Singapore's port-city past has helped shape its identity

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The Straits Times, 30 January 2019

As a port city that goes back hundreds of years, Singapore has seen vast changes in what constitutes its hinterlands and this has shaped its present-day identity.

The study of Singapore's history as a port city can supplement colonial and nation-state narratives, historian Tan Tai Yong said on Wednesday (Jan 30) at an IPS-Nathan lecture at Yale-NUS College.

He said the functions of port cities - with their hinterlands dependent on economic conditions - often shape the composition, social structure and development of mercantile groups as well as institutions.

Professor Tan, who is also president of Yale-NUS College, said: "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."

His lecture, titled "Singapore's story: a port city in search of hinterlands", traced the changing face of Singapore's port and its hinterlands over the past 700 years. It is the third public lecture by the historian since his first last September. About 300 people were in attendance.

The lecture series takes a look at Singapore's 700-year history as the island marks the bicentennial of the British arrival in 1819. He noted that Singapore's hinterland in the early centuries as a transshipment centre was effectively the maritime space around it and not dependent on nearby land mass.

During the colonial era, Singapore became "the great emporium and fulcrum" of the trade of the neighbouring seas. It dealt mainly in local produce - agricultural and mineral products in the Malayan archipelago - and sent them to colonial ports for packing and shipment to consumer countries. Trade also expanded to the various islands of the East Indies, the Peninsula, Siam and parts of Indo-China.

With a liberal immigration policy for traders and workers, the overlapping hinterlands and networks created a port city of immigrants from China, India, the Malay Archipelago and other places, said Prof Tan.

He said these different trading communities eventually constituted the plural and cosmopolitan society of Singapore. From there, a local experience began to emerge.

He said: "Singapore became the heart of the intellectual world of South-east Asia. From the late 19th 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.

"The port city became a dynamic force for social change."

By the late 19th century, Singapore became a staple port to the Malay peninsula. Singapore was where tin, rubber and petroleum extracted from the peninsula were processed and exported to the rest of the world.

By this time, noted Prof Tan, Singapore had become so used to this hinterland that it had "become inconceivable that the island could actually survive without it".

After World War II, Singapore's political leaders desired to create a common market with Malaya. Singapore briefly regained her northern hinterland when it formed Malaysia with the Federation of Malaya, Sabah and Sarawak in 1963.

Prof Tan noted that after Independence, Singapore has continued to define and redefine its hinterland.

In the early 2000s, political leaders described Singapore as having a seven-hour hinterland, encompassing a region within a seven-hour flight radius from Singapore, referring to major markets such as Asean, China, India and Australia.

While the port continues to shape the fortunes of the country, Prof Tan suggested other ways forward.

The idea of a fixed economic hinterland has lost its meaning for Singapore - now a global city in a globalised world.

His suggestion is to always remain open, be flexible and to look out for opportunities. "Hinterlands may shift, but if you can make yourself relevant, you will be able to adapt."

He cited the examples of New York and London with their declining world ports. He said both places "have transformed into global cities with diverse functions".