



Book Review

The Southeast Asia Connection: Trade and Politics. Sing C. Chew. 2018. NY, New York: Berghahn. 188 pages, ISBN 978-1-7853-3788-8. Cloth (\$120.00)

Reviewed by E.N. Anderson

University of California, Riverside

gene@ucr.edu

Southeast Asia has suffered a partial eclipse in world historiography. It has often been regarded as more or less a space keeper between the great powers of India and China, with its culture derived from a mix of theirs—the “Indo-China” of our schooldays. Perceptive historians, from Paul Wheatley and O. W. Wolters to Victor Lieberman and Ben Kiernan, have always realized this was an inadequate view. Now Sing Chew, noted for his previous research on dark ages in world perspective, has surveyed and summarized a huge literature to show that Southeast Asia has been a significant region in world history for over 2,000 years. Southeast Asian polities have been creative, original, and dynamic. They have changed history—perhaps more modestly than India or China, but still significantly.

To do this, Chew has used a world-systems perspective, looking at the world economy of the time, focusing on trade, commerce, and resulting dynamics within and between polities. Southeast Asia did indeed obtain much of its elite culture from India and China, but that was part of a broader and deeper relationship involving widespread trade, with Southeast Asia a major provider of commodities, most from the farms, forests, and mines of the region.



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The book is divided into three main sections: “the networks,” “the economy,” and “the polities.” These summarize the geography of the sea routes and land masses, the goods that flowed along the routes, and the rise of states from Bronze Age cultures within the Southeast Asian world.

The ‘maritime silk roads’– the Indian Ocean and Arabian-to-Mediterranean trade routes connecting China, Southeast Asia, India, and the west – have become a major topic for research in the last few years, with whole new book series appearing. The basic maritime silk road was established by 200 AD, running from China to new cities in what is now southern Vietnam and Cambodia, thence to Malayan centers, across to India, and from there to the western world. The author Chew draws heavily on Roman and Greek documents and on what is translated of the Chinese literature to trace out the routes involved. One problem with giving Southeast Asia due credit is that detailed written sources from the 500 BC-AD 500 period do not exist. We must rely on outsiders, and on later documentation that can be projected backward with the help of archaeological finds.

These sources show a considerable amount of trade. Southeast Asia was most famous for its spices (as it still is), including not only black pepper but long pepper (now widely supplanted by chile) and cubeb pepper, as well as cloves, cinnamon, cassia, ginger, turmeric, cardamoms of several species, and many more. These were, and most still are, medicinal as well as tasty, and other purely medicinal commodities were shipped with them, often called by the same general term we now translate as ‘spices.’ Incense woods, timber, metals, gems, and agricultural specialties such as coconuts were exported in massive quantities. The Roman Empire imported so much that its sages launched grim warnings about the balance of payments. J. Miller’s insightful early work is cited, along with the dramatic confirmation by recent excavations in the port of Berenike (Egypt) and elsewhere. Now a lifeless desert wash, during the Roman Empire Berenike was a huge harbor with slips for 200-foot craft. In this and other cameos, the author describes the whole trade system to which Southeast Asia was geographically central and economically important. Chew sensibly feels under no constraint to stay within his set time limits. He continues his discussion of important matters, such as trade, to take into account the medieval period.

Especially in the section on polities, Chew chronicles the rise of major cities from impressive Bronze Age settlements with their own advanced technology. Urban life in ancient times was spotty in Southeast Asia, but refined and complex where it existed, with fine architecture. Soon afterward, it grew to the great medieval cultures of Angkor, many cities in Vietnam, Java’s Borobudur, Pagan in Myanmar, and other centers. Problems of understanding these transitions, given the shaky documentation of many of them, are addressed.

Chew uses world-systems theory to interpret the rise of civilizations in the region. He calls the Roman Empire-to-East Asia trade pipeline the first Eurasian world system. Southeast Asia began as a periphery, supplying raw materials and little else to the Indian and Chinese cores. It

rose to more central status. Not long after 500 AD, the Khmer, Srivijayan, and Burmese states reached core status within their local but rich and varied worlds. The Chinese considered them 'tributary,' but traded with them as de facto equals (when not trying to conquer them). Srivijaya, ancestor of modern Indonesia, probably most clearly deserves the title of core polity, serving as metropole to an extensive realm. The role of climate and climate change is addressed, including the sharp cooling and drying trend that affected much of Eurasia after 200 and especially after 500 AD. Chew sees an evolution from very local societies to world traders increasingly enmeshed in a vast network, supplying increasingly important and valuable commodities to places thousands of miles away. Much of the critical evolution took place during the period of this book, and indeed Southeast Asia today still profits by exporting spices, precious woods, and minerals, and by throughput trade.

World-systems theory has the great advantage of foregrounding trade, and trade relations, in understanding the rise and dynamics of states and cities. Previous studies of Southeast Asia have tended to focus on military or cultural dynamics, though such pioneers as Anthony Reid and K. N. Chaudhuri were notable exceptions, their work being ancestral in spirit to the present book. The world-systems approach seems sure to find its way to greater importance, given the new emphasis on the maritime silk roads.

The book has a few limitations. It draws almost exclusively on English-language materials. It is sometimes repetitious; the map on page 45 is reprinted with a different caption on page 48. However, these minor problems do not detract from a major work that reviews the complex cultures of a little-known region in the light of modern social theory. The book is a valuable guide to available knowledge, especially recent findings on archaeology, environment, and trade.