

An Interview with Mr Gene Tan

Assistant Chief Executive, National Library Board



Gene Tan

Image Credit: Gene Tan

Culture Academy

Would you introduce yourself and what you do for our readers?

Gene Tan

I have been a librarian my entire working life and went from being Director of the National Library to Creative Director of The Future of Us and then the Executive Director of the Singapore Bicentennial. I'm back at the National Library Board

	launching a year of experimentation entitled LAB25.
Culture Academy	You've headed the Singapore Bicentennial and SG50's the future of us exhibition, which tell the stories of Singapore's past and future. How did you bring people together through these stories to share a sense of national heritage and destiny?
Gene Tan	<p>It boils down to choreography in the end. The superlative teams that I had for both national projects pulled together copious amount of content and in a way set it to emotions. The secret sauce to make it all work? Talent from many different fields at the top of their game coming together to develop a product possibly the first of its kind in Singapore. This was especially true of The Bicentennial Experience which was the creation of gifted practitioners from theatre like the natural born storytellers Michael Chiang and Beatrice Chia-Richmond, music, film, set design, illusion and even silat!</p> <p>And lots of lots of pop culture influences! I derived a lot from pop culture – cinema, tv, art, music – in my work as I admire how the most successful of them are accessible to such a broad spectrum of people. Drawing from influences like Christopher Nolan's Dark Knight, Steven Spielberg, Harry Potter and a sprinkling of Star Wars helped my team and I to shape a story and an experience that was like something of an indie subject (how many might think of the subject of history) into a mainstream blockbuster.</p> <p>The phrase - "a sense of national heritage and destiny" often feels like a long patriarchal lecture on how to be a better or a certain type of person. I like to think the team brought back a sense of magic and feeling to the question of what it means to be Singaporean.</p>
Culture Academy	Singapore has always been a diverse society with differences in opinions and perspectives, as well as, different identities and beliefs. How did we forge a sense of national identity from so many differences? Also, have we 'forged well' in recent years?
Gene Tan	I wonder sometimes if in the development of a national identity, we are thinking of commonalities. So I hope our national identity is not so much forged through the homogenisation of what was formerly different but an understanding of our differences and respecting how sometimes they are parallel lines that might never meet. With that in mind, I wonder if national identity is made up of our differences rather than in spite of our differences. How about national identity as a spirit that transcends differences? Would that be having an expansive and magnanimous perspective towards ourselves and people from the region and the world? And paired with that outlook is a quest to solve global problems with ourselves as a petri dish. I like to think we have one of the better chances to achieve that.
Culture Academy	What are some storytelling strategies that work well in developing strong inter and intra community ties in a highly digitalised society like Singapore?
Gene Tan	I guess it is not to start with that end in mind – developing ties – when you plan your story? I put a question mark as it is at best a tentative answer to the

	<p>question. For me, I feel that having that august ambition immediately constrains the storybuilding process. What works for me is building a story that touches a person in many, many ways – and sometimes this might be independent of each community’s avowed interests. I believe in the universality of what can make a person tick. And perhaps building that universality is what will transcend community differences. I find using the medium of cinema a great unifier. And it translates so well into so many products whether as cut-down versions or spin-offs. It is always magical to create something so attention-grabbing (such that) the fan art/fiction/memes start having a life of its own.</p>
Culture Academy	<p>In your opinion, how have the experience of the Covid-19 pandemic influenced Singaporeans’ sense of national identity?</p>
Gene Tan	<p>It is amazing how the pandemic makes us feel pretty much like everyone else in the world. Depending on which stage of the pandemic you catch us and others at, we would all have gone through the cycle of panic, comfort, dislodgement, reinstatement, etc. I suspect we will get to the last stage more quickly as we are just made to get to the location more quickly through our problem-solving skills and sense of collective responsibility. But we will all get there. So I wonder if this is more a sense of national identity being enhanced or changed, or a sense of us and the world being less divided and distinct. The latter feels like a key part of the Singaporean identity – eventually always connected whether we feel it always or not.</p>
Culture Academy	<p>Would you name a performing arts piece that you feel, captures a keen sense of belonging to Singapore, and why that piece is important to you?</p>
Gene Tan	<p><i>Lear</i> by Theatreworks, directed by Ong Keng Sen, pulled together different art forms including Peking Opera in service of Shakespeare’s <i>King Lear</i>. I remember leaving Kallang Theatre disoriented as it was often an uncomfortable marriage of art forms and cultures and sometimes it even felt like the art form (e.g. the aforementioned Peking Opera) was diminished in expressing <i>Lear</i>. Some might say it was neither here nor there. Sounds like what it feels to be Singaporean and our constant search for an identity that is distinct and sometimes a journey tinged with envy for what looks like – from a distance – cultures that are more homogeneous (re: Japanese, French?). But we are a new formulation (and arguably all the other supposedly more homogenous cultures we envy) and in each Singaporean there is this uneasy concoction. I like the uneasiness. It means we are still on a quest and that conveys to me a sense of movement, dynamism.</p>