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# BERITA

Malaysia/Singapore/Brunei Studies Group  
Association for Asian Studies



# Berita

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## Letter from the Chair

The state of scholarship on Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei continues to be strong, judging by the breadth of papers presented during this year's Annual Meeting of the Association of Asian Studies, held in Hawaii (March 2022). Participants were treated to a range of in-person and online/streaming papers, which proved that scholarship was alive and well after a challenging period dealing with Covid-19. These papers spanned multiple disciplines and were nestled in both country-focused panels as well as comparative, transnational sessions.

At the Hawaii meeting, the MSB Studies Group launched a new prize, the Craig A. Lockard Prize for the best journal article published in a calendar year by a junior or early-career scholar addressing research on Malaysia, Singapore, or Brunei in any field of study. The prize carries with it a US\$300.00 award, and is named after a veteran scholar of Malaysia and a past Chair of the MSB Studies Group who continues to be an unstinting supporter of scholarship in the region.

At the meeting, I had the honor of assuming the position of chair of the group. Patricia Sloane-White moves into the "Chair Mentor" position after serving these past three years. During her term, Patricia energetically expanded MSB's reach through her stewardship of the Facebook MSB group, by reaching out to many new scholars of the region, and instituting new partnerships and events, all with grace, charm and warmth. The MSB Studies Group will continue to benefit from her wisdom in this next term.

Joining the MSB leadership team as Deputy Chair/Chair-Elect is Elvin Ong, of the National University of Singapore. Sarena Abdullah rounds up the team as Editor of *Berita*, a task she assumed with the previous edition of the newsletter.

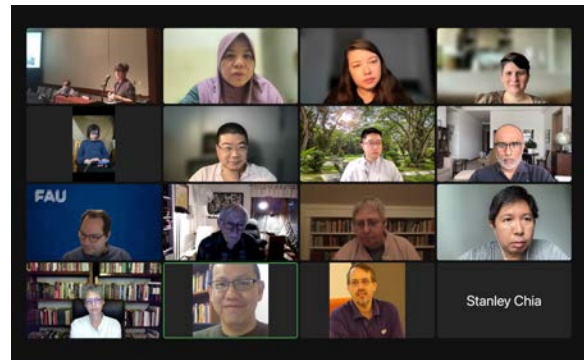


Figure 1 Patricia Sloane-White (Top left) at the AAS conference hall in Hawaii, Cheong Soon Gan (Second bottom screen) and other MSB members online.

Watch out for the announcement for our 2022 Annual Lecture, to be held later this year. We are also gearing up for the 15<sup>th</sup> Malaysian General Election, which must be held before the middle of 2023.

To join our virtual community of scholars of the region, join our Facebook group, the Official Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei Studies Group (MSB).

Best wishes,  
Cheong Soon GAN  
Chair, Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei (MSB)  
Studies Group  
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## Looking Forward to the Annual Association for Asian Studies Conference



Beginning with the 2023 Association for Asian Studies conference to be held in Boston, MA from March 16-19, 2023, the conference organizers invited the Malaysia, Singapore, and Brunei Studies Group (MSB) to name a “DESIGNATED PANEL FOR AAS 2023.” A “DESIGNATED PANEL” receives **automatic and guaranteed acceptance** to the AAS Program.

Here is the panel we have selected. Mark the dates of the AAS Conference now, and plan to attend!

### 2023 AAS MSB Designated Panel

#### **Disturbing Artefacts: The Politics of Preserving And Presenting Histories of Singapore and Malaysia**

**Panel organizer:** Muhammad Suhail Bin Mohamed Yazid

#### **Panel abstract:**

History is an exercise of the imagination: how the past can be constructed, told and remembered,

drawing inspiration from its traces. This panel critically examines four sets of sources, each representing a different genre of evidence, to offer new insights into the wider historical narratives of Singapore and Malaysia. These sources, however, are not recent discoveries or forgotten relics. On the contrary, they have been instrumental in strengthening dominant historical narratives pushed out as part of nation and state-building in authoritarian contexts. This panel recovers underappreciated dimensions of power relations at play in the representation and preservation of these familiar sources. In doing so, the panel proceeds chronologically and illustrates the idea that novel perspectives on the histories of Singapore and Malaysia do not always require exhaustive dives into the archives or a peek into its still-declassified sections. Rather, by experimenting with different frames and questions on sources already in plain sight, the most basic exercise of historical imagination can still add rich textures to what we know of the past.

#### **Paper Abstracts:**

#### **Networks of History Textbooks and Intra-colonial Control in Singapore, Malaysia, and Hong Kong, c. 1950s**

Allan Pang (PhD Candidate, University of Cambridge; tfap2@cam.ac.uk)

This paper will examine the flow of historical knowledge and the colonial response in Singapore, Malaysia, and Hong Kong during the 1950s. After the end of the Second World War, publishers resumed the circulation of textbooks among Chinese communities in Southeast Asia and Hong Kong. Entering the 1950s, these networks became more problematic to the



British colonial officials. On the one hand, they worried that communist ideologies would infiltrate the texts. On the other hand, historical narratives that centred on the ideas of the Chinese nation (be it the mainland or Taiwan version) did not fit into the political need in Singapore and Malaya, especially the various postcolonial visions that prevailed among local administrators and political leaders. Colonial officials across the three places gathered and exchanged information to contain these textbook networks, while Chinese publishers based in Hong Kong after 1949 were trying to persist. Even though the publishers had to create separate text for each territory, they still inserted certain common ideas about the Chinese nation. This presentation will examine the connection and contestation of historical narratives. It will investigate how the Chinese diasporic and intra-colonial networks operated under the contexts of decolonisation, the Cold War, and emerging nationalisms. These transregional networks met and clashed with each other. Local, colonial, and Chinese voices, meanwhile, all interacted with each other while defining the upcoming Malayan nation.

### **The Framing of Singapore's Wartime Experiences through Oral Histories**

Rachel Eng (Assistant Curator, National Museum of Singapore; rachel\_eng@nhb.gov.sg)

Since the National Archives of Singapore's efforts in the 1980s, Singapore has collected a considerable number of oral history interviews regarding the country's experience of World War Two. Snippets from these interviews are used for public consumption in a variety of ways—museums, schools, documentaries—and have

become integral to portrayals and understandings of the Fall of Singapore and ensuing Japanese Occupation. This paper considers the role of oral history in preserving and presenting the history of World War Two in Singapore, particularly with regard to the framing of a 'national', shared experience of the war. The discipline of oral history is a traditionally contentious field given, for example, its reliance on potentially unreliable memory, the inability to corroborate individual accounts, and biases that might be introduced by both the interviewee and interviewer. Yet oral histories also have an important role of capturing voices on the ground, especially in contexts where there are comparatively fewer artefacts and contemporary written records. How can we balance the need for these voices with both their selective use in public spaces as well as the problems inherent in them? I suggest that combining the two approaches would not only add to the dialogue between academic history and public practice but would also facilitate more robust discussions about the nature of war remembrance in Singapore.

### **The Interruptive Space of the Istana Kampong Gelam in Singapore**

Muhammad Suhail Bin Mohamed Yazid, University of Cambridge

What history is preserved with the conservation of the Istana Kampong Gelam, the home of the former Malay ruler of Singapore? This paper casts the historic compound as a site which both represents and upsets the normative orders in modern Singapore by contemplating its existence as a “heterotopia” or a space which both reflects and unnerves the world outside of



it. The British first earmarked the compound for the ruler as compensation for his collaboration with the colonial authorities. While its palatial presence was initially meant to project the legitimacy of the colonial order, the royal residence also offered a utopian space for pre-colonial notions of Malay kingship to reign. The dismantlement of colonial rule after the Second World War later turned the space into a node for nationalist networks which both resonated with and disrupted dominant multi-racial nationalisms in Malaya. After Singapore's independence as a republic, the compound became derelict, symbolic of the postcolonial state's abandonment of its historical baggage, although descendants of the island's royalty continued to reside there and live on the republic's resources. The site's subsequent designation as a national monument in the new millennium awkwardly consolidates the contemporary multi-racial order by serving as a constructed exhibit for Malay heritage in a Chinese-dominated country. This paper postulates that beyond the histories presented on its museum panels, the Istana Kampong Glam has in itself embodied a disconcerting historical presence across time. The enduring space offers a critical window into the uneasy transformations that have taken place in a modern Singapore embedded in the Malay world region.

**Disrupting the canon: decolonizing natural history drawings through curation**  
Syafiqah Jaaffar, National Museum of Singapore

Natural history drawings, such as the William Farquhar Collection of Natural History Drawings in the National Museum of Singapore collection,

were part of an imperial knowledge nexus in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries that sought to identify, catalogue and 'master' knowledge of natural world in the colonies by making use of scientific systems and categories. These frameworks have since come to be adopted as the main mode through which knowledge of the natural world is accessed and processed. The result is a double erasure of local agents in the production of such knowledge. Firstly, that of existing indigenous modes of knowledge and understanding of nature. In addition, the raising of 'discovered' flora and fauna as "specimen" to be studied also inadvertently divorced them from their social surroundings. The second erasure is of local active agents: collectors, scribes, artists, identifiers – reduced to an amorphous background for the commissioners-collectors to whom these drawings and other materials are credited to. I suggest that museums which are in possession of such materials have a responsibility to ensure future curatorial strategies evolve away from tying natural histories to imperial knowledge. I also propose that any attempt at a decolonizing curatorial practice requires the act of decentring, although these may take on various forms, subtle or overt. This paper looks at how the exhibition 'A Voyage of Love and Longing' aspired to do so via two main means: decentring the narrative focus of natural history drawings away from its credited owner; and re-ordering the naming conventions of specimens featured.

**Chair and Discussant:**

Dr. Fadzilah Yahaya  
Assistant Professor, Yale University



## Conference Panels / Symposium Reports

### 'Old and New: Biopolitics in Asia': Panel Presentation at AAS 2022, Honolulu, Hawaii

Prepared by Mohammad Khamsya Bin Khidzer

**Panel Organizer:** Mohammad Khamsya Bin Khidzer

**Panel Chair:** Shirley Sun

**Panel Presenters:**

Mohammad Khamsya Bin Khidzer (University of California at San Diego)

Shirley Sun (Nanyang Technological University)

Ann Hui Ching (National University of Singapore)

Shiwei Chen (Nanyang Technological University)

**Panel Discussant:** Hallam Stevens (James Cook University)

This conference panel was brought together to deal with what the panelists deem to be an important yet overlooked issue in Asia and social science, that is the question of healthcare and how it affects populations. Specifically, the panelists are concerned with how the various modes and configurations of healthcare in various parts of Asia – which includes healthcare financing, training of healthcare experts, biotech initiatives and community-based care – intersect with the governance of life to engender the different ways of understanding social groups.

States in Asia are faced with shifting economic and demographic demands. From developing precision medicine to tackling a greying population, these changes have undoubtedly shaped the understanding of the self, allowing us to revisit key questions on 'Asian' Biopolitics

raised by Nicolas Langlitz (2011). Insofar as biopolitics inhabits the intersection of 'life, science and politics' (Gottweis 2009), it presents ample opportunity to reflect on how it is refracted in contexts that do not necessarily follow strong liberal democratic traditions from which concepts such as 'biopower' or 'biopolitics' emerged (Langlitz 2011). To that end, we ask what is unique about 'Asian' Biopolitics and more importantly, where can we locate it?

This panel juxtaposes 'new' modes of biopolitics represented by biotech with 'old school' public health and population policy to better understand how Asian life is co-produced. Making sense of biopolitics in the cases we present also forces us to think through how it is inflected by histories of colonialism and translocal flows of people and ideas. For instance, contrary to Nikolas Rose's (2001) prophetic musings of biopolitics taking on the form of individualized risk in the 21st century, scholars such as Susah Greenhalgh (2009) and Herbert Gottweis (2009) point to the continued relevance of populations and social groupings in contemporary Asia. Greenhalgh's (2008; 2009) work on population policy in post-Mao China points to the importance of managing the biological bodies of the Chinese nation through the use of science and technology, a project that continues to this day albeit with genomics driving bionationalism (Sung 2010).

Social groupings in biopolitics emerged as a common thread in all the papers presented here. Shirley Sun and collaborators for instance, highlight the universalized problem of 'pragmatic racialism' in precision medicine in



Singapore and North America, pointing out that the use of race and ethnicity as proxies for genetic diversity reproduces essentialized racial categories and is also rife with contradictions and arbitrariness.

Mohammad Khamsya's historical study of postcolonial healthcare financing in Singapore traces the development of the narrative of sickly, risky and idle racial minorities alongside a growing 'insurantal imaginary', all of which combine to enable new ways of articulating unhealthy bodies. Race emerges as a crucial organizing principle in Ann Hui Ching's auto ethnography of medical education in Singapore too, where physicians in training encounter material linking health issues with racial stereotypes that can be traced back to colonial times. In Shiwei Chen's account of informal elder care strategies, the local village community in the form of peer groups too emerged as important support structures to cope with an ageing demographic.

Yet this continued relevance of social groups is not the only facet of 'Asian Biopolitics' that the panel explored. As Hallam Stevens astutely picked out, increasingly, biopolitical governance in parts of Asia has also adapted neoliberal modes of managing life. What this means is that despite the widely popular 'communitarian' narrative that is embedded within imaginations of Asian societies and politics (Chua 1999), health has become very individualized. Shiwei Chen's research is a perfect illustration of this, as the local community rallies to fill the chasm of eldercare left by the state. Even the community-based solution risk collapsing as the younger generation leave for urban areas and the elderly

grow more exposed to crooks peddling misinformation. The same forms of individualized health responsibility present themselves in the other three research papers, as race and ethnicity become entangled with notions of responsibility as the case in Mohammad Khamsya Bin Khidzer's presentation, cultural essentialism in Ann Hui Ching's observation which leads to physicians pushing the blame of health woes onto ethnic specific behaviors and preferences, and finally Shirley Sun's problematization of race based precision medicine represents the cutting edge of neoliberal biopolitics as scientists insist on using problematic racial categories described as the orientation of pragmatic racialism which continues to reify race.

In all these cases, postimperial and postcolonial histories figure prominently in the making of Asian Biopolitics. Asian Biopolitics draws from various local, regional and global political economic imaginaries to enact practices that are disciplinary and neoliberal. The latter is seldom interrogated given the communitarian façade of Asian healthcare. This, we argue, constitutes a uniquely Asian biopolitical situation that needs to be carefully developed and perhaps applied to contexts outside of Asia to better understand its theoretical utility.





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## Biographical Note

Mohammad Khamsya Bin Khidzer is a PhD candidate in the Department of Sociology and Science Studies at the University of California San Diego. His research examines the emergence of diabetes as a socially, economically and politically important disease category, as well as the different ways in which biopolitical configurations engender racialized understanding of diabetes in postcolonial Singapore. Khamsya is also interested in broader questions regarding the intersection of technology, innovation and identity as well as postcolonial theory. He is currently developing a secondary research project on 'Temasek Rice', focusing on the transnational relations and legal-material infrastructure in Southeast Asia that are oriented towards protecting bioscientific innovations.

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## 'Haze, Sand, Fire, Water: Environmental Crises': Panel Presentation at AAS 2022, Honolulu, Hawaii

Prepared by Cheong Soon Gan

**Panel Organizer:** Patricia Sloane-White, and Chong Ja-lan

**Panel Chair:** Patricia Sloane-White (University of Delaware)

**Panel Presenters:**

Helena Varkkey (Universiti Malaya)

Tabitha Grace Mallory (University of Washington)

Miles Kenney-Lazar (National University of Singapore)

Laavanya Kathiravelu (Nanyang Technical University)

Vanessa Koh (Yale University)

At the 2022 Annual Meeting of the Association of Asian Studies, the MSB-supported panel 'Haze, Sand, Fire, Water: Environmental Crises' drew a strong audience to hear a range of papers focusing on environmental issues across Southeast Asia.

This was the first time the Southeast Asia Council (SEAC) invited the country groups under its wing to submit proposals for SEAC's two Designated Panel label, which came with a guaranteed spot in the AAS program and additional funding to help presenters from the region attend the conference in Hawaii. MSB's 'Haze, Sand, Fire, Water: Environmental Crises' secured one of the two spots, in no small part due to the work of the panel organizers, Patricia Sloane-White (who also chaired the panel) and Chong Ja-lan.



Their work also reflected the first collaboration between MSB Studies Group and Academia.SG, a collective of researchers and scholars in Singapore. The synergy and ideas that resulted from the many email conversations and occasional Zoom calls resulted in a panel that featured speakers from different backgrounds and geographies, focusing on a broad range of topics in the South China Sea, Myanmar, Cambodia and Singapore.

The presenters were Helena Varkkey from Universiti Malaya, Tabitha Grace Mallory from University of Washington, Vanessa Koh from Yale University, Miles Kenney-Lazar from National University of Singapore, and Laavanya Kathiravelu from Nanyang Technical University. Helena, Tabitha and Miles presented their papers in person, while Vanessa Zoomed in and Laavanya recorded her talk with slides but was present via Zoom for the Q and A.

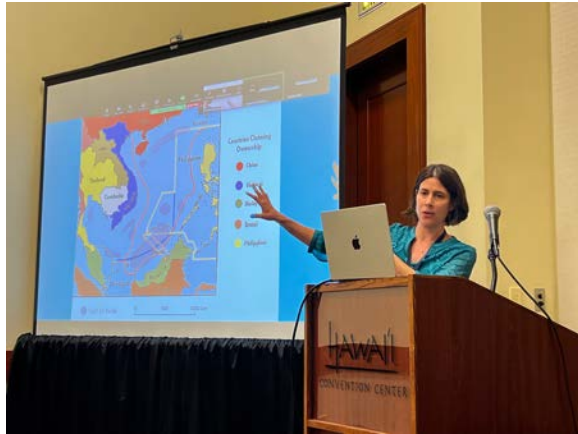
Helena Varkkey (Pic. 1) kicked off the session by examining the role non-state actors play in tackling the problem of haze. Her paper, 'Emergent Geographies of Chronic Air Pollution Governance in Southeast Asia: Transboundary Publics in Singapore', suggests that non-state actors (transboundary publics) in Singapore engage with and affect the transnational governance efforts by affected Southeast Asian states. She suggests that as a "highly depoliticised city-state, Singapore's experience serves as a microcosm for ways forward within the broader ASEAN geopolitical culture favouring depoliticised 'engaged non-indifference'."



Picture 1 Helena Varkkey from Universiti Malaya presenting her paper entitled 'Emergent Geographies of Chronic Air Pollution Governance in Southeast Asia: Transboundary Publics in Singapore'.

Tabitha Grace Mallory's paper, 'Beyond Hydrocarbons in the South China Sea', poses the question: If alternative energy options for the Southeast Asian littoral states are a viable alternative to oil and gas, would abandoning hydrocarbon drilling, with its attendant harmful impact on the environment, reduce the territorial disputes in the region, much of which is driven by the search of energy resources?





Picture 2 Tabitha Grace Mallory presenting her paper entitled 'Beyond Hydrocarbons in the South China Sea.'

From November 2019 to February 2020, before the worsening of the COVID-19 pandemic and the military coup, Miles Kenney-Lazar conducted fieldwork in Myanmar on villagers' responses to two oil palm plantation companies. His work follows the Myanmar state's push to expand the planting and processing of oil palm, a project that began in 1999, and which had various effects including deforestation, dispossession of villagers' agricultural lands, labor abuses, and ethnic conflicts with Karen communities. The democratic reforms instituted in 2010 allowed the villagers new opportunities to "contest the control of their customary territories and seek to reclaim their lands." Miles' paper, 'Contesting Oil Palm Plantation Territories in Southern Myanmar', looked not only at these efforts by villagers to assert their independence, but also examined the implications for Malaysian oil palm companies that had begun implementing projects in Myanmar.

Vanessa Koh's paper, 'Accelerated Development, Anticipated Dispossession: The Zero-Sum Game of Land Reclamation' examines the impact of large-scale dredging of sea-beds around a fishing village in Cambodia's Koh Kong province for sand destined for Singapore's land reclamation needs. Vanessa shows that the dredging altered local ecologies, transformed social relations, and dispossessed villagers. They experienced a "patiotemporal distancing effect, as villagers anticipate the collapse of their houses that sit on the riverbank when the ground eventually gives way due to the removal of sediment."

Laavanya Kathiravelu rounded up the panel by examining the experiences of migrants from "poorer" Asian states such as India and Bangladesh to Singapore. The migration system is fraught with risks embedded in the "infrastructural configurations such as visa regimes, cheap airline travel, and remittance networks." In her paper 'Risky Infrastructures: Low Wage Migrants and the Vulnerabilities of Transnational Immobility in Asia,' Laavanya examines disruptions, reconfigurations and vulnerabilities of those infrastructural system, highlighting the risks these migrants face that are often exacerbated by their lack of economic, temporal, and mobility capital.

**Biographical Note:**

Cheong Soon Gan is Associate Professor of history at the University of Wisconsin Superior. Email: cheongsoon@gmail.com



**Echoes, Shadows & Footprints:  
A Symposium on Sustainability, Mobility and  
Nationalism in Malaysian Performing Arts and  
Culture**

Location: Penang Institute

Date: 30 June to 2 July 2022

Organiser: Penang House of Music

Co-Organisers: Penang Institute, George Town  
Festival

**Overview of Speakers and Participants**

This symposium was the first of its kind organised by the Penang House of Music in collaboration with Penang Institute and George Town Festival. The aim of the event was to bring together a select mix of government and non-government performing arts organisations, practitioners and academics of Malaysian performing arts and culture. It featured keynote speeches by Dato' Dr Ooi Kee Beng, Director of Penang Institute; Prof. Ulung Datuk Dr. Shamsul Amri Baharuddin, Founding Director of the Institute of Ethnic Studies (KITA), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM); and Prof. Dr Tan Sooi Beng, School of Arts, Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM). Talks on performing arts sustainability, mobility and policy featured Eddin Khoo, Founding Director of PUSAKA; Pn. Zubaidah Mukhtar, JKKK; Datuk Dr Anis Yusal Yusoff, Principal Fellow of KITA; Prof. Hanafi Hussin, Dean of the Faculty of Creative Arts, University Malaya; Ashwin Gobinath, Nadir Studios; and Grey Yeoh, Australia Council for the Arts. The organisers are also happy to note the enthusiastic attendance from representatives of PORT Ipoh, Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra and PIQL.

Panels featured the latest research on Malaysian performing arts and culture conducted by faculty and postgraduate students from Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris (UPSI), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), Sunway University and UCSI University. These research panels were chaired by Symposium Organising Committee members Dr. Patricia Ann Hardwick (UPSI), Dr. Shazlin Amir Hamzah (KITA-UKM) and Dr. Adil Johan (KITA-UKM); all of whom are leading Fundamental Research Grant projects on performing arts and music funded by the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education.

The event also featured music educator and keyboardist Dr. James Boyle, of ASWARA, who performed songs composed by his father, the late Jimmy Boyle. The performance was accompanied by a presentation of Dr. Boyle's own research on his father's music, alongside a special screening of a research documentary on Jimmy Boyle, produced by the Penang House of Music. Owner of Gerak Budaya Bookstore Penang, Gareth Richards, provided commentary and summaries of the talks throughout the programme as the symposium's Master of Ceremony. Overall, the symposium ran smoothly and successfully, thanks to the dedicated and attentive technical team from the Penang House of Music, led by its Founding Director, Paul Augustin and his management assistants, Kevin Theseira and Jocelyn Ng.

**Issues Discussed**

Throughout the symposium, a host of academic terms were used to describe the new research that was being shared (e.g. cohesion, transnationalism, interculturalism, diversity, multiculturalism, hybridity, cosmopolitanism).



Such terms form the necessary “analytical tools” required for understanding the cultural past, present and future of Malaysia’s performing arts. However, there was also a call for a critical interrogation of terms such as “sustainability” and “nationalism”. Sustainability is a term that is imposed through the international language of heritage bodies such as UNESCO and overlooks cultural practices and practitioners that are continuously adapting their art over time and across changing spaces and locales. There is also a tendency to assume a monoethnic and idealistic notion of nationalism, without interrogating the exclusionary pitfalls of patriotism. Therefore, the following questions were frequently asked throughout the symposium. Whose culture is being protected? Who decides what counts as national vs. foreign culture? For whom are cultural policies made to protect? Which practitioners and what art forms are considered worth protecting?

It was evident towards the end of the symposium that cultural policies such as the NCP (National Culture Policy) of 1971 up until the most recent DAKEN (Dasar Kebudayaan Negara) of 2021 were implemented to control the national narrative for what and who counts as representative of national culture, in alignment with the political interests of the ruling government of the day (be they on the federal or state level). After the 1969 racial riots, the NCP served to integrate a diverse Malaysian population into a Malay and Islamic centred version of national culture. The DAKEN, building on the current Prime Minister’s Malaysian Family (*Keluarga Malaysia*) slogan attempts to make space for a wider acceptance of non-Malay and non-Muslim cultural practices.

However, there is still a prevalence of top-down, authority-defined control outlined in the policy document, with very rigid references to core values and strategic action plans. The question remains as to whether the spirit of inclusivity projected in DAKEN will be implemented by government departments. It was highlighted in the symposium that through no fault of their own, many government officers are not actually experts in the portfolios of their assigned ministry. Therefore, many top government bureaucrats and politicians in charge of performing arts agencies are not necessarily well-versed in the performing arts industries and cultural sectors. When ministers are shuffled, government-agency staff also have the challenging task of re-educating their new ministers. Such are the systemic problems of governing performing arts and culture that were revealed in the symposium.

#### **Potential Solutions**

It was evident from the case studies of research presented, as well as the real-world situations described by the practitioners present that the performing arts and culture are more genuinely and ethically sustained by ground-up, community-centred efforts. Collaboration between arts researchers, practitioners and communities have long-lasting impact on the flourishing of cultural practices and art among small communities and performing artists. For example, historical research has identified the cosmopolitan/intercultural roots/routes of collaboration that form the cornerstone of (Malayan and) Malaysian music that appealed to a diverse local and global market. Thus, there remains a need to find ways to commercialize, in ethical ways, the continuous production of



performing arts culture, so that practitioners and communities are empowered to sustain their livelihoods independently. Researchers at the symposium presented case studies on how working with small indigenous communities and traditional performing arts practitioners resulted in educational programs and products such as books and digital applications.

Moving forward, the symposium organizers are optimistic that the problems, ideas and potential solutions discussed over three days have provided inspiration for the many parties involved to consider the rich networks of potential collaboration between organizations, practitioners and academics to champion a community-grounded approach in flourishing Malaysia's diverse cultures of performing arts. Penang House of Music looks forward to acting as a facilitator for such constructive collaboration, and offers its expertise to bring people together, cultivate creativity, document, and archive the richness of Malaysia's culture of performing arts for posterity. The symposium is an initiative to draw attention to the lessons that can be learnt from the *echoes* (sounds), *shadows* (sights) and *footprints* (stories) of our cultural past and present, to step toward a more inclusive, creative, and vibrant future.

### Biographical Note

Adil Johan is a research fellow at the Institute of Ethnic Studies (KITA), National University of Malaysia (UKM). His research analyses aspects of popular music in mass media that intersect with issues of interculturalism, transnationalism, cosmopolitanism, intimacy, affect and gender in the Malay world and Southeast Asia. Such research has been published as articles in the Journal of Intercultural Studies and *Kajian Malaysia*. His book on independence era Malay film music, titled *Cosmopolitan Intimacies*, was published by NUS Press in 2018. He most recently co-edited *Made in Nusantara: Studies in Popular Music* (Routledge 2021). Adil also performs and records as saxophonist for Malaysian rock-fusion group Nadir.

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## Article

### IF ROOFS COULD TALK AND WALLS COULD SPEAK: THE UNDERSTATED ARTS OF YUEH HAI CHING TEMPLE

Guan-Fan Tan

National University of Singapore

#### Introduction

Nestled in the hustle and bustle of city life sits Singapore's oldest Teochew temple, Yueh Hai Ching Temple (Yuehaiqing miao 粤海清庙; Figures 1 and 2). A site steeped in history and exuding old-world charm, this temple was first built as a temporary shrine in 1826, later constructed into a permanent building in the 1850s, and finally by 1895, molded into its remarkable form observable today at Phillip Street, as explicated by architectural historian Yeo Kang Shua (2015, pp. 3–5)<sup>1</sup>.



Figure 1 Yueh Hai Ching Temple\*



Figure 2 Yueh Hai Ching Temple, 1970s.

Source: National Archives of Singapore.

Yeo, the leading architect-conservator for the temple's restoration project, reflects on his involvement incisively:

There's the idea that you're just the custodian, you don't own the temple, you're just holding it in trust for the generation to come (Ng, 2021).

Lest this quote sounds like a Patek Philippe advertisement, it most certainly is not although their similarity in timelessness is succinctly conveyed. Yeo's writings reveal the temple's extant "dual but overlapping roles as a religious and heritage site," a venue frequented today as a sacred space for religious worship and appreciated as a relic of local Teochew community's past (Chen, 2009, pp. 97; Ng, 2021; Borges, 2017).<sup>2</sup>

Over the past century, Yueh Hai Ching Temple has attracted many Shenist devotees, seeking blessings from and paying obeisance to the three enshrined deities in two adjoining temple compounds: The Palace of the Heavenly Empress (Tianhou gong 天后宫) on the left houses the



Goddess of the Sea (Mazu 妈祖) while in the Palace of the Heavenly Emperor (Shangdi gong 上帝宫) on the right resides the Mysterious Martial Heavenly Emperor (Xuanwu Shangdi 玄武上帝) and the God of Marriage (Yuelao 月老) (Yeo, 2019, p. 280; Lee, 2017).

The term “Shenism,” as Kuah-Pearce Khun Eng (2009, p. 21–22) argues, refers to the act of “praying to the deities and gods” (baishen 拜神), reflecting Vivienne Wee ([1976] 1997, pp. 130–132)’s assessment that the majority of Chinese in Singapore since the 19th century have been practicing Chinese syncretic religions, encompassing Mahayana Buddhism, Daoism and Confucianism. Yueh Hai Ching Temple is no stranger to this phenomenon. The worshiped deities are part of a diverse pantheon of Chinese religion deities, given that Xuanwu is a high-ranking Daoist deity, Mazu is a Chinese Buddhist-Daoist deity, and Yuelao is a Chinese mythological figure (Yang, 2016, p. 5).

### Plastering a Gap in Scholarship

While Yeo and other scholars have investigated the temple through distinct lenses of religion, social history, and architectural conservation, the arts within Yueh Hai Ching Temple have hitherto been sidelined and hence warrant exigent attention. As exemplified in the seminal *Monks in Motion* (2020) by Jack Meng-Tat Chia, the domain of religious studies has produced writings that spotlight the agency of monks, devotees, and Teochew institutions, yet overlooking the praiseworthy virtuosity of artisans involved in temple-building projects, as evident in the case of Yueh Hai Ching Temple. This oversight of artisans and their works in

many other Chinese temples built in the 19th century has resulted in a lamentable dearth of information surrounding their origins, organization, and artmaking journeys, as expressed in Yeo’s working paper (2018, p. 4). Notwithstanding this, this article maintains that there is value to be gleaned from analyzing their surviving temple arts.

One then wonders why historical scholarship on Singapore’s Chinese community omits, or at best cursorily covers, temple art forms like those in Yueh Hai Ching Temple, even for writings on the Teochew community. Testament to this disregard are Kwa Chong Guan and Kua Bak Lin’s *A General History of the Chinese in Singapore* (2019), which focuses solely on the entertainment arts of Chinese *wayang* and filmmaking in their chapter on “Culture and Art” (pp. 183–230, 477–636), and Tan Gia Lim’s *An Introduction to the Culture and History of the Teochews in Singapore* (2018), which describes decorations of Teochew-style buildings in one paragraph only (pp. 121–122). In another chapter on “Folk Crafts,” Tan (2018) meritoriously elaborates on the ceramics and wood carvings from Chaoshan region, which adorn the hallways and roofscapes of Teochew-style temples, houses, and other buildings (pp. 120–125, 140–143). Yet, despite the stature of Yueh Hai Ching Temple as an exemplar of Singapore’s Teochew identity, Tan (2018) makes no mention of its arts, preferring instead to give generalized descriptions and emphasis on the artmaking processes (pp. 140–143).

If one were to pin hopes on Yeo’s newly-published book, *Divine Custody: A History of Singapore’s Oldest Teochew Temple* (2021), to





deliver this desired outcome, one's optimism is met with lukewarm results. While his chapters are laudable in covering the historical and architectural aspects of Yueh Hai Ching Temple (pp. 7–29, 59–99), little information, if any, tackles the aggregated effects of the temple arts in consecrating the site for Shenist practice and learning. Besides, Yeo captures the evolving social relationships the Teochew community held with the temple (2021, pp. 31–57) but stops short of showcasing the potential of the temple arts in mirroring the social life of the Teochews. Finally, the remaining two chapters of Yeo's book (2021) speak to his expertise in temple architecture and conservation (pp. 59–147), yet the discussion fails to connect the technical aspects with the Teochews' psyche when conceptualizing their architectural arts. Truly, this lacuna in term of research looms large.

More awareness in this regard can also elucidate how the temple arts have buttressed its reputation and warranted its restorative care and protection. The site was gazetted as a National Monument in 1996 and awarded the UNESCO Asia-Pacific Cultural Heritage Conservation Award in 2014, following Yeo and team's restoration efforts (Yeo, 2020, p. 48; Ngee Ann Kong Si, n.d.). Incorporated into this temple's design are Teochew-style sculptures, reliefs, and carvings, composed in dialogical connections to one another, to the enshrined deities, and to Teochew devotees. For the purposes of this essay, I shall refer to them collectively as "arts" and specify them wherever necessary.

### **Throwing Arts into Sharper Relief**

Through consulting scholarly writings and undertaking several site visits<sup>3</sup>, I aim to reconsider the arts of Yueh Hai Ching Temple by exploring how they served the temple's dual roles in religion and history from 1850s to 1900. These arts participated in a multi-layered presentation of Shenism, embodied the immigrants' pride in their Teochew cultural traditions, and actively shaped the community's developing conception of their immigrant selves. By scrutinizing such arts from various perspectives, this article seeks to discerningly articulate the under-examined artistic mastery and valuable contributions of Teochew artisans who have heretofore been consigned to oblivion.

Fundamentally, Yueh Hai Ching Temple's arts serve its core function as a place of worship. I shall spotlight how the arts, in depicting Shenist deities, imbued and magnified the sacredness of the temple compound. Moreover, I posit that other art forms, as emblems of Chinese folktales, embodied and imparted Shenist teachings and values to Teochew devotees. Beyond the realm of religion, Yueh Hai Ching's arts, as remnants of history and material culture, showcased the developing immigrant Teochew identity. I postulate that artisans behind this temple's arts embraced the burgeoning Teochew entertainment then and exercised the Teochew community's newfound autonomy as immigrant Chinese. Furthermore, these artisans employed distinct artmaking techniques and styles when constructing and ornamenting the temple, thereby embodying Teochew folk craft traditions and architectural trends prevalent during late-Qing China.



### Augmenting Shenist Sacredness

A relook at the temple compound beyond the enshrined deities uncovers an interlacing and manifold repository of Shenist icons that surrounds devotees immediately when they step in. Entering into the spacious forecourt and turning back, one immediately notices an array of colorful ceramic figurines—Eight Immortals (Baxian 八仙)—adorning the roovescape of the entrance gateway as they catch the light (Figs. 3a and 3b).



Figure 3a The gateway roofscape featuring the Baxian.



Figure 3b Close-up of the Baxian.

Each of these immortals have their distinct possessions that endow them with powers ranging from nourishing life and the environment to warding off evils (Ma, 2012, p. 76; Williams, [1974] 2006, pp. 162–167). With these divine abilities, it is no surprise then, as Maria Cheng and Eric Choy (2015) observes, that these eight mythological figures were and continue to be highly regarded in Daoism, unitedly signifying prosperity and longevity (pp. 426–427). Further amplifying these two spiritual

blessings is the Three Stars (Sanxing 三星) depiction on a gilded temple beam (Fig. 4).



Figure 4 A temple beam featuring Sanxing.

Originating from Chinese astrology and mythology too, the three figures each represent Fortune (Fu 福), Prosperity (Lu 禄) and Longevity (Shou 寿), and are arranged from right to left, according to traditional Chinese writing (Cheng and Choy, 2015, pp. 424, 426). Indeed, fortune, prosperity and longevity were blessings crucial for incoming and existing Teochew immigrants then, many of whom were working in the agricultural and maritime trade or businesses, as posited by Tan (2018, p. 36) and Kwa and Kua (2019, pp. 119–120). While many have ensconced themselves in Singapore, the Teochew immigrants continued to pay their respects to Mazu, a Chinese Buddho-Daoist deity. They sought her protection over their families' sea-crossings via the red bow junks and thanked her for their safe arrivals to Singapore.<sup>4</sup>

This gratitude resurfaces through another temple hall beam that depicts a scene of four Chinese men bowing and kneeling on the grounds before Mazu, an ethereal figure who glides on billowing clouds (Fig. 5).





Figure 5 A temple beam featuring devotees praying to Mazu.

As such, the art icons which pervade throughout the temple compound feed into the syncretic brand of Shenism, melding Chinese Buddhism, Daoism, Chinese astrology and mythology together to expand its sacredness and deepen its relevance to the Teochew devotees' lives.

#### **Cultivating Filial and Religious Piety**

Apart from art icons, the narratives embedded in the temple's arts are significant in educating the devotees of Shenist beliefs and values. Mural bas-reliefs recalling Chinese allegories and Confucian tales embellish the adjacent walls of the temple's vestibules. One immediately recognizes the concept of filial piety transmitted through the setting of a grown man entertaining his mother and grandmother with a rattle-drum in hand (Figs. 6a and 6b).



Figure 6a A mural bas-relief featuring a man entertaining his elders with a rattle-drum.



Figure 6b Close-up of the scene of filial piety.



Like the allegory of Lady Tang breastfeeding her senior mother-in-law (Fig. 7), this temple bas-relief connotes filial piety by alluding to the story of Old Master Lai enlivening his elderly parents' moods with costume and pranks (China Culture, 2013; BBC, 2016).



Figure 7 A diorama of Lady Tang breastfeeding her senior mother-in-law, Haw Par Villa, 2012.

Both of such didactic stories are relayed through *The Twenty-four Filial Exemplars of Confucianism*, according to Mo Weimin and Shen Wenju (1999, pp. 15–16). As advanced by Rosemary Roberts (2014, pp. 23–24, 28–29), this “guiding principle” of filial piety is of utmost importance to Confucianism and has permeated the workings of Chinese society as it impresses on descendants their responsibility of caring for their parents. The overarching theme of practicing virtuous deeds is also connected to the temple interior’s mural fresco of a tigress with cubs (Fig. 8).

Coupled with accompanying calligraphy scrolls, the artistic and poetic imageries jointly alludes to the Buddhist narrative of “sacrificing one’s body to feed the tigers” (sheshen sihu 舍身饲虎), where Prince Mahasattva made his bodily

sacrifice to a starving tigress and her cubs, lest she devoured her own newborns.



Figure 8 A mural fresco of a tigress with cubs, flanked by two calligraphic scrolls and a diorama above, 2021.

Later, with the tigress well-fed and cubs alive, Buddha disclosed that he was Prince Mahasattva in his previous reincarnation (Ohnuma, 1998: 330).<sup>5</sup> Alongside the calligraphic words “all revealing the Buddha dharma” (jixian fofa 皆现佛法), the entire composition symbolizes the omnipresence and omnipotence of Buddha’s saviorhood and dharmic teachings. Hence, the temple arts’ expression of Shenist allegories and symbolisms are promulgated within the temple compound for Teochew devotees to imbibe and emulate.

#### Embodying an Immigrant Teochew Psyche

Beyond religious functions, the temple artisans displayed Teochew quintessential entertainment and revealed the immigrant community’s bold, independent psyche through specific motif features, thereby shaping a



distinct, local Teochew identity altogether. A look around the temple halls presents several dioramas of figurines interacting with one another in dynamic poses (Figs. 8, 9a and 9b).



Figure 9a A diorama above the tiger fresco, 2022.



Figure 9b Close-up of figurines and their gestures in diorama, 2021.

Set against Teochew-style vernacular architecture, these sculptures in gestural moves echo those of Teochew opera (chaoju 潮劇)—a popular mode of entertainment among Teochews in the past (Figures 10a and 10b) (Perris, 1978, pp. 297–298; Chua, 1989, pp. 32–33).<sup>6</sup>



Figure 10a Photograph of a Teochew opera troupe, c. 1950.

Source: National Archives of Singapore.

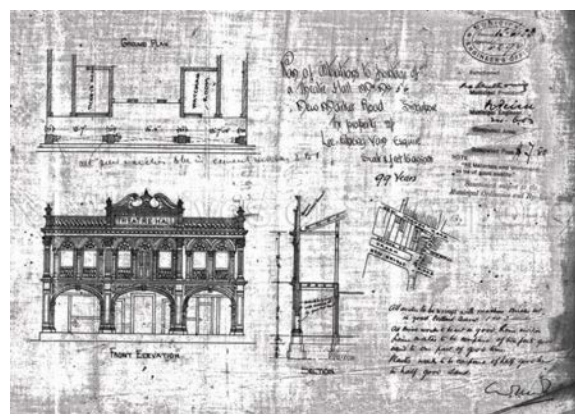


Figure 10b Apart from temple compounds, some Teochew operas also performed at permanent theaters like the Tiat Hng 哲園 along New Market Road (Tan, 2018, p. 131).

This is Tiat Hng's building plan in 1903.

Source: National Archives of Singapore and The Teochew Store.

In fact, scholars Tan (2018, p. 72) and Kwa and Kua (2019, p. 574) concur that from as early as 1826, Yueh Hai Ching temple's courtyard was a favored site for such opera performances. Since these dioramas are positioned at a higher



vantage point, one performs the same act of looking up and appreciating the ongoing theatrics throughout, very much akin to the Teochew audience watching these stage performances in its heyday.

The artisans also treated the temple as a site of autonomous creative pursuits, audaciously rendering two four-clawed dragons on an opposite fresco (Figs. 11a and 11b) to the aforementioned tiger fresco.<sup>7</sup>



Figure 11a A mural fresco of two four-clawed dragons, 2014.



Figure 11b Close-up of the dragons' legs, each with four claws, 2021.

Here, the number of claws is vital in revealing, albeit subtly, the artisans' and by extension the local Teochew immigrants' growing independence as a largely autonomous entity<sup>8</sup> from their Chaoshan homeland. These artisans exercised their creative autonomy and boldness by violating prevailing Qing sumptuary laws, which dictated that four-clawed dragon motifs were reserved solely for princes, nobles and their residences—none of whom had commissioned this overseas temple—and that improper use could result in execution (Cammann, 1951, pp. 304, 310; Komaroff, 2006, p. 320). Indeed, through exemplifying their love for Teochew opera and adopting four claws when imaging dragons, the Teochew artisans and community have collectively asserted their distinct immigrant identity.

#### Coalescing Teochew Traditional Arts

Although far from their homeland, the Teochew artisans pursued their traditional artmaking traditions of ceramics and wood carvings, thereby fostering stronger cultural ties and deeper identity association among the local Teochew community. Where ceramics are concerned, one notices an abundance of ceramic-based arts in dioramas (Figs. 8, 9a and 9b) and roofscapes, especially the elaborate town scene (Figs. 12a and 12b) that spans across the entire length of both temple roofs, comprising combative figurines, buildings, flora and fauna, and conspicuously, a pair of dragons (shuanglong qiangbao 双龙抢宝; Fig. 13) (ICOMOS Singapore and Urban Redevelopment Authority, 2018, p. 76).<sup>9</sup>





Figure 12a Elaborate roofscape featuring qianci arts, 2022.



Figure 12b Elaborate roofscape featuring qianci arts, 2022.



Figure 13 Close-up of a town scene using qianci arts, 2021.

Writers like Tan Gia Lim (2018, pp. 124–125), Qiu Yongzhe (2016, pp. 88–94), and Liu Zehuang (2020) have studied these arts employing the traditional Teochew cut-and-paste ceramic shard technique (*qianci* 嵌瓷), and traced this artmaking practice back to Chaoshan’s booming ceramics production and trade industry since the Ming dynasty. Similar ceramic arts have also decorated Singapore’s affluent Teochew

houses—Four Grand Residences (*sidacuo* 四大厝)—which Tan (2018) has covered in his book (pp. 122–125) and researchers Yeo Kang Shua and Martina Yeo (2018) have spotlighted one of such edifices in their “House of Ripples” article (pp. 40–45).

Consequently, these Teochew ceramic decorations became familiar sights to behold and were evocative of their identity, further strengthened by another art form—Teochew wood carvings. As one of China’s four renowned wood carving styles (Neo, 2005), Teochew wood carvings (*jinqimudiao* 金漆木雕) emerged from the Tang dynasty and feature gold coating over lacquered wood, accompanied with skillfully chiseled and hollowed timber wood trusses (Tan, 2018, p. 143).<sup>10</sup> Integrated into the temple architecture, these carved-in-the-round beams (Figs. 14a and 14b) depict scenes from Chinese folklores, opera tales and animals (Tan, 2018, p. 143), dialoguing with other temple arts to produce a multiplex of narratives and teachings pertaining to Shenism and Teochew culture.



Figure 14a An intricately carved timber wood beam, 2021.





Figure 14b A myriad of tools used to carve wooden beams exhibited at the Lian Shan Shuang Lin Monastery Museum, 2022.

These beams are further interlocked or stacked atop another, enhancing the complexity of artistic symbolisms therein (Fig. 15).



Figure 15 Temple trusses that stacked one atop another, 2022.

More fascinatingly, the corbel brackets (dougong 斗拱) supporting these trusses are carved into auspicious symbols of dragon-fishes (aoyu 鳌鱼; Figs. 16a and 16b) and phoenixes (Figs. 17a and 17b) yet conceived dissimilarly between the left and right halves of the temple

interior (Tan et al., 2015, pp. 13–17; Neo, 2005; Chen, 2009, p. 98).



Figure 16a Corbel brackets featuring two distinct designs of aoyu, 2021.



Figure 16b Corbel brackets featuring two distinct designs of aoyu, 2021.







Figure 17a Corbel brackets featuring two distinct designs of phoenixes, 2021.



Figure 17b Corbel brackets featuring two distinct designs of phoenixes, 2021.

This is a result of two competing wood carving guilds commissioned by temple patrons, characteristic of the architectural phenomenon, *duichangzuo* 对场作, during late-Qing era (Fig. 18); Yueh Hai Ching temple is one of only two temples in Singapore that boasts such dialectical wood carving compositions (Lianhe Zaobao,

2017). From exterior ceramics to interior wood carvings, these traditional Teochew arts, executed with finesse, encapsulated and enriched the local Teochew immigrant identity.



Figure 18 The resulting contrast in truss designs by two competing wood carving guilds, 2022.

### Crafting its Shining Future

Overall, Yueh Hai Ching's temple arts demonstrate the distinctiveness of Teochews residing in Singapore. Such virtuosic creations present the cultures and traditions associated with Shenism by providing visually to the Teochews' religious beliefs and epitomized the livelihoods, autonomy and traditions held dear to this immigrant community. Alongside contributing to disaster relief in China, this Teochew temple became the first in Singapore to be bestowed a plaque (Fig. 19) by the then Qing Emperor Guangxu in 1899, conveying his blessings to the Teochew community here (Yeo, 2015, p. 5; Roots, n.d.; Lianhe Zaobao, 2017).<sup>11</sup> Therefore, the temple arts have not simply or superficially<sup>12</sup> beautified the surroundings, but rather established deeper affiliations between



the Teochews, their homeland, and this site, through a meshwork of multifarious features.



Figure 19 Emperor Guangxu's 1899 plaque to Yueh Hai Ching Temple.

Even though I have examined an assortment of icons and narratives, the points advanced here are by no means exhaustive to the wellspring of ideas and sentiments that the temple arts contain and evoke. Potential research could illuminate the significance of bas-reliefs portraying The Generals of the Yang Family (Yangjiajiang 杨家将; Fig. 20) and those of scenes from Water Margin (Shuihuzhuan 水浒传) and Investiture of the Gods (Fengshenbang 封神榜) (Li and Situ, 2008: 193–194; Lianhe Zaobao, 2017).

Scholars can also examine the color palette of these temple arts and their connotations, especially since Teochew ceramics (chaocai 潮彩) from which shards were assembled to produce aforesaid works, are distinguishable by particular colors.<sup>13</sup> These avenues would unravel the nuances of Teochew arts in this temple and possibly transpire localized artistic adaptations by the local Teochew community.



Figure 20 A bas-relief featuring a scene from Yangjiajiang, 2022.

More than one century has passed since the construction of Yueh Hai Ching Temple but its arts continue to intrigue Teochew descendants and devotees with an understated elegance. As Yeo summarizes his motivations behind conservation work on historical buildings, one cannot help but acknowledge Yueh Hai Ching Temple's heritage value and enduring charm:

In a city-state like Singapore, we need historic buildings to create diversity [in] our city landscape. I hope that when people look at historic buildings, they're able to uncover the stories and understand [their] history and identity (Great Big Story, 2018).



Without doubt, Raffles Place, the financial hub of Singapore, would lack character should the temple capitulate to the ever-growing urban developments and land scarcity; Yueh Hai Ching Temple certainly earns its veritable stature and spot among towering skyscrapers and hopefully continues to stand the test of time. Its very dignified presence offers a juxtaposition between Singapore's past and present, entreating the Teochews of today to connect with their past, cherish its present features, and conserve the site for posterity.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The term "Teochew" refers to a specific dialect group of immigrants hailing from Chaoshan region, China. Numbering at about 575,000 individuals or about 19.8% of the Chinese population in Singapore, this dialect group forms the second-largest Chinese community in Singapore, as of 2015 (Ministry of Trade and Industry, 2017).

<sup>2</sup> During the mid-19th to mid-20th century, Yueh Hai Ching temple was the nexus of Teochew community's activities and administration: One of the more crucial services that the temple provided was housing for newly arrived Teochew immigrants and many businessmen of the community would come by to interview these immigrants, offering job opportunities to those whom they deem fit.

<sup>3</sup> During my site visit on October 4, 2021, I had a conversation with temple caretaker Mr. Cai who disclosed that he regrettably knew very little about the temple arts as he had only taken over the temple two to three years back. However, he kindly referred me to Dr. Yeo Kang Shua, whose writings I have heavily consulted for this essay and whom I have also approached to seek clarifications on specific historical details presented in his writings via email correspondences. The missing information surrounding the personhood of these artisans is marked during my recent conservation with another temple caretaker this year, who was visibly delighted

to learn that I was keen in Yueh Hai Ching's temple history but could not, unfortunately, supply any insights for similar reasons, concurring that there is a lack of records. Nonetheless, over the past trips, I have taken multiple photographs of these temple arts, which then formed the primary pool of visual materials that I refer to when writing this article.

<sup>4</sup> Many of these immigrants traveled from China to Singapore and the neighboring countries via red bow junks (*hongtouchuan* 红头船 in Mandarin or *angtauzung* in Teochew) and thereafter, encouraged their families to join them and resettle in the newfound homes in Southeast Asia (Tan, 2018, p. 36; Shuo, Ryan and Liu, 2009, pp. 581–582; Ruitenbeek, 1999, 281).

<sup>5</sup> For more details, see Ohnuma's article "The Gift of the Body and the Gift of Dharma," which is a commendable study into the popularity and variations of this "gift of the body" story across cultures and branches of Buddhism.

<sup>6</sup> The Teochews were not the only dialect community which enjoyed their operas; it was integral to Chinese culture and hence, there were many dialect-based opera troupes operating in the early days. According to British colonial officer Jonas Daniel Vaughan ([1879] 1971, pp. 85–87) and Tan (2018, pp. 126–133), Chinese communities watched traditional operas almost every day in the 1850s, attesting to their massive public popularity and contributing to their communal identities.

<sup>7</sup> The mural frescoes of tigers and dragons are strategically located, where the former faces West while the latter faces East. As part of the Four Symbols of Chinese astronomy, the (white) tiger is associated with the cardinal West while the (green) dragon is associated with the cardinal East (Karetzsky, 2013, p. 97).

<sup>8</sup> In his book (2018, p. 32), Tan restates what some scholars perceive to be massive waves of Teochews who left mainland China during the mid-19th to mid-20th centuries to resettle in Hong Kong and Southeast Asia. The resulting immigrant population and their descendants are hence purported to be similar in



population size to those who remained in China, encapsulated in the Teochew saying “*haineiyigechaoshan, haiwaiyigechaoshan* 海内一个潮汕, 海外一个潮汕.”

<sup>9</sup> Other sources, like Zaccheus (2014), have argued that the roofscape scene is derived from the Three Kingdoms, which is also likely given the many elaborate fighting scenes.

<sup>10</sup> The four eminent wood carving regions in China are Chaozhou gold-leaf gilded carving (*jinqimudiao* 金漆木雕), Fujian longan wood carving (*longyanmudiao* 龙眼木雕), Zhejiang Dongyang wood carving (*dongyangmudiao* 东阳木雕), and Wenzhou boxwood carving (*huangyangmudiao* 黄杨木雕) (Neo, 2005).

<sup>11</sup> The other Chinese temple in Singapore that features *duichangzuo* as part of its architecture is Hong San See Temple at Mohamed Sultan Road (Chen, 2009, p. 98; Lianhe Zaobao, 2017).

<sup>12</sup> I have deliberately used the root word “superficial” here to recall the James Fergusson’s lack of research depth and condescension towards Indian cultures, sculptures, and architecture, epitomized in his *History of Indian and Eastern Architecture* (1876), which revealed his prejudiced assessment of Indian arts as distasteful and ostentatious (Cunningham, 1999, p. 53, 65). Without the research by Partha Mitter (1999) into the Sanskrit term “*alamkar*” (p. 113), echoed by Patrick Flores (2017, p. 14), one might continue perceiving Indian and Hindu arts in the same vein as Fergusson. This negligence and bias are what I fear might come true in Singapore’s art-historical narratives colored by Western-inflected gazes and criteria; Scholars have hitherto relegated religious art forms as “folk arts” and consequently erased their much-needed place and attention in art history. These arts extend beyond Chinese religious temples to include stained glass of churches, calligraphy and arabesque patterns in mosques, figurines of Hindu temples, and more. I posed this curious question to Joleen Loh, a curator at National Gallery Singapore, during my HY3250 Week 8 lecture session and was heartened to learn that the curators are keenly aware

of this and looking to incorporate these arts into the overarching domains of sculptures and installations.

<sup>13</sup> *Chaocai* are differentiated from other ceramics through their combination of black, purple, blue, red, and green (Tan, 2018, p. 143).

\*All photographs in this article are taken by the author in 2021-2022 unless otherwise stated.

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## Article

### WHY DURIAN MATTERS: TANGLING WITH SUSTAINABILITY

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Matter

- 1. *noun*. physical substance in general, as distinct from mind and spirit; (in physics) that which occupies space and possesses rest mass, especially as distinct from energy
- 2. *noun*. a subject or situation under consideration
- 3. *verb*. be important or significant

Following a signed agreement between the Malaysia and Chinese governments, China began allowing the import of nitrogen frozen whole durians from Malaysia from mid-2019. Previously it had only permitted officially imported Malaysian durian in the form of pulp and paste. China is the largest and fastest-growing global market for durians. Most of the durians it imports are the *monthong* variety from Thailand (the world's largest durian producer) to be eaten fresh or used in desserts and various other dishes. But since Macau gambling tycoon Stanley Ho sent his personal jet to collect Malaysian musang king durians from Singapore which he gifted to his friend and fellow billionaire, Li Ka Shing (The Star/Asia News 2010), the musang king durian has been "celebrified" into an object of desire in China

where it can fetch four times more what Malaysian consumers pay. So far, only 3% of the China market is consuming durian, so there is a scramble to scale up musang king durian production in Malaysia from three- to ten-acre home orchards to 10,000-acre mega-plantations, with expected attendant environmental consequences. This potential growth drives the opening of large swathes of forest, the conversion of oil palm plantations into durian and also the upscaling of 'kampung (non-clonal) varieties' into premium durian clones among farmers and planters (AFP 2019). The impact is huge on several levels – environmental, economic, and social: for example, deforestation in Gua Musang, Kelantan, has led to the rise of Orang Asli activism in the form of blockades and legal action. Deforestation threatens the biodiversity and endangered wildlife (tiger habitat) along the Central Forest Spine and exacerbates water pollution<sup>1</sup>, erosion, landslides and flooding, the most recent being in Baling, Kedah where a burst dam from a musang king durian plantation. Other factors that contributed to flooding were erosion and debris from logging and deforestation at Gunung Inas, which also led to three lives lost and thousands displaced (Hana 2022; Noorazura 2022). The high price of musang king has also precipitated land grab, as the case with Royal Pahang Durian Group shows (Loh 2021).

All these feeds my interest to develop a sustainable and ecological model for the durian as a commercial crop in Malaysia with a focus on producers, funded by the Malaysian Fundamental Research Grant Scheme (FRGS, Nov. 2020 – April 2024). Durian matters and



there is no time like the present to pose key questions about the sustainability of mega musang king durian plantations and the ideology behind it. Considering the durian as matter, a physical substance or object which is a commodity (it has been called the new gold) and the literal fruit of human laboring, this project involves interviews with over 50 human stakeholders along the supply chain: small scale farmers and plantation representatives, Orang Asli affected by the plantations and also those who are growing durian themselves, durian homestay operators, wholesalers, retailers, distributors/exporters, travel agents, environmental protection NGOs like PEKA (Pertubuhan Pelindung Khazanah Alam Malaysia) and RIMBA (lit. Jungle, a small NGO that did scientific research on bat conservation), durian consultants and aficionados, academics, and Department of Agriculture officials. We also interviewed those working in sub-industries like nursery owners selling durian seedlings, agrochemical companies dealing in different types of fertilizers and pesticides and tech company representatives specialising in smart farms and IoT (the Internet of Things). Our findings so far reveal the following: The lucrativeness of premium durian has led to skyrocketing durian land prices (Ng 2019) and spurred the growth of sub-industries and new businesses that cater to large farms and plantations. Experienced individual durian consultants are highly sought after; and workers who are skilful bud grafters and ‘tiers’ (workers who secure raffia around the fruit to branches to make sure the ripened fruit does not fall onto the ground are paid RM2.50 per fruit<sup>2</sup>) are prized; newly incorporated plantation management businesses promise to look after their investors’

trees for them; technology companies promote smart farms and the IoT to solve labour shortage issues; and with the premium durian going global, there is talk of traceability like blockchain. Nurseries have begun to specialise in durian seedlings and saplings, companies create diverse downstream products like durian cakes and desserts for export, traditional agrochemical companies that have been catering for oil palm, rubber and rice are now pivoting back to durian. The current “wild, wild west” scenario attracts those with capital to enter the business without prior experience in agriculture or durian, for the “new” durian farmer is not someone who inherited the family farm but is far more likely to be a professional involved in property development, the food & beverage sector or public relations and media; this “new” farmer can easily be a retired banker, engineer, or teacher.

New plantation companies have sprouted up since 2015-2016 and they are either looking for durian investors to invest a minimum of RM10,000 with promised returns after the first 4-5 years that far exceed other investments,<sup>3</sup> with some advertising itself as syariah-compliant and regulated (for example, Durian Capital). Very much aware of the new consumer consciousness about environmental sustainability and the UN Sustainable Development Goals, the mega monocrop plantations looking for durian investors emphasize sustainability in their literature and website and sometimes even in their names (using the word ‘eco’ very loosely). The text mentions soil health, using organic fertilisers, and manual weeding instead of spraying pesticides. One company, Newleaf Plantation, whose farm is based on logged out



land rather than virgin forest, and which also contracts durian from other farmers claims that “many of our growers embrac[e] sustainable practices like solar-power, low-emission vehicles and water-saving irrigation systems.”<sup>4</sup> Others have not been so enlightened, and textual and visual analysis of videos posted on their websites and social media confirm that land clearing is very much an integral part of that process of durian development that heralds new wealth (limited to its investors).

This all brings us to the question ultimately of what sustainability means. How is it understood and by whom? The title of my FRGS grant gestures towards the idea of sustainability as split between economic and ecological sustainability. Yet economic sustainability hinges on ecological sustainability that has a far wider reach than the land the plantation occupies. In interviews, farmers, exporters and agrochemical representatives are aware that without proper regulation and enforcement put in place to control the overuse of pesticides and chemical fertilisers, that if chemical residue were to be detected on their durian shipments by China customs, this would endanger and curtail the reputation of Malaysia’s musang king export ambitions. They point to the example of the Malaysian bird nest industry’s collapse in 2011, which was wrought by lack of regulation. While the Ministry of Agriculture and Agro-based Industry requires durian farms to register for the Malaysian Good Agricultural Practices (MyGAP) certificate in order to export their durians, some non-MyGAP-certified farms sell their durians to distributors/exporters who have the MyGAP certificate which then legitimizes their fruit as adhering to farm safety regulations. This illegal

procedure occurs because demand currently exceeds supply. Discussions around economic viability with human stakeholders centre around foreseeable problems to do with the lack of manpower even before the Covid lockdowns (especially on mega plantations), climate change – small-scale farmers told us unpredictable and unseasonable weather was affecting the fragile durian – and the wrong use or overuse of fertilisers and pesticides that would compromise the quality of the durian and food safety.

Results from past studies raised in conversations with stakeholders do not seem to thwart their belief in their current practice. For example, while I raise the issue of non-fruiting occurring due to studies that suggest that the musang king is self-incompatible (Lim and Luders 1998, Muhammad Afiq et al 2018; Nurlisa & Mohd Firdaus 2022), most planters keen to only grow musang king alone or the even more expensive black thorn do not seem to be concerned or to heed the advice of agricultural consultants who recommend intercropping musang king with other species to encourage cross pollination. Although some plantations may also grow several varieties, they are not growing them in between or among the musang king trees but in a different section of the plantation to facilitate harvesting, and fertilization schedules, since different clones have varying ripening times. Neither are they worried that monocropping can see the rapid rate of disease (like *phytophthora palmivora*) sweep through a monocrop plantation compared to a plantation or farm that has diverse fruit trees and species. Perhaps this is due to faith in scientific methods ensuring proper drainage, water management and surveillance. Some new monocrop plantations



plant quick yielding crops like pineapple, papaya, pumpkin and soursop to recoup some of their initial investment and to cover management and operating costs while they wait for the durians to mature in 4-5 years' time. But in truth, the intention was never to plant them to increase plant diversity or to enrich the soil. This shows that planters are not driven by notions of sustainability but more by the idea of maximizing profit from a commercial crop. Neither are they concerned about the destruction of nearby bat habitat and fruit bats which are durian pollinators – the consequence of which may also eventually see low yields (Nur Hamzah et al 2021; Sheema et al 2021).

My discussion has so far focused on *human* stakeholders in the global supply chain. But adopting a posthumanist position bears asking how these human stakeholders relate to the durian and whether the durian and other associated non-human actants in the network or assemblage can be considered as more than just passive things or objects enacted upon by humans. Consider the non-human actants that help in worlding the durian: animals, insects, other plants, the pollinators, a balance of sufficient sunlight, water, and (usually human-added) nutrients in the soil at the right phase of the growth, some with the aid of the farmer but other being acts of nature seemingly beyond his control. All play a valuable role in the ecosystem of the durian. However, the literature and promotion materials of plantation management conceptualize sustainability only from the planting stage until harvest; they ignore the process of land clearing to make way for the durian plantation. This creates a false break from the biodiverse forest that was clearfelled to give

way to the musang king monocrop mega plantation. The definition of sustainability is couched within a modernist capitalist ideology meant to reign in the extremities of capitalism. That longtime industry experts warn against the overuse of pesticides, for example, and want to see the industry regulated in order to ensure a constant high quality food safe product that is permitted to enter China, demonstrates that economic sustainability is dependent on maintaining environmentally sound agricultural practices. But this awareness ultimately revolves around the social human world which it wants to preserve (it is farmers and consumers who would be affected by import bans by the China government). My paper asks, what might a consciousness about the webbed relationship between humans and nonhumans do to prevent further ecological disaster and to mitigate climate change? A possible alternative answer lies in the way organic farmers and Orang Asli practicing agroforestry treat the soil or share the harvest with other animals/insects/pests. They plant other flowering plants to distract pests, or leave some durians at the end of the season for the animals and wildlife. To reiterate the position of this paper, the values of sustainability cannot only begin on a terraced mountain top bare of tropical plants and wildlife, its red dry soil exposed. It should begin at the level of governance that considers a harmonious balance between natural forest, conservation, commercial development of land for agriculture and the rights of indigenous people.



## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Greenpeace Malaysia. (2020). Approval of Monoculture Farm Development in Peninsular Malaysia's Forest Reserves Raises Concerns. Press release. June 30.

<https://www.greenpeace.org/malaysia/press/3456/approval-of-monoculture-farm-development-in-peninsular-malaysias-forest-reserves-raises-concerns/> Interfering with water catchment areas is also another serious problem (Chin 2018).

<sup>2</sup> One of the conditions for exporting the Malaysian whole durian into China is that the fruit must not touch the ground or have soil on it, hence the necessity to tie the fruit. Thai durians, on the other hand, are cut before they naturally ripen and fall.

<sup>3</sup> Visit <https://duriancapital.com.my/investment/>

<sup>4</sup> See their website, "We're into sustainability": <https://newleaf.com.my/malaysia-durian-plantation-farming-musang-king/>

<sup>5</sup> China banned Malaysian bird nests in 2011 after finding in them 350 times nitrate levels above recommended human consumption (Kuo 2022).

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## Article

### PREVALENCE OF THE RAMAYANA EPIC IN MALAYSIAN VISUAL ARTS POST NATIONAL CULTURE POLICY

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#### Introduction

The vastness of the Ramayana epic in Southeast Asia's traditional culture and artistic heritage is well grounded. Over the years and centuries, this timeless epic has been intertwined into various art forms, cultural traditions and spirituals beliefs of the people in this region. The history of the Ramayana epic in Malaysia can be traced to its Hindu-Buddhist past when the Malay Peninsula was a passing station for traders, religious figures and travelers from both east and west (Sarkar, 1983, p. 206). The *wayang kulit* tradition in Malaysia owes its origin to the *Wayang Kulit Purwa* of Jawa that flourished during the Majapahit period (1293-1520) (Yusof, 2006, p. 9). In Malaysia, the Ramayana is not only found within the traditional art of *wayang kulit*, but its influences are also evident in Malay literary text, such as Hikayat Seri Rama (HSR), and more importantly in the Malay court culture (Osman, 1978, p. 30). Similar to the sporadic spread of Hindu-Buddhist religious influences across Southeast Asia, Islam too arrived to this region from different directions over a period of time (Kerlogue, 2004, p. 127). What is left of the *Wayang Kulit Purwa* tradition today proves the assimilation, transformation and reduction of the old traditional practices and

ritualistic beliefs during the Islamisation of the Malay Archipelago specifically.

In Malaysia, Rowland (2005, pp. 46) notes that the National Culture Congress was convened in 1971 to seek solutions of the racial tension and disharmony of May 1969. The outcome of this congress was the National Culture Policy (NCP) that outlined moves towards a unifying culture. Despite the provision for indigenous and other cultures, Islam was to be a vital component in the formation of the national culture (Ishak, 2014, pp. 127). Although the NCP was never implemented as legislative laws and acts, its effect was significant among the local art practitioners. It is noteworthy that despite the arrival of Islam at the Malay Archipelago between the 13th and 14th centuries, and further with the formulation of the NCP in 1971, the Ramayana epic still persists in the Malaysian visual arts scene. This essay intends to highlight and discuss a selection of a few artworks that consist of elements and attributes from the Ramayana epic post NCP.

Among the pioneers who captured the 'liveliness' of the *wayang kulit* projection together with the puppet characters onto their canvases are Yusoff Haji Abdullah and Nik Zainal Abidin as early as the 1960s. It is a point to moot that the practice of *wayang kulit* was very much alive in the north-eastern states in Malaysia, especially in Kelantan till the 1970s prior to the introduction of the NCP. Nik Zainal composes various monkey characters with reference to *Wayang Kulit Melayu Kelantan* (previously known as *Wayang Kulit Siam*) (Fig. 1).





Figure 1 Nik Zainal Abidin, "Hulubalang Kera" 1975, Watercolour on Paper  
Source: *Important Malaysian Works From 1940 to 1991* (2003).

Jamal (1987: 66) further highlights that Nik Zainal who was a native of Kelantan and had an early exposure to this rich cultural tradition brought forth its significance together with its close ties to the people in several other of his works too.

In this composition, titled "Hulubalang Kera" (Monkey Troopers), Nik Zainal Abidin had composed a somewhat chaotic scene of monkey characters charging forth from opposite directions. Taking into account the title and the aggressiveness of the monkey characters (wide open mouths, baring teeth and blood-shot eyes), this scene can be associated with the battle between Bali and Sugriva. In the Ramayana epic, Bali and Sugriva are brothers who fight over the kingdom of Kishkinda (Sugriva, Sugriv – Valmiki Ramayana Story, no date). The puppet characters in Nik Zainal's "Hulubalang Kera" are influenced by the *Wayang Kulit Melayu Kelantan* puppet characters where the puppet figures

appear shorter and sturdier compared to the slim and elongated figures of the *Wayang Kulit Purwa* of Jawa. More importantly, the inclusion of Pak Dogol (bald headed and beaked-nose dark character at the top) and Wak Long (bald headed and brown character at the top right) demonstrates the localisation of the Ramayana epic which was to suit the local socio-cultural setting.



Figure 2 Nirmala Shanmughalingam, "Friends in Need" 1986, Acrylic and collage on canvas  
Source: *Rupa Malaysia - Meninjau Seni Lukis Modern Malaysia* (2000).

Nirmala Shanmughalingam as a political artist has juxtaposed look-alike of *wayang kulit* puppet figures together with political figures/leaders to compose a message based on the concurrent socio-political realities (or atrocities) (Fig. 2). In a conversation with the artist pertaining to works on the social condition and realities, Wong Hoy Cheong shares Shanmughalingam's position of her art being labelled as "political, hence exploitative and opportunistic" (Wong Hoy Cheong, 1998, p. 1). Shanmughalingam's approach by contrast is far bolder and provocative compared to other Malaysian artists as she does not shy away from political figures or





political realities that came as a result of decisions and actions taken by those in power. The resemblance of Shanmughalingam's two main figures in reverse white and background figures to the characters of *Wayang Kulit Purwa* is hard to ignore. This is evident through the side-profiled stance of two-dimensional figures with elongated limbs, sharp protruding noses, fang-like teeth, wide open eyes (figure on top left) and positioning of the hands (figure on the right) (Fig. 2).

Shanmughalingam has assimilated the characters of these political figures into *wayang kulit* puppet figures to further convey their intentions or political interests. The injection of a 'non-Ramayana' storyline or even a new character is not foreign to the *wayang kulit* tradition, and here Shanmughalingam has brought forth Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan disguised as *wayang kulit* characters to criticise the bombing of Libya by the United States of America with the aid of Britain. Even though the collage of "Friends In Need" by Shanmughalingam raises socio-political awareness based on issues abroad, it further provokes the viewer to ponder, analyse and perhaps even question political agendas that they face at home.



Figure 3 Siti Zainon Ismail, "Hikayat Beringin Tenggara" 2008,

Source: *Pameran Siti Zainon Ismail: Dari Jogja Ke Bawah Bayu Karya Pilihan Dari Tahun 1970 Hingga 2016* (2016).

Siti Zainon Ismail composes a *pohon beringin* that is somewhat divided into three tiers in "Hikayat Beringin Tenggara" (Fig. 3). A translucent red horizontal stripe—indicating the middle tier—that consists of land animals separates the lowest tier and upper tier. The lowest tier which indicates water is occupied by underwater creatures in a variation of blue and dark blue. Although no figurative animals are present in the upper tier of her work, this particular segment almost comes alive and glows with small geometrical patterns and foliage details that reflect a beautiful lighted sky. The designs and features of the *pohon beringin* puppet figures may vary from one category to another as well as the region it originates from.



In the *wayang kulit* genre, among other names for the *pohon beringin* puppet figures are *kayon* and *gunungan*. Nevertheless, among the principal guidelines that maintain the unilateral look of the *pohon beringin* are the composition of flora and fauna (to represent the environment which we live in), and the hierarchy of the flora, fauna and mythological beings in some *pohon beringin* leather puppets. More than that, Zahari (2013, p. 60) explains that each of these flora and fauna signify a particular meaning in the shadow play performance.

In a conversation with the artist regarding Tenggarong, Siti Zainon explained that Tenggarong was a geographical location of a great Malay kingdom at the south of Borneo in the 17th century. Tenggarong was the city district (A boisterous royal ritual, 2013) of Kutai Kertanegara which was the earliest Indic kingdom in the Indonesian Archipelago in the fifth century (Supomo, 2006, p. 310). The symbolic representation of Tenggarong through the *pohon beringin* is anchored on Mount Meru's philosophy as the centre of universe which is deeply rooted in the Hindu-Buddhist past.

In a recent contemporary work, inspired by the distinctive figurative style of the *wayang kulit* puppet characters, Tintoy Chuo worked with a local puppeteer to custom design these characters. The Sangkala Vedeh (Darth Vader) which is one of the earliest puppet characters was created back in 2012 during the initial stages of the Fusion Wayang Kulit project (Joseph, 2015). Tintoy Chuo explains that he and Teh Take Huat were driven to create contemporary Malaysian characters for the exhibition taking

reference and inspiration from the *Wayang Kulit Melayu Kelantan* characters. This was an attempt to make this traditional art appealing to the younger generation. The side profiling of both the characters (Fig. 4) are in direct reference to the *wayang kulit* puppet design complete with rods attached to the limbs of these characters in order to move and animate them similarly to a *wayang kulit* act. Next, the elaborate detailing of both characters such as the perforated lines that decorate each area is yet another significant style from the *wayang kulit* puppet designs.



Figure 4 Sangkala Vedeh (Darth Vader) on left and Maharaja Ravana on right.

Peperangan Bintang (Star Wars) wayang kulit project.

Source: Tradisi ke Pop Exhibition at Creative Space at National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur (2016).

Sangkalan Vedeh's aggressive hands with black claws project the nature of his character which is similar to Maharaja Ravana's (Fig. 4). While Maharaja Ravana is placed on a naga to denote



his status, Sangkala Vedeh is positioned on a Star Destroyer Class 2. In a discussion with Tintoy Chuo regarding the design of Sangkala Vedeh, Chuo highlighted that during the early design stage, he had sketched Sangkala Vedeh with nine skulls on his helmet to resemble the multi-headed Ravana. Unfortunately, the inclusion of nine skulls made Sangkala Vedeh a little too tall with not much resemblance to Darth Vader. Eventually, these nine skulls were eliminated.

To conclude, this essay has highlighted and discussed a few artworks that are influenced by the Ramayana epic through the application of wayang kulit. The earlier works in the decade of 1970s bear strong resemblance and inspiration from the wayang kulit tradition, while later works have been intertwined with social issue or even historical significance of certain kingdoms. Many more contemporary works have been infused with movie characters in order to make them relevant to the younger generation. Over the years the Ramayana epic has been localised, Islamised and adapted to suit not only the socio-cultural settings and politico-religious framework, but also with the need of contemporary times. More importantly, in a Malay-Muslim majority nation like Malaysia, cultural elements and spiritual beliefs from the Hindu-Buddhist past have been eliminated in order to preserve and protect the Malay-Muslim culture. The extent of such an elimination can be seen through the implementation of a sanction on the *wayang kulit* practice in Malaysia (Dahlan, 2012, p. 323). Yousof (2010, p. 143) further highlights that folkloric Hindu elements as well as animistic beliefs that are well-rooted in indigenous Southeast Asia that are interlaced in wayang kulit practices are seen as a threat

against the Islamic framework and religious matrix. Furthermore, with the formulation of NCP in 1971 ('Kata Pengantar', 1973, p. vii) the Malay culture was given more importance as noted by Piyadasa (1993, p. 175) due to the majority population being the Malays and the position of Islam as Malaysia's official religion which was further argued by Ishak (2014, p. 127). Although the NCP had liquidified the adaptation and visualisation of the Ramayana epic in Malaysian visual arts, vital characters and significant plots from this age-old epic remain prominent choices for some artists as inspiration for their creative works. From a macroscopic point of view, the wayang kulit figurative style or 'wayang' style prevails as a distinct pattern or trend in the local visual arts along with transformation and evolution. Such adaptation and localisation by local visual artists demonstrate the elasticity and adaptability of the Ramayana epic that has existed since its inception in India thousands of years ago (Vatsyayan, 2004, p. 335).

#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> I had an informal discussion with Siti Zainon Ismail in regards to her works from her exhibition, 'Pameran Siti Zainon Ismail: Dari Jogja Ke Bawah Bayu Karya Pilihan Dari Tahun 1970 Hingga 2016' on 5<sup>th</sup> July 2019.

<sup>2</sup> I had an informal discussion with Tintoy Chuo in regards to the selection of the characters in the Peperangan Bintang play on 4<sup>th</sup> July 2019.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.



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### Biographical Note

Cheryl Chelliah Thiruchelvam has just completed her PhD in Art History with the School of the Arts, Universiti Sains Malaysia. She is currently attached to the Advertising Department, Faculty of Arts and Social Science in Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman (UTAR), Perak, Malaysia. Her research interests are anchored on Hindu-Buddhist arts of the Southeast Asian region, and to a lesser extent on feminist works. Her latest publication is a book chapter titled “Expressions of the Ramayana Epic in Malaysian Arts” for the book *The Multivalence of an Epic: Retelling the Ramayana in South India and Southeast Asia* (2021) published by the Manipal Universal Press. She also has a forthcoming essay entitled, “Subjectivity in Writing Art History Objectively”, for the *Convergence in Arts and Design Book* that will be published by Universiti Sains Malaysia. Besides that, she is also interested in writing critics, reviews or commentary within the Malaysian art scene.  
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### Fieldnotes

**Berita welcomes descriptions of in-progress fieldwork conducted by scholars**

*The following is Syafiqah Jaafar’s Fieldnotes – September 2022*

“It can’t be that this Tuan Simi guy is too mysterious to know anything about.”

In all honesty, that stubborn insistence framed much of my fascination with the figure of Tuan Simi, the seemingly mysterious author of *Syair Dagang Berjual Beli* and *Syair Potong Gaji* (written circa late 1820s to early to mid 1830s) – the manuscript in which they are contained in still being kept at the Bibliotheque National de Paris. My first encounter with those poems was in an undergraduate course on Malay literature, by way of the transliteration done by Muhammad Haji Salleh back in 1978. The course focus was on the content of the poems; I found myself however more intrigued by the authorial figure, and that fascination spilled over into my time in graduate school.

There was only so much about him one could gather through his poems – that he worked for the British East India Company and posted to Singapore’s customs house at some point in the 1830s; that he addressed and identified himself with the Malay and Bugis communities; that he felt some degree of connection with the employees from Bencoolen who were the first to be retrenched by the Company. But other than that, and apart from addressing himself as Tuan Simi, there seemed to be little else to identify him.

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It turned out I wasn't the only one who would be fascinated by his identity. Through some strange turn of events, I found out about a contemporary artist was doing his residency at NUS Museum under their Prep-Room: Drills series. Fyerool Darma was working on After Ballads, building up on his existing works based around his imaginaries of notable Malay literary figures from the 19th century such as Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir, as well as Ibrahim Munshi. Through his own research and reading, he too came across the works and figure of Tuan Simi, and similarly, he too was enthralled by the author's elusive personage. You could say that a phantom sparked our friendship; we built it partly through numerous random sessions of us throwing out various theories about Tuan Simi's possible identities. At some point, we also entertained the prospect of him being Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir's alter ego – something highly improbable, but it made for an exciting possibility nonetheless.

And then something struck us. It was so obvious, and yet it was something we completely missed: what if we were reading Tuan Simi's name wrong? We had gone along with existing "conventions" of reading his name in Jawi as Tuan Simi. But the Jawi script at times omit vowels, depending on the hand.

Our altered approach worked like magic: re-identifying our mysterious scribe friend as Tuan Siami changed everything. With that "newfound" identity, it felt like our research (independently done but we shared findings) got a new lease of life. Archival materials like the Blue Books between the 1820s to 1840s became much richer – I kept an eye out for any records

of a native scribe either going by such a name or who sound like they might fit Tuan Siami's profile.

It was also then that we came across journal articles by scholars who have attempted to elucidate a bit more on Tuan Siami. John Bastin in particular (his piece in turn a response to Ian Proudfoot's) name-dropped him in detail: our scribe friend was a Siamese Malay who has had a long history of working with the British East India Company as a writer. But perhaps more significantly – and arguably what changed the way our scribe friend left his traces in history – he also worked with that very famous John Leyden. The relationship between the two must have been very close, because our scribe friend was eventually adopted by Leyden, and given the permission to rename himself John Leyden Siamee – a portmanteau of the name of his adopted parent and his place of origin from Siam.

If that realization wasn't already exciting enough, at around the same time, a fellow researcher-friend of mine who was trawling through the records in the National Archives of Singapore for records related to land tickets and grants for her own project texted me to say she found traces of Siami in several documents she was looking at. (At that moment I kind of felt bad, realizing that I must have rambled on enough about Tuan Siami in every conversation we ever had for her to remember him.)

It turns out that our scribe friend made his appearances in several land records and appeal letters – always signing off as "J.L. Siamee". He must have been of reasonable wealth to be able



to be joint owners with the merchant G.R. Read of two substantially sized houses with tiled roofs at the foot of Fort Canning Hill facing the Esplanade. To further mystify his identity, one of the land records listed him as an “European”, but in the many other traces we found, including letters of recommendation and job postings, he was almost always referred to as a “native writer”.

It wouldn't be too much of a stretch to say that by that point in time, my interest in studying the poems Siami wrote had waned considerably. I had very clearly dug myself into a hole trying to grasp at his persona and the way he had fashioned himself. But the very acts of exploring and theorizing about his identity also reframed the way I assumed the authorship and intent behind his poems. On a more generic level, my interactions with Fyerool too had altered the way I view the possibilities and potentialities of history.

I admit this isn't the usual sort of research “fieldnotes” many are used to. Rather than content, what always stands out to me in any research process are the friends I made along the way that had moved my research along in significant ways. There is a tendency to think of historical research as a very isolating process: a historian cooped up with her archival materials, sifting through for traces and then trying to resurrect the people and their stories through her own writings. But perhaps that need not necessarily be the case as historical research should and could be one done in community as what can further enrich the process of our historical research are interactions with those beyond our field and discipline. Good history-

writing is no longer just about doing justice to the sources we can find; it is also about recognizing that sometimes the borders demarcating a particular discipline is arbitrary, and that it is perfectly okay to cross them. I would even go to say that it is necessary for us to cross them. When we are not bound by the conventional strictures of our discipline, we find and create new avenues to explore ideas. We begin to approach our materials differently. And perhaps above all, we find genuine friends in new places.

#### **Biographical Notes**

Syafiqah Jaaffar (BA, MA National University of Singapore) is currently Assistant Curator at National Museum of Singapore. Her research focus looks at the intersections of history, literature and visual culture, particularly that of late 19th to early 20th century Singapore and Malaya.

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## Recent Members'

## Publications

- Adil Johan. (2022). "Transnational Mobilities, Intercultural Rhythms: The Journey of a Drummer in Malaysian Popular Music, 1980s and 1990s", *JATI-Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*. 27(1): pp. 127–151. (online)
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## Upcoming Conferences

**Lien Development Conference 2022:  
The Dynamics of Governance in a Volatile,  
Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous World**  
25-26 November 2022

### Call for Abstracts and Full Papers

In recent decades, numerous terms have increasingly been used in academic literature, policymaking, businesses, and news outlets to highlight the growing difficulty in making sense of the developments happening around the world. They include change, turbulence, rapid change, disruption, chaos, and flux etc. These terms are encapsulated by the popular acronym VUCA, which refers to Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity. In today's VUCA world, states, as well as non-state actors, are facing not only unprecedented challenges, but also new opportunities in governance amidst a combination of several ongoing trends including accelerating climate change, heightening geopolitical tensions, deglobalisation, rapid digitization, prolonged economic and supply chain volatilities, worsening inequality, as well as the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

Against this backdrop, the Nanyang Centre for Public Administration (NCPA) of the Nanyang Technological University (NTU) will present the 2022 Lien Development Conference on 25-26 November 2022 in hybrid form. This conference is co-organised with the Lien Ying Chow Legacy Fellowship, International Institute of Administrative Sciences, and the Stratagem Group. The theme this year, "Governance in a Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous

World", invites academics, researchers, and practitioners from various fields and around the world to come together and deliberate how governance has developed in the VUCA world that we currently live in.

The theme of this year's conference is "Governance in a Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous World".

On behalf of the organising committee of the 2022 Lien Development Conference, we cordially invite you to submit an abstract (not more than 300 words) and full paper (not more than 8000 words including references) in conjunction with this year's theme, "Governance in a Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous World". We welcome theoretical, empirical, and comparative studies on all important aspects of governance in different countries and regions for the following broad themes, but not limited to them:

- Global/regional economic cooperation, competition, and recovery
- The role of international and regional organizations in times of crisis
- Sustainable and inclusive development
- Global supply chains in developing world
- Poverty, inequality, and food crisis
- Migrant and transnational knowledge transfer
- Public budgeting and finances in times of crisis
- New challenges for public administration and public service delivery
- Policymaking and implementation in a VUCA world
- Crisis management



- Public values and public service ethics
- Asian perspective of public governance in the new era
- Smart cities, smart nations, and smart governance
- Industry 4.0 and e-government
- Media, public communication, and public health
- Public health and policies
- Aging, health, family, and social policy
- Current and emerging policy directions of higher education
- Building resilience in world place and society
- Science in public policy

We also invite full paper contributions, which are optional but required to qualify for best paper awards and possible inclusion for journal publication in a special issue of either Global Policy or Asia Pacific Journal of Public Administration, or the symposium of either of the two Chinese journals: Journal of Public Administration (公共行政评论) and Public Administration and Policy Review (公共管理与政策评论).

Best paper awardees will be announced at the gala dinner on 25 November 2022. Awardees will be able to publish their article in the either of the journals mentioned above.

#### Key deadlines

Submission of abstract: 31st July 2022

Notification of acceptance: 15th August 2022

Submission of full paper: 31st October 2022

#### Submission links

Please submit your abstracts and full paper via <https://www.conftool.org/lienconference2022/index.php?page=login>

For authors who wish to propose a panel session relating to any of the above broad themes, please contact:

Dr Celia Lee @ [ncpa-research@ntu.edu.sg](mailto:ncpa-research@ntu.edu.sg)

For more information on the conference, please visit <https://lienconference.sg/2022/>

#### IASPM-SEA - ICTM Malaysia

(supported by Penang House of Music)

#### navigating (un)sustainability

2 to 5 March 2023

Penang, MALAYSIA

Venue TBC

Aside from its function as entertainment, music and the arts have long served as a means to engage with the world around us. Many utilize this form of artistic performance to help make sense of the unravelling sociopolitical climates that are evolving around them. As the climate crisis continues to seep into public consciousness, we are becoming increasingly concerned with the idea of **(un)sustainability**. While this term has significant merit from an environmental standpoint, we should also consider how sustainability – or lack thereof – can be embodied in terms of industry, practice, culture, pedagogy, community, theory and materiality.

The idea of (un)sustainability, as we understand it, also extends to:

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**(in)stability, (un)accountability, (in)viability, (dis)continuity, (un)reliability,** and so forth.

As we trudge further into the 21st century, it is time to reflect and focus our lens inwards to consider the vicissitudes of music-based industries, pedagogies, practices and communities. By critically reflecting on music's modes of (un)sustainability, we hope to mitigate our present situation for future generations. We encourage scholars and practitioners to contemplate how their research or personal praxis fits into this larger narrative and welcome all critical insights for music and arts studies in Southeast Asia and beyond.

#### Questions/points of reflection

- The (un)sustainability of music careers, especially considering the COVID-19 pandemic
- The (un)sustainability of the various 'spaces' for musical performance and creation
- The (un)sustainability of entrenched/unequal gender dynamics and sexual relationships
- Agents of (un)sustainability: music producers, fans and collectors
- How can the music industry become more sustainable?
- How can processes to preserve musical history, such as archiving, be sustained despite persisting obstacles?
- How are music scenes and communities sustaining themselves under the pressures of financial, sociocultural, political burdens? What makes them (un)sustainable in the 21st century?
- How are musical traditions sustained across national, translocal and/or international borders?

- How can music and performing arts pedagogy be sustainable in the education sector?
- What kinds of tools, concepts, and methods can be prioritized to think about sustainability in performing arts and popular music studies?
- What are the historical precedents and contemporary impact of music technologies (e.g. production, distribution, streaming) on popular music and performing arts (un)sustainabilities?
- What are unique issues regarding (un)sustainability in Southeast Asian music and the arts?

#### Presentation formats

- Individual Paper
- Organized Panel (3-4 papers)
- Roundtable (3-5 papers)
- Poster Presentations
- Performance lectures, music workshops, films
- Other forms of creative outputs are welcome and will be considered.

Submit an abstract for a presentation in one of the above listed formats (between 250-400 words) along with a short biographical note (100 words). Organizers of panels and roundtables must submit a statement on the focus of the panel/roundtable along with an abstract from each presenter and their respective biographical notes.

All proposals must be submitted in the following Google Form:

<https://forms.gle/nKfQ3LheBPmmjwkT6>

**Enquiries:** [iaspm.sea@gmail.com](mailto:iaspm.sea@gmail.com)

**Deadline:** 1 November 2022

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For further information about IASPM-SEA, ICTM  
Malaysia and Penang House of Music:  
<https://iaspm-sea.org>  
<https://ictmusic.org/world-network/malaysia-national-committee>  
<https://www.penanghouseofmusic.com/>

## Editorial Information

*Berita* is the official publication of the Malaysian/Singapore/Brunei (MSB) Studies Group. A part of the Association of Asian Studies, we are a cross-disciplinary network of scholars, students, and observers with research and other professional interests in Malaysia, Singapore, and Brunei.

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