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Introduction: Two Historical Shipwrecks and Their Implications for Singapore History

Kwa Chong Guan

The National Heritage Board (NHB) and the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute announced on 16 June 2021 the successful archaeological excavation of two historic shipwrecks in the eastern approaches to Singapore's waters. The first shipwreck was discovered in 2015 in the course of salvage work on a barge that had run aground on a prominent rock outcrop known for more than a millennium as a major hazard to mariners approaching the Strait of Singapore. The National Heritage Board commissioned the Archaeology Unit of the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute to investigate and then excavate the wreck in 2016. This wreck, intermittently excavated for the next three years, has now been identified from its cargo of Chinese ceramics to be a fourteenth-century vessel most likely headed for Temasek, and therefore named the Temasek Wreck.

A survey and search of the vicinity for other wrecks, commissioned in mid-2019, found a second wreck, which was excavated over the next two years. The second shipwreck has been identified from archival research as an eighteenth-century merchant ship, the *Shah Muncher,* which was commissioned and owned by the Bombay trader and ship owner Sorabjee Muncherjee Readymoney. It was built in India in 1789

and sank on its return voyage from China to India in 1796 with a diverse cargo of Chinese ceramics and other non-ceramic trade items ranging from glass to copper-alloy objects and umbrellas. There would have been other trade commodities, especially tea, which would have perished. At a thousand tonnes the *Shah Muncher* was similar in size to the larger East India Company (EIC) ships sailing between England and China.

The essays in this book provide the context of these two wrecks and their implications for our understanding of Singapore history. The two lead essays describing the wrecks and locating them in the context of other contemporary shipwrecks are by Michael Flecker, who brought thirty years of experience and expertise as a marine archaeologist to the excavation of these two shipwrecks. His essays here are summaries of more detailed preliminary reports published by the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute.[1]

Questions about Singapore History

The recovery of these two wrecks raises a number of questions about our understanding of Singapore history that we should have, but have not, asked. For the Temasek Wreck, were the 4.4 tonnes of ceramics recovered all destined for fourteenth-century Temasek? If so, then it raises further questions regarding the size and nature of Temasek's market to absorb that volume of ceramics, which included some of the newest blue-and-white ceramics being produced in the kilns of Jingdezhen. These questions are discussed by Derek Heng in his essay in this volume. The *Shah Muncher* Wreck raises other issues of who were the merchants owning and operating other similar ships trading between China and India? Using the *Shah Muncher* as an example, Peter Borschberg discusses the EIC's system of trade between Britain and India, which it had a royal monopoly of, and its intra-Asian trade. The Company rationalized this parallel trade as the *country trade*. And it was these country traders who were to become central to Singapore's historical development in the first half of the nineteenth century.

These two historic shipwrecks challenge us to view Singapore from the sea, from the deck of the *Shah Muncher*, or the fourteenth-century ship headed for Temasek with its cargo of ceramics, rather than from Fort Canning, the seat of government in the fourteenth century and again in the nineteenth century, and from where the history of Singapore has conventionally been viewed as a colony of the British Empire. What attracted traders and shippers to fourteenth-century Temasek and the EIC station Stamford Raffles established on Singapore? Were there traders and shippers calling at Temasek before the fourteenth century and in the five centuries between Temasek and Singapore in the nineteenth century?

Dr John Crawfurd, the second Resident of Singapore from 1823 to 1826, recorded that,

> For a period of about five centuries and a half, there is no record of Singapore having been occupied, and it was only the occasional resort of pirates. In that year it was taken possession of by the party from whom we [the British] received it, an officer of the government of Jehore called the Tumângung. This person told me himself that he came there with about 150 followers, a few months before the British expedition which afterwards captured Java passed this island, and this happened in the summer of 1811.[2]

Crawfurd was aware of a fourteenth-century settlement on Singapore, of which he saw and recorded the remains of, but was unimpressed by.

The history of Singapore since Crawfurd has been viewed from Government House. It is about the administration and governance of multi-ethnic trading communities that developed behind the quays of the Singapore River, around the Kallang River estuary and, later, the New Harbour at Tanjong Pagar. The sea in front of the port city was not a major concern of colonial governance. The 2 August 1824 treaty that Dr John Crawfurd concluded with Sultan Hussein and the Temenggong was for the ceding of the island of Singapore and "the adjacent seas, straits and islets, to the extent of 10 geographical miles, from the coast of the said main Island of Singapore". This was within the traditional territorial sea limit of four to ten miles claimed by coastal states. The sea beyond this ten-mile limit from Singapore was the high sea, open and free for all to travel across. Singapore's attractiveness to traders then and now depends upon the security of its porous maritime boundaries against piracy, smuggling and other criminal activities.[3] Ensuring the security and safety of the sea beyond the ten-mile limit was assigned to the Royal Navy, the dominant naval power in the region (and also globally).[4]

The fortunes of Singapore and other port cities were subject to systemic geopolitical shifts and competition to control the high seas and its trade by major powers of the day. As the explorer and courtier Sir Walter Raleigh declared in the early seventeenth century, "whoever commands the sea, commands the trade; whosoever commands the trade of the world commands the riches of the world, and consequently the world itself". From this perspective of the imperative to control the sea, "Raffles' acquisition of Singapore", then Raffles Professor of History Wong Lin Ken argued, "was the unforeseen long-term result of Anglo-French rivalry in the Indian subcontinent, the consequent rise of the British Raj, and the need to defend its interests in the Bay of Bengal and the transoceanic route to the Archipelago and China."[5] Two centuries earlier, the Portuguese and the Dutch thought of establishing forts on

Singapore to control the surrounding waterways.[6] Post-1945 Singapore continued to depend upon the Royal Navy, from its old naval base at Sembawang, to ensure the freedom of the high seas for its survival.

Writing Singapore's History from the Sea

Cyril Northcote Parkinson, the inaugural Raffles Professor of History at the then new University of Malaya in 1950, was well placed to pioneer a more maritime framing of Singapore's past. He had published a much-acclaimed work entitled *Trade in the Eastern Seas, 1793–1813* in 1937, which describes vividly how the EIC operated, the goods it traded in, the ships the Company owned and the working conditions of its sailors on these ships.[7] In 1954, Parkinson published a companion study, *War in the Eastern Seas, 1793–1815,* which focussed on the naval campaigns of the Napoleonic wars in the Eastern Seas.[8] However, the priorities of Parkinson and his colleagues were not on exploring the maritime history of the region, but on training their students to reconstruct the histories of Malaya and Singapore, largely on the basis of the 170 volumes of handwritten Straits Settlement Records archived in the old Raffles Museum and Library. It was about writing a local history grounded on colonial foundations, which, after 1965, was transformed into writing a national history of Singapore.

The Singapore Story is about the anti-colonial nationalist struggle for the future of the island.[9] The sea around the island was not an issue. The issues of pirates, smugglers and traders illegally moving commodities—from guns to pepper, opium and tin—and migrations across the seas had largely been brought under control. The challenges confronting the post-1965 city-state included the communalism of its plural society, lacking what then prime minister Lee Kuan Yew described as the "social glue" to hold it together as a modern nation-state, and the threat of communism within the larger geopolitical framework of the Cold War. The freedom of the seas upon which Singapore's survival as a regional entrepôt and city state depended continued to be provided largely by the Royal Navy, from its restored naval base,[10] at least until 1972, and by the US Seventh Fleet.

The sea has thus been taken for granted in the historical development of Singapore, which is perceived to be driven more by Singapore's strategic location—something that Raffles is credited with recognizing. If we subscribe to the claim by Raffles that the British station he established on Singapore "command[s] the Southern entrance of the Straits of Malacca, and combine[s] extraordinary local advantages with a peculiarly admirable Geographical position", then we have the question raised by Wong Lin Ken: "how do we account for Singapore's emergence as a strategic centre of trade linking the sea routes of the South China Sea

with the Bay of Bengal and wider Indian Ocean beginning only in the nineteenth century, but not before?"[11] An answer to Wong's quandary lies in an underappreciated 1955 monograph[12] by Dr Carl Alexander Gibson-Hill, the last British director of the old Raffles Museum, on the history of the Old Straits of Singapore.

Viewed from the sea, Gibson-Hill pointed out that mariners sailing south from China towards the Java Sea ports on the north coast of Java would need to make landfall on the southwest coast of Kalimantan. However, mariners heading up the Strait of Melaka would make their way through or south of the Riau islands to head towards Bangka and up the Sungei Musi River to where Palembang is today, to call at Śrīvijaya, the primary emporium at the southern end of the Strait of Melaka from the seventh to the second half of the eleventh century, when the centre shifted to Jambi. As Gibson-Hill noted, there would have been no interest in seeking out the Strait of Singapore for sailing between the South China Sea and the Bay of Bengal for as long as Śrīvijaya was the preferred port-of-call polity at the southern end of the Strait of Melaka. It was only after Śrīvijaya declined, at the end of the twelfth century, that traders and mariners started searching for alternative waterways linking the South China Sea and the Bay of Bengal, and that the passages for sailing past Singapore came into use. The evidence recovered from some thirty-five years of archaeological investigations on Fort Canning confirms that Temasek was established towards this end, of serving sailors and traders sailing past its shores.

Gibson-Hill's main argument in his 1955 monograph was, however, that sailing past Singapore on any one of the four passages around the island (hugging the north coast of Singapore island to sail through the Johor Strait, hugging the south coast of Singapore and sailing through Keppel Harbour, sailing south of Sentosa on the Sisters Fairway past St John's Island, or taking the main strait) was always a hazardous event because of the numerous islets, shoals and coral reefs, and rapidly changing currents. Gibson-Hill argued that sailors and shippers had throughout the millennium a choice of which passage to take, and that choice was determined by their knowledge of the waterways and their seamanship to navigate the waters around Singapore. Most ship captains took onboard an *orang laut batin* or local sea nomad to pilot them through Singapore waters.

Fifty years were to pass before Peter Borschberg reviewed and expanded Gibson-Hill's insights with early modern European cartographic and other records—primarily Portuguese and Dutch—which were unavailable to Gibson-Hill in the 1950s.[13] Benjamin Khoo's essay is thus a useful update, summarizing what we know today about the challenges of sailing past Singapore.

Borschberg[14] also reconstructed from the seventeenth-century Dutch archives the search by the Dutch for a base for their new East India company, the Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie (VOC). Cornelis Matelieff de Jonge, as commander of the second VOC expedition to the East Indies from 1605 to 1608, not only traded as far as Canton, but also tried to capture Melaka from the Portuguese and establish trade relations with the local authorities. Matelieff also searched for possible locations for an eventual VOC headquarters in the region. To this end, Matelieff started negotiations with the Johor sultan Raja Bongsu at his port-settlement up the Johor River at Batu Sawar for a plot of land on Singapore to set up a Dutch fort.

Matelieff realized, however, that Singapore was not the most suitable site for the VOC to locate its regional headquarters, comparing it unfavourably to a site on the north Java coast such as Banten or the old port of Jayakerta, among four other possible locations. As Matelieff reported,

> the rendezvous at Johor is unsuitable, because one cannot reach it at every time of the year. It is also unsuitable to navigate and sail to at all locations, and then there is the jealousy of the aforementioned king [of Johor] who does not want to concede us a fortress there…[15]

Two centuries later, Stamford Raffles assessed Singapore's location for a "British Station" rather differently.

The implication from Gibson-Hill's 1955 insights is that Singapore's fortunes as a British port-city, and earlier Temasek, depended to a large extent on what was happening on the sea in front of its harbours than we have hitherto acknowledged. Within a larger maritime context, it is primarily the structure and cycles of trade in the South China Sea and the Bay of Bengal that shaped the fortunes of Singapore as a port city. It depended also on the state of marine technology of shipbuilding, navigation and seamanship to sail to or through Singapore waters. Further, Singapore's fortunes have also been dependent upon how well it adapted to and networked with the maritime world it was a part of.

The Port City as the Cradle of Singapore's History

The "British Station" Raffles established on Singapore was linked with Penang and Melaka in 1826 to form the Straits Settlements. It was governed from the headquarters of the EIC in Calcutta until 1867, when control over the Settlements was transferred to London to become Crown Colonies until the end of World War II. However, underlying this constitutional framing of Singapore's history is a deeper history of Singapore as a port-polity.

Historian Tan Tai Yong argued in his 2019 IPS–Nathan Lectures[16] that,

> Historically, Singapore functioned as a port thriving on flows of people and trading networks that stretched from the Persian Gulf to the southern coast of China. Today, Singapore positions itself as a hub for the greater Asian region and beyond. And I [Tan Tai Yong] would argue that the underlying plot of the Singapore story has not changed fundamentally throughout its history.

Tan quotes maritime historians Peter Reeves, Frank Broeze and Kenneth McPherson that "port cities are not merely 'cities that happen to be on the shoreline'; they are economic entities whose character is maritime in character". As Broeze and his colleagues stress, "the main economic base [of the port city] must be its port. Indeed, the port must become the central dynamic force and organizing principle of the port city, and not remain a 'hidden function', a mere appendage."[17] Port cities are, according to Broeze and his colleagues, in a telling phrase, "Brides of the Sea".

Within this context of port cities, Chinatown, Kampong Glam and Tanjong Pagar developed in response to the emergence of quays along the Singapore River, the harbour in the Kallang River and docks at Tanjong Pagar. The town plan Raffles drew up in 1822, as architectural historian Imran bin Tajudeen[18] argues, was an attempt to rationalize and plan the expanding "British Station" in line with other emerging port cities that Raffles had experienced—Penang, Melaka and the northern Javanese coastal cities. All these coastal cities, as Imran points out, were grounded on the morphology of earlier Malay port cities, the *negeri*.

The multi-ethnic community of itinerant and resident traders and others in Chinatown, Kampong Glam and Tanjong Pagar reflected the entrepôt trade of their quays, harbours and docks, where Asian and European trade networks interacted. Local and foreign cultural interactions produced a cosmopolitan culture that defined not only Singapore but also all other port cities and facilitated their networking.[19]

It was the bicentennial of the establishment by Raffles of a "British Station" on Singapore that prompted a review of Raffles's achievement in the long cycles of time and recognition that there were predecessor port settlements on Singapore in the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries.[20] As Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong declared at the launch of the bicentennial commemoration on 28 January 2019,

> Today we mark a significant anniversary in Singapore's history. Stamford Raffles did not "discover" Singapore, any more than Christopher Columbus "discovered" America. By the time Raffles arrived in 1819, Singapore had already had hundreds of years of history. In the fourteenth century, this area, at the mouth of the Singapore River, was a thriving seaport called Temasek.

Raffles was certainly aware of an earlier settlement on Singapore, which he recognized as the "ancient capital of the Kings of Johor", and saw the remnants of its ruins. Archaeological excavations since 1984 have recovered several tonnes of artefacts attesting to a thriving port settlement in the fourteenth century around the environs of what is today Fort Canning. There was also another port settlement in the sixteenth century, which was probably located in the Kallang Estuary. Kwa Chong Guan's essay in this volume correlates the few textual and cartographic references to this port settlement in the European records with fragmentary archaeological evidence to argue for the existence of this forgotten port settlement.

Singapore's history begins with these pre-modern port cities and continues with the nineteenth-century quays, harbours and docks along the Singapore River and in the Kallang estuary, around which the town grew. From the mid-nineteenth century, a "New Harbour" was developed at Tanjong Pagar to cope with the expanding trade with the opening of the Suez Canal and the development of steamships. Today, that "New Harbour" has given way to a new mega port at Tuas with the infrastructure to handle the expanding containerization of commodities.

Underlying the expansion of old docks and wharves and the development of new harbours is the competition for land between bunkering services for shipping, ship repair and construction, and industry, banking and other businesses related to maritime trade. As with other contemporary port cities in Asia and around the world, Singapore's ports have grown, but port activities have gradually become overshadowed by the industrial, financial or service activities of a port city. The port has become "hidden"; relocated from the city's core to its periphery, becoming an appendage of a global city. The city rises to dominate the waterfront. Within this framework of port cities in transition, the future of Singapore, and other port cities, is the interrelationships, as sociologist Sharon Siddique states it, between the port and the city through the mediating feature of a common waterfront. The issue, as Siddique asks, is how to unite land and water worlds.[21]

The Maritime World That Made Singapore

A port is a haven for sailors and shippers; a place where traders from different trading zones—a hinterland or another port city—met to trade and exchange their goods. The two shipwrecks that Singapore archaeologically excavated in the eastern approaches to the Singapore Strait provide some insights into who the sailors, shippers and traders were who called, or would have called, at Singapore, and about the cargoes they were carrying. These two shipwrecks are the latest in a series of some thirty shipwrecks that have been archaeologically excavated off

the coast of Vietnam, off the east coast of the Malay Peninsula, in the Java Sea and in the Philippines in the preceding three decades.

These two wrecks are the material evidence of maritime trade and its routes that connected the various port polities and port cities of an Asian maritime world that Singapore was, and continues to be, a part of. The early ninth-century Belitung wreck that Singapore acquired the cargo of, which is now exhibited in the Asian Civilisations Museum,[22] is one of the more spectacular shipwrecks excavated. The evidence of these shipwrecks confirms our reading of the classical texts (primarily the Chinese and Arabic) of evolving maritime trade routes connecting West Asian with South and East Asian ports over long cycles of time, creating distinct but connected trading networks, and worlds, in the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea.

The German geographer Ferdinand Freiherr von Richhofen's (1833–1905) idea of a "Maritime Silk Road" connecting Europe and China, complementing the overland Silk Road connecting Roman Europe with Han China, has today become a dominant narrative of global history.[23] Temasek was a late node in these long cycles of trade forming a "Maritime Silk Road".[24] The larger regional context for this emergence of Temasek as a port polity in the fourteenth century has been elaborated by Derek Heng.[25] The Temasek Wreck provides us, in Heng's analysis in his essay, an insight into the "international history" that framed Temasek's fourteenth-century emergence and decline.

The "British Station" Raffles established took off because an expanding British economy generated a consumer passion for things Chinese, in particular tea, and a "Chinamania" for blue-and-white porcelains. The EIC's royal charter gave it a monopoly of trade between Britain and China. But intra-Asian trade along the coast of India and between India and the East Indies, as Southeast Asia was then known, and onwards to China was in the hands of a group of private or country traders operating outside the Company's monopoly. Peter Borschberg, in his essay in this volume, examines the Company's relations with this group of traders who operated outside their jurisdiction. Many of these "country traders" were servants of the EIC who covertly carried out their personal trade on Company ships. The Company recognized by the late seventeenth century the reality of this covert trade by its servants on their vessels and decided to cut its losses by withdrawing from port-to-port trade in the East Indies and allowing its servants to engage in private trade, and in doing so the Company could reduce salaries to its staff. [26] The *Shah Muncher* Wreck is an example of the ships owned and operated by the country traders and the goods they traded in.

The relationship of the EIC with these country traders was symbiotic and complex, with each depending upon the other for their survival

and profitability. It was a Madras-based country trader named Francis Light (1740–94) who persuaded the Company that it was in their (and the country trader's) interest to establish a base on Penang in 1786. The occupation of Melaka (1795), Dutch Java and the Maluku islands during the Napoleonic Wars (1803– 1815) drew the Company willy-nilly deeper into the affairs of the East Indies, culminating in the establishment of the "British Station" on Singapore in 1819.

Equally, if not more important, was that the "British Station" on Singapore rose to prosperity on the tailwind of the Chinese junk trade from Amoy. The Hokkien junk traders brought to Singapore an extensive trading network reaching out from the southeastern Chinese port cities of Guangzhou and Quanzhou into the East and South China Seas.[27] This essentially Hokkien trading world is cartographically depicted in a singular seventeenth-century Chinese map that was donated to Oxford University's Bodleian Library by the English jurist and orientalist John Selden (1584–1654). The key feature of this Selden Map, as it has come to be known since its retrieval in 2008, lies in the sixty or more ports marked on its mapping of the South China Sea, and the sailing routes to these ports. The quays along the Singapore River were the heirs of the Hokkien trading world marked on this Selden Map. The Singapore River/Port, as Stephen Dobbs has argued, grew into a global emporium, behind which the town of Singapore developed.[28]

Local traders led by the Bugis[29] were another group of traders underpinning the development of Singapore into a port city. Disputes with the Dutch led the Bugis chieftain Arung Bellawa to bring some five hundred of his followers to Singapore in April 1820, where they were warmly welcomed and allocated settlement in the Kallang-Rochor area. The Bugis brought with them an extensive trading and shipping network, stretching from Makassar to the Riaus, dealing in local products, especially sea cucumbers or tripang, which were traded for firearms and gunpowder, parangs and other knives, and Indian and European textiles. So valuable was the Bugis trade that the Dutch tried to persuade Arung Bellawa to return to the Riaus.

The "British Station" Raffles established thrived as a trans-shipment centre and entrepôt for traders from the surrounding seas to call at and use as their base. It did not for its first half century have a hinterland in the Malay Peninsula, and was, as Tan Tai Yong[30] points out, "a port city in search of hinterlands", which it found in the late nineteenth century when Singapore became a financial, shipping and technology centre supporting the opening and development of the Malay Peninsula after British intervention in 1874. Like other Asian port cities, such as Bombay, Colombo, Batavia, Saigon and Rangoon, Singapore then became a

beachhead for European colonial penetration into the hinterlands of their port cities.

Issues from the Shipwrecks for Our Understanding of Singapore's Maritime History

The Temasek Wreck and the *Shah Muncher* Wreck are, like all the other shipwrecks excavated, a kind of time capsule of the era in which they sank. The remains of their cargoes, other artefacts from the wreck and the fragments of the vessels reveal new insights into the nature of the trade these ships were engaged in, which is not often captured in the textual records. The 4.4 tonnes of Chinese ceramics recovered from the Temasek Wreck raises questions about our reconstruction and understanding of Temasek as an emporium. The *Shah Muncher* Wreck raises questions about the country traders who flocked to Singapore and made it their base.

The Temasek Wreck, like all other shipwrecks excavated—from the ninth-century Belitung Wreck to the *Shah Muncher*—carried large quantities of mass-produced Chinese ceramics.[31] The manifest of the *Shah Muncher* recorded that it was loaded with twenty tonnes of Chinaware on its return journey from China. But what is both unusual and significant about the cargo of the Temasek Wreck is, as Flecker points out, the unusually large quantity of underglaze blue-and-white ceramics compared with the ceramics recovered from the other contemporary wrecks he has either excavated or listed in his report. Blue-and-white ceramics—very common today—was an innovation in the fourteenth century when the Mongol empire connected West Asia with China and facilitated the transfer of the West Asian use of cobalt in glass and ceramic glazes to impart a bright blue colour to designs painted on the porcelains produced at the Chinese kilns at Jingdezhen.

Flecker infers that the unusually large quantities of these new blue-and-white wares on the ship suggests that Temasek, where it was likely headed, was a major regional entrepôt for the trade in Chinese ceramics. The recovery of significant quantities of similar blue-end-white wares in archaeological excavations on and around Fort Canning since 1984 suggests that Temasek was actively trading in blue-and-white porcelains and that the residents enjoyed a lifestyle that included using the newest products from China. Derek Heng's analysis in his essay confirms that the sociopolitical elites of Temasek residing on Fort Canning Hill were utilizing more blue-and-white ceramics than residents of Temasek living behind the wharves on the banks of the river, as would be expected.

The large cargo of Chinese porcelains on the Temasek Wreck (and many other wrecks) raises a fundamental issue about the nature of Asian trade. The Dutch historian J.C. van Leur[32] argued in his 1930 studies

that Asian trade was, as in medieval Europe, essentially a small-scale peddling trade in which traders with their consignments of handicrafts and bags of pepper boarded a ship to trade at ports the ship would call at. Van Leur discounted bulk trade in low-value commodities, such as comestibles. This has been challenged by M.A.P. Meilink-Roelofsz,[33] who pointed out that Melaka—as described in the Portuguese records, especially by the Portuguese supervisor of its spice trade, Tomé Pires (not available to van Leur in the 1930s)—was heavily dependent upon the bulk trade in everyday staples, including rice, vegetables, sugar and fermented foods. The manifests we have found of sixteenth-century Asian ships inform us that traders—van Leur's "peddlers"—boarded ships not with a few bags of pepper, but with tonnes of pepper and other staples.

The large number of neatly bundled and stacked plates on board shipwrecks, from the enormous quantity of Changsha ware on the Tang dynasty Belitung to the Ming dynasty wrecks excavated off the coasts of Vietnam and peninsular Malaysia, confirms what Meilink-Roelofsz argued about trade at fifteenth-century Melaka—that it was not entirely a pedalling trade in the earlier era, but also involved trading in bulk. Extending that understanding of the nature of Asian trade suggests that the cargo of the Temasek Wreck (and other wrecks) represented wholesale trade of mass-produced ceramics involving large-scale financing. But who was responsible for financing this wholesale trade of the best and brightest products of the Jingdezhen kilns to Temasek?

Van Leur[34] provided some insight on this: in Asian ports, the ruler and aristocracy—as well as the (rich) merchants (*orang kaya*)—dominated the trade of their ports, imposing levies and tolls, and enforced stapling. In other words, Asian rulers of port polities may have, like their medieval European counterparts, practised a form of investing on *commenda*, in which they would invest or fund a trader or captain of a ship to trade on their behalf. Tomé Pires[35] provides a fairly clear description of Melaka's version of a *commenda*:

> If I am a merchant in Malacca and give you, the owner of the junk, a hundred cruzados of merchandise at the price then ruling in Malacca, assuming the risk myself, on the return they give me hundred and forty and nothing else; and the payment is made, according to the Malacca ordinance, forty-four days after the arrival of the junk in port.

Pires is here referring to the *Undang-Undang Melaka* (Laws of Melaka) on the "Rules on the Supplying of Capital to Someone":[36]

> [If] a provider of capital says to his agent: 'Take dinars [or] gold or silver and use it for business, the profit for you is such and such an amount", the profit derived from the sale [transaction] must be fixed beforehand. Meanwhile if the capital is lost or if there were losses, he [the agent]

need not be compensated for [the loss] of the business or the loss of the property [provided] it was not caused by any negligence on his part.

An earlier chapter of this *Undang-Undang Melaka* deals with the "rules governing [the] consignment" of valuables and other goods in the context of family affairs, but it would also be applicable to the consignment of trade goods between traders and their financiers. *Commenda* trade was, as Meilink-Roelofsz[37] has documented, practised by other sultans in the Indonesian archipelago.

The Dutch apparently found it useful to continue this local practice of *commenda*. Researcher Peter Potters has found in the VOC archives documents relating to the wreck Flecker[38] excavated off the coast of Binh Thuan Province. Among them is the *cedula* (legal agreement) that the VOC factor Victor Sprinckel, based at Patani, and one Hendrik Janssens concluded with the Chinese merchant Em Po, providing him with 410 elephant tusks for a return cargo of fine silk, with the Dutch merchants covering the risk of the outward and return voyages. The "respectable *orang kaya* Sirenarre Wanxsa" and Em Po were guarantors of this *cedula*. Flecker, in his essay on the *Shah Muncher* Wreck in this volume, has suggested a link between the Binh Thuan Shipwreck to a 21 July 1608 report by the VOC factor Abraham van den Broecke (based at Batu Sawar, up the Johor River), in which Broecke describes how he has "received news that I Sin Ho, the Chinese merchant, while returning with his junk [to Johor] was lost at sea somewhere about Cambodia. For that reason, the VOC loses 10 piculs of raw silk and other Chinese goods."

Was there some kind of *commenda* system in fourteenth-century Temasek? If so, who would have underwritten this order of Chinese ceramics for sale or redistribution in Temasek? Were the settlement's *raja*s and their *orang kaya* sufficiently wealthy to fund a trader to go to Jingdezhen, the City of Blue-and-White porcelain, to purchase this consignment of Chinese ceramics? Would this funding have been in some form of coinage, or silver? Or, perhaps more likely, as in the case of the Dutch-funded I Sin Ho, it could have been in valuable local produce, such as hornbill casques, lakawood and cotton prints, for which the fourteenth-century Quanzhou trader Wang Dayuan recorded Temasek to be a notable port of supply?

Further, how did fourteenth-century Temasek and other earlier and later harbour settlements deal with the arrival and distribution of these large cargoes of Chinese ceramics? The several tonnes of sherds of Chinese ceramics and local earthenware excavated from around Fort Canning suggest some system of storage, inventory control and distribution of these large volume of ceramics, earthenware and other cargoes, which we currently have no information on. At least for the

nineteenth-century Singapore River we have the godowns along the quays as evidence of how goods were stored.

The *Shah Muncher*, which sank twenty-six years before Raffles arrived at Singapore, raises a different set of questions about the role of the country traders in the historical development of Singapore. Who were these country traders, who, from their base in the Indian port cities of Bombay, Calcutta or Madras, extended their trading networks into the port polities of the East Indies and on to Canton and Nagasaki? How did they interact with local rulers and conduct trade with them and other Asian traders, and in so doing open up new spheres of British commercial and political influence? How did they relate to the EIC who licensed them? Should the Company cooperate and work with these country traders, or hold them at arm's length, as the Company had no influence over them and their activities, which may not be in the Company's interest?[39]

Stamford Raffles, serving in Penang, would have interacted with the country traders. As a Company official he appeared to be ambivalent about country traders operating beyond the control of the Company. But he was aware of their resources, influence with the local rulers and knowledge of the region. Two of the six vessels making up the expedition by Raffles to find a suitable site for a British station at the southern end of the Strait of Melaka were country trader ships from Calcutta: the *Mercury*, owned by the trader J.R. Beaumont, and the *Indiana*, on which Raffles sailed, which belonged to James Pearl. Prior to this, Raffles had drawn extensively on information from country traders in planning the invasion of Java in 1811, and thereafter for the administration of British-occupied Java. Raffles also appeared to draw on information from country traders in Penang about the situation at the southern end of the Strait of Melaka in planning his expedition to search for a location for a British station in that vicinity.

The country trader Alexander Hamilton was aware of the significance of Singapore long before Raffles. He befriended the Bendahara sultan Abdul-Jalil while trading in Johor in 1703, and Hamilton records in his *Account of the East Indies* how the sultan "made me a present of the island of Singapura, but I told him it could be of no use to a private person tho' a proper place for a Company to set up a Colony on…". Hamilton was absolutely right that the Island of Singapore would have been of no use to him as an itinerant trader sailing from port to port. It fell to Raffles "to set up a colony on" Singapore 116 years later.

The establishment of a Company settlement on Singapore, and before that, at Melaka and Penang, provided the itinerant country trader the opportunity to put down some roots and become a resident merchant. Singapore, as a nineteenth-century port city, needed not

only traders to call at its ports but also resident merchants with connections and lines of credit to the major agency houses in Calcutta and banks and insurers in London.[40] Dr John Crawfurd, as the second Resident of Singapore, reported that in 1824 "there are 12 European firms, either agents of or connected with good London or Calcutta houses".

Alexander Lauri Johnston, a former EIC mariner who owned and commanded his own vessel, was among the first country traders to establish his own company in Singapore, in 1819 or 1820. Johnston was a confidant of Raffles, who appointed him as a magistrate in 1823. Other country traders followed, either establishing their own companies or joining up with other merchants, like the China trader Thomas Harrington, who entered into a partnership with Alexander Guthrie.[41] This partnership ended in 1823, but the company Guthrie established went from trading and related services to become a major conglomerate in the plantation industry in the nineteenth and into the twentieth century, before then Malaysian prime minister Mahathir Mohammad moved to acquire the company on the London Stock Exchange.

The country traders thus contributed much to the success of the "British station" Raffles established. Ironically, the success of Singapore was also the death knell of the country trader. They could not compete with the Hokkien merchants, the Bugis-Makassar and other Southeast Asian traders in bringing in local products—from the pepper and nutmeg of the Moluccas to the tripang collected from the coral reefs of the Riaus—to Singapore for trans-shipment to China or Europe. Neither did they have the resources of the resident merchants representing the major agency houses in Calcutta to bring in the goods from India and England to be traded for the local produce, or the credit lines to finance that trade.

Concluding Reflections on the Maritime Dimension of Singapore History

In 2005, a group of maritime institutions led by the Singapore Shipping Corporation and the Maritime and Port Authority of Singapore, with the support of three other maritime institutions, sponsored a commemorative volume on the *Maritime Heritage of Singapore*, to which former president S.R. Nathan contributed an essay on seamen's unions. Tan Tai Yong, who contributed three essays to the volume, declared in his "Message" that "the Story of Singapore is essentially the story of the seas that surround it".[42]

The essays gathered in this volume explore how the two historic shipwrecks excavated in the eastern approach to the Strait of Singapore represent a significant addition to our maritime heritage, enhancing our

awareness of how, as Tan wrote, "the Story of Singapore is essentially the story of the seas that surround it".

If the history of Singapore is about a journey towards nationhood, then that journey is about a port city developing into a global city, and is dependent on what was happening in the seas it was located in. As with all other port cities, from Quanzhou to Venice, the historical development of Singapore was very much dependent upon the monsoons and currents swirling around the port city, determining when and how ships could sail into and out of Singapore, the connectivity of shipping lanes on which ships sail, and its port facilities to attract traders and mariners. The challenge is how to connect Singapore's local, now national, history with a global history of the seas around Singapore. The sea is not only the stage on which Singapore's history was and is being played out, but, rather, happenings on the sea are the plot of Singapore's history.

Notes

1. Michael Flecker, *The Wreck of the* Shah Muncher *(1796), Singapore: Preliminary Report*, Temasek Working Paper Series no. 3 (Singapore: Temasek History Research Centre, ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2022) and Michael Flecker, *The Temasek Wreck (mid-14th Century), Singapore – Preliminary Report*, Temasek Working Paper Series no. 4 (Singapore: Temasek History Research Centre, ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2022).
2. John Crawfurd, *A Descriptive Dictionary of the Indian Islands & Adjacent Countries* (1856; repr., Kuala Lumpur: Oxford in Asia Historical Reprints, 1971), p. 402. Crawfurd compiled his *Dictionary* from his earlier reports and books when he retired in 1828. Crawfurd's *Dictionary* remains an authoritative summary of what was known about Southeast Asia in the nineteenth century.
3. On Dutch and British demarcation and policing of their maritime borders, see Eric Tagliacozzo, *Secret Trades, Porous Borders: Smuggling and States along a Southeast Asian Frontier, 1865–1915* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005).
4. Admiral Peter Rainier (1741–1808), commander of the Royal Navy in the Indian Ocean and the East from 1794 to 1805, established British dominance of the Indian Ocean against a renewed French challenge to British supremacy in India and the East Indies, with Britain taking over Holland's colonies in 1795. On this, see Peter Ward, *British Naval Power in the East 1794–1805: The Command of Admiral Peter Rainier* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2013).
5. Wong Lin Ken, "The Strategic Significance of Singapore in Modern History", in *A History of Singapore*, edited by Ernest C.T. Chew and Edwin Lee (Singapore: Oxford University Press), p. 31.
6. Peter Borschberg, *The Singapore and Melaka Straits: Violence, Security and Diplomacy in the 17th Century* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2010), pp. 117–36.

7. C. Northcote Parkinson, *Trade in the Eastern Seas, 1793–1813* (Cambridge: University Press, 1937).
8. C. Northcote Parkinson, *War in the Eastern Seas 1793–1815* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1954)
9. In this respect Singapore was no different from its neighbours, especially the Philippines and Indonesia, whose struggles for independence were also for territory. These nations recognized belatedly the significance of the sea for their sovereign status and the need to resolve maritime disputes. Indonesia, for example, initially allowed the waters lying between their islands to be regarded as open seas, and only moved to claim "absolute sovereignty" over all the waters lying within straight baselines drawn between the outermost of its islands as an "archipelagic state " in 1957. See Vivian Forbes, *Conflict and Cooperation in Managing Maritime Space in Semi-enclosed Seas* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2001).
10. See Malcolm Murfett, *In Jeopardy: The Royal Navy and British Far Eastern Defence Policy, 1945–1951* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1995) on why the Singapore naval base was rehabilitated and restored to something of its former glory after World War II.
11. Wong Lin Ken, "A View of Our Past", in *Singapore in Pictures, 1819–1945*, edited by Lee Yik and C.C. Chang (Singapore: Sin Chew Jit Poh and Ministry of Culture, 1981), p. 15.
12. Carl-Alexander Gibson-Hill, "Singapore Old Strait and New Harbour, 1300–1870" (1955), reprinted in *Studying Singapore before 1800*, edited by Kwa Chong Guan and Peter Borschberg (Singapore: NUS Press, 2018), pp. 221–308. I thank M. Flecker for pointing out to me issues in Gibson-Hill's understanding of sailing on the northeast monsoon in the South China Sea.
13. Peter Borschberg, "Remapping the Straits of Singapore? New Insights from Old Sources", in *Iberians in the Singapore-Melaka Area (16th to 18th Century)*, edited by Peter Borschberg (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2004), pp. 93–130.
14. Peter Borschberg, ed., *Admiral Matelieff's Singapore and Johor (1606–1616)* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2016), pp. 41–57.
15. Ibid., p. 155.
16. Tan Tai Yong, *The Idea of Singapore: Smallness Unconstrained* (Singapore: World Scientific, 2020), pp. 82–83.
17. Frank Broeze, ed., *Brides of the Sea: Port Cities of Asia from the 16th–20th Centuries* (Kensington, Australia: New South Wales University Press, 1989), p. 39. See also the follow-up volume, Frank Broeze, ed., *Gateways of Asia: Port Cities of Asia in the 13th–20th Centuries* (New York: Routledge, 1997).
18. Imran bin Tajudeen, "Reconsidering Raffles' Town Plan and its Position in the Urban History of Singapore and the Southeast Asian Port City", in *Raffles Revisited: Essays on Collecting and Colonialism in Java, Singapore, and Sumatra*, edited by Stephen Murphy (Singapore: Asian Civilisations Museum, 2021), pp. 148–79.

19. As displayed in the Asian Civilisations Museum. See Peter Lee et al., *Port Cities, Multicultural Emporiums of Asia 1500–1900* (Singapore: Asian Civilisations Museum, 2016).
20. On how the bicentennial of the arrival of Raffles at Singapore has been relocated in the long cycles of time, see Kwa Chong Guan, "The Singapore Bicentennial as Public History", *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 50, no. 4 (2019): 469–75.
21. Sharon Siddique, *Asian Port Cities: Uniting Land and Water Worlds*, compiled by Sharon Siddique and Shanty G. Coomaraswamy (Singapore: Lee Kuan Yew Centre for Innovative Cities, 2016).
22. For a catalogue of the Belitung Wreck exhibition, see Alan Chong and Stephen Murphy, eds. *The Tang Shipwreck: Art and Exchange in the 9th Century* (Singapore: Asian Civilisations Museum, 2017).
23. Kwa Chong Guan, *The Maritime Silk Road: History of an Idea.* Nalanda-Sriwijaya Centre Working Paper no. 23 (2016), pp. 2–13.
24. For a reconstruction of the cycles of trade and the trading worlds of this Maritime Silk Road, see Roderich Ptak, *Die Maritime Seidenstraße, Küstenräume, Seefahrt und Handel in vorkolonialer Zeit* (Munich: Beck, 2007).
25. Derek Heng, "Situating Temasik within the Larger Regional Context: Maritime Asia and Malay State Formation in the Pre-modern Era", in *Singapore in Global History*, edited by Derek Heng and Syed Muhd Khairudin Aljunied (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2011), pp. 27–50.
26. W.G. Miller, *British Traders in the East Indies, 1770-1820: "At Home in the Eastern Seas*" (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell, 2020).
27. Kwa Chong Guan, "Prelude to the History of the Chinese in Singapore", in *A General History of the Chinese in Singapore*, edited by Kwa Chong Guan and Kua Bak Lim (Singapore: World Scientific/Singapore Federation of Chinese Clan Associations, 2019), pp. 3–20.
28. Stephen Dobbs, "The Singapore River/Port in a Global Context", in *Singapore in Global History*, edited by Derek Heng and Syed Muhd Khairudin Aljunied (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2011), pp. 51–66.
29. Glenn Hamonic, "The Bugis-Makassar Merchant Networks: The Rise and Fall of the Principle of the Freedom of the Seas", in *Asian Merchants and Businessmen in the Indian Ocean and the China Sea*, edited by Denys Lombard and Jean Aubin (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 256–59.
30. Tan, *The Idea of Singapore*, pp. 83–113, esp. fn. 16.
31. See Kwa Chong Guan, *Locating Singapore on the Maritime Silk Road: Evidence from Maritime Archaeology, Ninth to Early Nineteenth Centuries.* Nalanda-Sriwijaya Centre Working Paper no. 10 (2012), which contains an inventory of the major shipwrecks that have been archaeologically excavated.

32. Jacob Cornelis van Leur, *Indonesian Trade and Society: Essays in Asian Social and Economic History* (The Hague and Bandung: van Hoeve, 1955).
33. Marie Antoinette Petronella Meilink-Roelofsz, Asian *Trade and European Influence in the Indonesian Archipelago between 1500 and about 1630* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1962).
34. Van Leur, *Indonesian Trade and Society*, p. 133.
35. Armando Cortesão, ed. *The Suma Oriental of Tomé Pires: An Account of the East, from the Red Sea to Japan, Written in Malacca and India in 1512–1515* (Hakluyt Society, 1944; repr., New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1990), p. 284.
36. Liaw Yock Fang, *Undang-Undang Melaka: The Laws of Melaka* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1976), p. 147.
37. Meilink-Roelofsz, *Asian Trade and European Influence*, pp. 48–52. For a more recent overview of systems and structures of trade in the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries, see Anthony Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce, 1450–1680*, vol. 2, *Expansion and Crisis* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), pp. 64–131.
38. Michael Flecker, "The Binh Thuan Wreck (Containing the Complete Archaeological Report)", in *Christie's Australia: The Binh Thuan Shipwreck* (Melbourne: Christie's, 2004). See also Flecker's essay on the *Shah Muncher* Wreck in this volume.
39. These issues of how to relate to private or country traders was not specific to the English EIC. The VOC also tried to restrict a number of their senior officers from engaging in personal trade. This issue of private trade was sufficiently significant to be raised to the board of directors of the VOC, the Gentlemen XVII, several times in the course of the seventeenth century, as noted by its long-serving secretary and senior advocate Pieter van Dam (1621–1706). On this, see J. de Hulla, "Een advise van mr. Pieter van Dam, advocaat der Oost-Indische Compagnie, over een geeltelijke openstelling van compagnie's handel voor particulieren, 1662", *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 73, no. 1 (1918): 267–98. It would appear the Dutch also tried to restrict English country traders, causing issues and tensions between the Companies.
40. Peter Drake, *Merchants, Bankers, Governors: British Enterprise in Singapore and Malaya, 1786–1920* (Singapore: World Scientific, 2018), pp. 1–24.
41. Sjovald Cunyngham-Brown, *The Traders: A Story of Britain's South-East Asian Commercial Adventure* (London: Newman Neame, 1971).
42. Aileen Lau and Laure Lau, eds., *Maritime Heritage of Singapore* (Singapore: Suntree Media, 2005). S.R. Nathan's essay recollects his early career as a social welfare officer assigned to work with seamen's unions.