Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce 1450–1680

Volume One
The Lands below the Winds

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Introduction: The Lands below the Winds

Most of “Below the Winds” enjoys a continual spring season...

As is always the case in “Below the Winds,” the posts which exist are not based on any power and authority. Everything is simply a show... The natives reckon high rank and wealth by the quantity of slaves a person owns.

—Ibrahim 1688: 174–77

Southeast Asia as a Physical Unit

Few major areas of the world have been so spectacularly demarcated by nature as has Southeast Asia. Apparently formed by the pushing together of the Pacific and Indian ocean plates, its southern rim is a massive geological arc, or rather series of arcs, pushed up by the advancing Indian Ocean plate. Most obvious is the volcanic arc formed by the Sunda Islands of Sumatra, Java, Bali, Lombok, and Sumbawa; but outside these is another largely submerged arc, showing itself only in the chain west of Sumatra, with a characteristic deep trench beyond it. On the eastern perimeter another such spectacular arc of volcanic activity is formed by the Philippines, again with a deep trench lying outside it where the Pacific plate appears to be folding down as it expands. The northern boundary of Southeast Asia is formed by the almost impenetrable mountain complex of the eastern Himalayas, where the region’s greatest rivers begin.

Within these boundaries lies what paleogeographers know as Sundaland, and marine geographers as the Sunda Shelf, the shallow waters from the Gulf of Siam to the Java Sea. As recently as fifteen thousand years ago water levels were two hundred metres lower and this whole shelf was a land mass uniting Sumatra, Java, Bali, and Borneo to the Asian mainland. The dominant flora and fauna of the region made their way to these larger islands prior to their separation from the
Mainland. Even now, when submerged, the Sunda Shelf plays a central role for the people of the region as one of the world's most abundant fishing grounds.

Water and forest are the dominant elements in the environment of Southeast Asia. Though very difficult of access by land, the region is everywhere penetrated by waterways. Thus on the one hand it has been relatively free from the mass migrations and invasions from Central Asia which affected India and China, while on the other it has always been open to seaborne traders, adventurers, and propagandists in more moderate numbers. Not only were the sea-lanes ubiquitous; they were also remarkably kind to seamen. Winds were moderate and predictable, with the monsoon blowing from the west or south in May–August and from the northwest or northeast in December–March. Except in the typhoon belt at the eastern periphery of the region, storms were not a major hazard to mariners, who on the whole had more to fear from swift currents in certain channels. Water temperature was uniform, with the result that vessels which could not survive a voyage to Europe or Japan could operate successfully for years in Southeast Asian waters. All of these factors made the Mediterranean sea of Southeast Asia more hospitable and inviting a meeting place and thoroughfare than that deeper and stormier Mediterranean in the West. Add to this the abundance of wood at the water's edge, suitable for boat building, again in sharp contrast with the Mediterranean during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries [Braudel 1966: 140–43], and we have a region uniquely favourable to maritime activity. A boat was a normal part of household equipment.

The other element, forest, owes its dominance not to the soils, which share the relative poverty of most tropical regions, but to the reliably high temperatures and rainfalls. Southeast Asia benefits at once from average year-round temperatures as high as any in the world and from higher overall rainfall than any other region of comparable size [Fisher 1966: 41–42]. Except at the southeastern and northern extremities of the region (the Lesser Sunda Islands and northern Indochina and Thailand), where there is a marked dry season, rainfall is dependable throughout the year, providing a luxuriant cover of evergreen rain forest. Although a large proportion of the trees are dipterocarps, the Southeast Asian forest presents "an abundance and diversity of forms which are without parallel anywhere else in the world" [ibid.:43], including many economically valuable species. Even today, industrialization and a twentyfold increase in population have not succeeded in taming this forest as sixteenth-century Europe or China had done theirs. Four centuries ago the areas of permanent cultivation were but tiny pockets in an otherwise forested region. More widespread was the exploitation of the regenerative powers of the forest itself through shifting cultivation and the collection of forest products. Even the largest urban centres appear to have enjoyed such an abundance of wood, bamboo, and palm as building materials that these are never recorded as significant items of expenditure or maritime trade. On the edge of such cities and agricultural pockets the forest remained, a common resource and a common danger—home to bandits as to tigers, elephants, and game.

Southeast Asia as a Human Unit

The bewildering variety of language, culture, and religion in Southeast Asia, together with its historic openness to waterborne commerce from outside the region, appear at first glance to defy any attempts at generalizations. Yet as our attention shifts from court politics and religious "great traditions" to the popular beliefs and social practices of ordinary Southeast Asians, the common ground becomes increasingly apparent.

For rather more than half of the people with whom we are dealing—those speaking the closely related Austronesian languages which then covered what are now called the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia except its easternmost extremity, and southeastern Vietnam [the Cham group]—this can be partly explained by common ancestry [see map 1]. These languages are thought to have sprung from a common parent [proto-Austronesian] about five thousand years ago, with the more widely spoken languages diverging much more recently than that. The Mon-Khmer group of languages still spoken in Pengu and Cambodia in historic times had previously been even more widespread in at least mainland Southeast Asia. The tones which Vietnamese and the Tai group [Thai, Shan, Lao, and others] share with Chinese once caused linguists to classify these languages as Sino-Tibetan, but recent work [Haudricourt 1953, 1954] has established that Vietnamese is an Austro-Asiatic language related to Mon-Khmer, and that its tones have developed relatively recently. Benedict's attempts [1942, 1975] to show that the Tai family belongs with Austronesian in an Austro-Thai group have been less widely accepted. It seems increasingly probable that the numerous common elements in all Southeast Asian language families should be explained in terms of intensive interaction between the southward-moving speakers of Vietnamese, Tai, and Burmese languages on the one hand and the longer established Mon-Khmer and Austronesian speakers on the
other. This same borrowing from longer-established Mons, Khmers, and Chams must explain many other sociocultural similarities between the relatively recent migrants and other Southeast Asians.

Two other factors have given this region a common character. The first is adaptation to a common physical environment; the second, a high degree of commercial intercourse within the region.

The common environment was responsible for a diet derived overwhelmingly from rice, fish, and various palms. Southeast Asia has no substantial grasslands, no pastoral tradition, and therefore a very limited intake of animal proteins. Rice is probably indigenous to Southeast Asia and has been from millennia the basic staple of the great majority of its people. In areas as far dispersed as Luzon, Sulawesi, Java, Sumatra, and parts of Siam and Vietnam, harvesting was done by women using not a sickle but a characteristic Southeast Asian finger-knife, which honoured the rice-spirit by cutting only one stalk at a time.

The dominance of rice and fish in the diet, and the small part played by meat and milk products, was characteristically Southeast Asian. So were the half-fermented fish paste which provided the major garnish to the rice, and the palm wine which constituted the favourite beverage. Palm trees provided much of the flavour of Southeast Asian diets, as of life-styles. In a few areas the sago palm was the staple source of starch, but everywhere coconut and sugar palms provided sugar and palm wine, as well as the fruit itself. The areca palm, probably also native to the region, furnished the vital ingredient of betel, which was throughout Southeast Asia not only the universal stimulant but also a vital element in social relations and ritual transactions.

The predominance of forest and water over a relatively thinly peopled region accounts for much else in the life-styles of Southeast Asians. Wood, palm, and bamboo were the favoured building materials, seemingly inexhaustibly provided by the surrounding forest. By preference Southeast Asians lived in houses elevated on poles, whether on the coastal plains, as a precaution against the annual floods, or in the most remote highland villages, where security against human and animal predators may have been the major motive. Much of the characteristic architecture, domestic pattern, and even sociopolitical structure characteristic of Southeast Asia can be derived from the ease of building and rebuilding such elevated wood-and-thatch houses.

Not all the common features of Southeast Asia, however, can be explained by a common environment. The universality of betel chew-
ing cannot have derived from similar spontaneous responses to the existence of areca palm in the region, since the three ingredients of areca, betel leaf, and lime have to be brought together in a complicated operation before the desired effects are experienced. Similarly, the dispersal of the finger-knife, the piston bellows, and such characteristic sports as cockfighting and takraw (kicking a basketwork ball in the air), of musical patterns dominated by the bronze gong, or of similar patterns of body decoration and of classification has little to do with the environment. Fundamental social and cultural traits distinguish Southeast Asia as a whole from either of its vast neighbours—China and India. Central among these are the concept of spirit or “soul-stuff” animating living things; the prominence of women in descent, ritual matters, marketing, and agriculture; and the importance of debt as a determinant of social obligation.

Whether such common phenomena should be explained by prehistoric migration patterns or by continuing commercial and political contacts lies beyond this study. What I wish to stress here is that maritime intercourse continued to link the peoples of Southeast Asia more tightly to one another than to outside influences down to the seventeenth century. The fact that Chinese and Indian influences came to most of the region by maritime trade, not by conquest or colonization, appeared to ensure that Southeast Asia retained its distinctiveness even while borrowing numerous elements from these larger centres. What did not happen (with the partial exception of Vietnam) was that any part of the region established closer relations with China or India than with its neighbours in Southeast Asia. The Chinese continued to see Southeast Asia (minus the special case of Vietnam) as a whole—“the Southern Ocean” [Nanyang]. Indians, Persians, Arabs, and Malays named the region “the lands below the winds” because of the seasonal monsoons which carried shipping to it across the Indian Ocean. Both terms stress the fact that it had to be reached by sea, by a journey substantially more difficult than that which Southeast Asians themselves required to reach such central marketing points as Sri Vijaya, Melaka, or Banten. As one observer noted about 1600, speaking primarily of the Archipelago, “these people are constrained to keep up constant intercourse with one another, the one supplying what the other needs” [Pyrrard 1619 II: 169]. Until the trade revolution of the seventeenth century, when the Dutch East India Company established an astonishingly regular and intensive shipping network to take a large share of the region’s export produce around the Cape of Good Hope, coinciding with an increase in Chinese shipping to the Nanyang, the trading links within the region continued to be more influential than those beyond it.

The period which I have designated “the age of commerce,” from the fifteenth to the seventeenth century, was one in which these maritime links were particularly active. I will argue that the interconnected maritime cities of the region were more dominant in this period than either before or since. The most important central entrepôts had, moreover, for some time been Malay-speaking—first Sri Vijaya and then its successors, Pasai, Melaka, Johor, Patani, Aceh, and Brunei. The Malay language thereby became the main language of trade throughout Southeast Asia. The cosmopolitan trading class of many of Southeast Asia’s major trading cities came to be classified as Malays because they spoke that language (and professed Islam), even when their forebears may have been Javanese, Mon, Indian, Chinese, or Filipinos. It was possible for Magellan’s Sumatran slave to be immediately understood when he spoke to the people of the Central Philippines in 1521 [Pigafetta 1524: 136–37], and almost two centuries later for Dampier’s Englishmen to learn Malay in Mindanao [southern Philippines] and use it again at Poulo Condore, off southern Vietnam [Dampier 1697: 268]. It was during this period that hundreds of Malay words in commercial, technological, and other fields passed into Tagalog [Wolf 1976], that the major trading centres of Cambodia came to be known by the Malay-derived term kompong, and that the Vietnamese adopted such words as cù-lao (from Malay pulau, for island). Similarly, Malay words such as amok, godang [storehouse], perahu [boat], and kris were noted by Europeans in Pegu and even in the Malabar coast of India, as if they were local words [Bausani 1970: 95–96]. At least those who dealt with matters of trade and commerce in the major ports had to speak Malay as well as their own language.

In defining any region there are peripheral zones whose position is problematic. In the first place, I am consciously defining a maritime region linked by waterborne traffic, so that the hill peoples of the northern mainland will not play a large part in my story, even though many of them were linked by culture with the Thai of the coast and the central plain. At the opposite extremity of the region, I am inclined to draw a boundary between Maluku [the Moluccas] and New Guinea, across which the level of maritime exchange and cultural similarity (although it cannot be ignored) becomes of a much lower order than that which linked Maluku with the islands to the west and north.

Vietnam, incontestably a major actor in Southeast Asia as we define it today, presents much more of a problem. Here alone I cannot
say with confidence that the common Southeast Asian elements outweighed the factors which linked Vietnam to China, and particularly to the southermmost provinces of China. In their diet and many of their pleasures—betel chewing, cockfighting, a type of takraw—the Vietnamese clearly shared in a common Southeast Asian culture, as indeed did some of their neighbours in South China. Their women were markedly freer, their manufacturing less developed, than was the case in China. Yet the political and intellectual life of Vietnam, and even such basic habits as the manner of eating [with chopsticks], had already borrowed deeply from China by the fifteenth century. Moreover, the population of the Red River delta was already closer to China's dense pattern than Southeast Asia's dispersed one. This may have been the reason why Vietnamese abandoned at some time in the first millennium A.D. the Southeast Asian pole house, just as the Javanese and Balinese were to do as their populations increased several centuries later. It was too demanding of wood.

Cambodia and Champa, which shared the southern half of the Indochina peninsula until the fifteenth century, were unquestionably Southeast Asian in commercial orientation and culture. Vietnamese expansion at their expense, which was very rapid during the period we are considering, was a two-way process, in which the conquering Vietnamese by no means obliterated the existing culture in the south. Until the eighteenth century, central and south Vietnam (then the Nguyen-ruled kingdom known to Europeans as Cochin-China—see map 2) continued, for example, to prefer the elevated style of Southeast Asian pole house [Borri 1633 III: D; La Bissachère 1812 I: 246]. Although the southern Vietnamese state was somewhat more closely bound in commerce as in culture to the rest of Southeast Asia than was its northern Trinh-ruled rival, it would be absurd to draw a line between the two. Both were essentially Vietnamese, and both looked to China as a cultural model. Although the Vietnamese appear to have traded with the south in the twelfth to fifteenth centuries, at least to judge from the dispersion of "Annamese" ceramics, they did not do so in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: "They do not sail to Malacca, but to China and to Champa" [Pires 1515: 174; cf. Dampier 1699: 46; La Bissachère 1812 I: 212–19].

In short, the role of Vietnam is as a frontier between Southeast Asia and China, and a critical one. Had Vietnam not learned so well the lessons of Chinese bureaucratic and military practice, and fought so hard to maintain its equality and independence from the Middle Kingdom, Chinese political influence would certainly have spread
further south, using land as well as sea routes. As it was, Vietnam forced the Chinese to reach the Nanyang only by sea, and almost exclusively as peaceful traders. In some important respects Vietnam will appear as part of the Southeast Asian maritime world. In most it will not.

2

Physical Well-Being

Historians have an understandable reluctance to draw statistics of misleading exactness from the extremely unsatisfactory sources with which we have to deal in precolonial Southeast Asia. Yet without some degree of quantification it is impossible to compare one period or one region with another, or to relate the Southeast Asian data to the increasingly sophisticated social history of such better-studied regions as Europe and China. The hazards of conjuring a specific figure out of partial and contradictory evidence are great, and the margin of error relatively high. Yet the problems of premodern European social historians are different in degree rather than character [they have more contradictory sources to handle], and no one would now question the advances that have been made after hesitant beginnings there. After cautioning the reader against giving any absolute value to the figures which follow, therefore, I will begin with the most important and perhaps the most difficult problem of quantification—that of population.

Population

Java, Siam, Burma, and Vietnam all had a tradition of counting households within their kingdoms for purposes of taxation and manpower mobilization. "The Siamese," La Loubère asserted [1691: 11], "keep an exact account of the Men, Women and Children... in this