

News from Southeast Asia

ISEAS YUSOF ISHAK
INSTITUTE

INSTITUTE OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES

**Research.
Scholarship.
Policy.**

In 2014, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong announced plans to rename the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS) to 'ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute' as a tribute to Encik Yusof Ishak, Singapore's first President. In commemoration of the 105th anniversary of Encik Yusof Ishak's birth, ISEAS was officially renamed on 12 August 2015. This issue features three articles from the Nalanda-Sriwijaya Centre (NSC). NSC pursues research on historical interactions among Asian societies and civilisations. It serves as a forum for comprehensive study of the ways in which Asian polities and societies have interacted over time through religious, cultural, and economic exchanges and diasporic networks.

New Titles from ISEAS Publishing

ISEAS Publishing is a dynamic press with more than forty years' experience. It is the largest publisher of academic books that focuses on Southeast Asian politics, economics and social issues. As a Unit of the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute in Singapore, its role is enshrined in Parliamentary Act 9 of 1968, to assist ISEAS in the "promotion of research on Southeast Asia worldwide".

The 3rd ASEAN Reader

Compiled by Ooi Kee Beng, Sanchita Basu Das, Terence Chong, Malcolm Cook, Cassey Lee and Michael Yeo Chai Ming
2015, 485 pages, ISBN 9789814620611, soft cover, US\$45.90

Deciphering Southern Thailand's Violence: Organization and Insurgent Practices of BRN-Coordinate

Sascha Helbardt

2015, 257 pages, ISBN 9789814519625, soft cover, US\$29.90

Imperial China and Its Southern Neighbours

Edited by Victor H. Mair and Liam Kelley

2015, 391 pages, ISBN 9789814620536, soft cover, US\$29.90

Demography of Indonesia's Ethnicity

Aris Ananta, Evi Nurvidya Arifin, M. Sairi Hasbullah, Nur Budi Handayani and Agus Pramono

2015, 384 pages, ISBN 9789814519878, soft cover, US\$29.90

Buddhist Dynamics in Premodern and Early Modern Southeast Asia

Edited by D. Christian Lammerts

2015, 440 pages, ISBN 9789814519069, soft cover, US\$29.90

Please visit the ISEAS Publishing website at <https://bookshop.iseas.edu.sg> for the full range of titles and for ordering. Books are also available as PDF downloads, either as full books or as individual chapters.



Digging the Lion City and the future of Singapore's archaeology

Lim Chen Sian

THE UNIMAGINABLE SIGHT of a 20-ton rain tree suspended 30m in the air caused the mid-afternoon downtown traffic to slow to a crawl. Smartly dressed office workers in pressed dress shirts and silk ties from the nearby Central Business District paused to photograph the phenomenon with their cellphone cameras.

A massive operation to transplant eight mature rain trees in downtown Singapore was initiated this past March, to create 'plaza' space in front of the Victoria Concert Hall and Theatre, on the occasion of the SG50 celebrations. The relocation of the trees, to their new home just 100m away, turned out to be the largest rescue excavation ever attempted in Singapore. The archaeology team from the Archaeology Unit, Nalanda-Sriwijaya Centre (NSC) ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, spent 100-days on the new site scrambling desperately to stay ahead of the fast encroaching construction.

Billed as an 'archaeological jackpot' by the local media, the Archaeology Unit safely recovered some 3-tons of artifacts from ancient Singapura, which would otherwise have been destroyed and lost to the development. These finds presented

new interpretations of pre-colonial Singapore, allowing researchers to not only reconstruct past lifeways, but also the murky chronology of the island. The irony was not lost, however, on those who inquired: 40-year-old trees were transplanted to celebrate Singapore's golden jubilee, but in the process the 700-year-old site of the ancient settlement of Temasek was uprooted.

Presently there is no legislation entailing the undertaking of archaeological impact assessments prior to development in Singapore. Despite the want of any regulatory requirements, the discipline has established itself within the tightly connected heritage community. Since 1984, archaeologists have been quietly going about digging on the island. The early days saw the reliance on expatriate archaeologists and volunteers, with American John Miksic, then with Gadjah Mada University Indonesia, who led the first systematic investigation on Fort Canning, followed by Greek museum consultant, Alexandra Avieropoulou-Choo. The first two decades of Singapore archaeology were sporadic and ad hoc, where digging

Above:
Empress Place
Rescue Archaeology
Excavation.

opportunities were few and limited to the occasional foray into construction sites within the boundaries of old colonial government quarters, particularly along the Singapore River.

As of the 2000s, local Singaporean archaeologists increasingly led and championed archaeology, and currently a small Singaporean team is based in the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute. Formalized in 2010, the Archaeology Unit (AU) seeks to contribute to the understanding of Southeast Asia through the study of the material record. Since its inception, the AU has expanded its mission to develop Singapore's archaeological capacity and today, it is the sole entity in Singapore capable of conducting the full suite of archaeological evaluations, heritage impact assessment, rescue excavations, post-excavation analysis, artifact collections management, public archaeologies, and academic research. The AU also has plans to roll out its past reports as part of the NSC working paper series and as standalone monographs. More crucially, the AU is training a new generation of Singaporean archaeologists who will be the future researchers and custodians of the buried past.

The AU's work is not confined to Singapore. From 2012 the NSC Field School of Archaeology provided young university students in archaeology and related disciplines an opportunity to participate in a 3-week program of fieldwork and classes held in a partner ASEAN host country. While many field schools exist in the region, their participants tend to be from the sponsoring institution or country. The NSC Field School seeks to not only provide adequate field experience for the participants, but more importantly recognizes and encapsulates interaction between aspiring archaeologists across national and cultural boundaries. The Field School, currently in its third installment is funded by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Singapore, and is opened to East Asian Summit member countries.

Back at Empress Place, the lumbering crane set a rain tree down in a cloud of dust, showering fine sediment over the yellow-helmeted linesmen and their animated supervisors. With a shrill whistle of the all-clear signal, the archaeology team scrambled back into their trenches. The water pump spluttered back to life, extracting groundwater that had preserved the 700/800-year-old planks from the ancient settlement. Everywhere buckets of soil stood, awaiting sieving for small finds in the likes of Yuan period export ceramic sherds, locally manufactured glass bangles, Song Dynasty Chinese cooper cash, and the odd gold *kupang* from the 16th century Johore Sultanate. The archaeologists and their loyal crew of enthusiastic volunteers rushed about the site – resulting in another 14-hour marathon day for them. Four precious hours were lost that afternoon as the trees crept closer to the dig and the incessant deadline loomed nigh.

Lim Chen Sian is a Visiting Fellow with the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute's Nalanda-Sriwijaya Centre.