

Introduction

For over 600 years, from the mid-eighth to the late fourteenth century, ports of southeastern China were home to communities of Muslim maritime merchants living thousands of miles away from their predominantly western Asian places of origin. That they were in China at all was remarkable, given the length and danger of sea travel between the two ends of Asia; that they were there for centuries in numbers great enough to constitute sizeable multi-generational communities is important for our understanding of world history. The nature of the trade that was their lifeblood varied over time, as did their composition, their competitors, their places of settlement and their relationship to the authorities in China, and the records relating to these changes are frustrating in their scarcity. But collectively, the sources present a wealth of information concerning these Muslim merchant communities in China's port cities, their critical role in China's trade with maritime Asia and their evolution over time.

The existence of the Muslim merchant communities and most of the evidence relating to them have long been known to historians. They are commonly mentioned in works on Chinese overseas trade, maritime commerce and world history. But they have almost always been treated either as brief points of reference or, in the more detailed studies, in the context of single dynasties, and seldom have they examined the ways in which the communities were embedded in commercial networks that spanned maritime Asia. Thus their remarkable longevity and the long-term arc of their history have been largely unexamined. Indeed, the references typically present the communities with fixed characteristics – for example, a foreign quarter with foreign headmen, mosques and cemeteries – that seemingly stand outside of time.

It is the goal of this book to recover their history, and there is an eventful and often dramatic story to be told. But before turning to that story we must acknowledge the commercial order spanning maritime Asia that supported the Muslim communities in China for centuries. The waters of Asia witnessed the movement of ships, goods and people from at least antiquity, as evidenced by the Roman trading port of Muziris (among

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others) on the southwestern coast of India. As we will see, the flourishing Abbasid–Tang trade of the eighth and ninth centuries CE peopled by Persian and, increasingly, Arab merchants produced the first truly trans-continental commercial system and the beginnings of the Muslim community in Guangzhou. However, it was a conjunction of factors in the tenth and eleventh centuries that led to the emergence of what Janet Abu-Lughod has described as a world system.¹ These included the rise of the Fatimid and then Mamluk regimes in Cairo – offsetting the decline of Baghdad during the late Abbasid and Buyyid – the assertive roles played by Chola, Java and Champa, and especially Srivijaya, and the appearance of new ports like Calicut, Palembang and Quanzhou. Most important was the great size and dynamism of the Song economy, with its policies that supported rather than restricted maritime trade. Demands for Chinese silks, copper and especially ceramics were reciprocated by the Chinese appetite for such luxuries as rhinoceros horn and pearls, but also spices and a wide variety of medicines, perfumes and incense. Over time, bulk commodities including grains and other foodstuffs and manufactured goods like iron implements entered this commercial world, especially between China and southeast Asia. These developments were accompanied by a diversification of traders, notably south Indians, Malays, Koreans, Japanese and, beginning in the Song, Chinese. But the role of Muslim merchants was particularly prominent, and while they were generally associated with Arabia (*Dashi* 大食) and Persia (*Bosi* 波斯) in Chinese sources, there is also evidence of their occupying prominent positions in southeast Asian states.

The Tang communities of Persian and Arab merchants located in the cities of Yangzhou and especially Guangzhou in the far south, where a kind of Wild West atmosphere seems to have prevailed, apparently lived in a state of tension with their Chinese hosts, if the massacres directed against them in both cities are any indication. This contrasts vividly with the well-integrated communities that were to be found in the twelfth century in Guangzhou, Quanzhou, Mingzhou and other coastal cities when the southeast was the economic and political center of the empire. Then in the late thirteenth century, a large influx of privileged Muslims and other foreigners under Mongol rule created profoundly different urban communities, stratified and complex in their internal organization, with many not involved in maritime commerce. As we shall see, these differences extended beyond the communities themselves, for their interactions with the Chinese economy, society and government

¹ Janet L. Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony: The World System A.D. 1250–1350* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), chapter 1.

around them varied greatly over time, as did the cultural interchanges between them and the host Chinese.

Nor did their activities stop at the water's edge. I would argue that these trading communities, whose livelihood depended on the movement of goods across the waters of Asia, constituted the Chinese end of a far-flung trade diaspora, a geographically dispersed collection of communities sharing some common identity and interdependent through their commercial activities. In his discussion of modern "trading diasporas," Abner Cohen points to a host of characteristics, such as their structures of authority, means of communication, organization and the like, but he also notes that these are old phenomena, as seen in the medieval Jewish trading diaspora made famous in the work of S. D. Goitein.² Philip Curtin, in his influential *Cross-Cultural Trade in World History*, developed a model for trade diasporas, arguing that diasporic merchants in port cities served the particular function of acting as cultural middlemen between their fellow merchants and local authorities, a function that disappeared with the rise of the modern world system.³ The concept of "trade diaspora" has had its critics. K. N. Chaudhuri has argued premodern traders almost all "conducted business through close-knit groups, irrespective of their location," thus obviating the need for a special category of traders. For him, all of the purported characteristics of trade diasporas – the attempt to monopolize the trade in particular commodities, the possession of informal social and political organization and the restriction of commercial information to their closed group – are "general characteristics of human behavior" and not unique to a spatially dispersed diaspora.⁴ Sebouh David Aslanian, in his fine study of Armenian merchants, also takes issue with the concept of "trade diaspora," though for different reasons. While acknowledging that it has been useful as a descriptive tool in painting broad pictures of early modern merchant groups, he questions its analytic utility, and instead uses "trade networks" or "circulation societies," in the latter case focusing upon the networks of commercial communication, as found in business correspondence.⁵

² Cohen, Abner, "Cultural Strategies in the Organization of Trading Diasporas," in Claude Meillassoux, ed., *The Development of Indigenous Trade and Markets in West Africa: Studies Presented and Discussed at the Tenth International African Seminar at Fourah Bay College, Freetown, December 1969* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), pp. 266–281.

³ Philip D. Curtin, *Cross-Cultural Trade in World History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

⁴ K. N. Chaudhuri, *Trade and Civilization in the Indian Ocean. An Economic History from the Rise of Islam to 1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 224–226.

⁵ Sebouh David Aslanian, *From the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean: The Global Trade Networks of Armenian Merchants from New Julfa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), pp. 232–233.

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I largely agree with these critiques of “trade diaspora” as an analytic model, for it is true that many of the characteristics ascribed to it were shared by most premodern commercial networks. My use of “trade diaspora” in this study is, rather, descriptive and historical, focused upon the communities and networks of Muslim merchants operating outside the *Dar al Islam* (the realm of Muslim politics and law).⁶ The problem with “trade networks” or “circulation societies” is that they are essentially static constructs, whereas “trade diaspora” – even as a descriptive category – provides a better sense of its members as being dispersed geographically and constituting a historical entity with its own history of development. Uncovering that history is a primary goal of this study.

It is important to note that the Muslim trade diaspora involved more than communities in western Asia and China. The issue of dispersion became increasingly complex as time went by, but its essential glue was Islam. At its heart were the innumerable ties generated through commercial transactions, political charges, legal obligations, religious beliefs, friendships, family alliances (sometimes operating over generations) and shared cuisines and customs, which together produced the network that gave the diaspora its coherence. Moreover, trade diasporas were by their very nature constantly in flux, not only because of the unstructured nature of many of these ties, but also in response to changes in political context (everything from the rise and fall of dynasties to changes in tax laws) and demography (including the maturation of diasporic communities).

The Muslim trade diaspora that established and maintained footholds in the ports of China extended into ports and polities across maritime Asia from quite early times. Well before the tenth century, we know that Muslims had established themselves in the Sind and were to be found in Sri Lanka, the Coromandel coast of India and in the major states of southeastern Asia.⁷ And as we shall see, from the tenth century on Muslims – especially Muslim traders – were increasingly numerous and important throughout this vast region.

The Muslim trade diaspora was constantly evolving and at times segmenting into smaller diasporic networks, but it was continuously connected by personal ties and kinship, by language, and most importantly by faith: a common belief that they had to survive in the *Dar al harb* (the

⁶ Andre Wink also uses a concept of “trade diaspora” – which he describes as open and historical rather than closed – in the sense of an essential alien element in their host societies. Andre Wink, *Al-Hind. The Making of the Indo-Islamic World. Vol. I. Early Medieval India and the Expansion of Islam 7th to 11th Centuries* (3rd edition. Leiden, New York, Köln: E. J. Brill, 1996), p. 67.

⁷ See Wink, *Al-Hind*, pp. 67–81 for a historical overview of the spread of Islam.

world outside of Islam) and a common acceptance of Muslim law, which governed such practices as partnerships and *commenda* contracts that were essential to their commercial livelihood. While we can often only infer what those networks were, they also underwent fundamental changes over the course of this seven-century history, and the discernment of those changes is yet another essential element in this process of historical recovery.

One challenge of this project concerns the scarcity of sources. Any records kept by the medieval Muslim merchants have long since disappeared, and China's Confucian elite evinced little interest in these foreigners, though we will make full use of the exceptional writers who paid them attention. Our information must therefore be culled from the writings of Arab geographers and travelers and Persian historians (for the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries); from a range of Chinese sources, including government records, histories, local gazetteers, geographies, genealogies and the writings of those exceptional individuals mentioned above; and finally from the buildings and cemeteries produced by these communities and the archaeological record, including stone funeral inscriptions and the excavations of shipwrecks. Amassing these has been a daunting task, especially for one who does not read Arabic or Persian. Fortunately, there is a vast literature of secondary studies and translations on which to draw, and while only a small portion of it deals specifically with the merchant communities themselves, such well-studied topics as historical geography, the spread of Islam, Chinese maritime administration and the history of trade throughout maritime Asia have made it possible to discern a composite picture of those groups and their history.

In this context, it is important to acknowledge some of the most important scholarship relating to the Muslim merchant communities in China, work that has been crucial for this study. Kuwabara Jitsuzō's 桑原鷺藏 study of the Sino-Muslim official and merchant Pu Shougeng 蒲壽庚 (d. 1296) marks the beginning of modern studies of the communities, for Kuwabara, in the course of demonstrating the important role played by Pu in the Song–Yuan transition, identified a remarkable array of sources treating the Muslim merchants in China.⁸ In recent years,

⁸ Kuwabara Jitsuzō 桑原鷺藏, "On P'u Shou-keng, a Man of the Western Regions, Who Was the Superintendent of the Trading Ships' Office in Ch'üan-chou towards the End of the Sung Dynasty, Together with a General Sketch of Trade of the Arabs in China during the T'ang and Sung Eras, Part 1," *Memoirs of the Research Department of the Tōyō Bunko* 2 (1928), pp. 1–79; "On P'u Shou-keng, Part 2," *Memoirs of the Research Department of the Tōyō Bunko* 7 (1935), pp. 1–104. See also his *Hō Jūkō no jiseki* 蒲壽庚 no 事蹟 (Tokyo: Kazama shobō, 1935), translated into Chinese by Chen Yujing 陳裕菁 as *Pu Shougeng* 蒲壽庚 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1954).

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Hugh Clark and Billy So have been instrumental in delineating the role maritime commerce and foreign merchants in Song Fujian.^{9,10} This is important, not only because the Fujian port of Quanzhou was the center of foreign merchant activity from the late eleventh century on, but also because of the Song and Yuan mosque and cemetery remains and the hundreds of Muslim stone inscriptions that have been discovered there. In that regard, special mention should be made of Wu Wenliang 吳文良, a Quanzhou teacher who in the 1930s began collecting inscribed stones that were being ignored by the authorities (often being used for construction purposes),¹¹ and Chen Dasheng 陳達生, whose lifelong work organizing, transcribing and translating those stones has contributed enormously to what we know about the Quanzhou Muslims.¹²

It is important to point out topics that will not be covered in this book. Because the geographical scope of Muslim merchant activity was overwhelmingly from the southeastern coast of China south into southeastern Asia and west across the Indian Ocean, we will not consider the flourishing trade of eastern Asia, particularly with Korea, Japan and the Ryukyu Islands. Muslim merchants were known to make their way to those countries on occasion, but not enough to make that historically consequential.¹³ We will also have little to say about Buddhism, that Indian religion that had an enormous impact on China and that came by sea as well as land. As important as that transmission was, especially during the sixth through tenth centuries when Buddhist-related Sino-Indian maritime trade and communication were especially active, there

⁹ Hugh Clark, *Community, Trade, and Networks. Southern Fujian Province from the Third to the Thirteenth Centuries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); “Moslems and Hindus in the Economy and Culture of Song Quanzhou,” *Abstracts of the 1993 Annual Meeting*, 4 (Ann Arbor: Association for Asian Studies, 1993); “Muslims and Hindus in the Culture and Morphology of Quanzhou from the Tenth to the Thirteenth Century,” *Journal of World History* 6.1 (spring 1995), pp. 49–74.

¹⁰ Billy Kee Long [Su Jilang 蘇基朗], *Prosperity, Region, and Institutions in Maritime China. The South Fukien Pattern, 946–1368* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2000); *Tang Song shidai Minnan Quanzhou shidi lungao* 唐宋時代閩南泉州駛抵論稿 (Taipei: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1991).

¹¹ Wu Wenliang 吳文良, ed., *Quanzhou zongjiao shike* 泉州宗教石刻, edited and expanded by Wu Youxiong 吳幼雄 (Beijing: Kexue, 2005). For a description of Wu’s lonely early efforts, see Nancy Shatzman Steinhardt, *China’s Early Mosques*. Edinburgh Studies in Islamic Art (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), p. 38.

¹² Chen Dasheng 陳達生, *Quanzhou Yisilan jiao shike* 泉州伊斯兰教石刻 (Fu-chou: Ningxia renmin chubanshe, Fujian renmin chubanshe, 1984); with Ludvik Kalus, *Corpus d’Inscriptions Arabes et Persanes en Chine, Vol. 1, Province de Fu-jian* (Paris: Librairie Orientaliste Paul Geuthner, 1991). Today most of those stones are in the collection of the Quanzhou Maritime Museum.

¹³ For the evidence concerning Muslim merchants in Korea, see Hee-Soo Lee, *The Advent of Islam in Korea: A Historical Account* (Istanbul: Research Centre for Islamic History, Art and Culture, 1997).

is little to suggest that Muslim merchants were involved in it.¹⁴ Finally, my attention here is on groups and their economic, social and political roles. Their religions and beliefs and practices and their cultural influence – topics of great importance – are treated only in passing and must await another study.

We must also be mindful of the very concrete realities of travel across Asian seas. Until the eleventh century, long-distance shipping was dominated by the Arab dhow or its close cousin, the southeast Asian Kunlun ship, both of which were characterized by planking sewn together by coconut fiber rope. The Belitung wreck, discovered off of the coast of Sumatra and dated to the early ninth century, provides important evidence for the use of dhows in long-distance trade (see Map 2). With a keel 15.3 meters (49.7 feet) in length, the ship carried a cargo of 60,000 objects, the great majority of which were ceramics from China. The Arabic representation of a dhow at sea (see Figure 1.1 on p. 16) dates towards the end of our period, but illustrates the relationship between the sailors and merchants, with the former busy above deck while the merchants peered out of the portholes. This painting also underrepresents the size of the ships. We have no way of telling the size of its crew, but literary evidence suggests that dhows could carry very large complements. Buzurg ibn Shahriyar (c. 900–953) described the loss of three ships en route from Siraf to Saba in 918, on board of which were “1,200 persons, merchants, shipowners, sailors, traders, and others.”¹⁵ By the eleventh century, the dhow began to be supplanted by the Chinese junk, a ship characterized by iron-nailed planks and bulkhead compartments that made the ships more seaworthy and allowed them to be built bigger. Marco Polo has a detailed account of a junk – on which he traveled on his return to Europe – describing 13 watertight bulkhead compartments, 60 cabins for merchants and their merchandise and a crew of 150 to 300.¹⁶ Writing a half-century later, Ibn Battuta described even larger Chinese ships that carried complements of a thousand men.¹⁷ The nautical sophistication evident in these descriptions bears witness

¹⁴ See Tansen Sen, *Buddhism, Diplomacy, and Trade: The Realignment of Sino-Indian Relations, 600–1400* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2003), and “Buddhism and the Maritime Crossings” in Dorothy Wong and Gustav Heldt, eds., *China and Beyond in the Mediaeval Period: Cultural Crossings and Inter-Regional Connections* (Amherst and Delhi: Cambria Press and Manohar Publishers, 2014), pp. 39–61.

¹⁵ Buzurg ibn Shahriyar (c. 900–953), *The Book of the Wonders of India, Mainland, Sea, and Islands* (*Kitab ‘Aja’ib al-Hind*), G. S. P. Freeman-Grenville, translator (London and The Hague: East-West Publications, 1981), p. 97 (CXIV).

¹⁶ Marco Polo, *The Travels of Marco Polo*, translated and with an introduction by Ronald Latham (London: Penguin Books, 1958), pp. 241–242.

¹⁷ Ibn Battuta, *The Travels of Ibn Battuta, A.D. 1325–1354*, translated with revisions and notes from the Arabic text edited by C. Defrémery and B. R. Sanguinetti, edited by

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to the flourishing nature of maritime trade, but it should not blind us to the fact that seagoing was hazardous, involving high rates of mortality, whether from storms, shoals, pirates or hostile governments. Describing a Captain Abhara, who had made multiple trips to China, Buzurg exclaims:

Only adventurous men had made this voyage before. No one had done it without an accident. If a man reached China without dying on the way, it was already a miracle. Returning safe and sound was unheard of. I have never heard tell of anyone, except him, who had made the two voyages there and back without mishap.¹⁸

Although clearly hyperbolic, since we know that many Arabs and Persians made the trip to China, Buzurg's statement illustrates the reputation that the China trade had as a dangerous venture, and makes even more understandable the tendency of Muslim merchants to seek the company and support of their co-religionists when far from their home.

The approach of this book is historical, with each of its five chapters describing a discrete phase in the history of the Muslim merchant communities. The first chapter begins with the great age of Tang–Abbasid trade (c. 700–879), a trade in luxury goods focused largely upon China and the Persian Gulf region. The early eighth century was a remarkable period in Eurasian history, with two great and vigorous empires in frequent contact with each other, both through embassies (sent by land) and as military rivals in central Asia. From the ports of the Abbasid Caliphate ventured merchants, with Arabs joining the Persians, who had for at least a couple of centuries been active throughout maritime Asia. The settlements they developed in China, anchoring the eastern terminus of their trade, were located primarily in the cities of Guangzhou, a distant outpost of the Tang empire, and Yangzhou, at the juncture of the Grand Canal and the Yangzi River, but also included an intriguing settlement in southern Hainan. They were not alone: traders from south and southeast Asia also flocked to the ports of China. But the Persians and Arabs dominated the flourishing and lucrative luxury trade with western Asia, with the Tang imperial court the principal consumer of the incense, rare woods, rhinoceros horn, pearls and other exotic goods that they brought. Thanks to the writings of Arab travelers and geographers, we know quite a bit about the sea route that connected the two ends of Asia and we have

H. A. R. Gibb, and annotated by C. F. Beckingham, 5 vols. (London: The Hakluyt Society, 1994), vol. 4, p. 813. Its explanation of the thousand men is worth quoting: "... six hundred of whom are sailors and four hundred men-at-arms, including archers, men with shields and arbalists, that is men who throw naphtha." Perhaps shipping in the Indian Ocean world was not as peaceful as it is often portrayed.

¹⁸ Buzurg, *The Book of Wonders*, p. 50 (XLVI).

access to perceptive accounts of Chinese life and customs. The chapter also considers the introduction of Islam into China, which occurred at this time. While there were Muslims in the capital of Chang'an who had come by land, Islamic traditions regarding the religion's introduction into the south include a legend that Muslim missionaries arrived within a generation of the death of Muhammad. Whether or not there is any truth to this, the story's very existence points to a religious dimension of the Muslim communities that was always there. As to their relationship to the Han Chinese with whom they interacted, Edward Schafer has noted that the seafaring merchants, though able to garner great wealth, were "often badly mistreated by the masters of the Chinese realm,"¹⁹ and in fact, as we shall see, relations between the merchants and the Tang authorities were at times marked by hostility: the reported plundering of Guangzhou by Persians and Arabs in 758, a massacre of the same in Yangzhou in 760 and a major massacre of Christians, Jews, Muslims and Mazdeans in 879. This last was of particular importance, for it resulted in the foreign merchants abandoning the port of Guangzhou and centering their operations in southeast Asia, thus effectively bringing to an end the first phase of the foreign coastal communities.

The short but crucial second chapter deals with a fundamental reorientation of trade that began in the aftermath of the 879 massacre. According to Arab sources, that massacre caused a flight of the merchant community from Guangzhou into southeast Asia, most particularly to Kalah on the Malay peninsula, which for decades served as the primary base of their east Asian commercial activities. These flourished, thanks in good part to the continued economic vitality of the Abbasid Caliphate and the prosperity of Chola in south Asia and the southeast Asian states of Srivijaya, Champa and Java, but the attractions of China soon reasserted themselves. With the disintegration of the Tang empire, the southeastern Chinese states of Southern Han and Min welcomed the Muslims and other foreign merchants, and for the first time in Chinese history treated employed taxation from maritime imports as a centerpiece of their state revenue systems, and set the stage for several centuries of uninterrupted commercial prosperity. The chapter concludes with a treatment of the first 60 years of the Song dynasty (960–1279), when the Chinese tried to use a Tang-style tributary system to channel the large and growing volume of maritime trade.

The third chapter of the book explores the varied aspects of the Muslim merchant communities from the 1020s to the end of the Song in 1279, an

¹⁹ Edward Schafer, *The Vermilion Bird: T'ang Images of the South* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), p. 76.

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era of free trade that was taxed by the government. At the center of this approach were the offices and superintendencies of maritime trade, which assumed general oversight and welfare functions for the foreign merchant communities in addition to taxation, and which were located in nine cities at one time or another, the most important being Guangzhou and Quanzhou. Under the paternalistic gaze of the superintendencies, the Muslim communities flourished, aided by the continuous growth of maritime commerce (through at least the end of the twelfth century) and tolerant policies on the part of Song officials, which resulted in a merchant elite that was remarkably well assimilated into the urban societies of the port cities. These activities were influenced by two important geopolitical developments. The Song loss of northern China in the 1120s made the resulting Southern Song (1127–1279) more dependent on revenues from maritime commerce, while the eleventh-century collapse of the Abbasid Caliphate attenuated the home-country anchor of the Muslim trade diaspora – or diasporas, for they had increased in complexity. As a result, the communities in China assumed even greater importance for the trade diasporas across the oceans of Asia.

The fourth chapter begins with the Mongol conquest, which, despite taking most of the thirteenth century, impacted maritime Asia only from the 1270s, and it continued to the end of the Yuan in 1368. In a Eurasian world that they had militarily reconfigured, the Mongols were enthusiastic supporters of maritime trade, albeit in ways that primarily benefited their favored merchants, while at the same time they militarized the maritime world through invasions of Japan, Vietnam and Java. Because of internecine Mongol conflicts on the continent in the late thirteenth century, the sea route to western Asia gained strategic as well as economic importance, since it connected Khubilai to his allies in the Persian Il-Khanate. Thus the tie with western Asia was refashioned more strongly than ever before, particularly since the Mongols also brought large numbers of foreigners to China, most notably Muslims from Persia and central Asia. The impact on the Chinese Muslim communities was profound, for they became larger than ever before, privileged and politically powerful, yet also more separated from their Han Chinese peers than they had been from their Song predecessors. As a result of these developments, the Muslim trade diaspora was once again anchored in its western Asian homelands and was dominated at its higher levels by politically powerful merchants in the Persian Gulf and India as well as in China. Whether the growing complexity of commerce throughout the maritime Asian world also resulted in the development of a less-visible Sino-Muslim trade diaspora active in southeast Asia is an issue that will be explored.