

cognates of each other? Is it therefore possible that we are missing some points by simply following historical or colonial lines of distinction? Perhaps by asking such questions and by outlining a more expanded Southeast Asian “emporium” of artefact, design and corollary identities, strands of regional unity may once again emerge and be understood in creating new perspectives and insights that would be truly difficult to ignore, thereby making the idea of “Southeast Asia” more resonant or meaningful.

Cheah's bulky tome now sits in the reserve section of the Asian Center library, part of a reading list for a course on the Arts of Asia...on loan from this reviewer until the publisher obliges the library with a copy of its own.

Southeast Asia in the Fifteenth Century: The China Factor

Edited by Geoff Wade and Sun Laichen

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(Re?)Evaluating the China Factor: China in Fifteenth Century Southeast Asia

It is always a hard task to build a historical narrative around any region. There is a need to look for a period of convergence in each society's history. This is the period when they all shared changes or interruptions that maybe caused by one stimulus or by chain reaction. In the book “Southeast Asia in the Fifteenth Century: The China Factor”, the editors and contributors have showcased their new research about the importance of China in the historical events of the fifteenth century.

The book was successful in compiling the research of the current top Southeast Asian scholars. Numerous experts in history and archaeology have contributed their views on how different societies in Southeast Asia were before. This illustrious group was edited by both credible Chinese and Southeast Asian History experts: Geoff Wade and Sun Laichen. Wade is currently affiliated with the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies at the National University of Singapore and the University of Hong Kong. He specialises in Sino-Southeast Asian interactions. On the other hand, Sun is currently an associate professor at California State

University, Fullerton. He also specialises in Sino-Southeast Asian interactions specifically during the early modern era (1350–1800). Both editors have published extensively about their specialisations individually (pp. 411-412). Through the efforts of both authors, this 507-page book was published and have shed light on the said period.

China's Role and Influence

The book has four parts. The first is about the overview of the different historical events caused by Chinese presence (focusing on the Ming dynasty) in the region and its political influence in the changing cultural and spatial territories of the Southeast Asian mainland. Meanwhile, the second part narrates the changes in the soon to be Vietnam territories when Chinese governance and scholarship were made available to them for their use. The third part features Tai and Khmer societies and their reactions to Chinese stimuli in terms of trade and technology. Lastly, the fourth part tackled the maritime activities of China and Island Southeast Asia.

Beside the spatial divisions of the editors above, we can also group the topics which tackle subjects like political assertion, economy, technology, and migration. The papers of Li Tana, John Whitmore, Momoki Shiro, and Ong Eng Ann Alexander centred on the territorial strain of China's assertion in the South. Meanwhile, the articles of Sun Laichen, Volker Grabowsky, Michael Vickery, Roxanna Brown and John Miksic showed how intense was the economic activity between China and Southeast Asia to the point that it changed each societies in terms of political and diplomatic policies. Adding to this, Christian Daniels and Pierre-Yves Manguin expressed in their articles the development of technologies between the societies and the social and political improvements that resulted from them. Last, Anthony Reid solely tackled the history of the so-called "strait Chinese" or the Chinese people that migrated to the islands of modern day Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines. Each article was adequately explained and valid evidence were painstakingly read and presented.

Triumph of Documents

Most authors have successfully accessed the available documents that were available to them even if they were written in different Asian languages. Wade, Sun, Daniels, and Ong were all well-versed in the Chinese language while Grabowsky, Li, Momoki, Vickery and Whitmore

have used important Southeast Asian documents to give us sufficient descriptions of the fifteenth century.

History through Artefacts

Archaeological data were also utilised by some of the contributors to reconstruct the fifteenth century world. Brown's search for the society that proves the ban of ceramic trade during the Ming period or also known as the "Ming gap" was aided by various archaeological reports in the region about the Chinese ceramic yields of these sites. Brown had look at them closely to see the sites where specific Ming ceramics are absent or in very few examples which she did successfully.

Success can also be said after reading Manguin's paper. Here, he wrote about the different technologies of boat-building developed in Southeast Asia. These boat designs have allowed the people to travel and trade intensely during those years. He also mentioned the existence of "hybrid" ships that both carry the local and Chinese shipbuilding designs. In these ships, the best part of each design was kept to produce new boats. Shipwrecks of these boats confirmed their existence.

Miksic also used underwater archaeological reports on shipwrecks to show the intensity of Southeast Asian and Chinese trade in the area. He practically listed each shipwreck that was discovered in the area's waters and laid the list of its contents. Numerous sherds of Chinese pottery were found all over the region. This solidified the presence (at least economically) of China. This proved how rich was the trade during that time.

The papers of Brown, Manguin, and Miksic further prove the importance of analysing archaeological data along with the written documents. Acceptance of design influences like what Manguin had discovered would never be known if such specially designed ships were not found and analysed. The same thing with the painstaking research of Brown and Miksic on important archaeological sites in Southeast Asia.

The Southeast Asia Question

The book is indeed a triumph in terms of scholarly articles backed with documents and archaeological data but somehow it failed to unify a region that was supposedly united by the *China factor*. It was my expectation after reading the book title that somehow, a new light will be shed in our present understanding of what is Southeast Asia and in this

case, during the fifteenth century. I was hoping that each society will be connected through their “Chinese” experience. In my opinion, the authors should have shown and explained their concept of what is Southeast Asia first. Then, they should have explained the importance of the China factor in changing the fifteenth century world.

It can be seen in the different parts of the book that the authors have no collective view of the whole region. Instead, they have focused on the societies that have experienced political and cultural assertions from China. On the other hand, societies that did not have the same experience were put to the end part. The topics are mostly about the basic physical existence of the Chinese and/or their trade products. One can formulate how the book lacks vision about what was the region during that time and why the China factor needs to be investigated in all societies. Is the China factor indeed a point of historical significance for every society?

For me, this book has failed to show a common view about the subject. Each article can stand on its own. I believe that each essay should have supplemented and proved a unifying theme for all ancient societies in Southeast Asia. The more that the reader moves to each article should strengthen their thesis that they sadly lacked or failed to focus on. It would have been a more fruitful and enlightening read if all contributions were harmoniously working towards a new view for the region.

Instead, we are now facing again age old debates that I thought were over. After reading the book, it was like taking David Steinberg’s journey again “In Search of Southeast Asia” (1986). It is asking again questions like “Is there really a region called Southeast Asia?” while Nicholas Tarling (1966) has already shown that it does exist in terms of significant historical events. Holding on to the idea that Southeast Asia is a legitimate geographical region will further strengthen the book and the importance of Chinese influence in the said region.

The China factor

All in all, the book is a good addition to Southeast Asian research. The sources that they have used and the new insights that they argued incite healthy debates about our views about the past. Each article clearly showed the China factor in each society. It would be better though if they had a common point that they would want to discuss. This would make the work more relevant and organised. Even so, I still recommend this book for Southeast Asian scholars and students.

References

- Steinberg, D. J. (ed.) 1986. *In Search of Southeast Asia: A Modern History*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- Tarling, N. 1966. *A Concise History of Southeast Asia*. New York: Praeger.

Asian Port Cities, 1600–1800: Local and foreign cultural interactions

Edited by Haneda Masashi

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This book is a product of a joint research project launched in 2005–comparative studies on the cross-cultural contacts in Asian port cities in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Masashi, p. xv)”. It preceded two conferences in 2007 which inspired these ten articles to narrate the intensive cultural contact that happened in maritime Asia in the said time period. This volume is intended to present a new methodological framework on comparing historical Asian port cities by gearing away from the seeming dichotomy between “European versus non-European” perspectives that treat Europeans and Asians as if they are separate entities, or what he defines as a Eurocentric historical view (Masashi, p. 2). As an aim, the editor would want to establish a framework of scientific discussion through the method of comparison that would hopefully incite other approaches too. Masashi highlights in his long introduction (and you may also say disclaimer) that Europe and Asia are words used in this book as a geographical unit rather than a representation of similar or contrasting (other than physical) characteristics of an area. Furthermore, he humbly recognises “that many points still need improvement (Masashi, p. xv)”.

As a strategic area of study, these port cities acted as business centres that supported the exchange of goods, services, languages, ideas, and other observable factors of comparison. This is why the editor sees these ports as a gateway to understanding Asian maritime worlds. By Asian maritime worlds, he means an ambiguous sphere with the sea at its centre that “connects two or more regions rather than dividing them (Masashi, p. 3)”. The editor limits the “discussion and analysis to port cities where at least one European East India Company established a fort