Proposal Application:

We make history every day, yet people are rarely aware of the complex ways in which it shapes our lives. History Lab is a youth-led NGO that aims to make history education in Southeast Asia more engaging, accessible, and futureproof by revisiting chapters in Southeast Asian history that have been discarded in mainstream education. We request a Davis Projects for Peace grant in order to operate a summer research camp that exposes high school students in Singapore and Hong Kong to major historiographical issues in the field and introduces them to methods for conducting original historical research. The purpose of such a project is to combat the decline in humanities that have occurred in Southeast Asia over the last few decades while training a new generation of students to think critically in the field.

This project was started by Rhodes Scholar Arman Husein (CC ‘23) last year and was selected as one of Columbia University’s Davis Projects for Peace for the 2021-22 Academic Year. However, the project was discontinued due to several issues in the execution stage. Stephanie Chan and I were founding members of the project and worked closely with Hussein in getting professor involvement, designing the curriculum, and administrative planning. We have altered the scope of the project, addressed the issues that prevented its previous execution, and are looking forward to bringing it to fruition this year.

Proposal Narrative:

Despite attending an international school in Singapore, I was acutely attuned to the fact that historical scholarship and the humanities were not respected at all. Students were pushed to pursue STEM-related subjects and were regularly pushing the limits of the AP curriculums of such subjects as Math and Computer Science. Meanwhile, the social sciences were downsizing, and my school offered little support for students interested in a more rigorous education in the humanities. I thought my school was a one-off case. However, I quickly found out from friends at local schools that not only was this problem ubiquitous, but it was even worse at the average secondary institution in Singapore.

I learned that this was a microcosm for how humanities, and particularly history, was treated in Southeast Asia and Asia at large—a second-rate field not to be taken seriously, relegated to the shadows behind cutting-edge science and technology research. From kindergarten to university, the history of Singapore is
caricatured as the discovery of an impoverished village by British colonialists in the 1800s. However, this version of history could not be further from the truth. National University of Singapore professor John Miksic is spearheading a revisionist trend with his archeological discoveries and research which argue that Singapore-Malacca has a rich, two-thousand-year history as a thriving cosmopolitan port and reached a zenith in the 14th century through maritime trade with Ming China and the Islamic Abbasid Caliphate.

Despite Miksic’s revolutionary discoveries, his research has garnered little popular attention. The Singapore government, from official politicians to national education and monuments, continues to parrot the colonial-spun myth that Europe brought civilization, and with it the embryos of Singapore’s modern success, to a ‘barbaric’ and ‘backwater’ village. This phenomenon—coined ‘self-orientalization’ by post-Edward Said scholars—describes the complex reality in which colonial-era myths and intellectual historiographies are no longer externally projected but persist through collective internalization and self-imposed repetition. The ubiquity of self-orientalization across many parts of Asia speaks to the vestiges of colonialism-imposed thinking in such societies; and as history becomes increasingly ignored as unworthy of study, it gets manipulated and dominated further by political myths and narratives.

This speaks to the overarching status of the humanities within Asia at large. Studying History at Columbia opened my eyes to the potential and value of quality historical education that Southeast Asia has yet to unlock. History could have interested students, training them to be critical thinkers and civic-minded citizens, providing them with the tools and skills necessary for navigating the 21st century. Instead, history and the humanities more generally are undervalued and not taken seriously.

We firmly believe that the decaying status of the humanities is intertwined with the larger colonial era myths that pervade Singapore and Southeast Asia’s collective memory; the purpose of History Lab is thus a two-fold solution that targets both aspects of this problem simultaneously. First, it will promote Miksic’s work by inculcating Singaporean students with a comprehensive understanding of Southeast Asian Pre-Modern history, an important facet of our past that gets completely omitted from any history curriculum in the country. We will also study the myths about Southeast Asian History themselves—where they started, why they arose, and how to combat them. This will tap into cutting-edge ideas by such thinkers as Syed Alatas who have addressed colonialist mythmaking in terms of intellectual history, historiography, and the study of collective memory. The second part of this project is teaching high school students how to conduct their own historical research to engender a better appreciation for the humanities. We will introduce a wide array of historical approaches that make use of cutting-edge historical methodology being pioneered by professors at Columbia—for example, the integration of data science and statistics in historical research by Matthew Jones.

Our program will consist of weekend modules from July 20th to August 21st based on a pedagogy for historical education adapted from Columbia’s history department. As per Columbia’s model, we will integrate lectures, discussions, and hands-on work. Our project will also include guest lecturers such as by Professor John Miksic himself, who will share his original research findings, as well as Christopher Hale, a popular historian and author who just published a book on Southeast Asia’s Pre-Modern History.

**Core Activities and Syllabus:** [here](#)

1. Research workshops, projects and symposiums
2. Lectures on Southeast Asian Pre-Modern History
3. Introduction to historical methods and research
4. Socratic discussions
5. History Olympiad/Quiz Bowl
6. College Admissions Information Session for Studying in the US
7. Individual Fieldwork
Contributing to Peace:

We define peace as having access to quality education that develops critical thinking, empathy, tolerance, understanding, and a sense of celebration of differences and diversity. This vision can be attained by developing a curriculum that trains students to become intellectually, emotionally, culturally, and socially intelligent.

In the short term, our project creates a space for high school students of different racial, religious, and income backgrounds to reconsider their relationship with the different subjects they all study together. They would not just acquire hard skills such as historical knowledge, but also develop strong intra- and interpersonal skills that would help them naturally develop social cohesion.

The purpose of our project is to further highlight the collaborative nature of historical education and its propensity to bring people together. Having experienced the divide in Singapore between the ex-pat and local communities myself, I believe that an opportunity such as this will allow these groups to come together and learn from each other, while also sharing in common learning of their history.

Our long-term vision is the integration of our pedagogy into curriculums in Singapore and Hong Kong, and also to make future generations more aware of Southeast Asian Pre-Modern History and the historiography behind the myths that obscure Asia’s past. We hope to push future generations in the direction of overcoming indoctrination-derived concepts of Southeast Asian history. We firmly believe that inculcating people in their own history, and teaching them to think critically about it, is an empowering and unifying process that frees people from the rigid frameworks of standardized education.

Critical Success Factors:

1. Increased confidence and proficiency in English, public speaking, and historical group discussions.
2. Increased demonstrated interest in history, statistics, and data science as potential fields of study and/or career.
3. Increased awareness/understanding of the importance of open data.
4. Increased data and historical literacy.
5. More awareness of options in higher studies.
6. Production of simple research outputs using mixed methodologies.

We will be assigning a cumulative research project to all participants of our program and will assess them accordingly. The success of our program can thus be measured by the quality of research produced by our participants, which we will analyze for grades and feedback. We will also elicit feedback from our participants for not only measuring the quality of our programming and teaching but for developing future iterations of our pedagogy.

Future Sustainability Plans:

1. Register as a student/youth-led NGO in Singapore
2. Recruit a team consisting of undergraduates and early professionals to run future virtual and physical programming (i.e., History Labs, year-long academic programs, partnerships with local schools, etc…) and secure financial and logical support for future iterations of History Lab
3. Engagement sessions with government agencies
4. Grassroots educational advocacy work in Singapore, Hong Kong, and the Southeast Asia region
5. Partnerships and Affiliation with universities (i.e, National University of Singapore and Hong Kong University)
6. Offering similar camps in other countries (closely modeling after Columbia’s Symposium) or an online camp open to high school students from all over the world