The infrastructure of the entrepôt: river, godowns and information

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The river and the roads

The physical infrastructure of the early port was simple. Large ships anchored in the roads off the town, while cargo was carried to and from the shore by lighters and small boats that crowded the Singapore River. The warehouses, called godowns, lined Boat Quay on the south bank, the heart of the Chinese commercial district, with the offices and stores of the European houses nearby. Lighterage, porterage and storage employed thousands of workers and formed a business in their own right.[1] Later in the century, locally built tongkangs, barge-like sailing vessels of Chinese construction, became a familiar sight on the river and anchored between Read Bridge and Ord Bridge at Boat Quay.[2]

The concentration of trade on the river created congestion and limited the size of the ships that could be served efficiently. The arrival of steamships, which needed deep-water wharves and coaling facilities, eventually shifted the centre of the port to

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the New Harbour west of the town, where the Tanjong Pagar Dock Company began operating in the 1860s. That transformation belongs to Part B. For the first half-century, the river and its godowns were the physical form of the entrepôt.

Commercial information and the first newspaper

Trade depends on information about prices, ships and markets. In the early years this information travelled by letter, by word of mouth and with the captains of arriving ships. On 1 January 1824 the first newspaper of Singapore, the *Singapore Chronicle*, began to appear. It was conceived as a commercial newspaper and published commercial news, government notices, shipping arrivals and departures, lists of imports and exports and current market prices, as well as advertisements and articles reprinted from other papers.[3]

The press worked under official control. An ordinance of 1823, known as the gagging act, required a licence and prohibited criticism of the East India Company and the government. Censored passages appeared as blank spaces filled with stars.[4] When the restrictions were lifted in 1835, merchants founded the *Singapore Free Press*, which soon displaced the older paper. The *Chronicle* ceased publication on 30 September 1837.[5]

The price lists of the early newspapers are the ancestors of the market data on which modern finance depends. Published prices reduced the advantage of insiders, allowed distant principals to check the accounts of their agents and made the Singapore market more transparent to traders across the region. A financial centre is, among other things, a place where reliable information is produced and distributed. Singapore began to play that role in its first decade.

Notes

1. On lighterage and the godowns along Boat Quay in the nineteenth century, see Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore 1819–2005*, chapter 2, and National Heritage Board, *Singapore River* heritage materials. ↩

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2. Ngiam Tong Dow, "Tongkangs: Hybrid Ships in a Moment of Singapore's Maritime History", *BiblioAsia*, vol. 2, issue 2, July 2006: tongkangs anchored along the Singapore River between Read Bridge and Ord Bridge at Boat Quay; from about 1880 an increasing number of registered vessels were locally built sailing vessels. ↩
3. "The First Newspaper", *BiblioAsia*, vol. 11, issue 4, January–March 2016: the *Singapore Chronicle* launched on 1 January 1824 as a "commercial newspaper" publishing commercial information, shipping arrivals and departures, import and export listings and current market prices. ↩
4. "The First Newspaper", *BiblioAsia*, vol. 11, issue 4, January–March 2016, on the gagging act of 1823 and the blank spaces with stars that marked censored passages. ↩
5. "The First Newspaper", *BiblioAsia*, vol. 11, issue 4, January–March 2016: the *Chronicle* ceased publication on 30 September 1837 after the lifting of the gagging act in 1835 allowed the *Singapore Free Press* to launch. ↩

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