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## ANNEX C:

### A TIMELINE – THE GENESIS OF *DAPUNTA HYANG*: *TRANSMISSION OF KNOWLEDGE*

**1999**

Zai disbanded Metabolic Theatre Laboratory, a physical theatre group that explored physical language and methodology inspired by Southeast Asian rituals, to go solo.

**2001**

Zai started a six-month artist residency with TheatreWorks (Singapore), with a proposal to go in search of the *orang laut* (sea people) around Bintan Island in the Riau Archipelago (Indonesia).



A map drawn by Zai Kuning in 2003, depicting his route across the Riau Archipelago in search of the *orang laut*.

After nine months of waiting, Zai finally met one of the *orang laut* communities when they rested at Tanjung Pinang, the capital of Riau Islands, south of Bintan. This encounter led to a six-month long 'research residency' resulting in a short film titled *Riau* (2005), which documented his search for, and experience living with, the *orang laut*.

Head of the National University of Singapore Museum, Ahmad Mashadi describes the work as "a sensitive elegy, painfully aware of its provisionality to the broader arc of his personal inquiry, of the people whose situations he could not reconcile to an indeterminate artistic project, and of the very nature of a relationship between artist and a source community that makes access possible." (*Before Riau: A Conversation with Zai Kuning*, 2017)

Zai followed this community for two years. During this time, he was adopted as a son by an island chief on Dendun Island, a small island 15 minutes by boat away from Mantang Island, where a troupe performing *mak yong*, the ancient Malay opera, resides.



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### 2003

Zai stopped following the *orang laut* as witnessing their plight was too much for him to bear. He recalls the experience:

*'Being a sensitive person, I was mentally tortured by their predicament and I kept having nightmares. After three years of witnessing their helpless situation, I knew I had to stop visiting them before I killed myself since I could do very little to help them besides bringing them some basic necessities. I gave up visiting them by 2003.'*

### 2004

Zai came to know of the Mantang Arang Lama *mak yong* troupe on Mantang Island. Zai met their chief Pak Khalid. He learnt of their difficulties and invited them to perform on their own island. He recalls of their first meeting:

*'When we sat down to chat I asked Pak Khalid to recall the last occasion the troupe performed. He replied that it was 20 years ago. I was shocked and asked why; he replied that there were no invitations to perform. After a long pause I asked him if he would perform if I were to invite him. He said "yes, but where?" I suggested their island. "And for whom?" he asked. "For the children," I said, "because it's important they see it for themselves, not just hear about mak yong.'*

He invited the troupe to rehearse and perform an unabbreviated version of *mak yong* for their own islanders. They also performed later on neighbouring Dendun Island.

This was the first time in 20 years the troupe performed on their own island.

### 2005

*Riau*, the 30-minute film about Zai's search for the *orang laut*, with music composition by Tetsu Saitoh, was completed and screened first at TheatreWorks (Singapore), and later at the International Film Festival Rotterdam, the Busan International Film Festival, and the 3rd Fukuoka Asian Art Triennale. It is now part of the permanent collections of the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, Singapore Art Museum and M+ (Hong Kong).

A series of drawings and music compositions inspired by the *orang laut* were also produced, under the titles *Brutality of Fact* and *When I woke up I realise I am Dead* respectively.

### 2007

Zai invited the Mantang Arang Lama *mak yong* troupe to perform on Dendun island, where Zai's adoptive family lived.

### 2010

TheatreWorks approached Zai to invite the troupe to perform at the *Singapore Night Festival: New World* in front of the Singapore Management University.

### 2013

Zai applied for and was awarded the Creation Grant under Singapore's National Arts Council (NAC), in which he proposed a three-year research project titled *Dapunta Hyang - Pre-Islamic Arts and Culture of the Malay civilisation*.

He was thus able to invite the Mantang Arang Lama *mak yong* troupe to perform again on their own island. The troupe was now headed by Pak Gani (Pak Khalid had passed away) and they performed a three-hour show over two consecutive nights - the original length of *mak*



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*yong*, which they had not been able to perform for 40 years. Notably, they revived the character Harimau (Tiger), which has been disallowed in official showcases and kept in the dark for 20 years.

#### 2014

Zai presented the first art work invoking the name of Dapunta Hyang Sri Jayanasa at his solo show in Ota Fine Arts (Singapore).

The installation *Dapunta Mapping the Melayu* marked the first time in which Zai used the ship as an emblem.



*Dapunta Mapping the Melayu*,  
2014. Courtesy of Ota Fine Arts.

The second presentation under the Dapunta Hyang series was commissioned by Institute of Contemporary Arts (Singapore), titled *The Fleeting World of Dapunta Hyang*.



*Fleeting World of Dapunta Hyang*, 2014.  
Presented at Institute of Contemporary Arts  
(ICA) Singapore.



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**2015**

Esplanade - Theatres on the Bay (Singapore) commissioned the third presentation, titled *Dapunta Hyang: Transmission of Knowledge*.



*Dapunta Hyang: Transmission of Knowledge, 2015*  
Presented at Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay, Singapore.  
Photo courtesy of Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay, Singapore

The work was then presented by Ota Fine Arts at the *Encounters* section at Art Basel in Hong Kong.



*Dapunta Hyang: Transmission of Knowledge, 2015*  
Presented at Encounters, Art Basel Hong Kong.  
Courtesy of Ota Fine Arts.  
Photo courtesy of Danny Yeo@Pure Talents

Subsequently, it travelled to Palais de Tokyo in Paris, as part of a group show *Secret Archipelago*.



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*Dapunta Hyang: Transmission of Knowledge, 2015  
Presented at Secret Archipelago, Palais de Tokyo.*

**2016**

Zai was selected by NAC to present *Dapunta Hyang: Transmission of Knowledge* for the Singapore Pavilion at the 57th Venice Biennale. He and collaborator Wichai Juntavaro began an expedition to trace the route of Dapunta Hyang's conquests. Places covered are Sumatra (Indonesia), Kedah (Malaysia), and Chaiya (Thailand). Temple complexes bearing similar architectural designs show the extent of the Malay-Srivijaya empire, and the strong Hindu/Buddhist influence it was under.



*The Srivijaya empire stretched across modern-day Southeast Asia.  
Map by Zai Kuning.*



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*A stupa (Buddhist shrine), Candi Kedaton, found in Muaro Jambi, a temple complex built between 11<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, Sumatra, Indonesia.*

The team also went back to Mantang Island to take portraits of each *mak yong* performer, as a tribute to their perseverance in sustaining this art form.

During this research period, Zai chanced upon *menora* in Phatthalung (Thailand). It is a dance-drama which he believes to be the origin of *mak yong*, most tellingly in the masks which are almost identical. This discovery points towards more research on *menora* that Zai intends to further explore in the near future.

## **2017**

*Dapunta Hyang: Transmission of Knowledge* is presented in the Singapore Pavilion at the 57th Venice Biennale from 13 May to 26 November 2017.