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Archaeology of Early Chinese Settlement in Southeast Asia

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Abstract

Little historical information is available about early Chinese settlement in Southeast Asia. By the 15th century several Chinese settlements of significant size had formed, but they vanished by the time the Portuguese reached the region. This article surveys the historical literature on these early overseas Chinese settlements, and summarizes the contributions which archaeology can make to clarifying the timing and nature of the process.

Keywords

Mayapahit – Gresik – Cirebon – Palembang – Semarang – Singapore – Kota Cina – Ming Dynasty – Melaka – Zheng He – archaeology

Introduction*

In the mid-19th century, Chinese emigration to North America and Australia accelerated. Several factors contributed to this development, chief among them the weakening Qing government in China and demand for labor in the construction and mining sectors in America and Australia. The American and

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Australian sites where Chinese migrants lived and worked have become a focus of interest for historical archaeologists in these regions (Gonzalez-Tennant 2011). These sites are relatively easy to locate, because they were recorded in maps, photographs, and documents. The Chinese in these areas tended to live in relatively homogeneous camps and urban districts, both by design and preference. It is thus possible to identify the ethnic identity of the people who occupied these sites, and to equate the material culture found there with Chinese inhabitants.

At the same time many Chinese also moved to Southeast Asia. Many were enticed to emigrate by offers of work in mines and plantations. Since written records make it possible to identify locations where *kuli keng* were established, it is possible to equate artifacts found at those sites with the customs and economic activity of Chinese inhabitants. None of these sites has yet been excavated.

This situation offers an opportunity for comparative analysis of archaeological assemblages between widely separated parts of the world. If differences in the archaeological remains of Chinese settlers and their distribution between North America, Australia, and Southeast Asia were discovered, it would be interesting to identify the reasons for this variation. No archaeologists have yet grasped the chance to carry out such research. So far, scholars have focused on comparing the sites of Chinese occupation with those of other contemporary groups in the same areas, leading to a lack of broader comparative studies.

The comparison is complicated by several factors. First is the fact that Chinese have been visiting Southeast Asia for a much longer period, beginning around 2,000 years ago. Second, Chinese often came to Southeast Asia as individuals or families rather than as part of groups who consisted entirely of men. Third, there is little written documentation of Chinese overseas communities in the period before 1800. Fourth, early Chinese immigrants were often businessmen or artisans who enjoyed a higher socioeconomic status than their counterparts at labor camps in American and Australia. As a result, although we have reason to assume that Chinese were living at specific places in Southeast Asia at specific times, we lack textual proof for this. It is thus necessary to rely on archaeological data to identify these sites, but at this time the reliability of methods of detecting the ethnicity of inhabitants of particular sites by relying on archaeological data is uncertain. We can only estimate the probability that Chinese (or other ethnic groups such as people from South Asia/India or the Near East) were responsible for creating a particular archaeological assemblage from artifacts alone, and there is as yet no generally accepted procedure for doing this. Circular reasoning becomes a problem in this case (Miksic 2001, Miksic 2004).

In this chapter, I will discuss archaeological and historical data obtained from sites where we can estimate the probability that Chinese were present

(thus reasoning inductively). I will also reverse course and suggest some methods for devising a hypothetico-deductive chain of reasoning to estimate the probability that Chinese were present. In the absence of comparative data in the form of written records, it will never be possible to be 100% certain that overseas Chinese lived at a particular spot in Southeast Asia, but it should be feasible to achieve a probability greater than random chance.

From 2,200 to 1000 years BP: The Han through Tang Dynasties

Early historians and archaeologists working in Southeast Asia often assumed that Indian colonizers played a major role in creating advanced civilizations such as Angkor in Cambodia. In the 20th century, explanations for the origin of complex societies in Southeast Asia became more sophisticated. No evidence of large-scale migration from India was detected, and the discovery that scripts and artistic motifs based on Indian models expressed different systems of government and religious beliefs forced scholars to rethink the nature of the relationship between Southeast and South Asia. In the 1980s it was still acceptable for historical geographers to ascribe the origin of urban society in Southeast Asia to Indian (or in the case of Vietnam, to Chinese) influences (Wheatley 1983), but new discoveries in Southeast Asia have forced scholars to develop new theories to explain the evolution of highly-developed art styles and commercial practices, based on the hypothesis that Southeast Asians were the principal actors in the formation of their own culture.

Written references to Southeast Asia appear in South Asian, Chinese, and Classical European texts about 2,000 years ago. At that time, Southeast Asia was already well integrated into a network of trade and communication stretching from the Red Sea to the western shores of the Pacific Ocean. Indeed Southeast Asians played the key role in linking the areas where spices and other exotic items from eastern Indonesia were carried 3,000 kilometers to the southern tip of the Malay Peninsula, where they entered the main east-west trade routes. This Asian Maritime Interaction Sphere (AMIS) owed its existence to Malayo-Polynesian navigators, who were responsible for the first human colonization of the Pacific Ocean as well as the island of Madagascar on the western side of the Indian Ocean (Miksic 2013: 25–27). The first European (Greek, Roman) authors to describe AMIS depict it as a well-organized set of institutions based on maritime trade (Wheatley 1961).

China first became directly involved in AMIS in the third century BCE, when the “first emperor” of the Qin Dynasty conquered the area which now comprises the southern Chinese provinces of Fujian, Guangdong, Guangxi, and the

northern part of what is now the nation of Vietnam. Indeed the motivation for these conquests seems to have been the desire to gain control of ports which were already connected to AMIS. The first Chinese artifacts in Southeast Asia appear at a site in the isthmian region of the Siam-Malay Peninsula around 100 BCE, together with artifacts from the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean (Bellina 2017).

Early Historical Sources on Overseas Chinese

For the first thousand years, Chinese involvement in AMIS was conducted through diplomatic channels. Confucian philosophy denigrated trade, so Chinese officials and scholars had to acquire the foreign luxuries they craved such as incense and pearls through exchanges of diplomatic gifts. Chinese texts record that foreign delegations were allowed to conduct limited trade with designated Chinese. It seems that either this “limited trade” was of high volume, or some other channel existed which bypassed the official exchanges, since some officials were said to have obtained large quantities of foreign luxuries (Wang 1958).

By the eighth century foreign quarters existed in some south Chinese ports where Arab, Persian, Indian, and Indonesian merchants were allowed to live. By the ninth century, the cargo of a shipwreck found in Indonesia shows that ceramics were being mass-produced in China for export. This shipwreck, the *Belitung*, indicates that a collaborative relationship existed between Chinese ceramic producers in the hinterland, a port on China’s southeast coast, a shipper who used a ship built in the western Indian Ocean, and a market in Java. How this highly coordinated system developed is unknown, since no written records deal with commerce at this period. It is possible that the main organizers were based in Indonesia. The foreign merchant quarter in Guangzhou had been destroyed 50 years earlier, and documents indicate that the Siam-Malay peninsula had become the central node in the network connecting the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean. Other sources indicate that a kingdom in central Java was in frequent diplomatic contact with China at this period, when major temple complexes such as Borobudur and Prambanan were constructed (Krahl et al 2010).

China’s government began to relax restrictions on foreign trade during the Song Dynasty. Foreigners were allowed greater access to the Chinese market. Chinese were permitted to travel abroad after the Yuan Dynasty was founded in 1271. Mongol rulers did not uphold Confucian beliefs; they were sympathetic to the formation of international trading networks. The memoir of the merchant Wang Dayuan in the early 14th century suggests that Chinese merchants were frequently sailing through the waterway now known as Keppel Harbour

on the south coast of Singapore, and that some of them were residing there (Rockhill 1915, Miksic 2013).

The Ming Dynasty, founded in 1368, reinstated traditional prohibitions against trade, and attempted to restore the old tributary system (Wolters 1970). This policy resulted in a shortage of imported luxury items in China. At the beginning of the 15th century, the Yongle emperor of the Ming Dynasty attempted to remedy this situation by dispatching fleets of “treasure ships” to collect the tribute rather than relying on foreigners to bring it (Mills 1970). The records of these voyages, as well as the ships themselves, were destroyed when Confucianism became ascendant after 1433, but a few texts survive. These mention the existence of sizeable communities of Chinese in Sumatra and Java which seem to have been there for several generations.

After the last voyage of the Ming fleet, all written evidence of these communities vanished. When the Portuguese began to document the ports where those communities had existed, they found no trace of them except for local memories. It is likely that the early overseas Chinese had been assimilated into local societies. In the eighteenth century a hybrid type of culture called *Peranakan* appeared in the same ports; these may have their roots in the 15th century, but it is equally possible that they formed after Chinese emigration resumed in the late 16th century.

The process of Chinese settlement in Southeast Asia evolved through several stages. In the first stage, possibly as early as the late Tang Dynasty, individual Chinese may have flouted the ban against overseas travel to trade in Southeast Asia. There is no evidence that they intended to move permanently to Southeast Asia; they merely sojourned for a few years before returning home. In the second stage, during the Song Dynasty, larger numbers of Chinese merchants may have begun to explore Southeast Asia. At first they too probably remained for a few years, as Wang Dayuan seems to have done. As commercial and personal relationships with local people in the ports developed, merchants probably began to spend longer periods of time in the region, until by 1400 they formed permanent communities of several thousand people. A special office was formed to regulate relations between the Ming government and one community in Palembang, Sumatra. After relations with China were severed in 1435, the overseas Chinese adopted local names and customs. Many of them seem to have been Muslim; at this time there were more Muslims in China than in Southeast Asia. The admiral who led most of the fleets, Zheng He, and some of his main subordinates, were Muslim. The Chinese Muslims may have played a role in the Islamization of Java, which would have made their assimilation into local society easier.

When the Dutch established a political base at Jakarta (which they renamed Batavia) in 1619, they began to encourage Chinese to immigrate. The Chinese had technical and financial skills and connections. In some areas such as western Borneo, the Chinese became sufficiently numerous and politically organized that they constituted rivals to the Dutch, who eventually undertook military measures to subjugate them (Heidhues 2003). Massacres of Chinese sometimes took place, such as in Jakarta and Manila. They did not deter further immigrants. The development of plantations and mines in the 19th century led to large-scale importation of Chinese workers, a separate development from the immigration of middle-class merchants which continued apace. It is at this stage that the archaeology of Chinese settlement in Southeast Asia can be compared with similar areas in Australia and the western hemisphere.

Archaeology of Early Chinese Settlement in Southeast Asia

This topic has not yet become a recognized subspecialty. This is ironic, given the much longer period during which Chinese have been migrating to Southeast Asia, and the greater range of activities in which Chinese have been engaged in this region. It is true that the different circumstances under which Chinese immigration took place poses obstacles which do not exist in other areas. The range of socioeconomic activities undertaken by the Chinese in Southeast Asia, their propensity to distribute themselves more widely there than elsewhere, and the long period of trade between Southeast Asia and China make it difficult to distinguish trade in Chinese commodities, principally ceramics, from Chinese habitation sites. It is necessary to be cautious when attributing artifact assemblages to Chinese occupation as opposed to storage of imported items.

Even where the 19th century is concerned, it is difficult to disentangle Chinese artifacts from Chinese settlement. Although there were Chinatowns in colonial ports such as Batavia and Singapore, available records suggest that not all inhabitants of Chinatowns were Chinese, and not all Chinese resided in Chinatowns. The boundaries are therefore very indistinct. In this respect, sites in places such as San Francisco and other parts of the western United States have an advantage because specific sites are identified as Chinese-owned properties or Chinese worker encampments by documents. The types of artifacts associated with these sites are quite different from those found in Southeast Asian urban areas.

The field of historical archaeology in the sense of the term used in America, Australia, and Africa has not attracted much attention in Southeast Asia. In the

former regions, historical archaeology is equated with western colonization over the past five centuries. Most of Southeast Asia was uncolonized until the mid-19th century. Conversely, historical records are available for a much longer period in Southeast Asia than in America, Australia, or Africa. This situation is ripe for the expansion of the theoretical approaches associated with historical archaeology, specifically the interplay of artifacts and texts, to encompass the Southeast Asian region. Such a development could yield considerable theoretical and substantive advances for the discipline.

As noted above, Chinese artifacts (specifically ceramics) began appearing in Southeast Asia 2,200 years ago. How they reached southern Thailand is uncertain. They were probably containers for trade goods, rather than trade items themselves. Very few Chinese artifacts have been reported from Southeast Asia in sites contemporaneous with the Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE). Some ceramics made during the Han Dynasty were acquired by a Dutch scholar (Orsoy de Flines 1941–47) in the early 20th century, but none have been found in excavations. It is thought that the Han artifacts in de Flines' acquisitions were imported much later. Convincing evidence of large-scale export of Chinese artifacts as opposed to luxury trade in expensive items does not appear until around 800 CE. This evidence consists of ceramics made in the Changsha region. Examples are found in Java, Sumatra, the Malay Peninsula, and at sites in the Indian Ocean.

Few trading ports from the first millennium CE have been discovered in Southeast Asia. The best-known are found in the lands around the Straits of Melaka, including south Thailand, northern peninsular Malaysia, and south Sumatra. Data from them is insufficient to address the question of possible Chinese settlement there. No port of this period has yet been identified in Java. In fact the only Javanese ports yet investigated by archaeologists date from the period after 1500 CE.

The Cirebon Shipwreck

A shipwreck found off the northwest coast of Java, the *Cirebon*, dates from the very early part of the Song Dynasty (960–1260 CE). This Indonesian ship was carrying a very international cargo consisting of Arabo-Persian, Chinese, and Southeast Asian items (Liebner). This is an interesting period in Indonesian history. The great Javanese kingdom of Mataram in central Java had been abandoned by this time. Few inscriptions from Java are contemporary with the Song Dynasty. Those that exist imply that the center of government had shifted to the northeast part of the island, where the great port of Surabaya eventually emerged. Several 15th-century Chinese settlements were located in this region. Surabaya is located in the delta of the Brantas River, where the coastline and

river courses have changed frequently over the past thousand years. Surabaya is now Indonesia's second-largest city. These factors hinder the search for archaeological sites.

Barus

The site of Barus, northwest Sumatra, is the oldest known place in Southeast Asia where historical and archaeological evidence for foreign enclaves has been found. This consists of inscriptions and artifacts associated with India and Persian Gulf, including ceramics used in everyday life. Chinese artifacts are present but not numerous (Guillot 1998, Guillot et al 2003).

Kota Cina

The best-studied of the possible sites where overseas Chinese may have settled during the Song Dynasty is located in northeast Sumatra. The site's name in Indonesian, Kota Cina, means "Chinese Stockade". No written sources, whether Chinese or local, mention this site. Archaeology provides the only insight into its existence. It was discovered in the early 1970s, and has been subject to two phases of excavation: once in the 1970s, and again in the 2010s. The results of the later research have not yet been published.

The name "Chinese Stockade" is highly reminiscent of Marco Polo's description of a temporary encampment built about 100 km away in 1292 (Latham 1958: 254). He was on his return journey to Italy with a Yuan fleet which was bound for the Persian Gulf. Due to the seasonal pattern of the monsoon winds, ships from China could only sail as far as the Straits of Melaka before contrary winds set in. They would have to wait in the Straits for 6 months before the winds reversed once more, enabling them to continue their westward voyage. Polo describes how the Chinese built a fortified encampment where they stayed. They conducted trade with the local people, but apparently needed to protect themselves against possible attack. A similar stockade was built in Melaka in the early 15th century (Mills 1970).

Polo does not mention any permanent Chinese settlements in Southeast Asia. It seems that the Chinese with whom he was travelling built their stockade from the ground up, and left it without intending to return. The formation of the Kota Cina site predates Marco Polo by about 200 years. Kota Cina was largely abandoned shortly before Marco Polo's fleet arrived. A small population may still have existed at Kota Cina, but Polo does not seem to have been aware of its existence. No evidence of a stockade has been found at Kota Cina.

The excavations of the 1970s were conducted on a small scale (Miksic 1979; Edwards McKinnon 1984). They established the size of the site as about 25

FIGURE 1 Qingbai porcelain water dropper for mixing ink, 12th or 13th century, found at Kota Cina, Sumatra

hectares. It seems to have been rectangular in shape, with the long sides perpendicular to the shore. The site was located at the inland edge of a delta, perhaps 5 km from the Straits of Melaka. This location was probably chosen due to the availability of a basic necessity: fresh water. Remains include foundations of sanctuaries, and statuary of Buddhist and Hindu deities imported from Sri Lanka and southern India. A few Sri Lankan coins have been found on the site, along with beads of probable South Indian origin. A few sherds of Middle Eastern origin have also been identified. One particular type of earthenware used for ceremonial water vessels was not made locally; it probably came from another location in Indonesia or the Malay Peninsula.

Ceramics are abundant in the habitation layer. Two-thirds of them are locally made; the other third consist of Chinese wares. Of the Chinese pottery, the majority consists of fragments of large storage vessels, which would have been containers for perishable commodities. Finer wares include green and white glazed wares, some of high quality. Among them are fragments of rare porcelain objects such as a water dropper for mixing Chinese ink (see fig. 1), a tea bowl of hare's fur glaze commonly called *temmoku* in Japan, and a bowl of standard dimensions used for measuring rice. These artifacts are suggestive of some daily practices associated with a Chinese lifestyle.

The presence of Chinese at Kota Cina is a hypothesis rather than a certainty. In addition to rare forms of Chinese ceramics, other artifacts suggestive of

Chinese presence include large quantities of Chinese coins, and gold flakes with Chinese characters incised on them (related to the purity of the gold). Small clay cups probably used as crucibles indicate the possible presence of Chinese goldsmiths at the site; gold ore is present in the nearby hinterland. The large proportion of Chinese ceramics to local earthenware is also suggestive but not conclusive. Similar statistics for other sites of this period have not been published, so it is impossible to ascertain whether this proportion may be correlated with Chinese presence or merely local prosperity (or consumer preference).

Recent excavation at the site covered a much larger area than the 1970s research. The new data will provide more detailed information on the distribution of specific types of artifacts in different parts of the site, which might be correlated with specific ways of life typical of separate enclaves of different ethnic groups. One of the main hindrances to this approach is the lack of data on this subject, both from other sites in Southeast Asia, and for contemporary sites in China. Until such data are available, no firm conclusions can be drawn regarding overseas Chinese settlement in the absence of written sources.

Singapore

The 14th-century Chinese trader-traveller Wang Dayuan mentions Chinese living together with Southeast Asian natives twice in his narrative. One instance of this phrase occurs in a reference to a small island off the west coast of Borneo. The people in this case were soldiers who were part of an expedition sent by Kublai Khan to attack Java in 1292. Apparently they became seasick and were put ashore, never to be picked up again. According to Wang they were still living on the island among the local inhabitants 40 years later (Rockhill 1914–1915: 261).

The second instance concerns the island of Temasek, now known as Singapore (Rockhill 1914–15: 129–133). Wang Dayuan mentioned two places in Temasek. One is Longya men or Dragon's Tooth Strait, which most scholars agree is the western entrance to Keppel Harbor, Singapore. Wang provides conflicting accounts of this place. On one hand he mentions that the local chief exhorted his people to live peacefully together with the Chinese, and he describes the goods traded between the two groups. On the other hand he describes the inhabitants of Longya men as murderous pirates who lie in wait to attack Chinese ships passing through the strait, and the dire fate of those who are captured. In another section he describes the people who live on the hill of Temasek at a place called Banzu as honest traders.

The report of Ma Guan records Zheng He's use of the Longya men/Keppel Harbor of Singapore in the early 15th century. At one point, he mentions that the Ming fleet sailed from Champa for 8 days to Longya men, then west for two

days to Melaka (Mills 1970: 108). He records that on the return voyage, they also travelled via Singapore Strait (Mills 1970: 25).

Archaeological research has uncovered evidence of intensive trade and settlement in the area along the north bank of the Singapore River, and a palace on what is now Fort Canning Hill, where rare Chinese artifacts were discovered. Temasek is the first place where archaeological and textual evidence converge to enable us to describe a place with a resident Chinese community.

It is not certain that the Chinese lived in a separate quarter of the city. Numerous small-scale excavations have been conducted at various places in an 85-hectare zone. The palace on the hill was abandoned around 1400, but ceramics from the Ming Dynasty indicate that a trading port continued to exist along the Singapore River during the Melaka Sultanate (1400–1511). Portuguese records confirm that Singapore was important enough to have an official harbormaster around 1600.

It is not yet possible to confirm that any specific part of Singapore during the precolonial period was allocated mainly or completely to Chinese residents. Chinese ceramics and coins are distributed in approximately equal quantities throughout the site. Analysis of the artifacts is still in progress, and more precise data on the distribution of specific types of Chinese and local artifacts may make it possible to hypothesize that some areas may have been inhabited mainly by Chinese. At this time, the most unusual Chinese items such as

FIGURE 2 Porcelain Compass, Yuan Dynasty, Fort Canning, Singapore

fragments of a ceramic pillow and a compass bowl (see fig. 2) are associated with the palace, where Chinese are unlikely to have lived.

Java's North Coast: Legend, History, and Archaeology

Early Ming Descriptions of Java

Relations between Java and China were marred by several incidents in the Hongwu reign of the first Ming emperor (Miksic 2014). As a result, there is a gap in Chinese reports on Indonesia in the late 14th century.

In order to revive the flow of Southeast Asian tribute to China, the Yongle emperor despatched maritime expeditions to Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean. Seven of these were organized by Zheng He, a Muslim eunuch. Several of his officers were also Muslims. Zheng He was no fundamentalist. For example, an inscription in Sri Lanka in Chinese, Tamil, and Persian commemorates his gifts to a Buddhist temple on his third voyage (1409–11) (Mills 1970: 12). He received the title *San bao tai qian*, Grand Eunuch Three Jewels (which refers to the Buddhist triratna; Mills 1970: 7).

Chinese records of the Yongle reign mention Chinese communities in northeast Java, but do not describe their appearance. We only know their approximate population, which part of China they came from, and their religion (which was Islam). Due partly to monsoon wind patterns, partly to economic factors, Java's northeast coast was an important stopover on the voyages of the Ming fleets. They usually sailed directly from China to northeast Java, where they await a change of winds which allowed them to work their way west along the Javanese coast, then turn north through the Straits of Melaka. Chinese communities existed in this area when the Ming fleets arrived, suggesting that the imperial fleets were following the sailing routes previously used by Chinese merchants.

Ma Guan, writing of Java in general, divides the population into three groups. One consisted of Muslims from the West. The second were Chinese from Guangdong, Zhangzhou, and Quanzhou “and other such places, who fled away and now live in this country [he also says that the Chinese of Palembang had “fled away”; see below]...many of them follow the Muslim religion”. The third were the indigenous inhabitants, who were not yet Muslim (Mills 1970: 93). Other Chinese communities probably existed in Java in addition to those he specifically describes. Local histories, architectural remains, and some archaeological data suggest Chinese communities existed in at least six ports

on Java's north coast in the 15th century (Surabaya, Gresik, Tuban, Lasem, Semarang, Cirebon). Two others formed in the 16th century (Jakarta, Banten).

Tome Pires, Portuguese apothecary, in his valuable report of 1515 does not mention any Chinese communities in Indonesia. He was aware that China had once been in frequent contact with Java, but Chinese had not come there for the last 100 years (Corteseo 1944: I, 179). He quotes a Javanese tradition that a king of China sent a princess to marry the king of Java along with a large retinue. A similar tradition existed in Melaka.

Apparently the overseas Chinese communities were absorbed into the local population between the last Ming expedition in 1433 and the arrival of the Portuguese. Pires says that the Muslim rulers of the ports were not Javanese, and that some were of Chinese descent. Chinese coins were still the principal medium of exchange (Corteseo 1944: I, 181).

The *Mao Kun* map, believed to have been based on information obtained by the Ming treasure fleets, depicts Lasem, Tuban, and Gresik (Mills 1970: 23). Ma Guan said that Java had four large towns (*kuo*). Chinese going to Java, including Zheng He himself, sailed from Champa to Tuban, then New Village (*Xin Cun*, Gresik), Surabaya, then Majapahit, where the king lived (Mills 1970: 86).

An important Javanese poem written in 1365 is entitled *Deshawarnana* ("Description of the Country"), written by a Buddhist clergyman named Prapanca in 1365 at the apogee of Majapahit's power. Prapanca refers to foreign traders in Canto 83, stanza 4, as a sign of the glory of Majapahit's ruler (Pigeaud 1960: III, 98). He mentions people from India, Cambodia, China, Vietnam, Champa, and Siam, "taking their way in ships, joining merchants, crowded." Traders appear again in his description of a major royal celebration when officials came from all over Java, Bali, and other islands. Traders and merchants attracted crowds to markets with a great variety of wares.

Lasem

Canto 17 stanza 6 (see fig. 3) of the *Deshawarnana* records a royal visit to Lasem in 1354. Lasem was the fief of a princess (Pigeaud 1960: III, 13, 21). Modern Lasem is known for dwellings built according to Chinese models of courtyard houses, still inhabited by descendants of Chinese who may have arrived here in the late Ming Dynasty (late 16th/early 17th centuries), and a particular style of batik cloth decoration.

Archaeologists have discovered a site at Caruban, on Lasem's seaward fringe on the northwest side of the modern town (Nurhadi 1986, Soejatmi 1985). Their data confirm Lasem's significance as a settlement from the 14th through 17th centuries. Systematic excavations from 1980 to 1985 yielded

FIGURE 3 Traditional Chinese house, Lasem, north coast of central Java

brick ruins, stone mortars, roof tiles, net weights, pottery tokens or *gacuk*, iron slag, bones, shells, human skeletons, and Chinese coins, porcelain, and stoneware. Sherds of Chinese ceramics were approximately equal in number to those of local pottery, a sign of Lasem's close commercial connection with China. Ceramics from the Song were present, but least common (4.5%). Yuan sherds (151) represented 18.5% of the imported ceramic assemblage. Ming ceramics constituted 21.3% (the report does not subdivide them into early, middle, and late Ming). Fifteenth-century ceramics from Thailand and Vietnam were also present, constituting 23.5% of the total (Maria 1986).

Tuban

Tuban was mentioned by Zhao Rugua in 1225, before Majapahit existed. Tuban was 14th-century Majapahit's main port. According to Ma Guan, the population of Tuban included many people from Guangdong and Fujian (Mills 1970: 89). No systematic archaeology has been conducted there, but the local museum, Kambang Putih, has a collection of ceramics confiscated from fishermen who found them in the harbor. These include Chinese wares of the Yuan Dynasty, and Vietnamese and Thai wares of the 15th century. Other remains include a portion of a brick city wall and stone bases for pre-Islamic statuary.

Tuban is associated with several Islamic saints called *wali* in Javanese chronicles, including Sunan Ngampel, who is thought to have been of Chinese origin. Javanese chronicles state that he married a daughter of Tuban's ruler. His son

became a *wali* too, and converted the son of Tuban's ruler. The *Malay Annals of Semarang and Cirebon* state that Chinese Muslims built a mosque there in 1411 CE (Zakaria Ali 1994: 333). Tome Pires depicts early 16th-century Tuban as a wealth place, protected by a city wall. The ruler was also a merchant (Corteseo 1944: 191).

Gresik

According to Ma Guan, Gresik was founded on deserted sand dunes by Chinese, who called their settlement "New Village" (Mills 1970: 90). This is unusual, because the other Chinese communities in Java seem to have been part of pre-existing local settlements. The chief of the town was from Guangdong, who governed more than 1000 families there. "Foreigners from every place come here in great numbers to trade...The people are very wealthy." Gresik was 20 *li* (12 kilometers) from an estuary dotted with small islands where large ships had to anchor. To reach the town of Surabaya, 12 km upstream, people and goods were transferred to small vessels. Surabaya had a headman, presumably a Javanese, more than 1,000 families of foreigners, including Chinese.

The 7th fleet sailed from Champa and 25 days later reached Surabaya. The fleet stayed there for over four months waiting for a favorable wind (Mills 1970: 15). Probably this was the practice for Chinese merchant vessels. This would explain the cluster of Chinese and other foreign settlements in northeast Java in the early 15th century. In 1515 Pires described Gresik as the best port in Java, frequented by Indians, Siamese, Chinese, and Ryukyuans (Corteseo 1944: I, 192).

Trowulan

The kingdom of Majapahit had lost some of its 14th-century glory, but was still a major commercial and political centre. To reach the capital, small ships were used to reach a river port called Cangu, about 45 km (70–80 li) upstream. Here it was necessary to disembark and travel overland for 1 ½ days. This journey is not described, but Javanese sources refer to a well-organized system of land transport. The site of the capital was thus not determined by trade, but two hundred or three hundred families of foreigners lived there (Mills 1970: 45, 91).

The ruins of Majapahit's capital are found in the town of Trowulan. The community of 200–300 foreign families there are the only foreigners known to have lived in the Javanese hinterland in the pre-Islamic period. They apparently struck the Javanese as amusing characters; they are portrayed in some lively terracotta figurines discovered at Trowulan. They are depicted with wide smiles which reveal their teeth (see fig. 4). Ma Guan wrote a detailed description of the palace, the dwellings of the populace, and customs such as the

FIGURE 4 East Javanese terracotta depicting a Chinese merchant, 14th century

carrying of short knives with elaborately decorated hilts (Mills 1970: 87–88). He notes that everyone used Chinese copper coins of various dynasties

The capital had been established in 1294, though inscriptions indicate that a settlement had existed here in the early tenth century. Sherds of Tang dynasty ceramics found in one part of the site confirm this information. Majapahit fell around 1527, and the site devolved into small agricultural villages. It was however visited by such people as Sir T.S. Raffles and A.R. Wallace (Wallace 1869: 77). On his visit to Trowulan in 1815, Raffles observed that “Ruins of temples, mostly executed in brick, are scattered about the country for many miles, and attest the extent and grandeur of this ‘pride of Java.’” Raffles mentioned the “Grave

FIGURE 5 Tomb of the Cham Princess, Trowulan, Java, probably 15th century. Note the Javanese style roof of the meditation room in the foreground with the Buddhist parasol, and the Chinese architectural style in the background

of the Cham Princess” which he described as well preserved (Raffles 1978/1817: vol. II, 54).

The archaeological remains are spread over an enormous area of about 100 km². Only a small portion of it has been systematically investigated. Most of the area has been seriously disturbed by sugar plantations and modern use of the site for small-scale brickmaking businesses. Large quantities of Chinese porcelain of the Yuan and Ming have been found by the modern residents, mainly in the form of sherds (Dupoizat and Naniek 2007). Many of these derive from large jars with cobalt blue designs (Miksic and Kamei 2010). It is unfortunately impossible to be certain of the connection between the Chinese ceramics and the Chinese community. They may have been used by the Javanese, the Chinese, or both. Inscriptions report that Chinese coins were used as the principal form of currency, and many examples of them have been found at the site. A Muslim graveyard in the village of Tralaya contains tombstones from the 14th and 15th centuries (Damais 1956). The ethnicity of the people buried here is unknown.

At another early Islamic site at Trowulan is another early Islamic cemetery complex called the Grave of the Champa Princess, though some versions of her story depict her as Chinese. Pires calls her a “Chinese princess of Champa” (Cortesao 1944: I, 185 note 1). The site has been thoroughly renovated as a place

of pilgrimage for traditional Javanese Muslims, with the incorporation of many Chinese architectural motifs (see fig. 5).

Demak

This northeast Javanese port is not mentioned in the Ming sources, but the large mosque here is thought to be the oldest in Java. Its walls are decorated with 15th-century Vietnamese porcelain tiles. Folk accounts say that Demak's first ruler was the son of the king of Palembang and a Chinese princess who

FIGURE 6 Gedong Batu (“Stone Building”), purported meditation cave of Zheng He, Semarang, Java. Modern reconstruction.

had come to Java by way of Champa. This tale probably preserves a memory of the ancient maritime links between northeast Java, Champa, and China. Pires (Cortesao 1944: 155) said that Demak was ruling Palembang Demak in 1515.

Semarang

Semarang lies approximately at the middle of Java's north coast. This port is not mentioned in Chinese sources of the 14th or 15th centuries, but it is well situated with respect to the Tang-dynasty heartland of central Java. Tang ceramics were found widespread in a survey of the area during the late Dutch colonial period (Orsoy de Flines 1941–47). In 1708, during the Dutch occupation, Semarang became an important administrative center.

No systematic archaeological research has been done in Semarang, but a syncretic religious complex in the city is reputed to have been established as a result of a visit by Zheng He. This complex is traditionally called the *Gedung Batu* ("Stone Building"). In its current state it is a fabrication of the late 20th century and displays typical Chinese temple architecture. Local legend says that a mosque was built on the site after Zheng He's visit, and many Chinese moved there, but the atmosphere now is that of a typical Daoist religious complex. Rituals carried out there however follow pre-Islamic Javanese traditions and dates. The core of the complex is a cave where Zheng He is reputed to have stayed (see fig. 6.). Caves in Javanese tradition have religious significance as places where important leaders meditated and attained supernatural powers. One of the structures contains an old iron anchor of European style. Another structure is said to have been used by Zheng He's army to store weapons; another is reputed to be the grave of Zheng He's navigator.

Cirebon

Indonesian chronicles such as the *Malay Annals of Semarang and Cirebon* report that a community of Chinese Muslims lived in Cirebon in the early 15th century and built a lighthouse on Gunung Jati ("Teak Mountain", a hill in the city), and three mosques (Kumar 1987; de Graaf and Pigeaud 1984). One of the nine *Wali* to whom folklore attributes the conversion of Java in the 15th and 16th centuries is Sunan Gunung Jati, "Lord of Teak Mountain". His tomb complex in Cirebon is a major focus of Islamic pilgrimage. One building in this complex contains a collection of Ming vases donated by his adherents. Others are used to contain water which pilgrims use to cleanse themselves. Although the description of an early Chinese community's activities cannot be confirmed, the assemblage of late Ming ceramics lends substantial support to the conclusion that the Sunan had many Chinese devotees.

FIGURE 7 Entrance to Kasepuhan Palace, Cirebon

A gateway to the palace complex which houses Cirebon's sultans has a chronogram which dates it to the first half of the 15th century. The style of the gateway is identical to Majapahit-period architecture in Trowulan. The entrance to the royal residential quarters has a unique combination of Chinese and Javanese motifs (see fig. 7.). Above the doorway and at its lower corners are molded plaster decoration in Chinese style signifying clouds. The same motif is found in a distinctive Cirebon batik pattern. The sides of the doorway describe a graceful curve. This is a Javanese convention to denote the entrance to a cave. This combination of motifs conveys the image of an ascetic's cave on a mountain. The entrance to Zheng He's cave in Semarang has a completely Chinese appearance, but this may be the result of renovations in recent times. Caves play an important role in Chinese folklore as mystical places too.

On the ground in front of the entrance is a miniature plaster mountain in Chinese rockwork style. The same decorative technique appears in other parts of the palace, and plays a major role in the Sunyaragi palace garden (Lombard 1969). The veracity of the local sources assigning major local influence from Chinese Muslim immigrants in the early Ming cannot be ascertained. The architectural remains are suggestive, but only archaeological research has the potential to provide objective evidence for their presence in Cirebon.

Palembang

Palembang was the main Southeast Asian port in contact with China during the Tang Dynasty. During the Song Dynasty the ports of the kingdom of Malayu along the Batanghari River in the province of Jambi became the dominant trading center in the southern part of the Straits of Melaka. In the Hongwu reign, Malayu was claimed as a vassal by Majapahit. Malayu attempted to obtain Chinese recognition as a vassal of the Ming empire. The Chinese court was apparently unaware of Majapahit's claim to suzerainty, and sent an envoy to invest the Malayu ruler with emblems such as official robes to signify his relationship with China. The Javanese waylaid and killed the envoy. The Hongwu emperor blamed his foreign affairs advisors for misunderstanding the situation, and did not punish the Javanese. When Majapahit's great king Hayam Wuruk died in 1389, the ruler of Palembang known as Parameswara apparently attempted to throw off Javanese suzerainty but was attacked and fled to Singapore, where he assassinated the local ruler. This time he fell afoul of the Thai kingdom of Ayutthaya, who claimed Singapore as its vassal. Parameswara was forced to flee once again, and eventually found refuge at a place on the southwest coast of the Malay peninsula which he named Melaka.

According to one historian's reconstruction of events, the indigenous population of Palembang deserted the port after the Javanese attack. The remaining population consisted of the Chinese community. Like many overseas Chinese, they were hesitant to return to China despite orders to do so. The Palembang Chinese established their own polity (Wolters 1970). According to Ma Guan, Chinese coins were used in the markets there (Mills 1970: 46). On his first voyage in 1405–07, Zheng He attacked the port and captured its leader, Zhen Zuyi, who was accused of being a pirate. Zhen was taken back to Nanjing and executed. This was no small pirate lair; the attackers killed over 5,000 men, and burned or captured 17 ships (Mills 1970: 10–11).

The 4th expedition called at *Sanfo qi*. Despite Ma Guan's assertion that *Sanfo qi* was Palembang, this term during the Song dynasty probably applied to the general area of southeast Sumatra, which was a loose confederation of ports under Malayu/Jambi's leadership (Miksic and Goh 2017: 405–409). The 4th and 5th expeditions, and probably the 6th and 7th, visited Palembang, which the Chinese called Old Harbor (*Jiu Jiang*). The 7th expedition sailed from Surabaya to Palembang, where it remained for 13 days. The inhabitants used Chinese coins, but also silk as currency (Mills 1970: 102).

After the conquest of the Chinese "pirates", Nanjing decided to recognize the Palembang Chinese as an official foreign vassal and created a special office to handle relations with them. The Palembang Chinese elected their own leader; after the first one died, the second was a woman. She was apparently deposed

by her brother and disappears from official records thereafter. She reappears in Javanese legend however as the adopted mother of one of the nine saints who are traditionally credited with proselytizing Islam in Java. Her supposed tomb in east Java is still a minor pilgrimage site today (Miksic 2013: 194–195).

In 1515, Pires described the population of Palembang as “heathens of low class” (Cortesao 1944: 155). He does not mention any Chinese there. He describes Palembang as a large country which was a vassal of Demak; he said Palembang was the “best thing” that the Demak ruler possessed. Most of its trade was with Melaka.

Modern Palembang is a large city situated on the upstream edge of the Musi River delta. It was originally comprised of marshy islands mostly located on the north bank of the river, which at Palembang is still tidal and approximately 1 km wide. Most of its population in the 19th century still lived on boats, rafts, or houses on stilts over the water. A few archaeological excavations and surveys have been conducted there, but no detailed reports have been published (Miksic and Goh 2017: 303). According to Ma Guan’s description, the majority of the population lived over water. Recent reports indicate that many artifacts are indeed found on the bed of the Musi River which flows through the city. This confirms the descriptions of early Chinese visitors, but poses a major obstacle for future archaeological inquiry into the nature of the city during the period when it was a purely Chinese settlement (Miksic 2020).

Melaka

Almost all the Zheng He fleets visited Melaka except the second, which had a specific mission to accomplish in India. A few years after Parameswara founded a new port at Melaka, the fleets of “treasure ships” under Zheng He began to call there. It was reached by sailing south from Champa to Long ya strait (i.e. Singapore), then west for two days. On his third voyage, Zheng He elevated Melaka to the status of “country”, and its ruler was recognized as a “king”. Melaka had previously been forced to pay tribute to Thailand. Melaka’s ruler went to China to express his gratitude and present tribute (Mills 1970: 46). This meant that Melaka technically did not have to pay tribute to Thailand any more. According to legend, a Melaka ruler married a Chinese princess, but Chinese sources do not confirm this. A hybrid culture combining Malay and Chinese elements known as Peranakan is believed to have originated there. This culture may have its roots in the 15th century, but the Ming sources do not mention a Chinese population there, nor do the Portuguese in the early 16th century, though a harbormaster there was responsible for dealing with Chinese traders, implying that they did call at the port.

Melaka played a strategic role in the Ming voyages. According to Ma Guan, “Whenever the ships of the Central Country arrived there, they at once erected a line of stockading, like a city-wall, and set up towers for the watch-drums at four gates; at night they had patrols of police carrying bells; inside, again, they erected a second stockade, like a small city-wall, within which] they constructed warehouses and granaries; [and] all the money and provisions were stored in them. The ships which had gone to various countries returned to this place and assembled; they marshalled the foreign goods and loaded them in the ships; [then] they waited till the south wind was perfectly favourable” (Mills 1970: 113–114). This is reminiscent of Marco Polo’s description of the Yuan fleet’s construction of such a stockade on the north tip of Sumatra in 1292. It is not clear why the Ming fleets chose Melaka for this purpose instead. The Ming fleets usually called at Samudera, on Sumatra’s north coast, which they considered the gateway to the trade of the Indian Ocean.

The *Sejarah Melayu* or *Malay Annals*, a chronicle which contains much historical material, contains a story that about the ruler of China who sent his daughter Ling to marry the sultan of Melaka. She came with 500 sons of ministers, who were given *Bukit Cina* (“Chinese Hill”) to live on. They built a well there which still exists; it is sometimes known as Li Po’s Well, after the princess, sometimes Sultan’s well, at others Sam Po kung, after Zheng He (Mills 1970: 10, 113). Their descendants were given a special title, “Chinese Yeomen”, by the court, as remembered by the copyist/editor of the 1612 rescension of the chronicle. One of the largest Chinese cemeteries in Southeast Asia is located at Bukit Cina. The tombstones there mainly date from the Qing era.

After marrying the Chinese princess, the Melaka ruler sent tribute to China, since the Chinese ruler was his father-in-law (Brown 1970: 81–82). Later the Raja of China was cured of a disease by drinking water used to wash the Melaka Sultan’s feet (Brown 1970: 86–87). The story of a Chinese princess sent to Melaka is not found in Chinese sources, but the Ming archives record that Melaka’s chief, his wife(s) and son(s) went to China in 1411 with Zheng He (Mills 1970: 109). The people were all Muslim. Melaka’s ruler must have become Muslim around 1413, when he assumed the title Megat Iskandar Shah. The *Ming Shih* used that title for him in 1414 (Mills 1970: 110).

No systematic archaeological excavations have been carried out in Melaka, though construction projects on the north side of the Melaka River have revealed 15th-century artifacts in situ, including Malay and Chinese ceramics. Folklore asserts that this was the location of the Ming stockade.

An Early Ming Shipwreck in Indonesia: The Bakau/Maraneï

Despite the early Ming ban on foreign trade, Chinese smugglers still sailed to Southeast Asia. A shipwreck found near Belitung called the *Bakau* or *Maraneï* is estimated to have sunk around 1430 (Miksic 2019). The ship was carrying a cargo of varied origins, including ceramics from Thailand and Vietnam as well as China. Its route would have taken it to Java. Its wares were probably intended for the towns of Majapahit, including Chinese and indigenous consumers. It also carried some well-made objects of silver, a metal which is subject to corrosion and so examples of it are rarely found on land. Comparison of the cargo of this ship with artifacts found on land could provide important indirect information about early Chinese settlements in Southeast Asia.

Bantam/Banten Lama

At the beginning of the 16th century here were two centers of spice trade in Southeast Asia. One was Melaka, the other was the Gresik/Surabaya coast. By the late 17th century these two centers were supplanted by a single 16th center in northwest Java. Bantam (known in Indonesia as Banten Lama). There were two main reasons for this consolidation. One was the conquest of Melaka by the Portuguese in 1511 which was followed by the relocation of many Muslim merchants. The second was the rivalry between the ports of northeast Java and the newly-constituted kingdom of Mataram in the hinterland of central Java. In the early 16th century. Sunan Gunung Jati's son Hasanuddin conquered the coast of northwest Java which had previously been part of the kingdom of Sunda. Tome Pires described an active port there at this time.

When the time the first Dutch and British trading expeditions arrived in the late 1590s, Bantam was the main international mart in Southeast Asia. Bantam retained this status until the 1680s, when it came under Dutch rule. International trade then shifted to Dutch-ruled Batavia (now Jakarta), but Dutch mercantilist policies did not favor free trade, and though Jakarta became prosperous, it did not succeed in engrossing a major portion of the trade.

This early Islamic city has yielded the most evidence on late Ming and early Qing involvement in Southeast Asian trade. The records of the East India Companies of the Dutch and the British contain much information on this topic. In the late 20th century, Indonesian archaeologists performed numerous important excavations in various parts of the site (Miksic and Goh 2017: 544–545).

Jakarta

One archaeological project has been conducted in the port area of Jakarta (Hasan Ambary 1981). The finds included locally-made earthenware very similar to that excavated from Banten Lama, indicating that the indigenous populations of the two sites were culturally similar. Chinese ceramics were plentiful; 90% dated to the Qing dynasty, but 10% are of Ming age. A small quantity of Thai ware of the 15th century was also recovered.

Ayutthaya

The 2nd Ming expedition (1407–09) went to Thailand (Mills 1970: 11). Some envoys were dispatched to secondary countries including Thailand during the 7th voyage (Mills 1970: 19). In the early 16th century Pires reported that many Chinese traded in Siam (Corteseo 1944: 103–104).

Two sites which have potential to reveal evidence of early Chinese trade and possible settlement exist in Thailand. One of these was the capital of the kingdom of Ayutthaya, which was founded in 1351 and destroyed by a Burmese invasion in 1767. Ma Guan reports that Chinese merchants conducted trade at Upper Water (*Shang shui*) 200 *li* (70 km) upstream from Ayutthaya, which might be modern Lopburi (Mills 1970: 105–106) where 500–600 foreign families lived, and many kinds of foreign goods were on sale there but he does not mention a resident Chinese community. Thais did not use Chinese coins (Mills 1970: 46). According to Mills, the Ming fleets conducted a fair amount of official trade in Thailand (Mills 1970: 19).

The Eastern Side of the South China Sea

Other ports appeared on the east side of the South China Sea where Chinese became active after the change in Ming policy in 1567 which allowed Chinese merchants to go abroad again. One of these was Brunei, where one important archaeological site has been investigated (Harrisson 1970, Kota Batu). In the Philippines, the Manila area was also a significant focus of Chinese economic activity when the Spanish arrived there. Some Chinese sources provide information on this development, but no archaeological investigations on the possible Chinese settlement sites have yet been conducted.

Conclusion

The quest for archaeological evidence of early Chinese overseas settlement is a difficult one. Few written sources exist to serve as a guide. The texts that do exist do not mention some important sites where early overseas Chinese

probably resided, not do they contain any information about the lives of those people. Detailed analysis of artifact distributions in settlement sites of the past 2,000 years is still scarce in both Southeast Asia and China. The discovery of some types of artifacts which have a close connection with daily life of one culture in the territory of another, such as the water dropper in Singapore and the temmoku tea bowl in Kota Cina are suggestive but not conclusive of the presence of a foreign community in the midst of or near to indigenous residents.

Much comparative data will be required from sites in Southeast Asia and China in order to form an algorithm to gauge the probability that certain sites were inhabited by Chinese. This objective may not be fully achievable, but the process of inquiry should at least lead to a better understanding of the causes and consequences of the social transformations which took place in places in Southeast Asia and China which were interacting with each other in the premodern period.

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