
For historians and geographers, the Malay region, a region often defined nautically as the ‘land below the winds’, has functioned as an important crossroads for the trading of goods, currency, and ideas from China, the Indian Ocean, the Middle East, and the riches of the region itself. The trade linkages with China have been of particular significance in transforming both the region and the ships, merchants, diplomats and travellers that criss-crossed the seas to build economic, political, and relationships. For Heng, professor of history at the Ohio State University at Marion, the period between the tenth and fourteenth-centuries was especially pivotal in this regional nexus. The era of the Song (960-1279) and Yuan (1279-1368) dynasties in China saw marked changes in trade and the regional economy, which shaped relations with the dominant Srivijaya and later regional powers in the Malay region. By drawing on a range of textual and archaeological sources, the author is able to reconstruct trading patterns in all their complexity, emphasising the importance of understanding smaller port-polities in both China and the Malay region and the extent to which they both complemented and, in some cases, superseded the better known state-level interchanges through which trade was conducted.

The structure of the book is clear and coherent. After an introductory chapter outlining the historiography of China-Malay trading and its geographical context, chapter one, ‘Sino-Malay Interaction in the First Millennium AD’, provides an important contextual examination of trading patterns in the first millennium noting the relatively late interaction of the region in trading with China by comparison with India-China trade. Chapter two, ‘China’s Economic Relations with Maritime Asia in the Song and Yuan Periods’, shows the development of China-Malay trade, connecting wider reforms and systems of control in the Song and Yuan periods to the expanding maritime trade from China by the early eleventh-century. Much of that trade, especially in the later period, was increasingly dominated by private traders rather than being characterised by state monopolies. Equally important were emergent diplomatic links, especially at the provincial level. Chapter three, ‘The Malay Region’s Diplomatic and Economic Interactions with China’, considers the nature of the Srivijayan polity and the extent to which it was able to operate in a unified way to
channel and direct trading links between the Malay region and China. Noting the Sinocentric nature of many of the extant source materials, Heng observes how by the thirteenth century there was a loosening of state trading structures controlled by Srivijaya and the emergence of a wide network of both ports and traders across the region working in a kind of parallel economy to the more visible official transactions through the key China ports. Srivijaya’s role, he notes, was critically eroded, creating a vacuum into which a number of the smaller ports and trading groups in the region moved.

Chapter four, ‘Malay and Chinese Foreign Representation and Commercial Practices Abroad’, considers the character of foreign, commercial representation in the region that developed as a result of the changing trading patterns traced in the preceding chapter. The author highlights in particular the increasing geographical and product differentiation which emerged, reflected in new, more diffuse networks between traders. Chapters five and six, ‘China as a Source of Manufactured Products for the Malay Region’ and ‘China’s Evolving Trade in Malay Products’, respectively, provide an important and novel exposition of the key products and networks that characterised trade between the two regions. Textiles, metals, copper, and ceramics were the dominant Chinese products, while Malay goods such as camphor, rattans, incense, and beeswax increasingly found their way in China markets. A valuable set of appendices tabulate the diverse range of goods that were integral to these powerful and lasting trading networks.

This well-written and researched book provides an excellent corrective to accounts of Malay-China trade, which emphasise a monolithic state-driven trading pattern, highly regulated, geographically confined to a few key ports, and heavily dependent on a rigid diplomatic structure. By contrast, Heng paints a picture of a highly complex, variegated and geographically nuanced trading network, which was responsive to broader political change and connected to important supra-regional changes in commodity demand. Extremely adaptive, well-attuned to wider political and economic changes, and imbued with strong commercial instincts, trading networks in the region evolved in a much more complex and variegated fashion than has previously been suggested. The book deserves a wide audience for the way in which it blends powerful research and scholarship in a lively, readable and well-organised text. Interestingly, Heng ends by seeking to draw parallels between those changing trading and political relationships in this period and the more diffuse and nuanced role likely to be played in the