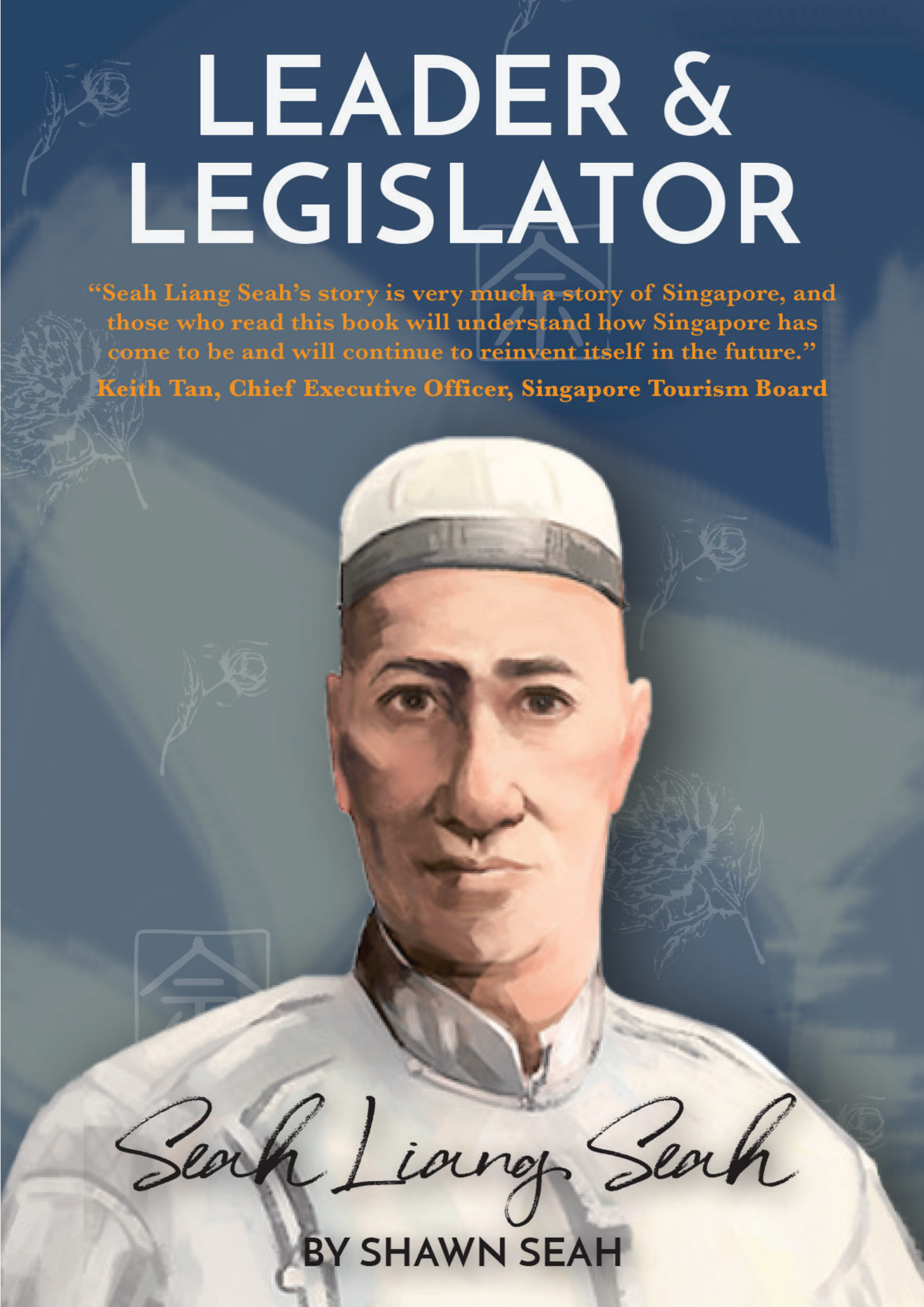


# LEADER & LEGISLATOR

“Seah Liang Seah’s story is very much a story of Singapore, and those who read this book will understand how Singapore has come to be and will continue to reinvent itself in the future.”

**Keith Tan, Chief Executive Officer, Singapore Tourism Board**

A detailed illustration of Seah Liang Seah, a man with a serious expression, wearing a white traditional cap and a light-colored high-collared shirt. The background is a dark blue with faint, stylized floral and architectural motifs.

*Seah Liang Seah*

BY SHAWN SEAH

# LEADER & LEGISLATOR

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Leader & legislator—Seah Liang Seah  
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**Bicentennial**  
From Singapore to Singaporean

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*This book is dedicated to the Seah family and the kind people who helped  
me along this incredible journey of discovery.*

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## CHRONOLOGY OF MAJOR EVENTS

<b>Year</b>	<b>Event</b>
1805	Seah Eu Chin is born in Swatow, China
1830	Seah Eu Chin establishes his own trading firm Seah Eu Chin establishes the Ngee Ann Kun Tan Seng Poh is born (around 1830)
1835	Seah Eu Chin enters the gambier business, acquiring an eight-mile stretch of land between River Valley Road and Bukit Timah Road Seah Eu Chin consolidates his trading business under the name Eu Chin & Co.
1845	Seah Eu Chin officially forms the Ngee Ann Kongsu
1850	Seah Liang Seah is born
1859	Tan Jiak Kim is born
1864	Seah Eu Chin retires from business
1866	The Government of the Straits Settlements Act is passed
1867	Singapore becomes a Crown Colony on 1 <sup>st</sup> April 1867 The Legislative Council of the Straits Settlement is formed
1869	Dr Lim Boon Keng is born

- 1871 Sir Song Ong Siang is born
- 1873 Seah Eng Keong is born
- 1880 (ca) Seah Eng Tong is born
- 1883 Seah Liang Seah is officially appointed an unofficial member of the Legislative Council  
Seah Eu Chin dies
- 1885 Seah Liang Seah succeeds his elder brother Seah Cheo Seah as Chairman of the Ngee Ann Kongsi and becomes de facto leader of the entire Teochew community
- 1887 Seah Liang Seah recites the congratulatory address on behalf of the Chinese community in Singapore on the occasion of the 50th anniversary celebrations of Queen Victoria's reign
- 1890 First meeting of the Chinese Advisory Board of Singapore takes place, with Seah Liang Seah as one of the Teochew representatives
- 1894 Seah Liang Seah is reappointed to the Legislative Council for a second term  
Seah Liang Seah is nominated as a member of the Municipal Commission
- 1895 Seah Liang Seah resigns from the Legislative Council again in January 1895 to protest against a tax imposed by the British government to increase the Straits Settlements' contributions towards British military expenditure

- 1895 Dr Lim Boon Keng is appointed to the Legislative Council following Seah Liang Seah's stepping down
- Seah Liang Seah purchases Whampoa House, one of the famous mansions in Singapore (renamed Bendemeer House)
- 1897 Seah Liang Seah resigns from the Municipal Commission
- 1899 Prominent Straits Chinese, including Seah Peck Seah, establish the Singapore Chinese Girls' School
- Seah Liang Seah holds trusteeship of Raffles Institution from 1899 to 1902
- Seah Eng Khway is born
- 1900 The Straits Chinese British Association (SCBA) is formed
- 1901 The SCBA forms a Straits Chinese company called the Singapore Volunteer Infantry for local defence
- 1905 Seah Eu Chin's wife dies
- 1908 British soldier William Arthur Bates Goodall discovers the Sembawang Hot Spring on Seah Eng Keong's land
- 1910 Seah Liang Seah and others organise the King Edward VII Memorial Fund
- King George V rules between 1910 and 1936
- 1914 World War I begins in Europe



- 1915 Seah Liang Seah becomes a member of the organising committee of the Ratepayers' and Landowners' Association
- 1916 Seah Liang Seah sits on a Special Committee to study the imposition of a war tax
- 1917 War tax ordinance imposed  
Tan Jiak Kim dies
- 1919 Seah Liang Seah's wife dies, and is buried at Thomson Road
- 1923 *One Hundred Years' History of the Chinese in Singapore* is published
- 1925 Seah Liang Seah dies
- 1929 The Singapore Teochew Poit Ip Huay Kuan is founded
- 1940 Seah Eng Tong dies
- 1941 Sir Song Ong Siang dies
- 1949 Seah Eng Khway dies
- 1957 Dr Lim Boon Keng dies
- 1985 The Sembawang Hot Spring is located within Sembawang Air Base when the government acquires most of the land in the area for military use
- 1996 Seah Liang Seah's will hits the headlines... again



## 2

### WHAT IS THIS BOOK ABOUT?

In 2017, I published Singapore's first book about Seah Eu Chin, an important business and community leader who played a significant part in Singapore's early history under British colonial rule. Leader of the Teochew community and founder of the Ngee Ann Kongsi, pioneer Seah Eu Chin contributed much to Singapore. Some of his values and lessons must have been passed on to his children and grandchildren, because they went on to serve and build Singapore up in a wide range of ways.

This book is about Seah Liang Seah, Seah Eu Chin's second and arguably most famous son, also honoured today with a street named after him. Just like his father, he was one of Singapore's early pioneers who shaped Singapore in his own way and to an extent that deserves detailed study.

Unlike his father, he did not come from China.

Seah Liang Seah was born and bred here in Singapore, and made many contributions—just as many Straits Chinese did—that are rooted in Singapore's particularly unique historical context. He was a central character in a changing Singapore

and was interested and involved in the issues and concerns of his time.

Roland St. John Braddell believed that “the history of a place such as Singapore is chiefly the history of the men who lived in it”.<sup>7</sup> Just like the book *One Hundred Years of Singapore* was fundamentally about the trader-statesmen and clans of trader-fighters and their descendants, this book is mainly about Seah Liang Seah and his descendants.

However, although this book focuses on Seah Liang Seah and his family, I explore the wider cultural, social, and economic history of Singapore, and consequently many colourful characters from Singapore’s history will appear in the story. The Straits Chinese will feature prominently in my narrative of Singapore’s colonial history, as will the British colonial masters. In fact, I also flesh out the characters who lived during and around Seah Liang Seah’s time, such as Tan Jiak Kim, Dr Lim Boon Keng, and Sir Song Ong Siang, among many others.

This narrative is pieced together from diverse sources, each containing a fragment of the puzzle. As Iain Manley rightly commented in *Tales of Old Singapore*, “Nobody learns history as an entirely linear narrative. Instead, we assemble it ourselves, from the bits and pieces we pick up along the way”.<sup>8</sup>

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7 Roland St. John Braddell, cited in C. M. Turnbull, “Introduction”, in Makepeace, Brooke, & Braddell (Eds.), *One Hundred Years of Singapore: Being Some Account of the Capital of the Straits Settlements from Its Foundation by Sir Stamford Raffles on the 6th February 1819 to the 6th February 1919*, Volume 1 (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. ix.

8 “Acknowledgements”, in Iain Manley, *Tales of Old Singapore* (Hong Kong: Earnshaw Books, 2015).

#### WHAT IS THIS BOOK ABOUT?

For me, from talking to extended family members, poring over many old and venerable books, and reading old newspaper articles, I have picked up facts, observations, and references. When put together, these fragmented pieces form a more complete picture.

Where there were pieces of the puzzle missing, I sought alternative primary and secondary sources and made inferences, often conjecturing based on others' research.

Nonetheless, despite our best efforts, we must still acknowledge that the historian is very much a creature of his day, as his writing often reflects the mood and concerns of his time:

In 1919, Makepeace and his colleagues wrote about Singapore as part of a British Empire on which the sun never sets. Sixty years later, Turnbull was concerned about Singapore's place in a waning empire on which the sun was setting. *The Singapore Story* is about shaping the social memories of Singaporeans and creating a national identity. In contrast, Chew and his colleagues were attempting to reconstruct Singapore's history as an emerging city-state. Perhaps the Italian philosopher and historian Benedetto Croce (1866–1952) was right that “every true history is contemporary history” in that it not only reflects the personal concerns and bias of the historian but is also suffused with concerns of the historian's time.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Kwa Chong Guan, Derek Heng, & Tan Tai Yong, *Singapore: A 700-Year History* (Singapore: National Archives of Singapore, 2009), pp. 7-8.

In recent years, I have observed an increased interest by the general public in the history and heritage of Singapore.

As an example, as I was leaving after visiting my ancestor Seah Eu Chin's tomb at Grave Hill one Sunday afternoon in October 2017, I was pleasantly surprised to meet several people in the jungle, led by guides who came over from nearby Bukit Brown. One of the visitors was from the United Kingdom! From them, I learnt that there had been many groups which had visited the tomb on several occasions.

In my view, the Brownies—volunteers from All Things Bukit Brown who work hard and passionately to raise awareness of the cultural and historical value of the cemetery—are doing an excellent job in spreading the word on Singapore's history.

Similarly, Kwek Li Yong, the founder of My Community, a heritage group that runs free guided tours in Queenstown, remarked that there was a trend of greater community-driven interest in local heritage and the documentation of memories, and this trend was not unique to Singapore.<sup>10</sup>

And as Kwek memorably and rightly remarked:

Singapore's success does not boil down to one person, one party, or a group of like-minded people. It's made up of contributions and sacrifices from each and every one in our communities.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Linette Lim, "Celebrating the Common Man: The Rise of Community History in Singapore", in *Channel NewsAsia*, 18 February 2017.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

## WHAT IS THIS BOOK ABOUT?



*Seah Eu Chin's magnificent tomb at Grave Hill (taken in October 2017)*

Confirming the trend in the same newspaper report, the Singapore National Heritage Board (NHB) observed that it had seen a healthy, growing interest in ground-up community-driven initiatives, and acknowledged that these efforts contributed to “the richness and diversity of the Singapore story”.<sup>12</sup>

Independent curatorial consultant and researcher Gael Newton also observed in a blog post in December 2014 that there has been growing interest in Singapore’s history as an important port city.<sup>13</sup>

And, most interestingly for the purposes of this book, she came to this conclusion because of the sale of a cabinet card (that is, a portrait in a card) of Seah Liang Seah—on eBay, no less—which made her reflect on the increase in international awareness

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> This paragraph is based on Gael Newton, “Singapore Lambert: The Sale Price of a Singapore Photograph, by G R Lambert”, in her blog *The Curatorial Crypt*, <http://photo-web.com.au/gn/the-curatorial-crypt/>. Accessed 5 June 2018.

about the value of such Southeast Asian photographs. According to Newton, on 22 February 1900, Seah Liang Seah had inscribed his personal portrait “with kind regards” to Mr Samuel Tomlinson (1859–1935), formerly a municipal engineer in Singapore (1895–1902). She conjectured that the albumen print cabinet card was likely sent by Seah Liang Seah to Tomlinson when he left the municipal office to start his own practice, Tomlinson & Lermitt, a civil engineering, surveying, and architectural firm. (According to an Instagram post by The Peranakan Museum on 22 July 2018, the gentleman designed the Jinrikisha Station building at the junction of Neil Road and Tanjong Pagar Road, as well as the historical Grand Hotel de l’Europe in Singapore with Swann and Maclaren.)

Based on previous sales trends over several years, she expected such a card to sell for about US\$200—but to her surprise, it sold for an astonishing US\$1,300—over six times the expected price.

She concluded that as more and more significant Singapore personalities are identified in 19<sup>th</sup> century portraits and photography, prices of such goods could easily double again, especially since more well-informed collectors would be entering the market for Singapore’s historical artefacts.

But beyond motivated enthusiasts and collectors, there is now a wider public interest in our own

#### WHAT IS THIS BOOK ABOUT?

history. Our own local history can help build, or create, a stronger sense of a uniquely Singaporean national identity. Indeed, a stronger sense of our own history can provide a ballast to anchor us amidst the waves of rapid domestic and international developments and changes taking place.

Or, in a related, similar vein, as a friend of mine remarked, a strong reason for nostalgia about Singapore's past is not so much because of a longing to go back to the past, but a reflection of how quickly our times are changing, and a sense that we need to hold on to something more permanent.

As part of the Singapore Heritage Festival in 2018, an island-wide celebration of Singapore's heritage and culture, I gave a talk on Seah Eu Chin at Tiong Bahru Community Centre, located at Eu Chin Street itself, on 7 April 2018. To my amazement, while about 70 signed up for the talk officially, my three volunteers and I eventually counted 85 attendees—a remarkable number for a history talk on a weekend morning in Singapore.

An earlier talk at the Peranakan Museum on 19 August 2017 saw about half that number of attendees. However, more important than the turnout were the dialogue and discussions I had with the audience. Many participants were passionate and held strong opinions about our history and heritage.

Both of these public talks were possible mainly thanks to various government agencies with an interest in history and heritage, like the Urban Redevelopment Authority and the Peranakan Museum. As an



individual, I could not have conducted these successful talks alone. They were only successful because of close collaboration and partnership with government agencies. Clearly, there has been rising public interest in Singapore’s history and heritage, which the government should continue to encourage, and the public must in turn give even more support.

In fact, on 31 December 2017, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong announced that Singapore would mark the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of 1819, calling on Singaporeans to understand how far back our history reaches and how complex it is.<sup>14</sup> PM Lee said that 1819 was a significant turning point which set Singapore on a different trajectory which generated events and policies which have shaped present-day Singapore.

It was in 1819 that Sir Stamford Raffles and William Farquhar arrived in Singapore and established one of the most successful ports in Southeast Asia. Singapore was a free port and an open city, situated strategically along regional and global trade routes. From then on, the city saw the start of private order institutions such as local community leadership, then the formation of modern, formal institutions such as law courts, all of which substantially transformed Singapore.

The nationwide commemoration of the bicentennial is a reflective attempt to understand the full essence

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14 This paragraph is based on Yuen Sin, “Plans to Mark 200th Anniversary of the Founding of Modern Singapore in 2019: PM Lee”, in *The Straits Times* (online), 31 December 2017. For more on the 700 years of Singapore’s history, you may wish to refer to Kwa Chong Guan, “700 Years of History, a Bicentennial and Four Cycles of Settlement”, in *The Straits Times* (online), 5 January 2018.

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and complexity of events in Singapore's history, and among other aims will also pay homage to ground-up organisations that reflect "the organic effervescence" of the story of how Singapore came to be.<sup>15</sup>

The Ngee Ann Kongsi, which Seah Eu Chin established and Seah Liang Seah presided over, immediately came to my mind, as did the related welfare and cultural organisation, the Teochew Poit Ip Huay Kuan. These two institutions are covered in a later chapter in this book.

In an article announcing the year-long calendar of events in 2019, Melody Zacchaeus rightly cites business and community leader Seah Eu Chin himself as an example of a young pioneer and early settler in Singapore, like Tan Tock Seng, "venturing at a young age into the largely uncharted territory of Singapore and laying its modern foundations".<sup>16</sup> We need to understand the stories of our past so that we can understand how Singapore came to be.

In my view, an understanding of our own history is important for us to have a strong sense of rootedness to our country. As then-First Permanent Secretary (Defence) Lim Siong Guan correctly said:

Recognisably, Singapore is a young country.  
A nation of immigrants. But for the country

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15 Ibid.

16 Melody Zaccheus, "Year-long calendar of events for bicentennial in 2019", in *The Straits Times* (online), 1 January 2018.

to be secured and well-defended socially, economically and militarily, we must have an emotional attachment to Singapore. We must be prepared to stay and fight for what we have inherited and achieved.<sup>17</sup>

Only by understanding our own history—what we have inherited and achieved—can we know what we are staying and fighting for.

However, there are some historians like Kwa Chong Guan who argue that Singapore has emerged and vanished as a port and a city in at least three historical cycles in its long 700-year history, and that even should the country decline, as founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew feared, it “may rise again in another form at some time in the future when another group of elites re-establishes its centrality as a new service centre and trading state in another cycle of globalisation”.<sup>18</sup>

I disagree, because, to me, the unique and special Singapore we see today is the way it is *precisely* because of the particular path-dependent journey we have made, with its specific twists and turns. The service centres and trading states of the past—while clearly important for an understanding of what kind of Singapore existed before Raffles—are unlike our Singapore today. We are a product of our British colonial history and our own blend of people who

<sup>17</sup> Lim Siong Guan, cited in “An All-Out Defence Plan”, in *The Straits Times*, 1 May 1984, p. 20.

<sup>18</sup> Kwa Chong Guan, *Singapore Chronicles: Pre-Colonial Singapore*, (Singapore: Straits Times Press, 2017), p. 86.

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came to Singapore and made this their home. While it is true that Singapore's history began neither at 1819 or our independence in 1965, the history between these two dates is important in shaping who we came to be as a people.

This book may be focused on the story of Singapore-born Seah Liang Seah and his home, and the people who lived in it. But it is equally a story of a Singapore gradually shaping up to be more and more familiar to those who live in it today.

As Singaporeans, I strongly believe that we must study the stories of our own past and learn about our own pioneers, and we must write our own local history. Discovering more about Seah Liang Seah has been a personal and meaningful experience for me.

Finally, one last comment is in order.

This book is but a mere sketch and an invitation to reflect and converse about historical topics. It is not the final word, and no book can or should pretend to be. In fact, as many people have said in various ways, the past is not an autonomous, fixed, complete reality waiting to be discovered, like a painting in the dark waiting for a bright light to be shone upon the canvas.

Rather, the past is always in a process of being interpreted and re-interpreted, as new facts come to light, intellectual fashions evolve, or the current, contemporary context—be it political, social, or even economic—changes. If the bicentennial celebrations

can inspire Singaporeans to be more interested in our own local history and heritage, that would be encouraging.

On my part, if this work can spark off thinking, reflection, and conversations about Singapore's history, I would have more than achieved my aim.

WHAT IS THIS BOOK ABOUT?



*In this illustration, Seah Liang Seah—as leader and legislator—is portrayed as sincere, serious, and focused on improving the lives of the community.*

**“For centuries, Peranakans played pivotal roles in Singapore and Southeast Asia. They were leaders in business, government, the arts and civil society, sometimes assuming many roles simultaneously. This book celebrates one of these leading figures in Singapore's history...”**

**John Teo, General Manager of the Peranakan Museum**

It was the heyday of the mighty British Empire. In the colony of Singapore, a rapidly growing settlement in Southeast Asia, a young man from a prominent local family rose to become a successful businessman, Teochew community leader, and member of the Legislative Council of the Straits Settlements. Straddling both East and West, he lived an exciting life marked by public service, profit, and parties. And when he passed away in 1925, he left behind many prominent descendants, a massive fortune... and an unusual will.

This remarkable man was leader and legislator, Seah Liang Seah.

Written by the author of *Seah Eu Chin—His Life & Times*, this book tells the incredible story of the man behind Liang Seah Street and Bendemeer, as well as the stories of his Straits Chinese contemporaries, such as Tan Jiak Kim, Dr Lim Boon Keng, and Sir Song Ong Siang, and the larger social and economic history of Singapore in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

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