

IPS-Nathan Lectures
Lecture I - The Long and Short of Singapore History: Cycles, Pivots and Continuities
Professor Tan Tai Yong
5 September 2018

IPS-Nathan Lecture Series

Lecture I: The Long and Short of Singapore History: Cycles, Pivots and Continuities

Professor Tan Tai Yong

**6TH S R Nathan Fellow for the Study of
Singapore**

5 September 2018

**Shaw Foundation Alumni House
National University of Singapore**

Introduction

Good evening everyone, and thank you, Janadas, for that kind introduction.

Let me begin by saying that I am deeply honoured to be the 6th S R Nathan Fellow, and to be in the distinguished company of my illustrious predecessors.

I am especially thrilled to be holding a fellowship carrying the name of Mr S R Nathan, a man who has a great sense of history. I have had the benefit of spending many hours recording his oral history, and have been captivated by the stories of his personal life and the different parts he had played in the Singapore story.

Understanding context is a key attribute of any historian worth his salt, and the context of my appointment to the Fellowship is not lost on me. Come 2019, Singapore will officially mark the Bicentennial — 200 years since the arrival of the British in the person of Thomas Stamford Raffles.

Major historical anniversaries provide an impetus for historians, as well as the general public, to reassess the way certain events or individuals have been written about and remembered, or, excluded and forgotten. They also offer a chance for official political and historical narratives to be reinforced or reframed.

Thus, when it was announced that a bicentennial would be commemorated, it was not surprising that questions were asked if we should be celebrating a “founding” by a British imperialist, and whether we should be proud of the fact that from 1819 to 1963, Singapore was ruled as a colony. There were other concerns: should we still be wedded to the idea that all our history began in 1819, and that we have no meaningful past before the arrival of Raffles?

Not unexpectedly, the organisers of the Singapore Bicentennial have been at pains to stress that, “rather than a celebration, the Bicentennial is a time to reflect on the nation’s journey”. There are plans for projects that will explore the 500 years before 1819 to allow the “full complexities of history” to emerge.¹

The act of historicising is, of course, never straightforward. Interpretations of Singapore’s past have been freighted with questions and contention over openness, access to official records and omissions. Several opinion pieces in the Chinese and English broadsheets have asked how we should be engaging our history. One opined that “all societies cannot avoid an inherent tension between history and politics, but the mature and correct attitude lies in respecting historical facts while retaining an openness towards all possible interpretations of those facts.” It adds, “only by having an open-minded attitude towards history, can we better understand and employ it as a compass for the future.” Another argued that the “freedom to grapple with and understand history on one’s own terms would be a mark of society’s maturity and liberalisation.” Writing for *The Straits Times*, Elgin Toh hoped that the Bicentennial can provide an opportunity to fully explore Singapore’s past, both the good and the bad.²

These are important questions, and as planning for the Bicentennial gets underway, they will need reassessing.

¹ “Singapore’s bicentennial commemoration in 2019: A time to reflect on its rich history”, Channel News Asia, 31 December 2017. Source: <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/singapore-s-bicentennial-commemoration-in-2019-a-time-to-reflect-9823248>

² Editorial opinions in *Lianhe Zaobao* and *The Straits Times*, cited Huang Jianli, “Bicentennial Commemoration of Raffles’ Landing in Singapore: Preparatory Steps and History Dilemmas” (Translation) article in Ee Hoe Hean Club publication, Vol. 36, July 2018. Source: <http://www.eehoehean.org/upload/file/15300043339337.pdf>

IPS-Nathan Lectures
Lecture I - The Long and Short of Singapore History: Cycles, Pivots and Continuities
Professor Tan Tai Yong
5 September 2018

So, my tenure as the S R Nathan Fellow for the coming year is timed, I believe, to contribute to an ongoing conversation about our history. I use the word “conversation” advisedly. The lectures that I will be giving in the course of the next several months will not be a history course or history module, delivered in a didactic manner. I will not be attempting to teach history, or to tell you WHAT you should know of our history; if I succeed, these lectures may perhaps suggest HOW to think of our history. Ultimately, I hope to stimulate thinking about our past, and what history should mean to us as a society and country.

A small caveat before I begin. I am not a historian of Singapore. I started my academic life specialising in South Asian history, and did my doctoral work at Cambridge University on colonial Punjab. My earlier publications were on the Sikhs, Punjab, and the Partition of India.

I came to Singapore history a little late, and have had the benefit of learning from several friends and colleagues who have dedicated their careers to studying Singapore history. This series of lectures does not all represent my own original research. They will be a synthesis of a large body of work that has been developed over the past few decades. I will draw on these works, and I wish to thank in advance all the scholars who have helped educate me on Singapore history.

In today’s lecture, I will analyse the state of history in the three phases in which our history has been written: a post-1965 national narrative, the colonial period, and the longer pre-1819 past. I will then attempt to cast a broader frame to make the case for a connected history marked by cyclical changes, occasional ruptures, significant

pivots and underlying continuities. Singapore has taken many forms, and I will highlight certain consistent dynamics that have shaped its evolution.

The evolving place of history in Singapore

Now, let me start at the beginning — well, at one of the beginnings – and not of the history of Singapore, but of the national project of writing the history of Singapore as a nation-state. This conceptual differentiation between history as a set of events and the writing of history is the key to understanding why the official history of Singapore is the way it is, why it will inevitably and always be contested, and how it has evolved and will have to continue to evolve.

In a sense, the writing of an official history and a people's experience of this history is not unique to Singapore. The writing of history is done by subjective human beings. These are fallible individuals relying on imperfect and incomplete information, with their particular personal biases and perspectives, and who reflect the needs and values, and hopes and fears of their society at the time of writing. This determines their identification of salient facts and colours their presentation. The British historian E.H. Carr concluded that "History is an unending dialogue between the present and the past". The historian, he said, "starts with a provisional selection of facts, and a provisional interpretation in the light of which that selection has been made — by others as well as by himself".³

³ Edward Hallett Carr, *What Is History?* (Penguin UK, 2018).

With these caveats, we can better understand how the official story of Singapore as a nation-state has solidified into a dominant narrative that is clear and consistent, and which goes like this: Singapore was an “accidental nation”; its birth was beset with existential challenges, and the ensuing story is one of struggle for survival and success.

No use for history

In fact, in the first few years of independence, we did not have much of an official history. History, or history-writing, was not an urgent priority for the People’s Action Party (PAP) government. The immediate needs were to establish the state and government, stabilise the economy, ensure social harmony, and survive challenges to its independence in a tough neighbourhood. There was no time to mull over the past, or worry about recording the present for the future.⁴ History could not contribute to the priority of nation-building and economic growth. In fact, the past, especially the recent past, was regarded as an obstacle to Singapore’s progress, and so Singaporeans were exhorted to look to the future instead. For Singapore’s political leadership, dwelling on Singapore’s past could lead our people back to primeval ties of race, and older allegiances to tribe and faith. These were seen as sources of Singapore’s social and political vulnerability, rather than strengths. For then Secretary-General of the National Trades Union Congress Mr Devan Nair, the dark past was to be differentiated from the ordered and hopeful present, with the turning point being PAP rule.⁵

⁴ Albert Lau, ‘Nation-Building and the Singapore Story: Some Issues in the Study of Contemporary Singapore History’, in *Nation-Building: Five Southeast Asian Histories*, ed. Wang Gungwu (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2005), 224.

⁵ Hong Lysa and Huang Jianli, ‘Sermon: Rajaratnam and Devan Nair as High Priests’, in *The Scripting of A National History: Singapore and Its Pasts* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2008), 52.

Reconsidering history with the benefit of hindsight

However, from the early 1980s, the Government began to show concern over Singaporeans' understanding of national history. Singapore had survived its tumultuous early years and done well economically, but this also meant that the Singapore of the 1980s was quite different from the Singapore that had exited the Malaysian Federation. Singapore leaders were now worried that Singapore's rapid transformation and development would mean that its young had no grasp of the past. Singapore's young lacked personal recollections of the turbulent colonial and Malaysian era of Singapore, and had gone through less hardship than their parents and grandparents. The leaders feared that Singaporeans would start to take Singapore's existence and success for granted.

The first official historical narrative focused on a generally benign and progressive colonial administration, the political changes that led to the establishment of the PAP government, a short period of post-independence economic struggle, regaining of socioeconomic stability, and an optimistic growth trajectory.

The making of this simple tale was anything but simple. For instance, the place of Raffles in Singapore's history was briefly in doubt in Singapore's early post-independence years. There had not been consensus among the first generation of PAP leaders over whether or not to retain Raffles as a key part of Singapore's historical narrative. While then Second Deputy Prime Minister Mr S Rajaratnam declared in 1984 that "nominating Raffles as the founder of modern Singapore [was] accepting a fact of history", he acknowledged that there had been debate over this given the PAP's

anti-colonial roots.⁶ Singapore's attitude towards our colonial past was not entirely one of straightforward acceptance, and it has continued to evolve.

In fact, beyond this simple history, Singapore's past had had its fair share of difficult, contentious moments — there were the vicissitudes of colonialism, political transitions, racial tensions, fierce ideological contestation, and merger and separation from Malaysia. But while the attenuated official narrative would appear inadequate today, given that we now know a lot more, it is understandable when we consider the contemporary context.

History with purpose: nation-building

The shift in the authorities' attitude in the 1980s meant that history, formerly dropped from the primary school curriculum in favour of more "useful studies" directed at Singapore's industrial needs,⁷ was now reinstated. The first textbook on Singapore history was issued to Singapore schools in 1984.⁸ Numerous political leaders reiterated the importance of remembering Singapore's uncertain beginnings and the lessons of other nations' rise and decline, in order to sustain Singapore's existence and prosperity.⁹

⁶ S Rajaratnam, 'Speech by Mr S Rajaratnam, Second Deputy Prime Minister (Foreign Affairs), at a Seminar on "Adaptive Reuse: Integrating Traditional Areas into the Modern Urban Fabric" Held at the Shangri-La Hotel on Saturday, 28 April 1984 at 10.30a.m.' (National Archives of Singapore, 13 July 1984), <http://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/speeches/record-details/79c7d80b-115d-11e3-83d5-0050568939ad>.

⁷ Lau, 'Nation-Building and the Singapore Story', 224.

⁸ Hong Lysa and Huang Jianli, 'Introduction', in *The Scripting of A National History: Singapore and Its Pasts* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2008), 5.

⁹ Lau, 'Nation-Building and the Singapore Story', 227.

National Education (NE) was introduced into Singapore's curriculum from 1997. It was to be implemented across subjects in the formal curriculum, with history being just one of them.¹⁰ The Ministry of Education's justification for NE was that school-going Singaporeans were largely unaware of Singapore's past, association with Malaysia, and demonstrated little interest in nation-building.¹¹ Thus, NE set out to make sure students were acquainted with basic knowledge of key moments in Singapore's national history, and strengthen students' sense of national identity and emotional attachment to Singapore.¹² According to then Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, the Singapore Story that was to be taught under NE was "objective history, seen from a Singaporean standpoint".¹³ The introduction of NE curriculum was timed closely with the staging of the exhibition *The Singapore Story: Overcoming the Odds*, and the launch of then Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew's first volume of memoirs, *The Singapore Story: Memoirs of Lee Kuan Yew*. According to Mr Lee, he had chosen to write his memoirs because he was "troubled by the over-confidence of a generation that has only known stability, growth and prosperity".¹⁴ His memoirs, while personal, were presented as an authoritative history. Together, these developments reinforced history's place on Singapore's nation-building agenda.

¹⁰ Lee Hsien Loong, 'Speech by BG (NS) Lee Hsien Loong, Deputy Prime Minister, at the Launch of National Education at Television Corporation of Singapore (TCS) TV Theatre on Friday, 17 May 1997 at 9.30am' (National Archives of Singapore, 17 May 1997).

¹¹ Lau, 'Nation-Building and the Singapore Story', 228.

¹² Lee Hsien Loong, 'Speech at the Launch of National Education' (National Archives of Singapore, 17 May 1997).

¹³ Lee Hsien Loong, 'Speech at the Launch of National Education' (National Archives of Singapore, 17 May 1997).

¹⁴ Lee Kuan Yew, *The Singapore Story: Memoirs of Lee Kuan Yew* (Singapore: Times Edition, 1998), 8.

History with purpose: legitimising a system of governance

The Singapore Story has since become inextricably tied to Mr Lee Kuan Yew's account of his experience of that history as the key player, with the PAP as Singapore's dominant political force post-independence. For PAP, Singapore's success has vindicated its correct rather than populist decision-making and its role as Singapore's dominant political force. The PAP had worked with its opponents reluctantly, if only to ensure Singapore's transition from colonialism to self-government.¹⁵ This account of Singapore's early nation-building years served to buttress the legitimacy of the government of the day and its system of governance.

Indeed, in one of the earliest telling of this story, by Mr S Rajaratnam, Singapore's first Foreign Minister, PAP was an innocent novice pitted against more experienced but ill-intentioned groupings. Mr Rajaratnam's "PAP's first ten years", which appeared in the *PAP Tenth Anniversary Celebration Souvenir 1964*, provided the first signed account of internal party history by a PAP leader and minister.¹⁶ His narration of history legitimised the PAP in opposition to its political foes. This narrative has since become a template not just for the PAP, but for Singapore history, too.¹⁷

Like other national histories, Singapore's national narrative was written to inform readers of their nation's past, by appealing to the immediacy of their past to their present. The Singapore Story of the PAP's leadership emerging as public figures

¹⁵ Hong and Huang, 'Introduction', 3.

¹⁶ Reproduced in Kwa Chong Guan and S Rajaratnam, 'PAP's First Ten Years', in *S Rajaratnam on Singapore: From Ideas to Reality* (Singapore: World Scientific, 2006), 180–226.

¹⁷ Hong and Huang, 'Sermon: Rajaratnam and Devan Nair as High Priests', 48-49.

became a reference point used to understand the present.¹⁸ Past and present PAP leaders have been portrayed as firm, capable and having foresight. Indeed, the dominant narrative was built around role of the PAP and Lee Kuan Yew, and the story was a teleology of progress from adversity to success. As a former graduate student of the history department wrote, “a Martian with only the official script would think there is only one political movement — the PAP; two important personalities in Singapore — Stamford Raffles and Lee Kuan Yew; and three dates — 1819, 1942 and 1965 — that are worth remembering.”¹⁹

Singapore’s straight arrow trajectory, beginning with Raffles

So we all grew up believing that Singapore’s story started in 1819 with the landing of Raffles. That colonialism brought some benefit — modern infrastructure, people and wealth through trade. The modern state of Singapore was apparently built on the benefits of colonialism and overcoming many of its downsides. This is best illustrated by the decision to retain, rather than cast Raffles’ statue into the Singapore River. Lee Kuan Yew revealed in his memoirs that it was Albert Winsemius, Singapore’s economic advisor, who suggested that letting the statue of Raffles remain would be a public acceptance of Britain’s colonial legacy. This would send a positive signal to investors. Even as Mr Rajaratnam acknowledged in the 1980s the irony of

¹⁸ Hong and Huang, ‘Introduction’, 6.

¹⁹ Liew Kai Khiun, 2006, cited in Hong and Huang, ‘New Testament: Singapore and Its Tensed Pasts’, in *The Scripting of A National History: Singapore and Its Pasts* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2008), 15.

the PAP selecting Raffles as the nation's founder despite its anti-colonial roots, the party had deemed it the best choice.²⁰

Thus, unlike most postcolonial states, Singapore embraced its colonial past. Pragmatism drove this decision, which served as a starting point in the Singapore Story. There was a concern that, given Singapore's multi-racial population, people would go back to their "primeval roots", leading possibly to racial tensions and polarisation. To avoid this, the political leaders decided that the most neutral party would be the British. It helped that Singapore had not gone through a period of mass-based nationalist movement or revolution, unlike many of its regional counterparts.

In this way, colonial exceptionalism, War and the Japanese Occupation, the tensions of the 1950s and 60s, all fed into the Singapore Story. The decision was made to present Singapore's story as a straight arrow trajectory, with clear positive outcomes. And this is how we arrived at the familiar refrains — "from colony to nation", the "struggle for success", "from Third World to First".

In many senses, this trajectory is not inaccurate. The story from 1965 was indeed one of significant growth and development. Use any economic and social indicator to compare Singapore between 1965 and 2015, and the story of amazing growth is immediately obvious. There were also the values that went into that success story — resilience, meritocracy, good governance, multiculturalism. These values and attitudes could then bind Singapore's different ethnic groups together on the level of

²⁰ Hong and Huang, 16. Mr S Rajaratnam gave two speeches, one about the choice of Raffles as Singapore's founder at the 160th anniversary of Raffles Institution in 1983, and another on the occasion of a national exhibition commemorating twenty-five years of self-government in 1984.

ideology.²¹ “Asian values” were interwoven into Singapore’s national narrative, and then repeated in National Education efforts in schools.

Beyond the best fit line: Edges and nuances

From a state and nation-building perspective in Singapore’s early years, the adoption of this straight arrow trajectory made sense. But prosperity was not to be taken for granted. Neither was it a forgone conclusion. Lee Kuan Yew admitted, in 1983, that “the past 24 years were not pre-ordained. Nor is the future....There will be as many problems ahead, as they were in the past”.²² The way Singapore society and government were arranged and constituted, as well as their values, had their basis in historical and contemporary challenges. However, these are not always clear, particularly during a period of prolonged peace and stability. Clearly, a deeper analysis and interrogation of the sources of Singapore’s strengths and weaknesses is due. If the current narrative survives following this review, then it would be on a firmer foundation. If it is shown to be inadequate, it needs to be renewed, changed, and buttressed.

Indeed, as time passes, Singaporeans are asking more questions and wanting to know more. Is the main narrative glossing over elements of our history that we did not have much knowledge of? Has our history been dominated by the stories of the winners? What about others whose histories have fallen by the wayside? Should we not know about those historical actors as well? Why is all history political history —

²¹ Ien Ang and Jon Stratton, ‘The Singapore Way of Multiculturalism: Western Concepts/Asian Cultures’, *Sojourn* 33, no. S (2018): 76.

²² Lee Kuan Yew, “Speech by Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew at his 60th Birthday”, 16 September, 1983.

what about social history, cultural history? What about the history of places, of neighbourhoods which are changing because of rapid development?

There are calls, for instance, for more comprehensive, deep and nuanced accounts of the anti-colonial and left wing movement of the 1950s. While the political battles between the PAP and its left wing rivals have been reprised as part of the Singapore Story and in the memoirs of the participants wishing to give voice to their side of the story, it is perhaps timely for historians, given the passage of time and distance from the dictates of the Cold War, to carefully historicise the events of the 1950s. Analyses should be done in the contexts of the period and its environment, which saw the interplay of many factors that included international communism, anti-colonialism, security calculations, merger with Malaya, power struggle, ideological contestations and simply differing visions for the future of Singapore.

To rule out this complexity, and to focus instead on single cause explanations for actions and events, or cast perspectives from the benefit of hindsight, is to miss the opportunity for a deeper understanding of and reflection on an important and defining episode of our recent past.

What we need, therefore, is solid research, even while further polemics cannot be avoided. And to do this research as a historian, I think it is important that this research be made possible by the opening of official archives and sources so that proper studies can be done with good materials.

Then, there is the need to understand Singapore's position as a city-state and its relations with the region and the world, and its historically outward orientation. This is a theme I shall dwell on in subsequent lectures.

A dominant national narrative might be necessary for national education. But, a good way of building historical consciousness is to instil it at a personal level, and grow it organically. This can be done in schools but also through self-discovery. Each of us needs to know our country through grandfather or grandmother stories. At the same time, there should always be space for personal recollections and individual reflections that are not strictly historical studies. These can be essential elements for a larger, multifaceted story that is the history of Singapore.

We are now seeing a renewed interest in studying Singapore's history more closely, from different perspectives, and at different levels. Our current official history is arguably not sufficiently fit for purpose and perhaps even its purpose of nation-building needs to be reexamined and expanded. I hope that this effervescence can find space and support in various forms.

Certainly, it is not sufficient to start understanding Singapore's history from 1965. So I turn to another beginning — our colonial history.

Singapore's Colonial History

As I had mentioned earlier, unlike most former colonies, Singapore has embraced its colonial past in largely positive terms, the period of British rule having been co-opted into the Singapore Story that I spoke of earlier.

Modern Singapore, as the narrative goes, dates from 1819 — when the British arrived on the island, signed a preliminary treaty with the Temenggong of Johor, and proceeded to set up a trading post. Colonial exceptionalism, to wit, Singapore's

IPS-Nathan Lectures
Lecture I - The Long and Short of Singapore History: Cycles, Pivots and Continuities
Professor Tan Tai Yong
5 September 2018

transformation in the 19th century from unpromising island to successful port-city, the Japanese Occupation, the political struggles of the 1950s and 60s have their place within a teleological framework. It explains events and actions as either impeding or aiding the attainment of nationhood, and thereafter progress from Third World country to First World under the ruling PAP government.

Early postcolonial sensibilities and the historical baggage attached to colonialism make this period in Singapore's history less amenable to being incorporated smoothly into the nationhood narrative. Here is Mr Rajaratnam in 1987, speaking at the opening of an exhibition organised by the National Museum Art Gallery.

Most of the 170-year history following Raffles' purchase of this island for a few thousand Mexican dollars is not something Singaporeans like to proclaim from the rooftops, because all of that history was British colonial history. The only proven history Singapore had was in the eyes of most nationalists a shameful episode of exploitation, oppression and humiliation of a people who insisted on remaining in Singapore. Patriotism required that we performed some sort of collective lobotomy to wipe out all traces of 146 years of shame.

... After Singapore became independent there was agitation that the statue of a brooding Raffles in front of Victoria Memorial Hall should be torn down and flung into the Singapore River to symbolically reject our past. Fortunately, sanity prevailed in the nick of time. Not only was Raffles' death by drowning commuted but, by way of apology, he now has a twin brother brooding beside a Singapore

River now free of industrial and other waste. Unfortunately, the passion to wipe out 146 years of shameful history until quite recently burnt unabated in the iconoclastic hearts of our single-minded city planners, unreal estate developers, businessmen, bankers and others who decided that Singapore's history should start from 1965 and that everything in our city should not be older than 20 years old.

... There is a Singapore history – the only history which we have and which can explain why we are what we are and why we must be different from our alien and distant cousins whose less adventurous fathers, wisely or unwisely elected to miss the immigrant's boat."²³

A present-day critical reading of Mr Rajaratnam's quote would undoubtedly throw up critiques, especially from a postcolonial perspective. It demonstrates how Singapore's colonial past has been appropriated to set the stage for the post-1965 story and cement the PAP's place in history. I am interested in locating these views within a broader discussion on how Singapore's past has been constructed and presented.

In their book, *The Scripting of a National History: Singapore and Its Pasts*, historians Hong Lysa and Huang Jianli discuss the motivation behind the writing of an official history for the purpose of nation-building. They argue that in the aftermath of Singapore's acrimonious separation from Malaysia in August 1965,

²³ Notes from Speech by Mr S. Rajaratnam, Senior Minister (Prime Minister's Office) at the official opening of the exhibition "A Vision of the Past" at the National Museum Art Gallery on Thursday, 14 May 1987 at 6.10pm.

an autonomous history of Singapore was eschewed as emphasising the different and divided ancestries and loyalties of the migrant population, which thus was best forgotten. Rejecting the option of scripting a credible pre-colonial past for fear that the price would be nativist claims on the part of the Malays (who) formed around 18 per cent of the population, which would alienate those with forebears from China (75 per cent) and India (6 per cent), the government decided to look towards an unencumbered future instead.”²⁴

The future of a *modern* Singapore that traced its roots to 1819 and drew on the legacy of colonial exceptionalism.

With Singapore history returning to the school curriculum, a narrative had to be found, and the inaugural edition of the two-volume textbook drew on the structure and themes suggested by historian Mary Turnbull, who is best known for her book, *A History of Singapore: 1819 – 1975*. Published in 1977, Turnbull’s work was not the first attempt at writing a history of Singapore. But her version, which was written in the belief that a distinctive national history was required for a young nation, was “the first to be conceived as a history textbook for the newly emerging Singapore nation-state.”²⁵ Gone was the focus on world history and ancient civilisations stretching from 500 BC.²⁶ No longer would the history of Singapore be “taught simply as a brief

²⁴ Hong Lysa and Huang Jianli, *The Scripting of A National History: Singapore and Its Pasts*, (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2008), pp. 4-5.

²⁵ Kevin Blackburn, “Mary Turnbull’s History Textbook for the Singapore Nation” in Nicholas Tarling (ed.), *Studying Singapore’s Past: C.M. Turnbull and the History of Modern Singapore*, (Singapore: NUS Press, 2012), p. 66.

²⁶ Blackburn, “Mary Turnbull’s History Textbook”, pp. 69 – 70. See also, Hong and Huang, *The Scripting of A National History*, pp. 5 – 6.

appendage of the history of Malaya”.²⁷ Singapore’s history now started with the arrival of Raffles in 1819 and led to independence in 1965. It can be seen as the precursor to The Singapore Story, which emerged in the 1990s, and has since established itself as the dominant version of the nation’s history.

Post-Colonial Writing of Singapore’s Colonial History

Historiographical shifts in the writing of Singapore’s colonial history did not take place in isolation from broader external developments. An older generation of history students trained at the University of Malaya viewed Singapore as a part of the larger British empire. Their history of Malaya and Singapore was gleaned from the archived records of the East India Company and the Colonial Office. After World War II, the writing of history underwent changes as Marxist and social history took root, as did the Annales school of thought. In the field of Southeast Asian studies, the idea for an autonomous history of Southeast Asia, a history written from within, was advocated by John Smail and Harry Benda in the 1960s. Cultural history followed in the 1970s and the 1980s.

As subsequent generations of Singapore students and scholars took up the study of history here and overseas, they were exposed to these historiographical trends, which in turn influenced and shaped the way they approached Singapore’s colonial history. Calling for the moving of historical gaze away from the high politics of the colonial state, historian Dipesh Chakrabarty said, “Consider for a moment what the results have been of incorporating into the discourse of history the pasts of groups

²⁷ Blackburn, “Mary Turnbull’s History Textbook”, p. 69.

such as the working classes and women. History has not been the same ever since a Thompson or a Hobsbawm took up his pen to make the working class look like major actors in society, or since the time feminist historians made us realise the importance of gender relations and of the contributions of women to critical social processes.”²⁸

Similarly, the telling of Singapore’s history has evolved. From just featuring “‘pioneer’ Asians, immigrants-made-good and businessmen who became community leaders”,²⁹ there was a trend in the late 1980s towards the writing of “history from below”, which endeavours to give voice and agency to the voiceless and marginalised, and to ordinary people. Two notable works in this vein were written by the American historian James Francis Warren — *Rickshaw Coolie: A People’s History of Singapore, 1880–1940*, which was published in 1986, and *Ah Ku and Karayuki-san: Prostitution in Singapore 1870–1940* in 1993.

Over the years, historians have adapted their methods by turning to other disciplines such as anthropology. Oral history, literature and literary thought are increasingly used, in addition to archival sources such as census reports and maps. Many historians have also heeded calls for the use of non-English, vernacular sources, which would help widen their scope of research. Historians exploring Singapore’s past are using new lines of enquiry and finding new ways of framing it.

The focus on the study of the colonial past thus far has been on local developments, but historians have also been looking at broader developments such

²⁸ Dipesh Chakrabarty, “Minority Histories, Subaltern Pasts” in *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol.33 No.9 (28 Feb, 1998), p. 473.

²⁹ Karl Hack, “Framing Singapore’s History”, in Nicholas Tarling (ed.), *Studying Singapore’s Past: C. M. Turnbull and the History of Modern Singapore*, (Singapore: NUS Press, 2012), p. 33.

as the emergence of networks driven by empire. A productive and useful approach to the study of colonial pasts has been proposed by historian Tony Ballantyne. He explains in his work *Orientalism and Race* that:

“The British empire, as much as a spider’s web, was dependent on these inter-colonial exchanges. Important flows of capital, personnel and ideas between colonies energized colonial development and the function of the larger imperial system”.³⁰

The metaphor of the web, he argues, holds several advantages for our study of the imperial past. “It underscores the idea that the empire was a structure, a complex fabrication fashioned out of a great number of disparate parts (colonies) that were brought together into a new relationship.”³¹ Adopting such a framework allows historians to uncover networks and flows of personnel, capital and ideas between colonies, which had previously been obscured when colonialism was examined mainly as a metropole-focused history or histories of individual colonies.

Now I'm going to argue that the study of Singapore would benefit immensely because it was a port city, it was a small city-state, from this sort of approach, where you do not see developments just from within, but to understand it in a larger context of empire, of flows, and of impact and changes across long periods of time, and across space. This is a theme I will return to in my later lectures.

The emphasis on networks also brings to mind the study of history as ebbs and flows. This is applicable in the case of Singapore’s pre-colonial past. Mr Rajaratnam

³⁰ Tony Ballantyne, *Orientalism and Race: Aryanism in the British Empire*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 15.

³¹ Tony Ballantyne, *Webs of Empire: Locating New Zealand’s Colonial Past*, (Vancouver, UBC Press, The University of British Columbia, 2014), pp. 45 – 46.

has said of the period, “What happened before 1819 – if anything worthwhile happened at all – has been irretrievably lost in the mists of time”.³² He was not alone in his views. Professor K. G. Tregonning, who was Raffles Professor of History, declared in an essay, “Modern Singapore began in 1819. 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.”³³

The history of modern Singapore may have started in the 19th century, but to insist that everything that happened before is irrelevant is inaccurate. A Braudelian, *longue durée* approach to the study of Singapore history will help uncover long term change and continuity which does not foreground 1819 or 1965 as definitive episodes. Singapore’s historical evolution did not just take off in 1819. Rather, the 200 years of colonial rule can be seen as a period in a longer cycle of developments that can be traced all the way back to the 14th century.

The pre-1819 narrative

Since the 1990s through the efforts of historians like John Miksic, Kwa Chong Guan, Peter Borschberg, Derek Heng, and Imran Tajudeen, to name a few, our historical perspective has broadened, with the chronology extending to include the pre-1819 past. We have been able to develop a clearer picture of a long stretch of Singapore’s history, long before the arrival of Raffles. With evidence from a

³² Quoted in Kwa Chong Guan, *Pre-colonial Singapore*, (Singapore: Institute of Policy Studies, National University of Singapore and Straits Times Press, 2017), p. 7.

³³ *Ibid.* p. 7.

combination of archaeological material evidence, classical texts like the *Sejarah Melayu*, regional court chronicles, the writings of early travellers to Southeast Asia, Chinese and European accounts, and cartography, we can no longer accept what Mr Rajaratnam had argued before, that Singapore “has no long past”. Historians are now able to show that there was a continuous period of history – however disjointed – that stretched back to the 14th century, during which there were activities that Singapore either had a presence in itself, or had a part to play in the maritime activities around the region. Such an account of Singapore’s longer past needs to transcend the nation-state paradigm, and has to be understood in the context of local conditions, regional changes and transformations.

Let me briefly sketch out the story of pre-1819 Singapore, as we now know it.³⁴

14th Century Temasek

Archaeological evidence shows that there were land settlements and differentiated space usage on the island from around the late 13th century. Information gleaned from Chinese historical texts, Malay oral traditions, colonial accounts and archaeological data allow historians to reconstruct an urban settlement around Fort Canning Hill that included a palace precinct, the existence of a wall encompassing the port city, and a settlement in the north bank of the Singapore river. Singapore’s history may be articulated to have begun in that period. This is not to suggest there was no settlement before the 14th century, but merely that there is no evidence pertaining to any

³⁴ The narrative in the ensuing paragraphs are recounted in considerable details in Derek Heng, Kwa Chong Guan and Tan Tai Yong, *Singapore. A 700 Year History of Singapore* (Singapore, 2009) and John Miksic and Cheryl-Ann Low Mei Gek, *Early Singapore, 1300s-1819. Evidence in Maps, Text and Artefacts* (Singapore, 2004).

settlement of historical consequence before that date. The polity that existed in the 14th century, which was then called Temasek, faded out towards the end of that century, caused by a multitude of factors that included environmental exigencies and shifts in the power configuration of the region.

But Singapore did not disappear altogether. It became part of the Melaka Sultanate as the island's settlement lost its political autonomy, owing to the rise of new regional powers in Siam and Java, and an ascendant Ming China. The island's inhabitants, in particular the various Orang Laut groups, became integrated as part of the larger Melayu body-politic, with its leaders having a place in the Melakan court, while the port in Singapore gradually declined to become a secondary feeder port to the primary emporium of Melaka.

The Melaka Sultanate

By the 15th century, Melaka had emerged as “the premier emporium” for the South China Sea and Bay of Bengal trade, a part of the Ming tributary network. According to Anthony Reid, *Southeast Asia from 1460-1680*, entered into what he called an “Age of Commerce”. Melaka was a point at which three different commercial networks—from the South China Sea, South Asia and West Asia—converged to trade. It thrived with attractive facilities, port charges and taxes, despite lacking the naval force to control or coerce traders. The Ming Dynasty had participated actively in the South China Sea maritime world to satisfy Chinese demand for exotic goods at that time. And to win Chinese favours and secure its position as the primary emporium in the Straits of Melaka, the rulers of Melaka sent tributary missions to the Ming Court in 1405 and 1407, even travelling to the capital Nanjing in 1411.

The *Shahbandar's* Office

Singapore's story took another turn at the beginning of the 16th century, following the Portuguese attack and capture of Melaka in 1511 and the establishment of the Johor Sultanate as the successor of the Melaka Sultanate. What happened to Singapore during this period? Portuguese maps and correspondence in the 16th century referred to a *Shahbandar's* office located in Singapore, serving as a local intermediary between the Sultan of Johor and foreign merchants. Singapore was then described in Portuguese navigator's reports around the early 1500s as a settlement "larger than a village but smaller than a city". Ming ceramics found in Singapore, coupled with Chinese records, showed the significance of Johor in trading networks that stretched from Southeast Asia to Quanzhou, and suggested that 16th century Singapore was very much part of that trading network.

Cast within the context of the shifting competition between the Johor Sultanate and Aceh for trade and political prestige in the Melaka Straits on one hand, and the emerging presence of the Portuguese and Spanish trading empires, and the Dutch East Indies Company in Southeast Asia and across the South China Sea on the other, the history of Singapore began to take on a dual nature.

As a settlement, it served as a collection centre for the Johor Sultanate and home to a local naval armada. At the same time, as the trade between East and West became increasingly integrated through the Portuguese, Spanish and Dutch shipping and commercial networks, the waters around Singapore became increasingly important, with the frontiers of western cartographic and navigational knowledge being systematically pushed forward.

Competition around the Waters of Singapore

The developments of the 16th century culminated, at the opening of the seventeenth century, in intense conflict and competition in the waters around Singapore. Singapore then became the arena of maritime conflict between the naval powers of Europe—Portugal, Spain and the Dutch Republic. Between 1570 and 1630, there was substantial maritime activity around the waters of Singapore, with the Portuguese, Dutch and English trading companies jostling for trading bases that would bolster their strategic presence in the region.

While Singapore's strategic significance to the European powers became increasingly apparent, the habitation history of the island ironically began to fade away. Cursory cartographic and fragmentary archaeological evidence, from the early seventeenth century, of the continued existence of a port on the south coast of Singapore eventually gives way, by the mid-seventeenth century, to the absence of any historical documentation of settlement activity on the island. Singapore's history shifted completely from a history driven primarily by habitation activities on land, to a history driven primarily by conflict and competition at sea.

By the 18th century, the Dutch had established their base in the Indonesian Archipelago with their headquarters at Batavia. Internal political divisions in the Johor Sultanate court also led to the Johor Sultanate moving its capital to the Riau Islands by the late seventeenth century. The consequent shift of the maritime shipping networks from the southern end of the Melaka Straits further south to the Sunda Straits-Riau-Lingga Archipelago nexus led to the decline of Aceh as a trading centre, and the loss of the strategic importance of the waters around Singapore to

international shipping and commerce. This led to the decline in the overall fortunes of the Melaka Straits region and the establishment of the Dutch in the Riau-Lingga Archipelago. This set the regional context for the contestation between the British and the Dutch in the early nineteenth century, at the cusp of the founding of Singapore by the East India Company.

The Johor Sultanate

By this time, the region's centre had shifted to Bintan and Siak, and trade to the Riaux. The demographics of the Straits of Melaka were changing, with Minangkabau and Bugis diasporas expanding into the peninsula and the Riaux, challenging the old Malay political order. Singapore, as the "site of the social memories about the ancestry of the Malay community" had become increasingly marginalised. The *Shahbandar's* office in Singapore was shut down, and the sea lanes around the island fell into disuse.

This now led to the part of the history that we are all more familiar with— Temenggong Abdul Rahman and Tengku Hussein welcoming the British presence in Singapore, hoping to establish a new *negeri* in Singapore to rival Bintan. The British were prepared to recognise Tengku Hussein as Sultan of Johor in return for the right to establish a factory on the island, benefitting him in the dynastic politics of the Malay world.

So, in a way, the national narrative was not wrong in suggesting that Singapore was a sparsely populated mangrove swamp when Raffles landed in 1819. But, even Raffles recognised that this was not always in the case on the island that he had chosen to set up a settlement for the East India Company. Raffles knew that the rulers of old Singapore might have been buried in Bukit Larangan — the Forbidden Hill (now

Fort Canning) — and chose to build his bungalow there in 1822, so that he could be located in the traditional seat of power.

This is a compression of over 500 years of history. If you are interested in knowing the full details, I will refer you to a forthcoming book — the substantially revised volume of the *700 Year History of Singapore* — that will be launched next year.

The long history that I have just outlined presents two main scenarios in Singapore's past—as autonomous societies and settlements on the one hand, and as societies and settlements that were part of a larger entity on the other. Autonomous societies in Singapore have only occurred three times in the past—during the Temasek period (late thirteenth to fourteenth centuries), the East India Company Straits Settlement period (1819 – 1858), and the post-independence period (1965 onwards). This oscillation between being a separate entity and being part of a larger entity is one way of thinking of Singapore's long history.

Conclusion

I will round off tonight's lecture with some thoughts on how we can develop a coherent frame of Singapore's history — by viewing an extended period in terms of cycles, pivots and continuities.

Cycles

Historians such as Peter Coclanis³⁵ have argued that Singapore's history may be framed as a series of cycles that echo repetitively across time, thereby providing continuity and rationality for tying the disjointed periods together.

Inspired by the historical concept of "*La Longue Durée*", this approach is premised on the timelessness of the geographical location of Singapore and set in the natural environment of maritime Asia. Within this contextual framework, Coclanis identified three cycles over the last seven centuries that were anchored upon economic globalisation. These were

- 1) the fourteenth to early seventeenth centuries, characterised by the rise of the Ming Dynasty and the entrance of European trading nations in Maritime Asia;
- 2) the early nineteenth to early twentieth centuries, characterised by the importance of the China Trade to Europe, European Imperialism and the establishment of imperial economies at the global scale, and the development of technologies that led to the compression of geographical space; and
- 3) the 1950s to the present, characterised by the US-led world economic order and the systematic lowering of barriers to the movement of goods, services and people across national boundaries. This period has seen a further compression of geographical space through the advent of technology.

Applying this to Singapore, Peter Borschberg has identified three different up-cycles—in the fourteenth century during the period of Temasek, the sixteenth and

³⁵ Peter Coclanis, *Time's Arrow, Time's Cycle: Globalisation in Southeast Asia over La Longue Durée* (Singapore, 2006).

seventeenth centuries under the Johor Sultanate during which time Singapore had a port administered by a *Shahbandar's* office, and the nineteenth century through to the present under the British Empire and thence under Singapore's independent government.³⁶

Kwa Chong Guan, on the other hand, has argued that Singapore's settlement history may be understood as a series of four cyclical echoes centred on the sociocultural notion of the mantle of the Malacca Straits regional port-polity, beginning with Srivijaya in Palembang in the late seventh century, followed by Temasek (fourteenth century), Malacca (fifteenth century), Johor (sixteenth – eighteenth century), and finally Singapore (nineteenth century to the present).³⁷

The above suggest that Singapore may be regarded as part of the cyclical history of a much larger geographical and cultural sphere.

Pivots

Where were the pivots? While the cyclical approach may offer a useful framework for analysis, I should point out that these cycles should not be seen as occurring on the same plane. The cycles are often spirals, and they do not always return to the same point. At various points in our history, Singapore pivoted away from a particular trajectory, changing its course of history. One could see 1819, for instance, as a pivot away from the Malay world on to something else, not an origin,

³⁶ Peter Borschberg, "Singapore in the Cycles of the *Longue Durée*" in *The Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Vol. 90, Part 1, June 2017, pp.30 - 60.

³⁷ Kwa Chong Guan, "From Temasek to Singapore: Locating a Global City-State in the Cycles of Melaka Straits History", in Miksic and Low (eds), *Early Singapore. 1300s-1819*, pp.124-146.

and likewise 1965, when we pivoted away again from the region and became a nation-state with a global outlook.

Continuities

Yet, underlying this cyclical approach across time and pivots in trajectories would be the place of Singapore in a trans-regional setting. Singapore's history bears out the notion that "geography is destiny". In this regard, Singapore's history is continuously linked to its location, which in turn, determined its role in trans-regional dynamics. In the case of economic globalisation, Singapore finds its place as a commercial nodal point; in the case of the regional sociocultural mantle of the Malay port-polity, Singapore is the port-city with its ruler not just exercising autonomy, but also influence (*daulat*) over a large region and the *rakyat* therein.

I am aware that the broad brushstroke nature of the resulting historical narrative, that might provide chronological depth, might mean that nuances would be lost. In other words, while economic globalisation could be used to explain the Singapore's history from the late thirteenth through the early seventeenth century as a single cycle, the differences between at least three identifiable settlement phases during those three centuries or so cannot be elucidated.

It is nonetheless important to assert that Singapore's history needs to be located within the broader regional and international contexts. The critical periods and events in Singapore's past may often be the result of developments that occur much further afield, and over long periods of time.

So, today's lecture sets the stage for my subsequent lectures, which will elaborate the argument that Geography, Regional Networks, and Globalisation are indeed enduring

IPS-Nathan Lectures
Lecture I - The Long and Short of Singapore History: Cycles, Pivots and Continuities
Professor Tan Tai Yong
5 September 2018

themes in the history of Singapore, and will perhaps continue to have a fundamental impact on the present and future of Singapore.

.....