

IPS-Nathan Lectures  
Lecture III — Singapore's story: A port city in search of hinterlands  
Professor Tan Tai Yong  
30 January 2019

# **IPS-Nathan Lecture Series**

## **Lecture III — Singapore's Story: A Port City in Search of Hinterlands**

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**30 January 2019**  
**Yale-NUS College**

## **Introduction**

For those of you who have been following my lectures, I have been trying to situate Singapore's long history in the larger contexts of regional and global dynamics. I spoke of the continuities and disruptions in Singapore's past through cycles of historical developments and how Singapore was "global", long before the terms globalisation and global cities became topical.

In such a narrative, I explain Singapore's evolution as a port city, whose character and fortunes were determined by regional and global politics, trade and movements of people. It has always been a connected entity and a nodal point of interlocking networks. And unlike a number of earlier prominent Asian port cities that have been bypassed by progress, Singapore stands as an example of a colonial port city that has managed to evolve into a major metropolis. From a traditional entrepôt port city serving regional trading networks, Singapore has evolved into a city-state whose economy, inextricably linked to an international system driven by commerce and enterprise, is sustained and nourished by global economic conditions.

As I showed in my last lecture, the aspiration to be a global city-state was articulated by Mr. Rajaratnam in 1972, but the imperative of looking outwards was far from novel in Singapore's historical experiences. I explained that Singapore had historically functioned as a port sustained by flows of people and trading networks that stretched from the Persian Gulf to the southern coast of China. Today, Singapore seeks to position itself as a hub for the greater Asian region and beyond. Throughout

its long history, I argue that the underlying plot of the Singapore story has not changed fundamentally.

Singapore's rapid growth and status as a global city-state has attracted the attention of economists, sociologists and geographers. Interestingly, historians, preoccupied in the past with colonial and nationalist narratives, have yet to grapple with the processes and conditions that explain Singapore's progress from port to global (or air-port) city. A narrative of Singapore's development as port city thus offers an interesting case study.

I am not suggesting that the traditional narratives of Singapore as colony and nation-state are unimportant — but that studying Singapore as a port city gives us another key to understanding Singapore's identity. Studying Singapore as a port city assigns greater weight to external factors and global phenomena in the shaping of the economy and polity of Singapore. For instance, it considers how the character and personality of the island state might have roots in regional identities and dynamics that predate 1965 or even 1819.

My lecture will address the following questions: What is a port city? What are its essential characteristics? And how was Singapore's historical development and personality linked to and influenced by its functions as a port city?

## Port cities and Hinterlands

I would first like to set the scene with a comment on the study of port cities. The scholarly literature on the roles and functions of port cities is a fairly rich one, but I would like to highlight three key features of historical port cities that are relevant for us.

First, port cities are not merely “cities that happen to be on the shoreline”; they are economic entities whose character is maritime in nature.<sup>1</sup> Any serious consideration of the urban culture, personality and morphology of port cities, would have to contend with their economic functions as nodes of sea-based trading networks. The port city is therefore a “place of contact where goods and people as well as cultures are transferred between land and maritime space”.<sup>2</sup>

When one considers the social, cultural and political connections within the port city, it is not difficult to see how its demographic and ethnic evolution is reflected in the city's economic functions. These functions in turn make the city cosmopolitan — in fact, require it to be so if it is to be successful. I had discussed this in some detail in my previous lecture. Scholars have pointed out that “[in port cities] races, cultures and ideas as well as goods from a variety of places jostle, mix and enrich each other and the life of the city”.<sup>3</sup> Port cities not only functioned as entrepôts for the movement of goods, labour and capital; they also served as nodal points for the reception and

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<sup>1</sup> Reeves, et al., 1989:29-53

<sup>2</sup> Kidwai, 1992:10

<sup>3</sup> Murphey, 1989:225

transmission of culture, knowledge and information.<sup>4</sup> Port cities are, therefore, not only distinct physical entities. Their functions also create opportunities and space for cultural mixing and hybridisation. Historical port cities that were polyglot centres include Batavia, Rangoon and Penang. Like Singapore, these port cities were home to a mix of different ethnic communities.

Second, port cities cannot exist without a hinterland. There are a few definitions of a hinterland, but I refer to a hinterland as the area that surrounds a large city or port, which serves the city/port and on which the city/port depends for economic growth. Port cities are necessarily linked to hinterlands by trade, and serve as the window — or conduit — through which the trade of the land is linked to the sea. More than just economic funnels, they often present complex and profound influences on the hinterlands they serve. There is a typology of different types of hinterlands. These include immediate hinterland (port area itself), primary hinterland (area where port and city assume a commanding role and determine the life of the area), commodity hinterland (based on shipment of particular types of commodities), and inferred hinterland (port's hegemony over a particular area, to the extent that it satisfies the demand for imports in the area it serves.<sup>5</sup>

In the 1970s and 1980s, the main preoccupation of studies on colonial port cities was the part that they played in the development of colonial control in Asia.<sup>6</sup> These studies revealed that colonial port cities often facilitated western influence, and

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<sup>4</sup> Frost, 2002:939

<sup>5</sup> Bird, 1971

<sup>6</sup> Basu, 1985

that western trade systems and demands transformed the market hierarchies in colonial port cities, as well as the mercantile elites and communities in their hinterlands.

Port cities that function as entrepôts may not have specifically defined hinterlands of their own. Instead, their maritime space — or networks of seaborne links — often constituted their hinterlands. Singapore is a prime example. For extended periods of its long history, the port polity served as a transshipment centre whose development depended largely on its position and function in the trading networks in which it was situated. These trading networks were determined by a combination of geography and available modes of maritime transportation. In other words, Singapore's existence did not depend on a surrounding or nearby land mass. The main economic base that supported the small island's very existence was its maritime port. Singapore's hinterland was effectively the maritime space around it, which included much of the Southeast Asian archipelago.

Third, studies of port cities have addressed the extent to which the composition and social structure of their populations have been determined by their port functions. These port functions have shaped mercantile groups and their institutions, as well as the very milieu in which specific groups existed and operated.

It is also evident that port cities are influenced to a large extent by the hinterlands.<sup>7</sup> How cities relate to their hinterlands often hint at the ways “in which

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<sup>7</sup> Kidwai, 1992: 26

global cities were formed, transformed and extended beyond their immediate geographical territoriality".<sup>8</sup>

By focusing on how Singapore identified its hinterland, and how the hinterland had, in turn, influenced its development, a narrative could be developed for explaining Singapore's historical evolution: for long periods in its history, as a port engaged in entrepôt trade, Singapore lacked a clearly defined hinterland. It then found a land-based hinterland in the Malayan peninsula in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, only to lose it in 1965. Throughout, Singapore has continued to define and re-define its hinterland. If such a historical perspective were adopted, the underlying plot in the narrative is simply this: Singapore is a port city whose development and growth were tied to its functions within the respective regional and global networks in which it operated. Let me elaborate.

### **Singapore: entrepôt trade and the Asian hinterland**

Soon after the signing of the 1824 Anglo-Dutch Treaty, which confirmed Singapore's status as a British (East India Company) possession, its position as an important regional port and emporium began to grow. Trade within Southeast Asia accounted for nearly one-quarter of its overall volume of trade in the late 1820s. China accounted for about 23 per cent, and India 16 percent.<sup>9</sup> The trade was essentially a maritime one; trade with mainland Southeast Asia accounted for just about 5 per

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<sup>8</sup> Olds and Yeung, 2004:489-521

<sup>9</sup> Wong, 1961:42-3; Wong Lin Ken, 'Singapore: Its Growth as an Entrepot Port, 1819-1941', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 9, no. 1 (1978): 50–84.

cent.<sup>10</sup> Singapore's position between two oceans appeared to matter more than its location at the southernmost tip of the Asian landmass. In fact, until 1923, when the Causeway was built, Singapore could be reached directly only by sea.

Located where it was, Singapore gathered for itself the Archipelago trade, while Penang served the neighbouring countries of Burma, North Sumatra and the west coast of the Malay peninsula.<sup>11</sup> Singapore soon became the “the great emporium and fulcrum” of the trade of the neighbouring seas, dealing mainly in local produce, known collectively as ‘Straits Produce’ — the agricultural and mineral products grown or produced in the Malayan archipelago and brought to the colonial ports for packing and shipment to consumer countries.<sup>12</sup> The nature of the trade and transactions gradually incorporated the various islands of the East Indies, the Peninsula, Siam and parts of Indo-China.

As such, Singapore's commercial hinterland was maritime-based, rather than land-based. The extent of Singapore's commercial hinterland was indicated by the origins of the vessels that arrived regularly at the port of Singapore to trade — from the Celebes, eastern Java, Gulf of Siam, Indo-China and the Malay peninsula.<sup>13</sup> Thus, in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, the multitude of maritime vessels from around the region collectively determined the hinterland and the system of entrepôt trade in Singapore.

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<sup>10</sup> Wong Lin Ken, ‘Singapore: Its Growth as an Entrepot Port, 1819-1941’, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 9, no. 1 (1978): 50–84.

<sup>11</sup> Wong, 1961: 71-85

<sup>12</sup> Bogaars, 1955:115

<sup>13</sup> Bogaars, 1955:118

As trade grew in volume, the morphology of the port began to reflect its 'hinterlands'. Different trading communities now gathered in the port vicinity and were physically separated into various sectors in the city. These hinterlands not only provided the resources that sustained Singapore, they also supplied the human capital that eventually constituted the plural and cosmopolitan society of Singapore. As an open port city that functioned as an emporium, it adopted an open immigration policy, enabling the easy movement of traders and workers key to its development as a trading centre.

As I mentioned earlier, this relationship between Singapore and its hinterlands were defined by maritime-based trading networks that had preceded the establishment of a colonial port in Singapore in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The trading pattern that formed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was based on the intermeshing of a number of pre-existing networks that connected the Arab lands and India to the west and China to the east.

Overlapping hinterlands and networks created in the port city a “polyglot migrant world constituted by streams of immigrants from China, India, the Malay Archipelago, and other far-flung places...”.<sup>14</sup> It was during this period of growth as a colonial port city, when much older and indigenous transnational connections were revitalised, that Singapore became the heart of the intellectual world of Southeast Asia.

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<sup>14</sup> Yeoh 2003: 48

From the late 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards, the port city was not only bustling with commerce. It was a centre for Malay culture and literature, of Chinese diasporic intellectual and political ferment, and of Indian debates on cultural and religious reformism. As Singapore became the centre of overlapping migrant worlds, incorporating networks of trade, labour and cultures, it developed as a key economic and intellectual node in which “rich innovations in thought and behavior arose”.<sup>15</sup> The port city became a centre of cultural and nationalist movement — a dynamic force for social change. It became what T.N. Harper calls a diasporic public sphere, where “information and ideas from outside lay in creative tensions with an emerging local experience”.<sup>16</sup> This experience was common in other colonial port cities like Rangoon and Penang, which were similarly home to hybrid communities that helped to shape a vibrant Asian public sphere.

### **Staple port and the Malayan hinterland**

Until 1874, when the British began extending political control over the Malay States, Singapore did not have a clearly defined and formal hinterland that was under British administration.<sup>17</sup> The bulk of its hinterland which facilitated its entrepôt trade was constituted by the Dutch East Indies — current-day Indonesia — and, to some extent, South China.

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<sup>15</sup> Harper 1997: 261-92

<sup>16</sup> Harper 2001: 7

<sup>17</sup> Wong 1991: 50

By the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, its hinterland became more clearly defined. Singapore served as a staple port to the Malay peninsula. During this period, the traditional idea of the hinterland supplying its cities was turned on its head as Singapore — the port city — played the role of supplier through its exports to the Malayan hinterland and the Dutch East Indies. Singapore became the conduit through which food supplies from Siam, Burma and Indo-China were re-directed to workers in the Malayan and Netherlands export industries. Economic historian Gregg Huff points out that “the dominant feature of Singapore’s exports of food and manufactures to [Southeast Asia] was the size of the [Dutch East Indies] market, which was twice that of the Malay peninsula (excluding inter-port trade)”.<sup>18</sup>

As staple port to the Malayan peninsula, Singapore was where tin, rubber and petroleum extracted from the peninsula were processed and exported to the rest of the world. The links between Singapore and its hinterland were very clearly defined and took on several forms. First, there were comprehensive transport links that connected the various mines in western Malaya to Singapore. The rail and road networks that developed with the rise of the tin and rubber industry integrated the island fully with its northern hinterland. More than transport links, the integration of Singapore with its northern hinterland was facilitated by the integrated economy that revolved around tin and rubber. A complex system of trade and credit incorporating European merchant houses, Asian dealers and local retailers was established in Singapore. The following statistics demonstrated that by the final quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Huff 1994:54

century, the processing and export of staple produce from the Malayan hinterland had become a mainstay of Singapore's port-driven economy:

"In 1864, 291 tons of tin reached Singapore from the Malay states: six years later, the imports amounted to 4025 tons, and by 1879 they had risen to 5283 tons....In 1817, 417 coasting vessels reached Singapore from both sides of the peninsula: by 1878 the total for the year had risen to 1798 vessels and in 1879 it amounted to 2569 vessels, more than six times the numbers arriving eight years earlier."<sup>19</sup>

Singapore's exports of tin would continue to grow, as seen from how by 1899, tin accounted for nearly a fifth of the value of Singapore's exports. Singapore was also the world's main tin exporter at this time. Similarly, by 1918, the rubber auctioned in Singapore amounted to nearly a quarter of the world's exports. The large quantities of Malayan tin and rubber that made their way through Singapore's market stimulated its economy, and paved the way for the construction of port facilities that were unrivalled by regional competitors. It also prompted the establishment of a government port trust, known as Singapore Harbour Board from 1913, which eventually became the Port of Singapore Authority.<sup>20</sup> Singapore would continue to grow in its volume of trade over the years.

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<sup>19</sup> Bogaars 1955: 120

<sup>20</sup> Lee Soo Ann, *Singapore: From Place to Nation*, Fourth (Pearson Education South Asia, 2019), 39, 47-51.

## **Hinterland Found and Lost**

By the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Singapore was an integral part of the Malay peninsula, serving as its primary staple port. Even as Singapore was developed as an imperial naval base in the 1920s, defence planning incorporated the entire peninsula. The persistent myth of the Singapore guns facing the wrong direction notwithstanding, military planners had incorporated the peninsula as part of the defence sector of the naval base in Singapore. This close port-hinterland relationship was thought to be a natural one, but it was soon torn apart by imperial policy-makers in London.

In the midst of the Second World War, planners in London began drawing strategies for the post-war development of Malaya and Singapore. The Malayan Union Plan, which was hatched in 1944, envisaged a separation between Malaya and Singapore. Adopted and implemented in 1946, the Union Plan saw an amalgamation of the Malay States, in which Singapore, with its predominantly Chinese population, did not seem to fit. The Malayan Union Plan did not last, and was scuttled on the back of determined opposition by a nascent Malay nationalist movement, which opposed the Plan's liberal citizenship rules and the political emasculation of the Sultans. It was eventually replaced by the Federation scheme, which addressed many of the concerns raised by the opponents of the Malay Union Plan. But this did not change the position of Singapore. The separation, much to the chagrin of the people of Singapore, seemed permanent.

Hopes were harboured that Singapore would return to the Malayan fold. The staple port had become so used to its hinterland that it had become inconceivable that Singapore could actually survive without it. This was an interesting case of historical amnesia, as Singapore had earlier thrived without relying primarily on that overland hinterland.

In any case, even as political developments in Singapore and Malaya began to take off on separate trajectories after 1947, the ultimate aim of Singapore's political leadership was to re-establish a union between the port city and its northern hinterland. From 1948, Singapore leaders from a range of political parties argued that political separation was an anomaly, and the island's first two elected chief ministers, David Marshall and Lim Yew Hock, of the Labour Front government, made repeated overtures to the Malayan Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman, urging him to consider merger with Singapore. The Malayan leader chose, however, not to reciprocate, uncertain if the conditions were right, where Malayan interests were concerned, to consider bringing Singapore back to the fold.

It was only through the determined pursuit of merger by Lee Kuan Yew and his People's Action Party (PAP) after 1959 that merger between Singapore and the Federation of Malaya became a reality. Among the platforms upon which the PAP campaigned in the 1959 elections, was the pledge to bring Singapore into a united Malaya. From its very inception in November 1954, the PAP had declared ending colonialism in Singapore as one of its main objectives. This would be done through

the establishment of an “independent [and non-communist] national state of Malaya comprising the ... Federation of Malaya and the Colony of Singapore”.<sup>21</sup>

The PAP built their case on economic arguments — the need to create out of the Malayan hinterland a common market that would sustain and nurture Singapore's attempts at industrialisation. Throughout the 1950s, the island colony had been under mounting economic pressure due to the explosive rate of population growth in the island and declining entrepôt trade. Its re-exports to the region had been dramatically reduced, owing to import restrictions on the part of many of its neighbours to protect their own nascent industries. Entrepôt trade — the mainstay of the Singapore economy — was also threatened by countries increasingly engaged in direct trading.

Another problem was ensuring that employment opportunities would increase at a pace corresponding to the rapid growth of the island's population. For Singapore to provide enough jobs for its young and fast growing population as well as reduce its dependence on entrepôt trade, it would have to embark on a course of rapid industrialisation. But, for this to work, integration with the economy and markets of the Federation was crucial.<sup>22</sup> Finance Minister Goh Keng Swee saw this very clearly and commented that “whatever we do, major changes in our economy are only possible if Singapore and the Federation are integrated as one economy”.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> CO 1030/973

<sup>22</sup> This was articulated by Lee Kuan Yew at the luncheon of the Singapore Union of Journalists, 24 May 1963.

<sup>23</sup> C.M Turnbull, 1989:267

There were political reasons for merger. There was a fierce tussle for power between a well-organised left wing group and the faction led by Lee Kuan Yew. The successful conclusion of merger, leading to the end of colonial rule, would take the wind out of the sails of the left wing movement, and the anti-communist British and Malayan authorities would become staunch allies in Lee's fight against his left wing and pro-communist rivals.

But Singapore's case for merger was built on the need for a clearly defined and functioning hinterland that would continue to support the port economy. More than that, without some form of economic integration or common market, the Singapore and Malayan economies would find themselves in direct competition with each other, particularly in attracting foreign investors. Singapore, with its smaller workforce and higher production costs, found that it was in a disadvantageous position as many local companies, such as small rubber footwear firms, were moving out of Singapore into the Federation, where costs of production were much lower.

Complicating matters was Singapore's status as a free-port economy. Companies operating within the state could not rely on tariff protection for their goods, unlike those operating in the Federation.<sup>24</sup> Without the hinterland and a common market, Singapore was therefore faced with a double-whammy: it could not protect its local industries by imposing tariffs on foreign competition, and its manufactured products would not easily find their way into Malayan markets because of the Federation's tariff barrier.

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<sup>24</sup> CO 1030/972

Singapore regained her northern hinterland when it formed Malaysia with the Federation of Malaya, Sabah and Sarawak in 1963. But this proved to be short-lived. In August 1965, following two stormy years in Malaysia, Singapore separated from the Federation. Political differences proved insurmountable, and once again, the hinterland had to change.

After separation and since independence, Singapore has continued to define and re-define its hinterland. As I have discussed at some length in my previous lecture, in 1972, then Foreign Minister S. Rajaratnam challenged Singapore to aspire towards global city status, making the world its hinterland. More recently, in 2001, then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong spoke of a 7-hour hinterland, encompassing a region within 7-hour flight radius from Singapore. He highlighted China and India as new markets within this hinterland. This hinterland included 2.8 billion people living in various countries and cities, with hundreds of millions in the middle income group.<sup>25</sup> Subsequently, in 2004, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong also made mention of this 7-hour hinterland, referring to major markets such as ASEAN, China, India, Japan, Korea and Australia.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Ministry of Information and The Arts, 'PM Goh Chok Tong's National Day Rally 2001 Speech, 19 Aug 2001', National Archives of Singapore, 19 August 2001, <http://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/speeches/view-html?filename=2001081903.htm>.

<sup>26</sup> Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts, 'Speech by Mr Lee Hsien Loong, Prime Minister and Minister For Finance, At The Opening Of Global Entrepolis @ Singapore 2004', National Archives of Singapore, 11 October 2004, <http://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/speeches/view-html?filename=2004101192.htm>.

Singapore's relationship with Malaysia today illustrates this economic reality amply. While Common Market was not achieved when Singapore was in Malaysia, our northern neighbour remains a hinterland of sorts as Malaysia is Singapore's second largest trading partner after China, with total bilateral trade amounting to S\$93.8 billion in 2016.<sup>27</sup> Malaysia's trade with Singapore accounted for 13 per cent of its total trade, only topped by Malaysia's trade with China, which made up 15.8 per cent of its total trade.<sup>28</sup> The colonial masters are long gone, we are more than 50 years from Separation, but the economic, cultural, and personal ties remain, realised through old and new networks, physical and virtual.

### **Changing nature of hinterlands**

Has the decline in relative importance of the Malayan hinterland for Singapore affected the evolution of Singapore from colonial port city to global city-state? Not much, I would argue. For Singapore the port city, the shifting circumstances in which economic space was constantly being re-defined meant that 'hinterlands' were not fixed entities and were regularly being constructed. As a trading node that has evolved over time, Singapore's hinterland has varied over the years. It was maritime space from the 14<sup>th</sup> century to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, before Malaya became the obvious proximate, physical economic hinterland.

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<sup>27</sup> <https://ie.enterprisesg.gov.sg/Venture-Overseas/Browse-By-Market/Asia-Pacific/Malaysia/Overview>

<sup>28</sup> Kementerian Kewangan Malaysia, 'Malaysia's Trade with Major Trading Partners' (Kementerian Kewangan Malaysia, 2017), [http://www.treasury.gov.my/pdf/economy/er/1617/st3\\_1.pdf](http://www.treasury.gov.my/pdf/economy/er/1617/st3_1.pdf).

In Singapore's current manifestation, a global city in a globalised world, the idea of a fixed economic hinterland has lost its meaning. Singapore does not primarily serve peninsular Malaysia in a foreland-hinterland relationship, and depends more on its role as a hub port in global shipping networks. The distinction between hinterland and foreland has become less clear, and Singapore now faces competition from its former hinterland, in the form of Malaysian ports located close by, such as Pelabuhan Tanjung Pelepas and Johor Port.<sup>29</sup>

But there is no question that trade will remain the lifeblood of Singapore. From regional emporium to Singapore Incorporated, Singapore has remained at its core an economic entity, totally dedicated to its regional and international outward looking vocation of trade and commerce. This can be seen from Singapore's continued reliance on exports, which includes re-exports, but also products manufactured domestically, such as electronics, petrochemicals, oils and petroleum products, and pharmaceuticals.<sup>30</sup>

The port continues to shape the fortunes of the country. Singapore was ranked as the leading maritime capital globally by Norwegian consulting firm Menon Economics in 2012, 2015 and 2017, based on categories like shipping, ports and logistics and maritime technology.<sup>31</sup> It was ranked alongside cities such as Hamburg, London, Oslo and Shanghai. Singapore's pursuit of free-trade agreements (FTAs) with

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<sup>29</sup> Sharon Siddique, *Asian Port Cities: Uniting Land and Water Worlds* (Singapore: Lee Kuan Yew Centre for Innovative Cities, 2016), 52.

<sup>30</sup> Sharon Siddique, *Asian Port Cities: Uniting Land and Water Worlds* (Singapore: Lee Kuan Yew Centre for Innovative Cities, 2016), 40, 44.

<sup>31</sup> Erik W Jakobsen et al., 'The Leading Maritime Capitals of the World 2017' (Menon Economics, 2017).

partners worldwide underscores the role that international trade has played in the evolution of Singapore, and the vital importance of a global hinterland for its survival.

From a traditional entrepôt port city, Singapore has metamorphosed into a global city-state. Its role as the middleman in regional trade may have eroded in the 1970s with the emerging economic nationalism of neighbouring countries, but its enduring entrepôt instinct remains. This is perhaps best summed up in the following remarks by then Minister George Yeo in 2000:

“In Singapore, you buy cheapest and sell dearest. We do not grow coffee in Singapore, yet we are a major supplier of coffee beans in the world. We produce no spices, but we are the centre of the Southeast Asian spice trade. We are also the biggest exporter of Swiss watches in the region. We have no oil, but we refine a lot of it and we are the trading centre for oil and other related products. Singapore's trade is 2.5 times its GNP.”<sup>32</sup>

Today, Singapore's trade is more than three times its GDP — the highest trade to GDP ratio in the world. The operations may be more sophisticated, the materials dealt with different, and the scope much wider, but at the heart of its thriving economy lies a great port through which goods still find their way to regional and international markets.

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<sup>32</sup> George Yeo, Speech on Information Technology and Singapore's Future, 4 June 1998

Furthermore, as Mr Yeo puts it, “we are moving from seaport to airport to teleport” but embracing all three.<sup>33</sup> This can be seen from Changi Airport's continued expansion, and the ongoing construction of Tuas Port, which will consolidate Singapore's (sea)port operations and handle up to 65 million twenty-foot equivalent (TEU) when fully operational.<sup>34</sup> This is an increase from the Port of Singapore's existing capacity of 50 million TEUs. To put things in perspective, in 2017, Singapore was the second busiest container port in the world (after Shanghai), handling over 33.6 million TEU.<sup>35</sup>

## Conclusion

In this lecture, I have attempted to examine how the dynamics generated by a port city in search of hinterlands have shaped Singapore's history. I first argue that Singapore had a fluid (literally and metaphorically) hinterland. Its economic, social and cultural hinterlands were defined by maritime trade that it conducted and the networks that were developed as a result of its commercial activities. As a result, its historical evolution and outlook is cosmopolitan and its identity an ongoing state of culture-mixing. In this respect, Hong Kong offers an interesting comparison. Throughout its evolution as a port city, Hong Kong has had a clearly defined and dominant hinterland — China. With the handover of Hong Kong from Britain to China, Hong Kong increasingly shares in the strengths and weaknesses of China's conditions and

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<sup>33</sup> John Curtis Perry, *Singapore: Unlikely Power* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 259.

<sup>34</sup> David Kim Hin Ho and Ho Mun Wai. *Singapore Chronicles: Gateways*. Singapore: Straits Times Press, 2016.

<sup>35</sup> Hong Kong Marine Department, 'Ranking of Container Ports of the World' (Hong Kong Marine Department,

institutions.<sup>36</sup> For instance, Hong Kong's approach to port governance is likely to become more focused due to competition from Shanghai and Shenzhen. The establishment of the Hong Kong Maritime and Port Board in 2016 marks a shift from its earlier laissez-faire style of economic governance, linked to its history as a British colony with little government intervention.<sup>37</sup> While Hong Kong retains its multiculturalism and its cosmopolitan reputation, it is no longer an independent city-state as it was "re-absorbed" into its hinterland in 1997.<sup>38</sup>

I have also tried to demonstrate that hinterlands are not always fixed entities and that port cities engaged in entrepôt trade often have to contend with shifting and sometimes overlapping hinterlands. The challenge here, for scholars especially, is to have conceptual clarity about the multifaceted nature of hinterlands, not only in spatial terms but in functional meanings as well. Is the relationship determined by functions or processes? Do 'hinterlands' still have meaning in a globalised world? In the case of Singapore, it may be useful to ask if hinterlands locate their port cities, or *vice versa*? Is the story of Singapore after 1965 one of a continued search for (or creation of) some form of hinterland? Singapore's still expanding network of FTAs perhaps reflects this preoccupation for expanding the city-state's economic space.

Finally, I want to ask if port cities cease being port cities. Many important port cities in history have fallen by the wayside, "bypassed by most of their former enriching flow of exchange and hybridization".

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<sup>36</sup> Report of the Commission, 1935:71

<sup>37</sup> Sharon Siddique, 'Port Governance', in *Asian Port Cities: Uniting Land and Water Worlds* (Singapore: Lee Kuan Yew Centre for Innovative Cities, 2016), 65–69.

<sup>38</sup> Kennie Ting, "Singapore's Port City Heritage", 59.

Calcutta is one such example. Formerly the capital of British India, it was an imperial city with all the characteristics of a thriving port city. However, from 1912, the British shifted the imperial capital to New Delhi. The partition of Bengal in 1947 proved to be a major setback to Calcutta, with an influx of refugees into the city putting considerable strain on its resources and leading to severe overcrowding. Furthermore, Calcutta's trade had been dominated by an inland commercial hinterland — but partition deprived the port of at least 30 per cent of its primary hinterland.<sup>39</sup> Today, Calcutta is a large regional city, and some regard it as India's cultural capital, but it has declined in economic strength. The extent of port cities' vulnerabilities can be seen from how quickly they rise and fall.

Shanghai has rapidly risen to be the world's leading port. On the other hand, New York's port has shrunk, losing its maritime functions in the city centre, which were shifted to its new container port on the other side of the Hudson River. London, formerly one of the most important maritime hubs in the world, is no longer a major world port.<sup>40</sup>

Even then, ports serving land-seas exchange have developed into some of the biggest cities in the world today. Their traditional port functions have been eclipsed by their other roles as manufacturing, financial, service, and administrative centres —

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<sup>39</sup> Tan Tai Yong, 'Port Cities and Hinterlands: A Comparative Study of Singapore and Calcutta', *Political Geography* 26, no. 7 (September 2007): 859–61.

<sup>40</sup> John Curtis Perry, *Singapore: Unlikely Power* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 259; Carola Hein, ed., *Port Cities: Dynamic Landscapes and Global Networks* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), 51.

therefore allowing them to retain their dynamism and cosmopolitanism previously tied to their port city status.

London and New York are prominent examples of port cities turned global cities with diverse functions. In particular, London's riverine port struggled to remain commercially viable in light of innovations like the bulk carrier and container. However, London continues to thrive as a global financial centre, having the most foreign banks of any financial centre, and remaining a top trader of bonds and currencies. London also leads the world in terms of areas of expertise like maritime law, journalism and intelligence, continuing to retain and attract human capital.<sup>41</sup>

Singapore has morphed into one of these world maritime cities, and remains one of the busiest container ports in the world. It is currently the world's top transshipment hub, feeding transshipments to smaller ports which lack deep water or cannot afford investing in facilities that would enable container handling.<sup>42</sup> But what next? An open city-state sustained by global flows will face tensions when it has also to function as a nation-state. The requirements of an international clientele and an open economy on the one hand, and the interests of a local citizenry, on the other, may often prove inimical. More fundamentally, the construction of national identity will constantly be subjected to the shifting strains of the myriad of cultural forms and traditions that are characteristic of a port city.

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<sup>41</sup> John Curtis Perry, *Singapore: Unlikely Power* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 260.

<sup>42</sup> John Curtis Perry, *Singapore: Unlikely Power* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 206-8.

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Professor Tan Tai Yong  
30 January 2019

The tensions and contradictions of a city that is also a country will be the subject of my next lecture.