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Multiple Motives and a Malleable Middleman: The Founding of George Town (Malaysia)

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Abstract

This paper places Penang within the larger context of the Indian Ocean world, considering its geographical position and composition, as well as economic and political interest in the island from a macro-perspective. George Town established in 1786 was a crucial settlement of the British East India Company (EIC) that connected the company's commercial interests in India with those in China. As the port city was strategically located on the island of Penang at the northern end of the Straits of Malacca, it was the first British settlement in Southeast Asia with the aim of breaking Dutch mercantile dominance in the Straits of Malacca and of preempting French imperial interests in the region. In a second step, this paper adds a micro-perspective in order to deepen the understanding of the complexly entangled reasons and factors that led to the founding of George Town. The emphasis within the micro-perspective lies on key figures foremost Francis Light and his pivotal role as a middleman between the Sultan of Kedah and the East India Company, as well as the Sultan himself, thus demonstrating how Light's dexterous mediation and the Sultan's personal circumstances contributed significantly to the founding of George Town.

Introduction

George Town was founded as a port settlement in 1786 by the British East India Company on a piece of swampy and uninhabited land on the island of Penang. While other parts of the island were seasonally inhabited by small fishing villages, a fact that will be described further below, the shore where George Town was founded consisted of swampy land and forest. In this paper, the port city is conceptualised as a node resulting from manifold trans-maritime connections, similar to the concept of hubs understood as ‘highly frequented and energized nodes along the routes taken by transmaritime movements’.¹ This conceptualisation turns the port city into a meaningful place for studying cross-border, transmaritime, and translocal interactions and connections. The connections examined in this paper are travelling goods, people, and ideas, with a particular focus on political, economic, and geographical interests in Penang and its region. How these connections eventually led to the emergence of a settlement that soon developed into an economically successful port city is the guiding question of this paper.

Writing about the emergence and development of a colonial settlement while trying to avoid a Eurocentric view is a challenging task, especially as the extant historiography is primarily based on colonial and other English-medium sources. To include stories ‘from the south’ and ‘from below’² becomes even more challenging. Nevertheless, the combined reading of primary and secondary sources, while paying close attention to ‘connected histories’³ on both the macro- and micro-levels, broadens the horizon on which connections can be drawn, thus deepening our understanding of how the port city came into being.

¹ Schnepel, Burkhard, “Introduction”. In *Connectivity in Motion: Island Hubs in the Indian Ocean World*, ed. Burkhard Schnepel and Edward A. Alpers. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), xvii.

² Freitag, Ulrike, and Achim van Oppen. *Translocality: The Study of Globalizing Processes from a Southern Perspective*. (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2010).

³ Subrahmanyam, Sanjay. “Connected Histories: Notes towards a Reconfiguration of Early Modern Eurasia”. *Modern Asian Studies* 31(1), (1997): 735–762.

As a social anthropologist, I examined historical, economic, and demographic data provided by archival records and previous studies in various disciplines of George Town's foundation including history, geography, and anthropology. Combining these perspectives with socio-economic data and especially the lives of certain individuals who were key figures, enables to scrutinise the complex and entangled economic, geographical, and political interests that led to the founding of this port settlement. To underscore the complexities of the emergence of a port city in the broader Indian Ocean and global contexts, it is important to examine the variety of motives that were crucial to the founding of George Town. Hints regarding these motives can be found in several nineteenth-century reports on the British acquisition of Penang and its early history, including early scholarly accounts, as well as contemporaneous narratives mainly written from the perspective of George Town as part of the British colonial network and the expanding British Empire.⁴

In this paper, two historical perspectives are applied. The first examines the various reasons and arguments for the emergence of George Town that coeval narratives and historians have put forth, enriched by geographical and anthropological studies of the region. This mixture of archival sources, reports, historiographies, and studies from other disciplines speak to three major aspects – geographical, political, and economic – that were integral to the founding of George Town. However, the reasons leading to the founding and development of the port city undoubtedly overlapped and were intertwined, as this paper will demonstrate from a macro-perspective.

The second part of this paper adds and examines a different perspective that is essential in deepening the understanding of George Town's emergence and development. Instead of making a clear distinction between colonial powers and local actors, as part of my argument I will highlight the role of different key actors from diverse backgrounds and their personal motifs that have a significant share in the founding of George Town.

⁴ See, for example, Macalister (1803), Leith (1804), Popham (1805), Low (1836), Newbold (1839), and Braddell (1861).

By combining macro- and micro-perspectives on connected histories, I seek to avoid binary notions of global and local, coloniser and colonised, Europeans and locals, as these antagonistic models are less helpful in investigating the complexity of the emergence of the port city. Instead, the focus is on demonstrating how the appearance of this port city should be seen as the outcome and manifestation of processes of connectivity within the broader Indian Ocean World, encompassing various circumstances, motives, and actors from different ethnic, social, and economic backgrounds.

Location and Geography of Penang Island

The island of Penang is strategically located at the northern end of the Straits of Melaka, a narrow, 800-kilometre-long stretch of waterway between the Malay Peninsula and the Indonesian island of Sumatra that turns the Straits into a bottleneck for trading routes, especially on routes between China and India. The Straits of Melaka are not merely a channel connecting the Indian Ocean with the South China Sea, but a region itself known for its immense diversity and variety in natural resources. Spices, palm oil, and tin are three of the main commodities provided by the region surrounding the Straits.



Figure 1 Map 1860, Straits of Melaka⁵

When in 1786 Francis Light's fleet landed on the swampy and mangrove-lined coast to take possession of Penang in the name of the British East India Company, he found a mainly uninhabited and densely forested island. Further north, small, seasonal fishing villages existed in addition to traces of earlier small-scale settlements along the north coast.⁶ Light's crew discovered transplanted fruit-bearing trees as well as graves, as Sir George Leith, the first Lieutenant-Governor of Penang reports:

⁵ https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:%281860%29_STRAITS_OF_MALACCA.jpg

⁶ Forrest, Thomas. *A Voyage from Calcutta to the Mergui Archipelago, Lying on the East Side of the Bay of Bengal*. London: J. Robson and I. Owen, 1792. and Newbold, Thomas John. *Political and Statistical Account of the British Settlements in the Straits of Malacca, viz., Pinang, Malacca, and Singapore*. 2 vols. London: John Murray, 1839.

From the appearance of many places in the Interior of the island and the number of Tombs that were discovered, soon after the settlement was formed, the tradition of its being formerly inhabited, seems entitled to credit. It asserted, that there was once near 3000 people resident on it, who chiefly subsisted by Piracy, but in consequence of their violent conduct, were expelled by one of the former Kings of Queddah [now Kedah].⁷

The fact that the island was partly inhabited at one point in its history also explains the existence of names for the northern parts of the island, in use prior to the founding of George Town, for example, Batu Ferringhi and Teluk Bahang.⁸ Batu Ferringhi translates as ‘foreigner’s rock’, foreigners being referred to as Ferringhi, ‘Franks’, in fact mainly Portuguese and Eurasians who were dreaded as pirates,⁹ thus matching Leith’s description of the remnants of pirates’ dwellings. Further evidence for the existence of pirate dwellings in the sixteenth century is provided in the report of an Englishman, Sir James Lancaster, who anchored off Penang in June 1592. He described the island’s coast as consisting of thick mangroves, infested by mosquitos and harbouring and bristling with pirates.¹⁰

Thus, when Light founded George Town in 1786, along a swampy forested coast that had been abandoned by pirates, Penang did not resemble a primeval landscape. Parts of the lowland and hill were covered with secondary forest, though there were no traces of large-scale agriculture like paddy fields.¹¹ Even the areca palm tree was not particularly widespread, despite giving the island its name of Penang (or Pinang), which derives from the Malay term for betelnut, the fruit of the areca tree. The areca or betelnut was the tree ‘chiefly cultivated by the Malays, who first occupied the island’¹² and was thus eponymous. However, when Light

⁷ Leith, George. *A Short Account of the Settlement, Produce, and Commerce, of Prince of Wales Island in the Straits of Malacca*. (London: J. Booth, 1804), 24.

⁸ *Teluk Bahang* is Malay and means ‘hot bay’ in English.

⁹ Küchler, Johannes. *Penang: Kulturlandschaftswandel und ethnisch-soziale Struktur einer Insel Malaysias*. (Gießen: Gießener Geographische Schriften, 1968), 28.

¹⁰ Karim, Wazir-Jahan. “The ‘Discovery’ of Penang Island at Tanjong Tokong before 1785: Bapu Alaidin Meera Hussein Lebai and Captain Francis Light.” *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 86(1) (304), (2013), 6.

¹¹ Küchler, Johannes. *Penang: Kulturlandschaftswandel und ethnisch-soziale Struktur einer Insel Malaysias*. (Gießen: Gießener Geographische Schriften, 1968), 29.

¹² Low, James. *A Dissertation on the Soil & Agriculture of the British Settlement of Penang, or Prince of Wales Island, including Province Wellesley on the Malayan Peninsula* (1836) [With plates and a map.]. Singapore: The Singapore Free Press Office, reprinted as *The British Settlement of Penang*, (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1972), 72.

founded the port the forest needed to be cleared, and the settlement was greatly dependent on migration.

Reasons for the Founding of George Town: A Macro Perspective

When the East India Company (EIC) was founded in 1598, it joined in the profitable trade in the East Indies, in which first the Portuguese and later the Dutch were already involved. Initially, the focus of the company was trade rather than building an empire. However, in the eighteenth century, as the Mughal Empire declined and the EIC struggled with the French East India Company during the three Carnatic Wars of 1746 to 1761, the British EIC's interest extended from trade to cover territorial power as well.¹³

George Town, founded on the coast of Penang Island facing the mainland, was the first British settlement in Southeast Asia. Initially called Fort Cornwallis, it was re-named George Town after King George III, who reigned between 1760 and 1820. After acquiring the site, a naval base, trading post, a shipbuilding dock, and a spice plantation were quickly established, highlighting the combination of political, economic, and geographical interests behind the foundation: political strategies required a naval base and shipbuilding facilities, economic interests were represented by the existence of the trading post, and geographical benefits such as the growing of spices were enabled by the island's particular location and features.

The prevailing explanation for why the British EIC founded George Town specifically is that the settlement was part of the company's strategy to expand the lucrative trade between India and China, especially exchanging Indian opium for Chinese tea.¹⁴ Focusing on the economic aspects by explaining the growing interest in trade with the Far East in the late

¹³ Peers, Douglas M. *India Under Colonial Rule: 1700–1885*. London: Routledge, 2006, 41.

MacGregor, Arthur. *Company Curiosities: Nature, Culture and the East India Company, 1600–1874*. London: Reaktion Books, 2018, 27f.

¹⁴ Freeman, Donald B. *Straits of Malacca: Gateway or Gauntlet?* Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003, 135.

eighteenth century means extending the transmaritime connections from the Indian Ocean further east to the South China Sea. The trade with Canton in southern China carried out by the EIC expanded particularly rapidly at the end of the eighteenth century, enabling the EIC to dominate the silk trade.¹⁵ Generally, the long-distance trade between India and China required a refitting station for the EIC ships on route, while the two most suitable ports, Melaka and Batavia, were under Dutch control and levied high charges for foreign vessels to land.¹⁶

The increased trade with China in the late eighteenth century can be identified as one key factor in the decision to found a British settlement on Penang Island.¹⁷ While tea and Chinese porcelain became highly desired goods in Britain during the eighteenth century, neither Britain nor India had much to offer to the Chinese.¹⁸ In fact, before the introduction of opium produced in India, the outflow of silver from Britain to China exchanged for tea and porcelain was a major concern of the EIC. To put it more bluntly: ‘The Westerners had nothing to offer the Asians and, *therefore*, they had to pay in cash for the goods they purchased’.¹⁹

The opium trade from India that entered the Chinese market in exchange for Chinese goods was at first not organised by the British Empire but by a complex and varied network of private merchants, including British traders. The main steps towards a state-organised opium trade were taken by the first British diplomatic opium mission of 1787, after the founding of George Town.²⁰

However, given the need for exchange goods to take to China, the Malay Archipelago offered a variety of commodities that were of high demand in China, including tin, bird’s

¹⁵ Clodd, H.P. *Malaya’s First British Pioneer: The Life of Francis Light*. London: Luzac&Company Ltd, 1948, 1.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ For some historians this economic aspect, in preference to stressing inter-European rivalries in the region; see, for example, Tregonning (1965) and Harlow (1952).

¹⁸ Mackay, Colin. *A History of Phuket and the Surrounding Region*. Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 2013, 208.

¹⁹ Derks, Hans. *History of the Opium Problem: The Assault on the East, ca. 1600-1950*. Leiden: Brill, 2012, 53, original emphasis.

²⁰ For a detailed analysis of the entanglement of private merchants and the state that led to Chinese tea being traded for Indian opium, see *History of the Opium Problem*, particularly the chapter on ‘Tea for Opium and Vice Versa’ by Hans Derks (2012).

nests, certain woods, ambergris, rhinoceros horn, and shark fins. Since people in the Malay Archipelago were interested in Indian goods, such as weapons, cotton and other textiles, and iron products, it was necessary to create a transshipment centre in the Malay Archipelago between India, Malaya, and China.²¹ Using such a base, the EIC would not only be able to conduct trade between India and China more efficiently, it could also include Southeast Asian goods in its networks of long-distance maritime commerce.

Already prior to the arrival of European colonial enterprises in the fifteenth century, the whole Malay Archipelago had long been crucial for trading routes across the Indian Ocean. Indeed, the much sought-after spices produced in this region were one of the major reasons for inter-regional trading rivalries. From the eighth to the fifteenth centuries, the eastern Indian Ocean trade was dominated by Chinese traders, to begin with in cooperation with the Indonesia-Malaysian-based Sri Vijaya Empire.²²

During the age of European empires, to control the Indian Ocean was synonymous with control over some of its most valuable and sort-after commodities. Yet, the geographer Philip Steinberg claims that from 1500 to 1800 the world's seas channelled the circulation of political and economic activities into the concept of mercantilism, with the consequence that the sea was constructed as an area in which political entities claimed rights over specific sea routes, but did not attempt absolute control.²³

However, in attempting to claim rights over specific sea routes, the control of port cities was imperative. The Straits of Melaka, being a pivotal channel on one of the most important sea routes connecting the Indian Ocean with the South China Sea, is named after the then central port city of Melaka. Already in the sixteenth century, Portuguese fleets had penetrated the region sufficiently to be able to take control of Melaka, while during the

²¹ Mackay, Colin. *A History of Phuket and the Surrounding Region*. Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 2013, 208.

²² For further details, see, for example, Geoffrey Wade (2008) on Ming China and Southeast Asia during the fifteenth century, for a detailed study of Sri Vijaya, see Hermann Kulke (1998).

²³ Steinberg, Philip E. *The Social Construction of the Ocean*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, 208.

seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the Dutch took it over. Thanks to their colonial rule in Melaka, combined with their other colonies, the Dutch government had a virtual monopoly in the spice trade, a state of affairs the British EIC wanted to challenge.²⁴ Thus, the EIC's acquisition of Penang and the creation of a competing port with the capacity to trump Melaka in importance were seen as critical to breaking the Dutch dominance in the Straits of Melaka. The fact that the island of Penang is located strategically at another choke point on the route between India and China and that the EIC thereby acquired a territorial interest demonstrates once again the intermingling of geographical, economic, and political interests.

Yet, it was not only the Dutch who seem to have been the target of British economic and political attention in the late eighteenth century. Another political aim of the settlement was to pre-empt French imperial interests in this strategic maritime region²⁵ and to be able to support the British navy in its wars against the French.²⁶ During the American War of Independence (1775–1783), while the British were losing many of their colonies in America, they feared that the French might occupy Aceh or destroy Bencoolen.²⁷ In 1784 this threat led to the appointment to Aceh of a British 'commercial resident', which can be understood as an important step towards the occupation of Penang in 1786.²⁸

The French controlled a naval base at Port Louis on the island of Mauritius (1715–1810) and had also obtained permission to refit vessels at Aceh in northern Sumatra.²⁹ In fact, the reigning Sultan of Aceh, Ala' ad-din (1781–1795), spoke some French and had knowledge of French military tactics, as he had spent a month as a young man working in the arsenal of

²⁴ For a detailed comparative study of the historical trade and development in Melaka and Penang, see Hussin (2007).

²⁵ Freeman, Donald B. *Straits of Malacca: Gateway or Gauntlet?* Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003, 135.

²⁶ Watson Andaya, Barbara and Leonard Y. Andaya. *A History of Malaysia*. Basingstoke/ London: Macmillan Education Ltd, 1982, 111.

²⁷ Reid, Anthony. "The French in Sumatra and the Malay World, 1760–1890." *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde*, Deel 129, 2/3de Afl., (1973): 195-238, 202.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Freeman, Donald B. *Straits of Malacca: Gateway or Gauntlet?* Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003, 135.

the Île de France (Mauritius).³⁰ Due to Britain's involvement in the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, British India needed to be secured from other contending colonial powers. The Straits of Melaka's proximity to the Bay of Bengal, their being well sheltered, and their providing the quickest route to China were decisive attributes in favour of the establishment of a settlement in the Straits.³¹ The British need for a naval base was also connected to having been deprived of the use of Dutch Trincomalee.³² Thus, in order to meet these military and naval requirements, a dockyard and shipbuilding facilities were established on the island of Penang shortly after the founding of George Town.

Generally, therefore, the British need for a naval base to repair ships was linked to maritime dynamics and tensions between the European colonial powers in the Indian Ocean. The limitations of British India in being able to provide support and repairs and project strong sea power play a crucial role in this trans-maritime perspective. Bombay, the nearest ship-repairing port, was too far from the ports on the eastern coast of India. The adverse impact of monsoon winds makes the restrictions imposed by this distance even clearer: it took a month to sail from Madras to Bombay, which was as long as it took to travel between Madras and Penang. But the difference was that in Bombay the ships had to wait for the monsoon winds to change before making a return trip to Madras (or sail further to Calcutta). Penang, on the other hand, enabled ships to sail along the coast and return to Madras during the same monsoon season.³³

In sum, the foregoing reasons suggest that the founding of George Town was associated with colonial expansion, economic calculation, and strategic political interests: first in the attempt to secure a strategic site on the maritime route between India and China; second

³⁰ Reid, Anthony. "The French in Sumatra and the Malay World, 1760–1890." *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde*, Deel 129, 2/3de Afl., (1973): 195-238, 198.

³¹ Wee, Samuel Tien Wang. *British Strategic Interests in the Straits of Malacca, 1786-1819*. Thesis (M.A.) at Simon Fraser University, 1992, 6.

³² *Ibid.*, 8.

³³ For further insights on the effect of monsoon patterns on British ships, routes, and the role of the Malay Peninsula, see Clodd (1948, 1f.).

to develop a rival port to the Dutch in the Malay Archipelago; and third to provide a naval base and pre-empt French imperial interests in the region.

By examining the founding of George Town as an expansion of British colonial rule for geographical, economic, and political reasons, so far this paper has put the East India Company and the British Empire at the centre of the discussion. Turning now to a micro-perspective, the following section scrutinises instead not how whole bodies like the EIC actually behaved, but how key figures functioned as middlemen. Although working as mediators for larger entities, these key figures had their own motives and experiences, which could play a significant role in history, as will be demonstrated below.

Accordingly, the following section describes these key actors, their backgrounds and interests in order to emphasise the complexity and relevant local contexts in which global history is played out ‘on the ground’.³⁴ As such it adds a necessary and complementary micro-perspective to the founding of George Town.

Key Actors in the Founding of George Town: A Micro-Perspective

One of the key figures involved in the founding of George Town was the British country trader Francis Light. The country trade was a term for the private commercial activity that took place between the coast of India and other Asian port cities, in contrast to the trade between India and Europe, which was undertaken by the British East India Company. Captains of the shipping vessels engaged in this type of intra-Asian commerce, as well as the ships used to transport the goods, were both referred to as ‘country traders’.

The interaction between country trade and European trade increased in the eighteenth century due to the expansion of European political and military interests from the 1740s

³⁴ Ferguson, James. *Global Shadows: Africa in the Neoliberal World Order*. Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2006.

onwards.³⁵ British private merchants especially had increased their commercial activities by the mid-eighteenth century.³⁶ As a country trader, Light himself had a great personal interest in the development of Penang for his own trading networks.

Light acquired the island of Penang on behalf of the British East India Company from the Sultan of Kedah, Abdullah Mukarram Shah. Kedah is today the state north of Penang on the Malaysian peninsula, originally, Penang was part of the Sultanate of Kedah. In exchange, he promised the Sultan military protection from the encroaching Siamese and Burmese armies. Light was a crucial actor in the negotiations between several factions that eventually led to the EIC selecting Penang as its first base in Southeast Asia.

Looking more closely at Light's background as a single actor, his biography challenges the usual binary opposition between European and local. Though Light was born and raised in England, he came to the region of Southeast Asia at quite a young age. Light joined the British navy in his early twenties, became a country trader in the Bay of Bengal region shortly thereafter, and in his late forties acquired Penang. Thus, he had spent half his life, and *all* his adult life, in South and Southeast Asia by the time he founded George Town. During this period, he became fluent in Malay, a *lingua franca* of the time, and was also able to speak Siamese and Hindi.³⁷ As an itinerant trader in the Bay of Bengal region, Light was based in different places, including Madras, Calcutta, Aceh, and Junk Ceylon. In a biographical portrait of Light and one of his sons, William Light, who later founded the port city of Adelaide, A. Francis Steuart writes:

When once out in the East, Francis Light became the captain of an East Indian "country ship", and, rapidly acquiring full command of the Malay language, Oriental customs, and the knowledge of ruling men, traded with Siam and Malaya with great success. He obtained "a title of nobility" from the former country, bore an "excellent

³⁵ Basu, Bhaskarjyoti. "Francis Jourdan and the Reopening of South-East Asian Trade in the 1760s by the Madras Association of Merchants." *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* Vol. 6 (2005-2006): 1275–1282, 1275.

³⁶ Furber, Holden. *Rival Empires of Trade in the Orient, 1600-1800*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1976, 285f.

³⁷ Mackay, Colin. *A History of Phuket and the Surrounding Region*. Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 2013, 207f.

character,” and was held in “the highest esteem with the Malay, Siamese, and Pegu chiefs”.³⁸

Due to the extensive period of time that Light lived in Southeast Asia, he acquired local expertise and connections that were integral to George Town’s founding. The correspondence preserved in the Madras Records Office³⁹ details the EIC’s attempt to establish trading factories in Aceh and Kedah around 1771. Both Aceh and Kedah were located at the northern entrance to the Straits of Melaka, opposite one another. Aceh had been a prosperous commercial hub until the late thirties of the eighteenth century, being reopened thirty years later by private traders.⁴⁰ The Madras Records show that Light suggested installing a trading post in Penang as early as 1771 – not to the East India Company, but at first to the trading company he was employed by at that time. He wrote:

The King (of Kedda) is very anxious ... to know your resolution (about taking up the commerce monopoly of Kedda) and I am no less so not only on the account of the disgrace (which) must accrue in case they refuse, but the detriment which our trade in general will suffer, in case this place falls into the hands of any other. Should the Dutch have it they would possess the entire command of the whole straits, for on the coast of Kedda is a river capable of receiving their largest ships at half flood defended from all weather ... Had I the authority to act, neither the Danes, nor the Dutch, nor the French or anyone else should drive me out.⁴¹

The company did not follow Light’s recommendation due to the demands the Sultan made in return, namely protection against his enemies. Light left the company less than a year later and from then onwards traded on his own account. The India Office Records (IOR), now at the British Library in London, have letters written by Light recommending the island of Penang to the EIC as a strategic settlement for the company, including similar comments stressing competing interests in the region.⁴²

³⁸ Steuart, Archibald Francis. *A Short Sketch of the Lives of Francis and William Light, the founders of Penang and Adelaide; with extracts from their journals*. London: Sampson Low & Co, 1901, 6.

³⁹ ‘Public Sundries’, 21, Record Office, No. 1374; discussed in an essay by Das Gupta ((1956) 2001).

⁴⁰ Das Gupta, Ashin. “Studies in Madras Records: Trade in the Straits”, in *The World of the Indian Ocean Merchant 1500–180: Collected Essays of Ashin Das Gupta* (1956), ed. Chakrabarti Kunal, 474–481. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001, 475.

⁴¹ cited in Das Gupta 2001, 476.

⁴² India Office Records, G/14/1, SS, Miscellaneous Papers, letter from Light, copy dated 18 March 1784, Fort St George (Madras).

Light's suggestion that both Penang and Thalang should be developed as British trading ports for the EIC was made in September 1777, when he wrote to Calcutta indicating that the King of Siam was interested in cultivating 'friendship with the Company'.⁴³ Thalang was located on the island of Junk Ceylon, where Light was residing, which at that time belonged to the King of Siam. Light became more explicit in pushing for Thalang in 1780, claiming that the inhabitants of the port would support British influence, since there were too many uncertainties about the rule of the King of Siam, Tak Sin, and the potential threat the country's inhabitants faced from Burmese and Malays. As Simmonds points out:

The possibility of European intervention, especially if directed by men like Light and Scott, who were personally well known, could have seemed an insurance against the schemes of Asian neighbours. The desire for local autonomy was also a motive. This was the probable cause of the initial resistance to Tak Sin's [the king of Siam] attempt to re-impose central control.⁴⁴

Scott, the European mentioned in this quotation, was a business partner and close friend of Light, and thus another key figure it is necessary to briefly introduce here in order to deepen our understanding of how George Town was founded. Scott played a decisive role in the history of the selection of Penang and subsequently in the foundation and early years of the young port settlement.

Light and Scott had been acquaintances from the time they served together on the British naval ship *HMS Arrogant*. At that time Light was 22 years old, and Scott was 17. Later, when Light became a country trader based in Aceh, he learned that Scott was also trading from Thalang. It is unclear how long Scott had resided in Thalang before he and Light reconnected, but Scott was already an established and successful merchant on his own account.⁴⁵

Scott's appearance and habits must have been quite alien to other European traders, as they described him as living 'a vagrant life amongst the Malays' and as having 'adopted the

⁴³ Simmonds, E. H. S. "The Thalang Letters, 1773–94: Political Aspects and the Trade in Arms." *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 26(03), (1963): 592–619, 594.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* 596.

⁴⁵ Mackay, Colin. *A History of Phuket and the Surrounding Region*. Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 2013, 210.

dress and customs of the Malays,' or as a 'perfect Malay.' While Scott obviously acquired local expertise like Francis Light, he did not manage to appeal to fellow British traders and officials like Light did. Scott's life-style was described as 'dishonorable and degenerate'.⁴⁶ He had at least one local wife and had children with her. In addition, he had relationships with several other women at ports right along the coast, from which other children were born.⁴⁷

In 1772, when Light left the trading firm he had worked for in Aceh and established his own private commercial network with his own ship, he also made Thalang his base. It seems to be at this point that he re-established his friendship with Scott. Subsequently, the two cooperated in their trading endeavours in the Bay of Bengal region through Thalang.

In a joint effort, Scott and Light tried to bring Thalang as well as Penang under British control. The 'Thalang letters' in the archive of the Library of the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London⁴⁸ provide evidence for this coordinated effort. The two men wrote in favour of both places, with Scott arguing strongly for Thalang and Light voicing his support for Penang, though simultaneously always making sure to suggest that the other place would be suitable as well.

From at least 1772 onwards Light was aware of and involved in the local politics involving Siam, Burma, and Kedah. He clearly knew about the Burmese threat to and Siam's rivalry with Kedah. Historian Freeman even reports that Light had helped the Sultan of Kedah repel an attack by Bugis forces in 1785.⁴⁹

As well as being fully aware of local rivalries, Light was also concerned about the Dutch dominance in the Malay Archipelago and feared that the French would enter the northern parts of this region through trading agreements with the Burmese.⁵⁰ Whether Light

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Examined in detail by Simmonds (1963).

⁴⁹ Freeman, Donald B. *Straits of Malacca: Gateway or Gauntlet?* Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003, 136.

⁵⁰ Simmonds, E. H. S. "The Thalang Letters, 1773–94: Political Aspects and the Trade in Arms." *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 26(03), (1963): 592–619.

was really personally concerned about these inter-European rivalries or whether he just knew it would be a valuable argument to use with the EIC is unclear. However, he certainly stressed these aspects in his letters to the Company, recommending Penang as a possible choice for a settlement by the British.⁵¹

It seems as if the EIC was by that point agreeing to bring either Thalang or Penang under its control for a new British settlement. In order to decide between them, the EIC Council asked Captain Joseph Price, one of the East India Company's directors in India, to write a report on Thalang and Penang and recommend which of them should be brought under the EIC's control. Price wrote in favour of Penang, saying that it was strategically located on the trading route to China, whereas Thalang was too far to the north.⁵²

In addition, Price stressed in his report that ships sailing into Penang were not affected by the south-west monsoon as was the case with Thalang. Even though Southeast Asia is described as the region where the monsoons – from the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea – meet, Penang did not form part of this ecological system. Its location at a choke point in the Straits of Melaka and the fact that the coast for the possible port faced the nearby mainland instead of the sea made it a strategic and secure location.

Light had already stressed these factors prior to Price. Furthermore, unlike Thalang, Penang was almost uninhabited, a factor Light also considered beneficial, even though he had described the willingness of Thalang's inhabitants to cooperate and support the British. Eventually the Council decided on Penang, but it did not give any specific instruction about Thalang, even though, as Price and Light had suggested, it could have been occupied by the same forces that were sent to Penang.

In addition to Penang's various geographical advantages, stressed by Light and Price in their reports, Francis Light's close relationship with the Sultan of Kedah was critical to the

⁵¹ See, for instance, India Office Records, G/14/1, SS, Miscellaneous Papers, letter from Light, copy dated 18 March 1784, Fort St George (Madras); and *ibid.* 10 April 1784, Fort St George.

⁵² Simmonds, E. H. S. "The Thalang Letters, 1773–94: Political Aspects and the Trade in Arms." *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 26(03), (1963): 592–619, 601.

founding of this colonial port settlement. The position of the Sultan of Kedah in local geopolitical disputes and contexts must be considered a central reason leading to the British settlement in the Malay Archipelago. Thus, to complete this historical perspective on key figures in the founding of Penang, one remaining character to discuss is, of course, the aforementioned Sultan of Kedah, Abdullah Mukaram Shah.

Abdullah Mukaram Shah was the Sultan of Kedah from 1778 to 1797. The more than a hundred and thirty letters sent by the Sultan to Francis Light between 1785 and 1794, the year Light died, reveals that the two had a close relationship.⁵³ Moreover, this correspondence is evidence that Light was not only able to speak *pasar* Malay when conducting his commercial activities among the locals, but was also able to read and write it in the Jawi script. *Pasar* Malay literally means ‘market Malay’ and denotes a colloquial form of Bahasa Melayu. *Jawi* is an Arabic script used to write Malay, Acehnese, Minangkabau, and several other languages in Southeast Asia.

Generally, Malay was the *lingua franca* for commercial negotiations in the region, which meant that a country trader needed to be able to speak at least colloquial Malay for his trading activities. However, more successful traders like Light were also able to read and write formal Malay.⁵⁴

Light, who mainly traded in guns, cotton, and opium between Aceh, Thalang, and Kedah, became an acquaintance of the Sultan of Kedah during the course of his trading activities in the region. The Sultan faced continuous naval assaults from the Selangor Bugis pirate fleet, and his troops had been expelled from Junk Ceylon after a Siamese interregnum.⁵⁵ As the Sultan hoped that an alliance with the Europeans would help him in his local conflicts, he sought Light’s help.

⁵³ The Light Letters, 1786 - 1791. School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) Archives, University of London. GB 102 MS 40320. They are originally Malay written in Jawi script, but have recently been transliterated into Latin script.

⁵⁴ Miller, W. G. “English Country Traders and Their Relations with Malay Rulers in the Late Eighteenth Century.” *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 84(1), (2011): 23–45, 30.

⁵⁵ For more details on this matter, see Mackay (2013).

At this time, Light was working for a firm engaged in trade and simultaneously leasing British India-trained sepoy mercenary troops. The firm had the ability to defend Kuala Kedah, the main port within the Sultan's territories. In return, the Sultan had offered the firm a share of his royal trade monopoly in the region. But the directors of the firm, as pointed out above, turned down the offer, after which Light proposed the deal to the British East India Company in Madras. However, initially the EIC also turned down the offer.⁵⁶ Even though this first attempt was unsuccessful, Light continued to mediate between the Sultan and the EIC.

Because of the Sultan's continuing dispute with Siam, it seemed beneficial for him to have a strong ally such as the British protecting his territorial and commercial interests. He therefore agreed to offer the British the island of Penang that Light had requested in return for their protection against possible invasion by the Siamese. Light brought this new proposal to the EIC. Part of the eventual agreement between the Sultan and the EIC was that the Sultan would be protected during local disputes.

The Sultan must have trusted Light greatly personally to have allowed him to conduct the negotiations. Despite the fact that he almost certainly wanted to make use of Light's contacts and influence in Calcutta, he must have been totally convinced of Light's honesty and concern for the prosperity of Kedah, as he entrusted Light to be his *wakil* or personal representative in Calcutta.⁵⁷ In addition, he honoured Light with one of his 'maids'.⁵⁸

Who this maid actually was is a matter of dispute. In Penang there is a well-known folk tale that Francis Light's wife, Martina Rozells, was not only this maid but in fact a Kedah princess.⁵⁹ The story goes that she was the daughter of one of the Sultan of Kedah's later wives and therefore of lower social status and was also of mixed Portuguese–Siamese

⁵⁶ Mackay, Colin. *A History of Phuket and the Surrounding Region*. Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 2013, 209.

⁵⁷ A *wakil* in Islamic law is an agent or delegate who acts on the behalf of a sovereign.

⁵⁸ Bonney, Rollin. "Francis Light and Penang." *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 38(1) (1965): 135–158, 143.

⁵⁹ Light and Rozells were not legally married, although they lived together as if they were.

heritage. In this folk tale, moreover, Penang is viewed as the dowry the Sultan gave to Light on the latter's marriage to Rozells.

Rozells was indeed a Eurasian, having been locally born of mixed Siamese and Portuguese parentage. However, as is often the case in the histories of women, little is known about her. What is known is that she had been born locally and raised in the Malay Peninsula, probably in Siam (present-day Thailand). The Sultan of Kedah had eighty-seven children by different wives, so it is indeed possible that one of them was Rozells. In fact, however, Rozells and Light had been living together in Junk Ceylon since 1772,⁶⁰ more than a decade prior to the founding of George Town, which makes the story of Penang being Light's dowry unlikely. After co-habiting together in Junk Ceylon, Light and Rozells moved to Kedah, and later to Penang. Moreover, archival material on the negotiations between the Sultan and Francis Light does not indicate any marital relationship.⁶¹ Instead, in the letters written by the Sultan of Kedah to Light before and after the founding of Penang, the Sultan always addressed the British country trader as a 'friend' (*sahabat*)⁶² rather than a relative by marriage.

Nonetheless, the narrative of Rozells being a princess and Penang being her dowry was taken up by Elisha Traupaud, who had joined the EIC in 1776 and wrote *A Short Account of Prince of Wales Island East Indies*,⁶³ published in London in 1788, only two years after George Town's foundation. Despite the fact that the story about Rozells and Penang was untrue, Traupaud published it as a coeval historical record. The author was in fact acquainted with Light, which raises the question of whether or not Light corrected or indeed invented the story, or whether Traupaud decided to write it off his own bat.

⁶⁰ Simmonds, E. H. S. "Francis Light and The Ladies of Thalang". *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* Vol. 38, No. 2 (208) (1965): 213-228, 215.

⁶¹ Light; Francis (1740-1794); Superintendent of Penang, *The Light Letters, 1786 - 1791*. School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) Archives, University of London. GB 102 MS 40320.

⁶² See, for instance, SOAS MS 40320/1, f.14

⁶³ After acquisition by the EIC, the island of Penang was renamed "Prince of Wales Island", a name has never caught on.

However, the creation of this story and its widespread status as a local narrative hints at a popular practice of the day of connecting local wives to royalty in order to increase their reputations. Today, narratives about a royal lineage in Eurasian communities seem to be quite common in Penang, and for many Eurasian Penangites this relationship is repeatedly associated with Martina Rozells herself. In addition, as intermarriage in port cities like George Town was to a large extent between slaves, the urge to create an alternative narrative must have been even more important for women's reputations.⁶⁴ In the case of Martina Rozells, the story about Francis Light marrying this Kedah princess and receiving Penang as a dowry was merged with the story of the Sultan giving Light a maid, probably actually a Siamese slave.⁶⁵

Yet, the Sultan's solid trust in Light is reflected not only in him providing him with a maid, but even more so in his making him his personal middleman and representative. Light, now the Sultan's official agent (*wakil*), took a letter containing the Sultan's conditions to Calcutta. This letter set out the following terms:

Conditions required from Government by the King of Queda

Article 1st

That the Hon'ble Company shall be Guardian of the Seas and whatever Enemy may come to attack the King shall be an enemy of the Hon'ble Company and the expense shall be borne by the Hon'ble Company.

[Article] 2nd

All vessels Junks Prows small and large coming from either East or West and bound to the Port of Queda shall not be stopped or hindered by the Hon'ble Company's Agent but left to their own Wills either to buy and sell with us or with the Company at Pooloo Pinang as they shall think proper.

[Article] 3rd

The Articles Opium Tin and Rattans being part of our Revenue are prohibited and Qualla Mooda, Pray and Kreaan places where these articles are produced, being so near to Pinang, that when the Hon'ble Company's Resident shall remain there this Prohibition will be constantly broke thro' therefore it should end and the Governor General allow us our Profits on these Articles, viz. 30,000 Spanish Dollars every year.

[Article] 4th

In case the Hon'ble Company's Agent gives credit to any of the King's Relations, Ministers, officers or Ryatts the Agent shall make no claim upon the King.

[Article] 5th

⁶⁴ For a detailed account on Women and Slavery in the Indian Ocean World see Campbell, Miers, and Miller (2007).

⁶⁵ Bonney, Rollin. "Francis Light and Penang." *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 38(1) (1965): 135–158, 143.

Any man in this country without exception, be it our Son or Brother, who shall become an enemy to Us, shall become an Enemy to the Hon'ble Company, nor shall the Hon'ble Company's Agent protect them without Breach of this Treaty which is to remain while Sun and Moon endures.

[Article] 6th

If any enemy come to attack us by land and we require assistance from the Hon'ble Company of Men, Arms or ammunition the Hon'ble Company will supply us at our expence [sic].⁶⁶

These six conditions concerning an annual payment in compensation for the anticipated losses in trade, the protection of the Sultan by the EIC's armies, and providing him with arms and ammunition stated in the letter were treated as negotiable by Light, even though it is doubtful how flexible the Sultan may have been with these terms. Light took the liberty to write remarks about some of these points, including the Sultan's request for protection, in order to make them more acceptable to the EIC. Furthermore, Light seems to have deliberately failed to mention the fact that the Kedah sultanate was a tributary state of Siam and the Burmese. Mentioning this might have prevented the EIC from agreeing to the deal.⁶⁷

Eventually, for all the economic, political and geographical reasons outlined at the beginning of this paper, the Council considered Light's proposal, and Price's affirmation of it, favourably. Finally, in early 1786 Light received approval from the EIC to found George Town, even though the agreement with the Sultan of Kedah quoted above was never officially signed.⁶⁸ As a result, after Light took possession of Penang, the Sultan's request for military support from the EIC was rejected by Marquess Cornwallis, the governor-general of India. Offended by this rebuff, the Sultan tried to recapture the island in 1790 but unsuccessfully.⁶⁹ He was eventually forced to transfer it to the East India Company in return for a payment of 6,000 Spanish dollars a year.

The significant role of private merchants such as Francis Light is rarely discussed in historiographies of Penang. Private merchants like Light often functioned as intermediaries

⁶⁶ Extracted from SSR. Vol. 2, f. 33–36 (Fort William, 2 March, 1786), British Library.

⁶⁷ Bonney, Rollin. "Francis Light and Penang." *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 38(1) (1965): 135–158, 145.

⁶⁸ Mackay, Colin. *A History of Phuket and the Surrounding Region*. Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 2013, 209.

⁶⁹ For a detailed analysis of the Sultan's unsuccessful attack on Penang, see Clodd (1948), especially chapter VI.

between the EIC and the Malay Sultans. W.G. Miller has analysed relations between the country traders and Malay rulers and pointed out four situations of contact between the two groups: ‘to obtain provisions, to engage in commerce, to undertake political activity, and to socialize with the local Malays’.⁷⁰ He concludes that the ability of the country traders to adapt, their ability to speak in the local languages and, equally importantly, their understanding of how to behave appropriately produced a form of knowledge that helped both authorities.⁷¹

The activities of Francis Light and his role in the emergence of George Town demonstrate this crucial contribution by certain individuals acting as key figures. On the one hand it illustrates the importance of country traders as a group,⁷² while on the other hand it is an example of the specificity and complexity of connectivity processes and their manifestations in the case of the founding of George Town.

Francis Light managed to function as a middleman not only for the EIC, who asked him for reports and advice, but also simultaneously for the Sultan of Kedah. As a result of this mediation, Light himself took possession of Penang, though he did so in the name of the East India Company. To put it more pointedly, as a middleman Light successfully negotiated in the name of *both* sides in order to acquire an island for himself. Light became Penang’s governor, and his close friend William Scott became the richest merchant on the island.

Conclusion

In order to analyse the maritime connections and networking processes that led to the founding of George Town, connected histories from a macro- and micro-perspective have been at the centre of this paper. Through this connection, common binary notions of global and local, coloniser and colonised, Europeans and locals, are challenged, especially as these

⁷⁰ Miller, W. G. “English Country Traders and Their Relations with Malay Rulers in the Late Eighteenth Century.” *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 84(1), (2011): 23–45, 26.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² See, for example, Bassett (1971) and Watson Andaya (1983).

antagonistic models are less useful in exploring the intricacy of the beginning of the port city. This paper demonstrated how the emergence of this port city is an outcome and manifestation of processes of connectivity within the broader Indian Ocean World. Such connected histories encompass the various conditions, multiple motives, and actors from different economic, cultural, and social backgrounds and experiences.

Penang's geographical advantages, British economic interests and global political currents were what led to the founding of this port city. Yet, such reasoning was embedded in local rivalries and was dependent on various actors. Consequently, to understand how the port city came into being, it is imperative not only to examine the context of imperial interests from a macro-perspective, but also to engage with the various individuals involved in the foundation and their personal interests.

Accordingly, Light's biography demonstrates his local expertise, as he not only spoke the languages of the region, but was so conversant in the resident customs and cultures that he even obtained a local title of nobility, was held in high esteem⁷³ and was living with a local wife, who accompanied him when he moved from place to place. As a result, it is not appropriate to treat Light as one pole of the usual binary opposition between European and local, nor British and Malay for that matter. Instead he proved to be an adaptable character, moving proficiently between different languages, cultural codes, and localities – features that turned Light into an ideal middleman, not only for the British EIC, but also for the Sultan of Kedah. In contrast to his friend and collaborator William Scott, who had 'gone native'⁷⁴ and was not able to appeal any longer to his fellow countryman but was described by them as 'dishonorable and degenerate',⁷⁵ Francis Light managed to be trusted equally by both his compatriots and the locals.

⁷³ Steuart, Archibald Francis. *A Short Sketch of the Lives of Francis and William Light, the founders of Penang and Adelaide; with extracts from their journals*. London: Sampson Low & Co, 1901, 6.

⁷⁴ Campbell, Ian Christopher. *'Gone Native' in Polynesia: Captivity Narratives and Experiences from the South Pacific*. Westport/London: Greenwood Press, 1998.

⁷⁵ Mackay, Colin. *A History of Phuket and the Surrounding Region*. Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 2013, 210.

The various circumstances leading to the founding of George Town outlined above clearly indicate that it cannot be described simply as resulting from the expansion of British Empire. The establishment of the port city was rather the outcome of complex networking processes on several levels, encompassing the political and economic interests of larger bodies like the EIC and the British Empire, as well as the individual interests of key figures, in this case the country trader Francis Light and the Sultan of Kedah Abdullah Mukaram Shah. Focusing on Light's biography, the historical narrative not only adds a complementary micro-perspective to the historiography of George Town's foundation, it also simultaneously scrutinised the pivotal role of key figures as middlemen.

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