

Concept Note: Penang and The Indian Ocean

In July 2008, George Town and Melaka were listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site (WHS), defined as historic cities of the Straits of Malacca and recognized globally for their unique multi-religious & multi-cultural living and built heritage. George Town, the capital city of Penang State, sits at the entry point of the Straits of Malacca. Its history is inextricably bound up with its immediate Southeast Asian region as well as the Indian Ocean.

Penang's connection with the Malay World is embedded in its earlier history as part of the Hindu-Buddhist kingdom of Kadaram and later, the island was part of the Kedah Sultanate. Penang has long been at the centre of interregional networks of exchange. Although much work has focused on Penang's position within a Chinese maritime world of commerce and migration, less attention has been paid to Penang's equally significant connections with South Asia. This conference which forms part of the broader Penang Story 2 project aims to bring together scholars with interests in Penang's role as a gateway to the Indian Ocean over the past two centuries.

The Penang Story was a project jointly organised by Star Publications & the Penang Heritage Trust in 2001 and 2002 to popularize local histories and to create intercommunal and intra-communal awareness of history and cultural identity. This new chapter of the Penang Story is themed "Penang in Global History", with special emphasis on Penang as a place of "conjunctures and confluences", highlighting its multi-ethnic and cosmopolitan society and its contribution to local, regional and global histories.

Recent discoveries of jetties and furnaces in Sungai Batu in the Bujang Valley throw new light on the long established trade links with India. Whilst new discoveries are changing contemporary perceptions of early history, economic historians have shown that the flows of peoples, knowledge and culture between East and West before the arrival of Europeans in the 16th century have had tremendous impact on the development of Southeast Asia; and more importantly, that these flows were never mutually exclusive.

Whilst the narrative of the "Indian Ocean" is often times linked with European entry, the so-called Vasco Da Gama era and the subsequent colonial rule over the past five centuries, what is often obscured is the profound influence of developments in Arabia, India and China up till the late 18th century, the rise and spread of Islam from West Asia, following upon earlier waves of Hindu and Buddhist traders and pilgrims, to-ing and fro-ing the Straits of Melaka.

Today, some two thousand years since the earliest encounters, networks with India have developed beyond family and trade to include knowledge partnerships, foreign direct investments and the free flow of talent. The recent rapid growth and transformation of the Indian and Chinese economies coupled with revolutionary changes in the Middle East has reinvigorated interest and focus on the Indian Ocean world. From issues of security, competitiveness to heritage and tourism, the challenges are manifold. Moreover, the Indian Ocean region is poised to house the world's largest middle-class, new and enthusiastic consumers in a world faced with severe environmental pressure.

The conference will examine the multiple networks, imperial, commercial, cultural, and biographical, that linked Penang with the littorals of the eastern Indian Ocean, stretching from Burma and Sri Lanka to the "Coromandel Coast" of India. How might Penang be treated as a site through which to examine the density of cultural and economic interactions in the Indian Ocean world and between the regions conventionally divided into South and Southeast Asia? How have Penang's urban

landscape, its population, and the development of its civic culture borne the imprint of its Indian Ocean connections? How does Penang's Indian Ocean history feature in popular and official memory in the present day, and with what implications for the future?

How will the rise of the Indian Ocean world and China in terms of wealth, production and intellectual capital impact a highly-globalized world? What will be the new set of challenges facing the region in the aftermath of the on-going global financial crisis and destructive climate change? What are lessons from the past to which we should be attentive? These are some of the important questions that the conference hopes to address.

Organizers & Partners

This conference is Phase II of an on-going "Penang & the Indian Ocean" project organized by academics from the University of Cambridge. The first workshop was held in May 2010 in Cambridge. This conference is an expanded version of that exploratory workshop and is organized by Think City, Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) and academics from the University of Cambridge and London University.

Conference conveners include Dr Loh Wei Leng (University of Malaya, Retd.), Dr T.N. Harper (Cambridge) and Dr Sunil Amrith (London). The main sponsor for the conference is Think City and Khazanah Nasional Berhad.

Conference Objectives:

The rationale for the selection of a 'city-state' perspective ties in well with the narratives of early East-West and intra-Asian exchanges from pre-historic times into the first millennium C.E. with multiple flows of peoples, products, ideas and technologies moving through the "ports of trade" of the ancient era and the port polities (akin to city-states). Penang belongs to this genre of port cities which were in evidence along the Indian Ocean littoral even prior to the European expansion into Asia.

Fast forward to current times with the increasingly globalising trajectory of the world economy, the phenomenal rise of India and China and the concomitant unparalleled growth of their middle classes, Penang would do well to capitalize on its location and past connections, not only to serve as an essential link between the two great commercial zones but to also look into niche activities which can be developed in the northern region, its hinterland, and to draw investors presently in this area to locate their business premises in Penang.

The specific objectives include:

1. To explore, discuss and celebrate Penang's history as a trading port as part of a wider understanding of George Town's Outstanding Universal Value as a historic port in the Straits of Malacca.
2. To provide a multi-disciplinary platform involving archaeologists, geologists, historians, economists, community leaders and captains of industry to understand Penang in the context of the Indian Ocean.
3. To create a research cluster dedicated to mapping the historical and contemporary linkages of Penang in its Indian Ocean context.

4. To highlight current thinking about the Indian Ocean from the historical, economic and political dimensions with a special emphasis on Penang's current and future position.
5. To investigate potential comparative advantages and opportunities, building on existing strengths in the context of Penang as a gateway to the Indian Ocean.

Time and Place

The conference will take place from 16 to 18th September 2011 at the Traders Hotel, George Town.

Participation

Paper writers will include academics from Malaysia, India, the United Kingdom, Singapore, Japan, the United States, representatives from governmental bodies and heritage activists.

The conference is open to the public who are invited to pre-register with Miss Kartina Mohamad to confirm attendance. Tel: 04-222 6800 or email: kartina.mohamed@thinkcity.com.my

For More Information

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