

maritime tradition began. He did impeccable research and maximised varied sources. This book is indeed a traditional and comprehensive historical work. The most interesting element of the book for me is the perspective of the author. As I look back, the book was finished during the start of the Cultural Revolution of China. Incidentally, Lo's family was entangled with the founding of the Republic of China by Sun Yat Sen. His father was a diplomat under this government that is why he had a varied educational background as his family travelled around the world.

During the 1950s, Lo had been living in the United States after finishing his master's and doctoral studies. Lo's research is indeed very important during those times. As World War II ended, the Cold war started and the events in China gave the country much international interest. As they build their new country with a new identity and government, researchers from non-Communist Chinese such as Lo provided interesting perspectives especially as he gave much value on the country's strong suit, its unity. Even though this book did not reach China during those times, it is still of importance. This book carries the life's work of a man that had a different view of China during its pivotal moment. In the end, he still believed in its unity and greatness as he held on to the China's illustrious past.

*The Portuguese and the Straits of Melaka, 1575-1619*  
**Power, Trade and Diplomacy**

Paulo Jorge Pinto De Sousa, Translated by Roopanjali Roy.  
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**They Were Here First**

Review by Joan Tara Reyes

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Most people forget that the Kingdom of Portugal was the first European country that sank its teeth on the lucrative trade available in Southeast Asia known to them as the Far East. Unlike the Spanish, Dutch, French and British, the Portuguese relatively started early and enjoyed trade monopoly for a relatively short period of time. The book of Paulo Jorge de Sousa Pinto tells this story of how state of the art navigation prevailed and how mismanagement brought this empire to its end. This book consists of five chapters with 336 pages of text. It includes some

coloured and black and white figures, maps and documents. This is de Sousa's long-term research first written in Portuguese then edited and translated into this book. De Sousa is a researcher and lecturer at the Institute of Oriental Studies, School of Human Sciences, at the Catholic University of Portugal.

### **Book Chapters**

The first chapter is about the workings of the Portuguese empire in SEA. It explains how the spices from Moluccas would be transported, stored and taxed in the different trade ports of Portugal namely Melaka in modern day Malaysia and Goa in India. In these ports, Portuguese officials act like despots instead of representatives of the crown. Even with this kind of mismanagement, the trade for spices, Chinese goods, and Indian silk was so lucrative that nobody minded the indiscretions. This did not last long as Javanese and Acehnese leaders started to trade with other European countries like the Dutch. The sultanate of Johor also started to trade spices creating great competition with Melaka. Even the Spanish became the Portuguese's competitors as the former traded intensively for Japanese and Chinese goods in the port of Manila in the Philippines. As these European competitors gained more territory and turned highly militarised, especially the Dutch, the Portuguese-controlled ports became more and more isolated.

In the second chapter, de Sousa narrated how the Portuguese empire reacted to the presence of other Europeans. The empire tried to build fortresses on strategic areas first manned by qualified Portuguese soldiers. Then the time came when less and less skilled soldiers and officers were sent to their ports. As they weakened, the Spanish and Dutch particularly got stronger holds in their respective colonies and local allies. During the late 1500s, the Portuguese tried to imitate their colonial foes especially the successful Spanish but to no added advantage. Their lack of wealth for building forts, compensating soldiers and officers, and supplying arms and war ships prevented them from gaining territories and political presence in Southeast Asia

The third chapter further discusses more problems for the Portuguese such as the changing political climate in the Southeast Asian region. As new sultans take over the sultanates, alliances continually changed, Melaka started to wane because of the formation of the Johor sultanate and the constant attacks from Aceh. Most Europeans waited for

the outcome of the instability but Portugal remained to protect its interest in Melaka. The empire also tried to connect with the Spanish as the Dutch and English militarily opposed their Latin rivals but it did not materialise. The Dutch was unstoppable and successful in controlling the seas. The VOC or the Dutch East Indies Company was officially formed and took roots in Batavia in 1619. The fourth chapter discusses the intricacies of the Malay sultanates that helped or destroyed further Portuguese attempts in gaining influence. Internal politics and economic interests, personal ambitions of sultans, and even aspects of Malay culture played on their standing in Southeast Asia. This showed how unstable the hold of the Portuguese and how volatile their political relations were. It seems that the Southeast Asian sultanates quickly adapted to the economic changes than the Portuguese. This made the local elite more active in the trade.

Such local intricacies were further discussed in the fifth chapter centred on the city of Melaka. This is the most special city for Portugal as the centre of their political power in Southeast Asia. Goans, Javanese, Chinese, and other Asian merchants lived in this city while the Malaccan-born Portuguese called *casados* led with their Iberian cousins. Political and religious positions control the city. All these relationships were connected like a web hanging on the promise of lucrative commercial ventures and the gain of military heroism. Some of the important Portuguese took centre stage in some parts of the chapter as the author narrated their stories of valour and enterprise. As de Sousa concluded his book, he reiterated the importance of the Portuguese documents and experience that could shed more light on the history of the Southeast Asian region. The Portuguese experience is a good story to be told and it should not be forgotten even though it was a short-lived imperial pursuit in Southeast Asia. After all, they were our first.

### **Some Comments**

The author presented a traditional historical narrative based on archival documents of the Portuguese experience in the East. Most of all, he wrote about a topic that was previously overlooked. Most Southeast Asians would gravitate towards the language and documents of their most enduring colonisers. Most forget that Portuguese documents are among the oldest European-written documents about the “farthest” Asian region. Being the earliest and apparently weakest European imperialist, they reserve a very different point of view during those times. These

points of view can be read in de Sousa's book. For Southeast Asian historians, these documents would present new sources of narratives. On the other hand, this book is clearly a continuation of European historical narrative set in the new lands. Here, they would set their new territories and gain political influences as they did in the Old World. European wars and alliances were also played in Southeast Asia. They would fight and align among themselves as easy as how they would do it in Europe within the distinct situations presented by the locals. The Portuguese clearly lost this fight but still it should be studied to understand the history of imperialism in Southeast Asia. Their experience highlights that imperialism is not something that a civilisation stumbles on as Portugal experienced. Imperialism is a stage a civilisation is ready for in order to endure. This was clearly shown by the Spanish empire.

Spain was the exact opposite of Portugal during the start of their imperialism. Unlike the savvy Portugal, Spain had no maritime technology nor experience as they were landlocked by the Moors. After the Reconquista, the Mediterranean promised a whole new world of commerce and wealth (Kamen 2004). Luckily, Spain already had set up certain institutions to control newly acquired kingdoms. Rules for organisations were laid. The veteran military was already in place. Then, maritime technology were outsourced from Portugal and the Italian states. It would only take a little time as Spain laid their plans outside Europe. They sailed to the Indies before the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century and the rest was imperial history that lasted for more than three hundred years in four continents. Clearly, Spain was ready while Portugal was not. Spain's institutions of control, and later the Netherlands' and Britain's commercial models (and military prowess) were evidently more effective. The Portuguese experience was a very good instrument in focusing on such models. Then again, the cultural aspect of imperialism is a different story altogether. As the last chapter discussed the city of Melaka, stories of the *casados*, catholicism, and even Goan influences were highlighted. One will comprehend that the empire left its indelible mark for the city will forever bear the marks of their Portuguese experience or should I say heritage? In this case, did the Portuguese really fail?

## Reference

Kamen, H. 2004. *Empire: How Spain became a World Power, 1492-1763*. New York: Perennial.