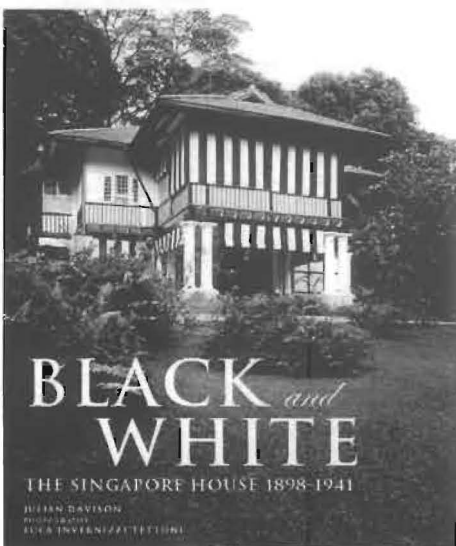


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REVIEWS

editor's choice



Black and White:
The Singapore House 1898-1941
By Julian Davison
Photos by Luca Invernizzi Tettoni
Singapore: Talisman, 2005. 148 pp.
Retail: S\$57.75 / SHS Price: S\$36.75

The 'black and white house' is such an ubiquitous part of Singapore's architectural landscape that we often take it for granted. We all dream of living in one of these beautiful houses that harken to a by-gone age and can often only admire them from behind tall gates and high fences. In this stunning new book, the story of Singapore's black and whites are told for the first time in fascinating textual and pictorial detail. The text, written by Dr Julian Davison is scholarly and detailed, and it is evident that much time was spent on researching the topic. More importantly, it is lovingly crafted, and Davison's light prose makes for a compelling read. The photographs are something else altogether. Taken over a span of several years by master lensman Luca Tettoni – whose professionalism and barbed wit I have come to admire from having worked with him on a previous project – the photographs are a feast for the eyes.

The narrative is broken into 10 chapters including an introduction: Out of India; Arts and Crafts Influences; Plantation

House Style; Tropical Edwardian; Postwar Apotheosis; Frank Brewer; Military Black and Whites; Art Deco and Modernism; and Black and White Lifestyles. There is something here for everyone: tons of brilliant nuggets for the history buff; great illustrations from the talented hand of Davison for the artists among us; and Tettoni's stunning and evocative images. Mind you, this is not an attempt at a comprehensive cataloguing of black and white houses in Singapore, but an attempt at capturing their spirit and essence through a detailed examination of prime examples of surviving specimens. For myself, I particularly enjoyed the first three chapters documenting the evolution of the black and white house, the chapter on Frank Brewer (one of my all-time favourite architects) and the chapter on black and white lifestyles. This book is a real keeper. Buy it for yourself, your loved ones and keep a healthy stock of it for anyone who might be passing through Singapore.

Reviewed by Kevin Tan

book review



Early Singapore 1300s-1819:
Evidence in Maps, Text & Artefacts

Edited by John N. Miksic and
Cheryl-Ann Low Mei Gek
Singapore: Singapore History Museum, 2004. 148 pp.
Retail: S\$31.50 / SHS Price: S\$22.10

As one peruses this volume of essays, it becomes apparent its central thrust revolves around a refutation of K.G. Tregonning's seminal (or shall I say notorious) assertion that "Modern Singapore began in 1819" and "nothing that occurred on the island prior to this has particular reference to an understanding of the contemporary scene; it is of antiquarian interest only". In doing so, Tregonning consigned the history of Early Singapore to the realm of myth and legend, trivializing it as only worthy the attention of "amateurs and dilettantes", not professional historians. This book mounts a credible offensive on this benighted notion. The essays can be divided into four themes – relevance, contestation, networks and place. Taken together, they provide a broad justification of why early Singapore history merits a more thorough look. Though coming at the end of the book, Kwa Chong Guan's chapter "From Temasek to Singapore: Locating a Global City-State in the Cycles of Melaka Straits History" suggests Singapore's current cultural dislocation and displacement, or post-colonial wandering, can be resolved by a close examination of its place and relationships within its re-

gional locale. Singapore's regional historical significance is further explored by John Miksic, who uses Karl Polanyi's notion of the "port of trade" as a specific, unique form of urban settlement to interpret the roles of early Singapore. This notion is germane for it underscores the idea that Singapore has always existed in relation to an other, and it has always been used as a conduit, through which ideas, goods and people pass, or a Southeast Asian Antioch from which where they are sent. Based on his analysis of artifacts unearthed from sites clustered around the Singapore River and what was possibly the nexus of early settlement, Miksic suggests early Singapore does manifest some attributes of a port of trade, but details are still lacking about its trading system or activities. The strength of this book lies in its considerable analysis of artifacts and documents. Yet, this also reveals a critical limitation to the study of early Singapore – the scant sources available. Still, it remains a credible attempt to move the history of that era from the realm of Sang Nila Utama into the realm of evidence based history.

Reviewed by Alvin Tan

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CATALOGUE

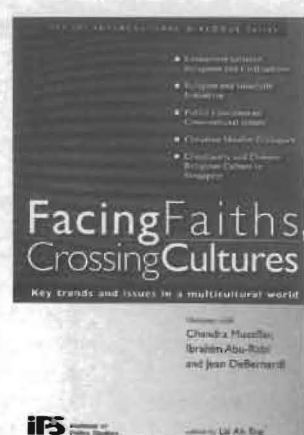
Welcome to SHS Book Club, an initiative by Singapore Heritage Society, in conjunction with APD Singapore and T&H Singapore.

As part of this Book Club, the Society selects, reviews and recommends good heritage-related books that are distributed by our partner organisations. These reviews are circulated to members, along with a catalogue of books.

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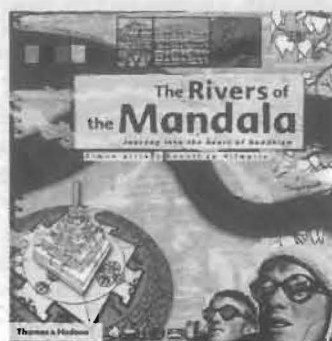
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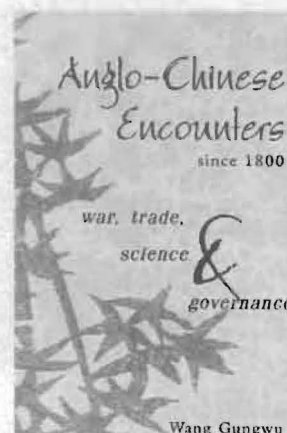
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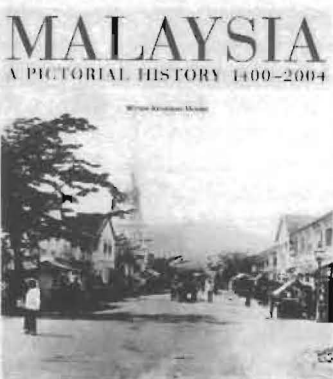
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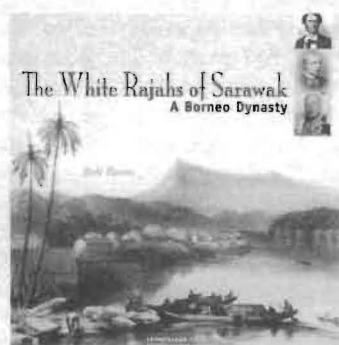
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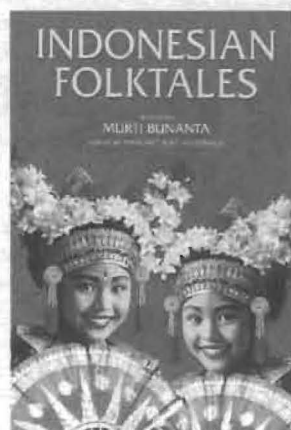
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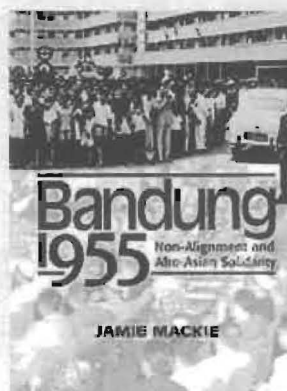
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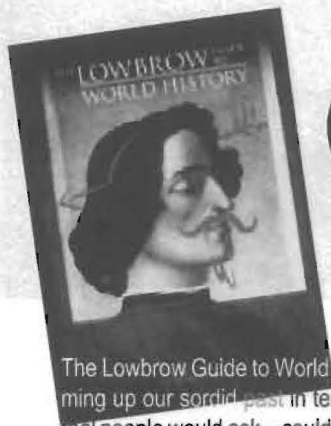
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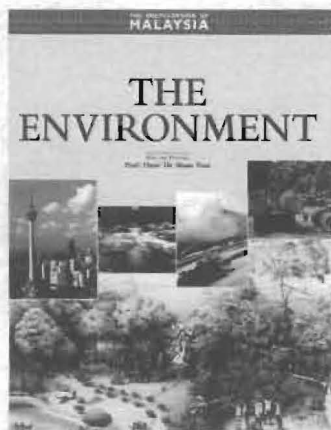
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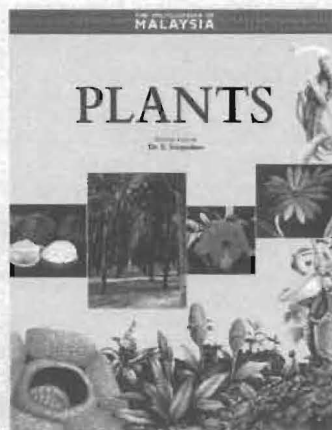
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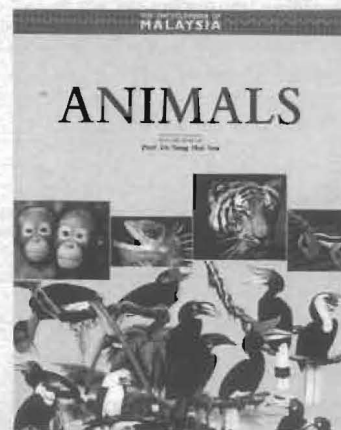
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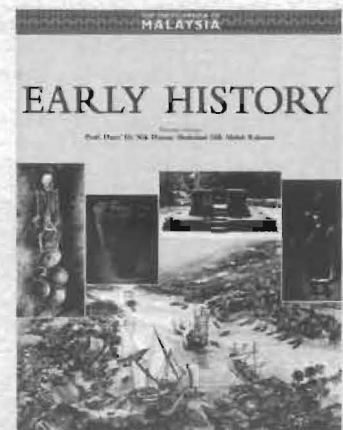
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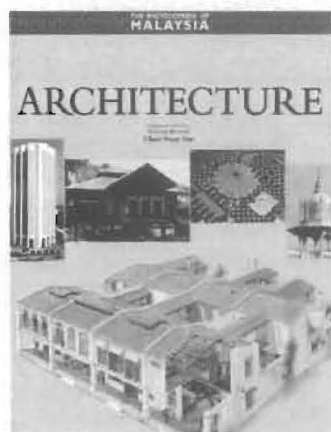
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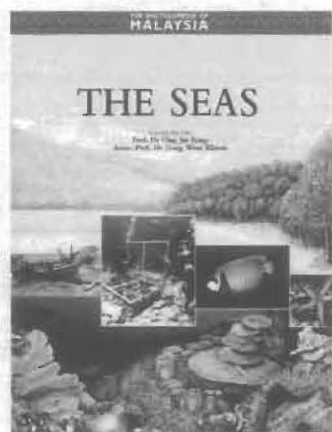
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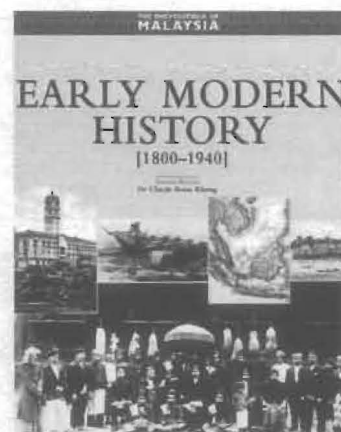
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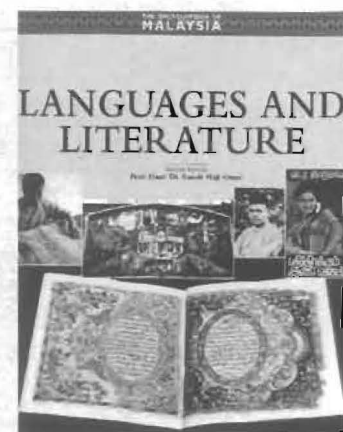
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