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South from Nagasaki, West from Hormuz

Suddenly the full long wail of a ship’s horn surged through the open window and flooded the dim room . . . burdened with all the passion of the tides, the memory of voyages beyond counting.

—YUKIO MISHIMA, *THE SAILOR WHO FELL FROM GRACE WITH THE SEA*

When I arrived in Nagasaki, the first thing I did was to climb into the hills. These hills ring the port on almost all sides, leaving a narrow basin of water below, where the ships come in from the sea. Four hundred years ago, as these vessels began to bring in more and more “things,” including strange commodities and strange, foreign ideas, the local ruler of Nagasaki decided that enough was enough. He had better act before he lost his kingdom. The sea was dangerous; its gifts were equally dangerous. He rounded up several dozen Christians, those who had converted to the new religion that had come through the port, along with a few foreign Christians, and he held them captive. Then he ordered his men to crucify them on wooden posts ringing Nagasaki harbor. Within full view of the docking ships, the strangers who had come by sea—and their impressionable Japanese audiences, some of whom had dared to believe their teachings—were told in no uncertain terms who ruled this place. Dejima (Deshima), the little island settlement in the bay where the foreign ships were quarantined so as to take advantage of their trade, but not their dangerous notions, fell into disrepair for a while after this. As an act of terror the local daimyo, or chief, had done his work well—the maritime “foreign” had been intimidated into acquiescence. But only for a while. Soon Deshima’s commerce picked up again, and over the next two centuries, while
Japan tried to some extent to isolate itself from the currents of the maritime world, a trickle of influence still came in through the port. Guns came, and were adopted quickly, though with much angst, moral hand-wringing, and discussion. Clocks came too, as did Western calendars, and more ideas. But the shadow of those executions can still be felt in the hills of the port city even now, some half a millennium away.\(^1\) One wonders if the martyred believers felt their sacrifice was worth it, to bring gifts from the sea to a place that so clearly did not want such offerings.\(^2\)

On the seacoast of Oman, in a town called Sur, I walked in the huge, sprawling fish market until I was weary. Sur is on the coast of Oman jutting out into the Arabian Sea; farther west along those shores, the waterway bends into the Gulf of Hormuz, and then sweeps into the Persian Gulf. From the Omani coastline farther up the strand, on a clear day, you can barely make out the dust-pink shimmer of Iran across the water. I had been walking in that fish market for hours, writing down the names of the fish that I could recognize, though there were many species that I did not know. But all of nature’s plenty was there—huge sharks whose fins had been sliced off, destined for the Chinese market; tiny reef fish, neon red and orange and magenta-blue. A manta ray as big as a motorcycle sat in its own blood on the grimy concrete floor, its rattle pointing out to the sea like a beckoning, spindly arm. Here, too, as in Nagasaki, lay evidence of the foreign, and the distant—in addition to the shark

\(^1\) For a sense of Catholic missionary interactions with Japan in the early centuries of contact, and voyages in both directions, see G. O. Schurhammer, “Il contributo dei missionary cattolici nei secoli XVI e XVII alla conoscenza del Giappone,” in Le missioni cattoliche e la cultura dell’Oriente. Conferenze ‘Massimo Piccinini’ (Rome: Istituto italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, 1943), 115–17; G. Berchet, Le antiche ambasciate giapponesi in Italia: Saggio storico con documenti (Venice 1877), 53–54; “Ragionamento I che contiene la partenza dall’Isole Filippine a quelle del Giappone ed altre cose notabili di quel paese,” in Ragionamenti di Fancesco Carletti fiorentino sopra le cose da lui vedute ne’ suoi viaggi dell’Indie Orientali, e Orientali come d’altri paesi. All’Illustriss. Sig. Marchese Cosimo da Castiglione gentiluomo della Camera del Serenissimo Granduca di Toscana (Florence 1701), part II: Ragionamenti . . . sopra le cose da lui vedute ne’ suoi viaggi dell’Indie Orientali, e d’altri paesi, 35–36.

fins, a small café advertised its connections with Indonesia. A sign in Bahasa told visitors—likely construction crewmen from the polar opposite side of the Indian Ocean—that they could come here to make phone calls back to Jakarta, as well as grab snacks that they missed from home. Fins and coffee; Christianity and quiet ships, moored on the tide. These ports on the opposite ends of Asia had much in common, and yet nothing in common. Arabic could be heard in one, and Japanese was spoken in the other, in both cases by gnarled, suntanned men on the docks. But the murmur of connection between these places was unmistakable. One didn’t even need to listen; one simply had to watch. As several dhows headed out to sea from Sur, pulling east with the monsoon winds toward the open waters of the Indian Ocean, I asked myself, “Haven’t I seen all of this before?” When I couldn’t answer that question to my own satisfaction, I started taking notes in preparation for writing this book.

When one drinks coffee in the morning, it is partly because of the sea routes of Asia. If one hears Chinese being spoken on one’s way to work in the Western
world, it is partly because of the sea routes of Asia. If a call center in Mumbai approved your credit card purchase today (and it probably did), this was partly because of the sea routes of Asia as well. How can this be so? How can maritime pathways that have existed for centuries be partially responsible for so many of the day-to-day realities of our lived existence? It seems counterintuitive, yet this observation is true. The slow-moving, elegant ships that brought coffee to the world from early modern Yemen; the quiet sailing vessels that brought Chinese immigrants to all of the planet’s shores; the growth of industry and population along India’s arid outstretched coasts—all are interconnected phenomena. All of these circumfusing actors have in common the single crucial element of the sea linking local places to far larger, translocal realities. It would not be an exaggeration, perhaps, to say that the sea routes of this part of the globe—and all of the people, ideas, and materiel that have traversed them—are partially responsible for creating large parts of our modern world. Most of us are connected to this history in one form or another, whether we realize this on a daily basis or not.

In Asian Waters attempts to tie together the maritime history of Asia into a single, interconnected web. The volume charts out some of the ways in which the sea has linked and connected the various littorals of Asia into a segmented and (at the same time) a unitary circuit over roughly the past five hundred years.


years, since the so-called contact age initiated a quickening of patterns and engagement that had already begun. As such, it is part and parcel of the new transnational history now being written widely across the discipline; this is a history that makes the broad sweep, both of geography and of time, the center of the narrative. Janet Abu-Lughod famously said of Asia in the time period just before this book takes place: “In a system, it is the connections between the parts that must be studied. When these strengthen and reticulate, the system may be said to ‘rise’; when they fray, the system declines, although it may later undergo reorganization and revitalization.” This book integrates transnational history à la Abu-Lughod with other avenues of historical vision that are now being used more and more by scholars, such as environmental history, science and technology studies, subalternity, and the critical history of empire. How these approaches fit together provides a window into the working gears of the globe as we know it.

I argue in this volume that by looking at the half-millennium “grand curve” of Asia’s seas, a number of important themes that ultimately helped forge our common, modern world come to the fore. The creeping advance of external power, and indigenous action and agency in dealing with this phenomenon, form one of these themes. The regional and eventually global trade in a wide variety of objects, both sea-related and non-sea-centered, but passing through the region on thousands of ships, is another. Finally, the maritime movement of religion and concomitant political challenges to earlier forms of entrenched authority are but some of these ideas. These notions—power; trade; the oscillation of empires; diaspora; and religion-in-transit—are among the main linking themes of the book. In Asian Waters tries to connect these disparate notions into a single study through a series of topical windows, and asks how our vision of the world’s largest continent and its history might vary if we see this vast expanse of territory not by land, but rather from the sea, as part of a unitary story. How does that shift in cadence change our collective historical vision?

5. Parts of the narrative go even further back in time, where I think a more extended timeline is useful; see particularly chapters 2, 6, and 8.


7. Some scholars have already been moving in this direction; I am by no means the first. I outline many of these studies in the notes of the pages that follow here in the introduction, but for a useful overview of the issues, see Markus Vink, “Indian Ocean Studies and the New Thalassology,” Journal of Global History 2, 2007: 41–62.
Writing histories of large bodies of water is not new; not all explanations of the past are geochronometric in character. Among the first historians to do this was the great Fernand Braudel, whose two-volume study of the Mediterranean world in the early modern age became the gold standard for a generation of historians following in his wake. Instead of studying Europe per se or even any of its nation-states, Braudel unified the history of southern Europe and North Africa’s Maghreb into one story. The results made great sense to the profession, who saw in his books new ways of approaching history generally. Bernard Bailyn did something along the same lines for the Atlantic, when he refused the disaggregated approaches of “European” and “American” history and instead sewed the two other in his own work, forming a single, coherent world. This approach also ensnared many admirers, and different takes on


“Atlantic history” eventually became very popular. Perhaps this was no more so than in the well-received (and often imitated) study of the “Black Atlantic” by Paul Gilroy. If Braudel brought the worlds of Christianity and Islam together through trade and the environment of the Mediterranean, then Bailyn brought what used to be called the “old” and the “new” worlds together through migration, and the exchange of revolutionary ideas across the North Atlantic. Gilroy added race into this potent mixture, and when triangle trades, the genesis of capitalism, and new forms of cultural history were grafted in as well, the study of the sea showed all kinds of new possibilities.11 Historians of the Left, too, found fecund possibilities here; Marcus Rediker and others then moved the paradigm forward in the Caribbean, with studies of piracy, class, and the advent of shipborne democracies as part of this evolution. Indeed, the Caribbean, much like the Mediterranean on the other side of the Atlantic, has become a complicated site of historical experimentation, especially when it comes to looking at transgression and innovation in history as regards race, class, and the rise of the modern state.12

The Pacific has not been as popular a site for this sort of experimentation, at least until fairly recently. Significantly larger than the Atlantic and also less obviously connected in terms of the kinds of sources that could illustrate such ties, it has only been in the past several decades that Pacific history has caught up to the Atlantic paradigm. Thick, somewhat popular-tinged volumes were published, and these look at the vast ambit of this ocean, from Tierra del Fuego north to the Aleutians, and the Kamchatka Peninsula down to Tasmania and New Zealand.13 Here again themes abound: the importance of whaling in the


Pacific interocean economy, for example, or the diaspora of indigenous peoples who were seeded through the ocean via ethno-astronomy and outrigger canoes, outfitted for epic, long-distance journeys. Only recently, however, have there been more sophisticated attempts to define and tabulate what all of this movement has meant. The injection of indigenous perspectives into this dialogue by scholars such as Epeli Hau’ofa and Kealani Cook has been of crucial importance, both by writers of Pacific heritage themselves, and sometimes by non-indigenes, who have nonetheless been sympathetic to the decades-long writing of local people out of Pacific History by earlier practitioners of the genre. It has been through these more recent studies by Matt Matsuda and others that Pacific History has taken on a new sophistication, and also a mooring of sorts within the larger global histories that are now being written. The history of the polar seas, for example, does not yet show much evidence of this sort of incorporation or evolution, focused as it still is on narratives of heroic exploration. The first Europeans who penetrated the polar seas certainly did not lack courage. But their stories are still for the most part told in isolation

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from local communities, as the exploits of “great men” who conquered nature, as if no one else was standing on the ice with them in their travels.

With only one recent exception, in the work of Sunil Amrith, there has not really been a single study looking at Asia’s seas through a broad macro-lens, and that is a lacuna that the present book hopes to fill.\(^{17}\) But that does not mean that scholars have not looked at maritime issues in Asia in novel and interesting ways. For East Asia, and the seas that have abutted and fed into the South China Sea as a sort of middle body of water, binding the region proper, comparatively few authors have staked out claims. The ones who have done so have often been very, very good, however. Andre Gunder Frank is one of these scholars, and his remarkable *ReOrient*—though not a maritime history in its constitution—laid down the gauntlet to others.\(^{18}\) *ReOrient* asks us to try to reconceptualize both space and the histories of those who have flowed through such spaces in novel and fascinating ways. Asians are at the center of his world history, and not (as has almost always been the case) figures upon whom history solely has acted, mainly through the expansion of Europeans. This was a real shift in lenses, and the production of Gunder Frank’s book led to new ways of thinking about Asian History as constituting its own motor for transformative events in the world over the last several centuries.\(^{19}\) Takeshi Hamashita has been more centrally located in the maritime paradigm, and his studies of the South China Sea (from the Ryukyu Kingdom of Okinawa down to Southeast Asia) have given us new impetus in thinking about the connections between China and the Sinicized countries of Northeast Asia in powerful ways.\(^{20}\)

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17. The closest thing we have is Amrith’s wonderful study. This is a very different kind of work than the present one, however, as it looks at water in all forms, and it is primarily geared toward the Indian Ocean. See Sunil Amrith, *Unruly Waters: How Rains, Rivers, Coasts, and Seas Have Shaped Asia’s History* (New York: Basic Books, 2018).


Hamashita has led this charge, though there have been other important figures more recently in this movement, too. But his work is based on the painstaking accumulation of many other scholars’ findings as well, so that he is in conversation with many Chinese and Japanese researchers whose data might not otherwise have been seen by English-speaking reading publics. Finally, Dian Murray has also been important in this context, with her pioneering *Pirates of the South China Coasts* also breaking new ground, in at least two ways. First, the book brought China and Sinicized Southeast Asia into one frame, to be discussed as equals in the maritime history that flowed between them. Second, her book also introduced gender to this debate in ways that had not previously been tried. Her monograph has become a classic of sorts in both of these senses, and is regularly cited not just by historians of a transnational bent but by scholars who are receptive to gender analyses in the drive of history as well.

In the lower latitudes of the South China Sea, and into maritime Southeast Asia itself, the history of the sea has also been a topic for vigorous debate. In this area, the “lands beneath the winds,” the ocean has been a necessary format for writing history for quite some time. Indonesia is the world’s largest archipelago, with some seventeen thousand islands, and when the Philippines and Malaysia and other regional cultures are thrown in, one can easily see why


lucid conceptualizations of maritime history become immediately necessary in this part of the world. The touchstone study here has been Anthony Reid’s two-volume *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce*, which bound the early modern history of Southeast Asia—and especially insular Southeast Asia—into one coherent story. Reed took on how all of these seemingly separate societies in fact had much in common, attributes often transmitted or shared by maritime means. Though some of his assertions were later challenged by scholars such as Victor Lieberman and Barbara Watson Andaya, the core assumptions seem to have been largely right, even if the farther one goes from island Southeast Asia up and onto the mainland (or as one takes gender more centrally into account), several of his points may lose some valence. But Reid’s was only the largest and most ambitious study to try to encircle the region’s seas, and to spin a narrative out of local waters that he saw as connecting cultures more than separating them. On a slightly smaller scale, the great French scholar Denys Lombard tried much the same thing with his remarkable *Le Carrefour Javanais*, and in the Southern Philippines James Francis Warren also moved along these intrepid lines in his path-breaking *The Sulu Zone*. In eastern Indonesia, Roy Ellen, too, did this for what he called the Banda Zone, and on the opposite side of the archipelago Dianne Lewis and later Leonard Andaya sought similar results from marking off the Melaka Straits. Clearly the notion of bodies of water hit home in Southeast Asian History, expanding the sea as a unit of analysis that could then tell us new things about historical patterns as a whole.


Yet if moves have been made in these directions over the past several decades for Southeast Asia, the site of the most frenetic intellectual exchange vis-à-vis Asia’s seas has undoubtedly been the Indian Ocean. It has been here, more than anywhere else in the region, that historiographical battle lines have been drawn, and in the starkest terms. K. N. Chaudhuri was undoubtedly the pater nostrum of this scholarship, with his Trade and Civilisation in the Indian Ocean making him the intellectual counterpart of Braudel and Baily for this part of the world. The level of synthesis of his study of the Indian Ocean was formative, and he managed to combine analysis of the monsoons, the environment, trade, and human actors all into one seamless web.29 His monograph was followed by others, with Ashin Das Gupta, Sanjay Subrahmanyam, Michael Pearson, Sugata Bose, Kerry Ward, and others all contributing studies that made the level of complexity and detail of Indian Ocean Studies quite something to behold.30 Engseng Ho, Clare Anderson, Michael Laffan, Isabel Hofmeyer, Ronit Ricci, Sebouh Aslanian, and Gwyn Campbell (among many others) have only deepened the evolving picture in the last twenty years.31

There are now Indian Ocean study centers in places as distant from one another as Montreal and Perth, and Cambridge University Press has commissioned a two-volume history of the ocean, while classes are taught on the region in universities worldwide. There are even now excellent studies of regional avatars of the Indian Ocean, such as René Barendse’s *The Arabian Seas* and Sunil Amrith’s *Crossing the Bay of Bengal.* This is a kind of rude health for the examination of an ocean that few could have imagined when the study of such seas was just in its infancy and questions were being asked whether this kind of history could (or should) be done at all. It is being done, and more and more PhDs are being minted in the large research institutions who take this sort of vantage as their own, rather than relying on land-based geographies. That more than anything else may be a clue as to where the profession is going, as new knowledge is produced and the scale of analysis is brought closer and closer to the ground (or to the sea, in this case).

Yet, perhaps a better index of how important Indian Ocean Studies has become as a kind of vanguard of maritime scholarship might be in the phalanx of smaller, topic-specific studies that are now out there to be used by researchers. A number of large, syncretic studies have now been done (as above), and these will doubtless be challenged in the years to come by others, who will focus on highlighting differing themes. But we can now rely on literally shelves of smaller studies that allow us to focus down on Indian Ocean ontologies that can come only from painstaking, small-scale research. It is in this vein that we have scholarship on the archaeology of individual ports, as well as on cyclones, mangroves, and the tidal basins of historical harbors. The histories of the large East India companies are known, but we are also learning about the Danes, the Armenians, and others in this respect, and the parts they played in...
The ocean’s contact and commerce.\textsuperscript{34} We are now able even to get to the roots of interaction on India’s seacoasts century by century, in micro-histories (often written by indigenous authors) that tell us details from the sixteenth century period of open trade to the imposition of British control in the late imperial age.\textsuperscript{35} When we add this all together, the benefits are clear. Writing histories of maritime Asia is easier now than ever before; many people have put in the hard, local work to make this so, whether in the archives, in the field, or on the ocean itself, collecting data. This is so from Hokkaido all the way to Aden, and in all the stretches of Asia’s seas in between. It will be the task of this volume to reveal some of these connections through a series of topical windows, which in turn can show us the unity and relatedness of these seas as the centuries have slowly swept by.

The book is organized into fourteen chapters. Two of these are an introduction and a conclusion with wide vantages on the importance of the oceans, as seen

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from Japan and the Middle East at the volume’s start (the two geographic poles of this study), and China at the book’s end. The remaining twelve chapters are evenly subdivided into six rubrics, each dealing with a particular theme that has been crucial to the history of these seas. Each of the six parts of the book has a short preface so that readers are given background into the rubric at hand. The two thematically linked chapters following then serve (in juxtaposition) as broad yet detailed windows into the dynamics of these large, ocean-related topics. As such, they function like an accordion that can be compressed or expanded, with one of the two chapters moving in each direction—as apertures—one widening, and one narrowing toward the theme at hand. Together, the essays span the waters between Pacific Russia and Japan on the one hand and eastern Arabia and the Red Sea on the other, making stops along the way in China, Southeast Asia, the Indian subcontinent and the Middle East, all through a variety of analytical windows. Southeast Asia forms the “center” of the volume in some senses. This is both because I am a card-carrying Southeast Asianist by trade, and also because this region was the geographic center of these routes, in many ways. This is history on a continental scale, therefore, and the book attempts to reach out to scholars, students, and the interested reading public along the width and breadth of these sea lanes. It is explicitly not a history of every ship that has ever set sail in Asia over the past centuries. It is, however, a way of looking at all of these ships—encapsulated into thematic form—so that these voyages and the people who made them can be thought about in one, expansive sweep. I do not see any of the human populations referred to in this book as static, either, in “ethnic composition.” Rather, I agree with some of the formative scholarship on ethnicity in Asia that all of the people chronicled here passed in and out of evolving “categories” as they connected to the routes.36 Each of the six thematic rubrics in the book mixes approaches to the sea and its histories by using a number of different methodologies: archival history, anthropology, archaeology, art history, and geography/resource studies. I have spent time on the ground in all of the regions that I write about here over the past thirty years, and there is a mixture in the source bases between history and lived experience, usually in the form of interviewing and oral history reportage for the latter.

Wherever possible I have tried to allow local people to speak into the record themselves, so that their own voices are heard.\(^{37}\) This happens through ethnographic work done in the markets and ports of many of these places: a variety of harbors in Indonesia and the Philippines, for example, as well as interviews with merchants of spices and marine goods throughout Hong Kong, Taiwan, and southern China, as well as Singapore, Malaysia, and southern India. Travels in the Arabian Sea, the Persian Gulf, the Red Sea, and coastal East Africa also informed this book. I have been fortunate to live or work in Asia for roughly ten of the past thirty years, cumulatively, and the rubrics of the book reflect these experiences. The languages of the sources and interviewing used in these chapters include Indonesian/Malay, Chinese, Dutch, French, and Italian (as well as English), so a wide mixture of reporting has been possible. *In Asian Waters* is a book that connects a large swath of geography and a large temporal frame at the same time, but it is a story that is indeed connected, and one that must be seen in its breadth to be appreciated for its coherence. Asia is the world’s most dynamic region, but beyond the neon of Tokyo harbor, the factories of southern China, and the seaside villages surrounding Mumbai there is the story of how these worlds fit together. Merchants—indigenous and foreign—once sailed between all of these ports in sleek, elegant ships. They still do, though the vessels now might carry huge cargo containers, the corrugated-iron descendants of this maritime past.

The first part of this book looks at “maritime connections.” Chapter 2, “From China to Africa,” does this by adopting the widest possible lens in Asian waters—looking at the long, though little discussed, history of connection between China and East Africa. The ties between these places, improbable as they are, go back many centuries, and are discernible through chronicles and histories, as well as through archaeology and DNA. Trade contacts between these two poles of Asian waters (the Indian Ocean after all washes up against East Africa’s shores) have existed for a long time. We do know that this connection persisted over the ages, and that at one moment at least—during the famed Zheng He voyages of the early fifteenth century—Africa was very much on the minds of the Chinese court. At that time, a live giraffe was brought back from one of the Zheng He expeditions, and was paraded through the streets of Nanjing. One can only imagine what local Chinese must have thought,

\(^{37}\) For a terrific new book that accomplishes this across much of Asia in the fin-de-siècle period, see Tim Harper, *Underground Asia: Global Revolutionaries and the Overthrow of Europe’s Empires in the East* (London: Allen Lane, 2019).
looking up at this strange beast for the first time. Chapter 3, “Vietnam’s Maritime Trade Orbit,” also looks at maritime connections, but instead of adopting a “tie the endpoints together” approach, as in chapter 2, proceeds with the opposite logic, discussing the ties between one place—the outstretched coasts of Vietnam during the early modern period—and the wider maritime world. During this time, as Vietnam began to coalesce into something more than a collection of small polities, the country began trading with an extraordinary range of distant peoples by sea. This chapter analyzes that trade, and asks what its conduct can tell us about the gradual opening up of a centuries-old polity to the new possibilities of the international routes. Vietnam, of course, traded with other places before this time, but during these centuries maritime commerce took on an importance that had been generally more muted before.

The second part of the monograph focuses down on “bodies of water,” of which two are of paramount importance in Asia. Chapter 4, “Smuggling in the South China Sea,” takes a longue-durée approach, focusing specifically on smuggling patterns and subaltern movement. It questions how strong states try to control nonstate spaces such as the South China Sea, and asks how local populations have resisted these enforced realities, often by voting with their feet to move trade and commerce outside of officially sanctioned channels. The chapter is both historical and concerned with the present in the relationship between China and Southeast Asia as “macro-regions.” Chapter 5, “The Center and Its Margins,” then looks at the Indian Ocean over a three-hundred-year period, from roughly 1600 to 1900 CE. It problematizes currents of exchange that were taking place over this huge geography, as Asian contact with European companies phased toward colonial domination over a broad sweep of time. The chapter catalogues these changes partially through the ideas of thinkers such as Adam Smith and Karl Marx who witnessed them in their own lifetimes, but also through close studies of events on the ground, and on several different rims of this vast ocean.

The third part of the book looks at “religion on the tides,” its two chapters showing first the transmission of early Indian religions overseas, and then how global religions have been incorporated into a single out-of-the-way place in the Philippines. Chapter 6, “Passage of Amulets,” analyzes the transit of Buddhism from South Asia (southern India and Sri Lanka) to mainland Southeast Asia and back. It takes the Bay of Bengal as a single sphere of study, and asks how this space became worn with the tracks of ships carrying Buddhist monks, who eventually proselytized their faith into the majority religion of this region. The chapter relies on studies of Buddhist canonical scripture, material culture
chapter 1

(including the archaeology of amulets and statuary), as well as anthropology
in sketching out this complicated and fascinating history of transmission, es-
pecially to southern Siam. Chapter 7 examines one remarkably understudied
city: Zamboanga, the main port of southwestern Mindanao in the southern
Philippines. Zamboanga has had a Spanish fort and Spanish cannon trying to
control local Muslim populations for many hundreds of years. It also has a
thriving Muslim secessionist presence, replete with men with more guns in
the streets, and a splinter group of Al-Qaeda in the form of Abu Sayyaf. Yet
Zamboanga also has a large Catholic community, and a history of remarkable
tolerance, too. This chapter scrutinizes these two opposing trends, and asks
how the port is both representative of Asia's maritime roots and anomalous at
the same time.

The fourth part of the book then queries what Asia's “cities and the sea”
mean for this huge sweep of geography along the trade routes. Chapter 8 looks
at the history of coastal cities in “greater Southeast Asia,” but this description
is a very loose one, as it incorporates ports now lying at some distance from
what most now consider to be this region, including Canton (Guangzhou)
and Hong Kong. The chapter asks how coastal cities became important on the
Asian trade routes, when this happened, why, and in what eventual formations
of urbanism alongside the edge of the sea. A wide lens is employed in order to
examine these patterns over a broad stretch of geography, and an equally large
cross-section of time. Chapter 9 then ties the even larger maritime geography
of (mainly British) empire together in Asia: from Aden (in Yemen) to Bombay
in India; from Singapore in Southeast Asia up to Pusan in colonial Korea. The
chapter looks at the “circuits” of travel, movement, and ideas along this thor-
oughfare, both of colonial officials and administrators, and of Asians who both
served the empire and eventually challenged it in the desire for their own
postcolonial states. The chapter uses a range of reporting from predominantly
British civil servants that bind these entwined histories together into a single,
complex story.

The fifth part of our story then moves into greener, less urban directions,
taking in the ecological sweep and “bounty of the oceans.” Chapter 10, “Fins,
Slugs, Pearls,” dives literally into the sea: under scrutiny here is the (lived)
history of marine-goods transport, all along the trade routes that have con-
ected East and Southeast Asia for the past several hundred years. The high
point of this commerce, in many ways, was the late eighteenth and early nine-
ten centuries, when sea produce helped fuel the “opening of China,” both
to global commerce and to opium addiction (opium and sea produce were two
of the main commercial products exchanged for Chinese tea, porcelain, and silk). But the chapter is half ethnographic as well, looking at how these Sino-Southeast Asian marine trades operate now, in our own time. Chapter 11, “On the Docks,” queries how the coasts of southern India became “central” to the passage of spices across the Indian Ocean. This happened on the wider shipping routes of the great companies (the East India Co, the VOC, etc.) before the region was later backwatered to some extent by the main oceanic steamship lines (the P & O, Rotterdamsche Lloyd, etc.). Since antiquity the Malabar and Coromandel coasts have had a number of ports that connected Asia to the wider world in fascinating ways (mostly through spices). But the opening of Suez in 1869 significantly changed these patterns, and also changed the nature of the commerce carried out on these ancient slipways. This chapter (which, like the previous one, is historical but also anthropological at the same time, both of them making use of fieldwork and interviewing), explores these processes, particularly vis-à-vis connections with Southeast Asia.

The sixth part of the book takes on “technologies of the sea” as a theme of Asian interconnectivity. Chapter 12, “Foucault’s Other Panopticon, or Lighting Colonial Southeast Asia,” is an analysis of one maritime-specific technology among many: the history of lighthouses in the area, stretching from Aceh in North Sumatra all the way to New Guinea and the fluid borders of Oceania. Lighthouses were critical structures in maintaining the safety of ships and commerce, yet they were also appropriated by burgeoning colonial states to “herd” and surveille Asian shipping into pathways deemed acceptable by imperial regimes. Chapter 13, “Of Maps and Men,” presents the history of another vital technology in the history of Asia’s oceans: sea-mapping, or hydrography, as it was called in colonial times. The mapping of the sea in this part of the world was at least as important as any land-based cartography, and this was so starting from the earliest European voyages to the region, around the turn of the sixteenth century. Mapping out shoals, reefs, and other dangers of the sea allowed European colonial projects to get off the ground with less and less loss of life. It also eventually gave rise (in Foucault’s terms) to a conjuncture between power and knowledge that eventually swung the way of the numerically inferior visitors from the West.

Chapter 14, “If China Rules the Waves,” concludes the book by looking both toward the past and toward the future. The primary locus of this final chapter is the China coasts—the place that many observers, both “expert” and casual, seem to think will be the engine of the world economy in the coming century. This last chapter looks at this assumption from the standpoint of
history, asking how reasonable this hypothesis might be, given past and present conditions. Some two thousand years ago, in the Han Dynasty, deceased Chinese courtiers were found with cloves buried in their mouths. Since at that time cloves only grew thousands of kilometers away in eastern Indonesia, off the outstretched coasts of New Guinea, we can see how powerful the maritime trade impulse was for much of human history. On those same Chinese coasts now, some two millennia later, newer Chinese ships are setting sail every day, their holds full of cargo for the outside world. What will happen if China becomes master of the sea? Will this be a peaceful process, as it was when the Han were looking for cloves to freshen the breath of their princes for the afterlife? Or will it be an altogether different approach to the wider world, whereby the sea becomes an avenue less of trade and connection, but one of conquest, recalling other (Western) histories of landings on distant shores, when the “contact age” began? This chapter asks these questions. It also leaves us with some historical perspective on the hyping of the world’s newest superpower, one that we are told is destined to rule the waves.
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