

## References

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

Edited by Haneda Masashi

2009. Singapore: NUS Press and Kyoto: Kyoto University Press. 233 pp.

Review by Kate A. Lim

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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

or factory (Masashi, p. 4)" during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. These cited locations are parts of China and Japan (Chapters 1 to 5), Indonesia (Chapter 6), Thailand (Chapter 7) and India (Chapters 8 to 10). The editor chose to limit the discussion through the presence of European East India companies in the said sites because for one, they have well-documented cases. Comparison may also be perceived to be easier with the said scope where a concrete system of exchange is visible, however, to claim the said title of the book can already be misleading to some readers. Having some Asian ports and European East India Companies during the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries as common parameters, could this be substantial enough to set a model whereby the said dichotomy can be challenged?

Likewise, in another book review published at the *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Roderich Ptak points out his uncertainty if the editor was really able to achieve his goal in providing a framework of study. Ptak explains that "although a detailed list of items to compare is provided in the last part of the introduction, the studies that follow, are, for the most part, confined to the investigation of one single port or geographical entity—without offering systematic comparisons between different settings. This problem is typical for maritime conference volumes: they address all kinds of commercial and cultural links, across the sea, or from coast to coast. By contrast, direct comparisons between two or more distinct sites are, almost as a rule, less frequent (p. 1)" Nevertheless, the author of this current review would still like to commend the editor and the writers, because generally speaking more than the technical side of setting a template of study, they were relatively effective in illustrating how the mentioned Asian communities were instrumental in shaping the maritime world (Ptak, 2010).

As a preparatory read, this book will surely stimulate anyone who is interested on the subject matter to visualise how this exchange and interactions came about in ports. In the first chapter written by Masashi himself, he compared the attitude of the state towards foreign trade as reflected with the interpreters and the children with mixed lineage in Canton and Nagasaki and also contrasted it with Bandar Abbas. He claims that this difference in attitude resulted in various situations of political and social considerations. In Chapter 2, Matsui Yoko also touched on the recognition of children with mixed lineage, the social and legal questions of foreign men and women and their association with Japanese locals in Nagasaki during the Edo period. Yoko points out how

the law would protect a child even with a Japanese prostitute mother (the child would not be allowed to go with the father), where foreign criminals would be judged—basically in their hometown and how these foreigners were treated as short-term residents who would not fall under Japan's jurisdiction. Liu Yong in Chapter 3 also notes how Chinese merchants control with their European trade in a competitive port as Canton by stating like how the Dutch traders would adapt, respect and build their credibility with their Chinese partners.

Chapters 4 and 5 would be more interesting to art and archaeology enthusiasts as the book moves towards inspecting material culture in Japan and China. Other than business exchange, further social influences became apparent during the mid-Edo period (eighteenth century) in Japan—noticeably with what Ito Shiori in Chapter 4 observed in the influences made in the Japanese paintings by the Western and Chinese communities. In this section, Shiori presented twenty-three colourful figures on the different styles of paintings. He documented the driving factor in the artists' selection of motifs which is primarily due to accessibility and/or exposure to a new perspective. Its choice however would also depend on his/her personal taste. As for Chapter 5, competing Chinese and Japanese porcelains during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were the centre of discussion. Supplementing the book with sixty-one samples, Liu Zhaohui concluded that the trade between the two cities where in Jingdezhen (Chinese) porcelains first exported to Japan deeply influenced imari (Japan's) blue-and-white. As Chinese porcelains declined during the 1650's, Japan boosts its claim to dominate porcelain exports and thus initiated rivalry with China to please the European market.

Leonard Blusse in Chapter 6 reminisce the Old Batavia as he narrated a glance of its history that was reflected from having a large mercantile operations that gained monopoly over Asian commerce from the Dutch Republic. As the Dutch move and traded to the West, they also interacted with the Kingdom of Ayutthaya, Thailand or Siam. Moving further, in Chapter 7 Bhawan Ruangsilp discussed the responsibilities of the Dutch settlers, highlighting extraterritorial rights and jurisdiction issues. Meanwhile, Chapter 8 by Soren Mentz focused on the role and the cultural interaction between the British merchants in the Madras with the Indian population that was kept at a minimum. While in India, the diary of Ananda Ranga Pillai, a courtier from Pondicherry was a helpful document for writer Philippe Haudriere in Chapter 9 who investigated the

complex association amongst the French and native settlers of the trading post. This was made evident between the Governor and the courtier who maintained a good relationship as long as commercial prosperity is stable. In the last chapter by Nagashima Hiromu, he reviewed the locations in Surat where European factories and facilities were stationed. He was able to trace that they were constantly moving unlike the Dutch in Japan. He also talked about the architecture and ownership details of these companies during the time of Mughal Empire which was supplemented with various maps and vibrant visuals.

More than the technical critique of what Ptak suggests having to struggle to be compelled with identifying common denominators; this read demonstrates how players highlighting Asian dominance over their trading ports were crucial in shaping interactions between their business partners. As a point of reference, this trade prosperity as an overlying interest was obviously instrumental in this exchange of social, cultural and political traditions. As Asian nations continue to compete successfully in world economy (Frank 1998), the articles written provided an overview as to what factors motivate actions and decisions amongst actors.

Although one cannot confine all the comparative notes on *Asian* maritime worlds, as a point of improvement, an enhanced version of the book would perhaps include an apparent representation of other Asian nations that may have been significant players during the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries. To further assert the title of the book and giving more weight in it, other investigations and narratives could be possibly included so as to avoid displacing other substantial port events and locations. After all, "the study of maritime Asia is strongly indigenised, rooted in the various historiography of various areas of Asia, a frequently the work of Asian scholars" (Wills Jr., p. 19).

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Wills, J. E. Jr. 2011. *China and Maritime Europe: 1500–1800, Trade, Settlement, Diplomacy and Missions*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

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