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Historians of Southeast Asia have been inspired by Fernand Braudel's classic The Mediterranean *because of its focus on the sea and multidisciplinary approach, and because it seems to solve two recalcitrant historiographical problems: the definition of time and space, and the reconciliation of local identities and external influence. But while Braudel's prose and intellectual ambition are justly seen as inspiring, conceptual confusion and analytic evasion limit his contribution.*

Many a scholar wrestling with the complexities of time, space and 'the rise of the West' has found a reassuring point of departure in the authoritative works of Fernand Braudel. Academic entrepreneurs also know that the 'Braudel' brand consistently claims an impressive degree of recognition in the intellectual marketplace. Most students could probably link him with the *Annales* school and something called 'structural history', and many might even be able to describe his famous division of time into three levels – roughly identifiable with geographical and social change (the *longue durée* and *conjonctures*), and the course of events (*événements*).[1] To the prosaic Anglophone historian, there seems something quintessentially French in Braudel's flair and ambition. However, the attraction of Braudel's books is, I suspect, due more to the great themes he tackled and to the power of his prose than to the precision of his thought or his contributions to methodology. In fact, his collected writings *On history* only produced a slim and rather limited volume. But in his two great works on *The Mediterranean* and on *Civilization and capitalism*, he combined a sweeping vision of history with a rich accumulation of detail and anecdote that is tremendously seductive.[2] Moreover, he

1   For an exhaustive collection of reviews and articles on the *Annales* school see the four-volume *The Annales school: critical assessments*, ed. Stuart Clark (London and New York: Routledge, 1999); the third volume is devoted to Braudel. A succinct introduction can be found in George G. Iggers, *Historiography in the twentieth century: From scientific objectivity to the postmodern challenge* (Hanover, NH and London: Wesleyan University Press, 1997), ch. 5. See also the four articles in *Itinerario*, 5, 2 (1981): H. L. Wesseling, 'Fernand Braudel, historian of the "longue durée"' (pp. 16-29); Herman van der Wee, 'The global world view of Fernand Braudel' (pp. 30-36); Peter Burke, '"Material civilisation" in the work of Fernand Braudel' (pp. 37-43); and Frédéric Mauro, 'Le temps du monde pour Fernand Braudel' (pp. 44-52).
2   Fernand Braudel, *On history* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1980). Braudel's *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II* was first published in 1949 (Paris: A. Colin); a heavily revised second edition appeared from the same publisher in 1966. The English translation of the second edition by Sian Reynolds was issued by Harper/Collins in 1973, which was then followed by a paperback

anticipated major intellectual concerns of the second half of the twentieth century, when 'progress' was no longer seen as totally beneficent, and decolonisation demanded a new approach to world history. Immanuel Wallerstein, for example, whose theory of the 'world-system' did much to shape scholarly and radical debate in the 1970s and 1980s, drew his primary inspiration from Braudel.[3]

If early twentieth-century German historiography emphasised the state, jurisprudence and administration, the historians of the *Annales* looked more to geography, economics and anthropology. They focused on material and cultural linkages at either regional or supra-national levels, while their abandoning of linear time was informed by a questioning of progress and Western superiority.[4] This sensitivity to the local and personal, and their refusal to privilege the state, were very appealing to post-war historians seeking new paradigms. More recent preoccupations with globalisation, community and identity only strengthened this appeal. Like their colleagues, students of Southeast Asia also questioned a 'regnant paradigm' whereby they were expected to validate the movement towards nationhood and modernisation.[5] Indeed, Southeast Asianists seemed to have a particularly acute need for a legitimising lineage, as their region's independent states and national identities seemed uncertain when compared to those of their Asian neighbours.

Southeast Asia's ambiguous boundaries

A look at a modern map of Asia seems to reveal the reasons for this insecurity. To the west is the solid thrust of the Indian sub-continent, to the east the bulk of China, while Southeast Asia straggles in between, with its ragged coasts, elongated peninsula and scattered islands. The primary arena for much of Southeast Asia is the South China Sea, together with the smaller Sulu, Celebes, Banda and Java Seas which flow into it. These waters connect the east coast of the Malay Peninsula, Vietnam, southern China, and the Philippines. The other great marine focus of the region is the Bay of Bengal, which not only links Sri Lanka, the Coromandel Coast and Bengal to Myanmar (Burma), Thailand, the western Malay Peninsula and northern Sumatra, but also offers indirect access to other rich markets further west. Around the tip of India lies the Arabian Sea, leading to the harbours of the Gulfs of Persia and Oman, the Red Sea and the Mediterranean.

edition in two volumes: *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean world in the age of Philip II* (London: Fontana/Collins, 1975), the version used here. Most of the book was actually written before 1939. The three volumes on capitalism were first published as *Civilisation matérielle, économie, capitalisme* (Paris: A. Colin, 1967-79); then in English as *Civilisation and capitalism, 15th-18th century* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982).

3   Immanuel Wallerstein, *The modern world system. Capitalist agriculture and the origins of the European world economy in the sixteenth century* (New York: Academic Press, 1974). On these debates see the comments by an active participant: Andre Gunder Frank, *ReOrient: Global economy in an Asian age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998). See also the programmes and publications of the Fernand Braudel Center for the Study of Economics, Historical Systems and Civilisations (est. 1976) of Binghamton University in New York, particularly Satoshi Ikeda, 'The history of the world system vs. the history of East-Southeast Asia', *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)*, 19, 1 (1996): 49-77.

4   Iggers, *Historiography in the twentieth century*; see also Immanuel Wallerstein, 'Fernand Braudel, historian, "homme de la conjoncture"', *Radical History Review*, 26 (1982):105-19, reprinted in Clark ed., *Annales school*, vol. 1, pp. 96-109.

5   Ruth McVey, 'Change and continuity in Southeast Asian studies', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* [henceforth *JSEAS*], 26, 1 (1995): 3.

These fabled waters might have seemed remote from Southeast Asia, but in reality goods moved so frequently between the Bay of Bengal and the South China Sea that both formed part of the wider Indian Ocean trading system.[6] Each had its own specific integrating rhythms, but the links between them helped determine their internal patterns of exchange. The crucial transit zone, the Melaka Straits, cannot be understood simply in terms of either the Bay of Bengal or the South China Sea, but only with reference to their connection. Sanjay Subrahmanyam describes Asia – seen through Portuguese eyes – as centred upon a long north-west/south-east axis stretching from the Red Sea and Persian Gulf to Maluku. Its fulcrum was Melaka, where three interlocking systems met: one going west past Cape Comorin and one east into the archipelago and the South China Sea, while the third reached north into the Bay of Bengal. He observes that 'Melaka – like Aceh later in the sixteenth century – was at one and the same time a part of all three networks, and of none of them.'[7] Such geographical ambivalence blurred regional definition.

Southeast Asians were involved in both long-distance and local networks, reinforcing identities to which modern political borders were utterly irrelevant. Moreover, physical location did not necessarily determine, let alone fix, membership in an apparently 'geographic' category: the density of connections and strength of economic or cultural orientation could be more decisive. R. Bin Wong cites Braudel's description of Spain 'leaving the Mediterranean' to focus on an Atlantic world, and Japan's departure from Asia as it increasingly looked to Europe, to underline this point.[8] Subrahmanyam concludes that the tension between the analytic need to divide and the recalcitrant reality of such connections could be reconciled by focusing on a specific theme and time and then drawing the geographical lines accordingly. This would free the Bay of Bengal, for example, from the 'historiographical limbo' of being divided between South and Southeast Asia, a fate that would deny its long history of integrating interaction.[9]

Such conceptual conundrums complicate not only the establishing of borders around Southeast Asia, but also the nature of division within it. The region is often seen as comprising a 'mainland' zone (Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, Myanmar), as distinct from the 'archipelagos' (Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei and the Philippines), a category also referred to as 'maritime' or 'island' Southeast Asia. These boundaries reflect geography, but have also been influenced by perceptions of the dominance of specific religions within each group. The Buddhism and Confucianism of the mainland linked these territories to neighbouring countries further north and west, while the Islam and Christianity characteristic of the islands were more remote in origin. The contrast

6   K. H. Chaudhuri, *Trade and civilisation in the Indian Ocean: An economic history from the rise of Islam to 1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); *India and the Indian Ocean 1500-1800*, ed. Ashin Das Gupta and M. N. Pearson (Calcutta: Oxford University Press, 1987); Kenneth McPherson, *The Indian Ocean. A history of people and the sea* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993); Eric Tagliacozzo, 'Trade, production and incorporation. The Indian Ocean in flux, 1600-1900', *Itinerario*, 26, 1 (2002): 75-106.
7   Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Improvising empire: Portuguese trade and settlement on the Bay of Bengal 1500-1700* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. xiv. See also Denys Lombard, 'The Indian world as seen from Acheh in the seventeenth century', in *Commerce and culture in the Bay of Bengal, 1500-1800*, ed. Om Prakash and Denys Lombard (New Delhi: Manohar, 1999), pp. 183-96.
8   R. Bin Wong, 'Entre monde et nation: Les régions braudeliennes en Asie', *Annales: Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, 56, 1 (2001): 5-42.
9   Subrahmanyam, *Improvising empire*, pp. xiii–xiv. See also Willem van Schendel, 'Geographies of knowing, geographies of ignorance: Jumping scale in Southeast Asia', in *Locating Southeast Asia*, ed. Remco Raben and Henk Schulte-Nordholt (forthcoming).

between the two zones is conventionally reinforced by emphasising differences in economic focus, with intensive rice cultivation seen as typifying the former, and trade the latter. This disparity in resource mobilisation reflected and influenced the dynamics of power, and diverging political trends seemed to reinforce variation. Major states emerged on the mainland, while maritime polities tended to fragment. Java is usually presented as the exception that proves the rule.

It is worth noting that the 'maritime' societies typically faced the South China Sea, while the 'mainland' was more oriented towards the Bay of Bengal. Historians had little knowledge of the important overland traffic linking communities in mainland Southeast Asia, Yunnan and Assam, and may well have underestimated both land and sea commerce. An undifferentiated focus on Southeast Asia as a whole could also lead to an undervaluation of the relatively strong Indian trade centred on the Bay. After all, from the later seventeenth century onward, merchants and shippers from the sub-continent retreated from the Malay World in the face of Dutch, Chinese and later English advances. This early modern era, when European mercantile activity generated substantial documentation, came to be regarded as a baseline against which subsequent change was measured. All too easily, this baseline image could also be projected back into the past as the 'traditional' situation, with long-distance trade in the archipelagos seen as typically the domain of foreigners, while mainland commerce was downplayed and regarded as subordinate to agrarian interests.

The agendas of colonial administrators and their heirs (local political elites) may also have been a factor. Myanmar, which under the British was administered from India, only has access to the Bay, and is usually categorised as solidly 'mainland'. Thailand, however, which borders both seas and hence has enjoyed commercial advantages, has seen its traditional 'mainland' image qualified by greater recognition of the significance of its trade.[10] Both categories have their anomalies: the Hispano-American and Christian Philippines sits uneasily alongside the Muslim Dutch Indies and British Malaya as part of the 'island world'.[11] Vietnam, meanwhile, is particularly problematic because of its close ties to China; Grant Evans has concluded that 'Vietnam is politically part of Southeast Asia, but…it is part of an East Asian cultural area.'[12]

The uncertainties underlying assessments of Southeast Asian identities were paralleled by an implicit emphasis on the region's subaltern status. China and India were great economic centres, the products of their manufactures admired throughout the known world. Ceramics, silks and other textiles were sought by Persians and Romans

10 See Chris Baker, 'Ayutthaya rising: From land or sea?', in the present issue; *From Japan to Arabia: Ayutthaya's maritime relations with Asia*, ed. Kennon Breazeale (Bangkok: Toyota Textbooks Project, 1999); Dhiravat na Pombejra, 'Crown trade and court politics in Ayutthaya during the reign of King Narai (1658-88)', in *The Southeast Asian port and polity: Rise and demise*, ed. J. Kathirathamby-Wells and John Villiers (Singapore, Singapore University Press, 1990), pp. 127-42; David K. Wyatt, 'Family politics in seventeenth and eighteenth century Siam', in *Papers from a conference on Thai studies in honor of William J. Gedney*, ed. Robert Bickner *et al.* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Center for South and Southeast Asia Studies, 1986), pp. 257-86.
11 As an overriding category 'Muslim' is also too simplistic; see the subtle analysis in Andre Wink, '"Al-Hind". India and Indonesia in the Islamic world-economy, c. 700-1800 A.D.', *Itinerario*, 12, 1 (1988): 33-72; these ideas are being further explored in a series of volumes entitled *Al Hind: The making of the Indo-Islamic world*, ed. Andre Wink (Leiden and New York: Brill, 1991–).
12 Grant Evans, 'Between the global and the local there are regions, culture areas and national states: A review article', *JSEAS*, 33, 1 (2002): 151.

alike. However, the commodities of Southeast Asia – most famously Maluku's spices – came almost raw from its forests and seas. When the Europeans finally opened direct maritime contact with Southeast Asia in the late fifteenth century, they found Gujerati and Chinese skippers dominating long-distance trade. Little remained of the impressive role once played by Malays and Javanese in earlier trans-Asian commercial systems.[13] The kingdoms of Southeast Asia seemed to be either isolated in the interior, focusing inward on their rice-fields, or else petty coastal chiefdoms and sultanates hardly worthy of the name. Their very religions appeared to be borrowed, mutant forms of the great faiths of India and the Middle East. The newcomers drew the convenient conclusion that this was a recipient and peripheral region where an accident of geography had exposed primitive peoples to the rich currents of passing trade. Colonialism could thus only be of benefit.

This image has since been discarded, but has left its legacy. The issue is one of striking a balance, recognising on the one hand the identity of the Southeast Asians themselves, and on the other the impact of external influence, borne most notably by the trading ships moving within and between the South China Sea and the Bay of Bengal. One logical response is to see this exposure as a source of strength and indigenous authenticity. 'Paradoxically', writes Anthony Reid, 'the diversity of Southeast Asia and its openness to outside influences were among the defining characteristics of the region'.[14] Craig Reynolds, however, comments that this attribution of tolerance 'is a clear manifestation of the Western liberal imagination projected onto the region's past'.[15] Denys Lombard, with an approach not dissimilar to that of Reid, sought a more specific answer. He recommended the study of 'networks and synchronisms': the reconstruction of contacts between regions, the untangling of linkages (Chinese, Muslim and Christian), and the locating of 'synchronisms', moments in time where parallel processes occur throughout the region, from the prehistoric Dong Son culture to the end of the classical cities. In his three-volume *magnum opus, Le carrefour javanais,* Lombard explored the potential of these ideas in impressive detail.[16]

Networks, syncretism, tolerance and openness can all be presented as positive, but they do not really constitute a solid core which can be conveniently used to delineate a territory. Initially historians of Southeast Asia sought to legitimise their field by emphasising a common cultural matrix, with Dong Son drums confirming pre-historic ties. 'Indianisation', with the widespread role of the *devaraja*, reinforced this foundation, for although it may have seemed to confirm the image of Southeast Asia as a recipient, it also created an apparently shared point of departure for the subsequent cataloguing of kingdoms and dynasties.[17] Traditional historians could then feel at home, reducing

13 Pierre-Yves Manguin, 'The vanishing *jong*: Insular Southeast Asian fleets in trade and war (fifteenth to seventeenth centuries)', in *Southeast Asia in the early modern era: Trade, power and belief,* ed. Anthony Reid (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), pp. 197-213.
14 Anthony Reid, 'Introduction: a time and a place', in Reid ed., *Southeast Asia in the early modern era,* p. 3. See also John N. Miksic, 'Urbanisation and social change: The case of Sumatra', *Archipel,* 37 (1989): 3-30.
15 Craig Reynolds, 'A new look at old Southeast Asia', *The Journal of Asian Studies* [henceforth *JAS*], 54, 2 (1995): 434.
16 Denys Lombard, 'Networks and synchronisms in Southeast Asian history', *JSEAS*, 26, 1 (1995): 10-16; idem., *Le carrefour javanais: Essai d'histoire globale,* 3 vols. (Paris: École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, 1990).
17 Reynolds, 'New look', p. 423. Oliver W. Wolters, *History, culture and region in Southeast Asian perspectives,* rev. edn (Ithaca: Cornell University Southeast Asia Program, 1999).

Southeast Asian history to the fluctuating fortunes of great rulers and colonial progress, neatly, if anachronistically, packaged within ASEAN state borders. As the twentieth century advanced, decolonisation and the Cold War brought a welcome and relatively lucrative boom in area studies programmes. However, the relatively short lineage of 'Southeast Asia' made its practitioners somewhat defensive *vis-à-vis* the heavyweight Indologists and Sinologists, and so they had to re-define and defend their turf, establishing not only their region's identity, but also its claims to a distinct indigenous civilisation, seen as essential to the recognition of local agency.[18] Given the fact that the 'regnant paradigm' emphasised state formation and the road to modernity, it was inevitable that agency be seen as located in states and cities. Reynolds has described the resulting search for 'authentic' origins as the driving force of much Southeast Asian history writing.[19] Subsequent political and economic shifts, epitomised in the much-discussed 'globalisation', led to a decline in regional typologies and renewed doubts as to the usefulness of 'Southeast Asia', which were part of a more general dissatisfaction with established categories.[20]

All histories of Southeast Asia seem to begin by considering what the term does, could or should mean. As Lombard remarked, 'It is truly not easy to write a "well-integrated" history of Southeast Asia. If today, anybody feels such a necessity, the procedure is far from obvious…The main difficulty is in fact to transcend the heaviness of regional, colonial and then nationalistic histories which have strongly partitioned off the historical space.'[21] Authors of early textbooks tried various solutions, ranging from D. G. E. Hall's classic 1955 country-by-country survey to the little–used but ambitious integrated 1968 history by John Bastin and Harry Benda. It is indicative of a persisting ambivalence that perhaps the most successful introductory text was called *In search of Southeast Asia*; it presented both thematic and separate national sections. The more recent *Cambridge history of Southeast Asia* slices Southeast Asia into topical and chronological chunks, but imposes geographical unity. Both divisions and conjunctions can seem clumsy.[22]

18 That this defensiveness is not entirely unfounded can be seen by the relative allocation of space in *Asia in Western and world history: A guide for teaching*, ed. Ainslie T. Embree and Carol Gluck (Armonk, NY and London: East Gate, 1997).

19 Reynolds, 'New look'. See also Heather Sutherland, 'Contingent devices', in Raben and Schulte-Nordholt ed., *Locating Southeast Asia*. Wolters, *History, region and culture*, p. 152 note 153, draws on Tony Day, 'Ties that (un)bind: Families and states in premodern Southeast Asia', *JAS*, 55, 2 (1996): 384-409; Wolters comments on the debate on centralisation in Southeast Asia as well. A critical discussion can also be found in Sanjay Subrahmanyam, 'Connected histories: Notes towards a reconfiguration of early modern Eurasia', *Modern Asian Studies*, 31, 3 (1997): 735-62.

20 For an impression see Heather Sutherland, 'Writing Indonesian history in the Netherlands: Rethinking the past', *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde*, 150 (1994): 785-804; *Unsettled frontiers and transnational linkages: New tasks for the historian of modern Asia*, ed. Leo Douw (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1997); Craig Reynolds and Ruth McVey, *Southeast Asian studies: Reorientations* (Ithaca: Cornell University Southeast Asia Program, 1998); and various 1990s issues of *Items*, published by the Social Science Research Council in New York.

21 Lombard, 'Networks and synchronisms', p. 10.

22 D. G. E. Hall, *A history of South-East Asia* (London, Macmillan, 1955); John Bastin and Harry J. Benda, *A history of modern Southeast Asia: Colonialism, nationalism and decolonization* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1968). *In search of Southeast Asia: A modern history*, ed. David J. Steinberg (New York: Praeger, 1971); a revised edition was published in 1987, and a third edition is currently in preparation. *The Cambridge history of Southeast Asia*, ed. Nicholas Tarling (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); a slightly revised four-part paperback version followed in 1999.

The dominance of the apparently self-evident categorisations noted by Lombard increases with growing European power over – and documentation of – the region. The more recent the history, the higher the walls, and it becomes increasingly difficult to peer over them. The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 is seen as opening Southeast Asia to 'high imperialism', from which point a seemingly inevitable momentum carried the region through conventional phases characterised by subjection to the world market and colonial manipulation, and ultimately by resistance and independence. Borders were in every sense increasingly well–defined and confidently proclaimed in contrasting cartographic colours. French, British, Dutch and Spanish spheres of influence became solid colonial states, only to see their white-washed capitals taken over by the nationalist products of their orderly schools. A relatively simple task awaits the researcher who accepts these essentially bureaucratic boundaries, as they frame not only the ambitions of competing elites, but also the organisation of the main source collections. Although Lombard's comment might seem to confirm that the difficulty of transcending such partitions is greatest for historians of 'modern Southeast Asia', it could be argued that in some contexts the opposite applies. The apparently clear patterns of twentieth-century state-centred history invite disruption by sceptics, while ancient dynasties, presented as embodying lasting cultural values, can prove surprisingly resistant to interrogation.

The carving-up of the region into a mosaic of European possessions, and later into nation-states, created obvious possibilities for comparative work, as in the 1940s publications of the Institute for Pacific Relations. However, these remained the exception to the rule. Most scholars were content to remain in their own monolingual (ex-)colonial cocoons. Gradually these boundaries began to chafe, and a process of historiographical decolonisation began, years after political liberation. New emphases emerged which reflected the need to place imperial incorporation in perspective, locating it in a wider timeframe and acknowledging the role of previously ignored or subaltern actors.

Innovative calls for a new history came in the 1960s. John Smail sought an autonomous perspective, while Benda's emphasis was on long-term processes, drawing on his familiarity with pre-war French and Dutch studies of early history – *terra incognita* for most Anglophone Southeast Asianists at that time.[23] B. J. O. Schrieke's essay on changing power relations in the Indonesian archipelago in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries had been originally published in 1925, and Jacob van Leur's work on early Indonesian trade and the 'world of Southeast Asia' dated from the 1930s. Both had appeared in English translation before Benda's influential article, which played an important part in introducing their ideas to a wider public. Schrieke's contrast between Java's inland agrarian and coastal trading polities and van Leur's insistence on the importance of Asian trade helped shape the contours of subsequent research.[24] A more

23 John Smail, 'On the possibility of an autonomous history of modern Southeast Asia', *Journal of Southeast Asian History*, 2 (1961): 72-102; Harry J. Benda, 'The structure of Southeast Asian history: Some preliminary observations', reprinted in *Continuity and change in Southeast Asia: Collected journal articles of Harry J. Benda* (New Haven: Yale University Southeast Asian Studies, 1972), pp. 121-53.
24 Bertram J. O. Schrieke, 'The shifts in political and economic power in the Indonesian archipelago in the sixteenth and seventeenth century', in his *Indonesian sociological studies* (The Hague: W. van Hoeve, 1955-7), vol. 1, pp. 1-82. Jacob van Leur, *Indonesian trade and society* (The Hague: W. van Hoeve, 1967); on van Leur and his ideas see Jaap Vogel, 'J.C. van Leur, 1908-1942: A short life in history', in *On the eighteenth century as a category of Asian history. Van Leur in retrospect*, ed. Leonard Blussé and Femme Gaastra (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998), pp. 13-38, and the other essays in the same volume.

comparative approach to early history developed. Much of this revisionist work bore its first fruits in the 1980s and concerned the period before 1800, which was particularly rewarding given the rich archival resources.[25]

The expansion of interest in maritime Southeast Asia was preceded by the creation in the 1960s of an impressive body of scholarship on the Indian Ocean. This had its roots in post-war reassessments of the great European trading concerns, particularly the English and Dutch East India companies. Many of the Indian Ocean specialists also documented the sub-continent's trade with Southeast Asia, and through Southeast Asia with China. Their skilful exploitation of the rich Company archives exposed patterns of Asian interaction. The link to the rediscovered work by van Leur and, to a lesser extent, Schrieke was quickly made. Such sea-centred approaches seemed well suited to Southeast Asianists' preoccupations and potential sources, particularly as they appeared to offer a chance to transcend spatial and temporal categorisations that were increasingly experienced as problematic.

Delineating space and time

Before the emergence of such border-crossing studies, most work on Southeast Asia was firmly contained within 'national' boundaries, treating kingdoms and cities as self-evident categories and Southeast Asia as merely the sum of these constituent parts. But for Southeast Asia, as for the Mediterranean, this was far too simplistic. As Braudel wrote in his Preface to the first edition of *La Méditerranée*:

> [I]t will be no easy task to discover exactly what the historical character of the Mediterranean has been… It is not an autonomous world, nor is it the preserve of any one power. Woe betide the historian who thinks that this preliminary interrogation is unnecessary, that the Mediterranean as an entity needs no definition because it has long been clearly defined…The question of boundaries is the first to be encountered; from it all others flow. To draw a boundary around anything is to define, analyse, and reconstruct it, in this case to select, indeed adopt, a philosophy of history.[26]

The deconstruction and redrawing of borders are fundamental to both analysis and identity formation. If once the emphasis was on shared characteristics within a category when opposed to 'the other', since the appearance of Frederik Barth's work attention has been increasingly focused on mechanisms of boundary maintenance.[27] For historians, the equivalent concern has generated a whole new field of study, that of 'borderlands'. Establishing limits is also central to all levels of politics: the international arena, intra-state machinations, or the contest for influence and power within local communities or specific institutions. As we have seen, boundaries seem particularly crucial for Southeast Asia, because they are intimately linked to sensitivities about identity and agency. While the debate has remained focused on the degree of coherence within the geo-political region, a related discussion has highlighted disagreement over the extent to which historical trajectories were shared in the early modern era. Spatial and temporal divisions

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25 Wolters, *History, culture and region*; Leonard Y. Andaya and Barbara W. Andaya, 'Southeast Asia in the early modern period: Twenty-five years on', *JSEAS*, 26, 1 (1995): 92-8; Lombard, 'Networks and synchronisms'.
26 Braudel, *Mediterranean,* pp. 17-18.
27 Frederik Barth, *Ethnic groups and boundaries* (Bergen: Universitetsforlaget, 1969).

may be selected, constructed and imposed as necessary conceptual categories, but they can all too easily be accepted as representing 'reality'.[28]

Donald Emmerson, a political scientist, has described 'Southeast Asia' as 'contingent and residual', produced by analysts from outside the region who needed a designation for the space between China and India.[29] As colonial frameworks weakened, new geo-political arenas were emerging. Indeed, by the 1940s the term had already become common in international relations and cultural analysis, and was soon institutionalised. Military and political alliances like SEAC, SEATO and ASEAN were joined by university departments of area studies. 'Southeast Asia' became an accepted framework for academic administration; it offered an appropriately sized body of subjects and sources, and gradually developed an intellectual genealogy (albeit a shallow one), and a canon.[30] Southeast Asianists mobilised to protect and expand their field, seeking funding and space in teaching and research programmes. They represented Southeast Asia, describing its history and cultures to their students, foundations and administrations; to their governments and the media; and even to the peoples of the region themselves. Consultants in fields ranging from the economic to the military also added Southeast Asia to their portfolio of territorial expertise. Sanjay Subrahmanyam is typically trenchant on 'Southeast Asia':

> Area studies can very rapidly become parochial, and we often see an insistence, taken to the limits of the absurd, concerning the unity of 'Southeast Asia'… It is as if these conventional geographical units of analysis, fortuitously defined as givens for the intellectually slothful, and the result of complex (even murky) processes of academic and non-academic engagement, somehow become real and overwhelming. Having helped create these Frankenstein's monsters, we are obliged to praise them for their beauty, rather than grudgingly acknowledge their limited functional utility.[31]

As Lombard observed, a similar tendency for common categories to assume an unquestioned life of their own can be seen in the partitioning of time.[32] Conventional periodisation recognises breaks in the description of the Southeast Asian past around the third century BCE, when Chinese sources introduce (written) 'history'. The latter is then divided into the 'classical' and then the 'early modern' eras, roughly corresponding to the ninth to fourteenth and fifteenth to mid-eighteenth or nineteenth centuries, respectively.[33] The 'classical' period is so called because the great early kingdoms of Pagan, Sukhotai, Angkor, Dai Viet, Srivijaya and Majapahit are regarded as forerunners of later

28 This is exemplified in various publications by Anthony Reid, Victor Lieberman and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, cited below; see also Sutherland, 'Contingent devices'.
29 Donald K. Emmerson, '"Southeast Asia": What's in a name?', *JSEAS*, 15, 1 (1984): 18. There were, of course, other and older designations for the region, such as those by Chinese or Arab navigators; see Anthony Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce 1450-1680, Volume One: The lands below the winds* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), p. 6. While they had their own rationale for the boundaries they drew, including differentiation between mainland and island Southeast Asia, there is no reason to assume they were any less contingent (or more 'authentic') than the modern European usage.
30 McVey, 'Change and continuity'.
31 Subrahmanyam, 'Connected histories', p. 742.
32 For a clear and concise presentation of the conventional view, see David J. Steinberg, 'Themes in Southeast Asian history', in Embree and Gluck ed., *Asia in Western history*, pp. 663-82.
33 See Andaya and Andaya, 'Southeast Asia in the early modern period'; Subrahmanyam, 'Connected histories'; and Tarling, *Cambridge History*, vol. 1, parts 1 and 2.

states, and as embodying cultural ideals.[34] Then came a descent into relative darkness till the mid-1400s, when a burgeoning 'Age of Commerce', as described by Anthony Reid, was characterised by flourishing international trade, rich cities and vibrant intellectual and religious exchange.[35] In the mid-seventeenth century, again according to Reid, this virtuous circle was broken. Southeast Asians turned their backs to the seas, entering a period of relative isolation and stagnation as European economic and then political ambitions prevailed. Standard accounts often depict Southeast Asians as only being able to recapture the initiative with the rise of twentieth-century nationalist movements. However, more recent considerations of the interaction between Europeans and regional societies during the 'long eighteenth century' have emphasised the latter's local initiatives and successful adaptation before their final subjugation to North Atlantic powers.[36]

Both history and geography are central to identity. 'Golden ages' are often part of the genealogy of power; colonial scholars told stories of pacification and modernisation, while later leaders might choose to emphasise the heroism of the nationalist struggle or the religious transformation of Islamisation. Constructing such national myths and celebrating selected dates as symbolic markers can create an illusion of consensus and precision in narrating the past.[37] Many of Southeast Asia's geo-political boundaries were once primarily defined by similar conventions, although modern states are much more exact. Historians have to try and disentangle the complex strands of temporal and spatial categorisation which frame their research, and these strands can be linked in unexpected ways. Disputes over periodisation may also lead to disagreements over the definition of place. Questioning turning points presumed to be shared by various regions can lead to a rejection of uniform timelines, and hence to denial of a common history and identity and thus to a redrawing of borders. For example, the debate on the 'unity' of Southeast Asia in the seventeenth century is characterised by dissent as to both the geographic definition of Southeast Asia and the extent of a shared chronological trajectory. This is fundamental to criticisms of Anthony Reid's *Age of commerce* by Barbara Andaya, Victor Lieberman, Craig Reynolds and Sanjay Subrahmanyam.[38] But

34 *Southeast Asia in the 9th to 14th centuries*, ed. David Marr and Anthony Milner (Singapore and Canberra: ISEAS and Australian National University, 1986); Michael Aung-Thwin, 'The "classical" in Southeast Asia: the present in the past', *JSEAS*, 26, 1 (1995): 75-91; *idem., Myth and history in the historiography of early Burma. Paradigms, primary sources and prejudices* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1998).

35 Anthony Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce 1450-1680, Volume Two: Expansion and crisis* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).

36 *The last stand of Asian autonomies: Responses to modernity in the diverse states of Southeast Asia and Korea, 1750-1900*, ed. Anthony Reid (London: Macmillan, 1997); see also the essays in Blussé and Gaastra ed., *On the eighteenth century*, particularly J. Kathirathamby-Wells, 'The long eighteenth century and the new Age of Commerce in the Melaka Straits' (pp. 57-82) and David K. Wyatt, 'The eighteenth century in Southeast Asia' (pp. 39-56).

37 Heather Sutherland, 'Professional paradigms, politics and popular practice: Reflections on "Indonesian national history"', in *Nationalism and cultural revival in Southeast Asia: perspectives from the centre and the region*, ed. Sri Kuhnt-Saptodewo *et al.* (Wiesbaden: Harassowitz, 1997), pp. 83-98.

38 Craig Reynolds, 'Review of Anthony Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce, 1450-1680 Volume One*', *RIMA (Review of Indonesian and Malayan Affairs)*, 24 (1990): 177-80; Victor Lieberman, 'Local integration and Eurasian analogies: Structuring Southeast Asian history', *Modern Asian Studies*, 27, 3 (1993): 478-572; *idem.,* 'An Age of Commerce in Southeast Asia? Problems of regional coherence – a review article', *JAS*, 54, 3 (1995): 796-807; Barbara W. Andaya, 'The unity of Southeast Asia: Historical approaches and questions / a review article', *JSEAS*, 28, 1 (1997): 161-71; Subrahmanyam, 'Connected histories'. The existence – or not – of a common Eurasian historical trajectory is a major bone of contention in these debates; see also Frank, *ReOrient*, ch. 5 ('Horizontally integrative macrohistory').

just as spatial categorisations can be seen as 'contingent devices', attempts at periodisation should also be recognised as 'heuristic rather than substantive exercises'.[39] If this all seems rather abstract, help is at hand in the Braudelian model.

The Mediterranean analogy

Braudel thrives on paradox. Typically, he reconciles ostensibly incompatible ideas by combining them in powerful images, so that the delighted reader seems to be presented with an elegant resolution to an analytic impasse. Concerning time he writes:

> The basic problem…is…somehow to convey simultaneously both that conspicuous history which holds our attention by its continual and dramatic changes – and that other, submerged, history almost silent and always discreet, virtually unsuspected either by its observers or its participants, which is little touched by the obstinate erosion of time. This fundamental contradiction, which must always lie at the centre of our thought, can be a vital tool of knowledge and research.[40]

His famous solution was to recognise the three different rhythms referred to at the beginning of this article. 'The final effect then is to dissect history into various planes, or, to put it another way, to divide historical time into geographical time, social time, and individual time. Or, alternatively, to divide man into a multitude of selves.' This permitted him to combine the 'deep bone structure of the Mediterranean' with anecdote, 'that miscellany of trivia and daily happenings which rises like a cloud of dust from any civilisation'.[41]

Braudel believed that 'the long term always wins in the end', and that the individual was 'imprisoned within a destiny in which he himself has little hand', but once again he qualified his stance. His apparent dismissal of the significance of events, 'those essentially ephemeral but moving occurrences', is coupled with the observation that Benedetto Croce had argued 'not without reason, that any single event…contains in embryo the entire history of mankind'. Braudel also tried to unravel the manifold manifestations of culture and space. He saw the history of the Mediterranean as one of a collective destiny, shaped by the struggle between 'the two great Mediterranean civilisations, warring neighbours', the Muslim and the Christian.[42] Civilisations exist 'in a geographic area which has been structured by men and history. That is why there are cultural frontiers and cultural zones of amazing permanence: all the cross-fertilisation in the world will not alter them…Men as individuals may be false to them, but civilisations live on in their own way.'[43] These civilisations were shaped by contact – 'to live is to exchange' – as 'a living civilisation must be able not only to give but to receive and borrow'. However, 'a great civilisation can also be recognised by its refusal to borrow, by its resistance to certain alignments, by its resolute selection among the foreign influences offered to it'.[44]

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39 Subrahmanyam, 'Connected histories', p. 743 (contingent devices); on periodisation, see Christopher A. Bayley, 'Van Leur and the Indian eighteenth century', in Blussé and Gaastra ed., *On the eighteenth century*, p. 301.
40 Braudel, *Mediterranean*, p.16.
41 Ibid., pp. 21 (dissecting history), 1240 (bone structure), 758 (cloud of dust).
42 Ibid., pp. 1244 (events), 1243 (Croce), 759 (warring neighbours).
43 Ibid., p. 770.
44 Ibid., pp. 761, 764.

Braudel describes the resulting variety of the Mediterranean ports as an 'overwhelming carnival', suggesting that it could perhaps be concluded that

> the essential Mediterranean race is that which inhabits its extravagant cosmopolitan ports…a single race embracing all others. But this is patently absurd. The very multiplicity of colour indicates a diversity of elements: the variety proves that there has been no amalgamation, that distinct elements remain and can be isolated and recognised as one moves away from the big centres where they are hopelessly entangled.[45]

The Mediterranean is thus typified by a dynamic balance between interaction and separation, in which a fundamental and almost unchanging character is overlaid by a kaleidoscope of movement and variegation. For Braudel, however, this essentially local and identifiable Mediterranean was also part of a wider world. In fact, he suggests that it might be necessary to see 'a global Mediterranean which in the sixteenth century reached as far as the Azores and the New World, the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf, the Baltic and the loop of the Niger'. This poses obvious problems of definition; Braudel consequently proposes that his central sea be compared to 'an electric or magnetic field, or more simply to a radiant centre whose light grows less as one moves away from it, without one being able to define the exact boundary between light and shade'. A little further on he notes that 'The circulation of men and goods, both material and intangible, formed concentric circles around the Mediterranean. We should imagine a hundred frontiers, some political, some economic and some cultural.' Recognising the fluidity of these frontiers he writes, 'The rule has been that Mediterranean civilisation spreads far beyond its shores in great waves that are balanced by continuous returns…Its fortunes are often easier to read on its outer margins than at the very heart of its bewildering activity.'[46]

However, even these metaphors drawn from protean nature cannot satisfactorily resolve the tension between imperceptible transitions and the need for categorisation. Braudel asks himself:

> Can it be said for a start that the Mediterranean is an internally coherent zone? On the whole the answer is yes, in spite of the indefinite and above all changeable boundaries both on its Continental and its seaward sides: the Black Sea, the Red Sea, the Persian Gulf, the Straits of Gibraltar and the Atlantic Ocean. These problems we have already discussed without reaching any hard and fast conclusion.[47]

The above quotations should make clear why the Mediterranean analogy has proved so appealing to historians of Southeast Asia, but also suggest why its ultimate contributions remain limited. The attractions are several. The centrality of the sea is an obvious factor, but there were also practical advantages in both Braudel's methodology and his vision of a maritime, trade-connected world. As Reid remarks, 'the interdisciplinary approach exemplified by Braudel and the *Annalistes* is especially rewarding in Southeast Asia because of the relative richness of its anthropology, orientalism and even archeology, as compared with the poverty of the strictly historical

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45 Ibid., p. 763.
46 Ibid., pp. 168 (radiant centre), 170.
47 Ibid., p. 419.

sources'.[48]   More profoundly, seeking parallels between Southeast Asia and the civilisations of the Mediterranean seemed to offer a solution to nagging doubts regarding Southeast Asian identity and agency. Both Reid and Lombard felt that the Braudelian model could reconcile the tension between what was once called 'local genius' and outside influence.[49] After all, it has apparently seldom been implied that for the Mediterranean, exchange, borrowing and adaptation were marks of weakness.

Lombard and Reid were neither the first nor the last to make this comparison. Van Leur had considered the option in the thirties; his work was published before Braudel's *Mediterranean*. This was also the case with Georges Coedès' *Les états hindouisés d'Indochine et d'Indonésie*, first published in 1944. Coedès, the *doyen* of early twentieth-century French studies of Southeast Asia, was Director of the influential École Française d'Extrême-Orient from 1929 to 1947. He described Southeast Asia as being centred upon a 'veritable Mediterranean, formed by the China Sea, the Gulf of Siam and the Java Sea. This enclosed sea, in spite of its typhoons and reefs, has always been a unifying factor rather than an obstacle for the peoples along the rivers.' Oliver Wolters quoted this approvingly in an influential essay first published in 1982, noting that Coedès had 'characterised the Southeast Asian seas' as a Mediterranean.[50]   But perhaps Wolters should have been a little more careful in his phrasing since – as indeed he makes clear – Coedès was referring only to the eastern seas of Southeast Asia, not including the Bay of Bengal, and hence excluding Myanmar from this Mediterranean. Subsequently, in 1985 and 1990, K.N. Chaudhuri explicitly – and successfully – used Braudel's *Mediterranean* as a model in his books on the Indian Ocean (including the South China Sea) and *Asia before Europe.*[51]

During the 1990s there was an increase in studies on Asian trade in the early modern era, spearheaded by French scholars associated with Lombard and accompanied by an ongoing interest in 'European expansion' at, for example, the University of Leiden.[52] Lombard's *Le carrefour javanais* appeared in 1990 with a deliberately Braudelian structure of its three volumes, subtitled 'The limits of Westernisation', 'Asian networks', and 'The legacy of concentric kingdoms'. In the Anglophone academic world this interest was reinforced by Reid's influential studies on Southeast Asia in the 'Age of Commerce', which, as we have seen, were also explicitly inspired by Braudel. More broadly, this focus

48 Reid, *Southeast Asia: The Age of Commerce*, vol. 1, p. xiv. In practice, the rich archives of the East India companies demand further exploration and analysis.
49 See the illuminating discussion in Reynolds, 'New look', p. 432.
50 Wolters, *History, culture and region*, p. 42; on pp. 43-4 he notes differences in port–hinterland relations. The quotation is from Georges Coedès, *The Indianized states of Southeast Asia*, ed. Walter Vella and tr. Susan Brown Cowing (Honolulu: East-West Center Press, 1968), pp. 3-4. On Coedès, see *Dialog Perancis Nusantara/Dialogue France-Insulinde*, ed. Christian Pelras (Jakarta: CNRS-LASEMA/Yayasan Obor, 1998).
51 K. N. Chaudhuri, *Trade and civilisation*; idem., *Asia before Europe: Economy and civilisation of the Indian Ocean from the rise of Islam to 1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990). The Braudelian model of Southeast Asia has even been mobilised in the region's modern political conflicts: see Stein Tønnesson, 'Locating the South China Sea', in Raben and Schulte-Nordholt ed., *Locating Southeast Asia.*
52 Regular reports of conferences have been published in *Archipel* since its inception in 1971, and in the newsletter and later periodical *Itinerario* of Leiden's Centre for the History of European Expansion (1974). Examples of collections include *Marchands et hommes d'affaires asiatiques dans l'Océan Indien et la Mer de Chine 13e-20e siècles*, ed. Denys Lombard and Jean Aubin (Paris: Éditions de École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, 1988); Kathirithamby-Wells and Villiers ed., *Southeast Asian port and polity*; and *Emporia, commodities and entrepreneurs in Asian maritime trade, c. 1400-1750*, ed. Roderick Ptak and Dietmar Rothermund (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1991).

was accompanied by renewed interest in how geography makes history, and vice versa.[53] A Franco-German conference on maritime Asia was held in Mainz/Germersheim in 1993, and four years later a follow-up meeting, organised by Lombard and Roderich Ptak of the University of Munich, was specifically intended to build on Braudel by examining the notion of an Asian Mediterranean. Most of the papers from the second meeting were published in a 1998 collection, and the idea was explored further in a special collection of papers included in *Archipel* in the same year, in memory of Denys Lombard.[54] More recently, the Mediterranean analogy has been considered in an article by R. Bin Wong, fittingly published in the *Annales*.[55]

Much of the contention surrounding the usefulness of the Mediterranean approach focuses on the coherence and authenticity of Southeast Asia as a region and on the problems of boundaries. Since Braudel himself could not arrive at any 'hard and fast' conclusion for the Mediterranean, it is hardly surprising that those who seek to use his ideas to resolve issues of identity and borders in a much less studied region should fail to agree. The debate is also fuelled by the differences between Reid and Lombard. Most notably, Reid accepts the borders of modern Southeast Asia as represented on political maps, while Lombard argues for a broader definition and would include coastal South China.[56] Sanjay Subrahmanyan has strongly attacked Reid's view as a back-projection of modern conventions. Drawing on Lombard, Subrahmanyam turns east, arguing that proper recognition of the 'Chinese factor' in Southeast Asia would help deconstruct reified images of the 'essential China' as well as of 'Southeast Asia' itself.[57]

Wong also identifies various Braudelian regions in Asia which fail to coincide with political boundaries, and shares this emphasis on ties across the South China Sea. He locates a 'Chinese Mediterranean' integrating southern and southeastern China with Southeast Asia, as opposed to a 'Northwest China' incorporating Han, Tibetan, Mongolian and Islamic elements, as well as other shifting regions in Asia and Europe. He also refers to Takeshi Hamashita's Japanese publications, which depict Asian trade as flowing within three zones: the first comprising China's southeastern coast, Taiwan, the Ryukyu Islands and Japan; the second, south-southeast China and Southeast Asia; and the third, eastern India and Southeast Asia. However, Wong contrasts the Chinese 'civilisational state' with the multi-webbed Braudelian Southeast Asia, and in that respect seems to lay himself open to Subrahmanyam's charge of essentialising China.[58]

53 See, for example, the special issue of *JAS* on 'Geographies at work in Asian history' (29, 3 [2000]) and the literature cited therein; another excellent example is Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam mapped. A history of the geo-body of a nation* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994).

54 Roderich Ptak, 'International symposium on the "Asian Mediterranean" (Paris, 3-5 March 1997)', *Archipel*, 55 (1998): 11-14; *From the Mediterranean to the China Sea: Miscellaneous notes*, ed. Claude Guillot *et al.* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1998); *L'horizon nousantarien. Mélanges en hommage à Denys Lombard*, vol. 1, published as *Archipel*, 56 (1998).

55 Wong, 'Entre monde et nation'.

56 Information on recent discussions of this issue can be found in Roderich Ptak, 'An international symposium on "China and Southeast Asia: historical interactions", Hong Kong, 19-21 July 2001', *Archipel*, 62 (2001): 3-4.

57 Sanjay Subrahmanyam, 'Notes on circulation and asymmetry in two Mediterraneans', in Guillot *et al.* ed., *From the Mediterranean to the China Sea*, pp. 21-44.

58 Ibid., pp. 38-9; Wong, 'Entre monde et nation', pp. 17-18; Takeshi Hamashita, 'The tribute trade system and modern Asia', *Memoirs of the Research Department of the Toyo Bunko*, 45 (1987): 7-25; *idem.*, 'The Ryukyu network between Southeast Asia and South China, 1400-1700', paper presented at the Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, University of Hong Kong, July 2001.

Steven Feierman, in his interesting article on 'African histories and the dissolution of world histories', recognises that Braudel opened up the boundaries of historical space, apparently enabling historians to escape the confines of the core-periphery model.[59] After all, as Chaudhuri has observed, Braudel was more neutral in his definition of 'world economies' than Wallerstein. Chaudhuri points out that Braudel accepted the historical concept of a world system that combined a 'generalised model of dominant relationships with a dynamic sequence of historical developments' and that showed 'the hierarchical ordering of spatial identities and sources of power'. Braudel did not, however, share Wallerstein's assumption that 'dominant relations in the distribution of economic gains' drove this world system. True to the French geographic tradition, he found central place theory more appropriate than an overriding emphasis on unequal economic exchange; he did not identify the 'world economy' with the 'economy of the world'. On the contrary, the 'world economy' was only part of a totality composed of many different economies, although it was 'a topological space within which existed a complete system of internal links and exchange'.[60]

Despite such important nuances, it is not surprising that Braudel has been accused of European triumphalism, since he sees the Mediterranean as the nucleus of the world, and civilisational conflict as the key historical dynamic. Consequently, Feierman concludes that 'Braudel himself could not break out of a unidirectional history of the world with Europe at its centre.' Moreover, Braudel is dismissive of 'Black Africa', seeing it as passive, inert and uncivilised when compared to the 'White Africa' of Islam. 'Non-Europe', writes Braudel, 'cannot properly be understood, even before the eighteenth century, except in terms of the mighty shadow cast over it by western Europe'. Braudel, suggests Feierman, regards this 'non-Europe' as having a role in history only as a provider of resources which, to quote Braudel again, enabled 'Europeans to reach superhuman heights in tackling the tasks encountered on the road to progress.'[61] These ideas are most clearly apparent in *Civilisation and capitalism*, but also underpin Braudel's thinking on Islam and the Mediterranean world.

With these comments Feierman places Braudel firmly in the framework of the 'regnant paradigm' described at the beginning of this article, which suggests that his liberating influence is ultimately limited, as a Europe-centred core–periphery model still lies at the heart of his vision. Subrahmanyam questions the assumption that every coherent socio-cultural space should be seen as composed of cores and peripheries. 'Is our repertoire of models', he asks, 'so impoverished that we have no other means of conceptualising a space such as the Mediterranean or, *a fortiori*, Southeast Asia?'[62]

59 Steven Feierman, 'African histories and the dissolution of world history', in *Africa and the disciplines: The contribution of research in Africa to the social sciences and humanities*, ed. Robert H. Bates *et al.* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), pp. 167-212.

60 Chaudhuri, *Asia before Europe*, pp. 383-4. For further discussions of Wallerstein see Wong, 'Entre monde et nation', and Michael Adas, 'Bringing ideas and agency back in: Representation and the comparative approach in world history', in *World history. Ideologies, structures and identities*, ed. Philip Pomper *et al.* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), pp. 81-104.

61 Fernand Braudel, *Civilisation and capitalism* (London: Collins, 1984), vol. 3, p. 386; quoted in Feierman, 'African histories', p. 174. An example of the rejection of Braudel's underlying assumptions is Hermann Kulke, 'Rivalry and competition in the Bay of Bengal in the eleventh century and its bearing on Indian Ocean Studies', in Prakash and Lombard ed., *Commerce and culture in the Bay of Bengal, 1500-1800*, pp. 17-36.

62 Subrahmanyam, 'Notes on circulation and asymmetry', p. 27.

Elsewhere Subrahmanyam has criticised 'the tendency inherent in the Western European discourse on modernity to claim that there was only one historical event of any significance, namely the birth of modernity itself.' He is also keenly aware that Braudel's imposition of a binary model reflecting old ideas of the struggle between Cross and Crescent is grossly oversimplified and ahistorical. Such a dichotomy ignores the flexibility and fragmentation within the two 'blocs' and their frequent overlapping and crosscutting alliances. Moreover, in reality, the image of 'the Turk' was created and consolidated over a long period from the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries; Braudel ignores the implications of this. His vision, concludes Subrahmanyam, reflects his disproportional reliance on Italian, Spanish and French archives, which causes him to erroneously see the logic of Mediterranean history as that of a pendulum, moving back and forth between opposing forces.[63]

As in so many instances, van Leur anticipated later concerns when he acknowledged both the attractions and limitations of the Mediterranean analogy in trying to understand the Indonesian archipelago. In his words,

> one is again and again struck by phenomena and configurations calling up images from the familiar history of the Mediterranean and western European areas. But on closer examination what had seemed historical parallels are seen to assume a complete historical autonomy that makes it practically impossible to carry through the comparison of phenomena…Viewed as a whole, Indonesian history remains a new and unknown world: as much by the autonomy of its historical perspectives as by the nature of its historiographic treatment.[64]

Van Leur's rejection of the Mediterranean analogy was echoed in Ptak's initial comments on the 1997 symposium. Given Anglophone stereotyping of Continental scholarship, it is ironic that the first general conclusion of the conference was that 'model-making in itself, clearly overstressed in the Anglophone world, usually fails to give answers'. The participants also thought that while the Mediterranean concept is attractive, 'any indiscriminate application to other regions will cause errors'. Other warnings concerned the dangers of Eurocentrism and inconsistencies in the 'diaspora' idea. In a final comment that is familiarly ambivalent, it was concluded that Southeast Asia managed to be a sort of *carrefour* between different worlds, 'without really losing its own identity'.[65]

Subrahmanyam, initially a critical participant in the symposium, later revised his negative response to the Mediterranean comparison – somewhat to his own surprise. In his subsequent article, he admits that in retrospect he is beginning, as did Lombard, to see the benefits of such an approach:

63 On modernity see Sanjay Subrahmanyam, 'Institutions, agency and economic change in South Asia: A survey and some suggestions', in *Institutions and economic change in South Asia*, ed. Burton Stein and Sanjay Subrahmanyam (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 25. The Christianity–Islam dichotomy has an unfortunate resilience; see the ubiquitous Samuel Huntington, *The clash of civilisations and the remaking of world order* (London: Touchstone, 1998) and recent political rhetoric. Subrahmanyam's comments on Braudel's perspective are in his 'Notes on circulation and asymmetry', particularly pp. 27 and 32.
64 Van Leur, *Indonesian trade and society*, p. 147.
65 Ptak, 'International symposium on the "Asian Mediterranean"'.

[T]he central utility of an idea such as that of the Mediterranean … is that it allows us to transcend or refashion national boundaries in the search for meaningful objects for historical analysis, a procedure that is absolutely essential as one moves back in time to an epoch when the nation state was as yet a distant prospect.[66]

Others might find that Subrahmanyam's conversion does not yet go far enough, and that the benefits apparent in such spatial reconsideration should not be limited to the early period. Wong sees an on-going value in the Mediterranean analogy. He concludes that although the differentiation of 'distinct spatial levels' has been mainly used in pre-modern history, for both Europe and Southeast Asia it remains a necessary methodological technique for the analysis of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Indeed, he argues, increasing communication will create new networks of interaction, and hence a greater need for such flexibility.

The location of further Braudelian regions will thus continue to be a fruitful exercise, enabling historians to avoid self-imprisonment in conventional but inadequate categories. Liberation from the bonds of imposed territorial frontiers has left historians wrangling over the boundaries of Southeast Asia, while the effort to locate an essential Southeast Asian identity has led to vague praise of 'openness' and 'hybridity'.[67] While the notion of a collective destiny is dismissed as privileging an imposed narrative moving towards nation-states and modernity, no new paradigm has yet emerged. Specific arguments continue about the existence and possible extent of a shared Southeast Asian trajectory.

Conclusion

Braudel's great achievement was that he seemed to deconstruct space and time, enabling historians to operate on different levels at the same time. No longer confined by political borders, one could explore connections and borrowings, while also reconciling continuity and change. This seems too good to be true – and indeed it is, at least if literal-minded English speakers try to translate French imaginative constructs into models representing reality.

Despite the identification of the *Annales* school with the idea of total history, the only writer who tried to realise that ambition was Braudel with *The Mediterranean;* Lombard was more cautious, subtitling his three volumes '*essai d'histoire globale*'. Braudel has had few followers, probably because despite all the accolades, the book does not fulfill its promise. Within two years of its publication Bernard Bailyn published a sharply critical review. 'The root of the difficulty', he wrote, 'is that Braudel has mistaken a poetic response to the past for an historical problem.'[68] Braudel thus betrays what he identified as the proper focus for the historian: not the history of a region, not the presentation of a string of events, but an analytic theme that should be explored, *histoire problème.* Braudel was seduced by his harvest of detail and insights, and embraced everything, presenting the rich result as 'total history', *histoire totale.* In reality, concludes Jack H. Hexter, *The Mediterranean* can best be read as a picaresque Rabelaisian narrative,

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66 Subrahmanyam, 'Notes on circulation and assymetry', p. 42.
67 Ibid, p. 29; Wong, 'Entre monde et nation', pp. 19, 24, 26-7. Wong grapples with the confusing ideas of 'openness' and 'hybridity' (pp. 5-6).
68 Bernard Bailyn, 'Braudel's geohistory - a reconsideration', *Journal of Economic History*, 11, 3/1 (1951): 277-82, reprinted in Clark ed., *Annales school*, p.15.

to be dipped into at random, when it will give both pleasure and instruction. Hexter also notes Braudel's loose way with sources and statistics, but sees these flaws as insignificant when weighed against his achievement.[69]

Bailyn is less forgiving. In his judgement, the three levels suggested by Braudel and reflected in the organisation of the book are misconceived:

> … this schematization proves to have been an exhausting treadmill. For all his diligence the author has not advanced towards his goal. To the extent that the divisions between the sections are effective, a comprehension of the organic totality of Mediterranean life is blocked. There are fine pages that illuminate their subject, but they do so, not because of these lines of demarcation so carefully laid out, but in spite of them. The parts of his 'world' are all there, but they lie inert, unrelated, discrete.[70]

H. L. Wesseling, an admirer of *The Mediterranean*, noted similar flaws but concluded that the book was 'brilliant', describing its author as a great researcher and writer as well as a thinker. However, Wesseling's recognition of the relative weakness of this third claim was underlined by his subsequent comment that 'Braudel is not averse to theory, although he wrote about it only under pressure'. More directly, Stuart Clark remarks of the same book: 'Difficulties of cohesion seem to be related, then, to difficulties in, or, more likely, the absence of a proper theory.'[71]

Perhaps it is fitting, then, that the most sensible evaluation comes from a literary critic, Philippe Carrard, writing on *The poetics of the New History*. In his conclusion, entitled 'The New History and the new fuzziness', he comments on the *Annales* in general: 'Looking at those texts, a post-structuralist critic would only need to point out the discrepancy between their agenda and its realisation – for instance, their efforts to be "scientific" and their use of means that are obviously "literary". But this, Carrard believes, is typical of the 'basic hybridity' of scholarly discourse, and he ends his book with a tribute to the historians' 'joyous polyphony'.[72] I would suggest, however, that recognition of this hybridity does not exempt a writer from the discipline of his craft. In practice, most historians do recognise the role of imagination and literary skill in creating and transmitting their personal construct of the past. Nonetheless, they would also continue to stress their obligation to subject this construct to systematic critical examination, in an effort to approach an objective understanding of a real past.[73]

Any Southeast Asianist using the Mediterranean analogy should be aware of the pitfalls inherent in both the poetic and analytic dimensions of Braudel's work. The use of Rabelaisian rhetoric has a seductive appeal, offering the chance to present the colour and movement of a lost world. But our knowledge of early modern Southeast Asia is fragmentary, and little consensus exists regarding the fundamentals of social structure, economic organisation and political change. Consequently, this evocation of the past can easily slip back into an Orientalist obsession with the exotic, unless it is grounded in

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69 Jack H. Hexter, 'Fernand Braudel and the *monde braudelien...*', *Journal of Modern History*, 44, 4 (1972): 480-539, reprinted in Clark ed., *Annales school*, pp. 30-84; see especially pp. 66-8, 71-2.

70 Bailyn, 'Braudel's geohistory', p. 14.

71 Wesseling, 'Fernand Braudel', pp. 22, 27-8; Clark ed., *Annales school*, vol. 3, p. viii.

72 Philippe Carrard, *Poetics of the New History: French historical discourse from Braudel to Chartier* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), pp. 218-25.

73 See, for example, Iggers, *Historiography in the twentieth century*, ch. 10, on the 'linguistic turn'.

careful use of primary sources and an explicit conceptual framework. However, meeting these demands entails so much qualification and hesitation that literary heights are seldom reached.

Taking Braudel's *Mediterranean* as a model for analysis is even more risky. Wolters notes Braudel's emphasis upon cities and their communications, the predominance of urban-based trading activities. However, he concludes that Southeast Asian cities were 'royal centres, with trading ports under their shadow', so that 'when we examine the sea's influence in shaping Southeast Asia's history, we do not stumble upon a helpful theme'. He thus rejects what seems to be the most obvious parallel between the Mediterranean and Southeast Asia, seeing the latter as much more polycentric.[74] More obviously problematic are assumptions that the two regions shared a similar trajectory, deriving from their participation in a commercial world economy; and, on a yet more fundamental level, that the conceptual vocabulary derived from Europe can adequately capture Southeast Asia. Both these assumptions weaken Anthony Reid's *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce*, which asserts the primacy of cities and trade. Reid avoids the organisational hazards of Braudel's model by concentrating his description of the 'world' in Volume 1 and dividing his analysis in Volume 2 into chapters considering cities, religion, states and poverty. His omnivorous Braudelian ambitions ensure that the books are readable, innovative and thought-provoking, but his related emphasis on urbanisation and the seventeenth-century crisis – elements central to his analysis – has, as noted above, been strongly criticised. Lombard's valuable thick description and avoidance of teleology make him less vulnerable.

Lombard's insistence on the pertinence of Braudel's recognition of 'a hundred frontiers' is completely justified. The task of speculating as to whether or not Southeast Asia was 'a Mediterranean' and seeking the exact location of its supposed borders is not in itself particularly interesting. What is fruitful is the struggle to identify relative densities of interaction which are relevant to the specific subject under consideration. This clustering would enable the researcher to define the geographic boundaries appropriate to the question, rather than operating within conventional but largely irrelevant and often misleading frameworks. Such webs of connections, with their fluctuations, can be traced by mapping both the synchronic and diachronic distribution of any number of selected variables: Chinese ceramics, Persian narratives, Mexican coins, boat-building techniques or linguistic affiliations. Such re-mapping, moving through space and time, would be a fitting tribute both to Braudel and to the pioneering work of Denys Lombard. It would also generate very useful contributions to our field. In his introduction to *Asia before Europe* Chaudhuri wrote:

> Braudel's *La Méditerranée* provides a methodological blue-print for historians looking for actual physical structures which lie invisible below the surface of social activities and which are subject to different rhythms of time. The work addressed

74 Wolters, *History, culture and region*, pp. 43-4. Despite the influence of Reid's emphasis on Southeast Asia's early and impressive urbanisation (*The Age of Commerce*, vol. 2, ch. 2), Wolters does not effectively revisit his 1982 conclusions in the 1999 edition. The urbanisation debate is discussed in Sutherland, 'Contingent devices', and Lucas Nagtegaal, 'The pre-modern city in Indonesia and its fall from grace with the gods', *Economic and Social History in the Netherlands*, 5 (1993): 39-59. Wolters does not reject European history as a source of inspiration, however. He is enthusiastic about John Hale's *The civilisation of Europe in the Renaissance* (New York, Touchstone Edition, 1995); Wolters, *History, culture and region*, pp. 172-4.

itself with great insight and in considerable depth to the question of how unities of time and space are established at different levels of cognitive logic…While it is possible to criticise Braudel's works on matters of factual detail or interpretation, to do so is rather like standing in front of Michelangelo's David …or looking at his paintings in the Sistine Chapel in Rome and saying that the artist's grasp of the human anatomy was all wrong.[75]

Chaudhuri's perception of a 'methodological blue-print' would not be shared by Braudel's critics, or indeed the present writer, but then Chaudhuri himself is a man with complex theoretical ambitions. Most historians, though, would agree with him that 'Braudel's work is a constant reminder that to write history with any kind of intuitive understanding, the historian must use his vision as much as his mind.'[76] Braudel's imaginative power and vivid prose are persuasive, but historians who look to him for help have to be prepared to live with paradox, even confusion. Solace might lie in the recognition that in historiography, as in life, the on-going search for lasting clarity and consistent categories represents the triumph of hope over experience. The value lies in what is learnt during the search, the 'exploration of cross-cultural dissonance'.[77] We historians of Southeast Asia might lack the wealth of monographs and archives that made Braudel's work possible, but we can perhaps aspire to sharing his ambition and his joy in scholarship. Not many writers begin their books with a declaration like Braudel: 'I have loved the Mediterranean with a passion….'[78]

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75 Chaudhuri, *Asia before Europe,* pp. 5-6.
76 Ibid., p. 11.
77 Reynolds, 'A new look', p. 429.
78 Braudel, *Mediterranean* , p. 17 ('Preface to the first edition').