

The Phasing-Out Of Venice In The Social Studies Curriculum: No More Lessons To Be Learnt?

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The Problem

The notion of linking Venice to Singapore is not new. As Singapore reaches 50 years old, books have appeared to question the city-state's survival or its next phase. In the social studies textbook of Singapore, the chapter of Venice in which students have been studying for more than a decade is about to be phased out from 2016. Has the chapter achieve its aim of making students learn some lessons of survival from Venice? Are there alternative ways to help the students discuss the developments of Venice? This paper will venture to make an attempt of last voyage to see what can be gleaned from a city which has survived a thousand years.

The first question and issue to deal with must be: can lessons of history be learnt? And then, can lessons be learnt from Venice by Singapore? "Learning lessons from history" has almost become a cliché. Some thought the derivation of these was the only utility of history. Figuratively speaking, "those who were doomed to repeat history failed to learn from it" (rendition from Winston Churchill). From the different perspectives (realist, Dawinian, biologist), peoples or civilisations which do not learn their lessons very well became extinct in history. In truth, practitioners of military history know that lessons from battle were only learnt after simulating the various

alternative scenarios or having pondered deeply. If no two situations were ever alike in history, it is not surprising that the key to diffusing a new situation is sometimes linked with being able to anticipate or predict it. At the other end of the extreme, Michael Howard in his inaugural Regius Professor Chair lecture in 1981 at Oxford University (entitled "Lessons of history") questioned the potentiality of learning lessons from history. While he accedes there might be a need for history to be more 'relevant' and 'civic conscious', one needs to be very careful and more open (or ignorant). Being 'ignorant', according to Howard, means not to be constrained by any type of parochialism. Howard also cautions against judging the 'usefulness' of histories and events in terms of their contemporary-ness; 'lessons' can come from all periods and geographical areas in history. In this direction, the topic of Venice in the Singapore social studies textbook can offer insightful lessons if issues in both societies and their overlap (or lack of) is discussed in a more open and in-depth manner (Howard, 1992).

Current lessons drawn from history are posited from an interventionist and Cartesian perspective of history; which also incidentally drew more from the similarities rather than differences between the two cities. From the textbook, the lesson which link to the economy is: Venice and its people need to take advantage of opportunities and be highly

innovative. The associated decline is pegged to the fact that Venetians were not able to operate new (ship) technologies effectively as well as not having more open trade laws. Taking a non-Cartesian and longer time perspective of the same issues can yield a different set of learnings. If the topic of Venice was meant to “integrate the other topics and themes [covered in the Social Studies curriculum]”, a closer nexus and reference can be made between it and for instance, the chapter on economics, environment, and globalisation in the textbook. Benefits and problems of globalisation involving for instance, increasing income gap, presence of foreign culture, and environmental degradation can be connected to Venetian history and discussed for possible learnings (CPDD, 2008). At a more basic level, one could even question the textbook whether Venice is indeed an appropriate case study for Singapore. Y.K. Chan (2013, p. 316) thinks that Singapore was never known as the “Venice of the East.” The post-independence association of Venice with Singapore is backed up by “two strongest [local] proponents of Venice’s history”, Mr. George Yeo and Mr. Tommy Koh, drawing from F. Lane’s work, stressing the “mercantile rationality... as an indispensable ingredient of Venice’s economic prosperity” and Singapore being connected to the world. In specific instances, the case of Venice was used to allay the fear of the “mass influx of immigrants” which the government ‘had to sanction’ (in order to keep up with the economic race). Chan also alerts to Hamilton-Hart who tries to convince of the usefulness of Venice’s lessons by highlighting the ‘differences’ between Venice and Singapore (Chan, 2013, p. 320 & 325).ⁱ While no approach to comparative history is bias-free, discourse can take the route of exploring possibilities rather than mandating didactic lessons to

be learnt.

Without negating the role of able leadership and human intervention in the course of Venetian and post-independence Singapore history, this paper aims to give some agency to the interpretations of non-Cartesian theorists and Annales scholars. The paper will first discuss the ideas of particular non-Cartesian theorists and draw linkages between these and the propositions of Annales scholars, most notably Fernand Braudel. Next, the essay will discuss the issues and problems of the economy, environment, and globalisation experienced in the two city-states and highlight how taking a step back or taking a larger or longer perspective can result in a different set of learnings and lessons for present Singapore.

Non-Cartesian and *longue durée* approach

The theoretical basis for a more diverse interpretation of affairs can be found in the ideas of Friedrich Hayek as well as proponents of “spontaneous order” and other associated theorists. As an economics Nobel laureate, Hayek is known for his many ideas of which “spontaneous order” appeared in the later part of his career. In its widest conception, no idea developed independently; “spontaneous order” must also have formed the basis of his earlier writings such as *Prices and production* and *The use of knowledge in society*. Hayek’s ideas are “critical of Cartesian constructivism” which seeks to measure and construct models of the natural world. The gist of “spontaneous order” postulates that self-interested individuals are able to unintentionally create a social order without the input of a centrally planning source and in the field of economics, appreciates the free market where prices serve as an indicator for activity. It is well

worth to remind that the “order” Hayek advocates is oriented towards the benefit of human ends.ⁱⁱ Still, Hayek thought that Cartesian modeling fails to capture the essence of the “spontaneous (social) order” and more importantly, new perspectives or alternative ways of thinking might be hampered by a constricting power.

Fellow Austrian school economist of the Mises sub-camp in the USA, Murray Rothbard conceded that Zhuangzi of the Chinese Daoist philosophy to be the first to work out the idea of “spontaneous order” (Rothbard, 1990). Although eastern philosophies have often been labeled as ‘mystical’, there have been efforts, linked to developments in naturalism, to ground the latter in ontological and methodological (metaphysical) approaches (Kirby 2008, p. 115; Ryder, 2003, p. 64).ⁱⁱⁱ From a certain perspective, the “natural laws and forces that operate the structure and behavior of the world” can be seen as the transcendental forces that govern the behavior of free markets, democracies, and living systems in environment. At a more ‘radical’ end, James March, Jack Steel Parker Professor of international management at Stanford business school, endorses the approach of Don Quixote, a knight (hidalgo) who embarked on a hopeful but unplanned journey against the background of a decadent and moral-less Spain and lending himself to help those who had been injustice; except his ‘victories’ were always achieved through a measure of “good luck and fortune” (Mooney 2014). Elsewhere, connecting with the Black Swan theory, which K. Mahbubani evokes in his book *Can Singapore survive* as a reason that can impact unfavorably on the Singapore’s survival, this author thinks that: 1) Black swan events are the “deviations” which Hayek talks about that the planners might have ignored in trying to come up with a “perfect” plan; 2) the “deviations” or

“events that are outside the bell curve” can be considered in context of the theories of “spontaneous order” and naturalism as either signals indicative of the forces “distorting” the system or lash backs which manifest when the system attempts to readjust itself back to equilibrium (Mahbubani, 2015, p. 13).

Coming up with a more definitive set of tenets or refining the theories of “spontaneous order” or naturalism does not mean that a scholar or central planner will have a complete view of the market, polity, or system because “he will never have enough information.” Also, clarifying the features of the naturalist approach does not fully resolve the rationalist-empiricist or subject-object debate; it does put naturalism in line with the rhetoric of more mainstream philosophers and promotes more (hopefully creative) perspectives of an observed phenomenon.^{iv} This is where the “pragmatist” camp of Singapore leaders has certain advantage, Mahbubani (2015) describes this as being willing to invite and incorporate critic’s ideas in a “Big tent” approach.

What do ideas in “spontaneous order” and “naturalism” have anything to do with Annales history? Founded by Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre in 1929, the school pioneered an approach to a study of long-term historical structures (longue durée), which later also included geography, material culture, and psychology of the epoch (mentalités), over events and political transformations. Fernand Braudel became the leader of the second generation of Annalists after 1945. Braudel's book, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* was not only his most influential work but also the most panoramic and representative of the Annales-school approach. The *Mediterranean* conceives time transpiration at three levels: the first level

is geographical time, and is the time transition of the environment, with its slow, almost imperceptible change, and its repetition and cycles. The second level involves long-term social, economic, and cultural history, where particular patterns in the Mediterranean economy, social groupings, empires and civilisations over two or three centuries are discussed. The third level of time is that of events as well as the history of individuals. Clearly, when time is stretched long enough, the history of human societies is subsumed under the history of the geography and the environment (Braudel, 1996).

The apparently ‘esoteric’ ideas discussed so far can be applied to developments in the histories of Venice and Singapore on the issues of: 1) continuance of a growth model and *longue durée* perspective, and 2) growth model and the environment.

Learnings from Venice

The limits to Venice’s growth signified the beginning of its stagnancy and decline in the 16th to 18th centuries. Hence, the identification of reasons for decline that resonate closer to reality has an impact on prescribing learnings for Singapore. Since the European crossing of the Atlantic and the ignition of the Atlantic or silver revolution, the general public of Venice began not to be surprised that banks could go bankrupt. By the early modern era, traders (businessmen), bankers and politicians were closely intertwined and the reverberations suffered by one group could easily affect the others. While contemporary economists try to find patterns to economic and crises cycles, there is no panacea to the cyclical disruptions and bank failures. Being a leading trading centre in the 14th and 15th centuries, the citizenry and institutions of Venice were no stranger to upheavals of

“unpredictable” financial and economic cycles.

Merchants, whether Venetian or non-Venetian, with trading businesses in Venice could become bankrupt through no fault of the city. At the extreme end, the merchant in trouble could even spark a bank failure. The kind of nexus formed between politicians and bankers (expansive government running on loans) gave an idea of how a modern government would operate (Diaries of Sanudo, 2008, p. 235). Moreover, patricians (Venice ruling elites) invested in the voyage and cargo trip led by traders (Diaries of Sanudo, 2008, p. 258 & 269). The petition of the Zane brothers recounted the misfortunes they had met: first, there was a Rialto fire which affected their warehouses. Then, their ship sailing to and fro between France and England was captured by the former; the attempt by one of the brothers to recover part of the losses led to his murder. Third, Prince Doria’s plunder of Patras (in the Gulf of Lepanto) led to the pillaging of the ‘marine’ warehouses of the Zane brothers there. Finally, the war with the Turks led to the enslavement and losses of a nephew (important member of the family business) linked to the brothers. Similarly, the case of Nicolçó Baron demonstrated further how people could lose their assets through no fault of their own. Although investigations “conducted by the creditors have established him to have nothing but hope and diligence”, he had landed himself as a prisoner because “neither prayers nor kindness have been able to bring [him] an honorable agreement” (Documentary History, 1992, p. 169-174 & 175).

Recent research by R. Mueller (1997, p. 230) in conjunction with primary sources examined show how a bank could lapse into a crisis accruing from its distortive activities in interaction with larger events –

in the case of a crisis linked to the House of Garzoni, “rumors circulated that the Garzonis had been buying silver at a price above the Mint’s ratio... and had lost [a substantial amount of] ducats in that speculation.” Wider events and developments that contributed to or prolonged the crisis included: the Portuguese (Vasco da Gama’s) circumnavigation of Africa and the piratical interference from the Barbary (North African) Coasts led to a “serious drop in Venetian imports of gold and silver.” The Doge and “heads of the Ten” came out and spoke for the bank so that the loss of confidence and panic will not spread to the other banks; the government even had to order for a special increase and production of bullion from the Mint in order to ease the apparent shortage.

The decline of Venice in the social studies textbook advocating that it “lost” because 1) it “maintained a monopolistic position” or “imposed a protectionist policy”; 2) it could not operate better-designed ships (for trade or war) need to be seen in the context of the larger economic and environmental developments (CPDD, 2008, p. 116). Venice only declined in relative terms from the 16th to 18th centuries. Venice declined because the key areas of economic activities had shifted from the Mediterranean to Northern Europe and the Atlantic since the crossing by Christopher Columbus. The textbook is right in saying that the “larger states such as England and Holland, were more successful in negotiating for favourable trading rights” (CPDD, 2008, p. 116). England and Holland were, in P. Kennedy’s terms, growing faster economically than Venice or any other city-states on the Italian peninsula. The relative decline of Venice was not a decline of the city-state per se, it signified the (relative) decline of the entire region of the Mediterranean. The

extraordinary lengthy period of Venice’s state-building and survival (over a thousand years) qualifies the story of Venice to represent the story of the Mediterranean in two ways. These are: 1) from the perspective of time, Venice epitomised the long-term history and patterns in the development of the economy, states and civilisation of the region; 2) from the perspective of space, Venice was part of a network of autonomous cities and ports which were able to utilise relatively advanced financial and commercial instruments backed up by a nascent infrastructure of trust and codified legal systems before larger states dominated the region. Why Venice was not able to revive itself in the 19th century after the Napoleonic occupation and whether it could have operated independently apart from the new state of Italy in the 1860s entail the consideration of a different set of dynamics that should not be blamed on the early modern period.

Venice put up a good fight against the process of decline. Venice was out-competed in the trade of sugar initially, sugar from the Portuguese offshore island (later from Brazil) drove down the price. Venice’s quest for a new and cheaper source of production secured it the island of Cyprus. In cotton, goods from India (as well as from Brazil) did not, for some reason, affect Venice’s commerce in the product in the Eastern Mediterranean. The appearance of new enemies, for instance, the Ottomans, was not always necessarily detrimental to Venice’s commercial interests – in fact, it opened up new markets for trading. In the later period and being an island, Venice not only procured supplies came from the surrounding areas, it also obtained the staple from places further away such as Sicily and Greece, as well as Egypt and Portugal(!). In the spice trade, it was feared initially that the Portuguese rounding of the Cape of Good

Hope would bring about depression of the spice price and ruin the Venetian market. This, however, did not happen. Portuguese cajoling of ships in the Indian Ocean (specifically, the Red Sea) did cut Levant route, this, according to N. Steensgaard (1975), revived at the end of 15th century. Moreover, the Portuguese also did not always get the best quality spices from India; this has impact on the selling price. It should be noted that Venice collaborated in the Portuguese enterprise to the Indian Ocean by investing in and hiring out sailors to the expeditions; being very experienced traders and sailors in the Ocean crossing over from the Red Sea (Verlinden, 1995).

There is some evidence that Venice's protectionist policy did worsen its trade. The report by Sir D. Carleton showed "there is a manifest decay in Venice in trade, and by consequence of shipping." The decay of trade was accrued to the high level of the 'imposts' (import tax) which caused trade to "run so quick [to] Florence, Genoa and Macelles... [in which] the impost is very small." There has hardly been a period when the onset of depression does not trigger protectionist measures. Venice's conservative policies need to be seen in the larger context of the economic shift. The "carriage of commodities directly from the Indies by the English and Hollanders to the Northern parts hinders the coming of these wares to Soria from whence they were usually bought, [and] from hence transported over all the Christendom." In another words, lesser trade was passing through the Mediterranean.

Singapore had its fair share of economic crises at the turn of the 20th to 21st centuries (1997, 2001, 2007).^v An important reason why Singapore was more exposed to the reverberations of the economic cycles was accrued to its

relatively small size; making it more susceptible to global forces. Linda Low (2006, pp. 423-432) updates of the various committees to tackle the economic developments and crises of the nation. The Singapore21 Committee (formed in 1998) was supposed to "establish the mechanism for civic participation and nation-building in the new millennium." The Economic Review Committee (formed 2001) was formed to "tackle the cyclical and structural matters [the economy faced] and turning point in the reinvention of Singapore's government-made model." The Remaking Singapore Committee "deliberated on the political and social strategies on a softer ground" to relax some of the regulations legalizing the social arena. As the committees debated and strove to meet the challenges, the dilemmas of the 1990s through the first decade of 2000s persist. These are: 1. how far is it desirable for a corrupt-free but less transparent government to helm the economy?;^{vi} 2. to what extent was smaller size and decentralisation strengths in the new economy?; 3. which (new) industries to focus on? 4. how far should citizens (young and aged) expect to be employed in the new economy or participate in the consultative process of the country's development?^{vii}

Linking to the issues discussed on Venice, 1) the increasing inter-dependence between global economic forces, state-owned investment institutions and citizenry have in the recent years before the 2015 elections saw increased voices and greater demands for accountability on for instance, investment of the sovereign state funds, of which the Central Provident Fund (CPF) is closely linked. The government will certainly have to find a more diversified and amenable channel to communicate to its populace. Having complete transparency however is an issue that the leadership of Venice would not

agree on either. This is taking into account that Venice was not a modern day democracy. The argument rests on the premises that full consultation engenders a certain degree of loss of efficiency and that popular sentiments do not always represent the best path of development for a state or economy because these are necessarily self-gratifying on the contemporary time scale. Elsewhere, R. King, who drew from P. Krugman's work and citing from tabloids, raises the question whether a corrupt-free government always translated into greater efficiency. At a time when Venice was faced with severe fiscal and debt problems, an experienced senator in the person of Giovanni Francesco de Priuli came forward to propose using part of the reserves the inhabitants of Venice save to pay off some of the debt on a regular basis, this would "free [the city's] revenues from the [heavy burden] of interest payments." The reform faced strong oppositions and was not easy to convince because the calculation involving the scheme was not obvious to the layman or even experienced businessman (Documentary History, 1992, p. 162). 2) Given the political instability experienced by Venice from the end of 18th century, the city-state might be able to put up another round of fight if the major area of economic focus had not shifted from the Mediterranean to Northern Europe and the Atlantic. Overall, the outlook for small states did not bode well in the 19th century. While Holland continued to thrive for some time more, many city-states in Central Europe became united under a larger state. If Singapore is not able to continue to carve a niche for itself, King predicts three scenarios for Singapore: a hotel Singapore society, a society of discontent and political change, and a consortium society (King, 2006). One of these outcomes is not too different from what Venice's contemporary plight is today.

The Venetian government was of the opinion that its people had become 'soft' and lost certain skills that made them prosperous (resonating challenges 3. and 4. facing Singapore). "The opinion of many is that [Venice] cannot long continue [their prosperity in trade] because they (the people of Venice) have changed their manners. Their former course of life was merchandising; they [now] look landward buying houses and lands... they won't send their sons upon galleys into the Levant to accustom them to navigation and trade [but] send them to travaile to learn [to be] more of a gentleman than a merchant" (Documentary History, 1992, pp. 27-29). As a result, some of things banned in the city included banquets as well as trivialities such as the wearing of pearls (Documentary History, 1992, pp. 166-169). In the new economy of the 21st century, the education in Singapore continues to stress on science, business and vocational learning although new courses catering to the production of luxuries are also increasingly seen in course offerings. A more commercialised society inevitably increased the material inequality between different groups of people in the city. A particular apprentice in the printing industry in Venice recounted the place he stayed in the squalid lodgings in the city as "the most wretched room in the whole town, and the worst company, and [he] suffered the worst discomfort in the world." His hard coarse bed was refuge to "an army of bedbugs and a mob of fleas", his roommate (separated by a board partition in the room) was sickly and gave off a stench, and the canals below also gave off a stinking smell (Documentary History, 1992, pp. 181-182). Venice increasingly relied on its charity and self-help organisations to ameliorate the problem of inequality in the city (Sim, 2014). For those who have gravitated to the fringes of society or fallen through the cracks in

Singapore, the responsibility in taking care of them is shared between the government and the self-help organisations.

Venice's growth or decline was intimately linked to the environment. The story of Venice from city-state to empire had been a story of dependency. As soon as it obtained its status of city, it began to look towards the mainland. However, it remained "subjected to Roman and Byzantine pressures" for a long time. Even when it began to acquire overseas territories, its food supply network and trade was never fully secure. Just when Venice looked to be at its peak, new hegemonic powers (Ottoman Empire) threatened the region. Each phase of the Venetian history, especially when it became 'grander', needed a greater input of resources to sustain. Hence, it is safe to say that the Venetians had to tend to the harnessing and conservation of resources since the founding of the city.

The ecological and environmental concerns of Venice should ideally be considered from the point of view of the interaction between the hinterland and 'the lagoon' or its vicinity. The Venetians had been harvesting resources from River Sile very early on; the area of Treviso was referred to as the "Granary of the Republic." The Po River Delta was in the Venetian's "Domain of Terraferma"; this was especially so in periods when Venice triumphed against the Duchy of Ferrara. Unregulated extraction of resources, especially in wood, led to disruptions in building schedule at the Arsenal (shipyard). K. Appuhn's (2009) work shows that the Venetians paid special attention to the creation of forest reserves as well as use the market mechanism (and associated legislative structure) to maintain a viable supply of wood. Despite Venice's attention to the husbandry of resources, general histories of the environment have

revealed that the supply of wood / timber from Europe's forests to be under stress before and especially during the different phases of the European expansion abroad. Timber shortage could be detected in Europe in the 15th century. Towards the end of 15th century, Venice was already importing ship hulls from Northern Europe. In the case of the Iberian empires, some part of the shipbuilding industries were certainly sub-contracted abroad to Indian and Brazil. Prior, the Arsenal had been so efficient that it is said "the [shipyard] could build a seaworthy vessel in the time it took the king of France to eat his state banquet!" (Diaries of Sanudo, 2008, p. 244). "Building a war galley consumed hundreds of trees, in its construction. Venetian shipyards also began to build round (sailing) ships" (Diaries of Sanudo, 2008, p. 251). Hence, to say that Venice slipped into decline because it could not catch up in ship-making skills is not entirely accurate. For non-war purpose, the building of breakwaters "spread along the barrier islands of the lagoon" was "reckoned to have used about 140,000 logs" (Bevilacqua, 2009, p. 36). The leaders who governed Venice were wise in the sense they realized the need to intervene and regulate the use of resources through the market and legislation. The 'inevitable' dwindling of wood resource showed whether in forests near Venice or in parts of its empire jointly managed by allies, the inability of the price mechanism in assigning prices to intergeneration costs, externality costs, as well as problems in enforcement in face of an increasingly competitive and capitalist environment frustrated the best plans in resource management.

Can any lesson be meted for Singapore's management of the resources and the environment? The stance of the Ministry of Environment appears to be one that lay between "free market liberalism"

and “social reformism.” This advocates for regulation through the market mechanism and “privatisation of the commons” as well as voluntary agreements, and provision of environmental incentives plus regulations. The *Singapore Green Plan 2012* was a concrete and progressive document that aims to coordinate the various spheres of the environment and economic sectors (in waste management, air pollution, water supply, and nature conservation) to achieve sustainability and livability of the island for its inhabitants (NEA, 2012). Outside the country, Singapore hopes to rely on the mechanism of the free market and is an active member of the Asean initiative and framework for environmental cooperation.^{viii} The cases of the sand embargoes by neighbouring countries and the annual haze problem show that Singapore may have to take a deeper ecology stance in coping with cross-border environmental challenges.^{ix} Aside from turning to more sustainable construction, and regardless of how many alternative supply sources it has, if it still needs the sand, Singapore may have to do more beyond stipulations (for sand vendors to act responsibly) and sending reminders (for vendors to observe source country regulations)” and render assistance in the surveillance of sand extraction licenses (Straits Times 11 May 2010). A similar challenge occurs in the haze problem in Indonesia which affects Singapore on an annual basis. It would do well to first note that a number of palm oil plantations and refineries in Sumatra (Indonesia) are based in Singapore. In this case, the surveillance and evidence collected has permitted the Singapore Government to undertake law suits against five palm oil companies; deemed to be a “game-changer in fighting haze” (Straits Times 18 Sep 2015). Singapore may need to be more proactive in this direction on a continual basis that preempts the seasonal burning. Ultimately, the environmental problems are not

Singapore’s alone, just as the wood-shortage problem was not solely Venice’s.^x

The foregoing discussion up to this point appears to be arguing in part for an interventionist approach rather than for a non-Cartesian and “spontaneous order” paradigm as advocated at the beginning of the paper. Two points of argument can be made here: 1. although Hayek disapproves of interference in the free market, he did not oppose the ‘necessary’ intervention that can facilitate the better working of the market (for instance, tackling externalities). 2. Planet earth in the 21st century is already pervasively affected by human activities such that the forces governing ‘human systems’ may not reflect those governing ‘natural systems’. Hence, recovering the equilibrium of ‘natural systems’ may require in the short term shocks in the opposite direction that hopefully reverse damages that have been done to the systems.

The wisdom of the history of Venice, having survived for a thousand years and operated at the “history of the civilisation”, is not manifested ideally when appropriated to extract lessons for a very limited period (mere 50 years) of Singapore’s post-independent history. A more ideal approach is to compare the history of Singapore as it has existed for 700 years to the history of Venice. Here, we can refer to the work of Derek Heng who has tried to map the different phases of the history of the island. Heng divides up the history of Singapore into six phases: 1. Temasek period, 2. Singapore under Melaka and Johor Sultanate, 3. East India Company period (1819-58), 4. Singapore as centre of British Malaya, 5. Singapore as part of Malaysia, 6. independent Singapore. Heng’s (2010, p. 57) approach to history hopes to show:

a history [of Singapore that is]

based on its repeated adjustments, sometimes self-conscious reinventions of itself... sometimes driven by rulers based in surrounding areas; but throughout Singapore had to achieve some kind of centrality [...] by acting as headquarters, to providing localized subordinate port services...

The most influential periods when Singapore's economic sphere was at its largest were during the Temasek period followed by the East India Company and independent Singapore periods; this was when the island was not excessively constrained by sizeable political powers in its vicinity. Incidentally, the Temasek period and the independent Singapore periods also coincided with prosperous periods in Asia (Frank, 1998). During these periods, Singapore not only acted as a gateway to a larger economic entity (or hinterland) but carved out its value as a major transshipment and service hub. In between these periods, Singapore was constrained under the Melaka / Johor Empire or under Malaysia (period of Union). Heng's classification of the 'low' period of Singapore under Melaka is interesting because although the Melaka period represented a period of Asian prosperity (seen in the voyages of Zhenghe), a port-economy might not benefit from this if it was overshadowed by another polity. Venice's history also yielded relatively high economic autonomy and advancement when it was under the overlordship of the Byzantine Empire (which did not constrain it excessively) from the 5th to 9th centuries and when the emerging European powers contested with the Ottoman Empire in the Mediterranean from the 10th to 15th centuries.^{xi} From the 5th to the 15th centuries, Venice built itself from an insignificant village to a gateway city and eventually to a transshipment hub in its own right. Resonating Heng's message for

Singapore, Venice's "decline" represents a period of readjustments that was dictated "by [powers] based in surrounding areas." Why Venice did not re-emerge after the Napoleonic occupation was accrued to the fact that the Spanish / Austrian Habsburgs had been interfering on the Italian peninsula as the Ottomans gradually retreated after Battle of Lepanto in 1571. In the period of high nationalism in the second half of 19th century, Venice, unlike Singapore was never able to leave the Italian peninsula and so its development priorities subsumed under that of the Kingdom of Italy. As one stretches the timeline, it becomes more difficult to pin down particular factors for rise and fall. Going forward, Mahbubani (2015, p. 17, 31 & 39) relegates the shifting away of economic focus from a region as a "Black Swan event." On a more optimistic note, he reassures that the present and upcoming century would be an Asian one (replacing the American century and reaching a certain peak in 2030 according to most strategic forecast reports; KPMG International, 2014).^{xii} In essence, "luck" will be on Singapore side for some time to come (barring the cycles of fluctuations). In any case, Singapore is actively cultivating a vibrant economic region for itself, it should "become the biggest cheerleader of Asean." It should be able to put up a fight as Venice had done should the situation turn averse. If there is any certainty, resource constraint always precedes any decline. As impulses of the Atlantic crossing were opening up new opportunities, the Mediterranean was experiencing depletion and shortages in resources. In the 21st century, "resource stress" is listed in many strategic forecasts as a "megatrend" (KPMG International, 2014).

Sum-up

The story of Venice has been a chapter

of study in social studies textbook in Singapore for more than a decade. Current exploration and learnings from Venice attempts to draw lessons from a limited context to see if it can benefit post-independent Singapore. Some lessons drawn from such an exercise can indeed be useful. The basis of this paper, drawing upon the ideas of F. Hayek, “spontaneous order” and Braudelian approaches, hopes to widen the context of the exploration. Drawing from translated primary sources and diaries, this paper looks at the economic and environmental developments of Venice during the decline period to re-assess the conventional or textbook understanding about the phenomena. Specifically, the alleged decline of Venice arising from its protectionist policies and inability to catch-up in sailing technology has to be understood from the larger shift in context of regional economies. Drawing upon an extended timeline of viewing Singapore, this paper also makes a comparison of the country and Venice. Periods in which both city-states were limited in influence faced similar constraints. The first prime minister of Singapore, Mr Lee Kuan Yew once said that Singapore would do good if it stretched half as long as Venice. At the end of the day, as time stretches out, what becomes important is that the city or state has tried its best because no state has ever maintained its peak without falling into an ebb.

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ⁱ It is however worth noting that Hamilton-Hart highlights the differences in a way as if Singapore “has made it”; for instance, Singapore or people of Singapore are portrayed as being risk-averse, not monopolistic or oligarchic, as well as “would never become an entertainment city at the expense of industrial and commercial viability.”

ⁱⁱ In the later part of Hayek’s career, he was supposedly to have been more accepting of neoclassical methodology, government intervention in the economy as well as authoritarianism.

ⁱⁱⁱ This is different from the metaphysical naturalism claimed by the creationists In a Ph.D thesis examining “naturalism in the philosophies of John Dewey and Zhuangzi”, Christopher Kirby (2008, p. 115) highlights that “interpretations of Zhuangzi have been drawn generally from a western philosophical framework that hangs on assumptions that are rooted in some sort of dualism.” Dualism denotes binary opposition, a meaning that is preserved in metaphysical and philosophical duality discourse but has been generalized in other usages to indicate a system which contains two essential parts. Kirby clarifies that Zhuangzi’s type of naturalism is not

(possible to be) “contiguous with or subservient to any hard or natural sciences” but connects to the non-reductive humanistic naturalism. Drawing upon John Ryder’s work, Kirby lists the theses of Zhuangzi’s ideas (Ryder, 2003, p. 64; Kirby, 2008, p. 115):

- 1) Natural phenomena have objectively determinable traits;
- 2) The traits of natural phenomena are knowable;
- 3) The process of inquiry is necessarily conditional and perspectival;
- 4) Human interaction with the rest of nature, cognitive or otherwise, is active and creative.

Ryder’s work attempts to reconcile pragmatism and naturalism. In philosophical terms, pragmatism was founded in the spirit of finding a scientific concept of truth that does not depend on personal insight or reference to some metaphysical realm. The meaning or purport of a statement should be judged by the effect its acceptance would have on practice.

^{iv} One should not forget that that Hayek and March face their fair share of critics. See for example, Jude Chua Soo Meng’s examination of Herbert Simon, James March and Friedrich Hayek’s ideas (in bibliography). Chua’s

sympathies for Aristotle, Aquinas and Finnis (new natural law theory) [led him to argue] that human reasoning prescribes choice-worthy values as ends as much as it can help discern the means to achieve these ends... March’s work [Chua argues] risks coming too close to voluntarist accounts of the will and his endorsement of Don Quixote concedes too much to arbitrary autonomy indifferent to the demands of moral rules and absolutes.

^v The first post-independence recession of the city-state was experienced in 1985.

^{vi} “Opacity and secrecy is needed precisely in the management of GIC’s overseas investment and Temasek’s domestic investment of surplus” (Low, 2006, p. 424).

^{vii} Embedded in the first two issues is the question of the extent to which “stone can be unturned” so that more transparency and decentralisation can take place.

^{viii} Singapore is also a member of the Transboundary Haze Pollution Institutional Framework.

^{ix} Malaysia banned the export of sand to Singapore in 1997. Indonesia banned the export of sand to Singapore in 2007. In 2010, an NGO put up a report pointing out that dredging operations in Cambodia to supply sand to Singapore appears to have caused a “degradation of ecosystems [leading to a fall in freshwater] harvests that threatened the livelihood of local communities.”

^x At present, Indonesia does not have a complete map which delineates the boundaries of the licences issued (Straits Times 1 Oct 2015).

^{xi} Siam in the 19th century was able to grow in this way sandwiched between the French and British.

^{xii} Based on the estimation that China will become a high-income country by then.