



RAFFLES RENOUNCED

TOWARDS A MERDEKA HISTORY

edited by
**ALFIAN SA'AT
FARIS JORAIMI
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RENOUNCED**

Raffles Renounced: Towards a Merdeka History
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ISBN 978-981-14-2038-2 (PAPERBACK)
ISBN 978-981-14-9023-1 (EBOOK)

Published under the imprint *Ethos Books*
by Pagesetters Services Pte Ltd
#06-131 Midview City
28 Sin Ming Lane
Singapore 573972
www.ethosbooks.com.sg

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Painting on front cover *City Dwellers* by Hilmi Johandi
Cover design by Lamees Rahman
Layout and design by Pagesetters Services Pte Ltd
Printed by Ho Printing Singapore Pte Ltd

First published under this imprint in 2021

Typefaces: Linux Libertine, Hiragino Kaku Gothic Std
Material: 80gsm Bulky Smooth

National Library Board, Singapore Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
Names: Alfian Sa'at, editor. | Faris Joraimi, editor. | Sai, Siew-Min, editor.
Title: Raffles Renounced: towards a Merdeka history /
edited by Alfian Sa'at, Faris Joraimi, Sai Siew Min.
Description: Singapore: Ethos Books, 2021.
Identifiers: OCN 1224295805 | ISBN 978-981-14-2038-2 (paperback)
Subjects: LCSH: Singapore--Historiography. | Singapore--History.
Classification: DDC 959.57--dc23

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Contents

1. Introduction	11
2. “We refuse to recognise the trauma”: A Conversation between Alfian Sa’at and Neo Hai Bin	17
3. “Merdeka!”: From cacophony to the sound of silence Hong Lysa	35
4. Stamford Raffles and the Founding of Singapore: The Politics of Commemoration and Dilemmas of History Huang Jianli	61
5. The Bicentennial: Of Precedents, Prequels and the Discipline of History in Singapore Hong Lysa	81
6. Why Raffles is Still Standing: Colonialism, Migration and Singapore’s Scripting of the Present Sai Siew Min	103
7. Finding Merdeka in a World of Statues: Singapore’s Colonial Pageant Remade and Unmade Faris Joraimi	119
8. Malay Literary Intelligentsia and Colonialism: A Stunted Discourse Azhar Ibrahim	145
9. Opening the Bicentennial: Historical Plurality in Sean Cham’s Art Nicholas Lua	167
10. “Giving up an attachment to power”: An interview with Jimmy Ong	183

11. “Theatre doesn’t change anything”: Merdeka / 獨立 / சுதந்திரம் and the Performance of the Singapore Bicentennial Joanne Leow	203	15. Excerpts from the opening address of the Asia-Africa Conference in Bandung by Sukarno, first President of the Republic of Indonesia (1955)	259
12. Merdeka Texts	217	16. Excerpts from a speech by the Prime Minister, Mr Lee Kuan Yew, at Malaysia Solidarity Day Mass Rally and March Past on the Padang, 31 August 1963	264
1. Excerpts from <i>Raffles and the British Invasion of Java</i> by Tim Hannigan	217	17. Excerpt from a speech by Mr S Rajaratnam, Second Deputy Prime Minister (Foreign Affairs), at a seminar on ‘Adaptive Reuse: Integrating Traditional Areas into the Modern Urban Fabric,’ 28 April 1984	266
2. Excerpt from the <i>Hikayat Abdullah</i> , Chapter 13: “The Treaty with Tengku Long.” (Translated by A H Hill)	220	About the Editors and Contributors	270
3. Excerpts from <i>Tuhfat al-Nafis (The Precious Gift)</i> (Translated by Virginia Hooker and Barbara Watson Andaya)	223	Index	272
4. Excerpt from the <i>Hikayat Abdullah</i> , Chapter 14: “Colonel Farquhar Stabbed.” (Translated by A H Hill)	225		
5. Excerpts from “Syair Potong Gaji” (The Ballad of Cut Wages), composed by Tuan Simi in Singapore, 1841	231		
6. Report on Singapore’s Centenary Day celebrations	232		
7. Excerpts from a speech by Subhas Chandra Bose at a military review of the Indian National Army, 5 July 1943	240		
8. Excerpts from Oral History Interview with Dr S Lakshmi and Colonel P K Sahgal (Group Interview) by the Oral History Department, National Archives of Singapore, 21 August 1990	242		
9. “Subh Sukh Chain,” Anthem of the Provisional Government of Free India (Azad Hind)	249		
10. Dr Paglar’s speech and resolution of 2 January 1945, Syonan Shimbun	250		
11. I Love My Malaya (1954)	251		
12. Petition to The Colonial Governor for National Service Exemption (1954)	252		
13. Singapore Chinese Middle School Students’ Union Manifesto on “May 13 Incident”	254		
14. Aggression in Asia by Poh Soo Kai and M K Rajakumar (1954)	257		

/merdéka/

Free (from colonisation, confinement, custodianship, etc.); released (from bondage, claims); standing on one's own feet; not dependent on others: *Malaysia is a ~ and sovereign country*. Memerdekakan: to grant freedom, to liberate from colonialism, confinement, etc.; to free: *India was granted independence in August 1947, through which it can ~ itself of those petty capitalists*. Kemerdekaan: the condition of being merdeka (free); freedom: *we successfully achieved ~ on 31 August 1957*. Pernerdekaan: relating to or the act of emancipation; liberation. Pernerdeka: someone who liberates others (from colonialism, bondage, etc.).

—Translated from *Kamus Dewan Edisi Keempat*, 2005

Merdeka

1. Free (from slavery, colonialism, and others); standing alone: *since that Proclamation of 17 August 1945, our people are ~*.
2. Unaffected by or released from, any terms.
3. Unaffiliated, not dependent on any other person or group; without constraints.

—Translated from *Kamus Bahasa Indonesia Lengkap*, 2005

Měrděheka

1. [Sanskrit: maharddhika] Freedom, in contrast to servitude; free. Měrděhekakan, or mēměrděhekakan: to liberate; to manumit. Pēměrděheka: liberator; sahaya pēměrděhekaan: freed slaves. Also mērdēka; ([Minangkabau Malay]) mardika.

—R J Wilkinson, *A Malay-English Dictionary (Romanised)*, 1932

महर्द्धिक

Maharddhika a. Very rich or mighty.

—Carl Capeller, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, 1891

Introduction

AT THE END OF 2018, Wild Rice decided to create a play called Merdeka / 獨立 / சுதந்திரம். It would premiere in 2019, at the company's new theatre at Funan Mall. Resident Playwright Alfian Sa'at roped in co-writer and researcher Neo Hai Bin, who would assist in reading through Chinese-language sources and writing Chinese dialogue.

The year 2019 was to be commemorated as the 200th year since the founding of Singapore. The playwrights were provoked by a simple question: why was the nation-state commemorating the beginning, rather than the end, of colonialism? Maybe because there were many ends to consider—self-government in 1959, merger with Malaysia in 1963 or separation from Malaysia in 1965? Or maybe there wasn't really an end, because the legacy of colonialism was still so present. Singapore had, after all, 'inherited' the British parliamentary system, the legal system, the educational system and the civil service, as well as the English language.

The two playwrights wondered why many Singaporeans seemed so reconciled with our colonial history. Was it true that episodes of colonial violence and exploitation were few and unremarkable? Was our independence granted because our former colonial masters simply decided that it was the ethical and strategic thing to do? In the gallery of the anti-colonial struggle, where are our heroines, heroes and martyrs?

And thus began their deep dive into books, libraries and archives, following the trails of voices ranging from Javanese aristocrats and Malay princes to a Eurasian doctor, an Indian infantry woman, as well as Chinese-educated and English-educated student protestors. In the play, the six members of a reading group called "Raffles Must

Fall” re-enact episodes from what they consider are suppressed or dissident histories.

While conceiving of the play, the two playwrights had also thought about producing a companion volume, which would feature some of the texts used in the play. It could serve as a primer for those who might be interested in creating their own decolonial reading groups. But what would such a book look like? Should it only contain these ‘primary sources’ that document anti-colonial moments and vibrations? Why not also include essays that could provide critical commentary not just on the past, but the persistent coloniality of the present?

Quite serendipitously, the editorial collective of *s/pores: New Directions in Singapore Studies* was in the midst of conceiving its latest issue. Started in 2007, *s/pores* is an online journal that disseminates essays investigating different domains of historical and contemporary Singapore. It was started largely by Singaporean academics, and has since published articles by historians, artists, cultural commentators, sociologists and scholars of literature, amongst others. The gestating issue was envisioned as a Bicentennial edition. However, its editors thought it more useful to wait until the Bicentennial was over before venturing to look back on the events as a whole. Since the articles would address the same themes and concerns tackled by the playwrights behind Merdeka / 獨立 / சுதந்திரம், it seemed intuitive to collaborate in the creation of a shared volume. And so, *Raffles Renounced* was born. In a way, it marks a meaningful development bringing together artists and scholars, who participate in siloed but parallel conversations.

What do we make of our attempt to provision a nation created in 1965 with a *longue durée* history dating from 1299 using a template still obsessed with Raffles and 1819? All of the chapters grapple with the consequences and implications of this deeply contradictory gesture of celebrating our colonial past as an already independent nation. The chapters show how Singaporeans live with the contradictions of independent nationhood which haunt both the collective and personal stories about Merdeka that we tell ourselves.

Merdeka. Independence. What does Merdeka mean for Singapore-

ans? Liyana, a character from the play, has this to say:

Independence Day would be about freedom. But National Day is about vulnerability. It reminds us every year of how we got kicked out, how nobody thought we could survive on our own. We live in a society where people don’t do things because they’re inspired. They do things because they’re scared.¹

These chapters are revealing of Singapore’s peculiar post-colonial condition, a consequence of the way we narrate our history. Singapore’s post-colonial condition is marked officially not by our merger with Malaysia in 1963, which was supposed to liberate us from the British empire—our proper colonisers—but by our separation from Malaysia in 1965. Thus signposted, Singapore’s independence is regarded as a dangerous predicament, and our post-colonial condition has been constantly spooked ever since by multiple threats of failed nationhood—of which colonialism was notably not one. Our lack of appetite for confronting and renouncing Raffles stems from this characteristically Singaporean ‘predicament of independence.’ For this reason, the book begins, emphatically, not with Raffles but with chapters two and three on “Merdeka.” The two chapters orient readers toward this once familiar word that now marks our under-explored predicament.

With an eye cast toward a decolonial history and future, chapters four to eleven provide a deep and critical examination of Singapore’s commemoration of the Bicentennial. Readers may regard these chapters as polyphonic voices on a set of common themes and questions on Singapore’s colonial past, trapped as we are in our current predicament. In chapters four to eleven, we ask if our efforts in coming to grips with our colonial past have been adequate, and weigh in on the historiographical attempt at ‘revisionism’ by providing Singapore with a 700-year history that begins way before 1819. Raffles—the contestation surrounding his status as ‘founder’ of modern Singapore and the politics of statutory commemoration in particular—features strongly in several chapters. These chapters approach our colonial and now novel pre-colonial past

1 Chapter 6, Words on Fire, Merdeka / 獨立 / சுதந்திரம்.

from several angles: the contradiction between lip service paid to an expansive notion of history and continued suppression of histories that disagree with official history; the spectre of the 1965 separation from Malaysia; the twinning of British colonisation and migration; the Malay world; artistic interventions in historical production; coloniality; and the personal politics of desire.

*

In 2019, the Bicentennial Office sponsored a slew of ‘ground-up’ initiatives intended to generate greater public interest in Singapore’s pasts. But beyond such state-sponsored efforts, private citizens and enterprises have also undertaken attempts to interpret and represent ‘public history.’ The emergence of divergent frames and narratives are exemplified in the proliferation of not just plays like *Merdeka / 獨立 / சுதந்திரம்*, but also multidisciplinary artworks such as those discussed in chapters nine and ten. Post-Bicentennial, the state has continued to enlist the help of scholars, filmmakers, antiquarian collectors and heritage enthusiasts to transmit its authorised retelling of Singapore history for consumption by a wider, lay audience.

In April 2020, CNA released a docudrama entitled *A Frame in Time*, directed by auteur Kelvin Tong. In the episode “National Language Class,” a dramatisation of Chua Mia Tee’s iconic painting of the same name was used to tell a broader story of *Merdeka*. The year it was painted—and in which the dramatisation was set—is 1959, when Singapore achieved full internal self-government from Britain. It is ironic, given how there was no event marking the 60th anniversary of this event in 2019.

The docudrama presented that heady period of anti-colonial fervour and merger with Malaysia as a mere transitional phase that naturally had to dissolve to enable Singapore’s path to nationhood. Establishing Singapore’s political and social status quo as a teleological given, it positioned the failure of Merger and gradual neglect of the National Language as a matter of pragmatic expediency: English ‘simply’ became the more relevant language for socio-economic mobility, which was why learning Malay became no longer viable. The ideological import of

this pivot was elided, and the multifaceted struggle for *Merdeka* tapered down to the conflict between the English-educated and Chinese-educated. The dynamic contributions of the Malay nationalists and anti-colonial intelligentsia were not cited in the programme. And despite the centrality of Chua’s impression of a National Language lesson, not one Malay individual—much less a living cikgu who actually taught the National Language in those days—was counted amongst the episode’s many interviewees.

This instance illustrates how there exists no conclusive interpretation or definitive consensus on Singapore history, which we wish to emphasise even as we present this volume. *Raffles Renounced* represents yet another effort, but certainly not the last word. Other rejoinders and responses will continue to enrich the discursive space seeking ways to better represent Singapore’s pasts. But at the same time, there is no denying the asymmetries of power that characterise this arena of debate. For every play like *Merdeka / 獨立 / சுதந்திரம்*, there will be a show like “National Language Class.” For every ‘magisterial’ reference like *Seven Hundred Years: A History of Singapore*, there may be a modest volume like ours.

If there is, however, anything Singaporeans should have a consensus on, it is the need for an open culture of historical reckoning—without fear of reprisal—and its inherent value to public life. Only then can we earnestly work towards a *Merdeka* history—one that not only untangles us from colonial narratives, but also as an approach to doing history that is emancipatory.

A *Merdeka* history empowers the plural, the non-elite and the oblique. It eschews ivory-tower snobbery, and is skeptical of axioms held as gospel truth. It resists the dangerous simplicity of thinking in black and white, and narratives complicit in continued silencing and erasure. It legitimises the participation of the many in shaping how we understand our collective pasts and social memories.

It is better to ground ourselves in such a mode of historical thinking, rather than rely on a singular narrative that—as the Bicentennial demonstrated—wears itself out with use and needs cosmetic updating

every few decades. Its features are shared with all endeavours that genuinely seek to deepen understanding of Singapore's past, and contribute to the making of its more pluralistic and just future.

Merdeka,
Alfian Sa'at
Faris Joraimi
Sai Siew Min

“We refuse to recognise the trauma”: A Conversation between Alfian Sa'at and Neo Hai Bin

Alfian Sa'at: Let's talk a little bit about the process of us working on *Merdeka* / 獨立 / சுதந்திரம். Let's start with the title. We wanted to have the title in three languages, which created difficulties for the designers. They had to download entirely new font libraries. I remember the designers would say, “How come I print it in a certain format and the font disappears?” I'd like to hear your thoughts about that—about multilingualism in Singapore and our commitment to it in the title.

Neo Hai Bin: I think we were bringing something back from the past. It's been a while since we've seen multiple languages on the same poster or on the same booklet. When my friends say, they want to watch *Merdeka*, I know they're not just referring to *Merdeka*. At the back of their minds they're also trying to pronounce the words in the other languages too. You can see it in their eyes. And I think that's wonderful.

I also remember you asking me, for the Chinese characters, do we use the traditional or the simplified script? And that really stumped me. I took a while to think about it. There are a lot of political connotations, even in today's context. In the past, it's also heavily laden with a lot of political sentiments as well. I had to consider what really fit this piece and secondly, what is this piece driving towards? And that probably helped me make a decision.

But I just assumed in the beginning, let's put simplified Chinese. So that was a wake-up call when you asked me, “What about traditional Chinese?” Why is it that I just referred to simplified Chinese immediately? I'm too used to this context: Singapore means simplified

Merdeka Texts

1. Excerpts from *Raffles and the British Invasion of Java*

By Tim Hannigan

Raffles, on the morning of 20 June 1811, is a man a very long way from the pedestal that was later constructed for him. Amateur botanist, gardener, gentleman scholar, liberal, visionary founding father of a multicultural city-state, and acceptable exception to the ugly rule of European imperialism, he is not.

The two preceding centuries of British colonialism had been in many instances shamelessly piratical, but, as with the rival Dutch project, money, not glory had been the motivation. But with a new century opening that was all about to change. Far from standing in contrast to the arrogant and aggressive side of the British Empire, Raffles was actually one of its pioneers.

Much has been made of how singularly awful the VOC [Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie, abbreviated VOC] had been in their rickety Indonesian empire—and awful they often were, as those accounts of torture attest. But even so, Java had consumed and digested the earlier generations of Dutchmen, modified their habits and got under their skin—quite literally—in a way that Raffles and those who came after him would find abhorrent. There were the native consorts, and those legions of mixed-race women in sarongs and kebayas for a start. The shuddering disgust of Olivia Raffles and the other English wives at all this was symptomatic of new social attitudes towards native people and native customs that would dominate in the coming decades. The aggressive compunction to crush and humiliate the Javanese courts displayed by her husband, meanwhile, was symptomatic of the equivalent political attitudes that would drive both the British during the rise of the Raj, and

About the Editors

Alfian Sa'at is the Resident Playwright of Wild Rice. His plays with Wild Rice include *Hotel* (with Marcia Vanderstraaten), *The Asian Boys Trilogy*, *Cooling-Off Day*, *The Optic Trilogy*, *Homesick* and *Merdeka / 獨立 / சுதந்திரம்* (with Neo Hai Bin). He was the winner of the Golden Point Award for Poetry and the National Arts Council Young Artist Award for Literature in 2001. His publications include *Collected Plays One, Two, and Three*; poetry collections *One Fierce Hour*, *A History of Amnesia* and *The Invisible Manuscript*; and short-story collections *Corridor* and *Malay Sketches*.

Faris Joraimi is pursuing his BA(Hons) in History at the Yale-NUS College. His research interests lie in the narrative traditions, cultural politics and intellectual history of the Malay world. He hopes to pursue graduate studies and explore ways in which texts and their materiality reflect broader processes of exchange, circulation and consumption in the early modern Nusantara. He has written for a number of platforms, including *s/pores*, *Mynah Magazine*, *New Naratif*, *Karyawan*, *Passage*, *Budi Kritik* and *天下* (Commonwealth Magazine, Taiwan).

Sai Siew Min is a Taipei-based Singaporean historian who researches Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia with a focus on imperial formation in Southeast Asia, the cultural politics of colonialism and nationalism, language, race and Chineseness. She is a founder member of the *s/pores* collective. Her essays on historiography in Singapore have appeared online in *s/pores: new directions in Singapore Studies*. Her academic writings have appeared in the *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, *Journal of Chinese Overseas*, *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*. She is also co-editor of the book *Reassessing Chinese Indonesians: History, Religion and Belonging*.

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Hong Lysa, a historian, is co-author of *The Scripting of a National History: Singapore and Its Pasts* (2008), and co-editor of *The 1963 Operation Coldstore in Singapore* (2013); *The May 13 Generation: The Chinese Middle Schools Student movement and Singapore Politics in the 1950s* (2011) and *Poh Soo Kai, Living in a Time of Deception* (2016). She is a founder member of the electronic journal *s/pores: New Directions in Singapore Studies* which commenced publication in 2007.

Huang Jianli is Associate Professor at the Department of History of the National University of Singapore and concurrently Research Associate at the university's East Asian Institute. His research straddles two related fields—the history of Republican China from the 1910s to 1940s and Chinese diaspora studies. His book, *The Politics of Depoliticization in Republican China* (1996, 2nd edition 1999), was translated into Chinese in 2010. He is also the author of *The Scripting of a National History: Singapore and Its Pasts* (2008, with Hong Lysa). His co-edited volumes include *Power and Identity in the Chinese World Order* (2003) and *Macro Perspectives and New Directions in the Studies of Chinese Overseas* (Chinese, 2002). He has also published in a range of international-refereed journals, such as *Frontiers of History in China*, *Modern Asian Studies*, *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, *Journal of Chinese Overseas*, and *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*.

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Nicholas Lua is an MA student in Nanyang Technological University's History programme and recently graduated from Yale-NUS College with a BA(Hons) in History and minor in Global Antiquity. He studies the Tantric Religions in Ancient Southeast Asia (600-1400 CE) and their connections to the broader Sanskrit Cosmopolis. More broadly, Nicholas is interested in how later cultures interpret, relate to and deploy their distant "Classical" pasts. Nicholas has been inspired by ideas from across the Liberal Arts and Sciences, Literature and Philosophy in particular.

Neo Hai Bin is currently a writer and a theatre practitioner. His literary practice involves research works in social issues and the human condition, which then translates into different forms of literary expressions: scripts, prose, critiques or short stories. His literary works can be found at thethoughtspavilion.wordpress.com. Some of his plays include *招: When The Cold Wind Blows* (Singapore Theatre Festival 2018), *Cut Kafka!* (Esplanade Huayi Festival Commission 2018), *Merdeka / 獨立 / சுதந்திரம்* (Wild Rice, with Alfian Sa'at, 2019) and *Tanah•Air 水•土: A Play In Two Parts* (Devised with Drama Box, 2019). He is part of the theatre reviewers team "劇讀: thea.preter" since 2017. He co-founded "微.Weii Collective" with lighting designer Liu Yong Huay. He is a founding and core member of Nine Years Theatre Ensemble.

Jimmy Ong (b. 1964) is a Singaporean artist best known for his large scale, figurative charcoal drawings on paper, marked by a distinctive fleshy quality. He came into prominence in the 1980s, with early works that focused on sexuality, identity and gender roles in the context of the traditional Chinese family. Based in Yogyakarta, Jimmy's projects interrogate the colonial figure of Stamford Raffles within Javanese history. His key exhibitions include *From Bukit Larangan to Borobudur* (FOST Gallery, 2016), *SGD* (Singapore Tyler Print Institute, 2010) and *Sitayana* (Tyler Rollins Fine Art, 2010).

Index

Symbols

700 years 57, 66, 99, 100, 103, 104, 106

1819

190th anniversary (2009) 93, 94

as a point of origin 103

as not a point of origin 104

Bicentennial (2019) 5, 6, 12–15, 25–27, 32, 33, 56–58, 61–65, 68–70, 72–82, 85, 90–94, 98, 100–108, 111, 116, 118, 119, 123–126, 138, 139, 141, 164, 167–172, 181, 192, 195, 202–206, 208, 215 (see also Bicentennial)

Centenary (1919) 6, 81–85, 121, 210, 232, 233, 235, 236, 240

post-1819 105, 117

pre-1819 91, 104, 105

Sesquicentenary (1969) 68, 81, 83, 85–90, 98, 122

Treaty 6, 124, 127, 128, 129, 220, 271

1959

60th anniversary 14, 36, 58, 104

self-government 11, 14, 36, 53, 57, 104, 105

A

Abdul Rahman, Tunku 38, 96, 97, 102, 146, 159, 220, 224

Abu Bakar, Sultan of Johor 120

‘Adnan & Comrades, Bukit Chandu’ 174

A Frame in Time 14, 58

Ahmad Boestamam 151, 159

Alatas, Syed Hussein 70, 112, 113, 133, 150, 151

Albatross file 101, 102

Alexandra, Princess 86

Alfian Sa’at 2, 5, 11, 16, 17, 138, 183, 206, 207, 270, 271

alibis of empire 114, 115

Aljunied, Syed Muhd Khairudin 71, 177

ASAS’50 (Angkatan Sasterawan) 152, 154

Abdullah Abdul Kadir, Munshi 89, 92, 124, 160, 212

Abdu’r Rahman, Temenggong 66, 67, 127, 146, 159, 220–223, 228, 229, 230

B

Barisan Sosialis 54, 55, 88, 99

Bicentennial

Bicentennial event 61

debates in *The Straits Times* 61

Experience 25

historians 57, 100

prequel 62, 91, 93, 94, 105, 205

Singapore Bicentennial Office 14, 61, 64, 68, 91, 103, 119, 124, 125, 167, 168

Black Lives Matter 141, 197

Borschberg, Peter 65, 66, 93

British military withdrawal 86, 87

Brunei Revolt 97

Bukit Ho Swee 177, 178, 181

By-elections

Anson 53

Hong Lim, 1961 52, 53, 94–96

C

Cham, Sean 5, 167–172, 176, 178, 180

Chinese

Chinese-educated 11, 15, 20, 23, 75, 114

Chinese language 72

Chinese middle school students 37, 41, 46

Chinese migration 14, 109, 113, 115–118, 201
(see also Migration)

Chinese revolutionaries 19

Chinese written script 17, 18

Chinese Heritage Centre 58

Chinese Protectorate 113, 114

Chua Mia Tee 14, 58

Civilised 25, 26

Cold War 75, 76, 80, 94, 123

Colonialism

anti-colonial discourse 22, 30, 163, 164

anti-colonial intelligentsia 15

anti-colonial struggle 11, 18, 19

beneficial colonial rule 113

British colonial rule 75, 104, 106, 111, 112

colonial capitalism 111–113, 124, 131, 140

colonial enlightenment 31

colonial government 55, 85, 88, 113, 142, 156

colonial history 11, 75, 79, 86, 89, 128

colonial inheritance 108, 109, 113

colonial legacy 31, 80, 109, 123, 160, 162, 203

colonial repression 37

decolonial history 13

decolonisation 30, 35, 110, 142, 158, 213, 215

deconstruction of colonial history in Singapore 23–25, 30–32, 82, 108–115, 129,
130–136, 138–140, 142

Eurocentric modernity 111, 116

Malay perspective 23

post-colonial condition 13

Post-Coloniality 73

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