

Diversity at a Port City in
Southeast Asia:

The Case of Singapore in the Fourteenth Century

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Research on the history of Singapore in the fourteenth century, when the first documented settlement on the island came into existence, is very rich. Since the arrival of Sir Stamford Raffles in 1819, there has been a persistent effort to bring light to the pre-colonial history of Singapore through textual research, art historical discourse, and more recently, through archaeological research. The result has been that we have a rich depiction of the fourteenth century world in Singapore, which provide the backdrop for the Malay traditional stories, such as those recounted in the *Sejarah Melayu* (“Malay Annals”), as well as Chinese accounts that we now know so well.

Temasik: a cosmopolitan settlement?

Indeed, the late Paul Wheatley (1921-1999), an eminent historical geographer and scholar of pre-modern Southeast Asian urbanism, noted in the 1960s that Temasik, the fourteenth century settlement located at the mouth of the Singapore River, was perhaps one of the port-cities in the Malacca Straits region with the richest historical textual information related to it.¹ From an urban historical point of view, there is a combination of information on the inhabitants’ ethnic backgrounds, the nature of the trade that took place, the nature of its politics, and the descriptions of the built features of the settlement – all these point to Temasik as a thriving urban centre that was engaged with the external world, both regionally as well as further afield.

Over the last thirty years, archaeological research has demonstrated that the settlement was prolific, maintaining a fairly high level of material cultural consumption and economic production. The broad range of imported and locally produced items, including ceramics, metalware, foodstuffs, and even coins, to name but a few types of artefacts recovered, along with the different values that were inherent in these finds, indicate that the consumption patterns of the inhabitants of Singapore in the fourteenth century were varied and complex. Taken together, the historical and archaeological records provide glimpses of what must have been a cosmopolitan society, if not in terms of the different ethnic groups that composed the population at large, then at least in terms of their tastes, activities and customs.

Temasik, from this perspective, appears to have been a well-connected urban centre. Yet consumption patterns alone can be a fairly superficial means of determining and characterising cosmopolitanism. The outward display of a cosmopolitan culture, made apparent by such visible attributes as the things that people would use, and even such tangible practices as the food that is consumed, is only one aspect of what could be a broader and deeper diversity that may be reflected in how the settlement functioned, how it subsisted and survived, and how it saw itself as a cultural identity.

This paper will endeavour to assess these three aspects of cosmopolitanism by looking at the settlement’s trading and consumption patterns; the possible agricultural practices and activities that the inhabitants maintained, and the aesthetics and religious practices developed by the population.

Diversity as a port of trade: the case of Chinese ceramics

Through the fourteenth century, Temasik maintained a small but vibrant trade with the external world. The archaeological recoveries from more than ten excavations in the area north of the Singapore River, including excavations at Empress Place, the Padang, the former Supreme Court building (now the National Gallery), and the old Parliament House (now The Arts House), to name but a few, have produced a material cultural record that demonstrates that Temasik imported a wide variety of foreign products.

As an example, ceramics imported by Temasik, which were primarily high-fired types made in China, ranged from cheaper examples made in provincial kilns located around the port cities of Guangzhou and Quanzhou, to rarer examples from kilns located further north along the Chinese coastline, such as at Jiangxi and Jiangsu. There were also expensive ceramics from such national kilns as Jingdezhen (Jiangxi), Dehua (Fujian Province) and Longquan (Zhejiang Province).

The different sources of Chinese ceramics at Temasik reflected the settlement's aesthetic diversity at a number of levels. On the one hand, the aesthetic experience of an end user, when he or she handled a ceramic, would have differed significantly depending on the type of material used. Ceramic bodies were of different types, resulting in different weight or densities. The different glazes, including the colour, degree of transparency or opacity, as well as tactile characteristics such as the smoothness or roughness of the glaze, all contribute

to the different aesthetic experiences of the use of these ceramics.

Ceramics also reflect the different values that the inhabitants of Temasik were able to support and appreciate. While bowls and plates were the normal forms of ceramics that were imported, there were also other, more unique, forms. The latter included large celadon (a grey-green glaze) platters that were exported to the Middle East, small figurines such as Bodhisattvas in Qingbai (a blue-white colour) glaze, and white-glazed figurines of a couple in a copulating position, mounted on the inside of a small ceramic box. This range of artefacts reflect the diversity of consumer preferences and usage that were present in Temasik, which included utilitarian, religious, ceremonial and even entertainment purposes. The values and religious outlook of the inhabitants would have been fairly diverse to have made the importation of such a range of forms and items possible.

Clues to Temasik's culinary culture

Other than reflecting the tastes and consumption patterns of imported ceramics, ceramic finds also provide a glimpse of the possible culinary practices of Temasik's inhabitants. Storage jars, both earthenware and high-fired stoneware, have been recovered from all excavated sites. While earthenware jars come from neighbouring areas, including north Sumatra, Borneo and South Thailand,² the high-fired stoneware jars come from further afield, primarily the south Chinese coastal provinces.³ Such jars were often not exported on their own, but were used as containers to ship smaller ceramics as well as foodstuffs.

None of the storage jars recovered from Singapore have any of the original foodstuff remains in them. However, shipwrecks from the region, including the Belitung wreck (ninth century), Pulau Buaya wreck (early twelfth century), and Turiang wreck (late fourteenth century), contain storage jars filled with foodstuffs.⁴ These finds from shipwrecks suggest that similar culinary ingredients were imported by Temasik's inhabitants during the fourteenth century. The types of storage jars recovered in Singapore are similar to those recovered from these shipwrecks.

As an example, two types of storage jars found in abundance in Singapore – mercury jars (round-bodied jars with narrow bases and small mouths that were used to store dense liquids such as mercury and rice wine) and Jiangxi purple-clay jars – were likely to have been containers that originally contained glutinous rice wine produced in South Fujian and sauces from Jiangxi respectively in the fourteenth century. Larger jars, such as those produced in the vicinity of the Chinese port cities of Guangzhou and Quanzhou, would have contained preserved foodstuffs that were known to have been produced in the immediate agricultural hinterlands of these port cities, including fish and vegetables.⁵

It has to be understood that all of these are postulations based on the archaeological record of storage ceramics. Nonetheless, it is likely that the population of Temasik used substantial quantities and varieties of imported foodstuffs to complement the local production of food supplies. The use of imported food ingredients hint at the possibility of familiarity with these culinary ingredients, which in turn would suggest that different foreign influences were present in Temasik and affected the culinary consumption patterns of its inhabitants. This situation possibly led to either a diversity of culinary traditions present, or a hybridised culinary

culture that adopted aspects of different culinary cultures that found their way to Singapore.

Agricultural practices and food sustainability in ancient Singapore

Because Temasik has traditionally been studied in the framework of a Malay port city, it has always been assumed that the bulk of its inhabitants' food supplies was imported from abroad. The Malacca Sultanate (1400-1511), along with the Johor Sultanate that succeeded Malacca, have frequently served as the model of sustainability. While the hinterland of the port city of Malacca yielded produce such as fruits and possibly some cereals, the supply was clearly insufficient to sustain approximately ten to thirty thousand people, which was the size of Malacca's population at its peak during the fifteenth century, during the high trading seasons of the year.⁶ Instead, such staples as rice were imported from such places as Ayutthaya (Thailand) and Majapahit (Java). Malacca's role as a Malay regional trade hub enabled it to import such staples for its own needs, as well as to redistribute the surplus to other port cities in the region.

Temasik was not in the same position as the Malacca Sultanate. There were a few possible sources of cereal staples that Temasik could have tapped into. Java would have been one, as would have been the Gulf of Siam littoral, including Sukhothai in the early fourteenth century and Ayutthaya in the later part of the century. However, trade in the Malay world in the fourteenth century was a lot more dispersed than it would be in the fifteenth century, and while it is possible that cereals such as rice could have been supplied to Temasik on a consistent basis, the

ability of the port-city to attract regular supplies of rice may have been lower than in later periods. The absence of larger ports in the Malay region with connections to the major rice producing states of Southeast Asia also suggests that Temasik did not have a network of nearby ports that it could tap into for supplies of cereal staples as did Malay ports of the pre-fourteenth and post-fourteenth century eras.

At the same time, Temasik's population was likely much smaller than Malacca's. In a previous study on the reconstruction of Temasik, it has been proposed that the inhabited land area north of the Singapore River was approximately 54,000 square meters, or fifty-four hectares.⁷ This excluded the land area of Fort Canning Hill, which was also occupied during that time, and represents the plain area at the southern foot of the hill. Such an occupied land area would have seen around five hundred to two thousand people as a possible population base for the settlement, similar to the population base of Malacca in the first decade of its existence following its inception in 1405.

The ability to ensure a sustainable food supply would have been important to the survival and well-being of the inhabitants of ancient Singapore. The absence of a broad range or volume of local products that could be traded externally, coupled with the relatively high material cultural standard of living exhibited by the archaeological record, suggests that the population was able to sustain itself to some extent, without having to divert all of its trade earnings towards purchasing food from abroad.

Could Temasik have had agricultural lands? One of the most important built features of that time was the moat, or freshwater rivulet, that stretched for approximately one kilometre from the shoreline (which then lapped the eastern fringe of the Padang)

towards the eastern foot of Fort Canning Hill in a southeast to northwest direction, corresponding closely to the course of Stamford Road up until the 1990s, when the road was redirected. Early 1820s maps of Singapore town show that the moat would have served as a catchment, drawing water from Fort Canning Hill and several other hills in the vicinity, including Mount Sophia, Selegie Hill and the hills which today form the grounds of the Istana.⁸

Similar to the moated irrigation systems built in the Gulf of Siam and Central Thailand during the first and second millennia, such as at Satingpra, Nakhon Si Thammarat, U Thong and Nakhon Pathom,⁹ water from nearby hills could have been used to develop agriculture in the northern vicinity of the moat in Singapore. The irrigation would have enabled Temasik's inhabitants to develop rice or other cereal agriculture in the area bound by present-day Stamford Road and Bras Basah Road.¹⁰ Research into the paleo-geology of this area indicates that clay with substantial organic material formed the soil stratification of this land.¹¹ This soil characteristic has been demonstrated to be ideal for rice cultivation.¹² In fact, cereal production at Temasik was alluded to by such visitors as Wang Dayuan (1311-1350), who noted that agriculture took place in the settlement, although the fields were not fertile, and the productivity low.¹³

Other built structures point to a concerted effort at developing and maintaining agricultural lands in Singapore. An earth rampart, named "The Old Malay Lines" by the British in the 1820s before it was demolished, pre-dates the nineteenth century. Built along the northwestern to eastern foothill of Fort Canning Hill, it would have had the effect of stemming systematic soil erosion and enhancing ground moisture retention on the northeastern slope of the hill, corresponding to where the National Museum is located today. Such soil

retention would have supported agriculture on the northeastern slope of the hill. This is similar to the soil retention techniques utilised at settlements such as Khao Sam Kheo and Si Pamuntung.¹⁴ The northeastern slope of the hill would have been suitable for sustained agriculture, as well as the construction of buildings, evidenced by the presence of brick foundations that were witnessed by John Crawfurd (1783-1868), Singapore's second British Resident, in 1822.¹⁵

The building of a rampart and moat suggests that agricultural influences in Temasik may have originated from the Gulf of Siam region, possibly alluding to either a sustained exchange between Singapore and the Gulf of Siam littoral, or an extension of the Gulf of Siam cultural sphere southwards into the southern end of the Malay Peninsula during this period.

Aesthetics and religion

As a cultural centre, Temasik's population would have produced, imported and appropriated, and exhibited cultural characteristics, which changed over time to reflect the nature of its population base, and the interaction that this population would have had with the external world. Unfortunately, there is a paucity of material that would provide an impression of the cultural aesthetics of Temasik.

In the case of the large bulk of the archaeological remains unearthed so far, it is not evident that specific tastes were articulated to the producers and procurers of the imported material culture, with a corresponding manifestation of unique tastes being reflected in the visual and physical attributes of the objects that were then brought into Singapore. Similarly, it is difficult, in the

absence of a more secure and detailed framework of analysis, to develop a sense of the aesthetic productions by the inhabitants of Singapore. In other words, we may be able to elucidate aesthetic consumption as a reactive activity, but not aesthetic production as an active aspect of the cultural production of Temasik.

As a case in point, it may be possible to develop a taxonomy of the decorative motifs seen on the earthenware sherds recovered. Nonetheless, these motifs were reflective more of the island Southeast Asian, and specifically the Malacca Straits littoral, aesthetics that accompanied the production of such ceramic wares, than necessarily of local aesthetics or even an appreciation for imported aesthetics.

Brick foundations: a Buddhist pattern?

At the same time, several archaeological remains from the period do provide a glimpse of the possible aesthetic production carried out by the inhabitants of Singapore. To begin with, in Crawfurd's account of Fort Canning Hill, he noted that the eastern and northern slopes of the hill were dotted with brick platforms that did not have any superstructures over them.¹⁶ There was apparently no spatial order or logic to the location of these built forms. This suggests that what Crawfurd was witnessing were likely the remains of the culmination of a series of building projects that took place organically, and over a long period of time.

Two points could be elucidated from Crawfurd's observation. Firstly, the geographical distribution of the brick foundation tradition is primarily located in the Malacca Straits region. Sites that

have such remains include Si Pamutung (north Sumatra), South Kedah (Peninsular Malaysia), Takuapa (south Thailand), and the east coast of Isthmus of Kra in Thailand.¹⁷ This regional pattern suggests that the inhabitants of Singapore who built the brick platforms on Fort Canning Hill were likely inspired by similar architectural practices evident in the north Malacca Straits and Isthmus of Kra, or included individuals with architectural skills who had hailed from these places.

Secondly, the practice of building individual religious structures over a long period of time, likely a collective act of merit making, stands in contrast to a singular building project to create a cosmological setting, which would have been a political project. The former practice has similarities with cultural traditions in Southeast Asia that adhered to Buddhism, including Bagan (modern day Myanmar), sites of the Dvaravati tradition in Central Thailand, and sites along Isthmus of Kra belonging to the first half of the second millennium AD.

Javanese influences

Other evidence, however, point to aesthetic production that may have been influenced by other cultural spheres. The Singapore Stone, which was discovered on the southern tip of the south bank of the Singapore River in June 1819, was a ten-foot high sandstone boulder split in half, containing writing on the inside surface of the split. A surviving fragment of this stone, which was blown up into smaller pieces in 1843 when the British sought to widen the river mouth, can be seen in the Singapore History Gallery at the National Museum of Singapore.



The Singapore Stone, discovered at the south bank of the Singapore River in 1819.

Courtesy of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board

J. G. de Casparis (1916-2002), a philologist of ancient Southeast Asian languages, has suggested that the language on the stone appears to have been a variant of Old Javanese, with a possible date of around the tenth to twelfth centuries.¹⁸ Boechari (1927-1991), an eminent Indonesian epigraphist and historian, has suggested that the language was possibly Sanskrit, a language used in Sumatra, with a date of no later than the twelfth century.¹⁹ Whatever written language influence that Temasik may have come under, however minimally, appears to have been from the Indonesian Archipelago, and more specifically the regional power of Majapahit in Java.

The cultural influence of Java may also be seen in a number of metal objects recovered from Temasik-period sites in Singapore in particular the cache of gold jewellery that was recovered from Fort Canning Hill in the 1920s.²⁰ The use of the goose motif on one of the rings is reminiscent of Javanese decorative arts up to the fifteenth century. Along the same lines, the use of the *kala* (a lion-headed Javanese demon) head on the gold wrist band is reminiscent of the *kala* head that is well-known in contemporaneous Javanese decorative arts. Archaeologist P. V. van Stein Callenfels (1883-1938) has suggested that the decorative icons on



Gold jewellery recovered from Fort Canning in the 1920s.
Courtesy of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board



Lead figurine of a male rider on a horse recovered from Empress Place in 1998.
Courtesy of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board

the jewellery, in particular the *kala* head motif, mirrors the best in fourteenth century Javanese gold craftsmanship. Finally, a lead figurine of a male rider on a horse was recovered from Empress Place near the mouth of the Singapore River in 1998. The figurine is similar to the ones that have been recovered from Majapahit sites in East Java.

Cultural diversity and hybridity in Temasik: sources and issues

The above aspects of consumption and production is only a glimpse into the way of life in Singapore in the fourteenth century. Foreigners traversing the Malacca Straits region have, through the centuries and millennia, been fascinated by the ways of life maintained by the region's inhabitants. In the case of Temasik, such descriptions have been noted in the account of Wang Dayuan, a Chinese merchant who travelled in this region during the first decades of the fourteenth century.

Wang's account mentions three groups of people resident in Singapore during that time – orang laut or “sea peoples”, land-based natives, and a group of South Chinese who were resident at the settlement at Keppel Straits²¹ (the narrow channel between Telok Blangah and present-day Sentosa Island). The presence of Chinese at Keppel Straits has often been cited by scholars of Temasik as a sign of cultural diversity, and possibly the first Chinese record of an overseas Chinese population in Southeast Asia.²²

Notwithstanding the merits of such arguments, two issues pertaining to ethnic diversity and the notion of cosmopolitanism of an urban centre, come to mind. Firstly, while ethnic diversity can be gauged from the number of groups of people resident in a settlement, sojourning alone does not in and of itself contribute to the benefits that diversity could bring to a place and its people. In other words, the mere presence of non-locals amongst the native population does not imply

that the local culture – and its attendant practices and traditions, methods of survival, as well as its behaviours and responses that foreigners may note anthropologically as differences – would be influenced or fundamentally affected and changed. The notion of equating ethnic group identity with population diversity has its roots in colonialism and port-city management, in earlier eras of the coastal Chinese port cities of Guangzhou and Quanzhou, during the early period of European incursion into Asian port cities as Nagasaki and Macau, and in European colonial cities and territorial holdings from the sixteenth through the twentieth centuries.²³

Instead, diversity may be elucidated: in terms of the specificity of consumption patterns, and of the key practices and activities of the population. In terms of consumption, one would expect that the impact of diversity would be evident from the range of specific foreign products that was imported by the settlement. Herein, specific tastes, including visual aesthetics, as well as tactile tastes, would be exhibited by the degree of consistency in the range of products demanded over a significant period of time.

For example, where the range of ceramics imported from China remained fairly consistent over the course of the fourteenth century, the archaeological record would suggest that a taste for such Chinese ceramic was quickly acquired by the population of Temasik and remained a part of their ceramic consumption taste for around a century. Similarly, the consistency of the range of storage jars recovered, suggests that the Chinese products stored in these jars, including foodstuffs and liquids such as wine and sauces, were very quickly incorporated into the culinary palate of the people of Temasik, and thence consistently demanded and imported over the course of the fourteenth century.

Herein, cultural absorption and hybridisation would have been the outcome of a diversity borne out of interaction between the local population of Singapore and those who brought different consumption patterns and tastes to the settlement. However, it is not possible to extrapolate the ethnic backgrounds involved as represented by the material cultural remains that have thus far been recovered. One can only assume that ethnic diversity was inherent in the initial interactions between the local population and the foreign groups that brought these materials, which eventually led to the development of a hybrid culture.

External discourse versus local exchanges

Cultural absorption and hybridisation were not the only dynamics at play. There is no other evidence of writing apart from the inscription on the Singapore Stone, and no gold jewellery other than the cache recovered from Fort Canning Hill in the 1920s. This suggests that certain cultural elements, such as writing and craftsmanship of high value metalwork, all of which have social-elite connotations, were extremely limited in terms of how widespread they were practiced by the population. One could argue that these examples highlight the regional cultural sphere within which Temasik found itself and therefore was a part of. But a counter argument could in fact be made that the exclusivity of these cultural elements, coupled with their extremely limited occurrence in Temasik, precludes them primarily as elements of external articulation to a specific external audience, as opposed to being elements of internal articulation and discourse.

In other words, in the absence of any correlation with elements of internal social dialogue – such as building structures and layout of built forms, local written traditions or ritual practices, or even the adoption of similar craftsmanship in the production of lower value articles made of different materials – these specific elements of high culture, having originated from a specific external culture (in this case, the Javanese cultural sphere), would have only been understood by, and relevant to, that specific foreign culture at the appropriately high socio-political level there. Rather than internalisation and hybridisation, the writing on the Singapore Stone and the gold jewellery from Fort Canning Hill would represent high cultural distinction and interaction with the outside world.

The vital practices maintained by the general population of Temasik would have denoted ethnicity. The construction of brick foundations (possibly religious buildings) occurring in an unplanned matter over a long period of time, as well as the building of the fresh water moat and earth rampart possibly for agricultural purposes, strongly hint to the possibility that for the population of Singapore, religious practices and urban survival strategies were more closely aligned with settlements in the Gulf of Siam and Isthmus of Kra.

It is not possible to determine if this alignment was the result of the movement and settling of people from the Gulf of Siam and Isthmus of Kra southwards to Singapore Island, or if it represented a transfer of cultural knowledge from one group to another. However, the fundamental importance of the built structures to the population of Temasik, given the scale of these structures in relation to the size of the Temasik settlement, suggests that unlike language or the aesthetics of precious metal

objects, these civil engineering practices were likely shared and undertaken by the whole of the settlement's population. The common culture, at least in this important regard, would have been Tai than Malay. Again, though, this may not be synonymous with Singapore's inhabitants being ethnically Tai, but rather, that the practices evident suggest the possibility of an internalised and hybridised culture.

Diversity and liveability in fourteenth century Singapore

This paper has sought to demonstrate that Temasik was likely a diverse community. Bound within a physically constrained space, and coupled with opportunities for interaction with the external world, the resulting adoption of external cultural traits enabled the population to develop a hybridised culture of its own, possibly distinct from the ethnic groups that were present in the area around Singapore at that time.

At least in the case of Temasik, diversity did not necessarily contribute to its liveability of as a value-added aspect or an enhancement in the intangible quality of life, along the lines of how the liveability of world cities and major urban centres have been defined by urban geographers and sociologists over the last four decades.²⁴ Instead, diversity was likely to have been one factor that contributed to the mosaic mix of strategies that enabled the settlement to become liveable, and therefore to remain viable for a significant period of time. □

Notes:

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