'Borderless' Southeast Asia historiography
New scholarship on the interactions and exchanges between Southeast Asia and its South Asian and Chinese neighbours in the pre-1500 era


Over the past two decades multi-disciplinary scholars have accessed newly available archaeological evidence to re-evaluate Southeast Asia’s early history. Site analysis of regional excavations and shipwreck recoveries, which have benefitted from new accessibilities and new technologies, have been particularly fruitful providing documentation that has allowed re-readings of the limited and often controversial early textual sources. Regional political stability and networking in the post-Cold War era has encouraged efforts to create a ‘borderless’ historiography that discounts notions of bounded ‘nation states’, particularly in the pre-sixteenth-century era. New archaeological and historical research collectively stresses economic, political, and cultural fluidity and the ongoing evolutions and negotiations of ethnic identity and societal space. Location, physical mobility, modes of subsistence, social organization, settlement patterns, and societal activities need not culminate in the establishment of new states, but may also resist incorporation by a state. This significantly contrasts to previous attempts to discover institutional centralizations or common societal qualities over societal variations, and the early evolution of civilization as this was a legacy of colonial-era scholarship that searched for gradual and peaceful inclusions of stateless populations. New archaeological and historical research is also sensitive to issues of human agency, and as an extension of subaltern critique the revisionist literature carefully distinguishes variations in local (emic) over external (etic) agency. The new scholarship encourages dialogue among scholars from Asian and non-Asian countries and acknowledges numerous cultural perspectives rather than having a singular voice.

The most recent archaeological excavations’ focus on Southeast Asia’s early history are of two types. Regional excavations by national archaeologists have produced significant recoveries that tell us a good deal more about the material cultures of indigenous societies in the early historical era, which is underreported (if recorded at all) in the surviving written sources. This new archaeological data is now being exchanged across national borders, encouraging mutual data analysis. International teams have more frequently targeted ‘pre-historic’ (often defined as prior to written records) sites, which have collectively documented societal transitions circa 500 BCE to 500 CE that archaeologists now distinguish as a critical transitional ‘proto-historical’ era.

James Scott’s book (2009), The art of not being governed: An anarchist history of...
Review essays 529

upland Southeast Asia is a product of this new trend in its address to the ‘borderless’ co-evolution of hill and valley cultures in the Southeast Asia-China border highlands (Zomia). Consistent with Scott’s approach, the five new books reviewed in this essay take two ‘borderless history’ tracks. The first track looks to the West to re-evaluate Southeast Asia’s various ‘borderless’ interactions with South Asia from the ‘proto-historical’ to early second millennium CE, when elements of South Asian civilization appeared in Southeast Asia consistent with local needs. The best of this new scholarship negates remaining conjecture of any type of South Asian ‘colonization’ in Southeast Asia. Instead of insisting on exclusive Southeast Asian agency in regional localizations, there is new openness to potentials of cross-regional dialogue. The second track looks to the north, as it focuses on China’s various early ‘borderless’ relationships and consequent impact on Southeast Asia’s early history.

South and Southeast Asia interactions

The richly illustrated collected volume Early interactions between South and Southeast Asia: Reflections on cross-cultural exchange, edited by Pierre-Yves Manguin, A. Mani, and Geoff Wade (2011) is an essential foundational resource that will frame discussion of the fluidity of South and Southeast Asian interactions for some time to come. Its first half is a valuable collation of representative recent archaeological research, followed by innovative studies of localizations of South Asian culture.

The archaeological studies collectively represent the latest archaeological standards that have moved beyond studies of monumental remains to address aspects of human agency. Currently multi-national teams of archaeologists doing excavation fieldwork in Southeast Asia are bridging the documentary ‘historiographic gap’ between iconographic and written sources that don’t appear until the fourth century CE and what came before. Herein what took place between the fifth century BCE and the fifth century CE has been removed from what was inclusively considered the ‘prehistoric age’ in which societies became increasingly complex but remained cut off from economic transformations and developments in a wider Asian context, ‘to be reconsidered as the initial recipients of Indic political and religious ideologies, a broad spectrum of architectural and iconographic agenda, together with a distinguished language (Sanskrit), and scripts soon adapted to transcribe their own languages’ (p. xvi). Thus most of the archaeological studies in this book evaluate the remains of ‘Indianized’ but undocumented early societies in Southeast Asia before there were written records, to create ‘proto-histories’ of Southeast Asia over a millennium-long phase of exchange between the Indian continent and the eastern shoreline of the Bay of Bengal and beyond to the South China Sea.
These representative archaeological studies look past evidence of religious and political activities to study daily life, settlement patterns, and the local economic activities of production and exchange. Collectively the chapter studies of artefacts suggest a long distance exchange of goods beginning in the fifth to fourth centuries BCE, the technologies used to produce them, and the agency of artisans proficient in such techniques. Ian Glover and Berenice Bellina reassesses early Thai sites; Phaedra Bouvet studies early Indian-style wares in Peninsular Thailand; Boonyarit Chaisuwan contributes extensive data on early Indian contacts on the Thai Andaman coast; Manguin and Agustijanto Indradjaja provide details of their excavations at a West Java early Buddhist coastal site; using newly excavated data, K. Rajan considers the early networks of trade in peninsular south India; V. Selvakumar takes on ceramic and boat building evidence of early Indian and Southeast Asian contacts from South Asia; and Sundaresh and A.S. Gaur give a well-illustrated marine archaeology investigation along the Tamil coastline. The Selvakuma and Sundaresh with Gaur Indian studies consider technology transfers in ceramic production and shipbuilding that travelled from East to West, rather than from India to Southeast Asia.

The prominence of Southeast Asian shipbuilding techniques, and the large size of first millennium CE seagoing ships built in Southeast Asia found in recent excavations has raised the issue of agency in maritime exchanges and trade across the Bay of Bengal – as the absence of confirming South Asian nautical archaeology at present leads to the conclusion that Southeast Asian mariners were the critical agents of transmission in the formative period. The major Funan sites of Angkor Borei and Oc Eo are discussed in separate studies by Le Thi Lien and Anna Slaczka for their early Hindu imagery and consecration rituals. Recent excavations at upstream Angkor Borei in Cambodia have revealed the early foundations for economic, social, and political complexity that supported the site’s rapid transition into a large Indianized urban site, possibly the capital of the Funan realm in the first millennium CE. In contrast, the downstream Oc Eo site in Vietnam was only inhabited from the beginning of the first millennium, but soon adapted Indian material culture for daily use (pottery styles and tiles), and by the second century had developed a pioneering urban pattern. As with these two contributions, the other studies in the first half of this book lead to the conclusion that by the time Indian-inspired temples, statues and epigraphy appeared in Southeast Asia, sometime between the third and the fifth centuries CE, the relationship between Southeast Asian and Indian societies were likely well established. Thus, collectively the archaeological studies raise the issue of whether Southeast Asia was Indianized before ‘Indianization.’

While in recent years new archaeological recoveries have supported Southeast Asian contributions to early nautical and ceramic technologies, recent
scholarship also has considered immaterial exchange, wherein Southeast Asian societies have been identified as assuming entrepreneurial roles in the adoption and adaptations of Indian concepts and constructions to pre-existing social and economic patterns, ‘from scripts and learning languages to literary genres and motifs, from religious texts and discourses to associated art and architectural forms, and to state and urbanization models’ (p. xxiii). Thus three volume contributors (Johannes Bronkhorst on the spread of Sanskrit in Southeast Asia, Daud Ali on the problem of early Sanskrit inscriptions in Indonesia, and Julie Romain on Indian temples on Java’s Dieng Plateau) reflect on Sheldon Pollock’s notions of strong local agencies in appropriations and acculturations to Indic Sanskrit culture in a ‘Sanskrit Cosmopolis’, as represented in Southeast Asian inscriptive sources and in the spread of Indian literary texts and architectural culture. Peter Skilling’s study of the circulation of Buddhist ritual on the Malay Peninsula raises the possibility of cross-cultural exchanges and trans-regional dialogue that were foundational to early Southeast Asian Buddhism.

Most of the papers in the second half of the book address regional ‘localization’ processes. Art historians (Robert Brown on Gupta-period sculpture in Southeast Asia and Julie Romain on the Dieng Plateau temples) draw from recent developments in the field of textual studies to better understand local adaptations of intellectual and artistic constructs. Martin Pokinghorne’s study of the decorative lintels at Angkor shows how new methodology allows the identity of individual artists and workshops. Le Thi Lien’s research on small Hindu artefact images from southern Vietnam and Anna Slaczka’s on comparative South and Southeast Asian temple consecration rituals as documented in textual and archaeological evidence, both re-evaluate archaeological representations of Indian texts, as to whether artefacts are consistent with religious pantheons or local temple consecration rituals, and the potential inconsistencies between Indian canon and local practice. Kyaw Minn Htin introduces previously unavailable Buddhist inscriptive data from the Arakan region of modern-day Myanmar.

Edwards McKinnon on Indian involvement in later northern Sumatra sites at Kota Cina and Lamreh, Daniel Perret with Heddy Surachmanon on other ninth- to fourteenth-century archaeological sites in northwest Sumatra, and John Guy on the artefact evidence of Tamil merchants and the Hindu-Buddhist diaspora in early Southeast Asia reconsider interactions among societies that had not been Indianized in the earliest phases of exchange with South Asia, the building of the only pre-modern Indian settlements in Southeast Asia, and changing trade patterns. Arsenio Nicolas studies Indian influences in Southeast Asian musicology; Boreth Ly follows contemporary adaptations of ritual authority among itinerant Tamilnadu ‘Brahmins’, whose ritual practices legitimate the modern-day political scene; and Sachchidanand Sahai demonstrates how Laotian writers, story tellers, and painters have
used the classical Indian *Ramayana* text to produce their own social space and express the cultural values of Buddhist communities into modern times.

In sum, this book frames a new discourse on the evolution of Southeast Asian society and culture that has moved beyond early discussions of ‘Indianization’, and subsequent post-colonial discussions of ‘local genius’ and nationalistic narratives. This latest research is transitioning beyond considerations of ‘localizations’ of South Asian cultural elements in Southeast Asia, to what John Miksic characterizes in his brief back cover overview of the book as ‘Southeast Asianisation’ of artistic, architectural, linguistic, and religious values that crossed the borderless Bay of Bengal into Southeast Asia.

*The Chola naval expeditions to Southeast Asia*

In contrast to the previous collection, the volume edited by Hermann Kulke, K. Kesavapany, and Vijay Sakhuja, *Nagapattinam to Suvarnadwipa: Reflections on the Chola naval expeditions to Southeast Asia* (2009), collates papers presented at a coincidental 2007 Singapore conference underwritten by Indian businessmen as associated with India’s ‘Looking East Policy’ that promotes India-ASEAN relations. The book highlights a single event: a controversial 1025 south Indian Chola dynasty maritime raid on the prominent Straits of Melaka-centred Srivijaya realm. In support of the authenticity of this event, collected articles address the south Indian Chola realm’s eleventh-century maritime contacts with the Southeast Asian region and beyond to China. But the surviving evidence is unclear whether the raid was consistent with the Chola realm’s maritime trade interests, or if Srivijaya’s networked ports-of-trade as enumerated in the Tamil language inscription were vulnerable to this and other Chola raids that brought back extensive plunder to finance the Chola monarchy.

The contributors to this volume assume the validity of the 1025 maritime raid claims of the Tirukkadaiyur inscription dated 1027 CE from a Tanjavur Chola-era temple (as translated in the book’s appendix, pp. 279-80) and attempt to fill in the missing details to conclude that the Chola kings had developed a ‘sophisticated maritime enterprise centered on sea-based commerce with trading contacts in Malaya, Sumatra, and China’, and that there was ‘an ocean-going fleet that was dispatched by the Chola King Rajendra Chola I against the Srivijaya Kingdom’ (p. xi). Nowhere among these studies is there citation of definitive textual, epigraphic, or physical evidence that there was any Chola maritime fleet capable of engaging in such an event. Such a ‘unique event in the otherwise peaceful and culturally exceedingly fruitful relation of India with its neighbours in Southeast Asia’ (p. xiii) requires compelling confirming documentation.
All the existing evidence of pre-eleventh century South Asia-Southeast Asia contacts, as detailed in the previously cited volume, indicate the peaceful spread of Indian culture across the Bay of Bengal, and local acceptance of Buddhism and Hinduism among emerging cultures of mainland and maritime Southeast Asia. There is a conspicuous absence of citations among that era’s Chinese dynastic records to support the notion that Srivijaya was obstructing Chola maritime trade, whether in the Straits or the adjacent Malay Peninsula, as this would have justified a Chola attack. Against this void one argument presented is that such a naval expedition would have been consistent with Rajendra’s ‘world conqueror’ claims that regularly appear in his inscriptions. Another proposal, based on the existence of epigraphic records that document contemporary south India-based merchant activity in the Srivijaya region, suggests that Rajendra’s initiative could have been intended to further the regional cause of Tamil-speaking merchants, who in partnership with Chola monarch acquired Srivijaya’s wealth. The single Chinese record that lays the foundation for a justifiable Chola raid is a Song dynasty report that ships trying to avoid the payment of passage fees to the Srivijaya monarch were attacked and destroyed (p. xiv).

The first chapters of this book locate the naval expedition in the context of contemporary Asian and Indian Ocean history. Hermann Kulke’s keynote study, based on the known epigraphic evidence, stresses that the Chola raids were intended to establish Chola dominance over the India to Southeast Asia leg of the Indian Ocean passageway, in order to become the gatekeeper for lucrative exchanges with Song China and support of the Chola realm’s emerging trade with Fatimid Egypt. Tansen Sen’s chapter shifts analytical focus to the Chinese sources, to speculate in support of a Chola reciprocal raid on Srivijaya. He asserts that the Chinese court scribes were being fed false information on the Cholas, and thus never received word of a Chola raid and therefore never recorded such in their accounts. The chapters immediately following are a mixture of insufficiently documented, overlapping, and unsupported speculation, including questionable evidence that there was a Chola navy, and incomplete discussions of the Chola realm’s relationships with Sri Lanka and Java.

The strongest chapters are provided by Noboru Karashima and Y. Subbarayalu, as they represent the cumulative epigraphic evidence of south Indian merchant ‘guild’ activities in South and Southeast Asia during the era of Chola authority. Hema Devare’s study of Indian Ocean cloth exports and Gokol Seshadri’s consideration of Nagapattinam as a significant international port of trade also have merit. Other chapters that report recoveries of contemporary Chinese ceramics on the Chola/south Indian shoreline, consistent with the archaeological remains or expected sites of Chola-era ports-of-trade. However, all of these ceramic collections are recoveries of surface finds rather
than the product of systemic archaeological excavations that might provide the missing details of Chola-era maritime interactions, and as such can only go so far in supporting the conclusions their authors provide. There is a conspicuous absence in this collection of legitimate archaeological studies that might substantiate the book’s efforts to bring about a reconsideration of that era’s South and Southeast Asia networking.

The book’s final appendices provide perhaps the work’s major contribution as they contain a valuable referential base for future studies, as Karashima and Subbarayalu have (re)translated previously cited epigraphic evidence. Karashima and Tansen Sen provide English language translations from the Chinese textual accounts of the Chola kingdom (Zhu-nian). Beyond a generalized introductory map, notably absent are detailed maps that would have been extremely helpful in situating these diverse studies and their referential evidence.

South and Southeast Asia and China interactions

*Sino-Malay trade and diplomacy from the tenth through the fourteenth century* by Derek Hong (2009) draws on the author’s solid Chinese language skills to read with fresh eyes the key tenth- to fourteenth-century Chinese texts, which he pairs with analysis of the new archaeological evidence from Singapore and other contemporary Straits of Melaka regional archaeological sites (as the author was personally engaged in several of these). His historical research is unique, in that he has approached the Chinese sources as a Southeast Asia specialist with Chinese language proficiency and expertise in ceramics analysis. This book substantially revises the previous standard synthesis of the early China-Southeast Asia relationship, drawn almost exclusively from O.W. Wolters’ 1960s detailed analysis of the Chinese sources, as Wolters portrayed the China-Southeast Asia trade relationship as inclusively imbedded in diplomatic exchanges. Wolters and other past historians rarely linked China’s internal changes to developments in Southeast Asia.

In contrast, this book demonstrates that by viewing the critical Chinese texts (dynastic annals, the *Song huiyao* collection, the *Wenxian tongkao*, and several ethnographic texts) from a more nuanced Southeast Asia-based perspective, supported by the new archaeological evidence, there was a more complicated trading relationship between China and the regions to its south than Wolters allowed. The book concludes that the China-Southeast Asia trade relationship from the Song through the Yuan era was less the product of diplomatic exchanges, and instead was marked by transitions in Chinese dynastic policies, driven by shifts and changes in the Chinese market. Consequently, substantial numbers of Chinese traders appeared in
the Southeast Asia region, increasing networking among a series of regional ports-of-trade, leading to new consumptive patterns of Southeast Asian products in China and Chinese products in Southeast Asia, and the overall importance of this era in laying the foundation for the Chinese ethnic presence in modern-day Southeast Asia. The author’s multi-layered model distinguishes ‘state level’, regional, and other types of exchange. Power groups were periodic factors, as for example the Ortaq ‘block’ in Mongol times that had a significant presence in China’s major ports. In Heng’s view their prejudicial support of Muslim communities marginalized Malay presence in China’s ports during the mid-Yuan era.

Heng embraces an inclusive ‘borderless’ realm that extended from China’s major coastal ports (Hangzhou, Mingzhou, Quanzhou, Guangzhou) to the Malay Peninsula, the eastern coastline of Sumatra, the northern and western coasts of Borneo. Java and its networked relationships to the eastern Indonesian archipelago are seen as peripheral to this extended core, and the study omits Thai and Vietnamese regions. The latter is a notable lacuna that stands out from most recent books, as discussed below, which view the Vietnam coastline as a major component in the inclusive China-Southeast Asia ‘borderless south,’ and the vital intermediary in the Malay world’s early networking with China’s major ports-of-trade.

Instead, this book centers on Srivijaya as the leading ‘Malay’ power during the era prior to a Java maritime raid in 1275 that destroyed Srivijaya’s port-base (then at Jambi), and argues that, especially during the eleventh-century era when the south India-based Chola realm became a serious competitor in regional commerce, the Srivijaya polity based at Palembang tried to maintain its status as China’s vital intermediary in the Straits of Melaka region and beyond.

Inclusively this book addresses interactive Chinese and local agency in maritime Southeast Asia, as a product of transitional dynastic policies and the consequent varieties of networked relationships that developed among Chinese and non-Chinese traders working the maritime routes between Southeast Asia and China. In Heng’s view, the tenth-century Song state monopoly over exports and imports had hindered China’s trade with Southeast Asia. This changed in the late eleventh century when the Song court opened additional designated ports-of-trade and then withdrew a variety of state restrictions. Heng makes the important point that Song-era policy required ship registrations that confined their coming and going to a single China port, and also stipulated a nine-month maximum shipping window that effectively constrained Chinese ships on outward voyages to a single destination using the northeast monsoon, and a mandatory return voyage on the subsequent seasonal southwest monsoon. These travel requirements effectively restricted trade to specialized exchanges in only a few volume
products. When the subsequent Yuan dynasty removed these restrictions Chinese ships and traders finally had unlimited opportunities to travel among several networked ports-of-trade throughout the Southeast Asia region on China-based sojourns. Ethnic Chinese established semi-permanent residential communities in Southeast Asia, as bases from which they might travel to and from China marketplaces, carrying a variety of Southeast Asia products, or specialize in intra-island trading. From Heng’s perspective the subsequent Ming dynasty’s redirection of their interests inward following the early fifteenth-century Zheng He Indian Ocean voyages had little regional significance other than reinforcing already well-established privatized Chinese trade in the Island regions, with legacies to this day.

The Tongking Gulf through history

The Tongking Gulf through history, edited by Nola Cooke, Li Tana, and James A. Anderson (2011) is in part an academic response to the ‘Two Corridors and One Rim’ development project contracted between Vietnam and China to link their shared coastal and upstream borderlands between Hanoi and Guangzhou by new superhighways and high-speed rail. Inclusively, the book substantiates that this contemporary initiative is a logical outgrowth of long-term regional history. Against the past two hundred years wherein for a variety of reasons large segments of this region were stagnant backwaters to developments in Vietnam Red River and Hong Kong/Guangzhou centres, the book documents prior long term ‘borderless’ fluidity characterized by shared regional, cultural, political, and economic exchange along the Gulf of Tongking coastline as also in the regional upstreams. The book’s collective studies – the first four on the newly recovered archaeological evidence that substantiates a revisionist understanding of the Neolithic to the tenth-century emergence of an independent Dai Viet from the former Chinese Jiaozhu (Giao Chi) administrative region, the second five representative of the subsequent nine centuries along the common Gulf of Tongking coastline – all focus on long-term human interactions over nation-centered histories, to demonstrate primary-secondary networked geo-political/economic/cultural relationships.

Issues of the Braudelian ‘mini-Mediterranean’ enter the book’s discussions, as the contributors were initially asked to address whether the Gulf region was over the ‘longue durée’ united less by geography than by movements of people, cultural interactions, economic exchanges, and networked land and sea routes. While there is no consensus among the resulting studies, the Braudelian comparison was foundational to the authors’ chapters that collectively work against traditional regional state-centred perspectives, as these have been constrained by trying to fit regional history into bounded spaces and politi-
cally constrained accounts examining the emergence of functional ‘nations’ through time. While the contributors do not all agree over the applicability of the Braudelian Mediterranean connection, they draw from the Braudelian historiography in mutually demonstrating the historical ‘mingling’ of people and cultures with emphasis on the importance of regions and regionalism.

The chapters build on newly available archaeological evidence/artefacts from Vietnam and China, as these allow the reinterpretation of traditional written sources. Herein the ‘borderless history’ approach is argued to be vital in looking at inclusive regional evidence, as premodern regional societies were not coincident with the modern Chinese and Vietnamese nation states, nor with contemporary Chinese or Vietnamese ethnicities. The authors even note their discomfort with the notion of bounded space implied in the book’s focus on the Tongking Gulf, which is not a commonly accepted region. While the consensus is that there existed a pre-tenth century region that included modern northern Vietnam and southern China that the Chinese called Jiaozhi, after the tenth century the newly independent Dai Viet realm is shown to have had inconsistent boundaries and in various ways separated from the history and culture of the Chinese administered regions to its north. But as the several articles that address the post-tenth century era assert, there was a good deal of common regional linkage that remained well into the nineteenth century.

The initial chapters provide detail on recent archaeological recoveries. Judith Cameron cites regional evidence of early textile production in the Hepu, Guangxi, and modern Thanh Hoa ‘arc of technological transfer’ as demonstrating pre-historical migrations of populations from south China southward, and the formation of hierarchical societies that by the Han-era were commonly producing wet-rice crops. Her sources are the recovered artefacts from Han dynasty tombs (circa 106 BCE-9 CE) from south China as these are consistent with recoveries from pre-Han-era regional archeological sites (10,000-2,000 BCE). Common tools for loom weaving have been recovered, notably biconical pottery spindle whorls used in hand spindles that extend fibre lengths prior to weaving cloth on back strap looms. She pairs these tool artefacts with the weaving scenes on early contemporary bronze drums, which include slaves in craft shops working under the guidance of higher status ‘owners’. The ‘missing link’ has been resolved by recent south China coffin excavations, where recovered funeral textiles match the cloth production depicted on the bronze drums. She concludes that the collective evidence is sufficient to assert remarkable regional consistency – against independent textile production types – at a high level of technology.

Following chapters by Li Tana and Michael Churchman highlight revisionist scholarship on the region’s signature bronze drums, wherein dating and production are debated issues. Both agree that the substantial regional recoveries of bronze drums demonstrate that by the Han era there was open
rather than ‘closed’ secretive ritualized production of distinctive drums, which were commonly symbols of power among regional chieftains. Han-era dynastic sovereignty in the south is argued to have incorporated the drum culture, not as an effort to negate prior networks of authority and cultural symbols but by the deliberate process of cultural synthesis — regional chieftains (‘Big Men’) entered into mutually profitable relationships with Chinese sovereigns, who found Jiaozhi regional integrations rather than impositions of Chinese sovereignty and culture to be more effective in supporting dynastic sovereignty. Production in the Red River delta ceased coincident with the introduction of Buddhism from South Asia and Daoism from China, as the Jiaozhi elites abandoned a centuries-old affinity for bronze drums as status markers that were by then judged to be ‘barbaric’.

Brigitte Borell’s chapter on the recovered glass artefacts from the Han-era regional tombs, paired with recent recoveries from south China, Vietnam, and the Kra Isthmus of the Malay Peninsula, document Gungzi glass production and regional distribution during the Han era that negates earlier conclusions that early glass recoveries in the East must have all had a Mediterranean or western Indian Ocean origin. New discoveries of contemporary Indian glass in central Vietnam at Tra Kieu and Go Cam excavation sites indicate the importance of the central Cham coastline as a vital intermediary in trade between the western Indian Ocean and China, and the identification of Gungzi glass in the contemporary southeastern Indian Arikamedu port-site excavations document wider Indian Ocean maritime commercial connections.

Li Tana’s excellent introductory essay and overview chapter provides a useful summary of Jiaozhi history from the Han era to the ninth century. She uses Chinese textual sources to report that Qin Shihuangdi (r. 246-210) was foundational to later Han regional sovereignty when on his 214 southern campaign he had the Ling Canal built as the vital link for Qin and subsequent Han dynasties, as it facilitated north-south movements of troops, people, and commodities into central China and beyond to the Changan capital via a waterway network. Thus Han-era tombs in modern Guangxi are the source of grave goods that reflect the circulation along this corridor, and the intersection of regional Yue and Chu cultures, connected to Jiaozhi. The Jiaozhi Commandery was thus an ‘imperial jewel’ in the Han era, as documented in the recoveries of the variety of commodities that substantiate that the region was a major production centre for local consumption and export, such as rice and Hepu pearls. Churchman argues that post-Han era Jiaozhi self-reliance and self-rule was foundational to the independence of the Dai Viet kingdom in 939.

Li Tana’s revisionist reconstruction of the transition to Vietnamese rule in the tenth century leads to James Anderson’s chapter that examines the consequent competitions for manpower between Dai Viet and Guangxi. He estimates that tenth-century north and central Vietnam had a regional popu-
lation that was half of what it was when the Han ruled the region. In part this was due to three hundred years of limited Chinese migration negated by ethnic Li-Lao ‘stateless societies’ to Vietnam’s north, and to competition among regional strongmen that resulted in the exodus northward of residents out of the Red River system at the invitation of neighbouring Guangxi officials. Anderson portrays the role of ‘men of prowess’ in the coastal regions rather than the land borders as vital allies of the emergent Dai Viet state, as he conceives that competition for control over the trading communities of the coastal ports, which is marginalized in the official sources, shaped Song-Vietnamese relations during the early years of the Dai Viet polity.

The four concluding chapters provide representative case studies of the Tongking Gulf region in subsequent eras. John Whitmore’s study is especially important as a major revisionist take on the late fifteenth-century initiatives during Le Thanh Tong’s critical reign. Whitmore introduces the critical research of the recently deceased Roxanna Brown on regional ceramics production and exchange, as it was a substantial issue in late fifteenth-century Champa and Vietnam warfare. Whitmore argues that new archaeological evidence negates his previous conclusion that Le Thanh Tong withdrew Vietnamese engagement from the sea to better develop his realm’s agricultural base. Instead, Whitmore charts the rise of the Van Don port of trade as the culmination of Thanh Tong’s efforts to monopolize coastal ceramics production in the critical ‘Ming gap’ era when Chinese officials restricted ceramics exports. Thus Thanh Tong’s armies took control of the central Vietnam coastline and its ports-of-trade and their upstream ceramics production centres and then resettled Cham artisans in new areas in Van Don’s upstream. Thus Vietnam’s commercial sector subsidized the institution of an innovative Vietnamese examination system and other cultural achievements of the era as retrospectively recorded by Vietnamese literati.

The book’s introductory essay adds to Whitmore’s account that the 1471 Dai Viet attacks on the Cham realm were also critical because of the subsequent disappearance of regional Muslim merchants, followed by the purging of Cham prisoner-of-war communities in the Red River Delta in 1508. Thus the involvement of previously essential Cham and Muslim merchant diaspora intermediaries between the Dai Viet region and the Malay Archipelago and beyond was negated, and the Dai Viet region temporarily lost its southern connections. Dai Viet products thereafter competed with rather than complemented those of Guangxi.

Iioka Naokko’s chapter details another era of successful commercial initiatives: the Le-Trinh court’s profitable seventeenth-century silk trade centred at the new Red River port of Pho Hien (during a temporary Chinese ban on silk exports), as this relates to that era’s regional trade that networked with Japan (based in exchanges of Vietnamese silk for Japanese silver) and included com-
mercial rivalry among Portuguese, Dutch, Japanese, and Chinese merchants, and the competing Nguyen dynastic centre at Hue on the central coastline.

The following chapter by Niu Junkai and Li Qingxin reports that seventeenth-century regional piracy was often a joint venture of multi-ethnic pirates and local officials, culminating in the pirate leaders promotion to naval officers and their loot funding the Tay Son rebellion (1771-1802). Subsequently, as the final study by Vu Duong Luan and Nola Cooke addresses the nineteenth-century aftermath, the Nguyen court dominated the region and the new Hue-based elite excluded those from the Red River Delta from any role in the Vietnam political system for the next fifty years. As the Red River Delta’s resources and human capital declined, the regional beneficiary was Guangdong, which drained the resources of the gulf shore Guangxi economy as Guangdong became the dominant center of regional commerce.

The China factor

Geoff Wade and Sun Laichen’s edited volume (2011) Southeast Asia in the fifteenth century: The China factor concentrates on transitions in fifteenth-century Southeast Asia, and debates the Chinese Ming dynasty’s role either directly or indirectly. For example, was there regional change that had its foundation in this century, or was there instead a century-long continuum that had prior roots that subsequently reached resolution? Certainly the Ming voyages of the Chinese eunuch Admiral Zheng He into the 1430s had prominence, but did they have any significance in directly setting into motion regional change, or was subsequent Ming withdrawal from overseas engagements of even greater significance?

The introductory essay by Geoff Wade situates the book in the context of wider regional and global historiography to make the case that there is a need to understand Southeast Asia’s place in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century globalism, as this relates to the realities of our twenty-first century world. Sun Laichen’s introduction proposes that the Ming dynasty had substantive impact in the Southeast Asia region relative to China’s southern expansionism; China’s emergence as an international economic and military superpower in the fifteenth century may mirror unfolding twenty-first century events. Sun first argues that the expansion of Han Chinese or Confucian culture was made possible by large-scale migration and settlement of Han populations, in the newly annexed regions on China’s southern borders. Secondly, he highlights the extension of Chinese military control (though often nominal) over non-Han populations in these and other Chinese borderlands. Thirdly, China’s ‘sphere of influence’ radically changed, wherein China’s influence, and political, economic, and military power (or combinations thereof), became a regional factor.
The dozen subsequent chapters are equally divided in their address to fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century Vietnam, Tai, and Khmer regions. The first Vietnam study is Li Tana’s perceptive overview of Vietnamese history in the fifteenth-century, which provides the numerical details of late fifteenth-century territorial and population incorporations, which she also summarizes in her introductory essay in the previously cited Tongking Gulf collection. Le Thanh Tong’s emerging Dai Viet state subjugated neighbouring areas in its upstream borderlands against the Lao and Tai, and also annexed the Vietnam coastline (inclusive of the prior Cham population centres in the central Vietnam region). John Whitmore’s article addresses the implementation of a Ming-inspired bureaucracy in fifteenth-century Dai Viet state, whose members felt that Vietnam’s future depended on emulating the ‘modern world’ of the Ming bureaucratic state. Whitmore includes a useful cross-reference to contemporary initiatives taking place in Korea. Momoki Shiro supplies a review of the texts produced by these literati, notably those who attempted to understand and depict the new Dai Viet ‘geo-body’ that had incorporated all these new territories in ways that could be understood in the context of Ming-era geomancy (‘water and wind’/fenshui, and ‘principles of the earth’/dili) to distinguish Dai Viet’s territorial legitimacy against that of its northern neighbour. The final study of fifteenth-century Dai Viet by Alexander Ong Eng Ann provides additional evidence of purposeful Ming destruction and confiscation of Vietnamese texts during their early fifteenth-century occupation, to eliminate local texts that had ‘deviated from the moral-ideological order created by the Yongle emperor’ and in doing so to negate an alternative moral order that would substantiate Dai Viet’s political equality with Ming China. In the aftermath of Ming occupation, new Vietnamese literati described in the previous studies subsequently compiled new Vietnamese texts to validate Dai Viet’s cultural legitimacy.

Sun Laichen’s lead article in the section on Tai and Khmer politics documents the Shan highlands borderlands gem trade, in exchange for Chinese silver, which supported the rise of Shan principalities in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. His study is notable for providing a detailed accounting of commodity flows in contrast to the Ming intellectual and cultural transitions that feature centrally in three of the Vietnam case studies. Volker Grabowsky studies the rise, consolidation, and fall of the northern Tai polity of Lan Na, a conglomerate of large autonomous muang regions that had been incorporated into the Chinese tu-si (native chieftain) system since the early fourteenth century, and was obligated to send tribute missions to the Yuan and Ming courts. In the early sixteenth century Lan Na developed into a major regional trading centre, based in a kingship that localized the Song bao-jia and Ming li-jia systems and heavily patronized a parallel Buddhist monastic hierarchy centred in three Buddhist order temples (two
reformed Singhalese orders and the third a traditional order) in Chiang Mai. Christian Daniels studies the variety of highland agricultural practices found in the borderlands regions occupied by frequently mobile Tay populations in the fifteenth century, with specific discussion of new agricultural technology transfers (including hoes and gunpowder weapons) that made the Tay populations who practice shifting cultivation using their unique irrigation agriculture more productive than their Mon and Khmer neighbours. This section concludes with Michael Vickery’s important synthesis of remaining and difficult to analyze documentation of Cambodia’s fifteenth-century history, focusing on Cambodia’s relationships with its neighbours.

The final section addresses maritime Southeast Asia. It consists of studies by Anthony Reid on ‘Hybrid identities in the 15th century Straits’ that hones in on the variety of localized Chinese and other mixed resident populations in the extended Malay world inclusive of Java, Borneo, and the Philippines; Pierre-Yves Manguin on ‘New Ships for New Networks in the South China Sea in the 15th and 16th Centuries’; the late Roxanna Brown’s important synthesis (with colour illustrations) of the ‘Ming Gap’ Data from the Southeast Asian shipwreck cargoes,’ which has been discussed above relative to its importance to revisionist fifteenth-century regional history; and John Miksic’s concluding summary of ‘Before and after Zheng He; Comparing some Southeast Asian archaeological sites of the 14th and 15th centuries’ that highlights his recent excavations at the Chinese maritime diaspora centre of Kota Cina in northern Sumatra; the fourteenth-century Majapahit court at Trowulan in east Java; and Fort Canning in Singapore. He also provides a useful overview of recent shipwreck recoveries that date to the Ming era.

Inclusively, four of the five books reviewed are important studies that provide valuable introductions to newly available archaeological and primary source documentation, and thoughtful revisionist perceptions of Southeast Asia’s place in the pre-1500 eastern Indian Ocean world and beyond. These are substantive books with ideas presented by various authors individually and in collected enterprises that encourage scholars across the disciplines to reevaluate a variety of interactive human agencies within fluid rather than bounded space.

Reference

Scott, James
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*The art of not being governed: An anarchist history of upland Southeast Asia.*
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