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MARITIME TRADE IN ASIA

Maritime trade in Asia antedates early modern history. During the fifteenth century, intrepid Chinese mariners and ships sailed into the Indian Ocean. Chinese produce was sold in Indian ports and shipped into the Red Sea, Persian Gulf or along the east African coast. By the end of the fifteenth century, Ming China's official interest in these commercial and political links with India and the Indian Ocean had collapsed. Maritime trade between China and India was sustained by junk traders sailing, principally, to Malacca and other ports in the South China Sea. At Malacca, the Chinese encountered and traded with other Asian merchants who frequented that port.

The Asian, Chinese, Indian, Arabian, Malay and non-Malay indigenous merchants who traded at Malacca met on the periphery of one geographical region in which the Chinese perceived themselves dominant. Those Chinese merchants did not concern themselves over the commercial and religious penetration by Islamic traders and missionaries throughout the Indonesian archipelago. Neither were they particularly preoccupied with the competitive commercial activities of the Malay and non-Malay indigenous merchants. Sinocentric attitudes led the Chinese merchants to ignore the maritime and commercial acumen of the many merchants of the Indian Ocean who were present at Malacca.

The Indian Ocean and the South China Sea are terms recently created by geographers to delineate the physical boundaries between three regions, the Indian sub-continent, Southeast Asia and China. Asian and European merchants of the early modern period would not recognise the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea as those terms are currently used. Today's actual boundary of the Indian Ocean includes portions of the Indonesian archipelago.1 But, it is argued that the Indonesian archipelago during the early modern period formed an integral part of the South China Sea. For those Asian merchants, the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea were a series of seas, bays, islands and coastal markets that stretched, respectively, from the east coast of Africa to the west coast of Malaya and Sumatra and from the south coast of China, including Taiwan, the Philippines, the Indonesian archipelago, to the west coast of Malaya and Sumatra.

The geographical range of the activities of those Asian and European merchants who participated in the maritime trade of China and the South China Sea focused upon China, encompassed the South China Sea, the Indian Ocean and, finally, Europe. It may be useful to mentally draw a series of more or less concentric arcs on a map of the world, with south China as the focal point, the first arc runs along
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the western border of the South China Sea and up to Japan. The second is drawn across the Indian Ocean, to the east coast of Africa; and the third in the north and south Atlantic to include western Europe. Within the first arc, Chinese junks dominated maritime trade. The Chinese were joined by Japanese, European and other Asian competitors, including Siamese ‘tribute’ traders. In the second arc, Asian and European country traders (those ship-owners and merchants involved in inter-Asian maritime trade) were active and the European Companies were also present. In the third arc, Europeans competed exclusively between themselves in supplying Asian commodities by sea via the Cape of Good Hope route to Europe.

THE MARITIME TRADING WORLD OF CHINA

Portuguese forces under the command of Alfonso Albuquerque conquered Malacca in 1511 and abruptly initiated early modern relations between Europe and China. Although aware, according to Tome Pires, of Malacca’s political and economic relationship with China, the Portuguese did not expect Ming officials to respond militarily or act intransigently towards their overtures to trade with China from Malacca.3 Despite such claims, the conquest of a tributary vessel of China potentially involved the Portuguese in confrontation. The reason why these two powers did not clash is based upon China’s highly divergent view from those of the Portuguese on the ordering of state relations and the role of maritime trade. The conquest of Malacca by the Portuguese disturbed China’s ‘world order’ – a term used to describe a set of ideas and practices towards foreign relations developed and perpetuated by the rulers of China, based on the concepts of Sinocentrism, an assumption of Chinese superiority and the utilisation of an intricate series of tributary relationships to justify their claims to a predominant position in the world.4 The Ming officials were not without aid in how to approach this new barbarian problem; in all probability, they had to determine the exact nature of China’s relationship with the Malacca sultanate. Based upon historical and conceptual antecedents, they had to establish the extent of the threat posed by these new barbarians to China and her vassal states and had to decide upon the manner in which these new intruders were to be controlled. They would have read the Emperor Ying-Lo’s inscription where he commented that ‘Malacca wished to be better than barbarian and wanted to be permanently part of the imperial domain.’5 Malacca paid tribute to Ming China, whose frontiers were stabilised by this relationship. Ming policy, no ‘outer-separation’ for Malacca, had also been supported if not fostered in China by enuch diplomats and naval commanders. Malacca was the gateway to the Indian Ocean and as a tributary state became involved as a useful support base for Ming naval expeditions.6

TRADITION, GEOGRAPHY AND OFFICIAL ATTITUDES

South China’s maritime tradition existed prior to the naval expeditions of the early Ming dynasty. The conflict of Chinese public and private participation in the exercise of maritime trading privileges touched many facets of local Chinese
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society. The maritime trade of China was not confined to Chinese participants alone; the tributary missions of the vassal states of the South China Sea to China had an economic as well as diplomatic and political purpose.

Geographical location, familial and occupational connections influenced the development of Chinese commercial and maritime trading practices and are a factor in the development of the south China ports as foci or enclaves of commerce and manufacturing. Most of China’s maritime merchant activity originated in the ports along the coast of Chekiang, Fukien and Kwangtung provinces. Merchants were mobile; Chang-chou merchants, for example, resided at Canton. Individual merchants from Chang-chou competed against each other, yet they did form a trade association based upon geographical location and type of product traded. Consequently, Chang-chou merchants at Canton defended their home port’s commercial interests vis-à-vis those of Canton’s merchants and Ming officials.

The ports of Ning-po in Chekiang, Amoy (a term used for the major ports Chang-chou and Chi’u-an-chou) in Fukien, and Canton in Kwangtung, were the principal Chinese maritime commercial centres involved in trade to the South China Sea. Shanghai, in Kiangnan, during the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, had not yet emerged as a major competitor to these ports’ trade in the South China Sea. The geographical, historical, administrative and economic characteristics of these ports are factors which explain why they developed in the late Ming.

Ning-po, Amoy and Canton, in an age when fluvial transport was fundamental to the marketing of goods over almost any distance, were river-based, slightly inland from the open sea and in the vicinity of island or estuary anchorage which offered protection from the elements, especially typhoons, and provided opportunities for smuggling. Only Canton was at the confluence of many river systems and had a large, productive delta region.

Geographic proximity to the South China Sea also aided Canton’s development in that maritime tributary trade missions were received at that port. In the eyes of officials, management of overseas barbarians should occur as far away as possible from the centre of the empire. This fact and Canton’s expansion in maritime trade had important repercussions on Portuguese involvement in China’s trade.

Surrounding most of these south China ports were large, flat, farming areas with fertile alluvial soils which had highly developed, or soon to be developed, flood-control irrigation and canal systems that insured the production and marketing of agricultural produce. The adjacent river systems provided navigable points of penetration into the interior which permitted the movement of handicraft products in various stages of completion, and agricultural and mineral resources to the port areas. With sufficient arable land, under food crop cultivation, hydraulic control and fluvial transport, the population of these ports grew. This population was also involved in the development of maritime technology and the application of improved agricultural, manufacturing and handicraft techniques.

Official attitudes, the Ming bureaucratic view of the world, and the Confucian-trained scholar-gentry antipathy towards merchants, meant that the Chinese
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merchant interested in maritime trade usually encountered vigorous bureaucratic
constraints. These constraints were diminished either by bribery or the formation of
a partnership between the merchants and officials. When such constraints and
the cost of overcoming them were too high, the local merchant had to decide
whether to divert his involvement in maritime trade and invest in more secure forms
of financial activity, such as real estate. The merchant also had the option of
opposing the official and participating in non-social activities. Maritime trading
opportunities, however, in the late Ming were on a scale that generally encouraged
merchants and investors at Canton, Amoy and Ning-po to overcome bureaucratic
constraints.

PARTICIPANTS, SUPPLIES AND DEMAND

The participants in the maritime trade of south China in the sixteenth century
were Chinese merchants, investors, and junk owners who traded openly in the
South China Sea and clandestinely with Japan. Others involved were the tribute
traders from Southeast Asia, the Portuguese, and the Spanish. The economic
development of the south China ports and their hinterland regions significantly benefited from the addition of these European participants.

The direct benefactors of the maritime trade that entered these ports were the
Chinese merchants, the middlemen and the regional producers and the purchasers of the articles that were sold for export and bought for import. Beyond the creation of wealth and profit for a few merchants and officials, maritime trade had a fundamental role in the transformation of agricultural, mineral and handicraft production.

China's major exports in the late Ming were divided into three categories: precious metals, textiles and ballast goods. Gold bullion, one of three principal metals used in coinage and by weight in the large-scale transfers of wealth, was exported in significant quantities to Japan, India and the Philippines. Textiles, especially raw silk, and different varieties of silk and cotton piece-goods, were in increasing demand for export within Asia and to Europe. Ballast cargoes were supplied primarily from expanding export-oriented agricultural production, sugar in particular, and other commodities, such as alum, porcelain and zinc.

There were regional differences in the supply of these goods dictated by geographical proximity, differences in pricing, and at times governmental controls. Zinc was mined near Canton and as a result was cheaper there. Large-scale sugar production for export first developed in Fukien province and stimulated Fukienese trade to Japan. The cultivation of cotton fibre for sale within China and the specialisation of cotton textile manufactures for the internal and overseas markets had emerged by the late Ming with Ning-po and Amoy deriving a slight pricing and ease of supply advantage over Canton.

China's major imports in the late Ming may also be divided into three categories: metals, spices, and ballast commodities. Since China's silver production was very small and its requirements so large, the merchants of south China imported and purchased tremendous quantities of silver from Japan and the New World via the
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Philippines, India and Europe. Previously, China was self-sufficient in copper production and copper coinage was exported; this trend reversed and sizeable quantities of copper were imported from Japan in the late Ming.

China's consumption of spices, pepper, cloves and nutmeg, probably increased in the last quarter of the sixteenth century. Portuguese traders were encouraged to bring spices to China; spices enjoyed a good market and were accepted for payment of customs duties, until 1582 when silver was demanded by Chinese authorities. The Portuguese encountered difficulties in securing supplies of cloves and nutmeg directly from Ambon and Banda in the Indonesian archipelago as a result of the successful indigenous rebellion against the Portuguese on those islands in the late sixteenth century. With the arrival of the Dutch and English in the Indonesian archipelago, the competition for spice supplies in the South China Sea intensified and Portuguese spice sales fluctuated in China.

The historical characteristics of the south China ports refer to those maritime traditions, skills and technical capacities developed on the Fukien coast in the fifteenth century that built the ships and supplied the manpower that sailed into the Indian Ocean. Although some of these skills may have been lost, the sailors and shipbuilders from these ports certainly retained the memory of their heritage. The Ming naval expeditions were state-financed and from the available descriptions were carried out in rather large junks. The Chinese junks encountered by the Portuguese at Malacca in the early sixteenth century and the Dutch in the early seventeenth century underwent changes in their size and ownership. The large junks of the Ming naval expeditions reportedly equalled the size of a Portuguese carrack; the size of the majority of the vessels described in European reports in the seventeenth century ranged from one hundred tons to a maximum of two hundred tons.

Ship-owning and building in south China by the mid sixteenth century was no longer dominated by the state and returned to a form of economic activity for the very wealthy and powerful individual group, or association of individuals or groups. Since ship-owning and investing was in competition with other forms of risk-taking, the Chinese junk-owners diminished the size of their ships in order to gain advantages in their operating and investment costs. These Chinese ship-owners and investors found in their illegal and banned trade to Japan that their small and more numerous ships could attain a significant market share equal to, or greater than, their European and internal Japanese competition in the supply of raw silk.15

THE MARITIME TRADING WORLD OF THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

The conquest of Malacca also brought the Portuguese into confrontation with the state systems in the immediate vicinity and those which had political and economic relationships with the Malacca sultanate. The Portuguese encountered three major categories of state systems: Sinic, Buddhist and Malay as they expanded through the South China Sea in the sixteenth century.
The Sinitic states, Tonkin and Cochinchina, possessed a set of ideas and practices towards foreign relations which were adapted from the Chinese model and developed by the rulers of Vietnam. Although based upon the Chinese pattern, the Vietnamese view was tempered by strongly held mythopoetic and religious views on the authoritarian role of the monarch. The ruling families of Vietnam, the Trinh in Tonkin (northern Vietnam), and the Nguyen in Cochinchina (central Vietnam), employed Sino-Vietnamese bureaucracies that were Confucian in orientation and replicated dynastic courts which were heavily influenced by China’s view of the world.

A protracted civil war, 1620–70, and its stalemate, reinforced the existence of two separate state systems in Vietnam. They simultaneously developed tributary systems based on a modified Chinese pattern of international relations. Tonkin by necessity and interest was an active participant in China’s world order; the Trinh’s claim to rule Vietnam was legitimised by Ming and, later, Ch’ing imperial investiture which aided the Trinh in its efforts to enlist foreign support for the conquest of the south.

Cochinchina, in contrast, was not an active participant in China’s world order; the Nguyen concentrated upon creating foreign relationships which would permit the continued existence of their regime and the expansion of their power into the lowland rice-producing regions of Champa and Cambodia. The slow territorial absorption of the present day southern regions of Vietnam, the nam-thien (southward) movement, was described by one Nguyen general as, ‘the policy of slowly eating silkworms.’ This expansionist Vietnamese policy began in the mid seventeenth century and lasted for well over a century.

The Buddhist state systems, Siam and Cambodia, despite close contacts with China in the early fifteenth century and Siam being a tributary of Ming and Ch’ing China, practised a set of ideas towards foreign relations based upon Buddhist concepts of order. In their view the role of the ruler was dominant and relations with other states were governed by a system of overlord–vassal obligations. The King of Siam was considered, ‘a reincarnated deity, a chakravartin or universal emperor. Moreover, he was a bodhisattva, a being destined to be a Buddha. His authority was absolute, his person was both sacred and unapproachable.’ Siam’s monarch received tribute from Laos and various Malay state systems; he claimed and received tribute whenever possible from Cambodia and Burma, states with similar perception of the world.

The Malay encompassed the vast expanse of land and sea, known today as Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia and the Philippines. It was divided into state systems, some of which were influenced to a variable degree by Islam and others which retained almost intact their non-Islamic traditions. Its rulers practised sets of ideas towards foreign relations that drew upon Islamic and non-Islamic traditions towards order and its maintenance through overlord–vassal relationships. In the Islamic state systems, the pre-eminent authoritarian figure was the sultan, ‘whose right to the throne was primarily based on his unbroken descent from a
glorious ancestor. While in theory no further justification for total authority was needed, in practice a ruler’s power was directly related to his material resources.122 In the non-Islamic state systems, the authority of the ruler depended upon the sophistication of the society and the extent of Hindu influence. This contrast is best exemplified by a comparison of Bali’s highly Hindu-influenced society with parts of Timor in which Indian influence were entirely absent. Although continental in scope, possessing abundant mineral and other natural resources, the South China Sea state systems failed, in comparison to China, to establish a ‘universal empire.’ The region remained highly bifurcated and China through its ‘tributary system’ projected in stark contrast, a ‘very real cultural and economic dominance and magnetism in East and Southeast Asia.’23 The Malay ruler in Aceh expanded his control over the pepper ports of north Sumatra, which were located at the confluence of one or more river systems. The ruler of Johor, in the early seventeenth century, made his kingdom the new centre of the old Malacca sultanate; Johor continued to be a maritime state highly dependent upon the rivers and the sea which were its principal means of communications and livelihood. In terms of distance Johor could very well be termed a ‘far-flung’ kingdom; but with the sea and the rivers providing easy access to even the most remote dependency, ‘Johor was a much closer-knit kingdom than the distance would indicate.’24 The Buddhist ruler, the King of Siam, recurrently claimed overlordship of various neighbouring Malay and Buddhist state systems. The Sinic rulers, contrary to their claims, did not maintain the unity of Vietnam nor could the Trịnh in Tonkin overtly limit the expansion of the Nguyen in Cochinchina.

Limits to expansion, diplomacy and maritime trade

The physical and political geography, as well as the demography, of the South China Sea in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, especially after the arrival of the VOC (the Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie, the Dutch East India Company), hampered tendencies within certain indigenous state systems towards their imperial expansion and did not permit the creation of a single-state universal empire. Consequently, divergent theoretical attitudes towards diplomacy and maritime trade within the region in practice succumbed to the more pragmatic exigencies of the exercise of state power. The attitudes of the Sinic, Buddhist and Malay rulers towards diplomacy and maritime trade may be characterised only in a general manner when discussing highly disparate societies over a century or more of intense political and economic development, confrontation with European interests and different perception of time and space. The theoretical purpose of diplomacy in the state systems of the South China Sea, as in China, was to reinforce the state’s perception of its position in the universe. Elaborate overlord–vassal relationships, the exchange of gifts, and formal patterns of behaviour in the reception of ruler-to-ruler correspondence and ambassadors was in evidence in all of the Sinic, Buddhist and Malay states.25
In the political theory of the individual state, the outward form of acceptance of a diplomatic message was maintained as well as the reception of an ambassador from a ruler who entertained a different political ideology, or was of a different status in a tributary relationship. What was necessary, and perhaps this in part explains the frequency of diplomatic activity in the South China Sea region, was the internal political and ideological requirement to receive and send diplomatic missions. The internal representation of embassies from non-tributary states was evidence of the power and prestige of the host state. In addition to the substantive political deliberations and the trade that might be carried out, these exchanges were interpreted or modified to coincide with that state's perception of the world. Vassalage was less onerous than is imagined and in certain unstable areas of the region was secretly negotiable; in some cases, it was a method of offsetting the encroachment of a powerful neighbouring state with another more distant powerful state.

The state systems of the South China Sea had varying attitudes to, and economic interests in, maritime trade. Consistent with the supremacy of the ruler, royal authority in theory was often equated with royal monopoly in the production, collection or sale of stipulated commodities. The regulation of maritime trade was controlled by the various courts and the indigenous ruler was usually the major participant in maritime trading ventures. Despite the apparent supremacy of the indigenous ruler and his domination of maritime trade, in practice there was a greater divergence on account of differing geographical, ideological and economic characteristics.

In the Malay and Buddhist states, with the major exception of Mataram, the political and commercial centres were combined and located either on or near a river system which provided fluvial access into the interior. In the Malay world, the kampung (village) formed the basic expression of socio-political organisation on account of the mountainous terrain and tropical vegetation and fluvial transport proved to be a relatively easy means of communication between the Malay peninsula and the multitudinous islands of the Indonesian archipelago as a result of relatively mild and protected sailing conditions. In the Buddhist states, the political centres of Siam and Cambodia were also the major maritime commercial centres and located on the Chaopraya and Mekong rivers. In the Sinitic world, by contrast, the political centres of Tonkin at Hanoi (Ke-cho) and Cochinchina at Hue, although located on river systems that had access to both the interior and the exterior, they were not the major maritime commercial centres. In Tonkin, Pho-hien (near modern H'ung Yen) and in Cochinchina, Fai-fo (Hoi-an) were the principal maritime centres of those states.

The harsher geographical characteristics of China were only one reason for its reliance upon foreign merchants in the development of its maritime trade; another, and perhaps the predominant, characteristic was ideological. The ideology of the Sinitic state was Confucian which conflicted with the development of mercantile endeavour; the Malay and Hindu state systems embraced an ideology which did not impede the direct participation of the ruler or bring the state officials in