

***Portuguese, Dutch and Chinese in Maritime Asia, c.1585-1800:
Merchants, Commodities and Commerce***

by George Bryan Souza
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As part of the prestigious Variorum Collected Studies series, this volume continues the series' philosophy of making available for the academic world a wide range of articles and papers usually buried in far-flung journals, proceedings, and workshops, only known to a small number of people. Its publication is also a sign of distinction for the author, since his name appears alongside the likes of Charles R. Boxer, A. R. Disney, Om Prakash, and Sinapah Arasaratnam, just to name a few authors with volumes published in the same field of study.

The author George Bryan Souza is a well-known historian with a reputable academic career across several continents, and whose scientific output of quality has been acknowledged since the 1980s. His groundbreaking doctoral dissertation *The Survival of Empire: Portuguese Trade and Society in China and the South China Sea, 1630-1754* published by Cambridge University Press in 1986 and reissued in paperback in 2004, remains to this day a must-read study to understand the resilience of the Portuguese home-traders of Macao and their networks in the Far East and in Southeast Asia in an age of turmoil and change for the *Estado da Índia*, the name given to the Portuguese Empire in Asia.

The dissertation shifted the focus of research from the official Crown structures, traditionally analyzed especially by Portuguese historians, to the less studied private traders, particularly those active in Macao, though Charles R. Boxer had already made some remarkable contributions to this field.¹ Souza used a wide range of sources for his study, notably those stored in Dutch archives, to reconstruct the economic and commercial life of the Macao home-traders, thus circumventing the lack of private papers in Portuguese archives and libraries. His study was also innovative in terms of the way he presented the relations between Portuguese home-traders and the Dutch East India Company officials, the Chinese as well as other Asian merchants as a bustling complex trading world full of “strange, un-natural” partnerships unlike portrayals in traditional historical literature, which had been too fond of presenting a more black and white image.

Of course, Souza benefited from a shift of historical paradigm that Asian and Eurasian studies began sensing since the 1970s, when an increasing number of scholars, many of whom were Asians, started questioning the long held view of European dominance after 1500, as defined by the Indian historian and nationalist K. M. Panikkar in 1953.² European dominance fell out of favor for the “Age of Partnership,” at least since the publication of the namesake book in honor of Holden Furber in 1979.³ The book presented a more balanced view of the European impact in Asia, particularly in the seas and in commerce, with a more assertive and robust Asian trading presence, far from the peddler image drawn decades earlier by the Dutch sociologist and historian J. C.

¹ Charles Ralph Boxer, *The Great Ship from Amacon: Annals of Macao and the Old Japan Trade, 1555-1640* (Lisbon, Portugal: Centro de Estudos Históricos Ultramarinos, 1959).

² Kavalam Madhava Panikkar, *Asia and Western Dominance: A Survey of the Vasco da Gama Epoch of Asian History, 1498-1945* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1953).

³ Blair B. Kling and Michael Naylor Pearson, eds., *The Age of Partnership: Europeans in Asia before Dominion* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1979).

van Leur. Less than ten years later, in 1988, another collective work edited by Jean Aubin and Denys Lombard put the record straight regarding the importance, survival, and resilience of Asian commercial networks and traders, some of whom were greater merchants than their European “partners” or rivals, even during the colonial period.⁴ Since then, at least two great historical paradigms have dominated the debate over this period of Asian history: globalization and convergence/divergence. The former sees the birth of a more closely related and interconnected world with the beginning of the European Expansion, especially after 1500 with a rapid circulation of men, goods, capital, ideas, and plants. The latter identifies with a more recent phenomenon that began only in the nineteenth century with the convergence of prices from the Industrial Revolution in Europe, particularly in Britain, which led to an economic divergence between the Western industrialized countries and the rest of the world, including Asia, at least until the 1960s when the world economic nexus began re-orienting to the Asian continent.

The above introduction serves to acquaint the reader of this book with the historiographic background that influenced the thirteen articles in the book, since many of the themes and debates against such a background surface continuously in the book from being at the core of Souza’s research. Souza presents himself as an empirically driven historian with a multi-disciplinarian approach and methodology from the social sciences such as anthropology, archaeology, economics, history, and sociology. His studies are focused on the social life of products, their economic chains, and mercantile networks. The questions, hypotheses, arguments, and analyses he applies are articulated with what can be observed and measured statistically in order to produce better informed, qualitative observations anchored by archival or other evidence (VIII, 61).

⁴ Denys Lombard and Jean Aubin, eds., *Marchands et hommes d'affaires Asiatiques dans l'Océan Indien et la Mer de Chine 13e-20e siècles* (Paris: Éditions de l'École des hautes études en sciences sociales, 1988).

Hence, Souza's work is more complex and sophisticated than what his empirical statement might lead readers to believe. A careful look at the footnotes demonstrate that Sousa has been an eager and attentive reader of debates and theories involving the aforementioned historiographic background, and is therefore no stranger to them since much of his own research revolves around themes connected to globalization, trade networks, commercial partnerships, and rivalries in the Early Modern Age, especially in the South China Sea.

The thirteen papers reunited in this volume have been published over a span of twenty five years from 1984 and 2009 although it has actually been less than ten years since eight of them have been published. In spite of the title's geographic conception, Maritime Asia, nine papers deal with realities in and about the South China Sea, which has after all, been an area of recurrent research for Souza. Not all papers published in this volume have been rescued from journals and proceedings of conferences, since the third had never been published and the tenth is a working paper. Apart from the introduction, Souza chose to divide the book into two sections: "Portuguese and Other Merchants and Administrators" and "Commodities and Commerce." Such a division seems awkward for the papers because it points to a divide of sorts between the Portuguese and "the others," contrary to the notion of a more shared, lively Maritime Asia dominant in historical studies of the region since the 1980s, despite Souza pointing out that the division had been "roughly" organized (xii). The book's title is also more embracing and ecumenical than what the section titles allow readers to believe.

Souza writes the book's preface to purposely justify his selection of the thirteen articles and to provide a general overview of them. He also uses the preface to explain his own research and historical itinerary, as well as his choice to study the formal and informal Portuguese presence in Asia, including Macao's economic and social involvement in the South China Sea region in particular, given its importance in the history of European Expansion. Souza has a more notably open and modern vision

of the role played by the Portuguese in Asia since the sixteenth century. His analysis steps away from the traditional metropolitan perspective to view the intra-Asian maritime commerce and society, thereby avoiding the usual trap that unfavorably compared the Portuguese with the Dutch and the English East India Companies. To overcome the lack of Portuguese sources, Souza employed other documentation, namely Dutch, which allowed him to paint a more complete image of a complex and sometimes contradictory mixed world (xiii). Unsurprisingly, the seventh paper deals with his attempt to reconstruct long-term price series in Asia using Dutch materials, and proposes an in-depth comparative economic study to analyze the impact of key commodities in Asia and in other continents. Time and again, this lively multi-racial, mixed, married, and settled society established in and around Macao and the South China Sea appears along with the Chinese, Dutch, Spanish, Armenians, and others in most of the thirteen papers, evincing an interconnected and dependent global world.

The author, however, should have given some explanation regarding his choice for using the expression “Maritime Asia” in the book’s title, since most of the articles deal with the South China Sea, while the Western Indian Ocean and adjoining seas are conspicuously absent from the book. In addition, there is no clear justification for the book’s choice of chronology. Most of the articles cover from around 1600 and beyond, except for the third in which the period 1587-1598 holds transient importance solely for the involved towns of Cochim and Malacca. If 1800 is the round date that has been repeatedly used since the 1970s to mark the end of the pre-Colonial Period, circa 1585 carries no weight and gives no clue as to its relevance in Asian or in Estado da Índia history. Moreover, the “Long Eighteenth Century” (1678-1791) should have been explained for the benefit of the reader, as it explicitly appears in the title of the seventh and eighth papers and implicitly in the twelfth paper’s title, notwithstanding the marginal difference in the terminal dates (1684-1796). The “Long Eighteenth Century” was, to the best of the reviewer’s

knowledge, coined by J. Kathirithamby-Wells in an essay titled *The Long Eighteenth Century and the New Age of Commerce in the Melaka Straits* written for a collective volume of studies edited by Leonard Blussé and Femme S. Gaastra.⁵ The book significantly reassesses the contributions to Asian history made by van Leur, from which sprang the discussion on the eighteenth century as a category in Asian history. Again, the choice of chronology and terminology seems to be more connected to the world of the South China Sea than with all Maritime Asia, which Souza should have stressed in the title.

Not all of the thirteen papers have aged graciously as they were written over a quarter of a century (1984-2009), but the author intelligently opted not to add revisions to the original texts. This is a wise choice, since most of the studies are fairly recent, dating back to less than ten years ago, and even the second essay, Souza's oldest published text in the book, is still a valuable essay today despite its "ripe old age." Much of what Souza has written on Macao, its commercial networks, and the Portuguese home-traders, their agents, and commodities edging into the wider trading world of the South China Sea, has changed and reconstructed existing perceptions of them. Therefore, it would make little or no sense to change the text, to introduce new unimportant data, or to modernize the bibliography, given their initial historiographic relevance. Nevertheless, Souza must have felt the need to include in the preface a lengthy explanation for his heuristic, hermeneutic choices and for the evolution of the book's first paper (xii-xiii), which serves as an introduction to the book and was published in a collection of studies dealing with India and the Indian Ocean edited by Ashin Das Gupta and Michael N. Pearson.⁶ What is notable is that this contribution once again

⁵ Leonard Blussé and Femme S. Gaastra, eds., *On the Eighteenth Century as a Category of Asian History: Van Leur in Retrospect* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 1998).

⁶ Ashin Das Gupta and Michael Naylor Pearson, eds., *India and the Indian Ocean, 1500-1800* (Calcutta: Oxford University Press, 1987).

involved China and the South China Sea.

Commerce and commercial history is the nexus binding these thirteen texts with its agents and commodities during the Early Modern Age when globalization put into contact distant and different men, markets, and merchandise. Souza clearly favors an earlier globalization in place and working since the sixteenth century, siding with Dennis O. Flynn and Arturo Giráldez in their debate against Kevin O'Rourke and Jeffrey G. Williamson. His own research led him to conclude in the sixth and eleventh papers that a few commodities were qualitatively important to establish a first global age after 1500, when merchandise like tobacco traveled around the world a few years after its discovery in America and directly impacted the lives and purses of people living in Asia and elsewhere. The same is true for other Asian commodities, including the traditional spices, among which Souza studies the Sri Lankan cinnamon (*Cinnamomum verum* J. Presl) in the book's final paper. An innovation led by the Portuguese in world trade, Sri Lankan cinnamon brought social changes to the island as the Portuguese pressed the locals to produce more and tried to manipulate Sinhalese caste obligations to increase production in the early seventeenth century. Yet, he could have pointed out more cases, namely Indian indigo (*Indigofera tinctoria* L.). Portuguese New Christian private traders abandoned the trade of Indian indigo to Europe around 1615 because they had easy access to the more abundant and cheap Guatemalan variety. Moreover, globalization produced dependencies, changed habits, and introduced disruptions in traditional producing markets. In the sixth paper, for instance, Souza refers to the introduction of Brazilian tobacco in Asia as an attempt to revive the declining *Carreira da Índia* by connecting Bahia with Goa and Macao and by introducing a monopoly for its sale in *Estado da Índia* to boost revenues. However, he fails to understand that the Portuguese had once more lost the world distribution battle to the Dutch and the English in the last quarter of the seventeenth century, which led the Brazilian plantation owners to try to find surrogate markets in order to survive. These

surrogate markets, namely in Asia, proved to be too small and competitive for Brazilian tobacco: the Dutch and the English started sending their own Caribbean and American tobacco to Asia, where their mildness put the harsh Brazilian brand out of business and restrained its consumption to the *Estado da Índia* and little else. If Souza had read Jean-Baptiste Nardi's paper on this trade, he would have discovered that the Portuguese authorities in Goa were burning old and damaged tobacco since the end of the 1600s because of a decrease in local demand.⁷ Curiously, Brazilian tobacco was preferred in China, which explains the interest to establish direct commercial voyages between Brazil and Macao in the eighteenth century, and the wish to create a company and a monopoly in this trade around 1735, which failed to come to fruition as the Crown wanted to maintain its own monopoly. For a historian so interested in the history of the social lives of things, he could have noticed this connection and globalization from orders of "tobacco leaf" porcelain by and for the Portuguese and British markets in the eighteenth century.

Other commodities had a more regional impact in Asia than a global drive, namely opium, zinc, sugar, and alum, though Souza notes that the effects of globalization could be witnessed in the Asian textile industry from the use of American dyes like brazilwood (*Caesalpinia echinata* Lam.) with the traditional sappanwood (*Caesalpinia sappan* L.). These commodities have a life, and some, such as opium and tobacco, were acquired tastes in regions outside their place of origin. Such a case was that of modern-day Indonesia in the eleventh paper, though the inducer in this case had the monopoly of sale, a characteristic shared by European empires in Asia in spite of the existence of an open market for opium and tobacco buyers. Yet, commodities depend on markets and its agents, which is the other significant and important part of this collection of

⁷ Jean-Baptiste Nardi, "Le commerce du tabac vers l'Inde Portugaise du XVIIe au XIXe siècle," *Moyen Orient et Océan Indien* 6 (1989): 165-176.

papers, because Souza gives equal importance to every trading group involved in commerce. As previously mentioned, he has been innovative in terms of identifying connections between Portuguese home-traders of Macao, their networks, trading diaspora, and their “contra natura” relation with Dutch Batavia. Archives and libraries in Portugal are less rewarding for the period earlier than 1700 in regards to long-term series and private entrepreneurs beyond the Crown control. From conducting research in Dutch archives, Souza seems to have discovered how to assess Portuguese home-trade in Asia using the old Batavian records and the surviving documents seized in Portuguese owned ships, as can be seen through the fourth and fifth papers. He thus tries to avoid the Eurocentric trap and provides an analytically rich and diversified image of the trading world of merchants: dealing with opium in Batavia beyond the general denomination of “Chinese,” opening the road to reconstruct individual and group biographies, strategies, and itineraries, and crossing references with sources of other types (epigraphy) or origins.

As Souza himself is well aware of, it is not always possible to clearly identify by name a merchant trading in a given place, since sources usually describe him as belonging to a broader social category (e.g., “Malays” or “Indians”), or because his name appears regularly broken beyond repair, sometimes through multiple readings. This seems to be the case of the name of the ship used by a Portuguese colonial administrator called Manuel de Sousa de Meneses. The name in this case appears as Fatemurad [Fateh Murad], but is rendered Fateh Moula by Souza based on the advice of Lakshmi Subramanian, when it seems phonetically impossible to transform the “r” sound into that of “l” (V, 49). This excellent study is about the involvement in private trade of an official whose biography has been reconstructed and whose career repeats an established pattern known since the sixteenth century of having given birth to the social hybrid of the squire-merchant. The study also reconstructs the complex trading world of late seventeenth century India, when Indian merchants used European figureheads for their business or

had them as minor partners to avoid the capture of their ship by Dutch, English, French, and even Portuguese patrolling vessels. Souza seems less at ease with the reality to the west of the Strait of Malacca, as it is a world and culture different from the South China Sea that has been dominated by the Overseas Chinese, although the Indian trader is a familiar sight and presence in continental and insular Southeast Asia since the first centuries of the Christian Era. This can also be seen in the third paper about imperial defense and Cochim's financial assistance to Malacca. Despite the massive readings done by Souza and the fairly complete bibliography for the Spanish side of the Catholic Monarchy (1580-1640), the paper does have major bibliographic deficiencies: namely, the study of António Manuel Hespanha on the early modern Portuguese state, with more recent demographic data regarding Portugal's demography, as well as the studies by Teresa Ferreira Rodrigues on the same subject.⁸

Most of the essays in the book are set in and around the complex and multiform world of trade in the South China Sea. Still, Souza establishes connections with a wider arena to include the trans-Pacific commercial route to America, and the connections with India and Europe, which shaped the first globalization. It is an economic history of commerce, referring to key commodities and heralding a new global world characterized by a quicker circulation of goods, capital, and men with an ever present social dimension. Souza vividly portrays this multifarious world with empirical abundance provided by countless hours spent in archives and libraries around the world, but always structured in sound ideas so that the reader is offered a solid text to study and to reflect upon.

⁸ António Manuel Hespanha, *As vésperas do Leviatã: Instituições e poder político em Portugal, século XVII* (Coimbra, Portugal: Livraria Almedina, 1994).