

Maritime Trade in Southeast Asia during the Early Colonial Period

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Abstract

The arrival of naval expeditions in the Philippines and Melaka from Spain and Portugal respectively during the early sixteenth century CE created profound transformations in patterns of Southeast Asian maritime trade as European markets became available to Southeast Asian products and vice versa. The production and distribution of Southeast Asian natural and manufactured products intensified in response to increased supply and demand. This subsequently led to the discovery of raw material sources and production centres as well as the emergence and development of maritime polities that serve as ports of call by various types of watercraft vessels. This paper will present the archaeological excavation results of sixteenth century shipwrecks in Malaysia (Xuande and Wanli), the Philippines (San Isidro and Royal Captain junk) and Thailand (KoSamui and KoKradat) in an attempt to analyse maritime trade patterns as the Southeast Asian region transitioned from its previous intraregional-focus on maritime trade to participants of the global trade economy.

Keywords: Shipwrecks, Southeast Asia, Maritime trade, Philippines, Malaysia, Thailand

Introduction

The Southeast Asian region played an important role in the development of global maritime economy in the sixteenth century. Anthony Reid's thesis on the 'Age of Commerce' highlighted the economic prosperity in Europe, the eastern Mediterranean,

China, Japan and perhaps India from the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries (Reid, 1988, 1990, 1993). The 'long sixteenth century,' Wallerstein (2004) noted, is the period 'during which our modern world-system came into existence as a capitalist world-economy.' The *raison d'etre* for this commercial boom was largely the demand for spices (pepper, cloves, nutmeg, and camphor) and other exotic marine and forest products in India and Southeast Asia (Reid, 1980, 1993). Although the spice trade intensified in the fifteenth century, the arrival of the Europeans in Southeast Asia created new market opportunities and reoriented maritime network circuits as the region accommodated the new players in addition to the Southeast Asian, Chinese, and Indian Ocean merchants (Reid, 1980). This led to the emergence of insular and mainland Southeast Asian-controlled trade centres such as Aceh, Banten, Makassar, Demak, Gresik, Surabaya, and Hoi An that catered mostly to international seaborne trade (Reid, 1989, 1999; Lockard, 2010). The Europeans later established their own port cities, with the Portuguese in Melaka and the Spanish in Manila and, a century later, the Dutch in Batavia (Doeppers, 1972; Andaya, 1992; Thomaz, 1993). Reid (1993: 23) summarised the range and diversity of exchanged trade commodities in Southeast Asia: "The pattern of exchange in this age of commerce was for Southeast Asia to import cloth from India, silver from the Americas and Japan and copper-cash, silks, ceramics and other manufactures from China, in exchange for its exports of pepper, spices, aromatic woods, resins, lacquer, tortoise shell, pearls, deerskin, and the sugar exported by Vietnam and Cambodia". For non-Southeast Asian traders, Indian cloth and silver were crucial commodities as these are what Southeast Asians wanted in exchange for spices and other natural and manufactured products (Lieberman, 2009).

The Southeast Asian Scene in the Sixteenth Century

At the beginning of the sixteenth century, Ayutthaya and Melaka became dominant trade centres in Southeast Asia (Reid, 1999; Andaya and Andaya, 2001; Lockard, 2010). Melaka underwent a difficult transition as the Portuguese takeover in 1511 caused the exodus of Malay rulers and maritime trade was diverted to other areas. The Muslim traders who felt the discriminatory policies of the Christian Portuguese opted to dispatch their goods at Brunei, Johor, Aceh, Patani and Perak (Reid, 1989; Lieberman, 2009). The setback in the Indonesian archipelago was, however, compensated with the

establishment of a trading concession in Macau in 1557 that led to the Portuguese being the sole carrier of the China and Japan trade that exchanged Chinese silk and gold with Japanese silver bullion (Boxer, 1953). Ayutthaya benefited from Melaka's difficulties in the early part of the century and became the focus for the China, Southeast Asia and Muslim trade (Reid, 1995; Lockard, 2010). The kingdom's expansionist ambitions led to war with the Toungoo rulers of Burma who seized and destroyed the Thai capital in 1569, transferring the lucrative China trade to Cambodia (Wade, 2000). Meanwhile China, incognizance of the ineffective implementation of the previous overseas trade restrictions during the early Ming period, officially lifted its maritime ban in 1567 and opened the Yuegang ports in Fujian to foreign trade (Lockard, 2010). In its early stages, "fifty junks per year were licensed to trade at first, but this figure grew to 88 by 1589 and to 117 by 1597" (Reid, 1993: 18). Majority of the Chinese trading vessels were destined to Southeast Asian markets¹.

When the civil wars in Japan came to an end in the middle sixteenth century the Japanese opened its ports to international trade (Andaya, 1992). The Japanese merchants sailed into Southeast Asian waters using the Red Seal permit with accompanying letters and gifts from the shogun. The foreign enterprise was, however, short lived as the ports were closed again in 1635 due to the Tokugawa government's restrictive overseas policy although the Japanese-Siam trade remained open and continued until the eighteenth century (Lieberman, 2009).

The Entry of the Europeans

The Portuguese appearance in Melaka and the Spanish in the Philippines in the early sixteenth century was a consequence of European territorial, economic and religious ambitions in Southeast Asia (Dixon, 1991). Both countries were primarily driven by the desire to acquire Southeast Asian spices and other natural and manufactured produce that were in growing demand in Europe (Boxer, 1953; Phelan, 1959). The Portuguese reached Southeast Asia via the western route through the Cape of Good Hope and India, establishing trading outposts along the way. By 1511, Afonso de Albuquerque captured Melaka, Southeast Asia's premier city in the 15th century in order to take control of Southeast Asia's maritime trade (Boxer, 1953; Hall, 2004; Lieberman, 2009). By the middle sixteenth century, Andaya (1992: 355) notes, "Portuguese trade had to all

intents and purposes become a part of the Asian system". Melaka continued its role as a trade entrepôt under Portuguese authority for more than a century albeit in gradually declining capacity before the Dutch successfully seized the city in 1641 (Dixon, 1991). Spain's arrival in the Philippines in 1521 was an extension of its colonial policies that began in the Americas in the fifteenth century (Phelan, 1959). After initial occupations in Cebu and Panay, Miguel Lopez de Legazpi finally settled in Manila in the late sixteenth century (Doeppers, 1972; Reed, 1979). Manila became the commercial centre of the world in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries due primarily to the galleon trade that linked the trading commodities of the east and west (Schurz, 1985; Fish, 2011). The galleon trade would run for 300 years, from 1565 to 1815. The Chinese demand for American silver from the trade brought Chinese merchants to Manila to trade silk, porcelain and other manufactured merchandise in exchange for the precious metal (Phelan, 1959; Andaya, 1992). This is evidenced by the large number of Chinese junk licenses (wen-yin) to Manila during the period 1589 and 1592 (Reid, 1995). Japanese merchants also sailed to Manila to exchange their silver for Chinese silk and Southeast Asian spices and bulk foods. Other Southeast Asian port cities brought spices and other natural and manufactured produce to Manila in exchange for Chinese, Japanese and American commodities.

The Shipwrecks

The proliferation of port cities meant new shipping routes and shipping destinations. It is also logical to assume that the number of ships increased in direct proportion to the greater demand of foodstuffs, staples and merchandise. Below are the ships that were excavated in Southeast Asian waters dated to the sixteenth century (Brown, 2009):

The San Isidro

The San Isidro wreck was found in 1996 during an underwater survey approximately nine km from the shore of San Isidro, Cabangan, Zambales (Goddio, 1997; Dizon and Orillaneda; 2002). Subsequent excavation of the site in the same year revealed a shipwreck with predominantly Chinese ceramic cargo. The Chinese ceramics were predominantly blue and white porcelains of the Zhangzhou ware type, otherwise known as "Swatow" wares that were dated to the early sixteenth century, during the reign of

Chinese emperor Zhengde (1506 - 1521 CE) (Goddio, 1997; Tan et al., 2007). The other ceramic wares were two stoneware jarlets from the Sisatchanalai kilns in Thailand and a blue and white box possibly from the Chu Dau kilns of Vietnam. Other artefacts included iron bars that may have been used as ballast, iron-cooking cauldrons, a knife, betel nuts that were found in a small jar, a coconut a sap of the *Agathisphilippinensis* Warb or almaciga tree used for caulking.

Initial measurements of the timber remains estimated that the length of the ship could be 15 m and 'clinker' ship construction type, with the planks connected with ropes made from plant fibers (Goddio, 1997). Much of the hull was constructed using material commonly found in the Philippines. Analysis of the hull structure and the wood composition indicated that the San Isidro ship may have been a local boat used to transport trading commodities from bigger trading ships to land-based merchants and equipped with sails, no outriggers and similar to the indigenous Garay, Parao and Barangay Philippine boats (Santiago, 1997; Tan et al., 2007).

The Xuande

The Xuande site was found in 1996 between the coasts of Malaysia and Pulau Tionam (Brown and Sjostrand, 2002; Sjostrand et al., 2006). Chinese blue and white porcelains and monochrome white-glazed wares were found, as well as Thai ceramics from the Sisatchanalai kilns and the Sukhothai kilns (Sjostrand et al., 2006). Other finds include bracelets and glass beads that were found inside a stoneware jar. It is notable that no shipwreck remains were found despite deeply probing the seabed and sub bottom profiling. This could be due to the soft wood composition of the vessel (Brown and Sjostrand, 2002). The cargo mound, however, formed on the outlines of a ship that led to estimation that the shipwreck could have measured 28 m long and 8 m wide. The initial fifteenth century date of the site based on the Xuande reign marks turned out to be misleading (Brown, 2009). The presence of sixteenth century blue and white ceramics along with two bronze cannons that could not have been manufactured earlier than 1520 CE revealed that the shipwreck was 100 years later than previously assumed (Brown and Sjostrand, 2002; Sjostrand et al., 2006). The porcelains with Xuande reign inscriptions were actually copies made by potters who worked during the reigns of later

Chinese emperors, most probably during the Zhengde (1506 - 1521 AD) and Jiajing (1521 – 1567 AD) reigns (Brown, 2009).

KoKradat

This shipwreck was discovered in 1977 by a Thai-Danish team and excavated in 1979 and 1980 as part of a training course in maritime archaeology sponsored by the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization Project in Archaeology and Fine Arts (SEAMEO-SPAFA) (Green et al., 1981; Prishanchit, 1996). The site lies near KoKradat Island, Trat Province, southeast Thailand (Green et al., 1981). The ship remains comprised fragments of the lower hull, its planks edge-joined by wooden dowels, indicating Southeast Asian shipbuilding construction (Green et al., 1987). The wood was also identified as of the genus *Terminalia* found in Africa and Southeast Asia (Prishanchit, 1996). Approximately 35 tons of ballast stones were found scattered around the site. The majority of the recovered artifacts comprised of Thai stone wares from the Sisatchanalai kilns and earthen wares from possibly Thai kilns, as well as different types of Chinese blue and white porcelains. Based on the stylistic analysis of the ceramic cargo, the shipwreck was dated to the mid-sixteenth century (Brown, 2009). After examination of the circumstances of the wreck and its cargo, Green (1981:42) concluded that 'the vessel may have been carrying an additional light cargo, or, she was returning home in ballast, with a small proportion of her cargo unsold, or undischarged'. The site was deemed significant as it showed the association of Sisatchanalai wares with Chinese blue and white materials, indicating the continued operation of the Thai kilns well into the sixteenth century (Green et al., 1987).

KoSamui

The KoSamui shipwreck was excavated by the Thai Fine Arts Department in 1984 off the shores of SuratThani (Intakosi, 1984). The wreck contained mostly earthenware pots, lids, stove, kendi, from local Thai kilns as well as small and large stoneware jars and celadon bowls, plates, bottles and jarlets from the Sisatchanalai kilns (Green et al., 1987). A few pieces of Chinese blue and white wares were also recovered. Similar large storage jars were also found in other 15th and 16th centuries shipwrecks in Thailand such as the Pattaya, Ko Si Chang III, and KoKhram. The meagre amount of large

Sisatchanalai jars were found in the shipwreck, indicating that these were utility wares and not used for trade. Storage jars from the Mae Nam Noi kiln site in Singburi Province were also recovered (Charoenwongsa and Praicharnjit, 1990). The ship was reported to be double planked and without a keel.

The Wanli

A fisherman accidentally discovered the site in 1997 approximately six nautical miles off Tanjong Jara, in the state of Terengganu, on the east coast of Malaysia (Sjostrand et al., 2006; Sjostrand and Idrus, 2007). Exploration and cargo recovery in 2004 revealed a site extensively damaged by fishing trawlers and as high as 90% of the ceramics have been damaged (Sjostrand et al., 2006). The blue and white ceramic pieces were of the 'Kraak' type wares, manufactured in the kilns of Jingdezhen. Other artefacts included two iron cannons, various bronze and brass objects, a sounding lead, and tons of ballast stones (Sjostrand and Idrus, 2007). The parts of the wooden ship found appeared to be joined by iron nails (Sjostrand and Idrus, 2007). Based on the measurements, the ship was approximately 18 m long and 6 m wide and constructed with a ribbed framework, suggesting a European style of shipbuilding. However, the wood used was a tropical type most frequently found in the Philippines and India. It appeared that this is a European type vessel that had been built in South-East Asia or India and had later additional 'sacrificial' planks added in China to compensate for woodworm damage (Sjostrand et al., 2006). Sjostrand (2006) surmised that the ship belonged to a Portuguese merchant based in Macao and may have been used on the Estado de India route that serviced the Macao, Melaka, Goa and Manila route and may have carried the whole range of Chinese ceramics that were traded during the period. It is believed that the Kraak wares were primarily destined for Europe; while others could be traded in local South-East Asian markets.

The Royal Captain Junk

The Royal Captain junk, found in 1985, was located west of Palawan Island in the Philippines (Alba, 1988; Goddio, 1988). A wide range of ceramic wares, predominantly blue and white porcelain wares of various shapes, sizes and decoration was recovered along with stoneware jars, coloured glass beads, bronze gongs, iron bars, copper

bracelets, and other metal objects. Goddio (1988: 115) concluded that “(the style of the ceramic wares) very clearly points to the Wan Li Period (1573 - 1620 AD)”. The nature of the recovered material evidence indicated the Royal Shoal junk to be an Asian vessel despite the very meagre wooden remains. Its small size meant it travelled shorter distances, possibly from Borneo to Manila, carrying trade goods in exchange for other in demand merchandise back to its home port (Goddio, 1988).

Conclusion

The study of shipwrecks and its associated cargo is just a part, albeit an important one, in untangling the complex and multi-layered maritime trade of sixteenth century Southeast Asian maritime trade. Based on the shipwreck material evidence, two general themes are examined:

The ships

The ships enumerated in this paper are of a wide range of type, size and construction. The information gathered from documents is insufficient to generate conclusive statements about vessel types and destinations but some information can be gleaned from them. The San Isidro, KoKradat and KoSamui wrecks appears to be examples of local, coastal traders that engaged in commercial activities within their immediate sphere. The San Isidro ship may have transported merchandise from bigger junks to local ports and carried out local trade between small ports and polities within the Philippines. The KoSamui ship was reportedly double-planked with no keel, an indication that the vessel is not built for long-distance, ocean-going voyage, as keels are needed to survive in a more hostile open sea environment. The KoKradat, meanwhile, is constructed using the local Southeast Asian tradition as evidenced by the use of wooden dowels in edge-joining the planks. Both the KoSamui and the KoKradat also carried predominantly local Thai ceramic wares. The Wanli, on the other hand, was constructed with a ribbed framework; a diagnostic European style of shipbuilding built for long distance trade. Sjostrand (2006, 2007) posited that the vessel serviced the Macao, Melaka, Goa and Manila route. The Royal captain junk and the Xuande did not yield any wooden vestiges due to various reasons. It is speculated that the Xuande was constructed using soft wood that deteriorated over time while the Royal Captain timber

remains also deteriorated and widely dispersed as it sits on top of a shallow reef and exposed to natural elements.

The cargo

Although historical documents emphasise the importance of spices as the primary driving force of the global maritime economy, the enumerated shipwrecks also show other types of artifacts that have been circulated and exchanged throughout Southeast Asia. Ceramic wares, mostly porcelain and stone wares from China seemed to be an important trading commodity as all the ships contained significant amounts in its holds. This gives tangible evidence of the re-exportation of these wares for Southeast Asian markets and beyond. From the late fourteenth century and most of the fifteenth century, these wares were largely absent outside China when the country restricted overseas trade and economic exchange can only be carried out through official and diplomatic foreign missions. The European demand for Chinese ceramics is also apparent in the Wanli shipwreck that carried porcelains made for the European market. There are also significant amounts of Thai stone wares but are mostly storage jars that contain liquids, foodstuffs and spices except for the Thai ceramics found in the KoSamui with Sisatchanalai celadon bowls, plates, bottles and jarlets and the Xuande that consisted of jarlets from Sisatchanalai and bowls from Sukhothai kilns that may be for trade. The presence of the Thai wares in sixteenth century shipwrecks also meant that some Thai kilns were still in operation during this century. The Wanli shipwreck on the other hand, carried predominantly Chinese blue and white porcelains destined for Europe that, at this time, was in great demand for Chinese ceramics. Iron bars were also found in the lower hulls of most ships as paying ballast and are used to manufacture other metal objects. Other items of trade included copper bracelets, glass beads and bronze gongs.

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Endnote

Reid (1993:19) further noted: “roughly half the Chinese junks in 1589 were licensed for the “Southern Seas”—the Philippines and Borneo. Spanish-controlled Manila was an important destination due to the galleon trade that brought American silver that the Chinese highly desired (Andaya, 1992). Of the half licensed for the “western seas,” the principal destinations were west Java (8), Cochin-China (8), southern Sumatra (7), Siam (4), Cambodia (3), and Champa (3). Japanese merchants began engaging in maritime trade in the fifteenth century, bringing silver to Chinese and Southeast Asian markets (Lockard, 2010).

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Biography

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