Engaging and Connecting with Singapore’s Children and Youth

Shaun Phua, General Manager, and Lynn Chiam, Head, Outreach
Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall Singapore

Shaun Phua is the General Manager of the Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial since September 2010. Prior to this appointment, he was involved in fundraising and donor management for the National Heritage Board (NHB) and was responsible for developing the heritage eco-system through implementing industry development efforts such as launching the Heritage Industry Incentive Programme (Hi2P), a financial incentive scheme for the heritage industry. Before joining the NHB, he was the Head of Department tasked to create a robust and vibrant environment for the tourism industry at the Singapore Tourism Board (STB).

Lynn Chiam recently joined the Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial as Head, Outreach. She has a MA in Contemporary Art from Sotheby’s Institute of Art and has been organizing outreach programmes for youth and young adults since 1999 at Singapore Press Holdings and the University of Melbourne.

Abstract
The Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall (SYSNMH), a heritage institution managed by the National Heritage Board since 2009, traces the activities of Dr. Sun Yat Sen and his comrades in Nanyang (which mainly refers to Malaya and Singapore in the early 20th century) and the impact of the 1911 Revolution in history.

In a fast moving and affluent Singapore where children and youth today are more exposed to information technology and are better travelled, it is a challenge for SYSNMH to understand their needs and to innovate in exhibition programming and activities. SYSNMH visited children museums in Europe, the USA and Asia to learn about new exhibition techniques, interactive educational programming, and children and youth engagement initiatives.

This paper looks into the key approaches of the SYSNMH’s strategy that aim to understand the learning needs of children and youth by engaging stakeholders, such as educators, schools and youth groups, and to enrich children and youth’s learning journey through the development of innovative programmes, as well as the enhancement the museum’s overall appeal to this group.

The man who overthrew the Qing dynasty, put an end to the monarchical system and founded the Republic of China, was Dr Sun Yat Sen. Dr Sun received critical support from the Chinese community in Southeast Asia for his revolutionary cause. He visited Singapore eight times and stayed at a villa provided by one of his supporters three times. Located on 12 Tai Gin Road, this villa, which is known as Wan Qing Yuan by the local Chinese, has since been renamed the Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall (SYSNMH) to commemorate Dr Sun and his revolutionary movement. On the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the Revolution in October this year, we will be re-opening this building, which was gazetted as a national monument in 1994.

Today, the Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall is actively engaging various community groups, especially our children and youth, to participate and help shape this museum into a place that captures who we are, where we come from and how we live in our communities. We are also developing programmes that support participation from visitors and scholars, and venturing into new ways of enhancing our museum’s appeal to an increasingly media savvy demographic that demands a deeper and more enriching experience in return for the time that they commit to this institution and its programmes.

Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall’s (SYSNMH) Mission and Vision
Outreach programmes are a key pillar that directly supports Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall’s guiding mission of developing the museum into a leading heritage institution and a focal point for the community. Our vision for the museum is to build it into a sustainable destination of historical and cultural significance for visitors and the community. We have identified that by focusing our outreach
on children and youth, with whom we wish to connect and to build the foundations of sustainability for the museum. This group is also key to the process of re-defining the museum’s historical and cultural significance to a new generation who may be less familiar with Dr Sun’s timeless story of change and revolution.

**Main themes**

Given the rich history of the memorial hall, the four main themes around which we have focused our programming and exhibitions are:

- **Wan Qing Yuan – House as Main Artefact**
  We will be highlighting the house museum, Wan Qing Yuan, as our main artefact. It is a significant site where the story of Dr Sun’s revolution unfolded in Nanyang, the name of a region which can be directly translated as the “Sea located in the South (of China)”. Nanyang attracted many Chinese immigrants in search of better lives, and continues to do so even today. These immigrants eventually settled down and built their home and families in Southeast Asian countries such as Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia.

- **Nanyang as a base for the Chinese Revolution**
  Our second point of focus will be on the region as a base for revolution. The visitor will be able to explore the reasons behind the Revolution and the role played by Singapore. We also take a look at how ideas such as “country before self” became an important notion that marked China’s transition from imperial rule to a modern nation state, and how it affected the socio-political environment in Nanyang.

- **In search of roots and modernity**
  The theme of searching of roots and identity is our third focus. Many Chinese leaders and supporters based in Nanyang made important sacrifices for the sake of the revolution. Prominent businessmen such as Tan Chor Nam, Lim Nee Soon and Teo Eng Hock are some of the main characters in Singapore who generously supported the revolution with much needed resources. Our exhibitions and programmes will aim to engage visitors by sharing the motivating force behind their commitment to the revolution and the social impact from the result of the success of the 1911 Revolution.

- **Identity & Consensus: Development of Nanyang Chinese Culture**
  Our final focus will be around the theme of identity and consensus, where the visitor will trace the path taken by the Nanyang Chinese community towards modernity through changes in education and vernacular literature as a result of the revolution. For example, as a result of the ideologies from the revolution, girls had the opportunity to receive an education. Economically, the revolution also led to the formation of strong trade associations in Singapore, through which supporters pooled resources to support the revolution.

**Outline**

This paper focuses on connecting with children and youth in Singapore within the specific context of the museum experience at the Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall. We would like to share some key initiatives that our team has been developing to reach out to this target audience at our museum. There are three aspects that we focused on to enhance the relevance and effectiveness of the outreach activities at the Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall:

1. **Engaging Youth Educators**
   Being an institution that focuses on experiential and self-directed learning as opposed to teacher-directed learning, we realized that before any programmes can be designed, it would be essential for our museum staff to better understand the learning needs of our children and youth by engaging youth educators. We have defined these groups to be educators at primary and secondary schools and junior colleges, and museum programmers who have specialized knowledge and experience identifying and meeting the needs and interests of this target audience.
In Singapore, we reached out to advisors from the Ministry of Education, principals and Chinese language teachers at primary and secondary schools and junior colleges to seek opportunities for participative collaboration with their students. We have received encouraging responses and feedback from schools such as Rulang Primary, Hwa Chong Institution and Pioneer Junior College. Tapping their vast knowledge and experience has given us better insight into the learning needs of students in the age range of 5 to 17 years old.

A much welcomed decision from the Ministry of Education as the result of these talks is their agreement to re-instate the topic of the 1911 Revolution into the school syllabus. The topic will be reviewed and assessed in 2012 and will be incorporated into the school syllabus by 2013.

Our museum staff also visited various institutions in Europe and Asia to observe and learn from the programming initiatives created to reach out to the children and youth. We found that these initiatives make full use of a wide range of techniques and methods for attracting and captivating the imagination and attention of children and youth.

2. Innovative Programming Ideas
We chose to focus on creating innovative programmes at the Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall for two reasons. With the re-opening of the museum, we have a precious opportunity to redefine our relationship with our visitors in our bid to realize our mission of making the museum a focal point in our community.

Secondly, having been enlightened and inspired on our study trips overseas, we have witnessed that creating educational experiences at museums that are deeply engaging for today’s children and youth is truly achievable and is something we should strive towards in order to sustain this target audience’s commitment to the museum as our volunteers or visitors.

3. Enhancing Museum Appeal
Our biggest challenge so far has been coming up with new exhibition techniques to better connect with a younger audience. At this very moment, the museum is being revamped to enhance the visitors’ experience by providing them with an intimate account of the Revolution. In the holding area of one of the galleries, visitors will be able to partake in the planning of uprisings and to immerse themselves in the spirit of revolution that the building pays homage to.

We have also partnered the Singapore Philatelic Museum and a private collector in Beijing to co-curate a joint stamp exhibition about the 1911 Revolution and Dr Sun Yat Sen in July this year, as well as to launch a special exhibition targeted at children in May 2011.

Beyond partnerships with fellow museums, we are also bringing our museum to the younger audience through media platforms such as the History Channel. We have collaborated with a production house based in Singapore who will be broadcasting an episode featuring the museum in the popular, award-winning documentary series hosted by Anthony Morse, titled Hidden Cities in late 2011.

Our efforts in engaging the children and youth will culminate in a three-week long Chinese Cultural Festival that will be held in conjunction with the re-opening of the Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall. The museum will be working with schools and educational institutions to encourage children and youths to partake perform at the Cultural Festival or partake in the activities that are being lined up for them.

Methodology
Our strategy in developing our key initiatives follows a basic 5-step methodology, not unlike the methods used in engineering design:1

- Understand the needs of children and youth
- Observe and study methods from other museums and educational institutions
- Visualize new concepts and how the target group will experience the programmes
- Evaluate and refine the programme concept and objectives
- Implement programmes for the museum

To understand the needs of children and youth, we first identified our communities where children and youth are being nurtured and interacting with one another. Hence we began to organize
on-going focus group sessions with youth, their teachers and policy makers from the Ministry of Education.

The museum had also sent museum staff to educational institutions in other countries to learn from their innovative programming strategies and seek inspiration to create unique experiences that can be created for this target group. During a visit to the Leonardo Da Vinci Museum in Milan, our museum’s general manager observed that to facilitate the learning of science for children and youth, the museum environment can be re-designed to incorporate strong visuals and be as highly interactive as possible. The museum invited scientists to conduct research in an actual laboratory in the museum so visitors can observe them at work. There is even a food processing activity that provides children with opportunities for hands-on participation, which was the result of a collaboration between museum programmers and scientists specialising in nanotechnology (please refer to Annex A for images).

In the next stage of visualizing new concepts and the programme experience for a younger audience, we begin by brainstorming new ideas which build upon our observations and feedback received. Having built a sufficiently robust foundation of accumulated insight of our target group’s current needs and innovative practices at other institutions, we are able to fuse these ideas with our understanding of the social environment to create programmes that will excite and engage our children and youth in Singapore. Our aim is to consistently move up the ladder of participation proposed by sociologist Roger Hart when it comes to engaging our youth so that these outreach activities will become increasingly more inclusive. We aim to move away from minimally inclusive approaches which result in activities where:

- Young people are manipulated
- Young people are decoration
- Young people are tokenised
- Young people are assigned and informed

To more inclusive and meaningful approaches higher up the ladder of participation where:

- Young people are consulted and informed
- There are adult-initiated, shared decisions with young people
- Young people lead and take action
- Young people and adults share decision-making

While designing collaborations with this target audience of children and youth, we made more conscious decisions to incorporate these approaches higher up in the ladder of participation, especially with those who are over the age of 12.

Evaluating and refining the programme concept and objectives are key steps for us to stay nimble and open to change. This gives us room to engage in partnerships that would potentially increase the depth and reach of our programmes. By improving on our programmes at this stage, we strive to ensure that the final programme experience will not disappoint our audience. This is the point where we are able to refine our message, and test if it is authentic to our target audience and if it serves to push the boundaries of how the programme topic has been perceived.

Implementation of the programmes often becomes a technical process that needs to be managed with care and diligence. It is often a test of stamina and patience in the lead up to the launch of the programme.

**Programmes**

Our programmes cater to two categories of children and youth; children under the age of 12 and youth over the age of 12. As redevelopment works are underway at the Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall, the network that we have built through engaging youth educators has enabled us to disseminate our artefacts and expertise to school and youth communities in Singapore.

**Education programmes for children under the age of 12**

As mentioned earlier, we are partnering with the Singapore Philatelic Museum and a private collector in Beijing to jointly curate a stamp exhibition about the 1911 Revolution and Dr Sun Yat Sen in July of this year. Designed for children under the age of 12, this exhibition will also be centered around outreach activities that will allow them to explore different aspects of Dr Sun’s life. For example, the
exhibition will also include interactive corners where children can feel and touch objects that make up a medical doctor’s toolkit, at the same time deepening their understanding of Dr Sun’s profession as a medical doctor. Other corners will include objects in his study, which will feature Chinese calligraphy brushes and paper and written examples of the ideologies which he actively promoted as a foundation for the modern nation state that he envisioned. These outreach activities will also form part of the Museum Roundtable’s Children Season in May, where more than twenty museums will be involved in a collaborative effort to reach out to children visitors during the International Museum Day celebrations and the mid-year school holidays.

**Education programmes for youth over the age of 12**

**Animated Books**

We have collaborated with a local artist and a renowned academic and author to provide content for two animated books that will expressively capture the spirit of the revolution in the visual narrative form. We are targeting to sell these books to primary schools at cost price so that teachers can use this attractive resource as a supplementary teaching aid in their Chinese language classes.

**Student volunteer guides**

As the museum prepares its permanent galleries for the re-opening in October, we are also in the midst of preparing volunteer guides for children and youth of different age groups. We have begun working with teachers and advisors for students from primary and secondary schools and junior colleges to create material that would help train student volunteer guides.

We feel strongly that the idea of volunteerism itself is an idea that the museum strongly identifies with, given that the 1911 Revolution would not have been possible without the support from a strong team of volunteers. As these student volunteer guides share their ideas and thoughts about the revolution through the artefacts in the museum with their peers and younger students, we hope that they will also find new interpretations in the content and leave the museum with a deeper understanding of how they can relate their lives to a significant part of our history.

Training will be conducted from July to August by museum staff. Children and youth whom we will be working with can expect to be consulted and informed on the content prepared by our curators at the start. Our aim with this programme is to increase their level of interaction with the material as they practise giving tours with coaching from museum staff and open discussion among staff and students. We will also be leveraging on technology by having students record their tours in the form of a smartphone application which their peers can easily download and listen to at their own time.

This programme is also an effort to build a sustainable relationship between the students and the museum. We hope that they will be able to apply the training that they have received by serving as volunteer guides with the museum for as long as they wish to maintain their high-level of commitment to the museum.

**Student-curated exhibition**

Another example of our collaboration with schools is the student-curated exhibition on the 1911 Revolution and Dr Sun Yat Sen from May to June 2011. The museum provides research materials and lends curatorial expertise to the students of Hwa Chong Institution who curate their own exhibition on this topic (please refer to Annex B for images). These students are in the age range of 16 to 17 years old. We have chosen to work with this school in particular because of the strength of their Chinese language programme, which opens up possibilities of developing a partnership between the museum and the students that would enable this student-curated exhibition to travel to other schools.

It is our hope that this approach will broaden and deepen the students’ willingness to be creative with the subject matter, and inspire them to lead and initiate action. It is important to us that the students will be able to experience the impact of their work beyond their own school community. To achieve this, we will create a supportive environment by providing them with easy access to materials and constructive advice from our curators specializing in the subject matter. We endeavour to become more inclusive in our outreach such that these students will not only lead and initiate action but also will share decision-making with adults. The museum curators will focus on providing guiding support by checking the content created for factual accuracy, giving the students free reign to interpret
the content creatively and to find this form of participation a more meaningful and satisfying experience.

A case in point would be the current exhibition that students are working on, where they have taken the initiative to respond and re-interpret the 1911 Revolution through the use of unrestricted literary mediums from poetry to essays, which will be published alongside other information-driven exhibition panels. This serves in part to dispel the notion of an official interpretation of the events. Instead, the students have decided that using the facts as a guidepost to re-imagine the significant historical events that took place, they could participate and take greater ownership in the curation of this event using such creative forms of expression, which they intend to enhance by adding self-invented motifs and other student-designed artwork.

**Chinese Drama Competition**

This competition, which will coincide with the re-opening of the memorial hall on 8 October 2011, will provide youth in the age range of 12 to 17 years old with the opportunity to tap into their creative talents of performance, script writing and stage production while learning about the 1911 Revolution and re-interpreting the story of Dr Sun and his supporters that they can identify closely with.

**Development of mobile phone applications**

The museum has also piloted a project that enables students to develop mobile phone applications on iPhone and android platforms. The applications fully developed by the students provide an opportunity for them to integrate technology taught in class with our museum’s content in the exhibition galleries and programmes.

The museum re-opening provides a unique platform where the students can interact with a wider and different audience than they are usually exposed to. We hope that the excitement of being given the opportunity to dramatize a topic that has rooted itself in popular Chinese film culture will provide these youth will a deeper learning experience where they are given free rein to re-imagine and recreate a significant moment in history.

**Conclusion**

With a clear focus on what the museum aims to achieve through a meaningful vision and mission, museum programmers and curators would then be able to create an interactive visitor experience for children and youth. We had chosen four themes to develop in our museum galleries, and these themes are similarly reflected in the outreach and collaborations that we have pursued with different schools. What we have learned is there is no limit to the type of participation in which we can involve our young visitors, but we have to be aware of the choices that we are making when we design our programmes. In our opinion, the best activities are those which encourage participation that is as inclusive and interactive as possible to meet the demands and needs of our children and youth of today.
Annex A
Images of a research laboratory where interactive children activities take place at the Leonardo Da Vinci Museum
Annex B

Images of students from Hwa Chong Institution in a working group discussion for the student-curated exhibition (to be completed by late May 2011)
References
