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Singapore Oral History, Liu Kang, And the Making of Nanyang Art History in Singapore

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ABSTRACT

While in other countries, oral histories are usually employed to balance state power and are initiated by non–governmental organisations, oral history in Singapore originates from and is strongly supported by its government and is an indispensable part of Singapore history. As a rather new nation comprised of various ethnicities, including Chinese, Malay, Indian, and Eurasian, nation– building is always at the centre of concern for the state. The use and archiving of Singapore's Oral History Project thus plays a significant role in its nation–building process, particularly in constructing its national art history. This research thus reveals the significance of archives and archival processing, particularly those related to oral history, in reinforcing nationalism and national identity.

Navigating through oral records of a specific group of Chinese Singaporeans termed "pioneer Nanyang/Singapore artists," this research article reveals a brief history of the Oral History Project and related institutions in Singapore, its political implications, and connection to nation building, specifically in the case of the interview with Liu Kang, a renowned pioneer Nanyang artist. The classification of oral records influences the way researchers use them, particularly with regard to

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Nanyang artists. Furthermore, the changing classification of Nanyang artists' oral history materials, particularly those of Liu Kang's, clearly intertwined with Singapore's changing direction, focusing more on art and culture in creating a national identity.

Keywords: Singapore Oral History Project, Singapore nation–building, Nanyang artists, Liu Kang

Introduction

While in many countries oral history is usually employed to balance state power and initiated by non-governmental organisations (Ritchie, 2014, p. 5; Thompson, 2017, p. 3), oral history in Singapore originated from and has been strongly supported by its government. As a rather new nation in the making comprising of various ethnicities be it Chinese, Malay, Indian or Eurasian, nation-building is always at the centre of concern for Singapore state. Although the use and archiving of oral history in Singapore plays a significant role in its nation-building process, the roles of oral history archives in nation-building have been underexplored. There are a very limited number of literatures engaging with the topics such as the works of Blackburn (2008, 2009) and Hong and Huang (2008). However, these works tend to focus on the portrayal of overall development of oral history archives and its engagement with politics of national historiography from the perspective of Singapore political elites. Previous literatures thus seem to perceive oral history archive as a monolithic thing and have not meticulously explored the intricacy of oral history archives categorisation. Those various categories that albeit not overtly political but are a part and parcel of Singapore nation-building such as art and artists are thus overlooked. By navigating through an oral record of a specific group of Chinese Singaporean who became termed pioneer Nanyang/Singapore artists, particularly Liu Kang, this research intends to shed some light on the overlooked dimension of oral record of a Singapore artist and its relations to nation-building and identification in Singapore. This research thus begins with the narration of a brief history of Singapore Oral History Project, its related institutions and their connection with Singapore nation- building from the mid-1970s onwards. Then, it moves on to discuss the sophisticated categorisation of Liu Kang's oral record against the background of changing themes of nation-building in Singapore.

Against the backdrop of Singapore's short time as an independent nation and the difficulty of comprehensiveness of written archives, oral history could be a powerful way to fill in Singapore's modern history record, and be further used as an effective means for the government to promote nation-building, enhance

national awareness and guide the construction of national identity. When the economic situation improved after the most difficult decade of Singapore's independence, the government began to work on nation-building and construction of the cultural identity. Under such background, a proposal to establish an oral history centre was initiated in 1974 by Dr.Goh Keng Swee, who later became Deputy Prime Minister of Singapore. The centre was formally inaugurated in 1979, and the oral history project has been implemented since then. Therefore, Singapore oral history project has received official recognition since the beginning, and few academics have challenged the credibility of this oral record as primary source of Singapore history. Several books and innumerable articles about Singapore history based on this project have been published.

The support of the Singapore government behind the project during its course, as well as the selection of interviewees and decision on retained content, to a large extent, has endowed this large oral history project with a sense of 'official history'. How the oral history project should be carried out, how the interviewees should be selected and how the interview records should be categorised are inseparable from the orientation of the Singapore government, which also indicates the significance of this project to Singapore nation-building process. Liu Kang and Chen Wen Hsi, two Singapore pioneer artists and founders of Nanyang art were among the very first group of interviewees as representatives from the art world. Paintings of Nanyang art are a synthesis of Western artistic media fused with Chinese painting technique and local subject-matters in Nanyang, integrating features of different ethnicities in Singapore, which fits well with the cosmopolitan national image that the Singapore government seeks to generate. It could also serve as medium to neutralise the trend of inward-looking identity within each ethnic group.

In addition, the life experience of Nanyang artists especially Liu Kang could exemplify the identity transformation of ethnic Chinese in Singapore: they were born and educated in China, albeit from different dialect groups, and finally chose to settle down in Singapore after transnational experiences. Their identification transformed from Chinese (Hokkien/Cantonese/Teochew), overseas Chinese in

Nanyang (Nanyang huaqiao), Chinese overseas (haiwai huaren) and eventually to Singaporean, which epitomised how contemporary Chinese identified themselves in a changing way. Consequently, their oral history interviews could reflect a generation of overseas Chinese and can be used as a tool for the state to construct the identity of Singaporean, particularly those of Chinese descent. Thus, Liu Kang's life and his art were utilised as tools to construct and reinforce a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural Singapore identity from the mid-1970s to the 1990s. As a result, Liu Kang was eventually recognised as Singapore national artist, and the National Archives of Singapore systemically categorised and stored his oral history collection.

Objective

1. To explore the significance of the Singapore Oral History Project to nation-building and identity construction in Singapore

2.To discover motivations behind the selection of interviewees for this project and the categorisation standard, and to analyse possible political implications gleaned from related documents such as archivists' memoirs.

3. To construct a more specific and deeper understanding of the role oral history project by looking into the interview records of Nanyang artists, especially the case of Liu Kang.

Research framework

This research focuses on the exploration of the development of Singapore Oral History archives and the categorisation of Liu Kang's oral history collection in particular. It situates these developments in the context of Singapore changing nation-building project from the mid-1970s to the 1990s.

Research methodology

Using historical approach focusing on reading along the oral history archival grain instead of reading against the grain, this research intends to explore how categorisation politics of oral records to a certain extent could navigate the way the researchers perceive the subjects they study and make certain historical

category conceivable. In revealing this process, this research focuses on how the Singapore state use this oral history archives to create the history of so–called Singapore national artists particularly in the case of Liu Kang. Furthermore, it also touches on the role of Liu Kang himself as a conscious individual agent who produced narratives about himself and his nation.

For nation–states with long written histories, oral history could be an alternative to the conventional or official history narrated by the state. However, in the case of Singapore, a newly–established state where written history records are either completely unsystematic or kept in colonial offices, oral history could serve as a powerful primary source in historical narratives.

Research discussion

Oral history, Liu Kang, and the making of Nanyang Art History in Singapore

The importance and orientation of oral history in different countries or regions varies, and has always been controversial in academia. Ritchie (2014), a historian emeritus of the United States Senate having conducted several oral history projects, argues that in some European countries, such as the United Kingdom, oral history adopts social history perspectives as a tool voice for less powerful people. In contrast, the United States launched an official oral history project recording the memories of the war after WWII (Richie, 2014, p. 5). However, another influential oral historian, Thompson (2017), contends that oral history in the U.S. is mostly commercial, whereas it is largely officially organised in the U.K. (Thompson, 2017, p. 3). Regardless of which viewpoint is adopted, it manifests that oral history projects can be either officially organised or initiated from the bottom–up. As for the Singapore Oral History Project, this article argues that in contrast to many countries where individuals and non–governmental organisations conduct oral history, the Singapore Oral History Project was initiated with the government's blessing.

Singapore has a rather short history beginning in 1965 as an independent nation–state, and written historical records are limited. In this background, the government could use oral history to stimulate nationalism. As a matter of fact, it was applied to many Asian, African and Latin American countries in the process of decolonisation, or freeing from state terrorism to build their own national identity (Richie, 2014, p. 6). Russia and other Eastern European countries, for example, conducted massive oral interviews after the collapse of the Soviet Union in order to rewrite their history, not the one that might have been distorted by the communist regime (Ritchie, 2014, p. 6). South Africa also conducted extensive oral history interviews after the end of apartheid by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission to find the truth about what happened to the people during apartheid, (Sean, 2017). The oral history project in Singapore, to a large extent, was coincidentally cleared by both the state and the public as can be seen from the oral history project in initiatives. Therefore, in this case, studying oral history in Singapore could shed some light on the intricate relations between state, nation–building, and the use and archives of oral history.

By analysing the purpose of Singapore's Oral History Project, the selection and categorisation of interviewees, and the case study of one of Singapore's national artists, Liu Kang, this paper explores the development of the Oral History Project, focusing on the project's significance for the construction of Singapore's history, nation–building, national identity, and the construction of Nanyang art history–Singapore's national art history and its pioneer[2].

[2] The "Nanyang Style" is frequently mentioned when art is being discussed in Singapore. However, in a strict artistic sense, the "Nanyang Style" could be a misnomer. Indeed, the artists did not coin the term themselves and rarely if ever used the term either to address themselves or their artworks. Some art critics also adopt the "Nanyang School" as its close connection to Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts. Realizing this controversy and seeing "Nanyang Style" as a socially constructed category like "national art," this article uses the term "Nanyang art" instead. Since it was the Singapore government that promoted and elevated this art to a national status, it is not exaggerated to use the term "Nanyang art" to refer to a collection of artworks produced by Liu Kang and his fellow Singaporean pioneer artists.

Origins and significance of the Singapore oral history project

As discussed earlier, whether people or historical events should be the primary interview subjects was a controversial topic in the development of Western oral history; the U.S. and Europe have their respective priorities in this regard. However, whether the goal is to interview important historical figures or to focus on historical events by interviewing ordinary people, oral history involves speakers as the object of interviews and relies on the memory of people's stories as historical materials. To a large extent, personal narratives can also be linked to the larger historical context, proving complementary and contrasting to one another (Yow, 2014, p. 36). In Singapore, however, the oral history project has been officially recognised since its inception, and few academics questioned the credibility of the oral records as primary sources of Singapore history except for some scholars who would argue that the project is an official voice, shaped by the government and the state. In other words, this project presents a one-sided history of Singapore, with its neglected and insufficient parts, but the credibility of the included parts is not in dispute. Singapore's renowned oral historian Loh (1998) argues in his article that Singapore's speech and memory are both government shaped and inseparable from the booming economy. Several books and articles on Singapore's history have been published based on interviews conducted by the Singapore Oral History Project.[3] It has not been long since Singapore became an independent nation, which makes it difficult to obtain comprehensive written archives. Although the staff involved with the Oral History Project in its formative years protested against the criticism that their works were imbued with a conscious political agenda, which is credible, the nature of and the context in which they worked unavoidably politicised their works. The assumption that their goal was merely to fill the gaps in Singapore's past

[3] Books include those published by the National Archives such as Oral History Centre (Singapore) (2007); Tan (2011) as well as monographs such as Barr (2019); Hong and Huang (2008); Chan and Chiang (1994) all adopting records from the Singapore Oral History Project as primary source. Example of academic article is Blackburn (2009)

with detailed understandings led to the team's uncritical awareness of the meta-narrative of Singapore history governing their work. Thus, rather than allowing different perspectives from various groups of people to be unfolded through their own voices, the Singapore Oral History Project reinforces Singapore government's voice (Hong & Huang, 2008, pp. 71–72). In addition, the government support behind the scenes, as well as the selection of interviewees and retained content, gave this large-scale oral history project a sense of representing "official nationalism".

The evolution of the Singapore oral history project against the background of nation-building

The Singapore Oral History Project has engaged with politics and nation-building since its inception. Although the Singapore Oral History Project was launched in 1979 and served as part of the National Archives of Singapore, which the National Library Board of Singapore manages now, its origin can be traced to the Ministry of Defence's oral history project in 1974. The project was initiated in 1974 by Dr.Goh Keng Swee, the then Minister of Defence, with the intention to document the history of the Singapore Armed Forces. It was merely nine years after Singapore gained its independence, and three years after the British pulled their military out of its former colony. There was an urgent sense to solidify and implant a national spirit to a newly created Singapore Armed Forces. Thus the project aimed to historicise and nationalise a new armed force in the making. However, by the time this project was finalised, there was already a nationwide interview program in place.

At the end of 1979, the National Archives established the Oral History Unit under the Ministry of Culture, which was the official start of the Singapore Oral History Project. The aim was to "collect and preserve audio recordings of oral history interviews for scholarly reference, or to disseminate oral history through publications, audio-visual materials and exhibitions, and to educate the public through seminars, workshops and forums" (Lai, 2019, pp. 62–65). To date, the Oral History Project has interviewed 4,800 people, ranging from high-ranking

politicians to peddlers, from medical experts to prisoners of war during the Japanese occupation, from artists to businessmen, and the scope of the project is as extensive as any on the world oral history stage. The success of the Singapore Oral History Project could partly be attributed to the long-standing support of the Singapore government. So, why did the Singapore government choose to support a vigorous oral history project and what was the impetus for choosing such a point in time?

When Singapore became an independent nation in 1965 after its brief union with Malaysia, nation-building became one of the central concerns for the government. On the day Singapore declared its separation from Malaysia, Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew could not stop crying in his speech over the airwaves. This unexpected event left many Singaporeans deeply grieved and scarred by racial conflict, and questioning the future of Singapore. Singapore was under tremendous economic and resource pressures externally and domestically. The Chinese were the majority of the population, whereas Malays and Indians also made up a significant portion of the population. Even within the Chinese community, there were disputes and conflicts due to dialectic groups and ideological differences. The Singaporean government had to consider and devote much effort within a short period to enable the people in this historical context to develop a sense of national identity and a sense of belonging to Singapore.

A shared history is one of the means by which a common memory can be established rapidly for all peoples within a country. However, as Singapore had been under colonial rule for a long period prior to its independence, written records were limited and mostly under the control of the colonial government. Because of the deliberate destruction by the Japanese during the Japanese occupation of World War II, by the time the Lee Kuan Yew government took over, Singapore was faced with not only physical deprivation, but also the loss of its historical records. Information for administration and pieces of knowledge to construct the nation was needed. History became an important knowledge for the nation in the making. Thus, two years after its separation from Malaysia, the Singapore government passed an act in 1967 leading to the construction of the National

Archives a year later (NAS, 2021a).[4] However, archived documents alone were not sufficient for the new nation. In this context, oral history could serve as a powerful way to reinforce Singapore's modern history, and could further be used as an effective tactic for the government to promote nation-building, enhance national consciousness, and guide national identity.

In the mid-1970s, when the Singapore government gradually moved into a more stable phase of economic development, nation-building became a relatively critical issue, and the curtain fell slowly on this major official oral history project. In 1974, then Minister of Defence, Dr.Goh Keng Swee, approved an oral history interview program for the Singapore Armed Forces as previously mentioned. Then, four years later, Dr. Goh took the initiative to expand the oral history program nationwide, an initiative that led to the establishment of the Oral History Centre in December 1979 (Lai, 2019, p. 63).

From 1979, the Singapore Oral History Centre, then affiliated with the Ministry of Culture, started with two projects. One was "Pioneers of Singapore," which aimed to document the lives of those who moved to Singapore in the early years, and to record the social and economic changes in Singapore along the way. The other was the "History of Singapore's Political Development (1945-1965)," which focused on the political history of Singapore from the decolonisation period after the end of World War II to the establishment of Singapore as an independent nation, both of which are inextricably linked to the ethos of Singapore nation-building. Both of these projects are a manifestation of oral history as a supporting means of establishing national identity in the process of decolonisation in post-War Asian countries. In other words, as Blackburn (2008) argues, the two projects aimed to use oral narratives to foster the Singapore spirit. Lying in the background was the emergence of the Singapore Story, a historical plot that the government has started to disseminate in Singapore since 1965. The story narrates that Singapore is a country where social and economic

[4] NAS and NASOHI are used as abbreviations for convenience's sake when referring to National Archives of Singapore and National Archives of Singapore's Oral History Project respectively.

development is booming, accord among ethnicities is achieved, and where civilisation and modern life have brought the greatest convenience to people's lives. Specifically, in terms of politics, the leadership of the People's Action Party (PAP) is most in line with the interests of the Singaporean people, and it is precisely because of the PAP's governance that the Chinese and Malays could avoid ethnic conflicts and possible redundancies among them. In addition, pioneers of Singapore shared similar experiences in their success, which represented Singapore's spirit (Blackburn, 2008, pp. 34–36). The interviewing process of the first two projects also reflects Singapore government's intervene on this project, because the coordinator of these two projects Lim How Seng admitted that their interviews then received instruction from the government, the interview questions were not free to ask by the interviewers, and the questions should not be sharp, moreover, the answers were not acceptable to PAP or Lee's criticism (Blackburn, 2008, p. 34).

"The Pioneers of Singapore" adopts an autobiographical approach, interviewing 60 people who, by the time Singapore was founded in 1965, had been living in Singapore or nearby countries since the early 20th century, and who achieved certain accomplishments in various fields by their own hard work and accumulation, especially political activists and business tycoons. That is why the program was initially named the "Millionaire Program" (NAS, 2018a). Interviews with these people shared an element of collective memory, such as their initial arrival in Singapore, the hardships they experienced during the Japanese occupation of Southeast Asia in World War II, their rapid development in their own fields under the increasingly lenient administration of the British colonial government after the Japanese left, their concerted efforts with the Singaporean government in securing the right to self–government, and their brief jubilation after the merger with Malaysia. These people were leaders in different spheres, but they also epitomised the struggles of that generation of Singaporeans as a whole. For a newly–formed nation, listening to their voices and recording such narratives could be an inspiration by understanding those who had lived through the same period of history and how hard it was for Singapore to become

what it is today. It shows later Singaporeans how difficult it was to build this nation, but at the same time it was full of opportunities and hope, which the "official nationalism" would emphasise. Concurrently, it also allows young Singaporeans to see the hard work of their forefathers in the first half of the 20th century in the land of Singapore, and for the new generation of Singaporeans to learn and pass on.

The other initial interview project, "Singapore Political History 1945–1965," is more in line with the nature of oral histories revolving around historical events, with interviewees being asked questions that focused on a range of political developments in Singapore during these two decades. Clearly, the aim was to connect Singaporeans to their national history in the making. Content included the Japanese occupation and its effects, the rise of the anti–colonial movement, trade unions, the successive emergence of political parties in Singapore, the flurry of political movements in society in the 1950s and 1960s, the arrest and detention of communists and leftists, and the brief merger split with Malaysia (NAS, 2018b). The theme of this project is more of a retrospective look at the political evolution of Singapore from its post–World War II anti–colonial rise to its eventual independence. It allows Singaporeans to see the political progress their country had made, such as gaining autonomy from the colonial government, and to reflect on the social unrest brought about by similar left–wing movements, with the subconscious hope of avoiding the recurrence of such situations. This is one of the functions in the process of constructing official nationalism. Simultaneously, it arouses emotional attachment to the nation as Ernest Renan brought forward in his famous article "What Is Nation?" that a shared memory of suffering and grief would contribute much to the formation of a nation (Renan, 2002, p. 19). Not surprisingly, this project was then followed by the "Japanese Occupation of Singapore."

The "Japanese Occupation of Singapore" began in 1981, with interviews documenting Singapore under the Japanese rule from 1942 to 1945. Topics covered pre-war Singapore, Japanese military activities, British surrender, Sook Ching, the life and economic conditions of the Singaporean people under Japanese rule, anti-Japanese activities such as the Malayan People's Resistance Army, prisoners of war, and the post-war administration of the British military government (NAS, 2018c). The choice of this theme also has a unique significance for the construction of Singapore's national identity; almost all Singaporeans who stayed in Singapore during its founding period and continued to contribute to the building of the new nation had experienced the horrors of the Japanese occupation. In many contexts, shared memories of trauma unite the nation, reminding them of the suffering they experienced together. This interview topic thus became a significant step in Singapore's nation-building project in constructing the shared memory of the times when Singaporeans came together to face the darkness of Japanese rule.

From the above, it could be noted that the initial interviewees of Singapore's oral history were mainly from the political and business sectors, which is inextricably linked to the government's policy of vigorously promoting economic development and political stability at the beginning of Singapore's independence. As it progressed into the 1980s, the economic development of Singapore had been increasingly solid. By the mid-1980s, Singapore no longer heavily relied on exports; instead, it had developed a multi-directional economy including industry, commerce, and a service sector (Turnbull, 1992, p. 326). Foreign investment doubled between 1979 and 1984, and the national confidence also increased. The first phase of nation-building and national identity was already in place (Trocki, 2006, p. 168). After decades of rapid economic development, there was a concern that Singaporeans, especially the younger generation Chinese, had become too westernised and de-culturalised (Tan, 2009, p. 329). There was a need for some "cultural ballast" that would serve as a tool to strike balance between global and local influences and at the same time, would hold Singaporeans from multi-ethnic backgrounds together. In this process, apart from political and

economic figures, the voices of cultural figures should be heard.

Immediately afterwards, the Oral History Project turned its interview targets to the cultural sphere. Among these were those who represented multiple ethnicities who were willing to integrate their cultures. The interview of cultural figures was particularly relevant to the Singapore government's needs for nation-building as Singapore national identity rested on its formula of Chinese, Malay, Indian, and others. At this moment, there was a concern about inward cultural identity evidenced among ethnic groups, which ran counter to the cosmopolitan national identity that the Singapore government was trying to build. Liu Kang and the Nanyang art were among the most relevant figures and cultural works of their time, so the oral history team began autobiographical interviews in 1982 with Liu Kang and Dr.Chen Wen Hsi, another founder of Nanyang art as Nanyang art adopted Western ways of expression and some Chinese painting skills, based on Nanyang's local customs and practices, and merging Batik elements, which highly represents the integration of multi-ethnicities living in Singapore.

In 1985, the Oral History Centre was separated from the National Archives and incorporated into the Ministry of Social Development of Singapore, until 1993, when the National Heritage Board was formally established and the Oral History Centre returned to the National Archives. Finally, in 2012, together with the National Archives, the Oral History Centre became a part of the National Library administration (NAS, 2021a). The constant changes in the affiliation of the Oral History Centre also show that the cultural sector in Singapore has gradually developed in the past 30 years, and has finally become a significant component of Singapore. The Singapore government also used oral history interviews for massive public exhibitions to inform Singaporeans about their history and thus promote nation-building. As early as 1984, the Ministry of National Development of Singapore held the 1984 National Exhibition entitled "25 Years of National Building, 1965-1984". The exhibition was centred on how PAP stabilised society and brought about rapid economic and social development in difficult conditions after Singapore's independence ("88,000 Visit Big Show in 2 Days", 1984, p. 3).

Another grandeur exhibition based on oral history project "The Singapore Story––Overcoming the Odds" organised by the Prime Minister's Office took place in 1998, which covered the history of Singapore in the past 60 years. The government's intended to show young people that it was arduous for Singapore to come all the way to where it is now, and this painstaking history should not be forgotten, as then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong put in the report for this exhibition "Young Singaporeans have not experienced first- hand the tumultuous events of the past 60 years..." (Goh, 1998, p. 2). How the Oral History Centre project unfolded, how the interviewees were selected, and how the interviews were categorised are inseparable from the guiding of the Singaporean government, and it could also reveal the significance of the Singapore Oral History Project to the nation-building of Singapore. The next section thus deals with the archiving and interviewing of Liu Kang, a famous Singapore national artist that a 'Special Project' chose to interview, where notable Singaporeans from a range of different fields were interviewed ad-hoc in the early 1980s. Interviews under this "Special Project" were later re-categorised when the Oral History Centre initiated projects that fit better under. As for Liu Kang's case, his interview materials were re-categorised as a part of "Visual Arts" in the mid-1990s, when the Singapore Art Museum collaborated this project with the Oral History Centre.[5]

[5] In the process of the research, the author noticed that Liu Kang's interviews were conducted between 1982 and 1983, whereas the introduction of the "Visual Arts" project states that this project was a collaboration between the Oral History Centre and Singapore Art Museum, which was initiated in the early 1990s and finally inaugurated in 1996. The author then consulted the National Archives of Singapore, and their response confirmed that Liu Kang's interview was originally a part of a very early collection called "Special Project."

Recollections of oral interviews with Liu Kang: A look at the connection between Singapore story and individual story

Liu Kang is considered one of the founders of Nanyang art, and known as one of the pioneer artists of Singapore, along with his colleagues, Chen Wen Hsi, Cheng Chong Swee, and Cheong Soo Pieng. These artists were born in the early 1910s, came to the Nanyang in successive years from the 1930s onwards, and together they experienced the Japanese occupation, the decolonisation phase, the ups and downs of political movements, and the brief period of merger with Malaya, culminating in the establishment of Singapore as an independent nation in 1965. In the process of nation-building in Singapore, it was also controversial with regard to what constituted a national identity. First of all, Singapore identity should be neutral and inclusive, without singling out any ethnicities, yet the reality that the Chinese population constituted the majority could not be ignored. At the same time, the city-state had always been part of the Malay world, historically and geographically, so Singapore's identity must also consider the Malay factor. The conclusion was that Singapore's national identity would not be built on any single ethnic culture. The Singapore government was committed to developing Singapore as a metropolis, so English was chosen as the lingua franca, and Singapore would become a global city where people of all ethnicities lived (Kwa, Heng, & Tan, 2009, p. 188).

As mentioned above, in the progressive nation-building that took place after the founding of Singapore, in addition to the mutual goal of economic development and the political stability expected by the people, the works of Nanyang art coincidentally became representative of a cultural "Singaporean national identity" for official nationalism. On the one hand, the paintings of Nanyang art technically combined Chinese brushwork, Western post-impressionist style, and the unique batik art of the Balinese Hindu islanders. On the other hand, their subjects were painted against the background of the Kampong (village) in the coconut grove and rubber trees of the Nanyang, and when it came to people, they included all the ethnicities of Singapore (Sabapathy, 1982, p. 16–127).

For example, one of Liu Kang's most famous works, Life by the River, was painted in 1975. In this oil painting, Liu Kang applied the technique of Chinese ink painting from a multi-point perspective. The distant and near scenes were staggered, and the content of the painting was slowly presented to the viewer as if it were a scroll. In the farthest distance is a dense rubber forest. In the background is a Malay kampong village situated at the end of the forest. Indian and Chinese women are working and doing laundry along the river. People in Malay costumes are chatting against the bridge, and in the near scene are men and women in modern clothes as well as Nyonya girls–the painting represents the ordinary and everyday life revolving around the Singapore River. Figures in the painting have different skin colours and clothing indicating major ethnicities of Singapore, which are Chinese, Malay, Indian and Peranakans. This piece of work met requirements for building official nationalism of Singapore, as it celebrates the inclusiveness of Singapore, and encapsulates social, political and cultural values, in addition to its artistic value. Similar paintings can be found in the works of Nanyang art, especially Liu Kang's. Such an inclusive and non-political art form was viewed by the government as one of the cultural symbols of Singapore's national identity, which was considered to be in line with the needs of the times.

In addition to these pioneer artists' works serving as symbols of Singapore national identity, their life stories were also utilised as tools to reinforce the Singapore identity. Yet, the life experiences of Nanyang artists were also informative in their own. They were all born in China, with different dialect groups, and had the experience of living across regions, and finally settling down in Singapore. Their self-identification underwent the transformation process from Chinese (Hokkien/Teochew)–overseas Chinese in Nanyang (Nanyang huaqiao)–Chinese overseas (haiwai huaren)–to Singaporean, which serves as an epitome of the identity transformation of Nanyang Chinese in the same period, and their experiences could also be a reflection of the overall journey of that generation of overseas Chinese. At the same time, the four artists, especially Liu Kang, actively engaged in Singapore's nation-building after its independence.

From 1965 to the 1990s, they worked assiduously to propagate this process of identity transformation in various forms, and were eventually recognised as Singapore's national artists.

Among the four founding pioneer artists, the Oral History Centre successfully found Liu Kang and Dr.Chen Wen Hsi as informants. Interestingly, the interview with Liu Kang is much more systematic and detailed than the interview with Chen Wen Hsi. The record of Liu Kang has 74 volumes of preserved recordings, while the record of Chen Wen Hsi has only 17 volumes. Liu Kang is distinguished from the other three Nanyang artists by the fact that he came to Nanyang as a child to live with his father, who had gone there to make a living, and then returned to China to study until coming back to Nanyang at the start of the Second Sino-Japanese War.[6] Therefore, Liu Kang's connection with the Nanyang was earlier and deeper compared to the other three Nanyang artists, and he was also in tune with the life experiences of most overseas Chinese during Singapore's founding in 1965, and could also be a voice as part of second-generation overseas Chinese. It could be said the choice of making more systematic and detailed recordings of Liu Kang was intentional. A figure such as Liu Kang, with artworks that fit Singapore's ideal national identity well, and whose transformation of self-identity can represent a generation of Chinese diaspora, is certainly an excellent interviewee subject for a state-directed oral history project. In other words, Liu Kang's story is the epitome of and a part of the Singapore Story in describing that despite coming from different regions with various backgrounds, people managed to take root in Singapore, gradually integrated into this metropolis and finally identified as Singaporeans.

[6] The summary of Liu Kang's life experience before the Second Sino-Japanese War comes mainly from volumes 1 to 37 of his oral history interview record. National Archives of Singapore Oral History Interview (hereafter NASOHI), Accession Number (hereafter AN) 000171/Reel 01-Reel 37.

Archiving, interviewing and institutionalising Nanyang art and Liu Kang

Although Singapore claims its national art history commencing with Nanyang artists, there are no such subjects classified as either Nanyang art or as Nanyang artists in the oral history archives. The history of Nanyang art and its artists have just been recently constructed along with Singapore's use of oral history and personal memory to foster and solidify Singapore's Story and its national identity. The term "Nanyang art" was coined by two art critics, T.K. Sabapathy and Redza Piyadasa. Ironically, the first exhibition on Singapore national artists, The Nanyang Artists—A Retrospective Exhibition, was held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, and sponsored by the National Museum of Art of Malaysia in 1979; the two curators, Redza Piyadasa and T.K. Sabapathy, conducted a study of these artists and institutionalised their style. (Piyadasa, 1979; Sabapathy, 1979). In their study as a tribute to the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, the terms "Nanyang Style" and "Nanyang artist" were raised to refer to a group of artists who "produced works which, collectively, can be recognised as marking the first modern art achievement in Singapore" (Sabapathy, 1982, pp. 116–117). In this context, it is unsurprising that Liu Kang and Chen Wen Hsi were interviewed and originally archived in a special project where notable Singaporeans from a range of different fields were interviewed ad-hoc. Interviews with Liu Kang were much more detailed than those of Chen whose record consists of 17 reels of recording in 1984, whereas Liu Kang has 74.

The centre conducted Liu Kang's interviews between April 9, 1982 and April 18, 1983, which lasted for one year, with a total of 17 interviews. There was a gap of about six months from the first interview in April 1982 to November of that year, after which they were conducted relatively regularly, once a week to once every ten days.[7] The interview content covers the whole life of Liu Kang. Interestingly, although interviews with Liu Kang were very detailed, the interview questions did not focus on his role as an artist and engagement with the art world

[7] It was traced through the time recorded under each reel.

in Singapore (The case goes to Chen's as well.). On the contrary, they documented his entire experience from his family's background at birth until the early 1980s, including his identity transformation as an individual under a series of historical events, overseas Chinese life in Singapore in the early 20th century, Singapore under Japanese rule, the struggle for independence, and the establishment of Singapore as a nation. At first glance, the interviews appeared to be normal and meticulous interviews that provided a clear detail of one man's personal life experience. However, a closer look at the interview process suggests otherwise.

Liu Kang's interviews were clearly conducted by using structured interview questionnaires. Answers dictated from this process are to comply with "PAP–endorsed version of the past," and in order to achieve this goal, the design of the questions actually controlled how the interviewee could respond (Blackburn, 2008, pp. 34–35). Compared to the project, "Political History of Singapore," with a more official voice, the significance of a personal history like Liu Kang's is to fill in the structured Singapore Story skeleton from the perspective of ordinary people, which depicts how ordinary people living in Singapore from the early 19th, working their way through World War II, decolonisation, and finally ushering in the founding of Singapore and a sense of belonging. Therefore, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when the Ministry of Culture needed to control the arts and humanities scene in Singapore, and later made it a symbol of cosmopolitan identity, artists such as Liu Kang could serve as representatives embellishing the Singapore Story from a cultural perspective. Hence, the interviews and archiving of Liu Kang's records originally had limited connection with the national history of Singapore art, particularly Nanyang art, with Liu Kang as its pioneer.

In the 74–volume interview of Liu Kang, the first 22 volumes deal with his birth in Fujian in 1911, through his youth in Malaya, his return to China for study, his life in France, his work in Shanghai, and finally his return to Nanyang after the Second Sino–Japanese War started in 1937. From volumes 23 to 37, the interviewer asked in some detail about what Liu Kang witnessed as far as anti–Japanese activities by Nanyang Chinese, and his participation, how he survived after the fall of Malaya in 1941, and finally about the reactions of

people in Singapore after the surrender of Japan in 1945. The contents from volumes 38 to 56 focused on Liu Kang's personal life and activities in the art world after the war. His trip to Bali in 1952, which is especially important for Nanyang art, is emphasised. These three phases reinforce some of the highlighted parts of Singapore's history: namely, the economic development of Singapore and Malaya under the colonial rule in the early twentieth century, but also the initial awakening of national consciousness, which was interrupted by the Japanese occupation. After the end of World War II, the process of decolonisation was accompanied by chaos and conflicts among various ethnic groups, but eventually the British left and all local people that survived on the land began to find their own place, which resulted in an independent Singapore.

After the 57th volume, there is a large part of Liu Kang's travel memories, mostly several trips to China, but some content also involved Europe India, and etc. At first glance, it seemed that Liu Kang's activities in the art world take up much of the contents of this interview. However, after reading the scripts of the 74 volume–recordings, the author realised that it was only in the first half of the recordings that the interviewer raised questions. Beginning with Liu Kang's trip to Bali, some questions had long answers lasting for as many as two to three volumes. For example, what happened in Bali accounted for three volumes of recordings, from 48 to 50. Nevertheless, the interviewer was less likely to continue regarding these questions, even though Liu Kang was in high spirits. The last part almost becomes Liu Kang's solo personal travel memoirs. The questions asked by the interviewer were very few and most of them had nothing to do with travel experience, but focused on some reflections of current affairs and politics behind these trips.[8] In the second half of the interview, the content took place after the founding of Singapore, but the vast majority of Liu Kang's answers focused on the art itself, such as the techniques, inspirations, and his understanding. In 1982, when the interview took place, art itself had not yet received enough attention from the Singapore government, this section was thus not as important

[8] For example, reels 58 to 60 were all in Liu Kang's own words on his recollection of travel details (NASOHI AN000171/Reels 58–60).

to the writing of Singapore's history as the previous three sections, which made the interviewer's questions appear to be fewer. At that time, Liu Kang's significance as a Chinese artist who had experienced different stages of Singapore's history was greater than the significance of Nanyang art to nation-building. It was not until the 1990s, when Singapore began to promote Nanyang art as national art that this part of the interview was reintroduced to amplify the analysis and publicity.

In the questions on Liu Kang's early life, a pattern and orientation of questions by the interviewer could be revealed. Although most of the personal oral history interviews began with family background, the interviewer's questions pointed to the general historical background then: the warlords' warring in China's southeast coastline from the 1910s to the 1920s, which was a major reason that many Chinese left their hometown and went to Nanyang. As Liu Kang came to Malaya at the age of seven, the interviewer was concerned about the teaching language of Liu Kang's primary school. Liu Kang answered that it was in Guoyu (the national language), which was Mandarin (NASOHI AN000171/Reel 01). It was indeed a crucial watershed in the history of the Chinese community in Nanyang. Before the promotion of Mandarin, various Chinese dialect groups in Nanyang lived independently, but there were still tensions between them. However, since the 1920s, the descendants of overseas Chinese began to receive Mandarin education and most of the teachers came from China, and the Chinese in Nanyang gradually condensed into a relatively unified group (Kenley, 2004, pp. 12–14). This was not only Liu Kang's personal life experience, but also a collective experience shared by many of the pioneer generation in Singapore. For the history of Singapore, it was the beginning of the awakening of the national consciousness among local people. Although most of them still identified with China then, they were no longer just Hokkien, Cantonese and Teochew people who came to make a living and then returned to their homeland, but there emerged a local Chinese community, which later made great contribution of nation-building in Singapore.

The questions asked about Liu Kang's memory of his secondary school life in Singapore are arguably a clear reflection on how the interview questions were pre-set and organised in a pattern that confined interviewees' answers to a scope. The interviewer was primarily concerned with to what extent Liu Kang and his colleagues at Singapore Chinese High School (Hwa Chong) were influenced by politics, such as whether they were asked to recite the "Three People's Principle" every week, or what the conflict between Aw Boon Haw and Tan Kah Kee (major contributors to China's resistance) over Hwa Chong, was all about. The most important thing was whether the student movement in Hwa Chong was deliberately being provoked by someone to encourage the students to revolt with political purpose (NASOHI AN000171/Reel 04). These questions may appear abrupt, as Liu Kang graduated from primary school in 1925 at the age of 14, and left Hwa Chong in early 1926 to continue his studies in China. The six months of study seemed to have little connection with his career as an artist at all, especially when considering that he was a teenager (NASOHI AN000171/Reels 04–05). Nevertheless, Hwa Chong played a role of "left-leaning" at times in the later decades of Singapore's history. The artists of the Equator Art Society, who were considered imbued with communist artistic features, were also Hwa Chong alumni (Kwok, 1996, p. 72). The interview questions implied that because most of the teachers at Hwa Chong then were intellectuals who fled to Singapore under struggle between the Chinese Communist Party and Kuomintang, it planted the seeds of several subsequent movements (Turnbull, 1992, p. 244).

The next 14 volumes about Liu Kang's experience during World War II were asked in a very detailed way, from 1937, when he returned to Malaya again from Shanghai, until 1945, when Japan surrendered and left. Although it was only a nine-year period, record of it is very lengthy because the questions asked by the interviewer were elaborate and specific. This period played a transformative role in Singapore history. Before the Japanese occupation, most of the Chinese living in Singapore bore no interest in political activities and simply concentrated on accumulating wealth. It was the Japanese atrocities against China in World War II and the Chinese in Singapore and Malaya that united the Chinese

community to defend themselves against foreign enemies. This experience was later utilised by the Singapore government after 1965 to generate collective memories of trauma as a stimulus of national identity. Questions were focused on three aspects chronically. The first concern was about anti-Japanese activities before the Japanese took up Southeast Asia. Whereas another oral history project asked similar questions several times, Liu Kang as an active artist then, had more knowledge on how artists and scholars were involved in anti-Japanese fund-raising movements. Thus, Liu Kang's answers might exceed their expectation as well. He described comprehensively on how artists and scholars both from China and based locally, initiated and participated in fund-raising activities in Singapore (NASOHI AN000171/Reels21-37). Two of the most prominent Chinese artists Xu Beihong and Liu Haisu both came to Nanyang holding exhibitions to sell their paintings for anti-Japanese funding raising from 1940 to 1942 (Shi, 1995, p. 360; Xu & Singapore Art Museum, 2008, pp. 70-72). Although they were at odds with each other, Liu Haisu was Liu Kang's mentor and Xu Beihong appreciated Liu Kang's talent in painting. So both of them had close contact with Liu Kang in Singapore, and Liu Kang even once tried to set up a meeting between them to resolve this "century-old feud" (NASOHI AN000171/ Reels 25-26).The New China Troupe also travelled around Malaya and Singapore in 1939 to and staged several times for funding raising (NASOHI AN000171/ Reels23-24). It was also during this time that Xu Beihong painted one of his famous artworks Put down Your Whip, depicting actress Wang Ying's character in the performance of the New China Troupe (I, 2010).

Questions regarding life after the Japanese occupation of Malaya were more concerned with whether Kang's life as a Chinese who had participated in the anti-Japanese activities was ever threatened, and how he used his expertise to live under Japanese rule. Interestingly, even as an artist rather than a member of the political or military establishment, Liu Kang was asked about his views on the defeat of the British Army at that time, which unsurprisingly aroused his discontent with the British Army that was "unskilful" and "without morale" (NASOHI AN000171/Reel 27). This interview is exactly in line with the image of

the British army in Singapore official history being powerless in the face of the Japanese invasion, which called for an independent Singapore without colonial rule. Questions regarding days after the Japanese surrender in 1945 were involved with whether people around Liu Kang were secretly supporting the Malayan Liberation Army, and whether there were conflicts between the Malays and the Chinese immediately after the war (NASOHI AN000171/Reel 32). All these questions are closely related to the main plot of the Singapore Story, as the Malayan Liberation Army was moulded as one of the driving forces, which generated hatred between the Malays and the Chinese in the after-war period in this story.

Liu Kang was 34 years old at the end of World War II, and 71 to 72 years old at the time interviewed by the Oral History Centre. Although it appears that the 37 volumes focusing on the first 34 years of Liu's life account for half of all the recordings, they are relatively evenly distributed. However, after reading through the 74 volumes, the author discovered the ratio of questions to answers in the latter 37 volumes had changed dramatically with several volumes of the recordings focused on answering only one question. As argued earlier, Liu Kang's answers on art techniques and methods are not on the main thread of Singapore's history, so the interviewer did not expand much. Furthermore, the interviewer did not ask any additional questions, especially regarding the origin and development of Nanyang art, which should have been what Liu Kang was most concerned about. On the contrary, it was mostly Liu Kang himself who was explaining and illustrating.[9]

[9] Reels 40 to 50 are about Liu Kang's activities from after-war days to the 1970s. Questions raised were mostly about his role as a leader in the art field, such as how he became one of the founding members of the Singapore Art Society and his service as the chairman of the selective committee of the National Art Exhibition. In contrast, questions regarding his Bali trip and his personal art development are long answer to one single question (NASOHI AN000171/Reels 40–50).

In contrast, when Liu Kang mentioned that he started to travel to China in 1974, even before the Cultural Revolution ended, the interviewer was keen to ask for some details. At the time of the interview, China and Singapore had not yet established diplomatic relations, but Lee Kuan Yew had already visited China in 1976, two years after Liu Kang and his group's trip. Lee Kuan Yew also paid a special visit to Liu Kang's mentor–Liu Haisu–during which he referred to Liu Haisu's students in Singapore, such as Liu Kang, Chen Jen Hao, and Huang Baofang Lee noted that it was because of their introduction that he came to China to meet Liu Haisu (Liu Haisu meishuguan, 2006, p. 203). China became an important potential target for Singapore's economic cooperation after its opening of the economy, and Liu Kang's connection with China was also a topic of concern for the interviewer; issues that Liu Kang could add to the Singapore Story as an artist.

The scarcity questions that were raised about art issues may have had something to do with the status of art in Singapore around the 1980s. Although Liu Kang served as the Chairman of Selective Committee for National Day Art Exhibitions for ten years, and his works as well as those of other pioneer artists were gaining attention; however, they were hardly taken seriously locally (National Day Art Exhibition, 1972).

Liu mentioned in his answer that the solo exhibitions of Nanyang artists could only be held at the National Art Gallery after his personal campaign, because the person in charge believed that "we don't display local painters" (NASOHI AN000171/Reel69). It was through their own efforts that the four pioneer artists could finally display their paintings exhibitions at their own "national" gallery from 1981 to 1984, respectively.[10] However, things began to change in mid–1980. Since the mid–1980s, concern about the cultural identification of younger Singaporeans has become apparent. In an opening speech of the National Exhibition celebrating Singapore's 25th anniversary of independence in 1984,

[10] Liu Kang's Retrospective Exhibition was in 1981, Chen Wen Hsi in 1982, Cheong Soo Pieng in 1983 and Chen Chong Swee in 1984 (Chen, 2006, p. 432; Yeo, 2010, p. 48; The Singapore Mint, 1994).

Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew conveyed his concerns about the younger generation of Singaporeans, and put forward that one possible measure was to use the past to educate the younger generation. Lee recounted the traumatic years of nation–building when the basic attributes of nationhood were missing. We were groups of diverse and different peoples. We had no common past. We had no common language, culture, or religion. We did not have "the social glue" to hold together as a nation (Lee, 1984, p.2).

Lee stated he hoped the exhibition would present younger generations of Singaporeans with "a compelling narrative of the past" and "a glimpse of the future" (Lee, 1984, p.2). Following Lee's concern, in 1988, an Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts was initiated, aiming to use arts and culture as instruments for the second phase of nation –building, in which culture was placed on the same footing as economic development. In 1989, a report was submitted to the First Deputy Prime Minister of Singapore, Mr. Goh Chok Tong, sent by the Advisory Council (Ong, 1989, p. 12). The report elevated the importance of culture and the arts to a national standard and proposed a series of measures to promote culture and arts development in Singapore. In his reply, Mr. Goh, pointed out that "Our shared heritage in nation–building, economic success, and a Singaporean artistic repertory, will reinforce our national identity" (Ong, 1989, p. 12).[11] The meaning and importance of art and culture to nation–building had finally been lifted to the government and policy level.

However, one question remains unsolved–what exactly should be the content of the art that the Singapore government wanted to promote? As a city–state relying heavily on the global economy, changes in the international politico–economic arena have greatly defined Singapore's domestic politics. Goh Chok Tong, Lee Kuan Yew's successor, encouraged Chinese cultural revitalisation during his term in the 1990s, considering an economic imperative to engage with a rising China coupled with a prevalent idea of Confucian values as a driving force behind the East Asian economic miracle (Tan, 2009, p. 329). However,

[11] The letter in which Mr. Goh Chok Thong replied to the Advisory Council was not paged but was placed in front of the detailed plan.

this promise came with the condition that such revitalisation must not lead to the closure of the "common space" where Singaporeans from multi–ethnic backgrounds could interact freely. In this light, the qualifications of being an amalgam of Chinese tradition and Western modernity while retaining multi–ethnic harmonisation made Nanyang art and Liu Kang the ideal archetype for the government promotion of art.

In this context, the institutionalisation of Nanyang art as Singapore's national art came to its zenith in the 1990s. A series of exhibitions and publications to acclaim Nanyang art and Nanyang artists were released. Until this point, Liu Kang and Chen Wen Hsi's interviews were re–categorised as a part of a new oral history project, "Visual Arts," in 1994. This project was a collaborative effort with the Singapore Art Museum, which was only officially inaugurated in 1996, but the blueprints for the construction of the museum were actually included in the aforementioned proposal in 1989 (Ong, 1989, p. 12). There–categorisation of these records happened in a time in which arts became a focus for second phase nation –building. Interviews with Liu Kang and Chen Wen Hsi perfectly fulfilled the role that artists should play in the Singapore Story. They have grown up together with Singapore all the way, and their artworks used to have their own specialties, just as Singaporean citizens come from diverse cultural backgrounds with various ethnicities. As Singapore history evolved, they gradually developed an identity with Singapore presented in their Nanyang artworks. They transformed from overseas Chinese artists to Singaporean artists.

It was also in 1994 that under sponsorship from the Singapore Mint, aretrospective exhibition on the four Nanyang artists, Reminiscence of Singapore's Pioneer Art Masters, was held. Liu Kang, as the only living pioneer artist, made the opening speech at this exhibition. Nonetheless, the meaning of this exhibition went far beyond the title of the event (The Singapore Mint, 1994). The Singapore Mint produced mixed gold and silver ingots dedicated to Liu Kang Chen Wen Hsi, Cheong Soo Pieng, and Chen Chong Swee. On one side of these ingots is an image of the artist while on the other side is one of the artist's paintings. This dedication served as important evidence to demonstrate to the public that

Nanyang art was officially a key contribution to the nation's art. Just as the pioneer Nanyang artists had reflected through their artwork, most ethnic Chinese in Singapore had transformed from overseas Chinese to Chinese Singaporeans who were living comfortably as Singapore citizens on this tropical island with which they identified, but they did not necessarily abandon their Chinese cultural roots.

Conclusion

With the government mandate and guidance from the very beginning, the oral history project has intertwined with Singapore's nation-building project. Owing to the conscious selection of interviewees, the aim-oriented design of the interview questions, and the screening process of the collection, the records of the Singapore Oral History Project, although not all were published as books, the compiled recordings themselves are used as primary sources in many books on Singapore history and government-sponsored exhibitions on national history. Since the late 1990s, the Oral History Centre has begun a digitisation process for oral history archives. Existing public recordings of oral history projects can be accessed through the National Archives of Singapore's website, and most of these are also available online in their corresponding texts. (NAS, 2021b). Thus, the oral history record became more easily accessible and widely publicised. For a nation like Singapore, which was founded only a short time ago, and where few written records have survived due to wars and changes of government, the archive and use of oral history is a significant way for the authorities to establish the history of the country.

From the interpretation of the early sub-projects of the Singapore Oral History Project and the case study of the Nanyang artist, it is evident that subjects chosen for this project were highly representative figures from all sectors who would have a positive impact on Singapore's nation-building and national identity and whose experience were in line with the Singapore Story constructed by the Singapore government. Singapore, with its short nationhood, demands such a history to strengthen the national consciousness and to motivate its

people to identify themselves as "Singaporeans." Since the 1990s, Singapore's economy has developed rapidly and the government's confidence increased dramatically, and there is a strong sense of national identity among citizens of all ethnicities. The Singapore Oral History Project has also grown in maturity. They turned its attention to a small number of diverse voices, especially those who had been marginalised in the development of Singapore's politics and culture, and listened to their stories, a reflection of the country's growing strength. The main theme of the Singapore Oral History Project will not change however; after all, more and more books related to Singapore's history adopt oral history records as primary sources.

Hence, in reading historical evidences particularly those categorised and stored in the national archives, scholars should cast a critical eye towards these evidences as they are not neutral. As Stoler (2008) suggests, archives is an institution that reinforces the state existence and serves as a tool for governance. To a certain extent, the categorisation of archival materials and the process that each collection comes into existence made the propagation of the state discourse palpable. In Liu Kang's case, it can be seen that the archiving of an artist's oral record reinforce the construction of Singapore national identity as a nation underpinned by cultural pluralism where various cultural groups maintain their unique identities while combine to form a larger richer whole. The exploration of Liu Kang's oral record's categorisation portrays how an overseas Chinese artist with Chinese cultural elements can be turned into a part and parcel of Singapore nation. Research focusing on archival processing is thus necessary in understanding how certain category prevails. The process is always entangled with politics particular in the case of Singapore discussed here.

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