee, Lee Kuan Yew²⁸—were all educated there. Raffles College later merged with the King Edward VII College of Medicine, which again was a consequence of British colonialism: reflecting the idea that “we

have to provide for the health and well-being of these natives we are ruling and provide them the means to be trained.” Combine those two institutions after World War II and you get the University of Malaya, which later became the University of Singapore.

We need to look at the legacies of British colonialism through this multi-layered historical narrative. What are the consequences, aftermath, and fallout of British colonialism?

Chen Qiuyuan (CQ)

The 1819 narrative is one that focuses on the inheritance left by colonialism. S. Rajaratnam's decision to begin Singapore's official history from 1819 was so that we can “forget” the multitude of histories and memories of “ancestral ghosts.”²⁹ He believed that a state-sponsored construction of nation and national identity, purged of inconvenient narratives, stood the best chance of producing a harmonious multicultural society.³⁰ On the other hand, *Studying Singapore Before 1800* and the Bicentennial seem like they are setting those “ghosts” free. You once said that museums link “our past with our present and future.”³¹ Can museums in Singapore evolve

27 Raffles College was commissioned in 1919 and set up in 1928.

28 Hon Sui Sen, a politician and once the Minister of Finance, studied at Raffles College on a scholarship from 1935 to 1938. Goh Keng Swee attended Raffles College from 1936 to 1939 and Lee Kuan Yew studied at Raffles College on scholarship, although his studies were disrupted by the Japanese occupation in 1942.

29 The full name of S. Rajaratnam, as he is popularly known, is Sinnathamby Rajaratnam. One of Singapore's pioneer leaders and Deputy Prime Minister from 1980 to 1985, he emphasised the need for Singaporeans to shed their heritage based on ethnic differences in order

to forge a national identity and build a stronger sense of multiculturalism. See: Rajaratnam, S. “‘Remembering’ ancestral heritage is building ghettos in the minds of the community.” *The Straits Times*, 9 October 1990.

30 See: Tee, Zhuo. “1966 Letter sheds light on origins of the National Pledge.” *The Straits Times*, 11 August 2018. See also: Hong, Lysa and Huang Jianli. *The Scripting of A National History: Singapore and Its Pasts*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2008, p. 54.

31 Kwa. “Redefining the National Museum: New Reflections on Heritage” in *Impressions of the Goh Chok Tong Years in Singapore*, p. 408.

into spaces that can ably navigate and curate controversial topics in a way that actively departs from a binary frame of thinking?

KCG Raffles was not the start of a new era; he was not the hero with the foresight to set up a community here. Rather, Raffles was the end point: the culmination of a series of events that started in 1784 when the Dutch invaded Riau and took over.³² There's a whole complicated series of events that led the British to fear that the Dutch in 1819 would close up the passage to China.³³

Rajaratnam had a very clear vision that history is written from the viewpoint of the present. To make the past relevant in the present, we have to forget things and only remember selectively. It was a decision he was struggling with then. Do you put all the communities metaphorically into one big cooking pot, like a curry, stir like crazy, put in all the spices? That was what the People's Action Party was trying to do. If you stir everybody long enough, cook it long enough, all these ancestral roots and cultural traditions will break up and become one mess—a new Singaporean. But Goh Keng Swee and others were saying that this doesn't quite work.³⁴ There were still bits in that curry that couldn't be broken up.

I think they were in a dilemma. On the one hand, they had to change the society that they had inherited in order to become more cohesive. On the other hand, what happens to Singapore if you break up the social contracts of the Chinese, Indian, Malay, and Others?³⁵ Are these demarcations relevant today, for your generation?

That was the realisation of George Yeo: perhaps our cultural genome is more like *rojak*.³⁶ Just as you can still distinguish the different vegetables that go into a *rojak*, we must accept that each of us has different cultural values. How do you learn to live with these differences? How do we make sense of them? To put these topics in context, the issue in the 1990s was values.³⁷ How can an aspiring global city differentiate

itself? The answer proposed was "Asian values." George Yeo's vision to make Singaporeans more aware of their ancestral roots and values was what shaped the Asian Civilisations Museum in 1992. Today, for your generation, how different is it? Is it still an issue of Asian values? Or have we become something else? When you become curators in a museum, you are representing a new generation; a new point of view.

Metta Yang (MY)

Aside from the archives that it houses, the museum plays an instrumental role in shaping national identity via the multiple layers imbued in exhibitions. The museum is therefore a highly politicised space that can be used for the governmentalisation of culture.³⁸ We have seen that the boundaries of the Singapore narrative have been pushed and that there has

32 Trocki, Carl A. "Prelude to Singapore: 1784–1819" in *Prince of Pirates: The Temenggongs and the Development of Johor and Singapore, 1784–1885*. Singapore: NUS Press, 2007, pp. 21–46.

33 Kwa, Chong Guan. "Raffles and the Establishment of an East India Company Station on Singapore" in *Singapore, A 700-year History: From Early Emporium to World City*, edited by Kwa Chong Guan, Derek Heng, and Tan Tai Yong. Singapore: National Archives of Singapore, 2009, pp. 85–86.

34 In 1978, then Deputy Prime Minister Goh Keng Swee warned of "'deculturation' should younger generations of Singaporeans lose touch with the traditions and practices of their ethnic cultures." See: Chong, Terence and Hoe Su Fern. "Nurturing the Cultural Desert: The Role of Museums in Singapore" in *The State and the Arts: Policies and Institutions*. New Jersey: World Scientific Publishing, 2019, pp. 256–257.

35 Lim, Jason and Terence Lee. *Singapore: Negotiating State and Society, 1965–2015*. London: Routledge Publishing House, 2016, pp. 58–61.

36 George Yeo, in his speech at the Singapore Perspective 2019, said "Singapore's cultural genome is the result of its history, not just of the last two hundred years since Raffles, but also of the cultural genes which those who arrived on our shores brought with them from their ancestral homelands... It must be in our cultural DNA that our young become 'future-proof.'" See: Yeo, George. *Singapore. World. Singapore Perspectives 2019 Conference*, Institute of Policy Studies, Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, 28 January 2019, https://lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/docs/default-source/ips/p1s1_george-yeo_formatted_website.pdf. Accessed 12 February 2019. *Rojak*, which means "mixed" in Malay, is a local dish comprising vegetables and fruits, with flavours from both Chinese and Malay cuisines.

37 Barr, Michael. "Lee Kuan Yew and the 'Asian Values' Debate." *Asian Studies Review*, Vol. 24, No. 3, September 2000, pp. 309–334.

38 Bennett, Tony. *The Birth of The Museum: History, Theory, Politics*. London; New York: Routledge, 1995, p. 24.

been a paradigm shift regarding how this should be articulated to both Singaporeans and a global audience. How can the museum complement the role of the archives in the re-shaping of Singaporean identity to reconcile this gap or transformation in our history?

KCG This is an issue that curators have to confront—how much do you depend on archives and archival records to structure exhibitions? Do you tell history entirely from the objects that you have? The classic example you see is our National Museum: there is nothing from the period between the 14th and the 19th centuries. Peter Borschberg has now shown that there are plenty of Dutch and Portuguese archival documents on what was happening. But you can't have a wall full of 16th century Portuguese and Dutch documents that nobody can make sense of. That's the problem museum curators face. You want to present that image of a 700-year Singapore, but what do you have to exhibit beyond those nine measly pieces of shards from the Singapore River to suggest that the Kallang River was a possible port in the 17th century? The only other objects are maps and documents.

So do museums then have to change their philosophy? Will different ways have to be found to tell these stories? And if you change your ways and use more interactive means, are you still a traditional museum? Are you still a keeper of objects to be displayed? The role of the curator today is changing tremendously. In the old days, the British called their curators "keepers": somebody who keeps things. But people like Jessica Rawson,³⁹ keeper of Oriental Antiquities in the British Museum, weren't just storekeepers who locked things in a cupboard. She determined what went into that cupboard. She shaped the collections and, in turn, the conception of Chinese civilisation and culture in Europe via these collections. **That is the power of the curator today. If museums today are increasingly telling stories, where do these stories come from? They come from the archives. Exhibitions will not wait for the archives to be declassified in order to tell us stories about**

Singapore history. What do you do then? You have to rely on oral history interviews. That's the basis of your narrative. At some point, these oral histories become not so much a support for the story but the primary exhibit in the story.

Tian Lim (TL)

Prof Pheng Cheah from the University of California, Berkeley posited that building cultural capital is a way for Asian cities to become "Global Cities." He added that, in contemporary globalisation, the cultural capital of a nation is no longer primarily located in its artistic production but rather in its ability to accumulate works of art with a global significance as well as in the promotion of the arts on a global stage.⁴⁰ Singapore is well on its way to becoming a "global city." How do you think we should or can refine our definition of "cultural capital" and the role of museums so that we can encourage and promote artistic production as well? Can we do so without artists transforming their work into "international commodities" in response to "bureaucratic imagination?"⁴¹

KCG This is a complex question that goes beyond the museums to the funding agencies of the arts: in this case, the National Arts Council. Museums can shape the image of Singapore as an aspiring global city via their display of its artistic achievements. New York is to a large extent defined by the Museum of Modern Art and the Metropolitan; Washington D.C. by the Smithsonian; London by the British Museum; and

39 Jessica Rawson was a curator in the Department of Oriental Antiquities at the British Museum in 1967 where she specialised in ancient Chinese art. She was also the Keeper of the Department of Antiquities at the British Museum and President of the Oriental Ceramic Society from 1993 to 1997.

40 See: Cheah, Pheng. "The Changing Functions of the Arts in World Hierarchy." Symposium: Rethinking the Asian Century with the Arts. Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore, 26 November 2012.

41 Chong, Terence. "Introduction" in *The State and the Arts: Policies and Institutions*, New Jersey: World Scientific Publishing Co., 2019, p. xvi.

certainly Amsterdam by the Van Gogh Museum. If you take that assumption as the starting point, that one of the key markers of any global city is their cultural capital as expressed in their museums—then where is Singapore in this respect? We can curate our art history and display from post-1945 to today. But what happens after? This is beyond the museums. It goes back to where artists themselves derive their inspiration from: **what do artists sense of their milieu?**

The government is trying to provide platforms and resources for the artistic community to draw on. I don't think the government shapes or can determine what artists do. In this sense, you could argue that museums have a limited influence in deciding which artists they want to take into their collections. **If the artist wants to enter a museum via its collections and earn their living in that way, they have to sense what is acceptable in art. But when artists, particularly those in performance, want to make a political point of view about their situation, their milieu today, how do we decide what to keep?**

The classic one is the artist who snipped his pubic hair, or preserved his urine. As a museum, what do you do when the artist presents you with that bottle of his urine? In this case the museum has kept it. Or Tang Da Wu, in his performance art, or Tan Teng Kee when he had that well publicised burning of his artwork. In the 1990s Amanda Heng came on the scene. **She is a feminist artist.** She draws pictures of female genitalia the size of a screen deck. Would any of you buy a picture of female genitalia that size? In the first place, if you live in an HDB flat, where is there wall space to hang a painting of that size? And even if you had the space, would you do it? So what does the museum do? As I told Amanda Heng, if I don't buy that painting for the museum, nobody will. How are you going to earn a living? Museum curators help to decide what is a work of art. Today, Amanda Heng is a very well established artist. Her later series is performance art, where she sits around an old-fashioned Chinese, coffee shop-style marble table with three or four audience members to pluck "tau ghey" and have a conversation.⁴² Is that art? My colleagues in the NUS Museum decided it is and have filmed it. As a curator, how

do you decide what constitutes the state of art? These decisions are all indicative of a stage of development of art in our society. But what is the museum's role? Can the museum shape the development of the arts in that sense? It can. But should it? Any museum curator has to question their role.

When the National Gallery Singapore organised their exhibition *Artist and Empire*,⁴³ they were trying to bring together artists from around the region to show how different artists, from the 16th century until today, have reflected on the impact of colonialism and empire. Is that then the role of the museum? To collate, curate, and make sense of how artists are sensing changes in their environment? In selecting these rather than the other artworks, do curators become producers of knowledge? Or are they absorbing all these influences and seeing if they form a pattern, a jigsaw? When the museum works with an artist to create a show or a biennial, the museum is actively shaping the artwork. What's the impact of commissioning, of working with artists, of making sense of the world of the artist? What impact does it have on cultural capital? You have to go back to the books that Patrick Flores has written about the role of curator.⁴⁴ What am I doing here? How do I negotiate my own interests with that of the

42 Josef Ng's snipping of his pubic hair in an unscripted performance, *Brother Cane*, in 1994 resulted in the withdrawal of public funding for and a ban on performance art in public places for 10 years. In a 1992 performance, Vincent Leow urinated into a coffee cup and drank his own urine; subsequently packing it into bottles and selling the bottled urine as works of art. Tang Da Wu is one of Singapore's pioneers in the field of performance art; he co-founded The Artists Village in 1988. Tan Teng Kee, a Malaysian-born performance artist in Singapore, was known for his *Fire Sculpture*: the burning of a three-dimensional work during a "picnic" event to exhibit and sell his artworks in 1979. Amanda Heng is one of Singapore's best-known

contemporary artists. For her work *Let's Chat*, first performed in 1996, she invited the audience to sit and chat with her at a table while drinking tea and de-tailing bean sprouts.
43 Held from 6 October 2016 to 26 March 2017, *Artist and Empire: (En)countering Colonial Legacies* was an exhibition organised by the National Gallery Singapore in association with Tate Britain.
44 Patrick Flores is curator of the University of the Philippines' Vargas Museum where he is also Professor of Art Studies. For his analysis of the role of the curator, see: Flores, Patrick. "Past Periphery: Curation in Southeast Asia" in *Reflections on the Human Condition: Change, Conflict and Modernity*. Singapore: NUS Museum, 2008, pp. 9–34.

stakeholder or the lenders? How do I bring them all together? In the case of Singapore, what are the constraints in putting up an exhibition? As a museum curator you have to push. It's for you, as curators, to look at artworks produced by artists and have the eye to detect which young artists show potential. That's the challenge of the curator today, and the challenge of the art museum.

BS That is not the only challenge museums face. Prof Tan Tai Yong once said that history "is a series of complex events crisscrossing and moving along. It is only by capturing the holistic view of its cause-and-consequence that one can comprehensively understand its complex nature."⁴⁵ In transforming the National Museum of Singapore, you mentioned that the museum must become a reference point for Singapore's collective memory and identity. It can, and must, become a place for Singaporeans to discover themselves.⁴⁶ Our museums need to re-think their roles in relation to expectations of both stakeholders and visitors.⁴⁷ Contemporary visitors entering museums are cognisant of the "crisscrossing of complex events" that Professor Tan mentioned. Some may even be aware of the internal machinations of museums. How can museums cater to such an audience while encouraging self-reflection and discovery?

KCG This is a question about public programming in museums. Traditionally, museums started out as cabinets of curiosities. There was no intent to encourage any self-reflection or discovery. Wonder, maybe; engagement, no. We attempted a transformation of Singapore's museums in the 1980s. We got rid of the idea of the museum as a repository where we put dioramas. But were we intentionally engaging with the local population or did they just come to look? Should we try to become more like a shopping mall where you engage the audience to want to buy a product? How do

we replicate that experience in the museum? That was what we were doing in 1989 in the Museum Development Committee.⁴⁸ The museum had to be "a place for Singaporeans to discover themselves."⁴⁹

Ultimately it is about the attention span of your visitor. How long is a visitor going to stand in front of a showcase and look at the exhibit inside it? Studies on visitor experience show that it is not more than thirty seconds.⁵⁰ When you go window-shopping, how long do you stand looking at the thing before you move on? How do we change that paradigm with a museum exhibit, to get you to stand in front of it and reflect on it? What techniques can you use: Sound? Vision? Touch? It's a challenge that we have today, and every generation will be different.

45 "Prof Tan Tai Yong: Our National History Can be Traced to 1299," *Lianhe Zaobao*, 1 January 2018.

46 Kwa, Chong Guan. "Transforming the National Museum of Singapore" in *Rethinking Cultural Resource Management in Southeast Asia: Preservation, Development, and Neglect*, edited by John N. Miksic, Sue O'Connor and Goh Giak Yan. London; New York: Anthem Press, 2011, p. 203.

47 Ibid., p. 215.

48 In 1989, the Museum Development Committee was formed to identify and define the museum's role for Singapore and its people. See: Kwa, "Redefining the National Museum: New Reflections on Heritage" in *Impressions of the Goh Chok Tong Years in Singapore*, pp. 479–490.

49 Kwa, Chong Guan. "Transforming the National Museum of Singapore," pp. 201–216.

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MA in Museum Studies and Curatorial Practices, 2018–2019

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Edited by Jennifer Burris and Adrian Tan

Questioning Museums: Art Institutions in Singapore critically examines the ways in which shifting social, political, and cultural histories are both produced and made visible through the island-state's institutional structures, collecting strategies, and modes of exhibition making. Working together in teams, the inaugural class of students from Nanyang Technological University's Masters of Arts in Museum Studies and Curatorial Practices (MSCP), a programme designed to prepare graduates for professional positions in the highly complex and diverse museum landscape of Southeast Asia, anchor their collective exploration through four in-depth interviews with leading figures of Singapore's ever-evolving museum field: Kwa Chong Guan, Peter Lee, Angelita Teo, and Kennie Ting.

MA in Museum Studies and Curatorial Practices, 2018–2019

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