CHAPTER 1
Commodity and Market: Structure of the Long-distance Trade in the East Asian Seas and Beyond Prior to the Early Nineteenth Century

Introduction: Studies on Maritime History
Maritime East Asia as a geographical concept has been gaining acceptance among scholars in recent years.¹ It covers the two maritime spaces of Northeast and Southeast Asia. Examining Fernand Braudel’s depiction of the Mediterranean Sea, one finds the same situation that enables the concept to be borrowed: the area of the East Asian Seas encircled by their surrounding lands “is not even a single sea, it is a complex of seas; and these seas are broken up by islands, interrupted by peninsulas, ringed by intricate coastlines.”² For centuries, shipping trade had facilitated connections between the northern and southern parts of the East Asian Seas. Unquestionably the littoral populations around the connected seas

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were the direct beneficiaries of the common economic activity. In fact, in one way or another the producers of trade goods, traders and consumers in the hinterlands and seafarers were all interrelated in the trade. In this sense, the boundary of maritime East Asia consists of both the seas and lands of the two regions that form a coherent geographical entity.

Studies on maritime regions often refer to the ideas of both Fernand Braudel (1902‒85) and K.N. Chaudhuri, who published their respective works in 1949 and 1985. “The idea that the study of a civilization might be named after a sea originated with Fernand Braudel”, as his admirer K.N. Chaudhuri remarks in the very first sentence of his own book. Writing in the preface to his English edition in 1972, Braudel highlights one salient feature of the sea that embraces both plurality and unity when he says that, “[t]he Mediterranean speaks with many voices; it is a sum of individual histories”. Despite the different cultures and religions, the Mediterranean regions embodied their unity and coherence because “the Turkish Mediterranean lived and breathed with the same rhythms as the Christian, [so] that the whole sea shared a common destiny”. He believes that, “history cannot be really understood unless it is extended to cover the entire human past”. One must take the journey “through the long expanse of history”. In other words, such a history “could only be written in the longue durée and from a long perspective”. The long view allows one to discover that, “all change is slow, a history of constant repetition, ever-recurring cycles”. The Mediterranean must be viewed in its broadest geographical context because “Mediterranean history is an aspect of world history”. Among other points, Braudel emphasizes the importance of exchange, especially long-distance exchange: “It is imbalance that creates exchange and therefore leads to progress.”

The second of these two influential works on maritime civilization is the book by K.N. Chaudhuri. The author was fascinated by Braudel’s

7. Ibid.
11. Ibid., pp. xix–xx.
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triple analytical foundations, namely: time, space and structure.\textsuperscript{12} He proposes to explore “the unity and diversity of Indian Ocean civilizations through the study of long-distance trade”.\textsuperscript{13} Studying the topic has enabled him to discover that, “the sea which washed the desolate beaches of Suez or the marshes around Basra provided an unbroken means of travel all the way to China”, and that the myriads of traders, commodities and markets along the way are the best manifestation of diversity and unity.\textsuperscript{14}

A large number of the studies on the various aspects of the subject have been produced on maritime trade in East Asian waters. To build on this large body of scholarship, the present survey attempts to track the long historical development of maritime trade in the East Asian Seas up to the early decades of the nineteenth century when the European powers began to attain dominance. Attempts will also be made to clarify a few contending interpretations in the different writings. The discussion revolves around the structure of long-distance trade as seen in the movement of commodities from their areas of production to their end-markets. Without doubt, commodity and market are two propelling engines of long-distance trade. However, the movement of commodities from the area in which they are produced to their end-market does not necessarily imply a process of direct shipment. Often, the commodities were sent through transfer stations and transshipment centers. When describing the trade movement from the Red Sea to South China in early times, Paul Wheatley observes, “Possibly this would be better described as a series of trade-routes, for during this period no one group of merchants operated throughout its length and no one category of merchandise travelled from end to end.”\textsuperscript{15} His depiction of long-distance maritime trade holds good for the developments over many centuries thereafter. In other words, the merchandise was brought to the transfer station to be transshipped to the designated market. This was a salient feature of the structure of long-distance trade. This structure is considered to mean the different composite segments within which the trade is operated. In other words, long-distance trade contains several layers in its structure, namely: (1) the local layer of activity of gathering merchandise from its production-area, often by small traders

\textsuperscript{12} Chaudhuri, \textit{Trade and Civilization in the Indian Ocean}, p. 2.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., pp. 2–3, 6.
or peddlers; (2) the regional layer of transferring the merchandise to the transshipment center or entrepôt; and (3) the linkages between the transshipment center and the end-market that were operated by other groups of maritime merchants and inland traders. In short, the whole process involved a multitude of trading groups and complex operations.  

The Asian Waters by the Fifteenth Century: The Nanhai Factor

For many centuries, the maritime trade of East Asia thrived, teeming with activity carried out on a sustainable level. The southern segment of maritime East Asia, known as the Nanhai (the South Seas, or Maritime Southeast Asia) in the ancient Chinese texts, played an indispensable role in the long-distance trade in Asian waters throughout the period in question. For some 1,500 years, this trade was a considerable factor in contributing to the successive emergence in the Nanhai of various maritime and regional powers, characterized by their ability to exert dominance over large areas within their sphere of influence and control their strategic maritime trade routes.

Catalyst of Long-distance Trade: Commodities and Markets

As Anthony Reid observes, “Southeast Asia’s products found their way into world markets very early.” Among its major exports were cloves, nutmeg, pepper, aromatic woods, gums, resins, products of forest-dwelling fauna and the harvest of the sea. From China came handicraft products, including silks, ceramics and metal-ware. In K.N. Chaudhuri’s words, the medieval trade of Asia was really founded by the demand for

18. Ibid., pp. 112–3.
the four great products of East Asia, namely, sandalwood, black pepper, silk and porcelain.19

The most important regional market for Nanhai products was the populous country of China that had augmented its demand in the fifth and sixth centuries, a period which saw the growth of Buddhism. This growth resulted in a shift in market demand from supplying the needs of the imperial court and high officials to meeting the demand of worshippers in other urban centers outside the imperial capital. Consequently, there was a surge in the import of such “holy accoutrements” as incense (gaharu wood), ivory and sandalwood stupas and statues, and glass vessels used in temple rituals, as described by Wang Gungwu.20 By the Tang (AD 618–907) and Song (AD 960–1279) dynasties, the Chinese were kept busy acquiring a great variety of the Nanhai products to meet the demand from a population of diverse social levels. As Paul Wheatley observes, “An inventory compiled in 1141 listed no less than 339 items of import, of which the most important both by value and volume were aromatics and drugs.”21 Many traders from South and West Asia also came to procure these products.

Prior to the sixteenth century, pepper was one of the most valued commodities imported into China. In fact, the country had become the largest market for pepper in the world not later than the Yuan period (AD 1271–1368). Observations made by Marco Polo are most revealing: “[F]or one shipload of pepper that goes to Alexandria or elsewhere, destined for Christendom, there come a hundred such, aye and more too, to this haven of Zayton (that is, Quanzhou in Fujian on the southeast coast of China), for it is one of the two greatest havens in the world of commerce.”22 On account of the large quantity imported, pepper had entered into the daily life of the general populace. Writing in the period AD 1512–15, Tomé Pires (AD 1468–1540) observed that the chief merchandise being exported to China from Malacca (Melaka) was pepper. “[T]hey will buy ten junk-loads a year.”23 Similarly, T’ien Ju-k’ang

23. The Suma Oriental of Tomé Pires: An Account of the East, From the Red Sea to Japan, Written in Malacca and India in 1512–1515, trans. Armando Cortesão
says, “In the 15th and 16th centuries, the average annual total amount
of pepper purchased by the Chinese has been estimated at 50,000 bags,
or two million catties; that is, almost equivalent to the total amount of
pepper imported into Europe from the East in the first half of the 16th
century.” 24 Not surprisingly, the bulk of the pepper produced in Sumatra
and West Java flowed into the huge market of Ming China (AD 1368–1644).

Among other Nanhai merchandise exported in large quantities to
China from Malacca were cloves, incense, elephant tusks, tin, Borneo
camphor, red beads, white sandalwood and the black wood that grows in
Singapore, as reported by Tomé Pires. 25

A whole array of trade goods was shipped from China including
such items as raw white silk, satins, damask, gauze, seed-pearls, musk,
alum, saltpeter, sulfur, copper, iron, copper vases, cast-iron kettles,
bowls, basins, boxes, fans, needles, brocades, ceramics, sugar and salt.
Tomé Pires considered salt to be one of the great items of merchandise
produced by China. Some 1,500 local junks would come to buy the item
after it had arrived in the port and, in turn, they would distribute it in the
surrounding region.26 Pires’ description of the junks arriving from China
tallies well with the general pattern of their cargoes in the following
centuries, goods that both catered to the high-end market and supplied
the general populace with their daily necessities.

**Ships, Navigators and Trade**

The earliest record of long-distance seaborne trade between China and
India via Southeast Asia comes from a Chinese dynastic history some
2,000 years ago. The passage is cited in full below:

> From the barriers of Rinan, Xuwen and Hepu, it is about five
> months’ voyage to the country of Duyuan. It is about a further
> four months’ voyage to the country of Yilumo, and yet another
> twenty odd days’ voyage to the country of Shenli. It is rather

(London: The Hakluyt Society, 1944), Vol. 1, p. 123. Tomé Pires arrived in
Guangzhou (Canton) in 1517 as the first Portuguese envoy to China.

Pepper was the most valuable export to Europe from the mid-sixteenth century
until the 1820s. See *Southeast Asian Exports since the 14th Century: Cloves,
Pepper, Coffee, and Sugar*, comp. David Bulbeck, et al. (KITLV Press, Research
School of Pacific Studies, ANU and Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1998),
p. 5.


more than ten days’ journey on foot to the country of Fukandulu, whence it is something over two months’ voyage to the country of Huangzhi. The customs of the people are rather similar to those of Zhuyai (Hainan). These countries are extensive, their populations numerous and their many products unfamiliar (rare and precious objects). Ever since the time of Emperor Wu [141–87 BC], they have offered tribute. There are chief-interpreters attached to the Yellow Gate who, together with volunteers, put out to sea to buy lustrous pearls, glass, rare stones and strange products in exchange for gold and various silks. All the countries they visit provide them with goods and companionship. The trading ships of the barbarians transfer [the Chinese] to their destination. It is a profitable business [for the barbarians], who also loot and kill. Moreover, there are the hazards of wind and wave to be encountered and [the possibility of] death by drowning. If these are avoided the outward and return voyages take several years. The large pearls are at the most two Chinese inches in circumference. During the Yuanshi period of Emperor Ping (AD 1–5), Wang Mang, [in his capacity] as counsellor, and desirous of manifesting the brilliance of his majestic virtue, sent rich gifts to the King of Huangzhi, at the same time commanding him to dispatch an embassy to present a live rhinoceros [as tribute]. From Huangzhi it is about eight months’ voyage to Pizong. It is about a further eight months’ voyage to the borders of Rianan and Xianglin. In the south of Huangzhi is the country of Sibucheng. From there the envoy and interpreters embarked on their return journey.27

The text reveals several interesting pieces of information about the trade routes, ships and navigators, the character of the trade and the navigational environment of the Straits of Malacca. No later than the first century BC, Han China (206 BC–AD 220) and Huangzhi (Kanci; Conjeveram), a kingdom located on the southeastern coast of India, had established contacts. They exchanged luxury goods with each other, a trade that clearly suited the taste of the court and the high-end market. The ship(s)

embarking from China departed from the west coast of Guangdong, sailing south along the coast, eventually entering into the Gulf of Siam. The party landed at the narrow neck of the northern Malay Peninsula, or at the present-day Kra Isthmus in southern Thailand. Crossing the Isthmian track to the west coast overland, the travelers continued their journey by sea again to reach Huangzhi. The whole journey required “several transfers” on “barbarian ships” to reach the destination. It recounts that the voyage did not follow a direct sea route from China to India. Should this indeed have been the case, the several missions from Huangzhi during the first century BC were probably serviced by transfers to reach China. On the return voyage, however, the Chinese envoy departed from a country south of Huangzhi, possibly Ceylon, and traveled all the way by the sea route, most likely via the Straits of Malacca. The journey was extremely hazardous because they would often encounter pirates who looted and killed. The account reveals that there was traffic frequent enough to attract the presence of piracy in the Straits. Other hazards that travelers often encountered were storms and shipwrecks.

Turning to the ship(s) the Chinese party boarded on the first leg of the voyage, Wang Gungwu believes that the travelers embarked on Chinese ship(s) sailed by the Sinicized Yue people from the southeast coast of China. Paul Wheatley also says that, “Yue sailors were almost certainly the carriers of both merchandise and merchants” in the Gulf of Tonkin and on the South China coast.28 Their suggestions are supported by archeological finds that point to the navigational skills of the Yue people as early as the Neolithic Age.29

The most revealing part of the text is the mention of “several transfers” on board “barbarian trading ships”, a statement that clearly indicates that these “barbarians” were participants in pursuing trade along the sea route. But who were these “barbarian” carriers? By then the Yue on China’s southeast coast had already been incorporated into the Chinese empire and would therefore no longer be considered foreign people. In the first two centuries AD, the rise of Funan in the lower Mekong Valley and Champa on the southeast coast of present-day Vietnam might offer a clue to the answer. The Khmers are believed to have founded Funan and the Chams were the founders of Champa. The two kingdoms were soon to become maritime powers in the Gulf

of Siam and on the southeast coast of present-day Vietnam respectively. We can reasonably assume that the Funanese and the Chams had been skillful seamen capable of undertaking transfers even before the founding of their kingdoms. Probably, Indian vessels were chartered for the last stretch of the voyage from the west coast of the Isthmus to the Indian coast. As mentioned by G. Cœdès, around the beginning of the Christian era, early Indian settlements founded by Indian traders and immigrants increased in the region around the northern Malay Peninsula and the Gulf of Siam. The text of the *Han shu* cited above tells about arrivals of Indian traders in China’s southern port “to offer tribute” during the reign of Emperor Wu.

In the third century AD, during the reign of Sun Quan two envoys, Zhu Ying and Kang Tai, from the state of Wu were sent to reconnoiter the Nanhai countries including Funan. Kang Tai recorded that Funan was capable of building large vessels that could carry a hundred passengers. By this time, Funan’s power had extended to the Isthmian region and hence it controlled the luxury trade between China and India. Another Chinese source records that, shortly before AD 484, the king of Funan, Jayavarman, sent a trading ship to Guangzhou. On the return voyage, an Indian monk, Nagasena, took passage on board the trading ship on his first leg of the long journey home. This information offers another piece of evidence suggesting that Funan was a major player in maritime trade and shipping between the Gulf of Siam and South China. However, the attack on it by its northern neighbor, Zhenla, in the following century led to its decline and subsequent collapse.

The zenith of Funan as a regional sea power and its subsequent decline around the end of the fifth and sixth centuries coincided with the transition from what Paul Wheatley terms “the Isthmian Age” to the rise of Java and Sumatra as trading, shipping and transshipment centers. Goods from the Indian Ocean for re-export to the China market would be shipped all the way by sea to the new transshipment centers via the Straits of Malacca. Simultaneously, the new era saw an increasing demand in the trade to China for commodities produced in the Malay-Indonesian Archipelago.

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Superb sailors, the coastal Malay-Indonesians became the major players in shipping and carrying trade not later than the fourth or fifth century. In AD 399, a Chinese Buddhist pilgrim, Fa Xian, traveled to India by way of Central Asia. In AD 413–14 he returned from Ceylon by sea. As recorded in his account, he sailed on board a large merchant-vessel carrying over 200 passengers. After just two days at sea, they ran into a severe gale that caused the vessel to spring a leak. The storm blew unabated for 13 days and nights and greatly terrified the passengers on board. Throughout the course of the voyage, they were also seldom able to cast aside the fear of encountering pirates who frequented the sea route. These sea bandits not only looted passengers’ property but also did not hesitate to kill them. The ship at last arrived in Yepoti (Java) some 90 days later. Fa Xian sojourned there for five months before he boarded another large merchant-vessel, also carrying over 200 passengers. The vessel set course for Guangzhou. Again, the vessel encountered a violent gale. Fa Xian and the other traveling merchants and traders felt totally helpless and could only pray for their safety.

Again, the source does not tell about the ownership of the two vessels. It is quite probable that they were local ships hailing from India/Ceylon and Java respectively. O.W. Wolters suggests that the voyage across the South China Sea was first undertaken by merchant ships sometime between the third and the fifth centuries, although one still cannot be certain who the ship-owners were. Be that as it may, the traffic between Java and South China had apparently become regularly available by the early fifth century. Wolters provides evidence taken from Gunavarman’s account that could be indicative of the regular shipping. Gunavarman was a prince from Kashmir and a highly respected pilgrim. He traveled from Java to China a few years after Fa Xian’s return journey. Having heard about Gunavarman’s impending visit, the Liu Song emperor Wendi (AD 424–53) “had ordered a ship to fetch the illustrious Buddhist, but before its arrival Gunavarman ... [had] boarded another merchant ship” from Java. Both the accounts of Fa Xian and Gunavarman indicate

35. Although Fa Xian did not tell about the country of origin of the ship, the commentator of Fa Xian’s account says it was a Ceylonese vessel. See Fa Xian zhuan jiaozhu [Annotated travel account by Fa Xian], annotated by Zhang Xun (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2008), p. 142; and Kuwabara Jitsuzo, Pu Shougeng kao [A study of Pu Shougeng], translator and annotator, Chen Songqing (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1954), p. 3.

36. For the place name, see Hsu Yun-t’s’iao, Nanyang shi, Vol. 1, p. 166.

“an unbroken voyage across the South China Sea”. Still the sources do not allow one to say for sure who actually sailed them or where the ships originated from. Could the one sent from Guangzhou by Wendi have been a Chinese vessel? By this time, there is no doubt that the Straits of Malacca had replaced the Isthmus for voyages from India to Java. It was also in this period that Guangzhou overtook Xuwen and Hepu as the principal port for the long-haul voyages across the South China Sea.

Regarding ships and those who sailed them, one’s attention is drawn to two oft-used terms in Chinese sources, namely: “Kunlun” and “Kunlun bo” [meaning ships]. Wolters argues that Kunlun was a generic term used by the Chinese to designate the prominent maritime peoples of Southeast Asia, but “by the seventh century the term had settled on the Indonesians”. In the same century, Kunlun (Indonesian) merchants “were coming every year in their ships to Canton (Guangzhou)”.39

Turning to the term “Kunlun bo”, Pierre-Yves Manguin says it means Southeast Asian ships arriving in southern China. The large ones were more than 50 meters in length and they carried about 600–700 passengers.40 He also cites an eighth-century Chinese text that says, “The bo are sea-going ships.... They are fast and can transport more than 1,000 men, apart from cargo. Many of those who formed the crews and technicians of these ships are Kunlun [Southeast Asian] people.”41

Going by the sources, it could be concluded that the Southeast Asian navigators played the undisputed leading role in the Nanhai shipping during the time period discussed above. A Chinese professor from Xiamen University, the late Han Zhenhua, shared a similar view, stating that the ships plying in the Nanhai in the early seventh century all belonged to “fan shang” (foreign merchants).42

The importance of Malay-Indonesian shipping was boosted by the rise of Srivijaya, centered in Palembang, Sumatra, in the seventh century.

41. Ibid.; see also Wang Gungwu, “The Nanhai Trade”, p. 60.
42. Han Zhenhua 韓振華, “Tangdai nanhai maoyi zhi” 唐代南海貿易誌 [A record of the Nanhai trade during the Tang Dynasty], in *Hanghai jiaotong maoyi yanjiu 航海交通貿易研究* [Studies on shipping and trade] (Centre of Asian Studies, University of Hong Kong, 2002), p. 340.
especially of the Straits of Malacca and the Isthmus in the northern Malay Peninsula, as well as its role as “a transshipment centre both for Southeast Asian products and those from the Middle East, India and China” had propelled it to the foremost commercial and maritime power. The Malay navigational enterprise that had begun some three centuries earlier reached new heights during the Srivijaya era, when its ships frequented Guangzhou as well as the southeastern coast of India. As a center of Mahayanist scholarship, it attracted visits from Buddhist monks from China.

Another important piece of information is provided by the eminent Tang Dynasty monk, Yi Jing. In AD 671, Yi Jing arrived in Guangzhou to arrange with a Persian ship-owner for his seaborne journey to Srivijaya, where he remained for six months studying Sanskrit grammar. From there he boarded the Great King Maharaja’s ship to Moluoyu (Melayu/Jambi) and Jiecha (Gelu, present-day Kedah) in transit to India. Returning in AD 685, Yi Jing made a stopover in Jiecha to await the winter, awaiting the arrival of a Srivijayan ship to carry him to Moluoyu. He remained in Moluoyu for a few months until mid-summer, when the arrival of the southwest monsoon facilitated his journey northward to Guangzhou.

During the early Tang Dynasty, several groups of West and South Asian merchants were active in the East Asian Seas. According to Han Zhenhua, who cites a contemporary source from the late seventh century, Persian ships from the “West Sea” (Xihai) used to sail to the Nanhai. They would also extend their voyage and arrive in Guangzhou in great numbers. Their presence allowed travelers the convenience of being able to schedule their voyages to the Nanhai with the Persian ship-owners in the port of Guangzhou. Besides Persian ships, Arab and Indian vessels were among other foreign ships entering Guangzhou Harbor. Paul Wheatley mentions, “Arab trading ships first began to penetrate the seas of South-
East Asia early in the seventh century." It would be quite natural for
them to have continued their voyages to Guangzhou. The presence of
Arab merchants in large numbers in that city by the ninth century offers
strong support for the claim. Other evidence has been provided by the
salvage of a well-preserved ninth-century sunken ship off the Indonesian
island of Belitung that testifies to the presence of Arab shipping between
the western Indian Ocean and China. Its cargo consisted almost entirely
of Chinese ceramics.

The Asian Waters
Traders from the Indian Ocean in the Early Centuries

The seasonal change in the direction of the trade winds facilitated
travel between the sub-regions of maritime East Asia. There was also
an eastward movement of Indian ships and travelers to Southeast Asia
across the Bay of Bengal in the early centuries. One might reasonably
assume that the cultural influence of the high-caste Indians in Southeast
Asia enhanced the Indian trading position in the region. G. Coedès says,
"an international network of trading relationships had indeed existed
since early times", in which the Indians played a part. Merchandise from
India was shipped to the Isthmus from the Indian ports and unloaded
on the west coast to be transported overland and then re-shipped to the
ports of the Gulf of Siam, or farther to South China, as G. Coedès adds.

As mentioned earlier, one important development in the seventh
and eighth centuries was the presence of the Persians and Arabs in the
East Asian Seas. They contributed to the building of direct trade links
between the Indian Ocean and China.

47. Michael Flecker, "A Ninth-century AD Arab or Indian Shipwreck in Indonesia:
First Evidence for Direct Trade with China" (Singapore, 2001). The sunken ship
later proved to be of Arab style.
49. Ibid., p. 53.
50. Wang Gungwu, "The Nanhai Trade", p. 75. J.C. van Leur is of the view that "Arab
and Persian shipping appears as a rule not to have made its way further than
the ports of western and southern India. Arab and Persian traders, however,
followed the trade route all the way to the Chinese ports. There seems to have
been an Arab trading colony established in Canton (Guangzhou) as early as the
fourth century. Settlements of Arabs were mentioned again in 618 and 626."
See J.C. van Leur, Indonesian Trade and Society (The Hague: W. van Hoeve Ltd.,
In Chinese historical texts, “Persian” cargoes had become known to the Chinese in the fourth century, but “no records of any direct contact by sea between Persia and China” have survived, as Wang Gungwu points out.\(^51\) O.W. Wolters also believes that “the shippers of ‘Persian’ cargoes” were for the most part Indonesians. Moreover, “Persian cargoes” indicated a variety of commodities shipped or re-exported from different parts of West and South Asia as well as the Nanhai.\(^52\) Even in the seventh century and later, “Persian” cargoes meant goods shipped to China by the Persians, rather than the Persian products. Nevertheless, it should be borne in mind that Persia under the rule of the Parthian Empire (247 BC–AD 224) and the succeeding Sassanid Empire (AD 224–651), that is before the rise of Islam, exercised firm control of the silk trade route between the Roman Empire and China. Moreover, the sea ports of the Persian Gulf that were under Persian rule should also have played an important role in maritime trade from the Mediterranean to the west coast of India prior to their arrival in southern China no later than the seventh century.

The founding of the Abbasid Caliphate in 750 and the removal of the capital from Damascus to Baghdad ushered in the Islamic Golden Age. By then the Arabs had become one of the most conspicuous foreign merchant groups in Guangzhou.

**The Emporium of Malacca**

Exploiting the opportunities arising from Zheng Hê’s seven sea expeditions between 1403 and 1433, the newly founded kingdom of Malacca successfully withstood the Siamese threat from the north. Its acceptance of Islam allowed Malacca even more freedom to connect itself to the wealthy and influential Muslim traders from the Indian Ocean. Equally important was its strategic location in the Straits of Malacca on the long sea route from the Red Sea to the East Asian Seas. Therefore it played an intermediary role between Insulindia (maritime Southeast Asia), India and China. This unique position facilitated its rise as another maritime and commercial power founded by the Malay people after the collapse of Srivijaya.

Malacca soon developed into a prosperous emporium that was the meeting-point for the Muslim traders from India and West Asia, those from the Malay Archipelago as well as the sea merchants from China.

\(^{51}\) Ibid., p. 60.

Tomé Pires gives a long list of places from where the traders originated as follows:

[There came] Moors from Cairo, Mecca, Aden, Abyssinians, men of Kilwa, Malindi, Ormuz, Parsees, Rumes, Turks, Turkomans, Christian Armenians, Gujaratees, men of Chaul, Dabhol, Goa, of the kingdom of Deccan, Malabars and Klings, merchants from Orissa, Ceylon, Bengal, Arakan, Pegu, Siamese, men of Kedah, Malays, men of Pahang, Pattani, Cambodia, Champa, Cochin China, Chinese, Lagues, men of Brunei, Lucees, men of Tamjompura, Laue, Banka, Linga (they have a thousand other islands), Moluccas, Banda, Bima, Timor, Madura, Java, Sunda, Palembang, Jambi, Tongkal, Indragiri, Kappatta, Menangkabau, Siak, Arcata (Arcat?), Aru, Bata, country of the Tomjano, Pase, Pedir, Maldives.53

Myriads of goods were brought by them from the Mediterranean, West Asia and India. For example, four ships came every year from Gujarat, bringing 30 different kinds of cloths. On the return voyage, they shipped back merchandise that included cloves, mace, nutmeg, sandalwood, seed-pearls, porcelain, silk, tin, damask and so forth.54

The Gujaratis were among the prominent groups of merchants of the Indian Ocean in the fifteenth-century Malay-Indonesian Archipelago. They arrived with their own shipping and capital. Their wealth allowed them to enjoy great political influence in Malacca.55 Hindu traders were another group from India who played a role as go-betweens in the trade to the Middle East, Southeast and Northeast Asia. Products from the Malabar Coast included black pepper, cardamom, cinnamon, sandalwood, and cotton textiles. Imports of spices, aromatics and Chinese goods would also be re-exported to West Asia in exchange for incense, pearls, precious stones, ivory and other products.56 In K.N. Chaudhuri’s words, “the merchants of Gujarat, Malabar, Coromandel and Bengal looked to the east, to the Indonesian archipelago, for direct voyages organized with their own shipping and capital”.57 The Armenians were probably the most ancient traders in the world and were also active in sixteenth-century Malacca. They continued to be much appreciated in the trading world in the following centuries. Their presence was seen in the Mediterranean,
all the major textile-weaving towns of India, in the Malay-Indonesian Archipelago and Guangzhou. 58

Malacca probably had a population of between 120,000 and 200,000 as estimated by Luis Filipe F.R. Thomaz. 59 Thomaz describes the Malacca sultan as the chief merchant of his state who “benefited from the profits of commercial activity through levying customs duty”. 60 In Malacca there were four Shahbandars, harbor masters, who were appointed from among the merchants in town: one for the Gujaratis who were the most important group of all; one for the Bengalis, Pegus and Pase; one for the Javanese, Moluccans, Banda and Palembang; and one for the Chinese. They were empowered to receive the captains of the junks from their countries, present them to the Bendahara, the highest official in charge of all civil and criminal affairs, and allot to them warehouses and dispatch their merchandise. 61

Although Tomé Pires’ arrival in Malacca coincided with the years immediately after the Portuguese occupation of the port city in 1511, his account of the last days of the Malacca kingdom testifies to a commercially active, prosperous sea port. It was not to last. The port soon lost its glory in the sixteenth century under the governance of the Portuguese. Its decline was the outcome of the Portuguese monopolistic approach to commerce and their hostility towards Muslim traders.

Chinese Outbound Shipping and Long-distance Trade

About 2,000 years ago, seamen from China’s southeast coast had been among the participants in the coasting trade, which probably reached as far as the Gulf of Siam. From the seventh century and thereafter, Chinese participation in longer-haul voyages emerged slowly. Throughout the whole period, China had been the main consumer market for the goods imported or transshipped from the South Seas. Despite dynastic changes, from the seventh to the fifteenth centuries, in commercial terms the country continued to be a large and wealthy state. It had developed into “an area of economic high pressure, attracting to itself overland caravans, tributary missions from foreign princes, and large ocean-going vessels

58. Ibid., p. 105.
60. Ibid., p. 26.
engaged in a two-way traffic”, as K.N. Chaudhuri puts it.62 The sea route from the Red Sea, passing by way of the Arabian Sea, the Persian Gulf, Malabar, Ceylon, the Gulf of Bengal and the Straits of Malacca to the South China Sea and ending up in South China witnessed the busiest shipping and carrying trade in the world.

When did the Chinese begin to participate in the outbound long-distance shipping trade? Existing scholarship gives even a casual reader the impression that, despite all the hard work done by researchers, our current knowledge about this topic remains insubstantial and what information there is is somewhat contradictory. The following three illuminating observations, for example, testify to the dilemma. Although one of the authors is more certain about the presence of Chinese long-haul shipping, the other two differ to a certain extent. On the basis of an Arab source cited by another researcher, Ch’en Kuo-tung argues that Chinese ships were in firm control of the long-distance shipping stretching from Guangzhou to Kalah from the ninth century.63 Kalah was located at the northern end of the Straits of Malacca and was a transfer station for ships sailing between India and the Malay-Indonesian Archipelago. In support of his view, the author cites a late twelfth-century Song text that mentions visits to Koulam (Gulin) on the southwest coast of India by Tang trading junks (Tang bo). From there the junk traders transferred to smaller vessels bound for Dashi (Arabia). The text is silent about the home port of the smaller vessels sailing between Koulam and Dashi.64 In fact, a much earlier contemporary eyewitness-account written around AD 851 by an Arab traveler unmistakably testifies to the arrival of Chinese ships in Koulam. For this reason, Ch’en’s view can be placed on a firm basis.65

A different suggestion is made by Chang Pin-tsun, examining the rise of South Fujianese sea merchants in the Nanhai trade. Chang believes

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63. Ch’en Kuo-tung, *Dongya haiyu yiqian nian*, p. 58. The phrase “主导” (leading) is used to depict the dominant Chinese position.
64. Ibid., pp. 59–60, quoting Zhou Qufei 周去非, Lingwai daida 驚外代答 [Answering the queries from beyond the mountain range], annotated by Yang Wuquan 杨武泉 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1999), section on “Gulin guo” 靈國 (State of Gulin), pp. 90–1.
65. See Zhongguo Indu jianwen lu 中國印度見聞錄 [An eye-witness account of China and India], translated and annotated by Mu Gen Lai 穆根來, Wen Jiang 汶江 and Huang Zhuohan 黄倬汉, from a French edition (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1983), Chapter 1, p. 8. Clearly, this Arab author was writing about China and India from his Arab perspective. It is unlikely he could have mistaken his countrymen for Chinese.
that Muslim traders, primarily Arabs and Persians, “controlled a trading network in the South Seas from 700 to 1200”. The South Fujianese benefited from the commercial knowledge and navigational expertise of the Arabs and Persians. By dint of long contact and collaboration with them, the Chinese gradually became acquainted with the maritime world. By the late tenth century, the Fujianese were to be found on board Muslim ships on their way to trade in the Nanhai. In other words, they were “essentially apprentices under their Muslim masters”. Only in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, some Chinese “sailed their own junks”, asserts Chang.66

The third author sets the date of Chinese engagement in the long-distance shipping even later. Discussing the indigenization process of foreign merchants in China, Cheng Wing Sheung argues that “fan bo” (foreign ships) controlled and managed overseas trade in the Tang period and before. The “fan shang” (foreign merchants) continued to dominate the long-distance trade during Song times. Their position in China’s ocean-going trade still carried weight during the Yuan Dynasty, Cheng claims.67 Therefore, Cheng believes that the “Tang bo” and “zhongguo bo shang” (literally “the ship merchants of China”) mentioned in the Song text should be understood as “ships originating from Tang China” and “sea-going merchants from China”, rather than Chinese ships and Chinese sea merchants.68

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Indeed, the issues about when the Chinese began to participate in the outbound long-distance shipping trade and whether the “Tang bo” mentioned in Chinese texts were owned by the Chinese still remains a bit murky. The limited sources available have presented researchers with a puzzle. Often they have to make deductions from circumstantial evidence.

To tackle these questions, it is proposed to put the study into perspective by taking another look into the long development of East Asian long-distance shipping trade. First and foremost, it is undeniable that the Chinese involvement in maritime trade in one way or another was characterized by a continuous process that commenced over 2,000 years ago during which their sailors were among the earliest goods-carriers along China’s southeast coast and the northern stretch of the Vietnam coast. By the third century, a mission sent to the Nanhai from the Kingdom of Wu reached as far as the Gulf of Siam and Chinese ship(s) could have been used for this purpose. Although no information exists about Chinese involvement in the regular long-haul shipping between Java and Guangzhou from the fifth century, the ship that the Liu Song Emperor intended to send to fetch Gunavarman from Java was probably a Chinese ship. Let us make a bold assumption that the ship was likely to have been sailed by both Chinese and Nanhai seamen. Even if this proposition is true, one has to concede that Chinese shipping in the Nanhai would have been a rare occurrence. At this point in time, however, it is good to recall that quite a number of Chinese Buddhist pilgrims in transit to India arrived in Java on board foreign ships. This seems a sure sign that undertaking a journey overseas from China had become less uncommon. Very likely Chinese traders and some migrants would have been among the travelers venturing abroad. During the Tang period, evidence shows that foreign vessels were numerous in the port of Guangzhou, making them the most convenient transport on which the Chinese could travel to the Nanhai or the Indian Ocean. There were also sizeable Persian and Arab merchant communities in the coastal cities during this time. Gradually a number of the sojourners chose to take up

69. In publications in China, scholars generally believe that, right from the mission to India at the beginning of the Christian era, Chinese and their ships had been sailing along the “maritime silk road”. See for example, Feng Chengjun 冯承钧, Zhongguo nanyang jiaotong shi 中国南洋交通史 [A history of communications between China and the Nanyang] (Hong Kong: Taiping shuju, 1963), part 1; Zhongguo haijiang tong shi 中国海疆通史 [A general history of China’s maritime frontiers], ed. Zhang Wei 张炜 and Fang Kun 方堃 (Zhengzhou: Zhongguo guji chubanshe), pp. 73–7, 134–5; and Zhongguo haiyangxue shi 中国海洋学史 [History of Oceanography in China], ed. Xu Hongru 徐鸿儒 (Shandong jiaoyu chubanshe, 2004), Chapters 3–7.
permanent residence in the trade ports. Within a few generations, from the late Tang period the descendants of foreign merchants in general and Arabs in particular had undergone a process of indigenization and they became Chinese (Tang ren). These foreign residents and their indigenized descendants were the best mentors the Chinese could have had in maritime affairs. Today there is still a temple located by the inner waterway to Guangzhou that has stood there since around AD 600. It is dedicated to the Sea God of the Nanhai (Nanhai zhì shen) and was a very popular place of worship for the seafaring people during Tang times. It might be a good indication of Chinese engagement in seafaring activities.

Shipbuilding is another factor that should be considered. Longer-haul shipping would have required seaworthy vessels. From early times China has had a long coastline and it improved its shipbuilding techniques in tandem with the increasing demand for vessels. At the very least, fishing had been undertaken and water transportation was used in the daily life of the littoral people for centuries. By around 2,500 years ago, the use of a water-borne force in wars by states such as Yue and Wu on the southeast coast was a frequent occurrence. By this time, large warships that could carry up to nearly a hundred men on board were being built. In the late Tang era, Chinese-style junks built in China were widely preferred and used by resident Arab merchants in their long-distance voyages to the Indian Ocean. In Song times, when Chinese shipyards were capable of building large, seaworthy junks for long-distance voyages, shipbuilding technology reached new heights. The more advanced features of the ships included the use of watertight-compartment techniques and the compass. That is to say, the Song people were without doubt technically capable of fitting out ships for longer-haul voyages when the commercial incentives made it worthwhile to do so.

70. Citing Chinese texts, Kuwabara Jitsuzo says that China was known to foreigners (including Muslims) as Tang 唐 and Chinese as Tangren 唐人. Refer to Pu Shougeng kao, p. 103.
74. Kuwabara Jitsuzo, Pu Shougeng kao, p. 98.
In fact, the Fujianese sea merchants in Song times had established a great reputation for their shipping trade not only along the China coast, but also sailing to Korea, Japan and the Nanhai. Findings by marine archeologists also support the existence of large-scale Chinese shipping activities at this time. One instance is the discovery of a sunken ship in Quanzhou Harbor in 1974. The junk probably foundered during the Mongol attack on the port city in the late thirteenth century. Trade goods found in the holds of the sunken ship consisted of large quantities of pepper and scented woods from the Nanhai. Another sunken junk was salvaged from Guangdong waters in 1987. The 800-ton vessel, that was given the project name Nanhai I, was fully loaded with export ceramics. On the basis of the kinds of merchandise they carried, the former was a homeward-bound vessel and the latter an outward-bound vessel. Nevertheless, it should be remembered that private shipping trade during the Song era was kept under strict state control and often it devolved into the hands of the powers-that-be.

The dominant position of Chinese junks in the shipping trade between China and India in the early fourteenth century was recorded by the Moroccan traveler Ibn Battuta. He witnessed 13 Chinese junks at anchor in the port of Calicut awaiting the seasonal wind to set sail for China. They carried 3 to 12 sails. One large ship carried 1,000 men, 600 of whom were sailors, the rest men-at-arms. The vessel had four decks and the owner’s supercargo on board was like a great amir. Ibn Battuta says that, “[t]here is no people in the world wealthier than the Chinese”. He goes on to report that Chinese ships were the only mode of transport for voyages from there to China. This raises the question of who was in control of the shipping trade during Yuan times. They would have included two major groups. One was the state-sponsored trade controlled by the Mongol nobility and merchants of Central Asian origin.

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78. Yu Changsen 喻常森, Yuandai haiwai maoyi 元代海外贸易 [Oversea trade during the Yuan era] (Xi’an: Xibei daxue, 1994), p. 90; Qu Jinliang 曲金良, Zhongguo
the period also saw the rise of a few very substantial class of Chinese maritime merchants who had the capacity to build large trading junks.\textsuperscript{79}

By this period, Quanzhou was among the great ports of China. It had risen to become an important seaport in the eleventh century and had surpassed the position of Guangzhou by the fourteenth century.\textsuperscript{80} Like Marco Polo, Ibn Battuta was also greatly impressed by the immensity of the port city Quanzhou, known as Zaytun, that he visited around 1343‒44. He described it as “one of the largest in the world”. He saw “in it about a hundred large junks; as for the small junks, they could not be counted for multitude”.\textsuperscript{81} More than 70 countries traded with Quanzhou during the Song-Yuan eras, including those from the Nanhai, the Persian Gulf, Arabia and from as far afield as Egypt, East Africa and the Mediterranean. Taking into account the myriads of commodities available in Quanzhou, Angela Schottenhammer rightly describes the port as the emporium of the world.\textsuperscript{82}

Although Guangzhou was later surpassed by Quanzhou, it was still another important port in the foreign trade. During the reign of Emperor Wu, Indian merchants from Huangzhi came to trade in Guangzhou. In the eighth century, Arabs, Persians and Indians were among the many large foreign communities thronging the port city. Traders from more than 140 foreign countries and places were present there.\textsuperscript{83} A contemporary Arab account cited earlier indicates that some 120,000 Arabs, Persians and members of many other foreign communities were massacred in the city in AD 879 by the invading rebel force led by Huang Chao,\textsuperscript{84} indicating the presence of great numbers of foreign sojourners in the port. It must have recovered from the setback with the return of peace and it continued to enjoy prosperity in the following centuries. When Tomé Pires was in Malacca, he was informed that, “[t]he city of Quantom [Guangzhou] is where the whole kingdom of China unloaded all its merchandise which were in great quantities. They were brought here from inland as well as


\textsuperscript{80} Ibid., p. 102.

\textsuperscript{81} \textit{Ibn Battuta Travels in Asia and Africa}, pp. 287‒8.


\textsuperscript{83} Chen Gaohua, \textit{Yuan shi yanjiu lungao}, p. 105.

\textsuperscript{84} \textit{Zhongguo Indu jianwen lu}, pp. 30, 96.
from the sea.”85 By this time, the Chinese were active participants in the shipping trade. The country “has more than a thousand junks, and each of them trades where it sees fit”, Pires records.86

In sum, Chinese ships might have begun to sail into the Nanhai and the Indian Ocean much earlier than is generally believed. The rather obscure picture of Chinese shipping grows slightly less obscure in the late Tang period. Hence there are grounds for arguing more confidently that, while the Arab merchants resident in Chinese ports often owned and operated the Chinese ocean-going vessels, there was nothing to stop them from having native Chinese or indigenized Arab merchants as their business partners, joining them or taking charge of the voyages. Certainly this was the situation in the Song era. By then, unquestionably many people of Arab descent had become indigenous Chinese people. In the fifteenth century, the presence of Chinese shipping had become a common scene in the Nanhai region. Its principal destination was Malacca to acquire commodities from Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean region.87 By this time, direct voyages farther west to Calicut no longer made commercial sense, since commodities from the Indian Ocean were now abundantly available in the new emporium Malacca. Besides Malacca, Chinese junks were also found in many other ports, even in the remote areas of maritime East Asia.88

The Emergence of Multiple Port Polities during the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries

As Anthony Reid suggests, the period between 1400 and 1750 witnessed “the Age of Commerce” in Southeast Asia.89 Nevertheless, it is possible to take a slightly different view and think of the fifteenth century as a transitional period in maritime East Asia. It was the final stage in the long preceding period that had lasted about 1,400 years, when it had been

85. The Suma Oriental of Tomé Pires, pp. 120–1.
86. Ibid., p. 123.
87. For the development of Chinese maritime trade during the Ming, see Roderich Ptak, “Ming Maritime Trade to Southeast Asia, 1368–1567: Visions of a ‘System’”, in From the Mediterranean to the China Sea, ed. Claude Guillot, et al., pp.157–91.
characterized by successive maritime and territorial powers from the times of Funan and Srivijaya to Malacca. Each of them was an undisputed leading power, controlling the strategic sea route in maritime trade between India and China. The early fifteenth century witnessed the Zheng He expeditions that re-established China-Southeast Asia relations and re-connected the China Sea to the Indian Ocean, contributing to the rise of the last indigenous maritime territorial power: Malacca. The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries brought a change that saw the emergence of multiple harbor-states, featuring a major shift from the regional primacy enjoyed in former times to the parallel roles played by a number of port polities. Each of them functioned autonomously and yet formed an integral part of the long-distance trade in Asian waters. It was in this period that Chinese seafarers emerged as the major players in the East Asian Seas. From the beginning of the sixteenth century, the new era also ushered in new players from Europe.

**Areas of Production and Trading Zones in the Malay-Indonesian Archipelago**

How the long-distance trade in maritime East Asia functioned can be observed from the linkages in the regional trade at different transaction layers. In simplest terms, the different layers connected the areas of production to local harbors and from them to a regional port that might also serve as an emporium in interregional trade. Each of the layers had its respective role as “collecting centers, feeder points and entrepôts”. The activity often involved a multitude of players from different ethnic groups. The transaction chain commenced with the household-to-household collection of local commodities directly from the small producers by peddlers. Different groups of dealers appeared at each level of the transactions. The upper layer of activities consisted of wholesalers who would buy in large quantities and sell the commodities to the long-distance traders from other regions.

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91. The three terms are used in Leong Sou Heng, “Collecting Centres, Feeder Points and Entrepôts in the Malay Peninsula, c. 1000 BC–AD 1400”, in *The Southeast Asian Port and Polity*, ed. J. Kathirithamby-Wells and John Villiers, pp. 17–38.

At different times, there were various trading zones in the Malay-Indonesian Archipelago, serving the long-distance trade of maritime Asia. The following are some of them:

"The Spice Islands". For many centuries, the area of the Moluccas had earned itself a reputation as "the Spice Islands" on account of the production of the cloves, nutmeg and mace that had found their way into many households in the west and east. The small producers and local people from the areas of production often brought their products to the nearby market-places in small boats to be sold to traders who traveled from island to island to collect them. As well as other spices, during the Song-Yuan periods China had been one of the major end-markets for cloves from the Moluccas. They were brought to Guangzhou by the "tribute bearers" from Srivijaya and other Nanhai countries. By the late fourteenth century, foreign traders including Chinese, Arabs and Javanese, were among the collectors sailing to the Spice Islands from the northeast coast of Java from where they conducted inter-island trade. The fifteenth century saw the rise of Malacca as the major international center for the spice trade. Although not widely known for their navigational skills, even the islanders from Banda would row their boats laden with spices to cover the long distance to Malacca in the final days of the sultanate, shortly before the Portuguese occupation.

Aceh: Located in northwest Sumatra lay Aceh. It had successfully grasped the opportunity presented by a weakening Srivijaya to shake off its control in the late thirteenth century. As it strengthened it began to conduct direct trade with China. Benefiting from its geographical location, Aceh was able to establish trade relations with the Arabs and

93. The term "trading zones", rather than the oft-used "trading networks", indicates a sub-unit of the long-distance trade. It might sometimes involve the trade in certain special products, or the active participation of a particular ethnic group. The term trading network implies a much more complex structure depicting an operational system. It involves horizontal and vertical human relationships and the organizational mechanisms that form in total an operational system. The discussion here does not cover the operating system as defined above.

94. More specifically, the Spice Islands include Banda Islands, Moluccas (Maluku), Ceram, Timor and some other neighboring islands.


Persians, as well as such other Islam-influenced regions as Gujarat, Malabar and Coromandel. An equally important presence were the Ottoman merchants from West Asia who were the middlemen in trade between the East Mediterranean and the Malay-Indonesian Archipelago. The link between Islamic influence and the dominant trade position of Aceh in northwest Sumatra was obvious.

After the occupation of Malacca by the Portuguese, the Gujaratis, who had a firm grasp on the pepper and spice trade, decided to withdraw from there and go to Aceh. The collaboration between the Acehnese and the Gujaratis worked to exclude the Portuguese from the lucrative pepper trade and gave rise to the emergence of Aceh as a trading power in the sub-region. In Tomé Pires’ words, with little effort Aceh could assemble a fleet of 30 to 40 ships to intercept a competitor’s vessels. Its trade zone extended to the Red Sea and the port of Aden. By the last 20 years of the sixteenth century, Aceh had firmly established itself as the international center for the pepper and spice trade as well as the meeting point for the Muslim trading ships that sailed from there to the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea. Cinnamon produced in Ceylon was even first transshipped to Aceh before being shipped to the Mediterranean. Shipments of spices to China, Indochina and India (with the exception of Malabar) also increased tremendously.

The tarnishing of the glory of Portuguese Malacca in the international pepper and spice trade can be attributed to the brilliant maneuvering of the Acehnese. Although it reaped the benefit of trade with the Muslim traders from the Indian Ocean, Aceh stopped short of becoming another sea and territorial power in the maritime trade. Its failure to attain this can be attributed to a new multi-port trading environment, in which each of the port polities was able to capitalize on its strength in the trading structure.

**Bantam:** The port town of Bantam was founded by Javanese Muslims in the sixteenth century and lost no time in attracting Indian, Chinese and European company merchants in pursuit almost exclusively of one commodity, namely pepper. A part of the production from Java, Sumatra, the Malay Peninsula and Borneo was sent here for re-export.
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to international markets. Bantam maintained close trade relations with Ming China. However, as it gained power, a newcomer was hovering on the scene. In 1596, four Dutch ships from Amsterdam anchored in the port for the first time. J.C. van Leur cites accounts from the Dutch records and depicts a vivid picture of the intense trading atmosphere:

There came [on board] such a multitude of Javanese and other nations as Turks, Chinese, Bengali, Arabs, Persians, Gujarati, and others that one could hardly move.

... each nation took a spot on the ships where they displayed their goods, the same as if it were on a market.  

Until the Dutch capture of the port town in the late seventeenth century, the British East India Company was in the habit of obtaining Chinese commodities from here.

The amount of raw silk brought to Bantam on Chinese junks each year was 300–400 piculs. Homeward-bound, they shipped back pepper and other commodities.  

Chinese merchants were an important group among the port communities. Although other foreign communities, such as Gujaratis, Coromandelese, Bengalis and Indonesians from other parts of the Archipelago, among them Buginese, Bandanese, Banjarese, people from Ternate, Makassar and eastern Java were lodged in the suburbs, the Chinese merchants lived in a quarter within the walls of the port city and "dwelt in stately houses, owned warehouses and ships, and held slaves", Van Leur states.  

Living cheek by jowl with the principal merchants or wholesale dealers were "the mass of traders carrying their valuable goods on board ship or selling the commissioners a few bags of rice, pepper, or spices on the market". Even the Chinese buyers might venture "inland into the villages with their weights in hand". Despite the peddling nature of the business of the small traders, the total amount of the goods that changed hands was very substantial owing to the multitude of the participants.

Initially Bantam was Batavia’s rival entrepôt but it was gradually weakened by internal conflict and was consequently forced to accept VOC rule in 1682.

Makassarese, Bugis and the Riau Trading Zones: Prior to the sixteenth century, as Gene Ammarell citing Anthony Reid points out, the long-distance trade between Malacca, Java, Celebes (Sulawesi) and the Spice

103. Ibid., p. 126.
104. Ibid., pp. 138–9.
105. Ibid., p. 139.
Islands “was carried out by Malay and Javanese seafarers.” On voyages to and from the Spice Islands it had long been the practice that their ships made stopovers along the southern coast of Celebes to take on fresh water and supplies. These essential stopovers contributed to the rise of Makassar. After the fall of Malacca, in their search for a new trading hub large numbers of Malays and Javanese as well as Chinese, Arabs and Indians turned to the north coast of Java and the southwest coast of South Celebes for their supplies of spices. Not content with their minor role of supplying the foreign ships, the Makassarese began to build trading ships themselves. In this same period, Muslim Malay traders from Johor, Pahang and Pattani appeared in Makassar in increasing numbers. An estimate of 1625 shows that these Malays who lived in Makassar numbered many thousands. They sent about 40 ships each year to the Spice Islands. Eventually, the availability of spices from the Spice Islands and goods from China and India in the port also attracted the Europeans to Makassar. Since the Dutch were locked in a struggle to obstruct the Portuguese from trading directly in the Moluccas, the latter also began to pour into Makassar in great numbers instead. Their visits intensified after the Dutch capture of Malacca in 1641, when some 3,000 Portuguese were recorded as living in Makassar. Around this time, the port town truly became an international entrepôt with the arrival of all the major European trading nations, namely the Netherlands, Denmark, England and France, all now competing with Portugal. As Gerrit Knaap and Heather Sutherland indicate, Makassar also traded with Mindanao (3 to 4 vessels), Sulu (3 to 4 vessels), Macao (a few vessels), Manila (2 junks), Cebu (2 to 3 junks), Siam (a few ships), Cambodia (5 to 6 big vessels), Malacca and Aceh (4 to 5 vessels), Banjarmasin (6 to 8 vessels), Sukadana (2 to 3 vessels), Java (30 to 40 vessels) and the eastern Kalimantan ports of Pasir and Kutei (a few ships). Makassar remained active commercially even after it was crushed by a Dutch-Bugis alliance in the years 1666‒69. The Amoy junks, for example, were still arriving in the port to trade in the mid-eighteenth century.

The Makassarese also had a rival much closer to home, their neighbors the Bugis, whose indigenous home was also in South Celebes.

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Superb seafarers, the Bugis had built their reputation in the maritime world by the early sixteenth century, and by that time were increasingly challenging the dominant Malays and Javanese. Taking advantage of the Dutch occupation of Makassar, "the golden age of Bugis navigation began,"111 Their ships were active in the Spice Islands, the Java Sea and later the Riau Islands, linking them to international trade in various harbors. The most important among their trading stations was the entrepôt in the Riau Islands that they had established in the early eighteenth century. Because of its strategic location as well as the Bugis' wide trading network, Riau had attracted the arrival of Chinese, English, Siamese and Javanese traders, making it "the most important port linking the trade of the South China Sea and the Java Sea with that of the Indian Ocean."112 Arriving there, traders could conveniently exchange spices from the Moluccas for cloth imported by the British from Bengal, and thereby threatened the Dutch interest in imported cloth. Not surprisingly, the Dutch found it necessary to take over control of Riau in 1784.

**Java’s Northeast Coast (the Pasisir):** The northern coast of Java, situated on one of the major trading routes in the Java Sea, had control of the inter-island trade and shipping in the Indonesian Archipelago by the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Traders from there were able to fit out scores of ships of around 60 tons each to sail to the Spice Islands. They brought along scales and set up tents or stalls to collect spices from either local small producers or peddlers. They also visited such places as Timor to purchase sandalwood and other products. The bulk of the transactions was conducted by small-timers drawn from the ranks of the peasants and fishermen at the bottom of the social spectrum, who provided "the close links between trade and the rural economy", as Luc Nagtegaal observes. He goes on to comment, "Javanese trade was far from insignificent, with hundreds of traders together responsible for transporting large quantities of goods over what could be very long distances."113 The Javanese also played a conspicuous role in inter-island trade, using small boats (prahu) to transport goods.

Nevertheless, wholesalers were not entirely absent from the transaction chains. For example, the goods collected would be sold to Chinese merchants in Gresik to be re-exported to China, and, through the Gujarati merchants, other spices would eventually reach the markets in the Mediterranean.114

After the Dutch had established a foothold in Batavia, they depended on Chinese merchants in Bantam for surrogate participation in the commercial activities on the Pasisir. Chinese merchants had been able to penetrate into the indigenous trading world not only by purchasing local products directly from the farmers, but also by giving local farmers credit against the produce of their next harvest. They went into the interior, rented land from indigenous rulers and supervised local farmers in the production of the required amount of goods. These Chinese merchants often owned the ships on which they transported the produce to the trading ports in Southeast Asia or south China. Furthermore, the Dutch authorities in Batavia or Malacca acquired essential foodstuffs from them.

By the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, the Chinese trading community had gained increasing prominence on the Pasisir. Kwee Hui Kian indicates, "[T]he symbiotic relationship between the indigenous rulers and Chinese migrants enabled the former to intensify their state formation process and the later to expand their commercial activities."115 The Pasisir also established close trading connections with the Chinese merchants in Bantam.

Upsurge in the Shipping Trade from the North

The Predominance of Chinese Overseas Trading Networks

Chinese communities were found in such ports on the northeast coast of Java as Tuban and Gresik not later than the early fifteenth century. By the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Fujian junks had become the major force in the long-distance trade with Southeast Asia and large number of migrants from Fujian and Guangdong provinces were arriving in the Philippines, the Malay-Indonesian Archipelago, Siam and other places in Southeast Asia. By the early seventeenth century, Chinese communities were also a force to reckon with in Hirado and Nagasaki in

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Japan, and Hoi An (Faifo), Ayudhya, Pattani, Manila, Bantam and Batavia in Southeast Asia. They formed the largest trading communities among the foreigners. Nor was their dominance confined to the urban centers; they also penetrated into the interior. They performed all sorts of roles, among them commercial agents of the indigenous rulers, tax farmers, brokers, administrators managing their own countrymen, miners and cultivators. In the Indonesian Archipelago, the Dutch paradoxically saw them as both competitors and collaborators in business. In short, by the beginning of the eighteenth century the Chinese were in a formidable position in many businesses on account of their well-developed networks in local societies.

Chinese Overseas Trade during the Late-Ming Period

Even though there were signs of private Chinese overseas shipping trade emerging during the Song-Yuan periods, this business was still generally carried on in the shadow of state supremacy. The situation began to change in the early Ming era. Explaining the status of Chinese overseas shipping, John King Fairbank firmly states, “tribute from Southeast Asia declined after the time of Cheng Ho [Zheng He], although trade did not... [I]t was no longer they [the foreigners] who came to China but the Chinese who went to them.” The development of Yuegang in Zhangzhou in South Fujian sometime in the fifteenth century seems to support Fairbank’s theory. At this time, Yuegang rose to become a bustling, prosperous sea port involved in what the Ming government perceived as illicit trade or smuggling. However, a conspicuous change, that Fairbank describes, occurred only a century later after the rigid policy of the maritime prohibition promulgated by the Ming state to suppress private shipping and trade had proved totally ineffectual. The authorities finally realized the limitations of their power to rein in the anarchical situation and in 1567 decided to rescind the prohibition law. Yuegang, now renamed Haicheng district, was opened to overseas private commerce under


a system of managed trade. In 1589, a quota of 88 sailing permits was issued. The number was later increased to 110, to allow junks to trade in the Eastern Ocean (eastern sector of the Nanhai covering the Philippines and the surrounding region) and the Western Ocean (western sector of the Nanhai consisting of mainland Southeast Asia and the western part of the Malay-Indonesian Archipelago). Maritime trade subsequently prospered. The tax list records 49, 89 and 115 items of commodities in 1572, 1589 and 1615, including ivory, pepper, sappanwood, sandalwood, Borneo camphor, bird’s nests, rhinoceros horn, tortoise-shell, buffalo hide, black lead, betel nut, opium, rattan mats, for example, listed by Chang Pin-tsun. Most of the items came from the Nanhai region.

The opening of Haicheng to outward-bound private trade came at an opportune moment as shortly afterwards Manila was occupied by the Spanish in 1571 and desired trade with China. Trading junks flocked to the colonial port, some 30 to 40 on average per year with a tonnage of 100 to 300 each. The first hundred years represented the heyday in the junk trade between the two ports. Another important opportunity for junk trade arose not long after the Dutch had found a foothold in Batavia that thereafter welcomed the arrival of Chinese junks. As a 1625 Dutch record shows, a Chinese fleet of five junks of 600 or 800 tons each, traded with Batavia. Each junk carried 100 to 500 migrants on board in addition to her cargo. According to Van Leur’s estimate, the total tonnage of the junks was “as large as or larger than that of the whole return fleet of the Dutch Company.” He also records that other large trading junks continued to arrive not only in Batavia but also in other Southeast Asian ports. In 1626, for example, five arrive in Batavia from Fujian, as well as “four to Cambodia, four to Cochin China, three to Siam, one to Pattani, one to Jambi, one to Jaratan (Grise), three to Siam and around 100 smaller junks on a shorter route to Manila.”

121. J.C. van Leur, Indonesian Trade and Society, p. 198.
122. Ibid.
Information about the junk-trade investors given by Van Leur reveals that the trade involved both Indonesians and local Chinese settlers who went to trade in China with the returning junks. In the case of Jambi in 1636, for example, the majority of those going to trade in China were traders with a small amount of money varying from 22 to 44 reals. Similar patterns can also be seen in junks departing from China with hundreds of such small traders on board. Van Leur calls them “peddlers”,123 or small investors, but Han Zhenhua uses another term, “san shan” or “small-timers”, to designate this group of people. The latter says, “There could be as many as hundreds of san shang ... on board each junk, occupying cargo compartments ..., with a very small amount of capital.”124 However, Van Leur reminds us that, besides the peddlers, also traveling on board each ship were substantial investors, called “merchant gentlemen”. Taking the five junks that arrived at Batavia in 1625 as an example, their total investment reached 300,000 reals, not overlooking the fact that the largest investment in the Dutch East India Company in 1602 amounted only to between 26,000 and 44,000 reals.125 Similar investment patterns continue to be seen in a later record on Makassar in 1755, detailing a complete list of cargo of 59 incoming items against ten outward-bound on board a junk. The former included “4 types of umbrellas, 5 types of paper, 6 different sorts of bowls, 11 of plates and 7 trepang”, among the bowls and plates were 63,000 and 42,000 pieces respectively. Besides these bulk cargoes, there were still high-value cargoes such as Chinese tobacco, silk-yarn or raw silk and 200 chests of gold thread. Tobacco alone was worth more than 40 per cent of the total incoming value. Among the export items, trepang alone represents 90 per cent of the export value. As for the investment, “(a) share of 16% was imported by the kongsi or ‘partnership’, probably of the investors who equipped the junk. Another 9% was in the hands of the skipper, the clerk and the first mate. The remaining 75% was owned by 13 to 14 individual merchants, averaging a little over 19 pikul each.”126

123. Ibid., pp. 198–9.
124. Han Zhenhua 韓振華, “Shiliu zhi shijiu shiji zhongguo haiwai maoyi hangyun ye de xingzhi he haiwai maoyi shangren de xingzhi” 十六至十九世紀前期中國海外貿易航運業的性質和海外貿易商人的性質 [The characteristic features of Chinese overseas shipping trade and merchants during the sixteenth to the first half of nineteenth centuries], in Hanghai jiaotong maoyi yanjiu, p. 518.
125. J.C. van Leur, Indonesian Trade and Society, p. 201.
126. Knaap and Sutherland, Monsoon Traders, p. 146.
The Ryukyus: The sea-going prohibition law of the Ming that disrupted Japan’s direct contact and trade with China opened the way for the Ryukyuan to take up an intermediary role between Japan, China and the Nanhai. The active participation of the Ryukyus in seafaring activities was greatly boosted by the Chinese migrants from Fujian. The early Ming government even sent Fujianese seamen there to help the local people develop navigational skills.\textsuperscript{127} It is one of the many examples illustrating the integrative power of the East Asian maritime civilization.

During the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, this small island kingdom not only maintained close friendly relations with Ming China, but also actively participated in trade with the Nanhai, successfully building a triangular trading zone between the three sectors. Takeshi Hamashita states that the Ryukyus established a trading network with Japan, Korea and China in Northeast Asia and Siam, Sumatra, Java, Malacca, Annam, Sunda, Pattani and other places in Southeast Asia.\textsuperscript{128} The Ryukyuan “served as active agents for maritime trade between China and many overseas countries in the fifteenth century” and their ships frequented “Japanese ports such as Hyogo, Sakai, and Hakata, to collect Japanese goods for the tribute-trade with China.”\textsuperscript{129} The Ryukyuan came to Malacca sometimes in the company of the Chinese; sometimes on their own with one to three junks every year. The goods brought to Malacca included swords, gold, copper, arms of all kinds, coffee, boxes veneered with gold leaf, fans, wheat, a great store of paper and silk in all sorts of colors, musk, porcelain, damask, onions and many vegetables. They shipped back the same merchandise as the Chinese did, including large quantities of Bengal cloths and Malacca wine, some of it to be sold in China and Japan. From Japan, in exchange for their merchandise they obtained gold and copper.\textsuperscript{130} Citing the Ryukyan archival records, \textit{Lidai Baoan} (Precious Documents of Successive Reigns), both Xu Yihu and

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Takeshi Hamashita points to pepper and sappanwood as two important items bought in Malacca to be sent to China as “tribute” in exchange for silks, porcelain and the like for other places in the triangular trade. From the Ryukyuan records, Takeshi Hamashita cites a letter from the Ryukyu king containing a detailed list of the cargo shipped to Annam as below:

Ten thousand chin of sulphur, 1 iron helmet with gilded copper plates and green leather pieces woven together with thread, 2 short swords in black lacquered scabbards with embossed golden dragons, 6 short swords ornamented with gold and gilded material, 2 long swords in red lacquered scabbards plated with gold and inlaid with mother-of-pearl, 2 black lacquered spears in sheaths plated with gold and inlaid with mother-of pearl, 4 bows of mulberry wood, 120 hawk-feather arrows plated with gold, 100 bolts of soft local linen in different colors, and 2,000 chin of raw iron; all of these are to be presented to Your Majesty the King of the Country of An-nam [Annam] in token of our appreciation.

The bulk of the goods shipped to Siam, Palembang, Sumatra (Aceh) and Java consisted of silk textiles, swords and ceramics. One other aspect relating to the Ryukyu trade as suggested by Sydney Crawcour is that: “Ryukyuan vessels came into contact with the traders of the Arab world and ... some of the Ryukyuan ships were under the command of people with Arab-sounding names.”

A total of 256 ships was dispatched from Ryukyu to Fujian between 1425 and 1564, and 104 to Southeast Asia from 1425 to 1570. The gifts bestowed by the Ming court, including silk fabrics, were taken to Siam and Japan in exchange for local products. However, the transshipment business declined from the sixteenth century, probably because of the Portuguese entry into the trans-regional trade, the surge of Chinese junk trade and the development of direct trade by Japanese with Siam and Annam. After the imposition of the ban on seafaring activities (known

133. Xu Yihu, “Mingdai Liuqiu wangguo duiwai guanxi”.
as “sakoku”, or close-the-country policy) by the Tokugawa Shogunate in the seventeenth century, Japan had to rely heavily on the Chinese and Dutch shipping for external trade, and the Satsuma-Ryukyu trade played a much smaller role in it. During the period 1612–34, for example, there were only 20 Ryukuan ships sailing to China, only one-thirtieth of the total number of Chinese junks.\textsuperscript{136}

The “Tosen” Trade to Nagasaki: The number of Japanese ships that traded with China under the guise of official missions greatly increased in Song times and continued until the Ming period when the court imposed the strict sea-going prohibition. As might have been expected, the restriction only encouraged the expansion of illicit trade. Toward the end of the sixteenth century, Japanese overseas shipping was surging. Since both the Ming merchants and the Tokugawa Shogunate, founded in 1603, were desirous of trading with each other, ships of both sides found a way to evade the Ming law by establishing contacts to exchange trade goods in such Southeast Asian ports as Manila and Annam. Japanese ships from Nagasaki and Hirado also ventured farther to Ligor (Nakorn) and Pattani in southern Siam. During the period 1604–35, a total of 355 Japanese shu-in, or government-licensed ships appeared in the Nanhai, of which 71 went to Cochin-China, 55 to Ayudhya and 7 to Pattani.\textsuperscript{137} Many Japanese sojourners also formed their own communities in major Southeast Asian cities. Their settlement in Ayudhya numbered around 1,500 in the early seventeenth century.\textsuperscript{138} Chinese junks from the Min-Zhe (Fujian and Zhejiang) region on the southeast coast also increasingly frequented Japanese ports. In about 30 years from 1612, some 600 of them departed to Japan to trade.\textsuperscript{139} The growth in shipping clearly indicates that maritime trade had not been deterred by the chaotic political situation in late Ming China. Obviously, in times of adversity merchants were skilled in finding ways to get around problems and make an even greater profit.

European ships had been trading in Japan from the sixteenth century. In 1616 they were allowed by the Edo government to dock in Hirado until


\textsuperscript{139} Sydney Crawcour, “Notes on Shipping and Trade in Japan and the Ryukyus”, p. 378.
1641 and after that in Nagasaki. When the ruling Tokugawa Shogunate decided to close its doors to foreigners, the Portuguese were expelled from trading with Japan and the Dutch were severely restricted in their movements and later ordered to move from their base at Hirado to the off-shore, artificial island of Deshima in Nagasaki Harbor. When the local authorities banned the export of silver in 1668, the Dutch bought copper, silks, ceramics and lacquered wares from Japan instead, exchanging them for Indian textiles and raw silk from Bengal.

After the imposition of the seclusion policy, the Japanese direct trade with Siam and Annam stopped, but the demand for foreign goods in Japan did not disappear and the Dutch Company and Chinese traders immediately filled the vacuum by shipping the desired merchandise to Nagasaki, the only port open to external trade. The incessant war ravaging coastal China and the sea-going prohibition imposed by the early Qing government during the Ming-Qing transition yielded extremely high profits from supplying raw silk to Japan. The traders chose to bypass the China coast and established direct contact between Nagasaki and the new source of supply in Annam. Earlier, prior to their expulsion from Japan, it had been the Portuguese who were in control of the silk trade between Tonkin and Japan, but now the Dutch took over from the Portuguese and founded a trading post in Tonkin to purchase silk. Chinese traders also flocked to Tonkin for the same purpose. Many Chinese ships moved their bases from the China coast to Southeast Asia in order to take advantage of the trade with Nagasaki. During the years from the 1640s to 1660s, for example, “about a third of the Chinese ships trading at Nagasaki departed from Southeast Asia, and in the following two decades only about a quarter of these Chinese ships were from mainland China itself”.

In shipping raw silk to Nagasaki from Tonkin, the Dutch Company had to face the challenge of Chinese rivals, including private traders and other merchant groups supported by the resistance force led by the Zheng family in Fujian and Taiwan. Using the tactic of a higher bidding price, Chinese traders were able to squeeze their Dutch competitors out of the silk market in Tonkin. Chinese networks in Southeast Asia also allowed them to work flexibly. For example, they maximized their trading profit by espousing a multi-port operation, making inter-port voyages to Batavia, Tonkin, the China coasts and Nagasaki. After the Qing court had lifted the maritime ban in 1684 and unsanctioned overseas trade, Ningbo resumed its trade with Nagasaki and replaced Tonkin as the main

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140. Ibid.

141. As shown in the shipping documents collected in The Junk Trade from Southeast Asia, ed. Yoneo Ishii.
exporter of raw silk. Until the ban on silver export from Japan, silver and copper from Nagasaki had been the main exports of the Chinese merchants. By around 1730, Japan itself had achieved self-sufficiency in silk production.

The port authorities in Nagasaki classified incoming Chinese junks into three categories, namely: the short-distance (kuchi-bune) ships from Zhejiang and the coast to its north; mid-distance (naka-okubune) ships from the southeast coast including Fujian, Taiwan and Guangdong; and long-distance (okubune) ships from the countries of Southeast Asia. Ships from Southeast Asia, including those commissioned by the Siamese court and Cambodian kings, were treated as tosen or "Chinese junks", because they were almost all manned by Chinese seamen or operated by Chinese merchants.

Ships visiting Nagasaki during the period 1674–1728 included 14 from Shandong, 500 from Nanjing of Jiangsu, 595 from Zhejiang, 652 from Fujian and Taiwan, 192 from Guangdong and 312 from Southeast Asia. Their carrying capacity varied. Taking those departing from Southeast Asia as examples, the Batavian junks had a tonnage from 120 to 200 each. The largest junks of 600 to 1,200 tons each were from Siam, while those from the Min-Yue (Fujian and Guangdong) carried 59 to 360 tons of cargo. These ships took on different types of cargo, depending on where they commenced their voyages. A 1658 record shows, for example, that a Siamese junk that arrived in Nagasaki carried 96 tons of sappanwood, 16 tons of pepper, 2,670 deer hides and 3,400 shark fins. Another junk arriving from Cambodia carried 270 tons of Tonkin silk, 180 tons of

143. The Junk Trade from Southeast Asia, ed. Yoneo Ishii, pp. 2–3.
144. Ibid., pp. 8–9; Sun Wen 孫文, Tang chuan feng shuo: wenxian yu lishi —Hua Yi Biantai chutan 唐船風說: 文獻與歷史—《華夷變態》初探 [Interview statements of Chinese junks: Documents and history—A preliminary study of Ka-i hentai] (Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan, 2011), Appendix; Louis Jacques Willem Berger IV, "The Overseas Chinese in Seventeenth Century Nagasaki", PhD thesis, Harvard University, 2003, p. 15; and Shiuh-Feng Liu 刘序楓, "You Hua yi biantai kan qing chu donya haiyu de haishang jiaotong qingkuang—yi chuanzhi de wanglai he renyuan de yidong wei zhongxin (1674–1728)" 由《華夷變態》看清初東亞海域的海上交通情況—以船隻的往來和人員的移動為中心 (1674–1728) [Maritime communications in the East Asian seas during the early Qing period, as seen from the records of Ka-i hentai: Focusing on shipping and movement of people, 1674–1728], in Haiyang shi yanjiu, 1, pp. 40–3. The figures provided in the above works vary slightly from one another.
aloes wood, 7 tons of sugar and 1.2 tons of natural medicines. The ships from Malacca carried tin and pepper to China to exchange for silk to be shipped to Nagasaki.\textsuperscript{145} The prosperity of Nagasaki that can be ascribed to the \textit{tosen} trade began to decline after its port authorities restricted the number of incoming Chinese junks at the end of the seventeenth century. One reason for the restriction was the fear of a surge in Chinese migrants that might threaten to become unmanageable.

The port from which a Chinese junk set sail on its voyage does not necessarily indicate its home port. For instance, most of the ships departing from Shandong originated from Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Fujian and Guangdong. The purpose of their coming to Shandong was to procure herbal medicines that were a local specialty. Most of the “Nanjing junks” departed from Shanghai and other ports in Jiangsu. The highest number was the vessels leaving here for Nagasaki. The reason is not far to find: the region of Yangzi delta produced a great amount of commodities, raw silk and silk fabrics in particular, that were in great demand in Japan. Ningbo, which also played an important role in trade with Japan, was equally renowned for its silk market. Besides local ships, other vessels came from Jiangsu and Fujian. A certain number of ships opted for Putuoshan off the Zhejiang coast as their port of departure, because there they could conveniently procure merchandise intended for Japan.\textsuperscript{146} The same holds true of the junks departing from ports in Southeast Asia. A 1680 \textit{tosen} document records seven vessels that had arrived in Nagasaki from Siam under the category of “ships from Ayudhya”. In fact, only three of them, among them two commissioned by the Siamese king, had their home port in Siam. The other four originated from Amoy and had come to trade in Ayudhya. After news that Amoy was soon to be the main base of the Qing naval force in the imminent war against the Zheng regime in Taiwan, these Amoy junks wanted to avoid sailing into the war zone and prudently decided to sail directly from Ayudhya to Nagasaki instead.\textsuperscript{147}

Chinese junks heading for Nagasaki from Ayudhya, Pattani, Ligor, Songkla, Cambodia, Batavia, Bantam and other Southeast Asian ports carried native products or goods from other places acquired via transshipment. Taking Siam as an example, its most important export in the \textit{tosen} included deer-skins, ray-skins, cowhides and sappanwood. Other commodities that were also in demand were black lac, eaglewood, tin,

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{145} The \textit{Junk Trade from Southeast Asia}, ed. Yoneo Ishii, pp. 4–5.
\item \textsuperscript{146} Sun Wen, \textit{Tang chuan feng shuo}, Chapter 4.
\item \textsuperscript{147} Document 1-1, Ship No. 14, in \textit{The Junk Trade from Southeast Asia}, ed. Yoneo Ishii, pp. 22–3.
\end{itemize}
elephant tusks, wax, buffalo horns, sugar and some other miscellaneous goods.\textsuperscript{148}

Whenever circumstances allowed, the trading junks would make a transit stop at a Chinese port, Amoy, Guangzhou, Wenzhou, Ningbo or Putuoshan being among the most favored, to sell some of their Southeast Asian products. This stop was also a good opportunity to procure such merchandise as raw silk and silk fabrics or to collect goods for which they had placed an advanced order. Replenishment of stocks of water and food was almost routine. Given the prevailing weather conditions, many junks would have probably required repairs to damaged fittings after a stormy voyage.

Such were the storms, there were occasions on which the ship’s captain found it necessary to charter or purchase another ship to continue the voyage if his original vessel was damaged beyond repair. Even the actual sale of a ship was not unlikely if a junk owner suffered heavy business losses during the voyage. His last resort would have been to sell his vessel to another junk trader at the port of call. Sometimes there was a crew change at the transit port. Furthermore, as junks were trading ships, they also functioned as passenger ships, picking up or dropping off passengers at each port of call during the voyage. Offering a passenger service was an opportunity to recoup some of the expenses of the voyage or even cover business losses.\textsuperscript{149}

All these situations indicate the existence of a mature, astonishing triangular \textit{tosen} trading network between Southeast Asia, coastal China and Nagasaki. The foremost goal of the junk traders at all times was to maximize profit through a flexible mode of operation.

The “Chinese Century” and the Ascendancy of the Europeans by the Early Decades of the Nineteenth Century

Two parallel developments in maritime trade began to take place in maritime East Asia in the sixteenth century. One was the emerging Chinese predominance in the seaborne trade. The eighteenth century


\textsuperscript{149} For information, see documents in \textit{The Junk Trade from Southeast Asia}, ed. Yoneo Ishii.
Commodity and Market

in particular is described by Leonard Blussé as the “Chinese Century” in the South China Sea region.\textsuperscript{150} Running parallel to this was the entry of European players, resulting in direct trade between the region and Western Europe. However, in the first 250 years, the Europeans only managed to hold on to their gains as one of the many players in the local trading networks.

\textbf{The Peaking of the Chinese Junk Trade}

\textit{The Economic Propellant for the Chinese Junk Trade}

The upsurge in the Chinese junk trade from the sixteenth century was propelled by the immense development of regional markets, cash crops and the handicraft industry in China. In turn these factors ushered in what was seen as “the Second Commercial Revolution”,\textsuperscript{151} or what the mainland Chinese scholars in the 1950s and the 1960s called “the budding of capitalism”. As a matter of course, these developments contributed to the stimulation of the commodity economy.\textsuperscript{152} The commercialized economy reached its height at the end of the eighteenth century.\textsuperscript{153} William T. Rowe cites the China scholar, Wu Chengming, saying that, “as of about 1800 roughly 10.5 per cent of the empire’s total grain production was marketed each year, along with some 26.3 per cent of raw cotton output, 52.8 per cent of cotton cloth production (over three billion bolts per year), 92.2 per cent of raw silk production, and nearly all of the very large tea and salt output”. Rowe comments, “…what Wu described is a domestic market of enormous scale, and a strikingly high degree of commercialization of the Qing economy, prior to its enforced ‘opening’ by Western commercial entrepreneurs”.\textsuperscript{154}

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{151} The first “commercial revolution” occurred during Song times between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries that saw “the first qualitative transformation of the Chinese economy”. See William T. Rowe, “Domestic Interregional Trade in Eighteenth-century China”, in \textit{On the Eighteenth Century as a Category of Asian History}, ed. Leonard Blussé and Femme Gaastra, p. 175.
  \item \textsuperscript{152} Wang The-chien 王業鍵, “Ming-Qing jingji fazhan bing lun zibenzhuyi mengya wenti”, 明清經濟發展並論資本主義萌芽問題 [The economic development during the Ming-Qing periods and the question of the budding of capitalism], in \textit{Qingdai jingji shi lunwen ji, 1} 清代經濟史論文集（一）[A collection of papers on economic history, Vol. 1] (Taipei: Dao Xiang chubanshe, 2003), p. 17.
  \item \textsuperscript{153} Ibid., p. 17.
  \item \textsuperscript{154} William T. Rowe, “Domestic Interregional Trade in Eighteenth-century China”, p. 179.
\end{itemize}
Other observations that vividly depict the flourishing condition of the Chinese economy have been made by Dennis O. Flynn and Arturo Giraldez who highlight the inflow of silver. As Flynn and Giraldez indicate, China was the most significant end-market customer for the silver output of Peru and Mexico in Latin America that began in the 1570s, initiating a trade on the global level. Another supplier in the late sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries was Japan. This should come as no surprise since in the Ming period China contained over a quarter of the world’s population and it was “the center of the largest tribute/trade system in the world,” continue Flynn and Giraldez. Andre Gunder Frank has also provided a very detailed discussion of the silver inflow into Asia in general and China and India in particular.

**Chinese Shipping Trade Achieving Supremacy in the “Long” Eighteenth Century**

Expanding their earlier achievements, after maritime trade was legally sanctioned again by the Qing court, the South Fujianese (minnan) people assiduously consolidated their strength on two fronts. Along the China coast, the South Fujianese were unquestionably the leading group in the long-distance trade. Their junks traded southward from Amoy to Canton and northward to Ningbo, Soochow, Kiaochow, Tianjin and Jinzhou. Crossing the Taiwan Straits, their junks enjoyed an unchallenged position in the shipping between coastal China and Taiwan. In the Nanhai region, for centuries the South Fujianese had been the leading contenders in the field of sea trade. When the Yue (Teochiu) people from Changlim in east Guangdong joined them in the seafaring business in the Nanhai in the later decades of the eighteenth century, the Min-Yue junk trade was an unquestionable shipping force in the region. They were omnipresent in the Nanhai, not only visiting the main ports of Bangkok, Batavia and Singapore, after it had been established as a British trading station in 1819, but also penetrating into many remote and feeder ports of the region. Very soon, the Teochiu junks managed to assume the leading role in the Siamese-Sino junk trade. As the eyewitness John Crawfurd confirms in his book published in 1820, during this time Chinese trading junks

enjoyed a virtual monopoly of the shipping business between Southeast Asia and China.157

The Extensive Hinterland Networks

China had always been the largest market for commodities imported from the Nanhai and the Indian Ocean regions. Its appetite for the foreign goods imported by its trading junks had swelled enormously since the sixteenth century. China’s trade expansion was greatly facilitated by linkages between ports and their hinterlands.

The extensive trading networks connecting ports and hinterlands are one area of study waiting to be explored in more depth. To illustrate the picture, one can cite as an example an eyewitness account by an anonymous author, probably an Englishman residing in Guangzhou, which was a major trading port for many trading junks and foreign ships. He offers some rare and illuminating glimpses of these domestic networks in the 1830s. According to his description, the port city of Guangzhou was the hub of the commercial networks. He mentions the flow of trade goods to the city from the regions that bordered on Tonkin and from all parts of the empire, including provinces near and far, among them Guangxi, Yunnan, Fujian, Zhejiang, Jiangsu, Anhui, Jiangxi, Honan, Hebei, Shanxi, Shaanxi, Gansu, Shandong and Zhili. Each would bring in their local special products in exchange for both the domestic products of Guangzhou and imported foreign merchandise. Attracted by the opportunities it offered, financiers and investors from these locations, particularly Shanxi and Ningbo of Zhejiang, were drawn there and invested in the various branches of commerce. Frequently, merchants from the provinces took up residence in Guangzhou. For instance, a very wealthy group of Ningbo merchants resided in the city and played an influential role in local businesses.158

The Europeans and Global Trade

Goa-Macao-Nagasaki

The Portuguese arrived in the Indian Ocean at the end of the fifteenth century. Their main goal was to seize control of the highly profitable spice

trade, by taking pepper and spices to Lisbon and selling them on to other European markets through Antwerp. Besides their virtual monopoly on spices, the chain of trading-stations that they established in the Indian Ocean, extending to Malacca, Macao and Nagasaki, worked extremely well for several decades from the mid-sixteenth century. The viceroyalty of Goa actively participated in the highly profitable triangular trade between Goa, Macao and Nagasaki. During the days of the triangular trade, the Portuguese “Great Ship” exported silver from Japan to China and India via Macao and raw silk and silk fabrics to Japan from Macao.159 In the early decades of the seventeenth century, the official annual Portuguese investments at Guangzhou were estimated at 1.5 million taels.160

However, by the end of the sixteenth century they were losing their edge in the competition in the pepper and spice trade from the Javanese and other Asian traders.161 The triangular trade also ended when they were expelled from Japan in the 1630s. When Macao was cut off from Goa after the Dutch capture of Malacca in 1641 and from the profitable trade with Manila after Portugal’s revolt from Spain, it suffered from irreparable damage to its trade position.162

**Haicheng-Manila-Acapulco**

Chinese trading junks from Haicheng began to call at Manila following the Spanish occupation of the port in 1571. The new colonial regime immediately opened direct trading connections with China. “Some half-dozen junks came to Manila in 1574 and twelve or fifteen the next year. By 1576 the trade was already firmly established,” William Lytle Schurz states.163 The Chinese junk traders brought raw silk, silk textiles, porcelains and hempen fabrics. On the return voyages, they shipped back Mexican silver. Part of it was allocated to the advance order of Chinese merchandise in the following shipment to Manila.164 In 1573, two Spanish galleons departing from Manila “carried to Acapulco,

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164. See Chuan Han-sheng 全漢昇, “Ming ji Zhongguo yu feilubin de maoyi” 明季中國與菲律賓的貿易 [Sino-Philippine trade during the late Ming], pp. 417–33, and “Ming Qing jian meizhou baiyin de shuru Zhongguo” 明清間美洲白銀的輸入中國 [Imports of American silver to China during the Ming–Qing transition], pp. 435–50; both in *Zhongguo jingji shi luncong, diyi ce* 中國經濟史
among other goods, 712 pieces of Chinese silk and 2,300 pieces of fine gilt china and other porcelain ware”. Beside Chinese silks, another highly valued staple was spices from the south. Most of these two categories of merchandise were thereafter forwarded to Europe.

Through the long-distance trade, both the Spanish and the Portuguese contributed to large flows of silver from Mexico, Peru and Japan into China and other Asian regions. As Schurz highlights, the Spanish and the Portuguese had set up a vast semi-circumference from Japan, China, India and the Moluccas whose radii met in Manila. Their coins also achieved the status of international currency during the time.

**Batavia-Ayudhya-Nagasaki**

Dutch and English ships appeared in Asian waters in the last decade of the sixteenth century. Shortly afterwards, both nations founded a chartered company known as the East India Company that allowed them to compete more successfully in trade with their Portuguese rival during the following 200 years. Large quantities of commodities were shipped back to European markets from Asia. These included cotton textiles from Coromandel on the east coast of India and silk textiles, raw silk, indigo and tea from China. Both the Dutch and English also involved themselves in the interregional trade of the Indian Ocean and maritime East Asia. Indian textiles were shipped to the Indonesian Archipelago to be exchanged for pepper and spices. Precious metals from East Africa and Japan became the major form of trading currency. An intra-Asia trade from the Red Sea to the China Sea was greatly enhanced by the burgeoning of Amsterdam and London as international trading centers in the Western world.

The Dutch opened up the triangular trade between India, Siam and Japan. They founded a trading-station in Ayudhya as a transshipment center in 1608. Within the triangular networks, large quantities of silver, gold and copper from Japan were carried to India where they were exchanged for cotton textiles from Gujarat, Coromandel and Bengal that were subsequently taken to Ayudhya. In return, from Siam they procured forest and fishery products suitable for the Japanese market. Profit from the triangular trade in the form of silver and cotton textiles was reinvested in the Indonesian Archipelago where they were exchanged for pepper.
and spices. With no choice but to acquiesce in the Japanese restriction on the number of Dutch ships permitted to trade in the country, the Dutch East India Company was forced to abandon the direct trade between Ayudhya and Nagasaki in 1715.  

Although the Dutch built fortresses in the Java Sea region and had no qualms about using force to achieve full control or a monopoly, they were constrained by the fact that they were primarily a trading company. This required them to have second thoughts about using force if the costs outweighed the benefits to be gained. Throughout the seventeenth century, they were just one of the many players in the existing indigenous trade network that showed no signs of losing its effectiveness. In 1660s, for instance, the aggressive Dutch policies against the Chinese junks that were trading between Tonkin and Nagasaki, failed badly simply because the vested interests of both the Japanese officials and the Trinh government of Tonkin provided them with protection against the unwelcome Dutch interlopers. In Batavia or on Java’s northeast coast, the Dutch knew perfectly well that they would need to collaborate with the Fujianese junk traders, local Chinese merchants and the indigenous rulers for own commercial survival.  

The Dutch gained a commanding position in 1743 after obtaining contractual suzerainty over the most important regencies in Java. Despite their consolidation of power in the island, the Dutch Company was fully aware that a burgeoning trade “demanded cooperation with local partners” and the Company continued to depend on the Chinese merchants, “whether to secure the products desired or sell imported commodities”. During the century, the Company was able to extract great profits from the trade in Moluccan spices, Indian textiles, Ceylonese cinnamon and Chinese tea, until they were sidelined by the British advance in Asian trade in the later decades of the century.

India—Singapore—China

By the late seventeenth century, the English East India Company had established itself in Surat, Madras, Bombay and Calcutta and was casting a speculative eye on the lucrative China trade. In 1712, the EIC obtained  

172. Ibid., pp. 15–6.
the permission of the Qing court to purchase tea, raw silk and porcelain in Guangzhou. Very soon it gained ascendancy over other European traders to become the major tea exporter from China to Europe. Gaining control of two important commodities, namely Indian textiles and opium, in the second half of the eighteenth century firmly established the dominant position of the British in the China trade.

The rise of Bangkok and British Singapore in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries signaled the eclipse of Manila and Batavia. These new commercial hubs took over as the two new emporia in maritime East Asia, becoming centers of the Chinese junk trade. Thanks to its geographical location at the heart of Southeast Asia, Singapore was especially successful in attracting traders from the Indian Ocean, Southeast Asia and China. It was a true trade emporium and regional hub right from its inception. In his work on the first 50 years of Singapore trade, Wong Lin Ken sums up its situation in the following words:

(It) consisted largely of the transshipment of European manufactures, Indian Opium, and Straits produce to China, and of the transshipment of Chinese manufactures and produce to Europe and America.173

Wong highlights two of the main trading groups which contributed to Singapore’s rise to pre-eminence. One was made up of the free traders who had created a demand in Europe for such articles as sugar; while pushing the sale of such European goods as cotton piece goods, cotton yarn, fire-arms and glassware, amongst other items, in the Archipelago.174 The other group was composed of Chinese junk traders, the majority from Amoy. In 1835, for example, almost one half of Singapore’s total trade with China was undertaken by Chinese junks. Chinese junk traders brought along “Chinese goods demanded by the Chinese settlers”, that “consisted of earthenware of different sizes and patterns, flooring tiles, coping stones, paper umbrellas, Chinese confectionary, dried and salted fruits, dried vegetables such as mushrooms, Chinese medicine, silk shoes and silk, Chinese cloth, straw, joss-sticks, tobacco specially cured to suit the palates of the Chinese residents, nankeen cloth, and gold lace. The value of these goods was extremely high.”175 For their return voyages, they purchased “raw cotton, cotton yarn, cotton piece goods, opium, arms and ammunition, and Straits produce from the Chinese dealers in

173. Ibid., p. 106.
175. Ibid., p. 111.
the bazaar". The term “Straits produce” “embraced a bewildering variety of products”. They covered “practically all the produce, both vegetable and mineral” found throughout the Malay-Indonesia Archipelago, including “pepper and other spices, gambier, tin, camphor, beeswax, coffee, ebony, and antimony, tortoise-shell, bêche-de-mer, bird’s nests, rattans, gold-dust, pearls, sandalwood, shark fins, agar-agar (seaweeds), dragon’s blood (a kind of resinous gum), amber[gris] and dammar to name a few”.177

While European traders continued to expand their share in the external trade, the carrying trade conducted by Chinese junks was experiencing a different fate. Although the number of trading junks arriving in Singapore rapidly increased even during the First Sino-British War (Opium War) in 1839–42, it reached the peak in 1856–57, when “the number of their arrival was as high as 143”.178 However, this marked the last spurt of Chinese junks from coastal China because their arrivals declined after that and “by 1863 junks were rapidly disappearing from the coasting trade of China”.179 European square-rigged vessels and, subsequently, steamers finally achieved an unchallenged position in the long-distance carrying trade in Asian waters.

Conclusion: Historiographical Remarks

When studying the sea or maritime regions, a contemporary author inevitably draws upon Fernand Braudel for ideas and vision. In his study of the Mediterranean, Braudel was able to perceive the unity of the region despite its great diversity. In a similar fashion, from the perspective of their maritime history the East Asian Seas can be taken as a geographical entity. The region was characterized by the vitality and sustainability of the regional circulation of goods between the producing-areas and the markets of the countries surrounding the East Asian Seas. Equally helpful has been K.N. Chaudhuri’s discussion of the Indian Ocean, in which he applies Braudel’s many concepts. One example is the idea of connections in long-distance trade. Chaudhuri presents a grand picture of long-distance trade, stretching beyond the geographical limits of the Indian Ocean to cover a long stretch of trade routes from the Red Sea at its western end to the China Seas in the east.

176. Ibid.
177. Ibid., pp. 108–9.
178. Ibid., p. 122.
179. Ibid., p. 124.
The Idea of an "Asian Mediterranean"

Inspired by Braudel, the metaphor of an Asian Mediterranean has proved appealing to historians of Southeast or East Asia. One prevalent theme in this scholarship is to compare the South China Sea to Braudel’s Mediterranean. Denys Lombard was certainly an enthusiastic promoter who envisaged the South China Sea as a second Mediterranean, shown by his organization of an international symposium in 1997 called “The Asian Mediterranean”.

In different writings, the boundaries of “the Asian Mediterranean” vary. In his work, first published in 1944 and revised in 1964, Georges Coedès suggests that, “there is a veritable Mediterranean formed by the China Sea, the Gulf of Siam, and the Java Sea”, generally known as the Nanhai in Chinese texts. However, Lombard prefers a broader boundary, one that incorporates into it the southeastern coast of China, Hainan and Taiwan, probably because the long development of maritime trade in the South China Sea cannot be properly comprehended without the inclusion of the China factor. In a recent publication, Francois Gipouloux refers to “[the] corridor linking the basins of the Sea of Japan, the Yellow Sea, the South China Sea, the Sulu Sea and the Celebes Sea” as the “Asian Mediterranean”, in his attempt “to uncover the hidden links between economics, geography, and international relations”.

Although terms such as “the Second Mediterranean” or “the Asian Mediterranean” highlight the comparative aspects of the two maritime civilizations, they might have also inadvertently set limits to a better understanding of maritime East Asia and a proper appreciation of its uniqueness. The fact that the people were producers of widely sought-after commodities with the availability of large markets within the region, combined with the mass participation of those seeking their fortune from around the East Asian Seas, explains the long sustainability of the East Asian shipping trade and its great impact on the economic life of its population. In fact, as early as 1937, J.C. van Leur cautioned against using the Mediterranean analogy in the Asian context. He argued that the comparison obscured “a complete historical autonomy” of maritime Asia.


181. G. Coedès, *The Indianized States of Southeast Asia*, p. 3.


“that makes it practically impossible to carry through any comparison of phenomena”. 184

Nevertheless, there is no denying that Braudel’s works remain a source of inspiration to those studying a maritime civilization named after a particular sea. Even Heather Sutherland, a critic of Braudel’s book, concedes that the “great themes” tackled by Braudel are the attraction of his works. Braudel frees a scholar from the confines of political borders, allowing him or her to “explore connections and borrowings, while also reconciling continuity and change”. 185 Without a doubt, any study of a maritime region will greatly benefit from Braudel’s intellectual imagination and rich conceptual vocabulary.

**Two Maritime Spaces**

Long-distance trade offers one opportunity by which to understand the geographical unity of maritime East Asia and to appreciate the linkages between the northern and southern sectors of the East Asian Seas more thoroughly. What have blurred the picture of the unity of the two maritime regions have been the two different historiographical approaches. One places a heavy reliance on the Chinese sources in research work and this has given rise to what is known as the “Nanhai” or “Nanyang” perspective. Terms such as “tribute relations” and “the Nanhai trade” in academic works reflect a southward-looking perspective. In contrast, John Smail’s appeal in 1961 for an “autonomous history” of Southeast Asia 186 has created an opposite Southeast Asia-centered approach. Although Smail’s main concern is the modern history of Southeast Asia and his hypothesis is to contend with “Euro-centric” historiography, his emphasis might inadvertently block the view of a connected maritime East Asia. Sanjay Subrahmanym, for example, is critical of John Smail’s argument, claiming that it has the effect of delinking “Southeast Asian history from that of China and India”. He deems such an approach hardly desirable and intellectually infeasible. 187 Roderick Ptak, on the other

187. Ibid., pp. 23, 33.
hand, has proposed another way to rectify the dominant northern bias in discussing the historical interactions between China and Southeast Asia. He hints at a possible reversal in the treatment of the subject “to put more historians on a ‘southern track’” and grow used to looking at the “north” from the “south”, moving away from the “Nanyang concept”. 188 However, this shift in position does not seem to resolve the problem of dealing with the two historiographical biases. Only when the two maritime spaces of north and south are connected is it possible to comprehend the long history of maritime East Asia.

**Positioning Southeast Asia in the Long-Distance Trade**

To reconcile the Northeast and Southeast Asia biases, the role of Southeast Asia in the long-distance trade is of essential importance. Sanjay Subrahmanyam rightly highlights “the India factor” and “the China factor”. One might want to modify the two factors as “the Indian Ocean factor” and “the Northeast Asia factor” to cover regions rather than individual states. In the long stretch of the sea-routes from the Indian Ocean to Northeast Asia, Southeast Asia did not merely play a passive intermediary role as the bridge between the two regions, it was itself an engine propelling and sustaining the long-distance trade with its unique commodities widely sought after by regions in the northeast and to its west. Together the three maritime spaces were organically connected and created a miracle in maritime trade in human history.

**Final Remarks**

Efforts to put an emphasis on the geographical unity of maritime East Asia and the complementary roles of Northeast and Southeast Asia in long-distance trade are indeed long overdue. One hopes for a new historiography on maritime East Asia. Our knowledge of maritime Asia in general and the East Asian Seas in particular remains sketchy with gaps to be filled, puzzles to be solved and conflicting views to be reconciled. Although quality works have been produced in the past 20 years, especially on seaports and port-to-port connections, linkages between ports and hinterlands are still understudied. Only when the inland rural producers and the hinterland consumers are connected to the structure of maritime long-distance trade can one claim to have gained a proper appreciation of a fuller picture of the trade.
