

Geoff Wade & Sun Laichen, eds., *Southeast Asia in the Fifteenth Century: The China Factor*, Hong Kong University Press, 2010. 508 pp.

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Modern scholars have long been fascinated by the history, the rich culture, architecture and art of Southeast Asia and Ming China during the 13th, 14th and 16th centuries. This is particularly true of Western writers studying Europe's Age of Discoveries during its 16th century phase, because it was then that the maritime history of the region became more exciting for the West after Portugal's naus sailed into Chinese and Southeast Asian waters. Other European maritime explorers and traders would soon follow. Less glamorous, or perhaps less motivating, is what was happening in Southeast Asia during the intervening century.

*Southeast Asia in the Fifteenth Century*, published last year under the editorship of Geoff Wade (韦杰夫) and Sun Laichen, tries to correct this false perspective by offering readers a collection of 14 historical essays that attempt to throw light on this little-known period. The essays are arranged in an equal number of chapters that address the political fortunes of polities and states emerging during the 15th century in mainland Southeast Asia. Except for the first part, where an introductory essay by each of the two editors provides readers with an overview of the subject, the larger part of the book is composed of groupings of four essays in three sections. Articles in sections two, three and four, respectively discuss subjects related to Vietnam, Tai and Khmer polities (including the practically unknown history of 15th century Cambodia), as well the role of the powerful Ming armies and fleets in the area. The emergence of Ming fleets and Ming imperial expansion by land and by sea—the latter exemplified by the Zheng He's historic voyages, “about which thousands of articles and many books have been written”, as Sun Laichen reminds us in his introduction—gives the books a particular focus. In fact, the subtitle of the book, “The China Factor”, makes it explicit. It nicely underlines what the editors evidently saw as one of the principal contributions that the book could make to current research on the subject. But as Geoff Wade states, “[the] 15th century remains enigmatic in the overall history of Southeast Asia”, and it is this book's declared aim to provide at least partial answers to this historical mystery.

Apart from an extensive 56 page bibliography, there is also an index that is welcome in a volume that includes numerous Vietnamese and other Southeast Asian names, always tricky for non-specialists. Two maps of the region displayed on the opening pages help readers get their geographical and historical bearings, with charts and figures accompanying a number of the essays in the following 400 or so pages. These figures or images include nine attractive colour illustrations of green-glazed, celadon and blue and white wares, as well as neatly drawn tables and charts that form part of Roxanna M. Brow's article entitled "A Ming Gap? Data from Southeast Asian Shipwreck Cargoes", it could be said that the essay is this ceramics specialist's swan song, produced before her tragic death three years ago. In fact, the book is dedicated to her memory.

Both editors have a deep interest in the historical interaction between China and mainland Southeast Asia, especially that which resulted from Ming expansionism. Dr. Sun Laichen, a Chinese scholar now active at California State University, Fullerton, is a specialist in modern Southeast Asian history. Here, apart from his introductory one, he also includes an illuminating essay on the overland northern Burmese gem trade generated by the huge demand for gems in Ming China, which he argues was of equal importance to the maritime route and of which little has so far been written. In the case of Dr. Wade, his study of Chinese Ming history has already resulted in several unique publications. Among others he has edited a six volume history of China and Southeast Asia, published by Routledge a few years ago, as well as an online database providing English translations of titles of Ming imperial documents, accessible under *Southeast Asia in the Ming Shi-lu: An Open Access Resource* (<http://epress.nus.edu.sg/msl/>).

In the present book most of the contributors provide new or novel historical interpretations and facts, a good example of which is Geoff Wade's argument that the reason the Yongle emperor put the eunuch admiral Zheng He and others in command of vast armadas was because they were Muslims, navigating maritime trade routes that had long been dominated by Muslims from Arabia and Persia and that, "an increasing number of Islamic polities were appearing in Southeast Asia". Equally interesting is the assertion that Ming emperors were not entirely free of colonizing ambitions, even if the implication of their expansionism was not as far-reaching as that of Europeans in the following centuries.

Dr. Wade is well-known in certain academic circles as one of the debunkers of Gavin Menzies' sensationalistic claim regarding the discovery of the Americas and much of the unknown world by Zheng He's fleet in 1421. Thus his integrity, together with the insights found in the essays of the other contributors, makes the rescuing and highlighting of the history of Southeast Asia and China in the 15th century a very worthy endeavour.