

## READING 1

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Candice Goucher, Charles LeGuin, and Linda Walton, "Trade, Transport, Temples, and Tribute: The Economics of Power," in *In the Balance: Themes in Global History* (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 1998), 216–29.

**Abstract:** This essay explores the development of riverine and island empires in Southeast Asia as a way of demonstrating how the physical and cultural environment of the region shaped the political orders that emerged there before 1500. In particular, water is a constant, defining feature in this region of islands and deltas, whether from rivers, seas, or monsoon rains. As a result of all this water, Southeast Asia was perfectly positioned for becoming a meeting-place of cultures from West Asia, Africa, and East Asia.

### Southeast Asian Riverine and Island Empires

#### The Monsoon Climate

Views of early Southeast Asia have often been shaped by assumptions drawn from historical experience outside the region. Situated at the intersection of Indian and Chinese civilization, Southeast Asia has been seen either through an Indian lens stressing the Hindu influence on the formation of the first state, Funan, or through an equally distorting Chinese lens reflected in the Chinese accounts of Funan. In contrast to either of these perspectives, it seems better to conceptualize early Southeast Asian polities in terms of indigenous ideas and practices that emphasize a complex system of personal loyalties as the basis for power relations rather than to consider them as territories with defined boundaries administered by representatives of one or another ruler. The precise boundaries of the territory controlled by a ruler were not of primary concern; what mattered was the network of loyalties on which that ruler could depend. The mandala, a symbol drawn from early Indian cosmology, has been used to characterize the nature of political authority in early southeast Asia. The mandala image, a sacred diagram of the cosmos constructed of concentric circles or rectangles, represents the ruler's personal charismatic authority radiating out from a center, in contrast to the vertically organized hierarchy of power directly exercised through the ruler's representatives.

#### Riverine and Island Polities

Many polities rose and fell in southeast Asia before 1500. The most impressive of these were empires that continued to influence regional traditions long after they had fallen. These empires were built on distinctive regional economic structures and created cultural and political foundations for their successors. The major polities of this period can be loosely

categorized into two types: those of the mainland, based on intensive irrigated rice agriculture on river plains, and those of the islands, based on control of the river network and sea trade. Each economic system alone could support a strong regional polity. Only the two systems together, however, could provide sufficiently diversified material and human resources to maintain an empire. Here we will look at two empires of this period that achieved such a linkage, Funan and Srivijaya. We will also consider one example of a strong regional polity, the mainland Khmer state, which controlled and organized the redistribution of resources produced by wet-rice agriculture on the Mekong River delta through a network of Buddhist temples.

### ***Funan: A Riverine Empire***

By the end of the first century C.E., the area of present-day Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, and Burma, the great river plains of mainland Southeast Asia, was divided among a number of regional polities. Made fertile by the silts of regular and relatively gentle monsoon flooding, these plains were very productive for rain-fed and increasingly irrigated rice farming. They were, moreover, quite large and capable of supporting sizable and concentrated populations. The plains were also easy to dominate politically, in contrast to mountainous regions, where communication and transportation were more difficult. One of the first states there to undertake empire building successfully was Funan. Sometime around 50 C.E., what later Chinese sources would describe as the “Kingdom of Funan” emerged on the lower Mekong delta and along the coastline of Thailand to the west.

Early Funan was composed of a number of communities, each with its own ruler, linked loosely together by a common culture and by a shared economic pattern of rice farming supplemented with participation in the regional coastal trade. Funan’s population was made up primarily of farming people in the hinterland and maritime traders in the coastal towns, who were economically interdependent. Surplus rice production found a ready market at the ports, where ships passing along the coast supplied themselves. Ship traders in turn had no difficulty paying for the rice and other agricultural products with goods brought from foreign ports. This nicely balanced exchange system, which may have been in place a hundred years or more previously, underwent a significant change between about 50 and 150. The change was brought about by external factors and reinforced internally by ambitious rulers, who transformed Funan into an empire. The catalyst for this transformation was a boom in the India-China maritime trade, which intensified the importance of exchange.

## Funan in Myth and Symbol

The mythical account of the founding of Funan reflects in symbolic terms the conditions that led to Funan's rise as a regional power by around 150 C.E. According to this story, sometime in the early first century C.E. a woman ruler of the lower Mekong delta region led an attack on a passing merchant ship. Successfully defending themselves, the merchants made their way ashore. Their leader, an Indian upper-caste scholar named Kaundinya, "drank water from the land" and married the woman ruler, who is described as the daughter of the ruler of the Realm of Water. Kaundinya then became king of the region, which is described as a number of settlements, each with its own ruler. Seven of the largest of these settlements were assigned to the children of this marriage, while the remainder were held directly by the new king.

There are several layers of interpretation to this story, each related to the others. The imagery is common to Southeast Asian traditions. The arrival of foreign traders from India and their "marriage" with local rulers to build a larger, more powerful state clearly relates to the intensification of international trade in the area during this period. The strength of the new capital afforded by the trade was controlled by merchants, Indian or Malay, experienced in the administration of large states such as India, the nearest great trade center.

The story suggests the social implications of this new political/economic structure. By all accounts, before Indian influences became prevalent in Southeast Asia women had considerable access to positions of public power. Matrilineage, tracing descent through the maternal line, appears to have been characteristic of social structure there. Indian society and ideology, on the other hand, was patrilineal, tracing descent through the male line, and strongly patriarchal. In the original story, a woman ruler represented the land of Funan; but after the marriage, the Indian husband took over as king. Although the regimented patriarchy and caste system seen in India did not overtake Funan's culture, it did affect the ruling class structures, and for the next several hundred years Funan's empire was ruled only by men.

## Trade and Ideology in Funan

Funan, which began as a group of autonomous agricultural communities on the lower Mekong and Tonle Sap Rivers, found that the growth of maritime shipping passing through the region brought enough profit through trade to support a larger population base. With an increased population, the leaders of Funan expanded their land's agricultural productivity by investing in more intensive irrigation, and they began to engage in the conquest of neighboring communities. They also sought to monopolize the region's maritime trade by conquering rival coastal emporiums, or trading centers. While doing so, they legitimized their expanding rule by blending the features of the increasingly

accepted Hindu ideology with the local cosmology. Funan rulers of the early first century legitimized their rule on the basis of claimed descent from heroic ancestors. By the end of the second century C.E., those ancestors and the rulers themselves had become representatives on earth of the Hindu god Shiva, who ruled from the "Sacred Mountain," maintaining order throughout the universe. Shiva was also identified with fertility, a notion that blended well with the indigenous beliefs in fertility deities and allowed the grafting of Hindu ideas onto local traditions.

By the second century, Funan rulers had established control over the strategic coastline of the India-China maritime route, and expansion continued through the third century. Funan established trading relations with the Chinese, and, after the collapse of the Han dynasty in the early third century, they continued to exchange delegations with rulers of the successor states in southern China. Chinese reports of "tributary" missions from Funan provide us with the most comprehensive description of Funan's government and economy, though these accounts are colored by the Chinese people's view of themselves as the recipients of tribute, a recognition of their centrality and dominance over surrounding states.

Once a region was conquered and attached to Funan territories, the region's leaders continued to rule there, although they now owed allegiance and taxes to the rulers of Funan. In exchange for this, the entire region enjoyed relative peace and stability under a common ideology, a blend of indigenous and Indian themes, and a generally accepted regional legal system. Such stability, reinforced by regular investment in agricultural development throughout the region under Funan's control, ensured continued good external trade relations.

### International Trade and the Decline of Funan

Although Funan's income was relatively diversified through trade and agricultural taxes and profits, a significant decline in one sector or the other could jeopardize the empire's stability. This may have been what happened in the fifth century. Just as international trade shifts had earlier led to the emergence of Funan's empire, so also did such a shift fatally undermine its economic strength and contribute to its breakup. In this case the restructuring of trade developed out of worsening political conditions in Central Asia and north China. Constant warfare there in the fourth and fifth centuries all but cut off the overland east-west trade. Southern Chinese traders, frustrated by the closure of the overland routes, sought both a faster and less expensive maritime route than that offered by their traditional partner, Funan. That route was through the Strait of Malacca.

By the end of the fifth century, international trade through southeast Asia was almost entirely directed through the Strait of Malacca. Funan, from the point of view of this trade, had outlived its usefulness. Unable to affect the

new direction of trade in any way, the Funan rulers turned back to the land in the hope that increased agricultural productivity would cover the country's trade losses. The fifth and sixth centuries saw the transformation of the agriculture of the Mekong delta and lower Cambodia and Thailand into intensive, irrigated rice production, with the addition of hundreds of new dikes, canals, and holding tanks built by the government.

Pressured by the constantly eroding economic base, struggles for power within the court weakened the dynasty and left it prey to attack from neighbors. In the second half of the sixth century, Funan's eastern regions were taken by the Hindu Champa rulers of southern Vietnam. The Khmer rulers of northern Cambodia and northeastern Thailand conquered the Mekong and Funan's western territories. Funan as an empire was destroyed, its place taken by two successor states which, each keeping largely to its own culturally and ecologically defined boundaries, survived well into early modern times. Both of these successor states built on Funan's experience in administration and political ideology, and both were ruled by dynasties claiming legitimacy based on their claims to descent from the rulers of Funan.

### ***The Khmer Kingdom: A Mainland State***

The Khmer state dominated the Mekong River Valley and delta for more than 400 years, from 802 to 1432, and at its height in the twelfth century controlled probably a million people in the area of modern Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and parts of Burma, Vietnam, and the Malay peninsula. A network of canals used for both transportation and irrigation linked the Khmer state physically, and reservoirs helped control the uneven rainfall of a monsoon climate by storing monsoon rainwater for later use. Both Hinduism and Buddhism provided sanction for the authority of rulers and the common cultural and religious bonds among the Khmer people. As in Funan, the rulers initially blended Hinduism with indigenous beliefs to consolidate their power over their expanding territory, and the Sanskrit language was adopted by the Khmer court. Worship of the Hindu god Shiva, who was identified as the "Lord of the Mountain," was connected with indigenous beliefs in the sanctity of mountains, the home of ancestral spirits. Shiva was also associated with fertility, and similarly worship of Shiva was merged with local fertility beliefs in Shiva's representation by the stone or metal phallus, the *lingam*, inserted upright into the circular "vulva," or *yoni*, at shrines to him in the Khmer state.

### **The Devaraja Cult**

Worship of Shiva was formalized in the *devaraja* (god-king) cult of the ruler Jayavarman II (770–834), who built the Khmer state through a combination of conquest and the formation of a network of personal alliances. Jayavarman

consolidated the worship of regional deities in the *devaraja* cult and built the principal temple at the center of the royal capital on a mountaintop. After Jayavarman, statues and *lingams* of gods were fused with the person of the ruler, symbolized by the merging of the monarch's personal title with the name of a god. For example, Jayavarman's successor was associated with the Hindu god Indra and thus became known as Indravarman I (r. 877–889). Rulers were believed to be the earthly incarnation of gods and responsible for maintaining order in the world.

### Angkor Wat

Massive public works projects carried out by the Khmer monarchy, such as the Hindu temple complex of Angkor Wat (*wat* means “temple”) built by Suryavarman II (1113–1150) are testimony to the ability of the Khmer state to collect and redistribute economic resources on a huge scale. This was accomplished through a network of temples, which served as centers of redistribution from villages to local temples and on up through a hierarchy to the central temple in the king's capital. In this way both the material wealth and the symbolic capital, the cultural and religious symbols used to integrate Khmer society, were distributed through a complex temple network spread throughout the realm.

### The Buddharaja Cult

After the twelfth century, at the capital city of Angkor Thom, Buddhist dominance was reflected in the Bayon temple complex façade, which showed the Buddhist deity Lokeshvara. This Buddhist deity was identified with the builder of Angkor Thom, Jayavarman VII, who was honored in the new Buddharaja cult.

### Pagan Burma

Other mainland states, such as Pagan in Burma along the Irrawaddy River (mid-eleventh to late thirteenth centuries), were similarly based on irrigated rice agriculture and built religious monuments that both reflected the use of Hinduism and Buddhism to consolidate control over local communities and testified to the ability of their rulers to commandeer sufficient resources to construct such monuments to their own power and glory, often identifying themselves with Hindu or Buddhist deities. Wealthy and powerful though their rulers were, mainland states such as the Khmer and Pagan Burma could not control the sea trade that would have allowed them to connect their agricultural hinterland with the maritime trade and expand into empires as both Funan and later Srivijaya did.

## ***Srivijaya: An Island Empire***

Funan's origins lay in agriculture-based communities transformed into an empire by wealth and power that came from control of the international coastal trading networks. In contrast, Srivijaya emerged from river-based coastal trading communities which were joined together to form a maritime empire. By developing good relations with the agricultural hinterland in order to gain a dependable supply of commodities for trade, the founders of Srivijaya were able to support a larger maritime trade zone and thus to establish an empire that dominated the region from about 670 to 1025.

### **Malay Merchant Mariners**

In the sixth century, when major international trading powers began to shift their routing southward from mainland Funan, several fleets operated by Malay seamen competed for the southern trade as it developed through the Strait of Malacca. Like their land-based cousins, these seamen – sometimes described as “sea nomads” by foreign observers – were organized into lineage groups. Power was measured by the number of boats one controlled. These boats were outrigger canoes – with floating timbers rigged out from the side to prevent tipping – up to 27 meters (90 feet) long with fore-and-aft sail rigging. Like all merchant mariners, Malay seamen spent much of their lives on water, but all had home ports upon which their lives and livelihoods depended. The ports provided food and boat equipment for the voyages; backing up the port was a hinterland trading system which delivered commodities for the maritime trade. The port government, headed by a *datu*, the common Malay term for “ruler,” thus had one foot on land and one in the water. It was obliged to maintain good alliances with both farmer and seaman in order to maintain the equilibrium of this complicated economic and political system.

Srivijaya was such a port state. Its capital, Palembang, on the island of Sumatra in modern-day Indonesia, was strategically situated near the southern entrance of the Strait of Malacca. With its fleets and armies, it gradually established dominance of the coastlines and built a major coastal emporium on the southeast coast of Sumatra. It eliminated piracy – which is another way of saying it eliminated competition from rival port states – and thus ensured safe passage for foreign shipping. In return for this, in the seventh century Srivijaya became by treaty the favored trading partner of the Chinese government, replacing Funan and gaining in effect a monopoly on the enormous China trade. Srivijayan ports cornered the lion's share of the India-China shipping business: ship repairs, outfitting, storage, supplies, and layovers between monsoons for thousands of ships and boats per year.

The large Srivijayan island empire was built on a combination of military force and the political acumen of the *datus* of the capital, Palembang. Given

the fluctuations in international trade and variations in human abilities, military power and political skill alone were insufficient to ensure the survival of Srivijaya. It also needed a belief system that could unite conquered regions with differing religious and ethnic groups under a common loyalty to Palembang. Srivijaya found such a unifying ideology in the universal religion of Buddhism.

### Buddhism in Srivijaya

Buddhism grew rapidly in the Southeast Asian archipelago during the seventh century. Early stone inscriptions at Palembang reveal a ruler there blending the local imagery of the sacred mountain and sea with the traditional veneration of ancestors into Buddhist symbols and ethics. Buddhist themes imposed upon indigenous traditions provided a common set of ideas that transcended local communities. To reinforce this ideology and build regional prestige upon it, the Srivijayan rulers used some of the profits of their empire to become the major builders of Buddhist temples and patrons of Buddhist scholarship in their territories. By the tenth and eleventh centuries, the empire was dedicating temples as far away as Bengal and the southeast coast of India. At the same time, practices reflecting both the indigenous worship of the water realm and the recognition of the importance of maritime trade were maintained. For example, the greatness of a deceased monarch was measured by the number of gold bars retrieved from the harbor at Palembang, into which the living ruler threw a gold bar every day to propitiate the ocean, a testimony to the debt of Srivijaya to the sea for providing the wealth in trade on which the empire had been built and a sign of the continuity of traditional beliefs in the power of the sea.

### The Srivijayan Political Order

The structure of the Srivijayan political order in the eighth century reflects its Malay *datu* origins. The king, who was in theory an absolute monarch, ruled nearby provinces through his sons and other royal family members. In more distant territories, however – on the Malay peninsula, for example, or to the south on Java – conquered *datu*s were left in place to continue their family rule in the king's name. In one sense, the empire was an alliance system between one powerful *datu* and many others, among them the fleet captains who functioned in alliance with the king, under whom they worked. In this system, Srivijaya's kings maintained their central position by carefully building alliances of regional leaders against rebels. Many of these leaders had private armies, the commanders of which were responsible to both the king and the local leader. Palembang's own royal army, paid for with imperial taxes and trade receipts, was large but not large enough to undertake major wars on its own. When the army of Srivijaya went on large campaigns, it did so as an organization of regional armies. It seemed a shaky



system, yet by the beginning of the eighth century Palembang's *datu* was unmistakably the ruler of an empire, whose carefully planned succession reflects a well-established central government.

A structured court bureaucracy helped to maintain this imperial monarchy. One division of the bureaucracy was made up of the king's judges, who administered a common court law throughout the provinces. Another group was made up of priests, advisers on Indian court ritual, which remained important in legitimizing the ruler's authority, at the same time as Buddhism was being used to unify the realm and consolidate the ruler's control of the Srivijayan state. Still another category of official was that of market supervisor. Appearing deceptively low in the court hierarchy, this post was of key importance in an empire in which much of the surplus wealth came from international trade. The market inspector was responsible for setting and enforcing throughout Srivijaya's territories standard measures for gold and silver, the currency of trade, along with standard market weights and measures, and to some extent even standard prices for the main trade commodities. Market stability was of critical importance in attracting and holding foreign trade.

Srivijaya's success in maintaining law and order on the seas of the strait and in its markets brought an increase of shipping to its ports, which encouraged the empire to expand still further. Many of the goods sought by international traders originated in the islands to the south and east; Srivijaya accordingly moved in that direction, taking over by force or agreement the main port towns of eastern Java.

### Sailendra in Java

For example, the marriage of a Srivijayan princess into the Sailendra dynasty, which controlled the strongest state on Java during the eighth and ninth centuries, integrated that state into the Srivijayan sphere. Although the Sailendra continued to rule their central Javanese realm independently, the union meant that the Srivijayan Empire had little challenge to its dominance of southeast Asian trade over the next hundred years.

### The Buddhist Monument at Borobudur in Java

The wealth the empire gathered produced not only better standards of living for the region's peoples but also large temple complexes, such as the great eighth-century Buddhist monument at Borobudur on the island of Java, which helped knit the people of the region together under a common religious ideology. Yet, as in the case of Funan and its dependence on international trade, the Srivijayan Empire weakened and collapsed when trade shifted and its balanced system of alliances between land and maritime interests crumbled, as it did in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

## Muslim Merchants and Srivijaya's Decline

During the same period, new powers were also emerging on the Southeast Asian mainland, in Burma, Sri Lanka, Cambodia, and Thailand. At a time when its control of the Malacca Strait trade was threatened by Burma and the Thai monarchy, Srivijaya was challenged by the advent of a new religion, Islam, and by merchants who were Muslim. It was unable to meet the dual challenge. Malay shipping in the region was replaced by Arab and Persian boats, with owners and merchants who, given the opportunity, preferred to deal with Muslim harbormasters and ship chandlers. In some of the smaller ports of northern Sumatra, these Muslim port officers began to appear in increasing numbers. The Srivijayan Empire broke up into a collection of smaller independent city-states and trading confederations such as Majapahit, the clearest successor to Srivijaya. Several of these polities found their legitimacy in claims of descent from Srivijaya's ruling family. All used the administrative and ideological legacy of the old empire, including the established patterns of standardized weights and measures and coinage. As Funan's legacy in mainland Southeast Asia survived in its successor states, so too did the tradition of the Srivijayan Empire live on in polities that claimed legitimacy through links to the era of Srivijayan power.

## **Majapahit**

In Java during the declining years of the Srivijayan Empire, the east coast maritime trading region became unified under the government of Majapahit, a dynastic city-state and trading confederation whose ruler, according to Javanese Buddhist ideology, was divine. By the 1290s, Majapahit had developed its own extensive and tightly controlled trade network with the Malay peninsula and islands to the north, including Sumatra, Borneo, Sulawesi, and the Moluccas. With its highly centralized taxation and efficient administrative structures, fourteenth-century Majapahit has been described by some historians as the first state in the region to move from an "ally-tribute" relationship with its hinterland – a system of economic exchange embedded in a framework of political alliance – to one more clearly defined as direct rule from the center. Throughout its territories, the state effectively standardized taxes, as well as the coinage, weights, and measures necessary to its economy. The rulers of Majapahit, beginning with Kertanagara (r. 1268–1292), cemented their political and economic control through splendid religious ceremonies and monuments, and through ritualized economic exchange.

## Summary

At the beginning of the first millennium C.E., there were many different belief systems in Southeast Asia, all of which had some common elements: animism, ancestor worship, and a sacred role for mountains and the sea.

Political leaders gradually adopted key features of Hinduism and Buddhism to sanction their rule and provide a unifying ideology for their states. Later, especially in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Islam in turn was adopted by regional political leaders with much the same unifying results. In each case, foreign belief systems were grafted onto indigenous ones. Foreign religions initially penetrated along trade lines into parts of Southeast Asian society, and thus the demands of commerce and economic motives brought ideas that were then used to support the concentration of power. Nowhere was the role of religion as an aspect of political economy more sharply brought out than in the network of temples that provided the mechanism for the collection and redistribution of wealth in the Khmer state.

Empires such as Funan and Srivijaya were constructed in part on the foundation of hinterland-port relationships, and the city-states of Southeast Asia and East Africa similarly depended for their survival on mutual exploitation: the hinterland needed the ports for its markets, and the ports depended on the production of the hinterlands for their livelihood. Both were dependent on technology and on the maintenance of sea routes [cut]. Technology is closely related to trade, and empires as well as port city-states in Southeast Asia were dependent on trade not only for the resources that sustained them but also, in the case of the Southeast Asian riverine and island empires, for providing ties that connected distant peoples and places to political centers. Port city-states such as Malacca in Southeast Asia depended on trade for their very existence.