Part One Waterscapes

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Geography as destiny? The role of water in Southeast Asian history

Standard historical narratives usually contain iconic images, epitomizing their central themes. In Indonesian history, one such emblematic scene is said to have occurred in the port-city of Makassar, South Sulawesi (Celebes), in the first half of the seventeenth century. A representative of the *Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie* (VOC, Dutch East India Company) confronted the leaders of the twin kingdom of Goa-Tallo', lords of this thriving east Indonesian entrepôt, and demanded that non-Dutch access to Moluccan spices be curbed. Each time the Company official pressed his case, the ruler responded with variations of the same statement: 'God has made the earth and the sea, and has divided the earth among men and made the sea common to all'.¹

This exchange symbolizes both the crucial role of oceans and trade in Southeast Asian history, and the conflict between indigenous and European interests and perceptions. This fundamental difference was not rooted in Asian maritime or commercial incapacity, but reflects rather the more aggressive attitudes of the European powers, which in turn derived from the dynamics of their history. Charles Tilly (1990) has argued that the burgeoning states of early modern Europe were driven by the competitive pressures of 'coercion and capital', as the accumulation of wealth and power formed a mutually reinforcing spiral. Initially supported by royal resources, and later by state-backed trading companies, the Europeans entered the southern seas with a desire to dominate. They regarded cannon and exclusive contracts not only as legitimate instruments of mercantile policy, but as indispensable if they were to be able to operate profitably in these waters. This is not to say that Southeast Asian kings and chiefs were indifferent to the economic, and hence political, potential of trade. On the contrary, they strove to concentrate commerce in their harbours, offering security and access to commodities in exchange for gifts and taxes. However, their demands were moderated by their awareness that extortion would drive shipping to less demanding ports beyond their political reach. The Europeans were more ambitious, seeking to extend their hegemony over the main sea-lanes. But Asian sea-faring skills, social and political networks, and consequent access to products, markets and protec-

¹ Stapel 1922; Resink 1968; L. Andaya 1981; Wolters 1999.

tion gave them a powerful edge over the newcomers. This social capital had been generated by many centuries of maritime interaction, and consequently had been shaped by the physical features of the Southeast Asian world.

As Fernand Braudel (1975:23) has observed, geography 'helps us to rediscover the slow unfolding of structural realities, to see things in the perspective of the very long term, geography, like history, can answer many questions ... it helps us to discover the almost imperceptible movement of history, if only we are prepared to follow its lessons and accept its categories and divisions'. Drawing on the long French tradition of social geography, Braudel's famous work on the Mediterranean traces the patterns of interaction between setting, structure and events. Because of its sea-focussed physical structure, its diversity of cultures, and rich and multi-layered trade, the Mediterranean has been a favoured model for historians seeking the underlying patterns of Southeast Asian history. As I have suggested elsewhere, an additional factor in the popularity of this analogy has been that it seemed to offer a way of acknowledging the openness of the region to economic and cultural penetration, without reducing it to peripheral and subaltern status.²

Water has been a decisive factor in Southeast Asia's historical development in a number of ways, many of which are discussed elsewhere in this volume, but our focus here is upon the impact of water-borne commerce. Over thousands of years, Asian waters have been much traveled, and it has often been suggested that the central dynamic of Southeast Asian history is to be found in the interaction between peoples, primarily through trade: down the rivers, along the coasts, across the seas and oceans. If this focus was once restricted to 'island Southeast Asia' (Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines), more recent research, as we will see below, acknowledges the crucial significance of trade on 'the mainland' (Myanmar or Burma, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam). This emphasis raises fundamental questions concerning the relative roles of local agency and external influence. The resulting debates encompass such issues as the differing strengths of various communities in commerce, and the role of trade in state formation, and in the dissemination of world religions. Long distance economic exchanges are also seen as central to the development of urban society, cultural change and identities.

The old colonial-era image of Southeast Asians, as passive beneficiaries of successive waves of civilizing invaders from overseas, has long been abandoned. Indian cultural influence cannot be explained in terms of Hindu colonization; it is no-longer advisable to see Islam as a uniformly thin veneer imposed by an alliance of local kings and foreign traders, and even the notion of a European 'civilizing mission' has been undermined. On the other hand, there is a growing if grudging recognition that Chinese were not just parvenu merchants or ignorant coolies serving imperial goals, but had a much longer

² Sutherland 2003; Guillot, Lombard and Ptak 1998; Reid 1988:xiii-xv; Chaudhuri 1990.

and deeper history in the region. Topics of this scale and complexity cannot, and need not, be explored here; all are subjects of ongoing debate, and there is already an impressive body of literature around these themes.³ One common point of departure, however, is the recognition that any understanding of Southeast Asia must begin with the geographic imperatives of location, water and wind.

Geography

The force of the constraints and opportunities that have helped form Southeast Asia can only be understood if the implications of its location are fully accepted. The region lies between the two great economic powers of Asia. Both India and China were vast and complex centres of production and consumption, generating a surplus of manufactured goods, such as ceramics, textiles and metalware, while offering a wealthy market for the exotics produced by the forests and seas of Southeast Asia, including foods, dyestuffs and medicines. The logic of ocean-currents, land-barriers and Straits channeled shipping through certain sea-lanes, enabling settlements on neighbouring coasts, estuaries and beaches to tap into the flow of goods by offering shelter and services. Moreover, and crucially, Southeast Asia fell under the regulating rhythm of the monsoon winds, which determined climatic and hence sailing patterns up the East African coast from Madagascar, to the Persian Gulf, and across to southern Japan and down to west Papua. These winds change direction, driven by temperature fluctuations in Siberia, Central Asia and Australia. Typically, the north easterlies blow down across the South China Sea from November to January, while the south west monsoon brought vessels from India between May and October. The monsoons, like the more southerly trade winds, filled the sails of ships carrying commodities across a wider 'Indian Ocean' trading system. These air currents thus influenced economic exchange in an area that extended from the southern shores of the Black Sea to Madagascar, including the present day Turkey and the Middle East, and reached across the Indian sub-continent, Southeast Asia and China to Japan and Korea.

Southeast Asia, as its name implies, was on the fringe of this system, but in another sense it was central. A glance at a map confirms that travelers between China and India, who sought to maximize the benefits of water transport, had

³ See Tarling 1999 for overviews of the state-of-play and bibliographic essays; the thirty one volumes of collected articles published by Ashgate/Varioum under the general series title *An expanding world; the European impact on world history, 1450-1800*, and periodicals such as the Paris based *Archipel* (since 1971) or Leiden's *Itinerario* (1977) for reviews of the literature and information on conferences. In 1979 *Archipel* issued a special number (18) on trade and shipping in the southern ocean.

several options. One was to combine shipping with land crossings, although 'land' is perhaps misleading, given the crucial role of rivers and canals in carrying cargoes from sea to sea. Early harbours important in handling goods moving across the areas now included in southern Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand and Myanmar were located in the deltas of the Mekong, Chao Phraya, Salween and Irrawaddy (Cooke and Li Tana 2004). Here boats could be used on man-made canals or natural streams to lighten the load, while the rivers provided access to inland markets or sources of commodities. Another possibility was to sail further south in the Andaman Gulf or the Gulf of Siam, and there make use of portage to have commodities carried across the narrow Isthmus of Kra.

But traders and skippers could also keep to the water, and pass through the Strait of Malacca or Sunda, between the Malay Peninsula and Sumatra, or Sumatra and Java, respectively. In either case, goods moving between India and China had to wait for the change of winds. An obvious transit region was around the Strait of Malacca, which not only provided the shortest sea-route, but also were on the edges of the complementary monsoons. Quick turn-arounds were impossible; large ocean-going vessels, sometimes carrying many hundreds of men, had to lie up for months in harbour, where they were the focus of port-based life and a magnet for the small ships of the coastal feeder-traffic.⁴ The resulting ramifications in trade and social contacts were felt throughout littoral zones, into estuaries and up rivers; commodities and ideas were carried in sailing vessel, canoes and rafts, by pack animals and porters into apparently remote corners of the region.

To appreciate the significance of this, we must re-tune our minds, forgetting maps in which Southeast Asia is a neatly defined patchwork of states, brightly clad in the cartographic livery of colonial empires, or proudly distinct in separate colours, emphasizing new national borders. This familiar image should be allowed to fade, enabling the seas and oceans to predominate. Appropriate emphasis can then be given to the western and eastern maritime arenas. The Bay of Bengal is the first, linking Sri Lanka, the Coromandel coast and Bengal to Burma, Thailand and the Malay Peninsula. The second is the South China Sea, connecting the east coast of the Malay Peninsula to Vietnam, southern China, Taiwan, the Philippines and Borneo's northern shores.

But such a shift in focus is only a beginning, albeit a good one. We should not concentrate on the Bay of Bengal or the South China Sea exclusively, because they derive much of their importance from the waters beyond. The Bay of Bengal opens into the Indian Ocean to the south, offering access not

⁴ Pluvier 1995:3; Cribb 2000. There is an overwhelming literature on Indian Ocean history; for introductions see Pearson 2003; Das Gupta and Pearson 1987; Chaudhuri 1990; McPherson 1993; Risso 1995; Tagliacozzo 2002. On Indian ships, see Mathew 1997. For a comparative perspective, see Tracy 1990, 1991. See also Reid 1993a:36-53; Manguin 1980; Ng 1983:137-63.

only to the Swahili coast, but also to the rich Arabian Sea, and through it to the Red Sea, the Mediterranean and the Gulfs of Persia and Oman. While the shallow South China Sea was more enclosed, within the arc of Malaysia, the Indonesian and Philippine archipelagos, its waters nonetheless blended with those of smaller seas: Sulu, Celebes, Banda and Java. Some of the commodities from the islands of southern and eastern Southeast Asia were rich enough to draw ships to this periphery since ancient times.⁵

This emphasis on the sea must not blind us to the ongoing, if in many ways less visible, importance of land communications. The hunger for Asian spices drove early Europeans to seek a trans-ocean route to Asia, but we should remember that the caravan trade was more significant until well into the seventeenth century. From the eastern Mediterranean, merchants traveled through modern Syria, Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan, and then had to brave the Gobi and Takla Makan deserts before reaching China. Another major route linked land and sea travel at the Red Sea ports of Mocha and Aden, feeding Indian Ocean commodities into Europe and Asia Minor. It has even been suggested that more spices might have reached Asia in 1600 if the Portuguese had never sailed into the Indian Ocean, as their interference with traffic into Alexandria blocked more exotics from entering Europe through the Muslim networks than their own ships carried.⁶ In mainland Southeast Asia caravan trails linked Northern Burma and Siam to Vietnam and Southern China, and by the mid seventeenth century, at least, relatively densely populated Java also had a few major roads with toll-gates and permanent bridges. Networks of horse, ox-cart and porter trails connected the interior with the coasts, and crossed water-sheds to link river systems, providing supplements and even alternatives to water transport.⁷ While these routes might have been much more labour intensive, they did offer inland populations the chance to seek the most favourable economic and political conditions for their transactions. Land and sea were linked by interlocking webs of collecting centres, markets, entrepôts and feeder routes. However, water remained a more efficient transport medium, particularly for bulkier cargoes; it has been estimated that it required only 20% of the energy expenditure required for movement by land.⁸

Besides the oceans and the seas, rivers provided another important element of Southeast Asia's water-borne heritage. Kenneth Hall (1985:2-3) has described how two different types of river system exerted their influence on early state formation.⁹ In island Southeast Asia many streams flow from interior mountains to the sea, where populations clustered near river mouths. A distinction emerged

⁵ Glover 1990; Pearson 2003:47-61; Ray 1999.

⁶ Waites 1999:64; Abu-Lughod 1989; Frank 1998.

⁷ Hall 1999:221-2; Schrieke 1957:102-20; Reid 1993a:53-61; L. Andaya 2000.

⁸ Miksic 1990:122; Pearson 2003:29; for more modern organizations see Bruijn 1990; Menard 1991.

⁹ Hall 1985:2-3 ; also Bronson 1977 and Hall 1999.

between the relatively inaccessible peoples of the inland and upland, the 'hulu' in Malay terminology, and the down-river settlements.¹⁰ Any chief who controlled the river mouth could manipulate the exchange of inland goods, such as forest produce or gold, for imports like salt, metals or textiles. Pressure could then be exerted on peoples of the interior, and alliances forged. The resulting 'partial hegemony through direct rule of only coastal plains and river mouths' (Hall 1985:3) was the defining characteristic of such 'dendritic' or tree like polities (Christie 1995:270). Jan Wisseman Christie (1990) stresses that these states were not mere passive 'conduits', as they compartmentalized and managed trade in three distinct segments, dealing respectively with raw materials from the interior, manufactures and sea-products from the coast, and imported valuables. This was typical of Sumatran, Bornean and Malay chiefdoms and even later sultanates. The great rivers of Kalimantan – the Rajang, Kapuas, Barito and Mahakam – provided channels for limited political and economic penetration of the interior. The shorter streams of Java's north coast, such as the Demak, and those of the east coast of Sumatera, facing the Strait of Malacca and the Java Sea (the Asahan, Siak, Inderagiri, Batang Hari and Musi) were also central to the power of local rulers. Nineteenth century Terengganu on the East Coast of the Malay Peninsula was a typical later example, where the Kemaman, Dungun and Terengganu were the main rivers, with the last directly administered by the Sultan and the others under powerful if subordinate chiefs.¹¹

However, the second main type of river system described by Kenneth Hall (1985) offered richer opportunities, including as it did broad and fertile plains, fed by tributaries and streams, which could provide sustenance for rice growing peasantries. Here power might be accumulated on a much grander scale, by such 'classical' states as Pagan on the Irrawaddy in Burma (11-14th century), Angkor near Tonle Sap in Cambodia (9-13th century), or the independent Dai-Viet state in the Red River basin (from the 10th century). Great rivers like the Solo or the Brantas (central and east Java), Burma's Salween, the Chao Phraya of Siam or the mighty Mekong, which runs through modern Southern China, Laos, Cambodia and southern Vietnam, shaped not only the physical but also the political and cultural ecology of Southeast Asia.¹²

Southeast Asia's location between major trading centres, and the patterns of oceans, seas, rivers and winds made much of the region open to interaction with distant lands. Add to this the attractions of local commodities,¹³ and it was inevitable that contact and commerce over long distances would be a constant historical theme. In more recent times, with their emphasis on the centrality of nation-states, and on the bureaucratic administration of fixed

¹⁰ L. Andaya 2000; B. Andaya 1993a, 1997a; Li 2001.

¹¹ B. Andaya and L. Andaya 1982; Sandbukt 1991; Wolters 1999:160-2; Sutherland, 1978.

¹² Marr and Milner 1986; Cooke and Li 2004; Aung-Thwin 1995; Hall 1999; Taylor 1999.

¹³ B. Andaya and L. Andaya 1982; Tarling 1999, II-1. L. Andaya 2000; Reid 1993a:2-36.

categories,¹⁴ Southeast Asia's openness has often confronted governments and even historians with dilemmas of definition. But before we can consider the historiographical ambiguities posed by the region's fluid frontiers, we need to understand just how deeply rooted these patterns of interaction are.

Chronology

The 'openness' of insular Southeast Asia was demonstrated as early as circa 3000 BCE, when the western and central parts of the archipelago were settled by Austronesian-speakers. These pottery-using peoples, with varied agricultural economies, migrated from Taiwan, through the Philippines and the Indonesian Archipelago, to Madagascar, Melanesia and the Pacific, with groups hiving off and settling as they went. They encountered existing populations, and adapted their own technologies to local environments. The very nature of their travel, by boat, was accompanied by the introduction of highly developed shipbuilding and navigational skills, and is reflected in mythologies. Marine food resources were also important in the development of early settlements.¹⁵ Exchanges of commodities between ecological zones, and the exploitation of advantageous niche resources, encouraged transactions between groups. Collecting centres, where products were accumulated, have been located in the Malay Peninsula from the first millenium BCE to the early first millenium CE. Such centres would have been located in strategic locations, such as those that could control an important route or transportation node.¹⁶

Given this background, it is not surprising that maritime contacts have a long history, going back more than 2500 years; Arabs were sailing to west India's Malabar Coast, and Chinese to the adjoining northern regions of modern Vietnam, in the pre-Christian era. Early on, commodities such as Moluccan spices reached distant markets, having passed through extended chains of transactions. The earliest archeological find of cloves, from a plant native only to Maluku, is from a Mesopotamian kitchen store dated at circa 1700 BCE, and sources document Chinese use of the spice back to the third century BCE.¹⁷ Trade oriented coastal cities such as Broach (Barugaza), on the north-west Indian Gulf of Cambay, or Coromandel's Masulipatnam had emerged by the beginning of the Common Era. Roman commerce with India reached a peak during the first and second century CE, and soon encompassed the east coast. An increasingly wealthy southern China was also turning seaward as the land caravan trade was disrupted. As will be described below, under the

¹⁴ Scott 1995, 1998; Aung-Thwin 1998; Sutherland 2001, 2005.

¹⁵ Cribb 2000; Bellwood 1999; Mangun 1991; Wolters 1999:179-80; Hall 1999; F. Dunn and L. Dunn 1984.

¹⁶ Miksic 1995; Leong 1990; L. Andaya 2000:23.

¹⁷ L. Andaya 1993:1-2; see also on cloves in Ptak 1999; L. Andaya 2000; Pearson 1996 and 2003.

T'ang (618-907) and Song (960-1126) dynasties China's markets drew traders from the west, including the newly emerging Muslim world. From the first millenium CE onwards, 'true entrepôts' developed in Southeast Asia. These centres of transshipment and commerce were strategically located, offered safe warehousing, food and water as well as access to supplies of commodities accumulated from local, regional and long-distance trade. Despite the existence of long-distance links since about the third century BCE, regional trade was probably – and logically – more important to Southeast Asian societies until maybe the fifth century CE.¹⁸

Christie (1995) gives an excellent overview of maritime Southeast Asian prehistory and its connections to trade.¹⁹ She notes the emergence of two main centres of wealth accumulation in the last few centuries BCE, one located on the Strait of Malacca, the other in the southern Java Sea region, the results of an 'explosion of trading activity' between about 500 and 200 BCE. Malay and Indonesian shipping probably carried the bulk of goods in the Bay of Bengal trade, and so was well placed to capitalize upon the growing Roman trade with India. During the fourth and fifth centuries southern China's trade in these seas expanded, leading Christie to comment that it is probable that 'this increased wealth from the China trade paid for the 'Indianization' of maritime Southeast Asia'. She concludes:

Trade appears to have been the key to economic growth; control of trade seems to have provided the key to political development. Moreover, trade in Southeast Asia waters seems to have [...] carried a substantial baggage of information and ideas along with material commodities. This suggests that the carriers of most of this trade were members of Southeast Asian communities rather than outsiders, and that the long-distance trade networks extending into the South China Sea and the Bay of Bengal were focused on the chiefdoms of western Indonesia and peninsular Malaysia. (Christie 1995:277.)

At the beginning of the Common Era trade already linked the Roman Empire, India and Southeast Asia, and by the second or third century Fu-Nan, where land and sea met in the lower Mekong delta, had developed into a commercial centre. From the second to sixth centuries Oc-Eo, Fu-Nan's port in Southern Vietnam near the Cambodian border, was a major entrepôt for sea-land traffic. Hall (1999:131) describes how the Fun-Nan traders 'went to China in order to exchange Mediterranean, Indian, Middle Eastern and African goods... for China's silk. But [...] sailors from the Sunda Strait area responded with entrepreneurial skill, and began to introduce their own products', substituting archipelago forest produce for frankincense and myrrh. By the fifth and sixth centuries south China and the Sunda State region were trading strongly, creating

¹⁸ Christie 1995:252-3; Chaudhuri 1985:34-62; Risso 1995; Christie 1990:42.

¹⁹ Christie 1995, particularly 251, 253, 277. See also Christie 1999 and 1990, 1991; Miksic 1995.

a climate in which the thalassocracy of Srivijaya could develop (670-1025). This South Sumatran polity's expanding trade with both China and India enabled Southeast Asian commodities and shippers to play an increasingly important role in maritime commerce. A polyglot population of merchants, skippers, traders and seamen sailed alongside the Southeast Asians. The commercial share of the various communities fluctuated. Persians were active in the seventh century, though the Arabs later eclipsed them; Gujarati and Coromandel shippers were then prominent, while the Chinese emerged strongly in the 1100s. From the mid-fourteenth to the mid-seventeenth century trade expanded, and with it the production or collecting of commodities, leading Anthony Reid (1993a) to characterize the period 1570-1630 as 'the boom years'.²⁰

We can get some idea of the exposure of Southeast Asian societies to these commercial and cultural currents, if we consider the routes that were traveled. O. Wolters (1999:132) concludes that Chinese were sailing to Southeast Asia as early as the tenth century. Early traders between India and China had hugged the coastlines, and then gone overland either at the Isthmus of Kra, or through natural and man-made channels across the lower Mekong plain. However, an easier all sea-route via the Strait of Malacca gained in favour from the beginning of the fourth century, heralding an expanding role for the Malays. Later history shows how the oceanic connection between Europe and Asia pioneered by the Portuguese facilitated trade expansion, and it seems logical that the earlier regional introduction of all-water freight movement, as opposed to shipping plus portage, also had a significant impact.

The all-important trade with China developed its own patterns, shaped by geopolitics and increasing knowledge (Ptak 1992, 2004). Up to the later fifteenth century, writes Denys Lombard (1995), the main route was that of the west. Ships sailed past the tip of the Malay Peninsula, to Cochin China via Tioman, along the Cham coast of the later Indo-China, then to Hainan in the Gulf of Tonkin, following the south China coast of Guangdong (Kwangtung) and south Fujian (Fukien) to reach the main ports of Canton (Guangzhou) and Quanzhou. Chinese, Indians, Persians, Arabs and Southeast Asians traveled between the ports along these shores. The early Muslim communities of Champa, together with those of Fujian and Guangdong, were linked into this network, which facilitated the spread of Islam. Vietnamese invasions, culminating in the fall of Vijaya in 1471, weakened the Chams, so contributing to the growth of an alternative passage.

There was also an 'eastern route' running more or less directly south from South Fujian's Quanzhou to Maluku and Timor. Ships threaded their way past the western coast of Luzon, through the Sulu Archipelago and the

²⁰ Hall 1999:195-6; Bellwood 1996; Manguin 1993a; Wolters 1970; Das Gupta and Pearson 1987: 'Introduction'; Reid 1993a:1-61; Kulke 1999; Ray 1999. Cribb 2000 gives maps showing trade routes and the rise of early states in Indonesia.

Sangihe and Taulud Islands off north Sulawesi to reach Ternate and Tidore. Ptak thinks this path may have been most popular in the late thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, but later declined, perhaps because of endemic piracy in the Sulu and Borneo seas. Another, linked seaway along the coast of north Borneo and then on to the Strait of Malacca, which was popular in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, is called the 'northern route' by Ptak. This benefited from the long established trade in sea and forest products of Brunei, which gained further in importance after the fall of Malacca in 1511, and also from the creation of the Spanish link with Mexico in the Philippines at the end of the sixteenth century. Chinese settlements of private merchants in the north Java ports, such as Tuban, were linked to both Maluku and the Straits by ships sailing an east-west course through the Java Sea. Perhaps for the sake of symmetry this could be described as 'southern', complementing the 'northern' path along the top of Borneo; later these two were less significant than the 'eastern' seaway between the Philippines and Borneo, and the coast-hugging 'western' route along the Southeast Asian mainland. By 1567 these two had become standardized within the Fujian trade complex as the Xiyang or Western Seas and Dongyang or Eastern Seas systems. West Javanese Banten was the wealthy southern terminus of the Western passage, while the Eastern was focused on Manila.²¹ Shifts in the location, or levels of use, of these commercial circuits would have profound effects on the polities and communities that were sustained by them.

The new arrivals from southern Europe fitted into these patterns. The Portuguese also followed the 'northern' route, heading east out of Malacca and turning southeast at the tip of north Borneo, through the Sulu Islands and past the pepper-rich coasts of eastern Kalimantan to reach Maluku. From the north, their compatriots in South China sailed between the Philippines and Borneo to Maluku, some going further south to the sandalwood island of Timor. These Portuguese, who had been settling on the southern Chinese coast since 1540, did a thriving business during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, working with local 'smugglers and pirates' despite imperial bans on trade. After 1557 Macau provided them with a base for expanding their commerce with Japan, the Philippines and India, and by the mid-seventeenth century the settlement was trading vigorously with Makassar, Manila and Tonkin. The Spanish were also a presence to be reckoned with, as in the later sixteenth century silver from Acapulco and Chinese commodities drew traders to Manila despite legal restrictions on access.²² As knowledge about more efficient routes spread, sailors adjusted, and the resulting shifts could offer

²¹ Taylor 1999:158, 173; Lombard 1995:13-4; Bouchon and Lombard 1987:65; Tonnesson 2005; Ptak 1992, particularly the map on p. 30. See also Wang 1998; Ptak 1999; L. Andaya 1999:3; Reid 1996, including the map on p. 16.

²² Ptak 1992:320; Souza 1987; Subrahmanyam 1993:208; Kathirithamby-Wells 1999:262-3.

new and profitable possibilities to harbours along their way. But the opposite was no doubt also true: port-polities able to provide a range of goods and services could draw business away from less well-managed rivals, who might actually have had a more advantageous location.

All these contacts fuelled cultural exchange and stimulated innovation. The adaptation of elements from Indian religions by Southeast Asian elites is one of the best-known examples of this process. Although Indian traders had been visiting Southeast Asia for hundreds of years, it was only when more sophisticated polities developed there that they sought and absorbed aspects of Indian culture. Hall (1999:193) comments that 'a cultural dialogue of profound importance to Southeast Asia generally developed between Fu-Nan and India' by the second or third century CE.²³ This dialogue, like those with other interlocutors in China, the Middle East and later Europe, went on for centuries, the changing content reflecting developments on all sides. In this context, the spread of Islam can be seen as a continuation of earlier processes.

After the Fatimid conquered Egypt (969 CE), existing Ismaili trade networks between the Middle East and India strengthened, as did those between India and China. During the prosperous T'ang (618-907) and Song (960-1126) dynasties, adherents of the new Islamic religion were major freight carriers between the western Indian Ocean and China, where Islamic quarters developed in a number of cities. Relations were not always smooth, and Muslims were expelled from Canton in 879 CE; some settled in Southeast Asia, reinforcing existing Islamic communities. But it was some four hundred years before the first Muslim states appeared in Southeast Asia, at the end of the thirteenth century. Islam gained further acceptance during the fourteenth century, when the new religion spread along the trade routes, creating enclaves in Java and Sumatra. In the mid-fifteenth century Islam in Southeast Asia received a decisive boost with the conversion of Malacca, a pivotal node in fifteenth and sixteenth century oceanic commerce. Sultanates emerged in the Malay Peninsula in the sixteenth century, and the following hundred years saw a strong expansion of the faith. The Portuguese conquest of Malacca in 1511 encouraged a partial shift of Malay settlement and Muslim commerce to more congenial ports, in the face of competition from aggressively Christian powers. Islam's position was consolidated during the sixteenth century. The prestige of the Islamic empires of the Mughals in India, the Safavid in Persia and the Ottomans in Iraq, Syria and Egypt further reinforced the image of Islam. Commercially active groups like the 'Moors' – as the Indian Muslims were known – and the Malays were vigorous proponents of the new religion. Victor Lieberman (1993) comments: 'The fifteenth through seventeenth centuries saw the creation of a distinctive Malayo-Muslim coastal commercial

²³ See also Mabbett and De Casparis 1999; Wolters 1999:108-9; Kulke 1999; B. Andaya 1999b.

culture along a three-thousand mile arc reaching from Western Sumatra to the Spice Islands and the southern Philippines'.²⁴

As Reid (1993a:12) has observed 'before the seventeenth century China was undoubtedly the most important market for Southeast Asian goods'. From the ninth to the fifteenth centuries, South Fujian's port Quanzhou became the centre of China's maritime trade, overshadowing the more southerly Canton, although it was to be surpassed by Amoy (Xiamen) from the late 1600s. Reid suggests that the symbolic beginning of the fifteenth century commercial boom could be dated from the famous expeditions of the Chinese admiral Zheng He (Cheng Ho) from 1405. The subsequent flourishing trade was dependent on the China market, despite the shocks attendant upon intermittently enforced bans on private trade. During such periods of theoretical isolation from foreign commerce, official 'tribute missions' from overseas were a significant means of exchange, while the enterprising southern provinces of China threw themselves into 'smuggling'. When Ibn Battuta visited Gujerati Cambay in northwest India in the mid-fourteenth century, he noted the diversity of trading communities there, including a strong Chinese presence. Contacts with the Middle East also increased during the 1400s, stimulated by the expanding trade.²⁵

At the end of the fifteenth century the Portuguese sailed into the Indian Ocean, an event which was once seen as marking the abrupt beginning of a new era. But the old image of a powerful Portuguese state ruling the seas has been abandoned in favour of that of a ramshackle system of maritime extortion. This system was relatively successful along the east African coast and western India, including the Gulf of Cambay, which controlled access to the rich Gujerati ports. The Portuguese were also quite powerful in the waters immediately around Malacca. But the Arabian Sea remained open to other traders, while the Portuguese were weak in the Bay of Bengal, and largely irrelevant east of the Strait of Malacca. By the second half of the sixteenth century Portuguese commerce was increasingly in the hands of private traders operating under state-granted contracts within an Asian context. But, as M. Pearson (1987) observes, the Portuguese had brought one major change: they claimed the right to control and tax all trade in the Indian Ocean. As early as 1499 the Portuguese king had declared himself to be Lord of Conquest, Navigation and Commerce of Ethiopia, Arabia, Persia and India. In 1500 the Indian Ocean had been a *mare liberum*, now cannon and the *cartaz* (pass) were intended to determine rights to trade. However, the Portuguese fleets, and their forts at Malacca and Tidore, were quite incapable of enforcing these pre-

²⁴ Lieberman 1993; Risso 1995; B. Andaya 1999b; Hall 1999; Das Gupta and Pearson 1987: 'Introduction':24.

²⁵ Pearson 2003; Ng 1983; Wang 1998; Wang 1981; Souza 1987; Risso 1995:45; Reid 1996; Ptak 1998; Ray 1999; Hall 1999:219.

tensions, and by the first half of the seventeenth century the Portuguese in Asia were increasingly marginalized. Nonetheless, a new principle had been introduced.²⁶

During the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries local Southeast Asian societies had still built and sailed large ocean-going vessels (Pearson 2003:63-75). *Jong* were the main carriers of the eastern Indian Ocean, and benefited from the booming pepper trade. But by the end of the 1500s these ships had vanished, leaving the bulk of the western Indian Ocean trade to the Gujarati, and the east to the Chinese. The resulting seascape encouraged Europeans to focus on the small-scale nature of indigenous shipping and the 'peddling' character of its trade. Pierre-Yves Manguin (1993b:209) rejects the idea that this disappearance of the big Southeast Asian *jong* was due to the Portuguese impact or technological failure, as the naval power of regional polities remained considerable. He stresses the causality of changing economic circumstances, which encouraged 'a new type of political power, with a growing emphasis on territoriality, centralisation, cash-cropping economy, absolutism, and the rise of belligerence at sea'. This maritime contraction and changing political climate precedes the 'mid seventeenth century crisis' which Reid sees as terminating Southeast Asia's Age of Commerce. Other historians, however, question the very existence of a crisis. Lieberman describes the idea of such a watershed as 'untenable' for the mainland, and Barbara Andaya doubts if the shift was so dramatic even in maritime Southeast Asia.²⁷

On the surface, the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries seem relatively amenable to a Eurocentric approach. The boom in trade during the 1600s is apparently inseparable from the expansion of the Dutch and English Company fleets, while the late 1700s saw the triumph of non-Asian 'country traders' operating out of an increasingly English India. But we should not assume that this must have meant a decline in Asians' business. On the contrary, even if their relative share of the maritime economy shrank, the actual intensity, volume and value of their commerce may have increased. Moreover, it seems that there was no Southeast Asia-wide decline in Asian trade. While the Dutch East India Company might have increasingly squeezed the Malay world (and the extent of this was subject to variation), the situation for the mainland was indeed very different.

During the 1600s, Gujarati merchants from northwest India strengthened their ties with Aceh, Johor, Kedah, Jambi, Gresik and Banten. Initially Surat remained the central West Asian distribution point for Southeast Asian commodities, such as spices and tin, although it gradually lost access to these

²⁶ Pearson 1987:84; Barendse 2002; Subrahmanyam 1990, 1993; Prakash 1997; Subrahmanyam and Thomaz 1991; Souza 1986.

²⁷ Lieberman 1993:479; see also the later publication in Lieberman 1999; B. Andaya 1997b:166-8; Reid 1993a:285-98, see also Chapter One; Reid 1999; Lieberman 1997; Sutherland 2005.

in the later seventeenth century as Dutch power grew in Indonesia. On the other hand, Gujarati traders, making use of English expertise, entered the Manila market from the 1660s, and developed it into a bridgehead for the China trade. S. Arasaratnam (1987:113) concludes that while Southeast Asia's commerce with Gujarat may not have grown in the seventeenth century, it did not decline.

Coromandel's age-old commerce with Southeast Asia, notably Malacca, the Burmese and Thai coasts, as well as Malayan ports (Kedah, Perak, Johor), Aceh, Jambi and Banten, remained so profitable that east Indian merchants persisted in visiting there despite tariffs and fees imposed in Dutch controlled ports. Coromandel trade with the independent states of mainland Southeast Asia flourished. The Burmese kingdom of Arakan imported cloth and pepper, in exchange for rice and slaves, while Ava was an even larger textile market. Tenassarim, to the south, fed Coromandel goods to its overlord Ayutthaya and to Cambodian ports. Similarly, Bengal's commerce with Southeast Asian boomed from the 1640s on, with foodstuffs, textiles, saltpeter and opium being exported in exchange for elephants, gold, tin and spices. In fact, as observes, the 'trade to mainland Southeast Asia remained an Indian preserve until the end of the century' (Arasaratnam 1987:120), despite Dutch and English attempts at infiltration.

Lieberman concludes that while there was a downturn in Southeast Asian trade in the mid-seventeenth century, this was a temporary slip that lasted a few decades at most, and not a severe structural shift. Despite this interruption, 'starting in the 1690s and more especially the 1730s, and continuing with but limited interruption into the nineteenth century, the overall volume of foreign trade grew sharply' (Lieberman 1995:801-2, 1999). Mainland Southeast Asia actually gained from the presence of the Europeans, which generated widening trade circuits and capital infusions, while Armenian, Indian and other Muslim merchants left Dutch controlled areas and brought their expertise with them. Burma, and particularly Thailand, benefited. The dislocating impact of Dutch political control over the Strait of Malacca and Indonesian markets in Maluku, Banten and Makassar for the archipelagos should not be underestimated, but Asian merchants adjusted. Some areas of Southeast Asia, such as the Malay Peninsula, Thailand and Manila showed an actual increase in Asian commerce. Lieberman also mentions a third factor underpinning flourishing trade in mainland Southeast Asia, namely the expanding activities of Chinese shippers and middlemen.²⁸

In the preceding paragraphs we have tended to see Southeast Asia as the southeastern fringe of the Indian Ocean system, emphasizing the relativity of European activity, and the continuity of Indian shipping and capital. But the

²⁸ Lieberman 1993:490-3, 1999. See also Lieberman 1995; Pombejra 1990; Cushman 1993; Blussé 1999.

Bay of Bengal was only one major maritime arena. The other was the South China Sea, and if we re-focus our attention on that arena, then our perspective changes, as different commodities, markets, freighters and skippers take centre stage.²⁹ This emphasis on China is crucial if we are to understand eighteenth century developments. In the late seventeenth century political turmoil in southern China ended when the Qing defeated the Ming. In 1683 Taiwan was conquered, and trade bans were consequently relaxed. This cleared the way for a surge in Chinese trade with Southeast Asia, as merchants from Fujian, Guangdong and Zhejiang (Chekiang) competed with the European companies for products such as pepper. Despite new bans, including a final one between 1717 and 1727, Chinese trade flourished.³⁰

The 1700s have attracted considerable attention from historians of Asia, and interpretations reflect the preoccupations of the times. From a European perspective it all seemed fairly straightforward. There was an undoubted shift mid-century, with the Dutch East India Company and Indian shippers losing ground to English (or Scots) and, somewhat later, American, country-traders. This applied in both the Bay of Bengal and the South China Sea, where commodities like tea and opium became increasingly important. This cold wind was felt most obviously by the Indian skippers. As Ashin Das Gupta (1987:140) observed, 'Asian ship-owners had always found it difficult to compromise with the Europeans because of the competition for the carrying trade, while the shore-based merchant had found accommodation both possible and often desirable'. The great Gujarati fleet 'dwindled into insignificance' and Muslim ship owning seemed to collapse' (Das Gupta 1987:134). But Indian merchants were also affected, and by the second half of the eighteenth century banking in India was also being taken over by the English. As for China, the English had been active there since 1701, and were regularly collecting cargoes from the 1720s. After 1734 the VOC moved in, but despite some initial successes it lost out to the English in the second half of the century. Since the problems in China coincided with successful pressure from the English and French Companies in India, from the mid eighteenth century on the Dutch East India Company, like the Indian skippers, gradually had to concede predominance on the high seas to the English.³¹

However, once again we cannot assume that this change in the balance of commercial power resulted in a generalized Asian economic decline. As had been the case in the preceding century, the many-leveled nature of commerce,

²⁹ The problematic issue of boundaries and regions in Southeast Asia continues to stimulate debate, see Kratoska, Raben and Schulte Nordholt 2005; Sutherland 2005; Subrahmanyam 1997; Evans 2002.

³⁰ Ng 1983; Viraphol 1977; Mazumdar 1998; Souza 1986; Blusse 1996; Gardella 1994.

³¹ Marshall 1987; Watson 1987:313; Torri 1990; Prakash 1998; Knaap and Sutherland 2004; Kwee Hui-Kian 2005. On the historiography of the eighteenth century, see Blussé and Gaastra 1998.

the complementary skills of the diverse participants, and the practised flexibility of traders combined to ensure there was no monolithic European victory. Southeast Asian kings and merchants had always had their trusted agents who could link them to wider networks, and such advisers, intermediaries and partners were even more essential for the newcomers from the north. Even the most powerful banker, wholesaler, broker or captain needed access to commercial intelligence, capital, political protection, commodities and markets. For hundreds of years, maritime officials like the *saudagar raja* (the king's merchant) and *syahbandar* (harbourmaster), or financial and commercial specialists like the *shroff* and *comprador*, remained indispensable brokers and counselors. Bruce Watson (1987) has also described the ways in which Indian merchants were part of both English East India Company and 'country' commercial activities in the century before 1760. Apparently peripheral areas, like east Indonesia, became increasingly integrated into Asian long distance trade networks that cut across emerging colonial spheres of influence.³² Moreover, as trade expanded, considerable space could be created in the margins and interstices of the system. Domination of the main ocean routes by Europeans might have displaced the long distance skippers from the Indian sub-continent, but it may well have increased the opportunities for smaller Asian shipping on coastal and feeder routes. As always, there were winners and losers, but perhaps the most spectacular success was reserved for the Chinese.

During the 'long eighteenth century' the economic logic of new markets and commodities shaped the pattern of trade, and Sino-Anglo cooperation was central to this process. Country traders, Chinese junks and Indonesian *perahu* – particularly those of the recalcitrant Bugis from South Sulawesi (Celebes) – met in harbours and exchanged cargoes from Sulu to the Straits. These profitable relationships were later to be epitomized in the role of Singapore, established in 1819. Reid (1997b) has noted that the resurgence of Southeast Asian commerce from the mid-eighteenth century onwards was dependent upon China's impressive development, particularly during the stable and extended rule of Emperor Qianlong (1736-1795). The impact of China during this period was such that the term 'Chinese century' has been used to characterize Southeast Asia between circa 1740 to 1840. Carl Trocki (1997) argues that the appearance of numerous Chinese settlements producing for the market was a new phenomenon of the mid-eighteenth century. While communities of Chinese merchants in Asian port cities were long established, going back to the Song (960-1126 AD), during the eighteenth century the pattern of 'off-shore' (that is, outside China itself) cash-cropping which had begun in Taiwan spread to Southeast Asia. This was linked to financing, migration and trade, which under-pinned

³² Hao 1970; B. Andaya 1978 notes the ambitious role of the Persians in the seventeenth century Thai court, and the accepted role of other foreigners, such as Chinese – and even Greeks. Marshall 1987; Watson 1987; MacLeod and Rawski 1998; Disney 1995.

the expansion of tin- and gold-mining, pepper, gambier and sugar production in places like Bangka, Perak, Sambas, Pontianak, Phuket, Kedah, Riau, Terengganu, Kelantan, West Java and Brunei. Such centres of commercial production could offer reliable sources of supply for Chinese traders and the China market. Trocki (1997:96) suggests that the embedding of these communities within Southeast Asia, usually in alliance with local rulers, represents 'the first elements of an emergent capitalist society'.³³

In the early nineteenth century, commercial expansion stimulated the need for feeder shipping by indigenous and Chinese sailing craft. Bugis sailors continued to supply Singapore with Straits produce through the 1800s, and they remained a factor on some routes through the twentieth century as well.³⁴ The period from the mid nineteenth century is more unequivocally dominated by the European powers, in a familiar story of expanding influence, subjugation, colonial state building and the emergence and vicissitudes of independent states. If we accept this hegemonic colonial framework, representatives of old diaspora trading communities are recast as 'middle-men', while border negotiations, and systems of tariffs and customs duties, carved Southeast Asia's lands and waters into neat pieces in an imperial jig-saw. Defining and confining become central preoccupations in maritime policy. The arrival of steam technology broke the power of the monsoons, at least for trans-oceanic shipping and longer regional routes. The first steam ships arrived in Indonesia in the mid 1820s, but the new fleets only began to expand significantly after the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869. Howard Dick (1987:5) notes that between 1869 and 1879 'the tonnage of steamships entering Singapore increased five-fold while that of sailing vessels (excluding Malay craft) declined by more than a quarter'. Steam also made its appearance on the great rivers, a notable example being Burma's state-subsidized Irrawaddy Flotilla Company. From the mid nineteenth century on, a 'mosquito fleet' of Chinese steamers plied the Straits and coasts; their low cost flexibility made them an irritating competitor of the European lines.³⁵ But in later decades the military, industrial and managerial skills of the Europeans gave them crushing advantages in that increasing number of sectors that they found both interesting and accessible.

Iron bands cut through the old geographic constraints during the second half of the nineteenth century. If in 1867 there were circa 10 km of railways in the Dutch East Indies, by 1939 this had grown to almost 7,500; Burma had 2,500 km by 1914. After 1885 modern railways in the Malay Peninsula enabled expanding tin-mines and plantations to move their products to the ports. In Indo-China, the largest item on the French colonial budget between 1900 and

³³ L. Andaya 1991; Reid 1997b; Blussé 1999; Trocki 1997:96. As always, there were precedents: Reid 1993a:32-6 for earlier examples of cash cropping.

³⁴ Wong 1960:74-7 on the Bugis; L. Andaya 1991; Leirissa 1993; Dick 1975a, 1975b.

³⁵ Campo 1992:339-86, 1993; Reid 1993b.

1935 was infrastructure, providing almost 3,000 km of railways, canals and metalled roads. A glance at the railway map reveals the new pattern of colonial economic and administrative centres: Mandalay, Rangoon, Chiangmai, Bangkok, Kunming, Hanoi, Haiphong, Phnom Penh, Saigon, Kuala Lumpur, Singapore, Medan, Palembang, Jakarta, Semarang, Surabaya, and Manila.³⁶ New road networks and the coming of the bicycle and the automobile further freed people from dependence on water transport, while the telegraph and air travel slashed communication times.

This revolution in transport supported the creation of a new political and economic order in Southeast Asia, in which land seemed to triumph over sea, and new types of cities became the centres of theoretically integrated states within clear borders. Times had changed. We have seen that the old views of European hegemony in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries have had to make way for recognition of continuities in the Asian maritime world. Both the relativity of the technological gap between West and East, and the resilience of regional trading systems, have now been acknowledged. But in the final decades of the 1800s Asian commerce was becoming increasingly subordinated to the white-managed, steam-driven rhythms of a more modern global economy, with trade and transport policies serving imperial political aims (Tagliacozzo 2005). Although non-European institutions and networks persisted into the twentieth century, they were increasingly seen as remnants of a fading world, or as illegitimate. Discussions on the role of trade and shipping in modern Southeast Asia have tended to focus on issues of 'economic integration' and 'state formation', particularly in the case of the Indonesian Archipelago.³⁷ However, the consolidation of trans-state alliances and the resurgence of local identity politics in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries are now modifying earlier teleological assumptions.

Historiography

Given Southeast Asia's exposure, and even apparent subjugation, to external influence, it is not surprising that questions of agency have a particular resonance for historians of the region. Braudel (1985:134) has commented on the 'historiographical inequality' between Europe and the rest of the world, but Southeast Asia often seems doubly disadvantaged. The Arab world, India and China each have strong historical traditions, and each helped shape the world of Southeast Asia. Indeed, it is all too easy for Southeast Asians to disappear from their own history, particularly when considering such themes as commerce and long-distance connections. The very 'openness' of Southeast Asia,

³⁶ Knaap 1989: Table 11; Kaur 1985; Elson 1999; East, Spate and Fisher 1950:274.

³⁷ Dick, Houben, Lindblad and Thee 2002; Resink 1968:107-48; Tagliacozzo 1998; Dick 1990; Campo 1994; Touwen 1997.

born of geography, is both a defining characteristic of the region, and a cause of the vagueness surrounding it (Sutherland 2003).

Craig Reynolds (1995:422) has persuasively suggested that history is a 'discourse about origins', and that Southeast Asian nationalist historiographies have built upon earlier work in their determination to 'pursue, locate and document' the genealogy of the new states. This has encouraged efforts to rescue the presumably real and authentic identity of the region, by dismantling colonial ideological superstructures, and peeling back the layers of alien contamination. It is apparently suspected that acceptance of decisive Indian, Chinese or European influence will deny indigenous autonomy and creativity, and hence, by implication, invalidate subsequent independent nation states. Interestingly, the sub-text on Islam's role is quite different, and also varies among the three countries most affected. Malaysian state-sponsored rhetoric places Islam at the core of national identity, and although Indonesia is more cautious, the faith is still often seen as a bulwark against the undesirable impact of both Western culture and Chinese economic or political subversion. The Philippines, as a majority Christian state, remains suspicious. In all three cases, however, Islam plays an important part in shaping regional difference and attitudes, reflecting, within the state, some of the identity dilemmas faced by Southeast Asia on a global level.

Reynolds (1995:434-5) notes that one solution has been to seek Southeast Asian agency in 'the capacity, the inventiveness, the genius to adapt, and this capacity is what makes localization, indigenization and vernacularization work'. In turn, this is rooted in 'an outward-looking attitude and openness', a 'dynamic interdependence with the rest of the world'. He does feel, however, that this emphasis on tolerance is 'a clear manifestation of the Western liberal imagination projected onto the region's past'. Sanjay Subrahmanyam (1997:740) shares Reynolds' suspicion that historians have allowed modern states too influential a role in shaping their perceptions. Subrahmanyam has been dismissive of Lieberman's attempts to embed Southeast Asian history in a Eurasian comparative framework, because he feels that Lieberman 'seeks to downplay the global and connected character of the early modern period, in order to reify certain chosen national entities'. More post-modern, culturalist interpretations go further in rejecting the centrality of the state, using the idea 'hybridity' to conjure up a unique identity from maritime Southeast Asia's patterns of adaptation.³⁸ Like 'openness', however, 'hybridity' poses its own problems, as the focus upon accommodation and blending presupposes the existence of clearly defined entities, from which the constituent components of 'the hybrid' can be drawn.

This uncomfortable ambivalence in dealing with issues of identity, autonomy and influence is partly caused by the nature of the sources (often Western in origin), and historians' predispositions (of which more below), but it

³⁸ Sutherland 2005; see also Wolters 1999; Young 1995; and Lombard's work.

is also due to the character of trade itself. Most attention is naturally given to the trans-oceanic routes, and the imposing vessels that traveled them; after the end of the sixteenth century these sea-lanes were rarely, if ever, sailed by Southeast Asians, but by foreigners. However, we should not forget that even they were dependent upon networks accumulating commodities and transferring them through hierarchies of collecting centres, local and coastal feeder traffic, and systems of tribute, feasting and gift-giving (see, for example, Junker 1999). We know little of these lower levels of trade, where goods might pass from boat to boat like a baton in a relay race, with most transactions generating small profits for the man or woman involved.

Major themes in historiographical debate continue to be the role of trade in state formation, the interaction between external influences and local innovation, and attempt to balance profit and loss for different regions, states or groups. Almost forty years ago Harry Benda (1972:121, 153) drew on work by such pre-war Dutch scholars as B.J.O. Schrieke (1955) and J.C. van Leur (1967) to suggest that two basic types of polity evolved in Southeast Asia. These were 'the inland-agrarian "hydraulic" prototype of which Angkor and the early Mataram are good examples, [...] and the riparian or coastal, commercial prototype, of which Srivijaya may have been the most important'. Water is crucial to both, and although subsequent research has blurred the distinction, it remains useful. For later periods of history, these ideal types became fused with distinct cultural and political identities. The 'inland agrarian' polity, exemplified by ninth-century Angkor, and including the 'classical' kingdoms of Siam, Burma and central or East Java, is seen as remaining more subject to 'Indian' influence. Early examples of maritime kingdoms were Funan, Champa and Srivijaya, but after the coming of Islam newly Muslim Malacca became the definitive archetype. Coastal trading polities became identified with a relatively strong commitment to Islam. However, this dichotomy underestimated both the dependence of some port-principalities on their food-producing hinterlands, and also the crucial role of long-distance trade in the expansion of such 'interior' kingdoms as Pagan, Ayutthaya, Angkor or Majapahit.³⁹

The debate on early state formation in Southeast Asia underlines the central interaction between ecology, human settlement and the development of hierarchy. John Miksic (1990:107) has explored how ecological zones, with varying seasons, may have developed complementary exchange patterns. As was noted above, such symbiosis could underlie patterns of prehistoric trade. Since water transport is much more energy efficient than movement by land, a coastal site, confluence or estuary provided a natural focus of settlement. L. Andaya (2000) describes how such *pankalan*, bases or departure points, developed in the early history of the Malay region. Miksic (1990:223) notes

³⁹ See Tarling 1999, I-1, particularly Hall, and 1999, II; also Miksic 2003; Marr and Milner 1986; Reid 1993; Sutherland 2005.

that during the first millenium BCE hierarchies of settlements had emerged in the mainland, but such differentiation is not visible in island Southeast Asia for at least another thousand years. He writes: 'In maritime Southeast Asia, transport was not sufficiently limited to be an effective incentive for people to live in dense agglomerations. This geographic feature combined with a high grade of maritime technological skill, a social adaptation tolerant of high mobility, and an environment permitting the transport of great bulk over long distances. These four factors produced the 'open' character of the cities of maritime Southeast Asia upon which the first Europeans visitors remarked'.

Similar arguments are advanced by Christie (1995:269): 'The geographical complexity of the Malay Peninsula and Sumatra (as well as Borneo), in combination with the rigid ecological constraints that high rainfall and relatively poor soil conditions imposed upon them, produced a diversity of economic niches more persistent than in better endowed regions'. Elsewhere in the same article (Christie 1995:270), she observes of southeast Sumatra that: 'the economic base of these polities was trade, and since most of them survived by trading the goods produced by others, individual states were economically quite fragile and historically often ephemeral, although the political tradition itself was very resilient'.⁴⁰ These suggestions that variations in access to water transport could account for a general distinction between settlement patterns in island and mainland Southeast Asia are intriguing.

The mainland was indeed different, but here too water was crucial. Janice Stargardt (1986:23) opens her essay on 'Hydraulic Works and Southeast Asian Polities' with an uncompromising statement. 'Whatever the merits of "the great river valley" theory for delineating the ancient pattern of settlement in the Near East, North India and North China, it seems to have little relevance in ancient South East Asia'. Early civilizations, she argues, did not arise on the richest soils of the valleys, but rather on the fringes of the alluvial tracts of the Irrawaddy, Mekong and Chao Phraya. Here, the seasonally differentiated climate provided a context for early and successful hydraulic systems which under-pinned urban sites and emerging polities. Small streams and tributary rivers were harnessed by increasingly complex social mechanisms. Thus, while the 'great valleys' may not have been the 'cradles of civilization' in Southeast Asia, the interaction between water and man remained central. Like other essays in the same collection, Stargardt (1986:31-2) refers to Karl Wittfogel's theories of 'hydraulic society', which, while the more extreme claims may be rejected,⁴¹ have done much to focus attention on these issues. However, she also notes that profits from long distance trade were ploughed back into the expansion of irrigation systems.⁴²

⁴⁰ See also Christie 1999.

⁴¹ See also Christie and Wolters, this volume.

⁴² Stargardt 1986:31-2; Christie 1986, 1995:240-3, and the bibliography to Sidky 1997.

Clearly, discussions of the role of trade or irrigated agriculture in early state formation in Southeast Asia cannot be reduced to an either/or proposition. The apparent clarity achieved by imposing fixed typologies on complex processes is often of short duration. Reid (1997b) has now given greater recognition to the continuing vigour of Southeast Asia's commercial economy, and the region's capacity for innovation, during the period 1750-1900. But he remains somewhat ambivalent. On the one hand, he concludes (Reid 1997b:20) that 'the colonial conquests of the nineteenth century in one sense mark the progressive retreat or extinction of one autonomous polity after another'. On the other hand, his caveat ('one sense') is based on the suggestion (Reid 1997b:21) that the 'most enduring changes of the colonial era – commercialisation, centralisation, intellectual renovation and popularisation of culture' had already taken hold in the region in the period since 1740 but before direct European intervention. However, somewhat paradoxically, Reid suggests that much of this last period of 'autonomy' could also be characterized as the 'Chinese century', as so many of these dynamic processes were heavily dependent on Chinese input (Reid 1997b:11-4). There seems to be an assumption that a shared 'Asianness' of Chinese and Southeast Asians made unequal economic relationships compatible with 'autonomy', while political intervention by alien Europeans destroyed it.

The concept of 'autonomy' has been central to ideas of Southeast Asian history since John Smail (1961) published his seminal article seeking to locate the authentic dynamic of Southeast Asian history. The underlying suggestion of the centrality of self-governing communities, with an implicitly self-determined trajectory, is difficult to reconcile with notions of openness or hybridity. Consequently, this juxtaposition of 'autonomy' with migration, regional economic networks and cross-cultural influence remains ambivalent. As was described above, from the second or third century CE, Indian influence becomes clear in inscriptions, architecture and art, revealing in turn new forms of political culture and organization. In 1990 it was still possible for Christie (1990:39) to comment that 'surprising numbers of scholars' still subscribed to the idea that the earliest Southeast Asian states were formed by, or through the agency of, emigrant South Asians. Chinese trading contacts, while less visible, go back to pre-historic times, and from the fifth century CE the sea link between the Strait of Malacca and China further stimulated commerce with India. Tributary relations between China and Straits kingdoms, incorporating political respect and economic exchange, are known from the seventh century, playing an important part in the development of South Sumatran Srivijaya. The ubiquitous presence of Indian beads and Chinese ceramics bears witness to the richness and extent of these trading systems. The diffusion of Islam from the fourteenth century onwards apparently confirms the recipient character of Southeast Asian societies, which seems to be neatly reinforced by the role of European trade and colonialism from the end of the 1400s.

However, as was also noted above, long-distance commerce did not necessarily lead to transformations of local polities or societies. As Miksic (1995:55) has observed, there is strong evidence of Indian exchanges with Southeast Asia long before any adaptation of Indian traits can be seen. Consequently, the 'assumption that trade inevitably has been accompanied by cultural change is now shown to be incorrect'. Old ideas of 'Indianization', to cover the adaptation of elements from the subcontinent, have now been rejected in favour of more emphasis on 'localization' or 'indigenization'. Similar shifts characterize discussions of Islamization and the rise of 'modernity'.⁴³ Influence from China has attracted less attention, perhaps because it has been seen as less decisive, producing no visible cultural change, such as religious conversion, preserved in great monuments. The Chinese legacy lay in the less obvious fields of technology and economy. An ironic result of this unobtrusiveness is a contemporary tendency to emphasize the 'alien', recent and exploitative character of the Chinese presence.⁴⁴

Once it was possible for a historian (Panikkar 1974) to write of a 'Vasco da Gama' epoch in Asian history, as the first Portuguese voyage into the Indian Ocean, in 1498, was seen as ushering in a uniquely new age. However, as we have seen, this perspective ignores the resilience and complexity of Asian trading networks, and grossly inflates the Portuguese role. The impact of the Dutch, English and Spanish is less easy to marginalize, and, after a post-colonial reaction, more recent work tends once again to admit their formative role in maritime Southeast Asia from the early eighteenth century, and on the mainland from the 1820s. But now, with the knowledge generated over the last fifty years of internal Southeast Asian developments, the European powers are seen as major players in an Asian context, rather than as giants moving across an empty stage. Indeed, it has even been suggested that some European regimes, such as that of the Spanish in the Philippines, are perhaps essentially more 'Asian' than 'European' in their organization and character.⁴⁵ Government sponsored Companies no longer absorb all the limelight, as increasing recognition is given to the crucial role of private enterprise. English, Scottish and American country captains, Chinese skippers, Armenian merchants and Bugis 'smugglers' are beginning to emerge from the wings, although they will never be as visible as the bureaucratic state enterprises.

Our understanding of the Southeast Asian past has been limited by the persistent, if unconscious, influence of a structural evolutionist perspective, and our reliance on external sources. The view from the deck of a ship, as described by Van Leur, remained predominant until the mid-nineteenth

⁴³ Aung-Thwin 1995; Reid 1997b; Wolters, 1999; Christie 1990; Mabbet and De Casparis 1999; B. Andaya 1999b.

⁴⁴ Lombard and Salmon 1994; Reid 1996; Chirot and Reid 1997.

⁴⁵ Lieberman 1993:557-8; B. Andaya 1999a; Reid 1997b; Legarda 1999.

century.⁴⁶ Stories by travelers, pilgrims and traders are a mainstay of early description, (and hence of accounts such as Reid's influential *Age of commerce*, 1988, 1993a), while the Companys' trade-focussed archival collections are also limited in interest and insight. The indigenous bodies of evidence required to amplify this perspective remain little known. Relatively few societies have produced written historical records and what there are primarily present a court perspective on politics and culture. Dynasties, battles, genealogies and competing claims to status and power dominate chronicles and folk accounts. These can be a very valuable corrective to the profit-obsessed Eurocentrism of the more accessible sources, but they often seem to inhabit different realms. However, archeology is being increasingly deployed to give a less one-sided understanding of Southeast Asian societies. Here, where trade goods are literally embedded in the local earth, a contextualized view is easier to achieve.⁴⁷ When external long-distance trade is brought back to the appropriate proportions, we are reminded that such commerce could only exist if Southeast Asian gatherers, producers, authorities, consumers and, at the least, local freight carriers, responded to the opportunities offered by such systems of exchange. It is against this more differentiated background that the question of Southeast Asian agency can best be raised.

The desire to reconcile local identity and diversity with the impact of external influence is at least partly driven by a wish to rescue Southeast Asians from what, in another context, has been called the 'enormous condescension' of history (Thompson 1970:13). Such a desire derives not only from the well-intentioned Western liberal imagination, and agendas concomitant upon decolonization, but is also, and more importantly, a prerequisite for understanding how the societies we wish to describe participated in an increasingly globalized world. As was noted at the beginning of this essay, the Braudelian view of the Mediterranean world seemed to offer Southeast Asianists a way out of this impasse; but despite the poetic power of his vision problems of data and analysis remain profound. Scholars working on India or China, however, seem less preoccupied with agency than their Southeast Asianist colleagues. Recognition is given to the relative vicissitudes of various trading communities, but even discussions of the decline of Hindu sea-farers, when compared with Muslims, seem – at least to an outsider – relatively straightforward. The unquestioned depth of both Hindu and Muslim culture in the subcontinent probably freed the debate of implicit and perhaps unconscious sub-texts, related to civilizational hierarchies and implications of inferiority, which have resonated in debates on early Southeast Asian history.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Reynolds 1995:428; Day 1996; Emmerson 1980; Van Leur 1967:261.

⁴⁷ Junker 1999; Bulbeck and Caldwell 2000; B. Andaya 1997b; L. Andaya and B. Andaya 1995; see Wolters 1999:122-4 on Joyce White's work on Thailand.

⁴⁸ The wider discussion on 'the rise of the west' reflects, more explicitly and on a global scale, similar themes: see among others Frank 1998; Landes 1998; Pomeranz 2000; also the thoughtful contribution by Barendse 2002.

The publication in 1955 of the English version of J.C. van Leur's *Indonesian trade and society* is generally seen as a turning point in the critically reassessment of the European role in Asian and Indonesian waters; the Dutch original dated from 1934. A crucial document supporting this revisionist approach was the *Suma Oriental* of Tomé Pires, with its description of the wealth and international renown of early fifteenth century Malacca, published in English in 1944 (Cortese 1944). During the next fifty years an impressive body of publications appeared, with M.A.P. Meilink-Roelofs detailed examination of 'Asian trade and European influence in the Indonesian Archipelago' appearing in 1962. In both institutional and personal terms, the work by Denys Lombard, at the EHESS in Paris, Oliver Wolters at Cornell, and Anthony Reid at the Australian National University in Canberra, has been crucial to the development of Southeast Asian historiography. All three began their careers in the late 1960s, with dissertations on local histories, and all three subsequently went on to guide the careers of many younger scholars, while moving towards broader visions of the region's history. Lombard's three volume *Le carrefour javanais; Essai d'histoire globale* (1990a, 1990 b, 1990c) and Reid's two volumes on *Southeast Asia in the age of commerce* (1988, 1993a) both reveal their debt to Braudel's work, particularly on the Mediterranean, economic change and capitalism. In 1995 Lombard summarized some of his preoccupations in an article on 'Networks and synchronisms in Southeast Asian history', directly addressing the tension between 'outside influences' and the integration of the region. He saw the solution as lying in the study of contacts between regions, the roles of Chinese, Muslim and European networks, and moments when significant events seem to coincide throughout much of the region.

Following the movement of commodities is another way of tracing the interaction between long distance commerce and local societies;⁴⁹ the history of trading communities and diaspora groups is also a useful point of entry. Reference has already been made to Southeast Asia's Chinese settlements, exemplified by the long-established merchant quarters in many ports, or the more recent, eighteenth-century mining and planting colonies. The Hokkien from Fujian were one of the most widespread and enterprising communities. But not all trading minorities came from outside the region, and many of those who did ended up thoroughly localized, including the Portuguese. The conquests of Malacca in 1511 and 1641 had paradoxical effects on the commercial integration of Southeast Asia. They were defining moments in the consolidation of Portuguese and Dutch influence respectively, but the resulting dispersal of Malay communities throughout the archipelago reinforced

⁴⁹ See for example the essays collected in the Ashgate Variorum series, particularly Pearson 1996 and Mazzaoui 1998; also Ptak and Rothermunde 1991; Clarence-Smith and Topik 2003; Mazumdar 1998; L. Andaya 2000; Sutherland 2000.

the infrastructure of indigenous trade. Similarly, the fall of Makassar to the Dutch in 1666-1669 created 'Bugis' diaspora communities who were to play a major political and economic role in the eighteenth century. Both Malays and Bugis, however, had longer trading lineages.⁵⁰

Other communities also had roots stretching far back into history. Chulia and Kling diasporas were extremely important. The former, Tamil-speaking Muslims from the Coromandel coasts, were 'Chulia' in the Malay Peninsula, while the Portuguese and the Dutch referred to them as 'Moors'. The Klings, also known as Chettiars, were Hindus from Coromandel who could be Tamil, Telugu or Kannada speakers. They had a temple in the great southern Chinese port of Quanzhou in the twelfth century, although they subsequently lost ground there to Chinese and Muslim merchants. Later they flourished further west and took advantage of British protection. During the nineteenth century, Nattukottai Chettiars of Madras spread their financial networks throughout Burma and the British colonies in the Strait of Malacca, where, along with other Indian groups such as Gujerati, Multanis and Marwaris, they became the region's 'indigenous bankers'. In the Straits they competed with Chinese from the South China coast, the Hokkien, Teochew and Cantonese. The alliance between the Bombay Parsis and the British is well documented. Similarly, the migration of Arabs from the Hadhramaut to Southeast Asia revived again in the nineteenth century; they became important ship-owners and traders in Indonesia.⁵¹ Such groups may have been seen as exotic fringe inhabitants of colonial cities, but they embodied the old networks that, in alliance with local nobles and merchants, had created maritime Southeast Asia.

The ways in which the rhythms and vicissitudes of Asian trade could be of decisive influence on local societies is well illustrated in the history of Makassar, on the southwest peninsula of Sulawesi (Celebes). Located strategically close to the Moluccan Spice Islands, commerce was the key to the spectacular rise of the twin kingdom of Goa-Tallo'. By the seventeenth century their capital of Makassar, as we saw in our opening quotation, was a major thorn in the VOC's side, and the Dutch conquest in 1666-1669 was intended to close Maluku to all competitors of the Company. The fall of Goa was a major shock to the whole Indonesian trading system, but although the free spice trade ended, the laws of supply and demand reasserted themselves, reinforced by the expansion of Chinese trade in the 1700s. With the boom in the export of marine produce, particularly trepang or sea-cucumbers, seemingly periph-

⁵⁰ Wang 1990, which was reprinted in Subrahmanyam 1996, along with other relevant essays on merchant networks; L. Andaya 1995a, 1995b; Dobbin 1996; Sutherland 2001; Chang 1991; Baghdiantz-McCabe, Harlaftis and Mingalou 2005; Bellwood 1999:135, note 56.

⁵¹ Dobbin 1996:131-55 discusses the Madras Chettiars in Burma; R. Ray 1987; Arasaratnam 1989; MacPherson 1990; Habib 1990; Van den Berg 1886; Mobini-Kesheh 1999; Broeze 1978; Abaza 1988; Ellen 1996.

eral areas of eastern Indonesia became increasingly integrated into the wider market. Exports of slaves and trepang were channeled through Bugis ports, or Buton and Sumbawa, from the distant catchment areas of the north Australian coast, New Guinea, Tanimbar and Aru to Makassar (and later Singapore) and eventually to China. In exchange, porcelain, metalware, tobacco, textiles and money were diffused through the eastern islands, first as luxuries and then as necessities. As the country traders from India and the Straits passed through the islands fringing the South China Sea, they also sought products for the China market, offering opium, weapons and textiles in exchange.⁵² Guns could tip the balance in local politics, and were an important element in the expansion of raiding and trading in areas in island Southeast Asia, the Malay coasts, and the southern Philippines.⁵³

Historians have become increasingly aware of the importance of differentiating between various contextual levels. Simple dichotomies between Asians and Europeans, or back projections of modern borders, are acknowledged as inadequate to contain or explain the many layered patterns of interaction which have formed Southeast Asia. We now recognize the powerful on-going presence of Asian shippers in the Indian Ocean and South China Sea, and see that government management of commerce proved less effective than private traders in adapting to, and profiting from, Asian markets. This was true of the Portuguese, who ended up relying on 'contracted' voyages, and of the English East India Company which relinquished intra-Asian trade to local captains. The fate of the apparently all-powerful trading companies was often, perhaps usually, determined less by their own strategies than by changes in the states and economies of the region itself. This theme recurs in articles by Pearson and Arasaratnam on the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal, in references to the impact of Chinese imperial policies, in Christie's emphasis on regional trade, in Subrahmanyam's comments on the importance of the local political context in Portugal's maritime decline and in recent analyses of the VOC, such as that by Jacobs.⁵⁴ In the framework of such wider sea-borne economic systems, Asian agency is increasingly apparent, as the roles of merchants, shippers and rulers become at least partially visible.

But Southeast Asians direct participation in oceanic trade seems to have contracted. Manguin described the decline of the *jong* in the mid-sixteenth century, and over the next hundred years archipelago states increasingly withdrew from long-range commerce. European perceptions of the Southeast Asian maritime past reflected the resulting balance of forces, so they were unimpressed by indigenous economic initiative. The convenient notion that

⁵² Knaap and Sutherland 2004; Sutherland 1988, 2000; L. Andaya, 1991.

⁵³ Warren 1981, but also Sutherland 2004; Velthoen 1991; Laarhoven 1989. See also Lapien 1987; Ellen 2003; Henley 2005.

⁵⁴ Christie 1990; Subrahmanyam 1993; Reid 1996; Jacobs 2000.

Southeast Asians were passive and isolated became widespread, and Europeans assumed that coastal traffic was all the local shippers could manage. They failed to see that while indigenous trade in the Malay world might have contracted, much had relocated to routes and harbours beneath their notice or beyond their ken. Similarly, most of mainland Southeast Asia's economy remained invisible to Europeans. The obvious surface of international trade might have been increasingly dominated by westerners, but in many areas, and for many commodities, local merchants continued to play a central role. In a simplified reflection of perceived political competition, it is sometimes assumed that trade was an ethnically structured zero-sum game, and that European or Chinese advances must have caused indigenous withdrawal or exclusion. However, in reality an expanding or diversifying economy often depended on, and rewarded, the varying input of all communities. Although the continuities in Asian social and economic history are increasingly emerging from the shadow of imperial priorities, critical contextualization remains essential. It might be tempting, for example, to see the economic dynamism of the mid-eighteenth century 'Chinese century' as a precursor of the 'bamboo networks' of the late twentieth century with overseas Chinese typifying entrepreneurial skills alien to indigenous rent-capitalists. The exploration of such ideas is rewarding, but demands careful work: recognizing local and international contexts, distinguishing between the structural and the contingent, acknowledging the role of cultural capital, while avoiding essentialism.⁵⁵

In his 1997 study of economic change in Southeast Asia between 1830 and 1980 Ian Brown (1997:277) concluded that the two factors crucial to the region's development were long distance maritime trade, and the presence of immigrant commercial minorities. He notes 'the proximity to the sea has drawn South-East Asia into long-distance trade in a dramatic manner [...], the major rivers brought vast interiors close to the sea and to the world that lay beyond [...] in almost all circumstances, and in almost all periods, water has provided the cheapest, frequently the only means to transport large bulk/low value commodities, and until [...] the twentieth century, often the most secure way to move substantial volumes of high value articles over long distances'. Actually, these two factors could be further reduced to one, the role of trade, as the presence of powerful Chinese and Indian business communities was, ultimately, a by-product of this commercial pattern.

⁵⁵ Sutherland 1995; Sutherland 2005; Van Leur, while striving to rehabilitate Indonesia's maritime past, nonetheless concluded that small-scale peddling typified its trade; Meilink-Roelofs 1962; Braudel 1985 and many subsequent writers disagreed. For an impression of the extensive literature on the Chinese, see Brown 1995; McVey 1992 or numerous websites. Sutherland 1988 illustrates how peripheral areas in eastern Indonesia became integrated in long distance commodity exchanges.

Conclusion

Southeast Asia's 'openness' is an attractive but problematic notion. If we assume that seas and rivers have always brought settlers, traders and ideas to the region, and that this is a unique and defining regional trait, then we can indeed conclude that geography is destiny. But while the idea of 'openness' has reassuringly positive connotations, it actually says very little, especially when it is used without any attempt to establish causality or standards of comparison. Moreover, it implies a continuity and uniformity of historical experience, dependent on geography. But much of Southeast Asia was not accessible by water, and the extent and impact of trade varied at different times. L. Andaya (2000) has argued that the early modern shift in favoured exports from forest products to pepper and tin resulted in a definitive loss of status for inland peoples. Nonetheless, as Reid (1997a) has pointed out, until modern times the interior – even in maritime Southeast Asia – was in many cases more attractive for settlement than the coasts. The seas, and their commercial possibilities, did offer increased possibilities for mobility, enabling commodities, people, ideas, techniques and beliefs to be exchanged over a wide area, paving the way for cultural and political adaptation and innovation. But these opportunities had to be used: the mere existence of seas and rivers, or the presence of passing ships, meant little in themselves. The basic patterns and institutions of local societies, and the concepts we use to describe them, remain uncomfortably vague. Abstractions like 'openness' or 'hybridity', or the back projection of twentieth-century ethnic and political categories, only offer illusory insights.

A thousand years ago sea-borne trade already connected four great cultural zones: the Irano-Arabic, Hindu, Indonesian and Chinese. The movement of goods in the wider Indian Ocean was naturally organized within sea-focused arenas. In the far west there was the Swahili coast, while the Arabian Sea, Red Sea and Persian Gulf offered access to rich markets, including those fed by the Mediterranean. To the East the Bay of Bengal and South China Sea were linked by the Strait of Malacca, and fringed by Southeast Asian waters, such as the Gulfs of Siam and Tonkin, and the Java, Banda, Celebes and Sulu Seas. Apart from the great ocean going vessels, these waters were plied by coastal and small-scale local traffic. Like riverine commerce, this was largely unrecorded. The opening of the European ocean route to India, spice-rich Maluku and China in 1492 introduced new players to the Asian seas. Although their commercial intelligence was less, and their technology no better, than that of their Asian fellow sailors, the northerners did have new and aggressive attitudes. The Portuguese impact remained extremely limited and Dutch glory brief, but, after the mid-eighteenth century, Anglo-American commerce expanded. Initially, both the East India Company and country traders com-

peted with, and depended upon, Indian merchants and shippers, but during the late 1700s the English advantage was consolidated. At the same time, following ancient routes in from the east, Chinese entrepreneurs and traders brought new capital and technology to expand their long established roles in Southeast Asia's commerce and society. Sino-Anglo cooperation was exemplified in the Malacca Straits port of Singapore (1819), which became as symbolic of the new age as Malacca had been of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The Suez Canal (1869), steam shipping and railways broke the old rhythms, binding dominant colonial cities into new transport systems.

Many of the major debates in Southeast historiography involve the role of water. These include discussion of the ecological, economic and cultural foundations of early states, of settlement patterns and the role of cities, the significance of river and sea transport, hydraulic engineering and the impact of trade. Related attempts to assess the relative roles of 'local genius' and 'external influence' in decisive phases of cultural change once known by such simplistic terms as 'Indianization', 'Islamization' and 'Westernization' have confronted historians with fundamental, and sensitive, questions of agency. Local, comparative and regional approaches to the Southeast Asian history of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries are still dominated by categorisations derived from Western priorities. As the Europeans began to build land-based, colonial and increasingly bureaucratic states, they also finally seemed able to realize their dream of controlling the sea. But we should learn from the fluid flexibilities of less structured eras. Current political and social debates are preoccupied with such issues as 'globalization' and 'identity', including the roles of ethnic minorities in cosmopolitan cities. Experts in the media ponder the pros and cons of global commerce, of free trade versus protectionism. Trans-national organizations, both political and economic, may prove to be inimical to the survival of the nation-state, and the vulnerability of local economies to penetration by alien business is a cause for concern. Because of its location, and the ways in which water enabled local communities to interact with other civilizations, both inhabitants and historians of Southeast Asia have been confronting these issues for many years.

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