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## **DISPARATE IDENTITIES: PENANG FROM A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE, 1780–1941**

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*Penang, one of the component states of Malaysia, represents a microcosm of the multiethnic, multicultural and multi-religious characteristics of the country's celebrated diversity. The state of Penang comprised the island and an adjacent rectangular strip of land on the mainland known as Province Wellesley (Seberang Perai). Contemporary Penang's racial diversity is undoubtedly one of its strengths offering a rich and colourful admixture of sociocultural traits and traditions. But more significantly is the peaceful, harmonious co-existence of the various ethnic groups living in close quarters to one another. Penang's socio-cultural traits and diverse traditions traced their genesis to the establishment in 1786 of George Town as a port-of-call of the East India Company (EIC). As a British administered trading outpost, Penang drew merchants and traders from as far as northern Europe, North America, as well as from South, Southeast and East Asia. It was from such beginnings that George Town subsequently evolved into a cosmopolitan port-city. This article seeks to trace Penang's historical development from the social and economic aspects specifically of the contributing factors to its socio-cultural characteristics and identity of George Town and Penang in general. It will be argued that Penang since its formative days as a port-city had embraced and nurtured multiculturalism in all its facets that subsequently contributed to the development of disparate identities along ethnic lines. The years 1780–1941 covered the period from its establishment as a trading outpost to the eve of the Asia Pacific War (1941–1945).*

Keywords: Penang, George Town, history, multiculturalism, disparate identities

### **INTRODUCTION**

Penang, one of the component states of Malaysia, represents a microcosm of the multiethnic, multicultural and multi-religious characteristics of the country's celebrated diversity.<sup>1</sup> The state of Penang comprises the tortoise-shaped island and adjacent rectangular strip of land on the mainland known as Province Wellesley (Seberang Perai). Contemporary Penang's racial diversity is one of its strengths offering a rich and colourful admixture of socio-cultural traits and

traditions. But more significantly is the peaceful, harmonious co-existence of the various ethnic communities living in close quarters to one another.

Penang's socio-cultural traits and diverse traditions traced their genesis to the establishment in 1786 of George Town as a port-of-call of the East India Company (EIC). As a British-administered trading outpost, Penang drew merchants and traders from as far as northern Europe, North America, as well as from South, Southeast and East Asia. It was from such beginnings that George Town subsequently evolved into a cosmopolitan port-city. This article examines Penang's historical development from the social and economic aspects particularly of the contributing factors to its socio-cultural characteristics and identity of George Town specifically and Penang generally. The article argues that Penang had since its formative days as a port-city had embraced and nurtured multiculturalism in all its facets that subsequently contributed to the development of disparate identities along ethnic lines. The years 1780s and 1941 covered the period from its establishment as a trading outpost to the eve of the Pacific War (1941–1945).

There were Malay settlements on Penang Island and Province Wellesley prior to the establishment of an EIC trading outpost in 1786.<sup>2</sup> The latter was a confluence of motives from various quarters, notably the EIC, Francis Light (1740–1794), an English country trader, and the Kedah rulers.<sup>3</sup>

The need to protect the EIC's lucrative China trade in luxury goods (tea, silk, porcelain) and to safeguard British military and strategic interests in the Bay of Bengal and the Straits of Melaka led the EIC to undertake steps to secure Penang. The rulers of Kedah – Sultan Muhammad Jawa (1710–1773) and Sultan Abdullah Mukaram Shah (1773–1798) – were willing to cede territories in return for British protection against their enemies, namely Burma (Myanmar) and Siam (Thailand).

In January 1787, Governor-General Lord Cornwallis of India (1786–1793) decided that it was not in the EIC's interest to render military assistance to Kedah. But determined that Penang be retained, Light delayed revealing to the sultan the EIC's refusal for military aid until June 1788. Understandably Sultan Abdullah demanded that the British leave Penang. Light instead ordered an assault on the forts at Prai on the mainland in April 1791 destroying the batteries and routing the Kedah forces. Defeat forced Sultan Abdullah to sign the Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Alliance on 1 May 1791 that neither addressed the cession of Penang nor EIC military protection for Kedah. A decade later in June 1800 the EIC contracted an agreement with Kedah's Sultan Dhiauddin Mukarram Shah (1798–1803) for the cession of a stretch of territory opposite the island between Kuala Muda and Kuala Krian that became Province Wellesley.

## THE ALLURE OF PENANG

Penang's trade flourished largely consequent of Light's administrative and development policies, the faith and confidence in a British-administered trading port, and the practice of free trade. The Supreme Government<sup>4</sup> declaration "to make the Port free to all nations" that boosted Penang's commercial success (Clodd, 1948: 59). Traders flocked to this new free port-city to avoid taxes from capricious native rulers and the monopolistic *Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie* (VOC) ([Dutch] United East India Company). Light, in fact, had instituted free trade even before the above-mentioned instructions from Acting Governor General Sir John Macpherson were received.<sup>5</sup>

Within three years of its establishment Penang exhibited impressive trade figures (Table 1).

Table 1: Early trade of Penang, 1789 and 1804

Year	Total value of imports and exports (Sp \$)*
1789	853,592
1804	1,418,200

\* The Spanish Dollar was pegged to the price of silver that fluctuated between 3s. 6d. and 4s. 6d. sterling. Often 4s. was accepted as the mean.

Source: Straits Settlements Records, Vol. 3, 20 June 1788; Leith (1804: 57–59).

The trade at Penang was borne of the transshipment of products from the east that were re-packed and forwarded to the west, and vice versa. George Town was an entrepôt that served the triangular trade between Southeast Asia, East Asia, and South and West Asia and Europe. The general pattern of Penang's trade is best illustrated in the following quote and Table 2.

The manufactures of Great Britain and [British] India were brought to [Penang] for distribution throughout the East Indian Islands [present-day Malaysia and Indonesia], while the products of the [Malay] Archipelago were collected there for transmission to India, China, and the United Kingdom. The principal imports from Britain and India were opium and piece goods (woolen, cotton, and silk cloths), steel, gunpowder, iron and chinaware. These were sold at Penang for the typical products of the Archipelago ... Straits produce, e.g. rice, tin, spices, rattans, gold-dust, ivory, ebony, and pepper. The greater part of these commodities came from the countries lying near Penang, and especially Burma, the Malay Peninsula, and Sumatra. Owing to Penang's position on the western edge of the Archipelago, its trade with the islands to the east of Sumatra and the Peninsula

was comparatively small. A large and increasingly important part of the commerce of Penang was carried on by native merchants, who collected the Straits produce, and sold it in Penang, buying in exchange British and Indian manufactures.

(Mills, 1966: 41)

Table 2: Trade Pattern of Penang, 1841–1914

Year	S.E. Asia		S. Asia		West		Others	
	Imports (%)	Exports (%)	Imports (%)	Exports (%)	Imports (%)	Exports (%)	Imports (%)	Exports (%)
1841	41.22	38.66	45.00	34.75	13.79	17.25	0.00	2.33
1851	54.13	50.15	24.40	24.00	19.99	25.47	1.48	0.38
1868	63.17	54.74	17.27	13.49	8.57	26.87	11.0	4.90
1878	47.61	66.38	21.44	7.52	30.60	26.07	0.34	0.03
1888	51.91	55.53	50.54	17.26	17.07	27.06	0.48	0.15
1898	52.51	51.23	30.42	18.06	16.17	30.67	0.90	0.04
1908	72.70	58.53	15.76	14.28	11.02	27.02	0.52	0.17
1914	69.92	36.92	17.55	9.77	11.82	52.58	1.01	0.73

Source: *Straits Settlements Blue Books* for aforesaid years.

Both Asian and European traders contributed to the growth and development of George Town.

Both Europeans and natives were necessary for the growth of Penang's trade. Without [this symbiotic combination] British commerce would have developed much more slowly, in fact [George] town would never have existed: but without Asiatic assistance the growth of trade would have been crippled ...

(Mills, 1966: 39–40)

This combined effort can be discerned in the spatial pattern of Light's George Town that remained generally intact to a great extent to the present (Figure 1). The business district represented by Beach Street (Lebuh Pantai) ran from the port southwesterly to Prangin Creek (Jalan Prangin) with Chulia Street (Lebuh Chulia) as the divider: the upper, northern end were lined with European establishments such as agency houses, shipping lines, freight companies, forwarding firms, insurance agents, whereas the lower, southern half of the street were the domain of Asian, mainly Chinese, trading concerns.

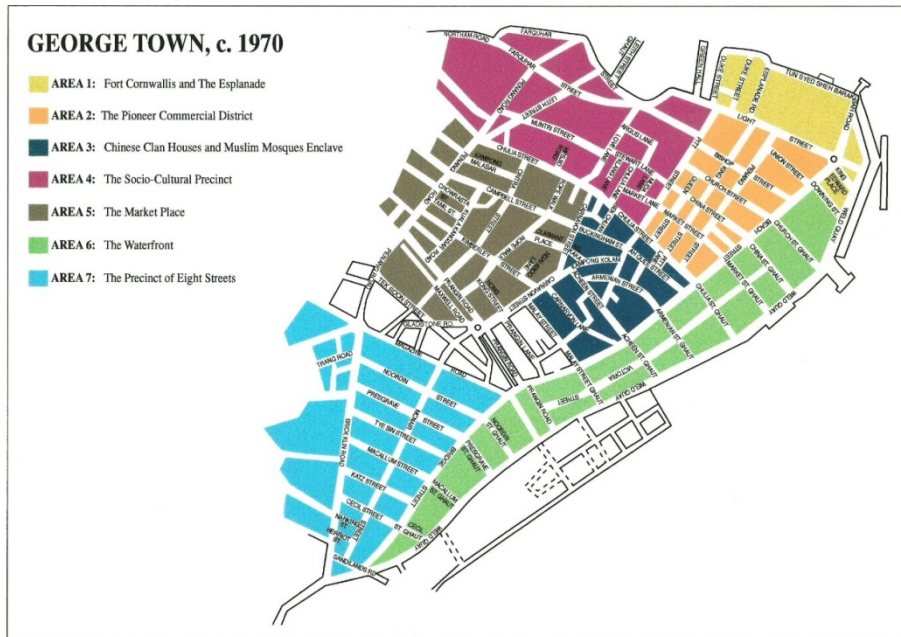


Figure 1: The growth areas of George Town.  
 Source: Ooi (2002: 23).

Maintaining law and order was the primary task of any newly established settlement. George Town, like most port-cities, had a transient population, and any wrongdoing and injustice would escape unnoticed if there were no proper law courts and policing. For instance, some fracas occurred in October 1787 where some European sailors created much havoc in George Town.

The riots these people [European seamen] committed in striking and abusing and plundering the [local native] inhabitants made it necessary to establish a Police [force]. Also great disorder is occasioned by a number of people retailing a very cheap and destructive spirit [arrack].

(Clodd, 1948: 62)

Light utilised this incident to appeal to Calcutta (Kolkata). As the Supreme Government was apparently unresponsive Light initiated measures to maintain peace and harmonious existence of the multiethnic population that had dramatically increased with the growth of trade. Within two years of its establishment, the number of inhabitants reached 1,000; by 1804, it grew to 12,000 (Straits Settlements Records, Vol. 3, 5 and 6; Leith, 1804: 29).

Light adopted the time-tested *kapitan* system whereby a headman or *kapitan* (captain) was appointed for each ethnic community or geographical

group of people.<sup>6</sup> For instance, for the Chinese community, a prominent merchant would be anointed as Kapitan China, for the Indian Muslims, a Kapitan Keling, and so forth. The Kapitan China acted as an intermediary and representative between Light's administration and the Chinese community; any issues, problems and/or disputes that unsettled peace and harmony within the community was the responsibility of the Kapitan China. The *kapitan* system was not only effective and economical (*kapitan* did not receive any remuneration only honour and respect) but also a guise of indirect rule over the population that the colonial authorities had little inkling of their customs, practices, and traditions.

Then in 1788, and again in 1794, Calcutta forwarded regulations that became general rules pertaining to minor crimes (Straits Settlements Records, Vol. 6, 1 August 1794; [Blundell], 1851a V: 294–300). In March 1807 Penang was granted a Charter of Justice that established a Court of Judicature presided by a recorder (hence Recorder's Court) with the governor and three councilors on the bench. This charter was primarily based on the Indian Penal Code. Sir Edmund Stanley was the inaugural recorder in May 1808 (City Council of George Town, 1966: 9). The Recorder's Court replaced the *kapitan* system that was officially discarded.

In practice, however, the Chinese continued to bring their disputes to their "kapitan," a respected elder, often one amongst the most successful merchants took on the responsibility as a mediator who adjudicated on customary issues and practices within the community. Although there is little documented evidence to indicate the aforesaid practice of seeking the assistance of the *kapitan* in resolving problems, there is no reason to doubt that this practice might be commonplace and much were carried out orally and informally.<sup>7</sup> Taking their disputes to a respected elder, a clan leader, was an accepted and familiar practice rather than to a formal alien institution such as the Recorder's Court presided over by non-Chinese "outsiders" (British officials). Likewise this "voluntary *kapitan* arrangement" operated within other ethnic communities that preferred to settle their problems from within rather than from without (Turnbull, 1972: 106).

The administration of land was a measure by Light to achieve two objectives, namely to transform Penang into a "second Moluccas", and to draw permanent settlers in lieu of a floating and transitory population of traders and merchants. It was Light's intention to wean off dependence on the Dutch possession for spices hence liberal land grants were given to would-be settlers and at the same time enthusiastically promoted commercial agriculture. Initial steps were taken to clear land for rice cultivation and market gardening as means to attain food self-sufficiency.

But Light's agricultural vision failed owing to natural causes, inexperience and unfavourable market conditions. Early attempts to cultivate spices such as cloves, nutmeg, and cinnamon were unsuccessful due to inexperience of the planters. The onset of the Napoleonic Wars (1803–1815) offered a golden opportunity for the EIC to forcibly seize spice plants such as

clove, nutmeg, mace, and others directly from the Dutch-held Moluccas; the Dutch were officially Britain's enemy when the Low Countries allied with the French Republic. The seedlings were nurtured in Penang with high hopes (Leith, 1804: 30, 35).

Pepper appeared to be the most successful crop. Introduced from Aceh in the late 1790s it enjoyed some prosperity (Straits Settlements Records, Vol. 3, 14 March 1788; Clodd, 1948: 61). Until 1810 the annual pepper output averaged 1.6 million kilograms, and the quality it seemed was unsurpassed in the region (Low, 1836: 40; Crawford, 1820 II: 359). Handsome returns of some Sp\$400,000 were registered for pepper in 1804. But Napoleon's continental blockade closed European ports and hence the market to Penang's pepper, and competition from Malabar pepper resulted in steady decline. By the early 1830s pepper exports plummeted to Sp\$5,000; in 1835 the quantity exported was reduced to about 100,000 kilograms. A decade later, pepper, once the staple export crop, was undertaken by a handful of Chinese cultivators for local consumption (Low, 1836: 16–17; [Blundell], 1850a IV: 378). By then nutmegs and cloves had succeeded as the staple export crops attained peak production in 1860. But subsequently disease destroyed the spice plants inflicting losses and snuffed confidence (Straits Settlements Annual Report, 1860–1861: 20; Straits Settlements Annual Report, 1861–1862: 36).

In attempting to draw settlers to the new settlement, Light, on the authority of Macpherson, offered free grants of land. Lord Cornwallis confirmed the generous offering of land: "We leave it to your discretion to receive such colonists as you may think it safe and advisable to admit and to give each family such portion of land as circumstances will allow and you may judge expedient" (Clodd, 1948: 108–109). But such generosity of perpetuity land grants was to encounter problems at a later stage (see Stevens, 1929: 388, 396).

## **FROM SOJOURNERS TO SETTLERS**

Initially, many flocked to Penang primarily for trade and after completing their commercial activities would return to their homeland. Subsequently, many of these merchants established businesses in George Town and settled down, some with local women, others had wives brought from the home country; the sojourner had turned settler.

When Light landed at Penaga Point, present day Esplanade or Padang, on 17 July 1786, accompanying him were five of his staff and 14 European civilians comprising "two merchants, a tavern-keeper, a ship's carpenter, a caulker, a cooper, a planter, a dealer, a blacksmith, a builder, a shopkeeper, a beach-master, a mariner and a ship-builder" (City Council of George Town, 1966: 1).

Apart from Malay settlements on the island, the bulk of the settlers in George Town were immigrants from neighbouring territories. The free trade



concept, the generous grants of land, and the confidence in a British administration brought many to this newly established outpost of the EIC. Consequently by 1804 the population on the island reached 12,000 (Table 3).

Table 3: Population of Penang Island, 1797–1941

Year	Population
1797	6,937
1801	10,310
1804	12,000
1812	23,418
1820	28,849
1830	33,959
1842	40,499
1851	43,143
1860	59,956
1931	218,463
1941	247,460

*Sources:* Jackson, 1961: 5; Leith, 1804: 29; Purcell, 1967: x, 68.

What was unique of the immigrant population was its admixture of a vast variety of ethnicity originating from various corners of the world. Besides the majority communities like Indians and Chinese there were smaller enclaves of Eurasians, Burmese (Myanmarese), Siamese (Thais), Acehnese, Arabs, Armenians, Jews, Japanese and Europeans, some arriving during the formative years while others settled later. Not only was Penang's population from its very beginning colourful and variegated but also multiethnicity, multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism were readily embraced.

In 1794, Light remarked about the south Indian Muslims whom he referred to as "Chuliahs."

... the Chuliahs, or people from the several ports on the coast of Coromandel. The greater part of these [them] have long been inhabitants of Quedah [Kedah] and some of them were born there. They are all shopkeepers or coolies. About one thousand are settled here, some with families. The vessels from the coast bring over annually 1,500 or 2,000 men, who by traffic and various kinds of labour obtain a few dollars with which they return to their homes and are succeeded by others.

([Blundell], 1851b V: 9)

A decade later Leith reiterated the transient character of the Chuliahs (Leith, 1804: 47).

Merchants from Bombay (Mumbai) also flocked to the new settlement for commercial and trading opportunities. They opened direct business links with their compatriots. The Indian mercantile community gradually increased in numbers and became more stabilised when families from India joined those in Penang.

Indian convicts were brought into Penang as early as the late 1780s as labour for public works. The Indian convict population progressively increased when Penang was designated a penal station in 1795 replacing Fort Blair in the Andamans (Rajendra, 1983; McNair, 1899; Turnbull, 1970). Around 1800, there were some 130 convicts engaged in making roads and the construction of public buildings. Their contribution proved essential to the extent that Leith requested for a further supply of 250 to 300 convicts (City Council of George Town, 1966: 4). In 1805, a year previous to Penang ceasing as a penal centre, the number of convicts was 772 (Jackson, 1961: 7; City Council of George Town, 1966: 4–5).

Indian troops, Hindus and Muslims, mainly from Madras (Chennai) comprised the garrison force at Penang. Their families were brought over from India to join the men serving in this new British outpost. Others of the Indian community include Bengalis, Parsees, Punjabis, Sindhis and Gujeratis from north India, and Tamils from the southern provinces. Tamils, who came in droves towards the late 19th century and early 20th century, constituted the majority within the Indian community (Chanderbali, 2008).

Light noted in his diary for 18 July 1786, one day upon his arrival on the island, that several Chinese led by a "Captain China" presented him with a gift of fishing nets ([Blundell], 1850b, IV: 629, 636). Their appearance was fortuitous as more of their countrymen came to settle. By September 1787, it was reported that Chinese-owned shops were "pretty extensive" and there were some 60 Chinese families in residence ([Blundell], 1850b, IV: 641–2).

Light described the Chinese settlers as:

the most valuable part of our inhabitants; they are men, women and children about 3,000, they possess the different trades of carpenters, masons and smiths, are traders, shopkeepers and planters, [and] they employ small vessels and prows and send adventures to the surrounding countries.

([Blundell] 1851b,V: 9)

During Leith's tenure the Chinese were estimated to number some 6,000; the wealthier class owning "valuable estates, in land and houses" and were pepper planters whereas the others were artisans, labourers, fishermen and market gardeners commanding high wages because they were "laboriously good workmen" (Leith, 1804: 25, 80). The Chinese were greatly encouraged to settle in

Penang as they were regarded by Light as "a valuable acquisition" and "the only people of the [E]ast from whom a revenue [might] be raised without expense and extraordinary efforts of government" ([Blundell] 1851b, V: 9). The insatiable appetite of the Chinese for opium and arrack, and activities such as gambling, enabled the authorities to collect indirect taxes through the excise farm system.

Chinese arrivals originated from neighbouring territories like Kedah, southern Siam particularly Junk Ceylon (Phuket) and Pattani, northern Sumatra and Melaka. Subsequently, there evolved a sub-group within the Chinese community known as Baba Nyonya<sup>8</sup> or Straits Chinese.<sup>9</sup> It was not inconceivable that long-settled Chinese families in Kedah and Penang intermarried with local "Malay" women such as Kedah Malays, the peoples of the then Dutch East Indies like Acehnese, Bataks, Javanese or Boyanese. Inter marriages also occurred between the Chinese, Siamese and Burmese communities.

Like their counterparts in Melaka, the Baba Nyonya of Penang represented a syncretic amalgamation of Sino-Malay culture. While the Daoist-Buddhist beliefs and tenets of Confucianism such as ancestor worship were adhered to, the Baba Nyonya adopted much from Malay socio-cultural traditions in terms of cuisine, attire (especially for women) and home-language (retention of Hokkien dialect juxtaposed with interjections of Malay and English).<sup>10</sup>

While the Baba preferred Western suits to Chinese garments, the Nyonya's clothing was decidedly Malay with the *sarung* as the mainstay. The Nyonya kitchen served spicy, Malay-based cuisine with liberal Siamese import. There was a distinct preference for English-medium schooling for both sons and daughters and joining the civil service or as professionals (doctors, lawyers, architects, or engineers) over business pursuits.

From the late 1820s and 1830s the yearly landings of *sinkheh* (guest, new arrivals) at the Penang harbour numbered between 2,000 and 3,000 mainly from the southeastern provinces of Guangdong and Fujian (Purcell, 1967: 58). Originating from different districts within the same province, and divided along dialect lines, the Chinese population exhibited schism and clannishness. Hokkiens and Teochews were the ascendant dialect communities in terms of numbers and socio-economic standing. Trading, real estate, large plantation-scale commercial agriculture, and retail shopkeeping were the forte of Hokkiens and, to a lesser extent, Teochews. The Cantonese were less numerous but considered more hardy and robust for it was them, together with Malays, that were employed in clearing the dense tropical jungle and thick undergrowth and preparing the land for cultivation (Purcell, 1967: 44, 60). Cantonese predominated as artisans (blacksmiths, carpenters, shoemakers), and some in retail trade. Other Chinese dialect groups included Hakkas, with arrivals particularly after the mid-19th century and Hailam or Hainanese from Hainan Island who specialised in food preparation serving as cooks and as proprietors of beverage outlets (*kopitiam*, literally coffee-shop).

Chinese town dwellers focused on commercial undertakings. Based in George Town, the *towkay*<sup>11</sup> oversaw his commercial domain that extended to plantations and mining activities on the mainland stretching as far south as Perak and Selangor, southern Thailand (Phuket, Patani, Songkhla) and northern Sumatra (Medan, Aceh). Other *towkay* established themselves in coastal shipping, tin smelting, wholesaling (importers and exporters), revenue farming (colonial government monopolies in opium, gambling, arrack) and the retail and distribution trade. The Chinese had a strong niche in retail trade and Chinese shop-houses predominate the build-landscape of inner George Town. Besides the sugar planters in Province Wellesley, Chinese (mostly Teochew) commercial agricultural activities (fruits and spices) vied with European holdings on the island. A Chinese English-educated clerical class dominated the colonial bureaucracy and European commercial firms and banks.

The Indians competed with the Chinese in commercial and trading activities. The northern Indians and the Indian Muslims had a fair share in wholesaling and the retail and distribution trade dealing in different trade goods (sub-continent) from their Chinese counterparts (mainland China). Money lending was the forte of the *chettiar*, a prosperous Indian Hindu clan. Tamils mainly worked as labourers, stevedores, plantation workers, and in petty trading. Sikhs and Indian Muslims served in the colonial constabulary.

Borne of unions between Indians (both Muslims and Hindus) and local Malay Muslim women particularly from Kedah, Jawi-Peranakan was a dominant community in the early decades of Penang's establishment (Omar and Jamaluddin, 2010; Fujimoto, 1989). Not only Indian Muslim traders who easily assimilated into the local Malay Muslim culture married with Malay Muslim women and settled in Penang but also Tamil Hindus who were brought over as labourers in the colonial public works, plantation workers (cane sugar, later rubber, etc.), port and wharf workers, and the railroad married local Malay women and embraced Islam (Ooi, 2009: 140–141; Halimah and Zainab, 2004). The Jawi-Peranakan traditionally dominated such economic niche areas as *nasi kandar* (rice with an assortment of curries), *mee goreng* (fried noodles), money changing, gold and jewellery, newspaper vendors, small sundry stalls, barbers, printers and publishing, bakery and bread distributors. George Town has long been the home-base to the Jawi-Peranakan community since the 19th century.

In spite of Penang being a British port and settlement, the European community was small (Harper, 2010; Butcher, 1979). Apart from colonial bureaucrats, Europeans constituted the managerial staff in the agency houses and trading establishments, shipping companies, banks, plantations, and in the professions (engineers, lawyers, doctors, surveyors).

Whereas the bulk of the Chinese, Indian and European population concentrated in George Town on the island, Malay *kampung* (villages) dotted the northern half of Province Wellesley in proximity to Kedah. Malay involvement in mercantile activities was limited; the majority engaged in rice farming and

coastal fishing. An influx of Malays began to move into Province Wellesley following the Siamese occupation of Kedah from 1821. Consequently, Province Wellesley's population expanded dramatically that by 1858 recorded 67,000 comprising 54,000 Malays, 8,000 Chinese, and 5,000 Indians (Turnbull, 1972: 14–15).

During its formative years, Penang was home to several minority ethnic groups, viz. Armenians, Burmese, Eurasians, Jews, Arabs and Siamese each bringing with them their unique customs and traditions, characteristic lifestyles (attire, food), colourful celebrations and festivities, religious observances and rituals that added to the multicultural scenery of Penang.

Penang had a long and mutually beneficial economic relationship with Aceh. The 1830s and 1840s witnessed the success and expansion of the Aceh-Penang pepper trade (Shaffer, 2013: 123–124). Besides mutually enriching both ports, the pepper trade also caused the settlement of Acehnese merchants in Penang. Islam bonded the Acehnese with local Malays, Arabs and other Muslim communities. Subsequently, within one or two generations, the Acehnese were almost completely assimilated into the predominant Malay community through commercial ties and intermarriages.

The close links between the Acehnese and Arab communities owed to two Arab entrepreneurs from Aceh: Syed Hussain al-Aidid and Syed Jaffar. Syed Hussain al-Aidid, a prominent pepper merchant, settled in Penang with his family in the early 1790s. Together with Syed Jaffar, Syed Hussain established a Malay Muslim entrepreneurial enclave in George Town centering at Acheen Street. Gudang Aceh (Aceh Ware House), or *Rumah Tinggi* (lit. "Tall House"), served both as Syed Hussain's business centre overseeing the spice trade and his residence.

Reputed for their industry, early Javanese settlers in Penang were engaged as agricultural workers in the spice and sugar plantations. Besides employment as labourers by the one and only tin smelting company in George Town, the Eastern Smelting Company at Dato Kramat, the majority of Javanese worked and lived in Province Wellesley as factory labourers on sugar plantations (Ooi, 2001). Some Javanese and Boyanese served as plantation hands to work off debts to the ship's master who brought them on the pilgrimage to Mecca. Other Javanese together with Tamils were indentured labourers "who bound themselves to serve for a specific period" (Cavenagh, 1884: 280). Owing to Dutch prohibition, there were no large-scale immigration of Javanese and Boyanese hence ensuring a small community resident in Penang. Like the Acehnese and the Arabs, both Javanese and Boyanese were easily assimilated into the larger Malay population.

The area around present-day Pulau Tikus, on the northwestern outskirts of George Town, was a Burmese-Siamese enclave that remained to this day notably their urban villages surrounding the Lorong Burmah area. Penang had long commercial ties with southern Burma and the southern provinces of Siam.

Siamese and Burmese settlers worked in commercial agricultural plantations and some involved in petty trade. Inter-marriages were not uncommon between Siamese and Burmese with Chinese. Siamese and Burmese Buddhist temples and stupas were constructed in the vicinity of Lorong Burmah and Lorong Perak that today are tourist attractions.

Following the European War (1914–1918), the boom years of tin and rubber attracted Japanese entrepreneurs to settle in Penang. They functioned as traders and financiers involved in primary commodities (rubber and tin) while others came as dentists and photographers. Females were brought in to work in the numerous brothels of George Town (Tan, 2013: 8–20). These early Japanese residents kept within their own self-contained community having its own distinct social and cultural organisations including schools and associations. The Japanese community, however, remained small.

Even much smaller than the Japanese presence were the Armenians who first settled in Penang at the turn of the 19th century. These traders and entrepreneurs from Armenia, in southern present-day Russia, ventured to Southeast Asia in pursuit of their fortunes. The Sarkies brothers, Tigran and Martin, were eminent hoteliers managing well-known landmark properties like the Eastern & Oriental (E & O) Hotel in George Town and the Crag Hotel atop Penang Hill.<sup>12</sup> The E & O enjoyed a sustained reputation as one of the most prominent and prestigious hotels east of the Suez Canal (Sharp, 2008).

East European Jews who arrived during the 19th century mainly engaged in trading activities and posed as bankers and financiers. The Jewish Cemetery at Yahudi Road (Jalan Zainal Abidin) in George Town with many tombstones with Hebrew inscriptions testified to a once prosperous community.

Inter-marriages between Europeans and Asians produced a rich cultural admixture reflected in the Eurasian community (Goh, 2002: 97–122). The mixed ancestries comprised on the one hand Portuguese, English, Dutch, Irish, Scots, French, Italian and German, while on the other, Malay, Chinese, Indian, Burmese and Siamese. A community of Eurasians from Kuala Kedah was one of the first immigrants to Penang. The Eurasian pioneers settled in the heart of George Town, namely at China Street and Bishop Street. In 1910s another community of Eurasians from Phuket (southern Siam) settled in Pulau Tikus in what subsequently became Kampung Serani (Eurasian Village). Being predominantly Christians, Catholics for those of Portuguese ancestry and Protestants of Anglo-Dutch lineage, the Eurasians in Penang subscribed to the English-medium mission schools. Owing to their Western-oriented background Eurasians tended to share a common affinity with the English-educated Baba Nyonya. Their educational background enabled Eurasians to serve in clerical positions in the colonial bureaucracy, European businesses, and the professions. Penang Eurasians converse in an English patois with traces of Portuguese, Malay and Siamese elements.

A contemporary in 1802 described the early multiethnic character of Penang.

The greater part of this community are but sojourners for a time, so that the population of the island is continually shifting as to the individual members of whom it is composed; this population includes British subjects, foreigners, both Europeans and Americans, people of colour originally descended from European fathers and Asiatic mothers [Eurasians], Armenians, Parsees, Arabs, Chooliars (Indians), Malays from the Malay Peninsula, Sumatra, and the Eastern Islands, Bugeses from Borneo, Celebes and other islands in the China Seas, Burmans from Pegu, Siamese, Javanese, Chinese, with Musselmen and Hindoos from the [East India] Company's territories in India.

(Dickens, 1851: 297)

## **EMBRACING MULTICULTURALISM**

Penang from its early beginnings and subsequently throughout its colonial period accepted and practiced multiculturalism. Vincent N. Parrillo defines multiculturalism as "a belief, ideology, movement, or policy that ... essentially advocates the peaceful coexistence of different cultural, ethnic, and/or racial groups within a single society interacting with one another on a mutually respectful, equal basis" (Parrillo, 2008 I: 598). For Superintendent Francis Light and his successors of colonial administrators, multiculturalism was adopted as an unwritten policy owing more to pragmatism rather than any preconceived ideological orientation or abiding by some movement and/or popular trend then. Apart from the so-called Penang Riots (1867), the multiethnic population had co-existed harmoniously with one another.<sup>13</sup> The colonial authorities, to borrow the contemporary label, were practicing integrative pluralists who believed and emphasised that Penang's "strength lies in its diversity, that the blends and contrasts of its different peoples generate a dynamic synergy in its culture, quality of life, and achievements" (Parrillo, 2008 I: 599).

The spatial pattern of businesses, socio-cultural institutions, houses of worship, and residences in George Town were integrative among the different racial communities often in close proximity to one another. Light laid down the grid of the town designating functional areas (Table 4; see Figure 1).

Table 4: Early functional areas of George Town

Function	Area
Governmental and civic	Esplanade and Fort Cornwallis (bounded by Esplanade Road, Fort Road and the Esplanade, Duke Street, Green Hall, Light Street and King Edward Place).
Trade and commerce	Initial commercial district (bounded by a part of Light Street as its northern perimeter, the northern section of Beach Street serving as its eastern extent, while the northern part of Chulia Street posed as its southern limit, and Pitt Street as its western boundary. The streets within this rectangular-shaped precinct are King Street, Penang Street, Union Street, Bishop Street, Church Street, China Street, Market Street and Queen Street).
Sino-Malay quarter	Chinese clan houses and Muslim enclave (Chulia Street as its northern perimeter, Beach Street on the east, Malay Street to the south, and Carnarvon Street as its western boundary. Within this quarter are Acheen Street, Armenian Street, Carnarvon Lane, Prangin Lane, Kampong Kolam, Pitt Street, Ah Quee Street, Buckingham Street, Sek Chuan Lane, Cheapside, Kampong Kaka and Pitt Lane.
Socio-cultural enclave	Socio-cultural enclave (bounded from clockwise Farquhar Street, Pitt Street, the section of Chulia Street between Love Lane and Penang Road, and the stretch of Penang Road until the intersection with Argyll Road. The area crisscrossed by Stewart Lane, Argus Lane, Chulia Lane, Klang Street, Mosque Road, Muda Lane, Market Lane, Love Lane, Muntri Street and Leith Street).

*Note:* The original street names have more or less remained intact; substitute the English terms to Malay, thus "Street" to "Lebuh," "Road" as "Jalan," and "Lane," as "Lorong."  
*Source:* Ooi (2002: 24, 40, 61, 75).

George Town's streetscape on the eve of the Japanese Occupation was not far different from what it was in the 19th century where Anglo-Indian colonial architectural styles were adopted for civic and governmental buildings juxtaposed with the ubiquitous shop-house, a variety of mosque designs (Moorish, Acehnese, Malay), southern China-style clan houses, Daoist-Buddhist temples, South India-inspired Hindu temples and Anglicized churches. The ambience of "Chinatown" with roadside peddlers and the vast variety of street foods were delightful sights comparable to "Little India", only a stone's throw away that could be mistaken for a sector of contemporary Kolkata or Chennai.



## DISPARATE IDENTITIES

With all these intermingling of the different communities what then was the socio-cultural identity of Penang? What kind of identity did the sojourners possess after having settled with local women and raising families while others had brides/wives sent from their homeland to join them in their adopted new home in Penang?

Nonetheless, one must be cautious not to view all the immigrant settlers in Penang as a singular group as there was a "layering" of diasporic communities. For instance, "notably among those of Chinese ethnicity resident in Southeast Asia, wherein some Chinese settled locally and acculturated, while later arrivals left China under very different circumstances, and were more likely to repatriate at some future time" (Hall, 2006: 456).

Besides the Chinese, other immigrants from the Indian sub-continent and the Malay Archipelago remained "long-term sojourners" but harbouring a heartfelt intention of "someday" to return to the ancestral village and subsequently buried in the homeland. For these individuals the host country, in this context colonial Penang, was an opportunity for them to accumulate a fortune and thereafter to return to their motherland to retire in comfort. For these "long-term sojourners," their identity as well as their loyalty were undoubtedly apparent to be their motherland and not Penang. Against this context there were disparate identities among the settled population where long-term sojourners resided alongside permanent settlers, the former still awaiting to return to the home country while the latter had long resolved to regard the host country (Penang) as home.

Further accentuating these disparate identities was the *kapitan* system where communalism was encouraged and sustainably nurtured. Despite the commencement of the Recorder's Court from 1808, the *kapitan* system that was officially discarded remained vibrant and continued to be practiced for the following reasons.

This voluntary kapitan arrangement suited immigrants because it encouraged a local autonomy to which they were accustomed in mainland China, where the mandarin [government officials] was thinly spread and local communities were expected to organize their own affairs and settle their own disputes. ... The authority for settling disputes within clans lay with the elders, while disputes between clans were settled by force of arms.

(Turnbull, 1972: 106–107)

Additionally,

Since most of the Chinese left China illegally ... they were not protected by the Chinese government. This political background led to a high degree of independence and self-reliance within the Chinese immigrant communities. ... [And] [a]s a result [of the Kapitan system], the Chinese immigrants had no contact with the local authorities except through their elected leaders. *They thus developed no loyalties other than to their own communities.*

(Wang, 1994: 7, 9; emphasis in original)

The Chinese perpetuation of the *kapitan* system was replicated by the other communities. The *kapitan* system fostered insularity of the respective communities, each with its own way of living, worldview, characteristics, identity and loyalty.

Furthermore Penang's colonial era plural school system was another contributory element to the disparate socio-cultural identity of the diverse population. The type of education and schooling contributed in shaping and moulding not only an individual's personality, taste and worldview but also identity, loyalty and sense of belonging. Education and schooling, more so in a plural school system, to a great extent influence and/or reinforce prejudices and stereotyping borne from the family household and neighbourhood environment. The colonial period that accommodated four asymmetrical school system English, Chinese, Malay, and Tamil operating in parallel, literally sowed the "seeds of separatism" (Loh, 1975).

Owing to the nonchalant attitude of the colonial authorities, education and schools were left to non-governmental agencies. Christian missions from various denominations, Chinese clan houses (*kongsi*), individual philanthropists, plantation owners and others took upon the responsibility of providing education for the children of settled traders, labourers, artisans and farmers in accordance to their respective agendas.

Although mooted by the colonial chaplain of Penang Reverend R. S. Hutchings, the Penang Free School established in 1816 was a secular boys' school. The "Free" meant that this English-medium school was opened to all students irrespective of ethnicity, religion, creed and socio-economic standing. It was reputedly the first English-medium school in Southeast Asia.

The La Salle Christian Brothers and the Sisters of St Maur established St Xavier's Institution, a school for boys and Convent Light Street for girls respectively in 1852 (Ooi, 1992; Thong, 1980: 118–126; Yap, 2006). Like Penang Free School, all the Christian mission schools used the English language as the medium of instruction, hence referred to as "English schools." Except for the mainly Chinese student population and a minority representation of Indians, Eurasians, Malays, the English schools were literally transplanted public schools

from Britain. The teaching faculty including the head teacher comprised English, Scottish or Welsh or Europeans particularly French and Irish in the Catholic mission schools and Americans in Methodist schools. The curricula and textbooks were adopted wholesale from Britain, likewise co-curricula activities such as sports and games (football, rugby, hockey, cricket, athletics and cross-country), clubs and societies (chess, music and drama, debating, elocution, philatelic, etc.), and uniform units (Boys' Scouts, Girl Guides, Boys' Brigade, Red Cross, St John Ambulance, etc.).

The secular English schools such as the Penang Free School and later St George's Girls' School, initially funded by the Anglican mission, were subsequently taken over and managed by the colonial government from the mid-1830s (Pereira, 1954). Despite being Christian mission schools, the majority of the student population mainly Chinese were non-Christians. A small minority, both Indian Hindus and Malay Muslims residing in George Town had no qualms in sending their sons to mission schools. However, it was rare then to find Indian and Malay girls in school owing to conservative notions that dissuaded young females being present in the public domain.

With regard to the education of the indigenous Malays, the colonial authorities were torn between the orientalist's view that native languages should be used as the medium of instruction particularly at the elementary level, and the liberal opinion that English should be taught to indigenes owing to the liberal bias towards Western science and technology where English was widely used in the literature. It was towards this latter end as well as the pragmatic necessity of clerical personnel for the colonial bureaucracy and European private sector that English-medium schools came into existence. Nonetheless, the two schools of thought that originated in debates among British colonial officials in India and applicable to Penang (and the Straits Settlements) as well, were in fact complementary, viz. "Macaulay's diffusionist idea underpinned British colonial policy for the education of a native elite, while the conservation theory influenced the British approach to the education of native masses" (Loh, 1975: 3).

Since Penang had only a farming peasantry and no aristocracy, the colonial government provided vernacular Malay schools at the elementary level. The Sekolah Melayu Gelugor (Gelugor Malay School) established in 1821 was the pioneering Malay vernacular school (Mujeini, 1982).

Education was the lynchpin to ascend the socio-economic and status ladder in dynastic China through success in the civil service examinations, the fulcrum of recruitment for the Chinese civil service. Diasporic Chinese community emphasised education hence strived to provide schooling for the younger generation. The Chinese settlers in Penang through community funding and collective labour erected schools for their children and supplied with teachers, curriculum, and textbooks from China. Chinese vernacular schools, elementary to lower middle level, were privately and communally funded and

managed independently from the colonial authorities. The earliest Chinese school in Penang was Jit Sin School that was established by the Fu De Zheng Shen organisation in March 1818.

The Indian community largely of Tamils relied on the colonial government for their educational needs. But during the early decades of Penang's colonial period, little has been undertaken (Subadrah, 1980). Tamil vernacular education only developed in the early decades of the 20th century with responsibility entrusted to rubber estate proprietors who were the employers of the bulk of the Tamil immigrant population. The estate school provided a rudimentary elementary education of between three and five years with Tamil as the medium of instruction, imported textbooks, curricula, and teachers from South India.

Owing to the transplanted curricula, imported textbooks and teachers, graduates from the different school systems possessed different worldviews, orientations, qualifications, and career opportunities. The rudimentary Malay vernacular schools that taught the Three Rs of *Reading, Writing and Arithmetic* ended five or six years of schooling with little to show or hope; apart from a token few who went on to become Malay school teachers, the majority returned to their *kampung* (village) no different than their forefathers. Parochial and inward looking, Malay school graduates with scant options continued with traditional subsistence farming and fishing. Estate school leavers were no better off than their Malay vernacular school counterparts; they too continued to live and work and remained within the confines of the rubber estate.

Despite being able to attain a higher level of schooling reaching to the lower middle (secondary) level, the career avenues of Chinese vernacular school graduates were limited as the colonial authorities did not recognise their school certificates, and employment in Chinese enterprises prioritised blood and clan ties rather than paper qualifications. Chinese vernacular school graduates hence looked to China for inspiration, identity, hope and even sustenance.

Beneficiaries of English-medium education possessed far greater career opportunities. The academically inclined could, through scholarships or wealthy backgrounds, pursue tertiary education to qualify as professionals (doctors, lawyers, engineers, architects). Others served as clerks in the colonial bureaucracy, Western businesses, banks, agency houses, trading companies, shipping lines, insurance and legal firms. English school graduates even in clerical positions could live reasonably comfortable and enjoy respectability within their own community as well as the wider colonial society. Their educational background transformed English school graduates into Anglophiles.

English-medium education acted on the one hand as a unifying factor but on the other as a divisive element. All racial groups that underwent English-medium schooling were unified by their educational experience. Conversant in English and possessing Anglicized tastes, interests and outlook, English school graduates shared a common identity and partiality, namely to the colonial

metropolitan – Great Britain (Ooi, 1967). At the same time the English-medium schools split communities between the English-educated/speaking, and the vernacular-educated/speaking. A clear division can be discerned within Penang's Chinese community, viz. English-educated Chinese versus Chinese-educated Chinese (Tan, 1988: 146–149). If not for retaining their dialect (Hokkien, Teochew, Cantonese, etc.), the gulf between the two groups would be insurmountable. A similar dichotomy existed in other communities between the English-educated and the vernacular-educated but less pronounced than the Chinese context due to the small minority of English school graduates.

Further to separatism along educational lines and communalism nurtured by the *kapitan* system, the spatial distribution of the various communities and the ethnic division of labour accentuated the distancing between the multiethnic inhabitants of Penang. Owing to occupational necessity, there was an apparent identification of ethnicity and livelihood: Indian Muslim (trade and commerce), Indian Hindu (unskilled labour), and Chinese (trade and commerce, clerical positions in colonial bureaucracy and in Western businesses and banks). In George Town, there was a clear divide between Asian and European businesses and likewise their respective residences. While the ubiquitous shop-house served both as business and residential premises for Asians (Chinese, Indian, Arab, Acehnese, etc.), European commercial premises concentrated along Beach Street (Lebuh Pantai) in proximity to the port while their residences were located away from the central business district (CBD) such as Northam Road (Jalan Sultan Ahmad Shah), Macalister Road (Jalan Macalister) and Anson Road (Jalan Anson) on the then periphery of the port-city.

The indigenous Malays were found in the outskirts of George Town, the traditional settlements of Teluk Jelutong (Jalan Sungai Pinang, Jalan Perak and Jalan Datuk Keramat), Batu Uban and Teluk Duyung on the island, and throughout rural Province Wellesley bordering Kedah. The rural subsistence rice farming economy was a predominantly Malay preoccupation. The Teochew Chinese sugar plantations of Batu Kawan Island that predated the acquisition of Province Wellesley in 1800 remained a predominantly Chinese settlement (*Penang Gazette*, 23 February 1856; Low, 1849: 617; 1850: 378). Later estates were established during the first three decades of the 19th century to its east namely Bukit Tambun that had a Teochew Chinese presence even to this day (Jackson, 1968: 128–133). The establishment of European sugar estates and mills in the southern portion of Province Wellesley brought in an influx of Tamils and Javanese as plantation labour.

As can be discerned, colonial Penang exhibited a division of labour along ethnic lines. In contrast to the subsistence farming of Malays, the Chinese gravitated to trade and commerce whereas the majority of Indians worked as labourers and plantation workers. To what extent this ethnic division of labour was consciously orchestrated by the colonial authorities remained debatable but such a phenomenon retarded inter-ethnic contacts (Brown, 1994: 216–217). Each

community withdrew into its respective economic domain further accentuating the disparate identities.

## **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

Penang's appeal as a free port-of-call attracted many traders and settlers. George Town subsequently developed into a cosmopolitan port-city. By the turn of the 20th century improvements to Swettenham Pier elevated Penang from a lighterage port to a deep-water modern port. The population comprised a multitude of racial groups whereby the various communities co-existed harmoniously despite the apparent differences physically, in socio-cultural practices, religious beliefs, economic livelihood, and overall way of life. This social plurality and the phenomenon of multiculturalism that emerged and developed were readily embraced not only by the British colonial administration but also the peoples themselves.

Furnivall's plural society in Penang's context was further accentuated by several other factors namely the *kapitan* system, spatial distribution, ethnic division of labour, and the plural school system that contributed and fostered the development of disparate identities among the inhabitants specifically of George Town and throughout Penang. Although in close proximity to one another, the various communities – each with their own unique identity and characteristics – often far divorced from the other were able to live in peaceful co-existence.

Just prior to the outbreak of the Second World War in Asia in early December 1941, Penang possessed and nurtured a host of multiple, disparate identities as a result of a multiethnic, multicultural, and multi-religious population. Disparate identities notwithstanding there were conspicuous absence of inter-ethnic animosity, racial clashes, or tenuous relations among the many communities. Kudos to the benign umbrella of British colonial administration that appeared to shelter all communities equitably but more importantly trade and commerce, the main lifeline of sustenance, was shared by all inhabitants regardless of ethnic and socio-cultural backgrounds. This commonality – the so-called "in sharing the same fate" – to a great extent sustained the social fabric despite the disparate identities of the peoples.

But the war years and experiences therein ushered in changes to the social landscape of Penang and George Town with differing outcomes. The post-war period witnessed the beginnings of a "new" identity.

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## NOTES

1. Covering an area of 329,847 square kilometers, Malaysia has a population of 23.7 million (2000 census), currently nearly 30 million, comprising more than 70 distinct ethnic communities. See Ooi (2009: 259–262).
2. For the early history of Penang predating the British presence, see Mahani (2008), Mokhtar (2008), and Othman (1988).
3. Circumstances and motives of the acquisition of Penang have been adequately addressed in other works, notably Hall (1955: 421–429), Bastin (1959), Bassett (1964), Bonney (1965; 1971), and recently Langdon (2013).
4. The "Supreme Government" referred to the administration of the EIC in the Indian sub-continent headquartered at Fort William in Calcutta (Kolkata).
5. Light was passionate of the free trade concept and eloquently expounded it whenever necessary. See Straits Settlements Records, Vol. 3, 20 June 1788, and Straits Settlements Records, Vol. 5, 7 December 1792.
6. The *kapitan* system was believed to originate from 15th century Melaka when it was introduced by the Malay rulers to administer justice among the cosmopolitan trading population of the port-city. In later years European colonial administrations in Southeast Asia adopted this system as a means of indirect rule. See Ooi (2004a, II: 711).
7. According to one opinion, "there is negative evidence to suggest that most of the disputes amongst the Chinese were dealt with by their elders without recourse to the English way of administration of justice" (Wong, 1964: 10).
8. *Baba*, an honorific respectful term of address for Straits Chinese men originated from Hindustani with Persian influence. It is unclear if *Baba* was in fact a corruption of *babu* (*baboo*), a Hindi term that literally means father, an Indian equivalent to Mister, Sir or Esquire. *Nyonya* is a Malay title for non-Malay women with (high) social standing. See Ooi (2009: 27–28).
9. The term "Straits Chinese" was to differentiate between those Chinese who were born in Penang, Melaka and Singapore – the Straits Settlements – and those originating from mainland China. Although the Baba Nyonya (mainly Hokkien) comprised the majority of the Straits Chinese community, there were others, Cantonese and Teochew, who were born locally hence also regarded as Straits Chinese.
10. While Penang's Baba Nyonya retained their Hokkien dialect their brethren in Melaka discarded theirs only utilising Baba Malay, a patois derived from Malay (Ooi, 2009: 27–28).

11. *Towkay*, from Hokkien, refers to a head of a family, business, or organisation. It is often used as an honorific for a wealthy entrepreneur including a proprietor of a shop, a tin or gold mine, or a rubber or sugar cane plantation. Simply used as an honorific to accord respect to an individual of standing. See Ooi (2004b, III: 1342).
12. The Sarkies also owned The Raffles Hotel, a landmark property in Singapore, and The Strand in Rangoon (Yangon). All these properties have long since changed ownership.
13. Although the 1867 incident appeared as a Sino-Malay clash, a closer look revealed it as a struggle for economic dominance of George Town between two Sino-Malay factions, viz. the Chinese Hokkien Khian Teik (Tua Pek Kong) secret society allying with the Arab-Acehnese of the *Bendera Merah* (Red Flag Society) against the Chinese Cantonese Ghee Hin secret society and their Kedah Malay *Bendera Putih* (White Flag Society) confederates. See Mahani (1999).

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