

History without Blinders

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Geoffrey Gunn's latest work on Asia, *History without Borders: the Making of an Asian World Region, 1000-1800* (Hong Kong, University of Hong Kong Press, 2011), is a landmark text that provides a wealth of data on the Asian trade networks that support the concept that regional identity, rather than national identities, may have played and in the future may well play an increasingly larger role in international relations.

Many readers may know Professor Gunn as one of the leading Historians of Macau, and its sister society East Timor. Over fifteen years ago in 1996, his 1st published work on Macau, "*Encountering Macau: a Portuguese-City State on the Periphery of China*" established his reputation as one of the most knowledgeable English-language analysts of this city. Subsequent revised editions of *Encountering Macau* in Portuguese in 1998, English in 2005, and a Chinese in 2009 have made Gunn's text required readings for those concerned with Macau through out China, Europe and America. He, along with the venerable Montalto de Jesus, is one of the few authors to have been translated into all three key languages of the city of Macau and the South China region. In terms of Macau's modern history, his book is the one of the most, if not the most widely consulted. This present work, published by the University of Hong Kong Press directly follows on Professor Gunn's 2003 publication "*First Globalization: the Eurasian Exchange, 1500-1800*) published by Rowman & Littlefield of the United States, a broad-based publisher and distributor of cutting edge publications.

History without Borders fills a neglected gap in the texts available on Asia: it provides a "non-nation-centered" history of the Asian region that is focused on the Eight-Hundred Year period before the era of 19th Century colonial expansion commonly associated with Britain, the Netherlands, France, the United States and Japan. It may be the first significant attempt to create a trans-Asian economic history of the region for this period

Both those dissatisfied with the historic "Euro-centered" approaches to histories and those equally unhappy with the "Euro-phobic" polemics of subsequent analysts are likely to find this book of interest and of substantial use. It contains a vast assemblage of data on the Asian economy, difficult to locate in other sources, as well as the bibliographical data of immense benefit for further study.

The book is a synthesis from the leading historians and analysts of the East Asia and Southeast Asia. While Gunn's formative studies began forty years ago at Australia's leading research institutions, including Melbourne, Monash and Queensland Universities with such eminent scholars as Jamie Mackie, David Chandler and CP Fitzgerald, the core of the book is based on his extensive subsequent residence and study throughout Asia. This includes his personal experience in Indonesia, Indochina, Brunei, Singapore, Portuguese-Asia, and Japan, among other locales. The book could only have been produced by an analyst with extensive personal experience in both Southeast and East Asia.

Gunn hypothesizes that the Maritime Trade of the Asian Seas acted as the medium through which commercial, technical and cultural interchange could take place between a wide range of peoples. Such trade and exchange transcended national boundaries, whether those boundaries were based on monarchical states such as the dynasties of China, Mongolia or Japan, or the fuzzily defined "Nation-States" which are theorized to have uniquely arisen post-Peace of Westphalia in 1648. It is asserted that trade defines "Maritime Trading Regions" that can be viewed as intermediate links between national entities and the changing global economy. These regions might also be seen as an intermediating link between the "Civilizations" described in Samuel Huntington's "Clash of Civilizations" and the nation state itself.

One of the significant contributions of the text is an appendix that offers an extensive bibliography and a breakdown of that biography into the text's themes and chapter divisions. These can provide an immediate and efficient reference inventory for further analytical or pedagogical work. While Gunn's primary research languages are Malay, Portuguese and French, he has accessed a number of primary materials translated from both Chinese and Japanese.

The work's analytical basis relies on Gunn's past ten major publications over the past twenty years that have included his Macau books from 1996, 1998, 2005; *Political Struggles in Laos (1930-1954)* (1988, 2005); *Rebellion in Laos* (1990 & 2003); *East Timor and the UN* (1997); *Theravadins, Colonialists and Commissars in Laos* (1998); *Nagasaki in the Asian Bullion Trade Networks* (1999); *Timor Lorosae: 500 years* (1999); *First Globalization: The Eurasian Exchange (1500-1800)* (2003); *New Nation: Peace-building in East Timor* (2004); *Complicity in Genocide; Report to the East Timor Truth Commission on International Actors* (2005); and the *Historical Dictionary of East Timor* (2010).

Gunn's analysis is reminiscent of Braudel's work on the Mediterranean Sea, but without Asia or Southeast Asia having a centrally defined ocean area such as the Mediterranean Sea or a centrally defined political power such as the Roman Empire which had unified that region. Differing from Braudel, Gunn identifies numerous specifically pertinent maritime channels for of the "East-Southeast Asian" region, including the Yellow Sea, East China Sea, South China Sea, the Java Sea, the Sulu Sea, the Sulawesi Sea, the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean. Similarly, however, Braudel might have further refined his concept of the "Mediterranean Sea" by adding the Rhine and Danube Rivers, the Aegean Sea, the Black Sea, the Red Sea, the Bay of Biscay, the English Channel, the North Sea and the Baltic Sea. As far as Maritime Trading Channels go, therefore, the basis of Braudel's analysis may indeed not be far from that of Professor Gunn. Missing from Asian history is the centralizing political power of a Roman Empire. Neither the Chinese dynasties of the Song and Ming fulfilled this roll, nor could the empires of the Mongols or Manchus, whose primary focus was continental, and which failed to incorporate Japan into their political spheres.

Gunn's text focuses on the period 1000- 1800 AD, predating the period of Industrial and industrial expansion in Asia that arose subsequent to the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815. Britain's successful response to the challenge of the two-decade-long French & Napoleonic Wars unleashed a British society carrying advanced industrial, technological and military systems that represented a radical break from the pre-Napoleonic Era. These technologies enabled Britain, and its allies in the Netherlands and France, to dominate 19th Century Asia.

Gunn analyses the period before the unequivocal rise of Britain in 1815 to assess the extent to which there were economic, technological and cultural forces that could have led to an Asian dominated 19th Century, rather than a European dominated period. This is clearly a "Longue durée" methodology, which has been utilized by the French scholars of the Annales School, to generate histories that analyze the continuity of long-term social structures rather than the detail of specific political events.

As an Indonesianist, rather than a Sinologist or a Japanologist, Gunn also seeks to ascertain the extent to which the Southeast Asia may have been able to create an identity that was not dependent upon the more powerful states of China, Japan, India and Iberia that traded with the region and at various times dominated it. He views the region as "the Southeast Asian Periphery" that at various times has been dominated by trade from a mixture of India, China, Japan, Iberia, and Western Europe.

In a sense then, the work can be viewed as a "search for Southeast Asia" through the maritime and economic history of the area. As such, it may be a helpful text for those who seek to locate sources of regional rather than national cohesion, for organizations that seek to assess the feasibility of advancing institutions such as the CPLP (Comunidade dos Países de Língua Portuguesa), or to bolster the identities of transnational organizations such as ASEAN of the Macau Forum. As the economic dominance of the United States and Europe fade, new forms of regional

identity seem highly likely to emerge around the trade links of Asia that are increasingly in evidence.

Dividing his analysis into eleven chapters, Gunn first looks at Austronesian expansion from the Asian mainland through Fujian and Taiwan and then rise of the ancient Hindu kingdoms of Southeast Asia. Two chapters focus on the subsequent modification of these Hindu kingdoms in waves of Islamification and then Sincification through the Chinese Tribute-trade system. While it may be asserted that these modifications of Southeast Asia trade arose primarily by trade, rather than conquest, Gunn provides alternative examples, particularly of the Moslem conquests of the Javan kingdom of Sunda Kepala, which he terms “the last center of Hindu-Buddhistic power on Java” and “an ally of the rising threat of Islam” (p. 164).

Before the arrival of Portugal and Spain pulled Southeast Asia into direct links with Europe and America, the extensive trade that had been undertaken through the region was based upon advanced textiles, ceramics, and metallurgy, in addition to the traditional spices, drugs and resources of these pre-industrial societies. Peppers, rice, sandalwood and sulfur are the more salient of these commodities. This trade resulted in widespread diffusion of production technologies thought East and Southeast Asia including that for wet rice cultivation, metals, ceramics, and textiles.

Financing this trade for a lengthy period was currencies that were derived from local sources of silver, copper and gold. Of central importance, silver became a key currency; this initially did not flow from Spanish Mexico, which would come to play a major role in the 17th century that would be transformed into a minted silver currency by the 19th century, but from the silver mines of Japan. The impact of the silver drain from Japan on the “closed-country” policies of the Tokugawa may shed new and controversial light on the strategies of economic isolation: by ending the monetary drain to China, Japan strengthened its domestic industries, to the extent that by 1858 it would be able to develop rapidly into an advanced industrial state. This observation leads from Professor Gunn’s data, but may not necessarily be shared by him.

In a detailed chapter on “The Iberian Maritime Networks,” Gunn emphasizes that as opposed to the Colonial expansions of the 19th century, the Portuguese and Spanish “substituted themselves for, or complemented, local merchant elites” and “did not greatly alter local production or consumption patterns” (p. 184). In Asia, as opposed to the Americas, they “frequently faced superior civilizations and political centers” and “settler colonialism was not an object of their maritime incursions into Asian waters” (p. 183). The position of these Iberian states was clearly one of partners, not of hegemons.

His concisely summarized and well sourced detail in this chapter would be of considerable assistance to historians further analyzing the Iberian inter-action with Asia. Of particular interest, his presentations might lead to two serious lines of questioning that distinguish first, the Iberian interaction with Asia from that with America; and secondly, the 16th century European maritime empires from the 19th imperial empires:

- (i) To the extent that Asia and Europe inherited the same dreaded disease pool, particularly the Black Death, which struck only 140 years before the first Europeans arrived in America, the native populations of Asia were not likely (and did not) suffer the devastating epidemics that swept the Americas following their first contact with Europeans. One only needs recall that the Black Death originated in Asia and had the same deadly consequences for European and Asian societies that the plagues in America had for the natives there in the 16th century.
- (ii) With the Iberians and Mediterranean powers in a death-struggle with the Ottoman Turks through-out the 16th Century in Europe, Portuguese and Spanish targeting of Moslem trading links in Asia in the 16th Century was understandable, and carried political and military significance. As is demonstrated by the data Gunn provides on Portuguese attempts to establish a network of allies with the Buddhist states in Pegu and Ayuttahaya, and the Hindu states of Vijayanagara in India and Sunda Kepala in Java (both of whom were under heavy

military pressure from local Moslem states, and both of whom would fall) the geo-political strategy of the intermarried dynasties of Portugal's Avis and Austria's Habsburg families has likely been insufficiently studied. Significantly the Portuguese acquisition of Malacca in 1511 and the Spanish acquisition of Manila in 1571 displaced Islamic powers who occupied key routes on the trade from East Asia to Europe. For both lines of inquiry, Gunn's data and analyses of Asian trading patterns may be highly useful.

Similarly, the detail provided in his chapter on the arrival of Dutch and English Trading Companies, links the struggles of European powers in Asia directly to the political struggle in Europe. The Dutch and English Protestant struggles beginning in the 17th Century against the Roman Catholic Portuguese and Spanish empires hardly differs from Roman Catholic struggle against the Moslem Turks, Arab, and Mughal of the century before. The religious, political and economic battle was over the same key trading ports, fortifications and trade from Southeast Asia.

The data provided in this text is of tantalizing interest, most of which can not be detailed in this short presentation. For instance, when highlighting the British acquisition of Malacca in 1824, after the Dutch had seized the port from the Portuguese 180 years before in 1646, of what purpose was Britain's "physical destruction of *A Famosa*" (p. 169) the medieval fortress that had guarded Malacca for the better part of the previous three centuries? In 1824, did not Britain hold to its "Eight-Hundred Year Alliance" with Portugal, particularly after the joint operations against Napoleon between 1807 and 1815 under the Duke of Wellington in his storied "Peninsula Campaign"? In 1824, only eight years after the campaign when the British General William Carr Beresford had commanded the Portuguese Army, was this destruction of the symbol of Portugal's ancient control over Southeast Asian trade a prelude to British support for Dom Pedro in the coming Portuguese civil war with Miguel and the conservative Catholic establishment of the Habsburgs and European continent?

This, of course, is just one minor example of the wealth of detail that "History without Borders" contains and the fascinating studies that might emerge from it. For those interested in a text that will rise above the traditional psychological boundaries of the Nation-based narrative and that will look to historic regional trade patterns for a clearer understanding of the "long durée" regional networks that may help construct future identities, this book is clearly of significance. Just as Professor Gunn's books on Macau and Timor have served as fundamental sources for the research of those jurisdictions, "*History without Borders*" is sure to play a similar role for those seeking to understand a larger East and Southeast Asian regional identity that may be based upon the shared commerce, technology and culture of the Eight-Hundred-year period before the post-Napoleonic Colonial period in Asia.

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