

Archaeologist wins S'pore history prize

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

Raffaella Nathan Charles

An archaeologist whose work refutes 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 1984, was unveiled 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 country's independence, the Singapore History Prize is given to a publication with a lasting impact on the understanding of Singapore's history.

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

Historian Wang Gungwu, who headed a four-man panel to choose the winner, said Prof Miksic's book "has laid the foundations for a fundamental reinterpretation of the history of Singapore and its place in the larger Asian context".

The book has confirmed that Singapore's history dates back more than 700 years. "We now know more about Singapore in the 14th century than any other city in the region in the same period," said Professor Wang, chairman of NUS' East Asian Institute.

A citation on the book noted: "We realise that Kuala Lumpur, Bangkok, Naypyitaw, Phnom Penh and Manila were all founded more recently than Singapore."

The book was one of 29 submissions received by the history department. The four-man panel that re-



viewed the five shortlisted submissions was made up of Prof Wang, academic Kishore Mahbubani, entrepreneur Claire Chiang and Prof Peter A. Coclanis of the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. The other four books on the shortlist were works about the history of the sarong kebaya, the Singapore Botanic Gardens, the Bukit Ho Swee fire, and Singapore 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-

A FORM OF TRIBUTE

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PROFESSOR JOHN N. MIKSIC, 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*.

ture excavations and training exercises, as well as to restore the artefacts he has in his lab.

"It really gives the field of archaeology 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 Singaporean 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 artefacts from a 2003 excavation at Singapore Cricket Club.

The book, which is into its third edition, can be bought through the NUS Press website as well as book store Kinokuniya for \$58, without GST. It will be translated into Chinese by 2019.

Professor John N. Miksic was the first person to conduct an archaeological dig in Singapore, in 1984.

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