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# The Malacca dilemma of the Raj: the Indian Uprising of 1857, the Second Opium War, and the British proposal of a Kra passage

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## Abstract

In the late 1850s and early 1860s, the idea of building a passage through the Isthmus of Kra in the Malay Peninsula was hotly debated amongst British officials, merchants, and investors. This study finds that the British East India Company's rule over the Straits of Malacca had been a dilemma for itself and British merchants in China. The Second Opium War and the Indian Revolt of 1857 exacerbated the dilemma and pushed some British policymakers and investors to seek an alternative route between India and China. The proposal of the Kra passage was the response and solution to the Malacca dilemma. In historicising the Kra passage proposal and putting it in the context of the British empire's simultaneous crises in Asia in the mid-nineteenth century, the case of the proposed Kra passage reveals the complex relations between different actors within the British empire and the challenges of integrating multiple imperial interests into a British world system

**Keywords:** British empire; China; India; infrastructure

## Introduction

In 1858, Robert Schomburgh, the British Consul at Siam, was asked by the British authorities in London to investigate a proposal to build a canal in the Isthmus of Kra to connect the Bay of Bengal and the Gulf of Siam. In his report, Schomburgh strongly supported the idea and highlighted that the Kra canal project was proposed in an age of astonishing public works that were significant to the whole civilised world. Among these grand projects, the planning of the canal in the Isthmus of Suez at the time was an obvious inspiration for a similar project in the Isthmus of Kra.<sup>1</sup>

As David Harvey and Duncan Bell find, the concepts of time and space had gradually been rationalised to facilitate capitalist expansion across the world since the Enlightenment. The compression of time and space fundamentally transformed

<sup>1</sup> The National Archives, London, Foreign Office Records (hereafter 'FO') 881/4537/Appendix 13 (i), from Sir R. Schomburgh to the Earl of Malmesbury, 31 May 1858. For the history of the planning, construction, and running of the Suez Canal, see J. Marlowe, *World Ditch: The Making of the Suez Canal* (New York, 1964); R. Duff, *100 Years of the Suez Canal* (Brighton, 1969); D. Farnie, *East and West of Suez: The Suez Canal in History, 1854–1956* (Oxford, 1969); Z. Karabell, *Parting the Desert: The Creation of the Suez Canal* (New York, 2003); H. Bonin, *History of the Suez Canal Company, 1858–2008: Between Controversy and Utility* (Geneva, 2010). For the connection between the Suez Canal and the British colony-building in India, see E. Haddad, 'Digging to India: modernity, imperialism and the Suez Canal', *Victorian Studies* 3 (2005), pp. 363–396; F. Harcourt, 'The high road to India: the P&O Company and the Suez Canal, 1840–1874', *International Journal of Maritime History* 2 (2010), pp. 19–72.

Western political thought, which began to imagine Western empires as closely integrated global polities.<sup>2</sup> In other words, time–space compression in the nineteenth century was both the result and the cause of the expansion of the railway network, the establishment of transoceanic telegraph communications, the growth of steam shipping, and the opening of the Suez Canal.<sup>3</sup>

Robert Schomburgh's support for building a ship canal in the Isthmus of Kra was motivated by and a response to the construction of the Suez Canal at the time. In the 1850s, a group of diplomats, engineers, and capitalists supported by the French government launched a plan to build a canal in the Isthmus of Suez to connect the Red Sea with the Mediterranean that would dramatically shorten the travelling time between Europe and Asia. The idea of constructing a public work through modern technology that would be able to greatly compress time and space caused worldwide attention.<sup>4</sup> The British government closely watched the event and was concerned that the proposed Suez Canal would weaken its maritime supremacy in Asia. Meanwhile, inspired by the time–space compression potential of canal infrastructures, the British was very ready to employ this sort of public work within their own global empire.<sup>5</sup>

Nevertheless, it seems ironic, as the proposal for the Kra canal was raised by the British authorities. Since the early nineteenth century, the Straits of Malacca—the main sea lane between the Indian Ocean and China—had been under the control of the British forces. The Straits Settlements administered by the British East India Company (EIC) was turning into an international trading hub. A ship canal aimed at diverting ships from the Straits of Malacca to the Isthmus of Kra would damage the established British interests. In other words, there might be some groups within the British empire that regarded the Straits of Malacca not as a strategic asset of the empire, but as a geopolitical dilemma. The proposal of the Kra canal was the solution to that dilemma.

Scholars have long called into question any approach that takes the British empire as a unified and coherent polity. C. A. Bayly points out that Britain's domestic tensions over business, politics, class, and religion were exported with merchants, colonial officials, professionals, and missionaries to other parts of the empire.<sup>6</sup> The British empire, in this sense, is a container of various interest groups with different and sometimes conflicting preferences. In his study of the British community in Shanghai, Robert Bickers argues that British professionals, missionaries, and businessmen had developed specific identities in

<sup>2</sup> D. Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Cambridge, MA, 1989), pp. 240–259; D. Bell, 'Dissolving distance: technology, space, and empire in British political thought, 1770–1900', *Journal of Modern History* 3 (2005), pp. 523–562. For further discussion on the transformation of the sense of time and space in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, see S. Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space, 1880–1918* (Cambridge, MA, 1983). For further discussion on the relations between the technology development and the British political thought of global space, see T. Pietsch, 'A British sea: making sense of global space in the late nineteenth century', *Journal of Global History* 3 (2010), pp. 423–446.

<sup>3</sup> In her study of the Suez Canal, Valeska Huber argues that the technologies and infrastructures of the time–space compression in the nineteenth century neither facilitated mobility nor strengthened government controls. Instead, they categorised, regulated, disciplined, and bureaucratized different kinds of movement; see V. Huber, *Channeling Mobilities: Migration and Globalization in the Suez Canal Region and Beyond, 1869–1914* (New York, 2013). Michael Low emphasises that the Red Sea ports and the Suez Canal had been regarded by Western and Ottoman authorities, not as transit hubs, but as hotbeds of infectious diseases; see M. Low, *Imperial Mecca: Ottoman Arabia and the Indian Ocean Hajj* (New York, 2020).

<sup>4</sup> J. Greene, *The Canal Builders: Making America's Empire at the Panama Canal* (New York, 2009).

<sup>5</sup> Haddad, 'Digging to India', pp. 363–396; Harcourt, 'High road to India', pp. 19–72; Pietsch, 'British sea', pp. 423–446.

<sup>6</sup> C. A. Bayly, 'Returning the British to South Asian history: the limits of colonial hegemony', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 2 (1994), pp. 1–25.

frontiers and outposts of the empire. These colonial groups' agendas were often different, and sometimes they came into conflict.<sup>7</sup>

John Darwin also agrees that British colonial expansion was driven not by official designs, but by consequences of conflicts and compromises between various government sectors, religious missions, business groups, and political organisations.<sup>8</sup> Although he admits that the various actors in the British empire had neither a conscious plan to build a colonial empire nor a master ideology of imperial expansion in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Darwin contends that the British policymakers came to realise that their accidental empire was too large and too fragile to defend in the mid-nineteenth century when several geopolitical crises simultaneously broke out across the world (the Crimean War, the Indian Uprising, and the war with China). As a result, they began to perceive the British colonies, outposts, concessions, and military bases in different parts of the world as an integrated and interdependent system.<sup>9</sup> This world system was first and foremost a military design that could facilitate the transportation of British military forces.<sup>10</sup>

The long-held assumption that the Straits of Malacca was a key geopolitical asset of British colonial rule in Asia is belied by the case of the Kra passage. In fact, the passage was proposed precisely to resolve what was known as the 'Malacca dilemma'—a problem that haunted both the Dutch East India Company (VOC) and the EIC. The interests of the British EIC and British traders in China concerning the cost of control of the Straits of Malacca conflicted with those of the private traders and settlers in the Straits Settlements. Thanks to the free-port policy of the Straits Settlements, traders from across the region and beyond were attracted to the newly established British colonies and made tremendous profits with very limited taxation. However, for the EIC, the Straits Settlements had, in the first half of the nineteenth century, become a 'Malacca dilemma'.<sup>11</sup> On the one hand, the EIC had to maintain (via control of the Straits Settlements) control of the Straits of Malacca, which was the principal corridor between India and China, to secure trade with its largest trading partner, China. On the other hand, the EIC's expenditure on defence and administration in the Straits Settlements far outweighed the revenue extracted from the region. In other words, the EIC had found that its rule in the Straits of Malacca had been unsustainable since the early 1800s. Additionally, British traders in China, whose trading interests lay in either India or Europe, took the Straits of Malacca uneasily because of its precarious waterways and rampant piracy. These facts suggest that the long-held assumption that the Straits of Malacca was the key geopolitical asset of British colonial rule in Asia should be re-examined.<sup>12</sup> While some British strategists at the Metropole and private British traders doing business in Southeast Asia highlighted

<sup>7</sup> R. Bickers, 'Shanghaianders: The formation and identity of the British settlers community in Shanghai 1843–1937', *Past & Present* 159 (1998), pp. 161–211.

<sup>8</sup> J. Darwin, *The Empire Project: The Rise and Fall of the British World-System, 1830–1970* (Cambridge, 2009), p. 2.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

<sup>11</sup> The term 'Malacca dilemma' was first used by the Chinese President Hu Jintao in 2003 to refer to the challenging geopolitical situation that China faced in the Indo-Pacific region. On the one hand, more than 70 per cent of China's petroleum imports were moved through the Straits of Malacca at the time; on the other, the Chinese leader was well aware that the United States Navy could easily control the Straits of Malacca and therefore cut off China's energy supply lines. In this article, however, 'Malacca dilemma' mainly refers to the question of the cost of controlling and maintaining the outpost in the Straits of Malacca that was faced by the Dutch and British colonial authorities in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

<sup>12</sup> A. Reid, *The Context for North Sumatra: Atjeh, the Netherlands, and Britain, 1858–1898* (Kuala Lumpur, 1969); N. Tarling, *British Policy in the Malay Peninsula and Archipelago, 1824–1871* (Kuala Lumpur, 1969); T. J. Newbold, *British Settlements in the Straits of Malacca* (Kuala Lumpur, 1971); C. M. Turnbull, *The Straits Settlements, 1826–1867: Indian Presidency to Crown Colony* (London, 1972); Y. Vertzberger, *The Malacca-Singapore Straits: The Suez of*

the great significance of British control of the Straits of Malacca, other groups within the empire saw the Straits as a concern rather than a strategic blessing.

The desire to address the Malacca dilemma reached its zenith during the Second Opium War and the Indian Uprising of 1857. A Kra passage proposal was then raised as an engineered solution to the dilemma. The Kra passage proposal echoed the craze for huge engineering-intensive infrastructural projects in the mid-nineteenth century. It further marks the coming of an age in which British policymakers tried to transform the British empire from a jigsaw to a connected and integrated world system. In such a transformation, modern infrastructures such as canals, railways, steamer lines, and telegraphs played crucial roles. Although the Kra passage proposal failed to materialise owing to the concerns of cost and French expansion in Cochin-China, the world-system mindset that it aroused further influenced British exploration in Upper Burma and Yunnan in the next few decades.

### The Malacca dilemma of the British empire

This section argues that the Straits of Malacca did not always serve the interests of the British empire that controlled it in the first half of the nineteenth century. Although the British private traders in Singapore, who tried to make use of the island's free-tax status to expand their business in Southeast Asia, viewed the British control of the Straits of Malacca as a necessity to guarantee their interests, the Indian government, which had its main business in China but had to pay the cost of maintaining the Straits, saw it as a dilemma.

Since the establishment of the Straits Settlements, it has been widely believed that the British empire obtained remarkable benefits from its control of the Straits of Malacca. Contemporary interest groups often referred to the rapid growth of Singapore's economic output and population after 1824 as a symbol of the prosperity brought by British colonialism to Asia. The story of the rise of Singapore has also often been cited by historians in their analysis of the (temporary) success of the British model of imperial expansion.

In recent years, mainstream narratives of British colonial rule in the Straits of Malacca that highlight a progressive and victorious storyline have increasingly been challenged. For example, the contribution of Thomas Stamford Raffles to the establishment and development of Singapore has been put under review.<sup>13</sup> Gareth Knapman uncovers the experiences of Raffles's contemporaries, including John Crawfurd, who had different ideas from Raffles about the development of Singapore and who left his marks on the port city's early history.<sup>14</sup> Some scholars have also argued that the success and achievement of modern Singapore should not be attributed solely to British colonial policies and British country traders. Chinese merchants and coolies and Indian convicts were cornerstones of the success of the British colonial rule in the Straits.<sup>15</sup> Even the effectiveness of the British hegemony in the Straits in the nineteenth century has been questioned as more and more scholars pay attention to how various border-crossing groups successfully challenged and compromised colonial rule.<sup>16</sup>

Most of these revisionist works draw on a homogenised and oversimplified account of British imperial interests in the Straits. In other words, whether in mainstream narratives

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*Southeast Asia* (London, 1982); A. Porter (ed.), *The Oxford History of the British Empire, Volume III: The Nineteenth Century* (Oxford, 1999); D. Freeman, *The Straits of Malacca: Gateway or Gauntlet?* (Montreal and Kingston, 2003).

<sup>13</sup> Syed Hussein Alatas, *Thomas Stamford Raffles: Schemer or Reformer?* (Singapore, 2020).

<sup>14</sup> G. Knapman, *Race and British Colonialism in South-East Asia, 1770–1870: John Crawfurd and the Politics of Equality* (New York, 2017).

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, J. Warren, *Rickshaw Coolie: A People's History of Singapore, 1880–1940* (Singapore, 2003); A. Yang, *Empire of Convicts: Indian Penal Labor in Colonial Southeast Asia* (Berkeley, 2021).

<sup>16</sup> E. Tagliacozzo, *Secret Trades, Porous Borders: Smuggling and States Along a Southeast Asian Frontier, 1865–1915* (New Haven, 2009).

or revisionist works, scholarly arguments are built largely on the assumption that control of the Straits of Malacca generally served British interests. Nevertheless, although the EIC authorities in Calcutta, the British government in London, and private investors and traders may have shared some common ground in the early stage of British domination of the Straits, their goals and interests diverged a few years later.

The Straits of Malacca have long been regarded as one of the most important shipping lanes in the world. The waterways between the Malay Peninsula and the island of Sumatra have been vital for the movement of human beings and commodities between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific. In the mid-seventeenth century, the VOC defeated the Portuguese and controlled the Straits of Malacca.

Nevertheless, the Straits of Malacca turned out to be a dilemma for the VOC throughout the eighteenth century. On the one hand, although the VOC concentrated most of its resources on the development of Batavia, it did not want to give up its influence in the Straits of Malacca because of its geographical and strategic importance. The VOC had to commit resources to not only maintaining Malacca, but also preventing other regional forces, such as Johore, Aceh, and Siam, from dominating the waterways of the Straits. On the other hand, the VOC constantly restricted its investment in the region to ensure that neither Malacca nor any other port city along the Straits would become a rival entrepôt to Batavia.<sup>17</sup> A power vacuum was therefore left in the Straits by this dilemma that drew the attention of the English EIC.

In the eighteenth century, the great expansion of British commercial activities in China caused growing concern among British policymakers about the trading route between India and China.<sup>18</sup> Firstly, without a significant transitioning port under British control,<sup>19</sup> it would be difficult and costly for British ships to secure fresh provisions. Secondly, British ships engaged in the China trade would be exposed to possible attacks from other European powers and local pirates if there were no British naval bases along the trading route. Lastly, since the Chinese showed no great interest in European products in the eighteenth century, the China trade had cost the British a large amount of silver bullion. To save its silver deposit, the EIC and country traders preferred to trade in Southeast Asia for products (such as bird nests, sea products, and spices) that had markets in China and brought these to Canton to exchange for tea.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>17</sup> D. Lewis, 'Dutch East India Company and the Straits of Malacca, 1700–1784: Trade and Politics in the Eighteenth Century' (unpublished PhD dissertation, Australian National University, 1970), pp. 264–268. In a later book, Dianne Lewis explains that, although Malacca under the VOC rule created little profit for the Dutch, the Dutch presence in that significant part of the Malay Peninsula brought about long-term influence upon the political and economic structure of the local Malay polities; see D. Lewis, *Jan Compagne in the Straits of Malacca, 1641–1795* (Athens, 1995). This study contends that the fundamental transformation of the Malay world in the eighteenth century was unintentionally caused by the VOC instead of the production of a colonial design.

<sup>18</sup> For the British concern over their commercial competition with other European countries in Asia, see H. Furber, *Rival Empire of Trade in the Orient 1600–1800* (Minneapolis, 1976).

<sup>19</sup> The EIC did have a port in Bencoolen in south-western Sumatra from the late seventeenth century to 1824, when it was ceded to the Dutch. Nevertheless, Bencoolen was not on any crucial trading route and was underdeveloped. For a general history of the EIC's Bencoolen settlement, see A. Harfield, *Bencoolen: A History of the Honourable East India Company's Garrison on the West Coast of Sumatra 1685–1825* (Hampshire, 1995).

<sup>20</sup> Nordin Hussin, *Trade and Society in the Straits of Melaka* (Singapore, 2009), p. 14. Paul Van Dyke finds that the EIC's China trade had grown from 25 ships annually in the 1760s to 70 ships each year in the 1800s. Most of the EIC ships stopped at posts across Southeast Asia for trade before they proceeded to China; see P. Van Dyke, 'New sea route to Canton in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the decline of China's control over trade', in Haiyangshi Yanjiu, (ed.) Li Qingxin (Beijing, 2010), p. 82. For the British commercial interest in Southeast Asia in the late eighteenth century, also see D. K. Bassett, *British Trade and Policy in Indonesia and Malaysia in the Late Eighteenth Century* (Zug, 1971), pp. 50–71.

After the Netherlands came under the control of France in 1795, the British authorities took aggressive measures against the Dutch colonies in Southeast Asia that culminated in the British occupation of Java in 1811. Thomas Stamford Raffles was appointed by Baron Minto, Governor-General of India, as the lieutenant-governor of Java. As a critic of Dutch monopolistic and authoritarian rule in its Asian colonies, Raffles proposed introducing a more liberal political and economic system to Java and Sumatra. Gareth Knapman even argues that Raffles was a colonial interventionist who advocated that the British should build a territory-based colonial empire in the region at the cost of the exploitive and old-fashioned Dutch colonial regime.<sup>21</sup>

Raffles's tenure in Java ended in 1815 when Britain returned the island to the Dutch. From the point of view of British policymakers in London, letting the Dutch take back their colonies would strengthen its political position. A strong Netherlands could be used as an important balancing power in post-Napoleonic Europe. On the other hand, maintaining the Dutch colonies under the rule of the EIC would generate huge expenditures and undermine the EIC's rule in India.<sup>22</sup> Unable to persuade officials in London and Calcutta to take the Indonesian archipelago, Raffles urged the British authorities to set up some outposts along key trading routes to protect British commercial interests.<sup>23</sup> This proposal was echoed by the British Resident of Malacca, William Farquhar, who suggested that the British should have new settlements situated at key sites along the trading routes between India and China.<sup>24</sup>

The appeal of Raffles and Farquhar had been well received by Lord Hastings, the new Governor-General of India. After the return of Java to the Dutch, Hastings also developed his suspicion of the Dutch and worried that they would have too much influence on the trading route of the EIC's China trade. Since Penang was at the margin of the Straits of Malacca, Hastings had been considering another outpost that could better protect the route through the Straits.<sup>25</sup> As a result, when Raffles established a settlement in Singapore in 1819 without consulting Hastings, Hastings accepted it.<sup>26</sup>

Michael Barr observes that the Anglo-Dutch Treaty of 1824 marked a turning point for Southeast Asia regarding its political landscape and economic development. After a decades-long decline, the Dutch eventually accepted that they were no longer the dominant European colonial power in Asia and switched their interests from seaborne trade to land-based plantation development and large-scale agricultural production. With Penang, Malacca, and Singapore under their control, the EIC was the new master of the Straits of Malacca.<sup>27</sup> Ironically, the EIC also inherited the Malacca dilemma from the hands of the Dutch.

When the EIC decided to establish some strongholds in the Straits in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the decision was motivated by two considerations. Firstly, since the India–China trade was the main source of the EIC's profits at the time and the Straits of Malacca was the key corridor between India and China, the EIC needed to maintain a certain kind of presence in the Straits to protect its ships and deter potential threats. Secondly, since the EIC's European and Indian products (apart from opium) did not have a market in China, its ships had to stop at ports in Southeast Asia to procure

<sup>21</sup> Knapman, *Race and British Colonialism*, pp. 125–127.

<sup>22</sup> N. Tarling, *Anglo-Dutch Rivalry in the Malay World 1780–1824* (Cambridge, 1962), p. 74.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 83.

<sup>24</sup> J. Bastin, *Raffles and Hastings: Pirate Exchange behind the Founding of Singapore* (Singapore, 2014), p. 24.

<sup>25</sup> Tarling, *Anglo-Dutch Rivalry*, p. 91.

<sup>26</sup> It is noted that the Dutch authorities were unhappy with the British presence in Singapore from the very beginning. Negotiations between the Dutch and the British officials were held between 1819 and 1824, and the Anglo-Dutch Treaty of 1824 was signed to settle the status of Singapore. British commercial groups in London worked hard to press the British government to retain Singapore on the grounds that the command of the Straits of Malacca was essential for British trade in the region; see Tarling, *Anglo-Dutch Rivalry*, pp. 133–146.

<sup>27</sup> M. Barr, *Singapore: A Modern History* (London, 2019), pp. 75–76.

goods suitable for the Chinese market before they moved forward to China. Having its own entrepôts in the Straits of Malacca rather than trading in Dutch-controlled ports would greatly facilitate the EIC's China trade.

The EIC's main concern about establishing entrepôts in the Straits was the cost. Being financially exhausted by its wars with the Mysore Kingdom and the Marathas in India, the EIC did not intend to bear the financial burden of maintaining outposts far from India. Raffles well understood the concern of the EIC and promised Francis Hastings, the Governor-General of India, that the cost of maintaining Singapore would be at the lowest standard and would not exceed 5,000 Mexican dollars a month.<sup>28</sup>

Due to Singapore's free-port policy, no tax or duty was charged against the foreign business. As a result, traders across Southeast Asia came to Singapore to sell their local products and procure European, Indian, and Chinese commodities. The trading output of Singapore had therefore shown astounding growth. In a personal letter to Lord Henry Petty, the Lord President of the Council, in 1821, Raffles claimed that Singapore had been turned from a minor station into one of the most important ports in the East. The commercial importance of Singapore rivalled that of Batavia, with an annual volume of trade worth more than 10,000 sterling.<sup>29</sup>

The booming trade in early Singapore could be attributed to the intraregional trade and large-scale sales of British textile products in Southeast Asia. British textile manufacturers' local traders and private agents brought their commodities to Singapore for redistribution and reselling in the region. In 1824, the value of the trade between Singapore and the Malay Archipelago amounted to 4,451,201 Mexican dollars. In the late 1860s, this amount went up to 19,114,754 Mexican dollars.<sup>30</sup> During the same period, Singapore's role in the India–China trade declined.

Since the early nineteenth century, Indian opium had become the dominant commodity in the India–China trade.<sup>31</sup> Most of the opium in the Chinese market was imported directly from India, while only a tiny amount was transferred from Singapore. In 1835–1836, 30,202 chests of opium were imported directly into China from India, and 418 chests were transferred from Singapore. In 1865–1866, 76,863 chests of opium were imported into China from India, while a mere 902 chests were transferred from Singapore.<sup>32</sup> The EIC and its country traders, who profited mainly from the India–China opium trade, found it unnecessary to stop at an entrepôt in Southeast Asia to procure local commodities for the Chinese market. Instead, they could simply bring opium from India to China.

While the booming economy of Singapore greatly advanced the benefits of British private traders who focused their business on Southeast Asia, the EIC found that it was facing a dilemma. On the one hand, it had to cover the cost of maintaining colonial rule in the Straits Settlements (including Penang, Malacca, and Singapore). The salaries of magistrates, civil servants, and soldiers had to be paid by the EIC. Additionally, the EIC was responsible for constructing infrastructures such as roads, bridges, and government buildings. On the other hand, the huge profits earned by private traders were exempt from tax in the free ports of the Straits Settlements and therefore did not contribute to the revenue of the EIC. Consequently, the EIC had to cover a huge expenditure to maintain these settlements in the Straits of Malacca while receiving very limited returns.

<sup>28</sup> The Bute Collection (Mount Stuart, Scotland), HA/11/1/22, from Raffles to Hastings, 25 March 1820.

<sup>29</sup> National Archives of Singapore, RRARE 959.5703 RAF, from Raffles to Lord Lansdowne, 19 January 1821.

<sup>30</sup> Wong Lin Ken, 'The trade of Singapore, 1819–69', *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 4 (1960), pp. 35–36.

<sup>31</sup> It is noted that the opium business helped the EIC to maintain a substantial surplus of goods in its China trade in the early nineteenth century; see J. Wong, *Deadly Dreams: Opium, Imperialism, and the Arrow War (1858–1860)* (Cambridge, 1998), p. 372.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 114.

As part of the effort to reduce the cost, the EIC decided to downgrade the status of the Straits Settlements from a presidency to a residency in 1830. The number of civil servants working for the settlements was reduced from 19 to eight.<sup>33</sup> In 1833, the British government passed the Government of India Act 1833, which terminated the EIC's trade monopoly with China. The EIC then became no longer a commercial organisation, but a purely administrative body. As the EIC stopped its India–China trade, its responsibility for ruling the settlements in the Straits was further called into question. In the eyes of the EIC directors, the Straits Settlements were both a dilemma and a burden. On the one hand, the EIC had to keep its control of the Straits of Malacca by maintaining the Straits Settlements for the British empire. On the other hand, the EIC leadership found that its settlements in the Straits no longer served any clear purpose despite incurring a considerable cost.

In the wake of China's military defeat in the First Opium War, the Treaty of Nanking was signed by the British and Chinese authorities in 1842. According to the treaty, the British government obtained Hong Kong Island to facilitate trade with China, and British merchants were allowed to trade freely in five Chinese treaty ports. The Treaty of Nanking boosted the India–China trade as more and more Indian opium was sold to China. In 1835–1836, 30,202 chests of opium were exported from India to China. Two decades later, the export increased to 72,385 chests.<sup>34</sup> Private traders based in Bombay, Calcutta, and Hong Kong were the main participants in this opium trade.

It was not only the private traders who benefited from trading opium from India to China. Although the EIC lost its monopoly in the China trade after 1833, opium production and sale in India were still under its monopoly. Since the cost of producing and taxing opium was cheap, the opium revenue had grown into a significant portion of the total revenue of the EIC. In 1832–1833, the EIC's opium revenue was 1.44 million sterling—around 6.98 per cent of the EIC's Indian revenue. In 1855–1856, the EIC's opium revenue rose to 4.87 million sterling, representing 15.8 per cent of the EIC's Indian revenue.<sup>35</sup> John Wong argues that the opium revenue allowed the EIC to cover its ever-growing debt and sustain its territorial expansion in South Asia in the first half of the nineteenth century.<sup>36</sup>

For EIC authorities and private traders alike, the main concern at the time was to maximise the profits that the opium trade could generate. Shortening the travelling time between Bombay/Calcutta and Hong Kong/Canton might be one way to increase profits. Most Indian opium was packaged in chests. A chest of opium weighed 140 pounds when packaged in Indian ports. However, because opium dried out with time, its weight was around 133 pounds when it arrived in China.<sup>37</sup> If the travelling time were reduced, the chests of opium would be heavier at the time of sale and would therefore bring higher prices.

Nevertheless, the Straits of Malacca turned out to be an obstacle to the idea of shortening the India–China trip. On the one hand, the Straits lay in the middle of the shortest shipping lane between India and China's coastal treaty ports. On the other hand, the shoals and rampant piracy in the Straits endangered and frequently delayed maritime transport.<sup>38</sup> The demand that the Malacca dilemma should be addressed had been looming among British stakeholders in India and China alike since the First Opium War.

Above all, this section sheds light on how the Malacca dilemma remained consistent through the periods of the VOC and EIC rule, even as trade conditions changed. It further refreshes out understanding of the geopolitics of colonial empires. By analyzing the attitudes

<sup>33</sup> Turnbull, *Straits Settlements 1826–67*, pp. 54–58.

<sup>34</sup> Wong Lin Ken, 'Trade of Singapore', p. 114.

<sup>35</sup> Wong, *Deadly Dreams*, p. 398.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 386–390.

<sup>37</sup> R. K. Newman, 'Opium smoking in late imperial China', *Modern Asian Studies* 4 (1995), p. 771.

<sup>38</sup> For the precarious condition for commercial shipping in the Straits of Malacca, see Van Dyke, 'New sea route to Canton', p. 59.



of different agents and groups within the British empire in Asia toward the Straits of Malacca, this section finds that the imperial geopolitics was far from consistent and coherent.

### **A Kra passage proposal amid the British empire's crises in Asia**

In the late 1850s and early 1860s, a series of political crises in Asia further instigated the Malacca dilemma of the British empire. This section will explore how the Second Opium War (1856–1860) and the Indian Revolt of 1857 pushed policymakers in Britain and India to try to address the dilemma caused by the Straits of Malacca.<sup>39</sup> One of the most prominent solutions was to build a passage in the Isthmus of Kra to open a shorter and safer sea route between India and China. This section contends that the Second Opium War and the Indian Revolt of 1857, both of which have long been treated as national events by historians, are intertwined and connected in a broader imperial framework. A study of the Kra passage proposal uncovers the integrated past of modern Asia.

In April 1856, Sir John Bowring, the governor of Hong Kong, forwarded a letter to the Earl of Clarendon, the British Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, mentioning a proposal to build a ship canal to connect the Bay of Bengal and the Gulf of Siam. In supporting this proposal, Bowring asserted: 'There are few projects whose accomplishment would confer equal benefits upon commerce and navigation, and I should indeed rejoice at its being brought to a successful issue.'<sup>40</sup>

Bowring's information came from Edward Forrest, the British interpreter at the British Consul in Bangkok. In early 1856, Forrest and John Richards, a British navy officer, met with Siamese officials and learned that the Siamese government had long been trying to build a canal in the Siamese part of the Malay Peninsula to connect the Bay of Bengal and the Gulf of Siam. The Siamese government then asked Richards to help survey the project and found that the Kra Isthmus, which happened to be the narrowest part of the Malay Peninsula, might be the perfect site for building this canal.<sup>41</sup>

The survey report by Richards was forwarded by Forrest to Bowring and obtained his strong support. As the governor of Hong Kong, Bowring was excited to see a shortcut that would shorten the travelling distance between Calcutta and Hong Kong. Since British business in Hong Kong in the mid-nineteenth century was largely built on the India–China opium trade, shortening the travelling distance between Hong Kong and Indian ports had been crucial to the development of Hong Kong. In receiving the proposal from

<sup>39</sup> In the twentieth century, studies of the Indian Revolt of 1857 and the Second Opium War were influenced by nationalist and imperial perspectives. Nationalist historiography tends to highlight how India and China were exploited and humiliated by British colonialists and imperialists, and how Indians and Chinese bravely resisted the oppression. Imperial historiography, on the other hand, tends to adopt the British perspective. British decision-making processes during the two crises; the causes of the revolts in India and the conflicts in China; and the political, economic, and cultural impacts of British interventions upon India and China have been scrutinised. It is noted that most studies of the Indian Revolt are confined within the framework of modern Indian history, while studies of the Second Opium War tend to be confined within the framework of modern Chinese history. Although a growing number of scholars are transcending the boundaries of national historiographies and highlighting the shared experiences, comparable features, and connected histories of modern India and China, few have systematically investigated the connections between the Indian Revolt and the Second Opium War, both of which happened in the late 1850s. Inspired by recent scholarship that transcends the confines of national history and highlights the transnational origins, actors, and effects of the Indian Uprising of 1857, this study contends that the Indian Revolt of 1857 and the Second Opium War were closely entangled. In so doing, this study challenges the hegemony of national historiography that confines our capability and imagination in narrating and explaining intra-Asian dynamics.

<sup>40</sup> FO 881/4537, from Sir J. Bowring to the Earl of Clarendon, 1 April 1856.

<sup>41</sup> FO 17/246, from Edward Forrest to Sir John Bowring, 12 February 1856.

Bowring, the Earl of Clarendon expressed his great interest and said: ‘Every encouragement should be given to so important an undertaking.’<sup>42</sup>

The Kra canal proposal was further supported by David Doeg, a British civil engineer who had overseen water supplies for the British army during the Crimean War. Doeg wrote to the British Prime Minister Lord Palmerston in August 1856 to ask him to consider the enormous value of constructing a canal to connect the Bay of Bengal and the Gulf of Siam.<sup>43</sup> Nevertheless, the British authorities took no further action upon the Kra canal proposal until 1858.

Although the British defeated the Chinese during the First Opium War and forced the Qing court to grant privileges to British business, British interest groups had been increasingly unsatisfied with the limited improvement in trade and diplomatic relations with China. The *Arrow* incident in October 1856 gave some hawkish British politicians an excuse to launch a new military campaign against China to force the Chinese authorities to make more concessions.

A large body of scholarship exists on the causes, process, and consequences of the Second Opium War.<sup>44</sup> However, most of these sources tend to confine their narratives and discussions within the realms of modern Chinese history and Sino–British relations. Although historians have long noted that troops and resources from India were used in China in both opium wars,<sup>45</sup> few offer detailed and serious analysis of how Indian personnel, institutions, experiences, and resources were mobilised, transported, and deployed in the British Raj’s China expeditions.<sup>46</sup> For most Chinese scholars, the Second Opium War, just like the First Opium War and other British military interventions in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, was a British imperial invasion designed, commanded, and executed by British politicians and military personnel. The focus has therefore been placed on British policymaking and Chinese responses.<sup>47</sup> Practitioners of British imperial history pay little attention to the Indian military experience in China, partly because the imperial historiography itself is trapped by mega-narratives and lack of interest in exploring how colonised subjects actively participated in the British empire-building process.<sup>48</sup> As Indian troops were involved in the Second Opium War at a time when the British Raj itself was in crisis (because of the Indian Uprising of 1857), the issue of transporting Indian troops between India and China during the crisis deepened the Malacca dilemma and revived the Kra passage proposal.

In early 1857, British policymakers debated in parliament over sending Indian or British troops to China for the war. Lord Panmure, Secretary of State for War, preferred British troops in this China Expedition. He pointed out that an expeditionary force composed of British and Indian soldiers proved inefficient during the First Opium War. During the summer season in China, the Indian soldiers were able to do their duty, while their

<sup>42</sup> FO 881/4537/Appendix 2, from the Earl of Clarendon to Sir J. Bowring, 9 June 1856.

<sup>43</sup> FO 881/4537/Appendix 4 (i), from David Doeg to Viscount Palmerston, 28 August 1856.

<sup>44</sup> For a major work on this issue, see Wong, *Deadly Dreams*.

<sup>45</sup> T. Metcalf, *Imperial Connections: India in the Indian Ocean Arena, 1860–1920* (Berkeley, 2007), p. 69.

<sup>46</sup> It is noted that a translation of an Indian soldier’s personal experience in China during the Boxer Uprising was edited and published in 2017. It does add a subaltern perspective for us to make sense of the experiences of Indian soldiers who fought for the British empire in China in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; see Anand Yang, Kamal Sheel, and Ranjana Sheel (eds. and trans.) *Thirteen Months in China: A Subaltern Indian and the Colonial World* (New Delhi, 2017).

<sup>47</sup> See, for example, Qi Sihe, *Dierci yapien zhanzheng [The Second Opium War]* (Shanghai, 1978); Wang Naizhuang, *Yaluoshijian de fengbo: dierci yapien zhanzheng [The Incident of Arrow: The Second Opium War]* (Beijing, 1992); Jiang Mengyin, *Dierci yapien zhanzheng [The Second Opium War]* (Shanghai, 2009).

<sup>48</sup> For critiques of the mega-narratives in imperial historiography, see F. Cooper and A. L. Stoler (eds.), *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (Berkeley, 1997); T. Ballantyne and A. Burton, *Empires and the Reach of the Global, 1870–1945* (Cambridge, MA, 2014).

British counterparts were unable to tolerate the hot weather. In the winter, when the British soldiers recovered their health, most Indians could not fight. Therefore, the second expedition to China should be carried out solely by either British or Indian troops. Since four British regiments were just about to leave for India, Lord Panmure had suggested that these regiments could be dispatched to China first to join the expedition before their assignment in India.<sup>49</sup> Although Lord Ellenborough, the former Governor-General of India (1842–1844), warned that the expedition would lack the adequate force to fulfil its goals if no Indian unit was involved, the British government took Lord Panmure's suggestion and ordered British troops in Britain and Mauritius to sail to China in March 1857.<sup>50</sup>

The outbreak of the uprising in India in May 1857 disrupted the original plan of the China Expedition. As the situation in India deteriorated in the following months, desperate British policymakers sought ways to reinforce the British military presence in India. A relief force of 4,000 was immediately summoned after news of the revolt reached Britain.<sup>51</sup> Nevertheless, it would take between 80 (travelling by steamers) and 110 (by sailing vessels) days for the British troops to arrive in India.<sup>52</sup> In response to the emergency in the first few months of the uprising, the British authorities decided to divert those British troops on their way to China to India.<sup>53</sup> A steamer was sent from Singapore to cruise off the Straits of Sunda to intercept the troopships that were bound for China and direct them to India.<sup>54</sup> By the end of July, a large portion of the 5,000 British soldiers who were supposed to be deployed to China were diverted to India.<sup>55</sup> British policymakers were satisfied that the timely arrival of these Chinese expeditionary forces in India maintained the safety of Calcutta and prevented further chaos and anxiety among the locals.<sup>56</sup>

To further strengthen the Indian defence, the British authorities also considered sending all troops already in China (five regiments amounting to 6,000 soldiers) to India in July 1857.<sup>57</sup> Although this plan was not implemented, some commentators turned their attention to the problem of transportation between India and China. They admitted that it was a fortunate coincidence, as the China expeditionary force was able to be diverted to India in a timely manner when the uprising broke out. Nevertheless, efficient communication and transportation channels should be built between India and China to facilitate the movement of troops in preparation for the next crisis in Asia.<sup>58</sup> A shortcut route that could shorten the travelling time between India and China would serve this agenda well.

In early 1858, Henry Wise, a British investor involved in the mining industry in Borneo,<sup>59</sup> revived the Kra canal proposal that was made by Edward Forrest and John Richards two

<sup>49</sup> 'The war in China', 12 March 1857, in *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates, 3<sup>rd</sup> Series*, vol. 144 (London, 1857), p. 2206.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> 'The army in India-reinforcement', 19 May 1857, in *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates*, vol. 145 (London, 1857), p. 481.

<sup>52</sup> Most British relief forces were transported by sailing ships instead of steamers to India during the revolt of 1857 due to the lack of coal along the shipping route. For the debate on using steamers or sailing ships to transport the relief force, see 'Conveyance of troops to India', 6 July 1857, in *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates*, vol. 145 (London, 1857), p. 949.

<sup>53</sup> 'The army in India-reinforcement', pp. 480–481.

<sup>54</sup> 'No title', *The North China Herald*, 4 July 1857.

<sup>55</sup> 'Conveyance of troops to India and China', 24 July 1857, in *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates*, vol. 147 (London, 1857), p. 362.

<sup>56</sup> 'India: the commissariat', 31 July 1857, in *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates*, vol. 147 (London, 1857), p. 798.

<sup>57</sup> 'The mutiny in India', 13 July 1857, in *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates*, vol. 146 (London, 1857), p. 1330.

<sup>58</sup> 'No title', *The North China Herald*, 27 June 1857.

<sup>59</sup> British Library, India Office Records (hereafter 'IOR'), L\_PS\_6\_532\_(No 49\_9), from E. O. Riley, Commissioner of Bassein to Lieutenant-Colonel A. Fytche, Commissioner of Tenasserim Division of British Burma, 29 July 1863.

years previously. Wise wrote a letter to the Earl of Clarendon, the British foreign secretary, warning that the uprising in India and the conflict with the Chinese government made British interest groups worry that their enormous interests in Asia were vulnerable. To strengthen the security of British possessions and prevent the recurrence of the conflicts, Wise proposed a ship canal across the narrow Isthmus of Kra that would unite the waters of the Bay of Bengal with those of the Gulf of Siam. Wise stressed that the Kra canal would save significant time in transporting troops in the event of an emergency.<sup>60</sup>

A few months later, Wise further specified his proposal. He pointed out that wind and waves in the Straits of Malacca were unfriendly for sailing throughout the year. The calm weather in the region seriously slowed the travelling speed of sailing vessels. As a result, it took around six or seven weeks for a sailing vessel to cross the Strait from Penang into the South China Sea. Wise estimated that, if the Kra canal were built, the shipping distance between Calcutta and Hong Kong would be shortened by 1,175 miles and that a sailing vessel would need just three or four days to travel from Penang to the South China Sea.<sup>61</sup> Wise further added that the cost of constructing the Kra canal could be significantly reduced by employing the large number of Indian convicts who had perpetrated the uprising of 1857.<sup>62</sup>

Amid the crisis in India and China, Wise's proposal immediately drew the interest of the British authorities. The British Board of Trade agreed that the proposed Kra canal would be of great importance to the commerce of the British empire. They admitted that the passage through the Straits of Malacca was not only time-consuming, but also dangerous owing to rampant piracy and the submerged rocks along the shipping lanes. A shipping canal across the Isthmus of Kra would address that dilemma. Nevertheless, officials in the Board of Trade also highlighted that the information they had acquired was too limited to allow them to make a decision. They therefore requested the British consul in Siam to conduct a detailed investigation of the subject.<sup>63</sup>

In May 1858, Robert Schomburgh, the British consul in Siam, drafted a detailed report to the Earl of Malmesbury, who had just succeeded the Earl of Clarendon as foreign secretary, to elaborate his opinions and suggestions on the Kra canal project. Schomburgh agreed that the construction of a canal that would connect the Bay of Bengal and the South China Sea would be invaluable to British commercial interests. He estimated that 25 days could be saved by sailing vessels travelling between Calcutta and Hong Kong, and eight to nine days for steamers, if such a canal existed. Furthermore, Schomburgh pointed out that the work of constructing the canal at Kra would facilitate the development of local mineral production. As a result, British commercial groups could have convenient access to cheap minerals and transport them to either India or China via the canal.<sup>64</sup>

Schomburgh's report was well received by the British authorities. An instruction from the India Board to the Governor-General of India, written a few months later, stressed that 'the subject [the Kra canal proposal] ... is one of considerable importance, both in a political and a commercial sense, and we are sure that it will not be lost sight of by your Government'.<sup>65</sup>

Thousands of British and Indian soldiers involved in suppressing the uprising in India were recruited to join the campaigns. By the end of the uprising in late 1858, the Indian authorities intended to discharge most of these units to reduce the tremendous cost. The

<sup>60</sup> FO 881/4537/Appendix 5, from Mr. Wise to the Earl of Clarendon, 11 January 1858.

<sup>61</sup> FO 881/4537/Appendix 20, from Mr. Wise to the Earl of Malmesbury, 30 August 1858.

<sup>62</sup> FO 881/4537/Appendix 5.

<sup>63</sup> FO 881/4537/Appendix 8, from Sir J. Emerson Tennent to Mr. Hammond, Office of Committee of Privy Council for Trade, 23 January 1858.

<sup>64</sup> FO 881/4537/Appendix 13, from Sir R. Schomburgh to the Earl of Malmesbury, 31 May 1858.

<sup>65</sup> FO 881/4537/Appendix 22 (i), from The Court of Directors of the East India Company to the Governor-General of India in Council, 1 September 1858.

British soldiers were transported back to their original bases. The Indian government had to pay for their transportation. More seriously, the discharged Indian soldiers were regarded by the authorities as an unstable element that could cause further chaos. Eager to relieve the Indian soldiers who had limited means of livelihood after being discharged, the Indian authorities were all too ready to dispatch them to overseas expeditions from which the soldiers could earn good salaries, booty, and batta.

In June 1859, a British naval force escorting the newly appointed Anglo-French envoys to the embassies in Beijing was defeated by the Chinese in the Second Battle of Taku Forts. The military disaster in Taku enraged the British authorities. While British policymakers in London were trying to work out a plan to retaliate, the Government of India considered the crisis in China as a good opportunity to address its economic and political concerns.

After hearing of the British failure in the battle at Taku, the Government of India immediately contacted the British War Office and expressed its willingness to send reinforcements to China to protect British life and property. Without obtaining consent from the British government, the Indian government sent British and Indian army units in Bombay, Madras, and Calcutta to join the China Expedition.<sup>66</sup> The scale of the reinforcement from India to China surprised the British authorities in London. Unwilling to cover the huge expenditure, the British authorities asked the Indian government to stop sending reinforcements to China pending further instructions.<sup>67</sup> However, it was too late for the Indian government to change its plan; the troops were already on their way to China. By early 1860, it was estimated that 12,000 soldiers (including 7,400 British and 4,600 Indians) were sent to China from India.<sup>68</sup>

It is noted that the Indian units selected to join the China Expedition were described by local newspapers as the 'Lucky Corps' owing to the relatively high payment that the soldiers could expect from this mission.<sup>69</sup> In fact, all expenditures for the troops from India, including their salaries, family pensions, rations, and transportation between India and China, were covered by the British government in London.<sup>70</sup> As a result, the Government of India saved the high transportation costs it was supposed to pay for the return trip of the British relief troops; it also resolved the uncertain mentality amongst Indian soldiers after the revolt and kept potential unrest at bay.

As thousands of soldiers arrived in China, the issue of supplies and provisions surfaced. Since Britain was so far from China, India had been set as the main supplier of provisions for the China Expedition. Salted beef, biscuits, vegetables, and carriage cattle such as horses had to be procured in India and transported to China.<sup>71</sup> Soon, the British authorities found that the cost of maintaining the supply line between India and China was just too high. Provisions needed to be transported from Calcutta to Singapore over almost 1,500 miles. These materials were later sent from Singapore to Hong Kong for another 1,600-mile trip before they were finally in the hands of the troops in Taku in Northern China.<sup>72</sup> It was estimated that the cost of transporting the provisions from Calcutta to Taku stood at £3 per ton.<sup>73</sup> Lord Seymour, the First Lord of the Admiralty in 1860, claimed that the largest portion of the cost of the China Expedition was this provision of transport

<sup>66</sup> 'No title', *The Bombay Times*, 26 October 1859.

<sup>67</sup> 'Supply-China war', 13 July 1860, in *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates*, vol. 159 (London, 1860), pp. 1888–1889.

<sup>68</sup> 'Troops for China', 7 May 1860, in *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates*, vol. 156 (London, 1860), p. 754.

<sup>69</sup> 'No title', *The Bombay Times*, 14 December 1859.

<sup>70</sup> 'The China Expedition', 17 February 1860, in *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates*, vol. 156 (London, 1860), p. 1267.

<sup>71</sup> 'The third Chinese war', *The North China Herald*, 10 March 1860; 'The great Tasmania: the Chinese Expedition', 22 March 1860, in *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates*, vol. 156 (London, 1860), p. 1006.

<sup>72</sup> 'The great Tasmania', p. 1007.

<sup>73</sup> 'Supply: China, vote of credit', 16 March 1860, in *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates*, vol. 156 (London, 1860), pp. 772–773.

between India and China. Of the monthly cost of the expedition of £164,970, more than £100,000 was spent on the India–China transport.<sup>74</sup>

Additionally, it was noted that foodstuffs made in India could not keep for the duration of the long voyage to China. The transition times for beef, vegetables, and bread should be shortened to prevent them from going bad.<sup>75</sup> The idea of creating a shortcut lane that could shorten the distance between India and China—cutting the enormous cost of transportation and saving travelling time—had become increasingly attractive to British policymakers and investors in London. Unwilling to cover the tremendous expenditure, they wished for the Government of India to take the initiative.

Echoing the appeal of the British authorities and investors, the Government of India sent A. Fytche, the Commissioner of the Tenasserim and Martaban Provinces of Lower Burma (Lower Burma was at that time a part of British India), together with Alex Fraser from the Bengal Engineers and J. Forlong, the Executive Engineer from the Tenasserim and Martaban Provinces, to conduct an on-site survey over the Isthmus of Kra in April 1861.<sup>76</sup> The team reported that the path between the Kraburi River on the side of the Bay of Bengal and the port of Tayoung on the side of the Gulf of Siam was the most feasible transit line over the Kra Isthmus. Nevertheless, the ship canal project involved too much engineering work to be practical to construct. Instead, they suggested a railway line that could connect the western side of the isthmus with its eastern side: cargoes could be loaded off on either side of the isthmus, transported to the other side via the railway, and loaded onto ships for their destinations.<sup>77</sup> By transporting commodities via the Kra Isthmus instead of the Straits of Malacca, it was estimated that shipping companies could save around Rs. 4,99,200 annually. More importantly, the team reminded the Indian government that the French were completing their conquest of Cochin-China (Southern Vietnam) and trying to expand their influence in Siam. If the British authorities failed to pay attention to the shortcut route through Kra Isthmus, then the French would soon take the chance to realise this project. A French-controlled transit passage at Kra Isthmus would pose an imminent threat to British India's trade with China.<sup>78</sup>

The Government of India, however, was not persuaded by Fytche's report and decided not to support the project further. Although the Indian government admitted that a passage in the Kra Isthmus could facilitate India's communications with Siam and China, it stressed that the information collected so far was not strong enough to persuade them to invest more resources in this project.<sup>79</sup> In fact, in the immediate aftermath of the uprising, the economy of India had been too poor to support any kind of infrastructural expansion. Although a canal or railway line across the Kra Isthmus could be beneficial to the Indian economy and Indian security in the long run, the Indian government currently had no spare resources to pay for it.

Since the eighteenth century, the Straits of Malacca had been causing dilemmas for the VOC and the EIC alike. The Malacca dilemma came to its height during the Second Opium War and the Indian Uprising when the British authorities tried to find a shorter and safer passage to transport troops and provisions between India and China. The Kra canal

<sup>74</sup> 'Transport of troops and stores to China', 10 August 1860, in *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates*, vol. 156 (London, 1860), p. 1092.

<sup>75</sup> 'The great Tasmania', p. 1006.

<sup>76</sup> The detailed report of this survey is included in a telegraph forwarded from Fytche to the Government of India in June 1861; see IOR, L\_PA\_6\_522 (No 103\_1), from Lieutenant-Colonel A. Fytche to E. C. Bayley, 10 June 1861.

<sup>77</sup> IOR, L\_PA\_6\_522 (No 103\_1), Fort William Foreign Department, Political. No. 65, 22 May 1862.

<sup>78</sup> IOR, L\_PA\_6\_522 (No 103\_1), from Lieutenant-Colonel A. Fytche to E. C. Bayley, 10 June 1861.

<sup>79</sup> IOR, L\_PA\_6\_522 (No 103\_1), from Colonel H. M. Durand, Secretary to the Government of India, Foreign Department to the Chief Commissioner, British Burma, 22 April 1862.

(railway) proposal was then put forward as a solution to the dilemma. As the uprising in India and the war with China ended, the urgency for addressing the dilemma waned. The economic hardship following the Indian Uprising further discouraged the Indian government and the British authorities from investing in the Kra Isthmus. Nevertheless, the Kra passage proposal, which had been offered as a solution to the Malacca dilemma, would soon become a problem.

This section shows that the Kra passage proposal came out during an age in which Western powers aspired to employ modern technology and engineered infrastructures to strengthen their control and extraction of global resources. The British empire's crisis in India and China in the mid-nineteenth century gave rise to an idea of tailoring the empire in a more systematic and connected form. The Kra passage is the result of that idea.

## Conclusion

As the British empire's crises in Asia ended in the early 1860s, the urgency for facilitating transportation between India and China also waned. At the same time, French colonial expansion was well underway in Indochina. By the mid-1860s, southern Vietnam had been turned into the French colony of Cochinchina, and Cambodia had become a French protectorate. The growing French influence in the region, however, made the proposal of the Kra passage a dilemma rather than a solution for the British empire.

The British authorities in India and London agreed that a passage through the Isthmus of Kra would greatly increase the trade and importance of French Indochina at the expense of the Straits Settlements in the Straits of Malacca.<sup>80</sup> In the late nineteenth century, the French even initiated their own Kra canal project, which aimed to provide its colonies in Indochina with an alternative path to the Indian Ocean, avoiding the British-controlled Straits of Malacca.<sup>81</sup> This French initiative further deepened British geopolitical anxieties in Southeast Asia. By the early twentieth century, the British authorities had not only given up their own Kra canal proposal, but were also working hard to thwart the plans of other governments and agents to construct a passage in the Isthmus of Kra.<sup>82</sup>

While the Government of India was trying to get rid of the Malacca dilemma, European residents in the Straits Settlements were also working hard to persuade the British government to separate the Straits Settlements from British India and set it as a Crown colony. Since the 1830s, European residents in the Straits Settlement had been increasingly uneasy with the rule of the EIC. They complained that it did not give them the rights of electing their own government, deported a large number of convicts and criminals to the Straits Settlements, and always tried to tax and exploit the residents in the Straits Settlements. The end of the Company rule after 1857 failed to relieve the residents in the Straits Settlements. The involvement of the Government of India in the Kra passage proposal convinced the residents that the Indian authorities not only had no interest in responding to their appeals and concerns, but also would sacrifice their interests at will. A determined movement that aimed to ask the British government to separate the Straits

<sup>80</sup> IOR, L\_PS\_11-75, from W. G. Greene, Admiralty to Under Secretary of State, Foreign Office, 19 March 1914.

<sup>81</sup> IOR, L\_PS\_11-75, Memorandum respect the Kra Canal Project, Foreign Office, 23 February 1914. For the detailed French plan of the Kra canal project, see V. G. Kieran, 'The Kra canal projects of 1882-5: Anglo-French rivalry in Siam and Malaya', *History* 141/143 (1956), pp. 137-157.

<sup>82</sup> IOR, L\_PS\_11-75, from War Office to Foreign Office, 27 March 1914.

Settlements from India was initiated by Straits Settlements residents and their supporters back in Britain. The petition was eventually approved in 1868.<sup>83</sup>

As the Straits Settlements became a Crown colony under the direction of the British Colonial Office in London, the Government of India was exempted from the administration expenditures. Nevertheless, the Indian authorities' pursuit of a shorter route to China did not stop. After the suspension of the Kra passage proposal, it turned its attention to Upper Burma and Yunnan with the purpose of finding an overland route between India and China that would be much shorter than the seaborne route through the Straits of Malacca. Nevertheless, the passion for the alternative route gradually waned as the economic relationship between India and China had been decoupling since the late nineteenth century. On the one hand, the Chinese had been rapidly expanding domestic poppy cultivation and importing less and less Indian opium.<sup>84</sup> On the other, tea produced in plantations in Assam and Ceylon had been competing with those produced in China.<sup>85</sup> The decades-long search for an alternative route to circumvent the Straits of Malacca came to a temporary end in 1901 when Lord Curzon, the Governor-General of India, formally called off the railway survey work, which was aimed at connecting India, Burma, and China, by calling the whole plan a 'midsummer madness'.<sup>86</sup>

In short, the Straits of Malacca had been viewed as a dilemma, instead of a strategic possession, by interest groups within the British empire (Indian government, opium traders, businessmen in Hong Kong, for example) and these interest groups tried to solve this dilemma by searching for alternative routes between India and China. The British empire's crisis in India and China in the 1850s and the global craze for modern infrastructures of this period gave rise to the Kra passage proposal, which had been treated as an engineered solution to the Malacca dilemma. The Kra passage proposal, among other imperial infrastructural projects such as railway systems in India and steamer lines across the Indian Ocean, can be seen as evidence of the rise of the British world system.

John Darwin contends that the British policymakers came to perceive the British empire as an integrated and interdependent system owing to the geopolitical crises that simultaneously broke out across the world in the mid-nineteenth century. The story of the Indian Uprising of 1857, the Second Opium War, and the Kra passage proposal shows that the rise of the British world system is not only about changing perceptions, but also infrastructural expansion that could materialise the perception of an integrated and connected British world system.

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<sup>83</sup> For the process of how residents in the Straits Settlements developed a specific identity and contended for the separation from India, see A. Webster, 'The development of British commercial and political networks in the Straits Settlements 1800 to 1868: the rise of a colonial and regional economic identity', *Modern Asian Studies* 4 (2011), pp. 899–929.

<sup>84</sup> J. Richard, 'Opium and the British Indian empire: the Royal Commission of 1895', *Modern Asian Studies* 2 (2002), pp. 375–420.

<sup>85</sup> A. Liu, *Tea War: A History of Capitalism in China and India* (New Haven, 2020).

<sup>86</sup> Earl of Ronaldshay, *The Life of Lord Curzon: Being the Authorized Biography of George Nathaniel Marquess Curzon of Kedleston* (London, 1928), p. 202.

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