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THE STRAIT OF MALACCA (MALAYSIA) WITH ITS ROLE IN THE NETWORK OF MARITIME TRADE IN ASIA AND EAST – WEST CULTURAL EXCHANGE IN THE MIDDLE AGES

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ABSTRACT

Founded around 1404, as the oldest city in Malaysia, Malacca (Malay: Melaka) is a bustling gathering place for traders from China, India, Arab and European countries. With its geostrategic location as it lies on an important maritime route from Europe, Africa, South Asia, the Middle East to East Asia, Malacca has become one of the region's largest international trading ports of Southeast Asia region in particular and the world in general. This commercial port held a golden position in the East - West-trading system in the middle ages. Besides the favorable economic conditions, this is also the place that carries many imprints of cultural interference, the place of exchange between the Eastern and Western civilizations. The multicultural imprints has clearly shown in the life, architecture and religion in Malacca city from the past to the present. In this article, we focus on researching about the geostrategic position of Malacca trading port and the East - West cultural exchange in this city that was known as a "Venice of Asia".

INTRODUCTION

The Strait of Malacca lies between the Malay Peninsula and Sumatra, connecting the East Sea and the Indian Ocean. This strait is about 805 km long (500 miles) and the narrowest place is only 1.2 km. This is one of the important clues in the background of international maritime trade. The Strait of Malacca has a very favorable geo-economic position when located on an extremely important traffic route, transporting goods by water from Europe, Africa, South Asia, the Middle East to East Asia. Starting in the 7th century, the Strait of Malacca has risen to become the largest commercial center in Southeast Asia, holding a "golden position" in the East - West trading system of the world. Therefore, in this land, there is also the exchange and contact between cultures, creating a multicultural area.

RESULT AND DICUSSION

The Strait of Malacca with the formation of Southeast Asia's largest international port

During the 12th and 13th centuries, the regional and international trading activities was expanding. According to research experts, the global world trade model in this period included three interlocking systems: a European subsystem with Genoa and Venice as commercial centres; a Middle Eastern network incorporating routes in and out of Mongol Asia using the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea; and the Indian Ocean - East Asia system, incorporating Southeast Asia and the China - India networks. Venice and Genoa owed their wealth to their roles as intermediaries between Asian goods and European markets. The sea route for any of the cargoes from Eastern Indonesia, Java and from China, Indochina and Borneo, lay through Malacca Strait of the Malay Peninsula (Virginia Matheson Hooker, 2003: 59-60).

The Malay Peninsula had been an important habitation area from the time of pre-historic period due to its rich natural resources that provided the essential subsistence for the settlement. This region started from the Isthmus of Kra went downward along the Strait of Malacca passing through the Malay Peninsula into Sumatra region. The Malay Peninsula was well known as a trade centre connecting the demands of the Eastern and the Western countries. The city of Malacca is situated on the Malay peninsula, at the mouth of a small river flowing into the Straits of Malacca. The territory attached to it lies between the Malay states of Salangore, to the north-west, and that of Johore to the south-east. Interiorly, and to the east, it is bounded by Rumbowe and Johole; and on the west, by the Straits of Malacca (T.J. Newbold, 1839: 108).

From very early times, the demands of international trade and the strategic situation of ports in the region of the Straits of Malacca contributed to the working of a system of collection and exchange points which circulated through the region and fed into longer-distance trade routes. Unlike most of the other ports in the region, however, visitors to Malacca left written accounts describing its royal court, commercial success and power politics. A Portuguese traveller, Tomé Pires, in the early 16th century wrote to persuade the Portuguese that Malacca was of crucial importance to Europe: *"Whoever is lord of Malacca has his hand on the throat of Venice. As far as from Malacca, and from Malacca to China, and from China to the Moluccas, and from the Moluccas to Java, and from Java to Malacca [and] Sumatra, [all] is in our power"* (Armando Cortesão, 1944: 287).

The Straits of Malacca developed from the 7th century under the reign of the Srivijaya Empire. Along with the Sunda Strait, Malacca is known as an important "traffic knot" connecting the India and Pacific oceans. These straits played a very important role for the fairly wide-ranging and sophisticated network of maritime trade in Asia. "*This network linked ports in the western Indian Ocean to those in the Bay of Bengal and, via the Malacca Strait, to those in the South China Sea. The Middle East, East Africa, India, South East*

Asia, China and Japan thus together constituted a major trading zone" (Sushil Chaudhury & Michel Morineau, 2007: 175*)*. Through the ages, many ports had risen and declined along the straits on the west coast of the Malay Peninsula and on the east coast of Sumatra. Some of the most important were Srivijaya, Malacca, Aceh, Kedah, Riau, Palembang and Siak. As early as the third century AD, traders from India had been trading with various ports in the straits to seek products such as gold, spices and medicinal herbs, which were brought to these ports from other areas of the archipelago. These Indian traders were later followed by the Arabs and Persians. Chinese traders from South China had also been trading with the ports in the straits and beyond, although since the 16th century they rarely ventured west of the straits. The importance of the straits ports as hubs regulating the exchange of goods between the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea had, therefore, been long established, dating from at least the beginning of the first millennium AD (Nordin Hussin, 2007: 2-3). For centuries, the ports along the coasts have been more than transshipment sites for goods; they are also the places of interaction between people from foreign cultures.

The history of the Strait of Malacca illustrate how maritime transportation has influenced the development of a coastal region in the course of history. This place is one of the busiest stretches of water in the world, extending for about 800 kilometers from north to south between Malaysia and the Indonesian island of Sumatra. This is one of the important clues in the international maritime trade system. The Strait of Malacca has a very favorable geographic position when it is located on an extremely important traffic route, transporting goods by waterway from Europe, Africa, South Asia, Middle East to East Asia. Beginning in the 7th century, overcoming Kedah and Funan, Malacca rose to become the wealthiest commercial port in Asia in general and Southeast Asia in particular, as the connecting hub in the India to China trade, and the most important international source of Indonesian archipelago spices (Kenneth R. Hall, 2011: 308). Through its policies of low commercial tariffs and its rigid enforcement of weights and measures, Malacca received a global reputation as a singular place to transact fair and profitable business (Eric Tagliacozzo, 2007: 923). This was an unprecedented move, and medieval merchants from as far away as East Africa, Egypt, and Okinawa (Japan) came to understand that they would receive a fair, standardized price for their goods there, and that they could expect the same surveillance (and enforcement) on whatever merchandise they chose to buy as well. As a result of these initiatives, the city of Malacca grew in the late 1400s to become one of the largest emporia in the world, in the words of Tomé Pires, *"there is no doubt that Malacca is of such importance and profit that it seems to me it has no equal in the world"* (Barbara Watson Andaya, Leonard Y. Andaya, 1982: 37*)*.

Malacca - A multicultural city in the medieval period

Southeast Asia, and particularly Malacca (Malaysia), is not only a monsoon region but also where the major civilizations converge. In addition to the favorable economic side, this place was also the best place to spread culture, the exchange between the two great Eastern and Western civilizations. Malacca was the hub of political, cultural and commercial life for the whole

Malay archipelago. Malacca housed an urban population of 100,000 (T.J. Newbold, 1839: 122), in which eighty different languages were spoken by Malays, Chinese, Arabs, Indians, and other ethnicities (Norman Yoffee, 2015: 74). With its geostrategic on the international maritime trade route, Malacca lies at the intersection of 500 years of Portuguese, Dutch, British, Chinese, Indian and Malay culture. Malacca was designated because of a unique blend of religions, cultures, and architecture. Malacca benefited from the collective heritage of its native origins, multiple colonial influences, and its successful rise from colonial independence to create a unique blending of cultures. According to Victor Savage, if Ayutthaya is a comfortable and beautiful city for Western residents in the seventeenth century, Malacca in the sixteenth century (Victor R. Savage, 1986: 282).

Anthony King argued that *"the first characteristic of the colonial city is that it is the product of a contact situation between at least two different cultures"* (Anthony D. King, 2007: 34). Malacca city is a typical example of this view. This commercial port city came under the control of three different European powers: first the Portuguese in 1511, then the Dutch in 1641 and finally the British (first temporarily in 1795, then from 1824 as part of the Anglo-Dutch Treaty, in which the city was exchanged for Bengkulu in Sumatra). Malacca continued to be a significant locus of exchange-symbolic, cultural and material - under European colonial control. Within the city we can see the re-use of symbolic sites with each new ruling group; within the community, exchanges in language, culture, and religion also took place, creating distinctive ethnic and regional identities. Despite the shift in European economies away from the spice trade, the city retained a certain symbolic value, outweighing its usefulness as an economic asset to its colonial masters.

Following their discovery of the sea route to India in 1498, the Portuguese quickly learned the crucial role that Malacca played in the Indian Ocean trading networks. They realized that to gain a monopoly of that trade they would need to have control of Malacca and of the shipping that passed through the straits. In addition to its commercial importance for the Portuguese, Malacca soon became the principal center for their missionary endeavors in Southeast and East Asia. In 1545, Francis Xavier (1506 - 1552) first arrived in Malacca and established it as the center for the Jesuit missions in Southeast Asia and Japan. Other orders followed the Jesuits: the Dominicans (1554), the Franciscans (1581), and the Augustinians (1587) (Ooi Keat Gin, 2004: 870).

The imprint of Western culture in Malacca city focused primarily on architecture side. The architecture of Malacca demonstrated the purpose of the city - whether as a strategic site for defence, a trading port, an image of the metropolis (including the projection of Christianity), or some combination of all three. The Portuguese focused on military defence; the Dutch planned more centrally, dictating brick sizes and drainage in civil architecture; and the British incorporated Dutch buildings into their use of the city and focused on access and transport, particularly in the late nineteenth century as Malacca became a centre for the export of rubber. In addition to colonial styles of architecture, there existed both Malacca-style Malay houses and Chinese shophouses.

As a colonial settlement, Malacca experienced endless recycling, in the re-use and adaptation of sites and buildings. The urban environment at Malacca was shaped by the Portuguese, most famously in their construction of the fort, which delineated how the city's growth would be defined by this imposed structure. The fort did not replicate an existing structure in Portugal, although it used Portuguese building styles. Instead, it had a fairly organic shape, responsive to the natural geography of the hill. The lack of a grand design for the city is an indication of the intentions of the Portuguese, in that they did not know how long they would stay and that they were not creating a large settler community. Building forts was something that they tended to focus on in their colonial efforts in other parts of the world, and a clear resemblance can be seen between the fort at Malacca and those at Mombasa, Goa and elsewhere.

In Malacca, the Portuguese built a stone fortress with its name A Famosa (meaning "the Famous") whose remains are still a symbol of this city (Virginia Matheson Hooker, 2003: 73). *A Famosa* was constructed with a thick, heavy wall. While obviously designed to protect the city from attack, it created a strong separation of the city from the hinterland of the surrounding regions; this was a particularly significant feature when the city was ruled by foreigners. The walled city served visually to divorce Malacca from the surrounding region, just as the cultural influences within the walls were creating a culture distinctive from that of the neighbouring regions. *A Famosa* is like *"a small Portuguese community"* (Abdul Rahman Embong, 2015: 44). Later, the fort and other buildings were re-employed by the Dutch, who carved their own reliefs into the walls to demonstrate ownership. The Catholic church of Our Lady of the Annunciation was renamed St Paul's and used for worship by members of the Dutch Reformed Church. The city thus demonstrates similarities as well as differences in urban creation between different European powers.

By the end of the sixteenth century the Dutch and the English had arrived in Southeast Asian waters. The Dutch were determined to drive the Portuguese out of all their strongholds in the region and repeatedly attempted to take Malacca; in alliance with the Acehnese, they finally conquered the city in January 1641 after a long siege (Ooi Keat Gin, 2004: 870). The Dutch made a series of attempts to seize Malacca, finally capturing the city after a lengthy siege in 1641. After they took possession, they did not attempt what they had initially tried (unsuccessfully) to do in Batavia: that is, to replicate a Dutch city. Nor did they bring large numbers of civilian settlers to Malacca who could serve as citizens of a "European" city or as an audience for the official performance of Dutch identity. Thus the city continued to develop as an Asian city under European jurisdiction rather than as a European city in the tropics (Arsahd et al., 2019, 2020; Salman et al., 2019; Shabbir et al., 2020).

Dutch construction included St John's Fort, which was situated for inland defence rather than defence against attack from the sea. Besides demonstrating the politics involved - that there was as great a threat to the city in an overland attack by Malay neighbours as in an attack from the sea - the fort serves to imply a visual dimension of hostility to the surrounding area and to reinforce

the insularity of the city. The Dutch also built the Stadhuys (the town hall, which still survives and is now a museum), other administrative edifices, and private housing. The historic Stadhuys featured the traditional style Dutch colonial buildings. The square itself is considered to be a unique space for community gathering, public festivals, and daily life within the city (Julie Williams Lawless, 2015: 42).

Under the Dutch, there was a small European population with few artisans or tradesmen, which meant that the European influence on material culture was less than it was in other colonies (Kernial Singh Sandhu, Paul Wheatley, 1983: 206). Chinese and Indian artisans were often involved in construction and design, which led to the development of a unique visual idiom and helped to give the city and its residents a particular identity. By the nineteenth century, for example, the Peranakan (local-born) Chinese had developed a distinct identity, reflected in their cuisine and costume, and a distinct aesthetic in material culture and architecture. This group was made up of the descendants of early Chinese traders and Malay women, and its syncretic culture was particular to Malacca and to urban living (Ahmad & Shabbir, 2020; Ashraf et al., 2019; R. Salman et al., 2019). Those Malacca Peranakans who later moved to Penang and Singapore would take their culture and aesthetic with them (Chee Beng Tan, 1988).

Significantly, Malacca did not rely on an agrarian hinterland, owing to its "unusually favourable position" for sea trade (M.A.P. Meilink-Roelofsz, 1962: 7). This favourability depended on supplies being conveyed from outside and a certain level of trade being sustained; however, this was not always maintained under the Dutch. Nevertheless, Malacca's economic position helped to accelerate the development of a distinctive localised urban identity, separate from the culture of the surrounding areas.

Following the Dutch's rule in Malacca, British's culture appeared in this commercial city. It was also under British rule that the distinctive architecture of Malacca, particularly the shophouse, developed. Typically, this kind of building has two or more storeys, with the residents generally using the ground floor for commercial purposes, such as running a business or practising a craft; the upper floors are reserved for private living space. The building is not free-standing but connected to several other shophouses to form a terrace or block. These blocks then make up streets and squares. A shophouse characteristically features a *kaki lima* (A verandahed walkway extending about 1,5 m from the frontage). This covered path typically has an arched opening connecting one house with the next, providing a continuous walkway along the façade of the shophouse block, and offering pedestrians protection from both the heat of the sun and tropical rain, as well as helping to keep the houses cool. The first shophouses were built under the Dutch, but the evolution of distinctive design motifs that have become known as Straits Baroque came into being while the city was under the British control.

Besides the imprints of Western culture (Portuguese, Dutch and British), Malacca is also the place to spread Eastern culture. The two major economic-cultural centers at that time were India and China. It is almost the beginning and end point of Southeast Asian merchants. The distance between the Indian

and Chinese markets calculated from Malacca does not have much difference, or in other words, Malacca seems to be the midpoint of the transport route connecting India and China. This is the ideal distance because in the 7th century - the 13th century, boats were not convenient enough for long trips across the ocean. For India and Saudi Arabia, Malacca is a strategically located road because they can save travel and transportation. Meanwhile, to the east, in contrast, Malacca is the gateway for Southeast Asian merchants, China and Japan to trade and exchange exotic and luxury products from the West (Hoang Phan Hanh Hien, 2016 :45).

Malacca's cultural influence spread beyond the immediate vicinity of the Straits throughout the Malay-Indonesian archipelago. A principal factor in the transmission of its culture was its association with Islam. The numerous Muslim Gujarati merchants who traded with Malacca played an important part in the conversion of Malacca to Islam, and Malacca soon became a center for the dissemination of Islam in the region (Ooi Keat Gin, 2004: 869). After being spread into Malacca, Islam quickly became the city's religion. The golden age of Malacca city was associated with the formation and development of the Malacca Sultanate. Coins from 15th century Malacca bore the new titles of sultan and shah and used Arabic phrases to describe the ruler as *"Helper of the World and of the Religion"*. Visitors to Malacca from other Muslim regions would have recognised these formulae of authority and perhaps felt reassured that they were dealing with a ruler who upheld Muslim values, respected Muslim law and protected fellow Muslims (Virginia Matheson Hooker, 2003: 62).

Along with the culture of the indigenous Malay people, Malacca also had the culture of the Baba-Nyona, the Chitty people (Tamil people in southern India live and follow the customs and culture of indigenous Malays). The Baba-Nyonya culture was actually started with the historical moment, when Sultan Mansur Shah get married with the Ming Princess Hang Li Poh. Later that, many Chinese foreigners had been brought into Malacca, and so they rooted themselves with the local Malays, hence Baba-Nyonya are formed, and a new culture was generated, where people nowadays recognized Baba-Nyonya is people who have Chinese traditions and blend with the local Malay culture (Muhammad Zainuddi, Chuah Pei Jin, Yu Tieng Wei, Petra Leong, Kek Koh Wah, 2012: 8).

If the culture of the Baba-Nyona and Chitty people is present in the Malacca cuisine, the culture of the Indians and British people is not really bold, it is easy to see Chinese culture, Dutch and almost everywhere in the city. Almost the whole center of the old town is narrow streets, narrow houses, in Chinese architecture, sometimes with columns, Dutch-style doors with lanterns hanging in front of the door. But the most bold is Cheng Hoon Teng pagoda built in 1685, with tile roof, entrance gate, main worshiping hall... featured Chinese architecture.

CONCLUSION

It can be said that Malacca has really played an important role in the regional and international regional trade system in general. For many centuries, the Straits of Malacca had been pivotal to the development of the trading world of

Asia. It was an important waterway linking East and West Asia, its strategic location between the two regions and its sheltered position between the island of Sumatra and the Malay peninsula giving it an advantage not available to other areas fronting the China Sea on the east and the Indian Ocean on the west. Through the determined efforts of its early rulers Malacca became a dominant power and created a Malay Empire. Malacca became an international port city and a magnet for traders from around the world. Some of these adapted to local conditions, settled down and served the government which thus evolved into a cosmopolitan society. Government, power and the right to rule were the preserve of Malays... Foreigners in Malacca included Arabs, Gujeratis, Indians, Siamese, Chinese, Japanese, Cambodians, Persians, and Malay communities from throughout the archipelago. For centuries, Malacca has become a geostrategic city on the world trade route. In addition to economic factors, Malacca port trade has moved to a higher level of a mix of cultures and interactions between different ethnic communities. In this city, Western culture and Eastern culture (Portuguese, Dutch, British, Arab, Chinese, Indian and Malay culture) have "found each other", interfering and coexisting, developing to nowadays.

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