

BOOK REVIEW

Through Turbulent Terrain: Trade of the Straits Port of Penang
by Loh Wei Ling & Jefferey Seow. Kuala Lumpur:
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The monograph, *Through Turbulent Terrain: Trade of the Straits Port of Penang* tells the tumultuous history of Penang's economy which had suffered through many trials in its attempt to remain competitive and relevant against the test of time. This is thanks to the unique history of how the island developed, from 1786. Dr Loh Wei Leng and Jeffrey Seow traced Penang's trade history with ports in the East and the West. The establishment of Penang Island was due to the fact that it was located right in between India and Canton, making it a most suitable port of call. The island went on to become British East India Company's port for collection and distribution of goods in the Straits of Malacca. Next, we learn about the island's development into standard port equipped with a naval dockyard, outpost and naval fleet. Penang's importance grew increasingly in 1826 when the British formed the Straits Settlements with Malacca, Singapore and Penang with Penang as its administrative centre. However, at the same time the island had to compete with the Dutch in Sumatra who were fighting to monopolise trade in the Straits of Malacca. One of their tactics was to ban Penang from trading in Sumatra.

Additionally, the *turbulent terrain* is further detailed from the time of the shift of the Straits Settlements capital to Singapore. Here, readers are able to witness how numerous ideas to advance the island are repeatedly refuted and rejected by the British East India Company's administration in Calcutta, India. This led to the deterioration of Penang's trade economy and its subsequent decline in 1810. Nevertheless in 1837, Penang successfully dealt with its troubles with the establishment of the *Penang Chamber of Commerce and Agriculture*. This was not only a symbol of recognition by mercantile groups and investors of their common interests, but it also allowed them to have a united voice especially necessary when dealing with the administrators in Penang and the higher ups in Singapore, Calcutta and London.

This monograph argues that the movement process and the relationship established with East and West have contributed a great deal towards Penang's viability today, via its dynamism and resilience in facing various trials and tribulations in its '*turbulent terrain*'. Penang remained as a commercial hub in the northern region of the Straits of Malacca until the end of the 19th century. It then evolved from regional trade to global trade in the 20th century. This new development is largely shaped by the Industrial Revolution in the West, which spurred high demand for raw materials from tropical areas, likewise a large market for the goods produced in their factories. This was the era of Europe's

domination of the world economy with its capital which enabled them to have a large share in the main commodity production in Penang's interior. It was also a time when they had control over the major sectors in trade and shipping in the port. However, towards 1854 Penang's trade went into such decline that it was now handling only a seventh of what Singapore was doing in trade.

This monograph is meant only as an introduction – a mere fraction of the subject. Hence, this research will not provide a comprehensive coverage of the topic at hand. In short, there is much room for more research to be done. The aim is to suggest to anyone with an interest in the history of Penang possible areas for further research. The larger themes are governed by the objectives which in essence, are to unravel the explanations that may contribute to a deeper understanding of the commercial development and decline of the port in the Straits of Malacca from the end of the 18th century until the beginning of the 20th century.

Supported by solid visual and primary sources, Dr Loh Wei Leng and Jeffrey Seow have provided a detailed narrative which has been thoroughly documented in order to demonstrate the fate of Penang's trade activities in the region. In summary, the island's community as a cosmopolitan community with a flexible way of thinking and has been able to draw upon past strengths to face challenges in a highly competitive economic scene currently. By facing the future head on, the community's resilience (a trait of the islanders which are demonstrated numerous times) in the face of difficulties will enable Penangites to overcome even the toughest of challenges. Hence, this monograph is a compulsory piece and should be studied by researchers of the island's history as it provides a fresh perspective of the maritime trade in Penang during the 19th century. Even more interesting is the fact that this monograph details the relationship between the survival of Penang's port with the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea ports, specifically from the commercial and cultural aspects.

Ku Boon Dar
School of Distance Education
Universiti Sains Malaysia
11800 USM Penang
Malaysia
E-mail: kubd@usm.my