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### Kwa Chong Guan [Singapore, Chairman of National Archives Board, Historian]

Kwa Chong Guan

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Interviewee: **KWA CHONG GUAN**

Interviewer: Paul Evans

Date: 24 February 2016

Location: Singapore

0:00:19

[Paul Evans](#)

In conversation today with Kwa Chong Guan, here in Singapore. I hope we might begin by talking about the substance of what I would say has been the main thread in much of your career, which has been archives, museums, and libraries. Why are they so important to Singapore? Is that about how citizens think about themselves? Their relationship to the Government? What's been the important factor in this?

0:00:51

[Kwa Chong Guan](#)

That point you make about the importance of archives, of museums, is a fairly recent phenomena. Can be quite precisely dated to the late 1980s when we had to decide what we wanted to do with a very old, ethnological colonial, ethnological museum we had inherited from the British, and had to be transformed. The committee that was set up to review this proposed that in line with museum developments in other parts of the world, the museum could become a place where the citizens of Singapore could reflect on, in that wonderful phrase, where they came from, where they are now, where they are going to.

Fortunately, at that point of time, we had twenty-five years of nationhood, we were on the threshold on economic take-off, and the awareness that that had to be put in some sort of a historical context was accepted by the policy makers. We were given then, the funding to redevelop the museum as a... to give more emphasis to Singapore history. The major breakthrough came in 1992, when the then late Deputy Prime Minister Ong Teng Cheong was tasked to review the whole cultural milieu in Singapore. We then put up a part of the report proposing that a major part of that review of the cultural landscape be focused on the museum, which would be transformed. There should be a museum; an especially dedicated gallery [that leans] more to Singapore history, one that would frame Singapore history, that history within the region. The point being that Singapore's development is very much shaped by developments in the region. And, the third one was, since we had a collection of modern art, we should have an art gallery. So, the plans for that were put in place in the early 1990s, and we were fortunate that at that point of time Mr Goh Chok Tong took over as the Prime Minister and was very supportive of those plans and provided the funding support to expand what was an old National Museum into three museums.

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Singapore history, and what was expected to be only Southeast Asia was widened by his young colleague, Brigadier George Yeo, the Minister for Culture and Information at the point of time to say, "No, why Southeast Asia? Singapore's context, people came from more than Southeast Asia, from South India, South China, West Asia... Have a museum of Asian civilisation." So that was the second component. Of course, the third was the art museum in the Minister's old school, St. Joseph's Institution. That's how we developed with the support of the Government of Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong.

0:04:43

[Paul Evans](#)

You as a historian have been active in trying to develop some new perspectives on when Singapore starts. You have written about a fifty-year history post-creation of the country in 1965. You have talked about a 200-year history, the Raffles period beginning. But one of the things you have done in a very interesting way as a historian is say that Singapore existed before Raffles, and what you sometimes have called the 700-year history of Singapore. How have museums, archives, fit in to the telling of that broader historical story that begins before Lee Kuan Yew, that begins before Raffles?

0:05:31

[Kwa Chong Guan](#)

A major paradox of the Singapore story is that it is premised on an anti-colonial nationalist struggle, but the underlying assumption is that there must have then been a period of colonialism to have that anti-colonial struggle, and then independence, and then voila, that's where we are today. The problem then that arises is... so what before British colonialism? Was there nothing? How can there be nothing on an island that we proclaim so loudly is strategically located, astride the sea routes of the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean? How can nothing had happened on this island before Raffles came? So, it was to bring out this paradox, and seek for answers to it that some of us, including myself, started looking at the... Wong Lin Ken, the former professor of history, in fact, summed it up quite nicely. He said that, "No historians have explained why there was no port on Singapore before the 19th century. Well in part, that earlier generation of historians were not aware of the Portuguese, the 16th century Portuguese, 17th century Dutch records of their rivalry in our waters. We dismissed that wonderful Malay annals' story of this peripatetic Prince from Palembang landing here and seeing what he thought was a lion. So, in that sense, we then ruled out that pre-Raffles period and gave to Raffles the honour, the foresight of recognising the strategic significance of Singapore." It was basically to realign that to give more balance, that I persuaded the National Museum in 1983, '84, to do a trial excavation on Fort Canning - to really verify that there was nothing there, that this Malay prince, Sang Nila Utama, didn't have a palace on Istana up there. Fortunately, against the odds, that two weeks' excavation was able to produce evidence of there being a settlement on Fort Canning and the start of that recognition that Singapore, in the 14th century, was a thriving settlement.

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Today, thirty years on, we do have several tonnes of artefacts, ceramics largely, that is testimony to the prosperity of that 14th century settlement. The issue becomes... but then that settlement, for various reasons, came to an - supposedly came to an end - in the end of the 14th century, 1392, '93, '94, and was overtaken by the new emporium of Melaka. So what happened to Singapore after that? It was supposed to be strategically significant... Went into a proverbial black hole of history until Raffles came and found this... As Mr Rajaratnam used to say, "Poor, lost, 150 odd fishermen living here?" So it was, we have since then been, I think, slowly gathering the evidence that now shows that there was in fact, in the 17th century, 1600s, a very active port harbour on Singapore, in which the Johor sultans, from their Istana up the Johor River, could have been even further on down, thought well enough to formally position a harbour master, a *shahbandar*, here on Singapore island to control. So we are slowly now building up that history from the... filling in that black hole from the 16-17th century. My colleague Peter Borschberg has done yeoman service in retrieving from the Dutch, Portuguese, Spanish archives, a very intriguing story of high politics between the Portuguese and the Dutch in the 17... at the beginning of the 1600s, to actually build forts on Singapore island. So in a sense, yes, we have been filling in that story.

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The significance of that is, where then do we start Singapore? If we were to continue to want to start it in 1892, then we have locked ourselves into basically an Anglo-American European world that we are, as Mary Turnbull argued in her classic text, "very much a product of the British colonial legacy." That, she would argue in the latest edition of book, right into post '65 and perhaps even the beginning of the 21st century. If, however, we accept that there was a settlement here on Singapore continuous history of sort that we are now building up, going back to the 14th century, then we have got a very different perspective in which we can see Singapore as a node point of a network of trading ports in the South China Sea here, long before the Europeans arrived here. So, if you're looking for the precedencies of Singapore as a city state, then yes, it goes back to the port city and colonialism. But you're looking for the precedencies of Singapore as a global city. Can you find it in the city state and the port city? Or does it go back to an earlier era of the 14th century where Singapore was independent, and networking very successfully with ports on the Indian coast, South Indian coast, and the South China?

0:12:21

[Paul Evans](#)

We're in the National Archives here in Singapore today for this discussion. Archives are often understood to perform two functions. One is the repository, where things go, to reside and live. The other is that they, the other version, is that they are a place that should be and must be opened for scrutiny, for accountability, as a way of telling a story in an open way to the citizens and to others who want to make sense of the place they're looking at. What's the function of archives in Singapore?

0:13:02

[Kwa Chong Guan](#)

The formal understanding that archives are a convenient storehouse for ministries to unload their closed files has been prevalent, and I think it's a role that the archives accept. It's quite glad because then at least those files have not been thrown out, destroyed, but have been preserved, and are available at some point in the future for whatever reason. The idea that archives are deposited, that files are deposited in the archives to be eventually opened up for whatever reason, is not a very prevalent concept. The idea that they are there to serve in the writing of history, yes, that is very strong. Generations of history students at the old University of Malaya, then Singapore, and now the National University of Singapore, have turned to the archives, mined it for data to write their theses. That is a major function. It continues to be a major purpose of the archives - To service historians, researchers who want to look into our past. But the wider function of archives as the corporate memory of not only the Government, but the society, as shaping a society's sense of its identity, is something that is emerging now. So, you find it in the mission statement in the archives that it sees itself as the corporate memory. Indeed so, because with new generations of civil servants emerging, coming and taking over, that corporate memory of why was this policy made? What were the assumptions of this policy? If they're not transmitted, socialised, in the workplace, then they are forgotten, and have to be then retrieved from the archives here. Likewise, for a younger generation of Singaporeans who want to know how they got to where they are today, and are turning to the archives, not only for hard policy matters but even cultural background, to how certain practices evolved, how the places that they are familiar with have evolved, have changed, for the data to justify their documentation of heritage in the sense of nostalgia of places, then the archives performs that function. So, in the example of, say here, Bukit Brown, the cemetery of Bukit Brown, largely forgotten until the proposal to put a new road through it, and suddenly there was an interest in Bukit Brown as a memory site. But the documentation of that Bukit Brown... who was buried where, the inventories and the registries of the tools... are all within the archives. So, it is then to the archives, that these younger Singaporeans, with a deep interest in their past, then turn to. It is a function that the archives will increasingly have to perform.

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[Paul Evans](#)

There's an episode about, which you have written, which is the debate about "Operation Coldstore," which had an archival dimension to it, and which had an argument about the history, that it comes alive because it's a political, very political issue. Would more open access to archives, in the sense of the record of Government, produce more kinds of controversies? Or would it... basically would they reaffirm the national narrative of the Government?

0:17:35

## [Kwa Chong Guan](#)

I don't think so that opening up the archives would resolve the political controversies of "Operation Coldstore," and other political histories there. We are talking there, of the politics, the histories of the wounded, those who... the losers, the victims of history who are seeking redress. For that sort of an issue, no amount of open archives is going to resolve their problems. What is wanted is an apology, which is not going to be forthcoming. So, in this aspect, was Mr Lim Chin Siong a Communist? I don't think any archival or non-archival record is going to prove it one way or another. Certainly, we are not going to find a nice little piece of paper that says Mr Lim Chin Siong was admitted as a member of the Communist Party on this date at this time. So really here, it is how we are choosing to interpret the existing archival records here that matters. It's more of the reading of the archival records that is the issue here. The records can be read to give and support very different interpretations of history, of that "Operation Coldstore". So one category of British records will show that the High Commissioner, Lord Selkirk and the staff here, were sympathetic to Mr Lim Chin Siong. But another category of British records, with the Cabinet papers, will show that White Hall took a rather, suggest that White Hall took a rather different perspective of developments in Malaya and chose to ignore the advice of the local person here. The Malaysia's national branch records, if they're ever open, the ISD (Internal Security Department) records here, if they're ever open, might well provide again another rather different understanding, perspective here. So yes, it is undeniable that a certain number of people were arrested on that date and time, but the interpretation of their circumstances leading to their detention... Why? It will continue to be disputed and different answers can be sought in the archival record.

0:20:18

## [Paul Evans](#)

You have had a fascinating... you have done a multiplicity of public service tasks in preparing materials, doing interpretations of Singapore and its world. But it's been an interesting career in that you have done many things. This is what we sometimes call a portfolio career now, that my students all are kind of aspiring to be doing a variety of things that make a difference. How did this strange career unfold?

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## [Kwa Chong Guan](#)

You flow, like a good Taoist, you flow with the times, the tides, and you then make what is assigned to you. Very few of us can really say that we have dedicatedly planned and followed through a career here. So okay, the Oral History Centre is about to be reorganised, they can't find anybody better than me to be assigned to do it. Okay, you take on the challenge and see what comes out of it. The museum at that point of time, still mite-ridden, somebody needs to be... coordinate the restoration, repair of it. Okay you are assigned, you take it on and do it, and go from there. That's how it goes.

Once you have decided, in my case, to go into the public service, then you flow with that career and where it takes you to. The difficult choice would be whether at some point I decided, "No, I want to join my other colleagues out in the private sector," or whatever. To the extent that I did not, and I saw no need to make that difficult decision then I went with the public career assignments given to me. The issue can then be, so what if you were assigned to a public office that you had no great interest in? Would you then have resigned? Would I have resigned? What again here, the options are that... Could that assignment not have been managed? And says well, could I come back to that in a later time? Do I do something else lesser, perhaps? So, I think here, this management of one's career choices one makes, a lot depends on flowing with the tide rather than against. A difficult choice means you have got the flow against the current, and that requires a lot of effort and struggle. It's best to go.

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[Paul Evans](#)

You once described yourself, in one of your writings, as not actually going with the flow, but rather being a wind surfer. Someone who understands which way the water is moving, which way the wind is blowing, and is nevertheless able to navigate towards some desirable objective. Are you really the windsurfer?

0:23:49

[Kwa Chong Guan](#)

Well, the windsurfer was what we all aspired to be; that you're on a surfboard, you can navigate to some, to where you want to go. But I think for those of us who do windsurfing or surfboarding, it never is that easy. The goals are never that easily achieved, or that point you want you reach is never that easily achieved. So, I come back again, here, whether you are flowing with the Tao's tide, or whether you are surfing, the point is to recognise your environment, and make the most of what you have at that point of time.

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[Paul Evans](#)

You have been described as an insider. You have been described as an outsider. You have also been described as a maverick by people who have looked at your career. Which one are you?

0:24:53

[Kwa Chong Guan](#)

Depending on time and place, you choose which one. So quite clearly in any meeting with senior colleagues, with ministers, if you want to get your ideas, your proposals accepted, then yes, you have to project yourself as somebody who's with them. Quite clearly, you cannot be critical and stand outside. Yet, the challenge is, if you want to perform a useful service to the insider, you also have

to bring a bit of, “Hey, those people outside, this is what they're thinking about, or this is how we need to position ourselves to better appeal or catch what is needed.” So, this is the issue of the museum. The stories you tell, the exhibition storylines... It's very easy to just go with the mainstream Singapore story, but will that appeal to the audience? Will that move them? Then the challenge is understanding what the audience expectations are, and then how you convey that to the insight there. I think that's the challenge there that you have, all of us have. Some of us are able to do it better, some not so.



0:26:32

[Paul Evans](#)

What is an example, of a situation you faced, where you were advocating an approach, or an interpretation that ran against the grain of official understandings? A problem.

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[Kwa Chong Guan](#)

Various. If you take Singapore's position in the region, does Singapore stand firm? This is where I am as a city state. This is my home. I arrange the furniture as I want, and you don't tell me how to arrange the furniture. My position. Or do you here take a position, hey, there is a neighbourhood around us, we have to take some cognisance of that neighbourhood. It may be a rather messy, perhaps even hostile neighbourhood, but can we go on putting up fences? Electrifying them? Or do we at some point have to go out and wade into that messy neighbourhood? How do you make sense of that neighbourhood? So, this is an issue that my colleagues and I have faced. Helping the senior officials, my senior colleagues, understand what lies on the other side of the fence. How do we make sense? How do we reach out to them? It's very easy to say that they are everything we're not. They are corrupt, they are fun-loving... We are not. But hey, wait. How does that improve relations? How do we better understand? If you take an example, in 1965, '67, when we're just independent and so was Indonesia; a new order had come in under Suharto, removing the old Sukarno whom we all saw as a major threat and danger. So how do you make sense of Suharto? Is he continuing that irredentist, declared irredentist intentions of the old order of Sukarno? Or is there a new order coming in that's changing it? So, in that sense of empathy for the other side, that was what I saw myself as attempting to do in an earlier career.

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[Paul Evans](#)

Which part of the portfolio have been to you the most satisfying? Where do you think you have made the most valuable impact?

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[Kwa Chong Guan:](#)

Here, it is not which part of the portfolio, whether it's that chunk in Ministry of Foreign Affairs, or that chunk in Defence or where. But whether one can in hindsight put a thread through it and connect it up. I would say that thread is the ability to put events, developments that you are studying in a time frame, a time context. So basically, it has been how do you, in the various assignments I have got, how do you locate, help people to better understand where Singapore is on the that river of time flowing from where to where. This goes contrary to a lot of mainstream thinking that really, let's forget about that past. Let's take that point of time where we are today. What are the factors that affect Singapore at this

point of time, and will change? But the factors that affect Singapore at this point of time are the outcome of an earlier series, and an earlier series that shapes our understanding of these factors. So, a shift of positions may give us rather different understandings of Singapore's strategic location, for example there.

0:31:07

[Paul Evans](#)

Last question. Are you and the people you have worked with in putting together things like the National Archive, this cultural precinct, that is dotted with buildings devoted to culture, history, to... there are very few places on earth that have such a concentration. Are you pretty proud of this accomplishment for the city? Has this made Singapore the better city that you had hoped for?

0:31:42

[Kwa Chong Guan](#)

Yes. The vision is not only mine, but that of my other colleagues on that museum, on the various museum committees. People like Tay Kheng Soon, the architect, Willy Lim and others who all had a hand in the shaping of the prospects of our culture, our museum... museum precinct in this part of the town. What drove us was that vision of a more culturally-aware, vibrant Singapore. That we needed to get a younger, post -65 generation of Singaporeans to be more aware of the world around them, that will enable them to adapt better to their future. Ultimately, that's a very pragmatic aim, but it comes down to how to ensure that the generations that comes after us aware... are aware of that world. I don't think we can impose the dictates of what we thought was our world on them, they have to find out themselves and the best you can do is to help them. Of course, if one wants to be cynical, well, we need them to succeed so that my pension is not screwed up.

0:33:19

[Paul Evans](#)

On that note, Chong Guan, thank you for a wonderful conversation.

0:33:25

[Kwa Chong Guan](#)

Not at all, thank you very much.