

# Continuities and Changes: Singapore as a Port-City over 700 Years

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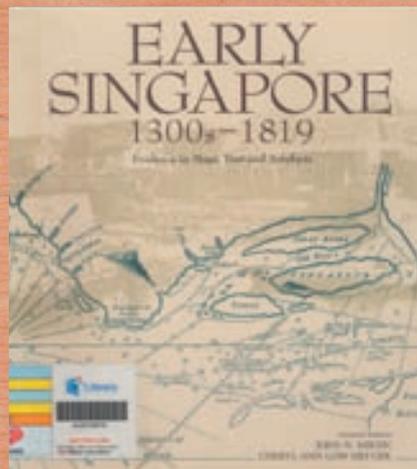
Situated at the southern tip of the Malay Peninsula, the waters around Singapore have, as early as the 14<sup>th</sup> century AD, been recognised by maritime navigators as strategic in international navigation, marking the access point between the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean. The key factor that underpinned this strategic significance was the development of a direct Indian Ocean-South China Sea trade, linking the economies of the West, the Indian Ocean littoral and the South China Sea.

Less known, however, is Singapore's long historical legacy as a port. Although the history of Singapore in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, first as a colonial port-city and then as an independent state that has managed to maintain its position as one of the busiest ports in the world, is well represented by a significant amount of literature, its historical legacy as a port prior to the 19<sup>th</sup> century has not been sufficiently explored.

Singapore's port functions, especially those of the last two centuries, had largely been generalised into those of an entrepot and staple port servicing the Malay Peninsula hinterland, when in fact, the port played a myriad of roles that were quite different from these. These roles have also remained fairly consistent despite the evolving nature of the regional and international forces that had swept through Singapore over the course of more than seven hundred years. What were they, and how did they define Singapore as a port in the *longue durée* of history?

### Singapore as an Indigenous Port before 1819

Some time in the late 13<sup>th</sup> century, an autonomous settlement was established on the north bank of the Singapore River. Known as Singapore, the settlement depended almost entirely on external sources for both its wealth and provisions. It was the only port in the Southern Malacca Straits region, and serviced ships and traders peddling in the region. It competed against rival



For further reading on Singapore before 1819, *Early Singapore 1300s – 1819* is an excellent source of material.

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ports along the Malacca Straits coast, such as Palembang, Jambi, Tamiang, Kota Cina, South Kedah, Lambri and Semudra, for a slice of the maritime trade pie.

Singapore's port functions were two-fold. Firstly, by making available several products that were in demand by the international markets, it attracted foreign traders to its port. According to the *Daoyi Zhilue Jiaoshi*, a Chinese account of



The *Daoyi Zhilue Jiaoshi* also provides a list of ports that functioned during the late 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries in the Malacca Straits region.

All Rights Reserved, Zhonghua Shu Ju, 1981.

the ports in Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean littoral, written by the Chinese trader Wang Dayuan some time in the mid-14<sup>th</sup> century, these were namely top quality hornbill casques, middle quality lakawood and cotton. The niche market was successfully established as these products, which were commonly found at other Southeast Asian ports, were unique in terms of their quality.

Secondly, it established itself as the gateway into the international and regional economic system for its immediate peripheral region. The immediate region, particularly South Johor and the Riau Archipelago, was a catchment area for Singapore's export products. In return, Singapore was the key source of foreign products to this region. Singapore was at the apex of this relationship, exerting a significant economic influence over the immediate region. This is substantiated by archaeological artifacts such as ceramics and glassware recovered from the Riau Archipelago.

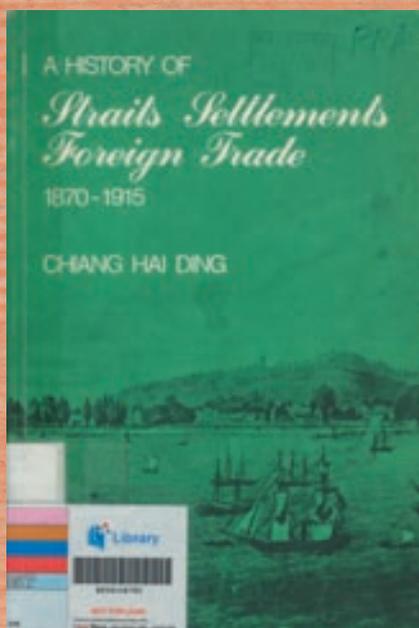
During this period, Singapore played only a minor role as a transshipment hub in international trade. Only one transshipment product was known to have been made available for export by Singapore – cotton – which could have originated either from Java or India.

By the 15<sup>th</sup> century, Singapore had declined as an international trading port in the face of the ascendance of the Malacca Sultanate. However, evidence revealed that international trade continued to be conducted on the island. A map of Singapore, drawn by the Portuguese Mathematician Manuel Godinho d'Eredia, shows the location of a sharbandar's office (the office of the Malay official responsible for international trade). Shards of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, and late 16<sup>th</sup> or early 17<sup>th</sup> century Chinese blue and white porcelain shards, were also recovered at the Singapore River and Kallang River.

Besides trading internationally, Singapore also provided other



position as an increasingly important trading port in Southeast Asia, coupled with its strategic location, enabled it to develop into a vital nodal point in the network of Asian and international shipping. Sailing vessels, and in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, steam vessels, used Singapore as a key port-of-call in their passage along the Asian sea routes. Thus, from the 1840s onwards, Singapore became an important coaling station for the steam shipping networks that were beginning to develop.



*A History of Straits Settlements Foreign Trade 1870 – 1915* offers an insight into the growth of Straits Settlements foreign trade during that period, and discusses the changes in its regional distribution.

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Towards the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Singapore as a port developed another important economic function – that of a staple port servicing a geographical hinterland. Following the instituting of the British Forward Movement in the Malay Peninsula in late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Singapore became the administrative capital of British Malaya. The Malay

Peninsula began to be systematically exploited for its natural resources, and Singapore, because of its role as a nodal point in the regional and international shipping networks, was developed to be the staple port and international export gateway of the Malayan hinterland. Transportation networks, both roads and railways, were developed to transport primary products, such as tin, rubber and crude oil, from different parts of the Malay Peninsula to Singapore to be processed into staple products, and then shipped to Britain and other international markets. This role, which was never played by any of the previous ports of Singapore, quickly became the most important one that came to characterise the port of Singapore during the colonial period.

### **Back to Our Roots: Singapore as an Indigenous Port Once Again (1963 – )**

In 1963, Singapore merged with Malaysia, ending approximately one hundred and fifty years of British colonial rule in Singapore. Although Singapore remained part of the Malay Peninsula, Singapore was no longer its administrative or economic capital. In addition, the processing of raw materials extracted in the Malay Peninsula, which was a vital aspect of Singapore's colonial port function, was severely curtailed by the absence of a common market between Singapore and the Malay Peninsula states. Singapore once again became a port-city devoid of a geographical hinterland.

Today, Singapore continues to function as an important nodal point in the network of regional and international shipping. In an age of shipping conglomerates with international networks, however, Singapore is no longer a crucial port-of-call. Neighbouring regions could, and have established, comparable ports-of-call. Singapore therefore has had to compete, as it did historically, against other ports in the region to attract trade and shipping to call at its port. This

has been done by making a range of products available for export to attract trade to the island. While Singapore does not possess any indigenous natural resources or products that are demanded by the international markets, the global consumer economy and globalisation have enabled Singapore to develop an export-oriented economy that is based on value-added manufacturing.

Devoid of a geographical hinterland since 1963, Singapore has successfully co-opted the regional and global markets as its virtual economic hinterland, successfully obtaining the raw or partially manufactured products needed for its value-added processing activities from these economies, and exporting the value-added products back into them through market access agreements such as the World Trade Organization directives and Free Trade Agreements. These manufacturing activities are not supported by domestic demand, but by external markets. The port acts as the gateway through which goods flow into the international markets. More recently, it has progressed to include activities such as the provision of financial and legal services as well as research and development, facilitating the already well-established port-related services conducted in Singapore.

The success of Singapore's economic activities has led it to expand its economic space over time. Presently, Singapore has managed to build up an enlarged economic sphere along the lines of the Extended Metropolitan Region. In this structure, Singapore is the centre of an integrated system of economic activities. The centre serves as the gateway to the international economy, and where there is the highest concentration of human and money capital. The peripheral region, namely Johor and the Riau Archipelago, supports Singapore by providing completed products that can be made available for export via the port of Singapore. This relationship mirrors that of the late 13<sup>th</sup> to early 17<sup>th</sup> centuries when Singapore was a classical Malacca

Straits region port-settlement, and in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries when Singapore was a colonial port-city.

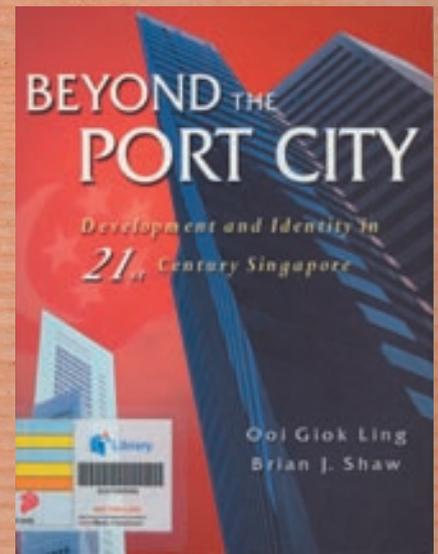
### Singapore as a Port Through the Ages

It is evident from the overview of Singapore's history as a port over the last seven hundred years that the phases of Singapore as a port were highly similar to each other. The roles they played and the functions that they performed to keep the settlements economically viable – roles and functions that transcend the course of time.

This is due, almost entirely, to the similarities in the external circumstances Singapore has had to face over the years. The absence of a geographical hinterland, and the absence of a land-based society, had compelled Singapore, in the past, to develop key characteristics that would enable it to surmount the constraints imposed on the viability of its ports. These characteristics

include the making of unique products available for export through its port, building the port to be a maritime gateway of the immediate peripheral regions around Singapore, and attracting passing mercantile shipping to call at the port.

In the process, Singapore has changed the concept of "hinterland" to complement the unique characteristics of its ports - from that of a geographical land mass providing the urban centre and maritime gateway to the external world with natural resources that may be demanded by external markets, to a virtual economic hinterland based on market access for the procurement of raw materials and the export of value-added products. Particularly in the present-day context, Singapore as a port is no longer merely an outlet of a larger economic entity, as it was between the late 19<sup>th</sup> and mid-20<sup>th</sup> centuries, but a port-city that is integrated into, and dependent upon, the economic nexus of the regional and international economic world.



*Beyond the Port City* takes a look at modern Singapore, tracing its beginnings as a colonial port and its growth today, particularly as a social structure made up of immigrants brought in by the port.

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### Further Reading:

1. *Pre-modern Commerce and Society in Southern Asia: An Inaugural Lecture Delivered at the University of Malaya on December 21* by Sinnappah Arasaratnam. Publisher: University of Malaya, 1972. [RSING 382.095 ARA] A slim volume based on the inaugural lecture at the University. It reviews trade between South and Southeast Asia between the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century and its relation with incoming European trade.

2. *A Study of Ancient Times in the Malay Peninsula and the Straits of Malacca and Notes on Ancient Times in Malaya* by Roland St. John Braddell. Publisher: Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, 1989. [RSING 959.01 BRA] Reprints from the MBRAS by Braddell on Malaya's early maritime

histories. The articles include reprints of ancient maps and detailed analysis of routes from China and India.

3. *Maritime Trade and State Development in Early Southeast Asia* by Kenneth R. Hall. Publisher: University of Hawaii Press, 1985. [RSING/R 382.0959 HAL] An attempt to look at early trade and the development of Southeast Asia as a whole. It begins with a conceptual evaluation of statecraft and trade in Southeast Asia, then elaborates further on the influence of Southern China on the northern Southeast Asian coastal states, with the rest of the book studying the influence of Srivijaya and Majapahit kingdoms on the

political development of the Southeast Asian states.

4. *Archaeological Research on the "Forbidden Hill" of Singapore: Excavations at Fort Canning, 1984* by John N. Miksic. Publisher: National Museum, 1985. [RSING 959.57 MIK] Describes the archeological finds at Fort Canning which reveal details of the influence of early Hindu Kingdoms on Temasek.

5. *Maritime Southeast Asia to 1500* by Lynda Shaffer. Publisher: M. E. Sharpe, 1996. [RSING 959.01 SHA] An introductory overview of the early maritime experiences in Southeast Asia including the influences from first century Funan and the Srivijaya and Majapahit kingdoms in pre-colonial times.