Introduction

Singapore River, even without its slipper-like bumboats and familiar faces of coolies, still evokes feelings of nostalgia among Singaporeans. There is so much history along that little stretch of water. One needs only to stand in front of a colonial building like Parliament House and face the old godowns along Lower North Boat Quay to realise that this river basin has seen much comings and goings. If only Singapore River can talk, the tales it will tell will fire the imagination of our young children.

How can a teacher make both the history and geography of the river come alive for our primary school children? All it takes is a little walk on a fine day around the 'belly of the carp', so named because the river basin bounded by Cavanagh and Elgin bridges is shaped much like a Chinese carp. The Chinese believe that the carp is a symbol of good luck and that businesses operating off the side of the river along the full belly of the carp will thrive and prosper.

A Good Starting Point at the Statue of Raffles

Begin the riverwalk with the statue of Raffles. This 3-metre tall statue marks what is believed to be the landing site of Sir Stamford Raffles when he first arrived in Singapore in 1819. Have the pupils read the inscription below the statue:
ON THIS HISTORIC SITE
SIR THOMAS STAMFORD RAFFLES
FIRST LANDED IN SINGAPORE
ON 28th JANUARY 1819
AND WITH GENIUS AND PERCEPTION
CHANGED THE DESTINY OF SINGAPORE
FROM AN OBSCURE FISHING VILLAGE
TO A GREAT SEAPORT AND
MODERN METROPOLIS

and ask them the following questions:

a. Why was the statue built on that spot?

b. How do we know that Raffles landed on that spot?

c. Can we be 100% sure that it is the exact spot where Raffles landed?

d. What was Raffles’ vision for Singapore?

e. Has his vision for Singapore come true?

It may be useful to provide the children with an idea of the landmarks in the vicinity of the river. They will then know their position in relation to these landmarks. A map from the Singapore Street Directory (Appendix 1) is a useful resource. Pupils can examine carefully the street map provided and compare the landmarks they see around them with the symbols of these landmarks on the map. A game of pointing can be played. With hands outstretched, have them point to the following landmarks:

- Elgin Bridge
- Parliament House
- Government Offices
- United Overseas Bank Building
- OCBC Building
- Standard Chartered Bank Building
Godowns along Lower North Boat Quay
Hawker Centre

Once these children are able to relate the landmarks around them with those on the map, they will then be able to locate their position on the ground with that on the map.

The various landmarks provide interesting material for discussion about Singapore's past and present. Parliament House and other government buildings along Lower South Boat Quay stand majestically as testimony of our colonial period and the seat of government. The row of old shophouses and warehouses still lines the river bank although lighters and bumboats have ceased their trading activities and stand to remind children of the river's past. The high-rise buildings point to the progress of Singapore as a great centre of commerce and finance. Comparing an early map of Singapore River with a current road map (Appendix 1) will provide the children with some idea of the physical changes that have taken place around the river since the time of the Orang Laut.

If your pupils have been taught compass skills in earlier lessons, take the opportunity during the riverwalk to practise these skills. The compass can be used to find out the direction of the flow of the river once magnetic north has been established. Compass directions to the various landmarks can also be found. During a fieldtrip experience, opportunities should be provided for children to make their own observations and to record these in some way, either on worksheets or on film. They can be asked to examine the river more closely for the following observations:

- the quality of water in the river
- the banks of the river
- aquatic life in the river

As your pupils walk towards Elgin Bridge, you may want to stop at two places of historical significance, Hallpike’s Boatyard and Yeo Kun Swee godown. Hallpike’s Boatyard was at one time the principal area for boat building and repairs; it was here that
the first sea-going vessel, the 194-ton brig Elizabeth was built. Yeo Kun Swee godown was built in 1843 and was demolished in 1981.

The Mid-Point Stop at Elgin Bridge

Bridges too have their own story to tell and are a link to the past, having witnessed for the last 100 years or so, developments and changes in the activities around the river. The Elgin bridge, with its ornamental lamps, majestic columns and graceful arches, is a reminder of colonial times. A plaque on the bridge tells us that at the turn of the century, more business was done on the south side and hence South Bridge Road became known as ‘Tua Po’ and North Bridge Road as ‘Sio Po’. As the children read the plaque, they will be able to find information to the following questions:

a. When was the bridge built?
b. Who built the bridge?
c. Who was the bridge named after?
d. Why was the bridge built?
e. Why was South Bridge Road known as ‘Tua Po’ and North Bridge Road as ‘Sio Po’?

Those who enjoy sketching may look for a nice shady spot to make a sketch of the bridge and to describe in a few sentences what they have observed about the bridge.

Down Lower South Boat Quay

The remaining row of low-rise shophouses along Lower South Boat Quay has its own quaint charm. They make interesting streetscapes for a closer look as the children may want to read the Chinese inscriptions on the front walls and columns of the shophouses. These inscriptions may reveal interesting stories. The ground floors of the shophouses are still being used for storage and warehousing with offices and residences on the upper floors.
Where possible, the children should take a look into the shophouses and take note of the kinds of goods stored. A friendly chat with people they meet may reveal a lot of interesting information about the kinds of activities in the shophouses. In this way, the children will have a first-hand experience of an oral history interview.

The old sluice gates along the quay are worthy of mention. These gates are still manned today and the schedule of opening and closing is dictated by the tides. If someone forgets to close them at high tide, the shophouses away in Chinatown will flood. The children may want to count the number of sluice gates found along the quay.

**Back in the Classroom**

The children’s field experiences of the river require opportunities for further sharing of perceptions once they are back in the classroom. The teacher needs to provide a channel for her children to reveal their perceptions of the river through various activities like completing worksheets, writing reports, drawing observations, making charts or giving oral presentations. Only then will the fieldtrip experience be integrated with classroom lessons.

The riverwalk around a portion of Singapore River provides primary school children with first-hand experience of a local environment. As pupils engage in making observations and recording them, reading maps, using compasses, field-sketching, taking photographs, reading available field information, interviewing residents and workers, answering teachers’ questions and asking their own questions during the riverwalk, they will begin to appreciate how closely linked geography is to history and economics. The geographical location of Singapore River has made it a significant river in the history and the economic lives of the people of Singapore.
References


*Acknowledgement:* The street maps on pages 94 & 95 are reproduced with permission of the Chief Surveyor, Survey Dept, Singapore.
The Singapore River In The Past

Source: CDIS

Look at the two maps. Compare the maps to find out the following:

WHAT HAS CHANGED ALONG THE RIVER SINCE EARLY SINGAPORE?

The Singapore River Today

Source: Singapore Street Directory (Map 10)

**Keys**

1. High Street Centre
2. Attorney General's Chamt
3. Parliament House
4. Victoria Memorial Hall
5. Government Offices
6. Mosque
7. Fullerton Building
8. Malayan Banking Ltd
9. Bank of China
10. Fullerton Square
11. Standard Chartered
12. United Overseas Bank
13. Hawker Centre
Have you ever thought where Singapore River begins?

Look at the two maps below to find out . . . .

* Beginning of Alexandra Canal

Source: adapted from Singapore Street Directory (Map 206)

A GENERAL LOCATION MAP OF SINGAPORE

Source: Singapore Street Directory