

Introduction: Region and Port City

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This conference takes a long view on Penang and the Indian Ocean, tracing historical processes and looking into contemporary realities. The usual perspective whenever *la longue duree* (or the long term in English) is evoked, is a picture across millennia, usually referring to a long history of whatever topic selected. However, in these two days, in addition to mapping the patterns of continuity and change in the past that have characterized this region coming under our collective scrutiny, where we start with the early centuries of the 1st millennium, there will be participants who will not only closely consider the present, but also the near future, with policy in mind.

As most of us are well aware, the UNESCO inscription of George Town as a world heritage site has given a breath of fresh air and renewed inspiration to be actively engaged to many groups: state, society, observers and academics with an abiding interest in matters Penang. By necessity it includes geographical locations with which Penang has had close links. This is because most of the time what happens in neighbouring areas as well as in many lands beyond, can have an impact on Penang, and will very likely continue to do so. Hence, Penang's relations with these places, in this instance, the IOR, warrant further examination.

Let us now turn to the Indian Ocean Region (also known as Indian Ocean World, hence are used interchangeably) to consider Region and Nation State. We live in a world where a larger part of peoples' daily activities are contained within the confines of the nation state. And, while we are also familiar with the concept of a region, for example Southeast Asia, as well as being used to the notion of various other regions further afield, as gleaned from print or electronic media, or seen on our television screens, particularly, events in various hotspots in regions such as West Asia (better known as the Middle East), the South China Sea and the Horn of Africa (where Somalia is located), to name but a few, it is nonetheless, the nation state which can determine an individual's existence and perhaps, identity. Here, it is acknowledged that a person may have multiple identities, besides place identity, there is very likely a group identity – for instance, for many of us here today, we are Penangites at the same time as we are Malaysians.

A quick look at the map on the Indian Ocean Region (hereafter IOR) confirms that it consists of a wide range of coastal settlements and their hinterlands, comprising many countries (their equivalents in the past, preceding kingdoms and polities), with distinct cultures, traditions, socio-economic and political systems. So, it is hardly surprising that questions which inevitably arise when confronted with such diversity in the disparate territories and states are centred on the subject of the validity of regional studies: what is the worth of such a focus? Why “locate existing studies on the parts within a regional context”? Are there any common features and are they sufficient to bind the varied lands together? What can constitute the basis of a regional identity? What is the importance of transcending national boundaries and national historiographies? For a start, it has been suggested that universal issues such as cultural diffusion and adaptation, development of commerce, imperialism and capitalism will benefit from a transnational perspective, particularly when applied to the IOR.

While it is only to be expected that the histories of these component parts of the IOR are more thoroughly explored as opposed to the larger entity, and accompanying that, an enormous literature in various fields on each separate territory, there is however, a body of studies on the IOR, or the Indian Ocean World. For instance, there are two academic bodies devoted to research, both historical and current – the Indian Ocean World Centre at McGill University, Canada and the Indian Ocean Region Organization based in Perth, Australia, which publishes the *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region*.

If we refer to the work of one of the leading scholars, to take a leaf from Kenneth McPherson, in his 1993 book, *The Indian Ocean: A History of People and the Sea*, a survey and interpretative essay which drew on an earlier corpus of work, he argued that it is the Indian Ocean's "unique maritime trading system which provided the peoples of that world with an economic unity and certain cultural commonalities which set them apart from the peoples of contiguous 'worlds' such as the Mediterranean and East Asia." (italics added). This has been inspired by renowned French historian Braudel's 'maritime economy' – "a region with an economic unity despite political, social, and cultural divisions." This maritime trading system arises from one significant geographical feature, "a system of seasonal monsoons", which was the crucial factor distinguishing not only the Indian Ocean from other oceans, notably the Atlantic and Pacific, but also distinguishing Asia from the continents of Europe, Africa, the Americas, and most importantly, which enabled regular travel over sea in opposite directions. In other words, a key role has to be accorded to trade for the forging of links between the different areas of the IOR, in turn facilitating exchanges in other spheres besides the economic, from cultural to social, religious, intellectual and political.

As this is not the place for a detailed treatment, a quick look at other scholarly efforts which highlight the vital role of trade as an engine of growth suffices to show that McPherson is by no means the only one with this view on the importance of trade and that he is in good company – just a brief mention to substantiate this observation, a short and indicative list. From world historians, Kenneth Pomeranz and Stephen Topik, we have their book, *The world that trade created: society, culture and the world economy*, focusing more on oceans than on continents and arguing that drugs (coffee, sugar, chocolate and opium) are the foundation of the world economy. In Asian history, there is Denys Lombard and Jean Aubin's edited volume, *Asian merchants and businessmen in the Indian Ocean and the China Sea*. In Southeast Asian history, Anthony Reid's, two volumes on *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce, 1450-1680* makes a case for political, social and economic changes as a consequence of a commercial boom while there is Geoff Wade's recent article, going further back in time, "An Early Age of Commerce in Southeast Asia 900-1300 CE". And of course, not forgetting economists who have long written on Trade and Growth under the rubric "gains from trade", a topic still actively researched. One last mention here of a volume looking into the nexus between trade and politics, *Politics and Trade in the Indian Ocean World: Essays in Honour of Ashin Das Gupta*, with contributions from two of our conference participants, Om Prakash and Lakshmi Subramaniam. We are alerted to the complex relations between trade and politics, by no

means a black and white picture, not always and not necessarily leading to a positive outcome.

We come to a related issue, the “relationship between maritime trade and processes of cultural diffusion and interaction”, a subject which has not been fully explored, as McPherson pointed out. Thus, this is where our conference aims to take the cue to examine more fully this matter, and to contribute empirical depth for a better understanding of the association between economic activity and social change.

Last but not least, Penang, the hub of the northern sub-region of Southeast Asia, a prism through which multiple networks, imperial, commercial, cultural, and biographical, can be investigated for elucidating connectivity between Penang and other segments of the IOR. How might Penang be treated as a site through which to examine the density of cultural and economic interactions in the Indian Ocean world? How did Penang serve as a gateway to the Indian Ocean in the past and how can Penang continue to retain this function? To suggest the basis for answers to the focus of this conference, the relevant literature on port cities can provide pointers. In lieu of an extended discussion, key features associated with port cities, past and present are sketched, also calling on evidence from Penang when it played the role of an entrepot for its hinterland, the neighbouring areas of Sumatra, the western littoral of Thailand up to Burma, present-day Myanmar – here we have a reminder of the infinite potential of capitalizing on the comparative advantages of commercial centers and harbour towns such as Penang.

At the risk of boring you with the obvious, I cite an observation from world historian William McNeill, in his 2008 article, "Globalization: Long Term Process or New Era in Human Affairs?"

at locations where strangers mingled more than usual, exchanging skills and ideas coming from extensive hinterlands. Consequently, wherever they existed, cities and civilizations circulated goods, skills and ideas more quickly and more widely than before.

Although this is a reference to millenniums before CE, I think that you would agree that it is a description visibly applicable to port cities of the past or those of today, namely that these are locations where strangers mingled more than usual, with the outcome, the circulation of goods, skills and ideas more quickly and more widely.

Scholars such as Karl Polyani who worked on prehistoric eras, used the term “ports of trade”, since the second millennium BCE/BC. Another expression, “harbour cities” has also come into use, both terms having the implication that their basic feature was one of maritime commerce. Today, even as maritime trade continues, it is complemented by commercial movements and the flows of goods in the form of air cargo.

Coming to the many functions of a port city, besides being a centre for exchange as just noted, at the global level, it serves major sea routes (and, from the nineteenth century, Penang was a port of call for major shipping lines of the industrial west). At the next level

is its regional role as a maritime hub (again Penang, as a Straits port from the early nineteenth century took on a feeder function to larger ports; namely Singapore). There is strong statistical evidence to substantiate Penang's pre-eminence in a sub-region of Southeast Asia, at its northern littoral, fulfilling the tasks referred to.

It seems apt to close with the view of maritime historians, Peter Reeves, Frank Broeze, and Kenneth McPherson, who stress that port cities are not merely 'cities that happened to be on the shoreline'; they are economic polities with a maritime orientation. And, if Penang can reinvent itself to be more than just the maritime hub for the northern sub-region of Southeast Asia, to build on previous connections, as an essential link between the two great commercial zones of India and China, Penang would be well on its way to realizing its potential, economic, social and cultural. While the saying "History repeats itself" usually has a negative connotation, we can choose to give it a positive spin, to rise to the challenge by revitalising past connectivities to Penang.