

Report on The Singapore Bicentennial Conference 30 September to 1 October 2019

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About the conference

The Singapore Bicentennial Conference examined not only Singapore's 200-year history since Sir Stamford Raffles arrived in 1819 but also the older recorded history of Singapore at least 500 years before that. Another important aspect examined by the conference was the evolution of governance in a successful post-colonial state. The programme included a special dialogue with Deputy Prime Minister of Singapore and Minister for Finance, Mr Heng Swee Keat. The objective of the conference was to help us reflect on the ways that our history can provide important ballast for the country as it navigates the uncertain age that the world seems to have entered. This is a report of the proceedings.

Session One: War & Wealth

Opening the conference at Session One, titled "War & Wealth", Professor Peter Frankopan brought the audience on a journey through the historical trading routes of the world.

On the overland Silk Road, he noted how the analysis tended to focus on extremes — such as the vast distances the routes spanned whereas the most intense activities took place among those who lived closest to each other.

Turning to ancient maritime trade routes, Prof. Frankopan explained how the winds dictated ship movements and where traders would seek safe harbour waiting for a change in the seasons and wind directions. These became cosmopolitan port cities and hubs for the flow of information, ideas, goods and people between the East and the West. However, once these cities were successful, people would seek "to replicate them and in the worst case, provide a target for unwelcome attention."

Singapore was such a hub where its early success invited attempts to take it over by neighbouring empires and eventually the great powers of Europe. He concluded by elaborating on China's contemporary efforts to revive the old Silk Road via its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and the escalating contestation for power in the region, much like it had been in the past.

The second speaker, Associate Professor (A/P) Peter Borschberg focused more closely on Singapore in the 16th to 18th centuries when the country found itself in a heavily contested geopolitical space.

Displaying an old Portuguese map, he indicated how Singapore was located where two maritime trading zones — the Bay of Bengal and the South China Sea — overlapped. Contrary to notions that Stamford Raffles “discovered” Singapore’s strategic importance, A/P Borschberg argued that the island was already a naval base of Melaka, a gatekeeper to towns along the Johor River, and a rendezvous point for Portuguese and Spanish armadas in the 1500s and 1600s.

However, the destruction of Malacca in 1511, the encroachment into the region by the European trading firms, and the shifting of the Johor Sultanate’s capital from the Johor River to Bintan led to Singapore’s decline, which was the state in which Raffles found it when he arrived.

A/P Borschberg concurred with Prof. Frankopan that Singapore remained in a contested space, stating that “security before 1819 was multipolar and due to this multipolarity, very fragile. And Singapore may revert to that again one day.”

Question-and-Answer Session



From left: Prof Peter Frankopan, Prof Danny Quah (moderator) and A/P Peter Borschberg react to an audience member’s question.

A participant asked what the ethnic profile was in pre-colonial Singapore society. A/P Borschberg said there were no statistics on this but added that at that time, race was not as much of a form of identity as language spoken or the tribal group one belonged to. “When they talk about Malays, they’re talking about people who spoke Malay, but we don’t know what ethnicity they were.”

The audience also asked questions about great power contestation throughout history in the region till the present, including the BRI. Prof. Frankopan observed that the prominence of the United Nations had declined since the 1990s, and that all states were under pressure to find ways to cooperate in spite of that, to respond to new transboundary challenges like climate change. “The best thing is to be flexible, understand what’s going on the world, and work out how to cooperate with people who are in a position similar to you,” he added. In response to a question on how geopolitical considerations and regional trading systems would be affected by the rise of the digital economy. A/P Borschberg said that physical shipping routes were still important as so much of global trade continued to be about physical goods.

Dinner Dialogue with Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat chaired by Ambassador Chan Heng Chee

With the conference focused on the bicentennial commemoration, Ambassador (Amb) Chan Heng Chee asked Deputy Prime Minister (DPM) Heng about the significance of various aspects of Singapore’s history to the modern state.



Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat answers a question from the audience as Ambassador Chan Heng Chee looks on.

DPM Heng said the British legacy of the use of English as an official language had been an advantage to commerce and diplomacy; the British rule of law and structures of governance remained important facets of Singapore as an independent nation. These underpinned economic development, foreign relations, the social compact between the government and citizens, and Singapore's effort to be an exceptional nation that remained relevant to the world despite its size.

Noting the ups and downs of Singapore's history, the dialogue turned to prospects for the future. Responding to questions about possible fissures in local society arising from differences such as nationality and race, DPM Heng agreed that social harmony should not be taken for granted. On an individual level, he urged each person to maintain a belief in Singapore's multiculturalism. Meanwhile, legal provisions such as the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act and policies like the Ethnic Integration Policy were there to address discrimination and greater threats of social discord.

Looking on the global plane, DPM Heng suggested that natural catastrophes could pose serious threats to Singapore in the future. Apart from international cooperation to mitigate environmental crises, local strategies like the Zero Waste Masterplan and "30% by 2030" goal of food self-sufficiency helped Singapore to play its part in reducing the burden it placed on the planet.

On the issue of rising regional economic competition, DPM Heng noted that Singapore had set up initiatives like Infrastructure Asia to support projects in the region with "good economic and social returns", but Singapore also needed to harness technology and restructure industries so that its domestic economy could stay competitive. He also acknowledged long-term difficulties accompanying US-China tensions, which he said were fundamentally about values and systems than simply about trade imbalances. He added that that situation was made more complex by non-state actors taking advantage of the political situation.

Thus, DPM Heng emphasised the importance of Singapore playing its part to promoting multilateral systems with like-minded nations, where countries would be regarded as partners regardless of their size — in order to deal with such large-scale threats as climate crisis, food security and pandemics.

For him, there was no contradiction between national interests and global cooperation. "Compete with one another to push ourselves towards excellence," he said, "but at the same time we also cooperate to maintain peace and stability around the world."

Session Two: Separations & Connections

The first speaker of Session Two, titled "Separations and Connections", Prof. Leonard Andaya examined Singapore's place in the *Negara Selat*, or the "realm of the straits", and the importance of the Straits of Melaka.

He argued that before the 19th century, Singapore was an outpost, as opposed to a major entrepôt on the scale of Srivijaya and Melaka. Nonetheless, Singapore was a base for the *orang laut*, or "sea people", who played an important role as protectors of sea lanes for Malay kingdoms, and shared a complementary relationship with, rather than subordinate position, to

the Malays. The orang laut had superior navigational skills and knowledge of the waters of the Negara Selat, while the Malays had superior organisation in international trade and could attract traders. They cooperated well in the key port cities in the region.

Next, Professor Wang Gungwu remarked that in Singapore's earlier history as a British colony, the connection between the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean were emphasised. Singapore had a particular role of linking China to the region and then, to Calcutta. The link with the immediate region, the rest of the Straits of Malacca or the Indonesian archipelago, was, on the other hand, weaker.

To explain by using a contrast, when the British arrived in Hong Kong, it became their priority to connect deeply with the hinterland, China. Gradually, however, Singapore became less important to the British as the direct India-China connection became dominant.

When Singapore tried to reconnect more closely to the Malay world, its links with the Chinese and its Chinese population made that more challenging. With the Japanese occupation came another kind of separation, that between the Malays, Indians and Chinese. This was because the Japanese did not trust the Chinese and instead built their connections with the Malays and Indians.

Subsequent connections that the British tried to establish for Singapore, such as with the Federation of Malaya, "were essentially failures" as they were unstable, and that was not a surprise given that history of its separation from the region.

Question-and-Answer Session

One theme that arose in the discussion was that the orang laut. One participant explained how the orang laut were still very much present in Singapore society today.

On the topic of reconnection with the region, Prof. Andaya said that Singapore could play a leadership role because of its wealth and facilities, which would attract scholars to drive a deeper appreciation of it. At the same time, he acknowledged the division of the Malay world that resulted from the nature of European colonialism, and the envy that confronted Singapore as barriers to overcome.

On the question of Hong Kong's identity and connections in contrast to Singapore's connection to the region, Prof. Wang said, "China was actively involved in Hong Kong affairs from 1840 right down to the present. It never really stopped ... that connection is so close that it is so difficult for Hong Kongers today to try and seek and find their own identity." Singapore's separations in 1819 and 1965 on the other hand granted it independence and allowed it to define itself. It had to be recognised, Prof Wang said, that "two centuries of separation has developed a habit of mind which makes it much easier for Singapore to connect with distant places — the farther away the better — whereas connecting nearby is somewhat less comfortable,".



From left: Prof Wang Gungwu answers an audience member's question as Mr Kwa Chong Guan (moderator) and Prof Leonard Andaya observe.

Session Three: Contestation & Choices

The Third Session titled “Contestation & Choices” began with the presentation by Professor Gyan Prakash who explained how the Second World War and the post-war upheavals shaped the forms of post-colonial states that came into being and their agendas.

He explained that these “introduced new and strange elements, excited political loyalties and enmities, and intensified struggles for power”; the global economic system controlled by European colonial empires was dismantled.

The nation-state became the dominant model for post-colonial development, with the rise of mass politics, a hardening of borders and the end to the free movement of people across them. The post-colonial states centralised power within their borders to make radical changes, and when improvements failed to materialise, became increasingly authoritarian.

Bringing a more local perspective to the decolonisation process, Professor Tan Tai Yong gave an overview of the turbulence in post-war South East Asia as the Americans and Communist bloc battled for the hearts and minds of newly independent states seeking national ideologies and identities.

Turning specifically to Singapore, he elaborated on the “British Grand Design” in that period of decolonisation, for Malaya and Singapore, with all three parties having different motives and visions for the process.

The mass detentions of leftwing activists were key, with Prof. Tan adding, “This was a very fundamental decision on what the future of Singapore should look like: a left-leaning communist or socialist kind of model, or one that is open to connecting with the rest of the world, one that is prepared to be part of a larger federation embracing Malaysian identity.”

Eventually, Lee Kuan Yew, the leader of the nationalist movement in Singapore managed to realise his vision of a multiracial Malaysian Malaysia but only after it country separated to become an independent state.

Question-and-Answer Session



Mr Ho Kwon Ping (centre) moderating the Q&A session with Prof Gyan Prakash and Prof Tan Tai Yong.

In response to a question about how Singapore could do more to acknowledge the historical role of the political left, Prof. Tan noted that historiography and history continued to evolve as new interpretations and sources surfaced. “The national narrative that many of us grew up understanding is not sufficient anymore,” he said. He added that all historians were effectively “revisionists”, revising what they understood in the face of fresh evidence, so the term and the role should not be viewed negatively as long as the process was undertaken “responsibly and with intellectual honesty.”

Responding to a question on how Singapore could cultivate a national identity while remaining a global city, Prof. Tan brought up his concept of “rooted cosmopolitanism” where one retains a sense of being Singaporean while remaining globally connected.



A member of the public poses a question to the panellists in Session Three.

Prof. Prakash responded to a question on whether Singapore was truly decolonised by stating that decolonising the mind was often much harder than erasing physical attributes of subjugation. On the other hand, Prof. Tan questioned Singapore was ever truly colonised, observing that the attributes that made the pre-colonial island successful were not removed but in fact exploited by the British and is what we continue to benefit from today.

Session Four: Diversity & Identity

The first speaker of Session Four, titled “Diversity & Identity”, A/P Farish Ahmad-Noor argued that Southeast Asian identities had historically been “very complex, very messy” and had its own way of dealing with its rich multiculturalism.

In contrast, colonial multiculturalism defined identities around race and with fixed boundaries as a way to keep communities apart.

He noted that current practice of identity politics claimed to be emancipatory but they are actually built on the language of the empire — thinking of identity in exclusive, static, fixed terms — and added that it is therefore important to recognise the “vocabularies from colonisation”.

Southeast Asians needed, he argued, to recognise that they can be many things at the same time and be comfortable with complexity.

Global politics had divided communities and the region; it broke our connections with the maritime region, said A/P Farish, but the time had arrived for Singaporeans to embrace diversity, messiness and complexities as they will have to live and work in the region in the jobs of the future.

Next, Prof. Brenda Yeoh traced a history of diversity in Singapore, while also noting that hints of colonial attitudes remained in Singapore's contemporary migrant labour policies.

She cited colonial Singapore's liberal open-door policy on immigration, the ensuing processes of mixing, fusion and hybridisation, shifts in Singapore citizenship laws over time, the ideology of "separate but equal" multiracialism in the nation-building phase, and more recently, the introduction of double-barrelled race classification.

On the other hand, she noted how the notion of multiracialism did not apply to non-residents; migrant workers in Singapore were subjected to a form of "containment strategy", not unlike the colonial enclaves of the past. The success of colonial Singapore was powered by migrant labour with little government responsibility nor rights for those migrants, and we should therefore be very mindful of replicating that social reproduction of labour in this new age.

Question-and-Answer Session

Participants posed questions about issues such as the importance of Southeast Asian identity; whether Southeast Asia could be positive and successful at multiculturalism in a world where this approach was being challenged; how Singapore should engage with the rest of Southeast Asia; and whether there could be "a healthy level of prescriptiveness" in Singapore's policies ensuring social cohesion.

A/P Farish said that while the public should "stop harping on states and expecting states to perform miracles", still "the state has to create avenues for understanding, genuine communication, ethical communication."

The speakers also expressed some pessimism about the region. A/P Farish shared that one of his biggest fears was a divided Southeast Asia with "comfortable, open-minded, cosmopolitan Southeast Asian elites ... swimming on a sea of 600 million poor Southeast Asians who are not mobile."



Prof Vineeta Sinha (centre) moderating the Q&A session with A/P Farish Ahmad-Noor and Prof Brenda Yeoh.

On the other hand, it was not impossible for Singaporeans to connect deeply to the region. A/P Farish shared that “as a Malaysian married to a Singaporean of Indonesian origin, I don’t have to look for ASEAN — it’s at the dinner table every time I go back.” Prof. Yeoh added, “We talk about Southeast Asia as though it’s out there. Aren’t we in Southeast Asia, and isn’t Southeast Asia here, in us, with us?”

Session Five: Fighters & Builders

The first speaker of the Fifth Session, titled “Fighters & Builders”, Prof. Tommy Koh opened the session by noting that most leaders of independence were passionate, charismatic and fearless fighters against colonial rule, but many fell short in building up their nation-states.

Singapore took a different path because its pioneer leadership were visionaries and risk-takers and managed build it up successfully.

His worry was that the spirit of innovation and risk-taking was on a decline as leaders became conservative and cautious with the country’s success.

As such, he wished to share an eight-point wish list for the next prime minister to consider: to keep Singapore safe especially from attacks through cyberwarfare and online falsehoods; maintaining Singapore’s racial and religious harmony; investigating discriminatory practices that might undermine this; making Singapore a more equal society; making it a more caring and inclusive one as well; engaging ASEAN in trade and people-to-people ties more;

demonstrating global thought leadership in sustainable development; and finally, be more welcoming of the contestation of ideas as a necessary part of democracy. “What Singapore needs is not sycophants but loving critics and critical lovers,” appealed Prof. Koh.

The second speaker John Micklethwait began with the observation that “if something cannot go on forever, it will stop.” Noting that this applied to both economic, political and even environmental issues, he said that there were two huge forces at work globally that simply could not go on forever — dragging politics to the left in the ideological spectrum was inequality; and dragging politics to the right was the sense that government did not work. “People are right to be cross,” said Mr Micklethwait.

While Singapore was “not a perfect democracy” because it was an urban economy and a small state, there was so much the world could learn from it like paying for good public services like it did for good teachers; involving citizens in sustaining the fiscal system as they too paid their share for services; and keeping the government relatively small.

He concluded by expressing his confidence that Singapore would continue to be relevant even in the midst of contestation between the US and China if its government was seen as a competitive advantage.

Question-and-Answer Session

In response to a question on popular comparisons of China and Singapore for the longevity of the respective ruling parties and perceived authoritarianism, Prof. Koh rejected that assertion as “inappropriate” by highlighting how Singaporeans enjoyed universal suffrage and exercised their political rights in regular, contestable elections, which were absent in China. In addition, he said, “Singapore is too small and too unique to be a model for China or for anybody else.”

Responding to a question about whether some of his ideas contradict social harmony, Prof. Koh cited that uplifting the Malay community for a more equal society -- which was part of his wish list -- would in fact enhance social harmony, as nobody would then feel they were falling behind the rest to illustrate how there was no such contradiction.

Asked what would be an alternative to capitalism, Prof. Koh replied that the right question to ask was what kind of capitalism Singapore wanted, and pushed for more effort to reduce extreme wage disparities for a form of “moral capitalism” to prevail.

Responding to a question about the US-China rivalry, Mr Micklethwait remarked that it was a very long-term contest and that it would be a mistake to think it was merely associated with the current US President.



From left: Prof Tommy Koh elaborates on a point while Mr Warren Fernandez (moderator) and Mr John Micklethwait look on.

He said for a while even before the election of Donald Trump, the Americans had felt “the dragon’s breath on their shoulder”. He added that the emerging split or regionalisation of supply chains would pose a challenge to business organisations and small trading nations like Singapore which we should all prepare for as we look ahead.

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