

NUS Singapore History Prize

Khiri Johari's winning title *Food Of Singapore Malays* lauded for historical ingenuity

Clement Yong
Correspondent

Khiri Johari's *The Food Of Singapore Malays: Gastronomic Travels Through The Archipelago* – a tome that took 14 years from conception to publication, and which weighs an impressive 3.2kg – has won the National University of Singapore (NUS) Singapore History Prize.

Beating five other shortlisted books published in the last three years, Khiri's richly illustrated opus bagged him a cash award of \$50,000, the highest sum paid out by any Singapore book award.

It is yet another laurel for the much-garlanded text, which has, since Marshall Cavendish picked it up in 2021, been nigh unbeatable in competitions local and global.

Through the lens of the Malay archipelago, the 600-page volume establishes Singapore's pre-colonial status as "the New York of the Nusantara" via essays, more than 400 photographs and 40 recipes. It also pays particular attention to how journeymen, migrants and traders of the area were integral to shaping the island's unique culinary landscape.

The mathematics-trained food historian Khiri, 61, says: "While the title says food of Singapore Malays – yes, because I'm a Singapore boy – it uses Singapore as a vantage point to look across the region to understand the story behind why we eat what we eat."

Food as a unifying force was an important impulse in motivating his research, which took him into archives from Leiden in the Netherlands to Yogyakarta in Indonesia.

There was also a keen awareness



of the precarity of oral histories, as he raced against time to interview those still with memories of a by-gone era.

"By the time the book was finally released, we'd lost 23 people. It's a textbook example that if you don't document, people are going to go. Allow me to say this one more time: The passing of an elder is like the closure of a library."

In 2023, the book was picked as the Best of the Best Book by the Gourmand Food Culture Award, known as the Oscars of the cook-

book world, in Sweden. A year prior, it eliminated fierce competition to win the Singapore Book Publishers Association's Book of the Year in the annual Singapore Book Awards.

Its recognition by the triennial NUS Singapore History Prize on Oct 24 shines a light on the work's scholarly and historical ambition beyond superficial impressions of it as a coffee-table cookbook.

Judges praised it for extending Singapore and the region's history back to long before Sir Stamford

Khiri Johari's *The Food Of Singapore Malays* took home a cash award of \$50,000. PHOTO: LIANHE ZAOBAO

Raffles came into the picture.

This third edition of the NUS Singapore History Prize received 26 submissions, their quality leading judges to issue, for the first time, two special commendations without attendant cash awards.

Reviving Qixi: Singapore's Forgotten Seven Sisters Festival by Lynn Wong and Lee Kok Leong was first runner-up; while *Theatres Of Memory: Industrial Heritage Of 20th Century Singapore* by Loh Kah Seng, Alex Tan, Koh Keng We, Tan Teng Phee and Juria Toramae came in third.

Former Singapore diplomat Kishore Mahbubani – who chairs the prize's five-member jury panel and who set up the prize in 2014 with the help of an anonymous donor – described at a media conference the 21st century as that of the Great Asian Renaissance. His memoir, published in 2024, is titled *Living The Asian Century: An Undiplomatic Memoir*.

"Whether it's China, India or South-east Asia, they are rediscovering their past, and they're becoming very, very proud of the past that they have, that they got disconnected with, to some extent because of the colonial period."

The NUS Singapore History Prize is important because the biggest challenge to Singapore is no longer in the economic realm, but in developing a national identity through a strong sense of shared history, he says.

"That major Asian Renaissance is going to be based on history, and what makes Singapore so interesting is this shared history with China, India, and from the region. We have a very interesting story to tell."