Rethinking Exchange and Empires:
From the Mediterranean Idea
to Seventeenth-Century Macau and Fort Zeelandia

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Introduction: The Maritime View and Exchange

Generally, historians and other specialists interested in the history of
empires, or larger regions such as China or the Indian subcontinent, ex-
amine the physical and other conditions associated with a given space. If
they extend their studies to the high seas, or at least certain coastal areas,
they tend to look at these entities from the land, implicitly assuming that
the seaboard and the open ocean should be treated as subordinated cate-
gories. These areas are thus assigned a peripheral character and are often
perceived as being functionally dependent on some political or cultural
centre in the interior of a larger land mass. Maritime historians take a
different approach. Metaphorically put, they place themselves in the mid-
dle of the sea, for example the Bay of Bengal, to observe the coasts
around this stretch of water. Their view goes from sea to land, and not
the other way around.

For the maritime historian, in theory at least, opposite coasts were
connected to each other by an infinite set of transoceanic "lines" and
"threads". Some of these links were only potentially existent and never
materialized, others can be made visible by historical, archaeological,
anthropological, and linguistic evidence. These links – or rather networks,
if they developed into more sophisticated "webs" – can be characterized
as systems of "exchange". Exchange in the Braudelian sense implies the
flow of material and non-material elements, usually over longer periods of
time. In other words, commodities and trade goods were circulated from
one coastal area to another, often through successive ages and quite inde-
pendently from the rise and fall of political power. Other than that, we
can also observe the flow of cultural elements such as religions, institu-
tional concepts, technological know-how, equipment, and so on.

One important assumption associated with the above is that the circu-
lation of "things" across the sea, from coast to coast, was more important

for a particular port or seashore – qualitatively and quantitatively – than the circulation of "things" from that same location to its respective hinterland, via overland routes. Indeed, if the sea hosted the majority of all exterior links, then the coastal site in question may be seen as one part of a greater maritime scenario, because, evidently, it depended more on its maritime connections than on its inland traffic. The central section of coastal Guangdong may be a case in point. Suppose it was more intimately linked to Southeast Asia, via the sea, than to its mountainous hinterland and the interior of China. If such a hypothesis is accepted, then a location like Macau or even the Guangzhou region might be treated as part of a larger maritime category vaguely identical with the South China Sea, or the "Nanyang world", if such a label would be permissible.

In some sense the above may also apply to certain island cultures, unless an archipelago depended, unilaterally, on a single land power or several nearby states, which would furnish the majority of all maritime imports – material and otherwise – indirectly or directly, via some intermediate port. For instance, if Sri Lanka were downgraded to an annex of "land-locked" India, it would perhaps become difficult to expose that island as a major factor in the maritime history of the Gulf of Manar, the Bay of Bengal or the Indian Ocean in its totality.

Constructing Space and Time

It was sometimes argued that the circulation of "things", and Asia's maritime past more generally, largely depended on the role of individual ports, or rather, on various sets of ports, which interacted with each other in different ways. As is well known, historians have made efforts to categorize such ports, usually by relating their performance to all kinds of traders, networks and larger political entities, such as kingdoms and empires. One general aspect concerns the weight that these coastal "exchange sites" – irrespective of whether they should be defined as *emporia*, bridgeheads or *entrepôts* – played within the total structure of a maritime system.[1] Here a variation of the model outlined above seems to apply: The maritime historian who wishes to define a particular sea space surrounded by coasts and ports as a homogeneous entity, is mostly interested in loca-

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1   For an early, but very useful and clear typology of ports, see Rothermund 1991, 3-8.

tions whose total sea-based exchange surpassed the total exchange be-
tween the port(s) in question and their respective hinterland(s).

The above presupposes two other things. First, it should be possible
to define a maritime scenario in terms of its area, and secondly considera-
tion should be given to the dimension of time. The definition of space
may be purely geographical, or it may be conditioned on factors created
by humans, or on a mixture of both. Suppose, for example, historians
would associate Guangdong's ports more closely with China's interior
than with the sea; in such a case one might want to argue that although,
geographically, Guangdong's littoral would delimitate the northern fringe
of the South China Sea, culturally and in other respects, it should be dis-
connected from the exchange scenario of the Nanhai world. In other
words, the Nanhai, as an entity of investigation, would then comprise,
say, the Sarawak and Sabah coasts, parts of continental Southeast Asia,
the western side of the Philippines, southern Taiwan and so forth – but
not necessarily Guangdong.[2]

Similar problems of space arise when two related maritime scenarios
are lumped together. The Mediterranean as *the* "classical" space of ex-
change can be defined in various ways – geographically, economically,
and even culturally.[3] But whether we should see the Black Sea as an annex
to the Mediterranean, or rather as a separate world, is another issue. In
the case of many Asian spaces, which are endowed with more than one
geographical exit, similar questions arise. Where should one draw the
southern border of the Nanhai, the Bay of Bengal, the Arabian Sea?
Should one see the Yellow and East China Sea as one scenario, are the
Bohai and Gulf of Tongking subsegments of larger entities? Clearly, the
answers to these questions will depend on the criteria used for defining
maritime space as such, and more specifically, on their criteria used for
their delimitation.[4]

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2   There are different ideas on whether and how maritime space, in the Braudelian sense,
    should be delimitated. Recently, François Gipouloux has opted for a rather open ap-
    proach. This enables him to also consider large inland territories. But his study is mostly
    confined to the early modern period and more recent times. See Gipouloux 2009. Also
    see my review to appear in *BEFEO*.
3   For some general ideas on the Mediterranean and its possible analogies in Asia, see the
    first segment of Ptak 2007a.
4   Also see Ptak 2008, especially 57-63.

The above can be further complicated by additional considerations. One question is this: How far should the maritime historian look inland? The intuitive answer could be that he will not move beyond certain natural barriers such as the Western Ghats and the mountain range behind the Omani shore, or alternatively, that he will again follow man-made standards when trying to define the outer limits of his academic field. In the second case he may argue, a maritime zone should "end" at an imagined line near which a set of land-based elements will emerge as dominant in an exchange matrix. Such an approach allows for some flexibility indeed: in certain cases it will be necessary to include the hinterland of a major port in a larger maritime setting, in other cases the coastal belt will already belong to a different sphere.

There can be no doubt, such "models" will only work in theory. Practical considerations will make it difficult to argue that a particular port or coastal zone should be associated with a maritime scenario, rather than with a land-centered area. Moreover, all our efforts at defining space – be this geographically, or otherwise – presuppose a good amount of mental groundwork. Such constructions vary over time, and from one civilisation to the next. "Southeast Asia", to mention just one example, is a fairly recent invention; it co-exists with other concepts that are quite different in nature. But these entities share one thing in common: they are all mental fabrications.

Finally, the construction of space is also instrumentalized for various purposes, and these in turn can be linked to political and other needs. It has been argued, to mention a further example, that the Mediterranean idea would be a kind of "northern concept", serving European dreams and rhetorics; the Ottoman side of "things" would be underrepresented in Braudelian thought.[5] Clearly, Greater China, greater Southeast Asia and other suchlike entities fall into the same category, which requires no further comments here.

The dimension of time is the second stratum to be looked at here. Braudel and many other historians were mostly interested in so-called *longue durée* phenomena. No doubt, some elements may be said to have lasted for longer periods than others. The longest ones, in most cases, were the physical conditions associated with an area. Typically, wind pat-

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5   Subrahmanyam 1998.

terns, the flora and fauna of a macro-region, tidal systems and currents fall into this category. These phenomena remained constant, or nearly constant, through several millennia, although the impact of sudden catastrophes such as earth quakes and floods should not be underestimated. By contrast, the fall and rise of coastal empires, ports and networks were usually short affairs. The exchange of goods and ideas seem to range between these two extremes; in some cases they lasted for several centuries, or even longer, in others they disappeared rather quickly.

What the minimum duration for an observable phenomenon should be in order to qualify as a major "maritime constituent", or essential characteristic of a maritime area, naturally, will always remain a matter of debate. For instance, should the export of Hainanese cottons, vaguely alluded to in medieval Chinese texts, be treated as a *longue durée* item of the South China Sea, or are we looking at a comparatively short-lived phenomenon in this case, which was of marginal importance within a greater segment of time? There are no precise answers to such questions, neither in theory, nor in practice, because quantitative evidence does not exist, nor is there any other precise framework which might allow us to weigh the cotton "candidate" against other observable variables that seem to fall into the "exchange" category.

In spite of such uncertainties, many of us are inclined to think that certain elements were definitely more important than others. Such ideas usually follow very "impressionistic lines" – often by implicitly assuming that the phenomena in question, be they static or of a less durable kind, exerted a significant and long-lasting impact on a given environment. This presupposes that a sufficient number of developments, or perhaps events, can indeed be identified as having occurred in a particular space, and over longer periods in history. Or to take it the other way around: A small data base is likely to be insufficient for the identification of key factors.

Approaching the Notion of Empire

The above can be reduced to a very simplistic "model": The issues we are looking at, in terms of space and time, are often grouped together in various ways, and analysed in the form of typologies. Indeed, many "elements" which maritime historians have been working on in recent years, became attractive to a larger academic community, simply because these elements were categorized in one way or the other. This applies, for ex-

ample, to port cities, merchants and entrepreneurs, networks and trading communities, commodities, technologies, legal institutions, and so forth. But there are some issues, which have received less attention, one being Sea Straits. A modern typology of such passages remains to be invented, and the different sub-categories possibly emerging from such investigation could perhaps be added to the maritime historian's matrix of analytical tools.[6]

Another category that is difficult to handle from a theoretical point of view is the issue of maritime empires. The English word "empire" and most of its modern European equivalents derive from the Latin term *imperium*. These expressions can be defined in many different ways, which has led to complex discussions, the details of which cannot be quoted here. Suffice it to say that the English term "as such" usually carries a geopolitical component and the notion of power, because it always implies that a single person, or a group of persons, or a major institution of some kind is in control of a certain space, and of other people, who are either residing within that same "territory" or beyond its boundaries.

Typically, the controlling side can be identified in terms of ethnicity, economic and financial influence, spiritual power, ideology, or other criteria. It makes use of coercive tools – to varying degrees – such as advanced military technology, economic and financial institutions, laws, or simple systems based on punishments and rewards. These tools can be combined in many ways and embedded into sophisticated frameworks.

Normally, traditional empires are conceived as entities located on a large landmass, less frequently on one or several islands. Although they may be agrarian, they will probably have cities and towns, local industries, a complex infrastructure, and so forth. Empires, it is also clear, are usually recognized as major states. If so, then a society, which has not gone through a state-formation process, cannot become an empire. In other words, normally a society develops into a state first, before becoming an empire. In that sense, "statehood" is the *sine-qua-non* condition for an empire to be born. There can be no shortcut from a non-state entity to an empire.[7]

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6   Ptak 2010.
7   Such concepts as "integrated state", "segmentary state", "autonomous spaces", etc. are not considered here. They would be of little help for the discussion.

Of course, such a simple notion presupposes that we know how to define state-formation, and that there is agreement in regard to the basic constituents of a state. Moreover, the notion of state, in turn, should be clearly kept apart from other concepts, such as nation, nation-building, nation-state, ethnicity, and so forth. How these latter concepts should be related to different notions of the term "empire", is a highly complicated matter that I shall not deal with here.

Be this as it may, usually traditional empires are run by a hierarchically organized apparatus. Military power may be of central importance, and the control of "alien" terrain, over longer periods in history, may be crucial as well. Intuitively, "size" and "impact" should matter very much, although it would be nearly impossible to state what the minimum coercive power, impact, or military control should be for a polity to qualify as an empire.

Whether an empire is headed by a monarch, or whether we are looking at a quasi-democratic structure, largely defined by the rule of law, may not be all that important, because in each case, the basic constituent is power, and there is always a small group, or "apparatus", which looks after a larger crowd. Of course, some historians would be inclined to exclude certain cases from the general notion of the term and restrict the semantic constituents to a much more narrow set of ideas. Put differently, there are *strictu sensu* definitions, and broader "applications", and the problem may – in the end – belong to the field of linguistics, and not so much to the "battleground" of the historical sciences.

That also applies to certain symbolic and even metaphorical strata of the term. There are merchant empires, religious empires, spiritual empires, pirate empires, to mention just three or four examples. If the empire happens to be a kingdom, one may even come across an "animal kingdom", and with some imagination, I am quite certain, it should be possible to invent a "vegetational thalassocracy".

Be this as it may – usually the structure of a man-made empire is hierarchical, as was said, and in terms of space, that structure may shrink or expand. Furthermore, it may change qualitatively, or remain the same over long periods of time. In that sense, it may be a typical *longue durée* phenomenon. But how are we to deal with an "empire-like" body, which undergoes a series of qualitative changes, or transformations, within a short period of time? Are we to give up the notion of a single empire in this case and refer to a chain of entities that come and go in quick succes-

sion? Once again, we have reached a point here, which is inevitably inter-
twined with the art defining things, i.e., with semantics and cultural con-
ventions.

From this it also follows that the notion of "empire", if a trading empire
or a merchant empire is meant, should be distinguished from the notions
associated with several "adjacent" terms. For instance, there are transna-
tional companies and merchant networks, and the question arises, where to
draw the borderline between a complex network and a small empire. Final-
ly, how far should we go in maritime history, when calling certain phenom-
ena "empires"? Moreover, can we make a clear qualitative distinction be-
tween maritime and non-maritime empires – or empires with a strong mari-
time component and entities structured quite differently?

Combining Different Forms of Exchange and Empire

As was said, at some point all these questions will take us back to the field
of semantics. More generally, they concern the complex relation between
what Ferdinand de Saussure has once called the *signifiant* and *signifié* sides
of a "word", or rather its mental equivalent, and they also involve the
cultural dimensions linked with that same entity.

However, for practical reasons, what may be of greater importance
here, is one simple observation already addressed above: In the maritime
context, the notion of "empire", associated with an element of power and
influence, will always be tied to the transmission of "things" and "ideas";
in other words, "empire", as I see it, should be conditioned, at least in
part, on guided exchange – between individuals or groups, within one and
the same system (the state or empire in question), and also between sepa-
rate entities, networks, countries, etc. If this notion is accepted, then ex-
change is an important vehicle, or perhaps the only major mechanism
that will lead to the manifestation of power and influence.

Exchange can assume different forms. It can be simple and direct, or
indirect and in stages – and it may follow one direction, or proceed in
various directions. Needless to add, the degree to which different types of
exchange are associated with power, in a coercive sense, varies from one
system to the next, and from one period to another period. This is one
reason for the assumption that systems, be they classified as empires or
networks, often underwent so-called transformations. Such transfor-
mations, defined as qualitative (and not simple quantitative) changes, can

imply institutional shifts, for example, from an "apparatus" with a set of highly coercive ingredients, to a system nearly devoid of such characteristics, or from an entity marked by a small number of "regular" exchanges between a fixed set of locations to an open-access system with very flexible links between varying sites. In other words, what gets changed, is not only the system as such, but also its internal and / or external exchange structure.

Although these introductory remarks may expose some of the problems associated with the term "exchange", they sound quite nebulous, partly because the semantic "fringe" of the "empire" concept remains enshrouded by clouds. As was said, if the notion of "empire" is treated in a loose way, then it may incorporate different things, entities, and special cases. Although it could be a challenging task to rethink such an open "model" – a model combining the notions of "maritime empire" / "maritime states" / "maritime networks" on the one side, and different exchanges on the other side (all within a highly complex matrix) –, we would certainly end up with a mental monster, full of possible contradictions, and not necessarily applicable to historical reality as such (if ever such a reality can be defined...). Instead of doing that, I prefer to draw attention to several other, rather general issues first, all surrounding the concept of exchange; this will then be followed by (or combined with) certain ideas pertaining to exchange within an empire, and exchange between systems. The difference between empire, state and network will largely be kept out of the discussion.

To begin with, exchange can be related to communication – indeed, it is one form of communication. Alternatively, communication may be the inferior category and thus one aspect of exchange, depending on the criteria used to define these terms. Whichever solution applies, communication in the broadest sense means that something – an object or an idea – is directed from one person to another person, or from one location to another location. It should also imply that sender and recipient will be able to make use of the messages, ideas and things that "travel" back and forth, or get "exchanged". In other words, exchange and communication are usually intentional – or bound to some kind of expectation. Thus, prior to the act of exchange, there is a plan. This means that time is an important dimension, because one unit of exchange can be linked to units of time in different ways, for example in the form of a linear function, or sets of intervals.

There is no society without exchange and communication. The shape, structure and intensity of all exchange varies with the evolutionary stage of a system, and with its extension in time and space. Total exchange inside a powerful empire (or its per capita / per group exchange) may be higher than the equivalent values associated with a less important polity. This presupposes that all forms of exchange can be quantified, which is of course pure theory. Nevertheless, if the idea is kept, then there must be some kind of positive relation between exchange on the one side, and its organisational forms on the other side. The degree of sophistication surrounding the issue of exchange may matter in that regard. A highly sophisticated institutional apparatus should normally favour the acceleration and expansion of exchange. Whether coercive power should be seen as an independent factor, or an element inherently present in the institutional structure, is a further point of debate, but may not matter very much.

By and large these ideas are mostly related to the internal setting of an empire. One question should then be: Are there striking differences between land-based states and maritime empires, if communication and exchange are employed as *tertia comparationis*? True, land-based polities will mostly rely on vehicles, horses, camels, streets and routes to circulate things and ideas; maritime polities will rely on oared vessels and sailing boats, and only resort to other "exchange aids" inside port cities. In other words, technology matters. But – depending on views and measurements – the "exchange gap", as measured in the total number of internally exchanged units (or a similar value), between, say, (a) a polity whose internal circulation is largely based on dromedaries and (b) a polity mostly depending on railways plus horses may be much larger indeed, for whatever reasons, than the parallel gap between the latter (b) and, say, (c) a ship-based maritime polity. Therefore, technology alone will not suffice to define a difference between land-based empires and maritime scenarios.

Other differences between both these worlds relate to natural conditions – for instance, seasonal winds, temperatures, etc. In the pre-modern age, such phenomena had a definite impact on the time that was needed to complete an "act" of exchange. A ship might require several months to reach its destination in the first half of the year, but only a few weeks in the second half, and a caravan travelling overland, would cover a similar distance more rapidly in spring than in fall, or vice-versa. This means that distance may enter our calculation, in absolute terms, or subjected to a set of background factors.

More formally, and less complicated, if a "unit of exchange" needs a certain time (t) to travel a specific distance (d), then exchange of any kind (e) could ultimately be derived from a basic equation of the kind: $e = d / t$. No matter how that equation would be altered at the right hand side, we would reach different values for the quotient e in different situations. It is possible, then, that by juxtaposing a set of "maritime exchange cases" to a set of "land-based exchange cases", one would be able to establish a relevant statistical difference between these two types.

The above picture can undergo many modifications. First of all, one could argue that technology should have a direct impact on d and / or t, just like natural conditions. If so, then technology would be a subordinated parameter on the right side of the equation, next to various other factors, and each of these factors could be weighed in one way or the other.

Furthermore, one might want to break up e into different kinds of exchanges, such as the circulation of ideas (e_i), the exchange of commodities (e_c), etc. Then e, as the total value of all internal exchange, would equal to $\Sigma e = e_i + e_c + ...$. In such a case, we could think of states or empires with one well-developed component and several lower values, irrespective of whether these polities are land-based or maritime entities. Moreover, once again, each element by itself would be a function of several causes, like time, institutions, degree of coercion, expectations, intentions, etc. In the end, we would have to invent an extremely complex exchange-orientated system to incorporate hundreds of parameters – clearly beyond "practical" history.

One complication, to give just one example, would arise out of the following considerations: Each subcategory of e, defined as d / t, might change over time, for example, due to improvements in transportation, or the removal of institutional barriers. In other words, there would have to be a diachronic approach, based on different data calculated for different periods; a static image, based on only one set of data, would not be sufficient in itself to characterize a longer period. Moreover, the e value, almost a proxy for exchange efficiency (how long does it take to transfer one unit of exchange between two points!), might be distinguished from other values, such as the total quantity of all exchanged units. A small and insignificant maritime entity would probably have low totals in both cases, over a long period in history. An efficiently run empire, with modern ships, would certainly reach higher values.

So far, the above was mostly restricted to the internal setting of an empire and its internal exchange. But how are we to treat exchange between different societies and states? – First of all, if exchange, as a form of communication, is a key characteristic of all polities, then we are looking at two general types of exchange, the internal and the external flow of things and ideas, as was just mentioned. Secondly, in analogy to the picture drawn above, for the internal sector, an advanced polity (advanced in terms of institutions, technological input, etc.) would certainly be more easily involved in external exchange, than a less sophisticated society. But once again, one may think of several deviations from this pattern; for example, a powerful empire might almost exclusively rely on itself, in "splendid isolation", and a smaller entity could be highly dependent on a complex set of external links. Melaka and Hormuz, as typical *emporia*, would belong to the latter category.

Irrespective of the difficulties involved in such an approach – if the basic idea of a combined model, with an external and an internal component, remains acceptable, then total external exchange, as a loose category, would be close to the measurable difference between all exports and imports (a variable regularly encountered in modern economic theory) *plus* many additional values for other "transfers", i.e., the exchange of cultural elements, their impact on different locations, etc. (if only these items were quantifiable).[8] This would be in partial analogy to the ideas already suggested for the internal sector of a polity.

It could then also be argued that in each case different transfer categories should be defined in terms of the geographical distance involved in each external "exchange act". This reminds of certain familiar concepts, such as the notions of long distance trade, coastal trade, direct trade, indirect trade, and other forms of exchange. In theory at least, each of these elements might enter our matrix in one form or the other. That also applies to the concept of redistributive trade, in contrast to other forms of circulation. Be this as it may, we would arrive at an even more complicated set of combinations. For instance, one could think of a maritime polity or empire whose total external "exchange balance" would reflect a high

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8   One regular item in basic economic theory is the so-called "ISLM model" with an export-import component as one of its major constituents. To what extent that component can be brought in line with the idea of Asian maritime exchange in the Braudelian sense, is a different matter.

commitment in long distance transfer of cultural elements, a high propor-
tion of short-distance trade, but only a small share in cultural exchange
over short distances, and a small share in long-distance trade. Similarly,
there could be empires with reverse values.

As each of these different elements could again be expressed through
a simple quotient, polities with strong ties to distant societies – based on
trade and commerce, or cultural exchange, or both – would probably
carry a low value for Σe, because of the time required to carry one "ex-
change unit" from location x to location y. Improvements in shipping
technology might accelerate speed and thus communication and ex-
change, which would raise this value in the next period of statistical
measurement. Different weights assigned to each parameter could of
course alter our picture, just as in the case of internal exchange.

Combining Ports and Maritime Empires

With these simple ideas in mind we shall now return to the possibility of
categorizing maritime empires. In the first section, some remarks were
already made on the "demarcation line" between maritime history and
conventional history. Space was seen as a constructed element. To some
measure, empires are mental fabrications as well (a point that I do not
wish to pursue here), but they may be more "real" than certain geograph-
ical and many other categories born out of our mind.

Ideally, for the maritime historian the most convenient terrain of in-
vestigation would be a clearly defined geographical space, filled by one or
two exchanged-based polities with their man-made "borders" located at
the outer limits of that space, not too far from / beyond the coastal hin-
terlands (because the hinterland would already belong to land-based em-
pires). Simply put, such a setting would bring together three dimensions:
the object of investigation, the category of a suitably constructed space,
and the general prerequisites associated with maritime history "as such".

A perfect situation of this kind will rarely be encountered. The defini-
tion of space remains difficult, a maritime empire often controls a sizeable
inland terrain, and at times a land-based polity exerts influence over a
maritime scenario. The overall layout of the arrangement, or object of
investigation, will become even more difficult if various kinds of net-
works, as separate categories, are added to our "model". In such cases,
one can think of a large land-based empire with a short coast line, but one

or several maritime networks operating on its behalf, either in the long distance sector, or at the coastal level, or in both segments. Similarly, there may be port-states, with large land-based cultural networks, serving as a kind of appendix to the maritime state itself. For the maritime historian, who approaches such cases in a rigorous manner, the land-based parts may not matter at all. He might consider all **e** quotients, the external and internal ones, but he will certainly be more interested in the ones related to "his" space. Perhaps he will even break up an empire into two artificial scenarios, a maritime space and a continental segment, with one assigned to maritime studies, and the other to "conventional" history.

Exposed to so many methodological possibilities and uncertainties – what else can one say in regard to "empires"? Let us stay exclusively inside the maritime scenario. There are cases of individual ports, which become centers of external exchange within a large region, while at the same time they only maintain a small hinterland and are not very successful in obtaining political control over other nearby ports. Melaka belongs to that category. For long periods in history, one can identify this sultanate with one major port. True, other coastal sites, along the Malayan peninsula and on Sumatra, did come under temporary rule of Melaka, but they were not very important as places of exchange, and usually they turned independent or became part of another state rather rapidly. Moreover, as has been argued in recent writing, the role of Melaka, as a typical *emporium*, was often inflated by economic history.[9] The question is whether that also applies to its role in cultural exchange. Melaka port served as a hub for the dissemination of Islam, Chinese cultural elements, Catholic priests, medical knowledge, and so forth. Some of these elements travelled to very remote sites. This may mean that Melaka's cultural exchange totals were probably quite impressive, irrespective of the question who the carriers involved in that exchange were, whether they normally resided in the town itself, or whether they belonged to some foreign group regularly moving in and out. Similar features can be associated with Bandar Aceh, Samudra, Pasai, and other ports. Many of these were *emporia*, perhaps cultural bridgeheads, or even export outlets for certain products originating from the nearby hinterland.

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9 For Melaka being inflated, see Ptak 2004.

If several ports with an outstanding exchange performance are placed under one political roof, then we are almost certainly dealing with an empire. Space, military ability, the degree of coercive influence and other key factors may (or may not) be crucial here. Srivijaya is often perceived as an example for such a system, although very little can be said in regard to its real nature. The famous notion of a loosely connected net of coastal villages and mini-ports (of the Bronsonian type[10]), with its politico-religious centers in Palembang and Jambi – this is how Srivijaya has been described – was sometimes compared to the Hanseatic League around the Baltic Sea.[11] In each case, one may assume, that port-to-port circulation, in the form of commercial transfer and cultural exchange, was quite important, and indeed, the major cohesive component for the entire system as such.

One may also argue here that much of the *external* exchange of each port became part of the *internal* matrix, as soon as the port in question began joining the Hanseatic mosaic or the Srivijayan system. The implied shift of the same kind of exchange – cultural, commercial, or otherwise – from external to internal should then be a kind of transformative experience associated with the growth of multi-port systems.

In that sense, the system of mini-sites constituting the early *Estado da Índia*, under Goa's rule, could be a variation of the same theme. Several coastal sites originally operating as independent "exchange units" became part of a huge structure with a sophisticated internal exchange rhythm, manifest in the form of *carreiras*, or trade routes, and other avenues of transfer. Similar observations apply to the *thalassocracies* of the ancient Mediterranean world, for example, the Phoenician network, the Minoan civilisation, etc. Naval power and / or other coercive elements, such as spiritual authority, as in the case of Srivijiya, were important features in some of these cases, next to exchange, or as subordinated variables, "behind" the relevant exchange values. But there was one difference as well, and this concerns the degree of "internal integration". The Hanseatic League was more like a network of "partner cities", the *Estado* had a strong power center, and in its totality the entire structure depended on yet another entity, namely Portugal.

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10   Details in Bronson 1977.
11   For Srivijaya and the Hanseatic League, see, for example, Kulke 1998.

The early Dutch "empire" in Asia is another case. The different locations under VOC rule were bound to each other through long-distance exchange across large spaces. Some locations were fully administered by their European masters, others were at the mercy of the VOC's Asian neighbours – and thus not much more than ordinary "trade factories". The Dutch installations on Deshima are a vivid example for this ambiguous situation. But what makes the VOC very special as a kind of empire, other than its commercial performance and its ability to use naval power very efficiently, is the fact that this entity was, in formal terms, simply a large firm and not really a state, although its structure as such was akin to that of an independent polity.

Let us get back here to the idea of distance. The *Estado da Índia* extended from East Africa to Melaka, the Moluccan Islands, Timor and beyond – and it had fast and modern ships. Therefore, its total internal exchange (expressed as an aggregated value combining all "units" transferred between the *Estado's* member ports in a given period, and all quotients d / t associated with that transfer) was probably higher than the comparable values achieved by the Hanseatic League and the Srivijayan system.[12] In other words, in terms of the "model", the ability to move sizeable quantities of "things" across the oceans, rapidly and over successive time segments, suggests that the internal exchange structure was quite efficient and perhaps very flexible.

Next, if one combines the internal value with the *Estado's* external exchange performance, then our picture will turn more complex. External exchange, in this particular case, would be a mixtum compositum referring to trade and transfer between, say, Goa and certain Indian inland polities, Macau and Guangzhou, Timor and Makassar, etc. It may be assumed that these exchange activities were well-developed and that, if only they could be measured quantitatively, attained a higher value than Goa's link back to Lisbon, via the Cape route. More prosaically: the *Estado's* intra-Asian component (consisting of internal and external exchange) surpassed the Euro-Asian component; this is why some scholars have argued, the Portuguese system gradually became absorbed by Asia, or became "Asianized".

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12 The fact that the *Estados's* ruling elite was composed by a thin layer of "distant aliens", who had superimposed new rules over an existing system of traditional exchange connections, may not matter very much here, and is left aside.

"Formalized" and "Shadow" Empires:
the Portuguese and Dutch

In the existing literature on the *Estado da Índia* certain layers of Luso-Asian activities have been addressed as a "shadow empire", i.e., as an informal annex loosely connected to the official government in Goa. Put differently, there was a formalized segment at the heart of the empire, and that segment was surrounded by different kinds of networks involved in trade and cultural exchange. The formalized section depended on a set of major locations around the Arabian Sea and along the East African coast, the "shadow" part, which is less easily re-constructed from the existing source material, consisted of many inofficial dependencies, or simply of merchant groups and *renegados* – white, Luso-Asian, or other – mostly operating in and around the Bay of Bengal and Southeast Asia.[13]

Many maritime empires, it would seem, were shaped in a similar way. Batavia was the official center of the VOC, but Dutch merchants could be found in many locations outside the VOC network, and just as in the case of Portuguese *casado* traders, these Dutchmen often acted quite independently from the official layers of the Dutch empire. Perhaps that also applies to Srivijaya. There may have been a strong nucleus on eastern Sumatra and a kind of loose shadow annex elsewhere. If so, the famous *mandala* structure, when emptied of its spiritual dimensions, should be a fairly frequent phenomenon in the maritime world, and not very much different from an ordinary core-periphery theme.

Similarly, and more generally, one could label the informal maritime merchant networks serving the needs of a strong continental empire as the maritime "shadow annexes" of that system. Or to turn things around: Land-based merchant networks tied to a port-polity may qualify as a continental "shadow empire" loosely connected to a maritime center. There are, indeed, a number of interesting cases that could be cited here. Religious expansion, as a form of one-way cultural transfer from one area to another area, was usually connected to a distant base, mainly for logistic reasons. This base – a port, ordinary state, or even empire – supplied money, institutional support, and personnel. The Jesuit network could be called a "religious empire" with its center in Europe. It was active inside

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13 With the publication of Winius 1983, the concept of a Portuguese "shadow empire" became very popular in scholarly writing on the *Estado*.

the *Estado*, but partly also beyond the latter. These "outer" segments could be seen as "adjuncts" of the *Estado*, or parts of the "shadow empire" itself.

But this is not all one can say in regard to the Jesuit example. – Conventionally, most historians will explain the rise and decline of empires as the result of material power, military superiority, efficient controls, etc. Without capital nothing can be achieved, money is a major variable, or even *the* key factor; this is what many of us were taught. Medieval and early modern writers often followed a different approach; not infrequently they assigned much more importance to the spiritual world than we would be inclined to do. Hence, in the case of Portugal's and Rome's activities, should one place God or mammon in *primo loco*?

Suppose, both were of equal importance, over a fairly long period in history, as a kind of *longue durée* phenomenon; then it could indeed be argued that we are dealing with two entities, a worldly structure directed by Lisbon and Goa, and a spiritual empire, embedded in the *Padroado* system, and ultimately guided by the Holy Chair. In spatial terms, both systems would overlap in some territories, but they would also "administer" certain segments separately, i.e., without the presence of the other entity. The Jesuits, for example, were active inside India, China, and Japan, but the *Estado* as a worldly structure was not; its influence did not reach very far inland. Put differently, the secular layers of the Luso-Asian mosaic would bear the characteristics of a purely maritime "apparatus", with some special annexes, while the "spiritual empire" would be a mixed entity, involved in both maritime places and inland locations. Furthermore, the religious structure would be mainly characterized by "slow" cultural exchange (*not* exclusively in the form of one way arrangements, I should like to emphasize, because the Catholic missionaries channelled Asian elements to Goa and Europe); by contrast, the *Estado's* worldly segments were mainly active in trade and perhaps not so much in cultural transfer.

If these ideas are put to test in the context of individual locations, we may raise additional questions. For instance, did the Jesuits in China function as an annex of the *Estado*, i.e., mainly in support of Macau? Or did Macau operate in the service of the Church – and not primarily to fill the pockets of greedy businessmen? If the second option would apply, the golden years of the silk-for-silver trade, and everything else commonly associated with that city's material rise and decline, would become a sub-

ordinate dimension under the roof of the Church's (or the Jesuits') spiritual empire.

There will be no answer to such a provocative question, but the question itself is not totally absurd, if one recalls the enormous cultural impact, which cultural exchange channelled through the hands of a few highly-educated churchmen has left in both China and Europe. If that view is accepted – and if the term "empire" will not be exclusively restricted to a few politically and economically determined arenas – then we are looking at a most remarkable case of exchange efficiency, indeed. Furthermore, it could be argued, just as comparative technological and military advantages were often crucial for the circulation of non-religious cultural elements and the growth of ordinary commercial exchange, a combination of education, open-mindedness and tolerance paved the path for spiritual success. More generally, then, different kinds of "exchange empires" had to perform in different ways, but in order to grow strong and expand, they had to master the relevant techniques in order to become masters in their respective leagues.

Admittedly, these cloudy ideas have taken us to very distant horizons, therefore we should better return to where we had started – to the level of an ordinary maritime system. This brings us back to the Dutch. The VOC had no "Church empire" to rely on, the few Protestant missionaries active in Batavia or on Taiwan mainly served inside the system. No one would want to subordinate the Dutch structure to a spiritual entity, because there was no such entity. Rather, the few arenas where Protestant groups became active, like on Sri Lanka, functioned like annexes to a very worldly patchwork essentially driven by material greed.

Seventeenth Century Macau and Fort Zeelandia Compared

The last two segments took us from Srivijaya to the *Estado da India* and the VOC. They did not look at "intermediate" cases such as the Ryukyu kingdom, which was an insular state with a regional network and some "factory-like" representations in Southeast Asia – or a small "nucleus" with a vast annex. Nor did I discuss networks embedded in larger continental structures, or operating without being backed by a powerful government. Here, one can cite the Fujianese system as one example. Perhaps earlier networks, as that of the famous Bosi 波斯 traders, fall into the same category.

Instead of identifying further details that might be added to our rudimentary notion of maritime empires (and their exchange annexes), beyond the elements already introduced above, this paragraph will highlight two very special cases, i.e., two ports which both played important roles within their respective systems: Macau and Fort Zeelandia. A general comparison between both locations, in turn, may help us to gain a better understanding of the systems to which these ports belonged.[14]

To begin with, the Portuguese settlement on the Macau peninsula and the Dutch trading post called Fort Zeelandia were born under different circumstances. Whether Macau – more precisely, the southern part of the Macau peninsula – was given to the Portuguese in compensation for providing military aid against pirate gangs, or whether money was involved in one way or the other, for example in the form of bribes, or whether both aspects came together, is an old point of debate. What is more significant here – Macau was not taken by force; no war was fought over this small piece of land. On the contrary, it was the local Chinese administration, which allowed the Portuguese to stay, with or without Beijing's explicit consent.

While the long history of Luso-Chinese relations is comparatively free of military clashes (there are only three or four minor incidents and this amounts to very little), the Dutch presence in Taiwanese waters, which only lasted for a few decades, provides a very different picture. After an unsuccessful attack on Macau in 1622, the Dutch turned to the Penghu Islands, from where they were ousted by Chinese troops. They then moved to Taiwan, taking advantage of unclear circumstances on the Chinese side, and set up a new base along the south-western shore of that island, near a small settlement often referred to as Dayuan 大員. In the course of time, the new installation, called Fort Zeelandia, became heavily fortified. But in spite of its military strength, Chinese forces led by the Zheng regime, took Zeelandia in 1662, after a long siege, and the Dutch were compelled to leave Taiwan once and for good.[15] Thus, while the Portuguese stayed in Macau for circa four and a half centuries, the Dutch presence on Taiwan was very short.

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14 Some of this is based on Ptak 2009.
15 Details and many references to recent secondary works on Zheng Chenggong and Taiwan in Ptak 2012.

Both locations were used as bases in trade to Japan. But while Macau was interested in peaceful exchange and giving logistic support to the Church in China and Japan, Zeelandia became a military stronghold, as was said, from which the Dutch would try to disturb trade between Manila and Fujian, move against the Spanish and Portuguese, and even launch "punitive" campaigns against tribal groups inside Taiwan. In the early 1640s this led to small local wars and unnecessary killings.

At the commercial level, the Dutch on Taiwan cooperated with some local Chinese migrants, but definitely not with all. In the course of time the VOC also gained control over a number of villages beyond Dayuan, but the territory "used" by Chinese settlers was then definitely larger than the one "ruled" by the VOC.[16] When relations between local Chinese groups and the Dutch began to deteriorate, heavy fighting left thousands of Chinese killed. Paradoxically, some VOC sources refer to these events as "insurrections".

Both Macau and Zeelandia formed part of a greater colonial or quasi-colonial structure, as was said. But Macau's foundation was not an official act promoted by Goa; originally it belonged to the informal sphere of the *Estado da Índia*, or its "shadow empire". It was only added to the "official empire" some years after its foundation. By contrast, the foundation of Zeelandia was an official project pushed with fierce determination and enormous support.

Neither Macau nor Zeelandia should be classified as free *emporia* accessible to everyone; Dutch and Japanese vessels were not allowed to enter Macau, Iberian ships were denied access to Zeelandia. Rather, both ports functioned as *entrepôts* in a general sense, i.e., as trading bases within a complex system of mini-posts, tied together by a net of official and less official exchange routes, as had been mentioned. In both cases, the ruling elite was European, but there were sizeable Chinese communities as well and these communities grew over time. This observation can be related to

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16 Already towards the end of the sixteenth century, European powers, especially the Spanish, thought about the possibility of acquiring larger territories in East and Southeast Asia. See, for example, the relevant sections in Ollé 2000. Interestingly, these territorial ambitions in the Far East coincide with the Japanese invasion of Korea. Perhaps it could thus be said that the model of a maritime empire based exclusively on a set of coastal posts was gradually substituted by a new concept. In that sense, Fort Zeelandia belongs to a period of "transition".

other familiar categories, for example the notion of diaspora, or the concept of *fanfang* 番坊.[17]

As Macau lasted much longer than Zeelandia, it experienced several major changes in its external exchange structure, and it also went through several transformations;[18] this does not apply to the Dutch post on Taiwan. One important stage in which Macau's situation underwent dramatic alterations was the decade of the 1640s. During these years the Portuguese settlement proved extremely vulnerable to exogenous factors: the closure of Japan to Portuguese ships, the end of the Luso-Spanish double-monarchy, the fall of Melaka to the Dutch, and the Manchu conquest of South China.

At the economic frontier, Macau was mostly hit by the end of direct trade to Japan. The Macau-Japan link can be seen as one branch of a gigantic exchange stratum based on the circulation of silk and silver, and when that trade broke away, the Portuguese were short of funds and compelled to search for alternative sources of income. They eventually managed to do that – by trading to other ports (Makassar, Banjarmasin, etc.) and reorganising themselves. This period has been called the "survival of empire".[19] Technically, it means that parts of the *Estado's* eastern exchange "fringe" turned inofficial, thus becoming one element of the old "shadow empire".

Fort Zeelandia did not experience such shifts and changes, because the life-line to Japan was kept open, and secondly, because Zeelandia itself procured locally produced deer skins and venison for the export sector. In other words, the Dutch ran a local "annex", which was linked to their mini-settlements on the island. Although that annex generated some income, the more important role of Zeelandia within the total VOC system certainly lay in its exchange function between Batavia and Japan, as a kind of intermediary basis. Therefore, losing the skin trade would not have mattered very much, but closing the Japanese connection would have put Zeelandia into serious trouble, comparable to the difficulties Macau went through.

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17 Much has been written on the diaspora theme, the *fanfang* model is less well-studied. For some ideas in regard to the latter, see Ptak 2001.

18 See, for example, Ptak 2000.

19 Souza 1986.

Macau did not have a subordinated "production zone" similar to the skin-producing areas "behind" Zeelandia. In other words, Macau had nothing to give up, there was no "material supplement" the loss of which might have been digested with some ease. Put differently, the Portuguese had to meet their traditional commitments, by all means and as best as they could.

Although Macau did not have an "economic annex", it had a different type of "hinterland", this was the "spiritual empire" of the Jesuits, already introduced in the previous section. Even during the difficult period of transition from Ming to Qing, this "spiritual empire" operated very efficiently – and did in fact grow. The Jesuits, it is well known, served the Southern Ming and Shunzhi courts simultaneously and such bright minds as Johann Adam Schall von Bell warned the Manchu government against the Dutch.

The case of Taiwan was different. There were some Protestant missionaries on the island, but these persons left very few imprints – and nothing comparable to what the Catholic Church was able to achieve on the mainland, as was already mentioned.[20] This leads to another point: In terms of classifications, Macau was much more a cultural bridgehead than Zeelandia. The difference in degrees becomes evident if one looks at the flow of intellectual expertise. Continental China received as much from Europe as it gave back to Europe in return, while the non-Han population on Taiwan had little to offer. Few intellectual debates could be led with these groups, if at all, neither on philosophical issues, nor on scientific or other questions. To this should be added that religious exchange between the VOC and its few Chinese partners on the island was minimal as well, and again in no way comparable to the transfer of knowledge taking place inside China or via Macau.

That picture can be enriched in several ways. The Jesuits thought of maximizing spiritual achievements, Macau's merchants dreamt of maximizing material gains. From the Church's viewpoint, Macau, as a bridgehead, served the Society and was one element in the *Padroado* structure, while Macau's residents probably took the opposite view: If the missionaries would act diplomatically and respect Chinese traditions, they were a factor that could be instrumental in stabilizing Macau's position. The

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20 Some Protestant missionaries did in fact have a bad reputation. For an introduction to Dutch missionary activities on Taiwan, see Blussé 1984.

Qing court understood this system quite well. It accepted Macau as a special item within its multi-cultural and highly compartmentalized empire.[21] Moreover, at the micro-level, Beijing was definitely not totally hostile against those highly-educated Han-Chinese intermediaries, who had entered the Society of Jesuit, or decided to work for the Portuguese authorities in Macau.[22]

On Taiwan, no comparable double structure (Church / *Estado*) existed, and there were no mechanisms and no minds, which would bring the Dutch into regular intellectual exchange with a Chinese or Manchu ruling elite. The delicate question of who would be instrumental for whom, therefore, was irrelevant. Moreover, in the eyes of Beijing, Taiwan constituted a peripheral region, something like a loose annex to yet another peripheral region, namely Fujian. Although the Qing had no particular liking for the Dutch, they only began to intervene on Taiwan, when the Zheng clan, with his followers mostly from Fujian, could no longer be tolerated.

Physically, Macau was far away from the *Estado's* capital, but Beijing – Macau's "host" – was nearby, at least spiritually. Metaphorically put, at the diplomatic level both the Jesuits and the Portuguese in Macau had mastered the art of "proper conduct". Cultural "proximity" between both sides gave Macau a good chance of survival, especially in situations, where, normally, Goa's help would have been needed.

Fort Zeelandia, although much more closely connected to its "suzerain" on Java, geographically and in other respects, could not count on an independent, or quasi-independent, circumglobal "enterprise" that would promote cultural research, provide "development aid" and offer spiritual exchange. There was no strong partner with whom to cooperate, whom to consult, or who would serve as a guide and mediator. The structure of which the Dutch possessions on the island formed part, rested on one pillar only – essentially a profit-maximizing firm, as was said, which had to rely on powder and guns.

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21 Some thoughts on the structure of cordial relations between Macau and Qing-China in Ramos 2007 and Ptak 2007. On Macau's "art of survival": Wu Zhiliang 1999.
22 For locally recruited Jesuits, see Pina 2011.

Final Observations and Summary

This paper began with some general jottings on exchange, space and time in maritime history. It then introduced basic constituents of the empire concept (not simple networks), trying to combine these, in very abstract ways, with the idea of exchange. Exchange itself emerged as a *mixtum compositum* of commercial, cultural and other transfers. Different kinds of exchange (external, internal, indirect, coastal, etc.) can be defined by different parameters, while the distance and time involved in the transfer of each "exchange unit" can be used, in theory at least, as a general measure to establish different exchange values in each case. Furthermore, it was proposed to examine whether there are statistically significant relations between these values and different kinds of empires, or between different sub-values on the one side and maritime / land-based empires on the other side, etc. Other factors – such as technology, institutions, coercive power, diplomacy, and so on – may also enter this model, possibly as subordinate variables. Finally, one may also think of how exchange "impacted" on a recipient culture or empire; no analysis of impacts, impact functions, impact paths and other possible concepts was provided.

The next section focused on one type of maritime empire – the kind of system that essentially consists of ports or coastal locations, tied together (over varying distances, in various institutional ways, and by varying degrees of efficiency) by all kinds of exchange connections. This took us to some examples selected from the medieval and early modern periods. The ports involved in such systems can be assigned to different categories, but that issue was again left out of the discussion. Other types of maritime empires were also put aside. The differences between Asia's maritime networks, "ordinary" maritime polities and maritime empires "as such" are a further theme, which would need a thorough treatment, perhaps in monographic form. Possibly different exchange criteria may enter such a survey.

It was also shown that certain maritime empires have some kind of informal annex. The idea of a "shadow empire", usually associated with the *Estado da Índia*, can be linked to this general concept. Here, then, the paper turned to two cases, seventeenth-century Macau and Fort Zeelandia. Both ports belonged to larger maritime entities, or empires, the *Estado* and the VOC structure. They shared certain characteristics, but differed in other respects. One essential difference concerned their "annexes": the

spiritual empire of the Church in China (Macau), and the production
zone on Taiwan (Zeelandia). Exchange and interaction between Macau /
Zeelandia and yet another "real" empire, China herself, cannot be inter-
preted without taking account of these annexes.

The internal setting of both the *Estado* and the VOC system involved
enormous distances. Therefore these two structures should be cases with
high exchange quotients, as measured in distance over time for each unit
of exchange. Possibly these quotients were superior to those achieved by
other types of maritime empires at that time – empires based on land or
located in a maritime space. Since the number of men used in shipping by
both the Portuguese and Dutch was low, as compared, for example, to
the personnel (and number of vessels) employed in the Fujianese net-
work, per capita exchange within the European systems may have been
rather high, at least during certain periods in time.

While the Dutch in Southeast Asia and around Taiwan relied on guns,
the Portuguese were not belligerent at all. The spiritual annex "behind"
Macau made efficient use of "soft strategies" to promote the exchange of
ideas and cultural achievements in the broadest sense. The fact that this
system lasted much longer than certain worldly structures mainly based
on commercial exchange, suggests that the circulation of non-profit items
may matter much more than we tend to think.

Differently put, the many elements that made up Macau, contributed
to the forms and ways Macau entered into exchange with China, with
other external locations, and with the many ports inside the Portuguese
world. An analogous constellation applies to Fort Zeelandia. From this it
follows that Macau's total exchange performance was quite special. It was
a case where a high share in non-commercial exchange certainly contrib-
uted to survival. Clearly, Zeelandia followed a very different path.

More generally, cultural flexibility – whatever that may mean – was
sometimes conducive to the maintenance of an empire. This applies to
many stages and segments of the *Estado* – and possibly much more than
to the Dutch system. On the other hand, it is also true that an early mod-
ern maritime empire needed a certain minimum of coercive power, inside
its own ranks, as well as vis-à-vis others, to maintain itself. In the course
of the seventeenth century, the *Estado* became quite weak in that regard.
Nevertheless, it survived as a political entity. Some of its segments went
through different kinds of "metamorphosis" and emerged newly, in the
form of networks, or a network-like structure, thus enlarging the "shad-

ow" annex of the *Estado's* remnants. Once again, these informal segments stretched over enormous distances; they were efficient exchange partners and often succeeded in staying on for extended periods. This entire process may not be untypical. Other Asian maritime states or empires probably experienced similar "transformations".

Much of what I have tried to bring to paper in these uncoordinated jottings rests on the basic assumption that maritime history is an arena largely determined by exchange. Indeed, many phenomena can be explained in terms of circulation, but certainly not all. Playing with methods and models has become an academic fashion; that fashion by itself is often "exchange-driven", because one needs something to talk about, and exchanging views on exchange might not be too foolish at all, although the term as such, and many things that should go with it, will certainly remain a mystery, so that this discussion will never end.

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