

1819 & Before

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1819 & Before

Singapore's Pasts

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Endpapers: Drawing by Aaron Kao. This artist's impression depicts a variety of activities along the Singapore River circa fourteenth century. Archaeological evidence recovered around Empress Place suggests that a marketplace greeted seafarers as they sailed into the Singapore river. Its location offered shelter and swift transaction of goods. All that remained were mostly inorganic material such as trade stoneware, exquisite porcelain and ubiquitous earthenware and coins—their dense scatter was a testimony to a bustling riverbank, including a scuffle (centre bottom), which were not uncommon in port settlements, even in nineteenth-century Singapore. Unusual sandstone features may have been foundations for disintegrated timber structures that once served the maritime community. Unique artefact assemblages from different sites also indicated that urban planning delineated space use for commerce, residential and industries. By referencing ancient text descriptions, early modern illustrations, colonial photographs and ethnographical inferences, this image is an attempt to provide a plausible visualization of events that animated the shores of ancient Singapore.

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Foreword

There is ample archaeological evidence today to argue that the island of Singapore was a trading port of significant importance from the fourteenth century, and perhaps earlier. This archaeological evidence has been accumulated over the decades from Singapore's very first archaeological dig in 1984 at Fort Canning Hill to the current work of the Archaeology Unit at the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute. However, public interest in Singapore's pre-modern history is very much a recent phenomenon. For one, until recently historians paid very little attention to the island's pre-modern histories. As Kwa Chong Guan informs us in his first chapter in this volume, seminal texts like Mary Turnbull's *A History of Singapore, 1819–1975* did little to try to understand Singapore as a pre-1819 regional port or see it as part of the larger Malay world. Kwa notes that this was because there was either insufficient evidence of pre-1819 communities for serious investigation or that these communities were not believed to be significant enough to justify studying. Much of the writing of national histories in Southeast Asia took colonialism as the starting point and embarked on a chronology that included post-World War II decolonization, the emergence of postcolonial governments and their struggles to build new nations during the Cold War. Pre-modern empires, sea-faring communities and border-crossing fishermen did not command the same attention as newly formed nation-states, authoritarian governments and developing economies.

The other reason for the lack of interest in Singapore's pre-modern histories was decidedly ideological. Upon expulsion from Malaysia in 1965, Singapore's multicultural society made it politically untenable for its national history to be hitched to the civilization and culture of any particular ethnic group. With multiculturalism and meritocracy as its pillars, it would have been contradictory to equate national identity

and culture with the country's largest ethnic community. In cutting the Gordian knot, the postcolonial government decided that the arrival of Sir Stamford Raffles to establish a British Station on Singapore would be ground zero without appeal to any ethnic culture. For many generations of Singaporeans, Singapore was born as a modern entity, transformed from the proverbial quiet fishing village to a colonial entrepôt with the stroke of a pen on 6 February 1819. This popular version of history was a strategic rupture, effectively dislocating the island from its surroundings and region, to introduce the island as *tabula rasa*.

Fast forward fifty years and the external environment has changed. Today the rise of China has made regionalism and sub-regionalism in Southeast Asia more geopolitically crucial than ever before. Southeast Asia's rapid growth has made it a region of opportunity, prompting Singapore leaders to encourage younger Singaporeans to develop a deeper understanding of the nearby countries. On the scholarly front, academics in the fields of history and archaeology have demonstrated the networks and linkages of the island to the region over the centuries prior to 1819. Key texts like *Seven Hundred Years: A History of Singapore* by Kwa Chong Guan, Derek Heng, Peter Borschberg and Tan Tai Yong and *Studying Singapore before 1800* edited by Kwa Chong Guan and Peter Borschberg bring together a body of evidence to show Singapore's pre-modern connectivity to the region vis-à-vis the economic activities of communities living on and around the island long before the arrival of Raffles.

The essays collected in this volume are summaries of a series of lectures organized by the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute in the first half of 2019 as its contribution to commemorating the bicentennial of Stamford Raffles's arrival in Singapore. Colleagues of the former Nalanda-Sriwijaya Centre were invited to speak on how their research contributed to a major theme of the bicentennial, inviting Singaporeans to reflect on Singapore's longer seven-hundred-year history.

I would like to thank my colleagues for accepting our invitation to speak on how their work pushes and probes the frontiers of our understanding of our history before Raffles. The summaries of their lectures compiled in this volume provide a glimpse of how deeply connected our history is to that of the long cycles of the maritime histories of the region and the importance of the Malay world to Singapore's identity and place in the region. *1819 & Before: Singapore's Pasts* will, I am confident, form a basis for future research on Singapore's pre-modern history and the island's changing roles under the Śrīvijaya Empire and the Majapahit Empire, followed by the Malacca and Johor Sultanates, and how Singapore has always been shaped by its surroundings. The Nalanda-Sriwijaya Centre has bequeathed its

successor, the Temasek History Research Centre, a substantive legacy of scholarship to draw upon for its research.

I would like to thank my ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute colleagues for organizing the series of lectures that forms the basis of this book. I am also grateful to Tan Chin Tiong, former Director of ISEAS and current Senior Advisor, as well as Choi Shing Kwok, current Director, for supporting this project.

Terence Chong
Deputy Director
ISEAS

Acknowledgments

The essays gathered here are revisions and summaries of a series of lectures convened by the former Nalanda-Sriwijaya Centre in 2019 to commemorate the Bicentennial of Stamford Raffles's landing in Singapore. I thank Terence Chong, Deputy Director of ISEAS, for inviting me to help plan and coordinate the series of lectures and to edit their revised summaries for publication. I am also grateful to Tan Chin Tiong, former Director of ISEAS and current Senior Advisor, for supporting this project.

I would like to thank current and former staff, fellows and affiliates of the Nalanda-Sriwijaya Centre for accepting the invitation to speak on how their research relates to and probes and challenges our understanding of Singapore's history before Raffles (or lack thereof). Their research provides a solid foundation for the Temasek History Research Centre to build upon.

The Public Affairs staff of ISEAS and the staff of the former Nalanda-Sriwijaya Centre organized the lectures with their usual efficiency, so leaving me the pleasant duty of moderating the lectures. Ms Fong Sok Eng has provided stalwart service in organizing the lectures and coordinating the publication of this volume.

Special thanks and appreciation to Terence Chong, as then Head of the Nalanda-Sriwijaya Centre and now Head of the Temasek History Research Centre, for continuing to support publication of this collection of essays.

Contributors

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Kwa Chong Guan is a Senior Fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, where he is currently working on issues of crisis management and risk mitigation of regional security issues. As Associate Fellow at the Temasek History Research Centre and Adjunct (Hon.) Associate Professor at the History Department, National University of Singapore, he is interested in the connected histories of monsoon Asia. Kwa chairs the Archaeology Advisory Panel established by the National Heritage Board in August 2019.

John N. Miksic

John N. Miksic received his BA from Dartmouth College, MA from Ohio University and PhD from Cornell University based on archaeological fieldwork on a trading port of the eleventh to thirteenth centuries in Sumatra. He has worked in Malaysia as a Peace Corps volunteer teacher and agricultural extension worker, in Sumatra as a rural development advisor under USAID, and at Gadjah Mada University, Yogyakarta for six years under a grant from the Ford Foundation and the Asian Cultural Council. In 1987 he moved to the National University of Singapore, where he is Emeritus Professor in the Southeast Asian Studies Department. He has been affiliated with the Department of History, University Scholars Programme and Asia Research Institute. He founded the Archaeology Unit at the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute. He received a Special Recognition Award and the Pingat Bakti Setia long-service award from the government of Singapore, and the title Kanjeng Raden Harya Temenggung from the Susuhunan of Surakarta (Indonesia).

His book *Singapore and the Silk Road of the Sea* won the inaugural award for best book on Singapore history in 2018. His specialties are the historical archaeology of Southeast Asia, urbanization, trade, Buddhism and ceramics.

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Derek Heng is currently Professor and Department Chair at the Department of History, Northern Arizona University. He was Associate Professor of Humanities and Head of Studies (History) at Yale-NUS College and was previously Head of NSC from January 2014 to July 2015. He specializes in the trans-regional history of Maritime Southeast Asia and the South China Sea during the first and early second millennia AD, and is the author of *Sino-Malay Trade and Diplomacy in the Tenth through the Fourteenth Century* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2009) and co-author of *Seven Hundred Years: A History of Singapore* (Singapore: National Library Board, 2019). He has also authored a number of journal articles and book chapters on the Chinese material remains recovered from archaeological sites in Southeast Asia, as well as having edited three volumes on the history and historiography of Singapore's past. He is currently working on methods in integrating archaeological data from Southeast Asia with Chinese digital textual databases. He maintains a keen interest on the historiography of Singapore, and he has edited *New Perspectives and Sources on the History of Singapore: A Multi-Disciplinary Approach* (Singapore: National Library Board, 2006), *Reframing Singapore: Memory, Identity and Trans-Regionalism*, ICAS Series volume 6 (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2009) and *Singapore in Global History* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2011).

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Michael Flecker, Managing Director of Maritime Explorations, has overseen some of the most important shipwreck excavations in Asia over the past thirty years. They include the ninth-century *Belitung* (Tang), twelfth-century *Flying Fish*, thirteenth-century *Java Sea*, fifteenth-century *Bakau*, c.1608 *Binh Thuan* and c.1690 *Vung Tau* wrecks. He earned his PhD from the National University of Singapore based on the excavation of the tenth-century *Intan Wreck*, and he specializes in ancient Asian ship construction and maritime trade. He has twice been a Visiting Fellow at the Nalanda-Sriwijaya Centre and is presently a Visiting Fellow at the Archaeology Unit, ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute.

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Iain Sinclair

Iain Sinclair is an Honorary Research Fellow at the University of Queensland School of Historical and Philosophical Inquiry. He studies the history, art and religion of South and Southeast Asia using primary sources in classical languages. His PhD dissertation (Monash University, 2016) examined the advent of tantrism in the medieval monasteries of the Kathmandu Valley. His recent publications include “Traces of the Cholas in Old Singapura” in *Sojourners to Settlers—Tamils in Southeast Asia and Singapore*, volume 1, edited by Nalina Gopal and Arun Mahizhnan (Singapore: Indian Heritage Centre and Institute for Policy Studies, 2019), “Sanskritic Buddhism as an Asian Universalism” in *Imagining Asia(s)* edited by Andrea Acri et al. (Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2019) and “Coronation and Liberation according to a Javanese Monk in China” in *Esoteric Buddhism in Mediaeval Maritime Asia* edited by Andrea Acri (Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2016). He has been a Visiting Fellow at the Nalanda-Sriwijaya Centre and a Käte Hamburger Kolleg Fellow at the Centre for Religious Studies, Ruhr University Bochum.

Peter Borschberg

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Tai Yew Seng is a Visiting Fellow at the Temasek History Research Centre and a ceramic archaeologist who specializes in excavating and handling ceramic from kiln sites, shipwrecks, ruins and tombs. He also has expertise in the Southeast Asian maritime trade with China. At ISEAS he conducted research on Singapore's pre-modern history and Chinese navigation charts and texts. During his stint as a Research Fellow at the Earth Observatory of Singapore, Nanyang Technological University (NTU), he participated in the Aceh Geohazard Project, which involved the collection and analysis of ancient ceramic sherds from over forty-four villages. Dr Tai has also taught several courses on Chinese culture and material culture at the Chinese Department at NTU and the National University of Singapore. He has published a number of research papers and co-authored books on ceramic archaeology and maritime trade in English and Chinese.

Aaron Kao

Aaron Kao joined the ISEAS Archaeology Unit as Research Officer. He majored in painting and received his diploma (as the top graduate from the school of Fine Art) from Lasalle SIA College of the Arts in 1999. As a scholarship recipient, he received his Bachelor of Arts degree (with Distinction) from Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology in 2003 and is currently pursuing postgraduate studies in archaeology at the University of Oxford under the Tun Dato Sir Cheng-Lock Tan MA Scholarship.

He was introduced to Singapore archaeology when he joined the Fort Serapong project in 2006. That experience exposed him to the world of archaeology and his interest blossomed to encompass the pre-modern history of Singapore and the region. He has since participated in numerous excavations in Singapore and was also part of the team for ISEAS's field school projects in Cambodia and Indonesia.

Apart from doing fieldwork and post-excavation processing, Aaron also applies his fine art training as illustrator for the Archaeology Unit. His main research interests are Singapore earthenware and its maritime cultural landscape. He has published a conference paper with SEAMEO-SPAFA International Conference on Southeast Asian Archaeology.