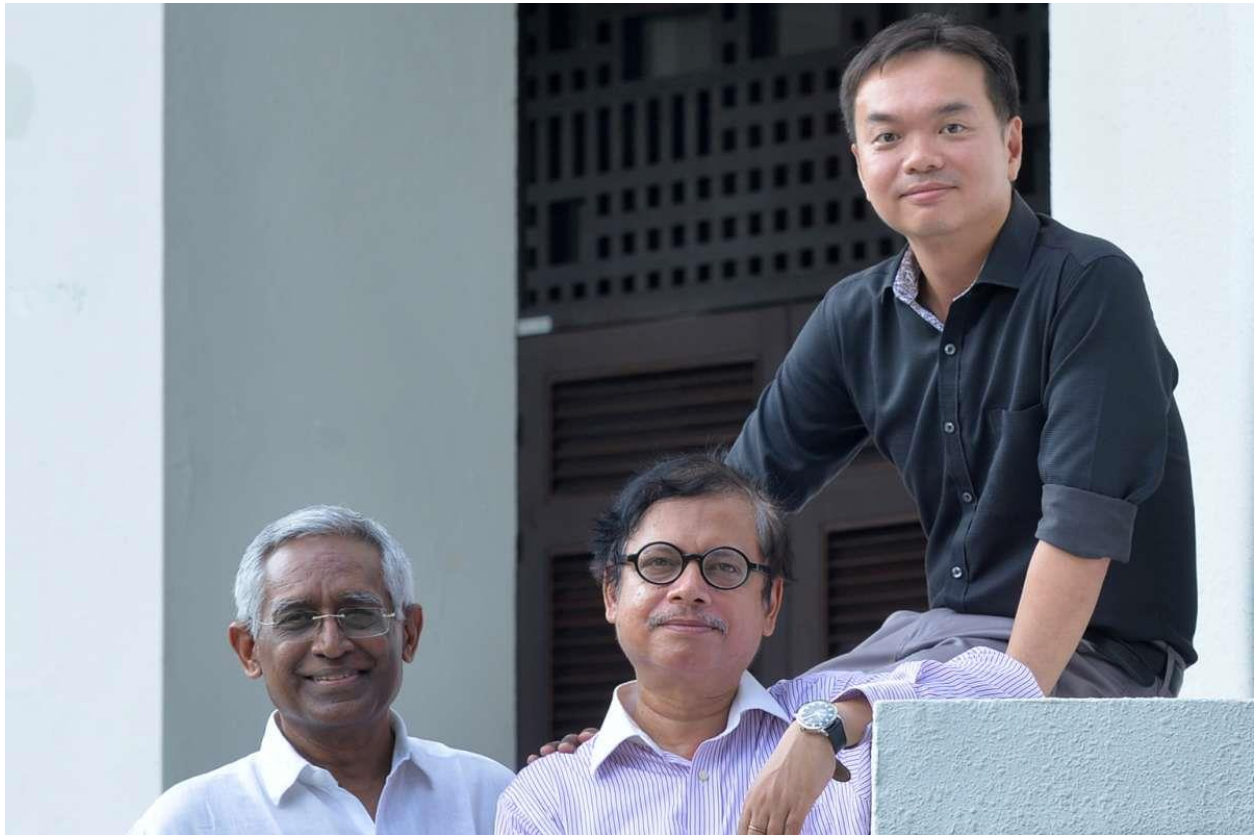


## Tracing Singapore's Roots

Singapore Chronicles is a series of carefully balanced accounts of the island's history from its days as a staging post for traders to the global city it is today

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The Singapore Chronicles' general editors (from left) Arun Mahizhnan and Asad Latif and their research assistant Sim Jui Liang. ST PHOTO: DESMOND FOO

LAST Thursday, on the last day of the Committee of Supply debates in Parliament, the subject of history - the very mention of which bores most schoolchildren to tears - came under scrutiny.

This was when Ms Grace Fu, Minister for Culture, Community and Youth, and Workers' Party leader Low Thia Kiang sparred over whether the Government imposes a "standard" or "official", as opposed to objective, account of Singapore history.

Ms Fu, for one, cited ample examples of available diverse perspectives on, among other things, Singapore's merger with the Federation of Malaya and parts of Borneo to form Malaysia in 1963.

Ms Fu and Mr Low may be glad to learn, then, that Singaporeans now have recourse to a wide-ranging series of factual, pithy and carefully balanced accounts of Singapore's history from its days as an almost deserted staging post for traders to the global city it is today.

All the books in this 50-volume series, with the first 10 launched in December last year, are edited by Arun Mahizhnan and Asad Latif, who work at the National University of Singapore's Institute of Policy Studies (IPS).

The reader might well cock an eyebrow at anyone who claims to be objective about history.

It is not for nothing that the saying "History is written by the victors" rings true.

Well, for one thing, Mahizhnan tells me that for certain subjects, "a master narrative has largely been articulated by the Government, but as far as this series is concerned, we do not echo this... We have been very conscientious about this because it is imperative for the sake of IPS' reputation and the usefulness of the series to give an objective account".

So here, for example, is how Nicholas Tarling, author of the volume Colonial Singapore, deals with merger: "The Malaysia scheme was pushed forward with remarkable speed after the Tunku declared his interest late in May 1961... being that he could (as the British Foreign Secretary the Earl of Home said) 'absorb the Chinese population of Singapore by bringing in the Borneo Territories to redress the racial balance; at the same time, this might forestall Indonesian ambitions in the area'."

When merger led to Separation in 1965, Tarling notes: "Extrusion from Malaysia undid the economic policies that the PAP connected with merger.

"Indeed Goh Keng Swee had already realised that the common market with the rest of Malaysia would not eventuate and argued for secession."

Tarling and his fellow authors' brief was to write precise and concise primers that A-level students could read easily; that are authoritative yet not scholarly; that are engaging and rich in insights backed by facts. They were also to "stick to the facts of what happened" for the most part, then proffer their views on the future.

"If we eliminated all opinions, it would be anaemic," says Mahizhnan.

All but two among the authors have surpassed those expectations.

The supple, measured insights of, most notably, Tarling, Goh Yihan on law and Thio Li-Ann on presidency, help readers see immediately where they stand in relation to Singapore and encourage hard thinking.

Amid the raucous court of public opinion, the Chronicles are a talisman.

## **FACT FILE**

### **Five Books became 50 Volumes**

When your boss asks that you do 10 times the work you had anticipated, you have quite a challenge on your hands.

That was what public communications expert Arun Mahizhnan, 70, faced after he recommended that his workplace, the National University of Singapore's Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), commemorate Singapore's Jubilee Year by publishing five books on such topics as national identity and community-building.

In an interview with The Sunday Times, he said his boss Janadas Devan, who is IPS' director as well as the Government's communications chief, decided that it should be 50 volumes instead.

Mr Devan also said that these should be shaped into a series, comprising factual and objective primers on, as Mr Devan says, "what makes Singapore Singapore".

To Messrs Devan, Mahizhnan and IPS' Board of Advisors, that ranged from Singapore's Constitution, heritage and legal and education systems to the Central Provident Fund, food and literature.

Mahizhnan enlisted Asad Latif, 58, a leader writer for, and former journalist of, The Straits Times as the Chronicles' project consultant.

"Asad has immense experience... and extraordinary language skills," says Mahizhnan. Among many other books, Asad is the co-editor of the book George Yeo On Bonsai, Banyan And The Tao and biographer of Singapore pioneer Lim Kim San.

Mahizhnan roped in Sim Jui Liang, 41, a research assistant at IPS who had worked at a publishing house, to play "good cop, bad cop" with the authors, chasing them to meet the series' strict publishing deadlines.

IPS' Board of Advisors, chaired by diplomat Tommy Koh, then sifted through the list of 80 topics suggested by IPS scholars and whittled it down to 50. In this, there were sometimes curious consequences, such as the dropping of Performing Arts. In its place are books on Literature, Visual Arts and Theatre.

As to who would write them, Mahizhnan recalls: "We got domain experts in the field. Their peers then reviewed the books, without knowing who wrote each book." Given the brief, they did not confine these experts to academics, but also included civil servants and journalists with long, deep views on past and present Singapore.

Mahizhnan, who has been at IPS since 1991, is its former deputy director and is now its special research adviser, which means that, among other things, he drives special projects such as the Chronicles, of which he is lead editor.

He was senior producer of current affairs programmes at Radio Television Singapore, then public affairs manager at Mobil Oil Singapore, then chief executive of public relations firm Hill & Knowlton. As he puts it, having worked with the Government for 45 years, he has a "ringside seat" on Singapore history. It will, he says, cost "close to \$1 million" to create all the Chronicles, including a cash grant from the SG50 Committee's Jubilee celebration fund.

From the outset, the team decided that it would not bust its guts producing all 50 volumes at once. Which was just as well, he muses, because he and his teammates found it "a constant vigil" to get the manuscripts polished enough for publication.

And he found that he and his teammates were not the only ones to find the Singapore Chronicles project daunting.

He says that, in general, publishers here "still have a paucity of experience in so many areas", including copy-editing. "I hope publishers improve our game. We have to gear up for large-scale productions," he adds.

## **FIVE QUESTIONS THESE BOOKS ANSWER**

1. Why has the development of education in Singapore been such a tangled web?
2. Why does the Government always give the military so much money to spend on arms?
3. What are some individual rights that Singapore had to sacrifice because it is small and vulnerable?
4. Why was there such a rush to merge Malaysia, Singapore and some parts of Borneo in 1963?
5. How difficult is it for Singapore to strike a balance between its interests and its ties with other countries?

## **JUST A MINUTE**

### **The Good**

1. The 12 authors of these first 10 volumes of the Singapore Chronicles, as well as their two lead editors, are not yet household names. But most of them ought to be after their stellar efforts in distilling the clearest streams of thought from a murky, if relatively short, history. Their narratives are as much primers on sharp writing as they are on balanced thinking on history.

### **The Bad**

1. The volume on heritage by Kennie Ting, National Heritage Board's Group Director of Museums and Development, falls at the first hurdle. He asserts that every Singaporean is an expert on Singaporean heritage. As he puts it in the opening pages: "Consider this: The average Singaporean believes he or she is no connoisseur of heritage. My counter-argument - and the implicit premise of this book - is that as long as he or she knows intimately, the delicious fragrance, texture and taste of Hainanese chicken rice, or mee goreng, or roti prata, or any of those Singaporean foods we hold so dear; as long as he or she speaks any of our many languages and dialects (including our very own patois, Singlish); or worships at any of the many religious institutions we have on our shores; as long as he or she has grown up in even one of

the many diverse places and precincts we boast of... then he or she is an expert in heritage; or at the very least in Singaporean heritage." Really? Then what would Ting make of, say, a Singaporean teen who was born and has lived only overseas; who has learnt to cook the traditional dishes of her Peranakan mother, who has learnt from her father how to curse in Singlish and who is an atheist? His narrative seems to say a lot without saying very much. Occasionally, the reader may even confuse his descriptions of heritage for nostalgia.

### **The Iffy**

1. Many among the authors of these 10 Chronicles, such as S. Gopinathan, Vineeta Sinha, Kevin Y. L. Tan and Nicholas Tarling, refer to their books and other works quite a bit in their narratives. Given that the Chronicles are meant as primers, not academic treatises, they would have helped readers by giving them a range of views for further reading. After all, their narratives are solid and so will not only stand up to deeper scrutiny, but also stand out against the competing narratives with which they are being compared and contrasted.



Kevin Y L Tan

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