

# Singapore shaped by port-city past: Historian

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As a port city that goes back hundreds of years, Singapore has seen vast changes to what constitutes its hinterland and this has shaped its present-day identity.

The study of Singapore's history as a port city can supplement colonial and nation-state narratives, historian Tan Tai Yong said at an IPS-Nathan lecture at Yale-NUS College last night.

He said the functions of port cities – with their hinterlands dependent on economic conditions – often shape the composition, social structure and development of mercantile groups and institutions.

“For instance, it considers how the character and personality of the island state might have roots in re-

gional identities and dynamics that predate 1965 or even 1819,” said Professor Tan, who is also president of Yale-NUS College.

His lecture, titled *Singapore's Story: A Port City In Search Of Hinterlands*, traced the changing face of Singapore's port and its hinterland over the past 700 years and was attended by about 300 people.

This is his third public lecture in a series, which started in September, that takes a look at Singapore's 700-year history as the country marks the bicentennial arrival of the British in 1819.

Prof Tan noted that Singapore's hinterland in the early centuries as a transshipment centre was effectively the maritime space around it and was not dependent on nearby land masses.

During the colonial era, Singapore became “the great emporium and fulcrum” of the neighbouring

seas trade. It dealt mainly in local produce – agricultural and mineral products grown or produced in the surrounding archipelago – and sent them to colonial ports for packing and shipment to consumer countries. Trade also expanded to the various islands of the East Indies, the Peninsula, Siam and parts of Indo-China.

With a liberal immigration policy for traders and workers, the overlapping hinterlands and networks created a port city of immigrants from China, India, the Malay Archipelago and other places, said Prof Tan.

These different trading communities eventually constituted the plural and cosmopolitan society of Singapore, and from there, a local experience began to emerge, he said.

“Singapore became the heart of the intellectual world of South-east Asia. From the late 19th century on-

wards, the port city was not only bustling with commerce. It was a centre for Malay culture and literature, of Chinese diasporic intellectual and political ferment, and of Indian debates on cultural and religious reformism,” he said.

“The port city became a dynamic force for social change.”

By the late 19th century, Singapore became a staple port to the Malay peninsula. It was where tin, rubber and petroleum, extracted from the peninsula, were processed and exported elsewhere.

By this time, noted Prof Tan, Singapore had become so used to this hinterland that it had “become inconceivable that the island could actually survive without it”.

After World War II, Singapore's political leaders desired to create a common market with Malaya. Singapore briefly regained its northern hinterland when it formed

Malaysia with the Federation of Malaya, Sabah and Sarawak in 1963.

Prof Tan noted that after Independence, Singapore continued to define and re-define its hinterland.

In the early 2000s, political leaders described Singapore as having a seven-hour hinterland, encompassing a region within a seven-hour flight radius from Singapore, referring to major markets such as Asean, China, India and Australia.

While the port continues to shape the fortunes of the country, Prof Tan suggested other ways forward.

Now a global city in a globalised world, the idea of a fixed economic hinterland has lost its meaning for Singapore. So his suggestion was to always remain open, be flexible and look out for opportunities.

“Hinterlands may shift, but if you can make yourself relevant, you will be able to adapt,” he said.

He cited the examples of New York and London with their declining world ports and said both places “have transformed into global cities with diverse functions”.

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Yale-NUS College president and historian Tan Tai Yong says Singapore's identity has been shaped by changes to its hinterland and port over seven centuries.