



Cultural Studies in Singapore Virtual Conference

Is there such a thing as Cultural Studies in Singapore? How is culture imagined in Singapore? What is cultural research and what are the cultural questions that occupy the ways Singapore, in its various levels as city, community, country, articulates its culture? The Cultural Studies in Singapore Virtual Conference will attempt to identify and address these questions and provocations surrounding the conditions of culture in Singapore.

The virtual conference will be part of the larger Inter-Asia Cultural Studies Society Conference and will include online live and asynchronous pre-recorded presentations.

Date: Tuesday, 27 July 2021

Time (SGT)	Online Live Event
09:00 – 09:30	Welcome Address 1. Prof Audrey Yue, National University of Singapore 2. Prof Chua Beng Huat, National University of Singapore
09:30 – 11:00	Opening Roundtable 1. Assoc Prof Lilian Chee, National University of Singapore 2. Assoc Prof Kamaludeen Mohamed Nasir, Nanyang Technological University 3. Prof Kwok Kian Woon, Nanyang Technological University
11:00 – 11:50	Live Q&A 1. Producing Disability Culture(s) in Singapore 2. Intersections of Race in Singapore 3. Media, Art and Popular Culture: Value, Taste, Flows
12:00 – 14:00	Lunch
14:00 – 16:00	Panel: Culture and the Making of Space(s) 1. Chair: Prof C.J. Wan-ling Wee, Nanyang Technological University 2. Mr Kok Heng Leun, Artistic Director of Dramabox 3. Ms Sim Chi Yin, Nobel Peace Prize photographer 4. Ms Nabilah Said, playwright and editor of ArtsEquator 5. Asst Prof Charmaine Chua, University of California, Santa Barbara
17:00 – 19:00	Panel: Sustainable & Adaptable Culture 1. Chair: Assoc Prof Daniel P.S. Goh, National University of Singapore 2. Asst Prof Anthony D Medrano, Yale-NUS College 3. Ms Yvonne Tham, CEO of Esplanade 4. Ms Zen Teh, artist and art researcher 5. Asst Prof Hong Renyi, NUS 2021 William Lim Siew Wai Internal Fellow

Access to the virtual website will open on 17 July 2021, such that registrants can watch pre-recorded paper presentations before the Live Q&A session. All other plenaries and addresses will be livestreamed.

To register, please click [here](#). This *free* registration is if you wish to attend the Cultural Studies in Singapore Conference **only**. For more information on the Inter-Asia Cultural Studies Society Conference 2021, including its separate registration process, please click [here](#).

Welcome Address**09:00-9:15**

The Welcome Address discusses the history of the emergence and institutionalization of cultural studies in Singapore.

Audrey Yue, National University of Singapore

Audrey Yue is Professor and Head of the Department of Communications and New Media, Convenor of the Cultural Studies in Asia PhD Programme, and Deputy Director of the NUS Centre for Trusted Internet and Community at the National University of Singapore. Her research covers cultural policy and development, urban communication and queer Asian studies. She started the Cultural Research Centre as part of her start-up grant at NUS where she is currently completing funded research on the cultural impact of COVID-19, foundations of home-based work and digital intimacy.

**Chua Beng Huat**, National University of Singapore

Chua Beng Huat is concurrently Professor in Urban Studies Program, Yale-NUS College and in Department of Sociology, National University of Singapore. He is co-executive editor of *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* journal.

Opening Roundtable**09:15-11:00**

The Opening Roundtable discusses the variegated rigour of studying culture within the different fields, conjectures and materialities in and around Singapore.

Architecture, Affect and Infrastructure*Lilian Chee, National University of Singapore*

The attunement to affect – how we affect and are affected – challenges the normative epistemology of architectural knowledge, the latter intrinsically derived from, rooted in, and protected by, conventions of the discipline. This paper argues that particularly in situations where the body is depoliticized, reading architecture through affect is tactical. Architectural discourse latched onto the affective encounter takes risk; it looks and reads different, being shaped by proximities, instinct and conjectures. To this end, the paper will discuss the infrastructure and cultures of housing through the lenses of affect.



Lilian Chee is Associate Professor at the Department of Architecture, NUS, where she co-leads the Research by Design Cluster. Her work connects embodied experience and affective evidence, with architectural representation. Her award-winning film collaboration *03-FLATS* (2014) has been screened in 16 major cities. Her current book projects are *Architecture and Affect* (Routledge), *Remote Practices* (Lund Humphries) and *Art in Public Space* (URA, Singapore).

Finding Religion in Hip-Hop Culture*Kamaludeen Mohamed Nasir, Nanyang Technological University*

The talk will focus on the intersections between religion and popular culture and the adjacent disciplines of sociology and ethnomusicology. I will use my latest book on young Muslims and hip-hop culture, which took on a global perspective, to discuss themes surrounding authenticity, human rights and state management. Hence, the talk will inevitably be comparative in nature but giving particular attention to the evolving Southeast Asian and local landscape.



Kamaludeen is an Associate Professor of Sociology and the Associate Chair for Graduate Studies at the School of Social Sciences, Nanyang Technological University Singapore. He is the author of six books including *Digital Culture and Religion in Asia* (with Sam Han, 2016), *Globalized Muslim Youth in the Asia Pacific: Popular Culture in Singapore and Sydney* (2016) and *Representing Islam: Hip-Hop of the September 11 Generation* (2020). His seventh book, which is being published this fall, is called *The Primordial Modernity of Malay Nationality: Contemporary Identity in Malaysia and Singapore* (with Humairah Zainal, forthcoming).

Thoughts on “Culture” in the Time of Covid-19*Kwok Kian Woon, Nanyang Technological University*

“Then came the virus, then came the vaccines, then came the variants...” This could be part of a narrative of the Covid-19 pandemic when it is recalled in living memory. In the face of a virus that caused devastation and death across the world, the role of Science has come into the fore. Yet “culture” matters at every turn – in terms of everyday practices and social relations, all of which have been upended. As “essential workers” play indispensable roles in the frontlines, what can we say about the place of “cultural work” and the role of “cultural workers”?



Kwok Kian Woon is Professor of Sociology at the Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, where he has served as a founding member of the School of Humanities and Social Sciences, and the first Head of Sociology, Senate Chair, Associate Provost of Student Life, and Associate Vice President (Wellbeing). His research areas include the study of social memory, mental health, the Chinese overseas, and Asian modernity. He has been actively involved in civil society and the public sector, especially in the arts and heritage.

Chair:

Audrey Yue

Audrey Yue, National University of Singapore

Audrey Yue is Professor and Head of the Department of Communications and New Media, Convenor of the Cultural Studies in Asia PhD Programme, and Deputy Director of the NUS Centre for Trusted Internet and Community at the National University of Singapore. Her research covers cultural policy and development, urban communication and queer Asian studies. She started the Cultural Research Centre as part of her start-up grant at NUS where she is currently completing funded research on the cultural impact of COVID-19, foundations of home-based work and digital intimacy.

Plenary: Culture and the Making of Space(s)**14:00-16:00**

The Questions of “space” have come to the forefront of cultural work – not just physical space but that of voice, imagination, and discourse, are all shaped by power, negotiation, and contestation. Differences in agenda among cultural workers and policy makers, artists and planners, play out in the public domain. Even within the culture of the everyday, the sensorial experience of space is changing as Singaporeans adjust to the new normal of a post-Covid environment, bringing with it dimensions of class, precarity and vulnerability. How then do we make, keep, and share the physical and imagined cultural spaces – and spatial cultures – of Singapore?

Singapore in the Global Logistical Imaginary*Charmaine Chua, University of California, Santa Barbara*

From its founding raison d'être as a colonial entrepôt to its contemporary position as a global logistics hub, the Singaporean state has long imagined its future and its cultural and economic centrality in terms of its global connectivity. This talk traces a brief cultural and economic history of Singapore in the global logistical imaginary, thinking through the displacements, dispossessions, and denials entailed in its making.



Charmaine Chua is Assistant Professor of Global Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara. A scholar of political economy, she is working on a book about the rise of logistics as a counterrevolutionary project. Her work has been published in venues including *Theory & Event*, *Environment and Planning D*, *Historical Materialism*, *Jacobin Magazine*, and the *Boston Review*. Find her on Twitter @charmaineschua.

In the Open, At the Margin*Kok Heng Leun, Drama Box*

This is a look at the tensions produced and encountered when creating dialogic experiences on marginal issues in public spaces. How do we, as actors in society, create and open space, and also a safe space, for conversation and interaction?



Kok Heng Leun is the Artistic Director of Singaporean theatre company Drama Box, and a prominent figure in both the English and Chinese-language theatres in Singapore. Thus far, he has directed over 80 plays. He is one of the most important theatre practitioners in Singapore advocating applied and engaged arts. In recent years, he has also ventured into multi-disciplinary applied and engaged arts projects such as *Project Mending Sky* which deals with environmental issues and *PRISM* which looks at issues of governance in Singapore and in recent years, *Both Sides, Now*, a long-going socially engaged art projects (now in its 4th year) using theatre and arts installation, involving healthcare sector and community, to explore what it means to live and die well.

Space: The Final Frontier for Singapore Arts and Culture

Nabilah Said, *ArtsEquator*

How do we make space for cultural work in Singapore amidst issues of sustainability, trust and autonomy? The loss of physical spaces is perennial yet urgent, while the pandemic has forced us to rethink how we make work and build communities. What are the gaps to unlocking a desired state of the arts and culture in Singapore, and what can those invested in a better future do to bridge these gaps and manifest these imaginings?



Nabilah Said is a playwright, arts critic and the editor of Southeast Asian arts website, ArtsEquator.com. She has dedicated her professional life to communicating about the arts and culture in Singapore, and was formerly an arts correspondent with The Straits Times. Her play *ANGKAT: A Definitive, Alternative, Reclaimed Narrative of a Native* (2019) won three Life Theatre Awards including Best Original Script. *Inside Voices* (2019) won the award for Outstanding New Work at London's VAULT Festival, and was published by Nick Hern Books UK. She is also an educator and a frequent public speaker and moderator. nabilahsaid.com

Art, Social Space and Public Discourse: The Bogeyman of Communism

Sim Chi Yin, *Artist*

In the heart of Kuala Lumpur, five soldiers with rifles stand triumphantly on a pile of other soldiers with red starred berets. In Singapore, across from the neo-classical facade of the Victoria Concert Hall, is a plaque memorialising the “fight for a democratic non-Communist Singapore”. These national monuments cast the post-colonial states’ narratives on the Malayan Emergency in stone — or bronze. But over the past decade, there have been multiple works made by Singaporean and Malaysian artists that complicate, challenge and contest those narratives of the state’s quashing of leftists. These range from Tan Pin Pin’s film *To Singapore With Love*, theatre maker Mark Teh’s *Baling*, Ho Tzu Nyen’s performance piece *The Mysterious Lai Teck* and filmmaker Amir Muhammad’s *Lelaki Komunis Terakhir* (*The Last Communist*) to my own books and photographic and filmic installations (*One Day We’ll Understand*, 2015-ongoing). Taken together, these can be seen as attempts to unsettle the public memory of the Malayan Emergency and leftist movements that preceded or followed. This paper will consider whether art does create space in public discourse where the civil society and political spheres are too suffocating — and ask what, if any, impact art can have on public memory.



Sim Chi Yin is an artist from Singapore whose research-based practice includes photography, moving image, archival interventions and text-based performance, and focuses on history, conflict, and memory. Chi Yin is represented by Zilberman Gallery in Berlin and Hanart TZ Gallery in Hong Kong. She joined Magnum Photos as a nominee member in 2018 and is currently also doing a visual practice-based PhD at King’s College London.

Chair:

C. J. W.-L. Wee



C. J. W.-L. Wee, Nanyang Technological University

C. J. W.-L. Wee is Professor of English at the Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. He was recently a Luce East Asia Fellow at the National Humanities Center in the USA. Wee is the author of *The Asian Modern: Culture, Capitalist Development, Singapore* (2007) and the editor of *The Complete Works of Kuo Pao Kun, vol. 4: Plays in English* (2012), among other work. His present research interest is in cultural production - mainly the curation of exhibitions of modern and contemporary Asian art and inter-Asian popular culture from the 1990s - and its link with rapid economic growth.

Plenary: Sustainable & Adaptable Culture**17:00-19:00**

Within the age of global crises represented by both the pandemic and climate change, the role of science has taken on increasing importance. What is the relationship between science and “culture” in confronting the urgent challenges of the Anthropocene? More than just raising issues of environmental degradation through specific artworks, the cultural sphere in Singapore must develop a sustainable model that aligns with both physical and digital realities. The logics of “resilience” are frequently deployed in narratives of struggle and overcoming, but – alongside that – a discourse of agency, creativity and adaptation must be re-instated and re-inscribed in practices and policies. What does it mean to talk about the arts and culture within the context of sustainability?

Sustainability and the role of Cultural Institutions*Yvonne Tham, Esplanade*

Yvonne will share how Esplanade has approached the issue of sustainability from the perspective of its various roles as an arts centre, an “iconic” public space, and ultimately, as a cultural institution. She will provide examples of how the issue of sustainability has shaped the evolution of its public spaces, its programmes, its relationships with different communities, and ultimately the governance and management of its building, people and financial resources.



Yvonne Tham is the CEO of Esplanade where she is responsible for the overall management and programming direction of Esplanade, as a performing arts centre for everyone. Prior to Esplanade, Yvonne was the Deputy CEO at Singapore's National Arts Council and the Director of Arts and Heritage Division at the then-Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts. From 2002 – 2009, she was involved in the development of policies such as the Renaissance City plans, as well as the setting up of the pre-tertiary School of the Arts, the Design Singapore Council, and the National Gallery. Yvonne had brief stints at the Ministry of Manpower in the area of labour relations and welfare, and taught literature in a Junior College. She has a BA and MPhil in literature from the University of Cambridge, and an MA in Art Business degree with the Sotheby's Institute.

Art Practice as a Living Inquiry*Zen Teh, Environmental Artist and Educator*

The pandemic has caused massive disruptions to our way of life, shedding light on the impact of human action on the environment. In the face of changes, we seek to understand, to make sense of these conditions. Art as a living inquiry explore our daily experiences with reflexivity, shaping our understanding, identity and relationship with the larger environment continuously. It allows us to relate to issues experientially and emotionally, thus understanding ideas in an embodied way. Environmental artist and educator, Zen Teh, shares with us how her art practice, grounded on observation and interdisciplinarity is used as a means of reflexivity, to evoke questioning of existing conditions within oneself and collectively as fellow humans.



Zen Teh is an artist and educator interested in interdisciplinary studies of nature and human behaviour. Her art practice spans across photography, sculpture and installation art. Her works were showcased in numerous group and solo exhibitions in Singapore, Thailand, Indonesia, Korea, Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong and China, and was invited as a guest speaker at regional environmental conferences such as ASEAN Powershift 2015 and Hanoi Innovation Week 2016. Teh has also been recently awarded the winning title for the 7th France+Singapore Photographic Arts Award and Finalist (Artist) for 2019 IMPART Awards and 2021 Julius Baer Next Generation Art Prize on sustainability.

The Botanical Turn: Rethinking Singapore in the Age of Plant Humanities

Anthony D Medrano, Yale-NUS College

From clearing forests to populating plantations, the world of botany has shaped the story of Singapore. But looking at the interaction between plants and cultures offers scholars something far more than just a retelling of environmental crises and anthropogenic changes. It opens up a new archive for rethinking Singapore in the age of plant humanities. Through the life and work of Juraimi bin Samsuri (b.1923-1971), the longtime artist at the Singapore Botanic Gardens, this presentation charts how the world of botany brings together not only conversations about science, culture, and art, but also threads of agency, creativity, and sustainability that speak to the promise of plant humanities for the field of cultural studies in Singapore.



Anthony D. Medrano is the National University of Singapore (NUS) Presidential Young Professor of Environmental Studies at Yale-NUS College. He's also a research associate in the Inter-Asia Engagements Cluster at the Asia Research Institute and the lead PI of the SSRC-funded project titled "Linking the Digital Humanities to Biodiversity History in Singapore and Southeast Asia." His teaching and scholarship examine the interplay between economic life and environmental change in the history of Southeast Asia. He's the author of "The Edible Tide: How Migrants and Estuaries Transformed the Straits of Melaka, 1870s-1940s," which was recently published in the *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* (2020).

From Road Warriors to Digital Nomads: The Politics of Adaptation and Remote Productivity

Hong Renyi, National University of Singapore

The term "adaptation" has taken on cultural prominence in the last few decades, motivated by economic disruption, environmental catastrophes, and the COVID-19 pandemic. By and large, adaptation is understood here as a positive trait, a means of yielding anticipative self-transformation that could lead to more sustainable lives. My presentation complicates this account by considering the uneven ways that adaptation is made available to populations. Charting the history of portable computers from the motifs of the "road warrior" to the "digital nomad," I illustrate how mobile productivity has engineered a world that buffers privileged subjects against conditions of existential insecurity.



Renyi Hong is Assistant Professor in Department of Communications and New Media at the National University of Singapore. He is interested in labor and its relationships with affect, technology, and capitalism. His first monograph, *Passionate Work* explores the uses of passion as a means of generating a milieu of endurance for those left out of the good life. His monograph in development, *Bearable Media*, examines the biopolitical relationship between human adaptation and computational media. His works can be found in *New Media & Society*, *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, *tripleC* and the *International Journal of Communication*, among others.

Chair:

Daniel P.S. Goh



Daniel P.S. Goh, National University of Singapore

Daniel P.S. Goh is Associate Professor at the Department of Sociology, National University of Singapore. He specializes in comparative-historical sociology and studies state formation, race and multiculturalism, urban politics and religion. He was formerly the convenor of the Cultural Studies in Asia PhD programme. His publications can be found at www.danielpsgoh.com.