

Singapore river has
undergone dramatic
physical changes
history essay



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The 19th century impressions of the Singapore River show sampans plying the river route and shop houses along the riverbank. The scenes in these impressions clearly show the emergence of a developing trading hub along the River during the early 1800s. The Singapore River was the focal point of the Singapore economy at this time and the river trade was the very reason of its existence as a British settlement. There are also hills clearly visible in some of the pictures and their inclusion reflected not only the reality of that time but also an intention to give “ picturesque scenes of native lands and good reports of a fledging colony” (Lim 2003, 15). We must bear in mind that many of these impressions were created by foreigners like Charles Dyce who might give us a biased or incomplete portrayal of the Singapore River because they had personal agendas of their own. The impressions they created were meant for Western consumption and would therefore cater to Western tastes instead of reflecting a completely objective view of the River. Also, it should be noted that the work of foreigners would not be reflective of local concerns, thus making it divorced from local social memories of the time.

The early 20th century images show a busier and much more congested Singapore river. In all the 4 images, the riverbanks are bustling with activity as more watercraft traverse the river and coolies unload goods from docked boats. There are many more shop houses and less hills in these images compared to the 19th century images, which tells us that the increase in economic activity around the river has necessitated the urbanisation of the area around the Singapore River. However, if we take a look at the first 2 images, we find that they depict coolies at work and yet they were taken

before 1920. This suggests to us that these are posed photographs since cameras were still unable to capture moving images at that time (Archives 2005, 31). In this light, it is possible to suggest that the image of the coolies hard at work along the riverbank is an exotic image that a photographer would want to create for a Western audience buying the postcards. The fact that these images were likely to be posed photos affects their credibility, even if they were an attempt to accurately portray coolies during this time. We must also consider exclusions to the images like the omission of the pollution problem on the River which was prevalent at this time.

In the 1970s-80s photographs, there is more focus on the life and surroundings of coolies. These photographs show the coolies in their working environment, their living quarters and their eating places. In the backgrounds, we can see the high rise buildings dominating the skyline around the Singapore River. With the state-led clean up and urbanisation of the area in 1977, the physical appearance of the Singapore River was being dramatically altered. The importance of the River as a focal point of trade had declined with the shift of the shipping industry to the East Lagoon due to the introduction of containerisation and the reallocation of the lighter industry to the wharves at Pasir Panjang (Dobbs 2003, 15-16). These photographs are an attempt to capture the last remaining vestiges of the economic role that had defined the Singapore River for over a century (Berry 1982, 12). This in-depth look into the lives of coolies was meant to capture the “ mood and tempo of a bygone era” (Oral History Department 1986, Preface). By this period, the Singapore River was becoming more of a historical relic in terms of its significance to the country.

The 1970s watercolours give us a romanticised view of the Singapore River during the 1970s. In the watercolours, the emphasis is on the watercraft plying the route along the Singapore River. Even though there are painted in the same period as the photographs, there is an almost deliberate omission of the urban high rise buildings. The romanticised portrayal of the Singapore River during is an attempt by the painters to influence social memories about the River during a time when the significance of the River was shifting towards that of a historical relic rather than a focal point of trade. All of them belonged to the Singapore Watercolour Society and the Society was strongly nationalistic. Member Ong Kim Seng explicitly stated that the River was a “source of nationhood” and “distinctly Singaporean”, viewing the distinctive surroundings of the River as “emblems of our country” (Kwok 2000). In the face of the urbanisation and the changing significance of the Singapore River, these painters were trying to emphasise what they felt to be historically important aspects of the River in terms of its past as a trading hub.

Today, the role and significance of the Singapore River is has greatly evolved from that of yesteryear. Its physical appearance has changed over the years in tandem with the changing roles and significance that the River has taken on. As trade started picking up in the 18th century, hills had to be levelled for reclamation around the river to accommodate economic growth, physically changing the river’s course. The resulting increase in river traffic then caused the river to become horribly polluted, a problem that was only solved when the economic role of the River declined and the state was able to initiate a clean-up effort of the River that involved the relocation of people

and industries based around the River (Dobbs 2003, 9-17). At each step of the way, changes in the roles and significance of the Singapore River have been matched by physical alterations as well. Aptly, other major physical changes have accompanied the River's evolution into the financial and cultural center of the country. The Singapore River today no longer even runs into the sea, having been dammed up as part of the Marina Barrage in order to create a new freshwater source for Singapore, the clearest indication that it has left its trading past behind (Chew 2008). It also retains some of its features from the past in the form of shop houses and colonial era buildings but they are now mostly restaurants offering overpriced seafood and alcohol. On the weekends, there are state-initiated and approved events like flea markets and performances around the River, another attempt to reinforce the notion of the Singapore River being a cultural attraction for tourism (Chang 2005).

The role and significance of the Singapore River is connected to the social memories of the people.