

Floating on a Malayan Breeze: Travels in Malaysia and Singapore

By SUDHIR THOMAS VADAKETH

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In the first sentence of *Floating on a Malayan Breeze: Travels in Malaysia and Singapore*, the author informs us that ‘This is a story about Malaysia and Singapore — or Malaya, if you will’. Sudhir Thomas Vadaketh, who works as a senior editor at the Economist Intelligence Unit in Singapore, tells us that he uses ‘“Malaya” because I grew up thinking of the two countries as one’. While it is no doubt true that although the separation of Singapore from Malaysia in 1965 has had social and political consequences, including the development of distinct national identities, it is also the case that so much shared history and culture cannot be put asunder by what is a very porous border, across which thousands of people cross every hour. While much is often made of those identities that are supposed to separate people, there are other stories to be told in which barriers are irrelevant and commonalities great. It is because of this that the project *Floating on a Malayan Breeze* sets for itself is of great value.

As suggested by the cover and the blurb, the book’s story revolves around a month-long cycling trip around Singapore and Malaysia (and some of southern Thailand as well) which the author undertook in 2004 with a close friend of his. This trip in turn evolved out of discussions with American classmates with whom Vadaketh was doing postgraduate study in 2003 in the United States. In response to accusations that the United States was inadequately informed about the countries about which it was making foreign policy, the author and his friend were challenged about their own knowledge of Singapore’s neighbours. Vadaketh’s response was the realisation that he did not in fact know as much as he felt he ought, and a desire to go beyond stereotypes and to experience Singapore and Malaysia from ‘the ground’.

While the reader might then expect the book to be a linear description of events, conversations and misadventures of this trip, such vignettes do not actually constitute the majority of the text. Rather, a selection of conversations and insights are presented within chapters that seek to address wider socio-political developments in Singapore and Malaysia, such as the recent faltering of the Barisan Nasional’s and the People’s Action Party’s political dominance in recent years. These discussions are also informed by the experiences and interviews the author conducted in the subsequent years, including for example his excursion to Kelantan in the days before Malaysia’s 2008 general elections.

Academics will likely find Vadaketh’s descriptions of his experiences and his conversations of interest for what they sometimes reveal about the lives of those far from urban centres and middle-class comforts. I found, for example, his description of the problems of life in a seemingly idyllic beachside town particularly poignant as he recounts the unfulfilled aspirations of residents and the dearth of opportunities, especially when the town’s only resort was closed down. In its absence and with little else to do, drug use is common and sexually transmitted disease infection rates are high.

As well as describing aspects of Singapore and Malaysia that are often overlooked, throughout the book Vadaketh discusses an array of familiar issues, such as those relating to ethnicity, politics, and religion. While reading his treatments of Malaysia's New Economic Policy, Mahathirism, and the 13 May 1969 riots, for example, the implied audience to whom he is writing appears to be those who are not well acquainted with Malaysia's or Singapore's history and politics — perhaps he is speaking to his American classmates. This quality would make *Floating on a Malayan Breeze* — whose title is suggestive of the lightness of his writing — an excellent introduction to Malaysia and Singapore for someone seeking an engaging and accessible text. Academics, however, might find the conversational tone sometimes too casual and some of the assertions not as well supported as they would be in a more scholarly work. And as a self-confessed 'proud Singaporean' (p. 6), it feels sometimes that pro-Singaporean biases leak through, such as in the frequently positive descriptions of Lee Kwan Yew and Singapore's 'race-neutral meritocracy' (p. 267), although Vadaketh does usually acknowledge the alternative perspectives, if not always immediately.

I am pleased that Hong Kong University Press and NUS Press have supported this publication and hope that they continue to publish texts that, in academic contexts, depart from common moulds and conventions. *Floating on a Malayan Breeze* is a personal journey that explores the supposed barriers between Malaysians and Singaporeans while passing through often unfamiliar places and familiar issues. Although it may not be everyone's cup of tea, there are many whose attention this book deserves and who will find the book rewarding.

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The Portuguese and the Straits of Melaka 1575–1619

By PAULO JORGE DE SOUSA PINTO. Trans. by R. ROY
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Translated from a doctoral dissertation (*Portugueses e Malaios: Malaca e os sultanatos de Johor e Achem 1575–1619*, published in 1999), this work by Paulo Jorge de Sousa Pinto is long overdue. The humble acknowledgement and location of his work in the survey of the subject field indicate an obvious gap and dearth of treatment in the area. The subject field is also, as is accurately observed by the author, except for scholars like Charles Boxer, Denys Lombard, Peter Borschberg, Sanjay Subrahmanyam, Alfredo Botelho de Sousa, Luis Filipe Thomaz and Jorge M. dos Santos Alves, plagued by the inaccessibility of scholars working in either Dutch or Portuguese-based language to both these and the Malay languages (p. xxiii).

Specifically, Melaka during the Portuguese period, a point also observed by the author, is glaringly absent in Kernial Singh Sandhu and Paul Wheatley's edited magnum opus, *Melaka: Transformation of a Malay capital*, which looks at the Melaka sultanate, and then hops to 'Melaka under the Dutch', 'Melaka under the British' and other chronological periods down the line.