Early Sinitic Empires and the Frontier Zone
Economy in Southern East Asia

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Introduction

During the period of ca. 400–100 BCE, the macro-region of southern East Asia—the territory roughly coinciding with the present-day People's Republic of China south of the Yangzi River (Fig. 1)—became part of the Sinitic states and empires. First, during the Warring States era (453–221 BCE), the states of Chu and Qin conquered large swathes of Yangzi valley. After 221 BCE, the Qin (221–207 BCE) and Han (202 BCE–220 CE) Empires incorporated the entire macro-region.

In retrospect, it is tempting to see the southward expansion as a "manifest destiny" of Sinitic empires: a great demographic and economic void that was bound to be filled by the numerous, technologically advanced, and industrious colonists from the empire's heartland in the Central Plains of northern China. However, the peripheralization of southern East Asia with regard to the Central Plains was a historical process, not a natural condition. Its acceleration after ca. 500 BCE had to do with political and socioeconomic transformations in the Sinitic world as well as within southern East Asia. Some of its contributing factors can be traced back to the earlier periods, starting from the East Asian "globalization" in the early Bronze Age (second millennium BCE), when metal prospecting and the quest for resources, technological knowledge, and technical experts (from craftsmen to horse-breeders) to shore up the elite's social power stimulated the expansion and cohering of several interaction spheres, including the inner Eurasian grasslands, the alluvial lowlands of East Asia, the upland massifs of Southeast Asia and southern China, and the sea-oriented coastal regions of the East and South China Seas.[1]

1 For recent discussions, see Shelach-Lavi 2015; Li 2018.

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Each of these long-range interaction networks offered unique technological, organizational, and ideological repertoires for the aspiring rulers and elites to consolidate their wealth and authority, for the general populace to improve their life prospects, and for societies at large to enhance the cohesion necessary for more efficient exploitation of their environments and neighbors. One of these networks—the community of Sinitic polities that took shape by ca. 1000 BCE—gradually developed the forms of administrative, military, and economic organization that allowed its leaders to increasingly divert the resources of other networks toward the political centers located, with one major exception (the state of Chu), in the Central Plains. The world of multiple, intersecting interaction spaces was morphing into one dominant, imperial network that, after 221 BCE, became politically articulated as the Sinitic empire. It is in this specific context that it becomes possible to speak of southern East Asia as a frontier zone.

The first part of this essay sketches the geography of southern East Asia and traces the development of contacts among its regions as well as between them and the dynastic states that emerged in the Central Plains of northern China from the early second millennium BCE onward. These early contacts provide a context for understanding the southward expansion of the Qin and Han empires.

The remaking of southern East Asia into a frontier zone transformed the local communities, their environments, and the ways they interacted with the broader world. It also stimulated political, military, administrative, and economic–managerial innovation in the Sinitic empire, which shaped the historical trajectory of East Asia. The Qin and Han incorporation of the southern borderlands resulted in the formation of a Sino-Southeast Asian complex[2] and in the growth of long-range maritime exchanges: a process that many scholars consider central to the emergence of a medieval Eurasian world-system and, eventually, modern globalization.[3]

Traditional (and, to a considerable degree, also present-day) Chinese historiography typically describes the process by which southern East Asia became part of the Sinitic world in terms of an assimilation into a culturally and militarily superior civilization.[4] This narrative is undermined by recent archaeological and environmental-historical research, which not only pays attention to the local responses to Sinitic imperialism but also reassesses the direct impact of its agents. It has been argued, for example, that, in terms of its scale, the migration from the Central Plains to the southern borderlands, formerly perceived as a vital mechanism of incorporation into the empire, was less significant than the human mobility within southern East Asia.[5]

2 Chittick 2020, 9–19.
3 See, for example, Abu-Lughod 1989; Frank 1998; Marks 2007.
4 See, for example, Lin and Zhao 2001, 334.
5 Wu et al. 2019, 6751–6781; Chittick 2020, 363–370.

Natural conditions, particularly the intensive disease environment of the tropical zone, were probably central to migration patterns, just as they were to restricting the empire's ability to integrate conquered territories.[6]

These and other insights invite a reassessment of frontier zone processes in southern East Asia during the Qin and Han periods that would account for the impact of imperial agents, institutions, and policies on the one hand and for the non-imperial interactions at various levels, from local to inter-regional, on the other. It would also involve the identification of the empire's advantages as a framework for economic, cultural, and political interactions vis-à-vis other options available to the indigenous individuals and groups. As I have argued elsewhere, the transition from the command-economy organization of the Warring-States-period Qin to the market-oriented state finance of the Han era provides a background for understanding the factors underlying the consolidation of the early Sinitic empires and their incorporation of borderland regions: the expansion of commercial circuits, monetization, urbanization, and the dissemination of metropolitan consumption patterns.[7]

In the second part of this essay, I explore the development of a frontier zone economy in southern East Asia as a series of interrelated processes: intercommunal conflict and violence; migration and changes in settlement patterns; dissemination of technology and emergence of new industries; and monetization and strengthening of exchange circuits.

Despite their considerable success in integrating the local societies into their economic and political network, the early empires never succeeded in becoming the sole framework for their subjects' interactions with each other or the sole point of reference in their identity-making. It is the nature of transmitted written sources, especially the state-centered official historiography, that left the alternative networks less visible and less studied, a bias that the scholars of early and middle period China are only beginning to address.[8] The third part of the present paper outlines the contours of these non-imperial webs of interaction and discusses their impact on the dynamics of frontier zone economies in southern East Asia.

6 McNeill 1976, 76–80; Marks 2004, 53–83; Hanson 2011.
7 Korolkov 2022.
8 Brindley 2015; Kim 2015b; Yao 2016; Churchman 2016.

Southern East Asia: Geography and Interregional Connectivity

Regions of Southern East Asia

In this paper, "southern East Asia" is a heuristic construct for the geographical zone south of the Yangzi River, bounded by the Pacific Ocean in the southeast and the Red River in the southwest (Fig. 1). From physical-geographic and ethno-cultural perspectives, this zone can be roughly divided into two sub-zones: in the east, the lowlands of the lower and middle Yangzi valley and the lower Pearl and Red River valleys; and, in the west, the Yunnan–Guizhou plateau, or southwestern highlands. The official Sinitic historiography of the early imperial period drew an ethno-cultural distinction between these two spheres: the former was populated by the Yue groups, the latter by the "southwestern barbarians."[9] Although neither of the terms represents a linguistic unity, recent studies tend to identify the Yue with the early Austroasiatic and Austronesian speakers.[10] Tibeto-Burman speakers possibly constituted some of the best-documented ancient societies in the southwestern highlands, such as the Dian in central Yunnan.[11]

Another important physiographical marker in southern East Asia is the Nanling mountain range, which forms the drainage divide between the Yangzi and the Pearl Rivers. Although the region south of the mountains, Lingnan (Chinese: "south of the [Nanling] Mountains") is not a physiographic unit—it consists of two river systems, the Pearl and Red Rivers, separated by the hilly terrain that hinders overland communication—from the Sinitic perspectives, it constituted a cultural and political continuum inhabited by the "southern Yue" (Nanyue) people who, at the end of the third century BCE, were united by the Nanyue state, a polity that enjoyed a lasting ideological heritage in the region.[12]

The divide between the Middle and the Lower Yangzi basin is cultural rather than topographic. Communities in the two regions formed distinct interaction networks as early as the Late Neolithic. While the Lower Yangzi contacts were primarily sea-oriented, the Middle Yangzi was a virtual riverine crossroads formed by the Yangzi itself and by its principal northern tributary, the Han River, and southern tributaries, the Gan, Xiang, and Yuan Rivers (Fig. 1). The latter three empty into the two largest lakes of the East Asian lowlands, Poyang and Dongting, hence my term for this region,

9 *Shiji*, 113.2967–2978; 114.2979–2984; 116.2991–2998; *Hanshu*, 95.3837–3867.
10 For a recent summary of linguistic research on the Yue, see Brindley 2015, 45–61.
11 Its 1972, 226–227; Starosta 2005, 182–197.
12 Baldanza 2016, 1–11.

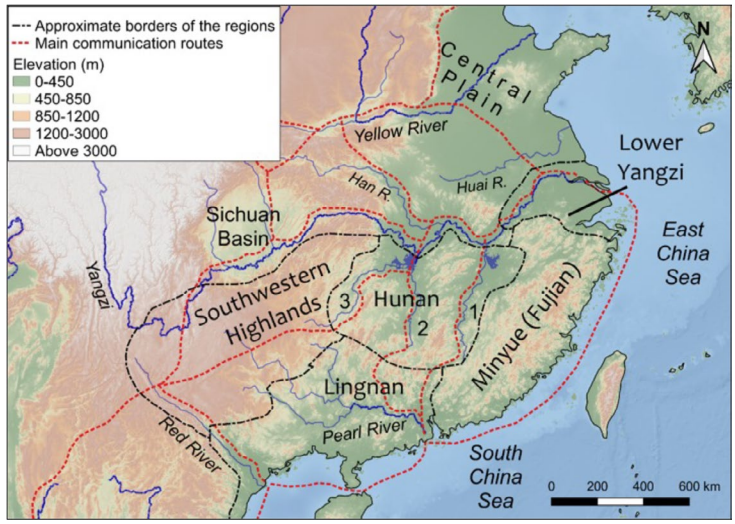

Fig. 1 Major regions and routes in early historic southern East Asia.Routes: Gan River (1), Xiang River (2), Yuan River (3).

Hunan ("south of the lakes," to be distinguished from the homonymous province of contemporary China). These river valleys have historically served as key communication corridors in a north–south direction that connected the Middle Yangzi to Lingnan and the southwestern highlands. To the north of the Yangzi, the Han River provided an important conduit between the Yangzi and the Yellow River basins. In the fourth and third centuries BCE, this was the main route of Qin's campaigns against Chu that, in retrospect, can be seen as a prologue to the Sinitic imperial conquest of southern East Asia.

The distinctive physiognomy of the fifth region, the southeastern uplands or the Minyue, which encompasses the present-day Fujian Province and some neighboring territories, is defined by the lack of riverine connections to the neighboring regions and by the fragmented landscape that hinders accumulation of resources to support large-scale political and administrative formation. For these reasons, unlike the other four regions, the Minyue was largely unaffected by the Sinitic expansion during the early imperial era, despite the episodic incursions by the empire's forces.[13]

13 Bielenstein 1959, 98–122; Clark 2016, 27–28.

Interregional Connections, Third to First Millennium BCE

With the exception of the Minyue region, the dense network of navigable rivers shaped interregional connectivity in southern East Asia, so much so that the "boats of the south" became the trope for physical traveling in the southern part of the Sinitic world, juxtaposed with the "horses of the north" in the Central Plains.[14]

The coastal route between the lower Huai River in the north and the Pearl River estuary in the south was instrumental in the formation of the cultural and political network centered on the Liangzhu Culture (ca. 3400–2250 BCE) in the Lower Yangzi, which is sometimes described as the earliest state-level society in East Asia.[15] This maritime conduit served not only the movements of religious ideas and associated objects but probably also the southward migrations of early rice farmers.[16] People, goods, and knowledge continued to travel along the coast during the later periods. The imports of the so-called Yue-style bronzes into Lingnan probably attest to the use of this route during the Spring and Autumn period (771–453 BCE), although its importance subsequently declined in favor of the more westerly, riverine corridors.[17] The discovery of the fragments of green glazed jars and ceramics with checkered pattern characteristic of the Lower Yangzi region at Khao Sam Kaeo, an important trading port in southern Thailand,[18] suggests the ongoing functioning of the route during the Han era.

The formation of the Middle Yangzi hub of long-distance interactions was also associated with the development of a regional core: the densely populated agrarian heartland with procurement and settlement networks extending into the periphery. The walled towns of the Qujialing-Shijiahe Culture (ca. 3300–2100 BCE), the largest of which possibly had as much as fifty thousand inhabitants,[19] projected cultural influence and trade contacts into the river valleys south of the Dongting Lake.[20] The wide distribution of Shijiahe-style clay figurines and red clay cups as far as the Wei River basin in the northwest points at the growing importance of the Han River valley as a conduit for long-distance exchanges.[21]

From the second millennium BCE onward, the spread of metallurgy was the major factor of interregional contacts in southern East Asia. The Middle and Lower Yangzi is home to the major copper and tin deposits in East Asia, while Lingnan and the southwestern highlands also contain important sources of tin and lead. Prospecting

14 Meng Jiao 1987, 8.76.
15 Liu and Chen 2012, 236–242; Qin 2013, 574–596; Shelach-Lavi 2015, 142–144.
16 Higham 2021, 63–93.
17 Müller 2004, 23–49.
18 Peronnet 2013, 155–169.
19 For the Shiijiahe Culture, see, for example, Zhang 2013, 510–534; Guo Jingyun 2013, 21–61.
20 See Xiangxi zizhizhou wenwu guanlichu et al. 2003, 52–71; Zhongguo kaogu xuehui 1987, 197.
21 Li 2018, 68.

of metal ores, migrations of metallurgists, and contacts among the bronze-using elites provided contexts for the dissemination of smelting and casting techniques, types of metal objects, ornaments, and uses of bronzes.

While copper-base metallurgy was probably introduced from the north and the earliest metallurgical center on the Yangzi, Panlongcheng (ca. 1500–1300 BCE), was associated with the Erligang Culture (ca. 1500–1400 BCE) in the Central Plains, a number of indigenous and interacting bronze cultures developed across the Yangzi basin after 1300 BCE. Many of them shared important cultural practices—such as the performance of bell music and burying of bronzes in sacrifices to natural spirits, and the use of bronze vessels as containers for jade beads and other small ornaments—that point to the growing east–west connections along the Yangzi valley, from Sichuan to the Lower Yangzi.[22]

After the advent of the Bronze Age in the Yangzi basin, the river highways of the Hunan region became conduits for the southward transmission of metal objects and metallurgical knowledge. The communities of the Wucheng Culture (ca. 1500–1000 BCE), south of the Poyang Lake, may have been crucial in the introduction of bronze casting to Lingnan through the Gan River corridor.[23] Starting in the mid-first millennium BCE, the Xiang River valley served the exports of Chu bronzes that gained popularity among the Lingnan elite.[24] The possible use of highly radiogenic Yunnan lead by the bronze casters on the Yangzi and in the Central Plains[25] suggests the functioning of routes between the southwestern highlands on the one hand and the Middle Yangzi and Sichuan basins on the other (Fig. 1).

On the western flank of southern East Asia, the expansion of millet agriculturalists from the Yellow River basin along the rim of the Tibetan plateau, through Sichuan to Yunnan and down the Red and Salween River valleys into the plains of northern Vietnam and central Thailand, shaped the western, highland corridor of north–south connections in the third millennium BCE.[26] In the second half of the second millennium BCE, copper smelters and prospectors for ore sources traveled this route to disseminate bronze metallurgy from Eurasian grasslands to the southwestern highlands and, from there, to continental Southeast Asia.[27] Driven by the adoption of casting methods, object types, and artistic styles from the Central Plains and the Yangzi basin, dramatic expansion of bronze industry in central Yunnan after the seventh century

22 Falkenhausen 2006a, 191–245; Flad and Chen 2013, 219–221; Lai 2019.
23 Laptev 2011, 93–102.
24 Falkenhausen 2002, 193–236.
25 Liu et al. 2015, 1–8; Jin et al. 2017, 1574–1587; Liu et al. 2018, 1–7.
26 Sørensen 1972, 459–506; Higham 2021.
27 Tzehuey 2009, 79–84; Higham 2021, 80–91.

BCE boosted communications along the Red River conduit[28] and contributed to the cohering of the highland and coastal networks.[29]

The Sinitic expansion in southern East Asia after ca. 400 BCE capitalized on the many centuries of interregional contact. This expansion can be seen as a military-political consolidation of long-existing connections. The Chu, Qin, and Han armies marched along the routes long traveled by farmer settlers, merchants, and metallurgists. Sinitic rulers and elites were attracted by the goods—metals, horses, pearls, stones, sea shells, forest products—that had long been exchanged among the communities in southern East Asia across long distances. The following section examines some important processes by which the imperial expansion and subsequent policies transformed the southern networks into a frontier zone.

Toward a Frontier Zone Economy: Four Processes

Conflict and Violence

In the eyes of Sinitic authors, regular outbreaks of intercommunal conflict defined local societies south of the Yangzi River. The ethnographic chapters on the southern and southwestern "barbarians" in the official histories narrate incessant raiding, rebellions, and punitive expeditions.[30] Provincial governors' efforts to reconcile indigenous populations to the imperial rule seem to have never achieved a lasting success. While the transmitted written sources praise the empire's agents as pacifiers of endemically violent "tribal zones," contemporary scholars point out that imperial expansion stimulated, rather than suppressed, armed conflict among the groups at the periphery.[31] The increase in intercommunal violence was sometimes, although not always, conducive to regional political integration, which, in turn, could pave the way for further incorporation into the empire.

Not accidentally, the militarization of societies in southern East Asia coincided with their increasing contacts with the Sinitic states in the third and second centuries BCE. The process was particularly salient in the southwestern highlands, where, during this period, "the taking of captives and headhunting become political themes that

28 Murowchick 2002, 133–192; Imamura 2010, 29–44.
29 Higham 1989, 287; Brindley 2015, 80–81; Kim 2015a, 246–247.
30 See, for example, *Hou Hanshu*, 86.2829–2868.
31 Ferguson and Whitehead 1998, 1–30.

are depicted with increasing frequency and realism."[32] Authority of local leaders and elites became tied to martial power, which relied on the array of new weapons (such as crossbows) introduced from the Sinitic world to control trade routes, accumulate wealth, and construct larger, more integrated military alliances.[33]

It is unclear to what degree the building of an enormous citadel at Co Loa, in the lower Red River valley, in the third century BCE was a response to the growing militarization in the southwestern highlands—the two regions by that time had centuries-long history of contact—or, as some scholars suggested, to the perceived Sinitic threat from the north.[34] The massive volume of crossbow arrowheads stockpiled at that fortress and the prevalence of weapons in contemporaneous Dong Son culture burials in the Bac Bo plain (lower Red River) attest to the importance of coercion in the emergence of the Co Loa-centered polity after ca. 300 BCE.[35]

In Lingnan, like in the southwestern highlands, the familiarity with advanced Sinitic weaponry, crossbows, and concomitant military organization—most likely due to the increased exchanges between Lingnan and the state of Chu during the late Warring States era[36]—was critical to the scaling-up of intercommunal violence. An extensive conflict accompanied the emergence of the Nanyue state in the late third and early second centuries BCE. The original consolidation was probably triggered by the resistance to the Qin invasion,[37] but it was cemented by the renegade Qin commander stationed in Panyu (present-day Guangzhou), who founded the Nanyue state.[38] From its base in the Pearl River valley, Nanyue projected some kind of control over the Red River delta,[39] raided the southern dependencies of the Han Empire north of the Nanling mountains,[40] and fought other Yue groups in the Minyue region. The Han rulers eventually capitalized on these inter-Yue feuds to interfere in Nanyue affairs.[41]

In the relatively isolated uplands of western Guangdong and Guangxi, internal conflict and the rise of military leaders accelerated at the end of Han and in the early medieval period, when this region became increasingly involved in trade with the Sinitic centers. According to Catherine Churchman, the strong demand for forest products and precious metals among the urban populations in Lingnan and in the

32 Yao 2016, 174.
33 Yao 2016, 168–181.
34 Kim 2015a, 283.
35 Hoang and Bui 1980, 55–65; Kim 2015a, 137–142.
36 Falkenhausen 2002, 193–236.
37 *Huainan honglie*, 18.1289–1290.
38 *Shiji*, 113.2967–2969; *Hanshu*, 95.3847–3848.
39 Taylor 1983, 20–21; Higham 1989, 289.
40 *Hanshu*, 95.3848.
41 *Shiji*, 113.2970–2971; *Hanshu*, 95.3853.

metropolitan region of Southern Dynasties on the Yangzi River "encouraged competition between the Li-Lao chieftains over territory in which precious metals and copper were to be obtained, but also over the control of populations that could be employed in the extraction of such metals."[42]

Although the volume of trade between the Sinitic empires and the communities in southern East Asia is impossible to measure, archaeological and textual evidence suggest that the accumulation of exportable resources and the concentration of military power fed one another and jointly fueled these regions' integration into the imperial Sinitic space. For example, transmitted histories tell about Han envoys taking advantage of highlanders' infatuation with Han textiles to secure alliances with the local leaders that aided in the conquest of Nanyue.[43] These records are corroborated by archaeological evidence for the growing number of imported "Chinese-style objects" in the wealthy tombs in the Dian Lake area in the third and second centuries BCE.[44]

These exchanges probably contributed to the empire's ability to tap into the local military networks. An account of the Han conquest of Lingnan in 111 BCE indicates that the imperial commanders made use of militias levied among the Yue groups and the southwestern highlanders.[45] Highland troops were, again, deployed in the Jin Empire's (266–420 CE) campaigns in the Red River valley in the third century CE.[46] The Han authorities relied on the local allies to quell uprisings and routinely pitted indigenous groups against each other.[47] Insofar as such conflicts were part of the competition among the local leaders for access to the prestigious metropolitan goods and honorary titles conferred by the Han court in reward for loyalty proven on the battlefield,[48] the low-intensity conflict was perpetuated as a structural feature of the frontier zone political economy.

An outcome of intercommunal violence and conquest, the political–military consolidation in different regions of southern East Asia was accompanied by the emergence of clusters of dense agricultural settlement that generated large surpluses for extraction—the "state spaces," to use James Scott's felicitous expression.[49] Their presence greatly facilitated the imperial expansion, which could focus on specific areas with human and material resources sufficient for maintaining administration and garrisons, from where the state control radiated into the surrounding countryside. In Lingnan, the Han Empire was anchored around the major population center at

42 Churchman 2016, 141–168.
43 *Shiji*, 116.2994.
44 Allard 2015, 26–35; Yao 2016, 168–171; Wu et al. 2019, 6759–6761.
45 *Shiji*, 113.2974–2975.
46 Herman 2009, 241–286.
47 See, for example, *Hanshu*, 95.3843; *Hou Hanshu*, 86.2832–2833.
48 See, for example, *Hou Hanshu*, 86.2837–2839.
49 Scott 2009.

the Bac Bo plain, the base of the Co Loa-centered polity in the third century BCE. By 2 CE, this region accounted for more than half of all taxable households south of the Yangzi River.[50]

Migration and Changes to the Settlement Patterns

Human mobility and changes in settlement patterns are vital elements of the frontier zone dynamics. The fringes of ancient empires were the locations of state-sponsored agrarian development, new settlement, often with a pronounced military component, and a destination for migrants from interior regions.[51] Since the frontier zones were also characterized by heightened intercommunal conflict (see above), forcible displacement replenished itinerant populations, which were a potential resource in the official projects but also a serious threat to state control.[52]

The rise in human migrations in southern East Asia during the second half of the first millennium BCE appears to have been related to the expansion of Sinitic states that gained momentum after ca. 400 BCE. The Chu incursions in the Lower Yangzi basin, where it destroyed the local polity of Yue,[53] and the colonization of the Xiang and Yuan valleys in the Hunan region[54] sent waves of Yue migration to Minyue and Lingnan,[55] which probably contributed to the consolidation of local polities. In 222–214 BCE, the Qin campaigns south of the Yangzi almost certainly involved enormous displacements of local people in Hunan and Lingnan.[56] After the failure to establish administrative control in northern Minyue in the 130s BCE, the Han authorities deported its population to the Lower Yangzi and Huai River valley.[57] Although there is no record of state-organized resettlements in Lingnan after the Han conquest of 112–111 BCE, archaeological evidence suggests a considerable outflow of people from the Nanyue heartland in the lower Pearl River to the areas around the Nanling

50 *Hanshu*, 28B.1628–1630.

51 For militarized frontier settlements in ancient empires, which involved both agricultural intensification and urbanization, see, for example, Hopper 2017, 126–150; Morris 2020, 53–93.

52 Korolkov and Hein 2021.

53 Yang Kuan 2003, 364–365.

54 Falkenhausen 2006b, 285–286.

55 Müller 2004, 23–49; Milburn 2010, 8–9.

56 Transmitted sources from the Han era record that the Yue of Lingnan fled to the mountains in response to the Qin invasion. See *Huainan honglie jijie*, 18.1289–1290. Excavated official documents from Liye (in the Yuan River basin in western Hunan) report the absence of indigenous people among the residents of the county town, a possible hint at the expulsion of non-Sinitic populations from the administrative centers. See Chen Wei et al. 2018, 466, tablet 9-2300.

57 *Shiji*, 114.2984.

mountains, which experienced rapid economic growth and increase in the registered population between the mid-second century BCE and the mid-second century CE.[58]

Some of these resettlements were state-organized, but the majority were probably private migrations, though in many cases induced by state action, such as conquest or the foundation of new administrative centers. In any case, population mobility within southern East Asia was vital to the shaping of a new settlement landscape. A recent isotopic analysis of skeletal remains from a Han-era cemetery in the Dian Lake basin, at the heart of southwestern highlands, revealed that the people previously considered Han immigrants most likely came from Sichuan, Lingnan, and the Middle Yangzi region.[59] It has been suggested that some of these people were the former Nanyue officials forced to move after the Han conquest.[60] The newcomers from other regions of southern East Asia, rather than from the Central Plains in the north, may have been the main population of the new walled towns with Han-style architecture that sprang up in the lake basins of central Yunnan from the first century BCE onward.[61] Migrants depended on the government for the organization of settlement and could be deployed to create a new human geography susceptible to state control.[62]

It is probably not a coincidence that the commanderies located along the riverine corridors between the Middle Yangzi and the Pearl River systems (Fig. 1) received an influx of "Yue" migration at the same time when the registered, taxpaying population of the region increased exponentially,[63] and two urban belts formed north and south of the Nanling mountains.[64] Although mass migration from northern China cannot be altogether ruled out, scholars have recently argued that this growth "can easily be attributed entirely to the mix of local factors: natural growth, immigration by fellow southerners, and improved registration practices."[65] By the second century CE, this region became a logistical, administrative, economic, and military backbone of imperial control in the south and a home to half of the registered households south of the Yangzi River. Troops were recruited here for campaigns in the far south.[66] At the end of the Eastern Han (25–220 CE), Changsha Commandery, south of Dongting Lake, became the base for one of the three major successors to the Han Empire, the state of Wu.[67]

58 Liu Rui 2019, 380–389.
59 Wu et al. 2019, 6773–6775.
60 Erickson et al. 2010, 164, with further references.
61 Yao 2016, 184–192.
62 Scott 2009, 24–26; Korolkov and Hein 2021.
63 In one commandery, Lingling, the registered population probably increased more than 160 times between the 180s BCE and 156 CE. This growth, of course, could not have been purely natural. See Lu Xiqi 2008; *Hanshu*, 28A.1595–1596; *Hou Hanshu*, *zhi* (treatises) 22.3482–3483.
64 Chen Bo 2016, 124–129.
65 Chittick 2020, 365.
66 *Hou Hanshu*, 86.2836–2837.
67 *Sanguo zhi*, 46.1095.

Dissemination of Technology and Industries

Students of ancient economies have long pointed out that the diffusion of technology and applied knowledge was among the principal drivers of economic growth in antiquity and that imperial expansion was a typical context for technology transfers.[68] In the frontier zones, adoption of new production tools and, especially, weapons often entailed radical sociopolitical changes and perpetuated the relationship of unequal exchange between the core and peripheral regions.[69] We have already seen that the heightening conflict and consolidation of military power in southern East Asia was accompanied by the dissemination of some important Sinitic military technologies, such as crossbows and, possibly, defensive architecture.[70]

The spread of iron metallurgy illustrates the linkage between the Sinitic imperial expansion and technological change, which profoundly altered the lifestyles of communities in southern East Asia and accelerated their integration into the imperial economic network.

The Lower Yangzi valley was among the early centers of the iron industry in East Asia, and some of the earliest steel weapons originate from a tomb in the area of dense Chu settlement south of Dongting Lake in northern Hunan.[71] However, throughout the Warring States period, the spread of iron metallurgy was quite limited in the outlying territories in Hunan as well as in other regions of southern East Asia.[72]

After 222 BCE, the Qin conquests south of the Yangzi introduced elements of the Qin-style command economy, including state-organized mining and administration of the iron industry.[73] They are documented in the archive of Qianling County in the Yuan River valley, where archaeological finds attest to the growing use of iron objects, especially tools, during the Qin and Western Han periods.[74] The excavation of a Qin shipyard at Panyu, the major Qin center in Lingnan, yielded the earliest evidence for the use of iron tools in the area: knives, adzes, and chisels.[75] Despite the brevity of Qin administration in Lingnan, which lasted less than one decade, it appears to

68 Lo Cascio 2007, 619–647; Kay 2014, 324.

69 Ferguson and Whitehead 1998, 1–30.

70 The use of stamped earth in the construction of the Co Loa citadel has been interpreted as evidence of familiarity with Sinitic-style defensive architecture. See Kim 2015a, 167; 243–246.

71 Needham and Wagner 2008, 115–170; Lam 2020, 595–614.

72 Bai Yunxiang 2005, 313–324; Gao Zhixi 2012, 277.

73 For a recent discussion of the Qin command economy of the Warring States period, see Korolkov 2021, 203–261.

74 For the written record, see Chen Wei et al. 2012, 152–153, tablet 8-454; Chen Wei et al. 2018, 186–189, tablet 9-713; Liye Qin jian bowuguan et al. 2016, 56, tablet 10-1170; 57, tablet 12-3; 58, tablet 12-447; 65, tablet 14-469. For the archaeological evidence, see Hunan sheng wenwu kaogu yanjiusuo 2006, 350–351, 170–179, 525–528.

75 Guangzhou shi wenwu guanlichu 1977, 1–17.

have provided an impetus to the development of the local iron industry in the hybrid Sino-Yue polity of Nanyue (ca. 204–111 BCE), under which the use of iron tools in agriculture continued to spread.[76]

The Western Han period was not only the time of critical technological developments in iron metallurgy, such as the innovation of the refined pig iron technique,[77] but also the development of market-oriented policies that contributed to further dissemination of iron implements. By the early decades of the second century BCE, the market for iron implements was already booming in Lingnan. In the apparent absence of its own smelting industry, Nanyue relied heavily on iron imports from the Han Empire,[78] so much so that its ruler, Zhao Tuo (203–137 BCE), went to war when the Han court banned iron trade across the Nanling mountains.[79] After the Han conquest of Lingnan and southwestern highlands at the end of the second century BCE, imports of Han ironware further increased and local iron production took off,[80] marking the beginning of the Iron Age in southern East Asia. The use of iron plowshares and plow-drawing ox-teams, which in Lingnan are dated to the Eastern Han period,[81] probably played an important role in the expansion of farming into the alluvial plains and in the growth of a permanently settled, taxpaying agricultural population throughout the southern borderlands.[82]

The inauguration of the official monopoly on the production and distribution of iron tools in 117 BCE (according to another record, in 119 BCE) made the government invested in the further expansion of the iron trade that became one of the major sources of state revenue.[83] The Han authorities in the south encouraged the adoption of iron implements in farming and organized the local iron industries.[84] Although this process often involved a degree of compulsion, it would be misleading to disregard the recurring rhetoric of "benefiting the people" (*li min* 利民) in the transmitted texts. Local farmers were probably induced to participate in the imperial network by resettling to the "state spaces," interacting with state officials, and producing for the Han urban markets, partly to acquire the more advanced farming implements supplied by the state.

From the imperial government's perspective, investment in local iron production was a tool for stimulating economic growth in some areas and sidelining others. The

76 Zhao Shande 2014, 200–203.
77 Lam 2020, 607.
78 Huang Zhanyue 1996; Bai Yunxiang 2005, 317–318.
79 *Shiji*, 113.2969.
80 For the southwestern highlands, see Yao 2016, 192–208.
81 Jiang Tingyu 1981; Zhao Shande 2014, 205–207.
82 Taylor 1983, 44–45.
83 Yamada 1993, 653–658; Von Glahn 2016, 113–120.
84 *Hou Hanshu*, 76.2459, 2462; Taylor 1983, 28; Higham 1989, 290.

geographic distribution of archaeological finds of iron objects in the Han south has been interpreted as a marker of deliberate restriction, after the Han conquest, of iron manufacturing in Nanhai Commandery, the center of the Nanyue state. This policy resulted in economic stagnation and an outflow of population until growth resumed under the Eastern Han. By doing so, it is claimed, the Han government sought to prevent the restoration of Nanyue power at its old core while at the same time encouraging new centers, such as the commanderies of Cangwu and Guiyang south and north of the Nanling Mountains.[85]

Monetization and Strengthening of Exchange Circuits

Exchanges between the Sinitic polities and the societies south of the Yangzi intensified during the centuries prior to the imperial expansion. The state of Chu extended its trade networks into the Lower Yangzi, Hunan, Lingnan, and the southwestern highlands.[86] While the contexts of these exchanges are far from clear, commercial motivations probably coexisted with political ones: for example, the distribution of prestigious Chu-style bronzes in Lingnan has been interpreted as a Chu effort to coopt local elites.[87] The circulation of Chu coinage was limited to the areas of dense Chu settlement south of Dongting Lake.[88]

The transition to the use of bronze coinage south of the Yangzi after the arrival of Qin is visible both in the archaeological finds of Qin *banliang* specie and in the excavated official documents, which record the payments of large amounts in cash.[89] As in the case of iron metallurgy, monetization of the local economy in the Yuan River basin was largely a state-driven development because the government provided coined money, and because state spending was critical to the supply of liquidity.[90] One of the largest amounts mentioned in these documents, 80,000 coins, was used to purchase clothing for convicts employed by the local government.[91] Since the local market alone was unable to satisfy this demand, the county officials dispatched procurement agents to market towns on the principal transportation artery, the Yangzi River.[92] Numerous references to cash in private transactions indicate that, after just a

85 Liu Rui 2019, 380–389, with references to archaeological reports on the related areas.
86 Peters 1999; Allard 2004; Beaujard 2019, 526–527.
87 Falkenhausen 2002, 221–223.
88 Long Jingsha and Guo Lige 2008, 64–66; Emura 2011, 313–353.
89 Hunan sheng wenwu kaogu yanjiusuo 2006, 169–170; Long Jingsha and Guo Lige 2008.
90 For a detailed discussion, see Korolkov 2022.
91 Chen Wei et al. 2012, 20–21, tablet 6-7; 179, tablet 8-560.
92 Chen Wei et al. 2018, 185, tablet 9-709+9-873.

few years of Qin administration south of the Yangzi, the use of Qin coinage already had taken root in the local economy.[93]

The disintegration of the centralized state economy after the fall of the Qin Empire spurred monetization and expansion of commerce. Imperial Qin authorities already experimented with commutation of in-kind taxes into cash.[94] At the beginning of Western Han, the introduction of a poll tax in coin became the major step in the transition to monetary taxation.[95] Debasement of *banliang* and legalization of private coinage enhanced money supply and monetary integration, not least because the rulers of autonomous regional states, which in the early decades of the Han rule encompassed the eastern half of the empire and much of the middle and lower Yangzi valley, cast coin on the Han standard to facilitate their participation in empire-wide trade and to finance their political ambitions.[96] The adoption of Han bronze currency in the Nanyue state in Lingnan, which is attested by the archaeological discovery of coins in mortuary as well as in residential contexts,[97] coincided with the growth of iron trade across the Nanling mountains.

The timing of Han expansion south of the Yangzi River coincided almost exactly with the major monetary reform that, in 113 BCE, greatly enhanced the quality, uniformity, and quantity of the new imperial coinage, the *wuzhu*, by consolidating the coin-casting at the capital under a specially designated administration.[98] For the rest of the Western Han period, the imperial mints were churning out approximately 230 million coins every year,[99] which helped to establish *wuzhu* as the main legal tender in East Asia until the seventh century CE.[100] The contrast between twenty-nine *banliang* cash discovered in four tombs at the Western Han-period cemetery near the Qianling county town in the Yuan River basin, and 4,555 *wuzhu* from sixty-six tombs at the same cemetery indicates the impact of the new coinage on the monetization of exchanges in southern East Asia.[101] Throughout the Lower Yangzi, Hunan and Lingnan, *wuzhu* coins were excavated from burials, including those that contained no other bronze objects, suggesting that even people of moderate means had access to currency.[102]

93 Chen Wei et al. 2012, 191, tablet 8-650+8-1462; 223–224, tablet 8-771.
94 Chen Songchang 2015, 107, slips 118–120; Korolkov 2021, 218–224.
95 *Hanshu*, 1A.46; Kakinuma 2011, 171–172.
96 See, for example, *Shiji*, 30.1419.
97 Guangzhou shi wenwu guanli weiyuanhui et al. 1981, 348–349; Li Zaoxin 2019, 21–27.
98 *Hanshu*, 24B.1169.
99 *Hanshu*, 24B.1177.
100 Qian Jiaju and Guo Yangang 2005, 37–45.
101 Hunan sheng wenwu kaogu yanjiusuo 2006, 508–511.
102 According to the recent count, out of 2,020 Qin and Han tombs with well-preserved burial inventory excavated in Hunan and Lingnan regions, 1,198 (59.3 percent) contained bronze coins, including 269 tombs (13.3 percent) where such coins were the only bronze objects. See Liu Rui 2019, 255.

In the southwestern highlands, the use of Han coins picked up from the early first century BCE onward.[103] The process was probably accelerated by the arrival of Han administrators, soldiers, and settlers. However, coin finds in the local burials suggest that "native participation in the monetary economy […] gained momentum two decades or more after conquest."[104]

Banliang- and, to a greater degree, *wuzhu*-based monetization was probably instrumental in the archaeologically and textually attested expansion of interregional circulations of people and goods: the growing imports of Han-style objects, migrations, changes in lifeways and settlement patterns, including urbanization. The extension of markets favored regional specialization and intensive exploitation of unique frontier-zone resources. By the beginning of the common era, populations along the South China Sea coast in Hepu Commandery (in present-day Guangxi Province) dedicated themselves exclusively to pearl hunting and relied on agricultural imports from the neighboring Jiaozhi Commandery in the Red River Delta,[105] which became a trade hub for pearls, one of the southern luxuries coveted by the imperial elites.[106] Although the terse records in the official histories do not provide the context of these exchanges, it is hardly a coincidence that the major regional trade center, the Red River Delta, was also the area where, around the same time, the Han coins become ubiquitous in the tomb inventories.[107]

The written and archaeological record of population growth and urbanization in the state-controlled lowlands coalesce with the evidence for rapid monetization and strengthening of exchange circuits, particularly in the commodities crucial to state finance (e.g., iron implements), to suggest that market-based mobility of people and resources was key to the sustainability of the imperial rule in southern East Asia. The possible index of state power is the number of registered households in the southern commanderies, which increased by sixty to seventy percent between 2 CE and 156 CE.[108] In a positive feedback loop, population growth within the "state spaces," commercial expansion anchored to the urban centers of consumer demand, and imperial incorporation of the frontier regions reinforced each other.

103 Yao 2016, 183–184; Wu et al. 2019, 6767–6768.

104 Yao 2016, 184.

105 *Hou Hanshu*, 76.2473.

106 Hence the expectation that a Han commander returning from a pacification campaign in the lower Red River valley would be bringing back cartloads of pearls; see *Hou Hanshu*, 24.846.

107 Higham 1989, 291–292; Higham 2014, 332–333.

108 The population numbers in 2 CE and 156 CE are provided in *Hanshu*, 28.1543–1640 and *Hou Hanshu*, *zhi* 19–23.3385–3554, respectively. For a detailed discussion of sources of demographic data in the *Hou Hanshu*, see Yuan Yansheng 2003, 3–8.

Non-imperial Long-distance Interactions in Southern East Asia

Non-imperial Webs of Interaction and the Impact of Sinitic Expansion

Transmitted textual narratives highlight the control of interregional communication routes among the principal motivations of Sinitic expansion in the south during the early imperial period. The initial Qin thrust into Lingnan was allegedly driven by the First Emperor's (r. 247–210 BCE) lust for exotic goods that circulated in the coastal exchange networks: pearls, ivory, rhinoceros horns.[109] Emperor Wu (141–87 BCE) of Western Han decided to advance into the southwestern highlands after receiving an intelligence report on the trade route between the Han-controlled Sichuan basin and the land of Shendu in the southwest (usually identified as India), from which the Han goods were reexported to Bactria.[110] Imperial diplomats and military strategists were becoming familiar with the southern world of long-distance exchanges.

Communication along these interregional highways intensified over time, as new resources were brought into circulation and new regions joined interactions. As early as 2000 BCE, the north–south riverine conduits of mainland Southeast Asia, such as the Salween and Irrawaddy Rivers, were probably important in the distribution of Indian Ocean cowries, which became important markers of social status in many societies throughout Southeast and East Asia and which, in Bronze Age China, came to be used as a measure of value in ritualized economic transactions among the elites.[111] In the second half of the first millennium BCE, this route was used for importing a range of manufactured goods, particularly glass objects, from Southern Asia to the emerging urban centers in the Yangzi valley (Fig. 2)[112] and for the booming export of horses, cattle, and slaves from the southwestern highlands to the Sichuan basin.[113]

After ca. 500 BCE, the trade ports along the rim of the South China Sea became integrated into the maritime web of long-distance economic, social, and cultural ties (Fig. 2). These coastal communities developed sophisticated craft industries that used a variety of imported materials and artisanal traditions, many of which originated in South Asia and possibly as far away as the Hellenistic world, to produce a range of high-value objects in characteristic "South China Sea style": ceramics, glass beads, and

109 *Huainan honglie*, 18.1288–1291.
110 *Shiji*, 123.3166–3167; *Hanshu*, 61.2689–2691.
111 Yang 2019, 128; Higham 2021, 67.
112 Beaujard 2019, 526.
113 *Shiji*, 116.2993; *Hanshu*, 95.3838; Yang 2004, 294–295; Yao 2016, 174.

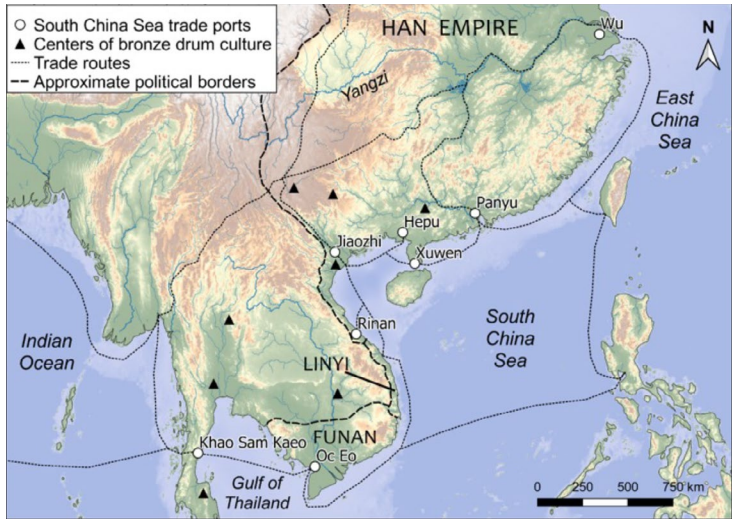

Fig. 2 Non-imperial networks in the south.

stone and gold ornaments. Along with the raw materials—bronze, nephrite, mica—these manufactures were circulated among urban coastal elites that shared cultural practices, symbolic systems, and esthetic preferences. Such networks of prestige goods may have been instrumental in the consolidation of political power in trading polities of the South China Sea basin, the cementing of inter-polity alliances, and the construction of a cosmopolitan elite identity.[114]

The distribution of the so-called bronze drum network attests to inter-societal links across highland–lowland and coast–inland divides in the second half of the first millennium BCE. Probably as early as the eighth century BCE, bronze drums and containers started to be cast in the Central Lakes basin of Yunnan as important ritual paraphernalia at the focus of communal ceremonies.[115] After ca. 500 BCE, these drums and containers, some of which may have been imported from Yunnan, started to be used by the Dong Son culture communities in the lower Red River valley for ritual activities and display of elite status;[116] by the Nanyue elites in Lingnan;[117] and in Han-era Hunan.[118] Around the turn of the common era, the "drum network" extended along the South China Sea littoral as far as the Malay Peninsula and Indonesia in the

114 Bellina 2003; Bellina 2014; Demandt 2015; Bellina et al. 2019.
115 Murowchick 2002, 164–170.
116 Higham 1989, 195–201; Murowchick 2002, 176–177; Brindley 2015, 78–79.
117 Psarras 1997; Allard 2017.
118 Psarras 2000.

south.[119] As in the case of the South China Sea network, the distribution of bronze drums may point to common elements of ritual culture, aristocratic identity, as well as to an "extensive and efficient exchange mechanism within the Southeast Asian world prior to any significant trade with imperial India or China."[120]

Sinitic expansion in southern East Asia had diverse impacts on these non-imperial webs of interaction. The Han conquest of Lingnan entailed the decline of drum casting at one of its major centers, in the lower Red River valley.[121] According to the official history of the Eastern Han Empire, after the suppression of the Trung sisters' rebellion (40–43 CE), the Han commander ordered confiscation and recasting of bronze drums in the possession of the local elite.[122] That the disruption of the drum production was accompanied by the region's accelerated adoption of Han lifestyles and belief systems—manifest in the growing use of Han-style objects (bronze mirrors, coins, belt-hooks, ceramics, lacquerware, etc.), transition to the metropolitan Han funerary culture, and spread of Sinitic domestic architecture[123]—suggests the re-orientation of resources from non-imperial to imperial economic, political, and social webs.

Elsewhere, urbanization, commercial expansion, and incremental monetization within the empire contributed to the intensification and extension of non-imperial interactions. The archaeological excavations of the Han-period cemeteries around the major sea ports of Hepu, Panyu, and Xuwen (Fig. 2) yielded large numbers of objects imported through long-distance maritime networks: pearls, agate and amber beads, glass items, ivory, fragrant wood, and so on.[124] The distribution of "South China Sea style" items, such as polyhedral gold beads, glass, and stone ornaments—particularly dense in the coastal centers but also along the inland riverine paths as far north as the Middle Yangzi[125]—sheds light on the participation of urban-based elites and sub-elites in the Han South in a consumption culture shaped by exchange practices beyond the empire's borders rather than by the cultural influences and economic policies of the imperial core.

These exchanges stimulated the development, during the Eastern Han period, of export-oriented industries, such as glass workshops in Guangxi that shipped their products to Han commanderies in coastal northern Vietnam and, from there, into the uplands along the Red River, as well as to places far beyond the imperial orbit, such as southern Thailand and southeast coast of India.[126] Han exports also included bronze

119 Imamura 2010; Bellina et al. 2019.
120 Hall 2011, 4.
121 Taylor 1983, 39; Imamura 2010, 40.
122 *Hou Hanshu*, 24.840.
123 Higham 1989, 292–294; Huang Xiaofen 2018.
124 Zhao Shande 2014, 189–195; Allard 2017; Beaujard 2019, 552–555.
125 Li Jianwei 2010; Xiong 2014; Demandt 2015.
126 Borell 2012; Borell 2013.

vessels, mirrors, and seals (unless the items excavated in southern Thailand were left behind by Sinitic merchants rather than used by the locals, who did not necessarily realize the original function of these objects) along with ceramic jars, mostly of Lingnan origin, but also distinctive green glazed ware from the Lower Yangzi region, which may have been used as containers for other commodities.[127]

Decline of the Early Empire and Reconfiguration of Frontier Zone Interactions in the South

Despite considerable local variation, the archaeological and textual records of the Eastern Han reflect a general progress of imperial integration of southern East Asia. It was accompanied by growing wealth and an expansion of consumption horizons, especially among the elites and sub-elites in the trading towns on the coast and along the river highways. However, notwithstanding the defeat of major rebellions, new hotbeds of resistance against imperial rule were building up throughout the Han South.[128] The decline of the center's power and the upsurge of political regionalism after the mid-second century BCE precipitated the revival of interactions that challenged the political and economic order of the empire.

As trade in southern goods boomed during the Eastern Han era, the Austroasiatic and Tai-Kadai-speaking populations in the uplands of western Guangdong and Guangxi (called Li and Lao in contemporary Sinitic sources) emerged as important players in the interregional exchange network. Along with the traditional "southern exotica," the region became a supplier of gold and silver, which gained importance as currencies after the end of Han. The strong demand for upland forest and mineral products stimulated competition for territory and control of manpower among the Li–Lao chieftains and accelerated social stratification, slavery, and polity building.[129] Tribal confederacies posed a serious threat to imperial control in the south, although they could also assist the empires in quelling rebellions among the taxpaying populations settled around the administrative towns.

While the growing power of Li–Lao chieftains was financed through trade relations with the Sinitic settlements in Lingnan and with the emerging centers of the Southern Dynasties in the Yangzi valley during the post-Han Age of Disunion (220–589 CE), the political world of highland leaders developed within a markedly non-imperial context. As Han rule in Lingnan floundered at the end of the second century CE, the hilly hinterland east of the Pearl River Delta and north of present-day

127 Peronnet 2013.
128 *Hou Hanshu*, 86.2829–2868; Lycas 2019.
129 Churchman 2016, 142–149.

Hanoi witnessed a flourishing of the bronze drum culture, which since the mid-first millennium BCE had provided a framework for alliance-building, long-distance exchange in resources, technology, and artistic styles, and a distinct symbolic language of political legitimacy among the small-scale aristocratic polities in southern East Asia.[130]

The revival of this non-imperial interaction web was associated with important economic developments throughout Lingnan, such as the expansion of copper mining in Guangxi[131] and the re-orientation of bronze foundries at the major Han center in Lingnan, Jiaozhi Commandery (in the lower Red River valley), toward drum casting for the needs of indigenous groups in the surrounding hill country.[132] The adverse impact of what they saw as an irrational infatuation with bronze drums among the Li–Lao leaders on the region's integration into the imperial economy was not lost on the Sinitic rulers. The Eastern Jin (317–420 CE) edict of 375 CE complained about the "barbarians of Guangzhou" melting imperial coins to cast their drums.[133]

At a more fundamental level, the disintegration of the Sinitic empire after ca. 200 CE triggered some radical political–economic and cultural innovations to undergird the successor regimes in the Yangzi valley. In his recent study of these post-Han regimes in the south, Andrew Chittick argued that this "Jiankang Empire" was much more akin to the contemporaneous sea-based trading polities of Southeast Asia than to the Sinitic empires of either the early imperial (Qin and Han) standard or early medieval Sino-nomadic synthesis (including the Sui and Tang Empires that "reunified" mainland East Asia in the late sixth and early seventh centuries CE).[134]

With a weakened and intrinsically unstable central government, the countryside controlled by the landholding "great families," and the capital at the intersection of major routes of waterborne trade, the Eastern Jin and the subsequent southern dynasties (420–589 CE) reorganized their core along the lines of the southern sea-trading world, resulting in the emergence of what Chittick calls the Sino-Southeast Asian zone. Government income came to rely heavily on the taxation of private commerce, rather than on the official monopolies that had been the mainstay of the Han Empire's market-oriented fiscal policy at its height.[135] The government's ability to register and tax households in the countryside declined, and effective administrative control shrank to the trading towns, which negotiated their relationships with the resource-supplying hinterland through intermediaries such as local landed magnates or tribal leaders.[136]

130 Imamura 2010; Churchman 2016.
131 Lu et al. 2020, 15–26.
132 Imamura 2010, 40–41 ; Huang Xiaofen 2018, 27–28.
133 *Jinshu*, 26.795.
134 Chittick 2020.
135 Liu 2001, 35–52; Liu 2019, 330–354; Chittick 2020, 177–205.
136 Crowell 1990, 171–209; Churchman 2016, 141–168.

The southern regimes established themselves as members of the maritime interstate network. Between the early third and the early seventh centuries CE, more than one hundred diplomatic missions from the South China Sea polities visited the southern imperial courts, which reciprocated with their own official emissaries.[137] Like their counterparts in the contemporaneous "Buddhist kingdoms" of Southeast Asia, the rulers of the southern empires deployed the Buddhist cultural repertoire for political legitimation.[138]

Conclusion

Starting from the Neolithic period, societies south of the Yangzi River have been part of a web of long-range connections. Some of these were instrumental in the cross-continental dissemination of critical innovations, such as bronze metallurgy. Others, of more circumscribed nature, were equally significant in transforming local lifestyles and socio-economic organization. With the emergence of large-scale polities in the Yellow River basin in the second millennium BCE, and especially with their vigorous military and economic thrust into the Yangzi valley after ca. 500 BCE, the acephalous interaction space of southern East Asia increasingly morphed into a frontier zone, whose trajectory was in many crucial ways molded by the encounters with the expansive Sinitic states and, after 221 BCE, empires.

At the early stages of these Sinitic encounters, their impact—typically delivered via down-the-line, rather than direct, contacts and strongly mediated by the local environments and social structures—is hard to single out as qualitatively distinct from the influences conveyed through other interactions and cultural borrowings. For example, intensification of intercommunal conflict and concomitant consolidation of military power across southern East Asia in the fourth and third centuries BCE was, in various ways, related to the growing contacts with the Sinitic world, but these processes were equally affected by endogenous developments and by the general expansion of intersocietal exchange. Notwithstanding their heterogenous etiology, political consolidation and strengthening of military networks were crucial to the formation of the frontier zone because they rendered local communities susceptible to economic and administrative incorporation into the expanding empires.

At the opposite end of the continuum of influences are the direct interventions by the Sinitic polities into the texture of indigenous life. These encounters, exemplified by the dissemination of the iron industry and coinage south of the Yangzi, typically

137 Wang 1998, 118–119; Schottenhammer 2019, 21–52.
138 Chittick 2020, 269–323.

took place at the latter stages of contact and generated distinctive features of peripheral economies: dependence on technology introduced from the Sinitic centers; export of natural resources and intensive, sometimes predatory, exploitation of unique ecological niches; imports of advanced manufactures; and adoption of metropolitan consumption standards. In this essay, I have argued that the dynamics of state power in the Sinitic world, particularly the command economy in the state of Qin during the late fourth and third centuries BCE and the subsequent transition to the market-oriented model of state finance under the Western Han, largely defined the frontier zone processes in southern East Asia.

At the peak of their power, the Sinitic empires claimed exclusive control of their frontier zones, a claim endorsed by present-day historical maps that depict territories south of the Yangzi as a mosaic of administrative units circumscribed by a clear boundary; yet, even after the Qin and Han conquests, populations of southern East Asia continued to participate in multiple networks, some of which stretched far beyond the empire's border. Imperial commanders and administrators sought to suppress some of these interactions, which were seen as subversive of empire's security. More importantly, the dominance of the imperial network relied on the important advantages for its participants, from more efficient agricultural and commercial tools to more appealing symbols of social authority to more variegated sets of tableware.

However, the resources of the empire could be redeployed to strengthen interactions that potentially undermined its political and economic orders. The weakening of the metropolitan center exacerbated this challenge as populations of the frontier zones sought for alternative sources of security, wealth, and sense of identity. Moreover, frontier zones provided interfaces for transplanting the organizational features of non-imperial interaction structures into the imperial network when the latter reconfigured itself after major crises. In East Asia, the three centuries after the fall of Han, when large segments of the former empire were involved in the South China Sea world, shaped the long-term trajectory toward commercialization, market-oriented agricultural and industrial innovation, and expansion of maritime trade.

Figure Credits

All maps in this paper were made by the author.

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