

Annex

Citation on the inaugural Singapore History Prize winning work “Singapore and the Silk Road of the Sea, 1300 – 1800” by Professor John Miksic

In the style of Fernand Braudel’s famous history of the Mediterranean, John Miksic’s *Singapore & the Silk Road of the Sea* explores the vast waters of Southeast Asia and asserts their role as a crucial nursery for civilisation and as the essential context for Singapore’s forgotten past.

This magisterial history calls persuasively upon recent archaeological revelations to refute the common misconception that Singapore’s history began with Raffles in 1819. Instead, Miksic contends, the archaeological record depicts a former Singapore as one of several important ports from approximately 1300 to 1600 AD, with the golden age of trade ending around the year 1400. Additionally, the population of this vibrant port appears to have been strikingly diverse (in a manner that echoes today’s demographics) as the strategically placed Malayo-Polynesian island also sat at a regular juncture of India and China. The medley of exotic wares passing through this port bears the stamp of highly internationalised trade, with glass beads and bronze bowls with knobbed bases suggesting India contact, nephrite from Taiwan, China’s famed porcelain, spices from the Moluccas, as well as coins, silk and sundry pottery sherds implying a rich diversity of commerce and tribute. Even Greco-Roman statuary makes an appearance in the regional commercial frenzy.

Miksic covers an ample timeline with memorable detail. He carries the reader through the many great trading kingdoms of Southeast Asia, beginning with the Mekong Delta-centred state of Funan (glimpsed through the famed archaeological site Oc-eo) and on to the rise of the ‘Island empires’ of Kedah’s Sungai Mas, Batujava and Cibuaya of Java, and others. This array of trading centres eventually gave way to Srivijaya of South Sumatra, which successfully drove the secondary ports of Southeast Asia into submission, resulting in the largest trading hub of the Strait of Melaka. Upon the capture of their king by a warring India, the fall of Srivijaya would eventually give way to the rise of Singapore as one key trading post for the whole of Southeast Asia. It is in the 14th century that Singapore appears to be the first large-scale site of a Chinese expatriate community. Miksic also discusses the narratives on Singapore of the Malay Annals and the accounts of various travellers to the period of possible Siamese vassalage and sudden decline in the 15th century, concluding with a near-full withdrawal from history in the early 17th century. The volume brings to life the accounts of Wang Dayuan, Godinho de Eredia, Tome Pires, among others, in an effort to extract a convincing picture of the ancient island from a diverse set of voices.

Miksic clearly matches this extensive history with broad-based in-depth research, drawing upon a large number of original sources, the writings of Raffles and his associate John Crawfurd, and a large amount of newly discovered archaeological data. The specialist will be glad to find that the second half of the book does not shy away from the technical discussions of archaeological processes and discoveries that have shone considerable light on the darker eras of the island’s history. These chapters are critical to reinforce the key thesis on the longer history. At the same time, clear effort has been made to allow for an easy reading of the initial paragraphs of every section, as Miksic moves through the various critical archaeological sites of ancient Singapore (Fort Canning, Stamford Park, etc), its plentiful imports (qingbai, porcelain, glassware, etc), and even a number of archaeological techniques (Energy-Dispersive X-Ray Fluorescence allowing for the study of both the shape and composition of glass artefacts). This powerful level of detail provides critical evidence needed to corroborate the fascinating history that is spelled out in the first half of the book.

We now see that today's port city works in very similar fashion to that of many centuries ago. We realise that Kuala Lumpur, Bangkok, Naypyitaw, Phnom Penh, and Manila were all founded more recently than Singapore. We can now view the Singapore Cricket Club as a former manufacturing site. We can see the split between what Miksic calls the stable orthogenetic society and the dynamic heterogenetic society, with Singapore decidedly occupying the latter camp.

This book lays the foundations for a fundamental reinterpretation of the longer history of Singapore and its place in the larger Asian context. With this monumental piece of work, Miksic has helped to bring colour and definition to a whole new chapter of the Singaporean identity. This book is a deserving winner of the first Singapore History Prize.