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2nd ARI-MBRAS Lecture 2019

**World City Routes:
Liverpool and the Relational Remaking of Singapore**

by Dr Tim Bunnell

AS8, Level 4, Seminar Room 04-04,
National University of Singapore, 10 Kent Ridge Crescent, Singapore
Saturday 28 September 2019, 17.00–18.30

Recounting his journey to the forests and swamps of Borneo in 1879, naturalist F.W. Burbidge described Singapore as ‘the Liverpool of the East’. It is likely that Burbidge’s comparison was based on little more than observation of the bustling harbour in Singapore at a time when Liverpool was also among the busiest ports in the world. Yet according to some economic historians, Liverpool – or, more precisely, some of that city’s most prominent firms such as the Ocean Steamship Company – had also played a significant role in the thriving colonial port of Singapore. I take this as a starting point for examination of historically shifting Liverpool-Singapore relations. Conceptually, my presentation is informed by a recent rise of interest in ‘relational’ forms of comparative urban studies. Empirically, I draw upon material collected as part of a wider research project on Malay seafaring connections between Liverpool and British Malaya. Malay men travelled from Singapore to Liverpool long before Burbidge made his comparative gesture – part of the colonial seafaring labour force that sustained the imperial economy – and they continued to do so until well into the second half of the twentieth century. Subsequent processes of decolonization contributed to both the birth of Singapore as a sovereign city-state and Liverpool’s economic demise as an imperial maritime centre. Across the lives of the Liverpool-based Malay men in my study, one time ‘world city’ Liverpool endured a demotion in its global commercial standing while Singapore was consolidated as a global city-state.

About the Speaker:

Tim Bunnell is professor in the Department of Geography and director of the Asia Research Institute (ARI) at the National University of Singapore. Tim’s research as a human geographer concerns issues of urban development in Southeast Asia, and that region’s global connections. His Liverpool-centred ‘Malay Routes’ project culminated in the publication of *From World City to the World in One City: Liverpool through Malay Lives* (Wiley, 2016). Tim’s latest book is *Urban Asias: Essays on Futurity Past and Present* (Jovis, 2018 – co-edited with Daniel P.S. Goh).

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