

Book on Kampong Glam wins \$50k NUS history prize

Author is a former resident whose ancestral home, Gedung Kuning, was acquired by Govt

Ng Keng Gene

When Ms Hidayah Amin's ancestral home in which she lived for almost 30 years was acquired by the state in 1999, she felt as if a piece of herself had been taken away, and turned to writing to process her emotions.

The heritage building, Gedung Kuning (Yellow Mansion) in Kampong Glam, was built in the 1800s by the British and had been her family home since 1912.

"When it happened, I just felt a piece of me (was) taken away and I just felt very lost," said Ms Hidayah, 49, a publisher at Helang Books. "I think that got me thinking... I need to find myself... so I decided to write the memories."

The book has won this year's National University of Singapore (NUS) Singapore History Prize, the university announced yesterday.

Leluhur: Singapore's Kampong Glam clinched the \$50,000 award over five other shortlisted works.

The non-fiction work with a personal slant shines a light on the history of a place many now know only as a tourist attraction. It delves into the history of Kampong Glam and its growth into a cosmopolitan urban centre, from its ties to the fall of the Srivijaya empire to its reputation as a trading and intellectual hub of the Malay world.

Ms Hidayah, who was born in Gedung Kuning – which is situated near the old Istana Kampong Glam – in 1972, spent five years putting the book together. This included spending two to three years interviewing the area's former residents.

The jury that awarded the prize was chaired by NUS Asia Research Institute distinguished fellow Kishore Mahbubani and comprised novelist Meira Chand; economist Lam San Ling; historian Peter Coclanis; and archaeologist John Miksic from the NUS Department of Southeast Asian Studies.

The prize – mooted by Professor Mahbubani in a 2014 column for *The Straits Times* – is awarded to a publication that makes a lasting impact on the understanding of Singapore's history.

He said that Ms Hidayah's book fulfilled the prize's goal of making

history accessible to all Singaporeans, especially with photographs, maps and sketches that bring the stories to life.

Prof Mahbubani added that the prize hoped to throw new light on Singapore's history and heritage.

"When I was a child in Singapore, I was taught that there was only a sleepy fishing village in Singapore before (Stamford) Raffles came," he said. "Hidayah's book brilliantly throws new light on the rich Malay heritage of Singapore. It describes how Singapore was a key hub in the Malay world, even prior to Raffles' arrival, and how Kampong Glam became its crux."

The prize money comes from a \$500,000 donation from an anonymous donor, and is awarded every three years.

Also on the shortlist announced by NUS in July were *Seven Hundred Years: A History Of Singapore* (2019) by Kwa Chong Guan, Tan Tai Yong, Peter Borschberg and Derek Heng; *Sembawang* (2020) by Kamaladevi Aravindan; *State Of Emergency* (2017) by Jeremy Tiang; *Home Is Where We Are* (2020) by Wang Gungwu and Margaret Wang; and *Imperial Creatures* (2019) by Timothy P. Barnard.

Professor Miksic was the winner of the inaugural prize in 2018 for his work *Singapore And The Silk Road Of The Sea, 1300-1800*.

He said that compared with other writers, Ms Hidayah had an "unfair advantage because she grew up in one of the most interesting parts of Singapore – Kampong Glam".

He described the book as both a synthesis of history and also a primary source, due to Ms Hidayah's personal inputs. "We hope that (the prize) is an indication to the general public that you don't have to be a professional historian. Anybody who's lived through a proportion of their lives in Singapore has the potential to write a history book, a story about the past."

Ms Hidayah said the award was an affirmation for ordinary Singaporeans who have important and compelling stories to tell.

She said: "You are part of the Singapore story, so I hope I will inspire you to write your story that deserves to be heard."

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Ms Hidayah Amin with her book, *Leluhur: Singapore's Kampong Glam*, which beat five other shortlisted works to win the NUS Singapore History Prize. The non-fiction work with a personal slant shines a light on the history of Kampong Glam, a place many now know only as a tourist attraction. ST PHOTO: MARK CHEONG

About the book

The citation for the 2021 NUS Singapore History Prize winner, *Leluhur: Singapore Kampong Glam*, says the book is elegantly crafted and well researched.

The book demonstrates that from the 14th century to the 19th century, Singapore was cosmopolitan and dynamic – way before Sir Stamford Raffles' arrival.

The island served as an entrepot of the Malay world, with Kampong Glam being a hub for economic activities, connecting Singapore to the Malay archipelago and beyond.

Ms Hidayah Amin highlights in her work that Singapore was, since the early 19th century, the intellectual and religious hub of the Malay world, where Malay works were published and printed before being distributed throughout the region.

The book is organised by themes rather than chronologically, and its chapters cover the history of the Malay world, Malay royalty, the lives of everyday residents, businesses and trade, as well as stories about religion, education and identity.

A labour of love, the book also includes stories from Ms Hidayah's family. For instance, her great-grandfather, Haji Yusoff, made his fortune by making belts and traditional caps worn by Malay men. He was among the entrepreneurial locals who dealt with the Europeans, sourcing materials and equipment from Germany.

The 384-page tome also corrects popular misconceptions – such as that the area was home only to the Malay aristocracy and community – by fleshing out the diversity of the Malay community, and demonstrating that the Malay identity is composite and shaped by migration.

Supported by a grant from the National Heritage Board, the book is available at bookstores such as Kinokuniya, Wardah Books and Epigram Books for \$49.90, including GST.