Diversion of river yields gem of a chance

Archaeologists expect to find artefacts in part of Singapore River to be drained for MRT line

He explained that objects buried in mud can stay preserved because they are protected from damage by marine life; additionally, the rate of decay in such a low-oxygen environment will be slow.

The LTA had announced last week that part of the river and the nearby River Valley Road will be realigned temporarily in the third quarter of the year for the MRT works.

A canal will be dug to divert the river. The drained portion will then be cleaned of debris and filled with a stabilising material. Two train tunnels will then be bored under it, after which the diverted part of the river will be returned to its original position.

National University of Singapore (NUS) history lecturer Kwa Chong Guan also believes the river could well be a site of archaeological significance.

“Singapore prides itself on being a maritime port. A large portion of our nation’s memories are associated with the river and part of our identity is buried under it,” he said.

He noted that the Pulau Saigon archaeological site had yielded European and Chinese ceramics, glassware, toothbrushes and opium vials when digging was done there in 1990, and that stoneware and porcelain had been found at the Empress Place site in 1998.

Prof Miksic’s colleague Lim Chen Sian said that even well-preserved discards from long ago would serve as a window into Singapore’s past as a trading post and a port city.

He added that he recalls seeing abandoned old boats on the river banks in the 70s and 80s, which later sank. “If we find them, they can provide insight into the years past,” he said.

Trading settlements along the river go back more than 700 years, to the time Singapore was a port settlement called Temasek.

NUS historian Donna Brunero points to the 14th-century gold ornaments of Majapahit origin that were found in 1926, when a service reservoir was being built atop Fort Canning.

The artefacts, one of the oldest found here, are regarded as one of Singapore’s most significant national treasures, which enable scholars to piece together a more detailed picture of Temasek-era life, she said.

Nanyang Technological University assistant professor Goh Geok Yian, who does archaeological research, said it will now depend on whether the authorities will give the archaeologists clearance to survey the soil below the river bed.

The archaeologists may not have the luxury of time to do their work, and it is work that definitely cannot wait until after the river is filled back up.

She said: “We’ll try to rescue as many of the artefacts, make records of them as precisely as we can in the time we have. We’ll probably have to work within a time limit.”