

QED52E TG3 Video Reflection Log Form

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3

Video #1: Title and Name of interviewee *

Conservation Efforts in Singapore / Prof Lee Sing Kong

Strand(s): *



Nature & Biodiversity



Singapore's Society, Culture & Heritage



Singapore in the World: Regional and Global Opportunities and Pressures

Video #2: Title and Name of interviewee *

Significance of National Gallery Singapore / Ms Kng Mian Tze

Strand(s): *

- ☐ Nature & Biodiversity
- ☒ Singapore's Society, Culture & Heritage
- ☐ Singapore in the World: Regional and Global Opportunities and Pressures

Video #3: Title and Name of interviewee *

Representing Singapore Interests on the Global Stage / Prof Tommy Koh

Strand(s): *

- ☐ Nature & Biodiversity
- ☐ Singapore's Society, Culture & Heritage
- ☒ Singapore in the World: Regional and Global Opportunities and Pressures

Reflection Questions:

1. What questions do / did I have about this topic?
2. I found the information powerful because ... OR This seems challenging to me because ...
3. The online discussion with my peers provided new perspectives / insights because ...
4. I would like to see the changes take place because ...
5. This helps me to better understand / appreciate Singapore because... ↑

Reflection *

Professor Tommy Koh and the late Professor Lee Sing Kong recount the centrality of compromise and negotiation in policymaking: Prof Koh spoke of the negotiations necessary in international relations, while Prof Lee outlined the considerations in balancing conservation and development that were (and remain) particularly pressing for a rapidly developing nation-state. Both interviewees speak authoritatively on the pressing issues of their time – conversations which Singaporeans are increasingly empowered to contribute to due to the emerging social and cultural institutions which such individuals as Ms Kng Mian Tze continue to strengthen. A Senior Manager at the National Gallery Singapore, Ms Kng frames arts education as (among many other things) a democratic platform that richly rewards organic participation, which I suggest will strengthen Singaporeans' ability to participate in the kind of compromise and negotiation which Professors Koh and Lee gesture towards.

I admire the late Prof Lee's lucid explanation of our national policy toward balancing conservation and development, between what he calls 'our constraints and our goals': 'Pragmatism needs to be considered, but it could be mitigated with the support of scientific application' (05:33). His position, I think, acknowledges that there are real costs to development that should be accounted for in some way (say, regenerating a mangrove grove where one was cleared for development). Gemonn succinctly captures the real sophistication and ingenuity on display here when he recounts how Prof Lee's 'example on Pulau Semakau transcended the argument between conservation and development', and how 'Singapore can go beyond the typical trade-off argument (as we teach in SS classes) and provide a win-win situation'.

Yet, I'm also conscious of the contemporary push within the environmental humanities to de-centre humans / people from our decision-making matrices in view of climate change. Matthew Schneider-Mayerson describes the consequences of such human-centred perspectives on the environment and climate change in "Eating Chilli Crab in the Anthropocene" (Ethos, 2020): 'Today in Singapore, as in many places in the early twenty-first century, "the environment" is

something that is out there, to be accessed on a weekend or holiday. It's exhibited in Gardens by the Bay, preserved in Sungei Buloh'. Such compartmentalisation does accurately describe my experience of Singapore. Nonetheless, as Prof Lee notes, there has been a history of concerted effort in pivoting our perspectives from that of a 'garden city' to a 'city in a garden'. As an educator for an increasingly (and urgently) climate-change conscious generation, I think it is important to acknowledge the immense work done while simultaneously asking if we can do more by even (and especially) considering perspectives that may initially seem counterintuitive or too idealistic.

Prof Tommy Koh's interview outlines a cognate tension between the descriptive and the normative in the field of international relations: while teaching as a profession (I think) involves a fair amount of idealism (how the world ought to be), Prof Koh's stories of the cut and thrust of diplomacy and international relations describes the world as it is (in his esteemed view): 'the world still belongs to the big powers ... if you're a small country you are often ignored, and this is the reality ... because we are not a big country or a big economy, we're not invited to the table'. Indeed, Singapore only gains a place at the table 'by being relevant and by being useful to the big countries', a remark that might have sounded obsequious or self-interested if it had come from, say, a student in our classrooms ("no backbone"!). Troublingly for me, realpolitik doesn't necessarily sit well with the concern for the Other (including the marginalised, the less privileged; those discriminated against) that Literary studies or even (I'd like to believe) our education system seems to emphasise. Prof Koh's remarks are a sobering reminder that Singaporean society is as much shaped by a compromise (or agreement) between its diverse citizenry (who may not see eye to eye) as much as it is a balancing act in our relationships with other nation-states (US soft power; China's view of the Singaporean Chinese diaspora). His views emphasise that as much as school is a safe space, there are moral and ethical realities educators must prepare students to confront and navigate for themselves.

On the other hand, I still believe that a more normative values-based education can go some way in inculcating the awareness and openness that is (please correct me if I'm wrong!) necessary for our future FSOs and negotiators. To build on Dominic's vital observation of the cynical and critical stance which many Singaporeans adopt toward policymaking -- such trends are, I believe, symptomatic of a relative weakness in being open to our interconnectedness, not just at the individual level but at the levels of community and state. Singaporeans may be in the midst of consolidating our nascent identity, but I hope that identity remains one that is cosmopolitan and open.

One public institution that can precisely nurture such cosmopolitan and open character can indeed be found in Ms Kng's defence of the democratic principles underpinning art education at the NGS. She asks, 'How do we unpack the rich content the curator has researched' and present this information for the everyman? Indeed, she emphasises that 'In terms of communication, you do need to know your audience, otherwise it's a monologue', where the cultural elite do not earn the right to an audience simply by virtue of their knowledge. As Ms Kng argues, art is 'lively and very organic', and 'one of the things we really hope for parents and teachers to do is create an open space for discussion' (4:34). In seeking to create conversations where gallery visitors are given the role of meaning-makers (co-constructing meaning, in policy parlance), we can see how Singaporeans are given the opportunity to negotiate meaning for themselves based on their prior knowledge, their response to the work of art itself and the interventions of curators and art historians. They are given a space at the table of what is easily an elitist and exclusionary cultural practice.

Ms Kng also broadly outlines strategies vital to creating outlets and ecosystems that value self-expression in Singapore, including increasing publicity, museum visits for primary school students, and acknowledging that one can find value, history and even oneself in art. Yet, as Terence Chong argues in a 2017 essay on arts education in Singapore, Singapore lacks the 'cultural intermediaries like art critics, reviewers, patrons, gallery owners and publishers' which producers require 'in order to bring art works to different types of audiences'. One indicator of the uneven development in Singapore's field of cultural production might be that Singapore's universities do not currently offer Art History degrees (and only recently began offering minors and second majors in the field). To address this challenge, I think educators should play their part in seizing the opportunities to bring art and culture into the classroom -- for myself, I see the possibility of incorporating art as a stimulus for CCE lessons. For English lessons, perhaps students can be asked to describe a work of art (ekphrasis); in Literature in English lessons, students might consider the interplay of art and literature in, say, William Blake's poetry or even compare Impressionist writing and art. By opening spaces for such discussions, we create opportunities for art to be seen, heard and valued in Singapore.

In sum, I read the call of the three interviews as being to foster Singaporean citizens with open hearts and minds, ready to take on the task for negotiating and living not just with one another, but in the wider world.

*On a side note, I also wonder if we could work towards gender parity in the choice of speakers for the suggested videos e.g. for strands 1 and 3 (Nature & Biodiversity and Singapore in the World?)

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