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EDITED BY  
CLAUDIUS MÜLLER AND RODERICH PTAK

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Editors / Contact:

Claudius Müller (Hong Kong): [Claudius.C.Mueller@googlemail.com](mailto:Claudius.C.Mueller@googlemail.com) (articles)

Roderich Ptak (Munich): [Ptak@lrz.uni-muenchen.de](mailto:Ptak@lrz.uni-muenchen.de) (articles, reviews)

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## Editorial

### Historical Notes on the Sea Straits in and around the South China Sea: Geography, Migration, Trade and Politics

The idea to investigate the history of Asia's sea straits goes back to a lecture that R. P. gave to the Guangdong Academy of Social Sciences in 2010. An English version of that lecture came out in *Crossroads. Studies on the History of Exchange Relations in the East Asian World* 1/2 (2010). Later a Chinese version and several other articles on sea straits appeared in *Haiyang shi yanjiu* 海洋史研究 2 (2011).

At that time, Li Qingxin 李庆新 (of the Academy) suggested to produce more research on this topic, partly owing to the fact that historians have written thousands of books and articles on ports and networks, entrepreneurs, commodity flows, piracy, institutions, the involvement of governments in local trade systems, and other such topics, whereas the function of sea straits within the total context of maritime Asia's past has remained somewhat underrepresented in academic research – with the exception, perhaps, of the Strait of Melaka and similar “prominent” cases.

Finally, in fall 2011 the matter came back on our agenda – in the form of an international conference called “Asia's Sea Straits: Functions and History (c. 500–1700)”. This meeting, organised by R. K., with the assistance of Rui Manuel Loureiro (Lagos / Lisbon) and R. P., and generously supported by the University of Bonn, which also hosted it, was attended by circa twenty-five scholars from Asia and Europe, who presented different papers on the history of individual straits and / or larger areas with a whole “cluster” of such “corridors”. That also included a number of related aspects, for example shifting trade routes, military and other questions, maps, varying perceptions of sea spaces, and so forth. A selection of these papers formed the basis for the articles printed in the present issue of the *Journal of Asian History*.

In terms of geography, the articles presented here, all deal with one larger maritime “zone”: the South China Sea, or Nanhai 南海 in Chinese, and some of its adjacent regions. As to the other papers read to the meeting in Bonn, there are plans to bring them out in a further special issue of a different journal, hopefully in 2013.

As was said, historians dealing with the history of maritime Asia, from the earliest times through to the modern period, have rarely considered the phenomenon of sea straits in its own light. These straits, sometimes also called “channels” or “passages” in English, constitute connective elements between individual sea spaces. Taken together, they were the joints between the various segments forming the so-called “Maritime Silk Route”, which ran from

Japan to the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea, through a chain of maritime zones, or seas. Without these sea straits, cultural exchange along the long corridor linking the Far East via South-east Asia to India and West Asia would have been very difficult.

Clearly, historians can easily define different types of sea straits. Some passages played a central role in long distance traffic, others were important for regional exchange. Certain sea spaces could only be accessed through one major channel – the Persian Gulf with the Strait of Hormuz is a case in point – others offered multiple entrances. Not infrequently, sea straits formed part of international trading routes, but one also finds locations, particularly along the continental shores, where their functions were restricted to separating island clusters from each other without ever assuming key roles within greater contexts.

In some cases, different types of ports emerged near or along the shores of sea straits, whereas in other regions one encounters no settlements at all. Usually it is necessary to investigate economic, social and political factors in order to understand why this was so, what roles sea “channels” would come to play under certain conditions and how one should interpret the rise and fall of “strait-oriented” polities, or their internal structure. Other themes relate to changing “functions”, the substitution of one port through another location, or of one channel through another channel within a macro-region.

The present volume contains five articles on sea straits. This concerns the Strait of Melaka, the Singapore Strait, the Qiongzhou or Hainan Strait, the Taiwan Strait and the traditional sailing corridor from Taiwan to Luzon, as well as a cluster of sea passages in the central section of the Philippines. The articles cover different periods in time, from the medieval to the early modern period. They are based on Chinese and colonial sources and highlight different issues from different perspectives, against different backgrounds.

It is our understanding that the study of Asia’s sea straits, whether restricted to individual cases or embedded in larger comparative contexts, may yield new insights into the internal mechanics of the Asian “exchange” world. More research will be needed in that regard, especially at the “theoretical frontier”; the present collection, we hope, will serve that end.

We wish to thank the authors for their contributions and the University of Bonn for its financial support of the meeting in 2011.

Ralph Kauz and Roderich Ptak