NUS don’s book uses archaeological evidence to examine pre-colonial history

Raffaela Nathan Charles

An archaeologist whose work re- futes the common misconception that Singapore’s history started with the landing of Sir Stamford Raffles has been awarded the inaugural Singapore History Prize.

Professor John N. Miksic of the National University of Singapore (NUS) was honoured for his book, Singapore And The Silk Road Of The Sea, 1300-1800, which uses archaeological evidence to examine the island’s pre-colonial history in the larger Asian context.

The 71-year-old American, the first person to conduct an archaeological dig here in 1964, was un- veiled as the winner of the prize at a press conference at NUS yesterday.

Created by NUS in 2014 to mark the 50th anniversary of the coun- try’s independence, the Singapore History Prize is given to a publica- tion with a lasting impact on the un- derstanding of Singapore’s history.

It will be given out triennially, with the next award to be given out in 2020 or 2021.

Historian Wang Guanqiao, who headed a four-man panel to choose the winner, said Prof Miksic’s book “has laid the foundations for a funda- mental reinterpretation of the history of Singapore and its place in the larger Asian context”.

The book has confirmed that Sin- gapore’s history dates back more than 700 years. “We now know more about Singapore in the 14th century than any other city in the re- gion in the same period,” said Profes- sor Wang, chairman of NUS’ East Asian Institute.

A citation on the book noted: “We realise that Kuala Lumpur, Bang- kok, Nanyang, Phnom Penh and Manila were all founded more re- cently than Singapore.”

The book was one of 29 submis- sions received by the history depart- ment. The four-man panel that re-

viewed the five shortlisted submis- sions was made up of Prof Wang, aca- demic Kishore Mahbubani, entrepre- neur Claire Chiang and Prof Peter A. Coclanis of the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. The other four books on the shortlist were works on the history of the sago ke- bayan, the Singapore Botanic Gar- dens, the Bukit Ho Swee fire, and Sin- gapore history from 1965 to 2015.

Prof Miksic, from the department of South-east Asian studies at NUS, will receive $50,000 in cash. He said he may use the money for fu-

ture excavations and training exer-
cises, as well as to restore the arte-
facts he has in his lab.

“It really gives the field of archaeo- logy a certain credibility it didn’t have before,” he said.

He also noted that more than a thousand Singaporean volunteers helped with many of the excavations referred to in the book. “I felt like I owed a debt to them, to write this book and show the important work they’ve done,” he added.

Prof Miksic is now working with NUS Press to build an online data-

base to classify and identify Singa-

proan artefacts earlier uncovered, to help fellow archaeologists.

The project’s first phase, to be ready by the end of next month, classifies more than 4,000 arte-
facts from a 2003 excavation at Sin-

gapore Cricket Club.

The book, which is in its third edi-
tion, can be bought through the NUS Press website as well as book stores.

I felt like I owed a debt to them, to write this book and show the important work they’ve done.

PROFESSOR JOHN N. MIKSCI of the National University of Singapore, saying that more than a thousand Singaporean volunteers helped with many of the excavations referred to in his book, Singapore And The Silk Road Of The Sea, 1300-1800.

PROFESSOR JOHN N. MIKSCI of the National University of Singapore, saying that more than a thousand Singaporean volunteers helped with many of the excavations referred to in his book, Singapore And The Silk Road Of The Sea, 1300-1800.