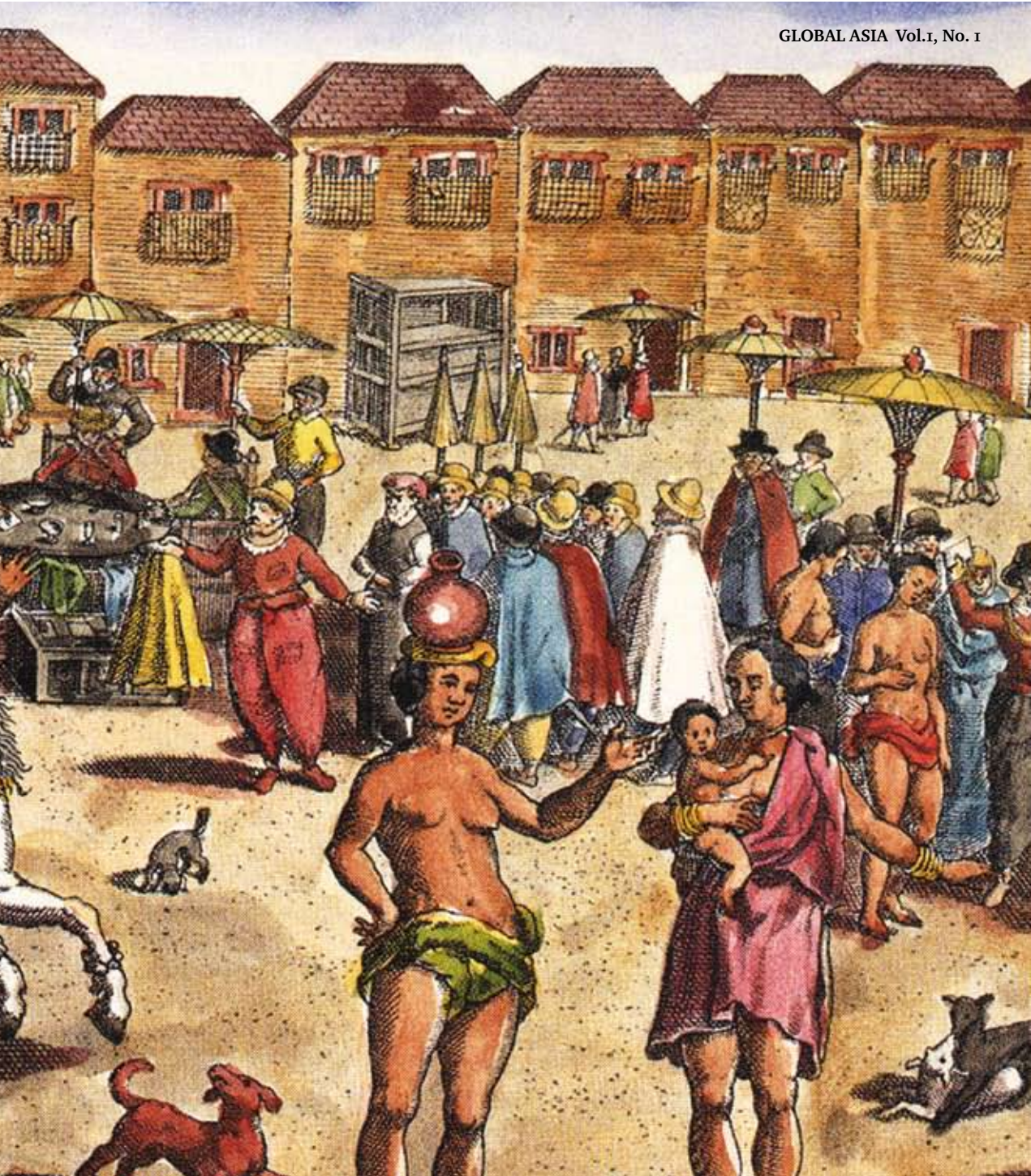


When Asia was one

By Nayan Chanda





Before dawn on May 20, 1498, three ships with large sails appeared on the horizon of western India. Curious locals from Calicut took to their canoes for a closer look and found bearded white men aboard. It was the Portuguese fleet of Vasco da Gama, looking for “Christians and spices.”

The era ushered in that morning would profoundly transform Asia over the next 450 years.

THE EFFECTS of that transformation are visible in the multi-colored mosaic of nation-states that emerged from the crucible of colonial rule and World War II, as well as in the ideological and political divisions that have since racked the region.

Yet, what are often obscured in the daily reports of differences within Asia are the common characteristics left by history. In the millennium and a half that preceded the era of da Gama, trade and travel closely interconnected the region, laying the foundations of prosperity and creating the common economic and cultural space that gave Asia its unique identity. Asian nations are now engaged, as was announced recently at the East Asia Summit in Kuala Lumpur, in building a forum for dialogue aimed at “promoting peace, stability and economic prosperity in East Asia.” In this context, it may be instructive to look back at how Asia achieved the enviable prosperity that first attracted European traders and adventurers long ago.

The Portuguese foray into the Indian Ocean was driven by a lust for spices and the strategic goal of depriving the Ottoman Empire of valuable Islamic trade in the Indian Ocean and the spice islands of Southeast Asia. Da Gama was dazzled by Calicut, which he described as “burst-

ing with merchandise of every kind, thanks to its maritime traffic with other lands from China to the Nile.”¹ But to his dismay, da Gama found that Muslim merchants – Arab and Indian – were already entrenched along India’s spice-bearing coast. Attempts to undermine Muslim dominance began two years later, with an attack on Muslim ships loading pepper in Calicut. This heralded a period of violent, religion-tinged struggle for commercial dominance that changed the region’s trading map. The Portuguese, Spaniards, Dutch and British launched bitter campaigns to claim the sea lanes as their exclusive domains.

Such state-sponsored violence, coupled with a crusading and proselytizing zeal, stood in sharp contrast to existing practice in Asia, which considered the ocean a zone of neutrality. At times, the imperial ambitions of some, such as the Srivijaya empire in the Indonesian archipelago, would succeed in controlling two or more links in the chain. However, in the words of O.W. Wolters, “the seas remained open until the seventeenth century... in effect, the single ocean was a vast zone of neutral water, which rulers inside and outside Southeast Asia independently and for their own interests wanted to protect.”

NOTES

1 Peter Boxhall, "Portuguese Seafarers in the Indian Ocean," *Asian Affairs* 23, no 3 (1992): 322 – 330

2 http://www.historycooperative.org/proceedings/seascapes/gaynor.html#_ftn23

At the beginning of the 17th century, the Dutch tried to use their superior naval fire power to establish a commercial monopoly of the oceans. An indignant ruler of Makassar protested against the Dutch in 1615: "God has made the earth and sea, has divided the earth among mankind and given the sea in common. It is a thing unheard of that anyone should be forbidden to sail the seas."²

Such protests were ineffective in the face of European galleys bristling with cannons and attempts to build commercial empires by linking trading posts across the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea continued apace. By the middle of the 19th century, the commercial and cultural unity that had marked pre-colonial Asia was lost to the advancing economic and military might of the colonial powers. Yet, the empires that were subsequently established came to be built on the foundations of the well-integrated and cosmopolitan trading centers that dotted Asia.

Nearly four centuries after Europe's intervention, as a resurgent Asia tries again to reintegrate itself through multilateral organizations and free trade areas, the history of common commercial and cultural space between oceans is again relevant.

A brief survey of this nature inevitably runs the risk of oversimplifying and over-generalizing historical trends. Still, it is tempting to identify three broad currents that flow through much of Asian history. First, the promotion of trade has been a leitmotif in the region. The desire to live better and earn profits has driven Asian traders to risk their lives crossing oceans and in the process created a common economic space from the very beginning of recorded history. Long-distance trading created a cosmopolitanism that laid the foundation for commercial prosperity. Second, common religious beliefs – whether Buddhist, Hindu or Muslim – afforded traders a structure

of trust, and yet there was never state-sponsored proselytizing until the arrival of aggressive European powers. Only India's Emperor Ashoka, who sent missionaries to preach the Buddhist dhamma to foreign countries, was an exception to this rule. Third, a corollary of this liberal attitude toward organized religion was a largely secular approach to life and a tolerance of other religions, which, in turn, created the necessary conditions for peace and prosperity. Conspicuously absent in Asia were events like the crusades and the decades-long religious wars that marked European history.

THE SILK CONNECTION

The search for luxury items such as medicinal herbs and metals boosted trade between distant parts of Asia, leading to the exchange of goods and crops. India, for example, sold Champa rice and cotton to China, which in turn sold tea to India and Southeast Asia. Two hundred years before the Christian era, a Han dynasty envoy traveled across Central Asia to blaze the trail that would later be called the Silk Road. At the farthest end of his journey, near today's Afghanistan, he was astonished to find products from southern China which had been brought from India. Unbeknownst to the Han emperor, Chinese, Southeast Asian and Indian traders had set up a caravan trading link running through Burma and India, all the way up to the head of the Indus River. At the end of the 19th century, when the British entered Burma, they were similarly astonished to find a vibrant trade between Yunnan and Burma on mule caravans, perhaps not very different from what had gone on in previous centuries.

By the first century, Chinese silk was transported along the Silk Road to an Indian port in modern day Gujarat, to be sold to Greek and Roman traders who had ridden the monsoon winds all the way from the Red Sea. The coral, wine,



NOTES

3 Valery Hansen, *The Open Empire* (New York: W.W.Norton & Co., 2000), 170

4 Charles Holcombe, "Trade-Buddhism: Maritime Trade, Immigration, and the Buddhist Landfall in Early Japan," *The Journal of the American Oriental Society* 119, no. 2 (1999): 280–292

5 Gene M. Chenoweth, "Melaka, 'Piracy' and the Modern World System," *Journal of Law and Religion* 13, no 1 (1996–1999): 107-125

glass, frankincense and other products that Roman traders brought had to be supplemented by gold coins in order to pay for their enormous demand for silk and spices. Emperor Tiberius and the historian Pliny complained that the Roman aristocracy's taste for luxury was draining the Roman treasury. Such complaints notwithstanding, trade between China and India flourished for a thousand years, supplying luxuries to the Roman and Byzantine empires. A booming South Sea trade carrying Indian traders – along with Hindu rituals, icons and language – created what has been called a "Sanskrit cosmopolis," extending throughout nearly all of South and Southeast Asia during the first millennium of the Christian era. As a result, Sanskrit became the universal language of celebratory public inscriptions. The rise of Melaka and Southeast Asian trade would later turn Malay into the lingua franca of regional trade. Although China lost its silk-making monopoly by the 4th or 5th century, it maintained a profitable trade with India by producing special export-quality silk with motifs specially designed for the Indian market. Indian semi-precious stones and medicinal herbs enjoyed great popularity in China. Even as far back as the 4th century, travelers encountered goods from different countries during their journeys through Asia. The Chinese monk Faxian, who traveled for 13 years to India and Southeast Asia, left a memorable account of his perilous boat journey from Palembang to China. He recounted how moved he was to see a merchant in Sri Lanka offer to the Buddha a white silk fan of Chinese origin. Seeing a familiar Chinese product being used to worship the Buddha thousands of miles away, a homesick Faxian found his eyes filled with tears.³

The trade between India and China in the early Christian era expanded with the spread of Buddhism from India to China through Central Asia,

reaching its peak in the 6th century. The traffic along the Silk Road expanded as pilgrims carrying Buddhist relics, icons, sacred stones and votive pieces of silk traversed the route. Religion was thus intimately intertwined with trade; religious inquiry and devotion promoted travel, just as the demand for icons and devotional objects propelled trade.⁴ Given the scarcity and price of imported luxuries, their use was limited, of course, yet the elite in China, India, and Southeast Asia all knew about and coveted the same products.

The commercial exchanges between India, China and the Mediterranean expanded over time into a huge pan-Asian trade network that prefigured David Ricardo's theory of international trade based on comparative advantage. China, with its silk and porcelain manufacture, and India, with its early expertise in cotton textiles, emerged as the region's main complementary partners. They were later joined by Southeast Asia's primary producers of rice, teak, nutmeg, cloves and scented wood products. As one historian notes, "by 1500, the importation of Indian cloth across Southeast Asia was about a square meter per person. If most of this went to the rich, still 'Indian cloth was traded not only in the great maritime emporia: it reached the tiny spice-growing islands in eastern Indonesia... and the land-locked kingdom of Laos.'"⁵

THE BUDDHIST CONNECTION

Thanks to the Tang Dynasty's liberal trading policy, the imperial capital, Changan (today's Xian), became the greatest urban center in the world, with nearly two million inhabitants. Until the middle of the 9th century, when the Tang rulers reversed their policy of openness, Muslims, Jews, Nestorian Christians and Buddhists from all over west Asia and India visited or resided in the Chinese capital. Since the 5th century, Changan had developed into

NOTES

6 Holcombe, "Trade-Buddhism," 280-292

Some are weeping, some beating their chests and one is even piercing himself with his sword. Buddha's message that human suffering and the path to salvation are universal was captured in the images and sculptures carved and painted over a thousand years after the Buddha's actual passing.

a major center of Buddhist learning. Kumarajiva, a famous monk of Indian-Central Asian descent, set up a school where important Buddhist texts were translated. Other famous Buddhist monks such as Faxian and Xuanzhang would later set out from Changan to travel the Silk Road to India and return with a treasure trove of religious texts.

The intensified contacts created a vast common space of ideas and products. Some 120 stone caves in western China, built around the beginning of the 4th century, today stand as testimonies to Buddhist Asia, with their elaborate sculptures and devotional paintings. Buddhism radiated from China to Korea and Japan. Along with the faith came trade and even greater connections. In 752, a south Indian Brahmin, Bodhisena, was on hand in Nara, Japan to officiate at the ceremony "opening" the eyes of the Great Buddha. He had arrived in Japan in 736 in the company of a Cham monk he had met at sea.⁶

A 10th century painting on the wall of the Dunhuang cave in China visually represents Asia's spiritual unity. A gigantic figure of the Buddha reclining in his last moments has as its backdrop a large wall painting of mourners of different nationalities. Each mourner is painted in minute detail, showing their different origins, garments and distinctive headdress, as they stand grief-stricken at the demise of the Buddha. Some are weeping, some beating their chests, and one is even piercing himself with his sword. Buddha's message that human suffering and the path to salvation are universal was captured in the images and sculptures carved and painted over a thousand years after the Buddha's actual passing.

A lingering symbol of the common religious space that Asia enjoyed in the first millennium is the continuing worship of Guanyin – the Chinese Goddess of Mercy – by millions of Asians from Japan to Southeast Asia. The name Guanyin is a



NOTES

7 Hansen, *The Open Empire*, 205



literal translation of Avalokiteswar, a Bodhisattva who was born again and again to help humans end their suffering. When caught in a frightening storm on the South China Sea, Faxian prayed to Guanyin. Centuries later, in the 1930s, a Japanese entrepreneur named the first Asian single-lens reflex camera “Cannon” because he was a devotee of Kwannon (the Japanese name for Guanyin).

ROOM FOR ALL RELIGIONS

While Buddhism dominated India and China in the early years of the Christian era, other faiths also flourished. The Tang dynasty capital Changan, with its 91 Buddhist temples, was predominantly Buddhist, but it was also a remarkably open and tolerant city. Historian Valery Hansen describes Changan’s foreign quarters around the Western Market:

“Non-Chinese residents built religious institutions dedicated to the religions of their homelands. The Persian-speaking merchants continued to worship at two kinds of temples devoted to religions they brought with them from Iran. They sacrificed live animals at Zoroastrian fire altars, and they sang hymns about forces of light triumphing over the forces of darkness at Manichaen (a Christian sect) temples. Travelers from Syria embraced their own form of Christianity, Nestorianism.”⁷

The intensity of religious contact between India and China spilled over into other areas of knowledge. Fa Xian, Xuanzhang, and others were also interested in the more worldly aspects of life, and their accounts provided the first detailed analyses of Indian society. During his 16-year sojourn in India, Xuanzhang, who was fluent in Sanskrit,

NOTES

- 8 Amartya Sen, "Passage to China," *New York Review of Books* 51, no. 19 (2004)
- 9 Shih-shan Henry Tsai, "The Eunuchs in the Ming Dynasty," cited by Gene M. Chenoweth, "Melaka, 'Piracy' and the Modern World System," *Journal of Law and Religion* 13, No. 1. (1996 – 1999): 107-125
- 10 Chenoweth, "Melaka, 'Piracy' and the Modern World System," 107-127
- 11 Luis Filipe F.R. Thomaz, "Melaka and its Merchant Communities at the Turn of the Sixteenth Century," in Denys Lombard and Jean Aubin, eds., *Asian Merchants and Businessmen in the Indian Ocean and the China Sea* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000): 34



successfully debated Buddhist scholars at the court of his Indian patron. The Indian scholars who traveled to China in the 7th and 8th centuries included not only religious scholars, but also other savants in mathematics and astronomy. In the 8th century, an Indian astronomer named Gautama Siddhartha was even made the president of the Board of Astronomy in China.⁸

Periods of religious persecution notwithstanding, the Chinese imperial court encouraged religious and cultural exchanges. The Kashmiri monk, Gunavarman, was visiting Java when he received an official invitation from the Chinese emperor. In the 15th century, Zheng He, a Muslim eunuch admiral of the Chinese imperial fleet, carried emperor Yongle's gifts for the three religious communities of Sri Lanka – Buddhist, Hindu and Islamic – which included "some 3,000

pieces of gold, 15,000 of silver and 300 rolls of silk, as well as perfumed oils and lacquered ecclesiastical ornaments."⁹

Islam's peaceful rise in Southeast Asia, where half the population converted to the faith in the space of two centuries, is in itself a remarkable story of openness. Islam spread organically to the islands of Southeast Asia, whose people were impressed by the devotion of Arabic and Gujarati traders, their Holy Book and culture, not to mention the advantage of doing business with co-religionists. The Hindu ruler of Melaka converted to Islam in recognition of the predominant position held by Arab and Gujarati traders in the region. However, in dealing with traders of many faiths who settled there, the ruler maintained strict neutrality. An early 16th century account of Melaka lists dozens of nationalities and faiths that could be found there, from Zoroastrian Parsees and Islamic Turks and Arabs to Buddhist Siamese and Hindu merchants who practiced their respective faiths without hindrance. Forced conversion to Islam would only arise in the 17th century, partly in response to aggressive conversions carried out by the colonial powers.

Observers noted that Melaka was not just a trading center, but thanks to its prosperous trade network and multi-ethnic population, it had become a multicultural hub and a center for Islamic culture and intellectual exchange. Melaka promoted regional affiliations of Sultanates through both commerce and the appeal of Sufism, although not at the expense of other faiths and practices.¹⁰ This "open type of Islam" was considered degenerate by some conservative Muslims, who complained about easy marriages between Muslims and infidels.¹¹ Yet there was pragmatic acceptance in the region that all faiths helped to bring prosperity. For example, due to their expertise in seafaring, the Shahbandar (harbor



“It is the port where all ships from India come laden with much costly merchandise and a multitude of extremely valuable precious stones and big rare pearls.

It is also the port from where the merchants of Mangi...put out to sea...in this port there is a constant movement of such vast amounts of goods and precious stones that it is a marvelous thing to see.”

masters) in most Asian ports, including in Buddhist Siam, were often Persians or Arabs.

On India’s Malabar coast too, there was an easy coexistence among Hindu, Muslim, Christian and Jewish communities, which was encouraged by Zamorin, the Islamic ruler of Calicut, who benefited from the trade they brought. Much of that pragmatic secularism would change in the face of the Portuguese onslaught on Islamic trade. Over centuries, the Arab traders’ practice of contracting temporary marriages in each port of call led to the rise of a mixed blood community on the Mala-

NOTES

- 12 Philip D. Curtin, *Cross-Cultural Trade in World History* (Cambridge University Press, 1984): 147
- 13 Anthony Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce* (Yale University Press, 1993): 133
- 14 Alfred W. Crosby writes that the navigator who piloted Da Gama’s ship from Malindi to Calicut was a veteran Gujarati mariner, Ahmad Ibn Majid. Alfred W. Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism* (Cambridge University Press, 1986): 120

bar coast, called Mappilas. Brought up in Sunni traditions, the Mappilas took to seafaring and trade. Facing the brunt of Portuguese attempts to destroy their business by the 17th century, Mappila shipping had turned into an armed diaspora. As the historian Philip D. Curtin notes, “the new emphasis on armed trade included an ideological shift in local Muslim thought, built on the ancient belief in jihad, or struggle against disbelievers.”¹² The anti-infidel, anti-Pagan violence that accompanied the Portuguese capture of Melaka in 1511, and the Spanish capture of Manila 60 years later, introduced a period of religious confrontation and intolerance hitherto unknown in Southeast Asia. Coinciding with other factors, such as Southeast Asian Islamic countries’ direct commercial, religious and military contact with Mecca and the Ottoman Caliphate, the premier Southeast Asian historian, Anthony Reid, argues that the period sharpened “a spirit of confrontation with unbelief as aggressively represented by the Portuguese”¹³ – a spirit that affected not only the Islamic rulers of the region, but the Confucian and Buddhist rulers as well. Religious persecution, which had been an exception rather than the rule in Asia, was now more easily resorted to.

PROSPERITY BASED ON TRADE

In line with the general openness extended to all religions, Asian interests in long-distance trade also fostered tolerance and an acceptance of differences. When China’s Admiral Zheng He arrived in Calicut with his Treasure Fleet, he took on board an Indian Muslim navigator to pilot his ships to Aden, and became the first high Chinese official to make the pilgrimage to Mecca.¹⁴ Even before Zheng He’s voyage in the 14th century, Chinese traders and their distinctive high sail junks became a common sight in Indian ports from Chittagong (now in Bangla-

NOTES

15 Robert Finlay, "Portuguese and Chinese Maritime Imperialism: Camoës's *Lusiads* and Luo Maodeng's Voyage of the San Bao Eunuch," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 34, no. 2 (1992): 225-241

16 Curtin, *Cross-Cultural Trade in World History*, 132

17 Holcombe, "Trade-Buddhism," 280-292

18 Quoted by Chen Dasheng and Denys Lombard, "Foreign Merchants in Maritime Trade in Quanzhou ('Zaitun'): Thirteenth and Fourteenth centuries," Denys Lombard and Jean Aubin, eds., *Asian Merchants and Businessmen in the Indian Ocean and the China Sea* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press): 19

19 Curtin, *Cross-Cultural Trade in World History*, 130

desh) to Calicut. Three decades of voyaging by Zheng He gave a fresh impetus to the Chinese presence in the Indian Ocean.

The descendants of Chinese traders were popularly known as Chini-bachagan, Persian slang for China boys. However, by the time da Gama reached India, the Chinese had virtually withdrawn from the sea by Imperial edict. Ironically, da Gama was given permission to build a fortified trading post in Calicut at a site known as Chinacota (fortress of the Chins), where the Chinese had erected their own storehouse some 80 years earlier.¹⁵ Even to this day, the Chinese presence lingers in large scoop-like fishing nets on bamboo poles – known as 'China nets' – which line the waterfront in Calicut. Of course, it was not just the Chinese who had a presence in Calicut. With its generous policy of land grants and other privileges for foreign traders, Calicut saw large numbers of Persian, Arab, and Jewish traders settling there, making it perhaps the most important international port in the western Indian Ocean.¹⁶

China, though ever suspicious of foreigners, had from a very early period designated Guangzhou as the only port open to foreigner visitors, allowing it develop a reputation as a cosmopolitan city. Within years of the advent of Islam, Arab traders had built one of Asia's first mosques there. On his voyage to Japan to introduce Buddhist doctrine in 753, the Chinese monk Ganjin passed through Guangzhou and reported finding "unknown numbers of Indian, Persian, South Sea and other boats, laden with incense, drugs and precious things piled up like mountains." He noted that "an extremely great variety" of foreigners "come and go and reside there."¹⁷

The Chinese port of Quanzhou (known then as Zaitun or Saiton), which impressed Marco Polo and Ibn Battuta, a 14th century Moroccan traveler, was another city of international com-

merce. "It is the port," Marco Polo wrote, "where all ships from India come laden with much costly merchandise and a multitude of extremely valuable precious stones and big rare pearls. It is also the port from where the merchants of Mangi (i.e. Southern China), or at least those from the neighboring regions, put out to sea. With the result that in this port there is a constant movement of such vast amounts of goods and precious stones that it is a marvelous thing to see."¹⁸

Ibn Battuta called Zaitun "the biggest of all ports," with a hundred large junks and legions of small ones. Arab Muslims, who had arrived in China around 618, had a major presence in the city, which boasted half a dozen mosques. Hindu, Manichaeian, and Buddhist traders also lived in different quarters of the city.

Elsewhere, the entrepôt city of Melaka in the Malay peninsula was a Muslim-led but secular place. A bustling trader-friendly port, it was the 15th century's equivalent of modern day Hong Kong. In order to attract traders, the city offered neutrality between rival regional powers and low tax to all comers. As the historian Curtin notes, all of the major communities were assigned their own residential areas within the city, either individually or with related groups. The Sultan's government designated four officials to hold the title Shabander (harbor master) from among the merchant community, so that they could represent their respective groups in dealings with the government. Through the Shabander, the government offered a variety of services, including warehouse space and transportation of cargo to and from boats by elephants.¹⁹

Pragmatism also marked business. In the late Ming period, China forbade ocean voyages, but enforcement was lax. Private traders from Fujian and Guangdong set up a settlement in Spanish-controlled Manila (which had by then



started receiving silver and new products like potatoes, tobacco and chilli, among others) and created “the celebrated Manila-Macao-Nagasaki trade triangle” that vied with the older China-Melaka trade.²⁰

From the mid-16th to the mid-17th century, before the arrival of silver from the New World, Japanese silver lubricated the region’s trade machines. Late Ming rules relaxing trade with Southeast Asia offered helped turn the Vietnamese port of Hoi into a hub for Japanese traders, who, though still banned from trading with China, could buy Chinese silk and other products there. Historians estimate that despite the official Chinese ban, some 10,000 tons of silver were exported out of Japan into China to pay for silk.

The trade relationship, however, was not built solely on an economic foundation. There were also personal and political ties. In 1599, Kenki, a Japanese pirate operating along the Vietnamese coast, was captured. In a letter to the Tokugawa Shogun in 1601, the Vietnamese ruler expressed regret at having mistakenly attacked him, “not knowing that Kenki was a lawful merchant” and stating his desire to continue good relations. Tokugawa praised the Vietnamese and authorized trade by ships carrying the official red seal. When in 1604 a trader named Hunamoto Yabeji arrived as Tokugawa’s envoy, the Vietnamese emperor promptly adopted him as his son and requested that he be sent back again. Another Vietnamese emperor gave his daughter’s hand in marriage to Araki, an important Japanese businessman. Not surprisingly, of the 84 red-seal ships that visited Vietnam, 17 of them were commanded by Hunamoto and Araki.²¹ The story of how the Nguyen emperors encouraged trade with powerful and often difficult neighbors is but one example of the pragmatism that was the hallmark of Southeast Asian traders and statesmen.

NOTES

20 Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Explorations in Connected History* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press): 182

21 Li Tana, *Nguyen Cochinchina, Southern Vietnam in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Cornell University: Southeast Asia Program, 1998): 60-66

History has shown how Asians, with their tolerance and openness, easy acceptance of others, and eagerness to trade fairly and respectfully with foreigners, once created prosperity that was

As Asia strives to develop itself as a region of peace and prosperity in the modern era, it should consider using its past as a rough guide for the future.

the envy of the world. From ancient Romans to Arabs and Europeans, Asia has lured generations of outsiders. Its dealings with them, barring the painful period of colonial oppression and plunder, materially and intellectually enriched the region. As Asia strives to develop itself as a region of peace and prosperity in the modern era, it should consider using its past as a rough guide for the future.

Nayan Chanda is a member of the editorial board of *Global Asia*, editor of *YaleGlobal Online* (<http://yaleglobal.yale.edu>) and the author of the forthcoming book, *Bound Together: How Traders, Preachers, Adventurers and Warriors Shaped Globalization* (Yale University Press, Spring 2007)