

Transcultural Networks: From the Red Sea to the South China Sea, 1000–1800

Continuities and Transformations

Abstract. In focusing on transcultural networks of the Indo-Mediterranean, this paper aims to provide insights into the cultural and economic genealogies of globalisation as well as into the divergent ancestries of its social geographies. Its methodological objective is to examine the extensive Indian, Southeast Asian, Arab and Chinese interaction in the littoral regions of Malabar, the Bay of Bengal, the Indonesian Archipelago and the South China Seas in the medieval and early modern period. Thereby, rather than underscoring the significance of merely economic factors implicated in this maritime connectivity, other relevant (and hitherto largely neglected) aspects will be discussed, namely the enactment of political sovereignty (as a layered and shared concept), the crucial significance of resilient networks (defined by mercantile, cultural and social factors) as well as of widespread dynamic diasporic communities (of Chinese, Southeast Asians, Indians, Persians and Arabs), and last but not least, the flow and exchange of ‘cargoes’ (including both commodities and intellectual ideas). In doing so, an attempt will be made to ascertain the continuities and transformations (subsequent to the entry of European companies) in the pelagic patchwork quilt of the Eastern Indian Ocean until the beginning of the 19th century.

Preliminary Remarks

Entre mers—outré-mer,¹ exemplified by Indo-Mediterranean connectivity, has created waves in scholarship: owing to previous cross-fertilization between the French *Annales* school² and Wallerstein’s world-systems analysis,³ and instigated primarily by K. N. Chaudhuri’s Braudelian pioneering research,⁴ the mari-

1 As a modified version of the paper presented at this conference in November 2014, this article constitutes an outline for a research proposal for which I received constructive feedback from the conference participants.

2 The pre-eminent French school of historiography, named after its scholarly journal *Annales d’histoire économique et sociale* (founded in 1929 by Marc Bloch, Lucien Febvre and Henri Hauser), in emphasising the analysis of long-term socio-economic develop-

time history of the Indian Ocean (or the ‘Afro-Asian Sea’, to use another designation for the Indian Ocean whose validity as a category we could also question)⁵ has recently been elevated to the status of a new thalassology.⁶ With the focus now on the Eurasian connection, this proposed paradigm shift towards an Indo-Mediterranean trans-continental oceanic orbit aims to illuminate the cultural and economic genealogies of globalization, as well as to provide insights into the divergent ancestries of its social geographies. In other words, by investigating developments in this expansive maritime region, viable contributions can be made towards “reorienting”,⁷ as it were, our appraisal of the globalization process—in an east-west direction which would underscore the “southernization”⁸ swing of the global economic pendulum as preceding and perhaps also succeeding the hitherto emphasis on the westernization trend.

ments, influenced trends in maritime history from the mid-1950s into the 1970s, with research being conducted almost exclusively by European scholars, focussing primarily on the early modern epoch (15th–18th century), and spatially on the Mediterranean, however only peripherally on the western Indian Ocean, see Hugh R. Trevor-Roper, Fernand Braudel, the *Annales*, and the Mediterranean, in: *Journal of Modern History* 44 (1972), 468–479.

3 Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System*, vol. 1, New York 1974, whose work initiated a shift in maritime history undertaken by Anglophone scholars based in the UK, North America and Scandinavia, all the while retaining a focus on social and economic history, but concerned more with subsequent modern developments from the 18th century into the contemporary period; see in particular contributions to the *Journal of World-Systems Research* (JWSR), founded by Christopher Chase-Dunn in 1995; Richard E. Lee (ed.), *The Longue Durée and World-Systems Analysis*, New York 2012; with specific reference to maritime history studies: Johan Rönby, Maritime Durées: Long-Term Structures in a Coastal Landscape, in: *Journal of Maritime Archaeology* 2 (2007), 65–82.

4 Kirti N. Chaudhuri, *Asia before Europe. Economy and Civilisation of the Indian Ocean from the Rise of Islam to 1750*, Cambridge 1990, explicitly inspired by the canonical oeuvre of Fernand Braudel, *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II*, Paris 1949.

5 See in particular Philippe Beaujard, The Indian Ocean in Euroasian and African World Systems before the Sixteenth Century, in: *Journal of World History* 16 (2005), 411–465; Pamila Gupta, Isabel Hofmeyr and Michael N. Pearson (ed.), *Eyes across the Water. Navigating the Indian Ocean*, Johannesburg 2010. For a similar questioning of the appropriate designation for the Mediterranean, see David Abulafia, *The Great Sea. A Human History of the Mediterranean*, London 2011.

6 Markus Vink, Indian Ocean Studies and the ‘New Thalassology’, in: *Journal of Global History* 2 (2007), 41–62.

7 André G. Frank, *ReORIENT: Global Economy in the Asian Age*, Berkeley 2008.

8 Lynda Shaffer, Southernization, in: *Journal of World History* 5 (1994), 1–21; for discussions about the 21st century becoming an ‘Asian century’: Rohan Mukherjee and Anthony Yazaki (ed.), *Poised for Partnership. Deepening India-Japan Relations in the Asian*

Mapping out Spaces, Modes and Agents in Four Sequential Dimensions

In this trans-regional maritime ‘highway’, stretching from the Red Sea in the west to the South China Sea in the east,⁹ where centre and periphery did not constitute stable entities, different cultural worlds (primarily Islamic, ‘Hindu’, Buddhist and Confucian, but also Jewish and Christian) interacted and overlapped, and in doing so, shaped distinctive, yet often also interwoven cultural, political and economic trajectories over the millennia.¹⁰ Although this essay targets a comparatively slender temporal segment within a millennia timescale –spotlighting as it does the Sino-Indian maritime interaction from the early 13th into the early 15th centuries–, yet given that our crucial concern is to gauge the transition from the pre-colonial to the colonial period, a *longue durée* perspective is considered essential, hence the time-frame 1000–1800. From a three-tiered Braudelian conception of historical time,¹¹ namely that of structures, conjunctures (*conjonctures*) and events (*événements*), and bearing in mind the synergism of “spaces, modes and agents” (to employ the volume’s terminology), this period, straddling eight centuries from the Middle Ages to the modern period, can be studied as comprising four influential (culturally and regionally specific) dimensions in maritime activity, in sequential but also overlapping order:

First and foremost, in view of my regional focus on the South and East Asian pelagic interplay, it is important to highlight the intensification of state support for maritime commerce and naval expansion in the 11th and 12th centu-

Century, New Delhi 2016; Hamish McDonald, *India, Australia and the Asian Century*, Melbourne 2013; P. Jegadish Gandhi (ed.), *India and China in the Asian Century. Global Economic Power Dynamics*, New Delhi 2007.

⁹ The connection of the westward shores, both with the southern Mediterranean as well as with the South China Sea, has crucial significance for historical developments which impinge correspondingly on the Indian Ocean world as on the Mediterranean and East Asia; for a geographical-historical appraisal, see André Wink, *From the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean: Medieval History in Geographic Perspective*, in: *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 44 (2002), 416–445, and for the whole expanse up to East Asia, see Ralph Kauz (ed.), *Aspects of the Maritime Silk Road. From the Persian Gulf to the East China Sea*, Wiesbaden 2010.

¹⁰ Kenneth McPherson, *The Indian Ocean: A History of People and the Sea*, New Delhi 1993. However, McPherson’s statement that the Indian Ocean comprised “a remarkably self-sustaining economic and cultural ‘world’ which was set apart from other ‘worlds’ such as the Mediterranean and East Asia” (4) is being partially modified or even contested in this paper.

¹¹ Olivia Harris, Braudel: Historical Time and the Horror of Discontinuity, in: *History Workshop Journal* 57 (2004), 161–174.

ries, as paradigmatically epitomized by the South Indian Chola dynasty with its nodal centre at Gangaikonda Cholapuram¹² and the medieval port city of Nagapattinam.¹³ This conjunction of terrestrial and maritime dominion, notable for the Indian subcontinent, was juxtaposed in its pelagic plexus by the simultaneous Chinese maritime expansion under the Song dynasty¹⁴ and complemented by the rise of Srivijaya in Southeast Asia.¹⁵ Such a triangular constellation (comprising the Cholas, the Song and Srivijaya) productively paved the way for an emerging second dimension, namely for the Muslim maritime networks of the 13th and 14th centuries.¹⁶ This second dimension of medieval maritime networks, a paradigm *par excellence* of *entre mers*—*outré-mer*, exemplifying Indo-Mediterranean connectivity, and linking up with their terrestrial overland

¹² Literally “the capital city of the Chola king who captured the Ganga” (i.e. who brought water from the river Ganges, which implies the Cholas’ symbolic hegemony over the north Indian Gangetic region), see Hermann Kulke, Trade and Politics in Eleventh-Century Bay of Bengal, in: *Trading World of the Indian Ocean*, ed. Om Prakash, Delhi 2012, 117–130; also the canonic studies by George W. Spencer, *The Politics of Expansion. The Chola Conquest of Sri Lanka and Sri Vijaya*, Madras 1983, and by Kallidai-kurichi A. Nilakanta Sastri, *The Cōlas*, Madras 2000.

¹³ As the prominent port of the Cholas for trade and the gateway to Southeast Asia, at the beginning of 11th century, it also served as the location for a Buddhist monastery (Chulamanivarma Vihara) donated by the Sailendra regent of Srivijaya, Mara Vijayayottungavarman, under the patronage of Raja Raja Chola (985–1014), see Gokul Seshadri, New Perspectives on Nagapattinam: The Medieval Port City in the Context of Political, Religious, and Commercial Exchanges between South India, Southeast Asia and China, in: *Nagapattinam to Suvarnadwipa. Reflections on Chola Naval Expeditions to Southeast Asia*, ed. Hermann Kulke, Singapore 2009, 102–134; see also Himanshu Prabha Ray, *A ‘Chinese’ Pagoda at Nagapattinam on the Tamil Coast: Revisiting India’s Early Maritime Networks*, (India International Centre (IIC). Occasional Publication 66), New Delhi 2015, 1–17.

¹⁴ Jung-pang Lo, *China as a Sea Power, 1127–1368. A Preliminary Survey of the Maritime Expansion and Naval Exploits of the Chinese People during the Southern Song and Yuan Periods*, Singapore 2012.

¹⁵ Oliver W. Wolters, *Early Indonesian Commerce. A Study of the Origins of Śrīvijaya*, Ithaca 1967; see also the book review by Anthony Reid, *Nagapattinam to Suvarnadwipa. Reflections on Chola Naval Expeditions to Southeast Asia*, ed. by Hermann Kulke, in: *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 42 (2011), 339–341.

¹⁶ This is being used as an umbrella term which, besides referring to *Hadhrami* and *Magrebi* traders, also includes Judeo-Arabs, Armenians, etc.; for the Judeo-Arab merchants, see the pioneering study by Shlomo D. Goitein, New Light on the Beginnings of the Kārim Merchants, in: *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 1 (1957), 175–184. For insights into the maritime merchants’ activity in western India, see Ranabir Chakravarti, Nakhudas and Nauvittakas: Ship-Ownning Merchants on the West Coast of India (C. AD 1000–1500), in: *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 43 (2000), 34–64.

counterparts, laid the tracks (or rather mapped out sea-routes) for the subsequent world-system connecting Europe and Asia.¹⁷ The ensuing crucial integration of the age-old terrestrial Silk Road with the maritime routes was only possible as a consequence of the synergetic interaction with the ongoing upsurge of East Asian activity.¹⁸ It is this intensification of Chinese maritime activity which comprises the third dimension: besides the change in commodities traded, from luxury to bulk (in concrete terms from Chinese silk to porcelain),¹⁹ a concomitant transformation of the Sino-centric world view was facilitated: as a result of the effective Sino-Arab interdependence, the hitherto pronounced Sino-centrism became considerably modified thanks to the knowledge acquired of maritime Asia and Africa, extending even as far as the Mediterranean. An analysis of the cognitive principles by which Chinese knowledge of the non-Chinese world was structured and evaluated would constitute an innovative feature of research, especially if contrasted with the mechanisms defining the early modern European quest for knowledge of the non-European world.²⁰

Methodologically, the case-study that is being envisaged would deal with the documentary evidence emerging from Chinese maritime interaction with India which intensified from the early 13th century and continued into the third decade of the 15th century. Representing a radical metamorphosis in the long tradition of Sino-Indian terrestrial contact (which in the early medieval period had been defined as explicit, primarily by a deep interest in Buddhism through the prominently recorded visits to important sites in north and central India),²¹ the renewed Chinese interest in the Indian subcontinent, shaped by maritime

17 Janet L. Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony: The World System A.D. 1250–1350*, New York 1991.

18 Tansen Sen, The Formation of Chinese Maritime Networks to Southern Asia, 1200–1450, in: *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 49 (2006), 421–453, and also Roderich Ptak, *Die maritime Seidenstraße. Küstenräume, Seefahrt und Handel in vor-kolonialer Zeit*, Munich 2007, 148–211.

19 For more details on the substantial transformation of Sino-Indian trade see Upinder Singh, *A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India. From the Stone Age to the 12th Century*, New Delhi 2009, 586–587; for specificities on the mercantile importance of porcelain, see Anne Gerritsen, Porcelain and the Material Culture of the Mongol-Yuan Court, in: *Journal of Early Modern History* 16 (2012), 241–273.

20 Kuei-Sheng Chang, The Maritime Scene in China at the Dawn of Great European Discoveries, in: *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 94 (1974), 347–359, and Harish Kapur, *China and the Afro-Asian World*, New Delhi 1966. For contrastive details about the early modern European perspective, see Gita Dharampal-Frick, *Indien im Spiegel deutscher Quellen der Frühen Neuzeit (1500–1750): Studien zu einer interkulturellen Konstellation*, Tübingen 1994.

21 For a differentiated appraisal of the early medieval Chinese interaction with India see Rabindra Panth (ed.), *India's Perception through Chinese Travellers*, Nalanda 2007. For

considerations, was more mercantile and political in portent and was directed towards South Indian littoral regions as has been substantiated by archaeological research.²² From the tail-end of the Song dynasty, or the middle of the 13th century, there is evidence of a sizeable Chinese trading settlement in Periyapatnam, the ancient Pandya port city on the eastern side of the Gulf of Mannar, where a pagoda was built in 1267 bearing Chinese inscriptions.²³ In the same period, a diasporic community of Tamil merchants settled in Quanzhou, where they constructed a temple dedicated to Shiva. This temple was excavated just over a decade ago by Chinese archaeologists.²⁴ Likewise, on the south-western Malabar Coast, Kollam served as an important harbour for Chinese ships en route to the Persian Gulf; ceramic shards excavated along the coasts of southern India and Sri Lanka testify to the existence of medieval emporia frequented by Chinese traders.²⁵ Under Kublai Khan (r. 1260–1294) in the Yuan period, profiting from improved nautical technology, as many as fourteen political embassies are reported to have sailed from the South China Sea to South Indian regents (of Malabar on the east, and Kollam on the west coast) in the years 1279–1293.²⁶ None other than Marco Polo is purported to have accompanied one of these embassies on an arduous maritime expedition across the Malayan archipelago to South India, *entre mers—outré-mer*, on his return voyage via Persia to the Mediterranean.²⁷ Five decades later, another well-known transmarine agent deserves to be mentioned, for his pelagic travels underscore the

details about the transformation, see Tansen Sen, *Buddhism, Diplomacy, and Trade. The Realignment of Sino-Indian Relations, 600–1400*, Honolulu 2003.

22 Roderich Ptak, *Die chinesische maritime Expansion im 14. und 15. Jahrhundert*, Bamberg 1992.

23 Adam T. Kessler, *Song Blue and White Porcelain on the Silk Road*, Leiden 2012, 460–461, citing the archaeological findings at Periyapatnam initiated by Noboru Karashima and Yellava Subbarayalu where blue and white porcelain shards dating from the Yuan period were excavated; the Chinese pagoda constructed in 1267, as reported by the Chinese traveller Wang Dayuan is incorrectly interpreted as being located in Nagapattinam by Sen, *Buddhism, Diplomacy, and Trade* (cf. n. 21), 237.

24 John Guy, Tamil Merchant Guilds and the Quanzhou Trade, in: *The Emporium of the World. Maritime Quanzhou, 1000–1400*, ed. Angela Schottenhammer, Leiden 2000, 283–308; religious relics found recently were reported about in the Indian press: Ananth Krishnan, Behind China's Hindu Temples, A Forgotten History, in: *The Hindu*, July 20, 2013, <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/behind-chinas-hindu-temples-a-forgotten-history/article4932458.ece> (accessed 21 July 2016).

25 Noboru Karashima (ed.), *In Search of Chinese Ceramic-Sherds in South India and Sri Lanka*, Tokyo 2004; see also the collection of papers in Roderich Ptak, *China's Seaborne Trade with South and Southeast Asia (1200–1750)*, Aldershot 1998.

26 See Tansen Sen, The Yuan Khanate and India: Cross-Cultural Diplomacy in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries, in: *Asia Major* 3rd Series 19/1–2 (2006), 299–326.

distinct contribution of Indo-Mediterranean connectivity: the Moroccan Ibn Baṭṭūta (1304–1368 or 1377),²⁸ *nota bene* originating from the Mediterranean port of Tangier, as a somewhat reluctant emissary of the Delhi Sultan, Muḥammad bin Tuḡluq (1324–1351) to the Mongol court, travelled south and eastward.²⁹ Ibn Baṭṭūta's *Riḥla*, perhaps a more reliable source than Polo's *Il Milione*, contains a wealth of details about the Sino-Indian trade and the cosmopolitan world of the many Indian Ocean port cities he visited en route.³⁰

Another half century later, however, it was the Ming Admiral Zheng He's seven expeditions from 1405–1433 to Indian littoral potentates, especially to Calicut, Cochin, Kollam (but also three to Bengal),³¹ that highlight the significance of Sino-Indian diplomacy and cultural exchange, seemingly superseding the importance of commercial trade.³² Extant woodcut illustrations scarcely give an idea of the dimension of these fleets which are reported to have comprised 250 to 300 huge ships, supposedly measuring about 400 feet in length and 200 feet in width.³³ However, what is of greater relevance for our study of Sino-Indian cultural interaction is the composition of the crew, estimated at

27 Marco Polo, *Il milione. Die Wunder der Welt*, ed. Elise Guignard, Zürich 1983; for references to Kublai Khan's nautical technology, see Hans van Tilburg, Chinese Maritime History and Nautical Archaeology: Where Have All the Ships Gone? in: *Bulletin of the Australian Institute for Maritime Archaeology* 18/2 (1994), 7–10.

28 Joseph Cuoq (ed.), *Recueil des sources arabes concernant l'Afrique Occidentale du VIII^e au XVI^e siècle: Bilad Al-Sudan*, Paris 1975, 289.

29 Stephan Conermann, *Die Beschreibung Indiens in der „Riḥla“ des Ibn-Baṭṭūta. Aspekte einer herrschaftssoziologischen Einordnung des Delhi-Sultanates unter Muḥammad Ibn-Tuḡluq*, Berlin 1993.

30 For instance, the *Riḥla* contains a classification of maritime vessels off the western coast of India, see Dionisius A. Agius, Classifying Vessel-Types in Ibn Baṭṭūta's *Riḥla*, in: *Ships and the Development of Maritime Technology in the Indian Ocean*, ed. David Parkin, London 2002, 174–208.

31 Roderich Ptak, China and Calicut in the Early Ming Period: Envoys and Tribute Embassies, in: *China and the Asian Seas. Trade, Travel, and Visions of the Others (1400–1750)*, ed. Roderich Ptak, Brookfield 1998, 81–111; Haraprasad Ray, *Trade and Diplomacy in India-China Relations: A Study of Bengal during the 15th Century*, New Delhi 1993.

32 Robert Finlay, The Voyages of Zheng He: Ideology, State Power, and Maritime Trade in Ming China, in: *Journal of the Historical Society* 8 (2008), 327–347; Edward L. Dreyer, *Zheng He. China and the Oceans in the Early Ming Dynasty, 1405–1433*, New York 2007.

33 There is an ongoing debate about the actual size of the ships, see Sally K. Church, John C. Gebhardt, and Terry H. Little, A Naval Architectural Analysis of the Plausibility of 450-ft Treasure Ships, in: *Zheng He and the Afro-Asian World*, ed. Chia Lin Sien and Sally K. Church, Melaka 2012, 14–46; *idem*, The Colossal Ships of Zheng He: Image or Reality?, in: *Zheng He: Images & Perceptions/Bilder & Wahrnehmungen*, ed. Claudine Salmon and Roderich Ptak, Wiesbaden 2005, 155–176.

numbering 20,000 to 30,000 men, who included not only sailors and nautical experts but also specialists belonging to a whole range of cultural and scientific fields, such as interpreters, physicians, herbalists, and astronomers.³⁴

After the 1450s in the wake of Chinese withdrawal from this long-distance maritime enterprise,³⁵ Indians (both Muslims and Hindus), reinforced by Christian Armenians, Venetians, Jews, Southeast Asians and Arabs not only kept alive the commercial and cultural Indo-Mediterranean connectivity but even contributed to an upsurge in maritime activity.³⁶ The continuing maritime dynamism of the late 15th century paved the way for the fourth dimension, namely the penetration of European commerce initiated by the Portuguese³⁷ who endeavoured to latch onto the highly lucrative spice trade as well as the Chinese trade in copper, silk and porcelain. From the 1560s, via the Portuguese base in Macao and from their first Asian foothold in the island port city of Goa,³⁸ intra-Asian connectivity became redefined to a greater or lesser degree by the Lusitanian newcomers,³⁹ and in quick succession, by the Dutch, British and the French, with Asian port-cities soon metamorphosing into European bridgeheads.⁴⁰ Yet not only did the Europeans have to accommodate themselves to pre-existing mercantile structures (thereby conspicuously resorting to

³⁴ Wan Ming, Reflections on the Study of Zheng He's Expeditions, in: *Ming Studies* 2004/1, 17–33.

³⁵ The reasons for the Chinese withdrawal from intensive maritime activity are elucidated by Haraprasad Ray, *The Eighth Voyage of the Dragon that Never was: An Enquiry into the Causes of Cessation of Voyages during Early Ming Dynasty*, in: *China Report* 23/2 (1987), 157–178.

³⁶ Roxani E. Margariti, Mercantile Networks, Port Cities, and 'Pirate' States: Conflict and Competition in the Indian Ocean World of Trade before the Sixteenth Century, in: *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 51 (2008), 543–577.

³⁷ Sanjay Subrahmanyam, The Birth-Pangs of Portuguese Asia: Revisiting the Fateful 'Long Decade' 1498–1509, in: *Journal of Global History* 2 (2007), 261–280.

³⁸ Pius Malekandathil, City in Space and Metaphor: A Study on the Port-City of Goa, 1510–1700, in: *Studies in History* 25 (2009), 13–38.

³⁹ Kirti N. Chaudhuri, The Portuguese Maritime Empire, Trade, and Society in the Indian Ocean during the Sixteenth Century, in: *Portuguese Studies* 8 (1992), 57–70.

⁴⁰ For studies on the Portuguese presence in the Indian Ocean see Pius Malekandathil and Jamal Mohammed (ed.), *The Portuguese, Indian Ocean, and European Bridgeheads, 1500–1800. Festschrift in Honour of Prof. K. S. Mathew*, Lisbon 2001; on the Dutch: Om Prakash, *On the Economic Encounter between Asia and Europe, 1500–1800*, Farnham 2014; on the British: Kirti N. Chaudhuri, *The Trading World of Asia and the English East India Company 1660–1760*, Cambridge 1978; on the French: Donald C. Wellington, *French East India Companies. A Historical Account and Record of Trade*, Lanham 2006; for a panoramic study, Frank Broeze (ed.), *Gateways of Asia: Port Cities of Asia in the 13th-20th Centuries*, London 1997.

piracy),⁴¹ but also Asian and Arab trans-regional networks, as competing ‘partners’, testified to their resilience by adapting themselves to the new challenges in this “Age of Contained Conflict” attempting to transform it into one of “Perceived Mutual Advantage.”⁴²

This is the lie of the land which has been mapped out at least partially by previous scholarship.⁴³ In particular, the pioneering work of Tansen Sen cartographically indicates the location of some historical port cities around 1000, whose dynamic rise and decline, however, needs to be charted out more extensively for the subsequent period of eight centuries. The importance of port cities needs to be highlighted as constituting spatial transit zones connecting the hinterland and the oceanic expanse. Representing, as they did, crystallisation points of economic, political and socio-cultural developments, in tracking the growth (and/or disappearance) of port cities, we would be able to provide crucial windows into the past of the Indian Ocean region.⁴⁴

41 For debates on the topic of piracy see Michael Pearson, Piracy in Asian Waters: Problems of Definition, in: *Pirates, Ports, and Coasts in Asia. Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. John Kleinen and Manon Osseweijer, Singapore 2010, 15–29; see also Patricia Risso, Cross-Cultural Perceptions of Piracy: Maritime Violence in the Western Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf Region during a Long Eighteenth Century, in: *Journal of World History* 12 (2001), 293–319; for Asian empirical data, see Pius Malekandathil, Criminality and Legitimization in Seawaters: A Study on the Pirates of Malabar during the Age of European Commercial Expansion (1500–1800), in: *Fluxos & Riscos. Revista de Estudos Sociais* 1 (2011), 55–74; Pius Malekandathil, *Maritime India. Trade, Religion and Polity in the Indian Ocean*, Delhi 2010, 125–150.

42 The term “Age of Partnership” was first coined by Holden Furber, *Rival Empires of Trade in the Orient 1600–1800*, Minneapolis 1976; “Age of Commerce” by Anthony Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce, 1450–1680*, 2 vols., New Haven 1988–1993 and Kenneth McPherson, Indian Ocean (cf. n. 10); “Age of Contained Conflict” by Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *The Portuguese Empire in Asia, 1500–1700. A Political and Economic History*, London 1993; “Perceived Mutual Advantage” by Om Prakash, *On the Economic Encounter between Asia and Europe, 1500–1800*, Farnham 2014.

43 In particular, see the studies of Sen, Buddhism, Diplomacy, and Trade (cf. n. 21), Ptak, Die chinesische maritime Expansion (cf. n. 22), Ptak, China’s Seaborne Trade (cf. n. 25), Ptak, Die maritime Seidenstraße (cf. n. 18) and McPherson, Indian Ocean (cf. n. 10).

44 For an initial overview see Rila Mukherjee (ed.), *Vanguards of Globalization. Port-Cities from the Classical to the Modern*, Delhi 2014.

A Case-Study of Sino-Indian Maritime Interaction (13th–15th centuries): Documentary Sources

Whilst using the already mentioned extended time-frame (1000–1800) as a parameter of reference, the primary objective is directed towards filling in the lacuna in our knowledge of medieval India and its intra-Asian links.⁴⁵ With this goal in mind, a paradigmatic case-study will be conducted of the extensive Indo-Chinese interaction in the littoral regions surrounding the Bay of Bengal with its dense patchwork of havens,⁴⁶ extending into the Malayan Archipelago *entre mers*, and including the Coromandel and south-western Malabar Coast, *terre entre mers*, so-to-speak. It is this Sino-Indian maritime connectivity (from the early 13th to early 15th centuries) which, especially during the Yuan (1271–1294) and early Ming periods (in particular, during the reign of Yongle, the third emperor, 1402–1424), after the decline of longstanding Buddhist interaction, needs to be investigated from the perspective not only of political and economic determinants (given the dynamic diplomacy and trade) but also in view of cultural impinging factors. In particular, the rationale for the Ming expeditions and the heuristic insights to be gained about Sino-Indian historical interactions is what primarily interests me.⁴⁷ Fortunately, a vast archive of Chinese source material has already been collated which comprises detailed ethnographies that considerably supplement the existing historiographical tableau.⁴⁸

One exemplary specimen of this systematic historical documentation would be the early 13th-century extensive report by Zhao Rugua (1170–1228), a

⁴⁵ For preliminary studies on intra-Asian links in the medieval period see Amita Satyal, *Making Culture Portable: Silk Road Merchants and Monks as a Bridge between Indian and East Asian Buddhism*, in: *Buddhism in East Asia. Aspects of History's First Universal Religion Presented in the Modern Context*, ed. Anita Sharma, Delhi 2012, 18–52; Hermann Kulke, *Indian Colonies, Indianization or Cultural Convergence*, in: *Onderzoek in Zuidoost-Azië. Agenda's voor de Jaren Negentig*, ed. Henk Schulte Nordholt, Leiden 1990; Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Iranians Abroad: Intra-Asian Elite Migration and Early Modern State Formation*, in: *Journal of Asian Studies* 51 (1992), 340–363. My research focus must perforce be somewhat restricted, defined primarily by South Asian empirical contingencies.

⁴⁶ See Rila Mukherjee, *Pelagic Passageways. The Northern Bay of Bengal before Colonialism*, Delhi 2011; Haraprasad Ray, *Trade and Diplomacy in India-China Relations: A Study of Bengal during the Fifteenth Century*, New Delhi 1993.

⁴⁷ For pioneering research in this field see Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilisation in China*, vol. 1: *Introductory Orientations: Sect. 1–7*, Cambridge 1954, 206–214.

⁴⁸ My focus converges fortuitously with ongoing research at the Indian Ocean World Centre in Montreal, in particular with the team dealing with the Zheng He voyages (URL: http://indianoceanworldcentre.com/Team_4 [accessed 21 July 2016]).

customs inspector at Quanzhou during the late Song dynasty, containing meticulous data on weights, measures, and even about revenue systems operating in maritime India (especially in the Tamil region and in Gujarat). Entitled *Zhufan Zhi* (1225), literally “Records of Foreign Peoples”, and comprising two volumes, the work also contains data (partially culled from other available reports) on the vast geographic region extending from East Asia, Southeast Asia, littoral South Asia, East and North Africa, and across the Islamic world as far as the southern Iberian Peninsula.⁴⁹ A century later, Wang Dayuan (1311–1350), a traveller during the Yuan dynasty,⁵⁰ furnished an ethnographic account of his visit (1328–1333) to Bengal, Orissa, both coasts of South India, Gujarat and Sri Lanka. A third report, the most detailed of the three, was penned by Ma Huan (ca. 1380–1460), Admiral Zheng He’s interpreter, conversant in Arabic and Persian, who accompanied him on three of the seven expeditions (namely in 1413, 1421 and 1431); the completed encyclopaedic work dating from 1433, entitled *Yingyai Shenglan* (“The Overall Survey of the Ocean’s Shores”), has undergone multiple re-editions into the 20th century.⁵¹ From a reading of J. V. G. Mills’ translation of the 1433 supposed Urtext,⁵² one obtains encyclopaedic data relating to maritime India, with graphic information about political constellations, commerce and the social economy, local customs, weather conditions and the environment. Moreover, since the Ming admiral visited Calicut and Cochin on almost all his expeditions, often sojourning for several months, with the Samudrin⁵³ and/or the Raja of Cochin⁵⁴ vying to host him, the descriptions of both Calicut and Cochin (including insights into their relationship of mutual rivalry) are correspondingly extensive. Preliminary reading of this historical

49 For an analysis of data relating to one region see Sally K. Church, Gujarat in a 13th Century Chinese Source: Zhao Rugua’s Chapter on Gujarat in Zhu Fan Zhi, in: *Gujarat and the Sea*, ed. Lotika Varadarajan, Vadodara 2011, 353–384; for more general evaluations see Karam Tej Singh Sarao, An Evaluation of Faxian, Xuanzang, Yijing, Hye Ch’o and Zhao Rugua as Sources for the Study of the Decline of Buddhism in India, in: *Buddhism in East Asia. Aspects of History’s First Universal Religion Presented in the Modern Context*, ed. Anita Sharma, Delhi 2012, 140–158; Suchandra Ghosh, South-East Asia and the Eastern Sea Board of India through the Lens of Zhao Rugua, in: *Convergence. Rethinking India’s Past*, ed. Radhika Seshan, Delhi 2014, 41–54.

50 As renowned an ‘agent’ for China as Marco Polo is for Europe see an initial paper evaluating Wang Dayuan’s report on Southwest India by Roderich Ptak, Wang Dayuan on Kerala, in: *Explorations in the History of South Asia. Essays in Honour of Dietmar Rothermund*, ed. Georg Berkemer, New Delhi 2001, 39–52.

51 A textual comparison of these differing editions would in itself be quite revealing, and should be supplemented by an analysis of the reports regarding the other four expeditions which as yet have received little scholarly attention.

52 Ma Huan, *Ying-yai Sheng-lan: The Overall Survey of the Ocean’s Shores [1433]*, trans. and ed. J. V. G. Mills, Cambridge 1970.

documentation reveals precise information not just about religious practices but also about matrilineal inheritance, specific techniques of calculation, the multiple uses of the coconut, and even references to methods of punishment for criminals. An interdisciplinary analysis of these meticulous specifications remains an important research desideratum for gaining cardinal insights into the functioning of late medieval Malabar society.

Supplementing these Chinese reports is Indian inscriptional material, originating primarily from the eastern littoral, such as the Motupalli inscriptions (dating from the middle of 13th to the late 14th century) honouring the 500 heroes of Coromandel, i.e. the Tamil merchants trading with China and Southeast Asia.⁵⁵ For the littoral regions of the Northern Bay of Bengal as well as the Malabar Coast, archaeological excavations are underway.⁵⁶ Vernacular sources from the 14th–16th centuries, such as the *Manasamangal* and the *Chandimanga*⁵⁷ which contain ethno-historiographical narratives of maritime journeys by Bengali traders, reveal not only empirical data about the sea routes, ships and commodities traded but also help to mitigate the clichéd view that sea-travel was taboo for Indians.⁵⁸ Not only will preconceived notions of the paucity of

53 Literally meaning “lord of the sea”, also termed ‘Zamorin’; K. V. Krishna Iyer, *The Zamorins of Calicut: From the Earliest Times down to AD 1806*, Calicut 1938.

54 For details about the political rivalry between the two see Alappat Sreedhara Menon, *A Survey of Kerala History*, Kottayam 1967, 170–172.

55 Noboru Karashima, South Indian Merchant Guilds in the Indian Ocean and Southeast Asia, in: *Nagapattinam to Suvarnadwipa. Reflections on Chola Naval Expeditions to Southeast Asia*, ed. Hermann Kulke, Singapore 2009, 135–157.

56 Rila Mukherjee, *The Northern Bay of Bengal, 800–1500 C.E.: A History apart?*, New Delhi 2013. For the Malabar Coast, Himanshu Prabha Ray, The West Coast of India and the Maritime World of the Western Indian Ocean, in: *African Archaeological Review* 31 (2014), 583–598; see also the exhibition in Pattanam, Kerala “Unearthing Pattanam: Histories, Cultures, Crossings” hosted by the National Museum, Delhi with the Kerala Council for Historical Research, URL: <http://www.nationalmuseumindia.gov.in/pdfs/Pattanam-Exhibition.pdf> (accessed 21 July 2016).

57 On the *Mangalkabyas*, including *Chandimanga*, see Asutosh Bhattacharyya (trans.), *Bangla Mangalkabyer Itihas*, Calcutta 2009 [1939]; these popular medieval religious texts also contain empirical data about maritime trade, for instance about the merchant Chand Sadagar and his ship’s voyage starting from Saptagrama [Satgaon], medieval capital in southern Bengal, see Aniruddha Ray, The Rise and Fall of Satgaon. An Overseas Port of Medieval Bengal, in: *The Indian Trade at the Asian Frontier*, ed. S. Jeyaseela Stephen, New Delhi 2008, 69–101; references are found in these narratives to ports of the eastern coast, Sri Lanka, and in the west, of Gujarat [the medieval port of Patan] and the Laccadives, see Priyatosh Sharma, Identifying the Chief Trading Emporia in Indian Ocean Maritime Trade, c.1000–c.1500, in: *Researchers World: Journal of Arts, Science & Commerce* 5/2 (2014), 131–142.

Indian maritime traditions be deconstructed through interdisciplinary research into the above-mentioned material (archaeological and historical, of both the ethno- as well as the endo-historical variety) but the significant role played by littoral communities in the history of the subcontinent will also be underscored.

Conceptual Modes and Explorations

Furthermore, to gauge the historical significance of this Sino-Indian connectivity—also with a view to tracking and assessing continuities and subsequent transformations—, I would suggest focussing on a set of crucial issues, as conceptual *modes*, to gain epistemic insights from a study of this paradigm of intra-Asian interaction extending over two centuries. Key elements of the envisaged analysis can be elucidated briefly as follows: given the central role of political diplomacy, which seems to have superseded in importance that of commerce, it would be salient to delineate the shifts in the enactment of political sovereignty (as a layered and shared concept)⁵⁹ as exemplified in the Sino-Indian tributary missions.⁶⁰ On the basis of the extant records meticulously detailing the several diplomatic missions to South Indian potentates as well as to the Sultanate of Bengal, a rigorous analysis would be undertaken of the modalities with which the discursive claims of political sovereignty were mutually negotiated for

58 Exemplified by the term *kalapani* ('black water'); for an Indological contribution to the colonial discourse on this topic see Susmita Arp, *Kālāpāni: Zum Streit über die Zulässigkeit von Seereisen im kolonialzeitlichen Indien*, Stuttgart 2000; that this taboo was not all-pervasive throughout Indian society is evidenced by the empirical data on the long-standing seafaring traditions of the littoral communities.

59 For innovative studies on the South Asian concept and practice of sovereignty see the contributions in Georg Berkemer and Margret Frenz (ed.), *Sharing Sovereignty: The Little Kingdom in South Asia*, Berlin 2003; Tiziana Pontillo, Cristina Bignami, Moreno Dore et al. (ed.), *The Volatile World of Sovereignty: The Vrātya Problem and Kingship in South Asia*, New Delhi 2015.

60 The shifting perspective of the Chinese during the early Ming period is dealt with in an initial study by Sally K. Church, *Changing Attitudes toward Foreigners from Overseas: An Investigation into the Policy of the Ming Emperor Yongle, 1403–1424*, in: *Nanyang Xuebao (Journal of the South Seas Society)* 56 (2012), 43–73. Chinese diplomatic missions, for instance to the Malabar Coast, also involved return visits by Malayali officials to the Ming court at Nanjing where they were lavishly entertained, and even integrated into the Ming establishment, as was the case with an official from the Samudrin of Calicut, who accompanied Zheng He back to Quanzhou and then to Nanjing where he was employed as a judge, and awarded the military rank of vice-battalion commander by emperor Xuande, and given the Chinese name Sha Ban.

ordering power relations between the different parties. An empirically grounded and conceptually defined study would contribute towards a more differentiated understanding of sovereignty as a negotiable relationship between constituting and constituted power.⁶¹ Despite obvious differences in pre-modern Sino-Indian political configurations, there seem to be indications of a shared axiomatic basis—or at least of a certain degree of political philosophical affinity —, as evidenced (to cite just one example) in the inherent congruity between the Chinese concept of *Da Yi Tong*, or unified empire as compared with the Indian notion of *Chakravartin*⁶² implying a symbolic all-encompassing sovereignty, albeit articulated in a ritualized mode.

Another important task would be to investigate how the transcultural networks were organised.⁶³ In this connection, the role and status of the ‘agents’ would be ascertained, together with the manner in which mercantile, cultural and social factors were defined to facilitate the networks’ extension across the fluid and porous (rather than fixed and closed) boundaries of cultures, societies and states. Besides examining the sociological anatomy of these networks, the mechanisms bolstering their resilience and adaptability to the changing morphology and strategic orientation of Indian Ocean trade require closer investigation. Part and parcel of these resilient networks were the widespread dynamic diasporic communities (with their multifarious ethnic, occupational and religious identities).⁶⁴ It will be shown that the differing extent to which these diasporic communities were integrated into the local societies (whereby

61 This historical Asian perspective would substantially supplement recent studies in this field, such as by Daniel Philpott, *Revolutions in Sovereignty: How Ideas Shaped Modern International Relations*, Princeton 2001.

62 Signifying the ancient Indian conception of a world ruler, the term literally means ‘the one who turns the (cosmic) wheel’.

63 For theoretical considerations concerning network formation, in particular for the later period, see Bhaswati Bhattacharya, Gita Dharampal-Frick, and Jos Gommans, Spatial and Temporal Continuities of Merchant Networks in South Asia and the Indian Ocean (1500–2000), in: *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 50 (2007), 91–105, where a concise definition of network is given, as “a structure [consisting of a centre, a locality, or a cluster of localities] through which goods, credit, capital and men circulate regularly across a given space which can vary enormously in terms of both size and accessibility” citing Claude Markovits, *The Global World of Indian Merchants, 1750–1947. Traders of Sind from Bukhara to Panama*, Cambridge 2000, 25; this approach would also take a cue from studies for the earlier period of which two pertinent titles are: Kenneth R. Hall, *Ports-of-Trade, Maritime Diasporas, and Networks of Trade and Cultural Integration in the Bay of Bengal Region of the Indian Ocean: c. 1300–1500*, in: *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 53 (2010), 109–145; Himanshu Prabha Ray and Edward A. Alpers (ed.), *Cross Currents and Community Networks: The History of the Indian Ocean World*, New Delhi 2007.

some migrants even participated in public administration and were involved in revenue collection in their host societies)⁶⁵ contributed significantly to the flourishing maritime economy. Investigating how the socio-economic status and the political role of diasporic Chinese, Indian, Persian and Arab communities were differentially negotiated with indigenous rulers and traders would enable us not only to better understand the functioning of the cosmopolitan Indian Ocean *oceanum* but also shed light on the shifting configurations of power existing between merchants (whereby the distinction between ‘foreign’ and ‘indigenous’ ones was fuzzy, to say the least) and political authorities.

An equally important focus of investigation in this maritime expanse would be on the flow and exchange of ‘cargoes’⁶⁶ whereby the hitherto emphasis on economic commodities will be superseded by a radical shift to more culturally orientated cargoes, representing substantial intellectual and symbolic capital. Underscoring this latter feature, a curious illustration of the symbolic value of ‘cargo’ in the Indo-Chinese missions is exemplified by the emblematic presentation of a giraffe by the Sultan of Bengal to the Ming court in 1414:⁶⁷ a methodological analysis of the political and socio-cultural ramifications of this exotic ceremonial prestation by Saif al-Dīn Hamza Shāh (1411–1413), upstart incumbent of the Ilyās Shāhī dynasty (1342–1487), could also provide compelling insights into the intricate mechanisms defining the Sino-Indian tributary system.⁶⁸

64 See the following studies indicative of the existing pluri-religious spectrum: John W. Chaffee, *Diasporic Identities in the Historical Development of the Maritime Muslim Communities of Song-Yuan China*, in: *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 49 (2006), 395–420; *Jewish Diasporas in China. Comparative and Historical Perspectives: A Three-Day Scholarly Symposium Sponsored by the John K. Fairbank Centre for East Asian Research*, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass. 1992; Malekandathil, *Maritime India* (cf. n. 41), 38–61; Hugh R. Clark, *Maritime Diasporas in Asia before da Gama: An Introductory Commentary*, in: *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 49 (2006), 385–394.

65 For details see Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Merchants, Markets and the State in Early Modern India*, Delhi 1990; the extent to which the formation of mercantile diasporas were relatively long-term or fluctuating will be investigated for South Asia, as has been underscored for Southeast Asia by contributions in *Sojourners and Settlers: Histories of Southeast Asia and the Chinese*, ed. Anthony Reid, St. Leonards, NSW 1996.

66 Auguste Toussaint, *Cargoes of the East. The Ports, Trade and Culture of the Arabian Seas and Western Indian Ocean*, in: *The Great Circle* 2/2 (1980), 142–143.

67 The giraffe itself originated from Somalia, see Sally K. Church, *The Giraffe of Bengal: A Medieval Encounter in Ming China*, in: *The Medieval History Journal* 7 (2004), 1–37.

68 For a conventional American appraisal of the so-called tributary system, see John K. Fairbank, *Tributary Trade and China's Relations with the West*, in: *The Journal of Asian Studies* 1 (1942), 129–149. For more recent Chinese perspectives, see Fangyin Zhou,

More significantly, given the sizeable crew of specialists (as mentioned previously) accompanying the Ming expeditions, the Sino-Indian transfer and exchange of cultural capital extended across a wide spectrum, including technological and scientific concerns, such as in the adaptation of technologies in shipbuilding, in agriculture, the mutual borrowing of mathematical and astronomical knowledge, of medical practices—between Chinese and Indian (*Siddha* and *Ayurveda*) medicine, of which we have concrete evidence, as also of linguistic research in the form of a Bengali-Chinese lexicon, compiled in the wake of the Ming nautical missions.⁶⁹ Mutual borrowings or shifts in the iconographies of religion, ritual practices and philosophical beliefs would also be worth investigating.⁷⁰ The results of such research could possibly complement and supplement Sheldon Pollock's large-scale project⁷¹ which set out to investigate the upsurge in creativity and innovation in Indian literary and philosophical production during the Early Modern Period (1550–1750): in our proposed research, however, we would contrastively underscore that, already in the preceding centuries, a socio-cultural and scientific dynamism not only extended to most spheres of societal concerns, not being restricted to the domains of literature and philosophy (as in the case of Pollock's project), but also that this productive dynamism may well have been initiated and stimulated by the dialogic and contesting spaces in this intra-Asian interaction.

The Sequel

With a view to evaluating the developments towards the end of the 15th century, a radically different set of significant questions is raised by the entry of

Equilibrium Analysis of the Tributary System, in: *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 4 (2011), 147–178, and Nianshen Song, 'Tributary' from a Multilateral and Multi-layered Perspective, in: *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 5 (2012), 155–182.

⁶⁹ Mukherjee, *Pelagic Passageways* (cf. n. 46), 84, footnote 392, with reference to Sen, *Formation of Chinese Maritime Networks to Southern Asia* (cf. n. 18), 442–443.

⁷⁰ For influences originating from the Indian subcontinent see Upinder Singh, *A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India from the Stone Age to the 12th Century*, Delhi 2008, 303–319 (Buddhism and Jainism), 429–445 (Religion beyond "isms") and 616–621 (South Indian Bhakti); for concrete examples of Chinese borrowings, see Roderich Ptak, *China and the Asian Seas* (cf. n. 31).

⁷¹ See the website link: URL: <http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pollock/sks/papers/index.html> (accessed 21 July 2016), where the project is introduced as follows: "The Sanskrit Knowledge-Systems Project investigates the structure and social context of Sanskrit science and knowledge from 1550 to 1750. The period witnessed a flowering of scholarship lasting until the coming of colonialism, when a decline set in that ended the age-old power of Sanskrit thought to shape Indian intellectual history."

Europeans (the Portuguese, the Dutch, the English, and the French) into the Afro-Asian Ocean world.⁷² This relates to missionary as well as commercial activity; quite tellingly, the missionary activity of the Jesuit Francis Xavier⁷³ (1506–1552) followed more or less the same maritime lanes marked out by the spice routes, thereby testifying to the interwoven nature of proselytization, trade, and subsequent colonial military control. What needs to be investigated with regard to the period from 1500 until ca. 1800 is how European ideas of state sovereignty, mercantilism, the military-fiscal nexus, and also ethnic-racial difference were mapped into the pre-existing patterns of resolving material and ideological tensions.⁷⁴ To what extent did older forms of exchange and networking prove to be resilient, even in a changed scenario?⁷⁵ The gradual transformation was concretized in the metamorphosis of port cities, from havens with bustling bazaars, to ones with fortresses, indicative of increased administrative and military control.⁷⁶ Beginning more unobtrusively in the shape of forts like the one built in Calicut by the Portuguese in 1513, somewhat camouflaged by the surrounding littoral habitations, the transmogrification became much more intrusive during the course of the 17th century when new fort cities were established by the British East India Company. Serving as militarized colonial bridgeheads, Madras, Bombay and Calcutta, through their strategic location at focal manufacturing sites, represented the three cardinal points on the subcontinent's coast-line; and within a century all three became upgraded to the status of headquarters of the three Presidencies of Madras, Bombay and Bengal, constituting the mainstay of the British Raj.⁷⁷ The developing narrative in China is substantially different, but the radical transfiguration of strategically located port cities (such as of Quanzhou to Canton) is indicative of a

⁷² For an overview see Michael N. Pearson, *The Indian Ocean*, London 2003, 113–189.

⁷³ Pamila Gupta, *The Relic State. St Francis Xavier and the Politics of Ritual in Portuguese India*, Manchester 2014.

⁷⁴ For useful insights into the maritime transformations see the article by Craig A. Lockard, “The Sea Common to All”: Maritime Frontiers, Port Cities, and Chinese Traders in the Southeast Asian Age of Commerce, ca. 1400–1750, in: *Journal of World History* 21 (2010), 219–247.

⁷⁵ A case-study of changes taking place in south-western India is provided by Malekandathil, *Maritime India* (cf. n. 41), 82–108.

⁷⁶ For the Dutch colonial perspective see the informative article by Markus Vink, From Port-City to World-System: Spatial Constructs of Dutch Indian Ocean Studies, 1500–1800, in: *Itinerario* 28/2 (2004), 45–116.

⁷⁷ See the canonical study by Peter J. Marshall, *Bengal: The British Bridgehead. Eastern India 1740–1828*, Cambridge 1987; for a more recent appraisal of the colonial Presidency see Benjamin B. Cohen, Introducing Colonial Regionalism: The Case of India's Presidencies, the View from Madras, in: *India Review* 13 (2014), 321–336.

story-in-the-making, whose continuities and transformations across eight centuries between centers and peripheries in the pelagic patchwork quilt of the Indo-Mediterranean sketched out very briefly here deserve a more intensive research focus which will highlight the processes of shifting hierarchies and asymmetries in this expansive maritime region.⁷⁸

Summa summarum: the proposed focus on Sino-Indian maritime interaction (ca. 1200–1430), besides filling a crucial lacuna in late medieval Indian historical research (facilitated by an interdisciplinary team of scholars),⁷⁹ would also be pertinent for gaining a better understanding of the historical genealogies of Asian economic and geopolitical developments in the 21st century.⁸⁰ Furthermore, whilst acknowledging that the present-day political economies and cultural configurations of this maritime region are largely a legacy of the massive shifts in regimes of political-economic governance and ethnic-cultural organization initiated in the age of European empires, analytical research into the prehistory of this age possesses more than mere academic value. By investigating the conceptual modes and mechanisms involved not only in negotiating political sovereignty, but also in managing far-flung socio-economic networks of diasporic communities, we should be able to gain insights into the *modus vivendi* in these extensive littoral regions, *entre mers—outré mer*, before the high tide of colonial dominance. These insights could also serve as heuristic tools to better facilitate and promote transcultural and transnational interaction in the 21st century.

⁷⁸ The rise and fall of port cities could be exemplified in a three-dimensional historical cartography (century-wise or even decade-wise) to concretize the continuities and transformations, to be pursued preferably in cooperation with the largescale project “The Indian Ocean Littoral: Cartography and Port Cities” (URL: <http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/indianocean/modules/group5/home05.html> [accessed 21 July 2016]) initiated by the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) at the University of Pennsylvania; hereby the role of Indian Ocean port cities as principle sites of social, economic, and cultural interaction during the period 1000–1800 would be examined.

⁷⁹ The envisaged interdisciplinary research team would comprise primarily historians, archaeologists, anthropologists, philologists (of Bengali, Tamil, Malayalam, as well as of Persian and Arabic) and above all sinologists.

⁸⁰ In particular, this historical research could give a welcome fillip to India’s Look East Policy and China’s Kunming-Initiative evolving into the BCIM [= Bangladesh, China, India, Myanmar] Forum for Regional Cooperation.