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The Short History of a Long Time Ago

Two generations of archaeologists, John Miksic and Lim Chen Sian.

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"They plan. They build", Boey Kim Cheng's poem "The Planners" begins. "They erase the flaws, / the blemishes of the past", while their "drilling goes right through / the fossils of last century."

As opposed to city planners, our archaeologists have burrowed into the past and found – rather than "blemishes" – Javanese gold and Chinese porcelain, their dormant value caked with the Singapore River's grime.

"The greatest misconception is that we look for treasure. Or dinosaur bones," archaeologist Lim Chen Sian says. "When they stumble upon one of our digs, they usually do the 'Raiders March' and think it's the funniest thing in the world."

"Indiana Jones is the exact opposite of an archaeologist," Professor John Miksic goes. "He destroys things, he ruins things."

"The Nazis he was fighting were doing better digging," Lim concurs.

Miksic sniffs: "There have never been any good movies about archaeologists. None, ever!"

Miksic and Lim are respectively honorary and research fellows at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies' archaeology unit, the only such division here. Two of less than five local archaeologists, their numbers rival that of the Merlion. But even Merlions have their own hallowed places in local history.

"Everywhere in Southeast Asia requires archaeology to be undertaken prior to any construction," Lim says. "Surprisingly, in Singapore, it's a bit archaic. No one is required to engage us to conduct a survey. The digs we do are for people who have specific vested interests in their own sites and want to find out more about the history of our land. Or more often than not, we are the lobbyists."

Their digs are also often made possible only with volunteers, who help with the cleaning, cataloguing, and analysing of artefacts. Despite these challenges, the archaeologists continue to make inroads into Singapore's and their histories.

"My first dig here was at the Old Parliament House," Lim recounts of the 2002 excavation that unearthed Northern Song Dynasty coins along with locally produced, 14th Century earthenware. "We started digging right under that elephant statue. You could just stick your hand into the ground and pull out fistfuls of artefacts. I was just mesmerised – we used to play soccer on the Padang, and just half a metre beneath me, there's a whole world out there."



The word 'archaeology' stems from the early 17th century, originating from the Greek 'arkhaios', which means 'ancient'. In Singapore, archaeology only began in 1984 with Lim's former teacher Miksic.

Miksic led the seminal excavation of Fort Canning Hill, or Bukit Larangan – the 'Forbidden Hill'. Funded by Shell, the richness of their discoveries – exquisite Yuan Dynasty ceramics, a Chinese porcelain bowl compass – undermined the folktale-like quality of Singapore being a backwater village before the British.

"We had ten days to find something, or they would redevelop the site. We got lucky!" he good-humouredly grins. "What we're trying to argue is that there was a lot more variability in the past. What we see now may look superficially similar, but it comes from very different origins."

Most significantly, their work has gone some way towards filling in the "collective amnesia" about pre-14th Century Singapore. "Anywhere between Stamford Road, the Padang, the Singapore River, and Fort Canning, there's a whole urban site that started around 1300. But we only have these short windows of opportunity. Every year there's a project downtown, and we were only allowed to dig in this tiny little area of the Padang. Lim found a lot of gas masks there from World War Two. They just recorded it and covered it up again. They're still there!"

Miksic made his first archaeological find at six, on a family farm in upstate New York. Under the tutelage of his grandfather, they uncovered Native American stone arrowheads and tools, using them to imagine the lives of their Iroquois predecessors.

"You get to travel around with archaeology," he says. "I never travelled around as a kid." After graduating from Dartmouth College, Miksic joined the Peace Corps and was sent to Kedah, Malaya. There, he carried out rural development, teaching farmers about cooperatives. Morning visits had him traipsing through villages in Sungai Petani, and evening excavations brought him back to the 5th Century, the Srivijaya kingdom, whose remnants lay below the loamy earth.

His peripatetic life continued with stints in Sumatra, the States, and Yogyakarta, where he set up an archaeology department at the Gadjah Mada University.

Miksic is now based in Singapore because to him, "there are so many universal questions that you can study here. It's a good place to test these theories formulated in other areas – about the formation of civilisations, urbanisation, and trade."

Despite being rejected for permanent residency, Miksic hopes to establish an Asia-wide institution for archaeology here. One day too, he would like to dig near the Tuas area, where according to 1890 records, Neolithic stone tools from four thousand years ago were found.

"I just do what I can. If I felt pressure from the last 25 or so years, I probably would be dead by now from a heart attack. But whatever I don't do now will be lost forever, so giving up is really not an option."



For every bit of Miksic's optimism, his former student is decidedly more droll about their profession. Lim views Miksic as the "*éminence grise*" of local archaeology, versus his own account of how he came to be.

"I guess was looking at one of those university catalogues and never got beyond 'ARCH'. I was thinking, oh my gosh, do I want to tell people I'm an accountant? Maybe being an archaeologist is sexier than being an auditor..."

Initially, Lim's desire for the supposedly sexier major fell prey to a quintessential generational concern: "Dad insisted I do something practical in my life". So finance became his first major during his undergraduate studies at the University of Boston, and archaeology was relegated to the second.

Upon graduation, he persisted with digs in Egypt and Central America. On a trip back home, he was inspired by contact with Miksic and made the switch to Southeast Asian histories.

"There's all sorts of stuff to dig here, but most people don't believe there's archaeology until they see a hole in the ground", Lim says. On one tour with policy makers, a senior government official even questioned him about his choice to stay here, proposing the States as a more exciting alternative.

"What?! Didn't you hear this entire tour?" he pantomimes tragi-comically.

"It hit me, what am I doing in Egypt or Central America? I can claim some social connection here, so why am I digging someone else's past? Singapore is a very unique entity. I don't know about public policies and transportation grants, but at least in my own way for archaeology – for buried past and buried heritage – we can be pioneers. Where else in the world can you do that?"

Words Vicki Yang

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