

## Kristang Revitalization in Singapore After Covid-19

By

Mr. Kevin Martens Wong

[zeekyang23@gmail.com](mailto:zeekyang23@gmail.com)

### Abstract

In just seven years, the Kodrah Kristang language revitalization initiative for the critically endangered Kristang language has gone from strength to strength in spite of a number of significant obstacles, most notably COVID-19. With the early milestones of the initiative documented in Wong (2019), this short paper thus provides a consolidated update on the subsequent evolution of Kodrah since COVID-19, and how it has continued to incorporate new approaches to language learning and teaching while expanding into new dimensions and interests in Kristang literature, culture and identity. Like Wong (2019), it is also written from the positionality of the author as the leader of the Kristang community in Singapore and Kabesa / Director of Kodrah Kristang.

### Keywords

Kristang, Singapore, revitalization, indigenous

### Introduction

#### The Original Revitalization Plan

The original Kristang language revitalization plan or *Kaminyu di Kodramintu* (Wong, 2016) articulated in July 2016 called for a five-phase model of revitalization leading toward the achievement of two main goals in the medium to long-term future:

- (1) by 2035, the existence of 50-100 new adult speakers who have learned Kristang to a high degree of fluency as adults

(2) by 2045, a pool of 5-10 bilingual native (L1) speakers of Kristang

Table 1 below summarises the actual development of each of these five phases as they have proceeded in real-time, especially since COVID-19.

| Phase | Title (in Wong, 2016, pp. 8-9) and original goals   | Planned duration (in Wong, 2016, pp. 11-13) | Actual duration                 | Revised goals / phase-demarcating event   |
|-------|---|---|---------------------------------|---|
| 1     | Prendeh / To learn and to teach<br><br>Momentum and public and community interest are generated and sustained | March 2016 to May 2017                      | March 2016 to November 2016     | First media feature on Kristang (completed: November 2016)  |
| 2     | Abrasah / To embrace<br><br>Generation of further forward momentum and public interest                        | May 2017 to November 2019                   | November 2016 to May 2017       | Successful organization of 1st Kristang Language Festival (completed: 20-21 May 2017)                           |
| 3     | Alkansah / To excel and to achieve<br><br>First new Kristang-speaking children in a generation are raised     | November 2019 to September 2021             | May 2017 to November 2017       | Successful completion of the first round of Kodrah Kristang 4B (completed: November 2017)                       |
| 4     | Krisch / To grow and increase<br><br>Development of syllabi for the teaching of Kristang to                   | 2021 to 2035                                | November 2017 to <i>ongoing</i> | First hardcopy publication of any text written completely in Kristang in Singapore ( <i>not yet completed</i> ) |

|   |  |                 |                        |    |
|---|--|-----------------|------------------------|----|
|   | children and young adults  |                 |                        |    |
| 5 | Subih / To rise<br><br>Full revived language with new domains of use | 2035 to<br>2045 | <i>Not yet started</i> | NA |

**Table 1: Planned and Achieved milestones in the Kristang Revitalization Plan / Kaminyu di Kodramintu**

The substantial differences between the planned and actual *Kaminyu*, and its tremendous acceleration, were catalyzed by the publication of a *Straits Times* article in November 2016 that greatly increased public interest in Kristang, and enabled a much wider and stronger connection with the public than had been previously thought feasible. Initiative goals were also reinterpreted and revised to include new dimensions of culture, identity, and ways of being and to further align the initiative to uniquely and particularly Kristang ideas and contexts that became more salient following COVID-19. These are hereafter outlined below.

### **Kodrah Kristang *na fora* / Outdoors**

Face-to-face Kodrah Kristang classes were suspended at the onset of the pandemic in February 2020, with no further classes proceeding after the twelfth iteration of the beginner's class and an elective class known as Eresberes catering to advanced learners ran from January to March 2020; meanwhile, the Kodrah Core Team was also dealing with the fallout from one member of the team sexually and psycho emotionally abusing the author, the main motivator and teacher of the Kodrah classes, between August 2018 and July 2019, and finally leaving the team in November 2019. Classes were therefore on hold from February 2020 until June 2022, with only an online version of the classes that eventually proved attractive but extremely tiring to run for the facilitators running from January to March 2021. However, in June 2022, the Kodrah team was finally able to restart face-to-face classes as events once again came together somewhat fortuitously: Singapore finally began moving toward reopening, as the author also simultaneously finally negotiated enough of the abuse to a sufficient degree to consistently be able to return to public and academic life.

A particularly pertinent facet of the trauma of COVID-19 was the general population's experiencing of a strong and pervasive disconnection from the place and space of Singapore; simultaneously, Singapore's Ministry of Education also began to highlight the pre-eminence and valuable benefits of outdoors place-based and experiential learning for both children and older people. also experienced some unusual difficulties in securing a venue with the People's Association community centers, a network that had prior to COVID-19 been otherwise quite supportive of hosting the Kristang classes. A decision was thus made in June 2022 to work with the synchronous opportunities that both events presented, and in July 2022 the first Kodrah Kristang *na fora* or Outdoors classes began. All sessions in a *na fora* class are held completely out-of-doors, treating the environment of Singapore, whether built/urbanized or natural, as the classroom instead; sessions also, therefore, are never held at the same place, and are rotated around different venues across the city-state, particularly those that either have or once had symbolic value to the Kristang community. Two rounds of the Kodrah Kristang *na fora* classes have been run since July 2022 and together constitute the start of Phase 4 of the revitalization initiative, *Kriseh*, which seeks to greatly increase and expand the conceptual and psych-emotional space of Kristang in Singapore.

### **Kultura Krismatra: Archeopelagic or Progenitor Kristang**

The author's own resignation from Singapore's Ministry of Education on 31 August 2022 after prolonged institutional abuse further allowed for a second, dramatic expansion of the *Kriseh* phase of revitalization, where the author, originally seeking to provide a platform for his students from the government junior college where he taught to continue to work with him, founded his own coaching and consulting initiative known as Merlionsman. Since September 2022, Merlionsman has quickly evolved into a dynamic counterpoint to Kodrah, providing a space for the development of what the author calls the Kultura Krismatra or Progenitor Kristang schema, incorporating more radical and deeper approaches revitalization that lie outside the domain of the Kristang language per se, and have more to do with Kristang culture, identity and ways of being. Examples of pioneering work that have emerged from the Kultura include:

- Singapore's first-ever Kristang MRT map

- The Kristang periodic table of the elements
- The Kristang creole/indigenous theory of the human psyche, the Osura Pesuasang / Individuation Theory
- A collection of material related to the Osura and to general mental health, known as the *Libru Laranja* or Orange Book
- The Kristang speculative history of the world, known as the *Roda Mundansa*

This emphasis on the revitalization of culture and identity is similarly two-fold and dual-facing, in that it has occurred with the author's own much fuller personal psych-emotional excavation and acceptance of his identity as Kristang, and a wider 'settling-in' or adapting of Kristang into the general Singaporean milieu, moving from being a curious leftover of Singapore's lost historical past to a living, breathing part of its present and future. Indeed, the strong emphasis on mental health in Progenitor Kristang means that at an informal/grassroots level, Kristang has become strongly associated with positive mental health outcomes among both Kristang and non-Eurasians in Singapore, ensuring that the language will have a likely very dynamic new domain of use in the near future that partially satisfies a major component of Phase 5 of the *Kaminyu*.

## Conclusion

The connection of language to literature, culture, and identity cannot be overstated and is something that remains meaningful near-universally, even and especially in Creole cultures like that of the Kristang – and all the more due to Kristang's deep and painful history in Singapore and elsewhere, where both the language and its attendant community were marginalized and stigmatized by colonial and independent governments and other agencies and institutions. Moving forward, the association of Kristang with domains of use and expressions of human behavior that have contemporary currency do indeed appear to be major success factors supporting its continued popularity and energy even after COVID-19, and is a key strategy that other communities seeking revitalization and reinvigoration of their culture, identity, and ways of being can consider deploying in their own ways that are suitable to their contexts to guarantee a holistic appraisal and embracing of past, present, possible and future.

## References

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## About the Author

Mr. Kevin Martens Wong is a Kristang/Portuguese-Eurasian speculative fiction writer, independent scholar, and linguist. He leads the internationally-recognized grassroots movement to revitalize the critically endangered Kristang language in Singapore, Kodrah Kristang, and was the 2017 recipient of both the President's Volunteer and Philanthropy Award (Individual—Youth) and the Lee Hsien Loong Award for Outstanding All-Round Achievement. His first novel, *Altered Straits*, was longlisted for the 2015 Epigram Books Fiction Prize, and his work has also appeared in *Transect*, entitled *Light to Night* Festival. He currently runs his own freelance coaching and consulting initiative, *Merlionsman* ([merlionsman.com](http://merlionsman.com)).

