

# 1 Early Modern Asia

## Geopolitics and Economic Change

The world between the Cape of Good Hope and Japan, where the Portuguese strove to build an elaborate network of trade and power between 1500 and 1700, was not a static one. It was characterized by change, at times almost imperceptible, at other times more clearly visible, both at the institutional and at the functional level. To understand Portuguese actions in Asia, therefore, and to comprehend the accommodations they had to make as well as the avenues they used, one needs to do more than describe the “Asian stage” on which they were actors. Rather, it is necessary to consider the problem of the dynamics of Asian history over these two hundred years.

The population of Asia in about 1650 was around 300 million, from a world population of perhaps 500 million. A hundred years later, in 1750, the continent still accounted for roughly 60 percent of the world’s population, which had by then risen to around 700 million. Over the century and a half prior to 1650, when estimates are much harder to obtain, it is likely that there had already been a fair degree of expansion in numbers; after the mid-fifteenth century, all over Eurasia, the recovery from the Black Death takes decisive shape in the form of a demographic expansion. We would probably not be far wrong to place Asia’s population in 1500 at between 200 and 225 million, which means that the Portuguese “saw” over the first two hundred years of their presence in Asia something like a doubling of the continent’s population.

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This population was, needless to say, unevenly distributed. It appears clear that tropical and semi-tropical Asia accounted for a far larger share of the total population than regions farther north, but this was a difference that was not quite so marked at the end of our period as at its beginning. At the farthest limit of the space we are concerned with was Japan, whose modern historians are agreed that the period between 1500 and 1700 witnessed a far more rapid growth of population than either the fourteenth or the eighteenth century, which respectively preceded and succeeded it. Indeed, if the estimates of scholars like Akira Hayami are acceptable, we may conclude that population growth rates in early modern Japan (which are said to have ranged between 0.8 and 1.3 percent per annum) were amongst the highest anywhere in Asia (Hall et al. 1981). In sharp contrast is Southeast Asia, whose historians suggest very slow population growth over the period 1600 to 1800; while this periodization does not permit us to speak directly of the sixteenth century, the impression is certainly left that rates of demographic change in that area (whose population may have been some 22 million in 1600) rarely exceeded 0.2 percent a year over the entire period from 1500 to 1800 (Reid 1988: 11–18).

Sandwiched between Japan and Southeast Asia, the two outliers in early modern Asian demographic history, lie other regions, some closer to Japan in their experience, others better approximating the Southeast Asian case. In the former category is China, whose population grew from about 60 million in 1400 to 180 million by 1750, even if a significant acceleration to this growth was given only after 1680 (at which point China's population has been estimated at a mere 120 million) (Banister 1987: 3–7). In the latter category, we must include much of South and West Asia, where one has to proceed on the basis of largely qualitative evidence, since population statistics are largely dubious until the eighteenth century. Taking one thing with another then, it is possible to assert that the balance of population in Asia gradually shifted from south and west to north and east over the period.

Not only did total population rise and its balance shift; the period also saw the consolidation of some great urban centers, and the decline of others. Cities like Delhi, Agra, Vijayanagara, Aceh, Kyoto, Isfahan, and Istanbul (the last lying in a sense between Europe and Asia), were comparable in order of magnitude and complexity of social structure to any of the European cities of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Nor was the change purely an urban phenomenon: partly under the pressure of population and partly for other reasons, land under cultivation expanded, as did manufacturing production, with India and China in the seventeenth century possibly accounting for over a half of the world's textile production. To reiterate our initial point, then, even the most obvious of indices do not support the idea of a static Asia that had to confront a dynamic and expanding Portugal.

## Fifteenth- and Sixteenth-century States

The changes that took place in Asia over these centuries are most obvious and visible, however, at the level of elite politics. In the sixteenth century, two very substantial and powerful states – of the Mughals and the Safavids – were formed in southern and western Asia, while still another state, the Ottoman one – grew considerably in strength. In southern India, the great political system centered around the metropolis of Vijayanagara first consolidated itself and then, in the latter half of the century, entered into decline. Equally dramatic changes are to be observed in the careers of states of Southeast and East Asia: in the former case, Aceh, Arakan and to a lesser extent Makassar are three remarkable sixteenth-century success stories, while in the Far East, the turmoils of the sixteenth century eventually throw up a lasting institution in the *bakufu* – the “shadow” government of the warlord house of the Tokugawas in Japan, who ruled behind the façade of imperial sovereignty until as late as 1868.

And yet, these changes can quite easily be dismissed as of no real consequence, as indeed they have often been by adherents of the “Omar Khayyam approach,” who insist – like the author of the *Rubaiyat* in its English version – that early modern Asian state-formation is well encapsulated in this verse:

Think, in this batter’d Caravanserai  
Whose Portals are alternate Night and Day,  
How Sultan after Sultan with his Pomp,  
Abode his destined Hour, and went his way.  
(verse XVII)

That is to say that these changes represent no more than a replacement of one regime by another, all of which were much the same in essential character. This has, after all, for long been the central thrust of such theories as the “Asiatic Mode of Production,” or “Oriental Despotism,” which stressed the static and unchanging character of both Asian societies and the states that ruled over them. If it is indeed our contention that the states formed in Asia in this period (which we will call early modern) differed from those of an earlier epoch (extending from say the eighth to the fourteenth centuries, which we might term “medieval”), how did they do so?

Before we enter into this question, however, it may be useful to differentiate *between* types of states in early modern Asia. It has been usual to distinguish Asian states of the period under two broad heads: first, the massive, agrarian-based imperial formations, such as the Ottomans, the Safavids, Vijayanagara and the Mughals, the Ming, and Qing in China, and Mataram in Java; *in contrast*, the relatively small-scale (usually coastal) states like Kilwa, Hurmuz, Calicut,

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or Melaka, which are thought to have been essentially trade-based, thus drawing their resources not so much from the harnessing of force under prebendal systems as from the control of strategic “choke-points” along key trade routes. Let us consider the Ottomans as an example of the first type. During the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, their central fiscal institution is seen as the *timar*, a revenue-assignment given to *timariot* prebend-holders who rendered military and other services to the state. Despite the attempts to develop central institutions designed to reduce the dependence of the state on such dispersed forces – attempts that are located by historians in particular during the reign of Sultan Süleyman “the Magnificent” (r. 1520–66) – it is argued that the Ottomans could never throw off their character as a state whose fundamental institution was a combination of the classic Islamic *iqta’* assignment, and a “feudal” land-grant deriving from the Paleologues, the last dynasty to rule Byzantium. The *timar*, like its counterpart the *jagir* in Mughal territories, is thus often seen as holding the key to an understanding of how the Ottomans functioned, and also why they failed to modernize and compete with the West (Shaw 1976).

It is implicit in most characterizations of states like the Ottoman and Mughal empires that the bulk of their revenues must have come from the “land,” rather than from “trade.” In practice, these categories prove rather difficult to disentangle in contemporary documents. Often, taxes on agricultural produce were collected through the control of trade in these goods; further, “land” was a convenient category for purposes of assignment, since it concealed the fact that what was in fact being parceled out was the right to use coercive force. Still, it is certainly true that if we were to examine the Ottoman budgets of the sixteenth century, the revenues of the greater part of the provinces under their control would show a preponderance of collections under categories other than “customs-duties.” Thus, the provincial budget of the Yemen province in 1599–1600 shows that of total current revenues of 13,675,239 *para*, no more than 35 percent came from port-duties, and this in an area with a relatively poor agricultural base. Again, the budget of Egypt in 1596–7 shows customs-duties accounting for a mere 8.2 percent of total provincial revenues, and taxes on Cairo-based traders and artisans for another 6.6 percent. Even for earlier years, such as the early 1560s, it has been suggested by Salih Özbaran that the land-tax (*harac-i arazi*) dominates the Yemen budgets (Özbaran 1986; Özbaran 2009: 183).

This is what is often thought to distinguish such states from, say, the Southeast Asian Sultanate of Melaka, or the East African Sultanate of Kilwa, ruled over from the late thirteenth century by a family of Yemeni *sharifs*, the Mahdali. In the case of Kilwa, or its northern neighbors and rivals Mombasa and Malindi (which emerged into prominence in the fourteenth century), we are not aware of any data on the fiscal foundations of the state, though links between the prosperity of these states and the Indian Ocean commercial triangle of Gujarat–Red Sea–East

Africa are often asserted (as is the importance in the case of Kilwa of control of the gold trade) (Pouwels 1987). In the case of Melaka, we are rather better served, for early Portuguese observers resident in the town (after it fell into their hands in August 1511) meticulously described how the erstwhile Sultanate had functioned. In the early sixteenth century Melaka, which had been founded under somewhat obscure circumstances a century earlier, was the metropolis-capital of a state whose shadow reached to the other extremity of the Indonesian archipelago. The population of the city, variously estimated at between 100,000 and 200,000, was large by Asian standards of the time; in the late fifteenth century, Istanbul had a population of no more than 100,000, while only Kyoto of the Japanese cities of the early sixteenth century could boast of a population over 150,000.

While the greater part of the population of Melaka was made up of Malays of the laboring class (including a substantial slave sector – perhaps 7 percent of the total population), there were also sizeable resident foreign communities, amongst whom the most prominent were the Gujaratis and Kelings (Tamils), followed by the Javanese and the Fukien Chinese. There is little doubt that these merchants were accorded a high status in Melaka's society: in the *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, a Malay prose-epic, even the semi-divine progenitor of Melaka's Sultans (a certain Sang Perta Dewa) is constantly escorted in Heaven (the Malay *Keinderaan* or Kingdom of Indra) by a retinue of merchants! At a more mundane level, what we know of the Melaka Sultanate's revenue-base confirms that foreign trade was indeed the lifeblood of the kingdom. A complex system of taxes differentiated ships coming from the *negeri di-atas angin* – which is to say west of Melaka – from those coming from the *negeri di-bawah angin* (parts east of Melaka). In both cases, the rates of customs-duty are however much lower than those obtaining in contemporary Burma, Bengal and elsewhere (though not lower than in, say, Calicut). Despite this lower rate of duty, customs-collections and related surcharges accounted for something like 90 percent of the Sultanate's revenues, swamping by far the tributes paid by the provincial governors and vassal kings of the Sultan. Besides this, Melaka's Sultans also participated directly in commerce, owning ships and plying routes between Melaka and the Indian coast of the Bay of Bengal. The presence of these ships, manned at times by the slaves of the Sultan, gives the state in Melaka a markedly mercantile character, thus strengthening the implicit divide between the character of large, agrarian states and small, trading ones (Thomaz 1986a).

We are aware that in about 1500, Melaka was one of the key nodes in Asian maritime trade, linked to China and eastern Indonesia, but also to India, the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea. In the last two areas, one equally finds political power seeking expression in the form of relatively small and compact trading states not dissimilar to Melaka, of which the two clearest examples are Yemen in

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the Red Sea, and Hurmuz in the Persian of Gulf, both of which also controlled key nodes in Indian Ocean trade respectively the ports of Aden and Jarun.

Considering the case of Aden first, it emerges into importance as a center in the late ninth or early tenth century, several centuries before the rise of Melaka. Together with the ports of Zafar and al-Shihr, Aden remained one of the centers where ships from India and Southeast Asia customarily made first landfall on the Arabian coast. Under the rule of the Ayyubid dynasty, the port duties (*'ushur*) at Aden were first codified in the twelfth century, and these rulers also instituted a system of galleys, to patrol the coast and the mouth of the Red Sea in order to protect merchant shipping from pirates. The Ayyubid governor (*na'ib*) at Aden, 'Usman b. 'Ali al-Zinjili (1175–83), is credited with rebuilding the port's harbor, and reorganizing the markets in the town. The structure of trade and state in the area, somewhat obscure in the Ayyubid period, becomes somewhat clearer during the rule of the succeeding Rasulid dynasty. Of particular importance as evidence is a text of 1411–12, the *Mulakhkhas al-fitan*, which sets out at some detail the administration of the port, the nature of the communities resident there, the extent of revenues, and so on. From this work, it emerges that the Aden port-duties in 1411–12 amounted to as much as 1,470,000 *dinars*, and that they were the major source of revenue for the Rasulid Sultans resident at Ta'izz (Serjeant 1988).

It is natural enough then that from the early thirteenth century, the Rasulid Sultans should have taken great interest in developing the port, building a reputation of such dimensions that in 1374–5, the *qazi* of Calicut wrote to them, requesting that the Muslims of this Malabar port be permitted to read the *khutba* in the name of the Rasulids. The regulations of the port speak of a certain degree of bureaucratic orderliness; all vessels entering Aden were to carry a manifest, in the hands of the ship's scrivener (*karrani*), all goods were to be examined in detail, body-searches of passengers were to be conducted and so on.

But evidence also exists of conflict between the Rasulid Sultans and merchants, especially the substantial magnates (*a'yan al-tujjar*) of Aden, and in particular those of the Karimi community. These conflicts arose largely because the Sultans, like their counterparts at Melaka, were themselves engaged in commerce, and also because – as was to occur later in Aceh, and *unlike* what usually obtained in Melaka – they at times acted as monopsonists or monopolists. The royal trading establishment, called *al-Matjar al-Sultani*, was probably founded in the mid-fourteenth century by al-Mujahid, in imitation of the Fatimid practice at Cairo. The headship of the establishment, which was engaged in the trade in madder, pepper, aromatics and so on, appears to have been a hereditary post, that of the *ra'is tujjar al-Yaman*; the Sultan's traders were to be found at Mecca, Cairo and other centers in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. It is likely that the Sultan also owned ships, though one has no evidence that they traded



over long-distance routes. For the most part, the trade of the *matjar* seems to have been limited to the Arabian peninsula, the Red Sea littoral, and Egypt; this would also explain why the merchants who were most often in conflict with Sultan were the Karimis, rather than, say, the Indian *vanias*, whose quarter at Aden (the so-called *hafat al-baniyan*) is to be encountered already in the late fourteenth century (Serjeant 1988).

Prosperous and cosmopolitan, fifteenth-century Aden bears more than a passing resemblance to Melaka, although some differences – which we shall explore below – also existed between the two. It also resembles its nearer neighbor, Hurmuz (or rather Jarun) in the Persian Gulf, in more ways than one. Jarun, unlike either Aden or Melaka, was an island, with two port-sites on it, one for small vessels, the other for large ones. Founded in around 1300, the island-city was virtually impregnable from land, and succeeded quickly in superseding the center of Qays that had earlier dominated Persian Gulf trade for two centuries. It became the center of a kingdom, the kingdom of Hurmuz, ruled over by Sunni rulers of Arab extraction, but still closely linked by way of trade and political relations to the Iranian world. Hurmuz, like Melaka and Aden, was organized in quarters, where different communities resided: these included the Gujarati *vanias*, Iranian merchants, and also a substantial community of Jewish traders in the fifteenth century. More than the rulers of Melaka, the Shahs of Hurmuz appear to have run a semi-tributary, semi-trade-based state. They controlled a number of islands in the Persian Gulf of which the most important – Qishm – was also the major supplier of agricultural products to feed Jarun. Other islands had a more clearly strategic function, such as Kharg which guarded the entrance to the Shatt-al-Arab waterway at the interior of the Gulf. Besides these islands, Hurmuz's rulers also collected revenues from their dominions on the mainland, both on the Iranian and the Arabian sides. The latter were more significant from the viewpoint of revenue yield, and included a number of settlements of which Qalhat and Masqat were the most significant. Frequently in revolt, the Arab part of Hurmuz's "exterior districts" was however not so necessary for the day-to-day survival of the port-city as connections on the other side (Aubin 1996–2006, ii: 291–317).

As a city located on a salinated, infertile island, with a population of over 50,000 in the late fifteenth century, Jarun was not merely deficient in food but also in drinking-water, for which huge storage tanks had been built by the rulers on the island, and which arrived from the Iranian side. On this side of the waterway, the rulers of Hurmuz claimed the allegiance of parts of Mughistan, as well as three other districts – Minab, Manujan, and Vashkird – which together yielded about a half in revenues of what was obtained from the Arabian dependent territories. It was also from this direction that the major overland caravans came and went, linking Hurmuz to the cities of the Iranian plateau and thence to the

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entrepôts of the Levant. In view of the strategic and commercial importance of these routes, the Shahs of Hurmuz paid a fixed sum, called *muqarrariya*, to the dynasties that ruled fifteenth-century Iran – the Timurids, the Qara-Qoyunlu and then the Aq-Qoyunlu – to ensure that the caravan links remained unbroken (Aubin 1996–2006, ii: 344).

Over a half of the total revenues of the kingdom came from trade and customs, in particular the trade to India. Fifteenth-century observers, as well as early Portuguese writers, suggest that as in Melaka, customs rates in Hurmuz were quite low: Nimdihi, writing in about 1500, suggests that all goods arriving in the kingdom by sea paid 10 percent of their value, and that all goods from Khorasan paid 5 percent. The Portuguese writers suggest a far more complex system, in which some Indian goods like raw cotton, rice and butter paid no more than 5 percent, Indian textiles 10 percent, and textiles exported to Hurmuz via Melaka as much as 16.5 percent. It is interesting to note that the bulk of customs duties were collected on imports rather than exports; neither of the major exports in the eastward direction, namely horses (exported at the rate of two thousand a year in the early sixteenth century), nor bullion – the major component in Hurmuz's trade to India – seem to have been taxed. This is not difficult to comprehend, for the bulk of Hurmuz's trade was a re-export trade, and to tax both imports and exports would have been tantamount to a double tax on the same commodity.

The total revenues of Hurmuz's rulers in the early sixteenth century are shown in Table 1.1.

The meticulous researches of Jean Aubin, based on both Persian and Portuguese sources, permit us to have a close look at the internal functioning of the Hurmuz kingdom in the fifteenth century, and point to an internal political structure somewhat different from that which obtained in either Melaka or Aden. It turns out that Hurmuz's rulers owned no ships, and did not participate directly in trade; the sort of conflict that emerges between the Rasulids and the Karimi community at Aden is thus absent here. For the most part, Hurmuz's

**Table 1.1** The Hurmuz kingdom's revenues, c. 1500

Head	Amount (in <i>ashrafis</i> )
Customs-duties	100,000
Other taxes at Jarun	41,300
Qays pearl-fishery	6,000
Revenue from Arabian lands	28,200
Revenue from Persian lands	16,700
Other	5,800
<i>Total</i>	198,000

(Source: Aubin 1973: 233–7)



rulers led an insecure existence: of ten Shahs between 1400 and 1506, five were deposed, and four assassinated, with only one, Turan Shah II, (r. 1436–70/71) dying of natural causes, and that too because (in the words of a Persian chronicler) “he ate only what he had fished with his own hands” (Aubin 1973: 129).

On the other hand, a major role was played here by a series of powerful *wazir* families, the Baghdadi, the Iji, and the Fali. The Portuguese in their early – dealings with Hurmuz had to contend with the figure of Khwaja ‘Ata (Cojeatar), a eunuch of Bengali origin who had risen to power in about 1475, and who virtually ran the kingdom over the head of first Salghur Shah (r. 1475–1505) and then his successor.

Thus, despite the apparent similarities, Hurmuz provides us with a quite distinct case from Melaka and Aden at one level, being somewhat closer perhaps to the situation in the southwestern Indian kingdom of Calicut, where the Samudri raja (or Zamorin) derived a great part of his revenues from taxing trade, but still did not run a fully fledged mercantilist state. In Calicut, as in certain other small kingdoms with access to the seaboard like Kotte in western Sri Lanka, the rulers left trade in the hands of specific communities – be they indigenized Muslims, like the Mappilas of Malabar, or foreigners (*paradesis*) from as far as Baghdad and Shiraz (Bouchon 1973).

On the other hand, whatever the distinctions between them, Aden, Hurmuz and Melaka still appear to conform to a certain category of state – one that depended on trade – and thus appear to confirm the divide between such states, and other, agrarian-based, states that we described earlier. But if one is to take such a divide seriously, contrary evidence must be explained away. For instance, in the early fifteenth century, between 1405 and 1433, at roughly the same time that the Melaka state was founded, the Ming Chinese state mounted a series of maritime expeditions, as far as East Africa, the most celebrated of which were commanded by a Muslim eunuch-admiral, native of Yunnan, Zheng He. Involving several thousand crew, and a number of vessels, these expeditions have remained a source of embarrassment to those who argue that such large agrarian states as the Ming should by all rights have had no interest in the sea or maritime trade. Of course, explanations can be found in specific circumstances, the pressure of nomads from the north, for instance, which might have caused the Mings to seek an alternative to the caravan routes through Central Asia. But taking resort to such *ad hoc* explanations does tend to weaken the general characterization. Nor is the sudden termination of these expeditions in the early 1430s susceptible of easy explanation, although one possible contributory factor may have been the humiliating defeat and withdrawal from Vietnam in much the same period. Examples of this type can very easily be multiplied: the Ottomans in the sixteenth century most certainly had an interest in maritime trade, as did some of the Mughal emperors like the builder of the Taj Mahal, Shahjahan, who

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had a whole fleet of substantial craft operating out of the western Indian port of Surat in the 1650s (Van Santen 1982: 71–8).

The issue of the extent of thalassophobia (or fear of the sea) of such states as the Chinese Ming, the Mughals, and the Safavids, therefore, remains a vexed one. For the sixteenth century, John Wills has made a case for the continuing validity of the traditional view, based on an examination of the South China coast between the Yangzi delta and Hainan, including the Pescadores and Taiwan. Arguing that maritime China offered relatively meagre opportunities for the interaction of power and profit, with its trade to Vietnam, Luzon, Taiwan, the Ryukyus, and Japan either too fraught with risk or of too little substance economically to interest the state, Wills points to how in the 1540s and 1550s, relatively small bands of pirates (*wokou*) played havoc in the countryside of Jiangnan and northern Zhejiang, attacking Hangzhou, Ningbo and even Nanjing with impunity. A state more driven to trade and maritime preoccupations, it is suggested, would surely have been more watchful of the coastline. While major *wokou* leaders like Wang Zhi were eventually defeated by state forces over the period 1557–61, the crisis of these decades on the coast seems to lend credence to the notion of Ming thalassophobia (Wills 1979). In the case of the Mughals, a similar argument has been put forward; whether in terms of the contribution to the exchequer or otherwise, trade – and especially maritime trade – could apparently never hold much attraction for this Central Asian warrior clan, who understood only the control of land as the currency of power (Pearson 1976).

Two intertwined strands in these arguments need to be separated here. There is first the issue of the lack of trading *opportunities*; states that occupied poorly monetized regions, or which had little control over either maritime or overland routes could never, even with the best of wills, really have been trade-oriented. The second question is that of ideological *barriers* to participation in trade, even in the presence of opportunities: thus, it is argued that certain political cultures were instinctively hostile to the very idea of trade, while others would embrace trade readily. Now, these two issues are naturally related, but we should not assume that one flows directly out of the other, or that ideology would necessarily accommodate itself to changing opportunities. Indeed, the coexistence of divergent ideological streams on the question of trade even within the same political culture can clearly be seen by juxtaposing two medieval Arabic texts, each of which is equally emphatic. The first, written “in praise of merchants” by Al-Jahiz, assures us that “Muslims know that Exalted God’s elect, His most sincere worshipper, the one entrusted with His revelation, was a member of a merchant house”; the other, the *al-Sadaqah wa’l-sadiq* of Al-Tawhidi, is equally firm in stating that “Concerning merchants, the gaining of pence sets up an obstacle between them and manly virtue and interposes a barrier for them from all that is connected with chivalrous qualities” (Serjeant 1988).

It is no coincidence, of course, that those historians who are disposed to favor the idea that the large continental polities of Asia in the early modern period subscribed to the views of Al-Tawhidi rather than Al-Jahiz, tend to see these states' ideologies as largely formed *sui generis*, rather than by a process of interaction with other states. The contrast is thus often drawn between "trading states" – mercantilist in spirit, outward looking, and eclectic in ideology – and "agrarian states" – anti-mercantile, but also inward-looking, and characterized by ideologies that stem from their own, unique, internal experiences. While there is undoubtedly some utility in these as ideal-types, locating most of the states of early modern Asia in either one of these two "boxes" proves difficult. The central problem lies in the fact that from the latter half of the fifteenth century, many states – even those that ruled over substantial and fertile agricultural tracts – were increasingly formed through the mediation of migratory elites, who circulated in two circuits: one embracing East Africa, West Asia, South Asia, and Southeast Asia, the other being formed by East Asia, and Southeast Asia. Ideas and ideologies thus rarely retained a pristine character, and can seldom be sited in a unique polity. Different states of the period show striking and unexpected parallels in the development of political institutions, and it is hard to dismiss these as mere coincidence.

Let us take the case of Japan. After the long drawn-out Onin War (1467–77), the *bakufu*, or shadow (literally "tent") government, of the Ashikaga Shoguns began to break down. Those of the family who succeeded Ashikaga Yoshimasa (r. 1443–90) were themselves manipulated by warlords, even as they manipulated the Emperor. The last decade of the fifteenth century and the first two-thirds of the sixteenth century are thus often characterized as the period of the *sengoku daimyo* – or Civil War Barons – all of whom struggled to reconstitute their domains, and eventually to throw up a *primus inter pares*. The extent of economic disruption and generalized "disorder" that resulted is the subject of some debate; but what is certain is that it is not until the late 1560s that the glimmerings of a characteristically early modern order are visible, with the rise to dominance of the military leader Oda Nobunaga. Nobunaga's purported role when he entered the capital city of Kyoto was, however, not as a *new* center of power; rather he claimed to be the restorer of one of the rival Ashikaga claimants to the Shogunate, Ashikaga Yoshiaki. Killed in June 1582, Nobunaga thus failed to transform his *de facto* power into control of the Shogunate for his family, and this was also the case with his successor as *supremo*, Toyotomi Hideyoshi (d. 1598). It was only the third of the "Great Unifiers," Tokugawa Ieyasu, who in the early seventeenth century managed to create a new *bakufu*, that of the Tokugawas, which remained in place for over two and a half centuries (Hall et al. 1981).

But was the order that emerged an unique experiment in governance? Did the concept of the "shadow government," accompanied by a tight control over the

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external trade sector, find no echoes elsewhere? Proponents of Japanese political insularity in the period (or, to put it more diplomatically, of the uniqueness of Japanese political institutions) would argue in the affirmative. Certainly, the comparison with Ming China is not a fruitful one in terms of suggesting parallels. But we are aware, on the other hand, that in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, Japan was a significant exporter of skilled military manpower, to mainland Southeast Asia as well as to Indo-China. Did these migrations, at the level of intermediate and elite segments of society, have any significance for the institutional structures of the recipient regions? At least one case would bear investigation, that of Dai-Viet or northern Vietnam, a region which maintained fairly close trading relations with the Japanese ports in the period. In this area, the expulsion of Ming forces after a brief occupation in the early fifteenth century had brought to the throne of Dai-Viet the Le dynasty, founded by Le Loi (r.1427–33), a warrior-leader from the mountainous western region, bordering Laos. Despite his origins, Le Loi sought to distance himself from the “turbulent barons” of his realm, the so-called *cong than*; his successors, in particular Le Thanh-ton (r. 1460–97), were essentially concerned to build a stable and bureaucratized state structure, based on the reformulation and assimilation of Confucian political concepts rather than on the model of charismatic leadership that had characterized earlier periods. What ensued in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries was a see-saw battle, with alternating phases of *cong than* dominance (such as 1442–59 and 1505–26), and of the dominance of court-based scholar-bureaucrats, who had a quite different vision of the state and philosophy of government (Ungar 1983).

What is significant for our purposes, however, is the resolution. that emerges eventually in the sixteenth century. After sixty-five years of rule by the usurper Mac clan, the Le lineage was restored to the throne in 1592. However, their position was now quite different from what it had been in the fifteenth century; their rule was a mere façade, and the real power was held by a lineage of hereditary regents, the Trinh, who ruled for eight generations, into the eighteenth century. The emergence of this system, strikingly different from what we observe in the Malay world in the period, but at the same time remarkably close to the system established by Hideyoshi and Ieyasu in precisely the same period, deserves closer exploration.

### The Circulation of Elites

The formation of conquest states in medieval Asia – be it the Sultanate of Delhi, or the Khanates formed by the disintegration of the Mongol empire – had always been accompanied by the migration of elites, at least at the level of courts and

central bureaucracies (whatever the size of the latter might have been) (Wink 1988). However, these migrants of the medieval period were usually military specialists, religious leaders and men of letters and the arts; their role was thus either to shore up the coercive power of the thin layer of conquering migrants, or to console them in their exile from their erstwhile homelands. In contrast to the bulk of these medieval migrations, the period from the latter half of the fifteenth century, and especially after 1550, marks something of a departure from the pattern. Now one has the circulation of elites proceeding even in the *absence* of conquest, elites who – moreover – are noted for their ability to combine commercial activities with the more conventional skills noted above.

The example of the Mughal state is instructive in this respect. As descendants of Timur and Chinggis Khan, the Mughals were scarcely a new ethnic element in northern Indian politics in the early sixteenth century. The initial takeover in 1526 of Delhi and Agra by Babur, the first Mughal to rule there, was facilitated more by political factionalism in the court of the Lodi Sultans ruling there than by true “conquest.” Babur’s son and successor Humayun first set about quelling the opposition of rivals in the Indo-Gangetic plain, particularly because they stood in the way of his eastward expansion (his ambition being to conquer the Husain Shahi Sultanate of Bengal). But the Bihar-based Afghan chieftain, Sher Khan Sur, defeated him in battle, forcing him into a long exile in Iran (which exceeded the period of his actual reign). Sher Shah, as the new ruler titled himself in 1539, appears to have been particularly interested in promoting trade along the Gangetic valley, and thence to the Iranian plateau and Central Asia (Qureshi 1970: 37–40). In effective terms, despite brief periods in which he dominated Bengal, his reign too is characterized by a failure to transform the landlocked Delhi state into one with direct maritime links. This was eventually achieved by Humayun’s son, Akbar (r. 1556–1605), who had by 1580 conquered both Gujarat and Bengal and gained access to their sea-ports (Streusand 1989).

In the course of their expansion, the Mughals had to make use of a variety of skills from the tool-box of contemporary statecraft. There was, first and most importantly, the issue of the power-holders in the localities, the ubiquitous *zamindars*, who had armed retainues at their disposal, and who could as easily rebel as accept the service (*khidmat*) of the Mughal. This armed rural gentry had to be placated, by the offer of a share of the fiscal take, and various other perquisites, and suppressed by main force only if they proved truly recalcitrant. Of them, the Dutch traveler Francisco Pelsaert wrote in the 1620s (during the reign of the Mughal Jahangir):

The whole country is enclosed and broken up by many mountains, and the people who live in, on, or beyond the mountains know nothing of any king, or of Jahangir; they recognize only their Rajas, who are very numerous, and to whom the country

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is apportioned in many small fragments by old tradition. Jahangir, whose name implies that he grasps the whole world; must therefore be regarded as ruling no more than half the dominions which he claims, since there are nearly as many rebels as subjects.

(Wink 1986: 191)

From the ranks of these *zamindars*, a chosen few – Rajputs, Afghans and so on – were elevated to a place of importance in the court, and given high *mansabs* (numerically calibrated ranks, denoting direct links with the Mughal emperor). There is a similarity between the policies followed by the Mughals in this respect, and the treatment by the Safavid Shahs of Iran of the Turkoman *amirs*; they also bear a certain resemblance to the manner in which earlier Sultans at Delhi had managed to keep the balance of forces. But the management of resources was now a far more complex affair; the sheer size of the court had increased, and the economy of even the core of the Mughal state – the Indo-Gangetic plain – was far more productive, monetized and populous than what the Khaljis or Tughluqs had ruled over in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

The second building-block of the Mughal state was therefore the incorporation of migrant intermediaries, who flocked to their court from Iran and Central Asia. The latter, often generically designated “Turanis,” had been present under earlier rulers as well; it is the Iranian migration that increases dramatically in Mughal times. Whether or not these Iranians constituted a faction in court politics is an open question; but it can scarcely be doubted that they, as a collectivity, had a substantial presence in the highest echelons of Mughal service (the *mansabdari*). The process had begun to accelerate in the closing years of the sixteenth century, and is remarked in particular during the reign of the Mughal Jahangir (r. 1605–27), when the fortune of the most prominent Iranian family of the high Mughal period (of I’timad-ud-Daula, his son Asaf Khan, and his grandson Shayista Khan) was made. Though their dominance was checked somewhat later in the seventeenth century, the position of Iranians remained conspicuous even under the reign of Jahangir’s grandson Aurangzeb (see Table 1.2).

**Table 1.2** Mansabdars under Aurangzeb, 1658–1707

	1658–78	1679–1707				
Rank	Iranis	Turanis	Total	Iranis	Turanis	Total
5,000 +	23	9	51	14	6	79
3,000–4,500	32	16	90	40	22	133
1,000–2,700	81	42	345	72	44	363
Total	136	67	486	126	72	575

(Source: Athar Ali 1966: 35)



Iranian elite migration had already been a significant feature of state formation in the Deccan (or south-central India) from as early as the fifteenth century; the Mughals were thus in a sense latecomers to the process. In the Bahmani Sultanate of the Deccan, men like Khwaja Mahmud Gawan Gilani (d. 1481) had held both the post of *malik ut-tujjar* ("chief of the merchants") and simultaneously controlled fiscal administration as *wazir* (Aubin 1973). Circulation and spatial mobility characterized these operators, as did a willingness to combine fiscal and commercial operations with military commands. A contemporary English trader's description of the Iranian Mir Muhammad Sa'id Ardistani (1591–1663), who was head of the fiscal administration of the Golconda Sultanate in the Deccan before becoming a high Mughal official, is worth citing at some length:

The whole kingdom of Gulcundah is governed by him, of whome the people stand in feare and subjection unto as to the Kinge himselfe. The revenue that hee yearly brings the King in amounts to twentye hundred thousand pegodaes . . . The revenues that he hath taken from the Jentue in the aforesayd countrye is to the somme of fortie hundred thousand pegodaes per annum. Hee hath of his proper owne four thousand horse, three hundred elephants, foure or five hundred cammels, and tenn thousand oxen, which transporteth his goods up into severall countryes, as Gulcundah, Vizapore and into dyvers partes of the Great Maguls country . . . Concerning forran navigation, he hath trade to Pegue, Tenasaree, Acheen, Rackan, Persia, Bengalla, Moka, Peruk, Maldeevaes and Macassar. He hath ten vessels of his owne, and intends to augument them, makeing much preparatyon for building of more.  
(Subrahmanyam 1990a: 326)

Thus, on the one hand, we have fiscal intermediation, on the other the command of war-animals and military labor; but this is only the tip of the iceberg, for it is in respect of overland and overseas trade that Muhammad Sa'id truly distinguished himself. Had detailed materials been available on other operators of the same period, like Mirza Abu Talib (Shayista Khan), we would have probably found a similar profile of activities.

Iranian elite migration follows a complex three-centuries-long cycle, extending from the early fifteenth century to the middle of the eighteenth century. In the first phase, their dispersion is largely across the littoral of the western Indian Ocean, to the Red Sea and East Africa, to Gujarat, and to the Deccan. The second phase, which commences in the last quarter of the sixteenth century, sees them concentrating on South Asia. This is the period in which an Iranian poet wrote:

Great is India, the Mecca  
of all in need  
above all for those who seek safety.



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A journey to India is of essence  
to any man  
made worthy by knowledge and skill.  
(Savory 1980: 205)

The third phase, which commences in about 1650, sees a further widening of operations by the Iranis. A minor Iranian presence is remarked in western Indonesia and mainland Southeast Asia even in the early sixteenth century; the first Portuguese to arrive there, for example, usually spoke of the Thai kingdom's capital of Ayuthia using its Persian name Xarnauz (*shahr-i nav*, or New Town). But it is only after 1650 that the Iranian political presence comes to dominate, being a particularly marked feature of the reign at Ayuthia of Narai (r. 1656–88). Similarly, the Arakan court in northern Burma witnesses an influx of Iranians of some dimensions in the seventeenth century (Aubin 1980).

If the Iranians formed one circuit, the Chinese from the southeast coastal provinces formed another. From the fifteenth century, in the aftermath of Zheng He's expeditions, there are clear indications of ethnic Chinese in positions of political power in Southeast Asian kingdoms (one conspicuous exception, however, being the Melaka Sultanate). The Sultanate of Banten, formed in the course of the sixteenth century, boasted a considerable Chinese population, as did most important port-towns of the Javanese north coast (*pasisir*) by 1600. When, in the early seventeenth century, the major Javanese state of the early modern period, Mataram, was under consolidation by Sultan Agung (r. 1613–45), it was with the aid of Chinese traders and revenue-farmers that this was accomplished. These Chinese, who were often assimilated, and took on Javanese or Malay names, continue to be conspicuous in Javanese politics, as local lords (*bupatis*) in the phase of Mataram's decline. Again, whether one looks at the Philippines, Indo-China, or even Dutch Batavia, the Chinese community is an important one, which plays the role of intermediary in diplomacy, recruits and manages labor, conducts overseas trade, and so on (Blussé 1986).

Our purpose in pointing to these instances of substantial elite migration is not to deny the existence of local dynamics, or the role of "autochthonous" groups in determining the shape of early modern Asian state formation. But at the same time, it is necessary to note that the political spheres of different Asian states inter-penetrated by this period to a far greater extent than is often assumed. In comparison with the period from the ninth to the fourteenth centuries, the later period – which dovetails fairly well with what Anthony Reid has recently termed an "age of commerce" in Southeast Asia – represents a phase of far greater elite political mobility *without conquest* (Reid 1988). This flexibility, and ability to accept new elements into the elite as well as to make use of their services, were important factors in determining the nature of Portuguese interaction with early modern Asian kingdoms.

## Towards a Taxonomy

The shapes and strategies of Asian states of the early modern period, we have seen, were at least partly determined by relations *between* these states and by the common conjuncture in which they at times found themselves. But differences also existed, and it would be misleading to see no essential distinctions between Tokugawa Japan, Aceh, and the Ottoman Empire – to take three examples that encompass the entire region we wish to survey. One such model of differentiation – which clearly distinguishes agrarian-based, trade-averse states, from trade-oriented ones, we have already examined with some scepticism. It is evident that, contrary to what such a model might lead us to believe, so-called agrarian empires grew increasingly attracted to trade, and to the management of their resources not through cash-less, prebendal systems, but by utilizing the cash nexus. Three examples will suffice here.

In west Asia, the fiscal system of the Ottoman empire, founded in the late thirteenth century, had, we have already noted, for long been dominated by the *timar* – a prebendal assignment, which was appropriate to a relatively poorly monetized economy. Revenues tended to be collected in kind rather than cash, and were used to support a somewhat decentralized military system. In the sixteenth and seventeenth century, however, a new feature is evident: this is the system of the so-called *salyaneli eyaletler* (“provinces with salaries”), described by a contemporary, ‘Ali Çavus, as follows in his *Risale* (1653):

The [Sultan’s] well-protected territories (*memalik-i mahrusa*) consist of thirty-four provinces; twenty-five of them are of *has*, nine of *salyane*. These are the *salyane* provinces: the Province of Egypt, Province of Yemen, Province of Habesh, Province of Basra, Province of Lahsa, Province of Baghdad, Province of Trablusgarb, Province of Tunus, Province of Jazair-i Garb... There are no prebends (*zeamet ve timar*) in the *salyane* provinces, but there exist janissary groups. All the revenues are held by the *Padişah*, the Protector. From these revenues the salaries of the governors, and wages of the janissary groups are given. The remaining sum is sent to the treasury in the capital.

(Özbaran 1986: 42)

Two remarks are in order here. First, we note that these provinces are for the most part areas captured by the Ottomans in the sixteenth century. Secondly, it is worth remarking that almost all of these are provinces where trade had a more important role to play than in the Ottoman heartland of Anatolia and Rumelia. The sixteenth century is also a period when the Ottoman state’s direct interest in trade reaches its height. Not only are there substantial maritime interventions in the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean, the Ottomans are seen as a potential

source of support by distant Southeast Asian kingdoms like Aceh (Casale 2010). The purportedly agrarian character of the state had thus been considerably modified; the prebendal assignment system was now giving way to a relatively centralized (and money-based) system controlled by the Treasury.

Our second example concerns Safavid Iran. Here, the Shi'i dynasty founded by Shah Isma'il in the early sixteenth century ruled over what is often portrayed as the fourth largest agrarian despotism in early modern Asia (after China, the Mughals and Ottomans), although the balance between nomadic tribes and settled cultivators and townsmen was rather more favorable to the former here than in the other empires. Safavid rulers spent much of the sixteenth century in a delicate balancing act between the Turkoman tribesmen (or *qizilbash*) who had initially supported them politically, and the so-called Tajiks of the towns and settled countryside. However, by the last quarter of the century, a new situation emerged. In the reign of Shah 'Abbas I (r.1588–1629), the Safavid state turns its attention to trade – both overseas and overland – as a major source of state revenue. Embassies are sent out to places as distant as Muscovy and Spain; the Shah decides to monopolize the trade in the premier export commodity – silk; links are built up with a trading community, which emerges as the Shah's favored client-group, the Armenians. A new coin, the *abbasi*, enters circulation in the Persian Gulf: and then the Indian Ocean, and it is in this coin that the Shah's *ghulam* corps of Georgian and Circassian mercenary and slave soldiers is paid. Thus, once again, we have the spectacle of an agrarian state taking recourse to trade and the cash-nexus (Savory 1980; Jackson and Lockhart 1986).

Our third and final example takes us far afield. This is the case of Japan under Toyotomi Hideyoshi and the early Tokugawas, that is to say in the 1580s and thereafter. We have already noted earlier that this period sees the re-emergence in Japan of a single central authority, after the period of *sengoku* beginning in the late fifteenth century. This period – namely the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries – is often associated with the rise in Japan of a sort of xenophobia, leading to the celebrated “closure” (*sakoku*) of the country to Europeans. But, as has been argued by Ronald Toby, such an argument fails to take into account the restructuring of Japan's relations with her *Asian* neighbours – Korea, China, and the Southeast Asian states – that was taking place. The restructuring – partly mediated by military struggle – was part of an attempt to create a Japan-centered world-order; it is also significant that of all early modern states Japan is perhaps the most reluctant to permit the sort of elite migration into her domains that we have discussed earlier (Toby 1984).

We should equally note however that the restructuring of foreign relations was part of a far larger package. Hideyoshi and his Tokugawa successors implemented a wide-ranging set of social and economic policies, which set them apart from both the Ashikagas and the *sengoku daimyo*. Most celebrated of course is the

**Table 1.3** Japanese fiscal reorganization, 1598–1602

**(a) The largest *daimyo*, 1598–1602 (in *koku*)**

Name	Holdings in 1598	Holdings in 1602
Tokugawa Ieyasu	2,557,000	–
Mori Terumoto	1,205,000	369,000
Uyesugi Kagekatsu	1,200,000	300,000
Maeda Toshiie	835,000	1,195,000
Yuki Hideyasu	101,000	751,000

**(b) *Ryogoku* reorganization by Ieyasu, 1602**

Domains	Number	Yield (in <i>koku</i> )
Total in 1598	204	18,723,200
Confiscations	90	4,307,000
Ructions	4	2,215,900

(Source: Sansom 1961: 414–16)

cadastral survey (*taiko kenchi*) conducted on Hideyoshi's orders in the late 1590s, which entailed plot-by-plot measurement of agricultural land, assessment of its tax-potential, and identification of the assessee. This measure also had a clear political dimension: it facilitated the large-scale redistribution of *ryogoku* (or *daimyo* domains) by Tokugawa Ieyasu in 1602, in which process he undercut the power of some houses, while shoring up others. The net beneficiaries from all this were, of course, the Tokugawas themselves, in the sense that they emerged as the ultimate source of even land-based power. Table 1.3 sums up the impact of the early Tokugawa reform on the leading *daimyo* of the epoch.

Furthermore, the period witnesses a growing *direct* control by the state of commerce, an attack on the guild system leading to the breakdown of guild monopolies, as well as a new system of registration of merchants and artisans with the state. The growing urbanization that accompanies these changes – with Kyoto and Osaka attaining populations of 410,000 and 405,000 respectively in 1634 – suggests a shift in the structure not merely of state but of civil society. Once more, at the center of things is the issue of the cash-nexus, and the growth in a sort of state interventionism (Hall et al. 1981: 327–72).

An alternative way of posing these phenomena might be to argue that if the two categories with which we began, namely agrarian-based, prebendally organized states, and trade-oriented ones, can be treated as two ends of a spectrum or distribution, what the period witnesses is a growing attraction towards the center, as opposed to a polarization. In part, this change is mediated through the growth of a sort of absolutism and it is of some interest that both Hideyoshi and Shah 'Abbas have been characterized as "absolutist" in their own

historiographies. To elaborate, the circulation of elites, the circulation of money-media, as well as certain other unifying phenomena, caused the direction taken by different Asian states in the period to appear similar. However, we may still speak in terms of differing degrees of interest and involvement in trade, of monetization, of measurement and enumeration of resources and the tax-base; from a choice between two bald categories, we emerge with a spectrum of possibilities, within which we can place Aceh, Arakan, Iran, Japan, and the Ottoman empire.

One of the keys to where we locate particular states would appear to be the degree of autonomy and political power wielded by a land-oriented aristocracy, as opposed to an urban trading class. The central state itself tended to operate on two principles: first, it abhorred a vacuum, and strove to expand its activities to fill any space left by the opposite tugs of these groups; but beyond this somewhat mechanistic role was also an actor and initiator, partly because it was open to external winds, and partly on account of a semi-autonomous dynamic provided by its own evolving ideology. Thus, in different periods, the shifting balance between *orang kaya* (or urban mercantile aristocracy), and *hulubalang* (or landed chieftains) moulded and remoulded the character of the Acehnese state, even as the tussle between Tajik *tujjar* (merchant) and Turkoman *amir* shaped but did not determine the destiny of Safavid Iran (Reid 1979; Haneda 1987).

## Long-term Trends

This chapter has attempted to highlight certain features of the changing relationship between the state, economy and society in Asia in the centuries preceding the Portuguese arrival there, as well as in the two centuries after 1500. There appears to be little doubt from a survey of available materials that the Portuguese did not arrive in an Asia that was in stasis, nor did they act on a *tabula rasa*. Rather, it was in a world of forces in constantly shifting geo-political, social and economic balance that the Portuguese found themselves resident in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Besides the specific questions that we have raised above, which pertain largely to the domain of state-society relations, it may be worthwhile to point to certain rather broad changes that took place in Asia over the years 1300 to 1700. The first set of these was in the commercial sphere. Whereas during the age of the Cholas and Srivijaya (that is the late centuries of the first millennium, and the early centuries of the second millennium CE), the main direction of commercial flows in Asia appears to have been in the east-west direction (both on the caravan routes, and on sea), the years after 1300 saw the rise of commerce largely in the north-south direction. Indian trade with Southeast Asia and southeastern Africa

grew, as did Chinese trade with the lands of the *nanyang*, as they termed insular Southeast Asia. This growing trade was largely based on the exchange of tropical products, such as spices and woods, and minerals, against manufactures – Chinese porcelains and silks and Indian cotton textiles. At the same time, the rise of the port-centered states that we have described, such as Aden, Hurmuz, and Melaka, led to the growth of a substantial trade in foodgrains and other items of bulk consumption. This trade, in relatively low-value and high-volume goods, may have existed earlier as well, but it would seem that the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries witnessed a substantial expansion in its extent.

It has at times been assumed that the commercial expansion of these centuries was part of a phase of “Arab dominance” of Indian Ocean trade. But this is surely too simplistic, for other Asian merchant groups participated in this trade on a large scale as well. These included Gujarati *vanias* and Bohras, Tamil, and Telugu Chettis (known in Southeast Asia as *Kelings*), Mappila and Maraikkayar Muslims from southern India, Chinese from Fujian and other provinces of the southeast in the Celestial Empire, and the Iranian *tujjar* whom we have discussed above. However, even if we question the extent of Arab dominance, it remains true that the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries saw the expansion of Islam on the shores of the Indian Ocean, and the growing presence of Muslim mercantile communities, whether in East Africa, India, or Southeast Asia. The centuries immediately preceding the arrival of the Portuguese in Asia therefore saw a redefinition of the religious map of the continent, and the expansion of Islam, and to a lesser extent Theravada Buddhism, religions that laid greater stress on the individual and individual salvation. The Christianity that the Portuguese brought to Asia therefore competed with other religions freshly on the ascendant, which were being spread not merely by conquest but by acculturation and trading contacts. This second aspect of long-term change in maritime Asia must also be borne in mind if we are to view Portuguese actions in perspective.

