

Melaka in the Long Fifteenth Century

Veranstalter: Melaka in Fact

Datum, Ort: 02.08.2019–04.08.2019, Melaka

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The conference on „Melaka in the Long Fifteenth Century“ took place between 2 and 4 August, 2019 and was organized by Melaka in Fact, a research project spearheaded by Datin Saidah Rastam (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia) and generously funded by the research division of Malaysia’s sovereign wealth fund Khazanah Nasional. The initiative offers a multi-pronged educational outreach to the general public with the aim of looking at the history of Melaka (Malacca) during the time of the Sultanate (c.1400–1511). In addition to this temporal frame it was also decided to concentrate on new (or at least less familiar) sets of sources, with Malay, Chinese, Japanese, Thai, Arabic, Turkish and Persian language materials moving into the spotlight, while the European texts – as important as they are acknowledged to be – take a back seat during this conference.

Enabling and facilitating this Asian vantage point in the study of Melaka have been advances in science and technology as well as improved access to different types of source materials. In the age of internet, digital humanities and document digitization, there is now a broader and more immediate access than ever before. These encompass archaeological finds, urbanization, architecture, material culture, as well as texts from across a range of Asian (and European) languages. The conference has also taken into consideration old maps and charts, as well as scientific data ranging from historic precipitation patterns and climate change to earthquakes and volcano eruptions.

During the two years of preparation, the conference assumed a clear and focused mission that avoids replicating the agenda and research topics of earlier meetings. These had Melaka or its urban and colonial legacy at the centre of research attention; alternatively, Melaka represented part of a larger programme that was structured around a specific research theme. Conferences specifi-

cally dedicated to Melaka included Kernial Singh Sandhu and Paul Wheatley’s conference on Melaka as a port, town and region from the 1400–1960s that was held in Singapore in 1982. Melaka’s early history, moreover, stood at the forefront of two conferences held in 2002 and 2011 that were also held in Singapore. These latter meetings had Portuguese language texts, sources and cultural legacies as the chosen focus of scholarly enquiry. Other conferences and international workshops examined early Melaka from a comparative vantage point, such as its role as an entrepôt and port, or alternatively as a maritime empire and thalassocracy. Additional research initiatives have examined Melaka through the lens of its laws known as the *Undang-undang Melaka* (sometimes *Hukum Kanun Melaka*) or alternatively through its maritime regulations (*Undang-undang Laut Melaka*).

It was against the backdrop of this research agenda and the determination not to replicate earlier research initiatives that the conference organizers aimed to gain a sense of where the knowledge of Melaka’s history stands today, in what direction(s) research is heading, and also what vistas remain open (or have opened up) for further investigation. The objective thus was to explore and bring together new or at least unfamiliar sources, methodologies and initiatives that were grounded internationally, but were rooted in an Asian vantage point.

Over the course of three days participants and invited guests learned a lot about Malay language materials as well as texts written in other Asian languages. They learned about the scope of the information that these sources impart, as well as their limitations and characteristics. The conference featured a total of four panels clustered around certain broader themes or topics.

Panel 1 was dedicated to identifying and delving into sources touching on the Melaka sultanate written in different Asian languages, including of course Malay. DEREK HENG (Flagstaff, Arizona) gave a sweeping tour de force of the official Chinese texts from the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries and explained *what* and *how much* we could expect to find in them about Melaka. ELKE PA-

PELITZKY (Shanghai) also examined the Chinese sources, but focused in her paper on a specific type of geographical and travel texts that were produced for and by the Chinese literati. ANDREW PEACOCK (St. Andrews) guided us with great confidence through texts written in Arabic, Persian and Turkish that touch on the Melaka Straits, and among other things describe Melaka as a port embedded in its hinterland. AHMAT ADAM (Kajang) skilfully sliced through the text of the *Sejarah Melayu*, unveiled some of its hitherto neglected Kawi or ancient Javanese vocabulary (I think here especially of the word „pituduran“), and in doing so tightened our understanding of the intentions behind and purpose of the text. NASHA RODZIADI KHAW (Penang) on the other hand shifted the discussion about the sources to a different plain, and did so in two ways: first, by drawing on his experience in the Bujang Valley excavations, he spoke about archaeology and material culture; and second he laid out what research has been done and still lay ahead for the planned diggings in and around Melaka.

Panel 2 looked at a range of issues surrounding remembering and heritage. There were five papers presented here, starting with PETER BORSCHBERG (Singapore) exploring a scholarly debate that took place around a century ago between two luminaries of Southeast Asian studies on the possible dates of Melaka's founding as well as the question whether the city might have been earlier known by a different name. JAN VAN DER PUTTEN (Hamburg) addressed the question as to whether the *Sejarah Melayu* had travelled to and been received in other parts of the Malay world, and in so doing made a case that it was a contested text in a competition for hegemony. IMRAN TAJUDEEN (Singapore) addressed certain facets of architecture (I think here especially of his claim that *A Famosa* had been built on the foundations of the old Melaka mosque) while AZHAR IBRAHIM (Singapore) confidently walked us through several Malay language texts that inform different audiences on different layers of Melaka's legacy, from the *Sejarah Melayu* and the *Undang-undang Melaka* to the *Hikayat Hang Tuah* and others. HASSAN KHALILIEH (Haifa), connected via video

link, argued how the maritime laws of Melaka broadly align with established Islamic practices in Western Asia when examined against the backdrop of specific problems, ranging from the status of the captain to jettisoning cargo in times of emergency.

Panel 3 comprised five papers that focused on Melaka as a society. BARBARA AN-DAYA (Honolulu, Hawaii) critically revisited the idea that Melaka represented an „empire“. She argued that it would be more productive to look at how and in what terms people at the time had understood Melaka. Relying on the metaphor of the wickerwork she explored a series of key Malay terms in search of ideas. AZYUMARDI AZRA (Banten) looked at networks of Muslim rulers and the role of Melaka as a successor to Samudra Pasai, relying among other sources also on the *Undang-undang Melaka*, while SHAWNAKIM LOWEY-BALL (Salt Lake City, Utah) looked at Melaka as a port space, the interaction of the different peoples trading or settled in and around the city, as well as specifically the role played by the four different *shahbandars* and the *Undang-undang Melaka*. She ended her discussion with observation on the issue of loyalty – or the lack of it – to Melaka in 1511. Examining the role played by several women mentioned in the *Sejarah Melayu*, RUZY HASHIM (Bandar Baru Bangi) used the model of social exchange to dig into and critically discuss certain Malay court practices (and their relation to Islamic law), the treatment of women in general, their agency, their role as „gifts“, as well as their role as producers.

Panel 4 addressed what Melaka was reputed for during the fifteenth century: its trade and commerce. In their joint paper, CHRIS BAKER (Bangkok) and LEONARD ANDAYA (Hawaii, Honolulu) looked at various aspects of maritime trade with Majapahit (esp. Gresik), Pasai and especially Ayutthaya, as well as the role of regional trade in contributing toward Melaka's rise. Other factors also entered into the picture, such as the function of the *orang laut* (sea nomads) in the state and defence, Ayutthaya's role in securing Melaka's food supplies, the significance of the overland and portage routes, trade and raid, tribute and diplomacy with China

as well as with the Portuguese after 1511. CHRIS JOLL (Bangkok) discussed how the fall of Melaka contributed toward the growth of Ayutthaya as a port during the early 1500s and argued that Ayutthaya's growing prosperity in this period can be taken as a confirmation of Melaka's commercial dominance during the 1400s. He contended that Ayutthaya seems to have taken on board Melaka's recognition that cosmopolitanism was good for business. Turning attention from the region to the Bay of Bengal and the Western Indian Ocean, KENNETH HALL (Muncie, Indiana) looked at navigational routes from the west to Southeast Asia, the formation of diasporas, knowledge networks and horizontally-linked communities. GAUKUSHO NAKAJIMA (Fukuoka), finally, fascinated the audience with insights from the *Rekidai hōan*. Specific attention was placed on the letters exchanges of the Ryukyu court with the *lak-samana* of Melaka and other Southeast Asian princes during the fifteenth century, as well as gifts and cargos exchanged between Ryukyu and Melaka.

Participants at the round table discussion expressed the view that the conference had raised a number of new unfamiliar perspectives as well as important issues: First, there is a need to engage the general public and redress popularized misunderstandings about this period in Malaysian history. The second is that the sources in the different Asian languages show considerable potential for further research, especially for the 15th century where European source materials are sparse and of qualified value. Moreover, future research endeavours should take a more comparative perspective and engage with a base of sources as wide ranging as possible in order to balance the hegemony of the Portuguese sources.

Conference overview:

Opening address:
Peter Borschberg (Singapore)

Panel 1: Sources for Melaka

Derek Heng (Northern Arizona University): „Melaka“ in Chinese Texts: Archiving and Macro Patterns Related to Records of Melaka in the Ming and Qing Periods (15th to 18th

Centuries).

Elke Papelitzky (NYU Shanghai): Melaka in Late Ming Historical-Geographical Texts.

Nasha Rodziadi Khaw (Universiti Sains Malaysia): Reviewing Archaeological Research in Melaka: Challenges and Future Potentials.

Andrew Peacock (University of St. Andrews): Melaka in Arabic, Persian and Turkish Texts.

Panel 2: Remembering and Heritage

Peter Borschberg (NUS): When was Melaka founded and was it known in earlier times by another name? Exploring the debate between Gabriel Ferrand and Gerrit Pieter Rouffaer (1918–1921) and its long echo.

Jan van der Putten (Universität Hamburg): The Quest for Cultural Hegemony in the Malay World – Sulalat-as-Salatin and its Successors.

Imran Tajudeen (NUS): Reading Melaka's Historic Urban Landscape: Reviewing Sources, Interpretations and Contemporary Heritage Politics.

Christopher Joll (Chulalongkorn University): The Legacy of Melaka's 15th Century in 16th Century Siam.

Azhar Ibrahim (NUS): Remembering Melaka: Indigenous Malay Sources in Charting Historical-Cultural Memories.

Panel 3: Melaka as Society

Barbara Andaya (University of Hawaii): Rethinking Melaka as „Empire“.

Azyumardi Azra (State Islamic University): Struggles for Melaka: Islamic Networks in the Region.

Shawnakim Lowey-Ball (University of Utah): Multiculturalism in Melaka.

Ruzy Hashim (National University of Malaysia): Women and Gender Relations in Malay Court Narratives.

Panel 4: Melaka in Trade

Chris Baker (Siam Society) and Leonard Andaya (Honolulu): Reassessing Melaka's Regional Role in the Long 15th Century.

Kenneth Hall (Ball State University): Melaka's 15th Century Networked Ports-of-Trade: Maritime Diasporas, Networks of Trade and Cultural Integration in the Bay of Bengal and the Western Indian Ocean.

Hassan Khalilieh (University of Haifa): The place of the „*Undang-undang Laut Melaka*“ in the History of the Islamic Maritime Laws and the Law of the Sea: A Preliminary Overview.

Gaukusho Nakajima (Kyushu University): Relations between Ryukyu Kingdom and the Melaka Sultanate from the mid-15th Century to the early-16th Century: Mainly from *Redikai Hōan*

Impressions

Anthony Reid (ANU)

Roundtable Discussion

Chaired by Barbara Andaya (University of Hawaii)

Closing Remarks

Peter Borschberg (NUS)

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