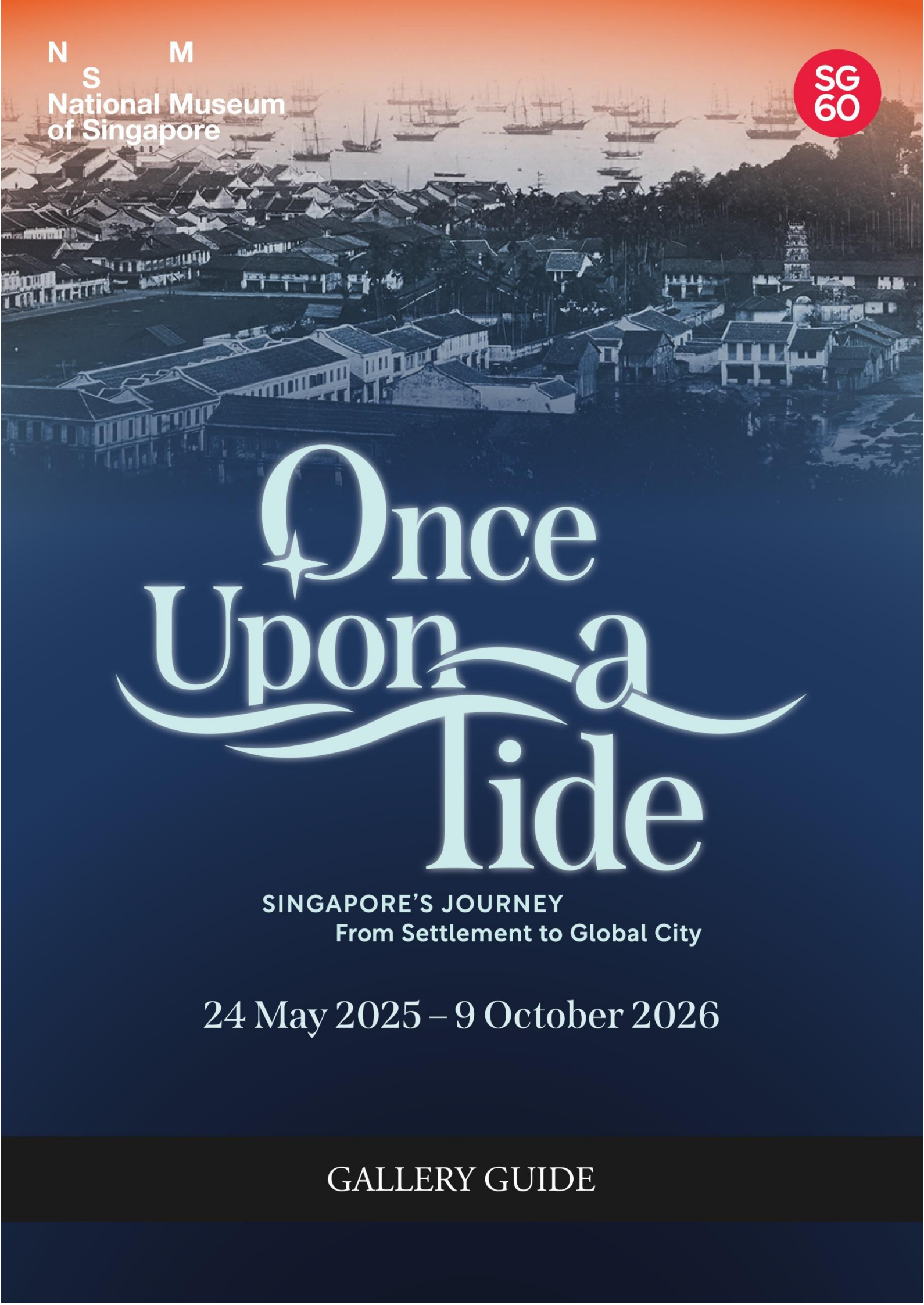


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Once Upon a Tide

SINGAPORE'S JOURNEY
From Settlement to Global City

24 May 2025 – 9 October 2026

GALLERY GUIDE

ADVISORY

Some areas in the gallery are dimly lit, and feature video projections and fragile installations.

Please exercise caution when moving through the gallery.

MUSEUM ETIQUETTE

**No food and
drinks**



**No flash
photography**



**Do not touch
artefacts**



**No bulky items. Please carry
backpacks on the front.**



**Please speak
softly**



**Please attend
To children**



0100

Introduction

Singapore is a modern miracle – an economically successful global city-state that is firmly rooted in its multiculturalism and Asian heritage. How did we arrive at this point, and how have we transformed ourselves and shaped our destiny? And throughout these changes, what has remained distinct to our identity as it continues to be expressed locally and to the world today?

In this special exhibition commemorating the nation's 60th anniversary of independence, we tell the longer story of Singapore's journey – as an island closely connected with the sea that surrounds it, of the river that has defined its identity, and of its people who have built Singapore into what it is today and make waves both on our shores and beyond.

We invite you to join us on this journey, to explore, engage and reflect. As Singapore looks ahead to what the future holds, your responses to the questions posed across the exhibition through your wristbands will help you, and us, chart the way forward.

1000

Chapter One

Always on the Map

Has Singapore always existed? That depends on how we define “Singapore” and trace its origins. Counting from its independence in 1965, Singapore is a 60-year-old nation state. But what if you considered its longer histories – when it became a Crown colony 158 years ago, or a British East India Company settlement 206 years ago, or a Malay kingdom more than 700 years ago?

The question can be approached by looking at how Singapore has been mapped. Maps and charts show how people find their way to a location, and illustrate how a place can be understood in relation to its surroundings. In this opening display, using historical maps of Asia and Southeast Asia as a starting point, we invite you to hunt for clues of Singapore’s early existence. What names was it known by, and where was it located?

1100

Episode One From Ancient Times

Which is the oldest map to feature Singapore? That depends on how certain we are in associating Singapore with places in a similar region, or which bear similar sounding names. Earliest links could possibly be traced to the 2nd-century Greek astronomer and cartographer Claudius Ptolemy and his mapping of the Malay Peninsula. More definitive appearances of Singapore began emerging in maps produced from European voyages to the East Indies in the 16th century. But the question remains: what was Singapore during this period, and what was known about it at that time?

1200

Episode Two

At the Crossroads of Asia

Singapore has never existed in isolation. On the contrary, it has always been part of larger, overlapping polities, empires and worlds, and connected to global trade and culture. This was certainly the case within Asia, given Singapore's part in the Chinese trade network since the 14th century and its status as one of the capitals and key port settlements in the Malay world. Such a regional framing of Singapore can be seen in the maps and artefacts presented in this section.

1300

Episode Three

Charting the Malacca and Singapore Straits

While Singapore's exact geographical identity has been either shifting or not very well understood in earlier maps, the various straits passing through Singapore began to feature distinctly in sea charts of the region by the end of the 18th century as a result of surveying missions and advances in hydrography. It is astounding on hindsight to note how much of Singapore's neighbouring waters were surveyed and known prior to the arrival of Raffles and the East India Company in Singapore in 1819.

1400

Episode Four Point of Arrival

The arrival of Sir Stamford Raffles, Major William Farquhar and Captain Daniel Ross of the British East India Company in Singapore at the end of January 1819 signalled the beginning of the company's trading settlement on the island. Based on the first map created following this arrival, which is reproduced for display in this section, it can be observed how Singapore's identity began to be solidified, both in terms of the in-depth surveying and mapping of its coast and harbour, but also with the beginnings of the consistent spelling of its name which remains to this day.

2000

Chapter Two

The River Road

What is the Singapore River's place in our history? Singapore's waters have always played an integral role in the island's journey. As part of Southeast Asian trade routes and the Maritime Silk Road from at least the 14th century, Singapore served as a key port along the primary sea route between eastern Asia and Europe, with known trading settlements along the Singapore River. This ancient maritime legacy influenced Sir Stamford Raffles' decision to establish Singapore as a strategic British seaport in the 19th century.

Following Raffles' initial landing at the bank of the Singapore River in 1819, trading activities were concentrated in this area until the mid-20th century. The British recognised the river, its surrounding waters (called the Singapore Roads or Roadstead) and later the harbour as crucial assets for trade, propelling the island's rapid development into a thriving port. The evolution of the river has mirrored Singapore's

transformation over time, from a gritty booming port to today's sparkling tourist destination.

2100

Episode One Colonial Entry

On 28 January 1819, a squadron of British East India Company (EIC) ships, led by Stamford Raffles on board the *Indiana*, anchored at St John's Island near mainland Singapore. Accompanied by Major William Farquhar and a musket-bearing sepoy (soldier), Raffles travelled by boat to the banks of the Singapore River to meet with the local chief, Temenggong Abdul Rahman.

The ensuing negotiation for control of the island was inherently unequal, given the EIC's status as a formidable global trading, governance and military entity. After reaching an agreement with the Temenggong, Raffles arranged for Sultan Hussein Shah of Johor to be brought from Riau to Singapore, where the three parties signed the official Treaty of Friendship and Alliance on 6 February 1819.

Having claimed Singapore as a British settlement, the EIC swiftly established a free trade port welcoming surrounding

sea traffic and mercantile activity. Farquhar was appointed as Singapore's first British Resident and Commandant. Under his administration, the Singapore River rapidly transformed into a bustling hub for travellers and traders of all nationalities.

2200

Episode Two

Singapore : Crossroads of the World

While Singapore was undoubtedly a busy port during the first half of the 19th century, it was the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 that sealed its position as the crossroads between the East and West. Within the following year, the value of trade in Singapore increased by more than 80 per cent.

The Suez route considerably shortened journeys between Europe and Asia as ships could now bypass the Cape of Good Hope by sailing through Egypt. This shift made steamships more popular than sailing vessels for Asia-Europe journeys, as the latter incurred fees to be towed through the canal. The development of New Harbour served to accommodate the increasing numbers of larger vessels in Singapore and provide services such as coaling and ship repair. At the same time, the Singapore River remained an important site for the loading and unloading of goods, particularly of bulky raw items such as rice and rubber.

2300

Episode Three

Mail and Tourism

For over a century, ships were the primary means of sending mail to and from Singapore before airmail became more accessible from the 1930s onwards. As the main form of communication with overseas family, friends and business partners at the time, mail provided people with a crucial link to the world. It was also how most international news came to Singapore, particularly until the 1860s when the telegraph network was established.

Prior to the advent of steamships, letters and news from places such as Britain, India and China took months to arrive by sea. However, by 1845, steamships were delivering letters to Singapore monthly, significantly improving the speed of communication.

The convenience and reliability of steamships also led to greater demand for recreational travel from wealthy individuals keen to explore “exotic” destinations. Many mail

and cargo ships soon began to accommodate international tourists, with Singapore as one of the stopovers.

2400

Episode Four

Waterfront Transformations

The Singapore River and its waterfront underwent dramatic transformations throughout the 20th century, mirroring the country's rapid development and changing economic priorities. In the early 1900s, the river was a bustling trade artery crowded with bumboats, its banks lined with shophouses and godowns. By the middle of the century, taller buildings of offices, banks and hotels began appearing, alongside Singapore's growing financial and tourism sectors.

The 1970s were the start of significant changes to the waterfront as part of urban renewal efforts. In 1977, then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew launched a massive ten-year clean-up operation of the river, phasing out or relocating bumboats, street hawkers, squatters, and pollution-intensive industries such as pig farming.

By the 1990s, the Singapore River had been transformed into a vibrant lifestyle and tourism destination. Historic areas like Boat Quay and Clarke Quay were rejuvenated, with old

shophouses converted into restaurants, bars and entertainment venues. New developments such as Marina Bay and the Esplanade further altered the waterfront, creating a globally recognisable cityscape and skyline.

3000

Chapter Three

Expanding Horizons

How much has Singapore grown? Singapore's land area has increased by about 25 per cent since it was established as a British East India Company (EIC) settlement in 1819, growing from 578 to 736 square kilometres through land reclamation. For a tiny island dealing constantly with land scarcity, such physical expansion has widened the possibilities of development and reshaped our relationship with the sea.

This began during the island's early days as an EIC settlement, with reclamation taking place at the Singapore River, and continuing throughout its colonial period with the waterfront spanning Telok Ayer to Kallang. However, it was only in the post-independence era after 1965 that Singapore's reclamation efforts grew substantially in terms of land area added. Throughout this journey of reshaping its physical identity, the key question that remains – more pertinent now than ever – is how Singapore's land can be best used in the present and in the future.

3100

Episode One Surveying Early Singapore

How much of Singapore's waters, coasts and interiors were known and recorded in 1819? As the British East India Company (EIC) developed the port settlement surrounding the Singapore River, it also commissioned early surveys in the decades following 1819 that charted the harbour, coastline and topography of the island. These surveys were first conducted by EIC officers and later by government-appointed superintendents of public works and surveyors. Information gathered and charted from these surveys was instrumental to the early planning of the town, and part of a larger colonial attempt to exercise control over Singapore's land and surrounding seas, even if at the expense of the local population.

3200

Episode Two Flattening and Expanding

While we often think of land reclamation as a contemporary practice, it has been employed in Singapore since the 19th century, beginning with the reclamation of the south bank of the Singapore River in 1822. In the 1870s, Singapore embarked on its first major land reclamation project with Telok Ayer Bay. As part of this flattening and expanding exercise, the surrounding hills were levelled to expand the coastline beyond Telok Ayer Street, which once faced the sea. Much of that land is occupied by the Central Business District today.

Subsequent projects during Singapore's colonial period included the reclamation of the Kallang Basin and the waterfront at Beach Road. While the extension of coastlines added useful land for development, this involved in some cases the displacement of indigenous communities and biodiversity.

“There is a story about how Mr. Raffles and Colonel Farquhar together debated the best way to enlarge the Settlement ... Then it occurred to Mr. Raffles that the small hill near Tanjong Singapura might be broken up and the earth used for banking on the near side of the river ... The next day men under the orders of Mr. Raffles and Mr. Farquhar came round calling for Chinese, Malay and Indian labourers, and some two or three hundred labourers were paid one rupee per head per day to dig and carry the earth.

- Munshi Abdullah, *The Hikayat Abdullah*, first published in 1849

3300

Episode Three

Breaking New Ground

Further reclamation took place under the post-independence government, with 138 square kilometres of land added between 1965 and 2015. This included the “Great Reclamation” of the East Coast – from which arose the Marine Parade housing estate, East Coast Park, and the East Coast Parkway” – and the reclamation of Marina Bay to expand the city centre.

The scale of these projects reflected the rapid development of Singapore during this period and the increasing demands that this placed on a tiny island. Recognising the costs and limits of reclamation, this section considers more holistically how land can be optimised– a perennial question central to Singapore’s survival and success today and in the future.

3400

Episode Four

Shifting Sands

Singapore's land reclamation activities over the years have supported the nation's development and infrastructure needs. In reclaiming land to support its growth, Singapore has sought to develop and adopt more sustainable approaches to doing so.

Local artist Sim Chi Yin's photographic series *Shifting Sands*, documents the role that sand plays in land reclamation. A selection from her series is presented here, highlighting Singapore's ongoing plans in reclaiming land and building the Tuas Port, an automated, intelligent and sustainable container port expected to be the world's largest when it is completed in the 2040s. The importance of ensuring a sustainable approach has driven the pursuit of research-based innovative solutions at Tuas Port and more broadly in Singapore's future developments.

4000

Chapter Four Flows of People

Who built Singapore and made it into what it is today? To answer this is to acknowledge local communities who were already here in the 19th century, as well as the diverse waves of people who arrived from around the world to these shores, and the descendants of those who settled here.

Singapore's location at the crossroads of global trade routes and its relative prosperity attracted people from all walks of life seeking better opportunities. Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, many arrived via sea routes at either Johnston's Pier or Keppel Harbour. While some had travelled here in luxury first-class cabins, the majority were steerage or deck passengers who brought little with them beyond a few clothes and their hopes for a better future. Regardless of status, the newcomers contributed their labour, skills and dreams towards developing the country and keeping it running and progressing.

The stories of the first-generation migrants presented here span from the 19th century to the present. These individuals have, through their everyday lives and work, collectively shaped Singapore's unique physical landscape and multicultural social identity.

4100

Episode One

An Early Multicultural Population

Right from the 19th century, following the establishment of a British trading post here, accounts of Singapore often remarked on its diverse population rubbing shoulders at the busy port.

The English explorer and writer Isabella L. Bird wrote of Singapore in 1883: "The city is ablaze with color and motley with costume... Every Oriental costume from the Levant to China floats through the streets – robes of silk, satin, brocade, and white muslin... Parsees in spotless white, Jews and Arabs in dark rich silks; Klings in Turkey red and white; Bombay merchants in great white turbans... Malays in red sarongs, Sikhs in pure white Madras muslin... and Chinamen of all classes, from the coolie in his blue or brown cotton, to the wealthy merchant in his frothy silk crepe and rich brocade..."*

The diversity of 19th and early 20th century Singapore was also documented through photography and art, although these

works often exhibit an Orientalist perspective and exoticise the people they depict.

**The terms "Klings" and "Chinamen" in this quotation refer to the South Indians and the Chinese respectively, but are generally considered offensive today and not used by the National Museum outside of historical documents.*

4200

Episode Two

Building a City

Much of the infrastructure of post-1819 Singapore was built on the backs of migrant labourers from India and China, some of whom had arrived by choice while others were brought in as indentured labourers or convicts. The heaviest, most physically demanding works such as repairing roads, building bridges and quarrying stone were mainly undertaken by Indian convicts, particularly between 1825 and 1873.

While the earlier migrants were primarily men, the 1920s to 1930s saw an influx of female migrants such as the Samsui women, who arrived from China during this period and were a common sight at construction sites even up to the 1970s.

The lives of these early migrants were often difficult, with long working hours, backbreaking toil and cramped, unsanitary shared living quarters. Yet they persevered, driven by the promise of better wages than in their homelands and the hope of improving their families' lives.

4300

Episode Three

Traversing the City

Early migrants who were willing to operate labour-intensive forms of transport helped to make the 19th-century town convenient to get around. Gharries (horse-drawn carriages) and rickshaws were the primary modes of land transport at the time. Rickshaws were the most affordable and easily available choice for many commuters, and were even hired by businessmen and hawkers to transport their goods. Trams were introduced in the late 19th century and public buses only in the early 20th century.

These various options contributed to an increasingly connected and robust local transport system, supporting business and commercial activities as well as facilitating day-to-day commutes as the city developed and expanded.

4400

Episode Four

Protecting the people

Singapore today has developed a reputation for safety and order. Its police force was established very early in 1820, shortly after it became a British trading post. By the mid-19th century, the force employed over a hundred policemen, comprising primarily Malays and Indians. The Singapore Volunteer Corps (SVC), originally formed by European immigrants as the Singapore Volunteer Rifle Corps, supplemented internal security.

Although the SVC, which evolved into the People's Defence Force after Singapore's independence in 1965, afforded a credible defence force based on volunteerism, it had its limitations. As such, National Service was introduced in 1967 to rapidly expand Singapore's defence capabilities through compulsory male conscription.

Another crucial aspect of Singapore's urban defence is fire protection. The city's early wooden structures and thatched roofs were highly flammable, making firefighters essential in

safeguarding the city as large fires were common even until the 1960s. The first Singapore Fire Brigade was established in the late 19th century by European estate owners, which later became a formalised professional brigade. Today, its successor the Singapore Civil Defence Force has a broader mandate of providing rescue and emergency medical services alongside firefighting.

4500

Episode Five

Caring for others

Those who came to Singapore in search of a better life sometimes chose, or found themselves in, care-related occupations that improved the lives of others. Many of them were women who supported other women, such as amahs who did domestic chores and took care of children, and midwives who looked after maternal health.

One group of amahs were the majie (meaning “mother and sister” in Chinese) – women from Guangdong, China who underwent the sor hei (or “combing up”) ceremony where they would plait their hair or tie it into a bun, and take a vow of celibacy. In Singapore, they developed a reputation for being loyal and hardworking, with many remaining with the same family for decades. There were also Malay and Indian domestic workers, who were more commonly known as ayahs.

Today, migrant domestic workers from various Asian countries continue to form an important pillar of the nation’s

workforce by supporting Singapore's families and their caregiving needs, particularly for households where all the adults are working full-time.

4600

Episode Six

Contemporary Experiences of Migrants

Migration into Singapore continues today, with over 40 per cent of its population in recent years born overseas, including the approximately 22,000 people who take up citizenship each year. Singapore's survival now, as in the past, depends upon remaining open to migrants and the diverse skills and perspectives that they bring. These individuals continue to play vital roles in our community and economy across a range of industries.

While each generation of migrants has faced unique challenges, many core experiences of past migrants are echoed in those of their counterparts today, such as the dreams and hardships of starting a new life in a foreign country, far away from family and friends. Take a glimpse into the lives of some more recent migrants who have arrived in and contributed to Singapore, while considering your own thoughts about migration and the "foreigners" who are an integral part of our society.

5000

Chapter Five

Making Waves

Throughout its history, Singapore has consistently punched above its weight as a tiny island. As the exhibition has shown up to this point, this sterling track record is attributable to how it has been historically connected to the wider world, with the Singapore River as its central artery of trade, commerce and culture. Singapore has also consistently sought to expand its physical horizons despite its small size, and in its openness, welcomed flows of people who have built Singapore and made it what it is today.

Yet, the Singapore story is one that is characterised by its post-independence growth and development. In this final section, we explore how Singapore as a global city-state, with Singaporeans as cosmopolitan citizens, has impacted the world, making waves regionally and internationally.

5100

Episode One

The International Stage

Singapore has been recognised as a leader in diplomacy and as a reliable and secure venue for holding key events of regional and global importance.

5200

Episode Two **Heart Work**

In times of global health crises and natural disasters, Singapore has made an impact locally and internationally in caring for those affected, including through humanitarian efforts.

5300**Episode Three****Daring to Innovate**

As Singapore embarked on rapid industrialisation from the 1960s, a spirit of innovation prevailed with domestic research and development efforts having a wider regional and global reach.

5400

Episode Four

From Local to Global

While language and food have been distinctive markers of local Singaporean identity, they have increasingly gained recognition grown in stature and popularity worldwide. Today, Singlish – or Singaporean English – is represented in the Oxford English Dictionary, and Singapore's hawker food culture has been inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

5500

Episode Five

Wave Makers

Singaporeans past and present have made their mark on the world in their own ways. Beyond being recognised on the regional and international stage, they have made a difference by being pioneers in their respective fields, leading through their excellence, and paving the way for other Singaporeans to blaze their own paths globally.

These two walls showcase some of the significant artefacts that have been contributed to our Collecting Contemporary Singapore initiative. They place the spotlight on some Singaporeans who have made waves in the world, and recognise their success in fields that have often been the road less trodden, from sport to music to fashion.

**Are there stories or objects that could contribute to this showcase of extraordinary Singaporeans making waves in the world? As part of our Collecting Contemporary Singapore initiative, we invite you to get in touch with us via the QR code below.*

6000

Conclusion

What does the future hold, and what paths will Singapore take?

As this exhibition has shown, it is crucial that Singapore continues to adapt, innovate, and stay competitive and connected, while celebrating our diversity, protecting our unique culture and sense of belonging, and ensuring opportunities for all. With the land and seas that we have, it is increasingly urgent that we chart our path ahead in a sustainable way, caring responsibly for our environment for present generations and those to come.

Our future depends very much on how well we balance these different needs. Reflecting on Singapore's journey thus far, we have good reason to be hopeful. Despite our small size and regardless of regional and international developments, Singapore has always found a way to survive and indeed thrive.

Singapore's story continues to be written, and the aspirations you have cast help to express hope and articulate a larger

vision of what that future could look like. Thank you for joining us and being part of this journey!