

Cheng Ho and Islam in Southeast Asia

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FOREWORD

After more than a decade of grappling with the idea of the clash of civilizations, many scholars have sought to stress the more peaceful relationships between people of different cultural backgrounds. Culture contacts did not always lead to conflict. On the contrary, most cultural exchanges have taken place away from political ambitions and jealousies. Most bearers of a culture carried their values with them to support their way of life in a foreign land and so that they could demonstrate why they deserved to be treated with respect even though they came from elsewhere. Occasionally, they were given the opportunity to teach the native people about their culture and sometimes their culture was found so appealing to the native people that they were ready to accept it as their own. Where there was active interest, the cultural ambassadors became missionaries and very likely some of their values would take root. The values could then blossom in fresh ways among those who came to admire them. This was especially true with the spread of a religion. The act of conversion may or may not occur with the help of missionary effort but, when it happens, it would have a transformative effect on the converted and even the community around them.

The spread of Buddhism and Islam eastwards, inland across Inner Asia to China and by sea (together with Hinduism) to Southeast Asia, reflects this phenomenon of cultural contact particularly well. Innumerable studies have shown how much of the impetus of this spread had come from traders, the exchange of diplomatic gifts as well as wars that stemmed from ambition and avarice. But the culture bearers preserved and transmitted what they brought with them despite the buying and selling, and the political and military games that the rich and powerful chose to play. That is not to say that conflicts did not produce opportunities for cultures to expand in influence. But the manifold ways that culture contact could lead to major changes in societies, and ultimately even in states and empires, deserve closer study to

help us get away from any obsession with the efficacy of force and aggression. It is in that context that Tan Ta Sen has chosen to study Islam in Southeast Asia with reference to Yuan and Ming China. He has consciously done this by going back to the way culture contacts had changed Chinese history from ancient times. By focusing on the arrival of Buddhism in China and the impact that had on Chinese life and thought and then examining the later coming of Islam and what that did to Chinese society during the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries, he prepared the background for his study of Islamization in maritime Southeast Asia.

Southeast Asia was, of course, very different from China. The region was always geographically fragmented and the key division between continental and maritime regions led to different responses to foreign influences by the local cultures. For example, the penetration by Hindu-Buddhist cultures produced one kind of mixture in Champa and Cambodia and another in Java-Sumatra. In part because of the differences, several of the mainland states absorbed Hinayana Buddhism while most of the archipelago eventually turned to Islam. The processes of transformation were obviously not the same. But in most history books, the direction of change has always been from the West, whether from India or Sri Lanka, or further west from the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Peninsula.

There is no real controversy about exactly where a more puritanical Buddhism came from across the Bay of Bengal. But where Southeast Asian Islam originated has been subject to dispute. Claims have been made for Arabia and the Gulf states and for the Muslim communities of the Indian sub-continent, especially those of South India. Some attempts have been made to trace Muslim groups in Java and its neighbours to the migration of Chinese Muslims. Among the earliest were my friends S.Q. Fatimi and Slametmuljana. Fatimi and I were briefly colleagues at the University of Malaya in the early 1960s and we spent hours together discussing the Chinese sources that led him to believe that Chinese Muslims did play a part in the spread of Islam in the Malay world. He even mentioned this in his controversial book, *Islam Comes to Malaysia*, which he published in 1963. Not long afterwards, I met Slametmuljana. This was before he published his *Runtuhnja Keradjaan Hindu-Djawa dan Timbulnja Negara-negara Islam di Nusantara* (in 1968), but he was already excited by the idea that some of the Nine Saints of Java were of Chinese origin and that Chinese Muslims were important to the story of how Majapahit became Islamized. He was later to describe this in *A Story of Majapahit* in 1976. I was impressed but not certain how reliable his

sources were. It was years later, in 1984, that the scholarly presentation by H.J. de Graaf concerning one of his main sources, *The Malay Annals of Semarang and Cheribon*, was published.

In this book, the subject of Tan Ta Sen's thesis at the University of Indonesia, he has continued with the quest for new sources. He admits that he has been handicapped by the lack of source materials. But he has scoured far and wide for Chinese, Malay, Javanese and sources in other languages, including examples from mosque architecture and other artifacts, to piece together his version of what happened during the Yuan and Ming dynasties, especially the two centuries from the late thirteenth to the late fifteenth. For him, the Mongol invasions in the region from 1283 to 1295 were relevant. Muslims from China were involved and at least some of them were left behind in Java. But even more significant were the voyages of Admiral Cheng Ho (Zheng He) between 1405 and 1433. As a Muslim trusted by the Emperor Yung-lo (Yongle) and accompanied by other Muslims who were knowledgeable about maritime affairs, Cheng Ho set up Muslim centres where there were already Chinese Muslim settlers, traders and pirates. These provided help in spreading the faith and also involved some Chinese in the politics of Java and Sumatra. Ultimately, most of the Chinese were absorbed into the local populations as Muslims, whether as Hanafites or as Shafi'ites or as Islamized mystic-Hindu Javanese.

Given the shortage of contemporary materials from the region itself, Tan Ta Sen has put together a coherent and plausible account of the role that Cheng Ho and his followers had played in spreading the religion among the Javanese. It is hard to predict whether more documents and artifacts can be found to support this account. He has modestly suggested that, as a book to illustrate the peaceful impact of culture contact, he is concerned as to how such cultural influences not only led to transmissions, conversions and transferences involving Inner Asian Muslims from China and Yunnan Muslims, Chams, Javanese, Malays, Arabs and Indians, but also enabled many Chinese in the Malay world to retain their non-Muslim cultural traits. In placing Cheng Ho's voyages in this context, the author offers a fresh perspective on a momentous set of events in Chinese maritime history.

*Professor Wang Gungwu
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Dr Tan Ta Sen