

THE MARITIME NEXUS

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The ports and its infrastructures, facilities and services of Southeast Asia have been thus far studied in isolation. This has given a false and skewed understanding on the development of maritime history of the region. It is important to bear in mind that island Southeast Asia stands at the gateway of east and west trade. It forms an island complex that has no parallel in the world. This region of approximately 23,000 islands all have harbours and ports locked into the east-west trade that was Asian in nature. The early ports were usually river ports and those that achieved international fame continued to be somewhat larger ports that were still located near rivers. The question posed is how one port in Southeast Asia came eventually to dominate the international trade of the entire region at the expense of others.

It is important to bear in mind that the Malay peninsula and the Isthmus of Kra that links that peninsula with mainland Southeast Asia is an important link that connects the trade and shipping of the Indian Ocean with that of the South China Sea. In this context the Malay Sultanates of Kedah, Perak and Aceh controlled the northern exits and entrances of the Straits of Malacca. The river ports within these kingdoms served as trading stations and anchorages for coastal and long-distance shipping. Goods and produce were collected and transacted at these ports for the largely Asian trade system. There existed also an overland trade network across the Isthmus of Kra that connected the west coast river ports with those of the east coast. In the latter case the river ports within the kingdoms of Pattani and Kelantan played a crucial role in carrying and collecting goods and produce on the Gulf of Siam and the South China Sea.

In the Southern entrance of the Straits of Malacca there were several Malay Sultanates that combined to dominate all entrances and exists into the Straits of Malacca. At the turn of the nineteenth century the ancient Johor-Rhio-Lingga Empire had long dominated the southern entrance into the Straits. The extent of this empire covered all seas, straits and islands within a zone that began southwards from the Settlement of Malacca and sprawled into the Rhio-Lingga archipelago that stretched as far south as the island of Lingga and eastwards into the islands of Natunas, Anambas and Tembilan. All these islands had its rivers and river ports. They formed a chain of ports that were intricately linked to each other within the orbit of the Johor-Rhio-Lingga empire.

The political structure of the empire was an awesome combination of the maritime traditions of the Straits Malays and the seagoing power of the Bugis

from the island of Sulawesi. The Malay Sultanate was stationed on the island of Lingga and served as the watchpost for all traffic from the Sunda Straits and that of the Java sea into the South China Sea. The Bugis Yam Tuan Muda who served as an underking to the Malay overlord was stationed on the island of Rhio. From this island they dominated the many straits that wove around the Rhio-Lingga archipelago. On the mainland of Johor, the Temenggong of the Empire built his establishment on the east coast of Johor. The Bendahara of the Empire was located in Pahang on the east coast of the Malay peninsula and had together with the Temenggong was linked to the many islands located between the large island of Borneo and the Malay peninsula. These four families were united in marriages and together they formed the formidable Johor-Rhio-Lingga empire with its many ports.

The nineteenth century rivalry of the British and the Dutch into the island complex that surrounds the Straits of Malacca led to the establishment of British and Dutch ports on these islands and the eventual partition of the Straits according to spheres of influence by the Dutch and the British. The British occupied and later were ceded the island of Pulau Pinang by the Kedah Sultanate in 1786. It is important to bear in mind that the island of Penang was nothing more than a granite island that had no resource base for international trade. However, the securing of this island eventually broke-down the triangular relationship between Aceh, Kedah and Perak.

On 17th March 1824 the Anglo-Dutch Treaty divided the Straits of Malacca into two spheres of influence. The Dutch was confined to the east and south of the main straits while the British secured their presence on the Malay peninsula. On 2nd August 1824 Sir John Crawfurd secured all seas, all straits, all islets within ten geographical miles from the main island of Singapore. The port of Singapore had its humble origins on the tiny Singapore River. The island of Singapore was never the key strategic island in the Johor-Rhio-Lingga empire. However, this port eventually developed in the next twelve decades to be mentioned in the same stature of New York, Rotterdam, Manchester and Yokohama.

The research behind its success conducted by a battery of postgraduate and undergraduate students organized by the Department of Southeast Asian Studies, University of Malaya have considerable policy implications for Malaysian maritime planners. The first premise is that the British settlement of Singapore that later became its Colony was nothing more than a geographical expression confined to the main island of Singapore and 10 miles around that island.¹ For the initial half century of its history it was one of many other river ports in the archipelago that participated in the east-west Asian trade. It was never *the* port of Southeast Asia as there were other ports with better facilities and services at Manila, Surabaya, Jakarta, Bencoolen and Sabang to mention a few.

It was in the second half of the nineteenth century that the international

structure of world trade shifted from an Asian trade system in which European powers participated to that of an Euro-Asia direct trade pattern where colonial controls dominated resources and markets. The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, the use of coal and later oil to drive steamships, the exports of *gutta pracha*, tin-ore and smelted tin and in the twentieth century liquid rubber latex all contributed to the expansion of the port of Singapore and the demise of other ports in the region, specifically other coastal ports along the Malay peninsula.

The British regional plan for Southeast Asia was to make the port of Singapore its main entrepot that linked the ports of mainland China with those of the Indian subcontinent. The other ports on the Malay peninsula served as feeder ports to the grand design. Table 1 illustrates the changing pattern of world trade. A brief glance at the table will establish that the value of imports and exports of the port of Singapore increased two and a half times in the period 1889-1912. It is significant to note that the two major imports brought into Singapore for the use of ships docking at the port were coal and oil. The port of Singapore had anticipated the changing technology in shipping and created facilities for the storage of these commodities. Steamships driven by coal and later oil carried trade between Asia and Europe. The other significant bulk cargo that were carried by steamers to European markets were smelted tin and liquid latex.

In all instances the shift in trade Asian based trade pattern to that of Euro-Asia and that of bulk carrying became a feature of trade patterns. The anticipation of the Colony of Singapore responding to global changes can be seen in the infrastructure investments of the Colony. Elsewhere on the Malay peninsula, the British authorities allowed the traditional ports that once served the wind driven ships too declined in strength. The roads and rails that transgressed the west coast major rubber and tin belts were made towards the direction of Singapore. In the second decade of the twentieth century a road and rail causeway linking Johor and Singapore completed the process.² Researchers examining the revenue and expenditure of the Federated Malay States (Perak, Selangor, Negeri Sembilan and Pahang),³ Johor and the Unfederated Malay States (Perlis, Kedah, Kelantan and Trengganu)⁴ have established that the Marine Department and the Port Authorities of the different protected Malay States were not central to the infrastructure development in this period. The emphasis was on roads, rails and bridges that led to the port of Singapore. Meanwhile the British authorities favoured the port of Singapore over the other ports of the Colony of the Straits Settlements that included Penang and Malacca. Infrastructure development for these ports were minimized. The expenditure for the Settlement of Singapore shows the heavy budget allotment for infrastructure building of the port of Singapore (Table 2).

The port of Singapore shifted its centrality from the river port that it began and moved westwards towards the New Harbour where its current fame rests. The shift is marked by the change in international trade patterns. The use of

Table 1: Singapore - Import and Export, 1889-1912

Year	Import (\$)	Export (\$)
1889	110,746,590	88,683,134
1890	112,633,960	94,131,604
1891	103,012,211	91,725,484
1892	106,970,062	97,850,449
1893	123,974,642	103,456,082
1894	164,000,000	137,000,000
1895	158,000,000	135,100,000
1896	156,900,000	133,500,000
1897	179,300,000	153,200,000
1898	197,600,000	164,200,000
1899	222,200,000	185,400,000
1900	251,700,000	205,500,000
1901	231,674,307	194,810,000
1902	280,516,661	234,224,585
1903	292,096,941	249,833,269
1904	274,674,307	243,556,190
1905	238,347,216	197,618,811
1906	n.a	n.a
1907	239,723,167	201,829,585
1908	n.a	n.a
1909	214,404,964	179,185,170
1910	n.a	n.a
1911	261,654,376	213,020,303
1912	293,653,355	225,751,279

Source: AR, 1890, 1891, 1892, 1893, 1902, 1903, 1904; Appendix C, Singapore Harbour Board, Statistics as to value of trade furnished by Sir Alexander Stuart, Registrar of Imports and Exports in CO273/285: f.117; SSD, 1901,1905,1907, 1909, 1911, 1912.

coal in shipping technology made the port authorities build coaling depots on the offshore islands to facilitate steam-driven ships to load coal for their onward passages. A similar development occurred in 1892 when an oil depot was built at Pulau Bukum when oil was used to propel steamships.⁵ Coal and oil were brought from various sources around the globe to serve the shipping needs of the port of Singapore. The carriers of these heavy bulk cargo needed much deeper port than that offered at the old Singapore river port. Elaborate plans were made and executed to deepen the New Harbour and Tanjong Pagar harbour. The natural shallow harbours were extensively dredged and designed to cater for the change in shipping technologies and the carrying trade.⁶ It included the dredging of two shoals - the Meander and Tembaga Shoals - that blocked the passages into the New Harbour.⁷ At Teluk Ayer the British authorities invested in reclaiming the offshore area to extend the waterfront from the Tanjong Pagar Police Station to the Gelang River. The inner harbour area under the Telok Ayer reclamation scheme extended the harbour facilities of Singapore by a further 1,300 acres⁸ (See Maps). Within these designed harbours there were also investments in other port facilities. The building of dry docks, wharves and jetties created the main fixtures of the port of Singapore. There developed the Empire Dock, Victoria Dock, Albert Dock, East Dock and West Dock.⁹ These were owned and operated by the private shipping concerns who were the captains of the industry.

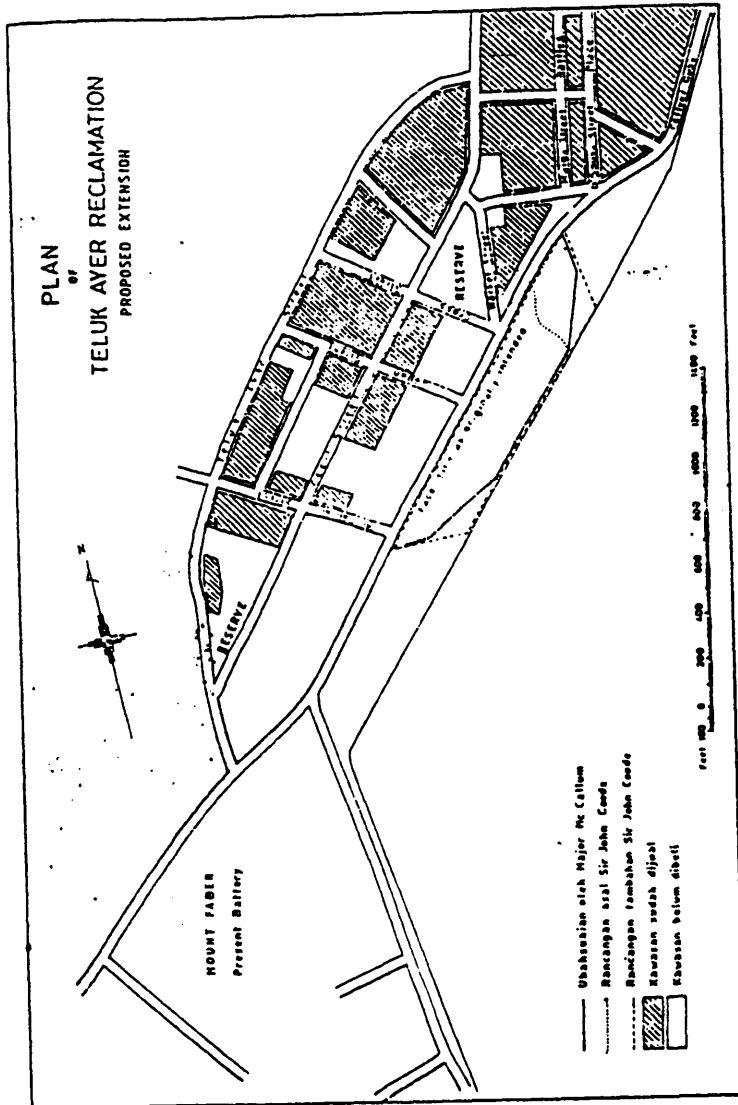
Table 2: Singapore - Revenue and Expenditure, 1905-1912

Year	Revenue (\$)	Expenditure (\$)
1905	5,240,354.26	4,072,004.79
1906	5,617,784.92	4,097,428.62
1907	6,154,579.25	4,484,476.20
1908	5,822,811.69	4,271,715.37
1909	5,849,063.00	4,271,715.27
1910	5,896,156.52	4,328,184.47
1911	5,740,965.09	4,074,669.33
1912	6,015,648.00	4,216,015.00

Source: AR, SS, 1909, 1911, 1912.

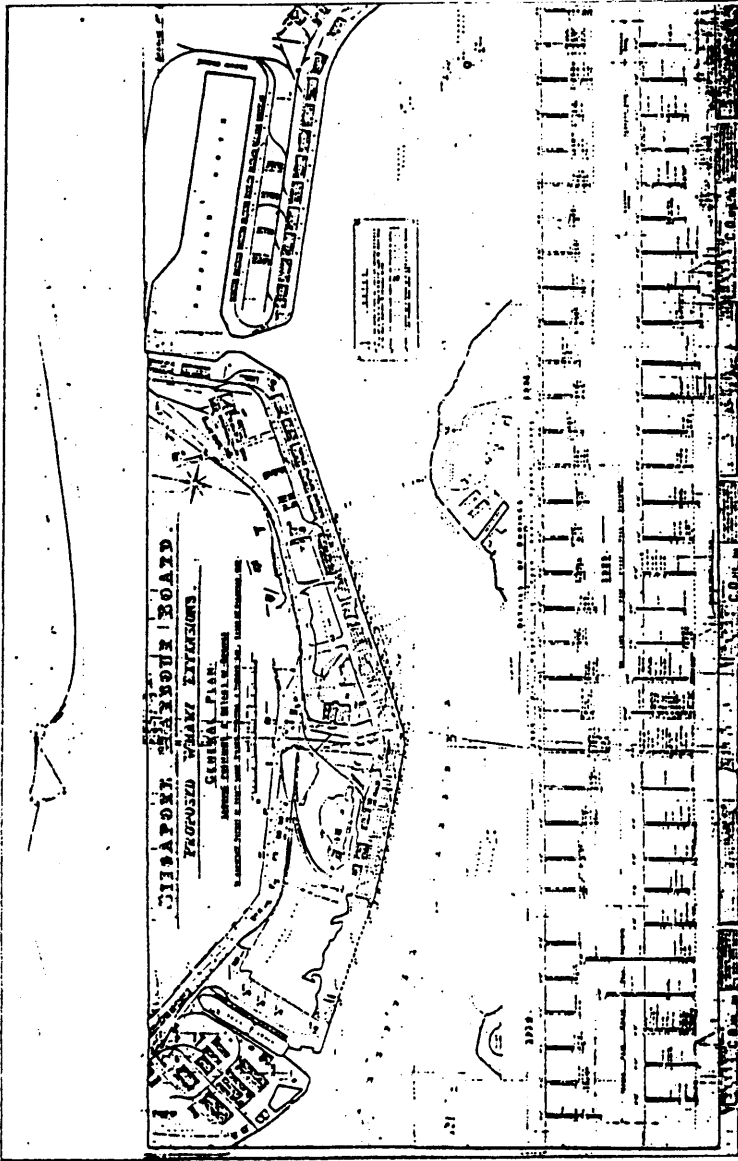
The port of Singapore was designed by science and technology. It was

Map 1:Telok Ayer Reclamation Plan(Proposed Extension)



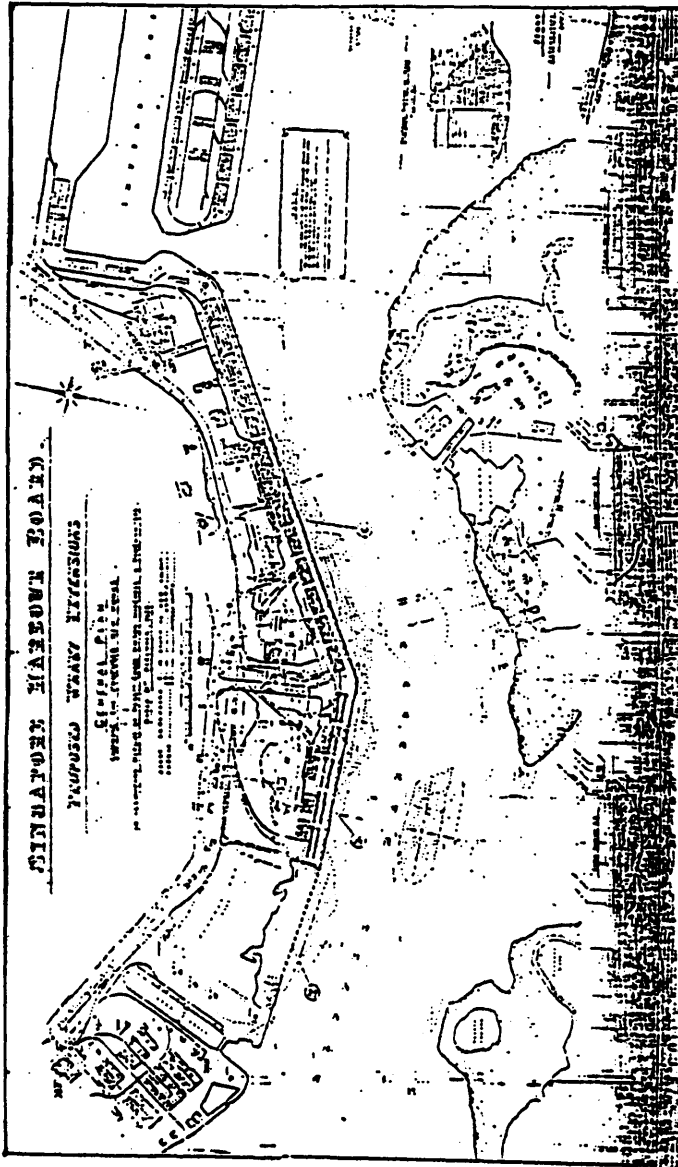
Source: C.O 273/34:Telok Ayer Reclamation, Sir John Coode to Colonial Secretary, S.S., dlm SSLCP, 1887, pg.C263

Map 2: General Plans Showing Positions & Details of Borings, Dated 31st December 1929



Source: C.O 273/563: Singapore Harbour Board, Proposed Wharf Extensions, Report by Mr. Coode, Wilson Mitchell & Vaughan Lee with Three Drawings to C.A. No.Fail:72047, 31 December 1929.

Map 3: General Plans, Singapore Harbour Board, Proposed Wharf Extensions, Showing The Proposed New Works, Dated 31st December, 1929



Source: C.O 273/563: Singapore Harbour Board, Proposed Wharf Extensions, Report by Mr. Coode, Wilson Mitchell & Vaughan Lee with Three Drawings to C.A. No.Fail:72047, 31 December 1929.

investments in science and technology that brought together other facilities and services that made the port of Singapore the cutting edge in the twentieth century. Britain made the island of Singapore the centre of telegraph, telephone and wireless facilities before the Second World War.¹⁰ Britain brought in electricity to the island in 1923 with the establishment of St. James Power Station and 30 years later increased the power capacity of Singapore four-fold by building a new power station at Pasir Panjang.

The expansion of port facilities and services need fresh water supply.¹¹ The Municipality of Singapore successfully negotiated with neighbouring Johor to pipe water across the causeway to be processed in Singapore for its own use. The Municipality guaranteed that processed water will be resold to Johor at pre-agreed prices. The arrival of sailors from all quarters of the world meant that an elaborate service system had to be developed to cater for their needs. One such institution was the Sailor's Home that looked after their temporary accommodation, welfare needs, health care and financial transactions.¹² The more spiritual matters were left to the church and the Settlement of Singapore funded church activities to keep the congregation happy.¹³

In all instances the port of Singapore managed to keep ahead from the other ports of the Malay peninsula and the rest of the region because it planned and designed its development against world shipping and trade patterns and trends. The other neighbouring islands that were the suppliers of raw produce for Euro-Asian trade and the importers of manufactured goods simply allowed Singapore to go unchallenged. The former invested on infrastructures at the production end (roads, rails, bridges, dams and drains) while Singapore invested at the marketing end on harbours, wharves, dredging, lighthouses, moles, docks, electricity, schools and hospitals. It emerged before the beginning of World War Two as the most technologically advanced island of all of Southeast Asia. It was made the maritime nexus of Southeast Asia.

Notes:

1. See Shaharil Talib, 'Singapore (1824-1958): This is My Island in the Sun', *Jati*, Bilangan 1, September 1995, Jabatan Pengajian Asia Tenggara, Universiti Malaya, Kuala Lumpur.

2. Ali Zainalabidin Syed Mohamed, 'Sejarah Pembinaan Tambak Johor', B.A. thesis, Dept. of Southeast Asian Studies, University of Malaya, 1992.

3. Ichiro Sugimoto, 'Perkembangan Kapitalisme di Negeri Johor, 1800-1957', M.A. thesis, Dept. of Southeast Asian Studies, University of Malaya which is in the process of completion.

4. Current Research by M.A. candidate, Yuka, Dept. of Southeast Asian Studies, University of Malaya, 1995.

5. C.M., Turnbull, *A History of Singapore 1819-1975*, Singapore, Oxford University Press, 1977, p.92.

6. See CO 273/279: Singapore Harbour Improvements, Mr. Matthew Reports, 5 February 1902, f.97-98.

7. See CO 273/563: Singapore Harbour Board, Proposed Wharf Extensions, Report by Messrs. Coode, Wilson Mitchell & Vaughan Lee with three drawings to CA, 31 December 1929.

8. See CO 273/279: Messrs. Coode, Son & Matthews, 10th December 1901.

9. See CO 373/562: Dockyard Department, The Singapore Board, Report & Account Ended for the Year 30th. June 1930, f.9.

10. Hasliza bte Ibrahim, 'Zaman Gelap di Singapura, 1862-1953', B.A. thesis, Dept. of Southeast Asian Studies, University of Malaya, 1993/94.

11. Ruhana Padzil, 'Bekalan Air di Singapura (1824-1956): Dari Pencarian Sumber Air ke Sumber Pendapatan', B.A. thesis, Dept. of Southeast Asian Studies, University Malaya, 1993/94.

12. Current research by B.A. candidate, Shamsidah Hasan, Dept. Southeast Asian Studies, University of Malaya.

13. Current research by M.A. candidate, Hasmah Mat Saat, Dept. of Southeast Asian Studies, University of Malaya.