

An Interview with Roald Maliangkay

Blue plastic cats, six languages, traditional folksongs and Swarovski crystals; such an assortment spells-out an expertise in Korean culture and a search to understand the nature of humanity. How? Well one man here at the ANU seems to know...

Roald Maliangkay's background in Korean cultural heritage forms the foundation of his expertise and research. However, it is the quintessential 'so what?' question that inspires his investigations and so called "story building" in Korean popular culture. Despite not following a particular plan, he feels that his background in traditional folksongs has been "quite useful" in developing his current research and interests.

Maliangkay's continued sourcing from his background in Korean history is inherent in the layout of his office. Here he spends an estimated 60% of his time researching, including weekends. On one wall stands an extensive library of textbooks, journals and language dictionaries, no doubt many written by Maliangkay himself, containing a wealth of knowledge and expertise in regards to Korean history and cultural policy. On the opposite wall, almost in contention with the Korean literature, is an overwhelming array of colours and ornaments from Korean popular culture. Despite the differences between these two areas of expertise, Maliangkay manages to reconcile past and present by using his historical knowledge as a base from which to investigate those 'so what?' questions. He describes such knowledge as a shore, saying that "it's really hard to swim in open water... and I like to kind of swim away from the shore, if you will, just so that I have something to go back to. So I always expand on what I have done."

Such is the nature of his research; one inspired by his interests and spurred on by his surroundings. Maliangkay believes that doing research at the ANU provides a fresh perspective into the study of Korean culture, generating creative responses that differ from his Korean counterparts. Some of his published work including 'Dirt, Noise and Naughtiness' and 'Classifying Performances: The Art of Korean Film

Narrators' emphasize the effect of his unique perspective and research process as they focus on original alternate sources providing new insight into Korean pop culture.

Maliangkay is fortunate to often begin his research with something he considers “interesting or cool”, and then build a story based on his own quirks and passions. It seems hard to go wrong when such is the nature of your research, however the struggle in differentiating work from play is what he considers to be “the tricky things about pop culture”. With an office filled with stimulating ornaments and pictures it is easy to see why Maliangkay is so passionate about his work. However sometimes he claims that writing about pop culture “really takes the fun out of it. Sitting in his office, it was enjoyable being able to laugh and admire the bobbing plastic cats and old film posters, although one can imagine that writing about them would not bring about the same level of amusement. In reflecting on his research it is easy to see how the line can blur between work and play and note that this is not an issue one encounters when coming from a discipline such as science.

It seems that this struggle is set to remain in his work as he moves onto future projects researching ownership and the nature of people in society. Inspired by visits to Chinese family homes, Maliangkay hopes to understand something “intrinsic about humans” through his work with collections in popular culture, namely Chinese Swarovski collectors. One can only wait in anticipation to see whether such collections will in fact speak to the nature of humanity.