

Lee Kong Chian Research Fellowship

Curious about the National Library's Lee Kong Chian Fellowship? Find out what our fellow, Dr Chua Ai Lin, has to say about the fellowship and how her research has benefitted from this opportunity.

NL: How did you get interested in Singapore's history?

Ai Lin: I studied European history as an undergraduate in a university in the UK. At the time, I felt that Singapore's history was very boring based on what I had been exposed to in school. When I came back to Singapore, I started my career at the National Archives of Singapore (NAS). In my role then, I had to deal with Singapore's history and was drawn to Singapore Heritage Society's talks and walking tours. From there, I saw Singapore in a new way and learnt about the rich and fascinating past we have. That new perspective helped me to adjust to life in Singapore after coming back from overseas. That sealed my affinity for Singapore history; it made so much sense because when you walk around the city, spaces have so many layers of meaning for you because you know what was there before or the things that happened. It really brought the city alive in a way that I had never experienced when I was growing up here. Sometimes, you take things for granted but once you know the history, even your everyday life and walking to spaces makes it a different experience.

NL: What triggered your affinity for Singapore history?

Ai Lin: The walking tours really did it for me; the walking tours with Geraldine Lowe who is a pioneer walking tour guide. She's one of the founding members of the Singapore Heritage Society, so I went for her tours and that really opened my eyes to a lot of things.

I was surrounded by stories and knowledge about Singapore both at work and outside of work. The tours and talks I went for with the Singapore Heritage Society helped me approach my work better because I knew very little about Singapore initially. After I left school, I completely forgot everything about Singapore history because it was so dry.

Moreover, what we learnt in school was mostly political history. But the society had talks on a whole range of topics. When you go on walking tours in different areas in Singapore, you'll learn about history that you have never encountered in school. When I was working at the NAS Oral History Centre, I encountered a very different sort of Singapore history. All that kickstarted my interest in history. At the same time, I was very lucky to have grown up with my grandparents. My grandfather had passed away, but I was living with my grandmother. I would go home and talk to her about the new things I was learning about Singapore's past and she would share her stories with me. There was always this reinforcement at home from being able to speak to my grandmother. I think those were perks of being able to share with her something that she could connect with too. When I started my Ph.D., I was completely inspired by something my grandmother said to me.

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NL: What did your grandmother say?

Ai Lin: After working for NAS, I went to do my masters at the National University of Singapore (NUS) to learn more about Singapore's history. My research was on 1930s Singapore and I used a lot of newspapers. I think my grandma was talking about how she was growing up at that time and that she had studied at Raffles College. She did her thesis on "The ancient and modern Chinese girl". The topic came about when she spoke to a colonial official who was interested in the Chinese community. From there, I got the idea of exploring modernity in Singapore during the 1930s. That's why I started looking at popular culture from then on. From her talking about modernity, I delved into topics like cinema and radio.

The upcoming issue of BiblioAsia will feature Chua Ai Lin's article on radio in the 1920s and 30s.

NL: Could you tell us about your current research for the Lee Kong Chian Research Fellowship?

Ai Lin: My current research looks at films — pre-war films that involve Singapore in some way. I'm looking at western or primarily American films. What we already know is that Samarang or Shark Woman was one of the first few movies filmed in Singapore in 1934, but there are a lot of other films that mention Singapore in its title or have Singapore somewhere in their stories but were not filmed here. I started by looking at the one filmed in Singapore and came across all these others, but I did not really research them because they were not filmed here; Singapore was just featured somewhere in the storyline. But in my current research, I look more carefully at them and analyse these different films that have Singapore somewhere. I don't want to give away the whole story but there are ones that try to take on a modern documentary approach about kind of exotic stories in the east and ones that are purely fictional. There are those that were filmed in the studio when they were supposed to be out in the east but they're not. I am trying to understand how to look at this body of films.

NL: How has the National Library's collection helped you in your research?

Ai Lin: The digitised newspaper archives have been absolutely revolutionary because we are looking at something like popular culture – so you're not going to find the answers in standard historical documents, government papers or legislative council debates. In fact, you're looking at things like advertisements. Sometimes, because it was very exciting when a film crew came to Singapore to make a movie, there would be a write-up of what they did here, so I think newspapers are crucial, although I wish that more of the local papers, such as The Malaya Tribune, were available online too. The newspapers have images as well so that it can be really exciting.

I think that NewspaperSG has completely revolutionised research. I'm getting new factual information that corrects the sources that I used previously. Without these digitised newspapers, intensive research would be hard. Before this, you had to use microfilms but finding something also depended on your luck. When I was doing my Ph.D., there were no digitised newspapers.

NewspaperSG is available at eResources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers.

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NL: What kind of impact do you hope your Fellowship will have?

Ai Lin: In the past, research on Singapore's history was not considered terribly important as it's often assumed that Singapore doesn't have much history, or that it is insignificant. This fellowship from the National Library, first of all, gives people a helping hand to carry out their research and complete it to a high standard. It also provides the opportunity to share that research. Without these efforts, we would continue to have a big gap in our knowledge of our country's past. You can see the changes in our school syllabus on Singapore's history over time. It was really boring political history initially, but a couple of years ago I was involved in the revamp of the secondary history syllabus. It's so interesting now! Instead of beginning in 1819, the history now starts with Temasek in the 14th century. They've included things like the history of road names and also examine different communities. There's even a section about the orang laut. From this, you can see that it's only with more research that this information can be passed down to a popular level.

The Lee Kong Chian Research Fellowship plays a crucial role in helping citizen-researchers to raise their standards. It is really important to bridge that middle ground of research between serious academic projects and small school projects. For example, good narrative stories are coming out from the Singapore Memory Project but for the academics, their research usually addresses history on a conceptual level. So what academics can do is hope that other people will do all this ground work, and then they can use these materials as the foundation for deeper analytical work. It's always a challenge for an academic researcher when the groundwork is not done as it takes so long to build up that data that they can analyse.

NL: Would you recommend this fellowship to your peers and why?

Ai Lin: I would recommend this fellowship to anyone who has a research project on Singapore and/or Southeast Asia. I'd invite them to come and explore the collections here at the National Library and see how they might help their projects.

NL: Could you give some tips to other aspiring researchers applying for the Lee Kong Chian Research Fellowship?

Ai Lin: I highly encourage researchers coming onboard the fellowship to interact with the librarians at the National Library because they can introduce materials that you might not have encountered before. Take advantage of both the primary material collections as well as the secondary literature that's relevant to your subject of research. And I recommend the National Library's magazine, BiblioAsia, which features excellent articles by the library's staff that showcase a lot of interesting topics that haven't been written up won't read about elsewhere.