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SHAKESPEARE & SINGAPORE, 1900–1975

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What role did Shakespeare play in 20th-century Singapore? How did individuals from Singapore's diverse ethnic communities respond to, and rework, the plays of this English Renaissance playwright? Beyond the classroom, how did students and teachers creatively adapt Shakespeare's texts to better resonate with life in this tropical city? This talk explores the Shakespearean threads within Singapore's multicultural history, tracing how people in Singapore engaged with Shakespeare as the island transitioned from being a British colony to an independent Southeast Asian state.

TIME (MIN)	
0:00 (Speaker: Ms Emily Soon)	So thank you Vidya for that kind introduction and thank you all for coming. So just a few words of thanks before I start. Firstly, thank you to the National Museum for sponsoring this fellowship. And thank you also to the Heritage Conservation Centre, National Archives, Lee Kong Chian Reference Library and National University of Singapore for enabling me to access the materials, and to Crescent Girls' School, Raffles Institution and NUS Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine for allowing me to reproduce images from their collections. And again, thank you all for coming. So, *Shakespeare & Singapore*. In November 1967, Singapore's then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew gave a televised interview in which he fielded questions from foreign reporters. At that point, Singapore had only just established diplomatic relations with Indonesia after the end of the armed Confrontation taking place between Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia from 1963 to 1966.
01:15 (Speaker: Ms Emily Soon)	When one reporter asked Lee for his thoughts on Singapore's relationship with Indonesia following the Confrontation, Lee responded somewhat unexpectedly by asking the reporter if he knew Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Lee noted, there is a finality after each act. Act one, scene one, then curtains rise. Act one, scene two and then the next act or scene or so on until the grand finale. Lee argued that the Confrontation, in contrast, is not structured like a Western drama and cannot end in such a final manner.

01:41 (Speaker: Ms Emily Soon)	Lee observed that the traditional Indonesian shadow puppet – or *wayang kulit* – performances are very different to Western plays. In a similar way, Lee implied, Singapore's ongoing drama with our southern neighbour will continue to evolve in ways that Western observers may not expect. Lee then went on to provide a more substantive analysis of the current state of Singapore's relationship with Indonesia – I think, to the great relief of the reporter. His opening allusion to *Hamlet*, however, did more than just buy him think time. For a start, it emphasised to the international media that this leader of a young Asian nation was well schooled in both Western and Eastern culture.
02:16 (Speaker: Ms Emily Soon)	The comparison also subtly puts the reporter in his place by insinuating that the Western cultural and diplomatic norms the reporter is familiar with do not apply in this part of the world. Lee implies that he – and not foreign observers – are best placed to comment on – and manage – local affairs. Lee's response is thus quite a dexterous one that serves his political agenda well. He is not the only Singaporean to use this knowledge of Shakespeare to good effect. Looking back over Singapore's archives, we can find a wide range of public figures employing Shakespeare to articulate their views about issues relevant to this nation.
02:52 (Speaker: Ms Emily Soon)	So for instance, in 1972, when Parliament was debating how to develop the Singapore Armed Forces, then Member of Parliament Joseph Conceicao outlined his vision for the ideal SAF officer via quoting a line from Shakespeare's *Henry V* which, when paraphrased, said "nothing so becomes a man as quietness and humility, though in war he should be like a tiger."
03:14 (Speaker: Ms Emily Soon)	The next year, when speaking to students at Swiss Cottage Secondary School, then Minister for Law and National Development E. W. Barker used Shakespeare's tragedy *Othello* to warn students of the need to make wise life decisions. Singapore Airlines also featured Shakespearean quotes in their advertising campaigns in the early 1970s and references to Shakespeare recur across the local press.
03:38 (Speaker: Ms Emily Soon)	So, for instance, when describing the Singapore River prior to its clean-up in the late 1970s, a local reporter adapted Lady Macbeth in Shakespeare's play. The tragic heroine, unable to rid herself of the guilt she felt over murdering King Duncan, imagined that her hairs were perpetually reeking with the stench of blood. So where Lady Macbeth had lamented famously that all the perfumes of Arabia cannot sweeten her little hand, the Singapore Free Press decided to write that, as Shakespeare almost wrote, "All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little river." As these examples suggest, English-educated Singaporeans knew their Shakespeare and they knew him well. The frequency with which Singapore's public figures and the press alluded to Shakespeare in the mid-20th century may initially strike one as somewhat unexpected. After all, the early to mid-20th century Singapore is often perceived to be a survival-driven society in which, to quote Lee Kuan Yew again, "Poetry is," I quote, "a luxury we cannot afford."

04:39 (Speaker: Ms Emily Soon)	While there is growing interest in contemporary 21st-century Asian Shakespeare, as exemplified by productions such as Ong Keng Sen's *Desdemona* held in the year 2000, and the scholarship and teaching promoted by the Asian Shakespeare Intercultural Archive, there has been relatively less attention paid to Singapore's literary history in the early 20th century.
04:56 (Speaker: Ms Emily Soon)	In this talk, I then seek to draw attention to some of the Shakespearean threads woven into 20th-century Singapore's national fabric, exploring how individuals from Singapore's diverse ethnic communities engaged with Shakespeare as this nation transitioned from being a British colony to an independent Southeast Asian state. So I begin with an overview of Shakespeare's plays in the English-medium school system, exploring how and why Shakespeare was taught over the years and using the museum's collection of textbooks to help illustrate this. Next, I look at school performances of Shakespeare to get a sense of how students and teachers adapted Shakespeare's text to better resonate with life in this Asian city. I then turn to consider how individuals from the Malay-, Chinese- and Tamil-speaking communities engaged with this playwright, before concluding by looking at Shakespeare's role in the development of Singapore literature.
05:46 (Speaker: Ms Emily Soon)	So first, Shakespeare in English schools. In the absence of a professional English theatre scene, the main place young people in early 20th-century Singapore could encounter Shakespeare's plays in English was within the colonial classroom. These English-medium schools, such as St. Joseph's Institution shown here, educated a limited number of students and were run either by the British government or private – often faith-based – organisations, as with St. Joseph's. These schools typically recruited students from across Singapore's diverse ethnic communities and thus provided an important platform for interracial mingling during this era. As with other British colonies, English schools in Singapore existed for a combination of pragmatic and ideological reasons. In practical terms, these schools equipped locals to fulfil the administrative needs of government and business. Ideologically, these institutions enabled the British to create a community familiar with, respectful of, and loyal to the British empire, at least in theory. And Shakespeare was used to address both these educational aims. Firstly, studying Shakespeare was believed to enhance students' spoken and written English. In 1902, St. Joseph's Institution – which was then operating at Bras Basah Road in buildings which now form the Singapore Art Museum – decided to, and I quote, "improve upon their commercial curriculum". They did so by adding a Shakespeare course which the principal believed would, and I quote, "greatly improve the boys' English". The commercial class was a stream designed to equip youths for administrative employment and the inclusion of a Shakespeare course suggests that the subject was similarly deemed to be useful in preparing students for the working world.
07:24 (Speaker: Ms Emily Soon)	So this textbook in the museum's collection, Book 3 of the *New Method Malayan Readers* series, gives us a sense of how Shakespeare could be used to aid language learning. Published in the 1940s, this reader features a prose version of the tale of Oberon and Titania, the fairies from Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. So the idea is that the class reads the story,

	paragraph by paragraph, and learns vocabulary items that were given at the top. In this case, “Fair Hair Servant” and the phrase “Laughs at” from context. Within the story itself, as you can see, the vocabulary items are placed in bold to help students identify them. So in addition to helping improve students’ English, Shakespeare was also used to help foster a sense of belonging to the British Empire in the early 20th century. But the British valorised Shakespeare as a national hero and this playwright featured strongly in the British quest to inculcate patriotism domestically and across the empire, including in Singapore.
08:22 (Speaker: Ms Emily Soon)	Another of the textbooks in the museum's collection, namely *The Pupils’ Class-Book of English History*, demonstrates how Shakespeare was used to advance this patriotic agenda in class. So this particular book was owned by a student named Tan Hock Leong, who was enrolled in the Mercantile Institution, a private school in Queen Street in 1951. And you can see he's written his name on the cover, so Tan Hock… right there. And within this textbook, Shakespeare is praised for being an exemplary patriot, a man who “was very proud of England and showed the noble deeds of his native land in some of his plays”. Across the book, students are repeatedly asked to memorise Shakespearean passages that celebrate Britain, such as these lines from *Richard II*, which described the country as a “royal throne of kings, this scepter’d isle…” et cetera, et cetera. Yeah, so writing about the British, the English literature curriculum at Raffles Institution (RI) in the 1930s, the critics Philip Holden and Suzanne Choo have separately discerned the tendency for the subject to, in Choo’s phrase, “result in a colonisation of students’ imaginations”. Text such as *The Pupils’ Class-Book of English History* amply validate their conclusions, demonstrating that the intention to use English education to shore up the British Empire extended well beyond RI’s literature classroom. Following Singapore's attainment of self-government in 1959, the ideological objectives of English education changed. Naturally, English schools no longer aimed to cultivate allegiance to Britain. Nonetheless, for pragmatic reasons, Shakespeare remained an important figure in English schools. The Cambridge School Certificate exam, which was what the GCE and A- and O-Levels were then known as, featured a compulsory Shakespeare section. The government had chosen English as Singapore's lingua franca to enable its people to tap into global economic and technological networks as well as to allow its multiethnic population to communicate in a relatively neutral language. Conscious that mastering the language could help their children get ahead in life, an ever-increasing number of parents sent their offspring to English schools. As had been the case in the colonial era, educators believed that studying English Lit. would substantially help improve students’ English language.
10:29 (Speaker: Ms Emily Soon)	So in 1969 to 1970, students from Queenstown Secondary (Technical) School who were found to be very weak in English were asked to read literature instead of science in order to give them more opportunities to use their language. They were also given extra tuition in English Language and Literature. English literature was deemed to be useful in its own right too, so young people who wished to apply for a range of university scholarship and job positions were often required to demonstrate that they had passed the subject at School Certificate level. As Singapore's tertiary education sector was still developing, the government invested heavily in scholarships to send young

	people abroad for specialised training. Scholarship candidates had to meet the entry criteria set by anglophone universities, which often required a mastery of English Lit. – even for subjects that appear to have very little to do with it. So, for instance, if in 1963, you wished to apply to study occupational therapy on a government scholarship to New Zealand, you would need to have passed English Literature at School Certificate level. You would get preference given to you if you had also passed it at A-level. Young people who wanted to study radiology in 1961 were likewise advised that they must possess a School Certificate or equivalent pass in English Lit. Jobseekers hopeful of a position in sales or book publishing were also required to prove that they had obtained a credit in this exam. So given the practical value of passing literature, a range of Shakespeare-related activities developed outside schools to help students master this important yet challenging author. Chief among these was Shakespeare Week in 1959, where schools and organisations collaborated to put on a full week's worth of Shakespeare events. Across the 1950s to 70s, there were also Shakespeare performances by amateur groups such as The Stage Club. And over the decades, the club has done a lot to make Shakespeare more accessible to schools. So this poster is from a 1964 production of *Twelfth Night* held to commemorate the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's birth. As you can see, the group specifically organised student performances. In addition, across the mid-20th century, Radio and Television Singapura, which is the predecessor of Mediacorp, put Shakespeare plays and programmes on public radio and television; cinemas offered concession rates on Shakespeare films for students, and organisations, including the National Museum and National Library Board, held Shakespeare film screenings and talks. The *New Nation* newspaper, which is no longer in operation, published weekly educational broadsheets providing analyses of Shakespeare plays and there was a thriving, if rather controversial, business in Shakespeare guidebooks. So looking at Shakespeare's plays in Singapore's school system from 1900 to 1975, one is tempted, perhaps, to conclude that, in some ways, the study of this playwright directly contributed to pumping Western culture into local students, creating generations of so-called Western Oriental gentlemen or gentlewomen who had lost contact with their Asian roots. And while there is, I think, some truth in it, I think this is not the whole story.
13:36 (Speaker: Ms Emily Soon)	And while Singapore-based educators may have been keen to teach students Shakespeare, they were also cognisant of the value of introducing students to Asian culture and attempted to provide students with a more balanced literature curriculum, both before and after independence. So, for instance, when we look at the 1939 Education Code for the Straits Settlements, we see that while the syllabus does specify that students should read tales such as Lamb's *Tales from Shakespeare*, which is a simplified prose version of Shakespeare's plays, they were also encouraged to use localised textbooks such as the *MPH Dramatic Readers*. These readers were a series of short classroom plays mainly set in Asia and written by the multiethnic members of the Singapore and Johor Teachers' Association. First published in 1932, these readers continued to be in use until the 1960s at least.

14:18 (Speaker: Ms Emily Soon)	The *New Method Malayan Readers* which I mentioned earlier also strove to provide students with a more multicultural reading experience. So Book 3, for instance, begins with a Malay folk tale about the mouse deer and crocodile, before students explore the tale of Oberon and Titania, which we saw earlier. The cultural medley then continues across the book as students read Indian and Arabian legends alongside the tale of Alexander the Great, a figure revered in both East and West, and particularly within Malay culture. The quest to provide students with a more balanced literary diet gathered strength as Singapore prepared for independence, with the Ministry of Education seeking to Malayanise school syllabuses and textbooks from the 1950s onwards. Shakespeare remained a compulsory part of the School Certificate exam, as I mentioned earlier, but the syllabus documents produced by the Ministry showed that policymakers were committed to supplementing British writing with more local material. Led by Mr Philip Liau, a long-serving educator who eventually became principal of Raffles Institution, the Ministry of Education's English Language and Literature subcommittee produced a recommended book list in 1960. This list advocated that, prior to studying Shakespeare, the equivalent of Secondary Three students should spend their lower secondary years exploring Asian-themed texts such as *Lady Precious Stream*, a play set in Tang Dynasty China, legends of the ancient Malay hero, Hang Tuah and Shamus Frazer's *The Crocodile Dies Twice*, a short novel set in post-war Singapore and written by a teacher at Victoria School. This multicultural emphasis continued at the pre-university level.
15:51 (Speaker: Ms Emily Soon)	So the 1958 syllabus for Higher School Certificate or A-level English Literature encourages students to pair Asian art forms such as the Malay *bangsawan*, the Indonesian *wayang kulit* and the Chinese *wayang* with Greek drama. The 1958 syllabus also encouraged science students to broaden their horizons by reading translations of Chinese poetry, the works of the modern Indian writer Tagore and the ancient Persian author Ferdowsi, alongside texts by Shakespeare. This commitment to introducing students to a wide range of cultures extended beyond the literature classroom. In response to the government's Malayanisation drive, Federal Publications, a company based in Singapore and Kuala Lumpur, produced a series of English language textbooks known as the *Federal Readers*. Book 9 features a simplified prose retelling of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* alongside a story by the pioneering Indian writer Dhan Gopal Mukerji and an extract from the diary of Jewish teenager Anne Frank. The collection also includes tales set in Indonesia, Poland and America, testifying to the book's intention of creating an international learning experience for students. The ministry also briefly incorporated literature within the compulsory second language syllabus. So if you were a student in an English school taking Chinese as your second language, you would do Shakespeare in English lessons, and in Mandarin lessons you would do Wenyanwen (文言文). Although, this didn't last very long because students, in practice, couldn't cope with it. Admittedly, despite these admirable efforts, neither the British nor Singaporean syllabuses and textbooks provided students with equal opportunities to explore Asian and European culture. The field of world literature remained developing and, correspondingly, the bulk of the school text recommended across the period remained Western. Nonetheless, what these syllabuses and textbooks indicate is that both British and Singaporean

	educators tried to supplement students' exposure to Shakespeare with Asian-themed writing – long before the 21st-century curriculum reforms made Singapore literature a permanent part of the national syllabus. That said, while these documents give us an insight into what educators intended for their students, they do not show us what actually happened in the classroom. Then, as now, schools are free to choose text from the recommended list and it is unclear how many schools opted to teach Asian-themed texts alongside the prescribed Shakespeare ones. I therefore turned to school performances of Shakespeare to get a better sense of how students in Singapore engaged with the works of this English Renaissance playwright.
18:17 (Speaker: Ms Emily Soon)	So across the 20th century, teachers in Singapore schools used a wide range of strategies to help students engage in Shakespeare with varied results. So this included asking students to paraphrase Shakespeare's text in their own words, which wasn't very popular, or asking them to visualise and discuss what was happening in a given scene. An especially popular activity was inviting students to act Shakespeare out. As a pedagogy, dramatisation came highly recommended.
18:41 (Speaker: Ms Emily Soon)	In 1908, the UK-based English Association published a pamphlet titled *The Teaching of Shakespeare in Schools*, which recommended that students act Shakespeare out because they believed that the living voice would give students a clue as to the meaning and reading aloud would be the only way to ensure knowledge of the metre. This pamphlet and the performance pedagogy it promoted would prove to be most influential in Singapore, with the 1936 Education Code for the Straits Settlements recommending it as a valuable guide for local teachers. Performing Shakespeare was an especially valuable experience for students in Singapore. Compared to their peers in Britain, with its long-established professional theatre scene, students here had relatively fewer opportunities to watch live Shakespeare plays. Students could sometimes watch Shakespeare productions by amateur theatrical groups, such as The Stage Club, as I mentioned earlier, or attend professional productions by touring companies. Such opportunities were, however, quite limited. In 1945, when the British Armed Forces arranged for a touring production of *Hamlet* starring Sir John Gielgud to visit the country, only 20 local undergraduates were admitted and they were required to serve as ushers. Under such circumstances, the most effective way to ensure that students had the opportunity to watch a live Shakespeare performance was for students to produce one themselves. And so that is precisely what students did. From 1904, at least, students in Singapore schools kept on putting on Shakespeare's plays in schools. This became particularly popular from the 1950s onwards and many schools put on productions. In this part of the talk, I'll highlight just some of them. So The Raffles Players was a group of students from Raffles Institution and Raffles Girls' School and they were especially keen on Shakespeare. From 1954 onwards, the group put on a Shakespeare play almost annually and various pioneers participated in these productions during their school days. Mrs Leaena Tambyah, who is well known today for her social work and for helping special needs children, for instance, was the group's first female chairperson. Former deputy prime minister, Professor S. Jayakumar and the playwright Mrs Stella Kon, author of *Emily of Emerald Hill*, were also part of The [Raffles]

	Players. This photograph shows the cast of the 1958 production of *Henry V* by The Raffles Players.
20:57 (Speaker: Ms Emily Soon)	You can see Professor Jayakumar here, and Mrs Stella Kon here – or Lim Sing Po, as she was known in her school days – in the back row. So these productions, as you can sort of see from this photo, were quite large-scale affairs. By the 1970s, each school production at Raffles had approximately two to three hundred players. These productions were also quite high profile and regularly attracted attention in the press; the students even being interviewed on national radio or television at times. So in 1975, for instance, [CHIJ] Katong Convent put on a production of *Twelfth Night* that was so well received they were invited to perform on national television. So from the records of these performances, students and teachers clearly went to considerable lengths to reconstruct the historical era the plays were set in. Student performers were often dressed in historical costumes. As you can see here, quite a few of the students are wearing Elizabethan-style ruffs around their necks.
21:51 (Speaker: Ms Emily Soon)	In this 1959 photograph of an unidentified Malayan school, which is probably a convent, but we're not sure, you can see that the students performing as male characters are dressed in the doublet-and-hose costumes popular in Shakespeare's time. And in this 1958 photograph, also of *Henry V* at Raffles, you can see them wearing medieval-style armour. And the school magazine reported that the students built about approximately 30 sets of armour out of aluminium for this production. So they kept themselves quite busy. However, these performances were not always about local school straightforwardly replicating Shakespeare in culture. We look at surviving records, it becomes apparent that, on multiple occasions, schools have seemed to have quite creatively incorporated Asian elements within their productions.
22:37 (Speaker: Ms Emily Soon)	So, for instance, this is a photograph of a 1970 production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* by The Raffles Players. So *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is set chiefly in the forest outside ancient Athens and the sort of Grecian-style tunic the actress is wearing and the laurel wreath the actor has on suggests that the school was striving for such historical accuracy. The painted backdrop visible behind the actors appears, at least to my eyes, to draw upon a different cultural tradition. If we look at the backdrop and we look at contemporary Chinese landscape painting, you can see that the mountain is painted quite, in style, similar to Chinese landscape painting. And the style of the tree, in terms of the trunk and the position of the branches, also quite resembles that [of which] you would find in Chinese painting. And we look at the photographs in the museum's collection, we can see that a similar type of background was being used sometimes by some of the Chinese opera troupes, as you can see here. So it seems that this is what the students were going for. However, that said, the school magazine does not explicitly comment on the background and so we cannot know for certain if the students were deliberately trying to imitate Chinese painting in their work. Nonetheless, members of the audience may well have recognised the parallels between Chinese *wayang*, Chinese painting and the backdrop. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the forest outside Athens is an enchanted place. For audience members familiar with Chinese paintings, the sense that the lovers had entered a magical space would perhaps have been

	enhanced by the unexpected sight of Singapore students dressed in Athenian costumes declaiming Shakespeare's lines before a background that looked rather more Asian than Greek. On other occasions, students used Asian-style costumes.
24:16 (Speaker: Ms Emily Soon)	So this is a photograph taken from a 1958 production, also for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, by Crescent Girls' School. And while some of the characters appear to be in Western dress, others seem to be wearing the flowing silks – the flowing silken robes – reminiscent of the sort worn by Chinese *wayang* performers. And in this case, we know for certain that the girls were wearing Chinese costumes because Professor Koh Tai Ann, currently of Nanyang Technological University, was a student at Crescent Girls' at the time and participated in the school drama. In a published talk, Professor Koh recalls that the cast were indeed wearing Chinese opera-style costumes here, as well as in another production of *Macbeth*. Singapore's schools used Southeast Asian attire at times too. In 1962, the student teachers of the Singapore Teacher's Training College or the forerunner of the National Institute of Education mounted a production of *The Tempest* where the players wore Malayan costumes. They also used Malayan setting and music. At times, students even rewrote Shakespeare in Singlish – an informal version of English which is… anyone who's lived here for any time would know it combines English with Malay, Chinese and Tamil. And Mrs Rosie Lim, who was an amateur actress and mother of the playwright Stella Kon, taught at Bartley [Secondary] School briefly in the post-war years. In an oral history interview, Mrs Lim recollects working with her students to produce an adaptation of *Pyramus and Thisbe*, the play staged within the play in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.
25:43 (Speaker: Ms Emily Soon)	Lim's daughter, Mrs Stella Kon, who watched her performance as a child, recollects that it was staged in what she describes as *wayang*-style and with the dialogue in Singlish. Mrs Kon notes that the use of Singlish on stage was considered a breakthrough for the time. Mrs Kon also recalls that watching the Bartley performance inspired her to write a play she called *The Tragedy of Lomeo and Zhuliet*. So this was an adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* in rhyming couplets and Kon, likewise, describes it as being written in Singlish. Her Primary Six class staged an adaptation in the Chinese *wayang* style for a school concert at Raffles Girls' Primary School. And her oral history interview is freely available, so if you want to listen to her talk about it, it's available. Through altering the backdrop, costumes and language used in Shakespeare's plays, schools thus created what could, perhaps, broadly be considered as early experiments in intercultural theatre. As defined by the performance critic, Catherine Diamond, intercultural performances are productions that combine Western text such as Greek or Shakespearean tragedies with Southeast Asian dance drama forms.
26:41 (Speaker: Ms Emily Soon)	Professional intercultural productions of Shakespeare by Singapore directors such as Ong Keng Sen developed from the late 20th century onwards. Based on records of 20th-century school drama, it would appear that Singapore witnessed versions, in a loose sense, of intercultural Shakespeare somewhat earlier than this contemporary vogue for Asian Shakespeare. In different ways, these performances place the very English world Shakespeare's associated

	with in conversation with the varied cultures present in Singapore and achieved a range of effects. For one, the use of Asian costumes to stage Shakespeare could perhaps have made Shakespeare's plays easier to relate to, thereby helping the audience to appreciate how Shakespeare's themes are applicable to life here as well. Drawing points of equivalence between Asia and Europe would have been particularly valuable and innovative in the mid-20th century.
27:41 (Speaker: Ms Emily Soon)	One of colonialism's lingering effects was the perception that British culture was superior to its Asian counterpart as captured in Victorian imperialist Thomas Babington Macaulay's infamous assertion in 1835 that "a single shelf of a good European Library was worth a whole native literature of India and Arabia". So using Asian elements to stage Shakespeare helps to correct this misperception by demonstrating that Asian culture was as worthy as being celebrated on stage as the internationally acclaimed works of Shakespeare. These cross-cultural performances, I suggest, would have provided young people here the chance to develop an awareness of – and pride in – Asia's rich cultures, even as these same performances helped students to become familiar with Western culture. These school productions hence contributed to ongoing efforts to help Singaporeans take pride in their Asian heritage. It was an especially important project during Singapore's early years when this nation was still developing a sense of cultural confidence. Where 20th-century English-educated Singaporeans are more commonly accused of being a deculturalised group whose Asian physical appearance contrasted with their Western ways of thinking, these performances suggest that this community retained an Asian core which schools were keen to champion and bring back into view. The drive to localise Shakespeare existed beyond the English-speaking sphere.
28:48 (Speaker: Ms Emily Soon)	In the next section of the talk, I'll explore how Singapore's Malay-, Chinese- and Tamil-speaking communities forge connections between East and West. So first, Malay Shakespeare. The *bangsawan*, or Malay opera, shown here was a hugely popular form of entertainment in 20th-century Singapore and Malaysia. In Singapore, this form would decline in the later 20th century with the rise of television. These groups put on a wide range of productions and their stories came from a wide range of sources including the Malay or Arab legends, Chinese romances and also Shakespeare plays. The *bangsawan* Shakespeare represents the most common form of vernacular Shakespeare in early 20th-century Singapore. While the productions of Shakespeare put on by students in English schools largely retained Shakespeare's plot, the *bangsawan* companies took considerable liberties with the text. As outlined by Tan Sooi Beng in her excellent monograph on the subject, *bangsawan* groups did not use fixed scripts. Instead, the troupe agreed on an overall storyline and set of scenes known as *babak* and freely improvised in Malay as they went along, often adding lots of comic moments. For a start, sometimes it altered the characters' names. So Hamlet, who is the very serious tragic hero of a very serious play, was sometimes renamed "Omelette".
29:59 (Speaker: Ms Emily Soon)	They'd also re-work or remove parts of the plot to suit the broader *bangsawan* tradition. So in *Hamlet*, for instance, Hamlet, as a tragic hero, dies in the end. He has to, even though he is essentially a good character because the genre of Western tragedy requires that the tragic hero must suffer terribly. However, this

	clashes with the *bangsawan* tradition which holds that good must be allowed to triumph over evil. And so, as a way of reconciling the two competing traditions, in some – but not all – Malay versions of *Hamlet*, the plot would be reworked so that although Hamlet is still poisoned as per Shakespeare, he manages to somehow crawl off stage, get himself to a witch doctor who then gives him some herbs to save his life and he then lives happily ever after, thereby ensuring that the *bangsawan* principle of good triumphing over evil is allowed to prevail as well. The *bangsawan* troupes could also add a good number of many performances or extra turns between the scenes. These could take the forms of sketches, dances, songs or short skits inspired by the local community. The actors you'd see on stage could come from a wide range of places and Tan has documented finding Malay, Filipino, Eurasian, Indian, Chinese, Indonesian and Arab members, and those are just what she could find when she did her study. News reports suggest that *bangsawan* Shakespeare was as profitable as it was popular, with patrons and audiences coming from across Singapore's diverse communities, most of whom could understand at least basic Malay.
31:28 (Speaker: Ms Emily Soon)	*Bangsawan* Shakespeare – that shows how Singapore's Malay-speaking community creatively adapted English literature to create its own unique form of cultural expression.
31:35 (Speaker: Ms Emily Soon)	Next, Chinese Shakespeare. There is a long history of studying, performing and translating Shakespeare in China that dates from the 19th century at least, as theatre historians such as Alexander Huang have documented. Singapore would have to wait until the early 1980s for its first full-length Chinese-language adaptation of Shakespeare. However, on at least one occasion in the mid-20th century, Shakespeare was translated into Chinese too. So Dato Loke Wan Tho founded and ran the Cathay Organisation and cinema which is still an operation down the road from here. And so this photograph shows the Cathay cinema as it looked like in the late 1930s.
32:30 (Speaker: Ms Emily Soon)	In 1948, Dato Loke – or Mr Loke, as he was then known – opted to screen Laurence Olivier's *Hamlet* using posters such as this one in the museum's collection to advertise the film. Surprisingly, this English-language movie was a smash hit, with the press reporting that the film generated the Cathay cinema's heaviest advanced bookings since its opening. This was somewhat unexpected because English remained a minority language in mid-20th-century Singapore and when they tried screening Olivier's *Henry V* the year before, it had not been a success. News reports suggest an intriguing reason for the success of this film, namely, Chinese subtitles. Mr Loke had engaged someone called Mr Lau Sheng Yan who had studied at St. Paul's College in Hong Kong to produce these. What Mr Lau did was, he etched a Chinese translation of the film's dialogue onto 250 glass slides that had been painted black with Chinese ink and the slides were then projected onto the stage. So, for instance, this four-character Chinese phrase was used to summarise about 15 lines from one of Hamlet's many monologues. Using the subtitles to summarise and convey the essence of the scenes rather than reproduce a direct translation of each line made practical sense for it minimised the number of slides the projectionist needed to manage. While we are quite accustomed to using subtitles to help us

	gain access to foreign language films such as *Parasite* today, in the 1940s, this was deemed to be a feature unique in Singapore film history. A pioneering move that underscores how the promotion of culture and the pursuit of profit need not always be mutually exclusive.
33:47 (Speaker: Ms Emily Soon)	So next, Tamil Shakespeare. So communities in India had been engaging with Shakespeare since the 19th century and the rich tradition of Indian Shakespeare continues today as explored by critics such as Harish and Poonam Trivedi. In the 1960s, Tamil artistes based in Singapore contributed to this field too. P. Krishnan is a Cultural Medallion winner and Tamil literary pioneer. In addition to publishing numerous Tamil short stories, in 1961, Krishnan also produced a translation of *Macbeth* in Tamil, which is then broadcast on Radio Singapura.
34:21 (Speaker: Ms Emily Soon)	He later published a full translation of the play in literary Tamil in 1996 and this was then staged in the year 2000.
34:30 (Speaker: Ms Emily Soon)	Another Cultural Medallion winner, S. Varathan, also contributed to the Tamil Shakespeare scene. S. Varathan is a founding member of the Singapore Rational Dramatic Troupe, a Tamil theatre group founded in 1955. In 1963, the troupe mounted a Tamil-language version of *Romeo and Juliet* and held it at Gan Eng Seng School Hall. And you've got some photographs from this production on the screen. The troupe also produced a souvenir booklet to commemorate the occasion, featuring a foreword by then Minister for Culture S. Rajaratnam. In his foreword, Rajaratnam declares that such productions will undoubtedly help in promoting better understanding between the various races and the manner in which the booklet itself was produced reveals that the production was indeed trying to cross cultural borders. Both Rajaratnam's foreword and considerable sections of the booklet are bilingual, published in both Tamil and English. Now if the intended audience for the production had been wholly Tamil-speaking, the English sections would have been entirely unnecessary. The presence of the dual English-Tamil text in the booklet suggests that the performance was twofold and serves to bring Shakespeare to the Tamil-speaking community on one hand, but also to enable English-speaking individuals from diverse backgrounds to access Tamil theatre. The sense of the production's consciously cross-cultural nature also comes across from the letters and adverts within the booklet, which include contributions by local Indian Muslims, Chinese businesses and cultural groups in Madras. The booklet therefore indicates that the performance did indeed seek to cross cultural borders, vindicating Rajaratnam's statement about the power of theatre in the foreword.
36:02 (Speaker: Ms Emily Soon)	So last but not least, Singapore literature. In addition to contributing to Singapore's performing arts, Shakespeare also had a small part to play in the early development of Singapore's multilingual literary scene. *The Cauldron* was a literary publication started in the late 1940s by the medical students of the King Edward VII College of Medicine, the forerunner of the Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine at NUS. When the medical college merged with Raffles College to form the University of Malaya – or NUS, as it is now known – *The*

	Cauldron became *The New Cauldron*. Between them, the two journals are acknowledged as early cradles for the emergence of Singapore literature. *The New Cauldron*, in particular, was where literary pioneers such as Edwin Thumboo published his early work. Across the two journals, the students explored a wide range of literary traditions. Though most of the submissions were in English, you can also find text written in Chinese, Malay and Tamil as well as pieces on Persian poetry, and so forth. So, overall, the two "cauldrons" effectively functioned as cultural melting pots where young people explored and experimented with a diverse range of literatures… what is perhaps not that well-recognised today is that Shakespeare provided one of the early ingredients in *The Cauldron*'s history.
37:10 (Speaker: Ms Emily Soon)	So this is the full cover of *The Cauldron* from 1948 which, as you can see, features three witches around the cauldron. The caption at the bottom is taken from *Macbeth* and ends with the immortal couplet, "Double, double toil and trouble; Fire burn and cauldron bubble." The presence of this quotation on the cover page suggests that the cauldron the journal is named after is therefore a Shakespearean one. Over time, the Shakespearean scene and quotation are reworked and eventually replaced as they, too, dissolve into the multicultural melting pot curated by the undergrads. Though fleeting, Shakespeare's presence in this journal gestures towards the creative relationship individuals in Singapore have long had with Shakespeare, as the undergraduates creatively adapted the Shakespeare education they had received in colonial schools to create a literary journal that would help to lay the foundations for the emergence of a multicultural Singapore literature.
38:02 (Speaker: Ms Emily Soon)	Overall, looking at how English students, Malay *bangsawan* troupes, Chinese cinema entrepreneurs and Tamil artists engaged with Shakespeare, it becomes clear that, in some ways at least, Shakespeare helped to bring people in 20th-century Singapore together and strengthen Singapore's regional ties to Malaysian, Chinese and Indian cultural networks. This is not to say, however, that Shakespeare provided the perfect conduit for cultural creative development. In some ways, these Shakespeare-related activities reinforced societal divisions. For one, English education was only available to a very limited, if growing, number of students, particularly at the tertiary level. And while most individuals in 20th-century Singapore could understand basic Malay, the *bangsawan* productions would still have been more challenging for the more recent immigrants to understand. The use of Chinese subtitles in the 1948 *Hamlet* did make Shakespeare more accessible, but only to those who could read rather than speak Chinese, and who could afford to go to the cinema. Nonetheless, despite these limitations, as I hope the examples discussed have shown, Shakespeare can be said to have contributed, in however small a way, to creating the unique blend of cultures that distinguishes Singapore society today. The Singapore Story, I would suggest, is therefore even richer, more multicultural and more literary than has henceforth been realised. Thank you. If anyone has any questions, I will bravely attempt to answer them.
40:03 (Audience)	Hi, thank you. This was a really fascinating talk. I'm wondering, do we know anything about the role of Shakespeare in, you know, vernacular language schools and universities? I mean, and also in vernacular literatures. I mean, like

	adaptation. I mean, you talked about the playwrights in Chinese, Malay and Tamil but I'm wondering if that… if we know anything about the shorts, the fiction and poetry writers as well?
40:37 (Speaker: Ms Emily Soon)	Yeah they did. They have… they did translate Shakespeare into Malay and there are… there is at least one copy of a Malay version of *Julius Caesar* done for schools and it's owned by a teacher in a Malay school in Singapore. So yes, that was happening. We don't know if it was actually used in the classroom but he certainly owned it and used it in a school library. In terms of… within the Chinese community, Nantah (南大) used to run Shakespeare courses and English literature and, although… I think they did actually do it in English. So if you're in a Chinese school and you wished to go to university, you would do sort of a bridging course at the Higher School Certificate level and you would do an exam that would prepare you for that and then you could go and do it at Nantah. Yeah.
41:31 (Audience)	It's alright, thank you. I wanted to say thank you so much. It's really interesting to see the wide spectrum of material you touched on. I was wondering, aside from the university's archives and collections, did you look at anything else to perhaps look at the way that Shakespeare was presented by the early school structures and systems? Thank you very much.
41:52 (Speaker: Ms Emily Soon)	So how Shakespeare's productions were presented in schools? I think it was a combination… basically it splits into two. So you've got, on one hand, people who use Shakespeare very much as a patriotic figure… so St. Joseph's Institution has a record of their school's Speech Day in the early 20th century where they had a British Union Jack on stage supported and underneath that was a bust of Shakespeare and that was what they used on stage for their prize-giving and it was reported in the press. Actually, the first Shakespeare production I've been able to find in Singapore was at Raffles Girls' School in 1904. That was *Richard II* and it was held for… held as part of Empire Day… Victoria Day or Empire Day, which was used to celebrate the British Empire. So that was the main… that was one key strand in the way Shakespeare was used. But again, it was also used to help students for less… It was also used to help students just to develop their language skills and even… yeah, so it wasn't all about colonialism. It was also used for less invidious purposes too.
43:06 (Audience)	Hi, sorry, can I ask, what is the earliest non-school production of a Shakespeare play that you managed to uncover in Singapore? And were there any locals involved at all? Was it just a purely… an expatriate sort of enterprise?
43:20 (Speaker: Ms Emily Soon)	Well, I was focusing on schools in this production – in this project – but there were a few examples of… there was at least one Shakespeare production by the European community prior to 1923. William Makepeace writes about it in his book. There was also a 1925 production by the Chinese Association. So they put on *The Merchant of Venice* to raise funds to build Singapore Chinese Girls' School and that was… from the photographs in the press, it looks entirely local but I can't be sure because it's a bit grainy.

44:06 (Audience)	Thanks for a great talk, Emily. Maybe I can frame my question by asking you to reflect on the broader philosophy of education in the 75 years that you've covered. 75 years is a long time and when did education become, as you're saying, an indoctrination of empire, an instrument of colonisation and, in a way, learning English itself as a tool of empire? And that itself is, as you said, invidious. But at what point, right? Is it 1965 or before that, when education itself became a tool for independence and nationalism and post-colonialism? And what part did Shakespeare play in that writing and crafting a modern national state because, I mean, the way you talked about *Henry V* right? *Henry V* is a great case, whether it's a celebration of Empire, a celebration of the English realm or if it's a critique of it, right? So were any of Shakespeare's plays used for either a tool for colonialism or a tool for post-colonialism and independence? Thanks.
45:34 (Speaker: Ms Emily Soon)	In terms of what education is used for, I think the full history of education in Singapore has yet to be written. Quite a lot of documents are still only recently been declassified, but what I can say is that, I think there's a lot… it was a lot less pro-colonial than you might think, early on. So, for instance, already in the 1930s you can get… so there's a very long-standing educator at [CHIJ] Katong Convent, Mrs Marie Bong, who did a lot to teach in this country and her father was named Mr Percival Frank Aroozoo. He's Eurasian and in the 1930s, he used to… he taught Outram School and what he would do is he would get his students who were then primary school students to perform Shakespeare, to do *The Merchant of Venice*, but because the students are mostly Chinese, because Outram was near Chinatown, he would also invite them to perform Chinese-themed plays. So he used *Lady Precious Stream*, for instance, and when he could find nothing, he actually wrote his own plays. So he wrote an entire play set in China for students to perform. And so, if you were a student of Aroozoo's at that time, you would have quite a bicultural experience. You'd be learning Shakespeare from him but you'd also be learning to take pride in Asia and you'd be performing that on stage as well. So, I think, from much earlier on than we currently might perhaps assume, educators were sort of subverting colonialism – not in an obvious way; it's just in terms of things that they do in class to give people multicultural experiences. Yeah. Sorry, I can't remember the second part of your question. Okay.
47:07 (Audience)	I have a question about *The Merchant of Venice*. You've mentioned it several times. You said that the Chinese players said it just now and, in my personal research, I actually found out that *The Merchant of Venice* was likely the first Shakespeare [play] actually performed in China as well. I don't know whether you have also come across that, but I'm wondering, do you have any insight into why that play might have been chosen? You know, why was… it seemed to be particularly resonant in Singapore and in terms of… I'm sure you've done a tally of the various plays which are of Shakespeare plays which were done here like… what keeps coming up again? Like what do you think people were drawn to in terms of, you know, his whole catalogue of plays? Thank you.

47:48 (Speaker: Ms Emily Soon)	On *The Merchant of Venice*, I think Alexander Huang has a lot of work on that and in his book on Shakespeare in China, he talks about how… he links it to the role of the female lawyer because *The Merchant of Venice* has, you know, as you know, Portia is the female lawyer and she's a very strong character and so it's a figure for reformation and reform. And I think you can definitely see that in the 1925 production by the Chinese Association here because they were using it to raise funds for the Singapore Chinese Girls' School and you know Peranakan culture traditionally does not accept women… does not allow women to go outside of the house. And so, Singapore Chinese Girls' School was groundbreaking in allowing women to go out of the house. And I think that performance helped to show… because they actually used a female actress for that production and that was unusual because, again, Straits Chinese men do not usually allow their women to do things like that. So it was a groundbreaking production and I think that that was used to advance female rights and to become more progressive. In terms of what was picked up more in Singapore, I think, to a large extent, it is driven by the exam board which is set across the Empire, unfortunately. So you'll notice that the schools will repeatedly only stage the play that was on the School Certificate exam that year. I think there's one case in which the students at Raffles Institution wanted to do something else one year but all the Secondary Four students protested so they had to scale back and do the exam's. So I would like to say there's a thematic reason but unfortunately I haven't been able to find one.
49:27 (Audience)	Can you say something about the standards of the performances over the years?
49:30 (Speaker: Ms Emily Soon)	That's a very judgmental thing to say but I think, what I've seen… they put in a lot of effort and they really put, they really tried really hard to build quite creative sets and backdrops and costumes. Beyond that, I would not like to comment. However, if you do read the… it's interesting that you mention that because [if] you read the students' own writings, like you look at school newsletters, often they're the harshest critics of themselves because if you read the national press reports, the national press is always very kind to the students. They say that these students did this, it was wonderful in these ways. Then you go and read the school magazines and you read reviews by their fellow schoolmates and they're often quite harsh and they say things like, "In this production, it was terrible. I could see the students behind their desk, sticking their heads out. Lady Macbeth wasn't serious. I didn't like it…" and all that. So you get a very different view if you look at what the students say about themselves and what the national press says about them.
50:33 (Audience)	I presume there is no footage…
50:34 (Speaker: Ms Emily Soon)	Not as far as I've been able to find but there may be in private collections.

50:42 (Audience)	My compliments on the excellent talk, Dr Soon. I really enjoyed it. Thank you. I was just wondering, what prompted you or inspired you to choose the subject?
50:50 (Speaker: Ms Emily Soon)	Well, my PhD was in early modern literature and how Asians were represented in there. So this is sort of the opposite. It's not Asia in early modern English Lit., it's early modern English Lit. in Asia. Yeah, so…
51:19 (Audience)	Is there a reason why you stopped at 1975?
51:21 (Speaker: Ms Emily Soon)	Time, basically. Yeah. If it had been one year… if it had been longer, there would've been more time. But yeah. I think the museum's collection of books is really rich in the colonial era. And it's been… there hasn't been much work done on the colonial materials so that was one reason why, for focusing on that period.
51:51 (Audience)	Hey Dr Soon, thank you so much for the talk. It was really interesting. As somebody who studied English literature in this millennium, what do you call it? This century… I was really, really shocked to hear that Shakespeare was once something that people studied to be employed. So I wonder if you could speak a little bit more about that and, perhaps, maybe also why that has changed so much where we are now?
52:26 (Speaker: Ms Emily Soon)	Yeah well, people also used to study Latin so if you wanted to be a medic… used to study Latin as well. So I think, basically, it comes down to the general shift in education internationally. So initially, it was very strong, humanities dominated. And the humanities remained the thing to study until roughly about after World War Two. After World War Two, the sciences started to develop. So I think it's a residual thing in that, because for the first half of 20th century, everyone believed that to get ahead in life you needed to study the humanities. That was how the job system was set up. And so all the recruitment was based on that. Then, increasingly, after the war, when people started to believe that sciences were more important, very, very slowly things started to change. But, I think, also for recruiting international students from Singapore to go to overseas universities, I think they were using English Literature, I would guess, as a proxy for your standards of English language. So I would… so I think when you keep seeing that overseas scholarship things and it keeps saying if you're from Singapore or Malaya you need to have a credit in English Lit., what they're actually saying is we need to prove that you can manage in English. I would guess, although I haven't found documentary evidence of that.
53:56 (Audience)	I've actually got two questions. One, I've heard that the first time Shakespeare was actually studied in the English curriculum was in India, as part of the colonial education scheme, and I'm wondering if you could expand on that and how it transfers to Singapore. And your description of "Omelette" was so fascinating that I'd like to know more details about how other Shakespeare plays were adapted for *bangsawan*.

54:29 (Speaker: Ms Emily Soon)	Okay. So on how it's taught in India. I think, so, the British were in India a lot earlier than in Singapore and they… so initially they kept wanting to inculcate Western values amongst the Indian population and so Shakespeare was really used as a tool of colonialism. However, that had the unintended effect of creating a lot more nationalists. And in India, you get a lot of cases in which people rewrite Shakespeare or they write quite strongly worded arguments about why Indian writers are better than Shakespeare and they use it to… so that was happening and if you are a colonial ruler, you would not like that sort of thing. And so they came… when they came to Singapore a bit later, they decided to limit the amount of English education that was available here to avoid some of the problems that they had experienced in India. So initially, that's also another reason why Singapore initially didn't have that much English education. They were very careful to limit it only to what they needed, only to the number of people they needed to have in their offices. And in terms of the other ways in which the *bangsawan* adapted things, so, well there's one performance in which Ophelia was dressed in a pink tutu which is quite interesting. And then, yeah, they would sometimes… it gets quite racist actually because they would like to do sketches based on the local community. So they would have… on stage, they like to make fun of the *jagas*, or watchmen, so in *Hamlet*, you get the scenes where they go to the graveyard, there would always be a *jaga* at the graveyard looking after the graves. And it would usually be racialised and then they would make fun of that individual. Yeah, they would also make fun of the British police, unsurprisingly. So that happens quite a lot too. And I think Judy Ick and Nurul Farhana Low in Malaysia have done a lot of work on this and how it's used to subvert colonialism in those countries.

About the Speaker

Dr Emily Soon is a Research Fellow at the National Museum of Singapore. Her research focuses on cross-cultural literary engagement between Asia and Europe.