SINGAPORE HISTORY THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS: REFLECTIONS ON MUSEUMS, MEMORY, HISTORY AND THE ARTS

James Francis Warren

Introduction

I would like to begin by thanking Lee Chor Lin, Director of the National Museum of Singapore and her staff, and Professor Anthony Reid, Director of the Asia Research Institute, for the opportunity to share my thoughts with you about my encounter with Singapore, the number of truly remarkable Singaporean people with whom I have come into contact because of my work, and about memory, museums, history and society.

Speaking about practising history and writing it is both a privilege and a gift. It is through speech and words that historians communicate with one another and the wider public, both inside and outside of the Academy.

As early as 1970, David Fischer, in his path-breaking polemical book, *Historians' Fallacies*, provided a thoroughgoing reappraisal of the whole idea of history, its purpose, and the techniques of writing history.¹ Fischer focused particularly on how historians mounted arguments and either used or abused evidence that related to their projects, and few were spared his sharp wit and incisive critical thought, whether they were of the theoretically informed historical analysis-type or of the narrative-story-telling persuasion. He started the book from the premise that historians generally have had a pathological disinclination to want to talk about the relationship between their life and work, and the source of their ideas and methods.

Taking up Fischer’s challenge, my address this morning deals in part with the experience of nearly 30 years spent on and off in Singapore—a nation profoundly different in certain respects from my own adopted country, Australia, during a period of remarkable economic change and global transformation. Rather than attempting to cover the whole period, I

wish to devote more space to a number of visits to Singapore, particularly in 1978, 1986, 1995 and 2002 as well as a singular childhood experience and memory.

I first came to Singapore in 1978 and subsequently made six more foundation trips in relation to the research for *Rickshaw Coolie*. During these visits I became friends with many Singaporean intellectuals and was able to observe academic life in Singapore in the final quarter of the twentieth century. I saw my friends in seminars, in the Archives and coffee shops, in their homes and in restaurants and at hawker stalls, in the city and the university, at work and play. Interestingly, however, after the publication of *Rickshaw Coolie* in 1986, my historical research and personal encounters led me to spend a good deal of time with playwrights, artistic directors, public intellectuals and artists, as well as university colleagues and their students.²

My reflections this morning are based on field notes, correspondence and personal recollections. I especially want to discuss particular artists and intellectuals and their disciples, some of whom I watched develop from youth to mature scholars of international repute, at the same time that I saw Singapore transformed from abject post-war colonial neglect to the state of economic pre-eminence it now holds in the region and the world.

**A historian’s voice**

During this crucial period of rapid transition and transformation, the nature of my own archival research and fieldwork on social history, my frequent visits and my travels within Singapore gave me an opportunity to see well beyond the confines of the archive, classroom and my office.

Reflecting the changing trends and practices of the spirit of 1960s social history—pre-eminently concerned with resurrecting and celebrating experience but not necessarily at the expense of analysis³—I my work on Singapore highlighted the gradual shift in orientation from political, military

and diplomatic history to social history. I also painfully observed how this work produced tensions among some Singaporean historians who lived through the 1980s—issues that were of great interest both for students of the history of Singapore and for anyone interested in the spread of the influence of social history and public history. It is a serious business to keep disturbing others, to shatter old truths, to dispel cherished myths, to bring people out of the shadows, to make them seek some courage to live and act, and to highlight injustice and prejudice. Neither the historian nor the audience has the right to be silent, but speaking and writing are serious matters and we must weigh our words carefully in the sight of one another.

Ludmilla Jordanova notes in her brave and exciting book, History in Practice, that the moral commitments of historians and the nature of their human values need to be made explicit, whenever possible. In her deeply reflective work, Jordanova stresses that historians, precisely because of their professional obligations, must be able to explain to the public and in a more open manner the processes through which their historical research and judgments are reached.4

Let me continue by asking a very basic question posed by the work of Jean Chesneaux, about the purpose of historical speech and writing. He asks, ‘Is history a “discipline” with no other purpose than to make academic reputations for skill in research and art in popularisation?’ Or is it a tool for a certain self-awareness, enlightening the oppressed and opening the future?5 The former well-known figure at the Sorbonne makes an acute and powerful case for an active relationship between past and present. But there is no typical answer to the question he posed, although for me highlighting injustice and prejudice have been an underlying basis of my historical analysis.

---

5 Jean Chesneaux, Posts and Futures or What is History For? (London: Thames and Hudson, 1987), pp. vii–x.
Childhood: The Haida voyaging boat in the New York Museum

This morning we are celebrating, in part, the renovation and recent opening of the National Museum and I want to begin this section of my address with a powerful childhood memory about a museum and other people and places. The time is the spring of 1946. The place is the American Museum of Natural History in New York City, located along the aptly named Avenue of the Americas.

This museum is a highly significant institution and a major cultural force in a national sense by virtue of its size, diverse holdings and resources. It was a nineteenth-century museum of the type that the American observer Stephen Weil argues was established to “raise” the level of public understanding, to “elevate” the spirit of its visitors, and to “refine” and uplift the common taste. This was a museum meant to serve a national purpose to educate, enlighten and civilise people by exposing them to the wonders of the natural world and the heritage of humanity. The primary function of this extraordinary museum was to collect, study and display rather than to ‘instruct’. The ‘nation’ was not one of its guiding themes.

My father took me to the Museum of Natural History at least twice a month and, as a four-year-old boy, I remember standing in the entrance to the Hall of the Northwest Coast Indians (the Museum’s oldest hall), which was my favourite place in the mammoth building. This particular Hall showcases the research conducted during the Museum’s first major field expedition—the Jesup North Pacific Expedition (1897–1902), which is considered one of the most important anthropological field studies ever made. Organised by Museum President Morris K. Jesup and led by Franz Boas, sometimes referred to as the ‘father of American Anthropology’, the expedition set out to investigate the cultural and biological links between people living on both sides of the Bering Strait with the hope of determining whether or not America was first populated by migrations from Asia. The display serves as a sober reminder of the close connection between the

---

development of the museum, the birth of anthropology and the advent of the nineteenth-century discourse concerned with race and colonisation.\textsuperscript{7}

Featured in the Hall are cultures that inhabit North America's shores from Washington State to Southern Alaska and British Columbia. The artefacts, folklore and artwork displayed document and celebrate the customs and artistry of the Kwakiutl, Haida and Tlingit and other peoples living on the offshore islands and along the inland waterways of the northwest Pacific coast. Boas would continue to study and write about the Kwakiutl—a fishing, trading and slave raiding people—throughout his professional life. In \textit{Patterns of Culture}, Ruth Benedict drew from Boas' accounts for the chapter on the northwest coast of America.\textsuperscript{8} From having read her popular book, many people retain some image of the Kwakiutl Indians and of their great \textit{potlatches}, tribal feasts and gift-giving ceremonies given by aspirants to high social standing.

In the Hall of the Northwest Coast Indians, as a four-year-old child, I had to stand on tiptoes to peer into a five-foot tabletop mahogany and glass showcase. As I peered into the small representation of a scene out of pre-colonial Kwakiutl village life replete with three-dimensional figures, the river and forest seemed to change, to dissolve and reform as I travelled backward in time. Scale mattered in the diorama as there was so much attention to detail, and the complexity of it all was fascinating. My father explained that I was glimpsing an era before the coming of the 'white man' to North America.

Mirrored in the case was a sea and coastline untouched by trawler, plough or chainsaw. The climax cedar forest was broken by a mirror-bright river, with salmon swimming in knee-deep water near the shoreline. The river flowed full, free and unpolluted. I could make out the large cedar-shingled plank houses of the village, some clustered close together, others more widely scattered. The wooden plank houses, hand-hewn with Stone Age tools, had beautifully carved and painted façades decorated with ravens, owls, whales, otters and eagles. In front of the houses, at a distance, at the edge of the river was a long row of seaworthy canoes drawn up on the shore. People were everywhere—more than one hundred of them. Men were catching salmon with nets and spears, others repairing a fish weir, still others.

\textsuperscript{7} Davidson, 'What should a national museum do?', p. 97.

\textsuperscript{8} Ruth Benedict, \textit{Patterns of Culture} (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1934).
carving protective totem poles with their extraordinary woodworking skills and artistry. Some were arriving by canoe, bearing gifts for a potlatch. Inside one of the houses, women bent over the fires, some were weaving cedar capes, and others were making baskets. Children were running and playing near the water’s edge. I remember leaning forward; eager to see the exact type of mask a shaman was wearing as families gathered around him on one side of the village. This particular drama was so special in my mind because it represented the full range of material culture of the Northwest Coast Indians.

This bi-weekly ritual of gazing at the scale-model in miniature gave me, as a young child, a sense of belonging in this fascinating faraway land—a sense that would continue for many years. On one memorable occasion, I remember standing in the Hall, staring up at the beautifully carved bow of a 63-foot-long (19-metre), ocean-going Haida canoe. Built in 1878, the 16-foot-wide (4.8-metre) vessel is full of life-like figures. A six-foot-tall chief in ceremonial robes and headdress was standing near the stern of the vessel surrounded by armed warriors. Slave rowers in animated poses propelled the sleek-looking vessel forward. From my child-sized vantage point, I could barely see the chests of the slaves straining against the oars. So much was hidden from view inside the seaworthy vessel, unlike the scale-model setting of the diorama. I remember plucking up courage and asking my father to lift me into the Haida voyaging canoe. There were no other visitors in the Hall at the time. My father carefully lifted me over the side of the vessel and gently placed me onto the deck of the canoe. Suddenly I felt very small. Standing on the deck among the crew I remember the fear of coming face to face with a shaman wearing a transformation cedar mask of a raven with a long beak. The great beak was opened wide and through it I could see the wide-eyed face of the shaman—the raven was suddenly revealed to me as a human being and I felt fearful. Needless to say, my father extricated me. That act of placing me in the Haida voyaging canoe was the first time, literally speaking, that I felt I passed over from one cultural setting into another and from one moment in time and space to another previous era and place, standing momentarily transfixed inside the ritual. The act of passing over marked the beginning of a pattern that would be repeated over and over again at certain stages in my life and was the beginning point in my aspiration to interpret the history and culture of nations and peoples in their regional and global contexts and to attempt to contextualise my heritage in relation to the heritage of other cultures.
The scene shifts now to my grandparents' apartment on the outskirts of Manhattan where I lived with my mother and father, recently discharged from military service. It is late 1946 and I remember sitting in the kitchen next to the window and fire escape, hour after hour, day after day, train-spotting, counting the number of box cars and tankers slowly passing by in the distance—a sign of America’s newfound industrial might and place in the world order. My Yiddish-speaking grandmother had transported a slice of old-world village life and charm to the apartment and there was invariably a large pot of chicken soup simmering on the stove. In the kitchen there were also stories. Some were terrifying stories of war and the concentration camps under Hitler. I remember my mother and grandmother discussing the shocking revelations in the New York Times concerning the liberation of the death camps. When I was older but not yet in my teens, I learned of the loss of almost all of my mother’s father’s family in Lithuania in the Holocaust. Except for my great-grandmother, and an aunt who had already left the village in Lithuania and migrated to America fifty years earlier, there had been no lucky escapes.

Thus, from an early age I learned about the meaning of justice and injustice and the importance of fighting with all our might, where we are, for more justice in the world. I realised, by the age of eight or nine, that contrary to the myth Hollywood was perpetuating about the ‘wild west’ and the ‘white man’s Indian’, there had also been a holocaust in America. The last of the just, holy men and warriors with names like Geronimo, Red Cloud, Sitting Bull, Osceola, Black Hawk and Cochise became my childhood heroes. I had read their biographies several times over by the time I was eight years old and most of these books are still in my library.

New York-born to second-generation northeastern European Jewish and Irish parents, I never meant to end up in Southeast Asia. I had my future mapped out: finish my Master’s thesis on the slave trade between West Africa and Brazil and then join the Peace Corps in Peru. I wanted to learn Quechua and pass over the cultural frontier of the Altiplano, the high plateau, to live with the vanquished Indian descendants of the great empire builders, the Incas. But, instead, my wife and I were sent to Sabah in Northeast Borneo to live and work with nomadic fishers. Subsequently, because of the experience of having lived with this pariah people in various stages of abandoning the sea and adapting to a house-dwelling way of life,
my life and the course of my future education moved in a very different direction.

We first went to Australia in 1971, where I studied for my doctorate at the Australian National University. Australia is my home now. I have family there. I have written all my books there and I have planted trees there. I have been at Murdoch University virtually from its founding in 1974. The issue of indigenous land rights and finding a place for first nation people within the framework of the teaching of history in Australian universities first motivated me to want to teach a course about Amerindian society and history; a course that would help establish a comparative basis to contextualise the history of Aboriginal peoples and non-Aboriginal peoples, settlers and strangers on the land, in Australia. While teaching at Yale in 1983, I consulted with colleagues and friends, especially William Cronon, and used Yale’s marvellous collections on the American West to create the framework for this course, which is still the only one of its kind taught in Australia today.

1978: Passing over and discovery

I now want to shift the focus of attention to my encounter with Singapore, since I have provided you with a bit of what Kai Erikson calls the ‘furniture of self’.\(^9\) I want to relive several years from the past in Singapore beginning with finding the Coroner’s Records and leading into my first year in 2002 as part of the founding generation of the Asia Research Institute (ARI).

The year is 1978. As a young historian, as part of an envisaged larger project about the labouring classes and colonial urbanism, I had embarked on a study of the rickshaw pullers of Singapore. At that time, I was swept into a lifelong encounter with the city-state. Much of the work on the Singapore project was done with colonial office records, unpublished papers and interviews. However, in the storeroom of the Subordinate Court Building, Havelock Road, I made an ‘extraordinary strike’.\(^10\) It was the once-


or perhaps twice-in-a-lifetime kind of research discovery that brings a rare thrill of elation. In this case, it was a reasonably complete run of octavo-sized Moroccan-bound volumes of Coroner’s Inquests and Inquiries and Certificates of Coroner’s Views, spanning the crucial years between 1883 and 1939—a time when Singapore experienced the large-scale intake of bachelor-migrant labourers from China and the ah ku and karayuki-san from China and Japan. No one among my friends at the Archives or colleagues at the National University seemed to be aware of the existence of the records; the originals had not been turned over to the Archives and they were neither mentioned nor indexed in the guides and hand lists to official government records. Without the local knowledge of an elderly Malay court clerk, to whom I owe an enormous sense of gratitude, we might never have found them—which would have been a serious set-back for my Singapore project. Barbara Tuchman’s stimulating discussion of the techniques of writing history and the historian’s role in Practising History notes that ‘this is the kind of thing that makes one shiver to think of what else may be missing’. It is important to note that one set of these records has since been accidentally destroyed!

In the space of the next four years I discovered in the Coroner’s Records a whole new world as fresh experiences, albeit disturbing and poignant, assailed me at almost every turn of the page. A sense of drama about ordinary lives and extraordinary histories, concerning the cases about death by homicide, suicide and misadventure, permeated the entire collection. They were everyday stories that with careful attention to detail could be developed into fascinating accounts of Singapore’s Chinese working-class society and its customs. I discovered in these documents a new language that conveyed new experiences of the past; new ways of perceiving a past reality; new emotions; new understandings about the work and play, and joy and grief of a people whose lives had been recorded in narratives that clinically teased out the principles of death and dying. The case stories were sometimes told with a dry, antiseptic, almost weary authority, especially in the later years. They looked not only at the underbelly of Singapore life, but also at the jigsaw puzzles that formed its surface. I was able to put together some of the pieces to make new pictures, examining the Singapore sojournning dream as if peering through a cracked looking glass.

11 Ibid., p. 76.
12 Ibid., p. 77.
I wanted to give readers a taste of these myriad experiences from the Coroner’s Records, where the world and the city were provisional, as the scenes kaleidoscopically shifted from the impoverished villages and teeming ports of Kwandung and Fukien across the South China Sea to a rising Singapore, or to the karayuki-san in Shimabara, and to the destitute daughters of the Canton Delta. The only way I could do that was to attempt to show the complexity of the lives of a vast number of different characters and to build up a collective sense of the density of their lives and world. Underlying the narratives about movement from a rural homeland to a colonial city and the bonds that were formed and broken between people is the theme of kinship and enormous sacrifice. The grittily real city that received them was both complete and incomplete at every moment. Their first real world—the world of their ancestors, parents and kinfolk—was central to their identity. And as the records would so manifestly reveal, it was away from the centre where the ‘losses, the stands, the arrangements’ rapidly multiplied in their lives.\(^{13}\)

**Passing over**

From the piles of filthy, dust-covered records laced with silverfish, an astonishing amount of information could be gleaned about the pullers and prostitutes of Singapore. There were insights about clothing and fashion, what they normally ate, dense, event-filled personal relations, and how they reacted towards the more impersonal forces affecting their lives—forces often beyond their control and at times beyond their comprehension. These included the incessant demands of the police and the public, the escalating hire fees charged by the rent-capitalists, and at the dawn of an age in motion, the increasing melodramatic, tragic threat of the rise of the automobile and motorised transport. Here was a vivid, wholly convincing source for the ages that would enable me to do far more than merely scratch the surface at nearly every stage of their lives. From childhood to old age, from triumph to despair, from Amoy to Singapore, the extraordinary lives and experiences of such ordinary people tumbled from the pages of the

records: they spoke about the choice of partners, love and betrayal, desperation and alienation, and I was drawn into their lives. These short but powerful vignettes would turn out to have remarkable implications for the pace, texture and period atmosphere of both Rickshaw Coolie and Ah Ku and Karayuki-san.

Although histories about governors, sultans, mandarins, rich merchants, colourful adventurers and leading politicians written from conventional historical sources continued to be published, I had taken up the challenge to leave behind the view from the deck of the gunboat, the fortress battlements and the balcony of the counting house, to reach out for the stories of those who largely remained nameless and unrecognised in most histories: the ‘little people’ of our grandparents’ and great-grandparents’ generations. From the 1880s to the late 1930s, tens of thousands of Chinese from the impoverished, famine-prone, strife-torn provinces of southeastern China came to Singapore in waves, in search of good fortune. Many men died trying, often succumbing to disease, exhaustion or the ravages of opium, as they ran between the shafts of a rickshaw, heaved coal in the belly of a steamer, or unloaded precious merchandise at quayside. Others, despite the physical hardship and grinding poverty, managed to send money back to their parents or families in China as they had promised when they left. Still others managed to put down roots and raise families in a crucially important period in Singapore’s history.

In order to piece together an alternative account, a complex vivid mosaic of past events and human activities in Singapore, I adopted a here-and-there, back-and-forth approach to the lives of these people. I took dot-like stabs at their lives with a kind of mosaic-pointillist technique, so as to join together the small fragments of hundreds of different lives. As I would later write, these rare, superb Coroner’s Records constituted ‘the living testimony of Chinese people who did not know how to express themselves in print and who did not have direct access to people with power’. The records brought the rickshaw pullers, their clansmen, kinfolk and especially the women of a forgotten past into the historical limelight.

As Tuchman challenged, I had found the significant detail opened my mind to it and let it report to me.\textsuperscript{15} I was able to get close to real life in the past on behalf of a culture I had come to respect, and by 1986 I had put \emph{Rickshaw Coolie} out there. People reacted to it, especially those from beyond the bounds of the precincts of the university. The range of responses from readers was incredible as the book sent a soul-searching shiver down the spine of Singapore society. The book had received widespread coverage in the newspapers, especially the Chinese press. At this time I returned to Singapore from Australia in between teaching semesters, to squeeze in a month's research towards the making of the next volume. Tan Beng Luan, a friend and colleague, telephoned the evening I arrived from Perth. She had a friend who was eager to meet me and who wished to take me to breakfast in Chinatown the following morning. My first impression was of a man in flowing black pants, white shirt and a black cotton jacket—simple traditional garb. There was warmth in the smile. We exchanged a few words and I was led briskly to a coffee shop in Pagoda Street.

As soon as we were seated and the orders taken, he turned to me and suddenly there was an avalanche of 'why' questions—questions that welled up from deep inside, from a place that he was familiar with that lay beyond the abyss—the atmosphere was electric—there was an intuitive sense of recognition, of being in the presence of a kindred spirit. Why had I written this book? How did I manage to find the sources necessary to write it? Why did I think the stories in the records were worth recording and telling? Why did I write history in a fashion that involved both problem-solving and story-telling or narrative? Tell me about your family. One heartfelt, transparent question followed after another. I explained how my views and practice were partially derived from my family background. I had written about the lives of the rickshaw pullers as Chinese migrants in diaspora. But the diasporic experiences under empire rule were also found in the familiarity of experience of my father and grandfather in Ireland and Britain and my mother and her father, my grandfather, in Lithuania and Czarist Russia, my grandfather who used to take me to the temple when I was still a young boy, yearning to visit the Museum of Natural History, while my Irish Catholic father was away during the war. As previously noted, I grew up

\textsuperscript{15} Tuchman, \emph{Practising History}, p. 44.
around a dinner table where it was hard to get a word in edgewise and the animated discussion was often about the rights and needs of others.

Time passed quickly that morning. We talked about origins, survival and the meaning of endurance. Hour after hour, stories of the past and particular worlds that had never entirely been left behind tumbled between us.

Throughout history, in families and diasporic communities, the elderly told stories to the young. It was a way of understanding and passing down cultural and community values, a sense of place and a past. This was especially true for migrants in a new place, for whom the past is still another country, and those unfortunate enough to be living in a time of calamity. As the exchange unfolded it was apparent to me that we both had a passion for story-telling inherited from our forebears. My host spoke about longing and endurance, capturing part of the essence of himself in his family’s life and circumstances particularly in relation to his two young daughters—viewing them growing up from behind a wire mesh screen while under detention between 1976 and 1979. Imagine a young girl looking at her father through the screen and putting her small hand against the wire mesh as a sign of love and affection and parting, always parting. I have never forgotten this deeply personal account so suddenly shared in the midst of the encounter. Apart from the extraordinary nature of this 1970s Singapore story, I realised the importance was also in the telling and the listening, and the interaction of the voices dwelling in the present moment.

Four hours had passed in what seemed like a matter of minutes. My host took me to see his recently established Practice Theatre Ensemble and introduced me to his remarkable wife Goh Lay Kuan, a dancer and choreographer. I suddenly realised it was dark outside. The afternoon, like the morning, had flashed by, as if in the blink of an eye. It was time to leave. The encounter triggered by the appearance of Rickshaw Coolie had sown a deep bond of familiarity over the course of the day. I returned to my small hotel room in Bukit Pasoh Road and sat down on the edge of my bed emotionally wrung out—in the knowledge that I had experienced something quite rare in having had the privilege to meet this gifted man in such a manner.
As a historian, I had met a person who was going to be of deep significance in my life, and knowing that it was going to happen was somehow right there in that first encounter with Kuo Pao Kun, dramatist, cultural worker, teacher and founder of the Practice Performing Arts School, the Theatre Practice and the Substation. It was both revelatory and humbling and a very mysterious business. For this reason and others and out of deep respect, I dedicated the second edition of *Rickshaw Coolie* to the memory of this remarkable human being, the father of Singapore theatre.

*Ong Keng Sen*

Pao Kun taught a whole generation of directors and playwrights to be proponents of devised theatre in which they did research and improvisation with a cast before sitting down to write a script. He was also one of the first playwrights to test the political limits of the government's tolerance in the 1980s, writing mildly satirical pieces about contemporary Singapore. Obviously there were still well-stated limits. But there was recognition by the public through this new form of social analysis of life in Singapore that Kuo was not only dealing with conscious open memory, but the whole area of historical memory which might be sometimes totally suppressed or might be half-suppressed.

In this genre, the person who really brought this issue to the attention of contemporary Singapore was Ong Keng Sen. He has argued, both implicitly and explicitly in his theatrical productions about colonial Singapore, that the memories of contemporary Singaporeans concerning that period were somehow attenuated and briefer than they ought to be. Ong, as a leading playwright, was attempting to deal with the question of what is not in the historical transcript or what is there but only hinted at. In the 1980s, he developed a distinctive house-style that would culminate in a series of extraordinary productions in the next decade. He frequently grafted traditional Chinese opera, martial arts and shadow puppetry onto western-style theatre. Ong's performances exploited a range of mediums, namely computer art, dance, eclectic music and elaborate lighting and set designs. This artistic approach of borrowing freely from various sources culminated in Theatrework's 1997 intercultural Asian production of Shakespeare's *King Lear*. Ong worked with an internationally-renowned team of actors including
a Noh master from Japan, a Beijing opera actor from China, a Thai classical dancer, Asian comedians and rappers, musicians from all over Southeast Asia and Japan, dancers from Indonesia and Malaysia, Singaporean entertainer Najip Ali, and of course Theatreworks performers. The production with Shakespeare’s text adapted by the Japanese playwright, Rio Kishida, was visually ravishing, theatrical, powerful and wild.

On 17 March 1995, sitting under the stars with Singapore’s Old Fort Canning Centre as a backdrop, I watched a two-hour multimedia theatrical production. *Broken Birds: An Epic Longing* told the story of Japanese women forced by circumstances to work as prostitutes in Singapore from the 1870s until the 1920s. The women sent money home to support their families and Japan’s war against Russia. Historians of Singapore had largely treated women as ‘invisible’. These women who went south, then, posed both a historiographical problem and a theatrical challenge for Ong. How and why did they become part of Singapore’s history? He wanted to bury forever the historical image of these Japanese women outside of time, confined solely to somebody else’s history, namely that of the Emperor and imperial Japan. Ong felt the need to stress their active role in pre-war Singaporean society and assess their historical and cultural noteworthiness from a broader perspective. Above all, he felt the need to increase the historical visibility of these women. ‘I am looking at marginal voices,’ Ong explained in a 1996 interview, ‘Often the plays I develop have a kind of underside.’

In the social history *Ah Ku and Karayuki-san*, I explained how young women were either abducted or lured from the rural villages of southern Japan and sent to Singapore with promises of abundant wealth. *Broken Birds: An Epic Longing*, which was inspired by *Ah Ku and Karayuki-san*, tells the story of these turn-of-the-century Japanese women and girls who were told that their bodies belonged to the State and that they constituted a form of female army. Already, by the late 1890s, there were 2,000 *karayuki-san* living and working on the streets of Singapore. *Broken Birds* provided gripping viewing; it raised profound issues about the human condition. Both the production and my book set the mind spinning around several of the central questions of our human past. One of the most important issues, so

---

old yet so current, is the relationship between good and evil, the difficulty of defining either, and the way in which all of us embrace at least some of both.

As much as the causes of evil lie in the human heart, they also lie in economic and political systems. Ong was deeply affected by the film Schindler’s List, in which he saw the sweep of humanity and the horror of the Holocaust. ‘In the same way, patterns and events like that of the karayuki-san that happened in the name of economic and political gain would not be repeated in time if we listened to history,’ stated Ong soberly in 1995. The genocide in Cambodia and Bosnia would not carry the echoes of the Jewish extermination. More voices had to be heard. 17

Keng Sen and his collaborators had given themselves a task that was as immense as it was deeply needed. They were seeking to create a theatre where the terrifying and incomprehensible reality of our time was inseparably linked to the seemingly insignificant details of our everyday lives. The task Keng Sen had given himself at that time, as a cutting edge director, was one of promethean scope and daring, namely to illuminate the threads of people’s lives that exposed the larger picture of the world and its history. In both Keng Sen’s productions and my histories set in colonial Singapore, enormous consequences are embodied in ordinary individuals. We have attempted to offer a perspective that is at once personal and global while trying to locate and understand the karayuki-san in a particular time and place. Here, history had given theatre material about Japanese women working abroad, and theatre had given history to a wider audience.

Workhorse Afloat

In 1997, Theatreworks contacted me to do another very exciting project with them. Workhorse Afloat, which was inspired by Rickshaw Coolie, would juxtapose the circumstances and situations of the rickshaw pullers at the turn of the century with that of the current migrant workers in Singapore. Keng Sen wanted to push the political boundaries by bringing the experiences and developmental significance of the resident foreign labourers

17 The programme booklet for Broken Birds: An Epic Longing, Theatreworks, Singapore.
driving Singapore’s ‘economic miracle’ into the very heart of the process of historical learning and civics in Singapore.

The production suggested that time had brought circumstances full circle. Just as the rickshaw coolies made a sojourn to colonial Singapore, 10 years ago Indian construction workers were granted temporary permits allowing them to work and send money back to their impoverished homelands. The rickshaw coolies’ plight in a foreign land was dramatised: their fragile sense of time and place; their floating between two worlds, precariously balancing a deep longing for home and the inevitable harsh reality; their displacement, their attempts to build a substitute world through opium and camaraderie. According to Ong, these voiceless beings formed an ‘invisible margin’ in the colonial world. In 1893, the Surgeon Major John MacGregor would write as follows about tens of thousands of men who remained a faceless multitude: ‘They are generally strong sturdy men, but yet perspire a little too freely in such sultry climates. By constant exercise, the calves of their legs get so developed and their hips so plump, that they move with all the ease and elegance of sturdy highland ponies.’

He continued: ‘The Chinese two-footed ponies in the rickshaws are obtuse enough in their intellects—all ponies are...’

Juxtaposed with such startling statements and dramatic enactments were the real-life accounts from foreign workers who flocked to Singapore’s Little India in Serangoon Road on weekends. Together, a mosaic of a temporary existence, a sojourn in a foreign land, was sketched on the mind’s eye of the audience. For Keng Sen, these Indian workers were equally ‘invisible’ in late-1990s affluent Singapore. The economy of Singapore had become so buoyant a decade ago that Singaporeans were no longer willing to engage in the lowest stratum of blue-collar jobs. Workhorse Afloat explored some of the contradictory feelings Singaporeans had towards their working conditions; the callousness of claims of the middle class, touching on points of vulnerability, such as fear of death, crime and disease and the overall ambivalence towards this transient but vital population of Singapore.

---

19 Ibid.
Two other identities

I want to briefly introduce two other important personalities and their work. They each provide penetrating sketches and fictional accounts of the intellectual, social and economic changes that have taken place in Singapore during the past century. Since 1986, *Rickshaw Coolie* and its companion volume *Ah Ku and Karayuki-san* have been used by those seeking to come to grips with Singapore’s past. For historical novelist Suchen Christine Lim and artist Kay Kok Chung Oi, the past is essentially open-ended, public and available for a wide range of uses. Recognising this has helped them to place their own activities and work in a wider national-historical perspective and raise questions about the idea of history and its purpose. Their respective work in literature and painting has at times acted against prevailing opinion to help break down the stereotypes created when the Singapore of yesterday and today converge.

Suchen Lim’s award-winning multi-layered novel, *Fistful of Colours*, describes the setting of Singapore’s Chinatown, where thousands of Chinese, mostly men, lived and worked in virtual isolation from white colonial society. The novel depicts colonial Singapore as a congestion of rooming houses, shops and brothels; of unmarked doorways in a labyrinth where rickshaw pullers smoked opium and lay with prostitutes. Lim examines part of the rich history of her family’s experience, validated in large measure by the source material in *Rickshaw Coolie*, to uncover a contrasting truth, namely that there were among the bachelors already a few upstanding families living there. Ah Buck was the grandfather of her protagonist, a young Singaporean artist struggling to define herself. Despite the poverty, the lack of education, and the powerfully claustrophobic existence of being excluded from the dominant society, Ah Buck gradually works up from menial rickshaw puller to ownership of a two-storey shophouse in Telok Ayer Street. He had prospered in this dog-eat-dog world, rising from ‘half-starved coolie to rickshaw owner with thirty rickshaws for hire’.”

Lim captures both the ordinary and the extraordinary events and relationships in the lives of common people responsible for the shaping of

---

21 Ibid.
Singapore. Her historical fiction has recreated Singapore’s early immigrant community and current Singapore identities, out of personal and family histories of a heterogeneous migrant people ‘yoked together’ by colonialism and the demands of the present. For Suchen Lim, who has retained an intense sense of loyalty to family, village and clan, her ancestors’ acts of immigration to Singapore have come to signify her liberation, the best gift of all for a remarkable story-teller in order to bind a new land and nation with old ties.

A sense of the crucial importance of public history and the Singapore of yesterday and today also converge in the artwork of Kay Kok Chung Oi. Kay Kok has approached her painting with a number of historical enthusiasms. She has investigated how to express Singapore’s history through personal voices and cultural histories. She has used different forms of display to reflect the cultural landscapes, human dynamics and diversity within various periods in Singapore’s history.

In April 2004, the Singapore public was invited to Kay Kok’s solo exhibition, Distant Call. She worked on this event while carrying her daughter, Candance, to full term. With her newborn daughter by her side, Kay Kok put the finishing touches to her first solo effort, based on her reading of *Rickshaw Coolie*. Visitors to the Utterly Art Exhibition Space were faced with visually fascinating paintings of geometric shapes arranged with neat regularity in their interlocking lines, triangles and honeycombs. This mathematical precision also linked art to science as a suitable representation of Singapore, signifying a young nation that seeks excellence in mathematics, science and technology.

A second series of paintings of more discernible cultural and material icons—rickshaws, straw sandals, cane hats, an opium pipe and rice bowls—were juxtaposed with the geometrical paintings to assist the public in interpreting the abstract from the literal and the past from the present and to help the viewers remember their past and forge their futures. Kay Kok’s visual artworks help to give history back to the public and either evoke or provoke people to contemplate their lives.

Her fascinating approach as a painter has also taken art and history to big public spaces—MRT stations, universities and buildings. Still managing a precise, colourful style full of social content, she continues to combine the
influences of modernism and realism. Her artwork, which enables a person
to develop historical awareness and cultural maps that express their own
beliefs and values, has consistently led her to study historical texts for
inspiration. In Kay Kok’s efforts to recover moments in Singapore’s past in
her solo exhibition, particular passages in *Rickshaw Coolie* were influential. It
is precisely because of this affinity of Kay Kok and Suchen Christine Lim to
dwell on the past and search for their roots that I came to understand both
how and why they answered the artistic summons of a distant call in their
paintings and historical fiction.

Both these women, along with Kuo Pao Kun and Ong Keng Sen, have
assembled some of the fundamental assessments of the national character
of Singapore and Singaporeans, in the media in which they have expressed
themselves. Their plays, novels, short stories and artworks are rich in local
character, celebration and criticism. I believe they have been involved in
what will turn out to be an extremely important episode in the cultural and
intellectual history of their times, namely the creation of new revolutionary
theatrical, literary and artistic voices and endeavours in framing Singapore’s
pasts and futures.

**Museums: The public sphere and historical memory**

In the final part of this address, I want to reflect on the gradual shift in
orientation from the museum as an institution of the nineteenth century to
the role of the museum as a modern institution today. I also want to
comment on how this change in the role and character of the museum over
the past two centuries has affected the purpose of history, and influenced
the formation and spread of cultural and historical imaginations—issues of
great interest both for students of history and society and for anyone
interested in the transmission of historical understanding and historical
memory in Singapore.

Latter-day museums have become major communicators of the past,
transmitting ideas about that past and shaping perceptions through a variety
of modes of display and activities.\(^\text{22}\) Value-loaded narratives, as well as

insights and information about the cultivation of national identity or citizenship, are frequently communicated to the general public. These messages are often balanced against a commitment to a ‘worldwide’ or a ‘global’ community. In 2000, Michael Heyman, the retiring secretary of the Smithsonian Institute, argued that museums had come to be key institutions that were called upon to create learning opportunities, stimulate imaginations and present challenging ideas about a country’s past, and also, to use Heyman’s pithy language, ‘to recognise values, to represent permanence in a changing world, and in general just sort out matters’.

Museums today can no longer afford to be mere repositories of collections, like that favourite museum of my childhood, when their largely inward-looking focus was to collect artefacts and artworks, display them in their galleries and act as gatekeepers of history, heritage and culture. The nineteenth-century national museum with its displays of history and culture was established, according to Stephen Weil, to ‘raise the level of public understanding ... to “elevate” the spirits of its visitors ... [and] to “refine” and “uplift” the common taste’. In other words, the chief mandate of museums 100 years ago was, as Dr Lee Boon Yang said, to ‘preserve, present and promote the history and culture of a country or region and its people’.

New museums, however, are often meant to contribute to the interpretation of national culture and national selfhood, and are readily perceived by the general public as a symbol of national identity. National continuity and national identity cannot be taken for granted, especially in countries struggling to transcend what has been euphemistically called the ‘colonial interlude’. Some of the most interesting new museums in the world are in locations as diverse as Scotland, South Africa and Germany.

---

23 Davidson, ‘What should a national museum do?’, p. 97.
25 Speech by Dr Lee Boon Yang, Minister of Information, Communications and the Arts, the ASEAN Museum Directors Symposium, 3 July 2007, Gallery Theatre, National Museum of Singapore.
27 Speech by Dr Lee Boon Yang.
28 Jordanova, History in Practice, p. 85.
which, like Singapore, are involved in nation-building experiments. Indeed, one of the commonly held assumptions today shared by governments and the public at large is that the leading purpose of a national museum is to define or express a sense of national identity, with the idea of ‘nation’ as one of its guiding themes. Consequently, national museums have become major cultural forces in their own right, but especially when identifying those institutions most responsible for charting the development of a particular nation’s historical imaginary. While heritage, broadly defined, has become a growth industry, there are only a handful of museums, including the National Museum of Singapore, that proclaim themselves as being about history, and offer instruction about the past.

Singapore’s Chinatown was the centre of this nation’s pre-independence life. Thousands upon thousands of Chinese labourers came to this place in 1904, the year the new first-class rickshaws appeared on the city’s streets. But the Chinatown of your grandparents’ generation, denounced by colonial officials as dirty and disease-ridden, as a centre of gambling and crime, was a world that spoke loudly and urgently to the concerns of the singkeh [Chinese migrants]. It has been one of the prime tasks of the National Museum of Singapore to revive the sense of dramatic immediacy about this Chinatown setting in order to assure a new generation that the history of their grandparents’ generation does not remain, in the prose of Simon Schama, ‘a remote and funereal place’.

Many singkeh who came to Singapore at that time remained faithful to family and village ties in China. The Museum’s attempt to recount their stories through carefully arranged displays or photographs, texts and iconic objects is part of a project to preserve national history and in the process to capture something about their lives and forgotten worlds. Nevertheless, the past being presented here is highly refined; one based on careful management and selective choice regarding the arrangement of objects and images, often chosen in part for their sense of visual appeal and impact. Hence, the galleries and displays about Chinatown and the sojourning experience have the narrative-flow of a story about selfhood and nation, and

[29 Davidson, ‘What should a national museum do?’ p. 99.
30 Ibid., p. 93.
as a work of invention rather than fiction, they have the persuasive force of truth.

History has tended to be defined by and about people who write—who have left records of their accomplishments and less often their failures—records that are then collected, analysed and assembled into an account of the past. It can be observed, however, that writing is an aberrant act as few people in turn-of-the-century Singapore kept diaries, maintained their correspondence, preserved their professional and personal records and then remembered to deposit them, perhaps after some judicious pruning, in a nearby archive, library or museum. Historians, until quite recently, have thus tended to concentrate on the most prolific sources of the past and these have been governmental records and private papers when such exist. In addition, certain ‘people’ classifications have dominated these records, namely gender: male; class: upper; colour: white. The bulk of our past has thus been on matters that related most directly to the 5 per cent or less of the population who have left a documentary record.

E.P. Thompson first identified not only the general problem of reconstructing the life and circumstances of occupational groups of working people, like rickshaw pullers and prostitutes, but he also grasped the absolute necessity of trying to understand people in the past in light of their own experience and their own reactions to that experience.32 However, the further back historians go in seeking to reconstruct the lives of the lower orders in Southeast Asia, the more restricted the range of sources at their disposal.

Fortunately, the talented staff of the National Museum of Singapore has chosen a boldly innovative strategy to tell their nation’s story and their family histories. Conventional documentation was almost non-existent for the vast majority of the populace. For the curators and researchers the principal sources were the oral histories of their grandfathers and grandmothers that had been saved more recently—first-person accounts that stand confidently on their own, albeit buried in colonial records, old photograph albums and precious glass plate negatives. The staff here has rendered the deeds and beliefs of their own families and ancestors—the

---

voices, colour and texture of their grandparents’ worlds—visible and as a result contributed directly to the public’s sense of national history and historical memory. Now a new generation of Singaporeans is reclaiming their own past and in the process striving to reframe and represent it.

The permanent gallery dedicated to the history of Singapore and the photography gallery are among the most important galleries of the National Museum. The exhibits constitute a very well-defined working through of the role and purposes of national remembering. They avoid an account of just one stratum of society—to reach beyond to class, gender, religion and ethnicity and to be inclusive of the past rather than exclusive. This approach allows for history’s increasing recognition in the National Museum of the perspectives of women and immigrants and a multitude of previously overlooked or suppressed voices.

I am suggesting here that the exhibitions of the National Museum of Singapore are of central importance for understanding the contemporary development of historical memory and the phenomenon of public history. These galleries and displays offer Singaporeans a new image of the past and of Singapore—vastly different from the earlier government’s more conventional picture-perfect version—through which visitors can select their own ‘path’ into the history of Singapore and construct their identity. In other words, the Museum involves the visitor in the interplay of three contexts: ‘personal, social and physical’ with each of these acting together to lead each visitor to their own unique museum experience.

Siou Li Sen has warned that when nations and communities have so little grounding in the history of their own families and ancestors, it is difficult to dwell in the present, except in the ‘most fleeting, tangible ways’. To put it another way, to know yourself you have to know the past; to know where you are going you have to know where you have been; once you lose sight of the past you lose yourself. Simon Schama perhaps put it best: ‘To

---

33 Jordanova, History in Practice, p. 154.
know our past is to grow up.’ 36 History’s mission then, along with that of the National Museum, should be to illuminate the ‘human condition from the witness of memory’. 37

The staff of the National Museum of Singapore, then, is doing one of the most important things a group of people can do, preserving the past before it disappears forever. These new galleries and displays, opened to the public and visitors in December 2006, show that Singapore is a young nation that increasingly has both the confidence and courage to face its past and the imagination to confront the ways in which the nation has both constituted and reproduced itself through collective memories. 38 Here is a place, not just for celebrating the concept of ‘nation’ and the nation’s triumphs, but also for forging a sense of ‘home’ and heritage in the face of today’s sheer materialism and frenetic pace of life.

Let us now go back to the future. I began this address by recounting the personal significance of my first truly interactive experience in the favourite museum of my childhood. I also posed a series of questions about historians and the nature of their craft. I argued that the moral commitments of historians and the nature of their human values should be made explicit whenever possible. 39 I also noted that historians, as a philosopher has fairly complained, are generally disinclined to commit themselves to general statements about their work, its aims, subject matter and methods. We have come full circle. I would like to end this address by asking once again, ‘What is history?’ Most people ask what history is about; the French historian Jean Chesneaux asked what is it for?

History—our knowledge of the past—is a dynamic factor in the development of society, a significant stake in the political and ideological struggles of today, a sharply contested area. History in Chesneaux’s mind was never neutral. For him, the important thing was not to reflect on history, but to reflect on the world in which we live. However, without history perhaps we shall never come to terms with that world, because the past is a ‘reference point that makes possible a critique of the present, and the

37 Ibid., p. 62.
39 Jordanova, History in Practice, p. 171.
definition of a qualitatively different future.\footnote{Chesneaux, ’What is History For?’, p. x.} But history, for Chesneaux, was only a gateway, an imposing entrance like the dedicated exhibits and displays in the galleries of your wonderful modern museum, and what is important is what we do when we get to the other side.\footnote{Ibid.} I want to leave you here where I began, namely with the image and memories of a four-year-old boy standing spellbound in a New York City Museum. That boy is the historian now standing before you in a museum once again—a marvellous museum—still gazing into the past and still concerned about other people and places and their pasts and futures. It was William Wordsworth who wrote in his poem The Rainbow that ’The Child is the father of the man.’\footnote{The Rainbow

My heart leaps up when I behold
A rainbow in the sky;
So was it when my life began;
So is it now I am a man;
So be it when I shall grow old,
Or let me die!
The Child is father of the Man;
I could wish my days to be
Bound each to each by natural piety.