

The rise of trade within Island Southeast Asia and the exchange with the mainland



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2019 version [without references]

Essay prepared for a book published by Mariemont Museum, ed. Alexis Sonet

[NB Will be translated into French for publication]

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This printout: Itanagar, August 24, 2019

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ABSTRACT

Over the last four thousand years, the South China Seas has developed into a major zone of maritime trade. Beginning with early trade in nephrite from Taiwan, and attested by similarities in pottery over a wide area, after 0 AD it evolved into a broad commercial zone, trading bronze objects from mainland Southeast Asia, for example Dongson drums and gongs, for obsidian, feathers and other products. Trade from India dominated the cultural life of early urban centres such as Oc Eo in Vietnam. Development in shipbuilding techniques allowed for much larger cargoes, leading to the evolution of Srivijaya, the first regional trading empire, from the 6th century onwards. The entry of Chinese shipping into the zone from the 11th century onwards led to an expanded trade in ceramics. At roughly the same period, Islamic shipping began to extended into the region from the West, and many of its polities converted to Islam. The first European ships entered the South China Seas in the sixteenth century, and rapidly became integrated in the trading sphere, transporting both their own merchandise and the trade goods of many nations.

Keywords; Indonesia; material culture; trade

Introduction

The South China Sea (SCS) region, centred on Island Southeast Asia, is both a rich zone for maritime interaction and an arena for political conflict in the present. There is no reason to think that this was not already the case as early as vessels were capable of crossing it on a regular basis. Evidence for some type of maritime capacity in this region goes back as far as the first movements of early humans into the area. Humans may have crossed the Arafura Sea from Timor to Australia some 55,000 years ago (O'Connor 2007). However, recent reports in the Madjebebe rock shelter in Northern Australia pushes back the first settlement to 65,000 BP (Clarkson *et al.* 2017) which argues for an even earlier sea-crossing. Ono *et al.* (2010) document the successive occupation and abandonment of the Talaud islands (north Sulawesi, which require a 100 km voyage across open sea) from 35,000 BP onwards. There seem to have been regular transits up and down the Ryukyu chain from 35,000 BP, which is particularly remarkable in the light of the dangers of the Black Current (Kuroshio). We have little or no idea what type of ships might be involved in these voyages, since prior to the modern types in the region, there is only evidence for bamboo rafts.

Around 4,000 years ago there was a revolution in shipbuilding, apparently in Taiwan, which enabled a marked expansion in seagoing capacity. We know this rather indirectly, as one subset of the Taiwanese populations, taking advantage of enhanced maritime technology, migrated not only to the Batanes and the Northern Philippines (Bellwood & Dizon 2014), but also eastwards to the Marianas (Reid 2002; Hung *et al.* 2011) and (more controversially) westward back to the Chinese mainland (Blench 2013). The archaeological evidence of first settlement in the Marianas by at least 3500 BP is strong, on the basis of convincing similarities in the ceramics (Carson *et al.* 2013). provide a comprehensive view of the evidence connecting the Northern Philippines and Micronesia. Interestingly, change in the ceramics of the Northern Philippines is rapidly reflected in the Marianas, and thus contact was continuous and intentional rather than a one-off voyage.

The observation that shared ceramic types existed in widely separated locations around the South China Sea goes back to Solheim (1964) who identified commonalities between the Kalanay pottery of the Philippines and ceramic styles found in Vietnam. Solheim attributed this to a putative trading culture, the Nusantao, to which he assigned rather early dates which have little or no foundation in archaeology. He later came to suppose this accounted for the dominance of the Austronesian languages throughout the region (Solheim 1984-5). Although we can safely say this equation is unlikely, his observations about contact remain valid and much additional evidence has now emerged. Since his era, our knowledge of the distribution of trade items has expanded dramatically, in particular underlining the importance of Taiwanese nephrite, which has been found as far away as the Isthmus of Kra in Thailand (Hung *et al.* 2007). From this we can be sure that active networks were disseminating high-value goods from at least 3500 BP.

Patterns of trade across the SCS region are only beginning to be well understood. Bellina (2014) characterises the region as part of a 'Maritime Silk Road' and Favereau & Bellina (2016) discuss the evidence for the 'Sa Huynh-Kalanay' interaction zone, which can now be fairly securely dated to (500 BC-AD 200). Indirect evidence points to still earlier contact, but exact dates for this must remain in the realm of speculation. However, the cultures that border the SCS region are extremely diverse in language and structural organisation, and part of the challenge in reconstructing the history of the sea is to understand the co-evolution which allowed these cultures to adopt a shared pattern of trade (Acri *et al.* 2017).

From around 500BC onwards, evidence for trade and regional interaction accelerates. Concrete archaeological evidence is provided by the distribution of Fengtian, 豊田, (Hualien) jade artefacts (Hung *et al.* 2007). The authors observe; 'These belong to two phases in Southeast Asian archaeology; the Neolithic in Taiwan (?3000-500 BC) and the Philippines (?2000-500 BC), and the Early Iron Age in a much broader region across the South China Sea between 500 BC and 500 AD'. Following this is the evidence from pottery types discussed by Solheim and then an abundance of evidence once bronze artefacts become traded (Hung & Bellwood 2010). Finally there is evidence for the ships themselves in the shape of finds in Indonesia and Vietnam (Manguin 2004).

Simanjuntak *et al.* (2016) has brought together the dispersed archaeological records for ISEA and finds two quite distinctive archaeological patterns, corresponding to eastern and western routes, coming out of Taiwan and Vietnam. The western route is strongly associated with cord-marked pottery and stone adzes, as well as pigs and dogs. Blench (2011) has identified this dispersal with an early expansion of Austroasiatic languages.

Map 1. South China Seas



A maritime culture depends on the technical capacity of its boats and the pulses of expansion after 4000 BP, including the growth of the Srivijaya trading empire (6th century AD), must have been powered by new techniques in shipbuilding and probably improved navigation. Although we have scattered information about ship construction, for example the famous images on Borobudur (e.g. Photo 1) and limited archaeological finds (Manguin 2004), much more will need to be done.

The first evidence for early trading polities in the maritime Southeast Asia qualifying for incipient city-states is around 400 BC (Bellina 2017). This may have been facilitated by a symbiotic connection between the Orang Laut, sea nomads (cf. Blench this volume), and the rise of the Srivijaya thalassocracy (7th -13th c. CE). The nomads were able to acquire key technologies, including iron tools and improved boatbuilding techniques which enabled them to explore remoter sea-lanes and extend the range and diversity of their commercial activities. The earliest references show that there was already a political and economic association between the Orang Laut and the Srivijaya trading polity (Chou 2010; Andaya 2008).

Photo 1. Large trading ship depicted at Borobudur (9th century)



Source: Author Photo, Borobudur

Andaya (2008: 192) also believes that mutually profitable relationships are attested in the ‘Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa’ (the Kedah Annals, a Malay literary account of the history of Kedah) between the Urak Lawoi

nomads and the leaders of the different port-entrepôts of the Kedah region (northwest part of Malaysia, bordering Thailand).

The importance of shipwrecks

The waters of the South China Seas are rich in shipwrecks and their discovery and excavation has been stimulated by the recovery of their cargoes, often porcelain and other highly saleable goods. By definition, ships are mobile and therefore shipwrecks do not necessarily represent local shipbuilding traditions. Arab, Indian and Mediterranean wrecks have all been recovered from SE Asian waters. The ninth century Phanom Surin shipwreck in Central Thailand is a remarkable example of the penetration of Mediterranean shipping to SE Asia during this period (Guy 2017). Manguin (1989, 1993a) reviews all the finds of shipwrecks to the date of the article with accompanying archaeological interpretation. More recent examples of shipwrecks in SE Asia include the Bakau wreck of Chinese origin (Flecker 2001) and the thirteenth-century Java Sea Wreck, which was an Indonesian ship carrying Chinese trade goods (Flecker 2003). The wreck of the San Diego, now in the National Museum of Anthropology, Manila is one of the most important examples of the early galleon trade. Kimura (2016) is a monograph of archaeological finds of East Asian shipping, while the most recent conspectus can be found in Heng (2018).

What ships were in use?

Drawings, engravings and stone-carvings can also provide some information about ship construction techniques. Cave paintings in Eastern Indonesia point to evidence for a maritime culture some 2000 years ago, although details of construction are obviously unclear (Lape et al. 2007). The Dong Son culture bronze drums represent large canoes, although these were probably only for inland and coastal waters. For ISEA, the most widely reproduced images are the friezes at Borobudur on the island of Java, dated to around 850 AD. These illustrate a variety of boats, from a small bamboo raft apparently at threat from whales, to an inshore trading vessel, to a large ocean-going trader, such as must have been used in the Indian Ocean trade (Photo 1). It is very striking that both larger vessels still have outriggers, despite their relatively large size, suggesting that stability was still a problem at this period.

Chronology of trade

The earliest items of trade for which we have evidence are obsidian blades which are travelling long distances as much as 30,000 years ago. By the Neolithic, we begin to find jade artefacts and then ceramics. It is plausible that many other perishable items, such as bird of paradise feathers were travelling in these trading ships, but this is difficult to trace in the archaeology. As ships became larger and trade networks were established, the variety of goods traded increased (Table 1).

Table 1. Broad chronology of evolution of regional trade

Era	Dates	Traded items
Palaeolithic	>30,000 BP	obsidian, feathers
Neolithic	3700 BP	jade, pottery
Bronze age	2200 BP	bronze drums, gongs
Iron age	2000 BP	metal tools, spices, cloth
Medieval period	1100 AD	porcelain, spices
European contact era	1550 AD	wide variety of trade goods

Key items of trade

Bronze drums

One of the most striking trade items found almost throughout the entire region is the bronze drum. These are cast bronze vessels with a flat top, usually finely decorated. They range in size from very large, up to 1.5 m in diameter, to tiny models 10 cm across. Photo 2 shows an example now displayed in the Vietnam National History Museum, Hanoi. They are not drums, and there is no evidence they were used for music when they were manufactured, although today communities in South China suspend them and strike them with sticks as accompaniment to ritual. The most recent summary of the archaeology and ethnography of bronze drums is Calò (2014). The drums, which were manufactured in workshops in Northern Việt Nam and possibly adjacent Laos from 400 BC onwards, were traded widely across the region for nearly a millennium. Fragments of these drums have been found in archaeological excavations as far as New Guinea.

Photo 2. Classic bronze drum (Vietnam)



Source: Author Photo

Photo 3. Moko

From 600 AD onwards, a radically different type, the *moko*, taller and narrower than the classic model, began to be manufactured and spread in Indonesia (Photo 3). We have no idea who the makers of these drums were and why this particular object was so widely diffused. Other products of the Dongson culture, such as the daggers and the bronze vessels, largely stayed on the mainland. These *moko* are still kept in many places in temples in Indonesia today and, particularly in the Alor-Pantar islands, where they are used in the complex systems of marriage exchange.



Gongs

The gong is a circular percussion instrument, usually made of bronze or brass, suspended and struck with a soft, padded beater. It is perhaps the single most characteristic musical instrument of the Southeast Asian region (Simbriger 1939). Gongs are divided into two main types, the deep-rimmed, bossed gong and the flat, shallow-rimmed gong, known respectively as *mang* and *luó* (鑼) in Chinese. The earliest gong, a *luó*, that has been excavated is from the Luobuwan site in Guangxi Province in southwestern China (Wu Ben 2002:111) dating from the period of the early Han Dynasty (i.e. after 202 BC). Casting of gongs was a highly specialised art, only practised in a few places and gongs were traded over great distances as prestige goods (Arsenio 2009). Peter Mundy (1919:123) described the gong in Sumatra in 1637:

another Copper Instrument called a gung, wheron they strike with a little wooden Clubbe, and although it bee butt a small Instrumentt, not much More then 1 Foote over and 1/2 Foot Deepe, yet it maketh a Deepe hollow humming sound resembling that of a great bell).

Photo 4. Gongs recovered from a shipwreck



Source: Author Photo, Puerto Princesa Museum

Photo 4 shows two trade gongs of Chinese type recovered from a shipwreck of Palawan in the south-western Philippines, and now exhibited in the Puerto Princesa Museum.

Chinese ceramics

One of the most desirable trade goods from the 12th century onwards were the sophisticated ceramics coming out of China. The Chinese had long been exporting large decorated jars to their southern neighbours, and these were much prized for production and storage of wine. Photo 5 shows a set of jars used by the Jarai people in Kon Tum province, in the central highlands of Vietnam.

Photo 5. Chinese jars used for wine production in Vietnam



However, as the Chinese maritime trade Source: Author Photo, Kon Tum Museum

Photo 6. Table setting from the wreck of the San Diego



Source: Author photo, National Museum of Anthropology, Manila network expanded after the twelfth century, a much wider variety of ceramics began to be exported around Southeast Asia, as is attested in many shipwreck finds. When these ceramics reached indigenous populations, they often found ways to customise them to fit in with local religious and iconographic traditions. Photo 7 shows a white ceramic vessel with a dramatic wooden lid made by the Batak people of Northern Sumatra.

Photo 7. Vessel with lid customised by Batak craftsmen



Source: Mariemont museum

Porcelain jars appear in trading ships, not only of the Chinese themselves, but in Indonesian and later European trading ships. One of the most spectacular wrecks of the 16th century was the Spanish galleon, the San Diego, which was discovered and retrieved from 1991 onwards in the Philippines. Preservation conditions were near ideal and thus provide rich insights into the *modus vivendi* of the South China Seas trade network in the 16th century. Photo 6 shows a table setting recovered from the wreck of the San Diego, now in the National Museum of Anthropology, Manila, which mixes Chinese porcelain with European bronze and pewter implements.

Navigation, charts and mapping

We know much less about navigational techniques in Island Southeast Asia. It is assumed however, that in the earliest phases, sea-captains made far more use of coastal trajectories, hopping between islands, to avoid open oceans. However this must have all changed in the period of the first encounters with Indian Ocean shipping. South Indian, Graeco-Roman, Sassanian and Arab merchants all made their ways to Island SE Asia, drawn by spices and other high-value goods. Suarez (2012) summarises the history of cartography in the SE Asian region, right through from Ptolemy, whose 4th century texts were still in use a millennium later. We can assume there was a transmission of skills, which increasingly used estimates of fixed distance, rather than the far more indeterminate measures which were of necessity employed in the Pacific. By the ninth century, when an expedition of a ‘thousand ships’ was sent from Sumatra to raid the coast of East Africa, mariners must have been very confident in their estimates of time and distance (Blench 2010).

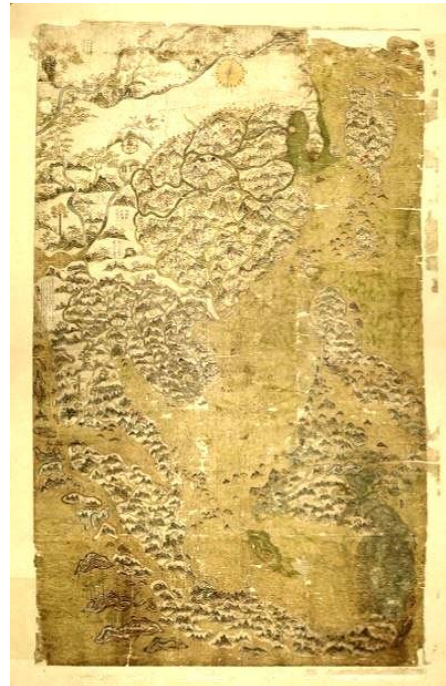
Cartography in China probably began in the early centuries BC, with the first unambiguous reference in 227 BC. However, maps remained focused on the mainland, and only the extensive voyages of Zheng He, 鄭和 (1371-1433/1435) produced significant maritime maps. The most striking of these is the Mao Kun map, *Zhèng Hé hángǎi tú*, 鄭和航海圖 (ca. 1423) which summarises the voyages of Zheng He in Island Southeast/Asia and the Indian Ocean (Mills 1970; Guangqi 1992).

From this date onwards, Chinese cartographic skills grow rapidly. One of the most remarkable testaments of this is the Selden Map (Figure 1) apparently drawn for a rich merchant around 1620 AD, and now in the Bodleian Library, Oxford. Conservation in 2008 revealed that this is the first known Chinese map to be drawn using systematic geometric techniques. It uses voyage data from a magnetic compass and distances calculated from the number of watches. Moreover, since it is the most accurate map of SE Asia to be drawn until two centuries later, it is considered likely it was prepared in SE Asia rather than on mainland China.

The Boxer manuscript, a sixteenth century sailor’s guide

One of the most remarkable documents to provide insights into the early Spanish navigation in the South China Seas is the Boxer ms. This appeared for sale in a London dealer in 1947 and when examined, proved to be a compilation of navigational guides and political and ethnographic commentary covering all the known islands and states of the Southeast Asian region. There is no clear evidence as to the rationale for its preparation but is presumed to have been intended for submission to the Spanish monarch, Felipe II. Since at this period many naval documents were kept secret for commercial reasons, its contents must have been considered of great value. The text covers the customs and culture of local tribal populations, as well as more fantastical accounts of Chinese birds and animals. In addition to the text, the pages are highly illustrated, with ethnographic paintings of local populations, in many cases, the first examples we have of this. Photo 8, for

Figure 1. The Selden map of China and SE Asia, ca. 1620



Source: Bodleian Library

Photo 8. Tamsuy aboriginal couple, Taiwan



Source: Creative Commons

example, shows the Tamsuy indigenes of Taiwan, and their remarkable custom of the wife following the husband, displaying the head of his enemy.

Conclusions

This chapter can provide only a very brief introduction to the rich traditions of commerce in the South China Seas (Acri et al. 2017). Broadly speaking, there is evidence for maritime interaction from a very early period, as valuable items such as obsidian are moved around the region, but evidence for the nature of maritime technologies at this period is virtually absent. Around 4000 BP, a technological revolution allowed for larger vessels and longer trajectories, stimulating a very rapid movement of both people and ideas, trade goods and iconographic elements. Southeast Asian shipbuilding techniques developed very rapidly after 0 AD and larger trading vessels led to the development of Srivijaya, the first great trading empire. Interaction with Indian and Chinese shipping expanded the trade networks still further and by the time European intruders ventured into these waters, they encountered a fully fledged maritime culture.