SMALL ASIAN NATIONS IN THE SHADOW OF THE LARGE:

*Early Asian History through the eyes of Southeast Asia*

BY

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In both research and teaching it has been my experience that viewing Asia's major civilizations, i.e., China, Japan, and India, from the perspective of Asia's smaller nations is useful and meaningful. I have found that in such a way it is possible to counterbalance the often idealistic self-image presented by Asia's major cultures, allowing me to go beyond the normal historical records of these civilizations that examine their societies from the top down, e.g., moving beyond the often self-serving views by the society's elite of their culture and history.

I wish to demonstrate the possibilities of this approach first by viewing the history of China and India from a Southeast Asian perspective. I will argue that Southeast Asia's contact with the Chinese and Indian cultural realms provides insight into the history of the Chinese and Indian civilizations. In my examination of many American textbooks that purport to examine Asian history I have too often found that these history texts either omit Southeast Asia from consideration or treat it in passing as a minor cultural zone that is best understood as an extension of the Indic or, in the case of Vietnam, the Sinic realms. My analysis will, I hope, encourage a quite different understanding.

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Then by focusing on the early interaction of Asian civilizations and those of the West I will argue that from a Southeast Asian perspective the initial European presence in Asia made no noticeable impact upon prevalent patterns of trade and statecraft. History texts that do imply coverage of Southeast Asia’s history normally begin their compilation in the sixteenth century after the Portuguese entered the island realm, or weight their treatment of Southeast Asia’s history by quickly passing over the significant developments of Southeast Asian civilization that took place prior to 1500, while concentrating their narrative upon the nineteenth and twentieth centuries when there was finally contact between Europeans and Southeast Asians beyond the periphery of the indigenous cultures. The consequence of this practice, as I will demonstrate below, is a further distortion of Southeast Asian civilizations and their history to fit a pre-conceived notion of a Southeast Asia that had accomplished little over time except when foreigners—and especially Europeans, had imposed themselves.

Rather than viewing Asia as socially and economically weak in the sixteenth century when the Portuguese and Spanish arrived I will argue that, quite the reverse, indigenous Southeast Asian evidence as well as the reports of early Western visitors demonstrates that Asian commerce was in the midst of a growth cycle that had begun in the mid-fourteenth century, and corresponding to the consequent economic prosperity were parallel social and political developments. Instead of assuming a major role in developing Asia commercially the Europeans thus initially fit themselves into the existing patterns of Asian trade as had other merchants of Western origin in earlier times. Southeast Asians in turn reacted to the Portuguese as well as to other Europeans who followed as they would to any other new customer. While the appearance of the Portuguese, and then the Spanish and Dutch in Southeast Asian waters was significant, the flow of commodities to Europe and other Western areas from Asia was not seriously increased by the initial European participation, although they did create a new demand.