

By Invitation

Crazy Rich Asians in early Singapore's history

Long before the movie was made and before the Europeans came to Singapore, Asians were making the island a hub for trade, money and ideas. Examples were Teochew rice merchants and Chettiar moneylenders.

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In the eighth century, long before Europeans arrived in our part of the world, Crazy Rich Asians were already building great maritime cities.

Singapore was destined to be one of them.

Persian and Arab merchants operated the trading networks that connected the Chinese ports with the Indian Ocean. During the Tang period, there was export of silk, cloth, ceramics, tea, copper and iron wares from China to West Asia. As the axis connecting East Asia and the classical centres of India and the Middle East, South-east Asia remained an important trading region throughout the Song Dynasty.

By the 13th century, long-distance East-West trade was conducted through an efficient segmentation of networks – the Arabian Seas, the Bay of Bengal and the South China Sea.

Professor Anthony Reid, who taught history at the University of Malaya in the 1960s, and later returned to be the founding director of the Asia Research Institute at the National University of Singapore, points out that the build-up of trade networks led to a “great expansion of cities and... gave them life”. He further argues that in South-east Asia, before 1630, “maritime cities were probably more dominant over their sparsely populated hinterlands than they were in most parts of the world”.

By the 19th century, when the Europeans arrived in Singapore to build a colonial port city, these flows and circulations formed the foundations on which new structures grew.

After Singapore was established as a trading colony by the British, it continued to function as a node of overlapping diasporic worlds and their networks. By the end of the 19th century, the island was an established hub of trade, pilgrimage and knowledge production.

Singapore experienced the forces of globalisation long before the term came into popular consciousness in the late 20th century, with a global orientation and purpose.

But beyond goods and communities, Singapore traded in money and ideas.

GLOBAL FINANCE AND KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION

By the mid-1800s, Singapore was, as historian Rajat Kanta Ray describes, “the centre of a dense web of Chinese finance and trade”.

A thick stream of Chinese migration to Singapore and Malaya led to burgeoning demand for rice in the region.

The lucrative trade in rice was dominated by Teochew rice merchants who were based in Singapore, but who were also known as Siam traders because of the large rice mills in Bangkok. The most prominent among the Siam traders was Choy Tsz Yong, who arrived in Singapore in the 1870s.

Back in his native Swatow, Choy was a successful sugar merchant and a commission agent. Seeing an opportunity in the new trade in rice shipments, the Teochew merchant came to Singapore with a substantial amount of capital. By 1908, Choy was the head of the local Teochew clan, and he owned four rice mills in Siam, which produced over 10 million dollars' worth of rice.

Teochews are still very much involved in the rice business today. Chop Chiap Heng, one of Singapore's largest rice importers, is run by a Teochew father-and-son team – Mr Tan Oon Meng and Mr Andrew Tan.

Mr Andrew Tan had been the chairman of the Singapore General Rice Importers Association during the 2008 food crisis, which was caused by a combination of severe weather, growing demand for biofuels, rising oil prices and panic buying. Global rice prices increased by about 40 per cent. Of the two key suppliers to Singapore, Vietnam banned rice exports while India lowered its exports.

It was at the time that Mr Tan met the former Thai commerce minister, together with major Thai rice exporters and Singapore rice importers. The Thai minister reaffirmed the strong relationship between the two countries and Thailand continued to supply rice to Singapore throughout that testing period.

Meanwhile, the Chettiers were operating a global financial centre on this little island.

The Nattukottai Chettiers, who originated from an area known as Chettinad in Tamil Nadu, India, had dominated the rural credit sector in many parts of South-east Asia. In the 19th century, Chettiar temples were important nodes of this network. More than religious sites, the temples served as clearing houses and places of business, as cashiers from Chettiar firms congregated at the temple to transact with their clients. It was also the meeting place for the Chettiar Chamber of Commerce.

As devotees of Murugan, the Hindu god of war, Chettiar moneylenders would invoke the deity as chairman and witness to all economic transactions. Unfair dealings constituted sacrilege. This



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provided a unified, ethical code of conduct for business, in contrast to opportunistic behaviour among other merchant communities that operated across vast distances.

Trust, rather than money, was the foundation of the Chettiers' international business.

The Chettiers provided a ready source of credit for small businesses, which would otherwise have found it difficult to secure loans from European banks, and they counted as their clients Indian traders, Chinese miners and businessmen, European planters, Malay royalty and civil servants.

In fact, in Singapore and Peninsular Malaysia, many a successful Chinese merchant began his climb from a loan from a Chettiar. Over time and with stricter legislation, the role of moneylending declined as the Chettiers entered other professions. By the early 1980s, there were only a handful of surviving Chettiar moneylending firms in Singapore, operating mainly in the Serangoon Road area.

My second example is Singapore's role as a knowledge production node. The flows and networks that ensured Singapore's strategic and economic position as a colonial port-city also gave it a

place in the world of ideas.

Colonial port cities, being diverse and metropolitan, provided public spheres, which allowed elites and literate classes to communicate and debate with one another.

Take, for example, Malay publications such as newspapers, magazines and literature. The dissemination of these materials, and the accompanying spread of ideas, was stimulated by the advent of the Malay lithograph and, subsequently, the printing press, with the main distribution and publication centre situated in Singapore.

In fact, Singapore was a centre for Islamic life, learning and literature in the Malay-Muslim world in the late 19th century.

PLURAL OR COSMOPOLITAN?

Early Singapore then was both a plural and cosmopolitan city. What are the key features of plurality versus cosmopolitanism? A plural society, as described by British writer John Sydenham Furnivall, is one that is segregated, with groups that live “side by side, yet without mingling”. Touch but don't mix – a plural society would not share common values and social bonds.

In contrast, a cosmopolitan

society is one where there is intermingling among different groups, and individuals look beyond national boundaries in building cultural, political and economic connections.

Globalising cities tended to foster cosmopolitanism – in other words, openness derived from divergent cultural experiences. However, cities and their societies are fluid and evolve over time. Singapore was at times more plural than cosmopolitan, sometimes both simultaneously.

People came to Singapore, often just passing through, on their way to, or from, their intended destinations, yet settled down here. Singapore was one of the most cosmopolitan cities in Asia by the end of the 19th century.

But where do we stand today?

After decades of efforts in nation-building and the promotion of racial harmony within the CMIO (Chinese, Malay, Indian, Others) framework, do we risk developing a much more impoverished and narrow concept of what Singapore and Singaporeans are? As a form of “state simplification”, the CMIO framework might have been necessary in undergirding social policies during the early years of

state building. However, the continued use of this rigid form of categorisation to pigeonhole people according to race can submerge the rich diversities, cultural fluidity and multi-layered identities of contemporary Singapore.

As a globalised Singapore becomes more of the polyglot cosmopolis that it was once, does the CMIO still serve its purpose? This is a question we ought to ponder as we attempt to strengthen our sense of identity.

Even as we write and make our national history, we should take into account our much longer and richer past, where we were a point of convergence for people from all over the world – a place that afforded them opportunities, vitality, interactions and cross-cultural encounters, and out of which grew a diverse, tolerant, multicultural population that went on to define modern Singapore.

We were that place in the past. We could be again, in the future.

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