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2<sup>nd</sup> MBRAS Lecture 2018

**From Stuffed Tigers to Weather Capsule: Displaying Malaya and Malaysia to the World, 1851–1972**

by Assoc Prof Dr Lai Chee Kien

Function Room,  
Level 2, Botany Centre, Tanglin Gate  
Singapore Botanic Gardens  
Cluny Road, Singapore  
Saturday, 29 September 2018, 5.30 p.m.

**Abstract**

The pre-war imagination of landscapes in Malaya was largely of vegetal jungles or colonial plantations by Western metropolitan audiences. Such impressions were perpetuated at the series of colonial exhibitions and world fairs. From 1851 onwards, colonial administrators, individual governors and state sultans exhibited disparate aspects of the peninsula at such events, which were visited by cosmopolitan crowds. As early as the Great Exhibition of 1851, for example, the exhibits were corralled under the heading “Articles from the Indian archipelago” displaying contributions from Java, Borneo, Sumatra, Celebes, Singapore, Malacca and “others in the Indian sea.”

Over time, such representations moved from jungle inhabitants and resource extraction, to the demonstration of achieved progress and fair governance in the colony. The subsequent exhibitions of 1886, 1911 and 1924 in London, and those of 1893, 1939 and 1964 in the United States, contained exhibits that undergirded intentions of both the colonial administration and local rulers as to how Malaya was to be displayed as an entity and in its various divisions. This talk provides a background to the series of exhibitions and world fairs, and how they were to be presented and received during their exhibition periods.

**Lai Chee Kien** is Adjunct Associate Professor at the Singapore University of Technology and Design (Architecture and Sustainable Design pillar), and is also a registered architect in Singapore. He graduated from the National University of Singapore with an M Arch. by research [1996], and a PhD in History of Architecture & Urban Design from the University of California, Berkeley [2005]. His publications include *A Brief History of Malayan Art* (1999), *Building Merdeka: Independence Architecture in Kuala Lumpur, 1957–1966* (2007), *Through the Lens of Lee Kip Lin* (2015) [Best Non-Fiction Title, 2016], *Building Memories: People, Architecture, Independence* (2016) [Book of the Year] and *The Merdeka Interviews: Architects, Engineers and Artists of Malaysia’s Independence* (2018). He researches on histories of art, architecture, settlements, urbanism and landscapes in Southeast Asia

## The Lecture

Dr. Lai Chee Kien's comprehensive lecture covered much of Malaysia's exposure to international and world fairs, and their evolution from very primitive displays of stuffed animals, jungle produce and wooden huts, complete with imported "native humans" acting the part, to state-of-the-art displays comprising curated exhibits, with a sensory experience augmented by technology. He also considered the prominent role of Perak in British Imperial Exhibitions in the 19th century, and the efforts of Johor under its sultans to compete on the same world stage by bringing the state to international exhibitions in the United States as an independent entity. Another part of the talk focused on the role of these fairs as a teaching tool for the British Government to instruct their citizens about the Empire and Malaya's prominent place in it, given the importance of its tin and rubber to the British economy. The last part considered the evolution of Malaysia's participation in international fairs from a colony to an independent nation, but now with a different aim, from educating British citizens about the Empire to promoting the capabilities and achievements of modern Malaysia before an international audience.

Report by Jonathan Ong







