

### Kevin Y.L. Tan

*Of Whales and Dinosaur. The Story of Singapore's Natural History Museum.*

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Kevin Y.L. Tan's history of Singapore's natural history museum is an informed addition to a growing body of studies on the history of biology in colonial and post-colonial Southeast Asia. Founded in 1874, the museum in Singapore gradually developed into a hub for biodiversity research and education in the Malay Peninsula. The museum, which is nowadays called Lee Kong Chian Natural History, holds around a million samples of prepared plants, animals, and minerals. Tan's study is well-researched and contains more than sixty illustrations, ranging from architectural sketches to mounted specimens, pictures of exhibits, and portraits of curators and staff. The lack of a strong analytical framework is partly compensated for by Tan's ability to weave interesting empirical details into a well-composed narrative of the museum's evolution over time.

Tan presents the museum's history in a chronological order. After an opening chapter in which he describes what led to the foundation of the museum in the late nineteenth century, the following chapters use curators and other individuals as narrative angles. In the second chapter, for instance, Tan highlights how Nicholas Belfield Dennys, a librarian and curator, successfully tied the museum into local and long-distance networks of expertise and specimen exchange. Next to acquisitions of specimens from similar collections in China, Denny also managed to secure the support of Malaysian rulers, fishermen, hunters, plantation owners, naval captains, private collectors, businessmen, and the British colonial governments in Singapore and London. In the fourth chapter, Tan uses John Coney Moulton, a military man and former curator of the Sarawak Museum in Borneo, as a heuristic vehicle to chronicle the museum's development. The legacy of Moulton's directorate, as Tan shows, was tremendous, particularly evident in the division of the museum's collection into a reference collection for scientific research, a museum collection for the general public, and a duplicate collection for the exchange of specimens, all of which have endured. By capitalizing on the specific needs of each of these collections and their users, the museum's directorate successfully attracted new funds. However, as Tan highlights, the museum's history can never be told only as a story of successes. In the years during and after World War II, the museum's future was continuously threatened by political and economic instability, for example. Only with the dedicated support of Hidezo Tanakadate and Yoshichika Tokugawa, both of whom were Japanese government officials and scientists, were the museum's collections saved from irrevocable breakup.

The heart of the second half of the book is about the museum's transformation from an imperial hub of collecting into a full-fledged biodiversity museum with a strong educational component after World War II. As Tan tellingly shows, the museum's curators at first faced a hard time. In particular after the British had withdrawn from Singapore in the mid-1960s, the museum lacked political and financial support. Being forced to leave the old building, curators moved the display collection to the newly established Science Center. The reference collection came under the aegis of the National University of Singapore. However, owing to unfortunate prioritization, the reference collection did not reach its final location in the Science Library at Kent Ridge before 1987, after more than a decade of travelling. Under the directorate of Lam Toong Jin, a biologist specializing in aquaculture, the reference collection eventually regained status and authority. By acquiring additional funds, Lam was able to hire new staff, enlarge the reference collection, and stimulate scientific publications. By the mid-1990s, the specimens were being studied by biologists from all over the world. With the addition of a new public gallery in 2001, the reference collection also became an educational site where citizens could learn about the area's flora and fauna. The successful development and implementation of an endowment plan after 2005, as Tan highlights, cemented the museum's position as regional hub for biodiversity research and education. To summarize: Tan's study provides readers with a concise, empirically rich, and very accessible history of Singapore's museum of natural history. However, since Tan avoids engaging in any historiographical debate, readers with a more specialized interest in histories of knowledge production in colonial and post-colonial South-east Asia might be disappointed.

*Andreas Weber*

University of Twente, BMS-STePS

*a.weber@utwente.nl*