

Raffles Renounced: Towards a Merdeka History - A Book Club Starter Pack

I. Chapter Summaries and Discussion Questions

General Questions

1. Was there anything unexpected you encountered in this chapter about Singapore's history?
2. What was your most important takeaway from this chapter?
3. What was your favourite passage in the chapter?
4. How did you feel while reading the chapter? Did you find the authors effective and persuasive?
5. Were there common themes, questions, threads and issues across the chapters? How did the authors address these issues? (Suggestion: to begin, you can use the index at the back of the book to identify common keywords.)

Introduction

The editors interrogate various features of the Singapore Bicentennial: why, for instance, was a decision made to celebrate the nation's history by tracing it back to the moment of British colonisation in 1819, when its expanded timeline stretched all the way back to 1299? It addresses the contested meanings of Merdeka [independence] in Singapore's national psyche, as a site of contradictory meanings – nostalgia for anti-colonial Malayan nationalism, but also as a symbol of its failure, with Separation from Malaysia and Singapore's precarious "condition" of sovereign statehood. It calls for a practice of history that centres the idea and spirit of Merdeka.

1. How are the issues surrounding Singapore history raised in this chapter different from the way the country's past is understood by, or taught to most of us?
2. Are you convinced by the notion of a 'Merdeka history'? How can we build on this to generate a mode of doing history that embodies its ideals in theory and practice?

"We refuse to recognize the trauma": A Conversation Between Alfian Sa'at and Neo Hai Bin

How does one stage history for a contemporary audience? Translation, orthography, language politics and competing national imaginaries converge in this conversation between the co-playwrights of Wild Rice's Merdeka / 獨立 / சுதந்திரம். Alfian and Hai Bin grapple with excavating the histories of ordinary individuals and silenced masses, despite an overwhelming proportion of existing material that represents the

perspectives of elites. They argue that anti-colonial ideas still maintain their relevance in our day and age, because “the spectres of colonialism are still with us.”

1. What are some possible risks involved in staging reconstructed narratives of the past that are based on historical ‘facts’, but supplemented with creative interpretation?
2. How can anti-colonial ideas be adapted to respond to some of the injustices and prejudice faced in Singapore today?

“Merdeka!” From cacophony to the sound of silence

Hong Lysa follows the word and the sound of Merdeka through the annals of Singapore in the 1950s-60s, and beyond. She notes its potency as an untranslatable rallying cry that tied Singapore’s struggle for liberation from colonialism to the broader decolonisation of the Malay world. Hong compares that to the hollow meanings it has taken on today, alienated from its original ties to Malayan nationhood and its anti-colonial politics.

1. In the absence of an emotive act like shouting ‘Merdeka!’, how have Singaporeans continued to publicly perform or signify their commitment to a cause?
2. How does hearing the cry of ‘Merdeka!’ – in old film reels or radio clips - make you feel?

Stamford Raffles and the Founding of Singapore: The Politics of Commemoration and Dilemmas of History

Examining the series of national commemorations undertaken by Singapore in recent years, Huang Jianli embeds the Bicentennial within public debates about how the nation should remember and honour its pasts. He highlights the sensitivities that continue to haunt retellings of the Singapore Story: how to understand pre-Raffles Singapore, the controversial record of Raffles himself, and ongoing clashes between politicians and historians.

1. How important is it for a society to be able to have rigorous, sensitive conversations about their history? Should we think of it as a skill that demonstrates our maturity as a people?
2. What should be the role of the State in that conversation?

The Bicentennial: Of Precedents, Prequels and the Discipline of History in Singapore

Coming back to Hong Lysa, the Bicentennial is compared to earlier civic commemorations of Raffles' arrival in Singapore. But while the new narrative it presents may have retired the 'Great Man' view of history, the sanctity of 1819 and Raffles has remained intact, as well as the story of Merger and Separation. Ironically, the discipline of history in Singapore has suffered further obfuscation, even as historians were prominent in shaping the Bicentennial's narrative.

1. How valuable has been the Bicentennial's 'adjustment' of Singapore's historical narrative?
2. What should be some of the tasks and responsibilities of the historian in helping to shape a nation's historical narrative?

Why Raffles Is Still Standing: Colonialism, Migration and Singapore's Scripting of the Present

Agreeing with the urgent need to 'revise' conventional understandings about Singapore's history, Sai Siew Min draws our attention however to "the incompatibility between narrative and occasion". Ultimately the focus on 1819 as a point of reference undermines the stated intention of properly interrogating a history built around colonialism. Sai proceeds to address the politically correct language deployed to avoid a clear disavowal and indictment of colonial rule and its institutions, even as those structures and ways of thinking remain entrenched up to this day.

1. It seems like the immigrant rags-to-riches story maintains a powerful hold on how we understand Singapore's history. How has this affected the way we see ourselves in relation to our immediate region?
2. Can Singapore ever undo the patterns of racial stereotyping and prejudice left behind by colonial ideas about race and difference?

Finding Merdeka in a World of Statues: Singapore's Colonial Pageant Remade and Unmade

Faris Joraimi provides an account of how Singapore has celebrated 1819 as its foundational moment from the colonial period to the present, in the process, building up and re-making the Raffles cult. Critiquing the new narrative put up in *700 Hundred Years: A History of Singapore*, Faris contends that 1819 and the Raffles cult has not been dislodged but partakes in the august tradition of colonial and neo-colonial pageantry. Turning to literary, artistic and intellectual traditions in the Malay world, Faris points to the possibilities of a Merdeka history and future by showcasing multiple examples, past and present, of critical interventions dismantling the pageantry.

1. How is Sang Nila Utama portrayed in the Bicentennial celebrations and the *700 Hundred Years: A History of Singapore*? Why is Sang Nila Utama a crucial figure in the history of Singapore?
2. What is your understanding of 'the Malay world'? Do you think the concept of 'the Malay world' is relevant to Singapore? Why and why not?

Malay Literary Intelligentsia and Colonialism: A Stunted Discourse

Azhar Ibrahim's chapter aims to resurrect the anti-colonial narratives and sentiments of the Malay intelligentsia in a Malayan context which includes Singapore. Mining the critical work done by Malay intellectuals and reading them anew through writers and scholars theorising colonialism and the post-colonial condition elsewhere, Azhar thinks through the costs, effects and implications of the elimination of an active anti-colonial discourse in Singapore. Written with passion and verve reminiscent of the intellectual tradition he now resurrects, the chapter raises the place of affect in Singapore's intellectual and history writing.

1. What genres of the 'anti-colonial' writing did this chapter showcase?
2. What did 'anti-colonial' mean for the different Malay intellectuals and scholars discussed in the chapter? What specific critiques of colonialism did they raise?

Opening the Bicentennial: Historical Plurality in Sean Cham's Art

Nicholas Lua uses the work of an artist, Sean Cham, to explore the contradictions and tensions between the apparent singularity of the Bicentennial narrative and the plurality of voices that it claims to also encompass. Through a close examination of Sean Cham's art, Lua shows how 'history,' in being intensely personal and subjective can also be disruptive of 'big histories' and national narratives. Weaving in multiple dates, years and numbers into his analysis, Lua questions whether 2019 represents a milestone or simply another moment in the historical consciousness of Singaporeans.

1. How did Sean Cham's approach to history disrupt "the Singapore Story" and the Bicentennial narrative?
2. The writer argued that Sean Cham's art pointed to the possibility of using art to interrogate history. What is the relationship between 'art' and 'history'? Is 'art' always intensely personal and subjective and is 'history' always its polar opposite?

“Giving up an Attachment to Power”: An Interview with Jimmy Ong

Yogyakarta-based Singaporean artist Jimmy Ong discusses how his works over the past 18 years have engaged with the national obsession with Raffles. He grapples with how his practice itself reproduces a kind of colonial power dynamic, as reflected in his reliance on studio assistants to produce his works. Shifting between explorations of Chineseness in Java, identification with the Sultan of Yogyakarta, and his personal politics of desire as an Asian gay man, Ong negotiates layers of relational identity and how they are in some ways all touched by the colonial legacy of Raffles.

1. How can we connect Raffles’ role in Singapore’s history with a broader story of colonialism in the region, especially Java?
2. What do we make of Ong’s treatment of the political in relation to the personal in his art?

“Theatre doesn’t change anything”: Merdeka / 獨立 / சுதந்திரம் and the Performance of the Singapore Bicentennial

Literary scholar Joanne Leow analyses the theatricality of history itself. Reviewing scenes from the play *Merdeka / 獨立 / சுதந்திரம்*, Leow demonstrates how Singapore ironically remains suspicious of ‘political’ narratives even as the Bicentennial reveals the artifice and curation of state-sanctioned histories. The characters, however, parody, satirise and ‘play’ with public history in a way the official commemoration cannot, providing an alternative space to question how history has been told and retold. Re-enactments of scenes from Singapore’s past blur the lines between the fictive and the factual, contemplating the effectiveness of theatre - both as artistic practice and political strategy - as a mode of decolonisation.

1. Singaporeans often use the Malay word ‘wayang’ (theatrical performance; play) to poke fun at politicians’ actions; it usually implies suspicion regarding their sincerity and real intentions. Singapore’s history is also a kind of wayang: how would you rewrite its ‘script’? Who would you cast as its ‘actors’?
2. Is there still room for grand gestures in our quest for decolonial work today? Should they be encouraged, or should we be suspicious of them?