

Singapore Heritage Roundtable

11 Nov 2025, 4-6pm

NUS FASS AS7 Research Division Seminar Room (6-42)/Zoom

Featuring:

Dr Clay Eaton (NUS Japanese Studies),
Asst Prof Guo-Quan Seng (NUS History),
Dr Jinna Tay (NUS Communications & New Media),
& Dr Yan Yang (NUS Chinese Studies)



Singapore Research Nexus
Faculty of Arts & Social Sciences

SINGAPORE RESEARCH NEXUS <i>Singapore Heritage Roundtable</i> Tuesday, 11 November 2025 3:50 to 6:00 pm	
3:50 pm to 4:00 pm	Registration
4:00 pm to 4:05 pm	Welcome Remarks and Introduction of Presenters by Jack Meng-Tat CHIA Associate Professor, NUS History, & FASS Assistant Dean of Research
4:05 pm to 4:10 pm	Opening Remarks by Melissa May TAN Director of Heritage Policy & Research, National Heritage Board
4:10 pm to 4:25 pm	In Their Own Ways: Identification and Documentation of Singapore's Chinese Medicine by YANG Yan Research Fellow, NUS Chinese Studies
4:25 pm to 4:40 pm	Mapping Middle Road: Prewar Japanese Community in Singapore by Clay EATON Lecturer, NUS Japanese Studies
4:40 pm to 4:55 pm	Re-Interpreting Fashion Narratives in Singapore: De-colonising the Modern by Jinna TAY Senior Lecturer, NUS Communications and New Media
4:55 pm to 5:10 pm	Small Businesses and Shops of Chinatown, 1819-1980s by Guo-Quan SENG Assistant Professor, NUS History
5:10 pm to 5:40 pm	Q & A
5:40 pm to 6:00 pm	Refreshments & Networking with Participants

In Their Own Ways: Identification and Documentation of Singapore's Chinese Medicine

YANG Yan

NUS Department of Chinese Studies

chsyang@nus.edu.sg

4:10 pm to 4:25 pm

Chinese medicine in Singapore is an integral part of Singaporean Chinese culture and has been increasingly used by other ethnic groups since COVID-19. However, few may realize that Singapore's Chinese medical tradition is not quite the same with its root in China and has thrived in different ways that are unique to the place, the time and the people, analogical to the development of Nanyang Art or Singaporean Mandarin. Despite the global trend toward a homogenized, state-led Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) promoted by China, Chinese medicine is neither monolithic nor static. Singapore's Chinese medicine (SCM), which previously emerged as Nanyang's Chinese medicine, has evolved within a specific local milieu, exemplifying the diversity, plurality and synthesis. Tailoring to local population and suiting to local conditions, it demonstrates regional variations and distinguishes itself from the Chinese medicine in other parts of the world in terms of its doctrines, diagnostic styles, practices, techniques, frequently used ingredients and formulae, etc. This project aims to identify and document the trajectory of this scholarly current of SCM, raise public awareness and scholarly interest in this current, preserve our local heritage, and respond to the call to find more efficacious alternatives to the PRC-TCM amid the widespread dissemination of a standardized and arguably westernized TCM. This project will employ two approaches to collecting and preserving data: 1) digitization of fragile textual materials and artifacts; 2) conducting interviews with a cohort of prominent senior physicians to explore their everyday clinical practices and skills that differ from textbooks.



YANG Yan is a Research Fellow at the Department of Chinese Studies, National University of Singapore. She obtained her Ph.D. in Chinese Studies, specializing in Overseas Chinese History, from NUS, supported by the President's Graduate Fellowship and the FASS Promising Scholar Award. Her research focuses on the history of Chinese medicine and Chinese banking in Singapore and Southeast Asia. Her recent publication is *The Making of Modern Chinese Medicine in Singapore: Actions and Interactions of the State and Professional Organizations (1867–2013)*.

Mapping Middle Road: Prewar Japanese Community in Singapore

Clay EATON

NUS Department of Japanese Studies

ck.eaton@nus.edu.sg

4:25 pm to 4:40 pm

“Mapping Middle Road” is a social history project which attempts to reconstruct the pre-war Japanese community in Singapore. The history of the Japanese community in Singapore remains relatively unknown apart from the period of wartime Japanese occupation. This presents an apparent gap in Singapore’s historical landscape, as the pre-war Japanese community played an important role in enriching the identity of Singapore as a cosmopolitan port city. The Japanese occupied a fraught position in pre-war colonial society, as subjects of an imperial power but also as fellow Asians in an overwhelmingly Asian urban population. Some Japanese ascended to the highest levels of colonial society, while others inhabited some of the most marginalized positions in that same society. Some settled in Singapore whilst others counted as more typical sojourners. An investigation of this community can help us to better understand the relationship between colonizer and colonized, between rich and poor, and between Asians and non-Asians in pre-war Singapore. We ask the following research questions: why did Middle Road become the locus of “Little Japan”? Who were the Japanese people who came to work and live in the “Little Japan”? Why was Singapore important to the Japanese? How integrated was the Japanese community, and how did the Japanese position themselves in the cosmopolitan culture of the port city?



Clay EATON is a Lecturer in the Department of Japanese Studies. He works primarily as the coordinator HSA1000: Asian Interconnections, which serves as the Asian Studies Integrated Pillar in the College of Humanities and Sciences common curriculum. Dr. Eaton is a historian by training, and his research has focused on the Japanese occupation of Singapore and pre-war Japanese communities in Southeast Asia. His broader research interests include global imperialism and historical connections between Northeast and Southeast Asia. He received his doctorate from Columbia University in 2018.

Re-Interpreting Fashion Narratives in Singapore: De-colonising the Modern

Jinna TAY

NUS Department of Communications and New Media

jinna.tay@nus.edu.sg

4:40 pm to 4:55 pm

In the City-State of Singapore, modernization and progress seemingly sweep the landscape clean of historical ‘debris’ and encumbrances. Yet, culture and modernisation do not emerge from vacuum, they build on suitable narratives and thrive on particular constructions of its past. More importantly, they are guided often by stringent interpretations of culture. The fashion scene in Singapore is one such site of temporal modernisation. This project sponsored by the National Heritage Board of Singapore, focused on the fashion history of Singapore from the 1950 to 1990s, exploring the threads of fashion media and what it reveals about Singapore’s national identity and how our social constructions of ourselves in the national broadsheet tells us about who we are. Based on historical archives into editorial columns, articles and features, this research identified gaps in the literature where fashion and historical archives in Singapore are waiting for further excavation. The data excavation itself employed a re-interpretative lens on society as viewed through media – allowing the historical distance to breath into a re-evaluation of social and cultural discourses. This paper argues that underneath the veneer of modernisation framework and discourse, the interpretation of progress is inherited via cultural values and notions already implanted through colonial imaginaries. Fashion as an evergreen social and popular site of modern self-construction points to default colonial re-inscriptions which the contemporary is able to de-construct.



Jinna TAY is a senior lecturer in the Department of Communications and New Media, National University of Singapore. She researches and teaches across television, alternative media, and fashion media in Singapore. Her current research is on the emergence and impact of alternative media organisations in Singapore, and her latest grant on Singapore Fashion History, sponsored by National Heritage Board can be found here (<https://sgfashionhistories.net/>). She has published widely in television studies and Singapore media, including taking on commentary for local media.

Small Businesses and Shops of Chinatown, 1819-1980s

Guo-Quan SENG

NUS Department of History

hissgq@nus.edu.sg

4:55 pm to 5:10 pm

This project investigates the social history of small-medium businesses and shops of Chinatown from the founding of the trading post at the Singapore River in 1819 to the post-urban renewal period in the 1980s. This is an understudied field, with most research focused on big business and well-known business pioneers. The project starts with the premise that small-medium businesses and shops were vital to Chinatown's economy and community life. Though modest, these enterprises were the pillars of Singapore's entrepôt trade with the outside world, as well as the mainstay of the local economy and informal sector. They enable us to further chart the social milieu of colonial Singapore and deepen our understanding of the lives of the Chinese urban working class. By framing "Chinatown" as a local and regional contact zone, we aim to reconstruct a history of how small and medium businesses enabled the circulation, consumption and production of commodities and services within Singapore, and across the region and the wider world. We organise our research along three major themes: flows, boundaries and renewal. The project reconstructs the flows of specific commodities (textiles, rubber) and money (remittances and commercial credit) through transregional Chinese networks centred around the hub of Singapore. By defining "Chinatown" as a multicultural site, we analyse the overlapping ethnic and subethnic boundaries of loyalties built around trade guilds and inter-ethnic trade relations. Finally, by tracing entrepreneurial developments historically, we trace how older businesses yielded to the new across time and space.



Guo-Quan SENG is a historian of Chinese societies in Southeast Asia, with a special interest in how racial, gender and sexuality structures in the region have been shaped through the forces of Eurasian imperialism, nationalisms and global capitalism. Born and raised in Singapore, he has been trained in History at the University of Cambridge (BA), National University of Singapore (MA), and the University of Chicago (PhD). His first book, *Strangers in the Family: Gender, Patriline and the Chinese in Colonial Indonesia* (Cornell University Press, 2023), is a gendered history of settler Chinese community formation in Indonesia during the Dutch colonial period (1816–1942). He also maintains an interest in debates in world history, historiography, and social, gender, and postcolonial theory.

Opening Remarks

Melissa May TAN

National Heritage Board

melissa_may_tan@nhb.gov.sg



Melissa Tan is currently Director of the Heritage Policy & Research Division at the National Heritage Board (NHB), Singapore. She and her team work with a wide range of public, private and non-government organisations to promote, develop, research and document Singapore's built heritage, intangible cultural heritage and archaeology, contributing to the implementation of Singapore's national heritage development masterplan. In the past few years, Melissa has led several new initiatives, including the gazette of Singapore's 76th National Monument, the new SG Heritage Business Scheme, the Outstanding Youths in ICH Award, and citizen engagement projects in Singapore's historic districts. Her division also administers the Heritage Research Grant, as well as the Organisation Transformation Grant to support heritage researchers and businesses respectively. Prior to the NHB, Melissa had nearly two decades of public sector experience in the social, economic and cultural domains with roles that included arts industry promotion, community building, and the development of engagement capabilities across the Singapore Public Service.

Chair

Jack Meng-Tat CHIA

NUS Department of History

jackchia@nus.edu.sg



Jack Meng-Tat Chia is the Foo Hai Associate Professor in Buddhist Studies at the National University of Singapore, where he also serves as Assistant Dean of Research at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. He is a historian of religion specializing in Buddhism and Chinese religions in Southeast Asia. He is the author of *Monks in Motion: Buddhism and Modernity Across the South China Sea* (Oxford, 2020), which received the 2021 EuroSEAS Humanities Book Prize, and *Dongnanya fayin: Xinjiapo fojiao yanjiu lunji* 東南亞法音：新加坡佛教研究論集 [Southeast Asia's Dharma: Essays on Buddhism in Singapore] (Boyang, 2025). His edited volume, *Figures of Buddhist Diplomacy in Modern Asia* (Bloomsbury, 2026), supported by the 2020 Social Science and Humanities Research Fellowship from the Social Science Research Council, Singapore, traces twenty-two monastic, lay, and political figures engaged in Buddhist diplomacy from the early twentieth century to the present. Chia is the founding chair of the Buddhist Studies Group

and the convenor of the GL Louis Religious Pluralism Research Cluster at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, NUS.
