

Tribute and Trade: An Overview of Economic Relations between China and Southeast Asia During the Song and Ming Dynasty

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Introduction

China and Southeast Asia have a long, shared history of commerce between them. Connections began to be formed during the Han dynasty, sharpened during the Tang, but only truly began to flourish during the Song.¹ From the end of the tenth century until the middle of the fifteenth, tribute and trade with Southeast Asia became the focal point of Chinese economic affairs. After the fifteenth century, Central Asian trade received more attention, but commercial relations with Southeast Asia continued to a significant degree well into the Qing.² The relationship between the two megaregions was complex. Both sides interpreted the tribute and trade that they exchanged in different lights. Both sides profited from the trade in different ways. And both sides would have their histories majorly impacted by this trade.

Ultimately, these commercial relations had more positive impacts in Southeast Asia and more negative impacts in China. I will focus on the crucial Song and early Ming dynastic periods, examining how Southeast Asian polities exploited flaws in the tributary systems to prosper at China's expense.³ First, I will explain the Chinese tributary system, explaining how the Chinese differentiated tribute from trade and exploring the differences between Song and Ming tribute and trade. Second, I will explain the rise of global trade,

1 Chau Ju-Kua, *Chau Ju-Kua: His Work on the Chinese and Arab Trade in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries, Entitled Chu-fan-chi*, trans. and ed. Friedrich Hirth and W.W. Rockhill (Taipei, Taiwan: Ch'eng-Wen Publishing Company, 1967), 4–5, 8, 18–19, respectively.

2 J. K. Fairbank and S.Y.T'eng, "On the Ch'ing Tributary System," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 6, no. 2 (June 1941): 155–156.

3 The Yuan dynastic period shares many of the characteristics of the Song and early Ming dynasty vis-à-vis commercial relations with Southeast Asia. For brevity, they will not be examined in this work. Please see Herbert Franke and Denis Twitchett, eds, *The Cambridge History of China: Alien Regimes and Border States, 907–1368*, vol. 6 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) for examinations of Yuan commerce and foreign policy.

examining what the Song and Ming exported to Southeast Asia as well as how they viewed Southeast Asian imports. Third, I will examine Southeast Asian attitudes generally, then delve into regional, case study examinations of Vietnam, the Malay Peninsula, Sumatra, and Java. In each region, I will focus on the strongest regional polities, describing that region's connection to China and further analyzing the goods they exported to China.

The Tributary System

The tributary system is an idea deeply rooted in Chinese understandings of the world order. It is the institutionalization of “the age-old tradition of Chinese cultural superiority over the barbarians.”⁴ China, as the middle kingdom, claimed to be at the center of the world, and at the center of that center stands the

Son of Heaven [who represents] all mankind, both Chinese and barbarian [yí, as barbarians were referred to by Chinese], in his ritual sacrifices before the forces of nature . . . [it was] the Emperor's mandate to rule all men . . . [as] mediator between Heaven and Earth.⁵

In other words, all peoples and nations owed their allegiance (and tribute) to the Son of Heaven, whether *yí* or *Huá* (Chinese). As seen from this understanding of the tributary system, the Chinese were “anxious to advertise . . . [their] cultural superiorities . . . to the rest of the known world.”⁶ It involved culture as much as commerce or politics.

Aside from culture, however, the tributary system performed a number of other functions, such as self-defense, diplomacy, and commerce.⁷ I will now explore these three functions in turn.

In pursuing self-defense, the tributary system was interested in keeping tributaries happy. Whenever a party of *yí* arrived in China, they presented their tribute of local goods to a representative of the emperor.⁸ In return, they received imperial gifts, Chinese goods like silk or porcelain that “were usually more valuable than the tribute . . . a means of keeping the

4 Fairbank and Têng, “Ch'ing Tributary System,” 137.

5 Ibid, 138.

6 Geoff Wade, “Engaging the South: Ming China and Southeast Asia in the Fifteenth Century,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 51 (2008): 588.

7 Fairbank and Têng, “Ch'ing Tributary System,” 137.

8 These goods had to be local, not reexported from somewhere else. “Envoys were expected to present things which were ‘locally produced,’ and nothing else.” Chau, *Chu-fan-chi*, 77–85.

barbarians [yí] in the proper state of submissiveness.”⁹ In other words, tribute missions produced a net positive gain for tributaries and were essentially a ritualized form of trade. The tributary would avoid aggression against China to maintain profitable relations, achieving China’s aim of self-defense.

Sometimes the Song and Ming used the tributary system as more than a means of self-defense, utilizing it to inform their diplomacy with Southeast Asia. As the Son of Heaven, the emperor could legitimize or rebuke his tributaries when he deemed necessary. When a new ruler became sultan in Melaka, the sultan requested imperial legitimacy: Melakan envoys “[requested] than an Imperial letter of protection for the country, as well as many dragon robes and a parasol be conferred upon . . . the king of the country.”¹⁰ Dragon robes, also called “robes of honor,” and parasols had legitimating value in Malay polities, as witnessed in the *Sejarah Melayu*.¹¹ When tributaries presented their offering of goods, they also had the opportunity to finagle more trading rights or complain to the court about their neighboring countries. Malay and Sumatran polities like Pahang, Melaka, and Samudera frequently used the opportunity to complain to the court about Siamese aggression in the fifteenth century.¹² Ming’s show of force through the Ming voyages (1405–1433) was still fresh in Siam’s mind, and Siamese intervention in the Malay Peninsula and Sumatra was subdued during the fifteenth century. From their cultural high ground as *Huá* people ruled by the Son of Heaven himself, the Ming used the tributary system to bully Southeast Asian nations, especially during the Ming voyages, which had an essentially militaristic character. The pirate hideout of Palembang was wiped out and converted into a “‘pacification superintendency’ [under Chinese control],” Majapahit was threatened and extorted, as were Ava–Burma and Hsenwi, and Samudera found the scales of their civil war tipped in favor of a pro–Ming candidate.¹³ These were the most

9 Quoted in Fairbank and Têng, “Ch’ing Tributary System,” 140.

10 Geoff Wade, translator, *Southeast Asia in the Ming Shi-lu: an open access resource*, Singapore: Asia Research Institute and the Singapore E-Press, National University of Singapore, <http://epress.nus.edu.sg/msl/reign/zheng-tong/year-10-month-3-day-29> [1445], accessed April 18, 2022.

11 See “*Sejarah Melayu or Malay Annals*,” ed. and trans. C. C. Brown, *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 25, no. 2/3 (1952): 157 for robes of honor, and *ibid.*, 54 for parasols. Melakans were very particular about parasols and their colors. White parasols were reserved for royalty.

12 Geoff Wade, translator, *Southeast Asia in the Ming Shi-lu: an open access resource*, Singapore: Asia Research Institute and the Singapore E-Press, National University of Singapore, <http://epress.nus.edu.sg/msl/reign/yong-le/year-5-month-10-day-21> [1407] and Geoff Wade, translator, *Southeast Asia in the Ming Shi-lu: an open access resource*, Singapore: Asia Research Institute and the Singapore E-Press, National University of Singapore, <http://epress.nus.edu.sg/msl/reign/yong-le/year-17-month-10-day-12> [1419], accessed April 18, 2022.

13 Wade, “Engaging the South,” 594–597.

active, political uses of the tributary system, but the Song and later Ming also spoke to other countries through the mouthpiece of the tributary system.

Whereas self-defense and diplomacy were the Chinese aims for the tributary system, the system's commercial basis was a decidedly foreign achievement, a mark of Southeast Asia's commercial influence on the imperial court. Though the court attempted to prohibit maritime trade several times—particularly in the late Song and early Ming periods for reasons that will be explored later—Southeast Asian envoys frequently extracted “trade concessions” and Chinese records of the time made “little effort to hide the essentially mercantile nature of the tribute/trade system in this period.”¹⁴ This commerce was an illegal function of the tributary system, however, and when the court did punish these commercial interactions, they did so severely. One Arab merchant was caught, and the emperor denounced him himself: “Ali is . . . a rogue who has surreptitiously brought trade goods and, on the pretext of offering tribute, is seeking great profits.”¹⁵ As seen from his complaint, this commercial illegality was a frequent occurrence, surviving through the tolerance of corrupt officials profiting from the trade.

It is worth noting that Chinese control of the tributary system was weakest during the Song dynasty. The Song approached Southeast Asia, trade, and tribute in a relatively hands-off manner, making them one of the most commercially and culturally open-minded dynasties.¹⁶ They did not seek to actively expand the tributary system. Instead, as Schottenhammer notes,

Seaborne trade increasingly came to be regarded as a financial source that could serve the political purposes of the state. In order to turn it into a source to be tapped, local rulers and, subsequently, the Sung [Song] government made many efforts to expand and promote maritime trade.¹⁷

Whereas other dynasties focused largely on agriculture, the Song saw economic opportunity in maritime trade. Though Song policies towards trade

¹⁴ Ibid, 614.

¹⁵ Geoff Wade, translator, *Southeast Asia in the Ming Shi-lu: an open access resource*, Singapore: Asia Research Institute and the Singapore E-Press, National University of Singapore, <http://epress.nus.edu.sg/msl/reign/yong-le/year-5-month-10-day-21> [1487], accessed April 18, 2022.

¹⁶ Kenneth R. Hall, *Maritime Trade and State Development in Early Southeast Asia* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1985), 212.

¹⁷ Angela Schottenhammer, “China’s Emergence as a Maritime Power,” in *The Cambridge History of China: Sung China, 960–1279*, vol. 5 part 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 463.

frequently changed, the posture was always one that welcomed trade.¹⁸ An attitude of openness to foreign goods, however, weakened the tributary system because of the system's reliance on cultural superiority, which helps explain why Song's tributary network remained small, and the work of its merchants more often termed trade than tribute.

The Rise of Global Trade

One of the most interesting aspects of China's trade with Southeast Asia is how it helped give birth to global, maritime trade. Near the beginning of the Song dynasty, the Sumatran-based empire of Srivijaya collapsed, leading to a shift in Southeast Asian trade patterns.¹⁹ The center of trade moved to Java and the Sunda Strait.²⁰ A Java-based empire, Majapahit, rose from the ashes of Srivijaya, profiting from the shift in trade. In the latter half of the fourteenth century, Majapahit sent military expeditions throughout modern-day Indonesia, Malaysia, and Papua New Guinea, leading to "ritual hegemony" and the centralization of trade in all of those regions into Majapahit.²¹ By binding together the previous regional markets into its empire, Majapahit contributed to a new pattern: global trade. As Hall notes,

During the fourteenth to early sixteenth centuries, a new pattern of world trade emerged linking the continents of Asia and Europe in an even more direct exchange of goods; the Southeast Asian trade regions described below were integrated into this world trade network. The new pattern left no single part of the world as the dominant "center" of the trading network. Each zone, along with the interconnected sea route from China to western Europe, was important to the whole system. . . . The exchange of goods in regional ports was intensive; each region in turn overlapped another.²²

Rather than having disconnected regional markets—for instance a regional Bengali, Sumatran, or Guangxi market—every region was becoming increasingly interconnected with other regions, and the longer this pattern continued, the closer contact arose between far-away regions.

Global trade is fascinating, but it is something that China's court officials pulled the country away from time and time again. The main problem

¹⁸ Ibid, 469.

¹⁹ Hall, *Maritime Trade and State Development*, 194.

²⁰ Ibid, 195.

²¹ Kenneth R. Hall, "Economic History of Early Southeast Asia," ed. Nicholas Tarling in *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia: From Early Times to c. 1800*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 218.

²² Hall, *Maritime Trade and State Development*, 223.

was China's export of copper coins. Just as Great Britain would have difficulty tolerating the outflow of their silver in exchange for Chinese tea in the early 1800s, the Song and Ming dynasties balked at how many copper coins they were losing to Southeast Asia. Throughout their dynastic periods, they suffered perennial copper shortages and inflation from the paper money printed to compensate for the shortage.²³ One Song official noted how, in Java, Chinese copper coins were so widely available they were used as currency, and that "Our Court has repeatedly forbidden all trade (with this country), but the foreign traders, for the purpose of deceiving (the government), changes its name and referred to it as Su-ki-tan."²⁴ Chinese copper coins also became accepted currency in Dai Viet, the Malay Peninsula, Sumatra, and Maluku.²⁵ Hundreds of thousands of strings of copper coins flowed into Southeast Asia from China during the Song and Ming dynasties, creating a fundamental imbalance in the trade between the two. This imbalance helps explain the Chinese court's frequent attempts to prohibit maritime trade, especially in the form of exporting copper coins.

The other two main Chinese exports to Southeast Asia—porcelain and silk—had a different problem. The Song and Ming dynasties exported goods that had staying power. Porcelain and silk may become cracked or broken, but they have the potential to last for many years. The goods that the Song and Ming dynasties imported rarely had staying power. They were most often foodstuffs or aromatics, goods with a one-time use. This imbalance meant Chinese demand for Southeast Asian goods would always be high while demand for Chinese goods slowly crept down, especially as sericulture and porcelain manufacturing spread into Southeast Asia. When one remembers that many Southeast Asian countries often acquired these goods as bartered gifts for presenting tribute as part of the tributary system rather than through purchase, this imbalance looks even worse. Nonetheless, when Chinese merchants were able to sell porcelain and silk (especially during the Song dynasty, when merchants were freer), they profited tremendously, as both goods are luxuries with tedious manufacturing procedures: "Even the [Song] Emperor declared:

23 Peter J. Golas, "The Sung Fiscal Administration," in *The Cambridge History of China: Sung China, 960–1279*, vol. 5 part 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 209 and William Atwell, "Ming China and the Emerging World Economy, c. 1470–1650" in *The Cambridge History of China: The Ming Dynasty, 1368–1644*, vol. 8 part 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 385.

24 Chau, *Chu-fan-chi*, 78

25 Hall, "Economic History of Early Southeast Asia," 266 and Anthony Reid, "Economic and Social Change, c. 1400–1800," ed. Nicholas Tarling in *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia: From Early Times to c. 1800*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 464.

‘The profits from maritime commerce are very great. If properly managed, they can be millions [of strings of cash].’²⁶ And despite the longevity of these products, demand for porcelain in Java, for instance, was still quite popular. As one Ming official noted, ‘The people of the country are very fond of the blue patterned porcelain-ware of the Central Country.’²⁷

The Southeast Asian View

Thus far, we have seen how the Song and Ming dynasties relied on the tributary system for cultural and security reasons, with commerce forced into the system by the tributaries themselves. We have also seen that, while maritime trade with Southeast Asia was bad for China in the short term, it could be quite profitable in the short term, and it was often easy enough to continue trade despite prohibitions. As Wade notes, ‘[By] the late fifteenth century, [we see] a movement away from the formal, regulated tribute trade system toward one which, while perhaps not formally ‘allowing’ private shipping, at least tolerated it.’²⁸ This movement occurred because preventing illegal trade proved to be impossible, the profits too tantalizing for Chinese merchants and corrupt officials to ignore.

But why did Southeast Asians buy into the Chinese worldview of the tributary system? Why did so many agree to kowtow before the emperor as ‘Son of Heaven,’ adopt the Chinese calendar and other cultural influences, and accept Chinese interference? For Southeast Asians, trade was the foremost consideration. As Fairbanks and Têng have argued, ‘tribute, in the minds of the tribute bearers, was merely a formality connected with trade.’²⁹ From a Southeast Asian perspective, then, China’s request for them to conform to their system was a mere cultural idiosyncrasy. In the case of Siam, some scholars have argued that ‘“Thai kings paid tribute to China for centuries and allowed the Chinese to regard Thailand [Siam] as a formal tributary; at the same time the Thai thought of the tribute as gifts freely and generously given.”’³⁰ In essence, Southeast Asians would tolerate China’s nominal claims of suzerainty over them if it meant that they could trade.

26 Quoted in Lo Jung-Pang, ‘The Emergence of China as a Sea Power During the Late Sung and Early Yuan Periods,’ *The Far Eastern Quarterly* 14, no. 4 (August 1955): 499.

27 Ma Huan, *Ying-Yai Sheng-Lan: ‘The Overall Survey of the Ocean’s Shores’ [1433]*, trans. J.V. Mills (Cambridge: Hakluyt Society, 1970), 86–97.

28 Wade, ‘Engaging the South,’ 606–607.

29 Fairbank and Têng, ‘Ch’ing Tributary System,’ 140.

30 Ma, *Ying-Yai Sheng-Lan*, 107.

Perhaps another reason that they would choose to sacrifice even nominal independence would be the way in which trade forms the cornerstone of Southeast Asian polities. Unlike in East Asia and elsewhere in the world, where countries were and are defined by their borders, Southeast Asian societies were defined by their centers, their capitals; their power then stretched out from the center in a circle or “*mandala*” with permeable borders.³¹ Southeast Asian rulers controlled a “core,” leaving “peripheral areas” increasingly autonomous the further they were from the core.³² They shrouded themselves with mystical ceremony, rooted in Hindu and Buddhist cosmologies, to bestow authority on their royal persons and relied on charisma to handle the rest.³³ The result of such a political structure is a fragile society, with peripheral areas frequently changing hands as competing cores grew or shrank in power.

For *mandala* societies, trade was a necessity, not something to be ignored. Trade allowed for the expansion of the periphery. When Srivijaya collapsed in the late tenth and early eleventh centuries (its territory shrinking to only its core), Pagan-Burma exploited the opportunity, its *mandala* expanding to cover more peripheral areas, becoming “a focal point of regional commerce” and political control.³⁴ In Southeast Asian *mandalas*, political and commercial control came hand-in-hand. To maintain or expand their authority, Southeast Asian rulers “[brought] the resources of their realms—in the form of tribute, talent, men, and goods—to *their centers* [emphasis mine].”³⁵ They then used this wealth to maintain or increase the prestige of their core, which meant investing in urban infrastructure, armies, and (most frequently) “large temple complexes that emphasized the state’s theoretical powers.”³⁶ Temple-building emphasized theoretical powers because of how rulers mystically grounded their authority in Hindu and Buddhist ceremony. As seen from the archaeological landscape of Southeast Asia today, this temple-building craze has given the world hundreds of beautiful temples, such as Angkor Wat in Cambodia and Borobudur in Indonesia, built to expand the Khmer and

31 Hall, *Maritime Trade and State Development*, 9. The idea of the *mandala* has achieved wide consensus among scholars and has been highly influential in Southeast Asian historiography. O. W. Wolters was the first to propose the idea; see his *History, Culture, and Region In Southeast Asian Perspectives* (Ithaca, NY: Southeast Asia Program Publications, 1999), 27–31 for a more thorough overview of the concept.

32 Hall, *Maritime Trade and State Development*, 4.

33 *Ibid.*, 6.

34 *Ibid.*, 202.

35 *Ibid.*, 10.

36 *Ibid.*, 10–11.

Majapahit *mandalas*, respectively. They could not have been built without the wealth that trade brought into their polities. In sum, trade was necessary because it allowed for the continuation of the Southeast Asian political regime.

Regional Examinations

I will now turn to regional examinations of Southeast Asian trade with China, in each case describing the strongest regional polities, the polities' relationships with the Song and Ming dynasties, and what goods those polities exported to China.

In the Middle Ages, modern-day Vietnam was split into Dai Viet (in the North) and Champa (in the South). Dai Viet's history emerges in the third century BCE, when the region was recorded as presenting tribute to the Han dynasty while remaining largely autonomous.³⁷ Dai Viet broke away from China at the beginning of the Song dynasty, becoming fully independent.³⁸ Two centuries later, however, a Song official noted how Tongkin and Annam (Chinese names for Northern Vietnam) annually presented tribute to China.³⁹ In the early Ming dynasty, the Yongle emperor invaded and conquered Dai Viet.⁴⁰ Dai Viet revolted, however, and drove out the Ming in 1428.⁴¹ They remained independent until the French conquered large parts of mainland Southeast Asia in the 1800s.

Champa's history emerges a few centuries after Dai Viet. "Champa," however, may be a misleading name for this polity. Hall notes, "Cham epigraphic records reflect a weakly institutionalized state system that depended upon personal alliance networks to integrate a fragmented population."⁴² In other words, the Cham peripheral areas were much more autonomous than the core than is usual in Southeast Asian *mandalas* and may have consisted of several independent but cooperating rulers instead of one. While Cham rule was somewhat unstable, the Chams' geographic position on the coast was excellent, allowing for easy trade and piracy with other nations, as well as agriculture, horticulture, and fishing.⁴³ The *Chu-fan-chi* makes no note of

37 Hall, "Economic History of Early Southeast Asia," 261.

38 Ibid, 265.

39 Chau, *Chu-fan-chi*, 46, 49, respectively.

40 Geoff Wade, "Ming Chinese Colonial Armies in Southeast Asia," eds. Karl Hack and Tobias Rettig in *Colonial Armies in Southeast Asia* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 84.

41 Ibid, 88.

42 Hall, "Economic History of Early Southeast Asia," 252–253.

43 Ibid, 256–257, 253.

Champa, even though they had existed for several hundred years by the time of the Song dynasty. It is only in Ming accounts like the *Ying-yai Sheng-lan* that Champa first appears.

Dai Viet and Champa were among the closest polities to China, and they exported a great deal to China as a result. Chinese records on Southeast Asia are often fragmentary, and as outside records they often do not know enough about trade goods to tell when a country is reexporting goods that they have imported from somewhere else. Nevertheless, they are the best indications scholars have of what trade between China and Southeast Asia was like, and Ming records are somewhat more complete than Song ones. During the Song dynasty, Dai Viet exported gharu wood, gold, silver, iron, cinnabar, cowries, ivory, kingfisher feathers, shells, salt, lacquer, cotton, lotus, sugarcane, bananas, coconuts, yellow wax, ebony, white rattans, cloth, bamboo matting, peacocks, and parrots.⁴⁴ There are no Song records for what Champa exported during their reign, but scholars have managed to piece together that they exported largely luxury goods to China, like ivory, tortoiseshells, pearls, peacocks, kingfisher feathers, spices, and aromatic woods. Dai Viet conquered Champa in 1471, and so Dai Viet and Champa trade goods can be considered jointly after that year.⁴⁵ During the Ming dynasty, Dai Viet (and conquered Champa) exported ebony, incense, bamboo, laka wood, ivory, oxen, pigs, goats, plums, oranges, watermelons, sugarcane, coconuts, jack fruits, bananas, gourd melons, cucumbers, bottle gourds, mustard, onions, ginger, areca fruit, and betel leaf. As seen from the goods that China imported above, they were largely foodstuffs or luxuries without staying power, like aromatic woods, feathers, or pets. All existing records agree that the two polities were quite prosperous from trading with China, the rest of Southeast Asia, and Indian traders.

The Malay Peninsula had largely primitive polities during the Song dynasty but was nevertheless a significant trading partner. The first advanced polity to develop was the Melakan Sultanate during the early Ming. Most polities in the Malay Peninsular before then were limited to a town or small city and the surrounding area, such as Ligor, Kwantan, Lengkasuka, and Beranang, the main polities in the Malay Peninsula during the Song. Under Chinese protection during the Ming voyages, however, Melaka rose above these polities, its mandala expanding over the entirety of the peninsula and much of Sumatra, with substantial influence over Java, Kalimantan, and the

44 Chau, *Chu-fan-chi*, 45–46, 47–50.

45 Wade, “Engaging the South,” 605.

Maluku islands. Melaka's fame spread far beyond Southeast Asia, as one Portuguese account notes:

Men cannot estimate the worth of Malacca, on account of its greatness and profit. Malacca is a city that was made for merchandise, fitter than any other in the world; the end of monsoons and the beginning of others. Malacca is surrounded and lies in the middle, and the trade and commerce between the different nations for a thousand leagues on every hand must come to Malacca. Wherefore a thing of such magnitude and of such great wealth which never in the world could decline . . .⁴⁶

Melaka, despite its immense wealth, did decline, captured by the Portuguese themselves in 1511. After the conquest, European influences prevented the rise of a single *mandala* or commercial center in modern-day Malaysia and Indonesia, with the Melakan trade community dispersing throughout the islands.⁴⁷ Before then, however, they would have controlled most exports to China, including exported goods from Sumatra and Java (see below). From the Malay Peninsula itself, Melaka, Ligor, Kwantan, Lengkasuka, and Beranang exported cardamoms, pepper, gharu wood, yellow wax, red kino gum, laka wood, incense, ebony, camphor, ivory, sandal wood, yellow su incense, dammar incense, tin, gum sandarac, nipa palm, nipa wine, sugarcane, bananas, jack fruits, wild leeches, onions, ginger, garlic, mustard, gourd melons, and watermelons during the Song and Ming dynasties.⁴⁸ Compared to Vietnamese products, imports to China from the Malay Peninsula were more likely to be spices, incense, and aromatics, although foodstuffs still constituted a large percentage of Malay goods. Though mostly small cities, these Malay polities were critically influential over trade in the region and prospered as a result.

Whereas the Malay Peninsula moved from multiple polities down to only one, Sumatra moved from a single polity to multiple over the course of the Song and Ming dynasties. Srivijaya was on its last legs at the beginning of the Song dynasty but still exercised a considerable *mandala* over Sumatra, the Malay Peninsula, Java, Kalimantan, and the Maluku islands. Chola raids in the eleventh century, combined with a Majapahit raid in 1275 (coincidentally

46 Tomè Pires, "The Suma Oriental: An Account of the East, From the Red Sea to Japan, Written in Malacca and India in 1512–1515," trans. and ed. Armando Cortesão in *The Suma Oriental: An Account of the East, From the Red Sea to Japan, Written in Malacca and India in 1512–1515 and The Book of Francisco Rodrigues: Rutter of a Voyage in the Red Sea, Nautical Rules, Almanack and Maps, Written and Drawn in the East Before 1515*, Vol. 2, (1944), 286.

47 M. C. Ricklefs, *A History of Modern Indonesia since c. 1200*, 4th ed. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008), 36.

48 Chau, *Chu-fan-chi*, 57–58, 67–68, 68–69, 69–70 and Ma, *Ying-Yai Sheng-Lan*, 108–114.

the same year that the Song lost a major battle to the Mongols), was enough to shatter Srivijaya into a flurry of independent city-states.⁴⁹ Sumatra would remain fractured through the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties, with various *mandalas* competing over peripheral areas, such as Melakan conquests in the south and the Sultanate of Aceh in the north, only reunified under Dutch control in the early 1900s.⁵⁰ The core of Srivijaya, from which its *mandala* extended, were the twin cities of Palembang and Jambi on the Southeastern coast. After Srivijaya's fracturing, Palembang retained influence, while Kampar, Besi, Samudera-Pasai, Aru, Lide, Aceh, and Lambri rose to create their own independent cores striving for influence. In combination, these polities exported wine, tortoiseshells, camphor, gharu wood, laka wood, sandal wood, eagle-wood, cloves, cardamoms, pearls, frankincense, rose-water, gardenia flowers, myrrh, aloes, asa-foetida, putchuk, liquid storax, ivory, coral, cats' eyes, amber, cotton, metalware, tin, birds, yellow su incense, gum benjamin, yellow wax, tapir, oxen, goats, pigs, dogs, fowls, ducks, vegetables, gourds, fruits, cloth, rice, grain, junket, *chin-yin* incense, sulfur, pepper, flowers, bananas, sugarcane, mangosteens, jack fruits, durian fruits, sour oranges, mangos, onions, garlic, ginger, mustard, gourd melons, watermelons, cotton, fish, and shrimp, quite possibly more trade goods to China than any other region.⁵¹ Most of what Sumatra exported to China was either foodstuffs or aromatics, though spices figured heavily, just like in the Malay Peninsula trade.

Java was like the Malay Peninsula in how it developed, but like Sumatra in the wealth of its trade goods. During the Song dynasty, the island was split into regional polities with weak control. Majapahit (in the eastern part of the island) was the strongest. Starting in the late thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, Majapahit rapidly consolidated Java and then extended its *mandala* from the core in Trowulan.⁵² The polity grew so wealthy and powerful that it was defeated by its own wealth. As Hall points out, "the spice business grew so great that Majapahit could not contain it."⁵³ The rise

49 Derek Heng, "State Formation and the Evolution of Naval Strategies in the Melaka Straits, c. 500–1500 CE," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 44, no. 3 (2013): 393.

50 Ricklefs, *Modern Indonesia*, 22 and Manuel Lobato, "'Melaka Is like a Cropping Field' Trade Management in the Strait of Melaka during the Sultanate and the Portuguese Period," *Journal of Asian History* 46, no. 2 (2012): 251. I recommend Leonard Andaya's excellent *Leaves of the Same Tree* to discover more about the various ethnicities and complex history of Sumatra.

51 Chua, *Chu-fan-chi*, 60–67, 71–72, 152, and Ma, *Ying-yai Sheng-lang*, 98–102, 108–114, 114–115, 115–121, 122, and 122–124.

52 Hall, "Economic History of Early Southeast Asia," 218.

53 Ibid, 226–227.

of the Melakan Sultanate in the Malay Peninsula only hastened the decline of Majapahit's *mandala*. Majapahit was so influential, however, that both the Sultanate of Melaka and of Aceh wrote into their court histories that their empires had been deemed ceremonial successors by Majapahit, and modern conceptions of Indonesia as a nation originate from the memory of this Javanese power.⁵⁴ During the Song dynasty, Javanese states exported pepper, pumpkins, sugarcane, gourds, beans, eggplants, rice (their main export by far), hemp, millet, salt, natural game, coconuts, bananas, taro, ivory, pearls, camphor, tortoiseshells, sandal wood, laka wood, sapan wood, aniseed, cloves, cardamoms, cubebs, mats, metalware, betelnuts, sulfur, saffron, parrots, cotton, clothing, wine, jack fruits, leeches, bay salt, sheep, and yellow wax. During the Ming dynasty, Majapahit and its successors exported rice, sapan wood, diamonds, white sandalwood incense, nutmegs, pepper, cantharides, steel, turtles' carapaces, tortoiseshells, parrots, pigs, goats, oxen, horses, fowl, bananas, coconuts, sugarcane, pomegranates, lotus seedcase, mangosteens, watermelons, langsat, gourds, vegetables, areca nuts, and betel leaves.⁵⁵ Like the other regions, most of the goods that Java exported to China had little staying power, being consumable foodstuffs and aromatics.

Aside from trade benefits, Southeast Asia was impacted by China in many other ways. Around the founding of the Ming dynasty, these Chinese-caused-changes started to have a sweeping effect on Southeast Asia. For instance, Chinese demand for Southeast Asian products resulted, according to Hall, in

a policy of territorial expansion that was actively pursued by important states in the Strait[s] of Malacca [and surrounding] region[s] . . . Loose federations of port towns characteristic of earlier times disappeared as in the new states only one dominant port [the core] . . . was tolerated.⁵⁶

To meet trade demands, state centralization and *mandala* expansion became inevitable. Rather than the occasional voyage for luxury products like yellow *su* incense or kingfisher feathers, trading developed into a largely bulk trade, dominated by foodstuffs.⁵⁷ It is because of Chinese influence that Southeast Asian states centralized and helped kickstart global trade.

54 See Bongsu, *Sejarah Melayu*, 82 and Heng, "State Formation," 394.

55 Chau, *Chu-fan-chi*, 70–71, 75–82, 82–87, and Ma, *Ying-Yai Sheng-Lan*, 97–98. On the export of rice: "Java's international position was based on its rice, the major commodity sought by the harvesters of spice. It was for rice that the Spice Islanders [Maluku islanders] came to Java." Hall, "Economic History of Early Southeast Asia," 220.

56 Hall, *Maritime Trade and State Development*, 228.

57 *Ibid.*, 231.

Conclusion

From 960 to 1550 CE, China and Southeast Asia enormously influenced one another economically (and politically and culturally to a lesser, but still quite significant, degree). Both the Song and Ming dynasties had an interest in commercial trade with Southeast Asia, albeit for Ming this interest was mostly confined to the fifteenth century. Chinese dynasties explored foreign affairs through the lens of the tributary system, seeing themselves, the *Huá* as culturally superior to the *yí*. In exchange for the tribute of local goods, they would give gifts to tributaries and meddle in diplomatic affairs, even though Southeast Asian nations thought of themselves as independent and thought of their tribute as gifts. Song and Ming officials at various times attempted to prohibit maritime trade due to the copper shortages both dynasties faced from the exporting of copper coins en masse to Southeast Asian countries. The export of silk and porcelain was also problematic, though to a lesser degree. The exchange of goods between China and Southeast Asia helped give rise to global trade. Southeast Asia participated in this trade because of how essential trade was for the maintenance and extension of *mandala* polities, leading to the construction of hundreds of beautiful temples across mainland and insular Southeast Asia. Dai Viet, Champa, Melaka, Srivijaya, and Majapahit, among other polities, profited from the trade with China.

This research has led to further questions deserving examination. The role of Arab traders and other foreign merchants in the region, especially during the Islamization of modern-day Indonesia, cannot be underestimated. How Arab traders impacted the commerce between Southeast Asian polities and China should be more thoroughly examined. Also, many of China's Southeast Asian tributaries positioned themselves as heads of their own regional tributary systems. This observation gains additional interest when considering how the peripheral areas of mandalas can be considered as mostly autonomous, tributary states. In this establishment of regional tributary systems, cultural exchange with China may be considered as a factor, as Southeast Asian polities may have done so out of imitation of the Chinese system. Turning again to China, it may be interesting to consider how Southeast Asian trade affected the status of Chinese merchants. Lufrano seems to think that the wealth merchants experienced during the Song and Ming dynasties helped fuel a status boost for merchants.⁵⁸ Finally, Southeast

⁵⁸ Richard J. Lufrano, *Honorable Merchants: Commerce and Self-Cultivation in Late Imperial China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1997), 3.

Asian polities were unafraid of using piracy to achieve their aims, as seen by Champa above, but also with Melaka, whose sultans employed pirates known as *orang laut* or “sea-people.”⁵⁹ I would tentatively suggest that there may have been more Southeast Asian *wokou* than previously believed, especially when considering how Southeast Asian polities pursued illegal trading with Chinese merchants during the maritime trade bans.

Aside from these questions, this history of political and economic influence will only gain in importance as people move further into the twenty-first century. Due to factors such as the Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia and China’s rising global influence, relations between the two megaregions are advancing in ways that will indelibly impact all nations with ties to China. Beyond the political sphere, those who engage with the continued debate over globalization must contend with the birthplace of global trade; the Straits of Malacca continue to be a major trade lane, and Singapore is the world’s second busiest port. Knowing the history of tribute and trade between China and Southeast Asia may well provide key context to understanding the relations between them.

59 Lobato, “Melaka Is like a Cropping Field,” 229–230.

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