

# A short history of singapore history essay



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Numerous evidences had been uncovered, and reports and archaeological findings especially, certainly suggest that Singapore was largely strategic between the period of Temasek, in 14th century, and late 17th century. However, to conclude that Singapore was hence always strategic would probably be too much of an overstatement. This essay will discuss Singapore's strategic significance, with the support of these evidences, during the different time periods.

During the 14th century, trade was already ongoing between the West, South Asia and East Asia. The Melaka Straits was crucial for traders to sail to and fro the Indian Ocean to the South China Sea. Sailing in the past depended on wind direction, thus ships had to stop in Southeast Asia (SEA) to wait for a change in wind direction to bring them towards either China or India[1]. Singapore was hence a strategic port because she was located in SEA and along Melaka Straits, making it a convenient stopover hence the central of international trade[2]. Bits of celadon (from China), Chinese coins[3], fragments of stoneware (mainly from Guangdong and South Fujian) and earthenware (from Sumatra, Java and Borneo)[4] and under-glazed blue and white stem cup (more expensive of porcelains from Jingdezhen during Yuan Dynasty)[5] recovered support the above claim as they suggest extensive trade links Temasek had with China and SEA, and that its inhabitants, especially the wealthier ones inhabiting Fort Canning, were able to afford the more exquisite products of Jingdezhen[6].

Temasek then, was able to attract maritime trade by providing unique products that rival ports were unable to supply. Recorded by Wang Da Yuan in Daoyi zhilue[7], Temasek supplied indigenous products like hornbills

casques of excellent quality. Found only between north of Malay Peninsula and South of Borneo, traders can only lay their hands on it at Temasek or Palembang[8]. Though Lakawood was in abundance, Temasek was one of the five ports that offer those of middle-quality[9]. Celadon, white wares and stonewares uncovered at Riau Archipelago, dating back to the period of Temasek, had patterns and craft similar to those imported from Temasek[10]. Furthermore, the origin of glassbeads of Riau Archipelago and Temasek should be identical given similar compositions[11]. Hence, Temasek probably served as a collection centre and an entry to export for Riau Archipelago[12]. In this case, evidences do suggest that Singapore was prospering and had an influence on regional economy and was thus strategic.

During the 15th to 17th centuries, though Singapore declined slightly when Temasek was relocated to Melaka, fragments of under-glazed blue porcelains found at Kallang River[13], and Portuguese maps which indicate the presence of a shahbandar's office[14], as elaborated in (b), suggest that she retained some of its strategic significance as a port by maintaining some trade with China.

As mentioned, being one of the strategically situated along the Melaka Straits, the power that was able to erect a strategic dominance around the waters around Singapore would be advantaged in terms of security and economically. The Dutch had wanted to destroy Luso (Portuguese-Spanish) monopolies in SEA when they first started attacking Portuguese trading ships around Singapore waters and declared war with the Portuguese when they raided Santa Catarina and auctioned off its products[15]. This saw the naval

battles between the Dutch and Johor Sultanate, and Portuguese and Acehnese in the early 17th century and gave rise to the considerations of fortifying Singapore by both powers[16]. Jacques De Coutre proposed to build forts at the east coast of Singapore and Muar River estuary and station a naval fleet at Sentosa to protect Portuguese trading ships from the Dutch[17]. Dutch had the same places in mind for their fortification plans[18]. Till this point, the Dutch and Portuguese reports do suggest that Singapore was strategic. However, the plans never realised, which made us rethink if Singapore was really that strategic after all.

Singapore's strategic significance took a turn in the 18th century. There was not much evidence to prove this period of time, but by referencing to my contextual knowledge, we know that the Dutch shifted their focus from the Melaka Straits to the Sunda Straits, Portuguese diverted their trade to Japan having difficulties trading in the Melaka Straits and Johor Sultanate relocated their capital to the Lingga Archipelago, shifting the maritime silk road southwards[19]. Singapore lost its value with the declination of Melaka Straits and was abandoned. She no longer held any strategic significance to participants of the maritime trade. Perhaps it is precisely that not much evidence was found that dates back to this period of time that it suggests that trading activities in Singapore was kept to its minimum. Moreover, no coins or porcelains were uncovered that dates beyond the Song and Yuan Dynasty, and the Ming Dynasty respectively[20], further supporting my contextual knowledge.

It is evident that Singapore's strategic significance changes with time, depending on human-related factors such as politics and economics, and

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hence is relative. The evidences may seem to imply that Singapore was always strategic, but when viewed from another angle, they can also suggest otherwise as stated in the previous paragraph. Therefore to say that they suggest that Singapore is always strategic may be a little too extreme.

**b. In light of this evidence, should Singapore's history from 1511 to 1819 be written as (1) little more than " a sleepy fishing village"? (2) a declining but still thriving emporium astride hotly contested strategic waters (3) part of the Johor Sultanate? Please explain your preference.**

From the 15th century to 17th century, Singapore was a (3) part of the Johor Sultanate, but she was (2) a declining yet thriving emporium astride hotly contested strategic waters between the 16th and 17th century. It was only during the early 18th century that trade in Singapore started dipping, and she was perceived by the British as a sleepy fishing village when they stepped ashore in 1819. Hence, (1) little more than " a sleepy fishing village" suitably describes Singapore's history between this period as it is a broader title and thus encompasses both (2) and (3), and the reduction of importance of Singapore's port resulting from the declination of the Melaka Straits during the 18th century accounts for Singapore being " a sleepy fishing village".

When Singapore was (3), trade was still ongoing though insignificant compared to its Temasek period. Excavations on the north bank of Singapore River, where a settlement was once present, and Kallang River revealed fragments of ceramics and under-glazed blue porcelains with designs dating back to the rule of Ming Emperor Wanli (1573 to 1620)[21]. Similar findings in Johor Lama and Johor Shoal imply that the findings in Singapore belonged to the Johor River trade controlled by the Johor Sultans[22].

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Some may suggest that these pieces might have been disposed into the Kallang River when ships stopover for supplies because they broke during the voyage, and not because of trade present in Singapore[23]. This may be true, however, according to two Portuguese maps, a shahbandar of the Johor Sultans' office was featured on the southern coast of Singapore[24], proving the above conjecture wrong and showing that trade at the Kallang River was flourishing to the extent it needed a shahbandar to run it. This also indicates that Singapore then, was continuing some degree of trade with China, showing that she was (1).

As mentioned, trade was also falling, compared to its Temasek period, as during this time, Melaka was the main port for international trade[25]. Singapore then, supported Melaka by providing goods from herself for Melaka to export. An example being blackwood, which was brought from Singapore to Melaka, and then bought in bulk by Chinese traders[26].

(2) may now seem to be plausible at this point in the essay since Singapore was a declining yet thriving emporium, and evidence show that its waters are hotly contested for between the Dutch and Johor Sultanate, and the Portuguese and Acehnese, and Singapore was seen by both as strategic to build a fort to achieve their individual aims as mentioned in (a).

However, one may wish to note that Singapore's waters may not be that strategic after all. In 1613, Aceh successfully attacked Batu Sawar as she was upset about the signing of the peace treaty between Johor Sultanate and Portuguese, uncovering the vulnerable position of Singapore waters, rendering it no longer strategic[27]. Moreover, when Melaka Straits lost its

importance to Sunda Straits in the late 17th century, Singapore was neglected and declined over the 18th century[28]. Its waters were no longer contested and the issue on it being strategic or not became irrelevant. A village of Orang Lauts and Malays, not being much of a deal, were all that were left in Singapore. Melaka Straits was filled with pirates and Singapore, lying on the Straits, was hence seen as a sleepy fishing village by the British when they landed in the 19th century[29]. (2) does not take into account these happenings, thus it is flawed in describing Singapore's history.

In conclusion, (1) best describes Singapore history as it accommodates the period when Singapore was (3), when trade was active though declining, the period when it was considered strategic and its waters contested by the Dutch and Portuguese, up to the period when British founded Singapore as a sleepy fishing village due to the decline of Melaka Straits. (2) was unsuitable as mentioned above, and (3) seems to be an understatement as Singapore was more than just part of the Johor Sultanate.