

Jarrold Sim | Fellowship Report

Project Summary

In 2020, the world mourned the loss of Eddie van Halen. Indonesian media began revealing his Dutch-Indonesian Eurasian heritage, leading to Indonesians claiming him as their own as a national hero and symbolic figure. This is hardly the case for many Eurasian musicians in Malaysia and Singapore, who are legally obligated to yield to the Chinese, Malay, Indian, Others (CMIO) ethnic category established historically by British colonisers as part of their “divide and conquer” strategy. The CMIO law still remains today, with Eurasians classified as “Other” in their own land. The term “Eurasian” refers to multi-generational descendants of European colonial origins, often referred to as Peranakan Eurasians and/or Serani. With the rise of ethno-national politics, and as intrinsically mixed-race, many Eurasians tend to downplay their European roots to assimilate into the geopolitical landscape. Today, their societal contribution is especially prevalent in music-related industries, where they perform and communicate predominantly in English.

This project seeks to produce a renewed perspective of the Eurasian lived experience through the history of music. It explores the sense experience of Penang’s Eurasian community by taking a sensory ethnographic approach. I will work closely with the Penang Eurasian Association to have members (or non-members) engage with PHoM’s existing collection. Prioritising music created and/or performed by Eurasian musicians, this research seeks to identify the lived experiences of different generations of Eurasians by engaging with PHoM’s archive. My primary research question is: what are the listening regimes of Eurasian musicians? Through this question, I will explore themes pertaining to their musical experience, such as childhood exposure, personal tastes, regional influences, musical inspirations, and aspirations. These “regimes” will reveal the habitus of Eurasians that reflect nuances that shape musical repertoires, genre preferences, and musicking. I will use the collection to elicit sensory and memory triggers to uncover the nexus of relations held toward particular items. I will then seek commonalities (or not) that reveal what it means to be a Eurasian today. The goal of this project brings the collection to the ‘present’ by providing stakeholders the agency to directly engage with their heritage and diversifies dialogue with the collection through an additional sensory layer that traverses intangible and tangible dimensions.

Approach

The lived experience of musicking in Penang will be explored through using sensory ethnography as method. Site-specificity and its relation to identity was a central theme to this inquiry. The primary demography were Eurasian musicians with an association with material from the archive. This included being descendants, collaborators, or pedagogical relations. Beyond that, other non-Eurasian musicians and Eurasian non-

musicians were also contacted, interviewed and asked to share their stories. Archival material in collection (mostly visual) were used to evoke memories, recollections, and experiences of sites that were featured in the visual collection. Participants were also encouraged to donate memorabilia to PHoM's collection.

Research Questions

1. What is the role of music in forging a sense of belonging?
2. How do we bring the sonic archive from the past to the present?
3. How do Eurasians negotiate their identity, and find a sense of belonging in a postcolonial context?

Challenges

Several challenges had surfaced in efforts to preserve Penang's musical heritage: the closure of the Penang House of Music (PHoM) had disrupted ongoing archival efforts, discouraging potential donors despite PHoM's continued existence. Due to the closure of the physical space, the venue of the Black Box (a performing space in PHoM) further hindered event hosting. Moreover, not all digitised materials are accessible to the public, or appeared in their catalogue, which complicated access to the full collection. Participants showed limited interest in sit-down interviews, citing time constraints, and a general lack of enthusiasm. Additionally, Penang Eurasians, scattered across various states and countries, pose logistical hurdles in the fieldwork. The short 3-months fellowship period exacerbate difficulties in building rapport with the Eurasian community, while urgency mounts to capture the voices of legendary performers, many in their 70s and 80s, before their stories are lost.

Responses

The project's focus shifted exclusively to 'legendary' performers (senior), who responded positively to outreach efforts. I had attended gigs and performances, engaging informally with friends of the performers to gather insights into public reception of music. Informal discussions and small talk replaced formal interviews, broadening the demographic scope to include non-musician Eurasians and affiliated musicians. Tangential musicians, not necessarily Eurasians but deeply involved in the scene, such as the guitarist Walter Ambrose, were also contacted for their perspectives. Additional meetings were held with Tony Sibert, a notable academic on Penang Eurasians, and the president of the Penang Eurasian Association (PEA), Peter Pedley, who had agreed to host my planned event. Plans were made for potential travel to nearby cities like Kuala Lumpur to further enrich the documentation of Penang's musical heritage, but due to time constraints, did not come into fruition.

Research Output

Research outputs include the "Yesterday Once More" exhibition featuring images of renowned Eurasian composers and performers alongside newspaper cuttings, photographs, posters, and advertisements, which aimed to bring their historical significance and contributions into a contemporary context. The Eurasian band "Colour Phases", which had been performing since the 80s to today, was the main band. They had invited their network of friends and singers who also performed alongside them. The event fostered connections across generations of Eurasian descendants, including the researcher's own family. The project aimed to bring archival materials from the past into contemporary relevance, extrapolating lived and sensed experiences through participant observation, informal chats, and sensory ethnography methodologies (Pink 2009; Stoller 1997). The event produced a wide array of data, the challenge of sit-down interviews was replaced with 'hanging out' (vis-à-vis the event), which yielded a significant amount of data related to the archival material, which reflected the sociocultural everyday life of the Eurasian community, their stories, and their relationship with music. Sonic sensibilities play a fundamental role in capturing the spatiotemporal dimensions of musicking in Penang, while the English language also served as a connecting medium for communication throughout the research process.

Findings

Engaging the archive through grassroot-centred events proved to be a successful strategy. Data was collected through participant observation. Participants had discussed and shared their memories with the exhibition and the performances, such as song choice and pedagogical pedigree. The event displayed an alternative way of community engagement (albeit context specific) to initiate discussion and meaningful engagement in the communities where these materials are from.

- **Lived experience**

The lived experience aspect of the project was highlighted through data observed and gathered through informal interviews, chats, and during the event where most of the attendees were discussing among themselves. What unfolded was the idea of how space and place were transitional in the lifestyle of full-time musicians in Penang in the past. Travel was often talked about, where many musicians travel back and forth between Penang and other Malaysian cities, as well as other countries. It was mentioned that Penang was a "training ground" for musicians to build their skills and network, and upon achieving a certain level of success, they will have a career outside Penang. It was concluded that almost all Penang musicians return to the island to retire and to "train" new musicians. New/young musicians for example, were taught by other famous musicians (for example, Joe Rozells and Larry Rodrigues had taught many guitarists who in turn taught the younger generation). This reflected a kind of systematic circle of tutelage. Seeing familiar faces on the wall had also evoked sentimental memories that were shared among themselves and the event organisers in private.

- **Sensed experience**

The sensed experience of Penang's musical scene is characterised by a blend of sensory elements and practical considerations. Venues were often described to exude a mix of smoke, sweat, and perfume, creating a vibrant atmosphere heightened by bright lighting. Practice sessions typically occur in domestic settings, fostering an informal yet communal environment where communication predominantly unfolds in English and rehearsals were done in a relaxed environment (often with gossip, alcohol, and food involved). Musical repertoire primarily features English songs, interspersed with Malay and Chinese music. Performance settings, often near beaches, are marked by a tropical climate and natural ventilation through windows, especially evident in school performances. Instruments demand meticulous storage and care to maintain their integrity, tuning, and sound quality amidst the region's climatic particularities. These are reflected in the material selected from the archive, and how the availability of air-condition which had changed the sensory experience of musicking in the past and the present can be observed. The archival images also reflected the tropics, with Hawaiian shirts, slide guitars, hula dancing and country/oceanic repertoire being especially popular during the 70s and 80s.

Reflections

While 'traditional' ethnographic approaches may have proven less effective, the interactive event and performance have successfully engaged audiences and elicited direct community-based responses to the archival material. Direct interactions with descendants and contemporaries of historical figures animate archival materials through speech-acts, bridging past narratives with present-day relevance. Formal research efforts beyond the archive may yield limited returns; despite the archive's auditory focus, the inclusion of sensory recollections and visual imagery is crucial for a more comprehensive understanding of the archival material beyond its metadata. Thus, future strategies should prioritise enhancing archival displays and incorporating diverse sensory elements to enrich public engagement and interpretation.

Recommendations

Fellowship length could be longer and more support and guidance from the PIs and other partners, beyond the host institution would help broaden the research and foster more collaboration. Additionally, offering fellows a chance to visit each other's archive might yield new perspectives toward their individual projects.