Seafaring, Trade, and Knowledge Transfer: Maritime Politics and Commerce in Early Middle Period to Early Modern China*

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Introduction

The ascendency of China as a maritime power was very obvious by the thirteenth century, when large battle ships sent by the Mongol rulers of the Chinese Yuan 元 court (1271–1368), initiated a series of military offensives, specifically against Japan (in 1274 and 1280) and the kingdoms of Champa (in 1281) and Java (in 1292–1293). But maritime relations have already been very active since the fourth century at the latest.[1] The great upswing of maritime trade and commerce, however, occurred during the mid-Tang (618–906) to early/mid Song 宋 (960–1279) – the so-called Tang-Song transition period (c. 750–1150).[2]

While, on the one hand, Chinese politics and society experienced a Neo-Confucian reorientation during the Song Dynasty, which was partially accountable for some quite negative attitudes among the intellectual élites, especially towards the northern "barbarians", maritime borders, in particular, became increasingly permeable and foreign traders were welcomed rather than banned. The motives for a general shift of trade routes from the tradi-

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1 In this context, the Chinese historian Liu Shufen (2001) even suggested that due to the prosperous maritime trade in China's coastal regions at that time, the Southern Dynasties (420–589) experienced an "impressive" commercial and urban development.

2 We interpret this period here a bit more generously, lasting until after the downfall of the Northern Song and including also major politico-economic and administrative changes in the sphere of maritime politics, such as, for example, the 1090-liberalization. Cf. Heng 1999, 48, with reference to *Song huiyao jigao*, "Zhiguan" 44.8ab.

tional overland to maritime routes have to be sought for the political instability in Inner, North and East Asia, and, last but not least, in China herself. The importance of this Tang-Song transition period notwithstanding, the tenth century in particular, is in various respects still relatively unexplored, for example because China was divided into several kingdoms and states with their own political goals and ideologies during part of this period or because historians rather concentrate on the examination of either the Tang or the Song Dynasty, hence neglecting a comparative analysis.

Both my own research and that of Li Man 李漫 deal with this Tang-Song transition. While my studies focus on the development of maritime trade during Tang period Guangzhou 廣州, as well as Guangzhou's maritime trade during the Southern Han Dynasty 南漢 (917–971), one of the most active contemporary coastal states and China's gate to the south, Li Man examines aspects of maritime trade of the state of Wu-Yue 吳越 (907–978), China's gate to the (north-)east, paying particular attention to their maritime relations with the Khitan Liao 契丹遼 (916–1125) in the north. Kimura Jun 木村純 eventually is introducing results from his recent fieldwork on the Vietnamese coast, focusing on a seventh/eighth century shipwreck as well as underwater discoveries and wrecks from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

By the Southern Song Dynasty (1127–1279), as we have long known, China's maritime trade reached an unforeseen prominence; China had become the economic motor of the whole Asian region. With the Mongol Yuan conquest, when China became part of the Mongolian Empire, new avenues in the exchange of knowledge, products, and human migration emerged. And to an unforeseen extent, maritime space also served military purposes, as the offenses of the Yuan navy against Japan, Champa and Java show (Song-Yuan transition). While the Tang-Song transition in terms of maritime politics can be characterized as a political, ideological and socio-economic change, the Song-Yuan transition appears more like a shift towards an increasing role of the military.

With the founding of the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644), Chinese rulers suddenly officially implemented a new policy, which to a certain extent can be characterized as a form of "iron-curtain-policy", both towards their northern and northwestern neighbours, and towards their sea border (maritime prohibition policy between 1371 and 1567). Historians even speak of a kind of "rupture" between a period of pro trade policy and a sudden anti-foreign and anti-maritime commerce policy. Definitely, this is only partly true; in terms of China's view of "the others"; of foreigners, we have to distinguish between official ideology and local practice.

The shift from the Yuan period promotion of maritime trade to the early Ming maritime trade proscription, raises the question as to what extent maritime commerce was actually maintained – after all, it was in the course of the Ming when "international" trade relations experienced another unforeseen peak – and which characteristics the inter-relation between military and commercial activities possessed during this "Yuan-Ming transition" (c. 1350–1500). This transitional period is an almost absolute white sheet in maritime history, a fact that obviously has much to do with the underestimation of the importance of maritime commerce for both the Yuan and the Ming, and a kind of reluctance of many sinologists to study the Mongol Yuan period. A thorough investigation of China's maritime policy, of local maritime activities, and commercial and technological exchange during that time is, therefore, of major importance to understand the background behind this change, as well as the involvement and interaction of official, in particular military (naval), government authorities and personnel in and with private commerce. Ma Guang 馬光 concentrates his research on maritime relations and coastal defence of the Shandong Peninsula during the Yuan-Ming transition, paying particular attention to the role of pirates and the inter-relationship between pirate raids and political and environmental changes. Generally speaking, the Yuan-Ming transition appears more like a phase of de-commercialization, nationalization, and partial isolationism.

In the late sixteenth century, a semi-nomadic people, the Manchus, rose in Northeast Asia and eventually invaded China and established their own dynasty, the Qing, as rulers. Again ruled by a foreign people, China largely extended her borders into north and northwest Central Asia and colonized new territories. Consequently, maritime relations and commerce seemingly played only a minor role, with its main focus basically on border security. While this is not absolutely incorrect, recent scholarship has already started to show that maritime commerce was much more important for the Qing than hitherto suspected.[3] But exactly because continental space was more important for the Manchu rulers than maritime space, the latter has still rather been neglected and underestimated in historical research, both in terms of commercial and cultural exchange, as well as human interaction. In this respect, Mathieu Torck investigates the role of Chinese armies and navies in coastal defence and maritime trade. Furthermore, Elke Papelitzky examines an early seventeenth-century text that describes sea routes and foreign countries, and seems to present China's

3 See, for example, Schottenhammer 2010; Zhao 2013.

foreign relations at a junction between "traditional" Ming manners, attempting to show the wide-spread net of China's (tribute) relations by collecting also completely out-dated information, and being "modern", for example, by integrating more recent knowledge on sea routes.

The Ming-Qing transition definitely reflects a strong military focus, the attempt to maintain control over both military and commercial advances of foreigners, and over piracy; but simultaneously the developments in maritime politics clearly demonstrate the importance maritime commerce had gained by that time.

With our project we pursue a longue-durée comparison of the development of maritime trade and its impact on state politics and vice versa, based on a comparative analysis of textual (including maps and sea routes) and recently discovered archaeological sources (such as shipwrecks with their cargoes, grave objects, tombs, and tomb inscriptions) from China and her "partner countries". In order to get a better insight into the interrelation between private commerce and official maritime politics, we have decided to focus here especially on periods of major changes between the traditional dynastic cycles (transitions), such as the Tang-Song transition. We want to examine primarily the interaction between private agents (e.g. merchants) and government/state interests and between Chinese and foreign actors. In this context, we have selected case studies focussing on Northeast and Southeast China respectively, analysing local developments against the macro-historical domestic and foreign background. In this way, we intend to shed more light onto the impact and repercussions of decisions made by central governments on local developments and vice versa as well as the interdependency of domestic and local with foreign and supra-regional developments. Also, the question of how Chinese and foreigners conducted their exchanges on a practical level and got along with each other will receive more detailed attention. Wim De Winter will pay attention to this aspect of Asian encounters with Europeans.

Significant transitions occurred (1) at a time period when maritime commerce experienced a significant upswing in the course of the late Tang to mid Song (I), (2) during the Southern Song and Yuan, when China rose as a real maritime power (II), (3) during the shift from the Yuan period promotion of maritime trade to the early Ming maritime trade proscription (III), and (4) eventually during a period when once again a foreign people (Manchus) ruled China, and who allegedly concentrated only on continental borders and border security with little to no interest in maritime commerce and defence (IV):

(1) Tang-Song transition (c. 750–1150);
(2) Song-Yuan transition (c. 1150–1350);
(3) Yuan-Ming transition (c. 1350–1500);
(4) Ming-Qing transition (c. 1550–1750);

Eventually, in a final step, we will attempt a longue-durée comparison of the particular characteristics of the four major transition periods in order to produce a broader, more integrative and more thorough narrative of the dynamics of China's historical maritime politics and commerce.

Although the focus of our research lies on maritime interaction, one has of course to thoroughly consider developments in Central Asia and along China's continental borders too, in order to be able to examine how the latter influenced the former. For, with the increasing ascendancy of China as a maritime player, the quality of exchange relations via the East China Sea and the Indian Ocean as well as via Central Asia underwent a major shift. In our project, Chinese and East Asian maritime space is consequently also treated as a part of Asia's macro-regional structures. Research, thus, also focuses on the investigation of China's multifaceted trading networks, including aspects of the migration of people to and from China. Here, the role of Muslim/Islamic commercial networks receives special attention, as it was Iranian[4] and Arab merchants who were among the most active traders in China's long-distance maritime commerce during the initial period under investigation here, and who were the ones who actually initiated the era of a *more routinized long-distance maritime trade*[5] – for example in port cities such as Guangzhou or Quanzhou 泉州, as I have argued elsewhere.[6]

4 "Iran" is the old designation of Iran (=Iranshahr), today a province located in the Southeast of Iran. The term "Persia" is derived from Old Persian "Parsa" or "Pārsī", a region in the Southeast of present Iran. The Arabs who conquered the Persian Empire in the seventh century and whose language did not know the consonant "p", changed "Pārsī" to "Fārsī". The Persian people is, on the one hand, consequently defined by the use of Persian language as mother tongue. On the other hand, the term "Persia" referred specifically to the people who lived in the region of Fars/Pars, located today in Middle East Iran. The Chinese term "Bosi" 波斯 is probably derived from "Pārsī". Pārsī and Bosi were, thus, not necessarily used for an ethnic identity but more generally for Persian speaking people or people from the region of Iran. As it is mostly not clear if Chinese texts refer to a Persian speaking community or generally to subjects coming from Iran, I use the term "Iran" for the whole country or region and "Iranians" for subjects coming from this region.

5 Schottenhammer 2016b.

6 Schottenhammer 2002, esp. 53-59, 57; Schottenhammer 2016b.

First Conclusions: The Tang-Song and Song-Yuan Transitions

As Li Man shows in this volume, during the period we designated as Tang-Song[7] transition Northeast Asia was in fact characterized by frequent economic and political communication, also on maritime routes. Because of the geopolitical situation and the competitive relationship of some so-called "peripheral" states within the geographically speaking central regimes, the former developed a special mode of what Li Man calls "jump-over contacts", for example, when we look at the contacts of the Southern Tang 南唐 (937–975) and Wu-Yue with the Khitan Liao 契丹遼. Contacts were established via sea routes in order to avoid the central regime, which blocked overland contacts. And these routes were used by merchants, travellers, and diplomats to exchange, transport, and transfer both commodities and knowledge, such as tea or fierce-fire oil (*menghuo you* 猛火油),[8] a kind of petroleum that was used for military purposes (see cover illustration).

To what extent commercial exchange and knowledge transfer, human interaction, and military (naval) enterprises are interlinked with each other may be demonstrated by two brief examples. Qian Liu 錢鏐 (852–932) placed his son Qian Yuanguan 錢元瓘 (887–941) in command of a Wu-Yue fleet of five hundred ships, called "dragon ships" because they were designed in the shape of a dragon. It set out in April 919 to invade Wu 吳. An interesting Wu-Yue account speaks of beans being thrown on enemy's ships and the shooting of "burning oil" (*menghuo you* 猛火油) to set fire to the ships. Then, the liquid was shot from a metal tube. The oil, it is recorded, was obtained from Arab merchants from Hainan 海南 (or simply from "south of the seas").[9] As Li Man shows in his contribution, this "wild-fire oil" also reached the Khitan Liao through either Wu-Yue or Southern Tang. That the substance and technology was originally introduced into East Asia by Arab merchants may attest to the manifold facets of human, commercial, scientific, and military-political interaction.

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7 As I myself have been basically busy with the examination of changes during the Tang-Song transition, this phase will receive special attention here. For the other transitions I would like to refer the reader to the contributions of my team members.

8 Wild-fire oil, which burned even more fiercely when water was added.

9 *Wu-Yue beishi* 吳越備史 3.4a-5a: 五年春三月命王率水師大小戰艦五百餘艘皆刻龍形[...]夏四月乙巳大戰淮人於狼山江將戰之夕王召指揮使張從寶計之曰[...]每舟必載石灰黑豆江沙以隨焉[...]乃撒豆於賊舟我舟則沙焉戰血既漬踐豆者靡不顛踣命進火油焚之火油得之海南大食國以鐵筒發之.

Another example also attests to the close interrelationship between political and military developments, and commerce – developments that also caused migration waves. Migration was for example already prompted by developments on the Chinese mainland in the late Tang – a period that has once and again been described as and praised for its multi-cultural, cosmopolitan character, with many foreigners residing in its capital Chang'an, as well as in many of the commercialized port cities, with foreigners who were cherished in China for their own cultural and religious traditions.

Speaking of maritime commerce and cross-cultural relations, we can in this respect definitely speak of a major break when between 878 and 879 the Chinese rebel Huang Chao 黃巢 (?–884) sacked the city of Guangzhou and wreaked a massacre among the foreign residents of the city. The Arab geographer and writer Abū Zayd of Sīraf (writing in 916) speaks of 120,000 Muslims, Jews, Christians, and Magians being killed by Huang Chao, apart from Chinese:

> Men experienced in their affairs have mentioned that he killed 120,000 Moslems, Jews, Christians, and Magians who lived in this city and became merchants in it, apart from those killed among the Chinese. The amount of the numbers of these four sects was known only because of [their] taxation [by] the Chinese people [according to] their numbers. [Huang Ch'ao] cut what there was of the mulberry trees and the other trees. Now we mentioned the mulberry tree especially because the Chinese inhabitants prepare its leaves for silkworms, until the silkworms spin [their cocoons]. And this became the cause for the cutting off of silk in particular from the Arab land.[10]

The massacre obviously had far-reaching consequences for the Arab trade, as also another Arab writer, al-Masʿūdi (c. 895–956), states in his *Murūj al-dhahab wa-maʿādin al-jawahir* (*Meadows of Gold and Mines of Gems*). He even speaks of 200,000 foreigners being killed:

> Le rebelle marcha donc rapidement sur la ville de Khankou, dont la population se composait de musulmans, de chrétiens, de juifs, de mages et de Chinois, et l'assiégea étroitement. Attaqué par l'armée du roi, il la mit en fuite et livra son camp au pillage; puis se trouvant à la tête de soldats plus nombreux que jamais, il s'empara par force de la place, dont il massacra un quantité prodigieuse d'habitants. On évalue à deux cent mille le nombre de musulmans, chrétiens, juifs et mages qui périrent par le fer ou par l'eau, en fuyant devant l'épée.[11]

The period between the late seventh and early eighth century can be described as an early peak of China's maritime trade with the Persian Gulf. In this context,

10 Levy 1961, 113f, citing the translation of Gabriel Ferrand.

11 Cf. De Meynard und De Courteille 1861, 303.

interestingly, the policy of Wu Zetian 武則天 (r. 690–705) seems to have had a quite positive effect on the development of maritime trade, for example, because she obviously initiated measures against the rampant corruption.[12] Subsequently the development of maritime trade experienced some ups and downs. But the Huang Chao rebellion eventually constituted a major setback and upheaval in Sino-foreign maritime relations. It forced many foreign merchants to migrate to other places in Southeast Asia, for example Champa (Zhancheng 占城; central Vietnam), Thailand, or the Malay Peninsula, such as Kalāh (Kedah), Kedah and Śrīvijaya (Chin. Sanfoqi 三佛齊). Such anti-foreign incidents in China were not restricted to Guangzhou alone. Already in the late 750s to early 760s, several thousand Arab and "Persian" (Bosi 波斯) traders were killed during local unrest in Yangzhou.[13]

But why did the aggression of Chinese military representatives, such as the military governor and general of the imperial troops, Tian Shengong 田神功 (d. 776), turn against wealthy foreign merchants? It is definitely true that such references cannot prove that no Chinese were killed, that the aggression did not turn against any Chinese. Another entry in *Xin Tangshu* 新唐書 and *Jiu Tangshu* 舊唐書 explicitly states that Tian Shengong plundered the wealth and fortunes of the ordinary people and of merchants.[14] Rich, wealthy, abundant private property resources were obviously the goal of the attacks – and especially wealth in the hands of foreigners, among whom the "Iranians" were considered especially wealthy.[15] In this respect, Suzanne Cahill has drawn our attention to an interesting observation. According to her, "(f)oreigners were the desired and feared Other", so they were viewed in both a negative and positive way. In his *Yishan zasuan* 義山雜纂 (*Scattered compilations from Mount Yi*) Li Shangyin 李商隱 (813?–858) includes an entry in a list entitled "Contradictions" ("Bu xiangcheng" 不相稱), namely "a poor Persian" (*qiong Bosi* 窮波斯),[16] obviously an unthinkable idea! This, too, clearly attests to the vision apparently quite common among Han Chinese that Persians use to be rich.

However, it should be clear that the aggression against foreign wealthy merchants was motivated not simply by animosities against the enormous wealth of

12 Schottenhammer 2016b.

13 *Xin Tangshu* 141.4655: 平盧節度使田神功兵至揚州，大掠胡人，發冢墓，大食、波斯賈胡死者數千人。*Xin Tangshu* 144.4702: [...]入揚州，遂大掠居人貲產，發[劉]屋剔窗，殺商胡波斯數千人。Cf. also Wang 1958, 80.

14 *Jiu Tangshu* 124.3533: 至揚州，大掠百姓商人資產，郡內比屋發掘略徧，商胡波斯被殺者數千人。*Xin Tangshu* 144.4702 (see footnote 13 above).

15 Cahill 2014, 220.

16 *Yishan zasuan*, 1b.

others[17] but by hostility against especially wealthy *foreigners* – foreigners who quite obviously led a luxurious life while at the same time the common Chinese suffered from the unstable political and socio-economic situation of heavy taxes and economic distress. The probable source of the wealth of these foreign, mostly Iranian and Arab, merchants for decades or even centuries had been from their engagement in the highly profitable overland and maritime long-distance trade – whereas the Chinese themselves did mostly not undertake such long journeys. The Chinese were only indirectly involved, probably as middlemen. The fact that the wealth of the foreign traders also exceeded the wealth of many local Chinese traders, increased the suspicion in the eyes of "nationalist" Chinese and led them to be even more suspect of their having illegally enriched themselves at the expense of the Chinese.

In this context, the xenophobic aspect and nature of such massacres should not simply be denied. It is also no mystery that in the past, as in present, the search for culprits in socio-economically speaking difficult and tense situations only too frequently hits foreigners, as those who are considered not to be part of the own community, thus unjustifiably having enriched themselves at the expense of the own (i.e. Chinese) community. The quotation above, for example, clearly states that an explicit goal of Huang Chao and the rebels was to damage the trade with the Arabs by cutting off one of their major sources of profit.

That this massacre was an explicit anti-foreign undertaking is also observed by Abū Zayd who continues:

> "And they [the rebels] raised their hands to oppress the foreign merchants who had come to their country; and to these events was joined the rise of oppression and transgression in the treatment of the Arab shipmasters and captains. They imposed illegal burdens on the merchants and appropriated their wealth, and made lawful for themselves what had not been practiced formerly in any of their dealings. Wherefore God the Almighty removed any blessing from them, and the sea became inaccessible to them, and by the power of the blessed Creator who governs the world disaster reached even the captains and pilots of Sīrāf and ʿUmān."[18]

17 Shao-yun Yang (2014) argues that it was the "merchants' great wealth, not their foreign origin, that made them particularly vulnerable to violence when these cities were sacked." I am here not discussing ideological streams among the post-An Lushan intellectual élites and their quest for a revival of a morally transformed culture that was able to restore good governance in China. This has already been analysed by Peter Bol (1992).

18 *Akhbār al-Ṣīn wal-Hind* by Abū Zayd, quoted by Hourani 1995, 77.

Also another Tang general, Gao Juren 高鞠仁 (fl. 756–763), when he captured the city of Yanjing 燕京, capital of the short-lived Great Yan 燕 Dynasty founded by An Lushan 安祿山 (703–757),

> "ordered that within the city those who killed *hu* would be highly rewarded. Following that, the '*jiehu*' 羯胡 [a pejorative designation of non-Han Chinese people in north China] were completely exterminated; small children were thrown in the air and caught on the points of spears. Those who had large noses resembling those of the *hu* and who (because of this) were killed in error were extremely numerous."[19]

While this latter incident was definitely motivated by animosities against the rebel An Lushan, who was of Sogdian descent, and his countrymen as well as other "*hu*", – basically this would include Western Asians, Turks, Arabs, Iranians, and also some other ethnicities – it is clear that the extreme wealth of foreign merchants was a particular thorn in the eyes of some politically engaged military men.

In terms of maritime commerce, the Yangzhou 揚州, but especially the Canton massacre, should be considered a caesura in its wavelike (with ups and downs) but still relatively steady development. The incident prompted many foreign merchant families to migrate to China's peripheries and beyond in Southeast Asia, such as Champa, Thailand, or places in the thalassocratic state of Śrīvijaya, which comprised the Malay Archipelago, Sumatra, and later, also parts of Java.

From the late Tang onwards one can, thus, clearly identify an Iranian-Arab merchant network extending from Champa via southern Hainan Island to Guangzhou and further to Quanzhou in Fujian,[20] the beginnings of which can be traced back to the early eighth century at the latest.[21] Economically speaking, ports located on the Indo-Chinese coast were, thus, of major importance for contemporary commercial networks. Acquiring more details on these merchant networks, including for example identification of certain merchant families at certain port cities, investigation of the specific commodities they traded, and identification of their commercial cooperation partners, definitely remain major tasks for the future. Current research attempts to step-by-step piece together more parts of the whole story.

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19 *An Lushan shiji* 3.44: [高]鞠仁令城中殺胡者重賞，於是羯胡盡殪，小兒擲於空中，以戈承之，高鼻類胡而濫死者甚眾。Cf. De la Vassière 2005, 220.

20 Cf. Ptak 2008, 67.

21 Manguin 1985, 3.

The new importance of Southeast Asia is supported by the changes that took place in contemporary Southeast Asia, which at the same time admittedly contribute to the complexity of the situation.[22] We encounter embassies by a country named Heling 訶陵 (Keling) in the Chinese sources (possibly initially a port in southern Sumatra), sending envoys between 767 and 835. Arab (Dashi 大食) ships are said to have arrived in Heling in 760/761. In 767 and 768 two more missions from Heling arrived at the Tang court in Chang'an. Further missions are recorded for the ninth century (813, 816, 827–835, 860–873).[23] By the third decade of the ninth century, Heling's embassies were superseded by a polity called Shepo 闍婆, certainly Java.[24] Then, between 868 and 992, the Chinese sources do not record any further Javanese missions, neither by Heling nor Shepo. Missions between 852 and 871 represented a country called Zhanbei 占卑 (Jambi). From Chinese records of the later ninth and early tenth century we can observe a shift of power in the Straits of Malacca from Zhanbei-Malayu to Sanfoqi-Palembang. In the early tenth century, in Chinese sources the renewed Sumatran supremacy is marked by the arrival of yet another embassy from Foqi 佛齊 in 904,[25] whereas Zhanbei only re-emerges in the eleventh century as "Sanfoqi Zhanbeiguo". This suggests "that for the Chinese chroniclers of the time Malāyu/Jambi was a part of the powers controlling the Straits of Malacca. In contrast to the abundant archaeological finds in both the Bujang valley and Muara Jambi, however, the third locale commonly associated with Śrī Vijaya, the vicinity of modern Palembang, did not produce the density of tenth-century monumental architecture and 'trade debris' expected from a major political and economic centre."[26] Persian-Arabic sources, however, recall al-Zābaj's title over Kalāh Bār, the Bujang valley Kedah, guarding the northern

22 See Wade 2014 for an excellent survey on Southeast Asia in Chinese texts up to the ninth century.

23 Wade 2014, 31.

24 Van der Meulen 1977.

25 Missions from a polity named Foshi 佛逝/佛誓 or Shili Foshi 室利佛逝 (according to *Xin Tangshu*) first appeared at the Tang court between the 670s and 740s. Most scholars agree that Foshi was centered in Palembang, but as Geoff Wade (2014, 31) has shown, the relations between Palembang, Śrīvijaya and Malayu are not clear. Foshi definitely was a commercial centre for the China trade and repeatedly sent missions in the early eighth century, but it remains unclear which parts of Southeast Asia it exactly controlled.

26 In this dissertation analysing a tenth-century shipwreck that was lost in the Java Sea, Horst Hubertus Liebner (2014, 42f) nicely summarizes all the arguments on the location of the polity of Śrīvijaya and introduces the actual state of research.

entrance to the Straits of Malacca.[27] And Pierre-Yves Manguin states that, while "pre-ninth-century sites without Chinese ceramics produce practically no surface finds",[28] the extant inscriptions alone imply a "political centre resolutely situated at Palembang at foundation times in the late seventh century."[29] The considerable numbers of ceramic shards of the ninth and tenth centuries found at a number of sites in Palembang support the existence of a late first-millennium port – although "possibly after a still undefined gap"[30] throughout the later eighth and early ninth centuries.

Archaeological wreck discoveries as introduced by Kimura Jun can provide us with intriguing insights into former merchant networks. He examines, for example, the seventh/eighth-century Châu Tần 周城 shipwreck salvaged from Quảng Ngãi 廣義 Province, located on the Central Vietnamese coast, just at the point where ships would leave the coastline and sail eastwards across the open sea to pass the southeast of Hainan Island and then head for China (map). This wreck constitutes possibly the oldest shipwreck ever found in the South China Seas. In addition, he investigates the twelfth/thirteenth-century Jepara and the Java Sea wreck and also introduces a stone stock that shows the typical features of an anchor stock used for the wooden anchors on medieval Chinese merchant ships.[31]

The research of Kimura Jun and his colleagues also sheds light on changes of the sea routes used by merchants but also on the identities of voyagers engaged in maritime commercial activities between the seventh and thirteenth centuries. Kimura's article seeks to periodize the growth of the historical seaborne trade into the two different eras. In terms of this division, the seventh/eighth-century shipwreck found in Central Vietnam demonstrates the dominant role of "Southeast Asian" and "Indian Ocean" seafarers (evidence that does include Iranian and Arab merchants who settled there) in the water transportation of Chinese commodities at that time. "(S)ignificant quantities of Middle Eastern glass and glazed pottery" have been excavated from Laem Po (Suratthani) and Tungtuk (Phang Nga) in Thailand). These sites have been recognized "as the richest sites with Chinese and Islamic finds in South East Asia." In Laem Po also a historical Muslim fishing village has been found.[32] Many of the ceramics

27 Ibid.
28 Manguin 2004, 306.
29 Manguin 2002, 75.
30 Ibid.
31 Cf. Kimura, Sasaki, and Long 2010.
32 Chen Dasheng 1995, 55.

found there could be attributed to the Tang kilns in Changsha. Most of the pieces found there could be dated as Tang period Chinese ceramics and have been classified as Yue 越 type, Changsha Tongguan 銅官 type, Ding 定 type white porcelain, and specimens of the famous Tang Sancai 三彩 wares.[33] Some of the Yue, Ding and Xing 邢 wares bear Chinese inscriptions. Green-blue glazed jar shards are Islamic ware, and archaeologists found many unglazed jars, other vessels, and plates (or perhaps lids) with inked Arabic and Indic inscriptions. The characteristics of the Chinese ceramics as well as the Arabic and Indic inscriptions indicate that the items were transported by a ship engaged in eighth-century maritime trade between China and the Indian Ocean.[34]

The twelfth and thirteenth centuries eventually saw a growing number of voyages by Chinese ships in the South and East China Sea indicating the emergence of active voyages by Chinese merchant ships. These twelfth and thirteenth century wreck sites go along with the growth of ceramics' export industries based in Fujian and Zhejiang. Shipwrecks and wreck sites from this period in Southeast Asia and East Asia show a complex assemblage of seaborne commodities from multiple regions, and provide insight into the traders' engagement in the supply business, associated with a general demand in overseas markets.

Here some words on sea routes may be added. Which sea route(s) did merchants take coming from the South China Sea and Southeast Asia into the maritime space of the Indian Ocean, or vice versa? Both the Jepara and the Java Sea wreck are considered to have been twelfth/thirteenth-century merchant ships and both ships had probably sailed to Chinese coasts before they sank in the Java Sea. Also the famous Belitung wreck has been discovered in the Java Sea, in Indonesian waters near the island of Belitung. The Belitung wreck is actually the first Arab-Indian or Arab-Iranian dhow so far discovered. It was dated to the first third of the ninth century (after 826).[35] The design of the ship belongs to a sewn-plank tradition of the Western Indian Ocean shared by both India and the Persian Gulf and possibly East Africa and is that of a traditional Arab dhow from the eighth and ninth centuries.[36] On the basis of the materials

33 Nishino, Aoyama, Kimura, Nogami, and Le 2014.

34 Personal communication with Kimura Jun (10.02.2015).

35 According to the dating of a bowl from the Changsha kilns, which was inscribed with a year equivalent to 826 on the bottom. Cf. Krahl, Guy, Wilson and Raby 2010, 19f, 20 (fig.12).

36 It is generally accepted among scholars that the Belitung wreck was probably an Arab-Iranian or Arab-Indian ship. However, Haw (forthcoming) rejected this assumption and suggested that likely the wreck was of Southeast Asian origin.

found aboard the wreck, archaeologists suspect that the destination of the vessel must have been a city in the Western Indian Ocean – and it most probably left China through the port of Guangzhou, possibly having called at Palembang or another port in Sumatra.

It is generally accepted that the standard route of sailors coming from the South China Sea, as a rule, passed through the Malacca (or Melaka) Straits.[37] Stephen G. Haw, however, recently suggested that ships rather took the Sunda Straits to sail to the western part of the Indian Ocean.[38] The Belitung wreck might at first sight support Haw's thesis. But the Sunda Straits was generally speaking very difficult to manoeuvre and hardly ever taken by any ships at that time.[39] Although we can of course not *per se* exclude the possibility that ships may have taken the Sunda Straits, that it was a standard route remains speculation. Evidence including the famous description of the sea route from Canton to Baġdād by the Tang Prime Minister Jia Dan 賈耽 (729–805) rather suggests a route through the Malacca Straits (see map 1).[40]

As for to why the Belitung wreck sank close to the Belitung Island, that is, rather in the vicinity of the Sunda than the Malacca Straits, there are simply too many unclear factors, that we will not be able to answer this question. The ship may simply have been blown off by strong winds a course it may have taken otherwise.

Interesting in our context is also the fact that some 60,000 ceramic pieces including porcelain, celadon and stoneware from Changsha have been found on the Belitung wreck, with Buddhist and Islamic motifs, as well as gold and silver ornaments.[41] In combination with the Tang period Changsha ceramics found along the Vietnamese coast, as introduced by Kimura Jun, we can now definitely state that the Changsha kilns constituted a late Tang period mass production centre for ceramics, explicitly designed for exportation to foreign, especially Middle Eastern and Islamic, markets. And besides Guangzhou, obviously Yangzhou was a major port for exportation.

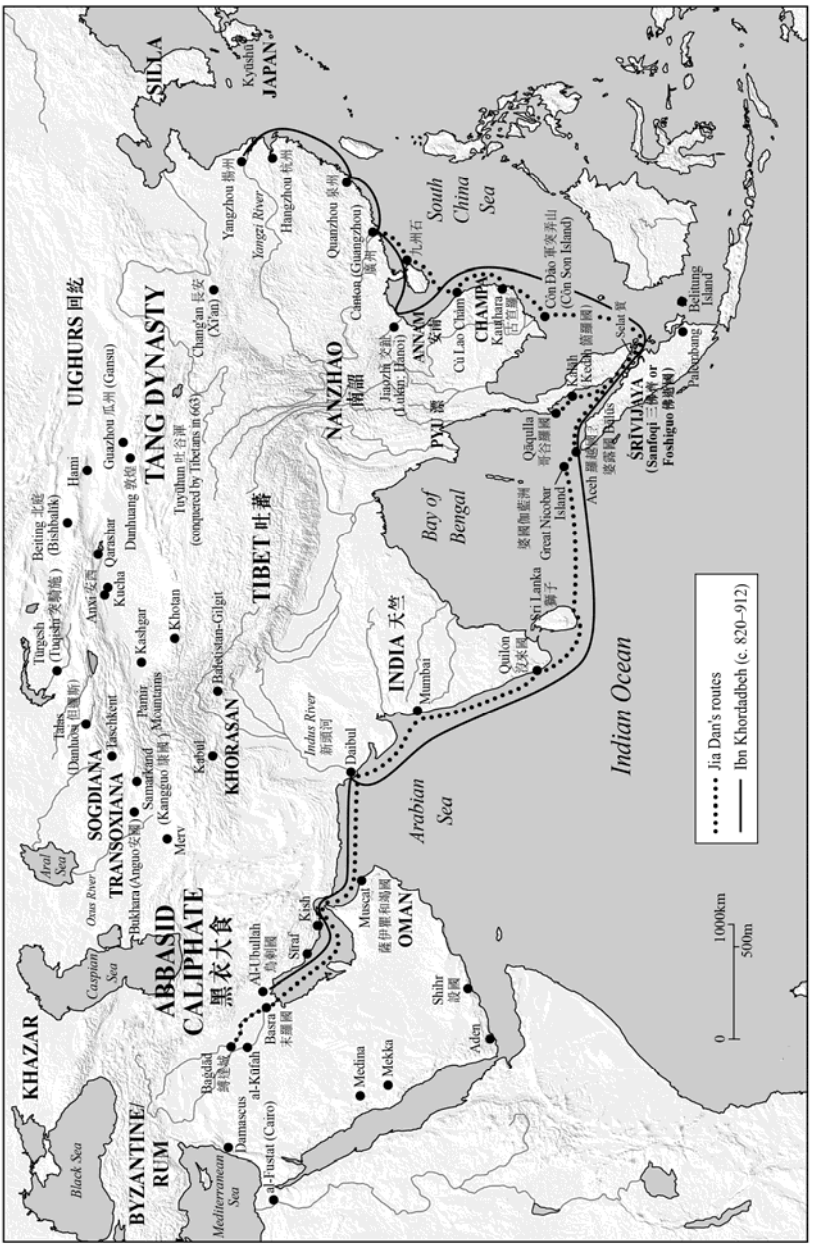
37 Cf. for example Wang 1958; Wade 2009; Heng 2006.

38 Haw 2016 (forthcoming).

39 Personal communication with Pierre-Yves Manguin, Taibei, May 28, 2015.

40 *Xin Tangshu*, 43B.1153 *et seq*. Hirth und Rockhill 1911, 10-14. For the identification of location names, see Chen Jiarong's 陳佳榮 website "Nanming wang" 南溟網.

41 Krahl, Guy, Wilson, und Raby 2010.



Map 1: Reconstruction of Jia Dan's sea route description from Guangzhou to Baġdād (Source: Map drawn by Inspiration Design House, Hong Kong)

Our recent research also suggests that the Tang government played a much more active role as far as maritime trade is concerned than has hitherto been assumed.[42] Although we will certainly never be able to assess the volume of trade more concretely, most evidence suggests that Iranian and Arab merchants *did matter* in early Chinese *long-distance maritime trade*. As I have argued elsewhere, these "Persian Gulf traders" may in fact be considered initiators of a more routinized long-distance trade with distant places and port cities in Persian Gulf area and the Western Indian Ocean world. This was definitely a novelty.[43] And these traders obviously dominated this long-distance trade until far into the ninth century until the Huang Chao Rebellion prompted the beginning of a qualitative change in trade relations.

The Tang court and other Tang authorities obviously greatly and actively sponsored commercial and political relations especially with the Abbasid Caliphate (750–1258) that controlled the trade routes in lower Iraq and Sīrāf on the Iranian coast of the Gulf after the 750s and they were very interested in attracting foreign, especially Iranian and Arab, merchants. The Abbasids on the other hand also officially greatly sponsored commercial relations with China.

Of course, also merchants from Southeast Asia and India traded in Guangzhou.[44] Definitely, future research will have to investigate in more detail from which locations beyond the Persian Gulf region the Iranian and Arab merchants came to China. Some may have also used ports in either South or Southeast Asia. And although Chinese merchants did not yet on a great scale sail overseas themselves in the period prior to the tenth/eleventh century, they were obviously very active as middlemen between domestic ceramic production centres and foreign merchants.

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42 Cf. Schottenhammer 2016b.

43 Schottenhammer 2002, esp. 53-59, 57; Schottenhammer 2016b; this does not mean that I want to argue that no long-distance trade at all had taken place before and that merchants from Southeast Asia or India were not of importance for the development of maritime trade in China. I want to stress that these "Persian Gulf traders" initiated an area of a routinized long-distance maritime trade with the Oriental world and the Western Indian Ocean, connecting parts of the Eurasian and African continent via sea routes that were formerly only connected coincidentally, if at all.

44 Chinese sources indicate the presence of Indian merchant communities in coastal China including Guangzhou as early as the fifth century. In the middle of the eighth century three Brahmanical temples with a number of priests existed in Guangzhou; see Sen 2003, 163. The mention of Hindu temples could also indicate the existence of merchant guilds.

After an initial peak of Iranian trade with China in the late seventh, early eighth century (and possibly earlier), corruption and over-taxation caused a decline. A brief recovery seems to have taken place under the control of Li Mian 李勉 (715–786) around 770. In 769, when Li Mian took office, only four to five foreign ships from Southeast or South Asia arrived annually at Guangzhou.[45] This was mainly due to the fact that officials oppressed the merchants and appropriated their goods; merchants had consequently moved to Annam since then.[46] Due to his favourable policies, however, the number of ships arriving from the Western regions – what probably mostly refers to ships coming from the Persian Gulf region – rose annually from four or five to over forty.[47] "Although many merchants certainly returned back home after having completed their business in China, some remained in Guangzhou and even settled there (*zhu Tang* 住唐).[48] Waiting for favourable monsoon winds and repair of their ships, or frequent fires in Guangzhou, where the majority of the houses, including warehouses, were constructed of wood, prompted many to remain in China for longer periods."[49]

Both Arabs and Chinese officially sponsored mutual commercial relations, as we have seen. But corruption continued to be a major problem; a second real peak of maritime commerce with the south seems to have occurred only in the ninth century, obviously between the 830s and 878, when the Huang Chao massacre caused again a redirection of Sino-Arab trade. This is suggested by both textual and archaeological evidence.[50] During this time period Chinese kilns, and primarily the Changsha kilns, produced ceramics *en masse* for Middle Eastern and Islamic markets, and customers. Ceramics and silks were exchanged basically for "pearls and aromatics, rhinoceros and elephant [horn and

45 *Jiu Tangshu* 131.3635: 前後西域舶泛海至者歲纔四五, *Xin Tangshu* 131.4507: 西南夷舶歲至纔四五.

46 "Lun Lingnan qing yu Annan zhi shibo zhongshi zhuang" 論嶺南請於安南置市舶中使狀, in *Hanyuan ji* 18.1a-2a; *Quan Tangwen* 473.14ab [4828].

47 *Jiu Tangshu*, 81.3635; *Xin Tangshu*, 81.4507-4508.

48 According to the biography of Lu Jun 盧鈞 (in *Xin Tangshu*, 182.5367) those who settled in China married with local women, bought fields and built houses: 蕃獠與華人錯居，相婚嫁，多占田營第舍。According to *Pingzhou ketan* 萍洲可談 2.4a, they were called "*zhu Tang*" 住唐, in contrary to Chinese people living for years in foreign countries that were called "*zhu fan*" 住蕃: 北人過海外，是歲不還者，謂之「住蕃」；諸國人至廣州，是歲不歸者，謂之「住唐].

49 Schottenhammer 2016b.

50 Ibid.

ivory], tortoise shells, and curious objects", such as perhaps glass objects and other luxury items – "overflowing the Middle Kingdom beyond the possibility of use", as the famous Tang literati, Han Yu 韓愈 (768–824) observed.[51]

Recent archaeological evidence now further supports the close relations between China and the Abbasids, also from a political-diplomatic perspective. A tomb stele (*shendao zhi bei* 神道之碑) of a Chinese eunuch, a certain Yang Liangyao 楊良瑤 (736–806), records the biography of Yang and claims that he was sent as an envoy to the Abbasids (*Heiyi dashi* 黑衣大食; lit. "Black-dressed[52] Tajik [sometimes also written Tadjik or Tadzhik], i.e. the Arabs") by the Chinese Emperor Dezong 德宗 (Li Gua 李适; 742–805; r. 780–805) in 785, obviously as a part of a foreign political strategy to gain the Arabs for a coalition in the face of Tibetan aggression.[53] Jia Dan also provides a brief overview of the conflict between the Umayyads (661–750; in Chinese *Baiyi dashi* 白衣大食) and the Abbasids and details the explicit military difficulties facing the Tibetans as well as the appeal of Arab support.[54] As we also know from another source, *Zizhi tongjian* 資治通鑑, Dezong's close advisor, Li Mi 李泌 (722–789), was planning to establish an alliance with the Uighurs, the kingdom of Nanzhao 南詔, a Tibeto-Burman confederation of tribes in what is now Yunnan, India, and the Arabs "as the most powerful country in the Western regions with a territory reaching from the Pamir to the Western Sea, thus covering half of the known world" in order to contain the Tibetans.[55] This whole background again attests to the close relation between maritime politics, diplomacy and war on the one hand, and trade and commerce on the other hand.

In the early tenth century, first the independent Nan-Han 南漢 Kingdom (917–971) tried to revive and stabilize maritime trade with Southeast Asia and beyond. The Nan-Han ruler, Liu Yan 劉巖 (r. 917–941) established the office

51 Schafer 1967, 77, translated from Han Yu's "Song Zheng shangshu xu" 送鄭尚書序: 外國之貨日至，珠香象犀玳瑁奇物溢於中國，不可勝用。 (*Quan Tang wen* 556.7b-9a, 8b).

52 The colour of the uniforms and the flag of the Abbasid rulers were black while the Umayyad colour was white.

53 Schottenhammer 2014; Schottenhammer 2016a.

54 "*Siyi shu*" 四夷述 ("Exposition of the Foreign Peoples of the Four [Parts of the World]"), cited in *Taiping huanyu ji* 太平寰宇記 186.3574f. This and other excerpts from "*Siyi shu*" which have survived in *Taiping yulan* 太平御覽 and *Taiping huanyu ji* were collected by Wang Mo 王謨 (1731–1817) in his recompilation of Jia Dan's *Junguo xiandao ji* 郡國縣道記 (actual passus: 13a-14a).

55 *Zizhi tongjian*, 233.1599-1600: 臣願陛下北和回紇。南通雲南。西結大食天竺。如此則吐蕃自困。馬亦易致矣。[...] 大食在西域最強、自蔥嶺盡西海,地幾半天下。

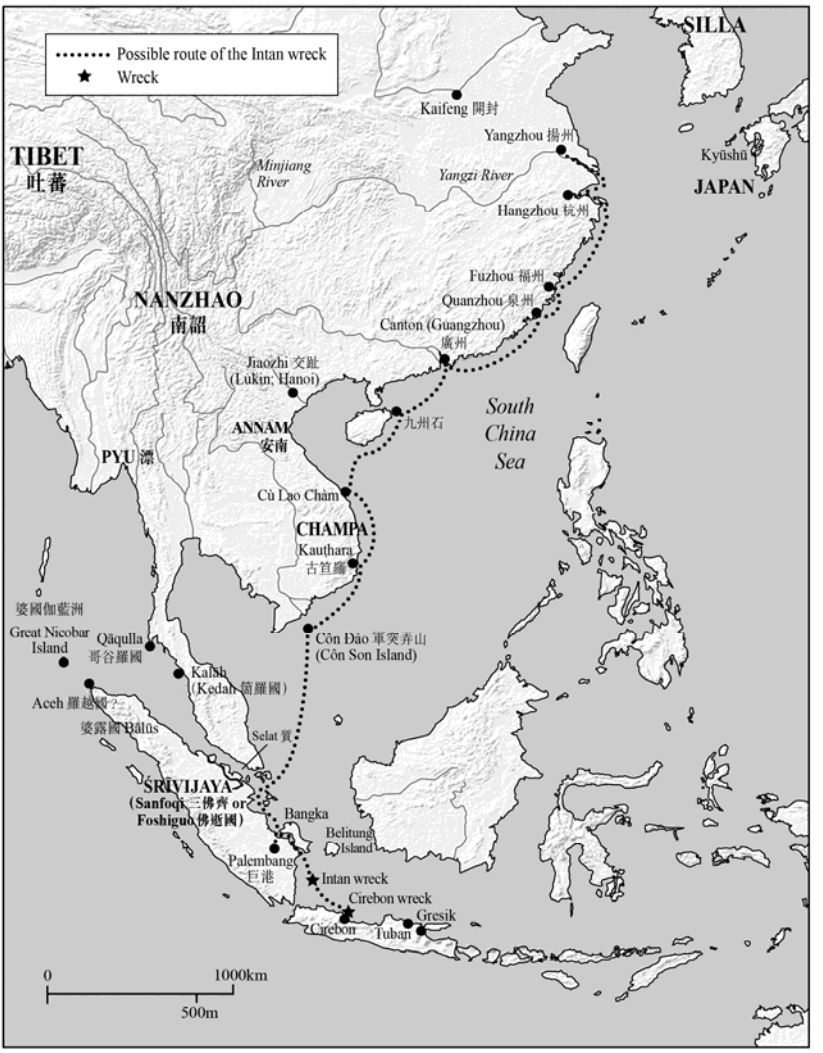
of a Maritime Ship and [Trade] Commissioner (市舟等使).[56] In 938, he tried to gain control over Vietnam. He used the death of the Annam Lord Protector, Dương Diên Nghệ 楊延藝 (?–937), as an attempt to invade Vietnam and reinforce Chinese supremacy over the region. Liu Yan nominated his son, Liu Hongcao 劉弘操, as commander of the expedition and named him "Military Governor who Pacifies the Seas" and "King of Jiaozhi" 交趾. But his troops were heavily defeated by the Vietnamese forces, led by Ngô Quyền 吳權 (897–944), in the Battle at Bạch Đằng River. Ngô Quyền anticipated his plan, used small shallow boats to lure the heavy Chinese warships upriver during high-tide, where the latter got trapped when low-tide set in. This battle factually ended Chinese domination of the Jiaozhou 交州 region until the early fifteenth century. The positive attitude of the following Song rulers towards maritime trade is well known. And it may not be surprising that in the eleventh century, the Song again attempted to impose their supremacy over the Annam and Champa regions: In 1052, a Song naval commander, Di Qing 狄青 (1008–1057), defeated Champa in a sea battle near Qinhon 歸仁, and in 1076 another Song fleet sailed southwards in order to seize Quảng Nam, until Annam and Champa officially acknowledged Song Chinese superiority in the macro region.[57]

But the Nan-Han were active not only militarily; they also greatly sponsored maritime commerce. Our recent research has shown that we have to critically reassess and start to revise the traditional picture of the rulers of the Nan-Han that official historiography has so far comported. We especially have to revise our picture of an ignorant, uneducated ruling élite with partly barbaric characteristics. Interesting to note is also the fact that obviously women played a much more important and active role also in politics than Song sources make us believe.[58]

Sponsoring maritime trade, what actually did this mean? The Nan-Han rulers disposed of metals and Kaolin resources for the production of ingots, metal objects, coins, and ceramics that could be exchanged for foreign products. The local ceramics industry definitely received a great upswing during the Tang, Wudai and early Song period and ceramics undoubtedly constituted a major export commodity also of Nan-Han merchants. Nan-Han ceramics have been found in various places in Indonesia, including Java.[59] Of course ceramics and

56 *Wu-Yue beishi* 2.19b. Cf. Li Qingxin 2010.
57 Lo and Elleman 2011, 57.
58 Schottenhammer 2015.
59 Zhou Jiasheng 2008, 223.

other products from other parts of China were also exported via the port of Guangzhou. These ceramics were from such places as Fujian, Zhejiang, Jiangxi, Anhui, etc. They probably mainly reached Guangzhou via river and sea transportation.



Map 2: Possible route of the Intan and Cirebon wrecks
[Source: Map drawn by Inspiration Design House, Hong Kong]

The importance of metals, silver in particular, for maritime trade can be assumed from the discovery of the tenth-century Intan wreck.[60] Silver in particular was obviously used by the Nan-Han ruling élite as an equivalent of value and means of payment and exchange to acquire valuable goods from overseas.

Recent wreck discoveries also provide us with more information on sea routes. That merchant ships sailed from Guangzhou (the Nan-Han capital) following the East coast of Sumatra as far as Java is for example supported by the Intan and Cirebon wrecks (see map 2). The Intan wreck was found in South Sumatra in 1997 and carried a mixed cargo of Chinese ceramics and other artifacts, many of them made from metals and some of West Asian origin, suggesting that the ship might have come from Śrīvijaya or perhaps even was a Śrīvijayan ship.[61] Most intriguing among the objects found on the wreck were silver ingots of extraordinary purity (between 93 and 98.1 per cent silver). They were enclosed in a folded wrapping of thin silver that bore inscriptions stating that the silver was of superior quality and had been used as revenue from the government's salt tax monopoly.[62] Somehow, it must have been paid into the Nan-Han treasury and probably used "to purchase from merchants (or possibly foreign envoys) some extremely valuable Southeast Asian commodities it required, such as incense."[63] The large quantity of silver that was found on the wreck at least suggests if not attests to the Nan-Han court's disposal over great quantities of silver.[64] The Cirebon wreck was a tenth-century trading vessel that was lost in the Java Sea and carried at least 40 tons of ingots, bars and readily fashioned implements of various metals,[65] including iron, and around 150,000 ceramic pieces.[66]

It is at least suggested by both textual and archaeological evidence that the Nan-Han court "was certainly actively involved in maritime trade in the sense that it purchased and sold goods and received envoys. But we have no records that members of the Nan-Han court sent embassies abroad. Nor do we have evidence of Nan-Han merchants privately sailing abroad with own ships. The evidence we have at least strongly suggests that both, the contemporary court

60 Flecker 2002, Flecker 2010.
61 Twitchett and Stargardt 2004, 60, 67; Flecker 2002, Flecker 2010.
62 Twitchett and Stargardt 2004, 35, 39 et seq., 46.
63 Ibid, 41.
64 See my discussion in Schottenhammer 2015.
65 Liebner 2014, 201.
66 Liebner 2014, 75, 304.

and the local social élites, as well as private merchants basically still depended on foreign traders and ships to provide them with commodities from overseas. Hopefully, future archaeological evidence will cast more light on these aspects."[67]

To summarize, the Tang-Song transition period was, thus, definitely an important phase in the development of maritime trade. Whereas in and for South and Southeast China long-distance maritime trade was of major importance, Northeast Asia during the time of separation and the existence of the Khitan Empire relied rather on what Li Man has called "jump-over contacts". Trying to resume and characterize the development of maritime trade during this period, we may perhaps speak of a rather continuous or steady development, certain setbacks notwithstanding among which we particularly have to stress the Huang Chao and perhaps also the Yangzhou massacre.

When the Mongols eventually unified the whole region, the exchange of knowledge, products, and human migration achieved an unforeseen peak. In terms of maritime trade, we may characterize this as a "continuous expansive transition", alluding also to the unforeseen militarization of maritime space in the area and the attempts to control important sea routes. Definitely, this Song-Yuan transition is characterized by an expansion of both commerce and military control.

The Yuan-Ming and Ming-Qing Transitions

The Yuan-Ming transition, as Ma Guang shows for Northeast China, was not only a transition period from private maritime trade to official tribute trade but also a transition from the active, aggressive strategies of the Yuan rulers to more passive defence structures. The military element remained present but the aggression came rather from abroad, from pirates. To this end, he particularly focuses on the relation between natural disasters, climate change, and the outbreak of *Wokou* raids. In the thirteenth century, the temperature in Japan became colder, what significantly affected grain production and caused food shortage, and there were many times famines, which not only caused domestic turbulences in Japan, but also forced Japanese people to plunder their neighbours, the Korean Peninsula and China. It was precisely around the time when the temperature began to

67 Schottenhammer 2015, 22f.

drop in the 1220s, that *Wokou* started to raid the Korean Peninsula. From the 1350s to the 1380s, the temperature reached its lowest point, and at the same time, the *Wokou* raiding activities in Korea and China, too, climbed to a peak. Piracy during the Yuan-Ming transition can, consequently, not only to be traced back to political-economic reasons, the decision of the first Ming emperor to curtail all private maritime trade, but also had "outside" objective reasons. In addition, I would add, the transition also moved along the lines from a primacy of commerce to a primacy of ideology and security calculations.

Mathieu Torck is discussing China's border defence during the Ming-Qing transition. The Ming had developed an intricate system in order to monitor border-crossing activities and defend the empire against piratical attacks (*Wokou* 倭寇). In theory, militarily speaking, Ming China had everything in its arsenal to successfully oppose external threats. But the Ming army could eventually not withstand the advancing Manchu troops. The downfall of the Ming cannot be traced back simply to military reasons and the aggressive Manchu military expansion, but also has to be seen against the general socio-economic situation of the late Ming.

The efficacy of the border control system crumbled with the advent of the Manchus, but was quickly reinvigorated by the new rulers after 1644. Generally speaking, while security calculations prevailed in the early Qing period, commercial interests gained in importance in the course of the eighteenth century.[68] In the course of the second half of the eighteenth century, however, Qing coastal defence gradually withered away. Based upon important late Ming sources discussing coastal defence, such as *Chouhai tubian* 籌海圖編 by Zeng Ruozeng 鄭若曾 (1503–1570) and *Wubeizhi* 武備志 by Mao Yuanyi 茅元儀 (1594–1640), Mathieu Torck scrutinizes the system of coastal defence in its institutional and organizational aspects before and after the Manchu conquest. Basically, the Ming-Qing transition is rather characterized by security calculations and an emphasis on coastal defence, while maritime commerce was in large parts privately organized, also in the form of "piracy" or contraband trade, a development that especially the Kangxi 康熙 Emperor (r. 1662–1722) sought to bring under control. He intended to re-organize maritime trade as a source of government revenue.

68 Schottenhammer 2010.

Wim De Winter eventually adds a historical-anthropological aspect to our research and links China up with Bengal, the Indian Ocean and Europe. The "General Imperial India Company (GIC)", also named the "Ostend Company", after its port of departure,[69] was established in 1722. The establishment of the company was the result of attempts to establish trade in Gujarat, on the Malabar and Coromandel coasts, and eventually in Bengal and China. The GIC rented an annual trading post in Canton, and established its own factory or trading establishment in Bengal, which was later unjustly called the first Belgian colony.[70] Wim De Winter investigates personal encounters of GIC-agents with agents in both Bengal and China. In this context, he moves from maritime politics, exchange of commodities, transfer of knowledge, or human migration to personal face-to-face encounters between countrymen and foreigners. His study reveals interesting differences in the context of social and courtly interactions in Bengal and China, specifically as to how the learning process of social and courtly rituals functioned. It also touches on the role of informants and intermediaries, such as Armenian merchants, in this process. The wealthy Armenian merchants in Bengal, for example, originated from New Julfa, near the Iranian city of Isfahan, and had great influence at the royal court in Bengal.[71] This would have made them perfect mediators for guiding European or foreign merchants in the spheres of shared Persianate cultural forms between Mughal India and Iran. As early as the fifteenth century there is evidence of people "who speak Parsi"[72] in Bengal. This information stems from the 1433 *Yingya shenglan* 瀛涯勝覽 by Ma Huan 馬歡 (fl. 1414–1451), who mentions that some people spoke Pārsī language. This might indicate the presence of Iranian or even Armenian merchants in Bengal for at least two hundred years before the GIC's interactions. Similar networks, as we have seen above, already existed during the Tang-Song transition period and were essential for an effective maritime trade. In the eighteenth century, even an Armenian company was trading between India, Lhasa and China.[73]

Resuming the development of China's maritime politics and commerce over the centuries we can observe that it was initially private merchants, basically

69 De Winter and Parmentier 2013, 35-42.
70 De Winter 2014.
71 Sinha 1956, 67f.
72 Sen 2005, 509.
73 Curtin 1984, 193.

foreigners above all (Iranians [or Persians, that is Bosi in Chinese sources], Arabs, Indians and Southeast Asians) who "opened" the sea routes for long-distance trade, exchanged their goods in China, transported knowledge and partly also settled permanently in port cities, such as Guangzhou or Yangzhou. This trade was certainly risky but it created enormous wealth for those who were successful. Subsequently the state, the Tang court, interfered, not only to get access to the luxuries and wealth of the "Southern Seas", but also to siphon off profits for the state (and private) coffers. Over the centuries we see a steadily increasing involvement in and control of maritime commerce by state authorities, which again had repercussions on the development of private trade. Above we have tried to summarize some of the most essential and particular characteristics of these changes during four major transition periods in Chinese history, but one thing at least remains constant over time and space, although its quality partly changed significantly – the close interrelation (or interaction) between private agents (or merchants) and government or court interests.

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