Book on Kampong Glam wins $50k NUS history prize

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

When Ms Hidayah Amni’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 1890s by the British and had been her family home since 1962.

“When it happened, I just felt a piece of me (was) taken away and I just felt very sad,” said Ms Hidayah, 49, a publisher at Helang Books. “I think that got me thinking...I tried 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.

Lehbar: 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 repuation as a trading and intellectual hub of the Malay world.

Ms Hidayah, who was born in Gedung Kuning – which is situated near the old Irama 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 Arts Research Institute distinguished fellow Rishina Mahbubani and consisted of historian Millicent Tan, historian Peter Coclanis and archaeologist John Milicic from the NUS Department of Southeast Asian Studies.

The prize – named 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 aim 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 helped to throw new light on Singapore’s history and heritage.

“When I was a child in Singapore, I was taught that there was only one 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 centre.”

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 Sun, Tan Tai Yong, Peter Borschberg and Beryl Hung; Sembawang (2020) by Kamarudin Ahmad; Siege Of Emer gency (2017) by Jeremy Tiger; Home Is Where We Are (2020) by Wang Guangyu and Margaret Wang; and Imperial Creators (2019) by Timothy P. Barnard.

The book is titled ‘Lehbar: ‘Gedung Kuning in the Singa pore story, so I hope I will inspire you to write your story that deserves to be heard’.

About the book

The citation for the 2021 NUS Singapore History Prize winner, Lehbar: 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’s book is about her work that Singapore was, since the early 9th century, the intellectual and religious hub of the Malay world, where Malay works were published and joined before being dispersed throughout the region.

The book is organized 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 Yusuff, made his fortune by selling fish 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 community 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.