Some Glosses on the Sea Straits of Asia: Geography, Functions, Typology

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1   Ports, Merchants, Commodities

Past research on the history of maritime Asia has often focused on such themes as ports and networks, types of entrepreneurs, commodity flows, piracy, institutional changes, the involvement of governments in local trade systems, migration, and so forth. In a number of cases a comparative approach was taken, sometimes aimed at defining categories or establishing typologies. It was argued, for example, that certain ports were similar to modern export outlets, i.e., they mainly offered a specific set of products, or perhaps even only one major commodity, which originated from the hinterland of that port, while other locations were almost disconnected from their hinterland, living exclusively on the exchange of such products that all came in, by ship, from fairly distant locations.

Some ports were open to all traders, while others could only be accessed by certain merchant groups. So-called emporia, it was proposed, should be associated with rather stable and predictable market conditions. This relates to the forces of supply and demand, prices, taxes and the institutional framework into which trade was embedded. Ports falling into the emporia category were often located at the intersection of larger commercial zones. They attracted hundreds of merchants and a growing stream of investments. Sailing to these places meant that merchants would reduce commercial risks and transportation costs.

By contrast, certain entrepôts chiefly served as intermediary posts within a fairly closed network. This may be said of Fort Zeelandia, a Dutch "dependency" used by VOC ships and some Chinese vessels, but not by Iberian and other ships. In the course of time, the functions of a port could of course change. Thus, while Melaka, as a typical emporium, was open to nearly everyone in the second half of the fifteenth century, it became less important under Portuguese rule, when it mainly functioned as a stronghold within a complex system of institutionalized *carreiras*, or trade routes, operated by the *Estado da Índia*, with its administrative center in Goa.

Entrepreneurs and merchant groups is another topic that has been dealt with in the literature on maritime Asia. Usually historians distinguish between long distance traders and merchants mainly active in the coastal belt, either individually or within small networks. But there are other categories as well. Sometimes institutions, firms or even governments became involved in maritime commerce. Generally, as we move into the early modern period, a more complex picture emerges. One example is the state-led voyages by Zheng He, which had both a commercial and a political dimension. The VOC is a further case: It was not only a large firm, with a unique organisational form by the standards of its time, but also a political apparatus.

Although the small itinerant merchant continued to appear on the scene, later periods were often marked by large-scale operations, a higher degree of market organisation, and more sophisticated commercial tools. There was a general development from small-scale "subsistence" trade, carried out by individuals or "mini" groups, usually with no political aspirations, towards a growing complexity in capital flows, and an increased interest of political entities in taking advantage of economic opportunities. Finally, the small merchant always sought to obtain gains, but probably he was not as profit-minded as a large-scale firm whose principal *raison-d'être* was the maximization of material income.

The flow of commodities across the sea, from port to port, has also led to a non-ending stream of scholarly work. This relates to the identification and use of certain trade items, to changes in demand and supply, to prices and taxes, substitution effects, institutional factors and other such determinants. Furthermore, some scholars have tried to make a clear distinction between the circulation of expensive luxury commodities and the trade in bulk, or cheap products for daily consumption, often associating the first with long distance traffic and the latter with coastal trade. But there were exceptions to the rule and in many cases hybrid forms can be identified.

2   The Mediterranean Model, Maritime Universals and the Silk Route

Other than commodities, non-quantifiable "things" – religions, styles, cultural patterns in the broadest sense – were also exchanged across the sea. Very often such phenomena lasted for several successive centuries and can truly be classified as *longue durée* items. This links to the ideas of Fernand Braudel and others who have tried to define the European Mediterranean as a zone of exchange characterized by a certain degree of internal homogeneity – culturally, in terms of natural setting, and in many other respects.

In recent writing on the non-European world, the Braudelian model, or at least certain dimensions of it, was often applied to individual zones in Asia, for example the South and East China Seas. Even the Indian Ocean was occasionally labelled as a scenario essentially comparable to the Mediterranean "archetype" of an international maritime space.

Elsewhere I have tried to discuss some of these ideas within a larger context, arguing that the various Asian Seas, from the Japanese Sea in the East to the Persian Gulf in the "Far West", may be seen as a chain of separate, yet mutually linked maritime entities, each with certain characteristics of its own, but also with a set of "shared elements". These shared elements, which are visible in each space, and over successive centuries or millenia, may be called "maritime universals" – in analogy to the various kinds of universals in other cases of model-making, or, more generally, in other sciences. From this it follows, that in lieu of transferring the Braudelian example to Asia, one could define any other maritime space, for example, the Nanhai, as "archetype" – in order to find out, in a second step, how such a model would "behave", if applied to a Non-Asian context.

Irrespective of such theoretical exercises, certain functional dimensions appear to be essential in each scenario – the flow of commodities and other "things", different categories of merchants and bodies involved in the exchange of quantifiable and non-quantifiable "things", long distance traffic, coastal networks, and so forth – as was explained above. However, as was also said, maritime spaces differ from each other, not only from a static point of view, but also in a diachronic sense, because certain dimensions only became visible in the course of time, and in different periods. In other words, a sophisticated appartus of exchange in zone A may surface much earlier or much later than a comparable pattern in zone B.

If the Asian seas are perceived as a chain of interconnected spaces, i.e., as a broad maritime avenue stretching from Japan to Basra and the Sinai, then we are – implicitly – moving towards the concept of the so-called "Maritime Silk Route". But the maritime silk route did not emerge at once, over night; it came into existence gradually, step by step, on the basis of individual maritime zones which had formed, one by one, in earlier periods. Thus, while coastal exchange and interregional trade became regular features in the Red Sea and around the Persian Gulf during the pre-Christian era, the same may not necessarily be true for the Andaman Sea. However, in the course of time, the northeastern section of the Indian Ocean, especially the stretch of open water between Sri Lanka and Sumatra, transformed into a corridor for East-West traffic, and Indi-

an cultural elements began to surface in the Malay world. In this way, Asia's many maritime zones grew together and the maritime silk route turned into an international highway with many local branches – into a highly complex structure, indeed, which tied the Far East to Egypt and the Levant.

As was explained, within this structure each zone developed its own characteristics, while certain other elements, often of a *longue durée* nature, can be associated with all geographical segments. In several cases, the emergence of new phenomena entailed qualitative changes, with long-lasting impacts on a given setting, i.e., existing "systems" began to mute, or to move from one "evolutionary" stage to another stage of develop-ment. In other cases such transformations cannot really be identified. Similarly, one may identify local changes which eventually set off chain reactions in the other zones as well, or within the entire system as such – i.e., within the maritime silk corridor in its totality, or all its subsegments.

Naturally, these ideas would need to be "streamlined" and cast into a manageable theoretical framework. Moreover, the implicit concept of transformation is of course a highly debatable issue, especially if consid-eration is given to the well-known idea that Asia's maritime world may not have changed too much in pre-European times. But instead of taking up these old points, I shall limit my notes to one small aspect of maritime history – the question of sea straits and their possible functional and other dimensions.

3   Investigating Sea Straits: Which View to Take?

Asia's maritime zones are bound together by a number of important sea straits. If these straits would not exist, the maritime silk route as such would not have been born and its many subsegments would have re-mained separate entities. Just as the Mediterranean, with the Black Sea as its eastern adjunct, can be accessed from the Atlantic Ocean, through the Strait of Gibraltar, each of the silk route's maritime zones can be reached through various sea channels, or at least through one such corridor.

The number of entries leading to an individual maritime space may be of some relevance if that particular zone is analysed in "its own light", or perceived within the total framework of the maritime silk route, i.e., if the focus is on the ensemble of all its members and branches. But for an analysis of the access channels as such, and only of these, their number appears to be less important. In broader terms, if one wishes to embark on a theoretical debate chiefly concerned with the very "nature" of a sea strait, and not so much with the internal mechanics of an adjacent ex-change zone, the issue of viewpoints must be considered.

Typically, the maritime historian – as opposed to the "continental" historian – will be looking from the sea to the land, as if he would be located in the middle of an ocean, trying to find out how opposite shores around "his" space were connected to each other by trade and traffic across the sea. From this it follows that, geographically, he will not only consider maritime exchange as such, but also diverse types of ports, or perhaps larger coastal regions, and, where applicable, their interaction with at least two kinds of "spheres", namely the high seas (the "purely" maritime dimension) and the coastal hinterland. Naturally, there are limits to the latter. Inland areas far away from the sea, disconnected from maritime exchange, are of no concern to him. In other words, the maritime historian observes the fringe of "his" area – and that also includes the maritime access routes to a given space. In his view, a sea strait, due to its location at the periphery of an exchange zone, may just be one type of "door" to that zone, side by side with rivers, ports, etc. More generally, the maritime historian will be inclined to subordinate all relevant sea straits to a "purely" ocean-centered approach.

The "conventional" scholar is primarily concerned with larger inland spaces. At times, it is true, he will also turn his view from the land to the seaboard, i.e., to the periphery of "his" area, but not necessarily to an adjacent oceanic space. When dealing with the history of exchange across the land, or with the rise and decline of empires, cities, companies, networks and so forth, he will certainly be inclined to subordinate all maritime activities to his land-based approach. That may also apply to the "fate" of individual sea straits – or areas, which, almost by definition, divided a land mass into two distinct entities. For the "conventional" historian, moving across a strait, from one side to the other, may not have been too different from crossing a major river, or a narrow mountain pass. A mountain pass, he will probably argue, connected two spaces of land, a sea strait was like an alley leading from one maritime zone to another.

The above suggests that sea straits functioned like special "mini zones", or "knots" – between land and land, and sea and sea. Here we may return to where we had started: Can one really examine such straits in their "own light", as parts of a special category, and not as subordinated entities at the periphery of a maritime zone, or a land mass? Is it possible to describe the characteristics of a strait from a "strait's point of view", and not from a sea-based or land-based perspective? The answer will probably be of a very mixed nature, because there is no strait without an adjacent sea, or without a nearby land mass, in other words, a sea strait cannot be disassociated from "its" respective mini fringes – its own sea

and land "borders". And yet, at first sight, a strait appears to be more closely linked to the sea as such than to its adjacent lands.

This may be related, in part at least, to purely semantic reasons. The compound "sea strait" suggests the existence of a connection between two maritime spheres, in a distinctly positive manner, while – implicitly and somewhat negatively – it also appears to "denote" an obstacle (or even terminal zone) for overland traffic. If so, when dealing with the nature and history of a sea strait, its maritime dimensions will probably require more attention than its "land-related" characteristics. Perhaps this could be compared to writing "river history". A long inland waterway has a connective function between distant sites scattered along its shores, from the river's mouth to the upstream regions; at the same time it separates one shore from another. Historians interested in river history would probably be inclined to emphasize the first dimension.

4   Sea Straits: Semantic Dimensions

The previous paragraph has touched upon a very special problem: When looking at the past, it is not only essential to make a clear distinction between views and "reality" (if ever reality can be grasped as such), but also to screen the semantic side of the terminology we are using to denote certain phenomena. Traditional Chinese texts, for example, make a distinction between *hai* 海 and *yang* 洋. Both these words can be translated as "Ocean" or "Sea", and they both stand for large maritime spaces. However, it is nowhere clearly told, how large a space should be in order to qualify as a *hai* or, alternatively, as a *yang*.

Similar problems occur in the context of "sea straits". What criteria do we associate with that term – and with the "real" phenomenon as such? Moreover, in other languages one does not always encounter a one-to-one equivalent for the English compound "sea strait". In Dutch, for example, the conventional word *straat* is not only used for a sea strait, but also for an ordinary street inside a city. The same applies to the German word *Straße* which, like its Dutch counterpart, may occur in the context of both land and sea ways. Interestingly, the "Maritime Silk Route", if translated into German, yields the expression *Maritime Seidenstraße*; thus the term *Straße* is used for yet another phenomenon. In French, the words *rue* or *avenue* denote a street or road (on land, or in a city), while *détroit* stands for a sea strait. Portuguese speakers make a clear distinction between *estrada / rua / avenida* etc. (on land / in cities) and *estreito* (sea strait). Besides these important terms, the languages just cited above offer a variety of other expressions – mostly for canals, small overland routes, lanes, etc. In English, for example, the words "channel" and

"passage" are often used where one might perhaps expect the expression "strait". In German, the word "Meerenge" is a possible substitute for "Seestraße". Conceptually, many but certainly not all of these terms mirror the idea of a narrow link between two points or larger maritime zones. In Asia, the English term "strait" seems to be more frequently used for a long corridor, while "channel" often denotes a short "gap", typically between two island chains. But there are exceptions to the rule, for example "Luzon Strait", "Balingtang Channel" and "Babuyan Channel"; these are all located between Taiwan and Luzon and are all quite short. Other areas inside the Philippine archipelago, it may be added, were classified as "passages".

In Chinese, the expression *haixia* 海峽, for sea strait, may be associated with a slightly more complex image, especially if both characters are considered separately. *Hai* stands for the sea, as was said, but *xia*, written with the mountain radical, is connected to "narrowness" (like the English "strait"). It also evokes the idea of a "valley", or even a gorge, for example in the expression *xiakou* 峽口.

Besides considering these semantic nuances, it would be important to find out under which conditions each term came into being. The expression (*hai*)*xia*, often written as (海) 峽, already occurs in early Chinese texts, for example the dynastic annals. Other words like *qu* 渠 (*shuiqu* 水渠, etc.), or *men* 门 (literally "gate") – the latter is frequently used for the mouth of a waterway, sometimes in the coastal area of southern China – are semantically different. Furthermore, a maritime space like the "Strait of Taiwan" (or Formosa) was not always perceived as a special geographical entity of its own, different in kind from an "ordinary" *hai* or *yang*. Many geographers probably thought of this area as belonging to a greater whole, the "Eastern Sea" (Donghai 東海), or the "Southern Sea" (Nanhai 南海), others were aware of its special character. Put differently, a space only became a "strait" when it was accepted as such.

In the Malay world, the term *selat* – for sea strait – already surfaces at an early age as well. This can be linked to the fact that the sea played a central role in insular Southeast Asia, while it was probably less important in the geography of other regions. More generally, different cultures developed different terminologies, for different reasons and in different periods. Similarly, "maritime" terms and concepts may have travelled, as loan words, or ideas, from one society to another society. The details of these linguistic and conceptual changes, which involved dozens of languages, have rarely been looked at by maritime historians.

5   Back to Reality: Military Dimensions

The "invention" of sea straits, as mental constructs, did not come over night. Some sea-faring groups or nations could do without such a concept, as long as they were able to achieve their goals, in other cases, the image of sea straits, as special maritime entities, was associated with political and military expectations. This brings us back from the "conceptual" to the "factual".

In the age of sail it was impossible to control larger maritime spaces. When two fleets clashed in a coastal zone, or in an open space, soldiers would eventually climb the enemy's vessels, using swords and knives in combat as if they were fighting on land. In the medieval period we hear of small artillery pieces mounted on war ships, but it took a long time until these new weapons began to alter the character of naval warfare. It was only in the early modern era that fire arms became more important. However, the range of ordinary cannon was still very limited and ships could easily escape a heavily armed Portuguese carrack, or a squadron of "speedy" Dutch sailing vessels. The only areas, where guns and other weapons really mattered, were narrow inlets, ports, river mouths and – sea straits.

Early Chinese sources refer to the activities of militant gangs in the area of modern Singapore. Presumably these groups had small boats and were armed with primitive weapons. They would approach commercial vessels at dawn or during foggy days, kill the ship's crew and take a sizeable booty. When Zheng He's 鄭和 armadas began sailing through the Strait of Melaka, the situation appears to have improved – not only because China had impressive fleets, but also because her ambassadors knew how to make efficient use of peaceful diplomacy. In terms of modern terminology, this was a case where *haiquan* 海權, or "sea power", played a key role in pacifying a region of strategic importance. After the conquest of Melaka by Afonso de Albuquerque, Portugal also undertook efforts to control the entire stretch of water between that port and the Singapore region, but political rivalries flared up again and several local wars were fought. These wars involved Johore, Aceh and other regional powers, including some piratical groups. The Dutch ran into similar difficulties, and even today, we occasionally hear of surprise attacks by criminal gangs. All this suggests that narrow sea alleys, such as the Strait of Melaka or the Strait of Singapore, posed considerable threats: they invited violent gangs or communities, who made a living by plunder, to strike out against others, which in turn compelled the latter to implement some kind of advanced control. But these control mechanisms often remained inefficient, partly due to the lack of adequate weapons.

Along the Malayan peninsula, the situation became even more complex with the rise of intra-European rivalries. Shortly after the VOC had appeared on the scene, the Dutch revealed their true nature: they started chasing peaceful Portuguese merchant vessels and in contrast to the latter behaved like pirates. Both sides had established various trading posts in Asia and, quite naturally, thought of the Melaka region as a key link between their respective possessions in the Far East on the one side, and the various dependencies around the Indian Ocean on the other. Thus, for the first time in history, the area around Melaka, Muar, Johore, modern Singapore and various locations on northern Sumatra was gradually torn into a context of circumglobal competition. In other words, exogenous powers, taking advantage of superior military equipment, had come to (partly) dominate an "alien bottleneck" of strategic importance, far away from their original centers of political decision-making.

Naval clashes in the long channel between Melaka and the area now called Singapore Strait mostly occured in such locations where this waterway was rather narrow. The limited range of artillery, the position of hidden shoals and reefs, wind patterns and the system of currents – these and other "variables" had to be considered in determining where an enemy fleet should best be attacked. This brought heavy losses to the Portuguese and compelled them to explore alternative routes, especially in the island world south of modern Singapore, or to send valuable goods across the peninsula, by land, from one shore to the other. Such portages also took place in pre-European times, as is well-known, but whether they were then related to piracy and local events in the Straits region, or mainly organised for financial reasons, is difficult to tell.

The "Melaka story" is only one example for the military side of the problem. A further example would be the Bab al-Mandab and its adjacent ports, especially Djibouti and Aden. Various projects aimed at achieving control over this strategic waterway, even in more recent times, could be cited. Be this as it may, the above suggests two points: First, a narrow sea channel was more easily blocked or controlled than a wide alley. New military technologies were particularly important in that regard, although, in the age of sail, controls were never perfect and ships could always find a way to "slip through". Second, in some (but definitely not all) cases, it was possible to evade the risk of being trapped in a dangerous sea strait by proceeding along other routes, over land, or through the sea itself. Finally, and that is related to the second observation, if there was a chance to use alternative routes, regularly and at little extra cost, entire merchant networks might shift and gravitate towards new centers of trade and commerce. Thus, when Melaka was taken by the Portuguese, many Muslim groups began moving to other emporia, often using the Sunda Strait to reach their destinations in the Malay world.

6   Changing Perspectives and Controls

In the third paragraph, it was suggested that maritime elements, rather than "land-based" dimensions, should be more important for our theme. Pirates and bandits who attacked commercial vessels in the Straits of Melaka and Singapore had their bases in nearby villages, sometimes on remote islands, or at the swampy shores of hidden inlets. For a long time, there was no major port, neither in the Strait of Singapore nor in the area of modern Melaka. Aru, Lambri and Pasai were far away, on Sumatra, and Melaka itself was founded only in the late medieval period. Little is known about the small coastal settlements under Sri Vijaya's "suzerainty" or the internal structure of the early kingdoms on the Malay Peninsula. But presumably all these entities had an eye on the Straits region and on commercial shipping passing through the area. Essentially, they relied on a small number of "mini ports" to monitor events in the coastal zone, and to collect taxes and provisions, but they rarely thought of conquering large territories beyond their "own world". Their view of the *selat* was like a view from "within", and less frequently, from "outside" – i.e., from a distant terrain, or the *selat's* farther hinterland.

This does not apply to the role of long distance traders, for example Persian and Indian merchants, who would view the Straits region from the Indian Ocean. When the Chinese and later the Portuguese and Dutch moved in, that picture became even more complex. They too adopted an outside point of view which was more related to the sea, or the vision of a giant macro-region, than to the micro-cosmos of the nearby land. Moreover, due to advanced technology, it now became possible to rely on a number of modern warships, which were called in from afar. True, Melaka played an important role for both China and the Europeans, but probably these powers would also have been able to exert influence on trade and traffic in this region without a permanent base.

More generally then, a sea strait could be "controlled" from within or from afar, depending on local and other conditions. Accordingly, there were different views, and these were related to different levels of power, military capabilities, ideologies, economic considerations and other ex-pectations. Views and conditions did not always remain stable over time, i.e., a narrow sea channel which was insignificant in the beginning could emerge as an important waterway in later periods, for commercial, politi-cal or other reasons. Put differently, the art of portraying a sea strait var-ied a great deal, from artist to artist, and may not have remained the same from one period to the next. But of course, there were exceptions to the rule, again depending on local conditions and general viewpoints.

7   Different Kinds of Sea Straits: Geography Matters

Just as the perception of an individual waterway, seen from "within", or observed from "outside", could vary over time, there were different kinds of sea straits "as such", especially if their natural setting is considered, for example, currents, nearby islands, weather conditions, types of shores, or water depth. These conditions were important for the possible functions of a sea strait. While the Strait of Hormuz was deep and not too difficult in terms of navigation, this did not apply to the waters between northwestern Sri Lanka and the Tamil coast. Ships easily ran aground in these shallow waters, called "Palk Strait", and with the exception of Ibn Khurdādhbih, Arabic geographers rarely alluded to the possibility of getting through that channel. Without doubt, large vessels would prefer to round Sri Lanka near Dondra Head, at the island's southern shore, when sailing from Cape Comorin to Bengal or in the opposite direction.

The Strait of Qiongzhou 瓊州海硖, between Hainan and the Leizhou peninsula 雷州半島, is another special case: it was much feared by sailors, mainly on account of dangerous contra-currents and unpredictable winds. Similar observations can be found in the literature on the Maldives, which could be crossed "horizontally", but only in a few selected sites (Kardiva Channel, Veimandu Channel, etc.), and with the assistance of experienced local pilots.

As was said, other areas now classified as "sea straits", were not always perceived as such in earlier times. The Strait of Formosa is so wide that it often took more than two days for a traditional sailing craft to reach the opposite shore. Moreover, in the eyes of many (but not all) Chinese geographers, the island of Taiwan, formerly called (Xiao) Liuqiu (小)琉球 (various spellings), was a distant location with little to offer and a very savage population. The Portuguese were equally uninterested in this place and did not disturb commercial traffic in its vicinity, but when the aggressive Dutch moved in, the situation began to change. They established a fortified post near modern Tainan 台南 and, for some years, tried to intercept shipping through the Taiwan "channel". A peaceful maritime space had thus turned into a dangerous "sea strait", or war zone. Needless to add, some Chinese groups offered resistance and eventually succeeded in ousting the Dutch from their stronghold, thereby restoring China's suzerainty over this place.

The case of the Taiwan Strait is interesting for several reasons: First, this area began to be perceived as a kind of channel when it was first torn into military rivalries. Second, at around the same time, or a little earlier, Chinese migration across the strait increased and Taiwan became more

closely attached to the mainland. Third, the system of currents near Tai-
wan's western littoral is rather complex, due to the off-shore position of
the Penghu Islands 澎湖群島 (Pescadores). Sailing across the strait south
of Penghu was one thing, crossing it farther to the north required differ-
ent techniques. Put differently, the broad east-west extension of this strait
should not conceal the fact that pilots had to be aware of natural obsta-
cles. Without doubt, this was already understood in pre-European times
and was certainly one important reason for China to install a government
post on Penghu. Fourth, in theory at least, sailing through the Taiwan
channel, from the East to the South China Seas or in the opposite direc-
tion, could be avoided altogether, if ships moved along the Pacific shore
of that island. But again, due to strong currents and winds, this could not
easily be accomplished and, from what we know, was rarely attempted in
pre-European times.

In terms of geography, the case of Taiwan Strait is largely defined by
the location of one major island – namely Taiwan (or several islands, if
Peng Hu is included) – in front of the mainland. Without such an island,
this strait would not exist. However, not in all cases of a similar kind
(island at some distance of the mainland), the expression "strait" occurs
in modern writing. The space between the Xisha archipelago 西沙群島
(the Paracel group) and Hainan/Vietnam bears no special name of its
own. In ancient times this was different: the sea to the south and east of
Hainan was called "Qizhou yang" 七洲洋 (Seven Island Ocean) in Chi-
nese. Moreover, when sailing between South China and Pulau Condore
(off the southeastern point of Vietnam), pilots had to be very careful,
because they wanted to keep their vessel on a safe course between the
Southeast Asian mainland and an imagined cluster of shoals and islands,
near the coast. This cluster, which was often thought to extend from
Xisha / Zhongsha 中沙 down to Pulau Condore, appears on the famous
Zheng He map (鄭和航海圖) and later in Portuguese cartography as a
dotted zone. The entire channel in between, no doubt, would deserve a
name of its own, because – seen through the eyes of a traditional mariner
– it is similar to a long "sea strait".

As opposed to this non-named area and the Taiwan Strait, other
"strait-like" passages are rather short. One example is the Ten Degree
Channel between the Andaman and Nicobar groups in the northeastern
section of the Indian Ocean. This channel already appears in early Arabic
writing (as "Purun shīr", "Farshīr", etc.) and was essential for trade be-
tween the eastern side of India and various ports along the Tenasserim
coast, for example Mergui, and certainly also for trade in and out of old
Kalāh. Another very short channel possibly used in early times, especially

by Arabic and Indian navigators, is Duncan Strait, inside the Andaman group. These and other straits can also be associated with the aforementioned idea of portages across the Malayan peninsula.

Presumably, in most cases the physical shape of a strait/channel/passage, together with the associated pattern of winds and currents, did not change significantly over the last two millenia, i.e., during the period covered by these notes. But there are exceptions to the rule. The complicated system of sea lanes at the southern edge of the Malay peninsula, in the Riau area, could be a case in point. Shifting coral colonies, perhaps earth quakes, sedimentary deposits and expanding mangroves seem to have altered the physical appearance of this region – to the extent that certain channels, which became impassable in the course of time, or simply too dangerous for ordinary vessels, were gradually substituted by others. This might also explain, in part at least, why early European maps – and even written texts – deviate from the present geographical setting.

Clearly, geological and environmental changes should not be overemphasized, but the problem also surfaces in other contexts. Several ancient ports were located at the mouth of a river. As the coast line gradually shifted towards the sea, due to sedimentary deposits in the delta region, these ports lost their original significance as trading centers and had to be rebuilt at new locations. One famous example is the city of Kayal (Cael, etc.) in southern India. Another area undergoing permanent change is the region south of Guangzhou. In the olden days, this zone consisted of several small bays and flat islands, now it is one large area, with canals and fertile land.

Here we may return to the issue of sea straits. It may be argued that an area like the Strait of Singapore with its many hidden shoals and reefs, and dozens of small islands, did not provide ideal conditions for a major emporium to emerge, at least not in the age of sail, when modern harbour and dragging facilities did not yet exist. There was simply not enough "geographical continuity", in contrast to, say, the entrance of the Red Sea, which was a deep and navigable channel at all times, or the Strait of Hormuz, where similar conditions prevailed. In all likelihood such areas were better candidates for the growth of substantial settlements, which could make a living on trade. In more abstract terms, there should be a positive relation between geographical continuity in and around a sea strait on the one side, and the duration of *longue durée* phenomena created by human intervention on the other. We shall get back to this point farther below.

8   Different Functions: Sea Straits and Sea Routes

Many factors impacted on the "functional role" of sea straits, as was just said. The concept of the maritime silk route may be useful for further explanations in that regard. If that route is perceived as a long corridor, or a system of interconnected sea lanes, by which one maritime zone was linked to another, then at least some of Asia's sea straits – as seen from the "total perspective" of the model, or from the viewpoint of its many subsegments – functioned like intermediate channels. This applies to the Strait of Hormuz, the Korea Strait, the Balabac Strait and other passages, but not to the many subordinated "mini waterways" (often called "passages", "channels", etc. as well) in the island worlds near Mergui, off the Korean west side, and other highly fragmented areas.

   Furthermore, some sea straits were "unavoidable": ships proceeding from one maritime zone to another zone simply had to take a particular route and pass through a particular "channel" in order to reach a particular destination. In other cases, it was possible to choose between two or more alternative routes, albeit very often at the expense of additional time and extra costs. Thus, in order to proceed from Cape Comorin or southwestern India to Mogadishu, a vessel was not compelled to move through the Nine Degree Channel, or through the Maldive Islands; it could follow the Indian west coast, then cross the Arabian Sea to Oman and sail via Soqotra to East Africa. But this route would require more time than a direct passage through the Maldives. Similarly, if the Strait of Melaka was blocked, traffic could be diverted to the Sunda zone, again at additional input costs. A further example relates to the Sulu and Celebes Seas. Both these zones are connected by several parallel channels – Basilan Strait, Tapianta Channel, Sibulgu Passage, etc. Here, however, the choice of route may not have mattered very much, unless pirates would focus on a particular channel and thus force a ship to sail through an alternative passage.

   Although there is only one entrance to each the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf, the concept of "alternative" sea channels can be extended to these two scenarios as well, if both seas are embedded into a larger context, i.e., if they are perceived as two "competitive" waterways between northern Egypt / the Levant on the one side, and the Indian Ocean on the other. Presumably, there were periods in history, when more ships would sail through the Bab al-Mandab than through the Strait of Hormuz, while at other times the Strait of Hormuz would take the lead, depending on a multitude of political and economic factors. The same may not necessarily apply to the Melaka and Sunda "duo", at least not with an identical degree of intensity, or to the Strait of Taiwan and the Pacific coast of that island (as was already indicated).

Admittedly, these ideas remain vague, because there are no statistics that might allow us to quantify the magnitude of possible substitution effects between two alternative sea routes in pre-European times; yet, it is important to keep in mind that such constellations may have impacted on the flow of commodities, the commercial setting of certain areas, the circulation of ideas, people, and so forth.

Another "technical dimension" which is again related to an exterior point of view and not so much to an internal perspective, or "strait's view", concerns the fact that one may distinguish between larger maritime zones and subordinated entities. The East and South China Seas belong to the first category. By contrast, the Bohai 渤海 can be treated as an appendix of the East China Sea (Yellow Sea), the Gulf of Tongking is a minor adjunct of the second area. It could be argued, therefore, that the Qiongzhou and Bohai Straits were different in kind from, say, the Korea Strait, which functioned like an avenue between two major zones. Moreover, in lieu of sailing through the Qiongzhou channel, merchants could move from Qinzhou 钦州 via the area of modern Nanning and the river route to Guangzhou, and in the case of trade between Tianjin and the fertile rice lands in southern Jiangsu and Zhejiang, the Great Canal could be chosen instead of the sea route. For some time there also existed a short canal through the Shandong peninsula, which implied that grain convoys did not have to round the eastern tip of Shandong when going north.

The above shows that sea straits were closely linked to the existence of sea routes. Indeed, it is only through the latter that the former gain a certain "momentum". Without a sea route, a sea strait remains an isolated natural phenomenon. Secondly, the character of sea routes matters as well. The last two cases are closely associated with coastal traffic – especially rice shipments – and not so much with international trade. This is substantially different from, say, the Strait of Hormuz, which was a channel for long distance trade, nearly at all times, and not so much an alley for coastal transport and small peddlers. The general conclusion should thus be: a strait between two major zones was closely linked to the international world, especially long distance trade; other sea passages, mainly those between a major and a minor area, or two subordinated scenarios, were like country roads used for regional transportation. Certainly, there should be several hybrid forms between these two extremes.

9   Different Ports and Sea Straits: At the Limit?

Such a typology of sea straits, as a kind of "route-defined" arrangement, would of course be different from other typologies, for example, of port cities. So far, port cities have never been exclusively defined by sea routes,

but rather by a multitude of human and environmental factors, as was said in the first section. Be this as it may, it should be possible to create some kind of relation between different types of sea straits and different types of ports, particularly, if both entities are placed in a greater maritime context.

Not infrequently, major emporia emerged in the vicinity of major sea alleys. Hormuz, Aden, Melaka, Bantem and Quanzhou are fine examples. Several ports in southern India could be mentioned as well, because ships sailing from the Arabian Sea to the Bay of Bengal, or in the other direction, had to go around Cape Comorin, as if that cape would function like a narrow (unnamed) strait. But how important were sea routes and sea straits for international ports, for their rise and fall? What exactly is the "triangular" relation between ports, routes and straits? Is it possible to establish a general picture?

The growth of emporia in medieval times has been aligned with the emergence of maritime trading zones, as is well-known. Chaudhuri and others have tried to develop this concept of a "compartmentalized" oceanic world. Perhaps a thorough discussion of the nature and functions of sea straits could enrich that model. Sea straits, it would seem, might then become a key for understanding transformation. However, the outcome of such a debate is open, because typologies are difficult to establish – there will always be exceptions to the rule. One exception does in fact pertain to the issue of emporia themselves: the vicinity of a sea strait was not a *sine qua non* condition for an emporium to prosper, several important emporia in locations far away from major sea channels are easily identified.

Other models, like the one by Bronson, suggest that ports of diverse categories, including emporia, flourished near the mouths of major rivers. These ports were supplied with inland products, by local traffic, which they would then offer for sale. Not all, but some ports of this kind should certainly go as "export outlets", and not as emporia, because they were known for one special commodity, or a fixed set of goods, difficult to obtain in other locations. However, there is no clear relation between the "Bronsonian" port and the issue of sea straits. It would thus be impossible to state that these ports should be associated with the existence of minor sea straits, while emporia grew in the vicinity of major channels. A much more complex matrix would be required to disentangle these and other questions.

10   Final Remark

Topics related to the function and culture of individual Asian ports have received much attention, as was said in the beginning. Maritime historians would be lost without these ports. All kinds of networks are condi-

tioned on their rise and fall; maritime exchange is unthinkable without the existence of urban markets in coastal zones. Besides such "port-centered" approaches to the maritime world, one may perhaps think of a new kind of "model", with the existence of sea straits at its center – a kind of "*selat*-oriented" concept. In the Malay world, it could be argued, sea passages were at least as important as ports. So, why not change to another point of view? The same should apply to the Philippines, the Mergui zone and similar areas. There were city states, yes – but can one also think of "*selat* countries", as a special category?

In theory there should be different intellectual avenues towards a major comparative study on the issue of sea straits. Such a study can be conditioned on the construction of an abstract "straits model", i.e., on the definition of "universal" criteria, of which a certain minimum must be fulfilled for a specific zone to qualify as a (major / minor) sea alley (strait / passage / channel). As was shown, for the construction of such a model, view points matter very much, both natural and human factors – for example the desire to control traffic by force – would require careful investigation. The terminology should also be considered. Finally, it was suggested that certain strata of the Braudelian concept can be brought in line with the image of the maritime silk route as a complex structure of interrelated maritime segments. Within this structure, sea passages played a crucial role. Without them, maritime history cannot really be understood.

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