

Аглядны артыкул

Адлюстраванне гістарычнага “алмазнага” эканамічнага шляху ў перыяд каля 900–1650 гг.: Азіяцка-Ціхаакіянскі рэгіён, Кітай і марскія Шаўковыя шляхі

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Анотацыя. Гэты артыкул пераасэнсоўвае эканамічныя і культурныя сувязі паміж Кітаем, Паўднёва-Усходняй Азіяй і шырэйшай Азіяцка-Ціхаакіянскай прасторай у перыяд каля 900–1650 гг. праз тое, што можна назваць гістарычным “алмазным” эканамічным шляхам. У аснове даследавання ляжыць ідэя пра Паўднёва-Усходнюю Азію як ключавую “вось” марскіх Шаўковых шляхоў, якія злучалі Індыйскі акіян і Паўднёва-Кітайскае мора. Абапіраючыся на тэкставыя, археалагічныя і параўнальна-гістарычныя крыніцы, праца рэканструюе дзве асноўныя фазы марскога развіцця: камерцыйнае пашырэнне эпох Сун–Юань (каля 900–1350 гг.) і мінскую “Эпоху камерцыі” (каля 1400–1650 гг.). Вынікі паказваюць, што, хоць замежны гандаль складаў адносна невялікую долю сукупнага выпуску, ён адыграў трансфармуючую ролю ў фарміраванні прыбярэжных эканомік, распаўсюджанні тэхналогій і міжкультурным абмене. Лібералізацыя марской палітыкі пры Сун, “марскі паварот” манголаў і мінскія экспедыцыі Чжэн Хэ спрыялі новым схемам абарачэння тавараў, такіх як кераміка, перац і баваўняныя тканіны. Артыкул таксама падкрэслівае станаўленне дыяспарных гандлёвых сетак — арабскіх, індыйскіх, малайскіх і кітайскіх, — якія арганізавалі абмен праз узаемазвязаныя рэгіянальныя “контурны” ўзаемадзеяння. Метадалагічна даследаванне грунтуецца на якасным гістарычным сінтэзе з акцэнтам на трыянгуляцыю разнастайных крыніц і сеткавую інтэрпрэтацыю. Пераўзяўляючы далёкамагутны марскі гандаль як “алмаз”, што злучае чатыры вяршыні — Кітай, Індыю, ісламскі свет і Паўднёва-Усходнюю Азію, — артыкул прапануе бачыць даўнюю глабальную эканоміку як поліцытрычную і ўзаемазвязаную сістэму, а не як простую перадумову пазнейшага еўрапейскага панавання.

Ключавыя словы: Марскія Шаўковыя шляхі; Паўднёва-Усходняя Азія; Кітай эпох Сун–Мін; эканамічная гісторыя; глабальныя гандлёвыя сеткі

Review Article

The Reflection of Historical Diamond Economic Pathway in c.900–1650: Asia Pacific, China, and Maritime Silk Roads

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Abstract. This article reinterprets the economic and cultural linkages between China, Southeast Asia, and the broader Asia–Pacific world during c.900–1650 through what may be termed a historical diamond economic pathway. At its core, the study situates Southeast Asia as the pivotal “axis” of the maritime silk roads that connected the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea. Drawing on textual, archaeological, and comparative historical sources, it reconstructs two principal phases of maritime development: the Song–Yuan commercial expansion (c.900–1350) and the Ming-era Age of Commerce (c.1400–1650). The findings highlight that, although overseas trade constituted a modest share of aggregate output, it played a transformative role in shaping coastal economies, technological diffusion, and cross-cultural exchange. Song liberalization of maritime policy, the Mongol maritime turn, and the Ming voyages under Zheng He each contributed to new circulation patterns of commodities such as ceramics, pepper, and cotton textiles. The paper also underscores the emergence of diasporic merchant networks as Arab, Indian, Malay, and Chinese that organized commerce through interlocking regional circuits. Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative historical synthesis emphasizing multi-source triangulation and network interpretation. By re-envisioning the long-distance maritime economy as a “diamond” linking four vertices such as China, India, the Islamic world, and Southeast Asia the paper reframes the pre-modern global economy as a polycentric and interconnected system rather than a precursor to later European dominance.

Keywords: Maritime Silk Roads; Southeast Asia; Song–Ming China; Economic History; Global Trade Networks

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Introduction

Southeast Asia occupied a strategic position in medieval and early modern commerce, acting as the hinge between the Indian Ocean’s west–east shipping lanes and the northbound routes through the South China Sea toward China and Northeast Asia. Major ports in Sumatra, Java, and the Malay Peninsula functioned as crucial entrepôts where vessels

paused to synchronize with the monsoon cycle and to load regionally sourced goods especially high-value spices from eastern Indonesia (e.g., cloves, nutmeg, mace), along with medicinal substances, aromatic woods, and other forest products. Building on this setting, the discussion concentrates on interactions along the so-called maritime silk/spice routes, with particular attention to exchange between Southeast Asia and China from around 900 to the early seventeenth century.

Maritime connectivity among China, Southeast Asia, and India extended over two millennia. Early Chinese dynastic accounts describe departures from Guangdong toward the Gulf of Siam, a crossing of the Kra Isthmus, and onward travel by ship to India; by the fifth century, the Strait of Melaka enabled more direct movement between South Asia and China, including travel in Malay-Javanese ships (kunlunbo, 崑崙舶). From roughly the ninth to eleventh centuries, Arab, Persian, and Indian shipping became especially prominent (Heng, 2009, pp. 28–30; Sen, 2014, pp. 40–41; Ng, 2017, p. 13). By the late Tang period, seaborne exchange with China began to surpass overland caravan trade, and exports such as porcelain and other manufactures increasingly outpaced silk (Liu, 2022, p. 239). Voyages by Chinese-built ships to Southeast Asia then rose sharply from the late tenth century, with trade deepening through the Song, Yuan, and early Ming eras; contemporaneous scholarship frames the eleventh century as a peak moment in expanding trade and cultural contact (Findlay & O'Rourke, 2007, p. 69).

The fifteenth-century expeditions associated with Zheng He further reshaped regional dynamics and helped stimulate an “Age of Commerce” before Dutch dominance took hold in insular Southeast Asia, even as Chinese merchants remained active within intra-regional circuits (Reid, 1988, 1993, 1999; Ng, 2017). Despite these expansive connections, overseas trade generally comprised only a small share of aggregate economic output when compared to domestic exchange; estimates typically remain below one percent, with the Song period sometimes placed at a high point of about 1.7 percent (von Glahn, 2016, p. 272; Schottenhammer, 2022, p. 640). Although overseas exchange represented a modest share of total output, it still mattered in very concrete ways for port-based economies and their surrounding hinterlands. In Song-era Fujian, for example, export-focused ceramic production may have absorbed a sizeable portion of the provincial workforce estimated at about 7.5% (Hansen, 2020, p. 216). In the first millennium, long-distance frontier exchange was often characterized by “horses-for-silk” arrangements (Liu, 2022), and many other traded commodities largely served courtly and elite demand. By the early second millennium, however, the maritime expansion under the Song and Yuan increased the circulation of more affordable goods and extended consumption beyond narrow elite circles, reflecting a broader social reach of exchange (Heng, 2009; Reid, 1993, 2009).

At the same time, the historical record is uneven: limited locally produced evidence restricts how fully we can reconstruct the roles of Southeast and South Asians in the early world economy. For earlier phases, analysis depends heavily on Chinese textual materials, supplemented by epigraphy and archaeological finds, while later periods are more frequently illuminated through European documentation (Wolters, 1967; Reid, 1988; Christie, 1998; Sen, 2017). Quantitative evidence is even more limited and often difficult to interpret reliably (Bulbeck et al., 1998; Henley, 2015, pp. 128–129). Despite these constraints, the chapter proceeds by examining two main phases (c. 900–1350 and c. 1400–1650) and ends by synthesizing the trading networks that connected these worlds.

Materials and Methods

The study uses a historical-synthesis (qualitative) method grounded in multi-source documentary analysis (Sekarang and Bougie, 2017). Because locally produced written records are limited, the author explicitly triangulates evidence from several types of materials: Chinese textual sources for the earlier phases, supplemented by stone inscriptions and archaeological artefacts, while European sources are used more heavily for later periods. The method is therefore shaped by source availability, and it also acknowledges that quantitative/statistical data are scarce and

methodologically problematic, which constrains the extent of numerical reconstruction and pushes the analysis toward critical interpretation of textual and material records.

Analytically, the study is organized through explicit chronological periodization and comparative review. Rather than narrating an uninterrupted timeline, it surveys two discrete time blocks (c.900–1350 and c.1400–1650) and then synthesizes the evidence by reviewing trading networks that connect actors, ports, and commodity flows across the broader maritime system. In other words, the method combines (1) structured historical surveying by period with (2) an integrative network-oriented conclusion to consolidate patterns of exchange across the full span of the chapter.

Results and Discussions

“Early Phase” c.900 to late 1300s: Age of Commerce

Extensive commercial, religious, and diplomatic interactions between Southeast Asia and China were already in place by the fifth century (Wolters, 1967; Heng, 2009; Lo, 2012; Ng, 2017). During the Tang era, Malay-speaking groups labelled by Chinese observers as “island barbarians” were established in port communities in Guangdong, Fujian, and Zhejiang (Heng, 2009, pp. 31–32). From about 900 onward, roughly four centuries of intensified exchange marked an “Early Age of Commerce,” when trade expanded rapidly across Southeast Asia (Christie, 1998; Wade, 2009). The fiscal and trade orientations of the Song and Yuan further amplified maritime exchange, strengthening links not only between Southeast Asia and China but also between Southeast Asia and India; these shifts supported Southeast Asian development (Wade, 2009, pp. 222, 238–258) and aligned with what has been described as a broader Song “medieval economic revolution” (von Glahn, 2016, pp. 3–4, 208–254).

At the opening of this phase, China remained primarily oriented toward Central Asia, consistent with patterns established since Han times (Liu, 2022). However, nomadic pressures during the Northern Song (960–1127) disrupted access to Central Asian routes and pushed merchants and the court to pivot toward the “South Seas” (Nanyang, 南洋). After Kaifeng fell in 1127, overland caravan movement effectively collapsed, and the Southern Song court now based in Hangzhou became more dependent on maritime revenues to sustain defence, encouraging private seafaring merchants in the process (Lo, 2012, pp. 91–92). Yuan maritime policy fluctuated between tighter control and support for private activity, yet private overseas trade expanded markedly in the dynasty’s later years (Heng, 2009, pp. 64–65). Within the Song itself, governance of foreign commerce moved quickly from state monopoly toward a model of state “stewardship” over private maritime exchange (Heng, 2009). A concrete expression of this shift was the establishment of the shibosi (市舶司) in 971 at Guangzhou followed later by offices at Hangzhou and Mingzhou (Ningbo) which helped intensify exchanges with Arabia and India through Southeast Asian intermediaries, with Srivijaya in Sumatra serving as the most important entrepôt in this network.

From 976 to 982, the Song court barred Chinese merchants from overseas voyages and instead kept a state monopoly over the domestic circulation of imported goods that arrived on Arab and Malay ships. In 982, this restrictive regime was eased: the court rolled back monopoly controls, reduced import duties, and lowered its own share of incoming cargoes changes that encouraged a larger role for private Chinese traders. Government involvement was pared down again in the 1030s, and by the mid-eleventh century roughly half of China’s foreign trade was handled by private actors (Heng, 2009, pp. 39–41). In effect, Song exchange practices shifted rapidly from ceremonial, court-centered transactions toward commercial dealings managed at the port of entry. This transition coincided with a sharp reduction in formal tribute missions, falling from 71 (960–999) and 31 (1000–1020) to just 14 (1020–1050) (Heng, 2009, pp. 39, 42).

Subsequent policy liberalizations in 989, 1072, and 1090 further expanded commerce with Southeast Asia. After 989, private Chinese vessels were permitted to trade overseas, but they were required to register at a shibosi (市舶司) port and return to that same port for customs clearance an arrangement that imposed extra time and cost on merchants based elsewhere (Heng, 2009, pp. 42–43). The reforms of 1072 (associated with Wang Anshi's fiscal restructuring) sought to increase foreign trade, develop maritime-related industries, and strengthen the role of private merchants: trade was increasingly monetized, restrictions on copper exports were lifted, and cash payments in copper replaced barter in transactions with foreign merchants. Further tariff reductions left the court with no more than about 35% of imports, and foreign-trade value (along with court revenue) more than doubled in the 1080s; Heng emphasizes that these reforms were foundational to Song maritime growth (Heng, 2009, p. 47). The 1090 liberalization then reduced the superintendencies' controls over private shipping, drawing port-hinterland ceramic and metalworking sectors even more deeply into export supply and contributing to a twofold rise in customs revenue. Private shipping also benefited from advances in shipbuilding, navigational tools, and expanding Chinese geographic knowledge of Southeast Asia; Lo argues these innovations helped Chinese mariners break Arab dominance of key sea lanes and maintain an advantage into the Yuan and early Ming (Heng, 2009, pp. 49–52, 126–128; Lo, 2012, pp. 103–111). With a wider range and larger volume of imports and exports, China became less dependent on foreign carriers, Chinese traders increasingly resided in overseas ports to purchase goods for the China market, and the growth of lower-value imports became more pronounced though regulations still limited how long ships could remain abroad and how far they could sail within a monsoon cycle (Heng, 2009, pp. 49–52, 126–128).

In 1127, the Southern Song government briefly suspended overseas commerce as part of a fiscal tightening strategy, yet within a few years it reverted to a more expansionary stance. By 1130, the court again promoted private trading and even offered official titles to both Chinese and non-Chinese merchants whose imported cargoes surpassed a set threshold. Later, a policy shift in 1164 raising customs duties and imposing compulsory state purchases on luxury imports made elite luxury trade far less attractive to Chinese merchants, who responded by pivoting toward everyday, non-luxury commodities. Ironically, this produced a rapid upswing in both low- and high-value non-luxury inflows from Southeast Asia.

A major turning point in the twelfth century was the Mongols' evolution into a maritime-capable power, which helped facilitate their victories over both the Jin and the Song. Under the Yuan (1279–1368), foreign-trade governance departed from the Song model of state “stewardship” and shifted toward direct state sponsorship of overseas voyages, alongside periodic crackdowns on private shipping (1284–94, 1314–20, 1322–23). Official trade was largely managed by Central Asian merchants favored by the Mongol regime. During this era, Quanzhou rose to become the premier international port, overtaking Fuzhou and Guangzhou; tax burdens were set at roughly half the Song level and compulsory state purchases of imports were removed. Once remaining restrictions on private maritime trade were lifted in 1323, private shipping and associated industries expanded strongly through the dynasty's final decades. After unsuccessful campaigns against Japan and Annam, Kublai Khan pursued submission through diplomacy, sending envoys to India and Java to demand tribute. In East Java, however, King Kertanagara of Singhasari rejected the demand and humiliated the envoy; in response, Kublai launched a punitive expedition in 1293. The Yuan force initially cooperated with Wijaya later founder of Majapahit (1293–1527) but Wijaya soon turned against his former allies. After being defeated, the Chinese fleet withdrew to Quanzhou carrying royal captives and valuable cargo including spices, batik cloth, and gold.

The failed Java expedition had lasting consequences for settlement patterns, technology transfer, and regional trade. Many Chinese involved in the campaign likely remained in Java rather than disappearing from the record, and later observers described Chinese communities living intermingled with local populations and forming identifiable settlements in East Java. These communities were linked to Islam's diffusion in Java, contributed to exchanges in

shipbuilding knowledge that fostered hybrid vessel designs, and strengthened commercial flows in eastern Indonesian spices. Mongol-era maritime policies also elevated Quanzhou and Fujian-based shipping, encouraging routes that moved east toward Taiwan before splitting north to Ryukyu/Japan or south through the Philippines, Borneo, the Sulu Zone, and onward to Sulawesi and the Maluku islands, with return movement via the western corridor through the South China Sea. Reports from the 1330s–1340s indicate Chinese ships purchased cloves in Maluku, though later in the century direct buying diminished and cloves were gathered by Makassar and Javanese traders for re-export; one interpretation is that Chinese traders were increasingly absorbed into East Javanese trading families. Thereafter, Maluku cloves moved through Java, and exports to both Europe and China rose sharply around 1400.

At a broad level, commodity flows between Southeast Asia and China tended to follow a complementary pattern: Southeast Asia supplied China mainly with primary products gathered or cultivated locally, whereas China shipped manufactured items into Southeast Asian markets most notably porcelain, metal goods, medicines, and fine textiles. In the Tang and early Song, many of the seaborne imports reaching China were elite luxuries originating around the Indian Ocean and West Asia, familiar to courtly circles through earlier Central Asian land connections (e.g., aromatics, storax, glass, ivory, gems, pearls, rosewater, dates). One mid-twelfth-century inventory (1141) reportedly enumerated 339 categories of imports from Southeast and West Asia. Srivijaya's role as a transshipment hub also mattered, because cargos were augmented there with Southeast Asian Forest and animal products such as g-haru and sandalwood, camphor, benzoin and pine resins, and items like rhino horn, ivory, feathers, skins, and medicinal materials; meanwhile, China exported ceramics, silk textiles, metalware/iron ingots, and foodstuffs, with porcelain styles sometimes tailored to West Asian tastes.

From the late eleventh century, this commercial mix shifted quickly. High-end luxuries increasingly became concentrated in the hands of the Song court and foreign merchants, while Chinese private traders oriented themselves toward non-luxury commodities. These included spices and aromatics (cloves, nutmeg, camphor, fragrant woods), pharmacopeia, sappanwood, betel nuts, coconut mats, and cotton textiles sourced from Java and also brought in via Indian re-export channels. Some imports directly competed with or replaced domestic materials rattan and camphor-treated woods, for example, fed furniture production. At the same time, Chinese exports to Southeast Asia diversified further, spanning precious metals and copper coinage, ironware and ingots, silks and brocades, and an expanded range of ceramics (including celadon, qingbai, blue-and-white, and domestic stonewares). Maritime archaeology especially shipwreck cargoes adds concrete evidence for how varied this interregional trade could be. The Belitung wreck (off Sumatra, dated to around 826 and likely Arab or Indian) carried Chinese ceramics and precious metalwork intended for West Asian consumers. The Cirebon wreck (tenth century, Java) points to mixed cargoes that combined Chinese ceramics with Persian glass and Indian Ocean pearls and gemstones. The Pulau Buaya wreck (c.1300, near Singapore) reflects China-to-Java/Sumatra movement with ceramics, ironwares, bronze gongs, and metal ingots, while the Java Sea wreck (thirteenth century) indicates exceptionally large volumes reported at about 100,000 ceramic pieces plus roughly 200 tons of iron pots and bars.

Over roughly four centuries, this sustained surge in exchange reshaped economic and social life on both sides. In Java, expanding trade supported technical change (including ceramic techniques influenced by China and textile influences from India), encouraged more intensive and export-oriented agriculture (e.g., double-cropping and other cash crops), and deepened commercialization in ways that increased demand for currency such as Chinese copper coin. In China, the diffusion of fast-ripening Champa rice contributed to Song-era commercialization by easing labor constraints in agriculture and enabling greater engagement in manufacturing and trade, reinforcing China's position as an exceptionally wealthy economy in that period.

Maritime exchange began to lose momentum around 1300, and scholars have proposed multiple explanations for this slowdown ranging from the disruptive aftershocks of the Mongol attack on Java, to broader climatic shifts and

waves of political instability affecting Southeast Asia, West Asia, India, and China. A key environmental factor highlighted is the onset of the “Little Ice Age”: cooler conditions from the 1340s are associated with weakened/failed monsoon patterns, which in turn contributed to crop shortfalls, famine, and social unrest in both Southeast Asia and China (Wade, 2009, p. 264; Heng, 2009, p. 207; von Glahn, 2016, p. 284). At the same time, interregional pressures intensified further inland. In Central Asia, the Mongol federation began to fracture, and the spread of bubonic plague along Eurasian trade routes is linked to catastrophic demographic losses in Europe, where the disease is described as killing around one-third of the population between 1347 and 1353. Taken together, these intersecting shocks environmental, political, and epidemiological help explain why maritime trade networks that had previously expanded so strongly could contract in the mid-fourteenth century.

c.1400 to 1650: Age of Commerce

The series of Ming expeditions led by Zheng He (1405–1433) is presented as a major catalyst for an “Age of Commerce” that sustained a long upswing in trade across Island Southeast Asia. In this framing, the boom was powered by commodities such as spices, cotton textiles, porcelain, and silver, and the voyages helped intensify exchange, broaden regional production, and foster the emergence of new commercial nodes most famously Melaka while also coinciding with the rise of new political formations on the mainland. At the same time, Ming maritime and diplomatic strategies from the 1370s to the 1430s are characterized as a sharp break with earlier patterns: they could be forceful and expansionary yet did not pursue colonial settlement in the way Europeans later would. A key early-Ming pivot was the haijin (海禁) ban on private seaborne trade (1372–1567), which outlawed Chinese merchant voyaging and redirected overseas exchange into a state-controlled tribute framework. Within this policy environment, Zheng He’s fleets are interpreted as instruments for projecting Ming claims to cultural and political primacy; and although many studies emphasize the Indian Ocean routes, the text also notes outward movement toward the Philippines, Borneo, and Eastern Indonesia.

The account then periodizes Zheng He’s missions by itinerary. The first three voyages (1405–07, 1407–09, 1409–11) repeatedly linked Southeast Asian ports and polities including Champa, Siam, Java, Melaka, Samudera, Palembang, and Lambri with South Asian destinations such as Ceylon, Cochin, and Calicut. The fourth voyage (1413–15) extended beyond India to Hormuz, then to Dhofar and Aden, and onward to Mogadishu. The fifth (1417–19) is described as bringing back multiple envoys and highly visible tribute, including a giraffe; the sixth (1421–22) similarly returned envoys from as far as East Africa; and the final voyage (1431–33), during which Zheng He died, revisited East Africa once more. Finally, the text treats the motives of the voyages as multi-stranded, combining political, military, cultural, and commercial objectives. Under Hongwu and Yongle, the court is depicted as actively asserting Ming authority from China’s southern frontiers through maritime Southeast Asia and into the Indian Ocean, grounded in a self-understanding of rule as divinely authorized. This stance underpinned demands that other polities recognize Ming legitimacy and deliver tribute, with the promise of political reward through the enfeoffment of compliant rulers. As the fleets of Zheng would show time and again, refusal or insufficient deference would be met with lethal force, recalcitrant rulers replaced with pliant ones and, as with Ceylon in 1411, the capture of the king who was taken back to the Ming court (Wade 2008, 596; Lo 2012, 338; Liao 2019, 136).

Wealthy and heavily armed, the Chinese [fleet] overawed potential opposition and crushed those unwise enough not to be willing to submit to a dependent status. ... [the absence of colonisation] should not obscure the Chinese use of massive military power to impose their will throughout Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean.

(Finlay 1991, 10)

Ming maritime governance aligned closely with Hongwu's broader effort to restrain commercialization and reassert an idealized Confucian autarky anchored in self-sufficient village life. Within this logic, the tribute system was an institutional "fit" because it enabled the court to monopolize overseas exchange, restricting inflows largely to high-value exotica spices, incense, aromatics, and rarities intended for imperial and elite consumption. The prohibition on private Chinese merchant participation was designed to protect that state monopoly, yet the repeated reissuance of the ban implies that enforcement was persistently weak (Wade, 2008; von Glahn, 2016; Schottenhammer, 2021, 2022). After the final Zheng He voyage, tribute missions increasingly took on commercial characteristics, while unofficial trade expanded "by stealth" (often categorized as piracy in official discourse) and domestic markets revived alongside wider economic growth (Wade, 2008; von Glahn, 2016; Schottenhammer, 2022). Economically, one of the most dramatic downstream effects of the Ming voyages appears in the pepper market, linking procurement decisions in the Indian Ocean to price movements in both China and Europe. T'ien argues that the fleets' exceptionally large purchases on India's Malabar Coast pushed pepper prices down in China so steeply that what had been a luxury became more like an everyday commodity. Conversely, because Malabar remained Europe's primary black-pepper source until the sixteenth century, depleted availability contributed to sharp European price spikes (O'Rourke & Williamson, 2009). A striking example is England in 1411, where the record shows only a single sale half a pound at an extremely high price in Oxford suggesting that pepper was scarcely obtainable there at the time (Rogers, 1882).

Two connected consequences followed one centered in China and another unfolding across Southeast Asia. Pepper had long reached China via Southeast Asian ports since the Tang and was initially valued for medicinal use; pepper and sappanwood were also treated as court-monopoly goods. From the mid-Yongle reign, pepper was even used as a substitute currency to pay civil and military officials, enabling the state to release huge warehouse stocks at monopoly valuations; officials then sold pepper into local markets at prices around one-tenth (or less) of the official valuation of one tael of silver per catty. This helped depress local pepper prices and indirectly supported market revival undercutting Hongwu's autarkic goals. At the same time, strong Chinese demand encouraged Southeast Asian tribute missions to carry more pepper, and by the 1540s the pepper-silver exchange rate could fall as low as 7.5 taels for 100 catties when Southeast Asian ships arrived far below official state rates (T'ien, 1981).

Pepper's growing importance in the China-facing economy of maritime Southeast Asia can be read as an outcome of both demand and institutional channeling. Although Chinese records sometimes attributed natural produce to the entrepôt where it was traded rather than to its true place of cultivation (Wheatley, 1959), evidence suggests pepper was already being regulated and standardized as an export commodity in East Java by the early eleventh century (Christie, 1998). In the fifteenth century, large-scale Ming-era purchases are commonly linked to the acceleration of pepper production especially in Sumatra and West Java so that an increasing share of supply served either local consumption or the China market (T'ien, 1981; Reid, 1993; Findlay & O'Rourke, 2007). Over time, Chinese shipping patterns shifted: by the mid-fifteenth century, Chinese vessels largely stopped sailing beyond Melaka for pepper, while by the sixteenth century Europeans increasingly bought pepper within Southeast Asia, with Aceh also connecting directly to Red Sea routes (Reid, 1993; Findlay & O'Rourke, 2007). By the early 1600s, pepper had

become the region's leading export, supported by measurable production and export dynamics discussed in the broader statistical literature (Bulbeck et al., 1998).

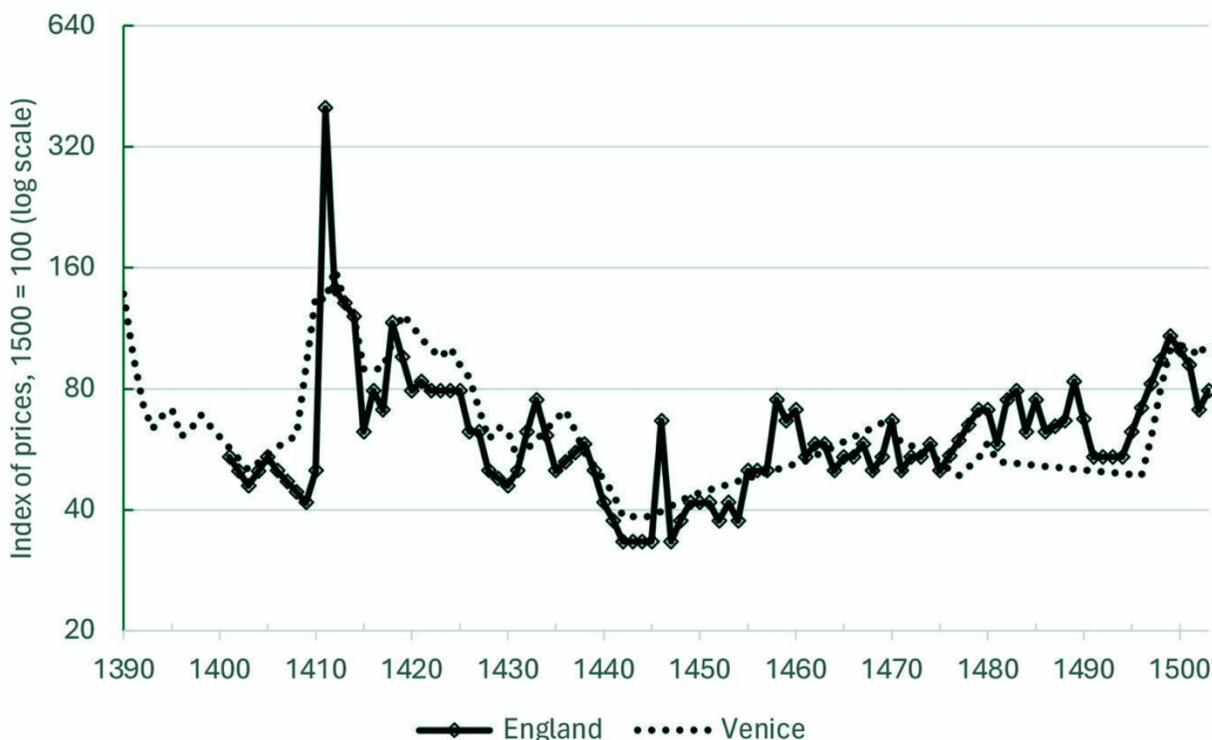


Figure 1. Index of nominal prices of pepper in England and Venice, 1390–1503

Melaka's rise illustrates how diplomacy, logistics, and market-making reinforced one another in the fifteenth century. After entering tributary relations with Ming China in 1405 framed as protection against Siam and accompanied by imperial enfeoffment Melaka functioned as a key logistical base for Zheng He's fleets, even as other stopovers (including East Java) remained important (Schottenhammer, 2021; Wade, 2008; Liao, 2019). Its emergence as the principal regional entrepôt stimulated upstream adjustments: intensified rice production and shipbuilding in Burma and Siam, and higher-volume circulation of Indian cotton textiles alongside Chinese silks, ceramics, and metalware (Findlay & O'Rourke, 2007). As the central clearinghouse for spices, Melaka also helped accelerate the diffusion of Islam toward eastern parts of the archipelago by tightening inter-port connections and commercial visitation (Reid, 2010).

When Ming maritime engagement receded after the 1430s, its aftershocks were felt unevenly across the network. The withdrawal is associated with a decline in China's practical maritime knowledge and a reduction of Chinese political leverage in Southeast Asian ports; overseas Chinese communities persisted but were increasingly left to operate within diaspora circuits (Reid, 2010; Findlay & O'Rourke, 2007). Material culture signals this disruption as well: Chinese ceramics became scarce for a period often labeled the "Ming gap," while alternative ceramic production centers expanded in Burma, Siam, and Vietnam, sometimes using vessels staffed by Chinese diaspora crews (Brown, 2010). This loosening of the earlier Ming-centered order helped create space for European intrusion, even though the

Portuguese seizure of Melaka in 1511 initially disrupted spice and pepper flows and only later did exports recover through diversified merchant channels (Liao, 2019; Findlay & O'Rourke, 2007). By the 1620s, international trade volumes reached a pre-modern peak, with pepper and spices constituting a major share of Europe-bound cargo and remaining central to trade with China and Japan (Reid, 1993).

European entry did not automatically translate into control. The Portuguese could pioneer a sea route from Europe to Asia without securing dominance over the pepper-and-spice complex; the Dutch VOC, however, pursued coercive exclusion in the early seventeenth century. Their campaign included violence to impose monopolies most starkly the Banda massacre in 1621 to secure nutmeg and the Ambon killings in 1623 to enforce cloves followed by successive moves against key nodes and polities (including Melaka in 1641, Makassar in 1667, and Bantam in 1683) (Reid, 1993; Findlay & O'Rourke, 2007). Yet even as the VOC narrowed competitors' access to production zones and chokepoints, a comprehensive pepper monopoly remained elusive (Reid, 1993). Finally, the mid-seventeenth-century downturn should not be reduced to VOC coercion alone. A growing body of interpretation frames the contraction as part of a wider "general crisis" affecting Europe, China, Japan, India, and Southeast Asia, driven by overlapping political shocks, economic stresses, and environmental pressures (Reid, 1993; Parker, 2013). In this reading, global integration intensified since the Iberian voyages and the massive circulation of silver interacted with climate-related hardship (drought, harvest volatility, and famine), contributing to systemic instability, including dynastic breakdown in China and subsistence stress across Southeast Asia (Reid, 1993; Parker, 2013). Within the region, collapsing pepper prices in the 1650s are linked to a wider retreat from trade and export-oriented cash cropping toward local self-provisioning, with declining incomes visible in reduced demand for imported Indian cotton textiles (Reid, 1993, 2009).

Trading and Economy Network

Asia's maritime commerce can be conceptualized as a set of overlapping merchant and diaspora networks operating through three interconnected interaction circuits (Sen, 2014, p. 34; Abu-Lughod, 1989, pp. 33–35). The western circuit followed the Arabian Sea rim from East Africa to India; a central circuit linked southern India, the Bay of Bengal, the Melaka Strait, and Mainland Southeast Asia; and a third circuit encompassed Maritime Southeast Asia from the Melaka Strait into the South and East China Seas. Rather than functioning as isolated routes, these circuits were joined by multiple merchant communities whose movements and settlements connected the system across regions and seasons.

Older labels such as "peddling" (van Leur, 1955; reiterated in Heng, 2009) and "trickle trade" (Hansen, 2020) describe the serial, staged nature of buying and selling, but they understate the scale and organizational sophistication of Asian commercial systems. In practice, intra-regional exchange was often less risky and more profitable than direct end-to-end voyages, since trade typically proceeded through segmental sub-networks timed to monsoon rhythms rather than spanning the entire corridor in one run. Long-distance ventures also faced classic business constraints: recruiting trustworthy agents (agency risk) and raising capital for voyages lasting months or years. Kinship-based firms helped, but diaspora networks organized around shared origin, kin, and religion also created a fraternity-like structure that reduced monitoring and transaction costs. Because information moved no faster than ships and traders, port layovers (often lasting months while waiting for monsoon reversal) became crucial moments to trade, reassess risks, and acquire intelligence about opportunities. Europeans quickly learned that profit in Asia often depended on mastering intra-Asian circuits especially using Indian cotton cloth to obtain pepper and spices in Island Southeast Asia rather than relying only on bullion shipments from Europe (Reid, 2009). Earnings from these regional cycles reduced the need to transport silver around the Cape and helped pay for overseas operations (Chang, 2019; Findlay & O'Rourke, 2007; Heng, 2009; Reid, 1988, 1993, 2009).

Evidence is uneven: we know far more about Chinese merchant networks (e.g., Guangdong/Fujian) and later European activity than about Southeast Asian traders themselves (Reid, 1993). Shipwreck and archival materials, however, show that Chinese participation ranged from elite-backed ventures to small traders and agents illustrated by ownership tokens in the c.1278 Quanzhou wreck and evidence of overseas Chinese involvement in intra-Asian trade during the Yuan (Heng, 2009; Hansen, 2020). Dutch-era observations point to similar patterns of many small traders sharing a single voyage's cargo space and partnership-based ownership structures (Ng, 2017).

Conclusions

The study synthesises how maritime commerce and interregional economic linkages between West and East Asia were channelled through Southeast Asia from roughly the tenth century to the mid-seventeenth century. Because the narrative depends heavily on Chinese documentary material, Southeast Asian shipowners and merchants appear less prominently, although archaeological discoveries have helped rebalance the evidence. Even so, Southeast Asia emerges not merely as the homeland of celebrated spices, but as the strategic hinge of sea-lanes and trading networks that connected producers and merchant communities along the maritime silk routes. Its ports functioned as redistribution hubs: commodities arriving from western circuits were frequently forwarded northward to China (and beyond to Japan and Korea), while cargoes moving out from northern markets were redirected toward South and West Asia, with only small volumes continuing on to Europe. In parallel, Southeast Asia acted as both a major consumer of manufactures from China and India and a supplier of spices and forest products valued across Eurasia.

In terms of composition, trade in the first millennium is often portrayed as dominated by elite luxury goods, but by the early second millennium the scale of “everyday” items expanded markedly within Southeast Asia and in exchanges with China. Demand surged for Chinese household ceramics and metalwares, while Indian cotton textiles became foundational for clothing in Island Southeast Asia and were even re-exported to China. China, in turn, drew on Southeast Asia for specialty timbers and rattan (and later rice). Although the Portuguese voyage around the Cape (1498) ultimately reshaped global commercial geography, European dominance in Asian long-distance trade only became pronounced in the seventeenth century after the Dutch consolidated control in Insular Southeast Asia diminishing (though not erasing) the earlier primacy of Asian merchant networks. The chapter closes with two core inferences: (1) seaborne exchange between Southeast Asia and India spices/forest products traded for Indian cotton textiles was substantial and connected onward to West Asia and even Europe; and (2) trade with China was larger still, because China's vast demand repeatedly drew merchants and captains across the Indian Ocean and through the seas of Southeast Asia for centuries.

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