Dr John N. Miksic is the Head of the Archaeology Unit at ISEAS in Singapore. He is one of Southeast Asia’s leading archaeologists on the study of ceramics, and has published numerous works including Borobudur: golden tales of the Buddhas (1990), Old Javanese Gold (2010); Earthware in Southeast Asia and the Historical Dictionary of Ancient Southeast Asia (2007). His latest book is Singapore and the Silk Road of the Sea: 1300-1800 (2013)

Q: How did you become interested in archaeology?

As a young boy, I became fascinated by the stone tools found on my own farm where I grew up in upstate New York, near Niagara Falls. My grandfather and I used to talk about what life would have been like on our farm a thousand years ago. After my BA work on North American prehistory, I joined the US Peace Corps and was sent to work in the Bujang Valley (Kedah), to help form farmers’ cooperatives. As I travelled around the area, I began to notice ancient ruins, including a large stone temple called Candik Bukit Batu Pahat. I also heard stories about Raja Bersial, a mythical king with fangs. I started looking for information on the historical archaeology of the area, though not much was available.

When I was applying to PhD programs I was accepted to Cornell University’s Department of Anthropology on the basis of a research proposal to study a modern Chinese neighborhood in Pening, Malaysia. Several months after my acceptance, I kept experiencing a nagging feeling that archaeology was still important, even though its practical applications were less obvious. So when I first arrived at Cornell, I reported to the head of the department that I was thinking about switching to archaeology. I was afraid that he might think badly of me for being indecisive, but he immediately shouted across the hall to John Henderson, a young archaeologist who was working on the Maya, if he was interested in supervising me, and he said “yes”. That was the moment when I realized I was actually going to become an archaeologist. For my PhD work at Cornell I did comparative research on the Maya, the specialization of my supervisor, where we conducted a major form of data. This led me to decide to focus on Southeast Asian earthworks.

After graduating with a PhD in January 1978, I had two job offers: one to teach archaeology in Montana, and one to join the US Agency for International Development and work in Sumatra. I chose the latter because I wanted to be in Southeast Asia if at all possible and move back into rural development. I spent two years as a rural development and management advisor in Bengkulu, Sumatra. While there I learned an of an opportunity to join the Ford Foundation to develop a new university curriculum for archaeology, so that enabled me to get back on track.

Q: How did you come to live and work in Singapore?

I became involved in Singapore in 1984, while I was working at Gadjah Mada University, Yogyakarta (Indonesia), sponsored by the Ford Foundation. We excavated near the Keramat Iskandar Shah, and found 14th-century remains in situ. I continued working in Indonesia for the next three years, but in 1987 I accepted the offer to work at the National University of Singapore. I viewed Singapore then as a good place to do further research on early ports and ceramic trade, within easy reach of Indonesian sites.

Q: What do you hope readers will take away from your latest publication, Singapore and the Silk Road of the Sea: 1300-1800?

I was trying to show how Singapore is a good example of a much larger phenomenon, the ancient Southeast Asian port city. Very little archaeological research has been devoted to this type of site, which is a shame, given its important role in the present as well as the past. I hope people will realize that modern Singapore is rooted in an ancient and elaborate tradition that can be traced back two thousand years.

Kharun warns against letting one’s guard down with Batam girls. “With money, they treat you well. As you know, they work in this line to find money in order to clear off their debts. Some of the Batam girls try to cheat your money... Do not fall too deep into their feelings. Well like I said, not all the girls are the same. If you accept a good girl, you are lucky!” Male fantasies come complete with feelings of vulnerability and the need for constant vigilance in the imaginary frontier. The cases of Dan and Kharun show that Batam is not merely a site for the exploitation of sex workers or the straight-forward fulfillment of hegemonic fantasies, as feminist scholars are quick to suggest. It is also a space in which scenarios of affection can be played out and the ability to provide can be exercised. The marginalization of working class men in Singapore compels them to defer their masculinity to the imaginary frontier. Their deferred masculinity is the cyclical act of economic castration and embodiment of the working class.

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Notes
4. Interview with author; name changed.
6. Interview with author; name changed.