

Summaries of Discussions

Rapporteurs: Andrew Jarvis, Simon Layton

Panel I: Early History

The first panel of the conference focused on the linkages between the Indian subcontinent and Malay peninsula during and after the first millennium CE. Mohd Supian bin Sabtu discussed the characteristic features of *candi* (stupas) in the Bujang Valley region, and the ways in which Indian architectural styles had been modified and appropriated. Supian suggested that the modest scale of the *candi* and the presence of fairly rudimentary carved idols indicates that the sculptors lacked mastery of the art. This point was later picked up in the discussion.

In the second paper, Badriyah Haji Salleh illuminated some aspects of the economic and cultural relations between southern India and Kedah. Badriyah emphasized the importance of Lembah Bujang (an entrepôt engaged in the trade of beads and stones with India and the Middle East) and Sungai Batu; she noted that recent archaeological fieldwork at the latter site has unearthed evidence of a riverside jetty and iron smelts.

In response to the two papers, Leonard Andaya highlighted areas of convergence between them. Andaya emphasised that a combination of Hindu, Buddhist and Tantric architectural influences can be found elsewhere in Southeast Asia, i.e. Sumatra. He indicated that this admixture was commonplace in the region during the period of 'Indianization', and that in Sumatra the *candi* are always found along trade routes. Andaya also drew attention to Leong Sau Heng's contention that the peninsula's major entrepôts were actually located on the eastern coast, where evidence of settlements and finer stonework has been found (i.e. Langkasuka). More excavation work is needed, he said. Andaya also mentioned 'the need to look north', and the fact that too much emphasis in the historiography has been placed on the southern part of the peninsula. One of the questions from the floor concerned the nature of the relationship between negritos and the Kedah sultans.

Panel II: Trade and Exchange

This panel sought to situate Penang within the broader networks of Indian Ocean trade and exchange. The papers ably integrated the perspectives of individual merchants with ongoing research into the evolution of the Straits economy and global economic patterns in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The speakers generally downplayed the importance of 'high' imperial authorities, both in respect to free-trading policies and the dissemination of colonial and 'Orientalist' knowledge. They preferred instead to focus on the personal relationships that sustained economies of knowledge and commerce, respectively.

Barbara Watson Andaya traces the production and transmission of commercial knowledge, exploring particularly the role of the private sphere in the learning of 'Oriental' knowledge, and its reproduction in the service of both burgeoning scholarly networks in the Indian Ocean world, as well as the structures of imperial rule. In this latter respect, commercial knowledge comes to the fore, while at a more intimate level cultural

interaction reveals itself as fundamental to the understanding of local habits and economic practices.

James Frey charts the development of navigational knowledge, arguing that Penang was instrumental in the consolidation and perfection of seafaring techniques, to face the challenges of building an international port in the Straits of Malacca. Establishing Penang as an entrepôt for China-bound shipping required detailed nautical surveys and careful provisions for pilotage and lighting.

Tomokata Kawamura focuses on the value and volume of trade itself, looking at the causes of fluctuation, patterns of growth and decline; free-trade in Penang, he argues, was less important than the division of trade between Penang and Singapore, the vibrancy of wider Indian Ocean commercial networks, and the changing nature of the China trade in the early nineteenth century. Kawamura concludes that Penang's development was equally oriented towards South Asia as Canton, with labour (especially convict labour) from British India sustaining the commerce dominated by Europeans and Chinese for the China Trade.

So too does Wong Yee Tuan downplay the imperial policies of free-trade in the economic development of Penang. More important, he argues, were the Chinese merchant families that used Penang as a doorway into Indian Ocean trade, and sought a role very much within the British imperial world. Such families were integral in 'reaching out' to the Indian Ocean, forming enduring business partnerships and dealing in key commodities, which bridged ethnic divisions and cemented the island's cosmopolitan identity, while at the same time establishing Penang as a site of international commerce.

Discussion of these four papers interrogated the relationship between culture and economy, exploring how Penang's diversity and burgeoning cosmopolitanism sustained and fed economic growth, and vice versa. It was stressed that the division of markets meant that Penang did not decline during Singapore's early rise, but continued to thrive, and indeed, strengthen its role as a focal point for Indian Ocean trade and Indian migrant labour. One question from the floor asked us to explore further the relationship between such labour and the kinds of connections established by Chinese mercantile families with the trading world of South Asia. We concluded that Penang's importance in regional trade and key commodities (such as the beetle nut which gave Penang its name) established the island as a unique and vibrant centre between Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean world.

Panel III: Cultural Flows and Encounters

The third panel featured three papers on different kinds of 'cultural encounter'.

David Irving discussed the nineteenth-century British historiography of Malay music, and he drew attention to some of the ways in which observers responded to and wrote about it. These included a leitmotif about the 'sweetness' of Malay music, and an eclectic range of comparisons with European musical traditions, including the 'Celtic fringe' and Italy.

Andrew Jarvis focused on photography in Penang before 1867. He addressed a number of questions relating to the dissemination and practice of photography: why are there no extant photographs of Penang from before c.1863, and how do the earliest photographs of Penang illustrate broader patterns of activity, such as the island's connections with the East India Company's other territories?

Christina Scott detailed the emergence of Penang as a centre of botanical experimentation and plant transfer, with a focus on the cultivation of nutmeg. (The remarkable absence of any substantial work on nutmeg in relation to Penang had been noted earlier in the day). Skott drew attention to experiments concerning different soil types and fertilisers, Chinese cultivation techniques, and the uniqueness of Penang in the story of British imperial expansion in Southeast Asia.

The discussant, C.A. Bayly, noted that although the three papers were very different from one another, there were common threads, such as the role of local intermediaries. Bayly suggested that each participant could give more attention to issues relating to colonial knowledge and epistemological violence. Bayly asked Jarvis to comment briefly on the relationship between photography and other visual media, and invited Skott to consider some comparisons that could be made with the Philippines, the Caribbean, and parts of Africa. He suggested that Irving might address performative aspects of Malay music.

A number of questions followed on this and other aspects of Irving's paper, including the problematic relationship between music and language; the scope for comparisons with European classical music, and some possible explanations for the remarkable fact that nearly all of the examples from the presentation were in the key of D Major.

Panel IV: Indian Diasporas

The focus of the fourth panel was on Indian diasporic groups and mobility in the Indian Ocean region.

Jayati Bhattacharya considered how Indian Ocean trading networks were restructured and led to the emergence of commercial centres such as Penang. Two distinct trajectories of migrational movements had been witnessed in Penang just like in many other places in Southeast Asia, which brought about a series of heterogenities and complexities in the discourse on the South Asian diaspora in the region. She noted that the working practices of Chettiars in Penang changed remarkably little over time, their operational structures remain similar, but they have mostly switched over from money-lending to properties and real estate business and in other professions.

Rathi Menon addressed issues relating to assimilation and acculturation in relation to the Malayali diaspora, and raised questions about the refashioning of identities and cultural practices. Menon referred to two waves of migration, an earlier phase of Malayali Muslim traders and convicts during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and a second from the 1920s which included many educated young people.

Khoo Salma Nasutian's paper focused on Tamil Muslims in Penang from the seventeenth-century in Indian piece goods to the establishment of the Muslim Merchants' Society (1912) which in 1916 opposed the introduction of a war tax and beyond. She identified the establishment of the railway terminal in Nagapattinam (1861) as one factor that greatly increased Tamil migration to Malaya.

Lakshmi Subrahmanian's paper focused on connected histories of circulation and migration, with specific reference to Tamils and Greater India. She considered how invested Tamils in Penang might have been in the idea of Greater India, and highlighted

the principal ways in which this idea was articulated in print: (i) in relation to the vitality of Indian capital and the antiquity of Indian Ocean connections; (ii) in relation to vocal concerns about labour conditions, and perceptions of India as 'the coolie race'.

In his comments, Sunil Amrith emphasised the plurality of the Indian diaspora and the striking diversity of associational life. Amrith highlighted the different kinds of cultural contacts evident in each of the papers, and the fact that significant points concerning acculturation/transculturation and Greater India had been made. The ensuing discussion was wide-ranging and it encompassed issues concerning the refashioning of identities through newspapers. It was suggested that Straits Chinese had a 'situational identity', while questions were asked about the education of the children of transnational families and about the collapse of a 'proto-class politics' in the early twentieth century. On the final paper, a number of questions were asked: how were ideas about Greater India taken up at the ground level by Tamils, and what about ideas about pan-Asianism? How did newspaper editors across the Indian Ocean world create the 'transnational Indian'?

Panel V: Law, Authority and Modernity

The fifth panel reasserted the position of imperial and nationalist governance in the making of Penang in relation to its surroundings, turning to the difficulties of defining political identities in a region that was arguably as involved with maritime and littoral environments as the ethnic, religious and national compositions that emerged in the twentieth century.

The commentator stressed the commonality of defining political space in relation to geography, stressing the problems of definition and 'dramas of integration' that Penang experienced, both as an entrepôt for imperial commerce and rule, and as space ultimately incorporated into the Malaysian nation.

Simon Layton explored the tensions between imperial authority and the commercial ideologies of the early nineteenth century by considering 'piracy' as a discourse that centred imperialism in the maritime world. V. L. Forbes expounded the difficulties attending Penang's incorporation into the British seafaring world. Discussion in these respects focused on the problematic representations of the piracy discourse, which essentially ignored the diversity of indigenous seafaring activity and inherent legitimacy of what the British considered 'piracy' in the Straits and archipelagos surrounding Penang.

Rachel Leow on the other hand, challenged the narrative of Penang as a centre of 'cosmopolitan' identity unlike Montesano who supported the idea of Penang cosmopolitanism. He used the case of a housing project undertaken by a Chung Ling old boy in Trang, southern Thailand, in the late 1960s to consider the influence of Penang on centers along the Andaman Littoral and the way in which, on both sides of the Thai-Malaysian border, the process of nation-building decreased that influence. He concluded by suggesting that, in an era of "globalization" and a rising China, southern Thai students may again be finding Penang a stepping-stone to the wider world.

Leow, in considering the equally 'modern' conservative articulation of the political state, situated Penang within a transnational intellectual milieu, but showed how such an environment produced 'insular ethno-nationalists as well as cosmopolites'. Discussion in these respects sought to clarify seemingly discordant perspectives of 'Malaysian' national identity, which, Leow argues created the complex intellectual environment within which reformist agendas were first expressed.

Panel VI: Cenpris Ocean Research

ORES seeks to ‘restore Penang’s former glory’, by extending its history before the British foundation of the settlement in 1786, and drawing it into the maritime-historical approach that would situate Penang within the historically rich Straits maritime region, and within the broader history of maritime trade in the Indian Ocean world and South China Sea.

Penang’s location in the Straits is considered as its greatest resource, resting its fingers on the pulse of the global economy and its international trade. Using a ‘Maritime Potential Index’ can illuminate why different states within Malaysia have developed (or failed to develop) shipping industries and port resources, and how such states could further capitalise on their respective endowments of maritime geography.

Alternatively, we might consider Penang as a ‘knowledge hub’ in a wider ‘architecture of knowledge clusters’, which have emerged in the Straits of Malacca at sites historically connected to the region’s enduring economic importance. Economic activity continues to align itself with state-based and (more limitedly) private capital investments in education and technology, contributing, in Penang’s case, to increasing productivity and commercial innovation. Looking further afield, Penang’s development as a knowledge hub is increasingly tied to research cooperation with India, especially, divorcing itself in this respect from the colonial legacy.

The Commentator stressed the burgeoning world of Indian Ocean port-cities, especially in the Arab world, and also the importance of navigational knowledge in the successes of littoral states intent on strengthening their involvement in the international maritime arena. The discussion sought to clarify the nature of research collaboration, suggesting that sciences are favoured over the humanities and social sciences. Why Malays apparently ‘retreated’ from the sea remains a difficult question to answer, although historians suggest that European attempts to dominate maritime trade had significant impacts in ascribing different economic roles to various divisions of colonial subjects. Looking forward, the transnational relationships being built from (and with) Penang in the postcolonial period place the region’s history at the heart of its future development.