



THE NALANDA-SRIWIJAYA LECTURE SERIES

THE BUDDHIST ORIGINS OF “SINGAPURA”
Re-reading Chapters 1-6 of the *Sejarah Melayu*
on the Founding of “Singapura”

Date: Thursday, 4 March 2010
Time: 4.00 pm – 6.00 pm
Venue: ISEAS Seminar Room II

About the Speaker

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Kwa Chong Guan is attached to the S Rajaratnam School of International Studies and the History Dept of the National University of Singapore. He was formerly the Director of the Oral History Centre and the old National Museum of Singapore and coordinated a strategic planning process which transformed the old National Museum into its three constituent Museums today. He continues to be associated with the National Archives of Singapore as the Chairman of its Board and with the museums through various advisory committees. He was one of the co-authors of *Singapore: A 700-Year history* (National Archives of Singapore, 2009) with Tan Tai Yong and Derek Heng.

About the Seminar

The island known today as Singapore derived its name “Singapura” when, according to the *Malay Annals/Sejarah Melayu*, a prince from Palembang landed on its shores in the course of his travels and sighted an animal which he was told is a “singa”. Seri Teri Buana interpreted this to be an auspicious omen for the location of a new “negeri” which the following three chapters of Raffles MS18 of the *Sejarah Melayu* describes becoming a “great city” under four generations of Seri Teri Buana’s descendants. Sir Richard Winstedt’s dismissal of this account of the founding of Singapura as “a hotchpotch of Chola and Palembang folk-lore (out of which) little can be made” remains the conventional mainstream judgment of the *Sejarah Melayu* narrative of Singapura.



This presentation attempts a re-reading of these first six chapters of the *Sejarah Melayu* in its time and location, the 14th century Malay world of the Rias and South Sumatra which was not yet Muslim, but still Buddhist. The presentation argues that the metaphors and referents of the first six chapters of the *Sejarah Melayu* are to a Malay world suffused with the theology of Mahayana Buddhism and all its implications for the moral authority to rulership for Paramesvara whom the Portuguese learnt was the founder of Melaka. Seri Teri Buana and his claims to divine incarnation and moral authority to rulership, this presentation suggests, was an allegory for Paramesvara and his Melaka descendants to claim the right to rulership. The presentation will explore the Mahayana Buddhist underpinnings of Paramesvara's claim to rulership and its incorporation into norms of Malay statecraft enunciated in the *Sejarah Melayu*.

ISEAS is pleased to invite you to this Lecture.