

empire – but also remind Asian readers they need to know how little, as well as how much, the British could do to shape the states which displaced that empire.

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Trade and society in the straits of Melaka: Dutch Melaka and English Penang, 1780–1830

By NORDIN HUSSIN

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By the late eighteenth century, Melaka had been a European-controlled port-town for almost 300 years. In 1786, a group of English East Indian Company merchants led by Francis Light founded a rival to this long-standing port in the northern part of the Melaka Straits. This new port was known as Penang. The emergence of Penang, and its similarities and contrasts to its more southern neighbour, is the focus of this book. In discussing trade and society in these two ports, the author, Nordin Hussin, raises a number of issues about how we understand colonial port-towns throughout Asia, thus providing not only a much needed case study of such ports, but also an examination of a region that was undergoing a transition from company-based European trade to high imperialism.

The first four chapters of *Trade and society in the straits of Melaka* focus on the role of trade in the development of Penang and Melaka. This section of the book reflects the role that Heather Sutherland played in the development of its original form, a doctoral dissertation, as it mirrors the work she has done, along with Gerrit Knaap, on the minutiae of trade records. By examining the VOC (Dutch United East India Company) and EIC (English East India Company) trade records in detail, with a copious use of secondary material, the author is able to show that during the half century from 1780 to 1830 there was a massive decline in trade to Melaka while there was a rise in Penang's fortunes. This shift in trade was due to a variety of reasons, including English free trade policies in Penang (and eventually Singapore), VOC Melaka engaging in a destructive war with Riau in 1784, VOC leaders in Batavia continuing insistence on monopoly trade, as well as the purposeful denigration of trade in Melaka during the English interregnum, which occurred during the Napoleonic Wars. The result was that by 1830, Melaka was a shell of its former self, while Penang had a firm control over trade in the northern Melaka Straits. Although the focus of the book is on Melaka and Penang, it is surprising that the author only occasionally mentions during these chapters the role that Singapore played in this trend. After its founding in 1819, Singapore siphoned off much of Melaka's merchant community in the 1820s and its own status as a free port allowed Malay states in the region to redirect their trade to Singapore for higher profits. Melaka, geographically in between Penang and Singapore, and saddled

with neglect and passed between the Dutch and English, would become a backwater after it came under English control in 1824 and the subsequent formation of the Straits Settlements in 1826. By 1830 Melaka's glory as a Malay and European company port had passed; Penang also was to become a secondary port as Singapore rose as the main entrepôt in the region.

Chapters 5 and 6 focus on the urban morphology of Penang and Melaka and their populations. The author discusses how Melaka represents a longstanding colonial town, built on the remains of a former Malay state, while Penang grew exclusively as an English trade port. Despite differences in their urban form, they had similar population figures and diversity during the period under review. By the early 1800s, each port had between 10,000 and 15,000 inhabitants. In these chapters, a picture of the various societies began to emerge, and the author continues with this line of enquiry in the remainder of *Trade and society in the straits of Melaka*.

Moving away from the numbers and tables that dominate the first six chapters – the book contains 49 tables and 17 'figures', or charts, that document an amazing number of facts about the societies ranging from male-female ratios to types of homes destroyed in the 1814 Penang fire – Nordin Hussin then turns his focus to how Penang and Melakan societies were organised and administered between 1780 and 1830. Over four chapters, he discusses the 'urban administration' of each port as well as the societal make-up. These chapters contain valuable explanations of a variety of organisations and practices that influenced the daily lives of Penangites and Melakans during the period, including the Orphan Chamber (*Weeskamer*) of Melaka, which functioned as a bank in addition to its role as an overseer of the welfare of orphans, as well as the office of *capitans* and the functioning of revenue farms. These sections are well-written, and explain institutions that can often be obscure to modern readers in easily understandable sections. *Trade and society in the straits of Melaka* finishes with two chapters that broadly describe the various ethnic communities in Penang and Melaka in the early nineteenth century. These chapters conclude that Melaka's communities were better integrated due to their presence over several hundred years, as well as larger VOC policies, while Penang was more of a pluralistic society.

The concluding chapter takes much of the earlier arguments in the book, which have been separated into Penang- or Melaka-centred chapters, and discusses the two ports in relation to each other and theories of urban port development in Asia. The author concludes that although the two ports shared a number of characteristics, there are enough differences, such as their trading environments, historical presence, and the political-economic entities that controlled them between 1780 and 1830, to bring into doubt larger theories of colonial port-towns. While seeming to have broad commonalities, Melaka was 'a stable settled town, a secondary settlement under Batavia, and essentially formed by the central Melaka Straits local trading environment' (p. 342), which helped it survive a trading and political system that was in decline. In contrast, Penang 'was a laissez-faire frontier town, oriented towards the northern Melaka Straits and the Bay of Bengal, run by adventurer merchants, with a floating population and part of the newly emerging trade system' (p. 342) the EIC was developing.

Trade and society in the straits of Melaka represents years of research and writing. It brings together a number of archival sources and secondary works, which the author

has consolidated to bring about a picture of life in the Melaka Straits during a period of great change. The author, by presenting this material in a readable form, has done a great service. This is a work that, despite sometimes getting bogged down in numbers and statistics, deserves to be read and cited by those interested in the transition from Company port-towns to imperial rule in Southeast Asia.

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Vietnam

The Vietnamese war: Revolution and social change in the Mekong Delta 1930–1975

By DAVID W. P. ELLIOTT

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David Elliott's *magnum opus* constitutes the longest and most detailed study of any aspect of the Vietnam War, and it is difficult to imagine that any other work could usurp this position in the foreseeable future. In many respects it is the definitive study of the war from the revolutionary perspective (as opposed to that of the US government and military), hence the choice of 'The Vietnamese War' for the title. Anchoring his study in the corpus of Rand Corporation interviews with National Liberation Front (NLF) defectors from the 1960s and 1970s, Elliott has expanded and integrated these data into a narrative which predominantly covers the 30 years from the August Revolution of 1945 until the fall of Saigon. He has drawn on a wide variety of other published and unpublished sources, notably US military archival documents and Party histories and memoirs published in Vietnam. The result is a highly readable book which is rich in detail, analysis, and insight; and while Elliott focuses almost exclusively on the single province of Định Tường (Mỹ Tho), he does an excellent job of building on his case study to make broader conclusions.

The only real flaw is the book's length, which makes it less accessible to a general readership. Elliott attempts to compensate for this problem by providing helpful suggestions on how to get through the book by reading only portions of each chapter, but even so, trying to navigate one's way through 1,400 pages of narrative is a daunting task. There is a certain amount of repetition within the text, and one could make a case that the overall narrative could have been trimmed and some of the interview segments relegated to appendices to make the length of the main body somewhat less intimidating. Having said that, however, the reader who is willing to plow through the whole book will come out of it exhausted but fascinated and with a much clearer understanding of the Vietnamese revolution at the grassroots.

Elliott's study follows a clear chronological sequence that enables him to provide a solid narrative for the 30-year period, one that is surprisingly seamless considering the diversity of sources that he is using. The periodisation of the book can be roughly divided into (1) the anti-French Resistance; (2) the Ngô Đình Diệm regime; and (3)