

**ISEAS** YUSOF ISHAK  
INSTITUTE



2018 marks the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute's 50th anniversary. Initiated in 1968 by then Deputy Prime Minister Goh Keng Swee, ISEAS has since been dedicated to research and scholarship on Southeast Asia.

# Excavating Singapore

Terence Chong

Singapore is a densely packed urban city not immediately associated with archaeology. However, there has been a surge in archaeological activities on the island in recent years, especially around the historical downtown Civic District. This flood of activities has been the result of growing public interest in the country's heritage and history. Globalisation and immigration have raised public priority over local and national identities, leading to greater attention to stories, artefacts and research that help Singaporeans understand who they are and where they come from.

ISEAS-Yusof Ishak's Archaeology Unit (AU) was formed in 2010. It is the only dedicated archaeology centre in Singapore committed to the promotion of archaeology in the country and Southeast Asia. AU not only conducts annual archaeological Field Schools in the Southeast Asian region for students but also collaborates closely with local agencies on excavations, archaeological surveys and post-excavation work. Local archaeologists have been excavating in post-independent Singapore since 1984. Approximately 30 sites have been examined since. Archaeology in Singapore can be chronologically organised into several periods.

Firstly the Neolithic Period (New Stone Age) (from approx. 10,200BC). In the 1930s, British archaeologists based at Singapore's Raffles Museum reported the existence of Neolithic stone tools and implements at Tanjong Karang (near Tuas) and on Pulau Ubin. No excavations were conducted in Singapore, but a brief excavation at Tanjong Bungah on the Johor side of the Tebrau Straits (known as the Johor Straits from the 1890s) revealed a well-preserved site with stone tools related to those found in Sumatra, but different from those found in the Malay Peninsula.

Secondly, the Temasek / Singapura Period (1300-1700 CE). Excavations since 1984 have revealed large amounts of artefacts dating from the Temasek period. The archaeological

evidence challenged past perceptions that the island's historical narrative only began with the British establishment of a trading station in 1819, and pushed back the historical timeline to approximately 1300CE.

Thirdly, the Colonial Period (1819 -1959). Some 11 sites specific to the colonial period have been excavated. The artefacts uncovered have provided insights into hitherto unknown social practices and cultural behaviour of everyday people. These practices and behaviour were simply not documented in official historical records. We also know little about the lives of the local population during Singapore's early years as an East India Company settlement or the daily routine of soldiers during the Battle for Singapore in 1942.

Finally, the Contemporary Period (1959-present). Singapore's frantic pace of industrialisation and urbanisation has resulted in only a few pristine sites left for archaeological study. These remaining sites feature the vestiges from a rural agricultural community. They also showcase the industrialisation period through brickworks and early post-war housing settlements. All of these sites present potential for archaeological research into the lifeworlds of our forebearers from the not too distant past.

The following articles are a sample of the research AU is conducting.

**Terence Chong** is Senior Fellow & Deputy Director, ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute; Regional Editor of 'News from Southeast Asia' [terencechong@iseas.edu.sg](mailto:terencechong@iseas.edu.sg)

## Archiving archaeological materials: whose responsibility is it?

Lim Chen Sian

Archaeologists are portrayed in popular imagination as individuals with dirt-caked brows, hunched over in a trench, patiently digging away the sediments, revealing marvels from the past. While true to an extent, excavation is nonetheless only one characteristic of the discipline. Beyond the excavation is a long-drawn sequence of processes that archaeologists grapple with behind-the-scenes: cleaning, sorting, conserving, illustrating, photographing, cataloguing and studying the finds. As a custodian of the past, the archaeologist bears a heavy responsibility in caring for and maintaining archaeological collections. However, the archiving and curatorship of archaeological artefacts is a frequently overlooked aspect of the archaeological progress.

In the UK, archaeologists have the ethical and professional duty to ensure that the archaeological collection is looked after for posterity. In Singapore, the ownership of archaeological finds is unclear. There is no law addressing any antiquities recovered from either archaeological excavations or by chance. As such, there is no agency or institution in Singapore that serves as a central depository for archaeological materials. While select museums under the National Heritage Board (NHB) may occasionally accept a few items for exhibition purposes, these institutions hesitate over receiving the complete archaeological

assemblage from an excavation project. Understandably, these institutions also do not have the necessary archaeological staff to handle and curate the collection. All this presents a conundrum for archaeologists in the country, as for the last three decades archaeologists have taken it upon themselves to look after the excavated materials, and this archive has grown over the years. Presently, the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute (ISEAS) has in its custody approximately 6 tons of artefacts from excavations dating back to 2004. Separately, another principal collection is held at the National University of Singapore.

In an attempt to answer the query of 'whose responsibility is it?' a dialogue on the future of the archaeological collection commenced with an ISEAS-NHB workshop on Archiving Archaeological Materials in late 2014, where heritage practitioners and archaeology specialists from the UK and Singapore debated and discussed the need for an archaeological archive. The workshop surmised that archaeologists and heritage institutions in Singapore all have a role to play in determining the fate of the archaeological collection or archive. In the immediate future, archaeologists as domain specialists will need to lead the way to develop the archiving protocols for Singapore. In the longer term, legislation addressing the ownership of antiquities, and the delegation of responsibility for their upkeep and care will need to be determined.

Meanwhile, at the NSC Archaeology Unit, the future is in the making. Since 2014, there have been post-excavation and collection management initiatives to demonstrate that archaeological archives are vital for both academic research and to safeguard a national collection for future researchers. With the provision of adequate resources and funding, the Archaeology Unit has plans to catalogue and care for the materials from excavations at the National Gallery Singapore, Victoria Concert Hall, Empress Place and other sites by 2024. This ambition is coupled with the production of useful research from the collection, including rolling out the publication of site reports as part of the documentary archive.

All this is contingent on the availability of adequate resources and funding. ISEAS looks forward to working closely with heritage agencies to collectively preserve the country's archaeological collection.

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Papers from the 2014 ISEAS-NHB workshop Archiving Archaeological Materials are now published and available for download on <https://tinyurl.com/auseries> as NSC Archaeology Unit 'Archaeology Report Series No. 7'.

**Lim Chen Sian** is an Associate Fellow of the Nalanda-Sriwijaya Centre (ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute). His interests include the archaeology of colonial period (post-European contact) in Southeast Asia; material culture trends over the past millennium; settlement development; archaeological legislation; and public archaeology. The archaeological investigations at the National Art Gallery site (former Supreme Court and City Hall) in Singapore is just one of many projects he is working on this year. [chensian@iseas.edu.sg](mailto:chensian@iseas.edu.sg)



Artefact storage at the NSC Archaeology Unit, ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute. (Credit: Aaron Kao)