

Redistributed Representation Through Multispecies Co-Design in Singapore

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(Received: 26th November 2025; Revised: 13th March 2026; Accepted: 16th March 2026)

Abstract

This article examines lion dance practice in Singapore as a site where participatory co-design challenges and reimagines the politics of representation—moving from historically suppressed clan identity and state-managed monovocal multiculturalism toward embodied multispecies agency. Rather than treating lion dance as a static cultural symbol representing a bounded “Chinese heritage,” this study proposes that participatory design interventions enable communities to reclaim representational authority from institutional gatekeepers and state narratives. By centering multispecies collaboration through the lion symbol, performer bodies, and collective practice co-design meaning, participatory approaches redistribute who speaks for the lion, who authorises cultural meaning, and how heritage practice can address contemporary community needs beyond preservation. Drawing on multispecies ethnography with the case study of a co-design project, this article argues for the importance of more-than-human agency in a participatory approach to redistributing representational power in heritage narratives. It implies more spaces required in cultural representation, navigating the dynamics between humans and non-humans, individuals and collectives.

Keywords: Lion dance; multispecies justice; participatory design; Singapore

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Introduction

The lion dance occupies a paradoxical position in contemporary Singapore. Simultaneously celebrated as a quintessential marker of Chinese cultural heritage—displayed in tourism campaigns, national celebrations, and educational curricula—and haunted by histories of (mis)representations, the practice exemplifies how bodily cultural practices involving multispecies non-human agency serve as a sociocultural site of contestation. The image of the lion connotes complexity with imperialism, Chineseness, and neutral non-human actors. During Singapore’s Cold War period and early nation-building decades, the lion dance faced state suspicion as a symbol of Chinese clan associations, which were viewed as potential vectors for communist influence or ethnic separatism threatening stability under the multi-racial and multi-cultural governance of the newly independent state. Fast forward to the present day, the state’s response has shifted to incorporating lion dance into officially “controlled spectacles” such as the Chingay Parade and community-level performances, decontextualising it from living clan practice, and repositioning it as “ethnic heritage”—representing abstract “Chineseness” rather than a living, clan-based, politically inflected practice (Tajudeen, 2025). Furthermore, the lion dance has been reactivated as a neutralised sport to promote exercise among the aging population or as a form of community building or a group activity for solidarity. In Chinese and Southeast Asian contexts, the lion dance exemplifies how an imagined animal “awakens” the symbolic lion, allowing it to act as an agent that bestows gendered identities, negotiates communal values, and influences cosmologies.

In the drastic shift in how we perceive the image of the lion dance, the semiotics of lions—such representational transformations—raise urgent questions: Who speaks for the lion dance? How do heritage institutions, state agencies, and grassroots communities dictate what the practice represents? And how might participatory design methodologies enable communities to reclaim representational authority through multispecies agency, such as the lion?

This article advances a primary argument: participatory lion dance initiatives with elders in Singapore exemplify an alternative redistribution of representational power in heritage governance, achieved through multispecies collaboration between human practitioners and the lion symbols as reframed material agents. Rather than accepting institutional or state-imposed meanings, participatory approaches position community members—alongside the material lion costume and embodied practice itself—as active agents in determining cultural representation. This reframing has profound implications: it moves beyond heritage preservation logic, which accepts institutional gatekeeping as inevitable, toward justice-oriented frameworks that interrogate who benefits from representational authority. Additionally, the non-human agency of the lion allows for the projection of human struggles and acts as an alternative ideological space that challenges an anthropocentric narrative.

This article first proceeds from the structural backdrop of state multiculturalism and institutional gatekeeping, which revolves around the historically positioned symbol of the lion as a cultural construct representing tradition, masculinity, systems of clans, and Chineseness. Secondly, it aims to highlight epistemic injustice among older Chinese men. By unpacking the impacts of the co-design process, we get to understand key factors necessary to achieve the realisation of redistributed representation, such as embodied storytelling techniques, reframing representation, and somatic commonality for a new anthropocentric ethic.

Literature Review

Representations of Clan-Associated Lion Dance

Historically, the lion dance's relationship to clan associations positioned it as politically threatening. Chinese clan associations, which originated as mutual-aid networks for immigrants from specific regions of Guangdong and other provinces, functioned as sites of kinship solidarity, dialect preservation, ritual practice, and community organisation (Lee, 2014). From the state's perspective, however, these associations represented potential vectors for competing loyalties—to dialect communities, to transnational Chinese networks, or to communist influence during the Cold War era. Operation Coldstores 1963 arrests of left-wing activists, many with clan association connections, exemplified the state's anxiety about cultural practices that might harbor political dissent. Following independence in 1965, the lion was further institutionalised as a key national symbol. The lion appears on the National State Crest, and in 1986, the Lion Head Symbol was introduced to reinforce the values of courage, strength, and excellence (Tajudeen, 2025).



Figure 1: A Lion Dance (Roots Sg, 1970s-1980s)

Despite the tradition of lion dance within Chinese heritage, the state has neutralised the lion symbol to be a multicultural strategic incorporation, where lion dance was gradually absorbed into state-managed spectacles where its representational power could be controlled. When the lion appears in officially sanctioned contexts—Chingay parades, National Day performances, tourism campaigns—it becomes decontextualised from clan ritual, neighbourhood practice, and embodied knowledge transmission, instead functioning as a visual symbol of state-managed multiculturalism (Goh, 2011). The lion is no longer Chinese; it is a national practice for collective courage, bravery, and resilience. As this transformation occurs, younger generations are increasingly consuming images of the lion through lion dance that is disconnected from clan associations, experiencing the lack of participation due to the overly generalised and appropriated image of the lion nowadays.

Through the shifting narrative of how lion dance is perceived, this micro-history reveals Singapore's approach to cultural governance—what scholars term “monovocal multiculturalism” (Goh, 2011). This CMIO-framed system presents culture as discrete and fixed, unlike Western liberal multiculturalism's emphasis on individual choice. Instead, Singapore institutionalises group rights while maintaining state authority to define legitimate cultural expression within each category. This governance emerged from regional geopolitical crises: post-1949 “Chinese threat” fears after the Communist revolution, and racial riots across Malaysia, Indonesia, and Singapore (Lee, 2014; Singh, 2015). Clan-based lion dance was perceived at once as an embodiment of dialect solidarity and as a symbol for a strong kinship with potential dissent from the unified national narrative.

Institutional gatekeeping by heritage authorities has reconstituted the lion dance as an abstracted form of “Chineseness,” blurring its historical ties to specific clan identities through national level Chingay parades and National Day performances. This process gradually appeases Chinese communities while reinforcing the state's model of managed multiculturalism. However, the participatory approach provides a safe space to navigate such resistance as the choreographies and practice routines are adapted to suit the needs of older participants, in their collective understanding of the lion dance culture. Design facilitators and elder performers were given the agency in the workshops to question the aestheticized spectacle of lion dance, unpack the rigidity of tradition into new lexicon based on lived experiences. Extending this dynamic into participatory co-design, elder practitioners question the sources of creative legitimacy and question who authorises their inclusion within the “creative class.” In reclaiming this agency, they transform monolithic symbols into plural, multispecies articulations of redistributed representational power.

Appropriation of the Lion Image

Lion dance in Singapore arrived through Chinese migration to the colonial port. As early as the nineteenth century, clan associations sponsored lion performances during festivals and auspicious occasions, with practices varying according to regional origins, martial lineages, and ritual traditions (H. M. Ang, 2024). These performances served multiple functions: They marked community gathering, transmitted embodied knowledge across generations, marked territorial claims within the multicultural city, and sustained dialect-specific and clan-based solidarity.

The post-independence period initiated transformation. As the newly independent state prioritised nation-building and ethnic stability, Chinese clan associations faced increasing scrutiny. During the Cold War, state authorities viewed clan associations with suspicion—as potential sites where communist influence might penetrate, where ethnic loyalty to China might supersede national loyalty to Singapore, or where traditional hierarchies might resist modernisation efforts (Singh, 2015). Lion dance, as a clan-sponsored practice, became implicated in these anxieties. The state's response involved neither outright prohibition nor unambiguous celebration. Instead, lion dance was strategically incorporated into state-controlled spectacles. The Chingay Parade, transformed from a Chinese religious festival into a multicultural national celebration, incorporated lion dance as one element among other ethnic performances—representing “Chinese culture” in abstract, decontextualised form (Q. Ang, 2022). Similarly, National Day celebrations featured state-sanctioned lion performances, positioning the lion as an ethnic symbol authenticating Singapore's multicultural credentials (2022).

This representational transformation accomplished multiple political objectives: It demonstrated state commitment to cultural recognition, it rendered the practice manageable within state-controlled contexts, and it severed the lion's connection to clan-based community practice, converting it from a site of lived cultural transmission into a representation of abstract "Chineseness" serviceable to state multiculturalism's logic. For clan associations, the consequences were profound. As state-controlled performances became the dominant public face of lion dance, participation in clan associations declined, and the practice risked becoming what government officials now acknowledge as culturally "irrelevant" to newer generations.

The lion dance was introduced to nineteenth-century Singapore via Chinese migration, with regional clan-associated performances that embodied martial lineages and ritual customs. The association with martial traditions encapsulated notions of masculine authority and kinship frameworks integral to clan identity, with the lion dance remaining predominantly male-performed and embedded within patriarchal socio-cultural norms (H. M. Ang, 2024). This representational shift severed the lion's connection to clan practice and clan-based masculinity. The state converted embodied cultural transmission into a serviceable representation of state multiculturalism. Clan associations, once sites where masculine discipline and kinship authority were enacted through embodied practice, found their cultural practices reframed as ethnic performances within a harmony-focused framework (Goh, 2011).

Methodology

This article draws on multispecies ethnography as both a conceptual framework and a research approach, recognising distributed agency across human and non-human actors (Latour, 2007). This study centres on NextOfKin Creatives' Silver Pride Lion Dance Troupe (SPLDT) project, a 2025 Presidential Design Award-winning initiative, supplemented by archival research, observational shadowing, and interviews. It primarily draws on one month of fieldwork conducted during the project, including one workshop and one public performance attended, followed by two months of follow-up interviews, analysis, and archival work—incorporating six hours of interviews with two lead designers. The SPLDT engaged 23 seniors aged 63–99 from Fei Yue Active Aging Centre (Holland Close), recruited voluntarily through centre collaboration and participants' networks; retired males were prioritised, which nearly doubled centre participation from 17% to 28%. Data comprised fieldnotes from workshops and rehearsals, semi-structured interviews with seniors, designers, and heritage professionals, and project documentation including design briefs and online press photographs. Analysis followed an inductive thematic approach, coding fieldnotes and transcripts for "co-creation," "freedom," "distributed decision-making," and "multispecies collaboration," iteratively linked to multispecies ethnography and representational decision-making. Regarding my own research positionality, I am a Singapore-based design researcher and educator, with prior industry networks that enable me to access the co-design community. Acknowledging that my foundational design language and prior experiences may have shaped my perceptions, I am open and remind myself to be reflexive in the analytical phase. This is to ensure a holistic approach to examining the hidden insights of power dynamics in the process of representational politics.

Findings and Discussion

Epistemic relations and gatekeeping are structurally intertwined: State institutions dismiss elders' clan-specific, somatic knowledges as illegitimate, yet the lion's materiality, mask, weight, and rhythm become a collaborative agent that physically embodies and circulates these micro-histories during performance, bypassing verbal gatekeepers. Gender neutrality

emerges through the lion's ambiguous performativity—elders “wear or remove the mask” to playfully subvert the masculinity stereotypes, with the nonhuman lion diffusing individual gendered exposure into collective, multispecies motion. Anthropomorphic ethics is navigated by treating the lion ethically as a co-creator, not an over-humanised fantasy, while sanctuary conditions manifest in the lion's rhythmic “safe space” where personal stories unfold through embodied movement rather than explicit disclosure. Together, these form a multispecies assemblage where human elders, with lion movements, co-produce knowledge that avoids extractive human-centrism to ensure that no single species (human or symbolic) monopolises meaning-making.

Multispecies Participatory Co-Design

Contemporary participatory design interventions with older practitioners represent nascent attempts to reclaim their agency to represent themselves through the imagined lion and the associated dance. Rather than accepting lion dance as a static heritage artefact, participatory design approaches older adults from the community as co-creators—people whose embodied knowledge, aesthetic judgments, and vision inform their practices and voices. Rather than top-down decision-making designs, older adults are reframed as community experts to leverage their lived experiences and cultural memory as assets to strategize a design collectively. The practice also brings to the surface the broader systemic issue of social isolation experienced by older males in Singapore, which is pronounced due to historical gender norms that label them as “sole breadwinners”—expected to be physically and mentally “strong”—resulting in underdeveloped social support networks when they are older and retired. Oftentimes, they spend their days drinking coffee and socialising with minimum effort at the public dining area of kopitiams. Nationally representative data from the Duke-NUS Centre for Aging Research and Education (CARE) showed that 37% of older males reported feeling lonely, compared to 31% of females (Duke-NUS Medical School, 2021). This is not just an individual story; it is a systemic issue caused by the intergenerational representations of Chinese males, and the constructed social responsibilities that limit their opportunities to build a support network after retirement.

Through participatory lion dance initiatives, elderly men and women reclaim agency over their embodied heritage knowledge, directing intergenerational transmission according to community values rather than social stigma. Younger volunteers bring digital, graphic, and social media skills to document rehearsals and performances; elders in turn, supply tacit knowledge of ritual sequencing and neighbourhood histories. This mutual teaching reconfigures intergenerational relations away from a one-way model of “youth helping seniors” toward reciprocal expertise, echoing findings that intergenerational arts programmes can function as “civic glue” and sites of mutual knowledge exchange. Participants are no longer recognised as “knowers” of heritage but as “co-creators” with shared responsibility and agency to represent the tangible collectives around them, rather than simply serving for a distant “imagined” public. The lion dance emerges as a multispecies collaborative agent—with older adults, they are performing a community resistance towards the colonial definition of power, no longer singular, patriarchal, and exploitative. It evolved into a cultural practice to counter-propose relational care by the newly re-envisioned lion dance choreography. It is based on horizontal decision-making with fellows and designers. The cultural construct of “elitist experts” is reframed from the equation. This reframing redistributes representational power from heritage institutions to practitioners themselves, enabling communities to articulate contemporary purposes—health, dignity, and collective care—beyond the colonial gaze of lion dance as something exotic or as merely a heritage asset. The act of participation honours plural

interpretations, which are simultaneously valid across generations. Justice-oriented design positions the lion not as a cultural symbol to manage but as a co-creator whose material agency and embodied knowledge are enough for presenting their own narratives.

The Silver Pride Lion Dance Troupe (SPLDT)

In 2025, a compelling empirical case study emerged that highlights the distinctive role the image of the lion can represent through the kinaesthetic practice of lion dance and how the agency of the lion can be revitalised political agency in Singapore. The “*Silver Pride Lion Dance Troupe*” (SPLDT) project was initiated by NextOfKin Creatives (NOK) under the “Seniors Invigorate Active Aging” with “*Inheritance*” initiative (Yabuka & Designer R, 2024). Launched in collaboration with heritage consultancy *Bridging Generations*, NOK, a Singapore-based design company, launched the initiative, which extended beyond other conventional exercise programs happening in the nation such as low-impact sports, board games, and cooking sessions. Notably, NOK designers introduced an innovative adaptation of traditional lion dance routines tailored for 23 seniors from the Fei Yue Active Aging Centre at Holland Close. In this practice, senior participants collaborate in the co-design and innovation of lion dance equipment to reduce weight and enhance manoeuvrability for wheelchair-bound seniors. A revised lion dance routine was also choreographed collectively with seniors and Lynn Wong, the director of *Bridging Generations* and a member of the lion dance troupe at the Chinese clan Chow Wui Koong. Beyond the physical consideration, the lion dance is associated with the intention to revive Singaporean-Chinese heritage, as a nostalgic memory to uphold the community spirit. This unconventional approach to social service design not only integrated heritage elements but also demonstrated how engaging with senior participants can be a fun and moderately challenging way to address prevalent social stigmas regarding aging. Specifically, participatory design methodologies challenge the “problem-solution” paradigm that often treats aging as a deficit to be solved, instead allowing older adults to engage as active collaborators whose knowledge and experience become central to design outcomes. As Comincioli et al. (2022) argue, when co-design processes consciously attend to implicit ageism and its stereotypes, designers become “more attentive to the true needs and desires of aging people by, for instance, considering more experiential design factors rather than just the users’ basic needs.” This shifts the representation of aging as “unproductive” or “not fun” to one of intergenerational vitality. Such participatory design with older adults creates “a design space” where care practices and collaborative learning foster both engagement and empowerment, simultaneously breaking down stereotypes about aging by having genuine epistemic recognition.



Figure 2: Equipment for Silver Pride Lion Dance Troupe (Chen, 2025)

The participation of older adults, primarily from the nearby neighbourhood, establishes a necessary condition of trust that fosters risk-taking behaviours in uncertain contexts. The risks refer to participants stepping outside their comfort zones to share personal ideas, challenge traditional practices, and collaborate with others in unfamiliar or ambiguous situations, which may expose them to potential criticism or perception of “failure” as they co-create new forms of community engagement and cultural expression. The image of a lion became a centrality for participants to project their reimagination of strength and community resilience. All participants must trust one another during the workshop to effectively share information and ideas, express concerns, and take ownership of the final design process. The lion also serves as a new community symbol that allows people to step away from their assigned family roles, such as husbands, main caretakers, or other family members. In particular, male residents are now designing and revitalising their agency and strength alongside the imagination of the powerful lion figure. This aspect is particularly critical for out-group civic engagement, as these seniors are ethnically Chinese and possess a strong intrinsic trust (Cook, 2005) that is often bound within traditional family structures. Therefore, this PD practice can also be seen as an effort to expand their generalised trust (2005) towards individuals outside their immediate social circles with humans’ bodily engagement and non-humans of lion, place, and materials.

An Agent for Representation

“If you tell people they have to go to the gym, they’ll say, ‘I’m still strong and I don’t want to go.’ But if we tap into memories, we might shift participation from a need to a want.”

— Rodney Loh, Design Director, NextOfKin Creatives

Repositioning lion dance as multispecies collaboration fundamentally transforms what representation means. Rather than asking “What does the lion represent?” or “How should the lion be authentically performed?”—questions that position the lion as symbol or object—multispecies frameworks ask: “What is the lion’s agency in this practice? What does the

costume require? How do bodies, materials, and collective rhythms collaborate to create meaning?” Contemporary participatory design, rather than treating design as a neutral problem-solving activity, draws upon critical design anthropology that insists that participatory approaches must attend to “power differentials in voice and recognition” and to the ways that institutional frameworks already shape what communities perceive as “problems” or “needs.”

The lion costume is a material agent with its own demands. Weighing 20-40 kilograms, constructed from bamboo frames and elaborate fabrics, its movement patterns are not infinitely flexible to human will. It arises not solely from human intention, but from the dynamic network of inter-agentive forces (Latour, 2007) between bodies, objects, and environments at play within cultural practice. The lion costume’s material agency emerged during the lion dance workshops, where its traditional 5-7 kg aluminium frame and bamboo structure, typically shouldered by agile youth, imposed physical limits on seniors’ mobility. Design facilitators shifted to lighter 3D-printed pulleys, reducing weight by 40%, and foam-encased frames to ease shoulder strain, while simultaneously addressing visibility constraints, including the head’s forward tilt obscuring wheelchair users’ sightlines. All these prompted choreography redesigns reinstated that “users” should design for “users” themselves: The front dancer now remains seated for fall prevention, with the hind dancer manoeuvring via wheelchair pushes, transforming dynamic leaps into grounded “wakes” and “searches.” These adaptations reveal the lion as a multispecies centre anchoring collaborations in practice. This is not a harmonious fusion, but a contested redistribution. The animalistic, ritualised image of the lion safeguards this process; it creates an alternative hybrid space that allows a more neutralised power dynamic to negotiate differences of race, age, and able-bodied-ness openly.

From a relational perspective, recognising the lion as a collaborative agent means honouring its material properties rather than subordinating them to predetermined institutional meanings. Participatory design processes that enable practitioners to experiment with costume materials, movement possibilities, and aesthetic innovations constitute a form of representational justice: rather than heritage professionals dictating what the lion should be, the costume itself—through collaborative co-design with practitioners—participates in determining what becomes possible.

The fundamental question animating participatory design interventions is: Who has the authority to represent the lion dance? Historically, this authority has been distributed among heritage professionals, state cultural agencies, tourism boards, and academic experts. Yet, if we are to safeguard the development of our “imagined” in a conjunctural way (Hall, 2015); we must recognise that this authority is not permanent; rather, it is a temporary alignment of forces that can shift, rupture, or to be rearticulated. The fact that we demand a participatory collective making the imagined is a phenomenon that people are experimenting with—the possibility of the interplay of many multispecies’ forces, of humans and non-humans acting together in a new common way. This shift is not merely rhetorical; it produces material consequences. When elders participate as co-designers rather than as research subjects or cultural informants, they gain authority to make decisions about how embodied knowledge gets documented, what aspects of practice matter most, how younger participants should be engaged, and what purposes the practice serves. Rather than heritage professionals determining these questions, community members author their own narratives.

Kinship-Based Plurality

Lion dance co-design practices demonstrate that community-building can accommodate hierarchies while safeguarding plurality. This approach diverges from the democratic, bottom-up models by retaining vertical structure, whereas a horizontal and kinship-based network of participant agency is feasible to solve contemporary issues. The lion dance offers a compelling anecdote for understanding clan-inspired kinship through the lens of Wittgenstein's family resemblance (Wittgenstein & Anscombe, 1994), which posits that belonging emerges not from uniformity but from networks of overlapping similarities. Sometimes competing logics and practices coexist and function simultaneously within a single social structure, without requiring uniformity or hierarchical resolution. Rather than seeking consensus or a singular "correct" way, practical plurality recognises that multiple ways of belonging, contributing, and organising care can be equally valid and mutually reinforcing. Much like Chinese clan associations—once a lifeline for early migrants seeking community, support, and social ritual in the absence of state welfare—the performance of the lion dance embodies this plural kinship structure. Each member participates in a distinct yet interdependent role: some manoeuvre the lion's head, others animate the tail, while additional members contribute by designing costumes, softening drum rhythms, or choreographing new movements. These collaborative contributions illustrate how kinship is enacted as a composite of overlapping practices rather than a fixed blueprint. No single role or lineage holds exclusive authority; rather, a tapestry of shared responsibilities and creative improvisations sustains the community—mirroring the ethos of clan networks anchored in mutual aid, lineage, and care (Lee, 2014). Such plurality bridges generations, gender identities, and cultural memories, offering retired men—who might shy away from activities stereotyped as "feminine"—an avenue for both physical engagement and cultural pride. The choreography of the lion dance thus becomes a material metaphor for family resemblance: Each practitioner's embodied expertise, whether in movement, music, or design, animates the collective spirit without erasing individual difference. In this context, the lion itself is not merely a marker of Chinese identity but a multispecies collaborator—a resilient symbol of how kinship is continuously negotiated, reconfigured, and expressed through communal action.

Individuality Matters: Embodied Storytelling

"I have witnessed many lion dances before, but I did not know the meaning behind the movements. Learning lion dance reconnects me with my childhood."

— Uncle Tan, 68-year-old retired process manager and lion head performer

The lion symbol resurrects as a multispecies enabler. Participants get to decide whether to wear or remove the mask—both physically and metaphorically. Through participatory creative agency claimed in the project, they choose when and how to tell their stories. Uncle Tan's reflection reveals this: As an older Chinese man, he chose to be reconnected with childhood by the choreographies of lion dance as embodied memory reactivated, even creating new meanings beyond mere nostalgic reminiscence. It is now about establishing a new community with like-minded senior friends. Rather than positioning seniors as passive recipients of heritage or victims of social isolation, the lion dance becomes a safe space anchored simultaneously in personal struggles for identity, negotiation, and affection over nostalgia. The participatory co-design process provides the essential mechanisms in elder-centred design: trust building, reciprocal contribution, and mutual learning. Through the collaborative act of learning and performing together, the lion itself functions as a multispecies agent of legitimacy, mediating storytelling and embodied

knowledge-making without demanding explicit vulnerability or therapeutic confession (Groutars et al., 2024). The movements — once witnessed but misunderstood — now become legible through elder bodies, transforming embodied practice into epistemic authority. This design intervention directly addresses what Miranda Fricker (2007) theorises as epistemic injustice: the systemic denial of certain groups' capacity to be knowers. By strategically prioritising cultural resonance based on the individual's micro-historical narrative, such as childhood associations, rather than the macro majority's history of the lion's nationalist symbolism, the project creates conditions where older men can articulate knowledge rooted in somatic and kinetic hands-on memory, circumventing the systemic pressures and structural silencing that have historically rendered Chinese masculinity — particularly in retirement — economically redundant or socially inert. The design process redistributes epistemic power, enabling elders' embodied expertise to constitute legitimate, valued forms of knowing and being within the community. In this way, participatory design with the lion as a collaborative agent does not “fix” elderly men; rather, it performs what epistemic justice (Fricker, 2007) demands: recognising that elder practitioners possess knowledge that “systematic credibility deficits” have previously obscured, and creating institutional space, recognised by both the community and the state, where that knowledge circulates, is valued, and reshapes collective understanding.

Not Inherently Emancipatory

Participatory design like SPLDT reveals nuanced power dynamics, not inherent emancipation. It is not emancipatory because designers are much influenced by institutional authority through funding and objectives. While structural constraints such as state priorities, selective access, and spectacle demand persistently limit day-to-day decision-making across community autonomy, SPLDT operated within Lien Foundation and DesignSingapore Council initiatives, aligning with mainstream state focus on the aging population and acknowledging lion dance as a multicultural practice, not just a Chinese tradition. Additionally, the demographic of participants also revealed the privileges for such co-design workshops; there is limited access to even participating due to a lack of time, mobility, or capacity. For example, someone who is actively working to earn a living does not have the excessive time needed to attend the workshop, while the participants who already have free time due to financial stability and certain educational backgrounds are able to join the conversation. All these factors expose the inherent restrictions of such initiatives, which may further reinforce hierarchies of participation.

A collective tension that emerged during rehearsals showcased the contested nature of representational redistribution. Seniors adapted lion equipment and choreography after weeks of labour, yet questioned: “Are we working so hard just for the ‘minister and VIP’ performance?” This reveals the limited representational power due to partial redistribution; elders involved in the process gained embodied knowledge for their own and community benefit, but often the objectives diverged due to institutional imperatives that may still prioritise spectacle for the authorities rather than giving full autonomy to civic participants, although it may be more sustainable in the long run.

Yet SPLDT acknowledges these doubts and limitations strategically. Designers facilitated open critique during rehearsals, enabling seniors to redirect efforts toward community storytelling rather than external validation. Such a reflexive approach reframes the power dynamic by treating tensions as “designable” materials; it is reframed to focus on the communal support system, where funding for the future should come from the remuneration yielded by the performances earned. The internal structure, administration, and

decision-making are also organically structured and framed through collective voting. This applies to the main objectives of the lion dance.

Anthropomorphic Ethics

“I am grateful to the partners for championing the Inheritance programme, empowering our seniors at Fei Yue Active Aging Centre to embark on a transformative six-week journey. It is heartening to witness seniors breaking societal stigmas and physical limitations to perform the lion dance to usher in the Lunar New Year.”

— Arthur Ling, Chief Executive, Fei Yue Family Service Centre

Inspired by Chakrabarty and Latour (2021), “species thinking” and an acknowledgement of more-than-human entanglements are essential for understanding the plurality and contingency of cultural practice in a planetary age. The anthropomorphic ethics of the lion dance emerge not as philosophical abstraction but as a redistribution of representational authority from heritage institutions to community practitioners. When designers facilitate multispecies encounters—positioning the imagined animal as a collaborative agent rather than a cultural object to be preserved—they fundamentally reframe the question of heritage governance. Heritage becomes not what experts authorise as “authentic” but what communities collectively steward as an ongoing, never-finished process. This approach is inspired by and intends to extend from Chakrabarty’s argument that heritage and history in the Anthropocene can no longer be conceived as exclusively human domains.

This distinction proves critical. Traditional heritage preservation logic accepts institutional gatekeeping as inevitable: professionals determine what cultural practices “mean,” how they should be transmitted, and what counts as legitimate change. Participatory design with lion dance communities in Singapore inverts this authority structure. Rather than seniors at the active aging centre receiving heritage as predetermined tradition, they become co-authors: Their embodied capacities reshape what the dance can express, their intergenerational knowledge redirects transmission, their interpretations—rooted in contemporary needs for dignity and belonging—redefine what the practice serves now.



Figure 3: Lion Dance Performance at Void Deck (Chen, 2025)

The lion's image provides a gender neutrality that signals the awareness of a neutral platform or blank canvas for all possibilities. Unlike heritage practices rigidly gendered through history, the lion's morphology invites participants across gender spectrums to discover embodied possibilities otherwise suppressed in Singapore's hierarchical social structures. This capacity to enable otherwise—to let participants become creative agents rather than tradition-bearers—models the “polyphonic” (Tsing, 2021) heritage meaning-making as multiple melodies of agencies and as simultaneous interpretations of the same cultural practice that coexist without being reduced to a single “authentic” meaning. Multiple interpretations coexist for harmony: For some elders, the dance revives diasporic connection; for others, it serves cardiovascular flourishing; for younger participants, it represents intercultural solidarity. These meanings are not contradictory but “mutually enriching; they testify to the practice's capacity to hold multiple significances for different community members” (2021).

Yet genuine multispecies justice requires more than celebratory pluralism. It demands that designers actively construct relational “sanctuary conditions” where plural meanings can persist against institutional appropriation and state multiculturalism narratives. It is not simply rejecting the top-down narrative but rather finding multiple commonalities to address the gap strategically. It is not resistance, but a process of participation. This stewardship, safeguarded by design creatives' function, means recognising that heritage remains porous and vulnerable to unexpected chemistries. The anthropomorphic ethic therefore signifies this commitment: Facilitators protect conditions for collaborative meaning-making precisely because communities' representational authority remains perpetually under threat from heritage governance in the systems. The lion awaits reinterpretation not infinitely but under conditions designers actively defend—conditions where elders' embodied expertise counts as legitimate knowledge, where intergenerational transmission proceeds on community terms, where plural meanings survive consolidation into singular “authentic” narratives.

Conclusion

Through participatory design interventions with the Silver Pride Lion Dance Troupe, elders have reclaimed how communities claim representational power from heritage gatekeepers, redistributing agencies to elders who become co-creators rather than tradition-bearers. The lion dance emerges not as a fixed cultural artefact but as a multispecies agent facilitating epistemic justice against the systemic denial of certain groups' capacity to be knowers. Auntie Lim shares: “Nobody asked about my sewing skills before, but now, when I repair the lion's eyes, the young people wait for my hands—they say it must be done properly.” By prioritising older adults' embodied expertise rooted in somatic and kinetic memory, participatory design processes legitimise knowledge that counters problem-solving for stereotyped stigma against Chinese older men in Singapore's efficiency-driven culture and retirement era.

The findings reveal a critical paradox in how heritage governance operates in Singapore. Institutional frameworks have historically positioned the lion as a symbol serving state multiculturalism narratives, severing the practice from its clan-based roots and lived transmission. Uncle and aunties in the project highlighted their demand for their real story. Yet, through collaborative design with community practitioners, the lion's material agency—its weight, visibility, and demand for synchronised coordination—becomes a vehicle for plural meaning-making, without chasing single authenticity, as Tsing (2021) describes as “polyphonic” narratives. Elders simultaneously experience the practice as diasporic memory,

embodied cultural narratives, and reclaimed creative agency, which is emphasised as a universal practice that should not be limited by gender, age, or class background.

What distinguished the SPLDT initiative was its commitment to what I term sanctuary conditions: relational environments where designers actively constructed safety nets enabling elders to step beyond assigned family and social roles and to stay in the incubation chamber during the co-design process. Here, their lived experiences are validated, and the design is recognised as fitting their strengths, rather than being subject to narratives of lack or remediation. Rather than treating design as neutral problem-solving, the project engaged in what critical design anthropology demands—attending to how institutional frameworks already shape communities’ perceptions of “problems” and redistributing credibility to practitioners whose voices have been systematically silenced, such as the aging population in Singapore’s fast-paced society.

The anthropomorphic ethics articulated through this research fundamentally reframes heritage stewardship. Rather than expert-authorised preservation, heritage becomes an ongoing, collectively negotiated process. Auntie Lim reflects: “The lion isn’t just cloth and bamboo—when we dance, it has its own spirit that teaches the young ones respect for hard work.” Designers function not as authorities but as custodians of the conditions enabling plural meaning-making—conditions perpetually threatened by state governance systems and heritage professionalisation. Such initiatives represent micro-resistances to top-down cultural management, creating spaces where care ethics and embodied collaboration serve as mechanisms for reclaiming agency. This is not just an exercise class or therapy. This provides a platform to represent “us” again—workers, parents, dancers, experts, and the lion carry their story forward.

This work suggests that participatory design with marginalised older adults and heritage communities offers generative possibilities for justice-oriented cultural practice—not by romanticising community participation, but by rigorously dismantling the representational hierarchies that systematically render certain ways of knowing as illegitimate. The lion is embracing being harmonised with humans and other beings, awaiting ongoing reinterpretation by those whose embodied expertise and cultural memory deserve recognition as essential human knowledge in the age of institutional commodification.

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