

From Product to Process: Community Heritage-Making in Singapore

Associate Professor Hamzah Bin Muzaini

Department of Southeast Asian Studies, National University of Singapore

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 South-east 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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