TRADING SHIPS OF THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

Shipbuilding Techniques and their Role in the History of the Development of Asian Trade Networks

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Paris

The South China Sea is the first leg of the long distance trans-Asian trade route leading from China to the Mediterranean. It fed into this route the products of its own interregional exchange network. To its north, natural and manufactured products from the vast Chinese mainland were gathered in the harbours of the southeastern and southern provinces to be shipped, through various stages, to South-East Asia, the Indian Ocean countries, the Middle East and Europe. Further to its south and east, the wide variety of tropical and equatorial climes of South-East Asia produced an array of trade goods that were in high demand the world over. The peoples living around the South China Sea, another "Mediterranean" in its own right, were among the shippers and traders that kept this major trade route of the Old World in lively operation.

The Chinese participation in the history of South China Sea shipping has been thoroughly investigated—and over-emphasized—for many years. However, the South China Sea, in its broadest geographical setting, also comprises the South-East Asian maritime

1) An earlier version of this article was read at the Sailing Ships and Sailing People Conference held at the Western Australian University in January 1987. I wish to thank Professor O. W. Wolters, Dr. W. H. Scott and Ms. J. Drakard for their critical comments. Indonesian shipwreck sites mentioned in this paper were excavated within a cooperation program between the Indonesian National Research Centre for Archaeology and the Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient, with financial assistance of the Ford Foundation.
expanses to its South and East. Serious research on the maritime history of South-East Asia started only three decades ago, and it was only in the late sixties that the dynamic role played by the South-East Asian peoples in shaping these trade networks was fully acknowledged by historians. In his important book on Early Indonesian Commerce (1967), O. W. Wolters was instrumental in shifting attention from activities directed from outside the region to early Malay World shippers and traders.

I shall examine this general problem from a different angle and will attempt to answer a question which needs to be posed in clear terms: did polities around the South China Sea master the ocean-going techniques that would have allowed them to play the major economic role outlined above? Assuming the evolution of socio-economic patterns is intimately connected with technical developments, what will then be considered here is the historical evolution of shipbuilding techniques, that is the development among South-China Sea peoples of the technical skills necessary to build the vessels that were used in their long-distance maritime trade ventures. This is not to say that technological innovation in the field of shipbuilding was the only or even the main force behind economic development in the region. That would have been determined as much by the overall Asian social, political and economic "conjoncture". However, to ascribe a truly dynamic role in the shaping of these trade networks to communities in the South China Sea—and particularly to those of Insular South-East Asia—necessarily implies that those skills were present which would allow for significant fleets of trading ships to be built.

My argument will be largely based on recent developments in the field of maritime archaeology. Due to the scarcity of written sources, the substantial progress which has been made in the history of South-East Asian shipping during the past few years has been largely depen-

2) The development of navigational skills is another important topic that would deserve in depth studies. The lack of sources for the earlier periods, however, will remain a formidable obstacle for such research.