

**“Is it Manipulative? Sure. But That’s How You Tell Stories”:  
The Graphic Novel, Metahistory and the Artist in *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye*  
By Prof Philip Holden**

Date : 24 Nov 2015  
Time : 16:00 - 17:30  
Venue : Asia Research Institute Seminar Room  
Tower Block Level 10, 469A Bukit Timah Road  
National University of Singapore @ BTC

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**CHAIRPERSON**

**Prof Chua Beng Huat**, Asia Research Institute, and Department of Sociology, National University of Singapore

**ABSTRACT**

Sonny Liew’s graphic novel *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye* has become a *cause célèbre* in contemporary Singapore. In May 2015 the novel had its Arts Council publication grant withdrawn because of “sensitive content, depicted in visuals and text”. It then proved widely popular, going into a third printing within a month of its initial appearance, and even being quoted at a political rally before Singapore’s general election in September 2015. Much popular discussion of the novel has, however, been reductive, often describing it as simply illuminating alternative histories in contrast to a putatively hegemonic historical narrative celebrating Singapore’s rise as a developmental state.

Close reading of the text’s use of both graphic and textual elements reveals that *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye* does not simply counterpose other histories to a dominant national narrative, but rather asks hard questions about the processes of historical memory and storytelling. Such questions can usefully be approached through the work of theorists of the graphic novel such as Benoît Peeters, and through Linda Hutcheon’s concept of historiographic metafiction, of historically situated texts that, through self-referential textuality, draw attention to their and history’s own fictiveness. While the medium of comics provides Liew with an expanded toolbox of metafictional techniques, *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye* is not simply metafictional: the novel also celebrates the redemptive possibilities of narrative. In doing so, and through its status as a fictional biography, it also asks uncomfortable questions regarding the agency of the artist, and, by extension, the individual, in a society marked by postcoloniality and processes of neoliberal subjectification, questions that resonate beyond the city-state of Singapore itself.

**ABOUT THE SPEAKER**

**Philip Holden’s** current research interests are in Southeast Asian Literatures in English, auto/biography, and in thinking through global modernity and its effects on literature and literary studies. His previous work has been on colonial modernity, autobiography and transnational literatures, and he has published a number of articles on Singapore Literature and Culture. In the Department of English Language and Literature he has taught modules on Singapore and Southeast Asian Literatures and Cultures, although his primary interest hasn’t so much been in establishing a Singaporean literary canon as in thinking about how such texts might make us engage more deeply with the society in which we live: his own thought is that questions raised by Singapore writing are best informed by regional and comparative perspectives, rather than simply national ones. He has thus moved to teaching courses that place Singapore Literature in regional, world literature, and postcolonial frameworks. From 2010-2012 he was seconded as Deputy Director (Academic Affairs) to University Scholars Programme. He has also taught interdisciplinary modules in the USP on the Idea of the University and Biography, Archives, and Memory.

His published books include *Orienting Masculinity*, *Orienting Nation: W. Somerset Maugham’s Exotic Fiction* (Greenwood 1996), *Modern Subjects / Colonial Texts: Hugh Clifford and the Discipline of Literature in the Straits*

*Settlements, 1895-1907* (ELT 2000), *Imperial Desire: Dissident Sexualities and Colonial Literature* (co-edited with Richard Ruppel, U of Minnesota P, 2003), *Questioning Chinese Transnationalisms: Society, Literature Film* (co-edited with Maria Ng, U of Hong Kong P, 2006), and *Autobiography and Decolonization: Modernity, Masculinity and the Nation-State* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2008).

## **REGISTRATION**

Admission is free. We would greatly appreciate if you RSVP to Ms Tay Minghua via email: [minghua.tay@nus.edu.sg](mailto:minghua.tay@nus.edu.sg).