

# A port city in search of a hinterland

Over the centuries, Singapore has continued to define and redefine its hinterland. This fluid, restless search for a 'hinterland' – or economic space – has forged the Singapore of today.



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While Singapore's economic development has sometimes been understood by policy scholars and economists as a matter of governance and strategic direction by the state, a historical overview would show that the underlying plot of Singapore's economic story has stayed constant over hundreds of years.

Its prosperity has always been due to its ability to find and adapt to shifting hinterlands.

From the 14th to 19th centuries, its hinterland was sea-based, covering much of maritime South-east Asia. From the 19th and 20th centuries, particularly with the completion of the Causeway in 1923, the Malay peninsula became a key land-based hinterland for Singapore. After 1965, the situation changed again.

Size is the one great "immovables" of Singapore's existence, along with an immutable tropicity in its climate and its economic destiny as a port city. Much of its current consciousness, especially among the immediate post-merger generation, has been the need for a hinterland, a body with which to feed the heart.

The history of colonial port cities is a cautionary tale – a number of earlier prominent Asian port cities have indeed faded into obscurity. Singapore has somehow managed to evolve from a traditional entrepot port city serving regional trading networks into a city-state whose economy, inextricably linked to an international system driven by commerce and enterprise, is sustained and nourished by global economic conditions.

## ECONOMICS OF A PORT CITY

What is special about the economy of a port city?

First, port cities have an ineffable porosity – they are not merely "cities that happen to be on the shoreline"; they are economic entities whose character is maritime in nature.

As nodes of sea-based trading networks, they are open to the flows of goods and peoples, a rich blend of social, cultural and political connections. A port city is naturally cosmopolitan.

Dr Rhoads Murphey, a historian of Asia, has pointed out that "(in port cities,) races, cultures and

ideas as well as goods from a variety of places jostle, mix and enrich each other and the life of the city".

Second, port cities cannot exist without an economic hinterland, an area that surrounds a large city or port, which serves the city/port and on which the city/port depends for economic growth. Port cities are necessarily linked to hinterlands by trade, and serve as the link between the land and the sea.

But for port cities that function as entrepôts, their hinterlands are less defined by geography than economics. Maritime space – or networks of seaborne links – often constituted their hinterlands.

Singapore is a prime example. For extended periods of its long history, the port polity served as a trans-shipment centre whose development depended largely on its position and function in the trading networks in which it was situated.

In other words, Singapore's existence did not depend on a surrounding or nearby land mass. Singapore's hinterland was the maritime space around it, which included much of the South-east Asian archipelago.

Third, port cities are influenced to a large extent by the hinterlands. By focusing on how Singapore identified its hinterland and how the hinterland had, in turn, influenced its development, a narrative could be developed for explaining Singapore's historical evolution.

Throughout, Singapore has continued to define and redefine its hinterland. This fluid, restless search for a "hinterland" – or economic space – has forged the Singapore of today. Let me explain.

## THE INTELLECTUAL HEART OF ASIA

In its earliest incarnation, the relationship between Singapore and its hinterland was defined by maritime-based trading networks that had preceded the establishment of a colonial port in Singapore in the 19th century.

The trading pattern that formed in the 19th century was based on the intermeshing of a number of pre-existing networks that connected the Arab lands and India to the west and China to the east.

It was during this period of growth as a colonial port city, when much older and indigenous transnational connections were revitalised, that Singapore became the heart of the intellectual world of South-east Asia.

Economic growth also brings cultural and political awakenings. Singapore became the centre for Malay culture and literature, of Chinese diasporic intellectual and political ferment, and of Indian debates on cultural and religious reformism.



The port city also became a centre of cultural and nationalist movement – a dynamic force for social change. This experience was common in other colonial port cities such as Rangoon and Penang, similarly home to hybrid communities which helped to shape a vibrant Asian public sphere.

By the late 19th century, Singapore's hinterland became more clearly defined. Singapore served as a staple port to the Malay peninsula. During this period, the traditional idea of the hinterland supplying its cities was turned on its head as Singapore – the port city – played the role of supplier through its exports to the Malayan hinterland and the Dutch East Indies.

Singapore became the conduit through which food supplies from Siam, Burma and Indo-China were

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redirected. Singapore was also where tin, rubber and petroleum extracted from the peninsula were processed and exported to the rest of the world.

For years, this economic

trajectory continued. As a result, the staple port had become so used to its hinterland that it had become inconceivable that Singapore could actually survive without it.

This was an interesting case of historical amnesia, as Singapore had earlier thrived without relying primarily on that overland hinterland. It is for this reason that the early Singapore politicians fought so hard for merger.

The People's Action Party built their case primarily on economic arguments – the need to create out of the Malayan hinterland a common market that would sustain and nurture Singapore's attempts at industrialisation.

Throughout the 1950s, the island colony had been under mounting economic pressure due to the explosive rate of population growth on the island and declining entrepot trade. Its re-exports to the

region had been dramatically reduced, owing to import restrictions on the part of many of its neighbours to protect their own nascent industries. Entrepot trade – the mainstay of the Singapore economy – was also threatened by countries increasingly engaged in direct trading.

Singapore regained its northern hinterland when it formed Malaysia with the Federation of Malaya, Sabah and Sarawak in 1963. But this proved to be short-lived. In August 1965, following two stormy years in Malaysia, Singapore separated from the Federation. Political differences proved insurmountable and once again, the hinterland had to change.

After separation and since independence, Singapore has continued to define and redefine its hinterland.

In 1972, then Foreign Minister S. Rajaratnam challenged Singapore to aspire towards global city status, making the world its hinterland. More recently, in 2001, then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong spoke of a seven-hour hinterland, encompassing a region within a seven-hour flight radius from Singapore. He highlighted China and India as new markets within this hinterland. This hinterland included 2.8 billion people living in various countries and cities, with hundreds of millions in the middle-income group.

Today, Singapore's trade is more than three times its gross domestic product – the highest trade to GDP ratio in the world. The operations may be more sophisticated, the materials dealt with different and the scope much wider, but at the heart of its thriving economy lies a port city.

In Singapore's current manifestation – a global city in a globalised world – the idea of a fixed economic hinterland has lost its meaning. Singapore can afford to live large as a small island, unconstrained.

This economic model, however, carries a political cost. As a maritime city, Singapore is one of the busiest container ports in the world. It is currently the world's top trans-shipment hub, feeding smaller ports which lack deep water or cannot afford to invest in facilities that would enable container handling.

But an open city-state sustained by global flows will face tensions when it has to function as a nation-state. The requirements of an international clientele and an open economy on the one hand, and the interests of a local citizenry, on the other, may often prove inimical.

In its current state, Singapore must find survival not as a port or even a city, but as a nation and a country. There is, after all, little point in having a body without a heart.

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