

*For immediate release*

## **New talk series to dissect role of literature in education and society**

**“Literally Speaking” brings together writers and educators in discussions**

**Singapore, March 7 2016** – The state of literature in Singapore goes under the microscope, as The Select Centre gathers writers and educators in a new series of talks, *Literally Speaking*, to debate the ongoing importance of literature in today's changing society. The monthly panel discussions will take place from March to May in the first line-up. Select will organise the second line-up from August to October.

What role does literature play in Singapore society? What literary texts in the different languages might we study and read? What questions do they help us ask about ourselves and the social world in which we live? These are some of the pertinent questions that *Literally Speaking* will attempt to answer. Moderated by National University of Singapore English literature professor Philip Holden, the series features nine notable speakers, including Angelia Poon, Chow Teck Seng, Loh Guan Liang, Tan Chee Lay and Tan Tarn How.

William Phuan, co-founder and Managing Director of Select, says: “Recently, there has been much handwringing over the state of literature, from the alarming drop in the number of students taking “A” level literature to the readership of Singapore literary works. We want to spark some meaningful dialogue and debate about these issues through *Literally Speaking*. We also hope to encourage the public and educators alike to think critically about literature, education and their role in society, not only in terms of skills and knowledge, but also about building community and empathy.”

The panel discussions will be organised along three main topics: “Why Study Literature” (March 15), “What Are The Boundaries” (April 14), and “What Should We Teach” (May 12). Please refer to Annex A for the full line-up and Annex B for the bios of the speakers.

The series will be held at Centre 42 and is open to the public. Admission is free.

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### **Literally Speaking**

March 15 – May 12

Free admission. Please register at <http://peatix.com/event/153572>

#### I. Why Study Literature

March 15, Tue, 7.30pm

### **Engaging Singapore Youths Through Creative Writing**

Speaker: Loh Guan Liang

### **The Key to Half Our Society's Ills: Reading**

Speaker: Tan Tarn How

### **Looking at Singapore Literature in Chinese from the Literary and Curricular Points of View**

Speaker: Tan Chee Lay

#### II. What Are The Boundaries

April 14, Thu, 7.30pm

### **Reimagining Singapore through a National Canon/Curriculum**

Speaker: Loh Chin Ee

### **Cosmopolitanizing Literature Education in Singapore: Rethinking Why and How We Teach Literature**

Speaker: Suzanne Choo

**Zoo as Metaphor: The Paradigm Shift from a Singapore "Chinese Literature" to "Literature in Chinese" Education in the Global Asian Sinophone**

Speaker: Zhou Decheng

III. What Should We Teach

May 12, Thu, 7.30pm

**Global Writer, Global literacy: A plea for a reintroduction of Shakespeare to all 'good' Singapore secondary schools**

Speaker: Angus Whitehead

**Literature for a Cosmopolitan and/or National Subject**

Speaker: Angelia Poon

**Teaching Literature, Cultivating Empathy**

Speaker: Vasugi Kailasam

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- End -

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## Annex A: About the Sessions

### Session 1: Why Teach Literature?

March 15 | 7.30pm

Our panelists will explore the state of literature education in Singapore, and how it might be transformed by moving beyond a focus on appreciating individual writers and their works. As alternatives, our participants propose different approaches, centering on the writing process, the act of reading, or through a larger exploration of a cultural tradition.

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#### **Loh Guan Liang** - *Engaging Singapore Youths Through Creative Writing*

Literature is currently taught in Singapore schools as an examinable subject. The term “examinable” belies a mechanistic outlook towards literary study, wherein the emphasis is on metrics and mean subject grades. Sadly, that is missing the point. Students become passive receptacles for literary teaching in such an assessment-laden environment, not critical creators of content. Schools should relook how Literature is taught and introduce (more) opportunities for creative writing in the classroom. In creating, youths do more than understand; they make mistakes, apply knowledge and appreciate Literature, themselves and their relationship with society better.

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#### **Tan Tarn How** - *The Key to Half Our Society's Ills: Reading*

The term cultural desert has been thrown around a lot when Singapore's character is discussed. While its arts and cultural outlook has improved dramatically over the past decades, the people of Singapore have continued to earn labels that are less than flattering. Some may describe Singaporeans as apathetic, narrow-minded, cynical. Others would say Singaporeans are too ingrained in their consumerist ways, and lack imagination. These could all be attributed to the focus on mathematics and



the sciences in school curriculums, and the lack of literature in most students' academic journey breeds humdrum Singaporeans. Tan Tarn How argues that a pursuit of reading will answer these societal ailments, and inject more culture in a clinical state.

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**Tan Chee Lay** - *Looking at Singapore Literature in Chinese from the Literary and Curricular Points of View*

Besides providing a broad introduction to the current state of Chinese literature in the Singapore society, this talk will make reference to the changing positions of Chinese literature in the school curriculum and syllabus. With more local students coming from an English speaking background, as well as more foreign Chinese students opting for this subject , the local student population taking Chinese Literature has been falling significantly. In such an educational context, Tan Chee Lay advocates the importance of literature, and creative reading and writing, amongst students and teachers alike.

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**Session 2: What Are the Boundaries?**

**April 14 | 7.30pm**

How should we frame our study of literature? Should we attempt to imagine a national tradition, or move beyond the nation through a stress either on the diversity of world literature, or a conscious breaking of cultural boundaries? Our panelists will stir the pot.

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**Loh Chin Ee** - *Reimagining Singapore through a National Canon/Curriculum*

Loh Chin Ee broaches the idea of a national canon and argues for Singapore literature's place in curriculums. Art education in Singapore has come a long way, but still lacks the much-needed focus on Singapore literature. Struck by her experiences overseas, Chin Ee found that our neighbours in Southeast Asia boast accomplished literary histories, and that Singapore should draw on its multicultural, multilinguistic richness in the quest to develop a national curriculum. The regional and international connections would be important to understand the nature of works that can be selected to be included in the Singapore canon, and what represents Singapore best.

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**Suzanne Choo** - *Cosmopolitanizing Literature Education in Singapore: Rethinking Why and How We Teach Literature*

Literature education in Singapore schools has historically centered on aesthetic appreciation of texts. In this paper, I explore what it means to cosmopolitanize literature education, by which I mean to consider ways that it can equip students to understand, empathize, and engage with multiple and marginalized communities in the world. When ethics rather than aesthetics becomes the end goal of literature education, literature teachers may be empowered to provide space for diverse voices and texts, to apply pedagogical approaches that encourage transnational comparison and



interruption, and to encourage assessments that empower students to be active, performative citizens of the world.

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**Zhou Decheng** - *Zoo as Metaphor: The Paradigm Shift from a Singapore "Chinese Literature" to "Literature in Chinese" Education in the Global Asian Sinophone*

Through the metaphor of zoos, this presentation views the choice of literature texts and genres selected in school literature syllabus similar to the collection of different animals kept in various zoo institutions. In order to be forward-looking, with the change of the larger Sinophone landscape and the reconstructing of Southeast Asian and Asian identities, I will propose a possible framework to construct the future Chinese-language literature course, which transcends both spatial and linguistic borders, but maintains a Singaporean identity, so as to nurture future patrons, critics and creators of the linguistic arts ecosystem.

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### **Session 3: What Should We Teach?**

**May 12 | 7.30pm**

How should the teaching of literature reflect a rapidly changing society? Should we return to apparently “difficult” authors who we have abandoned, and discover new facets for their work? Or should we aim to disrupt institutionalised norms, and promote empathy or respect for others? Our panelists will consider these and other questions.

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**Angus Whitehead** - *Global Writer, Global literacy: A plea for a reintroduction of Shakespeare to all ‘good’ Singapore secondary schools*

Up until the 1980s a majority of students in Singapore were exposed to Shakespeare in some form or another. Since then, the number of students taking literature has dramatically decreased, resulting in fewer students engaging with Shakespeare. Now regarded as a key global writer, Shakespeare is a primary figure on the world's stage. Students with no access to his work will be at some disadvantage. Angus Whitehead suggests ways in which Shakespeare is against all odds thriving in Singapore schools, as well as how and why those examples of good practice need to be replicated in every good school in Singapore. Culturally, linguistically, personally, educators in Singapore ignore Shakespeare at their own, and perhaps more importantly their students' peril.

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**Angelia Poon** - *Literature for a Cosmopolitan and/or National Subject*

Angelia Poon explores the aims of teaching Literature in English in Singapore schools. A traditional but dominant argument would be that teachers should teach Literature for nationalistic and nation-building reasons. This would be a justification for reading and studying Singapore literature. In the face of increasing pressure from globalization, we are moved to consider the need for conceiving of Literature teaching in more cosmopolitan terms. Even so,



the national subject envisaged within the framework of Singapore's centralized education system is one that is calibrated to possess only certain aspects of cosmopolitanism that would be aligned to the state's neoliberal policies and rationality. How can Literature reinforce or disrupt the constitution of such a subject? What kinds of pedagogies in Literature might lead to performances of the national and/or the cosmopolitan?

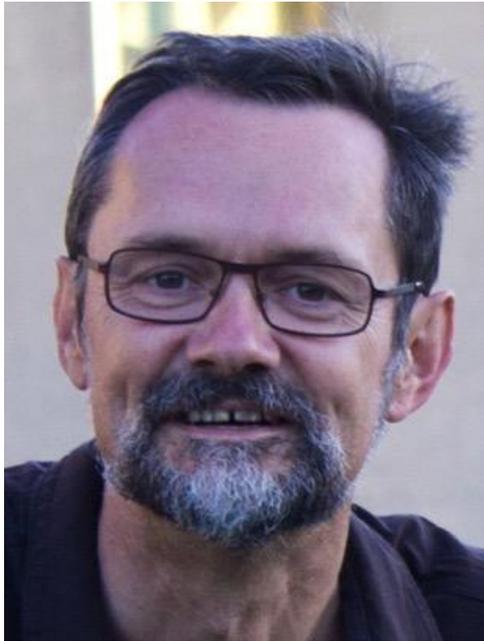
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**Vasugi Kailasam** - *Teaching Literature, Cultivating Empathy*

How does one use literature to evoke empathy? Vasugi Kailasam reflects upon her experience teaching contemporary Tamil literature to Singaporean undergraduate students who have little to no background in the humanities, except for a genuine curiosity to learn. She deliberates the changing nature of modern Tamil literature and its place in the canon of world literatures and how it poses exciting possibilities when taught in a diasporic and multicultural setting such as Singapore. The talk will touch upon the emotion of empathy and how it lends itself to fractured meanings while reading literature in the vernacular in our current attention-deficient age.

## Annex B: The Speakers' Bios

### About our Moderator



**Philip Holden** is Professor of English at the National University of Singapore, where he teaches courses in Southeast Asian and Singapore Literatures in English. He has also published widely on auto/biography, and Singapore and Southeast Asian literatures, is the co-author of *The Routledge Concise History of Southeast Asian Writing in English*, and one of the editors of *Writing Singapore*, the most comprehensive historical anthology of Singapore literature in English. In addition to his academic work, he is also a published short story writer and social commentator.

### About our Speakers (Panel 1)



**Loh Guan Liang** is the author of two poetry collections: *Transparent Strangers* (Math Paper Press, 2012) and *Bitter Punch* (Ethos Books, 2016). He also co-translated *Art Studio* (Math Paper Press, 2014), originally in Chinese by Singapore Cultural Medallion recipient Yeng Pway Ngon. Winner of the 2011 Moving Words poetry competition organised by SMRT and The Literary Centre, his poems have been featured in the Singapore Memory Project and The Substation Love Letters Project. He updates at <http://lohguanliang.weebly.com/>



**Tan Tarn How** is a Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies. His research areas are in arts and cultural policy and media and Internet policy. He has written on the development of the arts in Singapore, in particular, fostering partnerships between the people, private and public sectors; the creative industries in Singapore, China and Korea; cultural policy in Singapore; and arts censorship. His research interests also include arts education and role of education in cultural and human development.



**Dr Tan Chee Lay** has lived in Singapore, Taiwan and UK, and has studied Chinese literature, English Studies and Business Administration. He completed his doctorate in Oriental Studies (Chinese literature) in Cambridge University, specializing in Chinese poetry and exile poets. He is currently Assistant Professor of Chinese at Nanyang Technological University (NTU), and is the Deputy Executive Director of the Singapore Centre for Chinese Language, NTU.

## About our Speakers (Panel 2)



**Loh Chin Ee** is an Assistant Professor in the English Language and Literature Academic Group at the National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University. She is co-editor of *Teaching Literature in Singapore Secondary Schools* (Pearson, 2013), *Little Things: an Anthology of Poetry* (Ethos, 2013) and co-author of *Teaching Poetry to Adolescents: a Teachers' Guide to Little Things*. She is Book Review co-editor of *Pedagogies*, and international journal, and founder of *enl\*ght*, a NIE-based student-run publication for Literature teachers. Her current research focus is on reading and school libraries.



**Suzanne Choo** is Assistant Professor at the English Language and Literature Academic Group, National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. Her book *Reading the world, the globe, and the cosmos: Approaches to teaching literature for the twenty-first century* was awarded the 2014 Critics Choice Book Award by the American Educational Studies Association. More recently, she edited *Cross-worlds: Short stories on global themes* (Marshall-Cavendish) that features ten award-winning authors from around the world whose stories deal with contemporary global issues such as terrorism, asylum seekers, and immigration.



Singapore-born, **Chow Teck Seng** aka **Zhou Decheng** (周德成) was a high-school Chinese literature teacher and subsequently a teaching fellow at NIE, NTU teaching literature pedagogy before pursuing his PHD at Cambridge University (in literary criticism and comparative Sinophone literatures) in 2013. He won awards such as the 2014 Singapore Literature Prize, first (Chinese Poetry) at the 2009 Singapore Golden Point Award and the 2015 National Inspiring Chinese Teacher's Award. Besides publishing his first poetry collection *The Story of You and Me* in 2012, his poems and short stories are seen in both English and Chinese anthologies, local and overseas Chinese press and online journals.

### About our Speakers (Panel 3)



**Richard Angus Whitehead** is an Assistant Professor in English Literature at Singapore's National Institute of Education. He has published widely in the fields of British Romanticism, especially William Blake, as well as Singapore's local Literature. He is currently completing a book on the later years of William and Catherine Blake, co-editing (with Mark Crosby and Troy Patenaude) 'Re-envisioning Blake', a collection of essays exploring new directions in Blake scholarship.



**Angelia Poon** is Associate Professor of English Literature at the National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. Her research interests include postcolonial studies and contemporary writing with a focus on globalization and transnationalism. She is the author of *Enacting Englishness* (Ashgate, 2008) and numerous journal articles on postcolonial literature. She is also a co-editor of *Writing Singapore: An Historical Anthology of Singapore Literature* (NUS Press, 2009) and *Sexuality and Contemporary Literature* (Cambria Press, 2012).



**Dr Vasugi Kailasam** is a lecturer at the South Asian Studies Program (SASP) at NUS. She is currently working on a manuscript which is a comparative literary project that examines Sri Lankan English and Tamil literature and film as rich sites that can talk about the ethical and political stakes in forging reconciliation for Sri Lanka. Vasugi's other research interests include Tamil literature and culture, Digital Humanities and South Asian Cinema.