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THE SINGAPORE RIVER: A CLASSROOM AND FIELD STUDY IN HISTORICAL GEOGRAPHY

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No single physical feature on this earth has been of more importance to mankind than the natural river. From the beginning, rivers have furnished man with a source of food and a highway to travel on. The first civilization arose where water was a dominant element in the environment. Great rivers like the Nile of Egypt, the Tigris and Euphrates of Mesopotamia, the Indus of India and the Hwang Ho or Yellow River of China have each given birth to a mighty civilization. On a smaller scale but of no less importance, the modern city of Singapore had its early beginnings at the mouth of the Singapore River.

Rivers are interesting geographically. They have a special appeal especially to children. This is partly because the physical processes of erosion, transportation and deposition and the features they give rise to are alive. They are fascinating to study and explore.

In this respect, the Singapore River provides a basis for an interesting study in historical geography. It offers a great opportunity to break across the rigid school subject boundaries and to show how a knowledge of social history, art history and literature can help us understand the geography of past times.

Objectives

The purpose of this article is to show how:—

- a local river can be used for classroom and field-based learning activities.
- basic geographical concepts like growth and change can be studied by comparing old and contemporary photographs.
- learning skills fundamental to the study of geography, such as map and photo interpretation, field sketching and data collection, can be developed.

- teachers can use this approach to give students an experience in the use of historical records.
- awareness of and concern for conservation and heritage among students can be inculcated and enhanced.

Classroom activities

In a classroom situation, the study of the river could begin with a brief historical account to arouse interest and to create the need for learning. This could take the form of eye-witness accounts. For example, in Buckley's *An Anecdotal History of Old Times in Singapore*, one finds the following description of the river:

... the right bank which is the proper name for the side of the river where the Square is now, was a rising hill covered with jungle, and beyond the hill in the direction where the Police Courts are now and beyond, was what Abdulla calls a marsh. There was no one living on that side of the river ... the bank was covered with low jungle. On that bank, most probably somewhere between the present site of the Court House and Elgin bridge ... were a few houses.¹

Descriptive passages such as this, based on eye-witness accounts, help to build up a picture of the past landscape which makes for interesting comparison with the present. By this approach, pupils can be made aware of the topographic and biotic changes that have taken place over the years.

Another approach to the study of growth and change is by visual comparison of maps, postcards or photographs of the river as it was in the nineteenth century and as it is today. A series of questions based on these historical records can help stimulate thinking.

Analysis of pictorial resources in class

Study the photographs listed and answer the following questions. (The pictures can be found on pages 43 and 44).

Plate 1 : Singapore River in 1843

- 1 Name the hill in the background. What was the building on top of this hill?
- 2 Describe the types of boats along the river.

Plate 2 : Singapore River in 1982

- 1 What changes to the river and its surroundings have taken place between 1843 and 1982?
- 2 What evidence is there that the river has grown in importance?

Plate 3 : Middle reach of Singapore River

- 1 What kind of boats can you see on the river? Write a brief description of them.
- 2 What are the functions of the buildings in the background?

Plate 4 : Economic activities along the Singapore River

- 1 What are the men doing? Do you think this is an efficient way of using manpower?
- 2 Why are trading activities concentrated along the banks of the river?

A field trip

Pupils would enjoy a lesson outdoors. It is a simple matter of taking pupils for a walk along the banks of the river and stopping at selected points along it. Various learning activities could be focussed on these points using an inquiry approach. Learning in this manner heightens pupils' interest, gives them a sense of achievement through participation in meaningful activities.

The traverse could begin at the landing site where the statue of Raffles now stands and end at one of the bridges across the river (Fig. 1). An hour or two along the banks would be a worthwhile learning experience for the pupils if they are given work to do such as field sketching, interviewing or filling in the details on a base map.

A traverse along the Singapore River – learning activities

Observation point 1 – The landing site

- 1 Describe what Raffles saw
 - (a) as he approached the mouth of the Singapore River.
 - (b) when he first stepped ashore.
- 2 If Raffles should return today what would he see?
- 3 How did people cross the river before the bridges were built?
- 4 Can you name the bridges across the Singapore River? Who are they named after?
- 5 How have these bridges limited the movements of boats along the river?
- 6 With the help of the given photographs 1 and 2, compare and contrast the view of the river in 1843 with the view today.
- 7 Is the river as busy as it was in the past?

Observation point 2 – Elgin Bridge

- 1 Describe the buildings along the banks of this stretch of the river. What functions do these buildings serve?
- 2 Can you still find the sailing vessels that you see in the photograph today?
- 3 What type of boats do you now see? How do they differ from those of the past?
- 4 Draw a diagram of a bumboat. Estimate its depth, length and width. Why are they designed this way?
- 5 What functions do these boats perform? Who owns them? Between which places do these boats ply?
- 6 Make a count of the number of bumboats moving up and down the river at this point for five minutes. What does this tell you about the hourly volume of traffic?
- 7 What cargoes do these boats carry? How are they unloaded and where are the cargoes taken to?
- 8 Who are the people who work on these boats? Find out what you can about their background and livelihood.

Observation point 3 – Ord Bridge

- 1 What are the distinctive features of the buildings along this stretch of the river? Draw a sketch of them.
- 2 Why are the godowns located here?

- 3 Who own these godowns?
- 4 How old do you think these buildings are?
- 5 What do they tell you about early days in Singapore?
- 6 How are the goods transported from these godowns? Find out where these goods are sent to.

Conclusion

Both the classroom exercise and field trip can be reinforced by supplementary activities in a follow-up exercise. This may take the form of a project or a term paper focussing on the following questions:

- Describe the sequence of land use along the banks of the Singapore River. What factors have influenced the pattern you have described?
- What evidences of growth and change can you observe along the Singapore River?
- What further changes do you think will take place in the next ten years? How will these changes affect the river?
- How has the river influenced the growth and development of Singapore over the years?

¹ Buckley, C.B., *An Anecdotal History of Old Times in Singapore*, p.29.

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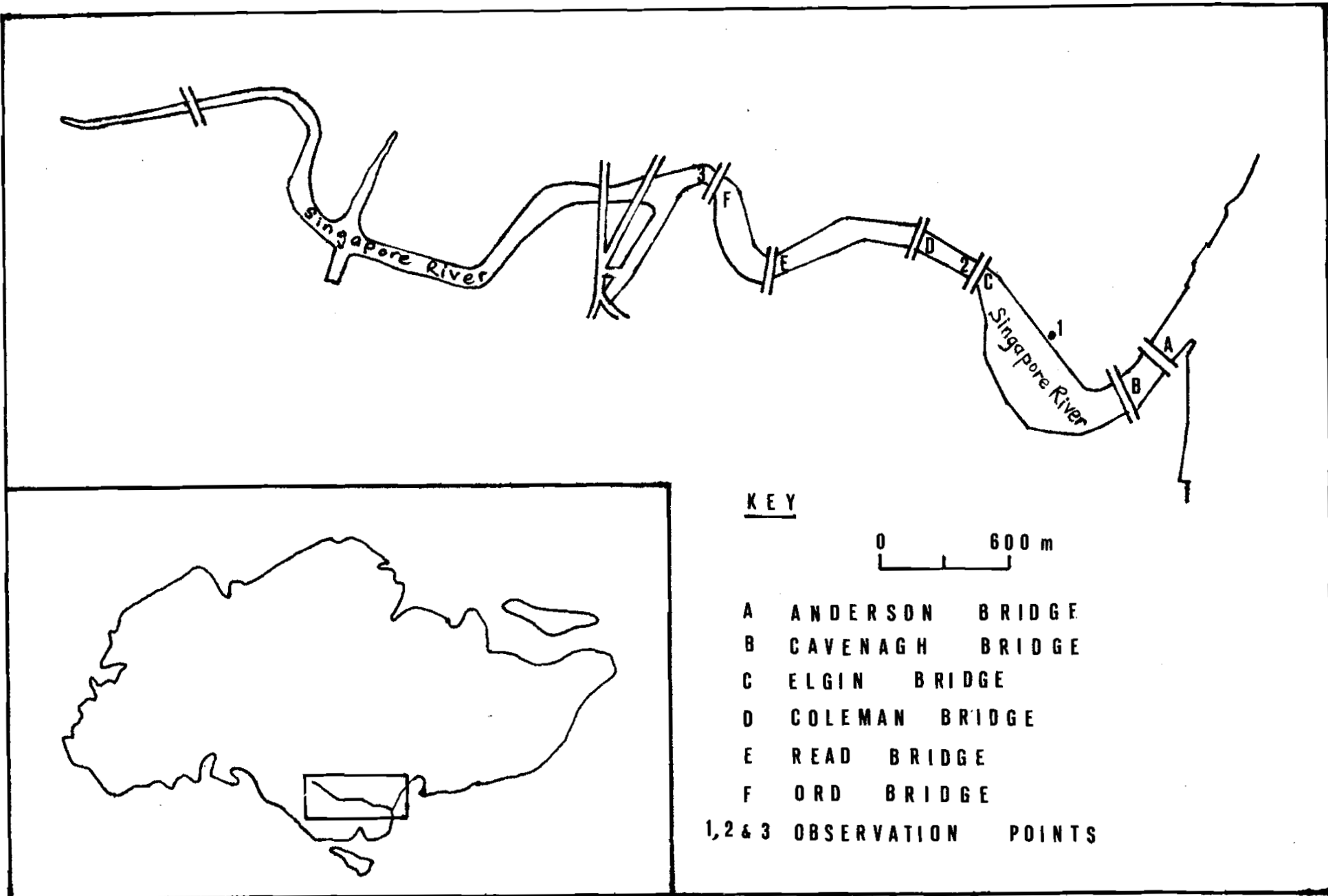


Fig. 1 Location of the Singapore River



Plate 1 :
Singapore River in 1843 (Source: National Museum)



Plate 2 :
Singapore River in 1982

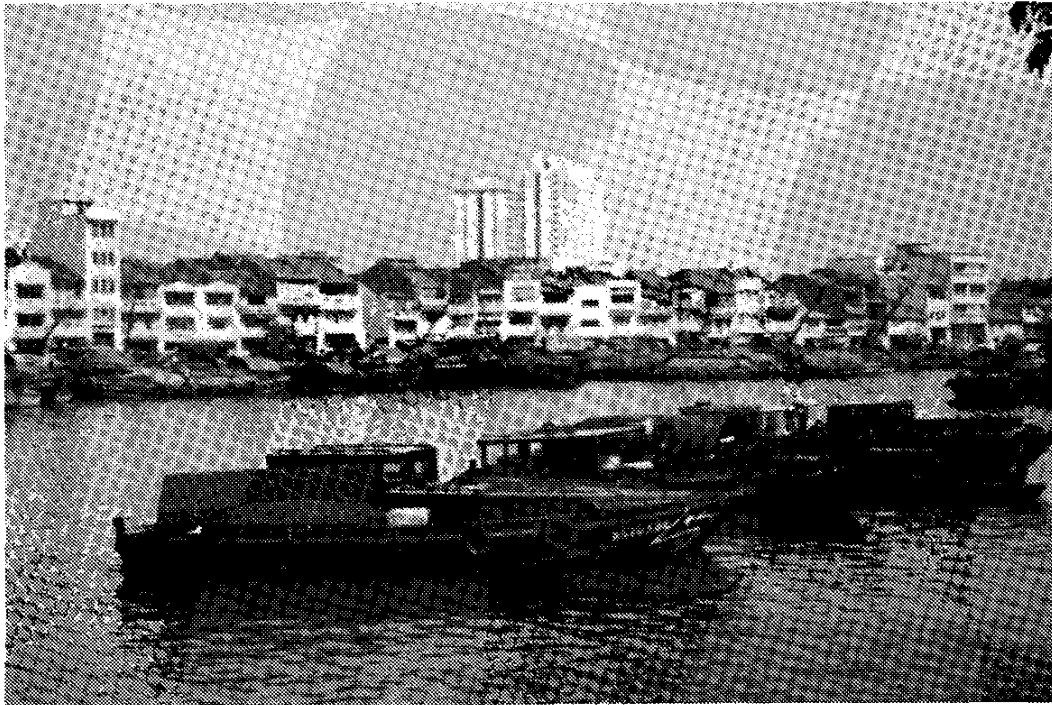


Plate 3 :
Middle reach of the Singapore River



Plate 4 :
Economic activities along the Singapore River