

MING WONG

# Wayang Spaceship





# Contents

3	↗	<b>Preface</b>
4	↗	<b>Foreword</b> Eugene Tan
6	↗	<b>Foreword</b> Sun Venture
10	↗	<b>Transmissions from</b> <b><i>Wayang Spaceship</i></b> Ming Wong
18	↗	<b>Tracing Routes to</b> <b><i>Wayang Spaceship</i></b> Syaheedah Iskandar
38	↗	<b>Other Explorations:</b> <b>Ming Wong’s <i>Wayang Spaceship</i></b> Jeannine Tang
52	↗	<b>Artist and Collaborator Biographies</b>
54	↗	<b>Acknowledgements</b>

# Preface

A *Wayang Spaceship* has landed on our shores. Alongside the industrial, technological and ecological crises that have taken place throughout time, it also stands witness to the rise and fall of dynastic and colonial regimes. During the day, *Wayang Spaceship* seems dormant, its reflective surfaces mirroring the bustling traffic around the container seaport. Its inactivity is interrupted by the occasional stray radio transmission relayed from another dimension. At dusk, *Wayang Spaceship* reclaims its form as a travelling Chinese theatre, illuminating the past, present and future with an operatic symphony of light, sound and image, as though it was livestreamed from the memory of a time-travelling scholar-warrior. At twilight, after Singapore Art Museum closes, a portal opens on *Wayang Spaceship*, allowing the public to commune with this solitary anti-hero of Chinese opera who is displaced across time, gender, space and oscillates between the ritual stage and the silver screen, the Pearl River Delta and the cosmic ocean.

# Foreword

Produced by Singaporean artist Ming Wong, *Wayang Spaceship* was presented as one of the inaugural projects under Singapore Art Museum’s public art initiative, The Everyday Museum, which launched in July 2022. Challenging conventional notions of public art, *Wayang Spaceship* moves beyond static forms, embracing temporality and various cultural practices from Southeast Asia. Drawing from itinerant theatre traditions and speculative storytelling, it reimagines public art as dynamic, performative and ever-evolving.

Making landfall at our museum’s compound within Tanjong Pagar Distripark and facing the Brani Terminal of Singapore’s iconic port, *Wayang Spaceship* was perfectly situated at the crossroads of trade, migration and cultural exchange that have shaped the nation’s history. Reflecting its itinerant nature, the work later journeyed to the Civic District as part of Light to Night Singapore 2024, landing in front of Victoria Theatre near the Singapore River—a site where Chinese street theatres were once located.

This project marks the largest installation ever produced by Wong. It was made in collaboration with master stage builder Lee Beng Seng, architect Randy Chan, as well as artists Liam Morgan, Wu Jun Han and Eric Lee. Bridging ancestral practices and futurity, *Wayang Spaceship* offers a conceptual and immersive encounter with migration, identity and cultural resilience. Drawing from Wong’s extensive research into Cantonese opera cinema and science fiction, the work transforms a *wayang* stage into a portal and vessel for storytelling.

Across the world, diasporic cultures have evolved through migration, shaping hybrid identities and cultural practices. In *Wayang Spaceship*, this adaptability is embodied in a work that blends vernacular storytelling with speculative imagination. By situating a *wayang* stage—a significant feature of Chinese street opera in Singapore—within the conceptual framework of a spaceship, Wong invites audiences to consider how inherited knowledge systems can inform our imagination of the future. Through kaleidoscopic visuals and audio-visual experimentation, *Wayang Spaceship* follows its central protagonist, the “scholar-warrior,” as they journey through a continuum where past and future converge.



Ming Wong is one of Singapore's most important contemporary artists, whose practice remains highly relevant today. The Singapore Art Museum proudly holds many of his artworks in our collection. Since representing Singapore at the 53<sup>rd</sup> Venice Biennale in 2009, Wong has continued to push the boundaries of contemporary art, an achievement that is exemplified in *Wayang Spaceship*.

We extend our heartfelt congratulations to Ming Wong and his collaborators for creating such an extraordinary and transformative artwork.

We also express our deepest gratitude to Sun Venture, whose generous support made this visionary project possible.

I hope this e-publication will significantly contribute to the scholarship on contemporary art from a Southeast Asian perspective, deepening our understanding of how our histories, diasporic connections and cultural expressions are continually evolving.

Eugene Tan

CEO and Director  
Singapore Art Museum



# Foreword

We bring art into the public sphere by transcending the confines of traditional galleries, we bring art into the public sphere, dismantling barriers and making creativity accessible to all. This fosters communal pride and a sense of belonging in our shared spaces. Public art not only broadens the audience for the arts in general, but also stimulates community engagement in a myriad of ways. Through their works, artists can incite transformative dialogues and ideas, unveiling the rich narratives behind existing sites.

Thus, it is with great pleasure that Sun Venture has supported the realisation of two art projects by The Everyday Museum, a public art initiative of Singapore Art Museum. These include *Wayang Spaceship* by the internationally renowned Singaporean artist Ming Wong, and *Singapore Deviation*, a curated art trail featuring local artists Sookoon Ang, Hilmi Johandi and Tan Pin Pin where they respond to the historic Rail Corridor with site-specific installations.

Ming Wong's *Wayang Spaceship* is the largest installation among his works that emerged from his extensive research into Cantonese opera's cinematic transformation over the last century and its unlikely relationship with science fiction. This breathes new life into shared memories of a diminishing art form and demonstrates, for me, the relevance of art to life and the importance of supporting the presence of art in the everyday.

This publication offers not only a deeper reading of *Wayang Spaceship*, but also insights into the artist's thought processes. I extend my appreciation to artist Ming Wong and to his collaborators for actualising this work and inspiring the minds of many. My congratulations also to Singapore Art Museum team for this successful collaboration.

Ricky Au

Chairman  
Sun Venture





TOP      Transporting wood from warehouse for *Wayang Spaceship* (2022) at Singapore Art Museum, Tanjong Pagar Distripark, 2022–2024.

BOTTOM      Structural build of *Wayang Spaceship* (2022) at Singapore Art Museum, Tanjong Pagar Distripark, 2022–2024.





Stage builder securing wood in front of the terminal for *Wayang Spaceship* (2022) at Singapore Art Museum, Tanjong Pagar Distripark, 2022–2024.





TOP  
BOTTOM

Installing reflective canvas for *Wayang Spaceship* (2022) at Singapore Art Museum, Tanjong Pagar Distripark, 2022—2024.  
Preparing and applying dichroic films onto acrylic for *Wayang Spaceship* (2022) at Singapore Art Museum, Tanjong Pagar Distripark, 2022—2024.



# Transmissions from *Wayang* Spaceship

BY

MING WONG

10



\*\*

A temple-boat rises, salvaged from the debris of the typhoon and cast adrift on the island's coast, only visible once the floodwaters recede. A stage of perfect symmetry, recast from barricades and makeshift materials from the wreckage of a battleship after the storm, stranded between daydream and nightmare, shipwrecked between worlds. It is right in front of your eyes but not there.

A strategically oriented mirrored garden, you would not find it if you were not looking for it. The coordinates of the floating architecture fluctuate with the tide. It never stays in the same spot, so as to confuse outsiders.

\*\*

My eyes are open, but there is only darkness. Have I lost my sight, or am I asleep and dreaming? Is it a power blackout, or merely the dark of night? Are my eyes covered with a mask or dark goggles? Am I in a VR matrix, or in a cinema?

Maybe it is the afterlife. An interim existence, a transitory space before I am reborn. Will I live again to tell the tales of my other lifetimes, or is this the space where I forget all past experiences and insights?

\*\*

Too much is left unsaid. Fragments of unexpressed meanings remain floating around in the brain, until electrified into dreams.

Occasionally, the silence is broken. Like a patchy radio transmission being caught out of the darkness. Like tuning in to a foreign station exiled from the future. Sounds like some kind of Chinese opera.

\*\*

I am dreaming stories for new operas. Scenes appear in a fevered dream as though from my memory. Like looking into a broken mirror of my mind's eye, I catch sight of myself in roles I have played or have yet to play, rehearsing the past for the future, or performing the future in the past. I see with more than one pair of eyes, I hear with more than one pair of ears. Towards this time, towards the past, towards eternity, all at once.



When I speak, I can hear echoes of myself in multiple dimensions.

\*\*

“It feels like I have been here before, and yet . . .”

It seems I have gotten lost in the memories of this place, which has now been remodelled as an opera set. I cross a bridge and run into my alter ego in a series of chance encounters from the past/future. Only this time they are speaking an “official” language. “Where have I met you before?”

The opera manuscripts have since been misplaced in the sea of time.

Finding myself centrestage, I valiantly project my voice into the void, like a sword cutting the air.

I hear only the echoes of an unreliable past, unfamiliar syllables, annoying registers, in memory of the mother tongue that has deserted me.

\*\*

## 12

Cantonese opera troupes used to live and travel in “Red Boats” along the waterways of the Pearl River Delta in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. They eventually evolved into land-based entities in the emerging urban centres of Guangzhou, Hong Kong and Macau by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. All-female urban troupes emerged as a second-class derivation of the feudal, traditional and all-male ensemble, with acting styles conforming to male coded interpretations. When the troupes crossed the Pacific and the Malay world to perform for the predominantly male immigrant populations of San Francisco and Singapore, the popularity of female actors paved the way for the rise of female Cantonese opera stars appearing in male and female roles.

More than other regional forms of Chinese opera, Cantonese opera underwent innovative transformations, due in no small part to the imagination of its leading performers and their encounters with cinema while travelling between Hong Kong and Hollywood. Mixed gender casts, Western music, costume and storylines began to appear on the Cantonese opera stage and silver screen.



\*\*

I look good in a Western suit—wide shoulder jacket and dandy tie.

Yes, mister, it sure buys respect.

Look at me, a Made in China Wall Street warrior. Come evening,  
I trade my dapper business suit for a majestic robe of silk armour.  
It bestows virtue and valour to my role as a “gender bender”  
scholar-warrior.

Armed for a revolutionary performance with weapon and wit:  
a spear in one hand and a brush in the other.

\*\*

It is hard to tell what is history or memory, fact or prophecy, as  
scenes of past and future lives are replayed in flashbacks and fast  
forward, before my eyes.

These fragments of stories, histories or memories once embedded  
in the depths of the soul and hidden in a corner of the mind are  
etched in the DNA of the body—seemingly electrified into the  
dreams of an immigrant from a country that has vanished and  
from a century which no one seems to remember.

\*\*

Looking at my reflection in the water, all I see is a blurred,  
distortion of myself in a flowing current of time—my mirror image  
in eternity.

Am I inside looking out, or outside looking in? Brother Outsider,  
Sister Insider.

\*\*

A portal opens up to a discontinuous state of time, place and  
being.

Here in a theatre of reconstruction, the past can be retold,  
reenacted and reused.

A stage between memory and futurity.

A setting for unbecoming and unbelonging from imposed roles  
and immutable identities.



A platform for unfixing foreclosed futures.

\*\*

A spirit guide glides through this space, time and gender continuum; once a star of the Cantonese opera stage and silver screen, now a cosmic poet, glitch-witch, scholar-warrior of heaven and earth; eternally inhabiting multiple roles and transporting across electric dreams that stretch out into the cosmic ocean.

\*\*





Installation views, *Wayang Spaceship* (2022) at Singapore Art Museum, Tanjong Pagar Distripark, 2022—2024.





Installation view, *Wayang Spaceship* (2022) at Singapore Art Museum, Tanjong Pagar Distripark, 2022–2024.





Installation view, *Wayang Spaceship* (2022) at Singapore Art Museum, Tanjong Pagar Distripark, 2022–2024.



# Tracing routes to *Wayang* *Spaceship*

BY

SYAHEEDAH ISKANDAR

18





Ming Wong, Exhibition view of *Wayang Spaceship* (2022) at Singapore Art Museum.<sup>1</sup>

## THE MACHINE

At precisely 7:15 p.m. the day’s glitchy humming of *Wayang Spaceship* gives way to deep thundering echoes as it comes to life. What was a mirror a moment ago is now a set of doors that slide open to reveal a frosted screen. Ming Wong describes it as a portal where spectators are introduced to a “messenger from the future. I call this messenger a scholar-warrior figure, which is a modern role in Chinese opera.”<sup>2</sup>

An arresting spectacle of moving images emerges, their vivid colours reflected in flickering fluorescent lights which pulse in harmonious shades of red, green and blue. The collage of images is overlaid one upon another like fragmented memories—a kaleidoscope of consciousness belonging to the “scholar-warrior” as they journey through various worlds. Like the fluctuating whispers of an old radio signal slipping in and out of range, the clarity of these images shifts unpredictably, as though transmitted live, caught in the ebb and flow of an unsteady connection. Against the spaceship’s silhouette, the southern sunset of Singapore appears as if a canvas set aflame, its fiery hues bleeding into the horizon, where dusk weaves a tapestry of warmth and fading light. Rain or shine, regardless of windy or humid conditions, the monotony of the container seaport is constant. When the spaceship shuts its “portal” at 7:45 p.m., ending its run for the day, a sense of disconcertment follows as an altered surrounding greets the mesmerised spectator. The sun has vanished, the atmosphere darkened, the museum closed, while only the hum of the seaport remains. Like slipping through a temporal rift, the experience evokes a time distortion, stretching the moments between the last light and first darkness into a surreal continuum.



*Wayang Spaceship* embodies all the essential elements of a science-fiction time-travel narrative. Emerging from Ming Wong's research on the transnational circulation of Cantonese opera cinema, it is the artist's most extensive manifestation of the project. When activated, its lights generate a spectrum that calls to mind the colours of Chinese opera scenography and costumes. Envisioned as a vehicle for new forms of storytelling, the spaceship bridges the realms of fiction and reality to grapple with complex ideas and imagine worlds that diverge radically from the ones we know. Rooted in multiple histories and rich traditions of vernacular storytelling—from the history and movement of ritual and street theatres, flows of migration and cultural exchanges, to their shaping of Wong's lived experiences; these circumstances culminate in the realisation of *Wayang Spaceship*. Without these elements, which intertwine fiction and reality, *Wayang Spaceship* would not exist.

*Wayang Spaceship* offers more than a nostalgic quest to commemorate a dying art; it emerges as a profound representation of Wong's identity as a Chinese Singaporean artist. Rooted in the lineage of itinerant theatres and migrant histories, the work marks his effort to grapple with the complexities of post-independence Southeast Asian identities. Emerging from years of research into science-fiction writing in Asia and its unexpected intersections with Cantonese opera—first shaped through Wong's family's ties to street opera—the work symbolises a bridge between past and present, seamlessly intertwining inherited knowledge systems like ancestral wisdom and ritual practices with modern creative forms like science fiction.

Having been exposed to this art form from a young age, Wong describes it as “a potent signifier of [his] Chinese identity, of [his] own Cantonese identity, but also a symbol of a life, and a way of thinking and the knowledge many people deem to be in danger of becoming extinct.”<sup>3</sup> This deep cultural connection positions him as a living archive, embodying the confluence of these histories in his work. Moreover, these intricate interconnections reflect the movement of both human and cultural capital. Together, they have shaped Southeast Asia's modern identity as a cultural entity deeply entangled in the transnational exchanges between Southeast Asia and East Asia. These interwoven histories shape Wong's proposition of the spaceship as a vessel for diverse stories—fact or fiction—that transcend boundaries and embrace conflicting viewpoints.

That said, the work can be understood as a form of historiography that connects present, past and potential futures. It offers a dynamic continuum where temporalities overlap and create a complex view of time. The endurance of these stories



is tied to their mobility, shaped by the routes they have traversed through history. As Wong explains:

Our forefathers, as immigrants, came from the southern coast of China via ship to the port of Singapore. And that’s also how Chinese opera and street opera came [...] the container port terminal [is] where you see the sign of contemporary, international global trading and commerce.<sup>4</sup>

Located between the seaport of Brani Terminal and Singapore Art Museum at Tanjong Pagar Distripark, this site itself embodies movement and exchange—of people, identities, commodities and capital—becoming a fitting location for its spirit-human communion. This is especially so when considering its ritual function, which is to express gratitude to the deities for safe voyages during the migration from southern China.<sup>5</sup> Though materially bound to Southeast Asia, the spaceship is inseparable from the broader context of Asia, especially China’s evolving past, present and future. It not only reflects Wong’s research into the legacy of science fiction in the Chinese-speaking world, but also argues that cultural narratives have long contributed to the imagination of the future.

A MIRROR OF MOVEMENTS



Video still from *Wayang Spaceship* (2022) which shows characters flying on a spaceship that is reminiscent of a traditional Chinese opera shoe. Image courtesy of the artist.

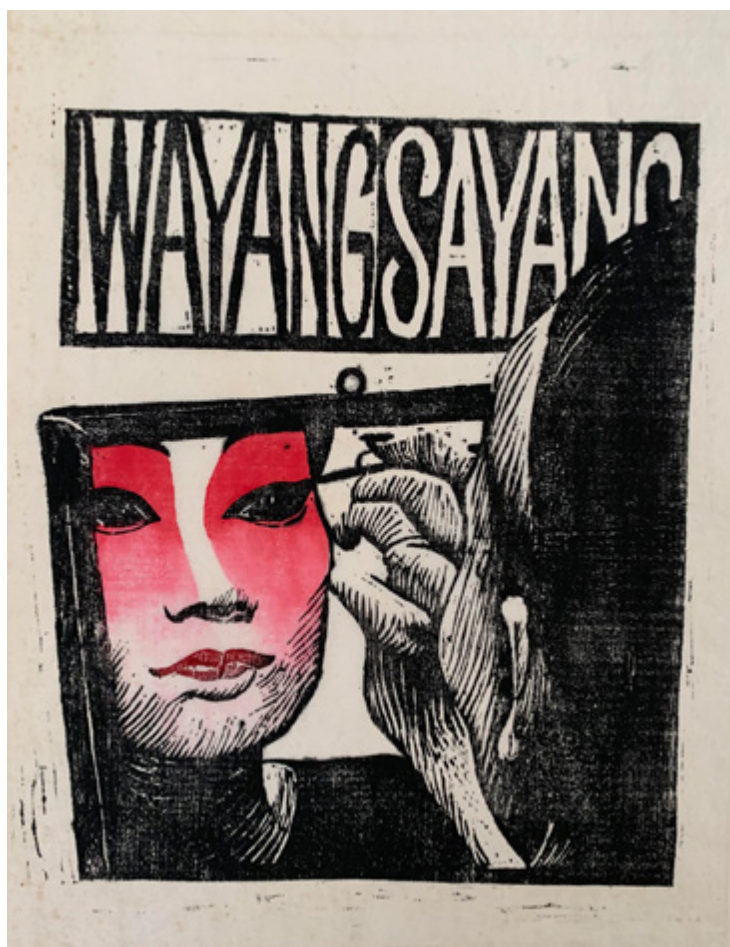
*Wayang Spaceship* reflects the intertwined histories of Southeast Asia and East Asia, which have been shaped by diasporic migrations and the circulation of art and culture. The spaceship’s design echoes these migratory journeys, blending the historical with the speculative. Tracing pivotal moments in Wong’s artistic



journey and lived experiences reveals historical parallels to his movements and relocations across geographies, offering deeper insights into the work. While his earlier practice is often defined by his artistic signature of “miscasting,”<sup>6</sup> *Wayang Spaceship* represents a significant evolution in his approach, both extending and shifting the direction of his work in the last decade.

Coming from Cantonese lineage, exposure to Cantonese opera was natural and formative for Wong, becoming foundational in his artistic development. Trained in Chinese calligraphy at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA) in Singapore, Wong’s early days as an emerging artist were also inspired by his family’s relationship with Chinese street theatres.<sup>7</sup> Exposed to what went on behind the scenes and in the front of house of these theatres, Wong was familiar with their traditions and had almost certainly witnessed its decline. His collaborator in the project, architect Randy Chan, recalls his own interactions with *wayang* stages in the 1970s, describing their use during special occasions (“tied to the seventh month or a deity’s birthday”), as well as childhood moments spent playing beneath the structures.<sup>8</sup> These stages, elevated like Malay kampong houses in a bid to adapt to the tropical climate, minimised flooding and protected costumes, props and performers from heavy rain and humidity.

## 22



LEFT Ming Wong. *Wayang Sayang*. 1993. Woodcut, dimensions unknown. Image courtesy of the artist.

RIGHT Ming Wong. *Wayang*. 1993. Ink on paper, dimensions unknown. Image courtesy of the artist.



Ming Wong exploring the backstage of a *wayang* stage in the 1990s. Image courtesy of the artist.



While the circulation of Cantonese opera within South China is mainly attributed to the itinerant troupes travelling in the red boats along the Pearl River Delta, temporary and makeshift stages (or the “thatched stage”) were more recognisable in Singapore and other parts of Southeast Asia.<sup>9</sup> *Wayang Spaceship* is modelled after this style of stage. The original materials used for this type of stage were timber and bamboo poles, both of which were readily accessible in China. With the mass migration of Chinese labourers and performers seeking a better life during colonial-era Singapore (then British Malaya), these traditions followed suit, but not without adaptation to local conditions. The *wayang* stages in Singapore were built using marine timbers sourced from Southeast Asia. Over time, the practice was no longer confined to a specific dialect group,<sup>10</sup> and these stages were for the general use for holding Chinese rituals, street operas or theatre, although distinctions could be made based on the creative content, purpose and size of these stages. They were often seen in temple courtyards, open fields, carparks and other public sites.<sup>11</sup> Today, these stages are typically built with metal scaffolding, while those built with wood scaffolding have become a rare sight. Wong’s collaborator, master stage builder Lee Beng Seng, recalls:

## 23

Earlier in the 1960s and 1970s, stages were made with attap (the stem and leaves of the attap palm). They put a sail canvas at the centre, canvas from Indian sailing boats, and fixed with the attap on two sides. That was how they set it up. And then, in the 1980s, when I took over the business, building stages with tarpaulin canvases became common.<sup>12</sup>

As a third-generation knowledge holder of *wayang* stage construction, Lee’s experiences exemplify how material culture evolved alongside the modernisation of Singapore, reflecting shifts in resources, techniques and the demands of these practices.

The origin of the term “*wayang* stage” remains unclear, but it likely emerged from organic creolisation over time, becoming embedded in Malay and adopted colloquially across communities, including among Chinese speakers, as a spoken rather than a formally written term. Derived from Javanese, *wayang* refers to shadow puppet theatre, and has been subsumed into the Malay language to mean drama or play. In Singapore, the Mandarin term for Chinese street opera is *jiexi*, which directly translates to “street show.” Alternatively, it is also referred to as “Chinese *wayang*.” Unsurprisingly, the term *wayang* illustrates Singapore’s linguistic and cultural blending



due to its diverse population, made plausible by its location in the Indo-Malay archipelago, and its shared history with Malaysia and Indonesia.<sup>13</sup> *Wayang* has become synonymous with urban street theatre delivered in various languages. Attending a *wayang* today could mean watching puppet theatre, operatic performances, or even films on the silver screen. Beyond this, *wayang* carries metaphorical connotations; in Singaporean colloquial speech, to be in a state of *wayang* implies artful deception or theatrics, akin to putting on a show. In some ways, these connotations mirror Wong's artistic style.

Born a few years after Singapore's independence, Wong belongs to a generation that experienced a shift in understanding their cultural identity. As a Chinese Singaporean, Wong's search for the post-independence Singaporean identity would have instigated a greater inclination toward embracing their birthplace, rather than accentuating ancestral ties to mainland China. This shift is in line with the multicultural nature of the Singaporean identity, given its diverse demographic makeup. Still, Wong would have also experienced the "domestic wave of Chinese cultural consciousness" in the 1970s to 1980s. During this period, traits of Confucianism became a cultural ideology in post-independence Singapore, as concerns arose about foreign values dominating social behaviours. It was a call to re-emphasise Singapore's societal attitude grounded in Asian values, rather than Western ones.<sup>14</sup> This critical period led to a brief revival of Singapore's Chinese street opera troupes, with the practice declining again in the 1990s due to competition, cultural policies, a shift in attitudes towards the arts and other factors.<sup>15</sup>

Early in his career, Wong's contemplation of identity unfolded in nuanced ways. His move to London (1999–2005),<sup>16</sup> first for his studies and later as a working artist, developed his awareness of what "multiculturalism" could mean outside of the Singapore context and where his ethnic positionality held different connotations.<sup>17</sup> In the 1990s, the discourse on hybridity<sup>18</sup> was gaining traction as a response to globalisation and the increasing circulation of goods, people, culture and information. These flows were further exacerbated with the arrival of the Internet, situating Wong's emerging practice as a product of its time. This awareness expanded when he moved to Berlin in 2007. By the late 2000s, Wong's contemplation of hybrid identities had evolved. His 2009 Venice Biennale showcase exemplified this developed perspective through his signature of miscasting, demonstrating culture as something constantly negotiated, where new forms of identity, representation and agency are being constructed. More significantly, Wong exposes its potential to subvert dominant narratives. As a descendant of Chinese diaspora that has become naturalised in the region, Wong's *Four Malay Stories* (2005) is an



example of how he challenges his own Chineseness within the cultural praxis of Singapore’s position in the Malay world. Wong’s restaging of Malay director P. Ramlee’s films as a Singaporean recognises his country’s historical significance as the cultural hub of the Malay world in the 1950s. However, as a Chinese Singaporean, Wong’s connection to these stories is depicted as a disjointed one. Although Malay is the national language of Singapore, and the island itself lies within the Indo-Malay archipelago, the majority of Singapore’s population is ethnically Chinese, who have limited proficiency in Malay. Wong’s inability to speak Malay is reflected in his learning process, which is captured on camera. This mirrors the challenge of forging a cohesive national identity in a diverse, multilingual society like Singapore. As a result of its global economic aspirations, the unified “Singapore story” becomes elusive.<sup>19</sup>



Video stills from *Four Malay Stories* (2005). Image courtesy of the artist.

Returning to *wayang*’s transformed meaning to include the silver screen, *Four Malay Stories* pays homage to the Golden Age of Malay Cinema (*Era Emas*). Recognised as the era spanning from 1947 to 1972, this flourishing industry was helmed by a multi-ethnic convergence of people from diverse backgrounds, including producers, directors, actors and writers.<sup>20</sup> For Wong, the Singaporean identity could be found in these moments of vernacular experiences. Like the organic creolisation of the term *wayang*, such identities resist institutional or policy framings. The Golden Age of Malay Cinema proved that by charting new paths for these theatrical show businesses to move their practice to the silver screen, the industry could evolve. In fact, one of the two significant key film producers, Shaw Brothers (the other being Cathay Keris Studio), not only contributed significantly to this era, but was also crucial in cementing Hong Kong’s cinematic legacy. As pioneers of Chinese filmmaking, the Shaw Brothers (originally from Shanghai) were involved in producing some of the earliest Cantonese opera films based on classic stage performances.



Many renowned opera actors collaborated with them, making the transition from star roles on the stage to prominent roles in silver screen productions.<sup>21</sup>

## FROM MISCASTING TO DISTANCING

Wong is renowned for his “miscasting” practice, which explores identity, cultural translation and representation in his art. His works typically reinterpret classic film scenes, taking on roles originally played by actors of different gender, ethnicity or cultural background. Through performances and video installations, Wong challenges concepts of fixed identity and questions cultural authenticity in cinema. By miscasting himself, he highlights the fluidity of identity and its complexities in cultural representation. As with most of his earlier works, this “shapeshifting” approach emphasises the performative nature of identity and language. As a hallmark of his practice, his scenes rely on repetition, yet each iteration inherently produces variation, revealing identity as something that is dynamic and perpetually evolving rather than fixed or singular.<sup>22</sup> Over time, his moving image practice consistently encapsulates experimental elements, including glitches, film montages, lo-fi aesthetics, expanded cinema, scenography and set designs. *Wayang Spaceship* symbolises the culmination of these conventions, embodying an evolved form of artistic shapeshifting that intertwines his past and present practices with historical parallels.

Wong’s return to exploring Cantonese street opera and Cantonese opera cinema was reignited through commissions across the Pacific in the early 2010s. This renewed direction began with *Making Chinatown* (2012) and *After Chinatown* (2012), marking the artist’s shift toward Pacific relations. The west coast of the United States has historically served as a key destination for mass emigration from south-eastern China since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. *Making Chinatown* critically engages one of Hollywood’s venerated films, Roman Polanski’s *Chinatown* (1974), which shaped the portrayal of Chinatown in film noir and neo-noir. According to Wong, Los Angeles’s Chinatown in the 1940s and 1950s was often depicted in negative stereotypes—full of danger, opium dens and exoticised characters. By the 1970s, neo-noir films like *Chinatown* treated the location more as a symbol than a physical setting. In Polanski’s film, Chinatown itself is minimally featured and is referenced instead mostly through Jake, the detective protagonist. As is Wong’s artistic convention, he plays the key characters in the scenes where Chinatown is mentioned. The miscasting creates a hilariously self-aware critical reinterpretation, emphasising the irony that a place so central to the narrative is never shown, while its key commentator is played



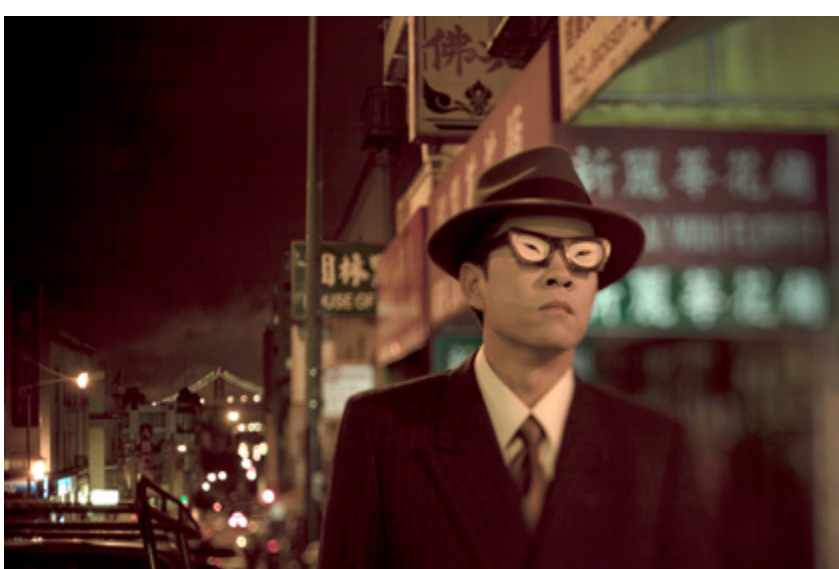
by a visibly Chinese artist. This deliberate choice draws attention to the problematics of representation, questioning Hollywood's historical erasure and stereotyping of Asian identities.



Video still from *Making Chinatown* (2012). Image courtesy of the artist.

Wong expanded his narrative approach in *After Chinatown*, adopting a stylistic homage to the classic film noir. Rendered in black and white with no dialogue and accompanied by a suspenseful, cinematic audio backdrop, the short narrative follows two characters—a mysterious femme fatale and a detective both played by Wong—as they navigate a reimagined version of the real-life Chinatown. They traverse distinct locations, including Los Angeles's Chinatown, San Francisco's Chinatown and Hong Kong—a city historically significant as a port for emigrants whose movements eventually resulted in the development of various Chinatowns in cities across the Pacific. The landscape shifts dynamically between these mostly vacant locales, creating imagery that might appear indistinguishable to an otherwise unaware audience. Serving as a bridge to *Making Chinatown*, *After Chinatown* incorporates traces of speculative fiction—a technique Wong began to explore more deeply through his study of science fiction in the Chinese-speaking world, and one that would later inform his subsequent artworks in East Asia.<sup>23</sup>

According to Wong, these commissions became voyages that mirrored the paths many Chinese migrants took, including those taken by Cantonese street opera troupes. From the 19<sup>th</sup> to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Chinese immigrants from the Pearl



Ming Wong, *After Chinatown* (2012), part of photographic series of the work. Images courtesy of the artist.



River Delta in Guangdong province introduced Cantonese opera across the Pacific and Southeast Asia, with Singapore and San Francisco emerging as critical nodes due to their sizeable Cantonese-speaking communities and levels of business patronage. Performers returning to South China often wore the prestigious *Nanyang hui* (meaning “return from Nanyang”) badge, symbolising quality and recognition, while others adopted the term *Jinshan* (meaning “Gold Mountain”) in their pseudonyms, reflecting their experiences in North America. While Hong Kong played a vital role in sustaining Cantonese opera, the preservation and evolution of Chinese street opera owe much to troupes travelling out of East Asia. During the Cultural Revolution, between 1966 and 1976, Cantonese opera was banned in mainland China, and only state-approved Peking opera model performances were permitted. This restriction led many practitioners to abandon the profession or flee abroad, allowing Chinese street opera to flourish outside the motherland. In Singapore, these circulations fostered vibrant cultural economies that persisted into the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>24</sup>



Ming Wong, Installation view of *Wayang Spaceship* (2022) at Singapore Art Museum. Detail featuring Yam Kim-fai, symbol of the scholar-warrior, in Western-style attire.

Even before the state ban during the Cultural Revolution, Cantonese opera underwent notable emancipatory movements throughout its history. Female-led troupes fled overseas to evade persecution for their practice. In fact, female-led troupes operating in Singapore were recorded in the 1880s, and this became the norm for the Chinese diaspora based in the Indo-Malay archipelago. By the time China began to relax its rules in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>25</sup> Cantonese opera had taken root abroad. Decades later, with the shift from live theatre to motion pictures, it is unsurprising that Hong Kong’s flourishing film industry paralleled the rise of the Golden Age of Malay Cinema (*Era Emas*) in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. These parallel developments reflected how both sites were advancing the cultural economy of the silver screen in their respective regions. Over the years,



performers began to don Western-style attire and borrowed from popular tunes to reflect their diasporic social realities. With the arrival of motion pictures, Cantonese opera was no longer confined to the theatrical stage, eventually setting the momentum for Cantonese opera cinema to take precedence. One such exemplary actor who gained prominence during this period is Cantonese actor Yam Kim-fai, whose career peaked from the 1940s to 1960s.



Video still from *Wayang Spaceship* (2022). Image courtesy of the artist.

## 29

Yam Kim-fai's image is used when portraying the protagonist in *Wayang Spaceship*, the “gender-bending scholar-warrior,”<sup>26</sup> whom Wong considers his “avatar” in the work.<sup>27</sup> Her image is stitched together from 18 films that she starred in, spanning Cantonese opera and modern cinema.<sup>28</sup> Notably, Yam gained acclaim for her performances in both Cantonese opera and cinema as a performer who specialised in male roles—an unconventional and remarkable achievement for her time. As Jeannine Tang notes in her contribution to this publication, Yam was widely regarded as a *wenwusheng*, a “specialist gender bender” of the genre. Like her, Wong's use of her imagery draws from the tradition of actors embodying multiple characters, a method that resonates in both their practices.

In the *Wayang Spaceship* film sequence, Wong begins by drawing on Cantonese opera films featuring Yam, weaving their fantastical imagery—rooted in cultural mythologies and folkloric narratives—into his exploration of speculative fiction. These films, with their richly imagined worlds, celestial beings and moral parables, demonstrate how speculative storytelling has long been embedded in cultural imaginations. Tang points out that “Wong's use of Yam's characters in *Wayang Spaceship* is not a straightforward recovery of earlier trans identities” but rather, they “devise a new type of character aimed at a speculative future.” By recontextualising these visuals, Wong



highlights Cantonese opera's historical engagement with cosmic ideas and tangents akin to what we now consider to be science fiction. Tang's observations affirm Cantonese opera's world-building capacity to envision alternate realities. Science fiction as a genre has been dominated by imagery produced by the West, particularly through Hollywood's lens, resulting in stereotypical depictions of Asia and Asians in the genre. Consequently, non-Western perspectives have often been marginalised, limiting the global narrative potential of speculative fiction. Through his research, Wong argues that the concept of the future is far more culturally diverse, linking science fiction to the unlikely relationship between Cantonese opera cinema and the genre.

Throughout the sequence, he overlays and superimposes images from science-fiction films predominantly from the Eastern Bloc,<sup>29</sup> pieced together to depict the avatar journeying through thresholds reminiscent of spaceship windows, docking ports, television screens and Chinese moon doors. In the latter part, Yam Kim-fai appears in modern roles, often wearing Western-style attire when portraying male characters, and dresses or the occasional *cheongsam* for female roles. Unlike his earlier works, Wong's own face is absent until the very end. These concluding shots derive from *Windows on the World (Part I)* (2014), which shows Wong as the avatar, dressed as an astronaut while navigating a spaceship. Tang suggests that these compositions allow the astronaut to "cite gender without re-enacting it," becoming "a gender-fluid and potentially nonbinary figure [...] wielding a repertoire of different masculine and feminine performances of gesture and affect." By likening himself to Yam, he suggests that his avatar is re-watching her journey through time, bringing the sequence to a circular, self-referential close. In this way, Wong's avatar, while invoking Yam's legacy, ultimately offers what Tang describes as "a queer relationship to Cantonese futurity"—one that preserves, transforms, and transmits critical Cantonese culture in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Wong's dialogue with China is not merely a straightforward commentary derived from his cultural lineage. As a Chinese Singaporean and descendant of a diaspora that settled in Southeast Asia, yet having spent most of his time in Europe,



LEFT Video still from *Wayang Spaceship* (2022). Image courtesy of the artist.

RIGHT Photo documentation of *Windows on the World (Part I)* (2014). Image courtesy of the artist.



Wong now inhabits yet another diasporic space. This movement has shaped his works, reflecting experiences of belonging and alienation, queerness and heteronormativity, and majority versus minority positionalities. Complicating the politics of representation, Wong navigates these perspectives with impunity by applying a form of “distancing”<sup>30</sup> that makes no exception—even for his ancestral motherland of China.

In his earlier works, Wong’s strategy of miscasting foregrounds the constructed and performative nature of identity, keeping audiences aware of the artifice. Through techniques such as linguistic struggles, visible rehearsal processes and cultural dissonance, he compels viewers to question underlying assumptions about identity and authenticity rather than passively consuming the narrative. With *Wayang Spaceship*, Wong extends this approach, employing a form of distancing akin to time-travel and science-fiction narratives. Here, temporal and spatial shifts provide viewers with a critical vantage point to reassess the familiar while exposing underlying issues. By disrupting conventional representations, Wong’s speculative storytelling urges spectators to engage with pressing contemporary issues and imagine more egalitarian futures.

As noted earlier, Chinese street opera underwent tumultuous periods in China’s history and ultimately found renewed life abroad, culminating in Hong Kong’s often celebrated cinematic legacy. These historical slippages produced extraordinary outcomes because of the critical distance created by exile and displacement. Wong’s personal trajectory mirrors



Photo documentation of *Windows on the World (Part I)* (2014). Image courtesy of the artist.



Ming Wong, *Scenography for a Chinese Science Fiction Opera* (2015). Mixed media installation featuring a hand-painted theatre stage set (paint on canvas, wood, steel, motors), presented at UCCA Center for Contemporary Art.



these tangents, veering away from any singular or sanitised definition of culture and revealing the organic, fluid nature of identity-making, alongside overlooked contours of “othering” that emerge in new contexts. It is within this indeterminate, third space—where no single origin or identity prevails—that Wong operates, enabling him to offer his critical reinterpretations.

### A STAGE BETWEEN MEMORY AND FUTURITY

While Chinese street opera—whether as a form of ritual or entertainment—has persisted by following the migratory routes of its practitioners, the art has also evolved into a distinctly Southeast Asian form. As argued by scholar Beiyu Zhang, these adaptations challenge the Sino-centric perspective that Chinese diasporas are merely passive recipients of cultural influences from the centre (China), where ancestral connections are presumed indisputable. Instead, Zhang highlights the active role of mobile opera practitioners in shaping the success of Chinese performing arts beyond the motherland. This perspective replaces the one-sided notion of hierarchical cultural diffusion with a more interactive and mutually beneficial cross-cultural exchange.<sup>31</sup>

An awareness of these histories, coupled with his itinerancy over two decades, has undoubtedly influenced Wong’s ability to navigate a multifaceted pathway that examines the construction of culture. His heightened situational awareness embodies a transnational perspective forged through historical experiences of displacement, transcending geographical borders and shaping contemporary cultural identities. By evoking multiple translations and transformations, Wong complicates our understanding of how culture acquires meaning, demonstrating that the process of signification is never fixed. Through his work, Wong skilfully amplifies stories shaped by the historical movements of people, underscoring the role of media technologies in connecting past and present identities. These tangents and diversions, culminating in the hybrid eventuality of *Wayang Spaceship*, deepen the space of articulation that Wong occupies.

*Wayang Spaceship*, with its transient nature rooted in its historical function as a ritual theatre, charts complex cultural meanings. As a reflection of Wong’s lived experiences, it navigates the “in-between” space, reinterpreting and rehistoricising familiar signs.<sup>32</sup> As an imaginative and historical apparatus, *Wayang Spaceship* transcends time—past, present and future—converging alternate readings to create new possibilities. Wong also situates these narratives within the broader context of China’s ascent to global prominence in



the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. His discourse on China coincides with its rise as a cultural and economic powerhouse, offering a nuanced and independent exploration of the global movements shaping these shifts.<sup>33</sup>

Through distancing, Wong produces a contemporary articulation of *Wayang Spaceship* as a site for negotiation and resistance, where non-dominant histories and identities are expressed. This is evident in how the art of Cantonese opera has historically had emancipatory effects, from escaping persecution to enabling female-led troupes to thrive in Southeast Asia. *Wayang Spaceship* also contemplates present-day realities, including the uncertainty of the future amid the impending climate crisis and the endangered knowledge of building *wayang* stages, which may soon disappear.

More importantly, Wong’s speculative approach offers a glimpse into how migratory forms might adapt in the future. *Wayang Spaceship* speaks to survival and hope, reminding us of the resilience and adaptability of the human condition—qualities that may be our greatest strengths in embracing change. Wong asks, “What would we like the future to be? What lessons could there be from the past? How would we mould the future together?”<sup>34</sup> Perhaps, like the temporal rift when the spaceship awakens—stretching the moments between the last light and first darkness—it is in these fleeting, magical moments that we find the courage to imagine solutions for a future unwritten.



Video still from *Sunu Jappo / 手拉手 / Hand in Hand* (2019). Image courtesy the artist.



- 1 Constructed in collaboration with master stage builder Lee Beng Seng and architect Randy Chan, an advocate for sustainable building techniques. Unlike traditional wayang stages, the exterior is made of polyethylene terephthalate, a solar-reflective canvas commonly used in agriculture. The design of the lightboxes containing dichroic film layers, along with their synchronised choreography, was by artist Liam Morgan. Sound and filmic collage were produced by Wu Jun Han and Eric Lee in collaboration with Ming Wong.
- 2 Singapore Art Museum, “The Everyday Museum | The Making of ‘Wayang Spaceship,’” 2023, YouTube, March 27, 2023. <https://youtu.be/pE8eMjFHuRI?feature=shared> (accessed 15 August 2023).
- 3 Singapore Art Museum, “The Everyday Museum | The Making of ‘Wayang Spaceship.’”
- 4 Singapore Art Museum, “The Everyday Museum | The Making of ‘Wayang Spaceship.’”
- 5 Singapore Art Museum, “The Everyday Museum | The Making of ‘Wayang Spaceship.’”
- 6 Tang Fu Kuen, “Notes from the Curator,” in *Ming Wong: Life of Imitation* (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 2012), 51–55.
- 7 Ming Wong’s aunt, Joanna Wong, was an important figure in the Chinese opera circuit. In 1981, she was awarded the Cultural Medallion for Theatre, Singapore’s highest accolade for those who have achieved artistic excellence in their field.
- 8 Singapore Art Museum, “The Everyday Museum | The Making of ‘Wayang Spaceship.’”
- 9 Wing Chung Ng, *The Rise of Cantonese Opera* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 28–29. These wooden vessels, measuring around 60 feet in length and 11 to 14 feet in width, were painted in vibrant crimson hues, with some adorned with auspicious symbols along their sides. Slightly smaller than the typical Chinese junk boats, these flat-bottomed barges were meticulously designed for both agility and speed, and were perfectly suited for navigating the intricate network of inland waterways and smaller streams within the region of the Pearl River Delta.
- 10 Beiyu Zhang, “Cantonese Opera Troupes in Southeast Asia: Political Mobilizations, Diaspora Networks, and Operatic Circulation, 1850s–1930s,” *Asian Ethnology*, 81:1/2 (2022):84. I am including here a thorough description of definitions by Zhang: “Dialect operas belonged to the Chinese *xiqu* (classical operas) that evolved from ancient China and formed their own regional aesthetic styles distinguished by plays, choreography, and languages for singing and dialogue. Each speech or linguistic group brought its own dialect operas from its native place to Southeast Asian diasporas, with *Yueju* (Cantonese operas), *Chaoju* (Chaozhou operas), *Minnanxi* (Hokkien operas), *Hainan xi* (Hainanese operas), and *Hanju* (Hakka operas) forming significant parts of the diasporic Chinese everyday popular entertainment.”
- 11 Zhang, 84.
- 12 Singapore Art Museum, “The Everyday Museum | The Making of ‘Wayang Spaceship.’”
- 13 Lee Tong Song, “Chinese Street Opera Performance and the Shaping of Cultural Aesthetics in Contemporary Singapore,” *Yearbook for Traditional Music*, 34 (2002): 139–161. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3649193> (accessed 20 September 2023).
- 14 Terence Chong, “Chinese Opera in Singapore: Negotiating Globalisation, Consumerism and National Culture,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 34 (2003): 454–469, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20072532> (accessed 10 November 2023).
- 15 Chong, 454–469.
- 16 Prominent artworks produced during this period include *Ham&cheesomelet* (2001) and *Whodunnit?* (2004), with the latter critiquing diversity planning initiatives by Arts Council England.
- 17 As an ethnic Chinese person, Wong would form part of the ethnic majority in Singapore, but would be considered an ethnic minority in Europe.
- 18 Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994) 1–18. While the terminology has since developed further in postcolonial studies, I am using the term to situate the context of Wong’s emergence during the 1990s, when “hybridity” gained traction when articulating the impact of cultural globalisation as one which was exacerbated by the global reach of media technologies.
- 19 Russell Storer, “Repeat After Me,” in *Ming Wong: Life of Imitation* (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 2012), 57–58.
- 20 Nor Afidah Btw Abd Rahman and Michelle Heng, “The Golden Age of Malay Cinema: 1947–1972,” *Biblioasia* by National Library Singapore, <https://biblioasia.nlb.gov.sg/vol-11/issue-1/apr-jun-2015/ga-malay-cinema> (accessed 15 August 2023).
- 21 Ng, 151. Shaw Brothers made significant efforts to expand their influence in the entertainment industry across Southeast Asia, with primary bases in Shanghai, Hong Kong and Singapore. After establishing their Singapore office in 1924, Shaw Brothers aggressively expanded their network of entertainment venues throughout British Malaya in the latter part of the 1930s until the early days of World War II. Their strategic moves played a crucial role in facilitating the movement of Cantonese opera actors before this era of transnational theatre came to a close. Regardless, their post-war recovery eventually gained momentum, and their impact has been prolific for Asian cinema.
- 22 Storer, 57–62.
- 23 Travis Jeppesen, “Ming Wong in the Studio,” *Art in America*, January (2014):82–89.
- 24 Ng, 48–55. Prolific actor Ma Shizeng is one exceptional example who gained recognition for his portfolio in Nanyang.
- 25 Ng, 89.
- 26 Ming Wong, writing in the perspective of the avatar in an artist text, “Transmissions from *Wayang Spaceship*,” in *Wayang Spaceship*, exhibition pamphlet published by Singapore Art Museum, 2022.
- 27 Singapore Art Museum, “The Everyday Museum | The Making of ‘Wayang Spaceship.’” Wong describes her as an avatar for imagining the future possibilities of humankind.

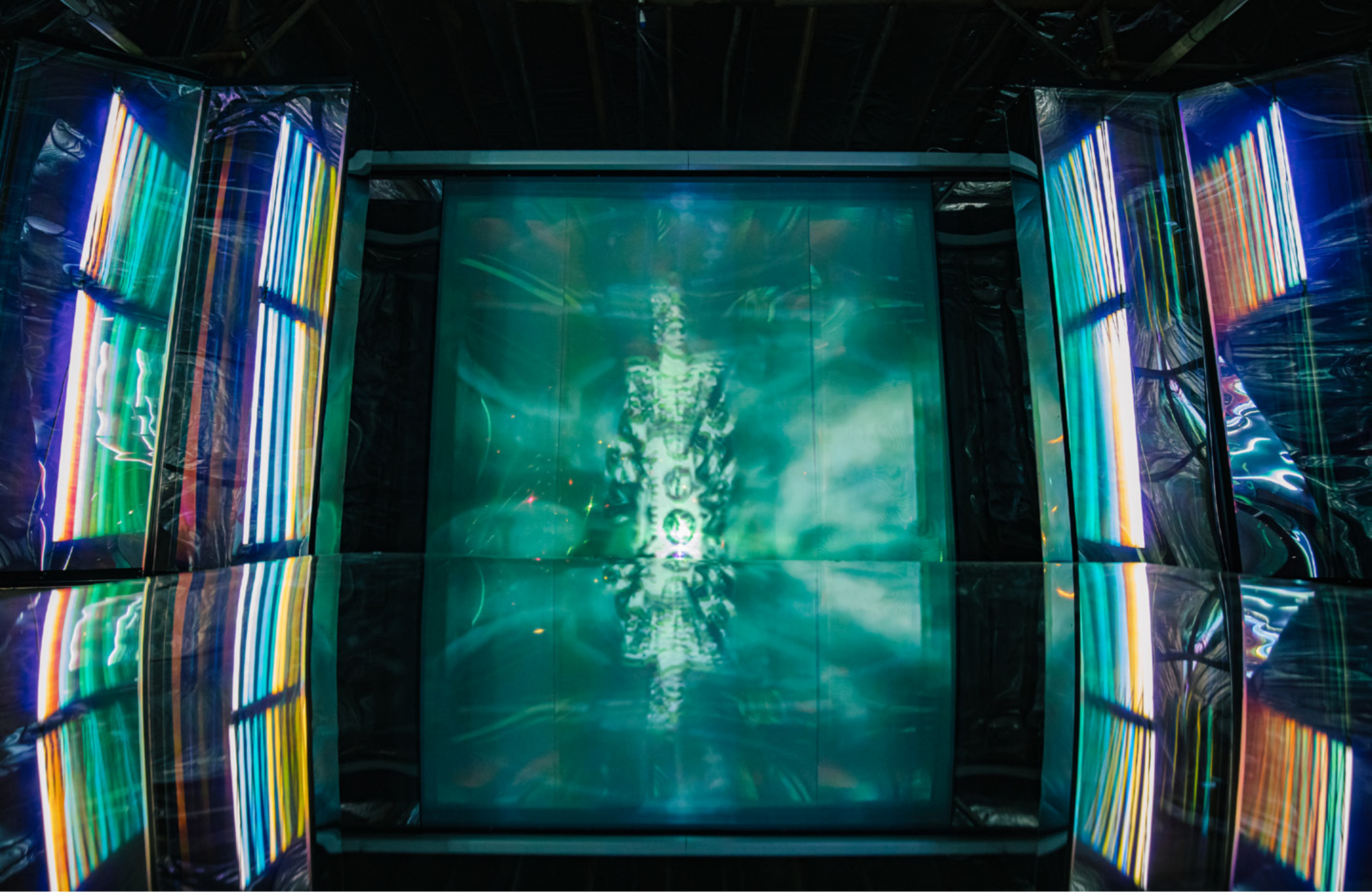


- 28 Extracted footage from films include *New Love Story of Leung Shan-pak and Chuk Ying-toi* (1951), *Lovesick* (1952), *The Twelve Beauties* (1952), *Sworn to Love* (1953), *Swallows in Spring* (1954), *Whose Son is This* (1954), *Sweet Dreams* (1955), *Best Fortune* (1957), *Goddess of Luo* (1957), *The Tragic Story of Leung Shan-pak and Chuk Ying-toi* (1958), *Beauty Fades from Twelve Ladies' Bower* (1958), *Triennial Mourning on the Bridge* (1959), *Princess Chang Ping* (1959), *Butterfly and Red Pear* (1959), *Golden Phoenix vs the Dragon* (1961), *The Intelligent Mandarin* (1963), *I Want My Country and My Wife Back* (1963) and *The 12 Hairpins and the 12 Balustrades* (1964). Films have been listed using their English-translated titles.
- 29 *Wayang Spaceship's* film montage features 20 Cantonese films, most of them starring Yam Kim-fai, alongside clips of foreign films from the Eastern Bloc including *Battle in Outer Space* (1959, Japan), *Battle Beyond the Sun* (1959, USSR), *The Silent Star* (1960, Poland), *Ikarie XB 1* (1963, Czechoslovakia) and *Solaris* (1972, USSR), with *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968, USA) being the exception.
- 30 Storer, 61. I am borrowing Storer's analysis and use of the term "distancing" to describe Ming

Wong's earlier work, *In Love for the Mood* (2009), where Wong instructed the actress from outside the camera frame. "Distancing" refers to a key aspect of his artistic technique of miscasting, which foregrounds the constructed and performative nature of his work. This includes the casting of a non-Cantonese-speaking Caucasian actress to play the role of a Cantonese character, the inclusion of her visible discomfort, linguistic struggles and rehearsals, and the use of multiple subtitled languages to highlight the multiplicity of meaning and interpretation.

- 31 Zhang, 85.
- 32 Bhabha, 37.
- 33 One such event that happened in the last decade is the launch of the controversial Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013 that channelled China's ambitions for global economic connectivity and geopolitical influence through infrastructure development and expanded trade routes around the globe. Wong has also responded to this development through his work, *Sunu Jappo / 手拉手 / Hand in Hand* (2019) (see image on page 33), demonstrating the alliance between China and Senegal through the BRI initiative.
- 34 Singapore Art Museum, "The Everyday Museum | The Making of 'Wayang Spaceship'."





Detail views, *Wayang Spaceship* (2022) at Singapore Art Museum, Tanjong Pagar Distripark, 2022—2024.



# Other Explorations: Ming Wong's *Wayang* Spaceship

37

BY

JEANNINE TANG



Ming Wong's *Wayang Spaceship* is a cinema for the moving image built from the scaffolding of Cantonese opera stages.<sup>1</sup> This structure with two lives is dormant in the day and enlivened at dusk. During the day, its mirrored surfaces reflect the setting around it, its structure available for exploration; visitors may climb its stairs and walk among its reflective mirrored planes, which reflect viewers and their environment. At sunset, the Spaceship comes alive, with audiences that are sometimes co-present (or at least, not those human ones—after all, Cantonese *wayang* opera in Singapore is as much for the ghosts as it is for the living, particularly during the Seventh Month when, according to Chinese belief, the deceased are said to walk the Earth). The animation of *Wayang Spaceship* is directed at both a speculative, spiritual realm and a mortally human world. Its clock emulates the nighttime shows of *wayang* opera, while its architectural armature is derived from *wayang* as a temporary, outdoor theatre, with traditional techniques and materials that are retrofitted here for an expanded cinema.

Upon awakening, an array of magnetic fluorescent lights flickers on. These are positioned in relation to one-way mirrors that flank the installation's stage left and right, upstage and downstage. The mirrored surfaces of the stage background part—these are doors that open to reveal a projection screen that plays *Wayang Spaceship*, a single-channel video sharing the installation's name. The parting doors echo the parting of theatrical drapes, cinema curtains and the opening of space shuttle doors—dissolving theatrical fourth walls and proscenium divisions between spectator and cinema, as well as viewer and action. By lifting the veil between audience and action and crossing thresholds of corporeal and virtual space, *Wayang Spaceship's* awakening creates a portal between one plane of reality and another.

Unlike the dark environments of cinematic auditoriums and outdoor night screenings—where spectators are absorbed in immersive experiences of a conjured reality—*Wayang Spaceship's* lights stay on as the video plays, calling attention to the moving image as something that is continually framed. In the work's choreography of light, stage and video devised by Wong with the support of lighting and camera artist Liam Morgan, dichroic films are activated once fluorescent lights come on, upon which light passes through the films' different colour tints. The colour palette is based on the visual spectrum and results in a pastel array of hues—salmon pinks, baby blues and minty greens reminiscent of Cantonese opera costuming. The stage perimeter flickers intermittently, as imperfections in the one-way mirrors refract light with an unpredictable rhythm, evoking the uncertainty of a spaceship potentially arriving, opening or even taking off, a vehicle in perpetual motion.



Such interactions of fluorescent light, mirrored surface and the moving image call to mind a number of references: Dan Flavin's fluorescent tubes, passed through the mirrored *mise-en-abyme* of Yayoi Kusama's *Infinity Mirror Room* and the functionality of Joan Jonas's *My New Theatre* cinematic structure. In ways akin to these predecessors of the 1960s and 1990s—in which sculpture and cinema operated in an expanded field of cinema where the apparatus of screening, projection, lighting and the image all form crucial aspects of a work—Wong's *Wayang Spaceship* is simultaneously both a structure and its environment, a film and its cinema. Unlike these predecessors, the animation of *Wayang Spaceship* incorporates theatrical traditions, as a work of the cinematic, visual and performing arts. Lit as though it were a character on a film set, while simultaneously serving as a cinematic environment, *Wayang Spaceship* becomes a portal into film history. Structured like an essay film, the video montage features a wide range of clips, including Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), Soviet science-fiction films, as well as Cantonese opera film clips featuring Yam Kim-fai's renowned cross-dressing performances. Yam's wide-ranging body of work is sampled in clips that range across her performances of mythical and modern characters—a hero rowing a boat through rushes and peering through trees, a dapper lover in modern suiting, gazing into a mirror with a smile, adjusting their tie, the performer's masculine visages fading into the coy gaze of an opera heroine.

In *Wayang Spaceship*, the use of dissolves, fades and other special effects troubles the binaries of dimorphic gender, while melding together the worlds of Cantonese opera and science-fiction films, cinematic genres that are so often held apart. Superimposition is used extensively, bringing together intergalactic space and Chinese pavilions, misty mountain ranges becoming both foreground and background to spacecraft cabins. Astronauts travel through landscaped botany and the galactic skies, while lovers from opera tales meander and commune beneath both gazebos and spacecraft control rooms, gazing out towards picturesque garden views and the skies of outer space. Edenic lands occupied by deities and fairies give way to the rocky terrain of planets, astronauts landing and coasting spacecraft. Not only do opera heroes and space voyagers share a landscape: they are one another's audiences and fellow travellers across all these different genres.

*Wayang Spaceship* features excerpts of these Cantonese opera films (that is to say, films shot, produced and adapted from the stage), including key scenes from the genre's heyday between the 1940s to the 1960s. These include *New Love Story of Leung Shan-pak and Chuk Ying-toi* (新梁山伯祝英台) (1951); *Lovesick*



(為情顛倒) (1952) and *The Tragic Story of Leung Shan-pak and Chuk Ying-toi* (梁祝恨史) (1958). Cantonese opera has long been celebrated throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century for the gender transitivity of cross-gender casting and cross-dressing performance (with male actors and female actor troupes gaining popularity at different times), along with its implications of homosocial relations and queering of audience fandoms and identifications in the work of particular actors such as Yam Kim-fai and Pak Suet-sin.<sup>2</sup>

Previously, in the single-channel video installation *Windows On the World Part 1* (2014), Wong played the role of a space traveller—clad in a silver astronaut suit with orange piping and a spherical silver helmet, this traveller strides silently in slow motion through a tubular passageway of silver fabric.<sup>3</sup> The traveller turns, arms outstretched to explore the walls or peer through a window. Their expression fluctuates: sometimes meditative and pensive, other times curious, exploring their surroundings. At other times, their gaze is bold, eyes firmly set on a distant horizon. With a face made up with drawn eyebrows and red lipstick, long hair coiled in a thick bun and short bangs across their brow, this character's physique and gestures amalgamate feminine and masculine styling, evoking Cantonese opera's many-gendered roles. The camera—initially offering fixed frontal and side views—then rotates in a circular path, evoking an anti-gravitational experience of space. A visitor to the gallery encounters this video after ambling through a tunnel installation of wood and silvery, reflective fabric, its round portholes echoed in the screen and video's round aperture. The character is backlit in white, then red and magenta light, tinting the walls surrounding the viewer, extending the tunnel of the video into physical space, the space explorer's passageway into ours.<sup>4</sup> The astronaut moves silently, while the Cantonese opera aria "Princess Zhao Jun Crosses the Border" plays in the background, evoking the story of Wang Zhao Jun's journey to the northern frontier to wed Chanyu Huhanye in an act of diplomacy between the Han dynasty and Xiongnu empire—a simultaneously sorrowful and agential act. Yet Wong's video includes no further language or scenes: as a work without narrative detail, one senses the feeling and affect of narrative abstracted from the specific details of plot. Set within a physical gallery, their exploration repeats endlessly in a loop—the process of exploration (rather than its results) is the point.

### THEIR TRANSITIVITY

The space explorer of *Windows On the World Part 1* (2014) is gender-ambiguous: their dramatic brows, white foundation and pink, contoured cheeks are immediately reminiscent of makeup for both male and female roles in Cantonese opera, as well as



the mutability of gender roles and cross-dressing on stage. At the same time, devoid of the genteel robes of the scholar, the evanescent dress of fairies, or the bulkier costuming of warrior roles—dressed instead in a puffy gender-neutral astronaut suit—the physical appearance of Wong's explorer flickers between masculine and feminine traits while never securing a definitive position. Crafted as a nonbinary character, the space explorer offers an alternative to (and implicit critique of) Western archetypes of Asian female space explorers—those disposable unknowns killed off in a film's first quarter, or when more fully rendered, appearing as an Orientalist alien threat or sexualised exotica. In contrast, Wong's space explorer is never subject to the rapid rise-fall of narrative action, nor are they consigned to the film's background or oblivion. Rather, their focus is on meditative, contemplative exploration suggestive of an interiority held in reserve, their gestures signalling and scrambling heterosexist codes of male or female gender.

By evoking characters without fulfilling their prototypical functions, Wong's astronaut cites gender without re-enacting it. If mutability was an aspect of plot in earlier narratives of Cantonese opera films, here it is emphasised. Historically, Cantonese opera troupes at their inception were all-male, necessitating the performance of female characters by men. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, all-female troupes emerged, albeit sidelined in comparison to the mainstream popularity of all-male troupes. Wong's sampling of clips cites the modernity of Cantonese opera in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, within which gender transitivity found an eager audience. Wong's selection notably features excerpts from the oeuvre of Yam Kim-Fai, who was renowned for her performances as male leads in all-female opera troupes between the 1920s and 1970s in Macau, Hong Kong and the United States. Working both on stage and in film, Yam was a notable *wenwusheng* actor who specialised in the primary heterosexist masculine character types of Cantonese opera—learned, military and scholar-warrior roles—a “specialist gender bender” of the genre.<sup>5</sup> Artists such as Ellen Pau have invoked Cantonese opera history in avant-garde video productions, for instance, Pau's single-channel video *Song of the Goddess* (1992)—which also appropriated footage from Yam Kim-Fai's opera film performances—drawing upon the homoerotic dynamics between Yam Kim-Fai and Pak Suet-Sin, who played romantic partners on screen and on stage and co-founded the Sin Fung Ming Opera Troupe. In contrast, even as Wong samples from Yam's oeuvre of characters, these performances rarely appear in relation to other actors but are positioned in relation to science-fiction films and special effects, rendering these performances allegorical rather than interpersonal.<sup>6</sup>



That said, I do want to stress that Yam's gender-bending performances—on their own, in their historical context—should not be interpreted as equivalent to or as representations of transgender identity. See-Kam Tam has noted how “cross-gender performances are by no means unique to Cantonese opera films, or opera from which such films derived their conventions.”<sup>7</sup> Additionally, for Priscilla Tse, cross-dressing performance in Cantonese opera “is a traditional practice [...] with minimal implications of social deviance and political agenda,” in the sense of its lack of equivalence to the Western politics of drag performance or transgender identity.<sup>8</sup> Wong's use of Yam's characters in *Wayang Spaceship* is not a straightforward recovery of earlier trans identities. Rather, the footage devises a *new* type of character aimed at a speculative future, constructed from a broader repository of tropes, echoes and references already circulating in popular culture.

As Wong puts it in a previous description of *Wayang Spaceship*:

In the land of Before, I set about structuring a storyline, a narrative shaped by a world that no longer exists, for a speculative fictional Cantonese opera cinema performance for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. My spiritual guide through this space-time-gender-travelogue—my Orlando of the East—takes the form of a gender-bending star of the Cantonese opera stage (an icon of the 20<sup>th</sup> century) reimagined as a transgender scholar-warrior of heaven and earth.<sup>9</sup>

Through the amalgamations of earlier gender-bending Cantonese opera performances, the space traveller of *Wayang Spaceship* was conceived as a gender-fluid and potentially nonbinary figure: using they/them pronouns, wielding a repertoire of varying masculine and feminine performances of gestures and affects. I am reminded of how Marquis Bey recently wrote that “trans is not merely, or even primarily, about having a certain bodily expression or sexed history. Rather, trans marks the ways that one transes gender,” describing how “trans” practices may give shelter to “bodily effects, psychical identifications, gendered subject positions, and performances of gendered “social, sexual, or kinship functions.”<sup>10</sup> That is not to valorise trans- as an abstract or universal cipher of mutability and changeability, nor to romanticise the state of transgender rights in Hong Kong and Southern China (indeed, struggles over oppression and rights persisted at the time and during the year of *Wayang Spaceship*'s installation).<sup>11</sup>

Rather, it bears mentioning that Yam's performances excerpted in *Wayang Spaceship* range from the masculinities of



mythic heroes to 20<sup>th</sup>-century suitors clad in corporate armour: working deals in shirtsleeves, making deals on the telephone, getting married in the Western drag of a bridegroom's suit. If Wong's Orlando-esque space traveller is a guide, then by casting this Orlando through the visage of Yam—a multi-continental celluloid star—we are equally reminded that this androgynous, gender-crossing oeuvre of characters was fundamental to Cantonese opera's diasporic migrations across Guangzhou, Macau, Hong Kong, Singapore and the United States, and allegories of modern Chinese society as it crossed thresholds of democratic invention across the world. If Wong's astronaut offers a trans relationship to gender, this forms part of a queer relationship to Cantonese futurity. At stake, then, is the cultural preservation, transformation and transmission of critical Cantonese cultures in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### OTHER CANTONESE FUTURES

The intervening years between this spaceship's arrival and Wong's earlier works *Windows on to the World Part 1* and *2* (2014) included Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement of 2019, in which Cantonese diasporas and the world witnessed Hong Kong pro-democratic struggles for political rights to election and trials, and a broader shoring up of concern regarding suppressions of Cantonese expression across political speech, the Cantonese dialect and critical popular cultures. In this regard, *Wayang Spaceship* “seize[s] hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger” as though it were Walter Benjamin's angel of history.<sup>12</sup> Wong's research for the project *Wayang Spaceship* included Cantonese opera's diasporic migrations and political history: the ways in which Cantonese opera films summon the genres, languages and cultures of Southern Chinese culture and their resistance to governmental control and the dominance of more dominant Sino cultures of the North.

The history of Cantonese opera notably included bans against it, against which troupes rebelled and resisted, fighting for the survival of their craft, language, tradition and forms. Although captivated by its colourful spectacle, Western ethnographers also associated Cantonese opera with incivility, unruliness and irrationality, in need of European civilising missions.<sup>13</sup> During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the late Qing government turned to Western ideals of “rationality, progress and science” for China's modernisation, and Chinese opera was seen as “incompatible with Western rationality”—leading to the building of playhouses that would resemble European architecture by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>14</sup> As Wing Chung Ng has pointed out, the “rise of Cantonese opera unfolded in the context of political and



cultural upheavals in China ushered in by the demise of the Qing monarchy and the frustrated transition into republicanism.”<sup>15</sup> Cantonese opera was also embroiled in radical nationalist politics of early 20<sup>th</sup> century Guangzhou, when “in an age of state-building when different government authorities—including the British in colonial Hong Kong, the successive warlord regimes in control of South China and the Chinese Nationalist government after 1927—all, to various degrees, sought to police the theatre and assert control in the interest of mobilisation, discipline, and order.”<sup>16</sup> Beiyu Zhang has argued that Cantonese opera was crucial in “China’s struggle for modernity and national awakening,” as a harbinger, collectivity and vehicle for revolutionary political movements across the diasporas, including the Taiping Rebellion and Sun Yat-sen’s anti-Manchu revolutions in Guangzhou.<sup>17</sup>

Consequently, the storied life of Cantonese opera is a tale of Chinese modernity, nationalist and democratic political struggles. Its conversion from opera to films emerged with the advent of the cinematic experience in Hong Kong and China, joining sibling technologies of the gramophone and mass media that would expand the democratic relationship between the people and traditional cultural forms.<sup>18</sup> The emergence of Cantonese opera films relied on a range of cinematic architectures, including those cinema-theatres built in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as part of histories of transpacific exchange in which Hong Kong and Macau were urbanised through British colonial modernity, giving rise to theatrical venues that became cinematic ones. The shift from theatrical performances into a cinematic, ticketed experience also produced a departure from its festival and ritualistic performance contexts. If Cantonese opera presentations were previously fundraisers for temples, activities for clan associations or performances for spirits during religious or spiritual festivals, the effect of its modernity and incorporation into capitalist experience economies saw its transformation into a commodified form.

However, in refracting Cantonese opera films, *Wayang Spaceship* does not so much represent Cantonese opera as continues its transportation and its reinvention—as cinema, stage and spacecraft. The valences of *Wayang Spaceship*’s futurity are, however, distinct from mass-cultural science fictions of the recent past: Dawn Chan has pointed out how Asian-inflected futures populate mass culture and contemporary art (whether through cyberpunk films, or the robots and cyborg figurations of Nam June Paik, Lee Bul, Lu Yang and others), not to mention the numerous techno-Orientalist figurations of East Asian cities and denizens, symptomatic of Western anxieties towards the economic rise of Asian countries—such science



fictions are sites of projection, cultural misunderstanding and psychic misrecognition.<sup>19</sup> That said, Xin Wang has argued that there is “danger in accepting the implication that otherness necessarily operates from a place of deficiency, which threatens to essentialise what is in fact radically heterogeneous.”<sup>20</sup> Wong’s study of science fiction for *Wayang Spaceship* notably drew upon Sino-cultural texts and literary studies, including the work of scholars of Chinese science fiction such as Wu Yan, whom Wong met during the research for this project. Wu has notably observed the tensions between Chinese science fiction’s proximity to imaginative desire, on the one hand, and the genre’s relationship to scientific realism across the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>21</sup>

The realism of *Wayang Spaceship*’s technological form surfaces in the materialism of its construction. The spaceship’s armature is that of a *wayang* opera stage built by Mr. Lee Beng Seng, whose craft derives from a family tradition of *wayang* stage building, which Lee learnt from his father. *Wayang* stages are often covered with makeshift canvas fabric roofs to contain the stage and protect it from the elements. For *Wayang Spaceship*, Wong sourced reflective insulating materials more typically used in agriculture and space technologies, salvaged from a stage builder who could no longer afford to store them (in this regard, *Wayang Spaceship*’s material life is a practice of regional conservation, of materials, skill and craft). And so, the work’s stagecraft manifests those imagistic and architectural technologies that historically propelled Cantonese opera from Southern coastal communities into international diasporas. The temporary theatre is a site of “cross-cultural interaction,” honouring the theatrical traditions of opera films and how the arrival of Cantonese opera and opera films in Singaporean cinema history involved actors, dancers and musicians from the Malay stage.<sup>22</sup>

It is a particularly poignant aspect of *Wayang Spaceship*’s circulation that its material architecture is reconstituted and assembled in each site of its installation, falling asleep and glowing with awakening. By way of *Wayang Spaceship*, spectators witness how cultural preservation, social resistance and even a trans relationship to gender and history have been fundamental to Asia’s modernities. This witnessing takes place, at the moment of threat—as critical Cantonese expressive cultures face suppression and its corollaries of resistance and renewal—we might be reminded that cultures exist through their promiscuous circulation and their material enactments. Indeed, the temporality of *Wayang Spaceship* is riven with repetition: the work’s nightly activations are at once an evening show and a loop in space.<sup>23</sup> *Wayang Spaceship*’s outdoor temporary stage and living cinema is a vehicle of traditions available to passing audiences (and I mean “vehicle” in both the semiotic and transportation senses



of the word—the work is a carrier of meaning and a means of transport).

Each time it is installed and stirs awake at night, the spaceship summons yet again new exploratory counterpublics. The space explorer that we perceive is also not a singular figure. When *Wayang Spaceship* is activated, its combination of mirrored surfaces and the angling of light upon dichroic film reflects the fluorescent lights to infinity, bending light patterns left and right. The programming of lights forms part of the film's editing, flickering with and against the video image, such that the projected image lands upon two layers of dichroic film rather than a flat white screen. As a result, the black-and-white projected images are divided into five or six layers of colour—as though it were a hologram. Consequently, instead of one astronaut in space or performer in an environment, a viewer perceives up to six of the same figure, choreographed differently by chromaticity and luminescence. That is not to say that this is a work of perspectival illusion: rather than a window view of the world or a world picture, *Wayang Spaceship* operates as though an open portal of multiple co-occurring realities, refracting an explorer—and exploration—in its multiplicity. Like all speculative projects, *Wayang Spaceship* is a bid for futurity and a reminder from history that dormancy in culture is never truly extinction. Exploration, and its kaleidoscope of personifications, remains at hand.



- 1 My thanks to the artist Ming Wong for the extended conversation that provided insight, detail and context, and Syaheedah Iskandar for the meaningful resources and interlocution that made writing this text possible.
- 2 See Kar Yue Chan, "Cross-Dressing and Gendered Voice Representation in Cantonese Opera," in *Comparative Literature: East & West*, 3:1 (2019): 1–14.
- 3 The work was produced in collaboration with Thomas Tsang / DeHow Projects and commissioned by ParaSite Art Space / Spring Workshop for the group exhibition *Islands Off the Shores of Asia* in 2014.
- 4 This cycle of works represents a shift of sorts, from earlier works—in which historian Joan Kee had argued, "Wong gravitates toward particularly climactic, emotionally charged scenes, whose affective content is channeled into heightening the unreleased tensions inherent in such appropriation. Indeed, much of the impact of Wong's work stems from the subtle ways in which he emphasizes the boundary separating the viewer from the on-screen world and its reenacted emotions without needing to break the proverbial fourth wall altogether." See Joan Kee, "False Front: The Art of Ming Wong," *Artforum*, May 2012.
- 5 See Shi-Yan Cao, *Queer Representations in Chinese-language Film and the Cultural Landscape* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020) and See-Kam Tan, "The Cross-Gender Performances of Yam Kim-Fei, or the Queer Factor in Postwar Hong Kong Cantonese Opera/Opera Films," *Journal of Homosexuality*, 39:3–4 (2000): 206.
- 6 Here, I use "androgynous" in the sense of Priscilla Tse's descriptions of androgyny in Cantonese opera—"performance is an emerging space that accommodates the possibility of intertwining the fantasy world onstage and homoerotic emotional intimacy together with fluidities of gendered identities and sexualities that are experienced by both actresses and audiences." See Priscilla Tse, "Performing androgyny: cross-dressing actresses, fandom, and queer sensibility in Hong Kong Cantonese opera," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 22:2 (2021): 140.
- 7 See-Kam Tan, "The Cross-Gender Performances of Yam Kim-Fei, or the Queer Factor in Postwar Hong Kong Cantonese Opera/Opera Films," *Journal of Homosexuality*, 39:3–4 (2000): 202–203.
- 8 Tse, 142. "Moreover, it is also important to point out the inaccurate use of the Chinese term 'fanchuan.' In today's Hong Kong, *fanchuan* is widely used by practitioners, scholars and laypersons to refer to cross-gender performance. They tend to make a simple equivalence between the English word 'cross-dressing' and the Chinese term *fanchuan* when referring to performances in Cantonese opera. However, the original meaning of *fanchuan* (*fan*, literally 'reverse' or 'opposite'; *chuan*, literally 'occasional acting') in the Chinese opera context refers to crossing role-type performances instead of crossing gender." (Cheung 2014, 140–145; Chou 2004, 243).
- 9 Ming Wong, "Tales from Wayang Spaceship" *Wayang Spaceship* (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 2023), exhibition poster for outdoor public installation, January 7–March 4, 2023.
- 10 Marquis Bey, "Notes on (Trans)Gender," in *Cistem Failure: Essays on Blackness and Cisgender* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2022): 65. For Bey, "trans" has importantly sheltered "a wide variety of bodily effects that disrupt or denaturalise heteronormatively constructed linkages between an individual's anatomy at birth, a nonconsensually as-signed gender category, psychical identifications with sexed body images and/or gendered subject positions, and the performance of specifically gendered social, sexual, or kinship functions."
- 11 See Jessie Pang, "Hong Kong transgender protesters say government is not abiding by landmark ruling," *Reuters*, March 31, 2023, URL: <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/hong-kong-transgender-protesters-say-government-is-not-abiding-by-landmark-2023-03-31/>.
- 12 "To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it 'the way it really was' (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger." Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History (Thesis IX)," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books), 258.
- 13 Beiyu Zhang, "Cantonese Opera Troupes in Southeast Asia: Political Mobilizations, Diaspora Networks, and Operatic Circulation, 1850s–1930s," *Asian Ethnology*, 81:1/2 (2022): 86–87.
- 14 Zhang, 86–88. See also Gretchen Liu and Angelina Phillips eds., *Wayang: A History of Chinese Opera in Singapore* (Singapore: National Archives, 1988).
- 15 Wing Chung Ng, *The Rise of Cantonese Opera* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2015): 6.
- 16 Ng, *The Rise of Cantonese Opera*, 6, 107–131.
- 17 Zhang notes how dialect operas such as *wayang* would stage assassinations of Qing officials and emperors, openly clamoring for the overthrow of feudal Empire, mobilising illiterate and working class migrant populations towards revolutionary ideas, forming temporary autonomous zones and critical counterpublics around modern concepts of nationhood, while troupes themselves were sometimes active participants in revolutionary struggle, transporting arms and storing armaments, using stage boxes to evade surveillance. From Zhang, "Cantonese Opera Troupes in Southeast Asia Political Mobilizations, Diaspora Networks, and Operatic Circulation, 1850s–1930s," 88–90. See also Bingchou Xie, "*Zhongguo xiandai xiqu de mingzhugeming secai he yueju de gailiang yundong*" [The revolutionary and democratic opera reform of modern China], in *Yueju yanjiu ziliao xuan* [Sources for research on Cantonese opera], ed. Guangdongsheng Xiju Yanjiu Shi, (Guangzhou: Guangdongsheng Xiju Yanjiu Shi, 1983): 226–288.
- 18 *Wayang Spaceship* pays homage to long relationships between film and theatre in Hong Kong culture—Cantonese opera actors and directors were among the genres' principal filmmakers, and part of the pivotal translation of opera from theatre to screen. The life of Cantonese opera films was not only restricted to Southern Chinese diasporas—it drifted north too, as Cantonese opera crucially entertained immigrants on the West Coast of North America, as male audiences were those recruited to work railroads, and opera troupes performed for them, bringing back their own encounters with Hollywood cinema to China and Hong Kong.



- 19 Dawn Chan, “Asia-Futurism,” *Artforum*, Summer 2016, <https://www.artforum.com/columns/asia-futurism-229189/>.
- 20 Xin Wang, “Asian Futurism and the Non-Other,” *e-flux journal*, No. 81 (April 2017), <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/81/126662/asian-futurism-and-the-non-other/>.
- 21 Wu has observed that after the formation of the People’s Republic of China, science fiction turned away from unrealistic forms of speculation towards adopting basic scientific ideas and sociological ideas from Marxism—“The so-called ‘possibility’ imagination mode involves envisaging ways in which people’s desire for social development and a better life may become a reality in the near future [...] Not only did science fiction adopt “miracles of technological progress, but also sociological or political theory which could explain the development path to a future world. This was not only expressed in literary science fiction’s landscapes and technologies, but in characters’ relationship to society.” See Wu Yan, “Imagination in Chinese Science Fiction,” *Frontier Literary Studies* 14:2 (2020): 161–180, <https://doi.org/10.3868/s010-009-020-0008-2>.
- 22 Zhang, 85.
- 23 The soundtrack of *Wayang Spaceship*’s video bleeds across different sources of footage, and is itself composite: mechanical sounds evoking spacecraft engineering and galactic flight commingle with the soaring vocals of opera songs. These overlays are associative and allusive. Eschewing the linear progression of plot, *Wayang Spaceship*’s essayistic structure is marked by a looping temporality. Footage of astronaut and spaceship explorations rewinds and accelerates, recurrences of visual movement that have an audio analogue as repetitions of song, sound and phrasing occur throughout, as though an uncanny echo pulsing through the piece.





Installation views, *Wayang Spaceship* at Empress Lawn as part of Light to Night Singapore 2024, 19 January—10 March 2024.





Installation views, *Wayang Spaceship* at Empress Lawn as part of Light to Night Singapore 2024, 19 January—10 March 2024.



# Artist and collaborator biographies

## ARTIST

The world of cinema is **Ming Wong**’s gateway to the imagination. In many of his works, he subverts the role of the actor in order to reveal how gender, race, nationality, language, body type and other categories are always a form of performance. Sometimes Wong plays all the roles himself—even learning different languages to do so. Wong has maintained a particular interest in Cantonese opera, having grown up with it in Singapore. Since 2012, he has investigated the modernisation of Cantonese opera in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, its cinematic transformations and unlikely relationship with the development of science fiction in the Chinese-speaking world. Alongside *Wayang Spaceship*, other works he has created that address this theme include *Windows on The World Parts 1 & 2* (2014), *Blast off into the Sinosphere* (2014) and *Scenography for a Chinese Science Fiction Opera* (2015). The latter was a work that invited the public to walk through a full-scale hand painted stage set of a hypothetical science-fiction themed Chinese opera inspired by cosmological motifs from Buddhist cave paintings and Eastern Bloc science fiction movies. Wong represented Singapore at the 53<sup>rd</sup> Venice Biennale in 2009 with his solo exhibition, *Life of Imitation*, which won a special mention.

## TECHNICAL PRODUCTION

Architect-artist **Randy Chan** is the Principal of Zarch Collaboratives, whose diverse portfolio spans architecture, landscape urbanism, art installations, curation, galleries, exhibitions and placemaking. Notable projects include the Warehouse Hotel, Jacob Ballas Children’s Garden Extension, Windsor Nature Park and the Wild Rice Theatre at Funan. His works have received local and international recognition, including SIA ADA (Gold), AHEAD Asia Hotel of the Year and Futurarc Green Leadership Award. Chan was appointed creative director/curator of *Singapore: Inside Out* and multiple editions of the National Day Parade and i Light Marina Bay Festival. He currently serves on public advisory panels and is an active educator at the National University of Singapore.

[www.zarch.com.sg](http://www.zarch.com.sg)

## CURATOR

**Syaheedah Iskandar** is Assistant Curator at Singapore Art Museum. She works with vernacular ideas of seeing, thinking and being. Drawing from Southeast Asia’s visual culture(s), she is interested in the entanglements between the unseen, the hypervisual and their translations from material to new media practices. She holds an MA in History of Art and Archaeology from the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London.



CONTRIBUTING  
WRITER

**Jeannine Tang** is an art historian who teaches as Assistant Professor in the Department of Performance Studies at the Tisch School of the Arts, New York University. Her writing on contemporary art, exhibition and curatorial histories, queer and trans cultures has appeared in venues such as *Art Journal*, *Artforum*, *GLQ*, *Theory, Culture & Society*, *Journal of Visual Culture*, *Art India*, anthologies including *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility* (New Museum & MIT Press, 2017) and exhibition catalogues for museums, galleries and biennials. With Lia Gangitano and Ann Butler, she co-curated the 2018 exhibition *The Conditions of Being Art: Pat Hearn Gallery and American Fine Arts, Co.* (1983–2004) at the CCS Bard Hessel Museum and co-edited the accompanying book. Tang received a 2020 Warhol Writer’s grant to support her book *Living Legends: Contemporary Art & Trans\* History*.

MASTER  
STAGE-BUILDER

**Lee Beng Seng** has been at the centre of constructing *wayang* and street opera stages in Singapore since the 1960s. He is amongst the few tradesmen remaining who are well-versed in the vernacular building techniques of Singapore. Passed down over generations, Lee maintains a collection of tropical and marine timbers sourced especially for *wayang* stages. He is an advocate for this material tradition in terms of its handling, upkeep and adaptability. Lee continues to promote these building techniques as a sustainable method of building despite the significant decrease in demand for *wayang* stages since the 1990s. In order to ensure the sustainability of the *wayang* street opera business, Lee and his father, Lee Baw Seng, developed a metal scaffolding wing for the construction industry. In the past few years, Lee has collaborated on projects with artists and architects, with the aim of raising awareness for the material traditions attached to *wayang* stage building. Today, the business operates under the trademark of Lee Baw Seng.

LIGHTBOXES  
AND PROJECTION

**Liam Morgan** is a Canadian artist, filmmaker and cinematographer. He works across the various visual and performing arts, as well as in cinema and the moving image. In 2002, he studied anthropology and development studies through Trent University at Chiang Mai University in Chiang Mai, Thailand. His studies led him into the now-defunct Images Asia, where he got his start in editing documentary film, and subsequently to feature film cinematography. In 2018, along with Unchalee Anantawat and Jeff Gompertz, he co-founded Thailand’s first biennial event, the experimental Bangkok Biennial. His 2020 expanded cinema performance collaboration with Xia Lin and Sheryl Cheung *Sun Moon Lake is a Concrete Box* was a finalist for Taiwan’s prestigious Taishin Arts Award. His lighting sculpture was shown at documenta fifteen in Kassel, Germany. Liam lives and works in Berlin and Taipei.



SOUND  
ARTIST

**Wu Jun Han**’s work explores the experience of impermanence and decay, and the futility of capturing its elusive quality in sound and images. Ever uncertain yet curious, Wu flits between playfulness and seriousness through an intuitive process. His process manifests in different forms, including an experimental music practice based on improvisation and cassette tape loops, a relational practice of recording conversations with strangers and site-specific sound installations. He also collaborates and contributes to live performances and productions as a musician, VJ, and sound designer, and is an educator at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts. He was part of The Substation’s *we are not going back, we are coming around* programme, where he used The Substation as a recording room, collecting and archiving conversations before the venue was handed over to the National Arts Council, Singapore. Recently, he has worked with contemporary dance company Raw Moves on an experimental video series that explores identity using machine learning tools.

VIDEO

**Eric Lee** makes videos in Singapore.



*Wayang Spaceship* is a commission by The Everyday Museum<sup>[7]</sup>, a public art initiative by Singapore Art Museum, and made possible with the generous support of Sun Venture.

SINGAPORE ART MUSEUM TEAM

**CEO and Director, Singapore Art Museum**  
Eugene Tan

**Director, Curatorial and Research**  
June Yap

**Curators**  
Shabbir Hussain Mustafa and  
Syaheedah Iskandar

**Contributing Writer**  
Jeannine Tang

**Content Development**  
Wong Jia Min

**Production Management**  
Teo Loo Bing and Derrick Yam

**The Everyday Museum**  
Ong Puay Khim, Koh Hui Ting, Estella Ng

**Partnerships and Patronage**  
Tan Shir Ee and Zhang Szeling

**Conception and Lead Artist**  
Ming Wong

**Architecture and Design**  
Randy Chan, ZARCH Collaboratives

**Wayang Stage**  
Mr Lee Beng Seng

**Lightbox and Projection**  
Liam Morgan

**Video**  
Eric Lee

**Sound**  
Wu Jun Han

**Sound Design Consultant**  
Shah Tahir

**Technical Production**  
ARTFACTORY

**Graphic Design**  
CROP.SG



Published following *Wayang Spaceship*  
(15 July 2022—31 December 2023, Tanjong Pagar  
Distripark; 19 Jan 2024—10 Mar 2024, Empress Lawn)  
a public artwork commissioned by Singapore Art Museum.  
© 2025 Singapore Art Museum

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be  
reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted  
in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical,  
photocopying or otherwise, without prior permission of the  
copyright holders.

Copyright of the content in this publication may also  
reside in persons and entities other than, and in addition  
to, Singapore Art Museum (SAM). SAM seeks to share our  
artworks with as many people as we can. We are fully  
committed to respecting the intellectual property rights of  
others and always use our best efforts to obtain permission  
for artwork images used. Please contact us at enquiries@  
singaporeartmuseum.sg should you have any queries.

Published in 2025

Please direct all enquiries to the publisher at  
Singapore Art Museum (Corporate Office)  
39 Keppel Road  
#03-07, Tanjong Pagar Distripark  
Singapore 089065

**Editor**  
Syaheedah Iskandar

**Managing Editor**  
Ong Zhen Min

**Project Editor**  
Wong Jia Min

Designed by CROP.SG

NATIONAL LIBRARY BOARD, SINGAPORE CATALOGUING  
IN PUBLICATION DATA  
Name(s): Wong, Ming, 1971- | Tang, Jeannine, contributor.  
| Syaheedah Iskandar, editor. | Singapore Art Museum,  
publisher.

Title: Wayang Spaceship / Ming Wong, Jeannine Tang;  
editor, Syaheedah Iskandar.

Description: Singapore : Singapore Art Museum, 2025.  
Identifier(s): ISBN 978-981-18-6158-1 (PDF)  
Subject(s): LCSH: Wong, Ming, d 1971---Exhibitions. |  
Public art--Singapore--Exhibitions. | Installations (Art)--  
Singapore--Exhibitions.  
Classification: DDC 700.745957--dc23

**Supported by**





