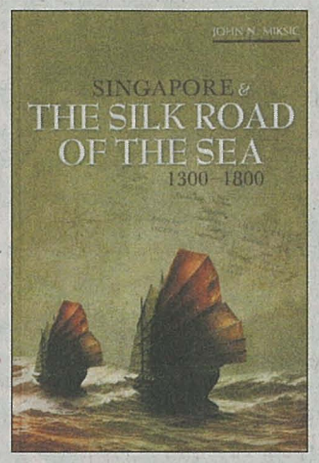
Singapore & The Silk Road Of The Sea 1300-1800
By John N. Miksic
Singapore: NUS Press and the National Museum of Singapore, 2013, 491 pages



Pre-Raffles S'pore: A thriving port

It was a centre of commerce and culture in 14th century

By ASAD LATIF
FOR THE STRAITS TIMES

A dig at the Padang outside the Singapore Cricket Club led by Miksic in 2003, which turned up many artefacts including Chinese coins and porcelain from the Tang, Sung and Yuan dynasties, and beads from India. LIANHE ZAOBAO FILE PHOTO

THINK of a Singapore which has defences against invasion. Money is a fixture of everyday life. The economy is diversified. Workers specialise in different occupations. The government and the people are honest. The population is multi-ethnic and multinational. People live together peacefully.

Which Singapore is this? Today's?

It actually is 14th-century Singapore, a rich and cosmopolitan trading port that was a key node on the maritime Silk Road that connected South-east Asia westwards to India and eastwards to China.

This "Silk Road of the Sea" was, if anything, more important commercially and culturally than the fabled land route from the Mediterranean through Central Asia to China on which the trade in silk epitomised the extremely profitable exchange in precious commodities. The port of Singapore prospered on that sea.

Much of this information is not new. But what this book – written by John Miksic, the eminence grise of Singapore archaeology, based on 25 years of research – does is to add the empirical evidence of excavations to the historical knowledge that Singapore existed long before the age of European colonialism and the arrival of Stamford Raffles.

In fact, Raffles, the founder of contemporary Singapore, did not create it out of nothing but saw himself as reviving an ancient centre of commerce and culture. He drew on the island's enduring attributes: its strategic location, a fair and liberal government, and a hardworking population (which included residents from China, other parts of South-east Asia, and the Indian Ocean) that was able to cohere socially in spite of its cultural, linguistic and religious diversity.

Ironically, Raffles acknowledged Singapore's pre-colonial provenance, in contrast to those who believe today that Singapore began with him.

Pre-Rafflesian society exemplified the possibilities of multi-ethnicity.

Malays and Chinese lived together and not in different quarters in Singapore, "the oldest known site where archaeology and history combine to confirm the existence of an overseas Chinese community", the author says. Even unlike Melaka, a Chinese stronghold where they had their own ward in 1500, there was no Chinese kampung here because they were safe and had no need for a stockade.

These realities and rhythms of life in pre-colonial Singapore come to life in this book, which cites early archaeological efforts before moving on to describe excavations made since 1984. In January 1984, the first systematic archaeological excavation began on Fort Canning Hill.

"By 1988, various groups had become interested in the possibility that Singapore's ancient past was not a closed book, but a story which was only beginning to be told," Miksic says.

Organisations such as the Southeast Asian Ceramic Society, the Lee Foundation, and the Friends of the National Museum were interested in supporting his research.

"By 1990, a true archaeological community had begun to develop in Singapore," he writes. "No other city in South-east Asia, and few in the world, can show a record of such active grassroots involvement in urban archaeology," he says of the 1,000 volunteers who came forward to claim the city's due: at least 700 years of history.

Excavations, in which Miksic was intimately involved, expanded to the Parliament House Complex, Empress Place, Colombo Court, Old Parliament House, the Singapore Cricket Club and St Andrew's Cathedral.

A chapter evaluates the value of the evidence unearthed: earthenware pottery, bronze and copper, and small fragments of gold. The significance of these finds lies in the proof they provide that early Singaporeans processed raw materials to make finished products. Far from being a primitive society of fishermen and pirates, Singapore was a place where "planning and technological skills combined to create businesses dependent on long-term planning and investment".

Its golden age ended just before 1400, but the island was not abandoned. A settlement that traded with other lands survived along the Singapore River till 1600 or so. Then, a historical and archaeological "vacuum" ensued till around 1800. Around 1811, the river was re-occupied by a small population affiliated to the Riau Sultanate on Bintan island.

This was the Singapore that Raffles encountered on arrival.

Singapore's journey up to that point is the ambit of this encyclopaedic book, which includes more than 300 maps and colour photographs. It bears testimony to the determination of the author, an associate professor in the Department of South-east Asian Studies at the National University of Singapore, to expand historical horizons beyond the Age of Raffles.

Also head of the Archaeology Unit at the Nalanda-Sriwijaya Centre of the Institute of South-east Asian Studies, he places this longer history of Singapore in the context of Asia's long-distance maritime trade between 1300 and 1800. In the process, he examines how Singapore functioned in its immediate regional context, which included Johor, Melaka, Java, Riau and Siam.

This is familiar territory, but the book serves to chart it through hard archaeological evidence that buttresses historical claims about the economic and diplomatic ingenuity of early Singaporeans.

The same ingenuity will be required of today's Singaporeans as they navigate their way in a possibly post-Western age inaugurated by the rise of China and India. America and Europe will play an essential role in Singapore's destiny, but the new terms of international relations in Asia will be set increasingly by Asian powers.

Sadly, the author ends on a plaintive note: "It will be interesting to see whether new evidence of Singapore's antiquity will continue to be perceived as anything more than a curiosity of minor importance to the formation of the nation's modern identity."

It would be a national pity if that occurred. Singapore's identity is an evolving one. The fact that the identity has been seven centuries in the making surely should give today's Singaporeans greater hope in their collective future. We are not a here today, gone tomorrow kind of people. At least, our national ancestors, living 700 years ago, were not.

The book was launched at the National Museum on Tuesday.

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This book is available at $58 (paperback) and $68 (hardback), both before GST.