Summary

History Lab Asia organized an academic conference under the title “Reimagining Southeast Asian History,” which convened 6 professors/popular historians, as well as an audience of 200 professors, graduate/undergraduate students, museum affiliates, and members of the public at the Asian Civilisations Museum in downtown Singapore. By introducing to the Singaporean public its rich pre-colonial past and encouraging a reconsideration of widely held narratives that venerate Singapore’s colonial founder, the project sought to help Singaporeans strengthen their multicultural identity and consolidate their once-fragile interethnic peace.

Project Description

Our project was primarily concerned with two overlapping issues: on the one hand, the declining interest in humanities and, specifically, history in Southeast Asia; on the other, the relative absence of pre-colonial Southeast Asian history in public and political discourse. So, the main aims of our project were to show that Southeast Asian history is interesting while simultaneously bringing awareness to the issue of coloniality in Singaporean history. Our decision to do a conference integrating pre and post-colonial Southeast Asian history (and historiography) was thus rooted in a desire to address both of these issues in a way that was feasible to carry out in one summer.

We chose the Asian Civilization Museum (ACM) because of its mission to produce more awareness about pre-colonial Singaporean history. It was also opportune because the statue of Sir Stamford Raffles, the famous colonialist to whom the modern founding of Singapore is credited, is right outside the museum. Not to mention that it was on the museum’s grounds that he first disembarked in 1819. The ACM’s help was instrumental because they offered us one of their best venues for free, which would otherwise have cost our entire budget. Moreover, they helped market the event to a lot of their donors and docents, which provided a substantial portion of our final audience. We were also supported by the restaurant Rempapa and their owner Chef Damian D’Silva, who specializes in reconstructing heritage Singaporean food—using the original ingredients that our ancestors would have used. Chef D’Silva helped cater our event at a very reduced rate; his food was fantastic and was also a huge draw for many of our attendees.

We made many changes and adjustments to our original plan. We intended to do something more pedagogical, following a Columbia seminar format, where we would teach Southeast Asian history over the course of a week. However, we decided that an academic conference with public involvement would help us better raise a wider awareness of the issues which we hoped to dissect. Our conference was originally two days, but we shortened it to one as a two-day conference would have exerted much more strain on our budget; we were also concerned about whether people would show up two days in a row. Unfortunately, even with the one-day conference, we still went overbudget and were not able to cover this from any other fundraising sources—each of our project members had to contribute funding from internships we did earlier in the summer.

We are excited to announce that, because our conference was a huge success, there was much interest from the professors involved in turning it into an academic publication. The benefit of this is that the contents of our conference will be spread throughout the academic world, where the ideas will live on
Reflection

At History Lab, we construe peace as an absence of violence, in all its forms, within one or multiple political communities. Since our project focuses on a specific region, Southeast Asia, namely the nation-state of Singapore, we understand peace as a phenomenon of harmony relative to the multiplicity of ethnicities that divide the inhabitants of this region. As Singapore emerged in the midst of ethnic tensions, the newly independent government concentrated its efforts on quelling the rivalries between the nation’s three main races. Therefore, our understanding of peace centers around one of its many dimensions - multicultural harmony.

We hoped to have contributed to the building of peace, or specifically the strengthening of multicultural harmony, which has remained relatively uninhibited since the independence of Singapore, by exposing the public to different ways it may rethink, commemorate, or reimagine its past. As history students, our team is aware of the different ways in which governments instrumentalize the histories of their nation-states to build an identity that holds institutions together. Such identity building often comes in the form of collective veneration of myths that define specific virtues or values within a political community. For example, in the French national memory of the Second World War, the memories of resistant figures are often placed at the forefront of commemorations, as they symbolize a combative Republican France that resisted the Nazi ‘evil’. However, the equally significant number of French citizens who collaborated with the Nazis are often left out of these national narratives or collective memory as they symbolize division, greed, and corruption rather than French Republican values such as “fraternity.”

Moreover, as René Girard develops in his Mimetic Theory, the power of myths that constitute the foundations of culture, identity, and the credibility of institutions often wane with time. From a Girardian understanding of institutions, Singapore or any other heterogeneous political community will sooner or later be at risk of falling back into the ethnic violence that it painfully experienced in its foundation. Therefore, if the conference successfully achieved its objective of encouraging the public to reconsider its widespread veneration for Singapore’s ‘colonial founder’ by introducing them to Singapore’s rich pre-colonial past, we hope that Singaporeans will have new ways of construing their identity. If our conference, in the short-term, enabled the public to view Singapore’s past as much more far-reaching than its colonization that started in 1819, then hopefully, in the long-term, we hope that Singapore will be able to create new myths about its past to reinvigorate the credibility of its national virtues that underpin its institutions, namely ethnic harmony.

A significant challenge we encountered during this project was trying to make the conference provocative without directing criticism to a particular narrative, group, or stakeholder. Since the nature of the conference was to make the public rethink what they may take for granted (e.g., Singaporean collective memory of the nation’s founding instilled by the government), we hoped that they would deepen their understanding of the subject to perhaps not reject the myths that underpin Singaporean national identity, but rather, trace a genealogy of their origins. Therefore, to navigate this dilemma, we agreed to make clear at the beginning of the conference that we were not trying to criticize the narratives produced
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by the Singaporean government but rather situate these narratives with the relevant contextual elements that could explain why such narratives were chosen in the first place. Our approach seemed successful because, during the conference, we had an engaged audience asking relevant questions defending both the more revisionist claims that some speakers made and others defending the more pragmatic reasons that led these orthodox narratives to become widely accepted in the Singaporean political community.

We are proud to say that our project has changed how we view ourselves and the public of a nation that may tend to overlook the social sciences. In the early stages of our conference planning, we had hoped that 20 people would attend. However, after sending out emails to relevant institutions, professors, and societies, we were extremely pleased to achieve a conference with an attendance of approximately 200 people, from all backgrounds. We may, therefore, reasonably claim that a well-planned history-themed conference with renowned speakers and relevant themes can be easily filled out anywhere in the world, no matter our preconceived notions about the declining popularity of social sciences in a specific region.

**Personal Statement**

“Made possible by the generous support of the Davis Projects for Peace, our conference enhanced the study of history in Southeast Asian region, particularly Singapore. In hopes of amplifying the conversation surrounding the pre-colonial history of Singapore, we successfully convened a selection of the most prominent historians on Southeast Asian history and hosted a conference with over 200 attendees at a venue of immense historical significance, the Asian Civilization Museum (ACM). We believe that our vision of crafting a space where academic discourse could flourish alongside raising awareness about marginalized historical narratives was actualized through the active participation of our diverse audience. From local residents, Southeast Asian students and academics from around the globe, our conference saw the intermingling of individuals from diverse backgrounds and its resultant discourse. From this incredible experience, we learned that a critical aspect of the promotion of peace is the strengthening of multicultural harmony and reclamation of a nation’s history.”

– Stephanie Chan, Matthew Oey and Luc Hillion