

The connections between the Malay Peninsula and the Kingdom of Italy in a global perspective (c. 1850-1914)



Alessandro Di Meo, PH. D.
Associate Fellow, Royal Historical Society, London

Malaysia in the accounts of merchants and travellers of the modern age

- **The first reports on the peoples of the Malay Peninsula, which spread throughout the Italian states, date back to the sixteenth century,** when Venetian merchants such as Cesare Federici and Gasparo Balbi published some accounts of their voyages in the Indian Ocean.
- **At the time, on the one hand, the port city of Malacca was one of the world's major trading centres, with routes connecting it to the ports of the Mughal Empire and Persia in the west; on the other, in the east, there were active trade routes with the islands of the Malay Archipelago, the kingdom of Champa (corresponding to the southern regions of present-day Vietnam) and Korea.**
- **The writings of some European merchants active in the city mentioned both the growing commercial volume of the port, which was able to compete with the main economic centres of the time, and the presence of a cosmopolitan community, composed of Arab, Persian, Asian and European merchants.**

VIAGGIO *Purchased Nov. 19 1867* DI M. CESARE

DE I FEDRICI,
NELL'INDIA ORIENTALE,
ET OLTRA L'INDIA:

Nelquale si contengono cose diletteuoli de i
riti, & de i costumi di quei paesi,

*Et insieme si descriuono le spetiarie, droghe, gioie,
& perle, che d'essi si cauano.*

Con alcuni auertimenti vtilissimi a quelli, che
tal viaggio volessero fare.

CON PRIVILEGIO.



INDIA-OFFICE
LIBRARY

IN VENETIA, M D LXXXVII.

Appresso Andrea Muschio.



Frontispiece of *Viaggio nell'India orientale et oltra*
(«Journey to Eastern India and Beyond») by Cesare
Federici, Venice, 1587

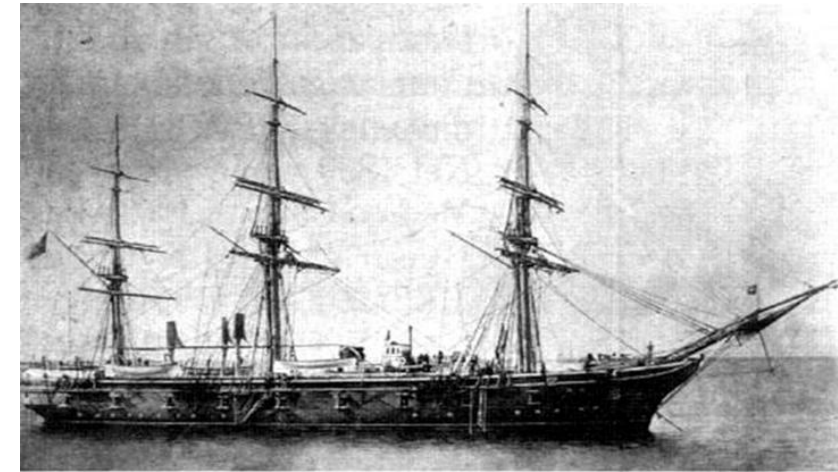
Malacca in a Portuguese sketch from 1568

The presence of Catholic missionaries

- **The trade routes connecting Malacca with the Italian States remained active throughout the seventeenth century**, as evidenced by the publication of reports by merchants such as Francesco Carletti and Giovanni Careri.
- **However, they declined from the eighteenth century onwards, when the Italian presence in Southeast Asia was limited to Barnabite and Franciscan missionaries.**
- **The Holy See's political rapprochement with France**, undertaken at the end of the seventeenth century to contain Spanish hegemony on the Italian peninsula, **favoured French support for Catholic missions**, accentuating Paris and Lyon's control over evangelisation activities, **with the result that missionaries' reports were mainly written in French. At the same time, publications in Italian on Asian civilisations declined steadily.**
- **The situation changed during the nineteenth century, particularly with the achievement of Italian national unity.** To gain recognition abroad, the new state organised numerous political and scientific expeditions, led by the Navy, to establish diplomatic and commercial relations with countries in Asia, Oceania, and the American continent.

The establishment of diplomatic relations with East Asian empires

- In 1866, relations with the Chinese Empire and Japan were officially established. Two years later, the Italian government signed bilateral agreements with Siam, and in 1871, a treaty of friendship and trade was signed with Burma.
- The Kingdom of Italy's need to obtain silkworm seeds for its textile industries, which had been hit by pebrina, encouraged commercial exploration in the East. At the same time, the desire to establish colonial presences to assert itself as a "great power" in the European context, prompted the Italian government authorities to enlist the help of compatriots residing in East Asia to explore areas deemed suitable for obtaining a territorial concession to be used as a penal colony or commercial outpost.



The *Vettor Pisani* Ship

Italy's presence in Malaysia

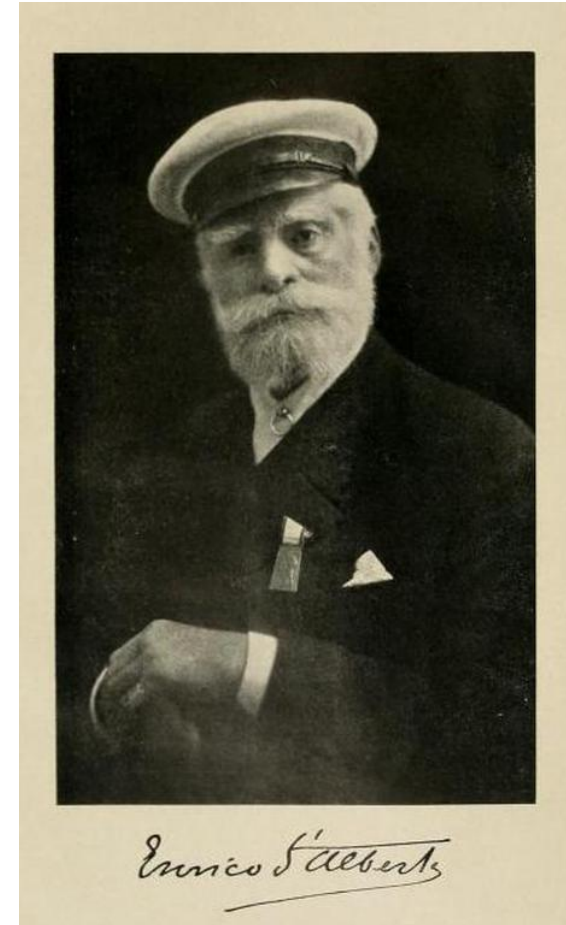
In this context, the Malay Peninsula was visited several times by Italian Navy officers. Mainly, commercial and cultural connections with the Kingdom of Italy were managed by navigator **Enrico Alberto D'Albertis**, merchant **Giovanni Gaggino** and, above all, Captain **Giovanni Battista Cerruti**, who settled among the Mai Darat people and was recognised by the British colonial government as their “superintendent”.



Old Gateway Malacca 1670 .

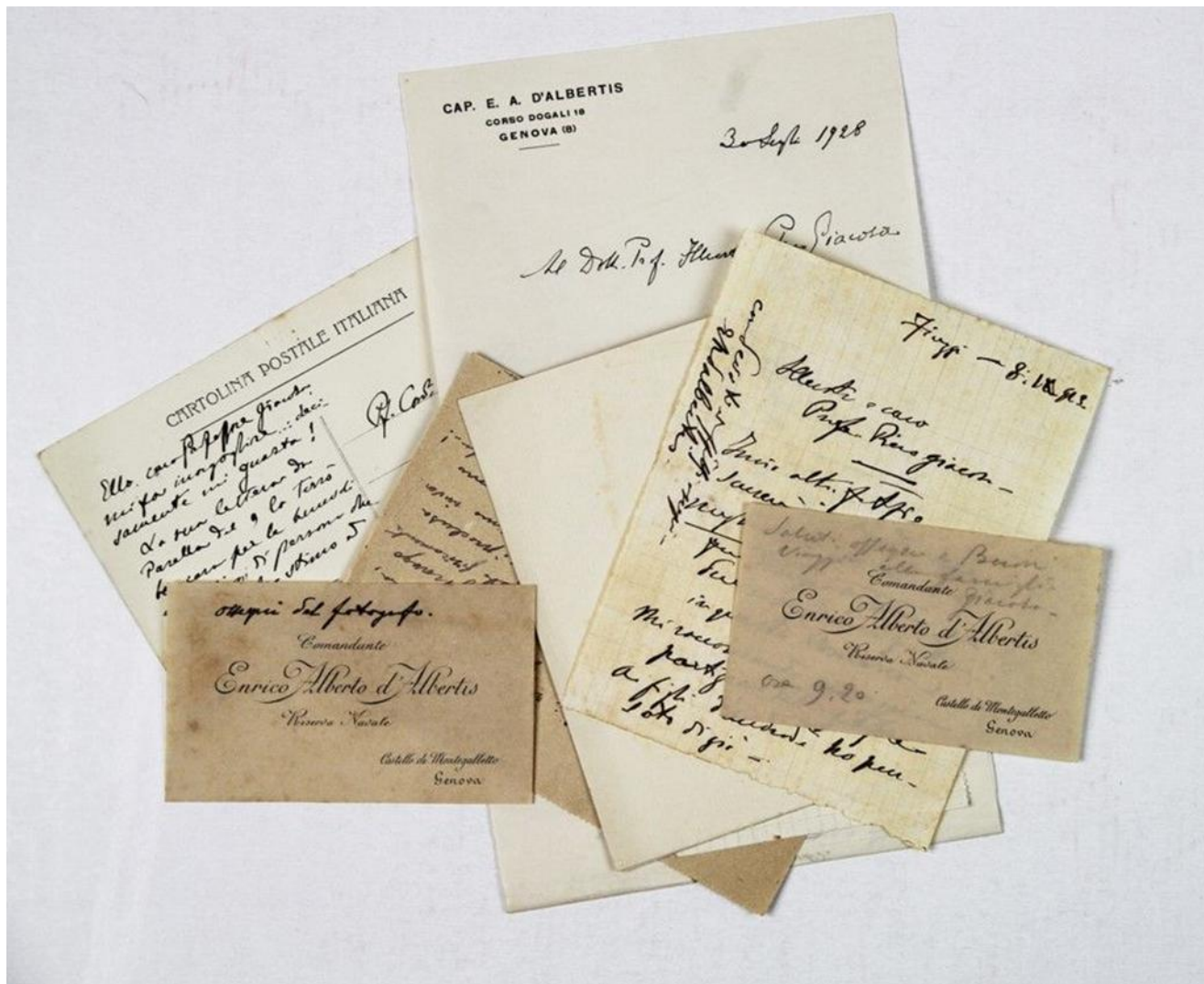
The setting up of ethnographic and botanical collections in a transnational perspective

- **Merchant navy officer Enrico Alberto D'Albertis**, a relative of naturalist Luigi Maria D'Albertis, **carried out numerous voyages around the world starting in 1873**, when he began to devote himself to pleasure boating, making sea crossings aboard the cutter *Corsaro* (since 1882), with which he reached Australia and made three circumnavigations of the globe, moreover he carried out a circumnavigation of the African continent.
- **His collaboration with naturalist Giacomo Doria**, director of the Natural History Museum of Genoa, permitted him to come into contact with a circle of scientists and scholars, including Odoardo Beccari, Raffaello Gestro, Orazio Antinori, and Leonardo Fea, and also accompanied the british naturalist Victor Brooke on his travels. **In 1877, he completed his first circumnavigation of the globe, accompanying Beccari to the islands of the Malay Archipelago and Sumatra**, then sailed up the east coast of China to Japan and on to the United States.



Enrico D'Albertis in Malaysia

- During his first circumnavigation campaign, D'Albertis visited the Malay Peninsula.
- He sent a letter to Giacomo Doria, in which he focused on his meeting with Luigi D'Albertis, who had settled on the island of Roro (then known as Yule) to conduct naturalistic research and prepare expeditions along the Fly River, which a few years later allowed him to reach the interior of the island of Papua New Guinea, "the last unknown land" of the time, and the subject of numerous exploratory missions conducted by European, Russian and American scholars.
- At the end of his travels, Enrico D'Albertis retired to private life and, in 1932, left his castle to the city of Genoa. Today, it is used as a museum, containing the ethnographic collections assembled during his travels, as well as artefacts collected by Luigi Maria D'Albertis in Malaysia and New Guinea, a collection of 21,000 photographs and an impressive number of notebooks and travel diaries, as well as archaeological remains from the classical world purchased in Greece and Egypt.



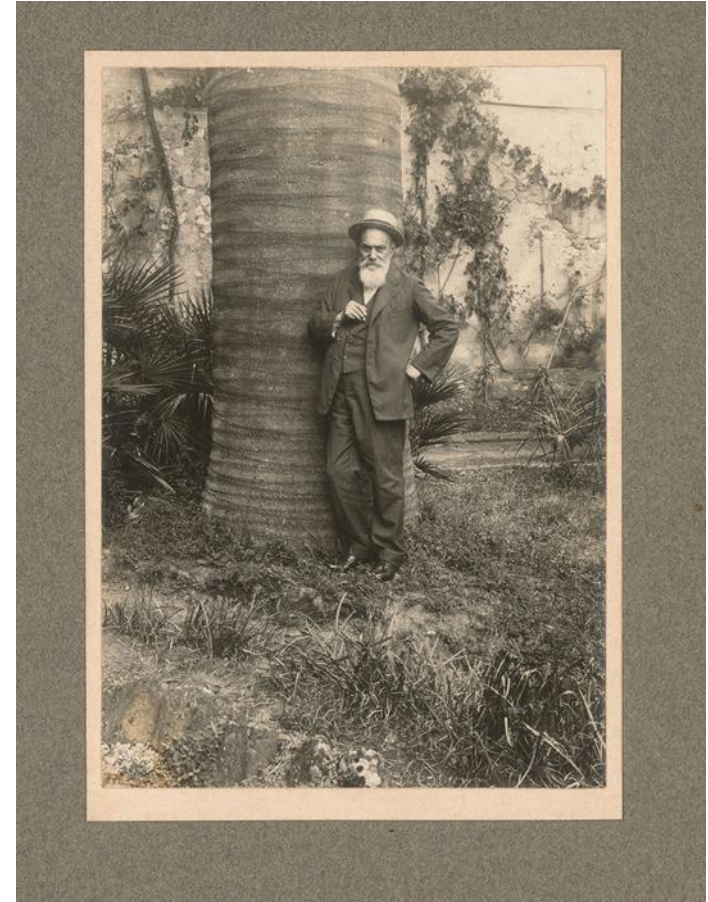
Autographed letters and telegrams by Enrico D'Albertis



Wooden model of the *Corsaro* cutter

Odoardo Beccari's studies on Malaysian flora

- In 1878, naturalist Odoardo Beccari travelled to Southeast Asia to study the recently discovered flora of the Malay Peninsula.
- Over the years, he presented the results of his studies in a scientific journal entitled *Malesia*, which he published from 1887 onwards with the aim of illustrating to global academic institutions the discoveries he had made during his travels in the Malay Archipelago.



Odoardo Beccari in the garden of his villa in Florence, 1915-1920; stampa alla gelatina ai sali d'argento; 13,7x9,5 cm; Firenze, Archivi Alinari, BOD-F-000150-0000.

Transnational circuits of scientific knowledge

- In the second half of the nineteenth century, discussions among botanists and natural scientists, based on the collection and sharing of technical data gathered during explorations, contributed to the formation of transnational networks of scientific knowledge, supported by the creation of botanical collections, herbaria, and gardens featuring tropical plants.
- In the last decades of the nineteenth century, botanical gardens modelled on Kew Gardens in London were opened, where scholars from all over the world worked, contributing significantly to the expansion of global scientific networks and the circulation of information , as Beccari noted in the journal's introduction:

Scopo di questa pubblicazione, come lo accenna il titolo, è di fare conoscere i risultati botanici ottenuti durante i miei viaggi nell'Arcipelago Indo-Malese e Papuano. Saranno quindi principalmente memorie originali intorno alle piante allora raccolte, che vi troveranno luogo. Mi propongo però di non limitarmi alla sola parte descrittiva delle medesime, ma di comprendervi altresì ricerche di varia natura, intorno alle Famiglie che trovansi nella regione da me esplorata.

Mi propongo ancora di ripubblicare o di riassumere nella «Malesia», tutto ciò che in altre opere verrà fatto conoscere intorno alle piante, che vengono comprese nel mio campo d'investigazione.

Saranno le Flore di Borneo, di Selebes, delle Molucche e della Nuova Guinea che verranno più particolarmente illustrate.

Se poi qualcuno facesse osservare, che la Nuova Guinea rimane botanicamente fuori dai limiti imposti dal titolo dell'opera, son certo che troverà nella «Malesia» ragioni plausibili per convincersi del contrario.

Radda in Chianti, Gennaio 1877.

O. BECCARI.

Odoardo Beccari, *Malesia. Raccolta di osservazioni botaniche intorno alle piante dell'arcipelago indo-malese e papuano pubblicata da Odoardo Beccari, destinata principalmente a descrivere ed illustrare le piante da esso raccolte in quelle regioni durante i viaggi eseguiti dall'anno 1865 all'anno 1876*, Genova, Tipografia del Regio Istituto Sordo Muti, 1877, vol. I, p. 1.

«**The purpose of this publication, as the title suggests, is to share the botanical findings obtained during my travels in the Malay and Papuan Archipelago.** It will therefore mainly consist of original memoirs about the plants collected at that time. **However, I do not intend to limit myself to merely describing them, but also to include various types of research on the families found in the region I explored. I also intend to republish or summarise in “Malaysia” everything that will be made known in other works about the plants that fall within my field of investigation.** The flora of Borneo, Celebes, the Moluccas and New Guinea will be illustrated in particular detail. If anyone were to point out that New Guinea lies outside the botanical limits imposed by the title of the work, I am sure that they will find plausible reasons in “Malaysia” to convince them otherwise»

The scientific journal *Malesia*

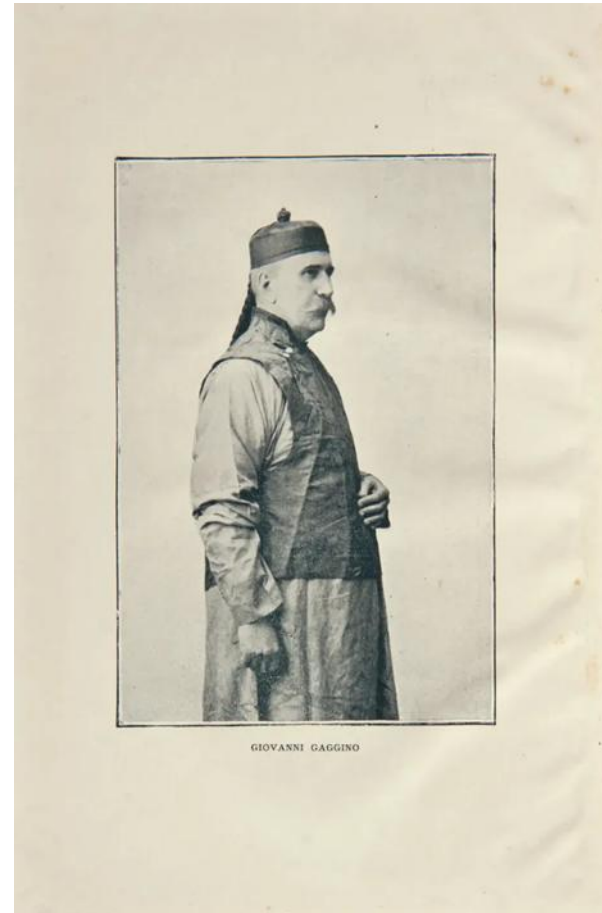
- The primary objective of this work was to classify the distribution areas of various plant species found in Southeast Asia, distinguishing between those native to the Malacca Peninsula and those native to the Malay-Papuan archipelago.
- Later, Beccari, who became director of the Central Herbarium in Florence, left a collection of 16,000 botanical specimens and several specimens of palm trees discovered during his travels in Asia and, later, in Africa, which were planted in the city's botanical garden.
- His studies garnered considerable international recognition, as evidenced by the numerous letters from European and American botanists now preserved in the historical archives of the herbarium in Florence.
- Among his correspondents, it was the British naturalist Alfred Russel Wallace, who in 1909 wrote to him to request information on the flora of Borneo and Sumatra, with the intention of clarifying the geomorphological origin of some of the islands in the archipelago.

Dictionaries and linguistic studies

- **The merchant Giovanni Gaggino**, a descendant of a family of shipowners, made his first circumnavigation in 1872, during which he reached New Zealand. A few years later, he settled in Singapore, where he attempted to establish a commercial business.
- In the early years, he worked as an interpreter and mediator, due to his **knowledge of the main European languages** – in addition to English, he spoke **fluent French, Spanish and Portuguese** – and learnt Malay, skills he used to **compile his dictionary**.
- **In 1876, he founded a trading company in Singapore and, within a few years, successfully developed his business**, gained concessions on Tioman Island (in the South China Sea) and on Freshwater Island, located a few miles from Singapore. He also owned companies in Indochina, where he established farms, rice fields, vegetable crops, and tobacco plantations in Annam and the Malay Peninsula; his trading company eventually came to own three steamships.

Giovanni Gaggino's works

- During his lifetime, Gaggino published three books; an account of his 1910 trip to China (*La vallata del Yang-Tse-Kiang*), a collection of aphorisms and proverbs common in the East, which he considered necessary for proper ethical training (*Il mio tesoro. Compendio di massime, sentenze, proverbi, consigli, pensieri*, 1900), and the Italian-Malay Dictionary (*Dizionario italiano-malese*, 1884), a grammar and language handbook to facilitate conversations between merchants and the peoples of Southeast Asia.
- The author did not consider the dictionary to be a strictly “scientific” work intended for the academic study of the Malay languages, as its primary purpose was to offer a “practical conversation manual” for compatriots interested in starting businesses in Southeast Asia.



The «*Dizionario italiano-malese*»

- Dedicated to the Maharajah of Johore, Abu Bakar, Gaggino presented it as a work designed to promote intercultural exchange and connections between peoples of different cultures.
- The entrepreneur's glossary was part of a tradition of Italian-Malay dictionaries compiled since the sixteenth century. It began with the dictionary compiled by **Antonio Pigafetta**, a Venetian officer of Ferdinand Magellan, who took over after the admiral's death as commander of the Spanish expedition that made the first circumnavigation of the globe in 1519. **According to Pigafetta, Malay was a lingua franca in the Indo-Pacific region, and he compiled approximately four hundred entries to facilitate communication and the management of commercial negotiations.**
- In Gaggino's dictionary, Malay terms are transliterated into Latin characters and the Italian spelling system is followed to facilitate the correct pronunciation of words, accompanied by the corresponding Malay word in Jawi, the **Arabic-Malay writing system widespread in the area at the time.** Among the sources consulted by the entrepreneur was the conversation manual compiled by Dennys and published in 1878 in London.

COR

Coraggioso.	Brani.	
Corallo.	Carang, maragjan.	براني
Corano.	Coran-an.	کارانج - مراجان
Coricarsal.	Baring.	کوران
Corno.	Tandoc.	بارنج
Corno del rinoceronte.	Ciula badac.	تندوق
Corona.	Mà-cota.	سورنا بادق
Corpo.	Badan, tubò.	مهورت
Correggere.	Agier.	بادن - تودا
Corrente.	Harrus.	اجر
		هاروس

COR

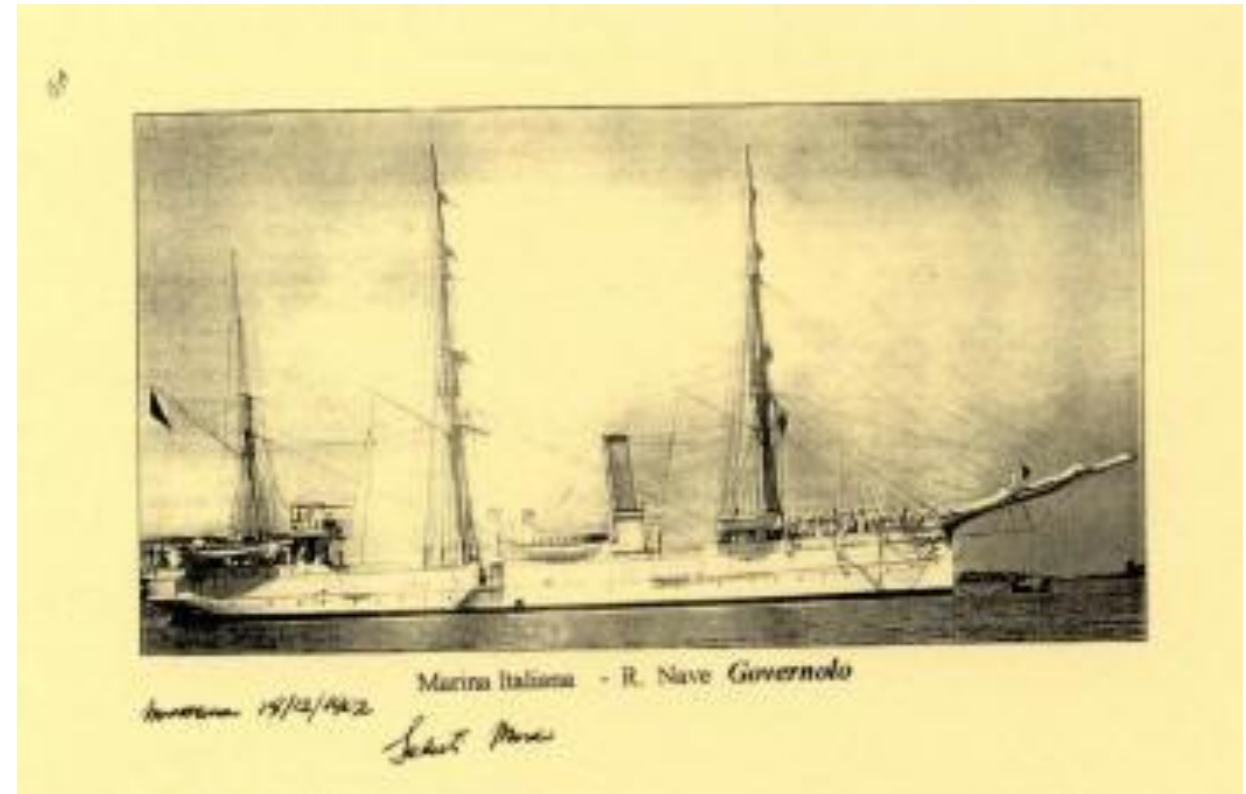
Correre.	Lari.	
Corretto.	Petut.	لاری
Corrompere.	Casi-sunp, bri-sunp.	بصول
Corte (la).	Kasi-sunp - bri.	کاسی سونپ - بری
	Adaman.	
Corteccia.	Culit rajò.	الاسن
Cortina.	Tabir.	کولیت کایو
Corto.	Pendec, pandac.	پاندر
Corvo.	Gugia.	تندوق تندوق
		کاجا
Così così.	Bighitu, bighitu.	بکیتو
Così.	Bighitu.	بکیتو

Giovanni Battista Cerruti

- **The merchant Giovanni Battista Cerruti played a key role as a cultural intermediary between Italy and the Malaysian peoples, particularly the Mai Darat, who lived in the interior of the Malay Peninsula. They welcomed him and allowed him to live among them.**
- **Cerruti was the descendant of a family of merchants, but decided to become a sailor. After sailing on several merchant ships that travelled the trade routes to the American continent, in 1872, he embarked on the corvette *Governolo*, tasked with carrying out an exploratory mission in the Malay Archipelago, where negotiations were underway between the Italian government, the Sultan of Brunei and the British Foreign Office to obtain a territorial concession in the Sabah region.**
- **During his months aboard the *Governolo*, Cerruti met the explorer Giacomo Bove, who, in early 1874, together with engineer Felice Giordano and doctor Paolo Bocca, made the first ascent of Mount Kinabalu in Borneo, the highest peak in Malaysia.**



Mount Kinabalu, Borneo



The *Governolo* Ship

Cerruti in Nias (Sumatra)

- **He travelled repeatedly between Siam, the Dutch East Indies and the island of Nias, where he carried out three exploratory campaigns;** on his first expedition, he met Rajah Siwa Sahilu, who was involved in the resistance against the Dutch, with whom he established cordial relations, while on subsequent missions **he accompanied several scholars, such as the ethnographer Elio Modigliani in 1886 and the Austrian baron Joachim von Brenner in 1887.**
- **In his report on the results of his scientific studies, entitled *Un viaggio a Nias* ("A Journey to Nias"), Modigliani mentioned Cerruti, writing that he helped him set up the natural history collections and accompanied him on some particularly challenging explorations.**
- **In 1887 Cerruti accompanied the baron von Brenner on his explorations in Nias, who mentioned him only once in his memoirs, writing that he had supervised the transfer to Gunung Sitoli of the cargo of goods previously purchased in Java and Ranau to facilitate contacts with the local populations.**

The Ethnographic Collections

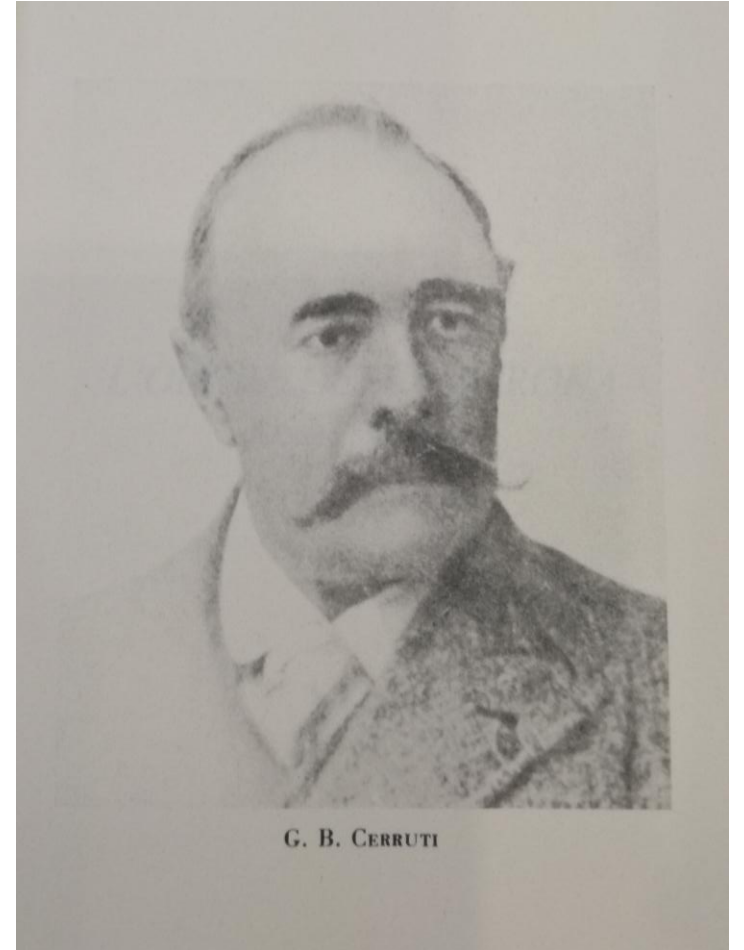
- During the years he spent between Nias and the Malacca Peninsula, Cerruti also assembled a remarkable ethnographic collection, which he sold to the Penang government in 1891.
- It was subsequently transferred to the Perak Museum in Taiping; at the same time, he donated another extensive collection of Malaysian weapons and artefacts to the city of Savona, which was lost during the Second World War.
- Thanks to the funds obtained from the sale of his ethnographic collections, **the explorer resumed his travels, visiting the interior of the Malay Peninsula in search of gold and tin mines.**



Perak Museum, Taiping

Cerruti among the Mai Darat

In 1893, Cerruti came into contact with the Mai Darat for the first time, a population settled in the Malacca hinterland.



Cerruti and the British

- Over the next fifteen years, **Cerruti learned the language and traditions of the Mai Darat, gradually integrating with them and becoming a full member, to the extent that he was recognised as their superintendent by the British colonial authorities.**
- In 1901, on the occasion of Edward VII's Coronation, the local British Resident invited the Italian explorer and a delegation of 500 members of the Mai Darat community to participate in the celebrations organised in the city of Tapah.
- **The explorer also argued that the British government authorities were interested in promoting the full commercial development of their colonies and, to this end, they made use of a network of foreign, European and Ottoman advisers and entrepreneurs.**
- In his opinion, **the anti-slavery policies introduced by the British, on the other hand, were still unable to prevent the raids and kidnappings carried out by other Malaysian communities against the Mai Darat, plundering villages and enslaving their inhabitants, resulting in a steady decline in the population.**



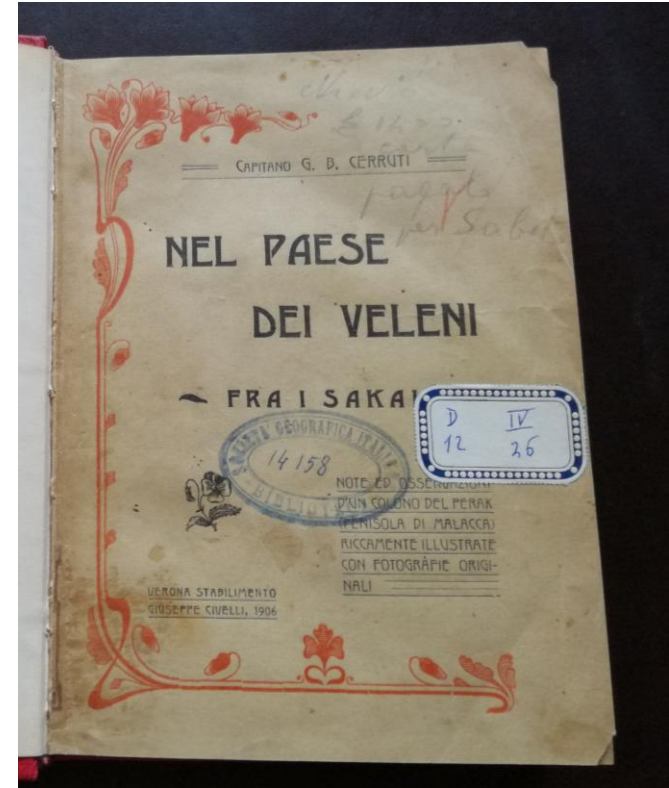
Riunione per festeggiare l'incoronazione di Re Edoardo VII

Descriptions of the Malaysian population

- **To justify his decision to settle among the locals, the captain wrote that he preferred to live according to the “slow” pace of life, free from the competition for wealth typical of the Western world, in a social context where there were no economic inequalities among the population and, consequently, where there was no constant tension between members of the same community, which made life in society impossible.**
- **Cerruti included numerous philosophical digressions aimed at demonstrating the presence of a local social system based on egalitarianism and controlled consumption of economic resources. In his account of a conversation with an old man, he wrote that the Dai Marat communities lacked authentic leadership and tended to share their possessions, an aspect that, according to some scholars, was emphasised by the author, as it was common to other travel descriptions compiled by Westerners who visited Southeast Asia and Oceania and settled themselves among local communities.**
- **During his years in Malaysia, the explorer established several rubber tree (*Hevea brasiliensis*) plantations and explored the interior regions in search of mineral deposits. He also carried out studies on the local populations, writing reports and scientific essays sent to the naturalist Giacomo Doria, then president of the Italian Geographical Society, focusing in particular on the skill of the populations of the Malaysian hinterland in the preparation of poisons.**

Cerruti's books

- In 1904, Duke Luigi Amedeo of Savoy, who was circumnavigating the globe aboard the cruiser *Liguria*, invited the explorer on board during a stopover in Singapore. **Invited to participate in the 1906 International Exposition in Milan, Cerruti presented some artefacts from the Dai Marat** – now preserved at the Civic Museum of Natural History in Genoa – **and a book of memoirs entitled *Nel paese dei veleni* (“In the Land of Poisons”)**, which was a huge sales success and was followed by an English edition.
- A few years later, in **1907**, the publisher Sonzogno suggested him to write a second volume of memoirs about his **expeditions to the island of Nias**, compiling some articles he had published in the *Giornale Illustrato di viaggi per terra e per mare* (“Illustrated Journal of Travels by Land and Sea”), a weekly review similar to the other European travel journal, such as *L'explorateur géographique et commercial* and *Ocean Highways*. **The volume was a considerable success, but it did not bring the author either the hoped-for revenues or official recognition from the Italian government.**

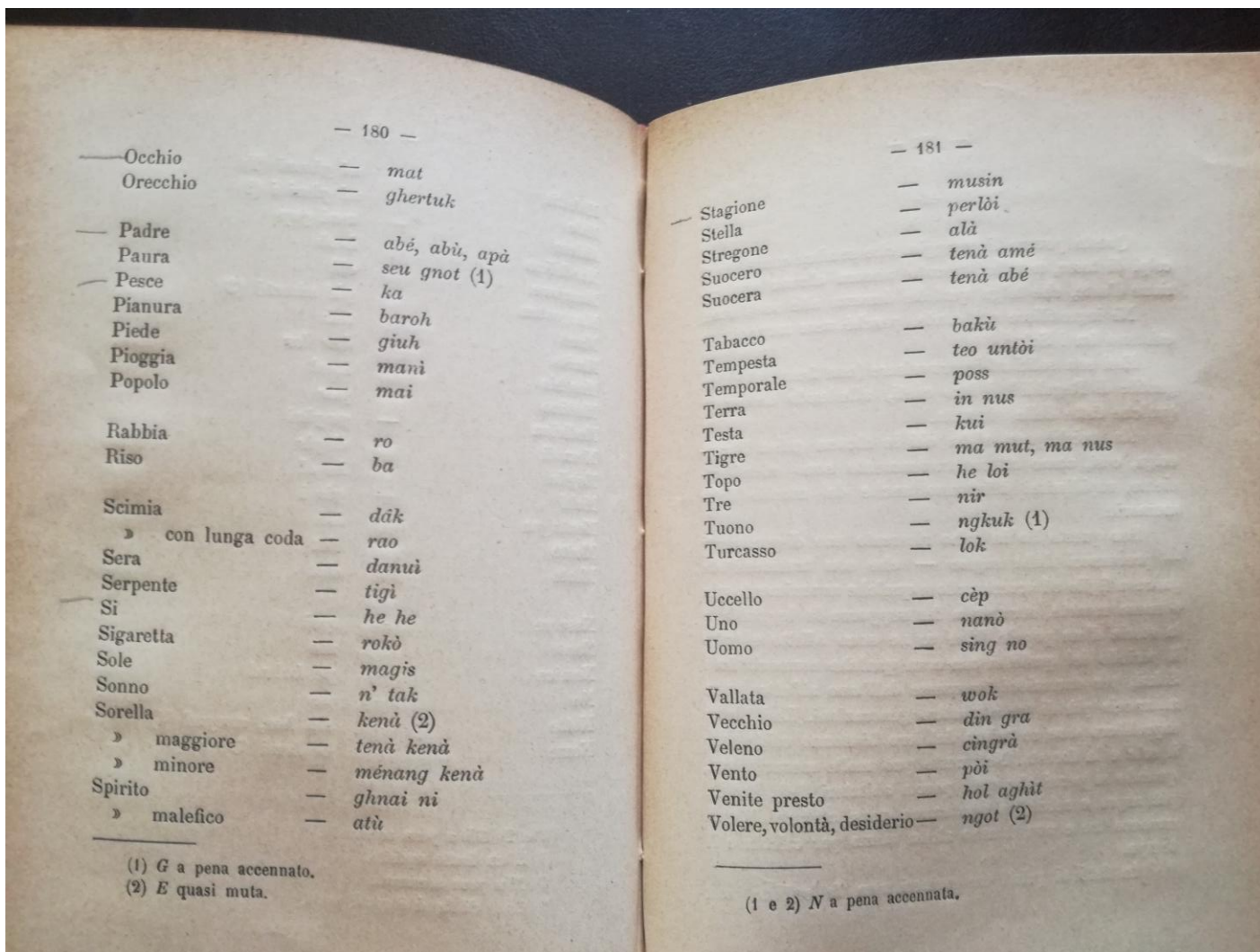


Cerruti and the European colonial expansion

- In his first book, **the author expressed his views on colonialism in numerous passages**; in general, he declared himself in favour of Western colonial expansion, as it would allow the Mai Darat to live in peace thanks to British protection, preventing invasions by neighbouring populations. Still, in some cases he expressed strong condemnation of imperialism, which in his opinion would end up destroying the local Malay culture, standardising it to Western values.
- His decision to settle inland stemmed from his observation that Malaysian communities along the coast were becoming westernised. **Probably, Cerruti's decision to make contact with the Mai Darat was also motivated by economic interests, as their regions were little known and there were rumours of mineral and gold deposits**, which the explorer continued to search for until the last years of his life.

A historical and ethnographic overview

- The desire to preserve knowledge of the Mai Darat people prompted the author to include a lengthy ethnographic digression in the volume, dedicated to reconstructing various aspects of their culture, albeit not without the *clichés* typical of the era.
- Cerruti reported data on the origins of their history, which he believed to be of Indian origin, described their social structures, both familial and social, the hierarchies observed by the inhabitants of the villages, the production of artefacts and tools, their artistic, musical and dance culture, their beliefs, their medical and scientific knowledge for treating illnesses, and concluded his report with an analysis of the orographic conditions of their territory .
- Based on the Italian-Malay dictionary published by Gaggino, Cerruti included in his treatise a brief linguistic compendium on the Mai Darat language, based mainly on monosyllabic words pronounced with a different intonation; in the absence of validated spelling rules for the transliteration of local terms, the explorer transcribed them following the graphic signs, part in Italian and part in English.
- He also wrote that he communicated with the locals using phrases and constructions typical of the English language to facilitate understanding of the colonial authorities' directives. The vocabulary was limited to the most commonly used terms, which described natural elements, parts of the body, animals and plants, and family relationships; however, some terms from the Mai Darat language that appear in the Italian edition of the book have not been published in the English version.



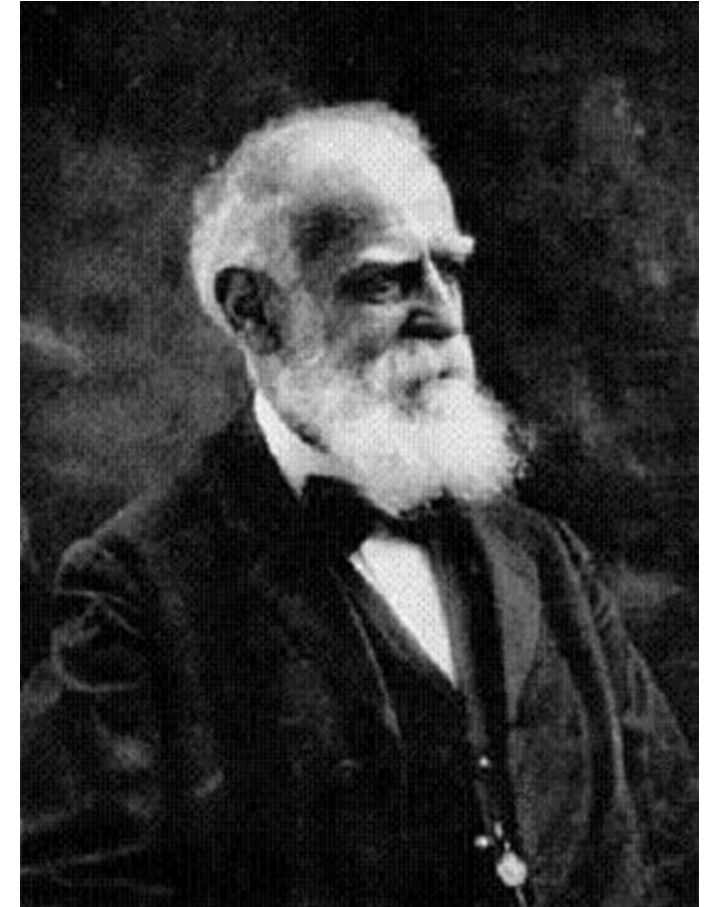
For the curious and the studious I have here added a short list of the words commonly used amongst the Sakais but as their language is totally exempt from every rule of orthography I have tried as well as I can to give a phonetic interpretation of the same.

Arm	— glahk
Arrow	— grog
» (poisoned)	— grog mahng tshegrah'
» (not poisoned)	— grog pe' m tshegrah
Bamboo	— annahd'
Banana	— tellah'e
Betelnut	— blook
Bird	— chep
Body	— brock
Born	— egoy (alphabetical sound of c)
Blow-pipe	— blahoo'
Brother	— tennah'
» (elder)	— tennah' bop
» (younger)	— manang se ne (e sounded as in met, men)
Child	— kennon
Cigarette	— rockò
Come soon	— hawl aghit (a as in father)
Cover	— tshenkop
Day	— e eah top
Dead	— daht
Death	— daht
Dog	— chaw
Ear	— garetok
Earth	— in noas
Evening	— danwee
Evil	— ne' ghne' e' (alphabetical sound of e)
Eye	— mah
Father	— abbay', abboo', appah'
» (in-law)	— tennah' amay
Fear	— sayoo neot

The Mai Darat Dictionary (Italian and English version)

Cerruti and the ethnologist Luigi Pigorini

- To promote awareness of Mai Darat culture in Italy, **Cerruti was invited by anthropologist Luigi Pigorini to send all the objects he considered worthy of attention to the Prehistoric-Ethnographic Museum in Rome, which he had founded a few years earlier and of which he was the director.** The correspondence between the two scholars is documented in eleven letters preserved in the museum's historical archive, together with a letter written by Colonel Gerolamo Emilio Gerini, who served as military advisor to the court of the King of Siam, had personally met Cerruti and introduced him to Pigorini.
- **Cerruti justified his collection of ethnographic artefacts and natural history specimens with his desire to preserve knowledge of the Mai Darat culture from the Westernisation caused by European imperialism.**



Luigi Pigorini

Photographs

In his letters, the explorer also mentioned the photographs he had taken during his years in Malaysia, sixteen of which were published in his book; eleven other photographs are currently preserved at the Civico Archivio Fotografico in Milan and constitute an unpublished source of great importance for reconstructing the life of the Mai Darat, as some depict scenes of daily life, others are individual portraits, and one depicts two Western explorers in the company of some inhabitants of a local village.



Conclusions

- **The connections between the Malay Peninsula and Italy**, which arose from attempts by the Italian government to integrate the country into international trade networks by establishing a penal colony in Southeast Asia, **promoted knowledge of local cultures and scientific progress in the fields of ethnography and natural sciences.**
- **Despite the failure of colonial attempts and the low volume of Italian trade with East Asian countries**, the scientific expeditions conducted by the Navy between 1865 and 1885 and the study missions organised privately by explorers in the following decades **contributed significantly to Italy's integration into transnational networks of scientific knowledge, based on international academic debates and the sharing of findings collected during their travels.**

- **The opening of new museums and the transfer to Europe of naturalistic specimens and ethnographic artefacts, still considered today as “ambassadors” of the peoples and territories of origin, encouraged the travel’s resumption and the start of commercial activities in the area.**
- **The Malay Peninsula was initially little explored by Italian adventurers because it was already part of the British Empire and it wasn’t territories legally considered *res nullius*, but, in the following decades it became one of the most promising regions for entrepreneurs and traders.**
- **Giovanni Gaggino successfully established a profitable trading company with branches in Siam, Annam, and China. At the same time, Giovanni Battista Cerruti discovered gold and tin deposits in the lands of the Mai Darat.**
- **Through their writings and photographs, they successfully disseminated linguistic and cultural knowledge of the peoples they encountered throughout Europe, respecting their traditions and social structures at a time marked by the expansion of Western imperial networks across Asia and Africa.**