

Ronggeng Singapura: Early Stages of Dance Revivalism and Activism

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Abstract

This paper is an autoethnographic and action research documentation of an initiative by a newly formed collective ‘Arki-Gen’ that is made up of artists, researchers, and educators. Their project, *Ronggeng Revival: Ground Sensing Phase 1*, aims to revive the social practice of a music/dance form through conducting research, documenting and formulating a training curriculum. Through the focus group discussions with four selected segments of the arts community, Ronggeng still bears the taboo and stereotypes of social histories. As an initial phase, this project is part of a larger expectation to create a community of Ronggeng activism and the eventual integration of Ronggeng to be an Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH). This paper supports the need to recognise the social aspects of Ronggeng as a choreomusicological practice, and as part of a Nusantara revival movement.

Keywords: intangible cultural heritage, Malay dance, revival, Singapore, social dance

Introduction

Dance revivalism is hard work! This is especially when the practice that you would like to revive is seen as a controversial one by your own community of practice. The apprehension for Ronggeng as a social dance practice is one that is entangled in the sociohistorical and contemporary politics of religion, nationalisation and ethnic minoritisation. This paper is an autoethnographic and action research of a collective that I co-founded, Arki-Gen and it offers a preliminary analysis of what I refer to as “Ronggeng revival” in the nation-state of Singapore. I offer my perspectives as a dance activist leading and coordinating these efforts with my colleagues of our collective, Arki-Gen and also as a dance practitioner-scholar whose emic-etic positionality provides perspectives that could help understand the circumstances on the ground and the larger socio-politics that are at play.

Revival of Ronggeng as a social dance practice is neither a new initiative nor an isolated activism. Groups of Malay communities in the Nusantara have been initiating their own Ronggeng activities promoting the practice that are not only art dances but social dances too. The former refers to the dances that have undergone a process of adaptation for the stage, usually proscenium for the direct purposes of addressing and engaging an audienceship, the latter refers to dances that involve two

participants in direct engagement and communication with one another in an event setting where there might be spectators observing them—however in this case, audiences/spectators become secondary as oppose to the former where the dance caters to the audiences.

Before going into an active discussion of contemporary revival efforts, I will first offer a historical background on Ronggeng in the Nusantara to provide some helpful context. Ronggeng as a social dance form was a common activity amongst Malay-speaking communities in the region. It is difficult to pinpoint Ronggeng's specific historical origin, especially if we consider the historical and cultural confluences of a maritime region that has shared languages and cultures. In addition, the Ronggeng practice was also introduced to many communities within the archipelagic region by itinerant entertainment troupes that saw entourages of musicians and dancers, travelling from one island to the next, at times even staying on for a few months.

Upon an evaluation of the limited scholarship on Ronggeng that is available within the field of performing arts and Malay studies, I have triangulated my sources with colonial ordinances, historical newspapers, and oral history recordings. From the survey of research and archival materials, it can be derived that Ronggeng is indeed a social dance activity that may/may not involve men dancing with hired female dancers and usually accompanied by a music ensemble. There is also a tendency to differentiate village Ronggeng to the Joget Moden/Joget Modernen, the latter was co-opted into urban entertainment parks that became popular amongst urban dwellers in colonial port cities in peninsular Malaysia and Singapore (Md Nor, 1993). The latter became a craze amongst male youths who would flock to the dancehalls of these urban entertainment parks to buy bundles of tickets which were used to “purchase” the time of attractive female taxi-dancers who would dance with them till the end of a triumvirate of music/dance genres of songs. This form became quite the fad and dance manuals were created to teach would-be dancers how to dance. This was possibly the much-needed initial guidance for young men who did not want to embarrass themselves when they engage the services of a professional taxi-dancing woman!

The nature in which the female performers are hired for their time to entertain young men gradually became a subject of moral degradation. The social impression that their profession as “taxi-dancers” who were merely employed for the enjoyment of men saw these women in unfavourable light and associated them with other immoral acts such as prostitution. Such impressions are not only unique within the Malay community. The castigation towards the profession of Asian female entertainers and artists is a long-lasting one with historically complex entanglements of Victorian colonial morality, permeating religious, national, and elitist patriarchies where men were eager to control the bodies of women from their perceived immorality.

The term “Ronggeng” is a shared term within the Nusantara and could refer to other social dance forms that have similar functions (partner social dance) but different dance techniques. The Ronggeng that we are referring to in the revival here, termed as “Ronggeng Melayu,” is distinguished by the triunity of the music genres of *Asli*, *Inang* and *Joget* that are played by the music ensemble, specific dance techniques and the fashion wear that is associated with the form. The incorporation

of “Melayu” is also a way to distinguish the differences between other adjacent forms such as the Sundanese Jaipongan, Gandrung of Banyuwangi and Lengger from Banyumas.

Ethnochoreologist, Andriy Nahachewsky proposes the term “revival” to “broadly to describe any dancing activity in which the participants actively invoke past performances of the dance” (2008). I would add that a revival of a certain practice assumes that a practice or a form is no longer in function by a community but has now, in the contemporary moment, found a renewed sense of purpose and relevance by its community of practitioners. The Ronggeng is unique in its circumstance because after its perceived demise which I pinpoint to the closure of entertainment parks in Singapore, the art dance form which is a sanitised and staged version of the Ronggeng continues to be practised today. The Ronggeng art dance adheres to similar conventions of Malay social dancing that observes no contact partnering between sexes, the aesthetics, and techniques of the three Malay music/dance genres of Asli, Inang and Joget inherent within Ronggeng.

Arki-Gen

Arki-Gen was initiated in 2021 by 6 founding members: Muhammad Norisham Osman, Muhammad Aryandi Ahmad, Seri Rahayu Anuar, Lenny Karmila Mohamed Kamal, Lyn Hanis Rezuhan and myself, Muhammad Noramin Bin Mohamed Farid. The formation of Arki-Gen during the tumultuous years of the COVID-19 pandemic came as a response from a collective of practitioners of Malay performing arts who were interested in filling a gap within the ecosystem. This collective is made up of millennial instructors of dance and music in public schools and professional practitioners within the scene. As practitioner-observers of a small ecosystem of about 5 generations who are currently actively practising and promoting Malay dance in Singapore, the collective acknowledges that there is a lack of discourse of Malay dance and this is evident due to the lack of scholarship and opportunities to discuss critically about dance.

Knowledge and practice transmission of Malay dance has consistently been from teacher (Guru) to student and within specific groups that are founded by a certain personality. These personalities could have originated from one group and upon their departure started their own groups. Gurus may choose to adopt methodologies from their former groups or create an adapted curriculum incorporating their own style. Though there is recognition of what sociologist Howard Becker deems as an “art world” where there are shared practices due to artistic genealogies and collaborations, organisational styles can sometimes create silos. Hence the push for discourse comes as an intention to break boundaries and promote better understanding of music-dance relationship and a deeper awareness of sociocultural contexts.

As a collective that acknowledges the trends of Ronggeng revivals that have happened in the past decade in neighbouring countries of cultural affinity, Malaysia and Indonesia, Arki-Gen took the opportunity to initiate the project, The Ronggeng Revival Project. This project gained financial support from National Arts Council’s Self-Employed Persons Grant (SEPG) which allowed the collective to pursue their initiative for a duration of 6 months from October 2021 to March 2022. Arki-Gen

recognised that a revival endeavour is a long-term one and must involve the concerted efforts of various stakeholders. Thus, for the awarded grant quantum, the project’s initial plans which was referred to as “Phase 1,” focuses on a few aspects such as historical research, an evaluation of Ronggeng practice and consolidating the perspectives of various stakeholders via focus group discussions.

Formally titled, *Ronggeng Revival: Ground Sensing Phase 1*, the project’s objectives are threefold: (a) Revive a social dance/event known as Ronggeng that used to be popular arts and entertainment pre-1970s; (b) Revitalise and Reinstall the integral bond between music and dance in the practice of performing arts that is often sidelined; and (c) Innovate new models of performance presentation and collaborative working among artists, scholars and activists. There are a few aspects that Arki-Gen’s objectives are trying to work towards and it is focused on community building, education, and collective activism. These are factors that require time and scaffolding to achieve them.

Multi-Pronged Approach

The project consists of three components: Research, Documentation & Training.

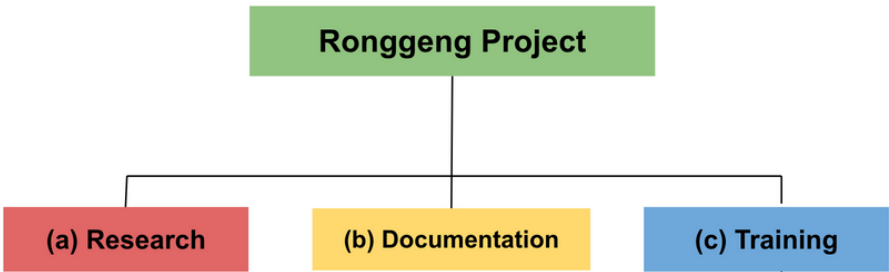


Figure 1. Three components of the project.

We see these three components as an all-encompassing approach because it brings together historical contexts, contemporary endeavours, and the application of revival, we are initiating and activating the necessary processes to make the revival activity a nuanced and achievable experience.

Research. The research component involves the process of searching, unpacking, and discerning the activities of Ronggeng in its heyday. The materials found and used were visual ephemera, oral history recordings, films, and academic books on the subjects.

It must be understood that Ronggeng as a village social dance activity underwent a transformation as a result of colonial capitalism in the form of urban entertainment parks. The urban entertainment park phenomenon did not occur in a vacuum. It became an exotic attraction, organised by colonial governments where colonies were being presented to the citizens of colonial powers. These events known as colonial exhibitions or sometimes masked under a “friendlier” moniker “world fairs” offered exoticism-at-its-best in colonial centres or for travelling colonial

citizens into its colonies.

Through these fairs which became entertainment parks accommodated Ronggeng as a popular activity of the Malays and provided access for it to be enjoyed by people of all walks of life were showcased and experienced by visiting patrons. This is evidenced by newspaper articles that would describe the invitation of a few dance stars that would definitely attract many to come. A key event in the Malay Archipelago that saw the curation of the multitude of people living in British colonies within maritime Southeast Asia was the Malaya-Borneo Exhibition of 1922.

Laurence Guillemard who was the Governor of the Straits Settlements, noted in the souvenir guide that the exhibition brought “together, for the first time in history, representatives of all classes from the two important Malayan countries under British influence [Malaya and Borneo] ... by interchange of ideas and discussion of matters of interest to each, considerable mutual benefit might be derived by all, and a revival of local trade possibly stimulated” (*Guide to Malaya Borneo Exhibition* 5).

The presentation of Ronggeng to colonial eyes also meant to serve the practice within methods and presentations that they can understand. Hence, the Joget Moden/Moderen taxi dance model of ticketing hired female entertainers took on a transactional dancer-patron engagement. This is of course different from village practices of communal dancing and if there were any transactions involved it was indirect between accompanying matrons or the heads of Ronggeng troupes. Information regarding village Ronggeng is scarce, but a lot could be imagined and discerned from close readings of visual ephemera and oral history recordings of former Ronggeng girls.

Aside from historical practices of Ronggeng, another focus of the research was to also to consider the choreomusicological dimensions of Ronggeng as a music-dance practice. The concentration on the moving body takes precedence in a lot of the resources that were found. This is understandable as the transition from village to urban centres meant that when Ronggeng became a hired transactional activity, the mastery of dancing skills became important for any participant of Ronggeng in the joget halls. Pedagogical materials regarding Ronggeng were made available to the public. Upon introspection of these guide books, we noticed that it was catered for a male readership as the photos presented were of Ronggeng girls to offer a sense of familiarisation for the would-be male patron who would need to be knowledgeable enough to engage a Ronggeng dancer. There was neither any mention of the music genres nor guidance about listening to music.

We felt research on choreomusicology was important as it will offer in-depth insights on the symbiotic relationship of dance and music. This is especially necessary because the nature of Malay performing arts was not distinguished into music, dance, and theatre. The division into categories has done a huge disservice to the practice of Malay performing arts, specifically into dance and music for the case of Ronggeng, as it does not recognise the relationship, interdependence, and co-production of both practices. This choreomusicological turn in the performing arts of Southeast Asia has found renewed momentum with the publication of *Sounding the Dance, Moving the Music*, co-edited by Mohd Anis Md Nor and Kendra Stepputat. This would require more attention due to the current interest and development of scholarship on the subject matter.

Documentation. The documentation component of the project entails the recording and evaluation of the ground sensing endeavours consisting of focus group discussions and the production of pedagogical training materials to teach Ronggeng. Viewpoints from the Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) are important because the participants who are involved in FGDs are from dance, music, and cultural sectors with a range of expertise in education, performance, journalism, cultural and heritage management. In addition, to consider Ronggeng as a prospective Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) requires longitudinal planning and community building. Hence, a preliminary introduction to subsequent phases will help to scaffold and provide an understanding of the direction of this endeavour. An evaluation of the FGDs will be provided in the subsequent section.

Training. The training component is a practice-based research initiative with members of Arki-Gen to formulate a curriculum for the teaching of Ronggeng. Our collective expertise as educators in the fields of music and dance helped us to produce reference materials that will be helpful when we create a “train-the-trainers” programme in due time. The findings from the research and documentation activities supplemented the brainstorming that was needed for this project. We were very motivated by the activism of Nusantara Performing Arts Research Centre (NUSPARC) under the leadership of Mohd Anis Md Nor, who were able to create learning materials for Ronggeng to be taught to students in primary and secondary schools as well as professional dancers in State cultural groups under the National Department of Culture and Arts (Jabatan Kebudayaan dan Kesenian Negara [JKKN]).

Aside from the creation of pedagogical structures, we are also committed to study and include into the curriculum about the different ways to teach, especially when there are new methods of teaching students of different abilities and competencies. We feel that the arts offer a space for inclusiveness and creativity. Ronggeng’s inherent symbiosis of music-dance and the emphasis on the interdependence will be helpful as fundamental learning about Malay performing arts.

Focus Group Discussion: Identifying Stakeholders

In any initiatives involving the community, there must be acknowledgement that thinking of the community as a monolith is counterproductive and not helpful when thinking of the deliverables required to move forward. Hence it is crucial that we had to first discern several collectives of stakeholders within the community, whose perspectives are important in our ground sensing effort. As insiders within our small yet interconnected art world, we were able to identify four groups of stakeholders who were seen as crucial in bringing the conversation forward. We first had to consider, (a) their influence within the community of practice, (b) the level of expertise and connections that will be helpful for us, and (c) the potentiality of individuals who will benefit and adopt the proposed revival activities.

The four groups we identified were,

(a) Malay dance veteran generation

These are elderly practitioners with influence and/or leaders of their own Malay dance group. Some of them are Gurus of the subsequent generation (group b) that are actively teaching, performing, and creating Malay dance performances.

(b) Current Malay dance practitioners

These are practitioners who are millennials to early Gen Z dance members who are actively contributing to the scene as school instructors, choreographers, and performers. They may also be leaders of groups that they have set up.

(c) Traditional Malay musicians

An intergenerational group of musicians who are involved in the scene as composers and are involved as musicians in productions organised by Malay dance organisations.

(d) Adjacent arts and cultural practitioners

A diverse group of invited adjacent arts and cultural practitioners consisting of Malay cultural scholars, educators, journalists, producers, and artists from the field of visual arts and theatre.

Focus Group Discussion: Facilitation Process

Every Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were facilitated by my Arki-Gen peers and I. The invited participants were grouped and attended the FGD on different evenings. All FGDs followed the same structure. Participants took their seats at the different clusters of tables and chairs. This will also become the groups that they will be engaging in discussions with for the breakout sessions.

Participants were first introduced to the project, objectives and milestones of the current phase and the intended direction of the subsequent phases. We felt this was necessary to help our participants understand our intentions and also our way of softening the tension we were expecting due to the sensitive and taboo topic.

Later, Arki-Gen members became the facilitators for the ensuing breakout sessions wherein participants were seated in groups and provided writing materials such as post its and mahjong paper for them to write their notes or keywords which will act as points of discussion. Facilitators are not only tasked to manage the discussions but also to record important micro-macro perspectives that will be relevant for our findings.

The questions included:

- a) In your perspective and lived experience, what is Ronggeng?
- b) What do you think is the perception of the community about Ronggeng?
- c) In your perspective, how important is it to recognise Ronggeng as an Intangible Cultural Heritage?

Discussions

Collectively there seems to be an acknowledgement that Ronggeng is a subgenre belonging to Joget and not something that or should stand on its own. The stories regarding Ronggeng and what it was to them back in their youthful days, seemed to revolve around the night clubs and times of endless partying. There is also a fixation to reference the term to taxi girls that graced the dancing halls at various “Ronggeng Clubs.” Concerns were raised on the discussions of Ronggeng and how it was being used as an exploitation of the Malay culture during the colonial period. In regards to this, the veterans were also troubled that if Ronggeng was to be reintroduced to the current community, how will the stigma be addressed.

They agreed that if it were to be reintroduced, it should be packaged with a new or rather “sanitized” label. However, others have also spoken about Ronggeng’s colourful history, and its erasure will be disregarding the struggles of cultural agents of the past who have contributed to the idea of what Malay Culture was back then. This of course includes the working women known as the “*perempuan joget*” and arts enthusiasts who went to the clubs.

However, there were also stories that brought them to reminisce about times that Ronggeng was a highlight at Malay weddings from the 50s to the 90s. There are also recollections of the music during the 70s through to the 80s. There were also mentions of Siput Sarawak, an iconic figure that represented the term for their generation.

In this discussion, most have agreed that Ronggeng is a community and social event that brings people together. There is acknowledgement that those who practiced Ronggeng are trained artists, regardless of the place in which their art is practiced. Ronggeng was recognized as an opportunity for people to be exposed to and appreciate live traditional Malay music. The term also brought them to remember a care-free environment of the kampung days where the Malay communities welcomed or accepted the cultural aspects of Ronggeng.

The musicians of the current industry talked about the original ensemble of traditional Malay music instruments, which includes the rebana, rebab and accordion. They also expressed that the Ronggeng music particularly, is made to be appreciated live. Without it, the dance aspect would be plain or simply boring. Collectively, they also believed that dance and music in general should always exist together when it comes to a performative setting.

There are also concerns that Ronggeng would always come with negative connotations and be deemed as a practice that rarely brings any form of benefit to the community in general. Ronggeng as a dance genre, has been viewed as a social dance which holds a lot of promiscuous contexts. Questions that were raised from this

discussion revolves around the education to the younger generation regarding the context of what Ronggeng is, with the hopes that this would encourage an interest among the community on the diversities of art practices in Ronggeng itself.

Conversations with the current practitioners brought about questions on how the reimplementation of Ronggeng into the scene could further elevate the current progress and development of Singapore Traditional Malay dance form. However, they collectively agreed that there is much sensitivity to be taken into consideration towards the approach of executing Ronggeng to the community. Tracing back the history of Ronggeng in the early 50s when it was largely active in the Ronggeng halls, it was regarded that the Ronggeng girls were exploited working women and this led to the negative stigma surrounding the Ronggeng culture.

Some suggestions are leaning more towards recognition rather than revival, due the existence of the form since the early 50s. The effort of reviving Ronggeng does not revolve only within the dance community but having the right media platforms to expose the Ronggeng culture to the mass public. This has been proven during the early 80s, when SBC broadcasted the TV program called 'Kelab Dondang Sayang' and was well received during that time.

The thoughts were shared by participants of how Ronggeng could be reintegrated into the current traditional Malay arts and if discarding certain aspects of its history would mean to degrade the originality of the form. Some questions included the relevance of Ronggeng and how it could apply to current practices were also raised. They collectively agreed that proper considerations should be taken when it comes to redeveloping the form.

Since Ronggeng is considered as a taboo to the majority in the Malay traditional arts, the reasons surrounding why it was should be accessible to the community. The history of Ronggeng at this point has been attached to a negative stigma and stereotypes due to the lack of knowledge that has not been accessible to the people. The information that passes to the current community is based on hearsays from their elders and their negative experiences. Though it is only natural for such instances to occur since those involved in the ecosystem of the Ronggeng culture at that time were mainly people from the lower income communities.

The group believes that the Ronggeng culture should be made accessible and inclusive of both the pros and cons. This would provide an opportunity for the people to understand the functionality of what the culture could bring and hopefully to incite raving discussions amongst the community in general. Other conversations revolving around Ronggeng reminded them of jovial celebrations in the Malay community. It is an event that brings people together, mostly through the nature of how Ronggeng is formatted.

Ronggeng Practice as Choreomusicological Research

The dance and music coordinators led workshops to experiment and discuss about the various components of Ronggeng, in particular to elucidate about the choreomusicological function and interdependence of Ronggeng's music and dance. We acknowledge that these practices as research endeavours are only preliminary but

it has given us an entry point to think deeply about our related practices. Here are some notes from both the facilitators regarding the workshops:

Dance Notes

Joget's double-step which is a shuffling motion of the feet in double time is a necessary technique that requires attention and awareness of the body. It involves the quick shifting of weight from one foot to the other and, depending on the technique of double-step, will also affect the quality of the main body. For example, one such technique is a double step that is initiated with the front of feet and toes: this would produce a springy motion.

We felt the "kick" technique gives the closest choreomusicological related movement wherein the kick in the joget technique coincides in relation to the base gendang (drum) before the gong. This makes dancers more aware of their movement and understand the fast tempo joget music better. At the same time, dancers will not take for granted the specific instruments that are necessary in the joget, such as the gong, drum and a melodic instrument which can be the accordion, flute, or violin.

There needs to be better communication with musicians and also the awareness of different versions of songs which can be shorter or longer. Dancers who are focused on melody could be at a disadvantage and if there is better listening and understanding of the drum's percussive pattern, dancers are able to determine if a music is ending on time or is the version with the longer coda.

Understands the importance of observing gender mannerisms when dancing with a partner of the opposite sex. The gendered movement of the ronggeng repertoire serves the purpose of the Ronggeng and also provides further insights on maintaining healthy boundaries between dancers since the convention of Malay dance does not allow contact between sexes.

We recognise that this is a new endeavour and it does feel that Phase 1 will be something Arki-Gen will continue to work on because in the six months since we started work, we realised that there are other things we would like to do. One of our subsequent endeavours is to continue discussions with our community of practice. Some prominent individuals who were not able to attend the focus group discussions have expressed interest to support our project. We would like to do another cycle of focus group discussions to gather their thoughts—probably a survey to active practitioners as well.

Also at the same time, we have noticed that our discussions have been focused on immediate thoughts about Ronggeng as social practice: the bulk of our conversation by our practitioners were still focused on the social stigma of the 1970s that continue to affect the thoughts and decisions of our veteran practitioners. However, we see this as a concern of only a group of elderly practitioners as the younger ones are keen to explore the possibilities that the revival of Ronggeng can bring to them and the community in due time.

The musicians are more receptive to the Revival process partly because they see the value of Ronggeng as a cultural practice that may benefit them: the promotion of Ronggeng could also mean opportunities for frequent hiring of their services. Some strategies formulated during the discussions for the revival process to

be a meaningful one includes:

- a) Further education of Ronggeng and its evolving practice today
- b) Acknowledging Ronggeng's historical past and finding ways to understand its Art
- c) To introduce Ronggeng gradually in social events, as using Live traditional music as an example, this entertainment component has become a key feature of Malay weddings today
- d) To work together with Mediacorp and adjacent media presses to raise awareness of Ronggeng's value
- e) To work with educational officers in schools to promote education and practice of Ronggeng

Conclusion

Dance revivals require the effort of not a few passionate individuals but many stakeholders within the ecosystem. In this phase of the Ronggeng Revival Project, some members of the community, especially ones from an older generation, were apprehensive of the intentions by a young collective to resuscitate a form that is considered controversial due to persistent stereotypes that plagues the collective memory of a community. True to the belief that Malay social dance may provide an educative function for a minority indigenous community's heritage and history, Ronggeng is proposed as a contemporary solution.

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Biography

Dr. Noramin Farid is a choreographer, arts educator, and maritime Southeast Asian performing arts researcher. A recipient of the 2017 Singapore Youth Award and the 2018 India-ASEAN Youth Awards, Amin is the curator of an online portal, ARKITARI, which documents maritime Southeast Asian dances. He is also the current president of a dance organisation, DIAN Dancers, and the founding member of Arki-Gen, a group focused on promoting discourse and research about Southeast Asian performing arts. He holds a PhD in Theatre, Drama and Dance Studies from Royal Holloway, University of London, UK. Amin currently teaches Southeast Asian Performing Arts & Cultures at Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA), Lasalle College of the Arts, and Singapore Raffles Music College (SRMC).