

Southeast Asia in World History

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Between 250 BCE-200 CE China and India began exercising a stronger influence; China even colonized Vietnam in the 2nd century BCE, ruling for the next thousand years. Some scholars see these contacts as a generator of state building, others as a response to it. Indian traders and priests began regularly traveling the oceanic trade routes, some of them settling in mainland and island states. They brought with them Indian concepts of religion, government, and the arts. At the same time, Southeast Asian sailors were visiting India and returning with new ideas. Mahayana Buddhism and Hinduism became a strong influence in a process often termed "Indianization" (or, more recently, "southernization"), which continued over many centuries and synthesized Indian with indigenous ideas...

Coastal states, especially those in the Malay peninsula and the western Indonesian archipelago, which were adjacent to major international trade networks, mainly thrived from maritime commerce. The Straits of Melaka between Sumatra and Malaya had long served as a crossroads through which peoples, cultures, and trade passed or took root in the area, with peoples of many societies following the maritime trade to this region. The prevailing climatic patterns in the South China Sea and Indian Ocean of alternating monsoon winds allowed ships sailing southwest from China, Vietnam and Cambodia and southeast from India and Burma to meet in the vicinity of the Straits, where their goods could be exchanged. This process had already commenced by 200 BCE. Sumatra and Malaya had long enjoyed international reputations as sources of gold, tin and exotic forest products; the Romans referred to Malaya as the "golden khersonese." Between the 4th and 6th centuries CE the overland trading routes between China and the West (the "Silk Road") were closed off by developments in central Asia, increasing the importance of the oceanic connection. Srivijaya, for example, in southeast Sumatra, was the hub of a major trade network linking South and East Asia as well as a center for Mahayana Buddhism...

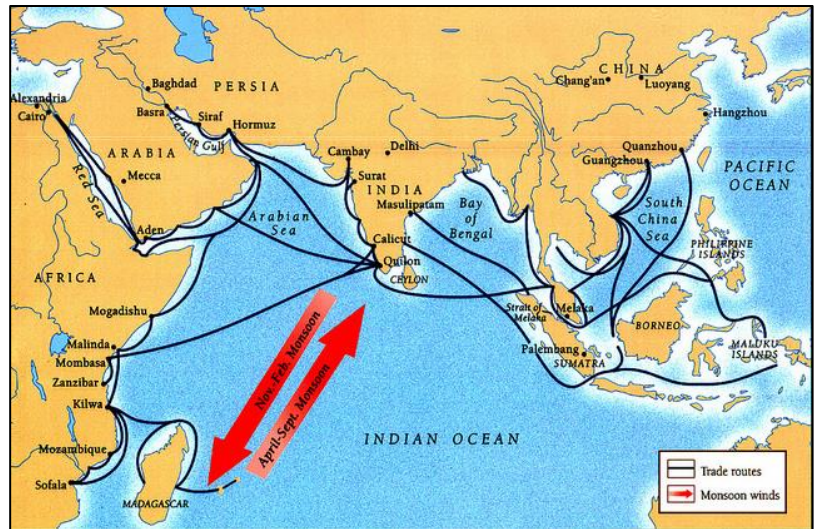
Gradually a more complex and increasingly integrated maritime trading system emerged that linked the eastern Mediterranean, Middle East, East African coast, Persia, and India with the societies of East and Southeast Asia. Over this network the precious spices of Indonesia (especially cloves, nutmeg and pepper), the gold and tin of Malaya, and the silks and tea of China traveled to Europe, sparking interest there in reaching the sources of these eastern riches. Inevitably, then, a vigorously mercantile variation of Indianized classical culture emerged to capitalize on this growing exchange.

The great Indianized kingdoms gradually came to an end between the 13th and 16th centuries, for reasons both internal and external. The Mongols helped destroy the Burman kingdom of Pagan, but were unable to extend their domination into Southeast Asia generally, failing in attempts to conquer Vietnam, Champa, and Java. Hence, Southeast Asians were among the few peoples to successfully resist persistent efforts at integrating them into the vast and powerful Mongol empire, a tribute to their skill and might as well as their distance from the Eurasian heartland. However, Angkor was eventually unable to resist invasions by the Thai-Lao peoples migrating down from China. The empire disintegrated and the capital was abandoned.

Religion and Maritime Trade

Two other forces, the arrival of new religions and the expansion of maritime trade, were also at work. By the 1300s two of the great universal religions were filtering peacefully into the region: Theravada Buddhism and Islam. Theravada Buddhism from Sri Lanka became the dominant religion of the major mainland societies (except Vietnam) by incorporating the rich animism of the peasant villages and the Hinduism of the courts. Sunni Islam arrived from the Middle East and India, spreading widely in the Malay peninsula and Indonesian archipelago [group of islands] while gradually displacing or incorporating the local animism and Hinduism; it was closely tied to international trade. Through this process of trade and religious networks, Southeast Asia became even more firmly linked to the peoples of Southern and Western Asia. These trends inaugurated a new era that persisted until the acceleration of European conquest in the 19th century.

Beginning in the 14th century a new pattern of world trade was developing that more closely linked Asia, Europe and parts of Africa. There was no particular center but Southeast Asia, especially the archipelago region, became an essential intermediary as long voyages were replaced by shorter hops and more frequent trans-shipment. This enhanced the value of regional ports and a half dozen distinct commercial zones arose in Southeast Asia. Southeast Asian peoples like the Malays and Javanese played active roles



in the interregional trade, which also spurred the growth of cities. Changes in the international maritime economy beginning around 1400 fostered an unprecedented commercial prosperity and an increasing cultural cosmopolitanism, most especially in the archipelago. A new type of maritime trading state arose to handle the increased amounts of local products dispatched to distant markets.

Expansion of Dar al-Islam and Trans-regional Trade Networks

By the 14th century Muslim merchants (mostly Arabs and Indians) were spreading Islam along the great Indian Ocean maritime trading routes. The arrival of Islam coincided with the rise of the great port of Melaka, on the southwest coast of Malaya, which became the region's political and economic power as well as the crossroads of Asian commerce. During the 1400s Melaka was a flourishing trading port attracting merchants from many lands including Chinese, Arabs, Persians, Vietnamese, Burmese, Jews, Indians, and even a few Swahilis from East Africa. Observers reported that Melaka boasted 15,000 merchants and more ships in the harbor than any port in the known world, induced by stable government and a free trade policy. Melaka's rulers sent tributary missions to China and their port became an important way station for the series of grand Chinese voyages to the Western Indian Ocean in the early 15th century led by Admiral Zheng He, the greatest seafaring expeditions in history to that point.

Soon Melaka became the southeastern terminus for the great Indian Ocean maritime trading network and one of the major commercial centers in the world, very much a rival to Calicut, Cambay, Canton, Hormuz, Kilwa, Aleppo, Alexandria, Genoa and Venice. An early 16th century Portuguese visitor noted the importance of Melaka to peoples and trade patterns as far away as Western Europe: "Melaka is a city that was made for merchandise, fitter than any other in the world... Commerce between different nations for a thousand leagues on every hand must come to Melaka... Whoever is lord of Melaka has his hands on the throat of Venice."

The spread of Islam and the expansion of commerce developed simultaneously in many places, ultimately creating a *Dar al-Islam* ("Abode of Islam"), an interlinked Islamic world stretching from Morocco, Spain and the West African Sudan to the Balkans, Turkestan, Mozambique, Indonesia, and China, joined by a common faith and trade connections. Muslim merchants and sailors became central to the great Afro-Eurasian maritime trading network. By the mid-15th century Melaka had become the main center for the propagation of Islam in the Malay peninsula and Indonesian archipelago.

Southeast Asia, Western Expansion, and the Emerging Global System

Southeast Asia had long been a cosmopolitan and wealthy region where peoples, ideas and products met. The intrepid Italian traveler Marco Polo had passed through in 1292 on his way home from a long China sojourn; his writings praised the wealth and sophistication of Indochina, Java, and Sumatra, fostering European interest in these seemingly fabulous lands. The Moroccan Ibn Battuta stopped by on his way to China in his lifelong tour of the *Dar al-Islam* in the 14th century. Vietnam and the Siamese kingdom of Ayuthia were two of the powerful and prosperous states that stretched across Asia from Ottoman Turkey to Tokugawa Japan in the 1600s.

By the end of the 15th century a few Portuguese explorers and adventurers, who came from a country with superior military technology, unparalleled missionary zeal, and a compelling appetite for wealth but a standard of living little if any higher than that of Siam, Vietnam, Melaka or Java, would enter Southeast Asia in search of, as the explorer Vasco da Gama put it, "Christians and spices." They were the forerunners of what would ultimately be a powerful and destabilizing European presence to gradually alter the history of the region between 1500 and 1914. The Europeans would prove the bloodiest of the new forces reaching the region in these centuries.

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