Fernand Braudel classically proposed three interlocking historiographic time frames: the ‘history of events’, the history of cycles, and the *longue durée* or long duration (see this volume, Chapter 1). As an example of cyclic historical change, Braudel (1960:5) cited the fifty-year cycle of rising and falling prices identified in European history by the economist Nikolai Kondratiev. In Southeast Asian history, as Boomgaard (2002) has shown, the Kondratiev cycle is only of late and limited significance. In recent literature, however, another, much longer and more important economic cycle has emerged in the historiography of Southeast Asia: an epic succession of centuries-long ‘ages of commerce’, separated by trade depressions lasting many decades. Although approximately cyclic, the chronological scale of this phenomenon seems to put it firmly in the realm of Braudel’s *longue durée*, as do the profound political and cultural consequences which some writers have ascribed to it. The present chapter provides a brief critical survey of the development, implications, and limitations of the Age of Commerce paradigm.

Not so long ago, the history of commerce in Southeast Asia was for most purposes equated with the history of colonialism. Money and trade were seen essentially as one component of a great Western assault – economic, political and cultural – on ‘traditional’ Southeast Asian societies that began in the sixteenth or seventeenth century, and led ultimately to the nationalist reaction of the twentieth (Boeke 1953:67–86; D. Hall 1955:649–671). It was Europe which, with a little help from Chinese ‘middlemen’, had intruded upon and broken open Southeast Asia’s age-old self-sufficiency. In this view, epitomized by B.J.O. Schrieke’s memorable declaration (1955–57, II:100) that ‘the Java of around 1700 AD was in reality the same as the Java of around 700 AD’, a millennium of virtual stasis – in economic as in other spheres – was brought to a late, dramatic end by the accelerating rise of Western power in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Of course there was always a memory of the fact that the very earliest European interventions in the region, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, had consisted of attempts either to extract parasitic profits from pre-existing intra-Asian trade systems (as in the case of the Portuguese occupation of Malacca), or to destroy and supplant them (as in the case of the VOC assault on the Moluccas). But scholars who had looked at this period tended to characterize the precolonial sea trade of Southeast Asia as a primitive ‘peddling’ of
luxury goods from port to port, having ‘nothing in common with “bourgeois”
commercial forms of trade’ (Van Leur 1960:54–55). Compared with nineteenth-
century developments like the ruthless state-orchestrated commercialization
of the Dutch Cultivation System, the free-trade fanaticism of British Singapore,
the ‘opening up’ of Siam under British pressure following the Bowring Treaty,
and the great military mise en valeur of French Indochina, the early episodes in
which Asian commerce was restricted or suppressed by European arms seemed
inconsequential counter-currents within a larger history whereby the expan-
sion of trade was overwhelmingly associated with European expansion.

A Precolonial Age of Commerce, 1400–1650

It was Anthony Reid (1988–93, 1990a, 1990b), albeit building on earlier revision-
ist work on precolonial trade by Meilink-Roelofsz (1962) and others, who at the
end of the 1980s initiated a paradigm shift. Reid presented evidence that a
serious economic (and demographic) as well as political crisis took place
throughout island Southeast Asia during the period of VOC expansion in the
seventeenth century, and identified that century as marking the end – not the
beginning – of a Southeast Asian Age of Commerce.

During the period 1405–1630, Reid argued, a long boom in pepper and spice
exports to Europe (first via Arabia and the Mediterranean, later via Portugal)
and to China led a general expansion of commerce throughout Southeast Asia,
triggering in turn a series of new developments in the cultural, social and polit-
ical spheres. These included mass conversions to Islam in Indonesia, the estab-
lishment of the modern Theravada Buddhist orthodoxy in mainland Southeast
Asia, the growth of trading cities like Ayutthaya, Malacca and Makassar, and
the formation around them of new centralized states financed by trade wealth.
Toward the end of this Age of Commerce, the general movement away from
local economic autarchy toward commercial exchange and specialization was
supported by the emergence of a new pan-regional currency in the form of
Spanish American silver imported via the Philippines.

In the mid-seventeenth century, according to Reid, the trade boom ended
due to the military conquests and spice monopolies of the VOC, together with
the threat of further Dutch aggression against polities encouraging non-VOC
commercial activity. Among the earliest signs of the crisis was the complete
disappearance by 1650 of the very large Southeast Asian sailing vessels, effi-
cient but vulnerable to naval attack, which had previously carried much of the
region’s commerce. Starved of trade income, those major Indonesian states
which avoided Dutch conquest (Aceh, Java) declined and fragmented, while