

Living and Trading: A Dual Approach to Studying Southeast Asian Port Cities

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Abstract

The historical ports of Southeast Asia were highly active regional mercantile hubs located at the crossroads between the East Asian and Indian Ocean trading networks. These strategically places attracted merchants and sailors from the world over, some of whom stayed on a permanent or semi-permanent basis to carry out their business. By their very nature, Southeast Asian ports are thus both economic spaces dedicated to maritime activities, and cosmopolitan spaces where people from different social and cultural backgrounds came together. This duality is expressed in the built environment, which contains specialised structures to facilitate trade (such as wharves, warehouses, and boatyards) but also communicates people's identity. This paper proposes studying historical port cities by combining a maritime cultural landscape approach and urban social theory to understand the economic as well as the socio-cultural fabric of Southeast Asian ports.

This approach will be applied to two very different port cities: Hội An in Central Vietnam, and George Town in Malaysia. Whereas Hội An was an informal temporary market place that grew to be one of the region's biggest entrepôt ports in the 18th century, George Town was founded as a trading outpost for the British East India Company in 1786, before becoming the seat of many mercantile firms and banks in the 19th century.

Key words: ports, economies, structures, socio-cultural

Introduction

Ports, by their nature, are highly economic spaces dedicated to maritime activities. The ports of Southeast Asia, strategically located at the crossroads between the East Asian and Indian Ocean trading networks

(and by extension the East-West trading network), were chiefly stopovers and entrepôts through which moved traders from all corners of the world. Due to the monsoon trade, merchants would often stay in these ports for months at a time waiting for the winds change, and created settlements where the various traditions would intermingle, yet remained distinct (Li, 1998; Lockard, 2010; Reid, 1993). Southeast Asian port cities were thus — in addition to being highly economic — also highly culturally and socially diverse; in other words they were cosmopolitan. Craig Lockard (2010) described them as “places of economic exchanges as well as cosmopolitan gateways for the import and export of people, goods, and ideas.” This paper proposes to apply a maritime cultural landscape approach in conjunction with the environment-behaviour theory in order to highlight this duality and understand the fabric of historic Southeast Asian ports.

This paper will address two case studies to illustrate this dual approach: Hội An in Vietnam, and George Town in Malaysia. Both are inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List, Hội An in 1999 and George Town in 2008, under criterion (ii): “to exhibit an important interchange of human values, over a span of time or within a cultural area of the world, on developments in architecture or technology, monumental arts, town-planning or landscape design” (UNESCO, 2016).¹ Hội An is located on the Thu Bon river in Quảng Nam province in central Vietnam. It was established as a foreign port for the Nguyen Lords some time in the mid to late sixteenth century, though the exact date and circumstances are unknown (Dror and Taylor, 2006; Wheeler, 2006). Hội An was a successful entrepôt until the eighteenth century when was eclipsed by Đà Nẵng, a few kilometres north. During this time, the Japanese and the Chinese were the two largest foreign trading groups in Hội An. George

Town, Penang was established in 1786 by Sir Francis Light as an East India Company free port and naval base (though the naval base did not actually succeed) (Hussin, 2009). It was the first British port city in Southeast Asia, and had attracted over ten thousand Malay, Chinese, and Indian merchants within a decade (Hussin, 200; Lewis, 2016).

Theoretical Background

Both the maritime cultural landscape and environment-behaviour concepts ultimately aim to understand tangible manifestations of culture, the former from an archaeological perspective and the latter from an urban studies perspective. Underlying these concepts are discussions regarding the nature of culture. The urban theorist Amos Rapoport (1998) summarizes the scholarship on culture by presenting three complementary views of culture: “one view defines it as a way of life typical of a group; the second, as a system of meanings and schemata transmitted through symbolic codes; the third, as a set of adaptive strategies for survival related to ecology and resources.” He views culture as too abstract for his purposes (understanding culture in the built environment); it is unobservable and thus “essentially useless” in environment-behaviour studies (Rapoport, 1998). It is instead the “effects, expressions, or products” of culture, such as social variables, that are visible and useful (Rapoport, 1998). He describes increasingly specific expressions of culture in order to arrive at something actionable: lifestyles and activity systems. A lifestyle is “the outcome of choices about how to allocate resources,” in other words; it is composed of a series of activities, and is influenced by norms, standards and expectations (Rapoport, 1998). Christer Westerdahl arrived at a similar conclusion regarding maritime culture specifically, as will be described below.

Maritime archaeologists have long debated whether there is such a thing as a distinct maritime culture — that is a culture specific to communities living on or near the sea that is inherently and completely different to inland culture. Many have concluded that the separation between land and sea is not in fact absolute (Tuddenham, 2010; Westerdahl, 2007, 2011). Indeed, humans do not ever exclusively experience the sea unconnected to land (Mushynsky, 2011; Tuddenham, 2010; Westerdahl, 2007, 2011). Christer Westerdahl (2007) explains that maritime culture is “eminently a mixture, a creolization, of others. It is based on the subsistence gained from the seas and the water, and consists of all the thought patterns, cosmologies, customs, objects, phenomena and patterns of action connected with a life by the sea.” Like Rapoport, his view of culture is ultimately related to subsistence strategies, even referring to the “life mode” concept, and conceptualizing the maritime life mode as a series of subsidiary trades dictated in this case by living on the coast or related to a primary maritime trade, not unlike Rapoport’s lifestyle concept (Westerdahl, 1992, 2007). Some examples he presents are fishing, hunting, and gathering (at sea or on land), as well as boat building, shipping, ferrying, pilotage, and lighthouse attendance (Westerdahl, 2007). It is this recurring idea of culture as a “mixture” of activities that guides this paper. In order to understand the cultural fabric of Southeast Asian ports, a port should be seen as a sum of parts: a trading community, a crossroad of sea routes, and a concentration of different traditions.

Ports are often described in the literature as transit points: the point of change between land and sea, of changing modes of transportation, and of exchanging goods and ideas (Lockard, 2010; Reid, 1993; Parker, 2001; Westerdahl, 1992, 1999, 2006, 2011). They are also, in Westerdahl’s (2006, 2011) words, “maritime enclaves:” semi-permanent or permanent

settlements engaged in maritime activities. As he conceptualises maritime culture as a concentration of maritime activities, these enclaves can be considered the origin of maritime culture, as well as its centre (Westerdahl, 2006, 2007). In them are thus found the “remains,” or expressions, of maritime culture such as sailing marks, beacons, loading places, anchorages, inns, and other cultural deposits (Westerdahl, 2006). Likewise, Jan Bill and Birthe Clausen (1999) argue that maritime trade directly impacts the physical development and appearance of towns, giving them a distinct “maritime town topography.” These are towns that developed around a port or harbour, and thus had to build specialised structures such as wharves, jetties, warehouses, and boatyards in order to participate in maritime trade.

This perspective on ports focuses on its economic fabric, not without reason considering their role. It is predicated on Westerdahl’s (1992) innovative maritime cultural landscape concept, which represents “human utilisation (economy) of maritime space by boat: settlement, fishing, hunting, shipping and its attendant sub-cultures.” The maritime cultural landscape is thus a visualisation of people’s relationship to the sea, in particular with regard to economic exploitation. Many of Westerdahl’s definitions of the concept focus on seafaring, for example a later one in a paper about roads and sea routes describes it as the “network of sea routes, with harbours and related constructions and remains of human origin, below as well as above the water” (Westerdahl, 2006). Maritime enclaves are thus the nodes of this network, where maritime culture comes about and a concentration of “constructions and remains” are found. Much of Westerdahl’s discussions still focus on economy and transport, because “their occupations [...] to a large extent define their culture” and “living in an ecological niche leads to an adaptation precisely

to that niche” (Westerdahl, 2007). Indeed maritime, riverine, and lacustrine environments tend to develop a culture of transport and communication characterised by rapid transmission of information and spatially extended networks (Westerdahl, 1999, 2006). Thus, taking a maritime cultural landscape approach— as Westerdahl defines it —helps highlight the adaptations specific to maritime environments and maritime activities.

This approach however risks overemphasizing the economic role of trade in the development of ports, to the detriment of social and cultural factors. As has been reiterated throughout this paper, ports are very diverse spaces by virtue of their need and ability to attract merchants from all over the world. Along with goods to trade, these merchants bring with them their culture: their beliefs, their values, their lifestyles, their tastes in food, clothes, and architecture... The interaction of people from different social and geographical backgrounds, all of whom are trying to maintain their identity, is reflected in the built environment.

Adam Rogers (2013) argues for a more social approach to port and harbour archaeology, as he believes that studies of ports have focused too often on how changing technologies (including the characteristics of ships) and commercial trends have impacted the design of harbours. Paralleling Rapoport and Westerdahl, Rogers brings up the concept of “taskscape,” explaining that the environmental context of ports, the waterfront, dictates the type of activities people engage in, which in turn influences the shape of the port (Rogers, 2013). He however goes beyond this idea by reminding scholars that “by their nature and function, the connection [of ports] with places across water and overseas means that they could often attract a large range of different peoples with varying perspectives” (Rogers, 2013). He proposes drawing from the domestic

architecture discourse as one way of highlighting the diversity of people living in ports but points out that in a port setting, it might be difficult to separate “domestic” and “business” (Rogers, 2013). Environment-behaviour theory does not necessitate such a distinction, which is why it is well suited to the study of ports.

As stated above, Rapoport’s environment-behaviour theory posits that certain aspects of culture, lifestyles and activity systems, are observable in the built environment. He states that in order to understand culture fully in built structures, it is the “latent aspect of activities,” meaning, which must be considered (Rapoport, 1998). This meaning is connected to values and social variables such kinship, gender, social roles, and status, and is transmitted through symbolic codes; it is thus reflected in the choice of things like colour, material, and spatial organisation (Rapoport, 1998). Rapoport (1998) illustrates his point with the example of the kitchen: food preparation varies greatly across cultures, it is also related to other activities and meanings (for example rituals, familial ties, gender roles), all of which affect the design of the kitchen and location within the house. In short, buildings reflect the wants and needs of its users in their structure, layout, and decorative elements. As lifestyles are expressed in the built environment, maritime culture is expressed as “a recurrent set of maritime traits and repetitive maritime behaviour,” which is visible in the archaeological record (including the built environment) (Mushynsky, 2011). David Tuddenham (2010) puts forward the concept of “maritimity” to help guide studies of maritime culture. This concept is based on the idea that material culture is rarely either maritime or terrestrial, rather somewhere on a scale between the two. In other words, determining maritimity asks “how maritime is this?” It is however “to be understood as a category of understanding, not something with empirical qualities,” the

same way that thinking of life modes, activities, and social variables helps understand (maritime) culture (Rapoport, 1998; Tuddenham, 2010; Westerdahl, 2007).

The maritime cultural landscape approach in conjunction with the environment-behaviour theory provides a conceptual structure with which to understand the fabric of Southeast Asian port cities, and in particular how maritime trade influenced their development. It is clear that the economic and technological aspects of trade highly dictate the use of space. Their reason for being and their continuing success hinges on the efficiency with which merchants can participate in regional and/or global trade. On the other hand, it is important to continuously remember that around the ports grew towns built by foreign people. In order to understand a Southeast Asian port, one must consider how the Chinese, or European, or Indian trader experienced the setting and how (or if) they maintained their identity.

The Development of Hội An

The practical application of the above approach can take many forms by focusing on different aspects and characteristics of the port in question. For example, one could look at community-specific trade practices, the way they were adapted to function in a foreign port, and the way they may have been expressed in specialized structures. Another avenue of enquiry would be to compare the inns and hostels of different communities within a same port. Westerdahl sees inns as a major feature of the maritime cultural landscape, acting as relay stations and safe havens in an emergency (Westerdahl, 2006, 2007). The Chinese, Japanese, British, and Indian people of Hội An and George Town had similar institutions that served as accommodation and aid for visiting members of their communities. Though a cross-cultural study would more fully address the

question of cosmopolitanism, this paper will focus on a single foreign merchant community. It will analyse the public buildings and residences of the Chinese merchant communities in Hội An and George Town in order to understand the impact of trade on its lifestyle.

The overseas Chinese community represents a large group of migrants in Southeast Asia, who have played important roles in the history of the region since the third century before the Christian Era (Mackie, 1996; Wu, 2010). It is composed chiefly of groups from the southern provinces of China, especially Fujian and Guangdong. Due to the mountainous geomorphology of their home, the inhabitants of this region did not establish very strong ties with Central China, instead turning to the sea and developing mercantile and fishing activities, and later being highly involved in regional and global trade. In addition, population pressures such as poverty, war, and disease, resulted in migration towards Southeast Asia, in particular after the Qing conquest of the Ming in 1644 and in the second half of the nineteenth century as a result of the two Opium Wars (1840–1842, 1858–1860) and the Taiping Rebellion (1851–1864) (Wu, 2010).

The Chinese communities living in Hội An and George Town immigrated at different times and for different reasons. The first Chinese to arrive in Hội An after its establishment were highly involved in maritime commerce, either as traders themselves or running businesses to support trade (Chen, 2002). This was a relatively small group, outnumbered by the Japanese until the mid-seventeenth century. The Togukawa policies of the 1630s prevented Japanese nationals from leaving Japan, leaving a vacuum in Hội An which was quickly filled by the Chinese (Wheeler, 2001). Furthermore, a substantial number of Ming loyalists sought refuge in Hội An in 1644; they were given a special status, *Minh Hương*, which

allowed them the right to own land, marry local women, and hold office (Chen, 2002). The height of Hội An's success, the eighteenth century, coincided with what Anthony Reid (1993) and Carl Trocki (1997) refer to as the "Chinese century" when the Qing rescinded the Ming trading bans and breathed new life into the junk trade. Contemporary visitors to Hội An often describe the town as a Chinese town, and comment on the affluence of their neighbourhood (Chen, 2002; Morel, 2010; Wheeler, 2001). The exact number of Chinese living in the Nguyen port is unclear: Thomas Bowyear counts around 100 Chinese households in 1696; an anonymous source counts 6,000 Chinese in 1744, while another estimates 10,000 "married and tax-paying Chinese" in 1750 (Chen, 2002; Dalrymple, 1791–1797).

The bulk of Chinese immigration in Penang takes place over a century later, during the decline of the junk trade and the integration of Chinese merchants into the global capitalist system (Wu, 2010). The majority of Penang's early Chinese migrants in fact were not from China but from the Malay Peninsula, mostly from Kedah (Hussin, 2009). Only the wealthiest Chinese participated in trade, as owners of shops, shop houses, and ships or members of mercantile companies; while the majority worked for wages as skilled, semi-skilled, and unskilled labour (Hussin, 2009). Along with the Indian community (Chulias), the Chinese community formed the bulk of George Town's population; the number of Chinese grew steadily in the first decades of the nineteenth century, overtaking the number of Indians in 1828 (Hussin, 2009). Both communities dominated the commercial centre bounded by Light Street, Beach Street, Chulia Street, and Pitt Street (Hussin, 2009).

Despite these inceptive differences, there are many similarities in the Chinese settlements in Hội An and George Town, particularly with regard

to economic and cultural institutions. The first thing to note is that the “Chinese community” in both these ports was in fact several communities, dictated by clan or hometown, each with distinct traditions and languages (Hussin, 2009). Often, they would create associations, guilds, or societies according to dialect or family name, which provided a sense of comfort and belonging to its members. This institution has purely economic origins in fifteenth century trade guilds that helped regulate business abroad (Moll-Murata, 2008; Naquin and Rawski, 1987; Purcell, 1965; Wu, 2010). The associations in Southeast Asia, named *kongsi*, provided lodging and a meeting space for visiting merchants, and offered assistance to new settlers, but also served as a storage facility and as the custom house (Naquin and Rawski, 1987). Oftentimes, they would take on the role of a municipal government for the local overseas Chinese population, providing fire-fighting, policing, and schooling services, as well as maintaining public infrastructure (Moll-Murata, 2008; Naquin and Rawski, 1987; Wu, 2010). At the end of the 19th century, the *kongsis* lost their economic and regulatory roles, instead becoming *hui guan*: common-origin associations and public assembly places that promote history and traditional knowledge (Moll-Murata, 2008; Wu, 2010). The institution is made concrete in the form of assembly halls and clan houses that are considered symbols of their community, reflecting unity, loyalty, and prosperity.

In Hội An there are five Assembly Halls: four common-origin guilds (Fujian, Guangdong, Teochew, and Hainan) and the Trung Hoa guild that brings together all the Chinese communities; the latter was originally established as the Dương Thương guild, the guild for Maritime Commerce (Chen, 2002). It is notable that an association intended as a professional guild for the main economic activity of Hội An later came to be a pan-

Chinese cultural space. In addition to accommodating travelling merchants and drafting an ethical code of conduct in trade, Dương Thương hall contained a shrine to the Goddess of Mercy², the patron of fishermen and sailors, and the first deity for whom overseas Chinese would erect a shrine after sailing away from home to settle in a new place (Chen, 2002; Purcell, 1965). Today's Trung Hoa Assembly Hall still maintains the shrine, which now also contains a model of a Chinese junk.

There are some 170 Chinese associations in George Town relating to clan or dialect; some are headquartered in shop houses, such as the Ch'ng Si Soo Bee Tong (now Persatuan Zhuang & Yan Pulau Pinang), though most are housed in grand hall such as Lim Kongsì. The Lim clan had been trading in Penang since 1821 and established their clan house in 1863 on Beach Street, the busiest commercial street of George Town, located on the waterfront until the reclamation projects in the 1870s and 1880s (George Town World Heritage Incorporated, n.d.; Langdon, 2015). Like the Dương Thương in Hội An, Lim Kongsì pays tribute to the goddess of seafarers. She is a recurrent figure around George Town, including at Kuan Im Teng temple, the oldest Chinese temple in Penang built in the eighteenth century.

The associations and halls are a public expression of the Chinese merchant identity. In the above examples, the sea plays a clear role in the way the community both views itself and connects with each other. As a community of seafarers, the sea represents to the Chinese merchant group a connection and a divide from home, yet it is also their livelihood. The central role of maritime trade is further illustrated in Hội An and George Town's predominant style of housing: the shophouse. As its name suggests, the shophouse is both a commercial and residential space. The shop is located at the front of the building, opening on the street, and is

generally larger than the residential part, which is located in the back or on the top floor. In Hội An, the shop houses are built as near as possible to the water to facilitate loading and unloading from ships. Though the basic layout remains the same, the materials and ornamentations varied slightly from Hội An to George Town. The Hội An shop houses were mostly built from an incredibly strong local wood called *tin* (ironwood); the early George Town houses had *attap* roofs, while the later houses were built of burnt clay bricks (Dror and Taylor, 2006; Hussin, 2009). The houses in Hội An were also built with flooding in mind, as the river was known to overflow during the monsoon; they had removable boards and pulley systems to protect goods (Dror and Taylor, 2006; Morel, 2010). The façade of shop houses in George Town very distinctly reflected the ethnicity of its owner through ornamentation: “carved wood panels and fascia boards of the indigenous and Indo-Malay, elaborate and superstitious images of the Chinese, the arches of Mogul India, the neo-classical elements of British architecture of the Georgian and Regency periods and the modernism of art deco and modern architecture” (World Heritage Site Special Area Plan SAP §A4.11.8).

Conclusion

This analysis of Chinese public and private buildings in Hội An and George Town has helped understand one aspect of the fabric of Southeast Asian ports. The overseas Chinese merchant community was a significant presence throughout the region and thus highly impacted both its economy and society. However, this study has also shown that their seaward migration and activities in trading has impacted their lifestyle and culture. The built environment reflects the dual relationship of this group with the sea: there is a preoccupation with efficiently utilizing it for

trading and an understanding of it as something that both separates and connects them to the homeland.

The theoretical approach outlined in the first section of this paper considers the port both as part of the maritime cultural landscape and as a maritime cultural landscape in and of itself in order to visualise how the economic and technological aspects of maritime trade impact its form and development. It also proposes focusing on the built environment in order to draw out the characteristics of a cosmopolitan port culture, based on the idea that trade forces cosmopolitanism, that is the coexistence of various cultural groups in one space. The reverse relationship has not yet been investigated. With the same approach, it may be possible to visualise how cosmopolitanism impacts trade (the same way it impacted architecture as seen in the evolution of shop houses in George Town), where the specialised trade structures (wharves, warehouses, customs...) would reflect adaptations to new environments and new people.

Endnotes

¹Hội An also fits criterion (v): to be an outstanding example of a traditional human settlement, land-use, or sea-use which is representative of a culture (or cultures), or human interaction with the environment especially when it has become vulnerable under the impact of irreversible change.” George Town also fits criterion (iii): to bear a unique or at least exceptional testimony to a cultural tradition or to a civilisation which is living or which has disappeared;” and criterion (iv): to be an outstanding example of a type of building, architectural or technological ensembles, or landscape which illustrates (a) significant stage(s) in human history.”

²Known in different contexts as Mazu/Matsu, Tianhou, (Thiên Hậu in Vietnamese), or Guanyì (Kuan Im in Penang)

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