I was brought up amid the cornfields of Illinois, a thousand miles from salt water. I may have spent as much as a month of my life on saltwater, but only if I count the Hong Kong-Macao hydrofoil. I listen with clueless fascination as colleagues in the field who are always sailing, such as Leonard Blussé of Leiden University and Stephen Davies of the Hong Kong Maritime Museum, describe the challenges of getting the winds behind you, watching for shoals, and watching coastal peaks appear above a watery horizon. So how did it turn out that twice I ran the “maritime” flag up the mast, and eventually a few colleagues saluted? I began with a vague interest, to which I keep coming back, in the big question of “Why is China so big?” In particular, how did it happen that the big and diverse pieces of China, as big and diverse as the nation-states of Western Europe, were for long periods stable and functional as provinces of a huge empire? Part of the answer, perhaps visible in my *Mountain of Fame*, was the long history of a protean strand of Chinese political culture in which the elite individual esteemed human relations, *guanxi*, often asymmetrical, and could find self-respect in a dependent position. The rulers of a province as large and defensible as a major European kingdom might find positions as imperial ministers and administrators of subordinate provinces materially rewarding and full of moral integrity. Many of the provinces of late imperial China had borders with foreign peoples or seacoasts. How did that change the nature of the provincial position? Fujian turned out to be especially instructive.4

Scholarship on maritime Asia was not flourishing when I got involved in the early 1960s. There had been a great deal of archive organizing, source publishing, and scholarly writing that was closely connected to the European empires in Asia that hit the skids pretty quickly as the Asian colonies won their independence after World War II. The imperialist literature was more likely to produce a detailed biography of a colonial governor or general than anything that took seriously the ways dominated Asian peoples continued to shape their relations with their rulers and their futures. But many of the writers had rich personal experiences in imperial areas, and you could learn a lot from their books if you ignored the biases. The very name of the field in American academe, “history of European expansion,” denied the agency of the colonized. A few excellent scholars, such as John H. Parry, moved away from imperialist attitudes and sometimes taught in ex-colonies. For studies of maritime Asia, the amazing erudition and productivity of Charles R. Boxer was of immense importance. Boxer was no apostle for empires, but it’s still the Europeans who are front and center in most of his work.

I caught a bit of the turning of the tide in 1963 when I started doing archival research in the records of the Dutch East India Company in the old Algemeen Rijksarchief in The Hague. I had as my strong coffee and eye-strain companions Om Prakash, on his way to being the doyen of the Delta Research Center in Calcutta, and was fascinated listening as one of them described the roles of a coastal governor, a mouth-of-river anchorage, and an upriver capital in Guangdong to Gujerat.

As I, Reid, Prakash, Subrahmanyam, and others continue to work in the field, we are constantly delighted by the work of our students and others. Just for East Asia, we have a fine new book that shows complex phases of Japanese expansion and interactivity before the “closing of the country,” two excellent books that show “how Taiwan became Chinese” and the implications of that major military defeat of a European power, and a major study of cross-currents among East Asian and European seapowers in the 1600s. All of these books are based in energetic cross-reading activity of a monument to da Gama, with the enthusiastic cooperation of Anthony Reid, but had no boost from local-origin historians comparable to the Indian. From Naga-saki to Mocha in present-day Yemen, this new scholarship was making it clear that, while the end point around 1800 was growing European domination, that shift had been slow, contingent, and interactively shaped by the actions of Asian coastal peoples and of two great non-European maritime networks: a Muslim one reaching from the Red Sea to Maluku in eastern Indonesia and Mindanao (Philippines), and a Chinese one from Japan to Java, Sumatra, and occasionally South India.
Many of the major ports of early modern maritime Asia remain major centers of commerce and politics today, with good airline service, tourist amenities, and major relics of past centuries.
I would like to some day see the sites of one of the most complex and dramatic confrontations of vigorous, state-building Asian power against the rising power of the British, that of Tipu Sultan, the ruler of the South Indian kingdom of Mysore.

Nagasaki Harbor, you might move on to the ruins of the Dutch Casteel Zeelandia on the outskirts of Tainan, Taiwan, or the older, noncasino areas of Macao. You could also move to the Portuguese fort gate, Dutch town hall, and the Chinese cemetery of Melaka (old spelling Malacca, in Malaysia), which is a short flight or day’s drive from Singapore; the old English fort and church at Chennai (formerly Madras); the wonderful old churches of Goa; and even the Portuguese fortress at Mombasa. You could try to read old tombstones in more than one European or Chinese cemetery. For me, one of the most stunning evocations of the multilayered interactive emergence of this maritime world is the Chinese cemetery at Manila, which seems not to have been well-studied and in which the central chapel among the fine family tomb complexes makes room for several Bodhisattvas and for the Crucified Savior.

I will end this exploratory voyage at the west end of the Indian Ocean. The geography is pretty easy to see. There’s the mass of Africa, with a few ports where Muslim traders settled, sold their wares, and bought ivory and, much later, slaves. There, on the two sides of the desert mass of the Arabian Peninsula, are the two seas leading up to Suez and Basra (in present-day Iraq). The timing of sailing voyages from the Indian subcontinent to these seas, including the huge pilgrim traffic to Mecca, was dictated by the shifts of the monsoon winds. So where shall we end our imaginary tour? I don’t think we should try Mocha this year, and there isn’t much to see there anyway. I have not yet tried to play tourist around Mysore in southern India, but I would like to some day see the sites of one of the most complex and dramatic confrontations of vigorous, state-building Asian power against the rising power of the British, that of Tipu Sultan, the ruler of the South Indian kingdom of Mysore. The drama can be sensed a long way from southern India in an object held by the Victoria and Albert Museum in London and widely reproduced in the literature: a piece of loot long way from southern India in an object held by the Victoria and Albert Museum in London and widely reproduced in the literature: a piece of loot from Mysore that is widely known and pictured, Tipu’s Tiger is a life-sized wooden model of a tiger standing over and mauling a British soldier that contains some crude organ pipes, which can produce something like the growls of the tiger and the moans of its victim. A PowerPoint of that will wake students up!

The story of Tipu, his father, Haidar Ali, and their struggle to strengthen their realm and push back the rising British power might not seem especially maritime-related. They devoted a great deal of effort to improving the agriculture and craft productions of a largely inland realm. Muslims ruling over a region with a big Hindu majority, they sometimes were accused of anti-Brahmin bigotry but had many loyal and effective Hindu ministers. Their palaces contained many splendid tiger images, which spoke of power to both Hindus and Muslims. Their unwavering hostility to the advancing English power led them to reach out in every way possible to the French, employing French soldiers and technicians and even sending embassies to the French island of Mauritius and to Versailles. They established maritime trading posts as far away as Muscat (Oman). Both Haidar and Tipu had projects to build their own warships and navy; the British destroyed one promising fleet in 1780, and Tipu was at work on another when his capital was overrun by the British and he was killed in 1799.

So by 1800, all the great Asian realms were intricately shaped by the oceans. The Japanese in their relative isolation were starting to worry about Russian intrusion in the northern islands and stray whalers elsewhere. The great Qing Empire still faced toward Central Asia but had to cope with pirates based in Việt Nam, drew revenues from massive exports of tea to Europe and America, and still paid little attention to the massive presence of its émigrés across Southeast Asia. The interactions of local peoples and Muslims, Chinese, and Europeans arriving by sea were reshaping maritime Asia and the world well in advance of the impact of steam power and industrial production.

NOTES


5. Wills, “Maritime Asia.” See endnote 1. Readers of the present essay are referred to that text for details on books published before 1993.

6. For the papers from this conference, see Anthony Disney and Emily Booth, eds., *Vasco da Gama and the Linking of Europe and Asia* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001).


17. In an open-stack scholarly library, one will find shelves of modern editions published by the Linschoten Vereniging and the Hakluyt Society. For an intelligent sampling, see Peter C. Mancall, ed., *Travel Narratives from the Age of Discovery* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).


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