

IPS-Nathan Lectures
Lecture II — Circulations, Connections and Networks: Early Globalisation and Cosmopolitan
Singapore
Professor Tan Tai Yong
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IPS-Nathan Lecture Series

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Introduction

In my first lecture, I provided an overview of Singapore's 700-year history, and ways of framing that long history. This set the scene for what, in my view, are the enduring themes in Singapore's history over the *longue durée* — geography, regional networks and globalisation. I will argue that these factors have continuously shaped Singapore's fate and fortunes for the past 700 years, and will probably continue to have an impact on Singapore's present and future.

In this lecture, I shall examine how Singapore experienced the forces of globalisation long before the term came into popular consciousness in the late 20th century and that, as a classical port polity and colonial port city, Singapore had a global orientation and purpose that was nourished by transnational flows and networks.

Rajaratnam's Global City

Let me begin by making reference to Mr. S. Rajaratnam again. In 1972, as Minister for Foreign Affairs, he articulated a vision for Singapore as a "global city", an identity that would be realised over three or four decades. According to Mr Rajaratnam, "times are changing and there [would] be less and less demand for the traditional type of *entrepôt* services Singapore [had] rendered for well over a century. Its role as the trading city of South-East Asia, the market place of the region, [would] become less and less important". In Mr Rajaratnam's views, Singapore could no longer hope to sustain its economic growth by serving the needs of Southeast Asia alone. It would need to position itself as part of a supply chain of goods and services for a much larger market — the whole world.

There were also political and geo-strategic realities that prompted Singapore to look beyond Southeast Asia. In an interview with the *Time* Bureau chief in 1969, Lee Kuan Yew expressed hopes that Southeast Asia would experience “constructive development”, and that Singapore could act as a “spark plug” for the progress and development of the region. However, he warned that the region could go the other way, towards chaos and destruction, in which case he hoped that Singapore could play the role of Venice when the Dark Ages descended on Europe.¹ From the Singapore perspective, Southeast Asia had too many problems to become a bastion of stability and growth for the foreseeable future. Relations with Malaysia remained fraught following separation in 1965, and the race riots of 1969 in Kuala Lumpur was a stark reminder that the underlying tensions that had led to the parting of ways a few years earlier had not wholly subsided. While *Konfrontasi* had ended, Indonesia was still finding its feet, emerging from the throes of domestic upheavals. The war in Vietnam was entering a critical stage with uncertain outcomes, and Indo-China remained the cockpit of Cold War tensions in Southeast Asia. The formation of ASEAN in 1967 was an attempt to find political stability amidst these geostrategic challenges, but the economic possibilities in the region were not promising. Singapore had to find a way to leapfrog the region for economic growth.

What made the Global City, as envisioned in 1972, so different from the cities that came before it? According to Mr Rajaratnam, a Global City, or “Ecumenopolis”, would be a “world embracing city”. Cities of the past, in contrast, had been “isolated

¹ Interview with Lee Kuan Yew, 10 June 1969, Hugh D.S. Greenway, Time/Life Bureau Chief, Southeast Asia, National Archives of Singapore.

centres of local civilisations and regional empires”, and “somewhat parochial with an extremely limited range of influence”.²

Thus, while Singapore’s size and links to its region would remain part of its identity, it would connect with other cities in the world, and make “the world ... its hinterland”.

Global Cities, unlike earlier cities, are linked intimately with one another. Because they are more alike they reach out to one another through the tentacles of technology. Linked together they form a chain of cities which today shape and direct, in varying degrees of importance, a world-wide system of economics. It is my contention that Singapore is becoming a component of that system — not a major component but a growingly important one.

Expounding on a hopeful future, Mr Rajaratnam asserted that the trend towards global cities would benefit Singapore. It had been assumed that “an independent Singapore would be a self-contained city state”, or at most “a regional city ... [whose] fate and fortunes would depend wholly on the economic climate in the region.”³ Instead, Singapore was now on the cusp of realising its potential, which extended beyond the confines of its immediate neighbourhood. Singapore would soon, in Mr Rajaratnam’s words, “draw sustenance from the international economic system to which as a Global City we belong and which will be the final arbiter of whether we prosper or decline.” Expressing his confidence in the future of

² S Rajaratnam, ‘Singapore: Global City’, 230.

³ S Rajaratnam, ‘Singapore: Global City’, 232.

cities, Mr Rajaratnam asserted that, “nothing short of a total collapse of world civilisation can halt the take-over of the world by cities.”⁴

What did this shift towards being a Global City entail? There would need to be increased connectivity, both physical and technological. According to Mr Rajaratnam, Singapore’s port was one crucial link to the world. But it was not Singapore’s port alone that would turn Singapore into a global city, capable of overcoming its lack of natural resources and its small domestic market. Singapore’s air traffic would have to grow tremendously if Singapore was to be closely connected to other global cities, like London, Tokyo and New York. Besides air travel, connectivity was viewed in terms of cable and satellite communications, the international financial network (and Singapore’s position as “an important gold market centre”), and collaboration with multinational corporations.

The level of connectivity that Singapore could aspire towards, thanks to technology, marked a departure from its past, where Singapore’s strongest overseas links were regional. Mr Rajaratnam was visionary in conceiving of Singapore as being “linked intimately” with a network of global cities, even if they were not geographically close to Singapore.

But Singapore’s connections with the rest of the world had long been key to its well-being. Mr Rajaratnam and the Singapore government demonstrated confidence in a vision that had yet to fully materialise. He spoke of transformation — changing Singapore to something it was not. This is perhaps historically inaccurate. Singapore was an internationally connected port city for a long part of history. The

⁴ S Rajaratnam, ‘Singapore: Global City’, 231.

inspiration for that vision, in my view, lay in the past — it rested on 700 years of connections and comfort with engaging the rest of the world. This is not transformation but continuation. This was an engagement that went deep in time. In many ways, this was a return to the past, and it is that history and broader context which I will now examine.

Forms and Drivers of Early Globalisation in Southeast Asia

The term globalisation became popular in the 1990s as the preferred explanation for the multiplicity of the supranational forces that have imprinted themselves on the contemporary world. A large and illuminating literature on the economics, politics and sociology of the phenomenon now lies readily at hand. Historians have shown how globalisation has evolved and taken many forms in history, in stages that have been categorised as archaic, proto, modern and post-colonial forms of globalisation. These so-called phases of globalisation, which overlapped and interacted with each other, were driven by similar impulses. Referring to early globalisation, historian Christopher Bayly explained that “globalising networks were created by great kings and warriors searching for wealth and honour in fabulous lands, by religious wanderers and pilgrims seeking traces of God in distant realms, and by merchant princes and venturers pursuing profit amidst risk across borders and continents”.⁵ The difference between the earlier and later phases was determined by technological development. Subsequent phases of globalisation and improved efficiency in the transactions sector generated flows of

⁵ Bayly, “Archaic Globalisation”, in Hopkins, ed, *Globalisation in World History*, Cambridge, 2002

goods, bullion, and labour that were far more extensive than those achieved under earlier forms of globalisation.

Another way of looking at the so-called phases of globalisation is to distinguish between early globalisms prior to the 16th century, and the globalisation of today. I have been reminded by my good friend, Professor Geraldine Heng, that “the more careful of contemporary cultural theorists do not usually deploy the term globalization mainly to indicate the planet’s interconnectivity and networks”.⁶ While both globalisation and globalism are terms that have been spoken about negatively and pitted against ideals like nationalism and awareness of local variation, their use in a scholarly context is helpful in thinking about the types of interconnectedness that Singapore has experienced. The term “early globalisms” can refer to the links between places and peoples around the world, even before the European maritime empires of the 16th to 19th centuries. “Early globalisms” can be contrasted with contemporary globalisation, which is associated with “complex, often ironic, uneven and contradictory ... outcomes produced by new technologies” and “for which no premodern or early modern antecedents exist”, to quote Professor Heng.⁷ American political scientist, Joseph Nye, explained globalism as a world system that is “characterised by networks of connections that span multi-continental distances”. To him, globalisation refers to the degree to and speed with which globalism is expanding or declining.⁸

⁶ Geraldine Heng, Preface to “Whose Middle Ages?” (unpublished manuscript, August 24, 2018), Microsoft Word file.

⁷ Heng, Preface to “Whose Middle Ages?” (unpublished manuscript, August 24, 2018), Microsoft Word file.

⁸ Joseph Nye, ‘Globalism Versus Globalization’, *The Globalist*, 15 April 2002, <https://www.theglobalist.com/globalism-versus-globalization/>.

The dynamics that generated early globalism or the globalisation process were the networks that were established when migration of commodities, capital, ideas and people took place over long distances. From very early on, many parts of the world, especially those accessible by water, have been connected by long distance trade, with its attendant exchanges of goods, people and ideas. This was especially true of maritime Southeast Asia, which has been a region connected by commercial flows for centuries. As the axis between East Asia and the classical centres of India and the Middle East, and the focus of early modern maritime empires, the archipelagic seas had for centuries been shaped by global migration, cultures and religion tied together by trade and tradition.

Long before the Europeans arrived in Asia, trading communities from the Arab world to China flowed through and operated in the region. For instance, an extensive Arab trading network, stretching from the Persian Gulf to South China, was already in place from the middle of the 9th century CE. Traders from the South of the Arab peninsula were known to have plied the Indian Ocean routes, through Ceylon and the Nicobar Islands to the port of Kalah Bar (probably in modern Kedah in Malaysia) for trade. This extensive trade network also included Sumatra and Java, and extended eastwards through the Straits of Melaka, all the way to South China. It was through these connections that Islam first spread among the coastal cities by the end of the 13th century, becoming the great religion of commerce throughout the Indian Ocean.

Like the Arabs, Indian merchants from the Malabar and Coromandel coasts had established trade links with Southeast Asia long before the coming of the

Europeans. As regular traders, the Indian merchants probably preceded the Arabs and the Chinese. Indeed, historians have claimed that for more than two thousand years, “the lure of gold” had drawn Indian merchants to Southeast Asia.⁹ By the 16th century, Indian traders were known to have frequented the major trading emporia of Pegu, Ava, Tannasery, Kedah, and Malacca, where wares and produce were bought and sold.¹⁰ Trade links were especially strong between South India and the Malay Peninsula, where the eastern Indian ports and their western Malayan counterparts served as important entrepôt centres in the East-West trade.

Chinese sailors and merchants were already a regular sight in Southeast Asia from the time of the Han Dynasty, trading in fragrant timber, spices and other exotic goods in exchange for Chinese pottery and silk. As a destination for trade, Southeast Asia then came to be known as part of the *Nanhai* trading region.¹¹ The *Nanhai* region functioned as a trans-shipment hub for China’s trade with the west as Chinese junks rarely travelled beyond the Straits of Melaka at that time. Indian and Ceylonese traders dominated the Indian Ocean leg of the Maritime Silk Road, while the Chinese dominated the *Nanhai* trade. Both groups would have converged at the Malay Archipelago to trade.¹²

Southeast Asia grew in prominence during the Tang Dynasty period, when Srivijaya emerged as the dominant trading player in the Maritime Silk Road during the second half of the 7th century. There was direct contact between the Sumatran power and China around 670-680 CE, and Srivijaya was deemed important enough

⁹ Kenneth McPherson, *The Indian Ocean: A History of People and the Sea*. (Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1993), p.55.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 59

¹¹ Wang Gungwu, *The Nanhai Trade*, p.37

¹² *Ibid.*, p.41

to receive a royal envoy in 683 CE. From the 8th century, Persian and Arab merchants operated the trading networks that connected the Chinese ports with the Indian Ocean. With their involvement, maritime commercial activity during the Tang period included the export of silk, cloth, ceramics, tea, copper and iron wares from China to West Asia. (The Tang-era shipwreck found in the Java sea — the Belitung Cargo — is evidence of this trade). Southeast Asia remained an important trading region throughout the Song Dynasty. During the Ming dynasty, notwithstanding changes in imperial policies on the conduct of trade, the Chinese maintained connections with many strategic ports in maritime Southeast Asia. The Zheng He voyages marked the high point of Chinese connections, but even with the termination of the court-sanctioned expeditions, the Chinese merchants continued to trade with the region.

Trading Zones and Maritime Cities

By the 13th century, long distance East-West trade was conducted through an efficient segmentation of networks. These segments were the Arabian Seas, the Bay of Bengal and the South China Sea. The segmentation of networks revolved around intermediate coastal stopovers, transit zones and trans-shipment points. These locations developed into emporia where goods were collected, traded and distributed. Many eventually became maritime cities. Anthony Reid points out that the build-up of trade networks led to a “great expansion of cities and ... gave them

life”.¹³ He further argues that in Southeast Asia, before 1630, “maritime cities were probably more dominant over their sparsely-populated hinterlands than they were in most parts of the world”.¹⁴ Ayutthaya, Thăng Long (Hanoi), Banten, Aceh, Pegu and Melaka were examples of these maritime cities that developed into centres of wealth and power through trade, which were also antecedents of colonial port cities.

As centres of trade, it was not surprising that relatively large populations of merchants and sailors could be found in these maritime cities. Seasonal monsoon winds dictated the timing and regularity of travel along the shipping routes, limiting them to at most one single return voyage per year. As a result, “Southeast Asian cities at their peak season are thronged with visiting traders from all over Asia”.¹⁵ In Melaka, for example, a large community of Tamil merchants, known locally as *klings*, had settled with their families and were reported to have owned large estates and great ships. Many of these Tamil merchants went on to assume positions of power and authority in local society.¹⁶ Similarly, Chinese communities settled where they traded, and from the 9th to the 15th century CE, travellers’ accounts frequently noted the presence of settled Chinese communities in Palembang, Java, Cambodia, Siam and Melaka. Wang Gungwu’s concept of the Hokkien informal empire in the 15th century refers to traders from South China who were engaged in exchanges in the ports of Southeast Asia during that period.¹⁷

¹³ Anthony Reid, ‘Economic and Social Change, c.1400-1800’, in Nicholas Tarling (ed), *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia* Vol 1, Part 2 (From c. 1500-c. 1800) Cambridge, 1992, pp.119-120.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.128

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.132

¹⁶ Kanakalatha Mukund, *The Trading World of the Trading Merchant. Evolution of Merchant Capitalism in the Coromandel*. Orient Longman, 2000, p.40

¹⁷ Loh Wei Leng with Jeffrey Seow, *Through Turbulent Terrain: Trade of the Straits Port of Penang* (MBRAS, 2018), p.16.

Colonial Port City *Par Excellence* — flows and circulations

I have shown that prior to the colonial era, local merchants had preceded European trading companies in weaving together Asian webs of trade.¹⁸ These webs were not broken up by colonial intervention; rather, colonial trading structures came to be built on these long existing practices. After Singapore was established as a trading colony by the British, it continued to function as a node of overlapping diasporic worlds and their networks. Colonialism in Singapore reinforced those systems and by the end of the 19th century, the island became an established regional hub of an integrated system of trans-regional trade, pilgrimage and knowledge production. These functions, flows and networks sustained Singapore's strategic and economic position within the British Empire, which, at the end of the 19th century, spanned Afghanistan, Egypt, India, Jamaica, Nigeria, Burma, Australia and New Zealand. Singapore was no longer a regional port polity; as part of a global empire, it had integrated with an inter-continental world.

As a colonial trading port, however, Singapore's trade was a predominantly Asian one, covering the Malay Archipelago, China and India. As trade grew in volume, the commercial networks that Singapore served shaped the form and structure of Singapore the port city. These networks provided the goods and services that sustained the colony, but also supplied the manpower that eventually formed the plural society of Singapore.¹⁹

¹⁸ Sunil S. Amrith, *Crossing the Bay of Bengal* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England: Harvard University Press, 2013), 35.

¹⁹ Tan Tai Yong, 'Port Cities and Hinterlands: A Comparative Study of Singapore and Calcutta', *Political Geography* 26, no. 7 (September 2007): 853.

Here is a literary re-imagination of a typical scene in Singapore from Amitav Ghosh's *River of Smoke*, which is set in the first half of the nineteenth century:

Well-heeled visitors to the island might prefer to do their shopping in the European and Chinese stores around Commercial Square, but for those of slender means and pinched purses — or those with no coins at all, but only fish and fowl to barter — this market, listed on no map and unknown to any municipality, was the place to go: for where else could a woman exchange a Khmer sampot for a Bilaan jacket? Where else could a fisherman trade a sarong for a coattee, or a conical rain-hat for a Balinese cap? Where else could a man go, clothed in nothing but a loincloth, and walk away in a whalebone corset and silk slippers?²⁰

Singapore is depicted here as a site where assorted objects from elsewhere in Southeast Asia, or even the “distant corners of the Indian Ocean”, could be obtained. Amitav Ghosh alludes to the dubious means through which some of the goods reached the “*Pakaian Pasar*”, or “Clothes-Market”, including violence, robbery and piracy. Still, the mind-boggling range of items available, and the market’s “unusual kind of renown” far beyond Singapore, showcased the free-wheeling laissez-faire attitude and mode of commercial exchange typical of port cities.

Raffles had boasted that, within three years of Singapore’s founding, more than 3,000 vessels had called at Singapore’s harbour.²¹ Singapore’s free port status attracted junks from Siam, Cambodia and Vietnam, which came to Singapore in droves. The arrival of these vessels brought goods and people, and led to

²⁰ Amitav Ghosh, *River of Smoke* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011), 108-9.

²¹ Amrith, *Crossing the Bay of Bengal*, 70.

“Singapore [having] one of the most diverse populations on earth”.²² As the port-city grew, so too did its migrant population. By the late 19th century, Singapore was considered one of the most cosmopolitan port cities in the region. Numerous groups of people were drawn to Singapore for trade and for work. They arrived in different phases, but their numbers picked up significantly with the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 and advances in steamship technology. There was also an eight-fold increase in the volume of trade that passed through Singapore between 1873 and 1913 (a span of 40 years).²³

A visitor to the bustling port-city would have been struck by “the medley of peoples – Europeans, Chinese, Indian and native.” This was an observation made by the British colonial administrator and scholar, J. S. Furnivall, who further noted that, “it is in the strictest sense a medley for they mix but do not combine. Each group holds by its own religion, its own culture and language, its own ideas and ways. As individuals they meet, but only in the marketplace, in buying and selling. There is a plural society, with different sections of the community living side by side, but separately, within the same political unit.” Furnivall, who was stationed in Burma for most of his career, argued that mass migration to colonial port cities in Southeast Asia resulted in the creation of “plural societies”. His thesis started to gain currency from the 1930s and 1940s onwards, and those who subscribe to this school of thought have pointed out that migrant communities worked and traded alongside one another in the marketplace, but they lived in ethnic enclaves, and their cultures remain closed and static. This segregation was further entrenched by municipal

²² Amrith, *Crossing the Bay of Bengal*, 70.

²³ Mark R. Frost and Yu-Mei Balasingamchow, *Singapore: A Biography*, (Singapore: Editions Didier Millet and National Museum of Singapore, 2012) p. 134.

planning, which was shaped by three main considerations: 1) “enabling business”, 2) anchoring the mercantile community, and 3) segregating the different ethnic and occupational groups”.²⁴

Writing in 1934, Roland Braddell, a prominent lawyer, went to great lengths to describe the composition of different communities in Singapore. He categorised the Europeans, producing a long list of nationalities. He categorised the Asian communities by ethnic group, detailing the many sub-groups under broader labels of "Malays", "Klings", "Asiatics" and "Chinese".²⁵ Singapore's economy was certainly very plural in terms of its participants and sources of exchange.

Populations of different race and religion coexisted, while living separately from each other. This could be seen from ethnic enclaves that developed based on the 1822 Town Plan that British colonial administrators had implemented. There was a designated European Town on the northern bank of the Singapore river, but European settlers subsequently moved away from the urbanising city centre, which was increasingly home to non-Caucasian communities.²⁶ By the middle of the 19th century, the port had become a kaleidoscope of different segregated communities,

²⁴ Tan Tai Yong, “Port Cities and Hinterlands: A Comparative Study of Singapore and Calcutta”, *Political Geography* 26, (2007): p. 854.

²⁵ Lai Chee Kien, ‘Multi-Ethnic Enclaves around Middle Road: An Examination of Early Urban Settlement in Singapore’, *BiblioAsia*, July 2006. Roland Braddell's categorisation of the early composition of different communities in Singapore can be found here.

Europeans (“white people”): “English, Irish, Scottish, Welsh, Australians, New Zealanders, Canadians, Americans, Belgians, Danes, Dutch, French, Germans, Greeks, Italians, Norwegians, Portuguese, Russians, Spaniards, Swedes, Swiss and others”

“Malays”: “real” Malays, Javanese, Boyanese, Achinese, Bataks, Banjarese, Bugis, Dyaks, Menangkabau, people from Korinchi, Jambi, Palembang;

“Klings”: Tamils, Telugus, Malabaris; “Bengalis” include Punjabis, Sikhs, Bengalis, Hindustanis, Pathans, Gujeratis, Rajputs, Mahrattas, Parsees, Burmese and Gurkhas;

“Asiatics”: Arabs, Singhalese, Japanese, Annamites, Armenians, Filipinos, Oriental Jews, Persians, Siamese and others; “Chinese”: Hok-kiens, Teo-chius, Khehs, Hok-Chias, Cantonese, Hailams, Hok-Chius, and Kwong-Sais.

²⁶ Lai Chee Kien, ‘Multi-Ethnic Enclaves around Middle Road: An Examination of Early Urban Settlement in Singapore’, *BiblioAsia*, July 2006.

naturally coalescing along ethnic lines, and trading alongside one another in the marketplace. There were also more active measures of exclusion — colonial hotels tended to segregate non-white patrons without turning them away, by giving them differential treatment from European patrons.²⁷ While the port's business flew the flag of cosmopolitan openness, the social reality was at times one of strict boundaries between different groups that had converged on the city for trade and work.²⁸

But, reality often defies neat categorisation, and Singapore was no exception. Historian Sunil S. Amrith has pointed out that “taking a broad view of migration, it is equally easy to find instances of cosmopolitanism and of segregation”.²⁹ Singapore was not merely a location where different communities settled and coexisted side-by-side; more importantly, it was a site of complex interactions between diverse groups, facilitated by commerce, religious engagements, and knowledge production.

Networks, Circulations and New Knowledge Practices

This is where I would like to revisit the theme of flows and networks that sustained Singapore's strategic and economic position as a colonial port-city. In my previous lecture I had referred to Tony Ballantyne's use of the metaphor of a web in his study of the British Empire. Ballantyne notes: “[The] British empire, as much as a spider's web, was dependent on inter-colonial exchanges. Important flows of capital, personnel and ideas between colonies energized colonial development and the

²⁷ Maurizio Peleggi, ‘The Social and Material Life of Colonial Hotels: Comfort Zones as Contact Zones in British Colombo and Singapore, ca. 1870-1930’, *Journal of Social History* 46, no. 1 (2012): 141.

²⁸ Tan Tai Yong, “Port Cities and Hinterlands”, p. 854.

²⁹ Sunil S. Amrith, *Migration and Diaspora in Modern Asia*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 11.

function of the larger imperial system”.³⁰ This analytical framework allows historians to uncover flows of capital, personnel and ideas between colonies, which would otherwise go unnoticed when the focus is placed on individual colonies, and “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

I had spoken earlier about how the colonial trading arrangements were essentially built on pre-existing networks that had been established by merchant communities. The colonial structures simply provided the conditions for older networks to be resuscitated and reinforced, and for new ones to emerge. The Asian rice trade, which stretched from China to the Straits and the Archipelago, and developed quite independently of the Europe-oriented trade zones, is a good example. By the mid-1800s, Singapore was, as historian Rajat Kanta Ray describes, “the centre of a dense web of Chinese finance and trade”.³² A steady increase in Chinese migration to Singapore and Malaya, particularly among Chinese labourers, who found work in the plantations and mines, had led to a burgeoning demand for rice in the region. The lucrative trade in rice was dominated by Teochew rice merchants who were based in Singapore, but who were also known as Siam traders because of the large rice mills in Bangkok they owned. Together with the Chinese rice millers in Saigon, the Teochew rice merchants controlled the largest disposable amount of rice in Southeast Asia. The most prominent among the Siam traders was

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.

³² Rajat Kanta Ray, “Asian Capital in the Age of European Domination: The Rise of the Bazaar, 1800 - 1914”, in *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (July, 1995): pp 449 - 554, p. 503.

Choy Tsz Yong, who arrived in Singapore in the 1870s. Back in his native Swatow, Choy was a successful sugar merchant and a commission agent. Seeing an opportunity in the new trade in rice shipments, the Teochew merchant came to Singapore with a substantial amount of capital, which he proceeded to invest in the import of Chinese goods and in Siam rice. By 1908, Choy was the head of the local Teochew clan, and he owned four rice mills in Siam, which produced over ten million dollars' worth of rice. Half of this rice was sent to Singapore, and the other half to Hong Kong.³³

While we now have a sense of how commercial networks operated, what is less commonly known and researched are the new forms of knowledge and cultural adaptation that came about as the different migrant communities interacted with each other. How did the practices and cultures change in the process of acculturation? Increasingly, historians are looking at colonial migration in terms of cultural exchanges that “produced creative instances of cultural hybridity”.³⁴ For instance, in the absence of a common language and out of necessity, migrant communities developed new ways of communicating with one another and in the process created new linguistic and cultural forms.³⁵

The *hua yi tong yu* (华夷通语), which was published in Singapore in 1883, is a good example. The dictionary, or vocabulary book, to use a more accurate term, was one of several Chinese-Malay dictionaries produced in the 19th century as Chinese

³³ Ibid., pp. 511 - 512.

³⁴ Amrith, *Migration and Diaspora*, p. 11.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 11.

migration to Singapore and Malaya picked up significantly. Many of the migrants hailed from the Fujian and Guangdong provinces, and spoke Southern Min dialects such as Hokkien. In the absence of a common language, these Chinese migrants initially found it hard to communicate and trade with the Malay-speaking local population. Attempts to overcome the language barrier saw the publication of several Chinese-Malay dictionaries, which listed Malay words with equivalent terms in Chinese.

The *hua yi tong yu* (华夷通语) contains more than 2,800 words across 25 categories. The entries included common business phrases, names of various food and fruit, herbs and household items, as well as terms and concepts used in subjects such as mathematics (numerals), geography and cosmology. The author of the dictionary also devised a rather ingenious method of phoneticising Malay words using southern Min dialects. Not only does the *hua yi tong yu* (华夷通语) provide a useful historical record of words that are obsolete or rarely used today, it also offers an insight into the lives of Chinese migrants and their interaction with the local population. ³⁶

The acquisition of linguistic skills was what gave certain merchant groups comparative advantage over others in the marketplace. However, not all merchant communities were equally adept at picking up languages. This was especially relevant before English emerged as the *lingua franca*. Making the case for more research on “knowledge practices”, historian Claude Markovits argues that “contrary

³⁶ Lee Meiyu, “A Dictionary that Bridged Two Races”, *BiblioAsia* (National Library Board Journal, web version), Vol. 11, Issue 4, January 26, 2016. <http://www.nlb.gov.sg/biblioasia/2016/01/26/a-dictionary-that-bridged-two-races/#sthash.pNEVuwEI.dpbs>]

to what is often assumed, merchant skills are not a static body of recipes which are simply transmitted from one generation to another without any incremental aspect. Merchant knowledge is not purely routine but can often be innovative to a certain extent, at least in as much as it can adapt itself to changes in political and market conditions.”³⁷

One group which performed particularly well in this area were the Hyderabad Sindworkies, originally a monolingual Sindhi-speaking community. Unlike the Jewish and Armenian merchants, who generally received a multilingual education from childhood, Sindhi merchants, who migrated in search of trade opportunities in the colonial period, had to acquire multiple business languages in a very short time. Markovits notes, “One is struck by the capacity of such merchant groups to process information into a body of knowledge, of a largely pragmatic kind, concerning markets, which gave them often an advantage over competitors and [which made them] actively sought out by others.” He adds, “Thus in Southeast Asia, Japanese companies valued highly the knowledge about markets accumulated by their Sindhi agents, and that it was their possession of such knowledge that made the Hyderabad Sindhi merchants indispensable intermediaries for some Japanese firms.”³⁸

Religious and Commercial Networks

There were other forms of networks — built on ethnic and religious affinities — that were effective because they fulfilled critical functions that leveraged on

³⁷ Claude Markovits, “Ethnicity, Locality and Circulation in Two Diasporic Merchant Networks from South Asia, unpublished conference paper, p. 9.

³⁸ Markovits, “Ethnicity, Locality and Circulation”, p. 10.

Singapore's port city connections and position as a commercial node. Let me cite two examples to illustrate my point. The Nattukottai Chettiars had dominated the rural credit sector in many parts of Southeast Asia (Malaya, Burma, Thailand and Cochinchina) in the 19th century. Chettiar financial activities spanned the length and breadth of Southeast Asia even before the arrival of European colonialism; the increasing connectivity of the high noon of empire only served to strengthen the Chettiars' transnational financial network.³⁹ Chettiar temples were important nodes of this network. More than religious sites, the temples served as clearing houses and places of business, as cashiers from Chettiar firms would congregate at the temple to transact with their clients. Furthermore, the temples provided a meeting place for the Chettiar Chamber of Commerce, allowing firms to exchange business information and set rules and norms governing the trade. Consequently, these temples facilitated the development of a cohesive network of social relations, bringing together the Chettiar community, allowing for the information exchange and coordination of financial activities necessary for international financial operations.⁴⁰

The central role of religion to Chettiar money-lending reinforced the success of this global financial network. As devotees of *Murugan*, the Hindu god of war, Chettiar moneylenders would invoke the deity as chairman and witness to all economic transactions. Moreover, concentrated temple funds loaned to firms was seen as a means of drawing divine involvement into financial dealings. Considering

³⁹ Ummadevi Suppiah and Sivachandralingam Sundara Raja, *The Chettiar Role in Malaysia's Economic History* (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: University of Malaya Press, 2016), p. 6; Heiko Schrader, "Chettiar Finance in Colonial Asia," *Zeitschrift Für Ethnologie* 121, no. 1 (1996): 101–26, pp. 104, 106.

⁴⁰ Schrader, "Chettiar Finance in Colonial Asia," pp. 107–108; Hans-Dieter Evers and Jayarani Pavadarayan, *Asceticism and Ecstasy: The Chettiars of Singapore*, vol. no. 79, (Bielefeld: Forschungsschwerpunkt Entwicklungssoziologie, Fakultät für Soziologie, Universität Bielefeld, 1980), pp. 9, 11.

the sacred connotations that money-lending had for the Chettiars, business ethics became imperative since unfair dealings would constitute sacrilege against their deity.⁴¹

It would appear that religion served as a means of surveillance over Chettiar business dealings and provided a unified, ethical code of conduct for business, in contrast to opportunistic behaviour among other merchant communities that operated across vast distances.⁴² Thus, clients could expect a degree of reliability and trustworthiness from Chettiars across Asia, facilitating international business. The Chettiars provided a ready source of credit for small businesses, which would otherwise have found it difficult to secure loans from European banks, and they counted as their clients Indian traders, Chinese miners and businessmen, European planters, Malay royalty and civil servants. In fact, it was known in Singapore and Peninsular Malaysia that many a successful Chinese merchant began his climb from a loan from a Chettiar.⁴³

My second example is the pilgrimage trade, the *Hajj*. By the late 1800s, Singapore was the main departure point for Haj pilgrims who came from across Southeast Asia, in particular, the Malay-Indonesian region. Before embarking on their journey to Mecca, the pilgrims had to first travel from their hometown to Singapore. Bussorah Street in the Arab quarter was where Haj pilgrims could find many businesses that catered specifically to their needs, from clothing to

⁴¹ Evers and Pavadarayan, *Asceticism and Ecstasy: The Chettiars of Singapore*, pp. 11-12.

⁴² Schrader, "Chettiar Finance in Colonial Asia," pp. 107-108.

⁴³ K. S. Sandhu, "Indian Immigration and Settlement in Singapore" in K. S. Sandhu and A. Mani, eds. *Indians Communities in Southeast Asia*, (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1993), pp. 781 – 782.

accommodation.⁴⁴ In this setting, Malays from the Malay states intermingled with Muslims from different social and economic backgrounds.

Arab communities played a key role in managing the pilgrimage markets. Prior to their arrival in Singapore, Arab merchants had successfully established commercial and social networks in the Indo-Malay Archipelago:

Using Singapore as a base, Arab recruiters roamed through the Malay-Indonesian communities seeking prospective pilgrims. Their task was to identify pilgrims, guide them through the preparatory process, and escort them to Arabia. Such was the degree of organization of such recruiters that they structured themselves into guilds and obtained recruiting licenses from the colonial authorities.⁴⁵

Given that the holy sites were in a foreign and distant land, Arab entrepreneurs in the Malay-Indonesian world served the function of promoting and facilitating participation from locals. For much of the last century of colonial rule, the pilgrimage trade was largely controlled by the Arabs in Singapore.⁴⁶ Arab-owned steamships transporting *Hajj* pilgrims became a common sight at Singapore's harbour.

Although the pilgrimage trade started off small, it grew so rapidly that by the end of the 19th century, the number of pilgrims had risen to more than 7,000 from a

⁴⁴ Frost and Balasingamchow, *Singapore: A Biography*, p. 103.

⁴⁵ Peter G. Riddell, "Arab Migrants and Islamization in the Malay World during the Colonial Period: Indonesia and the Malay World: 29 (84), 2001, p. 124.

⁴⁶ William R. Roff, "The Malayo-Muslim World of Singapore at the Close of the Nineteenth Century" in *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Nov. 1964, 24 (1): 75–90, pp. 80 – 81.

modest 2,000 pilgrims in the 1850s.⁴⁷ This number only continued to increase, save for years during the First and Second World War. By the early twentieth century, over 10,000 Malay-Indonesians embarked on the *Hajj* annually.⁴⁸ After the introduction of air transport, the numbers ballooned, with over half a million *Hajjs* in 1958 alone.⁴⁹ Throughout the years, the *Hajj* remained an important driving force of migratory travels and mercantile trade.

Several factors were responsible for the growing pilgrimage trade in Southeast Asia. One significant factor — especially during the early periods — was the Arab communities in the region, who persuaded local Muslims to embark on the pilgrimage. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, European companies also played a crucial role, introducing new technologies and organisational methods to the trade. For instance, steamship services and pilgrimage arrangement companies were introduced into the region, making mass transport by sea more accessible than before. European shipping companies also fostered networks with indigenous firms that provided entry to markets, clients, and cargoes. They worked these connections into the wider global networks they were assembling, creating larger economies of scale and efficiency in the pilgrimage trade.

Ultimately, the *Hajj* was both a religious and commercial affair in the Straits Settlements, with Singapore being the locus for the pilgrimage trade. It was profitable, but also poorly regulated (especially in the early days), thus resulting in the exploitation of pilgrims. This was largely due to the British role in the *Hajj*, which

⁴⁷ Michael B. Miller, 2006, "Pilgrims' Progress: The Business of the Hajj" *Past & Present*, 191 (1), 2006: p. 194.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 195.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 201.

oscillated between their desire for profit and the need to protect their reputation as a governing power. Commercial interests ultimately won out. Nonetheless, given the extensive movement of Muslims through this affair, the *Hajj* was a crucial factor in explaining migratory patterns and the formation of Malay communities in Singapore.

The migratory movements of Muslims, facilitated by the *Hajj*, also resulted in the spread of ideas, customs, and traditions. Malay-Indonesians returning from the *Hajj* for instance, were demonstrably more devout with their Islamic practices.⁵⁰ It is no wonder that the colonial rulers saw these migratory movements as a threat — introducing social and political thought, often Islamic reformist ideas — from other regions. This was especially so with the Dutch, who initiated restrictive rules on *Hajj* travels for the East Indies from the early nineteenth century. The British in Singapore, too, became concerned about Mecca as “the site for the spread of anti-colonial, pan-Islamic ideas during the ‘haj’ season”.⁵¹

Knowledge Production

Colonial port cities, being diverse and metropolitan, provided public spheres, which allowed elites and literate classes to communicate and debate with one another. Take for example Malay publications such as newspapers, magazines, and literature. The dissemination of these materials, and the accompanying spread of ideas, was stimulated by the advent of the Malay lithograph and subsequently, the printing press, with the main distribution and publication centre situated in

⁵⁰ Aiza Maslan, *Hajj and the Malayan Experience, 1860 – 1941*, *Kemanusiaan* 21 (2) 2014, p. 84.

⁵¹ Nurfadzilah Yahaya, “Good Friends and Dangerous Enemies - British Images of the Arab Elite in Colonial Singapore (1819-1942)”, (MA dissertation, Department of History, National University of Singapore, 2006), p. 42.

Singapore.⁵² In fact, with the “added stimulus of more frequent and intensive communication with the Middle East”, coupled with the introduction of new communication technologies, Singapore quickly grew to become a centre for Islamic life, learning, and literature in the Malay-Muslim world in the late nineteenth century.⁵³

The printing press was introduced in Southeast Asia in the sixteenth century, with the first Malay book (a Malay-Dutch dictionary) published in Batavia, in 1677. The first complete Malay Bible in Jawi was published in the same country in 1746. Yet, it was only in the early nineteenth century that British missionaries set up stations and printing presses in Singapore to spread their religious ideas. The printing of Malay texts thus began through a collaboration between a Danish missionary and Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir, a translator from Melaka, who is better known as Munshi Abdullah. The first printing press in Singapore, *Mission Press*, was then established in 1823. Munshi Abdullah’s original literary works, including the famous *Hikayat Abdullah*, were published by the press. *Mission Press* continued to be operated by missionaries, with the help of Munshi Abdullah as a translator, until the 1860s, when the “first indigenous printers and publishers emerged in Singapore.”⁵⁴

These indigenous printers were primarily immigrants from Java who settled in Kampong Glam. The printing industry flourished from the 1860s, peaking in the 1880s. Early lithographic publications tend to be “jointly produced with contributions

⁵² Roff, *The Malayo-Muslim World of Singapore*, p. 84

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

⁵⁴ Anuar Mazelan, “Early Malay Printing in Singapore”, *BiblioAsia* (National Library Quarterly Journal, web version), 7 October, 2017.

from copyists and owners of the text and press”, resembling the form of a Malay manuscript.⁵⁵ Some of the most prolific Malay printers during the period included Haji Muhammad Said bin Haji Arsyad and Haji Muhammad Siraj bin Haji Salih. The former, along with his sons, published more than 200 Malay publications between 1873 and 1918, while the latter published more than 80 Malay books.⁵⁶

A significant marker of the early phases of the Malay vernacular press (late nineteenth century) was the publication of the first Malay newspaper in 1876, the *Jawi Peranakan*.⁵⁷ The newspaper owned a significant number of lithograph presses, and had a circulation of approximately 250 copies.⁵⁸ In 1888, with the passing of the newspaper’s chief editor, the *Jawi Peranakan* struggled to keep afloat as public support diminished. During this period, another newspaper, *Sekolah Melayu*, emerged, aimed at catering to “the needs of students in Malay schools in Singapore”.⁵⁹ *Sekolah Melayu* is significant in the history of the development of the Malay vernacular press as, for the first time, the “question of language was raised and discussed openly in the editorials”.⁶⁰

Indeed, similar to how new ideas on language emerged in the *Sekolah Melayu*, the increasing publication of Malay religious and secular writings in Singapore during the period helped spread the awareness of social and political thought, as well as expand the literary imagination of the Malay Muslims in the Straits Settlements. Religious texts were also an important cornerstone of the

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Nik Ahmad Bin Haji Nik Hassan, “The Malay Press”, *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 36, 1, 201, 1963, p. 38.

⁵⁸ E. W. Birch, “The Vernacular Press in the Straits”, *JSBRAS*, No. 4. December, 1879, p. 53.

⁵⁹ 22 August 1888, *Sekolah Melayu*.

⁶⁰ Hassan, “The Malay Press”, p. 40.

publishing scene. In many parts of the world since the ancient times, printing has been used to “diffuse religious and ethical literature”.⁶¹ In the early 1890s for instance, a *Wasiat* – literature on revivalist Islamic thought – circulated in profusion in the Straits, printed and reprinted in both Singapore and Palembang.⁶² Other materials, such as “old and new translations of classical romances and legends of Arabic or Persian origin and Islamic flavour, traditional folk tales, poetry, and modern autobiographical chronicles” were also increasingly produced by Singapore lithographers.⁶³ Literary activity in the region was diversifying, and growing rapidly.

After 1900, the Malay lithographic printing output declined. Eventually, such printing technique was overtaken by the more efficient letterpress. Moreover, the Malay book market had to compete with publications from India and the Middle East, imported by Malay booksellers. Many local publishers were affected, and had to scale back on their output, eventually ceasing their operations. Nonetheless, while Malay lithographic printing became a lost art after the 1920s, Malay newspapers continued to garner a substantial audience, achieving success. Newspapers became more popular with the increasing number of urban Malays, and the “new medium was better able to fulfill the information needs of the community as well as adapt to their changing reading patterns”.⁶⁴

Religious questions only emerged from newspaper publications from 1906, with the establishment of the journal, *Al-Imam*.⁶⁵ After returning to Singapore from his studies in Egypt, *Al-Imam*'s founder had a desire to “bring social and religious

⁶¹ Hilary M. Carey, ed., *Empires of Religion*, (UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 357.

⁶² Roff, *The Malay-Muslim World of Singapore*, p. 84.

⁶³ *Ibid.* p.84

⁶⁴ Mazelan Anuar, “Early Malay Printing in Singapore”, 7 October 2017.

⁶⁵ Hassan, *The Malay Press*, p. 44.

reforms into Malaya ... purify Islam from malpractices and non-Islamic influences and to eradicate despondency, inertia and the feeling of inferiority which were predominant among the Muslims in Malaya.”⁶⁶ While the paper only lasted for three and a half years, its call for religious reforms were adopted by subsequent publications, such as the *Neracha*. The paper also enjoyed a responsive readership base, who wrote in letters to comment on their increased interest in Islam.⁶⁷

During the period however, it should also be noted that a diverse range of publications still existed. The popular *Utusan Melayu* for instance, still focused largely on world news, and had no interest in dealing with religious issues. The first newspaper published daily, the *Lembaga Melayu* (1914 – 1931), also dealt mainly with foreign and domestic news, eventually becoming the main Malay language newspaper of the Straits Settlements until the 1930s, during which time Malayan political issues received prominent coverage.

Conclusion

Singapore was global in its outlook long before Mr Rajaratnam articulated his vision of Singapore as a Global City. I have shown in this lecture that Singapore was home to flows of people and goods, circulations of populations, and the site of networks sustained by commerce and religion. Amidst this context emerged hybridity, in terms of communities, cultural practices and ideas. For instance, Singapore was home to “mobile societies” such as the Southern Chinese trade diaspora, and creole communities, like the Peranakans, who were the descendants

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

of unions between mobile men and local women.⁶⁸ As Eng seng Ho described it, Singapore was part of an inter-Asian space, crisscrossed by connections and societies.⁶⁹

I have referred to “early globalisation”, and the circulations, connections and networks that framed Singapore’s port city existence in the title of today’s lecture. This interconnectivity, took place at a pace slower than the instant communications afforded by today’s technologies, but was nonetheless very much present in pre-modern Singapore and its colonial days.

Another point I hope you will take away from this lecture is that Singapore was both a plural and cosmopolitan city. What are the key features of plurality versus cosmopolitanism? A plural society, as described by Furnivall, is one that is segregated, with groups that live “side by side, yet without mingling.”⁷⁰ According to Furnivall, different segments in a plural society would not share common values and social bonds.

On the other hand, a cosmopolitan society is one where there is intermingling among different groups, and individuals look beyond national boundaries in building cultural, political and economic connections. Globalising cities tended to foster cosmopolitanism — in other words, openness derived from divergent cultural experiences.

⁶⁸ There are the Peranakans, also known as Straits Chinese, whose origins are traced to intermarriages between Chinese traders and local Malay women in Penang, Melaka and Singapore, and the Jawi Peranakans, whose origins are traced to intermarriages between Tamil merchants and Malay women in Melaka.

⁶⁹ Eng seng Ho, ‘Inter-Asian Concepts for Mobile Societies’, *The Journal of Asian Studies* 76, no. 4 (November 2017): 907–28.

⁷⁰ James L. Peacock, ‘Plural Society in Southeast Asia’, *The High School Journal* 56, no. 1 (1972): 1.

However, cities and their societies are fluid and evolve over time. Singapore was at times more plural than cosmopolitan, sometimes both simultaneously.

We have good accounts of how specific diasporas came to settle in Singapore and adjusted to their new environment, but we know much less of how the different diasporas conversed with one another. Still, recent research has offered some insight into how public print cultures and other institutions in the late colonial period facilitated cross-cultural interactions in Southeast Asian port cities.⁷¹ Individuals' identities and affiliations were far more complex than broad categories could encapsulate. People came to Singapore, often just passing through, on their way to, or from, their intended destinations, yet settled down here. Singapore was one of the most cosmopolitan cities in Asia by the end of the 19th century.

But where do we stand today? After decades of efforts in nation-building and the promotion of racial harmony within the CMIO framework, do we risk developing a much more impoverished and narrow concept of what Singapore and Singaporeans are?⁷² This is a question we ought to ponder as we attempt to strengthen our sense

⁷¹ Su Lin Lewis, *Cities in Motion: Urban Life and Cosmopolitanism in Southeast Asia, 1920-1940* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

⁷²A recent Channel NewsAsia-IPS Survey on Ethnic Identity in Singapore found that more respondents reported that new citizens from Malay, Chinese, Indian or Eurasian backgrounds were more likely to be accepted as "truly Singaporean", compared to citizens from other backgrounds.

"At least three in five respondents reported that out of people from 10 backgrounds presented, those from any of them would be acceptable as "truly Singaporean" if they were to become new citizens. However, more respondents reported that new citizens from Malay, Chinese, Indian or Eurasian backgrounds would be accepted as "truly Singaporean". Although about 60% of respondents reported that citizens from Arab and African backgrounds would be accepted, this was relatively lower than the over 90% acceptance levels for those from Chinese, Malay and Indian backgrounds. This may potentially indicate that there is a close association between national identity, i.e "Singaporeanness" and the core ethnic groups that have constituted it for decades."

of identity. Even as we write and make our national history, we should take into account our much longer and richer past, where we were a point of convergence for people from all over the world — a place that afforded them opportunities, vitality, interactions and cross-cultural encounters, and out of which grew a diverse, tolerant, multicultural population that went on to define modern Singapore.