

South-east Asia largely inspired by ancient Indic civilisation, says NUS historian

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SINGAPORE - For the first 1,000 years of recorded history, the South-east Asian region was most responsive to the Indic civilisation from the Indian sub-continent, and adopted many of its elements to shape distinct cultures, said renowned historian Wang Gungwu.

Records and artefacts show that the peoples of this region did not develop their own civilisations, said Prof Wang, best known for his explorations of Chinese history and his writings on the Chinese diaspora.

Instead, early South-east Asians adopted practices of those they were in contact with. Besides the Indic civilisation, they were also influenced by the Sinic civilisation in China and the Mediterranean civilisation.

Being at the centre of this region, Singapore's national identity was also moulded by these ancient civilisations.

Prof Wang was speaking at the Institute of Policy Studies' (IPS) 12th IPS-Nathan Lecture Series, entitled Living With Civilisations: Reflections On South-east Asia's Local And National Cultures, on Tuesday at the Shaw Foundation Alumni House in National University of Singapore (NUS).

Prof Wang, IPS' 12th S R Nathan Fellow, has been a university professor at the National University of Singapore since 2007, and an emeritus professor at the Australian National University since 1988.

The 92-year-old began his teaching career at the University of Malaya (UM), Singapore, in 1957 after completing his doctorate at University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies. He went on to become dean of UM's arts faculty (1962-1963) and a professor of history there (1963-1968).

He currently also serves as a senior fellow at Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Diplomatic Academy and is adviser to the Ministry of Education's Social Science Research Council. Among his many accolades, he was awarded the Distinguished Service Order in 2020 by the Singapore Government.

This was his first lecture of a four-part series on how the cultures of South-east Asia interacted with other civilisations, and how these civilisations shaped local identities and cultures in turn.

The predominant Indic civilisation offered original and esoteric insights into life that inspired many in this part of the world.

The Khmer, Thai and Burmese consolidated their Indic heritage through their versions of Buddhist authority, which provided strong foundations for developing their modern national culture.

“Neither the Khmers and their successors nor the Archipelagic (in South-east Asia) elites produced visionaries of their own with independent world views that could have led to civilisations of their own,” said Prof Wang.

“Both sets of states were content to shape their own respective cultures by selecting what they wanted from Indic civilisation.”

The Chinese, attracted to Buddhism within the Indic spirituality, were drawn to South-east Asia. The expansion of their trade in the South China Sea was largely based on the natural products collected by the Hindu-Buddhist peoples for their commercial needs.

For centuries, it was the spiritual light of “western Heaven” in India that drew the Chinese to the region, Prof Wang said.

“From Fa Xian’s travel account of the early fifth century to Yi Jing’s two volumes on monks travelling to India via Sri Vijaya in the seventh century, there was enough testimony of the Indic magnet that stimulated Chinese maritime trade across the South China Sea,” he said, referring to Chinese monks. Sri Vijaya was an old capital in Palembang, where Buddhist scholars studied Indic civilisation.

The people of Nusantara, or maritime South-east Asia, were no less influenced by Indic civilisation, as evidenced by monuments such as Borobudur and Prambanan, said Prof Wang.

Much of archipelagic South-east Asia gave up on their Indic heritage later, turning to the monotheistic Islamic civilisation instead.

The Indic civilisation’s emphasis on rigid caste divisions also did not take root here, a clear example of how this region was selective in what it assimilated in local cultures.

“What was striking was that the peoples of our region had their local genius. This enabled them to choose only what they wanted so that they could enrich and empower their own cultures,” said Prof Wang.

The Age of Enlightenment in Europe led the world to the idea of modern civilisation subsequently. By the 19th century, this modern civilisation began to impact all the cultures in Asia that the European civilisations encountered.

However, the European civilisations’ mission was diminished in the 20th century by the two world wars that brought an end to national empires.

Singapore’s development was shaped by many civilisational influences, as well as the rise of global maritime trade and its role as a port under the British empire.

“Singapore has had to live with several civilisations when the city-state became independent,” said Prof Wang. “It chose an exceptional path by declaring its commitment to a ‘plural-society’ nationhood.”