The entrepôt economy and the comparison with Geneva

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Geneva and Singapore both built their early commercial prosperity on networks of merchants who trusted one another because they belonged to the same community. In Geneva, the Protestant International of bankers and merchants linked Geneva with Lyon, Paris, Amsterdam and London. In Singapore, the dialect groups of the Chinese diaspora, the Hadhrami network of the Arab merchants and the Chulia traders of the Bay of Bengal performed the same function. In both cases the network carried credit, information and people across political borders.

The difference lies in the number of networks and the role of the state. Geneva's commercial elite was relatively homogeneous in religion and culture, whereas Singapore's entrepôt was from its beginnings a meeting place of several networks, each with its own language, religion and institutions. The colonial state in Singapore provided the neutral framework within which these networks met: a free port, a court and a police force. It left the internal organisation of each community largely to its own leaders. This arrangement, in which a strong state guarantees a common framework while diverse communities organise their own affairs, is one of the lasting legacies of the entrepôt economy.

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In figures

Tonnage of Chinese junks arriving in Singapore: 18,400 tons in 1841–1842, 3,280 tons in 1865–1866. Wajo Bugis ships: 90 in 1824, some 120 in 1825, around 200 prahus a year in the 1830s, each with a crew of about thirty. Arab residents: 15 in 1824, 465 in 1871. Natives of India in the census of 1824: 756. Tan Tock Seng's donation to the Chinese Pauper Hospital in 1844: $5,000. Southeast Asia's share of Singapore's total trade: 48 per cent in 1825 and 43 per cent in 1865 (Wong Lin Ken).[1]

Notes

1. Wong Lin Ken, "Singapore: Its Growth as an Entrepot Port, 1819–1941", text accessed through Cambridge Core, September 2026: Southeast Asia accounted for 48 per cent of total trade in 1825 and 43 per cent in 1865. ↩

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