

## Regional historiography of Malacca Straits and the civilizational discourse on post-colonial communities



Al-Amril Othman \*, Mohd. Fuad Mat Jali, Junaidi Awang Besar, Azlan Abas

Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), Bangi, Malaysia

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### ABSTRACT

The importance and potential of the Malacca Straits as the world's ultimate natural maritime route has been so widely discussed by scholars. However, their discussions are more focused on economic and geographic potential, especially geopolitics derived from it. Thoughts, values, and civilizations are a rare aspect of attention and this paper is a reflection towards that direction. One of the elements that can be shown in highlighting the aspects of thinking behind the potential of the Straits of Malacca is the formation of a complex framework of historiography in Malaysian history. It is formed as a result of the interaction and the clash of thought that occurs between the parties involved, both from the colonial powers, as well as the local community and immigrants who make this route their field of activity. The initial discussion will illustrate the history of this route until the formation of modern nations along the Straits of Malacca since the end of World War II. The next discussion will focus on post-colonial era developments, taking into account the phenomenon of globalization as well as changes in the geopolitical aspects of the phenomenon. The speed of development and the changes that hit the area should be utilized well through some of the suggestions that will be presented in the next discussion. The position of this country which is in the middle of the route has enabled it to function as a historical observer in assessing the interactions and clashes of civilizations taking place in the region. This paper further concludes that the cooperation of various parties at the domestic level and regional agreements are the two most effective variables to meet the changes. However, it relies heavily on political commitment from policymakers from those countries to make it work.

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### 1. Introduction

The importance and potential of the Malacca Straits as the world's ultimate natural maritime route has a widely discussed topic by scholars. There are four study groups that discusses this. The first group generally focused on the emergence and role played by ports along the route from the 6-18 AD century as shown by Srivijaya, Melaka, Aceh, and Johor. The second study group focused on the competition of Western powers to control the trade of this route since the 16<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> century as shown by the Portuguese, Dutch and English (Tarling, 1969; 1962; Bassett, 1971; 1990). To ease the tensions between these Western powers, a compromise was

achieved through the Treaty of London in 1824 whose impact not only benefited them, but also paved the way for the formation of modern nations as it exists today. When these countries gained their independence, the local point of view that influenced the historiography of these countries led to a more intensive study of these maritime route areas. Malaysia, as a host, has made Malacca the special focus of their study to track the historical legacies left of the empire to be part of Malaysia's historical development as shown by the third study group (Sandhu and Wheatley, 1983; Khoo, 1982). This made the notion that the beginning of the country's history founded in Malacca began to stand out even though it had been disputed by the discovery of archaeologists who submitted the latest data to deny the notion (Shuhaimi and Rahman, 2004; Majid, 1991). Recent studies have largely focused on the growth and development of port cities along this route, especially from the social and demographic point of view since the domination of Western

\* Corresponding Author.

Email Address: [amril@ukm.edu.my](mailto:amril@ukm.edu.my) (A. Othman)

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Corresponding author's ORCID profile:

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4145-5760>

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powers to the formation of the nations by the sketch of the powers (Hussin, 2007).

The list of studies, however, has never been touched on the aspects of the outcome of the interaction and clash of societies that existed through maritime activities along the Straits of Malacca. If any, it is just general, especially in explaining the history of the plurality of Malaysians as shown in textbooks at school, higher education and public service (Zainuddin, 2010; INTAN, 1990; Abdul, 1996; Baharuddin, 2007; Ramli, 2009). One of the elements that can be shown in highlighting the aspect of thinking behind the potential of the Straits of Malacca is the formation of a complex framework in Malaysia's historiography. It is formed as a result of the interaction and the clashes of thinking, values and conflicts between the parties, both from colonial powers, as well as local communities and immigrants who make this route as their activity field. The initial discussion will describe the history of this route until the formation of modern nations along the Straits of Melaka since the end of World War II. Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore are the countries to be discussed in this section. The next discussion will focus on post-colonial era developments, taking into account the phenomenon of globalization as well as changes in the geopolitical aspects of the phenomenon. Subsequent discussions will propose some suitable proposals that can be used by countries that control this important route based on the rapid growth of the economy and the phenomenon of globalization that struck the area. The proposal is expected to create an effective regional agreement. The position of this country that is in the middle of the route has enabled it to function as a historical observer in assessing the interaction and clash of civilizations through every event that took place in the region.

## 2. A brief history of Malacca Strait: From tradition to early colonial era

Sea of Malays who are now known as the Strait of Malacca has been known since the earliest times by Arab sailors and merchants who came to the country to trade in the Malay world (Tibbetts, 1979). The role of this pathway that includes the West and East in world trade network has been known since the beginning of its existence Malays trade control of the strategic importance and geopolitical position in this area.

In those days, there were many settlements and along the route of this port city at the center of the collection and marketing of local goods and commodities to be traded. Chinese sources record that there is momentum in trade activities between the Malay Peninsula with the continent's countries. The area is an important source of forest revenue collections, especially fragrant wood, sandalwood, spices, ivory and rhino horn for medical needs. More specifically, for example Kelantan producing the following types:

- (a) Daily necessities such as salt, rice, iron and pottery;
- (b) Luxury goods such as gold, silver, silk, ceramics and items for use by the ruling elite canoe and
- (c) Products used for the purposes of religious or official (Wheatley, 1980).

The strategic location of this maritime route also attracted the attention of the Europeans to browse them. Based on the information activities of trade between Rome and India, Ptolemy, a Greek geographer (150M) drew a map detailing the Malay world with ports that exist in this area. Malay Peninsula as part of the breakdown area, also known as "The Golden Chersonese" or "Suvarnadvipa" (land of gold) according to Ramayana (Harrison, 1957).

The rapid growth of trade relations in the area has also become a platform for the development of three major world religions-Hindu-Buddhism, Islam and Christianity. Legacy Hindu-Buddhist and Islam clearly shown through the remains of the great empires of representing both religions started Funan, Majapahit, and Srivijaya (Hindu-Buddhist), while Islam was represented governments Melaka, Johor, Aceh, Demak, Mataram, Bantam, and Brunei. Christianity also, despite opposition in the beginning, helped give significant Protestant flow through the idea of separation of religion from politics in all aspects of local life.

The real role of the maritime route stands out because despite changes in trade regimes at local level through the replacement of the emergence of a number of ports along the Straits of Malacca, it does not affect the trading network as a whole. But ahead of the 16th century, Western powers began to join trade competition in this area. Portuguese and Spanish presence at first, followed by the Dutch and British presence has revealed this maritime route to the prolonged uncertainty until the 19th century. At the same time, local governments also compete among themselves to make room for Western powers are exploiting the situation for their benefit.

Spice Islands is a field of intense competition for both the European powers. Neither the Dutch nor the British each of which is represented VOC and EIC have intensive contacts with local governments through a series of agreements and sometimes war is necessary to obtain trade in this area. Intense competition has finally reached its climax when a total of 18 Englishmen, 11 Japanese and one Portuguese were arrested for allegedly conspiring charming Dutch base in Ambon. In addition to the Portuguese, respectively 10 English and Japanese were beheaded after being prosecuted by flogging for their recognition. Although the British seem to have no hope of establishing a base of trade in the Spice Islands.

In an effort to alleviate this uncertainty, a series of intensive negotiations had been made between them began in 1819. Through a series of negotiations, a diplomatic compromise was reached between the European powers through the London Agreement was signed in 1824. For Malays, the

agreement not only solved the Malay world into two spheres of influence colonization of different policies, but it gradually eroded the dominance of the Malay supremacy of the route and is unable to absorb the presence of immigrants on a large scale to the region.

British sources said that in addition to Malacca, Penang is beginning to explore the Chinese immigrants. Francis Light reported that after a year of his administration on the island, there are about 60 families living in the island, and the number is increasing over time. These trends clearly reflect the views of his early British in particular and generally toward Chinese immigrants who are more influenced by the economy even though it may be negative social consequences for political stability in the Malay States. This scenario is evident from the statistics showing the increase in population of the Malay States, which partially Chinese immigrants. Singapore for example has recorded a number of people quite impressive since the British occupied the island. In 1821, the island's population was estimated at about 4,724 people and 1,150 of them were Chinese immigrants. This number has increased to a total of 10,683 and about 3,317 of whom are immigrants from the same. The rapid development of the mining industry has spurred a number of them, whether before or after the intervention of the British. The pattern of this increase can be seen as shown in [Table 1](#).

**Table 1:** Population growth of the Chinese population in Malaya, 1871-1941

Year	Total Population	Number of Chinese people	Percentage of Total Population
1871	308097	104615	34 %
1891	910123	391418	43 %
1901	1227195	583396	48 %
1911	2644489	914143	35 %
1921	3338545	1170551	36 %
1931	4345503	1703528	39 %
1941	5545173	2418615	44 %

Pattern matching is also shown by the increase in the number of Indian immigrants in line with British control over the Malay States since acquired Penang, Malacca and Singapore. It also helped stimulate demand for labor employment in developing the region.

Francis Light, for example, through a report to the British East India Company (HTI) has submitted its request to be supplied to him a total of 100 skilled work force in industry construction of India to develop the area. Although the timber cannot meet the demand for consistent, but it does not prevent the increase in the number of Indian immigrants to the Malay States. It occurs as a result of its own timber needs to skilled workers for the construction industry infrastructure in new areas they get. In addition, some of them, especially the Sikhs were needed as soldiers to control the settlements. British intervention on the Malay States has given space to exploit economies of these countries to introduce commercial agriculture, especially rubber industry

which in turn has boosted the labour force increased number of Indians in Malaya, as shown in [Table 2](#).

**Table 2:** Population growth of the Indian population in Malaya, 1871-1941

Year	Total Population	Number of Indian people	Percentage of Total Population
1871	308097	33390	11 %
1891	910123	74081	8 %
1901	1227195	115536	9 %
1911	2644489	267159	10 %
1921	3338545	471536	15 %
1931	4345503	621774	14 %
1934	5545173	767693	14 %

British seem to benefit from the agreement against the Netherlands, has acted arbitrarily by changing political boundaries of Malaya. The opening of the port cities of Penang and Singapore not only lead to the deterioration of Malacca directly, but it also makes it easier to control them in the Malay States as a whole. However, some scratched their prowess since Japan emerged as an Eastern power that tried to challenge British domination in the region when the Second World War. It was felt that the Dutch in Indonesia. Even the Dutch finally had to resign after failing to prevent the rise of nationalism in the country.

### 3. Question of the nation post-independence, globalization, and its impact on Malacca Strait

The issue on the question of post-colonial nation-building, particularly in the context of South-East Asia has been much discussed ([Anderson, 1991](#); [Hunter, 1966](#)). In the Malaysian context, it is more critical because of questions raised related to the question of diversity of British society who inherited the structure of its community. Not surprisingly, the country has attracted interest among scholars to make it as one of the focus of their study ([Embong, 2006](#); [Cheah, 2002](#)).

Although the discussion among scholars about the state of this nation does not touch the Strait of Malacca directly, but a fact that must be recognized is the route that have witnessed the history of the formation of these countries to the occurrence of the existence of political entities that today. In other words, despite the existence of a network of economic and trade relations encircling this route, something that should not be denied is the existence of a clash of values and ideas between civilizations across this route, both from the standpoint of society or ideology.

Period witnessed the existence of a clash between the local population and thinking with elements of civilization brought from outside, such as China, Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam. Starting 16<sup>th</sup> century, the Western civilization through a process of evolution and secularism gradually began to show his face, either through political and legal institutions or even the thought clearly in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. This direct network makes this area vulnerable to any changes that occur

in Europe. In addition to Islamic nationalism as a catalyst for the region, its growth was generated from the flow of liberal democracy and socialist communist each of which shows the impact after the Second World War.

When World War II broke out, the colonial powers really desperate to think seriously about the future of their colonies. They apparently had to think through whether the idea of an appropriate place for the people who inhabit their colonies. Independence is certainly unstoppable again as their image has been tarnished as a result of the war. This situation reveals the region, especially countries which dominate the Strait of Malacca to the existence of potential conflicts as demonstrated through the ideological struggle Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore while also showing the orientation of ethnic discourse dispute. It is not surprising because the channel's independence manifested Indonesia shows elements of the armed struggle.

In an effort to alleviate this uncertainty, the political elite of these countries lead the sort has taken two important steps. The first step is shown through the mechanism of government based on a consensus conclusion that emphasize the importance of socio-economic development of the people than political development. Through this deal, they have to justify autocratic government for the sake of stability so as to restrict freedom of expression in the name of development that is expected to eradicate poverty inherited from colonialism to these countries. No wonder the government patterned so began to emerge in these countries since the years 60s. This trend is clearly shown by Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore in the structure of state and government in response to dish out the elements which could affect their goals. Restrictions on opposition parties, both through political control as shown in Malaysia and Singapore as well as the role of the Indonesian military as shown is the mechanism the governments of the countries involved to make it work. The action was later reinforced by ideological ideas through Asian values as issued the leaders of these countries. However, the extent of their opposition to the values of the external moot since it is a purely political rhetoric. At the same time, countries of the former colonialists did not show significant opposition even aware of these provisions conflict with the notions of democracy that they embrace. This pragmatic attitude taken to guarantee their business investment in the countries of their former colonies maintained as a lasting legacy of their colonial rule in these countries.

When the wave of globalization began sweeping the world as a phenomenon by the early decades of the 90s, most of the country, whether forced or voluntarily welcomed such phenomena as interpreted through their policies. Countries that dominate the Strait of Malacca also joined other countries to try to acquire as many economic benefits to be gained from it. Malaysia has even taken the first step since the decade of the 80s with the introduction of

privatization policy to develop its economy. It was followed by the construction of the Multimedia Super Corridor in the next decade.

Not surprisingly, there are some observers who consider the organization as a "mere talk shop" only (Milner, 2003; Acharya, 2009). This is evident from the organization's failure to deal with two issues diplomatic existed until today, that China claims the South China Sea as well as overlapping claims to the islands Spratley completely. Although there are guidelines in the Code of Conduct agreed between the parties concerned, but it is not a legislative mechanism that could bind the parties to adhere to the agreement. This is evident from the organization's failure to deal with two issues diplomatic existed until today, that China claims the South China Sea as well as overlapping claims to the islands Spratley completely. Although there are guidelines in the Code of Conduct agreed between the parties concerned, but it is not a legislative mechanism that could bind the parties to adhere to the agreement. This is evident from the organization's failure to deal with two issues diplomatic existed until today, that China claims the South China Sea as well as overlapping claims to the islands Spratley completely. Although there are guidelines in the Code of Conduct agreed between the parties concerned, but it is not a legislative mechanism that could bind the parties to adhere to the agreement. At this stage, a paradox can be seen through the conflict of interests between freedom of expression and human rights on the one hand with the public interest and law enforcement on the other. If this conflict is associated with the geographical context, then surely we can understand that this maritime route there is an area that witnessed the clash. However, due to the clash is also likely to trigger a different pattern of statehood among the countries concerned. So far, Singapore has maintained the status quo in government compared to Malaysia and Indonesia are already beginning to change even if it is seen still early compared to other developed countries.

#### **4. Maritime routes of Malacca Strait and its impact on the development of historiography Malaysia**

The role of the Straits of Malacca as a forum in bringing together the local community and thoughts with the thoughts of the society and civilization is already proven. This can be seen from its impact on the rapid development of commercial activity as a result of the emergence of a number of ports and the value of goods traded along this narrow path. The impact triggered the clash of civilizations will be more meaningful if it is viewed from the standpoint of the development of historiography of the countries which dominate the strait, especially Malaysia. This can be seen from the distribution cluttered historical sources covering the continents of Asia and Europe covering a number of countries such as China, India, Arab, Portuguese, Dutch, British

and Japanese. Some of the people who inhabit these countries, especially India and China also migrated massively to the region to support their livelihoods. Sambal also expressed their point of view. This position Malaysia as an ideal observer of history in assessing and thus capable of interpreting every event that happens around it if given the opportunity to do so.

Although this position is viewed very special and important, but without the cooperation of all stakeholders, the responsibility is not easy to implement. In other words, the historian is not the only party to be charged with that responsibility although it is undeniable that they are the pillars of this great mission. In this case, the two proposals submitted respectively focused on the role of stakeholders in the domestic as well as regional responsibility for the success of the line with current demands to disclose fully the potential of this route.

On the domestic front, one of the short-term measures that can be taken is to try to collect all the available resources related materials scattered abroad. Medium-term measures are translating, transcribe and transliterate these materials into simple language to facilitate the researchers refer to these materials for their research. Similarly, long-term measures are to reform the existing education policies, especially in terms of learning languages among other nations as a third language accordingly required in the early stage. All these, however, need not spend a few in number. Thus, the private sector should take responsibility through their corporate social provision for the success of this mission.

At the regional level, in addition to seminars and research is often carried out by the academic staff in the countries concerned, a long-term view that we should explore is through drastic changes to the existing education policy that is not only focused on building a nation state, even more than that. This is where historians can play a role by highlighting elements of regionalization in its historical framework. For this purpose, history teaching curriculum at all levels must be reoriented in line with the demands of students who are able to assess the history and interpretation of the overall position of the region without being restricted by the framework of each nation state as exists today. This step is not easy as it also requires a strong political will among the political elite of these countries to start. The challenge for the formation of political entities nation-state that exists today is the current reality that should be considered in depth. But it must be made from now to face the advance of foreign powers, especially China who want to dominate the region in the framework of political domination. This is where the importance of strong cooperation between the political elite and scholars, especially historians to determine the direction of the region in the years to come. A series of discussions between the stakeholders involved should be intensively followed up by a comprehensive concept paper for the education history of the region can be developed through a

special agency that can coordinate all related activities. Being a diverse country of residence and source of history, Malaysia should be able to offer the service if necessary. The question is whether historians Malaysia is ready to do so while the issue of rewriting history has yet to be fully addressed.

## 5. Conclusion

It is obvious that the potential of the maritime routes in the Straits of Malacca trigger commercial activity in the region is the fact that is well known and there is no denying its importance. Otherwise, an important route is not only documenting the activities of trade and the emergence of port cities and the political forces that overshadow trade and port city, even he implied were also recorded all the history of civilization, civilization, values and thoughts of civilizations bound by this route as a whole. Thus, it is desirable for the historians to uncover the potential of this civilization through the network for our mutual benefit and this paper is a small contribution to the success of this intention.

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## Compliance with ethical standards

## Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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