

The Statue of Sir Stamford Raffles and His Legacy



Singapore



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Wan Yii Lee

Abstract

In 2019, Singapore commemorated its bicentennial and the 200th anniversary of the arrival of Sir Stamford Raffles to its shores. The innovative approach to addressing the statue of Raffles and the state's narrative regarding his legacy sets this case apart from other colonial-era figures around the globe. Singapore's historical narrative on Raffles reflects the state's role in crafting a coherent, resilient, and adaptable narrative that suits its nation-building agenda. This paper traces the evolution of this narrative, from the state's choice of Raffles and 1819 as the starting point of modern Singapore, to its recent shift towards recognising the island's pre-1819 history as well without overtly contradicting its previous position regarding the role of Raffles. This case study is useful for understanding the role of the state in determining national discourse on colonial histories, and unearthing how investigating silences can be as enriching as tracing visible contestations.

Introduction

The legacy of British colonialism in Singapore, a small island-city-state in Southeast Asia, is unique among the case studies presented in this series, as a case of the conspicuous absence of visible contestation. The physical cityscape of Singapore has been noted for “[keeping] the markings of its colonial past” in its street names such as Victoria Street or Queenstown, as well as the number of schools, hospitals, and businesses named after Sir Stamford Raffles, who is widely recognised as the nation’s colonial founder in 1819.¹ The normalisation of his colonial legacy is most explicitly seen in the untarnished statue of Raffles himself at the bank of the Singapore River, seamlessly integrated into the waterfront and frequented by hundreds of locals and tourists on a daily basis. In a parallel fashion, the figure of Raffles (and British colonialism) is seamlessly integrated into the national historical narrative of Singapore, depicted as a benign colonial ruler and an existentially crucial character without whom a “modern, outward-looking and cultural Singapore” would not exist. In the diplomatic words of the Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong,

This journey [towards Singapore’s independence] was not a straight and level path, forwards and upwards. ... we fought for independence from our colonial masters. But we also recognise the decisive and indelible imprint that the British left on Singapore — the rule of law, our parliamentary system of government, even the language I am speaking today.²

Background

The Statue of Raffles

The most popular and visible icon of Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles is the polymarble statue located at his supposed historical landing site along the Singapore River, which many locals and tourists pass by every single day. Standing tall at eight feet with his arms folded and his weight on his left leg (an iconic pose well-known amongst Singaporeans), Raffles gazes with an aura of pride and assurance beyond the river bank, with the caption underneath him reading “On this historic site, Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles first landed in Singapore on 28th January 1819, and with genius and perception changed the destiny of Singapore from an obscure fishing village to a great seaport and modern metropolis.” This replica was unveiled in 1972, a copy of the original.

The original bronze statue, sculpted by sculptor-cum-poet Thomas Woolner, still stands today at Empress Place, in front of the Victoria Memorial Hall. It was originally installed at the Padang³ to commemorate Queen Victoria’s Golden Jubilee on 27 June 1887, and was

¹ Tom Benner, ‘Pirate or Hero? Raffles Bicentennial Fuels Singapore Debate’, *Al Jazeera*, 28 January 2019.

² Janice Lim, ‘Despite rich history before Raffles’ arrival, 1819 was a ‘turning point’ for Singapore: PM Lee’, *TODAY Online*, 28 January 2019.

³ The Padang has also been written about as a centrepiece of British colonial design in Singapore. See Chee Kien Lai, ‘The Padang: Centrepiece of Colonial Design’, *BiblioAsia* (blog), 8 September 2016.

even nicknamed orang besi (“iron man” in Malay). However, as it was often struck by flying footballs or used as a makeshift seat for field games at the Padang, it was moved to its current and more dignified location during Singapore’s centenary celebrations on 6 February 1919, marking the 100th year of the arrival of Raffles and the British in Singapore.⁴ During the Japanese occupation in 1942, it was temporarily removed to the Syonan Museum, only to be reinstalled at Empress Place in 1946 after the Japanese were defeated.⁵ Although the white polymarble statue is more visible and photographed today, the history of the original bears the trace of Singapore’s colonial history in its creation, movement, location, and symbolism.

These statues embody the unique relationship that Singapore and Singaporeans share with their colonial history. In order to understand this relationship, a brief history of colonialism, decolonisation, and independence in Singapore is necessary.

British Colonialism in Singapore

On 6 February 1819, the British statesman Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles signed a treaty with Temenggong Abdu’r Rahman and Sultan Hussein Shah of Johor, which gave the British East India Company the right to build a factory and set up a trading post in Singapore, beginning Singapore’s journey as a British settlement.⁶ Singapore was a crucial possession with an exceptionally strategic location for the British to prevent the Dutch monopolisation of commercial influence.⁷ This led to a mass influx of immigrants seeking opportunity especially from China, India, and the Middle East, which can largely explain the demographic make-up of the population today as well as its established status as a cosmopolitan city of trade in Southeast Asia. Although some may consider Singapore a “successful” case of colonialism or choose to foreground its “positive” legacies, the legacy of colonial rule was in fact mixed. For one, “indirect rule” was premised upon the distinctive profiling of each “race”, thus the British segregated the groups by land and policy, and “racial stereotypes came to provide both the informal and formal bases for social interaction”.⁸ Raffles’ writing at the time revealed his “jaundiced view towards various ethnic groups in the Malay Archipelago: Chinese, Arabs, Americans, and so forth” and particularly against the Malays.⁹ The fraught racial relations on the island state can often be traced back

⁴ Bonny Tan, ‘Statue of Stamford Raffles | Infopedia’, Singapore Infopedia, National Library Board, 13 January 2005.

⁵ Heirwin Mohd Nasir, ‘Raffles Library and Museum (1942-1945) | Infopedia’, Singapore Infopedia, National Library Board, 24 January 2005.

⁶ ‘1819 Singapore Treaty | Infopedia’, Singapore Infopedia, National Library Board, 16 May 2014.

⁷ J. S. Tay, ‘The Attempts of Raffles to Establish a British Base in South-East Asia, 1818-1819’, *Journal of Southeast Asian History* 1, no. 2 (1960): 30–46.

⁸ Benjamin Geoffrey, ‘The Cultural Logic of Singapore’s “Multiracialism”’, in *Singapore: Society in Transition* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1976), 115–33.

⁹ Syed Muhd Khairudin Aljunied, ‘Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles’ Discourse on the Malay World: A Revisionist Perspective’, *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 20, no. 1 (2005): 1–22; Syed Hussein Alatas, *The Myth of the Lazy Native: A Study of the Image of the Malays, Filipinos and Javanese from the 16th to the 20th Century*

to colonial racial policies.¹⁰

After the Japanese occupation of Singapore (1942-45), the British returned to Singapore prepared to increase self-governance for Singapore and Malaya. The People's Action Party (PAP) won the first elections in 1959 and Lee Kuan Yew became the first Prime Minister of Singapore. In 1963, there was a merger between Malaya and Singapore into the Federation of Malaysia, but this did not long endure due to conflict between the United Malays National Organisation's (UMNO) racial policy that favoured Malays and the PAP's communitarian vision of a national identity prioritised over racial identity. Eventually, in 1965, the Malaysian Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman decided to expel Singapore from the federation, and thus began Singapore's journey of independence.

Independent Singapore

Upholding the statue and status of Raffles as the founder of Singapore was strategic in postcolonial, independent Singapore. Ang and Stratton summarise the contradictions in Singapore's search for national identity after 1965:

Singapore's ability to construct itself as a national imagined community suffers from an originary identity deficit. It cannot lay claim to a myth of indigenous origin (which is the case for Malaysia), nor to a history of heroic struggle for independence against colonial oppression (as is the case with Indonesia), which in these two, and in other contexts, have provided the basis for a transcendental legitimation of the post-colonial nation-state.¹¹

Using Raffles and 1819 as a starting point in the founding myth of Singapore was a neutral ground that sliced through ethnic tension. More importantly, in the context of the Cold War, it was important to demonstrate to the British and to the Western world that the PAP was not a radical force for communism, with a view to retaining the presence of British military bases for strategic and economic reasons;¹² Lee Kuan Yew himself acknowledged Albert Winsemius's (a Dutchman serving as economic advisor to Singapore) point that "investors wanted to see what the new socialist government in Singapore was going to do to the statue of Raffles".¹³ Hence, although there were people who "were all for casting the Raffles statue situated in front of Victoria Memorial Hall into...the Singapore River", eventually the statue was retained as was the colonial landscape.¹⁴ Singapore's first Foreign Minister,

and Its Function in the Ideology of Colonial Capitalism (London: Frank Cass, 1977).

¹⁰ Stephen Dziedzic, 'Singapore's Quarrel over Colonialism', *The Interpreter*, 12 February 2020.

¹¹ Ien Ang and Jon Stratton, 'The Singapore Way of Multiculturalism: Western Concepts/Asian Cultures', *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 33, no. 5 (2018): 572.

¹² Lysa Hong and Jianli Huang, *The Scripting of A National History: Singapore and Its Pasts* (Hong Kong University Press, 2008): 17-18.

¹³ Kuan Yew Lee, 'Singapore Is Indebted to Winsemius: SM', *The Straits Times*, 10 December 1996.

¹⁴ S Rajaratnam, 'Speech by Mr S Rajaratnam, Second Deputy Prime Minister (Foreign Affairs), at a Seminar on "Adaptive Reuse: Integrating Traditional Areas into the Modern Urban Fabric" Held at the SHangri-La Hotel on Saturday, 28 April 1984 at 10.30am' (Singapore Government Press Release, 28 April 1984), National Archives of Singapore: 6.

Sinnathamby Rajaratnam, expressed in a speech in 1984 (in spite of his reservations about the eccentricity of a balanced view of imperialism):

“We may detest imperial rule but, as with Roman imperial rule in Britain, British imperial rule had both positive and negative aspects. It was both oppressive and liberationist. The intelligent and responsible anti-imperialist should, once the battle is won, retain and improve upon what is positive in imperialism while discarding its reactionary and oppressive features.”¹⁵

National education about the “Singapore Story” was crafted with Raffles marking the beginning of modern Singapore, presenting the colonial government “not as brutal, oppressive, and exploitative, but as incompetent and ineffective” (in contrast with the PAP’s competent technocratic state under Lee Kuan Yew).¹⁶ Hong and Huang summarise the story as such: “there is only one political movement – the PAP; two important personalities in Singapore – Stamford Raffles and Lee Kuan Yew; and three dates – 1819, 1942 and 1965 – that are worth remembering”.¹⁷ This carefully scripted narrative is presented not only in the National Education curriculum but also in election campaigns, government speeches, and other platforms.¹⁸ While highlighting certain parts of history, it deemphasizes others such as Singapore’s connections with the Malay world, even though there is official acknowledgment that Malays were indigenous to Singapore (mostly viewed as a political move to appease Malaysia after separation).¹⁹ Even though there is evidence that Singapore had a history of being a thriving port city with two waves of settlement prior to the arrival of the British, pre-1819 Singapore is seemingly non-existent in national curricula, often framed as a sleepy Malay fishing village.²⁰ The arrival of Stamford Raffles marks the “birth-time of modern Singapore, equalising the positions of the racial groups” in the national narrative.²¹ However, with 2019 marking the 200th year since Raffles’ arrival in 1819, the Bicentennial was a moment to question the status of Raffles and colonialism in Singapore.

History of the Contestation

The Bicentennial

The Singapore Bicentennial Office (SBO) was set up by the Singapore government to organise events in commemoration of the 200th year since 1819. This was run by a

¹⁵ Ibid 7.

¹⁶ Kenneth Paul Tan, quoted in Benner, ‘Pirate or Hero? Raffles Bicentennial Fuels Singapore Debate’.

¹⁷ Hong and Huang, *The Scripting of A National History*, 15.

¹⁸ Walid Jumblatt Abdullah, ‘Selective History and Hegemony-Making: The Case of Singapore’, *International Political Science Review* 39, no. 4 (2018): 473–86.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Samantha Boh, ‘Raffles Who? 200 Years since the British Colonialist, Singapore Would Rather He Disappear’, *South China Morning Post*, 27 January 2019.

²¹ Hong and Huang, *The Scripting of A National History*, 25.

ministerial steering committee, and advised by an advisory panel and other “partners”.²² The ministerial steering committee was composed of 10 Ministers across a variety of ministries and levels of seniority, chaired by Mrs Josephine Teo (Minister for Manpower) and Mr Desmond Lee (Minister for Social and Family Development) while advised by Mr Heng Swee Keat (Deputy Prime Minister and frontrunner of the next generation of PAP leadership) – this committee was in charge of the overall planning of the Bicentennial, demarcating this as a government-led initiative. Meanwhile, there were 16 individuals on the advisory panel, including academics, educators, lawyers, community leaders, and other prominent members of society intended to represent a good mix of the public and private sector. There were also over 300 partner organisations, such as ministries, private companies (including government-linked companies), public schools, community organisations, and more (as well as a few individuals). The website states that the exhibition “would not have been possible without a nationwide collaboration” of all these individuals and organisations, who “not only [provided] research and resources [but] also [helped] to plan for programmes and events”.²³ However, it is not clear from press releases or other public sources exactly what and how much influence the advisory panel or partner organisations (or any other external actors) had on the content and presentation of the final Bicentennial exhibition.

On 2 January 2019, the polymarble statue of Raffles along the river was painted over on one side to blend into the OCBC tower in the backdrop, making it seem to disappear when viewed from the front. This was revealed to be the curtain raiser to the Bicentennial, as the deputy director Wong Chock Fang stated that “the idea... was to arouse curiosity, maybe some reflection and ultimately, to spark conversations about our history.”²⁴ By rendering Raffles invisible, it was meant to push Singaporeans to expand the historical narrative beyond one date or one man.²⁵ This was complemented on 4 January 2019 by the installation of four additional sculptures of Sang Nila Utama, Tan Tock Seng, Munshi Abdullah and Naraina Pillai along the river, “four figures of diverse communities and people who have shaped Singapore over the years”.²⁶ This was to send the message that Singapore’s achievements “are not built by a single visionary man, but built by a multi-racial, multi-cultural, multi-religious people, with richly diverse backgrounds and their human

²² ‘The Singapore Bicentennial Official Site’, Singapore Bicentennial, accessed 22 March 2020.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ “Disappearing” Raffles Statue a Teaser for Singapore Bicentennial’, *Channel News Asia*, 2 January 2019.

²⁵ Boh, ‘Raffles Who? 200 Years since the British Colonialist, Singapore Would Rather He Disappear’.

²⁶ ‘Sang Nila Utama, Pioneers Join Stamford Raffles along Singapore River’, *Channel News Asia*, 4 January 2019. Sang Nila Utama was the Palembang prince who landed on the island of Temasek and established Singapura Kingdom in 1299. Munshi Abdullah was a linguist who was Sir Stamford Raffles’ secretary and interpreter, known for early literary contributions to Malay community, who also taught Malay language to British and American missionaries and helped bridge communication and cultural gaps. Niraina Pillai was a successful entrepreneur and community leader and the first Indian building contractor, and helped build the iconic Sri Mariamman Temple in 1827. Tan Tock Seng was a philanthropist who was the main donor to the Tan Tock Seng Hospital, and the first Asian to serve as Justice of Peace.

strengths".²⁷

The centrepiece of the Bicentennial was "From Singapore to Singaporean: The Bicentennial Experience", a multimedia sensory experience with a timed programme located in Fort Canning Park that was free for all Singaporeans. It portrayed Singapore's "momentous evolution" across over 700 years, starting from 1299, "shaped by wider regional and global shifts".²⁸ It was divided into five acts: Singapore from 1299 to 1819 as a thriving maritime emporium, the arrival of the British and the waves of migrants, the long nineteenth century that saw a bustling metropolis and local leaders stepping forth to resolve social ills, the Japanese Occupation which made Singapore realise the dangers of dependency, and a recap leading into present-day Singapore. The revisionist history extending Singapore's past to 700 years is in line with historian (and Dean of Yale-NUS College) Tan Tai Yong's reframing of Singapore history, as he was part of the advisory panel for the SBO.²⁹

Another highlight of the Bicentennial was an exhibition on "Raffles in Southeast Asia – Revisiting the Scholar and the Statesman" at the Asian Civilisations Museum from 1 Feb to 28 April 2019. This acknowledged the "complex legacy" of Raffles, as he has been "known for establishing modern Singapore as a British port, as the author of *The History of Java*, and as a collector of natural history and cultural materials", but also been viewed as "a committed imperialist, and even a plagiariser".³⁰ While it highlighted what an "ignoramus" he was by detailing his misconceptions about religion in Southeast Asia and his questionable involvement in the discoveries he is credited with today, it was not as critical as some had hoped of the violence committed under his leadership in Singapore and especially in Yogyakarta.³¹

There were no public protests, petitions, or social media campaigns contesting the Bicentennial or the general discourse on colonialism. The coverage in the *Straits Times* and *Channel News Asia* was generally neutral and positive, though there were some criticisms as highlighted in online independent sources.³² Despite the fact that multiple articles mention how it "stoke[d] debate" or covered "thorny issues" (often raising the question of whether this might count as a "celebration" of colonialism), beyond debates held on social media it did not cause a large public stir, perhaps demonstrating the success of the Bicentennial in neutrally reorienting the national narrative while deflecting mass criticism.³³

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ 'The Singapore Bicentennial Official Site'.

²⁹ See Tai Yong Tan, 'Looking Back at 700 Years of Singapore', *BiblioAsia* (blog), 23 January 2019.

³⁰ Bicentennial website

³¹ Amanda Chai, 'Revisiting Raffles Exhibition Reveals What an Ignoramus Raffles Really Was', *SG Magazine*, 7 February 2019.

³² Yuan Cheng Nien, 'The Singapore Bicentennial: It Was Never Going to Work', *New Mandala* (blog), 6 March 2019.

³³ Benner, 'Pirate or Hero? Raffles Bicentennial Fuels Singapore Debate'; Sonia Sarkar, 'Raffles Bicentennial

One artist, Jimmy Wong, expressed his opinion on Raffles and colonialism through two art exhibits, “Seamstresses’ Raffleses” and “Open Love Letters”, in the same year as the Bicentennial. In “Seamstresses’ Raffleses”, fabric statues of Stamford Raffles (in his iconic pose) were cut, sewn, and stuffed by Javanese seamstresses, with the head and legs chopped off (referencing the punishment that past sultans would have used against traitors). In “Open Love Letters”, a hollow metal replica of the Raffles statue is cut open in half; one side is used to cook a traditional dish called kueh kapit (or love letters), and the other is used as a cooling rack. Guests are then invited to consume the cooked love letters and “free themselves of coloniality”.³⁴ It is interesting to note that these were exhibitions conducted with replicas of the statue, not the original statue. However, this was not a widely known exhibition in Singapore and did not receive a lot of media attention or reach wider public debates, and appeared to have mixed reviews from the exhibition goers interviewed by the BBC. It received comments such as “shocking” and “Isn’t he the one who founded Singapore? And yet he’s not being respected in that way?”³⁵

This raises interesting questions about the profound effects of the state strongly framing national discourse around a historical colonial figure like Raffles. As it is beyond the scope of this paper to answer such questions conclusively, further qualitative research should be conducted regarding Singaporeans’ current views on Raffles and on the amount of criticism and/or popular legitimacy that the state-led narrative has actually accrued.

Summary and Conclusions

The statue of Raffles continues to stand firm on the waterfront, and segments of the Bicentennial exhibition have also been retained at Fort Canning, so that “years from now, the next group of Singaporeans who are given the immense responsibility to commemorate the quarter millennial or 300 years of Singapore will have materials to rely on,” in the words of Mr. Desmond Lee, co-chair of the ministerial committee.³⁶ Although these monuments may seem to stand as testaments to an uncontested legacy of colonialism, this paper has attempted to contextualise their position in Singapore’s history alongside the state’s active role in historical narrativization. Specifically, its initial narrative scripted Raffles’ arrival in 1819 as the foundation of modern Singapore, as this would serve the double political function of conceptually equalising across race and assuaging foreign investors of the PAP’s commitment to anti-communism. However, since the 2019 Bicentennial, the script by the government has been deftly shifted, extending Singapore’s history further back in time (700 years, to be precise) to emphasize the island’s ever-global

Stokes Debate in Singapore over Colonization Legacy, *Welle* (blog), accessed 22 March 2020.

³⁴ ‘The Artist Cutting the Head off a British Colonialist’, *BBC News*, 28 October 2019, sec. Asia.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Timothy Goh, ‘Bicentennial Experience closes, but parts will remain at Fort Canning’, *Straits Times*, 2 January 2020.

identity without discarding the turning point that Raffles' arrival signified. This raises the question: is 700 simply the new 200? To answer, one must monitor the ways that the government will mobilise the figure of Raffles and this revised script in future discourse, as well as the opinions and debates amongst Singaporeans themselves.

The case of Singapore demonstrates the outcome of a meticulously state-defined narrative which permeates the collective historical consciousness and the built environment, the far-reaching consequences of which require further inquiry and research. More importantly, it serves as a distinctive example of how a conspicuous lack of visible historical contestation can be profoundly instructive about a nation's history, politics, and identity, which nevertheless remain highly contested and dynamically negotiated in their own right.

About the Author

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About Contested Histories

In recent years, there have been many contestations over memorials, street names, and other physical representations of historical legacies in public spaces. These contestations often reflect deeper societal tensions whether triggered by political transitions, demographic shifts, inter-ethnic strife, or a growing awareness of unaddressed historical injustices.

Contested Histories is a multi-year initiative designed to identify principles, processes, and best practices for addressing these contestations at the community or municipal level and in the classroom.

Conflicts about history, heritage, and memory are a global phenomenon, and, although each case is different, comparative cases can indicate lessons learned and reflect best practices.

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