

Introduction: Seasons and Civilizations

David Henley

Abstract

This chapter lays out the purpose of the *Monsoon Asia* anthology: to explore the usefulness of studying South Asia and Southeast Asia as a single unit, and to investigate historical and contemporary connections and contrasts between them. It traces the history of the idea of the southern rim of Asia as a single region, and outlines some of the similarities that can arguably be identified across the countries of that region in the domains of ecology, culture, ethnicity, social and political institutions, and postcolonial identity. It discusses the concept of cultural “Indianization” and argues that whatever oversimplifications that concept has fostered, in many respects Southeast Asia does belong to a cultural “Indosphere” which is clearly distinguishable from the “Sinosphere” of Northeast Asia. This asymmetry has its origins in a period of more than a millennium, starting in the last centuries before the beginning of the Common Era, in which Southeast Asia’s relations with India and Southwest Asia, navigational and commercial as well as cultural, were decisively closer than its relations with China. Reasons are tentatively suggested for the Indian head start, and for the fact that cultural transfers across the Indian Ocean mostly took place from west to east rather than vice versa. The chapter continues with a preview of the structure and contents of the rest of the volume, and concludes with a reflection on the significance of the Monsoon Asia concept in the twenty-first century.

Keywords: South Asia; Southeast Asia; history; geography; region; Indianization

Atiśa Dipamkaraśrījñāna [...] (982-1054). [...] Buddhist monk and scholar revered by Tibetan Buddhists as a leading teacher [...] of Buddhism in Tibet. [...] Born into a royal family in what is today Bangladesh, Atiśa [...] journeyed to the island of Sumatra, where he studied under the Cittamātra teacher Dharmakīrtiśrī (also known as guru Sauvarṇadvīpa) for twelve years [...]. Atiśa was invited to Tibet by the king of western Tibet Ye shes ‘Od and his grand-nephew [...] who were seeking to remove perceived corruption in the practice of Buddhism [...]. Atiśa reached Tibet in 1042 [...]. He spent the remaining twelve years of his life [...] there and his relics were interred in the Sgrol Ma Lha Khang.¹

Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism (2013)

Munshi Abdullah Bin Abdul Kadir, born 1796, Malacca, Malaya – died 1854, Jiddah, Turkish Arabia [...]. Malayan-born writer who, through his autobiographical and other works, played an important role as a progenitor of modern Malay literature. Of mixed Arab (Yemeni) and Tamil [Indian] descent, and Malayo-Muslim culture, Abdullah [...] spent most of his life interpreting Malay society to Westerners and vice versa. [...] He was copyist and Malay scribe for Sir Stamford Raffles [...]. *Hikayat Abdullah* (“Abdullah’s Story”) [...] was first published in 1849; it has been reprinted many times and translated into English and other languages.²

Encyclopaedia Britannica (2021)

The maritime southern rim of Asia, from the Arabian Sea in the west to the South China Sea in the east, has been the most important axis of long-distance travel, trade, and cultural exchange in human history. As a result, the countries of the regions conventionally referred to today as South and Southeast Asia, from India to Indonesia and from Pakistan to the Philippines, all have deeply intertwined histories. The two eminent lives sketched above, separated in time by eight hundred years, provide testimony to the enduring interconnectedness of events across and beyond the South and Southeast Asian countries: the monk Atisha, Bengal-born, Sumatran-educated apostle of Buddhism in eleventh-century Tibet; and the writer Munshi Abdullah, part-Tamil, part-Yemeni pioneer of modern Malay literature in nineteenth-century British Singapore.

Yet despite this extraordinary history of connectedness, twentieth-century geopolitics have led South Asia and Southeast Asia to be treated in scholarship and education as two distinct fields of study. The purpose of our volume is to contest this now conventional divide by bringing together scholars of South and Southeast Asia from diverse disciplines to reflect, through their own work, on the possibility and utility of conceiving the two areas as a single overarching region. The combined region might have been labelled southern Asia, or tropical Asia, or, following a recent trend in archaeology and historiography, the “Indian Ocean World”. For reasons to be discussed presently, we prefer to refer to it here as Monsoon Asia – a term that was popular among a wide range of academic writers in the mid-twentieth century, never disappeared in the earth sciences, and has recently begun to see a revival in the cultural and historical disciplines.³

In many cases our contributors bridge the South/Southeast Asian divide by focusing explicitly on *links* between the two subregions, in the form of tangible histories of exchange, translocality, and mobility. In other cases they do it by *comparing* developments in (parts of) South and Southeast Asia, thereby exploring the utility of the wider frame of Monsoon Asia as a heuristic device. Either

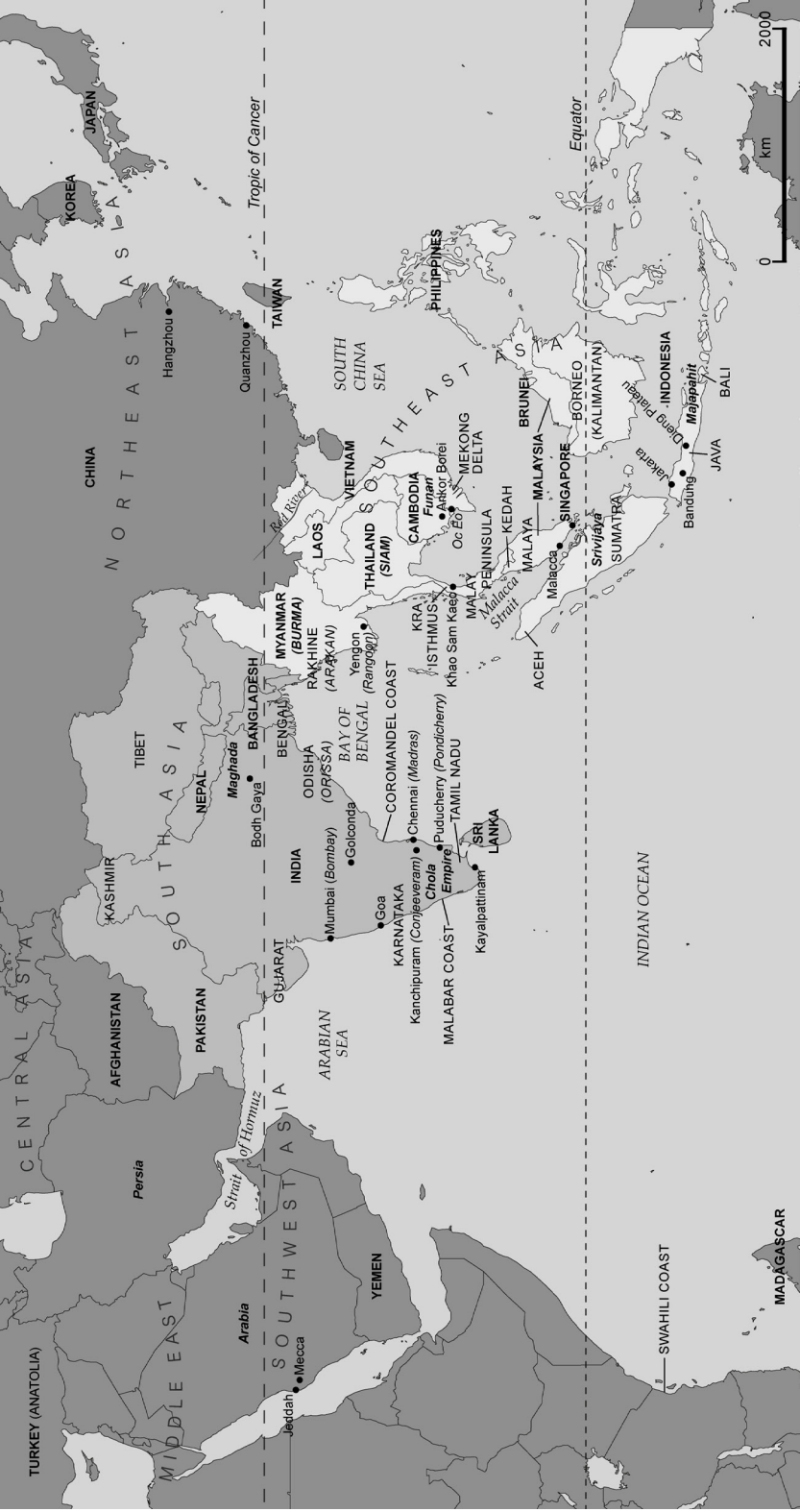


Figure 1.1: South Asia, Southeast Asia, and the places and areas mentioned in this chapter
Obsolete names, and no longer existing places and polities, are shown in italics.

way, the intent is not to insist on the superiority of one geographic frame over another, nor even to prioritize, *a priori*, transnational over localized processes. One of our contributors, Marieke Bloembergen, is in fact explicitly critical of our terms of reference, entitling her chapter “The problem of transregional framing in Asian history”. What we do hope to accomplish is threefold. First, to explore the usefulness, from diverse perspectives, of treating Monsoon Asia as a unit of study and analysis. Second, to highlight areas of contrast and contention, as well as comparability and consensus, which can serve to generate engagement between scholars of South Asia and Southeast Asia. And third: to provide an introduction, for general readers seeking to know more about both regions or subregions, to the many historical, cultural, and other links between them.

Monsoon Asia: geographies and genealogies

The idea that South and Southeast Asia can be seen as a single historical and cultural region is not, of course, a new one. Two centuries ago it was commonplace, reflected in the use of terms like “Farther India”, “Trans-Gangetic India” and “the East Indies” to refer to Southeast Asia. Today it is still unintentionally commemorated in the name of Southeast Asia’s largest nation, “Indonesia”, originally a Greek-based neologism translating the expression “Indian archipelago”,⁴ and in the continuing if sporadic use of the term ‘Indochina’ to refer to (parts of) mainland Southeast Asia. The historical tendency to treat Southeast Asia as an extension of India is partly a matter of Eurocentrism, reflecting the hereditary limitations of European geographical terminology. But the notion that India and Southeast Asia can sometimes be talked of in the same breath also has an empirical basis in observations of the natural and human environment.

With their tropical or subtropical maritime climates and their natural Himalayan boundary to the north, South and Southeast Asia form to a large extent a single ecological zone, sometimes labelled the “Indomalayan biogeographic realm”, across which many plant and animal species and associations are widely distributed.⁵ Human populations, too, show characteristic adaptations to the conditions of that zone in terms of agriculture,⁶ diet, and architecture.⁷ The weather pattern is distinctive: in most areas a system of seasonal monsoon winds brings rain in the northern hemisphere summer, and drier conditions in the winter, setting the rhythms of farming and the ritual calendar. For centuries the same seasonally reversing winds (Fig. 1.2) were also the engines of long-distance commerce, making possible regular voyages between all harbours from the Arabian Sea to the South China Sea and beyond.⁸ Since the region has long coastlines and most of it is relatively accessible from the sea, the monsoon system affected its economic and

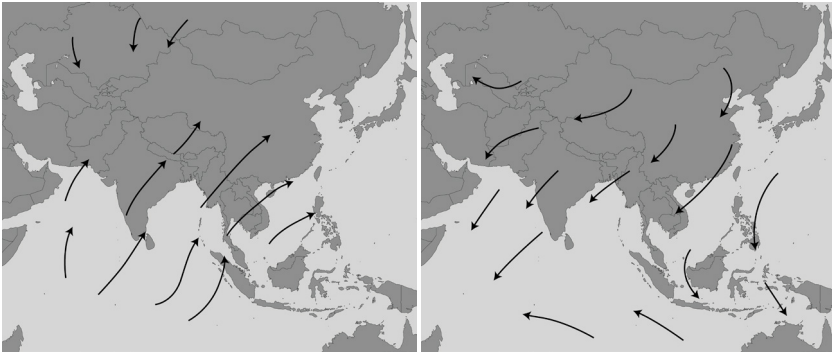


Figure 1.2: Monsoon Asia: prevailing winds, July (left) and January (right).

social life almost as deeply via the trade winds as it did via the agricultural cycle. “The lives of ordinary people”, observes Richard Hall in his popular history of the Indian Ocean, “were always ruled more by nature than by great events, by the perpetual monsoons rather than by ephemeral monarchies”.⁹

It is the multivalent historical importance of the monsoon for our region, together with the evocative quality of the term itself, in South and Southeast Asian as well as European languages (for instance: Hindi *mausam*, Malay/Indonesian *musim*, both with the meaning “season”, from Arabic *mausim*, also the ultimate origin of the English word), that inspires us to choose the label ‘Monsoon Asia’ for South and Southeast Asia as a combined unit. “Southern Asia”, by comparison, is prosaic and perhaps too easily confused with South Asia alone; “Tropical Asia” has a very climatological flavour and belies the fact that much of South Asia lies north of the Tropic of Cancer; while the “Indian Ocean World” has perhaps too strictly marine a connotation, includes Hormuz, Yemen, and the Swahili coast of East Africa, and threatens to exclude Vietnam, the Philippines, and much of Indonesia.

An important disclaimer immediately needs stating here. Our own terminology is itself inconsistent in that Monsoon Asia, in our sense, excludes a large part of Asia which climatologically and ecologically speaking is almost as much affected by the monsoon system as is the southern rim of the continent. Japan, Korea, and much of China share with South and Southeast Asia the alternating monsoon seasons (albeit with important differences in weather and timing), and to some extent the historical patterns of maritime trade shaped by these.¹⁰ They also feature the same predominant system of agriculture and subsistence, wet (pond-field) rice cultivation, that is most characteristic of the regions to their south. For these reasons, mid-twentieth century textbooks with the term Monsoon Asia in their titles tended to encompass Northeast as well as Southeast and South Asia.¹¹

That we do not follow their example is due in the first place – though not, as we shall see, the last – to the fact that our own frame of reference is set not *only* by ecology and climatology, but also by considerations of cultural history and geography. It is here that the observations underpinning the old “Farther India” concept remain relevant. The European travellers who embraced that concept were aware that almost all of Southeast Asia had at some point been strongly affected by many of the same influences that had shaped the societies of South Asia, including Hinduism, Buddhism, Indian kingship, and Indian law. In the course of the colonial period this awareness was heightened by the academic study of Sanskrit, inscriptions in which language are numerous in Southeast as well as South Asia, and by the archaeological study and restoration of ancient religious monuments, in which colonial governments came to take great pride. As a result, the early history of Southeast Asia was increasingly seen as a story of cultural, religious, and indeed political “Indianization”. The first comprehensive textbook on the subject, published in 1944 by George Coedès, was entitled *Histoire ancienne des états hindouisés d’Extrême-Orient*, ‘Ancient history of the Hinduized states of the Far East’.¹²

Three-quarters of a century on, many academic writers are wary of using the term “Indianization” as such. One reason for this is that it seems to suggest passivity on the part of the recipients of Indian culture – clearly a dubious implication given that many pilgrims from Southeast Asia are known to have travelled to centres of religious learning in India, while South Asian monks and scholars, as we saw in the case of Atisha, also studied in Southeast Asia.¹³ Another reason is that the idea of Indianization has come to be seen as unacceptably condescending toward Southeast Asians. Actually there seems to be little evidence of serious resistance to it among Southeast Asians themselves, who in the colonial period were generally impressed by the challenge to European cultural dominance posed by self-confident Indian thinkers,¹⁴ and whose postcolonial relations with South Asia (of which more below) were seldom intensive or competitive enough to make them sensitive to any implication of cultural inferiority. Nevertheless, Southeast Asian intellectuals can hardly have been enthusiastic when, in the mid-twentieth century, attempts were made in some Indian nationalist quarters to extrapolate ‘Farther India’ into bluntly asymmetric historical narratives featuring an expansive “Greater India”, an Indian “civilizing mission”, and even “Indian colonies in the Far East”.¹⁵ In more recent decades, the intellectual environment of postcolonial scholarship has played an important role here by discouraging, across the board, the characterization of particular regions and societies as sources of “civilization”, and others as its recipients.

More substantively, the reduced prominence of Indianization as an explicit paradigm also has to do with a growing awareness that the social and cultural changes associated with Indian influence in Southeast Asia followed a long period of bilateral prehistoric contact across the Indian Ocean, and were by and large

paralleled, rather than preceded, by similar changes taking place at the same period on the Indian subcontinent itself.¹⁶ There was, for instance, little or no time lag between the sequences of stone Hindu temple construction in South and Southeast Asia: both essentially began in the seventh century CE, with Southeast Asian temples almost immediately surpassing their Indian counterparts both in scale and, by most accounts, in architectural brilliance.¹⁷ Neither is there much to suggest that in doing so, they moved progressively away from initially more similar and more “Indian” forms; the temples of Java have been described as “vernacular from the start”.¹⁸ If India itself was “Indianized” no earlier than Southeast Asia, and in some ways even to a lesser degree, then the term automatically seems to lose some of its validity, and it becomes reasonable to think that developments on either side of the Bay of Bengal need to be understood in terms of bilateral convergence rather than unidirectional diffusion.

It is partly in this spirit, as well as in the spirit of twenty-first-century globalization, that scholarly interest in the history of cultural relations between South and Southeast Asia has in recent years been revived. The most important moment in the revival was perhaps the publication in 2006 of philologist Sheldon Pollock’s monumental account of the “Sanskrit cosmopolis” which spanned both regions in the first millennium of the common era. Equivalent to what used to be called the “Indianized world”, in Pollock’s vision this constituted a single civilization, stretching from Afghanistan to Java, united by a common familiarity – particularly, but not exclusively, on the part of elites – with the Sanskrit language, its literary corpus, and the body of social, political, and religious ideals embedded in that corpus. As far as the era of the Sanskrit cosmopolis is concerned, Pollock argues, “it makes hardly more sense to distinguish between South and Southeast Asia than between north India and south India, despite what present-day area studies may tell us”.¹⁹

In the wake of Pollock’s work, others were soon inspired to extend his model, or at least his terminology, to two other aspects of the cultural interaction between South and Southeast Asia: the “Pali cosmopolis” which united and buttressed the resiliently Buddhist societies of Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia and Laos as Buddhism gradually died out on the Indian mainland in the second millennium CE;²⁰ and the “Arabic cosmopolis”,²¹ created by a seaborne “Monsoon Islam”,²² which linked together the newly Islamized lands of island Southeast Asia and the coastal Muslim enclaves of the Indian subcontinent in the early modern period. Better documented than their Sanskrit predecessor, these more recent transnational communities of faith, language and literature have proven amenable to study not just in terms of their cultural consequences, but also at the level of the specific social networks and religious orders that created them.²³

In the last decade, the new wave of interest in cultural relations between South and Southeast Asia has coincided and intersected with two other, related scholarly

developments: a maturing body of research – Nigel Worden provides a partial review – on the history of trade and shipping in the Indian Ocean,²⁴ including a Braudelian magnum opus on the history of that ocean and the lands around it by Philippe Beaujard;²⁵ and an upsurge of writing, inspired by contemporary globalization, on the modern history of transnational migrations, connections, and interactions in Asia,²⁶ particularly across the Bay of Bengal.²⁷ These trends have combined with the “cosmopolis” literature to rekindle interest among prehistorians and archaeologists, as well as historians, in interactions between South and Southeast Asia. Panoramic publications reflecting the resulting synergy include the anthologies edited by Pierre-Yves Manguin, A. Mani and Geoff Wade (*Early interactions between South and Southeast Asia*, 2011),²⁸ Andrea Acri, Roger Blench and Alexandra Landmann (*Spirits and ships: cultural transfers in early Monsoon Asia*, 2017),²⁹ and Angela Schottenhammer (*Early global interconnectivity across the Indian Ocean world*, 2019).³⁰

These works vary in the tightness of their geographical focus, and necessarily include excursions beyond South and Southeast Asia, as do many of our own chapters. However their main focus, at least in the first two collections, is on Monsoon Asia in the same sense as in the present volume, and the most important reasons for this lie once again in those facts of cultural geography that long caused Europeans to label Southeast Asia as a part of India. Although Northeast Asia is itself partly “Indianized” in the sense that Buddhism forms an enduring subsidiary part of its cultural matrices, Southeast Asia has clearly been much more deeply influenced by its contacts with the lands to its west. Its Hindu as well as Buddhist monuments and artistic forms, its Indic scripts, and its orthodox, societally inclusive Theravada Buddhist religious institutions are all transparent testimony to this. So too is the Islam of its islands, the story of which cannot be disentangled from that of Islamization in maritime South Asia. Later in this introductory chapter it will be argued that these patterns are not coincidental, but reflect a history in which commercial exchanges and population movements, as well as cultural interactions, were for many centuries decisively more frequent and intensive across the Indian Ocean than across the South China Sea.

Monsoon Asia: persistent parallels

We have taken quite some space to discuss and justify our frame of spatial reference in terms of cultural and civilizational geographies. Ultimately it is not the framework that counts, but the insights it yields, and in any case our contributors have not been rigidly bound by it. The discussion, moreover, has not yet revealed much about the underlying reasons for the observed affinities between South and

Southeast Asia. More will be said further on about the specific mechanisms of cultural convergence. First, however, it is worth mentioning three other ways, besides their deep historical interconnections and their shared legacies of Sanskrit, Hindu, Buddhist, and Islamic culture, in which the countries of South and Southeast Asia can be described as comparable with one another. These have to do with their political as well as their cultural histories, and they continue to be important up to the present day.

Despite their commonalities at the level of high culture, firstly, both South and Southeast Asia, and almost all the individual nation-states within them, large and small, have always been places of enormous human diversity, ethnic and cultural, at the grassroots. Ethnicity, of course, is a subjective phenomenon and a social construct rather than a straightforwardly quantifiable matter. It is also defined, and shaped, in very different ways by different states. In China, for example, huge numbers of people whose mother tongues are mutually unintelligible have long been classified under a single ethnic label (Han). In South and Southeast Asia, by contrast, ethnic diversity and fragmentation were accentuated during the period of colonial rule by the characteristic enthusiasm of colonial states for ethnic classification and discrimination, as well as by the large-scale migrations which they encouraged. Cultural pluralism is a product of history, not an intrinsic property of nations or civilizations. That said, it is still instructive to illustrate the extent of that pluralism in Monsoon Asia by citing some quantitative data on ethnic fractionalization, indices of which measure the probability that two randomly chosen individuals in a population will belong to different ethnic groups. The potential range is from 0 (everybody belongs to a single group) to 1 (no two individuals are ethnically similar). Historical data for 1960 put the level of fractionalization in (for instance) Sri Lanka at 0.45, in Pakistan 0.59, in Malaysia 0.60, and in Indonesia 0.71 – all figures which contrast dramatically with (for instance) a vanishing 0.01 in the case of Japan, and a straight zero for the Republic of Korea.

Ethnic fractionalization index (1960)			
South and Southeast Asia ³¹		Selected others	
Pakistan (with Bangladesh)	0.585		
Nepal	0.808	Japan	0.012
Bhutan	0.502	Korea (South)	0.000
Sri Lanka	0.451	China	0.101
Myanmar/Burma	0.433	Taiwan	0.195
Thailand	0.387		
Cambodia	0.231		

Ethnic fractionalization index (1960)			
South and Southeast Asia ³¹		Selected others	
Laos	0.562	Netherlands	0.013
Vietnam ³²	0.250	Italy	0.041
Malaysia	0.601	Poland	0.027
Singapore	0.385	USA	0.259
Indonesia	0.709		
Philippines	0.819		

Source: Historical Index of Ethnic Fractionalization, Harvard Dataverse.³³

Historically, the societies of Monsoon Asia have responded to – and perhaps perpetuated – their endemic diversity by developing relatively permissive, pluralistic social norms and institutions. These old traditions of pluralism are still perceptible today, even if in the era of nationalism, democracy, and the politicization of religion they have sometimes been strained to breaking point – most dramatically with the partition of the Indian subcontinent along religious lines in 1947, but also by the recent upsurge in many countries of chauvinistic populism.

A second area of comparability is to be found in the social and political institutions of Monsoon Asia, which are characterized by a paradoxical combination of hierarchical, inegalitarian social norms with relatively weak and decentralized states. The South Asian “caste system”, with its hereditary, endogamous, ranked social and/or ethnic divisions, is conventionally the very archetype of human inequality.³⁴ And although caste as such is all but absent from Southeast Asia, slavery was until recent historical times a common and characteristic institution there, and “vertical bonding” between individuals has been described as “very ancient and central to almost all Southeast Asian societies”.³⁵ Yet all this hierarchy did not typically translate into strong, enduring institutions of government. Instead it was often religious institutions, enjoying considerable autonomy from the state, which provided the most stable basis for social organization and solidarity. It would be wrong to think of traditional South and Southeast Asian political systems as simple or undeveloped: particularly at a local level, they often featured complex corporate institutions.³⁶ Neither should their distinctiveness be exaggerated; in their pluriform and decentralized character, their intertwining of kinship and descent with status and power, and their tendency toward secular/religious diarchy, they were comparable with many other premodern polities, including those of Europe. Nevertheless, these characteristics were not universal. They were clearly in contrast, for instance, with those of imperial China, where what has been described as an “all-embracing officialdom” was already established before the beginning of

the Common Era, and where both aristocratic privileges and the autonomy of the (Buddhist) church were eliminated in the first millennium.³⁷

It is in relation to Southeast Asia that the characteristic institutional features of Monsoon Asia have been most systematically described. Ideologies of universal kingship notwithstanding, most precolonial Southeast Asian states were in reality complex, decentralized oligarchies.³⁸ Alliances based on kinship and marriage played an important role in holding them together.³⁹ So too did chains of those unequal partnerships, involving exchanges of personal service and political support for physical, social, and economic security, which are known in modern literature as “patron-client relationships”.⁴⁰ Lacking territorial control and vulnerable to shifts of allegiance, rulers also used cultural prestige to help retain the loyalty of their subjects, sometimes investing in pomp and ceremony on such a scale as to create what Clifford Geertz called “theatre states”.⁴¹ More important still was their sponsorship of religious elites, institutions, and monumental building projects, with which they developed close and mutually supportive relationships.⁴² In some cases, the rulers themselves claimed divine status.⁴³ In the Southeast Asian literature the terms “galactic polity”⁴⁴ and “mandala”⁴⁵, associated respectively with Stanley Tambiah and Oliver Wolters, have been widely adopted as shorthands for this species of diffuse, borderless state based on supernatural authority, cultural prestige, personal loyalty, and unequal exchange.

Views of the traditional political organization of South Asia have evolved in parallel directions, with South Asianists often referencing in this context the work of scholars of Southeast Asia, particularly Geertz and Tambiah. In addition, Burton Stein influentially used the model of the “segmentary state”, derived ultimately from the study of African chiefdoms, to characterize the political systems of pre-colonial South India, up to and including the great Chola Empire (tenth to thirteenth century CE).⁴⁶ Like a mandala or galactic polity, a segmentary state in this analysis consists of numerous power centres of which one has primacy as a source of “ritual sovereignty”, but all exercise actual political control over a part, or segment, of the whole. Throughout the polity, according to Stein, “the functions of government are embedded in kinship”; the “little kingdom” that forms each segment is inseparable from the kin group of its ruler.⁴⁷

Subsequent scholarship, notably by Nicholas Dirks, underlined the role of “gifts” and exchanges of various kinds, alongside kinship, in holding together such personalistic political systems: “the shared sovereignty of overlord, king, chief, and headman was enacted and displayed through gifts and offerings”.⁴⁸ Perhaps the most important gifts were those made by rulers to religious authorities, as in Southeast Asia a crucial source of political legitimacy.⁴⁹ Local chiefs, according to Dirks, “became little kings when, emulating the actions of kingly overlords, they gave gifts to temples and to Brahmins”.⁵⁰ Also fundamental, however, were more

mundane forms of patronage offered, along with physical protection and honorific titles, to favoured subordinates in return for their allegiance: profitable positions and privileges, land grants, royal feasts, and financial help in times of need, when the normal extractive flow of wealth from subalterns to elites was temporarily reversed. Whereas in Southeast Asia this kind of clientelistic relationship was usually conceptualized in terms of credit and debt,⁵¹ in India, according to Anastasia Piliavsky, the key terms were more often “gift” and “service”.⁵² But there were many similarities, including the use in both areas of kinship metaphors whereby clients referred to their patrons as “parents”.⁵³ Piliavsky goes so far as to argue that the Indian caste system can itself be understood as a collective form of clientelism, with each caste or subcaste forming a hereditary “service community” defined by its dependent relationship to another such group.⁵⁴

The clientelistic structure of the Monsoon Asian states, together with their economic resources and their accessibility by sea, had the effect of making them vulnerable (and more so than their Northeast Asian counterparts) to Western intervention and conquest, so that colonial rule ultimately joined Indianization and Islamization as part of their shared historical experience. By the early twentieth century all parts of South and Southeast Asia, with the exception of Thailand (Siam), were under some form of Western rule. Together with the disruption caused by colonialism itself, and the conflict and instability that accompanied decolonization, the historical legacy of clientelism probably also contributed to the prevalence in postcolonial South and Southeast Asia of what Gunnar Myrdal labelled “soft states”, characterized by limited administrative efficiency and weak law enforcement.⁵⁵ With few exceptions, and despite great diversity in other respects among national political systems, the region’s states have remained “soft”, in this sense, up to the present day. Since poor scores on scales of “good governance” are typical of developing countries worldwide, the element of historical continuity here should perhaps not be exaggerated. Nevertheless, throughout Monsoon Asia, many of the everyday practices of political clientelism in the twenty-first century would certainly have been familiar to past generations.⁵⁶

A third point of similarity, and indeed source of active solidarity and common identity – at least for an important part of the twentieth century – across Monsoon Asia emerged from the shared experience of colonialism, and more particularly from the struggle against it. Dutch and then British domination of the Indian Ocean, followed by the British occupation of Singapore and Malaya and the conquest and incorporation of Burma/Myanmar directly into the Indian Raj, led to an intensified movement of people and ideas across the Bay of Bengal.⁵⁷ Although the rest of the region was divided up among many colonial powers, by the 1930s its various anticolonial nationalist movements were in active contact with each other.⁵⁸ The Second World War, the Japanese occupation of Southeast Asia, and the sudden end

of the war in 1945 enabled Indonesia to become the first Asian colony to declare its independence (17 August 1945), closely followed by Vietnam (also in 1945), the Philippines (1946), India and Pakistan (1947), Sri Lanka and Burma/Myanmar (both 1948). As the vanguard of the emerging postcolonial world it was five South and Southeast Asian states, Indonesia, India, Burma/Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Pakistan, which took the initiative to stage the famous 1955 Asian-African Conference in Bandung (Indonesia) in 1955, one of the events leading to the foundation of the Non-Aligned Movement in 1961. Although Third World solidarity was in practice short-lived, the “Bandung spirit”, a spirit born in Monsoon Asia, survives in global memory and its consequences are perhaps not exhausted yet.

Great asymmetries: Indosphere and Sinosphere

The history of Monsoon Asia, and especially its cultural history, is characterized by great geographical asymmetries, the discussion of which is not always regarded as *bon ton* in contemporary academic contexts. But because these asymmetries are in reality intrinsic to how we – and others – understand and define the region, and because by and large they are not directly addressed in other chapters, it is worth considering them explicitly here in our introduction in order to avoid their becoming the elephants in the room of our anthology. Such a discussion has additional value in that the same asymmetries are to some extent also elephants in the larger room of Southeast Asian Studies, practitioners of which are sometimes too quick and too keen to portray Southeast Asia as an open, cosmopolitan “crossroads” of cultures.

The first great asymmetry lies in the fact that in sharp contrast to its undoubted permeability to cultural influences from India and points west, Southeast Asia has historically been very little affected by Sinicizing influences from the Confucian world to its north – or indeed from the tens of millions of people of Chinese ancestry who now live within its borders.⁵⁹ To be sure, this is not true of every area of life. Chinese influence on Southeast Asian food and cuisines, an important cultural domain, is substantial.⁶⁰ Chinese novels, as translated and published in local languages by the ethnic Chinese populations of nineteenth-century Southeast Asian cities, played a role in the early development of the modern national literature of the region.⁶¹ But such countervailing currents across the South China Sea are hardly comparable with the weight of religious, literary, aesthetic, and other influences that have operated on Southeast Asia through the centuries along the Indian Ocean axis.

Southeast Asia is an intensely plural region and a historical crossroads of trade and migration, but it is not an indiscriminate melting pot of cultures. Loanword frequencies in Southeast Asian languages provide a crude but useful quantitative indication of this. Most of Indonesia is geographically closer to China than to India,

but only 0.7 per cent of the vocabulary of modern Indonesian comes from Chinese languages, against 8.4 per cent from Sanskrit and Tamil, and another 5.7 per cent from Arabic or Persian.⁶² Thailand has a border less than 200 kilometres from China, and ten per cent of its population is of Chinese descent. Yet only 2.5 per cent of the vocabulary of modern Thai is borrowed from Chinese languages, compared with 14.5 per cent from Pali and Sanskrit, and 4.6 per cent from Khmer and other languages of nearby Southeast Asian countries.⁶³ While there are structural and phonological (as opposed to lexical) convergences between Chinese and some non-Sinitic languages of mainland Southeast Asia, including Thai,⁶⁴ these originate in distant periods of contact and migration in what is now China itself, and/or reflect subsequent areal interactions among the affected languages within Southeast Asia.⁶⁵

Although people in Thailand may not routinely be aware of it, many other aspects of their lives besides the borrowed words in their language link them with distant South Asia. The script in which that language is written, for instance, derives, via Cambodia, from an ancient writing system of southern India.⁶⁶ The Buddhist religion to which more than 90 per cent of Thais adhere originates of course in northern India, and the specific doctrines of the Theravada school of Buddhism which they follow, including the rules of monastic discipline to which every male, regardless of class or status, is expected to subject himself at some period in his life, were codified in Sri Lanka. When Thais die they are not buried, as their own distant ancestors were and as has always been customary in China, but cremated, in the Indian tradition. The king of their country boasts Sanskrit titles and, although a Buddhist like most of his subjects, is attended by a hereditary corps of Brahman (Hindu) priests of Indian descent, who perform vital rituals at his inauguration and at other life-cycle and seasonal ceremonies.⁶⁷

All these observations on Thailand are also true of Cambodia, and most of them are true of Myanmar/Burma and Laos too. In maritime Southeast Asia today the cultural footprint of South Asia is less immediately self-evident, but still decisively clearer than that of China and the Sinicized countries. The only serious exceptions to the rule of non-Sinicization among the Southeast Asian countries are those two that can reasonably be said to prove it: Vietnam, a Chinese province for more than a thousand years (conventionally, 111 BCE to 938 CE) before throwing off northern rule, whereafter it preserved and developed its Sinicized political and educational institutions in continued contact with China; and Singapore, where three-quarters of the population is descended from people who migrated from southern China to the “South Seas” (Nanhai, Nanyang), as they called Southeast Asia, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, or consists of recent Chinese migrants of the last three decades.

While the Chinese orientation of Vietnam and Singapore is exceptional in the *modern* history of Southeast Asia, almost the whole population of that region

nevertheless has its *ultimate* origins in ancient migrations from what is now China.⁶⁸ It has been suggested that these migrations were triggered by an agricultural revolution: the domestication, probably in central and northern China respectively, of rice and millet.⁶⁹ In late prehistoric times Southeast Asia's cultural affinities and trade relations continued to lie mainly with the lands to its north,⁷⁰ and a single cultural sphere, for which Andrew Abalahin has coined the term "Greater Southeast Asia", extended northward far beyond China's modern borders.⁷¹ The great change came with two momentous developments of the last centuries before the beginning of the Common Era: the southward expansion and consolidation of the Chinese empire, within which a new form of centralized, self-contained, patriarchal society developed under bureaucratic administration; and the intensification of maritime commerce across the Bay of Bengal, which brought Indian influences to Southeast Asia proper.

The mainland of Southeast Asia consists of upland terrain separated by a number of very long river valleys [...] following generally north-south directions [...]. These [...] must have served as major conduits of human population movement in the past. Thus, it is not surprising that the Neolithic archaeology of this region shows much stronger connections with China than it does with India, an axis of relationship to be dramatically overturned at about the time of Christ with the spread of the Indic cultural influences which came to dominate [...] Southeast Asia.⁷²

In the wake of this "Indic" reorientation, the populations south of the Red River were progressively integrated into networks and communities from which the northern peoples, some brave Buddhist pilgrims and itinerant monks excepted, were excluded. Through these two successive phases of external influence from different directions, Southeast Asia, as Reid succinctly puts it, "derived most of its modern gene pool and language stocks from the north [...] and its religions and written cultures (except the Viet) from the west".⁷³

The last part of Reid's observation refers to a second great asymmetry in Monsoon Asia's transnational history: the fact that along the Indian Ocean axis itself, the predominant direction of cultural transfer and influence has indeed been from west to east, not vice versa. Southeast Asians may have been quick to adopt them and inventive in developing them, but ultimately there is no denying that Buddhism, the Hindu pantheon, the Indian epics, the Sanskrit and Pali languages, and the Indic scripts and syllabaries all have their origins in the Indian subcontinent. Islam, too, reached Southeast Asia from west to east, and partly from South Asia. Below it will be shown that even in prehistoric times, important innovations were already being made in India before diffusing eastward. To acknowledge this asymmetry is not to insist that Southeast Asians owed their early historical achievements entirely to Indian inspiration; Southeast Asian societies may have adopted

Indian symbols and products because their development was running *parallel* to that of the subcontinent, for instance in terms of political centralization.⁷⁴ But like “non-Sinicization”, the cultural Indianization of Southeast Asia remains a subject which no anthology on Monsoon Asia can reasonably fail to address.

Again, a caveat is immediately in order here. The interaction between South and Southeast Asia was always to some extent a two-way street. It was Indonesians, more than Indians, who – together with Persians – pioneered long-distance seafaring in the Indian Ocean, settling Madagascar,⁷⁵ and leaving a technological legacy of locally adapted outrigger boat designs along the East African, Indian, and Sri Lankan coasts.⁷⁶ Southeast Asian, not Indian, ships and ship-masters probably dominated early trade across the Bay of Bengal.⁷⁷ A whole series of domesticated plants believed to originate from Southeast Asia, including bananas, betel nut and leaf, ginger, sandalwood, and some types of citrus fruit, found their way westward to India and beyond in prehistoric or early historic times. In the classical era, when Southeast Asian pilgrims travelled to the holy sites of India, Burmese kings supported the temple commemorating the Buddha’s enlightenment at Bodh Gaya in what is now Bihar, while rulers of Srivijaya in the Malacca Strait sponsored the foundation of at least two new Buddhist religious institutions elsewhere on the subcontinent.⁷⁸ There were even Southeast Asian military expeditions to South Asia: in the thirteenth century, armies from Tambralinga on the Malay Peninsula twice invaded Sri Lanka, albeit without lasting consequences.⁷⁹

Perhaps the most striking examples of cultural transfer from east to west across the Indian Ocean took place within the transnational Theravada Buddhist world, or “Pali cosmopolis”, as it emerged in Sri Lanka and mainland Southeast Asia during the second millennium CE. Within this ecumene it was often Southeast Asia that provided authoritative sources of religious knowledge. Beginning as early as the eleventh century, monks from Southeast Asia were repeatedly called upon to help renew the Sri Lankan Buddhist tradition after periods of turmoil or decline.⁸⁰ In accordance with this pattern, the major monastic orders of modern Sri Lanka all trace their origins to countries further east:⁸¹ the majority Siyam Nikāya, introduced from Thailand (Siam) in 1753, and the smaller Amarapura Nikāya and Rāmañña Nikāya, founded by Sri Lankan monks ordained in Burma/Myanmar in 1803 and 1861 respectively.⁸²

Countervailing flows from east to west, then, have been significant. Neither should the depth and impact of the dominant currents from west to east be exaggerated: Indianization was a very selective process and even at its height, many key South Asian institutions – patriarchal gender relations, the caste system, vegetarianism – were rarely adopted across the Bay of Bengal. That Southeast Asia has its own regional identity, nowadays strongly felt by its inhabitants and institutionalized in the form of ASEAN, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, is clear.⁸³

The big picture, nevertheless, remains one of profound asymmetry in cultural relations within Monsoon Asia. Painstaking searches through the lexicons of Indian languages have discovered no great trove of borrowings from Southeast Asia to compare with the mass of Sanskrit, Pali, Tamil, and Persian loanwords in Southeast Asian languages.⁸⁴ Whereas the Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore, touring Java and Bali in 1927, is famously said to have exclaimed: “I see India everywhere”,⁸⁵ it is telling that a recent review of historical and linguistic evidence refers to Southeast Asians as “*invisible agents of eastern trade*” in the Indian Ocean.⁸⁶

Various explanations have been suggested for the asymmetry of Southeast Asia’s external cultural relations. Some involve idealistic arguments about the intrinsic qualities of the Indian cultural models: that the Sanskrit language, with its intellectually challenging and satisfying grammatical complexity, was – as a Sanskrit poet put it – “charming like a creeper”;⁸⁷ or that Southeast Asians, like twentieth-century Indologists, were simply “fascinated by the universal quality of Indian civilization”.⁸⁸ A converse approach points to allegedly intrinsic limitations of Chinese civilization: the “low exportability” of China’s complex ideographic writing system, and its close association with “imperially appointed officials versed in the classical literature”.⁸⁹ Tied to power and bureaucracy, in this view, Chinese culture remained confined behind the borders of the empire, which for various reasons – tropical disease, lack of maritime ambition, and, after the tenth century, the military resistance of the Vietnamese – never extended further south than the Red River delta.

In one of the few publications to tackle the question in an explicit way, Monica Smith goes a step further by suggesting that it was “apprehension about Chinese expansion” which, together with the usefulness of Indian political models – and political theatre – for local rulers, caused Southeast Asia to become Indianized rather than Sinicized.⁹⁰ The relative importance of these two factors, she proposes, varied from state to state according to its distance from the Chinese colossus.

In [...] Myanmar and northeastern India, as well as in island Southeast Asia, the adoption of subcontinental traditions may have been undertaken by local leaders desiring to impress and govern their populations by reference to powerful but distant authorities. And in many parts of mainland Southeast Asia, the adoption such traditions may have included the additional motivation to maintain autonomy as a reaction to the spectre of Chinese expansion.⁹¹

In the absence of direct evidence regarding the motivations of the leaders in question, the idea of Indianization as insurance against Chinese expansion remains speculative, and it is hard to say more about it than this – except perhaps to note that along China’s southern land borders, outward diffusion of Chinese culture (as well as ethnic Chinese emigration) does on occasion seem to have prepared the ground, at least

on a small scale, for imperial expansion, so that fear of the political consequences of cultural Sinicization might not have been unjustified.⁹² Smith's complementary argument regarding the internal function of Indianization within Southeast Asian societies suffers from the same problem of evidence. On this point, however, it is possible to say more, because it brings us to a long-running scholarly debate about how exactly Sanskrit civilization was propagated through the Indosphere.

The most popular way of categorizing the competing positions in this debate, classically laid out by Indologist F.D.K. Bosch in Leiden in 1946, takes its terminology from the primary caste (varna) divisions of Indian society.⁹³ The "brahmin theory", favoured by Bosch himself, sees religious specialists – "clerics" of the priestly brahmin caste – as the main agents of cultural transmission, typically acting in the role of advisers to local warrior-chiefs who are keen to enhance their authority by association with exotic knowledge and prestige. It is this idea to which Smith, too, refers when she writes of "local leaders desiring to impress and govern their populations by reference to powerful but distant authorities".⁹⁴ In the "ksatria theory", by contrast, the warriors themselves are the motors of change, "knights" seeking fame and fortune by violent means on the frontiers of their civilization, which they expand in the process. The "vaisya theory" has that civilization propagated by traders who, possessed of wealth and mobility, settle among, intermarry with, and gradually influence the cultures of, recipient populations. To this classic triad, finally, Reid has recently added what might be called the "sudra theory" of Indianization, according to which religious conversion – especially to Buddhism – is a grassroots phenomenon originating among ordinary people inspired by wandering monks and ascetics.⁹⁵

The varna scheme is neat and comprehensive, but its usefulness is limited by the fact that good evidence can be found to support all four of the alternatives which it lays out. The literary, philosophical, and "scholastic" character of much of the cultural borrowing, as Bosch pointed out, speaks in favour of transmission by an intellectual (brahmin) elite.⁹⁶ That brahmins sometimes served to consecrate and elevate emerging royal dynasties in Southeast Asia is proven by a well-known early inscription from Borneo/Kalimantan.⁹⁷ That traders also played an important role (the vaisya theory) is not only a logical inference from the fact that communication is a precondition for intercultural contact, but also an empirical inference from specific evidence for an early association between Buddhism, trade, and sea-faring.⁹⁸ The Bodhisattva (Buddha-like being) Avalokiteshvara became popular in the first centuries CE as a supernatural protector of travellers, in particular as "the saviour of mariners from shipwreck".⁹⁹ A fifth-century Sanskrit inscription from Kedah in Malaya records a gift by "a pious Buddhist sea-trader",¹⁰⁰ the ship-master (*mahānāvika*) Buddhagupta, to a religious institution. In the case of the "sudra theory", the idea of Indianization as a movement of popular piety at the agrarian

grassroots is supported by the anonymous and decentralized character of some of the religious building projects of the period, particularly in Central Java.¹⁰¹

Even the ksatriya or military theory of Indianization, although often treated in recent literature as entirely discredited, probably contains elements of truth. One episode of violent Indian intervention in Southeast Asia is certainly well documented: in 1025 the South Indian Chola Empire launched a powerful naval expedition against the Malay trading state of Srivijaya and its allies in the Strait of Malacca, attacking many port towns including at least six on the Malay Peninsula and four in Sumatra.¹⁰² This event seems to have marked the beginning of Srivijaya's decline as a commercial centre and maritime power,¹⁰³ and although it did not lead to a sustained occupation of the Straits area as a whole, there is evidence that for many decades Kedah in Malaya remained the seat of Chola "vice-roys" who promoted the construction there of Hindu monuments in South Indian styles.¹⁰⁴ The Chola invasion is generally regarded as an anomaly in the generally peaceful history of interactions between South and Southeast Asia, but given the incompleteness of historical sources for the classical period, it may not have been unique. Although the issue is contested, there is much circumstantial evidence that the eighth and ninth-century Sailendra "dynasty" of Central Java, associated with the construction of Buddhist monuments, was of foreign, quite possibly Indian, origin.¹⁰⁵ Within Southeast Asia, Indianized kingdoms certainly often expanded their power, and with it their cultural influence, by violent means.¹⁰⁶

It is never very satisfying when an academic discussion concludes simply that reality is complex, and that all of the available theories have some merit. In the case of Indianization, however, there is no avoiding the fact that we are dealing with a diffuse and multi-stranded process, one in which many groups, pathways, and motives were likely involved. Instead of trying to tease these apart historically, the next two sections take a holistic approach to the two great geographical asymmetries that mark cultural and civilizational exchange across Monsoon Asia down the ages: the predominance of interactions across the Indian Ocean over interactions across the South China Sea, and the predominance within the Indian Ocean world of transfers from west to east – that is, from South to Southeast Asia – rather than vice versa. Both asymmetries, it will be argued, were already established at very early dates, before the beginning of the historical record, for reasons which, while they can be guessed at, are not fully clear. Once established, however, directionally selective patterns of migration and interaction were extremely durable. This was partly because existing networks and orientations acquired lives of their own, reproducing themselves across generations and structuring subsequent developments over centuries of cultural and economic change. Another very important factor was the near-constant hostility of the Chinese state, until very recent historical times, to trading and travel by its subjects in the lands to its south.

Precedence of the Indian Ocean axis: India's thousand-year head start in Southeast Asia

By the beginning of the Common Era, Southeast Asia already had strong maritime connections with India. Among the most important archaeological indicators of very early globalization is a class of glass ornaments, produced from about the third century BCE, known as “Indo-Pacific beads”.¹⁰⁷ By the seventh century CE these were found across the whole of maritime Eurasia from England to Japan, as well as in many parts of Africa.¹⁰⁸ But their densest distribution, and all of their known places of manufacture, were in South India, Sri Lanka, Sumatra, the Malay Peninsula, and the Mekong Delta, indicating that it was along this equatorial axis that trade and cultural interaction were concentrated. The Indo-Pacific bead industry appears to have originated on the Coromandel (eastern) coast of southern India near modern Puducherry/Pondicherry, then spread quite rapidly to Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia, but never further.¹⁰⁹ In this it anticipated to a remarkable degree the pattern of later cultural Indianization, in the age of Sanskrit and monument-building. Finds of another characteristic manufactured trade good of the same era, a type of fine ceramic known as “rouletted ware”, are similarly distributed across South and Southeast Asia.¹¹⁰ China, significantly, was peripheral to both geographies: it had a separate tradition of glass bead-making, the products of which did not enter maritime trade,¹¹¹ while Chinese ceramics were rarely exported to Southeast Asia before the seventh century CE.¹¹²

To date, the most important archaeological site for the study of Southeast Asia's early maritime trade is Khao Sam Kaeo, at the eastern terminus of an ancient overland portage route across the narrow Isthmus of Kra in what is now southern Thailand. Excavated in 2005-09, this was a regional centre of commerce and manufacturing from the fifth to the second century BCE. Some of the artefacts recovered there, including Dong Son drums from northern Vietnam and jade ornaments belonging to an ancient South China Sea culture complex, reflect the old north-south axis of prehistoric exchange. Taken as a whole, however, the corpus of finds at Khao Sam Kaeo clearly reveals the ascendancy of what Sunil Gupta has labelled the “Bay of Bengal Interaction Sphere”.¹¹³ Ninety percent of the glass beads, for instance, are classically Indo-Pacific in type.¹¹⁴ The great majority of the semi-precious stone beads and ornaments are Indian in either production technique, or style, or both.¹¹⁵ Among the pottery sherds, more than 600 consist of “Indian fine wares” including rouletted ware,¹¹⁶ and another 1,100 are either Indian or show clear Indian influence.¹¹⁷ By contrast only 84 sherds are identifiably Chinese, all of them from storage vessels rather than trade wares, and perhaps associated with Han Dynasty diplomatic missions.¹¹⁸ Further evidence of incipient Indianization in late prehistoric Khao Sam Kaeo is provided by a burial jar containing cremated

ashes. “For thousands of years”, comments Charles Higham, “the dead in Thailand had been inhumed”; the new practice of creation “took hold at the same time as Indian influence increased”.¹¹⁹

The predominance of Indian over Chinese archaeological finds at Khao Sam Kaeo is replicated at the slightly later sites associated with Southeast Asia’s first historically documented Indianized state. Known to contemporary Chinese writers as Funan (Fu Nan), this flourished in the Mekong Delta from the first to the sixth century CE. Reviewing the archaeology of Funan, Pierre-Yves Manguin remarks on “the almost total absence of artifacts of Chinese origin”.¹²⁰ “Although China lay much closer to Fu Nan than India”, concludes John Miksic, “and although we know that communication with China occasionally took place, it seems that Fu Nan’s contact with South Asia was more intense”.¹²¹ Chinese sources from the third century CE throw light on this situation by recording that whereas trading vessels in the South China Sea still cautiously hugged the coasts of Indochina and the Malay Peninsula, “great merchant ships” were already making transoceanic voyages in the Indian Ocean.¹²²

The liveliness of early commerce between India and Southeast Asia may seem rather counterintuitive given what has been said about the relative ecological homogeneity of the Monsoon Asia region. Potential for trade, after all, is generally greater between high and low latitudes, with contrasting climates generating complementarities of agricultural and natural production, than along east-west axes. In the case of the relation between South and Southeast Asia, however, important economic complementarities did exist. The forests of Indonesia produced spices, woods and resins not found further west, while deposits of gold and tin, scarce in India, were relatively plentiful in Southeast Asia.¹²³ In return India sent manufactures, almost certainly including cotton cloth, its staple export throughout later history.¹²⁴ It has been suggested that foodstuffs were also involved.¹²⁵

To the north, meanwhile, trade between Southeast Asia and China was constrained by a number of factors. One was environmental: whereas Indonesia and the equatorial part of the Indian Ocean are typhoon-free, voyagers to China (or the northern Philippines, and to some extent also Bengal) had to run the gauntlet of tropical rotating storms (Fig. 1.3). Another constraint had to do with the timing of technological development in China: in the first centuries CE the most important Chinese export industry of later times, pottery/ceramics, “was still in its early stages and did not lend itself to commerce with the Nanhai”.¹²⁶ In this period China’s exports to Southeast Asia were limited mainly to luxury silks, most of them transit goods destined for places further west.¹²⁷ A third factor was the political turmoil which afflicted China intermittently from the third century CE to the sixth.¹²⁸ Probably the greatest impediment to intensive interaction along the South China Sea axis, however, and certainly the most persistent at later periods, was the

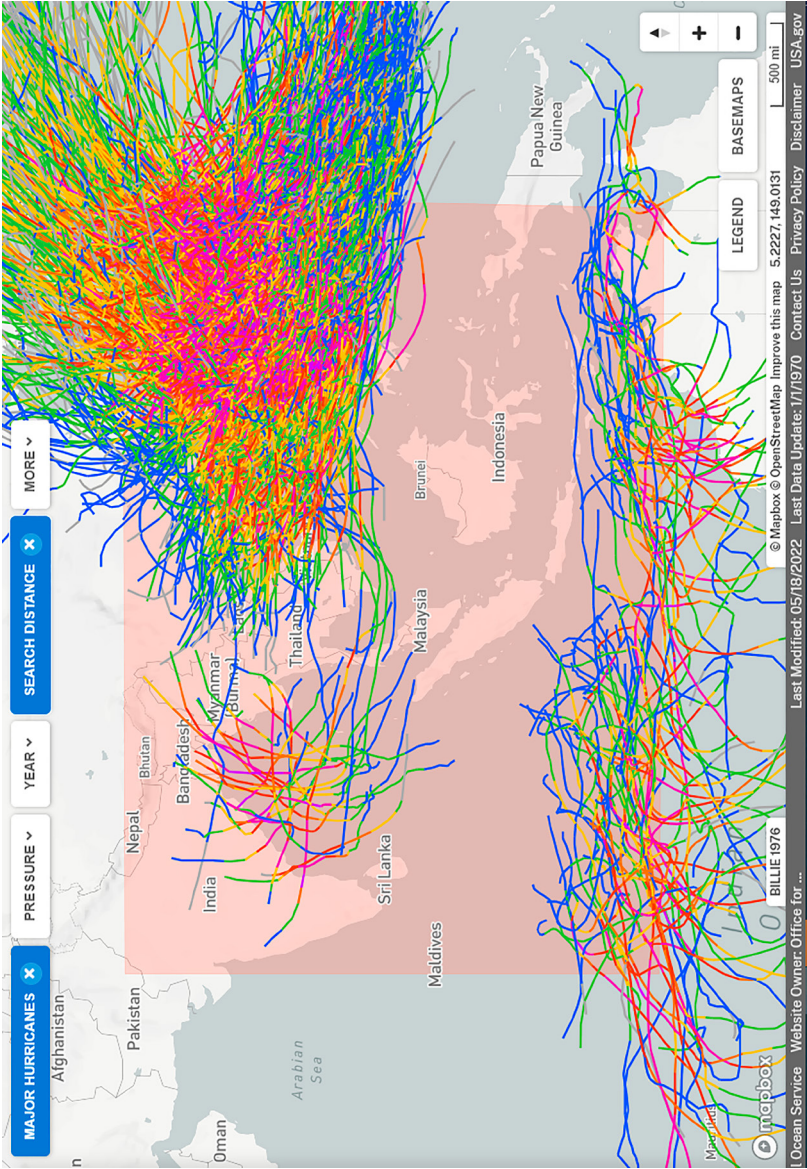


Figure 1.3: Tracks of major hurricanes (category 3 and above) recorded in the boxed (darkened) area according to the Historical Hurricane Tracks database of the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (<https://coast.noaa.gov/hurricanes>).¹³¹ Constructed 15-6-2022 and reproduced by permission of NOAA Digital Coast, with thanks to Matt Pendleton.

restrictive attitude of Chinese governments toward overseas private commerce.¹²⁹ As late as the tenth century, on the eve of premodern China's most important interlude of commercial openness, the Chinese state still repeatedly issued harsh laws prohibiting its subjects from voyaging overseas, and continued to monopolize not only all imports, but also the domestic distribution of all imported goods.¹³⁰

First-millennium commerce between China and its southern neighbours took place almost entirely in the framework of formalistic, ritualized political relationships between Southeast Asian polities and the Middle Kingdom, involving official trade monopolies and infrequent "tribute" missions from the Nanhai to the Chinese emperor and his representatives.¹³² All such trade was carried on foreign vessels; China itself did not build oceangoing ships, and would not begin to do so until the second millennium, when it copied their designs partly from Southeast Asian models.¹³³ The fact that a good chronology of the official tribute missions survives in the Chinese records has tended to obscure the fact that compared with early Indian Ocean commerce, their significance for Southeast Asia was in most ways limited. Although their economic impact did grow during the Tang (618-907) with the emergence of Chinese ceramics as a valuable return cargo, the highly regulated character of these missions, each carrying a large volume of goods under monopoly control, continued to ensure that they did not involve intensive social and cultural contacts between China and Southeast Asia. It has been calculated that the 600,000 pieces of Chinese stone- and earthenware carried by a single Malay-Austronesian ship that sank off Cirebon around 970 CE, the wreck of which was salvaged in 2004-06, could have supplied Java's entire demand for such products for a year.¹³⁴

Between South and Southeast Asia, by contrast, flows and exchanges were far less constrained, and trade brought people as well as goods from India to Southeast Asia from an early date. DNA analysis of a tooth found with imported pottery in Bali suggests that it belonged to a trader of Indian extraction who was there in the late first millennium BCE.¹³⁵ Bellina and Glover infer from the archaeological evidence that "Indian craft persons" skilled in the manufacture of beads and other ornaments were already settled at Khao Sam Kaeo in the same period.¹³⁶ A goldsmith's touchstone found elsewhere on the Kra isthmus carries a Tamil inscription in a script of the third or fourth century CE, likewise indicating immigration since Tamil, unlike Sanskrit, was not a language used by Southeast Asians for official or devotional purposes.¹³⁷ A whole series of later Tamil inscriptions, ranging in date from the ninth century to the thirteenth, confirm the presence in Malaya, Sumatra, and Burma/Myanmar of settled Tamil-speaking populations, often linked with merchant trading guilds operating on both sides of the Bay of Bengal.¹³⁸ By this period, Indian traders of many other ethnicities were also resident in Southeast Asia. Javanese inscriptions from the eighth to the fourteenth centuries CE list multiple

South Asian merchant communities, including groups from what are now Odisha, Karnataka, and Sri Lanka as well as Tamil Nadu.¹³⁹

Southeast Asia's early interactions with South Asia also had a political dimension. Around 250 CE, a Chinese diplomatic mission to Funan met at its court an envoy of the Indian Murunda dynasty, with which Funan had previously initiated relations by sending its own envoy to northern India via the Bay of Bengal and the Ganges river.¹⁴⁰ More important for future developments, however, was the arrival of Indian religious experts in Southeast Asia. Evidence for the presence of these, perhaps surprisingly, is scarcer than evidence for Indian artisans and traders, and often more contested. But while some references to Brahmins in historical sources may refer to mythical figures or indigenous Southeast Asians, specific mention of the presence of Indian Brahmins is made in a number of Cambodian and Javanese inscriptions dating from the eighth to the thirteenth centuries.¹⁴¹ In some cases the careers of these men are summarized and their Indian birthplaces named.¹⁴² The celebrated fourteenth-century Javanese court poem *Negarakertagama* (Desawarnana) names two Indian scholars who have composed eulogies to the king of Majapahit (East Java), adding that the home of one of them is in what is now Conjeeveram/Kanchipuram, near Madras/Chennai.¹⁴³ Some details are also known about the life of a pioneer South Asian preacher of Buddhism in Southeast Asia, the royal-born Kashmiri monk Gunavarman, who travelled to Java via Sri Lanka at the beginning of the fifth century CE.¹⁴⁴ Many were to follow in his path: a ninth-century Javanese inscription mentions a stream of visitors to a Buddhist temple in Central Java, pilgrims "bowed by the burden of devotion", who "continuously arrived from the Gurjara country" – a region of India, most probably modern Gujarat.¹⁴⁵

Because of their prehistoric origins in what is now China, modern Southeast Asian populations are predominantly Northeast Asian in genetic heritage. But their long history of interaction with Indian Ocean peoples has also left its mark in their DNA, at least in the areas where cultural Indianization was strongest. Genetic research in Bali shows that "haplogroups [...] making up approximately 12% of the Balinese paternal gene pool appear to have migrated to Bali from India", indicating "substantial levels of gene flow".¹⁴⁶ In Central Java almost 15 per cent of a sample population showed 'Western Eurasian' (South Asian, Middle Eastern, or European) paternal ancestry, with South Asia as "the most frequent point of origin"; eight per cent, perhaps more surprisingly, had similar maternal ancestry, again "primarily [...] from South Asia".¹⁴⁷ A South Asian genetic signature is also "consistently visible" in populations of Burmese and Malay ethnicity,¹⁴⁸ as well as among the Batak of North Sumatra, an area of medieval Tamil influence.¹⁴⁹

Southeast Asia's early westward connections did not stop at the Indian sub-continent, but also extended to Southwest Asia, the Middle East, and indirectly to Europe. Roman beads have been found in several parts of the region, including

a late prehistoric site in Bali.¹⁵⁰ Persian or Southwest Asian cultural influence in Southeast Asia appears to date back to the time of Funan,¹⁵¹ where funerary monuments have been found that have no equivalent outside the “Indo-Scythian” world of western Central Asia and northwest India.¹⁵² Ships of Persian or Arab design traded directly with Southeast Asia and China in the first millennium.¹⁵³ Linguistic and literary evidence indicates that Java developed cultural as well as commercial links with Persia well before the island’s Islamization in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.¹⁵⁴

The long early history of navigation and migration to Southeast Asia from India and the Middle East contrasts sharply with the scarcity of Chinese visitors until almost the end of Southeast Asia’s classical era of Hindu-Buddhist civilization. The Chinese empire, as noted, was concerned to keep foreign trade under tight administrative control, and in principle did not permit its subjects to trade privately overseas.¹⁵⁵ During the “Golden Age” of the Tang Dynasty China’s overseas commerce expanded rapidly, yet that commerce was still brought to and from Chinese shores exclusively by foreigners, including Southeast Asians, Indians, and Muslims from western Asia (Persians and Arabs). There are no records of private Chinese traders going overseas during the Tang.¹⁵⁶ As for the overseas visitors to China, with the exception of some Buddhist monks,¹⁵⁷ their interactions with the Chinese were limited. Foreign traders lived in separate ethnic quarters within the Chinese port cities, and contemporary sources suggest that their relations with the host population were “uneasy and contentious”.¹⁵⁸

During the first millennium CE almost the only Chinese visitors to Monsoon Asia beyond Vietnam were occasional diplomatic envoys, together with a trickle of Buddhist pilgrims to India. The southward diplomatic missions, at least to places relatively distant from China’s borders, were few and far between. Only one, to Srivijaya in 683 CE, appears to have been sent to any part of maritime Southeast Asia (the islands and the Malay Peninsula) over a period of half a millennium between the fifth century and the tenth.¹⁵⁹ As for the pilgrims, it is worth noting in relation to the issue of limited Chinese cultural impact that they came not as bearers of what they regarded as a superior civilization, but as seekers of sacred knowledge in South Asia, and indeed in Southeast Asia too. Srivijaya in Sumatra and/or Malaya was not only where the Bengali monk Atisha studied for twelve years before teaching Buddhism in Tibet; it was also where Chinese pilgrims like Yi Jing (635-713), travelling by sea to India, sojourned for long periods to study Sanskrit, scripture, and ritual before proceeding to their destination. In Sumatra, Yi Jing reported, Buddhist scholars could study “all the subjects that exist just as in the Middle Kingdom [Madhya-desa: India, not China]; the rules and ceremonies are not at all different”.¹⁶⁰

It was not until 989 CE that the Chinese government for the first time allowed Chinese private shipping, albeit initially still subject to tight restrictions, to sail

abroad for the purpose of trade.¹⁶¹ Deregulation continued in the eleventh century and became a matter of political survival in the twelfth, when Mongol invaders conquered the north of China and the Song dynasty established a new southward-looking capital at Hangzhou. The Southern Song (1127-1279) was too financially dependent on overseas trade to contemplate leaving such trade to foreigners.¹⁶² After the Mongols completed their conquest of China in 1279, their new Yuan dynasty continued the relatively active, outward-looking commercial orientation of its predecessor, although free trade conditions now alternated with periods of monopoly in which the state itself sponsored official Chinese trading expeditions to the exclusion of private Chinese competition.¹⁶³

Despite the more favourable policy environment from the eleventh century onward, the Chinese commercial movement into the Nanhai remained slow. The earliest epigraphic mention of a Chinese trading community on Java does not occur until 1305 CE,¹⁶⁴ and prolonged Chinese sojourning in the Malacca Straits area appears to date from the same period.¹⁶⁵ It is, then, only a mild exaggeration to say that by the time the first Chinese people settled in Southeast Asia, and indeed by the time any Chinese beyond a handful of pilgrims and diplomats even set foot in Southeast Asia, South Asians of diverse classes and occupations had been travelling, sojourning, and settling there in significant numbers, as well as Southeast Asians visiting India, for well over a thousand years.

China's medieval interlude of outward orientation, moreover, was not to last. Despite the famous episode of extroversion represented by the great "Zheng He voyages" of official trade and exploration in the years 1405-1433, private sea commerce was once more heavily restricted under the Ming Dynasty during almost the whole period from 1371 to 1567, and then again, albeit less effectively, in the early Qing from 1654 to 1684.¹⁶⁶ Not until the middle of the eighteenth century did Chinese traders, miners and farmers begin to arrive in Southeast Asia in large numbers,¹⁶⁷ prefiguring the mass migrations of the period 1850-1930.¹⁶⁸ Chinese activity beyond Southeast Asia in the Indian Ocean, meanwhile, was limited to the Zheng He episode, together with an earlier period during the Yuan when Chinese shipping briefly frequented India's Malabar Coast.¹⁶⁹

Given the long prior history of sustained east-west interaction and the lack of a comparable tradition of north-south contacts, it is hardly surprising that when the classical era of Indic civilization in Southeast Asia came to an end in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the rise of the new international cosmopolis which replaced it in Indonesia and Malaysia, that of Islam, took place mainly from the same direction and through the same channels as Indianization. Portuguese chronicler Tomé Pires' contemporary account of the Islamization of Java, written around 1515, gives a good sense of how this process was shaped by the island's intensive commerce with many different countries and peoples to its west.

At the time when there were heathens along the sea coast of Java, many merchants used to come, Parsees, Arabs, Gujaratees, Bengalees, Malays and other nationalities, there being many Moors among them. They began to trade in the country and to grow rich. They succeeded in way of making mosques, and mollahs came from outside, so that they came in such growing numbers that the sons of these said Moors were already Javanese and rich, for they had been in these parts for about seventy years. In some places the heathen Javanese lords themselves turned Mohammedan, and these mollahs and the merchant Moors took possession of these places. Others had a way of fortifying the places where they lived, and they took people of their own who sailed in their junks, and they killed the Javanese lords and made themselves lords; and in this way they made themselves masters of the sea coast and took over trade and power in Java.¹⁷⁰

Although much was no doubt different, it is not hard to discern in this passage an analogue of the multi-pronged Indianization process of the previous millennium, in which traders, brahmins (“mollahs”) and warriors all played their roles. While Pires’ antagonism toward Islam may have led him to exaggerate the violent aspect of Islamic conversion, it was certainly present, as it no doubt had been in the growth of the Indianized kingdoms. Two aspects of Islamization not mentioned by Pires likewise echoed earlier paths of cultural change: alliance and intermarriage of Muslims with existing elites, including members of the court of the last Javanese Hindu-Buddhist kingdom, Majapahit;¹⁷¹ and popular enthusiasm for the universal appeal, charismatic proponents, and supernatural benefits of the new faith.¹⁷²

As Pires’ account suggests, the rise of Islam in Indonesia was closely connected with similar developments around the shores of the Indian Ocean.¹⁷³ While migrants from the Chinese port of Quanzhou also seem to have played a part in Java’s conversion,¹⁷⁴ they did so as participants in long-distance networks based in Persia and the Indian Ocean, and indeed as refugees from one of the periodic episodes of violence between foreign traders and their hosts in China.¹⁷⁵ Indologist J.G. de Casparis, noting the involvement of South Asian Muslims in the spread of Islam in the Malay world and the role of the Mughal Sultanate as a model for the early Islamic kingdom of Aceh (Sumatra), once argued that “Indianization” never really ended in Indonesia, and that the whole concept could better be replaced by one of ‘a lasting relationship between the Indian subcontinent and maritime Southeast Asia’, embedded in “a complicated network of relations”.¹⁷⁶ What is clear is that the historical precedence of that network, and its persistence over many centuries during which it had no real equivalent connecting Southeast with Northeast Asia, goes a long way toward explaining the primacy of the Indian Ocean over the South China Sea as a highway of cultural and other change within Monsoon Asia.

The puzzle of directionality: South Asia as innovation hub and exemplary centre

There remains the question of directionality: why did the major currents of cultural change always flow from west to east? As noted this cannot be explained in terms of the means of transport and communication across the Indian Ocean, which in the first millennium were probably mostly in Indonesian or other Southeast Asian hands. In relation to the proselytizing, global religion of Islam, spreading in all directions, closely associated with trading networks, and benefiting in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries from a sustained expansion of commerce and cities,¹⁷⁷ the idea of a directional bias may not be a particularly relevant or sensible one. But in relation to Indianization, some elements of which were perhaps less intrinsically dynamic, and which outside India itself did not extend beyond Southeast Asia, the directionality question still begs for some kind of answer, however tentative.

Possibly the directional bias, like the primacy of the Indian Ocean axis itself, was partly an accidental legacy of the earliest period of contact, when Southeast Asians, in return for products of the land, acquired desirable artefacts and technologies – ornaments, textiles – from India. A higher degree of early economic complexity on the Indian subcontinent, supported by larger, denser populations and associated with professional craft specialization along caste or guild lines, could have played a role here.¹⁷⁸ Such early exchanges might then have set up a lasting pattern of cultural expectation with respect to things foreign, or even things Indian. Perhaps they also created or enhanced “stranger-king” traditions in which foreigners themselves, as well as foreign goods and skills, were perceived as bearers and sources of prestige – even if those foreign people and products were deliberately fetched to Southeast Asian shores by Southeast Asians themselves, rather than appearing mysteriously there as in a Pacific “cargo cult”.¹⁷⁹ Indeed, it is conceivable that the very mastery of Southeast Asian peoples when it came to ships and sailing caused them to develop a habit or custom of looking overseas for valuable innovations in other domains, rather than relying on their own powers of invention.

While claims for the intrinsic superiority of Indian cultural products must always be treated with caution, some introduced ideas or technologies may well have been so genuinely new and useful as to have promoted themselves regardless of any tradition. The obvious example is writing. Southeast Asian societies were illiterate until they encountered Indian-derived scripts and syllabaries, which they adopted with an enthusiasm possibly unmatched in the history of writing.¹⁸⁰ In India itself, ironically, premodern literacy was largely restricted to elites, and even among the literate few there was a “bias toward the oral” whereby the use of the written word was disapproved in some contexts.¹⁸¹ In many parts of Southeast Asia, by contrast, the art of writing seems to have embraced by almost all groups

in society, and was soon used for domestic and economic purposes as well as in the spheres of religion and statecraft.¹⁸²

Whatever the solution to the puzzle of directionality, the Indianizing pattern of extensive and unidirectional acculturation without political unification is less unique than some commentators suggest. During and after the collapse of the Roman Empire, Christianity and Latin-Greek civilization spread well beyond the boundaries of the empire that had been their incubator, from Ireland to Scandinavia to Russia. A closer analogy with Southeast Asia's Indianization, first explored in a Japanese-language article by Aoyama Toru, can be found in Japan's *longue durée* cultural relationship with China and the Sinicized world.¹⁸³ The export of Chinese culture was not everywhere prevented by the difficulty of the writing system and the tightness of its association with imperial political institutions. Whereas the roots of Vietnam's Sinicization lie in its millennium as a Chinese province, Japan, in the course of that same millennium, borrowed and adapted many elements of Chinese civilization – writing,¹⁸⁴ law and political ideology,¹⁸⁵ and the Buddhism which had reached China through Central Asia during the Han¹⁸⁶ – *without* falling under Chinese rule.

As in the Indosphere, this borrowing was a complex process involving many groups. Like their Southeast Asian counterparts, emerging Japanese political elites used exotic knowledge, religion, and connections to reinforce their local status and power. “Book, writing brush and the icons of the Buddhist cult”, as Joan Piggot puts it, “replaced armor and sword [...] as insignia of royal rule”.¹⁸⁷ This was possible, however, because Buddhism and the new legal order seem to have proved widely popular innovations. Meanwhile, the migration of craftsmen, scholars, and monks to Japan from the mainland also played a role in the cultural shift. The political, technological, and commercial predominance of China for Japan was no doubt greater than that of India for Southeast Asia, making the persistent directionality of the cultural transfer perhaps less mysterious. But it is worth noting that many of the foreign artisans and literati who influenced Japan in the first millennium did not themselves come from China, but from small kingdoms on the Korean peninsula, which like Japan was part of the Sinosphere without being part of the Chinese empire.¹⁸⁸ This suggests that civilizational, not political, prestige was central to the process of acculturation.

A final, striking point of similarity with the Indianization of Southeast Asia is that the close cultural relationship which developed between Japan, Korea and China in the era of the Nara and the Tang was not a new one. It was prefigured by a long period of prehistoric cultural convergence, illuminated by recent archaeological research, between the countries around the Yellow Sea and the Sea of Japan.¹⁸⁹ Piggot coined the term “China Sea Interaction Sphere” to refer to this maritime domain.¹⁹⁰ Like the Bay of Bengal Interaction Sphere, it represents a very old arena of habitual movement and interaction which has shaped history in multiple ways over successive periods. Its cultural significance lasted far into the second

millennium, when Japan continued to borrow primarily from China – for instance, in the area of Confucian values and ideology – until Western pressure forced it to widen its horizons.¹⁹¹ Like Southeast Asia, Japan offers no easy lessons on the specific mechanisms of cultural change, but rather a more general lesson on the power of geography and the momentum of history in the cultural sphere.

Two millennia of Monsoon Asia

Of the remaining fifteen chapters in our collection, the first, “Revisiting the Monsoon Asia idea: old problems and new directions”, by Andrea Acri (Chapter 2), deals explicitly with Monsoon Asia as a concept. Acri calls for a revival of that concept in a form which has ecology and prehistory at its centre, and which takes its cue in the first place from French thinkers of the early twentieth century. While he pays due respect to Indologists like George Coedès and Sylvain Lévi, his main inspiration comes from the geographer Jules Sion and especially the sociologist Paul Mus, who argued that Indic civilization was underlain in South and Southeast Asia by a common cultural and religious substrate that both shaped its development and facilitated its diffusion. Elements of the prehistoric “religion of the monsoon zone”,¹⁹² in this view, included the cult of local ancestors and the idea of an autochthonous god of the soil, both of which were fused with new beliefs of “Aryan” origin as Indian and Indianized cultures developed. With its characteristic attachment to territory, water, and fertility, the common primordial culture was rooted in ecology and the intensive, sedentary agricultural systems of the monsoon countries.

Consistent with his ecological premise, Mus located the ancestral culture of Monsoon Asia in southern China as well as India and Southeast Asia. This means that his theory cannot in itself account for the specific geography of Indianization and Sinicization that has been the subject of much of our introductory discussion. Nevertheless, in proposing that the Indianization of the classical era had prehistoric roots, and by suggesting that sea travel as well as environmental similarities already promoted cultural coherence across Monsoon Asia in prehistory, Mus clearly anticipated much later scholarship on the region. The remainder of Acri’s chapter consists of a succinct intellectual history of the Monsoon Asia concept, with useful illustrative maps, together with a review of twentieth and twenty-first century works in anthropology and other disciplines which offer support for the idea of a cultural unity across the region in prehistoric times. Finally he proposes linking the old idea of Monsoon Asia with two innovations of recent scholarship: Johannes Bronkhorst’s “Greater Magadha hypothesis”,¹⁹³ which Acri suggests can be interpreted in terms of the presence in the prehistoric Gangetic plain of an Austroasiatic language-speaking population with Southeast Asian affinities; and

the concept of “Zomia”, a zone encompassing the stateless margins of both South and Southeast Asia, as popularized by James Scott.¹⁹⁴

Chapter 3, “Space and time in the making of Monsoon Asia” by Jos Gommans, is a similarly wide-ranging enquiry into the history and value of this concept as a way of understanding the Asian past, but now with a focus on historically documented periods and on relations with other world regions. Gommans’ intellectual genealogy of Monsoon Asia begins less with Indologists and colonial scholars than with Fernand Braudel, whose *opus magnum* on the sixteenth-century Mediterranean (1949) popularized the idea that a zone of maritime connectivity could be an object of historical scholarship,¹⁹⁵ and Braudel’s disciple K.N. Chaudhuri, whose standard works on trade and civilization in the Indian Ocean applied the Braudelien method to Asia’s most historically important maritime space.¹⁹⁶ Gommans compares the sea highway of Monsoon Asia with its overland Silk Road counterpart in the arid zone of Central Asia, and argues that the most important nodal points of the premodern world were those which had access to both marine and terrestrial systems of long-distance transport. This helps to explain the persistent importance of one such node, Gujarat in northwestern India, in the history of Southeast Asia as well as the Indian Ocean.¹⁹⁷

With respect to chronology, Gommans argues that the histories of South and Southeast Asia are of a piece in the sense that both can be divided into the same three broad periods. The first is that of large but loosely organized “Charter Empires”, beginning with the Indian Maurya Empire in the third century BCE. In cultural terms, this period corresponds to the development of Pollock’s Sanskrit Cosmopolis. From 750 to 1250 CE, secondly, both South and Southeast Asia saw a trend toward smaller, more centralized “Temple States”, accompanied by a cultural vernacularization whereby local languages increasingly replaced Sanskrit in written use. From 1250 to 1750, finally, disruptions caused in northern India by Muslim invasions, and in Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean by new commercial impulses, led to the development of what Gommans calls “Frontier States”, both terrestrial and maritime, and to Islamization. This bold, broad-brushstroked chronology of Monsoon Asian history, not corresponding exactly to conventional cutoffs and categories for either India or Southeast Asia, should serve as a valuable point of reference for future discussion and debate.

With Pierre-Yves Manguin’s “New paradigms for the early relationship between South and Southeast Asia: the contribution of Southeast Asian archaeology” (Chapter 4) we move from the domain of intellectual history and re-interpretation into that of recent empirical findings. Manguin draws on the results of the flowering of Southeast Asian archaeology since the 1980s to show how much more is now known about the ancient history and late prehistory of the region than was known in the time when inferences were based almost entirely on epigraphy. The most striking findings are those that illustrate the levels of organization and

sophistication which Southeast Asian societies had already achieved prior to the appearance of inscriptions, statues, or temples. In the Mekong Delta, for example, a rectangular moat of 15 by 3 kilometres surrounding the city of Oc Eo has now been dated to no later than the second century CE, and a 70-kilometre canal linking it with Angkor Borei, the other main centre of Funan, Southeast Asia's earliest Indianized kingdom, to the fourth century at the latest.¹⁹⁸

Significantly, Manguin and other archaeologists do not hesitate to ascribe the moat, and other aspects of the design of ancient Oc Eo, to inspiration by 'Indian urban concepts'. That borrowing from India was not limited to exotic words and religious abstractions is already clear, after all, from other archaeological evidence of prehistoric technology transfer. The examples of Indo-Pacific bead and Indianized pottery manufacture, of which the Mekong Delta was one centre, have already been mentioned. Manguin adds that the roof tiles covering early wooden structures at Oc Eo were also identical to tiles found at Indian sites. Other themes of his chapter include new evidence for the role of "sectarian, devotional forms of Vaishavism [Hinduism]", alongside Buddhism, as agents of Indianization among commercial and urban groups in Southeast Asia. Of all our contributors, Manguin is the frankest in his acknowledgement that India and Southeast Asia were not equal parties in the cultural exchanges of the period. "No historian", he writes, "has seriously contested the asymmetry of the mid-first millennium CE process that we still need to designate as 'Indianization' of Southeast Asia, for lack of a better word".

A philological perspective on connections between South and Southeast Asia is provided by Tom Hoogervorst in Chapter 5, "Contacts, cosmopoleis, colonial legacies: interconnected language histories". This begins by sketching Sheldon Pollock's idea of an early rise of Sanskrit as a cosmopolitan language of aesthetics, learning, and power.¹⁹⁹ Hoogervorst then compares the subsequent vernacularization process, whereby Sanskrit was replaced in written use by "literarized" and partly Sanskritized vernaculars like Javanese, Khmer, and Tamil, with the emergence in Europe of what would become national written languages, still using Latin script and often with much Latin vocabulary, at the expense of Latin itself. In the modern era the influence of Sanskrit has nevertheless continued in Southeast Asia as national language planners have looked to the old prestige language as a source of official neologisms. By no means all of the Indian words borrowed into Southeast Asian languages come from Sanskrit: Pali, the liturgical language of Theravada Buddhism, is an important source of vocabulary in Burmese and Thai, as is Tamil for Malay/Indonesian. Hoogervorst also gives examples of loans from colloquial languages of northern India. Islamization, in Indonesia and Malaysia, brought influences from Persian as well as Arabic. In the colonial era, Portuguese, Dutch and English also left their mark, while the Tamil connection was sustained by continuing migration across the Bay of Bengal.

With Chapter 6, “Indianization reconsidered: India’s early influence in Southeast Asia”, we return to the classical era for a survey by Hermann Kulke of the debate over the nature and causes of Indianization. This is a revised and updated version of Kulke’s own most influential contribution to that debate, a 1990 article in which he laid out the idea of a long-term “cultural convergence” between South and Southeast Asia as a corrective to the “Indocentric” frames of reference inherited from the colonial period.²⁰⁰ In the early centuries CE, Kulke argues, commercial development and state formation proceeded at a similar pace, and in a context of continuous mutual contact and influence, on both sides of the Bay of Bengal. Cultural innovations such as stone temples were similarly synchronized: although Buddhist stupas have a longer history on the subcontinent, the early Hindu temples of the Dieng Plateau in Java are almost exactly contemporary with similar structures built by emerging kingdoms on India’s eastern seaboard in the late seventh century CE.

In terms of the character of the causal links between sociopolitical and cultural change, Kulke leans toward a brahmin theory of symbolic innovation as an instrument of political legitimation for emerging elites, but without the traditional assumption that Southeast Asians were in awe of Indian cultural superiority. Whereas early theorists assumed that it was the perceived *distance* between India’s great culture and Southeast Asia’s parochial cultures that drove the process, he explains, “the convergence hypothesis postulates socio-political *nearness* as a major factor promoting Indianization”. The chapter concludes with a review of some subsequent additions to the literature, including Pollock’s *The language of the gods*,²⁰¹ which he criticizes for its lack of clarity regarding the relationship between aesthetics and politics in the Sanskrit cosmopolis; Aoyama’s pioneering discussion of the parallel with Japanese Sinicization; and a recent article by Andrea Acri (author of Chapter 2 in the present volume) on local and cosmopolitan paradigms in the study of premodern Southeast Asia.²⁰²

In Chapter 7, “Local projects and transregional modalities: the Pali Arena”, Anne Blackburn introduces our second historical cosmopolis (although she herself prefers to avoid that term due to its specific association with the work of Pollock). This is the world of the Buddhist network or networks, oriented toward the Pali language, that were to evolve into what much later became known as Theravada Buddhism. Buddhists in the Pali tradition accorded authority to a corpus of Pali-language scriptures and commentaries, standardized in Sri Lanka, which they regarded as true to the original teachings of the Buddha. Beginning in the middle of the first millennium, and more robustly from the turn of the second, they formed a community which spanned both sides of the Bay of Bengal, including Sri Lanka, the Coromandel Coast, and “the maritime spaces along Burmese, Mon, and Tai territories”, and which “acted – in composing texts, undertaking pilgrimages,

and conducting diplomacy [...] – as if these regions were not distinct”. Blackburn describes how the import of monastic teachers and ordination lineages from distant parts of the Pali-oriented ecumene, as sketched earlier in relation to Sri Lanka, was in fact a common tool of statecraft for Buddhist rulers in mainland Southeast Asia too, serving to strengthen their control over the religious establishment. She traces the history of the Pali world up to the colonial period, when it began to develop connections beyond Monsoon Asia.

Chapter 8, by R. Michael Feener, is the first of three dealing with Islam and transnational Islamic communities. Under the title “Muslim circulations and Islamic conversion in Monsoon Asia”, it discusses the advent and spread of Islam in the region. Feener begins by cautioning against the tendency to assume that Southeast Asia’s Islam must be eccentric or derivative with respect to that of the Middle East, and that the question of its routes of transmission must be vital to understanding it. Distance from Mecca is not necessarily the operative variable here. The Islamization of Anatolia/Turkey (roughly, 1100-1500 CE) was nearly contemporary with that of Malaya/Sumatra, and seems to have involved the mediation of Sufism (Islamic mysticism) and Sufi organizations,²⁰³ just as the conversion of Indonesia is often said to have done.²⁰⁴ But Turkish Islam is not normally thought of as a foreign transplant to the same extent as is Islam in Southeast Asia. By framing the conversion process in terms of “circulation” rather than transmission, Feener aims to promote a more balanced understanding of Muslim Southeast Asia both in its own right, and as part of the broader Islamic world.

Feener’s concern is with the seaborne Islam of coastal Asia, not the horseborne Muslim incursions and conquests that led to the partial Islamization of northern India from about 1100 onward. For maritime Asia, the rise of Islam effectively came in two discrete stages: the initial establishment of a Muslim sea trade network between the Middle East and China, which took place with breathtaking speed over the earliest phase of Islam’s history in the seventh and eighth centuries CE; and the great demographic surge of Islamic conversion and conquest, spreading outward from the Muslim port cities, which began in the fourteenth century and reached its peak, dramatically described by Tomé Pires, with the Islamization of Java in the sixteenth. Feener agrees broadly with Reid that the main driving force behind this second phase was an increase in the scale and importance of international trade,²⁰⁵ as a result of which “expansion of Muslim local communities beyond court circles and the mixed families of merchant intermarriages appears to have reached tipping points [...] that [...] triggered wider identifications with the increasingly prestigious faith of Islam among broader populations”. After the Portuguese capture of Goa in 1510 and Malacca in 1511, competition with the self-consciously anti-Muslim Christian interlopers, and more militant modes of expansion, also played a role.

Whereas Chapter 8 told a panoramic story of the rise and expansion of Islam over time, Chapter 9, “Islamic literary networks in South and Southeast Asia”, by Ronit Ricci, focuses on one specific transnational Islamic community in mid-second millennium Monsoon Asia: that linking Java, Sumatra, and Tamil-speaking southern India. Ricci gives some detail on the trade flows that underpinned this community – steel, diamonds, and fabrics, for instance, from Golconda (Hyderabad) to Aceh (Sumatra) in return for pepper, benzoin (gum resin) and camphor (also a tropical tree product) – and mentions the special role played within the community by the Chulia, a commercially specialized Muslim Tamil subgroup.²⁰⁶ But she stresses that religious, as well as commercial, journeys bound the community together: the grave of one Sufi saint in Kayalpattinam, on the southern tip of India opposite Sri Lanka, still attracts Indonesian and Malaysian pilgrims today.

Ricci’s central focus is on the function of the Tamil-Indonesian ecumene as a “literary network”. A well-known Islamic literary work, the *Book of one thousand questions*, is used to illustrate this. Originally composed in Arabic, the *Thousand questions* was also widely distributed and read in loose Tamil, Malay and Javanese translations, written in modified forms of the Arabic script, often adjusted to local cultural settings and differing significantly from each other in content. Ricci suggests that a precedent and model for such translations was provided by the post-Sanskrit vernacular literature of Indianized Southeast Asia, such as that written in Kawi or Old Javanese. Although the explicitly sacred status of Arabic was not exactly prefigured by the role of Sanskrit in the earlier cosmopolis, Ricci sees strong continuities between the classical and post-classical periods in terms of a fertile interplay between cosmopolitan and local languages and narrative styles, underpinned by “fundamental beliefs in the power of words”.

Chapter 10, by Mahmood Kooria, deals with another aspect of the transnational Islamic world of South and Southeast Asia: “Islamic legal cosmopolis and its Arabic and Malay microcosms”. Indianization had already involved a legal component, with the ancient Indian Dharmasastra, and especially its subcomponent the Code of Manu, becoming revered sources of law in mainland Southeast Asia and Java/Bali.²⁰⁷ But law and justice were more important still in the spread of Islam and the creation of Islamic societies. Kooria tells the story of how one of the four major schools (*madhhab*) of Islamic law, the Shafi’i, came to be linked with the “cosmopolitan vernacular” language of island Southeast Asia, Malay, and thereby to dominate that part of the Islamic world while other schools prevailed elsewhere – the Hanafi, for instance, in Mughal South Asia, and the Maliki in North Africa. Like Swahili across the Indian Ocean on the East African coast, where the Shafi’i school also became dominant, Malay was a regional lingua franca that became a language of transmission, alongside Arabic, for Islamic knowledge. Ultimately it gave rise to a

whole set of transnational ethnic identities that defined themselves as Muslim as well as Malay-speaking.²⁰⁸

Monsoon Asia in the modern era

Long-distance commerce, we have seen, has been a defining feature of Monsoon Asia since the earliest times. Nevertheless, for technological and institutional reasons – steamships, British naval hegemony, and economic liberalism – the nineteenth century brought a huge increase in the volume of trade across the region.²⁰⁹ It also saw migration on a scale that was unprecedented, and indeed never later equalled, at least not in proportional terms. The greatest movement was from China, with some 6.5 million Chinese migrants settling permanently in Southeast Asia between 1850 and 1940.²¹⁰ But several million Indians also migrated to Sri Lanka, Burma and Malaya in the same period, and a many times larger number worked there temporarily before returning home to the subcontinent. Chapter 11, “Human traffic: Asian migration in the age of steam”, by Sunil Amrith, describes this movement. The majority of the migrants came from the Tamil southeast, where there was poverty and a tradition of bonded labour. Taking advantage of both, labour recruiters working with European planters used a combination of inducement, coercion, and debt to deliver Tamil workers *en masse* to Sri Lanka’s tea plantations and Malaya’s rubber estates. Indian migrants to Burma/Myanmar were more diverse, including Chettiar moneylenders and Telugu urban labourers. Most left Burma during and after the Second World War, but in Malaysia and Singapore, ethnic Indians still make up about seven percent of the population today.

Chapter 12, “The problem of transregional framing in Asian history: charmed knowledge networks and moral geographies of ‘Greater India’”, by Marieke Bloembergen, examines how intellectual elites of the late colonial period conceptualized the region we refer to as Monsoon Asia. Bloembergen’s focus is on how new knowledge about cultures and histories was filtered and structured by civilizational and colonial ways of thinking in which inequality was fundamental. The characteristic result was a double value judgement: Indonesia, as the derivative civilization, was essentially inferior to India, justifying chauvinistic forms of Indian nationalism; and the present achievements of both countries were inferior to the greater glories of their past, justifying European colonial endeavours to raise them up again on the civilizational ladder – for instance, by explaining to them the achievements of their ancestors. To make matters worse, the “moral geography” that associated India with spirituality and non-violence served to shield these prejudices from criticism and prolong their lifespan in the postcolonial world. Bloembergen suggests that there are cautionary messages here for present-day proponents of the Monsoon Asia

paradigm. In empirical terms, her chapter provides a wealth of historical detail on the extraordinary multinational cast of adventurers, archaeologists, artists, poets, theosophists and gurus who contributed to the “Greater India” idea.

With Carolien Stolte’s “Pragmatic Asianism: international socialists in South and Southeast Asia” (Chapter 13) we remain in the sphere of ideas and ideology, but now from the very different perspective of “Labour Asianism”, or international solidarity among Asian socialist and labour movements. In the mid-twentieth century, roughly from 1930 to 1960, several organizations based on this hybrid principle were active. Stolte focuses on the Asian Socialist Conference (ASC), founded in 1953. The ASC was essentially an association of non-communist and anti-communist socialist parties disillusioned by the lack of priority which their European counterparts, organized since 1951 in the Socialist International, were prepared to give to the issue of decolonization. The ASC did not exist for long – technically until 1965, in practice not beyond 1960 – and was never particularly influential, partly because some of its member parties were only minor forces in their own countries. Its interest in our context lies in the fact that *de facto*, if not *de jure*, it was very much a South and Southeast Asian institution. Its driving forces were socialist groups from Indonesia, India, and Burma, joined at its first conference in 1953 in Rangoon, where it had its headquarters, by similar parties from Pakistan and Malaya, and at the second, in Bombay in 1956, by Sri Lankan and Nepali allies too.

Stolte notes that the ASC was “not [...] held together by any particular map of Asia (real or imagined), or the attribution of key cultural characteristics of Asia”. Rather, its geographical scope was dictated by the fact that, rejecting both Western and “neo-Soviet” imperialism, in that time of Sino-Soviet solidarity it automatically found itself wedged between “the Soviet Central Asian republics and revolutionary China to the north, and resolutely aligned Australia to the south”. But if there was no continuity here with the “Greater India” ideologies of the colonial past, it is nevertheless tempting to see in this political geography an echo of the old cultural geography of precolonial Monsoon Asia, of which “non-Sinicization”, as we have seen, was *de facto* a defining characteristic. The same could almost be said of the far more important Non-Aligned Movement, given that one of the main concerns of the South and Southeast Asian states which organized the 1955 Bandung Conference, in which that movement partly originated, was their collective relationship with revolutionary China.²¹¹

Our most thoroughly contemporary chapter, by political scientist Ward Berenschot, is entitled “The informality trap: politics, governance and informal institutions in South and Southeast Asia” (Chapter 14). Earlier in the present introduction it was suggested that in postcolonial times one of the most striking similarities among the South and Southeast Asian countries has been the weakness of their legal and administrative institutions. Berenschot presents concrete

evidence of this from international indices of quality of governance. Except for the city-state of Singapore, where corruption has been kept rigorously at bay by a legalistic form of semi-authoritarianism designed to preserve the city's prosperity as an outpost of international capitalism, all countries of Monsoon Asia score poorly on regulatory quality, rule of law, and control of corruption. Some, such as Pakistan and Vietnam, score very poorly, worse than most Latin American and Caribbean countries.

The success of many of these countries, including Vietnam, in generating rapid growth and poverty reduction shows that institutional quality – at least as conventionally measured – is less vital to economic development than has often been assumed. Nevertheless, in terms of the prospects for impersonal legal justice, it is a bleak picture that Berenschot paints from his fieldwork experience in both Indonesia and India. While entrenched social values favouring personal reciprocity and clientelism are part of this story, Berenschot stresses that the situation also needs to be understood as a massive collective action problem. Even when individuals would prefer not to give or receive bribes, to stop doing so, in the absence of a coordinated change of behaviour by very large numbers of people, would be to disadvantage not only themselves, but also their family and dependants, without improving the wider system. Today, most countries of Monsoon Asia remain deeply mired in this “informality trap”.

In Chapter 15, “Epics in worlds of performance: a South/Southeast Asian narrative”, Bernard Arps picks up the theme of the “literary network” introduced by Ricci in relation to Islamic texts and genres in India and Indonesia. Arps, however, paints on a broader canvas, and brings his story up to the present day. His thesis is that common elements can be detected in all the great epic stories of Monsoon Asia, from the Indian Ramayana and Mahabharata, still the stuff of popular as well as high culture almost everywhere in South and Southeast Asia, to the tales of Amir Hamza, champion of Islam, which until recently were popular throughout the Muslim countries of the region. South and Southeast Asian epics, by definition, have some characteristics in common with similar tales elsewhere in the world: they are “grand and elaborate stories told about heroes and heroines on adventures”. But other features stand out, at least in combination, as distinctive in global terms, yet shared across Monsoon Asia. They are: a concern with noble kinship relations and the struggles these engender over love, leadership, and land; named protagonists belonging to distinct types, appearing *vis-à-vis* nameless masses, and facing challenges willed upon them by (supernatural or human) others; “atmospheric storyworlds” highlighting the emotions, moods and temperaments of the protagonists; and “splendid, modularly structured narration”. Although set in alternate worlds, the stories are in some ways realistic and intersect with real sociopolitical issues. Often they play a role in the assertion of political authority and are employed as charters for power.

Arps proceeds to illustrate these characteristics from Hindu and Islamic epics, Buddhist Jataka stories, Javanese Panji tales, the Bugis *La Galigo* cycle, the Tibetan epic of King Gesar, and Filipino *pasyon* texts recounting the Passion of Christ. In the process he highlights some specific differences between the tradition he is describing and defining, and other epic genres around the world. For instance, whereas European and some African epics tend to be “chronotopic”, recounting the lives and journeys of their heroes in chronological sequence, South/Southeast Asian epics often branch out anachronistically along lines of kinship into subsidiary tales about relatives of the main characters (Malay/Indonesian: *cerita ranting*, “twig stories”). Arps does not speculate on when or how the great convergence of epic styles within Monsoon Asia took place, or what it might have to do with – for instance – kinship patterns, social stratification, state formation, or indeed Indianization. And his model of a single shared tradition of South and Southeast Asian “epicality”, straddling historical eras and religious traditions, will no doubt have its critics. But as an attempt to explore and chart deep, hitherto nameless commonalities of human experience and sensibility across Monsoon Asia, his contribution stands out in our volume for its originality.

The volume ends with a postscript by my co-editor Nira Wickramasinghe, entitled “The many worlds of Monsoon Asia”. Its central theme is that Area Studies is at its most useful, and most true to life, when it takes as its objects of analysis areas that are defined not by fixed boundaries, but by dynamic connections: “rather than being a solid thing, embedded in the bedrock of geography, an area is rather like a fountain, which is given shape only by constant activity and movement”. Maritime, as opposed to terrestrial, arenas of human interaction epitomize this kind of dynamically defined area, and the Indian Ocean, and by extension Monsoon Asia, is an example *par excellence*. The postscript draws upon several of our earlier chapters to illustrate this point and advocate its significance for future studies, before concluding with a different kind of hope: that the political legacy of Monsoon Asia, as the birthplace of Asian anticolonialism, Third World solidarity, and the Non-Aligned Movement, will also prove inspirational for the future.

Monsoon Asia in the twenty-first century

To what extent are the movements and interactions that gave Monsoon Asia its historical coherence still ongoing in the twenty-first century? In some respects, undoubtedly less than in the past. Trade and migration between South and Southeast Asia, for instance, have long ago lost the importance they once had. In 2015 only 2.6 per cent of the foreign trade of the ASEAN countries was conducted with India, against 15.2 per cent with China, 10.5 per cent with Japan, 10.0 per cent with the

EU countries, and 9.4 per cent with the USA.²¹² Neither do religious, cultural, and intellectual relations across the Bay of Bengal seem to have been particularly close or intensive in recent years – although there are exceptions, and this remains an area for research.²¹³ In political terms, too, South and Southeast Asia drifted apart for many decades after the heady moment of the Bandung Conference, the more so following the failures in 1967 and 1981 of two somewhat ambivalent attempts by Sri Lanka to join ASEAN.²¹⁴

But if active exchanges and solidarities among the countries of Monsoon Asia have on the whole declined in strength and importance in recent decades, the old geographical and environmental similarities among those countries remain strong, and continue to be of great significance for the inhabitants of the whole region. So too do persistent parallels in the social, economic, and political spheres, as well as the shared cultural legacies of past interactions. The following paragraphs briefly explore some of these continuing similarities and parallels, beginning with ecology and its influence on patterns of economic development in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

Monsoon Asia's intensive agriculture, particularly the pond-field farming of its rice-bowl areas, has proven a good springboard for broad-based economic development thanks to its amenability to improvement through technical irrigation, market access, and Green Revolution inputs.²¹⁵ Despite pessimism about their prospects in the 1960s and 70s, and despite many setbacks due to political instability, Cold War conflicts, and policy errors, most states in the region, including India, Bangladesh and Myanmar/Burma as well as the better known Southeast Asian success stories, have ultimately been able to take advantage of this potential and create the conditions for large-scale poverty reduction. Their maritime aspect, facilitating trade as it always did, has been another favourable factor, at least once experiments with autarchic economic policies were abandoned. Economic growth has led to urbanization across the region, in the 1960s still one of the least urbanized in the world. Together with a huge expansion of public education, especially for girls, it has also brought about changes in social and family life that have caused birth rates to fall and the spectre of overpopulation, which loomed large in the twentieth century, to fade.²¹⁶

If the nation-states of Monsoon Asia have increasingly succeeded in combating poverty and educating their citizens, none has become a full-scale "developmental state" along the lines of late twentieth-century Taiwan or South Korea, capable of managing industrial as well as agricultural development in such a way as to sprint into the ranks of the developed countries. Of the South and Southeast Asian countries, only the hyperglobalized city-state of Singapore and the tiny oil sultanate of Brunei have so far risen above middle-income status. Although some, notably Malaysia and Thailand, have substantial outward-oriented manufacturing sectors, these have mostly remained labour-intensive and either technologically

unsophisticated, or operated as offshore dependencies of Western or Northeast Asian corporations. While there are many reasons for this intermediate or incomplete developmental status, some of them probably have to do with the clientelistic character of South and Southeast Asian states, which tends to propel business-state relations in the direction of cronyism rather than developmental partnership. The ethnic diversity of Monsoon Asian countries may also have played a role here, in so far as one common aspect of that diversity is the presence of commercially specialized ethnic minorities. Particularly in Southeast Asia, where business life is dominated by ethnic Chinese groups toward which antipathy tends to exist among the population at large, this pattern has made it difficult to generate the kind of dynamic cooperation between state, capital, and society, based on the pursuit of economic development as a common national project, which is the hallmark of the Northeast Asian developmental states.²¹⁷

In terms of formal political institutions, most countries have alternated between democratic and authoritarian systems, only India boasting an (almost) unbroken democratic record. Between about 1985 and 2010 the general trend was one of democratization, but in the last decade Thailand, Cambodia and Myanmar/Burma have reverted to (de facto) dictatorship, while almost everywhere else, India included, civil liberties, minority rights, and the rule of law have been under pressure from populist, sectarian, and sometimes openly authoritarian forces. Here again a constant factor has been the intertwining of political and economic interests, leading to the development of powerful oligarchies capable of manipulating democratic systems. Another has been the personal character of political life, in which charisma, kinship, and private gain play important roles. In the sagas of twenty-first-century leaders like Thaksin Shinawatra in Thailand, Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines, and Mahinda Rajapaksa in Sri Lanka it is easy to see echoes of the epic “storyworlds” which Arps, in this volume, identifies as recurrent elements of both South and Southeast Asian literature: worlds in which “focal personalities” struggle for power and wealth amidst a web of families and factions, and against a backdrop of “masses of nameless others”.

Active connections between South and Southeast Asia, it was noted above, have been less developed in recent decades than at most times in history. Very recently, however, international relations have begun to change in ways that may bring the old Indian Ocean axis back to the foreground of history. The cause is the return of tension between the People’s Republic of China and many of its neighbours, as well as with the USA and its Western allies. Today the term “Indo-Pacific” no longer refers only to an obscure class of prehistoric glass beads, but to a strategic concept associated with the containment of Chinese ambitions by the West and its Asian partners, including India. With ASEAN in disarray as a result of expansive Chinese territorial claims in the South China Sea, to which it has been unable to

develop a common response, Southeast Asia's potential great power, Indonesia, has shown signs of greater engagement with India and the Indian Ocean countries. The geography of the emerging Cold War, like that of the previous one, corresponds approximately to that of the ancient civilizational divide between Indosphere and Sinosphere, and once again this may not be wholly coincidental. The contrast between Monsoon Asia's traditions of cultural and political pluralism on the one hand, and the centralizing, standardizing ethos of Confucian China on the other, is partly analogous to the contest between democracy and totalitarianism that forms the ideological aspect of the new superpower confrontation.

Geopolitics aside, we hope that this book demonstrates the continuing utility and fertility of the Monsoon Asia perspective as an aid to understanding what South/Southeast Asia has been in the past, and is today. Intellectually that perspective has two very different roots: an old root in Indology, philology, and colonial scholarship, and a newer one in the postcolonial study of transnationalism and globalization. The combination is not always an easy one, and ethical issues remain. Marieke Bloembergen, in her contribution to this volume, warns that the endeavour to reconnect South and Southeast Asia in the academic imagination may revive "essentializing views" of the two regions as a cultural unity and, in doing so, resuscitate "ideas of Greater India".

That the danger of "essentializing" transnational cultural units does indeed exist is sufficiently illustrated by my own equation above – however tentative – of Confucianism with totalitarianism, and democracy with the Indosphere. That a Confucian cultural heritage does not somehow condemn a people to authoritarian rule is obvious from the flourishing democracies of modern Taiwan, South Korea, and Japan. Monsoon Asia, conversely, has seen its share of dictatorships, including one of the most extreme in history, the Cambodian Khmer Rouge regime of 1975–1979. In a time of rising ethnic and religious nationalism, as well as ideological confrontation, essentialized thinking is not something that academic writers should engage in frivolously.

A few defensive observations are nevertheless in order here. First, while no reasonable person would claim that the future of a nation or region is predetermined by its cultural (or even institutional) heritage, it is equally indisputable that such heritages do shape ongoing political developments, if only because they provide powerful resources that leaders can draw on to legitimate political projects. The Chinese Communist Party's revival and embrace of Confucianism is a transparent example of this. So too are the ways in which successive architects of Indonesia's resolutely pluralistic (if often far from democratic) "Pancasila democracy" have drawn upon old traditions of religious tolerance and syncretism to strengthen their project of multicultural nationalism. In a less explicit way, what has been called the "argumentative democracy" of India draws inspiration and resilience from habits

of public debate, disagreement and heterodoxy that far predate the democratic institutions introduced during the periods of British rule and decolonization.²¹⁸

Secondly, in so far as the danger is one of inheriting stereotypes and prejudices from colonial literature, it may be pointed out that colonial scholarship on the relationship between India and its cultural sphere of influence was quite diverse. Before the Second World War, Southeast Asian art and architecture already found champions in scholars like A.J. Bernet Kempers, who wrote that the temples and classical sculpture of Java were “absolutely different from similar artistic products in India” and “may be regarded as the most splendid and elaborate specimens of their type”.²¹⁹ As Bloembergen points out, this was in fact an established trope in colonial literature on Indianized Southeast Asia, codified at the end of the period by Horace Quaritch Wales in the expression “local genius” – a respectful and surely accurate way of characterizing what Southeast Asians have brought over the centuries to the various cultural traditions from overseas that they have interpreted and made their own.²²⁰ As always, the scholarship of the past needs to be treated selectively and with discrimination, but not dismissed *a priori* on the basis of presumed biases and distortions.

A final point worth making here is that history has moved on since the colonial era, and that events, especially in Asia, have a way of overtaking fixed ideas, prejudices, and hierarchies. The economic history of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century has certainly done something to redress the historical imbalance in prestige between India and its neighbours, in the sense that most of Southeast Asia has been far more successful than most of South Asia in fighting poverty, educating citizens, raising living standards, and bringing people *en masse* into the modern world. In Jakarta in the early 2000s I more than once saw visitors from India, taken aback by the unexpected modernity and prosperity of the Indonesian capital, being forced to revise their thinking in this respect – just as two decades earlier I myself, arriving from a dilapidated London via an even more dilapidated Moscow, had been taken aback by the gleaming wealth and efficiency of Singapore, with similar consequences for my world view.

Antecedence is not destiny, and neither should a chain or direction of causality ever be understood as necessitating a hierarchy of importance or value – least of all between people, cultures, or nations. As long as we bear this clearly in mind, we can surely live with the exercises in association and classification that areal approaches to the study of human society inevitably, and productively, involve. Knowledge of connections through time and space may be prone to abuse in support of claims to precedence, superiority, and entitlement, but it can also serve to refute such claims. Tom Hoogervorst, in his contribution to this volume, suggests for instance that a thorough, linguistically informed study of the history of the Rohingya people of Rakhine/Arakan might well help to undermine the narrative of “ethno-linguistic

otherness” currently being used to justify violence against that group in Myanmar/Burma. It would be nice to think that this is true. But wherever knowledge turns out to lead, the correct response to the knowledge that knowledge can be abused surely cannot be: to refrain from seeking it.

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