

In New Textbook, the Story of Singapore Begins 500 Years Earlier

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By Jane A. Peterson

SINGAPORE — [Singapore](#) has rewritten the history taught in secondary school to expand the story of the island state's birth.

While earlier generations learned a narrative that essentially started in 1819 with the British colonial administrator, Sir Stamford Raffles, stumbling upon a sleepy Malay fishing village, 13-year-olds now learn of a golden age that started 500 years earlier.

The new story, introduced in January, brings into focus a 300-year period, from 1300 to 1600, when Singapore was a thriving multinational trading hub, with an estimated population of 10,000.

An education ministry official who declined to be named, in line with government policy, called the change a “shift” rather than a rewrite, saying it allowed students to “explore Singapore’s origin as a port of call and her connections to the region and the world.”

Behind the revision is the work of John N. Miksic, an American archaeology professor at the National University of Singapore, or N.U.S., who advised the government on the new school text, “Singapore: The Making of a Nation-State, 1300-1975.”

Professor Miksic has led major archaeological excavations across Southeast Asia, including a dozen in Singapore over the past 30 years that have yielded eight tons of artifacts — evidence of a precolonial history that was largely neglected until now.

In a recent book, “Singapore and the Silk Road of the Sea,” he laid out detailed archaeological evidence of the settlement’s early importance and prosperity. One find cited in the book is a large cache of artifacts found at Empress Place, in the central business district near the mouth of the Singapore River, proof that the site was an ancient dock used by merchant traders from China, India and Java, beginning in the 14th century. Among the booty are a blue and white porcelain-stemmed cup from the Chinese Yuan dynasty (1271-1368) and the “Headless Horseman,” a Javanese-style statuette found among objects dating from the 14th to the 16th centuries.

Nearby, Professor Miksic’s team found evidence of the ancient city center framed by an earthen rampart and defenses that Raffles mentioned in letters. Among 30,000 artifacts from the 14th century were Chinese coins and pottery, Indian glass bangles, and gold jewelry.

Why did it take 30 years to change the story? “It takes overwhelming evidence to shift the mind-set of a people from one image of its past to another,” Professor Miksic said in an interview at his campus laboratory.

He said Singapore still tended to consider archaeology an “unaffordable luxury.” Private grants have largely financed his work. Now 67, he worries that his laboratory may close when he retires, for lack of funding. “It’s a field that is still not that appealing to enough Singaporean students,” he said. “There’s no money in it.”

Professor Miksic gives credit for the new history lesson to former students who have reached positions of authority in academia and in the Ministry of Education. Derek Heng, a former student who is a history professor at the recently created Yale-N.U.S. College, called the artifacts “tactile, visual ways to look at the past and reposition Singapore in history.”

Professor Heng surmised that one reason it had taken so long to change the narrative may have been the government’s fears of communal conflict in the 1960s and ’70s. Indonesia engaged in “Konfrontasi” — violent confrontation against the newly formed Malaysian state — in the early 1960s, which was followed by Malaysia’s ejection of Singapore in 1965. “There was a deliberate attempt not to talk about links to the ethnicity of the past,” Professor Heng said. “Now we are more confident to say we were once a Malay polity cutting straight down through Asia.”

Prof. Brian Farrell, who heads the history department at N.U.S., takes Mr. Heng's idea a step further. "If Singapore before 1800 was a sleepy backwater, the Chinese majority could say, 'We built Singapore; before it was a blank slate,'" he said.

Another factor that delayed a rewriting was a 200-year period of decline, a sort of historical "black hole," between the formerly thriving emporium and the establishment of the 19th-century British trading port, according to Kwa Chong Guan, an adjunct associate professor at N.U.S. who also advised on the textbook revisions. "Until a connection could be made, the tons of archaeological shards Miksic excavated remained of antiquarian interest," he said.

In 2009, the professors Kwa, Heng and Tan Tai Yong published evidence from written Malay sources that bridged the gap and put Professor Miksic's artifacts into a larger maritime trade framework. Their book, "Singapore: A 700-Year History – From Early Emporium To World City," linked the port to the larger sultanate of Johor-Riau in the Strait of Malacca. Concurrently, Peter Borschberg, also a professor at N.U.S., published another important link: Dutch and Portuguese maritime accounts and maps showed that Singapore was on European radars well before Raffles arrived.

Other factors also may help explain the timing of the rewrite. "Now is a good time," Professor Heng said. "There's a need to develop a collective social memory. It's become a political issue."

Professor Heng suggested that one catalyst for change might have been a government announcement in 2011 of plans to run a motorway through Bukit Brown cemetery, a colonial-era Chinese municipal burial ground, slating hundreds of tombs for exhumation. Thousands of citizens signed petitions against the plan. "We have a fast-paced, highly urbanized society where people are getting disoriented," he said. "There's a huge momentum to look at heritage and our historical legacy."

Singaporeans, he thinks, will feel more rooted if they see their early predecessors as part of a longer regional legacy, rather than a British colonial transplant.

"It's time to sink new, deep psychological roots and construct an identity for ourselves," he said.

Professor Miksic says the controversy over Bukit Brown proved that tangible heritage is important. "People want more than prosperity," he said. "Once you have enough to live on, you want something to live for: identity, a desire to know your ancestors. It's an innate part of what it means to be human."

Demographic change is another relevant issue. A government white paper recently reaffirmed proposals to expand the population from 5.3 million to 6.9 million, raising hackles among those who blame inward migration for rising inflation, high home prices, crowded roads and public transport systems and a perceived lack of a level playing field in competition for top jobs.

While the government has slowed its migration plans, further inflows appear inevitable if Singapore is to remain competitive and position itself as a leading global city. Mr. Kwa argues that the rewriting of the island's history will help citizens accept the population explosion and become more inclusive.

"Every generation has to rewrite its history," he said. While it used to suit Singapore to see itself as a city-state with a British heritage, modern Singapore needs a different interpretation of history to reinforce a more global perspective, he suggested.

Professor Heng also sees the opening of Singapore to new migrants as a stimulus for reassessing its history: "If inward migration continues, we need to know who we are or we will get lost," he said.

Professor Miksic goes a step further. "A short history puts a nation on shaky ground; a shallowly rooted place could be overturned quickly," he said. "If you can show a long cohabitation between the Malays and the Chinese, it proves you have a pretty stable arrangement."

The new syllabus is also designed to repair Singapore's educational image, he said. Students are now being encouraged to interpret primary sources themselves to stimulate their reasoning and analysis, rather than relying on old-style rote learning: "One of the objectives is to overcome the stereotype that Singaporeans are not good at creativity," he said. "There's a good chance this will change the mind-set."

Professor Kwa said he believed that Yale-N.U.S., a liberal arts college – the first in Singapore – established in 2011 as a collaboration between Yale University and the National University of Singapore, would help build a new generation of Singaporean historians, raising the profile of humanities and softening Singapore’s image as a nation preoccupied by science and technology. Already, he said, more government scholarships are going to liberal arts candidates for study in the United States and Europe.

Student attitudes have become more skeptical in the past decade, said Quek Ser Hwee, a professor of history at the National University of Singapore, adding that no student now would ask her if she feared arrest for discussing heterodox views. Opinions expressed on the department blog are now quite wide-ranging, she observed, though they stop short of breaching the “out of bounds” limits that once were rigorously policed by colonial and post-colonial administrations: “It’s part of our DNA to know them,” she said.

Yet for all the cultural shifts, the number of students majoring in history has barely changed, possibly reflecting parental preferences for “concrete” degrees, such as law or medicine. “Singapore is still an iron rice bowl,” Professor Farrell said, “a place to make a living.”