

The Imprint of 1819— Entrepôt, Place, Community in Images

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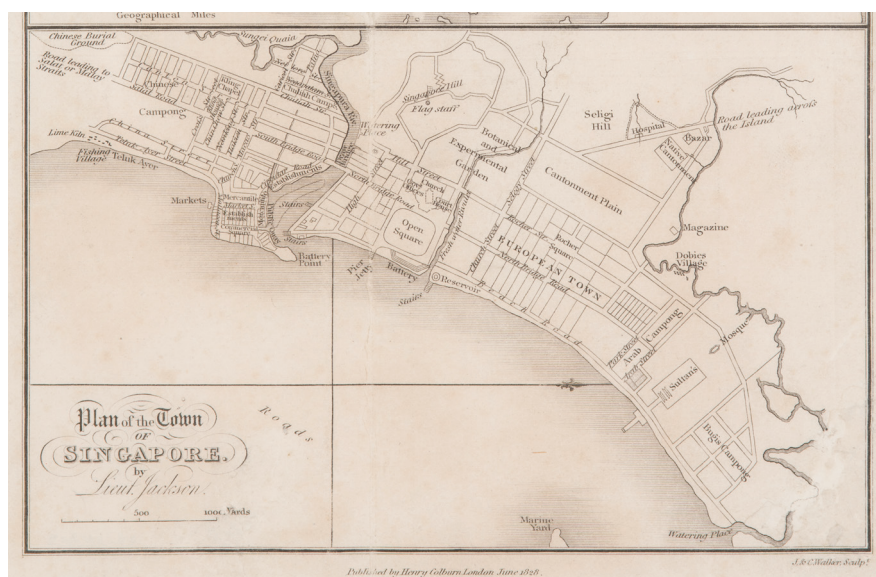
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Taking the settlement as a starting point, this essay explores the texture of the entrepôt's identity through images selected from the National Museum of Singapore's collection. It covers the time period from the 1820s to about the

The concept of the “urban artefact” as elaborated by the Italian architect Aldo Rossi, in his book, *The Architecture of the City*, is useful as a guide. According to Rossi, an “urban artefact” refers to a building, street, and district of a city that brings out its “individuality, locus, design and memory” and collectively contributes to an experience of place and time. With this framework in mind, it is hoped that the images that follow can generate such an awareness through the impressions of images of scenes, peoples, and activities.



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Figure 2. The Dalhousie Obelisk, Singapore, late 19th century, albumen print photograph. The Dalhousie Obelisk was built to commemorate visit of the Governor-General of India, the Marquis of Dalhousie to Singapore in 1850.



Figure 3. Horsburgh Lighthouse on Pedra Branca, 1851. Watercolour by John Turnbull Thomson. The Horsburgh Lighthouse was completed in 1851 by colonial engineer and surveyor John Turnbull Thomson, and named after the East India Company hydrographer James Horsburgh.

Entrepôt

The entrepôt based on the Singapore River was an intersection of traders and trading routes and evolved to become the preferred port of call in the region.



Figure 4. Singapore from the Government Bungalow, 17 November 1828. Watercolour by Marianne James. James, the wife of Bishop John Thomas James of Calcutta, painted this view from Fort Canning which shows the busy shipping around the early Singapore entrepôt settlement.



Figure 5. The Singapore River entrepôt in the 1840s. Coloured lithograph by Vincent Brooks based on a sketch by Lieutenant Edwin Augustus Porcher of the Royal Navy. A flurry of trading activity is depicted in this scene of the Singapore River with the Master Attendant's Office situated on the right.

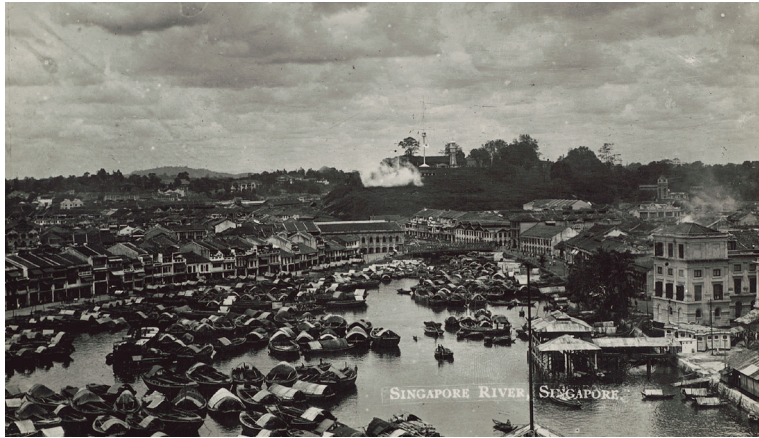


Figure 6. Singapore River, early 20th century postcard. This scene shows the river flooded with lighter boats like *tongkangs* and *twakows*, with the flagstaff visible atop Fort Canning in the background.



Figure 7. Unloading cargo from boats at the Singapore River, 1937. Vintage gelatin silver photograph by Maynard Owen Williams. National Geographic Image Collection, courtesy of National Museum of Singapore.



Figure 8. Loading and Unloading in a team of three, 1971. Photograph by Loke Hong Seng.

Although Singapore River gained prominence, the Kallang-Rochor river basin should not be discounted as it also became an active conduit of trade and settlement in a continuation of its historical roots likely going back to the 17th century.

By the late 19th century and first decades of the 20th century, the trans-shipment of Malayan rubber and tin became increasingly important to the entrepôt economy. Light industries which manufactured commodities or processed raw material were also in operation in the decades before World War II.



Figure 9. Kallang River, late 19th century photograph featured in an early 20th century postcard.



Figure 10. View of junks docked at the harbour of Rochor River, 1907. Photogravure by C. J. Kleingrothe.

In the 1960s, a new climate of state-driven industrialisation saw factories and industrial estates being built to kick-start Singapore's economy as a newly-independent nation. The images below

offer a glimpse into the types of industries that sustained the transition from entrepôt economy to industrialisation during the 1950s to 1960s.



Figure 11. Seaplane at Kallang River basin, off Kallang airport, 1939. Vintage gelatin silver print photograph by J. Baylor Roberts. National Geographic Image Collection, courtesy of National Museum of Singapore.



Figure 12. Rochor River, Singapore, engraving published in 1866 based on an original work by Fedor Jagor. This print shows a Chinese junk along the river.



Figure 13. Women working in the Michelin Rubber Company's rubber warehouse, 1950s. Vintage gelatin silver photograph by J. Baylor Roberts, National Geographic Image Collection, courtesy of National Museum of Singapore.



Figure 14. Workers of Goodyear Orient Company moving bales of rubber, 1952. Vintage gelatin photograph by J. Baylor Roberts. National Geographic Image Collection, courtesy of National Museum of Singapore.



Figure 15. Workers from Straits Trading Company Ltd. stacking 100-pound (45-kilogramme) ingots of refined tin in piles ready for shipment, 1952. Vintage gelatin silver print by J. Baylor Roberts. National Geographic Image Collection, courtesy of National Museum of Singapore.

Place

A sense of place-identity may arguably be observed from 19th century postcards of Singapore. Many were locally produced. Titled “Greetings from Singapore”, they depicted specific landmarks

and scenes of Singapore. They functioned as travel souvenirs with short messages written on them to be sent home by the visitor or traveller.

Besides these mementos, a closer look at street photographs of the evolving city points to the character and vibrancy of place. Although these photographic representations were the outcome of the individual photographer’s motivations, the



Figure 16. Government House, Raffles Museum, and the Post Office, late 19th century photographs published in an early 20th century postcard.



Figure 17. Battery Road and Cavenagh Bridge, late 19th century photographs published in an early 20th century postcard.

resulting point of view or angle guides us to see specific features and their relationship with the surroundings. For example, the John Little & Co., a prominent department store, in Raffles Place stands out and the store's ground floor opens to the square with people entering and leaving the store in front of the waiting rickshaws and motorcars.

Other images present this type of relationship between site and activity such as the boats and rickshaws off Collyer Quay; the urban traffic in Collyer Quay with its commercial offices; the General Post Office as seen from the decks of ships; and the street market in Rochor.



Figure 18. John Little & Co., 1920s, photograph.



Figure 19. Sampans at Collyer Quay, late 19th century, photograph.



Figure 20. View along Collyer Quay depicting commercial buildings in the background, 1920s, postcard.



Figure 21. The waterfront with the General Post office, 20th century, photograph.



Figure 22. A scene at Rochor market, 1930s-1940s, postcard.

Community

With the development of the entrepôt, a multi-ethnic population began to take shape. The first census in Singapore undertaken in 1824 recorded a population of over 10,000 comprising 74 Europeans, 16 Armenians, 15 Arabs, 4,580 Malays, 3,317 Chinese, 756 “natives of India”, 1,925 Bugis, and others (Buckley 1965). From the start, Singapore was a meeting place of ethnicities bringing their aspirations as well as

their links with their countries of origin. Street photographs depict the immigrants in the context of their everyday lives and activities.

The below scenes provide clues to attire, trades and occupations, housing, and the mood of the street. In the case of the Cross Street scene, a particular moment had brought together a crowd of Chinese and Indian pedestrians which point to their co-existence in a common space.

Other images focus on specific individuals who remain nameless but nevertheless were an integral part of street life or of domestic households, such as carriage drivers working for families.



Figure 23. A busy scene captured in China Street, located between South Bridge Road and Amoy Street, 19th century, photograph.



Figure 24. A quarrel taking place with onlookers gathering at Cross Street, 19th century, photograph.



Figure 25. Chinese hawker, 20th century, postcard.



Figure 26. "Native fruit seller" and Indian sundry goods stall, early 20th century, postcard.



Figure 27. Malay satay hawker, 20th century, postcard.

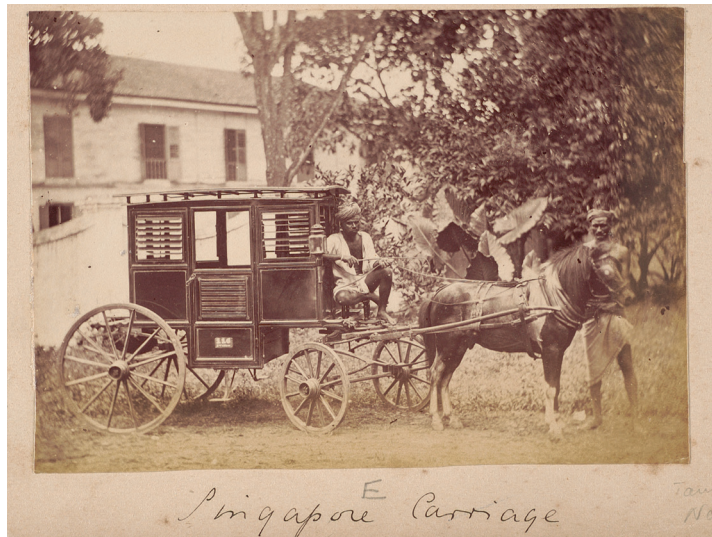


Figure 28. Indian horse-carriage driver, 19th century, photograph.



Figure 29. Javanese horse-carriage driver with a Chinese family, 19th century, photograph.



Figure 30. Malay horse-carriage driver with European family, 19th century, photograph.

Perhaps the most telling images of migrant communities come from the paintings of the 19th century British surveyor, John Turnbull Thomson, who lived and worked in Singapore from 1841 to 1853. An 1847 painting by him shows a level of interaction among various ethnicities in the social space of the Padang. It seems as if we have stumbled upon many conversations taking place.



Figure 31. John Turnbull Thomson's painting in 1847 illustrates the various activities the different communities were engaged in at the Padang during that period. This painting can be positioned with picture postcards (Figures 32, 33, 34) derived from photographic studio depictions of local inhabitants.



Figure 32. “Types of natives”, Singapore, 19th century, postcard.



Figure 33. Chinese and Indians, Singapore, 19th century, postcard.



Figure 34. “Children of different nationalities at Singapore”, early 20th century postcard issued by SPG (Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts).

Conclusion

In this preliminary exploration, visual images from the 1820s to the 1960s provide a first step towards unravelling the complex topic of how the island's identity was shaped by its entrepôt origin. These images depict the networks of migration, livelihoods, flows of capital, goods, and services; in short, the establishment and duration of the many points of connections between the island and the world. In this bicentennial year, focusing on the history of the entrepôt settlement and the legacies it left behind will help us understand our continuing place in the world. □

All images are from the collection of National Museum of Singapore unless otherwise stated.

Bibliography

Buckley, Charles Burton. 1965. *An Anecdotal History of Old Times in Singapore*. Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press.