INTRODUCTION

“Our generation,” Singaporean playwright (and USP alumnus) Joel Tan remarks, “is sick with nostalgia.” This module studies some examples of such nostalgia, predominantly as manifested in Singapore art: ad campaigns, documentaries, essays, films, graphic novels, poems, TV movies, and short stories. Although Tan seems to be referring to events of the past 20 years, our class will more broadly analyze post-1965 Singapore, examining in particular: the nostalgia of exiles and émigrés; what sociologist Chua Beng Huat calls “nostalgia for the kampung”; the national mood during the recent SG50 celebrations; and the nostalgia that appears to be responses to recent perceived crises in heritage, and demographic changes brought about by immigration.

When looking at these episodes, we will ponder Tan’s characterization of nostalgia as a “sickness.” Tan is not alone in this view: numerous cultural and intellectual historians, geographers, literary critics, political thinkers, and sociologists have argued against nostalgia, though just as many have sought to rehabilitate it. Accordingly, we will survey arguments about nostalgia’s complicated relationships with capitalism, consumerism, history, heritage, memory, nation, politics, progress, and sentiment. Do these critiques and debates apply in the case of Singaporean nostalgia? Or can practices of nostalgia in Singapore art help us rethink the potential of nostalgia?

The artists we will study include Boey Kim Cheng, Boo Junfeng, Koh Jee Leong, Eric Khoo, Oh Yong Hwee and Koh Yong Teng, Alfian Sa’at, Tan Pin Pin, Royston Tan, and Simon Tay. More theoretical essays will come from Kevin Blackburn, Alastair Bonnett, Svetlana Boym, Chua Beng Huat, Fred Davis, Paul Grainge, Linda Hutcheon, Fredric Jameson, Michael Kammen, Christopher Lasch, Loh Kah Seng, Pierre Nora, Kimberly Smith, Kenneth Paul Tan, Brenda Yeoh and Lily Kong.

SCHEDULE

Aug 15
Seminar 1.1: Introduction


Aug 18
Seminar 1.2: Introduction—Histories


Aug 22
Seminar 2.1: Introduction—Vocabularies


Aug 25
Seminar 2.2: Introduction—Definitions


Aug 29
Seminar 3.1: Introduction—Conditions


Sep 1
No class (Hari Raya Haji)

Sep 5
Seminar 4.1: Exiles & Émigrés (I)


Sep 8
Seminar 4.2: Exiles & Émigrés (II)


Sep 12  
Seminar 5.1: Exiles & Émigrés (III)


Sep 15  
Seminar 5.2: Kampungs (I)


Sep 19  
Seminar 6.1: Kampungs (II)


Sep 22  
Seminar 6.2: Kampungs (III)


Mid-term Break

Oct 3  
Seminar 7.1: SG50 (I)


Oct 6  
Seminar 7.2: SG50 (II)

Oct 10  
Seminar 8.1: SG50 (III)  


Oct 13  
Seminar 8.2: SG50 (IV)  


Oct 17  
Seminar 9.1: Heritage (I)  
“Seletar Airbase—Singapore’s Secret Garden.” Dir. Li Xiuqi. Video. Pt 1: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9ZZoWm7Hk3Q&t=9s> & Pt 2: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rs4Sm9X2w4o>


Oct 20  
Seminar 9.2: Heritage (II)  


Oct 24  
Seminar 10.1: Heritage (III)  


Oct 27  
Seminar 10.2: Heritage (IV)


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**Oct 31**

**Seminar 11.1: History & Politics (I)**


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**Nov 3**

**Seminar 11.2: History & Politics (II)**


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**Nov 7**

**Seminar 12.1: History & Politics (III)**


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**Nov 10**

**Seminar 12.2: History & Politics (IV)**


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**Nov 14**

**Seminar 13.1: History & Politics (V)**

RESOURCES

Several films and videos we are discussing can be streamed online (e.g., “Seletar Airbase—Singapore’s Secret Garden,” The Provision Shop). Three are however only available as DVDs:

• To Singapore, with Love: one DVD copy available in USP Reading Room

• “Koridor”: two subtitled DVD copies available in USP Reading Room. The NUS Central Library also has a copy, but that has no English subtitles.

• 7 Letters: one DVD copy available in the USP Reading Room, and two in the NUS Central Library

We are reading The Garden of Foolish Indulgences in full. You should preferably purchase your own copy from the NUS Coop, although the USP Reading Room and NUS Library also has copies.

All other readings are available as pdf files from our IVLE workbin. This is true even in the case of online publications (e.g., Shouse, Hutcheon, Rumens)—the pdfs will be easier to refer to during class discussions.

REQUIREMENTS

There is no final exam for the module, which is 100% CA. The CA is in turn based on five components, as follows:

1. Attendance, Engagement with Readings, and Seminar Participation (10%)

Attendance of seminars is mandatory. You are allowed one unexcused absence; anything beyond that will negatively affect your grade. If you need to be excused from a class for good reason—family emergencies, documented illnesses—let me know, in advance if possible. When you miss a meeting, you are still responsible for doing the readings for the day (especially since the readings tend to refer to and build on each other), and for completing any work assigned during the class.

The assigned readings and viewings are a key part of the module: we will learn a lot of information from them, but also from questioning and pondering them. The requirement is therefore that you carefully read and think about the assigned readings before each class. The onus is then on you to thoughtfully demonstrate, during our seminars, that you have indeed done so. This is usually done by participating in the seminar discussions—by answering or posing basic questions about the readings, analyzing and interpreting them, and so on. Even when you find a reading difficult, you can still think and speak about how it is difficult, where in the text the difficulty arises, why this difficulty might be significant, and so on.

2. Opening Comments (10%)

Beginning from Week 4, we will be engaging with several works of Singapore art, including:

• Tan Pin Pin’s documentary To Singapore, with Love
• Boey Kim Cheng’s poems
• Koh Jee Leong’s poems
• Alfian Sa’at’s story, “Corridor,” and Abdul Nizam Khan’s TV adaptation
• the SG50 anthology film 7 Letters
• a cluster of texts about Seletar Airbase, especially essays by Simon Tay
• Royston Tan’s telemovie The Provision Shop
• Oh Yong Hwee & Koh Hong Teng’s graphic novel The Garden of Foolish Indulgences

During each of these seminars, one or more of you will be providing some opening comments. These should be brief (no more than 5 minutes), and oral comments delivered from your seats (as opposed to, say, a powerpoint presentation from the front of the classroom). The substance of these comments should be lightly planned with me beforehand, and, depending on the content of the seminar, could engage with one of the following areas: biographical details of the artist; relevant histories and contexts of the artwork; possible interpretative frameworks; central questions worth discussing.

3. Blog Entries: Making Connections and Article Review (25%)

You are expected to contribute to the class blog at <https://blog.nus.edu.sg/uhb22122017> in two ways.

Blog entry #1 (no specified length; throughout the semester): Nostalgia is not simply an academic subject, but often part of everyday discourse. Over the course of the semester, you should post to our class blog interesting examples of, or discussions about, nostalgia that you come across in the non-academic sphere. These do not have to be restricted to the context of Singapore. Your contributions should be several, and span this spectrum: in some cases, you can simply provide a link to a newspaper article on nostalgia that you’ve come across, without too much commentary. In at least one instance, however, you should provide a more extensive response. You should also capitalize on the medium of blogging, and comment on and respond to your classmates’ posts. One aim of this assignment is to help you make connections between our classroom discussions and the world “outside” of it, and it is also a way of building up a resource bank for the module.

Blog entry #2 (300-500 words; by Week 11): Your second blogging assignment requires you to review an academic article or book about nostalgia that we are not reading in the module. Many of the assigned readings are broader considerations of nostalgia; in contrast, you should select for this assignment an article or book that utilizes a case study. Your specific task is to reflect on how the article/book moves between its case study and broader conclusions about nostalgia. One objective of this review is to get you thinking about how academic arguments move between the specific and the general—and thus prepare you for your own final paper, when you will likewise have to do so.

Since these are blog entries, they are not expected to be highly rigorous, though they should still be reasoned. Furthermore, since you’ll be able to read each other’s entries, you can also respond to and converse with your classmates.

4. Paper 1 (20%)

3-4 pages (or self-defined length for creative projects); due Week 4/5: your first paper requires you to demonstrate your understanding of the formal qualities of nostalgia. You will have two options for how to do so. One will be to analyze an existing text that is (commonly recognized as) nostalgic, in which case your task is to explicate how that text evokes—or comments on, or undercuts, etc.—nostalgia. A second option is creative: here, you would actually author your own nostalgic text. This text can be in any medium: hence, you can write a short essay or story or poem that is nostalgic, or you could submit a video, photograph, painting, etc.

5. Paper 2 (35%)

10-12 pages; due Reading Week: your final paper should be an argumentative essay. In it, you should pose an interesting question about some form or aspect of Singaporean nostalgia, and then—through research and the analysis of textual evidence—make an original and intriguing argument about that work, and about how your analysis might advance our understanding of nostalgia.