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EARLY CHINA AND THE INDIAN OCEAN NETWORKS

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ABSTRACT. This contribution examines Chinese engagement with the maritime world, specifically the greater Indian Ocean region, from the Neolithic Period to the ninth century AD. It highlights three key issues: the problems caused by the fact that the Chinese dynasties did not actively participate in maritime trade and exchanges until after the seventh century; how, despite this passive role of the imperial courts, several regions of China were already intimately connected to the Indian Ocean networks; the significant contributions of the spread of Buddhism through the maritime routes during the Later Han period (AD 23–220) and the fiscal needs of the Tang empire (AD 618–907) in the mid-eighth century to the ways in which the Chinese engaged with the Indian Ocean world.

RÉSUMÉ. Cette contribution étudie les relations de la Chine avec le monde maritime, et plus spécifiquement avec la vaste région de l’océan Indien, du Néolithique au IX^{ème} siècle ap. J.-C. Elle dégage les trois questions principales suivantes : les problèmes posés par l’absence de participation active aux commerce et échanges maritimes des dynasties chinoises avant le VII^{ème} siècle ; comment plusieurs régions de la Chine étaient déjà intimement connectées aux réseaux de l’océan Indien malgré la passivité des cours impériales ; les contributions importantes de la transmission du bouddhisme par les routes maritimes durant la dynastie des Han postérieurs (23–220 ap. J.-C.) et des besoins financiers de l’empire Tang (618–907 ap. J.-C.) au milieu du VIII^{ème} siècle à la manière dont la Chine s’engagea auprès du monde de l’océan Indien.



This essay examines China’s (including what is present-day northern Vietnam) engagement with the maritime world, specifically the greater Indian Ocean region, from the Neolithic Period to the ninth century. It highlights three key issues. First, it underscores the difficulties of examining early China’s interactions with the Indian Ocean realm due to the fact that the Chinese dynasties did not actively participate in maritime trade and exchanges until after the seventh century. Second, it demonstrates that despite this passive role of the imperial courts, which were mostly located in the Yellow River Valley region, and even before the occupation of the territories south of the Yangzi River by the Han dynasty (206 BC–220 AD), several regions of China were already intimately connected to the Indian Ocean networks. Third, it argues that the spread of Buddhism through the maritime routes during the Later Han period (23 AD–220 AD) and the fiscal needs

of the Tang empire (618–907) in the mid-eighth century contributed significantly to transforming the ways in which the Chinese rulers and their subjects engaged with the Indian Ocean world.

THE COMPLEXITIES OF CHINA'S ENGAGEMENT WITH THE INDIAN OCEAN WORLD

It is important to make a distinction, especially at the early stages of Chinese history, between the Yellow River valley, where the first Chinese dynasties were centered, and the peripheral regions, including the southern coast, inhabited by non-Sinitic people. It was not until the gradual expansion towards the south (and the south-west) by the Qin (221–206 BC), Han, and subsequent dynasties that the coastal regions and people were incorporated into what is present-day China. Even after the incorporation of the coastal regions, the Chinese courts had limited, in any, interest in advancing territorial control into the maritime realm before Qubilai Khan (r. 1260–1294) in the thirteenth century. In fact, prior to the eighth century, the courts were also less concerned about administering maritime trade and the foreign merchant communities living in the coastal areas. This lack of court interest in the southern coastal region had several implications on the ways in which China engaged with the Indian Ocean world and how these engagements should be examined and understood.

One of the main consequences of the neglect of the maritime world was the inadequate Chinese reporting on Indian Ocean interactions and the regions that lay beyond the southern coastal area. Only partial information on the exchanges taking place at the coastal region reached the court officials and scribes before the eighth century. These writers, who may have gathered their information from second- or third-hand sources, most likely had very rudimentary understanding of the geography of the maritime world. Moreover, since the Chinese courts, influenced by Confucian teachings, perceived trading activity and the merchant class with contempt, commercial exchanges between foreign traders and the inhabitants of coastal China were not something that merited detailed discussion in the official dynastic histories. Notices about the court's interactions with the Indian Ocean polities found in the Chinese dynastic histories are mostly in form of records about foreign tribute missions. These were mostly mercantile ventures organized by foreign traders trying to access Chinese markets, but the court scribes described them as diplomatic missions sent by distant rulers to acknowledge the *sovereignty of the Chinese emperor*. For most of the first millennium AD, the foreign tribute carriers appearing at the Chinese court were the main source for information about the Indian Ocean world. Often the information provided by them was inadequate and sometimes deliberately distorted in order to maximize profit and elevate the status of the polity the tribute carriers represented at the Chinese court. Thus evidence for early China's engagement with the Indian Ocean polities and merchant networks have to be parsed from these subjective records.

An example of such problematic, albeit widely cited, record is found in the *Han shu* (History of the Han Dynasty), compiled in the first century AD. The record describes trading and tributary relations of the Han Empire with the maritime region, the furthest of which seems to be a polity called Huangzhi. According to the record, contacts with these maritime sites existed since the time of the Han Emperor Wu (r. 141 –87 BC), with court officials sailing on boats belonging to ‘barbarians’ to procure foreign goods such as pearls and precious stones. On one occasion, Huangzhi reportedly offered live rhinoceroses as tribute to the Chinese court. While this record suggests contacts between the Chinese court and the maritime world during the Han dynasty, it is not clear how far into the Indian Ocean these links went. The identification of Huangzhi has ranged from Borneo in Southeast Asia to Kanchipuram on the Coromandel coast of India.¹ Huangzhi is not mentioned again in Chinese sources, nor do the Chinese Buddhist monks, who travelled between South Asia and China by the maritime routes, clarify its identity. The records on Huangzhi, therefore, must be used with caution especially with regard to the extent of early China’s interactions with and knowledge about the Indian Ocean world.

The second point that needs to be highlighted is the fact that very few Chinese traders or officials ventured into the Indian Ocean prior to the ninth century. Frequent arrivals of foreign merchants at the coastal regions, the lack of court interest in external trade, and the absence of a local shipbuilding industry may have prevented Chinese officials and traders from actively participating in maritime exchanges. This does not imply, nonetheless, that there was total absence of people from the Chinese dynasties venturing into the maritime world before this period. The above record on Huangzhi, for example, is indication of possible travel by court officials at least into the South China Sea region. And as noted below, there are other occasional notices about the visits of court officials and Buddhist monks from China to South and Southeast Asia by the maritime routes prior to the ninth century.

Third, foreign sources are also sporadic and inconclusive about Chinese presence in the Indian Ocean before the ninth century. The earliest mention of ‘Chinese boats’/ ‘Chinese vessels’ in the Indian Ocean is found in Arabic records, *Akhbār al-Šīn wa’l-Hind* (An Account of China and India) compiled by Abū Zayd al-Sīrāfī in the mid-ninth century, and *Muruḥ adh-dhahab wa ma’adin al-jawahir* (The Meadows of Gold and Mines of Gems) attributed to Abu al-Ḥasan ‘Alī ibn al-Ḥusayn ibn ‘Alī al-Mas‘ūdī (d. 956).² However, it is not clear if the authors of these two works were able to distinguish between Chinese and Southeast Asian people and boats. Especially during the ninth and tenth centuries two powerful polities, invested in maritime commerce, dominated the Indian Ocean trade.

¹ Yü Y., *Trade and Expansion in Han China: A Study in the Structure of Sino-Barbarian Economic Relations*, Berkeley: University of California Press (1967), pp. 172–75.

² AHMAD S.M., (trans.), *Arabic Classical Accounts of India and China*. Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Studies (1989); MACKINTOSH-SMITH T., (trans., *Accounts of India and China*, New York: New York University Press (2014); SPRENGER A., (trans.), *El-Mas‘ūdī’s Historical Encyclopaedia, Entitled ‘Meadows of Gold and Mines of Gems’*, vol. 1, London: The Oriental Translation Fund of Great Britain and Ireland (1841).

These were Srivijaya (c. 650–1377) in Southeast Asia, which monopolized maritime trade with China through the Straits of Malacca, and the Cholas (c. 850–1279), who controlled the Coromandel coast and sometimes parts of Sri Lanka.³ It is unlikely that these two polities would have permitted a direct commercial link between China and the Persian Gulf. Moreover, there is no archaeological or textual evidence for the production of Chinese ocean-going vessels before the twelfth century. The earliest excavated remains of a ship engaged in trade with China, as mentioned below, are from a ninth-century, Arab-made, dhow found near the Indonesian island of Belitung.⁴

Finally, it should also be noted that the Indian Ocean connections of China were not always through the coastal regions. As noted in the next section, areas such as Sichuan and Yunnan in southwest China received supplies of cowries from the Maldives Islands in the Indian Ocean from the second millennium BC through to the second millennium AD (see fig. 1). Maldivian cowries reached southwest China through the Bay of Bengal, Assam in northeast India, and Burma (now Myanmar). Some of these were subsequently traded to the Chinese courts in the Yellow River Valley. It was perhaps not until the middle of the second millennium AD, when Chinese representatives reached the Maldives Islands, that the court scribes became aware of the oceanic connections of southwest China.

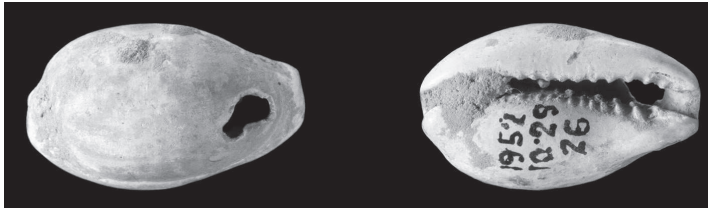


Fig. 1 Cowries from the Maldive Islands. These sea snail shells were used as currency; they were imported into China from the 2nd millennium BC

EARLY CHINA AND THE MARITIME WORLD

Peter Bellwood, Wilhelm G. Solheim, and Tianlong Jiao have discussed the maritime networks of early seafaring people that linked parts of Taiwan, coastal China, Southeast Asia and Madagascar during the Neolithic Period.⁵ According to Solheim,

³ SEN T., *Buddhism, Diplomacy, and Trade: The Realignment of Sino-Indian Relations, 600–1400*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press (2003), pp. 220–227.

⁴ FLECKER M., 'A ninth-century AD Arab or Indian shipwreck in Indonesia: First evidence for direct trade with China', *World Archaeology* 32.3 (2001), 335–54.

⁵ BELLWOOD P., 'Austronesian Prehistory in Southeast Asia: Homeland, Expansion and Transformation', in *The Austronesians: Historical and Comparative Perspective*, ed. P. BELLWOOD, J.J. FOX and D. TRYON, Canberra: The Australian National University (1995), pp. 96–111; SOLHEIM W.G., *Archaeology and Culture in Southeast Asia: Unraveling the Nusantao*, Manila: The University of Philippines Press (2006); JIAO T., *The Neolithic of Southeast China: Cultural Transformation and Regional Interaction on the Coast*, Youngstown: Cambria Press (2007).

the ‘Nusantao’ people, who consisted of Austronesian and non-Austronesian speakers, started establishing their maritime trading networks sometime around 5000 BC. Originating from eastern Vietnam, this ‘Nusantao maritime trading network’ comprised ‘four lobes’ or ‘sub-areas’, and covered the vast region from Japan to Madagascar.⁶ Tianlong Jiao, on the other hand, has demonstrated the existence of sub-regional maritime networks of the Damaoshan and Huangguashan people that connected coastal China to the Taiwan Straits and the islands of Southeast Asia. Painted pottery, ceramic jars, and stone adzes seem to have circulated within these networks.⁷

The maritime linkages of coastal China with sites in Southeast Asia, and through these sites to the wider Indian Ocean world, developed rapidly after the southward expansion of the Qin Empire. This expansion triggered the formation of several new polities in the coastal regions by non-Sinitic people collectively known as the Hundred Yue (Bai Yue).⁸ For example, in 204 BC, the Nanyue polity was established shortly after the fall of the Qin empire. It eventually ruled over areas that included parts of what are now the Yunnan, Guangxi, and Guangdong provinces, as well as parts of northern Vietnam. In 111 BC, the Nanyue polity was annexed by the Han Emperor Wu.

It has been suggested that the Qin and Han expansions into the coastal regions may have been instigated by ‘commercial motives’.⁹ Indeed, before these expansions, the Yue people seem to have developed lucrative trading relations with ports in Southeast Asia using boats that sailed close to the coastline. By the time the Nanyue polity was established, maritime contacts between Southeast and South Asia were already vibrant, with commodities and traders moving frequently between the two regions. Additionally, craftsmen from South Asia settled in various ports of Southeast Asia were using precious stones imported from South Asia to make jewellery and other adornments for local consumption and for export to places such as Jiaozhi and Hepu in Han China.¹⁰

During the Qin and Former Han (206 BC–9 AD) periods, the list of foreign commodities entering the coastal regions of China included glass, rhinoceros horns, ivory, pearls, beads, and incense. Most of these objects have been found in the tombs belonging to the elite members of the society in Hepu (see fig. 2). These artifacts, which primarily date to between 30 BC to 220 AD, are clear indications of coastal China’s connections not only to the South China Sea region, but also,

⁶ SOLHEIM, *Archaeology and Culture*, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

⁷ JIAO, *The Neolithic of Southeast China*, *op. cit.*, chapters 6–11.

⁸ PETERS H., ‘Tattooed Faces and Stilt Houses: Who Were the Ancient Yue?’, *Sino-Platonic Papers* 17.April (1990), 1–27; NORMAN J. and MEI Tsu-lin, ‘The Austroasiatics in Ancient South China, Some Lexical Evidence’, *Monumenta Serica* 32 (1976), 274–301; HENRY E., ‘The Submerged History of Yuè’, *Sino-Platonic Papers* 16.May (2007), 1–36.

⁹ BORELL B., ‘Han Period Glass Vessels in the Early Tongking Gulf Region,’ in *The Tongking Gulf Through History*, ed. N. COOKE, T. LI, and J.A. ANDERSON, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press (2011), p. 63.

¹⁰ GLOVER I.C. and BELLINA B., ‘Ban Don Ta Phet and Khao Sam Kaeo: The Earliest Indian Contacts Re-assessed’, in *Early Interactions between South and Southeast Asia*, ed. P. MANGUIN, A. MANI, and G. WADE, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (2011), pp. 19–45.

through various maritime networks, to the Red Sea area. Several of the items of glassware found in these tombs seem to have originated in South Asia and suggest Roman influences. Similarly, necklaces and bracelets made of carnelian and garnet were South or Southeast Asian imports. Crystal and gold ornaments, on the other hand, may have come from the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean Sea.¹¹

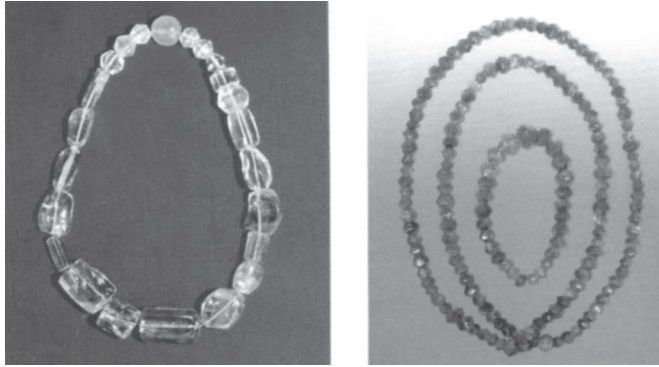


Fig. 2 Hefu jewelry of the Han period, made from imported glass beads.

Records in the early Chinese dynastic histories *Shi ji* (Records of the Grand Historian) and *Han shu* mention Guangzhou also as a flourishing port and a place to accumulate great wealth through trade in foreign luxuries. In fact, it has been suggested that early maritime trade had a significant impact on the production of agricultural goods and handicrafts in the port-city, contributing to the commercialization of Guangzhou and leading to the growth of economic exchanges between the coastal regions and the hinterland areas of China.¹²

Also by the beginning of the Common Era, the hinterland areas around the Yellow River valley as well as the present-day provinces of Sichuan and Yunnan were connected to the Indian Ocean world through trade in cowries. Archaeological evidence dating to the second millennium BC indicates that cowries originating in the Maldives reached coastal Bengal through the Bay of Bengal maritime networks and were subsequently traded to the Dian (located in the present-day Yunnan region), Sanxingdui (located in the present-day Sichuan region), and Shang polities through complex networks of overland routes across Assam and Burma. The supply and use of these cowries in rituals, as adornments, and in economic activities in Yunnan, Sichuan, and the Yellow River Valley illustrates the multiple ways in which various regions of China were integrated into the Indian Ocean world.¹³

¹¹ XIONG Z., 'The Hefu Han Tombs and the Maritime Silk Road of the Han Dynasty', *Antiquity* 88 (2014), 1229–1243.

¹² HUANG Q., *Guangdong haishang Sichou zhilu shi* [The Maritime Silk Road in Guangdong's History], Guangzhou: Guangdong jingji chubanshe (2003).

¹³ VOGEL H.U. and HIERONYMUS S., 'Cowry Trade and Its Role in the Economy of Yunnan from the Ninth to the Mid-Seventeenth Century, Part 1', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 36.3 (1993), 211–52; YANG B., 'Horses, Silver, and Cowries: Yunnan in Global Perspective', *Journal of World History* 15.3 (2004), 281–322.

CHINA AND THE MARITIME WORLD IN THE FIRST MILLENNIUM

The period from the collapse of the Han dynasty in the early third century to the end of the first millennium AD was critical for China's engagement with the Indian Ocean world. During this phase, the coastal areas of China became more integrated with the South China Sea and Bay of Bengal regions through the networks of Buddhist travellers and itinerant traders from different parts of the maritime world. Diplomatic interactions with maritime polities also increased in course of these several centuries. Additionally, from the eighth century onwards, maritime commerce was formally incorporated into the fiscal policies of the Chinese dynasties. This latter development may have led to advances in local shipbuilding industry and eventually, during the first two centuries of the second millennium, the spread of Chinese diasporic communities to several Indian Ocean ports.¹⁴ This section of the essay explores the Buddhist and the commercial connections through to the end of the ninth century.

By the third century AD, Jiaozhi had emerged as a key center for Buddhist activities. The port attracted foreign traders from South and Central Asia, some of whom are known to have practiced Buddhism. Frequently cited is the example of the Sogdian monk Kang Senghui (d. 280 AD), whose ancestors lived in India before his father migrated to Jiaozhi. It is not clear if Kang became a monk in Jiaozhi, which would indicate the presence of monastic institutions in the region, but the site was evidently an important link between Buddhist centers in South Asia and China. In fact, from Jiaozhi, Kang Senghui travelled to Jiankang (present-day Nanjing), the capital of the Wu polity, where the ruler Sun Quan (r. 222–252) was actively promoting Buddhism and maritime trade.¹⁵ Not far from Jiankang, in the northern coastal region of the Jiangsu province, is Mount Kongwang, where some of the earliest images associated with Buddhism have been found engraved on the boulders. Dating from the late-second or early third century, these images suggest the existence of Indo-Scythian or Parthian seafaring communities in the region.¹⁶

Guangzhou was another location on the Chinese coast that witnessed influx of Buddhist ideas and monks through the maritime routes. Central Asian monks named Liang Qianglouzhi and Zhi Fafang reached the port in 281 and between 362 and 365 respectively. A monk from Jibin (indicating the area around the

¹⁴ LO J., *China as a Sea Power (1127)–1368: A Preliminary Survey of the Maritime Expansion and Naval Exploits of the Chinese People During the Southern Song and Yuan Periods*, Singapore and Hong Kong: NUS Press and Hong Kong University Press (2012).

¹⁵ SEN T., 'Maritime Southeast Asia between South Asia and China to the Sixteenth Century', *TRaNS: Trans-Regional and -National Studies of Southeast Asia* 2.1 (2014), 31–59; SEN T., 'Buddhism and the Maritime Crossings', in *China and Beyond in the Mediaeval Period: Cultural Crossings and Inter-Regional Connections*, ed. D. WONG and G. HELD, Amherst: Cambria Press (2014), pp. 39–62.

¹⁶ RHIE M.M., *Early Buddhist Art of China and Central Asia, Volume One: Later Han, Three Kingdoms and Western Chin in China and Bactria to Shan-shan in Central Asia*, Leiden: Brill (1999), pp. 27–47.

present-day Kashmir and Afghanistan) named Tanmoyeshe (Dharmayaśas) arrived in the late fourth century and was credited for establishing the famous Guangxiao Monastery in Guangzhou. In the fifth century, the number of Buddhist monks reaching the Chinese coast increased significantly, with at least 25 of them arriving in the six decades between 420 and 479.¹⁷ The establishment of Buddhist monasteries and the growing maritime trade in Guangzhou attracted Chinese immigrants from the north that contributed to the urbanization and further commercialization of the port-city.¹⁸

Existing textual sources suggest that Faxian was the first Chinese monk to travel from South Asia to China by the maritime route. Faxian, who embarked on his trip through the overland route in 399, started his return voyage by first travelling on a mercantile ship from the eastern Indian port city of Tamralipti to Sri Lanka in 411. Subsequently, he took a 'large ship' from Sri Lanka that was sailing towards Southeast Asia. After reaching 'Yepoti' (either Sumatra or Java), the Chinese monk transferred to another large mercantile ship that was meant to travel to Guangzhou, but because of a storm ended up instead in Shandong province in northeast China.¹⁹(See figure 3.)

Faxian's maritime itinerary illustrates several important patterns of China's contacts with the Indian Ocean world in the early fifth century. First, it is indicative of the linkages across the maritime space between Bay of Bengal and the Chinese coast through distinct shipping networks. Second, it suggests the perils of maritime travel. Third, it demonstrates the intimate connections that existed between itinerant monks and seafaring merchants. These patterns endured through to the end of the first millennium AD, with monks frequently travelling by the maritime routes between South Asia and China. In the seventh century, for example, the Chinese monk Yijing (635–713) sailed from Guangzhou to Tamralipti almost in the same manner as Faxian (but without going to Sri Lanka).²⁰ A major difference by the seventh century, however, was the emergence of Sumatra, under the Srivijayan rulers, as a leading center for Buddhism and maritime commerce. (See figure 4.)

¹⁷ HE F., *Jin Tang shiqi Nanhai qiufa gaoseng qunti yanjiu* [An Examination of the Community of Eminent Monks Who Travelled to the Southern Seas in Search of the Law between the Jin and Tang Period], Beijing: Zhongjia wenhua chubanshe (2008); SEN, 'Buddhism and the Maritime Crossings', *op. cit.*, p. 44.

¹⁸ LIU S., *Liuchao de chengshi yu shehui* [The Cities and Society during the Six Dynasties Period], Taipei: Taiwan xuesheng shuju (1992).

¹⁹ SEN, 'Buddhism and the Maritime Crossings', *op. cit.*, p. 45.

²⁰ SEN, 'Buddhism and the Maritime Crossings', *op. cit.*, p. 50–1.

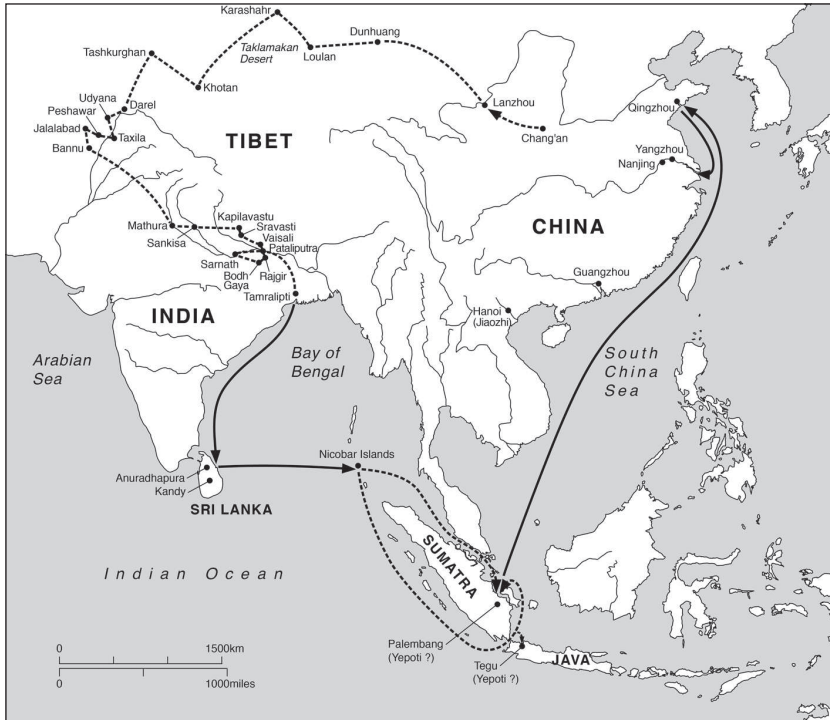


Fig. 3 Map showing the travels of the Chinese monk Faxian in the early 5th century AD.

Already in the third century, the above-mentioned Wu polity had tried to establish diplomatic, and perhaps commercial, ties with rulers in Southeast Asia. At that time, the Funan polity controlled several ports in the Malay Peninsula, especially Oc Eo, which seems to have been the main maritime link between coastal China and the Indian Ocean.²¹ Bactrian horses, Roman glassware, and South Asian precious and semi-precious stones entered the Chinese coast through these Funanese-controlled ports. It was perhaps to access foreign commodities directly from the Funan ports that the Wu court sent envoys, named Kang Tai and Zhu Ying, to visit the region in the mid-third century. The envoys returned with detailed information about Funan as well as the Southeast Asian polity's connections to South Asia.²²

²¹ PELLIOU P., 'Le Fou-Nan', *Bulletin de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient* 3 (1903), 248–303; M. VICKERY, 'Funan Reviewed: Deconstructing the Ancients', *Bulletin de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient* 90–91 (2003), 101–43.

²² J. CHEN, *Sui qian Nanhai jiaotong shiliao yanjiu* [Research on the Historical Material on Contacts with the Southern Seas Before the Sui Period], Hong Kong: Center of Asian Studies, The University of Hong Kong (2003), pp. 73–90.

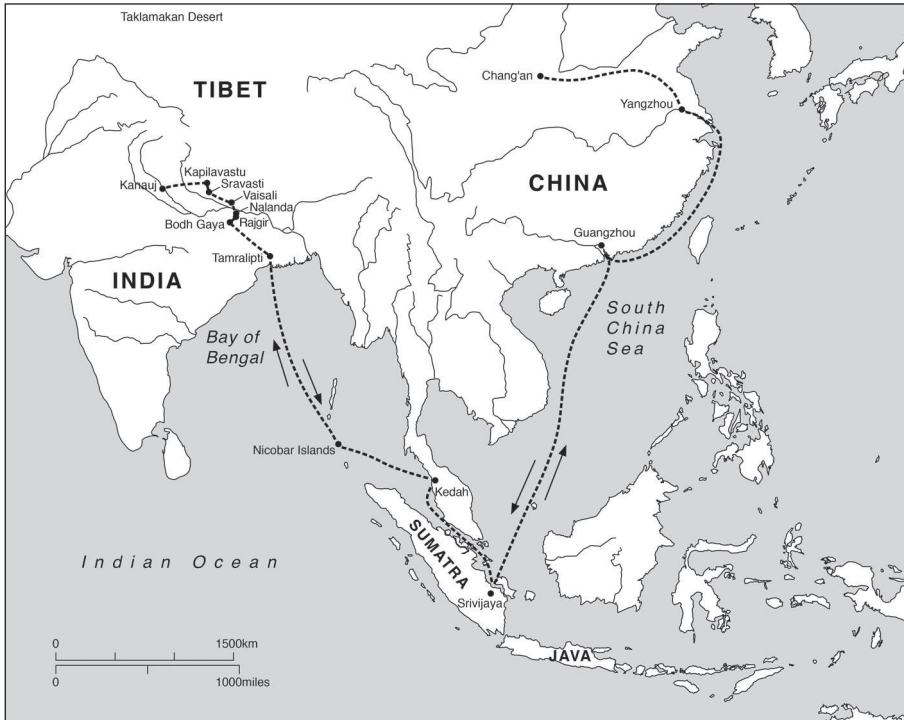


Fig. 4 Map showing the travels of the Chinese monk Yijing in the second half of the 7th century AD.

By the early seventh century, the Funan polity had collapsed and Sumatra under the Srivijayans replaced the Malayan Peninsula as the main transit center for maritime trade between the Chinese coast and the Indian Ocean. The parallel shift of maritime transportation through the Straits of Malacca, instead of crossing the land strip across the Isthmus of Kra, resulted in an increased movement of bulk goods such as spices and incense from the Persian Gulf and South Asia to China. At the same time, porcelain wares manufactured at various kilns in China were exported in large quantities in the other direction. The tremendous growth in maritime commercial activity between the seventh and ninth centuries can be discerned from both textual and archaeological sources.

Textual evidence for the flourishing commercial exchanges with the Indian Ocean world comes from a variety of sources.²³ The official dynastic histories of the Tang, for example, mention frequent tribute missions arriving at the court through the maritime route. Other sources from the Tang period record imported goods and the existence of foreign merchant guilds at the coastal regions.²⁴ Initially, the Tang court did little to either administer or profit from maritime

²³ WANG G., 'The Nanhai Trade: A Study of the Early History of Chinese Trade in the South China Sea', *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 31.2 (1959), 1-135.

²⁴ SCHAFFER E.H., *The Golden Peaches of Samarkand: A Study of Tang Exotics*, Berkeley, University of California Press (1985).

trade. It was only in the aftermath of the devastating An Lushan rebellion against the Tang rulers in the mid-eighth century that the imperial court decided to turn to maritime commerce as an option to address its fiscal problems. In 714, the Tang court had already appointed a special officer known as *shiboshi* (commissioner for trading with foreign ships) located in Guangzhou to procure foreign commodities for the government. After the rebellion, the duties of the officer were expanded to include collection of taxes, registration of the names of foreign traders, and enforcement of the laws on the export of contraband products.²⁵ By this time, the foreign population at Guangzhou, mostly consisting of Arab, Persian, and South and Southeast Asian traders, reached between 100,000 and 200,000, who resided in designated foreign quarters known as *fanfang*.²⁶

The impact on coastal China of the surging maritime trade and the court's decision to administer it was significant. Manufacturing industries, marketing structures, and monetary investment in commercial activity all developed rapidly in Guangzhou, and were later replicated at other Chinese ports. The eighth century marked a watershed with regard to China's engagement with the maritime world. This was also the period when, according to a funerary inscription, the Tang court sent a eunuch named Yang Liangyao to the Abbasid Caliphate (750–1258) by the maritime route. Yang departed Tang China in 785 and returned in 788. Yang's visit to the Abbasid Caliphate may have been related to addressing the extremely volatile situation in Central Asia, where Arab, Tibetan, and Tang Chinese forces were vying for territorial expansion.²⁷ It was perhaps also due to this unstable situation in Central Asia that Yang Liangyao travelled by the sea route. It is not clear what kind of ship Yang boarded in Guangzhou. The Chinese monk Jianzhen who travelled to Japan from Guangzhou a few decades earlier reported seeing South Asian (Poluomen), Persian (Posi), and Southeast Asia (Kunlun) ships.²⁸ The discovery of the so-called Belitung shipwreck is the most pertinent evidence for the surging maritime exchanges between Tang China and the Indian Ocean. Dated to the second half of the ninth century, this Arab ship sailed with a cargo of export-quality Changsha ceramics as well as gold and silver objects (see fig. 5). Some of the ceramics have Buddhist and Islamic motifs.²⁹ While the Changsha ceramics indicate the commercial objective of the sailors, the precious cargo seems to be gifts for foreign ruler(s). The Buddhist motifs and Arabic script, on

²⁵ KUWABARA J., 'On P'u Shou-keng: A Man of the Western Regions, who was the Superintendent of the Trading Ships' Office in Ch'üan-chou towards the End of the Sung dynasty, together with a General Sketch of the Arabs in China during the T'ang and Sung Eras', *Memoirs of the Research Department of Toyo Bunko* 2 (1928), 1–79, and 7 (1935), 1–104.

²⁶ LI Q., 'Sui Tang Wudai haishang sichou zhi lu de fansheng' [The flourishing maritime silk route during the Sui-Tang-Five Dynasties Period], in HUANG, *Guangdong*, *op. cit.*, pp. 206–10.

²⁷ RONG X., 'New Evidence on the History of Sino-Arabic Relations: A Study of Yang Liangyao's Embassy to the Abbasid Caliphate', in *Imperial China and Its Southern Neighbors*, ed. V.H. MAIR and L. KELLY, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (2015), pp. 239–67.

²⁸ RONG, 'New Evidence', *op. cit.*, p. 251.

²⁹ KRAHL R., J. GUY and RABY J. (eds), *Shipwrecked: Tang Treasures and Monsoon Winds*, Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Books (2011).

the other hand, demonstrate the circulation of religious ideas and objects closely associated with the maritime networks connecting China to the Indian Ocean world that persisted throughout the first millennium AD.



Fig. 5. *Changsha ceramic bowl from an Arab ship wrecked off Belitung Island, Indonesia, dated to the 9th century AD.*

CONCLUDING REMARKS

China's interactions with the maritime world between the seventh and ninth centuries set the stage for the eventual emergence of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) as a leading naval power in the early fifteenth century. While the Song court established fiscal policies and administrative structures to profit from maritime trade, Chinese private traders during the eleventh and twelfth centuries started venturing into South and Southeast Asian ports to procure foreign goods. This active involvement of the court and private traders in maritime trade resulted in the improvement of shipbuilding technology and navigational skills. The Yuan court, under Qubilai Khan, employed these advances to launch the first naval attacks on polities beyond the Chinese coastal region. The court's interest in the Indian Ocean world peaked during the reign of the Ming emperor Yongle (r. 1402–1424), who initiated the unprecedented maritime expeditions between 1405 and 1433 that reached the Swahili coast of Africa.

The transformation of China's engagement with the Indian Ocean world from a passive participant during most of the first millennium to a maritime power in the early fifteenth century was associated with the expanding knowledge of the Indian Ocean region, the development of technologies, and a greater willingness to engage with the sea. Most of these began in the period between the seventh and ninth centuries.