This book's jacket makes the claim that it is ‘a genuine pioneering study of Malaysian urban history . . . at its best it is a fine-grained social history of which we have seen far too little in Southeast Asia.” As a revision of the author’s doctoral dissertation, which was completed under the tutelage of the University of Leiden-linked scholars who are doing important revisionist research based in the Dutch colonial archives,1 the book breaks new ground in its comparative urban study of the Melaka and Penang colonial ports-of-trade. The book is consistent with the strengths and weaknesses of the author’s Leiden mentors’ research. In common with their recent scholarship, this book places its focus on the shipping lists and records of people in the Dutch and British East India Company as well as other colonial records, and especially highlights the previously underutilized harbormasters’ registers of private traffic. It explores and analyzes ships’ volume, transported commodities, and records of exchange in order to identify the leading commodities and dominant participants in commerce and government during this period. This study is solid in its statistical analysis of trade, commodity, and urban population data. The author goes beyond the VOC archives, which he readily admits have much more to offer than do the British East India Company and Colonial Office records (notably documentation from the British interregnum in Melaka from 1794-1818 and post-1825) that pale in comparison to those of their Dutch predecessors. Notably missing is any attempt to explore the variety of records of the British “country traders” who figured prominently in the origin of Penang and British rule in Burma and Malaya.2 Ultimately, this book, like the


2) Anthony Webster, Gentlemen Capitalists. British Imperialism in South East Asia 1770-1890 (London: Tauris Academic Studies, 1998). This seminal book, which does not appear in the author's bibliography, provides a useful window into the same era of study based in...
studies of his mentors, is unfortunately overly confined to Southeast Asia in its considerations and applications of its data.3

Taking its cue from post modernism, this book, in the tradition of the best recent urban history scholarship, presents urban identities and forms as cultural constructions constantly in the process of being refashioned. Following the work of geographers and theorists such as Michele Foucault, Henri LeFebvre, and Edward Soja on the “production of space,” urbanists approach space as something more than the background scenery for social activity. They examine urban social spaces such as neighborhoods, streets, parks, or markets as human creations with competing sets of meanings inscribed in them. By closely exploring the process of creating and defining these and other city spaces, urban scholars hope to better understand the identities, relationships, and experiences of city dwellers in the past and in the present.

Charles Tilly established the parameters of this work a decade ago, when he argued that urban studies must explore the ways in which factors distinctive to specific times and places mediated the broad social trends associated with the rise of industrial capitalism and other national and international transformations. Cities, he argued, are “prime examples” of the extensive and largely untapped archival records of the British country traders who were active in the Bay of Bengal region, and Malay Peninsula in particular.

3) The book leaves unexplored repeated undocumented assertions that Portuguese, Dutch, and English colonial ports-of-trade were influenced by colonial urbanism in South Asia. The author’s sources on colonial urbanism in South Asia are largely cursory out-of-date and sample readings in more recent collected volumes, in contrast to the most important recent literature on early European-era South Asian port-of-trade urbanism that is mostly available in diverse professional journal articles. This revisionist work is summarized and extended in James Heitzman’s newly published The South Asian City (London: Routledge, 2008)—which in fairness was not available to the reviewed book’s author. Heitzman raises issues that could have been meaningfully considered in the reviewed book, among these that India’s ports-of-trade were historically coastal commercial appendages and centers of “foreign” residence rather than having a multidimensional prominence typical of traditional urbanism and urban networking in India’s heartland. Thus the traditional Indian multidimensional city, whether under Buddhist, Hindu, or Muslim rulers, served variously as a political, military, and market center, coincident with its function in some way as a ritual center. In Heitzman’s view, by the end of the eighteenth century the European rulers of evolving coastal metropoles eliminated any remaining potential of this traditional ritual function. The European ports-of-trade were exclusively well-fortified urban centers, which enabled economic extractions from the preexisting urban networking systems in the Indian hinterland by one or another of the European colonial enterprises.