

## Epilogue: Hugh Tan and the Raffles Museum of Biodiversity Research—A conversation with Peter Ng

The Raffles Museum of Biodiversity Research (RMBR) of the National University of Singapore (NUS) was established in 1998 and consisted of the Zoological Reference Collection (ZRC), the Herbarium of NUS (SINU) and a public gallery. The RMBR was set up around the same time as the merger of the Botany and Zoology departments into the School of Biological Sciences, which subsequently became the Department of Biological Sciences. Peter K.L. Ng, a zoologist, was appointed as Director of the RMBR. When Ng's first deputy, Benito C. Tan, a botanist, stepped down in 2007 upon his retirement, another botanist, Hugh T.W. Tan, was appointed to take his place on 11 June 2007. Hugh Tan stepped down as Deputy Director in Oct 2013, about six months before the RMBR was renamed the Lee Kong Chian Natural History Museum (LKCNCNHM).

During his time as the Deputy Director of the RMBR, Hugh Tan brought about order and structure to the operations of the museum. In 2008, he started a journal, *Nature in Singapore* (<https://lkcncnhm.nus.edu.sg/publications/nature-in-singapore/>), and the RMBR E-book series (currently LKCNCNHM E-books; <https://lkcncnhm.nus.edu.sg/publications/lkcncnhm-e-books/>). Both publications reflect his strong advocacy of natural history studies in Singapore and the region.

After Hugh Tan completed his tenure as the Deputy Director of the RMBR, he was appointed as the chairman of the building advisory committee and also provided advice on plants for the landscaped area of the new LKCNCNHM. He remained the Editor of the *Nature in Singapore* journal and the RMBR (and later the LKCNCNHM) Ebook series until 9 August 2020. During his tenure as the Editor, he oversaw the publication of 370 articles in 13 volumes of the journal and 31 E-books.

Peter Ng and Hugh Tan have been acquainted for more than four decades. As a Senior Tutor in the late 1970s, Hugh Tan had taught Botany to Peter Ng, who was then an undergraduate. Hugh Tan's tenure at the RMBR, however, was the first time that they worked so closely together. The following edited excerpts are based on an interview with Peter Ng conducted by Chong Kwek Yan and Ng Ting Hui on 14 July 2021.

### EXCERPTS

**The Zoology-Botany 'rivalry'.** "Hugh is an old friend. We 'quarrel' all the time...but this is a traditional rivalry. The Botany Department as well as the Zoology Department have always been best friends, and always, as they say in Cantonese, 'ying kar' [Chinese: 冤家]—the best of friends and the worst of enemies. Botanists and zoologists always have a go at each other. Zoologists always think 'the botanists are boring, slow, too conservative and not 'garang' [meaning fierce in Malay]'. Botanists think exactly the opposite way about zoologists, that they 'make too much noise, are too garang, aggressive'. So very much like plants and animals—we are like the animals and plants that we study."

**Balancing different work styles.** "When Benito retired as my Deputy Director in 2007, it was suggested that we approach Hugh. I was amenable to the idea as we always got along—at the end of the day, Hugh and I are both strong advocates for the one science everybody thinks is rubbish, which is taxonomy. We have always agreed on that. Besides being a taxonomist, the second reason why I liked the idea of Hugh being the Deputy was because he is exactly the opposite of me. I have a habit of charging ahead and doing all sorts of crazy things and Hugh would always tell me: 'No, you can't do this, you will break five articles, and this law and that rule, etc.'. It does not mean that I always agreed with him, but it is always useful to have somebody telling you that you are stretching things. Hugh has one annoying/wonderful asset, which is this: he is singularly meticulous. He is fussy even about small things. To my knowledge, he has kept every email I sent him, including 'Congratulations' or 'Hello, how's your day?'"

"I tasked him to oversee the operational aspects of the museum because I know I'm bad at this. For example, making sure meetings take place every month or every three months. [Before Hugh's tenure] I was charging around in 20 different directions. Hugh would always hold the centre, to make sure the operational things are not neglected, that every sentence has a full stop behind it... That is Hugh's strength—he is very meticulous, structured and organised. Nothing out of the normal gets by him and that, in a way, is good, because I have always believed that every team leading an organisation should be complemented by yin and yang. In an organisation, you need a person who can charge ahead, because to get new things done, you cannot be too conservative. At the same time, you also need somebody to hold the fort, because you can't just charge ahead and then leave a mess behind. So, there was a certain balance in the way we worked—while we don't agree on a lot of things, I have always appreciated him giving me the heads up, or his perspective of things. The structured world that he lives in is actually very useful because sometimes it prevents me from going too far off course in one direction."

“He would always have his very structured way of looking at things, which is good for me. If both chiefs of the museum think in exactly the same ways, that would not be good overall. The fact that he thinks differently from me—and because we are friends, we can agree to disagree and that allows a way to move ahead. On many occasions, he has been right—although I won’t tell him that. But I would change my management approach, partly because he had told me something that I had not realised. I value that in a deputy. This is how you lead an organisation to greater heights.”

**Setting foundations.** “His time at the museum was a phase of consolidation, when things were being put together. The evolution of the RMBR to this building [referring to the LKCNHM] took place at a time when we had a home and we could do the things we wanted to do. With Hugh taking very good care of the back-of-house, while I went out to speak to others and explore new things, the organisation was pretty structured. That set the stage for us to start the fund-raising for the present museum. By the time Hugh stepped down (as the Deputy Director), the museum was in a very healthy state and we were set to take the next step, which was to build this whole building. This outfit here does owe Hugh a debt of thanks. One of the jokes we that shared was that he used to say, ‘If I weren’t around, I cannot imagine how chaotic this place would be’, and my retort to him would be, ‘Yes, but without you, it would be so much more interesting!’ But sometimes, ‘interesting’ is not what you want. You know the curse, ‘May you live in interesting times?’”

“Hugh joined the museum at a time when biodiversity research was seen by some quarters as unimportant because the research was not ‘high impact’. The museum became a refuge for the biodiversity group to conduct research. Hugh and I worked together to overcome the challenges of these times. Hugh is brilliant at planning, and it was good to have a structured man to work with a more disorganised person: me. Together, we did wonderful things with the RMBR and the biodiversity group. I would say that most of the successes that the biodiversity group enjoys today had their roots set in those periods of ‘strife’, when Hugh and I were taking care of the museum. I think that he was there at the right time and the right place. Hugh was very important during this stressful period for the whole biodiversity group.”

**The pragmatic idealist.** “Hugh, even as recently as last year, is still coming up with strange and novel ideas to change Singapore. Hugh suffers from one huge ‘problem’. He doesn’t call it a problem; he calls it an asset. He’s an idealist. He’s the sort of character who likes to see the world in black and white. He believes in it. He has a perception of how the world should be, how things should be done because it achieves goals A, B, C, D. Now, I am quite different. We disagree a lot: he thinks I’m unrealistic, I think he’s mad; and vice versa! Sometimes we can be too practical to the point that we don’t do certain things that are useful to do. I would always tell him, ‘It’s good to surface your ideas, but be realistic.’ But he always keeps trying... I’m always pleasantly surprised that he keeps trying! That’s the mark of an idealist. In any organisation, you need characters like that because it provides a certain vision and a reason for why you’re doing some of the things that you are doing. In that way I suppose, as the expression goes, it keeps you honest. It doesn’t mean that I always agree with him, but he does keep you honest! That is why I say that he is ‘annoying’.”

**His biggest contributions to academia.** “Hugh is an old-school taxonomist, a traditional botanist. The interesting thing about Hugh is that he has stayed this course through all the years. His contribution is that he has trained a whole generation of people, some of them who are even more idealistic and pragmatic than him! At the end of the day, what is a university teacher? Somebody who trains students for the next generation, imbues in them good values and attributes and, to help them in their life and career, teaches them what is right and wrong and what is the correct way to do things, and show a good example—to be an honourable man. Hugh ticks every one of these boxes. You [referring to Kwek Yan] were trained by him, and I think part of your attributes come from him. If he were half a crook, you may have turned out to be half a crook. He has always set a good example. Whatever you say about Hugh, he is not a hypocrite—for a scientist, that is always important. One of the worst things for a scientist or a teacher to be, is to be a hypocrite, a person who does the opposite of what they teach you.”

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