# FROM TRADE ROUTES TO STREETS CULTURES – AN OVERVIEW OF THE SIGNIFICANCE AND CHARACTERISTICS OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN TRADITIONAL STREETS

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## Abstract

The uniqueness of the Southeast Asian Traditional streets requires careful investigation in the context of its existence. In this regard, the study focuses on examining what factors contribute to the significant formation of Southeast Asian traditional streets. As early as 1500s the region became an important trading centre for the world, where the West meet the East. The emergence of ports along the coastal line and river mouth played remarkable roles, not only as places for trading goods, but also as a place that exchanged skills, languages, customs, ideology, religion through various means and aspects. Reviews from historical background indicate that ports and cities were transformed physically by virtue of the varieties of hybrid cultures that accumulated from time to time. In this respect, the accumulation of cultures tremendously affected the streets activities and its settings. Urban elements as ports, markets, commercial districts and public spaces point out several identities pertaining to the street cultures and characteristics. It was identified that the maritime trade routes during 15th-18th centuries brought abundantly changed to port cities such as Melaka, Bangkok, and Hanoi through the exposure to various influences. This paper demonstrates the correlation between physical forms and cultural entity of these cities. It reveals the linkages of the influential components from the adopted culture that merged with local context, which strongly emphasized the streets characteristics. Comparing with western commercial street models, Southeast Asian Traditional streets convey the local wisdom that inscribed how people use the streets and how streets formed by hybrid settings.

*Keyword*: Southeast Asian trade route, port-cities, informal activities, traditional streets, and street culture

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## INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND OF RESEARCH

Unlike elsewhere in the world, a long and rich history of Southeast Asia played remarkable role in the establishment of cities and port cities with the showcase of trading activities – a rich international emporium where business never account to built style but merely reflective of its vibrant atmosphere. Indigenous settlement and urban life existed for a thousand years and towards the rise of the age of commerce during 15th century until the postcolonial eras, Southeast Asia exhibited in the global position as international emporiums where the congruent of mixed culture is an everyday occurrences, the land where the West eventually discovered the East.

Beyond the Southeast Asia's roles, trade routes became the interesting point to study about how cities and urban areas were developed and how cultures were formed and shaped. From the primate cities to the long extended lines of sea routes beyond the boundaries of kingdoms or empires, port cities along the coastal lines or by the river mouths developed provide excellent examples to explore in their elements and the street patterns.

## AIM AND OBJECTIVES OF STUDY

The research aims to establish a linkage between the trade-based port cities, from their emergence during maritime trade routes in 15th-18th centuries and the reflections of the past that laid on the street activities and their culture. This research explores into 3 layers of studies from; a) the reviews of maritime trade routes; b) the emergence and importance of port cities; c) the streets cultures in context of human activities, the physical setting and the endemic cultures.

The research objectives in particular are directed to; a) categorize the key elements that shaped the characteristics of the urban port cities and b) illustrate the aspects of street cultures derived from case studies and the major influences that shaped the traditional streets. Case studies from Bangkok (Thailand), Hanoi (Vietnam), and Melaka (Malaysia) were selected in order to reveal the significances of Southeast Asia's street cultures. All sites selected are the representative of Southeast Asia port-cities, which shared some common aspects and features that will be discussed later.

The result will demonstrate the significant roles of trading activities that derived from the past maritime trades to the culture of the formal and informal activities on the streets today. In this regards, the streets characteristic require the careful approach in understanding how important the quintessence of the streets activities that remain in the present day.

# THE LANDS BELOW THE WINDS: THE EMERGENCE OF TRADE ROUTES SINCE 15th CENTURIES

*"...human kind's greatest creation has always been its cities."* Kotkin, J. (2006)



Figure 1: Trade Routes of Southeast Asia circa 11st – 13rd (left); Southeast Asia political map as seen today (right)
*Sources: Gunawan (2008) (left); Department of Field Support (2012) (right)*

## The Lands, the Sea, the Winds:

The sub region of Asia remarked itself as the great meeting point of the exotic land that lay between India and China on the critical point of sea passage way (Hall, 2011) and was called as 'the Lands Below the Winds' defined by the seasonal monsoon and geographical context. However, Southeast Asia was a 'place of fluid pluralism', where many states during the time rose and fell relatively frequently (Reid, 1999: 12). Therefore being the place of 'openness' that adopted the cultures from other world, which merged with localization and local wisdom. Southeast Asia played a critical role for the global commercial expansion (Reid, 1999: 3).

The expression of the term 'lands below the winds' was once again noted in the classic literature by Reid (1988, 1993, 1996). The development of cities were noted by many Asian and Western scholars namely, Hall (1964), McGee (1967), Kotkin (2006), Reid (1980,1988,1993,1996) Masashi (2009), Tarling (1999, 2001), Kasetsiri (1992), Winichakul (1994), Clammer (1996), Leinbach (1999) and a few more. All pioneer studies formed the great foundation for the understanding of Southeast Asian port cities. However, further investigations still need to be done to determine the micro dimension of traditional streets' model of Southeast Asia. The model in which should imply the significances of traditional street in the Southeast Asian's paradigm.

In early centuries of C.E., 'Southeast Asia' was unknown neither in terms of name nor of definitions of boundaries. During the early of Christian era, Indian merchants defined these unclear boundaries as *Suvarnabhumi*, which later coined up by the Malays as *Nusantara*. Earlier scholars believed that the name was called 'Land of Khersonese' (or Malay peninsula), derived from the ancient Greek term, 'Land of Gold' (Hall 2011:1-3). Indian, Chinese, Arab and Western all knew that this is the 'Spice land' of the world. The lands which cover the large area from South of Myanmar, Laos, Siam and Malay

peninsula and included some parts of Sumatra and Java island. It was also considered by its neighbours in ancient time i.e., the Chinese called it Nanyang and the Japanese Nan'yō, both names meaning "South Seas," and South Asians used such terms as Suvarnabhūmi (Sanskrit): "Land of Gold") to describe the area (Leinbach, 1999).

Long before the first visitors from Europe arrived in this place, this land was already in contact with India and China with respectful and peaceful interconnection. After the European recognised the existence of the peaceful land that existed over Indian ocean to the east, the name was given as 'Far East or Further East' in reference to the location taking into account the known bearing of India which existed paralleled to the Chinese civilization on the other side. Existing between these two great world civilizations bore great opportunities and advantages for this 'plentiful land' to developed their entity.

Historians have shown that most historical evidences on settlements in Southeast Asia remained obscured for many reasons, but it was never denied that the first settlements were associated with foreign trading contacts (McGee, 1967:31). Historical evidence indicated that the three major empires emerged during the first to second century were the Funan Empire located in lower Mekong delta, the Champa Empire in the mid and south of modern Vietnam and the empire of Lungkasuka located on Kra Isthmus. This is where the local mainland adopted the influences from the trading between the Indian and the Chinese, the first two visitors, who were interested in the spice land. The cities growth emerged ever since the empires extended their boundaries and made connections with other parts of the world.

Clammer (1996) pointed out 3 principles that guided the city growth during that period which were focused on the interplay between; a) religion; b) kinship and sociological factors; and c) ecology. These three factors were mentioned in order to perceive the significance of social structure and social values of Southeast Asia in the context of history before the rise of the age of commerce, whereby the cross-cultural relationships gradually became more important factors. Clammer (1996:17) also sketched a broad scheme of classification of social types. For the religious dimension, there are four-fold classification emerged; a) The mainland Theravāda Buddhist (in Myanmar, Thailand and Cambodia) and the western part of Mahayana Buddhist (in Vietnam); b) The South Peninsular Muslim (in Malaysia, Southern Thai, parts of Indonesia and southern Philippines); c) The Christian on the East (in most other parts of Philippines and eastern Indonesia) and d) The tribal or animistic cultures (in Northern Thai and the Hills of Vietnam).

Figure 2: Map of Southeast Asia circa 1400 CE, showing Khmer Empire, Ayutthaya Kingdom, Lan Xang kingdom, Sukhothai kingdom, Champa, Kingdom of Lanna, Dai Viet and surrounding states.
*Source: Javier (2011)*

Religious and sociology were one of the most influential aspects that affected the local and indigenous lifestyles, custom and practices. Trading and religious activities took advantage as part of the exchange of cultures and beliefs. Siamese society reflected Theravada values, which emphasised gentleness and meditation (Lockard, 2009: 59) but unlike in Vietnam, where Chinese influence was much greater, adopted an imperial system in which the emperor was considered a 'son of heaven'. Malaysia (and Indonesia) strongly practiced Islam after the spread of Islam from the Middle East in 1300s. Expansion of Islam in Southeast Asia conceded with the rise of the great port of Melaka in early 1400 (Lockard, 2009:65).

Apparently the essence of the trade routes were not merely in the dominance of commercial or business activities, but have served for variety purposes such as the exchanged ideas, skills, customs and religions. During late period of Srivijaya Empire (6 -12 century AD), the coastal cities became the strategic points of the beginning of maritime trades activities. McGee (1967:35) mentioned a series of port cities during that time such as; Indrapura (Danang,Vietnam), Grahi (Chaiya, South Thailand), Ligor (Nakorn Srithammarat, South Thailand), Singora (Songkhla 1600s), Lumini (North Sumatra, now Aceh), Jambi (east coast of central Sumatra), etc.

Historian emphasized that international trade has been a major factor of Southeast Asia since there were trading cities and trade-based kingdom in the past of this region. But after 1400s or early of the age of commerce, the rapid growth of trade network offered the variety of internal and external sources (Reid 1980:235). Correspondingly on the other side, the Mediterranean started to search for their luxury items from the East.

After the collapsed of Mongol Land's route or classically called the "silk routes" during Yuan Dynasty (1279-1368) there was a new emphasis towards the sea-route. The Ming (1368-1644) later reached their peak trading era by engaging series of fleets (voyages) sent out to Southeast Asia, where the ports became the centres of exchange with the Arabs, here was where the West met with the East. Chinese traders play a most important role since then Chinese emperor paid high attention to their business and trade activities.

O'Connor (1983) cited Georges Coedès (1968) French historian who described the characteristics of the Southeast Asia seas as;

> "*A veritable Mediterranean formed by China sea, the gulf of Siam and the Java Sea. This enclosed sea, in spite of its typhoon and reefs, has always been a unifying factor rather than an obstacle for the people along the rivers.*"

Chinese influence from the two dynasties; Yuan Dynasty (1271/1279-1368) established the Sino-Arab routes. Later Ming Dynasty (1368-1644/1662)-Age of Commerce had great contributions to the expansion of port-cities to entrepôt. Ming Dynasty sent their fleets to explore the world, led by Admiral Zheng He, who visited many parts of Southeast Asia's ports and the mainland. These ports are where Chinese established a strong connection with the rulers of the empires during 15th-16th centuries. Some important points to be concerned such as the Zheng He voyages that affected to the world economics and urban ports growth. Seven naval expeditions (1405-1433) mentioned took great opportunities to introduce the Chinese knowledge and system to the world. As before, Zheng He fleets started from Nanjing and Quanzhou en route to visit Quy Nhơn in central Vietnam (Champa), Ayutthaya or Siam (Thailand at present), Melaka, Palembang, Surabaya then to several places in India especially Cochin on the West. His route went as far as northeast of Africa and Mecca in the red sea region of the Middle East.

The emergence of Melaka coincided with the rise of the Ming Dynasty and its outward-thrusting foreign policy and promotion of economic exchange, a policy reversed by the mid-1400s. All maritime routes linking the major civilizations to the east and west of Southeast Asia led through the Straits of Melaka (Andaya and Leonard, 2015: 237). Melaka was easily accessible to ships traveling to and from China or India. Tomé Pires, a Portuguese explorer who witnessed the greatness of Melaka in 1512 confirmed the spectacular port of the world, when he wrote in the Suma Oriental, that Melaka was "*no equal in the world*" in its vibrancy as an entrepôt. He further added,

> "*Melaka is a city that made from merchandise, fitter than any other in the world. Commerce between difference nations for a thousand leagues on every hand must come to Melaka*"

> The Suma Oriental of Tomé Pires (1512-1515)

**Urban History & Structure of Cities:**

McGee (1967) described the broad view of Southeast Asian cities development. Each city played their roles differently though a period of time. From the first phase starting from $3^{rd}$ century B.C., showed three types of the patterns - *sacred cities,* administrative cities, and coastal cities. The *sacred cities* emerged from the interior part of a country (or existing empire at that time) and mostly function as capitals with religious structures, a king-powered system and an agricultural system. The *administrative cities* were cities

that reflected the hierarchy and acted as the imperial city, the centres of political power that also housed the sacred structures welded with the religious system. For the *coastal cities,* which were mostly developed by traders and merchants, many of these settlements also function as the capitals. Marketplace, economic hubs, and technological innovation were developed. However cities' development in this phase depended on their prosperity on trade.

The second phase was the time of *the Colonial urbanisation* which began from early16<sup>th</sup> century especially when the Portuguese and Europeans started their trade policies with China and India by direct control over the region with the exception of Ayutthaya (in Thailand). Large-scale market and trading system were opened to serve the global market business scale. Ports were the places where colonial cultures were absorbed with other cultures endemic of the society to form a hybrid cultures with multi-ethnic characters.

The third and the fourth phases were the periods of independence (post-colonial) in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century and the advent of modern era. These phases rapidly changed the cities where the growth was depended upon the open-market economic trade, which extended the scale of cities' and the urban areas. Beyond these four phases that categorised urbanisation in Southeast Asia, it was the sea trade-based factors that emerged the cities port zone as described by well know McGee's model of 1967, which found the similarity of what have exhibited. The land use pattern has the focal point on its colonial port zone.

From McGee studies, the urban developments in Southeast Asia were formed by rapid growth during the second phases and especially on the coastal cities, which served trade activities. The key elements of urbanization such as Royal Institute location, river or river mouth, religious activities, transportation networks, residential area, and commercial area are typical settlements for most of traditional cities/towns in Southeast Asia urban growth. The business area were adopted the physical setting from India and China and later was influenced by the West. The commercial area started from open space that referred to the mobility and flexible marketplace and for several purposes of used.

## PORT CITIES AS THE TRADE NETWORKS AND PLACE FOR EXCHANGE

The development of ports cities in Southeast Asia was an outcome of the rising maritime trade (Reid, 1999; Masashi, 2009). The relationship between India and China and their knowledge of seasonal monsoon since the first centuries rose up trade activities and embed new layers of urban port settlement along the coastal line. Many towns and cities were only fisherman village settlements before the golden age of maritime.

Since the beginning of their role as international ports, Strait of Malacca became the well-known strategic passages that link the world to China. Chinese trading policies during the reign of Ming's Dynasty were one of the important factors that clearly reflected the development of Southeast Asia's ports and their culture.

Chinese urban merchants used their wealth to scale the rigid barriers of class. The layout of Chinese city reflected the priority of their society (Kotlin, 2006). The palace of the rulers placed in the centre of the axis, the market, and other residential area were placed in the peripheral location. This pattern of the city in Asia is similar in term of hierarchy and urban structure.

Masashi (2009) mentioned that Port cities were a common and ordinary type of city found everywhere in the world. Port cities were often important political centres, hub of regional economies. Ports were the place where new ideas, arts, technologies were developed in the 'melting-pot' of overseas and home cultures. Moreover Masashi emphasized that port city seems to belong to the country but, in fact, also belong to maritime world trades that connected it to the outside world. Port cities apparently were the sites where cross-cultural exchange happened and how people experienced the cities. The place represented the local culture and customs of society were to the foreigners who confronted it. The economics pattern of Southeast Asia cities shaped the characteristics of the port zone (McGee, 1967).

Ports were marketplaces with especially good location, priority of accessibility and transportation networks. Since the pre-colonial era, port cities fostered not only economic but also cultural exchanged (Lockard, 2010). Southeast Asian entrepôt during early modern era adapted all form of variety either physical or non-physical aspects, but the significant point is, what that been exhibited on the streets were and are still, the people's lifestyles and their activities.

## FORMS OF URBAN ELEMENTS AND ITS INFLUENTIAL FACTORS

Southeast Asia urban port cities emerged, rose and fall through times. They shared some similarity in the components that shaped the characteristics. The research has identified some components in the urban elements such as follows; a) nearness to a river or sea; b) the royal institution; c) the religious centre; d) the indigenous settlement area; e) the commercial area or marketplace and f) the transportation hub. These features were parts of the investigation through several selected cities and can be seen illustrated in the table below:

### Urban elements: case studies

Surveys had been conducted in three major locations in Southeast Asia namely; a) Sampheng and Thong Wat Street, Yaowaraj, old Bangkok; b) Jonker Street, World Heritage City of Melaka; c) Hang Ngang, Hang Dao, Ta Hien, Hang Buom and Hang Khaai street in Hanoi Ancient Quarters. These study areas formed the basis of the understanding of the ancient city structure and street characteristics of Southeast Asia. Many answers were derived from these studies but the paramount point here is to demonstrate that the informal context of the street characters hold true in every street studied.
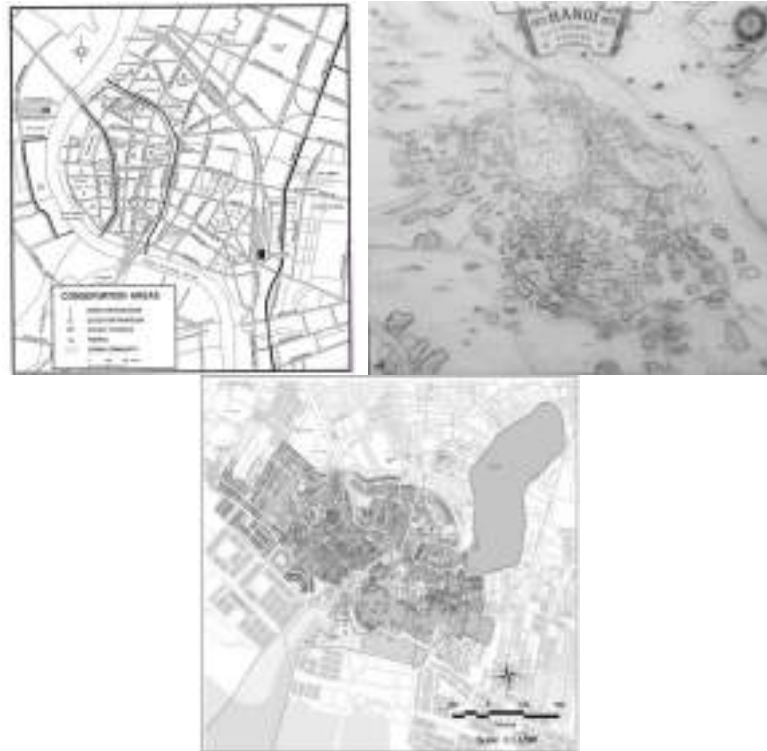
Figure 3: Map of Inner Bangkok, showing the study area 'Sampheng' located southwest in Rattanakosin conservation zone" (left); Map of Hanoi's ancient quarter (middle); Map of Melaka city and commercial area circa 1895 (right)
*Sources: Logan and Askew (1994) (left); edited by author (middle); Pusat Konservasi Negeri Melaka (n.d.) (right)*

Table 1: Urban Elements of selected Port Cities of Melaka, Bangkok and Hanoi

| Urban elements / Cities | | Thailand Bangkok | Vietnam Hanoi | Malaysia Melaka |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| a) | Location: nearness to a major river/sea | Chao Phraya River connected to Gulf of Siam | Red river connected to the South China Sea | Melaka river connected to the Straits of Malacca |
| b) | Royal Institutions | The Grand Palace within the walled city at Rattanakosin Island | The Citadel located on the west bank of Red river | The Sultan's Palace replaced by the Portuguese Fortress of a-Farmosa |
| c) | Religious centre | Wat Prakaew - Emerald Buddha Temple - Theravada Buddhism | The Grand Pagoda in the centre of the main axis in the Citadel - Mahayana Buddhism | The State Mosque – the Portuguese Fortress of a-Farmosa later the Christ Church built by Dutch |

| Urban elements / Cities | Thailand Bangkok | Vietnam Hanoi | Malaysia Melaka |
|---|---|---|---|
| d) The indigenous settlements | Indigenous groups mixed with Chinese immigrants from south China | The rehabilitation system after the Chinese imperials left, the indigenous group reoccupy the land surrounding the Citadel. | During the Sultanate period, on opposite side of river were the indigenous population but after the Dutch period replaced by Chinese immigrant community. |
| e) Commercial area | Mostly occupied by Chinese merchants | The guild system representing specialities from each village occupy a specific area. | During the Sultanate era, it was an international entrepôt – Occupied by traders from Middle-east, India and the Far-east. |
| f) The street system | China town, located on south of the old city wall started beginning of the Chakri dynasty and the big shift happened during the reign of Rama IV | The ancient quarter existed on the west side of The Citadel. The 15th century guild system evolved again when Hanoi become the capital for the second time in 1887 and this made it possible for the establishment of present day specialized streets. | Commercial area extended to the east bank of the river since Dutch-Melaka period and the same street system exist today. |

## STREET CULTURES AND THE OVERVIEWS FROM CASE STUDIES

Cultural significances shared across boundaries have to be more arbitrated, looking on how the streets creating strong sense of places, emphasising the uniqueness street characteristics. Streets culture or in particular, the street activities and peoples' perception of the street represented the entity of each place. The correlation of spaces, activities and times are the essential components of the place that need to be learnt and understanding that activities themselves will never exist without space.

In Melaka, the core zone of the world heritage city, after the establishment of weekend night market famously known as Jonker Walk (on Jonker Street) creates a modern means to transform back the traditional street in its full sense to the people. The economic values rose and the activities brought massive number of visitors and tourists from all over the world to experience that night shopping activities in an approximately 800 meters length of the streets flanked by some significance old shop houses which some dated back to the 18th Century style.

In Hanoi old quarters, the scene of local people doing their daily activities, street vendors and petty traders, high-density motorcycle volumes, and series of the tube houses and guilds show the strong senses of the Vietnamese street typology. The guilds transformed with old style shophouses since 19th Century is the evidence of Hanoi's local lifestyles making each street unique with specialised trades initiated by the guilds (Hoang and Nishimura, 1990).

Bangkok *(Krung Thep)* founded in 1782, was the capital after the Ayutthaya reign and has adopted the city's planning concept from the previous capital. Thailand in general, adopted their culture with continuously strong relationship with Chinese

merchants. Bangkok City with the arrangement of zoning regulation emerged the area for Sino-Siamese resident, which later named as China town. Since 1853 The Chinese settlement in *Sampheng* had become the bustling market with full of supply for wholesale and retail product. *Sampheng* as the heart of Chinese community in Bangkok, represent the ideology of commercial area of Siam until today.



Figure 4: Illustrated the streets scene from cases study, Bangkok (left); Hanoi (middle); Melaka (right)
*Source: by the author (2015)*

In analysing all the three case studies, it is generally noted that all the cities demonstrated a common typical characteristic; that the main activity patterns of the local inhabitants are informal in nature and this is reflected by the way space is structured and organised. In order built forms to response to this characteristic, they must express the capacity to accommodate those informal activities through proper design and layout. It is important to express this informality from the internal spatial organisation of a single building, through to the external relationship within the layout of groups of building and the activities that operate within and around them. Therefore the streets remained as interface between buildings and other urban activities.

The complexity of street activities and the ground-level uses are part of the urban identity and, therefore, specific design emphasis should be given to enable these activities and uses to operate within an organised level. (note: Being organised does not necessarily reduce the state of being informal.) Strategic organisation of various spaces and distribution of activity nodes are essential as an integral approach towards accommodating the diverse activities and uses on the street (Idid, 1991). The nature of attractions of the various land uses and activities has to be noted. For example, a shop may have a greater attraction to shoppers as compared to hawkers who may only operate to compliment the shopping activities in terms of providing on the spot refreshment for shoppers. The movement of shoppers is influenced by these kinds of attractions and

therefore it is vital to employ various design concepts to achieve maximum interaction between land uses and activities.

Integrative Space: Integrative space plays a vital role in the overall space organisation within the urban context-enhancing the urban identity. There is a need to reintroduce integrative space within the urban context so that it can accommodate all the informal street activities as mentioned before. It will also encourage continuity at street level of various dislocated individual developments. The essence of the connections between each component of the recommendation is derived from the traditional example (Idid and Sholiah, 2004). This is regarded to be the key formula for a successful environment as well as enhancing the local identity.

## CONCLUSION

Since the beginning of time when Tomé Pires first laid eyes on the port city of Melaka, he described that there was no other place in the world he could compare with Melaka even the most vibrant European port as Rotterdam. He was making remarks of Melaka not based on great monuments he saw or any colossal buildings that struck his awesome sight but merely on the grand scale trading activities he saw. Remarkable it was since it was only the sight of people from all over the world congregating on this one port doing business in general and what seemed to be "in the open" without any grand formal architectural forms to boast of. This was the scenario of the port cities during the hey-day of the port cities. During the period of colonial administration, saw transformation of more formal trade building premises, which later took form into what we see today, of shophouses. From open field where trading activities occurred now formal buildings seemed to be the fad. This gave rise to the "streets", the space bounded by buildings on either side of it. Following the traditions of the informal markets, streets in Southeast Asia never seems to be designed just for access or transportation way. Market or trading activities have never been confined to an internal space and generally spread out into the streets. Streets became the realm of many urban activities sometimes less dependant on the trading activities. Informal trading activities from street vendors, petty traders or hawkers became the common scene of the street activities.

Streets do not transformed much from the early period where they started until now. Streets are where public occupied the space and live, the space that offered formal and informal activities. East culture is more flexible in the way of the activities are arranged on the street. Informalities are most preferred. However, informal activities that occur as in the case studies can be categorised into three types; fixed activity, semi-fixed activity, and mobile activity. Mostly emphasized by streets vendors who play the most important role that can be noticed by the users and visitors alike.

Flexibility and mobility are the key attributes to the streets informal settings The settings on traditional streets require more emphasis on the informal activities, as it is the very essence of the character of Southeast Asia's traditional streets. Therefore, it is important to uphold this value towards the street design and preservation.

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