



ART HATS IN RENAISSANCE CITY

Reflections & Aspirations of
Four Generations of Art Personalities

Edited by **Renee Lee**

Foreword by **Professor Tommy Koh**

 World Scientific

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Editor

Renee Lee

Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, Singapore



NATIONAL ARTS COUNCIL
SINGAPORE

 **World Scientific**

NEW JERSEY • LONDON • SINGAPORE • BEIJING • SHANGHAI • HONG KONG • TAIPEI • CHENNAI

Published by

World Scientific Publishing Co. Pte. Ltd.

5 Toh Tuck Link, Singapore 596224

USA office: 27 Warren Street, Suite 401-402, Hackensack, NJ 07601

UK office: 57 Shelton Street, Covent Garden, London WC2H 9HE

With the Support of

National Arts Council

Lee Foundation

Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts

World Scientific Publishing Company

Phoon Huat & Company (Pte) Ltd

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Arts hats in Renaissance City : reflections & aspirations of four generations of arts personalities /

edited by Lee Renee Foong Ling (Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, Singapore).

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-9814630771 -- ISBN 978-9814630788 (e-book)

1. Arts--Singapore. I. Lee, Renee Foong Ling, editor.

NX581.7.S55A16 2015

700.95957--dc23

2014040840

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

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In-house Editor: Juliet Lee Ley Chin

Design by Loo Chuan Ming, Art Department, World Scientific

Printed in Singapore

Photo Credits

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Dedicated to the next generation

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About the Editor

Acknowledgements

I wish to express my thankfulness to many individuals who gave me incredible support and motivation.

I must express my appreciation to Professor Tommy Koh, Dr Tan Chin Nam, Liew Chin Choy, Michael Koh and Juliet Lee for their strong support in ensuring that the anthology has the required substance to make the ecosystem alive in the minds of the students and readers.

I thank and applaud the volunteers who gave off their personal time to be on the Editorial Panel: Johnson Paul, Ong Zhen Min, Robert Yeo, Liew Chin Choy, Elysee Arcadia Lee, Christine Lim, Devika Tay, Bernard Yap, Olive Kan, Charlene Audrey Sim, Freddy Low, Dr Tony See and Benjamin Chee, and the team of researchers — Ivy Tan Yan Jie, Francy Yang, Tricia Tang, Nicholas Khoo, Augustine Sim, Chris Aw and Yeo Lanxi. These volunteers who are from organisations such as the National University of Singapore, Singapore Management University, National Heritage Board, Ministry of Education and Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts demonstrate the generosity and goodwill that exist within the arts community.

I am grateful to Choo Thiam Siew, Carol Tan, Samuel Lee, Tan Ooh Chye, Tan Yee Noh, Ho Hui May, Jerry Koh, Dr Rebecca Kan, Jerry Soo, Wong Kron Joo, Tan Choong Kheng, Coco Wang, Bernadette Cruz, Tan Chwee Seng, Chloe Thang and all my wonderful colleagues at NAFA for their insightful feedback and constant support.

I benefitted from the experience of established writers and editors Choy Weng Yang, Dr Shang Huai Min, Juliet Lee, Carolyn Chiam, Phan Ming Yen and Dr Gauri Krishnan, each of whom has helped steer my thoughts when I became discouraged.

I became acquainted with excellent academics and practitioners who gave off their time to listen and discuss with me, and I learnt. My thanks goes to Dr Eleanor Tan, Dr Alan Chong, Yow Siew Kah and Dr Chow Yuen Ho.

I received kind support when I needed help in technical support, translation, networking and other critical aspects to continue my work. Through the years, I appreciate the help proffered by Surya Dharmawan, Ang Book Kok, Mar Cusso, Steve Zhu, Nelson Chia, Jeff Chua, Li Li Woon, Jeff Tan and Anne Pek.

I want to thank the authors and interviewees for sharing their precious experiences and knowledge to make the anthology written in a personal style most authentic.

This book will not be possible if not for many unseen individuals who have helped in many ways and I am grateful for their amazing support.

Foreword

I thank Renee Lee for inviting me to contribute the foreword to this timely and important book.

First, the book is timely because, after two decades of progress, we seem to have reached a point when the policy-makers have decided to press the “pause” button. Why the pause? I think it is because of a desire to take stock of our achievements and shortcomings; to evaluate what has worked and what has not worked; to determine where future state funding should be targeted at; to achieve a better balance between high art and popular art, between art for the elite and art for the people; to consider how we can strengthen our ecosystem for art, culture and heritage; and to determine, in consultation with the stakeholders, our collective ambitions for the next stage of our development.

Second, this is an important work because the authors or interviewees of this whole anthology are among the most eminent of our thought leaders and practitioners. Each of them has, either through their long years of diligent practice or through their writing and teaching or through the leadership roles which they had played in our cultural institutions, contributed to the vibrant cultural life that we are able to enjoy. I would call them: champions of the arts in Singapore.

Third, I have read all the essays with pleasure and benefit. I have known almost all the authors and regard them as friends. One of them, Dr Michael Sullivan, has passed away. For this reason, I have read his essay several times in order to remember and digest his wise advice and insights. One of his insights is that Singapore is a hub surrounded by the rich civilisations of Indonesia, Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, etc. Singapore’s karma is to draw inspiration from this ring of great civilisations and forge its own identity. I also value Sullivan’s advice on how to view and evaluate contemporary art. Sullivan wrote that his approach was to ask whether “a work displays honesty or insincerity, feeling or lack of feeling; whether it is something for a moment’s surprise or amusement, or whether it is something I could live with and contemplate again and again”. I completely agree with Sullivan’s statement: “We don’t need much discrimination to see Damien Hirst’s *Shark in a Tank* as a work totally lacking in feeling, or Zhang Huan walking across Broadway clad only in slabs of raw meat sewn together as mere exhibitionism.” I know that the admirers of Damien Hirst would object to Sullivan’s statement but I agree with him.

I would like to use this opportunity to pay a tribute to several of the authors with whom I have worked closely over the past two decades. Tan Chin Nam had made an enormous contribution in his capacity as the Chief Executive of the Singapore Tourism Board. I was the Chairman of the National Arts Council at that time. Together, STB and NAC collaborated to bring Andrew Lloyd Webber and Cameron MacIntosh and their outstanding musicals to Singapore. Chin Nam would subsequently serve as the Chairman of NLB. Together with the CEO, Dr Christopher Chia, they revolutionised our National Library and made it one of the best in the world.

Liew Chin Choy and Goh Ching Lee were two of the comrades with whom I established the National Arts Council. Chin Choy was the Director of both the Festival of Arts and, my baby, the Festival of Asian Performing Arts. Ching Lee served for ten years as the Director of the Festival of Arts. During her long tenure, she put the FOA on the world map, by commissioning or co-commissioning new works, by nurturing local talent and by constantly pushing the envelope.

Michael Koh, Kwok Kian Chow, Gauri Parimoo Krishnan and Tan Boon Hui were colleagues at the National Heritage Board. The beautiful and well-designed South Asian Gallery of the Asian Civilisations Museum is the legacy of Gauri Krishnan. Kwok Kian Chow was the founding director of the Singapore Art Museum (SAM). During his distinguished tenure, Kian Chow made SAM one of the best and most respected fine art museums of Asia. Tan Boon Hui was able to consolidate Kian Chow's achievements and to bring SAM to an even higher peak. Michael Koh was the person who transformed our museum scene. He made our museums "cool" and exciting. He mounted blockbuster exhibitions. He reached out to new constituencies. He was brilliant with the media, both local and international. He can be very proud of his legacy.

T K Sabapathy was my classmate at Raffles Institution. I regard him as one of Singapore's most learned art historians. I am a fan of Som Said who has, almost single-handedly, kept Malay dance alive and thriving in Singapore. Benson Phua is Mr Esplanade. Together with his talented team, Benson has made the Esplanade one of the best centres of performing arts in the world.

I am an admirer of Professor Bernard Tan, who is truly one of Singapore's renaissance men. He is a professor of physics, a composer, and a champion of Western classical music. He made significant contributions to the founding of the Singapore Symphony Orchestra and the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory. He was also

a founding member of the National Arts Council and a member of the team that built the Esplanade — Theatres on the Bay.

I am very pleased that the President has conferred the Cultural Medallion on Maestro Tsung Yeh. Under the dynamic duo of Tsung Yeh and Terence Ho, the Singapore Chinese Orchestra has become a world-class orchestra.

I cannot conclude without referring to Yeo Lanxi as I am the Patron of the Very Special Arts (Singapore). VSA has done so much to enrich the lives of our disabled compatriots through the arts and to enable those with artistic talent to showcase them.

Professor Tommy Koh

Hon. Chairman, NHB

Chairman, NAC (1991-1995)

Chairman, NHB (2002-2011)

Introduction

A small sleepy fishing village was being transformed into an English colonial outpost from 1819 when Sir Stamford Raffles first set shore on Temasek. Almost 200 years have gone, with this land of mainly diaspora peoples having unpacked their cultures from the Chinese, Indian, Malay-Arab and English-European worlds and then, in the post-independent Singapore era, were made to question their identity.

The notion of cultural identity and national identity has taken many interesting forms. While the majority of the citizens were richer under the able and astute governance which saw Singapore becoming the fifth wealthiest economy in the world in 2013, there is yet no distinct flavour of a cultural identity. Revisiting Temasek, the earliest known name for Singapore happens most often with poets, historians and artists. This anthology will hopefully serve to record the journeys of those who have lived as artists in one way or another, and created a soul for Singapore. From the patronage of the government to the struggling drama student to the nation's first poet laureate, the arts in Singapore takes shape and the form is a confluence with its trajectories flowing through different terrains.

It is through the personal voice of each individual that I hope you treasure the authenticity of the book and partake of the experiences of them who have laboured to help develop the arts scene into our cultural history. The comprehensiveness would be a necessity in relating a beginner's history of art and culture of Singapore; the criticality must be a requirement in offering up an academic study of aesthetics or a political position. The anthology presents perspectives through the profession of the authors or interviewees, each squaring up to his or her role, so a historian's parlance, for example, would differ from a politician's.

The sections begin with policy that the government formulates for a fuller and more vibrant life for each citizen. It follows that these policies enable history to be created. It is indeed true that creative people view life and contexts in myriad ways, and the section on practitioners' perspectives in creativity precedes that of tertiary art education. Research studies having shown that artists are born, more than nurtured, though the fortunate were given both talent and nurture. Education of creative minds has become more diverse yet integrated, and the academician section on pedagogical routes attributes learning as foundational apprenticeship

to develop talent towards a career in the arts, to develop manpower for an industry of creative services.

Renaissance City Vision

This work had its beginnings in 2011, a task I set to document the Singapore Arts Scene as a supplementary text for my students and (general) readers aspiring to work in the creative and cultural industries. In the age of “wiki” and “Google”, almost any information from institutional statistics to personal blogs can be found online. A renaissance is multifarious: the revival of learning and culture; the period of European history at the close of the Middle Ages and the rise of the modern world; a rebirth. The planning of the Renaissance City of Singapore, when heard in the boardroom of policy-makers becomes a course in work than an official statement on the web or a report. For some two decades ago, economist Dr Tan Chin Nam helped to formulate policies for our own Renaissance City:

Not known to many, EDB has been instrumental in setting the backdrop for the local creative industries. The first step on this journey to become a Renaissance city took place in 1986, when I was Managing Director of EDB which adopted the new paradigm of “Total Business” following the recommendations of the Economic Review Committee. Together with Chairman Philip Yeo, we charted the course towards becoming a global city through the route of developing the services sector on top of the mainstream manufacturing sector. Four years later, the Creative Services Strategic Business Unit was set up following the exploratory study of 18 task forces covering the creative business sectors including film, music, art, design and media, with Mr Kesavan Yoo Weng spearheading this path-breaking initiative.

Dr Tan Chin Nam

Personal stories manifest individual toil, the achievements by eminent professionals show certain traits — visionary, determination, diligence, focus, innovativeness, passion and care for others. There was also the probability of planning the anthology to fit within a solid empirical framework — historical or

post-colonial or modernity. However, I believed this would consequently negate the subjective. The selection of essays reveals that art and culture must become a way of life to keep us from being mere “economic man”. My brief, to the writers, was to remember the essence of the human condition while being aware of the environment and our place in it.

The contributions of economist Dr Tan Chin Nam and career diplomat Professor Tommy Koh to art, culture and heritage were catalytic to our dream of a vibrant and global arts hub, their brilliance on the full spectrum of the ecosystem — our ancestral lineage, our artists, the educational aims, the audiences.

Cultural Policy and Cultural Capital

In 1969, UNESCO published *Cultural Policy: A Preliminary Study*, its first publication in the Studies and Documents on Cultural Policies series. Cultural policy was posited as “a body of operational principles, administrative and budgetary practices and procedures which provide a basis for cultural action by the State”. The understanding, then, was that there cannot be “one cultural policy suited to all countries; each Member State determines its own cultural policy according to cultural values, aims and choices it sets for itself”. By 1995, the term “cultural capital” had taken root with Sharon Zukin examining three notions of culture — ethnicity, aesthetic and marketing tool — which are shaping urban politics, in her book *The Cultures of Cities*. What is most brilliant is the new “symbolic economy” which Zukin connected with tourism, media, entertainment, real estate development, and elite and more democratic expressions of art. 1998 saw the publication of Lavrijsen’s *Global Encounters in the World of Art*, which to me, was the precursor of the development of “aesthetic cosmopolitanism”, as Western canons of art began to be challenged through the ideas essayed by artists, curators and scientists. Then, the ideas were based on “world culture”, “new internationalism”, and the relation between “tradition and modernity”.

Little was documented of our cultural policies. Our governors over the different eras had varying stance: pre-colonial Temasek (Sea Town, the old name for Singapore) was a small Malay fishing village with a good trading port with no known unifying policy dictating the culture of the land. Britain (1819–1965) had an arm’s length approach, allowing the various immigrants and residents in her colony to continue with their practices, and the 1965 post-independent rulers positioned cultural policy to enable the multi-cultural and multi-ethnic communities to create

new expressions or blended forms or preserve traditional arts. We question national and cultural identities, a new nation formed of old cultures, blended, and sometimes at odds with each other.

The 1950s and 1960s communal riots among the different ethnic communities took us on a journey to understand a different culture so deeply that we become open to the possibility of fusion in arts, among other endeavours. This multi-culturalism and fusion are today aesthetic cosmopolitanism in the international community. Nations, like us, have come to embrace diversity. In art and education, policy and curatorial directions, only the artist has an asset less homogeneous and produces life experienced. The micro-experience of a human, performed or painted or written, is at the centre of our cultural policies. The connectivity is subtle in some essays, clear in other essays, and non-existent in several. The professionals who wrote their personal journeys, reflections or observations are individuals whose work has been devoted to developing culture in the nation-state of Singapore. When I approached each writer, nationalism being a personal ideology was not a selection criterion but their personal role in heritage development.

Renaissance City Plans

With an enviable peace and economic prosperity in place by the 1980s, the government's cultural policies became expansive, including a judicious study of creative economies. The 1989 Report on Culture and the Arts, spearheaded by Deputy Prime Minister Ong Teng Cheong, was the most extensive review of Singapore's state of the arts and culture, culminating in the formation of a National Arts Council in 1991. The Renaissance City Plan I (RCP) emerged in 1999. With it, the momentum started with national investments in hardware and software to develop a creative economy, encompassing economic and social benefits. The Ministry of Information and the Arts released the RCP II in 2004 and RCP III in 2008 when the sector became a viable economic model with the fastest growth rate in employment, outstripping traditional industries such as manufacturing, finance and trade. Our government's outreach programmes to "heartlanders" (residents who live in public housing and who constitute 80% of the population) were successful avenues to foster a greater appreciation of the arts, once considered elitist, perhaps due to decades of economic survival, leaving most Singaporeans little time to be involved in the arts. Though this could be a simplistic view, these, together with other factors, created the "cultural desert" moniker for Singapore.

In reality, the cultural history of Singapore is rich as a consequence of the many trading vessels which came to dock and trade at the mouth of the Singapore River since the 14th century AD, with economic immigrants and those seeking refuge from war or strife in their native land. Temasek was our earliest known name; by the 14th century, with the first urbanised settlement, we became known as Singapura or Singapore (Lion City). Our cultural heritage was passed down from one generation to another only through daily practice, with little written documentation.

Art Hats

A deliberate choice to approach 96-year-old historian Professor Michael Sullivan in 2012 was to extend our cultural history from colonial days to the present. By 2014, four generations of “go-to” personalities have contributed their reflections and aspirations, demonstrating the many avenues one can contribute to in the dynamic cultural ecosystem. The scope of work is diverse; the educational background includes law, science, economics, history, psychology, management, communication and art, among others. The authors don different hats at different times and situations.

The anthology is organised into four sections: Leaders; Curators, Critics & Historians; Artists & Practitioners; and Academicians. The 2012 Arts and Culture Strategic Review recommendations for the next phase in accelerating the development of our creative economy included plans to develop manpower in arts practice and arts management to meet the vision of the country to become a global arts hub. There are many avenues you can contribute to; you can invent and innovate — cut across the parameters, as well as form new alliances to scaffold on existing ones. First-world nations have seen currency in building a creative economy as was the case with the knowledge economy in the last century. My fortune is being able to appreciate art and business given that my grandfather was a jeweller and jade craftsman trading in gold, and retailing designer timepieces and jewellery. He escaped the war in China and did not forget the importance of living fully despite the displacement of his cultural origins. This heritage in appreciating history, aesthetics and culture has enriched my life.

This anthology does not qualify to boast of the victor’s tales; the national history is the work of many.

Renee Lee

Preparing for the Creative Economy: The Fusion of Arts, Business and Technology

TAN Chin Nam

Dr Tan Chin Nam, a Colombo Plan cum President's scholar, essays on policies for manpower development for these sectors, as part of the larger vision to develop Singapore into a Creative Nation or Renaissance City. The policies implemented included the upgrading of the two tertiary arts institutions, NAFA and LaSalle.

With the beginning of the New Millennium, Singapore embarked on a strategy to transform itself into a Knowledge and Creative Economy with an emphasis on innovation, entrepreneurship and new value creation, and building on its strong foundation in manufacturing, transportation, finance, tourism and other services. Creative industries have now become a crucial part of this growth strategy that embraces the arts, design and media industries in a fusion of arts, business and technology. Our arts and creative manpower development initiatives have played a central role in the movement to realise this vision.

A significant point in this journey which preceded the more recent creative industries development was the formation of the Committee to Upgrade LaSalle and NAFA, appointed by Dr Tony Tan, then Minister for Education in 1997 to prepare Singapore for the Knowledge Economy, which requires talents in different fields covering both the analytical and logical left brain and the creative right brain.

Our tertiary institutions have been reinventing themselves to train the new generation for the Knowledge Economy. There were, however, no courses supported by the state in visual and performing arts. At the polytechnic level, there were courses that prepared students in media and design, and graduates would then stream into

the job markets in the creative industries that consisted of design houses, advertising agencies, media production companies, etc., but largely without much attention given to building a firm foundation in the visual and performing arts.

Our school systems were also found to be lacking in their emphasis on the visual arts, music and performing arts. It was limited at best, with only a few rare exceptions at that time like the Victoria Junior College, where a student could take up drama studies. Thus it was obvious that our society as a whole had cultivated a strong focus on science, mathematics and engineering. Engineers and technical manpower were being churned out, cohort after cohort, with a bias towards logical thought and processing. It would have been considered quite appropriate in those stages of Singapore's economic development. However, as we move forward, it is in my opinion that the right brain — the creative component in us that nurtures the imagination which inspires innovation and entrepreneurship — needs to be fostered within us all for Singaporeans to become a collective force of well-balanced and cultured individuals.

Developing Cultural Capital

The 1990s was a time that saw the momentous global development of a union of arts and technology. In Singapore, the Ministry of Information and the Arts (MITA) — formed in 1990 and led by Minister George Yeo — laid the foundation for Singapore to further develop its cultural capital, without which there would not be any scope for the subsequent deployments that saw the birth of new enterprises for value creation which supported the development of the Creative Economy. By 2003, strategies for the development of the creative industries were incorporated as part of Singapore's national economic strategy by the Economic Review Committee chaired by then Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong. MITA was formed to promote arts and heritage, and also to shoulder the responsibility of information management. Subsequently, when the Information Communications Technology (ICT) function was injected into the Ministry, it was re-named the Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts (MICA),¹ under the leadership of

¹ MICA is now restructured and renamed MCI. See the Press Statement from the Prime Minister on New Ministries, "Restructuring of MCYS and MICA and Establishment of New Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth (MCCY)", point 2c. MICA, renamed the Ministry of Communications and Information (MCI), oversees the development of the infocomm technology, media and design sectors; the national and public libraries; as well as the government's information and public communications policies.

Acting Minister David Lim first and then Minister Lee Boon Yang, as the creative industries began to take off within the economy.

These timely developments paralleled the efforts spearheaded by Dr Tony Tan to stimulate the educational front, to broaden our talent base. Thus this could be viewed as laying, in a way, the foundation for the 1997 upgrade study of the two existing private arts colleges, LaSalle and NAFA.

Concurrently, a transformation was taking place in the labour scene, when the Ministry of Labour was repositioned as the Ministry of Manpower in response to the growth of the Knowledge Economy, which was itself an evolving phenomenon that had a great impact on the workforce and skills development. A new Knowledge and Creative Economy was in the making, and with it, a sweeping wave of changes and responses in manpower and technical education rippled through.

Therefore, the transition from labour to manpower was the government's response in recognition of the need to develop different talents within its labour force. The diminutive size of Singapore made it all the more necessary to ensure that we effectively addressed the responsibility to create opportunities for different talents to be developed, for all individuals to realise their full potential. To underscore the recognition and importance of these issues, the creative industries development strategy was formulated as part of the Economic Review Committee's recommendations during the 2002 period. By 2003, it was formally adopted as part of a new economic strategy.

Specific reference to the creative industries and economy thus reflected the fusion of arts, business and technology — sectors recognised as vital to create new economic value for Singapore. This could however be traced to the earlier work done at the Economic Development Board (EDB). EDB had recognised rather early the prospects of creative business, a new focus introduced during my tenure at the EDB as its Managing Director. The work was subsequently transferred to the Singapore Tourism Board (STB), when I was appointed STB's Chief Executive. In many ways the whole function of tourism promotion dovetailed well with EDB's pioneering work to attract big musicals such as *Cats*, *Les Misérables*, *Phantom of the Opera*, etc., to Singapore by promoting creative companies like the Really Useful Group and Cameron Mackintosh. There were discernible linkages also in development plans between the Ministry of Labour, which later became the Ministry of Manpower, and MICA. Simultaneously, a structured approach towards art education was receiving attention at the Ministry of Education (MOE), to prepare manpower to

propel the creative industries, in order to make Singapore a Creative Nation or a Renaissance Nation. These were orientations that led to the whole foundation of the term “Renaissance City”, in which Singapore would evolve to be a Learning Nation, with an emphasis on creativity in arts and culture. Thus the evolution of the Creative Economy and creative industries incorporated the strategic linking of development plans in various ministries, with a resultant and major confluence of the arts, business and technology.

This, in a way, was borne out in planning for sites to house and incubate the workings of these linkages, the fusion of various organisations and functions. Fusionopolis (opened in September 2008), a major complex in the one-north development, was conceived and designated to host activities requiring the linkages of the left and right brains, and is now the home of many of our R&D institutes in science and engineering under the Agency for Science, Technology and Research (A*STAR) as well as Media Development Authority (MDA) and several media and ICT companies.

Upgrading Art Education

It is interesting to note that the genesis of such a transformational plan, in fact, lay in the early and modest assistance in 1989 given by the EDB to Brother Joseph McNally, an Irish Catholic priest resident in Singapore and a well-known local champion of the arts, to set up an arts college. I was then EDB’s Managing Director. One of our officers, Mr Kesavan Yoo Weng, a Colombo Plan Scholar and a St Patrick’s boy, had appealed to me for assistance to Brother McNally for his path-breaking initiative. The request was considered. My chairman then, Mr Philip Yeo, and I decided that we could allocate \$1 million to Brother McNally, justified on the basis of his contribution to our own master plan for arts manpower, and therefore the LaSalle Arts College project was born. However, the \$1 million was used up most rapidly.

Fortuitously, an interesting opportunity presented itself through the involvement of Singapore Airlines (SIA), which had been active in sponsoring and promoting world-class arts events and musicals such as *Evita*, although not of the scale of other productions like *Les Misérables* and *Phantom of the Opera*. Being very focused on promoting the arts, SIA at that point in time decided to allocate \$15 million to support the arts; it fell upon me to identify an opportunity or approach to make use of the \$15 million. Kenneth Liang from the then Singapore Broadcasting Corporation decided to join me at the EDB for a year to work on a project to set

up an institute of creativity training. A report was produced and presented to then Minister of Trade and Industry Lee Hsien Loong. The idea of making use of the \$15 million allocation to set up such an institute was our main intention; however, a question we considered was whether we might have been getting ahead of ourselves in terms of the timing. Thus, the whole project was re-formulated, and Ngee Ann Polytechnic was instead asked to set up a school of image and sound engineering with separate funding, as the technical emphasis would be viewed to be more in line with the charter of the polytechnic. This would in fact lay the foundation for Ngee Ann Polytechnic to develop its Film School subsequently.

The \$15 million from SIA which had to be used for an arts-related purpose was then reassigned to Brother McNally who had been waiting in the wings to seek financing for the further development of the LaSalle Arts College at the newly identified Goodman Road site. The college was thus renamed LaSalle-SIA College for the Arts, to acknowledge SIA's financial contribution.

In time, the \$15 million had begun to run out and new financial challenges presented themselves.

While financial problems may have been common to both colleges, LaSalle-SIA and NAFA had separate challenges and their own responses to them. They each have charted their own progress in parallel operations. NAFA, set up in 1938, has had a far longer history, one related to the migration of artists and a propagation of their art, on which the school accumulated its heritage and cultural capital.

At this point, in 1997, Dr Tony Tan decided that the timing was right to form a committee to look into the upgrade of these two colleges, the only two ongoing private institutions offering education in the arts. As Permanent Secretary of the then Ministry of Labour, I was tasked to chair the committee to examine the issues and to recommend solutions.

Right Brain and Left Brain

As a result of the recommendations, both colleges were given polytechnic level funding, recognition and support from the Ministry of Education. The notion of "right-brain" creative training thus had gathered recognition by the government as essential human capital development in order for Singapore to be part of the globalised Knowledge and Creative Economy. It was to me a major step in our vision to build a Renaissance City and Nation. The Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music at the National University of Singapore can also be viewed as a derivative of this

study, leveraging on the previous investigation as to whether Singapore should have a conservatory of music, an initiative which could perhaps be better understood when seen through the prism of the underlying desire to set up an institute of the arts at the university level. Similarly, the School of the Arts, a project under MICA and co-financed by MOE offering art education for children between 13 and 18, could be viewed as a further development of our arts manpower strategy to prepare Singapore for the Creative Economy.

It will be important to note the impact made by the late President Mr Ong Teng Cheong to Singapore for our transition into a Renaissance Nation. In 1979, as Deputy Prime Minister, he formed an Advisory Council of Arts and Culture, which was instrumental in establishing the Ministry of Information and the Arts out of the previous Ministry of Culture and bringing about the formation of the National Arts Council, National Heritage Board and The Esplanade Company. The Council's work laid the foundation to totally transform the arts landscape in Singapore. It also provided an appropriate backdrop of support organisations and activities in arts and culture for the timely commissioning of the study to upgrade LaSalle and NAFA later. That Singaporeans and visitors are now able to enjoy world-class performances at the Esplanade — Theatres on the Bay by both international and local artists can be traced back to the epoch-making work of the Council. The roles played by Singapore Totalisator Board and Singapore Pools for funding the Esplanade project must also be noted.

NAFA and LaSalle, with their distinctive histories and unique styles, have yet to be authorised to award their own degrees and qualify for university-level funding as was envisaged in the original review. This will require a conclusive validation exercise and decision on the part of the degree-issuing body to be determined by the Arts Education Council. Ten years have passed since the recommendations of the Committee to Upgrade LaSalle and NAFA were made and it may be timely for the whole issue of validation to be resurrected again in the near future.

Meanwhile, Singapore will continue to surge forward as a distinctive and attractive global city with buzz, innovativeness and entrepreneurial flair, a magnet to attract and retain talent, an ideal home for people to work, live, play and learn in, as it evolves to become a world city in the Knowledge and Creative Economy with the rise of the creative class.

TAN Chin Nam

Dr Tan Chin Nam has 33 years of distinguished service in the Singapore Public Service holding various key appointments before completing his term as a Permanent Secretary in 2007. He started his career in the Ministry of Defence as a Systems Engineer. Subsequently, Dr Tan was appointed General Manager and Chairman, National Computer Board; Managing Director, Economic Development Board, 1986 to 1994; Chief Executive, Singapore Tourism Board, from 1994 to 1997; Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Labour, from 1997 to 2001; Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Information and the Arts, from 2001 to 2007, and was then appointed Chairman, Media Development Authority.

Dr Tan served on the boards of the Singapore Symphony Orchestra, Singapore Dance Theatre, and Esplanade — Theatres on the Bay, was the Chairman of the steering committee which oversaw the conception and establishment of the School of the Arts, and was one of the first 15 charter members of the National Arts Council. He has contributed to Singapore's development across industries and conferred many awards, including the Public Administration Medal (Gold) (Bar) in 2002 for reinventing the public library system. He was already a keen amateur pianist as a young man. He went on to obtain two engineering and economic degrees from Australia in 1972 and 1973 on Colombo Plan and President's scholarships. Dr Tan graduated from the University of Newcastle, Australia, with first degrees in Industrial Engineering and Economics and a Master of Business Administration degree from the University of Bradford, UK. He has an Honorary Doctor of Letters degree conferred by the University of Bradford and an Honorary Doctor of Engineering degree conferred by the University of Newcastle.

The Development of the Cultural Ecosystem in Singapore, 1991–2011: A Personal Journey

Tommy KOH

As a pioneering champion of the arts, Professor Tommy Koh shares on the implementation plans for the development of the Renaissance City based on his experience from chairing and participating in various committees.

Introduction

I grew up in a middle-class family. My father was a businessman and my mother was a homemaker. What made my upbringing unusual was that before she married father, my mother was a performing artist. She was a member of Rose Song and Dance Company, a Shanghainese company of actors, dancers and singers. Several members of the company had settled down in Singapore and were frequent visitors to our home. My father, on the other hand, was an avid reader. Our home was full of books and magazines. I trace my love of culture and the arts to the good influence of my parents.

American High Culture

The other major influence was my long residence in the United States of America; one year in Boston, thirteen in New York and six in Washington DC. Singaporeans are familiar with American popular culture due to the popularity of American movies, TV, music, food and fashion. What is less familiar to Singaporeans is American high culture: the great symphony orchestras, ballet companies, opera companies,

theatre, museums, galleries, books, etc. It was during my two decades in America that I refined my love for western classical music, opera, ballet and theatre, as well as a lifelong affection for museums.

National Arts Council

It is often said that one of the ingredients of success is good timing. I came home from Washington DC in 1990. It was a good time to come home. Goh Chok Tong had succeeded Lee Kuan Yew as our second Prime Minister. A young and brilliant leader, George Yeo, had been appointed the Minister in charge of a new portfolio, Ministry of Information and the Arts (MITA). George Yeo set up the three statutory boards to carry out the ministry's responsibilities: the National Library Board (NLB), the National Heritage Board (NHB) and the National Arts Council (NAC). He asked me to be the founding chairman of NAC. At first, I declined because I already had two other jobs. However, he insisted and I relented. I was the Chairman of NAC from 1991 to 1996 when I resigned in order to be the founding executive director of the Asia Europe Foundation. They were happy and fulfilling years. Through my monthly tea sessions, I got to know many members of our artistic community. Many of them have become good friends and are doing well in their careers.

NAC's Agenda

What was NAC's agenda? NAC had the following agenda during my tenure as Chairman:

- to raise the social status and income of our artists;
- to nurture the growth of a number of flagship companies;
- to support young experimental artists, for example, through The Substation;
- to grow the audience for the arts through the highly successful Arts in Education programme, and by bringing the arts to the people, for example, at the botanical gardens and community centres;
- to support the two art colleges, the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA) and the LaSalle College of Arts, financially and otherwise;
- to provide affordable housing for arts groups, at Waterloo Street and Cairnhill, and studio spaces for artists at Telok Kurau;
- to give scholarships to young artists;

- to champion cultural philanthropy by raising money from the government, private sector, foundations and wealthy individuals;
- to launch a new festival focusing on Asian performing arts to complement the Festival of Arts;
- to upgrade the Festival of Arts and to make it an annual instead of a biennial event;
- to help the arts groups to be more professional in their governance, marketing, public relations and fundraising; and
- to protect the artists from unhappy conservatives.

Did NAC succeed in achieving its ambitious agenda? In some areas, we were very successful. In other areas, we were partially successful. In one or two areas, we had to accept a strategic retreat. When an attempt was mounted to demonise *The Necessary Stage*, I rose to its defence and the attack fizzled out. I could not, however, defend Josef Ng from the wrath of some ultra-conservative elements in the government. Kuo Pao Kun and the other members of the artistic community were very disappointed with me for not preventing the police from taking action against Josef Ng. Alas, I had no such power. Singapore was a very different society in the early 1990s than it is today. At that time, forum theatre and performance art were viewed with suspicion. It is a sweet irony that, recently, the Ministry of Home Affairs commissioned *The Necessary Stage* to produce a play, using forum theatre, to promote its community engagement. Looking back, I am glad to have played a small part in the paradigm shift which George Yeo accomplished in his nine years as MITA Minister. The seeds he sowed have blossomed. As a result, the arts are blooming in Singapore.

1992 Censorship Review Committee

In 1992, I was appointed the Chairman of the Censorship Review Committee. The circumstances surrounding my appointment were unusual. The matter was brought up in Parliament. Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong had announced the appointment of the committee. When asked who he would appoint to chair the committee, he turned to George Yeo, who offered my name. Minister Yeo subsequently apologised to me for not having obtained my consent first. My wife was not pleased that I had accepted this job. She warned me that my recommendations would very likely be criticised both by the conservatives and the liberals. It was a fair warning.

I was given a free hand to propose the committee's composition. I was very ambitious and wanted a committee which would be a microcosm of Singapore. The 18 members of the committee included priests and artists, representatives of our major religious and linguistic communities, men and women, young and old, conservatives and liberals. We met regularly and worked very hard. Because of the diversity of views in the committee, it took us a year before we arrived at a consensus. We were very relieved when the government announced that it would accept all our recommendations.

The following were the most important recommendations:

- There should be greater public involvement in decision-making on censorship matters.
- NAC should take over the responsibility from the police as the vetting authority for theatre.
- A new advisory committee should be established to advise on appeals for publications.
- A new NC16 rating for films should be introduced.
- The performing arts groups should exercise self-regulation and should be exempted from the prior vetting of scripts.
- The artistic, literary and research merit of media materials should be given due consideration.
- Strike a balance between religious sensitivities and artistic merit.

What was the overall thrust of our recommendations? It was to liberalise our censorship policies and procedures, but at a pace acceptable to the majority of our citizens; to reduce the power of the bureaucracy and to enhance the power of the people and the arts groups; and to be very cautious on issues touching on race and religion. Because of the strong feelings of our Muslim community, we felt that we had no choice but to ban Salman Rushdie's book, *Satanic Verses*. We did not, however, ban Martin Scorsese's controversial film, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, because we judged that the Christian community would be unhappy but react with equanimity.

We commissioned a poll by Gallup in order to help us decide whether to unban the magazine, *Playboy*, and to reduce the age for viewing R(A) movies from 21 to 18. We were very surprised by the results of the poll. The majority of Singaporeans

were against unbanning *Playboy* and reducing the age limit. Twenty years have passed since that poll. I wonder if the moral sentiments of Singapore have changed significantly during that period.

Building the Esplanade

Whilst living in the United States, I had become acquainted with the Lincoln Center in New York and the Kennedy Center in Washington DC. I dreamt that one day Singapore, too, would have a world-class centre for performing arts.

In 1989, the Ong Teng Cheong Report on Culture and the Arts was published. This was a seminal report, and has often been described as the master plan for the development of the arts in Singapore. One of the key recommendations of the report was to build a world-class centre for the performing arts. The government accepted this recommendation and decided to build the centre at Marina Bay.

George Yeo, as MITA Minister, was in charge of the project. He constituted a steering committee which included himself, Minister Wong Kan Seng and President Ong Teng Cheong. I was a member of the committee by virtue of the fact that I was the Chairman of NAC. A company was incorporated under the NAC to undertake the construction of the project. My job was to ensure that the company, headed by Robert Iau, was run competently. My other job was to chair a committee to interface with the local arts community. It was a very interesting but challenging job, as the arts community had many demands and concerns. However, we received much useful feedback which we incorporated into our brief for the architects. Later, the government decided that, in the interest of good governance, Robert Iau should give up the chairmanship of the company to Michael Wong Pakshong, and remain as the CEO. He did not agree with the decision and chose to resign. We found Benson Pua who stepped ably into Robert Iau's shoes. The Chairman and CEO worked harmoniously and the project was completed, two years late but exquisitely.

My one painful memory from this period was when George Yeo instructed me to announce at a press conference that the two medium-sized theatres, which are the venues of most interest to the local arts community, would not be built in Phase 1 but only in Phase 2. This was the result of a last-minute compromise in the Cabinet, to which I was not privy. At the press conference, the announcement was very badly received. The local arts community was indignant and felt that I had betrayed them. I am very pleased that the Arts and Culture Strategic Review Committee has

recommended that the theatres be built. I hope that the government will accept this recommendation. After serving on the steering committee, I subsequently served on the Esplanade's board of directors from 2000 to 2007. The Esplanade has been a great success from the day it opened its doors in 2002. It has been embraced by the people of Singapore. Both the Concert Hall and the Theatre have excellent acoustics. We must thank the late Russell Johnson and his team for getting the acoustics right. We must also thank the architectural team, a combination of British and Singaporean talent, and the consultant, David Staples, for giving us a centre which works and an iconic architecture. We all love the Big Durian.

The Esplanade is, however, not without its critics. The following are some of the most common criticisms:

- It caters only to the elite.
- It hosts mostly imported shows.
- It is unfriendly to the local arts community.
- It has made little contribution to the development of the arts and arts performance in Singapore.

Are these criticisms true? I do not think so. Let us review the following facts:

- In 2009, of the 1.9 million people who attended ticketed and non-ticketed activities at the Esplanade, 75% were Singaporeans, 20% were permanent residents and 5% were tourists.
- In 2009, local artists and crew made up 80% and foreign groups 20% of the groups the Esplanade worked with.
- In 2009, of the 1.9 million attendees, 1.4 million attended free concerts.
- The Esplanade co-produced shows with local groups and artists, such as the Singapore Dance Theatre, the Singapore Repertory Theatre, TheatreWorks, Singapore Chinese Orchestra, Toy Factory, Finger Players, Teater Ekamatra, etc.
- The Esplanade organised annual festivals to celebrate the Chinese New Year (Huayi), Hari Raya (Pesta Raya) and Deepavali (Kalaa Utsavam).
- The Esplanade organises technical theatre training courses in such areas as lighting, design, etc.

The Esplanade is ten years old this year. It has become so much part of our cultural life that we cannot imagine life without it. Ten years ago, there were some who wondered if the \$600 million of gamblers' money was well spent. Ten years ago, there were some who wondered if we would be able to fill the 1,600 seats of the Concert Hall and the 2,000 seats of the Theatre. Ten years ago, there were some who wondered if Singapore was ready for the Esplanade. Ten years later, we know that it was one of the best investments we have ever made. Singapore is more than ready for the Esplanade. It is one of the most successful centres of performing arts in the world. Looking ahead, I hope that we will build the medium-sized theatre. I hope that the management will give a higher priority to showcasing the artists and cultures of our region. I also hope that it will invest more in path-breaking productions of Asian epics, such as the *La Galigo*.

The National Heritage Board

In 2002, I succeeded Lim Chee Onn as the second chairman of NHB. The portfolio of NHB includes all the state-owned museums, the National Archives, the National Monuments and the three heritage centres, namely, the Malay Heritage Centre, the Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall and the Indian Heritage Centre. The National Art Gallery (tentative name), consisting of the City Hall and the Supreme Court, is also a member of the NHB family. The National Archives runs two interpretative centres, namely, Reflections at Bukit Chandu and Memories of World War II at the Old Ford Factory.

NHB had taken the initiative to establish and chair the Museum Roundtable (MR), consisting of over 50 public and private museums. The MR seeks to nurture a museum-going culture in Singapore, markets the exhibitions of the member museums and shares best practices. MR's ambition is to make Singapore a city rich with museums and to communicate this message to our citizens and to the world.

After nine happy years, I stepped down as Chairman of NHB at the end of July 2011. I consider the following to have been the most important achievements of NHB during that nine-year period:

- increasing the visitorship to our museums from 0.5 million in 2002 to 2.7 million in 2010;

- opening new museums, such as the Asian Civilisations Museum, the Peranakan Museum, 8Q, Bukit Chandu and the Old Ford Factory;
- building up the biggest and the best collection of Southeast Asian (including Singapore) art in the world;
- launching new festivals, such as the *Heritage Fest* and the *Night Festival*;
- collecting, researching and exhibiting the works of our first- and second-generation artists, and, at the same time, promoting our young artists;
- elevating the standards of heritage conservation in Singapore and developing the Heritage Conservation Centre into a well-respected institution, both locally and internationally;
- growing the museum-going culture in Singapore;
- championing cultural philanthropy;
- curating and exhibiting outstanding exhibits from our permanent collection and sending the exhibitions abroad;
- showcasing blockbuster exhibitions from foreign museums and countries, and bringing world history and civilisation to Singapore;
- establishing very strong ties with the museums and other heritage institutions in the other nine ASEAN countries and convening the ASEAN Museum Directors' Symposium once every two years;
- showcasing the history and culture of one ASEAN country per year;
- encouraging and rewarding good research and scholarship and growing our intellectual capital with the help of the NHB Academy;
- making history, heritage and the arts accessible to our students, working adults, senior citizens and our heartlanders;
- using history and heritage as instruments of diplomacy, such as putting up markers to honour Joseph Conrad, Jose Rizal, Ho Chi Minh, Deng Xiaoping and Pandit Nehru; and
- organising many community outreach events and programmes right where people live, in cluster schools, libraries and shopping malls.

Conclusion

During the past 20 years, a paradigm shift has taken place in culture and the arts in Singapore. We have made more progress in this sector than anyone could have imagined 20 years ago. We now enjoy world-class infrastructure, such as the Esplanade. We have several museums, such as the Asian Civilisations Museum and the Peranakan Museum, which are unique. They and other museums have put Singapore on the world map of museums. We have augmented our collections, nurtured the growth of a new generation of writers, composers, musicians, dancers, actors, curators, designers and conservators. We have broadened our intellectual and artistic freedom. We have also grown a new generation of culture-loving Singaporeans. The future of culture and the arts in Singapore is a bright one.



Tommy KOH

Professor Tommy Koh is currently Ambassador-at-Large at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs; Special Advisor of the Institute of Policy Studies and Chairman of the Centre for International Law, National University of Singapore. He is the Chairman of the SymAsia Foundation of Credit Suisse. He is also the Rector of Tembusu College at the University Town of the National University of Singapore.

Among his diplomatic posts were Singapore's Permanent Representative to the United Nations, High Commissioner to Canada, Ambassador to Mexico and United States of America, President of the Third UN Conference on the Law of the Sea, and Chairman of three WTO dispute panels. He had also served as the UN Secretary-General's Special Envoy, on a peace mission, to Russia, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania in 1993. He has received other prestigious awards and honours from the governments of The Netherlands, Chile, Luxembourg, Finland, France, Spain and the United States. Professor Koh was awarded the Public Service Star in 1971, the Meritorious Service Medal in 1979, the Distinguished Service Order Award in 1990, and the Order of Nila Utama (First Class) in 2008.

Professor Koh has a First-Class Honours Degree in Law from NUS, a Master's in Law from Harvard University, and a Postgraduate Diploma in Criminology from Cambridge University. He was conferred a full professorship in 1977. In 1984, Prof Koh was awarded an Honorary Degree of Doctor of Laws by Yale University. He has also received awards from Columbia University, Stanford University, Georgetown University, the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy and Curtin University. On 22 September 2002, Prof Koh was conferred an Honorary Degree of Doctor of Laws by Monash University. He has taught at various universities in the United States and China and has published many books and articles.

The Evolving Role of Cultural Administrators in Singapore

LIEW Chin Choy

Liew Chin Choy essays on the evolving role of a cultural administrator and examines the prerequisites of working in this emerging field — what an aspiring cultural administrator ought to be equipped with — and the challenges he faces in a knowledge-based, globalised economy.

My first foray into the arts was with the now defunct Ministry of Culture in 1982, after which I joined the National Arts Council when it was established in 1991. I am presently the Director and Head of Ossia Music School, a private music training institution. As a senior cultural administrator, I planned and organised major projects in the performing, visual and literary arts on a national level. As a retired civil servant and one who has for many years been involved in promoting the arts and culture in Singapore, I would like to share my experiences on the evolving role of a cultural administrator, as there is a dearth of information on the history of arts management in Singapore. I will also examine the prerequisites of working in this emerging field, what an aspiring cultural administrator ought to be equipped with, and the challenges he faces in a knowledge-based, globalised economy.

Development of Arts Management as a Management Study

Arts management has in recent years emerged as a new field of study in higher education both in its organisational and management aspects. From post-secondary and vocational training at diploma and certificate levels, formal training in the

field has in recent years progressed to include degree programmes and is now also offered as a postgraduate course in institutions of higher learning. Tertiary institutions offering degree programmes in arts management include University of Northumbria, Newcastle (Postgraduate Diploma in Arts Management), Anglia Polytechnic University, Cambridge, UK (Master in Arts Administration), and City University, London (Postgraduate Diploma in Arts Administration and Master in Arts Management). Academic attention to the field is not only confined to the UK, but in other parts of the developed world as well, thus reflecting the growing awareness of the significance of arts administration as a field of study as well as a profession.

As a cross-discipline of the humanities and management studies, arts management is today recognised as having a body of knowledge that can be subjected to systematic theoretical and empirical scrutiny using the tools of management research and enquiry. By stimulating and encouraging research and enquiry, it is able to come up with critical theory and in-depth analysis for testing of hypotheses and application of ideas. But the field's forte remains in its multi-disciplinary approach that borrows concepts from business management studies and the social sciences. Indeed, arts management is often treated as a major sub-discipline of organisational and management studies, which draws on a diverse range of disciplines from sociology of culture, cultural economics, cultural policy, art history and museology, to management studies that include organisational management, marketing, strategic planning, accounting and finance.¹

Emergence of Arts Administration in Post-Independent Singapore

In the immediate years of post-independent Singapore, arts organisations were largely amateur in nature and the work of the cultural worker/administrator (the term "arts administrator" as it is commonly used today was not in vogue then) was essentially confined to simple administrative functions of personnel and financial administration, including filing of regular returns and financial reports to the Registrar of Societies in compliance with the laws. Even so, one would be able to discern three categories of cultural administrators working in the early decades of the Singapore arts scene.

¹ Chong, D. (2002), *Arts Management*, Routledge, Oxon, p. 29.

Volunteers

These volunteers, who operated and ran amateur arts societies, with or without training in the arts, came from all walks of life; many held full-time jobs elsewhere. They often met as society members in the evening after work or on weekends to volunteer as cast members, back-stage production workers, front-of-house helpers, etc. The volunteers would work under the leadership of an experienced art practitioner, often the artistic director or stage manager. Although the hours were long and arduous, it was the volunteer's passion and love for the arts that kept him going. As financial assistance schemes were virtually non-existent then, many a volunteer would make personal sacrifices to contribute part of his salary towards the production costs of a stage performance or the day-to-day administrative expenses of the arts organisation. These amateur arts societies operated on a simple organisational structure held together by a deep sense of *esprit de corps* that saw volunteer "cultural administrators" helping out in various administrative and production roles to achieve their yearly production targets (usually in celebration of their societies' anniversaries or in commemoration of special events). Examples of amateur societies in the immediate post-Independence years include the Stage Club and the Experimental Theatre Club, which were known for their regular productions of British plays. There were also many amateur Chinese, Malay and Indian drama and folk dance groups, and Chinese dialect opera groups.

Employees

These include the staff working for private-sector impresarios or show presenters who brought in pop concerts, pantomimes, circus acts and acrobatic shows with mass or popular appeal. These "cultural administrators" were mainly involved in the management and marketing of such profit-making events. The market was, however, limited for the "high arts" due in part to low public appreciation as well as high-ticket prices such that esoteric and "highbrow" performances were far and few between in Singapore's cultural calendar then. It was under such trying conditions that Donald Moore operated. One of the leading impresarios in the private sector, his enterprise eventually failed even as many from the older generation will remember the excellent international dance and theatre performances Moore brought in, including Sadler Well's beautiful *Swan Lake* at the former National Theatre on Clemenceau Avenue in the early 1970s.

Civil Servants

These public servants who were recruited through the Public Service Commission (PSC) were mainly generalists deployed to the Ministry of Culture and its agencies such as the National Museum, National Library, the Archives and Public Records Department, Board of Film Censors, the performing venues of Victoria Theatre and Victoria Memorial Hall, Drama Centre, etc., to provide administrative support for programmes and activities. Radio and Television Singapore (RTS), with its own complement of professional broadcasting and administrative staff, was a part of the Ministry of Culture before RTS was corporatised as Singapore Broadcasting Corporation (eventually to become MediaCorp TV today) and henceforth operated quite independently.

In the 1970s, the National Theatre Trust was another cultural agency existing as a statutory body under the charge of the Ministry of Culture. It had its own Board of Trustees, which was responsible for the management of the not-for-profit National Theatre. A venue for state functions, the National Theatre is principally remembered for its year-round offerings of arts and cultural performances that helped to enliven Singapore's cultural scene. Many will remember performances by PRC traditional opera groups and folk song and dance troupes at the National Theatre. These were particularly well attended by the Chinese community in Singapore before the two countries established bilateral diplomatic ties in 1985 and China opened its doors to commercial travel.

Aside from civil servants appointed by the PSC, public servants appointed by the People's Association (PA) made up another group of public-sector cultural administrators. These were responsible for managing and running multi-ethnic programmes and activities for the community at the hundreds of Community Centres operated by the statutory board. With the support of the PA, the Ministry of Culture ran a series of popular open-air variety shows, such as *Aneka Rakyat Ragam*, featuring the music and dance of the ethnic communities of Singapore on the steps of City Hall.

Duties of Cultural Affairs Officers

The duties of "departmental grade" Cultural Affairs Officers — civil servants with specialist qualifications or training in professional fields, e.g., museum curators and humanities graduates — who were specially recruited to manage state-organised cultural programmes and activities in post-independent Singapore, were relatively

simple. Those in the Ministry of Culture headquarters were responsible for formulating cultural policies aimed at promoting racial harmony and establishing a sense of national identity among the country's multi-racial communities — this was at a time when there was as yet no sense of nationhood or a sense of belonging to Singapore. The Ministry of Culture's priority was to build a united nation out of the diverse ethnic communities by promoting greater appreciation and understanding of the arts and culture of the different races. With this in mind, the state apparatus found itself immersed in planning and organising national-level cultural events that promoted greater cross-cultural appreciation of the arts and culture of Singapore's multi-ethnic communities. The Ministry of Culture's work was supported by the PA at the grassroots level through the latter's network of Community Centres (CCs). Each CC would have its own programme of cultural events, all targeted at the masses on the constituency level.

As the ground was weak with grossly under-funded and under-staffed arts organisations, it fell on the Ministry of Culture, with all the resources at its disposal, to plan national-level cultural events such as the Shell Drama Festival, the Traditional Theatre Festival, the Short-Story Writing Competition and the biennial Singapore Festival of Arts. Other performing arts festivals, smaller in scale but as yet beyond the organisational capabilities of local amateur arts groups then, included the Dance Festival, Music Festival, Young People's Theatre Festival, the Singapore Writers Week, etc. These events were invariably guided by the state's policy to include all the major ethnic groups in order to be representative of the country's multi-racial demographics.

The duties of the Cultural Affairs Officers were structured along programming lines, with different sections within the Cultural Affairs Division in charge of promoting specific genres of the arts, each servicing its respective Advisory Committee of expert volunteers who assisted the Ministry in planning and organising its numerous arts programmes and events. For example, the Drama section was responsible for promoting theatre under the guidance of the Drama Advisory Committee, and the Dance section had its own committee of advisors for dance. The cultural administrator was thus able to develop in-depth knowledge and expertise in his section's art genre, and his knowledge was put to good use when processing and evaluating grant applications by the arts groups.

One should not forget the numerous intra-ASEAN cultural exchange programmes in the 1980s and 1990s in the performing, visual and literary arts that were organised under the aegis of the ASEAN Committee on Culture and Information

(ASEAN-COCI). These programmes were largely funded by the ASEAN Cultural Fund, which was donated by the Japanese government. The work of programme coordination with their ASEAN-COCI counterparts also helped our Singapore cultural administrators to develop greater appreciation for the arts and culture of the region.

Emergence of Arts Management in the 1980s and 1990s

The emergence of arts management as a career option coincided with the growing importance of the arts and culture when the government decided to promote “the finer things in life” following the successful industrialisation of Singapore and the country’s impressive economic growth in the 1970s and 1980s. Today, Singapore is no longer the “cultural desert” that it was in the early decades of the country’s independence. We are so culturally vibrant that there are reportedly no less than 90 arts and cultural activities happening on any single day. In 2008, Lee Suan Hiang, then CEO of NAC, reported that ticketed attendances to performing arts and cultural events reached an all-time high of almost 1 million in 2003, from 562,000 in 1989.² In tandem with the growth in arts attendance, the number of arts companies more than doubled in numbers, from 302 in 2003 to 720 in 2010,³ while employment in the arts and cultural sector increased from 20,177 in 2003 to 24,795 in 2009,⁴ not inclusive of the big pool of freelance project-based workers in the arts industry.

Development of Arts Infrastructure

Along with the growing interest in the arts and increasing arts attendances, the 1990s saw a building spree of cultural infrastructure, which changed the cultural landscape of Singapore. These include the Singapore Art Museum, the Asian Civilisations Museum, Esplanade — Theatres on the Bay, the new Drama Centre in the new National Library, the Yong Siew Toh Music Conservatory, the redevelopment of the Old Parliament House into the multi-disciplinary Arts House, and the rehabilitation of disused government buildings for housing arts groups and cultural institutions.

² “A Vibrant Singapore Arts Scene”, (2008), *Straits Times*, 7 August 2008.

³ Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts (2011), *Singapore Cultural Statistics 2011*, p. 10

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

An example of the latter is the upcoming National Gallery Singapore, which will open in 2015 at the former Supreme Court Building and City Hall.

These infrastructural developments have not only spurred the growing interest in arts and culture but also created tremendous employment opportunities for graduates keen on making a career in the arts as arts managers, event organisers, stage managers, and arts marketers, just to name a few positions in arts management. Added to the fold are requirements for specially trained technical support staff to man the increasingly sophisticated lighting and sound systems in performing and exhibition venues, and trained sets and props designers to meet local requirements.

Today, the whole ecosystem of arts and culture in Singapore is well supported by a good network of state-run agencies and institutions such as the National Arts Council, the National Heritage Board, NUS Centre for the Arts and NUS Museum, private art galleries, auction houses, professional and amateur arts groups numbering about 300, and professional Western and Chinese orchestras such as the Singapore Symphony Orchestra and Singapore Chinese Orchestra, all of which are supported by a large workforce of arts administrators.

Future of Arts Management in Singapore

Until recent years, it was a common thing that cultural administrators came to the job with no arts management background. Many stepped into the arts industry straight from colleges, without any formal training or the benefit of industrial attachment. They were often simply given on-the-job training and thrown into the deep end to carry on with their duties and provide leadership to local amateur arts groups. In view of the present developments in the arts scene, the role of arts administrators will become more complex and demanding. No more will they be confined to mundane financial and personnel administration, and it will not just be about efficient management of organisational operations either. Arts administrators will now need to contend with strategic development, marketing and audience development, fund raising and donor management, corporate governance and regulatory compliance. Today, an arts administrator in a not-for-profit arts group that is dependent on private and corporate donations has the added responsibility of complying with the regulations established by the Charity Council to account for the money collected and spent on top of maintaining up-to-date financial records for government audit.

Arts Administrator as Middleman

An arts administrator is the nexus between the artist and his audience, traditionally fulfilling the intermediary role in the interest of both parties by making use of his acquired knowledge in the related art form to promote the artist's work to the general public. This function will likely continue so that the art practitioner — actor, artist, dancer, musician, etc. — can pursue his artistic interests to excel in his creative field while leaving the day-to-day administration to the arts administrator. This intermediary role can be seen in the three-stage process of creative output starting from production to distribution and finally to consumption.⁵

In the three-stage process, there must firstly be the creation of an artistic product for performance or exhibition by the art practitioner. Production is followed by distribution wherein the finished work of art is marketed and delivered to the audience for their consumption. Throughout this process, the art practitioner has a moral obligation to commit to the highest level of artistic excellence and integrity in his practice while the arts administrator's role is to market and make the artistic output accessible to the public. This brings in the need for public education to widen the audience base through public talks, lectures, demonstrations, workshops, etc., in order to justify the investment of resources. Today, the arts administrator has to ensure that the presentation of an exhibition or a performance has to be done in a most cost-effective way and ensure financial prudence.

Development of Arts Management in the Global Arts Hub of Singapore

The notion of a career in the arts has changed in recent years. Most arts administrators still do not have a formal background in arts management or in operational experience. What they know is acquired on the job. Yet what they do is important in enriching the quality of life of the community. Arts marketing has become an art form in itself: in taking up the challenge of audience development, of promoting the arts and stimulating interest in arts and culture; arts administrators are also impacting lives, selling a lifestyle and nurturing core values.

With the changing arts landscape in Singapore and the rising expectations of a more demanding and sophisticated public, arts management is poised to become a more challenging (and a more satisfying) field in management study. The Singapore

⁵ Chong, *op cit.*, p. 120.

arts scene is increasingly globalised, and arts administrators must be more creative in their thinking, in fusing the disciplines of arts with business management, and more technologically savvy in tapping on advances in computerisation and virtual presence in the new and more complex arts environment. With more pursuing arts management courses at graduate and postgraduate levels, Singapore will in time develop a pool of well-trained and experienced arts administrators who will be able to take Singapore to the next stage in arts professionalism. This is a particularly compelling “selling point” for the Republic in our aim to be an international arts hub. We now have a sleigh of excellent exhibition and performance spaces, arts academies to train and equip our aspiring artists, and state support in arts funding and promotion; we need well-trained and skilled arts administrators to complete the ecosystem.

LIEW Chin Choy

Liew Chin Choy is one of Singapore's pioneering generation of cultural administrators. His career started in 1982 when the discipline of arts administration was still in its infancy and Singapore was regarded as a “cultural desert”. Prior to his retirement from the civil service, he served in various government departments including the now defunct Ministry of Culture (1982–1985), the Ministry of Community Development, and the Ministry of Information and the Arts (1986–1990), and the National Arts Council (1991–1998), before leaving the public sector, to join the Singapore Symphony Orchestra (1999–2003), and later, the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (2004–2013). He is presently the Director and Head of Ossia Music School. Among his many contributions to the arts in Singapore, Liew is most noted for his role as Programme Director of the Singapore Festival of Arts and the Festival of Asian Performing Arts (1991–1999). In 1999, he was awarded the Public Administration (Bronze) Medal in recognition of his contributions to the arts. He graduated from the University of Singapore with an honours degree in history.

Strategic Intent with Artistic Integrity*

GOH Ching Lee

Goh Ching Lee, the former Festival Director of the Singapore Arts Festival, writes about the evolving contexts of festival development in Singapore and her efforts in balancing artistic impulses and pragmatic expectations. Her work placed exacting demands and justifications on many fronts. This essay reveals her approaches behind a decade of programming the Singapore Arts Festival.

I had not intended to become a culture professional. My real ambition was to be a diplomat. I was absorbed by the world that was outside my own, and avidly followed the political developments and crises of the day that were no less dramatic than what one might have found on a theatre stage. I needed a place where I could be in touch with the moving world, and the only place I saw that offered this opportunity was the foreign affairs ministry. But as luck would have it, a piano music certificate among my application papers convinced the government recruiters that I was better suited to culture than diplomacy, despite the fact that I had read politics, history and philosophy at the National University of Singapore, and picked up French and Esperanto.

That was how I came to be Assistant Director for Music and Literature at the Ministry of Culture in 1984, soon after leaving university. This turned out to be the best thing that could have happened to me. I did become a diplomat, albeit a 'cultural diplomat', with the added bonus of engaging with artists and the arts.

* This piece is an edited version of an essay of the same title, first published in *EFA BOOKS 5 Inside/Insight Festivals: 9 Festival Directors — 9 Stories* (October 2012), published by European Festivals Association and CultureLink Singapore.

I was to find myself combining art and diplomacy to win friends and goodwill for Singapore's arts both at home and abroad. Those same interests in history and current affairs were to provide helpful contextual resources for my future role as a festival director.

My childhood was invaluable in provoking my first creative ideas as a festival programmer — living next to a Taoist temple; I was no stranger to stage performances and ritual spectacles. I used to watch temple mediums dance themselves into a trance, practise self-flagellation, slash their tongues and write in their own blood. The Chinese street opera troupe would set up its wooden stage in front of our house and perform over several days for the temple gods and the neighbourhood. Itinerant food vendors flocked to the area and did a roaring trade. Unknowingly, I had grown up living the life of festivals with no inkling that I would one day come to create festivals of a different kind.

Initial Journey — Festival of Asian Performing Arts

I believe that my childhood memory of growing up watching street performances and festivals gave spark to the idea behind the Festival Village I had created as the centrepiece for the 1997 Festival of Asian Performing Arts (FAPA), which I was unexpectedly entrusted to direct. FAPA started in 1993 to alternate with the larger and more prestigious biennial Singapore Festival of Arts. Its intention was to focus on Asian work and take it from under the shadows of the international Western productions in the Singapore Festival of Arts. Unfortunately, the consensus was that this was not working and FAPA was perceived as “second class” and the “poorer cousin” to its big brother, with audience numbers trailing behind it.

I had become disillusioned with the artificiality of traditional Asian and folk performances on the modern stage and wanted to re-contextualise them in a more authentic setting. I also wanted to reconnect urban Singaporeans with the memory of their rural roots and to remind them that village performance traditions, while threatened, remained very much alive in Asia. Part of my inspiration also came from a performance of the Balinese trance dance, the *Calonarang*, which I saw in a village in Bali. This had left me in awe of performance traditions in communities where the distinction between art and life, between villager, farmer and performer, was still indivisible.

I invited the Kecak Dance from Bali to the inaugural 1997 Festival Village located at the Fort Canning Park, a semi-sacred hillock in the heart of the city.

I also invited the Jiangzhou Drums from China, aboriginal singers and dancers from Taiwan, and the Indian folk theatre Yakshagana. Working with theatre director William Teo and a team of designers, we used simple natural materials such as wood, bamboo and fire to create the stages and village ambience. The perimeter of the fort was ringed with cauldrons of fire (improved from Chinese frying pans known as woks), and the Village reverberated with chants, drums, dance, and epic stories from the Ramayana and Mahabharata.

There were moments of serendipity, as when Balinese performers draped park sculptures with black-and-white chequered sarongs in homage of the spirits believed to inhabit them; when Taiwanese aboriginal dancers circled around a bonfire specially lit for them; or when the thumping of the giant Jiangzhou drums in rehearsal solicited an “approving” answer from the heavens that unleashed an enormous storm before opening night. This was the beauty of the Festival Village where the real, spiritual, cultural, ritual and social dimensions blended magically. It captured the public imagination and was a huge success.

FAPA in 1997 saw attendances rise from its previous 60% to more than 90%, an outcome that exceeded everyone’s expectations, including my own. This also reflected the positive reception given to contemporary Asian work presented in theatres, showing Asian tradition under a different light. Ironically, this most successful edition of FAPA was to be its last, as the arts minister had decided to merge it with the Singapore Festival of Arts to create an annual festival with an “Asian flavour”. Although at the time I was disappointed, in retrospect it was not an unwise strategic decision, and there was the satisfaction of knowing that FAPA had exited on a high note. From my own perspective, I had passed the “test” of directing my first major international festival and this paved the way towards future responsibility for the larger festival, a prospect I had not until then had the audacity to contemplate.

Cultural Policy and Artistic Activity

Looking at Singapore’s economic success and its lively arts and entertainment scene today, it is hard to imagine its former epithet as a “cultural desert”, or to recall that its GDP was lower than some African countries’ when it gained independence in 1965. We were a tiny, vulnerable island state, with an immigrant society made up of disparate ethnic communities. We were “cultural orphans” cut off from our mother

cultures in India, China and the rest of the Malay Archipelago. Our forefathers mostly hailed from poverty-stricken parts of Asia and for them the pursuit of the arts and culture was an alien concept.

When I joined the civil service in 1984, Singapore's cultural and artistic activity was in the hands of amateur groups and societies belonging to clan, neighbourhood, school or university structures, many of these formed along ethnic or linguistic lines. There was little notion of "professional" arts organisations or "professional" arts management, and this was not helped by the lack of formal arts training institutions. The only professional arts organisation at the time was the Singapore Symphony Orchestra formed in 1979, of which many of the musicians were recruited from overseas.

Cultural policy was oriented towards nation-building and creating inter-racial understanding and tolerance through displays and performances by local cultural groups. This was the environment in which the Ministry of Education was to create the first Singapore Festival of Arts in 1977. It was an entirely local affair. After its transfer to the Ministry of Culture in 1978, it became a biennial festival that began to introduce international content.

1984 turned out to be a seminal year in Singapore's cultural history, when the government announced it wanted to build a "culturally vibrant society" by 1999. This was the first time the government unequivocally placed arts and culture on the national agenda, feeling politically and economically secure enough to turn its attention to the "softer" areas of national development. It was also a response towards a more affluent and better-educated generation that aspired towards self-fulfilment beyond material gratification. This paved the way for a 1989 cultural blueprint by the Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts that eventually established national cultural institutions like the National Arts Council (1991), the National Heritage Board (1993), a host of new museums and the green light for the building of an arts centre now known as the Esplanade — Theatres on the Bay (which opened in 2002).

The Singapore Festival of Arts, because it preceded these institutions, presided over much of Singapore's cultural landscape and shaped its development through the 1980s and much of the 1990s. It was the largest and "craziest" single arts event, a surfeit of paid and free performances in theatres, concert halls and open public spaces — the only time in the year when people could enjoy a diversity of high-quality international classical and contemporary music, dance and theatre performances.

This fuelled a public demand for quality performances and established a base of festival-goers and arts enthusiasts.

It also helped stimulate a professional theatre scene with the founding of the country's first professional companies like Act Three, TheatreWorks, The Necessary Stage, and the Singapore Dance Theatre in the mid-1980s. The Festival Fringe brought the unusual and the bizarre into the streets. New art genres and events were introduced — installation and performance art, a film festival, a writers' week, and the first Singapore musical — all of which subsequently developed identities and trajectories of their own.

The Festival did important work in pooling local talents for new Singaporean drama. A new wave of plays instilled confidence and pride in a fledging theatre community, including the *Samseng* and the *Chettiah's Daughter* (a local adaptation of the *Threepenny Opera*), *Kopitiam* by theatre doyen Kuo Pao Kun who unified a cast drawn from disparate Mandarin theatre groups, and *Beauty World* by TheatreWorks, the Singaporean musical that has since become a Singapore theatre classic. At the same time, international theatre productions created new encounters that reverberated throughout the arts community.

By the late 1990s, the arts scene in Singapore had grown in depth, scale and scope. The festival grew to become a cultural juggernaut stretching over four to six weeks. Though no longer the only importer of international performances, it remained a sought-after event. By 1999, Singapore was enjoying most of the trappings of a "culturally vibrant society", and was eagerly anticipating the completion of the Esplanade Theatres. After the 1997 Asian financial crisis, arts and culture were included in the economic strategy to turn Singapore into a cultural and entertainment hub that would help attract investment and global talent. This was to culminate in 2000 with another national blueprint, the Renaissance City Plan, which saw special funds injected into arts organisations, arts tourism and the creative industries.

Programming Reflections

It was at this juncture in 1999 that I was asked to direct the newly renamed and annual Singapore Arts Festival. By that time, I had more than ten years' experience managing a portfolio that included cultural policy and research, management of music, literature and visual arts events, and international cultural exchanges. Additionally, I had obtained an MA in Arts Management from the City University of London and was among the first "trained" arts administrators and cultural

“bureaucrats” in Singapore. As a cultural planner, I came to regard the festival (and all other events of the National Arts Council) not as an end in itself, but as a means and a developmental tool towards advancing the interest of artists, audiences and Singapore itself. The Festival had been an important catalyst in engineering cultural change in Singapore, and I wanted to carry on in the same spirit with a new agenda. My personal goal was to think with a planner’s mind but act with a heart for artists, and to marry strategic intent with artistic integrity.

As the foremost arts event in Singapore, the Festival’s *raison d’être* is to be compellingly different from everything else that happens in Singapore. Its explicit remit is to instigate change, and to positively alter behaviour and perception, even if this means encountering resistance. Singaporeans lead sheltered lives and need to be encouraged to experience worlds that can awaken and shake them out of their comfort zones. The Festival would be a travesty if it were to replicate existing work. Instead, it should fill the gaps in our cultural scene by treading new territories, taking the road less travelled, and inviting people on special journeys that can enrich and enlighten them. At the cusp of the new millennium after 20 years of existence, how could the Festival continue to make a difference to the cultural life of Singapore? What would be the next phase of change, where would the Singapore Arts Festival go from here? How could we re-imagine it?

The answer was immediately clear. It was to nudge artists’ work and audience sensibilities. The Festival would be a place where artists and their ideas took centre-stage and would be artist-led rather than aimed at pampering the audience. We needed to raise its ambitions and vision, to be forward-looking, progressive, to be leaders rather than followers. A festival has to be an indulgence, an “excess”, an unfettered exploration of the imagination; a “window on the world”; and equally important for a small nation like Singapore (like Iceland and New Zealand), a window for the world to view us.

The Festival has to mirror the aspirations of our times and be inspired by the spirit of the city it inhabits. It must reflect the creative work of artists in today’s environment. There was much catching up to do, as the Festival had started to lag behind in artistic currency and had fallen on a familiar formulaic approach. Recurrent programming patterns had reinforced narrow stereotypes about particular art forms and cultures. It had also become complacent as a receiving house for touring productions, often towards the end of their touring cycle.

The Festival needed an identity and purpose, rather than to hide behind the anonymity of a “something-for-everyone” approach. Singapore as an open, cosmopolitan, multi-cultural, multi-lingual, technologically advanced, and innovative society at the crossroads of East and West provided me with the building blocks to shape the Festival’s identity and to find its own authenticity. As the repository of many cultures and as a nation attempting to overcome its physical limitations and cultural differences, Singapore is a living laboratory and the perfect setting for exploring concepts of hybridity and alchemy. Interdisciplinary works that cross geographical, political, cultural and linguistic boundaries could find their natural home here. Openness to innovation and experimentation, resulting in rich discoveries, convergences or collisions, would give the Festival its vital meaning.

My first festival in 2000, *New Inspiration*, had many firsts. It was the first time a Singaporean work opened the event. It was also the first time it entered into co-commissions and co-productions with international partners. The opening performance, *Desdemona*, an intercultural deconstruction of Shakespeare’s *Othello* by Singapore’s foremost theatre director Ong Keng Sen, was co-produced by the Adelaide Festival, and for the first time a Singaporean festival work premiered outside of Singapore. It was also the first time an international artist outside Singapore was commissioned, taking a big leap with Robert Wilson’s multimedia music theatre *Hot Water*.

I sought to break away from cultural stereotypes and conventions that had become commonplace, replacing the flamenco and the butoh with radically different companies like La Fura Dels Baus from Spain and the Japanese contemporary dance company Pappa Tarahumara. I invited contemporary Asian dance that was new to Singapore, like Taipei Dance Circle (they performed on a stage bathed in baby oil) and the new bharatanatyam Chandralekha Dance Company. We also pushed political boundaries with a “retrospective” of two works by Singaporean playwright Kuo Pao Kun, who is regarded as the father of modern Singapore theatre. Jailed as a leftist activist, his two enduring satires about bureaucratic rigidity, *The Coffin Is Too Big for the Hole* and *No Parking on Odd Days*, were once frowned upon, and one was banned for a time. I commissioned not one, but four double-bills by different directors in the four languages of Singapore as homage to Kuo’s search for multi-lingualism in Singapore theatre.

The 2000 Festival was among the most controversial in its history. Opinion was sharply divided. People loved or hated it and there was little middle ground.

Desdemona's opening in Singapore had one audience member walking out, calling it "shit" before slamming the door. Even Robert Wilson was referred to as a "conman" by a paper. Another major paper asked, "Is the Festival Too Avant-garde?", and carried mixed or negative reviews of most of the productions. Perhaps this reflected the paper's inexperience in reviewing unfamiliar forms. This was evident in the fact that they assigned two reviewers to *Hot Water* — one to review its merits as a classical concert performance by the pianist Tzimon Barto, and the other to review it as a piece of theatre, rather than reviewing it as a single integrated work.

But rather than landing me in hot water, the controversy actually generated excitement and sparked discussions that had been sorely missing from the Festival for some time. I did not set out to "shock" or cause controversy, but simply did what I thought was necessary to update the Festival in the new millennium. The public was jolted into an awareness and acceptance of this "new" Festival. It felt as though a glass ceiling had been broken, allowing more room for a new wave of artistic work to be shown.

The following nine years were exciting and exhausting. I continued to promote the innovative, presenting artists and ideas that would reveal something "new" to the Singapore audience. The Festival celebrated not only the big but also delighted in the small, not only the "brand" names but also the emerging "unknowns", not only the beautiful but also the ugly, and not only the "sunny" spots but also the dark corners of the human experience.

I eschewed programming on a single theme. Fidelity to a theme may help marketing but can end up stifling artistic content. Attempts to broaden the programme can lead to tenuous connections that weaken the theme or render it redundant. I prefer the freedom of exploring several thematic strands with recurrent interests in history, memory, migration, conflict, urban realities and globalising societies. Performances that are purely abstract with their own aesthetic language can flourish within this framework.

I felt my particular role and responsibility was to seek out good art, wherever it could be found. This meant looking in places that are culturally marginalised or where art is least expected. This responsibility was all the more significant given Singapore's own marginalisation in the cultural world. Indeed, some of the most memorable shows came from the unfamiliar. These included *The Wall* from Palestine, *Segreta y Malibu* from Argentina, the *Architecture of Silence* from Slovenia, and *Class Enemy* from Bosnia.

We took delight in productions that attempted to bridge the past and present, the old and the modern, the virtual and the real, East and West, as well as juxtapose parallels of universe, cultures and languages. We coined the term “intercontinental world premiere”, when *Play on Earth* by Station House Opera was simultaneously premiered in Singapore, the UK and Brazil with three separate casts “conjoined” across time and space through live video streaming. There was also *Awaking* that embraced the literary and musical worlds of Shakespeare and his contemporary Tang Xianzu, the author of the *Peony Pavilion*, both of whom died in 1616.

While developing new approaches in defining the main programme within theatres, we did not lose sight of the need to connect with the segment of the public who are not yet ticket-buying arts participants. We expanded the Festival’s outreach activities, creating performances in public places where people lived, worked, played, shopped, and commuted. The cityscape provided the malls, parks, subway stations, street junctions and neighbourhood corners that came alive with a variety of performances. Our skyscrapers, greens, and water bodies became inspiring settings for large-scale aerial and theatrical spectacles. What people often did not realise is that these events constituted 70–80% of the Festival’s output, in effect assuming the proportions of a parallel international street festival.

After years of feeling the cultural “cringe” of being a small nation, it was time to stand up for Singapore’s artists who had started to come of age. I wanted to explore a new phase of commissioning that would create the “international” Singaporean work which would not only be relevant locally but also have a resonance outside Singapore. Very few of the Festival’s commissions in its previous 20 years had been shown outside. Could we create more works that could tour beyond our borders? Could we defuse the long-standing tension between “local” and “international” by having a Singaporean work that would be both? Could we banish the negative perception of Singaporean work by encouraging bold and innovative ideas? Could we nurture these ideas by giving them the resources to help them succeed, while also allowing room for failure? How could the Festival make a difference to Singaporean artists, and how could these artists make a difference to Singapore?

My interest was to “put the money where my mouth was” by investing a greater proportion of festival funds into worthy and ambitious ideas by Singapore’s artists. Collaboration between different companies was actively encouraged in order to break away from their “silo” habits and to encourage positive creative tensions.

We also introduced foreign collaborators into their projects, and persuaded other festivals to join in commissioning and presenting these works, many of which were inter-cultural and inter-disciplinary projects.

This meant taking the necessary risk of subjecting Singaporean premieres to the harsh pressures of being judged alongside the polished work of visiting companies. I took inspiration from the words of Kuo Pao Kun that “it is better to have a worthy failure than a mediocre success”. I worked with artists who had a shared interest in exploring a “new Asian” contemporary sensibility, and who could work in collaborative and inter-disciplinary partnerships with regional and international artists. Among them were Singapore Dance Theatre, the Singapore Chinese Orchestra, Drama Box, TheatreWorks, Toy Factory and composer Mark Chan. Younger Singaporean artists were given platforms like Forward Moves (dance) and Full Frontal (theatre) where the Festival produced their work, so they could focus their energies on the creative aspects without worrying about administrative and technical management.

The Festival had its fair share of successful and unsuccessful commissions. However, we were also rewarded with a number of works that broke new ground artistically, as well as receiving the co-commissioning support of international festivals, and seeing Singapore-made productions tour overseas.

Internationalisation

Singaporean works were also clustered together to present a “showcase” to which we invited international festival curators to make regular visits to Singapore and for whom Singapore represented a new source of content from Asia, such as when the then New Zealand Arts Festival Director invited a slew of Singaporean artists and works which we branded “Singapore Season at the New Zealand International Festival” in 2004.

The Season’s success in New Zealand helped spawn the Singapore Season in London (2005) and China (Beijing and Shanghai 2007), which evolved into major culture-cum-trade diplomatic initiatives. Singapore music ensembles, dance and theatre companies and film-makers were presented at major venues and festivals in these cities. At the same time, parallel trade and business forums organised by Singapore’s economic agencies and their local counterparts took place alongside these events. For a country where business usually came first, I took pleasure that

for once, business was subordinated to the work of the artists who took centre-stage. The Season was a way of levelling up the playing field for Singapore artists whose own merit ultimately secured their engagement with local presenters.

We also championed an Asian festivals' network that was missing in Asia, as part of our contribution to promoting regional and international exchanges. In 2004, the Association of Asian Performing Arts Festival was started with 15 members at our Festival. It included the Seoul International Dance Festival, the China Shanghai International Arts Festival, Jakarta Festival, the Macau International Arts Festival, and the Hong Kong International Arts Festival. While each had its own programme vision, socio-political contexts, and different financial capabilities, the Association was a great way to deepen friendships and fellowship, and a valuable vehicle for developing connections with peer networks in Europe and America, such as the European Festivals Association.

It has been said that festival directors are like magicians. I have felt like a juggler tossing balls while standing on one foot, keeping an eye on different agendas that came with conflicting demands. We are expected to master the art of resolving contradictions — to be innovative and critical without being inaccessible, to be demanding and selective without being exclusive, to embrace diversity without sacrificing identity, and to win new audiences without losing old loyalties. But herein is the magic of festival-making, where through optimism, persistence and some good luck, the improbable can happen.

Some of the most difficult moments have also been the most satisfying ones. When SARS hit Singapore in 2003 (claiming more than 30 lives), public places were shunned. However, contrary to our worst fears, the international artists and audiences were determined to show up despite the health risks and travel advisories. There was a sense of solidarity and determination that the Festival must go on. In times of adversity, people need more art, and this was where a festival finds its home and meaning for humanity — bringing people together to heal and uplift the human spirit.

Even though I was working within government, I was fortunate to be given considerable freedom to make artistic decisions. Nevertheless, one of my regrets is that it was still not my time to show some great works that would have been too daring for Singapore society and its censors. I would have liked to show Jan Fabre's *Je Suis Sang* (I am Blood) with its explicit nudity, and DV8's *I Want to Be Straight with You*, highlighting gender and sexual discrimination. In later years, I sensed less support to push political and artistic boundaries with successive administrations

at the arts ministry. While in 2002 I was able to commission the play *Causeway*, a satirical exploration into the fractious political relations between Singapore and Malaysia (it had to be sanctioned at a very high government level), I would have found a similar venture difficult in later years. I had to sense the mood of my political masters and if I exercised some degree of self-censorship, it was to protect the festival and await a more opportune moment in the future.

Opportunities and Conundrums

In all my time with the festival, I have never underestimated the Singapore audience. We are fortunate to have a relatively young arts-going audience, with 70% aged 40 and below. Singaporeans are “world travellers”, well-educated and well-travelled, and do not carry a heavy cultural baggage. It is an audience that has been exposed to a diversity of performance programmes over the years, and their curiosity for different experiences has stood the Festival in good stead.

One of my greatest pride is the creation of the Singapore Festival Orchestra (SFO), which I consider Singapore’s third professional orchestra (after the Singapore Symphony Orchestra and the Singapore Chinese Orchestra) made up of mostly professional freelance musicians. The Orchestra was born of a desire to support a growing pool of young musicians in Singapore (in particular, hiring many of the first graduates of the newly established Yong Siew Toh Conservatory), to wean the Festival from the increasingly expensive international symphonic orchestras, and to develop instead multimedia concert experiences that would attract new audiences. In a few short years, the SFO was put to the grind accompanying dance companies to performing the hugely successful video game symphonies under the baton of international conductors. The musicians’ enthusiasm and their hunger for more work was a great reward.

One exasperating experience was the “festival bashing” in my later years by a certain section of the media who regarded it as too “avant-garde” and hence “inaccessible”. This over-generalisation did not reflect the diversity of the Festival programme nor recognise the significant support it already enjoyed. The 2008 festival which the paper headlined “a flop” (based upon selective statistical reporting) was artistically among the most satisfying in my career. I was flooded with grateful emails from those who were moved and transformed by their experience. While we will always need to educate the public that a festival’s success cannot be defined by numbers alone, I had expected a deeper understanding of the arts from a mature paper.

If the 2008 edition was a more introspective festival, then the 2009 festival was a highly extrovert one. Responding to the doom and gloom of the financial crisis, we explored the idea of “play” with programmes like *Sutra* by choreographer Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui that featured Shaolin monks, *H3* (“hip hip hop”) stripped down to its bare essentials by Bruno Beltrao, and *Les Sept Planches de la Ruse* by Compagnie 111 inspired by the Chinese game of tangram. While these programmes were no less avant-garde or esoteric to the more traditional audience, they struck a chord with the public. The Festival reached 92% attendances, the first time in 20 years that it had surpassed the 90% mark. The outcome exceeded my expectations, repeating the surprise I had experienced at the 1997 FAPA. It also confirmed again that in times of economic adversity, people need more, not less, art.

Cusp of New Festival Future

I had indicated to my superiors that I wished to make way for a new director after my tenth edition that took place in 2009. A decade seemed a natural and logical point, and it also made perfect sense to exit the same way I had entered the festival world in 1997 — with a strong public reception of the programmes. I did not want to outlive my usefulness. I had achieved a number of my original goals and it was now time to pass on the mantle to someone else.

The current cultural climate has taken a more parochial and insular turn, in contrast to the open and holistic policies in pursuit of the “global arts city” vision of the last two decades. While this may be intended to re-balance culture policy in the post-millennial decade of globalisation and in an uncertain economic climate, the recalibration may have tipped too far. The overriding focus on community or grassroots arts, in a new blueprint drawn up by the Arts and Cultural Strategic Review Committee, could potentially short-change a generation of Singaporeans of a more diverse and fulfilling cultural life. There appears now to be another glass ceiling above the one that was broken a decade ago.

The Singapore Arts Festival is not likely to remain unaffected by these policy changes. As I write, the National Arts Council has decided to cancel the Festival for one year in 2013 in order to review its future in alignment with the direction of the new blueprint. It will return in 2014, although in what form and spirit is unclear. There is speculation that future festivals could be programmed by a committee of artists, or that it will be transferred to the Esplanade, Singapore’s performing arts centre that already organises more than ten festivals.

My wish is to see the festival develop into an independent arts organisation setting its own artistic course. My hope is that it will find its own niche to rise above the din and remain a vital force for artists and audiences in Singapore and beyond. It is also because of, rather than in spite of, a busier arts landscape that the moment has come to liberate the festival from the burden of being all things to all people, in order to pursue a clear and unapologetic vision and purpose. Far from a diminishing role, I see the festival as having a strong life ahead. The best is still yet to come.

GOH Ching Lee

Goh Ching Lee is a cultural planner and producer, and one of the first trained arts administrators in Singapore. She is the Executive and Artistic Director of Culture-Link Singapore, an arts consulting and management company she founded in 2009. She joined the team of mentors of the Atelier for Young Festival Managers in SINGAPORE 2011 and now for the second time, in Izmir. Ching Lee is also an Associate Director at Festival and Events International, and holds a Bachelor of Arts (Hons) from the National University of Singapore, and a Masters of Arts Management, City University of London. She directed the Singapore Arts Festival for a decade from 2000–2009 where her innovative approaches established the Festival as one of the leading Festivals in Asia. She has been noted for her efforts in bridging artistic work and professional networks between Asian and European artists and festival producers. She initiated and co-founded the Association of Asian Performing Arts Festivals and served as its first chair from 2004 to 2009. She also developed Singapore Season, a programme showcasing Singapore's arts overseas which was first launched in London in 2005 and later in China (Beijing, Shanghai) in 2007, and in Edinburgh in 2009.

Ching Lee is the recipient of the Public Administration Medal (Silver) bestowed by the Singapore government in 2005, and received two honours from the French government — *Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres* in 2002 and *Officier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres* in 2005.

In Making Museums and Heritage Accessible!

Michael KOH

Michael Koh shares several strategies that the National Heritage Board has used to reach out to all residents to enjoy arts, culture and heritage. The innovative programmes to make museums less stodgy have seen huge leaps in museum visits.

Singapore Rocks

Singapore is a highly urbanised city with a unique blend of old and new. A new commercial district around Marina Bay is taking shape; spanking new shopping malls have opened throughout the island; and new attractions have also just opened. The three historic districts, Chinatown, Little India and Kampong Glam, continue to retain their old world charm, albeit the injection of these new activities. New restaurants, hip bars and chill-out venues open throughout Singapore every week; parks and nature reserves are well patronised especially on weekends. Beyond running errands and spending time with family and friends, with so much to see and do, there is much competition for personal time.

Steady Stream of Visitors to Museums

The good news is that even with this onslaught of new attractions and time constraints, a steady stream of 2.8 to 2.9 million visitors annually (from 2009 to 2012) managed to find time to visit the National Heritage Board's (NHB) museums and attend their heritage programmes. Around 40% of these visitors are

Singaporeans or Permanent Residents (PRs), which translates to 1.1 million out of 3.8 million Singaporeans and PRs annually, with tourists making up the remaining 60% (translating to 1.7 million visitors out of 14 million tourist arrivals). All things considered, these are quite impressive figures, given the denominators above, tight marketing budgets, and despite the perception that interest in museums or heritage is low on the agenda of most Singaporeans and cultural tourism is not high on the visit agenda of tourists. In addition, positive critical reviews of exhibitions and programmes in both local and foreign media reach an average annual value of S\$45 million. Given this, I believe we can do more in promoting cultural tourism as one of the authentic reasons for visiting Singapore.

Kids and PMEBs Are Coming

The perceived lack of interest by Singaporeans is often attributed to a lack of museum-going culture, given the previous generation of education culture in pursuing grades and being geared towards contributing to the economy. The truth is that kids are now coming in droves. Education programmes in museums are growing as the Ministry of Education explores more learning journeys and avenues for creative learning. The annual Children's Season is highly anticipated during the June school holidays, and attendance has been growing from 130,000 in 2009 to 220,000 by 2012. Adult support especially amongst the professionals, managers, executives and businessmen (PMEBs) is also growing, despite claims by some that Singaporeans "just do not get culture" due to the emphasis on maths and sciences in our education system. Authentic ground-up festivals like Singapore Heritage Fest and Night Festival (in 2012) attract large multi-generational crowds (1.3 million and 490,000 visitors respectively). At the Night Festival, one can hear cheers for performances and appreciative comments from the crowds having a jolly good time. It shows that our audiences are getting more appreciative, quite capable of discerning what they like and what they choose to spend their time on.

Visitors Do Know Better

The fact that tourists or travellers to Singapore do visit the national museums goes unnoticed by many. It is even misconceived by some that museums should not be for tourists but should focus on engaging Singaporeans primarily. Such comments are quite misguided as museums are cultural institutions that are ambassadors of

heritage for our country, showcasing the richness and diversity of our peoples to the world, and bringing the world to Singapore. Museums are strongly recommended in tourist guidebooks on Singapore as must-see places and are ranked highly in visitor experience. “Free and easy” travellers do know better! The Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM) has been regularly nominated for Singapore Tourism Board’s annual tourism awards as one of the best attractions in Singapore. In the recent Trip Advisor Reader’s Choice Award, ACM was voted as one the top 12 museums in the whole of Asia! Museums thus do contribute towards making Singapore a vibrant city and provide good enough offerings to entice visitors to stay longer in Singapore.

New Ministry, Renewed Emphasis on Culture

In November 2012, a new Ministry focusing on culture (arts, heritage and sport) was formed. I, for one, cheer the fact that the word “culture” has been brought back into the fore, hailing back to the vision of Mr S. Rajaratnam who had set up the first Ministry of Culture when Singapore first gained independence. Culture is regarded as a way of life, defining us as a society and embracing everything that makes us human. Some of the strategies of this new Ministry are to use culture as a basis for our people to bond, interact, share common interests, create points of dialogue and build a common identity. These point towards a positive future for culture and reset the context of making museums and heritage even more accessible to all.

During my term as CEO of NHB, some of the measures taken to further enrich the heritage scene were in planning surrounding areas and activities, designing and building new museum facilities, strategizing the context for exhibitions, increasing museum and heritage programming, expanding community outreach, increasing the use of IT, and expanding volunteerism. These measures are discussed below.

Plan It Right: Destination Edifices versus Urban Mix

In a traditional city plan, urban planners cluster museums together in a museum mile or grouping. Such examples include the Museum Mile in London and Philadelphia; the Museum Quarter in Vienna; and the Bras Basah area in Singapore. These museum clusters, combined with other institutional buildings, result in what planners call a “Civic District”. In my view, such planning isolates museums and institutional uses from city life and makes the district a destination for which a specific intent, effort or choice must be made to visit by people.

Alternative city planning models are more mixed-use. Melbourne's Federation Square is located in the midst of the downtown, and New York's Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in mid-town near Fifth Ave is right next to mixed-use areas. The Ayala Museum in Manila is integrated within the Greenbelt shopping mall, conveniently next to food and beverage (F&B) outlets, open spaces and commercial uses. This model allows museums to be integrated into urban mixed-use areas where people stay, work or play. Rather than as edifices or destination attractions that one must make a specific effort to visit, museums would then become part of everyday city life and touch people on a regular basis as they go about their daily routines. Such an urban mix of uses provides instant accessibility and enhances the visitor experience in the district. In this way, people have a complex layering of activities to choose from.

Can the Bras Basah area be recalibrated? I believe that the answer lies in gearing the area for the younger set. Look how the students at the University of Melbourne and Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology activate Carlton, and how New York University students activate Greenwich Village in New York City. More hostel or affordable private accommodation for students and lecturers may need to be injected to make the Bras Basah area more "bohemian"; space for commercial galleries and artists' spaces could also be layered in. These uses can be introduced at Waterloo Centre, where there is leftover space that can be used for arts incubators and start-up galleries.

Design to Invite

Cross the Threshold

Inviting "soft" facilities like F&B and retail outlets, located in front of or near visitor or pedestrian traffic, can attract the curious and uninitiated to cross the threshold into the museum. Some have criticised this approach, saying that it is the galleries that matter in a museum. They forget that such facilities can be cleverly designed with exhibits integrated as a gentle introduction. This can expose the uninitiated to the exhibitions and programmes that museums offer, and make them converts. In today's world, museums also rely heavily on the revenue generated by commercial uses and sales. It is important in the architectural design that the location of such facilities be not tucked away in a corner but given full frontage.

Such strategic placement can be found in the National Gallery London, where the F&B and retail outlets front right onto Trafalgar Square. The V&A shop and

MoMA shop are both shoppers' dreams and are located at the entrances. The Tate Modern's shops are a major destination for visual art material of every kind; they are located throughout the museum, along the strategic riverfront and in the upper storeys, near the exhibition halls. We have adopted these concepts in Singapore, and over at the upcoming National Gallery Singapore (at the former Supreme Court building) there will be a dedicated shopping area and rooftop F&B outlets that will give visitors spectacular views of the Padang and Marina Bay.

Free the Space

Museums need to provide publicly accessible areas for free exhibits such as the crowd-pulling dinosaur skeleton at Natural History Museum's lobby in London, or the changing rotunda exhibits at National Museum of Singapore (NMS), where artist Titarubi's two-storey high and batik-clad *David* drew large crowds of admiring women. Such free spaces can be designed for flexibility — for example, the information counter at the V&A entrance transforms into a bar on Friday nights.

Provision of open spaces is another point of access. The courtyard spaces at the V&A and National Museum Phnom Penh are places to sit and relax amidst outdoor exhibits, and the landscaping and exhibits at MoMA's courtyard changes with the season. Roofs too can be maximised. The roof garden at the Met in NYC is used for martini parties and art displays every Friday. Similarly, when NAGA opens, the rooftop will be publicly accessible with outdoor exhibits and activities.

The Ayala Museum's new Artists Space is a flexible space where Filipino artists can exhibit their work, with some guidance from the museum's curators. Located next to Greenbelt Mall, it offers enormous public exposure to exhibiting artists. When NAGA opens, I believe that there is an opportunity for such a "museum within a museum" to happen in an informal manner. In this way, we can make NAGA beloved by our artist community right from the start.

Buildings Come Alive

Urban legends about ghosts and spirits wandering through historic museum buildings can spark the interest of visitors. At NMS, there is a story passed from generation to generation that there are ghosts populating the area in the roof that can be reached by the wrought iron spiral staircase. Many older visitors remember this and new generations are taking photos by this same staircase today.

Secret passages and historic rooms with stories of their previous occupants abound at the upcoming NAGA. Architectural heritage tours to jail cells, hidden chambers, secret corridors into courtrooms, historic rooms like the surrender chamber and the Chief Justice's chamber are being planned for NAGA. Such special rooms and legends are what form the essence of the building and can be used as a hook to whet visitor interest. They are platforms to facilitate a better understanding of the rich history behind these buildings that are now museums.

Make the Place: Go beyond the Building

Museums need to look beyond their buildings to root themselves within their local community. NHB's precinct management team engages with external stakeholders around the museums. This has resulted in cross-promotional efforts and greater buy-in by them for museum and heritage events. The Night Festival has been a successful rallying point, bringing more people into the area, which in turn patronises the businesses. An amazing \$5 offer for a glass of wine and *croque monsieur* by a French bistro was sold out before 11pm every night.

Holding regular events and festivals that people look forward to encourages access. The Public Garden flea market at NMS every last weekend of the month draws new visitors to the museum. Lighting the historic museum facade during the Night Festival is eagerly anticipated by the audience. All this allows the Bras Basah area to become anchored in people's minds as the place to go for cultural and heritage activities in Singapore. It can also provide a new way of appreciating art and heritage. Visitors can also relate to the historical monuments in a new light.

A key challenge for the future is whether the Singapore Management University's (SMU) Campus Green and other public spaces around Bras Basah can become a focal point that excites Singaporeans' imagination just as Federation Square has become entrenched as the cultural place to go to in Melbourne. This will need the alignment of community and agencies to programme the area with a range of activities. For example, a more regular closure of Stamford Road in front of the National Museum can allow an extended forecourt space for programmes and spillage of activities. This can be our own version of the public space in front of the Centre Pompidou, Paris. Regular art street markets can be allowed at Waterloo Street much like the well-loved Paddington Weekend Market in Sydney.

In Chongqing, China, there is an area around the Sichuan Fine Arts Institute where residents proudly volunteer their buildings to be painted with murals by the

students. This very ground-up community participation has created a surrounding that has since become an iconic must-see destination in Chongqing. We have three small wall murals in Bras Basah. Are we bold enough to expand it to the scale of Chongqing?

Who's Afraid of Heritage?

Blockbusters WOW

Blockbuster or travelling exhibitions of major collections or from major institutions make world heritage accessible to Singaporeans. As a strategy, such exhibitions are used to attract visitors, both new and existing, to the museum. Exhibitions that NHB museums have hosted include Egyptian mummies from the Kunshistorische Museum in Vienna; the Terracotta Warriors from Shanxi National Museum; the Impressionist Masters from the Musée d'Orsay; and the story of Buddha's enlightenment, including historic bone relics, in *On the Nalanda Trail* at ACM. These exhibitions generated long queues and attracted between 120,000 to 180,000 visitors each during their respective three-month exhibition periods. This shows that audiences in Singapore are discerning and appreciative of world culture. For the Impressionist Masters, there were overseas-conducted tour groups who visited the exhibition.

Many of these exhibitions adopt an intellectual approach and provide the opportunity for Singaporeans to learn about world history in the comfort of familiar surroundings. NHB has been thanked by many people from all walks of life for bringing such exhibitions to Singapore as they would not have had the chance to expose their children to such displays due to the cost of travelling abroad.

NHB curators also go the extra mile to contextualise world history in relation to Singapore so as to give a better understanding of our own historical timeline, or to relate world history in terms of our own beliefs and practices. This facilitates a better understanding of who we are and where we come from. For example, the Aga Khan exhibition, which showcased the best in Islamic art and architecture, was contextualised with an ACM-curated parallel exhibition of Southeast Asian and Singapore Islamic architectural styles, elements and artefacts.

The Popular Appeals

Popular culture appeals to most people, especially the younger set. They are fascinated by the current, and they feel that they can relate better to popular culture than to

historical events. The most successful exponent of popular culture is the Singapore Philatelic Museum (SPM), which in recent years has curated annual exhibitions using collectibles to make the stamps on display “come alive”. The *Iron Man CollARTible Exhibition* featured Iron Man stamps alongside collectibles and also handcrafted one-of-a-kind models and figurines.

SPM’s *Dark and Light* brings private collections of Star Wars figurines, Lego and also scale models of spacecraft to the fore; yet SPM remains true to its mission as these are shown in relation to Star Wars stamps. In so doing, they engage a whole new market of audiences and collectors who are inspired enough to even dress up as Storm Troopers to entertain the children. Such popular culture might well become historical objects of tomorrow. I propose that SPM can be re-gearred as a Museum of Recent Collectibles to take on this market gap in museums and bring even more private collections to the fore to be shared with all.

Building Bridges

I once spoke with two young couples on board a return flight from Hanoi. When asked if they had an enjoyable trip, they responded by saying that the city was boring as there was no good shopping. One does not go to Hanoi for shopping but to enjoy the rich heritage and culture! The best type of shopping in Hanoi is not as we expect in terms of t-shirts and bargains, but that of art and antiques.

Museums are vehicles to build people-to-people ties as we bring the heritage of others to Singapore and our own heritage to foreign lands. This aspect of cultural diplomacy facilitates better cross-cultural understanding and can soften Singapore’s image abroad.

Through the series of ASEAN-themed museum festivals on Vietnam, the Philippines, Indonesia and Thailand, NHB has brought the best of historical artefacts, visual arts, stamps, cinema, food and dance from these countries to Singapore. Some were graced by high-ranking foreign government officials at the Deputy Prime Minister or Minister level; then President Arroyo of the Philippines made a special effort to grace the opening of SAM’s *Thrice Upon a Time* — an exhibition featuring Filipino art — right upon her arrival in Singapore for an Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation (APEC) meeting. Through these shows, NHB professionals have become more knowledgeable of the respective art histories, ecosystems, artists and collectors. These ties are reinforced by the three ASEAN Museum Directors’ Symposium conferences organised by NHB.

NHB has in turn had the opportunity to share our Singapore story with the world at the Brunei Gallery, School of African and Oriental Studies, London; Musée du Quai Branly, Paris; National Museum of Korea, Seoul; and with joint stamp exhibitions in Hanoi, Vientiane and Macau. Our collections have also been exhibited in Beijing, Yokohama, Paris, Canberra and Brussels, to name a few. Appreciative audiences now have a better understanding of Singapore's culture and identity.

Use a Soft Touch

Programmes Attract

Accessible programming is critical in developing new audiences. Programmes are used to explain museum exhibits and bring educational messages home. They involve live performances through dance, or performances within the gallery. Successful examples include villagers from South Thailand at the Salak Yorn Festival at ACM's *Thai Buddhism* show, and concert pianists performing within the galleries for NMS' Impressionist Masters show.

Singapore Art Museum's (SAM) innovative programmes include an art education centre with permanent exhibits for teaching. This is done in consultation with teachers, and 10,000 school children go through it annually. The programme is coupled with specific "Who's afraid of Contemporary Art" worksheets and information kits for the teachers. SAM also has a small screening room that allows a range of films from artistic to children's art films to be featured. More such education centres can be built in ACM, the Peranakan Museum (TPM) and NMS to capture the hearts and minds of our young.

Use Plain English

Text labels allow visitors to understand the artefact or artwork. Some curators like to use intellectual lingo but this fails to engage. We live in a sound-bite generation who have short attention spans and we need to cater to the demands of instant messaging. People generally do want to learn and like to feel that they are smart.

At NHB, we have instituted simple label text between 30 to 50 words, in plain easy-to-read English targeted to be understood by 16-year-olds. Separate text for younger children with even fewer words is also provided. Catalogues in simple English help further understanding. To this effect, ACM's catalogues for *Terracotta*

Warriors and *Land of the Morning* exhibitions have been bestsellers, going into reprints due to both foreign and local demand.

ACM's multi-award-winning Terracotta app done in conjunction with Magma Studios brings further simplicity. It has been wildly successful allowing one to understand and interact with the exhibits with a personal handheld device. It is now being used in the San Francisco's famed Asian Art Museum. More investment in such apps can be done to engage a new generation of tech-savvy visitors.

Bring Heritage Home

The Heritage Industry Incentive Programme, or HI2P, has spawned a series of heritage-based products that one can take home. The most widely appealing is the series by artist Justin Lee, developed for the *Terracotta Warriors* exhibition. It includes handphone covers and notebooks, to contemporary interpretation of the warriors in piggy bank busts and statues. It is like having a slice of heritage-inspired memento close to one at all times to gently remind one of our historical origins. Another heritage industry project involved design collaboration with FARM, a Singapore design collective, who produced artistic heritage-based products for sale at NHB's Museum Label store. FARM received the Best Merchandise award at the International Design Communication 2013 Awards in Stockholm.

As a further development, I hope that HI2P can be expanded to build on these successes towards jump-starting the heritage industry ecosystem. In addition, we can consider allowing people to bring a selected "handle-able" artwork or artefact from an expanded Art Bank home for a period of time. This will broaden the appeal and give even more access to heritage for the community, especially school children.

Get It to Where People Are

Satellites Near You

NHB museums are located in the core Central Area, but often people cannot find the time to visit. So a major effort by NHB is to bring heritage to the people right where they live, with satellite museums, festivals and exhibitions. The first community gallery was opened at Taman Jurong Community Centre (TJCC) in 2012. It comprises three containers fitted out to museum standards, including relative humidity controls, in which pieces from the national collection are exhibited. One of the containers is designed to be detachable to travel around the larger community, so from TJCC

the “gallery” can now travel to five other CCs. I hope the community will eventually take over the TJCC community gallery in terms of organising exhibitions and programmes that are related to the community around it.

NHB was one of the first to bring festivals such as the Singapore Heritage Fest and travelling exhibitions to regional shopping centres and libraries to make it super-convenient for Singaporeans to have a brush with heritage and museum activities while they go about their daily lives; we also bring exhibitions and programmes to cluster schools. Specially choreographed heritage dramas bring history to life at school assemblies across Singapore; a travelling heritage trunk accompanied by volunteers will soon travel to schools as well.

With such a future network of regional galleries around the Central Area, this hub-and-spoke concept will allow NHB to reach out to even more people and bring heritage messages right to the heart of the community. It serves to drive greater interest back to the museum core while facilitating better understanding of heritage, thus providing “light education” that will prepare the visitor for future museum visits. I hope we can organise a nation-wide heritage day so that we can have one day in the year to remember the richness of our cultural diversity and shared heritage.

Say Hi to HIs

NHB was given the opportunity to operate community Heritage Institutions (HIs). These are rallying points for the community, serving to connect communities to their heritage and their links to the larger diaspora in the region and beyond. We re-invented and re-opened two heritage institutions to some success. They are the Malay Heritage Centre located in Kampong Glam, and the Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall located in Balestier. A third HI, the Indian Heritage Centre, located in Little India, is now being built. The various community boards were very active in steering the new exhibits, sourcing for new material and organising many heart-warming community events. The combined efforts to engage the community and encourage community ownership have worked well. A new generation of visitors is now rediscovering their heritage.

Beyond the HIs, my hope is for a National Trust of key buildings that can be opened to the public for viewing. Such buildings could include the Admiralty House in Sembawang, selected black-and-white bungalows in Mt Pleasant and Alexandra Road, and even shop houses in historic districts. Visits by school children can be

part of National Education tours. It will allow Singaporeans and visitors to gain insight into the historical life of buildings they might otherwise never have the opportunity to visit.

Go Take A Hike!

Heritage is more than displays within museums. There are living “museums” all around us in our Historic Districts, National Monuments, and individual historical buildings and sites all over our island. NHB has developed heritage trails and put them on apps. Contributing in research and memories, the local community has been very much involved in creating the trails with us. For example, in the Kampong Glam Trail, one can walk and explore the lively neighbourhood and gain insight into the area’s rich heritage and historic past. The aim is to have an island-wide trail that is plugged into the park connector network. How wonderful it will be to walk and learn at the same time!

In London, a visitor will notice circular plaques adorning historic buildings. The plaques give information about the historical significance of the building, describing a famous resident or event that took place there. We can learn from this as such markings on buildings will contribute meaningfully to enlivening the walking trails and make history come alive as visitors walk by old buildings that they might otherwise not take notice of. Marking historic buildings can also instil community pride in the local area.

Community Can Curate

Individuals or groups can be empowered to do more and to take more ownership in sharing knowledge with the community. Museum professionals cannot assume that only they know best. There are many others who are just as well-versed as experts in specialised topics. The issue is how to engage and how to facilitate.

There are two community galleries located next to the main entrances of NMS and TPM. They are meant for community-focused exhibitions and exhibitions by the community, enabling the museums to engage with diverse groups and to cover community-interest topics such as vanishing trades. I also hope that such spaces can additionally become interfaces for exchange between museum professionals and external field experts and researchers.

SPM holds regular sessions that allow students to curate stamp exhibitions; a documentary produced by NHB on wet markets got students to interview stallholders; the exhibition organised by the National Archives of Singapore (NAS) on the Bukit Ho Swee fire pooled research and artefacts from the community; Joo Chiat constituency not only curated their own exhibition but also designed their own heritage trail. Joo Chiat was the first recipient of the two Heritage Town Awards presented by NHB in 2011.

The best example in successful ground-up heritage events is Ground-Up Initiative's (GUI) *Heritage Kampong* festival held at Bottle Tree Park in Yishun in 2012 where the not-for-profit organisation curated exhibitions and programmes on kampong life of yore to educate our young. I visited a similar living village on the outskirts of Sydney where young families volunteer to go back to the earth, plough the land and live off the fruits of their labour for a period of time without any modern conveniences. I thought that that was a fantastic National Education tool. Can such a concept also work in an expanded scope of GUI's vision?

Bring IT around

In the Pocket

Virtual outreach presents another big opportunity to make museums and heritage handily accessible, especially to younger tech-savvy audiences. Handphones and tablets are enabling new mediums with which one could easily access heritage anywhere, anytime. Working in partnership with app developers, NHB has developed downloadable museum guides and apps of heritage trails. Tiong Bahru and Balestier are online, as are the World War II trail and Singapore River walk. HI2P also facilitated development of apps for walking trails such as Chinatown and World War II sites. This allowed the app developer LDR to use their enhanced experience to develop education apps for Brunei.

The community blog Yesterday.sg offers an easy read. It is self-administered, and has been awarded the fifth best museum blog in the world for consecutive years. The next step is to put our museum catalogues online for the world to read.

Through YouTube and NHB's own Heritage TV, NHB brings short museum and heritage videos to the small screen in your palm. *Heritage in Episodes* is a programme that features intangible heritage such as the last rattan weaver and an old-style Teochew bakery. Heritage TV takes one to historic places of Singapore and

comments on heritage issues. All episodes in Season 2 were done by two polytechnic students as their school project.

At Home and School

With 3D technology, one need not physically be in a museum to view an artefact. Instead, the artefact can be accessed on a small screen within the comfort of one's home or on a big screen in the classroom. SG COOL (Singapore Collections On-Line) showcases the national collection with a short educational description of each object. *Exhibitions Online* harnesses 3D technology to enable visitors to take a virtual walk through past exhibitions such as *Land of the Morning*, and to click on objects for descriptions. The next step is to draw up downloadable lesson plans that are developed with MOE's (Ministry of Education) curriculum, and this can open up a cool new way of teaching.

Games online with a heritage theme also bring heritage alive. Magma Studios' *World of Temasek* is a virtual role-playing game (RPG) that recreates the historical world of early Singapore and also allows gamers to use artefacts from the national collection to dress their avatars or to furnish their virtual "historical" homes. Such educational virtual games can engage younger audiences and fan their interest to find out more. Can more game creators step forward, please?

Involve Everyone

Giving Time

The involvement of the community and volunteers is a key part of the overall museum ecosystem. NHB has many good-standing people who step forward and serve on the NHB Board and on various institutional Advisory Boards. They contribute their ideas, time and passion to challenge and inspire NHB to even greater heights of achievements. Local celebrities such as Qi Yuwu, Mark Lee, Dick Lee and Irene Ang have also volunteered their talent to expose new communities to heritage. Mark Lee, a popular comedian/host/actor, in particular, stood out in the media and told the world that if he can visit museums and appreciate heritage, then anyone can! This really brought home the message that NHB's aim is to make heritage more accessible to all. Needless to say all his guided museum tours were over-subscribed.

The Friends of the Museum and Museum Volunteers are NHB's key partners in making heritage accessible to museum visitors. As museum docents, they tell stories and engage with visitors to better understand the exhibits and their histories. NHB has also seen more and more youngsters volunteering in NHB's programmes, an example being the Night Festival. Moving forward, active agers and the silver hair community are sources we should tap for volunteers. We started with RSVP for the Jalan Besar trail where community residents and friends guide every weekend at the TJCC gallery.

In addition, we need to step up our engagement with non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Art Outreach is an NGO that trains parent volunteers on Singapore art and art history (Art Outreach has produced some outstanding training programmes, one of which focuses on the life and art of pioneer artist Georgette Chen); the parent volunteers then go to schools and teach students during art lessons. This fills a gap in knowledge in art teachers and gives the students new insight. We need more of such heritage champions to step forward, make use of our heritage assets, and give us their time.

Gifting Hearts

Without donors, our museum programmes cannot fly. Cash and in-kind gifts go towards exhibitions and programmes. Mrs Julia Oh committed S\$10,000 per year to help NHB's younger professionals to be able to attach themselves to major international institutions. A group of individuals including Mr William Lim and Mr Vinod Nair selflessly contributed cash to sustain an annual Singapore young artist series of exhibitions. Hong Leong Foundation gave NHB our biggest single cash donation of S\$5 million. This amount is contributing towards ACM's new extension which will expand the space for the East Asian collection.

Artefact donors and private collectors are crucial in the ecosystem because they help fill gaps in the national collection. This allows more artefacts to be brought to the fore for public viewing and, with conservation care by NHB institutions, will protect and preserve our precious heritage for generations to come. The donation by the late Chinese artist Wu Guanzhong worth S\$75 million will allow millions of visitors to appreciate his artistry; a heart-warming donation of a humble tin-cup by the widow of the war hero Lt. Sidek will forever tell the story of the heroism and sacrifice of the Malay Regiment during World War II. Mr Lee Kip Lee and family have been generously building up the Peranakan collection at the TPM with their

gifts of *sarong kebayas* and old photographs, among others. I hope that more selfless donors will step forward in future.

Conclusion: You Be the Judge

This is the first time that I am reflecting on the achievements during my six-and-a-half-year term as CEO of NHB from 1 September 2006 to 28 February 2013. I have also included some ideas that I would have liked to have carried out. How did NHB fare during my appointment period? You be the judge!

The stories and memories I have shared are the happy ones, but they form only part of the story. On the flip side, we battled increasing costs, manpower shortages, administrative differences, pressure to reprioritise budgets and close festivals, differing opinions on how museums should be run, how heritage should be promoted and even questions if staging blockbuster exhibitions were actually useful in bringing world heritage to Singaporeans. But that's another story.

I am personally proud that, when I stepped down, awareness of heritage had increased dramatically, visitorship was at an all-time high and museums were no longer regarded as fortresses of knowledge but as accessible people-friendly places where heritage comes alive.

Public and education programmes expanded substantially, heartland outreach grew and exhibitions with Singapore content increased both locally and overseas. A big thank you to everyone for your strong support! I passed on the appointment of CEO NHB to Ms Rosa Daniel on 1 Mar 2013 and look forward to her writing the next chapter, building on the foundations that the three previous CEOs of NHB Mr Lim Siam Kim, Ms Lim Siok Peng and I have built over the last twenty over years of NHB's existence as a statutory board. With the strong support of heritage champions like current Minister MCCY Lawrence Wong and PS MCCY Ms Yeoh Chee Yean at the helm, I am confident that NHB, the National Gallery Singapore and the role that heritage plays in our lives will grow even more. Most of all, I dedicate this essay to the stalwart "never say die" officers (both past and present) at the NHB; to NHB Board members and all institutional Advisory Board members; to colleagues at the then MICA and MCCY; and especially to Singapore's exemplary heritage champion Prof Tommy Koh and Dr Tan Chin Nam for both championing the role of making Singapore a vibrant global city, and the arts and heritage accessible to the community.

Michael KOH

Michael Koh is credited for raising the profile and importance of museums and heritage in Singapore, making programmes and activities accessible to all. He is an architect by training, with two bachelor's degrees from the National University of Singapore and a Master's from Harvard University. He has 18 years of experience as a city-planner and urban designer at the Urban Redevelopment Authority, where he was a key driver behind Concept Plans for Singapore, and the vision, planning and urban design of Marina Bay and the Central Area. He had the wonderful opportunity of leading the National Heritage Board (NHB) for six and a half years as its third CEO (from August 2006 to February 2013). He was also concurrent CEO of the National Gallery Singapore (named National Art Gallery then, from January 2009 to May 2012). He has currently returned to the urban planning and real estate sector. He was conferred the *Officier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres* by the Ministry of Culture and Communication of France in 2010.

A Knight at the Esplanade

Benson PUAH in Dialogue with Renee LEE

Benson Puah in dialogue with Renee Lee discusses institutional agendas and his personal belief in developing arts for all through thousands of programmes and events at the Esplanade Theatres, which Benson and his team developed for the People's Arts Centre.

Benson Puah is the CEO of The Esplanade Co Ltd, and until July 2013, was also the CEO of the National Arts Council (NAC). Benson has a broad view of the arts, encompassing both “high art” and popular culture. Benson was forty-one years old when he became the Esplanade’s first CEO. He was clear from the start how he wanted to drive the performing arts venue: it must be relevant and belong to the people. To him, every individual has a need and an ability to communicate and express himself and is able to do so in a variety of forms, whether it be through song, dance, writing, painting or other very personal forms of expression. Singapore, with its diversity of peoples, is the beneficiary of artistic traditions from the four great civilisations of the Malay-Arab, Indian, Chinese and English-European. The nation had to engage with multi-ethnic and multi-cultural strands to create a national identity while preserving the cultural identity of each group.

From the interview conducted 2 April 2013 at the office of Benson, CEO of both NAC and The Esplanade, this piece provides a brief introduction to the decade of work done since the Esplanade — Theatres on the Bay opened its doors in October 2002.

Renee Lee: You've been made Knight of the Order of Arts and Letters by the French government.

Benson Puah: Oh, the knighthood was something that took me by surprise and I didn't feel deserving. The work that I do with my team is the legacy that should endure. I am quite happy to remain in the background and be forgotten.

RL: Still, the knighthood is an acknowledgement of your work and contributions to the arts, which takes us to the anthology. One of the objectives of the book is to go behind the scene, so to speak, and gain insights of the person behind the work. Now you say that your aim is to give choices to people to be themselves, aside from work. Do elaborate please.

BP: Our society has reached a stage where our priorities have shifted beyond the basic bread-and-butter issues. We are more concerned with the quality of our lives and are no longer satisfied just being gainfully employed as a digit of the economy. We now seek different pathways to find meaning and fulfilment. We want to realise our full potential. This may explain the increasing recognition that arts and sports are after all important in an individual's development. It is no longer a frill or a thrill but important strands that forge our DNA. I believe that society's lingering pre-occupation with material wealth has upset our equilibrium and has insidiously depleted our soul. The arts can offer choices for an enriched life that is not defined by the job we do or the amounts of money we earn. As individual human beings, the value of our life is more than just figures on our pay cheque! Reclaiming our humanity is priceless. The responsibility that my team and I shoulder is to help people connect in their own personal way with the wealth the arts can offer. It is very gratifying when we see glowing eyes after a moving performance or a certain calm that follows a soul embraced. We know that something deep within the person has been touched and perhaps a door opened for that person to explore their innermost selves. We all want the world to be a better place. Well, what we do at the Esplanade are the little steps that hopefully help with making that change happen.

RL: How is this belief operationalised in the Esplanade for example?

BP: The Esplanade must be an arts centre that is relevant to people. And by people we mean all people, not just segments of people who are already art lovers

or connoisseurs. So the first thing we needed to do was to ensure that people are comfortable to visit. Many national arts centres are scary places where there are stringent dress codes, codes of behaviour that separate the man-on-the-street, unfamiliar with such rituals from the converted, cultural elite. The Esplanade welcomes everyone and all our staff, including our out-sourced service providers, are trained to ensure that we care for our visitors. At any time of the day, you will see a cross-section of Singapore and tourists feeling very much “at home” throughout the Esplanade. As we welcome our visitors we ensure that they are exposed to a variety of art forms at any time. The free music programming we do nightly at the Concourse and over the weekends at the Outdoor Theatre is intended to expose and engage visitors to a variety of music and sometimes dance that they would not ordinarily encounter or choose to listen to. For instance, you may be attending a Malay popular concert but you may hear music from a Chinese ensemble at the Concourse. Through time, people’s aural aesthetics become attuned to the variety of sounds that is very much a part of Singapore culture. Likewise visual arts. There are changing exhibitions all year round at different spaces at the Esplanade. The public have become accustomed to the variety of ideas and forms that help evolve their visual aesthetic. Then there is the broad and varied calendar of events that we present.

RL: I like the corporate and visitor culture you created to make people feel safe and comfortable in your arts centre. What does the calendar include?

BP: We have about 14–15 festivals and over 21 series that literally cover all cultural, ethnic and age groups. We present over 3000 performances and between 40 and 60 exhibitions yearly. That’s a lot to choose from!

RL: That is a “happening” calendar of events! What differentiates the festivals from the series? And does the Esplanade do productions on top of performances?

BP: Our festivals are intense experiences over either a weekend starting Friday or for ten days spanning two weekends. They offer wonderful journeys for those open and curious enough to commit themselves to art and artists that may not always be familiar to them, whereas our series are single presentations spread through the year. Between our festivals and series we cater to almost every segment of our

very diverse communities and age groups. From our opening in 2002, when we commissioned a new dance production, till today, we have increased significantly the number and range of performances commissioned or produced by my team. The Studios series has a high percentage of newly produced work and for our tenth anniversary in 2012, most of the local works presented were new, including *National Broadway Company*.

RL: Please explain the programming priority. Is it policy or research?

BP: "Policy" is perhaps too rigid or unyielding a term to describe our programming strategies and direction that is guided by our mission and vision. The choices and decisions we make are certainly influenced by the realities of the market and the public we serve. We are not programming in a vacuum but sensitively and sensibly to ensure that we invest wisely in developing the arts and our people, through the arts.

RL: You are the first and only CEO of the Esplanade. It would be education to know the greatest challenge of the decade for you as leader of the Esplanade.

BP: The greatest challenge this past decade and the decade to come would still be that of fixed mindsets. Despite the wider general acceptance of the arts, there is still a lack of real understanding of its value to the individual and society. The decision-makers who decide on funding for the arts still use business models as a comparative benchmark. A hospital and an army camp are equally not-for profit institutions as much as cultural institutions. Each plays different roles in serving the varied needs of society. I do believe that whilst the arts (and sports) may not have the same priority as defence, education and health, it is not unimportant. How a society thrives and a nation built is not solely driven by its economics but also by its cultural and emotional DNA, the sense of community, belonging and identity. The softer aspects which are perhaps difficult for technocrats and bureaucrats to financially justify are the cultural lubricants to the building blocks of Singapore.

RL: What's the lowest point in your career with the Esplanade and how did you overcome that?

BP: I really cannot recall a specific lowest point as I had never expected that the responsibilities of managing the Esplanade would be easy, considering all the negativity that surrounded it when I first joined. I guess it couldn't have gotten

any worse from that very low starting point! Admittedly, it was not and is still not easy-going. That the Esplanade can play a meaningful role in serving our people through the arts gives me the resolve to keep at it.

RL: What is the Esplanade's greatest achievement through the decade?

BP: I really don't know how to answer this as I do not think that a 12-year-old cultural institution can yet boast of achievements. We have been quite successful in many of our endeavours, of creating festivals, events, markets, even some behavioural shifts, but it is the sum of these endeavours and how it influences desirable changes in our society that matter most. Perhaps our achievement in relation to our contribution to society is best measured after one generation.

RL: Personally, what is your greatest achievement at the Esplanade?

BP: This is an even more difficult, if not impossible, question for me to answer! I cannot think in terms of achievement for my responsibilities at Esplanade. I have derived a great deal of fulfilment in seeing my young team grow in their knowledge, experience and dedication to the mission of Esplanade. It is also deeply gratifying when I see happy people or people moved by their experiences at the Esplanade. It makes my labour meaningful when others benefit.

RL: What do you think the Esplanade will be like in ten years?

BP: What I do know is that the needs and issues that will influence the Esplanade's role and contributions the next ten years will not be anything like the past ten years. Hopefully in ten years' time, the Esplanade's Phase 2 would have been built, completing the original design and vision of the Esplanade. The medium-sized venues and additional studios for residencies will be game-changers for the arts in Singapore. It will catalyse the development of artists and works adding to a thriving arts scene with a greater breadth and depth of high-quality, locally produced works.

RL: Most people know that you were a hotelier. How did a hotelier become interested to work in the arts? How did that help you in your work?

BP: I wasn't actually in the hotel business when I joined The Esplanade (Co.). I was in health care then and prior to that at Sentosa Development Corporation, a statutory board. So I came from several different sectors aside from hotel management. The

arts aren't so much an interest but a part of my life from a very early age. I started piano lessons even before going to school and in school was involved in almost all the art forms and also in competitive sports. I joined The Esplanade not because it was another job. I believed that The Esplanade had a role to play in the transformation of our society, from an economy to a nation and I accepted the responsibility to helm it when asked to serve.

RL: Are you inspired by any particular leader?

BP: I cannot say that I had the good fortune of working directly with people who were inspirational as leaders. If anything, I had lots of poor experiences with bosses that fuelled my resolve to not be like them! That perhaps in itself is valuable. I have encountered many people, not necessarily leaders, who have been inspirational; ordinary, hardworking people, very principled, strong value systems, strong moral compass, humble. I believe I can learn from the good in people, not necessarily from leaders only.

I have, however, the greatest respect and admiration for our founding generation of leaders, such as Lee Kuan Yew, Goh Keng Swee, S Rajaratnam and Lim Kim San.

RL: How would you encourage the next generation of arts administrators and artists?

BP: Think positive, have faith and give it your best with whatever you've got. It will matter to many others. We are privileged to be able to serve through the arts.

Benson Puah

Benson Puah is Chief Executive Officer of The Esplanade Co Ltd and is responsible for the overall development, management, programming and artistic direction of Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay. He was concurrently CEO of the National Arts Council from 2009 to 2013. He recently stepped down after ten years in office as Chairman of the Association of Asia Pacific Performing Arts Centres (AAPPAC). In 2008, he was the first Asian to be elected as Chairman of the New York-based International Society for the Performing Arts (ISPA), a position he held for two years before retiring as immediate Past Chair for another year. In 2010, he was conferred the *Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres* or "Knight of the Order of Arts and Letters" by the French government for his contributions to the arts in Singapore.

Imprint
Cultural Diplomacy and Singapore Season

Carol TAN



IMPRINTS – Impression. Mission. Press. Reach. International. Name. Talent. Singapore. It took much cajoling before Carol Tan agreed to share her experience as a cultural diplomat. Even so, she prefers to leave barely a mark of herself, pushing Dr Tan Chin Nam and Goh Ching Lee as the initiators and experts in the various high-profile cultural missions that Singapore embarked on in the last decade.

Carol joined the public sector in 2002 as Deputy Chief Executive Officer of National Arts Council (NAC) after 18 years in the private sector. She was seconded to the Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts (MICA) to head the National Marketing Department in 2004. The department was tasked to create affinity and positive perceptions for Singapore internationally by leveraging on cultural diplomacy programmes like the Singapore Season. Within Singapore, she also worked closely with the Singapore Kindness Movement in promoting graciousness and a sense of belonging. Carol has an MBA from the University of Strathclyde and joined NAFA in 2012. She was appointed as Vice President (Admin) in July that year.

Carol is a person reliable and relatable for all seasons and her work should be remembered, her talents and contributions to Singapore profiled. On stage or back stage, she is able to move with the times, helping to bring Singapore into the global era through cultural diplomacy.



Singapore Festivals came about as a framework agreement on cultural cooperation between France and Singapore in January 2009. This was followed by the signing of a memorandum of understanding between the National Heritage Board and France's Réunion des Musées Nationaux. These agreements marked an important milestone in the bilateral relationship with France and signified a commitment and determination on the part of both countries to intensify arts and cultural cooperation.

Other highlights included nine days of colourful, family-friendly Peranakan programmes titled *Semaine Peranakan*. Visitors experienced and learnt about the rich and hybrid nature of Peranakan culture through performances, demonstrations and interactive activities.

Some of Singapore's best performing arts groups, including the Singapore Chinese Orchestra Ensemble and the T.H.E Dance Company were programmed into Festivals by the NAC. Popular local films such as *Here*, *881* and *Blue Mansion* by Singapore directors were also screened to give audiences an insight into Singaporean customs, lifestyles and humour.



Tier 3: Mission Ambassadorship

This tier was meant to support Missions in cities that do not have benefit from the first two tiers, through supporting artists for the Missions' own cultural diplomacy programmes. The impact of this initiative was seen by influential opinion and decision-makers in those cities along with a more targeted reach of a segment of the public. This programme provided the opportunity for outstanding artists to be profiled in a niche manner.



Key Takeaways from Organising Cultural Diplomacy Programmes



Programme Partners and Scalability

The core arts and cultural programme and associated events should be developed in close association with public and private sector partners even as the relevant agencies program their activities. Programmes should be scalable and programming must take into account differences in culture and preferences of the host country. In China where they have thousands of tribes for instance, our multi-racial offerings would not have as much appeal as our creative media and pop culture. A consolidated marketing effort led by a main agency to look at overall marketing and branding should be provided for government agencies and sponsors to leverage on and plug into with minimal effort.



Choice of City

In deciding where to go, a factor to consider was whether a country has strong or growing trade links with Singapore as Singapore's economic agencies are more likely to give their support. Substantial Singapore private-sector investment in the country was another consideration as it would encourage participation from the private sector. The target city in the chosen country should ideally be the centre of the arts in the country as the natural audience will be an advantage.



Frequency of Singapore Season

Singapore Season should not be attempted annually as it is of a large scale that requires long lead times. Organising one every two or three years would ensure sufficient planning time as each Singapore Season instalment is typically a major initiative involving arts programmes of the highest quality. The marketing and publicity programme should also be tailored to have an expansive and extensive impact.



Duration

A six-week-long season is thought to be an ideal length of time for a major Season as the length is deemed to be of optimum yield in the cost-impact

equation. This, however, should also depend on conditions in the country/city of choice.



Working Structure

A Steering Committee and many Working Committees should be appointed to look after the various aspects such as the Arts Programmes, Business Engagement Event, Gala Dinner, Marketing & Publicity and Budget & Sponsorship. This practice will ensure that we minimise things falling through the cracks.

Arts Programmes and Venues

The need to be aware of the differences in the culture of each country and the norms cannot be over-emphasised. There is no one size that fits all in terms of the programming. Likewise the right choice of venue and presenters would help to position Singapore correctly in the minds of the target group. It is important to book the right venues for the type of programmes. In starting out late for Festivarts, the programmer for the Singapore Chinese Orchestra (SCO) was not able to get a suitable venue and the SCO ensemble was made to perform in the Museum, a venue which was not suited for an Orchestra of SCO's stature.

Thought should be placed into choosing performances that appeal to audiences in the target city; for example, pop rather than classical music worked better in some markets like China.



It is useful to make the effort to explain to the participating artists that Singapore Season had benefitted everyone in general as the profile of Singapore arts scene is raised.

Associate Programmes

The inclusion of a business engagement event is almost always welcomed and deemed beneficial to the economic agencies participating in these programmes. Business engagement events could take several forms like a conference with a keynote lecture, or closed-door round tables where captains of industry are hosted by an influential person.

Associated events can be independently organised by government agencies and private companies to benefit from the overall branding of our programmes. An example was the Singapore Food Festival hosted by a Singapore Hotel where care was taken to ensure that the quality of this associated event was kept at a high level. We cannot have negative media coverage to impact on the perceived success of our Cultural Diplomacy efforts.

(Gala) Dinner

A (gala) dinner to top off our efforts is highly recommended as it provides an occasion for government agencies and private-sector sponsors to host their clients or potential investors. The programming aspect of the Gala Dinner should be used to spread messages on Singapore's vibrancy, and business connectivity can be subtly showcased. We have many talented local chefs that we can feature.

Support of Singapore High Commission

The Singapore High Commission or Embassy should be sought to invite distinguished guests in the target city for the purpose of building relationships. Likewise they should provide media contacts and logistical support as ground experts, so that the Patron of Singapore Season and our guests can fully benefit from the participation.

Conclusion

In spite of the high costs, I am of the opinion that cultural diplomacy is a good tool that has helped to present a softer side of Singapore and shape positive perceptions. In addition to media coverage, the result of bringing our artists overseas can also



bring strategic spin-offs as they could be subsequently invited to perform in other countries. Business leaders and key opinion leaders who attended the conferences and evenings have expressed new conviction in Singapore as a business and lifestyle destination. The diplomatic community also recognised that employing the arts is a powerful platform for diplomacy. A bonus outcome of these cultural diplomacy programmes is the possibility of it becoming a rallying point for overseas Singaporeans to remain rooted to Singapore.

I am happy to note that an additional \$20 million will be committed in the next five years towards this purpose and wish the National Arts Council every success as the lead agency for our Cultural Diplomacy efforts.

CURATORS CRITICS HISTORIANS

This section introduces the writers whose works lend credence and longevity to culture, arts and artists. The chronological documentation of the visual arts in the intellectual contexts of aesthetic and critical theories enables Singapore to build a reputation and international presence. The essays also reveal methodologies in curatorial directions, research and cultural history.

Crossroads of History and Art

Alan CHONG

Dr Alan Chong reflects on Singapore history as a means of articulating a direction for the Asian Civilisations Museum — to refocus its mission on the cross-cultural and fused forms of artistic expression in this part of the world. A museum of the past can remind audiences that there are strong historical precedents for globalisation.

Cultural History

The cultural institutions in any major metropolitan area must strive to represent and capture many different voices: from local talent to international celebrities — whether in the visual or performing arts. Moreover, the nurturing of local art forms and the related impulse to push them onto an international stage is often the explicit goal of national cultural programmes. Singapore's rapid expansion of its museum and its performing arts sector in the 1990s and in the first decade of this century is impressive by any standard, and this seems an appropriate time to reflect on the strengths of the programmes so far and to anticipate new opportunities that may arise.

The opening of the Esplanade and the refurbishment of the Asian Civilisations Museum and the National Museum of Singapore, as well as more recent projects such as the Victoria Concert Hall and the National Gallery Singapore, have given Singapore world-class facilities. Strong support for the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music and for schools of art has further deepened culture in the city.

One of the great strengths of these cultural programmes is the balance between local content and world prominence. While dealing with local history and

artists, and representing local talent and collectors, the National Heritage Board museums have also mounted important international exhibitions to educate and delight local audiences. This larger educational mission lies at the core of all museums: to make the cultures of the world accessible to all. Yet this balance is very difficult to achieve and sustain. There has long been pressure on the “national” institutions — the National Museum and the National Heritage Board — to campaign for a sense of identity. Museum professionals know very well that anything that smacks of propaganda and indoctrination encounters strong resistance from audiences, especially younger visitors. Moreover, the practice of history as a field of study has evolved quickly in recent decades, away from political histories of great powers and leaders, towards more socially aware and expansive concepts of the past. It is no longer sufficient to simply report the evolution of a state from colonialism to independence, nor is it even enough to narrate the rich story of immigration and economic development. History can now be regarded as a seamless flow of politics and economics into culture, language, food, fashion and behaviour. The National Museum of Singapore’s galleries devoted to photography, film, food and fashion admirably attempted to deal with history at its widest impact, although this was not without criticism. And we can look forward to a refinement of this approach in the museum’s re-installation.

This challenge is compounded by the fact that the museums of Singapore did not inherit strong collections of archaeology and anthropology of its native culture, as is the case with nearly every other national museum in Asia. While the Raffles Library and Museum, the precursor of the national museum network, first founded in 1849 and given its own building in 1887, can legitimately claim to be one of the oldest museums in the world, it had sparse holdings of regional (let alone Singapore) arts. The lack of a land and maritime archaeology policy, coupled with the limited resources devoted to archaeology, has meant that the national museums have not grown in these areas. The picture is completely different in Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, Indonesia and Malaysia (as well as China, Japan and Korea), where vast collections of historical artifacts reaching back thousands of years are part of their



Silver Cup (depicting centaurs abducting Lapith women)
 Roman Empire (eastern Mediterranean), ca. AD 1
 Found in Gandhara
 Silver, height 11.7 cm
 Asian Civilisations Museum
 Singapore

national museums. Many of them are able to present an integrated survey of their national histories that blend art, artefact, culture and history.

One of the challenges of Singapore's cultural scene is that Singapore is a city-state. The ideas of nations and cities represent very different historical impulses, and any strict definition of "national" and "nation-state" is fraught with problems. That there is no simple and easy definition of a national culture is a problem faced by many of the nations newly created in the course of the 20th century. But the problem is exacerbated by Singapore's size and interconnections with its region and the world. Put simply, the political definition of Singapore as a nation and an identity does not relate with the history and cultures of the region.

Intelligent revision of the narrow political view of Singapore's history and culture has been undertaken by several historians, for example, Kwa Chong Guan, Derek Heng and Tan Tai Yong, whose book *Singapore: A 700-Year History — From Early Emporium to World City* of 2009 resets the narrative of Singapore's origins not only much earlier than traditionally conceived, but also shows it to have been more regional in its connectivities. John Miksic's work on



Brushrest

China, Jingdezhen, Ming Dynasty
(Zhengde period, 1506–1521)
Porcelain, 11 x 22 cm

Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore

Southeast Asian trading patterns, *Singapore and the Silk Road of the Sea, 1300–1800* (2013), expands our understanding of Singapore's place in the world. Peter Lee's reconceptualization of the Peranakan world discards the notion of an isolated community of Chinese in the Straits Settlements appropriating certain Malay customs, and proposes that Peranakans as a blended community have roots in the ports ranging from Goa and the Cape to Batavia.* These writers have reinvented Singapore as part of rich trading networks, rather than an isolated colony founded in 1819. They also suggest that the idea of the modern nation-state inadequately explains this history. Their view privileges the connections among the port cities of Asia, such as Penang, Malacca, Jakarta, Manila, Macau, Hong Kong and Shanghai — which shared trade, populations, behaviours, colonial tensions and art forms. Moreover, I would suggest, these networks form cultures of their own, quite independent of the Western colonial powers and their successor nations.

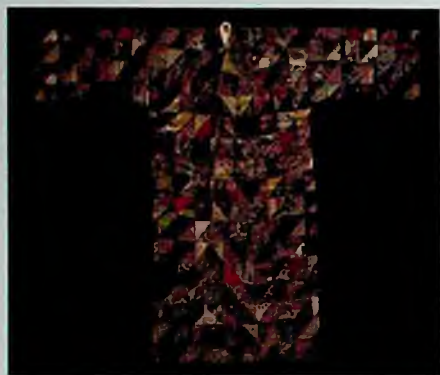
* Lee, P. (2014), *Sarong Kebaya: Peranakan Fashion in an Interconnected World 1500–1950*, Select Books.

Asian Civilisations Museum

Also significant is the invention of the Asian Civilisations Museum as part of the national museum network in 1991, an idea formulated by George Yeo, then Minister for Culture, who is responsible for much of the cultural landscape in Singapore today. The Raffles Museum (after 1965, the National Museum) was divided into institutions that focused on history, art and ethnology. Several impulses came together in the founding of the Asian Civilisations Museum, prime among them being the representation of the ancestral cultures of the Asian immigrants which made up Singapore — the traditions, arts and religions of China, India and the Malay world. There was also discussion of capturing pan-Asian or Confucian values. With core strength in Southeast Asian ethnographic arts, much of it collected in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and a small group of Chinese ceramics, the new museum needed to embark on entirely new collecting areas in India and the Islamic world. The components of the museum were gradually expanded and refined so that at the time of its installation in the building at Empress Place, the Asian Civilisations Museum was arranged in the broad geographic categories of Southeast Asia, East Asia, South Asia and West Asia (Islamic world). In 2008, the Peranakan Museum was added to this scheme.

If this first scheme was intended to reflect Singapore's composition and identity, it captured a fairly narrow concept, based roughly on the policy need to represent Chinese, Indians, Malays and others. Like the old narrative of great political events and great leaders employed for history, the scheme did not work well for a museum of art and culture. First, it largely left out the European influence on Asia culture, and vice versa, which would seem to be a crucial ingredient in the art of the region. Second, the concept of West Asia/the Islamic world sits awkwardly in the arrangement, if only because much of the Malay world is Muslim and West Asia embraces many more religions than Islam. Third, the collections of Chinese and Indian art do not compare well in quality with major museums around the world. Finally, as the formation of the Peranakan Museum demonstrated, cross-cultural art is not only extremely vibrant and interesting, it is directly tied to the history of Singapore itself.

The Asian Civilisations Museum has recently attempted to refocus its mission on the cross-cultural and fused forms of artistic expression in Asia. This is intended to more directly mirror the nature of Singapore's history in the world as a port city composed of many different communities who have lived and worked



Kebaya

Sumatra, Lampung, 18th century
Patchwork of cotton, silk and wool from India, China,
Indonesia and Europe, 122 x 142 cm
Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore
Gift of Mr and Mrs Lee Kip Lee

together. Singapore is the result of immigration and trade, and at certain points in its history, blended cultures have emerged. Moreover, the rise of inter-cultural marriage and the influx of new immigrants will further enrich society. A museum of the past can remind audiences that there are strong historical precedents for this.

In its collection and display policies, the museum will attempt to move beyond the traditionally isolated cultural categories and explore important points of exchange and fusion. This is not only a way of

representing Singapore's community but also a way of setting the museum apart on the world stage. For example, there are many good collections of Islamic art and of Chinese export art around the world, but few major museums attempt to collect the Islamic art of Southeast Asia or of China, or to display Chinese export porcelain made for Southeast Asia and India. The history of religion in Asia has rightly focused on the dominant role of Buddhism and Hinduism in many regions, but attention should also be given to Christianity and Islam in the visual cultures of the continent. We also intend to give attention to nodal points in Asian art history, where different political and religious influences overlapped — again in a manner that reflects Singapore's unique position. Thus, Goa, Sri Lanka, Malacca, the Himalayas, Macau, Quanzhou, Guangzhou, Manila, Jakarta, Istanbul and Nagasaki are worthy of close study for the unique hybrid forms of art they produced. In this way, the museum might suggest that globalisation is nothing new — that trade and migration have brought people together for millennia, and thus engendered the creation of new cultures and art forms.

Alan CHONG

Dr Alan Chong is Director of the Asian Civilisations Museum and the Peranakan Museum, and is concurrently the Chief Curatorial Director of the National Heritage Board. The Asian Civilisations Museum is preparing new galleries and a new riverfront entrance, to be opened in October 2015. A new gallery will focus on the Tang Shipwreck excavated near Belitung Island in the Java Sea.

Dr Chong leads a curatorial team that has expanded the museums' collection, especially in export and trade art. Recent exhibitions at the museums include *Secrets of the Fullen Pagoda: Treasures from Famen Temple and the Tang Court*; *Emily of Emerald Hill: Singaporean Identity on Stage*; *Devotion and Desire: Cross-Cultural Art in Asia*; and *China Mania! The Global Passion for Porcelain, 800–1900*.

Raised in Hawaii, Dr Chong received his PhD in art history at the Institute of Fine Arts at New York University and his undergraduate degree at Yale University. Dr Chong previously served as curator at the Cleveland Museum of Art and the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston.

A Museological Challenge: Presenting Living Cultures of the South Asians in a Museum Context in Singapore^{*}

Gauri Parimoo KRISHNAN

Dr Gauri Parimoo Krishnan provides insights into the curatorial decisions she had to make in exhibiting Indian culture. A trained historian, she writes on issues and challenges, shedding light on how she developed the curatorial brief, design decisions and gallery display, which unfold the storyline and its experiential rendition in the South Asia gallery of the Asian Civilisations Museum.

Background

As the newly appointed curator for the Asian Civilisations Museum's yet to be developed South Asia collection, I first walked into the stores of the former National Museum¹ to find a post-Gupta sandstone *Mukhalingam*, a bronze dancing Krishna (later identified as Sambandar) from the Chola period, a clutch of erotic ivory carvings, a gilded *pichhavai* and beautifully painted Sri Lankan pots. It was August 1993 and the South Asia Collection per se had been conceived only the year before. The collection was piecemeal and had begun with a view to showcase the artistic and cultural heritage of the Indian subcontinent.

^{*} This essay is a revised version, first published as "Constructing A Museological Paradigm of Living Cultures: The Making of the South Asia Gallery at the Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore", in Shivaji K. Panikkar *et al.* (eds.), *Towards a New Art History: Studies in Indian Art (Essays presented in honour of Professor Ratan Parimoo)*, DK Printworld (P) Ltd, New Delhi 2003.

1 The National Museum began as the Raffles Museum and Library in 1887 and became the National Museum in 1960 under the direct supervision of the former Ministry of Culture, which has become the Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts (at the point when this essay was originally written, but currently the Ministry of Communications and Information). See Liu, G. (1987), *One Hundred Years of the National Museum, Singapore, 1887-1987*, Government of Singapore, Singapore.

The National Heritage Board (NHB), an umbrella organisation, was set up in August 1993 to manage museums on Singapore's history (Singapore History Museum), ancestral cultures (Asian Civilisations Museum) and modern and contemporary art (Singapore Art Museum). The Oral History Centre and the National Archives were also brought under the umbrella of the NHB. Taking over the collection of the former National Museum, which had been run as a department of the Civil Service under the Ministry of Culture, the NHB became a statutory board by an act of Parliament under the newly formed Ministry of Information and the Arts (MITA). Speaking at the opening of the exhibition *Gems of Chinese Art* at the Empress Place Building (where the present Asian Civilisations Museum opened in 2003) former Minister George Yeo said: "The Asian Civilisations Museum is not intended for Singaporeans alone. It is intended for all Asians and for all those who want to understand Asia. We should establish such a museum because Singapore is a centre of Asian cultures with a remarkable mix of races, languages and religions."²

The period from 1990s onwards is perceived as a sea change when considering the government's keenness to develop the arts and heritage in Singapore. Commitment to developing museums was unprecedented. A long-term plan involving the conservation and refitting of old buildings was drawn up to accommodate world-class museum conservation standards while at the same time building up a collection of relevant artefacts.³ The Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM), with special focus on Asian material culture, saw to the development of new West Asian/Islamic and South Asian collections as its fresh mandate, in addition to its inherited Southeast Asian and East Asian collections.⁴ The Southeast Asian collection was formerly part of the National Museum, which began as the Raffles Library and Museum in 1887. Stamford Raffles collected natural specimens and ethnographic artefacts from many tribal and courtly cultures of Southeast Asia, leaving some examples in Singapore before shipping the bulk of the collection off to England. Other artefacts were gradually bought or donated, although the funding for acquisition was never generous, even

2 *The Straits Times*, 31 January 1992, p. 4; Singapore Government Press Release, release no. 34/JAN. Speech by BG (RES) George Yeo, Minister for Information and the Arts and Second Minister for Foreign Affairs, at the opening of the "Gems of Chinese Art" exhibition on 30 January 1992 at 11 a.m. at the Empress Place Building.

3 Museum Precinct Master Plan, Architectural Concept Brief, National Museum, Singapore, LORD Cultural Resources Planning & Management Inc., August 1992, unpublished.

4 By May 1991, a concept paper "Structure and Themes of the Museum of Asian Civilisations in the National Museum Precinct" had been drafted by Mr C.G. Kwa, then Director of the National Museum, incorporating ideas and revisions from then Minister (BG) George Yeo.

in the 1980s. Nor were the conditions for storage particularly sophisticated. Today, both these have achieved international museum standards.

In this essay, I will focus on the conceptualisation of the storyline and its presentation in the South Asia gallery design of the ACM, challenges of objectivity faced by me as the pioneer curator and about negotiating the various issues associated with diversity of the Indian community and constructing a cohesive narrative.⁵

Storyline for the South Asia Gallery

As the collection strength of the South Asia gallery is India, the gallery took greater Indian inspiration without ignoring the other subcontinent cultures. There needed to be an experiential anchor more than a chronological unfolding of the civilisation. However, the dangers of such an approach were many, chief of which were the influences that impinged on my objectivity as curator.

In Singapore, prevailing Indian stereotypes envelope colour, language, food and cultural habits. The same is true all over the world. International Indian stereotypes that we often come across are generally over-merchandised, over-philosophised, orientalised or sometimes typecast as blind faith, ranging from curries, tandoori chicken and Bollywood movies, to Bhangra aerobics, the Hindu caste system, yoga, Ayurveda, Vedanta philosophy, Art of Living, Vipassana — the list is endless. The task I faced was to identify stereotypes objectively and to challenge them courageously.

Exacerbating my predicament further was the debate over the Saffronisation of India in the 1990s. The concern over India's pluralistic identity being replaced by an explicitly Hindu one led to strong criticism of the Saffron lobby from many quarters, with the result that even archaeology was being politicised! India was once again becoming divided on grounds of religion. In ACM's South Asia gallery, we attempted to project a positive, unified image: however diverse Indian cultural

5 Originally published as "Constructing a Museological Paradigm of Living Cultures and the Making of the South Asia Gallery at the Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore", in Shivaji K. Panikkar *et al.* (eds.), *Towards a New Art History: Studies in Indian Art (Essays presented in honour of Professor Ratan Parimoo)*, DK Printworld (P) Ltd, New Delhi 2003, pp. 410–425; "Museological Challenge in the 21st Century: The Making of the South Asia Gallery at the Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore", in Usha Bhatia (ed.), *Lalit Kalia: A Journal of Oriental Art*, No. 30, Lalit Kalia Academy, New Delhi, 2004, pp. 67–84; and "A Museological Challenge: Presenting Living Cultures in the South Asia Gallery of the Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore", in Gauri Parimoo Krishnan (2007), *The Divine Within: Art & Living Culture of India & South Asia*, Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore pp. 12–19.

roots may be, they reflect a common heritage as well as interconnections and cross-fertilisation of ideas and practices that have existed over centuries.

Indians of our generation have no spokesperson or *yugapurusha* such as Vivekananda or Gandhi to raise the consciousness of people abroad (as well as within India) about what Indian culture really stands for. Against such a backdrop of confusion, any effort to showcase Indian culture with diversity is next to impossible. India's glorious past can still be presented with some credibility, but such presentation would be haunted by the unsavoury reality of the present.

My role as curator, conceptualising and executing the storyline, collection policy and gallery design, made me vulnerable to the prevailing tensions: either exoticise the culture or turn nationalistic and glorify the ideal of an ossified Indian culture. I attempted to steer clear of both. Instead, I embraced the current reality through the eyes of the Indian diaspora in Singapore and decided that it should be the story of *their* culture that was to be unfolded through the various sections of the gallery. This way I tried to bring a flavour of the current cultural practices into the museum and in turn offer a perspective on the South Asian community with which *they* would be able to relate.

Taking this approach neither excluded popular culture nor glorified high culture — balancing the two extremes was a conscious effort. In any case, the South Asia gallery cannot be a true reflection of any one culture, as it is the intention to present several essential references or points of entry for visitors to learn, interact and explore further. Very often, therefore, a familiar chord is struck without the attempt at generalisation. Engaging in a post-modern discourse relating personal identity, shared identity or forced identity, rootedness and displacement due to migration, the South Asia gallery hopes to highlight Singapore's Indian cultural heritage, and its relation to the cultural identity of Southeast Asia and the future of Indians in Singapore.

Design Inspiration for the South Asia Gallery

The South Asia gallery was to be located on the ground floor of the Empress Place building and visitors will generally reach it after they have been through the Southeast Asia, East Asia and West Asia galleries. The context of the gallery space (a colonial building with high ceilings, massive columns, arches and cornices) casts the gallery in overwhelmingly colonial overtones. ACM curators faced the challenge to fit

Asian artefacts within this given space by co-habiting it and tried to avoid hazarding their decontextualisation. This was the perennial trial that curators and designers had to go through. For the South Asia gallery, the decision was made to allow the architecture to envelope the gallery space. The gallery was painted in a neutral but inviting colour. The English vault doors and iron grill⁶ in the performing arts and sanctum-*mandapam* area were retained, so as to evoke the feel of the *gudha mandapam* (small connecting hall) and *garbhagriha* (sanctum) of a Hindu temple. This way we lent new meaning to the original space: when the visitor arrived in the temple sanctum section to find it carved out of the original treasury vault when the Ministry of Finance occupied that section of the building with its grill doors to lock up the bank notes and other valuables, he encountered the deconstruction of the Colonial administration building into a Hindu temple! This space has ever since delighted our visitors who enjoy the dual narratives in the context of this display.

The main gallery display is arranged in a linear chronological labyrinth, so visitors meander their way through historic and thematic displays of early civilisations, sciences and religions before arriving at the South India section where the real journey begins through a temple town. Two different types of journeys are implied here: a physical, sensory one, which dovetails into a spiritual one; from secular to sacred that ends in the sanctum resounding with the continuous chanting of *Om*.

On the special treatment given to certain sections of the gallery, designer Patrick Keyser had this to say:

I take different approaches to tackle the various elements of the original context of the site when designing the display. I therefore look for certain key feature[s] that I can add to the display to create an impression of the "whole". In some cases, I begin with a peculiar detail of the architecture and slowly abstract it ... by eliminating the details and leading the visitor's attention on to the abstracted form, shape and rhythm. ... But I do not overplay on various elements, I just try to focus on one or two essential elements only and if through that the message is conveyed, I feel my design has been successful. I believe that in display design, the artefact is most important and

6 In the past, when this building housed the Commission for Currency (among other government offices), it had several strong rooms, each with an iron gate and strong vault door.

*not decor. ... In museum displays we need special lights, so I am quite sensitive to using lighting for creating moods, and emotions. This helps to bring out the best qualities ... which may vary from sculpture to sculpture.*⁷

Display of the South Asia Gallery

The gallery layout and storyline for South Asia is defined in keeping with the cultures of the diaspora in Singapore, which directly or remotely owes its origins to more than one part of the subcontinent. The structure of the collection is thematic although chronology is the backbone. The themes loosely link the artefacts over space and time so as to suggest their interpretation (in context) to the viewer. Because of the nature of collecting and the lack of relevant artefacts, the thematic approach is not only practical but imperative. Some of the prominent themes are religions, festivals, performing arts, visual and decorative arts and architecture, which call up the original context, function and meaning of the artefacts. Music and literature are also explored by means of multimedia displays. Throughout, the experiential rationale has remained uppermost. We explore aspects of Hinduism, Islam and Buddhism which travelled to Southeast Asia through trade, missionaries and migrations. The Malay Peninsula has had direct contact with India from the earliest times. Thus it is important to link the two regions and their interactions over time.

The display begins with the earliest archaeological reference points: South Asia is introduced from its earliest civilisations — the Harappan period people residing in the Indus-Saraswati plains and their lifestyle. The recent archaeological find of Dholavira in western India, which re-examines the “Aryan-invasion theory”⁸ was captured in pictures by a curatorial and exhibition design team from the ACM in December 2000, and the images are projected in this section of the gallery.

Also in this section, a beautiful collection of gold coins on loan from the Chand collection bearing the images of early kings such as Kanishka I (c.123–150 CE) and Samudragupta (c. 330–380 CE), founder of the imperial Gupta dynasty, testifies to

7 Excerpts from the interview with Patrick Keyser quoted in Gauri Parimoo Krishnan, “Constructing A Museological Paradigm of Living Cultures: The Making of the South Asia Gallery at the Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore”, in Shivaji K. Panikkar *et al.* (eds.), *Towards a New Art History: Studies in Indian Art (Essays presented in honour of Professor Ratan Parimoo)*, DK Printworld (P) Ltd, New Delhi 2003, pp. 410–425.

8 Klostermaier, K. (2001), “Questioning the Aryan Invasion Theory and Revising Ancient Indian History”, in *Journal of Indian Council of Historical Research*, Special Issue, pp. 63–77.

the flowering of civilisations in the historic period. Along with these, ivory and gold ear plugs of the Kushana period and terracotta mother goddesses of the Mauryan and Shunga periods highlight the lifestyle and cultic worship prevalent in the early historic periods, while a capital of *shalabhanjika* from the Kushana period (probably used in a Buddhist monastery) reminds visitors of similar figures found on gateways such as those of the Sanchi stupa.

“Early Beginnings” also makes reference to the inventions and innovations of the ancient Indians in the areas of astronomy, astrology, medicine, mineralogy, arts, architecture, polity, the Vedas and aesthetics. India’s contribution to pure and applied science and technology has received scant recognition globally, and an attempt to contextualise that has been made in this small but informative section. The design for this scientific space was inspired by the Ram-Yantra of the 17th-century Jantar Mantar observatory in Delhi.

Stone sculpture is well represented in the collection mainly because sculptures were relatively easy to collect and the range of Hindu, Buddhist and Jain iconography offered many possibilities for selection. Most of what was collected was meant for display and this was an essential criterion. Also uppermost in the selection criteria were: (1) chronological periods, i.e., Mauryan, Kushana, Gupta, Pala, and medieval central India (under which there are many sub-styles) along which were collected some key iconographical and stylistically representative artefacts; (2) iconographical attributes, such as Vaishnava, Shaiva, Shakta, Ganapatya, Saurya, Jain and Buddhist, which would enable the exploration of divine personalities and the myths related to them; (3) architectural styles such as *nagara*, *vesara* and *dravida* that could be represented with architectural fragments to create a contextual display and not an assemblage of pleasing decoration.

A holistic approach has been attempted in presenting the multiplicity of Hinduism, its philosophies, their interpretations by *acharya* and the rituals or festivals associated with each of the sectarian beliefs and practices. For example for Vaishnavism, figures of *Chaturbhuj*a Vishnu and *Sheshashayi* Vishnu from Madhya Pradesh represent mainstream Vaishnavism; reference is made to the Shrivaisnava and Pushtimargi philosophies of Ramanuja and Vallabhacharya as examples of Vaishnava cults; and a short video focuses on how Krishna’s birthday, Janmashtami, is celebrated in Singapore. This approach is effective in providing insight into Indian religious culture as practised in Singapore, rather than a chronological, iconographical or purely art historical approach.

The Buddhism section focuses on the life of Buddha and the spread of Buddhism. This theme is developed with few but representative artefacts such as a narrative panel from the Gandhara region depicting Buddha's meditation and enlightenment. Sri Lankan Buddhist material in this section demonstrates, by stylistic similarities, the links and interactions between regions. The role of practical religion is highlighted in artefacts of Tibetan Buddhism, and a parallel display of Hindu and Buddhist ritual objects affords the opportunity to focus on non-iconic, contextual material with high artistic value. The highlights of the Buddhist collection are the sculptures of the dated Kushana Buddha (97 CE), the Pala stone Akshobhya (11th century), and the Sena bronze Lokeshwara (12th century). It is hoped that the small collection of Jain materials will be augmented in the future.

Many central-Indian sculptures of the post-Gupta period from about the 8th till the 12th century, collected and displayed from an architectural perspective, reflect the complexity of the medieval culture, philosophy and politics in northern India. The medieval temple wall built to showcase these artefacts emulates the exterior of a *nagara* temple, in that the arrangement of its planes echoes the temple *mandovara*, or main hall. A large Paramara period sculpture of Devi or Yogini from Bijamandal in Vidisha district, on loan from the Government of India, is displayed alongside 12th-century images of *apsara-devangana*, *vyala*, Chamunda and dancing Ganesha. Unique to this section are a South Indian stone spout (c. 12th century), a lion surmount from the *shukanasa* of a *nagara* temple from Madhya Pradesh and a lintel from a mid-9th century Durga temple. The lintel is displayed at its actual height of about six feet on a doorframe with *dwarashakha* jambs and a threshold. The spout, although very bulky and a rather unusual artefact in any museum, is displayed from a wall at the height of the *adhishtana* (plinth).

The largest thematic section of the gallery, and the one with the most extensive collection, relates to the Tamil culture of South India. The usual definition of "South India" from the Singaporean context was rather limiting as it mostly referred to Tamil Hindus. There is, in fact, a sizeable population of South Indian Muslims speaking Tamil, Telugu and Malayalam⁹ which migrated here in the 19th and 20th centuries. Unfortunately, there are at present not many artefacts for display and

9 There are about 150,184 (58.25%) Tamils in Singapore and 21,736 (8.43%) Malayalees. Statistics do not mention the Telugus but I am sure their number is significant. The Indian population comprises 55.4% Hindus, 25.6% Muslims, 12.1% Christians, 5.4% Sikhs and 0.7% Buddhists [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indians_in_Singapore].

study of this community. Similarly, reference to Christians has also been rather minimal. In future, collection development and research will be focused on these religious communities. I have also explored the synthesis of village gods and folk cults with mainstream Hinduism, which in my view captures the essence of the Hindu community in Singapore. By drawing parallels between the two, I have tried to bridge traditional and modern, ancient and contemporary, Indian and Singaporean Indian multi-culturalism. Multi-culturalism per se in India and Singapore has very different meanings compared with what the West denotes as multi-culturalism. For India it is an underlying diversity of politics, language, religion, food and lifestyle covering different geographic regions of a subcontinent in which: racially and ethnically all are called Indians. For Singapore, multi-culturalism refers to the major ethnic groups found here since the century before last, namely Chinese, Malay, Indians and others — each of which constitutes a monolithic generalisation of inter-ethnic identities.

The South Indian collection aimed to acquire some high-quality Chola sculptures including bronzes, but also attempted to collect humble ritual objects and village sculptures. In all, a democratic semblance of the prevailing heritage within the existing Indian community in Singapore was attempted. There are images of Subrahmanya, Brahma, Bhairava and Aiyandar in granite of the Chola period and bronze images of Somaskanda, Hanuman and Sambandar of the late Chola and Vijayanagara periods in the collection. Aspects of cultural anthropology, especially the gamut of festivals, rituals and religious life of South Indians in Singapore, soon became an area of focus. We plunged headlong into documenting the popular festivals of Thaipusam and Theemithi, recognised as national Indian festivals in Singapore.¹⁰ In both these, the journey from home to temple is arduous, involving not only grit and self-discipline, but a passage, a spiritually evolving journey, which was what triggered the inspiration for the display. The journey from “home to temple” became the overarching theme of this section, and the aim was to evoke the experience of visiting an Indian temple town such as Madurai, Varanasi or Srirangam. Some highlights of this section are wooden *vahana* of *yali*, peacock, Nandi and Garuda. These very large, realistic polychrome-painted animal and bird forms are the

10 Refer to the author's two articles, “Following Murukan: Tai Pucam in Singapore”, http://murugan.org/research/gauri_krishnan.htm, and an unpublished paper on fire-walking: “Theemithi — Re-enacting the Great Ritual-Drama honouring Draupadiamman at Singapore”, presented at the International Conference on Art & Aesthetics, Kanchipuram, 2001.

vehicles on which deities are anchored and taken around the temple courtyard on special festivals such as Brahmotsava. Juxtaposed against the sculptures is a large Bengali palanquin, setting in stark contrast the vehicle of the divine with that of the human. The vehicles collectively bring to the fore the idea of conveyance, servitude, patriarchal domination and all its attendant sociological implications.

A satellite to the journey from “home to temple” theme is a display of temple textile paintings with ritual functions inter-linking ritual, sectarian calendar and cosmological connotations dating from the 18th and 19th centuries. These paintings on cotton come from different regions including Rajasthan and Himachal Pradesh. A scroll from Rajasthan depicts a visit by a Jain monk while *pichhavai* of Shrinathaji from Kota, Jaipur and Deccan elaborate the Shrinathaji cult and include a topographical view of Shrinathaji Temple in Nathadwara. A unique piece is a very rare cloth painting in Basohli style documenting a *shraddha* ceremony in a schematic composition of shrines to Shiva.

We have acquired a large group of *kalamkari* paintings depicting Durga, *Ramayana* and *Krishnalila* of the 19th and 20th centuries. These are narrative in nature. There are Andhra and Tamil versions, and one can see the stylistic differences among them. A rare painted cotton scroll of the Telangana region in Andhra Pradesh depicts the history of the Kunepullalu community.

The themes of performing arts and temple are rather uniquely linked. On one level they define the *garbhagriha* sanctum space and the culmination of the “journey” through the *mandapam* or pillared hall.¹¹ On another level, the sanctum and courtyard were traditionally used for dance and music, performed as worship in many ancient temples all over India. Two large 19th-century polychrome-painted figures of devadasis¹² adorn this section. Dasiattam was their dance form and it evolved into the contemporary bharatanatyam, currently very popular in India and Singapore. A 7th–8th-century terracotta *chaturmukha lingam* and a 19th-century bronze *gaumukha* adorn the sanctum area. They are surrounded by c. 12th-century Chola bronzes of Somaskanda, Hanuman, Sambandar, Uma-Parameshvari and standing Ganesha. Ritual temple jewellery (18th century) used for decorating the deity is displayed on the walls to further contextualise the sanctum. This space

11 Two specially commissioned pillars in Chola style with *handi* lamps and carved wooden light holders set the decor for this space. The Chola pillars were fully sponsored by Mr Hwang Soo Jin.

12 See the article by Chung May Khuen (2002), “A Pair of Devadasi Sculptures”, in *Arts of Asia*, 32(6), pp. 104–106.

is meant to evoke a sense of timelessness and eternity, and to offer a spiritually uplifting experience.

The concept of later medieval India is explored with its roots in the synthesis of Hindu-Muslim cultures, Rajput history and Deccan Sultanates culminating in the advent of the Europeans in India. This is another umbrella under which the smaller themes of textiles, architecture, decorative arts and paintings have been displayed. The cultural and artistic base of Rajput (Hindu) — Mughal (Islamic) synthesis is further enriched by Sikh, Maratha and European elements which contributed to the entire Mughal and post-Mughal styles, which lingered in art and architecture till as late as the early 20th century. One of the major highlights of this gallery is a 3.65-metre-high gateway from the Vraj area in Uttar Pradesh, which formed the facade of a nobleman's house, in post-Shah Jahan period (late 17th to early 18th century) vernacular style.¹³ The hall exhibits symmetry and balance in the two parallel rows of arches leading up to an 18th-century Mughal or Rajput velvet and gold leaf tent panel placed behind a cotton and silk 18th-century summer carpet. The ethos of Islamic colonnaded structures, expressed as an arched corridor, binds the room in an intimate space and further emphasises the dichotomy between public and private, interior and exterior spaces.

This section on Medieval India explores very briefly themes of *bhakti*, Sufism and Sikhism as salient phenomena of the 15th century, which led to many changes in social and cultural contexts. This theme of confluences and syncretism relates particularly to the Muslim and Sikh diaspora in Singapore today.

As a finale to the "journey", a strong sense of historical relevance is needed to link the display with Singapore today. Hence the reference to Indian pioneers. Sepia images of Chettiar moneylenders, snake charmers, *kavadi* bearers and itinerant dancers and musicians appear in this section an Indian pioneers dealing with the theme of Colonialism (19th century). The diachronic and synchronic "journey" experience comes full circle with familiar scenes of Singapore in a not-so-distant past. Many of our older visitors relate to this spontaneously, but for the younger ones, it will be a "journey" hitherto unexplored.

13 In consultation with Dr R. Nath, Agra, December 2001.

Gauri Parimoo KRISHNAN

Dr Gauri Parimoo Krishnan is the Centre Director of the Indian Heritage Centre, and the founding curator of the South Asia collection of the Asian Civilisations Museum. She spearheaded the Research and Publication unit of the museum as its Deputy Director. Dr Krishnan obtained her PhD in art history from the Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda, India. Besides her specialisation in Buddhist and Hindu architecture, her interests include museum studies, Indian dance and modern and contemporary art. Dr Krishnan has curated key blockbuster exhibitions such as *Alankara: 5000 Years of India*; *Eternal Egypt: Treasures from the British Museum*; *Beauty in Asia*; and *On the Nalanda Trail: Buddhism in India, China and Southeast Asia*. She has taught Indian and western art history and aesthetics at the M. S. University of Baroda, Gujarat. Dr Krishnan is the author of the following books among others: *The Divine Within: Art & Living Culture of India & South Asia* (2007); and *The Power of the Female: Devangana Sculptures on Indian Temple Architecture* (2014); and edited *Ramayana: A Living Tradition* (1997); *On the Nalanda Trail: Buddhism in India, China and Southeast Asia* (2008); and *Ramayana in Focus: Visual and Performing Arts of Asia* (2011). She is a recipient of the Commendation Medal (Pingat Kepujian) from the Singapore government for her contribution to the arts and heritage sector.

A Re-look at the Genesis of the Nanyang School*

KWOK Kian Chow

Kwok Kian Chow redefines Nanyang Art by investigating the term “Nanyang”, which opens up research possibilities on the Nanyang School to further link art discourse with contextual and comparative studies on the “West Seas”, “East Seas” and “South Seas”.

The early history of the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA) is closely linked to the socio-cultural ferment in the 1930s Singapore and the Malayan Peninsula, and in particular to developments in ideological fronts in aesthetics and formal articulation of what may be termed the “Nanyang School”, that is to say, a discourse on Nanyang art.¹ I will return to the 1930s, when NAFA was founded, to examine what the term “Nanyang” implied then.

Literally translated, “Nanyang” means “South Seas”, historically the Chinese reference for Southeast Asia. For the ethnic Chinese community here, “Nanyang” is also a cultural signifier pointing to the arts of this region, and hence we have the art

* This essay is an edited version of a paper of the same title presented at the New Asian Imaginations Symposium, Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, Singapore, 2008.

1 The term “school” rather than “style” is preferred here as it designates the broader landscape of cultural discourse, art practices and stylistic traits in Nanyang art. While “school” in Western art history has its origins in locales or specific workshops under the apprenticeship system, “school” in Asian art history takes on elements of a cultural phenomenon, such as the *Shanghai School* and the *Lingnan School*. There is also a sense of a thesis in the making or a preliminary nature in the term “school” as opposed to the finality of “style” which comes with a set of well-defined formal traits.

terms “Nanyang School” and “Nanyang Style”, which signify the set of aesthetic frames that gradually shaped developments in the visual arts in the Malayan Peninsula.

By returning to the 1930s, what I want to show is that “Nanyang” as a cultural term was actually quite open and fluid, if not also amorphous and unstable in meaning, at the point of NAFAs founding. For instance, if we were to consider “Nanyang” in the light of how “Dongyang” (“East Seas”) and “Xiyang” (“West Seas”) were used in Chinese art pedagogy in the first decades of the 20th century, we will find that the latter two terms were comparatively more stable in their signification. “Dongyang” referred to art education in Tokyo, or more specifically Western art education in the tradition of the Meiji Restoration. “Xiyang”, on the other hand, referred to art education in Paris, then regarded as both the source and centre of Academic and Modern Art in the West. Thus compared, the term “Nanyang” offers no meaningful art pedagogical counterpart: it is not a signifier of aesthetic origins or transmission in the manner of “Dongyang” and “Xiyang”. So how did the term “Nanyang” acquire meaning as a cultural signifier, and indeed, what and who shaped its meaning? For this, I propose to look at the socio-cultural ferment of early 20th-century Singapore.

I will start by re-examining the influence that Xu Beihong is purported to have on Nanyang art. One of the most influential figures in 20th-century Chinese art, Xu studied in “Xiyang” Paris² and upon his return to China in the mid-1920s, he took on teaching positions in art academies and until 1936, was dean of Central University’s art department in Nanjing, then the capital city of China. A nationalist and a reformist, Xu was critical of the literati tradition in painting, famously saying that literati painting had “degenerated into mere copying” of the “four Wangs and the two Stones” (Shitao and Shiqi). He spearheaded the use of Western scientific realism in China, and was the first to use Western fixed-point perspective and the study of anatomy to depict new forms in Chinese ink and in oil painting. Xu’s much celebrated monumental oil painting *Tian Heng and His Five Hundred Followers*, created soon after his return to China, drew equal share of admiration and criticism from his peers for its treatment of Han dynasty subjects in the tradition of Western painterly realism.

Xu Beihong made a total of seven visits to Nanyang between 1919 and 1942. Spending extensive periods here from 1939 to 1942 to galvanise relief efforts towards

2 Xu Beihong studied oil painting and drawing at the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts from 1919, returning to China in 1927.

the Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945), he taught and painted in the Nanyang. His 1939 exhibition at the Victoria Memorial Hall and the Chinese Chamber of Commerce was organised to raise funds for China's war efforts. Officiated by the British Governor of Singapore, the exhibition drew the elite from the political, business, intellectual and social circles, and was considered the high point of the cultural calendar. Thirty thousand people attended his exhibition.³

Why was Xu Beihong so well received in Singapore in 1939? There were a number of reasons, among which included Chinese nationalism at the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War. At Xu's fund-raising exhibition in 1939, each painting was sold for the sum of a hundred or two hundred dollars — the latter price included the privilege of choosing the work. Another reason for the warm reception was Xu's painterly realism — in both ink and oil — and what it variously stood for to his audience in late colonial Singapore, a society finding its way to multi-culturalism: a confluence of cultures, the epitome of modernity, the idea of fine art, the ideals of high culture, etc. In other words, Xu Beihong's art was a tableau on which aspirations of new trans-cultural modernity could be projected.

NAFA was founded in 1938, a year before Xu's highly successful exhibition in Singapore, and three years after the founding of the Society of Chinese Artists in 1935. Singapore's first art society of prominence, the Society of Chinese Artists, comprised members who were mostly graduates of the various art academies in Shanghai including Xinhua Academy of Fine Arts, Shanghai University of Art and Shanghai Academy of Fine Arts. These were modern art schools established at the turn of the century. The Society of Chinese Artists also included members who were based in Indonesia and Hong Kong. These events in the latter half of the 1930s marked a turning point in the art discourse and practices within the Chinese community in Singapore and formed the backdrop of, and indeed the seedbed for, the genesis of the Nanyang School.⁴ The question thus arises: Did Xu Beihong's Western realism

3 For a detailed account of the 1939 Xu Beihong exhibition please see 欧阳兴义, *悲鸿在星洲, 艺术工作室* (Ouyang Xingyi, *Beihong in Xingzhou, Singapore Art Workshop*), Singapore 1999, pp. 99–108.

4 According to Yeo Mang Thong, art activities and discourse within the Singapore Chinese community can be traced to the latter half of the 19th century. With the large population of Chinese immigrants in Singapore, civil societies such as clan associations and community schools that grew with the Chinese population began to incorporate literary and arts programmes into their activities from the mid-19th century onwards. For example, literary scholar and poet Khoo Seok Wan (1874–1941) supported calligraphy and painting activities by inviting artists to Singapore; he also published his personal collection of calligraphy. Visiting artists in the late 19th century not only included painters and calligraphers from China but also Korea and Japan. 姚梦桐 Yeo Mang Thong, “十九世纪末 (1887–1899) 新加坡华社美术活动研究 [Late 19th century (1887–1899) research in calligraphy and painting activities in Singapore]”, in *华人文化研究 (Journal of Chinese Cultural Studies)*, vol. 1 no. 2 (December 2013), Taipei.

exert significant influence on the shape of Nanyang School? I would argue that it was relatively tangential.

In the writings of NAFA's founder Lim Hak Tai, and other writings by his contemporaries, it is evident that the writers saw new possibilities and perspectives for art in the Nanyang that went beyond Xu's notion of realism. These perspectives shaped the aesthetic trajectories of the Nanyang School and sowed the seeds for developments that, in the 1940s, saw immigrant artists such as Cheong Soo Pieng and Chen Wen Hsi helming the path forward. Notably, it was a reconnection with the literati value in Chinese art that provided Chen Wen Hsi his direction in modernist expressions. Xu Beihong, as mentioned earlier, was highly critical of the literati tradition.

The idea for NAFA was first mooted by a group of alumni associated with the Jimei School in Xiamen (Amoy), Fujian province. Lim Hak Tai was himself a native of Xiamen. He studied in Fuzhou and later lectured at the Xiamen Art Academy and Jimei Teachers Training College before his appointment as NAFA's principal. The relationship between Xiamen and Southeast Asia extended in deeper and more complex historical links. For example, the founders of the Xiamen Art Academy, Huang Suibi and Yang Gengbao, were in Manila to study "Western Art" as early as 1918; Lim Boon Keng, a Singapore Peranakan, was the chancellor of the Xiamen University from 1921 to 1937.

Conversely, a geographical and cultural distance separated Xu Beihong and the Nanyang artists. A native of Jiangsu, Xu regarded Nanjing as his base. Despite his many visits and the deep friendships⁵ he formed in the region, Nanyang remained a region culturally remote to Xu Beihong, as one might gather from Xu's colophons in paintings by See Hiang Tuo and Chen Chong Swee. On Chen's ink painting of tropical fruits painted in 1939, Xu inscribed: "Who says you cannot live in a hot wasteland? ... You can eat your fill of colourful fruits here"; on See's painting of a bird perched on an overhanging rock in a tropical setting (also painted in 1939), Xu wrote: "Here's a peaceful corner, untouched by the fowler's net." Tropical Nanyang was for Xu an exotic and idyllic other.

Given its Xiamen connection, it may then be said that at the point of NAFA's founding, the academy was inherently influenced by the intellectual culture of the Fujian-Nanyang connection, one that was also inflected by Chinese modern art

5 Straits Chinese leader Lim Boon Keng counted as one of Xu Beihong's fervent supporters.

discourse that had its roots in the turn-of-the-century reform movements and the May Fourth Movement after 1919.

In a volume published in the 1940s, Lim Hak Tai wrote of 1930s Singapore as a crossroad of cultures and commerce, and a land rich in heritage and artefacts. He went on to muse about the “great pity” if there were no art school to take advantage of Singapore’s cultural wealth. The plan to establish NAFA was first announced to the public in January of 1938 by the Society of Chinese Artists. The academy was inaugurated two months thereafter. It was around then that Lim first proposed the concept of *Nanyang yishu* (“Nanyang Arts”).

Lim’s concept of “Malayan Arts” (Lim appeared to have used “Nanyang Arts” and “Malayan Arts” interchangeably) extended towards a set of objectives for NAFA, namely:

- Integrate cultures of the different races;
- Bridge the arts of the East and the West;
- Promote scientific spirit and social consciousness;
- Create an art form typical of our tropical nation; and
- Nurture creative talent.

The scope of Lim’s objectives for NAFA is expansive, covering multi-culturalism, global aesthetic exchange, social responsibility, identity and regionalism, as well as individual creativity. In conceptual terms, Lim’s broadly embracive yet integrative approach is akin to monism in Asian philosophy. In distinct contrast to Xu Beihong’s emphasis on visual over non-visual elements, instanced by his critique of literati painting for being reprehensibly literary, Lim’s inclusive approach to art, society and creative expression appears to point to a modernity that grew organically out of the monistic philosophy of “the unity of the Nature and men” that is the fundamental dictum in traditional Chinese aesthetics.

The contrast between Xu Beihong’s delineated perspective and Lim Hak Tai’s broad and inclusive approach for visual arts in Singapore is instructive. Discussions on the social responsibility of artists were particularly accented during the tumultuous period between the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War and the Fall of Singapore in 1942. The issue of realism and social responsibility had also come to the fore in debates surrounding Xu’s *Tian Heng and His Five Hundred Followers*. Featured in Xu’s 1939 exhibition in Singapore, the painting was critiqued on grounds of apparent

incongruences in its treatment of the historical subject matter and physical type. These early debates on the social responsibility of art, and by extension, the role art can play towards galvanising the public in support of war efforts, were aspects of social realism that provided grounds for another strand of social realism in the 1950s and 1960s Singapore. However, these trajectories have somehow been overlooked such that social realism in Singapore art has not been generally regarded as a key characteristic of the Nanyang School.

Meanwhile, different trajectories in Singapore art were being developed by Chen Chong Swee and See Hiang Tuo — Chen by adhering to realism within localised contexts, and See through classical pictorial language from epistemological fronts. Writing in 1967, Chen asked: “What should be the content of our ink painting in view of the change in social and geographical circumstances?” In what appears to align him with Xu’s approach to realism, Chen’s answer to his own question: “Firstly, the depiction of actual sceneries.” But Chen departs from Xu as he proceeds: “Secondly, the merger of literature and painting as a basic characteristic of Chinese art must be preserved,” and finally, embracing multi-culturalism, Chen adds: “Why not feel free about adding English or Malay inscriptions to ink painting in order to enhance its appeal?”⁶

See Hiang Tuo took refuge in Sumatra during the Japanese Occupation (1942–1945). While in Indonesia, he continued to observe the physical landscape of Indonesia through the lenses of classical Chinese art. In his descriptions of Indonesian landscape, See’s 1946 recollections demonstrated how he understood visual realities in terms of traditional ink textural strokes. For example, See likened the trees in the swamp to the axe-textural strokes of the 17th-century painter Shitao, while mud piles formed by crawling insects drew analogy with the ink dashes of 14th-century Huang Gongwang.

Such tracks in traditions and multi-culturalism, reality and *xieyi*, realism and social responsibility, delineated the conceptual and aesthetic coordinates of the Nanyang School, laying the ground, in the late 1930s, for the subsequent development of the Nanyang School. I should think that future research on the Nanyang School will attempt to further link art discourse, popular imagery in film, print and photography, literature, and contextual and comparative studies on the “West Seas”,

6 Quoted in Kwok Kian Chow (1993), “Chen Chong Swee: His Thoughts”, in *Chen Chong Swee: His Thoughts, His Art*, National Museum, Singapore, p. 12.

“East Seas” and “South Seas”, to help us better understand the genesis of the Nanyang School. The fact that the term “Nanyang” was relatively less stable in meaning than its counterparts points to Nanyang as possibly existing outside of the usual Asia/East–West binary. A study to further understand its taxonomical and historical meaning can therefore contribute to new perspectives that will free art discourse from such a binary framework. Such is the need to look at the broader picture of art and cultural history in Singapore, along with its much broader geographical reach such as the Manila-Amoy-Singapore nexus mentioned above.

KWOK Kian Chow

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Modern Art in Singapore: Pioneers and Premises*

T.K. SABAPATHY

The aesthetic positions made available by Chinese painting traditions and the School of Paris established significant components for the Nanyang artists. Professor T.K. Sabapathy posits the implications of these positions through the processes and techniques entailed in the composition of a picture. His thesis establishes the factors that shaped and birthed the first modern-art movement in Singapore.

It may well be the case that critics and historians inspired by mythical visions are able to dramatise the story of modern art in Singapore by identifying a single production or event with the intention of personifying its parentage. Is it to claim an essence which can account for generative progenies? In general, the history of art is enlivened by such dramatisations. In particular, the discussion of modern art aspires to such mythical conditions.

For an eventuality such as this to be realised requires a richly textured, articulated backdrop — one on which general lineaments as well as the minutiae of detail are clearly etched. Such a provision has yet to be assembled. For that matter, a sufficiently fleshed out, persuasive story has yet to be told. For the uninitiated, the possibility of relating such a story might appear remote if not surprising. For the initiated, there is conviction that a story exists, and is in the making. However, its contours are blurred, its contents sketchy, lacking purpose and definition.

* This article was first published in 1986 in *Sources of Modern Art*, Ministry of Education, Singapore, pp. 129–130a.

Here is an example of such a situation. The Nanyang artists, the Nanyang movement, the Nanyang style! These are terms and labels, like many others, freely and frequently used in the discussion of modern art here (and in Malaysia). Despite their currency, they have not been adequately accounted for. Consequently, the contribution and importance of the Nanyang artists, whilst generally and informally acknowledged, have not been critically assessed. For this occasion, I will suggest some of the diverse, competing contexts and impulses that shaped approaches adopted by these artists. Needless to say, the present discussion does not exhaust the subject and the issues involved.

In the early months of 1937, a handful of art enthusiasts met to discuss establishing an art school in Singapore. A leading voice was Lim Hak Tai, who had studied and taught art in academies in Amoy, and had arrived in Singapore that very year.

The enthusiasm and optimism were based on the notion that such a school in Singapore — a prosperous, commercial centre situated between East and West, with a multi-racial society, and surrounded by tropical beauty — would “certainly benefit all by bringing about an artistic and cultural atmosphere”.

Later that year, in a small room in the vicinity of the Geylang Gay World amusement park, Lim Hak Tai and three others began providing formal instruction in art. In 1938, they moved to 93, Serangoon Road. The first enrolment consisted of 14 students, and so the Nanyang Yishu Xueyuan was inaugurated. Lim assumed the dual role of teacher (watercolour and oil painting) and principal, remaining its principal until his death in 1962. In 1941, with the fall of Singapore, the Academy was closed. It was reopened in 1946 at 49 St. Thomas Walk with 30 students, 40% international. The name “Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts” was formally registered.

The Academy was the first school devoted to the teaching of art in Singapore, and served a useful function for students from Malaysia interested in the study of art. Throughout the 1960s, it served as one of the vital centres of art activity for both countries. One of the most significant and distinct directions in modern art in Singapore and Malaysia was shaped in connection with the Academy, a direction enlivened and enriched by two generations of artists, and which, till today, continues to be influential in a variety of ways.

It is therefore not surprising that terms such as “the Nanyang style” and “the Nanyang artists” are increasingly becoming part of the vocabulary used in the discussion of modern art activity in Singapore. Indeed any narration of the story

of modern art in Singapore and Malaysia will have to designate a substantial role to the Nanyang artists/style. (This issue was the subject of an exhibition titled “The Nanyang Artists — A Retrospective Exhibition”, sponsored by the National Museum of Art, Kuala Lumpur, in October 1979.)

Who are the artists who shaped the Nanyang style? What models and traditions did they select? In what ways can their attitudes toward art activity be identified as being modern?

In all these respects, the School of Paris must have been an attractive and compelling model. In the absence of a comparable or an alternate one, in which the notion of the modern is so vividly fleshed out, those artists in China, and indeed in our countries in Asia, who were seeking for “a new art”, turned towards it.

The ways in which it was understood, transformed and related to older and competing models and traditions (in this instance, Chinese painting traditions) varied from artist to artist. Such diverse orientations and positions are evident in the works of the Nanyang artists. They reflect not only preferences but also educational and cultural factors.

Chen Chong Swee and Chen Wen Hsi are more at home within the structures and techniques of Chinese painting traditions. Georgette Chen, who was born in France and studied painting in Paris, New York and Shanghai, reveals a direct and an intimate assimilation of the Parisian model. Cheong Soo Pieng is not only versatile in his use of Chinese painting techniques and the styles of the School of Paris, but also produces significant transformations by linking the two.

Underlying these diverse inclinations are also shared characteristics, concerning the processes and method of work, the choice of subject matter, and the relationship to art traditions.

All these characteristics contribute towards forging a context for the Nanyang artists.

The aesthetic positions made available by Chinese painting traditions and the School of Paris establish significant components of the framework for the Nanyang artists. What do these positions imply in terms of the processes and techniques entailed in the composition of a picture?

An aspect of Chinese art practice requires an artist to master brush conventions, which consist of techniques related to the manipulation of the brush for expressive purposes, and the study of essential shapes and structures of forms. In this connection, the works of the masters are vital sources for such research and

knowledge. By studying these conventions and their particular expressions in the tradition, the artist equips himself with the appropriate pictorial vocabulary which is then used to suit individual requirements and expressions. The effortless manner by which a painting is produced — a highly valued aesthetic quality — is in part made possible by the mastery of this vocabulary.

In using this vocabulary, the artist seeks to give expression to essences, rather than to the description and analysis of objects and phenomena in terms of concrete and material existences. Furthermore, such essences are not contained in a specific moment or by a particular place. They float into continuous and undefined spheres. Consequently, a Chinese painting does not assume a fixed position for the spectator, rooted to one spot outside the painting. The total spatial construction depends on the moving focus of the viewer within the scene.

To produce such ever-changing aspects effectively, a painting is constructed from many viewpoints. Features such as these are best exemplified in landscapes depicted on handscrolls and hanging scrolls. The handscroll is particularly suited to these purposes. It is to be unrolled a little at a time in sympathy with the progression of a traveller through a landscape. The viewer is led from the foreground into the middle distance by a path or a stream and then to the distant peaks and back again. This arrangement is repeated with variations throughout the whole. At any point, the viewer can look to his right, from where he came from, or the left, the area still before him. There are no human, dramatic scenes, no climactic events.

A totally different world is proposed by the Parisian model. The School of Paris brought to a climax (and a crisis) the easel painting tradition.

The easel painting is a movable picture hung on a wall. It is made up of a framed surface which cuts the illusion of a box-like cavity into the wall behind it. Within this, the artist composes semblances of three-dimensional entities in order to create dramatic presences. The surface is worked in a methodical and deliberate manner. With the aid of preparatory studies (sketches), the artist erases and overlays the surface with colour until the desired effects are produced. Each painting presents a climactic moment. The designing of this moment is the dominant constructive principle, which also established for the spectator a fixed position for viewing.

In all these respects, the easel painting is as unique to the West as the handscroll and the hanging scroll are to China.

In accordance with the new purposes of art, the artists of the School of Paris turned towards the everyday environment for visual stimulus and subject matter.

Scenes from everyday life, and objects and utensils reflecting domesticity provided content for pictures. These are closely observed and studied, and rendered into pictorial form with a sense of immediacy and directness. The purpose is to transform visual phenomena as seen, felt and thought by the artist in relation to the newly adopted perceptual and constructive values.

These values were not only shaped by artistic factors. Experiments in optical physics regarding the properties of light and colour, new chemical synthesis resulting in more luminous pigments, the emergence of photography, and increased knowledge of the physiology of the eye and the psychology of perception were influential in shaping the new values and approaches. Consequently, the easel painting tradition was radically altered.

In traditional art, the dramatic elements were shaped by heroic acts and events, balanced composition and correct drawing. The new drama, on the other hand, is concerned with the fleeting nature of time, the physical and sensuous appeal of colour, the texture of surfaces, the expressive and gestural properties of the brush, and the structure of form and movement.

All of these become the proper concerns of art. The styles which make up the School of Paris provide expressions for these aspects in a variety of ways. In the hands of the artists, these are transformed into personalised visions and statements.

As stated earlier, the ways by which the Nanyang artists understood and transformed these models varied with each artist.

These variations reflect preferences, competence, educational and cultural factors, and personal circumstances. However, underlying these variations is an implicit adoption of the aesthetic positions characterised by the two traditions, and a readiness to use them freely.

In addition to working within these traditions simultaneously, some of the more remarkable innovations produced by the Nanyang artists are the result of the fusion of the two traditions.

For example, the hanging scroll and the handscroll are converted into easel paintings, thereby introducing new formal considerations regarding the structure of space, the function of colour, the distortion of forms, and the sequence of time. Conversely the principles of easel painting are transformed by altering the figure-ground relationship. That is to say whilst the figure (any three-dimensional entity) is constructed to provide an image of a concrete existence, the ground (space) which it occupies is left undefined.

In all these instances, the customary expectations of the viewer regarding the easel painting are appreciably altered.

In addition to such formal innovations (detailed study of these features can substantiate the notion of a Nanyang style), a substantial number of works produced by the Nanyang artists reflect a common source for pictorial motifs and subject matter.

These sources are extracted from their immediate surroundings. This is significant for it provides not only insights into an aspect of their working methods (i.e., the transformation of visual stimulus into pictorial form) but also accounts for the particular character of the iconography.

This feature can be clarified by referring to a disclosure made by a graduate of the Nanyang Academy in *The Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts* by R. Piyadasa. Chung Cheng Sun (class of 1952–1955), a Nanyang artist who has established a reputation in Malaysia, recalls the following:

Lim Hak Tai was the man who gave the Academy its direction. He always suggested to the staff and students that the subject matter in their works should reflect the reality of the Southern Seas. He emphasised that our work should depict the localness of the place we all live in.

This disclosure firmly establishes the importance of Lim Hak Tai as an educationist and as a guiding voice in art activity in Singapore in the late 1940s and 1950s.

The reflection of “the reality of the Southern Seas” and “the localness of the place” may not necessarily have assumed the stature of an ideological programme for the Nanyang artists. Nevertheless these notions conveniently formulate positions and attitudes which are shared and manifested in their works.

In 1952, Liu Kang, Cheong Soo Pieng, Chen Wen Hsi and Chen Chong Swee journeyed to Bali. (Liu Kang was not on the staff of the Nanyang Academy, but he shared a common approach to art activity with the members of the Academy, and was associated with the Academy in a personal capacity. Furthermore, as the President of the Society of Chinese Artists of Singapore, he assumed a pivotal role in the promotion of art.) The choice of Bali is significant. As if in response to Lim Hak Tai’s suggestions, these artists sought the one context in Southeast Asia in which art

and life appeared to be inextricably meshed and which also promised the extension of pictorial motifs and subject matter.

In 1953, these artists organised an exhibition titled "Four Artists to Bali" which was significant, particularly in relation to the depiction of the human figure. It resulted in the creation of figure types which are indelibly linked with the Nanyang artists, and which proved to be influential for other artists.

When the story of modern art in Singapore gets to be told and written, the journey to Bali, undertaken by these artists will in all probability etch for itself a unique position. In terms of a quest for art forms in a Southeast Asian context, it has few, if any, parallels or sequels.

Strangely enough, it provokes parallels to a journey made by an artist who left Paris in 1890 for the proverbial South Sea Island, Tahiti, in order to reinvigorate his strength, intensify feeling, and rediscover a direct manner of expression: Paul Gauguin! Indeed, Gauguin's Tahitian paintings are of crucial importance for many artists in Asia, including the Nanyang artists, who were seeking a new art. And that is yet another chapter in the story that has yet to be told and written!

"The reality of the Southern Seas", "the localness of the place" and the journey to Bali contributed to shaping an iconography that is distinct to the Nanyang artists. It consisted of nine subject matter which are suitable for transcription in terms of the adopted picture categories. Consequently, the varieties of landscape include fishing and rural villages (the *kampung*), city-scapes, riverine scenes (the Singapore River), and the views of mosques and temples. Still-lives feature local fruit, products of the sea and domestic utensils. Genre scenes portray festivals, rituals, modes of work and varieties of pastime. A range of subject matter such as this continues to be featured till the present day, often as tiresome clichés. What is significant is that it was given its initial expression and pictorial formulation by the Nanyang artists.

The artists mentioned in this discussion belong to the first generation of Nanyang artists. Their efforts do not exhaust the achievements of the Nanyang artists as such. Earlier, mention was made of two generations of artists who enriched and enlivened the directions pioneered by the first generation. Motivated by different impulses, some of the younger artists produced works which added to the repertoire of iconography outlined above. Reference has also been made to Liu Kang who is not officially placed in the Academy. There are others like him, who contributed to the identity of the Nanyang artists, for the Nanyang artists are not necessarily

synonymous with the Nanyang Academy. The shared attitudes towards art activity generally constituted its formative factors.

Attitudes regarding working methods, the response to the surroundings, the choice of subject matter, and the selection of particular traditions are some of the shaping factors which provide the Nanyang artists their distinct identity.

And in all these respects, they established the first modern-art achievement in Singapore.

T. K. SABAPATHY

Professor T. K. Sabapathy, a former student of Professor Michael Sullivan, is a foremost art historian who has researched and published extensively on Southeast Asian art and artists. For four decades, he has devoted his life to the research, documentation and support of contemporary visual arts in Singapore and Malaysia. He has been a lecturer of art history at the National University of Singapore, Nanyang Technological University and National Institute of Education. He set up and headed Singapore's pioneer art research facilities, the Contemporary Asian Art Centre and subsequently, Asia Contemporary. He has also written countless articles, books, catalogues and artist monographs, making an invaluable contribution to the study of art in Southeast Asia, and is well-respected for his scholarship and beloved for his tireless advocacy of art and artists of Singapore and Malaysia. Besides editing and writing, Prof Sabapathy has also been involved in numerous exhibitions. He served as co-curator of the recently concluded retrospective, Cheong Soo Pieng (5 March–31 July 2010, NUS Museum, Singapore).

The Slow Burn: Privatised Protest in Recent Contemporary Art from Singapore*

TAN Boon Hui

Tan Boon Hui reviews the narratives of the current contemporary artists whose ideologies appear confined to the exhibition space in contrast to that of earlier artists whose social agency was more public and direct. His essay reveals both curatorial sensibilities in the selection of artists for a group exhibition and how a critic or historian might define an art movement in this age of aesthetic cosmopolitanism.

Commentaries about contemporary art from Asia often highlight the role of the artist as an agent of social engagement and protest, most popularly against the big bad monsters of oppression, inequality and capitalist domination. We like our Asian art loud, angry and sometimes mocking as in the cynical realist paintings of the Chinese 1985 new wave artists like Fang Lijun and Wang Guangyi or the neon-saturated works of T.V. Santosh and Chintan Upadhyay from India. In the last decade, however, Singapore has produced a group of artists who have departed from the direct and more explicit provocations that characterised the late 1980s till 2000 period. The work of this group of younger artists, some of whom are included in The Singapore Show: Future Proof 2012 exhibition is often challenging for two main reasons. Firstly, the lack of overt political content as expressed in the form of narrative or direct critique of society. Secondly, the difficulty in detecting any explicit cultural or social markers that would define these works as originating from Singapore or are Singaporean-created.

* First presented at the 2009 Asian Art Conference, National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts, and later published in the catalogue of the exhibition, *The Singapore Show: Future Proof* at the Singapore Art Museum (2012). The author has subsequently amended the essay.

This essay, however, speculates that among some younger artists, these tendencies mark a shift towards social critique that is increasingly refracted through the lens of the personal. In a sense, the political has become personal (and indeed could only make sense through the personal) and the withdrawal from “large” statements does not mean an end to social critique.

The establishment of the Artists Village, the collective 5th Passage, the founding of The Substation and the landmark *Trimurti* exhibition in the period from 1988 to 1991, helped to introduce conceptualist alternatives to painting into the artistic mainstream and wedded it to a clear sense of social engagement (see the essays in the *Negotiating Home History Nation* exhibition catalogue, for a fuller account). The most explicit expression of this new direction was in the vigour of performance art with its acts of defiance which flourished in the open until the much reported 1994 incident in which artist Josef Ng cut his own public hair in the work *Brother Cane*, resulting in an increase of restrictions on the artform.

One of the most dramatic was Tang Da Wu's public intervention at the Singapore Art exhibition in August 1995.¹ Approaching then President of Singapore, Ong Teng Cheong, the artist Tang wore a jacket emblazoned with the words “*Don't Give Money to the Arts*”, while handing a note to the President that read: “I am an artist. I am important.” Speaking later to the press, he explained that he wanted to impress upon the President that art is important and worth supporting; further, that we should not just support art that was commercial and had no “taste”.

This is not to say that this choice of direct provocative expression does not continue today but rather that new, more shaded and tentative voices have been added to those of pioneers like Tang, Amanda Heng and Vincent Leow. Indeed, these pioneers still continue to produce urgent and relevant work today, but they have also increasingly expanded into other non-performance genres.

In recent years, even with the loosening of restrictions on performance art, a group of young contemporary artists have focused their energies not on the grand gestures of defiance that performance art typifies but instead turned inwards towards coded and allusive works that need to be unravelled by a “discerning” audience. This has been accompanied by an increasing technical sophistication in the ability to build complex installations and video works, often seemingly stripped of local context and decipherable by any viewer outside the Singapore context. This essay looks at singular works by this group of artists including Jason Wee, Chun Kaifeng,

1 “Pay more attention to the arts — President”, *The Straits Times*, 12 August 1995.

Donna Ong and the artist collective Vertical Submarine, to suggest that instead of withdrawing into apathy, the sheer surface of these works, with their coolness and arch attitudes, often conceal a continued yearning for freedom and an acknowledgement of the costs and losses to culture and community that have been the price of modern Singapore. These works are also distinguished by the way that material, form and text have been used to generate layered meanings that also question the role and values of art and artistic representation.

The close reading of singular artworks is here adopted as a strategy to tease out not causal relations but rather to sketch out possible heuristic or ideal types and tendencies that could be used as the basis for understanding general trends in the development of contemporary art in Singapore. It is important to stress that although there might be temporal shifts or changes in emphasis at different points in history, at many times, the “grand gesture” and “the slow burn” occurred alongside each other.



Jason Wee
Self Portrait
 (No More Tears, Mr Lee), 2009
 Mixed media installation

In the installation, *Self Portrait (No More Tears, Mr Lee)* (2009), the artist Jason Wee assembled 8,000 shampoo bottle caps and by opening or closing the cap tops the image of Singapore’s Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew will be formed. The artist speaks of this work as a “pixilated image”.² In this sense, like a computer pixel, the bottle cap could be either opened or closed and by arranging them in a deliberate sequence, a clear image could be discerned. The reception of this seemingly glib and humorous work could, however, be changed when one realises that the image is actually modelled after

the famous and much circulated television footage of Lee Kuan Yew, then Prime Minister, weeping on screen following his 1965 announcement that Singapore was out of the Malaysian Federation and would henceforth be an independent country. What then is the intention of the artist, especially when we are told that the bottle caps could possibly be from that famous children’s shampoo? Added to this is also the realisation that this artwork shares the same name as the tagline for that famous children’s “No More Tears”. Shampoo Material, language and form amplify each

2 See artist statement in *Art Buffet: Singapore Art Exhibition 2009*, exhibition catalogue, National Arts Council and Singapore Art Museum, Singapore, p. 59.

other and create a work full of possibilities and alluded meanings. Is it satirical, or is it reverential? Can we say that it is a work of social commentary? Conversely, can we say that it is not? That local viewers understood the Singaporean context from which this work arises and what it is commenting on is clear, judging from some of the public responses during its display at the Singapore Art Show 2009.

While the acknowledgement of context transforms our appreciation of *No More Tears*, in her installation *Dissolution* (2009), the architecturally trained Donna Ong begins by attempting literally to strip context out of the artwork to purify it of culturally specific understandings (Lingham 2009, p. 30).³ Taking 30 to 40 examples of Chinese landscape paintings, she proceeded to cut out all the typical features — rocks, mountains, trees and huts — that made up these works by anonymous painters.



Donna Ong – *Dissolution*, 2009
Mixed media installation

The mutilated landscape parts, forcibly removed from their original figurations, were then spontaneously pasted and sandwiched between 44 acrylic sheets of varying thickness, then bolted together into a three-metre block. The physical layering of these landscapes introduces Western perspective to the otherwise flattened world of the traditional Chinese landscape. Ironically, the three cameras mounted on the work's plinth capture flattened images of the work. The resulting work is a decontextualised tableau that seems to be a strange homage to the Chinese landscape.

For decades, the binary concepts of East and West, with all their value judgements, have been deployed by the Singapore state and its representatives as a way to engender debate and policy about the future of Singapore culture and national identity. That this debate could never be so easily resolved one way or the other is aptly hinted by the title of Ong's work — *Dissolution*. To dissolve is to lose

3 Lingham, S. (2009), "The Seams Show... (the skyless and groundless picturesque landscape, pared, and barely there)", in *President's Young Talents*, Singapore Art Museum, Singapore, pp. 27–35.

one's form, especially physical manifestation, into another. This work fails, even as it tries so hard to deny its origins. The flattened electronic images on the three monitors facing the installation in actuality capture only one physical reality of the work. Yet the whole is indeed greater than the sum of its parts; the beauty of the work does not seem to have been affected by all the attempts to focus on the materiality and indeed artificiality of the construction. Is this East or West or East and West, or neither? As an artwork, *Dissolution* is, in my opinion, one of the most striking works in recent years that have engaged with this most Singaporean of fixations.

Chun Kai Feng's mixed media installation *He's Satisfied from Monday to Friday and on Sunday He Loves to Cry* (2009) won the Jury's Choice in the last Singapore Art Exhibition 2009, a biennial survey exhibition organised by the National Arts Council and the Singapore Art Museum. The work adopts the format of the diorama but writ large. Viewers peer through a glass window into a grey room, seemingly that of an office worker, possibly a home office. Upon closer observation, the presence of certain objects in this room raises the spectre of violence and danger.



Chun Kaifeng
*He's Satisfied from Monday to Friday and
 on Sundays He Loves to Cry*, 2009
 Mixed media installation

The artist explains his work thus:

He's Satisfied from Monday to Friday and on Sundays He Loves to Cry conveys an anxiety concerning the aesthetisation and anaesthetisation of everyday life. The different objects in this work space represented by the limited chromatic range of colours presents a certain psychologically-charged atmosphere. The work is meant as a reflection of the visual and material homogeneity of life in urban Singapore. If one looks closer and observes the carefully orchestrated placement of extrinsic objects, one will be able to notice that the work hints at a sense of forlornness and a desire for transgression in a carefully controlled environment.

The work resonates with visitors on many levels, hinting at the darkness

beneath the veneer of urban, sophisticated Singapore. The grey office, epitome of the white-collar jobs many Singaporeans aspire to, is drab and monotonous. The work also restricts public access to the view through the glass window or a partial look through a half-opened door. The secrets that lie within can never be fully revealed, try as we might. The use of grey, a colour functioning as a sign for the lack of colour — read “life” — also resonates with the use of this colour in theatre sets as the ideal “blank” colour which can take any coloured lights that the lighting designer chooses to throw onto the stage. Grey, the non-colour that has the potential to take on any colour, thus speaks also of the yearnings of the urban alien, forever looking for the “real thing” out there, beyond the cubicle. The visitor looking in through the single window thus comes from this world of real colour and life. The work asks: Will you stay out here or enter into this blank grey room from which escape is not easily achieved?

A secret room also lies at the heart of the work, *A View with a Room*, by the artist collective Vertical Submarine. The three artists in the collective share a common love for reading and literature and much of their installations derive from a process of translating words into objects and their eventual translation into three-dimensional environments. In a room filled with their earlier works, the viewer encounters a wall of text derived from Western literature. Quotations from Edgar Allan Poe, Alain Robbe-Grillet and Georges Perec describe the interior of a room. If one were to peer hard enough, a peephole can be found in a line of text through which a grey room can be discerned. Like the children in Narnia, only persistence and a child-like curiosity will enable the viewer to find his/her way through the wardrobe. Once through the wardrobe, the visitor navigates a paper room filled with typewritten text. This room is itself a reconfiguration of an earlier 2003 work, *Paper Room*. Continuing on, the journey ends in a totally grey room. The room is truncated, like an image is cut off at the edges of a photo frame. The objects in this room — a typewriter, literary texts and even the sickle and hammer motif on the floor tiles — hint at the owner occupant of the room. On closer inspection, it becomes clear that instead of being a direct physicalisation of the Western texts on the wall outside, local elements have been incorporated in the process of giving birth to this room. The process of transforming text into action involves more than a simple act of translation but also creation.

Vertical Submarine's work within a work, room within a room, is a call to the imagination of the viewer. Indeed the title of the work, *A View with a Room*,

recalling as it does the E. M. Foster novel with its themes of emancipation through a personal act of will, also hints at the artists' belief in the power of the creative imagination to give birth to new realities. Literature and text need to be transformed by the viewer into action. By placing the viewer into the text, so to speak, Vertical Submarine's work makes its demands clear (Tan 2009, p. 129).⁴



Vertical Submarine — A View with a Room, 2009
Mixed media installation

The earlier work displayed alongside this installation, *DeComposition II* (2008), also picks up the same themes. An AO sized book containing an original story with drawings is bound up and locked up, thereby making its contents unavailable to the viewer. The sole exception is during specified "performance" times, when a sacred ritual is enacted to reveal the book's contents to the viewer/audience. The use of language as a basis for visual art by Vertical Submarine ironically also highlights the difficulty of this development: We may literally be confronted with a new visual language "foreign" to us that requires interpretation and hard work on the part of the viewer. At this juncture, we may be touching the roots of that view often expressed by members of the public as: "Why is it so difficult to understand?"

The work of this group of young contemporary artists therefore marks a turning away, or rather, a turning inwards of artistic energy. Even among the other group of artists featured in the exhibition who deploy elements of urban and street art, we need to question the gains and losses when public protest art enters the coded spaces of the gallery or institution, as they now seem to be around the world. Nadarajan (2007, p. 21)⁵ has argued that criticality is an essential condition of contemporary art. Art as protest turns allusive and coded and gestures of defiance are increasingly wrapped up in a private language. Yet, as the readings in this essay attempt to show, criticality remains in the art. The sources of this shift are still unclear but such may possibly be profitably compared with the rise of conceptual painters like the Jendela

4 Tan, S.L. (2009), "A View with a Room: the Lines, the View, and the Wardrobe", in *President's Young Talents*, Singapore Art Museum, Singapore, pp. 121-129.

5 Nadarajan, G. (2007), "Not Modern: Theses on Contemporary Art", in *Contemporary Art in Singapore*, G. Nadarajan, R. Storer & E. Tan (eds.), ICA, Singapore, pp. 19-23.

group in Indonesia in the post-Suharto period and the conceptual painters from the Philippines such as Geraldine Javier, Nona Garcia and Yasmin Sisson. Further research would be needed to further sketch out these developments.

TAN Boon Hui

Tan Boon Hui is Group Director, Programmes, at the National Heritage Board (NHB) overseeing exhibitions, programmes and outreach events across the museums, institutions and divisions of the NHB, and is currently artistic director for the Singapore *Festivarts 2015*, an interdisciplinary festival of visual, performing, design and film in France. He was Director of the Singapore Art Museum from 2009 to 2013, and in 2011, he curated (with Khairuddin Hori and guest curator Iola Lenzi) the landmark exhibition of contemporary art from Southeast Asia *Negotiating Home History and Nation*. From 2006 to 2009, as head of programming at the National Museum of Singapore, he created large-scale events such as the Night Festival, the Children's Season and the first major season of contemporary visual and performing arts from the Arab World and Turkey — *Under the Crescent Moon*. From 2002 to 2005, Boon Hui handled international development and Visual and Literary arts development at the National Arts Council, managing key initiatives like the Singapore Pavilion at the Venice Biennale 2004; International Society for the Performing Arts Congress Singapore: Face Asia 2004; IFACCA's 2nd World Summit for Arts and Culture; and Singapore presentation at *São Paulo Biennial 2012*. From 1989 to 2002, he was Assistant Curator for Southeast Asia at the Asian Civilisations Museum.

Nan Qi

Authority Sex Money*

CHONG Huai Seng

Chong Huai Seng — founder of China Art Foundation, art collector, curator and critic — shares his erudite understanding of contemporary Chinese art, in particular insights of Nan Qi, one of the foremost exponents of this new “Xieyi”.

Shui mo or ink wash painting has a long rich tradition in the annals of Chinese culture and heritage. For almost two thousand years, Chinese artists have used ink on rice paper to showcase not just their drawing skills but also their intellect and nobility. Past masters of the medium composed poems or wrote verses on their paintings, thus creating a unique Chinese art form which may not be fully understood by the uninitiated. From the late 1800s, Chinese artists evolved with increasing exposure to Western art; some who sojourned to the Western art schools rejected Chinese painting totally while others innovated with a fusion of both Chinese and Western traditions. Oil painting was introduced into China in the 1900s, thus began the era when modern art became popular. As a matter of fact, the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, Singapore, was officially opened in 1938 by a group of art teachers from China who introduced Chinese and Western art. While Chinese painting has not seen a big revival in Singapore, contemporary artists in China have set new heights in creating, using ink and water or mixed media. Singapore has started to invite

* This piece is updated from the essay of the same name published by Art Plural Gallery in 2013.

more Chinese artists to exhibit here, with many art collectors among the first to acquire contemporary Chinese art since the 1990s.

Against such a backdrop, I set up China Art Foundation (CAF) in 2004 as a non-profit organisation and in October 2004, CAF organised an exhibition entitled "Xin Xieyi" or "New Freehand Chinese Ink Painting" at the National Art Museum in Beijing. It was curated by a team of distinguished art critics led by Professor Liu Xiaochun, Researcher at the Chinese Art Research Institute. The curatorial team selected a group of 30 Chinese ink artists, with the inclusion of Hong Kong's Wucius Wong and Singapore's Tan Swie Hian. The exhibition explored the various aspects of freehand brushwork, especially the concept of "original simplicity".

Coincidentally, there was a high-profile international exhibition held at the same time in the National Museum. It was the first Impressionist Art Exhibition held in Beijing, a cultural programme initiated and organised by the Chinese and French governments to commemorate forty years of Franco-Sino ties. The differences and relationships between the two art movements could not be better served and it left a strong indelible impression on the audience. Nan Qi participated in "Xin Xieyi" as both my exhibition director and artist. He was then already a well-known artist in China, both as an oil and ink painter.

His subject matters range widely, but he was particularly interested in exploring themes which relate to authority, money and sex. Over the years, I witnessed Nan Qi's journey as an artist who dared to break new ground, experimenting early with the painting of ink dots on rice paper. He harnessed digital technology and combined it with traditional ink techniques to create a whole new body of work, many of which produced a three-dimensional effect, even to the naked eye. Georges Seurat, Roy Lichtenstein and Andy Warhol were all well-known for their signature work, employing the dot effect on canvas, in a pointillist manner and with screen-printing techniques. With Chinese ink, Nan Qi created a new oeuvre of dot-inspired paintings,



Fortune Dot, 2006

Ink and Tibetan incense on rice paper
155 x 124 cm

imbued with strong Chinese symbolic characteristics.

Born in Yongkang City, Zhejiang Province, China in 1960, Nan Qi was trained in traditional Chinese painting not in an art school but in the army. The artist graduated in 1986 from the People's Liberation Army Fine Arts Academy, Beijing. In 1990, he travelled to England and France to study European art. He moved to Hong Kong in 1995 and had several international exhibitions in Tokyo, Singapore, the Netherlands, Hong Kong and China before returning to Beijing in 2002. Nan Qi also made oil and acrylic paintings but later decided to focus on ink. He is now considered by many throughout China and the world to be the master of ink dots. The constant evolution in his technique and narration makes him a singular artist whose use of ink is on a par with 3D technology. Today, museums, galleries and foundations have organised major retrospectives dedicated to contemporary Chinese ink painting of the recent past. As a consequence, traditional shui mo painting is still widely practised. Moreover, the rapid modernisation of China provided unprecedented stimuli to a younger generation of ink artists to re-assess their art form. Taking a leaf from the Impressionist art movement and its influence on Western art in the 19th century, contemporary ink artists are breaking ground to create an innovative dimension and perspective for shui mo.



1949 Portrait of Chairman Mao, 2009
Colour on rice paper
158 x 123 cm

Working with ink on *xuan* paper alternating black and white, Nan Qi's work is deeply rooted in the technique of traditional ink painting. From this strong personal attachment to ink, the artist keeps incorporating new elements to his work and injecting an innovative dimension to the traditional medium. These various components are all part of his unique artistic language and stand out in his latest works.

Nan Qi, recognised as "the master of ink dots", replaces lines with juxtapositions of dots forming an actual image when seen from a distance. This pointillist style renews the Chinese traditional freehand technique (*xieyi*), literally "writing an idea": calligraphy characters are turned into dots. Each dot is thus a sign locking up its own meaning. The actual form of what is being perceived is conveyed by infinity of independent dots. As a

result, it is not enough to observe the overall image; one literally needs to “read” the image to understand it. As Nan Qi shares:

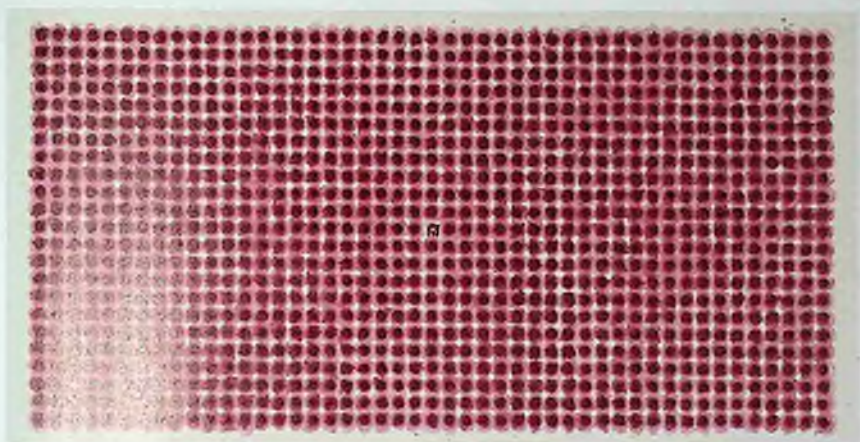
Western dot matrices are often accomplished with screen-printing, and my works are all completed by hand. [...] The dots in my work have many layers, including ink layers themselves and layers of colour, but all in a single dot. [...] Western dot matrices are not the same; their dot is only subservient to the entire form; there is not much meaning in looking at each individual dot.

The second innovative aesthetical component in Nan Qi’s work lies in his recent use of the 3D technique. The artist critically refers to the digitalisation of the world, forcing society to make it a norm and to adapt to this new paradigm. Indeed, in his art, the 3D is imposed to the viewer as no special 3D glasses are needed to see clearly the special effect. The artist rejects this material way of looking at the world through the prism of technology. The series, entitled *Eerie 3D*, deconstructs existing images in a fragmented and harsh reality facing digitalisation, consumerism and financial power. Using 3D, Nan Qi allows symbols to come out of his artworks and puts the contemporary world in suspension — symbols of authority/power, money/renminbi and sex/fantasy.

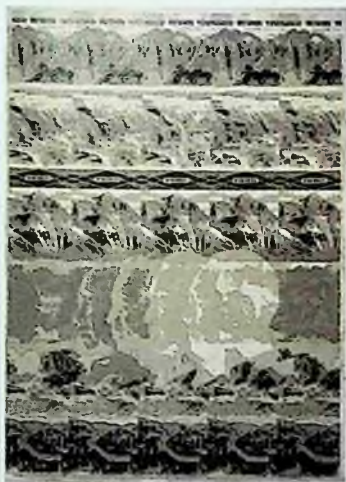


Black 'Nan' RMB Currency, 2013
Ink on rice paper
3D images in ink and wash
108 x 70 cm

Following this critical statement on today’s society, Nan Qi expresses a certain nostalgia towards the past Maoist regime. Indeed, his experience as a soldier left a deep impression on the then young artist. His work, saturated with references to the army, is marked by the recurrence of the colour red and the omnipresence of revolutionary symbols. A whole series, entitled *Red* features Mao and the “valiant heroes”, distancing the artist from the critical artistic movement led by some of his Chinese contemporaries.



Nan Qi — Red Halo Dot, 2013, Colour on rice paper, 70 x 140 cm

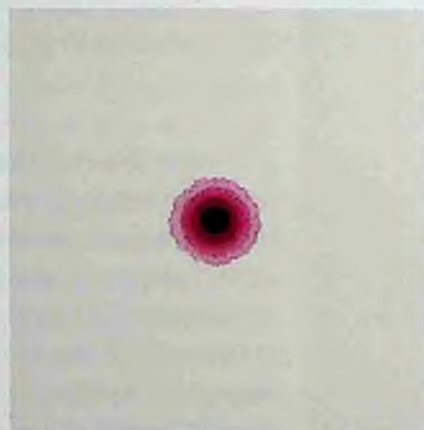


*1980 Chinese Bank Note, 2010
Colour on rice paper
3D images in ink and wash
172 x 124 cm*

In Nan Qi's art, one has to read between the lines. Even though the unique image emerging from the final ink painting appears extremely rational and almost detached — as if the artist was intentionally using an external focalisation to depict an objective reality, the multiple dots represent a kaleidoscopic truth expressed through individual feelings. From politics to sexuality or urban scenes, Nan Qi superimposes layers of tension and invites us to cast a new eye on China and its ideals.

Nan Qi is one of the leading contemporary artists who have contributed to the recent revival of Chinese ink wash painting. For over a thousand years, ink wash painting has always been a mainstay in Chinese art and culture.

Today, this art form is undergoing a renaissance. Numerous recent conferences and exhibitions on modern and contemporary Chinese ink painting have focused attention on this new art form now at the centre of global conversations on art.



Nan Qi's Dot A, Dot B and Dot C, 2013, Colour on rice paper, 70 x 70 cm (each)

CHONG Huai Seng

Chong Huai Seng spent about 15 years in the financial services industry, heading the stock-broking operations of Vickers da Costa Securities in Singapore in 1984, and later started John Govett (Asia), which was a UK fund management company with extensive investments in listed equities in Asia.

In 1994, Huai Seng became the Managing Director and major shareholder of Pan Pacific Public Company. In 1997, he became the Vice Chairman and major shareholder of Panpac Media Ltd, a leading independent magazine publisher in Singapore and Malaysia. In 2003, he left Panpac and started an investment consultancy, Allied Ventures International (AVI), which assists small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in China to raise development capital and make Initial Public Offerings (IPOs).

Huai Seng is the Founder and Chairman of the China Art Foundation (CAF). CAF was founded in 2004 as a non-profit organisation to promote and develop contemporary Chinese ink painting. It has organised and sponsored major exhibitions in Beijing and Singapore for some of the top contemporary ink artists working in China today. CAF has also presented public symposiums and published art journals in which leading curators, critics and artists are encouraged to investigate and debate on the past, present and future of Chinese ink painting in modern China and promote contemporary China Visual Art to the world. Huai Seng, a Colombo Plan Scholar who graduated from University of Manchester with a First-Class Degree in Polymer Physics, is a discerning art collector, having invested in contemporary art, conservation studio and art galleries. His writing has given voice to foreign artists here and internationally, a Renaissance man of the Renaissance City of Singapore.

Acquisition

Building a Collection

QUEK Tse Kwang in Dialogue with Renee LEE



Chong Siew Ying, *Aung Sun Su Kyi*, 2010, Oil on linen, 180 x 200 cm

Interviewing Quek Tse Kwang (TK), one of the top architects and art collectors in Singapore, has been very inspiring for the editor. True to his profession — an architect — TK is a person who works at building relationships in each encounter. Little wonder that Singapore's pioneer artist Cheong Soo Pieng would offer him his favourite place, one that was famous due to the image being publicised by UNICEF — *Mother & Daughter*. This is also TK's personal favourite as the acquisition of this painting was a very touching story. The artist reduced the price without prompting as he wanted the young architect to have that particular artwork. It was the most expensive painting TK had ever bought. The artist passed on the next day. That was in 1983.

Since that fateful day, TK's art collection has developed into one of the finest in the region. Collecting art is his passion. He is an Architect and a Director (with Rene Tan) of RT+Q Architects Pte Ltd. Beyond his love for aesthetically inspiring works and buildings, he contributes to the development of the art ecosystem serving as the Deputy Chairman of Singapore Tyler Print Institute (STPI). He previously served as Board Member of the Singapore Art Museum (SAM), Member of the Istana Art Collection Advisory Committee (IACC) and Advisor to Ernst & Young Asean Art Outreach Programme.

TK is an international judge for Tun Foundation Bank's Annual Painting Competition in Myanmar. He also serves on the auction vetting committee for The Edge's Auction events. A self-confessed "hobbyist" publisher, he produced a total of four books, his most recent being *30 Artfriends 2: Collecting Southeast Asian Art*.

With his deep and broad involvement in building the fine art scene in both public and private contexts, the editor offers a glimpse of TK, a man whose "hobbies" have real impact on the growth of the arts scene. A brick and mortar work, indeed.

Building a Collection

RL: This session is on private and public acquisition of art and I would like to title the topic “Building a Collection”. I heard you have written a few books on artists and art collectors.

TK: I am a “self-confessed” hobbyist publisher. My first book was on the Malaysian Artist Ahmad Zakii titled *Ahmad Zakii Drawings, Paintings, Prints 1991–2007* which was published in 2007 in conjunction with a one-man exhibition at Singapore Tyler Print Institute (STPI). At that time, Zakii was an emerging artist and was getting known in Singapore. In 2010, I published *30 Art Friends: Appreciating Southeast Asian Art* on the collecting stories and experiences of Malaysian and Singapore collectors. This was followed by a smallish book in 2011 on Min Wae Aung, Myanmar’s leading artist in conjunction with an exhibition in Singapore called *Figurescape*. This year, I completed *30 Art Friends 2: Collecting Southeast Asian Art* which is a sequel to the first. This publication is again on the compelling art stories by collectors from the Philippines, Malaysia and Singapore. As with the previous book, this is an art charity project as the proceeds of the sales of this book go towards supporting talented and deserving students at LaSalle College of the Arts. In this book, we had the distinct support in the form of the separate Forewords penned by President Benigno Acquino, Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak and Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong.



Ahmad Zakii, *Kato Sepi*, 2012, Charcoal on paper, 76 x 206 cm

RL: Your involvement has been quite active in the art ecosystem, sitting on the committee boards of public institutions.

TK: I am privileged to serve on several Art Committees. The two most current — one is an initiative spearheaded by Suryani Senja Alias (who is Ahmad Zakii’s

wife) for a sculpture competition called *Art in the Park* for Kuala Lumpur. I have recently agreed to participate on the Board of Patrons for the upcoming Singapore Art Fair with other local and foreign art collectors. At present, I continue to serve as a Board Member and Vice Chairman of STPI. My previous art involvement includes Board Member of Singapore Art Museum, Committee of the National Art Gallery (currently National Gallery Singapore), and Istana Art Advisory Committee. I was also an Advisor to Ernst & Young ASEAN Art Outreach Invitation programme.

RL: TK, you had, at 17 years of age, aspired to become an artist, so how did you become a trained architect with a successful and award-winning practice? I hope you can start your fine art practice soon. Would you?

TK: Basically, most architects of my generation can draw. It was natural for me and I used to do well in this subject in school — which is a blessing as it meant I had one less subject to study. At that time I wanted to get into NAFA, but due to financial constraints I was unable to. We are aware of the difficult career path of an artist, so I guess I did a “cowardly” move and studied architecture instead! I do not think that I will start a new career as an artist as the practice of architecture does allow me to continue to fulfil my artistic side. Together with my partner Rene Tan, and supported by many enthusiastic young architects, we continue to explore the beauty of art and complemented by rigours of building technology.



Drawings of TK's house to be built on Stevens Road

RL: It is a lot of hard work to be a collector of art. Do you go to galleries, artists' studios, exhibitions, auctions?

TK: Hard work is probably the correct description of the task which all collectors have to undergo. However this is a pleasurable chore and can be rather addictive. I search for art on a continual basis: visiting websites, attending art openings, going to

galleries and participating in art auctions. I practically review an art auction catalogue from cover to cover and keep the old copies. I also have to negotiate with my wife not to throw them away. One enjoyable aspect in this art search is the discovery and the fostering of friendship with many artists. This friendship allows me to understand their works much more intimately. While my "art search" is somewhat predictable, occasionally I digress from my usual. As an example, I recently bid for a rare, single-line, beautiful, quirky drawing by John Lennon, which was offered in a New York auction. Unfortunately I was unsuccessful as my feeble bid did not stand a glimmering chance against other Lennon fans that were more passionate and with deeper pockets. Through the years I have also befriended many collectors in the region who share the same passion on collecting art.

RL: When did this collecting bug bite you?

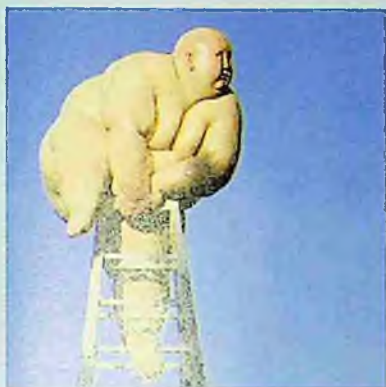
TK: I started collecting 30 years ago. I buy art which I consider beautiful and affordable, works which I am proud to display in my home/office and works which I am pleased to share with my friends. I do not see art as only an investment and hence have been less focused and savvy as compared to some other more astute collectors. These collectors have bought Indian and Chinese contemporary art which have risen significantly.

RL: Do you buy mainly Southeast Asian modern and contemporary art?

TK: Yes. I buy mainly Southeast Asian art, which is a territory I am familiar with and works that are readily available. I also collect some Chinese contemporary art and more recently, Korean and Japanese art.

RL : May I have a preview of a few pieces of your favourite art works? In the two publications *30 Art Friends* and *30 Art Friends 2*, you selected six pieces and wrote very eloquently on the pieces, critiquing the aesthetics as well as the artists' oeuvre, sometimes dwelling on the historical contexts of the pieces. How much influence do art critics, curators and historians' reviews or writing have on your collecting choice?

TK: Of the 6 works selected in the two books, I must say Soo Pieng's *Mother & Daughter* is my personal favourite. It has an interesting and compelling story which I shared with the reader. All the other works by Srihadi, Zakii, Siew Ying and Min Wae Aung are also important as they are personal friends developed over a number



Mu Boyan, *Fix*, 2012
Casting in resin and stainless steel
360 x 150 x 100 cm

of years. I do read art critic, curator and historian's reviews as they are the wiser and educated scholars of the art ecosystem.

RL: What preventative conservation or restoration methods are used to preserve your collection?

TK: Let me reply to you in the opposite manner, that is, "what not to do". Several years ago, I purchased an oil painting by a rather (at that time) unknown Chinese artist called Ai Xuan. Ai Xuan painted faces and portraiture of people in wintery scenes.

They all look rather melancholic. I like the work very much but this enthusiasm was not shared by many people especially my family. It was around the 1987 Asian Crisis when I was asked by my (now late) sister: "Why don't you take the painting down as it makes the place so melancholic?" So I took the painting down, wrapped it and kept it in the storeroom and left it as it was. About two years later, I opened the



Computerised drawing of TK's new house designed with a double loft gallery to display his art collection, including his acquisition of the towering sculpture *Fix 2012* (Fatty Series) by China Artist Mu Boyan at Art Stage exhibition in Singapore



Min Wae Aung, *Traveller One*, 2004, Acrylic on canvas, 117 x 239 cm

wrapping and found some portions of the paint to have flaked off. I summarily got an artist to restore the work. Upon completion, he advised that while the painting was very good, he was of the view that the paint material was not very good and should be quickly sold away. I subsequently sold the painting and told my wife that the haunting face of this girl will one day re-visit us. Needless to say, Ai Xuan has since then become very famous and the painting is worth more than 20 times what I paid for. This is a good lesson of “what not to do” in keeping paintings!

RL: We turn now to your role as a director on the NHB acquisition committee. Please elaborate.

TK: The Acquisition Committee consists of a few individuals who review works presented by the Curators of the museum for consideration. These include donations, offers for sale by individual, institute or auction house. Each member assesses

the merits of the proposal, and completes a comprehensive form. After the papers have been submitted, a summary is collated and the majority carries.

RL: What are areas of conflict of interest and what are areas of synergy?

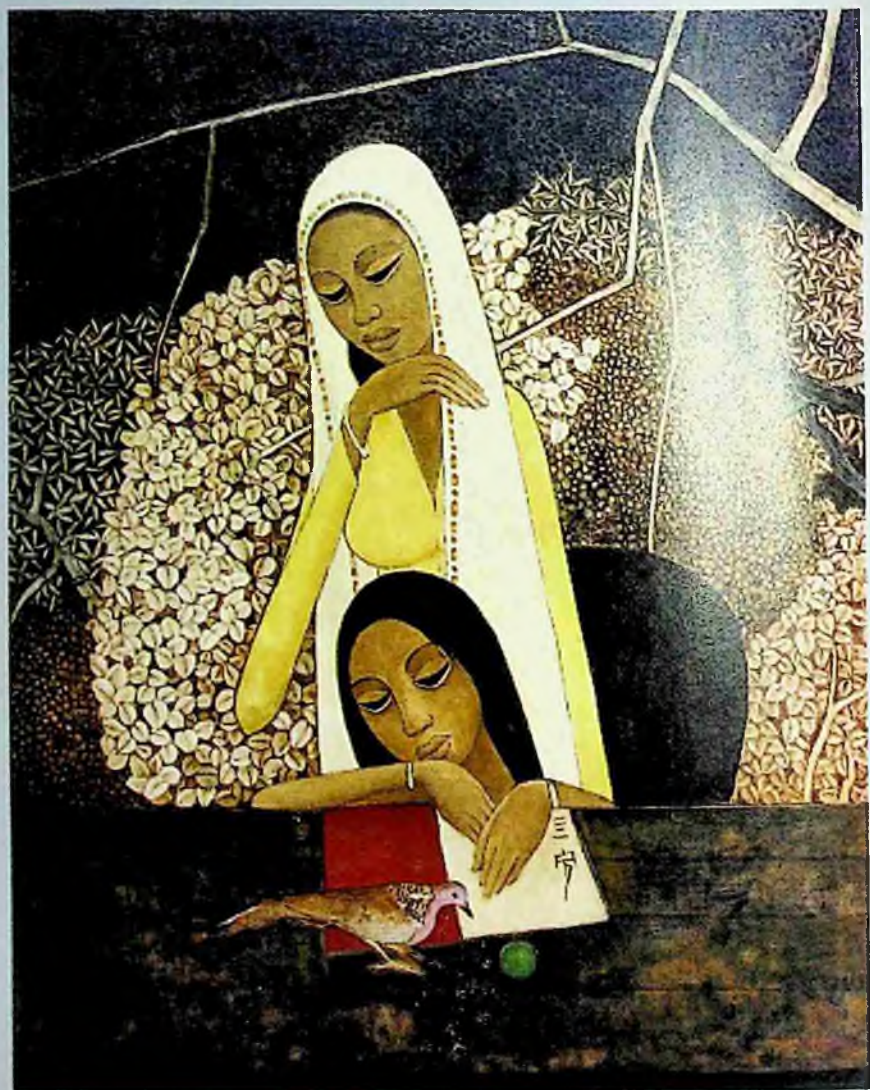
TK: There is a proper system of disclosure. For example, if I happen to be a major collector of a certain artist and if one of the works is being presented to the Acquisition Committee, I will refrain from participating in the evaluation for the acquisition.



Srihadi Soerdarsano
Sitting Dancer, 1998
Oil on canvas, 130 x 100 cm



Ahmad Zaki, *Kenduri (Feast)*, 2007, Charcoal on paper, 117 x 239 cm



Cheong Soo Pieng, *Mother & Daughter*, 1975, Oil on canvas, 100 x 80 cm

RL: Now, private collectors are becoming a force to be reckoned with in Southeast Asian art collecting. There might come a time when the best works are bought by private tycoons and connoisseurs, and the public do not get to view such priceless art. Notwithstanding issues of bureaucracy in public museum acquisition, so forth, how should private collectors make available these valuable pieces for public viewing?

TK: Really, I am not in that league of collectors but there are such collectors. However, in an Asian society like ours, they tend to be conservative.

RL: Syndicates can “play” the market as well. But of course the winner is that art becomes a worthwhile commodity and artists can become full-time practitioners instead of just a form of self-enrichment. How should artists plan their careers?

TK: As far as syndicates are concerned, I do not know it well enough but I am sure there are such groupings. Recently over lunch with the Art Advisory Committee at the Istana with President Tony Tan, we were asked if Singapore can produce great artists. In my view, although we have a small population, we are still capable of producing good artists. However the budding artist will have to be nurtured and supported.

RL: What is art?

TK: For the general public, art is an expression or application of the creative skills and imagination of man. This is typically in a form of painting or sculpture and they are produced primarily for the beauty and emotional power. I can tell you what I personally do not consider as art. In June 2014, at the exhibition of Gustave Courbet's infamous 1866 painting *Lorigine du monde* (*Origin of the world*), a performance artist from Luxembourg was seen and filmed (you can access this link at <http://news.artnet.com/art-world/artist-enacts-emorigin-of-the-worldem-at-musee-dorsay-and-yes-that-means-what-you-think-35011>). She exposed her private parts while the museum guards crowded around her amidst cheering visitors in the gallery. To me, this is not art.

My Theatre Journey

Nelson CHIA

Nelson Chia shares on generating new ways to nurture great actors for the local stage. This essay is a journey in theatre studies, practice and administration, and also a journey of deciding between an engineering scholarship and a degree in the arts.

This essay is a narrative of my experience as a theatre practitioner in Singapore. More specifically, it traces the various stages and significant moments that marked my journey from being a student (who hardly knew the existence of this art form) to becoming a professional theatre artist. I am aware that the story I am about to tell is far from being representative, and may even seem egotistical and prejudiced. However, it is hoped that a personal account such as this will allow the readers to view the issues and development of Singapore theatre from a different, albeit biased, perspective.

The Non-Formative Years

I shall begin with my school days. I call it the “non-formative” years precisely because there was very little guided exposure to theatre although I had been involved in some theatrical activities at various stages. I should clarify at this point that by “theatre”, I mean the western form of modern theatre. Although it is true that I had witnessed Chinese street opera and occasionally attended commercial music revues with my parents while I was growing up, the knowledge that these were in

fact theatrical experiences came only much later. It was in the 1980s, and back then school performances put up by students, under the direction of teachers, were called “assembly shows” or “assembly items”. In fact, the word “theatre” was not used to describe any kind of performance we did or watched in school — there was no sense that any of those dramatic activities could be associated with the idea of art. In those days, and to an average student like myself, art was painting and handicraft, and music was learning to play the recorder. Drama was, of course, not a subject offered in the curriculum. My only direct involvement in creating performance was when I led my classmates in devising an original story for one of our assembly items, much to the amusement of my teacher initially, who later commented that the show lacked content. All that, if I recall correctly, just about summarises my encounter with theatre before my teenage years.

In my secondary school days, I was a science student who had chosen Scouting as my extra-curricular activity. Although I must have sung and danced in “items” presented at campfires, my two most significant memories of theatrical activities were firstly, a literature excursion where we watched an excerpt from Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* before trying to answer questions from a prepared worksheet and secondly, my class’s participation in an inter-class drama competition. I remembered receiving a special mention from the teacher-judges for my performance in the latter because I, in their words, “reacted aptly at the appropriate moments”. Unfortunately, that did nothing to spur me into understanding theatre or performance on a deeper level.

In junior college, I was the chairman of the Outdoor Activities Club and had spent my days learning to pitch tents and paddle canoes. Our club was next door to the Chinese Society, which was famous for its big annual theatre performance. Again, the sight of the Chinese Society members working along the corridors over long hours, crafting props and building set pieces from scratch did not even interest me to consider attending any of their performances. Then came one fortuitous day when one of my friends insisted on dragging me to a performance of Andrew Lloyd Webber’s *Phantom of the Opera* — it was presented by a visiting Australian company. A musical by a foreign company was a rare thing back then, and rarer for me because I had never heard of such a thing as a musical in my life.¹ The performance left me awestruck for it was the first time that I realised that Chinese opera actors are

1 I attended primary school from 1979 to 1984, and secondary school from 1985 to 1988. From 1989 to 1990, I was in junior college. My first attendance of the musical or any professional performance for that matter happened between 1989 and 1990. The name of the Australian company eludes me.

not the only ones who sing their lines and a stage set can actually be mechanised. All that, we must understand, happened during a time when public housings looked like match boxes and Singapore was still very much a cultural desert.

The Beginning

The beginning of my theatre career came as a bit of a fluke. It was 1993 and I was a regular serviceman in the Singapore Navy. I had by then intended a career in the military, secured a place to study Computer Science at the National University of Singapore and was offered an opportunity to do that under the Singapore Armed Forces Scholarship. One day, my younger sister who was on school vacation saw an audition notice by a local company Toy Factory Theatre Ensemble. She asked if I would like to go with her to the audition. I said yes, not having the faintest idea what an audition entailed. All I can recall of the audition was a group movement session, which I rather enjoyed.²

Anyhow, as luck would have it, I got through the audition and my first professional performance was as an ensemble player in Toy Factory's *OsEAN*, directed by the artistic director of Toy Factory Theatre Ensemble³ Goh Boon Teck and performed in a rooftop swimming pool at the Pan Pacific Hotel. After that, I performed again with Toy Factory in *Titoudao: A Fallen Angel*⁴ as an ensemble member, followed by taking on two small roles in Practice Theatre Ensemble's⁵ *Where Love Abides*, directed by May Wong.⁶ That was the start of my long relationship with these two companies. In those days, all of us were amateurs with a day-job, no formal training in theatre and, as amateurs, we were paid by way of a small honorarium. I remember how totally surprised I was when I received a generous S\$400 payment for 3 months of work on *Where Love Abides* in 1994. Even so, there was always a very strong sense of responsibility, teamwork and passion in those early productions. I still believe these are the values that continue to inform my attitude towards my profession to this day.

2 The movement audition was led by Lim Chin Huat, a dancer and choreographer, and later artistic director of local dance company Ecnad.

3 Toy Factory Theatre Ensemble is now known as Toy Factory Productions.

4 Both *OsEAN* and *Titoudao: A Fallen Angel* were written by Goh Boon Teck.

5 Practice Theatre Ensemble is now known as The Theatre Practice.

6 *Where Love Abides* was written by Hong Kong playwright Raymond To. May Wong was the assistant artistic director of Practice Theatre Ensemble, and later The Theatre Practice.

By 1994, I was already severely bitten by the theatre bug. While still serving in the navy, I woke up one day and literally heard a voice in my head telling me “theatre is my career choice”. Sitting in bed that morning, I made the decision to reject the SAF scholarship and to resign from my military career. Soon after, I re-applied to the same university and this time, I chose to do Theatre Studies as my major.⁷ It was then a young programme that was started a few years back under the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences.

The Learning Journey

My time in the Theatre Studies Programme marked the beginning of my formal education as a theatre artist. I felt extremely fortunate to be able to study and earn a degree in what I loved under the programme when there was then no vocational institute for theatre training. Although we were required to be involved in a lot of practical works which included two major productions over the three undergraduate years, the programme was by large an academic study but it helped lay down a strong foundation of theatre art in me. Throughout the four years in the programme (with an additional honours year), I continued to get myself involved in theatre productions with various local companies. By the last year, besides Toy Factory and Practice Theatre Ensemble, I had also worked with companies such as Asia in Theatre Research Centre⁸ and TheatreWorks. As I was bilingual, I began working in both English and Mandarin productions, taking on several lead roles under the guidance of directors such as Goh Boon Teck, May Wong, the late Kuo Pao Kun and the late William Teo, Ong Keng Sen and Casey Lim,⁹ to name a few. In fact, so involved was I that I was acting in six major productions in one particular year — acting had inadvertently become my full-time occupation even while I was pursuing my degree.

Fortunately, I did manage to complete my university studies with good-enough results. It was 1999 and I had already been working in the local theatre scene for six years. Although I was then primarily an actor, I was also interested in directing. As

7 The NUS Theatre Studies Programme was started in 1992. I was the fourth batch to graduate from the programme.

8 Asia In Theatre Research Centre is now known as World In Theatre.

9 Kuo Pao Kun was then the artistic director of The Theatre Practice; William Teo was artistic director of Asia in Theatre Research Centre; Ong Keng Sen was, and remains, the artistic director of TheatreWorks, while Casey Lim was then an associate artistic director with TheatreWorks.

such, after graduating from the Theatre Studies Programme, I decided to pursue a graduate degree in Goldsmiths College, London, majoring in directing. Getting myself to London was not easy. After being accepted by the college for an MA programme in directing, I needed a scholarship from Singapore to pay for the expenses. I applied for the Shell-NAC scholarship offered by the National Arts Council but was not successful as the focus of the scholarship then was, I believe, to support undergraduate studies. Instead, I was awarded a bursary by NAC. While it was generous, the bursary was not enough to cover the full amount needed. As a result, I took up two bank loans and finally made my way to London.

My postgraduate days in London were indeed an eye-opener. I wanted very badly to make this trip possible because I knew that the experience of discovering arts in a foreign land would be an important factor in my future endeavours as an artist. Hence, despite financial constraints, I managed to save on daily expenses by rushing back to my hostel in-between classes to cook lunch instead of eating at the campus café. I would only order soft drinks at social gatherings and had on several occasions walked the whole neighbourhood just to find cheap stationery. I spent most of my money attending theatre performances and visiting art museums over the weekends. By semester break, I had saved up enough to go on a month-long backpacking tour in Europe, travelling on student rail passes and eating a lot of bread for meals. As a result, I was blessed with unforgettable encounters with world-class museums, ancient ruins, theatre performances in foreign languages, and many other memorable moments. To me, those experiences were extraordinary because, unlike now, Singapore then was not a place bustling with international performances and exhibitions. Time passed rather quickly and I ended my study in London with a graduation performance where I directed a group of English actors in Tom Stoppard's *Rozencrantz And Guildenstern Are Dead*. The play was selected as one of the programmes in the Goldsmiths Festival of Arts. I returned to Singapore in the new millennium with a new degree and a sizable bank debt.

The Professional Stage

Just before I left London, I had written to The Theatre Practice (TTP) in Singapore to ask if I might have a chance to work in the company. Fortunately, TTP was going through a restructuring phase at that time and they wanted to form an artistic team in the company with young artists. As such, I started working as a full-time resident artist with TTP, acting and learning to direct under the tutelage of May Wong and

Kuo Pao Kun. This was the beginning of my journey as a full-time professional theatre practitioner — I was one of the very few who held a resident position in a company at that time. Few local theatre companies had the resources to sustain a group of core actors: several companies had just one or two resident positions, and freelancers made up the general pool of theatre artists. This remains the situation, although with the growing arts scene, we now have a larger pool of freelancers in the market.

During my time at TTP, I had many opportunities to work alongside master directors, acting or learning to direct productions of classic plays and experimental works. With the setting up of the Theatre Training and Research Programme¹⁰ — conceived by Kuo Pao Kun in 2000 — discussions were underway within the company for actor training programmes. I was hopeful of the future before things came to a halt with the unfortunate demise of Kuo Pao Kun in 2002. Soon after his passing, the direction of the company deviated from what had, in my opinion, been laid out in the previous two years, and I decided to leave the company. I thus entered the world of being a full-time freelance practitioner.

It was at this point in 2003 that the idea of setting up my own theatre company was born. I was, however, not entirely clear about the kind of company I wanted to create. Moreover, it did not seem to make sense to me then, given the limited national resources that were available to support another theatre company in Singapore. I decided that to contribute to existing companies might prove to be a better move. Therefore, I accepted the position of Associate Artistic Director with Toy Factory Productions and continued to direct and act on a freelance basis. From then on, the ten years that followed saw me trying my hand at various things. I directed a number of plays, failed many times at realising my vision for productions, acted in many more plays, experienced a production of international collaboration that lasted three months, got married, started a family, dabbled in TV acting, hosted TV programmes for a period, taught theatre as a subject in two different institutions for about six years, directed numerous student productions, wrote theatre syllabus and pursued academic research in theatre. I had also pushed for actors' equity as a committee member of the Association of Singapore Actors, joined The Substation as an associate artist and created a series of solo works. Through all these, I was subconsciously searching for what I really wanted for my career. Then, something happened in 2008 that, looking back, I now realise, was a turning point in my career.

10 The Theatre Training and Research Programme is a three-year full-time acting course that ran as an independent division of Practice Performing Arts Centre. Kuo Pao Kun and T. Sasitharan were the co-directors in 2000.

The Formation of a Company

In the summer of 2008, I applied for a month-long intensive training programme at the Saratoga International Training Institute (SITI), held at Skidmore College, Saratoga Springs, New York. This summer training programme was co-started by Japanese director Tadashi Suzuki (of Suzuki's Company of Toga) and American director Anne Bogart (of SITI Company). Under the programme, we were taught the Suzuki Method of Actor Training and Anne Bogart's Viewpoints, along with many other subjects such as dramaturgy, composition and movement. I was particularly attracted to the two methods by Tadashi Suzuki and Anne Bogart. The former is a training system aimed at developing the actor's ability to control energy, breath, and the body's centre of gravity, while cultivating an inner sensibility in the actor; the latter is a method for developing the individual's sensitivity to the stage and ensemble work. Ever since my days with TTP, I have been searching for actor training methodologies that are systematic and supportive of long-term practice. I was therefore delighted to have experienced these two methods. More importantly, I had learnt how the methods could be applied to become the foundation of a company's philosophy.

In July 2008, I co-founded an ensemble collective named A GROUP OF PEOPLE (AGOP) with four other participants of the SITI summer training.¹¹ For the next three-and-a-half years, the members of AGOP tried as much as possible to gather for regular training and to exchange ideas. We trained in the Suzuki Method of Actor Training and Viewpoints, and created works using the "composition method", among others. AGOP was one of the earliest theatre collectives to emerge at that time, working on artists coming together to create under a non-hierarchical model. In my opinion, the success of AGOP suggested the possibility of artist-led initiatives in the local arts scene and encouraged the emergence of similar collectives. However, the demands of increasing commitments elsewhere made it difficult for AGOP members to continue training and creating together, and by 2012, the collective had ceased to exist.

Just a year before, in 2011, I had attended the summer training of the Suzuki Method of Actor Training hosted by the Suzuki Company of Toga (SCOT) in Toga, Japan. During the two weeks of training, not only was I able to learn the training methods from the company that originated the method, I was also able to observe

11 The other founders of A GROUP OF PEOPLE are Oliver Chong, Koh Wan Ching, Timothy Nga and Edith Podesta.

the company's annual offering of plays at the Toga Summer Arts Festival. More invaluable, it gave me insight into how philosophy, belief, method, lifestyle and, most of all, practice, are related to the sustainability of a company. After that experience, the idea of continuous, regular training for actors and an actor-centred work practice became the motivation for a search into different ways of developing a space for interested artists to gather and train. As a result, I was involved in the initiation of several training platforms with varying focus and structures.

In the same year, something else happened. While talking to Kok Heng Leun, artistic director of local theatre company Drama Box, he urged me to start a Mandarin theatre company. Again, I was apprehensive, thinking that I should not compete for limited resources but continue to push for actor-centred works in my own capacity. To that, he explained that he had suggested the formation of companies to several of my contemporaries in Mandarin theatre because there are simply not enough Mandarin productions being produced to create a lively and varied scene in Singapore. That made me consider his proposal at a deeper level and as I thought about it, it came to my realisation that most established Mandarin theatre companies such as Drama Box, Toy Factory Productions, and The Theatre Practice are already well over 20 years old, and with the lack of new companies in the scene, there may be a problem of continuation.

In 2012, I returned twice to Toga through an invitation to participate in an international production at the Toga Summer Arts Festival. This time round, I had the opportunity to work more closely with SCOT members and to more fully immerse myself in the company's practice and culture. It was that period of rehearsing and training with SCOT members that helped me consolidate the idea of establishing a theatre company. While I was there, I spent nights thinking about how I could use what I have seen and learnt from SCOT over the past two years, SITI back in 2008 and the three years of experience with AGOP, to create a basic philosophy for a company of my own. The result is the founding of Nine Years Theatre (NYT) in 2012.

The Future from Here

Nine Years Theatre¹² is co-founded with Mia Chee. NYT was officially incorporated as a non-profit company in August 2012, with Mia as Company Director while I hold the position of Artistic Director. The company believes in the accumulative

¹² Nine Years Theatre website: www.nineyearstheatre.com.

process of art. This is reflected in our three-prong artistic direction: development of our creation; long-term and regular actor training; and building of audienceship through knowledge-sharing. The name “Nine Years” is symbolic of our commitment to accumulate experiences and to grow the company year by year.

In our creations, we are concerned with what we can learn from the work. Furthermore, we would like to see how efforts put into one work can inform the next. Whenever possible, we try to work with certain artists over an extended period of time, or repeat a certain theme in various ways, or practise certain methods over a series of works. We are interested in continuity. However, this should not amount to settling into comfortable and familiar modes; rather, the aim is to develop new challenges from foundations built over time. Holding this belief is also a way of reminding ourselves that art is not about churning out one product after another: it is a process of continuous learning for the artist and the audience. NYT does not limit its range of productions by genre or scale. We aim to create works that are essentially actor-centred, that challenge the nature of the actor’s art, and fundamentally, that question the notion and the state of Mandarin theatre.

As I write, NYT has been awarded a three-year seed grant by NAC for the company’s initial set-up and operations; we have also been successful with our application for a studio space at the Aliwal Arts Centre under the NAC arts housing scheme. With the grant and a permanent work space, NYT has rolled out a series of productions and projects that include the staging of classic works in Mandarin; classes on Suzuki Method of Actor Training and Viewpoints; Mandarin speech classes for actors; Audience Knowledge Sharing Platform targeted at achieving deeper interaction with the audience; training platforms such as Suzuki and Viewpoints Jam to encourage long-term and regular training of actors; and the NYT Ensemble Project¹³ with the aim of creating an ensemble of actors.

At the age of 42, I am embarking on a whole new exciting journey in my theatre career. For half my life, I have benefitted from the Singapore theatre scene; I feel that it is time for me to give back in some ways. I have always reminded myself that NYT is not only set up to enable me to do the work I want to do, but that more people

13 NYT Ensemble Project is an attempt to build a company of ensemble actors who train and create together over an extended period of time. Its main activities are divided into: regular training, creation and performance. For regular training, the ensemble uses the Suzuki Method of Actor Training and Viewpoints as its main systems to develop the art of the actor. The creation process draws on the synergy that emerges from these trainings over time. The ultimate aim of the project is to develop a sustainable group of company actors that accumulates its strengths through the ensemble environment to create works that are grounded and organic.

can also do the work they desire. The long-term aim of NYT is to be able to create and sustain a group of core actors who will train and create with the company in an ensemble environment. Whether that is operationally and financially possible in the next 10 or 20 years' time, no one can say for sure. But I believe, even as I write, that these issues of actor training and ensemble work will be one of the future trends of development in the Singapore theatre scene.

Nelson CHIA

Nelson Chia is Co-founder and Artistic Director of Nine Years Theatre. He is an actor, director and theatre educator. He obtained his first degree in Theatre Studies from the National University of Singapore, before graduating with an MA in directing from Goldsmiths College, London. He was the Associate Artistic Director of Toy Factory Productions, a Resident Artist with The Theatre Practice, an Associate Artist with The Substation, and a founding member of the ensemble collective A GROUP OF PEOPLE. Nelson has been training regularly in the "Suzuki Method of Actor Training" and "Viewpoints" since 2008. He studied these methods with SITI Company in New York and the Suzuki Company of Toga in Japan.

Who's Who Among Asian Americans: The Mind Palace

Renee LEE with Wenhai MA

Wenhai Ma shares with Renee Lee about his practice in set design for which he has an excellent reputation. His selected works in both Chinese and Western scene designs are presented in this essay, written from Ma's account, along with brief comments on the objective of the designs.

In the mind lies a diorama. Act 1 scene 1; act 2 scene 3; the play, a scheme of things, and for days to weeks I live in the theatre of impeccable details. Sometimes the imaginings are halted by real living. I come from the Central Academy of Drama in Beijing armed with a degree in Scene Design. In opulent dynasties I ravel in the sumptuous colours and yet the characters are most important in my mind. The peasantry in the darkest forests, quietened by its lack of courtesans and servants, is actually more challenging to make a scenography of, than that of a colourful palace. When I read my masters in scene and costume design in America, it was the technical sophistication that pulled me to the next level. In China, we are very detailed and artistic and America is a force to reckon with. The world of seeming impossibilities can be achieved in America. The audiences appreciate; the critics give attention to the scenography. To be hailed into the *Who's Who Among Asian Americans** in 1995 for my work was unexpected.

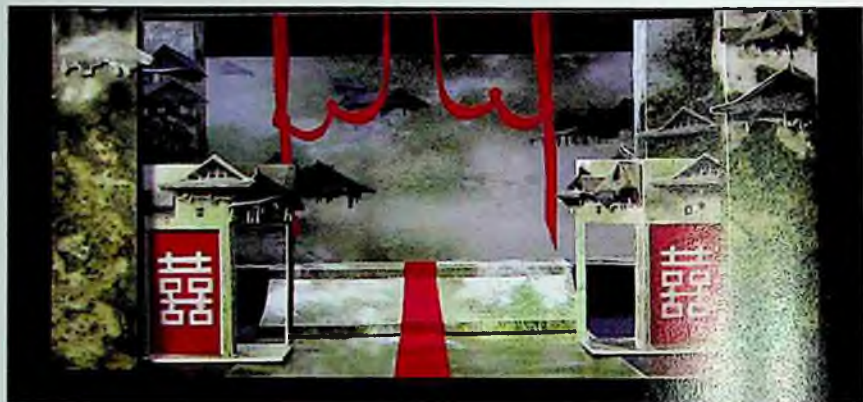
* These are reference collections of information about living persons gathered into such national collections as *Who's Who?*. The biographical dictionary of notable living men and women of the United States was first published in 1899.



Crazy Snow, Storyboard, Shanghai Dramatic Arts Centre, 2005

From young, I was considered a curious and observant boy. I appreciate beauty. Characters come alive and I see sometimes beyond. I absorb a place or ambience quite naturally. The context of story or drama is played out in my imagination. I would sketch the story on pieces of paper. It seems that palaces and farms have similarity in different countries. The rustic pours forth a robust strength while the aristocracy has a constraint thus elegant. I think not of the palace in my mind but as the editor pointed out this metaphor, I ponder on the meaning of the process which my mind goes through in creating scenes for theatre and musical performances.

Like I said, a palace is opulent and elegant yet constrained. There are indeed constraints in set design. The actors need to be mobile and the backstage actors and people need a traffic flow. As I put my ideas on paper, my skills are constrained by a lack perhaps of a yet unseen object or peculiarity of that culture in which the play is set. Researching does take a bit of time. This I found was often the requisite to great set designers. The ability to read a script, to comprehend the plots, to harness technology to its fullest; these expertise are the ingredients that enable my mind to connect and disconnect, which means that while imagination is critical, the



The Peach Blossom Valley, Hunan Changde Han Opera Rep, 2006



Crazy Snow, Musical, Shanghai Dramatic Arts Centre, 2005

challenge is to not become discouraged by the limitations. We, each person, have limited resources in various aspects.

In doing set design, I have learnt to not be overcome by the problems but to create solutions that become a part of the story. Yet the greatest work done is in the simplicity or minimalist style, which differentiates my design from another. There is a fine line in every era that is the context of theatre plays. What is considered grand is not necessarily loud and overly elaborate. I see the colours according to the story. Obviously, the director and the playwright and the producer have their own palaces in their minds as well. In performing arts, there is the need to be highly collaborative in order that the production becomes integrated and seamless.

In small collegiate plays, the set design must not overpower the ability of the learning students. Through the years of teaching in universities, I became mindful of these contexts as well. Often, though, a great set does lift the spirit of the actors. At least, I hope and think so.

Normally, I inhabit an introspective corner of life; it is in solitude that I am able to access the first seeds of ideation. Then the rest of the creative process can be energised by others and places I visit. All in all, my life is quite fun and happy. I teach and practise at the same time.

The “seeing place”, a term used by set designers often to relate the historical roots of the practice, is quite appropriate to the idea of a mind palace: people do get to see your mind literally. For this, I am grateful to have been able to do so at many performances around the Asia Pacific region. Singapore is a new home since a few years ago. The multi-cultural nature of the country is sometimes worked through in performances but the set design can only contextualise as much as is written in the script. Elements denoting ethnicity are often stereotyped as in most plays and not a huge challenge to set design. What are challenging would be the colours, the subtle layers of a city life which can differentiate Singapore set designers from others. Have we found a style that has revolutionised set design on the world stage? Perhaps there are not many set designers here as yet. In coming to teach here, giving up my professorship in an American university, is to help ignite a group of set designers who can create remarkable work. This work has only just begun.

Seminal Works

In practice, I would have to decide on the overview of the design elements of line, shape, form, space, value, colour and texture, in set design, costume design, set dressing, and lighting design. The director and I have meetings and I understand his vision. From there, I begin to imagine the context of the play and the characters, and how the sets can be stunning and hopefully memorable to the audience. It has to be original and I think of creative ways to help tell a story, deciding how the set designs will be built, painted, and decorated. Through the years, I have created vignettes as well as elaborate set designs. Most of



Lost in Balcony Fog, A new Kunju opera
Chenzhou Theatre, Hunan, 2009

all, I enjoy experimenting with unusual materials and a strong focus in the centre of the stage to balance the movements of the characters.

The Chinese scenography which necessitated both big and small statements encompasses stories in *Turandot*, Hong Kong in 2005.



Turandot, Opera, Grand Theatre, Hong Kong Cultural Centre, 2005



Family, 2003

The stories in *Family* are intimate dialogues; the staging requires a degree of “neatness” due to the pacing in the script. That comes with experience, perhaps. It is a plot that unfolds relationships.



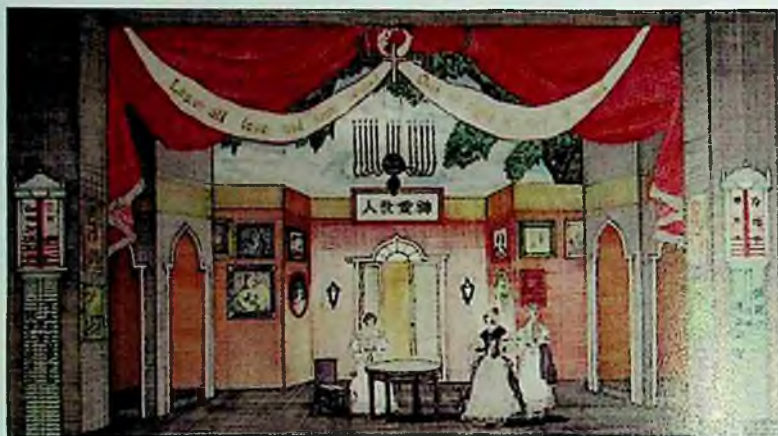
Family, Drama Theatre, Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts, 2003

In Western scenography, there are interesting possibilities of detailed “set dressing” due to the writing of some novelists. The lights, candles, and drapes are described with relish.

When there is a blend of both Chinese and Western characters, the scenes become interesting — how much of each element should be



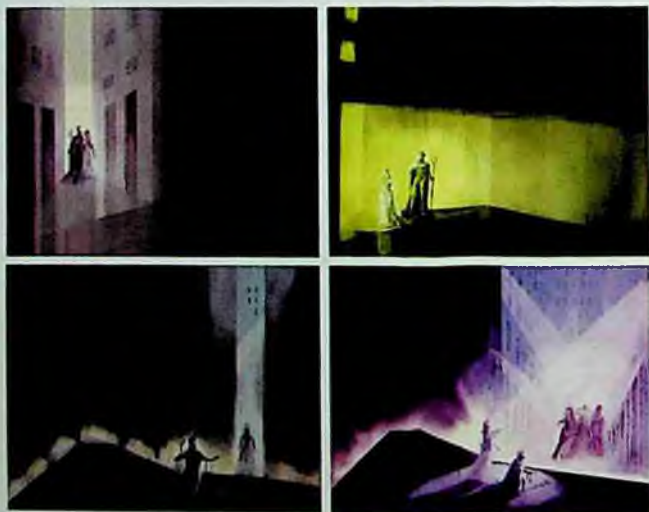
The Way of the World, Class project, 1982



Tartuffe, Experimental Theatre, Central Academy of Drama, China, 1986

included in each context? Is there a possibility to create a new visual style in terms of the colours, the font types or the textures?

Thirty years ago, I designed the set for *Duke of Blue Beard's Castle* to create the context using lighting as the primary emotive ploy.



Duke of Blue Beard's Castle, Class project, 1983

Just a year earlier than *Duke of Blue Beard's Castle*, I designed the set for *The Hairy Apes*. There were different scenes and I used a main framework as a grid, a structure to allow the set to be transformed into an office, a seaside jetty and other contexts that the play was set in. It was a great and wonderful challenge.



The Hairy Apes, Class project, 1982



Falling in Love with Her, Spring-Time Stage, Hong Kong, 2005



Lost in Balcony Fog, A new Kunju opera, Chenzhou Theatre, Hunan, 2009

Falling In Love With Her, in Hong Kong, 2005, was particularly poignant. This 3-dimensional model I made was well executed. The story of the play had interesting scenes; by employing long dangling lanterns, a different space is achieved. Like the play *Lost in Balcony Fog* in 2009, I used a stream of fabric, but this time to denote not a place but used it as a device, a metaphor of the feelings between the characters in the scene.



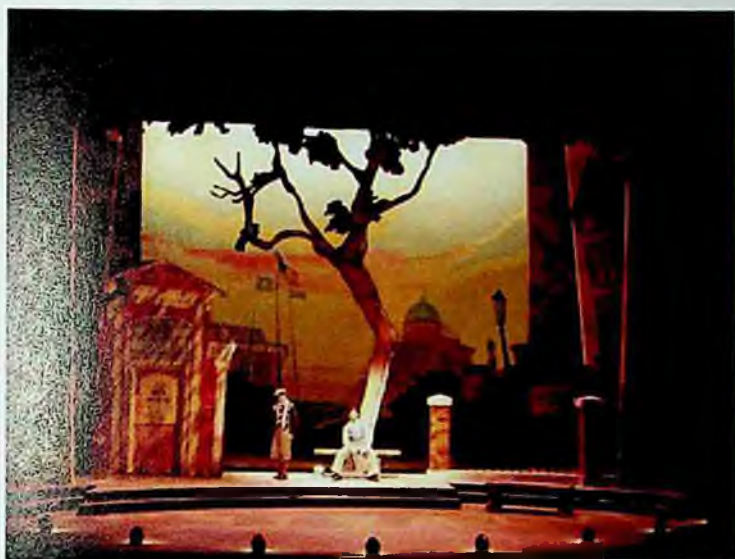
Forever Teresa Teng
A new musical storyboard TNT
Hong Kong & Taiwan
2003–2004

I was commissioned to create the scenography for the new musical of Teresa Teng, a Taiwanese singer known for the sweetest voice when she was alive. The musical is set in a modern world, with all the neon lights of showbiz in the entertainment world. The main statement I think is the angled backdrop which created an interesting “entrance to an entrance” as the main character was a singer, and the story included her singing on the stage. I had to differentiate the two different contexts.

As with most artists, it is not easy to choose my favourite personal or seminal work. However, *College Widow* in 2005 was an impeccable execution from model to actual set.



Forever Teresa Teng, A new musical, 2003–2004



The College Widow, Model ¼", Nancy T. Hansen Theatre, Purdue University, USA, 2005

No. 1 Restaurant in China which I designed in 2002 is like designing a movie set. The stage was tight with highly realistic details and sets.



No. 1 Restaurant in China, City Hall Theatre, Hong Kong, 2002

Viewers appear to like *Turandot*, in Hong Kong, 2005.



Turandot, Production photo

Wenhai Ma

Wenhai Ma graduated with a Master of Fine Arts in Scene & Costume Design from Carnegie Mellon University, USA and a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Scene Design from the Central Academy of Drama, China. He is a long-time Chinese-American Professor of Scene and Costume Design, primarily teaching in the USA over the past 30 years. Before joining NAFA in 2011, he served as Chair of Scene Design, Senior Designer and Master Teacher in the Department of Theatre at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, USA, where he was granted tenure professorship. He also served as Head of Theatre Design at Duke University, USA, for 11 years. His other teaching posts included Purdue University, the University of Nebraska Lincoln in USA, Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts and the Central Academy of Drama, China.

Wenhai has designed more than 100 productions in USA and Asia. He is the author of the textbook *Scene Design: Rendering and Media* (Focus Publishing/R. Pullins Co., USA, 2012). He has also illustrated numerous picture books published in USA, UK and Canada. His research in theatre design education and art was recognised through inclusion in Who's Who among Asian Americans in 1995. He has authored a textbook "Designing the Scene" by Focus Publishing R. Pullins Company, USA (forthcoming).

Being Human: Music Therapy

NG Wang Feng

Ng Wang Feng offers a few case studies on how she uses music to help with the healing of the emotionally and physically disabled. Her training in music therapy enables her to work in this specialised field. Most of all, it is her compassion and understanding of each of her individual cases that makes her special.

My Journey

I am a music therapist. I started my career as a music therapy student in 2001. I remain a student as I continue to learn — from research, from students and from my clients; from the past, present and the future.

I did not envisage that I would become a career music therapist. It was in my first year as a music student in the United States that I stumbled upon some writings about music therapy. The immediate and innate realisation that it made sense to use music to heal propelled me to find out more. Later on, I would learn about the value-laden connotations of the word “healing”, which for many evoke the shamanistic practices of trance-inducing drumming and dancing. The music therapy schools that trained me, in contrast, were behavioural, humanistic, holistic, research-based and Western.

Upon my graduation and after getting board-certified as a music therapist, I returned home to practise in Singapore. I knew that I needed to adapt what I have learned to the local context. Most importantly, I desperately needed to be part of a local support network so I got in touch with locally based music therapists. At

that time, a few had returned to work in Singapore. To take the next step, we also got in touch with the Singaporean music therapists who were based abroad. The Association for Music Therapy (Singapore) (AMTS) was formally registered with the Registry of Societies in September 2007. We continue to sail the uncharted waters, being the first music therapy association in Southeast Asia.

Music and Being Human

During my undergraduate and ensuing postgraduate training, I had listened keenly while my music therapy professors explained that the human species seemed to be hardwired for music. Engaging in music is a basic human behaviour. It has also been noted that “music, like love, is one of the most universal of human experiences”¹ Even in very early human cultures, strong evidence has pointed to the existence of music and music-making. While music did not provide for any of the obvious physiological needs, e.g., food and shelter, it certainly served very important basic needs for human survival.² “[T]here is no human civilization that has not experienced and produced music.”³

Music has a very important role to play in three main areas: as the key to knowledge of universal law; as a way of relating to the Divine; and as a therapeutic agent for healing and wellness.⁴ Anthropological evidence also suggests that we chanted before we spoke. Speech production is a relatively recent development: “Early human skeletal remains reveal signs that the use of the voice to produce speech goes back only 80,000 years, while also suggesting that chanting began perhaps half a million years earlier.”⁵ Also, instruments were crafted by humans as early as 42,000 years ago,⁶ that is to say, earlier than previously thought. Making music is the most human thing to do!

We are rhythmic beings. “Our bodies are made of rhythms: pulse, respiration, movement.”⁷ From the moment we are born, “innate musicality has a vital function”

1 Peters (2000), citing Whitwell (1993). Refer to Peters, J.S. (2000), *Music Therapy: An Introduction* (2nd ed.), p. 49, Charles C Thomas Publisher Ltd., Springfield, IL.

2 Crowe, B.J. (2004), *Music and Soulmaking: Toward a New Theory of Music Therapy*, Scarecrow Press Inc., Lanham, MD.

3 Peters (2000), quoting Spintge (1991), p. 49.

4 Crowe (2004).

5 Crowe (2004), quoting Menuhin and Davis (1979), p. 3.

6 Wilford, J.N., “Flute’s Revised Age Dates the Sound of Music Earlier”, *The New York Times*, 29 May 2012, D4.

7 See p. 9 in Abbott, E. & Avins, K. (2006), “Music, Health, and Well-Being”, in E. R. Mackenzie & B. Rakel (eds.), *Complementary and Alternative Medicine: A Guide to Holistic Approaches to Healthy Aging*, Springer Publishing Company Inc., NY, pp. 97–110.

as we use sound to communicate our “hunger, contentment, need for sleep, and so on”.⁸ The parent communicates instinctively with the infant using sounds. Research demonstrates that “a lack of opportunity for this early communication can have a profound effect upon the emotional and cognitive development of an infant.”⁹

Researchers have been studying the way the human brain processes music with much interest. One of the most important things we now know for certain is that music perception bypasses cognitive processing.¹⁰ In other words, one does not need to be alert or aware to perceive music. Musical stimulus (in the form of auditory stimulus) has a great advantage compared with other stimuli, because the human auditory system typically is fully “functional about four and a half months before we are born”.¹¹ “Hearing is the first sense to develop before birth and the last to leave at death.”¹²

The human brain is engineered in such a way that gives auditory input an express route! The auditory nerve has five synapses in the brain, including the brain stem (responsible for basic vital signs) and the thalamus (an important control centre of the brain, which receives and coordinates where signals should go).¹³ The thalamus is also one synapse away from the amygdala, a structure in the limbic system credited with emotional responses. So this is why when a piece of music played at an important event in one’s life or at a memorable phase of one’s life, it takes only a re-hearing of this music to trigger “flashbacks” to those very specific and emotional moments in the past.

Case in Point: What Type of Music is Most Effective?

Western music is deeply rooted in the early Christian Church tradition, but also in pagan rites.¹⁴ Interestingly, there were various attempts to stamp out the pagan influences to give music “a spiritually curative virtue [but] many early documents prove that music went on, taking part in the dark work of Satan”,¹⁵ which leads to the question: Which type of music is most therapeutic?

8 Darnley-Smith, R. & Patey, H.M. (2003), *Music Therapy*, Sage Publications Ltd., London, p. 6.

9 Darnley-Smith & Patey (2003), quoting Malloch (1999), p. 6.

10 Peters (2000).

11 Crowe (2004), quoting Minson (1992), p. 55.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 55.

13 Crowe (2004).

14 Alvin, J. (1966), *Music Therapy*, Stainer & Bell, London.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 13.

The current music therapy perspective is that client-preferred music is most effective and appropriate. Hence, in the local context, there is likely to be as much interest in popular music and oldies from the United States, Taiwan and Hong Kong, just to name a few. Traditional classical music of the respective ethnic and dialect groups also plays an important role. Singapore's homegrown music, *xinyao*, also has a faithful following particularly among ethnic Chinese born in the 1960s and early 1970s. I have used a variety of music from the exciting mix described above. There is no one type of music (or sounds) that works for everyone or for any specific condition.

Case in Point: Music Therapy and Sound Healing

Music therapy needs to be distinguished from other approaches under the "sound healing" umbrella, which involve the "direct impact of physical, acoustical vibrations on bodily structures, physiological functioning, and neural activity".¹⁶ Music therapy is rooted in the active participation in the musical experience within the context of a therapeutic relationship between the client and the trained music therapist.

Transformations in Music Therapy: Two Stories

Music opens many doors. Very often, once the music is played, there is a shift in the energy. A sullen or indifferent face becomes interested and animated, a flat expression is transformed into smiles and sometimes, laughter is triggered.

J was a teenager living in a state residential facility when I first met her. She was usually by herself, and her peers usually left her alone. One of the staff referred her for music therapy as she had low self-esteem and was very interested in music, particularly in learning the guitar. We started individual sessions. She was usually sullen and distant, but music transformed her and made her smile. We started with single chords, and soon progressed to four chord changes one after another. Her motivation and focus was really extraordinary. I have seen many youth (including the macho male with an intimidating swagger and a piercing stare) give up on the guitar because of the numbing pain in the initial weeks from fingers pressing the strings on the fretboard. Here, a quiet girl was bravely taking on the fretboard by its horns, relentlessly practising away!

16 Crowe & Scovel (1996), citing Bruscia (1989); Goldman (1992). See Crowe, B.J. & Scovel, M. (1996), "An Overview of Sound Healing Practices: Implications for the Profession of Music Therapy", *Journal of Music Therapy*, 14(1), pp. 21-29.

My focus was not solely on whether J was strumming the correct rhythm, but also on whether she was feeling more confident about herself, and how she responded to praise and encouragement. Earlier on, she ignored praise, seeming not to know how to respond. Week after week, we played and sang her requests, even howled together, while strumming frantically to upbeat songs. Her requested songs initially had themes of teenage angst and betrayal, but later on the songs were about leaving pain behind, of standing up after falling down, of courage and hope. Naturally, over time, she was creating more resonant sounds with stronger and better fingering with practice. She was making chord transitions more smoothly, and she was better coordinated playing and singing at the same time. Self-mastery does wonders to one's self-esteem, and musical mastery is one great avenue to nurture self-confidence! In our journey of 19 sessions over eight months, she gained confidence in herself and responded positively to praise. After our last session, we hugged and she smiled proudly.

I am drawn to relate about another client, H, with progressive muscle weakness.¹⁷ In a year of group music therapy sessions, this quiet and mild-mannered young man blossomed into a confident, vocal group member who started to offer witty comments and he surprised everyone (staff included) with animated facial expressions. When I first assessed him, he shared that he did not really listen to music much. His interest was more art than music. He also had very limited hand strength and range of motion. Weekly, in our group music therapy sessions, I offered various music-making opportunities using small handheld percussion and melodic instruments, which allowed even those with very limited range of motion to manipulate mallets to sound instruments and keep the beat, and play rhythmic patterns. H gamely took the first step by attempting each experience I offered, and within a few months, he was indicating his instrument preferences — he knew which instruments allowed him to express his musicality better, which mallets were easiest to hold and so on. I also introduced into our sessions a primary school music lesson staple — the recorder. He started to give me specific directions on how to position the tray table to support his holding of the recorder, and keeping his posture as erect as possible, to allow for easy breathing. He was highly motivated in playing

17 Progressive muscle weakness is the characteristic symptom of muscular dystrophy. The author wishes to acknowledge the Muscular Dystrophy Association (Singapore) (MDAS) for providing consent to share H's story here.

the recorder, even though he might have contributed to the collective group groan whenever I announced it was time for the recorder.

I was thrilled and privileged to be able to see H transform. His physical functioning was maintained and his confidence improved significantly. As for him completing his mortal journey on Earth, I was unprepared. His passing was rather abrupt, which left peers and staff who worked closely with him completely stunned. Just a week before his passing, in the last group session together, he was singing along with enthusiasm, and playing instruments competently, keeping a mean beat with all his might! I attended his wake, and said goodbye. I started looking at other members in this group with new eyes — thinking, this day could be the last; for anyone, me included.

Being human is being mortal. We are told that death is inevitable. But what of it? Cherish the moment? Exactly! We all probably know that we should do that, but do we do it? Music is, by definition, a phenomenon that happens in time, with a clear beginning and ending. When we are in music, we are in time. We are literally “in the moment”. Being wholly in-tuned with another person in music therapy is a very intimate and powerful experience. It is as if the rest of the world fades away. It is a powerful moment of synchronicity, which in the next second, might slip away. When the moment comes, I intend to be totally present for the client.

Case in Point: What Is Progress in Music Therapy?

Other clients have not made their musical liking quite as obvious as J. I am recalling another client, N, from a special education setting. I could not really tell whether he enjoyed the sessions if not for his dedicated mother, who tracked her son’s every blink and breath. She told me that if he did not like something he would frown. By the time I saw him, he was wheelchair-bound and increasingly unresponsive due to his progressive physical deterioration. He needed physical assistance to play instruments and to move his hands. He did not resist, and I hardly saw him frown during our time together. His mother and teachers told me that he liked the sessions. His lack of obvious responses led me to ask what, if at all, the therapy did for him. Did he “progress” in music therapy?

Typically, progress is defined as an improvement. Now, it is important to also look at how music therapists state therapeutic goals and objectives.

Music therapy is a systematic process of intervention aimed at promoting health using musical experiences within the context of a therapist-client relationship

(my modified version of Bruscia's widely-used definition of music therapy).¹⁸ Goals generally point to a direction of "improving" some aspect of health, for example, physical or cognitive functioning. For some clients who have degenerative conditions, physical maintenance goals are pertinent. Hence, progress is made when functioning is maintained. It is important to note that music therapists also focus on quality of life, without which life may not be worth living for some of our clients and patients who face bad news or overwhelming obstacles every day. And of course, the goal is to "improve quality of life", which then the music therapist might track, for example, by having the client report on his or her perceived quality of life using a rating scale.

The Final Point: My Evolving Music Therapy Philosophy

After less than a decade of clinical work and being with clients (some whose progress seemed stalled and some who made amazing progress), I began to see things a little differently. It began to dawn on me that while I offered opportunities for growth and interaction in my music therapy sessions, I had no real sway over how my clients responded. Theoretically, I had intended to accept and embrace my client wholly, just the way she or he is. However, I had also expected that my client would make significant progress over the treatment period and would feel disappointed, confused and inadequate when a client did not make progress according to my "plan". This would qualify as countertransference as it stems from the psyche of the therapist himself or herself. (In transference, the therapist is picking up on how the client is feeling; hence, is the client feeling disappointed, confused and inadequate?)

As I started to understand more about unconditional love and accepting everything as it is, I began to take to this as an approach to life.¹⁹ It is no longer something restricted to the treatment room where the humanistic music therapist receives and accepts the client with unconditional positive regard. I am learning that everyone is simply being the way she or he knows how. Being human, to me, is being able to relate to fellow human beings with empathy. More importantly, it is about recognising that however they appear or behave, they are trying their best all the time. With increased detachment (reduced personal attachment to outcomes), I find that I am a more loving therapist and human being. Needless to say, the journey towards being more loving and compassionate has its ups and downs. Luckily, I never

18 Bruscia, K.E. (1998), *Defining Music Therapy* (2nd ed.), Barcelona Publishers, Gilsum, NH.

19 The author is impacted by the teachings of Dr David R. Hawkins.

get to veer far from this path as I periodically get timely reminders from someone I meet in my day-to-day life, whether he or she be a client, a colleague, or a friend.

Music is perfect for any human condition. There is a song for every mood, every nuanced experience. If there is no song, it is possible to make something up the very instant. The music therapist can be right there with the client, with a guitar in hand, or another instrument. Most of us love music, so the music therapist is primed for success and making connection with clients. For those of us who do not particularly enjoy music or music-making, do not worry; the music therapist will understand and respect that — but know that most people do.

NG Wang Feng

Ng Wang Feng is a Board-Certified Music Therapist. She graduated with a Master of Music Therapy from Temple University, Philadelphia, USA, in 2005. In her training and subsequent work appointments in music therapy, she has worked with various client populations in Singapore and in the United States, including adult and geri-psychiatrics, geriatrics, cancer survivors, individuals with developmental needs, orthopaedic impairments, and brain injury, as well as youth at-risk. She is also the founding President of the Association for Music Therapy (Singapore) and is a professional member of the American Music Therapy Association. Wang Feng has published two articles in the online journal *Voices: World Forum for Music Therapy*. She is an adjunct lecturer at tertiary institutions.

Moving Forward with Tradition: A Personal Dance Journey

Som M. SAID

Cultural Medallist (Dance) Som M. Said contextualises her role in some of the critical developments in Malay Dance in Singapore, briefly outlining the historical background of Malay Dance in Singapore since the 1950s.

This chapter uncovers my personal dance journey through my 48 years of experience as an art practitioner through observation and active participation. I will share my experiences with regards to my roles as a dancer, choreographer, artistic director and cultural ambassador in serving organisations such as Sriwana, Young Musicians Society, Instant Asia, People's Association (PA), Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA), LaSalle College of Arts, Ministry of Education (MOE) and Sri Warisan Som Said Performing Arts Ltd.

To contextualise my role in some of the critical developments in Malay Dance in Singapore, I will briefly outline the historical background of Malay Dance in Singapore since the 1950s.

The Malay Archipelago

Before Raffles set foot in Singapore in 1819 and established Singapore as an outpost of the British Empire, Singapore was a small fishing village inhabited by a few hundred indigenous Malays or *Orang Asli*. They were the fishermen who lived

along the shores, at the *Temenggong's* palace with his followers which included the *Orang Laut* (Sea people). There were a few hundred Malays when Singapore became a colony of the British Empire.

The Malay population soon increased with the arrival of migrants from the Malay Archipelago. Singapore is geographically located along the Malay Archipelago — the geographical region of the political mapped-out nations of Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Timor Leste. The geographical term “Malay Archipelago”¹ was defined by the concept of the Malay race. The root of Malay art forms was thus derived from the Malay Archipelago. In this chapter, the term “Malay Dance” is loosely defined as movements and dance art from the Malay Archipelago practised by the Malay race.

When Singapore developed its port and became a centre for trade, neighbouring migrants from states like Sumatra, Java, Penang, Malacca and Johor came to seek opportunities and a new life here. Throughout the centuries, increase in trade across the seas brought in further new influences from different cultures and from various parts of the world, which influenced Malay dance in Singapore. Today, the Malays make up 14% of the 5 million multi-ethnic populace of Singapore. The Malays have a lifestyle based on Islamic teachings and the preservation of their rich cultural values. Malay art is very much influenced by nature, legends, history, myths, human communication and traditions. The arts have a specific role in society and thus the changes in form and function are dependent on the dynamics of the community.

As time went by, these traditions became part of the Malay culture in Singapore, enriching the identity of the Singapore Malays which grew along with the Malay language and the religion of Islam. The definitions of tradition are set according to the daily practices of the Malays/Muslims. This became the *Adat*² that formed the structure of Malay society and the guiding principles.

A. True Traditions — *Adat sebenar*

One that is permanent, based on nature and God's will

B. Traditional Traditions — *Adat yang diadatkan*

System of etiquette and ways of life — values

C. Respected Traditions — *Adat yang teradat*

Based on consensus, such as is witnessed at weddings

1 Wallace, A. R. (1869), *The Malay Archipelago*, Macmillan and Co, London, p. 16.

2 *Adat* — Custom.

D. Rites and Traditions — *Adat Istiadat*

To foster appreciation of their own culture and identity

The Seeding Years of the 1950s

I was born in 1951 in Singapore and became aware of Malay Dance when I started going to school during this era. The origins of Malay Dance in Singapore are unclear. It has been said that in its earliest form, Malay Dance reflected the way of life such as rice planting, farming, fishing and daily activities. Some historical accounts claim that it emerged due to external influences of the *Anak Wayang* or *Anak Bangsawan* (screen actors and actresses), which led almost nomadic lives, performing at various locations from time to time. Some stayed on and performed in Malay films at the Cathay Keris, and Shaw Brothers and Joget Halls Amusement Park.

According to some experts, Malay performing arts can be traced to art forms that originated in Indonesia. The anti-colonialism campaign of the mid-1950s stimulated the popularity of performing arts in Singapore. This led to the formation of Malay cultural organisations such as 4PM, *Perkumpulan Seni*, *Perwanit* and the *Pasak Silat Seni Gayong* group.

Anglo-Malay Evening School (A.M.E.S.) was set up in 1950 with the objective of promoting Malay culture through stage performances and to generate funds for education and scholarships.

Initially, the cultural organisations could not participate actively in dance as the youth of that time could not dance. They were stiff and did not have a place where they could learn Malay dance. The arrival of Tengku Yohanet Husni (Indonesia) and Liau Ah Choon (Malaysia) between 1957 and 1959 to 1961, respectively, played a part in enlivening the Malay dance scene in Singapore. In a short time, Singapore was able to become a meeting point for dance teachers from Johor, Malacca and Kuala Lumpur, who came to learn from Sriwana and other groups which embraced Malay dance from Tengku Yohanet Husni and Liau Ah Choon. Tengku Yohanet Husni³ recalled that she taught the Singapore youth the correct dance methodology — the body movements, the *berlenggang* and the *Serampang 12* dance. During the same period, Liau Ah Choon came to Singapore and taught them the *Asli* dance, *Makan Sireh*, *Gunung Banang*, *Mak Inang*, *Hitam Manis*, *Pulau Kapai*, *Baju Kurong*, *Tempurung*, *Gunung Sayang*, *Tanjong Katong*, *Bunga Tanjong*, *Serampang 12* and *Zapin Asyik*.

3 The interview with Tengku Yohanet Husni was on 5 June 2008 at her residence in Jakarta.

In 1959, the Ministry of Culture organised *Aneka Ragam Rakyat* to foster cultural awareness in Singapore. The success of *Aneka Ragam Raayat* and *Festival Budaya* in integrating the various races encouraged the MOE to organise cultural education as a co-curricular activity in schools from 1967, with the objective of involving youth in the arts scene and to gain a better understanding of a multi-cultural society.

The Ploughing Years of the 1960s

I was introduced to Sriwana (founded in 1955) by a secondary school dance mate, Sri Rahayu, a daughter of a film director of the Malay Film Production. Nongcik Ghani was particularly inspiring and an eye-opener for me to the essence of Malay dance. As a voluntary group, our weekly rehearsals were based on the availability of individual members. A dance instructor was chosen every week based on those who attended the dance sessions. Not long after, I found myself at the front of the class, guiding my co-members during the absence of other senior dance members. Soon after, I was commissioned to lead the group as an instructor, choreographer and was later appointed as Artistic Director from 1985 to 1999.

The rise of the dance scene was evident in 1960. The pioneers included members from Sriwana — Nongcik Ghani, Ibu Sopenah and Sulaiman Jeem. In 1963, Francis Yeoh, a ballet dancer/choreographer, choreographed a Harvest Dance for Sriwana, incorporating a ballet dance style. The positive reception was a milestone that encouraged Sriwana to create more new works. The choreography and the dance formations performed during the period consisted of two rows and circles at the front and back. Sriwana participated at the Southeast Asian Cultural Festival hosted by the Singapore government and involved the first creation of Fishermen Dance, the Farmers Dance and Tari Payung.

To foster community bonding, the People's Association (PA) set up its PA Cultural Talents in 1965 as a performing unit with full-time performers who brought arts and cultural performances to the masses. This platform of multi-cultural group participation in performances was to establish a sense of national identity and social cohesion among the people of Singapore. The PA continues to play a significant role in popularising the ethnic dance by conducting dance classes with nominal fees charged. Through dance classes at community centres, new dance groups were formed. I collaborated with the PA through the decades, choreographing works from 1972 to 1985.

The Blooming Years of the 1970s

1970 was a transition period for many types of Malay dance. Familiar dance steps such as the Tudung Saji Food (cover dance), umbrella dance, candle dance, harvest dance and coconut shell dance were repeated during many performances. These repetitive dance steps failed to sustain interest among the audience.

It was during this period that the search for the identity of Singapore National Dance took place. The Malay Dance Night used to be a core programme of the Singapore Arts Festival/Dance Festival which debuted in 1977 and ceased in 1998. The annual event displayed different themes each year with works from legendary and budding artists of the local arts fraternity making the event into an icon. The Singapore Arts Festival, as a national event, played a critical and major role in the development of the cultural life and arts in Singapore over the past three decades. In particular, the Singapore Dance Night, being part of the festival, presented a platform for the promotion of various dance genres.

My epiphanic experience at Sriwana provided me with the opportunity to perform as a National Dancer with the National Dance Company (NDC) which was set up in 1970 by the Ministry of Culture in response to an invitation to participate in the Adelaide Festival in 1972. The company's objective was to bring together passionate and dedicated performers, and experts in traditional ethnic dance in Singapore. I was selected and became a National Dancer with the company. Under the direction of Artistic Director Francis Yeoh, the company enjoyed success with a highly acclaimed debut performance in Adelaide in 1972. The experience had a great influence on me. I discovered the high quality of international dancers at festivals and their ethos of hard work and discipline.

I was actively involved in the PA dance group head office at Kallang, assisting Nongcik Ghani who was in charge of Malay dance. I assisted with the choreography and instructions for the Malay dance session from 1972 to 1985. The works created for the PA were showcased in community Arts Reach Programmes, Chingay and the National Day Parade, to encourage mass participation. It was during this period that I unintentionally ventured into choreography work due to the absence of senior dancers. I explored the possibility of creating work which was uniquely mine, work that was based on the lifestyle of Malays in Singapore. It was a long process, but with tireless and continuous effort, I experimented, explored and created many new works.

These initial works were based on Malay custom, guided by the Islamic teaching and rich cultural values, with the use of symbolic props and gestures to portray Malay

aesthetic values. Such examples included *Pulut Pahar*, *Sekapur Sireh* and *Bunga Manggar*. Besides cultural dance, I also focused on historical and legendary tales to create dance drama, conveying the message that good will always triumph over evil. These examples included *Radin Mas*, *Sang Nila Utama* and *Singapura Dilanggar Todak*. Other new creations were based on the five basic Malay foundations, along with some contemporary approaches which made use of “contract and release” techniques, with variations on floor patterns. The Singaporean themes addressed were based on *Di Tanjong Katong*, *Dayung Sampan*, *Rentak Berirama*, *Silat Pusaka*, and *Hari Raya*.

The Singapore Youth Festival (SYF) is an annual festival which celebrates the achievements of youths. Over the years, the event grew significantly. Through this highly publicised programme, school children of all races were able to embark on a multi-cultural educational experience. As one of the adjudicators in 1973, I noticed the poor standard of the dance segment in Singapore. Many lacked a solid foundation in dance so I initiated a skills upgrading course to create an awareness of the importance of a basic foundation amongst students. This was done by organising workshops for dance teachers and school teachers. This resulted in a high demand for trained dance teachers by the schools.

This awareness of a need for a high standard of performance increased the overall standard of the SYF. The depth in performance subsequently strengthened the cultural identity of student performers. Many of the Malay student dancers eventually became resident instructors at many local schools. I was privileged with the National Youth Service Award which the government awarded me in 1979 for my work with children.

The Harvesting Years of the 1980s

In March 1982, the National Theatre Trust organised the first Singapore Festival of Dance. The five evenings of cross-cultural presentations by 27 groups compelled the audiences and participants to interact socially and culturally. However, reviews regarding creativity, ideas and techniques were honest: That there was much room for growth.⁴ This shortcoming led to the search for new sources of learning. It was

4 Dr Chua Soo Pong commented that most of the Malay dances lacked “imaginative ideas and creativity, although the quality of their performers generally improved in terms of costuming and movement training”; in Tinggal, Z.A. (1998), *The Dances of ASEAN*, ASEAN Committee on Culture and Information.

during this period that workshops and training programmes were conducted at different stages of time with Sriwana, PA, and National Theatre Dance Circle with guest choreographers and instructors from Indonesia and Malaysia. The Asean choreographers workshop organised by the Ministry of Culture in 1980 was also an eye-opener. Choreographers from Thailand, the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore gathered for seminars, workshops and dialogue sessions. During the process of learning the wide variety of dances, many came to realise how energetic and dynamic movements could be blended with slow, graceful and gentle Malay dance movements.

I was selected to participate at the Nippon Maru Youthship Program in 1980 organised by the PA and in 1983, I received a scholarship to study Indonesian arts in Padepokan Seni Bagong. The scholarship was a project of COCI (Committee on Culture and Information), organised by the Ministry of Culture. Under the mentorship of Bagong Kusudiarjo, the dance maestro of Indonesian contemporary dance, I received training in the “Dance Creativity” course based on the Martha Graham technique.

Upon my return, I created new works that fused traditional form with a contemporary approach. One significant work was *Life* for the Singapore Arts Festival Malay Dance Night in 1985. *Life* was the debut contemporary Malay dance that led to many other contemporary works that focused on Malay cultural values. The multi-ethnic work titled *Stories of Singapore* opened my eyes to fusing rhythms and movements with multi-cultural influence from the Chinese choreographer Madam Yan Choong Liang and Indian choreographer Madam Neila Sathyalingam.⁵ We collaborated on this piece of work since 1988. Through S.M.E.D.E, Singapore Multi Ethnic Dance Ensemble, we became Singapore Cultural Ambassadors. The intensive six-month course did not end there. I returned to Padepokan Seni Bagong regularly to improve on my skills and to stay relevant with the times.

In 1989, I was awarded a Residency Scholarship from the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization Regional Centre for Archaeology and Fine Arts under the charge of Dr Chua Soo Pong, for which I attended a one-month Residency Course, “Introduction in Labanotation”, which provided me with a new tool of movement analysis and on the structure of dance. The Residency Scholarship

5 Neila Sathyalingam is an eminent figure in the Indian classical dance arena and was awarded the Cultural Medallion (Dance) in 1989.

provided me with a new environment for working with dance practitioners from the ASEAN⁶ countries. I enjoyed the experience and appreciated the diversity of cultures. The programme encouraged us to work together, and emphasised the meaning of friendship and the importance of tolerance.

The Globalisation Years in the 1990s

In 1997, I founded Sri Warisan Som Said Performing Arts Ltd with the mission to make its presence known on the international stage through:

- cultural exchange programmes
- cultural and heritage promotion
- international festivals
- seminars and workshops

Since its inception in 1997, aside from developing artistic talents locally, Sri Warisan promotes Singaporean works overseas through cultural exchange programmes and engages in international networking. To date, Sri Warisan has toured more than 40 countries through its participation in international festivals with *Stories of Singapore*.

Several turning points occurred in my dance journey which included the creation of *Bangsawan in Dance* in 1998. The commissioned work was for the Singapore Arts Festival in 1998. The *Bangsawan in Dance* premiered successfully in 1998 at Victoria Theatre and has been in the National Arts Council (NAC) “Arts Education Programme” in Singapore ever since. It was also presented to international audiences around the world.

As a result of our global presence at international festivals and collaborative works locally and internationally, Sri Warisan was invited to conduct Master classes for more than 80 Disney’s *The Lion King* Musical cast members at Marina Bay Sands (Singapore) in 2010 and in Hamburg (Germany) in 2012. It was a great honour sharing our Singapore Malay dance techniques on another level with prestigious

6 Association of Southeast Asian Nations which comprises ten member states: Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam. Established on 8 August 1967 in Bangkok, Thailand, by the Founding Fathers Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand.

world-class acclaimed international production cast and crew members of Disney's musical.

Today, Sri Warisan's young team continues the collaborative effort with Padepokan Seni Bagong Kussudiarja (Jogjakarta), PPPTK (Teachers' Training Institute in Jogjakarta), Arts Institute of Indonesia (ISI), Jogjakarta, Jakarta Institute of the Arts (IKJ) Jakarta and Saung Angklung Udjo (Bandung) Indonesia, to generate awareness of the artistic activities, to support and complement the development through bilateral collaborations which benefit both parties.

During the same period, my personal collaborative work since the 1980s with Malaysian and Indonesian Arts Masters such as Onn Jaafar, Tom Ibnur, Bimo Wiwahatmo and Sukarji Sriman continued. I was honoured with the Public Service Medal in 1992 for contributions to the nation through dance in Singapore.

The Successive Years from 2000

At the age of 58, I pursued a degree in Dance Anthropology, a four-year course at the IKJ, Jakarta Arts Institute in Indonesia, obtaining an Arts Degree in Dance Anthropology in June 2012.

For half a century, I have immersed myself in Malay cultural dance, choreographing more than 30 major works, sharing common ideologies and artistic philosophies with fellow comrades and imparting knowledge to my students. There are now many up and coming talents in the dance scene.

We have yet to see the surge of emerging new works by our talented young choreographers as the works so far have been season productions. Sri Warisan showcases dance theatre musicals such as *Towkay Wayang*, *Anak Wayang*, and *Sembang Seni*. Zapin Muara and other organisations, such as Kirana Seni, Perkumpulan Seni, Sriwana, Aspirasi, Fuchun Artis Seni Budaya, Atrika and other groups from community centres, hold their own annual productions.

I mentored potential dancers in choreography training through production platforms such as Tariana and Selangkah Seirama for Sriwana, and Lestari Seni, Bakat Cilik and Semarak Seni for Sri Warisan. At Sri Warisan, young artists are given the opportunity to create their own works through mentorship which include pieces for the Singapore Arts Festivals. Today, Sri Warisan comprises a young team which possesses the core mission of making Malay arts their way of life. They impart artistic, aesthetic and moral values through Arts Education Programmes, season productions and international performances.

Malay Dance in Transition Again

Efforts to develop Malay performing arts in Singapore are influenced by social, economic and political factors. Whether or not arts groups are aware of it, many still showcase performances which do not represent the identity of Malays today. These include performances which depict the lives of Malays as fishermen and farmers. This is perhaps done in an effort to educate and reinforce a Malay identity of days gone by.

There are, however, also many who now showcase performances which combine the identity of Malays of yesteryears with that of Malays in contemporary society. This can be seen through the development of five basic dance foundations of *Asli*, *Inang*, *Masri*, *Ronggeng* and *Zapin*. This was perhaps apparent through the experiences of collaborative work for Singapore Dance Festivals since the 1980s such as in *Gemala Tari I* in 1984, *Puteri Gunung Ledang* in 1988, *Gemala Tari II* in 1991 and *Dendam Berahi* in 1998.

With the absence of the Malay Dance Night at the Singapore Arts Festival since 2000, there were no other major or national platforms for Malay dance, other than Chingay, National Day Parade and *Gentarasa* by MESRA.⁷ Many ongoing annual events that showcase Malay dance and culture are specific to the organisations that produce the events, such as:

- Hari Raya light-up Majlis Pusat
Supported by the Singapore Tourism Board and produced by Majlis Pusat, it features performances by Kirana Seni and other television personalities.
- Gentarasa by MESRA/PA
Supported by MESRA/PA and NAC and performed by activists of the MAECs (Malay Activity Executive Committees).⁸
- Pesta Raya (outdoor event)
An Esplanade presents event facilitated by Mr Osman Abdul Hamid of Era Dance Theatre Ltd., in collaboration with Indonesian and Malaysian artists.
- National Day Parade and Chingay
These national celebrations feature performances by members of the PA, in collaboration with other partners.

⁷ MESRA is the abbreviated form for Malay Activity Executive Committee Co-ordinating Council.

⁸ MAEC is under the MESRA.

Aside from the annual events by these specific groups, the Singapore Heritage Festival is the only other platform that Malay Dance groups can look forward to. I curated the community arts reach programme organised by the National Heritage Board, in collaboration with many dance groups comprising musicians, singers and actors. The combined Malay dance group was set up recently with the support of NAC. With the debut of the *Óh Bangau* production at the Esplanade Theatre in January 2013, the group demonstrated the artistic potential of the Malay dance scene in Singapore. There are three main aims of Malay dance in Singapore. It aims to preserve, promote and create. This is carried out by:

- Individuals who take up Malay dance as a hobby
- Freelance performers
- Professional performing artists from non-profit companies

In 2007, I received the *Anugerah Warisan Kencana* by the Malay Heritage Centre, Singapore. I would consider my creation of *Bangsawan in Dance*, commissioned for the 1998 Singapore Arts Festival my seminal work to date. It was presented to international audiences around the world, with the most recent performance at the “Dance Connect International Festival” in New York in 2012. Another significant milestone was the creation of *Gurindam Melayu* in 2002, a production based on *Gurindam 12*, a century-old text written by Raja Ali Haji. *Gurindam 12* was traditionally recited in a melodious manner. When presented in a contemporary manner, “new life” was given to the meaningful text, with the aid of creative symbolic movements, songs and vocals.

Moving Forward with Tradition

Tradition is not static. Many innovative efforts have been made which still seek to preserve traditional values. In recent years, the Malay dance scene in Singapore has evolved with the times. Many creative works have emerged through innovation, fusion and collaboration. With a growing number of professional Arts Management personnel, performing arts groups are progressing well. The need to nurture local talents remains, due to a greater number of quality experimental works based on history, legends and contemporary themes which contribute to the enrichment of our talent.

Malay contemporary dance today is often understood as a Western dance form, with most works seldom reflecting the Malay identity. Efforts are currently ongoing to educate school teachers in-charge of Malay dance, dance instructors and choreographers, through Malay dance master class workshops. Arts institutions such as NAFA and School of the Arts (SOTA) also conduct Malay dance master classes for students.

The strong expertise and experience of the foundations of Malay dance which are guided by Islamic teachings and rich traditional customs allow Malay dance in Singapore to successfully progress onwards and stay relevant with the times. The task ahead may not be a necessarily easy one for Malay dance in Singapore, but as the poet T. S. Eliot once said: "Tradition cannot be inherited; you must obtain it by great labour."

Som M. SAID

Som M. Said is a dynamic cultural ambassador for Singapore, and has been recognised for her work with children, winning the National Youth Service Award in 1979. She received the Cultural Medallion in 1987 and the Public Service Medal in 1992 for her contributions to dance. In 2007, she received the Anugerah Warisan Kencana by the Malay Heritage Centre, Singapore. She is a choreographer for "instant Asia", a dramatic dance presentation of Singapore's diverse cultural heritage. As cultural ambassador for Singapore, she has been involved in creating dance productions unique to Singapore's cultural heritage. As part of these international goodwill exchanges, the Republic of Singapore has commissioned her to promote the multi-cultural and multi-ethnic performances in many parts of the world, such as, Russia, Cairo, Dubai, New Delhi, West Germany, Nepal, Milan, New Zealand, Korea, Canada, and Australia. Som Said continues to share her love for dance with Sri Warisan, which she founded in 1997.

Very Special Arts

YEO Lanxi

Yeo Lanxi, who works for the disabled, shares her insights on art beyond disability, including what moves Cultural Medallion recipient Chng Seok Tin to create art, and the latter's thoughts about art and people with disabilities. Lanxi researches on and interviews disabled artists who practise at the pinnacle of their profession on a national level.

My disability has opened my eyes to see my true abilities.

— Robert M. Hensel

Working in a charitable organisation that brings art to people with disabilities and brings art created by people with disabilities to the public is like discovering a deserted alleyway off a busy main road. How often do we see information on the streets of Singapore about artists with disabilities? Not only are artists with disabilities marginalised in mainstream art, they are also often portrayed by our mainstream media as people in need of help by reason of their disability, hence people to be pitied and sympathised. It is not easy for a person of disability to overcome such perceptions and the social stigmas that go along with these perceptions — so deeply ingrained are they in the public's mind. We do need to re-educate the public to make them see that 'disability' does not equate to being 'not able'. A disability might affect the physical mobility or the intellect of an individual but it does not in any way affect the human spirit or the individual's ability to express oneself through art.

Artists with disabilities are special in many ways, not least of which in the ways they transcend their disability. In sharing their stories with you, I hope you will go beyond their disabilities and, like me, see special artists as truly tributaries contributing to Singapore art and the spirit of art making. Some were born with disabilities or they may have become disabled at a very young age; others became disabled later in life. As special artists, some began making art at a very young age, while others became interested in the arts after disability became part of their lives.

Local Scene of Arts and Disability

Very Special Arts Singapore (VSA) is the main organisation that supports and promotes artists of disability in Singapore. It is the local chapter and affiliate of VSA International, which was founded in 1974 by Ambassador Jean Kennedy Smith. VSA Singapore was launched on 27 September 1993 by Singapore's Ambassador-at-Large and VSA Patron Professor Tommy Koh. Our core mission is to provide people with disabilities with opportunities to access the arts for rehabilitation and social integration.

Since its inception, VSA Singapore has organised programmes in the visual and performing arts. Unlike other welfare organisations that focus on helping people with specific disabilities, VSA programmes are open to all people with disabilities, regardless of age, language, ethnicity or religion. VSA not only believes that art as therapy will help rehabilitate people with disabilities, but also allows them avenues for creativity and expression. We believe that everyone with a disability should be given the opportunity to develop his or her artistic abilities. Launched in 2012, *Voices: Expressions of Young VSA Artists* is an exhibition programme that showcases artworks completed by selected young artists over the course of a year and tracks their progress and development through the exhibition series; *Welcome to My World: A Concert by People with Disabilities* is a national-level platform that showcases the performing talents of individuals and groups from the special needs community in Singapore. Our hope is that given opportunities to showcase their creative work, young special artists will be motivated to continue their artistic pursuits and gain acceptance and recognition for their abilities as professional artists.

Cultural Medallion recipient Chng Seok Tin and musician Azariah Tan may be individuals with disabilities but they each excel in the arts and are highly recognised as practitioners and professionals in their respective fields. But it remains that little is known about special artists in Singapore. Given that each disability differs, not

every person of disability has the opportunity or the ability to qualify for formal art education. Many art practitioners with disabilities in Singapore do not hold formal qualifications in art. This is often due to the nature of their disability as well as the stage in their lives when art making became a part. The lack of paper qualifications aside, some artists truly have a gift in their chosen field in the arts. Their artistic talents deserve recognition and they ought to be accorded the same measure of regard with or without formal art education. Seok Tin once said: "How is art created by people with disabilities different from others if art is an expression of one's stories and feelings?" Her rhetorical question challenges us to reconsider the ways we as practitioners and viewers have regarded special artists and their art. The next time you see an artwork made by a person with disability, consider this question: Do you see the art or do you see the disability? Or do you see both the art and the disability? Shouldn't it be that the art ought to always come first, regardless of whether the artist has a disability or not? Art has a life of its own, regardless of the maker; the artist's condition may influence art making, but his disability does not make it less of a work of art. It is my privilege to interview and then share with you the stories of four special artists.

Chng Seok Tin: Art as Expression of Her Vision of Life

Renowned artist Chng Seok Tin has qualifications in art from Singapore, France, UK and USA. She is an artist who never restricts herself to working on one medium alone. After losing her eyesight as a result of a surgical procedure in 1988, Seok Tin turned her focus towards mixed media and sculptural works. Her art expresses her moral values and her thoughts about the world around her. Seok Tin believes that a good character is far more important than technical perfections in art. The loss of most of her sight did not stop her from creating art that continues to provoke, probe and inspire.

Seok Tin was at the height of her career when she was left with 10% of her sight. Her world is now a blur of various shapes and colours. While Seok Tin may have lost much of the visual control in her arts creation process, her current works are more expressive and random, and possess "a raw vitality and strength not evident in the more controlled work executed when her vision was perfect".¹ Seok Tin continues

1 Chng, S.T. (1996), *Metamorphosis: Sculpture, Prints and Mixed Media Works, 1993-96*, K2-Fox trot Productions, Singapore, p.10.



与天地共舞 *Dance in Nature*, 1994
Monotype, 57 x 39.5 cm

to practise art with “a more complex form of expression, to a freer use of material”² and the belief that art has the power to move people, impart values and change perceptions. It is therefore very crucial for an art practitioner to have a good character because if “the innate nature of an artist is warped, obsessive and absurd, he would be deviating further from the truth, goodness and beauty of art”³.

Because creativity comes from within and it cannot be forced, Seok Tin firmly believes that there is no difference between art created by the able and by the disabled. Every person is the same by our common ability to feel, to express our emotions. What is different is how we express our thoughts and feelings through the art we create, for art springs from the depths of a soul, born of emotions and thoughts and feelings.

Perhaps then, there are only two kinds of art: art that is a mere copy and art that is alive, the fruit of the artist's emotions, thoughts or ideas. An artwork that merely copies is a resemblance with no story behind it: it is merely a beautiful art piece appreciated purely based on aesthetic value. On the other hand, an artwork that is the expression of an emotion or thought opens up avenues for the imagination to roam without boundaries.

In standing by her principles in her art making, Seok Tin is an artist who does not commercialise or compromise her art to win approval or to sell her works. She has firmly refused to accept accolades based on pity or sympathy for her disability. For Seok Tin, artistic quality alone is the criterion by which an artist should be appraised.⁴ At the end of the day, Seok Tin believes that people should be interested in good art and not the condition of the artist: “Clear vision is not necessary, as long as one uses his heart to experience and feel, to live and to create art.”

2 *Ibid.*, p. 12.

3 Chng, S.T. (2001), *Life, Like Chess*, Books and Arts of All Ages, Singapore, p. 8.

4 Chng, S.T. (1996), *Metamorphosis: Sculpture, Prints and Mixed Media Works, 1993-96*, K2-Foxtrot Productions, Singapore, p. 7.

Azariah Tan Peng Chay: A Hearing-impaired Musician

Diagnosed with bilateral sensorineural hearing loss when he was four years old, Azariah is a piano major graduate of the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music, National University of Singapore (NUS), who is currently doing his D.M.A doctorate after obtaining his Master of Music (M.M.), Piano Performance and Chamber Music at the University of Michigan.



VSA International Young Soloists Awards, 2009

Azariah has performed in front of dignitaries and has also received awards at numerous music competitions, including the 2009 VSA International Young Soloists Award. Playing the piano since he was four, Azariah continues to hone his artistic abilities and is an inspiration to many aspiring artists with disabilities. His achievements and his love for music demonstrate one thing: Art does not

identify with the disability; instead, artistic excellence takes shape with the heart. He urges artists with disabilities not to dwell on what they are not able to do, but to focus on what they are able to do and to always strive to do it well.

Azariah's musical journey began when as a four-year-old his parents introduced him to the electric organ and keyboard. At the age of twelve, Azariah discovered his passion for music when he no longer regarded playing the piano as "homework." To him, music is a meaningful and beautiful form of expression, a language and a form of communication that can express what words cannot; a performer's creativity lies in his ability to evoke and convey ideas or emotions through music. Azariah regards the piano as "an extension" of his body, his fingers "moulding" sound into musical expression. Whenever he plays the piano, memories would play in his mind and be expressed in his music.

Azariah believes that before even attempting to play a piece, a performer must understand the musical piece and what it is trying to convey. It is essential for the performer to analyse the basic outline and phrase structure of the piece, to work out small fingerings and technical sections; to listen to a few other recordings of the piece to compare how other performers have approached the piece. This will help a performer to decide how he will interpret and perform the piece.

Playing the piano requires an extremely sensitive ear to detect, analyse, and respond to the smallest of vibrations. Because of his disability, Azariah has had to put in extra effort into mastering his craft. Understanding the nature of his disability and how it affects his perception of sounds enabled him, with the help of audiologists and specially devised hearing-aids, to adjust and adapt to his hearing impairment. His disability has made him aware of his limitations, but it has also taught him important life lessons. Avoiding negative thinking, he chooses instead to focus on his abilities and to persevere in honing them. He willingly accepts feedback and reminds himself to be ever grateful and generous in sharing with others.

Despite the achievements, Azariah remains a humble person with a deep passion for music. He is truly an inspiration to aspiring artists with disability, and proof that despite any limitations one might encounter, it is possible to achieve great things with hardwork and an unwavering belief in self.

Tan Kek Leong: From Lion Dancer to Professional Artist

In 1988, an unfortunate lion dance accident left Kok Leong a quadriplegic. Now an artist with the Mouth and Foot Painting Association, Kok Leong paints to express himself and to support his family. Watching Kok Leong while he paints, one is invariably impressed by the mouth artist's patience and endurance. Gripping a brush between his teeth, the wheelchair-bound quadriplegic slowly applies paint on the canvas, moving his head with each brushstroke. The accident may have robbed Kok Leong of his ability to do things that many people take for granted, but it has given him the opportunity to discover and develop the artist in him. Being a special artist has also given Kok Leong the courage to share with others his experience as a person with disability.

In 1989, when Kok Leong first picked up painting, he approached different teachers to learn whatever he could to acquire the basic skills of painting. Among his teachers included a Chinese ink painting specialist with whom he trained for ten years. Despite not having any professional accreditations in painting, Kok Leong's works are highly sought after by supporters of artists with disabilities. A keen learner, he has also worked with other mediums such as acrylic and watercolour, each of which entails Kok Leong to pick up new skills.

Kok Leong believes that it is all right to make mistakes along the way of making a painting: One does not have to start all over again, as being able to correct



云雾迷家 *Mist*, 2006, Mixed media, 27 × 24 cm

a mistake and complete the artwork is part of the process of art making. An artist also does not need the best materials to create art. Even with limited resources, a true artist will make use of what he has, to give life to an artwork.

As an artist who paints according to his heart's desire, Kok Leong only asks of people to respect his artistic abilities and to inject love into the appreciation of the artworks created by any artist with a disability. He hopes that people will be able to see the artist before the disability. This, to him, is the most basic level of respect a person deserves, regardless of the individual's ability or the way society perceives.

Fern Wong Li Ting: Sharing Her Joy with Everyone around Her

Fern is born with Down's syndrome. With her joyful and childlike nature, Fern's artworks are often bright and happy. She seeks to bring joy and happiness to people through her art.

As a child, Fern loved doodling, and she would doodle everywhere and on anything. Seeing her interest in art, her parents registered her for art classes at VSA to further develop her artistic abilities. In 2002, Fern won the 1st prize in VSA's annual art competition. The award caused her to realise that people liked her



Rhythm of Joy, 2011, Permanent marker, 48 × 48 cm

art and this greatly boosted her self-esteem and encouraged her to push on in her artistic endeavours. Fern's paintings are all about life as she sees it. Her happy themes and the bright colours she uses are expressions of joyful experiences and encounters. She is further assured of her artistic abilities and the fact that her artwork has a

positive impact on the world when she was awarded the Certificate of Distinction in the open category of the 2006 UOB Painting of the Year Competition.

Fern is an artist with a mind of her own. She is not easily swayed by the opinions. To her, art is like a dear friend who brings much joy and purpose to living. Fern is always happy when she is making art. She also believes that her artistic talents is a gift from God and that she is serving God's purpose for her in bringing a message of joy through her art. Her life motto: "Sharing my joy."

Conclusion

An intimate connection exists between art and life for each of these special artists. They are strong and courageous in creating artworks that do not compromise their values and human experiences. Through art, they speak of their lives with authentic joy, sorrow, strength and perseverance. Their disabilities in no way impede their human capacity to hope, dream, love and experience life. They neither fear living nor creating art which is true to who they are. For the rest of us, do we dare say we have this courage? Do we dare say we try to live as authentically as they have each day?

YEO Lanxi

As a Programme Executive at Very Special Arts Singapore (VSA), Yeo Lanxi's roles include that of a teacher and an arts administrator, putting her gifts to use by integrating people with special needs and the mainstream society through events organised by VSA. Lanxi's portfolio includes art exhibitions and the most recent VSA annual concert: Welcome to My World 2013 — A Concert by People with Disabilities. Lanxi graduated from NAFA with a degree in Art Management in 2009. She has experience in production work such as the NTUC Income Kite Festival 2010 and various children theatre shows with ACT 3 International.

Travelling is one of her lifelines. Lanxi has travelled across some parts of Southeast Asia on a backpack and most recently went to Brazil to join over 3 million Catholic youths on a journey of faith to meet the Pope and partake in a rich diversity of cultures from all over the world. Last but not least, Lanxi does no art but enjoys sports and is trying to learn the piano at the moment. In everything that she does, she firmly believes that each person is unique and blessed with individual gifts to influence the world around.

A Vision and a Mission: Development of Nanyang-Inspired Music

Eric WATSON with Tsung YEH

Singapore-based British musician and composer, Eric Watson, details American Maestro and Cultural Medallion (Music) recipient Tsung Yeh's journey to this part of the world and the influences on his [Yeh's] artistic direction, and the platforms to expand the repertoire of the Singapore Chinese Orchestra. This essay, written from Maestro Yeh's account, is an edited version of a paper presented at the New Asian Imaginations Symposium 2008.

Although I have always been interested in ethnic music particularly in my work with Chinese orchestras and their repertoire, I can trace the start of my interest in music of the Nanyang to September of 2001.

I was then in Singapore as a guest conductor of the Singapore Chinese Orchestra (SCO) when on a weekend I happened to stroll over to the Singapore Art Museum and saw a collection of paintings that were labelled to be of the "Nanyang Style". The artists in the exhibition included Singapore's pioneer artists Chen Chong Swee and Liu Kang, both of whom are key proponents of the Nanyang Style in art. I was impressed by how the two pioneer artists applied Chinese ink and Western oil techniques to local themes and subject matters in their paintings. I was also impressed by the vibrant colours of their paintings, and felt that there was something quite special about their artworks. This encounter with Nanyang Style art certainly planted a seed in my mind.

The presence and influence of the local in art of the Nanyang is understandable. As one still new to Singapore and to her multi-racial heritage when I was first here,

I was immediately struck by the diversity of ethnic cultures here, and how the heritage of the early immigrants are still everywhere to be seen. For instance, reminders of the early Chinese immigrants are still evident in areas where immigrant workers first settled, the houses that rich merchants built for themselves, the names of the various clans and clan houses, and the rich collection of archival photographs and displays in the museums. I was able to detect familiar dialect phrases that Singaporeans use in the Singlish they speak to each other, and was intrigued how Singlish is commonly spoken across all ethnic groups here. I was initially paying more attention to the presence of ethnic Chinese heritage and local influences on the Chinese diaspora in Singapore, and this perhaps explains my early attraction to the Nanyang Style paintings. With time, however, I began to notice the presence of other influences and the rich blend of cultures, and I saw in the Peranakan hybrid-culture the flair and love for vivid colours that encapsulated for me what I first saw in the Nanyang Style paintings.

Towards SCO's Nanyang Vision

In 2002, I was appointed as SCO's Musical Director and Conductor. Remembering the Nanyang Style paintings, I began to think about developing a vision for the orchestra that would give SCO a unique flavour and one that would, alongside the established Chinese repertoire, include music of a Singapore character and identity.

Traditional Chinese repertoire would of course remain the foundation of SCO's repertoire, but when I began to develop a vision for the orchestra, I started to think of Singapore's unique blend of local cultures and international influences. Singapore's position as a "crossroad" also drew me to think of a wider vision — some might regard the crossroad analogy as cliché but this alone does not make it any less true. The word "crossroad" is often used in reference to Singapore as a meeting point between the East and the West, but Singapore is a very modern city and modern Singapore is now more of an international crossroad where many cultures converge. My vision for the orchestra thus came to also include a repertoire that is not normally played by Chinese orchestras. For me, the Nanyang is itself a kind of land of diaspora where many cultures meet, and this inspired me to look outward and to include other musical genres in SCO's repertoire. Thus my Nanyang Vision took on two important facets, namely, that SCO's repertoire must include the ethnic local, and that it should also look beyond and wider to reflect Singapore's modernity.

What this means is that while we still do play a large number of traditional Chinese music, the broader Nanyang Vision has allowed us to successfully venture into popular music such as jazz (with the famous Brubeck Trio) and European folk music (Celtic music with British artists like Christopher Stout and Alistair Anderson). Our success is very much due to a selective approach in choosing suitable music, artists, and composers/arrangers. We have also been successful in developing high performance standards in terms of intonation, rhythmic accuracy and ensemble tone, these being essential performance qualities that are crucial to the development of SCO such that the Nanyang Vision would become possible.

Allow me to digress a little to explain why this is so. There are significant differences in playing styles between musical genres particularly in relation to intonation, tuning and inflection within traditional and non-traditional repertoires; indeed each genre has its own performance practices. This means that SCO's musicians must be very flexible and they must be able to switch from one performance practice to another, sometimes within one concert. For example, jazz requires musicians to develop a "swing" style of playing (and even jazz swing comes in several varieties), whereas classical playing requires a straighter and more conventional practice, although this too has its own set of variations; Viennese waltz has a rhythmic style that is very different from jazz waltz and this is also very different from folk ballads written in three/four. Jazz and Blues ask for notes to be bent in pitch, and while this can also happen in folk or classical playing, the way this quality is achieved is different. These are performance practices inherent and specific to the different musical genres that SCO musicians must learn to deliver in their playing. When we were preparing for the concert with the Brubeck Trio, part of the rehearsal time was spent in a workshop where jazz musicians worked with SCO musicians to develop improvisational techniques. This was so successful that SCO musicians were able to improvise as soloists during the concert.

The Nanyang Vision is a commitment that will take time — years perhaps — for SCO to build knowledge, application capabilities, and flexibility in performance practice, and it will require constant attention to details and willingness to explore new territories. I see this commitment of time, energy and resources as being a part of the Nanyang spirit.

I was once asked: "Is it your personal philosophy to study the social context of an orchestra in order to make it relevant to its audience?" My answer: "Absolutely!" As an imported cultural form, Chinese orchestra music has evolved to the point

where we must find our “home” or “music root”; and this must come from the local culture, the natural environment, the weather, the fruit, the spices, etc. To me, it is a calling, and it is a compelling one. I envision that Nanyang-inspired music will give SCO a distinctive musical character. I am passionate about it, and I have seen success in pursuing similar missions in my experience with the South Bend Symphony Orchestra in the USA and the Hong Kong Sinfonietta.

Multi-thematic Approach

In fleshing out my Nanyang Vision for SCO, I began by studying the city, the culture, the people, their ethnicity and character, local flavours, relevant Western influences, even the soil and the climate. I also thought about the differences between island culture and continental culture and between “mono-thematic” and “multi-thematic” (I will explain what I mean by these terms later).

Singapore has a blend of cultures that co-exist and interact with each other. While there is a natural blending of cultures in Singapore, there is concurrently a “purist” approach to preserving the core heritage of the respective ethnic groups. There are North and South Indian social groups, Malay groups from both Indonesia and Malaysia, and European groups; there are Chinese clan associations and a Eurasian association. In other words, there is great diversity here. One might argue that there is great diversity too in a large continent such as China, but I will say that China is more mono-thematic in culture. By this I mean that there is perceivably a dominant or mainstream culture in China, such that it is possible for us to recognise and acknowledge what is “traditional” in the heritage of a Chinese orchestra and to insist that the traditional repertoire of a Chinese orchestra is naturally and essentially “Chinese”. My research has shown me that the Nanyang artists were generally not purist or mono-thematic in their approach: theirs was a more “*rojak*” or multi-thematic approach. For the benefit of readers who are unfamiliar with the word, *rojak* is a Southeast Asian salad of many different ingredients that one might initially doubt the mix but upon sampling the dish will agree that it is surprisingly delicious, colourful and stimulatingly spicy.

Next I went about finding out the “ingredients” of Singapore’s multi-thematic *rojak*. That was when the work became complex because I realised that I cannot look at multi-cultural Singapore without also researching into Southeast Asia, and the origins, histories and cultural heritage of the immigrant groups, etc. — it was like dropping a pebble into a pool and watching the ripples grow bigger and bigger.

An example on particularity — when I delved deeper into the roots of the ethnic Chinese community in Singapore, I found that they originated from different regions in China. Many originated from Fujian province of the *Lingnan* (嶺南) culture, but even this province is greatly diverse because from Fujian came the Teochew, Hainanese, Hakka and Cantonese dialect groups, and these made up a part of the Chinese Nanyang diaspora.

I then decided to test the waters by commissioning several works, one of the earliest being *Prince Sang Nila Utama*, and later *Zheng He — Admiral of the Seven Seas* which is, of course, inspired by the story of the 15th-century Chinese admiral who voyaged to Southeast Asia. Mr Law Wai Lun was the composer for both of these works. On his shoulders was placed the responsibility of stirring the waters so that I might see if a similar “Nanyang Style” in music, as in art, would emerge.

SCO's International Competition

Soon after I joined SCO, I had the idea of starting a competition — an international competition to be exact — for an original work for Chinese orchestras. One of the criteria of the competition was that the composition had to in some way or other embody “the spirit of the Nanyang”. The competition was intended as a way of attracting composers to write for the SCO. More importantly, I was hoping that through the competition, SCO would be able to:

- Create a repertoire of Nanyang-inspired compositions and a list of composers;
- Build public awareness, both nationally and internationally; and
- Identify a group of excellent composers, and through this initiative to forge a team that would be racially diverse in age, gender and experiences with whom SCO can share its vision.

The competition was a major step to opening the door to virtually anything that had a Nanyang connection; indeed, we wanted to see what the “rippling effect” would amount to on the meaning of “the Nanyang” as seen through the eyes of the competitors. Conscious of the fact that the term “Nanyang” is of Chinese origin, we avoided an overly Sino-centric interpretation and opened the boundaries to include Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia (although I was myself prepared to accept a wider geographical field).

The competition took place in November 2006 and we selected 12 finalists out of the 70 entries we received from Singapore, China, East and West Malaysia, Hong Kong and the United Kingdom. The concert of compositions by the finalists was a wonderful diversity of works and titles. After the concert, we held a weekend symposium devoted to various aspects of the Nanyang, during which the prize-winning composers were invited to discuss their works.*

Subsequent to the competition, SCO organised a number of study tours to Sarawak, Kota Kinabalu and Singapore, to research and attempt at tracing Nanyang musical influences in Southeast Asia. For example, we visited Hokkien and Teochew performing groups in Singapore, some of whose members are rather elderly and are facing difficulties maintaining their group numbers; but we also saw groups that are reinventing themselves and perpetuating a living heritage of music. My SCO colleagues have also had several meetings and discussions with composers to generate ideas for future works; we have put out a compact disc recording to promote Nanyang music.

I am happy to report that our endeavours are beginning to bear fruit. Several of the original competition works have been played overseas, notably in Beijing, Macau, Guangzhou and Shanghai, and we have also commissioned more works from the competition composers. I can say with pride that I have been able to develop a unique and relevant repertoire and performance tradition to hand over to the next generation.

Conclusion

The new Nanyang repertoire will not replace SCO's existing or more traditional repertoire; rather, it co-exists with the latter, and brings into SCO's fold both local relevance and international presence. The Nanyang Vision has contributed towards the development of an identity for SCO, building the orchestra into a flexible body that can perform in many stylistic traditions. In many ways, one can say that this very ability is the orchestra's identity. The timing was right for this development — it was

* Composition Award Finalists: *Tapestries — Time Dances* (composer Eric Watson, 1st Prize); *Ispirazione II* (composer Simon Kong Su Leong, 2nd Prize); *Buka Panggung* (composer Yii Ka Hoe, 3rd Prize); *The Sisters' Islands* (composer Wang Chen Wei, Singaporean Composer Award); *Volcanicity* (composer Tang Lok Yin, Young Composer Award); *Colours of Gamelan* (composer Lu Pei); *Hot Melody from Southeast Asia* (composer Jiang Yin); *Fire Dances* (composer Fang Xiaomin); *Spirits of Sea* (composer Yu Wei Hong); *Echoes* (composer Wong Hok Yeung, Alfred). Honorary Award Finalists: *The Dance of Lion City* (composer Chang Ming Chi); *Ispirazione* (composer Simon Kong Su Leong); *Admiral of the Seven Seas 1. The Voyage; 2. The Vow* (composer Law Wai Lun).

right for cultural reasons in light of the reasons leading to the decision to establish SCO as a professional national orchestra in 1997, and more so than ever with the phenomenal growth of the Singapore arts scene since SCO's inauguration. As Singapore continues to develop in confidence its own unique identity in the world, my wish is for SCO to contribute towards the making of the Singapore identity.

Eric WATSON

Eric Watson, born in the UK, received musical training at the Trinity College of Music in London, principal studies being piano, violin, composition and conducting for which he was awarded the Ricordi Prize. After graduating, he established a career as composer and musical director. In 2006, he won the first prize at the Singapore Chinese Orchestra's first International Competition for Chinese Orchestral Composition. This has led to more collaborations with the orchestra — *Dialogue for Tabla*, a *Jazz Overture* and a concerto grosso titled *Songs of the North*. Now domiciled in Singapore, he has twice been composer for the Singapore National Day parade. He is also active as a conductor and pedagogue.

Tsung YEH

Maestro Tsung Yeh is currently the Music Director of both the South Bend Symphony Orchestra in the USA and the Singapore Chinese Orchestra. Tsung Yeh entered the conducting profession in 1984 as the Exxon/Arts Endowment Conductor of the Saint Louis Symphony Orchestra. He has worked closely under the mentorship of Daniel Barenboim, Leonard Slatkin and Max Rudolph. As an orchestra builder, Maestro Yeh has gained a reputation from his accomplishments in artistic growth and innovative programming. As a visionary he has demonstrated an outstanding ability to cross boundaries between East and West to produce critically acclaimed works on both sides of the Pacific. Maestro Yeh received the Cultural Medallion (Music) in 2013.

Define a conducive arts scene.

“

A conducive arts scene is one where there is something for everyone, where all aesthetic tastes are catered for, from the frivolously frothy to the obtusely obscure, because all art is subjective and valid. But at the heart of it all, the arts must be bold and challenging and provocative; it must force us all to question our society, our values, our lives; it must challenge us to think, to feel, to love more fiercely, to live more fearlessly — art has to stimulate us intellectually, emotionally, viscerally, even spiritually. And in order to sustain this, the powers that be have to show support in the form of the elusive “F” word: FUNDING. Between the authorities, the artists and the public, the relationship must be a passionate and long-lasting *menage à trois*, not an occasional flirtation.”



Adrian Pang

After graduating from Keele University with a degree in Law and Psychology, Adrian did the natural thing and spent the next eight years working as an actor in the UK, where his theatre credits include *Hair* at the West End's Old Vic Theatre; as Oberon in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; as Dromio of Syracuse in *The Comedy Of Errors*; *The Magic Fundoshi* (Best Comedy at the London Fringe Theatre Awards); *The Mens Womb*; *A Christmas Carol*; *Tormented*; *The Circles of Paradise*; *One For The Road*; *Sleeping Beauty*; *New Territories*; *Take Away*; *Leaving Turnpike Lane* and *Privates On Parade*. Unlike many actors in the UK, he has never had to be a waiter in his spare time, although he did act as one once.

Adrian's UK television work includes *The Fragile Heart* opposite the late great Sir Nigel Hawthorne; *Lovejoy* with Ian McShane; *Arabian Nights* with Jason Scott Lee; and he has also appeared in *Happiness*; *Bugs*; *Call Red*; *Taggart*; *The Knock*; *Trauma* and *The Bill* – but then who hasn't?

Adrian's UK film work includes the lead role in *Spiralling* (Best Film Award at the International Solidarity Festival); *SpyGame* with Brad Pitt and Robert Redford; *Nightwatch* with Pierce Brosnan; *Everybody Loves Sunshine* with David Bowie; *Peggy Sue*; *Night Swimmer*; *Yellow Fever*; *A Brief Walk*; *Offending Angels* and *Second Generation*. Some of these films have actually been seen by more than twelve people.

During that period, Adrian would occasionally return to Singapore for stage work, most notably in Singapore Repertory Theatre's first Shakespeare *In the Park* production, in the title role of Hamlet, as well as roles in *Little Shop of Horrors*; *Into The Woods*; *The Glass Menagerie* and *They're Playing Our Song* opposite Lea Salonga. At that time, he was perhaps best known to Singaporeans for his lead role in Glen Goei's disco movie *Forever Fever*, though he admits his hair did most of the work for him.

Since re-locating to Singapore with his family in 2001, Adrian has found a whole new audience with his work on Singapore TV, including his much-ballyhooed performances in Chinese dramas such as *Portrait of Home* and *Nanny Daddy* (even though speaking Mandarin is as pleasurable for him as a root-canal); and English shows like *Ah Girl* (Winner of Best Actor in a Comedy Series at the Asian Television Awards); *Red Thread* (Winner of Best Actor in a Drama Series at the Asian Television Awards); *Polo Boys*; *The Pupil* (Seasons 1 & 2); *Parental*

Guidance; Maggi and Me; Pulau Hantu; Do Not Disturb; 9 Lives; Durian King and the acclaimed *Six Weeks*, which he created and co-wrote. Really.

Adrian has been the host of several popular Chinese television variety shows, as well as the hit game show *Deal Or No Deal*. He has also hosted numerous “live” events, ranging from corporate functions, to prestigious awards ceremonies, to the National Day Parade. Hey, everyone needs a day job.

In recent years his film credits include *The Faith of Anna Waters; Unlucky Plaza; Blackhat; Bait 3D; Dance Dance Dragon; I Do I Do; Gone Shopping; The Carrot Cake Conversations* and *The Blue Mansion*. He has also appeared on stage in the title role of *Macbeth; Boeing Boeing; Into The Woods; Twelfth Night; Forbidden City; Barefoot in the Park; A Twist of Fate* and *God of Carnage*. At the Life! Theatre Awards Adrian earned Best Actor nominations for *The Odd Couple; The Pillowman; The Full Monty; Dealer's Choice; Swimming With Sharks* and *Next to Normal*; and he is a three-time Best Actor Award Winner, for his work in *The Dresser, Much Ado About Nothing* and *Rabbit Hole*.

Adrian and his wife Tracie are Artistic Directors of PANGDEMONiUM!, whose inaugural production was the hit musical *The Full Monty*, followed by Patrick Marber's *Closer, Dealer's Choice*, the rock musical *Spring Awakening*, and the showbiz satire *Swimming With Sharks*. For their 2013 Season they staged *Rabbit Hole, Next To Normal* (Winner of Production of the Year at the ST Life! Theatre Awards), and *Gruesome Playground Injuries*. Their 2014 Season was made up of *Fat Pig, The Rise & Fall of Little Voice*, and *Frozen*. For their 2015 Season they will be staging *Circle Mirror Transformation, Tribes* and *Chinglish*.

But all the above are nothing when compared to the two productions he is most proud of — his two sons, Zack and Xander.

Adrian is represented by FLY Entertainment.

Passion

A Passion for Art, A Passion for Life

Benjamin CHEE
(*featuring Terence Ho*)



Photo by Tato Olivas

Working alongside some of Singapore's top artists and productions, the youngest contributor in this volume Benjamin Chee started out as a creative entrepreneur at age 24, shortly after two years of national service in the Navy. He set up Benj-mark as a platform for creative projects. A theatre studies graduate, he has managed the first ever Youth Olympic Games Flame Arrival Ceremony, stage-managed sold-out performances of Francis Yip and Dick Lee, represented artist Julian Hee in the Men's Fashion Week, presented the Proclaimers (UK) in the F1 Singapore Grand Prix, and initiated the Diplomatic Spouses' Coffee Morning at the Peranakan Museum.

Benjamin also heads the Spain-Singapore Connection under the Embassy of Spain to introduce the language and culture to educational institutes and the Singapore community. In 2013, he served in the fund-raising committee of Tan Tock Seng Hospital Patient Care Centre, and in the same year, he attained first-class honours for his Bachelor's in Creative Industry Management, University of Essex, UK. His studies include Social Returns of Investment (SROI), a social accounting framework to understand effectiveness and promote accountability within social enterprises and their programmes. He was interviewed and his research published in the White Papers: Asia's Most Innovative Cities 2013 (Solidiance). At 26, work has taken him to France, Hong Kong, the Philippines and Indonesia. In the closing chapter of this section on Artists & Practitioners, Benjamin catches up for an interview with another high achiever, Terence Ho, in today's fast-paced world.

A Passion for Arts, A Passion for Life

Frame

In the course of writing this chapter, Mr Terence Ho, General Manager of the Singapore Chinese Orchestra (SCO) was in the midst of a SCO concert tour in China. The tour took the company to various performing venues in the four host cities, sparking off several collaborations. Terence was there to promote the unique Nanyang sound as well as to build ties with the arts community in the region. Subsequently, the SCO returned with raving reviews and new friendships built.



In between his work in China and projects in the region, technology such as “WhatsApp” and emails are employed to bridge the distance to discuss about his involvement as well as taking on leadership roles in the arts.

Terence was the supervisor and mentor for the writer’s academic studies under the University of Essex, BA (Honours) in Creative Industry Management. Over the semesters, he supervised two major theses submitted by the writer for his tertiary



education endeavour, one of which was a study on Social Returns on Investment. In 2010, he became the first local arts manager to be awarded the Singapore Tote Board Scholarship to study “Strategic Management for Non-profit Leaders” at the prestigious Harvard Business School (HBS) in Boston, Massachusetts. He had much earlier graduated from the University of Central Arkansas, America, with MBA and BBA degrees.

Context

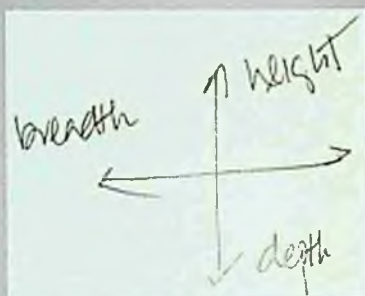
Over a *tête-à-tête* conversation, Terence was able to share more information which would inspire one to view life in the multi-tiers and multi-roles that he plays. At breakfast, Terence shared that it was an immense experience to have classmates who are leaders of other Non-Profit Organisations (NPOs) around the world. He was able to interact and share with like-minded leaders and give a platform to formulate theories and to debate



on. “HBS is renowned for its business strategies and philosophies,” said Terence. One of the models at HBS that resonates is the impact/outcome model, which he applied to his work at the SCO. Ultimately, it was passion that was eminent amongst the course mates. Terence recalled fondly the opportunities to network and share ideas with other leaders who may not necessarily be from an arts organisation. Course mates are leaders from various organisations: voluntary, charity, arts and others. The course structure made the experience more relevant to the attendees, focusing on recent case studies and strategic studies, following which, the attendees were asked to apply their solutions to the various cases and to put up for all to debate. Such pedagogy stimulates learning and encourages critical analysis and proactive responses. When leaders are gathered with such unified passion, Terence described it in one word: “Dynamic!”

There is a difference when work harmonises with passion, and Terence has achieved that. Like an inclusive ecosystem, Terence sees his role as part of a bigger picture and interdependent development. As the leader of a national organisation, he has gained insights and information, and witnessed challenges on both micro

and macro planes. In few words, he recalls of the fervent memories and passion in HBS that stirred within him. Action reaction, responding to his innate desires, he started to engage in committees and communities in the following areas — academia, culture and community, with one objective: to contribute back to the ecosystem.



In a simple diagram, Terence explains the holistic development in three dimensions.

Give



On top of his work, Terence serves on national non-profit organisations such as the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA) Music Curriculum Advisory Committee, NAFA Arts Management Curriculum Advisory Committee, National Arts Council (NAC) Seed and Major Grant Assessment Panel, NAC Arts Scholarship Assessment Panel, NAC-Singapore Tote Board Arts Fund Assessment Committee, MDA Arts Consultative Panel, National Chinese Music Competition 2014 and Singapore Chin Kang Huay Kuan Youth Division.

With a good grasp of the ecosystem, Terence is able to influence certain decisions and propose new strategies for the betterment of the industry. His personal academic achievements and experiences arm him with the relevant authority and affirmation that is essential to the progress of the industry. He agrees that the industry is still young and a lot more needs to be looked into to ensure its growth and development. Policies have to protect the artists and administrators without short-changing national priorities. Policy-makers have to understand the stakeholders, and implementations ought to be well thought-through.



As the chairman of various Curriculum Advisory Committees, Terence leads and provides insights on the pedagogy, academics, trends, international practices

and possible hurdles, which enable the professors and lecturers to constantly update their lecture materials and methodologies. This in turn nurtures new administrators and musicians ready to meet the industry standards, or even possibly raise the bar to a new level. Annually, he also supervises a few students taking their BA (Honours) at NAFA. He believes in contributing at the ground level and engaging the youth. The students are able to observe a national arts organisation in close proximity, which is useful and provides a sense of standards benchmarked at an international level.

Second

The Singapore Chinese Orchestra (SCO) was inaugurated in 1997. Recognised as one of the world-class Chinese orchestras, the SCO stages at least a hundred concerts annually. The SCO has performed concerts in many prestigious events and venues around the world, taking its music from as far in the East, in China, to the furthest West, in Edinburg, Scotland. The SCO boasts of its unique sound and styles found nowhere else around the world. The orchestra has a myriad of repertoire that comprises classical, traditional, folkloric, opera and in recent years, pop and jazz.



In the first question, we ask of the SCO, is what differentiates the SCO sound from the other Chinese orchestras around the world, particularly in China. Terence brings us back to the core of the SCO, its vision, which is: “We aspire to be a world renowned Chinese Orchestra with a uniquely Singaporean character.” In our earlier correspondences, Terence shared that the SCO fuses local Singapore culture — which is very much influenced by its geographical location and history — with other musical and artistic elements. The strategic location of Singapore provides a fertile ground for an East-meets-West cauldron of influences. Reflecting on the vision, Terence shared that for a uniquely Singapore character to take shape, there are a few challenges. They are musicality, technicality, interpretation and style. These factors contribute to the Singapore sound and character. Outlining the presentation is the repertoire. In the course of touring, the SCO found that their identity has set them apart, with these as distinct differentiations. Known as a liberal orchestra that embraces a myriad of genres from classical to jazz and other influences, it surpasses experimental music as fusion is perfected and presented at international platforms. Led by Music Director Tsung Yeh, the orchestra has developed its unique

sound and niche amongst the other Chinese orchestras in the world. By attaining strong musicality and technical practices, the orchestra is able to overcome any compositions presented to them. Its vast repertoire of classics and fusion music, or even collaborative efforts ensures dynamic and creative concerts. The orchestra also organises the Singapore International Competition for Chinese Orchestral Composition to encourage and scout for new works to nurture new composers for the Chinese orchestras. This ensures a line of artistry and new works to be presented throughout the years.

Role

Leveraging on the 4Ps of the Arts and Culture Strategic Review (ACSR) by the NAC, Terence is able to align the SCO's strategic paradigms, committees' objectives and goals with the nation's policies. As a ground-up approach, each organisation is then able to contribute and integrate within the ecosystem of the Singapore's artistic development and cultural policies. 4 Ps of the ACSR:

- Product
- People
- Participation and Partnership
- Place

What are the challenges that the SCO faces and what are the solutions? In a one-line response, Terence replied: "By overcoming artistic and operational challenges is to aim for sustainability."



The writer ventured: "Which is the nutshell for?"

To which Terence elaborated: "Instead of competing on common grounds, the SCO shifts its paradigm of competition to its advantage. Artistic challenges are subjective, as most artists would agree; success is varied. However the SCO has benchmarked its success to its audience and accessibility to its core mission guided by its values. With each season and concert, the SCO progressively aligns its activities with its mission — to inspire

Singapore and the World with our music. Steered by its values that take after its acronym:

- S — Strive for excellence in our performances
- C — Committed to teamwork
- O — Open to innovation and learning.”

To enable readers to understand a management approach, Terence provided the following:

Impact > Outcomes > Values > Sustainability

Enthusiastically, Terence shared the five strategic paradigms in which the SCO operates on to ensure holistic development and sustainability, which spans across short-mid-long-term plans. They are:

- Artistic Development
- Talent Development
- Audience Development
- Partnerships and Sponsorships
- Hardware and Venue

The SCO also conducts workshops for the community and school Chinese orchestras to help them improve and to nurture and inspire talents. Some eventually pursue music and become professional musicians. Not only in terms of musicality, the SCO also sends its staff for courses and upgrading to ensure the team is at its best. Actively participating in the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy programmes — by sharing and also participating in a variety of professional courses — enable the staff of the SCO to learn from other like-minded leaders in their respective fields.



Keeping up with technology, the SCO also leverages on social media and applications (apps) to attract the young and technology-savvy music lovers. The

SCO engages, interacts and informs potential tech-savvy concertgoers via the Internet, SCO app and other social-media platforms. Online bookings for SCO concert tickets have been increasing steadily, making this one of the most popular outreach channels. The SCO app offers free music downloads and is well-received by the SCO following and Chinese music enthusiasts in Singapore and beyond. The social-media platform has impacted and developed audiences, and showcased the orchestra's repertoire in the national and international arenas.

Within the SCO, there is a business development (BD) department that constantly seeks to expand the list of partners and sponsors. It is essential to ensure funds are managed well and sponsors are well taken care of. SCO is the top three largest national arts companies, which attained the Institution of Public Character (IPC) status in Singapore, alongside the Singapore Symphony Orchestra and the Esplanade. Fundraising efforts go beyond financial gains to ensure a greater and positive impact. Impact in the form of "value" is the key to non-profit organisations such as the SCO. Thus, the BD's role in the SCO is also to ensure, entrust, and engage with social impact and outcomes for the donors, sponsors and partners.

As the orchestra was given the Singapore Conference Hall to call its home in 2001 and has remained in the premise till today, it also generates income through rental of its studios, concert hall and office spaces. The income goes towards upgrading and maintenance of the facilities. One of the highlights is the acoustics of the concert hall. The SCO has invested in upgrading projects that will refine the architecture and acoustics, ensuring its standards and technology are on par with international standards.

Life

In our conversation, Terence shared some advice. He picked three out of seven habits from *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* by the author Stephen Covey.

- Begin with the end in mind
- Put first things first
- Think win-win

Terence won the 1st Prize of the er-hu senior category in the 1985 National Music Competition and was then invited by the Singapore Youth Orchestra (SYO) to tour the UK as a soloist. He played the cello with the Conway Civic



Orchestra during his college education in USA. He is also an active participant and speaker to many arts management conferences, lectures, workshops, orchestra management meetings and arts market overseas. He has presented papers and attended conferences in numerous countries including USA, UK, China, New Zealand, Australia, Canada, Hungary, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan and Korea.

A former commando in the Singapore Armed Forces, Terence is a “casual-competitive” participant in at least 10 to 12 marathon, biathlon and triathlon races a year. He runs almost daily, even when he is overseas, and even in winter.

Of his most important priorities is that family is first. Terence is married with three children — an older daughter and two younger sons. This is a family of athletes. His two sons are also sportsmen, taking on their father's footsteps — they, too, participate in their own race events. Terence's other passions in music and sports are driving forces that catalyse his role as a father, husband, musician, manager and a role model for his children. As he shared towards the end of the coffee session:



Age slows me down. Running speeds me up!

Editor's special note on photographer Pate Eng: I thank Pate Eng for all the photos by him in this special feature. A Singaporean photographer based in New York, Pate Eng is currently a staff photographer for Ralph Lauren. My classmate in design studies at NAFA, Pate went on to study photography in Sydney, Australia. Ambitious but not impossible, he established his career in the highly competitive New York City in the early 2000s. Pate has travelled extensively around the world for his photography, except for two continents left on his bucket list: Africa and South America. He hopes to achieve this feat within ten years. We wish him good luck!

ACADEMICIANS

This section presents the essays of the research interests and practices of faculty members of the local tertiary institutions, evidencing the rigour of arts and art education in Singapore for the training of future artists and managers. Academicians here do venture out of the classroom to participate in the real world and document their findings that we might eventually have a more complete resource on arts and art education in this country.

Music in Singapore Since the 1960s: A Personal Account

Bernard TAN

Professor Bernard Tan has been an invaluable resource for educational institutions as well as the country. A scientist and composer, Professor Tan reflects on his involvement with pioneer projects such as the Esplanade, Yong Siew Toh Conservatory and various music groups. His tireless attention to helping the country develop a world-class arts centre and conservatory is an inspiration.

I have been privileged to have been closely associated with many key events in the development of classical music in Singapore since the 1960s, when I was still a student. The development of music in Singapore in earlier eras, and particularly during the colonial period, has been amply covered by Phan Ming Yen,¹ Jun Zubillaga-Pow² and Eugene Dairianathan.³ In this essay, I will draw upon my personal experiences as a listener, musician/composer and member of various music-related boards and committees to sketch a hopefully coherent picture of events in which I was privileged to participate, and then comment on the current state of musical affairs in Singapore and venture my hopes for the future.

1 Phan, M.Y. (2014), "From a 'Pioneer Town' to a 'Cosmopolitan City': Music from 1866 to 1899", in J. Zubillaga-Pow & C.K. Ho (eds.), *Singapore Soundscape*, National Library Board, Singapore.

2 Zubillaga-Pow, J. (2014), "Western Classical Music: A Metahistory", in J. Zubillaga-Pow & C.K. Ho (eds.), *Singapore Soundscape*, National Library Board, Singapore.

3 Dairianathan, E. (2005), *A Narrative History of Music in Singapore*, National Arts Council, Singapore.

Colonial Singapore

In post-war colonial Singapore in the 1950s and 1960s, there was actually a fairly lively musical scene. The presence of a large British military expatriate community — many of these expatriates trained in Western classical music as performers or had a keen appreciation of such music — was certainly a major factor. Several Singaporean musicians were beginning to return from their overseas musical training, and a number of them made a considerable impact on the musical scene. Two of the Singapore-based musicians who were among the earliest to commit themselves to a performing career were the pianists Lee Kum Sing and Yu Chun Yee, both of whom have become highly respected and internationally known pedagogues. Bass-baritone Choo Hwee Lim, singer/pianist/conductor Benjamin Khoo and conductor Paul Abisheganaden also returned to Singapore during this period and each of them made their own major contributions to the musical scene.

The fact that Singapore was a major stopover for airliners flying from Europe to Australia also ensured that musicians of international renown would give a recital in Singapore en route to Australia. Amongst the great artists who did stop by were: Benjamin Britten and Peter Pears, Julius Katchen, Eugene Istomin, William Warfield and Ruggiero Ricci. Most of these concerts were held in the venerable Victoria Memorial Hall, the predecessor of today's Victoria Concert Hall. This was then a single-level auditorium with no air-conditioning, so all its doors were left open during concerts, but I don't remember that extraneous noises were a major problem. Perhaps the traffic at Empress Place was not quite as heavy as it is today.

Many of these concerts were presented by the Singapore Musical Society, and I would go along to the booking office at the Robinson's department store at Raffles Place and as a student member, buy a ticket for a concert at the princely sum of S\$1 (considered a large amount in those days). The Singapore Musical Society also ran its own orchestra and choir, with personnel drawn from both the expatriate and local communities. Paul Abisheganaden founded the Singapore Chamber Ensemble to provide a completely home-grown alternative to the Singapore Musical Society, which tended to be dominated by expatriates.

What were orchestral standards like in those far-off days? With members of the orchestras drawn from the ranks of mainly whatever enthusiastic amateur musicians there were in the expatriate and local communities, and wind players largely from the military bands present in Singapore, to be honest, standards were somewhat uneven and patchy. And when the British military community started withdrawing

from Singapore in the late 1960s and 1970s, the lack of musicians for orchestras became acute. Orchestral activity virtually came to a standstill.

Independent Singapore

However, after independence in 1965, valiant souls were hard at work to remedy the situation, and the Singapore National Orchestra (SNO) was inaugurated with a concert at the National Theatre on 13 September 1970. Sponsored by the National Theatre Trust, the SNO had Israeli conductor and long-time friend of Singapore, Shalom Ronly-Riklis, as its Music Director and Singapore composer and conductor Leong Yoon Pin as Resident Conductor. However, the SNO had a relatively short life, and further developments in the orchestral arena were not to take place till the late 1970s. Indeed, four critical developments in the musical and performing arts life of Singapore took place over a span of 25 years, which were to forever reshape the musical and performing arts landscape of the nation:

1. The inauguration of the Singapore Festival of Arts (later known as the Singapore Arts Festival) in 1977.
2. The founding of the current Singapore Symphony Orchestra (SSO) in 1978 (there was at least one other orchestra with the same name in previous decades).
3. The opening of the national performing arts centre, i.e., Esplanade — Theatres on the Bay, in 2002.
4. The establishment of a full-fledged music conservatory at the National University of Singapore in 2003.

While these four events covered a span of 25 years or so, the first two events, the Festival of Arts and the SSO's founding, were very close together in time, and the second two events, the Esplanade and the Conservatory, also occurred close together in time. This is purely coincidental, as the gestation of the Esplanade took a very long time, dating back to the 1970s. It is interesting to note the sequence of the establishment of the three "national" institutions — the orchestra, the concert hall and the conservatory. One could have postulated a more logical sequence where the conservatory was established first, to train local musicians. The concert hall would then follow, to provide a performing venue for them, and finally, once a corpus of

well-trained musicians had been created, a professional symphony orchestra could then be founded.

In fact the sequence in Singapore was the exact opposite: orchestra first, then concert hall, then conservatory! Historical events, of course, seldom follow a neat and logical sequence, and it is also interesting to note that each of these three national musical institutions was championed by the Deputy Prime Minister of Singapore in office at the time: the SSO was of course founded by Dr Goh Keng Swee; the Esplanade with its concert hall and theatre was strongly championed for 25 years by Mr Ong Teng Cheong; and the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory was the brainchild of Dr Tony Tan Keng Yam.

The Singapore Festival of Arts

The inaugural Singapore Festival of Arts in 1977 was a relatively modest affair and was in fact structured as a performance competition for local musical groups. The genesis and development of the Festival have been comprehensively chronicled by Venka Purushothaman.⁴ Its initial sponsors were the Young Musicians' Society, an organisation with close links to the Ministry of Education, and Mobil Singapore, which provided most of the sponsorship. The then Public Relations Manager of Mobil, John Lim, provided much of the initial impetus for the Festival. In 1978, the Ministry of Culture was brought into the Festival, with Mobil still as sponsor, and my long association with the Festival dates from 1978 when I joined one of the Festival's many committees.

One has to admit that the first decade of the Festival was uneven in quality, but by the late 1980s, the artistic direction (first under Liew Chin Choy and then under Goh Ching Lee) became more focused and confident. The Festival was a bi-annual affair, and achieved reasonable success in its aim of providing something for everyone — blockbusters such as major orchestras and dance companies for the general audience, arts performances specifically for children, and a small but significant number of experimental productions. New works were commissioned, from both Singapore and international groups, and the Festival gained a reputation for its artistic credibility.

⁴ Purushothaman, Venka (2007), *Making visible the invisible: three decades of the Singapore Arts Festival*, National Arts Council, Singapore.

In 1999, the Festival was combined with the Asian Performing Arts Festival and became an annual affair. I had the privilege of chairing the Arts Festival's Steering Committee for a number of years, working with Artistic Director Goh Ching Lee on maximising the limited budget of the Festival to reach as many people as possible. The recent announcement of the formation of a new company to manage the Arts Festival is a development that could allow the Festival to develop in new directions. This new incarnation of the Festival should enable it to remain a key event in Singapore's arts calendar, amidst the many new challenges from new performing venues such as those in Marina Bay Sands and Resorts World Singapore.

The Singapore Symphony Orchestra

I have given a detailed personal account of the founding of the Singapore Symphony Orchestra (SSO) by Dr Goh Keng Swee in 1978 elsewhere.⁵ Dr Goh, the architect of Singapore's economic development, played a pivotal role in the transformation of Singapore's performing arts life from a low level of amateurism to the fully professional status which the SSO, the Singapore Chinese Orchestra (SCO), the Singapore Dance Theatre (SDT), and several theatre companies such as TheatreWorks, Wild Rice and the Singapore Repertory Theatre, enjoy today.

Dr Goh's very conscious and deliberate decision to quickly establish the SSO was viable only because of his firm belief that Singapore needed a professional orchestra of high standards, and his special status in the Cabinet which enabled him to push this risky project to a successful conclusion. From an initial meeting that I had with Dr Goh in late 1977 at the suggestion of Tan Boon Teik (Attorney-General of Singapore then), we were able to establish the orchestra from scratch, first as a legal entity in mid-1978, and then as a real performing ensemble at its inaugural concert in January 1979.

There is absolutely no question that the founding of the SSO was a watershed event for the arts in Singapore, not only paving the way for professional groups like the SCO and the SDT, but enabling live classical symphonic music to be an important part of the fabric of Singapore's cultural life. This was deeply appreciated not only

5 Tan, B.T.G. (2012), "Goh Keng Swee's Cultural Contributions and the Making of the Singapore Symphony Orchestra", in E. Chew & C.G. Kwa (eds.), *Goh Keng Swee: A Legacy of Public Service*, World Scientific, Singapore.

by the music lover, but also by the talented young musician who might have been wondering whether classical music could provide a basis for a legitimate profession in a city where only skills and talents of high financial value seemed to matter.

Esplanade — Theatres on the Bay

Another Deputy Prime Minister, Ong Teng Cheong, was the prime mover behind Singapore's performing arts complex, Esplanade — Theatres on the Bay, which since its opening in 2002 has transformed the performing arts calendar beyond recognition. Ong Teng Cheong's vision, like Dr Goh's, had a long gestation, dating from his early days in government as Acting Minister for Culture in 1977, when he requested the Land Office to reserve a plot of reclaimed land next to the historic city centre for a possible future performing arts centre.

It was only after 1985, when he had been appointed Second Deputy Prime Minister that he judged that he had enough clout to make a move on the performing arts centre. He was by then also Secretary-General of the National Trades Union Congress (NTUC), and a number of us involved in the performing arts were summoned to a meeting in his office at the Conference Hall on Shenton Way. Among those attending this meeting were Choo Hoey, Music Director of the SSO, Tisa Ng, General Manager of the SSO, and Tommy Koh, Ambassador-at-Large, and myself. I do not have records of this meeting, which could have been sometime in 1987 or 1988, but judging from those who attended the meeting, it was clear that Mr Ong had in mind the SSO as an anchor tenant of the planned performing arts centre.

A Steering Committee to guide the development of the performing arts centre was then formed, with Ong Teng Cheong as Chairman, and with those who had attended the meeting, plus several senior government officials, as members. The basic specifications for the centre were soon drawn up, and included a 2,000-seat Lyric Theatre which could be used for opera and musical theatre, a 1,800-seat concert hall for symphonic concerts (and which was to be the new home of the SSO), and a number of smaller venues, including a 750-seat Medium Theatre, a 400-seat Adaptable Theatre, and a 200-seat Developmental Studio (i.e., a black box).

An international competition was launched to select an architectural design team, and an exhibition was mounted to display the shortlisted designs at the annexe to the Ministry of National Development, which aroused considerable public interest. The eventual winner of the competition was a consortium comprising

internationally renowned architects Michael Wilford and Partners and the Singapore firm, DP Architects Pte Ltd. The theatre consultants were UK-based Theatre Projects Consultants, led by David Staples.

Most important was the search for the acoustical consultants for the project, as this would determine the acoustical qualities of the performing spaces and of the concert hall in particular. The three shortlisted consultants were Artec Consultants (Russell Johnson), Lawrence Kirkegaard and Associates, and Jaffe Associates.

In 1989, as the search for an acoustical consultant began, it happened that the long-delayed plans of the National University of Singapore (NUS) to build a large auditorium suitable for its convocation ceremonies as well as for concerts came to life (this project became the current University Cultural Centre). The NUS Vice-Chancellor, Prof Lim Pin, asked me to initiate a search for an acoustic consultant. My thoughts turned to Prof Harold Marshall of Auckland University, who had been most helpful (as had been his former student, Ong Boon Lay then in the Public Works Department or PWD) during our planning for the renovation in 1980 of the Victoria Memorial Hall, which transformed it into the Victoria Concert Hall. I decided to contact Prof Marshall who suggested that we visit his latest project, the Segerstrom Centre for the Arts in Orange County, California.

At the same time, the Steering Committee wanted to begin looking at concert halls and planned a trip in November 1989 for SSO Conductor Choo Hoey and I to visit the Oslo Concert Hall in Norway, and the Gothenburg Concert Hall in Sweden. I therefore went first to California and visited the Segestrom Centre, then flew to New York to connect to a flight for Oslo. My connecting flight was delayed by bad weather, so I almost missed my connection to Oslo and had to sprint to the gate to board the plane! The Oslo Hall's acoustician was Jordan Akustic, and Choo Hoey and I were fortunate to catch the 70th Anniversary concert of the Oslo Philharmonic and hear an excellent performance of Mahler's Resurrection Symphony.

After the concert, I went backstage to speak to the conductor, Mariss Jansons, to say how pleased we in Singapore were to receive him and the St. Petersburg Symphony Orchestra for the 1990 Singapore Arts Festival. He then promptly told us that he was sorry the trip was off because of perestroika; the Orchestra was now free to make its own decisions and had decided not to go to Singapore! I had to make a frantic phone call to Singapore to tell my Arts Festival colleagues about this sudden change of plans!

Between January and February 1991, just as the bombing phase of the first Iraq War was underway, a delegation led by me, and which included Choo Hoey, Foo Meng Liang (Deputy Secretary of MITA — Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts), Khor Kok Wah (Deputy Director of MITA), Goh Ching Lee (Assistant Director of MITA) and Tay Yew Whatt and Tan Thiam Lye of the PWD, made a two-week-long trip to the US, Canada and Mexico to look at the most important halls of the three shortlisted consultants.⁶ This extended trip took us to the Morton Myerson Center in Dallas (Artec), the Calgary Performing Arts Centre (Artec), the Portland Performing Arts Center (Kirkegaard), the Ordway Hall in St Paul (Kirkegaard), the *Sala de Conciertos Nezahualcōyotl* of the National University of Mexico (Jaffe), the Wortham Theatre Center in Houston (Jaffe), as well as the Shepherd School of Music at Rice University in Houston.

Every hall we visited had its particular merits, but we were eventually won over by the Artec halls, and particularly by the Myerson Center's concert hall with its reverberation chambers. Artec and Russell Johnson were thus chosen as our acoustic consultants. Russell Johnson was famous for his conservative approach to concert hall acoustics using the tried and tested "shoe-box" principle. He had also developed a system of massive reverberation chambers placed above the main concert hall space, which could be connected to the main hall and thus vary its reverberation time significantly. Other shorter trips, notably to Japan and Taiwan, were made to visit other performing arts centres, but this US/Canada/Mexico trip was our longest and most memorable.

In 1992, the Steering Committee set up the Singapore Arts Centre Company (SAC),⁷ which was to oversee the building of the Centre and take over its operations when the Centre was completed. The founding Directors of the Board of the SAC Company were Robert Iau (Chairman), Col Ho Meng Kit (later succeeded by Tan Tee How), and myself. The Company set up its offices initially in an office suite in the Marina Centre close to the worksite, but later moved into temporary buildings on the worksite itself. The Steering Committee also set up three Advisory Groups to facilitate its work — the Design Advisory and Aesthetics Advisory Group chaired by noted architect Raymond Woo, the Commercial Advisory Group chaired by

6 MITA (1991), *Report of Study Visit to Arts Centers of USA/Mexico/Canada 28 Jan-9 Feb 91*, Singapore.

7 Singapore Arts Centre Co. (1997), *Annual Report 95/96*, Singapore.

Robert Iau, and the Users' Advisory Group which was to act as a bridge between the Steering Committee and the performing arts community, chaired by Tommy Koh and with me as Deputy Chairman.

In 1993, Ong Teng Cheong became President of the Republic of Singapore and could not officially be a member of the Steering Committee, whose chairmanship was passed on to George Yeo, then Minister for Information and the Arts. Ong Teng Cheong's deep passion for the project never diminished, and he continued to attend meetings of the Steering Committee and to play an active role in the shaping of the Centre as the Advisor to the committee.

In that same year, some months after he had become President and hence was no longer a member of the Cabinet, a key Cabinet meeting at which the budget for the Centre, which exceeded S\$800 million, was discussed. Predictably, fears surfaced that the public would find this sum too large to be justifiable for a project that might have been perceived to only benefit a minority of the population. George Yeo was out of the country and thus was not able to attend the Cabinet meeting at which he would undoubtedly have stoutly defended the whole project.

As it happened, the decision was taken to reduce the budget for the project from over S\$800 million to around S\$500 million. This meant that of the three major parts of the Centre, i.e., the Theatre, the Concert Hall, and the three smaller performing spaces, one part would have to be eliminated. The Users' Advisory Group was to hold meetings with the arts community to determine which part should be eliminated. However, Tommy Koh and I agreed that we should keep the Theatre and the Concert Hall, as there might not be another chance to build such major performing spaces in the future. Our task was to persuade the Singapore performing arts community that this was a sensible decision, but for many local groups, the loss of the smaller performing spaces, which were a much better match for their requirements, was very hard to accept. 20 years later, I believe that our decision has been vindicated, as the Theatre and Concert Hall have vaulted Singapore into the international performing arena, and large ensembles such as symphony orchestras, ballet companies, opera companies, and musical theatre companies can perform in Singapore without any performance compromises or limitations.

One issue that arose early in the planning of the Concert Hall was whether there should be a pipe organ in the Hall. Initially, no provision had been made for a pipe organ, but I and a number of others lobbied vigorously for such a pipe organ to be included in the Hall, and after making a presentation to the Steering

Committee on the need for such an organ in terms of its importance in key works of the symphonic and choral repertoire, the Committee accepted that a pipe organ should indeed be an integral part of the Concert Hall. The organ builder, Klais, who had built the organ in the Victoria Concert Hall in the 1980s, was appointed to build the new pipe organ, which has enabled works such as Mahler's *Symphony of a Thousand* to be performed with its complete orchestration.

As of today, the shortage of smaller performing spaces has been somewhat alleviated by the Drama Centre at the National Library, the Yong Siew Toh Concert Hall, and the Drama Theatre, Concert Hall and Studio Theatre at the School of the Arts. The current extensive renovation of the Victoria Theatre/Concert Hall complex will yield a mid-sized theatre and concert hall of the highest standards that will be new and important venues for Singapore performing arts groups.

Ten years after its opening in 2003, it is abundantly clear that the Esplanade — Theatres on the Bay has become not only a prime focus for the arts in Singapore, but also a place where all members of the public feel comfortable and very much at home, and where Singapore performing ensembles of all styles, cultures and genres can find a space for both formal and informal performances which attract a wide variety of audiences.

The Yong Siew Toh Conservatory

The Yong Siew Toh Conservatory at the National University of Singapore (NUS) also had a lengthy genesis. In the early years of the SSO, a report proposing the setting up of a conservatory, with the SSO musicians as the instrumental teachers, was produced, but did not result in anything concrete. In 1998, Tan Chin Nam chaired a committee to look into the future of the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA) and LaSalle College of the Arts and in particular their future degree-granting status. The report⁸ that the committee produced came to the conclusion that, as far as the performing arts was concerned, it would be better to start from scratch with a new degree-granting institution linked to the National University of Singapore.

Subsequently, under the direction of Dr Tony Tan, then Deputy Prime Minister and Minister in charge of NUS, and Vice-Chancellor Prof Lim Pin set up an NUS Steering Committee in September 1998, appointing me as Chairman of the Committee. The Steering Committee's brief was to plan a new multi-disciplinary

8 MITA (1998), *Creative Singapore, A Renaissance Nation in the Knowledge Age: Report of the Committee to Upgrade LaSalle and NAFA*, Singapore.

performing arts institution that would grant degrees in music, theatre, dance and even film.⁹ It was envisaged that the institution, provisionally known as the Institute of the Arts (ITA), would start initially with majors in music and theatre, and build upon these disciplines to establish dance and film majors in a later phase.

Planning for the ITA thus proceeded on the assumption that the institution would be multi-disciplinary, and a Singaporean Director should be appointed who would oversee the overall development of the ITA, with specialist Directors in charge of each discipline who would be internationally recruited. Members of the Steering Committee made visits to arts schools and colleges such as the Hong Kong Academy of Performing Arts, the Victorian College of the Arts, the Victoria University of Wellington, the Tisch School of the Arts, the Peabody Conservatory in Baltimore, and the Departments of Music and Drama at Stanford University.

Our visit to Peabody Conservatory in March 1999 to learn about Peabody's music programme and to initiate a possible collaboration (as Peabody was part of Johns Hopkins University with which NUS already had close links) was particularly fruitful. I met with the Peabody Director Dr Robert Sirota, who was extremely helpful and who generously offered his assistance. I then recommended that Dr Tony Tan should visit Peabody at the earliest opportunity, which he did shortly after my own visit. Dr Tan's visit to Peabody not only underscored the very high standards of Peabody and its eminent suitability as a partner for NUS, but also highlighted the cost and complexity of maintaining a music conservatory programme with its one-to-one tuition inherent to all music teaching.

The decision was therefore made that the new NUS institution would focus only on music and be linked initially to Peabody, which as it turned out was a wise move enabling a very quick startup of the new NUS Conservatory, as the ITA had now morphed into. Like Peabody, the NUS Conservatory (as its name implied) would concentrate on training instrumental performers at the highest standards, accepting the best students from Singapore and the region.

During 1999 and 2000, a small team which included the Peabody Dean of Admissions David Lane, Tan Hang Cheong and Constance Wong from the Ministry of Education, and I, made visits to conservatories and music colleges in countries in the region such as Thailand, Vietnam, the Philippines and China to gauge the quantity and quality of musical talent at these places. Our objective was to assess

9 Tan, B. (1999), *Status Report on ITA*, NUS, Singapore.

whether the NUS Conservatory had a chance of attracting sufficient numbers of young and talented musicians to Singapore. After our team's report was written, which strongly concurred that the talent was there and that we could attract enough of them, the irrevocable decision to go ahead with the NUS Conservatory was made.

One of my last duties as Chairman of the Steering Committee before handing over to the new Director of the NUS Conservatory, Steven Baxter, was to finalise the text of the legal agreement¹⁰ with Peabody for the establishment of the Singapore Conservatory of Music, as it was then to be known. The formal agreement between NUS and Peabody was signed in November 2001 — just after the September 11 events! Steven Baxter arrived in NUS to assume duties as Director of the Conservatory just a few days before the 1st of January 2002. It must be to Steven Baxter's credit that he was able to admit the first batch of Conservatory students in August 2003, starting from an *ab initio* position with zero resources.

Since then, the obvious success of the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory (as it is now known) has clearly justified all of the investment in terms of funding, attention and resources which were poured into it in its initial years. Now clearly established as a leading and trend-setting conservatory in this part of the world, under the leadership of its current Director, Bernard Lanskey, it continues to consolidate its achievements and attract the admiration of many in the world of conservatory education.

Singapore's Musical Scene Today

At this point in Singapore's musical history, 34 years after the founding of the SSO, and ten years after the launching of the Esplanade and the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory, it is clear that Singapore's musical life has moved to a new level of activity and quality far removed from what was in existence at the time of the founding of the SSO. In 1978, the SSO was a completely novel phenomenon — a fully professional performing ensemble whose members were paid wages comparable to other professionals in society, and whose members could devote all of their energies and attention to honing their skills and working with their fellow professionals to make their ensemble as good as it could possibly be.

In contrast, prior to the SSO, orchestras in Singapore from the immediate post-war years, had been purely amateur groups, dependent on whoever happened

10 NUS—Johns Hopkins University (2001), *Agreement for the Establishment of the Singapore Conservatory of Music*, Singapore.

to be available irrespective of their instrumental skills, as performing talent was so thin on the ground. The best orchestras in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s were made up of a motley crowd of individuals whose instrumental skills ranged from the “so-so” to the abysmal, and who could get away with attending just the last couple of rehearsals before a concert as their conductors were so desperate to have the benefit of their (dubious) talents.

Today, the musical situation is vastly different. In particular, within the last ten years or so, the local standards of performance on virtually every orchestral instrument has improved so dramatically that Singapore is now able to support several orchestras of quality that are largely composed of non-professionals. The Orchestra of the Music Makers is the newest of these orchestras, and it has already garnered much respect for taking on the blockbusters of the orchestral repertoire such as Mahler's *Resurrection*, and has performed to acclaim at the Cheltenham Festival. The Singapore National Youth Orchestra has also received much praise for its performances at home and overseas, while the Philharmonic Orchestra has progressed to works such as the *Rite of Spring*, *Petrushka* and the complete Beethoven Piano Concertos. The Braddell Heights Symphony Orchestra is also looking towards more ambitious programmes under its new leadership, and a brand new orchestra, the Metropolitan Festival Orchestra, has just been launched.

Chamber concerts and solo recitals are now regular events in the musical calendar, and indeed many of the chamber concerts which I have attended would compare well with similar concerts in major cities in the USA and Europe. One interesting phenomenon is the surprising number of young conductors which has emerged in Singapore, some of whom are now making their mark on the international scene, such as Darrell Ang, Chan Tze Law, Jason Lai, Joshua Tan Kang Ming, Adrian Tan and Wong Kah Chun.

How did this comparatively recent upsurge of musical talent and activity in Singapore of such a uniformly high quality come about? The emergence of a first-rate Conservatory in Singapore must have undoubtedly contributed to the overall raising of musical standards. The increasing numbers of internationally renowned musicians and ensembles performing in Singapore due to the presence of a world-class performing arts centre must also be given credit for the awareness of international musical benchmarks. The 34 years of the SSO's yearly seasons of musical programmes of consistently increasing variety and quality must also have contributed to the raising of standards. Some will point to the influence of YouTube

as a means of enabling anyone in the world to compare and match their musical standards with the best performers in the world.

In the field of musical composition, there was a time when I feared that the current aging generation of Singapore composers would not be replaced by a younger generation of composers. This fear has evaporated, as a younger generation of composers, such as Kelly Tang, Ho Chee Kong, Joyce Koh, Er Yenn Chwen, Zechariah Goh Toh Chai and Tan Chan Boon, consolidate their position in Singapore's musical community as a solidly credible group of composers gaining international recognition. Even more encouraging is a younger group of composers in their 20s and 30s emerging, with a young composer in his 20s such as Chen Zhangyi rapidly building his international reputation.

Whatever the reasons, the musical renaissance that we are enjoying in Singapore now augurs well for the musical future of Singapore. It is clear to me that Singapore, with all its tremendously talented and active young performers, conductors and composers, will be well placed to be the musical hub of the region. This will enable us to keep pace with the East Asian nations such as Japan, Korea and China which have given a new lease of life to Western classical music, and which are creating new musical perspectives uniting East and West. As we move into such an exciting and challenging musical future, we will surely see the emergence of a distinct Singapore musical identity that will make an invaluable contribution to the cultural heritage of our nation.

Bernard TAN

Professor Bernard Tan joined the National University of Singapore (NUS) in 1968 as a Lecturer in Physics and served first as Vice-Dean and then as Dean of the Faculty of Science at NUS for 12 years from 1985 to 1997. He has also been Head of Physics, Acting Head of Music, and Associate Director of the Centre for Musical Activities and Dean of Students. Other NUS appointments held by Professor Tan are Chairman of the Centre for Remote Imaging, Sensing and Processing (CRISP) and the Singapore Synchrotron Light Source (SSLS). He obtained his Doctor of Philosophy in Electronics, Oxford University, UK and Fellow of Trinity College of Music London (FTCL) in Composition, among many qualifications.

Professor Tan's current research interests are in microwave solid-state properties and devices, digital musical analysis and synthesis, and directional perception of multiple sound sources. He has published over 85 papers in international peer-reviewed journals. His compositions include a symphony, three overtures, a piano concerto, a violin concerto, a guitar concerto, a cello concerto, four sinfoniettas and many choral works. He is the Chairman of the Orchestra of the Music Makers, Cadi Scientific and Keppel Credit Union and sits on the boards of the School of the Arts, Keppel Telecommunications & Transportation and NUS Technology Holdings. He also sat on the boards of Keppel Corporation and the Singapore Symphonia Company. He was Chairman of the Singapore Arts Festival Steering Committee and the Singapore Youth Awards Science and Technology Advisory Committee. He was President of the Institute of Physics Singapore and Vice-President of the Singapore National Academy of Science. Professor Tan has been awarded the Public Administration Medal (Silver), the Public Service Medal, the Public Service Star, the Public Service Star (Bar) and *Chevalier dans l'ordre des Palmes Academique*.

Music Education in 21st Century Singapore

Eleanor A. L. TAN and Chee Hoo LUM

Two scholars Dr Eleanor Tan and Assistant Professor Chee Hoo Lum examine the impact of cultural and education policies on music education, and suggest areas which could further advance learning of music in schools and by the community.

The Early Years

Context

It has been almost five decades since Singapore became an independent city-state in 1965. Back then, social and economic exigencies such as high population growth, coupled with high unemployment were the bane of the ruling party, the People's Action Party (PAP). Racial tensions and the destabilising effects of unemployment were palpable problems that the government sought to address. In *The Tasks Ahead: P.A.P.'s Five-Year Plan 1959-1964*, a publication leading up to the 1959 General Election, the government presented its manifesto to tackle the issues of labour, economic development and education. The latter, in particular, would lay the foundation for more sustainable employment in this tumultuous pre-independence period as the country faced political uncertainty and an imminent separation from Malaysia. And in what might be termed as social engineering, the PAP steered its citizens towards the study of languages, mathematics and science, in recognition of "the realities of our economic and social conditions and to the actual needs

of our society”¹. Singapore’s pre-independence years thus witnessed a pragmatic education system that was survival-driven, as its leaders recognised that the people were its natural resource.

Music Education

How was music education regarded amidst the developing economy and paradigm shifts of the educational models in the early 1960s? The importance of music education is undoubtedly a British legacy, and having a General Music Programme as a compulsory component within the general curriculum in the newly emerging nation of Singapore is revealing. As Stead and Lum (2014) observed:

Part of the answer must lie in the British colonial inheritance of teaching Western music through singing ... [W]ithin the British education system, music had been included in the curriculum since the advent of mass education in the late 19th century, initially as a means of inculcating strong moral values in pupils through the singing of hymns and other “worthy” songs.²

This observation dovetails nicely into the multi-cultural rationale given by the Ministry of Education, Singapore, for having music in the classroom as it would be a “strong binding force among children of the various communities so that they can grow up respecting each other’s cultural traits”³. The Ministry’s recognition of music education as a sociological (and political) tool to foster understanding and respect for the different cultures in the early years of Singapore’s independence ensured its intransience in the educational curriculum. Even so, the government’s cultural policy, inclined towards nation-building and inter-racial understanding, left little for personal creativity or inspiration.

1 *The Task Ahead: P.A.P. Five-Year Plan 1959–1964* (1959), Petir, Singapore, p. 7. The significance for its people to study more languages is an obvious one as Singapore is a multi-racial country. And as there was a need to preserve harmony, Malay, Chinese, Tamil and English were made official languages.

2 Stead, P. & Lum, C.H. (2014). “The Development of the General Music Programme in Primary and Secondary Schools”, in J. Zubillaga-Pow & C.K. Ho (eds.), *Singapore Soundscape: Musical Renaissance of a Global City*, National Library Board, Singapore.

3 Ministry of Education (1977), *Draft Music Syllabus for Secondary School*, MOE, Singapore, p. 12.

The Singapore education system thus prescribed music as a compulsory subject within the primary and lower secondary schools, with at least half to an hour a week devoted to music lessons within curriculum time.⁴ These music lessons are taught by music specialists in the secondary schools and typically by generalists within the primary schools. Although there have been many changes over the intervening years, and schools now have more autonomy in the allocation of time to subject areas, this model still forms the basis of music provision in the General Music Programme in the primary and lower secondary school levels.

The Last Decade

Context

This new millennium offers a broader perspective with which to consider Singapore's educational landscape, from its initial survival-driven model, to an efficiency-driven system in the 1970s and 1980s, and an ability-driven model in the 1990s and beyond. As Singapore moved towards a knowledge-based economy, the emphasis of value shifted from production to innovation and creativity.⁵ To meet the challenges of the new century, the government has now recognised that the Humanities could play a significant role in nurturing a creative and entrepreneurial mind, as they provide "multiple lenses to help students understand our world, ... [and] equip students with critical thinking and communication skills as well as global perspectives to become confident persons, active contributors and concerned citizens".⁶ Teachers were encouraged to adopt new pedagogical approaches to engage students and to motivate them to build upon their own experiences to create knowledge. For the child, such approaches as inquiry-based learning and field-based learning would help facilitate the movement from experience to learning, and enable them to take

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- 4 Half-hour music lessons were mandated as early as 1959 in *The Task Ahead*. Appendix 1, p. 14. Singing and music appreciation were the key focuses in these general music classes.
- 5 Goh, C.B. & Gopinathan, S. (2006), *The Development of Education in Singapore Since 1965*. Available from http://siteresources.worldbank.org/EDUCATION/Resources/278200-1121703274255/1439264-1153425508901/Development_Edu_Singapore_draft.pdf [Accessed: 1 August 2013].
- 6 Ministry of Education (2012), *Teaching in the 21st century — Enriching Minds, Engaging Hearts* explains the competencies needed to equip students to become confident in the globalised world. Available from <http://www.moe.gov.sg/media/speeches/2012/05/30/opening-address-by-mr-heng-swee-keat-at-humanities-educators-conference-2012.php> [Accessed: 9 August 2013].

ownership of their learning. To this end, the government invested \$4.9 billion in FY1998 (3% to 4% of GDP) and \$8.7 billion in FY2009 (5% of GDP) in human capital. By 2013, spending on public education is projected to increase by 25% to \$11 billion. The government also gave its assurance that it would re-train and add to the teaching force in order to:

Provide for a more rounded education with greater emphasis on love for learning, appreciation of aesthetics, sports and arts.... Beyond this, MOE may need to build Centres of Excellence, to help schools in areas such as the arts, music and sports development.⁷

50 years hence, this paradigm shift from the earlier survival-driven educational model which instructed its citizens to be uncritical consumers of music, to an education system that seeks to nurture key skills and competencies such as the ability to curate and to synthesise information, to create and innovate, is explicable as its people are, and always will be, Singapore's *only* natural resource. Furthermore, the government's earlier exhortation for its citizens to develop vocational and technical skills was no longer crucial as Singapore developed into a First World economy.

When was the pivotal moment in Singapore's history that transformed this "cultural desert" into a global city for the arts? If one may speculate a response, perhaps the catalyst for change lay in the 1989 Report of the Advisory Council of Culture and the Arts (ACCA). The report criticised the minuscule budget that the government committed to cultural activities in 1987:

... The combined budget for Cultural Affairs Division, National Library and heritage departments was only \$22m or 0.2% of the National Budget. ... [The] Government provided only 38% or 3.5m of the \$9.4m spent on the arts by the Ministry of Community Development's Cultural Affairs Division, National Theatre Trust and Singapore Cultural Foundation. The rest of the funds came from sponsors and other sources.⁸

7 Ministry of Education (2009), *Seizing Opportunities to Build a World Class Education System*. Available from <http://www.moe.gov.sg/media/speeches/2009/02/10/fy-2009-committee-of-supply-de.php> [Accessed: 5 August 2013].

8 Advisory Council of Culture and the Arts (1989). Available from http://www.acsr.sg/advisory_council.aspx [Accessed: 1 July 2013].

Apart from the inadequate facilities and unimaginative use of spaces, the ACCA further noted the absence of systematic introduction to arts and cultural activities, which resulted in poor attendance at arts-related events, and thus recommended the need for a “pool of artistes, arts administrators, arts entrepreneurs, and other professionals” to support greater cultural development in Singapore.⁹ This report led to the establishment of the National Arts Council (NAC) in 1991, National Heritage Board in 1993 and the building of the Esplanade — Theatres on the Bay in 2002, as well as the launch of several arts projects and festivals for the community.¹⁰ In the early years of Independence, the government’s low prioritisation of culture and arts due to the slow developing economy was obviously a factor limiting the growth of cultural activities, and the art and heritage collection in the country.

A decade after the release of the ACCA, the government approved a five-year Renaissance City Project: Culture and the Arts in Renaissance Singapore (RCP I) which outlined the pathway to a renaissance city through the development of Singapore’s cultural “software” capabilities, audience and vibrancy.¹¹ It benchmarked Singapore against such major arts cities as New York, London, Glasgow, and Hong Kong, and utilised comparative indicators of talent pool, arts facilities, arts activities and government funding, to situate Singapore’s cultural evolution since the ACCA Report of 1989. Particularly significant in this new study is the educational imperatives recommended by the committee to set up a comprehensive art education system similar to that for academic and technical education in order to “improve the quality of arts education in the schools and implement an Arts-in-Education programme to allow students to participate in and appreciate performances and exhibitions”; and to “develop a tertiary arts education system”.¹² In addition to the founding of the Singapore Conservatory of Music in 2001, the last recommendation led to increased government funding in support of such private arts institutions as Nanyang Academy

9 *Ibid.*, p. 5.

10 National Arts Council (2013), Report on the Setting up of Infrastructure and Statutory Boards. Available from <http://www.nac.gov.sg/about-us/milestones> [Accessed: 1 July 2013].

11 *Renaissance City Report* (2000), was the first report detailing the policies of the government to create a vibrant arts and culture economy in Singapore. Available from http://www.acsr.sg/PDF/RCP_I.pdf [Accessed: 9 August 2013]. See also Renaissance City Plan III.

12 *Ibid.*, Annex A, pp. 62–63. According to President Tony Tan, the establishment of NUS’ Singapore Conservatory of Music in 2001 (now known as Yong Siew Toh Conservatory or YST) is “part of a wide-ranging strategy to position Singapore as an Asian renaissance city of the 21st century for the arts and culture ... [and is] an affirmation of the government’s ability-driven approach to education”. Available from http://www.nus.edu.sg/music/01i_aboutus_history.html [Accessed: 1 July 2013].

of Fine Arts (NAFA) and LaSalle College of Arts, and to accord them polytechnic-level subsidies and extra funding for facilities and teaching staff.¹³ The RCP I thus offered a compelling argument for the government to fund the art schools, which would in turn germinate talent and creativity, and fuel cultural economics.

The Plan also drew a convincing narrative that early involvement in arts and culture can help define national identity and foster community-building. These recommendations led to the building of infrastructure for primary and secondary schools, enhanced curriculum and pedagogy, and financial assistance for all students, as it is through early education that the benefits of such exposure will endure. The government had ardently acted on the RCP I recommendations and by 2004, Lee Boon Yang declared that since the 1999 RCP I, there has been a 26% increase in the arts groups (from 435 to 549) and a 25% increase in the number of cultural events in Singapore (from 4127 to 5158). It was also committed to building an independent School of the Arts (SOTA) for students between 13 and 18 years old so that they may consider artistic and creative careers.¹⁴ By 2009, the government's contribution to Edusave accounts for each child was \$200 per year for primary students and \$240 for secondary students (MOE 2009). Even so, regardless of positive government intervention, the development of Singapore's cultural "software" capabilities and vibrancy can be sustained only if its people take ownership in the creation or co-creation of the arts, instead of being mere consumers of another's creation. For Singapore to transform into *the* Asian Renaissance City of the 21st century, cultural policies have to evolve quickly to fulfil the needs of her people in this increasingly borderless world, and yet still preserve a deep connectedness with the multi-cultural roots of her forebears. The following sections seek to explicate the Singapore music education scene post-2000.

Music Education

Music education, particularly within the formal government primary and secondary school systems, has seen vast changes over the past decade. Beginning with the

13 NAFA and LaSalle offer degree programmes validated by the Royal College of Music and Goldsmiths' College, respectively. The Yong Siew Toh Conservatory's music curriculum was originally modelled after the Peabody Institute of the Johns Hopkins University, USA.

14 See Ministerial Statement by Dr Lee Boon Yang (Minister then for Information, Communications and the Arts), in Parliament on 13 March 2004. Available from http://www.mita.gov.sg/pressroom/press_0403013.html [Accessed: 8 July 2013].

national General Music Programme syllabus, and with yet another revision underway, the emphasis has gone beyond just learning about musical skills and techniques towards a greater “awareness of and appreciation for music of various cultures and the role of music in daily living ... [and to nurture the] ability for creative expression through music making”.¹⁵ The continuing emphasis on the creation and improvisation of music and the discernment and understanding of “music from various cultures and of various genres”¹⁶ within local, global and glocal perspectives, bodes well for the development of students in their creative, reflective and critical thinking skills. Additionally, collaboration and teamwork helps them to engage and be cognizant of the complexities in their current sound- and land-scapes, to “enhance the development of 21st century competencies ... to thrive in a fast-changing and highly-connected world”.¹⁷ As an example, group music composition is often encouraged as a general music activity. The activity allows students to experience collaborating as a group to create a simple rhythmic and/or melodic work of their own through particular stimuli, taken perhaps from a characteristic of a world music culture or ideas linking to their musical heritage and culture. Students are also encouraged to explore and experiment on a host of instruments available in the music classroom, including the use of music apps on iPads during the composition process and in the performance of their compositions.

The emphasis on music education is further concretised by the Ministry of Education’s commitment to holistic education by (i) investing in infrastructure and facilities such as providing primary schools with two Programme for Active Learning (PAL) rooms, a performing arts studio, a dance studio and a band room; (ii) the establishment of the Singapore Teachers’ Academy for the aRts (STAR) to support and strengthen in-service training and professional development of music and visual art teachers; and (iii) the movement towards “single-subject” specialisation for music and art teachers.¹⁸ Current music and visual art primary school teachers who have not been fully trained to specialise in music and art have also been requested to

15 Ministry of Education (2008), *General Music Programme: Primary/Secondary*, p. 2. Available from <http://www.moe.gov.sg/education/syllabuses/aesthetics-health-and-moral-education/files/general-music-programme.pdf> [Accessed: 8 July 2013].

16 *Ibid.*

17 MOE to Enhance Learning of 21st Century Competencies and Strengthen Art, Music and Physical Education. Available from <http://www.moe.gov.sg/media/press/2010/03/moe-to-enhance-learning-of-21s.php> [Accessed: 5 August 2013].

18 *Ibid.*

attend full-time Advanced Diploma courses at the National Institute of Education (NIE) to upgrade their musical skills and knowledge, as well as develop facilitative skills in interacting and dialoguing about issues on culture, heritage, identity and socio-emotional values through the arts.

Outside curriculum time, many schools will have bands, choirs, Chinese or Western orchestras, and a wide range of music clubs and ensembles for students to participate in. These are taught by external music instructors who are hired by the school for these specific purposes. Principals are given the autonomy to hire external vendors to teach within the music curriculum if there is a lack of teacher expertise, or if the school should decide to develop certain music specialisations or programmes within its purview. The National Arts Council's Arts Education Programme (NAC-AEP) which aims to "connect the arts community with the education sector and supports the professional development of artists" further provides a wide network for schools to tap into local arts expertise to enhance their arts education programmes. Given an annual grant of \$15,000, schools can tap into the NAC-AEP for their schools' assembly programmes, to bring their students out for performances at external venues or have short-term to long-term arts programmes (including artist-in-school schemes) where these can be customised in collaboration with practising Singapore artists to cater to student needs (NAC, 2010).¹⁹

Should the student intend to pursue music at a higher level beyond the general music curriculum, there are also subject specialisation choices such as the Music Elective Programme (MEP) and the possibility of pursuing music at GCE "O" and "A" levels, and more recently, an International Baccalaureate (IB) programme available as an intensive course at SOTA.

Tertiary institutions offering music performance programmes include LaSalle, NAFA, Singapore Raffles Music College (SRMC) and YST. All students specialise in Western instruments, with the exception of NAFA and SRMC, which also teach Chinese instrumental studies. In addition to diploma and degree studies, NAFA also offers a pre-service Diploma in Music Teaching programme.²⁰ NAFA's revised curriculum from 2013 requires students to enrol for such common foundation

19 The National Arts Council's Arts Education Programme (NAC-AEP) allows for customised arts items to be offered by artists to students in the local schools with grant subsidies from the TOTE Board. Available from <http://www.nac.gov.sg/education/arts-education-in-singapore/programmes/national-arts-council---arts-education-programme> [Accessed: 6 September 2013].

20 NAFA music teacher trainees study three years for the Diploma in Music Teaching certificate, and progress towards a one-year Diploma in Music Education certificate from the National Institute of Education.

modules as Key Skills in Learning and Performing and Fundamentals of Performing Arts, as well as to elect cross-disciplinary modules from within eight departments.²¹ The NIE offers music education programmes at the diploma, degree and postgraduate levels, preparing pre-service and in-service teachers to teach at primary, secondary, or junior-college level.

Research in Music Education

For music education to evolve with the changing times, there must be corresponding research to provide contextual understanding and evidence to support changing paradigms in teacher training and music learning.

In Singapore, music education has come to be placed at the foreground of local educational considerations, with many local and international conferences on music teaching, learning and research being organised by educational institutions. These include the 11th Cultural Diversity in Music Education Conference in January 2012 and the 9th Asia-Pacific Symposium in Music Education Research in July 2013, both organised by the UNESCO-NIE Centre for Arts Research in Education (CARE); Arts in Education Forums (SOTA 2010, 2012); New Asian Imaginations Symposiums (NAFA 2008, 2011); and the Performer's Voice Symposiums (YST 2009, 2012).

Still, an often repeated chime in the discussion on music education is that educators need to take stock of documentation through research that has transpired over the last few decades to inform teachers, leaders and policy-makers about successes, challenges and gaps to better negotiate further and future phases involving this triangle of concerns: music, education and research in Singapore. As an example, a research study by Lum²² which examines nineteen community-nominated exemplary local arts educators/artists working in early childhood, and primary and secondary settings has interestingly revealed these arts educators/artists' inclination towards pedagogies and practices that are very much in line with the development of 21st century competencies in students. In terms of designing and implementation of curriculum, these arts educators/artists tended towards an instructional framework that does not constrain students' expressivity and creativity, but serves to cull the creative processes from the students, allowing for them to establish personal meanings

21 Students also have to register for Academy requirements which include Singapore Arts Scene, Language Arts and Career Skills.

22 Lum, C.H. & Dairianathan, E. (2013), "Mapping Musical Learning: An Evaluation of Research in Music Education in Singapore", in *International Journal of Music Education*, DOI: 10.1177/0255761413491206.

through the arts that connect with their daily experiences and contemporary culture. The focus on experimentation, exploration and play, while critically examining the artistic process and product in question through improvisation, creative and critical thinking seemed also to have come to the fore.

Conclusion and Implications

Despite Singapore's music education scene being at its early developmental stages, tremendous efforts through governmental initiatives and support, the progressive vision of art education institutions and art educators/artists have mostly resulted in music teaching, learning and research that are concerned with engaging and connecting students with their changing globalised landscape. The significance of perceptive listening and experiential learning is reinforced through composition, whilst the emphasis on community-based music activity will sustain the children through adulthood. Apart from the development of musical skills and competencies, the government has also placed due emphasis on socio-emotional learning, value education, culture and heritage links, diversity and inclusion awareness, popular culture, identity formation and development, creativity, reflective and critical thinking, and collaboration and teamwork.

While some seeds of music education within the formalised schooling system have been sown that look towards relevance to 21st century competencies, many challenges and gaps still remain. Several key questions are posed here as concluding thoughts: How can music educational training further encourage the expansion of the imagination and ensure the sustainability of creativity and criticality in its people? How can music education take more cognizance of the expansive role of technology and media in transforming and redefining its own practice? How can music educators ensure that music learners' needs are placed at the fore in terms of provisions and access for diversity and inclusivity?²³ How can we better forge a community of participatory music-making and cultivate a framework to foster cross-discipline, cross-arts, cross-cultural and cross-sector work? Without doubt, the pragmatism and generous fiscal policies of the government towards art education have established a sound foundation for this Renaissance City of the 21st century to flourish. All Singapore needs now is a creative populace to hasten its *musical* pulse.

23 *Ibid.*

Eleanor A. L. TAN

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Contemporaneous, Contemporisation, Contemporary Expressions in Dance

Caren CARINO

Dr Caren Carino chronicles the development of contemporary dance in Singapore from colonial times to the present. Her analysis looks at contemporary dance and its evolution in this age of aesthetic cosmopolitanism, as Singapore's evolving identity moves on from its colonial past and traditional multi-ethnic roots.

If there is one word to describe the dance scene in 21st century Singapore, it would be “contemporary”. Besides the genre Contemporary Dance, contemporary influences have permeated the dance creations of other genres such as Ballet and Ethnic Dance. Hence, “contemporary dance” has become an increasingly fluid term embracing diverse forms blurring the boundaries of once clearly defined genres. Contemporary dance simultaneously constructs and reflects Singapore’s evolving identity as it moves on from its colonial past and traditional multi-ethnic roots.

While contemporary dance is often associated with Western constructs, the various forms of contemporary dance have arisen out of the different positions taken by some Asian dance artists, which reflect their predicament, i.e., their anxiety over emulation, rejection and negotiation of Western ideas. On one hand, some artists embrace the ideals and aesthetics of the West, seen as progressive but, on the other hand, they reject the West because of their need to express local autonomous meanings that differ from Western notions. The concept of “contemporary dance”, therefore, does not refer only to Western-influenced forms but includes a variety

of contemporary dance forms that may or may not be associated with Western aesthetics.

Singapore's history has seen Ballet evolve from its Western classical origins to later include contemporary explorations. During Singapore's initial colonisation by the British (1823–1959), Ballet was an artistic expression for those whose transformed identities were British. This was apparent particularly for English-educated Straits Chinese who interacted with the colonial officers together with the colonists. "Baba" Chinese (or Chinese born in Singapore) valued British citizenship and sought to establish close relationships with the colonial officers for both protection and the opportunities to achieve higher social and political status. This group, according to Singaporean historian Wang Gungwu, was eager to adopt Western culture and become Christian, displayed loyalty to the British Empire, and established a Westernised community.

In the 1930s, Ballet was taught by expatriates Angela de Martinez, Vyner Gomez, Signe Green, Hilda Wright, Isabel McIntyre and Courtney Green.¹ Maudrene Yap was among the first group of Singaporean students shaped by the pioneer effort. She went on to found a Ballet school of her own and was the first Singaporean teacher to obtain an Advanced Certificate from the Royal Academy of Dancing (RAD) in the United Kingdom. The school was later renamed the Frances School of Dancing, after Frances Poh who, with Florrie Sinclair, took over from Maudrene when the latter migrated to the West in 1954. The school has since produced some of the most important figures in Singapore's Ballet history, including the Goh family — Goh Soo Nee, Goh Choo Chiat, Goh Choo San and Goh Soo Khim.

After World War II during which time the Japanese occupied Singapore (1942–1945), the British returned to rule. Singapore increasingly moved towards self-governance that culminated in a brief merger with Malaysia (1963–1965) and finally independence in 1965 when it ambitiously attended to nation-building, establishing political and economic stability as well as a Singaporean identity. The British continued to assume a "nationalistic" posture even as their colonisation of Singapore drew to an end. It was observed that the rise of the Royal Ballet (formerly named the Sadler's Wells Ballet) coincided with the decline of Great Britain as a colonial power. Trying to

1 Chua, S.P. (1998), "Ballet and Other Dances in Singapore", in Z.A. Tinggal (ed.), *The Dances of ASEAN*, Asia Printers, Brunei Darussalam, p. 200.

adjust to less global power, Britons reacted with a mixture of anxiety and responsibility, sometimes clinging to a heightened nationalism that was for instance manifest when the Royal Ballet went on foreign tours in the 1950s and 1960s. Sentiments then were: "We were taught that we were 'ambassadors' of Britain, that we had to behave very well ... This meant in particular evincing at all times a modest demeanour."²

Ballet continued to develop, especially through those who held steadfast to their transformed British identity. The legacy of the Royal Academy of Dancing (RAD) system of training dancers was underway at this point and was strengthened with the return of Goh Soo Nee. After graduating from the Sadler Wells Ballet School in the United Kingdom (now renamed the Royal Ballet School),³ Soo Nee set up the Malaya School of Ballet. In 1958, the Malaya School of Ballet and the Frances School of Dancing amalgamated to form the Singapore Ballet Academy, which is still in existence today and is affiliated with the Singapore Dance Theatre. Later, in the early 1960s, several senior dancers from the Academy went abroad to continue their training. Amongst them was Goh Soo Khim, who was the "first Asian student admitted by audition to the Australian Ballet School in Melbourne and she consistently showed talent throughout her training, and finally emerged as the top graduate of the year".⁴

Goh Soo Khim went on to co-found the Singapore Dance Theatre (SDT) in 1988 with Anthony Then, another Singapore Academy senior student who went abroad to continue his dance training. Eventually, SDT became known for its "unique cosmopolitan character ... reflected in a look defined by the delight in the inherent physical beauty of its dancers and in a style marked by ability to cross — whether in concept or in movement — the boundaries between the East and West, modern and classical, traditional and contemporary".⁵ Today, SDT's repertory under the artistic direction of Janek Schergen (appointed in 2009) features both classical as well as contemporary. *Passages*, a performance platform created by Schergen, is SDT's annual contemporary season, showcasing works by both local and international choreographers.

2 Wulff, H. (1998), "The Britishness of the Royal Ballet", in *Ballet Across Borders*, Berg, Oxford, p. 27.

3 The Royal Ballet School's system of training is the Royal Academy of Dancing syllabus.

4 Chua, S.P. (1998), "Ballet and Other Dances in Singapore", in Z.A. Tinggal, (ed.), *The Dances of ASEAN*, Asia Printers, Brunei Darussalam, p. 201.

5 Singapore Dance Theatre (2001), *Ballet Under the Stars: Dancing By Numbers*, Singapore Dance Theatre, Singapore. This is a programme booklet produced for the event.

Following Singapore's independence in 1965, Ethnic Dance provided a sense of community for the different immigrant populations — the Chinese, Malays and Indians. Singaporean dance scholar Chua Soo Pong relates that under the leadership of then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, dance during this time played a role “in anti-colonial campaigns, in political competition between the ruling government party and its opposition and in forging unity. It is doubtful that performing arts [including dance], can be totally cut off from the cultural roots and emotional importance of the three major ethnic groups.”⁶ Thus, Chinese, Malay and Indian dance, including Chinese opera, Malay folk dance and Indian dance dramas, were promoted separately as well as cross-culturally as expressions of the Singaporean identity.

In a report produced by the Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts in 1989, it was recommended that “our multicultural heritage [makes Singapore] unique and we should promote excellence in our multi-lingual, multicultural art forms”;⁷ meaning that of the Malay, Indian and Chinese. This importance of developing the arts gave rise to concerted efforts to grow and promote Ethnic Dance. Various Ethnic Dance groups established themselves, including but not limited to the following Indian dance groups: Singapore Indian Fine Arts Society (1949), Bhaskar's Arts Academy (1952), Nrityalaya Aesthetics Society (1952), Apsaras Arts Ltd (1977), Temple of Fine Arts (1981), and Alapana Arts Limited (1999); Malay dance groups: Majlis Pusat (1969), Sri Warisan Som Said Performing Arts Ltd (1997), Sriwana (1955), and Era Dance Theatre (2009); and Chinese dance groups: Hokkien Huay Kuan Dance Troupe (1989), Frontier Danceland (1991), Tampines Arts Troupe (1991), Dance Ensemble Singapore (1993), Leng Kee Dance Troupe (1999) and Dance Horizon Troupe (2001).

Chua also observed that “[a]rtists from different cultural backgrounds worked hand in hand in the presentation of cultural shows which featured dances of three communities”;⁸ and in 1960 the People's Association (PA), a grassroots cultural organisation was formed by the Singapore government “to promote cultural activities

6 Chua, S.P. (1995), “An Overview of Southeast Asian Performing Arts: Issues of Cultural Identity”, in Chua, S.P., *Traditional Theatre in Southeast Asia*, UniPress for SPAFA, Singapore, p. xxii.

7 Ministry of Information and the Arts (2000), “Chapter One: The 1989 Report — Ten Years Hence”, in *Renaissance City Report*, Ministry of Information and the Arts, Singapore, p. 2.

8 Chua, S.P. (1998), “Singapore”, in Z.A. Tinggal (ed.), *The Dances of ASEAN*, Asia Printers, Brunei Darussalam, p. 172.

and racial unity, to create a bridge between the government and the people”⁹ It has accomplished this through Singapore’s numerous community centres and, since 1973, in its organisation of the annual Chingay Parade, a procession featuring dance among many displays, in celebration of the Chinese lunar new year. Furthermore, Singapore’s Chinese, Indian and Malay dance forms were promoted overseas through the government-supported National Theatre Dance Company (established in 1968), National Dance Company (that became full-time in 1970) and People’s Association Dance Group (set up in 1971). Today, PA Talents has replaced the People’s Association Dance Group. It is “Singapore’s only multi-ethnic and contemporary dance and orchestra group. It comprises ten performing units, [including the] PA Dance Ensemble comprising Chinese, Indian, Malay and Modern Dance Groups and the Hip Hop Club”.¹⁰ Today, PA performing groups and the Singapore community continue to organise and participate in Chingay Parades, as well as National Day Parades and the Prime Minister’s Chinese New Year Garden Party.

Hence, Ethnic Dance in Singapore has progressed from its preservation intentions to embrace contemporary creations as well. Today, experimentation in Ethnic Dance has become common practice. Sometimes it means keeping within the conventions of the traditional dance form; at other times it involves the exploration and incorporation of other aesthetics/elements from other cultures. The name of the dance form is often prefaced by the term “contemporary”, or the term “contemporary dance” follows the name of the dance form. For example, both “contemporary Indian Dance” and “Indian contemporary dance” are often used to mean the same thing.

Besides in the community, Ethnic Dance is also advocated in Singapore’s education system where both the preservation of tradition as well as exploration of the contemporary exists. The annual Singapore Youth Festival (SYF) organised since 1967 by Singapore’s Ministry of Education’s (MOE) Arts Education Branch, Student Development Curriculum Division (formerly known as the Co-Curricular Activities Branch (Dance unit)), is a platform for primary and secondary school students to showcase their dance co-curricular activities (CCAs), including Chinese, Indian and Malay dance. The “significance is in the participation of school children

9 Pee, T. (2004), “Singapore Ethnic Dance Development in the Socio-Economic and Socio-Political Environment”, in J. LaPointe-Crump, *International Dance Conference, Taiwan — Conference Proceedings*, Congress on Research in Dance, World Dance Alliance, Taiwan, p. 190.

10 People’s Association. *Culture Shiok*. Available from <http://www.cultureshiok.pa.gov.sg/all-groups/pa-talents> [Accessed: 20 April 2012].

in a highly educational activity which stresses the search for identity, advocates unity emerging from cultural diversity, and inculcates a strong sense of purpose”.¹¹

Ethnic Dance extends beyond primary, secondary and junior college education into university as well as tertiary art education. The National University of Singapore’s (NUS) Centre for the Arts (CFA) helps “in developing an appreciation of the arts, laying the foundation for the future of the arts in Singapore”.¹² Established in 1977, NUS Chinese Dance group is comprised of students as well as alumni. Led by Ms Ding Hong as Artistic Director and Resident Choreographer, and Mr Zhou Lei as Technique Instructor, the “repertoire ranges from the technically demanding traditional and tribal folk dance to contemporary Chinese dance. While [the group] continually strive[s] to stay true to traditional Chinese dance forms, [it is] also keen to explore new styles and choreography in order to achieve greater heights of performance. The result is often interesting and unusual dance pieces from refreshing new perspectives. Through close partnerships links and various external engagements, the group aim[s] to foster expertise and experience in Chinese dance, as well as an appreciation for Chinese culture”.¹³

NUS Indian Dance (established in 1977) has been under the guidance of its Artistic Director and Resident Choreographer, Santha Bhaskar, a Singapore Cultural Medallion recipient and considered a pioneer in the Indian Dance scene. She says: “When you are unable to communicate from the existing vocabulary, it is natural to find another way. ... Artists need freedom to create and express. ... CFA is a space where all these requirements co-exist thereby allowing for experimental works to emerge.”¹⁴ NUS Malay Dance (established in the early 1980s) was renamed the NUS Ilsa Tari in 1998. Osman Abdul Hamid, who is a Singapore Young Artist Award recipient and choreographer for the People’s Association Malay Dance Group, leads the group in performing “traditional dances such as inang, ronggeng, zapin, lambak and silat. It also blends contemporary dance forms — where dancers move with free

11 Chua, S.P. (1998), “Singapore”, in Tinggal Z.A. (ed.), *The Dances of ASEAN*, Asia Printers, Brunei Darussalam, p. 177.

12 National University of Singapore, *Centre for the Arts*. Available from http://www.nus.edu.sg/cfa/our_talents/index.php [Accessed: 30 April 2012].

13 *Ibid.*

14 Bhaskar, S. (2011), *Explorations in Dance Aesthetics*, Nrityalaya Aesthetics Society and Bhaskar’s Arts Academy, Singapore, pp. 8–9.

flow of sharp movements — with its traditional pieces. This results in traditional and contemporary dance fusions”,¹⁵

As Ballet and Ethnic Dance (namely Indian, Malay and Chinese dance forms) were taking root in Singapore, the genre called Modern Dance (also known as Contemporary Dance) emerged in the mid-1980s.¹⁶ Besides Goh Lay Kuan, who founded Practice Performing Arts School in 1965 with her husband, the late writer/theatre director Kuo Pao Kun, two other individuals are primarily responsible for the introduction of Contemporary Dance techniques and styles, namely Lim Fei Shen (the artistic director and main choreographer for the PA from 1985 to 1991), and Angela Liong, who was a major choreographer for the Television Corporation of Singapore from 1984 to 1989. Although their early forays were mainly in the Jazz Dance style, their Contemporary Dance proclivities influenced the way they trained dancers at these organisations. Eventually, when they worked as independent artists they created Contemporary Dance works.

Both women are responsible for cultivating a generation of dancers. Lim Fei Shen, a solo artist, has taught in several educational institutions including the NUS, National Institute of Education (NIE), LaSalle College of Arts (LaSalle) and Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA), where she is presently a full-time senior lecturer. It is said of her choreography: “Her works focus upon the development of unique cross-cultural dance forms which draw from traditional Asian sources.”¹⁷ Fei Shen has influenced many dance students through her teaching, primarily in the areas of dance composition and improvisation.

Angela Liong bred a line of Contemporary Dance artists through her direction of the Dance departments at two tertiary arts institutions, NAFA in 1989 and later LaSalle in 1996. She trained student dancers whom she later employed on a full-time basis in her own company, The Arts Fission Company (TAFC, formed in 1994); they

15 National University of Singapore, *Centre for the Arts*. Available from http://www.nus.edu.sg/cfa/our_talents/index.php [Accessed: 30 April 2012].

16 The term “Modern Dance” is often used interchangeably with “Contemporary Dance”, an umbrella concept encompassing the development of all Modern Dance forms from its inception to present. However, the term “Modern Dance” (coined in 1927) is also understood in reference to the first Modern Dance techniques or forms that emerged during the early period of modernism in the West, such as those established by Martha Graham and Doris Humphrey who linked dance to modernism as a force in art and architecture. Later, the term “Contemporary Dance”, coined in the United Kingdom by Robin Howard following the set-up in 1966 of the Contemporary Ballet Trust (later London Contemporary Dance Theatre) was used in Britain to describe the subsequent development of Modern Dance beyond the pioneering stage.

17 The Substation (2001), *Sept Fest*. Programme Booklet, The Substation, Singapore.

include Rusman Rahmat, Wong Wai Ee, Alvin Tan and Elysa Wendi. Later, several of Angela's students such as Lim Chin Huat, Tan How Choon and Choo Lei Lei (who formed Ecnad Project Ltd, initially Dance Dimension Project, in 1996), went on to form their own dance companies. Wong Wai Yee and Ricky Sim Seow Kiat founded Moving Arts in 2005 and Raw Moves in 2011. Aaron Khek Ah Hock was a student of Angela's for a brief period before taking up a scholarship at the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts, returning to Singapore after completing his studies to join TAFC and later co-founded Ah Hock and Yu in 2003 with his Chinese Malaysian partner Ix Wong Thien Pau. Other Contemporary Dance companies were also established such as Tammy L. Wong Dance Company (in 1998), Odyssey Dance Theatre (in 1999), John Mead Dance Company (in 2005), The Human Expressions Company (in 2008) and Re: Dance Theatre (in 2012). Frontier Danceland, established in 1991 under the artistic directorship of Low Mei Yoke, recently changed its primarily Chinese Dance profile to a Contemporary Dance focus.

The concept of contemporary dance, therefore, does not refer only to Contemporary Dance the genre, but includes a variety of contemporary forms that has eventually become prevalent in Singapore's dance landscape. Krishen Jit, the late Malaysian theatre director as well as dance and visual art critic, explained the preference of the term "contemporary dance" in Asia, including Singapore:

To the international dance community, modern dance is very nearly synonymous with the works, techniques, and inventive genius of Martha Graham. ... Contemporary dancers and choreographers bristle against the parental rein exercised by the Graham technique upon modern dance. ... In short, contemporary dance is the purist's nightmare. It is many things, including ballet, modern dance, and the fusion of one or both of these genres with traditional dance. It is the sum of its parts. It is eclectic and plural. It defies genre.¹⁸

By the end of the 20th century and into the 21st century, the various contemporary dance forms that have taken root in Singapore are acknowledged as having a significant role as the government focuses its intentions of becoming a world-class

18 Jit, K. (2003), "An Uncommon Position", in K. Rowland (ed.), *Contemporary Dance in Malaysia*, Contemporary Asian Art Centre, Singapore, pp. 197-198.

city in which a high quality of life and prosperity are key signifiers. Since Singapore is desirous of becoming a “hub for business, financial services, electronic commerce, travel, tourism, telecommunications, information, education and innovation”,¹⁹ a vibrant arts scene is critical to attract and sustain these industries. Contemporary practices in dance have, together with the other performing art forms, become vehicles to engineer social consciousness and a creative mindset as key components in the creation of global cities such as London and New York.

Caren CARINO

Dr Caren Carino has a PhD in contemporary dance research, National University of Singapore; MFA in Theatre & Dance (dance performance and choreography) and BEd (dance) from the University of Hawaii, USA. A dance practitioner, academic, administrator, educator and advocate, she began as a dancer with the Ririe-Woodbury Dance Company (USA) performing and teaching extensively throughout America as well as the Caribbean, Germany, Ireland, Puerto Rico, the United Kingdom, Samoa, and the Virgin Islands among other places. Now based in Singapore, Dr Carino was Programme Leader (Dance) at LaSalle College of Arts prior to her appointment as Head of Department and Principal Lecturer (Dance) at Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts in 2007. Her research focuses on education, performance and cultural studies, with a particular interest in “contemporary Asian dance”. She has published and presented her research internationally, including America, China, Korea, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Taiwan and Thailand. Dr Carino is a dance advisor to Singapore’s Ministry of Education and the National Arts Council. She is also affiliated to the World Dance Alliance, where she is Vice-President of the Singapore Chapter.

19 Ministry of Information and the Arts (2000), “Benchmarking Cities”, in *Renaissance City Report*, Ministry of Information and the Arts, Singapore, p. 24.

New Asian Imaginations

Michael SULLIVAN

Professor Michael Sullivan, whose book Chinese Art in the Twentieth Century (1959) was the first ever on the subject, while his Art and Artists of Twentieth Century China (1996) is a primary reader for art history students in many universities, recalled his posting to colonial Singapore. His work on Nanyang Art privileged Singapore artists with an international voice. This essay is an edited version of the paper presented by Prof Sullivan at the New Asian Imaginations Symposium organised by NAFA in 2008. He was very happy to have this paper included in this anthology. That evening in September 2012, he asked the editor when the book will be published and the editor promised to send him a copy. He passed away in 2013, a prominent scholar, humble and humane, and a well-loved gentleman who was also an amazingly loving husband who missed his dear wife so much that he took a teaspoon of her ashes with his morning cereals till his doctor stopped him. The Portrait of Khoan was of some comfort and he missed it so much when the museum here loaned it for an exhibition. They ingeniously made a close replica and sent that to him. When the art exhibition was over, Prof Sullivan was so pleased he had two portraits of his wife and he displayed them next to each other.

I first came to Singapore 68 years ago on my way to China; I paid a fleeting visit in 1946 on my way back to England, with my wife Khoan. My memories of these brief visits are few, although Singapore in 1940 was the colonial city described so vividly in the novels and short stories of Somerset Maugham, while, six years later, Singapore was recovering from the nightmare of the Japanese Occupation. A souvenir of that time, which I still possess somewhere (I think), is three books of sketches by Liu Kang, depicting the sufferings of the people during that dreadful time. Art was barely alive, although it was in that year, 1946, that the Singapore Art Society was founded, which signalled the beginning of the slow recovery. When I returned eight years later to take up a lectureship in what was then still called the University of Malaya, that artistic infant had grown into a healthy child, and things



Cheong Soo Pieng
 Portrait of Khoan Sullivan, 1959
 Ink & colour on paper
 Michael Sullivan Collection

were moving forward. So it is a special honour and pleasure to me to be invited to return to this fascinating city, and to take part in this ground-breaking Symposium.

Let me give you a brief impression of what the situation was in the mid-1950s. By then the Singapore Art Society was flourishing, as was the Society of Chinese Artists, which had been founded in 1935 and formally registered in 1936, and the Y.M.C.A Art Club, while the University of Malaya, as it was then called, had opened its own little art museum dedicated to the arts of Southeast Asia, China and contemporary Singapore.

In the city and in the University, exhibitions were being held of art from Thailand, Indonesia and India. The Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, founded by the dedication of Lim Hak Tai, was struggling to keep going, supported by at least one major artist, while the Singapore Art Society's Tenth Anniversary Exhibition of 1956 showed one

hundred and twenty works by local artists.

Who were the important artists at that time? Let me name a few and ask you how many of their names are familiar to you: Lim Hak Tai, Cheong Soo Pieng, Chen Wen Hsi, Liu Kang and Georgette Chen (both of whom were trained in Paris), the batik painter Chuah Thean Teng, and the young Chia Yuchien, who was soon to go to Paris to study. Undoubtedly Cheong Soo Pieng was the most talented of them. I still have a photograph of him painting a portrait of my wife Khoan, who had dropped in to his studio one day. It is one of the finest paintings in our collection.

In 1959, government support for the arts received a big boost with the establishment of the Arts Council. We persuaded Lim Yew Hock, Prime Minister of the new state, that the job of the government, as in Britain, was not to tell the participating societies what to do, but to provide the funds to enable them to put on shows, concerts, dance recitals and exhibitions such as Singapore had never seen before. The Arts Festival lasted a week, took place all over the city, and any

seat for any event cost one dollar. The quadrilingual Programme for the week was printed in English, Malay, Chinese and Tamil. There were 36 events, ranging from concerts to Malay, Tamil, Chinese and European drama in four languages, and dance, photography and films, with a grand closing ceremony at night on the Padang, when dragons and lions wove in and out under the glare of searchlights provided by the Royal Navy, before an audience of over 10,000 people. I have no idea what the Festival does today, but I hope it captures the commitment and excitement, and the air of complete freedom, of that first festival almost 50 years ago.

So there was quite a lot going on in the 1950s. But, as I wrote in the Catalogue of the Tenth Annual Exhibition of the Singapore Art Society:

In spite of the vigour and talent of her local artists, Singapore still lacks many of those things which reinforce and consolidate the position of art in the community. The public needs a permanent art centre where at any time they can see the best works of local and foreign artists. The young painter is entitled to a first-class education in his (or her) craft, and, when he is trained, to the patronage of Government, schools, churches and other public bodies. ... The idea of the artist as free and unattached, living in a world of his own, is a romantic figment. As society needs his work, so does he need their encouragement and support.

50 years ago, the traditional idea of what one meant by “art” was still more or less intact. The work of the Surrealists of the 1930s and the New York School of Abstract Expressionists of the 1950s could still be considered art, as it consisted chiefly of pictures of one sort or another to hang on the wall. What about today? In the last 50 years, the idea of what constituted art has changed more than at any other time in history. Today, Installations, Performances, Multimedia art, Conceptual Art, Body Art, and many other forms, have extended the boundaries of art so wide as to embrace almost any object or activity, so long as it is displayed or performed.

This is not to say that the more conventional forms of expression have been abandoned. To give one example, the recent exhibition in Singapore of the work of the Taiwan sculptor Ju Ming shows that there is still an important role for more orthodox forms to play.

But the new forms tend to dominate. In addition to their range and novelty, they have another characteristic which is of great significance for our understanding

of what is going on: they are transnational, so that we find essentially the same forms, in architecture as in art, in Peking and London, Tokyo and Buenos Aires. An extension to the National Gallery in Washington is designed by a Chinese — I.M. Pei; the main Terminal of the new Peking Airport by an Englishman, Norman Foster. Architects, and artists, are working world-wide, in what seems to be an international language.

So what is Chinese art today? Is it ink painting, or something else? Wu Guanzhong works freely in Chinese brush and ink and in Western oil paints. When he was asked if his work was “Chinese”, he replied: “When I take up a brush to paint, I paint a Chinese picture.” By this he meant, I think, that the actual style or technique is not the essence of the work, but the experience, and above all the feeling, of the artist. If he, or she, expresses his or her feeling as a Chinese, then, whatever its style, the work is Chinese.

There still remains the question of quality. In the more conventional forms, that is not a problem. Although we have our individual preferences, a general consensus emerges about what is good and what is bad, in art. There is no problem here.

But when forms are subverted and accepted rules and principles abandoned, by what criteria are we to judge the work? Many critics today avoid this challenge by simply describing what the artist does, for a value judgement is thought to be purely subjective. Express a critical opinion and you’ll be told: “That’s only what *you* think.” The result is that today “anything goes”, so long as it is exhibited or performed.

This is especially true of much of today’s Conceptual Art, which is based on the notion of the importance of the “idea”. But this is a fallacy, and a dangerous one. To appreciate a Rembrandt self-portrait, or a Beethoven Sonata, we do not need to look for the “idea” or the meaning behind it. The meaning is the work itself. When a journalist asked Picasso the meaning of his work, he turned on her in a fury and said: “Since when do you have to explain the language of painting? It’s not meant to explain anything ... but to foster emotion within the soul of the viewer. No work of art should leave people indifferent ... they should be moved. ... The viewer must be dragged from his torpor ... shaken and grabbed by the throat.” If it doesn’t do that, he seemed to be saying, it’s not a work of art.

Few artists are profound critics, and if they are, they should be practising philosophy, not art. But in today’s atmosphere of competitive commercial exposure they are provoked, or bribed, into talking about their work, formulating ideas in words, when their natural language is paint, to give it respectability and seriousness

in the eyes of the critics. In a poem, Goethe wrote: “*Bilde, Künstler! Rede nicht!*” (“Paint, artist — don’t talk!”). Artists should be left in peace to get on with their work, not be badgered by journalists to make, or make up, statements about it.

You may think I am taking an unwarrantably strong position on this issue — and indeed, there are notable exceptions. We have only to read the letters of van Gogh to his brother Theo, or the critical writings of Wu Guanzhong, to find artists who are deeply thoughtful and articulate with both the brush and the pen. But they are rare.

But that still leaves us with the question — how do we evaluate a work that is expressed in a new language which we haven’t yet learned and don’t understand? Have we the right to express any views about it at all?

I do not have a general answer to this question, but rely upon my own experience and “gut feeling”, which tells me — and of course I may be wrong — that a work displays honesty or insincerity, feeling or lack of feeling; whether it is something for a moment’s surprise or amusement, or whether it is something I could live with and contemplate again and again. This is of course a purely subjective reaction, but in the absence of an accepted set of criteria, what alternative is there?

Yet I am reluctant to believe that all judgements — and this goes for moral as well as aesthetic judgements — are relative and subjective. I believe that a consensus about what is good in art emerges in time. Ernst Gombrich once told me that an art-historian friend of his had been touring the art galleries of Europe and had made a great discovery, namely that the acknowledged masterpieces were, in fact, masterpieces. Have we reached a point where we can say that of contemporary art? Or are we still at the stage of saying that Tracy Emin and Damien Hurst are just as good, and as important, as Henry Moore or Wang Huaiqing — or, even, that we shouldn’t make such judgements at all? If this is the case, then the sooner we move on, the better.

Of course, it takes time for new forms of expression to become accepted. How much time? The musicians asked to play Beethoven’s late Quartets protested that they were unplayable. The French painter Paul Signac thought Matisse’s *Joy of Life* “disgusting”, while Matisse called Picasso’s *Demoiselles d’Avignon* “an outrage”. The American critic Leo Steinberg said that today it takes only about seven years for a wild young artist to be accepted, because the shock value of his work is so quickly exhausted. Perhaps the time is getting even shorter.

In the meantime, first impressions can be true ones, especially when the work is manifestly false, drawing attention to the artist or performer rather than to the work itself. We don’t need much discrimination to see Damien Hurst’s *Shark in a Tank*

as a work totally lacking in feeling, or Zhang Huan walking across Broadway clad only in slabs of raw meat sewn together as mere exhibitionism. There was a time when to do such a thing was daring and original. In 1980, a group of radicals at Peking University wrapped themselves in white cloth and poured ink all over it before an audience of puzzled and astonished students. I asked one of the participants, Kong Chang'an, what was the significance of that performance. He replied: "The significance of it was that we did it." To do such a thing at that time, and in that context, was indeed significant. But today, when anything goes, it has lost its force, and is simply entertainment, for which, I suppose, we should be grateful.

Now this symposium is about Singapore, Southeast Asia and the future direction of art in this area. You would not expect someone whose knowledge of the arts scene here is of the early to mid 1950s to say anything sensible or helpful about art in Singapore today, but perhaps I can make a few observations about how Singapore contemporary arts scene looks from distant Oxford. Please forgive me if what I say sounds obvious, or superficial.

The civilisations that surround Singapore — those of Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam and Indonesia — are the great wheel of which Singapore is the hub. Hubs are hollow, and culturally speaking Singapore was, until the post-War period, just that. I remember how for concerts and recitals by major performers, we had to lure them down out of the sky on their way to Sydney or Tokyo, and how a world-renowned pianist — was it Horowitz? — performing under a bright light in the non-airconditioned Victoria Memorial Hall, was continually slapping the top of his bald head to swat the insects that collected there. Those days are gone, and the surge of artistic activity of recent decades, and the fact that this symposium is taking place here, indicate that this hub is not hollow at all and that, now that its colonial past is a distant memory, is packed with creative energy and is a magnet to attract talent from all over the world.

What I find most fascinating about Singapore — from my distant and superficial viewpoint — is the contrast, the conflict even, between its consciousness of being at the very centre of a ring of great civilisations which affect it richly, and its constant desire to forge its own identity. Out of what? You might ask. The fact that this symposium is being held shows how urgent this question is for Singaporeans. But will it provide the answers? Only if we believe that scholars, historians and critics, like most of us here (including, of course, myself) are the ones who will do this. I attended a conference recently in Canton, one purpose of which was declared, to "strategise" (what a horrible word!) the future direction of art and art education in China, as

though the future direction and character of art could be determined by a conference or a committee. We can describe, record, analyse what is happening; we can give it support, as the Arts Council supported our first Arts Festival. This is the back-up, as it were, to create the conditions in which Singapore's cultural consciousness can find expression. But we cannot create that consciousness ourselves, or find the means for its expression. That is done by the artists and musicians, writers and poets, dancers and dramatists, who translate their feeling and experience into form.

When after the crackdown that followed the Tiananmen demonstrations of 1989, the artists fell silent and seemed paralysed by the shock of it, I, like many others, wondered, what will happen next? Is the modern movement dead? How will they respond? The answer came in the next five years, not from the professors or the critics, but from the artists themselves, who responded with a surge of creative activity which took many forms, some almost unimaginable, as they dealt with the crisis each in his or her way. The critics and scholars came after. The answer to the question of identity and direction lies not with us, but with the creative men and women who will find the forms to express what it is to be Singaporean.

So what is our role? If it is not to create the arts, then it is to help to create the conditions under which the arts can flourish and to discuss how this can be done.

Michael SULLIVAN

Professor Michael Sullivan (1916–2013) was a British art historian and one of the major Western pioneers in the field of modern Chinese art history and criticism. Professor Sullivan was Emeritus Fellow at St. Catherine's College, Oxford University. In 1939, after he graduated from Cambridge University, he voyaged to China working for the International and Chinese Red Cross there. He conducted archaeological work as well. In 1943, he married Khoan (Wu Huan), a biologist he met in China. 1946 saw Professor Sullivan heading back to England where he enrolled to study Chinese at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS). In 1952, he received his PhD from Harvard University. He taught Art History at the University of Malaya (now known as the National University of Singapore) in Singapore, establishing the University Art Museum as Curator, amongst other arts and cultural programmes. He returned to SOAS in 1960 as a lecturer, and from 1966 to 1984, he was the Chair of Oriental Art at Stanford University.

Cultural Medallion Visual Artists

Do Artists Think?

Renee LEE

Renee Lee interviews Wee Beng Chong, the first Cultural Medallion recipient in visual arts, and two other Cultural Medallion recipients — Tan Kien Por and Ho Ho Ying — to investigate the prevalent notion that artists are more emotional beings, using a three-pronged approach to examine their practice, from the formative years and critics' reviews, for their artistic aesthetics to be perceived within their pedagogical, historical and intellectual contexts. Studying these artists, with their breadth and depth of accomplished practice in the visual arts, can perhaps help us understand better the creative process and how creativity for ground-breaking art can be nurtured.

According to Roe's findings on Western painters and scientists, cognitive thinking is not so prevalent in artists though artists have need for a high degree of autonomy to become accomplished.¹ This essay on Singapore's Cultural Medallion (CM) Recipients examines creative process and creativity through a three-pronged approach as evidenced in three CM artists' oeuvre, theories and teaching of the art of Chinese and Western traditions. The aims of this study are: to evaluate their connection with the native-cultural tradition of Chinese art to establish the more complex question of their connection with Western art, and how much these were in fact within their creative impetus; to assess their evolving style, in particular their form of innovation, through case studies of their prolific output; and to evaluate if cognitive thinking is prevalent in their creative process. The three-pronged approach, undertaken through the examination of their practice from their formative years and critical reviews of their practice, allows for their artistic aesthetics to be perceived within their pedagogical, historical and intellectual contexts.

¹ The research on accomplished American painters and cognitive thinking by Roe is found in Roe, A. (2007), "Painters and Painting", in I.A. Taylor & J.W. Getzels (eds.), *Perspectives in Creativity*, Transaction Publishers, New Jersey, pp. 157-172.

Their Formative Years

Wee Beng Chong (Wee), Tan Kian Por (Tan) and Ho Ho Ying (Ho) were conferred the CM by the President of the Republic of Singapore for their distinctive contributions in shaping Singapore's cultural landscape through artistic excellence in the field of visual arts. Wee was presented the award in 1979, the year that the award was instituted, while Tan received the award in 2001 and Ho in 2012.

Born in Singapore in 1938, Wee would draw on anything he could get his hands on since he was five years old. Boldly asking for charcoal from the shopkeeper of the charcoal shop near Rex Theatre near Little India, he would sketch on the pavements only to have irate adults who lived nearby pour buckets of cold water on him and his charcoal markings on the public streets of Singapore.



Wee Beng Chong
Chu Qi Jie Sheng, 1999, Ink on rice paper

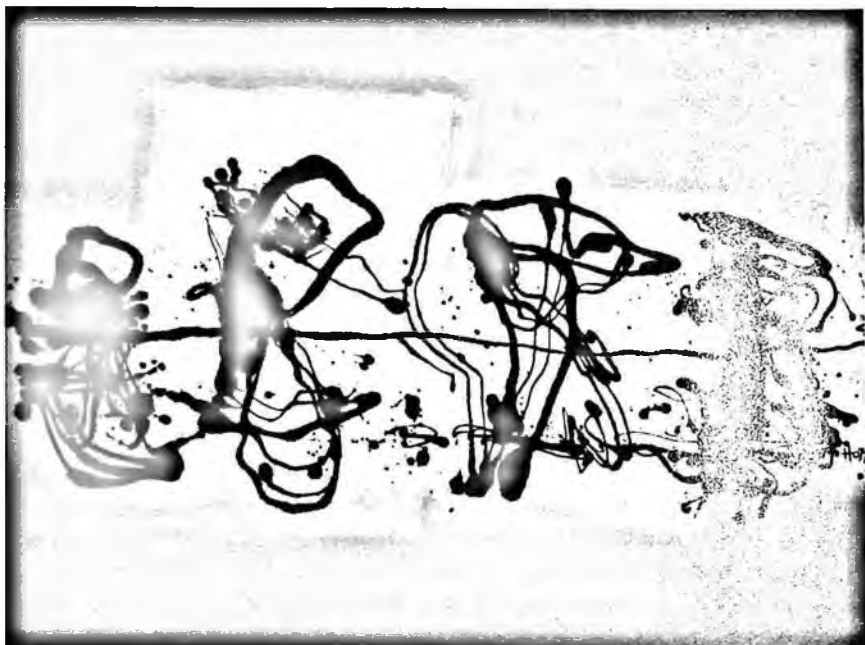
Undaunted, he continued until a neighbour introduced him to Yu Chok De, a portrait artist of the Western realist tradition. He would later enrol in the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA).

Tan was born in Chaozhou, China, in 1949. Like Wee, the young Tan was an avid pavement artist, and would also draw whenever he could. Everything about art fascinated him. He recalls that as a seven-year-old he would walk three long miles to town to buy Chinese comic books in order to admire the drawings and the noble characters. In 1962, he and his family migrated to Singapore where his father started a business. His wish has always been to become an artist. Tan would later enrol for formal studies in NAFA, which is where he found his mentor.



Tan Kian Por
Seal carving, 2010

Ho was born in 1935 on Hainan Island, China. His family moved to Singapore and enrolled him in Chinese High School. He devoted many weekends to art excursions organised by Liu Kang and Chen Wen Hsi, who were then art teachers at Chinese High School. His mentor, Chen Wen Hsi, would support the young secondary school student to buy art materials. Ho would later enrol in Nanyang University to study Chinese Literature.



Ho Ho Ying
Opera Performance, 1977
 Mixed media on canvas

Learning and Teaching

In 1958, Wee enrolled at NAFA for a three-year diploma programme, thus sealing his foundations in Western painting and sculpture, Chinese ink painting, calligraphy and seal carving. Under the mentorship of the Nanyang artists Chen Wen Hsi, Chen Chong Swee and Cheong Soo Pieng, he consolidated his artistic practice with clear definitions of the fine art traditions. He attended many exhibitions by established artists and the Nanyang artists, and inspired, he would immediately rush back to his studio to paint.

The passion to learn was a hunger that led Wee to glean from his teachers at their personal studios; first by peeping through the windows to see how great artists really work. Eventually, he entered boldly into Chen Wen Hsi's studio to inquire about techniques or styles. His fondest memories were of Yu Chok De and Chen Chong Swee. The latter would often finish his students' paintings with a few masterly strokes and instruct them to have these framed. Chen's students would soar to levels

of joy with his encouragement. He would similarly encourage his students when he was NAFA's Head of Fine Art from 1982 to 1989, and in subsequent years, a Teaching Fellow at NAFA.

In 1965, Wee sailed to France, enrolling in *L'Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux Arts* (Paris) where he became further fired by the works of art in the many museums in Europe where enormous sculptures and paintings are *de rigueur* by French standards. He also worked as a chef, and in his small hotel room, he managed to create hundreds of paintings, but these were thrown into a bonfire by Wee himself after his return to Singapore. He was not satisfied with his work. He wanted to start anew. Such was the streak of perfectionism that led him to experiment with new ways of artistic expression.



Wee Beng Chong
Self Portrait, Charcoal

As a teacher, Wee prefers his students to innovate and create their own distinctive styles. He would demonstrate the techniques and yet strictly tell the students not to imitate his work, but to study the techniques instead. His teaching style is rigorous — walking around the studio for three hours and stopping at each student's easel — commenting quickly or nodding his tacit approval. While his abstract expressionist works tend to utilise thick layers of oil paint, he is equally encouraging of thin and even layers of paint. To save on costs, students often stint on materials — he says he fully understands. He would urge his students to use their own minds to think and to be fearless. As a CM recipient, his words spur students to resolutely pursue an art career.

From 1968 to 1970, Tan studied fine art in NAFA. A student of the Western and Chinese traditions like Wee, he became more passionate about Chinese ink painting, seal carving and calligraphy through the influence of his lecturer See Hiang Tuo, who would welcome students to his home and studio, lending them Chinese literary books and always demonstrating his concern for their welfare. Tan's mentor remains his role model to this day, and he tries to emulate See as a teacher. He recalls that See loved the narcissus flower, and to this day, Tan would buy some narcissus on See's death anniversary.



Tan Kian Por
Bust of Self
Cement fondue

Tan began teaching art to various groups of students who had enrolled in art courses for enrichment or vocational studies. The most fulfilling teaching to him is to impart the philosophical as well as technical aspects of being an artist. He believes that the character of the artist would be revealed through his art, and encourages his students to nurture that aspect by reading the classics. In the Chinese Painting Studio at NAFA, the tradition of showing respect to one's teacher by preparing a pot of Chinese tea before class begins still persists.

Tan would monitor the welfare of his students, and this included buying frames for their first exhibition. He loves to remain in contact with his students, saying that they have taught him a lot as well. He constantly reminds them to become artists and not simply hobbyists.

Although he had won prizes for art during his school days, Ho chose to study Chinese literature at Nantah (Nanyang University, now Nanyang Technological University). Dr Han Suyin was his lecturer for a course on creative writing. He excelled and won a prize for a literary piece he submitted for a competition. The author of *A Many-Splendoured Thing*, which was made into an Oscar-winning movie of a similar name, Han was already an internationally renowned literary figure. Whilst Ho had diligently practised art under the guidance of Chen Wen Hsi and Liu Kang before he entered university, it was Han who continued to support his art by helping to organise the first exhibition for the Modern Art Society in 1963.



Ho Ho Ying
Self Portrait
Oil on canvas

Han was also the guest-of-honour at the exhibition. Ho remains grateful to Han, who saw his dream of being an artist and gave him the encouragement he needed. After he graduated from university, he went on to teach Chinese Language to secondary school students. However, the principal chanced upon his paintings and soon re-designated him to teach art. He was able to quickly step into his new role as he had learnt much from Chen Wen Hsi and Liu Kang, establishing his teaching

ethos on fundamentals such as technical excellence in still life and observational skills. Ho believed that foundational skills in realist art must be mastered before embarking on any other art form. Eventually, he moved on to another career albeit still in teaching. He trained young leaders at the National Youth Leadership Training Centre.

Founding Art Societies

In a Picasso–Braque friendship, Wee and Ho spent many years painting and discussing art at Wee’s studio in Niven Road, Singapore. They started experimenting with Chinese calligraphy and Western painting to delve further in the fusion style of the pioneer artists. In 1961, Wee started laying the groundwork for the Modern Art Society and the group of seven² registered the society in 1964. Ho became its first president. The first exhibition received reactions not unlike Claude Monet’s first Impressionist Exhibition in Paris; a public outcry and two vandalised paintings did not deter the Moderns. Tan set up the Siaw-Tao Chinese Seal Carving, Calligraphy and Painting Society in 1971 upon his graduation from NAFA. He wanted to create a group of like-minded artists to critique each other’s work and to hold exhibitions together. He had studied to become an artist and that was the only career he wanted. The founding of the society was a step he took to sustain his artistic practice. Since then, all three artists are involved in many local and international art societies. This ensures that they are always creating and exhibiting their art work, and the “competition” adds to the motivation to innovate.

Critics

It is interesting to discover how the CM artists assimilated the internal, along with the external aesthetics of their times. Here, their creativity is previewed through the secondary voices of the critics, who served as cultural barometers of popular taste and fashion, thus allowing for the artist reception to be located within the historical context, offering greater validity to the following studies of more technical aspects of their art.

In the East–West cultural melting pot of Singapore, a new form of vocabulary was being developed by the artists and the art historians shaping the Nanyang style or

² Ho Ho Ying, Jolinda Goh, Tan Yee Hong, Ng Yat Chuan, Tay Chee Toh, Wee Beng Chong and Tong Siang Eng formed the Modern Art Society in 1964.

the pioneering Moderns, and yet none was wont to discard the traditional aesthetic canons. The three CM artists had to work within and outside the traditional canons, honing classical skills as well as innovating by fusing Chinese and Western aesthetics.

The most important book on Chinese aesthetics is perhaps the Twenty Four Shi Pin setting out the principles of *gaogu* (sublime), *xilian* (succinct), *xionghun* (forcefulness), *kuangda* (big heartedness), *shuye* (natural and raw), *haofang* (uninhibited), and *qingqi* (fresh and novel). Chinese art is based on artistic conception and subtlety differentiating it from Western art's characterisation, structure and use of colour.³



Tan Kian Por
Cloudy Pines at Huang Shan, Ink on rice paper

Tan's 40 years of seal carving encompasses Han Dynasty official script and stone inscriptions of the Northern Wei Dynasties, while at the same time Tan evolves his own style which eschews decoration and feels simple, solid and authentic. One of his commissions was to carve a seal for Goh Chok Tong (a former Prime Minister), Chairman of the Monetary Authority of Singapore, in 2005, for use on the new series of bank notes. Most of Tan's critiques are the Chinese literati as he is known mostly as a Chinese artist. Albert Chua wrote: "Tan Kian Por is not only an important Singapore artist, he is also an outstanding artist of international renown ... In his works, you sense not only deep-rootedness of tradition and Chinese culture but also path-breaking innovation and creativity. You also appreciate how he has merged and married the cultures of East and West."⁴

3 Tan, K.P. (2012), *Chinese Seal Carving by Tan Kian Por*, Regent Printing (S) Pte Ltd, Singapore, p. 9.

4 Albert Chua is Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Singapore to the United Nations. He is quoted in Tan, K.P. (2012), *Chinese Seal Carving by Tan Kian Por*, Regent Printing (S) Pte Ltd, Singapore, p. 1.

1960s to 1970s: Tan Kian Por



Mai Xiang Jiao De Fu Ren, Chinese ink



Fishmonger
Ink on rice paper

1970s to 1980s: Tan Kian Por



Set of Lotus, Ink on rice paper



Opera Figure
Ink on rice paper



Fragrance and Windy Drops
Ink on rice paper

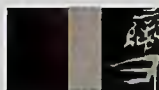


Li Jin Cang Sang Shi Zhi Qi You Wei Xiao
Chinese seal carving



(B/W photograph)
Fishing Life, Oil on canvas

1990s to present: Tan Kian Por



Computer seal carving



Seal carving

The famous international grandmaster art collector, Wang Ziqian, was seen at Tan's exhibition in New York tracing the strokes of Tan's works. Wang said to his friend: "I have never imagined this kind of ink and strokes to come from a place like Singapore!"

Lim Lai Hwa wrote: "Four years ago, I did a television interview with Tan Kian Por. My first impression was that he was reticent and ineloquent ... After the shoot, he expressed an immense interest in video and photography, and asked a lot of questions about digital cameras. He thus gave me a second impression: childlike and curious." A year later, Tan held an exhibition fusing calligraphy, painting and photography, and Lim commented that the exciting exhibition showed how Tan is always open to new possibilities to be at the frontiers of creativity.⁵

Yi Shuihan remarked that "Tan willingly becomes a fool for art, and goes where no man has gone before with art. The master uses such deprecating terms to deride, but also accurately ascribe, himself. The essence of art is to create, to invent. It is to rage against mediocrity, duplication, and merely copying others' work. Such invention might not find public acceptance for now. But why does it matter? As long as I love, and do what I do".⁶

W.Y. Choy tracked Tan's almost three decades long commitment of nine solo exhibitions and countless group shows to Tan's "robust mental and emotional reservoir" over three major distinct disciplines of Chinese art: ink painting, calligraphy and seal carving. Within ink painting alone, traditional themes of bamboos, birds, landscapes, flowers and people are not always all painted by one artist and he remarked on Tan's excellence in such a vast number of subjects.⁷

Similarly, T.K. Sabapathy has followed Ho's artistic discourse and productions for 30 years since Ho's involvement with the Modern Art Society. In *SEE IT. READ IT. LOVE IT*, an exposition by two CM artists Ho and Teo Eng Seng, Sabapathy questioned the issues surrounding the function of calligraphy encapsulated within Western medium as against the traditional classical as well as the socio-political "baggage" of calligraphy during the Mao era. Within the larger external historical

5 Lim Lai Hwa (2008), "Antiquity, Poetry, Creativity", translated by Philip Y.H. Poh in *Tan Kian Por: Old Flame and New Love* (2008), Regent Printing (S) Pte Ltd, Singapore, p. 11.

6 Yi Shuihan (2008), "Roaming Through the Ages, Riding on the Billows — The New Artistic Exploration of the Master of Chixia Xuan, the House of the Foolishly Artful", translated by Philip Y.H. Poh in *Tan Kian Por: Old Flame and New Love* (2008), Regent Printing (S) Pte Ltd, Singapore, p. 7.

7 Choy reviewed Tan's exhibition in Tan, K.P. (2000), *Cheng Huai Wei Xiang*, Regent Printing (S) Pte Ltd, Singapore.

frame, Sabapathy stated: "As a field of study, i.e., calligraphy and its related pictorial implications, it is untouched, especially in Singapore ... As productions, they touch us deeply because they speak of conditions of flux that exemplify our world." On Ho's oeuvre, Sabapathy reviewed: "The imagery embodies kinetic forces that are ceaselessly dilating and coalescing. These are hailed as hallmarks of Ho Ying's art, distinguishing his method and aesthetic ideology."⁸

Sabapathy, one of Singapore's foremost art history scholars, also accorded Ho: "There is another matter. Ho Ying has written extensively on art and continues to do so. I have been drawn to this dimension of his activity, especially in developing parameters for writing art history in Singapore. He is a forceful advocate of critical thinking in creative practice. When he published his thoughts on the advent of modern art he precipitated decisive shifts in practice as well as in claiming theoretical positions for art, in the 1960s. He has continued to advance himself in the critical arena. Ho Ying has registered significant interventions in the exegesis of Singapore's art history."⁹

That Ho had to cull thousands of years of Chinese and Western art history to elucidate his creative oeuvre is an apparent move towards concretising his contributions to Singapore art history. He has always challenged the "status quo" in order to develop a critical voice for Singapore art, championing discourses on art through exhibitions, writing, group critiques and open sessions, thus fertilising the ground for younger artists and critiques to grow in stature. Cheo Chai-Hiang (graduate of the Royal College of Art in the 1970s) and translator of Ho and Liu Kang's *Re-Connecting: Selected Writings on Singapore Art and Art Criticism*,¹⁰ who used to correspond with Ho when he was in England (1971–1978), said: "I believe his [Ho] encouragement partially prompted me to write, sending occasional articles to Singapore for catalogues, magazines and newspapers. Ho never hesitated to give me critical and provocative comments. Sometimes he could be absolutely adamant and dismissive about what I proposed. He and I were never reluctant or

8 Sabapathy, T.K. (ed.) (2003), *SEE IT. FEEL IT. LOVE IT. Art Derived from Chinese Calligraphy*, Modern Art Society, Singapore and Writers, Singapore, pp. 8–15.

9 Sabapathy, T.K. (ed.) (2003), *SEE IT. FEEL IT. LOVE IT. Art Derived from Chinese Calligraphy*, Modern Art Society, Singapore and Writers, Singapore, p. 8.

10 Ho, H.Y. (2005), "On Incomprehensibility, Hanging Upside Down, Doodling and Artist's Stance", in T.K. Sabapathy (ed.), *Re-Connecting: Selected Writings on Singapore Art and Art Criticism*, Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore, Singapore, pp. 29–33.

1950s to 1960s: Ho Ho Ying

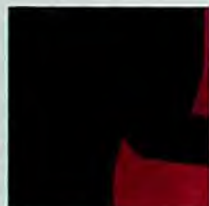


Inspiration of Mountain
Mixed media on canvas



Free Brushes, Mixed media on canvas

1970s to 1980s: Ho Ho Ying



Created Shape, Mixed media



Construction, Mixed media



Alive, Mixed media

1990s to present: Ho Ho Ying



Heaping Rock, Acrylic



Rain Drop, Acrylic



Self Portrait, Oil on canvas

shy about disagreeing with each other. I often feel that if artists in Singapore were more willing to engage in critical and uninhibited debates the way Ho and I used to, instead of evading disagreements, a healthier and more conducive environment for art discourse might emerge..."¹¹

A man of few words, Wee is often the harshest and greatest critic of his own work. He feels the CM Award is a huge encouragement and achievement and would enhance the arts scene in Singapore. He discussed the criterion for the award — that it is necessary to consider holistically the meaning of a body of work of an artist. The difference between artists who spent decades painting and exhibiting, and artists whose artistic aesthetics can be perceived in terms of historical and intellectual contexts. Wee's oeuvre is multi-disciplinary, stylistically diverse encompassing both the Chinese and Western art traditions including academic realism and modernist abstraction. It is often acknowledged that his modernist expressions received the most critical attention.

W.Y. Choy — Singapore's multi-talented scholar, artist, curator, academician, critic, art administrator — assessed Wee's oeuvre: "A hallmark of Beng-Chong's art is his success in maintaining an overall consistency in standards and quality, never slipping into mediocrity. This is a remarkable feat considering that his diverse media, having little in common, throw up unique problems concerning concept, material and techniques."¹²

As a matter of fact, Wee is relentless in perfecting his practice and in seal carving alone, he has created more than 30,000 seals by 2000.

Regarding Wee's seal carving oeuvre, Professor Tommy Koh, then Chairman of NAC, wrote: "He [Wee] has created the seals of some of our most prominent artists, such as Chen Wen Hsi, Chen Chong Swee and Liu Kang. He has successfully mastered and straddled the Chinese and Western cultural and aesthetic traditions. There is often a Western element in his Chinese paintings and a Chinese element in his Western paintings."¹³

Wee's fusion and artistic synthesis of the Chinese and Western genres in his paintings drew critical reviews and amongst these he was named as the top ten artists in contemporary China. Dr Lo Hong Ling, Justice of Peace and President of Lanting

11 *Ibid.*

12 A curatorial critique by W.Y. Choy in *Trajectories: The Oeuvre of Wee Beng-Chong* that was published in 2003.

13 Excerpted from Professor Koh's "Foreword" in *Trajectories: The Oeuvre of Wee Beng-Chong*, published in 2003.

1950s to 1960s: Wee Beng Chong

*In Praise*, Oil on canvas*Resonance*, Oil on canvas*Qin Yin*, Ink on rice paper

1970s to 1980s: Wee Beng Chong

*Painting*, Oil on canvas*Home Sweet Home*
Ink on rice paper*Wee Kheng Chiang*
Founder of UOB 1974
Sculpture

1990s to present: Wee Beng Chong



Seal carving

Seal stamp of
Prime Minister of Singapore
Lee Hsien Loong
Seal carving, 5.08 x 5.08 cm*Li Zheng Shang You Man Xiang Shi Jie*
Engraved pottery

Art Society, Singapore, wrote: “Beng-Chong’s Chinese Ink painting set him apart from the ordinary. With the training in Western art he is able to create form and composition quite distinct from the traditional Chinese painters. Yet at the same time the ink play and brush strokes are fully deployed with mastery and depth.”¹⁴

Oeuvre

This section presents the stylistic antecedents of Wee, Tan and Ho’s art and provides evidence that their innovation was based primarily on the fusion of Chinese and Western traditions. The cultivation of an excellent set of foundational techniques in sketching, brush strokes and in-depth knowledge of various methods and materials, are simply the first precepts in artistic practice. The artists suggest the importance of their knowledge of Chinese literature, aesthetic theories and art history to their artistic career. Furthermore, the trio remarks that *tu po* (breakthrough) is necessary for artists to be considered as creating. Otherwise, the artist is no longer making art which is a statement of who he really is. Audience ambivalence is more often an ambivalence of the artistic process and development of the artist’s oeuvre through the years.

Wee was lauded with the nation’s first visual arts CM, yet he hardly looks at the medal, fiercely defying the suggestion that his artistic oeuvre had already peaked on being conferred the CM. Wee imbues energy into his works, assessing the “*hong hong hong*” or the charging reverberations from the artwork as the “life” given to the work. He prefers his art to speak for itself. Approaching Wee as his former student enabled the interviewer to coax a generous outpouring of valuable insights.

Creating art to Wee is a personal journey of lengthening never-ending thoughts best expressed in visual languages. *You Shi Shi Jie Di Yi* means “Still Number One in the World Again”. Here, he employs Western symbols in Chinese methods and materials, unlike his earlier works which were created using Chinese symbols in Western methods and materials. His works testify of the human



You Shi Shi Jie Di Yi

14 Excerpted from Dr Lo’s “Message” in *Trajectories: The Oeuvre of Wee Beng-Chong*, published in 2003, p. 166.



Zhi Zhe Le



Wen Hua Yuan

condition, as can be seen in his poetry, idioms and proverbs, written and carved in ancient and cursive scripts, dependent on the essence of the philosophical meanings.

In *Zhi Zhe Le* and *Wen Hua Yuan*, couplets composed pictorially in ancient scripts express that “self-knowledge is joy” and the “beauty of culture”. Wee’s works are at the core *xionghun* (forcefulness) in Chinese ink painting, similar to his oeuvre in the 1960s with calligraphy embedded in thick layers of oil paints, as in Western painting, with the Chinese scripts emerging through the abstract expressionist brush strokes. In the 1950s and 1960s, Wee was attempting to fuse both the Western and Chinese

traditions in his art to create a new modern art movement. His recent contemporary works have mainly returned to a delineation of the two. And, yet, within the traditional aesthetic canons of Western and Chinese art, Wee’s mellifluous instincts confirm each genre and cultural origin, solidifying the work as a *Wee*.

Tan describes art as selfhood: “The life is in my brush.” Unless there is life flowing through the self to the work, there is no imprint of the artist. Many of his early works were classical and later, they were derived from scenes of Singapore such as tropical fruits and scenery, and the local ethnic population. Rendered in Chinese ink on rice paper, in the style of traditional subjects of Chinese art, *Fading Away the Remaining Years* questions the purpose of his subject’s life. The man was sitting on the road in Serangoon Road in Little India, Singapore, with a begging bowl, looking lost and bedraggled. Though it seems that the man had a simple existence, and the artist has also chosen a simple life, Tan was moved to create the painting and philosophised the meaning of simplicity in existence.

*Fading Away the Remaining Years*

A heart surgery in about 2010 made it difficult for Tan to express through art and he took a one-year break, questioning life in a different light. The first painting he did after he felt the urge pulsated with freedom from structure and conformity to the natural laws, and a second spiritual awakening akin to a second life of an artist. He painted fishes flying to the moon with blood-red water following close behind. The brush strokes took on the delicacy of his earliest works, though imbued with the rugged strength in his later works.



Lunar Contemplation

Tan's works became less traditional. In 2011, he exhibited a series combining art and technology. The photographed and scanned images of seal carvings, calligraphy, clay sculptures, such as *Li San Jiao* ([martial artist Bruce Lee] Li's 3 Kicks), were manipulated via compositional space, foreground and calligraphy font sizes, and in another series, he merged photographs of himself and sounds of his laughter into the work. In reconciling Chinese art and Western techniques, Tan's aesthetics encompass the total being within the created work, aptly locating and displacing elements of the self within contexts, and delineating lines and intensity by the spirituality of the subject matter.



Li San Jiao



Rhythm of Dance

Ho is forthcoming that his stylistic antecedents were beholden to the Western abstract expressionists. His earliest works in the 1960s of calligraphy scripts in Western medium were created using thick brush strokes intermingling with the application by palette knife. *Rhythm of Dance* (1959) is one of the first significant abstract works he created.

In his earliest explorations of the abstraction of Pollock, Ho wanted to “perform” a step further than Pollock, which he did by constantly tilting his canvas to create flowing lines, instead of keeping the canvas static.

A personal favourite of Ho’s is *Painting 1973 IV* which he originally installed as a diamond shape. This series of art with lines flowing from one direction to the edges of the canvas intersecting and pulling away was seminal to his practice, now a hallmark of his oeuvre. Ho does not determine how the work should be installed. A Ho can be hung or placed any way up; the perspective belongs to the audience. He once wrote: What is the problem with this? When we travel on an aeroplane and view the earth from the sky, what appears on the ground will change according to the direction and position of the aeroplane.¹⁵ And he repeated that in our discussion.



Painting 1973 IV

Infinite Way (1995) was Ho’s subversion of realism and the traditional; the lines of the script flow to the outer edges of the rice paper leaving a white (negative) space in the centre. Ho enthusiastically points out that this has become nothing new today, and designers now use Chinese fonts in such “incompleteness” for catalogues as

15 Ho, H.Y. (2005.) “On Incomprehensibility, Hanging Upside Down, Doodling and Artist’s Stance”, in T.K. Sabapathy (ed.), *Re-Connecting: Selected Writings on Singapore Art and Art Criticism*, Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore, Singapore, pp. 29–33.



Infinite Way

design elements to allude to “Asian” or “Chinese”. To him a “created form” in painting or in an abstract compositional painting can be appraised as a painting in its own right, giving examples of art inspiring designers to design everyday products such as a book cover designed with the influence of Mondrian. He discussed that the genesis of abstraction in modern art premising mainly on the invention of the camera and the academic realism tradition has to evolve with the winds of change; but to what form remains the creative imaginings of artists of the genre.

Thinking, Creativity and Creative Process

This section synthesises the creative process of the artists through an examination of their approach to the issues of creating, thinking and broader participation, revealed through essays, and their oeuvres and interviews. The specific natures of creating and of thinking were chosen because the outstanding artists’ particular form of Singapore art hinged on their virtuosic display of these aspects. While the tripartite correlation of these categories offers a more integrated model with which to view their creative process, it also betrays certain inconsistencies and contradictions in comparative analysis of the three artists to Roe’s research on Western painters’ creative process and creativity.

Roe’s research findings on the creative process of accomplished painters in America are summarised in her essay “Painters and Painting”: “For both artists and scientists, emotion is involved in the creative act itself, although they express it differently, if scientists express it at all. Some painters may use a sexual analogy directly, although this is far from universal among them, but I have never heard it even remotely suggested by a scientist. For both, too, the whole person is intimately involved in the production.”¹⁶ Roe found that for these creative professions, life experiences and personality characteristics (upbringing, parents’ occupations, oedipal problems, etc.) are intricately related with their work though much more obvious in artists. Her research concluded that cognitive thinking is not so prevalent

16 Roc, A. (2007). “Painters and Painting”, in I.A. Taylor & J.W. Getzels (eds.), *Perspectives in Creativity*, Transaction Publishers, New Jersey, pp. 157–172.

in artists though artists have a need for a high degree of autonomy, self-sufficiency and self-direction, and as they are fully on their own, they have a great deal of self-discipline to become accomplished.

Findings for this study on CM artists revealed that accumulated knowledge and skills in many areas of art practice and the humanities impacted their creative process and creativity. In Chinese art, composing poetry and prose is part of the excellence of a great artist. In endeavouring to found new movements in Western art, the CM artists spent much time dissecting the history of Western and Chinese art and the impact on Singapore art. Wee, Tan and Ho have each performed various creative endeavours, such as writing, theorising, painting and teaching (and or mentoring) creative learners. Within the diverse portfolios of creative activities, actual art making is the most central to their life, while the other activities are subsidiary offshoots of their art creation and expression. Focusing on the *mind in transit* (thinking during creative act) becomes essential to delineate the factors which are crucial to produce art. While scientific researchers would look to measuring brain waves during creating, and art historians would be interested in canonising the body of work in contexts, this study thus questions the myth that artists do not employ much cognitive thinking in art making.

The CM artists could clearly relate the experience during creation or creative act. Wee describes his mind as brimming with an urge to make something different and his heart as full of excitement and capacity to transfer the force to the work. Wee's description of his actual working: "I have a cup of hot coffee, sipping it while mulling over whether I feel inspired to create something new today or not. If I feel the urge or tendency to paint at that moment, I will do so. Then the brush just comes to life and the painting is effortless. I have, on many occasions, painted many pieces of the same theme and finishing only when it is resolved."

Tan says: "I consider the blank ground and with the accumulation of decades of work, I take on one step at a time, adding the next stroke as I work. I can finish the art in minutes sometimes. Chinese painters should not perform in front of an international audience as the process of art making is only a few minutes long, and would many know that it has taken years of practice in the studio and thinking about issues in the world around us?"

Ho likens the creative process, which the interviewer puts to him as *mind in transit*, to hunger, and supplied the illustration of eating, and said: "It is as simple as

that. A basic urge and you cannot stop till you are satiated. The mind — it is blank. The force which comes through overtakes and there is no preconceived notion of what the artwork will look like except that you have mastered all the techniques of natural forms for decades. Still, you need to perform beyond the past. Techniques help as you push for redefining, for example, to depict a dog, you need to know the natural anatomy so well beforehand that when you distort or do something different to the natural form, you do so with precision and swiftness, confident of the aesthetics in each genre.”

For these artists, creative process and creativity are clearly defined. Tan explains that the practice in his studio has been almost a daily work, and creativity is the ability to imagine while talent appears to be ordained. Further, all the artists articulated “creative process at the point of creation” as the ability to move with the flow of inspiration, however the flow is dependent on skills, diligent practice, critical thinking, knowledge and, foremost, the worldview and life experience which differentiate each artist’s oeuvre. Wee describes the difference between practice and

creating a piece of art: “Creative process can be honed through practice and knowledge of methods and materials but creativity encompasses both ideation and critical evaluation of issues in art and the world.” However, for Ho, his creative process is part of the artwork as he utilises the rhythms of his body to tilt his canvas, moving 360 degrees around the artwork. To him, the thinking process takes up much of his time as he evaluates the world around him in order to create and present different perspectives in his art.

The CM artists are unanimous that the creative process for art differs for Chinese art and Western genres. Chinese painters can create a piece of artwork — as shown by Wee’s calligraphy — in a few minutes, unlike most Western artists. What makes an artist more outstanding than others is that their art communicates new and innovative concepts by employing differing creative processes to achieve that which no one else has done before. Imagination and creativity are only in the



Fang Yan Gao Kong Ru Guo Yun

mind; the creative process of artists itself is the expression. Creativity is imagination, sometimes “in-expressible” or “un-expressible”. Hence, the ability to imagine might not translate to an ability to paint. The ability to imagine might not translate to an audacity to exhibit nor does the ability to paint provoke others to imagine.

Conclusion

The nature of creative process is necessarily more comprehensive as it explicates art and aesthetic theories about the history of Western and Chinese art, self-directed learning of techniques and improvisations and a deep knowledge of selfhood, and this accumulation is the catalyst which enables artists to display their views of the world regardless of what others may think. Great art marries techniques and ideas to involve the total self during the creative process. The creative process in actual art making is akin to a force — an urge — and for these artists the impulse to create had been there since they were young. Art making is uninhibited by the “noise” that crowds the mind and pollutes the heart. Thus the mind is said to be ...

blank.

Cultural Medallion Visual Artists

Creativity

TAN Swie Hian in Dialogue with Renee LEE

Tan Swie Hian in dialogue with Renee Lee is forthcoming in sharing about his success in fine art practice. This interview piece reveals how one of the brilliant thinkers in the arts defines creativity and the creative process in diverse disciplines.

RL : It must have taken a great deal of focus to become a national artist recognised for your art. What is the main source of your motivation to keep creating? How much of talent and how much of effort are needed?

TSH : I am a spiritual seeker. I have been meditating for over 40 years and art happens to be my craft which is a good vehicle for showing how a free mind functions. Before 1973 when I had the first spiritual illumination, I was a poet who had to be stricken by thunder to be inspired into painstakingly creating verses but after the watershed, I became a multi-disciplinary artist trying my hand at whatever medium I fall in love with at a particular time and place and the word "inspiration" is meaningless as I have just to get started in my studio and things flow naturally.

RL : What do you consider as talent?

TSH : In the light of an artist, talent is one who has artistic seeds held in store in his mere consciousness and who comes into being with the inborn sense for lines, shapes and colours.

RL : What would you describe your talent as?

TSH : As far as my craft is concerned, I am a multi-disciplinary writer/artist.

RL : What have others described your talent as?

TSH : Tan Tien Chi, a well-known collector and the builder of Tan Swie Hian Museum in Singapore, says in an interview with Han Yong Hong published in Lianhe Zaobao on 6th December 2004: "When I was 17, Swie Hian and I were schoolmates at the Chinese High School. At that time, I already admired him as a great genius. It requires being at the right place and at the right time for this genius to blossom. If Singapore had truly made him a genius, then how should we retain this genius? This occurred to me when I was only 17."

Marin Sorescu, the greatest poet/painter of 20th Century Romania says in his preface to his Romanian translation of Tan Swie Hian Fables published in Bucharest in 1996: "I had the chance to spend a few hours in the Tan Swie Hian Museum in Singapore and again, seeing many of his paintings at the National Theatre Gallery in Bucharest, I realised that the emotion I felt persisted and amplified. An outstanding landscape artist, a great portraitist and an extraordinary painter of animals!"

RL : Is art instinctive to you? Were there times when you faced blockage and can't paint?

TSH : As I have said in the answer to the first question, when the mind is silenced and free, it is like a hummingbird flying forwards, backwards, sideways, as it soars, swoops, performs somersaults or remains stationary in the air.

RL : What is effort to you?

TSH : Effort is empowering yourself with knowledge and skills. I am keeping a diary for over 40 years in longhand thereby perfecting my calligraphy skill and organising my thoughts daily. Every day I train and I read avidly until my vision turns blurred. And I spend at least two hours daily in chanting, meditating, climbing a thousand steps to keep my mind mindful and focused and my body fit.

RL : How do you sustain or keep on creating art even when few believe in your work?

TSH : A bird sings because it has a song. To create because you have something to express and you create only for TIME who is the ultimate judge to decide on what

RL : Who were your mentors and how did they influence you?

TSH : I am autodidact.

RL : Who did you mentor? How would you mentor or guide another artist?

TSH : When I have the chance of coming into contact with young artists, I search for their light as talent shines. You can't argue with talent. Once I spot it then I will separate it into a spectrum of analytical colours. I talk hoping to put across my observation. I was one of the judges for the UOB Painting of the Year Competition both in 1987 and 1993: in the former, I picked Baek Yeok Kuan and in the latter, Raymond Lau Poo Seng. I saw light coming out of their works. Both have proven themselves to be distinguished artists. They are also residents at the Telok Kurau Studios today and we used to get together for exchanging views.

RL : Stroke of genius – point of resolution of completeness of work – how do you know when the art is completed or resolved?

TSH : Please read one of my fables entitled *Flowing With Tao*: "A patch of sun was caught on the canvas. He picked up the brush and added it to the composition. While he was considering if the draft of a poem should be final, a gentle wind turned the page. He signed."

RL : Were your family supportive of your career and/or study in the arts?

TSH : Yes.

RL : Which are your seminal works collected or reviewed by others?

TSH : My works are collected worldwide and in three private museums. Many books and articles have been written and films made about me and my works of various media. It is really hard for me to pinpoint them.

RL : Which of your works are significant to you personally?

TSH : While I have no preference whatsoever for any one of all my "children", one small, long-forgotten pencil drawing of the *Portrait of Marilyn Monroe* done when I was 15, salvaged from under piles and piles of damaged documents and works after a fire in the Telok Kurau Studios early this year, kind of reminds me of where the journey starts.



It is of course not titled but it is certainly Marilyn Monroe and the technique used is called sfumato, a smoky shading technique without lines or borders used by da Vinci to paint the *Portrait of Mona Lisa*. It shows art has chosen me a long, long time ago.

TAN Swie Hian

Tan Swie Hian, quadrilingual and multi-disciplinary writer/artist, has published 57 titles of poetry, prose, stories, critiques, translations and artworks and has created oil, acrylic, and ink paintings, sculptures, seal-engravings, calligraphy, prints, ceramics, photographs, songs, installations, earthworks, performances, costumes, masks and stage designs. He has held 23 solo shows and participated in numerous group exhibitions worldwide. He has won 29 accolades nationally and internationally, including, Gold Medal of *Salon des Artistes Français* (Paris 1985), Singapore Cultural Medallion (1987), Marin Sorescu International Poetry Prize (Romania 1999), Gold Medal of Korea-Japan World Cup International Calligraphy Exhibition (Seoul 2002), Singapore Meritorious Service Medal (2003), World Economic Forum Crystal Award (Davos 2003) and *Officier de l'Ordre National de la Legion d'Honneur* (France 2006). He is a Member-Correspondent of the Institute of France, the oldest and the most prestigious art institution in the world. There are three private museums dedicated to his creations, namely: Tan Swie Hian Museum (Singapore), Zheng Yun Lou (Singapore) and Tan Swie Hian Earth Art Museum (China). His art achieved a record price at a 2012 auction in China, putting him as the most expensive living artist in Southeast Asia.

Cultural Medallion Visual Artists

For All Things Bright and Beautiful

Renee LEE

Renee Lee explores the practice of fine art as a full-time career in this essay. Ong Kim Seng who has been a full-time watercolour painter since 1987. The relevance of landscape and still-life artworks is challenged in contemporary art circles, even as the fundamental skills in art are debated in art education. This essay explores key points in the journey of an artist who has an international following and who was accorded distinction by the American Watercolour Society.

Café Dewi is Ong Kim Seng's favourite place in Bali. It faces a tapestry of tiered greens that surround a placid lake from where vignettes of Balinese life is played out: the farmers slowly walking about amidst clouds of smoke or incense or mist that rise into the air. It is an idyllic Asian pastoral scene in a hundred hues. The light is tropical bright but the trees that tier to the heavens shroud the harsh sunlight. Ong paid justice to this grand landscape by painting the largest watercolour work in his career in 2010 when he felt he had achieved some measure of skill to master such a vast piece of work in watercolour. Ong explains that his colours have evolved with the years, mellowing as with life. Measuring 1.8 metres by 1.2 metres, the work was done in the studio from the much smaller *plein air* piece painted in *Café Dewi* years earlier.

Ong's mastery harmonises what could have been a cacophony of greens in the hands of a less skilful artist. Washes of hooker green, sap green, olive green, viridian, emerald, green gold, fir green, leaf green, light green, mint, saffron green, opaque oxide of chromium, apart from the primary yellows and cobalts, in varying tonal depths and transparency, capture the effects of shifting light on the verdant



Terraces in Bali, 2010
Watercolour on paper
Ong Kim Seng Collection

tropical landscape. The scene is one that evokes a sense of peace and meditative calm. For Ong who is a lover of nature and an admirer of beauty, it is a scene he wishes to share with others.

Born on 10 June 1945 in Singapore, Ong had already suffered for his passion for art since a child. His father passed away when he was little, and he was over-aged by the time he started school. His mother worked as a washerwoman to bring up the family. His mother's hope was for Ong, her only son, to become a clerk. By her motherly wisdom, she would tear up his art pieces that he might attend to a more



Heart of Kathmandu, 1983, Award-winning painting, American Watercolor Society

mainstream and stable career. This drove the young child underground; painting in secret, for the innate urge to express in art could not be snuffed. By his secondary school days, his artistic forays landed him several awards at the Inter-School Art Exhibition with publicity in the newspapers “betraying” his secret. His mother was still adamantly against his talent for art, and he went on to work as a bill collector, welder, policeman and with the “golden handshake” of several thousand dollars as retrenchment package as a technician in 1985, Ong, with the moral support of his wife, became a full-time artist.

From the 1960s, he joined a group led by artist-lecturer Chia Wai Hon, and his contemporaries were Chen Chong Swee, Lim Cheng Hoe, Ong Chye Cho and Choy Weng Yang. The group would gather every Sunday at the Singapore River to paint the bum boats and the scenery of old Singapore. Each artist has become a notable artist since, and has been featured in many publications: Chen is considered a giant in pioneer Singapore art history; Lim is a key pioneer watercolourist; Ong Chye Cho is a major art educator; Choy became a famous curator, arts writer and artist. Ong was in great company.

Today, Ong has sold hundreds of paintings and each artwork is a plein air painting, lovingly interpreted on the spot. From Nepal to China, he treks to various exotic locations to challenge his skills in capturing the luminosity of light on his subject.

He would also paint the kampong houses on stilts, and the old charm of Chinatown. His book *Mastering Light & Shade in Watercolour: Infuse Your Paintings with Luminosity and Dramatic Contrast* (2003) was translated into English and available in Singapore, and the Chinese version is very popular in China. A plein air teacher, he has taught at various universities and academies in Asia, demonstrating for two hours at a stretch to large groups of students under the hot sun. The master has exhibited with his students, lending his clout to help his students gain recognition.

At our interview sitting, the artist talks about life and art. A self-taught painter, Ong has found recognition for his work but he is also wary of the vanities of life. Instead, he chooses to speak about art as a way to experiencing the world around us through the small and sublime, like the shape of a dewdrop on a leaf. He also speaks about the transience of nature, and the irony of its permanence through art: the lilies that inspired Monet are no more, but his famous paintings forever capture their sublime beauty; many seasons have passed since *Haystacks* was painted, but the moment of summer-time light lives on in art.

It is refreshing to encounter an artist whose purpose in art is purely about beauty. There was little angst in his work or his life. His artist statement is an announcement to the world of his inner state of being. He creates when he is relaxed and his mind is emptied of the stress and vagaries of life, and it is in this peaceful state that he creates works of luminosity and calmness. Every brick, every shadow or light is lovingly interpreted as Ong ponders the depths and perspectives in his subject. His artistry in watercolour techniques in line, shape, mass, three-dimensional space, two-dimensional space, perspective, light, colour, texture, pattern, time and motion are consolidated inimitably into a style easily distinguishable as Ong Kim Seng.

Watercolour is a most challenging medium — there is no room for mistakes; plein air painting in watercolour can be daunting in the face of an audience, students or terrain. He is never fazed as he has been working under various conditions, from teaching demonstrations to climbing the Himalayas to capture its beauty. Café Dewi is beautifully lush and languid and Ong's ode to the realist impressionist genre took him to greater heights of achievement in mastering techniques in both the bodily physical and artistic techniques of methods and materials. In the freezing cold of



Nepal, 2001, Award-winning painting, American Watercolor Society

Nepal's Himalayas, the artist grappled with new conditions to create his watercolour paintings, this time the landscape was geometrical and the subject was almost aloof for watercolour works.

Trekking through Asia to represent the monumental and the mundane, he interprets Asia through traditionally Western frames, in a visual language quickly understandable by an international audience. Yet the collectability of Ong's paintings is a double-edged sword, such as his prize winning award for Nepal, for artists ought to be social agents of change, not highly lauded for easily understood paintings. Aesthetic theory continues to question the purpose of art and art itself, which, through the interview with Ong, art sites itself in acknowledgement of interpreting what peace is and no one can take that away from an artist who paints to express his potential in being able to include the beautiful to him or exclude the not beautiful. He has been conferred seven AWS Memorial Awards by the American Watercolour Society, and is still the only Dolphin Fellow who is not from USA, and was awarded the Cultural Medallion in 1990 for being one of the key figures in the development



Mount Everest, 1986
Watercolor on paper

of the arts scene in Singapore. His collectors include Queen Elizabeth II and Kofi Annan. His fascinating career as a Singaporean artist garnering international awards puts him ahead of the globalisation trend of the 21st century. Thirty years before, Ong has travelled and opened the world up for himself.

The First Colombo Plan Scholar in Art and Design

Renee LEE

Loh Khee Yew, the Colombo Plan Scholar of 1966, discusses with Renee Lee the development of design education as the precursor to create a design industry. This essay traces Loh's pioneering work provided by the opportunity of an international education, and ponders the current state of applied art education and business.

The studies of fine and graphic art were in fact art and design — two sides of the same coin.

— Loh Khee Yew

The story of the Three Little Pigs is all too familiar. It's a morality tale that ends happily for the piglets. But what of the Big Bad Wolf? What's his side of the story? A revisionist take, when strolling along the bookshop-lined streets of London I chanced upon in a book *My Side of the Story*, puts it down to an opportunistic eye for (bad) design and hunger on Wolf's part; his campaign went well until thwarted by the sturdy design of Piglet #3's brick house. I would like to believe that while the latter's home met the standards of functionality, the structure was also artfully and beautifully designed.

This interesting new angle to the original tale appears to personify the dichotomy, which exists in art and function. While art serves the almost spiritual side in each of us, the notion of function in art has not taken over our psyche as recognition of an integration of the two is often not articulated enough.

"Applied art" was the new term given to this concept of utilitarian art in the early 1900s, when the Bauhaus founded a new movement to create a school of thought where the purpose of mass-produced good design was to give us a higher quality of life.

Endeavouring to uncover the history of our own genesis of design education and industry development meant turning the spotlight on one who had devoted all of his life to design education in Singapore — Loh Khee Yew. Loh was the right man at the right place at the right time. In the 1960s, Singapore was going through rapid growth and economic development. The country was internationalising, opening its doors to tourism and investors. The influx of rich visitors and business people meant that the demand for higher quality souvenirs, consumer items and corporate identity collaterals was on the rise. Save for a few firms churning out design work, there were no school churning out design graduates.

Education — World War II and Scholarship

Loh grew up during the Japanese Occupation. Faced with a past disruption in his education, he knew the value of learning and took on the opportunity of an overseas education with great fervour and focus. As a young school boy, his education was halted for three years during World War II, and he became a grass cutter, a tool apprentice and a shoemaker, living on 15 katis of rationed rice a month. The best meal of the day was the catch of bullfrogs, eels and fish salvaged from the large canals.

After the war, Loh returned to Rangoon Primary School to continue with his studies. He went on to Victoria School and Raffles Institution, and then to teach at the Institute of Education (IE), currently the National Institute of Education (NIE).

In 1966, the government awarded the first Colombo Plan Scholarship in Art and Design to Loh and a fellow colleague¹ from IE, to pursue fine art and design studies overseas. Loh went to the Alberta College of Art, Canada, where, for four years (1966–1970), he put his heart and soul to learn everything he could on fine art and applied arts. It would require two universities to educate the young Loh. Loh reminisced:

In 1966, and with a sinking heart, I saw my beautiful wife and our two kids aged three and four waving sadly through the pothole of the plane departing from Singapore. This was some fifty years ago when I first landed on a place that covered one-sixth of the earth's

¹ The other scholar was Lim Guan Poon, a trained teacher from the Chinese stream. He returned to teach basic drawing and illustration until the Baharuddin Vocational Institute (BVI) was dissolved. Lim retired and passed away soon after retirement.

crust. My odyssey began when I saw [a] vast stretch of drab brown earth, crimson plains, blue mountains, platinum rocks, pink snow, dazzling against a canopy of greys. Nature's palette of vibrant colours was extraordinary — a feast to the eyes of one who flew some ten thousand miles to learn fine and commercial² art. It was the first time, I realised Nature would be my best art teacher with its inexhaustible source of art canon.

The curriculum was world class with Loh mastering the finer points of fine art and design. The studies of fine and graphic art were in fact art and design — two sides of the same coin.

The first two years of studies comprised art fundamentals and principles, art history and a variety of medium such as watercolour, ink and wash, gouache, acrylic, conte, mixed media and collage. However, the application and focus were design-based, requiring further skills of rendering, illustration and graphics. Amongst the teaching staff were established sculptors, ceramicists, illustrators, designers, artists and creative directors. It was not uncommon for a sculptor to teach the principles of perspective. The next two years included the studies of photography, typography, design, advertising, image composition, reproduction processes, methodology and rationale at solving design problems.

A distinct concept which Loh learnt was Bauhaus — a school set up in Germany in 1919 — which was the universal movement grounded in utilitarian art. In exploring the notion of how art can have function in everyday life, it became clear that good design comprises the beauty of an object with the function in the form. An example of the new paradigm being introduced then was the marriage of art and design, yielding from the Bauhaus thought on applied arts. At the Canadian university, Loh learnt this concept of the union of art and design which a group of architects, painters, potters and sculptors had fused into a single creative expression for the purpose of creating useful as well as beautiful objects for a heightened sense of aesthetics in daily life. This utilitarian art he learnt and later applied to creative design where form follows function and function must have skills. In other words, function must be imbued with art and craftsmanship.

2 "Graphic design" and "commercial art" were used interchangeably. By the 1990s, the term "visual communication" became more commonplace than the former.



The universities in Canada were cooperative for the advancement of learning. Loh was to learn that, throughout the four years at Alberta College, he would never be denied knowledge; if the university could not provide the knowhow, another university in Canada will. Hence, the Ottawa Administration made arrangements with the Vancouver School of Art for him to study photography and printmaking, as the Alberta College did not have such programmes at that time. The lecturer taught Loh, his only student, various techniques in photography and gave him the key to the studio for further exploration in studio techniques.

Sensing that his future career might see him managing an art curriculum or department, Loh made a further request to study arts administration. The Canadian Ministry could not locate such a course and the Principal gave Loh an internship with himself (the Principal) as the arts administrator. A desk and chair were brought into the office of the Principal so that he could study arts administration hands-on. Listening in on all the Principal's telephone conversations, meetings with faculty and all, Loh was later able to step into his new role as Head of Applied Arts at Baharuddin Vocational Institute (BVI) upon his return to Singapore in 1970.

School of Applied Arts at BVI

The history of design education unfolded with the building of BVI at Stirling Road in 1968; Loh returned to helm the School of Applied Arts in 1970.

Loh was motivated by the government support in developing Baharuddin into a state of the art applied arts institution. The two-year art training programme, admitting students with a special aptitude in art, was continually revised from craft/trade/technician certificate levels to higher levels to meet industrial needs. Within the premises of BVI, the German government provided aid in setting up the Printing School. Nine German staff including a Director were flown in to organise the various departments of the new School of Printing. The School of Printing had

a very comprehensive curriculum, integrating separate subjects such as typesetting and compositing, letterpress or offset printing, lithography, plate making, binding and finishing, and delineating the diverse potential applications of printing to new industries. Close alliances with top brand name companies, such as Kodak, were developed for mutually beneficial support. The German educators trained local staff to gradually take over the School of Printing after they had transferred the technological know-how to BVI. Loh recounted this almost forgotten world-class education within BVI.

The Fledgling Design Industry

In 1973, BVI fed the first batch of design graduates to the industry. Thus began Singapore's fledgling design industry. There were graphic artists, illustrators, ceramists, and gold and silver smiths, and other types of designers and craftsmen. By 1980, BVI was preparing the first cohort of students, staff, equipment and training facilities to a diploma level. The new courses were graphic design, interior design, furniture design, and fashion design. BVI was a beacon to many students with a passion and aptitude for art and design with internship an integral part of the studies. Loh coordinated frequent visits to various creative studios in the advertising and design-related industries — to evidence that ideas, concepts, presentation media, calligraphy and art preparation were carried out hands-on by artists with their skills in drawing, painting, design, airbrush, and illustration. Students began to recognise how a specific art form provided a better solution to the visual presentation of a business brief by a client.

In keeping with the educated clientele — Singapore consumers and more discerning international corporations — in the 1980s, the government set out policies for a creative workforce. The notion of creative became explicit: The purpose of creative within the nation's context became the domain of arts schools to educate "creatives" in fine and applied arts. By the early 1990s, BVI was closed, and with it, an era of doers or craftsmen appeared to have given way to thinking "creatives". The Temasek Polytechnic's School of Design emerged which enrolled visual communications and three-dimensional designers for a three-year diploma programme. The new millennium saw the rise of more polytechnics offering art- and design-related courses. Singapore Polytechnic, Ngee Ann Polytechnic and Nanyang Polytechnic started offering design and multimedia courses, with the English Language and academic prerequisites.

LaSalle College of Arts

In 1992, Brother Joseph McNally, President of LaSalle College of Arts (LaSalle), talent-hunted Loh as Dean of the School of Design, and allowed him a free hand to plan the curriculum. Loh was then a Creative Director of his own LO-DESIGN consultancy firm after having worked at international design agencies following the closure of BVI.

From 1992 to 1995, Loh created a programme which extended beyond what BVI and LaSalle offered, and the revamped diploma comprised both practice and theory. Students were trained in live model (figure) drawing and the study of art fundamentals, history of art, copywriting, aesthetics and so forth. Notable theory lecturers were Choy Weng Yang (the first Manager and Curator of the National Museum) and Patrick Chia Seow Leng (now the Director of Design Incubation Centre, Division of Industrial Design, School of Design and Environment of the Nanyang Technological University).

Six miles away from LaSalle, on San San campus, next door to the Istana (official residence of the President of Singapore), was Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA), which has been teaching art since 1938. It started graphic design courses in the 1980s. All their lecturers were mostly trained in Europe, and it was through many long walks with Loh that Dr Gwee Yee Hean, who was a historian by training, and then principal of NAFA, became more familiar with the applied arts training which Loh had undertaken in Canada.

There was a sense of camaraderie between the leaders of the two arts institutions; several of their lecturers taught at both institutions and shared their expertise. Singapore began to birth several outstanding creative directors and entrepreneurs.

Degree in Applied Arts

While competition for the best students for the diploma courses began to heat up, the only through route to a credible and Ministry of Education accredited overseas design degree locally, was via the two private institutions of NAFA and LaSalle. In a fortuitous move, which was to provide an affordable degree pathway for their own diploma graduates, the two private art institutions had already worked hard to link up with Australia and the United Kingdom to provide degree programmes with advance standing in the early 1990s.

From 1992 to 1995, as Dean of the LaSalle Design School, Loh was tasked to restructure the programmes to a more advanced level. The diplomates could look forward to further pursue their studies at degree level with RMIT University of Melbourne, Australia. A five-year Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) was signed to read for the degrees of visual communication, architectural interiors, fashion design, and gold and silver smithing. The degrees were of the same status as those offered on the RMIT University campus. A similar MOU was signed with the University of Central England.

In the 1990s, NAFA partnered Curtin University, Huddersfield University and Loughborough University. Later, in the 2000s, NAFA tied up with Loughborough University and Huddersfield University, and LaSalle collaborated with the Open University followed by Goldsmith College for the degree in design.

Industrial Practice

Loh became a pioneer member of the Designers Association of Singapore (DAS) in 1984, and an exco member of the Design Council under the chairmanship of Dr Tay Eng Soon, then Minister for Education. The purpose was to provide design students opportunities to interact directly with prospective employers — creative professionals and advertising entrepreneurs working in the advertising, design, hotel, and retail industries. It was meaningful for students as they realised that much of these creative business operations were related and relevant to their art and design training in their respective institutes.

Between 1982 and 1992, Loh applied his skills in the private sector as Head of Creative Services, managing three advertising agencies under one holding company to create TV commercials, retail and press advertisement, and pitching advertising accounts to companies in the banking and petroleum business, and a highlight was being co-winner of the South Advertising Award, AdAsia 84, Seoul, South Korea in 1983. Later, he would branch out to start his own practice naming it LO-DESIGN.

With the dawn of 1990, Loh decided to schedule more time to fine art exhibitions and held his first solo art exhibition at the Empress Place gallery, subsequently entrenching himself in fine art by participating in many group exhibitions, namely Maiden Inspirations, Magnificent Seven and Different Strokes. In 1995, he and Brother Joseph McNally co-pioneered art group 90 within the premises of LaSalle. The objective was to augment the sustained figurative studies from a live model.

In 2003, Loh and his daughter Joan set up an art studio amidst the lush greenery of Bishan Park 2 to reach out to heartlanders, conducting pottery classes to housewives in English with a mix of dialects. The drawing and painting classes were popular amongst working adults who could only attend from 7pm to 10pm on weekdays and 10am to 1pm on weekends. This vision was short-lived as the lease of the studio facilities was not renewed. They had hopes that this location might be converted into an artists' village, to encourage participation from heartlanders, and evolve a new form of art culture enriching the lives of the (general) public.

Thoughts on Epistemology

During discussions with Loh, I took his vision for the next lap for design education and industry seriously. He was of the view that design should be twinned with business in an entity such as design business. The objective would be to ensure a new generation of design entrepreneurs who could create their own identity locally and venture internationally. Such models of design firms could bring Singapore to another level.

This is by no means a new phenomenon if research on international design studios or companies were carried out. If this were an aim for the design industry, then we would need to rethink design education once again. Schools need to build a firm foundation of design capabilities in their students. In attempting to understand the "knowledge" which students would require, an examination of epistemology would enable educators to make decisions based on the various approaches to the acquisition of knowledge. More importantly, the notion of knowledge in the context of design education could involve multiple ways of knowing, from abstract analytic reasoning to sensory-motor skills. In the contemporary and global contexts, deciding on curriculum aims to make the theory of knowledge or epistemology an encompassing application of skills, rules and facts (or generally termed as "knowledge"), to develop learners who are rational, creative, skilled and dynamic rests with the academicians.

This brings us to revisit the story of the three little pigs which built three different houses. Each built a house they thought was necessary for themselves with the resources they could get, given their skills and beliefs of what is important. Then we have the Philip Starcks of this world who invented an orange juicer/squeezer which many thought was unnecessary and simply a form with a tad of function. In Singapore's culture and context, this invention has little function. A glimpse into

the ritual of an affluent European would perhaps show that at 7.30 in the morning, he awakes and places a tall drinking glass under the Philip Starck juicer and without having to keep refilling into a drinking glass, he gets his orange juice with one glass and one tool. And the juicer looks cool and trendy too.

Perhaps being creative is not building your own design because it looks like something you can use or have used before, but by expanding horizons to see whether function in contexts are really about cultural constructs. For between a concept and product takes a lot of hard work given to understand techniques, ideas, and most of all, the person using the product.

Inventors design goods or services to create wants which may become needs. I want a computer has become I need a computer. It has been said that, in business, one should look for a gap in the market. But, is there a market in the gap? Designers, unlike fine artists, need to assess aspect of utility.

In a nutshell, design education is about more in less, for only when one knows the least met needs would one be able to create a product or product class to fulfil those yet unmet needs. Most people only articulate needs they think they should have or are commonplace, such as a nicer and bigger car.

It would appear that the new vision for design education is one which ideally develops “problem finders” than “problem solvers”. In this, the wisdom of management is *Art of War* by Sun Tzi. The playing field has widened from the local context to a global one, and in order to be a hub of international design education and industry, Singapore would need her own vision now. The call for new visionaries, architects, implementers and executors in design and education rests upon those who have the passion and knowledge to devote their work to transforming lives by design.

In the end, it is building a house that is solid to the core. Education cannot be stressed harder for it provides the window to the world as is supported by the decision, in 1966, to send two teachers overseas to return home and train generations of designers to develop a design industry. While it has taken a few good men and women to bring the world here, it is time for a new generation to bring Singapore to the world, seeing “more in less” in an international sense.

But what of a new Big Bad Wolf? What’s his side of the story?

Editor’s Note: I have to express my thanks to Mr Loh Khee Yew and the late Brother Dr Joseph McNally for their wonderful guidance when I was a young art educator at LaSalle. I was to continue in some areas of Loh’s work when I became the curriculum consultant for the School of Design in 1994 and School of Visual Arts in 1997, writing curriculum for standardisation in teaching and the accreditation documents for submission to the Ministry of Education and partner universities in courses such as arts management, visual communication, architectural interiors, fashion design, and gold and silver smithing.

1980s and Beyond at NAFA

Critical and Creative Thinking in Contemporary Art Practice

CHIEW Sien Kuan

Chiew Sien Kuan examines the state of art education in NAFA and questions the purpose of requiring teachers to ensure students master foundational technical excellence in fine art courses.

Art Is a Marathon — Are We There Yet?

BOO Sze Yang

Boo Sze Yang recounts his life as an art student, where fine art education is very much an apprenticeship; one remembers teachers vividly, from their quiriness to their interesting teaching styles — very human and humane. Sze Yang recalls the days when teachers were free to express and sing in class and along the corridors. Students became free to express.

Chiew Sien Kuan

I believe that there is a general consensus that until recent years, the “traditional” methods in art education that NAFA adhered to afforded little flexibility for both teaching and learning.

Needless to say, the inflexibility of NAFA’s traditional teaching methodology gave rise to frustrations, if not tension between students and lecturers. Students felt their needs and expectations were not being met, and lecturers felt constrained by the teaching methodology to adequately provide the guidance their students needed. In effect, NAFA students and lecturers were searching for a balance between flexibility that allowed greater freedom for thought, expression and ideas on the one part, and technical training within a closely guided programme on the other. By the late 1980s, the NAFA tradition was increasingly being challenged by fresh ideas on art and art making with the entry of the likes of performance artist Tang Da Wu, printmaker Chng Seok Tin, sculptor Han Sai Por and painter Tan Chwee Seng, into NAFA’s teaching staff. That some majors in the Fine Arts Department’s

three academic disciplines — Western oil painting, Chinese ink painting and sculpture — should interest only a handful from a yearly cohort of 30 to 40 full-time students was an indication that NAFA's discipline-based approach was in question. It was also felt that the programme was churning out technique-based "specialists" who had the technical skills, but lacked creativity; while there was expression, there was little concept.

NAFA's attempts to tweak its curriculum and teaching methods saw the introduction of art theory and courses to improve the communication skills of its students. With at least 15 to 20% of students eventually becoming full-time artists, it was also decided that opportunities for further studies and programmes to prepare them for entry into the arts industry as practitioners should also be introduced.

The late 1980s also marked the beginning of the sea change in Singapore's arts scene. Following the 1989 Report of the Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts, government funding was channelled into "hardware development". NAFA and LaSalle were among the beneficiaries of the arts and culture developmental blueprint that put in plans new arts campuses and thrusts for the two arts academies to offer degree programmes. The two decades since the first report on arts and culture has further loaded the arts into the economic bandwagon as cultural policy pins a leg on the persuasive arguments of knowledge and creative capital in Singapore's drive towards globalisation.

"Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts is a temple of arts built for wonderful artists who create beautiful art that cleanses the soul of art lovers," my ten-year-old daughter Anna once wrote as I was still looking for the words to start off my reflection on critical and creative thinking in the contemporary art practices. She must have learned this from a book on the ideals of art and holistic art education. Being an art lecturer and a practising artist, I am only too aware of the dilemma we face in fostering creative and critical thinking in art education. Critical thinking requires "the ability to think clearly and rationally".¹ Vygotsky suggests that the "learner talks him or herself into understanding" and argues that "thought is born in language".² The sad truth is that many practising artists are strong in their visual language, but poor in their verbal and written skills. Unfortunately, this "truth" has too often been

1 Refer to "What is critical thinking?". Available at <http://philosophy.hku.hk/think/critical/ct.php> [Accessed: 12 January 2015].

2 Yenawine, P. (1999), "Theory into Practice: The Visual Thinking Strategies", paper presented at the Aesthetic and Art Education: A Tran-disciplinary Approach Conference, September 27–29 1999, Lisbon, Portugal.

used as a reason by art students and lecturers to excuse themselves from engaging with art theory and critical thinking.

It is in my opinion that important as it may be, the artist's passion alone is not enough, nor will formalistic "beautiful" paintings make the mark in the contemporary arts scene. In this age of multi-disciplinary and multimedia practices in the visual arts, over-emphasis on the mastery of technical skills, be it in the conventions of oil painting, Chinese painting, printmaking, photography, ceramics or sculpture, etc., is not realistic. Creativity, and the ability for independent and critical thinking, almost appear to be the new drivers.

My colleagues and I have had long debates about how art should be taught, and indeed, what disciplines in art making should be transmitted. NAFA now looks to nurture creative talents and to prepare them to lead in the contemporary arts scene. We encourage diploma graduates to further their studies and to explore outside their comfort zones. As an art educator, my role is to equip my students with skillsets they can take with them to master their future and to solve the problems in life they will encounter.

Picasso once said: "Some painters transform the sun into a yellow spot; others transform a yellow spot into the sun."³ Will my students be artists who transform a yellow dot into the sun, or will they reduce the sun into a yellow dot? It is up to them. In preparing themselves for their chosen career in the arts, students should be engaged with the arts scene, see the big picture of the world around them, and be able to decide for themselves the value they wish to bring to the world as artists. If they should otherwise choose another path in life, it is my hope that my students will see the value that art has brought in helping them realise their full potential as a human being.

Boo Sze Yang

Give a man a painting and he will hang it on his wall until the paint on the canvas fades. Teach a man to paint and you can only keep your fingers crossed that he will continue to paint throughout his lifetime. It was in NAFA that I discovered myself — I realised that I could do magic with a few brushes and tubes of paint. I must have been a bad student because I cannot remember much of what my teachers taught me, but

3 Von Oech, R. (1986). *A Kick in the Seat of the Pants*, Harper Collins Publishers, New Jersey, p. 57.

I do remember Mr Wee Beng Chong constantly urging his students with these words of wisdom: “oil thick thick”, “be daring” and “won’t die lah”. I also remember how Mr Lim Yew Kuan always spoke about music when we met to look at my paintings.

It was here at NAFA that I spent hours in my studio at San San campus on Mount Sophia Road, trying to perfect that charcoal drawing of that less than perfect plaster cast of *Venus*. The solid foundation in drawing and painting is one key to sustaining and developing my artistic vision. When I went to England in 1994 to further my studies, I found my weakness with independent thinking and my inability to contextualise the work I made. I had a difficult but enjoyable year at the University of Reading, spending time reading (pun unintended) and equipping myself in verbalising the content in my paintings.

I came back to Singapore in 1995 after completing my Postgraduate Diploma in Fine Art and had my first solo art exhibition at The Substation in 1996. Mr Chiew Sien Kuan visited the exhibition, and that was the starting point of my teaching career at NAFA. In 2004, I received a scholarship from NAFA to do my Master’s at Chelsea College of Art and Design in London. That turned out to be another turning point in my artistic journey. I realised nearer the end of the course that I was over-conceptualising my painting and not allowing the painting to speak for itself. It is interesting how the learning process is actually a process of taking-in and throwing-out. I am a Libra and so I should know better the need for balance.

It was in NAFA that I met some of the most passionate people working towards the same dream, albeit within a not-so-perfect “dream factory”. While many renowned art schools in the UK were established at least a century ago, NAFA is still relatively young as an institution. But it has been a long time since 1988 when I first studied watercolour painting with the late Madam Lai Foong Moi. The campus was much smaller and there were fewer students, but the bond between students and teachers was closer then. If you were to stand at the entrance of the main building at old San San campus, you would be in position for a full view of the NAFA spirit. If you didn’t hear Mr Lim Yew Kuan singing his favourite tune along the corridor outside the studios, you would most probably hear Mr Tan Chwee Seng doing an aria from an Italian opera. In the centre courtyard, you might catch Mr Tan Teck Heng playing basketball with students. In one drawing studio, you could see mesmerised students watching the most beautiful teacher in NAFA, Miss Zhu Wei Li, working magic with a willow charcoal stick on a sheet of Fabriano paper. Next door, you might catch Mr Choo Keng Kwan doing his magic too, wielding a feather duster across the

surface of a student's charcoal drawing and uttering the magic words: "Do it again." On the ground level, you could hear the late Mr Tan Tee Chie serenading to a group of less-than-fascinated students on the philosophy of Chinese Painting. If you turned around and faced the open courtyard where the canteen was, you might hear our favourite auntie promoting her special dish-of-the-day to hungry art students. On your way out, you might bump into the eccentric campus care-taker Mr Raju and regret having started a conversation with him on how to get to the Cathay building.

One senior artist once said that art is a marathon — how fast one can run is not as important as how long one is able to sustain a practice. I am glad that I am still able to make paintings, have enough to travel and see the world, healthy enough to continue a weekly game of badminton with good friends, and have my favourite albeit not very healthy dish — Sri Lanka crab cooked with salted egg.

CHIEW Sien Kuan

Chiew Sien Kuan is the Deputy Head of the Department of Fine Art. Chiew graduated from NAFA with a Diploma in Fine Art in 1989, majoring in painting. Thereafter, he joined NAFA as an assistant lecturer. In 1994, Sien Kuan undertook BFA with University of Tasmania. Upon his return, he continued his next ten years with NAFA as a lecturer before completing his MFAD in Tasmania in 2005. Sien Kuan works with oil painting. As a carpenter's son, he was unaffectedly driven also into making "objects" and sculpture since 1990. In 1992, his painting was awarded the Highly Recommended prize in the Australian Bicentennial Art Award of Young Artists and the 1st prize in the 3D category in the Phillippe Charriol Foundation Contemporary Art Competition in 1993.

BOO Sze Yang

Boo Sze Yang graduated from the NAFA in 1991, completed his Postgraduate Diploma in Fine Art at the University of Reading, UK, in 1995, and holds a Master in Arts degree from Chelsea College of Art and Design, University of the Arts London (2005). He has had 13 solo exhibitions, including Sanctuary Art at St Francis, Melbourne, Australia (2012); The New Cathedral, NAFA Galleries, Singapore (2012); Sanctuary, Red Mill Gallery, Vermont, USA (2011) and In-between, Zandari, Seoul, South Korea (2005). Recent international group exhibitions include: The Realm in the Mirror, the Vision Out of Image, an Exhibition of Singapore Contemporary Art, Suzhou Jinji Lake Art Museum, China (2013); the 26th Asian International Art Exhibition, Hangaram Art Museum, South Korea (2011); Exchange China-Singapore Art Showcase, Yingu Art Mansion, Beijing, China (2010); Stretch Your Imagination, Penang State Art Gallery, Malaysia (2009); and From Left to Right and Right to East, University of Huddersfield and Huddersfield Art Gallery, UK (2009). Sze Yang was full-time lecturer at NAFA from 1996 and Head of Department of Fine Art from 2007 to 2010. He is currently a full-time artist.

成为优秀的艺术讲师需要具备哪关键要素？

What do you consider as critical requirements of an excellent art lecturer?

“

1. 要会做游戏，或懂得带领学生玩游戏。当我们孩提时，人人都会，都爱玩游戏，那是极认真和投入的。随着年龄的增长，慢慢失去玩游戏的能力或兴趣。游戏是需要极大的想象力和热情的，这也是艺术学习或创造的基础条件，是艺术讲师首先自己要具备的素质

Know how to play games or guide students to play games. During childhood, all can and love to play — an activity we get seriously engrossed in. As we grow older, we lose the ability and interest in play — something that requires a strong sense of imagination and deep passion, which is the foundational prerequisite for artists' learning or creativity, hence an art lecturer must first possess this quality.

2. 求新求变的创造力。科技发展一日千里，按几个键，就搜索到大量的咨询，甚至所有的教学内容。所以，对于教学内容要因人而异，因时而异，新意和变化不为哗众取宠，而是提高学生的求知欲。

Creativity and innovative ideas. Rapid advancement in technology enables one to search for tons of information, including teaching contents, just a few clicks away. Consequently, teaching contents should be customised to suit the students and the times. New ideas and changes notwithstanding, the utmost goal is to enhance students' curiosity.



Guo Liang

3. 打破权威、尽量拉平年龄差距，不是总想着教导，而是分享。艺术家从来不是教出来的，所以老师要做的事是引导，启发，开悟，和学生一起去发现，去探寻。

Go beyond the teacher authoritative figure. Try hard to bridge the student-teacher age gap and to not always think only of teaching but of sharing. Artists are born and not taught. The teacher's role is thus to guide, stimulate and enlighten students, discovering and exploring with them together.

在我看来，做到这三样就已经相当不易了。

In my opinion, for a lecturer to achieve these three facets is already a feat.

艺术职业生涯要取得成就

To achieve a successful career in the arts



1. 学习 学习 再学习
这是最重要的，只有不断的学习，方有进步得可能。
Learn. Learn. And continue to learn.
This is most important. Progress is possible only when one never stops learning.
2. 具有好奇心和怀疑的眼光
好奇让人先想办法搞懂，怀疑让人不断寻找新的可能
Be curious and questioning
Curiosity gives one the impetus to acquire knowledge; questioning makes one unceasingly search for new possibilities.
3. 对过往的批评力
不管他人如何评价，自己始终要知道还是可以更好地，因为没有最好，只有不断向最好靠近的可能。
Strength from critiquing past experiences
Regardless of how others evaluate, one must know one can always be better because the best does not exist and can be achieved only by aiming for a possibility of the best.

4. 不放弃

职业生涯不易，不要轻易怀疑自己的能力，就会保持创作激情，自信的面对周遭世界的各种变异。

Never give up

Establishing a career is not easy. If we do not readily doubt our ability, we can maintain creative fervour and be confident in the face of all kinds of changes in the world.

Guo Liang graduated from the renowned Shanghai Theatre Academy and was head-hunted by the then Television Corporation of Singapore in 1994 to launch his career as a professional TV host in Singapore. He immediately became an audience favourite with his charismatic hosting style. Today, he is undeniably one of the most respected TV hosts in Singapore. Guo Liang's hosting style is sharp, mature and yet witty. He is the choice when it comes to large-scale "live" programmes and has hosted local and regional top shows like Star Awards and China Singapore in Concert. His vast hosting experience ranges from serious current-affairs genre to casual light-hearted gameshows, harnessing fans from the professionals and executives to the heartlanders. Trained professionally as an actor, Guo Liang also has an impressive track record in acting. He has acted in local and regional co-productions, including blockbusters like *Breakout* and *Romance of the Book and Sword*.

How have you managed to maintain a balance between both your academic profession and international artistic career?



Creativity affirms the attitudes of invention and imagination equally; it asserts the attributes of perception and of discovery. Whilst academia focuses on the pursuit and transmission of knowledge, it presupposes the attribute of perception and discovery. The relationship between the creative energy and the academic energy is complementary. By engaging with and in the academic environment through research and teaching, my process of creating is enhanced or even provoked, leading to new discoveries. In the same breath, my approach to academia in the area of curriculum design is informed by the way I think about and work with material and form.



Dr Joyce Beetuan Koh

Both the creative and academic environments demand rigorous attention to ensure the highest quality of work. Whilst I feel privileged to be able to stay active in both environments, it is not an uncommon state to be all consumed by a project that leaves me completely drained of energy afterwards. I must confess that the sensation of being engulfed is strangely self-sustaining, even nourishing. Nevertheless, I have learnt that an effective way to stay artistically and professionally healthy is to plan ahead primarily to vary the degree of intensity and allow periods of creative pauses. What is more difficult but necessary is to refuse projects which are not aligned to your artistic trajectory. To do so, one must muster up courage and stay focused.

Award-winning composer Dr Joyce Beetuan Koh has a portfolio ranging from concert music, dance collaborations, sound installations and multimedia production. Two piano works (*la pierre magenta* and *Piano Peals* for piano and soundtrack) are published by the Associated Board Royal Schools of Music (UK). The International Piano Quarterly has described her sound world as one that “engages the intellect and requires a different approach”.

Dr Koh's concert music is featured at international festivals and concert series: BBC Radio 3 (*Tai* for orchestra by BBC Symphony Orchestra, Johannes Kalitzke), Magyar Rádío (*Tai* by Hungarian Symphony Orchestra, László Tihanyi); Birmingham Frontiers Festival (*Sonography IV*, trio with electronics by Birmingham Conservatoire musicians); Biennale Musiques France (*Sonography II*, for 6 voices by Résonance Contemporaine); Melbourne Arts Festival (*Six Hermits* for Chinese instruments by Hong Kong Chinese Music Virtuosi); the Concertgebouw Netherlands (*The Water Burns* for contralto and chamber ensemble, Hilary Summers and Nieuw Ensemble); Ensemble Contemporaine de Montréal Concert Series (*Le Piano Magenta* for chamber ensemble, conducted by Véronique Lacroix); Concertgebouw Maths and Music Festival, UK (*Fors* by East Anglia Chamber Orchestra UK, Sharon Chao) and Stavanger Symphony Orchestra concert series (*Divergent Plates* for accordion concerto, Frode Haltli and Susanne Mällki).

Highlights of Dr Koh's multimedia collaborations include *Future Feed* (Arts Fission Company, 2014, site-specific dance) at Singapore Design Centre, *On the String* (Lindborg, Khiew, 2010, multimedia production) produced at Singapore Arts Festival 2010, *The Canopy* (Lindborg, Yong, 2011, sound installation) featured at World Stage Design 2013 Cardiff, UK; and *Hearing Lines* (Koh, 2013, audiovisual projection and electronics) presented at International Computer Music Conference 2013, Perth, Australia.

Dr Koh holds a PhD in Composition (York, UK) and Postgraduate Diploma in Music Computing (IRCAM, Paris). She lived and worked in Europe for 20 years. Currently, she is Vice-Dean (Interdisciplinary Studies) at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (Singapore).

Poem
Books

Edwin THUMBOO



Professor at National University of Singapore's Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Edwin Thumboo was the founding Director of the Centre for the Arts of the National University of Singapore. He majored in History and English Literature with a minor in Philosophy at the University of Malaya, and obtained his PhD in African poetry from the National University of Singapore.

Professor Thumboo was the first Singaporean to be conferred the SEA Write Award in 1979 and the Cultural Medallion in 1980 for Literature. His awards include the National Book Development Council prizes for poetry (1978, 1980, 1994), the ASEAN Cultural and Communication Award in Literature (1987), the Public Service Star (Bar) in 1991 and the 2013 Thailand Sunthorn Phu Award for poets.

Reflecting his personal belief that poets of post-independent Singapore should share in the responsibility of creating a national literature, Prof Thumboo's second volume of poetry, *Gods Must Die*, dealt substantially on Singapore's national life, further establishing his reputation as a national poet committed to articulating a cultural vision for a multi-cultural Singapore.

Professor Thumboo composed and contributed *Books* for the anthology in June 2013 while at Universiti Brunei Darussalam — a poem he subsequently read at the UNESCO symposium August 2013.

Books

(for Chee Kiong & Jiew Kim)

After starting up the Universe, the Word
Gathered memory, multiplied knowing,
And ways to tame and carry early worlds.
There were images in caves, etched bones,
Rough palm-leaf alphabets. After we inched
Across millennia, grew erect, your nuances
Within revoked the last primordial darkness,
Formed languages to power families into
Continental tribes. They sketched intricate
Beginnings on parchment; paper. Raised Tao,
Aleph, Amen, Omm, whose theologies code
Nations and plant sense and sensibility. Boldly,
Man proud man invented to improve, compete.

Sheets	bound
Became	books,
Chronicles,	Holy texts;
Celebrations,	primal rites;
Compendiums,	treatises, ledgers;
First letters gilded	in decorative gold,
Some having covers	edged with soft brass.



Down the ages Book of Hours to vellum Folios
Loosed imaginings. Wrote rare chapters in our lives,
Inspired, tinted verbal opulence, tact and learning,
Libraries, calligraphy and UNESCO conferences.
Now Samsung Tabs: our moving fingers trace
Chip, byte, icon, up-grades, e-books, packages.

Yet

You remain in print despite ipads, other gizmos
With million words hustling screens and ear plugs.
Many prefer the page. I grew between them. Birds
Sang Mary, Mary quite contrary. Flowers spoke
In Mama's stories, their pages wide and pretty.
I heard tales retold. Ripped their crisp sound, before
I learnt to dream over many hills and far away.

So

Too grandchildren busy haunting Public Libraries,
Taking you off shelves in a canter; scattering you
About the floor; tasting here and there; absorbed.
They stare, hesitate, leave, then re-think, re-turn.
Pages rustle and whisper. MRT cards, fingers, mark
Favourite passages; resist dog-earring. Each starts
A book-journey. Rich. Unique. Unending, through
Your many mansions, and those fabulous gates
You open, with light and provocation, relevant
Mysteries, ideas that are tidal; doors prelude to
Crystal gates, magic rainbows, knowledge, life.

Where is my book? Ah...there.....

Glossary

A

ACSR (Arts and Culture Strategic Review)

An analytic report of a culmination of strategic reviews and thorough public consultation processes, and an emblem of the partnership between the private sector, the community, the arts and culture sector and the government, that will be necessary to lift Singapore to the next peak of cultural development.

Amanda Heng

Amanda Heng is a female contemporary artist, curator and speaker from Singapore who works in Singapore and internationally. She has a multi-disciplinary practice, working collaboratively in contemporary art exhibitions, performance forums, workshops and art interventions. Her practice explores themes of national identity, collective memory and social relationships, gender politics and social issues in urban, contemporary Singaporean society.

Aneka Ragam Ra'ayat

From 1959 up till the early 1960s, Singapore's then Ministry of Culture organised a series of free, open-air cultural concerts with a strong multi-racial theme. Known as *Aneka Ragam Ra'ayat*, meaning "People's Variety Show", these concerts were held at various locations across Singapore. The objective of these government-sponsored shows was to help develop a sense of unity among the people by promoting better understanding among the different ethnic groups.

B

Batik

Batik is a technique of manual wax-resist dyeing applied to a piece of cloth. Batik is made either by drawing dots and lines of the resist with a spouted tool called a *canting* or by printing the resist with a copper stamp called a *cap*. The applied wax resists dyes, thereby allowing the artisan to colour selectively by soaking the cloth in one colour, followed by removing the wax with boiling water. This can be repeated until the artisan has achieved the colours and desired design.

Brother Joseph McNally

An Irish Celt, Brother Joseph McNally (1923–2002) came to teach in Singapore at St. Joseph and was later appointed principal of St. Patrick. He was a well-known sculptor who founded LaSalle College of Arts after his retirement from St. Patrick. He obtained his doctorate in education from Columbia University, New York, and had always considered himself an educator above all other roles he dutifully performed before he passed away. He was born Johnny McNally in Ballintubber, Ireland.

C**Chen Chong Swee**

Chen Chong Swee was a Singaporean watercolourist belonging to the pioneer generation of artists espousing the Nanyang-styled painting unique to Singapore at the turn of the 20th century. He was also one of the first artists in Singapore to use Chinese ink painting techniques to render figurative and landscape paintings of local and Southeast Asian themes.

Chen Wen Hsi

Chen Wen Hsi was one of Singapore's pioneer artists, known for his avant-garde Chinese paintings. His gibbons' series were particularly sought after.

Cheong Soo Pieng

Cheong Soo Pieng was a Singaporean artist and a pioneer of the Nanyang art style, and a driving force to the development of Modernism in visual art in the early 20th-century Singapore. He was also known for his signature depiction of Southeast Asian indigenous tribal people with elongated limbs and torso, with almond-shaped faces and eyes.

Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres

The *Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres* (Knight of the Order of Arts and Letters) is an Order of France, established on 2 May 1957 by the Minister of Culture, and its supplementary status to the *Ordre national du Mérite* was confirmed by President Charles de Gaulle in 1963. Its purpose is to recognise significant contributions to the arts and literature, or the propagation of these fields.

E**Ecosystem**

Referring to the complete interdependent stratas and responsibilities of each unit complimenting the overall development of the sector and/or industry.

EDB (Economic Development Board)

The Economic Development Board (EDB) is a statutory board of the Government of Singapore, which plans and executes strategies to sustain Singapore as a leading global hub for business and investment. EDB has been the driving force in the original planning and research of the creative clusters to evolve a creative economy.

G**Georgette Chen**

Georgette Chen (aka Chang Li Ying) was a Singapore painter known for her Post-Impressionistic-styled oil paintings at the turn of the 20th century. She was a prominent lecturer and practitioner of the visual arts in Singapore and a key figure in the founding of the Nanyang art style in Singapore.

George Yeo

George Yeo Yong-Boon is a former Singaporean politician. A President's Scholar, he was a member of the governing People's Action Party (PAP). He served in the Cabinet from 1991 to 2011 as the Minister for Information and the Arts (1991–1999), Minister for Health (1994–1997), Minister for Trade and Industry (1999–2004) and Minister for Foreign Affairs (2004–2011). He is often credited for the cultural policies to execute the Renaissance City vision.

Goh Chok Tong

Goh Chok Tong is a Singaporean politician in the People's Action Party (PAP) who became Singapore's Prime Minister on 28 November 1990, succeeding Lee Kuan Yew, and served in the role until 12 August 2004, when he stepped down and was succeeded by Lee Hsien Loong. He subsequently served as Senior Minister until May 2011 and Chairman of the Monetary Authority of Singapore (MAS). He continues to serve as a Member of Parliament (MP) representing the Marine Parade Group Representation Constituency and holds the honorary title of "Emeritus Senior Minister".

K**Kampong/ Kampung**

An Indonesian and Malaysian word for a hamlet or village. In Singapore's context, these villages were idyllic places with wooden houses, sometimes built on wooden stilts, with roosters and chickens roaming freely about. The term "balik kampong" which means "go back to your village" is still used today, though the implications could depend on contexts. In art, the kampong scene is an endearing feature harking back to old Singapore when life was less hectic and more carefree, and people were more warm and friendly.

Kuo Pao Kun

Kuo Pao Kun (1939–2002) was a playwright producing plays in both the English and Chinese language. He was considered one of the most significant dramatists in Singapore and a pioneer of Singapore theatre. Many of his works, produced over four decades, have been translated into Malay, Tamil, German, Japanese and Arabic, and performed by theatre companies in Singapore and abroad.

L**LaSalle**

Founded in 1984, LASALLE College of the Arts was also known as LaSalle College of Arts and LASALLE-SIA College of the Arts — an art educational institution in Singapore. Founded in 1984 by De La Salle educator, Brother Joseph McNally, LaSalle today offers a range of diplomas and degrees (the latter offered in partnership with Goldsmiths' College, University of London) in design, fine arts, film, media arts, fashion, dance, music, theatre, art therapy, Asian art histories and arts management. LaSalle is a non-profit, private educational institution operating autonomously with some financial support from the Singapore Ministry of Education.

Lee Kuan Yew

Lee Kuan Yew (born Harry Lee Kuan Yew) is a Singaporean politician. He governed Singapore for three decades as Prime Minister of Singapore. He is known as a fiery orator, having had his first-class honours in law from the University of Cambridge, United Kingdom. His visionary brilliance enabled Singapore to achieve rapid growth from a third-world nation to a developed country status in a very short time. He

has his detractors but his impartiality to gender enabled women in Singapore to achieve their potential in many areas of work.

Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy

Part of the National University of Singapore, the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy educates and trains the next generation of Asian policy-makers and leaders.

Lim Hak Tai

Lim Hak Tai (1893–1963) was one of Singapore's pioneer artists at the turn of the 20th century and who inspired the Nanyang School of art form, to reflect the Nanyang (Southeast Asia) region, both in painting style and subject matter. Born in Xiamen, China, he was the first principal of Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA) which he helped found in 1937 and officially opened in 1938. Though a gifted artist, he portioned most of his time in running the academy which went through many financial troubles as it was self-funding. His devotion to NAFA could be seen when he was so ill that he had a bed taken to the office so he could work. Lecturers did not receive any pay at some point in time due to financial troubles in keeping up the school but they kept teaching so that the students could continue their studies. After he passed away, his son Lim Yew Kuan took over the financially strapped academy.

Liu Kang

Liu Kang was a Singaporean artist famous for his Balinese-themed figurative paintings. He was a founding member of the Singapore Art Society and was credited with developing the Nanyang Style. His critical writings on art enabled the first stirrings of a record of Singapore art history. He was an art teacher but continued his art practice ardently. His name is synonymous with the Bali Four.

M

MDA (Media Development Authority)

A statutory board of the Singapore government that promotes and regulates the media sector, so as to contribute towards economic growth and help foster a cohesive and inclusive society in Singapore.

Ministry of Culture

The Ministry of Culture was officially established in pre-independence Singapore on 5 June 1956. The Ministry of Culture dissolved in 1985, with its divisions (namely, the Information and Cultural Affairs Division) split and restructured under the Ministry of Communications and Information and Ministry of Community Development. In 1990, the divisions were reshuffled to come under the new Ministry of Information and the Arts (MITA). On 13 August 2004, the acronym was changed from MITA to MICA, which stands for Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts. On 1 November 2012, MICA was renamed as the Ministry of Communications and Information (MCI), after the restructuring of MICA and MCYS (Ministry of Community, Youth and Sports) into MCI and MSF (Ministry of Social and Family Development).

N

NAC (National Arts Council)

The National Arts Council of Singapore (NAC) was established in September 1991 to nurture the arts and make it an integral part of life in Singapore.

NAFA (Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts)

The Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA) is the longest established tertiary art education institution in Singapore. Founded in 1938 by Xiamen artists and teachers to nurture fine art students, the academy is now a comprehensive arts institution offering full-time three-year diploma studies in the visual and performing arts. NAFA partners various universities around the world for degree studies. The Royal College of Music, London, opened its first and only overseas bachelor's (Hons) degree in NAFA. The academy boasts many Cultural Medallion winners, a feat not always appreciated by the public who view the academy as being too conservative. The design students continue to swipe many Crowbar Awards annually, and the lecturers continue to garner the Young Artist Award. The second oldest arts institution in Southeast Asia, NAFA enrolls students from around the region.

Nanyang

The direct translation from Mandarin is "Southern Ocean", a term commonly used by the Chinese migrant population, as the region of Southeast Asia.

NHB (National Heritage Board)

The National Heritage Board (NHB) is a statutory board of the Singapore government, under the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth (MCCY). NHB aims to foster nationhood, promote identity building and champion the development of a vibrant cultural and heritage sector in Singapore. It was formed on 1 August 1993 and has purview over the national museums of Singapore.

Non-Profit Organisation

An organisation that uses surplus revenues to achieve its goals rather than distributing them as profit or dividends.

Q***Officier de l'ordre des Artes et des Lettres***

Officier (Officer) — medallion worn on a ribbon with rosette on the left breast and is awarded to some sixty recipients around the world each year. The *Ordre des Arts et des Lettres* (Order of Arts and Letters) is an Order of France, established on 2 May 1957 by the Minister of Culture, and its supplementary status to the *Ordre national du Mérite* was confirmed by President Charles de Gaulle in 1963. Its purpose is to recognise significant contributions to the arts and literature, or the propagation of these fields.

Ong Teng Cheong

Ong Teng Cheong (1936–2002) was the fifth President of Singapore and the first directly elected by the populace. He served a six-year term from 1 September 1993 to 31 August 1999. An accomplished pianist and architect, he was an ardent supporter of the arts, and when he was a Minister in Parliament, he took on the pioneering role in driving the research in developing the arts and cultural sector, especially the Esplanade — Theatres on the Bay.

P**PA (People's Association)**

The People's Association (PA) was established in Singapore as a statutory board on 1 July 1960 to promote racial harmony and social cohesion. Among other community-

based activities, the PA is known for organising the Chingay parade which is an annual event hosting performers from around the world. The street parade is the highlight of the Chinese New Year.

R

Rojak

Rojak (Malaysian and Singaporean spelling) or Rujak (Indonesian spelling) is a traditional fruit and vegetable salad dish commonly found in Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore. It is served as a cold dish, dressed with shrimp paste and topped with roasted ground peanuts. The term “rojak” is Malay for mixture. Singaporeans, comprising Chinese, Malays, Indians and Others (Eurasians and any racial groups resident in Singapore), have a harmonious relation, and though retaining their distinctive heritage, are nonetheless seeking to create a symbolic and unifying identity. The terms “rojak” and “mosaic” have been used to describe the multi-ethnic composite that is separate yet gelled in some way.

S

Singapore Chin Kang Huay Kuan

The organisation was founded in 1918, with the purpose to establish ties and friendships amongst the community and to take care of the welfare of fellow members and the development of cultural education, to uphold and ensure the continuity of the Chinese culture and traditions.

Singapore Chinese Orchestra

Singapore's only professional Chinese orchestra, as well as a flagship local arts group.

Singapore International Competition for Chinese Orchestral Composition

SICCOC, started in 2006 and held again in 2011, aims to promote musical creativity, stimulate international awareness and to establish a repertoire of Nanyang- and/or Singapore-inspired Chinese orchestra pieces.

Singapore Tote Board Arts Fund

The Singapore Totaliser Board sets aside a portion of its annual profits through the

Arts Fund for the arts community. The objectives are to fund projects that benefit a greater portion of society that enrich lives and bring communities together. The National Arts Council administers the funding process and determines the recipients of the Arts Fund. Through the Arts Fund, it is hoped that more Singaporeans will enjoy the arts.

Singapore Tote Board Scholarship

In 2008, the Tote Board instituted the Tote Board Scholarship with a view to build capacity, in the areas of governance and management, and contribute to the development of professionalism in the social service and non-profit sectors.

Social Returns on Investment

A framework that measures the ratio of value to input, developed by the New Economics Foundation, UK and recognised by The Office of the Third Sector and the Scottish government.

School of the Arts (SOTA)

The School of the Arts (SOTA) is Singapore's first national pre-tertiary specialised arts school to offer a six-year unique integrated arts and academic curriculum for youths aged 13-18 years old. Under the ambit of the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth (MCCY), the School offers a dedicated development path for those who have interest and show early talent in the arts. With a vision to identify and groom future generations of artists and creative professionals to be leaders in all fields, SOTA builds on Singapore's unique strengths, including her multi-cultural Asian diversity and globally connected networks to synergise talents and resources. A school of the future, SOTA embraces a holistic educational philosophy that celebrates experimentation, expression and discovery.

Substation, The

The Substation is Singapore's first independent contemporary arts centre. It was founded in 1990 by Kuo Pao Kun. The Substation is centrally located in the city's civic

district and was the first building under the National Arts Council's "Arts Housing Scheme". It officially opened on 16 September 1990. The Substation is a non-profit organisation and registered Institution of Public Character in Singapore, and relies on financial and in-kind support from the general public, commercial organisations and government ministries to cover the costs of operating and developing arts and educational programmes. The name was derived from the former building which was once a power substation under the Public Utilities Board.

T

Tang Da Wu

Tang Da Wu is a Singaporean artist who works in a variety of media, including drawing, painting, sculpture, installation art and performance art. Educated at Birmingham Polytechnic and Goldsmiths' College, University of London, Tang gave his first solo exhibition, consisting of drawings and paintings, in 1970 at the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Industry. He began engaging in performance art upon returning to Singapore in 1979 following his undergraduate studies. He founded the Artists' Village and is known for his political agency through art. His artworks have been collected by the Japanese, who sometimes snapped up almost all his works in an exhibition. He is known to create his works with unique processes.

V

Vincent Leow

Vincent Leow is an artist and an art educator whose practice spans a wide range of genres from sculpture, installation and performance art to painting and mixed media. Vincent was awarded the Culture Award (2002) by the Japanese Chamber of Commerce and Industry for his contribution to the arts in 2002.

W

WhatsApp

A cross-platform mobile messaging app which allows one to exchange messages without having to pay for SMS (Short Message Service).

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About the Editor



Renee LEE is Course Leader of the BA (Hons) Creative Industry Management at NAFA in collaboration with the University of Essex, United Kingdom. Renee hosted NAFA's first international symposium 2008, with Professor Michael Sullivan as Keynote Speaker, and created the theme New Asian Imaginations locating Singapore as a catalyst in art education in the geographic South Seas.

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Professor Tommy Koh, flanked by Iskandar Jallil (left), Choo Hoay (right), Professor Edwin Thumboo (behind) Joanna Wu Quee Heng (extreme left) and Goh Soo Khim (front)

Art Flais in Renaissance City is an anthology of the personal reflections and aspirations of four generations in the new ecostructure in Singapore, from those who help formulate policies to that of the individual artists, who have helped develop and build an exciting arts and cultural scene from scratch and into a viable economic model. As evidenced by the professions featured in this anthology, the scope of work within the creative and cultural industries is diverse, from backgrounds such as history, communications, management, economics, law, science, art, psychology and entertainment.

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 SINGAPORE

ISBN 978-981-4630-77-1



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