



BIOGRAPHICAL DICTIONARY of Mercantile Personalities of Penang

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Following the settlement of Penang by the British East India Company in 1786 the island quickly developed into a flourishing maritime port of exchange. By 1805 the population was 'so diversified as at this day to write in 13 distinct alphabets, & speak in 28 distinct dialects'.

The 200 concise biographies of early Penang mercantile personalities included in this volume offer the reader a rare and invaluable glimpse into their lives. The selection is a veritable cultural cross-section of those who pioneered the growth of Penang in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It highlights not only their contribution to the economic, social, political and cultural development of Penang, but also of Malaysia and Southeast Asia as a whole.

"At last an invaluable historical directory of merchants, traders and shopkeepers who contributed to the growth of all sectors of Penang's economic and social development"

CHEAH BOON KHENG (Retired) Professor of History, Universiti Sains Malaysia, author of *Malaysia: The Making of a Nation*, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2002.

"The merchant and business community has formed a major pillar in Penang since the late 18th century. This biographical dictionary offers a scholarly collection of data on the members of this community up to the mid-20th century and is useful not only as a ready reference but as a stimulus to further research on these personalities."

DR LEONARD Y. ANDAYA, Professor of Southeast Asian History, University of Hawai'i at Manoa, author with B.W. Andaya of *The History of Malaysia*, University of Hawaii Press, 2001.

“Penang was built on commerce, and without an understanding of the personalities who initiated and sustained this commerce, our knowledge of the history of the island will inevitably be partial. This volume thus does us a great service by detailing an extensive range of the merchants and business people from all communities who, over two centuries, built Penang into a major trading and commercial centre.”

DR. GEOFFREY WADE, author of *Southeast Asia in the Ming Shi-lu: an open access resource*.
Singapore E-Press, National University of Singapore, 2005.

FOREWORD

By Wang Gungwu

The romance of empire building can lead us to forget that the modern empires came not from heroic and glorious deeds but out of long-distance commerce that ultimately made the empires global, pushing them to reach out to every corner of the world. The lives of those adventurers who saw opportunities to extend British, Dutch or French rule and fill their colonies with exotic peoples are, of course, attractive as historical yarns. And speculations about court and imperial intrigues have always added spice to those stories. But it is the down-to-earth records of successes and failures of people seeking to make a living and perchance build their fortunes that explain why some of the imperial ports succeed and others fail.

The rise of the port of Penang highlights this contrast. Much has been written about the port in terms of the geopolitics of imperial rivalry and the ingenuity of English East India Company officials with feudal Malay rulers. It has thus been easy to forget the mundane efforts of the merchants, artisans and workers whose enterprise and courage made Penang the great trading port at the northern end of the Straits of Malacca.. The editors of this dictionary of biographies have set out to remind us what the real story was behind the port’s success.

Perhaps even more important is the way the dictionary shows the multiple identities of the mercantile personalities who enlivened the place. Penang did not create the diversity by itself. That was already there in the neighbourhood, in Kedah, Aceh, Deli, Junk Ceylon and beyond, the various polities that had, over the centuries, attracted merchants from India, the Arab world, the southern Chinese coasts, as well as peoples from various parts of the Malay Archipelago. But the British decision to make Penang a free port was the great innovation. It set the scene for high levels of activity that brought so many risk-taking entrepreneurs to its wharfs. Furthermore, those who came quickly saw the possibilities of opening up the peninsular mainland, especially the state of Perak, for its tin mines and subsequently the plantations that gave rise to large-scale industrial agriculture.

Prior studies have selectively told some of the more dramatic stories. Thus some of the names in this volume are familiar and their exploits have become household legends. But the majority of those included here are little known except to a handful of local historians. And the editors have dug deeper into the surviving records and pursued new leads with local families. Through their efforts, they have uncovered accounts of lives that have been less dramatic but no less significant to the growth of Penang's economy from the late 18th to the 20th centuries. They make absorbing reading. Once started, I could not put the book down and I shall be dipping into it again and again for the intriguing glimpses of the past that each story gives us.

I congratulate the editors for recovering the past for us by giving flesh and blood to people who otherwise would have been no more than names on a long list. In particular, the editors and their assiduous collaborators have clearly demonstrated, through the lives of the leaders of the mercantile communities, who really laid the foundations for this lovely historic city in Southeast Asia.

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