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Studying Singapore Before 1800 –
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Reviewed by:

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& YEO HUIJUN MARTINA**

In 1969, Raffles Professor of History at the University of Singapore, K.G. Tregonning, proclaimed that modern Singapore began in the year 1819. Referring to Stamford Raffles' establishment of a British settlement in what was deemed a largely uninhabited island along the Melaka Strait, he states:

‘Nothing that occurred on the island prior to this has particular relevance to an understanding of the contemporary scene; it is of antiquarian interest only’.¹

About a decade later, Tregonning's successor as Raffles Professor, Wong Lin Ken, further bemoaned the lack of knowledge on Singapore's earlier trading history, claiming that, ‘no historian has yet adequately explained why Singapore failed to be a major trading centre before the 19th century’.²

Tregonning and Wong's claims capture the essence of Singapore's popular national narrative, which credits both the island's foundation and its economic significance to its British colonial inheritance. 2019 marks 200 years since the arrival of Stamford Raffles and British settlement. At the same time that the nation prepares to celebrate the bicentennial of its official founding, Kwa Chong Guan and Peter Borschberg's edited volume, *Studying Singapore before 1800*, presents an alternative response to the origins of modern Singapore. Rather than a 200-year time frame of history beginning at 1819, the editors suggest that a longer 700-year framework might be more appropriate when considering the island's past.

The volume is a rich collection of pre-existing research on Singapore before the 19th century, ambitiously brought together for the first time. Its extensive 18 chapters consist of journal articles and book chapters originally published between 1921 and 2006, with the majority of work already over 50 years old. The age of the articles shines light on how scholarship on Singapore's early history has been relegated to the margins of the national-colonial framework. Rather than a gap in literature, as Wong Lin Ken assumed, it becomes apparent that this kind of research was being conducted all along, waiting to be brought to the surface again by a new historical agenda. Looking to the global transformations of the island and its surrounding waterways before British intervention, the book's combined chapters aim to establish Singapore's global identity using a deeper past, underscoring that the island's historical position ‘should not be as insignificant as some people used to consider’ (p. 52).

The chapters cover an overwhelming scope – from periods of antiquity all

1 K.G. Tregonning, ‘The Historical Background’, in *Modern Singapore*, ed. Ooi Jin Bee and Chiang Hai Ding (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1969), p. 14.

2 Wong, L.K., ‘A View of Our Past’, in *Singapore in Pictures, 1819–1945*, ed. Lee Yik and C.C. Chang (Singapore: Sin Chew Jit Poh and Ministry of Culture, 1981), p. 15.

the way to the 18th century, and with topics ranging from toponymy and geography to political organisation and naval conflict. The source base of the volume's 16 authors are similarly impressive – utilising Malay, Arabic, Chinese, Dutch, Portuguese, Javanese, Tamil, French and British records – often in combination and comparison with one another. Among other classical texts, particular attention is accorded to the Malay Annals (*Sejarah Melayu*), the 17th-century chronicles of the Melaka royal court. Where historians have dismissed the Malay Annals for its incorporation of folklore, the volume's authors have made significant efforts to treat the text as a genuine historical source, closely and critically examining its rich contents and corroborating its validity with other records, including maps, poems, epigraphy, travellers accounts and archaeological evidence. Pieter Gerritsz Rouffaer's article (Chapter 5), translated from Dutch to English for the first time, is particularly dedicated to the analysis of the Malay Annals, examining in great detail the text itself, the historical context under which it was written, and the sources used to construct its narrative.

Although each of the chapters share a driving concern for Singapore before 1800, their histories do not necessarily follow the same paths, nor are their arguments completely in agreement with the other chapters. This can be seen, for example, in the question of how far back Singapore's history can be stretched. The answers the chapters' authors present span from the 2nd to 13th centuries C.E. But by presenting a variety of research, covering a wide range of time periods, themes and disciplinary backgrounds, Kwa Chong Guan and Peter Borschberg's volume establishes a rich basis of secondary scholarship from which new research on pre-1800 Singapore can spring up, encouraging readers to make up their own mind about what this history entails.

Chapters 1 to 7 are earlier articles from the 1920s to the 1970s which touch on the historical geography of Singapore and its vicinity, mainly through the comparison of toponyms found in classical texts, travellers' accounts and contemporary geography. The authors seek to pinpoint specific geographical locations and time periods pertaining to important recorded episodes in and around Singapore island. Their focus on historical geography reflects the larger historiographical preoccupation with using Singapore's strategic geographical location to explain its economic success. Where the succeeding chapters focus exclusively on the early-modern era and onwards, this first section covers the earliest periods in Singapore's history. What can be evinced in these chapters and the evidence they use, especially travellers' maps and accounts, is the extent to which the pre-colonial history of the island was deeply embedded in not only the local contexts of neighbouring regions, but also wider, global transformations, such as long-distance travel and the navigational technologies that enabled them.

Chapters 8 and 9 are later research papers, from 2004 and 1992 respectively, indicative of more recent historiographical trends. In Timothy Barnard's contribution on the role of Singapore in Malay histories (Chapter 8), his focus on collective memory can be seen as part of the cultural turn in historical studies

and an increasing concern with memory. Similarly, the emphasis on ethnicity in Muhammad Yusoff Hashim's study on the role of the Seri Bija Diraja within the Melaka court (Chapter 9) reflects an escalating interest in ethnically-based identity politics within Malaysia and Southeast Asia from the late 1980s onwards.

Chapters 10, 11 and 17 contribute significant insights into the key actors of the region's early-modern societies, concentrating on the social, economic and political structures within which they functioned. The activities of sea nomads like the Orang Laut, living autonomously on Singapore's islands and around its waterways, as well as the roles of Melaka's rulers, noblemen, and political liaisons (the *Shahbandars*), are discussed in detail, imparting a rich imaginary of the personalities of pre-1800 Singapore. Chapters 13 and 15 describe accounts of European naval conflicts in the region based on early-modern Portuguese and Dutch records. They highlight the significant relationships that existed between early-modern Johor, Singapore and Europe, as well as the broader European interest in the region before British colonisation. Chapters 14 and 16 focus on the theme of navigation, looking at various waterways and nautical passages around Singapore using a combination of historical texts and navigational records, like maps and nautical charts, with geographical studies. Geologist Victor Obdeijn's paper on the Melaka Strait trade route (Chapter 16), first published in Dutch in 1946, is a stand-out piece that combines studies of geomorphology with an in-depth examination of travel records. With both scientific and historical scrutiny, he claims that trade in Singapore and wider Melaka would not have been able to thrive until ca. 1350, when the Strait of Singapore, a waterway which did not formerly exist, came to be navigable. Chapters 12 and 18 are contributions by editor Kwa Chong Guan that are closely aligned with the central premises of the volume. Chapter 12 is a long-durée history of the trade routes along the south Melaka Strait, underlining the centrality of this trade to Singapore's long-term historical legacy beginning in the 7th century C.E. Jumping to the nineteenth-century, Chapter 18 considers a different vantage point to 1819 in Singapore's history. Attention is given not to Raffles nor the British colonial administration, but more to the part of Johor statesmen, Tengku Husain and his Temenggong, in signing Raffles' treaties and, in effect, inaugurating the modern Singapore we know today.

When taken as a whole, this huge breadth of information can be overwhelming and complicated to follow. The chapters are loosely ordered by chronology, but often jump between different topics and time frames unpredictably. Not sorted by publication date, it is also difficult to trace the historiography and the state of each chapter's research when making one's way through the book. Outdated elements in older articles follow and contradict chapters published more recently, oftentimes leaving the reader with a confused and undefined take-away from each contribution. Combined with the heavy use of specific toponyms and the overwhelming mentions of actors, places and events – often interchanging between different literary traditions, the content is challenging to read without prior familiarisation with the context.

The book's agenda to prove Singapore's early significance can be seen as a rather ambitious national project. Its aims to further designate this significance as the 'clear beginning' to Singapore's contemporary realisation as an 'aspiring global city' (p.23) establish high expectations, assuming that the island's early history *should* prove to be noteworthy. Despite the editors' push towards rewriting the history of Singapore, not much action in the volume actually takes place on the island itself. The narratives presented are much more focused on what happened in and around the island's shores and waterways, and their implications in wider regional and global transformations, especially with regard to trade, conflict and exploration. Indeed, given the centrality of archaeology in corroborating the existence of complex trade and societies in 14th-century Singapura island and the editors' emphasis of this in the introduction, it is surprising that not one chapter is specifically focused on archaeology and these findings. The volume's emphasis on movement and mobile societies, such as that of the Orang Laut, grounds its history less on Singapore's soil and within its current national boundaries, but more as part of an extended regional history. Timothy Barnard's argument, in Chapter 8, towards implicating Singapore in a wider Malay legacy appears as a more convincing conceptualisation of the island's global past, better corresponding with what the book's chapters actually achieve. A further disconnection between the editors' aims and the volume's content is the centrality of the 200- vs. 700-year framework of Singapore's history made in the introduction (p.21). This poses a limited scope to the various narratives offered in the chapters, which extend the historical framework to a much longer period, beginning in some cases more than 1700 years ago.

Due to the significant age of most of the articles, the content of research in *Studying Singapore Before 1800* does at times feel outdated. All of the 16 authors are male, and especially those who wrote the older chapters, such as Richard Winstedt and Carl Alexander Gibson-Hill, belonged to a privileged political class of administrators, lawyers and executives of colonial and national institutions. Reviewing the content of their chapters, many of the histories presented are traditional, masculine narratives based on politics and power, comprising of themes of discovery, mapping, political structure and conflict. Where the editors seem keen to remove the 'Great Man' trajectory of Stamford Raffles in Singapore's popular history (p. 4), they turn a blind eye to how their new history might also be grounded on the worlds of other high-ranking men. However, these limitations come with the choice to showcase older articles, and can point to the very difficulty of conducting this kind of research in the first place. Indeed, the decision to create a volume using only older material sheds light on the very short supply of new research that exists on pre-1800 Singapore. In the country as well as elsewhere, researching and writing Singapore's history is not a very popular endeavour. It is also difficult to accomplish new work when primary sources are so limited and no new resources are being found. Still, the book could have benefited from having a conclusion that rounds off the findings of the existing research and indicates possible new

directions and approaches for the study of Singapore's early global past.

Despite their internal flaws, the authors should still be commended on their impressive and varied use of source material in uncovering this 'hidden' history. What is apparent in each chapter is a deep engagement with the sources, reading both against-the-grain and along-the-grain in a critical, comparative and contextualised manner. The authors' serious treatment of the Malay Annals, however not always agreeing with the veracity of the entire text, also makes an important case for how historians should not dismiss historical accounts written in non-Western tradition as completely fictitious, invalid or irrelevant. A few authors even looked deeper into the very myths and symbols that originally gave these sources their bad reputation. In Chapter 10, Leonard Y. Andaya justifies taking seriously the myth of the Johor sultan's supernatural powers as this was what the nomadic Orang Laut accepted as true. This spiritual faith in the ruler was the backbone to their fierce loyalty and willingness to provide naval support to the Johor Kingdom during the 17th century. As Kwa Chong Guan suggests, this 'spiritual prowess or daulat of the sultan' was 'at the apex of society' in Melaka (p. 192). In Chapter 4, Paul Wheatley explains the significance of the recurring symbol of the crown and its loss in the writings of the Malay Annals and other Sumatran texts. Some time in the history of Srivijaya, he explains, 'the lack of a crown had to be explained away, possibly by a usurper legitimizing his reign'. The physical 'crown was considered essential for a valid coronation' in Malay history (p. 70). These examples demonstrate the necessity of examining the spiritual and symbolic content of local texts; they were what contemporaries genuinely believed and were central to their social and political relationships. Considering the scarcity of source material and the limited new research available on these periods of history, more of such studies looking deeper into local classical sources, and especially their myths and symbols, could be a potentially productive direction, enabling a profounder view into the belief systems of people at the time and how they interpreted these narratives.

Kwa Chong Guan and Peter Borschberg's ambitious source collection, *Studying Singapore before 1800*, is a clear move away from the 200-year-old fascination with Raffles and British colonisation in the history of Singapore. Presenting an extensive selection of research on the island's pre-colonial past, the editors piece together a new collective memory of Singapore's regional and global origins. Despite its dense content and inconsistencies, the edited volume is a welcome addition to historical scholarship on Singapore, breaking away from the limits of the dominant colonial framework and bringing forward a much more vibrant picture of the island's global past. Our hope is that more work will emerge from this, which not only engages Singapore's pre-colonial history with a focused inquiry into the local sources or with the question of 200-, 700- or 1700-year time frames, but also new research that can bring fresh approaches to this once-forgotten past.