

In Conversation with

Ms Chang Hwee Nee



Ms Chang Hwee Nee is the Chief Executive of National Heritage Board (NHB). Prior to joining the NHB, she has held senior positions in the Ministries of National Development, Education, Health and Finance. Miss Chang graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in Economics (Honours) from the University of Cambridge, United Kingdom and a Masters' degree in Public Administration from Harvard University.

The Singapore Botanic Gardens (“the Gardens”) is a valuable site steeped in over 150 years of history and was inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2015. This has understandably put Singapore in the spotlight and channelled favourable attention to our ability to maintain harmony between economic development and cultural and natural preservation.

Beyond a sense of pride which Singaporeans feel about having a culture of world significance, how do you think the Gardens’ newfound status has contributed to Singapore’s economy (e.g., in tourism and botany research, among others)?

The Singapore Botanic Gardens is a world-renowned institution for tropical botanical and horticultural research, education and conservation, with a long and rich history since the 19th century. It was at the Gardens that rubber cultivation and extraction were perfected, catalysing the rubber boom in the region and subsequently the world. In recognition of its contribution and relevance to world heritage, it was

inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2015. This is our nation's first! Since then, many more people are aware of the Gardens' status as a World Heritage Site — 85% in 2019, compared to 78% in 2017.

The Gardens has been a prominent centre for plant research in Southeast Asia since the 19th century, and over the years, the Gardens has enjoyed the support of corporate and individual partners who fund development, research and botanical or horticultural projects. Since the inscription as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, even more contributions have flowed in. These have enabled us to grow Singapore's first Seed Bank in the Gardens and to develop the Gallop extension. We also have an extensive project to catalogue and describe more than 3,000 plants in Singapore, under the Flora of Singapore research series. Today,

the team of nearly 20 researchers at the Gardens is working with collaborators from around 30 countries, such as the US, UK, Europe, East Asia and those in the region.

The Gardens has won the hearts of generations of Singaporeans and visitors. Its beauty has drawn many from far and near, and inspired artists and designers in the creative industry. I am sure many have precious memories on the Gardens' grounds — I often encounter wedding parties and happy families enjoying the trails and programmes. It draws almost 5 million visitors each year today. Perhaps unsurprisingly, many tourists are drawn to a special part of the Botanic Gardens — our National Orchid Garden. I like to think that the Gardens is deeply rooted in our national identity, flourishing as a result of our collective care and appreciation for it.



On a related note, notwithstanding the significant gains from tourism receipts, are there any dangers of Singapore's heritage sites being commoditised? Specifically, are there safeguards to prevent local heritage sites (not restricted to the Gardens) from turning into a Disneyland? Any insights on the cost-benefit analysis conducted prior to opening up a heritage site to unrestricted public access would be helpful.

Heritage is intrinsically linked to memory-making, for both locals and tourists. For a land scarce city state where land is a premium, Singapore has done well to have 74 National Monuments and over 7,000 conserved buildings.

Heritage is intrinsically linked to memory-making, for both locals and tourists.

These heritage sites are often important spaces for communities to gather. We retain many of them — for example places of worship — in their original functions. Many of our key national museums and heritage institutions are also housed in our monuments and conserved buildings.¹ Through NHB's signature festivals and initiatives such

¹ These include National Museum of Singapore, Asian Civilisations Museum, The Peranakan Museum, Malay Heritage Centre, Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall, Singapore Art Museum, and National Gallery Singapore. Additionally, Singapore Philatelic Museum — which will reopen as Singapore's first dedicated Children's Museum in late 2022 — and Reflections at Bukit Chandu are conserved buildings.

as the Singapore Heritage Festival and heritage trails, we are proud to have increased access to heritage sites so more Singaporeans can experience these spaces.

We do need to strike a careful balance between heritage preservation and economic sustainability. On the one hand, many of these heritage sites have to be adapted for reuse to keep up with the times and stay relevant. At the same time, we learn continuously from earlier experiences and public response to guard against the challenges of commodification and the “Disneyfication” of heritage, and to avoid what UNESCO refers to as the dangers of decontextualisation. Since the first Conservation Master Plan in 1986, we have been fine-tuning our adaptive reuse strategies.

Take for example Temasek Shophouse, a three-storey building — part of a row of conserved buildings — built in 1928 and given conservation status in 2000. The building was originally conceived as a townhouse with commercial space on the ground and residential apartments above. In 2017, Temasek Shophouse underwent an extensive restoration and was transformed into a publicly accessible social impact hub on Orchard Road, to feature co-working spaces and social enterprises, as well as house Temasek's philanthropic entities. Recently, Temasek Shophouse was awarded the 2019 Award for Restoration at the annual URA Architectural Heritage Awards,

a recognition of the exemplary care taken to ensure maximum retention, sensitive restoration, and careful repair. Adaptive reuse is a dynamic process, and each site is unique in its needs and functions. This calls on us to be flexible in our approach while maintaining conservation principles.

Prior to the UNESCO listing, Singapore had typically been recognised by tourists as a shopping paradise, with key draws such as Sentosa, Gardens by the Bay and the Integrated Resorts to boast. Does NHB feel the need to compete with the above attractions to place heritage sites such as the Gardens on every tourist's to-do list when they visit Singapore?

We are fortunate to have so many attractions well-loved by locals and tourists and we should increase the range and diversity of options for both groups of visitors to meet their varied interests. NHB's efforts are directed towards building social capital so Singaporeans know and understand our history, feel a greater sense of rootedness and identity, cherish and celebrate our shared cultures, and recognise the importance of leaving a heritage legacy towards a vibrant future.

At the same time, if we can draw tourists to our heritage sites, it will deepen their understanding of Singapore's history. Tourists also have a choice of many places to visit – in Singapore, and around the world. Drawing tourists to

our heritage sites challenges us to tell our history in more compelling ways. And with more tourists, we generate more resources to enhance our heritage sites.

Actually, attracting local and foreign visitors is synergistic: what is more attractive to tourists will naturally excite locals and imbue a sense of pride, and draw in more locals, while foreign visitors will get a better sense of Singapore's character and spirit. Collectively, a wide range of offering — including heritage sites, museums, and the many you have listed — contributes to a vibrant city and endearing home.

Heritage can be broadly categorised into tangible and intangible cultural heritage. Tangible heritage includes buildings and landscapes e.g., the Gardens that serve as physical reminders of our history and culture, while intangible heritage includes practices, events and trades which communities recognise as part of their cultural heritage.

In March 2019, Singapore submitted the nomination documents to inscribe an intangible heritage — Singapore's hawker culture on the UNESCO Representative List. Do you see a difference between the value of tangible and intangible cultural heritage in a country?

Cultural heritage comprises both the tangible and intangible cultural heritage. The former relates to our beloved spaces, while the latter, also known as living heritage, enlivens the tangible buildings and sites through the traditions and

practices associated with the spaces, and stories of past and lived experiences.

For instance, while our national monuments and conserved buildings serve as important physical reminders of our history and culture, various forms of intangible cultural heritage, such as processions or festive celebrations take place within these buildings. Intangible cultural heritage therefore complements and reinforces our appreciation and understanding of our tangible heritage in our multicultural society. It is important to consider them holistically, rather than as separate entities.

Both tangible and intangible cultural heritage foster social cohesion and contribute to our identity as Singaporeans. We know from international studies that heritage places play a pivotal role in anchoring our memories and engendering a sense of belonging and rootedness. Studies on human brains also show that rootedness enhances our physical, physiological, and emotional wellbeing. NHB has embarked on several initiatives to improve wellbeing through heritage participation. This includes an international collaboration with National Museum Liverpool and British Council to develop an application which uses our National Collection to support persons with dementia and their caregivers.² We are also working with local partners such as Lien Foundation and Khoo Teck Puat

Hospital Geriatric Education & Research Institute to spearhead meaningful programmes and better understand the social benefits of heritage. While these effects are continuing to be studied, it is clear that cultural heritage brings benefits in multiple ways.

In December 2018, a survey with 7,500 Twitter users across 13 countries conducted by the media giant found that around 25% of travellers who use Twitter have been to Singapore – with the top reason for visiting being Singapore’s good local food. Given the vibrancy and draw associated with Singapore’s food scene, how important is it for Singapore to obtain UNESCO recognition for this intangible asset?

We identified hawker culture as Singapore’s first intangible cultural heritage nomination to UNESCO because it is an integral part of everyday life in Singapore, and a common experience that resonates with people regardless of our individual backgrounds. Hawker centres serve as important community dining rooms where people from diverse age groups, ethnicities and backgrounds interact over food.

In early 2018, in a poll conducted as part of NHB’s Our SG Heritage Plan, the public identified “Food Heritage” as the most important aspect of heritage. Subsequently, in-depth focus group discussions in 2019, which included a spectrum of participants, consistently highlighted Hawker Culture as the form

² <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/coming-2020-dementia-friendly-app-seniors-loaded-museum-provided-content-jolt-memories>

Hawker centres serve as important community dining rooms where people from diverse age groups, ethnicities and backgrounds interact over food.

of intangible cultural heritage that best represents Singapore's multicultural heritage. Since we embarked on the nomination effort, it has been encouraging to observe Singaporeans showing their strong support.

While we recognise that our hawker centres appeal to both locals and foreign visitors, our nomination of Hawker Culture is primarily to bring pride among Singaporeans and celebrate our multicultural heritage. Recognition by UNESCO will encourage greater

appreciation for our hawkers and their fare and ensure the sustainability and vibrancy of our Hawker Culture. It will also be a strong recognition of our dedicated hawkers and their hard work towards contributing to the rich food heritage of our country.

We are pleased that UNESCO affirms our recognition of Hawker Culture as integral to our identity — you may recall the rush of pride and jubilation amongst Singaporeans when Hawker Culture was successfully inscribed to the UNESCO





Singapore's economic growth has been steady and fast-paced in the past few decades. It is clear that having achieved progress in material living standards, Singaporeans are increasingly looking towards the fulfilment of other non-material aspects of life. As a result, Singaporeans are also becoming more aware of the role of heritage in establishing and anchoring our sense of identity, as evident from the growing number of online communities documenting Singapore's heritage sites and passionate debates about preserving historical sites such as Bukit Brown.

Can you shed some light on the work that goes on behind the scenes in deciding which heritage sites to preserve (e.g., collaboration across Ministries or cost-benefit analyses involved)?

Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in December 2020!

Following the success of the Hawker Culture nomination, the NHB has embarked on consultations to identify possible elements for Singapore's second UNESCO intangible cultural heritage nomination. After a series of focus group discussions, we have identified a total of 10 possible elements. These include Chingay Parade, the Making and Sharing of Kueh, Orchid Cultivation, Yusheng, and various other suggestions. NHB will broaden its consultations to engage the general public, before a final decision is made on the element to be nominated.

An important thrust of Our SG Heritage Plan is to incorporate heritage considerations into planning by working closely with public agencies in the early stages. The inter-agency collaboration was enhanced with the completion of an NHB survey on Singapore's tangible heritage landscape in 2017. We have also made public the information: on Roots.sg, you can access a tangible heritage inventory to learn more about our 74 national monuments, various marked historic sites, heritage trails and buildings, sites and structures of architectural, historical and social significance. We will add more progressively to raise greater awareness and appreciation of our built heritage.

With careful and early planning, we can weave heritage in our urban and town planning to enhance the character of our day-to-day spaces and create identity nodes in our neighbourhood. An example is the Bidadari estate, where NHB worked with the Housing and Development Board (HDB) to research on the heritage of the area. We will develop a Heritage Walk along Old Upper Aljunied Road to feature the history of Bidadari and the contributions of prominent figures associated with the area. We will also integrate the Bidadari memorial garden that commemorates the former Bidadari Cemetery into the future Bidadari Park. These efforts to incorporate heritage into urban planning will make Singapore a more distinctive city and endearing home.

We acknowledge that trade-offs are occasionally inevitable. In these instances, we evaluate the considerations holistically and implement mitigating measures to minimise the impact. We also conduct public engagement and consultation as part of the planning

process to ensure that the views of experts and key stakeholders concerning heritage issues are considered in policies and plans. An example is the Dakota Crescent estate, which was built in 1958. Over time, the flats aged, and residents were relocated to newer HDB flats. In 2016, the Save Dakota Crescent group submitted a comprehensive conservation plan for the estate and government agencies worked with the group to study various options. It was eventually decided that the estate will be redeveloped for new public housing while the central cluster of buildings around the courtyard and the iconic Dove playground will be retained and repurposed for future civic and community use.

The above cases illustrate our approach towards achieving a balance between meeting Singapore's long-term development needs and maintaining the unique history and character of our places.

As part of our continual efforts to improve our processes, the URA, HDB and NHB commissioned a large-

With careful and early planning, we can weave heritage in our urban and town planning to enhance the character of our day-to-day spaces and create identity nodes in our neighbourhood.



scale detailed heritage study of the Old Police Academy in 2018. The study's findings resulted in the conservation of six buildings within the Academy, which will be incorporated into the future housing estate. The study's learning points have also led to the introduction of the heritage impact assessment (HIA) framework, which was announced in March 2022. Under the framework, public projects that are likely to cause major impact to significant heritage sites may be required by URA and NHB to conduct heritage studies. The new HIA framework further strengthens how public agencies must thoroughly evaluate the heritage significance of a site as an important consideration in the early stage of early planning for development projects.

We are mindful that public consultation is an important part of the assessment and planning process. We are also heartened to observe more public interest and encouraged by citizens' active participation in understanding our past and sharing their aspirations for the future. We work closely with stakeholders

such as the Singapore Heritage Society (SHS), both formally and informally. The Public-Private-People partnership is also evident in our efforts at place-making and programming to enliven neighbourhoods and public spaces. We hope more partners, including the Economic Society, will come forward and work with us to grow public consciousness around the value of heritage.

The government runs a "Our SG Heritage Plan" which is the first master plan for Singapore's heritage and museum sector that outlines the broad strategies and initiatives for the sector over the next five years (2018 to 2022) and beyond. Can you share more on the strategic thrusts under this plan and whether you foresee subsequent master plans after the objectives under the first one are met?

Our SG Heritage Plan is Singapore's first dedicated masterplan for the future of Singapore's museum and heritage sector. We formulated the plan after an extensive stakeholder engagement

process involving over 30 focus group discussions and consultations with more than 700 participants. It was heartening that over 7,300 people provided their views, showing the strong support from Singaporeans.

We developed the plan in response to the growing interest in heritage and museums among Singaporeans. More people wish to play an active role in protecting and promoting our heritage. The fabric of our society is also evolving and the pace of change increasing. Our SG Heritage Plan outlines how we — across government, with citizens, and among citizens — can work together to protect and promote Singapore's heritage so it remains valued amidst our ageing population, an increasingly diverse society, rapid technological changes, and globalisation.

We have grouped the key strategies of Our SG Heritage Plan into four pillars: Our Places, Our Cultures, Our Treasures, and Our Communities. Individually, these pillars deep dive into the core components of Singapore's heritage; collectively, they cover the breadth of NHB's work with our many stakeholders and partners. Some of the key initiatives of the plan include increasing appreciation of intangible cultural heritage, encouraging community ownership of heritage, leveraging technology and digitalisation, and ensuring greater accessibility and inclusivity at our museums. We hope that through these efforts, more

Singaporeans deepen their connection to our shared heritage.

Master plans are, by nature, work-in-progress and while they encapsulate key strategic thrusts, they must also be constantly updated to remain relevant. I am happy to share that we are already working on the next phase of Our SG Heritage Plan.

Your first degree was in Economics, which may not be the direct focus of NHB's work. Can you share with us how your Economics training has been useful to your current work?

My entire career has been with the Singapore public service and I am proud that fiscal prudence is a hallmark of our governing philosophy and successful management of the economy. In my current work, I have been encouraging my colleagues to use data, do rigorous analysis and take a more evidence-based approach to policy-making. That means we consider value-for-money, opportunity costs for the capital and resources, as well as closely monitor policy objectives and outcomes.

I am personally encouraged by the emerging empirical research into the value of heritage. There is currently a paucity of cultural economics research in Singapore, and NHB is actively monitoring and working with academics in universities and research institutes to develop this field. For example, we have commissioned Dr Euston Quah,

the Albert Winsemius Chair Professor and Head of Economics at the Nanyang Technological University (NTU), to assist us with a study on the economic value of heritage. This will build on his earlier study in 2019, on economic valuation of heritage sites in Singapore, using Contingent Valuation Method and Pairwise Comparison to measure the total economic value of Lau Pa Sat, former Tanjong Pagar Railway Station and Haw Par Villa. The study elicited Willingness to Pay (WTP) for the maintenance and preservation of these sites, and potential correspondence with demographic attributes. For example, Singapore citizens were found to have significantly higher WTP compared to non-citizens. That seems to me to bode well for NHB's efforts! NHB has also

recently provided a research grant to the National University of Singapore (NUS) to develop a decision-support tool for the conservation of post-independence buildings in Singapore. We hope that this project will provide useful insights in our discussions on modernist buildings in Singapore.

Of course, my colleagues and I are still working through what studies like that mean for us as policy-makers, and how we can incorporate these insights to our work. However, we also recognise that cultural economics is a developing field and, naturally, there will be limitations to the applicability of the research findings in policy formulation. Therefore, we should consider a variety of indicators to measure the impact of our work. We have to develop a holistic





and multi-dimensional understanding of the value of heritage, and while we are making a modest start now, we are mindful that this will be a long-term effort involving many stakeholders.

On a personal note, could you share with our readers which is the most satisfying aspect of your work?

As with any head of an organisation, my work is multi-dimensional. To fulfil the vision and mission of NHB, it is important for me to build a strong institution, grow our staff, partner our stakeholders and delight our customers. I find the most satisfying aspect of my work is the opportunity to work

with my team at NHB as well as our partners and volunteers who are all very committed and dedicated to promoting and safeguarding our shared culture and heritage. Ultimately, it is all about people — the passion and enthusiasm of our heritage and museum community is most inspiring! All of us find it very meaningful to promote a better understanding of our past, so that we understand our present to navigate our future with greater confidence. It is very rewarding to be given this opportunity to harness the tremendous amount of energy and creativity of my team and the community towards achieving our shared aspirations.