

Back Out to Sea After the End of Empire

Studies of Maritime Asia Since the 1960s

By John E. Wills Jr.

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 salt-water, 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?”¹ 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.² 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.³

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 apologist 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 Delhi school of maritime studies, and two fine scholars from Ghana, Kwame Daaku and John Fynn. From my first year of teaching in 1964–65, I often taught, in addition to courses in Chinese history, a course that at first was called the History of European Expansion and later went through a variety of less Eurocentric titles, such as Europe, Africa, and Asia: Maritime Relations, 1415–1789. The new scholarship on which I could draw expanded after about 1980. Much of it was the work of scholars focused on one part of Asia or another, many of them Asian, and I was pretty sure that not many of them, as well as fewer students of early modern Europe and the Americas,

would be aware of all of them. I began to work on a review article. Before I finished it, publishing in the field had exploded, and I had to limit the list at the head of my article to important books published between 1987 and 1993—twenty-four of them—citing earlier work in footnotes.⁴ A major conference organized by James Tracy did a lot of bridge-building between European studies and the emerging global maritime history. Historians of Indian origin—Chaudhuri, Goonewardena, Prakash, Das Gupta, Rayachaudhuri, Arasaratnam, Subrahmanyam, and more—gave us more to read about the maritime histories of South Asia, including Sri Lanka, than any other maritime area. Scholarship on East Asian maritime connections, hostage to the three great national/civilizational narratives of China, Japan, and Korea, was slower to become maritime and interactive. Work on Southeast Asia, one of the early modern world’s most important, complex, and instructive zones of maritime interaction, got some big boosts from the summarizing work and continuing conference activity of Anthony Reid, but had no boost from local-origin historians comparable to the Indian. From Nagasaki 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.

Starting in 1977, the Leiden-based journal *Itinerario* was another source of a new sense of community in an emerging field, enhanced by its later connection with the North America-centered and not always Atlantic-centric Forum on European Expansion and Global Integration. Occasional conferences turned into geography lessons. In 1997, our friends in Australia invited us to take some notice of the quincentennial anniversary of the voyage of Vasco da Gama. In the Perth area, we attended the dedication of a monument to da Gama, with the enthusiastic cooperation of the Portuguese community of western Australia, descendants of fishermen from Madeira who in the late 1940s sailed their craft straight across the southern Indian Ocean without benefit of modern guidance systems, a far more dangerous voyage than Dom Vasco’s 500 years before.⁵ Leiden worked up a very smart doctoral program for students from around the Indian Ocean called TANAP (To Assure A New Partnership). Several of these young scholars have published excellent books, and I hope they are staying in touch and giving these studies the interactive coherence that has been so fragile in it as they build careers in their homelands.⁶ I met with them occasionally when I was a visiting scholar at Leiden in 2005–2006 and was fascinated listening as one of them described the roles of a coastal fort, a mouth-of-river anchorage, and an upriver capital in Việt Nam; and at once others saw the similarity to the river-mouth trades they were studying, from Guangdong to Gujarat.

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,”⁷ two excellent books that show “how Taiwan became Chinese” and the implications of that major military defeat of a European power,⁸ and a major study of cross-currents among East Asian and European seapowers in the 1600s.⁹ All of these books are based in energetic cross-reading

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The Turtle Ship on display in Korean Museum.

Source: Admiral Yi Sun-shin, Hero of the Korean People by Justin Lee at <http://tinyurl.com/19fx7h5>.

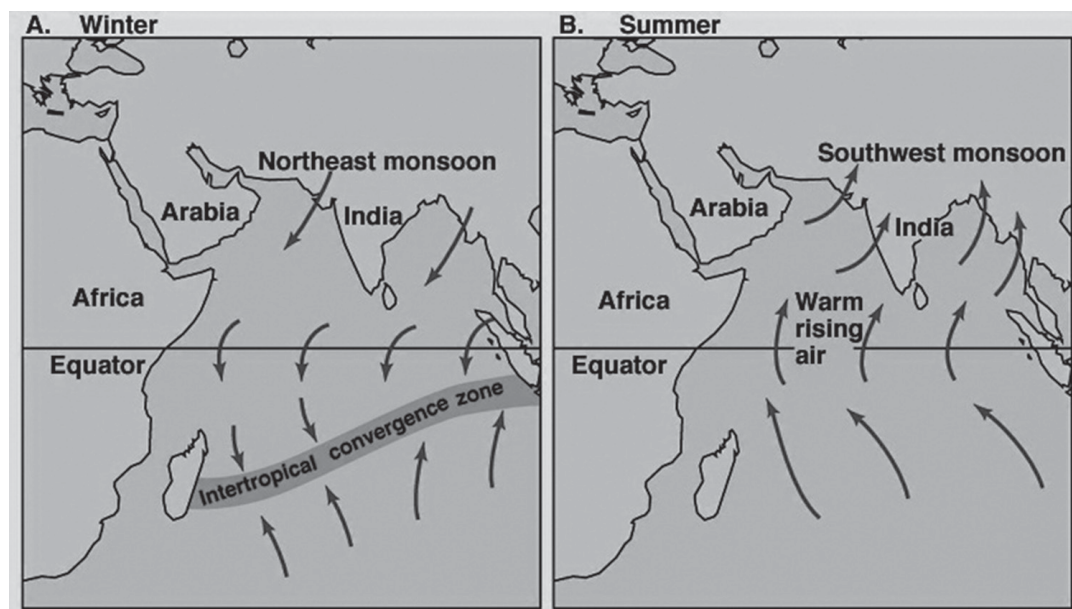
among Chinese, Japanese, and Dutch texts. These include a full account of the great upheaval of Hideyoshi's invasion of Korea in the 1590s, with its famous maritime dimension of Admiral Yi Sun-sin's "turtle ships";¹¹ a reinterpretation of Qing attitudes toward maritime trade based on very wide reading in Chinese sources;¹² an important rethinking of Qing political crises around 1800 that includes a major account of conflicts with Vietnamese pirates;¹³ and the best multiarchival and multidimensional studies of the Canton trade ever produced.¹⁴ The ports of the area that became modern Việt Nam were only occasionally important to Europeans, but a central Nguyễn polity was fundamentally shaped by a big port at Hội An, with a large Chinese and a small Japanese colony.¹⁵ An energetic network of scholars is opening up a multidimensional picture, drawing on new sources, shipwrecks, and other archeology, and paying attention to the inland trades of the region and the heritages of the old kingdom of Champa, located along the southern and central coast of present-day Việt Nam.¹⁶

Landlubbers and their students can get a sense of the imperatives of maritime spaces by reading pieces of the wonderful "I saw it" literature of voyages, but it takes time to find the right passages.¹⁷ If you start projecting a set of maps of different seas of the world, the students may stop texting, pay attention, and take their own pictures of what you have on the screen. This is especially true if you show wind regimes, the annual shift of monsoons, and the steady Atlantic and Pacific circulations. For the world history survey, you need to show the steady wind regimes that made voyages across the Atlantic reasonably predictable, the short voyages from Angola to Brazil, the immense complexities of the Caribbean and the Gulf of

Mexico, and the very distinctive spaces of the Mediterranean. Historians have sometimes been too ready to call any maritime zone of strong human

interaction "another Mediterranean," making it difficult to notice fundamental differences.¹⁸ If you're sticking to Asia, you will show on one side of it the immense void of the Pacific, the slender connection across it of the Acapulco galleons, and the nineteenth-century transformations, then wake students up again with new scholarship that looks from Indonesia east into Micronesia and Polynesia.¹⁹

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 can imagine a visit to several of them that would make early modern maritime Asia unforgettably vivid, and you could bring back digital images for your classes. From the outlines of the Dutch quarantine island of Deshima in

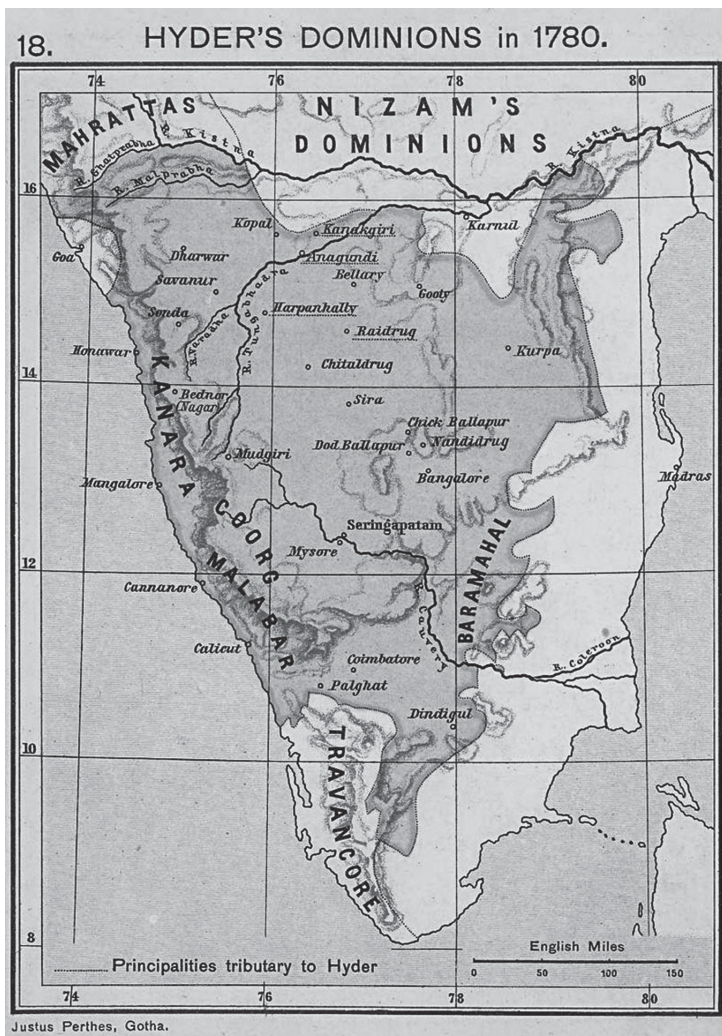


Winter and summer monsoon wind directions.

Source: Cram.com at <http://tinyurl.com/ovmkwdc>.

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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;



The dominions of the Sultanate of Mysore, ruled by Hyder Ali in the year 1780. Scanned image of 1909 map of Hyder Ali's dominions in 1780 (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1907). Source: <http://tinyurl.com/kaa3hhd>.

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 Boddhisattvas and for the Crucified Savior.

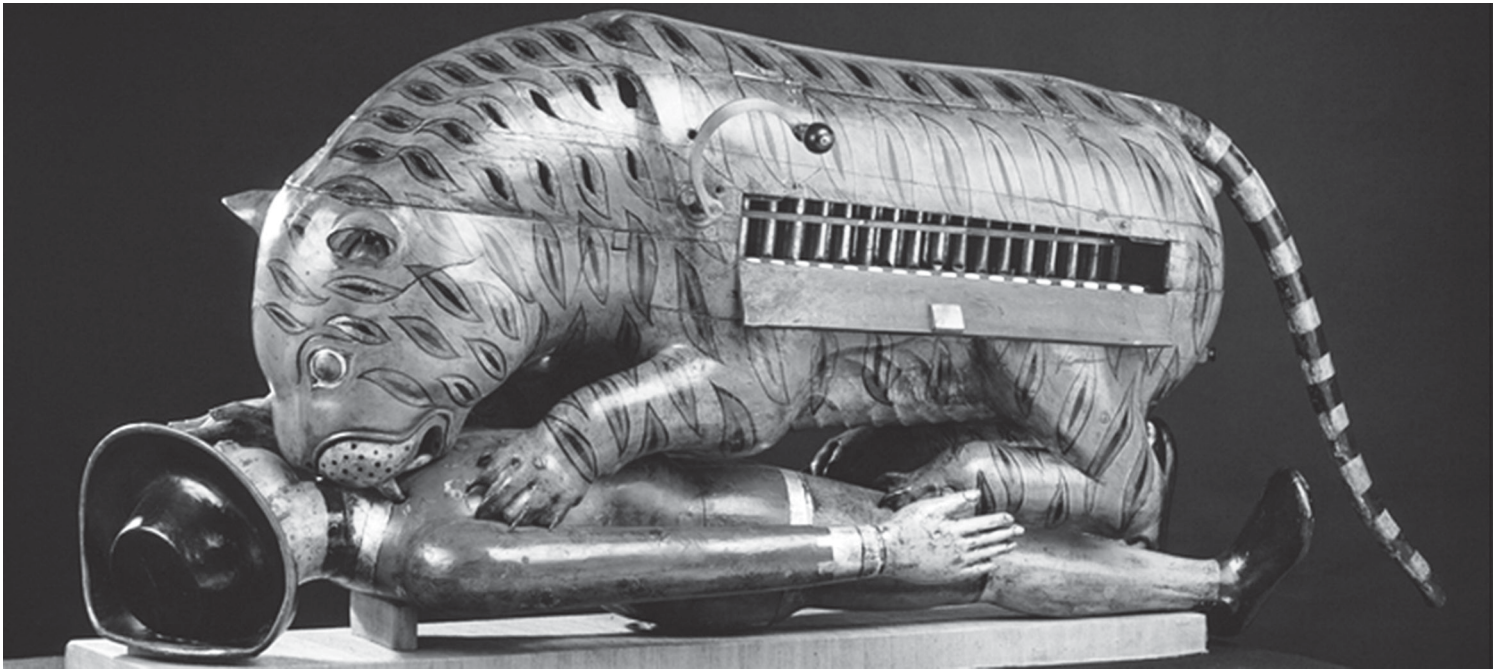
I will end this exploratory voyage at the west end of the Indian Ocean. The geography is pretty easy to see. There's the mass of Africa, with a few ports where Muslim traders settled, sold their wares, and bought ivory and, much later, slaves. There, on the two sides of the desert mass of the Arabian 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.²⁰ 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 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

1. John E. Wills, "Maritime China from Wang Chih to Shih Lang: Themes in Peripheral History," *From Ming to Ch'ing: Conquest, Region, and Continuity in Seventeenth-Century China*, eds. Jonathan D. Spence and Wills (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979; paperback, 1981), 204–238; "Maritime Asia, 1500–1800: The Interactive Emergence of European Domination," *American Historical Review* 98, no. 1 (February 1993): 83–105. For a few more personal perspectives, see an interview with John Wills by Hendrik E. Niemeijer and Frans Paul van der Putten, "Why Is China So Big? And



Tipu's Tiger, a carved and lacquered wooden semiautomaton in the shape of a tiger mauling a man, Mysore, India, about 1793. Source: Museum no 2545 (I5).
© Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

- Other Big Questions," *Itinerario* 30, no. 1 (2006): 7–15. This journal is indispensable reading for anyone with maritime Asia interests.
2. For a recent effort, see Wills, "How Many Asymmetries? Continuities, Transformations, and Puzzles in the Study of Chinese Foreign Relations," *Past and Present in China's Foreign Policy* (Portland: Merwin Asia, 2011), 23–39.
 3. Wills, *Mountain of Fame: Portraits in Chinese History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994; paperback, 1996). Updated with new afterword in 2012.
 4. Wills, "Contingent Connections: Fujian, the Empire, and the Early Modern World," *The Qing Formation in World-Historical Time*, ed. Lynn A. Struve (Cambridge and London: Harvard East Asian Monographs, 2004), 167–203.
 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).
 7. For more on their books, see Wills, "Interactive Early Modern Asia: Scholarship from a New Generation," *International Journal of Asian Studies* (Japan) 5, no. 2 (July 2008): 235–245.
 8. Adam Clulow, *The Company and the Shōgun: The Dutch Encounter with Tokugawa Japan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).
 9. Tonio Andrade, *How Taiwan Became Chinese: Dutch, Spanish, and Han Colonization in the Seventeenth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press/Gutenberg-e, 2007); Andrade, *Lost Colony: The Untold Story of China's First Great Victory Over the West* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2011).
 10. Cheng Wei-chung, *War, Trade, and Piracy in the China Seas 1622–1683* (TANAP Monographs), vol. 16, (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2013). For more summary and citations on relations with Europeans, see John E. Wills, ed., *China and Maritime Europe, 1500–1800: Trade, Settlement, Diplomacy, and Missions* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).
 11. Kenneth M. Swope, *A Dragon's Head and a Serpent's Tail: Ming China and the First Great East Asian War, 1592–1598* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2009).
 12. Gang Zhao, *The Qing Opening to the Ocean: Chinese Maritime Policies, 1684–1757* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2013).
 13. Wang Wensheng, *White Lotus Rebels and South China Pirates: Crisis and Reform in the Qing Empire* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2013).
 14. Paul A. Van Dyke, *The Canton Trade: Life and Enterprise on the China Coast, 1700–1845* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2005); Van Dyke, *Merchants of Canton and Macao: Politics and Strategies in Eighteenth-Century Chinese Trade* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2011).
 15. Li Tana, *Nguyễn Cochinchina: Southern Việt Nam in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Ithaca: Cornell University Southeast Asia Program Publications, 1998); Pierre-Yves Manguin, *Les Nguyen, Macau, et le Portugal: Aspects Politiques et Commer-*
ciaux d'une Relation Priviliégée en Mer de Chine, 1773–1800 (Paris: École Française d'Extrême Orient, 1984).
 16. Kenneth R. Hall, "Revisionist Study of Cross-Cultural Commercial Competition on the Việt Nam Coastline in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries and Its Wider Implications," *Journal of World History* 24, no. 1 (March 2013): 71–105.
 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).
 18. John E. Wills, "The South China Sea Is Not a Mediterranean: Implications for the History of Chinese Foreign Relations" (lecture, Conference on Chinese Maritime History, Taipei, Taiwan, August 2006). This lecture is also published in *Zhongguo haiyang fazhanshi lunwenji*, vol. 10, ed. Tang Xiyong, (Taipei: Research Center for Humanities and Social Sciences, Academia Sinica, 2008): 1–24.
 19. Jennifer L. Gaynor, "Ages of Sail, Ocean Basins, and Southeast Asia," *Journal of World History* 24, no. 2 (June 2013): 309–333.
 20. Irfan Habib, ed., *Confronting Colonialism: Resistance and Modernisation under Haidar Ali and Tipu Sultan* (London: Anthem Press, 2002), especially Habib, "Introduction: An Essay on Haidar Ali and Tipu Sultan," xvii–xlvii; Kate Brittlebank, *Tipu Sultan's Search for Legitimacy: Islam and Kingship in a Hindu Domain* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997); Susan Stronge, *Tipu's Tigers* (London: V&A Publishing, Victoria and Albert Museum, 2009). See Stronge, 63–64 for the tiger. I have not found the right reading for a survey class on Haidar and Tipu; some reader of *Education About Asia* probably will know of one.

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