Cultural Connections

Volume X | 2025

Celebrating SG60: Deepening Roots, New Momentum

About Culture Academy Singapore

The Culture Academy Singapore (CA) champions the development of the next generation of Singapore's cultural leaders in the public and private sectors. CA's work focuses on three inter-related areas: Leadership and Capability Development, Research and Scholarship, and International Partnerships, which cut across all of CA's strategic priorities.

Cultural Connections is a journal published annually by Culture Academy Singapore to nurture thought leadership in cultural work in the public sector. This journal encourages scholarship and the exchange of ideas in the sector. It thus provides a platform for our professionals and administrators in the sector to publish alongside other thought leaders from the region and beyond.

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Contents

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Contents

Foreword

Singapore's 60th anniversary offers a poignant moment to reflect on our national journey and envision our cultural future. The theme of this year's edition of *Cultural Connections*—"Celebrating SG60: Deepening Roots, New Momentum"—encapsulates this dual opportunity to look back on six decades and to project forward to the decades ahead. It invites us to appreciate how our foundations have been shaped and strengthened, and recognise the forces that can realise or challenge our collective aspirations.

Our arts and culture ecosystem has matured over the past decades, shaped by sustained investments, vibrant communities and a growing confidence in our creative voices. These diverse voices reflect Singapore's fundamental multicultural and multilingual character. This collection demonstrates how cultural diversity is increasingly a defining strength to be celebrated. It is vividly brought to life in the thoughtful panel discussion between Meenakshy Bhaskar, Samuel Wong and Mohd Yaziz Mohd Hassan, who share how their respective performing arts practices continually evolve through cross-cultural innovation. Similarly, Pooja Nansi and Meira Chand's reflections on Singapore's literary development remind us how writing in multiple languages and from different cultural traditions enriches the tapestry of Singaporean storytelling.

Technology is another recurring theme in this volume. While it is most directly addressed in Lindsey McInerney's essay on the urgent need to reimagine creativity in the age of artificial intelligence (AI), other contributors also grapple with its implications. Several contributions note how the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated our embrace of digital platforms, reshaping everything from artistic production to audience engagement. While our artistic community pivoted with excellence to leverage technology, there are new challenges—questions of access, authenticity and sustainability. We continue to address these issues while recognising the immense opportunities to reach wider audiences and work in more collaborative, distributed ways.

Several contributions touch on the robust and growing dialogue among art forms. The boundaries between genres are increasingly porous. Literary practitioners describe how they draw from and incorporate performance and sound; theatre-makers work with digital installations; visual and musical artists are inspired by movement, rhythm and text. What we are witnessing is not a fragmentation but a fruitful interweaving of artistic domains and skills. This year's contributions demonstrate how Singaporean practitioners resist the constraints of disciplinary silos, embracing fluidity, hybridity and experimentation as creative principles.

(Continued on next page)

Amid this dynamism, we remain anchored by shared values: commitment to excellence, a desire to connect, and the belief that the arts are essential to our collective identity and wellbeing. As we reflect on six decades of cultural growth and innovation, we must also look ahead—to the artists and audiences of the future, to forms of expression that are emerging or even yet to be discovered, and to the policies, programmes and platforms that will nurture them. I hope that this issue of *Cultural Connections* will inspire continued dialogue, deepen the roots of our understanding, and spark new energy for the journey ahead.

Rosa Daniel (Mrs)
Dean, Culture Academy Singapore

Editor-in-Chief's Note

This tenth volume of *Cultural Connections* marks a key milestone: not only the 60th anniversary of Singapore's independence, but also a decade of documenting our cultural imagination through this publication. This year's theme, "Celebrating SG60: Deepening Roots, New Momentum," presented our contributors with a generative polarity, within which they have explored multiple tensions: between old and new, continuity and change, memory and possibility.

Kwok Kian Chow opens the volume with a rich meditation on "generative polarity" itself—how dualities, constructively engaged, can inform policies, practices and partnerships across our cultural institutions. He urges us to embrace complexity in cultural development, and to engage with our history not as a static legacy, but as fertile ground for reimagination.

We see this reimagination in Goh Yew Lin's essay on the Singapore Symphony Orchestra, which reflects not only on musical excellence, but also on infrastructural and audience-building strategies needed to propel classical music into a "golden age". Similarly, Meira Chand and Pooja Nansi examine the arc of Singapore's literary growth: Meira recounting how far we've come since the early days of Singapore Writers Week and its successor the Singapore Writers Festival, which Pooja directed for several years as it shaped new generations of authors and readers. Nisha Sajnani reminds us that reimagination can help us to find new roles for artistic and cultural activity, including the maintenance and nurturing of health and wellness, both individual and collective.

Singapore's policy ecosystem has often been lauded for its coherence, with strong alignment between public agencies, private initiative, and community energy. Rachel Teo explores this nexus through the lens of private museums and philanthropic support; Hamzah Muzaini examines the role of community-led initiatives in the richness and range of Singapore's overall offerings.

This collection also features wide-ranging wisdom from two panel discussions with experts from the performing arts and theatre. We have described these contributions as being "In Their Own Words", retaining as far as possible the conversationality and mutually iterative idea-building of these discussions. Among many insights, Meenakshy Bhaskar, Samuel Wong and Mohd Yaziz Mohd Hassan delve into the importance of seamless leadership transitions by building up the next generation of performance practitioners. Chong Tze Chien, Nelson Chia, Shaza Ishak and Subramanian Ganesh ponder the

(Continued on next page)

challenges of speaking to both national and specific ethnic audiences, even as the local theatre scene has professionalised significantly over the years.

In all these essays, past, present and future are in dynamic conversation. History is never static, as Kwok Kian Woon and Kwa Chong Guan remind us. Whether tracing 700 years of regional history or reinterpreting civilisational narratives, they show how understanding our past is essential to orienting ourselves in the present. Heritage is not merely about preservation, but about meaning-making. The future—particularly through technology—has also loomed large across the volume. Lindsey McInerney challenges us to reckon with artificial intelligence as a new creative co-pilot, while urging us to retain and strengthen our uniquely human capacity for creative, independent thought. Others address technology more implicitly—from hybrid formats to digital audiences, from tech-enabled storytelling to new audiences. The momentum is real; if steered well, new technologies can deepen and even broaden our cultural roots.

As we look ahead to SG100 and beyond, I hope the reflections in this volume offer inspiration—not only for what has been, but for what is already here, and might yet be. May these contributions spark new collaboration, nourish creative risk-taking, and strengthen our sense of shared cultural purpose.

Dr. Aaron Maniam
Editor-in-Chief, *Cultural Connections*

The Museum on the Wet Rice Field[1]

Kwok Kian Chow

Former Senior Curator, Director, and Senior Advisor
National Museum Singapore, Singapore Art Museum, and National Gallery Singapore

Formerly the senior curator of National Museum Singapore, founding director of Singapore Art Museum, and director and senior advisor of National Gallery Singapore, as well as the author of Channels & Confluences: A History of Singapore Art, Kwok Kian Chow offers an expansive view of Singapore's museological vision and the emergence of the nation's art institutions, calling on them to challenge overly convenient categorisations in defining their identity and purpose. Touching on developments in local art historiography, he discusses how diverse influences continue to shape collection and exhibition development, discourse and scholarship. These have resulted in more inclusive recent approaches which embrace the complexities of reflecting on and engaging with a broad and dynamic, regional cultural milieu.

Preamble: Singapore in Venice

Singapore's inaugural pavilion at the Venice Biennale, presented by the Singapore Art Museum (SAM) in 2001, featured the works of Henri Chen KeZhan, Salleh Japar, Matthew Ngui, and Suzann Victor. 23 years later, Singapore made a significant impact at what is arguably the most established global art stage.[2] Robert Zhao Renhui showcased *Seeing Forest* at the Singapore Pavilion.[3] Two Singapore artists, Charmaine Poh and Sim Chi Yin, were featured in the main exhibition. Their works, titled *What's Softest in the World Rushes and Runs Over What's Hardest in the World* and *Requiem*, respectively, highlighted the prominence of Singapore's contemporary art. Furthermore, the National Gallery Singapore loaned eight works in its collection to the sub-section titled "Portraits," also in the main exhibition.[4] I vividly recall the happy day in 2000 when I received a call on my mobile phone from Khor Kok Wah, then the Director of Arts and Heritage at the Ministry of Information and the Arts (MITA). He informed me that the Ministry had approved SAM's funding request to initiate a Singapore national pavilion in the Venice Biennale. The subsequent events are now part of history. However, it is important to reflect on Singapore's global engagement and the developments of SAM since its establishment in 1993, with the SAM buildings (former St Joseph's Institution) on Bras Basah Road being inaugurated in 1996.[5] Global engagement has played a crucial role in the development of art museums in Singapore. The meaning of "global" in the museum sector has evolved over the past few decades, intersecting with concepts of "modern" and "contemporary" in art discourse. This evolution forms a trajectory closely related to the developments at SAM.

1993–2009

SAM was initially conceived as a "Fine Arts" gallery/museum. The 1989 report from the Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts had called for the establishment of "a fine arts gallery in the former St Joseph's Institution."[6] By 1992, as Singapore's museum development plans began

"Singapore's art institutions must redefine their identity and purpose, embracing inclusive approaches that reflect the region's cultural complexities."

to materialise, the "Fine Arts Museum" was designated as one of five museums to be developed. Many in the arts community, including myself, argued that the term "fine arts" should be replaced with simply "art" to reflect modernity and inclusivity.[7] The term "fine arts" appeared to be associated with the government's call for a "gracious society" and a notion of the Civic District linked to "civilisation" in refinement and (neo-)classicism in architecture.[8] SAM was institutionalised the following year (1993) with Dr. Earl Lu (1925–2005) appointed as the chair of the board and me as the founding director. Curators Chi Ching-I, Joyce Fan, Ahmad Mashadi, and Joanna Lee would join quickly after, and play major roles in SAM's initial development.[9]

Prior to SAM's founding, Singapore had earlier art museums, prominently the University of Malaya Art Museum, established in 1955, and the National Museum Art Gallery, which was opened in 1976. SAM was substantially larger, with better facilities. More importantly, at a significant moment in the globalisation of the art world, SAM served as a valuable platform for a diverse array of exhibitions, including participation in biennales such as those in Venice, São Paulo (featuring Matthew Ngui and Ho Tzu Nyen), and Johannesburg (featuring Tang Da Wu).[10] SAM also organised the largest exhibition on Southeast Asian art in China at the National Museum of Art China in Beijing (2006). Its programming included not only the art of Singapore and Southeast Asia, which were its collecting and curatorial focuses, but also showcased works by renowned artists such as Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519), Chang Dai-chien (1899–1983), and Hiroshi Sugimoto, among others. Additionally, SAM hosted educational exhibitions, such as "Original or Copy: How to Authenticate Chinese Paintings" (2000).[11]

Between 1994 and 2009, some 100 exhibitions, with related publications, were organised. This period ended with the announcement of plans for the National Gallery Singapore, which would focus on modern art, allowing SAM to focus on contemporary art. In terms of art historical scholarship, on the other hand, the "modern" and "contemporary" were a continuum. Under the able leadership of the subsequent SAM director, Tan Boon Hui (1968–2022), contemporary works in the SAM collection were brought together in excellent compilations such as "Tomorrow, Today" (2012), setting a new focus for SAM, transitioning from a comprehensive programming to a contemporary art focus.[12]

The early decades of SAM, prior to its "contemporary turn" in 2009, were about evolving alongside various global and regional engagements that can be generally described as "postcolonial" and "global". While "globalisation" generally refers to the interconnectedness and interdependence of the world's economies, cultures, and communities,

and shows at least some tendencies towards homogenisation, the art world's globality is accompanied by a cultural discourse of postcoloniality, affirming aesthetic traditions and local creativity in a more inclusive manner.

This period involved two main aspects of SAM's work: first, the active development of collections and scholarship related to Singapore and Southeast Asia; and second, the presentation of historical and international artists through exhibitions. Additionally, SAM participated in international platforms that had progressively moved away from purely Western-centric perspectives, contributing to the ongoing decolonisation of art history and challenging the power dynamics dominated by traditional art centres. SAM also organised many forums and talks on local and global art issues, such as a talk by Okwui Enwezor (1963–2019) in 2007 in which he presented one of his first iterations of "postcolonial constellation," a framework to analyse the dynamics of global contemporary art. Enwezor would later be appointed the artistic director of the 56th Venice Biennale with the theme, "All the World's Futures" (2015). That year, the Singapore Pavilion featured the work of Charles Lim entitled *Sea State.*[13]

The development of SAM occurred as major international art museums aimed to globalise and maintain their influential roles in the art world. To cite an example, in 1999, the New York Queens Museum presented "Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, (1950–1980)", which invoked conceptualism in art as a frame for a host of regional art developments in various parts of the world, including East Asia, Latin America, and Australia/New Zealand.[14] While the biennales presented contemporary international art organised under a curatorial theme, museum exhibitions such as the Queens Museum example attempted global art historical frameworks. The "Portraits" section in the aforementioned 2024 Venice Biennale main exhibition was also an effort to include the Global South in understanding the trajectories of modernity.

Since SAM's inception, the focus of Singapore and Southeast Asia has evolved into a unique museological identity for Singapore.[15] Currently, the National Gallery Singapore and SAM, both of which emphasise Southeast Asian art, are dedicated to modern art and contemporary art, respectively, as noted on their websites. The National Gallery Singapore positions itself as "a leading visual arts museum which oversees the world's largest public collection of Singapore and Southeast Asian modern art,"[16] whereas SAM "will present contemporary art from a Southeast Asian perspective in active dialogue, discovery and collaboration with our constituents; through our collection, research, exhibitions and programmes".[17] This institutional divide intensifies the division between modern and contemporary art, even amid ongoing discussions about how to even define these art categories and what purposes they serve.[18]

Generative Polarity and Deepening Roots

"Generative polarity" is an intriguing concept, emphasised in the brief for contributors to this 10th edition of *Cultural Connections,* which is themed "Celebrating SG60: Deepening Roots, New Momentum". My understanding of this idea is that it encourages the exploration of seemingly contrasting or opposing perspectives,

with the goal of interfacing them to create a dynamic understanding that may fuel what in this issue has been termed a "new momentum". Generative polarity could serve as a framework for meaningfully examining the distinctions between "modern art" and "contemporary art". Additionally, in the context of art historical studies in Singapore, there is significant potential for exploration through "deepening roots", which can also be approached through the lens of generative polarity.

When considering modernism as a historical concept, it is essential to recognise the non-Western trajectories that intersect with and diverge from the Western mainstream. As Delhi-based art historian Geeta Karpur pointed out, these perspectives reshape our understanding of the "international".[19] A Southeast Asian museological identity can help highlight Singapore's art history within this broader international positioning. On the other hand, the study of history requires more effort in addressing concerns related to "deepening roots," and we still have many primary sources in local languages to look into.

Jeffery Say and Seng Yu Jin, co-editors of the two readers on modern and contemporary art in Singapore, respectively, noted: "rather than a singular modernism, we argue that there were multiple trajectories that intersected with migrations of populations from China and India to Singapore".[20] This point rekindles one of the key rationales for the museum development in Singapore in the early 1990s, as articulated by then-Minister for Information and the Arts, George Yeo, to underpin the roles of the National Heritage Board which would oversee the museum development: "Although we are a young nation, we are an ancient people. Thus a Singaporean is not only a Singaporean: he is also a Chinese, a Malay, an Indian, a Eurasian, an Arab or a Jew, the inheritor of an ancient culture and a contributor to it. Thus, in discovering Singapore, we also discover Asia and the world."[21]

Although relative to "contemporary", the term "modern" is often seen as more historically distant, Say and Seng noted that, paradoxically, it is easier to identify a starting point for what is considered "contemporary" in Singapore: "the proliferation of experimental and process-based art practices in the late 1980s as distinct from the visual arts—painting and, to some extent, sculpture, printmaking, and photography—that had characterised much of post-war Singapore art".[22] The confidence in stating a "starting date" for contemporary art may itself indicate that this was a narrower, perhaps even more "closed" category. Also worth investigating are the institutional dynamics that highlighted a distinction of the "modern" and "contemporary". This distinction emerged alongside the necessary institutional positioning required to establish a global framework. This framework enables leading institutions to retain their roles in an increasingly inclusive art landscape by selecting a manageable historical starting point, i.e., contemporary art. Hence, the polarities of modern and contemporary can go through the lens of "generative polarity" in a way that is specific to art developments in Singapore, beyond adherence to the globalising trends in traditional art centres, but also looking deeper into Singapore's own aesthetic heritage.

We have greatly benefited from Western languages and research methodologies. When it comes to culture and art history, there is still a tendency to translate primary sources into English before they are included in formal discourse. While this practice is necessary for effective cross-local language research and scholarship, much could be lost in translation. Curator Syed

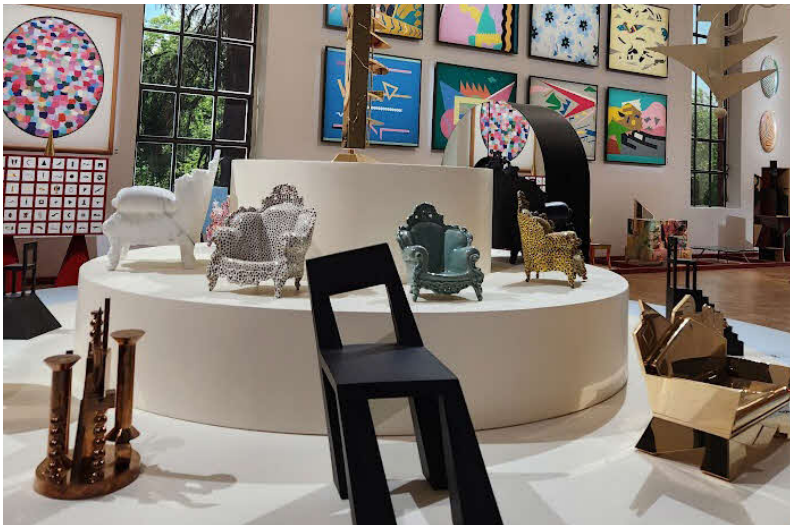

Figure 1. Alessandro Mendini: *I Am a Dragon* (exhibition), Triennale di Milano, 2024. Photo by Kwok Kian Chow.

Muhammad Hafiz noted that "The issue of language is perhaps one of the more fertile areas to look into, in trying to understand the 'lack of' the Malay artist. With Singapore's location within the Malay Archipelago, the Malay language discourse is definitely a worthwhile framework in looking at the community's arts and cultural development."[23]

Although the term "Nanyang Style" in English originated in the exhibition titled "Pameran Retrospektif Pelukis-Pelukis Nanyang" at the Muzium Seni Negara Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur, in 1979, it has become nearly synonymous with Singapore's national art style.[24] However, art historian Yeo Mang Thong counterproposed that the term "Nanyang Feng 风" had its first original usage in Chinese, when it was articulated in 1955 by Lim Hak Tai, the founder of the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (founded in 1938). The distinction between "style" and "feng" extends beyond mere semantics or translation. Yeo criticises the tendency to limit the narrative of art history by focusing only on the formal innovations of the 1960s. This approach often overlooks the rich history of Singapore art from the early to mid-20th century, which provided a crucial foundation for later artistic practices, even if these new styles diverged from previous traditions.[25]

The SAM Building on Bras Basah Road

In the early 1990s, one of the rationales for constructing the Stamford Road Tunnel was to create a "peaceful and quiet ambience in the museum precinct". To incorporate the museum precinct, the Civic District also expanded to 160 hectares from the earlier 105 hectares outlined in the 1988 Civic District Plan. Within the Civic District, serving as a "cultural spine" would be

the "Fine Arts Museum" at the former St Joseph's Institution.[26] In 1992, the former St Joseph's Institution buildings were designated as a national monument. Fast forward to 2019, following SAM's relocation to the Tanjong Pagar Distripark—initially expected to be a temporary move for renovations of the SAM Building on Bras Basah Road—the building has remained unoccupied since that time. There have been recent considerations for developing the SAM Building as a Design Museum.[27]

In Singapore, the planning of art and design museums often involves matching heritage buildings with different categories of art, such as "modern," "contemporary," and "design". While these categories have distinct connections to various industries and fields, they collectively contribute to and promote aesthetics and cultural development on a broad social scale. When considering culture and the arts at this level—an essential part of the museums' collective mission—we should prioritise integration rather than having different institutions, due to their specialisations, becoming overly focused on their individual categories. The experience of SAM over the past three decades has tended to shift towards narrower focuses.

Seeking a point of reference beyond Singapore, the Triennale di Milano is a prominent art and design museum that features a remarkable design library, offering a comprehensive perspective on culture, art, and design. Apart from the prominent Milano Triennale, a good example of its exhibition programmes is the 2024 retrospective on the designer and architect Alessandro Mendini (1931–2019). This exhibition offered an in-depth exploration of Mendini's work, showcasing his designs, artwork, writings, and ideas. It highlighted not only his visionary mind but also the social impact and design discourses evident in, for instance, design magazines such as *Casabella, Modo,* and *Domus,* each edited at different points by Mendini.

SAM has evolved significantly from its initial concept as an art museum focused primarily on the "fine arts", which were associated with notions of a "gracious society" and "civilisation". This mindset was also evident in the enthusiasm for classical architectural elements from the colonial period, a sentiment that extended beyond a contemporary respect for architectural heritage to include nostalgia for the colonial past. There was a strong enthusiasm for the "grand" traditions of the West, which resonated with a specific vision of the Civic District. After SAM's launch, the focus shifted towards modern and contemporary art, as well as a globalisation effort that aimed for inclusivity of regional cultures, which was further underpinned by Singapore's museological focus on Southeast Asia in a postcolonial global context.

SAM's recent history, together with the term "generative polarity", reminds me of the famous passage from Zhuangzi (5th century BCE) featuring a conversation between a shadow named Wangliang 罔兩 and the form that cast the shadow, named Jing 景. Wangliang was questioning Jing about the order of its movements and transformations, which Wangliang could only echo as the shadow. Jing explained that its movements were influenced by various dynamics and complexities that shaped its form. This passage from the chapter Qiwulun 齐物论 ("The Sorting Which Evens Things Out") serves as a classic Daoist exploration of the nuances of identity and dependency.[28] I would like to expand on this idea by discussing the importance of deconstructing categories and realigning them with the appropriate institutions, facilities, and spaces in the ongoing consideration of the

"shadow" and "form" relationship in various contexts. This is essential to continually challenge binaries and polarities.

When examining the development of SAM alongside other museums in Singapore, it may be beneficial to adopt a different approach to organising these spaces. Instead of strictly categorising them as "modern", "contemporary", or "design", we could strategise global and local (another generative polarity) community engagements at the exhibition programming level. By aligning spaces with their relevant themes, we can promote a more dynamic engagement with specific audiences, aesthetics, and discussions. □

About the Author

Kwok Kian Chow is a former senior curator, director, and senior adviser of the National Museum Singapore, Singapore Art Museum and National Gallery Singapore.

Notes

1. The wet rice field in the title refers to the Bras Basah (or "Beras Basah" which is Malay for "wet rice") area where the former St Joseph's Institution and later the Singapore Art Museum were located. This was, in the past, a field where traders spread out hulled wet rice to dry.

2. Singapore Art Museum's Singapore Pavilion at the 49th International Art Exhibition—La Biennale di Venezia, 2001.

3. Robert Zhao Renhui and Haeju Kim. *Seeing Forest.* Singapore Pavilion at the 60th International Art Exhibition—La Biennale di Venezia, 2024.

4. Pedrosa, *Foreigners Everywhere: Biennale Arte 2024.*

5. St Joseph's Institution was founded in 1852 by Father Jean-Marie Beurel (1813-1872) of the Missions Étrangères de Paris. He first arrived in Singapore in 1839 and was initially responsible for the building of the Church of the Good Shepherd (later renamed the Cathedral of the Good Shepherd) and subsequently St Joseph's Institution.

6. National Library Singapore, *Report of the Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts.*

7. At one point, it was called the "national art gallery". See *The Straits Times,* "Museum to Reopen after $6m Renovation."

8. See *The Straits Times,* "Good Museums 'Help to Make a Gracious Society'"; *The Straits Times,* "A Piece of Peace in the City."

9. The National Heritage Board was constituted in 1992. The Singapore Art Museum board was formed in 1993.

10. Bienal de São Paulo 1996 and 2004; Africus: Johannesburg Biennale, 28 February–30 April 1995.

11. Singapore Art Museum. 2000. "Original or Copy: How to Authenticate Chinese Paintings."

12. Singapore Art Museum. 2012. "Tomorrow, Today."

13. Gyalui, *La Biennale di Venezia, 56th International Art Exhibition: All the World's Futures.*; Lim and Shabbir Hussain Mustafa, *Sea State: Charles Lim Yi Yong.*

14. Queens Museum, "Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s–1980s."

15. See National Gallery Singapore, "National Gallery Singapore Places Southeast Asian Art on World Map."; Chia. "In Singapore, South-South discourse is having a moment."

16. National Gallery Singapore website, "Our Story."

17. Singapore Art Museum website, "About SAM."

18. On its website, SAM further notes that "Contemporary artists work in a wide range of mediums… concepts play a prominent part to challenge traditional boundaries and ideas of how art is defined—or even what constitutes art" and "When engaging with contemporary art, viewers are encouraged to consider whether the work is 'thought-provoking' or 'interesting.'" Beyond asking "Is this work aesthetically pleasing?", viewers can also reflect if the artwork questions the status quo, or changes perspectives on an issue.

19. Kapur, *When Was Modernism: Essays on Contemporary Cultural Practice in India.*

20. Say and Seng, *Histories, Practices, Interventions: A Reader in Singapore Contemporary Art.*; Say and Seng, *Intersections, Innovations, Institutions: A Reader in Singapore Modern Art.*

21. Yeo, "Speech by BG (RES) George Yeo, Minister for Information and the Arts and Second Minister for Foreign Affairs, at the Opening of the 'Gems of Chinese Art' Exhibition on 30 January 1992 at 11.00 AM at Empress Place Building."

22. Say and Seng, *Histories, Practices, Interventions: A Reader in Singapore Contemporary Art,* 7.

23. Syed Muhammad Hafiz, "Nanyang or Nusantara: The Genealogy of Singapore's Art History."

24. Piyadasa, *Pameran Retrospektif Pelukis-Pelukis Nanyang.*

25. 姚梦桐 Yeo, "第五届刘抗年度讲座 (The Fifth Liu Kang Annual Lecture): 解码'南洋风 (Decoding Nanyang Feng)."

26. Goh, "A Piece of Peace in the City."

27. Yong, "Old SJI Building Could House New Singapore Design Museum."; Seow, "Govt Considering Setting Up New S'pore Design Museum, Which May Occupy Former S'pore Art Museum Building in Bras Basah."

28. Several English translations of the Wangliang passage are available. See, for instance: Graham's *Chuang-tzŭ: The Inner Chapters.*

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Celebrating SG60:

Literary Imagination as Cultural Infrastructure

Pooja Nansi

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While a nation's literature is often valued as its repository of lived experience and collective social memory, Pooja Nansi—publisher and former Festival Director of the Singapore Writers Festival—emphasises that its importance in nation-building lies beyond cultural preservation. In providing space for imagination, exchange and discourse, the literary ecosystem has the ability to spur cultural progress, engaging wider society in the cultivation of a shared future bolstered by plurality, creativity, empathy and connection.

From 2019 to 2023, I served as Festival Director of the Singapore Writers Festival (SWF). It was a period of unprecedented transformation for both the festival and the larger cultural landscape in Singapore and globally. It turned out to be a period that demanded not only adaptive cultural leadership but also a radical rethinking of what literary programming could mean within a rapidly shifting sociopolitical and technological landscape. During this time, we saw global disruptions brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, increasing conversation around our decolonial legacy with the commemoration of the Singapore Bicentennial, and generational shifts in how cultural work is produced and consumed.

Against this backdrop, SWF evolved into a space that sought not only to reflect cultural change but to help catalyse it. This essay reflects on the experience of leading SWF through this transformative period, situating its curatorial ethos within the broader context of cultural strategy, and offering provocations for the future of literary programming in Singapore and beyond.

Holding on to Our Roots: Language and Legacy

One of the defining strengths of Singapore's cultural identity—and one that continues to shape its literary landscape—is its deep-rooted multilingualism. Grounded in the nation's longstanding language policy and broader commitment to multiculturalism, our literary ecosystem has long been enriched by the dynamic interplay of our four official languages—English, Malay, Mandarin, and Tamil—alongside the many dialects and creoles that inhabit daily life across our communities. Far from being merely administrative categories, these languages reflect lived histories, social intimacies, and evolving identities. They constitute not only a civic compact but also an extraordinary resource for literary innovation and experimentation.

SWF has long operated within this multilingual tradition, with early champions such as KTM Iqbal, Arthur Yap, Suratman Markasan, and Wong Yoon Wah laying the groundwork for a literary culture that embraces polyphony. Building on this foundation, my tenure as Festival Director was shaped by a desire to not only honour but activate this heritage. We asked what it would mean to approach linguistic diversity not as a box to be ticked but as a generative, relational practice. We were inspired to curate programmes that brought literature off the page and into the breath, voice, and body.

These took the form of multilingual readings, live translation duels, and cross-lingual collaborations between poets working in vastly different registers and cultural traditions. Such events created space

for audiences to encounter literature as something sonically textured, communally held, and culturally resonant. They also pushed back—gently but firmly—against the dominance of English as the default mode of literary value, instead centering a more expansive vision of what it means to listen, read, and belong. These curatorial choices were not made in opposition to tradition but in fidelity to a richer one: a literary tradition that has always included oral forms, multiple languages, and stories carried across generations not just in print but in rhythm, cadence, and conversation.

New Momentum: Youth as Co-Creators, Not Consumers

A key pillar of SWF's strategic direction during this period was the re-imagination of young people as co-creators in the literary ecosystem. Rather than engaging youth merely as passive consumers of curated content, we wanted them to be partners in the co-production of culture.

The Festival's youth programming—most visibly through the SWF Youth Fringe—offered young artists, students, and aspiring cultural workers not only a platform but the curatorial reins. The resulting programmes included zine fairs, open-mic showcases, poetry slams, and meme-driven exhibitions, all designed and led by youth collectives for their peers. This was not a mere outreach initiative but a strategic investment in cultural continuity. It signalled to young people that they are not the audience of tomorrow—they are the stewards of the now.

In the context of a rapidly changing global information economy, where cultural authority is increasingly decentralised, this approach affirms a vital truth: sustainable cultural ecosystems must be participatory. By recognising young people as cultural producers in their own right, we are ensuring that Singapore's literary future is built on inclusion, trust, and creativity from the ground up. This move aligns with cultural policy discourses that emphasise the importance of "next generation" leadership development—not only in governance but in aesthetics, ethics, and voice.

Cross-Cultural Collaboration: Beyond the Nation-State

Singapore's strategic positioning as a global cultural hub has long emphasised the importance of international exchange. What has shifted in recent years is our understanding of that exchange—not simply as cultural diplomacy or artistic export but as an opportunity to invite new publics into the cultural conversation, and to challenge assumptions about who literature is for and what it can encompass.

At SWF, this was most powerfully embodied during our partnership with the French Embassy, which brought in a range of French writers who spoke not only of literature but also of food, music, and football. One of the most impactful moments was a conversation with Lilian Thuram, World Cup-winning footballer turned public intellectual and anti-racism advocate. His presence at the festival drew in football fans and members of the general public who may never have previously consid-

"Literature drives nation-building by inspiring imagination, dialogue, and a shared future grounded in diversity and empathy."

ered a literary event relevant to them. The session unfolded not only as a discussion of sport and politics but as a profound reframing of what story-telling and cultural discourse can look like.

This kind of programming reveals something crucial: literary festivals are one of the few cultural spaces that can hold such breadth of inquiry. They allow for rigorous intellectual exchange while also making room for joy, fandom, identity, and the unexpected intersections between disciplines. In the case of the collaboration with the French, it blurred the artificial lines between sports and culture, challenging the long-standing notion that "the literary" is niche or elite. Literature and football may seem like unlikely teammates—but it turns out they play very well together when given the space.

At the same time, the collaboration served as a powerful platform to showcase Singapore's own cultural richness to international guests, not just through the official programme but through the energy, curiosity, and diversity of our audiences. The festival became both a mirror and a window: a space where local and global artistic perspectives could enter into dialogue, and where Singapore could be seen not only as a host but as a vibrant cultural actor in its own right.

Looking ahead, such international collaborations will be essential to the cultural future of Singapore. They allow us to share our evolving narratives with the world while remaining open to new forms, voices, and conversations. In a time that often demands clarity and certainty, literary festivals offer instead complexity, connection, and play, reminding us that cultural meaning is not fixed but made together across difference. And sometimes, that shared meaning can begin with something as simple (and as profound) as a beautiful goal or a well-told story.

Navigating the Digital Turn: Disruption as Opportunity

The COVID-19 pandemic necessitated a rapid pivot to digital formats, presenting immense logistical challenges and new curatorial challenges. Initially, the move to virtual programming was framed as a stopgap measure. However, it soon became clear that digital space could also be a site of intimacy, access, and experimentation. The anthropologist Arjun Appadurai asserts that "electronic mediation allows for new forms of intimacy at a distance". And so, plagued by the COVID-19 outbreak in 2019, the first fully online edition of the festival in its 30-year history was themed "Intimacy".

Digital programming expanded our reach, both geographically and demographically. It enabled diasporic Singaporeans to reconnect with local literary production and opened up new modes of engagement for people with mobility or accessibility challenges. We also experimented with asynchronous content—podcasts, digital chapbooks, interactive installations—that allowed users to shape their own festival journeys.

Yet the digital shift also surfaced questions about attention, community, and presence. Could a live-streamed reading hold the same affective charge as a physical one? What does collective listening mean when we are not sharing the same location? These questions prompted us to recalibrate our understanding of literary space, not as venue-bound but as a distributed field of encounter. We have the opportunity now to think of hybrid programming as being much more than a compromise; it is a deliberate design principle that acknowledges the plurality of reader-listener modalities.

Going Forward: Risk, Ritual, Relevance

Drawing inspiration from adrienne maree brown's concept of "emergent strategy", we are invited to understand cultural programming not as static delivery but as a living, relational practice. Emergent strategy is built on the idea that big change can start from small, thoughtful actions and strong, responsive relationships. adrienne maree brown looks to the natural world for inspiration—how birds move together in flocks, or how forests grow and adapt—to imagine how cultural work can grow in similar ways. At its heart, this approach is about being flexible, grounded in care, and willing to learn and adjust along the way. Some of its key ideas include seeing how small patterns reflect larger systems, staying open to change, relying on one another, and understanding that progress doesn't always happen in straight lines.

Applied to literary festivals, this approach challenges conventional metrics of success, particularly those rooted in visibility, attendance figures, or institutional prestige. Instead, it encourages cultural leaders to prioritise depth of connection, resonance, and the slow-building power of transformation—outcomes that are often immeasurable but deeply impactful. From this perspective, the most meaningful moments in cultural programming may not be the most visible ones; they may unfold in the quiet pause after a poem shared with an audience of hundreds, in the formation of new communities, or in the feeling of being seen. Emergent strategy reminds us that cultural work isn't just about putting on a good show, it is about a practice of co-creation, building something together. It's about designing festivals not just for communities but with them. Where care, curiosity, and collective imagination guide how we design the cultural futures we wish to live into.

Conclusion: Literature as Cultural Infrastructure

As Singapore marks 60 years of independence, we are invited not only to reflect on the narratives that have brought us here but also to consider the

cultural architectures that will carry us forward. In the national journey of development, identity formation, and social cohesion, literary spaces play an indispensable, if often understated, role. They are where a society rehearses its collective memory, articulates its evolving values, and imagines its future with nuance and depth.

Within Singapore's broader cultural infrastructure, SWF serves as a vital and enduring pillar. It is a space where the multiplicity of our voices—across language, generation, and geography—can be held, heard, and challenged. Far from being a niche or elite enclave, the festival functions as a quiet but powerful engine of national cultural capital. It nurtures a more thoughtful citizenry, fosters dialogue across difference, and anchors our multicultural ethos in lived, expressive form.

As we look to SG100, the role of literature in nation-building must be recognised not simply as heritage preservation or aesthetic celebration but as a dynamic, responsive mode of civic engagement. Literary festivals like SWF allow us to think expansively, feel deeply, and engage with complexity—qualities essential to a resilient, confident, and culturally mature society. Literary spaces, in particular, offer a rare and generative rehearsal ground for the futures we dare to imagine—spaces where we can test ideas, hold contradictions, and co-create the narratives that shape who we might become as a people. In a time when polarisation and reductionism threaten discourse globally, these spaces remain among the few where imagination, empathy, and plurality are actively cultivated. The literary arts may speak softly in Singapore's larger imagination at the moment, but they hold the keys to charting the emotional and imaginative terrain of a nation. In the stories we tell, we seed the possibilities of who we might yet become. It is time we move beyond framing literature as a form of soft power and begin to recognise it as cultural infrastructure—essential to the way a society reflects, reimagines, and renews itself. In looking to our future, we must invest in literary spaces—not only as sites of reflection but as blueprints for more humane, inclusive, and imaginative societies still to come. □

About the Author

Pooja Nansi is a poet, performer, and arts educator. She is the author of three poetry collections and has created key performance works, including *You Are Here* (Wild Rice), a one-woman show on migration and family histories, and *Thick Beats for Good Girls* (Checkpoint Theatre), which explores the intersections between feminism and hip-hop. She served as Festival Director of the Singapore Writers Festival (2019–2023) and is the Chief Publisher of AFTERIMAGE Press, the non-profit poetry publishing arm of Sing Lit Station. A recipient of the Young Artist Award (2016), she was conferred the title of Chevalier dans l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres in 2024, one of France's highest cultural honours.

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In Search of the Singapore Soul

Meira Chand

Novelist

Over the past decades, post-colonial Singapore's national literature has moved from diasporic themes and local publishers towards embracing local identity and international platforms. Novelist Meira Chand examines how, alongside Singapore's national and cultural development, Singapore's literary scene has grown in strength and confidence.

I

In our individual lives, we can only judge the distance we have travelled if we look back to our beginnings, the road journeyed through the years, opportunities missed or taken, and our emotional resilience to the inevitable bitter lessons interwoven through every life. The evolutionary journey of a nation is little different.

Singapore and I met at about the same time in our development. It was 1962, when Singapore was still struggling towards freedom from British rule. I was newly married, and on my way from my home in London to Japan, a country in which I would live for the next several decades. The aircraft I arrived on had to descend from the sky every few hours to refuel, and the Singapore I dropped into was one of shophouses and sampans.

In a tourist video of that time, a camera pans up the Singapore river. Settling on an army of small rocking vessels, a British-accented voiceover claims colonial Singapore is the highlight of any trip to the Orient. The tone of the narrator is condescending; Singapore is but an exotic imperialist fantasy.

II

Nearly three decades later, while still living in Japan, I was invited by Professor Edwin Thumboo to participate in the 1993 Singapore Writers Week, the precursor of the present Singapore Writer's Festival. 30 years after my first visit, I found an entirely different Singapore. The sampans were gone from the river, tall buildings crowded the skyline, and novel bendy buses swung along roads. Singapore was no longer a colonial enclave but a proud and bustling entity, a city come into its own.

Writers are used to modest accommodation at festivals and conferences, but in Singapore we were housed in luxury at the Regent Hotel, given a generous per diem and ferried around town for panel discussions and readings. On arrival at these venues, however, it was a shock to find almost no audience waiting to hear us. It was clear that writers were low on the city's list of interests.

III

A few years after this visit, in 1997, I unexpectedly left Japan to relocate to Singapore. The energetic, multicultural warmth of the nation immediately embraced me, and through my work I began to connect with the country in a deeper way. Within a few years, I started a new novel, *A Different Sky,* set in Singapore between the years 1927–1957. This short but intensely dramatic span of history provided multi-layered and riveting research. A great resource

"Singapore's literature has grown in confidence, embracing local identity while engaging global platforms."

of information was the Oral History Department of the National Archives. Here, I could put on headphones and immediately voices surrounded me, plunging me into a human history of dilemma and adventure, terror and sorrow, joy and uncertainty. I was taken into the minutiae of individual lives in an all-embracing way. I came to know the country's different ethnic communities and could explore the connections and disparities between them. I was thrown into the horror of war and the liquid fear of the Japanese occupation. I could travel the distance between a prostitute and a politician, know the drudgery of life as a rickshaw runner and the social etiquette of the elite. I came to understand the beating heart of the nation, the stoic and irrepressible human fibre on which modern Singapore is built.

In the nineties, the local creative community was small, and world-class orchestras and theatre groups flew straight to Sydney Opera House, giving Singapore a miss. But a circumspect arts scene persisted. I was quickly drawn into various educational programmes to promote the arts and mentor students with a desire to write. There was talent and originality in the bright young people I met, but all too often they told me of the discouragement they faced at home and at school if they took their writing too seriously. They were encouraged to be doctors and lawyers, civil servants or engineers, keeping any artistic talent dutifully hidden away.

This disappointing view of the arts was exemplified for me in the speech of an eminent man, who came to address young creative arts students at the end of an academic year. He praised the work of the students and enthused on the pleasure the arts in its many forms gave. Then, in carefully chosen words, he proceeded to gently discourage a career in the arts, urging students to find livelihoods in more sharp-edged professions that would help consolidate the nation's growing profile and power. The arts and its dreamers, he indicated, were better relegated to the fringe pleasure of amateur entertainment.

Shocked as I was at these words, I realised they reflected the country's stressed efforts for survival after its harsh and unexpected ejection from Malaya. Since that traumatic moment, the country had been single-mindedly focused on nation-building, to the exclusion of all else. It was as if the state did not yet feel able to lift its collective head from the grindstone, to acknowledge the distance travelled, the insurmountable odds overcome, the sheer brilliance of its achievements.

IV

Yet quietly and surely, a new awareness had begun. In 2002, after many years of planning, Esplanade-Theatres on the Bay came into being, and a new frisson of creative energy fizzled through the country. The famous international orchestras and theatre groups that once bypassed Singapore now

happily stopped to perform at the country's new world-class venue. A fresh awareness of the arts, of its soft power and prestige, quickly began to grow.

Although once a visiting author, I was now an insider and involved in the organisation of the Singapore Writers Festival. I came to know first-hand the perennial uphill struggle to gather audiences for not only our local authors but the international writers who we flew in. In 2009, the popular English author, Neil Gaiman, was invited to the Singapore Writers Festival. I had been at the Arts House all morning for various events, including Gaiman's unprecedented standing-room-only performance, and decided to go home before returning in the evening for a panel discussion. As I left the Arts House at 1.30pm, I was amazed to see Gaiman sitting at a table in the midday heat outside the building, signing books for a large crowd. I was even more amazed to see that from the Arts House, a never-ending queue of young people snaked away around Empress Place, all clutching books for Gaiman to sign. This level of enthusiasm in Singapore for a writer, even one as popular as Neil Gaiman, was phenomenal. I went home and returned to the Arts House at 6pm to find a limp and exhausted Gaiman still signing books for a now dwindling queue.

V

To my mind, that extraordinary event was a turning point. Since then, the Singapore Writer's Festival has happily gone from strength to strength. Whatever else was at work that day, the moment was right. Something seemed culturally awakened by Gaiman's presence; it has since grown unstoppably, through not only the literary arts scene but Singapore's multiple arts platforms. From the few people I faced in an almost empty auditorium in 1993 to the approximately 60,000 or more expected to attend this year's two-week Singapore Writers Festival, the event's audienceship has indeed enjoyed a prodigious escalation in just a few decades. It was as if the nation, now assured and steady on its feet, took a deep breath in the early 2000s and began looking for—as well as started to find—its soul.

The idea that a nation has a soul has been put forward in different ways by both the ancient Greek philosopher Plato and the founder of modern analytical psychiatry and psychology, Carl Jung. "We must acknowledge", says Plato in *The Republic*, his Socratic dialogue about order in a city state, "that in each of us there are the same principles and habits which there are in the State and that from the individual they pass into the State." In our modern age, Carl Jung's theory of the collective unconscious surpasses this idea, suggesting that a universal unconscious mind exists, shared by all humanity.

VI

Singapore is now 60 years old. Although indisputably young and small compared to many other countries, it nevertheless stands tall in the world. Over the years, it has learned the nimble art of reinvention. Colonial versions of Singapore's history inevitably start with the arrival of Raffles, and see it as a transient place nobody called home, a place conceived of as a commercial venture, money, not culture, its purpose. However, recent archaeology has shown the

existence of at least a long-standing indigenous population, and quite plausibly a thriving trading post. From across the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea, a motley stream of poor migrants arrived at these shores to make money and then depart. This history allows Singapore to embrace strangers with ease, giving the country a special depth and dimension.The Singapore Soul is a rainbowed melding of ethnicity and the once derogatory moniker of "Little Red Dot" now stands for the power of agility and excellence.

With the diverse customs, traditions and vernaculars of its writers, Singapore's literary community is no exception to this variegated construct. In many countries, writers of different ethnicities, even if born and raised in that country, form distinct subgroups, such as ethnically Indian writers in the United Kingdom or ethnically Chinese writers in the United States or Canada. However, writers of different ethnicity in Singapore are seen and appear to see themselves only as Singaporean writers. Even if their language is one of Singapore's vernaculars, they write as Singaporeans, examining their sense of self and identity, their connection to the local world around them, and their engagement with Singaporean issues. In their work, these writers have made the transition from exile to native. Diaspora no longer concerns them to any great degree.

Singapore's unofficial poet laureate, Edwin Thumboo, says, "the freedom from Exile is a release from having an alternative to whom and where you are. It is the prelude to relocating culture". Writers of the Chinese and Indian diaspora in Singapore have made the long transitional journey through language and difficult cultural terrain to the wholeness of a new and unique Singaporean identity. This identity is now a long way from the early poverty-stricken ancestors who travelled as deck passengers, over rough seas, to reach this legendary island.

VII

Today's Singaporeans are eclectic and sophisticated while retaining their earthy, practical roots. This urbanity is reflected in Singapore's growing appreciation of the arts; there is culturally now so much going on that patrons are hard pressed to decide what play to see, which orchestra to hear, what exhibition to attend. This pursuit of the arts has also encouraged more young people to write. Yet, this new and growing literary community is facing unprecedented difficulties. Under pressure from an online world, bookshops are closing, and local publishers are diminished. In larger societies, such tremors can be weathered, but in miniscule Singapore they are devastating.

As a result, a growing band of young talented Singaporean writers have been forced to look beyond these shores to publish their work. Their talent is being internationally recognised, and they are now publishing on a world stage. In seeking a larger arena and readership, they must venture into a world of fierce competition unlike anything known at home. Publishing globally requires writers to give of their best and grow, or not publish at all.

This need of Singaporean writers to stake out international territory may be bad for Singaporean publishing, but it cannot be bad for Singaporean literature. Stretching beyond our island shores means we grow as a nation in strength and stature. As we connect with the greater world, our self-awareness deepens. A writer's work is a living force and within it the aspirations of the individual reflect the nation's soul. The Singapore Soul is vigorous and growing, and in the literary arts is in the process of exciting

expansion. Beyond opinions and politics, it is generating new streams of creative energy that embody the very best of this thrifty, inventive nation. □

About the Author

Meira Chand was born and grew up in London and has lived extensively in Japan and India. In 1997 she moved to Singapore and is now a Singaporean citizen. She has a PhD in Creative Writing from the University of Western Australia and is the author of 10 highly-praised international novels. The recent hit Singaporean stage production, *The LKY Musical,* was developed from a story she wrote. She is involved in programmes to nurture and promote young Singaporean writers. In 2023, she was awarded the Cultural Medallion, Singapore's highest accolade for literary excellence.

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A Sense of Place, a Sense of History: Rethinking the Question of "Roots" In and Beyond Singapore

Professor Kwok Kian Woon

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National identity is anchored in shared roots and common aspirations. The shaping of a collective identity is particularly challenging in multicultural societies. Given humankind's long history of migration, diverse civilisational influences have, for centuries, converged to shape cultural identity wherever humans have settled. In Singapore, we have only recently begun to reframe our national history by going back 700 years. As Singapore embarks on its 60th year of independence and looks to the future with an emphasis on "deepening roots", Kwok Kian Woon, Vice-Chancellor of the University of the Arts Singapore, highlights the need for us to explore deeper questions about our "roots" and what that concept truly entails.

The theme "Celebrating SG60: Deepening Roots, New Momentum" presents an opportunity for rethinking the question of "roots", which is embedded in a complex set of intellectual and social issues explored by many thinkers across the arts, humanities and social sciences. Due to space limitations, I can only provide a preliminary outline of a work in progress, drawing on the insights of a few key thinkers.

To anticipate my broad argument, the issues centre around a leitmotif in human life, involving our capabilities of sense-making and imagination: individually and collectively, we find our bearings in the present by relating ourselves to the past and the future. Indeed, there are many possible ways in which these processes intertwine as we grapple with contemporary challenges. The question of "roots"—for example, "where do we come from?"—is indelibly tied to concerns about the present and the future. Living in the present invariably entails recollecting a past and projecting a future. The future, which is inherently unpredictable, is imagined, but the past is also constantly being *re- imagined* in each instance of recollection, shaped by our present circumstances and our hopes for the future.

The Partiality of Historical Accounts

This is what makes the study of history so important, and why many thinkers refer to related concepts such as "memory", "heritage", and "tradition". There is a basic distinction in the idea of history: history as what "actually" happened in the past and as how the past is remembered, recounted, and reinterpreted. It is impossible for human beings to understand the past in an entirely comprehensive or objective way. All historical understanding draws from selected sources and partial perspectives—partial in the double sense of being both incomplete and guided, consciously or implicitly, by specific concerns about the present and the future. As much as academic historians strive for trustworthiness in the choice and use of sources, or truthfulness in interpretation and narration, they would also acknowledge that any historical account must be provisional—that is, open to questioning in the light of new sources and perspectives. Paradoxically, while the past may be thought of as unchanging or unchangeable, our understanding of the past keeps changing with the times. The work of historians—and our task as bearers of memory—is never done.

"Singapore must explore deeper questions about its 'roots' as it reflects on 700 years of history and 60 years of independence."

Any understanding of the past, therefore, can be critically reevaluated from various viewpoints, which begs the normative question: how should people relate to the past? Even if the question is not posed within and outside academia, we may say that some identifiable ways of relating to the past are already operating at any given time. These ways evolve and are shaped under conditions of significant social change, that is, when people experience profoundly new circumstances, often with a palpable sense of discontinuity with the past and uncertainty about the future. The massive social transformation in different parts of the world in recent centuries is encapsulated in the word "modern". The concept of "modernity" suggests a break, perhaps even experienced as a rupture, between past and present, ushering in a new social order and engendering new possibilities but also threats to preexisting ways of life —for example, with the advent of digital technology in many societies. This partly explains why responses to radical social change include nostalgic sentiments about a mythic past or calls for a return to traditional ways of life.

Official and Everyday Discourses in Singapore

Concerns about how individuals and groups relate or should relate to the past are commonly articulated in official and everyday discourses in many societies. Singapore is a prime example of a relatively new nation-state that is continually defining and redefining its relationship to the past amid rapid modernisation, led by an avowedly pragmatic and future-oriented political leadership. It is therefore unsurprising that, in marking 60 years of nationhood, the theme of "deepening roots" has again emerged. In effect, this implies an ongoing awareness that the resident population has relatively shallow roots that do not trace back to more than a few generations in Singapore. Hence, the often-repeated narrative of Singapore as an "immigrant nation"—although the term, commonly used to describe countries such as Australia and the United States of America, has been criticised for not recognising the status and rights of indigenous peoples.

Several recurrent and evolving themes can be highlighted in a critical overview of the successive discourses on "roots" in Singapore. From the 1950s onwards, government leaders have been concerned with defining and shaping a national culture or a

"Singaporean identity". With "multiracialism" as a central ideological pillar, nation-building efforts emphasise the respective group identities of the three main "races": Malay, Indian, and Chinese, whose "traditional values" provide a counterweight to "Western" values and lifestyles, often critiqued as decadent. At the same time, from 1965, the political leadership made a deliberate effort to instill a nation-centric consciousness, the clearest example being the framing and recitation of the national pledge, which calls for unity "regardless of race, language or religion" and the building of "a democratic society based on justice and equality".

Dualities, Old and New

From the early days of nationhood, therefore, we find a dual emphasis on both traditional values rooted in ethnic cultures and modern values rooted in the constitutional framework of the nation-state and the learning of science and technology, with English as the dominant language of education and administration. The dual preoccupation with modern meritocratic principles and traditional moral values was also reflected in the educational reforms of the late 1970s, resulting in the introduction of streaming and the revamp of the Civics curriculum. The latter was replaced by a compulsory Religious Knowledge programme, covering the major world religions and "Confucian Ethics", which received the most attention in curriculum design and public discourse. By the end of the 1980s, Religious Knowledge was withdrawn as a compulsory subject because of concerns about religious revivalism and the need for the secular state to practice neutrality in managing religious matters. But government leaders continued to be preoccupied with the need for social cohesion and discipline founded on secular moral values.

By the early 1990s, there were two developments along such lines. Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong had earlier expressed the need for a "national ideology", which led to the White Paper on Shared Values passed by Parliament in early 1991. The five officially identified values, which were taught in schools, were communitarian values that contrasted with "Western" liberal and individualist values. In the ensuing years, these communitarian values continued to figure prominently in public and even international discourses, this time in the guise of the "Asian values debate" led by Singapore's former prime minister Lee Kuan Yew and Malaysia's prime minister Mahathir Mohamad. Among other things, the so-called Asian values were promoted as serving economic growth and political stability in the region, again an example of the dual thrust of earlier discourses. By the end of the 1990s, another version of the dual approach was reflected in Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong's idea that social cohesion depended on a sense of obligations between two categories of citizens: "heartlanders" who are locally rooted and uphold traditional values and "cosmopolitans" who are internationalised in their outlook and advance the nation's competitiveness in the global economy.

Throughout, the school curriculum has been a major vehicle for socialising youths through "national education" or "citizenship education" programmes. The key messages focused on Singapore as homeland, meritocracy, national security, and an ethos of survival and progress, and, as a corollary, "preparing students for a global future". In parallel, the making of the nation was narrated in the school history curriculum against the backdrop of the pre-colonial past, the colonial legacy, the Japanese Occupation and the political contestations of the postwar era.

Evolving, Overlapping Narratives

But the narrative has also evolved over the last two decades, situating modern Singapore within a longer historical timeframe and a broader geographical canvas. Independence in 1965 is still officially regarded as the beginning of Singapore's national history, as attested by the celebrations of SG50 in 2015 and SG60 in 2025. The colonial legacy is also acknowledged, for example, in the bicentennial commemoration—rather than celebration—of Stamford Raffles' establishment of the island as a trading port in 1819. However, these two pivotal historical moments are now located within a much broader narrative of 700 years of history, traced back to the regional maritime trade and the Malay world of the 14th century, and substantiated by archaeological and archival research.

Nationalism and cosmopolitanism—and, gradually, a more pronounced regionalism—also undergird cultural policies, which facilitate the development of local arts and the promotion of national heritage, as well as the showcasing of Singapore culture on the global stage. For example, the National Arts Council provides support for artists exhibiting and performing abroad. The National Heritage Board has made successful bids for the Singapore Botanic Gardens to be recognised as a World Heritage Site (2015) and "Hawker culture" and the Kebaya listed as part of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (in 2020 and 2024 respectively), under the aegis of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Significantly, the proposal for the Kebaya was a joint submission on the part of Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and Singapore.

To be sure, the cultural orientation towards Southeast Asia is relatively more well-developed in two specific areas. In the visual arts, this is evident in the collection and curation of the art of the region over decades, culminating in the work of the National Gallery Singapore (established in 2015). In academia, the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS) was founded in 1968, a year after Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand formed the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

It is tempting to criticise the earlier and current discourses by summarily dismissing the official formulations and pronouncements as "ideological"—for example, by treating the messaging in the national education or history curricula as "propaganda". Yet, we can expect that the political leadership of any nation-state would tend to propagate a version of a national past in keeping with its definition of national interests. At the same time, however, this would involve, as in the case of Singapore's national pledge, articulating a vision of progress and a model of a desired social order, with its concomitant social obligations. These are genuinely profound concerns in human life that could be said to transcend the agenda of nation-building. In other words, an idea of what constitutes human advancement, a good society, and social solidarity is not necessarily or solely defined by national interests. Indeed, for the idea to be compelling rather than superficial and rhetorical, it would have to speak to fundamental human concerns. If this argument has any merit, then the very question of "deepening roots" must itself be deepened by us asking deeper questions, as we develop a sense of place and a sense of history at this juncture of the 21st century.

Whether or not this kind of questioning is readily evident in the thinking of political leaders, it should be part of the intellectual substrate of a society, with thinkers and scholars playing a significant

role in developing critical perspectives on cultural inheritance and nation-building. Examples of such intellectual work in our neighbouring countries include the parallel contributions of Professor Osman Bakar in Malaysia and Professor Ahmad Syafil Maarif in Indonesia. Within the contexts of their nation-states, each with a predominantly Muslim population, they have unpacked and probed questions relating to the relationship between religion and modernity: Professor Osman on the need for civilisational dialogue, and Professor Maarif on Islam, democracy, and national identity.

In my view, the dual thrust of the official discourses in Singapore reflects iterative attempts at grappling with several apparent dilemmas and contradictions: tradition and modernity, religion and the secular state, communitarianism and meritocracy, Asian values and modernisation, local cultures and cosmopolitan mindsets, the colonial legacy and postcolonial consciousness, and national history and regional history. Many questions remain unresolved: How can traditional values be retained under modern conditions? How do values rooted in religious traditions matter in a multi-religious society governed as a secular state? How can communitarian values thrive amid the prevalence of meritocratic individualism and social inequality? Are so-called Asian values inimical to democracy and human rights? Does cosmopolitanism exclude specific groups in a global city (like migrant workers in Singapore)? Should colonial history be more critically reevaluated? How can Singaporeans better understand and find affinity, if not common cause, with the diverse peoples of the region, strengthening ASEAN as a community of nations? And beyond the showcasing of local arts and culture, how can Singaporeans and Southeast Asians contribute meaningfully to shaping a shared humanity, giving substance to the UNESCO idea of a "heritage of humanity" in ways that transcend national interests—a particularly pivotal issue in an era of geopolitical polarisation?

Deepening Our Intellectual Questioning: Two Examples

Instead of concluding with these questions held in suspension, let me highlight two recent examples of how they may be addressed by intellectuals in Singapore and the region. First, I refer to the two volumes of *The Modern in Southeast Asia,* edited by T.K. Sabapathy and Patrick Flores and published by the National Gallery Singapore. This compendium presents 300 writings—those in vernacular languages translated into English—by Southeast Asian artists and thinkers on the experiences of modernity in their countries, mostly from the late 19th century to the late 1970s. Taken together, these texts document the particular yet intersecting histories of how the most sensitive and creative minds of the region struggled with the roots of the modern in their countries, offering a plethora of clues to how we can retrace their steps and reframe our questions about contemporary times.

Second, I refer to Professor Wang Gungwu's *Living with Civilisations: Reflections on Southeast Asia's Local and National Cultures*, which provides an insightful analysis of the making of Southeast Asia over many centuries, with local (and later national) cultures drawing on the influences of Indic, Sinic, Islamic and modern European civilisations. Civilisations, as distinguished from cultures, embody deep reservoirs of spiritual, intellectual

and philosophical resources that address fundamental questions about human existence, social order and moral character. Civilisational influences are borderless, transmitted across empires through written traditions and facilitated by maritime trade and the exchange of ideas. Southeast Asian countries creatively selected and adopted these civilisational influences, shaping their local and national cultures as they modernised.

It is perhaps not accidental that these two exemplary works, offering insightful ways of thinking about Southeast Asia as a region, are published in Singapore—a perpetually modernising nation constantly in search of its roots as it navigates its future. Singapore's past, present and future are not self-contained within its territorial borders but are inextricably and inescapably linked to the region, whether conceived as Nusantara, Nanyang, Southeast Asia, or ASEAN. So, too, our evolving sense of place and sense of history as an island-city-nation-state will be enriched or impoverished by the breadth and depth of our archipelagic—rather than insular—imagination, reaching out to neighbouring lands and beyond, and drawing from a complex regional history of multiple civilisations and intersecting modernities. □

About the Author

Kwok Kian Woon (PhD, University of California at Berkeley) is Vice-Chancellor of the University of the Arts Singapore. He is also Emeritus Professor at the Nanyang Technological University, where he had served as Professor of Sociology and in several pioneering roles over two decades. He has a sustained record of teaching, research, academic leadership, and intellectual engagement in civil society and the public sector, especially in the areas of the arts and heritage. His writings and public presentations have covered central themes such as ethics and politics; history and memory; the nation state and civil society; mental health and wellbeing, and culture and the arts.

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(In lieu of citing a vast literature and some of my earlier writings on related themes, I have listed works by Singapore and Southeast Asian thinkers that readers may find useful. Although I have not directly referred to Kuo Pao Kun in this essay, his work remains of great relevance.)

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Making Art From Emerging Long Histories of Singapore

Kwa Chong Guan

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The misrepresentation of pre-colonial Singapore as an obscure fishing village discovered by a benevolent British imperialist empire has underpinned the city-state's national historical narrative for two centuries. Over the last 40 years, however, archaeological evidence and archival research—observes Kwa Chong Guan, Senior Fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies—have revealed truths that counter this misperception. As Singapore grows into its 60th year and beyond, its maturity necessitates a rewriting of its history —one that recognises its historical legacy as being far older, far more complex, and far more enriched by its roots in the Nusantara than previously claimed. A more comprehensive understanding of Singapore's long histories can only fortify its people's national consciousness and help them better imagine and connect with the tangible realities of a shared past, present and future, as several Singaporean artists have done.

The Settlement on the Hill

Dr. John Crawfurd, MD, visited Singapore in February 1822, enroute to the Courts of Siam and Cochin China as an envoy of the Marquis of Hastings, Governor-General of India. Crawfurd recorded in the *Journal* of his mission that he walked around the "ancient town of Singapore" and climbed the nearby hill—then known as Bukit Larangan because the spirits of the old kings were believed to reside on it—dominating the town. He reported viewing the remains of an ancient settlement on the summit of the hill.

Crawfurd's description became the basis for planning an archaeological investigation of the hill in 1983, to verify if there were still any remains of the ancient settlement he saw. The summit had been levelled in 1858 for an artillery fort named after then Viceroy of India, Viscount Canning; and in 1929 it had been excavated for a covered reservoir to receive water piped in from Gunong Pulai in Johor for distribution to the city.

Dr. John N. Miksic, then lecturer at Gadjah Mada University in Jogjakarta, was invited by the old National Museum to undertake the investigations from 18 to 28 January 1984. Against the odds, Miksic recovered *in situ* 1,346 pottery sherds weighing 14.31 kilograms, confirming what Crawfurd saw of the remains of an earlier settlement on Fort Canning. Further excavations of Fort Canning in the 1980s raised public awareness and interest in what archaeology can tell us about our long past, incentivising archaeological investigation of other potential locations along the Singapore River before redevelopment of the site.

Nearby Excavations

Miksic also supervised excavations at the site of the new Parliament House Complex before its construction in late 1994; at Empress Place in 1998, before its restoration as the Asian Civilisations Museum; and at Colombo Court in 2000, before it became the site of the new

Figure 1. The underglaze blue-and-white bottle illustrated above, now displayed in the Asian Civilisations Museum, demonstrates the significance of trade in such porcelains for Temasek. Image courtesy of Asian Civilisations Museum.

"Singapore must rewrite its history to reflect its deep, complex roots in the Nusantara, countering the colonial myth of a humble fishing village."

Supreme Court. In early 2003, the Singapore Cricket Club allowed Miksic to excavate a corner of its cricket pitch. The artefacts recovered in the two-week excavation confirm the Padang as a potentially large archaeological site. St. Andrew's Cathedral also allowed Miksic to excavate its grounds in late 2003, before construction of an extension to the Cathedral.

The archaeological excavations at and around Fort Canning have recovered more than several tonnes of artefacts, making the 14th-century port settlement on this island one of the best archaeologically documented port sites in the Straits of Melaka. Most of the artefacts excavated are ceramics, with local earthenware for everyday use pots and utensils constituting some 50% of the ceramics recovered. Coarse stoneware jars for storage and transportation of foodstuff constitute the next largest category. Most of the high-fired ceramics recovered are green glazed celadons, produced in quantity for export at Southeast China provincial kilns and the Longquan kilns at Zhejiang province. High quality Qingbai and Shufu white wares for everyday use have also been recovered in notable quantities.

Most significant about the excavated ceramic sherds is the large quantity of underglaze blue-and-white porcelains found on Fort Canning. These underglaze blue-and-white porcelains—produced for the first time at the Jingdezhen kilns when their potters started experimenting with brush painting underglaze cobalt pigments to produce the brilliant blue decorations on their wares during the Yuan dynasty—rapidly became a much desired and highly valued category of ceramics. The notable quantities of the porcelains found on Fort Canning single out 14th-century Temasek as a significant market for this new category of Chinese ceramics.

Between 2016 and 2019, the marine archaeology excavation of a 14th-century shipwreck near Pedra Branca recovered approximately 3.5 tons of ceramics. Marine archaeologist Michael Flecker, who supervised the excavation, points out that the most impressive element of the ceramic cargo is the range and volume of Yuan blue and white porcelains, much more than in contemporaneous shipwrecks.

The several tons of ceramics recovered from the earlier terrestrial and more recent marine excavations indicate that Singapura was an international and regional trading port in the 14th -century. More significantly, it corroborates the *Sulalat al-Salatin* or *Malay Annals* narrative of Sang Nila Utama or Sri Tribuana establishing a settlement on Temasek, which he renamed Singapura to commemorate the lion he thought he sighted upon landing on the island. It also supports the claim that the settlement grew into a "great City" to which traders flocked in great numbers.

Beyond the 1400s

However, the archaeological evidence of settlement in Singapore runs out after the 14th –century, suggesting that the thriving port settlement declined as a new port settlement emerged in Melaka in the 15th century. Portuguese, Dutch and other early modern European textual records indicate that cycles of settlement on Singapura corresponded to what was happening in surrounding seas. The Chinese records of the eunuch Admiral Zheng He's voyages shows that the Grand Admiral sailed past Singapura on his voyages between 1405 and 1433 C.E., although some of his crew may have gone ashore to visit a settlement here. Historian Peter Borschberg has found in the Portuguese records and Dutch East India Company archives corroboration of the *Sulalat al–Salatin* narrative, that the descendants of the Melaka Sultan who lost their city to the Portuguese in 1511 moved up the Johor River, where they established a new Johor Sultanate and maintained a harbour master in the Kallang River estuary as a gateway to their capital up the Johor River.

Implications for Art and the Arts

The deep dive into Singapore's pre-1819 past has provided Singaporean artists with a wider and longer range of events and issues to

Figure 2. *Dapunta Hyang: Transmission of Knowledge* (2017) by Zai Kuning presented at the Singapore Pavilion as part of the 57th International Art Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia. Image courtesy of National Arts Council.

reference in their artistic practice and engage with as historical material. As art critic, historian, and curator June Yap argues, there is a "historiographical aesthetic" in which art makes history and history shapes art. For Yap, such "artworks are more than a representation of a historical past. Instead, they confront history and its production, laying bare the nature and designs of the historical project via their aesthetic project". In a 2017 unpublished paper,[1] Yap examines "Srivijaya as an aesthetic project… not a historical project, even if it has historiographical purpose. Rather, what is evinced is a narrative extended, new grounds for affinities and fellowship, and the possibility of confronting the fear of loosing oneself, in order to enrich and enlarge not merely history, but one's experience of the present."

More than less, this is what multi-disciplinary artist Zai Kuning attempted in his presentation of *Dapunta Hyang: Transmission of Knowledge* in the Singapore Pavilion at the 57th Venice Biennale: to recover forgotten histories and knowledge of the first king of Srivijaya and his people—the sea nomads, or *orang laut,* of the Riaus. Zai's tracing of this *Transmission of Knowledge* leads him to also explore the ancient *Mak Yong* dance-drama dating back to the Srivijayan era and the controversies it evokes today.

Ho Tzu Nyen has deployed a similar multidisciplinary approach to art in his 2003 work *Utama—Every Name in History is I*, comprising a video and 20 portrait paintings interrogating the founding figure of the *Sulalat al-Salatin* as a quixotic person, perhaps not very different from Zheng He, Vasco da Gama or Stamford Raffles. Ho's *Sejarah Singapura* (2006) commissioned by the National Museum of Singapore, is an immersive panoramic audiovisual projection that serves as an introduction to the Museum's main galleries on Singaporean history. It raises June Yap's prescient question of whether this is history making art or art making history.

Playwright, theatre director and arts activist Kuo Pao Kun (1939–2002) portrayed the eunuch

Admiral Zheng He in his play *Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral* as a liminal figure, "in the limbo between departing and arriving, between being a man and a non-man". But as Kuo also noted in the 1995 performance programme: "Zheng He is especially inspiring to Singaporeans on many levels and… dimensions. As a minority Chinese ethnically, religiously, culturally, and as a eunuch rising to the pinnacle of power and achievement, Zheng He mirrors [Singapore's] existence in many ways."

Conclusion

Crawfurd claimed that Singapore—for the 500 years between the time of the settlement whose remains he saw in 1822, and the British takeover of the island in 1819—was unoccupied, "the occasional resort of pirates". However, archaeological investigations and archival research over the past 40 years reveal several historical developments on the island and especially in the seas around it. Zai Kuning and Ho Tzu Nyen are among a younger generation of artists rising to the occasion of exploring how these historiographical developments can inspire new artworks, drawing on new or alternative histories which help us understand who we are, where we came from and can go in the future. □

About the Author

Co-author of *Seven Hundred Years: A History of Singapore,* Kwa Chong Guan is also Chairman of the National Heritage Board Archaeology Advisory Panel and former Director of the old National Museum.

Note

1. The full paper can be accessed at https://www.researchgate.net/publication/313477032_Srivijaya_and_the_Aesthetic_Project.

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In Their Own Words:
Polarities (in, of and for) Performance

Interviewees

Meenakshy Bhaskar

Artistic Director, Bhaskar's Arts Academy

Dr. Samuel Wong

Co-Founder and Creative Director, The TENG Company

Yaziz Hassan

Co-Founder and Director, Nadi Singapura Ltd

Interviewer

Dr. Aaron Maniam

Editor-in-Chief, *Cultural Connections Volume 10*

The performing arts scene in Singapore is inherently variegated. This article captures key insights on several dimensions of this variety, drawing insights from a panel discussion among three established practitioners, familiar with the Chinese, Indian and Malay communities respectively, and with the connections and cross-pollinations between the three. The panel's conversation strongly echoed the work of management theorist Barry Johnson[1], where different facets of a choice are characterised not as mono-dimensional traits, but as "polarities"—dualities with two sides, where "both/and" rather than "either/or" approaches can allow for rich, non-binary outcomes rather than mutually exclusive choices. This approach brings out the dynamic and generative diversity of Singapore's performance ecosystem.

1
Tradition and Innovation in Art Forms

Samuel: The unique thing about traditional music is that the contemporary of the present is going to be the tradition of tomorrow. So what happens is that a lot of people don't realise that we are actually on a continuum. They just think of it as two sides of a coin. Oh, this is modern. And this is traditional. But the fact is that we vacillate across a line. We take elements of the past and make it relevant in the present. We take elements of the present and then reinterpret our past.

So we have interpretations of history and we have historical interpretations of the present as well. In many senses, this identity actually forms us, frames us, and gives us growth. I think what's scary is the environment that we are creating art in right now where there's so much polarity. There are wars happening and stuff like that. No doubt a lot of people have said that good art comes from strife and wars. But I think, from another perspective, we are also thinking about continuity, sustainability and leaving legacies for next generations of Singaporeans as well.

Meenakshy: I've always said that what was yesterday is tradition tomorrow. And what's today will become tradition three years down the road. How do we know how dance was practised in the past?

You have all these people talking about purity, keeping the purity [of an art form]. You know, you can't really judge. We didn't live in those days. We do not have any video recording, you know, that recorded all of that. So let's just go with what we have and be strong with what we do, but the challenges and worries about tomorrow are real.

2
Local and Global Influences

Meenakshy (on her Academy's interpretation of the Chinese legend of *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai,* often known as "The Butterfly Lovers"): Our first creation of *Butterfly Lovers* really set the trajectory for how my parents were going to approach Indian dance in Singapore. They

were deeply influenced by the various cultures found in Singapore, and deeply inspired by the multicultural landscape of Singapore the first time they saw Chinese dance and Malay dance. And then internationally, there were other performers coming [onto the scene].

As my mum grew up in a very small village, she had not seen anything other than classical Indian dance. So it was a very rewarding, inspiring time for them; it inspired my mother to create the story of *The Butterfly Lovers* in bharatanatyam. Nothing like that had been done in India. So that was something very new for them. It set the tone for cultural collaborations… and really honed my mother's skills for collaboration.

Yaziz (on how global influences *and* Western-style systematic training contribute to Malay music): When I started in the early 90s, only about three or four established groups were involved in Malay drumming, mainly from the performing arts groups, Sriwana, Sri Warisan and The Singapore Kemuning Society. But over the years, I think we've achieved a major milestone in that we now have more than 13 established groups. All the individual groups have their own percussionists and musicians. And they learn from proper musical training, not just from oral tradition and copying current practices. Now all these youngsters have gone to the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA) or LASALLE College of the Arts, so they learn from [systematic Western] training methods, which is good.

In 2009, Riduan (Zalani), Nadi's co-founder, and I were in the show committee for National Day. That was when we realised that there were no iconic percussion groups in Singapore. Whether Chinese, Malay or Indian, there were no large Asian ensembles. That's why, in 2011, Riduan and I created Nadi Singapura. Since then, we have had [ensembles] Drum Feng and Damaru.

During the 2009 survey, [we found that] most tertiary-level groups played Brazilian batucada or African music, and 70% of them comprised Malay musicians. Why did they not want to hold a rebana or kompang, which is much cheaper, much lighter? Very simple. Their answer was that the Malay forms were not cool because Malays traditionally did not move and play. They didn't move around or dance, and played mostly traditional Malay music or Islamic music.

The changes that we've put in place aim not to recreate the genre but to make the genre more current and relevant. We mixed Malay traditional percussion with some movement, and it has now attracted more Malay youngsters to play the traditional drums again. Today, most tertiary-level groups have at least one Malay drum group.

In 2018, we performed at the first Gemadah Malay traditional music festival presented by Persatuan Pemuzik Tradisional Melayu Singapura in collaboration with Esplanade–Theatres on the Bay. That's when we found out that we have a minimum of 13 groups playing traditional music. Actually, there are a lot more if we include less formally established groups. Most of the percussionists are now Nadi members.

3
Purity and Combinatorial Potential of Art Forms– Balancing Depth and Range

Meenakshy (on not being Indian enough): My parents were here from the 50s so, by the 70s, their artform had evolved. That's almost 20 years. So when other Indian teachers were coming in and setting up schools here, getting connected with the government and working with the People's Association, there were criticisms that we weren't Indian enough.

That really hurt us in a few ways. It hurt us in the sense that a lot of the alumni who would have brought their children and other students back to us, stopped and went elsewhere. Financially, it also hurt my parents, because questions came up, and the then-Ministry of Culture started questioning the value of what we were doing.

So at that point, my father then started doing side jobs just to make ends meet. The situation eventually evolved. There was a market of people who came back and things worked out. I think arts housing was one big thing that really helped. I think it happened during the mid to late 80s. Stamford Arts Centre was deemed a place of art. My father was one of the first people to submit an application, and we got our original space there.

Yaziz (on roots and tradition while experimenting and innovating): We needed to [combine global and local influences] to attract [young people's] interest. They would often ask, "How do you infuse K-pop music with your traditional Malay drumming?" Because we were rooted very strongly, we knew our roots, that's why we could experiment [with other influences].

So that's where younger players started to learn their roots, and develop a sense of what they needed to do now to continue evolving. In 2024, during an event for Catch (www.catch.sg), Nadi Singapura played modern music with our traditional instruments. We got about a million online views because of this. But such innovation must be relevant to where we live. We cannot make changes indiscriminately. To make changes, you need to know your roots, and how strong they are. Only then can you know how to make a change.

4
Cultural Dilution and Loss of Tradition

Meenakshy: I'm concerned that, in schools, traditional arts are now taking a back seat. Principals are now choosing to do something called "World Dance". It's not happening so much in music, but it's happening in dance. They used to have the traditional dances where the Chinese dance teachers used to teach their own dance form, and similarly for the Indian and Malay groups. Now a whole lot of Indian dance teachers have lost their jobs because of "World Dance". Instead of offering classes on Chinese dance, Indian dance, and Malay dance, every school [offering dance as a co-curricular activity] has one choreographer who's dabbled a little bit in each, and is not really trained in any specific dance form, choreographing "World Dance". This is where students are getting their first introduction to the traditional arts. This is a concern because you're having someone who's passing information to them without deep training in any specific form.

We're losing the identity of the Chinese, the Malay, the Indian. You have to go back to your tradition periodically. We're always going back to revisit

our roots, then coming back to reinvent them into new forms. We find relevance in the past or we try to contemporise the past. But if you don't have that anchoring, where do you start?

It's the same for Western classical music. You have a syllabus of classical music, and there's a progression and form for how you teach it. If the basics are not there, then I wonder where things are going.

This also affects the whole idea of working together. It's different if you only have one person doing a diluted synthesis—not the same as the three of us working together. This collaboration and synthesis are what we want to continue.

Yaziz: This is also happening in my school. I started teaching at Zhenghua Secondary School in 2005. I see the Indian dance, Chinese dance and Malay dance groups combining at certain times Throughout, they also remained very rooted in their own traditions. It was a delicate balance.

I do not know when they started to scrap traditional dances, and everything became modern dance. The dance instructor [at my school] is very young—unlike before, when, for the Chinese and Malay dances, we had several Cultural Medallion recipients as instructors. I don't know what happened and it's really a waste, not teaching students what their roots are.

5
Mentoring the Next Generation and Building Ecosystems

Samuel: How do we reach the young? How do we sustain their interest, energy and enthusiasm? How do we grant access to people who might want to reach us but don't know of us yet?

Yaziz: After the COVID-19 pandemic, we went back to our 50-year plan for Nadi Singapura. The next milestone is for us to open a school to ensure proper learning for Malay drumming, instead of relying only on oral traditions. We don't have any syllabus yet; in NAFA and LASALLE the focus is on gamelan rather than traditional Malay music. We're going back to what we planned—training our own members to be the future instructors in the School of Nadi Singapura.

Meenakshy: We had to rebrand ourselves in 2022 after my mom passed away. Now that the founders are gone, we are the new generation taking over.

We sat down and looked at the contributions and strengths of the founders. We figured out that giving back to the community and mentoring the next generation, not just within but also outside of our school, were always among their strengths. Having a history of 70 years [meant that] several of our students had moved on to establish big schools of their own in Singapore. So how could we help and uplift them as well? It's not just about us, it's the survival of all of them as well. So we prioritised working together with them, and with our alumni.

We found that bharatanatyam had taken off really well here. But there are other art forms that have come in from India like kathakali and mohiniyattam. Our next hope is to help these also gain the same foothold in Singapore, so we are focusing on creating awareness about these dance forms. For example, we organised a Kathakali Festival in 2025, focusing on kathakali,

and gaining support for this by working with the Malayalam language community, the different associations. We gave free workshops on how to appreciate kathakali to cultivate more audiences for the art form.

A lot of this draws from my mother's personality. She was the kind of person who's very giving, very kind, and she never held anything back. She never felt that if she gave away trade secrets, someone would run away with them. She was just this overflowing well of giving, with an intrinsic abundance mindset.

I grew up around that, so I have the same mindset. If someone comes and asks me for help or asks me a question, I give 100%. I don't hold back. It's nice to work collaboratively. It's really nice to work communally because there's a lot of sharing and exchanges going on. This is one thing I learnt from watching my mother.

6
Polarities in Harnessing Technology

Samuel (on the need for strong foundations): There was a recent trend of creating Studio Ghibli-style images that prompted discussions about Intellectual Property (IP). I think this [issue of IP] also applies to SingLit and the arts more broadly. Can you take the voice of another author and subsequently write a novel—does that person then lose authenticity?

There is a risk that we lose the beauty of the traditional form that has been there since ages past. Similarly when we work with technology like Artificial Intelligence (AI), if one has a really good understanding of the form, I think one can manipulate that form and then create new works as a result. And these new works may be ideas and identities which AI cannot necessarily work on.

This is something that I still am grappling with. AI is helping us with things like digital distribution and AI-assisted creativity. But it's not yet at the stage of creating our work. I think there's immense opportunity with things like helping us to work with different storytelling models, different musical framework modules, genres which we thought couldn't possibly be fully realised, like music and literature that we thought couldn't be fused together. AI has shown us how we can do that.

So, in many ways, AI is broadening our experience. I think the issue for us is to think critically—how do we ask the right questions to inform our works, so that we create works which are relevant to our AI-saturated society.

I can speak for how TENG is going to grow. We have a series of programmes where we work with music and binaural, as well as monaural, beat technology. AI is helping us grow our neuroscientific frameworks; there are studies on how this music actually affects people's brain and brain waves.

AI and other technologies have also allowed us to collaborate with therapists, social workers, and educators. We are finding ways to create educational programmes using technology, which has not been done before. But this can only happen [when one has] strong fundamentals in the art form as a base for innovation.

This is where I think Yaziz and Meena rightly feel a bit angsty—because you have teachers outside there without strong fundamentals who produce output with labels like "fusion", "World Dance", etc.

There seems to be a larger emphasis on assimilation, without realising that the core actually comes from traditions, history and heritage.

Yaziz (on the need for high-tech *and* high-touch): Nadi Singapura is revisiting our original plans. We realise, especially for the Malay community, that we have lost the human touch. Even when you go to McDonald's, you touch a screen to order rather than speak to a middle-aged aunty about your order.

We feel that, for the Malay arts, we lack this human touch, which actually is the best medicine offered by the arts in its healing role. One to one, face to face, we can communicate with an audience. We can talk to them after a show, rather than have them watch an AI or digital performance from home while drinking coffee and eating cookies. We feel that when things are done digitally, we really don't have the human touch anymore. In Singapore now, many things are done on machines. We also risk slashing the salary of a Singaporean who's replaced by this technology.

With Nadi Singapura, we know what we want to do for Malay drumming. It's about teaching the roots properly, so that [our members] know how to create the human touch for those who come to our performances, when they see us on the roadside, when they hear or feel the drums that we actually play.

Meenakshy: I agree with everything that Sam and Yaziz have shared. The lack of human touch is a concern for us as well, especially because with music, you can put on your headphones and hear it, but you can't do the same with dance. Watching it in a video is not the same as having a live experience.

Samuel (on technology for monitoring and evaluating projects): AI has helped TENG to work with measurement impact frameworks. How does our music actually affect people? Do we have any psychological studies that this music can work to help with stress, anxiety, etc. It's given us very different ways of looking at our music.

AI has actually allowed us to create frameworks for music and then assessments of those frameworks which we created. It has allowed us to think a little bit deeper, and allowed us to think of ways in which we could have outcomes that could help the community and enhance wellness. So it has made us think differently. But again, this can only be said about TENG because we are a very data-driven organisation.

My model of my company is weird in that it doesn't function very much like an arts company even though we call ourselves one. But Yaziz and Meena worked with me and they know that we think very strategically. AI has allowed us to clarify the decisions that we make.

AI has allowed us to test strategic models of how our company should move: What is the percentage of failure? Would we be able to get this? And why are we not able to do this? It's also able to predict ways in which we move into the future. I like to think we're an innovative company that does Chinese music, not just a musical company that happens to innovate.

7
Balancing the Polarities of COVID-19

Samuel (on the impact of COVID-19 and digitalisation on audiences): The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated digitisation and reframed many discussions around artist livelihoods and mental health. There were also new hybrid models of engagement that increased some aspects of viewership. Many of us started reframing the conversations that we were having on audience engagement.

COVID-19 also highlighted the role of the arts in social cohesion and healing. Arts companies now more than ever have multiple platforms with which to engage our audiences, and we are competing with new content and new dissemination mechanisms. We need to go through a point of inflexion, to explore where change is necessary in how we are getting our audiences and how we are moving ahead.

Because post-COVID, audiences have changed. The numbers of people going to shows or concerts are very different from those pre-COVID. My data shows that the audience engagement patterns for Singaporeans have changed, and so we need to study exactly how and why COVID-19 changed them.

There was also so much online content during the pandemic that nowadays, people find it a little more difficult to pay for tickets, because everything became free [of charge]. This leads to deeper questions: What is the nature of the arts and their value? How should the arts best be disseminated?

Meena (on post-pandemic market over-saturation): We found COVID-19 a challenge and we all disliked it, especially teaching online, but I think it opened up avenues for us to connect with the community.

It may have initially been very difficult, but we adapted very well. We presented several performances, like children's programmes, and reached out to a different community altogether than we normally would have. So that was good for us, though it was a tough time.

As Sam mentioned earlier, the audience has changed considerably for us as well. They did not want to watch anything unless it was free. It took a while for everybody to come back.

The market in Indian dance is now over saturated in Singapore. You have a proliferation of different dance forms and more artists. We're competing for audiences and performance venues.

The unique thing about Singapore is that we offer arts grants to even permanent residents, which you don't see anywhere else in the world. And there are a lot of permanent residents who are creating. This is great because I think it's a good thing to have variety. It's a good thing to have a lot of people come in because some changes happen during that time—a lot of people get pushed because of the competition and it just creates a totally different environment. People get more creative. But that's been our biggest challenge, how do we find relevance in this seascape of many.

Yaziz (on digitisation and the struggle for audiences): Honestly, during the COVID-19 pandemic, Nadi did nothing. We did have a grant for us to do a pilot project but all the grant money actually went to the video company for the project. All the video companies made a living during COVID, but the artists themselves didn't.

But during COVID-19, we learnt a lot. Previously, we didn't have any media or marketing team. Now we do. That means an extra budget that we need to put aside for this department to make us more relevant.

In 2019, Nadi performed to a full house of 1,800 people at Esplanade Theatre, but a lot of this was because of Esplanade's marketing strategy. The budget that they put into the marketing was high, so even people in the alleys knew about this show.

[In the Malay] community, to pay more than $30 for a traditional arts show, concert or even a theatre show is very hard. A key challenge is that people now, even the youngsters, want to go more digital and watch from home. They do not wish to pay for tickets. That's why I think the government subsidising Singaporeans to come and watch us live, through the Culture Pass,[2] is a very good initiative. This is a milestone we can be proud of.

8
Recognising the Value of the Arts in Singapore

Yaziz (on recognising quality and qualifications): The artist fees paid to traditional practitioners is very far off from those received by our classical counterparts, although we sometimes manage or play at similar levels of quality. The problem is that, in Singapore, we do not have a certificate that recognises what Malay music is all about. I have a friend with a degree in music from Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM). In Singapore, this degree is not recognised even though it is from one of the most prestigious music academies in Malaysia.

Samuel (on excellence, access and cross-sector collaboration): As traditional arts groups, when we first start out, there is a general stereotype that a lot of us tend to be very old, very stagnant and very antiquated. So there's "arts", and then there's "traditional arts", and the two are not perceived equally.

As a result, many of us have difficulties trying to prove our value in a larger arts scene, and that is why I think maybe Yaziz, for example, finds it difficult to price certain things higher as well. Increasingly, we have to work to prove our relevance in contemporary society.

When TENG started, we went with the idea that we would try to break as many stereotypes and perceptions as we could. In a sense, the threat became a little bit of an opportunity for us.

Meena, Yaziz and I all work in the traditional arts field, and we know that today's society is now quite pragmatic. Always at the back of our minds is the issue of sustainability and how we can be relevant in a very pragmatic society.

How do we innovate and how do we subsist in a society which has a social perception of utility?

So there's always a perceived tension between artistic value and social utility. TENG has worked on a hybrid model combining excellence with accessibility, which we've found works.

Our second strategy is the idea of access and equity. At TENG, we direct our work towards communities through targeted outreach—it might be to at-risk youth, or groups with special needs. We work with healthcare professionals. We collaborate with therapists, educators and social workers to ensure that cultural participation isn't a luxury but is part of everyday society. So we break down the silos in the usual arts paradigms, and instead start merging everything together. We bring together arts and health, arts and the social compact, arts and other areas.

The larger strategy that works for us is carefully selecting what we work on. Everything else is basically about our skills—how we take our skills and find an alignment to broader concerns.

It is a virtuous cycle: once we are able to break down silos, we can also work with other entities from other fields. We find that we are stronger together than apart. We or other art companies working together with different entities, let's say health or healthcare, can bring artistic merit (in terms of programming) as well as economic benefits. So I don't see these as separate efforts. The further we break down silos, the more we find alignment.

Samuel (on the arts as essential public infrastructure): As artists, we need to find a way to make the arts an essential public infrastructure. It's a little bit like education and healthcare. Artists should be able to co-lead policies and innovations because we need to keep building bridges across various different types of disciplines and sectors—this is to build Singaporeans' awareness about the arts, and to anchor the arts in the heart of Singaporean society.

It would be great if government policy could increase such interactions. This could both inform policy and shape the core Singaporean identity in the future. I hope that the arts in general—not just my company—will become a core infrastructure.

Meenakshy (on broad-based appeal): Arts in every home. That's one of our mottos. I think Singapore is ready for it. We're ready. We have the funding, we have the monies, and Singaporeans are at a place where we can afford it.

Yaziz (on leading the ecosystem): Our motto for Nadi is: where others choose to follow, some choose to lead. We want to be leaders of the arts, not just followers. That's what our motto is all about.

9
Conclusion: Creating to Assert Our Singaporean Identity

Samuel: I also want to point out something very unique: every time we work and innovate, we actually assert our Singaporean identity as well.

Meenakshy: One of my hopes is for us to not be ashamed of what we are, that [our work] is Singaporean, to not be afraid to own that this is Singaporean. We don't have to be apologetic about it.

Indian dance is so rooted in tradition. But you know, this is also our tradition in Singapore. We should be proud of that. I recently met someone from New Zealand who is proudly owning our diasporic version of Indian dance. It's really wonderful. We had very similar conversations about history and how she's surviving her struggles.

I think this whole idea of identity in Singapore, trying to be so Singaporean—it's already happening, it's already happened. Our identity in our art form has already happened, and we have a clear identity. We have a clear culture.

I'd like to see every single Singaporean proud of our diasporic version of each culture. I think Sam, Yaziz and I, we are all in the traditional arts scene, we are shakers and movers. We're doing different things, innovating in different ways, presenting our art form to the public in a very relevant Singaporean way. And I hope that Singaporeans can someday turn around and look at us and all Singaporean arts as something to be proud of. To be really proud of the artists and the artwork that's coming out of Singaporean theatre, literature, in every scene, music and dance. I think we have a lot to be proud of. □

About the Panellists

Meenakshy Bhaskar, the Artistic Director of Bhaskar's Arts Academy and Advisor for Nirtyalaya Aesthetics Society, is the daughter of the late pioneering couple, Mr KP Bhaskar and Mrs. Santha Bhaskar. Having performed extensively from childhood through early adulthood as a Singaporean cultural ambassador, she has transitioned into the significant roles of teacher, choreographer, and mentor.

In 1996, Meenakshy was honoured with Singapore's Young Artist Award for dance. She remains passionately committed to promoting artistic excellence, encouraging collaboration, and championing inclusion within the dance community.

Her choreography, while influenced by her eclectic background, remains firmly grounded in the classical tradition of bharatanatyam. In 2015, she was commissioned by the Singapore Festival of Arts to co-choreograph the production *Returning*. Her recent choreographies include cross-cultural collaborations and multidisciplinary works such as *Radin Mas* (2023), *Marabu 3* (2022), and *Butterfly Lovers* (2021).

Dr. Samuel Wong is a musicologist, cultural leader, and visionary innovator in the field of Chinese music. As Co-Founder and Creative Director of The TENG Company, he has redefined the role of Chinese music in contemporary Singapore through research, performance, and social impact initiatives. He holds a PhD in Ethnomusicology from the University of Sheffield, where he was awarded dual scholarships for his research in Chinese orchestras.

Samuel has led groundbreaking projects such as The Forefathers Project, which preserves and reimagines Singapore's dialect-based music, and Music for Mindfulness, which integrates binaural beats with traditional instrumentation for wellness. His initiatives, including The Singaporean Composers Series and SMRT Train Chimes, showcase his ability to bridge heritage with innovation.

A respected educator and author, his works, including *The TENG Guide to the Chinese Orchestra,* are used in Singapore's national music syllabus. He has given keynote lectures at the Chinese University of Hong Kong and the Conservatorium van Amsterdam, shaping the future of Singapore's arts and culture.

Yaziz Hassan has been actively involved in traditional Malay music and culture since his early days in school. His passion for this musical genre has taken him to many cultural exchanges, performances, workshops and competitions, both locally and internationally. In his 37-year musical career, he has bagged close to 20 awards in dikir barat and traditional Malay music competitions.

As Co-Founder and Director of Nadi Singapura Ltd, Vice-President of Persatuan Pemusik Tradisional Melayu Singapura, and Advisor to several Malay arts groups, Yaziz has also brought traditional Malay music and culture to the international stage through performances and workshops in Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei, Thailand, Taiwan, Japan, Korea, Hong Kong, India, the Netherlands, Russia, Mexico and Ireland. In 2005, he conducted 700 students at the Singapore Drumming Festival and represented Singapore at the Commonwealth Youth Programme held in India, where more than 20 countries were involved. In 2024, Yaziz received the Steward of Intangible Cultural Heritage award for his contributions to Malay Music Traditions and the Making and Repairing of Malay Drums from Singapore's National Heritage Board.

Notes

1. For details, see Johnson, Barry. 1996. *Polarity Management: Identifying and Managing Unsolvable Problems.* HRD Press.

2. The SG Culture Pass aims to help Singaporeans discover, enjoy, and engage with Singapore's vibrant arts and heritage scene. All Singaporeans aged 18 and above in 2025 will receive S$100 worth of credits, which can be used to defray the cost of tickets to attend and participate in various local arts and heritage programmes. These include performances, exhibitions, experiences such as learning tours and participatory workshops, and other cultural offerings. Details can be found at https://www.sg60.gov.sg/budget-initiatives/sg-culture-pass/.

In Their Own Words:
The Necessity of Struggle? Continuity and Change in Singapore Theatre

Interviewees

Chong Tze Chien

Playwright and Director, The Finger Players

Nelson Chia

Co-Founder and Artistic Director, Nine Years Theatre

Shaza Ishak

Executive and Artistic Director, Teater Ekamatra

Subramanian Ganesh

Founder and Director, AGAM Theatre Lab

Interviewer

Dr. Aaron Maniam

Editor-in-Chief, *Cultural Connections Volume 10*

Few art forms mirror life with the unvarnished directness that theatre offers. This panel discussion among four veteran practitioners applies the same stark honesty to the theatre scene itself. In line with this collection's theme, the discussion looks both back and forward. It celebrates achievements and points of pride, like the sector's ongoing professionalisation through skilling, salaries and contracts, the opportunities afforded by Singapore's unique multicultural mix, and the emergence of "next generation" practitioners. At the same time, the discussion was realistic, sober even, about challenges like pricing pressures and how to balance between community and national identities. Ultimately, panellists raised the critical issue of whether we can think of the arts—and theatre specifically—as part of critical public infrastructure, both shaping and shaped by broader national discourse.

1
Accelerating Professionalisation…

Nelson: In the 1990s, something quite significant happened: a springing up of professional theatre companies. Some are still around—TheatreWorks, The Necessary Stage, The Theatre Practice which had its roots even before the 1990s, Toy Factory and so forth. This was significant; suddenly a group of artists were coming together, starting their own companies. They had to figure out what to do and how to do it in the arts scene.

Thinking back, we were actually writing the playbook of how to do theatre as we went along: where to find money, how to set up a company, how to draft a contract, how to protect our actors. The issues were raw; companies were focused on making productions happen. There were many adventurous projects during that time, including experiments with outdoor theatre.

Some people say that nowadays, we are less adventurous. This is partly because back then, there were fewer rules. You want to do a production outdoors? Something site-specific in a particular theatre? You want to bring in water, sand? We were all figuring things out. It was a very significant time in our history.

Tze Chien: The idea of making a career in the arts was almost unheard of until maybe the late 1990s. That's a testament to how quickly we have evolved as a scene: from almost non-existent to a professional scene within 30 years.

Shaza: Teater Ekamatra [Eka] has found both professionalism and finances—two related issues—challenging. When we first started, it was difficult to expect volunteer artists to arrive on time for rehearsals while juggling full-time jobs. The whole sector struggled with this. For some companies with full-time actors, it might have been possible for everyone to be 15 minutes early, all warmed up and ready to go when rehearsals started. For us, everyone ended work at 6:30 and rushed to rehearsals starting at 7. We couldn't expect anything more beside the fact that they even turned up for rehearsals. This was two decades ago. Things have changed a lot since.

What I mean by professionalism and finances is that when you can't afford full-time artists, not only as part of the company but in the sector as a

whole, when you don't have a lot of Malay language-speaking actors in the scene, rehearsals tend to be at night.

Directors have full-time day jobs, which they have to finish before attending rehearsals. This affects the sort of work we put out, and the sort of fees we can afford to pay.

We've survived these challenges. It's part and parcel of running an ethnic minority theatre company or theatre in general. But it did feel unique to us for a very long time. It felt like a failure that we couldn't pay people well and consistently enough for theatre to be a viable career option.

This applies personally too. In our 36 years of existence, I'm the first full-time Artistic Director; we had more than 10 before me, but I'm the first on full-time payroll.

Some sacrifices can spur creativity, but sometimes the idea of sacrifice can be overly ingrained. When we tried to run the company full time, paying people properly was seen as obscene; paying ourselves relatively properly was something bizarre and uncomfortable. People asked, "What are you doing making money out of running a theatre company? You know this is not okay?"

I was falling deeply into that hole and sacrificing everything—juggling two other jobs in order to continue running the company. I felt that everyone before me had given up so much of themselves. Many of us still have incredibly good relationships with one another and the company, but several also have this massive bitterness about how much they've given up of their lives for the art. I feel for them because Eka is built on that pain, their tears, blood and sweat, but to what end? Ultimately, I felt that this pattern had to stop.

Ganesh: A full-time theatre practitioner does about 160 hours of rehearsal in a month. Compare that with many Indian and Malay theatre practitioners who used to do evening rehearsals. If each rehearsal takes three hours, covering the same 160 hours takes close to five months.

This can seem like a long process for the same amount of rehearsal, especially for part timers, driven by passion. Does that mean the quality is not good? I don't think so. Passion drives up the quality, but with much more resources spent, so there's a financial sustainability question.

What Ekamatra did 10 years ago is now happening in the Tamil theatre scene. People have started to study full time, embarking on more full-time theatre practice. We have full-time arts managers. That's definitely progress.

2
…But Also Price Pressures

Ganesh: Grants alone are not sustainable. Our sponsors, our donors must evolve too. There's an example of an Indian donor who gave $500 for every play 20 years ago, and still gives the same amount per play today. It's very nice of him, but the cost of productions is increasing.

The national average spend figure by audiences is around $30-40 per show. But that's the average. For Tamil language theatre, if I charge $35 per ticket, audiences won't come. I suspect that the average spend right now for a Tamil language production is $20 to $30 at most. To match rising

costs, we also have to spend resources educating our people.

Shaza: Likewise, Eka didn't change our ticket prices for over a decade. This is wild when you look at costs, which have increased five-fold. Sensitivity to ticket prices can be very different depending on the socio-economic backgrounds of the community you mainly cater to.

I've run the company for 14 years now and people frequently tell me that I shot myself in the foot by wanting to pay people decently. I wouldn't even say we're paying people ridiculously well, but I would rather not create anything if we can't pay people properly. I understand that there are many different views on this.

3
The Challenge—and Opportunity—of Contracts

Ganesh: When we go to Indian artists who've been doing theatre for many years, we must remember that they came together out of passion. It's a passion-driven art. Back in the day, collectives and societies came together and performed plays for friends.

When we started to give out contracts, it was taboo. Artists started to worry. AGAM had to help them see the value of contracts. With some grants, after you finish a production, the grants come to you six months later. Instead, we made sure that on the last day of every production—before or during the strike [the dismantling of a set]—everybody got their payment. This helped everyone see that contracts protected them. This process of educating our artists is a big challenge, but it's moving in the right direction.

Shaza: We faced exactly the same problem. Some people stopped working with Eka because we became too serious, and that wasn't why they were there. When we started formalising contracts, some people found it weird and said, "You guys are not the Eka that we know. This is not us coming together to create something anymore." The move from passion to professional did lose us some long-term collaborators. Some have returned, but others no longer agreed with what we wanted to do.

4
A National Theatre?

Nelson: Both professionalisation and spontaneity are part of the ecosystem. One of my teachers, Kuo Pao Kun, talked about starting a national theatre company in Singapore. He may not have been totally right, but it was a viable idea back then.

I have often questioned: Do we need a national company? Our theatre scene is so varied. We have all these companies, we are so colourful, so "multi" in many senses. Pao Kun's approach to this question was to suggest something structured and centralised, which everything else could then go against: questioning, pushing. Otherwise, we'd just have multiple different versions with no anchor, all merely nudging one another. Revolution

always happens because there is something unchanging, something big, to react to.

Tze Chien: It is very important for any country or culture to have a national theatre. It represents and signals national endorsement.

When Pao Kun first mooted the idea of a national theatre, the authorities at the time told him: we can't just have a Chinese national theatre or an English one. We need to include Malays, Indians, Eurasians. He couldn't move the conversation further. There were many questions to answer: What would this national theatre be as far as languages were concerned? Who would be the artistic director? Who would the theatre hire? Would there be a quota for each race?

We have not answered many of these fundamental questions even today. This filters down to how the funding pie has been shaped and carved out. Some companies struggle more than others. I think one elephant in the room has never been properly addressed: What is our national identity? In the 1980s, a national theatre meant having our own faces, our language, local actors on stage. Today, we have more diversity, but we are still grappling with the core issue: What is Singapore theatre?

5
The National Theatre Scene

Tze Chien: (on going beyond ethnicity, language and personality): How do we survive as a scene? Most companies depend on the personalities of their artistic directors. Beyond these personalities, would the companies still exist? What will happen in 50 years; how many theatre companies will survive? Ekamatra is rare, having survived multiple personalities, but I can't say that for most companies in Singapore. With The Finger Players, there is a certain artistry that we are trying to inherit, which is why in the last five years, we developed systematic succession plans for the company to survive beyond any single artist.

Many theatre companies in Singapore are also based on language as well as ethnicity, at least that of the first generation. Beyond this, what are we inheriting? A certain methodology? Or a particular history, which can be baggage? The Theatre Practice has gone through one transition, from Pao Kun to Kuo Jian Hong. Ekamatra has gone through multiple iterations. The Finger Players is in its second generation. The Drama Box has begun handing over to the new generation. But these are all few and far between. We need to develop succession plans beyond personalities, ethnicity and languages.

Shaza (on evolving into an ethnic minority theatre company): Eka has had easily the most artistic directors of any theatre company in Singapore. I thought about it as a challenge initially, but after being involved for 20 years, I see how every artistic director had a different responsibility. Each responded to the zeitgeist, to what both the audience and artistic communities needed. Every artistic director ushered in a new phase. It's been exciting. When you're actually witnessing it, it's also scary.

In the last decade or so, we in the company haven't seen ourselves as solely a Malay theatre company. We see ourselves as an ethnic minority theatre company. Our works are primarily in the Malay language, but are not specifically about Malay

culture. They are about the experience of being Malay, of being an ethnic minority.

This nuance is not necessarily accepted by people from both sides of the community. Some in the Malay community feel that they are losing a theatre company, but to us there are other theatre companies that are more representative of Malay-ness. The idea that we cannot be labelled and boxed in specifically as a Malay theatre company might feel disconcerting. But for us, it is exciting.

I've found that the term "ethnic minority" has been rife with misunderstanding and creates much discomfort. I was determined to change Eka from being purely Malay. When Zizi took over, she wanted it to be a Singaporean company. I wanted it to be an ethnic minority company when Fared and I took over in 2014. For me, this felt most representative of us and our work. We believe that being an ethnic minority theatre company does not make us any less Malay.

Many conversations ensued: "People are going to be so scared. It's so political. It's such a scary term." I've always maintained that if people are uncomfortable with the term, it's their cross to bear, not ours. We know why we call ourselves "ethnic minority". And if it's politicised, so be it. After all, as a theatre company, much of our existence is political. But during COVID-19, conversations were happening around identity politics much faster than before. That allowed more people to feel comfortable about the topic.

This is ever evolving. One day we might call ourselves something else. This is part and parcel of evolution. For now, I think people understand when we consider ourselves and our work part of a political space or persons.

Ganesh (on the mission of AGAM): Our mission at AGAM is ensuring the longevity of Singaporean Tamil language theatre. If we don't do these language performances, who will? The performances have been around for something like 100 years and we need to take care of them. That doesn't mean we still need to perform only Indian epic productions like the *Mahabharata*. It's about using the language medium to bring our culture, and even other Singaporean art forms, to our audiences.

Tamil language is the medium with which we present the art form. What we are doing here is similar to any other language production, be it in English, Malay or Tamil.

Ultimately the work is about artists. There can be a Malay or Chinese person working on a production. In fact, my set designer is Chinese, my lighting designer is Indonesian, my stage manager is Eurasian. Language is just a medium.

Nelson (on the mission of Nine Years Theatre): Nine Years is the last of the professional Mandarin theatre companies, in a sense. There are smaller pockets of Mandarin theatre. Some focus on work for schools. But in terms of professional companies, at least under the NAC Major Company grant scheme, we are kind of the last on the scene.

Together with many predecessors and friends, we're trying to preserve something intangible, like other mother tongue theatre companies. As Shaza said, Eka is starting to call themselves an ethnic minority company. Drama Box is moving away from being a Mandarin theatre company. They just call themselves a Singaporean company, though they still do Mandarin works. Toy Factory and Theatre Practice have been calling themselves bilingual companies for the longest time.

So we decided that Nine Years Theatre would still call ourselves a Singaporean Mandarin theatre company. Singapore is important to us. It is the prefix; then we are Mandarin; then we are a theatre company. I'm proud that we still uphold the beauty of Mandarin. This is not to say that the others do not, but we have that background of training actors to speak the language properly, beautifully, effectively and powerfully on stage. We are emotionally attached to how mother tongue languages can be beautiful. They're worth preserving.

6
What Makes Singaporean Theatre Unique—Cross-Cultural Influences and Other Defining Qualities

Tze Chien: I think it's our ability to shift perspectives and paradigms—easily, naturally, organically. This is part and parcel of art-making and culture-making: we can take on multiple perspectives without losing our core principles.

This is something that connects us, other than food. But food is still a good analogy; we can have nasi lemak in the morning, chicken rice in the afternoon, then nasi goreng or chicken or fish curry at night. We have a wide palate for all these different tastes. Our tongues are used to it. Similarly with our theatre, I'm proud of how we shift paradigms and simultaneously work towards bridging differences. Because of this, we can adapt and survive.

We sometimes don't give ourselves enough credit for how open we are to different cultures; how we are informed and influenced by other cultures and make that diversity our own. It's something very unique to us.

Ganesh: Many people do Tamil language theatre—in India, Sri Lanka and elsewhere. But when it comes to Singaporean Tamil language theatre, Tamil language is a medium, not the end in itself. We can present multiple art forms, like wayang kulit or Chinese opera, but with the Tamil language. This can only be done in Singapore.

We have a unique cultural resonance in Singapore. Audiences can relate to a play because they connect to its multicultural influences. This happens nowhere else in the world, I think I can safely say. When we bring a Singaporean play to India, audiences may not relate to our inclusion of the Malay language or other influences in the play. They may not really understand the blend of treatments, languages or styles.

But this is our uniqueness. This is where our audiences come together. It's the presentation that people connect to, whether they are Chinese, Malay or Indian. For example, Tze Chien and his team presented a retelling of the Indian epic *Mahabharata.* Others across the world have done it, like Peter Brooks with his 1989 film. But Tze Chien did a uniquely Singaporean version with *Kingdoms Apart.* There were many Singaporean elements—Indian, Chinese, Malay—which we connected with. That's Singaporean theatre.

Shaza: Our experiences are unique, and our theatre represents that: the tug and pull of being Asian with all the baggage that comes with it, but also being, for lack of a better word, quite Westernised. We hold both multiplicities in us—that's the unique part. Our theatre is local and honest. I lived in London for quite a while and of course I watched a lot of theatre there, but I also really missed Singaporean theatre. There's something in it that I miss when I'm anywhere else.

Nelson: I've come to realise, especially when I encounter international counterparts, that our uniqueness is our multiculturalism. This is similar, of course, to our neighbours in Malaysia. But it's also unique in the sense that we are mixed in our language, our food, the manner and frequency of our interactions with other races, how we celebrate their festivals, how we eat their food like it's our own. The frequency and intensity are very high, compared to other countries that are multicultural in different ways. Singaporean work embodies that multiculturalism or multiculturality. An English-language Singaporean play, despite being mostly in English, will also encompass other languages, other ethnic values, sometimes religious values as well. If there was only one kind of people on the stage, it would look weird to Singaporeans, unless the play was intentionally crafted that way.

Of course, we are still talking about English theatre, Mandarin theatre, Malay theatre, Tamil theatre. Some people say there's no need to talk about these categories—we can all be Singaporean. I say the opposite. We should talk about these categories. It is all these individual cultures that make Singapore colourful. If we simply mix them together, then we're not "multi" anymore.

Being "multi" means that we have very strong Tamil poetry, and very wonderful Malay novels and Mandarin theatre. They interact, push and pull against one another. That's what is colourful—Singaporean theatre is that constant negotiation.

Nine Years fits in this constant negotiation process as a mother tongue theatre. But when we perform a Singaporean story, it's peppered with English and Mandarin and Chinese dialects, and other languages. We are moving towards having characters of other ethnicities in our plays. We always use surtitles so that non-Mandarin speakers can attend our performances.

Working on mother tongue theatre might feel optional. But it is not. It is part and parcel of our lives. We see ourselves holding the fort, seeing how we can preserve and pass on as much mother tongue heritage as possible. We see a clear and present danger of losing abilities in, and appreciation of, mother tongue languages and cultures. I find it hard now to find playwrights or even artists who can work powerfully in Mandarin. Some novelists can write really well in Mandarin, but writing good Mandarin scripts for theatre is different. Some young people can do that, but only if they have a longer time horizon and are willing to spend the next five years building their skills and sensibilities. Five years is a long time nowadays. It takes determination to want to respond to how the scene needs more Mandarin playwrights.

7
Points of Pride in the Past 60 Years

Tze Chien (on making art as a Singaporean): Expression and creation are privileges—not just an entitlement, but also a national duty. Many of us practitioners take these on as a form of national duty because we love the arts and our country very much. We love the people; we love our culture. We are proud of our culture; tapping into and expressing it becomes fuel for creation. As much as I enjoy working abroad, the idea of representing my country, embodying being Singaporean, is something dear to my heart. You can spot a Singaporean from miles away whenever you're abroad, right?

There are many cultures we have integrated into. We've created our own ways of art-making; our approaches are unique to us. I've realised this increasingly in the last couple of years: Singaporean artistry is very apparent in the global scene. There's something specifically Singaporean in how we manage art-making. I didn't realise it until I started working internationally. We've got something, despite our short history, very deeply ingrained and entrenched. It has a very strong foundation in mediating, understanding and knowing how to negotiate differences.

Tze Chien (on multiple moving parts): We should not take for granted how easily we can have conversations about art-making. There are many moving parts to making culture. It's not just about the artist or the administrators. It's about the funding bodies, the national conversations around art. Being in such a small country, many of us working towards the same goals.

Being an artist in Singapore is very much about being a Singaporean, trying to understand who we are when we hear different languages and see different faces, colours, ethnicities. We're all reflections of each other. There are differences but also many overlaps that spur us to see ourselves in others. This is not often seen in other modernised cultures or countries. It is our burden but also our privilege. That is why we thrive in it.

Nelson (on service to the country): After many years in the arts scene, we have progressed to a level where many mature artists are thinking about cultural leadership, about where and how our work can impact more sectors and segments of society. Artists nowadays are not all just thinking about themselves and making works. They are aware of how they are impacting society. They are contributors to society.

Shaza (on artists as donors): Our artists are also our donors! This is very important to me. It's been my ethos as an arts manager and now as an artistic director. At first, I was very concerned because I thought—we need money from other people, not our own artists. But I also realise that they donate because they love us and believe in what we stand for. Hopefully, they believe that we treat them well. I think the humanity that we bring into creating art is important to them. I'm always incredibly emotional every time I look at the donor list and see that many of them are artists. I'm still concerned if they are our only donors, but also very proud.

Ganesh: I did a project in 2017, the "Digital Archive of Singapore Tamil Language Theatre", with the

National Library. We spent a whole year digitising, transcribing and archiving all Tamil works from the 1930s to today. It's all in the National Archives now.

In some ways, it was a painful process. I met legends like S.S. Sarma. He did a world tour in the 1960s. But when I met him, all his works were printed in a book that sat in his home storeroom. Nobody else knew the works existed. But I'm also proud of that project. Nowhere else in the world could we have done such documenting. Not the US, not Sri Lanka. Our art form in Singapore is thriving.

A personal proud moment was in 2024, when we won the ST Life Award for *Twin Murder in the Green Mansion,* our adaptation of the British play, *The Play That Goes Wrong,* by Mischief Theatre Company. We performed it in Tamil. Before we signed the agreement, they asked us: Are you sure you want to do this? It's an expensive affair and you're sure you want to do this many showings? We said yes, paid the royalty, did the show, and were nominated in ST Life.

Why was this a proud moment? The Indian theatre scene, somehow or other, had never been nominated in the past. Winning was not just about AGAM or that play—it was unprecedented recognition for the Indian theatre scene *as a whole.* For artists, recognition is very important. When we got nominated, many Indian language theatre practitioners were proud. The entire industry came together, taking pride in that moment.

A final point of pride—we've been building our own black box. AGAM is effectively the first Indian organisation with our own black box, a 100-seater inspired by Kuo Pao Kun's black box at The Substation. Hopefully, this will lead to a proscenium theatre in a few years, and be a space for more productions.

Nelson (on innovations in performance): We're proud of something we started quite long ago, called the "Drink and Talk session". After every performance, if possible, we have a post-show dialogue. It's casual, held in the foyer of the theatre, and we serve tea or wine and sometimes tidbits to the audience. We casually chat with the audience about anything. They can ask questions, I can tell them what the play means, we can talk about Nine Years Theatre or about the arts scene, or about life in general. We do this as much as possible. I find it a really good way to engage audiences.

We've come to realise that our work is just a vehicle. The engagement with people, with the audience, that is the main point. We're trying to show audiences that they should not just come to a performance to consume art, but to be offered the opportunity to discuss art. They can voice opinions about what they like or do not like. The discussion can help audiences understand that each of them can appreciate and discuss art. There's nothing to feel shy or timid about. Art is not scary. Mother tongue theatre is not scary. These sessions have become a signature part of Nine Years productions, and our regular fans look forward to them.

The first time Nine Years Theatre presented a work—a Singaporean Mandarin play about Singaporean stories—on Esplanade's main stage was in 2022 (10 years after the company had been founded). The response was good. Two years later, in 2024, Esplanade asked if we wanted to create another work on the main stage. I suggested a sequel to our 2022 play because that had been very well-received. So, overall, the result was a two-part, large-scale Singaporean work on the Esplanade main stage. This was a big thing for us because for a long time, only foreign theatre companies could fill the main stage. We didn't manage to fill the house, but we still had a very

good response. This was a milestone for us: we had put up something on the main stage, and people had come and appreciated the work. Now, we are thinking about where we go from here.

8
Challenges of Representation

Tze Chien: In the Singaporean ecosystem, we have a certain national rhetoric about dividing and conquering, as much as it is about racial harmony and social integration between the different ethnicities. The notion of representation always gets politicised. Various groups or various languages are perceived as privileged over others, based on different politics and different social contexts.

As a Singaporean practitioner working with an evolving ecosystem, for instance with new immigrants and new languages, I think that our ethnic categories of CMIO (Chinese, Malay, Indian and Others) may no longer be the right construct in the next decade. We may have a new set of categories. But it is probably true that race, ethnicity and languages will always have the potential to be politicised.

I'll cite an example—my collaboration with Ekamatra. I had a conversation with Zizi, the Artistic Director at the time, and we created *Charged,* a play that is still talked about today. It explored what happens when Chinese soldiers allegedly kill a Malay soldier. This was a very difficult conversation—one that was important outside the play.

The then-Media Development Authority (MDA) stipulated that we needed to have a talkback after each performance. The conversations during the talkbacks were so insightful, enlightening and powerful for everyone. They were conversations that we had been afraid to have before. We had circumscribed and limited such conversations because we were afraid of the aftermath.

I think this fear is translated into policy-making, down to funding. Many policies are very helpful, but some are crippling. A major frustration for me as a practitioner is that a lot of my material and creative impulses are still based on old boundaries of multicultural practices. That's how we were brought up by our predecessors, from Pao Kun to The Necessary Stage to TheatreWorks. Some issues have been happening on the ground since the beginning, but we can't take the conversation and practice further because of potential red flags. This fear doesn't allow us to creatively and insightfully tackle the subject of multiculturalism and community.

Shaza: My most massive gripe in life is the need to box us into neatly packaged boxes that do not wholly and accurately represent us. We don't discuss enough the burden of representation that is visited upon companies and their people.

Take Eka as an example. People don't realise how much is on our plate. For example, when we don't do director development programmes, it means there are no pipelines for future directors. When we don't do playwright development programmes, there will not be playwrights coming in, and not enough space for them to grow. If we solely look

at art schools like LASALLE [College of the Arts] and NAFA [Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts], then we also have to talk about socio-economic backgrounds. In addition to CMIO, we need to include other aspects. For instance, you cannot divide race from class.

9
COVID-19, Technology and Community Adaptability

Ganesh: I think post-COVID, people started to think differently and out-of-the-box to maximise resources and digital opportunities. A lot of innovation started happening.

Tze Chien: When it comes to the metaphorical space for creativity in Singapore, we are always aware that we are vulnerable to a confluence of factors—political, social, global. Singapore is just a little red dot in the grand scheme of things. We know more about the world than the world knows about us.

During COVID-19, transnational conversations could happen very easily. Those conversations made my colleagues and me realise that we are actually very quick and adaptable to change. We could do Zoom plays and digital theatre without lags. We knew that survival was key. This was a global crisis that threatened the existence and livelihood of performing artists. What could we do about it? You'd be surprised by how many artists globally were stuck and refused to acknowledge that this existential crisis could cripple the scene because we didn't know how long we would take to recover from it. Many were stubborn and resisted change.

I'm very proud of how we responded. Of course we had some resistance as well, but practitioners in Singapore adapted and pivoted quickly. It's a testament to our adaptability, our ability to move with the times. To pivot so successfully and wholeheartedly for survival is a trademark of the Singaporean artist. We have been conditioned to think that way—that we are vulnerable to external factors. That has made us more resilient.

Ganesh: Let me also touch on the point of Zoom and digital theatre, which happened a lot post-COVID. I think we still have practitioners who are very worried about being replaced by digital technology. I don't think that way. Technology is just a tool with which we elevate our audienceship, our theatre methodology. The scene is evolving.

I agree with Tze Chien; our people have used technology correctly, embracing it especially during and after COVID. Now, many productions incorporate technology. We work more with virtual and augmented reality. That's a good thing.

We've also become even more attuned to social dynamics in Singaporean theatre. We cater to our current problems—the ageing population, inclusivity—which has meant broadening audience demographics since the pandemic. We're trying to bring all these into our performances, directly or indirectly.

Nelson: For me, everything is opportunity. Maybe I'm just a curious person. When I see social media, I ask: What is that? It could be a great opportunity. When I see technology coming in, I know it costs a lot. But I also wonder: How can we tap into the virtual space, including AI?

Key opportunities come from how technology has made us think and communicate differently. There are of course dangers to all this technology. But if you look at what it can help us do, I think the arts and culture can benefit a lot with greater awareness of how technology can be used.

We want to grow Nine Years. There's still a lot of room to grow. To go beyond old ways of thinking, we need more funding, more revenue and more people. With new technologies, we're also thinking of how to do things differently. How can we make things more efficient and effective, communicate differently, even regroup and work differently? Technology helps us to move beyond any single growth model. So we can think of growth in many different ways. For instance, we all use AI now in our work. Used properly, it can be very efficient, which helps us cut costs. These savings offer a glimpse of hope that we can maybe employ one more person. All kinds of things become possible.

10
Hopes for the Future: The Arts as Essential Public Infrastructure

Tze Chien: My hope is simple: to have our students know at least one artist very well. To be able to say, "Hey, I know this Singaporean artist; he or she's cool. I can talk about him or her. I know him or her by name". It's my small wish, but a very important wish for our future generations: to feel proud of our cultural makers.

Shaza: I hope that more ethnic minority stories become part of the national narrative. Not just at the extreme ends of successes and failures, but also everything in between: the good, the bad, the ugly, the messy. I hope more people see that any sort of theatre is part of Singaporean theatre, whatever language it's in.

I also find a general apathy in Singaporean society towards social justice. This may be because we are so incredibly stable. But now, with global political turbulence and instability, more people are understanding our part and our country's part in global politics. I feel that people are catching on to their complicity in some global issues. As artists, we can continue bringing issues up, combining social justice and art.

Ganesh: On Broadway and the UK's West End, theatre productions are part of life. I want theatre-going to be part of life in Singapore. With Tamil language theatre in Singapore, teachers have to bring students on excursions to watch productions. We have to convince audiences to come and watch a play. Attending a theatre production is a journey on its own, not as everyday as watching a movie. I really hope that in 20 years, on a Sunday morning, people will wake up and think, "I'm going to play football, I'm going to watch a movie, I'm going to watch a play". If this becomes common among most families, then the arts will have truly become essential business.

Nelson: One of the greatest challenges is perception. From my observations and encounters with friends, relatives, people around me, my audiences, people think of arts and culture as an afterthought, as something only "other people" do. Sometimes they make me feel that I'm only doing a personal passion project. I'm always a bit bemused by this. Shouldn't all of us be doing things we're passionate about?

But more deeply—what do they mean? I'm guessing they feel that I've given up something, perhaps the opportunity to earn a lot of money or to progress in other fields, just to work on theatre. And to a certain extent, it is true that artists in Singapore do what we do because of passion.

The truth is that passion is necessary but doesn't get you very far. Artists in the 21st century should be thinking about how we are genuine, professional contributors to society, to the nation. Our work cannot merely be passion projects. We should have aspirations to serve our audiences, the people, and the country, as politicians, medical workers or even lawyers do. Our work and impact may be more abstract, but we are also serving [others]. The challenge is: How do we shift perceptions? We must first start to nudge them, however gently.

Second, we need to ask: What is the value of culture? Many countries and big cities are researching this, to quantify and help people understand that value, for instance, in improving healthcare, wellness, and societal cohesion, building communication, and fostering education. Arts and culture help with all these things, but their role is not articulated, not seen enough.

Thirdly, and this is more personal, I hope we can get people to feel proud about Singapore's work. Somehow, we still tend to think that international output is better. That can be true in some instances, but sometimes it's because we do not engage with the arts often and deeply enough, so we do not recognise the deeper value of Singaporean artists' works. To have people take pride in Singaporean works may be a real challenge for many Singaporean artists.

11
Advice for the Next Generation

Tze Chien: Enjoy the marathon. It's a relay race—you're always passing the baton on to the next person to run the next phase.

Shaza: Don't be afraid to ask for help. A lot of people are incredibly willing to share. Just ask.

Ganesh: I love the cartoon *Ratatouille,* about the rat that can cook. As they say in the movie, anybody can cook. Similarly, anyone who wants to work in the arts, who's passionate about it, can do it. But can you do it in a way that brings the art form forward? Tamil language theatre has been around for 100 years; can we take it to the next 100 years? This means doing the work passionately and doing it right. Governance plays a huge role. For our art forms to survive, some of us need to have business acumen.

Nelson: You need to have a plan. If you really want to make it, you need to have a plan because hope is not a plan. You can hope to be an actor, a director, an artist. Hope is good. Hope drives your

dreams, so keep dreaming. But you actually need a plan. And that includes you asking yourself: How much time am I willing to commit? How far am I willing to go before something becomes too much to tolerate? What is my risk appetite?

This all sounds a bit like investment, but after all, you are investing your life and time. In investment, people talk about risk, risk management, risk appetite, time horizons. In a career as an artist, you need to think about those things too.

I know a lot of young people don't like to be part of a single company anymore. They feel like they're being bonded, that they're under a lot of scrutiny from the National Arts Council, or that they have to report many things as part of governance. There are many more collectives now, a lot of artists moving around. But what's the underlying operating model? You've got to articulate it. □

About the Panellists

Nelson Chia is a leading figure in the theatre scene, known for his contributions to Singaporean Mandarin theatre and cultural leadership. As the Co-founder and Artistic Director of Nine Years Theatre (NYT), he has played a pivotal role in rejuvenating the local Mandarin theatre landscape and championing artist development. Beyond NYT, Nelson has helped shape arts education and policy, serving on advisory panels for institutions such as the Singapore International Festival of Arts and the Intercultural Theatre Institute. He was a founding member of the Singapore Chinese Language Theatre Alliance and has adjudicated the Singapore Youth Festival (Drama). Internationally, he was a fellow of the International Society for the Performing Arts and continues to serve on its Programme Committee. Committed to cultural exchange, Nelson has collaborated with organisations from New York, China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Macau. His work reflects a dedication to recognising Singapore's multicultural identity through theatre, and bridging tradition with contemporary storytelling.

Chong Tze Chien is a playwright, director, and core member of Singaporean theatre company, The Finger Players, where he served as Co-Artistic Director and Company Director from 2004 to 2018.

Chong's passion for theatre has earned him widespread recognition with his critically-acclaimed works, including *PIE,* published by The Necessary Stage, Epigram Books, and The Finger Players. As a playwright and director, he helmed *Oiwa—The Ghost of Yotsuya*, a 2021 SIFA commission. Featuring artists from Singapore and Japan, the production won five categories at The Straits Times Life Theatre Awards in 2022, including Best Director and Production of the Year. Beyond the stage, Chong's versatility is evident in his writing for feature films and television, contributing to platforms such as Channel 5, OKTO/Arts Central, and Vasantham Central. On a national level, he was the co-curator of The Studios: fifty, a 2015 Esplanade festival spotlighting 50 iconic Singaporean plays. He co-conceptualised and served as a writer for the National Day Parade (NDP) 2016.

His plays have been performed in the UK, Hungary, New Zealand, Japan, and Taiwan.

Shaza Ishak has been leading Teater Ekamatra since 2011, steering the company's artistic vision, strategy, and programming. Committed to the power of storytelling to drive social change, she is dedicated to advancing the ethnic minority arts scene in Singapore and beyond.

In recognition of her contributions to the arts and heritage sector, she received the inaugural *Tunas Warisan* (Special Mention Award) from President Halimah Yacob on behalf of the Malay Heritage Foundation in 2021. She holds a Master's in Creative Producing from the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, supported by the NAC Arts Scholarship, the Goh Chok Tong Youth Promise Award, and multiple foundations; and a second Master's in Race, Media, and Social Justice from Goldsmiths, University of London, funded by the Chevening Scholarship. Shaza is also a fellow of the Eisenhower Fellowship and the DeVos Global Arts Management Fellowship.

Subramanian Ganesh has played a pivotal role in shaping Singapore's performing arts landscape throughout his distinguished 20-year career. A multifaceted theatre practitioner who excels in directing, acting, and lighting design, he has evolved from performer to visionary creator within the Tamil theatre ecosystem.

His collaborative approach has fostered relationships with every Tamil theatre company in Singapore, earning widespread industry respect. Under Ganesh's artistic leadership, AGAM achieved historic recognition in securing the first-ever Straits Times Life Theatre Award for Tamil Theatre (Best Ensemble, 2024).

His directorial portfolio showcases his artistic versatility with acclaimed productions such as *Othello* (2013), *Kullanari* (2014), *Duryodhana AR/VR* (2020), and *Pachae Bangla Rettae Kolaida* (2023). These works reflect his commitment to innovative theatrical expression that honours cultural traditions while embracing contemporary approaches.

With boundary-pushing creative vision, Ganesh continues to shape Singapore's diverse performing arts landscape, cementing his legacy as a pivotal creative voice of his generation.

From Product to Process: Community Heritage-Making in Singapore

Associate Professor Hamzah Bin Muzaini

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The making of heritage in Singapore has, for decades, been the domain of a government focused on scripting "the Singapore Story"—the dominant national narrative highlighting independent Singapore's political history and aimed at forging a national identity based on shared heritage. Hamzah Bin Muzaini, Associate Professor of Southeast Asian Studies at the National University of Singapore, observes how local heritage-making has now expanded from government initiatives to encompass community-led projects concerned with the preservation of personal memories of bygone everyday life.

> "In a multi-racial, multi-religious, and multi-ethnic Singapore, we have always placed a great importance on… Both the heritage of our unique, distinct communities [which] gives our society a unique, multi-cultural flavour… [and] the shared heritage of us Singaporeans, as a common people [which] informs who we are."
>
> —Mr Edwin Tong, Minister for Culture, Community and Youth, at the Stewards of Intangible Cultural Heritage Award, 2023

Over the years, Singapore has made great strides in developing what may be referred to as its "community heritage". At one level, this may be conceived as a product, embodying the tangible and intangible aspects of the past that form the core of the cultural identities of particular communities. Put together, these constitute the shared ingredients that make the nation "a common people" (see quote above). Yet community heritage can also be a process, a form of dynamic heritage-making in which communities themselves participate. In the latter sense, heritage-making thus becomes not only the preserve of heritage experts and policy makers, but something which anyone can take on to preserve what is salient to them.

The making of community heritage in Singapore, driven officially by the National Heritage Board (NHB) as the custodian of our national history, has in fact gradually shifted from a product-centred approach to one that is more process-centred. This latter approach places increasing emphasis on engaging the community from the bottom-up, giving them agency to decide what of the past to preserve moving forward. But what does this mean and why is it happening more now? What can we get out of adopting this more participatory approach to community heritage? This article seeks to answer these key questions before considering some issues regarding community heritage-making in Singapore.

Heritage-Making in Singapore: The Early Years

When Singapore gained independence in 1965, heritage was not high on the young nation's agenda, its leaders and citizens preoccupied with bread-and-butter issues like housing and employment. In fact, it was not until the 1980s that heritage became a buzzword. Even then, spurred by falling tourist numbers, the target group was foreigners. In the 1990s, however, more efforts were made to make heritage a necessary staple for citizens who were

Figure 1: Chinatown Historic District. Photo by Hamzah Bin Muzaini.

found to know little about the nation's history. NHB itself was formed in 1993. This turnaround could also be attributed to how, by that time, Singapore had made much material progress, as well as how the flipside of that was that rampant urbanisation and industrialisation had led to the significant loss of the familiar. It was time to focus on less tangible issues such as building our national heritage.

During this period, the formal heritage-making process initiated by NHB was largely a top-down affair. Community heritage was seen merely as an end product. For instance, more heritage paraphernalia (e.g. brochures and trails) was produced to disseminate information about our historic districts such as Chinatown (Figure 1). Standing museums were periodically refurbished and new museums—such as the Malay Heritage Centre (in 2004) and the Peranakan Museum (in 2008)—set up. These were all curated by experts and authenticated by scholars. The value of heritage was calculated more in terms of fit to the broad Singapore Story than what it personally meant for lay people. The community was relevant only in a cursory manner, often subjected to being a mere passive consumer of the nation's history, left out of the actual process of crafting national narratives.

NHB's Heritage Plan 1.0

In 2018, NHB introduced its first master plan for Singapore's heritage sector, outlining strategies for the sector over the next five years. The aims were to raise pride in our heritage, build an awareness of what made us Singaporean, strengthen our sense of identity, and foster our sense of belonging. While the community featured in this first iteration of the Heritage Plan, community heritage was mostly seen as a product. Efforts focused on collecting the communities' stories, curating and then displaying them in museums and the digital repository of NHB website, Roots. Since 2013, NHB has also established community heritage museums—such

Figure 2: Tour of Alexandra Village organised by My Community, 2022.
Photo by Hamzah Bin Muzaini.

"Singapore's heritage-making is shifting from a state-driven narrative to community-led efforts preserving personal memories of everyday life."

as Our Museum@Taman Jurong (now defunct), Geylang Serai Heritage Gallery and Kreta Ayer Heritage Gallery—to celebrate our public housing estates, although these too were accomplished formally; the community contributed stories and materials but did not actively or directly participate in the curation process.

It is important to note that, by then, there already existed community groups seeking to carve out their own heritage initiatives. For example, the grassroots group My Community, founded in 2010 to advocate for the preservation of Queenstown as the nation's first public housing estate, although its remit has since extended beyond Queenstown, lobbied for a more community-centric approach to heritage-making. Its approach, ranging from the documentation of place histories and personal memories to the acquisition of everyday objects, was driven by the loss of heritage caused by changes to the nation's landscapes, and a desire for the community to be more involved. Its activities include public tours and self-guided trail booklets (Figure 2). In 2019, they even established their own museum (Figure 3). All these activities have the community at their heart, and provide platforms for the people to have a voice.

Figure 3: The first Museum@My Queenstown at Tanglin Halt, 2023. The museum has since been relocated following redevelopment of the old estate.
Photo by Hamzah Bin Muzaini.

NHB's Heritage Plan 2.0

Perhaps inspired by such grassroots efforts, NHB revised its take on what constitutes community heritage-making. On 19 March 2023, NHB launched its second Heritage Plan. In this second iteration, Singaporeans were invited to weigh in more on key aspects of the future of Singapore's heritage. This was a chance for them to play an active part in building the nation's heritage, particularly by guiding plans for our heritage and museum landscapes from 2023 to 2027. While the community had only been tangentially involved before, there was now additional emphasis on involving stakeholders, including community groups, youths, and traditional arts and crafts practitioners. Mundane heritage was given greater emphasis, focus groups were conducted, and calls made for Singaporeans to provide ideas on what they would like to keep from the past. As NHB put it, this endeavour was meant to "unite communities, create a sense of belonging and strengthen social bonds… by embracing practices, beliefs and histories of diverse communities in Singapore".

Beyond involving the public more in heritage-related activities and discussions, NHB also sought to invite some Singaporeans—dubbed "Heritage Champions"—to create heritage content and projects. This was to facilitate greater co-ownership of our heritage, emphasising the shift in considering community heritage-making from product to process. Currently, other initiatives include NHB's Heritage Activation Nodes, introduced in 2024, which involves community stakeholders in co-developing projects that celebrate everyday heritage, and the Youth Heritage Kickstarter Fund (YHKF) which encourages youths to embark on their own heritage programmes and enables heritage enthusiasts to execute their own projects. NHB now also provides Heritage Research Grants for the research of various

Figure 4: Event at Fernvale Community Centre focused on the heritage of Seletar, project funded by the YHKF, 2025. Photo by Hamzah Bin Muzaini.

aspects of Singapore's history. These have benefitted community institutions such as My Community in terms of funding some of their research endeavours.

Merits of Community Heritage-Making

While the idea of "community" may be found in both iterations of the NHB Heritage Plan, the emphasis has clearly shifted—from considering community heritage as a product to be made top-down, to being more process-oriented and participative, with individuals in the community now encouraged to partake in the making of their own heritage. The benefits of such community heritage-making—both as product and process—serve manifold purposes. As a product, the accumulation of the heritage of different communities reminds people just how multicultural and diverse Singapore is, and how various communities come together across differences to form the DNA of Singaporeans, instilling pride and belonging.

As a process, allowing communities to participate in their own heritage-making also helps to expand the Singapore Story. The state may focus on Singapore's broader history, but not at the expense of micro histories. While micro histories emerge from community heritage-making projects whose focus may be more specific and personally-motivated, they must not be misperceived as being less directly relevant to the national story. Having individuals from the community contribute with support from the YHKF and NHB Heritage Research Grants helps to cover more ground in our quest to uncover more about our nation (See Figure 5). Supporting individual and community efforts in heritage-making also provides communities with a greater stake in the making of our history, giving them a bigger voice.

Figure 5: Southern Islands community engagement event at the NUS Museum, supported by the NHB Heritage Research Grant, 2018. Photo by Hamzah Bin Muzaini.

Conclusion: Issues regarding Community Heritage-Making

A few notes of caution are worth making, however. First, it is important that, even as the products of bottom-up efforts may be seen to come from a community itself, they should not be romanticised. It is important to realise these are potentially biased and possibly nostalgia-driven, for in the reminiscing of that which has been lost, individuals may be insufficiently critical of the factors that led to the losses to begin with. Thus, these projects should be subjected to the same rigour as any other scholarship.

Second, individuals who seek to embark on personal endeavours of heritage-making often do it voluntarily and out of passion, and may need additional support in terms of research training and outreach. While NHB occasionally matches grassroots researchers with experts, it can do more to connect like-minded individuals in heritage project collaborations.

Third, there are, sadly, still those in the heritage industry who look upon community heritage-making with disdain, deeming such efforts a detraction from the work of formal heritage-making. Those who hold such views believe that community heritage-making may bring to light information that seems useless or, worse, antithetical to the task of nation-building. Yet it is important to realise that heritage-making on the global level is already moving in a more participatory and process-oriented direction, as seen in the growing emphasis on the intangible and the ordinary in UNESCO's work. Such pluralisation of heritage narratives ultimately enriches—rather than weakens—the Singapore Story.

Finally, we need to remember that individual heritage makers have their own agendas in their engagement in heritage-making. While they may profess to speak for one or more communities, we need to be mindful that their individual versions of community heritage may not necessarily be representative of the community or what it wants to remember of the past. After all, a community is never homogeneous and not always cohesive.

In summary, while NHB is to be lauded for shifting towards a more processual approach to community heritage-making, more can be done. It must also be wary of potential issues that can arise. Moving forward, NHB could implement a more systematic means of quality control for research done by the community, and provide support beyond funding for those seeking to be heritage champions. Only then can we enrich our community—as well as national—heritage, and make the Singapore Story ours. □

About the Author

Dr. Hamzah Bin Muzaini is Associate Professor with the Department of Southeast Asian Studies, National University of Singapore. He is a cultural and heritage geographer and his research interests include the politics of war commemoration, cultural theme parks, migration heritage, the heritagisation of vices, and the history and heritage of the offshore islands of Singapore. He is author of *Contested Memoryscapes: The Politics of War Commemoration in Singapore* (with Brenda Yeoh, 2016, Routledge) and co-editor of *After Heritage: Critical Perspectives on Heritage from Below* (with Claudio Minca, 2018, Edward Elgar). Supported by NHB Heritage Research Grants, he is currently focused on revealing the hidden histories of the many communities that used to live on Singapore's southern islands.

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Classical Music in Singapore: Possibilities for a Golden Age, and How to Realise Them

Goh Yew Lin

Chairman, Singapore Symphony Group

Introduced to Singapore in the 1800s by colonialism, Western classical music in Singapore reached a pivotal milestone with the founding of the Singapore Symphony Orchestra in 1979. Since then, the orchestra has grown in professionalism, excellence and esteem, alongside significant growth in the nation's Western classical music audienceship, musicianship, and education. Confident in the future of Singapore's Western classical music scene, Goh Yew Lin, Chairman of the Singapore Symphony Group, offers four recommendations that will be critical to propel it into an era of unprecedented success.

Excellence in Challenging Times

Classical music in Singapore is in a very good place today, and its future is bright. This is in stark contrast to some Western cities where a sense of crisis has been growing for some time. The symptoms are varied: diminishing and aging audiences, funding cuts eating into the capacity for artistic ambition, curatorial confusion because of shifting societal priorities, declining music literacy because of changes in school curricula.

Artists visiting Singapore often comment that our audiences are so young, and so engaged. Indeed they are: the average age of a person buying a Singapore Symphony Orchestra (SSO) subscription concert ticket has dropped to under 45, the average attendance at SSO concerts hit a record 93% in 2024, and we have had up to 10,000 people at the Botanic Gardens concerts, testing the physical limits of the space around Symphony Lake. Beyond the SSO, there are now many non-professional ensembles performing at a standard that the SSO itself could not have attained in its first decade; choral, chamber music and early music groups are growing in ambition and quality; young Singaporean composers and performers are making their mark internationally; and we have a burgeoning calendar of recitals presented by entrepreneurial impresarios.

Early Roots and Long-Term Vision

The formation of the SSO in 1979 was *the* pivotal event in Singapore's classical music history. For the first time, Singapore had a core of salaried, professional musicians performing a year-long schedule of concerts, while teaching and inspiring the next generation of musicians.

Dr Goh Keng Swee had declared in 1974 that it was a "scandal" that Singapore did not have a professional orchestra, and it was he who put together a team and persuaded his Cabinet colleagues to invest in the creation of a national orchestra. From the start, however, it was recognised that this had to go beyond just an orchestra; we needed to build audiences and a supportive ecosystem for music to thrive.

Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew's speech[1] at the opening of the renovated Victoria Concert Hall (VCH) in October 1980 is riveting and revealing.

I'll highlight two important points. First, it was already recognised in 1980 that the newly-renovated

"Singapore is one of the world's great cities, and we should aspire to build an orchestra that music lovers from other great cities like New York, London, or Tokyo would fly huge distances to come and listen to."

VCH was too small for a full orchestra. It still is. The SSO then had 52 members, and it was estimated that this number would grow to more than 70 in a decade, by which time a full-sized concert hall would need to be built. This need was met only with the completion of the Concert Hall at Esplanade-Theatres on the Bay in 2002.

Second, Mr Lee spoke at length about why Singapore was unlikely to produce enough world-class musicians to populate a whole orchestra (at the time, there were seven Singaporeans out of 52). At one level, this was a statement about avoiding chauvinistic thinking—if there weren't enough Singaporeans of requisite standard, then we had to be open to inviting excellent foreign musicians to fill the gaps and sink their roots here. But the more important implication was that, even in 1980 and with all the financial constraints of that time, they were planning for the eventuality of a world-class orchestra, inspiring young musicians to ever higher standards, to perform in a modern concert hall and tour internationally as the country's cultural ambassadors.

Dr Goh and his team were tough on financial discipline, but also generous in planting the seeds for future excellence. They didn't take the easy route, and supported founding Music Director Choo Hoey's missionary zeal. Choo forged his orchestra with a challenging repertoire, frequently exposing audiences to music far beyond their comfort zones. When given the opportunity to make a 10th anniversary recording for Philips, Choo Hoey chose Shostakovich's Tenth Symphony—according to some, a gnarly portrait of Stalin by a composer who had suffered much under his rule.

To expose students to orchestral music and help build the long-term pipeline of professional musicians, the Singapore Youth Orchestra (now the Singapore National Youth Orchestra) was formed by the Ministry of Education (MOE) in 1980 (after which it came under SSO management in 2016). MOE also offered many scholarships for talented musicians to study at the world's best conservatories, the best of them coming back to form the core of the SSO. In the same spirit, the decision would be taken two decades later to form what is now the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music at the National University of Singapore which, together with the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, continues to add annually to the pool of talented musicians bringing much vibrancy to the entire music ecosystem. More broadly, MOE's school curriculum plays a major role in the cultivation of music literacy in our youth; it is in school that life-long foundations for music appreciation are laid, and the SSO has worked closely with MOE to expose students to the excitement and breadth of classical music.

I've been involved with the SSO since a year after its founding, when at the age of 21 I found myself pronouncing on its concerts as music critic for *The Straits Times*. After a few years abroad, I came back to make my career as a stockbroker, and was invited to join the SSO's board in 1990, becoming its Deputy Chairman in 2002 and Chairman in 2010. I was also the founding chairman of the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music from 2002 to 2017. It has truly been a privilege to help shape these two pillars of the classical music ecosystem.

Drawing on these experiences, I suggest a few recommendations that both build on our strong foundations and continue taking the Singaporean classical music scene to new heights.

RECOMMENDATION 01:

Stay focused on the prime objective: to build one of the world's great orchestras

When the SSO first performed at London's Royal Festival Hall in 2010, one critic (*The Spectator's* Damian Thomson) asked whether this could be one of the 21st century's great orchestras in the making. He was clearly impressed, but while he saw both potential and ambition, he implied we weren't quite there yet. It was, I think, a fair assessment of the SSO in 2010.

I have frequently borrowed from that *Spectator* review to frame what I think *should* be the SSO's prime objective: to build, for and in Singapore, one of the world's great orchestras. Everything else derives from having an inspiring core of excellence: music education, effective outreach, national pride, international recognition and cultural diplomacy, and a vibrant and growing ecosystem of music-making in Singapore.

Today, the SSO is recognised as one of Singapore's success stories: an orchestra that has earned standing ovations on tours to Berlin, London and Dresden, and been ranked by *BBC Music Magazine* as being among the best in the world—one of only two from Asia on the list when it was first published.[2] Some of our recordings for international labels have reached Top 10 ranks on classical music charts in the United Kingdom and United States.

Why does it matter whether the SSO aspires to higher peaks of excellence? Could we not say to ourselves that the status quo is already good enough?

We don't really have a choice. Audiences are increasingly discerning, and demand quality. Many are well-travelled and have heard great orchestras in their home halls. In an increasingly digital age, everyone has access to concerts streamed from the best in the world. Live concerts must deliver a degree of technical excellence, excitement and emotional engagement that is comparable, if not superior, to the virtual alternative.

Excellence in orchestras results from many factors coming together to deliver a total experience that stirs hearts and minds. Some elements are subjective, but many are matters of professional competence, such as the technical limits and expressive capacity of individual players. Wise professional judgement and strong artistic leadership are essential in building an orchestra.

At a pivotal point in the SSO's history, after the 2010 London concert, we turned to two leading orchestra managers from Germany and the United Kingdom to provide feedback on what we needed to do better, and how. Their frank opinions went on to shape a strategy paper that guided us well for the next decade.

Each person (including music critics) responds to a concert from a perspective shaped by prior experience and affected by their present emotional state. I have lost count of the number of times an audience has been enraptured by a concert that the conductor (and often the musicians) felt was a poor reflection of what they could have done. This self-aware hunger to improve is to be cherished. Conversely, we have to guard against complacency, however tempting that may be: that way lies mediocrity.

Singapore is one of the world's great cities, and we should aspire to build an orchestra that music lovers from other great cities like New York, London, or Tokyo would fly huge distances to come and listen to. That, I think, is an achievable goal as we continue to build the SSO, and to position Singapore as an international centre for great music-making.

RECOMMENDATION 02:

Build a second full-size concert hall within the next decade

The SSO is the largest user of the Esplanade Concert Hall, but it still performs many concerts at the VCH, which even in 1980 was understood to be too small acoustically for a full symphony orchestra. The SSO's standards rose noticeably after the opening of the Esplanade in 2002 because the musicians were finally able to work in an acoustic environment which allowed them more latitude in expressive range, and to better hear and respond to each other.

In earlier years, the SSO kept to a routine of one iteration per Esplanade concert, except for occasional gala events; it was felt that audience numbers could not yet support repeat concerts. Today, with average attendance at 93% and many concerts selling out, the SSO needs to step up to doing two, if not more, iterations on a more regular basis. This is the norm for any major orchestra; many American orchestras play each programme up to four times, allowing continuing refinement of the ensemble across a run of concerts.

The good news is that there is now substantial demand for the Esplanade Concert Hall. Singapore's music ecosystem has grown, and the Esplanade curates a rich and diverse calendar of concerts and events. Unfortunately, this means that, even with the greatest goodwill, there probably will not be enough dates available for the SSO's programmes as its needs increase over the next decade.

The Esplanade was planned around 1996, when the population of Singapore was 3.67 million. We now have six million people. This increased density is part of the reason our halls are full, but it also provides grounds for optimism that demand for live music will be sufficiently robust to justify a second world-class concert hall.

RECOMMENDATION 03:

Dedicate Victoria Concert Hall as a forum for recitals, chamber and vocal music, prioritising excellence in its core offerings

I have not said much so far about the classical music ecosystem beyond the SSO, even though much of it is very dear to my heart. The reason is that I believe a strong core is necessary to energise the whole, and if we get that core right, the rest of the ecosystem will blossom. In the Singaporean concert calendar today, there is already a richness of content, of musical talent, and of artistic ambition that bodes well for the future. However, consistent funding support from the National Arts Council will continue to be critical to the growth of these young ensembles.

I believe we should re-imagine the VCH as a home for recitals and small-ensemble performances, prioritising excellence so that VCH develops a reputation similar to that of Wigmore Hall in London. A well-curated VCH calendar will provide a healthy counterpoint to the orchestral offerings in the symphonic halls, and can be a consistent, high-quality and well-equipped venue that serves a different but no less important segment of music lovers and music makers.

RECOMMENDATION 04:

Build quality performing spaces in heartland parks

Up to 10,000 visitors have thronged the Botanic Gardens to hear the SSO. There is clearly popular demand for such park concerts, but at present there are only two venues where outdoor concerts are presented with any frequency: the Botanic Gardens, and Gardens by the Bay.

It is time for us to create similar performing spaces in places such as Jurong, Bedok and Woodlands, with permanent sound systems and onstage climate control. This would bring the best of Singaporean music to the people, and create focal points for communities to come together. The SSO can play its part, but such spaces should also serve performing groups cutting across musical and ethnic genres, allowing for the curation of a diverse year-long season that resonates with all heartlanders. It would also allow performers to prepare one programme for presentation across multiple venues, magnifying the impact of their current efforts.

Concluding Thoughts

Three of my four recommendations for the classical music ecosystem focus on building or repurposing performance spaces. I put these thoughts forward to kindle a debate on

long-term structural needs, because I am fundamentally optimistic about the continuing growth in audience numbers. This is partly a consequence of escalating performance quality, which in turn partly builds on big structural and policy decisions made 25-30 years ago—such as to build the Esplanade, to set up a high-quality Conservatory, to actively build the public's appreciation of the arts. The number and quality of music-makers in Singapore has burgeoned as a consequence.

From the early history of the SSO, we can see that decisions were taken with the expectation that a better orchestra would catalyse performing standards, generate bigger audiences, and eventually justify investment in a better concert hall. Long-term consequences were kept clearly in mind, with unstinting focus on excellence as a guiding objective.

In focusing on hardware, I don't mean that things are perfect on the software side; indeed, there is potential for greater ambition to make Singapore a key hub in different musical genres. However, the quality and variety of ensembles and programmes that have emerged in the past decade give me much hope. I am also thrilled by the new chapter that will unfold at the SSO, with the appointment of Finnish conductor, Hannu Lintu, as Music Director for the 2026/2027 season.

In short, I believe that we stand at the cusp of a Golden Age for classical music in Singapore, if we keep our focus on nurturing excellence, and continue our heritage of building confidently for the future. □

About the Author

Goh Yew Lin has been engaged with Singapore's arts scene since 1980, when he landed a freelance role as music critic for *The Straits Times* a year after the formation of the Singapore Symphony Orchestra (SSO). He continued to contribute a classical music column till 1997. In 1990, he joined the board of the SSO, which he now chairs; he has also served two six-year terms on the National Arts Council. In 1994, he helped found the Singapore International Piano Festival, and was also the founding chairman of the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music. His business interests are completely unrelated to the arts, and he is currently chairman of Duke-NUS Medical School and a board member of the Agency for Science, Technology and Research.

Notes

1. The full speech can be accessed at https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/data/pdfdoc/lky19801001.pdf.

2. The full ranking is available at https://www.classical-music.com/articles/worlds-best-orchestras.

Bridging the Private and Public: A Journey of Patronage and Purpose

Rachel Teo

Co-founder, The Private Museum Singapore

In many cultures, private patronage is essential in enabling the production of art. Unconstrained by institutional regulations and responsibilities, private art patrons and collectors can pursue a range of considerations in their curatorial decisions and their support of artists—resulting in a plethora of diverse artistic expressions and under-represented voices residing within private collections that can often remain hidden from public view. Rachel Teo, co-founder of The Private Museum Singapore, explains how an arts space like hers makes previously inaccessible works available to the public and adds diversity, breadth and depth to a nation's cultural capital.

The Beginnings of The Private Museum (2010)

In 2010, The Private Museum (TPM) was founded by my father, Daniel Teo, and me with a mission: to encourage private art collectors to share their collections with the public. We wanted to create a space that fostered an art ecology grounded in patronage and which promoted art appreciation across wider communities. This foundation would allow us to be connected with our own history, culture, and heritage while encouraging others to engage in the experience. With this understanding, we set about planting the seeds for an institution that would contribute to Singapore's arts ecosystem.

The opportunity arose with a government tender for the use of 51 Waterloo Street—a compact, 1,400-square-foot space offered by the National Heritage Board (NHB) and the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) to encourage private arts initiatives. For collectors, this space would foster a deeper appreciation of how art spaces can connect people, ideas, and communities by offering exposure through exhibition-making. The space would also allow us to provide internships and job opportunities for the next generation of artists and art professionals who were being nurtured at institutions such as LASALLE College of the Arts, Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA), and School of the Arts Singapore (SOTA).

Building Foundations: Structure, Practice, and the Waterloo Years (2010–2021)

The establishment of TPM as a charity required structure, governance and the generosity of directors who were willing to give their time and advice pro-bono. As part of our governance, we ensured that over 50% of our board comprised non-family members to align with charity regulations and to embrace accountability. In 2015, we were accorded Institution of a Public Character (IPC) status, and, in 2020, we were invited by the National Heritage Board to be part of The Museum Roundtable. The latter was a pivotal milestone for TPM as it formalised our inclusion in a network of more than 50 museums and heritage galleries in Singapore.

"Private collectors can unlock hidden artistic voices, enriching a nation's cultural capital through diversity and access."

Over 50 exhibitions were presented at our Waterloo Street home from 2010 to 2021. This period was marked by experimentation, learning, and resilience. In the beginning, we were often misunderstood. Were we a gallery or a private collection on view? But we remained focused on our vision: to become a leading independent private museum.

We were fortunate to have had the guidance of Tan Hwee Koon, a seasoned curator formerly from the Singapore Art Museum. Her knowledge in museum practice was instrumental to our museum's foundation. We worked with professional art installers, conservators, and writers, treating every exhibition with the same rigour as a public museum would—through condition reports, art handling protocols, and catalogue publications.

I recall our very first collector exhibition with Alan Hodges in 2011, *To Add a Meter to an Unknown Mountain: An Iconic Collection of Contemporary Chinese Photography.* When I asked him why he collected art, he replied, "Art moves my soul." My response to him was simple: "Please help me move more souls." This remains at the heart of what we do at TPM. My father has always said that "art is medicine for the soul", and we hoped to create a space that offered just that—a quiet sanctuary where people could take a moment away from their busy lives to reflect and connect with art.

Another highlight during this period was our exhibition of works by Khoo Sui Hoe from the collection of Datuk Lim Chong Keat from Penang. One of the works, *Children of the Sun,* was eventually acquired by the National Gallery Singapore—an outcome that illustrates how private collections can meaningfully contribute to our shared heritage in Singapore and Southeast Asia.

We also marked significant milestones, such as an inaugural fundraising gala in 2018 to commemorate our 8th anniversary. What began as a celebration quickly evolved into a cornerstone of our sustainability strategy. Since then, we have had numerous fundraising campaigns, all going well beyond raising funds. They affirm our commitment to long-term partnerships, deepen our network of patrons and supporters, and reinforce our belief in the enduring value of TPM.

A New Chapter: Osborne House and Expanding Horizons (2023–2025)

In 2021, we closed the chapter at Waterloo Street and began preparing for something bigger. The road to this next phase was not without challenges, but was made possible by the tenacity and direction of our Associate Museum Director, Aaron Teo. He was instrumental in our expansion and move to Osborne House, a colonial-era building at 11 Upper Wilkie Road. Aaron helped to envision its potential as TPM's new home, together with my father and me. His efforts in working with stakeholders and key partners including Richard Hassel from WOHA were key to bringing our vision to life.

In 2023, TPM reopened in Osborne House, renewing its commitment to heritage, accessibility, and evolving the role of the museum in contemporary society. The move marked an expansion in vision, scale, and ambition. Our new space gave us the opportunity to dream larger and organise bigger exhibitions.

The first exhibition we presented was a large-scale survey exhibition of Kumari Nahappan, charting over 30 years of her interdisciplinary artistic practice. Since then, we have presented eight monumental exhibitions at our new home, engaging over 20,000 visitors. Among these was one of our most ambitious undertakings to date—*Chronic Compulsions*, a landmark group exhibition developed in collaboration with the collecting community, Art Addicts Anonymous. This exhibition brought together 15 private collectors in Singapore, each sharing deeply personal selections from their collections. It was a powerful reflection of our founding mission—to spotlight the role of collectors as cultural custodians and to build on a culture of patronage through public access and dialogue.

Private Sector Partnerships: A Catalyst for the Arts

TPM's work is underpinned by the belief that the private sector plays an essential role in shaping the future of the arts. From the beginning, we invited and collaborated with artists, collectors, architects, philanthropists, corporate sponsors, and members of the public to be meaningful partners in this journey.

Outside of exhibitions, TPM has also built a strong culture of patronage through sustained fundraising efforts. We have organised over 10 large-scale fundraising initiatives—from art gala dinners to charity golf tournaments—each designed not only to raise funds but also to cultivate a broader community of supporters. These events serve as critical platforms for engagement, allowing us to encourage communities to become active patrons.

Longstanding collaborations with design studios and logistics providers, as well as our cultural partners across Southeast Asia, have allowed us to deliver professional, thought-provoking experiences. Serendipitous opportunities and creative risks have afforded us the chance to grow TPM into an example of how the private sector can contribute meaningfully to cultural development.

Internationalisation and Public Engagement: The Role of the Independent Museum

Meaningful internationalisation goes beyond simply showcasing art; it is also about fostering relationships and positioning Singapore in a broader international conversation with artists, collectors and institutions. We have been fortunate in our internationalisation efforts, with the support of various grants and art agency partnerships. Future development will depend on continued support and commitments from both existing and new partners.

In 2015, we partnered with visual artist, Takuji Kogo, director for Kitakyushu Biennale in Japan, in presenting our first digital art exhibition. Through our second collaboration "Candy Factory Projects" in 2017, we brought in artists from beyond Singapore to engage with local audiences. With support from the Government of Western Australia, we hosted a collaboration between Australian artist Ian de Souza and Singaporean Andy Yang to present an exhibition exploring the fluid exchange between the cultural landscapes of Singapore and Australia. Another example of our internationalisation efforts was our presentation of Natee Utarit, a renowned contemporary Thai artist, whose exhibitions at TPM were supported by international collectors. These exhibitions were not only artistic showcases, but also opportunities to engage and educate local audiences through featured artist talks, docent-led tours (in collaboration with Friends of the Museum), fireside conversations, and workshops designed to foster community engagement.

Organising international art residency programmes with partners like Bali Purnati and Cemeti Art Space in Indonesia, for Singaporean artists like Han Sai Por, Hong Zhu An and Lim Tiong Gee, provided new experiences in immersive overseas environments. These artist-in-residence programmes resulted in new works which were exhibited at TPM, created important networks, and opened up fresh artistic dialogues across geographies.

One of our most memorable public initiatives involved specially curated bus tours that took audiences across the city to visit public sculptures by acclaimed Singaporean artist, the late Anthony Poon (1945–2006). Programmes like these take art beyond the walls of the museum and into the arenas of daily life, offering new ways to connect with Singapore's cultural landscape and encouraging audiences to engage with art in everyday spaces.

Our continued involvement with international art fairs such as ART SG and S.E.A. Focus remains an important element of TPM's internationalisation and public engagement efforts. Through their VIP programmes, we have raised our interaction with global patrons and art professionals, and increased awareness of our exhibitions. Such encounters with the international art community play an important role in cultivating long-term relationships and cross-border patronage.

Looking Ahead: Building for the Future

Patronage has always been integral to art history. For example, the masterpieces of the Renaissance

would not exist today without the church and wealthy supporters. Particularly with TPM, a charity-based organisation, patronage is an indispensable part of our future. But we aim to foster a broad-based rather than narrow patronage. We consider every visitor who walks through our doors a patron—everyone who lends their eyes, heart, and mind to engage with art, everyone who could potentially become a collector or a donor.

Government support has played, and will continue to play, an important role in sustaining our mission. The Cultural Matching Fund (CMF) and endorsements from the National Arts Council (NAC), in particular, have been instrumental in doubling the impact of private giving—reinforcing the importance of a shared responsibility between public and private sectors in nurturing the arts. Grants, both private and institutional, have enabled us to scale our programmes, deepen our research, and build long-term cultural value that benefits the wider community.

A perspective by Eric Crosby, an American museum director, is worth sharing: "To open our perspective, museums need to start acting less like local institutions with global aspirations and more like global institutions with local aspirations". For TPM, our global relevance—already evident in our showcasing of international art—will continue to be reflected in tandem with the growing collector base in Singapore. As this base grows, many will collect art pieces from both local and international artists. As a Singapore-based institution, remaining connected to our local audiences and our artists is vital for TPM as our job of curating collector shows in Singapore is central to our core programming.

A key challenge of having a museum in Singapore is the cost of real estate. This challenge is compounded by the short leases given by the Singapore Land Authority (SLA). Nevertheless, we remain focused on our vision for TPM to become a museum for all Singaporeans—one that reflects the richness of our local narratives, fosters a sense of belonging within the community, and invites all to share in the ownership of our cultural heritage as joint custodians for Singapore's growing legacy of arts and culture. □

About the Author

Rachel Teo is the co-founder of The Private Museum (TPM), which she established together with her father, Daniel Teo, in 2010. Envisioned to support art appreciation and patronage, TPM is a non-profit, private museum that aims to be an alternative platform bridging the gap between the private and the public, by connecting communities through art, culture, and heritage, actively engaging local, regional, and international audiences from all walks of life.

Deeply committed to supporting, advancing, and developing the arts, culture, and heritage ecosystems in Singapore, Rachel serves on the Board of leading Singaporean music charity The TENG Company, and was on the executive committee of the Art Galleries Association of Singapore from 2019 to 2022.

For her contributions, Rachel was recently awarded the Patron of the Arts award at Robb Report Singapore's Gala 2024, and the Friend of the Arts award at the National Art Council's Patron of the Arts Awards in 2023.

The Global Imperative to Articulate, Evaluate, and Implement the Arts and Culture as a Health Resource

Professor Nisha Sajnani, PhD

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A growing body of evidence shows that arts interventions promote and sustain health and wellbeing among individuals, encourage community cohesion, and have therapeutic effects in clinical treatment. Nisha Sajnani of the Jameel Arts & Health Lab calls for a holistic approach to healthcare worldwide, highlighting the need for policymakers to sustainably integrate the arts into national healthcare systems, and ensure their efforts are built on large-scale, inclusive research as well as systemic support in the form of professional training and funding.

Across continents, public health systems are burdened by rising rates of anxiety, depression, chronic illness, and loneliness. Singapore is no exception. In this context, the arts—long celebrated for their intrinsic value, as well as cultural and economic contributions—are increasingly recognised for a vital additional role: promoting and sustaining health and wellbeing. From dancing to improve symptoms of Parkinson's disease, to singing in choirs to support those with chronic lung disease, arts-based interventions are proving to be low-risk, non-invasive, cost-effective, and meaningful complements to traditional biomedical treatments. Yet while interest is growing, the health value of the arts is still inconsistently articulated, unevenly measured, and inadequately implemented. This essay argues for the global imperative to examine the public health value of the arts through robust evaluation, culturally grounded approaches, and sustained cross-sector collaboration and investment.

Towards a Holistic Understanding of Health

Over time, the concept of health has evolved beyond the mere absence of disease to reflect a more holistic understanding of human wellbeing. In 1948, the World Health Organization (WHO) articulated this shift by defining health as "a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity". Health today is seen as the ability to adapt, to find meaning, and to build resilience in the face of life's challenges. In this evolving vision, the arts have emerged as a resource that supports not only personal expression, but also connection, healing, and growth. Creative engagement offers people a way to express themselves, process emotions, and connect with others—a critical offering in an increasingly fast-paced, (mis)information-heavy and uncertain world. This recognition is leading to the integration of the arts into national and global health policy, and the incorporation of care and wellbeing in cultural agendas.

The term "Arts and Health" refers to an expanding ecosystem of practices that use arts, culture, and creative expression to support wellbeing across the lifecourse and in different settings. These can range from receptive arts engagement such as attending cultural events to active arts engagement such as participating in heritage crafts and interactive arts practices in schools, community, and cultural centres. It can also involve arts-based public health campaigns and residencies with artists and creative arts therapists employed in hospitals and clinics. This wide spectrum reveals how the arts operate

Figure 1. The making of "A Picture of Health@Bukit Batok" mural, co-created by Mural Lingo with residents of hospital-adopted rental housing block and staff of Ng Teng Fong General Hospital, as part of the hospital's Community Arts&Health programme, 2023. Image courtesy of Ng Teng Fong General Hospital.

across a continuum of wellness and care to support individual and community wellbeing.

The Value of the Arts Across the Lifecourse

Globally, the evidence base is growing. Reviews of international research, including a landmark report published by WHO and population health studies led by the WHO Collaborating Centre for Arts and Health at University College London, have shown the power of the arts to support healthy development in children and young people. For example, research from large cohort studies in the United Kingdom and the United States shows that children and adolescents who regularly engage in arts activities—like reading for pleasure, music, drama, or dance—tend to have fewer behavioural problems, including lower levels of hyperactivity, inattention, and antisocial behavior. Arts engagement was also linked to healthier behaviours, such as reduced substance use and better diet, though effects on physical activity and social support were less consistent. Among young adults, increases in arts participation were associated with greater flourishing over time, particularly in the strengthening of social wellbeing and a sense of community connection—an important protective factor known to buffer against mental health challenges and promote resilience across the lifespan.

For adults, recreational arts activities have been associated with higher life satisfaction and wellbeing. Large-scale studies in the UK have shown that both frequent arts participation (like making art or music) and cultural attendance (like going to concerts or museums) are linked to better mental health and life satisfaction in adults—even after accounting for demographic and health factors. Arts partici-

"Integrating the arts into healthcare can boost wellbeing, strengthen communities, and transform treatment—if supported by research, training, and funding."

pation, in particular, was associated with stronger coping skills for everyday mental health challenges, likely because it activates key emotional regulation strategies such as distraction, emotional processing, and self-esteem building. Researchers also found that both in-person and virtual arts activities, like choir singing, helped people regulate emotions—though in-person activities were slightly more effective. Importantly, people with depression benefited from arts engagement just as much as those without, helping explain why arts-based interventions can be effective for improving mental health.

Among older adults, arts participation is linked to cognitive stimulation, reduced depression, and even lower risk of dementia. For example, a recent study using data from the US Health and Retirement Study found that older adults who engaged in receptive arts activities at least once a month were more likely to experience healthier aging over the next four years. This included better mental and physical health, greater social connection, and lower risk of chronic conditions. These findings were consistent with those from the Busselton Healthy Ageing Study in Western Australia, which showed that older adults who regularly engaged in recreational arts activities such as attending or participating in visual arts, crafts, and music, or volunteering with arts organisations on average once per week reported significantly higher mental well-being scores compared to those who did not participate, even after controlling for factors like age, gender, education, income, and physical health. Finally, a study of over 1,000 adults aged 50+ in Singapore found that both attending and participating in arts activities were linked to better wellbeing. Those who attended arts events reported higher quality of life and a stronger sense of belonging, while active participants showed even greater benefits, including improved health, meaning, and spiritual wellbeing.

Together, findings from recent studies consistently show that both receptive and active participation in the arts are associated with better mental health, enhanced resilience, and stronger social ties—supporting the arts as a potential population-level strategy for healthy development and improved quality of life as we get older, provided opportunities are made accessible from birth to old age.

Advancing Research and Infrastructure for Creative Health

Despite the growing evidence, there are still significant challenges to integrating the arts into health systems. One of the main issues is the lack of consistent definitions. Terms like "arts," "culture,"

Figure 2. Residents from Villa Francis Home for the Aged participating in a creative movement pilot "Everyday Waltzes for Active Ageing", a collaboration between Agency for Integrated Care Pte Ltd and the National Arts Council, 2018. Image courtesy of Agency for Integrated Care Pte Ltd, Singapore.

"arts engagement," or "arts participation" can mean different things across studies, making it difficult to synthesise findings. Many studies also fail to recognise informal or culturally specific practices, leaving gaps in understanding and excluding valuable knowledge.

Methodologically, much of the research remains small-scale or cross-sectional. There is a need for more longitudinal studies, more randomised trials, and an appreciation for an unbiased and nuanced approach to understanding the sustained and specific effects of arts interventions. Moreover, the majority of research has focused on mental health and could be further expanded to examine the impact of the arts on chronic disease, rehabilitation, and prevention. Understanding how arts interventions actually work—their mechanisms of change—also remains under-explored. While people may feel better after participating in an arts activity, the pathways through which this occurs need greater clarity.

To evaluate the true value of arts interventions, we also need to expand capacity to make use of the tools that exist and develop better metrics. Quantitative measures—such as changes in health status, healthcare usage, or economic impact—are essential for identifying trends, demonstrating scale, and informing policy. However, they are insufficient on their own. Qualitative approaches like storytelling, journaling, and arts-based research methods can help capture the nuance, emotional depth, and contextual factors that shape lived experience. When combined, these approaches enable a more comprehensive understanding—where numbers offer rigour and reach, stories reveal meaning and perspective, and images, performances, and films capture attention, inspire imagination, and motivate action.

Equity is another key concern. Much of the existing research comes from high-income countries. Marginalised groups—including migrants, people with disabilities, and low-income communities—

Figure 3. Participants from SPD explore *Space Sculpture No. 1* by Tan Teng-Kee during a volunteer-led tour at National Gallery Singapore, 2023. Image courtesy of National Gallery Singapore, Community & Access.

are often under-represented. Culturally grounded, locally relevant, and co-produced approaches that include people with lived experience are needed to ensure the field is inclusive and globally applicable. The arts are rooted in cultural identity and tradition; failing to reflect this in research risks reinforcing inequality.

On a systemic level, implementation barriers remain significant. The arts are often siloed from health policy. There is a need for workforce training to equip artists and cultural leaders to understand and articulate their role as partners in public health. The pathways to professional recognition for trained arts facilitators and arts therapists are uneven, and a lack of funding to support arts and health programs make it harder to grow and sustain impactful programmes. Meanwhile, economic analyses show that the annual health savings and productivity gains from creative engagement are significant, with a recent report from the UK Department for Media, Culture, and Sport indicating the savings from increased productivity and reduced visits to general practitioners (GPs) to be an estimated £18 billion per annum, underscoring the potential return on investment.

The Cultural Future of Health

Despite these obstacles, momentum is building. Collaborations between cultural and health organisations are beginning to inform new policies and frameworks. Cities and countries are taking steps to embed the arts in public health strategies, recognising their role in prevention, care, and community resilience. For example, social prescribing—a model that connects individuals to non-clinical, community-based activities such as arts, cultural programmes, and nature-based

initiatives—has emerged as a critical tool for addressing social determinants of health, loneliness, mental health challenges, and social inclusion. It focuses on leveraging existing community resources to support recovery, reduce symptoms, and foster meaningful social connections. In Singapore, this approach is gaining momentum with the designation of SingHealth Community Hospitals as the world's first WHO Collaborating Centre for Social Prescribing. This milestone recognises the growing role of arts, culture, and nature in promoting overall health and wellbeing, particularly mental health, and reflects a broader commitment to integrating community engagement into the continuum of care.

Toolkits and resources are beginning to emerge, offering guidance on identifying, designing, implementing, and evaluating arts and health programmes. For example, the Arts and Health Singapore Repository actively documents the state of arts and health field in Singapore, and the Centre for Music and Health within the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music (YST) at the National University of Singapore (NUS) has been developing an Arts and Health Evaluation Toolkit (AHET) to provide practical frameworks and outcome-focused tools to help practitioners assess the impact of arts and cultural activities on health, wellbeing, and social connection.

To move forward, a globally coordinated approach is needed. A shared framework should promote consistent definitions, map current cultural assets and evidence, develop culturally responsive, validated, and standardised measures, and support interdisciplinary research and training. This includes public awareness campaigns that position the arts as a health behaviour, investment in professional development and post-graduate training for artists and health professionals including the creative arts therapies, and infrastructure that supports both artistic and scientific integrity. Importantly, it also means ensuring recognition, job security, and new employment opportunities in this emerging area of creative health where artists and creative arts therapists can pursue fairly compensated work in healthcare, education, and community settings, enabling the cultural sector to play a greater role in advancing public health.

The arts are not a luxury or an afterthought. They are how communities process change, express identity, and build connection. Around the world, people sing, draw, and dance not because they are told to—but because these acts help them heal, adapt, and thrive. The task before us is not to invent a new role for the arts in health, but to recognise and support what communities have always known: that creativity is essential to survival and flourishing. In an era marked by disconnection and digital acceleration, the arts offer something vital—presence, reflection, and humanity.

By bringing the arts into the centre of health policy and practice, we shift from intuition to evidence, from anecdote to infrastructure. We reimagine health not only through treatment, but also through meaning. Singapore, with its deep cultural diversity, growing leadership in arts and health, and strong systems for policy coordination, has the opportunity to be at the forefront of this movement—shaping a future where wellbeing is cultural, communal, and creative. □

About the Author

Professor Nisha Sajnani is Director of the NYU Steinhardt Graduate Program in Drama Therapy and Co-founding Co-Director of the Jameel Arts & Health Lab, established in partnership with the World Health Organization to measurably improve lives through the arts. Through the Lab, she consults with city and country governments, cultural institutions, and academic centres, to map and mobilise the arts as a health resource. Professor Sajnani has been published widely and leads the Jameel Arts & Health Lab–Lancet Global Series on the Health Benefits of the Arts, in collaboration with Dr. Nils Fietje at the WHO Regional Office for Europe. An award-winning author, educator, and advocate, her body of work explores the unique ways in which aesthetic experience can inspire equity and care in service of public and planetary health.

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Creativity as a Matter of Urgency

Lindsey McInerney

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Escalating capabilities and use of generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) across industries have sparked multiple debates worldwide, birthing questions from the ethical—What sort of governance should we apply to AI's use?—to the epistemological—How do we exercise control over our beliefs in an AI-filtered world? What are the roles of intention, meaning, subjectivity, and truth in this world?—to the ontological—What does it mean to be human? Certainly, when Descartes wrote "Cogito ergo sum" ("I think, therefore I am"), he had not considered algorithmic cognition. Joining this debate, tech futurist Lindsey McInerney shares valuable insights into AI's rapid permeation into most aspects of human life. She cautions that we must utilise AI with consciousness and intention, and constantly exercise our intellect, strategic thinking, imagination and creative muscle in order to retain—rather than outsource and lose—that which makes us most profoundly human.

Creativity is a deeply human thing. It is stimulated by our subjective and nuanced lived experiences, our ability to process and to feel emotion. Creativity comes to us in our dreams and heartaches; it lives in our imagination. It comes from our ability to bring together different parts of the human experience, wrestle with them, struggle—and turn them into something inspired. In art, we translate pain into beauty and find meaning where there was none before.

As the age of Artificial Intelligence (AI) comes rushing in, we are called to re-examine what it means to create and to be human. Critically, we need to ask how we will remain both creative *and* human, and not surrender the essence of what makes humanity special, even as we welcome AI agents into our lives. Nurturing creativity has never been more urgent.

I've spent my career looking deeply into technology. What has fascinated me most is technology's human impact. No matter how good things seem, humans always strive for better. We've built technology to support us in living consistently better lives. The leaps we've made since the internet became ubiquitous have been on a scale unimaginable, even 50 years ago. Since OpenAI launched ChatGPT in November 2022, the leaps have exponentially accelerated, ushering in a new era of technological growth.

So far, we've only seen the very beginning of how humanity will leverage AI. But the change it will bring is as incredible as it is inevitable. Many are in awe of how AI allows them to express themselves. Others are warning that over-reliance on AI will mark the end of creativity, or perhaps worse, usher in what some friends and I have been describing as an "era of average". In this scenario, the places we normally encounter creativity would become mundane, consisting almost exclusively of AI output. Life as a human would become uninspired.

While I do believe there is a risk of moving towards an era of average, I'm also excited about how AI can enhance our ability to create if we find ways to use it both consciously and intentionally. Creatives have already begun to blend this technology into their work. In many ways, AI has the potential to democratise creativity, liberating big ideas from minds that don't have the ability to take them much

"We must use AI consciously—keeping our intellect, creativity, and imagination active—so we don't lose what makes us most human."

further than thought. Getting things right might even permit us to be our creative selves more regularly: relieving us of mundane tasks, allowing us to reallocate that time to the things we love, create more, dream more, and spend more time in the liminal space that allows us to be inspired. This optimism doesn't come without consideration for potential downsides, however. Governments and governing bodies, parents and teachers, indeed all of us will have to consider how to most purposefully use this technology, to ensure that we bend the arc of AI towards good.

So much of this new technology has delighted us. It feels creative and novel. What is less predictable is how the use of AI will affect humans and our creative minds in the long term. We've been here before. When social and digital media was put in the hands of the masses via mobile phones, we were so excited about the ability to connect with one another that few of us paused to consider the possible downsides. Since then, we've learned that these beautiful apps, which have no doubt done much good, also came with dire consequences for many. The mental health of young people has never been worse, with studies showing a direct link to social media use. This doesn't even speak to some of the other challenges social media has introduced, like misinformation and polarisation, or the decline in real world connection. And yet AI is not going away, and it would be a disservice to humanity to not find ways to leverage what could well be the most powerful tool of our time.

Liberating Ideas, Birthing More Creativity

Some of the world's most creative, living voices haven't been heard yet. Big ideas, bold thinking, and innovative concepts are stuck inside brilliant minds and imaginations. Why? Because despite having a big idea, many people lack the skillset or knowledge to bring it to life. AI promises to change this. There simply has never been a faster way to turn an idea from thought to reality. AI has opened up a world where natural language prompts—common human language—can become a moving picture, an image, or even code. People with no experience building software can launch anything they can dream up and describe, shifting the question from "who will build it", to "who will imagine it", and "who will have the language to prompt it". If you can articulate your concept to a large language model (LLM), it can deliver a working prototype with a codebase almost instantly. If you can describe what's in

your mind's eye to an AI platform, it will convert your words into a drawing or even a presentation deck right away, allowing people to express themselves where they previously couldn't.

But with this simple "creative power" comes a risk: the slow erosion of our imaginative muscles. When anything can be generated instantly, we may stop struggling, sketching, tinkering or wrestling with ideas ourselves. And with that ease, we risk outsourcing the very process that makes us uniquely human: the messy, magical act of figuring things out. Over time, this might lead us to lose our ability to have big, bold, creative ideas at all.

I've felt this first hand as I adopted other technologies. In 2003, I found myself in Paris for the first time. Smart phones didn't exist. The internet was still in its relative infancy. If I wanted to write emails to my family members with email addresses back home, I needed to find one of the internet cafes scattered throughout the city. For a few Euros, I'd buy an internet connection by the minute—it was expensive! Yet within a few days, I could navigate the city with ease, without the technologies we enjoy so much today. I quickly built a mental map, orienting myself by the Eiffel Tower, the Seine, Notre Dame, and Sacré-Cœur. I never felt lost.

Fast forward to today. For over a decade, my smartphone and apps like Google Maps, City Mapper and Waze have been my navigational crutches. Despite living in the UK for nearly 12 years, I rarely drive anywhere without Waze guiding me. When it comes to getting to places and mapping out cities, I just don't have the topographical mapping command that I once did. That part of my brain, the one that builds mental maps, has atrophied. My sense of direction has faded. Not because I lost the capacity, but because I stopped using it.

We risk the same thing happening with creativity. If we default to AI for every blank page, every new concept, every first draft, we risk losing the subtle internal signals that guide and shape our originality. Just because AI *can* help us express ourselves, doesn't mean we *should* skip the generative tension that gives rise to great ideas. The danger is not in using the tool, but in forgetting how to use ourselves.

Exercising our Creative Muscles

Because AI will be so ubiquitous and accessible, we will need to model elite athletes in the way we stay disciplined in training our own thinking. It's always easier to sit on the couch and turn on the TV than to get out and run, train, or push weights. But when an athlete steps on the court in a competitive arena, they can't fake it. They've either done the reps and built the competitive muscle, or they haven't. Not too long from now, in moments when we need to be creative, we'll have either done the reps and built the capability or we'll be outpaced by someone who did. If we've leaned too heavily on AI and lost those muscles, we just won't be able to win creative games.

This extends to how we hire and nurture creative talent. We are already seeing creative

jobs in marketing and advertising being heavily augmented, if not completed entirely, by AI. The speed at which an LLM can create decent copy or a weird and maybe viral advertisement—think of the Kalshi AI generated ad that launched during the NBA finals in North America—is not only impressive but, in many cases, more than good enough, given the cost. The Kalshi ad cost just US$2,000. But the actual cost, if we begin to rely on AI too heavily, far exceeds potential and inevitable job loss. The cost will be our ability to think and create as humans. It will be the death of the brain trust inside our companies. Many businesses may find that in 10 years, they simply won't have much internal thinking capacity at all.

It takes years for senior creatives to gain the muscle required for bold, creative work. Companies that rely too much on AI to replace junior creative roles won't have senior, dynamic thinking talent in the future. We can't afford to make the mistake of rushing to an AI future without being disciplined in continuing to train human ingenuity and the mental muscles behind it. A balance must be struck. And while it will be tempting to use AI for tasks that used to be completed by junior talent, the future won't be so bright when young minds haven't been given the opportunity to be big thinkers earlier in their careers.

Each of us is now more responsible than ever for our own learning. A recent MIT study made this clear. Students who used ChatGPT to write SAT -style essays showed lower neural engagement and weaker critical thinking skills than those using Google or no tools at all. When we use AI to think for us, our brains eventually check out. Tools like ChatGPT, Claude and Gemini can write, brainstorm, even reason. But if we let them do all the thinking or all the creating, our own skills will atrophy. In this new era, owning your learning, sharpening your judgement, and staying intellectually engaged isn't optional. It's essential.

It's important that we begin thinking right now about which parts of our brains we are willing to outsource to AI, which cognitive muscles we might be okay to allow to relax. Equally, we should be carefully thinking about which ones we want to keep sharp. Our ability to dream, imagine, create and be inspired should not be on the table. Creative and strategic thinking are fundamental to who we are as human beings. They are things we want to stay sharp at, even as AI becomes a bigger part of our lives.

So how should creatives use AI? While it might sound like I'm ringing alarm bells, and dissuading the use of AI, that couldn't be further from the truth. In fact, when I teach my university course "The Future of the Internet", I encourage my students to use AI in every lecture, and on every assignment. *How* they use it is key. Fundamentally, they continue to flex their cognitive muscles. Every interaction with an AI model is thoughtful and intentional. Like my students, we can't seek easy answers.

Collaboration, Iteration, and Speed

Many of us spend time creating in vacuums. For whatever reason, we don't have consistent partnerships that help to drive us. And yet often the best creative breakthroughs don't

happen in isolation. They happen in conversation, in tension, in collaboration. Take one of my favourite bands for example, The Beatles. As individuals, John Lennon and Paul McCartney were (are) brilliant. But together, they were generative. They pushed each other in directions they would likely have never gone alone. Their contrasts made their music textured and daring. McCartney's polish refined Lennon's rawness. McCartney's meticulousness tempered Lennon's chaos. Later in their careers, when the two were known to write more separately, knowing that the other would hear, tweak, or challenge their work raised the creative bar. There are many similar stories where creative partners drive new outcomes, entirely different from what individuals can do alone.

This dynamic is mirrored in how many artists and creatives are already working with AI. Not in replacing themselves or outsourcing their imagination, but augmenting and challenging it. AI is becoming a creative sparring partner, a mirror, and even a mild antagonist. When worked with thoughtfully, AI becomes less like a ghostwriter, and more like sitting down with a co-conspirator who has infinite patience, a large memory, and zero ego. It can be used to iterate quickly, test alternate perspectives, remix influences, and break out of creative ruts. It can be like having a partner on call to throw creative juice into a room when things go quiet—a source of infinite "what ifs". It's a great feedback loop when you're feeling stuck. It collapses the time between inspiration and execution, making the early, murky phases of creative development in many ways faster, freer and more experimental. Such a world, where more of us have creative partnership, feels special.

Eliminating the Mundane, Carving Out Creative Space

A world where more of us have time to create feels even more special. And yet all of us spend time on mundane and boring tasks. Spreadsheets, billing, email, managing content, formatting, organising, fact-gathering, researching, scheduling. These things take time; they take brain power and mind muscle that we need not give away. Instead, we could spend more time engaging with other humans or on creative work itself. Equally, gaining early feedback, notes for improvement, or alternate perspectives on what we've created to eliminate our own bias and help us deliver better first drafts might help us push our work further and faster, making us better creators overall.

The Road Ahead

Multiple commentators are predicting that many of today's jobs will soon disappear. The main casualties? Knowledge workers. One of society's key challenges is how quickly this will happen—think the next five years, not even the next decade. This is an incredibly compressed amount of time to adapt. While much of what is to come simply can't be predicted given how unprecedented this technology is and how quickly it is developing, one thing is clear to me. We absolutely must lean in to the best of what

makes us human. Dreaming, Imagination, Inspiration, and Creativity must be pursued at all costs. Ecosystems like Singapore, with significant technological penetration, coordinated policy approaches for the arts and innovation, and its confluence of cultures and creative genres, will offer early signs of how to do this. But ultimately, it will be a challenge for us all.

> "Logic will get you from A to B, imagination will take you everywhere."
>
> - Einstein □

About the Author

Lindsey McInerney is a globally recognised advisor, operator, and keynote speaker, focused on the future of business, technology, and culture.

As the former Global Head of Technology & Innovation at AB InBev, the world's largest brewer, Lindsey led enterprise-scale digital transformation and launched one of the company's most widely recognised brand activations in immersive digital spaces. She has since co-founded two companies, raised $9M in funding, and advised a wide spectrum of clients including global brands, public figures, and C-suite leaders.

She serves as Scholar-in-Residence at McMaster University, where she lectures on the future of the internet, and works privately with a select group of leaders, helping them navigate change and define what's next. Her TEDx talk on "The Return to the Humanities in the Age of AI" has been widely shared, and her work has been featured in *Forbes, Adweek, Vogue Business, CoinDesk*, and more. In 2023, she was named to the Thinkers50 Radar List of global business thinkers shaping the future.

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