Southeast Asia and the Early Maritime Silk Road
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By the third to fourth century A.D., Hindu and Buddhist kingdoms were beginning to emerge in the westernmost lands of Southeast Asia. The adoption of Indic political and religious concepts and their display through architecture, statuary, and urban configurations as well as the use of Sanskrit and other imported writing systems represented a sweeping change, which early researchers of Southeast Asian history characterized as the “Indianization” of the region. The definition of this concept has shifted over time, in tune with historiographic paradigms, researchers’ theoretical orientations, and political agendas. The current thinking overall takes a more systemic and complex view of the process and integrates individuals belonging to more diverse social groups.

Trained in Indian linguistics and history, early researchers focused on epigraphic and monumental remains. The late prehistoric period, from the late centuries B.C. to the early centuries A.D., was lacking in both types of evidence and consequently remained a lacuna in their historical reconstructions. The absence of earlier data, as well as what appeared to be a striking contrast in the levels of sociopolitical organization on either side of the Bay of Bengal, with only South Asia experiencing the growth of empires and kingdoms, seemed to give full credence to the view that Southeast Asia owed much of its civilization to the mere adaptation of Indian traits.

Beginning in the 1960s, opponents of this perspective became more vocal, especially proponents of the “internalist,” or “autonomous,” paradigm, which emphasized endogenous factors for cultural, social, and political change in Southeast Asia. The region was no longer considered a passive recipient of culture but a politically independent center able to generate its own social, religious, and political organizational structures, many of which survived, and even thrived, when adjusting to later cultural imports. During the 1980s, more hybrid frameworks, such as O. W. Wolters’s “localization” and Sheldon Pollock’s “vernacularization,” combined elements of previous scholarly trends, foregrounding the innovations that resulted from local adaptations of Indian models. These new theories developed during a turning point in archaeology: its new focus on prehistory, primarily following Ian C. Glover’s pioneering

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Fig. 25. Exotic valuables found in South China Sea

A (top to bottom): Carnelian and agate ornaments, dimensions variable. Private collections, Khao Sam Kaeo, Thailand
B: Glass ornaments, dimensions variable. National Museum, Chumphon, Thailand
C: Lingling-o. Nephrite, diam. approx. 1 ¼ in. (3 cm). Suthi Rattana Foundation, Nakhon Si Thammarat, Thailand
D: Doubled-headed ornament. W. approx. 2 ½ in. (6 cm). Suthi Rattana Foundation, Nakhon Si Thammarat, Thailand
E, F: Metal vessel fragments. Suthi Rattana Foundation, Nakhon Si Thammarat, Thailand
research at Don Ta Phet in central Thailand. This cemetery complex yielded the first prehistoric evidence of exchange between South and Southeast Asia, thus demonstrating the antiquity of contact between the regions. Excavation of sites belonging to the late prehistoric period increased. Multidisciplinary analysis began to be applied in the field, with geoarchaeology and archaeobotany, and in the laboratory, with materials science. Helping to challenge the archaeological bias that results from the poor preservation of perishable materials in tropical environments, these studies highlighted previously invisible evidence and defined regional production and distribution networks. Their significant reappraisals of Southeast Asia’s sociopolitical and economic organization prior to the so-called “Indianized” period advanced our understanding of its role in the first global system linking the West through India to China—the trading system known as the maritime Silk Road.

Indeed, research has shown that Southeast Asia had already developed extensive and dynamic regional trade routes during the Neolithic period. The importance and intensity of exchange between the area and its East and South Asian neighbors from the Metal Age on (since the mid-first millennium B.C.) have also been reassessed. These reevaluations benefit from increasingly thorough analysis of the early industries and materials of the period, such as glass, stone ornaments, siliceous stones, jadeite, metal, and ceramics (fig. 25). Each study highlights one facet of a preexisting, prehistoric exchange network around the South China Sea, and the results demonstrate some of the ways in which the societies reacted when they became intertwined in exchange with neighboring populations.

From peninsular Thailand to coastal Vietnam and the Philippines, several populations developed and shared elaborate cultural practices thanks to Neolithic networks that traded in a similar set of exotic valuables. These shared items included nephrite ear pendants (*lingling’o*), interrupted rings, double-headed ornaments, and specific types of ceramics such as those of the Sa Huynh–Kalanay tradition (fig. 26). Primarily through acknowledging the connections among ceramics at various archaeological sites dating from the end of prehistory and stretching from the Philippines (Kalanay) to peninsular Thailand (Sa Huynh), Wilhelm Solheim was the first to recognize this tradition. Apart from some morphological differences, these ceramics have in common both decorative techniques and patterns.

As soon as South Asians and Southeast Asians came into contact, the latter superimposed their ideas on certain South Asian industries, thus contributing a distinctly regional perspective to the cultural exchange. In addition to actual commodities, the network circulated South Asian ornamental techniques, which were applied, probably initially by South Asian artisans, to the production of items to suit Southeast Asian tastes. Objects designed for local populations included carnelian and agate beads, glass ornaments, and, probably, metal vessels and other wares not yet identified. Studies of these and other industries help to identify and explain the social contexts that motivated the adaptation of complex knowledge and skilled technologies while supporting the strategies of the Southeast Asian polities in the process. They thus contribute to a better understanding of the connection between political economy and cultural transfers between South and Southeast Asia. In addition to products adapted for Southeast Asian tastes, imports also circulated, including Indian fine ware (fig. 27), such as the famous rouletted ware, seals (fig. 28), and Indian steatite containers (fig. 29). For example, the fragments of steatite containers found in peninsular Thailand at Phu Khao Thong (Ranong province) and at Khao Sam Kaeo (Chumphon province) are comparable to early steatite containers discovered in stupa complexes in the region of Gandhara (present-day Pakistan), among other places, which were used, and at times reused, as reliquaries. Their contents varied from bones to deposits of valuable goods, such as ornaments made of ivory, crystal, bronze, and semiprecious stones.
A better understanding of the complexity of the early networks and of the polities structuring them has also grown out of the analysis of organic materials, many of which—for example, spices, precious woods, textiles, and animals—formed a good part of the inventory of exchanged goods. Current research in archaeobotany and ancient textile studies demonstrates the diversity of subsistence crops and cash crops circulating in routes that originated in various distant lands, from China to India. Some goods, such as spices and silks, were likely luxury items aimed for courts, but others, including foods and other crops, may have accompanied traders for their own personal use. The alleged Indianized period definitely appears to have been preceded by sustained contacts, contradicting the previous assumptions of intermittent interaction and limited cultural exchange.

New interpretations of the region’s role within the networks of the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean owe much to revisions of the historical record, which now integrate a larger and more diversified range of actors than were considered previously: socioprofessional groups such as artisans as well as “ethnic” groups—that is, the less politically complex social units that were part of the producing hinterlands. This appreciation of a wider social horizon has resulted from a change in theoretical orientation—including subaltern studies, ideas of a “connected” history, and other postcolonial and globalized approaches—that assigns greater importance to both nonelites as agents of social and political change and to contacts among all groups beyond political boundaries. This broader perspective has also arisen from revised understandings of technological developments and studies of their trajectories through time and space. While much of the evidence is subtle, it can also be direct, as in the case of Southeast Asian shipbuilding techniques or the spread of Austronesian vocabulary, which is present in many languages around the Indian Ocean.

Other evidence is indirect, such as local variations in South Asian manufacturing techniques and products that satisfied regional and local requirements. All told, some of these analyses grant a leading role to artisans, who actively produced social and cultural forms, especially in a likely context of increasing interpolity competition to control trade and access to foreign prestige goods. A given leader probably had to manage his network of volatile allies and dependents—both of whom provided jungle or maritime goods for trade—by distributing titles and prestige goods, such as ornaments, to build the ruler’s power and renown as well as to ensure the wealth of his trading polity. In this scenario, artisans produced various items representing different techniques, qualities, and styles as the political currency to build this pyramidal network. But as the study of stone-ornament industries at Khao Sam Kaeo has demonstrated, artisans there, probably at the request of the leaders, were asked to exceed known standards of technological excellence, pushing productive capacities to their limits. In this way, they would have participated in the prestige apparatus of the elite, who used the artisans not only to show their ability to mobilize labor but also to control skilled labor in the arts, industry, and spiritual realms (such as religious practices and magic).

Different social and socioprofessional groups more or less attached to local elites in port cities and similar transportation hubs may thus have contributed to the ways in which complex and less complex polities interacted as the maritime Silk Road developed. Various ecological niches, whether forested or maritime, and the populations exploiting them may have been linked in this early global network. Overall, current research draws a more balanced picture than was previously possible of the cultural complexity of Southeast Asia and its contributions to the world from the late prehistoric to the early historic period.
SOUTHEAST ASIA AND THE EARLY MARITIME SILK ROAD

1. Majumdar 1941; Coedès 1968.
7. For glass, see Dussubieux 2001; Dussubieux and Gratuz 2010; Dussubieux, Gratuz, and Blet-Lemarquand 2010. For stone ornaments and siliceous stones, see Thennissen, Grave, and Bailey 2000; Bellina 2001; Bellina 2003; Bellina 2007; Thennissen 2007. For jadeite, see Finot 1902; Huang and Bellwood 2010. For metal, see Pius and the other of Marcus Aurelius, true of the two coins, one of Antoninus Pius and the other of Marcus Aurelius, found in Or Eo and of the many Roman coins found along the southeast coast of India. For a broader view of such links, see Racchle 1978.

3. The term kanlan was a generic reference to peoples of the maritime realm of Southeast Asia. The origins of the term are unresolved. For an overview of the occurrence and use of the term, see Ferrand 1919. 4. Jiu Tang shu (Old History of the Tang), juan 124; Xin Tang shu (New History of the Tang), juan 144 (Biography of Tian Shengong = Phra Por). 5. The most detailed study of Linyi can be found in Stein 1947, while Maspero 1928 places it in a longer historical context. The Nan shi (History of the Southern Dynasties) notes that Linyi was 600 li south of Guangzhou, 400 li from the southern border of Rinan, and 120 li from the sea. For some background on the archaeological vestiges of Linyi, see Yamagata Mariko 2007.

6. Jin shu (History of the Jin), juan 97. 7. This reference also accords with the earliest attested inscription recorded for Champa, the fifth-century My Son stele inscription of Bhadravarna I, near the Linyi capital; see Pinot 1902. 8. The political affinity of the Vo Canh inscription remains moot.

Beyond the Southern Borders: Southeast Asia in Chinese Texts to the Ninth Century

Transliteration of Chinese in this essay follows the Manya Pinjun standard except where the original name or title being represented by the Chinese characters is uncertain. In that case, syllables of the represented term are separated by hyphens to possibly facilitate identification. A jian is a subdivision of a traditional Chinese text. The author expresses his gratitude to John Gou for the energy, time, and ideas he contributed in preparing this essay for publication.

1. “From the barriers of Rinan, or from Xuwen and Hepu traveling by ship for about five months, one arrives at the country of Duyuan. From there, traveling farther by sea for some four months, one arrives at the country of Yilumo. Again sailing for twenty-plus days, one reaches the country of Shenli. Then, proceeding on foot for some ten days, one reaches the country of Jagrata. From Jagrata, after sailing for about two months, one reaches the country of Huangzhi.” Han shu, juan 28. For further discussion, see Wang Guangwu 1998, p. 18; Wheatley 1966, pp. 8–11.

2. Missions from Tianshui 天水, P.187 came to the Eastern Han court in Luoyang in A.D. in 159 and 161 through Jiaozhi, located in what is today northern Vietnam, while another claiming to be from Dagu 大谷 (& eastern part of the Roman Empire) also arrived in this period. A mission from Yeliao 龍驤, a possible Southeast Asian polity, arrived in 152. We know nothing of these missions other than the names of the polities that sent them but can assert that they sailed through Southeast Asia. For these references, see Wang Guangwu 1998, pp. 24–25. The third-century Roman coin of Emperor Victorinus found in Thailand and discussed in this publication (cat. 2) may well be a product of such long-distance trade during these early centuries. The same is true of the two coins, one of Antoninus Pius and the other of Marcus Aurelius, found in Or Eo and of the many Roman coins found along the southeast coast of India. For a broader view of such links, see Ruchhle 1978.

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