Foreword

There is ample archaeological evidence today to argue that the island of Singapore was a trading port of significant importance from the fourteenth century, and perhaps earlier. This archaeological evidence has been accumulated over the decades from Singapore's very first archaeological dig in 1984 at Fort Canning Hill to the current work of the Archaeology Unit at the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute. However, public interest in Singapore's pre-modern history is very much a recent phenomenon. For one, until recently historians paid very little attention to the island's pre-modern histories. As Kwa Chong Guan informs us in his first chapter in this volume, seminal texts like Mary Turnbull's *A History of Singapore, 1819–1975* did little to try to understand Singapore as a pre-1819 regional port or see it as part of the larger Malay world. Kwa notes that this was because there was either insufficient evidence of pre-1819 communities for serious investigation or that these communities were not believed to be significant enough to justify studying. Much of the writing of national histories in Southeast Asia took colonialism as the starting point and embarked on a chronology that included post-World War II decolonization, the emergence of postcolonial governments and their struggles to build new nations during the Cold War. Pre-modern empires, sea-faring communities and border-crossing fishermen did not command the same attention as newly formed nation-states, authoritarian governments and developing economies.

The other reason for the lack of interest in Singapore's pre-modern histories was decidedly ideological. Upon expulsion from Malaysia in 1965, Singapore's multicultural society made it politically untenable for its national history to be hitched to the civilization and culture of any particular ethnic group. With multiculturalism and meritocracy as its pillars, it would have been contradictory to equate national identity

and culture with the country's largest ethnic community. In cutting the Gordian knot, the postcolonial government decided that the arrival of Sir Stamford Raffles to establish a British Station on Singapore would be ground zero without appeal to any ethnic culture. For many generations of Singaporeans, Singapore was born as a modern entity, transformed from the proverbial quiet fishing village to a colonial entrepôt with the stroke of a pen on 6 February 1819. This popular version of history was a strategic rupture, effectively dislocating the island from its surroundings and region, to introduce the island as *tabula rasa*.

Fast forward fifty years and the external environment has changed. Today the rise of China has made regionalism and sub-regionalism in Southeast Asia more geopolitically crucial than ever before. Southeast Asia's rapid growth has made it a region of opportunity, prompting Singapore leaders to encourage younger Singaporeans to develop a deeper understanding of the nearby countries. On the scholarly front, academics in the fields of history and archaeology have demonstrated the networks and linkages of the island to the region over the centuries prior to 1819. Key texts like *Seven Hundred Years: A History of Singapore* by Kwa Chong Guan, Derek Heng, Peter Borschberg and Tan Tai Yong and *Studying Singapore before 1800* edited by Kwa Chong Guan and Peter Borschberg bring together a body of evidence to show Singapore's pre-modern connectivity to the region vis-à-vis the economic activities of communities living on and around the island long before the arrival of Raffles.

The essays collected in this volume are summaries of a series of lectures organized by the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute in the first half of 2019 as its contribution to commemorating the bicentennial of Stamford Raffles's arrival in Singapore. Colleagues of the former Nalanda-Sriwijaya Centre were invited to speak on how their research contributed to a major theme of the bicentennial, inviting Singaporeans to reflect on Singapore's longer seven-hundred-year history.

I would like to thank my colleagues for accepting our invitation to speak on how their work pushes and probes the frontiers of our understanding of our history before Raffles. The summaries of their lectures compiled in this volume provide a glimpse of how deeply connected our history is to that of the long cycles of the maritime histories of the region and the importance of the Malay world to Singapore's identity and place in the region. *1819 & Before: Singapore's Pasts* will, I am confident, form a basis for future research on Singapore's pre-modern history and the island's changing roles under the Śrīvijaya Empire and the Majapahit Empire, followed by the Malacca and Johor Sultanates, and how Singapore has always been shaped by its surroundings. The Nalanda-Sriwijaya Centre has bequeathed its

successor, the Temasek History Research Centre, a substantive legacy of scholarship to draw upon for its research.

I would like to thank my ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute colleagues for organizing the series of lectures that forms the basis of this book. I am also grateful to Tan Chin Tiong, former Director of ISEAS and current Senior Advisor, as well as Choi Shing Kwok, current Director, for supporting this project.

Terence Chong
Deputy Director
ISEAS